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Katalepsis

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On the day I met Raine, the first thing I did was jerk awake in bed and vomit nightmares into my lap.

That's not quite accurate. If I could purge the nightmares like a bad meal then life would be a lot easier. No, I brought up bile and what little I'd managed to keep down over the last couple of days, then dry-heaved through the aftershocks, shaking and coated in cold sweat. The nightmares had lashed at me for two weeks; last night set a new record of unbroken pain.

For a long moment I screwed my eyes shut and struggled to forget the nightmare. The endless dark plain, the watchers, and the great Eye which had crammed my head full to bursting with things I didn't want to know, night after night, until I'd clawed my way out through the bedsheets and back into the sick prison of my nausea-wracked body.

I mumbled some poetry to drown out the Eye, a few lines of Coleridge through the taste of sick in my mouth.

“And now there came both mist and snow, and it grew wondrous cold ... and ice ... ”

Poor old Coleridge and the rapture of the Arctic weren't strong enough, not when scratched out through my throat, raw from bile and acid. Pressure spiked inside my head. I felt a nosebleed start, then watched the fat, bloody droplets join the reeking puddle on my bedsheets. The Eye's lessons filled my mind, a jumble of painful geometry and impossible equations quivering and bleeding on the rim of reality.

I dry-heaved again.

Predawn grey crept around the edges of the sheet I used for a curtain. The green numbers on my bedside clock told me I'd been asleep for less than three hours. Not even two full REM cycles. My room stank of vomit and fear-sweat, cut through by the iron tang of blood. I pinched my nose to stop the bleeding.

I said some unflattering things to myself, then finally accepted that

I was suffering the worst schizophrenic relapse of my life. Wonderland was calling me back. Once or twice a month I could handle—I had coping strategies—but after two weeks without respite I felt fragile, brittle, and spent.

It was time to call my mother and go back on the crazy pills.

Crazy was a safety-blanket word for me. It defined a neat boundary in which I could exist without screaming at the walls or talking to people who weren't there. A safe zone to keep me from being locked in a padded cell. I'm not fond of the word *insane* because that implies *sane* is an objective value. *Crazy* has no opposite.

Raine was about to take away my safety blanket; if I'd known, would I have gone out that morning? For Raine, probably yes.

I'd constructed a routine the last couple of weeks. Strip my bed and my sweat-stained clothes, shove it all into the ancient washing machine in the corner of my one-room bedsit flat, clean myself up as best I could, down three cups of coffee, and drag myself to morning classes.

And try to ignore the hallucinations.

A spindly figure by the back wall watched me with holes instead of eyes. Too many fingers, all pressed to its face, with too many joints, skin made of mushroom flesh and marble.

A vast shadow outdoors drifted across the window, trailing ropy tentacles, a gas-bag jellyfish humming whale song.

I had finally gotten the washing machine going, on my feet by willpower alone, when a ball of spines and black chitin sniffed at my foot. I scooted it away. Of course, I felt nothing. It wasn't really there.

I put the kettle on, then shuffled into the tiny bathroom to wash out the taste of stomach acid and blood. I spat tainted saliva into the sink over and over again until I felt a little less defiled, then scrubbed the dried blood off my face and blew my nose. The water ran pink. Even when clean I didn't relish the sight of myself in the mirror, my eyes ringed with dark exhaustion. Sallow and slack and sick. I dragged my hair into a semblance of order.

My stomach clenched with exhaustion-hunger at the smell of instant coffee. I rummaged for food but found another hallucination, huge

and covered in wire-coarse hair, shifting in the back of the cupboard. I waited for that one to pass, afraid it would look at me if I reached inside.

I needed real food if I was going to have that fatal conversation with my mother, so I made a deal with myself. A last meal.

“Have to go outside, outside we go. You can do it, Heather, you escaped once before, you can do it again. It’s easy, it’s just a bedsit room. All you’re going to do is walk down the street and get bacon and eggs. That sounds good, yes. Bacon with the fat still on, just how you like it. Come on, out we go. You can do it.”

I kept up the one-woman pep talk to coax myself into real clothes, dragged a thick jumper over my head, found an almost clean pair of jeans, and pulled my coat around my shoulders. I loved that coat, thick and padded like armour to keep the world out. It was the most expensive thing I owned, after my laptop.

That thick security held back the crush of defeat. My parents had never believed I’d make it through university, and here I was, two months into my first year, ready to throw in the towel, ready to admit that the stress of writing a few essays about Shakespeare and Byron had caused a relapse, that I was never going to be normal, that I was never going to have any friends, that I was meant to spend the rest of my life in a drugged stupor.

I was too exhausted to care.

I was also wrong.

My name is Heather Lavinia Morell and I’m not crazy. On the bad days, I wish I were, because then none of this would be real.

* * *

Seven minutes’ walk from my flat would bring me to the front gates of the university campus, but it was half past five in the morning and the canteen was closed. Chill autumn air nipped at my neck and hands, a welcome relief from the unclean feeling of sticky sweat. I had no energy to shower. At the end of the cul-de-sac I turned the other way instead, walking deeper into the tangle of Sharrowford’s student quarter.

I kept my head down.

Outside, in the street, the visions were always worse. Sharrowford's open skies and public squares gave my hallucinations room to blossom.

A hunched hulk wreathed in black haze drooled molten saliva on a suburban corner, rooted into the ground with questing barbs of knotty red flesh. I passed a tree half-dead from the late autumn weather, wrapped in a layer of pale worms thick as my arm. A cluster of naked bone-white figures in a front garden turned to watch me as I passed, and none of them had faces. A giant shape strode overhead, blotting out the early dawn sky, six pillar-like insect legs towering over the city. I heard a distant boom each time it took another step.

A thousand delusions skittered and crawled and writhed at the end of every road. The few real humans out at this hour weren't worth acknowledging—in the monochrome dawn static of Sharrowford in November, I could be wrong, I could nod a friendly greeting to a figment of my fevered brain. Couldn't afford that.

Even if you've never visited Sharrowford, you've probably at least heard of the university. The city doesn't have much else going for it, just another post-industrial hulk on the edge of the North of England. The centre dresses itself up as trendy and hip, but it's old, ossified, trailing edges of decay wrapped around a core of ancient stone and a million hidden secrets.

If you're anything like me, don't come here.

I reached Abbots Lane, clustered with takeaway joints and a shuttered video store and my destination—the Aardvark, a twenty-four hour breakfast cafe with greasy tables and dirty floors and incredible food. Other students didn't go there much. My kind of place.

Another monster lurked in the middle of the road, twitching and shaking, twelve feet of scribbles in the air like rents torn in paper over an abyss. I stopped, reluctant to pass too close. My skin crawled at the way the thing moved, like seaweed in an invisible current. I tore my eyes away and put it from my mind, ready to focus on the very important business of my last meal.

And then I saw her.

A girl stood by the cafe, peering through the front window.

She glanced my way and our gazes touched. She smiled, a rakish flash of her teeth with a little upward twitch of her eyebrows, as if we were sharing some silent joke. I had to look away. Even at my worst I could never have mistaken her for a hallucination.

A leather jacket sat loose on her shoulders. She held her head high, her eyes up, taking the world full in front. Rich chestnut hair swept back loose and lazy from her forehead, shorter than my hair but with that special illusion of never having felt the hairdresser's scissors. A pair of well-worn boots showed off a faded rose design on the sides. Her eyes were sharp and warm in the cold grey morning.

Her smile cut right through me.

Not the sort of girl who'd ever be interested in me. I knew I was clutching at straws, so alone and exhausted that even a hint of sympathetic human contact had me ready to beg like a dog.

She forgot me, looked back at the Aardvark, then ambled up to the door and went inside. I was about to turn around and start the long walk back to campus, to wait outside the canteen, because I couldn't follow her in there now. What if she tried to talk to me? She'd work out I was crazy, I'd wither up and die under that smile. I could imagine the disgusted look on her face when she realised what I was.

But then the scribble-monster jerked toward the cafe on flickering legs. It bent, folded itself at the waist like a contracting length of intestine, and pressed what passed for a face up against the glass. I fumed for a moment and then forced myself to step past it and into the cafe. I wasn't about to be upstaged by my own subconscious. If one of my hallucinations could ogle a pretty girl who I didn't have the courage to speak with, then at least I could prove I wasn't afraid.

Truth was, I barely paid attention to her once inside the Aardvark. The smell of frying food all but demolished me. She was already lounging in a corner booth, a book in both hands and coffee on the table in front of her. None of the other patrons—a handful of insomniacs and night-shift lorry drivers—spared me even a glance. I shuffled to the counter at the back to order bacon and eggs.

I took an empty booth diagonally across from the girl, safely hidden from the risk of further eye contact, but close enough that I could tilt my head a few degrees to catch sight of her boots crossed at the ankles, the book in her hand—a battered copy of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*—and a feathery lock of stray chestnut hair.

I contented myself with those scraps. I’d been doing so all my life. Half-glances at people I liked. Contact was too much risk, to both parties.

After a few seconds of waiting, my body decided it was time to cash in all my sleep debt. I struggled to keep my eyes open, sat up straight, pinched the back of my hand under the table. I tried not to look at the shifting nightmare face pressed up against the glass at the front of the cafe. I wished I’d had the coherence of mind to bring a book myself; I was supposed to be reading *Pilgrim’s Progress* for class, but over the last two weeks I’d managed all of five pages. Couldn’t even do the things I loved.

The fry cook called out my order from the counter. My mouth watered when I carried my plate back to the table, but then I swallowed one bite and felt wrong.

My vision swam. Vertigo tugged at the pit of my stomach.

Not sleepy anymore.

I was Slipping.

“No, not now, not now,” I hissed through my teeth, a familiar prayer when I felt a Slip rushing toward me. My heart pounded and I started to shake. I bit back a whine of fear and frustration. I was so tired, I was *so tired*, all I wanted to do was eat, please let me at least get some food in my belly before it happens. Not now, not after two weeks of hell, not ever again. *Please*.

Slip vertigo yanked me sideways. My vision fogged with a ghost of elsewhere overlaid on the cafe, dark and windswept and ashen. I skidded to my feet and banged my shin on the edge of the booth, then lurched for the toilet.

I slammed into a toilet stall in the cafe’s public lavatory just before another wave of vertigo rolled over me. Bracing my feet against the floor and my hands against the stall walls, I pushed and held on, I anchored myself as hard as I could and squeezed my eyes shut and whined and prayed under my breath. I could have done this in the

booth and saved a few seconds, which might have made all the difference between staying here and Slipping over, but the pathetic thought in my head was that I couldn't look like a crazy person in public, not in front of a pretty girl who'd smiled at me.

Bracing myself didn't always work; maybe it didn't work at all, maybe it was pure delusion. I'm supposed to have those. Delusions.

I smelled bone ash and the spice of chemical fire, heard howling wind, and felt the bite of alien air on my exposed skin. How's that for a delusion?

My hands jerked, as if the walls weren't there anymore.

Slipping.

"Hey, you okay in there?"

My eyes snapped open. The walls were back, solid, here. The air was filled with the smell of cheap toilet cleaner and greasy food. I spluttered and gulped.

"Yo, you can hear me, right?" The voice spoke again, drifting up and over the stalls, female and concerned. She knocked on the stall door. "Sure hope you're not deaf, 'cos then I'm just talking to myself, and that's never a good look. Seriously, you okay?"

I froze up. I could lie, or I could say *No, I'm not okay because I just fought off a portion of my own diseased mind that wanted to make me spend several hours lost in another world.* Safest thing was to stay quiet, pretend I wasn't there. She'd shrug and give up and go away.

"I know you're in there," she said. "I can see your shoes under the door. Drank too much last night? It's no shame to ask somebody to hold your hair back for you, you know?"

How had I fought off the Slip? My mind betrayed me—before I could shy away, my thoughts alighted on a fragment of knowledge imparted by the Eye, some equation which governed what had just happened to me. My head throbbed with sudden pressure. I choked and doubled up and vomited a string of bile into the toilet bowl, then whined with pain and felt a nosebleed start.

"Yeah, you are two hundred percent not okay, girl," she said. "Right, executive decision time."

She stepped into the next open stall, clambered up on the toilet, and

peered down at me over the dividing wall. I yanked myself as upright as I could manage and stared back at her, feeling like a plague victim at the bottom of a pit.

It was the girl in the leather jacket with the rakish smile and the pretty eyes.

“W-what on earth are you do—” I tried to say, but it came out in a croak as another nauseous spasm gripped my stomach. I doubled up and heaved bile into the toilet bowl, then spat and jerked upright again and felt blood running from my nose. I clamped a hand to my face.

“Ahhh, jeez, look at you,” she said, not unkindly. “For starters I’m helping you get cleaned up.”

She vaulted the top of the stall with a little *hup* and climbed down in front of me.

“I’m not— I don’t need— I-I don’t even know you.” I backed away and fumbled with the latch, then burst out into the bathroom and clutched my coat around myself, dripping nosebleed onto the floor tiles.

“We can change that part easy enough,” she said. She held up her hands and flashed the same smile she’d given me outdoors, beaming endless confidence straight into my brain. That’s the only thing which stopped me running. “Hey, look, I’m not gonna bite, ’less you ask me to. I saw you come in here and thought, ‘Heeeey, that girl looks a bit messed up, maybe she needs a hand, maybe she needs some help.’ And, yeah, you are a bit messed up, let’s be honest. If you don’t need help then I’m Ned Kelly. I’m not being catty or weird. Solidarity, you know? Gotta look out for each other.” She thumbed over her shoulder. “One of those guys out there coulda followed you in here instead, found you passed out on the toilet. Here, lemme help.”

I wiped at my nosebleed, then pinched it off, breathing through my mouth.

“I’m not—”

“You’re not hungover. I know, I can tell.”

“ ... how can you tell that?”

“Seen that sort of look in your eyes before. I don’t know what your

deal is, but hey.”

She held out a hand.

The smile, the knowing look in her eyes, or just the fact that she was stunning; I took her hand.

I’m so easy.

“I’m Raine,” Raine said.

“Heather,” I muttered.

Raine was true to her word. She steered my exhausted body over to the sinks, helped me wipe the drying blood from under my nose and the vomit from my lips. She waited with me for the bleeding to stop, handed me paper towels, and made sure I leaned forward so the blood didn’t drain down my throat, then got me to wash my mouth out. She fetched a glass, filled it with water, and made me drink it all, slowly. Her hand on my back helped, a gentle, unfamiliar pressure. She wet another paper towel and suggested I wipe my face again, just to help me feel better.

I couldn’t speak, too mortified to even mumble a thank you.

“There, feeling a little more human now, eh?” Raine smiled at me in the mirror. I managed to shake my head. “So, you’re not hungover, you don’t look like a druggie, but hey, you never know. You haven’t greened out, and I’m gonna presume you don’t do Molly?”

I frowned. “Who’s Molly?”

“Ecstasy. E. Party drugs. You don’t really look like a party girl, but I don’t want to assume and be an asshole about it.”

“No, I don’t take things like that. I don’t do drugs. I don’t smoke or drink, at all.”

I expected a return of the rakish smile and a familiar old refrain: *How do you have fun, then?* She did look the type to say that.

Instead, Raine put her palm on my forehead. It was so soft, so surprising, and so brief.

“Yeah, not clammy enough to be food poisoning,” she said. Raine took a step back, chewing on her lower lip, and spread her hands in a speculative shrug.

She was a whole head taller than me, more athletic—though that’s not difficult—and she looked healthy. Strong. Much more alive than my face in the mirror. She was about my age but she seemed so much more mature, a real adult rather than a floundering child.

“Thank you,” I said. “But I’m ... I can’t explain what I was doing. You don’t want to know. Thank you for helping, but ... I should go finish my food. I’m sorry, I probably stink, I know.”

Raine made a gun with thumb and forefinger, aimed it at me, and nodded, solemn and serious.

“Pregnant, right?”

“What? No! No, I’m not even strai— no, it’s not morning sickness. I’m crazy. I’m a crazy person and I was being sick because I thought I was being pulled into another dimension, and a giant eyeball in the sky was teaching me impossible physics, which makes me ill, and I’m at the end of my rope because I’ve been going mad and not sleeping and barely eating for two weeks.”

I averted my eyes as I spoke, couldn’t meet Raine’s gaze. A long silence followed. I wanted to curl up and die. I prayed she wasn’t a student at the university because there was no way I could ever bump into her without crawling into a hole in the ground. But that wasn’t going to be a problem anymore, was it? Because I was going to call my mother and drop out, take my medication again and be a zombie.

Raine grabbed my hand. I looked up and saw raw, naked fascination.

“We should get some food in you,” she said. “It’ll be getting cold. Nobody likes to waste a whole fry-up, and you paid good money for that.”

* * *

Raine joined me back in the booth with my rapidly cooling breakfast.

“This place is top notch, you know, but it’s always pretty quiet,” she was saying. “A lot of the snooty-trouser types on campus won’t

come to places like this. Sure, they do one of those drinking tours of the city a couple of times a year, but they're all Oxford and Cambridge rejects, all think they're too good for Sharrowford, really."

I ate a mouthful of bacon and had to stop myself shovelling it in, to avoid overloading my tender stomach. My puzzlement at Raine helped. When I looked up she met my eyes and smiled.

"Good stuff, yeah?" she said. "I come here, like, once, twice a week. Nice quiet place to think in the wee hours of the morning. All the regulars, the lorry drivers and whatnot, they're actually alright guys. Never bothered me nothing."

I nodded and felt awkward. She was so obvious, the way she was avoiding asking.

"You're a student, right?" Raine said. "I know I've seen you in the university canteen once or twice. I never forget a face like yours, Heather."

"... pardon? What does that mean?" A blush rose in my cheeks.

Raine grinned and shrugged. I tried to hold her gaze but I faltered, gave up, and focused hard on the next two mouthfuls of scrambled egg instead.

"So I assume your lack of food for the last two weeks had nothing to do with the crappy canteen fare?" she asked.

"I don't go there much. I don't live on campus."

"Oh?" Raine's eyebrows climbed. "You a first year?"

"Yes."

She gave a low whistle. "And not on campus. Special circumstances? Living with friends? Rich parents?"

"My parents made it a condition of me attending university. They pay the rent, didn't want me living on campus, what with all the noise and drinking and stress, things which might set me off. Or people who might try to take advantage of me. Because I'm crazy." I speared a fragment of bacon on my fork, then looked up and held Raine's gaze as best I could.

Raine narrowed her eyes and tapped two fingertips on the tabletop. "You don't seem crazy to me."

All my nervous reticence went out the window. What did I have to lose? She'd already seen me covered in sick and shaking with terror. I couldn't go any lower.

"Appearances are always deceiving." I managed to pull myself up straighter. "For example, I thought you looked like the sort of girl who would laugh at me being sick and then try to sell me cannabis."

"Really? Shit." Raine laughed and ran a hand through her hair. "Definitely not the sort of look I'm going for."

"And what look might that be?"

"Robin Hood of the urban jungle." She puffed out her chest and hooked her thumbs into the pockets of her leather jacket. "Guess I better rethink if it's making me too scary. I'd hate to have frightened you off, Heather."

"Keep the jacket, it suits you," I managed to say before my courage ran out.

"Really?" Raine cracked a grin.

I ate more. Raine gave me just enough silence to know the question was coming.

"I ... " A lump in my throat. Wanted to look away. Fought the desire to get up and leave. "I can't have this conversation. I haven't in ... ever, really. Medication never really did anything and I never told anybody the pills didn't work, so ... "

The silence stretched out long enough to hurt. I felt myself shrinking.

"Lemme guess." Raine clapped her hands together. "History, right?"

I blinked up at her. "I'm sorry?"

"History student, am I right? You've got that sort of hunched-up-with-the-books look about you, too many long hours in the uni library, not enough sleep. But I guess that last part isn't related. And you haven't got the natural bearing of a STEM student, either."

"... no, you're wrong. Literature."

"Literature! Dang, you got a lot more guts than me. I could never do that."

I felt the littlest flush of pride. Enough to lead me on. “And you?”

“PPE,” Raine said, then rolled her eyes. “Though I sort of dropped the E and most of one P, so now it’s just philosophy. Would be plain sailing, but I’m in a sort of experimental degree program right now, all a bit hush-hush.”

“... you lost me. You—you talk too fast for me,” I said. “It’s the sleep deprivation.”

Raine laughed and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Heather. PPE: politics, philosophy, and economics, it’s—”

“I know what PPE is,” I said. “You just don’t look like ... well ... ”

“Like one of the wankers who studies PPE at Sharrowford? No kidding. They all want to be MPs and spads and think-tank suits. Boring, the lot of ’em. But enough of that, I’m more curious about you. What’s your favourite book, miss literary scholar?”

“That’s an impossible question to answer, and I suspect you know so.” I sighed, but Raine grinned again and wiggled her eyebrows at me. “I suppose ... there’s too many. Um ... ”

I started slow, named a few titles I’d read as a teenager, then books my dad had given me, science fiction novels and fantasy worlds, my dad’s old stack of *Interzone* magazines and mum’s copy of *Watership Down*. I rattled and stuttered and picked up steam, began to retread my favourites in my head, and told Raine about the summer I spent reading *The Hobbit* seven times. When I looked up at her again, she was beaming. I cut off mid-sentence, blushing terribly.

“Not such an impossible question,” she said. “Easier than talking about mental illness.”

“I can talk about books because I love them. I don’t love being crazy.”

“What’s it like?”

Her tone was so straightforward, not what I’d expected; no pity, no coaxing, no kid gloves for the crazy girl. Nothing like the doctors, the psychiatrists. Nothing like my parents. A pressure valve popped in my subconscious, a breach in years of inhibition and shame. She’d already seen me at my worst, and when I called my mother later I’d be as good as dead. Why lie? At least I could unburden myself once before I vanished into a hole for the rest of my life.

“Have you ever read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*?” I asked.

Raine nodded, and waited for me to continue.

“I went to Wonderland,” I said, and felt my throat try to close up. “Not the place Alice went, that would have been fine and I wouldn’t be sitting here today. I call it Wonderland because that’s the only cultural reference point we have, but it was nothing like that. It was dark, and vast, and full of things that wanted to teach me impossible lessons. Impossible creatures, giants, things watching me ...” I swallowed as my words ran out; I’d never dredged this deep before, not out loud. Somehow I kept speaking as I stared at the tabletop, digging through the refuse of my self. “I was nine years old. You know how sometimes children can see things or experience things which would really mess them up, but they just keep going because they don’t know any better? Because they’re children? That’s what it was like in Wonderland. A dream, and the payload of trauma only hit once I woke up.”

“Yeah,” Raine said so softly.

“And there was no rabbit hole or magic mirror to get there. We went through an abyss underneath my bed. A hole. A non-place. Me and my sister just found it one night as we were reading stories to each other in the dark, under the bed covers with a torch. She came back from the toilet, and there it was under the bed, inviting us. And we just decided to go in, because that’s what you do when you’re children and you’ve been reading fairy tales all your life and nobody tells you it’s possible to see things which aren’t real.” I took a shuddering breath and forced myself on, to the hardest part.

“We were twins. My sister and I. We went in together, because we did everything together. But when Wonderland let me go, I was alone. Her bed was gone. Her clothes, her— everything. It was just me. And later on, after the screaming hysteria and the hospital and the tranquillisers, I tried to ask my parents. ‘Where’s my sister?’” I swallowed hard and bit back on the pain; the wound was still open, no matter how old.

“What happened to her?” Raine asked.

“She never existed,” I whispered. “You can’t know what it’s like, to grow up with another half, a twin, who turns out to be a lifelong delusion. A hallucination. Just me in the family photos. She was never real. Six months later I got an official diagnosis, from the

child psychologists at Cygnet Hospital in London.”

Raine waited for me to continue, head tilted slightly to one side.

“Ever since then, I’ve had nightmares. It’s like being back there, and I wake up screaming, my head full of ... of— pressure in my head and— and—” I started to shake, had to back away from the idea.

“Night terrors, they call them. They come and go, it’s not every week, or even every month. Sometimes I think it’s finally over, but the respite never lasts. I get daytime hallucinations too, monsters and things, and sometimes—rarely—I *Slip*. That’s what I call it, when reality spits me out to some other place for hours on end. That’s what was happening to me just now, when you found me.”

“To Wonderland?”

I shook my head. “No, other places. I think I’d die if I had to go back to Wonderland again. It’s almost never the same. First time I Slipped I was ten, and I went to this place full of giant worms and pyramids and ... the doctors put me on medication.”

“Antipsychotics?”

“Yes.”

“They work?”

“No. They didn’t do anything, but I pretended they did because I wanted the side effects to stop. I learnt to live with seeing monsters everywhere.”

Raine’s eyes narrowed into a shrewd look. “What exactly did you see in Wonderland, Heather?”

I looked at her for a moment like she was one of my hallucinations.

“I-I can’t talk about it, it hurts to think—”

“Please, try,” Raine said, then reached across the table and took my hand. Hers felt so warm and soft. I tried to pull away but she held on. “You’ve never told anybody this, have you?”

“The doctors ... ”

“But you lied to them a lot, right? You told them the drugs worked, and you never really told them the core of it, not at ten years old. What do you dream about, Heather?”

“Why are you even asking?”

“Because you need it, don’t you?”

I gulped, screwed my eyes up, and for the first time in my life I told the truth.

“A ... an Eye,” I said, and felt my stomach clench. Raine squeezed, I squeezed back. “A giant eye, the great Eye, and it is all the sky, from horizon to horizon.” My voice dwindled and I tried not to shake, tried not to think about what I was saying. I squeezed Raine’s hand until my knuckles were white. “It has a million million servants in the ruins and dust below. And it watches me, and it *thinks at me* and sorts through the neurons in my brain and forces me to learn things— things about reality, physics— no, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t—”

Raine was up and into the seat next to me before I lost control. She put her arm around my shoulders. I sat and shook and she told me to take deep breaths, and I did, until I could think clearly without seeing the impossible equations and unreal physics the Eye had spent ten years force-feeding to me. Nobody paid us the slightest bit of attention, two university girls having a moment of private drama.

“You okay?” she asked eventually.

“No, not really.” I sighed, turned away, and wiped my eyes. She disentangled her arm from around me, and I was too much of a coward to ask her to keep it there. “But, um, thank you.”

“You really needed that, huh?”

“I guess so,” I muttered. I had never spelled it all out before, not in such simple terms.

Raine studied me for a moment, then said, “What if I could prove you’re not crazy?”

And there was the catch, the other shoe dropping: Raine was a kook. A really good-looking kook who gave me attention and comfort on one of the lowest mornings of my life. At least I could have an hour of companionship before I called my mother and tore everything down. I didn’t want Raine to leave.

“You can’t prove a negative,” I said.

“Ha, you sound just like a friend of mine. Okay, that’s true, you

can't prove a negative. What if I could prove you're sane, Heather?"

"There's no such thing as sane, there's only subtle grades of illness and wellness. I just happen to be close to the deep end of the spectrum."

"Yeah, but people like you are supposed to be deluded, right? You don't believe any of the stuff you see is real, or at least that's the impression I get. You're not technically paranoid schizophrenic, that's not the diagnosis they ever gave you, is it? I'm willing to bet they tried real hard to put you in that category, but they couldn't find enough markers, because you don't believe it's real."

I nodded, but I didn't see where she was going with this. If I'd known, I would have gotten up and ran.

"See any hallucinations in here, right now?" she asked. "Parrot on my shoulder? Skeleton doing the cooking behind the counter?"

"They're— they—" I struggled for a moment, still mortified at having it out there in the open, even if it was just one person who I'd probably never see again. "My hallucinations are more coherent than that. Singular, separate, almost never replacements or additions for real people or objects."

"Right, got it." Raine nodded, dead serious. "And do you see any right now?"

"Do we— do you— do you have to ask that? Can't we, I don't know, talk about something else?"

"Please, Heather."

I hesitated, then raised my eyes to the scribble-thing still peering in through the cafe's front window.

"Yes. Outdoors, there's a thing made of rents and breaks, gaps in the air which open on blackness. It actually peered through the window when you entered, and hasn't stopped staring."

Raine's body language changed. She sat up and turned to look over her shoulder as if she could see the monster, her head on a swivel. Suddenly both her hands were visible over the tabletop as she flexed her fingers. She looked at me, then back at the window.

She was alert, on guard. I figured it was an act, but it was still very endearing.

“Really?” she asked.

“Mhmm, really.”

“Can you describe it?” She squinted at the window.

“Just like I said, the shape of a person, but sort of like a scribble.”

“How tall?”

“I don’t know. Maybe ten feet? It’s pretty tall.”

“Eyes? Face? Hands?”

“No, it’s got a mass of black for a face, like a knot in a tree. And the limbs taper off into sharp points.”

Raine turned back to me with a wild look in her eyes. “Ever tried shouting at these things in Latin? Greek? You know any Latin?”

“What? No.”

“One sec, I have to message a friend real quick.” Raine pulled out a chunky mobile phone and sent a text message, then placed it on the table and winked at me. “Can’t prove a negative, eh? Let’s do an experiment, Heather. You’re gonna love this one. If you’re not impressed, I’ll buy your breakfast. Hell, I’ll buy you breakfast anyway, and lunch and dinner, and another breakfast. Oh wow, you got no idea. This is not what I was expecting.”

The phone buzzed. Raine scooped it up off the table, grinned at whatever the message contained, and then took my hand.

* * *

Outside, in the weak morning sunlight, the scribble turned to watch as Raine led me out of the cafe.

“Uh, Raine?” I gulped and pulled my coat closer around myself.

“What? What’s it doing?” Raine looked up and down and everywhere. She figured out the right direction from the way I backed up, then put herself between me and the creature. It bent toward us, extending limbs like knives made of night.

“Following— um, it followed us when we left. Raine, I don’t like

this, it's not normal, this is my head reacting to my own attention."

Raine opened the text message she'd received. I glimpsed a picture on the screen for a split second, a jumble of lines. She grinned at me, then she held the phone up and showed it to my hallucination.

A miracle happened.

The scribble-thing *screamed*, a split-second tearing of rusty nails across the inside of my skull. I clamped my hands to my ears. As quick as it began the sound dissipated and lost all force. The creature unravelled, twisting and pulling at itself, scraps of darkness floating away on the wind until it vanished, the wounds in reality closing up and sliding shut with a papery rustling sound.

"What happened to it? Is it gone?" Raine asked, still holding up the phone, reluctant to look away. "It's gone, right? No way that didn't work. Come on, Heather, say something!"

I was speechless. Nobody else had ever touched my hallucinations. They interacted with me if I was careless enough, but never anybody else. And none of them had ever done anything like that.

"It's ... yes. Yes, it's gone."

Raine turned back to me, smug all over. "Did it explode? Fireworks? Bada-boom! She shoots, she scores!" She threw her hands up and whooped and punched the air.

"I don't— no, it sort of fell apart. I mean, that doesn't prove anything, all you did ... " She'd used suggestion and trickery, I wasn't well, and I was sleep-deprived. "How did you do that?"

"Oh, I have no idea." Raine wagged her phone. "All I did is point this in the right direction." The screen showed a symbol drawn on a piece of paper, a symbol like a blocky fractal representation of a tree. "But I can introduce you to the person who made it happen, a really good friend of mine. She's ... well, she's kind of like you, a little bit. I think you'll get on great with her."

"Wait, wait, stop." I held up a hand and noticed it was shaking. "That wasn't real, that was one of my hallucinations. A *hallucination*, not real."

"Sure it was," Raine said, then rummaged in her jacket and pulled out a thick black marker pen. "And you've been kept up for two weeks by nightmares. First thing you're gonna do is go home and

get some sleep, because you're totally shattered and that's not helping you think straight. I'm not going to dump a load on you about the occult and invisible monsters and how I just banished a servitor with magic, not before you've got a few hours' sleep in you, because then you'll think I really am trying to exploit you, right?"

"What? No, I never said you were a nutcase or anything."

"Yeah, but you thought it. No shame, I would too, in your place. When all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like nails. Here, hold out your hand."

I was helpless to resist, too confused and still in shock. Raine stuck her tongue out from the corner of her mouth as she copied the symbol from her phone on to the back of my left hand.

"There." She slapped the cap back on the marker pen. "Now, I got no idea if that will actually help you sleep or not, but it *might*, and might is better than more nightmares." She grinned and pointed a finger-gun at me as I cradled my graffitied hand.

"I ... I suppose."

"Now come on, I'll walk you home. I'll fend off the monsters with a sharp stick if I have to." Before I could stop her she looped her arm through mine and led the way.

Thankfully, Raine wasn't psychic—she did have to ask where I live, but my barriers were so weak by then that I just told her. All my caution, years of my parents acting like I was a disabled child, the lectures on staying safe, how easily I'd be hoodwinked because I was mentally ill, all of that went out the window.

"So, what else do you see around here, Heather?"

"Excuse me?"

"What other monsters walk Sharrowford's streets?" I caught that look on Raine's face again, naked fascination.

"They're not ... they're not real, Raine. They're phantoms of my diseased brain, for god's sake." I had to take a deep breath and look away, a blush rising in my cheeks.

"Pretty please? I'm dying to know. Hey, come on, look at me. Heather?"

"I-I know what you did earlier wasn't real. It was a confidence trick,

and right now I don't care. But my hallucinations are *not real*."

"Sure they're not, but tell me about them anyway."

Slowly, the words sticking like dry toast in my throat, I told Raine about the thing with three legs that squatted at the end of Peasley Drive, and the hulk to the south, towering over the city in mute silence. I described a shambling ape with a sprouting mushroom for a head, and the humpback reptilian sloth which ambled across the road ahead of us. Raine listened, nodded, and asked questions like she was compiling a taxonomy. She only stopped when we reached the foot of my block of flats. We swapped mobile phone numbers, my fingers numb as I made absolutely sure I had hers correct.

Raine checked the time on her phone and puffed out a sigh. "I'd love to come up and make sure you actually get to sleep, but I've got class."

"It's okay, you've ... I don't understand why you're being so friendly, doing all this. Being nice."

Raine cocked an eyebrow. "You know this city isn't safe for people like you? Ahhh, who am I kidding, you haven't the faintest idea."

"What? Sharrowford?" I almost laughed, despite everything. "It's hardly the crime capital of England. The worst things that happen here all seem to be the fault of students." Raine gave me an odd look, the sort of look the doctors used to give me, an I-know-better look tainted with patronising compassion. I felt myself bristle. "Wait, you mean because I'm crazy?"

"No, Heather, I mean because you can see things you shouldn't. You wanna know why I'm doing this? Because I don't wanna let somebody like you get hurt. And I think you're kinda sweet."

I tried to form a reply, but found my mouth was made of useless flapping rubber. "Um ... o-okay?"

"Do you know where the university's Medieval Metaphysics Department is? Well, it's not really a department, there's only two of us. Anyway, point is, I've got class until three, which means you're gonna sleep for six or seven hours, then you're gonna come up to the department and meet Evee. I think between us we might be able to shine a light on your head."

"The— the what? Sorry?"

“Medieval Metaphysics Department. It’s in the top of Willow, technically just part of the philosophy department. There’s only two doors, one-one-seven and one-one-eight. One says— oh, wait, here!” She fished around in her jacket, pulled out a bunch of keys and slipped one off, then pressed it into my hand. “You’ll need this to get in, the key to one-one-eight. If I’m not there, just go on in, make yourself at home.”

“Why?” I asked.

Raine cracked another smile. “Because I’m Robin Hood.”

“Medieval Metaphysics?”

“You can’t miss it.”

mind; correlating – 1.2

“Can’t miss it” turned out to be a typically Raine-like oversight. The Medieval Metaphysics Department was hidden away in the furthest corner of Sharrowford University’s “new” building, Willow House, a snaking four-story structure of Brutalist concrete and brown glass, built in the 1960s to dominate the campus, alongside the Gothic spires and stonework of the university’s tiny old core.

I’d fallen in love with the old university buildings on my very first visit. Soaring ceilings and oak panelling and tiny, intimate lecture halls. But Willow House was the sad con behind the romantic bait. It was ugly and drafty and full of echoes, and I hated its blank impersonal spaces. Other students thronged the ground floor, rushing to get out before the rain intensified, but few other people walked the upper reaches. I jumped at the sounds of gurgling radiators and creaking doors, cursing my nerves and embarrassed at how I looked.

Oddly, my hallucinations didn’t seem fond of Willow House either.

They stayed outdoors, still visible when I risked glances through the stairwell windows into the misting rain. A gaggle of giant predatory birds, smoking with inner fire, clustered around a sixty-foot tree of black shadow-flesh rooted in the university’s central courtyard. I spotted an insectoid behemoth nightmare climbing the side of the library building. But here, inside, there was nothing.

It was a relief, but I didn’t know what it meant.

I’d also slept all day. No nightmares.

Or at least they’d stayed on the far side of sleep, like normal dreams. I’d woken to my mobile phone alarm at three in the afternoon and felt such relief; the weight of bone-grinding exhaustion had lifted. My head felt relatively clear. I could have slept for another twelve hours, I could have danced, I could have hugged Raine.

I couldn’t do any of those things, of course. I was still me, and I was still sleep-deprived. A wave of tiredness had chased a dizzy spell as I’d stood in the shower earlier, and I’d almost fallen over.

I'd been careful not to scrub the fractal symbol off my hand.

Placebo, I told myself. Raine's kindness, the fractal, and the few moments of fleeting fantasy that my hallucinations might be real. The experience had convinced my unwell subconscious that I was being saved.

But I didn't care if it was an illusion. Raine was a confidence trickster or a crank, but I liked her, though she probably didn't swing my way. As soon as I called my mother my life was basically over, so I figured I may as well spend my last day or two doing whatever made me happy.

Right now that meant more of Raine's rakish smile. More attention. Maybe a hug.

What did I have to lose?

In two months at university, I'd expended little effort exploring beyond the lecture halls and seminar rooms for my own classes; I'd risked careful forays into the canteen, spent several therapeutic afternoons in the library, and made one abortive attempt at attending the student literature club. By the time I found rooms 117 and 118 I'd climbed five staircases and gotten lost twice in the corridors of threadbare carpet and whitewashed walls.

Medieval Metaphysics wasn't listed in Willow House's directory on the ground floor, nor included in the thumbnail blurbs for each department and school on the university website, but I trusted Raine, against all sensible judgement. When the philosophy department corridor ran out at room 116 I did my best to think outside the box.

I discovered the doors to 117 and 118 tucked away in the back stairwell, like a dirty secret in the attic, framed by cold concrete and lit by a single tiny window. At first I thought I must be mistaken, these were janitor's cupboards or maintenance access doors, but a small plaque was fixed to the wall.

medieval philosophy and metaphysics, professor —

A little slot for a name card stood empty.

I swallowed and took several deep breaths in a vain effort to calm my churning stomach and the pulse in my throat. I reminded myself I had nothing to lose.

Part of my subconscious didn't agree, the same part which had convinced me to wear my best clothes. Before I could knock on the door I had to smooth my skirt and make sure nothing was out of place. I only owned two skirts, long ones. I loved them but I never felt right wearing them. They made me feel frivolous and silly, as if feeling that way wasn't for me, but I wanted so badly to show Raine that I was—what?

Not just a crazy weirdo? Who was I kidding? What did I expect, that we were going to go out to late lunch together, so I'd dressed up cute? I'd showered, scoured myself clean, stood in front of the bathroom mirror and fussed with my hair for minutes on end. I was wearing my best sweater, a cream turtleneck with no holes or raggedy ends, and I'd even brushed down my coat, the most effort I'd taken in weeks. But my skin was still pasty and pale, my eyes still dark-ringed from chronic sleep deprivation, and I knew I looked awful.

The longer I hesitated the more I felt out of place.

I'd worn winter mittens to conceal the fractal Raine had drawn on the back of my hand, but now I tugged them off, worried she might think I was ashamed. I cursed myself again and pulled my back straight and knocked on the door.

My heart pounded. I clasped my hands behind my back, then thought that looked too formal, so I folded them in front, then worried I looked twee and girlish, so I fluttered about for a moment at a complete loss.

And I realised nobody was answering.

I knocked again and listened.

“Raine?”

Disappointment unclenched my stomach, but respite lasted only a heartbeat: what if this was a test? Raine had given me the key and specifically stated I was to go in if she wasn't here. Was she inside, waiting for me to show initiative? Was she smirking behind her hand at my timidity? I decided right there that if she was inside and pretending not to hear my knocking, I was going to turn around and leave. I would not grovel for comfort.

A few hours of sleep had given me back a portion of my spine, but not my full capacity for rational thought.

“Raine, are you in there?” I called out, and rapped my knuckles on the door one final time. I fished out the little key she’d given me and fitted it into the lock. The thunk of the bolt echoed down the empty stairwell, and in that moment, before I pushed the door open, I noticed a tiny tree-like symbol scratched into the wooden door frame.

It was identical to the fractal Raine had drawn on my hand.

I pulled myself up to my full height—not much—set my face in a confrontational scowl, and opened the door to the Medieval Metaphysics Department.

And found nobody inside.

Instead, I found a treasure trove.

The wall between rooms 117 and 118 had been removed long ago, and the combined interior had been turned into a scholar’s grotto. Patterned blankets pinned up over the windows kept the light out, replaced with the gentle glow from a pair of shaded desk lamps. Sagging, overstuffed bookshelves leaned against one wall. A tangle of racking hid the far side of the room, packed with overflowing cardboard boxes filled with junk. The other door was blocked by a heavy filing cabinet.

A large leather-bound book lay open on a low table in the centre of the room, accompanied by a sheaf of notes, a pair of empty mugs, and a creepy little stone statue of a goat. A trio of comfy armchairs squatted behind the table, with some blankets bundled up on one of them. A polished wooden cane leant against another. On the wide windowsill I spotted a kettle and a box of cheap tea bags, a compact laptop, and a fist-sized stress ball.

The books drew me into the room, the same way I’d been drawn into the abyss of Wonderland. Curiosity hadn’t killed me yet, but it might, one day.

I expected the room to smell of dust, but I crossed the threshold to the scent of warm tea and old books, conspiring to soothe my senses. My stomach unknotted and the tension drained from my shoulders. This place was lovely, private and quiet and cosy, the kind of place I daydreamed about. The rain outdoors had picked up, pattering off the windows. If this was Raine’s personal space, then—but how? You couldn’t just commandeer a whole departmental

room for your little club.

I ran my gaze along the bookcases and lifted my fingers to the spines of the books. The titles raised red flags: *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, *The Golden Bough*, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, along with dozens of titles in Latin or Greek, none of which I could read, and at least a few in Arabic and Hebrew. At one end I spotted a cluster of modern books about witchcraft and paganism, by authors with awful pen names like “Star Raven” and “Silver Wolf.”

I sighed, but did my best to withhold judgement. I already felt guilty and stupid for getting angry at Raine earlier, when she wasn’t even here.

The tome lying open on the desk was different. Real, a leather cover, cracked and brittle. Pages yellowed by age, covered in tiny handwritten script, notes in the margin in a different hand, in a different language.

I’d never seen such an old book before. It delighted me. A century old? A century and a half? It wasn’t crumbling, so it couldn’t have been truly ancient. I was tempted to feel the texture of the pages between my fingertips, even if the content was probably utter nonsense. I peered closer to see if I could make out any of the words.

“All right, that’s far enough,” said a voice.

I jumped out of my skin.

Hand to my heart, heart in my throat, I stared at the source of the voice.

A woman had been sitting very still in one of the armchairs all along, half-hidden by the blankets which she’d eased aside.

“I-I-I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there. I-I must have— I didn’t see, when I opened the door, I-I’m sorry.”

She’d seen everything—the way I’d nosed around the room, my eye-roll at the shelves, my blatant interest in the book on the table.

She didn’t look impressed.

For a moment I thought she must be the professor left unnamed on the door plaque, but then I realised she was my age. Her stern expression made her seem older than she was. She could have

glared a hole through sheet metal.

She was short, maybe my height, but better filled out, with an amazing mass of golden-blonde hair twisted up in a loose bun behind her head. She wore an oversized fisherman's jumper and a pair of plaid pajama bottoms. In one hand she held a mobile phone; in the other she gripped a chunk of white quartz the size of a golf ball. A book lay abandoned in her lap. Bizarre in retrospect, but I felt terrible for interrupting her reading.

She was almost exactly the sort of girl I'd dreamed about meeting at university, tucked away with her books, wearing pajamas, soft, fluffy, almost cuddly—if it weren't for the sheer hostility on her face.

"So, can I help you or not?" she asked, words like bullets. Her frown deepened.

I realised, too late, that she was a little bit afraid.

Afraid of me? The mouse-like, jittery girl she'd spooked merely by speaking, who hadn't seen her sitting there in plain sight? She could probably tell I was crazy, tell from a mile away. That must have been why. People always think the mentally ill are dangerous.

"I'm sorry for intruding," I said, and couldn't stop the flow once I started. "I really didn't mean to interrupt your reading, I was told to come here, this specific room. I must have gotten the wrong—I mean, no, I was given a key." I held up Raine's key. "I didn't think anybody was in here, I knocked and—"

"Yes, I quite heard all the knocking. Who told you to come here?"

I took a deep breath and put the brakes on. "I met a girl this morning, Raine, she told me to come here this afternoon. I— oh! Are you Evee?"

The woman let out a heavy sigh and squeezed her eyes shut. She tossed the lump of quartz and her mobile phone onto one of the free armchairs, then rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"You don't get to call me that," she said. "My name is Evelyn."

"Evelyn. Right. Sorry. Heather. That's my name, I mean."

When Evelyn looked at me again all the hostility and the hint of fear had left her expression, replaced with dull contempt, even

worse on a face which seemed so naturally inclined to kindness. She had that sort of round face which had never shed all the teenage puppy fat, and these big blue eyes, narrowed at me.

She was also missing most of her left hand; I hadn't noticed until that moment, I'd been so focused on her expression.

Evelyn still possessed her thumb and forefinger, but had lost the first knuckle of her middle finger, most of her ring finger, and the little finger was gone along with a portion of that side of her palm. The wound was long healed with smooth scar tissue. I did my best not to stare.

"So, Heather?" she asked. "What obscure species of lunatic are you?"

My mouth fell open. She *could* tell.

"How do you—"

She waved a hand at me and stood up from her chair, favouring her right leg for such a long moment that my gut reaction was to move forward to help her stand. Only embarrassment held me back. She didn't speak until she found her balance, straightened up, and stared me in the eyes.

"I assume you're Raine's latest pity project? Which means you're either batshit or useless. So, come on then, let's make it easier on all of us. Wiccan? Flat-Earther? Astral-plane warrior? Or are you one of the really hard-sell cases? You do look a bit fundamentalist Christian."

"What? No! I'm none of— wait, wait." I held up a hand as a pit opened in my stomach. "What do you mean, 'pity project'?"

"Oh? You think you're the first sad little kitten she's dragged home? You're not, and you certainly won't be the last, either. You're not clinically depressed or anything, are you? Because I really don't approve of her pulling this routine on the mentally ill."

"I'm—" Foremost in my mind was reluctance to admit that *Yes, I'm crazy*, please use that as a barb against me. Here, have this ammunition to belittle and insult me. Instead I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "There's no need to be so rude."

Evelyn's eyebrows climbed an inch. "Ah, not a total doormat. At least you've got that going for you. And yes." She paused, puffed

out a sigh, and shrugged. "I suppose I am being rude. It's hardly your fault, but Raine has rather a pattern by now. I'm sick of it and you are the last straw. Are you a lunatic? I'm right, aren't I? I can see it plain on your face."

I gathered what little resources I had for a return volley of indignation. In all likelihood I was about to merely squeak at her and retreat.

"Heeeeeeey, Heather, you came!"

Raine rounded the doorway with a great big grin on her face before I could speak, but the flush of relief turned sour as Evelyn's words echoed in my mind: *pity project*? We both looked at her, me on the verge of panic and Evelyn glaring daggers. Raine's grin petrified as she glanced between Evelyn and me.

"Shit," Raine muttered.

"Good afternoon, Raine," Evelyn said, and made it sound like knives. She put her hands on her hips.

"Uh, Eevee, this is Heather, I met her down the Aardvark this morning. Heather, you look great, did you sleep? You did, yeah? Told you it would work."

"Yes, I did, thank you." I almost melted under Raine's sudden attention. I drew my left hand up toward my chest, not sure if I should show off the fractal design or try to hide it. "But actually you said you didn't know if it would work."

"Details, details!"

"*What* worked?" Evelyn asked. "Raine, what did you do?" She noticed the drawing on my left hand and jabbed a finger in my direction. "Raine, what is that? What is that on her hand? Tell me I'm not seeing what I think I am."

"Eevee, it's fine. She's fine."

"You never cease to surprise me, you know that?" Evelyn said. "Every time I think you've reached your ceiling, a theoretical limit, you find entirely new ways to be staggeringly stupid. And for god's sake, lock the door."

Raine hurried to close the door and throw the latch. "Look, Eevee—"

"And stop calling me that right now. In case you can't tell, I am not

best pleased with you.”

“Evelyn, look.” Raine cast about and settled on me. “I’m really sorry about this, Heather, it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“I don’t— I don’t want to be involved in this,” I said in a very small voice, and put up both my hands in a gesture of surrender. If I could have vanished into the floor at that exact moment, I would have done so. This was like an argument between an old married couple. I’d never felt so awkward. My stomach was churning and my face was flushed with embarrassment. “I can just leave. I’m sorry.”

“See, Raine?” Evelyn said. “She’s got a lick of sense. She knows when to cut her losses and run. Perhaps you should learn from her.”

I edged toward the door. I was consumed by a sense that Evelyn was like a dangerous dog, that she’d go for me if I turned my back.

“Evee, give me five minutes to explain, this is all going to make sense,” Raine said, then she turned to me and put a hand out to stall my retreat. “Please don’t go, Heather. This is all just a misunderstanding. It’s my fault, I promise, Evee’s not usually this bad.”

“What’s to explain?” Evelyn said. “You had me send you the warding sign so you could impress a girl you met less than twelve hours ago. So you could do what? Tag your conquest?”

“Excuse me?” I bristled and turned a frown on Raine. “Conquest?”

“It’s *not* like that,” Raine said to me. She said it with a smile, with such charm that under different circumstances I would have believed her; I wanted to believe her.

“And worse than that,” Evelyn continued. “You gave her a key to the department, where you knew I was going to be. What on earth were you thinking? She could be anybody.”

Raine turned that same winning smile on Evelyn, but also spread her hands in frustration. “You think I would put you in danger? You think I would let anybody dangerous within a hundred feet of you? You really think I would do that?”

That threw me for a loop. Danger? It had a similar effect on Evelyn too; she visibly dialled back for a moment, awkward and averting her gaze.

“Look,” Raine said. “The reason I brought Heather here is that she’s the real deal. She’s had ... experiences.”

My embarrassment crashed out, replaced with sick realisation; Raine and Evelyn really believed all this stuff, these nonsense supernatural books they had lining the walls. They were playing some melodramatic double-think game that I’d unwittingly wandered into. Or worse, they were recruiters for some exploitative new-age religious group, the lowest rung in some organisation they’d oh-so-gently introduce me to. The supernatural, the implication of danger, the forced drama. I’d read about this sort of thing before. I was the right demographic to be a victim.

“The real deal?” Evelyn rolled her eyes and thumped back down into her chair as my expectations collapsed. She winced and rubbed her left leg. “That’s what you said about the Wiccan, the one who tried to flog healing crystals to me. And the goth who believed she was a vampire. They were both the real deal, until they weren’t.” She turned sharply on me. “What makes you different, dear?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I’m ... I’m a crazy person.”

“Oh, she admits it! Wow, Raine, you really do know how to pick them, well done.”

“She’s not crazy.” Raine sighed with exasperation. “Heather, you’re not—”

“Yes, I am.”

“Please, just tell Eevee what you told me this morning. I promise this is all gonna make sense.”

“No, thank you.” My heart hardened with disappointment and humiliation. All I’d wanted was to hang out with a nice girl for a couple of hours. A girl who’d take the lead, cheer me up, somebody about whom I could maybe fantasise or at least have a fleeting dream. Not this new-age cult-freak stuff. “That was between us. You and me. I can’t ... I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have to explain the whole thing, just the gist of it.” She reached out for my hand but I drew away from her.

“Even if I wanted to, I don’t think I could. I wouldn’t want to vomit all over your nice carpet, would I?”

Evelyn gave Raine a sickly-sweet smile of smug triumph.

“Heather sees things which aren’t there,” Raine said, and I felt my stomach drop out.

“Raine!” I squeaked.

“She was abducted by monsters as a child—taken *Outside*,” Raine said, and I could hear the capital O. “She’s had night terrors and daylight visions since then.”

“Raine, stop! This was between you and me. In confidence.”

“She’s been *Outside*, Evelyn, the real deal. She has lost time, gets dragged back there. Look, the reason I messaged you for the sign this morning was—”

Raine’s brazen betrayal paralysed me as she explained what had happened at the cafe this morning. Evelyn’s eyes narrowed and her expression changed as Raine spoke, but the contempt never lifted.

“Let me get this straight,” Evelyn spoke slowly and quietly when Raine finished. “A girl who sees things which aren’t there claims that when you held up a mystical symbol at one of her hallucinations, it vanished.”

“Yes.” Raine nodded and grinned. “The sign worked.”

“A vanishing you couldn’t see.”

“Right.”

“In fact, you couldn’t see any of this. You don’t have any proof for this except what she says.”

“It was the sign, Eevee. You know it works. And I’m pretty sure it was a servitor, it was following me and—”

“We are not going to talk about that in front of other people,” Evelyn said. “It was a placebo effect, Raine. You’ve picked up a sick girl off the street and convinced her you’re doing magic.”

Raine actually laughed. “We are doing—”

I raised my voice. “It was a placebo effect.”

“Thank you, Heather,” Evelyn said. “Thank you.”

“How is this any different to your situation, Eevee?” Raine asked.

“My situation? *My* situation? Oh yes, please, Raine, that’s going to

get you out of the doghouse, comparing me with a verifiable lunatic.”

Despite everything, curiosity prickled me. Was Evelyn like me? I’d never met anybody with similar issues who I could talk to. All the other high-functioning schizophrenics at Cygnet Hospital had been teenage boys, much older than me while I’d been there.

“Your ... your situation?” I asked.

“Is *private*, thank you very much.”

“Evee, the whole point of bringing her here is to help her,” Raine said. “The sign helped her, it kept her nightmares at bay. It worked!”

“Great. Wonderful. Then go help her. Take her home. Feed her. Potty train her.”

“Will you stop?” I said, incensed at last, but Evelyn didn’t even bother to look at me.

“What you get up to with your weird little friends is none of my business, really,” Evelyn said. “I don’t know why I bother.”

“Evee, I know there are—” Raine shot a glance at me before she continued, lowering her voice. “Rituals you can do. Methods for figuring out exactly what’s wrong with Heather, what’s haunting her.”

Evelyn looked at Raine as if she’d bitten into a lemon. “She is haunted by her own brain chemistry. Deal with it, Raine.”

Raine lifted her chin, voice low and serious. “If you won’t help her, then I’ll write to your dad instead. He’s still got contacts.”

“Oh, he’d love that, yes. You know he prefers to pretend you don’t exist, that I freed myself with—” Evelyn flicked a glance at me and suddenly cut off, as if she’d forgotten I was there.

I couldn’t stand this anymore. The disappointment, the third-wheel feeling, the pounding in my head. I boiled over.

“You two really believe all this stuff, don’t you? I’m not your kind of crazy.”

“Heather, it’s not like that.”

“Oh?” Evelyn smirked, razor-thin. “Then please, enlighten me. What exact manner of nutcase are we dealing with this time, Raine?”

The way she looked away from me to Raine broke a fragile little thing inside me. I raised my chin. Made myself stand tall and straight.

“Schizoaffective disorder,” I said, and was rewarded with the snap of Evelyn’s attention back to me. I tried to keep my voice steady and defiant as I used my dirty little secret like a bludgeon. I was halfway successful, but I felt shameful and disgusted at myself. “With co-morbid hallucinatory and dissociative episodes, with non-specific triggers. That’s what I was diagnosed with as a child, thank you.”

Evelyn raised an eyebrow as if she expected more, but I’d run out of angry words. My chest tightened, a lump grew in my throat, but I wasn’t going to give either of them the satisfaction of seeing me cry. I still had the key in my right hand, so I slammed it down on the table, turned on my heel, and made for the door.

I got halfway down the philosophy department corridor before they stopped shouting at each other. I’d been forcing myself not to run, but in the main stairwell Raine came after me, calling my name, and I broke.

“Heather, come on, wait! It’s not what you think it is!”

I almost tripped down the stairs in haste to escape her false promises. I was such an idiot, what had I been expecting? I sniffed back tears as Raine rounded the stairs behind me.

“Heather, let me help, please.”

“You’ve helped enough!”

I didn’t look back.

On the other side of the stairwell window, my hallucinations raged in the pouring rain, driven to frenzy by my distress. Two scythe-sharp flying shapes tore at each other, trailing black blood and fragments of hissing, burning metal as they fell past, outpacing my own stumbling progress down the stairs. A wounded giant staggered in the distance beyond campus, a four-legged hulk pushing against some invisible force. The giant predatory birds were fighting in the courtyard, spilling molten viscera across the concrete. The thing

which had been climbing the library earlier was now atop the building, head open like a flower of flesh, discharging spores the size of footballs.

Raine made a grab for my arm on the last flight of stairs and succeeded in turning me to face her for a moment. She was smiling in the same reassuring way she had that morning, warm and welcoming and promising help.

“Heather, it’s okay—”

“Leave me alone,” I tried to say, but my voice came out as a wretched scratch and I pulled away, almost fell over, stumbling and skipping steps, clutching my coat around myself as I finally hit the ground floor and fled out into the rain.

* * *

An hour later, my hair still damp, I sat on the bed and stared at my parents’ number in my mobile phone.

Raine had tried to call me three times. I’d blocked her. I dreaded a knock on my door and had to remind myself that I’d only walked her to the block of flats. She didn’t know which unit was mine.

What had I lost? The last remaining scraps of my dignity, and the sliver of hope that Raine had given me that morning.

I’d never felt so humiliated, not even in Cygnet with the other crazy people, poked and prodded and drugged. I’d been willing to accept the illusion, to humour Raine in exchange for some transient warmth, an afternoon of friendship, a hand to hold. Couldn’t even have that.

Friends weren’t for me. Lovers even less. My headache was coming back, the pressure mounting behind my eyes.

Time to leave. I pressed the dial button.

“Heather, dear, how nice to hear from you,” my mother answered. She seemed so far away on the other end of the phone.

“... Heather?”

I couldn’t get the words out. I’d intended to rip the plaster off as

quick as I could, tell her I was done, I needed to come home, I was giving up. I'd even rehearsed the words: *Mum, I need help. You were right, I can't do this.*

"Heather? Heather? I can't hear you, dear, there's no sound on my end. Can you hear me?" She tutted and sighed as I struggled to open my throat.

She ended the call and I sat there in the growing dark. A tentacle grew across the far wall of my apartment, a thick black rope of pulsing muscle, bleeding phantasmal blood into the sink below. The phone jumped in my hand. My mother calling back. I gathered myself and answered.

"Hi Mum. No, I think the phone malfunctioned. I think I pressed the wrong key. Yes, yes, of course. No, just calling to say hi, see how you and Dad are. Oh, I'm fine, I just ate dinner. Got caught in the rain earlier, sort of enjoyed it though, but I'm dry now, don't worry."

The fluidity of my lies surprised me. As I spoke to my mother, I cursed Raine. She'd given me this little glowing mote of promise and now I couldn't let it go. Sleep without nightmares had bolstered my reserves. Maybe that was all I needed. Maybe the proof that placebos worked would hold the Eye at bay.

After I finished lying and ended the call, I did something very unhealthy.

I needed comfort, real comfort, and there was only one unconditional source of that in my life. I got into bed and hugged my pillow to my chest and closed my eyes.

And I allowed myself to remember her name.

I thought about Maisie.

My twin.

I wasn't supposed to remember her. She'd never been real, she was a schizophrenic brain-ghost, and the more I reinforced those neural pathways the harder it would be to ever let her go. But I saw her every time I looked in the mirror at my own face. Maisie, who I'd spent ten years of childhood alongside, doing everything together, playing together, growing together. We'd creep into each other's beds and cuddle in the dark and fall asleep together. Sit with our

heads together. Hold hands and laugh together. Fight and push and play and live.

I clung to the memory of cuddling my twin. I pictured it and felt it now, made the pillow into her, conjured up all the comfort and warmth I'd wanted from Raine. I imagined the things Maisie and I would say to each other, things I was really just saying to myself. What would Maisie think of Raine? If only she were here, I'd feel stronger. But if she never existed then she's just me, so she *is* here. Maisie was always with me, and I can do this.

Afterward, I cried a bit. I'm not ashamed to admit it.

That night I was careful not to scrub the fractal design off the back of my hand, but I didn't renew it with a marker pen. It wasn't real, after all. It was all in my head. I could do this with willpower alone.

* * *

The fractal lasted three days until it washed off.

I slept, recharged, ate, and prayed I wouldn't bump into Raine or Evelyn on campus. Three days of denying my nightmares, of letting the pressure build up on the other side of sleep. Three days of telling myself the distant ringing in my ears was just fluid draining. Three days of pretending I was normal.

One morning I did bump into Raine; I spotted her on my way to a lecture and my heart missed a beat. Couldn't mistake that leather jacket or her easy rolling walk. She was so pretty it hurt to avoid her, to double back and pretend I hadn't seen her, to keep walking fast in case she'd spotted me. I hid like a rat.

The next day, in the university library, my luck ran out.

Standing deep in the stacks, my hand halfway to a book, I noticed the fractal was too faint to make out anymore.

The distant ringing sound sharpened, somewhere beyond the range of human hearing, felt in the centre of my head. I tried to focus through the sudden spike of headache. I'd come to the library to read, and I was going to have a nice afternoon with the books and write half an essay. The fractal was just a placebo, this was all in

my head. All in my head. It had washed off, so what? It meant nothing. I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed my face.

My hand came away covered in blood. A nosebleed.

My gut clenched and my vision lurched sideways. I flailed to catch myself on the shelves, smearing blood, knocking books over and clutching the metal frame, pain far away as the world wavered and spun.

I Slipped.

mind; correlating – 1.3

Slipping was never the same twice.

Once, when I was twelve years old, it gripped me as I stepped into the shower. A jerk and a twist and another world bloomed around me; I crept naked for hours through a rotting jungle beneath a throbbing black sun. My parents found me curled up under my bed, drooling and insensible. When I was a little older I went missing in the middle of school. Everyone recalled I'd been in biology class, but I never arrived at maths. I'd rounded a corner behind my classmates and felt a tug at the base of my spine. I had looked back for a moment and found the school hallways replaced by a labyrinth of windowless metal corridors, with ceilings so high they vanished into a lightless void. I'd wandered through strange echoes until I turned up in the gym, crying softly at the shapes I'd seen moving in the darkness.

Sometimes a Slip was imperceptible, but other times I had a moment to brace, to pull myself back from the brink. Often it left me wracked with nausea, my head twisted all wrong around reality's sharp angles.

After three days of denying the Eye, the Slip hit me like a train.

No time to pull myself to my feet, let alone brace against the library shelves. All I could do was cling on where I'd fallen.

An alien tang of iron and ozone invaded my nose and mouth, a wind from Outside. Grit and stone shifted beneath my shoes even as I still felt the library shelves against my palms. My guts roiled and my head throbbed as if trying to burst. I told myself not to lose control, don't vomit on the library books, swallow whatever comes up. At least nobody was there to witness this. Nobody in that part of the university library to see the crazy girl having an episode.

Nobody to call for help if I passed out and choked on my own sick.

Had to stay conscious. Panic gave me the strength to pull myself up against the shelves.

Then the shelves vanished, went out from under me, and I fell face-first into the dust and ash of some other place.

I'd Slipped.

I sprawled, skinned my hands, smacked my knees, and narrowly avoided bouncing my head off the ground. A low whine of pain escaped my throat as I drew my hands toward my chest, to cradle the shallow, bleeding scrapes. I rolled onto my side and took a moment to catch my breath.

Giant rock pillars reached up toward a sky the colour of rotten apricot. The ground looked like cold grey lava frozen in mid-flow, studded with metallic outcrops. The air carried a foul chemical tang. Humanoid shapes stalked in the distance with jerky thrashing motions, obscured by banks of low mist.

"No, no," I hissed. Slipping was bad enough. Inhabited places were so much worse. I had to get up, get away. Hide.

I struggled to my knees and my head spun. I clenched my eyes shut and spat blood onto the rocks and—

And I was back in the library for a split second, spitting nosebleed and phlegm onto the carpet.

I blinked; back in the Stone-world.

That was new.

For one horrible moment of bright blazing hope I thought I might be able to shock myself out of this Slip, like waking from a bad dream. I screwed my eyes shut and put my bloody hands over my ears and focused and prayed and told myself none of this was real, it was all in my head, my schizophrenia trying to kill me.

"No place like home, no place like home," I whispered over and over.

Hey, it worked for Dorothy.

I opened my eyes and saw stone pillars and mist and almost sobbed with failure. Then a mad idea struck me. I grabbed my left hand and tried to make out the faint remains of Raine's fractal. Needed something to write with. My bag was right next to me on the floor in the library, but I couldn't touch it over here in the Stone-world.

But I could, really. Because none of this was real.

I spent precious moments scrabbling at the unyielding stone, trying to feel for my bag, wincing at the grazes on my hands and wiping

nosebleed on my sleeve. The chemical mist seeped into my clothes, cold and clammy. The shapes concealed in that mist shambled closer, less and less human with every step.

No bag. Nothing to touch.

I hunched up small and did the only thing I could think of; I dabbed a fingertip in the blood dripping from my nose and tried to trace the outline of Raine's fractal. My finger was too wide, the blood too slippery, my hand shook too much. I strangled a whine in my throat. What good was a placebo if I couldn't use it?

No way out. No way back. Why had I seen that moment of the library? Just to torture me? There must be a way out.

There must be some mechanic that governs this, I thought.

The wrong thought.

A fragment of the Eye's lessons burst into the forefront of my mind, summoned from the dungeon of the subconscious by my desperate need to escape. A twisting, impossible knot of mathematics grabbed my mind like a bunched fist. I doubled up with the sudden pressure in my head and vomited onto the stone ground. I spat and whined and sobbed, and the sound drew the creatures in the mist toward me, their knobbly heads twitching and whirring.

Out, the equation spelled on the surface of reality.

I dry-heaved and struggled to stay upright, the edges of my vision blurring as darkness closed in.

The equation completed. Searing, white-hot, razor-sharp needles in my brain. I blacked out.

A moment of the stone ground beneath my cheek—then nothing. I slid through darkness. At least I'd passed out face down. Couldn't choke on my own sick.

Then I felt a hand.

In the non-space between dream and the waking world, between reality and schizophrenic illusion, somebody held my hand. It was small and clammy, and grabbed my own with frantic urgency.

The hand gripped tight enough to hurt, crushed my fingers. Another hand joined it—or at least a couple of fingers did, a stump or two, half a hand. It grasped my wrist in panic, holding on against some

tearing force trying to pull us apart.

Don't let go!

I couldn't see or hear, but I felt the pleading in my bones: *Please don't let go!*

I wasn't strong enough. I tried to help, to reach out and hold on, but the dream ripped us away from each other. I slipped down into merciful unconsciousness.

* * *

"Heather? ... Hey, Heather? Time to wake up ... You are breathing, right? Right."

I woke in a rush with no idea where I was, squinted my bleary eyes against the light, and struggled up out of a sucking quicksand feeling which turned out to be just some cushions. I coughed and hacked and gasped for breath, my heart going a hundred miles an hour.

A gentle grip on my shoulders eased me back down.

"Hey, hey, easy, easy," a voice purred.

Raine's face came into focus as my vision cleared, her eyebrows knotted in concern. I found armrests and worked out I was half-reclined in a big armchair.

"What—"

"Hey, Heather, just breathe, breathe. You're fine, you're absolutely fine. Just breathe for a moment, don't think about anything else. Just breathe."

Raine took deep breaths herself to set the pace. It worked—I copied her breathing and my heart rate dialled down. She nodded encouragement as we went. She was the best thing I'd seen in days.

Behind her were the overstuffed bookshelves and the soft, shaded glow of the Medieval Metaphysics room. I cast left and right, suddenly horrified that Evelyn might be here too, but the other armchairs were empty.

"It's just us, Heather. Just me here."

"Okay, okay."

I felt drained by the Slip, my head stuffed with cotton wool. I wiped my face on my sleeve and it came away smeared with half-dry blood. My hands throbbed with dull pain from the grazes and cuts.

Raine crouched down in front of me to match my eye level.

"Heather, I need you to do me a really big favour. I need to go somewhere for five minutes, can you wait here until I get back? Don't try to get up, don't go anywhere, just wait here and I'll be right back."

I levelled as much gaze as I could muster. "I'm not a child."

"Yeah, but you're also very obviously not okay. If I'm gonna get some water and a towel to help you clean up, I gotta know you're not gonna try to stand up and fall over."

"... okay, I'll ... yes. Thank you. Sorry."

Raine stood and—to my surprise—ruffled my hair. "Promise?"

"Promise?"

"Yeah, promise you're not gonna run off?"

"I hardly think that's needed ... but okay, I promise."

Raine was true to her word. She was gone less than five minutes, then returned with a bottle of water and paper towels, but her brief absence gave me time to recover and think, time to transmute confusion into suspicion. How had I moved here from the library? I couldn't help but notice she locked the door behind her when she left, then threw the latch again to lock us in when she came back.

This was the second time Raine had helped me clean up after an episode, and she was no less patient and gentle than the first. That made me like her way too much for my own good. I felt pathetic and needy. She perched on the arm of the chair and helped me wipe my face, rubbed my back as I scrubbed at the sticky blood under my nose, and handed me the water to wash the taste of vomit out of my mouth. She took off her leather jacket and I found her bare forearms very distracting, until she produced a bottle of antiseptic hand gel, because then I was too busy wincing as I rubbed it into my grazed palms.

Raine tilted her head to peer at the back of my left hand. “Ah, it washed off. I guess that explains what happened?”

“Mmhmm. Suppose so ... ”

Discomfort grew in the silence. The plain embarrassment I should have felt was muted underneath days-old humiliation and a growing terror of Raine herself.

How else could I have gotten here?

“Here, sorry,” I said. I handed her the wadded-up mess of bloody paper towels. Raine smiled and touched my head lightly with her fingertips, then got up to dump the paper towels into the bin. My throat constricted at the sight of her back, and I blurted out my thoughts, with no plan. “You brought me here, didn’t you? You found me passed out in the library.”

Raine stared at me for a second as if she’d only just realised how crazy I was, then laughed.

“Please, Heather, give me some credit. If I found you unconscious in the library I’d call an ambulance. Hell, I’d do that for anybody passed out, anywhere, except perhaps in the recovery position after some heavy drinking.”

“Then how else could I have gotten here?”

Raine cocked an eyebrow at my tone and made a show of looking me up and down. “You know, I think I could carry you. You’re small enough. But across campus and up all those stairs in Willow House? Without anybody seeing? Naaaah.”

“Then you— you must have done it. There’s no other way.” The lump in my throat grew larger. There had to be an explanation.

“We could test it if you want, just to prove the point. I’ll princess-carry you up and down the stairwell until you’ve had enough.”

Raine cracked one of those grins which made my legs melt. She flexed her arms like a bodybuilder—Raine was willowy but wiry, and without the jacket on she did look quite well toned indeed.

“You want a guided tour of the gun show?”

I shook my head and had to look away. Started to blush.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I managed. “I ... sorry.”

“Hey, it’s cool, no worries. See, I was going to ask you the exact

same thing.” Raine sat down in one of the empty armchairs—not Evelyn’s, which was conspicuously occupied by a pair of neatly folded throw blankets.

“What?” I asked.

“How *did* you get in here?”

I blinked at her, lost.

“The door was locked,” Raine explained. “I locked it myself early this morning, and you were asleep in that chair when I got here. So unless you had a copy made of the key, before you, uh ... left it here, then you somehow entered a locked room. Or, you know, you’ve got a secret past as a master cat burglar and safe cracker, which would be seriously cool. You know how to pick locks?”

“I ... I don’t know, no. It must have been unlocked. I had an episode, a—” I frowned, came up short, and recalled the touch of a disfigured hand. “Wait a moment, Evelyn could have let me in, and then left.”

“She’s not on campus today,” Raine said instantly. Her certainty threw me off for a moment.

“How can you be so sure?”

Raine gave a sheepish smile. “Even when we’re having a set-to, I always know where she is. She’s at home all day today.”

“Oh, right. Fair enough.”

I lapsed into silence. Raine waited with a little ghost of a smile still gracing her lips. I couldn’t keep my thoughts from her, something about the way she looked at me. Maybe I was just an easy mark, a sucker for her type. I sighed and gave up. “It’s difficult to trust you. I’m sorry.”

“To trust anybody? Or me in particular?”

I gave her another little glare, the most I could summon. “You in particular.”

“Why’s that?”

She asked without a hint of defensive posture, no how-dare-you-not-trust-me in her voice, just curiosity. I wondered if it was an act.

I gestured at the bookcases along the wall, the rows of occult titles and new-age pagan authors and silly nonsense in Latin and Greek. The old book on the table was gone, along with the sheaf of notes and the little goat statue. I forced myself to sit up straight and argue my case.

“You really believe in all this stuff, don’t you? And so does Evelyn.”

“What, those?” Raine did a double take at the books. “That stuff’s mostly performance art, mass-market paperbacks, and Dark Ages fantasies written by monks. Gets pretty boring in a monastery with nothing but a load of dudes around, I guess.”

“But everything you said before, it sounded ... ”

“You think Evelyn would keep the real thing out in the open like that?” Raine grinned.

“Then I was right. You do believe in some supernatural mumbo jumbo.”

“Heather, this room is always locked. You didn’t have a key. You had a ‘Slip,’ didn’t you? That’s what you called it, yeah? Please tell me I’m getting it right, because I’m very, very interested in you—and in your condition.”

“That doesn’t mean I somehow teleported in here,” I said, a little harsher than I’d intended. “Yes, I—I had a Slip, in the library, and I passed out. Or I thought I passed out, but obviously I was sleepwalking. A fugue state, whatever.”

I trailed off and felt awful after my mini outburst, but Raine just nodded for me to go on. I rubbed at my grazed palms and took my time.

“Sometimes, after a Slip, I wake up in a different place, because I lose time, I walk around, my body autopilots, I don’t know. So I must have left the library and walked here, and the door happened to be unlocked. Nothing supernatural about it.”

Raine glanced at the blanket-shrouded windows. “It’s pretty packed out there on campus today, despite the crap weather.”

“ ... so?”

“So you think you walked across campus with blood all down your face, and nobody said anything? Nobody called campus security?”

Nobody took you by the shoulder and asked you what's wrong?"

I shrugged and tried to ignore the chink in my explanation. "People don't care."

Raine laughed softly. "Heather, this is Sharrowford, not London. It's not a crime to speak to a stranger in public. Especially a girl with blood all down her face."

I shrugged again, shrinking from this line of thought. Raine took a deep breath and leaned forward in her chair.

"But you're right, yeah," she said. "To be totally honest, Eeve and I are into some 'supernatural mumbo jumbo' pretty hardcore, and you know, Eeve would love to hear it put like that. No joke, she'd get a kick out of it."

"Great," I muttered. "So you're crazy too."

"Yeah, well, we've had ... experiences. Our situation is kinda unique. When I met you the other day, I thought maybe we could do some good, for you. You're not crazy, Heather. You're haunted."

"... can you show me any proof?" I meant to stop there, but the words kept coming, sceptical and biting. "Werewolf pelt on your bed? Summon a ghost? Read my mind? Wave your hands around and shout abracadabra?"

Raine couldn't keep a smile off her face. "How about the mark I drew on your hand? It held the nightmares at bay, right? Eeve's warding sign worked, didn't it?"

"That was a placebo, Raine. I know it was just a psychological trick. There's nothing supernatural about a fancy drawing on my hand. I mean something I can see, something I can't explain away. Can you do that?"

"I can't, no, but—"

"Thought not."

"But Evelyn can. She's really the whole reason I'm here in Sharrowford."

The implication of Raine's words rolled right over my head. I was too busy venting my frustration.

"What on earth was her problem with me, anyway?" I said. "She

was so rude and spiteful. I've never been spoken to like that, and it's not as if I demand a lot of respect."

Raine sighed and her smile turned awkward. She ran a hand through her hair and thought for a moment before answering. "Evee is kinda touchy. She doesn't like new things or having to deal with new people, it scares her. The other day was all my fault, I should have let her know you were coming, or just invited you over to my place instead. She's a total sweetheart once you get to know her, I promise."

Evelyn, scared of me? I didn't believe that. She seemed like a spoiled, smug brat.

A selfish little question snagged a corner of my mind; I couldn't stop myself.

"Is she ... Evelyn, is she your girlfriend?"

Raine opened her mouth and froze for a split second. I scored the delightful if short-lived victory of seeing her blush. "Uh, heh, no, she's ... she doesn't— Well, that's her business, but no, we burnt that particular bridge a long time ago. Also, wow, Heather, you've got one hell of a finely tuned gaydar there."

"No, I haven't. You're just very obvious."

"Am I really? Ah, well, can't complain, can I?"

She did swing my way. What a delight. Pity she was bonkers, and very likely using my sexuality as a weapon.

"Are you and Evelyn in a cult? Is this a recruitment strategy?"

"Cult? Noooo, no no no, oh Heather, Heather." Raine rested her chin in her hand. "That word has a very different definition for us. The whole point of me being here with Evelyn is to avoid cults."

"What, she might start one if you don't keep an eye on her?"

"That would be an idea, wouldn't it? Maybe if you join us, we count as a cult? Two's company but three's a crowd? Maybe you can pitch the idea to her."

"So ... wait, it's really just you and her?"

"Yeah. Serious. Scout's honour." Raine held up three fingers, dead serious. "It's not like there's nobody else aware of us and all this."

There's a couple of people around who we both know, but most of them we try to avoid. We're not in any kind of group or whatever. And hey, I was actually in the Girl Scouts, so you know this counts."

I shook my head and looked away. I wanted to believe her so much, if not about the supernatural stuff then at least that her interest in me was real.

"I'm being a hundred percent honest with you here," she said.

"There's some stuff that's difficult to explain—understatement of the century—but the easiest way is just to have Evee show you. You and her got off on the wrong foot the other day."

"No kidding," I said, then tasted fresh bitterness. "You're not in the clear either. Evelyn's not the only one mad at you. The way you blurted out everything about me, things I told you in private. You talked about me like I wasn't there." A lump formed in my throat. "Betrayal hurts, Raine."

"Ahh, shit. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Heather. I have this thing where I leap before I look, you know?" Her sheepish smile crept back. "It's a bad habit but it gets results. I wasn't trying to betray your trust, I was just thinking on my feet."

I'd wanted her to laugh it off or say it was for my own good, so I'd have an excuse to continue being mad, a reason to keep her at emotional arm's length; instead I got that smile, and an apology, and an excuse based on the very reason I found myself drawn to her.

"In future, try thinking more clearly," I said.

Raine cracked a grin. "In future?"

"Is this how you treat all your 'pity projects'?"

Raine spread her hands. "Look, Evee was being a right bitch when she said that, it was aimed at me. I like to help people, I can't help being the way I am. I've had these run-ins with people like you, but not *like* you, if you get my meaning."

"No, Raine, I don't. Am I just another—"

"You're not *just* anything, Heather. My attempts to help people in the past haven't really worked out, not since Evee herself, but you're the first one who isn't crazy. You're the real deal."

“I am crazy.”

“You’re totally not. Will you come with me to Evelyn’s place? You want proof, she can help with that. And it would be really cool if you and her get along. I’ll call ahead, let her know we’re coming, smooth things over. Plus, her place is her own territory, she’ll be fine. I promise she’s not always like that.”

I let out a huge sigh and levelled a resigned gaze at Raine; she was breaking down all my barriers. “You do realise how wildly irresponsible you’re being?”

“What, in trying to make a friend? You need friends, Heather. Doesn’t take Robin Hood here to know that.”

“No, in telling me I’m not crazy. You can’t say those sorts of things to a person like me, Raine.” My chest tightened as I poured out one of my greatest fears. “I can’t *allow* myself to believe that my hallucinations are real. I can’t risk pretending the supernatural is true. Do you have any idea how unmanageable people like me get when that happens? You won’t like me very much if I start talking to things which aren’t there, screaming at my own brain-shadows. A relapse becomes a downward spiral into a pit. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life institutionalised. It’s terrifying.”

Raine nodded, the grin absent for once. She took a deep breath before speaking. “I won’t let that happen to you.”

That was one of the kindest things anybody had ever said to me. My parents had always wanted me to follow doctors’ orders, take the right drugs, try to be normal; they’d medicalised me. I had to look away from the sincerity on Raine’s face.

“You barely know me,” I said.

“Yeah, but I want to. First step is come meet Evee, properly this time. Please, Heather? For me?”

I wrestled with myself. I wanted Raine—or at least I wanted her attention, her presence, a little warm comfort. I gave in, weak and stupid, and made a bargain with myself, the craziest thing I’d ever done. Perhaps humouring Raine for one day, one night, was worth it. Then I could call my mother and leave before I started to believe my own delusions. Just a day, for myself.

“One condition,” I stammered, my heart in my throat as I clutched

my courage.

“Sure. Anything.”

“Hug. Give me one, I mean. Then I’ll come to Evelyn’s with you.”

A smile blossomed on Raine’s face. “Heeey, sure.” She held out a hand to help me up.

I needed the hand—not because of any post-Slip weakness, but because I was shaking with nervous anticipation. I thought my knees might give way as I stood. My mouth was dry and I couldn’t look Raine in the eyes.

I hesitated.

She pulled me into a hug.

Oh, it was worth the bargain. I knew it was just oxytocin, happy brain chemicals, the ancient alchemy of physical contact, but it felt so good. I hadn’t hugged anybody—except my parents on rare occasion—in years, and those had been brief upper-body affairs. This was the full English breakfast, mushrooms and tomatoes too. Raine wrapped her arms around me and rubbed my back and I couldn’t resist the urge to rest my head on her shoulder. For the first time in a long time, for just a moment, I felt warm and protected, even though I knew those were the exact feelings she was using to bait me. She smelled of cheap detergent and moisturising soap, leather and rain.

She smiled at me when she eventually let go. I nodded an awkward, blushing thank you, embarrassed at how cheaply I’d been bought.

“You want those, I’ll give ’em away for free, you know?” Raine said. I frowned at her.

“Are you certain you can’t read my mind?”

“Sure,” Raine laughed. She pulled her mobile phone out of her jacket. “I’m gonna call Evee, let her know we’re coming over.”

“Are you sure she won’t mind? I don’t want to cause another argument.”

“Not with ample warning. That was the mistake I made the other day. Never surprise Evee, if you can help it.” She smiled at a private joke and stepped away a pace to make the call. I sighed and flapped my arms and noticed my bag was next to the chair. Somehow it had

made the journey from the library too. I must have picked it up without realising during my frantic scrabbling around on the floor.

“Hm. Weird.” Raine frowned at the wall as she held the phone to her ear. She lowered it and stared at the screen. The look on her face made me nervous.

“Raine? What’s wrong?”

“Went straight to voice mail,” she muttered.

“Maybe Evelyn’s phone ran out of battery?”

“No. Never. Her phone’s never supposed to be off. Kind of a safety thing. Even if she’s in the shower, she’ll get out and pick up when I call. We have an arrangement for this.”

“Maybe she took a nap, put it on silent?”

Raine shook her head. “I know when she sleeps. And her phone’s never on silent. I’ll try again, maybe it was a fluke.”

She did. Straight to voice mail.

“You know when she sleeps?” I muttered. *That’s one intimate friendship*, I thought. *Maybe I should be jealous.*

Raine puffed out a big sigh and forced a smile for me. The visible effort did not reassure. “It’s probably nothing, but let’s get moving. One sec.”

Then Raine raised the biggest red flag so far. Possibly the biggest red flag I’d ever witnessed, and I’d spent time in a mental hospital for children. She crossed to the racking which took up one side of the room, reached behind a box, and pulled out a nightstick.

A foot and a half of matte black steel with a projecting side-handle. A sleek, alien object in her soft hands. A riot-police truncheon. I stared, wide-eyed.

She shot me a sheepish grin as she shrugged on her leather jacket, then concealed the nightstick inside.

“What— what is that for?” I asked.

“Insurance.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s illegal to carry. In fact, I’m not even sure it’s legal to own.”

What I didn't say is how dangerously sexy it made her. I could only half admit that reaction to myself. She was *armed*. Part of me said run away, hide, this can only end badly, with you dead in a ditch. The other part of me wanted to find out what the truncheon was for. I was falling hard.

"Yeah, technically." Raine waved a dismissive hand. "But hey, we're not gonna get stopped and searched. Who ever heard of college girls carrying offensive weapons?"

"I-I'm not comfortable with this, Raine."

"It's only insurance." Raine took my hand in hers. "You're probably right. Eevee's been mad at me ever since I brought you up here, so yeah, maybe she's turned her phone off to mess with me. Or maybe it broke. Let's go find out. The stick's just for a worst-case scenario, and that's never happened. You got nothing to worry about, not with me on bodyguard duty."

"You're carrying a weapon," I said softly.

"I know, right?" She cracked a grin.

"This is crazy. You're crazy. I'm crazy. I can't do this."

"Hey, I gave you the hug. Gotta keep your bargains, Heather."

I don't know if it was the grin, the weapon under her clothes, or the lingering warmth of her skin.

I couldn't resist.

mind; correlating – 1.4

I halted at the front gate to Evelyn's house as Raine stepped onto the garden path. When she realised I wasn't following, she turned and raised her eyebrows at me.

"You have got to be joking," I said. "Evelyn lives here? Alone?"

"Her family owns the house. It's complicated. Come on, it'll be fine, she won't bite, not this time."

We'd left campus about twenty minutes ago, skirted the northern side of the student quarter, and crossed over into Sharrowford's frayed eastern edge. Overlarge houses from another era squatted between weed-choked empty lots. Further west, toward the city's core, these sorts of hulks got redeveloped, but out here they were home to the occasional student squat, older people unable to move away, and those poor fools hanging on to second homes in the vain hope of selling them one day. It wasn't unsafe, but it wasn't pretty either.

My hallucinations loved this place. Shaggy mammoths of hide and scale strode across the horizon, ghoulish forms watched us from dark corners but whipped away as we approached, and prowling canine shapes flowed back into the streets behind us as we passed, padding after me with pack curiosity.

I tried to ignore the itch between my shoulder blades, the feeling of being cut off, my retreat blocked.

Raine held my hand nearly the whole way. I hadn't known what to do about that, hadn't wanted to risk commenting on it in case she stopped. At first I was self-conscious. What if somebody saw us? But as we settled into a rhythm of walking, I allowed myself to enjoy the moments of peace and quiet, alongside a person I wanted to trust so badly.

When we stopped in front of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, I wondered for an abstracted moment if Raine was a serial killer, and if this was where she hid the bodies.

Evelyn's house was a late Victorian red-brick monster draped with a mantle of overgrown ivy. A few tiny sash windows peered out into

the street, all of them with curtains drawn. Blue tarpaulin patches peeked out from the damaged slate roof. The garden had gone to seed, grass matted and crowded out by moss, one huge tree in the back rustling in the wind. The garden path was at least clear of debris, but the paving stones were cracked and weathered. Framed by the overcast sky above Sharrowford that afternoon, this house was the last place I wanted to be.

Raine's own obvious trepidation didn't help. She wore her usual encouraging smile as she squeezed my hand and coaxed me over the garden threshold, but a tightness had seized her eyes, a thrumming expectation in her movements.

She'd tried to call Evelyn three more times on the way here. Straight to voice mail. Text messages too, no response.

She finally let go of my hand once we reached the front door, and shot me an attempt at a reassuring look. "Seriously, Heather, take a deep breath, it's gonna be fine this time, I swear."

I nodded and reminded myself that I wasn't doing anything that crazy. A girl I sort of liked was trying to get me to be friends with her best friend, that was all. A little social effort and risk. They also both believed in the occult. Oh well.

What was the alternative? I glanced down the street at the swarm of hallucinations blocking my way out. Didn't fancy walking back alone, shouldering my way through the claws and reeking fur and alien drool. I guessed that was my subconscious telling me I wanted this.

Raine pulled out her bunch of keys and fitted one into the lock.

"You have her door key?" I asked.

"Yeah. Like I said, she's kinda the whole reason I'm here in Sharrowford. You know, look after her, keep certain kinds of people away from her, make sure she doesn't hurt herself." Raine tensed up as she swung the door inward, then relaxed when nothing jumped out at us. She took a step inside and called out. "Evee! Evee, s'me."

I crossed the threshold. Raine closed the door behind us.

I don't believe in love at first sight, but I was smitten with that house's interior from the first step.

The large, open entrance hall probably used to be grand and fancy,

a place to impress social callers. But it had since been hollowed out, re-filled and reused, like a hermit crab's shell. Bare floorboards, cracked plaster, exposed ceiling beams. Less-faded rectangles of cream paint showed where paintings had once hung. Boxes were piled up against one wall, some of them crammed with stacks of paperback books, others filled with odd bric-a-brac, little pewter statues, painted wooden masks, all sorts of strange things I could have spent hours wondering at.

A grandfather clock stood opposite, ticking away the seconds, a beautiful oak and brass relic of the nineteenth century. I'd never seen a real grandfather clock; they were for haunted houses in old movies. I found the sound calming and unwavering. Several thick rugs covered the floor and the heating was turned up against the gathering cold, pumping from a wall-mounted iron radiator, another real relic. I could see the kitchen through one open doorway. A set of creaky-looking stairs vanished up into the darkness of the second floor. Half the room was cast into shadows by the soft ceiling light.

It was so cosy. No manufactured anonymity in sight. The sort of place I wish I dreamed about. I had to remind myself this house belonged to Evelyn, who had been very rude to me. Perhaps we had some taste in common, at least.

Raine cupped her hands to her mouth. "Evee!"

Silence.

"Hmm, well, all her shoes are here, so she must be in." Raine puffed out a long breath. "Evelyn!"

I noticed the shoes scattered by the doorway—old trainers, some big weatherproof boots, a pair of fluffy ugg—along with a coat and an anorak hung up on hooks nearby. A wooden walking stick was propped next to the door. Then I noticed two of the rugs had been rolled up and pushed against the walls to clear a space.

"Are the carpets meant to be like that? ... Raine, what is that?"

We hadn't seen it at first, in the gloom. Raine quickly kicked her shoes off and went for a better look. I slipped my shoes off too and followed her.

It was a magic circle.

Exactly like you might see in those silly books about pagan rituals and summoning demons, all multiple interlocking rings and esoteric symbols, with a few words written in Greek around the edges.

It was drawn with a mixture of chalk and dry-erase marker, straight onto the bare floorboards. The chalk and pens lay nearby, along with a sports bottle full of water and a bag of cheese snacks. A big leather-bound book was open on the floor, showing a diagram which looked very much like the magic circle, next to a smaller modern notebook with additions and redesigns of the symbols.

One of my hallucinations brooded in the darkest corner, a hunched, emaciated thing with tiny pinpoint black eyes and thin bones, skin stretched over bulging ribs, twitching to itself and plucking at the ground with blunt claws. A product of my private tension. I did my best not to look.

“Ahh jeez, Eevee, what the hell have you been doing without me?” Raine muttered as she looked down at the circle.

Bile rose in my throat. I had to avert my eyes. The symbols around the edge of the magic circle gave me a terrible sense of *déjà vu*, as if I’d seen them in a nightmare. Great, now new-agey nonsense had become a brand new schizophrenic trigger. Just what I wanted, thank you, Raine.

“This isn’t exactly helping my scepticism,” I said.

Raine looked up and cracked a grin for me. She gestured at the circle. “I don’t even know what this is for. I wish Eevee had let me know what she was up to. Could be anything.”

“Such as pulling a prank on a mentally ill girl she doesn’t like much?” I gave a sad little smile and shook my head to let Raine know I wasn’t entirely serious. Wouldn’t surprise me, though.

“She’d never do that. I mean it, she’s really not that bad if you get to know—”

The bone-thing in the corner stood up and stretched itself as Raine spoke, slow and sinuous, like a cat, clicking and grinding its joints. I couldn’t help but glance at it for a moment. Raine followed my gaze.

Her grin died. Her eyes went wide.

“R-Raine?”

“Heather, you see that, right?”

Raine didn't wait for an answer. She grabbed my arm and pulled me away, hard enough to make me stumble, and put herself between me and the creature.

The bone-thing stared at us, flexing its claws and unfurling another pair of limbs from its back, delicate arched blade structures tipped with razor-sharp hooks. It clicked and clacked as it whirled its head back and forth, dark grey skin bunching and stretching. The air filled with the scent of acid-etched metal, iron filings, and blood. All in my head.

“Raine, there's n-nothing there.”

Raine bit the tip of her tongue in concentration. She stared it down. A bullfighter ready for the charge.

The bone-thing swayed one way, then the other, testing its own weight. I tried to slow my breathing.

“Y-you can't see that,” I stammered. “You're f-faking it, you just followed the direction of my eyes. Raine, stop—”

The bone-monster screamed and leapt.

It sprang toward us on kangaroo legs, claw-tipped arms hissing through the air, screeching through a lamprey mouth of ringed teeth. The sound felt like blades rubbing together inside my head, the too-thin bones of its face and naked chest vibrating under pressure.

I'd like to think that under other circumstances I could have ignored it. I'd ignored hallucinations doing much worse before. Instead I squealed and flinched and fell down on my arse with a thump.

In that moment I hated Raine. I hated her for making me suspect a figment of my diseased mind was real, for exploiting my illness, for humiliating me, for terrifying me with my own brain-ghosts.

Raine was ready for it.

That's kind of what Raine does; she takes the impossible in her stride.

She yanked the nightstick out of her jacket, flipped it in her hand, wound up—and smashed the bone-thing's charge to a dead stop.

I couldn't make sense of what I was seeing. I sat there like a lemon, unable to process my own sensory data. To be fair, Raine hardly needed any help.

Her first strike caught the bone-thing across the chest. Apparently those thin ribs weren't very robust, because they shattered under the stainless steel club, along with my sense of reality. Raine followed through as the monster's screech warbled out and it crumpled up around its ruined chest, spurs of grey rib poking from ragged holes. One bone-tipped limb groped for Raine as she ducked out of the way. She whacked it in the back of the head and it flopped down in a heap, twitching and jerking on the floorboards. She aimed a good hard kick at the thing's neck, connected with a wet *crunch*, then hopped back a couple of steps.

"Woool!" Raine let out a victory whoop and shook herself all over, heaving deep shuddering breaths in and out.

When she turned to me, she was grinning. She'd been grinning the whole time.

My hallucination was real and my cute new friend was high on violence. A small, dutiful, still-functioning part of my mind managed to file these facts away for later before the rest of me succumbed to numb panic.

"Don't look at me," I said. "Make sure it's dead first!"

"What? Oh, yeah." Raine laughed and turned back to the bone-thing. She flipped the nightstick over in one hand and broke the monster's fragile spine. At least, I assumed it had a spine. It stopped twitching a few moments later. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

Raine ran her free hand through her hair and blew out a long, slow breath. She forced herself down from whatever psychological precipice she was flirting with. I tried to get up but found my legs were made of jelly.

"Hey, hey, lemme help." Raine took my hand, pulled me to my feet, and braced me against her side until we were both sure I could stand unaided. She squeezed my shoulder. "I remember the way it felt, my first time seeing weird shit. Take a moment, okay? Take your time."

"I'm fine, I'm okay ... Thank you." All I could do was stare at the dead monster on the floor. Raine frowned in my peripheral vision.

“Sure about that, Heather?”

The world seemed very far away. The dead monster on the floor expanded to fill all my senses—the grainy, pitted texture of the grey skin, the smell of acid and metal in the air, the folded and crimped flesh around the claws, the spurs of bone poking through the ripped meat of the ruined ribcage, the pooling blood leaving awful stains on the floorboards.

“Heather? Hey, Heather, look at me.” I ignored Raine and gently pushed away from her, then stepped forward and poked the dead monster with my shoe.

It was solid enough. Weighty. It had mass. I pushed harder, felt the flesh yield and the bones resist.

Then, I gave it a little kick.

“How is this real?” I asked, and the hysteria gripped me at last. “How is this real, Raine?” I turned on her and spread my arms in a shrug, as if this was all her fault. “This thing even looks stupid, it looks like a rubber-suit monster from a horror film. And it’s real. It’s real. I can touch it. How can this be a real thing?”

I was breathing too hard, my chest tight and my throat constricted.

“This is nonsense,” I said.

Raine laughed. “You’re gonna be fine, Heather. You know, I thought you’d go into a full-on crying jag. This is pretty much the last way I wanted to introduce you to the real world, but you’re taking this great. Good on you.”

I shot her a dark look. This was, in a way, still her fault. Ignorance was not bliss, but it was better than this.

Raine smiled at me, and I almost couldn’t deal with that. She still held the nightstick, smeared with the creature’s oily black blood. It was right there, dead on the floor a few feet from the magic circle, and she’d killed it. Ten seconds ago she’d committed the most brutal act of physical violence I’d ever witnessed. Wasn’t anything like reading about it. I felt shaky and numb.

And I found her *irresistible*.

My brain didn’t have any spare bandwidth to deal with the implications of Raine’s violence high or my gut response. I quietly

filed away a question—*Am I attracted to dangerous people, or just likely psychopaths? How did I not know this before?*—then crashed back to reality as the adrenaline drained away.

“Quick and really important question,” Raine was saying. “I’m guessing you don’t see any other hallucinations in here, right?”

“No, no, I haven’t done. I mean I don’t. And I better not do.”

“And you didn’t in Willow House, either?”

“How do you know that?” I frowned at her.

“Sneaking suspicion. We’ve got both here and Willow warded against intrusion by various things, and I think it’s dampening whatever causes your visions. So, if you see anything, it’s probably really here. Shout if you see something, yeah?”

I raised both hands in surrender, still teetering on the edge of hysteria. A strange laugh entered my voice. “I can’t— Raine, I can’t — I can’t process this. Okay? I can’t process this. What does this mean?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you. It means you’re not crazy.”

“Yes, I am. One monster—which, okay, I’ll admit it’s probably not made of paper-mache and chicken wire—does not explain a lifetime of hallucinations and blackouts. One dead freakshow does not negate schizophrenia.”

“You’re not schizophrenic. I mean, you’re probably not. You might have a touch of it anyway, I don’t know for sure, but that’s not the point. You ain’t crazy, Heather. You’re touched, you’re haunted, and it’s not your fault.”

“What even is this thing?” I gestured down at the monster. “Where did it come from? What’s it doing here? These are basic things that make no sense, Raine!”

“Oh, I have no idea.” Raine laughed. “Evelyn, she ... uh.” Raine’s smile died as realisation returned. “Evelyn might. Ahh, fuck.” She turned and raised her voice, calling to the empty spaces of the cavernous old house. “Evelyn! Evee!”

“Maybe she’s hiding?”

“Maybe.” Raine glanced down at the monster’s corpse. “No red blood on it, that’s a good sign. Right.”

“ ... right, yes.” I swallowed, hard and involuntary.

Raine grabbed my hand. “Come on, stick with me, in case there’s more of them.”

The frantic search for Evelyn acted as a firebreak on my mounting hysteria, gave me a task to focus on, even if I was just tagging along. Raine’s panic helped as well, raw and real and turned to practical ends. She checked corners and slammed doors open and shouted for Evelyn.

Half the light switches in the place didn’t work. The floorboards creaked and the windows let in precious little light. The rooms were a jumble of old, stately furniture and junk piled up in crates and under sheets, except for Evelyn’s comfy, pastel-filled bedroom, where the bed was piled with layers and a laptop lay abandoned in the middle of a huge slab desk. Raine darted into a study packed with books, then took the stairs back to the ground floor three at a time. She leapt the last half dozen. I struggled to keep up.

I wish my first impression of Evelyn’s house had been less tainted by the circumstances. I could have spent days going through those books and peering at the mysterious contents of all those crates. So many nooks and crannies, hidden secrets, rooms full of surprises.

Evelyn wasn’t there.

Back in the front room Raine seemed lost. We’d covered the whole house. She looked at the nightstick in her hands and stared at the bone-thing’s corpse for a moment. Then she started toward the front door before thinking better of it. I struggled not to look at either the dead body or the magic circle on the floor. The circle tickled at the edge of my mind, taunting me to pay attention.

“Maybe she went outside?” I tried.

“Nah, not without her cane.” Raine jerked a thumb at the wooden walking stick propped up against the wall. “She wouldn’t get very far.”

“She needs a cane?”

“Fuck, why can’t I find her mobile phone anywhere?”

“She must ... must be here somewhere,” I said. Which was a lie. I did not believe I was correct.

Because Evelyn wasn't here, was she? She was wherever those ethereal winds had taken her. That unmistakable disfigured hand clutching at my wrist, desperate to hold on.

In a dream, in a hallucination.

In a place only I could go.

Raine's panic, the distraught look on her face, allowed me to entertain a line of thought I had kept locked and bottled and shuttered for a decade, since I was a scared little girl crying for a twin sister who had never existed.

What if all this was real?

Evelyn had insulted and humiliated me. She was a clear competitor for Raine's attention. I owed her nothing. What sense was there in risking myself for her? That's what a sane person would have thought, a self-interested rational actor with a healthy sense of caution.

You know what I thought?

Nobody deserves Wonderland.

I forced my eyes down to the magic circle on the floor. The interlocking design and the symbols meant nothing to me, but my subconscious understood. All those buried lessons from the Eye. The magic circle described more than words; it was a species of mathematics.

The inside of my skull tingled with pressure pain and my stomach clenched with tension.

I squinted and concentrated. The pain climbed as I dredged my memory, trying to connect the circle to the underlying principles I'd been taught over and over again. I hunched up around my chest, my mouth bone-dry, back drenched with sudden cold sweat.

Raine stared at me. "... Heather?"

My eyes teared up, stinging and aching as a great wave built behind them. I hiccuped and tasted bile in my throat, acid reflux as my body rebelled. I wrapped my arms around myself to control the shaking.

"Heather? What's wrong?"

The relevant lesson burst into my conscious mind, a nightmare-ghost, a present from the Eye.

It was the mental equivalent of plunging my hand into boiling water; I whipped my mind back and howled in pain, gritting my teeth and squeezing my eyes shut as the pressure in my head slammed to a blinding spike.

I made it into Evelyn's kitchen and got my face over the sink before I vomited, once, twice, three times, until my stomach muscles clenched shut on nothing. My vision blurred and a high-pitched whine invaded my hearing as a nosebleed started. I coughed and snorted out blood and pinched the bridge of my nose.

Raine joined me at the sink, hands on my back. "Heather! Shit, what happened?"

"I can do this," I said between heaving breaths, and wiped my mouth on my hand. I turned the tap on and splashed my face with water. It ran pink with blood. "I can do it."

"Do what? What? What are you talking about?"

"I can—I can— don't— don't touch me, it might not work." I pushed Raine away and stumbled back into the front room as fast as I could. Raine grabbed my arm.

"Heather, hey, whoa, come—"

"Don't!" I yanked my arm out of her grip and almost fell over as I lurched back toward the magic circle.

"Heather, now is not— I need to find Evelyn, please."

"I'm trying! I know where she went!"

I forced myself to stare at the circle. For a moment I shied away from both the pain and the implication of what I was trying to do.

I owed Raine. She'd saved me, in a way, that morning in a sad little Sharrowford cafe. She'd given me a sliver of hope and kept me from giving up on life, made me try for one more day, then one more week, and here she was with her best friend—her girlfriend? I didn't care anymore—lost and gone like I had been. On the other side of nowhere. Elsewhere. *Outside*.

I plunged my mind back into the boiling water, back into the Eye's lesson.

My nose streamed with blood and my head pounded as my mind ran impossible pathways. I curled up as my body tried to vomit again, but my stomach was empty. Each piece of the equation burned like molten metal, but I forced myself to picture every one with perfect clarity. I was shaking all over, my knees felt ready to collapse, my fingers and toes were numb with pins and needles.

Raine stood at arm's length, one hand outstretched as she hesitated to touch me.

The pain in my head rose to a crescendo as I slotted the last number into place.

Reality collapsed.

I screwed my eyes shut as the angles of the world twisted and inverted and Raine's face ran into a kaleidoscope of colours, certain that I'd be rendered truly, irreversibly insane if I watched the process happen.

A whisper of alien wind brushed my face and left the taste of iron and ozone on my tongue. Grit and stone shifted under my feet. I opened my eyes and saw sky like rotten apricot. The Stone-world from this morning.

I'd Slipped, on purpose. I'd made it happen. It worked.

At least it wasn't Wonderland.

Every muscle ached like I'd been worked over by a gorilla with a rolling pin. My head pounded with an expanding band of red-hot steel inside my skull, and there was a razor-sharp stabbing behind my eyes. I had to lean forward to stop the nosebleed draining down my throat. I'd also drained myself in some other way, some less easily definable way. I was trembling all over, felt weak and bruised inside, in a core place I'd never felt before. A phantom organ.

I squinted through blurred vision across the bleak grey rock of this Outside place. It was so ugly, barren and broken, with towers of stone like arthritic fingers reaching upward. I stood in a natural dip in the landscape, filled with foul-smelling ground fog and surrounded by a jagged ridge.

Shapes prowled that ridge, jerky things with knife-bodies and thin bones, hidden in the mist.

"Evelyn?" I tried to call out, but had to hack and cough and spit to

clear my throat. "Evelyn?"

And there she was.

Evelyn sat with her back against the base of a stone pillar, her knees drawn up to her chest, small and shaking. She gaped at me, speechless, a lump of white quartz held in one hand. Her loose bun of blonde hair was lank and damp from the soaking, sucking fog, and her palms were scuffed, clothes dusted with gravel, eyes red-rimmed from crying.

"... *You?* H-how ... ?" she managed to ask, then glanced up at the figures on the ridge. They'd heard our voices, peering and clicking and creeping down into the dip to find us.

"I felt your hand, this morning," I said. I struggled to stay standing, hands on my knees to hold myself steady.

Evelyn frowned at me. "What? That was you?"

We stared at each other, the magician and the schizophrenic.

Except I wasn't, was I? I wasn't crazy.

No more safety blanket.

mind; correlating – 1.5

“We—” I croaked. “We should leave before I pass out.”

I was trying very hard not to look at the twitching skeletal shapes descending from the ridge, creeping toward us through the mist.

“Leave?” Evelyn’s voice shook. She took a deep breath and used the stone pillar at her back to pull herself up. She was unsteady on her feet, all her weight on her right leg. “Yes, you can do that, can’t you? You—”

Thunder interrupted us.

A rolling crash shook the ground, so deep and so loud it rattled my bones. Evelyn slammed her hands over her ears. I winced and screwed up my eyes. The rotten-apricot sky boiled and bubbled, clouds like sea-tossed oil. The stalking figures in the fog stopped and crouched, as if the skin of the world threatened to buck them off.

Evelyn lowered her hands as we both watched the sky.

“That wasn’t happening earlier,” she whispered. “You can get us out?”

I opened my mouth to explain and a wave of dizziness passed through me. My vision swam, black around the edges. My knees gave out, my feet slipped out from under me, and I struck out with one blood-smeared hand to break my fall.

Evelyn lurched forward and caught me under the armpits.

She hissed with pain as her left leg buckled and we fell together on our knees. At least we weren’t face down in the rocks.

I clung to her shoulders and squeezed my eyes shut as my consciousness ebbed back, along with the throb of pain in my head. Evelyn did her best to hold me up as I sagged, but she wasn’t very strong.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry I let go,” I babbled, gripped by an urge to explain myself, explain why we were here, like I was embarrassed to be rescuing her from this nowhere-place. “This

morning, when I felt your hand, I wasn't strong enough. I-I didn't know I could do this, I thought it was all insanity, I wasn't— didn't think it was real."

"Oh, don't worry, I probably wouldn't have saved me either." Evelyn's voice quivered beneath the veneer of cynicism. I pulled back and she looked at me with mouth agape.

"What? What is it?" I asked.

"Are you aware you're bleeding from around your eyes?"

I wiped my face. My sleeve came away smeared with sticky crimson. "Huh. That's new."

Evelyn looked at me like I was mad. Which I wasn't. Not anymore. Too numb to panic over blood from the eyes. One more misfiring bodily process wasn't worth my attention right then.

We had to get out.

I had to do it all over again, in reverse.

A second peal of thunder ripped through the landscape, juddering our bones and shaking my brain. Evelyn suppressed a scream and dug her fingers into my upper arms. The rotten-apricot clouds bulged downward, a swell in an inverted ocean, surrounded by a churning vortex widening by the second.

"Something knows we're here," Evelyn said. She nodded toward the creatures in the mist. They were less than forty feet from us now, frozen again in the wake of the thunder, clutching at the ground. "They certainly do."

"It's okay, it's fine, it's—"

What was I going to say? It's not real?

Evelyn stared at me, wide-eyed. "We are most certainly not fine."

"Yes, yes, I know, I know."

"Then do it, get us out of here, before—"

Thunder, deeper and longer and louder, the voice of an angry god. We clung to each other, two tiny, soft, vulnerable apes surrounded by stone and metal and sharp blades. The thunder rolled and rolled, for ten seconds, twenty seconds, and just when I thought it was

never going to stop, it began to ebb away.

Evelyn wasn't looking up. She didn't see the sky.

The cloud bulge parted; a black rope of tentacle reached through.

The distance, the scale. That tentacle was wide as a train tunnel.

I tore my eyes away.

"Okay, okay." I felt sick as my mind touched the Eye's lessons. "Just hold on to me. I think I can move both of us. W-well actually I don't know but it's—"

"You *think*? Oh god, can you or can't you?"

"I can. I know I can. It just hurts so much and—"

I never got to finish that sentence, because the world reared up and shook us from its back.

The thunder roared and the ground shuddered. Evelyn and I scrambled to find something to hold on to, slipping and sliding across the floor of the pit, barely clinging to each other. The great black tentacle rushed down toward us. Displaced air washed away the mist, revealing the knife-and-bone creatures all around. They were screeching, screaming as they crouched low to the ground, long claws dug into the rock, hind legs locked against the stone. They'd anchored themselves, like fleas in the hide of a dog.

I realised, in that moment of clarity, exactly what we'd been standing on.

Whatever it was, it was scratching its back.

The ground shook side to side in a sudden burst of motion, so fast that neither of us had time to brace. The first shake threw us against the floor, bruised my hip and the side of my ribs and drew a sharp cry of pain from Evelyn.

The second shake sent us flying.

The ground spun beneath us. The motion tossed our bodies out of the dip in the landscape like rag dolls. It was a miracle neither of us passed out or suffered whiplash. Evelyn's hands clawed my arm and she screamed over the rush of air as we fell, her hair loose and streaming out in the wind.

But I wasn't letting her go this time. I tightened a death-grip around her shoulders.

People with much more courage than me don't have time to think while they're falling from the sky. I certainly didn't think. That might be what saved us. I groped with my mind for the right formula, the correct equation to take us back home.

Out.

My head exploded. For a second I thought we'd hit the ground and this was death, but Evelyn was still screaming.

Then I saw it, grasped it, had it. Not with my eyes, but with my soul, or what passes for a soul in creatures as small as us, compared to the black, dripping truth of the engines and gears of reality I was trying to manipulate.

"Close your eyes!" I screamed, hoping Evelyn could still hear me.

Reality folded up.

* * *

Evelyn and I landed with a soft thump on the floorboards of her front room.

We didn't let go of each other for a very, very long moment, even when Raine scrambled to her feet nearby.

"Evee! Heather! Fuck yes!" She laughed with relief. "How ... what ... ? Actually, screw it, you know what? I'm not gonna look a gift horse in the mouth. This is amazing, I don't care how you did it."

I managed to meet her eyes but I couldn't form any words. My body felt distant, a shell I inhabited on a whim. Evelyn gingerly rolled off me and sat up in a heap.

"You two, holy shit," Raine continued. "I can't believe that worked. Heather, wow, I—"

"I don't know what you're laughing at," Evelyn said. Her voice croaked, thin and strained, but she cleared her throat, and out came

the barbed tongue. "This is all your fault, you realise that?"

"What?" Raine blinked, a goofy smile on her face.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, you know perfectly well what you've done."

"Me?" Raine spread her arms. "Evee, come off it, you're the one who decided to try untested magic without me here."

"Well you should have been here to stop me, shouldn't you?"

Evelyn turned to look down at me. She dropped the scorn she'd used on Raine and met my eyes with naked concern. I tried to blink, but my eyelids felt heavy as iron.

Raine laughed. "I don't believe you. Come off—"

"This is no time for arguing." Evelyn clicked her fingers at Raine. "Get a glass of water, the chocolate in the tin, and painkillers. The good stuff, the co-codamol, and be quick about it."

Raine opened her mouth to argue but then finally realised I wasn't sitting up or saying anything, or indeed moving at all. She ran out of the room. Good Raine, could always rely on her. Shouldn't have distrusted her. It was all real, wasn't it? All of it.

"And you did kill the thing that came through in my place, yes?" Evelyn called after her.

"It's under the bin bags!"

Evelyn returned her attention to me. "Heather, Heather, can you hear me? What you did there was very brave. Oh dear," she whispered. "Please don't die now." She reached down and awkwardly patted my cheek. I realised she was trying to slap me to keep me conscious.

With great effort I managed to turn my head to one side, then heaved with every last ounce of energy I had and rolled myself over into the recovery position. The world went dark for a moment.

Directly across from me lay the dead monster, underneath some black bin liners Raine had draped over its shattered corpse. Poor thing, lost thing, transported to another dimension where nothing made sense, unable to go home, then confronted by two terrifying apes and beaten to death when it had responded in fear. Not fair, was it?

Raine returned and helped pull me into a sitting position, though I whined and resisted. I just wanted to lie down and sleep forever. She held a glass to my lips and made me drink small, sharp sips of cold water. I stared into the middle distance. She broke off a piece of dark chocolate and held it up.

"It's okay, Heather, you don't have to eat a lot."

"You need it for the serotonin," Evelyn said, breaking off several squares for herself. "Best medicine after too much exposure."

I just stared at it. Didn't register as food. Raine shot a wordless glance at Evelyn.

"No, Raine, I have no idea what's wrong with her," Evelyn said. "She did all that with nothing except her own brain. Even my mother couldn't do that. Heather, open your mouth."

I accepted being fed, too heavily dissociated for embarrassment. Sip water, nibble chocolate, repeat; the process went on for ten or fifteen minutes until I began to feel merely exhausted instead of actually dead.

"The ... " I croaked, coughed with a spike of headache pain, then tried again. "The painkillers would be nice."

Raine lit up and sighed with relief.

"She's back, she'll be fine," Evelyn said.

Raine grinned. "I'll bet. Here, courtesy of Evee's supply."

I swallowed the pills with a mouthful of water, then realised I was still smeared with my own blood. I made a half-hearted attempt to wipe my face on my sleeve. "What ... what—"

"Shhh, don't worry about it right now."

"Go run her a bath, we're both filthy," Evelyn said. "And fetch my stick, I'm sick of cowering on the floor."

* * *

By the time I woke, night had fallen on Sharrowford.

The hour after we'd returned from the Stone-world was a soft blur of bodily need and bare consciousness. Raine had helped me up the stairs and into the bathroom. I was barely able to undress myself, all my movements slow and stiff, clothes stuck to skin with half-dry cold sweat. I'd pushed away Raine's well-intentioned help, far too embarrassed to let her strip me. In the end it took me ten minutes just to get my clothes off while she waited in the hallway.

In the bath, I'd drifted off for a long time, soaking in the hot water. Couldn't recall the last time I'd had a bath. Always showers. Less dangerous when you believe you're prone to passing out. Eventually I summoned the energy to wash the blood off my face and the iron tang of that other world off my body. Raine had left me clean clothes, a baggy t-shirt and plaid pajama bottoms, which I assumed belonged to Evelyn. Took an awfully long time to get into them.

I let Raine guide me to Evelyn's bedroom, where she told me to lie down on the bed. She draped a blanket over me and said to sleep as long as I needed. If I'd been tucked into bed by a girl like Raine a few days ago, I would have been over the moon, too excited for sleep, but I passed out the moment my head touched the pillow.

Nothing like a supernatural near-death experience to disarm anxiety disorders. I wouldn't recommend it, though.

Only afterward, sitting up on the mass of Evelyn's quilts and sheets, did I feel a distant twinge of embarrassment about sleeping in another girl's bed.

Streetlight glow filtered around the edge of the curtains, but otherwise the room was dark. The door had been left ajar. I tested the strength in my legs, then wobbled over and peered out into the upstairs hallway. A light shone from downstairs.

I descended the stairs slowly, one at a time like a small child, clutching the old wooden banister to hold myself upright. My head still ached with echoes of pain and my legs trembled as I walked, but that was nothing; weakness radiated from my core, as if I'd pulled a muscle I hadn't known about. Halfway down I smelled greasy food and my stomach grumbled. Muttered conversation broke off as the stairs creaked.

In the front room the magic circle was gone. Cleaned away. A dark stain lingered nearby.

I found Evelyn and Raine sitting at the kitchen table.

“Heather!” Raine stood up and took my hands. “How do you feel? You slept okay, yeah?”

“I’ve been better,” I mumbled.

“I bet, I bet. Come on, sit down. You hungry?”

“ ... extremely.”

Evelyn sipped from a mug of tea and met my eyes with quiet regard. She was freshly scrubbed, hair washed and pinned up behind her head. She had a fluffy blanket draped over her shoulders, t-shirt and shorts underneath.

I tried not to stare at her scars.

The kitchen was all cracked tiles, wooden counters, and a massive metal stove, rustic and cosy and very much my kind of place. An antiquated survival in the modern world. Heat poured from a naked iron radiator bolted to the back wall. Raine settled me in a chair and set about reheating some of the chicken stew they’d been eating.

Sitting hurt. I took a moment to probe my left hip and the side of my ribs, left elbow and shoulder. Bruises from Outside.

“Feeling the aftermath, are you?” Evelyn said. “It’ll be worse in the morning.”

She was bruised too, a nasty purple welt on her chin, and I assumed more underneath her clothes. I tried to give her a smile.

“You can look, if you want,” she said. “No need to pretend you don’t see.”

“Wait ’til she’s got some food in her, hey Evee?” Raine said, spooning rice into a bowl of chicken and setting it in front of me. The greasy smell made my mouth water.

“I think Heather is more than capable of fending for herself.” Evelyn gave me an expression much softer than the one she kept for Raine. “I don’t let people see me like this, but I assume our relationship is rather past that point.”

“Nothing like saving a girl’s life to break the ice,” Raine said. Evelyn shot her a withering look.

In a tiny, selfish way, I agreed with Raine; I felt guilty, as if I'd taken a dirty shortcut to Evelyn's heart.

"I was only being polite," I said. "It's rude to stare at ..." I gestured with my eyes at her bare legs.

Well, at what remained of them.

Evelyn's left leg was twisted at the knee and ankle, the muscles thin and withered, as if it had once been broken in multiple places and healed at the wrong angles. She flexed her left foot to show me it still worked.

Her right leg, the good one, was artificial.

A pale rubber socket ringed the stump of her thigh, attached to the matte black curve of a modern prosthetic limb. It terminated in a blade-shaped support structure inside a plastic foot. It looked wrong, a blunt piece of machinery attached to soft flesh, but it was far less weird than anything else so far today.

"It's carbon fiber," she said.

"State-of-the-art stuff. Costs an arm and a leg," Raine said, and cracked a huge grin. Evelyn rolled her eyes, and I could tell by her expression she'd heard that joke a million times before. A tiny pang of jealousy pricked at me, but I was too hungry to care.

"I have to eat," I said.

Evelyn just stared level at me, so I dug in.

Rice and chicken. Doesn't sound like much, but it was the first proper home-cooked food I'd eaten in weeks. Not a cereal bar or a microwavable ready meal or instant coffee. The empty, bruised space inside me responded with the most intense hunger of my life, and I had to force myself to slow down. A wave of animal gratitude passed through me. I asked who made it. Raine had. Salt and pepper, oregano and cumin. Real food, made by a friend?

Raine busied herself clearing up the table, but Evelyn watched me and sipped her cold tea. Raine kept giving her meaningful looks, which drew worse and worse counter-glances from Evelyn, until I was sitting in the firing line of an emotional cold war.

"I have not forgotten, Raine," Evelyn said eventually, thumping her mug down. "The severity of my—" She bit the words back and took

a sharp breath. “The moment requires significantly more gravity.”

“... iiiiif you say so.” Raine sat back at the table. She turned a smile on me and touched my arm. “Let me know if you need anything, okay? There’s brownies in the fridge, if you fancy one for afters.”

“Do you really think I’m that callous?” Evelyn carried on. “That much of a bitch? Your confidence in me is touching. We’ve both been through rather a traumatic experience today, Heather and I. Give me a moment.”

Raine held up both hands in surrender, a barely controlled smile on her lips. “I didn’t say anything.”

I swallowed a mouthful of food and put my spoon down with a clack. “Will you two stop it? Please? I can’t deal with you bickering on top of ... everything else. Not right now.”

Raine had the good grace to look sheepish. Evelyn nodded and took a deep breath. She tried to sit up straight, but a suppressed wince passed over her face as she struggled with her posture. She sighed, caught my eye, and spoke.

“Heather, I want to thank you, for rescuing me. You have my gratitude, and I am in your debt.”

I blinked at her.

“That’s Evee’s way of being friendly,” Raine said.

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “You have no sense of gravitas, Raine. Absolutely none.”

“Uh, sure, you’re— you’re very welcome?” I shrugged. “I don’t even know what I did, not really.”

“Mm, yes, so you say.” Evelyn leaned back in her chair with obvious physical relief.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m not interested in the *what*. I know what you did. You breached the membrane between *here* and *Outside*, and you did so without any magical tools or devices, no access to the relevant books, no knowledge, no training, no history. Your mind, alone. I want to know how.”

I held up a hand—the *how* presented itself to me in a flash of the

Eye's lessons, and suddenly the food in my belly turned to lead. "I can't— it's very difficult for me to talk about this. I-I—"

"Hey, Evee, maybe drop this?" Raine said softly.

"Raine filled me in on the basics, the things you told her about," Evelyn said. "But I need more, I need the details. Yes, there's some entity out there feeding you hyperdimensional mathematics in your dreams, but—"

I curled up, cold sweat beading on my forehead, nausea roiling in my belly. "E-Evelyn, I—"

"—but what I don't understand is how you executed it, any of it—"

"Evee, drop it, seriously." Raine raised her voice. "She's exhausted and I told you this makes her ill."

"Will you stop babying her?" Evelyn turned on Raine. "Not everybody needs your bloody ministrations twenty-four seven."

I lurched out of my chair, shoved my face over the kitchen sink, and vomited.

The edges of my vision throbbed black. My knees buckled. My body had nothing more to give. Gentle hands touched my back and Raine murmured in my ear, talked me through each deep breath. Clear my mind. Don't think. Just breathe.

I groped for the tap and washed my mouth out, then turned on Evelyn. She was frowning at me, confused. The same expression I'd seen on a dozen would-be friends in my early teens: *Oh dear, turns out little Heather Morell is crazy. Better handle her like spun glass.*

"I don't know anything," I snapped. "This is what happens, when I try to think about it. Well done, thank you for that, Evelyn, thank you. Why do you think I was bleeding so much when I came for you? Bleeding from my eyeballs? It's not supposed to be in my head, it's *alien*, and it's killing me."

I forced myself to hold her gaze, to stand straight, hanging on to Raine for support. I wasn't really angry at Evelyn. I was angry at everything, life, reality, the Eye, all my certainties crumbling beneath me. No outlet for the frustration.

Evelyn swallowed and looked away.

"Heather, hey, let's get you sat down again, okay?" Raine purred.

I allowed myself to be sat back down, rubbing my tender stomach muscles. Raine put a glass of water in front of me. I drank slowly.

“Some of us never had the luxury of fragility,” Evelyn said.

“Evee, for fuck’s sake,” said Raine.

I gave Evelyn a very unimpressed look. She cleared her throat.

“What I mean to say is, it’s difficult for me to place myself in your shoes, Heather. I’m quite used to all of this.”

“What, almost dying in other dimensions?”

“Well, no, not that, that part was new.” Evelyn looked awkward and took a long sip from her mug. She settled it back on the table and stared at it for a moment before she continued. “I suppose you need it right from the top. Very well. I am a magician, and Raine is my bodyguard.”

Raine slapped the table. “Come on, at least upgrade me to companion. Champion, even! Childhood friend, at the very least?”

“You might not believe in what you’ve seen today—”

“She’s been practising this for hours,” Raine stage-whispered. Evelyn stopped and glared daggers at her.

I glanced between their faces, trying to gauge if this was serious. But of course it was. Did I doubt everything I’d seen today? The blood, the sweat, the choice I’d made to save Evelyn?

A tiny, screaming part of me refused to accept that this was real.

I’d ignored the most important implication.

If this was real, then—

No.

A great tightness seized my chest.

Had to distract myself. Deny, deny, deny.

“Magician?” I repeated, struggling to keep my voice level.

“Yes,” Evelyn replied. “Magician. Mage. Wizard. Whatever term makes the most sense to you.”

“So, what, you ... ” An unbidden laugh entered my voice, the leading edge of hysteria. “Throw fireballs and talk to black cats? Do

you have a cauldron in the basement? Dancing brooms?” A hiccup slipped out as I fought to control myself. “Is that what the Medieval Metaphysics Department is all about? A secret magic school in Sharrowford University?”

Evelyn sighed and sagged heavily in her chair.

“Not that sort of magic,” Raine said with a sad kind of smile. “It’s a bit more difficult than that.”

“The department is a convenient bureaucratic fiction,” Evelyn explained. “Protective colouration. It did exist, from 1902 to 1954, for the study of the sorts of things I do. But it wasn’t out in the open, you understand? Respectable academia was cover for a tiny coven of men from the university—professors Amblesworth and Wakeley, with a few hangers-on. They founded the department when they encountered certain books they shouldn’t have been in possession of, things they shouldn’t have seen. Amblesworth went mad in 1948 and died in a mental hospital. Wakeley blew out his own brains two years later. The others limped on for a little while, but there was another suicide and a scandal. That ended it. All that’s left now is the book collection in the university library. Rare things, things you can’t find anywhere else unless you’re part of the right clandestine cliques. I know all this because my family was involved—is involved.” She gave a humourless puff of laughter. “I’m still here, after all. Now the department is just me. When one’s family has donated as much money to an academic institution as mine has, they sort of let you do what you want, as long as you keep it quiet and appear respectable.” She pulled herself up and looked me in the eye. “And what I do there is study the books. Officially I’m getting a degree in classics.”

A battered spark flickered inside me. “Classics? You’re learning Latin and Ancient Greek?”

“I don’t need to learn them, I was taught them as a child. Came with the family obligations. I turn in a few essays every term and the university turns a blind eye. I’m even lined up for a postgraduate program afterward. They don’t have a clue, it’s just me and Raine. If you meet any other mages in this city then it’s too late, you’re already dead.”

The way she spoke those last few words made my skin crawl.

“Yeah, it’s more Hannibal Lecter than Harry Potter out there,”

Raine said, then caught the look on my face and put her hand over mine. “Hey, that’s why I’m here.”

“There is no community of mages,” Evelyn went on. “There’s my ... *family*.” She made the word sound like an insult. “There’s a few dangerous cults worshipping things they shouldn’t—a couple of them right here in Sharrowford. There’s lone madmen, maybe even one or two others like me, and there’s things out there in the world we try to avoid. And you, apparently.”

I shook my head slowly.

“No, no, this isn’t real.” My voice quivered. I had to convince myself. The alternative was unthinkable. “You’re just ... this is just a story. This is some fantasy nonsense play-acting. It’s not real.”

Evelyn frowned. “You need more proof than what happened today? You provided your own proof quite handily, I thought. And you’ve already adapted to it.”

“She is taking it well,” Raine said.

“Yes, but what if I’m crazy?” I had to bite my lips for a moment to control my voice. “What if you two have been watching me and stalking me, cataloguing and recording my behaviour, and you’re both perfect improvisational actors pulling some sick joke on me, riffing off whatever I’ve hallucinated today?” Evelyn blinked in surprise but Raine nodded sagely. She understood. “These are the sorts of questions I have to ask myself.”

“Didn’t Raine kill the tick in front of you?” Evelyn asked. “Wasn’t that real enough?”

“The what, sorry?”

“The tick, the thing which came through in my place, when I completed the swap. That’s what I’ve decided to call it, unless I find it properly described and categorised elsewhere. I think that’s what those things were. That, or fleas. The proof is still right over there.” Evelyn gestured at the kitchen doorway.

I looked round and saw what I’d missed in the front room. Several black bin bags bulged next to the stairs, double-wrapped, sealed with duct tape.

Dissociation washed over me as I imagined the contents of those bags. I looked back at my new friends and noticed other details I’d

missed earlier: the shiny clean nightstick on the kitchen sink draining board, next to a butcher's cleaver.

"Hey, somebody's gotta do it," Raine said, smiling awkwardly. "Don't be scared of me, yeah?"

"That's okay, I'm not scared."

Raine's violence had turned me on earlier, the rush and the romance of it, but the thought of her chopping up a body and stuffing it into rubbish bags left me ice-cold.

This couldn't be real, because if it was—

Traitor, weakling, coward.

The void yawned wider.

"It's not real," I whispered.

Evelyn steepled her fingers and considered for a moment. "Raine, pass me the fade stone."

Raine fetched something from the kitchen counter and pressed it into Evelyn's palm—the chunk of white quartz I'd seen her holding twice before.

"Pay close attention," said Evelyn.

I stared at her, not sure what to expect. She held the piece of quartz in her lap and closed her fist around it, then lowered her eyes in concentration.

She wasn't there.

Oh, I thought, did I miss her standing up and going into the other room? I looked around and caught Raine smirking at me. I cleared my throat and frowned with mounting confusion. "Wait, wait, I was supposed to be watching Evelyn. Wasn't I?"

"Heather, look at the chair," Raine said, barely able to hold back a laugh.

"And don't laugh at me. I still haven't forgiven you for earlier, Raine, laughing at me when I was on the verge of a panic attack."

She cleared her throat, sheepish now. "Take a look at the chair, seriously."

I glanced back at Evelyn's chair. The blanket she'd had wrapped around her shoulders lay draped over the wooden back. Her walking stick was propped against the armrest.

"And?" I asked.

"And nothing," Evelyn said.

She was sitting exactly where she'd been before. Somehow I simply hadn't seen her there. The blanket was wrapped around her shoulders again.

I blinked at her, felt a dislocation of time and space, like reality had just failed and glitched out.

"Where— where did you go? What just happened? Don't— don't try to confuse me, I ... "

Evelyn held up the chunk of white quartz. "This stone is a small piece of my inheritance. The right sequence of thoughts, personal silence, a little practice, and the user is edited from the sight of an observer. I don't quite know where it came from, but I suspect my family made it somehow. You've seen it before—I was using it Outside, to hide from the ticks. And from you, when you barged into the Medieval Metaphysics room."

"Hiding from me? I'm not exactly threatening."

"I told you. There are things and people in this city we want to avoid. You could have been anybody."

"Okay, that was ... okay." I swallowed on a dry throat. My hands were shaking.

Raine stood up, stepped behind my chair, and started to rub my shoulders. I shrugged her off and pushed her away.

"Heather, hey, it's good for you, I promise I'm not—"

I turned on her as the ground began to crumble beneath my feet. I groped for a way out, anything to hold back that one thought.

"Are you even real?" I demanded.

" ... Heather? Of course I'm real." Raine grinned and spread her arms. "I'm flesh and blood, you can touch me as much as you like."

"No, this isn't real, neither of you are real. You!" I clamped down

on the lump in my throat, the wrenching in my chest. “You’re too good to be true, Raine. You’re everything I need. You’re a walking, talking fantasy, my brain telling itself a fairy tale about being accepted and wanted. About a cool older girl taking me under her wing. You’re not real.”

“Heather—”

Tears were rolling down my cheeks. I fought to keep speaking.

“No! How can you be real? What a coincidence, that you’re here in Sharrowford, that you happen to go to the Aardvark on the exact morning I did, at the exact time I did. What a coincidence that I have a breakdown and you just happen to see me. You’re not real. This is my fantasy and I’m sitting in an empty house in the dark, talking to myself.”

Evelyn and Raine shared a glance. Evelyn looked like a deer in headlights.

I knew I was being unfair, scrabbling for the slimmest handhold I had left to deny, deny, deny.

“Heather,” Evelyn said. “You performed a technical miracle today. You can’t—”

I rounded on her. “And you, you’re even worse. You’re the unspoken promise that my insanity means something. That being crazy has a purpose. You’re the beginning of paranoid schizophrenia, persecution complexes, banging my head against a padded cell wall for the rest of my life.”

“Have you finished?” Evelyn asked. I tried to stare her down, but I felt like a sick child.

“Why Sharrowford? Why are you even here?” I said. “Can either of you answer that?”

“The ‘Eye’—whatever it is—has been feeding you knowledge for a decade,” Evelyn said. “The most likely explanation is that it wanted you in Sharrowford, so it nudged you to choose the university. I’m not surprised, considering the nature of the city, the sorts of things that happen here.”

“Heather, it’s okay.” Raine tried to take my hand but I flinched away from her.

“That still doesn’t explain you two,” I said.

Raine leaned down so I couldn’t avoid her face. “Heather, hey. Sometimes you get lucky. The nightmares stopped, didn’t they? Even if we’re not real, that’s a pretty good trade-off.”

That look on her face—the kindness, the understanding, the bloody-minded stubborn refusal to give up on me—shattered my last line of defence. I lost control.

I wrapped my arms around my head and rocked in place on the chair, great big wet sobs ripping out of my throat. Ten years of nonsense and lies. Ten years of being *this*, and the whole thing fell apart around me and I couldn’t keep it out anymore. I scrubbed at my eyes, hid my face behind my hands, drew my feet up onto the chair and tried to curl into a ball.

“It can’t be real it can’t be real it can’t be real—”

Raine put her arms around me and held on tight. I tried to push her off but I didn’t care anymore, gave up and buried my face in her shoulder. She could cut me up and shove me in bin liners like the monster if she wanted, because I was living rubbish.

“Shhhhhh, it’s okay,” she murmured. “Heather, it’s okay.”

“It’s not, it’s not, it’s never okay.”

“It will be, it—”

Couldn’t deny it any longer. The truth came out in a wail, at long, long last.

“I left her behind.”

Neither Raine or Evelyn said anything for a long moment, but I could picture their faces. The shared look over my head, Evelyn’s frown, Raine’s realisation. I kept going, pouring it all out between the wracking sobs and the horrible pain in my chest.

“My sister. Maisie. My twin. I left her behind in Wonderland. If this is real then she was real and I left her behind. I left my sister behind.”

“Here, Heather? Try to keep something down, yeah? You really need it.”

“I don’t feel like eating.”

I’d cried until empty but the wound still ached. Twin-shaped hole in my chest, ten years in the making.

Evelyn had brooded in silence as Raine held me and hugged me and brought me tissues to blow my nose. Eventually I’d uncurled, sat up, and tried not to feel like the worst traitor and coward in the world. A glass of water and long minutes to calm down and think did help, but time fixed nothing.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think I’d—”

“Heather,” Raine said before I could bury myself under a mountain of apologies. “It’s okay to cry. It’s okay to let it all out. That’s some serious burden, you don’t have to bear it alone.”

“Mm.”

“... so, are we real now? Gotta start somewhere.”

I shrugged. “What choice do I have? At least I’m not lonely. Imaginary friends are better than dying of a brain aneurysm.”

Raine put her hand over mine and gave me an it’s-going-to-be-okay smile. “Real friends are even better. Promise you that.”

I shook my head. My throat tightened but I had no more tears to cry. “I left her behind.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Raine said. “Right, Evee? Could that have been her fault?”

“... no, of course not,” Evelyn answered. “A child, Outside, in a face-to-face encounter with a ... with something beyond our comprehension. No. Raine is correct.”

“Survivor’s guilt,” I said. “I know. A ten-year dose all at once. Knowing what I’m feeling doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Difficult, yes. I understand,” Evelyn said, with such conviction.

I looked up at Evelyn, this mage with her fluffy golden hair and missing fingers, her stolen limbs and spinal problems. I wondered

what her history was. What could she do, what were her limits?

The seed of an idea took root in my mind. A seed only possible after a day like today. I didn't dare feed it light or water. Not yet.

But I started to ask the questions anyway.

"Why were you even over in ... wherever that was?" I gestured at the air, at the Outside places. "You did a spell, took yourself there?"

Evelyn looked away, failing to conceal her discomfort. "In a manner of speaking. You saw the circle, the methods I used. Yes, that was magic. Of a kind."

"Why go there?"

"She was jealous," Raine said.

"Oh for pity's sake, Raine, that is such an ugly word." Evelyn turned back to me. "I was ... intrigued by what Raine said about your 'Slipping' episodes. I didn't believe it was possible. There were a few relevant passages I recalled from *Unbekannte Orte*, and an incantation in Stellhoff's *Unfinished Book*, but I'd never risked the procedures before. And ... well, as it turned out, there was no way to bring myself back again. That's why nobody had written more about that particular method. Nobody who goes through with it comes back to record anything. I should have known. Too easy, too good to be true. Hubris and arrogance. Raine should have been here to stop me."

"There's nothing about me to be jealous of," I muttered.

"Heroism, perhaps."

"That wasn't heroism. I'm a coward. I just had to know if it was all real."

Raine opened her mouth, probably to stop me beating myself up, but Evelyn spoke first.

"Hardly the act of a coward, to voluntarily put oneself through such a test. I should know."

I said nothing, took up my food again, just to fill the roaring silence inside my head, but it tasted bland and chewy now. Raine kept trying to catch my eye with another smile, and after a few moments I allowed her to find me.

At least I had that. At least Raine was real.

If a bit weird.

Raine was busy saying something about a permanent solution to my nightmares—but I paid another sliver of attention to the dangerous seed in my mind.

“Evelyn,” I said. “Tell me about magic, please.”

Evelyn started to speak, but Raine raised her voice and took my hand.

“Look, Heather, you’ve been through a lot today. You can worry about all that tomorrow.”

“No,” I said, and pulled my hand away. Raine was pretty and Raine was dashing, and the memory of her earlier violence still sent a thrill through me at the sight of her, but not like this. “I won’t be treated like a child. If you’re going to treat me like that, I’m going to just go home and ... and forget about both of you.”

It was an obvious bluff, but I kept my poker face. Raine smiled all the same. Evelyn let out a dark laugh.

“Perhaps you were right, Raine,” she said. “Heather and I are a little alike.”

For the next hour, with the wind picking up outside, my new friends told me truths.

Magic, according to Evelyn, was not throwing fireballs or waving wands, it was not casting the runes or reading the future in tea leaves. It was blood and bone and the application of human willpower to the secret workings of the cosmos. It was half-remembered scraps of stolen Latin and Greek and older inhuman languages from a time best left forgotten. It was to scream the names of alien gods and their unseen workings in the hope that a fragment of knowledge would yield a result. It was frequently unclean and often dangerous and potentially obscene.

As I would come to learn, her words did not do it justice. No words can.

Raine and Evelyn had known each other for years. Evelyn became terse and evasive over the details, but I gathered that she’d had problems with her family’s expectations of her, and Raine had

stepped in to help. I found out later what exactly those expectations were, but at the time I left Evelyn to her privacy.

Raine convinced me to eat again as we talked, and this time I kept it all down. She fixed me a mug of hot chocolate and offered to add a slug of vodka from the fridge.

“No, thank you.”

“It’ll help, promise. It’s hardly the devil’s juice, it’s not even Tesco Value, and I’m only gonna give you a little drop. You’re not allergic or anything?”

“No, no, I’m not.” I sighed. Why not abandon another foundation?
“Oh, why not? Go ahead.”

Peer pressure. Not something I ever experienced back in school. Never went to parties, never had any real close friends, never got offered a cigarette or stolen alcohol. That had always been for bad girls, people going off the rails, and I hardly needed any extra help to do that.

The hot chocolate went down smooth, chased with a sharp aftertaste and a slow warmth radiating out from my chest. I drank more, sighed, and realised I’d never done this either—sat in a cosy, comfy room with people my age. Friends? My soul was weak and sputtering, but I felt almost good. I wanted more.

“Where do I fit in to all this? What happened to me? To Maisie and I?”

My throat caught when I said her name, but I had to say it now.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn said, shaking her head. “I could make an educated guess, but I don’t know what it was that took you, or what it wanted, anything about it. This ‘Eye,’ hmm, I guarantee we’re all much happier in ignorance of the motivations of such a being.”

Raine got up and crossed behind my chair as Evelyn spoke. She went in for a shoulder rub again. This time I let her touch me, stiff and tense at first, wincing as she melted the knots out of my muscles. Evelyn looked on with barely concealed distaste. I wondered if it was jealousy, but I didn’t have the extra mental bandwidth for that right now.

“Why do I see the things I do?” I asked. “If they’re not hallucinations, then ... ”

Evelyn studied me for a quiet moment. “I have a theory.”

“Our Eevee’s got theories for everything,” Raine said. “One for every day of the year.”

Evelyn fixed Raine with a dagger-stare. “Will you stop that? And I am usually correct.” Raine held up one hand in surrender and Evelyn continued. “I suspect your waking visions are an ability to see pneuma-somatic fauna, without aid of any trance state or device, likely an intention or perhaps a side-effect of the Eye’s changes to your mind. I’ve never heard of it before, I have no idea if it’s possible, but it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Pneuma-somatic fauna,” I echoed, deadpan. “That means what, exactly?”

“Well ... a less technical term ... that is—”

“Say iiiiiiiit,” Raine said, lighting up with a grin. “You know you want to.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and huffed. “Spirits. You can see spirits, anima, kami, whatever you want to call them. Though I suspect you of all people don’t need to be told that doesn’t mean bedsheet ghosts and headless ladies.”

My menagerie of horrors? I nodded.

“And there was that servitor following me, don’t forget,” Raine said, a hint of smug pride in her voice.

“Yes, yes, we’ll have to look into that.” Evelyn waved her down and fixed me with a penetrating gaze. “More importantly, Heather, as Raine has made abundantly clear to me, you want the nightmares and the visions to stop, to go away. Correct?”

Yes died on my lips. Evelyn saw more than she let on.

She saw the seed, growing.

“Heather?” Raine prompted.

“Because that is not the only option,” Evelyn continued. “You deserve to know that. You did things today, with nothing but your mind, and that—”

“I think now’s a little too late at night, Eevee,” Raine said. “And, uh, practical issues first, right?”

"You see?" Evelyn asked me. "Raine would have me coddle you."

"Evee, come on, you promised," Raine said.

"I did no such thing."

"You did! And hey, she saved your life today, don't be a shit about this. You're not the only one who can sulk."

"Stop it. Both of you," I hissed, and shrugged Raine's hands off my shoulders. "Stop talking past me and over me like I'm not here. Promised what?"

"I'm gonna put the warding sign back on your hand," Raine said. "And under your pillow, and on your door. And Evelyn here, my lifelong friend and ally," she said with an unexpected twist to her tone, "is going to help look into a more permanent solution. Aren't you?"

Evelyn looked unimpressed, arms folded.

"If you can make the nightmares stop, then ... " I swallowed hard.

It had been ten years. One night in Wonderland had ruined me and torn out half my soul.

Not the only option?

Revenge?

Rescue?

I dared not touch the idea too closely. White-hot and impossible. Ten years? I couldn't think that way, I'd drive myself over the edge. My resolution must have shown on my face, though, because Evelyn took a deep breath and answered me.

"Yes, yes, I do believe we can stop the nightmares. Using the warding sign will buy us time for a more permanent solution. We'll have to see."

"There you go, wasn't so hard, was it?" Raine asked. Evelyn huffed.

"This is the hardest thing I've ever done," I muttered. "In more ways than one."

"It'll be okay, I promise," Raine said, and squeezed my shoulders.

"Says you."

“Yeah, damn right, says me. Welcome to the real world, Heather.”
And then there were three.

* * *

I suppose you want to hear about the rest of it, don't you? About the events in Sharrowford the following year, the ones which made the national news, the ones you don't know half the truth about. And after, about how we turned back the clawing at the rim of reality.

But first, about those in Sharrowford my new friends were so eager to avoid.

And about my twin sister. About Maisie.

Don't come here.

providence or atoms – 2.1

Two weeks and a day after the night which altered my life forever, I did a new and brave thing: I answered my front door at eleven in the morning.

Might not seem like much, unless you're used to seeing monsters around every corner.

A month ago, I wouldn't even have acknowledged the knock. That would risk opening the door to a leering skeletal face, or six hundred pounds of fur and blubber covered in mouths, or inviting a nightmare to spend days gibbering and whispering in the corner of my bedroom. Better not to answer, pretend I wasn't home, hide.

But now I was safe. Now things made sense, in a limited fashion. I was still adjusting to the fact that I wasn't mentally ill, at least not in the way I'd believed; the world really was demon-haunted. So I left my book and carried my mug of coffee to the door. An unbidden smile tugged at my lips.

The smile froze when I opened the door and found Evelyn waiting there, by herself.

My mouth stalled in a greeting for the wrong person. I was suddenly conscious of my messy hair and my slept-in pajama bottoms and the unmade bed behind me.

"Good morning, Heather?"

"Good ... " I took a deep breath and gathered my composure. "I'm sorry, yes. Good morning, Evelyn. You— you surprised me. Being here. On my doorstep. I mean."

Evelyn nodded, as if my loss for words explained everything. "Expecting Raine, were you?"

"Actually, yes, I was. It's okay, I'm sorry. Come in, please."

I stepped aside and closed the door as Evelyn made her way across my tiny flat, her walking stick tapping on the floorboards. My face flushed as I felt her eyes rove across the detritus of my disorganised life. Stacked books all over the place, unwashed dishes piled up in

the sink, the mound of laundry at the foot of my bed, notes from class spread out across my desk.

“Please, do try to overlook the mess,” I said. “If I’d known you were planning on visiting, then I’d have cleaned up a bit. Or a lot.”

Evelyn eased herself onto her good leg. “A little mess is nothing. Don’t bother yourself over it.”

I flopped my arms in defeat. “But there is mess. There’s always mess. Even sane and sleeping I’m—” I swallowed back the rest and forced a smile. She didn’t want to hear me whine. “Sit down, please. Take my desk chair.”

Evelyn thanked me and sat down carefully. She put her tote bag on the floor between her feet and did her best to return my smile. Neither of us was very good at that expression, but Evelyn’s case was due to a permanent tightness around the eyes. Stone-cold sober came easily to her. Natural and unguarded joy did not.

She looked an awful lot better than the last time I’d seen her. She’d twisted her great mass of hair up into a ponytail, the rest of her wrapped in a huge dark-grey woollen sweater and a thick ankle-length skirt, with cosy ugg boots on her feet. She looked warm and comfortable, her oaken walking stick ready for a hike down a leafy country lane or across some picturesque village green, instead of sitting in a dirty Sharrowford bedsit with the likes of me.

Evelyn frowned and tutted. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Being nervous about me. It might be a rational response, yes, but don’t. I would like it very much if you considered me as a ... if we could be ... ” She waved a hand in the air and grunted. “Mm.”

I blinked at her several times. “Evelyn, this isn’t nervousness. I feel like a disgusting grease troll right now. It’s not doing wonders for my dignity.”

“I ... don’t understand?”

“This is the first time we’ve seen each other since our unscheduled dimension-hopping accident. I wasn’t exactly in top form then, between the vomiting and the bleeding. And now I haven’t showered yet this morning. I’m still in the clothes I slept in, my hair is a rat’s nest. Not to mention the state of my flat. I can only

imagine what you must think. You could have called me before visiting, given me warning. I'm wearing pajama bottoms, for crying out loud."

"Oh ... well ... so am I." Evelyn tugged up the corner of her skirt to show the ankle of plaid pajama bottoms underneath.

"Yes, but you're clean and well put together. You can get away with that."

Even as I spoke I realised that was hardly fair. Evelyn had heavy, dark bags under her eyes. Her hair was clean, but it probably hadn't seen a brush this morning, and certainly no touch of the hairdresser's scissors for many months. Her clothes were fresh but old and well worn, the collar of her sweater darned and mended with different-coloured thread.

Evelyn started to respond, then sighed and rubbed at the bridge of her nose. She drew herself up as straight as she could with her crooked back, and I felt a sudden desire to shrink away, certain she was about to yell at me.

"You're right," she said. She swallowed and looked at the floorboards, shoulders tense, face stiff. "I should have called, I should have acted normal. I've gone and made you uncomfortable."

That made me want to hug her.

I didn't, of course. Sane and sleeping I may have been, but boldness was not in my nature.

"No, I'm sorry," I said, and felt lame. "Forget it, I was rude to mention it. Do you want something to drink? If you don't like coffee I have some tea as well."

Evelyn kept her gaze fixed on the floor. "I am not very good at socialising. Not very good at maintaining friendships."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Evelyn, neither am I."

She finally looked up. A mote of understanding passed between us, and Evelyn nodded slowly.

I brewed a cup of peppermint tea for her, then left her with the run of my books while I squeezed myself into my flat's tiny bathroom with a clean change of clothes. Only once I was under the shower did I realise that I hadn't asked her why she was here in the first

place.

When I returned I was delighted to find Evelyn had made herself quite at home. She'd settled back in the chair, with her cup of tea perched in a clear spot on my desk. A real smile crossed my face as I recognised my copy of *Paradise Lost*, propped open in her lap.

"Have you had the pleasure of reading that before?" I asked.

I sat down on the bed to dry my hair and resisted the urge to rub my sternum—to massage the untouchable bruise inside my chest.

That strange bruise had pained me since that night, since Outside, wounded internally in some obscure manner I couldn't pinpoint. Raine had plied me with good food, guilty food, fried chicken and supermarket sushi, fresh fruit and scrambled eggs, but all the protein in the world didn't help the bruise to heal.

Evelyn closed the book. "No. No, I haven't had a lot of time in my life to read for fun."

"Feel free to borrow it if you like. Milton's one of my favourites. I know poetry isn't for everybody, especially old poetry. It's not a popular form anymore, but I love it."

"Mm, perhaps." Evelyn raised an eyebrow at me. "So, I take it you wouldn't have minded if it was Raine at your doorstep this morning, seeing you unshowered and unclean?"

"That's ... different."

"Is it really?"

"She's already seen me at my absolute worst. There's not much more for her imagination to fill in."

"I've seen you at your worst," Evelyn said. "Such states are badges of honour, not sources of shame."

I couldn't keep the incredulous frown off my face.

Evelyn sighed and gestured around the room. "This is hardly the worst condition to which a human being can sink. You should be proud of how quickly you've accepted reality. Most people who have to be introduced to magic spend the rest of their lives trying to refute it or forget it, or go mad in the process. You're not smearing your own excrement on the walls, are you?"

A lump formed in my throat. She didn't get it. "Well ... no, but—" "You're doing better than I did."

I struggled with a moment of pain and frustration, then pulled a false smile to control myself. "Evelyn, my state has nothing to do with monsters and magic. It's because of Maisie. I'm not struggling to accept reality, I'm grieving for my twin sister."

"Ah, well, hm." Evelyn cleared her throat. "That's different, yes. Yes, of course. I ... yes."

"It's fine," I lied.

To grieve would be such a relief.

I'd dealt with Maisie's absence for years by telling myself she was always with me; an imaginary friend plus. Except she'd been real, so now she wasn't here. I was incomplete.

Evelyn raised her chin and assumed an air of importance.

"Regardless, I didn't come here to lecture you, Heather. I came here to apologise."

"Whatever for?"

"For the way I spoke to you when we first met. I was an uncharitable ratty bitch. Raine's cried wolf so many times, when she finally brought home a real one I wasn't ready."

"You're mixing your metaphors." I almost giggled at the absurdity. "Me, a wolf?"

Evelyn waved a hand. "You get what I mean."

"I do, and thank you. You were ... "

"I am a difficult person, I know. You can say it, I won't be offended."

I shook my head. "You don't need to be so formal about this. We already made up, didn't we?"

"Accounting for one's mistakes, one's debts, I find it important. It can be a matter of life and death. And I do not like to make mistakes." Evelyn's voice carried a razor edge I didn't much like, but then she took a deep breath and the feeling passed. "Anyway, there's another reason I'm here. I have the first steps of a possible

solution to your unique problem.”

I perked up, everything else briefly forgotten. “Yes? Go on? I did wonder why you’d come all this way. A solution?”

“Indeed. It’s taken a little bit of thought and some questionable research, but I believe I’ve come up with a place to start. An experiment, to figure out how this ‘Eye’—” She waved a hand. Total dismissal, as if the Eye didn’t even matter. I liked that. I liked that a lot. “How this thing is contacting your mind. We can go from there.”

“How soon can we begin?”

Evelyn inclined her chin. “If you’re not busy? Today. We need to visit the library, there’s some details I must check before we begin. Then back to my house, to do some real magic.”

“The library? For books?”

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. “No, for video games and Chinese food,” she said, but not unkindly. “Of course for books.”

“Magical books, right, yes.” I nodded. “I admit, I’m fascinated. By the prospect, I mean.”

My words stalled and stuttered in time with my uncertain excitement. So many questions, no way to phrase them. But books, they would teach me everything.

Evelyn held me with a steady gaze, as if measuring me.

“Evelyn?”

“The books I have do not make easy reading. Real magical grimoires can be ... demanding, on the mind. Try, please do, you deserve the chance, but temper your curiosity.”

“I will, I will. I’ll be careful.” I nodded.

“Mm, good. Remember that.”

“Thank you, Evelyn. Really, thank you.”

“Hmm.” She grunted and looked away. I detected a hint of embarrassment, almost bashful. I was about to tell her it was okay, but Evelyn continued before I could speak. “Raine tells me the warding sign is on your left arm now. Show me.”

I rolled up my sleeve to show off one of the best presents I'd ever received. This version of the Fractal was much larger than the one Raine had drawn on my hand. Thick black lines wrapped around the pale curve of my forearm, a tree of folded angles spilling from a kinked central trunk, clean and precise.

Evelyn leaned forward with a professional frown. She grunted approval and I felt a flush of pride. Raine had dedicated half an hour of delicate work to the Fractal, so intimate with my arm lying across her lap, this little fragment of irrationality which kept my nightmares at bay and the terrors off my doorstep. She'd bought a body-art marker pen for the task, and left it on my desk so I could refresh the design if it started to fade. The ink was supposed to last up to six weeks, but I checked the integrity every night.

Evelyn straightened up and shook her head. "Raine was an idiot to draw it on your hand the first time, out in the open like that. You are keeping it concealed, yes? She was clear about that much, at least?"

"It's always under my sleeve. Nobody's going to see it."

"Get used to that. Doing everything we hoped it would?"

"Absolutely. No more nightmares. I'm sleeping. Real sleep. I even had a couple of actual dreams, normal dreams."

"No lingering effects? Nothing at all?"

"Well, there's a sort of pressure in my head after I wake up, like a distant ringing in my ears. It goes off after an hour or two."

Evelyn stared at me and nodded slowly, as if this made perfect sense.

"Is that supposed to happen?" I asked.

Evelyn laughed, a humourless, dry sound.

"I have no idea," she said. "We're miles beyond precedent here." She looked down at her lap and tapped her fingers on the closed cover of *Paradise Lost*. "An educated guess says your 'Eye'—she actually did little air quotes with her good hand—"is probably still trying to get through. It's not discouraged by a firewall. For our purposes, that's a good thing."

"It is?"

“Yes. For now. How about the ... ” She sighed and gestured with one hand. “ ... spirits?”

“Oh, no more haunted apartment!” I couldn’t keep the smile off my face. “They’re keeping their distance like never before. They don’t completely ignore me, but I don’t feel like a beacon for horrible weird monsters anymore. I can’t tell you how much that means to me, how much less messed up the world feels.”

“Good, good. I didn’t know exactly what it would do left on human skin for days on end.” Evelyn’s eyes took on a distant look. I rubbed the skin around the Fractal and asked one of the questions I’d avoided thinking about these last two weeks.

“What is it? The Fractal, I mean. You call it a warding sign, but what is it, how does it work?”

Evelyn’s eyes snapped back to the present and she stared with sudden cold precision. “How much do you want to know, really?”

I couldn’t answer that. I took the low road.

“You’ve been practising that line, haven’t you?” I asked.

Evelyn huffed. “I may have done. I find unrehearsed interaction more difficult than most people, and I had considered you might ask that question.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s actually quite sweet. You have a flair for certain kinds of dramatic delivery, that’s all.”

Evelyn looked as if she was sucking a lemon. “Well, how much do you want to know?”

“I don’t know.” My shield of good humour crumpled, and I cast it aside. “I need answers.”

“To what?”

I shrugged, at a loss. “Everything. I know, I know, magic is real and unicorns exist and I’m not schizophrenic, but those are facts, not answers. Not the ones I need. Why me? Why Maisie? What happened to us? What should I do now?”

Evelyn nodded and thought for a moment before speaking.

“The warding sign is part of something much larger, my family’s ... inheritance. My inheritance. The warding sign’s particular set of

angles generate a kind of repulsion or firewall effect, as far as I can tell. It's one of the very few things I have which works consistently. Which is bloody useful, because otherwise it would be impossible to keep my home shielded, or keep you hidden, or really do much of anything without attracting unwanted attention."

As she spoke, Evelyn stared at the exposed Fractal on my arm. I rolled my sleeve back down, feeling protective and self-conscious.

"I think I understand," I said.

"I suppose Raine did the actual penwork for you, yes?"

"Uh, yes. She did."

"And she's been visiting you every day, has she? Spending a lot of time together?"

"Not— not every day." I shook my head and forced a laugh.

Just most days; an edge in Evelyn's voice prompted me to edit the truth.

Raine had eased herself into my life with shameless familiarity. She turned up unannounced when she didn't have classes and learnt my schedule so she could find me on campus after lectures. She sent me text messages and silly pictures, and she told me good morning and good night and take care. At first I hadn't known how to respond, but after so long without a friend it felt good to let her take the lead. She took me out to eat greasy burgers and chips, made food on my cramped bedsit oven, and watched movies and cartoons with me on my ancient laptop. I'd lent her my copy of *Watership Down* and she was trying to get me to read some Kant. We talked about everything and anything—except for magic and spirits and demons.

Evelyn saw straight through the fake laugh, stony-faced. "She slept with you yet?"

"W-what? Evelyn, excuse me?"

"Well, has she?"

"No! No, we haven't— she hasn't even— we— it's not like that. I don't think it is, anyway."

"With Raine, it always is."

"I wouldn't know how to judge that." An old frustration surfaced for

the first time in a long time, fed by indignation and a yawning pit of uncertainty. “I don’t have any experience with romance. None whatsoever. Maybe you don’t appreciate that about me. I spent a significant chunk of my teenage years in psychiatric hospitals, and the rest of it as the weird mentally ill girl who might go catatonic or start screaming at any moment. Not to even mention the whole lesbian thing, that’s a minor blip compared to the rest, but it doesn’t help my odds. I’ve never even kissed anybody. Raine is nice, yes. I don’t know what that means. We’ve hugged a few times. That’s it, that’s all.”

I shrugged and looked down at the floorboards, embarrassed more by my loss of control than the intimate details.

“Well,” Evelyn said at length, “that makes two of us.”

I expected a cruel joke, but lowered my defensive hackles when I saw she was dead serious. “I’m sorry?”

“Yes, Heather. I too am a kissless virgin. What did you expect? Look at me. Nothing wrong with that, especially under the circumstances.”

“Kissless virgin?” I echoed. “You shouldn’t put yourself down like that.”

“It’s a meme.” Evelyn waved the question away.

“... ‘meme’?”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “An internet joke, never mind. Point is, we’re not so different, you and I, and that is fine. All the more reason not to let Raine take advantage of you.”

“I don’t feel taken advantage of. If anything, it feels like the opposite. She’s been ...”

The words *too kind* died on the way to my lips, blotted out by the memory of Raine’s ecstatic grin as she beat a monster to death with a truncheon. She was kind to me. Beyond that, I didn’t really know, did I?

Evelyn did not look impressed. I took a deep breath and steeled myself; may as well get this out of the way.

“Okay, let me put all my cards on the table,” I said. “Are you jealous, Evelyn? If I understand correctly, you’ve been close with

Raine for years. Have I intruded on something? I'd rather we be open about this."

"Jealous?" Evelyn's eyebrows climbed in surprise. "No, most certainly not. Whatever Raine has said about me, I'm not interested."

"You're not—"

"No."

Final word. I nodded. Okay then.

"Look, Heather, I'd advise you not to get too close to Raine. You're setting yourself up for disappointment."

My turn to raise my eyebrows.

Raine Philomena Haynes. She loved that middle name, and I liked it too, though I did wonder if she'd adopted it herself in a pretentious act of self-creation. It had taken me a long, winding evening to weasel out her family name, which she hated for reasons I didn't understand. Twenty years old to my nineteen, which seemed a more significant gap at that age.

I knew her now—but not enough *about* her, and I told myself it was subconscious behaviour on her part. She'd happily spend hours extolling the finer points of any book I handed to her, and share her favourite foods—chicken korma and pomegranate—or about where she'd grown up in leafy Suffolk, what she thought of every movie from *Dambusters* to *Shrek*, and a growing litany of teenage japes and hijinks, but they were all oddly unconnected to concrete people, her family, or any personal history with Evelyn.

Evelyn put down her tea, steeped her fingers, and gave me a sober look.

"Raine requires a damsel in distress for whom she can play the knight errant. And let's be honest, you do fit the bill. That's why she shows so much interest in you. I used to fill that role, but I changed. If you fail to remain dependent, her attitude toward you will deteriorate."

I struggled to keep a straight face. Maybe Evelyn was jealous after all, even if she didn't know so.

"Did she treat you the same way she treats me now?" I asked.

“Not exactly. With us, the reality-shock was the other way around, or should have been. But she’s the same as always. Don’t get me wrong, Raine is ... ” Evelyn gestured, searching for a word. “Once she’s made a decision, she will fight in your corner even if it kills her. She is loyal, and she means what she says, and one could not ask for a better ... You get the picture. But she’ll hurt you in the long run, if you let her.”

I didn’t want to think about this. Was I just filling in a role? It didn’t feel that way. I chewed my bottom lip.

Then I realised what was wrong with this whole picture; what had been wrong since the moment I’d found Evelyn on my doorstep, alone.

“Wait a second,” I said. “Isn’t ... isn’t Raine supposed to accompany you almost everywhere?”

Evelyn smiled. The first real smile I’d drawn out of her, and it made me deeply uncomfortable. Sharp and devious and smug. “Indeed, indeed she is. I thought it was past time I engaged in some creative disobedience.”

“But— but— you keep implying that Sharrowford is dangerous, that —”

“Heather, I am more than capable of defending myself.”

“I saw how Raine reacted, when she couldn’t reach you by phone. Genuine fear for you! For your safety.” I cast about for my mobile phone. “I have to call her.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Evelyn snapped.

I spread my arms, intimidated by her tone but unwilling to bend. “What? You can’t seriously expect me to betray her trust.”

Evelyn huffed and hunched a little in the chair. “Some things have to be done without Raine hovering over our shoulders all the time. You saw how she reacted, that night. She wants to coddle you. I’d prefer you retain a little independence—and me too, perhaps, dare I bloody well hope. She won’t like you getting into the books, the grimoires, if that’s what you want. Go ahead, call her if you like, it’s your choice.”

I hesitated. Just enough.

That smile crept back onto Evelyn's face. "Come on, then, it's past time we went and did some serious work, before she spoils our fun."

That smile crept back onto Evelyn's face. "Come on, then, it's past time we went and did some serious work, before she spoils our fun."

providence or atoms – 2.2

Between her prosthetic leg and her walking stick, Evelyn put me to shame. Our route took us along Bluebell Road, a twisty humpbacked residential street on the edge of the student quarter, which led up to the university drive. The name was deceptive, not a single bluebell in sight. Defeated looking trees lined the pavement, a half-finished attempt at re-greening.

The blustery day plucked at my hair and the hem of Evelyn's skirt. This was the first time I'd seen her walk any real distance and I was ashamed by my own assumptions, that she'd be slow or awkward or have to stop to rest on the way to campus. Her limp was only apparent if you watched for it, and I was too busy keeping up.

And rubbing the base of my ribs.

The urge to rub a bruise is almost universal; pressure and compression feel good. But I couldn't reach the supernatural bruise inside. Walking and breathing harder made it worse, a throb at a deeper level than mere muscle and bone.

"I'm fine, really, I'm fine," I said as Evelyn gave me the third questioning look in as many minutes. I forced myself put my hands in my coat pockets.

"You don't sound fine."

"It's just this ache, since that night, since the ... brain math."

"Mm."

We had to wait at the zebra crossing opposite university drive. I took the opportunity to lean against the guardrail, taking deep steady breaths for a few moments, doing my best to will the ache away.

“Look around you,” Evelyn said. She was staring at the pigeons perched on an overhead power line.

“At what? What are we looking at?”

“Anything, everything. It’s good practice. Who’s watching us? Look around.”

I did as she asked, feeling silly and sceptical as I glanced up and down the street, like we were little girls playing spies. Cars passed in ones and twos. A six-limbed beast of bristles and spines lumbered along the end of a side-street. A couple of other students plodded up the opposite pavement. A pack of things half-wolf and half-ape picked their way across the suburban rooftops. Pigeons cooed.

I shrugged. “Nobody suspicious around here.”

“What about the pneuma-somatic fauna?”

“Quite normal, for a given value of normal. Evelyn, this feels absurd.”

“What about them?” She nodded at the pigeons.

I stared at her for a moment and hoped I’d misheard.

“The pigeons,” I said.

“Yes, the pigeons.”

“ ... they’re watching us. Right. Pigeons.”

Evelyn spoke softly. “We’re perfectly safe right now, yes, but this is part of being safe without always relying on Raine. Watchfulness, care, attention. Any of those animals could be carrying a little demonic passenger, birdbrain scooped out and replaced, relaying information back to the mage who put it there. I can’t tell just by looking at them, any more than you can. You can’t, right? No? There you go then. We must be aware of the ever-present possibility of being watched. Like with the Servitor following Raine the

morning she found you. We've no way of telling who or what sent that. Pay attention. The habit will help."

I sighed, a big heavy puff, and Evelyn hiked an eyebrow at me as if expecting a challenge.

"You're as bad as Raine," I muttered.

She frowned, perplexed. "What? What does that mean?"

"You don't get it. You can't. I'm trying to unlearn a decade of behaviour based on the incorrect assumption I had schizophrenia. The last thing I need right now is to suspect I'm being watched by *birds*."

She stared at me for longer than was comfortable, but I stared back until she grunted. "Mm. Fair point."

= =

Sharrowford university library was a hybrid monster, a chimera of brutalist block-tower welded to an aborted neoclassical facade, wrapped around a spun glass kernel of abused Gothic revival, all built on ancient stone foundations. It had begun life as a fortified manor house in 1456, pounded into gravel two centuries later by Parliamentary cannon, gifted to the university and rebuilt, 'restored' by arrogant Victorians, wounded by stray Luftwaffe bombs on their way to Manchester, and at long last shored up with 1960s concrete. Birds strutted and preened across the rooftops, their nests wedged between air conditioning units, blissfully unaware of the insectoid leviathans which only I could see, clinging to the library's spires.

Inside was a sprawling labyrinth of modern racks rubbing shoulders with carved wooden shelves, vomit brown carpet rubber-stripped to worn oak floorboards, creaking century old staircases and concrete stairwells that reeked of industrial cleaner. The Dewey Decimal System fought an endless siege against the privations of Resource

Description and Access standards, one that I suspect would degenerate into an insurgency to make any Vietcong commander proud. With a catalogue of nearly 10 million books, it certainly didn't rival the British Library for size, but more than made up for that with the number of small-print run, rare books, and strange subject areas tucked away in its hidden bowels.

Of course I'd fallen in love with the library. This was the primary reason I'd picked Sharrowford university in the first place.

I refused to tolerate the idea I'd been influenced by *The Eye* in this respect. This love was mine.

Thankfully the library was quiet this time of morning, at least once Evelyn and I passed the front desks. Few spirits stalked the tangle of the library stacks themselves, a mere handful of lurking multi-armed grazers. At last now they'd keep their distance entirely.

"Down?" I asked once we were alone in the stairwell.

"Where else?"

Evelyn led the way, her gait more awkward on the wide steps.

We descended together into the basement levels, concrete shelters for the rolling stacks stuffed with decades of obscure PhD theses. The long corridor was stapled to a much older hallway panelled in dark polished wood, and we passed over the threshold into the buried strata of previous eras. Our footsteps returned strange echoes.

I'd been down here twice before by myself, just to bask in the glow of the all those books and the enclosed silence – despite the modern no-smoking signs and air vents.

"I'm going to take a guess," I said. "You hide an occult library in plain sight, in the rolling stacks?"

Evelyn frowned sidelong at me. "If I wanted to invite disaster. Don't be ridiculous."

I flushed with embarrassment, but Evelyn didn't seem to notice. We turned a corner and found the corridor terminated by a very solid wooden door, strong enough to withstand a battering ram. A small brass plaque was bolted to the front.

'Rare and Restricted books – no student admittance without staff permission.'

Evelyn produced a keyring and unlocked the door.

"Are we breaking the rules? Is that key legitimate?"

She gave me the thinnest of satisfied smiles. "Oh, I'm allowed to be here. The wonders of nepotism."

Ceiling strip lights flickered to life, rolled back the shadows on doorways to reading rooms and secure stacks. The air felt dry and cool on my face, conditioned for long term book storage.

Evelyn turned the latch to lock the door behind us, then led the way past a treasure trove of crumbling texts and vacuum-packed manuscripts. Nothing occult about any of this. My head was on a swivel. I wanted to ask her to stop, pause a while so I could dip into each of these rooms and read for five minutes, a minute, just one glance. An undergrad never got into places like this. We turned a corner and I opened my mouth to ask if she would let me down here again.

And I slammed to a halt, breath caught in my throat.

Evelyn raised an eyebrow at me. "Oh, I guess you can see it, right?"

I thought I'd be used to this by now.

A monster barred our way.

A glossy black arachnid nightmare hung from the ceiling ahead, big as a horse. Arm-thick glistening spider-silk webbed the upper half of the corridor, leaving just enough space for a tall person to pass

beneath.

Far too many legs, body segmented and armoured and wrapped with bio-mechanical tubes and pipes, vent stacks rising from its back like a miniature nuclear reactor. The head was a solid mass of unblinking crystal eyes. Several giant stingers waved lazily in the air, tipped with points the size of railway spikes.

I felt it stare at me, a probing searchlight.

Very slowly, as if the slightest twitch would set it scuttling toward me, I turned my eyes away and looked at Evelyn. My voice came out in a strangled whisper.

“What do you mean, I can see it? *You* can see it too?”

“Well, no, of course not, but I know it’s there.” She waved an arm down the corridor. “You think the most dangerous occult collection outside of the British Library would be unguarded? Hide them among the stacks, really.” She rolled her eyes.

“You could have warned me,” I hissed. “What on earth is it?”

“I don’t know, you tell me. All I know is it’s some kind of spider. I’d be fascinated, actually, if you could describe it?”

“Terrifying.”

Evelyn blinked several times and cleared her throat. “It’s a Servitor, like the thing that was following Raine. A sort of artificial pneumasomatic robot, not a summoned demon or a bound spirit. Though that thing spying on Raine was about as complex and robust as a roomba compared to this.”

“Artificial? You made this thing?”

“No. No, of course not.” Evelyn looked oddly embarrassed. “It’s practically a family heirloom. My great grandmother made it and left it here. Look, it’s perfectly safe, it can only do what it was programmed to. It triggers off recognition and intent, I think. I’m

inherently trusted and so is anybody in my bloodline, as well as those I bring with me. It leaves the library staff alone because they only enter as part of their normal routine, though I don't think anything down here gets cleaned or checked very often. Unless you're planning on knocking me out and stealing the books, it won't pay you the slightest bit of attention."

"It is definitely paying me attention."

Evelyn sighed and strode forward. I fought down an embarrassing urge to grab her by the arm; I didn't want to be alone in front of this monster. She passed under the spider web, stopped by the last door leading off the corridor, and looked back at me as if I was being a fool.

"Oh, for pity's sake," I said, and forced myself to walk, concentrating on my feet.

I almost made it.

On the step which would place me directly under the spider, it moved. A sudden spasm of motion, ratcheting limbs and whirring eyes. It dropped on the webbing and unfurled all those legs, poised like a bear trap. The stingers whip-cracked out to full extension and curved back toward me. I choked down a scream and froze on the spot.

"Heather? What is it doing?" Evelyn said, her voice suddenly serious and urgent.

"I don't know," I whispered. I swallowed, throat like sandpaper. "It doesn't like me. I think it's angry."

"It can't get angry. It's triggering off something. What is it doing? Describe it."

I could barely make myself form words, let alone follow instructions. Instead, I took a half-step back.

Wrong choice.

The spider followed, inching forward with muscles tensed and stingers quivering. I halted again and stood very, very still indeed. My throat clenched tight and cold sweat ran down my back and I was almost on the verge of tears. Light glinted off the clustered crystalline eyes. This close up I could see tiny imperfections in the black chitin carapace, bumps and abrasions and rough patches, old scars and deep gouges.

“Evelyn, call it off,” I whispered.

“I shouldn’t need to. It’s not going to attack you-”

“Call. It. Off.”

The terror on my face finally got through to her. Evelyn raised her chin and spoke quickly and confidently. “*Discedant et agnoscis, ex auctoritate dei* Evelyn Saye.”

Nothing happened.

I stayed very still.

“Well?” Evelyn prompted.

“I don’t think it’s listening.”

“What? There’s no reason it shouldn’t.” She huffed in exasperation. “*Per quod ... terminus ...* dammit, no, that’s not it. Uh ... *desine plura et reditus ad formam tenens, ex auctoritate dei* Evelyn Saye.”

The spider-servitor remained exceedingly ready to murder me. I said this to Evelyn, in not so many words. She grit her teeth and looked frustrated enough to belt the spider over the head with her walking stick.

“*Finis, terminus, exitus. Nova anima agnoscis*, God dammit!”

Latin finally worked as actual magic words, or perhaps Evelyn’s swearing did the trick; the spider surged back into its original

position with a flickering of limbs, and I felt that cold, mechanical attention switch away from me at last. I scurried under it as fast as I could, shoulder blades itching, until I stood safely next to Evelyn again. I let out a long shaking breath and tried to force my muscles to unclench, heart hammering in my chest.

“I take it that worked?” Evelyn asked.

I nodded and leaned against the wall, hands on my knees to keep myself on my feet.

“Well, what did it do then? I assume it stood down?”

I turned a very unimpressed look on her. “Yes. Eventually.”

She rolled her eyes. Though I could tell it was mostly to cover her own embarrassment, the gesture still made me bristle with anger.

“It’s a good thing you and Raine never went into the attic in my house, when you were looking for me,” she said.

“ ... there’s more of these things?”

“Of course. My family’s historical paranoia has to be worth something. God alone knows what triggered it to treat you as a threat though.”

“The fractal?” I gestured with my forearm. “Maybe?”

“No, it’s far too robust to be bothered by that. Regardless, it should be calibrated to recognise you now. I had to make it register you as trusted, it didn’t want you inside otherwise.”

“Evelyn.” I tried to keep my voice steady and quiet, to overcome a lifetime of conflict-avoidance. “I really do want to be your friend, but you have to warn me in advance when you are going to surprise me with a spring-loaded monster. I am very serious.”

She avoided my eyes. “It’s never done that before. I ... I only know a fraction of the command interface language for it. I can’t even

make it move to a new post. Trust me, I've tried."

An awkward moment of silence passed over us.

"I ... I apologise," Evelyn said softly.

I straightened up and gave her the best smile I could muster. She was trying, she really was, and that meant a lot. "Apology accepted."

"Mm."

Evelyn busied herself unlocking the door. It bore another understated brass plaque.

'Special collection and sensitive storage room K-11.'

"Why do you need such a lethal guard dog?" I asked.

Evelyn snorted a humourless laugh. "At least two cults operate in Sharrowford, that I know of. They'd love to get their hands on my books."

"Cults?"

"Small-time idiots, worshipping things they don't understand." She waved a dismissive hand. "But they're still dangerous. Not to mention my mother's and grandmother's old rivals elsewhere, and any other mages who know about this collection."

Not for the first time, I wondered if I'd be happier and safer in ignorance.

Evelyn led me over the threshold.

What had I been expecting, if only subconsciously? Books bound in human skin and chained to lecterns? Flickering torches, stone walls, leering gargoyles? A little, I confess.

It was a small dusty room, with no windows and two strip lights in

the ceiling. Sickly light illuminated a pair of battered reading desks and a row of plain, functional bookcases.

Empty bookcases.

Evelyn closed the door behind us and dumped her tote bag on one of the desks. I looked closer.

Not quite empty, I corrected myself.

Only two of the shelves held anything – one was lined with sixteen books. Sixteen exactly, I counted them. Most of them were aged and leather bound, though a few looked at least twentieth century, in modern hardback covers. Three much older volumes were packed inside transparent protective plastic bags, lying flat on the shelf below, next to a stack of bound photocopies. A cardboard storage box sat at the foot of the one occupied bookcase.

“Is this it?”

Evelyn raised an eyebrow at me in silent question. I shrugged, unsure what to say, painfully conscious of my silly assumptions. She crossed to the books and gently eased one of the modern looking volumes off the shelf.

“In the right hands, every one of these is more lethal than an atomic bomb,” she said. “Personally, I’m glad there’s so few of them. And that they’re mine.”

“Are you being serious?”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Sort of. Sit down, if you like. I need to look up some details.”

= =

“What is magic?”

I didn't want to distract Evelyn, but I couldn't hold the question back anymore. She'd been making notes and muttering to herself as she read from one of the grimoires propped open on the desk. Her pen paused as she looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

"I've been thinking about it all week, but I couldn't articulate it until this." I gestured at the books, the tiny occult library, the incomplete magic circle Evelyn had drawn on a notebook page. "I took it on trust. Magic is magic, but that's a tautology. You did magic with esoteric symbols and circles and books, but I did the same thing by ..." I swallowed and fought down a stab of nausea. Recalling impossible equations was still dangerous. "By *thinking maths*. I thought the books might give me some answers, some context, but I suppose it's not going to work that way."

I offered Evelyn an apologetic smile. She sucked on her teeth in thought.

We'd been in the reading room – Special Collection and Sensitive Storage room K-11 – for about twenty minutes. I'd parked myself in a chair and tried to sit still, but nearly bounced from foot to foot in excitement at all these wonderful old books, even if there were only nineteen of them.

Evelyn had noticed and directed me toward one of the less fragile volumes, a huge blank-faced hardback entitled *The Diaries of Richard Barker and his great working, reprinted with commentary*, by one James Oston. Despite the relatively modern binding the inside pages informed me of only the printing date – 1932. No publisher's mark, location, nothing.

"Just don't read any Latin or Greek out loud," Evelyn had said. "Even under your breath."

Whoever mister Barker was, he was very 17th century, and his 'diaries' consisted of a lot of magical experiments, summoning demons, communing with 'angels', and when I read between the lines, several brutal murders.

The symbols he included made my head hurt. They looked wrong.

My fascination had curdled, returned to the cold reality of academic rigour as I'd flicked past pages of regurgitated medieval mythology. The commentary was worse, an unreadable jumble of concepts – somatic-transfer membranes, cellular resonance, the dangers of astral voyaging, whatever all that meant.

I flipped the book shut to illustrate my point. “None of this means anything to me. None of it seems real. What is magic? How does it work?”

Evelyn nodded slowly. She put her pen down and folded her hands together.

“I don't know,” she said.

“ ... you don't know?”

“Is there an echo in here?”

I goggled at her, unsure of her sincerity. “You're the magician, Evelyn. What do you mean, you don't know?”

Evelyn raised her chin and stared at me in silence, like a professor waiting for a bright but slow student to comprehend the point under their own intellectual steam. I felt like I was the butt of a joke I didn't get.

I shook my head at her, lost for words.

“I'm not much of a teacher, you understand?” she said. “I'm not going to be good at this, and this is not going to make sense to you.”

A note in Evelyn's voice rang false. She was putting on a role, the wizened master of occult secrets. I never would have noticed the artifice if I'd been my usual sleep-deprived self. I couldn't fathom why she was acting like this.

“And I'm not an idiot, Evelyn. Please don't treat me as one.”

She inclined her head. "I'm not. Here, let's say you're a metalsmith in 2500BC."

"... okay?"

"You know how to make iron weapons and armour. You know how to smelt the metal, how to get it from the ore, where the deposits are underground. Every part of the smelting and smithing process is done by eye, by feel. You know how hot the fire should feel at every stage, what colour the metal should be, and that's how you judge when to hammer it and when to quench it. Do you know the temperatures involved? Can you put specific numbers to those temperatures? Can you measure them, with iron-age tools?"

I nodded, following in an instant. "Right. Of course you can't."

"You don't know what iron atoms are, or how they reform and bond during the smelting process. You don't know the chemical composition of metal. You just know how to get the results." She rummaged in her tote bag and produced the white quartz invisibility stone, the one she'd used on me. "A result. I don't know how it works. I don't know how magic works. I suspect nobody does."

"Nobody at all?"

Evelyn shook her head.

"Surely somebody has tried. You say there's more mages out there, there's a whole magical ecosystem, cults, people, right?"

"Yes, but it's not straightforward."

"Then someone must have tried to apply modern science, done systematic experiments, come up with some first principles. This isn't the Dark Ages, this is the twenty first century." I glanced over at the books, frowning now, my mind chewing on issues I'd ignored. "Why is this stuff hidden down here in the first place? How could an entire branch of reality, physics, whatever you want to call it, go

hidden for centuries? This is making less sense the more I think about it.”

Evelyn levelled a very cold gaze at me and started to speak.

“Imagine a field of study in which too much progress, too fast, results in one’s madness or death; in which any attempt to contact one’s peers risks them murdering you to steal what secrets and power you’ve amassed; in which the best way to experiment is to commit unimaginable atrocities; in which, for hundreds of years, any public attention would have you burned at the stake, and in modern times will see you locked in a mental asylum. There is no pipeline of talent. No safe harbour. No peer review. No civilian applications.”

“That speech sounded very well-rehearsed.”

Evelyn’s whole act fell apart.

She shrugged and hunched her shoulders. Her air of superiority dropped away. Suddenly she seemed very small and weak, curled up to protect herself from the world. I felt so mortified by the impact of my words I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to reach over and take her hand, cross the table and hug her.

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t-”

Evelyn waved a hand. “You’re right, completely right. It’s just a version of what I got drummed into me as a child. Except I had it less as a warning, more a justification.”

“That’s okay, I didn’t mean to knock you off your flow. You just seemed so ... ”

“Fake. Pretending to be somebody I’m not. Forget it. Better to call me out on it than let it fester.”

“Well, okay, if you say so.”

I sketched a smile and hoped it looked reassuring, accepting, kind –

instead of shaken and insecure. Was I supposed to reassure her here? I'd touched a nerve of personal history and wasn't sure I should dig any further.

Evelyn didn't seem bothered. She tapped a finger against the tabletop, lost in real thought, no longer playing the role.

"I meant everything I said, even if my delivery was bloody awful. I really don't know how magic works." Evelyn sighed and waved a hand, as if trying to summon an idea she'd shooed away. "What I do have is various working theories, things I learnt as a child, the scraps my mother left in her notebooks."

"Your mother?"

"Yes," Evelyn said, and shifted uncomfortably. "She never put anything in print herself. No reason to. But I have most of her notebooks. I can share what little I know."

"Please. Please do. I can't express how hungry I am to understand, Evelyn. Please, anything you have."

"Don't beg." Evelyn shot a strange frown at me. "You're better than that."

I blinked at her in surprise, but she continued before I could say anything.

"Magic," Evelyn began. "Magic is manipulation of the underlying structure of reality, via the directed application of human willpower. That willpower requires shaping, it needs conduits to flow through, tools to access the controls – magic circles, symbols, bits of Latin and Ancient Greek. You can break the laws of thermodynamics, for example, in limited, local ways, but they always reassert themselves. Physical effects are more difficult the larger they are. Mental effects are damn near impossible, hypnosis or mind control or implanting ideas. The human mind is largely tamper-proof to direct magic. Summon things from Outside, though, and all bets are off. They break all the rules. That's the basic 101, best I can do."

“That’s ... surprisingly straightforward, but it doesn’t really explain anything. Somebody would know about magic. There would be a ... I don’t know, a secret government department. Ministry for mages?”

Evelyn half-smiled, a minimalist laugh. “That would make life easier.” She spread her hands, hesitated, then seemed to withdraw into her her thoughts, resigned to something she didn’t want to face.

“Evelyn? Evelyn? ... Evee?”

That made her look up. Our eyes met and I flushed with embarrassment at using the diminutive version of her name.

“I’m sorry, you looked like you needing snapping out of that.”

She nodded and half-shrugged. “Call me Evee if you want. It’s fine.”

“I will then. Thank you.”

“Our reality is auto-correcting and self-enforcing.” Evelyn paused and sighed. “My mother’s words, for what they’re worth. I don’t have a better way to phrase it. Think of reality like a big rubber sheet. You can deform it for a second by throwing a bowling ball against it, but it springs back right away. You can break the laws of thermodynamics, to a point, or bend light, or do a million other things, but reality snaps back.” She clicked her fingers. The sound echoed off the empty reading room shelves. “Sometimes right in your face.”

“What goes up must come down?”

“To a point, yes. Self-enforcement applies up here, too.” She tapped her temple.

“ ... meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning I need an example. Let’s say I draw a magic circle on the

floor right here, do a lot of things I shouldn't do, and summon a monster from Outside. Let's say it goes upstairs into the library and kills a couple of people. What do you think happens afterward?"

"Uh, mass panic? It would be on the evening news. Everywhere."

"Exactly. Except that doesn't happen, does it? Instead of an unimaginable demon, witnesses will remember a madman with a axe, or a crazed homeless person, or whatever else their prejudices and assumptions provide. Unless you're already broken in by exposure to magic, or Outside, or worse, then your mind self-edits, reality cushions the blow."

"People would film it on their mobile phones, there'd be evidence."

Evelyn gave me a knowing smile. "Would you believe it was real? Or CGI?"

"... I ... I can't ... Evelyn, I don't like this idea about the 'self-editing' mind." I swallowed, struggling to find a way to say this, to make her understand why that concept made my guts churn. "I can't go from ten years of distrusting my senses, to being told I'm not crazy to ... to back again. How can I trust my own memories, if that's accurate?"

Evelyn shook her head. "Once you're in, you're in. You've been exposed, and you didn't deny it or go mad."

I understood what she was getting at, and I suspected my 'exposure' – to the Eye – was more than enough to acclimatise my soul to all this. But it still sat heavy in my stomach.

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," I muttered to myself.

Evelyn frowned at me. "What?"

"Misquoting Shakespeare." I gave her a little embarrassed smile. "Just a line I've always liked, from *Hamlet*. The concept helps."

“Mm. If that’s what you need.”

“I still don’t get it, how do you deform reality in the first place? If the laws of thermodynamics are breakable then nothing around us should work.”

Evelyn nodded slowly. “Yes, you’re a child of the post-Enlightenment age. The scientific method, causality, the heliocentric model, they’re all still correct. I’m not going to ask you to believe in magical particles or spirit energy or that the earth is flat.”

What Evelyn did ask me to believe in was the parable of The Castle.

It didn’t resonate with me, over that long slow hour under the one dull strip lights in that secret reading room.

Evelyn wove a complex metaphor, one I suspected she’d been fed as a little girl, a child’s fairy tale to make sense of an impossible universe for an impressionable, frightened mind. I didn’t mention that feeling, it seemed too cruel to point out how she slipped into a child’s cadence and rote repetition as she related the tale. I just let her run through it, for whatever comfort it gave her.

Over time, I built my own version of Evelyn’s metaphor, one much less charitable than what her family had left her.

= =

Imagine you live in a castle.

You were born enclosed by walls so thick and so high that they seem the limit of the world. No gate or drawbridge or window leads out. Nobody has ever been outside, and those who suggest such a feat is even possible are dismissed as madmen or charlatans or dangerous zealots.

Inside the castle, life makes sense. Rooms connect to each other at

proper ninety-degree angles. The grass and trees of the inner courtyards are neat and orderly, regularly cut and trimmed. If you throw a ball up, it will come down. If you do not eat, you will starve. Human behaviour is sane, if not always kind. If you observe a physical law, and test it, you can create a theory to accurately describe how it works.

Then, one day, you find a way up onto the walls. A secret way, hidden in a place nobody goes. You are curious, so you step inside, and the door slams shut behind you. It will not open, no matter how much you pound on it, how long or loud you scream, how afraid your tears. There is no way out.

Except up.

You climb the stairs. They are dark and cramped and you hear horrible sounds from above. For the first time in your life, perhaps for the first time in any life, you emerge into the daylight on the battlements.

What you see ruins you.

The castle is not all. The walls do not demarcate the edge of the world. Your castle is merely a tiny keep, set in the middle of a much larger curtain wall. In the space between the keep and the curtain wall live such inhuman things. They do not obey the laws that govern inside the castle, they bend them into impossible shapes. They caper and dance and go about their bizarre alien business and sometimes look up at you and make eye contact, or hoot strange sounds to you, watch you and follow you and surround you.

Perhaps you do your best to ignore them.

But they – the pneuma-somatic life outside our comfortable castle of reality – are not the worst thing you see from atop the battlements. Oh no. Because next your sight is dragged up, beyond the outer curtain wall, to outside the castle entirely.

To *Outside*.

Out there the laws of the castle are nought but a whispered suggestion. Giant shapes move on the horizon, in their own domains, with different laws, other rules, rules that produce only screaming insanity for a human being, rules that will break you if you try to comprehend them, rules which once understood, cannot be forgotten, and will worm their way inside your soul and wreck you for knowing them.

Let's say you manage to get back down, inside the castle. Maybe you try to forget what you saw. Maybe you pretend to be normal.

But then you discover you're not the only one. Others have been up on the battlements.

Some have found cracks in the walls.

Been Outside.

Brought things back.

And those things they bring back – magic – can break the laws inside the castle, make it more like Outside, if only for brief moments before the laws of reality reassert themselves, before the human mind rebels against what it witnesses, before the mob tears them apart in sheer outrage.

To do this they need tools, protection from the searing truth of the Outside, a framework through which the fragile human mind can operate: magic circles and symbols, dead languages, rituals, bloody knives and stained altars. And these things do not always work, do not always protect so well.

And then, last and most terrible of all, you realise that you are unique. That you alone can bring things back from Outside merely by thinking them.

providence or atoms – 2.3

Evelyn wound up the parable of The Castle, watching me with faint hope in her eyes.

“That’s ... very comforting,” I said. I hadn’t yet constructed my own far less optimistic version. She nodded and smiled a sad kind of smile.

“It does make some sense of things, even if it’s a bad metaphor. Map isn’t the territory and all that. The other way to think of it, which my mother was fond of, is that God was a poor workman who left a lot of holes in reality, but, eh.”

All my two-week-long suppressed curiosity was leading up to one unthinkable prospect, a concept so tender and fragile that I couldn’t approach it head-on. I needed every piece laid out, accounted for and examined, before I could form the question.

“So I can do magic with my mind,” I said.

“No.”

“No?”

“Self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics. That’s what you did. I think.” Evelyn paused and looked at me with a funny frown. “Can we talk about this without making you vomit? These floorboards are no fun to clean.”

I blushed a little. “As long as you don’t expect me to write the maths down.”

“Mm. Well. Your ‘Eye’, I think it’s been feeding you hyperdimensional mathematics, an access method for the layer of reality which underpins everything, the stuff magic manipulates. When you transported yourself to that world of rock and stone,

Outside, it took you minutes. Raine told me. No tools. No knowledge. No books. That spell took me over an hour. You skipped magic, went straight to the result.”

Her voice was low, serious. Admiring? It left me deeply uncomfortable.

“And lost a lot of blood. And my lunch.”

“Mm, I don’t recommend you make a habit of it. The human mind was never meant to jam itself into the gears of reality so unprotected.”

“You hardly have to tell me that.” I sighed. “Look, this contradicts everything you said before about it being impossible to apply the scientific method.”

Evelyn sighed and waved a hand in dismissal. “It’s a just a theory, one my mother dabbled in. She didn’t believe it though. There’s no way of testing it or proving it. The human mind can’t perform the necessary operations. Until you. I think this ‘Eye’ has tried to make you capable of direct access to the mathematical substrate.” A strange smile crept onto her lips. “You proved my mother wrong. Living evidence it’s possible. Though not desirable, I suppose.”

“No kidding,” I muttered.

Evelyn didn’t say anything further on the subject, but watched me with cold calculation in her eyes, one crooked finger to her lips.

This would have been the perfect moment to ask the question. We were on the subject, Evelyn was taking me seriously. Ask it, do it, I willed myself. But I circled away to safer waters.

Coward.

“Can Raine do any magic?” I asked, forcing down the lump in my throat.

Evelyn scoffed. “Nothing that I don’t hand her ready to point and

pull the trigger. Even the most simple magic takes long study, mental discipline, attention to detail. And you have to be a little bit broken to even start, be exposed and survive, put your mind back together. There's a reason most mages are insane, or worse. Raine just sees everything as a problem to be solved, usually by punching it."

"I don't mind that about her." I smiled and shrugged and edged closer to the core of my curiosity, trying to stay calm. "Why study magic at all, if it messes you up so badly?"

"Who knows? I'm under no illusions about myself. I know I'd make a clinical psychologist's career if you got me in front of one. For other mages, I can only guess." Evelyn shrugged. "Power. Knowledge. Some people just want to know the mind of God. Cultists, people messed up by things from Outside, I suspect they have less human motives. Present company excluded."

"Thank you, I think."

"I meant it."

"Why do you keep going with magic? Because of your family?"

"My reasons are deeply personal," Evelyn said in the same tone one might deliver news of a terminal disease. I waited a beat, expecting her to add 'so I'd rather not talk about it', or 'you wouldn't understand', but that was apparently her last word on the subject. The silence lingered.

I came to learn that between Evelyn and I, much could pass without discomfort that between others would be cause for awkward feelings. Those shared minutes in an alien world, lost Outside, bleeding from my eyes and plucking her from the pit of absolute terror, counted for quite a lot. Despite her rough edges and my own poorly managed responses, our shared silences defaulted to comfortable.

"Evelyn," I said, much softer than I'd intended. I cleared my throat. "Evee, do you think I could learn magic?"

She raised a questioning eyebrow. I wish I could tell her how much that wasn't what I needed right now.

I could no longer avoid the reason for all my curiosity, no longer hide behind what I dressed up as grief.

"I-I think I could try. If nothing else I know I'm at least a little intellectual, I can think clearly this last week, I can get some focus. Maybe if I read the books seriously. Or maybe if I could learn to control the ... the math ..." I tapped my forehead and trailed off. What absurdity. What an unthinkable idea. Who was I kidding?

"Why?"

Oh, the question, the worst question.

"Third stage of grief," I said. "I can't accept she's dead. If I learned ... if I ... I want to find my twin. I want to find Maisie."

My voice died as I spoke, quieter and quieter, until I whispered her name.

"Oh," Evelyn said. "Mm. That's--"

"Stupid notion, I know." I shook my head and looked up. Evelyn frowned at me.

"Not stupid, no. But- oh dammit all, Heather. If I was a less ethical person, I would say yes, seek out your sister, you can do it, let's go rescue a lost child. Let's all aspire to be bloody heroes. That would certainly further my own aims. Having another mage on my side. But no. Absolutely not."

The spark of hope guttered into darkness. I sniffed, suddenly aware I was holding back tears. "Why- why not?"

"Because I won't mislead you. I won't do that. You're talking about going up against an alien god. Something so powerful it can reach across dimensions to alter your mind. It can't be fought, not by

either of us, not by anybody. The best we can do is wall you off and hide you from it. This isn't what you want to hear, and it's not what Raine will tell you: your sister is dead. She's been dead for ten years. There's nothing to rescue. Nothing human can survive out there for long."

"I know," I murmured.

Evelyn was not like Raine. In fact, I don't think she was wired for physical comfort at all. She got up and gave me a few moments privacy to pull myself back together, and I think that moment was when I began to grieve for real.

Maisie was gone, and I was no hero.

Evelyn returned with a slender paperback book held to her chest, more a pamphlet really, a few dozen pages bound with staples. Her eyes searched mine. I sniffed and wiped my nose in embarrassment, but she didn't seem to care.

"I'm not sure I should give you this," she said.

"What- what is it?" I did my best to sound normal again.

She turned the pamphlet to show me the title: *Notes Toward a Unified Cosmology*, by Professor Wilson Stout. It looked cheaply printed, faded and battered.

"This is by one of the men who was involved in the Sharrowford coven, here at the university, the secret group of academics responsible for the Medieval Metaphysics department. Stout must have been a young man when the department existed, because he wrote this in 1974. Very small print run, for sycophants and acolytes only. And my grandmother."

"No relation?" I asked, half suspecting some juicy tale of romantic liaison.

"No. Ha." Evelyn barked a laugh and actually smiled in amusement. I was glad her earlier fake gravitas was long forgotten. "She tried to

have him killed, actually. Long story.”

She placed the pamphlet on the table, slowly and carefully, like live ordinance.

“He put forward the theory. Self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics. It’s not an easy read, he was pretty far gone when he wrote it. Maybe he met your Eye too, who knows. Never made a lot of sense to me, but you might get something out of it. Also might make you chuck your guts up, but it might be worth the pain.”

In her eyes, I saw something much more complicated than pity or sympathy. I didn’t understand why she was doing this, but I didn’t care. I swallowed, about to thank her.

“He vanished,” she said. “Went missing in strange circumstances, from inside a locked office. Maybe dabbled with the maths a little too much. Understand?”

I nodded. “Thank you. I’ll-”

“Don’t. Don’t get yourself killed. Don’t try to fight a god. Just ... learn, if you must.”

“Okay. I will.”

I reached out for the pamphlet, hesitated, then took it. Evelyn sighed as if she’d been holding her breath, and wandered back over to her chair, leaning heavily on her walking stick.

She could not have found better bait for me in all the world.

The pamphlet felt dry and brittle between my fingers. I peeked inside the front cover and found a line in faded, looping handwriting: ‘To Miss Laurissa Saye, I hope you will find this illuminating.’

History bled from the page, soaked into my fingers and stole into my heart. Here was proof, written down and printed and distributed, that I was not mad. I felt a strange kinship with this

long-dead, vanished man. Professor Wilson, whoever he had been, had known a Saye as well, and maybe, just maybe, known the Eye.

I glanced from the pamphlet at the rest of the shelves, the row of twentieth-century hardbacks and the older volumes packed in their moisture-proof bags, and realised just how much temptation this room held.

“Is it safe to take this outside?” I asked. Evelyn sat back down with visible relief and sucked her teeth in thought.

“Probably. Nobody’ll know you have it and nobody else could ever understand the context.”

“Oh.” I frowned at myself as I realised what I was suggesting. “Oh, oh dear, no, I shouldn’t be trying to sneak rare books out of the library, that’s terrible of me.”

Evelyn laughed, a dry cough. “And here I thought you were worried about cultists trying to steal it.”

“Is that a real prospect? Could that happen?”

Evelyn shrugged. “My mother thought so. Only a small fraction of this collection is actively dangerous, and then you have to know where to look. Mostly the older stuff, the magic circles and techniques and whatnot. The most lethal stuff is all at my house.” She gestured at the book in my hands. “That’s pure theory, you couldn’t use anything in there to punch a hole in reality unless you already knew how. Which, well, I suppose you do.”

I tried to shrug off that last comment. “There’s another occult library at your house?”

“Hardly a library. Four books, to be precise, plus a few odds and ends, and unpublished notes.”

“Why not keep it all in one place, if you need a guard like Mister Spider out there in the corridor?”

The corner of Evelyn's mouth turned up in the slightest smug satisfied smile. "My home is a damn-sight more secure than this blasted library."

"... magically speaking?"

"Mmhmm."

It still felt bizarre to say 'magic' out loud, as if we were children playing make-believe.

"Also, I do have to consider the university," Evelyn was saying. "Nepotism only gets me so far. I can't up and steal all these rare books. Plus, splitting the dangerous stuff up helps me keep things under control if something goes wrong – this place is so well-known, at least in rumours, that the fact I have a small collection at my own house is unthinkable. Why would the Saye family risk it?" She smiled to herself.

Evelyn left me with the pamphlet. She busied herself with the reason we came down here in the first place, digging up the details she needed for her magical experiment.

I flicked through a few pages, scanned the long introduction and mentally filed away some of the technical terms for later consideration, then ran headfirst into three pages of densely packed mathematical notation. My stomach clenched and a wave of nausea passed through me. I averted my eyes. Yes, Evelyn was right, perhaps I needed to read this on an empty stomach, with a sick bucket nearby. I slipped the pamphlet into my coat pocket.

My gaze wandered over to where my new and difficult friend poked through the books.

I watched her for a long moment, openly, though she was unaware. It was innocent – I couldn't have stared with anything less than honest thoughts.

Despite everything, I found Evelyn very endearing. Nothing remained of my initial impression, a cuddly girl tucked away with

her books. She'd dispelled that in scant moments on that rainy morning in the Medieval Metaphysics room.

But watching her now, her serious expression, the way she gently handled the old, cracked books, every motion of her hands compensating for the missing fingers on her left, her posture bent around her kinked spine – I felt a connection I couldn't define.

I liked that. A connection.

"Evee," I said her name softly. She glanced at me across the room and I smiled. "I couldn't help but notice earlier, you mentioned your mother several times. She's a magician too? Did she teach you?"

"Was."

She turned back to the books.

Evelyn crammed a lifetime of bitterness into that one word. I stared in shock, until she huffed and shot a dark look at me.

"Your face was like an open book. Whatever ridiculous, faux-pastoral notions you have about my family, they're wrong."

"I-I was only-"

"My mother is dead, a fact for which I am thankful every day I live. I mentioned her only because I have to, because what little I have on magic is whatever I pulled from her grip."

I realised she was shaking.

"Evelyn, I-I'm sorry, sorry, it was just a passing thought." I raised my hands in surrender, shaking my head. "I'm sorry."

She turned back to the books without another word. I let out a shuddering breath. My heart fluttered in mortified horror. Evelyn shoved a book back onto the shelf and stood staring at it for far too long. The silence hurt. Words stuck in my throat.

Our connection had curdled. I gathered myself to stand up, apologise, and let myself out, legs itching to run away, already planning a cold walk home, alone.

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” Evelyn muttered.

She couldn’t meet my eyes. She faced me but looked sidelong at the books, expression drawn and exhausted.

“Evelyn- I-I mean, Eevee, it’s okay-”

“It’s not okay. You deserve better than Evelyn Saye the hair-trigger bitch. You saved my fucking life from my own idiot decisions and I can’t even control myself.” She swallowed, hard and dry. “I don’t want you to have to walk on eggshells around me. I know, I know, Raine’s told me, you’re tougher than you look, but ... still.”

I smiled, a little sadly. “I’m not tough at all. Don’t know where Raine got that idea.”

Evelyn nodded, sighed, and went back to the books. “I won’t be much longer with this.”

“I forgive you,” I said.

I don’t know where it came from. I’d tried to think of something profound or comforting or friendly, something Raine might say. The words just popped out.

Evelyn blinked at me like a deer in headlights. For a moment she seemed lost, then turned away.

= =

Trouble found us on the way out – scowling, angry, rabid trouble.

We left room K-11 and passed back underneath the Spider-servitor.

It ignored us, much to my relief, but Evelyn had barely spoken since her outburst and apology.

I tried to imagine what Raine would say. She'd know what to do. A joke or a quip or a few murmured words of comfort, to pull Evelyn back out of this dark hole. But I wasn't Raine, however much I admired her, and all I could do was sneak glances at Evelyn's sunken expression and thank her again for the pamphlet. She grunted in reply, locked the Rare and Restricted books door behind us, and that was that. We plodded back through the library basement corridors.

A young woman, another student, was lounging against the wall just beyond the dividing line between age-worn wood and concrete breeze blocks.

For a split-second I felt a familiar old shock and guilt; the library basement levels were usually so unfrequented, too easy to forget they weren't some cloistered private domain.

Evelyn grabbed my elbow. "Wait," she hissed.

The girl at the end of the corridor was death-glaring at us.

She was small and slight, maybe even a little shorter than me, with a mane of dark curls spilling down over her shoulders. She wore a white hoodie underneath a clashing blue and lime green coat.

Her posture, arms crossed, leaning on the wall, was a masterpiece in studied boredom and eloquent silence.

One did not have to be an expert in body language to read that statement. I felt it in my gut, on an animal level; she blocked our way out.

She raised her voice and turned Evelyn's name into a sneer.

"Saye," she called down the corridor. "What the hell are you doing, Saye?" She pushed off the wall, unfolded her arms, and stalked toward us.

“What? What’s going on? Who is this?” I hissed back at Evelyn – and caught the look on her face. Gone was dark melancholy withdrawal, replaced with naked contempt, head high. But she’d shuffled closer to my side. Her hand had tightened into a white-knuckle grip on her walking stick. She shook slightly, her breathing not as steady as her voice.

I’d once been the target of that look from Evelyn, when I’d surprised her in the Medieval Metaphysics room.

When I could have been anybody.

When I was a possible threat.

A ball of cold lead settled in my stomach. “Is this- are we-”

“*That* is Twil,” Evelyn muttered without taking her eyes off the girl. “And no, to your unspoken questions. She’s not dangerous, just an irritant. God alone knows what’s put sand up her arse this time.”

Twil made a show of cracking her knuckles as she advanced. I couldn’t believe my eyes at such a playground gesture.

“What do we do? This doesn’t look like nothing to me,” I hissed, then glanced over my shoulder toward the door we’d just locked. I itched to retreat, avoid, run away, but I was also painfully aware how Evelyn had closed the gap between us. She was relying on me. I could hardly flee while she stayed.

“Don’t give her an inch. Twil’s bark is much worse than her bite, but we should still get out of here before she gets any ideas. We need to reach the stairwell, that has CCTV coverage, she won’t risk anything there.”

“Risk? Risk what?” I whispered, but then Twil was upon us.

To my incredible surprise, I felt Evelyn’s maimed left hand slip into mine, palm clammy and fingers cold. I squeezed back.

Twil walked right up to us and got in Evelyn's face, personal space be damned. She planted her feet wide, hands in the front pocket of her hoodie, chin tilted up. Her gaze flicked to me, probed and jabbed, made me want to shrink away, then slid back to Evelyn.

"Who the fuck is this?" Twil said, indicating me with a nod. "I thought we had a deal, Saye."

Until that moment, for all of Raine's protective gestures and Evelyn's doom-mongering, the reality hadn't hit home, of physical danger from cultists or mages or other semi-fictional people. Danger was monsters in the places I Slipped to, danger was the threat of choking on my own vomit, danger was my nightmares. People? People were white noise.

I'd never been in a fight. Not so much as a minor confrontation in all those long months of psychiatric hospitals, which was quite an achievement. I'd forgotten, during our little jaunt under the library, what it meant that Raine wasn't with us.

It didn't matter that Twil was barely as tall as me, or that there were two of us to one of her, or that she had her hands in her pockets.

Adrenaline hit me like a sledgehammer.

"I'd sooner drink piss than make a deal with you," Evelyn snapped back. "What exactly did we agree on, Twil? Favourite flavour of dog food? Don't flatter yourself, you know you can't convince me of anything."

"Oh yeah?" Twil drawled, voice slow and dripping venom. "Wanna bet?"

"Certainly, what's the stake? Let's put your money where your mouth is, shall we? Fifty pounds?"

Twil scowled harder. "Stop mocking me, this is serious. What are you doing taking other people back there? Who is this? What are you pulling?"

“Of course, fifty pounds wouldn’t be enough to shut your trap, would it? Can you even scrape that much together? Do a whip-round for it?”

Twil gritted her teeth.

And *growled*.

I flinched. The sound vibrated the air, guttural and barrel-chested, not at all like an edgy teenager imitating an animal.

Up close, the effect clashed, because Twil was shockingly beautiful. She was blessed with the sort of porcelain-skinned, angelic face that launched child actor careers or got married to royalty.

Or could bite your head off.

Under other circumstances I’d have spent a day or two weaving guilty daydreams about a girl like Twil. I’d have noticed details that only came back to me later – the slow tilt of her head as she spoke, her sharp amber eyes, the way she had her hood drawn up about her neck to keep warm.

But not after that sound from human vocal chords.

She spoke like a suburban middle class girl doing her best to sound dangerous, and looked the part too, athletic and well-fed and young. I was so used to years of my own haggard face in the mirror, exhaustion-wracked, eyebags and sallow skin, that I could tell Twil never stayed up past bedtime and always ate her vegetables. And was going to punch one of us.

I had no idea what to do. I was frozen, heart going a million miles an hour.

Evelyn glanced at me. “You know how Yorkshire terriers or sausage dogs will bite your at heels, because they still think they’re 400-pound direwolves? That’s Twil.”

“Hey!”

“This is my friend,” Evelyn said to her. “And we are going home. Now shove off.”

Twil narrowed her eyes. “You don’t have friends.”

“She certainly does. Don’t be so rude.”

Twil scowled my way. A heartbeat passed before I realised I’d spoken.

She jerked her face toward me and I recoiled, not at all brave or confident but trying very hard not to show fear. Twil sniffed the air – sniffed me, such a bizarre gesture that I just blinked at her.

“You reek like both of them,” she said.

“Excuse me, what?”

“Yeah, ‘friend’, whatever. I wasn’t born yesterday. What’s Saye got on you? What’s she done to your head?”

“Um, I’m ... Heather? Yes. Hello. Twil, is it? Why are you acting like we’re all twelve?”

Twil squinted at me in confusion. Not the response she’d expected.

“Are you going to let us past, then?” Evelyn barked. “Or are you just going to yap until you get bored?”

Twil grinned a nasty little smile and made a show of looking up and down the corridor. She shrugged. “I don’t see Raine anywhere. What is this then, a sneaky trip to show off your collection of obscenities back there?”

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. “Yes, there it is. You really must get over Raine.”

“Hey! Fuck off! I don’t-”

“Let’s get to the point. What are you going to do, Twil? Beat me up on university property?”

Finally, Twil backed up a step and stared at Evelyn, as if thinking this over. I tried to breathe, feeling myself shake. Evelyn squeezed my hand.

Was she serious? I had visions of a stupid, messy slapfight down here. Or worse? My mind couldn’t keep up with the pounding of my heart. Twil knew about the books – ‘obscenities’? – which meant she was in the know. But Evelyn had said she wasn’t dangerous, right?

Twil looked like she wanted to spit. Instead she gave Evelyn a stinkeye stare and said, “You’re lucky you’re a cripple.”

“How dare you,” I heard myself say.

Twil blinked at me, cheeks flushing. She had almost enough sense to look ashamed. As she should do, I thought. I was as surprised as her. I’d never spoken to anybody like that before.

“S-shut up, you zombie. You-”

“You think you’re so intimidating,” I said, the floodgates open now. “Swaggering over here and acting like a playground bully. Well, it’s not working. I’ve seen scarier things than you every day of my life. I deal with them before breakfast. You are not scary.” I pointed over my shoulder, behind Evelyn and I. “The thing guarding Evelyn’s *wonderful* little collection of books – that, that is scary, and I faced that down not an hour ago. Now kindly move out of the way, or-” Or what? My tongue had outrun my brain. I was running out of steam. “Or I shall insult you some more, you nasty little goblin.”

Twil looked as if I’d slapped her with a fish. Her mouth staggered over a comeback.

For one of the first times in my life, I felt big and clever and strong. I knew it was adrenaline-fuelled bravado.

Evelyn laughed, dirty and mean. “You always were thin-skinned. Go on, shoo, run back home. Let the adults do the real work.”

Twil lost her temper in a flash and rounded on Evelyn, teeth bared. She grabbed a handful of Evelyn’s jumper, fingers snapping shut like claws, and all my quick easy confidence vanished in a dash of cold water.

“Hope I don’t have to burn the library down to stop your nonsense,” Twil all but spat in Evelyn’s face.

“You can’t burn books!” I said, flailing for anything to throw her off-kilter, get her to let go of Evelyn, to slow things down – but why? Who was going to save us? Raine wasn’t about to turn the corner and chase this foe away. It was just us. “Who on earth do you think you are? You utter barbarian.”

Twil blinked at me and said “What?” in a most befuddled tone of voice, scrunching up her eyes in a frown of disbelief.

I was out of verbal ammunition, on the edge of panic.

I slapped her.

It stung my hand. Didn’t work like in the movies. I think I got the angle wrong, too far back on her face, catching her jaw-bone rather than the full-on flat of her cheek. It made such a loud sound in the concrete corridor.

Twil jerked back and let go of Evelyn, blinking at me, face burning red with my hand print.

I had no follow up, too shocked at myself.

“I-I-” I raised my hands in surrender.

Twil bared her teeth, growled like an animal, and pulled her fist back.

Evelyn saved me from having to come up with a next step of the plan. Which was good, because the next step was ‘get punched in the face’.

She belted Twil across the head with her walking stick.

Not once, but twice. It was clumsy and poorly aimed and weak, but it did the trick. The first strike bounced off Twil’s skull with a loud thwack of wood on bone. She yelped and staggered back in swirl-eyed shock.

The second hit broke her nose.

At least, I think it did. A crunchy, gristly crack heralded a spurt of blood, down her face and spotting the front of that immaculate white hoodie. She doubled-up, hands over her nose and mouth, groaning in pain behind a veil of hair. I gaped at the sight, until Evelyn grabbed me and pulled me forward, forcing me to put one foot in front of the other. Evelyn couldn’t run, but she marched us toward the stairwell.

“You fucking bitch, Saye!” A muffled cry followed us.

“Keep your eyes forward, don’t look back, don’t give her anything,” Evelyn muttered.

“You broke her nose!” I hissed.

“Hey!” Twil shouted. “Don’t ignore me. We’re not done here!”

“She’ll be fine,” Evelyn murmured.

“I slapped her. I *slapped* her.”

“She’ll be fine.”

Evelyn, however, was not fine. We got up the stairwell and onto the library floor and then out under the open skies. Her expression gave nothing away but she couldn’t stop shaking. The wind plucked loose strands from her ponytail.

“Twil will follow us, it’s what she does. We should ... should go ... ”

“She’s got a broken nose and there’s blood on your walking stick. She’s going to go to campus security.” Visions of real-world consequences flooded my mind.

Evelyn shook her head in irritation. “Don’t be absurd. Can’t have her follow me home. We need, uh ... ”

We made for the nearest safe place – the Medieval Metaphysics room. By the time we crossed campus and reached the stairs up to Willow House, Twil was following us, a small figure framed against the concrete walkways, lime green coat flapping in the wind. She held one hand over her nose.

I called Raine.

providence or atoms – 2.4

Ten minutes later, behind the locked door of the Medieval Metaphysics room, Evelyn provided a practical answer to ‘what is magic?’

Magic, in this quick and dirty example, started when she noticed the smear of Twil’s blood on her walking stick. She was still shaking, but her lips curled into that sharp, devious smile.

“Evee?”

She grunted in reply. That’s all I got.

I was too busy crashing out on adrenaline.

Raine would get here any minute. She’d had to skip straight out of a lecture. From the tone in her voice down the phone, she’d probably cross campus in record time. A twinge of guilt plucked at my gut.

Guilt, however, paled in comparison to the high still racing through my heart and pounding in my head.

I’d acted tough and *won*. Was this what Raine felt like all the time? Powerful but spent, shaky and winded? I suspected not. I leaned against the back of a chair and focused on my breathing, one hand wandering up to rub at the bruise inside my chest.

Evelyn slapped her walking stick onto the table and dug around in her tote bag, pulling out odds and ends – a box of cotton buds, a hand mirror, a tub of Vaseline and a black marker pen. She dumped it all on the table. Her hands still quivered as she found an unlabelled bottle of pills and popped two slender white tablets into her mouth, swallowed them dry.

“What are those?” I asked.

Evelyn stared at the detritus on the table, her lips moving in silent thought.

“Evelyn? What did you just take?”

“Nothing. Painkillers.”

She grabbed the mirror and the marker pen, sat down in her chair facing the door, and got to work.

A visible, focused calm settled over Evelyn as she drew curved symbols around the edge of the mirror, her hands steady and working fast after the first minute. The bottle of painkillers tempted me too, but the bruise inside was immune to ibuprofen and paracetamol and codeine. Not to mention the pills probably weren't painkillers at all.

Evelyn finished drawing and grabbed her walking stick, then wiped at the sticky red patch with cotton buds.

With painstaking attention to detail, eyes tightly focused, fingers braced against the bare glass, she drew a spiral design in the centre of the mirror – in Twil's blood.

A deep sense of unreality crept over me, in silence half born of sudden exhaustion, half fear of violating Evelyn's unspoken ritual quiet, broken only by the scuff of the cotton buds and her constant stream of low muttering. The room was soaked in a deep twilight, with the lights off and blankets pinned over the back windows, the overstuffed bookshelves towering over us in the gloom.

I stepped over to the windows and the big desk along the back, flicked the switch on one of the lamps. Soft orange glow chased the shadows away, into the corners and under the bookcases.

Evelyn's head snapped up. She stared at me.

“It was dark.” I hiccuped.

Expressionless, she bent to her work once more.

I sat down and rubbed my sternum. The ache and the adrenaline crash fogged the inside of my head.

“There,” Evelyn said. She straightened up, tugged the blanket off the back of the armchair to settle it over her knees, and placed the finished mirror-design on her lap. She braced her right hand against the surface, thumb and two fingers resting at what seemed like very specific points of the design. “Not my greatest working, but it’ll do. I hope Twil tries it on again, I really hope she does.”

“I assume that’s magic?”

“Just a slapdash job. Very little range, and it’s only good for one use, but it’ll give Twil a nasty little surprise.”

“Evelyn, what just happened?” I picked through my adrenaline-fuzzed memories. “What was that all about? Who is Twil, exactly?”

“An idiot and an irritation. Really, there wasn’t any need to muck about calling Raine. Twil is essentially harmless. That was all so much guff and drama.”

“You use magic on harmless people?”

“This is to remind her not to fuck with me.” Evelyn hesitated. “Us,” she added. “I mean us.”

I opened my mouth again but Evelyn whipped around to glare at the door. She waved me into expectant silence. My heart caught in my throat.

“Someone’s-”

Then the triple-knock, the key in the door, the breathless rush.

Raine barrelled into the room, flushed and wild eyed, thankfully faster than Evelyn could panic-cast the blood-mirror bear trap in her lap. Raine jerked to a halt, as if she’d expected to throw herself headfirst into the middle of a fight. I admit, the look rather suited

her.

“You’re both alright?” she asked.

“Yes, we’re fine, we’re okay.” I smiled in relief. “Hey Raine.”

“Hey yourself.”

“Close the bloody door!” Evelyn snapped.

“Don’t look so happy to see me then.” Raine winked, but she did close the door and throw the latch. “It was Twil, right? On her own? What happened, where is she now?”

“Lurking, I suspect,” Evelyn said.

I nodded. “Yes, on her own. I’d never seen her before. We were in the library, I-”

Evelyn raised her voice. “I suggest you get out of the way of the door.”

Raine quirked an eyebrow at the mirror-and-blood construction in Evelyn’s lap. “Oooh, Eevee, you got some voodoo brewing down there?”

“No, I thought I’d expend all the effort just for fun. What does it look like?”

“What are you gonna do, blast the door into Twil’s face?”

“Something along those lines.”

“Can she actually do that?” I asked. “Is that possible?”

“Of course I can’t,” Evelyn snapped, as Raine shrugged and said “Sure, why not?”

They shared a look. Raine cracked a grin and Evelyn scowled before she resumed staring daggers at the door. Raine glanced between the

two of us, wiggled her eyebrows, and stepped out of the way of the firing line with a flourish of one arm.

“So, you two were having a girls’ morning out together, doing some bonding over library books, when Twil rocked up and ruined your day?”

Evelyn grunted.

“I’m sorry,” I said. The guilt twisted in my chest.

Raine pointed two finger-guns in my direction, struck a dramatic pose, and grinned. It worked. I almost giggled, despite everything.

Raine was wearing a thick black polo-neck underneath her leather jacket. Her boots – not the faded rose ones today – looked sturdy enough to see off any foe all on their own. She had her hair swept back, as if she’d just run a hand through it, an effortless artful disarray.

There’s a unique emotional spice, when you’ve met a person you like an awful lot, and they arrive in your day. You notice every detail, every little change, every minor adjustment of gesture.

Raine had a glove on her right hand. An exercise glove, old and tatty, with silvery wire wrapped around the plastic knuckle brace.

I’d never seen it before.

“It’s really good to see you,” I said, for more than one reason.

“Heather, I am not mad at you. You’ve done nothing wrong. Thank you, for calling me for help.” The finger-guns swivelled to Evelyn, who steadfastly ignored the show. “I’m not actually mad at you either, Eevee, just totally mystified.”

“As usual, then,” Evelyn grunted.

“Like, hey, don’t we have this, you know, arrangement where you let me know where you’re at, ask me to come with you, organise

things in advance, because otherwise spooky ghost lizards and super-zombies from dimension X might kidnap you and eat your brains. Ring a bell at all, Eevee?”

Raine’s good humour seemed genuine. Simple relief, perhaps, but from anybody else I’d have expected shouting, anger, or passive aggression at the very least.

“Yes, yes, I haven’t suddenly gone senile,” Evelyn said. “Ever consider that perhaps I’ve grown out of it at last? Don’t you have other things to worry about now?”

“That’s not what you sounded like earlier,” I said.

I regretted speaking up; Evelyn turned the full force of her frown on me, silent reminder of the day I’d surprised her in this very same room. I resisted a gut-strong urge to curl up and vanish into the chair, forced myself to look her in the eye, get this nonsense under control.

“You were as scared as I was,” I said.

Evelyn opened her mouth to snap at me – but then blinked and swallowed, her expression softening. “I ... yes, Heather. I ... you helped me. Thank you. I needed ... ” She glanced at Raine with obvious discomfort.

“Don’t mind me,” Raine said, barely suppressing a grin.

“And don’t you pull a silly face at this! It’s important. Heather and I shared a ... moment. We came to an understanding.” She sighed heavily. “And yes, she’s right. You’re right, Heather. I was scared, but only because Twil caught us off guard. She won’t be doing that again.”

Raine clapped her hands together and beamed at us. “Look, you’re both safe, and that’s all that matters. Please, Eevee, if you need to rush out somewhere, just call me, yeah? You know I don’t mind. Ever.”

Evelyn grunted and returned to watching the door.

I wished I understood their relationship. Maybe with Evelyn, in private, maybe I could get her to talk about it, if I approached the subject the right way? I cursed myself for such intrusive thoughts, but I felt a burning need to know. Why was Raine so devoted?

Raine leaned down to peer at my face, her hair hanging sideways and her grin at an angle.

“You are far from alright, Heather. I can tell, you know, especially with you.”

“I’m ... shaken. We both were. The ache is really bad. I think it was all the adrenaline.”

Raine perched on the arm of the chair. She started rubbing my back in exactly the right way.

No idea how she’d learnt so fast. In the space of two weeks, she’d already figured out the precise way to melt my muscles. For a long few minutes she didn’t say a word, just kneaded the tension out of my shoulders. Adrenaline and panic drained away. Raine was here. Safe now.

A little voice in my mind whispered those damnable words; ‘damsel in distress’. I told it to shut up.

“So what did Twil do?” Raine said.

I told her.

The more I spoke, the further Raine sharpened into rapt attention, focused and listening, asking no questions. I recognised the change coming over her. Tense, quiet, ready. I found it deeply, astoundingly attractive.

Or rather, I would have, if the puzzle pieces weren’t slotting into place.

No longer buzzing with adrenaline and jumping at shadows, I hesitated at the clues in my own memory. I couldn't be right, it was too absurd. If I was correct then the world was dumber and more annoying than I'd dared imagine. I let my explanation trail off as I stared at Raine. She raised her eyebrows.

"Heather? It's okay, you-"

"What is Twil, exactly?"

Raine paused, split-second hesitation. Any other time, any other circumstances, I wouldn't have noticed. "Okay so, Twil Hopton, that's her name, here's the 101. She's not that hard to deal with, but she does represent some potentially dangerous people, depending-"

"No, that's not what I meant." My throat tightened. "*What* is she?"

Raine glanced at Evelyn for help. "Uh, Eevee, this didn't come up?"

My friends shared a look for just a moment too long. Evelyn shrugged and Raine bit her lower lip.

I felt myself bristle, left on the outside of some secret communication. Is that what they thought of me? The hesitation all but confirmed my worst suspicions, that the world was bonkers. I couldn't believe this. Absurdity.

"I can put two and two together," I said. Raine raised a placating hand but I forged on. "The growling noises Twil made. The dog jokes you were throwing at her, Evelyn, which seemed to strike such a nerve. And you," I frowned at Raine. "Do you think I don't notice things? You've got silver wire wrapped around a weightlifting glove."

"Uh, that I have. Well spotted, yeah." At least Raine had the sense to look guilty. She raised the makeshift knuckle-duster and gave me a sheepish smile.

"I'm not completely culturally ignorant."

"I knew you'd get it, Heather, I just wanted to be gentle and-"

"She's a werewolf." I said. "Twil's a werewolf."

The word didn't seem real. I huffed and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Werewolf is hardly the right term," Evelyn said. "But you're basically correct. Don't be so surprised, I thought it was obvious."

"*Werewolf*." I jammed as much scorn into my voice as I could muster, which at that exact moment was rather a lot. "I can't believe this. This is nonsense."

"She doesn't actually turn into a wolf," Raine said. "She just ... summons it. Kind of."

"Oh yes, because that makes all the difference, great."

"You've dealt with far worse. It's not that wacky."

Memories of the confrontation in the library basement repeated in my mind, slotted into a new context, but one shone out above all the others. A cold hand crept up my spine.

"Evelyn," I said. "What exactly did you mean when you told Twil she needs to 'get over Raine'?"

"Ah." Raine winced.

Evelyn snorted with dark amusement. "This is what you get, Raine, your chickens come home to roost. Or wolves. Whatever."

"You have a werewolf ex-girlfriend." I gaped at Raine.

"No, no!" Raine put her hands up. "No, it was like, a week, or maybe two. And it was all her."

"You have a jealous werewolf ex-girlfriend and you thought this wasn't relevant information that I needed to know?"

"I didn't even know she still came up to Sharrowford. I thought she was gone for good."

"And she smelled you on me," I said.

Raine frowned, hair-trigger switch to serious. "She said that?"

"She said I reeked of both of you. She probably thinks you and I are ... you know." I threw up my hands, too exasperated for embarrassment.

"A safe assumption," Evelyn muttered.

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands. I felt a headache coming on, and this time it had nothing to do with impossible math.

"Heather, I'm so sorry I didn't tell you," Raine said. Her hands found my shoulders again and squeezed. "I really didn't think she was even around any more. If I thought you were in the slightest amount of danger, I would have warned you. I'd knock her lights out if she threatened you."

I knew I didn't have any right to be mad at Raine. After all, we weren't lovers. Just friends. Right? This was her ex, her past, her business. None of my concern. I had no right to demand anything.

Her ex-girlfriend also happened to be an insupportable break with even my tenuous standards of acceptable reality.

"Magic and monsters and other dimensions I can just about deal with. Werewolves are a step too far. Let alone jealous werewolf ex-girlfriends. When did I end up in a bad supernatural romance novel?"

"Romance?" Raine's voice kinked with amusement.

I blushed furiously, amazed she had the audacity right now.

She kept rubbing my shoulders and I kept my face hidden, trying to

accept this incredibly stupid addition to my incomplete model of the world.

“Do you want the full lowdown on her?” Raine asked.

“Oh, why not? I suppose I should at least try to understand. Can hardly make *less* sense at this point.”

“You got it, Heather. Like I was saying, Twil represents some potentially dangerous people, depending on what they’re after right now.”

Evelyn snorted a derisive laugh. “Idiots and amateurs, begging to get their minds eaten by an Outsider.”

“A cult?” I asked, looking up again. “She’s in a cult as well? Oh, great, this gets better and better.”

“Not actually from Sharrowford,” Raine said. “There’s a cult up in Brinkwood, two train stops north of the city. Pokey little village on the edge of the woods. You ever been past there?”

I recalled a rotting ex-mill town seen from dirty train windows, trees marching down to a valley in the mid-distance. “I think so.”

“It’s a run down place. They’ve got some fancy name for themselves, but we just call them the Brinkwood cult. They’re a bit mad, but not screaming avocado batshit level like the Masonic-lodge wannabees in Sharrowford itself.”

“Screaming avocado batshit’?”

“Let’s just say the Sharrowford cult is real bad news. The Brinkwood weirdos, eh, I’d rather we never have to deal with them again, but they’re not stab-happy.”

“Probably because they’re much older,” Evelyn supplied without looking away from the door. “A little stability goes a long way.”

That piqued my interest for real. These people had history, local

history? “How old?”

“Approximately three hundred years, at an educated guess,” Evelyn said. “My grandmother had them well-documented, from a safe distance. They probably started as a group of Quakers, tried to rebuild the abandoned church out in the woods, where Lowdon village used to be. That’s about three miles north of Brinkwood. They found something there in the basement, hibernating, and they’ve been worshipping it ever since. At least, that’s what they tell themselves.”

“What did they find?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Something washed up from Outside. Stranded and crippled and half-dead, I suspect.”

“Well,” Raine said after Evelyn fell silent. “Cut a long story short, Twil’s the cult’s greatest success story. The reason I know all this is we were friends for a bit.”

“Friends,” I echoed.

“Yeah, friends, really. I mean, yes, she had a crush on me, I think?”

“You encouraged her enough,” Evelyn said.

“Ahem, well.” Raine spread her hands in an apologetic shrug. “I may have. Poor decision, I know, yeah. Fair cop, I admit that.”

“I don’t want to know,” I lied. I was dying to know.

“Twil wasn’t born a werewolf,” Evelyn said. “As far as I know, werewolves don’t even exist. She’s the product of a experiment a few years back, to bind a demon or a spirit or some other Godforsaken thing to human flesh, without displacing the human soul. Her back’s covered with a mural of binding tattoos. Keeps them carefully hidden, but Raine saw.”

Raine winced again.

“Right,” I said, voice tight.

“She showed me!” Raine said. “I wasn’t getting her naked, I swear.”

“Lucky for us, the Brinkwood cult had some kind of internal power struggle right after they made themselves a werewolf foot soldier. Since then – nothing. Twil’s basically been left to have a mostly normal life. Her grandfather died, which I suspect meant a change of cult leadership. They seem more concerned with tending to their crippled God these days. They took some interest in my library about a year ago, but I sent them packing. That’s how we met Twil, she’s developed a bee in her bonnet about us. Blame Raine.”

“She hasn’t been around in at least six months,” Raine said. “She’s probably here on actual cult business. They could be up to anything. Including spying on us. Wish I knew why. Maybe I should beat it out of her.”

“So what do we do? Break out the wolfsbane? Wait for a full moon?” I couldn’t quite keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“I need to find her and shoo her back to the sticks, that’s all. Seriously Heather, I won’t let her hurt you, even if she did smell my scent on you. She can take it up with me.”

“Oh, I can’t sit here and listen to this nonsense,” Evelyn snapped. “Stop trying to scare her, Raine, it’s not going to help you get into her knickers any faster.”

“Evelyn, please!” I said. Raine laughed and ruffled my hair.

“Twil’s not going to bother Heather one bit,” Evelyn continued. “She’s going to come here, to finish up what she started, with me. Why in hell would she bother Heather? She doesn’t even know her. She was on the same old hobby horse as usual, pissing and moaning about the books. This time I’m going to teach her a lesson. This is the last time, last time she does this.”

“Evee, you’re my friend and I love you, but why didn’t you call me the moment you saw her?”

“Certainly, I should have taken out my mobile phone while trapped in a corridor with her. ‘Just a moment, Twil old dear, I’m going to call Raine to come punch you in the face for me.’ That would have diffused the situation very handily, wouldn’t it?”

“Better than breaking her nose with your stick. She might have hurt you. Or Heather. I wish I’d been there.”

“Oh, nonsense.” Evelyn pulled herself around to face the door again. “She wouldn’t have dared. It was all front and bluster. You know her, Raine. You know she’s not dangerous, not really.”

I raised my hand. “I do seem to recall her winding up a punch at me.”

“See, Eevee?” Raine turned back to me. “Damn, she didn’t actually hit you, did she?”

“No. And to be fair, I did slap her first.”

“You ... what? You slapped her?” A grin crept across Raine’s face. “*You* slapped her? You slapped Twil?”

“I know! I don’t know what came over me. It’s not a behaviour that should be encouraged, please.”

Raine raised her hand for a high-five. I blushed and hesitated.

“Come on, Heather, you earned it.”

“F-fine.” I touched my hand to Raine’s. Not much of a high-five. “It does complicate things though. She was provoked. I struck first. I slapped a werewolf. Oh, that’s such an intolerable word.”

“From the sound of things, she deserved it.”

“It makes absolutely zero difference,” Evelyn said, punctuating her words by jabbing the arm of her chair. “She wouldn’t bother with Heather, she’s waiting outside for me to leave. But I have more

patience.”

Raine sighed and spread her hands in a wide shrug, a good-natured grin on her face. “Can’t leave you two alone for five minutes, can I?”

“Believe what you want. Perhaps you should listen to-”

A knock shook the door of the Medieval Metaphysics room. Three sharp raps. My heart jumped.

“Ha! I told you so,” Evelyn said.

She stared at the door with an evil glint in her eye and re-oriented her fingertips against the bloodied glass once more.

providence or atoms – 2.5

Raine didn't say a word. She didn't need to.

She stood up, the change in attitude evident in every shift of muscle and posture, instant and electric. She flexed her right hand, the one in the modified glove, curling and uncurling a fist.

From anybody else it would have seemed empty showboating. A ridiculous, playground gesture. Except I'd seen Raine beat a monster to death once before, grinning and flushed and loving the violence. My mouth went dry and my heart hammered all the faster. A tiny, squirming part of me acknowledged how attractive I found her when she did this.

Another part of me laid down the law: that response was deeply unhealthy.

"Let me in, Saye!" a voice called through the door, unmistakably petulant. Twil jerked the handle. The lock held.

"You're not talking to Evelyn, you're talking to me," Raine said, voice rock steady.

"Let her break it down," Evelyn hissed.

"Yeah, I know. I know you're all in there. Open the door, we need to talk, face to face, right now."

"Like earlier?" Evelyn called out. "Go get knotted, Twil."

Raine grimaced. "Evee, ugh. Sick."

Twil growled, long and low. She rattled the handle again, then thumped the door. "Open up or I'll pull the hinges out of the wall."

"Be my guest, please. Huff and puff and blow the door in," Evelyn

said. "We'll get you thrown off campus and the university will charge you with property damage. This is the real world, you addled mutt."

"Quite right. Go away, you ... you horrible person!" I said.

Raine shot me a suppressed grin. I shrugged, desperate to contribute.

"Yes, hear hear." Evelyn said. "Go away, Twil, you're not wanted. Sod off back to your kennel."

Twil whacked the door again. The impact shook the frame, the floor, and my nerves.

Raine stuck out a hand and lowered a voice to a whisper. "Hey, Eevee, hold up, hold up." She tiptoed to the door and reached for the latch, every muscle wound tight and ready to spring. The tip of her tongue poked from the corner of her mouth.

"Are you mad!?" I hissed and scrambled to my feet. "You can't be serious. Yes, go ahead and let the werewolf in here, great plan! Raine, stop!"

"You're in the way," Evelyn added.

Raine inched toward the handle. "Twil? Tell me what you want, maybe we can talk. Gimme an explanation, gimme something to work with here."

A second of silence, then Twil spoke again, but her voice carried less confidence. "... save a life, maybe. Saye, the girl with you earlier, what have you done to her head-"

Raine burst into motion.

She slapped the latch down and whipped the door open, jammed her arm through the gap and yanked Twil inside by a fistful of her collar. Twil yelped in surprise, all wide eyes and windmilling arms, and I thought she was about to sprawl onto the floor or crack her

head off the edge of the table, but Raine wasn't even remotely finished with her.

Raine kicked the door shut, pulled Twil around before she had time to recover her balance, and slammed her against the wood, almost lifting her off her feet. Twil grunted, a deep oof of air forced out of her lungs.

Raine shoved the exercise glove in Twil's face, silver wire an inch from her eyes.

Twil yowled. The most awful noise I'd ever heard from a human throat, inside or outside of a psychiatric hospital. She flailed and thrashed, hands scraping at the door as if trying to dig through the wood and away from the silver.

"You think I don't come loaded for bear?" Raine said.

Zero aggression. Blank and flat.

Then Twil twisted like a fish, jackknifed a leg up, and booted Raine in the chest.

Raine staggered back winded and wrong-footed, her grip dislodged. Twil sagged and shook herself from head to toe, then growled and flexed both hands, fingers open wide like claws.

Between her hanging curtain of hair and her hunched posture, Twil looked the picture of a comic-book savage, halfway to animal already – but the effect was more than mere acting; a second figure was overlaid on her, ghostly half-flesh enveloping her own like an afterimage, fingers too long, bared teeth too sharp and too numerous, the front of her face too snout-like. From a distance one might mistake Twil's additions as figments of a stressed imagination, a half-glimpsed hallucination.

Up close there was no mistake.

Raine grinned, flushed and bouncing on the balls of her feet. She raised her hands in a classic boxing stance.

Violence is never easy to watch. One is pulled between a very sensible desire to hide, and a desperate need to help one's friends. I'd mythologised Raine for two weeks straight. She was unstoppable, she was invincible; she'd killed a monster and she'd done it *for me* and here she was after a kick to the chest, her opponent easily as frightening as she was. Incensed, shaken, confused, I almost broke – which way, I never found out.

Absurdity saved me, as I pushed the last puzzle piece into place.

They both tensed, ready to bash each other senseless over a stupid misunderstanding.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Stop, both of you. Oh my goodness, stop fighting."

I forced myself to step forward, shaking, palms sweaty, dismayed to find that I'd unconsciously slid behind the armchair.

Raine spared me a sidelong glance and Twil blinked at me, teeth bared. I had only seconds to de-escalate this. I focused on Twil.

"They haven't done anything to me." I spoke fast, concentrated on not tripping over my words. "You called me a zombie in the library, but I'm not being mind controlled or coerced or seduced or anything like that. You asked what Evelyn has on me? Absolutely nothing. I saved *her* life, not the other way around. I'm Evelyn's friend, and I'm Raine's ... friend, too. My name's Heather Morell and I know what you are and I can probably mind-zap you into another dimension if I try hard enough, and if I'm completely wrong about what you're thinking and instead you're determined to hurt my friends, then I will do exactly that."

For a split-second I thought I'd got this all terribly wrong. Staring Twil down was like trying to intimidate an actual wolf. I shook so hard I was certain my knees would give way.

Twil lowered her hands; the fight went out of her. She straightened up and swept her hair out of her face. Human again, as if those bestial additions had been a trick of the light. She narrowed her

eyes at me, an intense scrutiny that shifted in turn to Raine and then Evelyn – who had gone very quiet and pale.

“Yeah, what she said,” Raine added. She shook her arms out and rubbed her chest where she’d been kicked, then shot me a questioning look.

“It was pretty obvious once I thought about it,” I said. “She thinks I’m a victim here.”

“You’re sharp,” Twil said. “That is why I came up here. Look, I don’t ... I don’t wanna fight, I just wanted to ... ” She gestured at me, as if for help. “I thought ... ”

“You ever threaten my friends again,” Raine said. “I’ve got a lot more silver with your name on it.”

“Oh fuck off. You started it.”

“Raine,” I said, gently as I could. “Less of that, please, for me? This is all a misunderstanding.”

Twil scowled at me. “It might not be. How do I know you’re not too scared to speak up? Heather, that’s your name, right?”

“Scared? Of what?” Raine asked.

Raine spoke with a smile, but she did a poor job of hiding her tension. She was ready to throw down at the slightest wrong move from Twil. I could tell she wanted to, she enjoyed it on a level I didn’t understand, and I had to keep talking unless I wanted to witness an actual fistfight.

“I think you should explain this in your own words, Twil.” I injected just enough scold into my voice to make it clear what I thought of all this. I put my hands on my hips and did my best to look stern and unimpressed despite the pounding adrenaline in my head and the painful ache in my chest and the fact I was standing in front of a bloody werewolf. The alternative was sit down in a hurry.

Twil grumbled and crossed her arms, looking for all the world like a moody teenager.

“I saw you and Saye go into the library together, down to her ... stuff. What was I supposed to think?”

Evelyn and Raine both opened their mouths at the same moment.

“Ah!” I held up my hands. “Stop, stop, just listen. Listen, please. What did you think, Twil?”

She squinted at me, as if she thought I was an idiot. It wasn’t an easy look to take from such a stunningly beautiful face, but I was too shaken to care much right now.

“I’m new to all of this,” I said. “Humour me. What did you think?”

“ ... that Saye had recruited a minion. An easy fool to ... I don’t know, sacrifice, use for magic. Something worse.” She shrugged. “Wasn’t gonna let her get away with it. Still won’t.” She shot a dark look at Evelyn.

“There we go. That’s what I thought. Well, I’m not. I’m here of my own free will. Very happily, in fact.”

“Should have said that in the first place, shouldn’t you?”

“You made it quite difficult,” I said.

Raine grinned and shook her head. “You absolute spanner, Twil.”

“*Sacrifice?*” Evelyn finally piped up, scowling like thunder. “That’s the sort of thing your lot do. This is all so much bullshit, Twil. Why on earth were you watching me in the first place?”

“I just happened to be in the library, alright? It’s a free country, last I checked.”

“No, I don’t believe a word of this. A very creative excuse, that’s what this is. You shouldn’t even be in the city.”

Twil bared her teeth and growled. Raine raised her fists. Evelyn flinched and almost squeaked. I felt an uncontrollable urge to duck behind the chair. All my hard work undone.

Then Twil jammed a hand into her blue-and-lime coat pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. She shoved it toward Raine, a faint blush in her cheeks.

“That’s why I’m here, alright? My life doesn’t revolve around you lot all the time. Go on, open it. Fucking wasters.”

Raine took the paper, unfolded it, and snorted a suppressed laugh. I peered over her shoulder.

A Sharrowford University Open Day flyer.

Come all ye prospective undergrads; see the departments, talk to professors, wander around the campus. No exclusion for secret werewolves.

“Yeah go on, yuk it up,” Twil said. “You’ll see, I’ll get in and I’ll beat all your marks as well. I’m getting a fucking first. You think I’m just some idiot living in the woods.”

“I’m not laughing at you,” Raine said. She showed the flyer to Evelyn.

“You so are. Bitch.”

“What course are you applying to? And stop being so rude,” I said. Twil blinked at me in a frowny-squint. “It’s a serious question,” I added.

“ ... bio-med science.”

“What were your A-level results?”

“Three As.” She jutted her chin high, then wavered and lowered her gaze. “Okay, one A, two Bs. Predicted.”

“Predicted? Wait a moment, how old are you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m eighteen. I’m an adult.”

“I had assumed you were a little older.” I spread my hands in a silent apology. “With those A-level grades, you’ll probably get accepted. Next year?”

“Yeah, keeping my hopes up. Here, maybe Manchester. You know, get a little further away from home.” She frowned at me. “Why the hell are we talking about this?”

I shrugged. “Because a little normality goes a long way. Because not everything needs to revolve around supernatural nonsense and ... *werewolves*.” I struggled to keep my voice free of pique. Twil smirked, showing too many teeth.

“Told you all about me, did they? Good.”

“That we did,” Raine said. “Didn’t think you’d developed a white knight complex though. Impressive.”

“Oh fuck you, you saddo. You can talk.”

Raine laughed. “It was a compliment, dumbass.”

“From Raine, it probably was,” I muttered.

Twil snorted, barely a laugh at all.

“Sorry about the old rough and tumble, you know?” Raine mimed throwing punches. She didn’t sound sorry. “Got a little too carried away, I guess.”

“Got you good too, didn’t I?”

“Meant what I said though. Don’t hurt my friends.”

“If I wanted to hurt anybody – and I don’t – who’s gonna stop me?”

You and what army?"

Raine shrugged, expansive and theatrical, playing to the crowd. "Silver runs about fifteen quid an ounce these days, I think."

I knew it was unhealthy, chest-thumping nonsense, but the way Raine stared her down, that casual look, as if the outcome would never be in doubt, was far too attractive for me to deal with right now. Raine could use that look for evil if she wanted, I knew she could, and if she ever turned it on me in private I doubt I'd last long.

Too bad Twil was staring right back.

I was jealous.

What on earth did I have to be jealous of? They were ready to knock each other black and blue, and on Raine's side that was at least partly in my defence. But I didn't like them looking at each other, butting heads with familiarity behind their words.

I knew it was petty and stupid but I couldn't help myself. Raine wasn't my lover or my partner and I'd known her for less than a whole month. I felt like a hormonal teenager, and I knew why: because I'd never been allowed to be one before.

I told myself off and resolved to be sensible, measured, and diplomatic.

And to remind Twil I'd already scored a point against her.

"I apologise for slapping you earlier," I said.

Twil shrugged. "Hardly matters, does it? S'cool, whatever."

I opened my mouth to request an apology for her attempted punch, but the words died on the way up.

There wasn't a scratch on her.

No bruise, no slapped face, no broken nose.

The only evidence of our clumsy slapfight was the red stain down the front of her hoodie, diluted and smeared about. She must have scrubbed at it with a wet paper towel in one of the toilets.

Twil cocked an eyebrow at me. I realised I'd been staring.

"Werewolf, right." I huffed a sigh. It just wasn't fair. "Broken noses shouldn't heal in thirty minutes."

Twil barked a laugh.

Even sullen and rude, she was far, far too pretty.

How could I, frumpy shapeless pullovers and daytime pajamas and sallow stress-ruined complexion, compete with that?

Twil watched me watch her, slow and thoughtful. I shrugged at her in silent question, not trusting myself to speak in case I snapped out jealous teenage nonsense.

"So why are you here?" she asked.

"In general?" Too much mocking hostility in my voice. I tamped it down. "Or you mean Sharrowford, or here in this specific room?"

"I mean what the hell are you doing hanging out with these two? What's your deal?"

"I don't think that's any of your business," Raine said quietly.

I crossed my arms. "Quite right. Any answer to that is long and complex and very personal. I'm not comfortable talking about it, except with close friends."

"Oh, uh, right." Twil blinked and looked lost. I felt a little sorry for her. She did mean well, after all. My jealousy wasn't her fault. "Can I like, talk to you alone for a minute?" she asked. "Out in the hallway?"

“Twil,” Raine said, a warning note in her voice.

“Whatever for?” I asked.

“Without these two listening in.” She indicated Raine and Evelyn with a jerk of her chin. “How can I be sure you’re not getting conned?”

I was about to say sure, why not? Twil’s only real desire here was to make sure a timid-looking college girl wasn’t being exploited by a pair of scary clued-up supernatural types. Well, that, and she probably wanted to irritate Evelyn. She was awkward and slightly intimidating, but I had a hard time imagining her actually wanting to hurt me. Also, that lost expression made her look even prettier. I wasn’t immune to that.

Raine spoke before I could open my mouth. “No way, no how, Twil. Absolutely not.”

“Raine.” I heard an unintentional whine in my voice. I killed it, not liking where that was going. “I can make my own decisions.”

“Yeah, maybe you should listen to her?” Twil narrowed her eyes at Raine.

“I’m not trying to control your decisions,” Raine said. She stepped over to my side. “My danger senses are still tingling, really.”

“Danger? Talking with her in the corridor for five minutes? Twil just wants to make sure I’m not being coerced.” I glanced past Raine. “Am I correct?”

“Right,” Twil said. “This ain’t convincing me, by the way.”

Raine leaned in close, cupped my ear, and whispered. Her warm breath tingled on my scalp.

“Heather, this could be a set up for a snatch job. Everything out of Twil’s mouth is suspect.”

“What?” I said out loud.

“It’s not impossible that the Brinkwood cult knows about you somehow. I didn’t mention it before, didn’t want to scare you. Do not let Twil get you alone. I was skating on thin ice earlier; without the silver, she could pull my head off if she wanted. Kidnapping you would be easy.”

Raine straightened up and squeezed my shoulder. I knew that look. I’d trusted it on a sick and lonely morning in a dirty Sharrowford cafe, and it had saved me.

“I-I think you’re wrong,” I said. “But I trust you. Okay.”

“Well?” Twil growled.

I shook my head.

“Fine, whatever. S’your funeral. Can’t say I didn’t try.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, it’s very sweet of you, but I’m fine, I’m safe. I don’t need saving. Probably for the first time in my life.”

“Yeah, I think we’re done here,” Raine said. “Time to go, hey Twil? You leave us alone, we’ll leave you alone. Non-aggression pact, all that good stuff?”

Twil grunted, then looked hard at me. “I don’t trust anything these two do. Like, I dunno what exactly they told you about me and mine, but Saye’s infinitely more fucked up than I am.”

I felt myself bristle at the implied insult. “That’s hardly a mark against her, even if true.”

“Whatever. Don’t let her do any magic to you, that’s for sure.”

Twil must have seen the silent question in my expression. She frowned and glanced between Evelyn and I.

“Woah, shit, that’s not why you went down to the books, was it?”

I cleared my throat. “Well-”

“Was it?” Raine asked. “Evee?”

“Oh no fucking way,” Twil said. She unfolded her arms and flexed her hands, glowering and baring her teeth. “Nuh uh, not letting you mindfuck this girl.”

“For pity’s sake,” I said, cursing my own open-book face. “It’s fine, it’s to help me.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

Raine stepped forward, raising her gloved fist again. “Hold up, Twil.”

Evelyn cleared her throat.

“This is all very dramatic and edifying, I’m sure,” she said. “But you seem to have forgotten something, you dense mongrel.”

Twil frowned at her. “What?”

“Yeah, what?” Raine said.

“Your reasons are irrelevant,” Evelyn spat. “Apologise and leave. One chance.”

“What? Fuck you Saye, you-”

Twil’s eyes went wide. She lunged for Evelyn. Raine yelled and leapt for her. I jumped so badly that my heart achieved escape velocity.

“Oh,” I mouthed, before Evelyn cast the spell we’d all forgotten about.

She twisted her fingers against the blood-smeared mirror,

completed her infernal circuit, and spoke a rush of words which sounded like they hurt to pronounce, all throaty consonants and hard inhalation. Her maimed left hand thrust forward and squeezed into a fist.

The air temperature plummeted several degrees in an instant, enough to draw a gasp and shiver from me.

Static electricity sparked off my fingers and crackled across my jumper.

And Twil slammed to a halt.

She froze mid-step, fists clenched, mouth half-open on an unfinished snarl. Her eyes bulged with blinding rage. The muscles on her face twitched. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she vibrated all over, as if fighting to fill her lungs. Her right arm jerked up, millimetre by painful millimetre.

Raine caught herself on the edge of the table to avoid touching Twil. Static jumped from her hands to the metal table legs and she swore under her breath.

Evelyn shook and panted, dripping with sudden cold sweat. She grinned at Twil, ugly and triumphant.

“You forgot what I can do,” she said, effort in every word.

Disgust and fascination fought in my heart. I stared at Twil and then at the blood-thing in Evelyn’s lap. This was impossible, my mind said, but there it was, evidence of my own eyes. And Evelyn was enjoying it far too much.

“Evee, you’ve made your point,” Raine said. “We don’t want a body on our hands. Let it go.”

“Body?” Evelyn choked out a laugh. “Oh, I think our doggy friend can take a lot more than this.”

Twil was gritting her teeth, hissing a sound halfway between a

broken gas pipe and a dentist's drill.

"Yeah, but maybe you can't," Raine said.

That snapped me back to the moment. "She can't- Evelyn, she can't breathe," I said.

"That's the point."

She clenched her fist tighter, knuckles white. Twil was so red in the face she looked ready to burst. Evelyn shook and quivered, a flu patient with the chills, about to collapse, blinking rapidly just to stay conscious. Raine looked wary of touching either of them, as if they carried live current. For all I knew, they did.

"Evelyn, stop!" I cried. "I won't let you do this to somebody over me. It's not worth it! I won't have it. Not even a rude, ridiculous person like Twil. Stop!"

"Not about you." Evelyn had to force every word. "About respect."

"I don't care! I won't have much respect left for you or myself if I stand by and let you commit *torture*. Stop!"

The tug of war collapsed.

Evelyn sagged and her fingers slipped on the bloody mirror. Twil crashed to the floor. Her chin bounced off the ground and she yelped like a kicked dog. I flinched, my own tension pulled piano-wire tight. Evelyn slumped and started to slide out of her chair, but Raine ducked forward and held her under the armpits, pushed her back into the seat. She was coated with sweat and shivering all over. Her eyes found mine, guilty and ashamed for a split-second before they fluttered shut.

"Raine, what- what do I-" I stammered, hands half-raised in a please-let-me-help gesture.

"It's okay, I've got her, I've got her," Raine said. She clicked her fingers in front of Evelyn's face. "Evee. Evee, open you eyes. Don't

go to sleep. Evelyn, open your eyes.”

Evelyn coughed and grunted. “I’m fine. Stop clicking at me.”

“Dammit, Eevee.”

Twil struggled to her knees, sucking in air like she’d run a marathon. “Oh yeah, nobody worry about me, just over here getting my guts fried. You shower of utter bitches.”

“Come off it, you’re basically invincible,” Raine said, but she stood up and offered Twil a hand.

“Yeah, but I can still feel pain. Fucking hate you, Saye.”

“Good,” Evelyn grumbled, eyes still closed. “Perhaps you’ll show some respect.”

“Evelyn, shush,” I said, an unfamiliar lash in my voice. She opened bleary, confused eyes on me.

“Bet you’re out of ammo now, you-” Twil started.

“And you,” I rounded on Twil. “Sit.”

“Yeah yeah, don’t have to tell me twice.” Twil winced as Raine helped her into one of our armchairs.

Even in the heat of the moment, it wasn’t an easy sight for my fragile self-esteem: Twil with her arm over Raine’s shoulders to help her stand, Raine frowning at her with at least a modicum of care and attention. I told myself it didn’t matter. We had bigger things to deal with now. I could be immature later. In private. Alone.

“Can’t believe I have to be the adult in the room,” I said, and took a deep breath. My hands were shaking, quite badly, and I clasped them together to get myself under control. It was over, I told myself. It was done. We could all pretend to be sensible adults now.

The room temperature had returned to normal, and none of us

seemed charged with static anymore.

Twil was hunched up as if around a stomach wound, though there was no visible mark on her, and Evelyn looked like she was asleep, her frowning, conflicted expression the only evidence to the contrary.

“Right, I think we’ve all had enough for one day,” Raine said. “We are going the hell home, and you’re going to sleep, Eevee.”

“Why did you do it?” I asked.

Evelyn’s frown darkened. She knew I was talking to her.

“Heather, maybe leave it for now?” Raine murmured.

“Standards have to be maintained,” Evelyn said. “Debts paid.”

Twil growled, either at Evelyn or just to get our attention. “You’re kidding if you think I’m going anywhere now. So desperate to stop me seeing what you’re gonna do to this poor girl, huh? No way, Saye. You’re doing magic, so I’m not going anywhere.”

“Neither of you are in any state to do anything right now,” Raine said.

Evelyn scoffed. “Watch me.”

“Sure thing, bitch,” Twil shot back.

Raine rubbed the bridge of her nose. I sighed and hugged myself, feeling like I was under siege.

“I’m haunted,” I said.

Twil blinked at me. “What?”

“Hey, you don’t have to do this, Heather,” Raine said. I shook my head, didn’t matter now.

“Haunted. By something much bigger and scarier than you, and Evelyn’s going to help me with it. Raine’s been helping me with it. You, I don’t know what you’re doing, but I suppose you’ve at least earned an answer, after Evelyn hit you with the magical version of live battery clamps to your sensitive parts.”

“S’this true?” Twil said.

I nodded.

Evelyn turned bleary eyes to stare level at our curious werewolf. “Quite. Heather’s got the attention of something much worse than the sad little god your cult worships.”

“Hey, don’t call it a cult.”

“I’ll call it whatever I bloody well like. I could take it apart if I wanted.”

Twil bared her teeth and growled.

“Girls, calm the hell down.” Raine raised her voice and rapped her knuckles on the table. Evelyn winced at the noise and Twil jerked her head back.

“Why can’t we just act like reasonable adults, instead of extras from a bad drama?” I asked. “Let’s compromise, so we don’t end up doing this all again? I assume, Twil, that if you’re not satisfied, then you’re going to start following me around? Or go after Evelyn again?”

Twil blinked at me as if I had mind reading powers.

“And Evelyn,” I continued. “If we’re still on for your magical experiment today, do you object to Twil watching?”

Evelyn sucked her teeth in thought. “We’d have to go back to my house.”

“Then I’m coming with you,” Twil said.

“Over my dead body.”

“I gotta agree. Though not the dead part,” Raine said. “You ain’t coming back there.”

“The security would eat you alive,” Evelyn said.

Twil flexed her back and arms, rolling muscles like a wrestler. “We can find out.”

“No,” Evelyn said.

“Why don’t we do the spell here?” I asked. Three pairs of eyes looked to me. “Well, why not? You two have manoeuvred yourselves into a stalemate, and I am deeply uncomfortable at being at the heart of it. I’m not thanking you for your concern, Twil, or you, Evelyn, for ... whatever ego-trip nonsense that spell was.”

Evelyn held my gaze for a long moment. I was too wiped out to worry about looking away. Bitter damage lurked behind her eyes, and I promised myself that after this day was over and we all did go home again, I was going to give her a hug. I would be her friend. A real one.

“It’s possible. No reason why not,” she said. “But I need tools from home. Somebody will have to fetch them.”

“Ah,” Raine said.

The impasse was obvious: Twil was barred from Evelyn’s house; Evelyn couldn’t go alone; Raine didn’t want to leave us here with Twil.

“I’ll go,” I said. “It’s for my benefit anyway. And to be honest I need some fresh air after that.”

Raine shook her head. “No, not by yourself.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, it’s fine. I’m hardly going to get snatched off

the street.”

“You might,” Raine muttered.

She guided me a few steps toward the back of the room, out of earshot. I didn’t mind – it was a very reassuring way to be handled, but a tiny voice in the black pit of my self-esteem giggled those damnable words again: damsel in distress.

Raine dropped her voice to a whisper. “Heather, look, I don’t like this.”

“It’s fine.” I said, whispering back despite myself. “I trust you, but I think you’re wrong, Twil’s just concerned.”

“And if I’m right, she might have others waiting for you. I dunno. It’ll have to be me, I’ll have to go. Here.”

Raine tugged off the silver-wire exercise glove and held it out to me.

“Oh, I can’t. No, Raine.”

“All you gotta do is wave it in Twil’s general direction and she’ll get back right sharpish. She’s weak at the moment. I dunno how long it’ll take her to recover but I can get to Eevee’s and back in under half an hour.”

“It’ll be fine, I don’t need-”

Raine pressed a finger to my lips. The intimate gesture made my heart skip. “No, I am only doing this if you promise to do what I say. The alternative is I knock Twil’s lights out, then carry Eevee home, and you sleep at my place until we’re sure Twil’s gone.”

“ ... Raine, really,” I hissed, unimpressed, trying to ignore the bait. Sleep at Raine’s? Yes please. She’d not taken me there yet.

She didn’t even blink.

“Hey, this is what I do.”

I sighed and took the glove. “Fine.”

“Promise.”

“To what?”

“Don’t get within six feet of Twil. Keep a chair between you and her. Don’t answer the door to anybody but me. And whatever you do, do not, absolutely do not go outside with her. Promise me.”

“If you think she’s so dangerous, why leave in the first place?”

“Hey, you took the wheel here, Heather. You’re in charge right now. This is your compromise. I’m just interpreting orders.”

“Alright, I promise.”

Raine smiled, relief obvious, and I took selfish comfort in her absolute trust in my promises. Then she pulled me into a hug, and I took comfort in that too.

Maybe I didn’t need Maisie. Maybe I had Raine now.

Or maybe I was just kidding myself.

Or dependent.

When Raine let go I wished we were anywhere but here, anywhere but in the Medieval Metaphysics room with an angry werewolf and Evelyn. Raine took a deep breath and crossed the room, whirling into action. All she needed was a long trench coat billowing out behind her to complete the look.

“Right, Evelyn, what do you need? List me.”

“Hmm. Paper. The silver plate underneath the stairs. The bottle of aqua vitae. That’s still in the kitchen cupboard, has a picture of unicorn on it, you can’t miss it. *Inprencibilis Vermis* from my library,

third shelf up on the left hand wall, you know the one.”

“That’s it?”

Evelyn nodded.

“S’not much.”

“It’s an experiment. Probably won’t even work.”

“Got it, no probs. And you.” Raine turned to our grumpy werewolf visitor. Twil was still hunched up like a brooding teenager with her hair half down in front of her face.

She shot a dark look at Raine. “What?”

“Heather trusts you. I don’t. If she’s wrong and I’m right, I’ll kill you.”

Her voice sent a cold hand crawling up my spine. That wasn’t the Raine who hugged me a moment ago. That wasn’t my Raine.

Twil just grunted.

Raine turned to me one last time, winked, and then she was out of the door. The latch clicked shut behind her, followed by the sound of her footsteps receding down the corridor, walking fast.

I made a conscious effort to smile, but nobody was paying attention. Evelyn lay in her chair, watching Twil through half-open eyes. Twil stared back, the very picture of a wolf waiting for prey to slip up.

“Well then,” I said. “Won’t be long, I hope.”

providence or atoms – 2.6

Thirty minutes.

That was Raine's estimate.

Thirty minutes stuck in a room with two very angry people who hated each other for reasons I didn't understand, waiting for Raine to return before either of them felt well enough for attempted murder. Thankfully, neither seemed inclined to get up yet. Twil had hunched tighter around her imaginary stomach wound, while Evelyn brooded, her eyes barely open and fixed on Twil with dark intensity.

I did as I'd promised, positioned myself behind one of the three armchairs, casually as I could, a nice safe distance from the firing line. Raine's anti-werewolf punching glove still felt warm from her hand, but even with that enticement I couldn't bring myself to put it on. I slipped it into my pocket.

Raine's instructions gave me focus, though I didn't believe they were necessary.

No, I was more concerned with Twil and Evelyn trying to pull each others' faces off again.

Seconds ticked by, each one worse than the last, and neither of them made a sound. Couldn't bear the tension. Made me want to rake at my scalp, scratch my back, crack my toes, anything. I chewed my lip and couldn't hold back any longer.

"Can you walk?" I asked.

Two blank faces turned my way.

I'd tried to muster a gentle, conversational tone, as if we were all friends here, but I sounded like a school mistress about to lose

control of her class.

“It’s not exactly an unexpected or untoward question.” I spoke too quickly. “You were hocus-pocused into a tomato,” I said to Twil. “And, well, you, Evelyn, I don’t know. Can you walk or not?”

Twil rolled her shoulders and shot me a toothy smile. “I’ve walked off worse.”

“Of course I can walk,” Evelyn said. “That was nothing, hardly real magic at all.”

“Well. Well, yes, that’s good then, isn’t it? Good.” Had to stall. Must stall. Pleasantries, everyday things, small talk. “Why don’t you- why not stretch your ... uh-” I stammered to a stop on the gaffe.

“Leg? Singular?” Twil finished for me. She showed Evelyn her teeth.

Evelyn stared at her, very blank and very cold. “Why, I don’t understand the joke. Care to explain?”

“So, Twil.” I spoke loud and bright, clapped my hands together. “You’re from this ... this ... group?”

Oh goodness, why didn’t I just shove my entire foot down my throat? Good job, Heather, keep digging. Maybe Raine will bring you a spade.

“Cult,” Evelyn corrected. Her voice was free of malice, just tired and certain.

“It’s a *Church*.” Twil glared at Evelyn. “Look, sorry Heather, I’m not going to talk about my religion with Saye here.”

Evelyn cocked an eyebrow. “Religion? Don’t try to legitimise yourself, it’s sad.”

“Oh go swivel. You talk about it like we’re baby-eating monsters, sacrificing people on altars in the woods and having orgies with the devil. It’s nothing like that, Saye, and you know it.”

“That describes your grandfather quite well.”

“You shut your mouth,” Twil said through clenched teeth. “My grandfather gave me the greatest gift a girl could ever want. This.”

Twil yanked her sleeve up and held out one toned forearm.

In the blink of an eye, she wore a werewolf.

Air and light solidified around her flesh, like coalescing mist. Twil’s pale forearm was encased in an overlaid ghostly image, of thick grey-white fur with a rich reddish brown under-layer, muscle and tendon flexing like steel cables beneath. Sharp claws of ghostly matter extended from her fingers, the palm of her hand shadowed by a padded canine paw. Human skin resumed just above her elbow.

She closed her fist and the ghostly layer vanished. “I won’t hear a single fucking word against my family. You get me?”

Evelyn huffed. “Your grandfather made you into a foot-solider. You’re lucky he died before you could be put to use.”

Twil growled and bared her teeth.

I didn’t have time for that.

I was fascinated.

“Do that again,” I said.

“What?”

“Your arm. Show me. Do that again.”

Twil frowned at me and started to jerk her sleeve back down.

“I’m serious,” I said. “You can’t flash that around and not expect attention. Do it again, show me, I insist. You were so proud of it a

moment ago, too.”

“Bloody hell, I’m not a zoo animal.”

“No, you’re a werewolf.” I resisted a mean-spirited urge to roll my eyes. “Perhaps this is normal for you, but try to appreciate this is a matter of some interest for me, to put it lightly. Please, Twil, may I see your ... gift, once more? Perhaps for a moment or two longer than it took you to threaten Evelyn?”

Evelyn snorted, but luckily Twil was too busy frowning at me – a very normal, human frown. I’d irritated her on a perfectly safe level, by accident.

“Ugh, fine.”

Twil stuck her arm out again.

I didn’t realise until a moment later that I’d broken my promise to Raine. I half slid out from behind my covert chair barricade and leaned in close, for a good look, a lot closer to Twil than the recommended six feet minimum safe distance.

Twil’s werewolf arm was one of the most fascinating sights I’d ever laid eyes on.

I’d spent my whole life seeing and hearing and – heaven forbid, sometimes – feeling the unnatural, but Twil’s ghostly arm seemed clean and normal in a way that no spirit had ever quite managed. Or perhaps I’d never looked closely enough before.

It was corporeal too, solid and material enough to touch. The fur sprang back up after the slightest pressure, thick and glossy and velvet soft, as if she’d come straight from a doggy shampoo and blow-dry. Maybe she had.

A sleazy smirk crept across Twil’s face. “Didn’t say you could touch, you know?”

I started and jerked back, hand to my chest in mortified

embarrassment. “I-I’m sorry, I don’t know what- I didn’t realise I was touching you. I’m sorry.”

“S’fine. Can’t blame you.” She turned her arm over a couple of times, smiling at the sight of herself

“I didn’t- I-” I took a surreptitious step back behind the armchair, curiously lightheaded and blushing badly. Evelyn watched me with an unimpressed look. “Sorry, I just- it looked very soft. I’m not used to animals. Never had any pets.”

“Is there some fetish we should know about here?” Evelyn drawled. “Are you a secret furry, Heather?”

“A-a what?”

“Hey, back off,” Twil snapped at her. Evelyn shrugged, radiating boredom.

“So- so-” I stammered, trying to regain control of the situation. “No full moon? You don’t need that, you just transform at will?”

Twil flicked her wolf-arm as if shaking off water. It blurred back to human again. She pulled her sleeve down and shrugged. “Yeah, sure. Why not, huh? Wouldn’t be very fun if I just wiggled out at the moon, would it?”

A question caught in the back of my throat. Twil didn’t exactly seem like the damsel in distress type. My imagination, gorged on poor self esteem and affection-starved paranoia, fed itself an elaborate fiction about supernatural exoticism. I compared myself to Twil and found myself wanting, plain, boring, cowardly.

Pure projection.

“Is that why Raine went out with you?” I asked. “The whole werewolf thing?”

In the dark recesses of my mind I’d expected Twil to grin and toss her head back, like a temptress from some bad 50s noir film.

Instead, she spluttered.

“Eh? What? No. We never went out. What? What kinda bullshit has she been feeding you?”

“You had a remarkable interest in her,” Evelyn said. “Following her around like a puppy.”

Twil rolled her eyes and shrugged, but I could clearly see the kernel of old disappointment. She’d wanted. Not gotten. “Yeah, in your dreams, maybe. We never did anything, okay? I dunno where you even get the idea.”

I felt the most selfish, satisfying flush of relief, laced through with guilt. I was acting ridiculous.

“Well, that’s- yes, yes.” I stammered and flustered. “I see. I’m sorry. I mean, I apologise for bringing it up.”

Twil eyed me with an odd sort of frown.

“W-what? What is it?” I asked.

“Missing piece of the puzzle is what.” Another sleazy grin spread across her face. “I get it now, I get what you’re doing here. You’re Raine’s little femmy girlfriend.”

“I’m *what*? Excuse me?”

“Apparently not,” Evelyn added.

Twil turned to her. “Eh?”

“Mmhmm. Apparently.”

“Nah, no way.” Twil grinned and slapped her own thigh. “You’re having me on. The way Raine was all over her? Yeeeeeah. Obvious, now I think about it. How did I not notice that?”

"I know, right?" Evelyn purred.

I'd gone bright red in the face. "We're- she's- we're not! You're completely wrong. We're *not* together. I've already had this conversation once today, for goodness sake."

Twil barked a laugh and Evelyn snorted. I fought down an urge to stamp my foot.

"Least you seem pretty straight up and down," Twil said.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Means you're better than the last few." She turned to Evelyn. "Am I right?"

"Mmhmm. An insult to Heather to even compare."

"Compare me to what? Who?"

By slow, wary degrees at first, then blooming into a full-on gossip session, Twil and Evelyn talked about Raine behind her back.

I hung on every word and learnt a lot more than I'd bargained for. The 'pity project' before me had been a girl in the history department, by the name of May. She'd started out very promising until Raine had discovered she'd believed in lizard people and UN mind-control satellites.

As they spoke, Evelyn dug around in her bag and produced a little packet of wet-wipes. She set about cleaning Twil's blood off her fingers and the mirror.

That would have been too surreal for me, if I wasn't dying to hear more.

The girl prior to May had been a classical goth called Christie, all dark makeup and heavy eyeshadow and emotionally needy, a snippet of history which made me bristle with brief jealousy, until conversation turned to how Christie had been utterly convinced she

was a vampire, and made herself sick drinking cow's blood she'd gotten from a Sharrowford butcher's shop. Apparently she'd locked herself in Raine's bathroom for most of a day and sobbed about 'the dark pact' until Evelyn driven her off by pretending to be Raine's obsessive, spurned admirer.

The tension dialled down as Twil and Evelyn laughed over that last one, as if they weren't a werewolf and a mage and ... whatever I was.

I couldn't take it. I loved every detail, but I couldn't take it.

"Will you stop talking about her like that?" I said. "We really shouldn't be bad-mouthing her."

"It's only the truth," Evelyn muttered.

I frowned, painfully aware she knew Raine a lot better than I did.

"Ahh, don't worry about it." Twil leaned back and cracked her knuckles. "You're sore 'cos you think she's gonna get bored of you, but Raine's a hopeless romantic."

"I already told you, we're not even together."

Twil shrugged. "Whatever you say."

I did my best not to sulk. Evelyn had developed this smug little smile. Twil pulled an old, battered flip-phone out of her pocket and checked the screen.

"Fuck knows why I'm even here at this point," she said. "It's almost four, I'm supposed to be on the train home. I'm gonna miss Bake Off."

"You watch that tripe?" Evelyn asked.

"Go suck a fart. You don't even own a telly."

"I do, actually, for your information."

“I don’t,” I said, feeling peevish, a proxy defence for Raine. “I much prefer reading.”

Twil rolled her eyes.

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Raine returned with all the drama and impact of a commando raid. And on time, thankfully. I didn’t know how much longer the truce would hold.

She all but burst in the door, carrying a big sports bag over one shoulder and waving a silver plate above her head. Twil scrambled to her feet and backed away. Raine froze and grinned.

“Yo, did I interrupt something?”

“You could say that,” I muttered, but internally sighed with relief. “Hey Raine.”

“Yeah, my fucking personal space.” Twil pointed at the silver plate. “The hell are you doing with that?”

“Uh, just, you know, if I was wrong. Like I said.” Raine shoved the silver plate back in the sports bag and closed the door behind her.

“You got everything?” Evelyn asked.

“Sure did, plus a few party favours.” Raine dumped the sports bag on the table and heaved out an armful of winter clothes. Evelyn raised an eyebrow. “For Heather. Figured you wouldn’t mind. It’s all there, when you’re ready.”

“Alright,” Evelyn grumbled. “Let’s get this over with. Help me up.”

Evelyn eased herself out of the chair with a hand from Raine, then set about extracting her ritual tools from the sports bag. She

unfolded a big sheet of paper and spread it across the table, carefully centred the silver plate in the middle, and then shuffled around the edge with a marker pen.

First she drew a triple layer of circles, followed by flowing script of esoteric symbols and interlinked geometric designs. She referenced her notebook as she worked, turning it this way and that, double and triple checking. Toward the end, she pulled a big leatherbound book from the sports bag and carefully read several passages before adding more symbols to her work.

It took an awful lot longer than the blood-magic she'd used to hurt Twil.

As Evelyn worked, our werewolf visitor lounged against the wall, clearly enjoying a safe distance from the silver plate. Raine presented me with the armful of winter clothes.

"Glad I was wrong, Heather. Here, for you."

"Presents are lovely, but is this really the moment?"

"You'll wanna wear these, trust me."

I spied comfy looking mittens in berry purple, a huge fluffy scarf, and a woollen hat with floppy rabbit ears. "Um, why?"

"Trust me."

Evelyn tutted. "She's not made of spun glass." She glanced up from her work. "That- Raine, that's my- my hat!"

"It was the closest one to hand, that's all. Seriously, Eevee, it's Heather's first time. Cut me some slack."

"First time for what?" I picked up on of the mittens.

"Magic."

"What about earlier? That wasn't magic?"

“That was just a little thermodynamics,” Evelyn drawled, already concentrating on her sigil once more. “This may indeed be an experiment, but it’s the real thing.”

“It’ll probably get real cold, real fast. Please, Heather?” Raine held out the scarf.

After a moment’s hesitation, I allowed her to wrap me up. I felt like a small child about to venture outside to play in the snow. She looped the scarf around my neck as I pulled the mittens on. At least they were nice and soft inside.

If I hadn’t felt so terribly guilty for all the gossip about Raine earlier, then I probably would have resisted more, listened to that little voice in my head whispering that I enjoyed the damsel in distress role, enjoyed being treated like this.

How could I not? It was such a sweet gesture, it almost hurt.

I tugged the woollen hat down over my hair. Raine reached up and tweaked the floppy rabbit ears.

“Suits you.”

“Oh, shush,” I said.

“What did you three get up to, then? Feels lot less tense in here than when I left.”

I glanced at the other two, but they weren’t listening. I pitched my voice low. “They were talking about you, in fact.”

Raine’s eyebrows tried to leave the atmosphere. She grinned. “My reputation proceeds me. All good, I hope?”

My eyes answered for me, whether I wanted them to or not. I don’t know if she saw guilt or curiosity or jealousy or worse.

“Ah? Heather?”

“Stop flirting, you two,” Evelyn called. She tapped the table with the end of her pen. “It’s ready and it won’t wait for anybody. Get over here.”

Raine’s attentions had distracted me from the worst phase of Evelyn’s work.

My stomach tightened at the obscenity on the table.

Black ink crawled and writhed over every inch of paper, except for the area directly underneath the high-lipped silver plate. The three circles were clear and stark, untouched by any other lines, but between them and around them the symbols seemed to recur into each other over and over again, vanishing into an optical illusion of infinity on the flat surface.

The design looked a little like a funnel, with an opening on one side.

“You stand here.” Evelyn jerked her walking stick at the opening.

“What- ugh, sorry.” I had to avert my eyes and take a deep breath. “Makes me feel sick.”

Raine put a hand on my back. “You can sit down if you want.”

“No she can’t,” Evelyn said. “She doesn’t have to look at it. Just stand.”

“It’s okay, I’ll be okay,” I murmured, mostly for myself. “I can do this.”

I did as Evelyn asked. I kept my eyes open, but stared at the blankets pinned over the windows. The setting sun had dimmed the air to a murky orange. The lamp at the back now provided most of the light in the room.

“Raine, you stand clear over here,” Evelyn said. I felt Raine’s hand squeeze my shoulder, then leave. “Twil, don’t interrupt. Whatever

happens, nobody is to touch the three circles. Anything else should be fair game in an emergency.”

“How safe is this?” I asked.

Evelyn shrugged. She took up the bottle of aqua vitae, the last unused ritual ingredient, and wiggled the cork out. “Should be safe. You’re only a reference point, carrying the scent for my bloodhound here. I’m not actually opening a gate, just a sort of window, I need a good look.”

My blood ran cold.

I knew the answer to my next question.

No, she couldn’t do this, this was insanity. She didn’t know what it meant, she’d never seen it, never felt it sifting through her mind. Evelyn was already pouring the clear alcohol into the silver plate, creating a transparent layer above the mirror-finish.

“Good look at what?” I hiccuped, voice caught with sudden terror. “Evelyn, good look at what?”

Twil levered herself off the wall. “Woah, what-”

“Heather?” Raine piped up. “Yeah, Eevee, wait-”

Evelyn slapped the cork back into the bottle. “At your Eye, what else?”

I took a step back and started to form a denial, shake my head, tell her no, stop, don’t do this, not here, not to me.

Evelyn spoke a word that no human mouth was built to speak.

The aqua vitae shimmered like mercury.

Too late.

I screwed my eyes shut and clamped my hands over my ears.

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Gasping in the dark.

Then I felt Raine's hands on my arms and heard her muffled voice beyond the mittens I'd shoved against my ears.

"Heather? Heather, it's okay. It's okay, we're safe. Heather, open your eyes, look at me."

Raine was alive and standing and talking, so I assumed we hadn't all been obliterated. I found myself blinking at her, shaking and struggling to breathe through a blast of adrenaline. She met my eyes and and nodded slow and held me by the shoulders. I blinked back panic tears.

"I-it's okay," I repeated after her. "It's okay, I'm okay. I'm okay."

She smiled, but tense and stiff.

"That was some fucking major-league bullshit right there, Saye. What the fuck?" Twil almost shouted. For once, I agreed with her.

She looked like she wanted to strangle Evelyn, but dared not approach the table. Evelyn was bent over the silver mirror, staring into the surface of the aqua vitae. The liquid had blackened into a rich, rolling darkness.

I pulled the stupid rabbit hat off my head.

"Why didn't you tell me what you were going to do!?" I yelled.

"Because you wouldn't have agreed to it," Evelyn croaked.

About to shoot back with words I'd probably regret later, I realised Evelyn was literally spitting blood. She held a tissue wadded up in one hand, already speckled with crimson spit, then hawked up a

gob of bloody mucus. She caught me staring and glanced up from the magical window.

“The activation word. Damages the throat.”

I cast about at a loss, then shoved the hat at Raine. “Were you in on this?”

“No. I wish I had been.”

“You wouldn’t have agreed either.” Evelyn croaked and coughed and spat again.

“Bloody right I wouldn’t have,” Raine said. “Between terrifying Heather and hurting yourself, are you kidding?”

Twil shook her head and tapped her temple. I was inclined to agree, but too angry to think straight. Evelyn didn’t even bother with a response. She was utterly intent on the dark window in the silver mirror.

With the hat off, cold air quickly soaked through my hair and pinched at my nose. The temperature had indeed dropped sharply, colder than outdoors. I exhaled a white plume and shivered, wrapped my arms around myself. “This cold can’t be good for the books.”

“What, those?” Raine nodded at the bookcases along wall of the Medieval Metaphysics room. “They’re just nonsense, remember? Here, put your hat back on.”

“They’re still books.”

“They’ll be fine,” Evelyn muttered. “This won’t take long.”

She was touching the surface of the liquid window with two fingers, sliding and twitching them ever so gently. The viewpoint swung across a landscape that had haunted me half my life.

Wonderland.

My breath stilled.

“Evee,” Raine warned.

“It’s perfectly safe. It’s one-way,” Evelyn said as she panned across the landscape. “Anything there can’t see us, can’t touch us. Don’t watch if you don’t want to. Step outside if you must. Just don’t interrupt me.”

The liquid rippled as Evelyn moved her fingers. Despite the barely eighteen inches diameter of the silver plate, the image was strikingly clear. If it was any other place, I would have marvelled at the magic. My complaint died on my lips. I couldn’t look away.

Wonderland, exactly as I recalled, except from half a mile up.

Rubble and ruin stretched away to a horizon of broken teeth, monoliths of masonry embedded in the ground and cracked apart by unthinkable forces. Dark mists scudded across the acres of wreckage, drifting with more than a hint of intention. Wherever a wall stood intact, every inch of brick and stone was scrawled with tiny devotional script. Even at such a distance, from outside reality, the words made my eyes water.

Bio-luminescent jellyfish creatures bobbed and weaved through the air, each as big as a bus, their disgusting inner organs pulsing and throbbing to some unheard beat, meaty and wet.

Malformed life picked through the ruins, not even remotely humanoid. None of us could look at them for long. Twil made a gagging sound. Raine was silent. Evelyn quickly panned away.

In the distance, watchers stared up at the sky in mute worship. Some were vaguely simian, hunched over on their knuckles. Others squatted or crouched, toad-like, but most were unidentifiable combinations or phylum with no earthly analogue. I knew from memory each of them was the size of a mountain. One did not risk their attention lightly.

Raine murmured my name. She gently tried to ease me away, hands on my back. I was shaking, shivering, on the verge of tears but not sad, not afraid. "Heather, you don't have to look. Come on, let's go out into the corridor. Hell, we can go down the campus canteen. Heather?"

"No," I hissed. Couldn't look away. "I want to see."

"You don't have-

"I need to see," I said, almost pushed her away with a jerk of my elbow.

"Okay, okay. I'm right here."

Evelyn grunted. "Thought you might."

She panned the view until she'd circled the horizon. Frozen grey static filled the edge of the sky, as if the sun had exploded and forced iron filings across the firmament.

Twil muttered about how messed up this was, but Raine shushed her.

This was futile, I knew. I had nothing to gain by subjecting myself to this.

But I felt such release.

"This is the place you went?" Evelyn asked.

"... yes."

"Hm." Evelyn flicked her fingers, swung the viewpoint up toward the sky.

I realised a second too late why the perspective was half a mile up from the ground. My heart leapt into my throat as the window filled with dark ridges and folds, cleft by a horizontal line across the middle, like a mountain range of puckered flesh. Bigger than any

mountain, like a planet hung in low orbit.

“No, turn it away! Turn it away!” I cried.

Evelyn frowned into the dish. “What is-”

The eyelid cracked open.

It was in the sky and it was the sky and it was everything and all and so large it filled all creation with itself and forced out all thought and reason and demanded one look back into it and acknowledge its gaze with one’s own and never think of anything else ever again.

Open by the slimmest crack. On a true abyss.

More than enough.

It saw us.

All of Evelyn’s assurances of safety and one-way glass meant nothing. The Eye could reach across dimensions and rewrite physics with a thought. Of course it could see us. I’d hidden from it for two weeks and now it had found me.

I felt it in my head. All of our heads.

Noxious light spilt from the mirror-window and underlit Evelyn’s face, casting nightmare shadows across the ceiling. She was paralysed, frozen horror in her eyes. Raine wrapped her arms around her own head, bent forward as if trying to walk into a gale. Somewhere, Twil was yowling.

The first feelers of alien thought stroked at the edges of my mind, a familiar old fumbling and probing, prelude to a lesson. I swallowed a scream.

I was shaking, tears streaming down my face. For ten years this had been confined to dreams. Now I was wide awake.

I was also the only one who'd been here before.

The only one to retain my wits.

I scrambled forward and crashed into the table, slid across the paper sigils and magic circles. The Eye's tendrils tightened around my thoughts, pulled and teased them apart. My vision swam. My skin crawled and my mind cringed away from what I had to do.

I reached out skimmed my mittened hand across the surface of the window, spun the viewpoint away from the Eye.

The spell broke instantly with a crackling discharge of static.

The image in the dish flickered, greyed out, cleared as the liquid returned to normal.

Evelyn sat down on the floor with a loud thump, both hands to her chest. Raine gasped and straightened up, heaving in great gulps of air. Twil, not exactly human right now, shook herself all over and huffed through a snout of razor-sharp teeth.

"Fuck me sideways," Raine said.

We all took a moment to enjoy the absence of alien thought-tentacles in our brains. My whole body felt numb. Raine swung her arms and bounced on the spot. Twil rose from a tight, canine crouch and looked mostly human again as she rubbed her face, but even she was out of insults and complaints.

"Heather?" Raine said.

"Mm?"

"Good. Good call." She nodded at the dish. I was still touching it. I think she wanted to come over to me, hold me, but she looked as stunned and numb as I felt.

"I guess."

“What in bloody arsefuck Jesus Christ was that?” Twil said.

“The thing that haunts me.”

Evelyn shook her head slowly, looked between Raine and I, then looked away and sighed a deep, heavy sigh of defeat and shame.

“Fucking idiot,” Twil grumbled.

“Now’s not the time.” Raine took a deep breath. “This is all safe now, right? Evee?”

“Yes, Heather broke the connection. I won’t make it again.” Evelyn glanced up from her spot on the floor. “I didn’t expect a-”

She froze and her eyes widened just a fraction, just enough for panic. She stared at me.

“What? Evee, what now?” Raine said.

“Heather, did you touch the circles? Did you break the circles?”

I was too numb for blood chills or dramatic pit-of-the-stomach feelings. I think we all were. But when I looked down at my arm, where I’d slid across the table, I knew on an instinctive level that I’d made a mistake. Raine hurried to my side.

My impact had scrunched and torn the paper, breaking all three of Evelyn’s clean, precise magic circles. My arm lay right across them.

Evelyn heaved herself to her feet, suppressed a wince of pain.

“Don’t move,” she was saying – as I pulled my arm back.

The surface of the aqua vitae rippled and parted.

A hand made of solid night shot out from the liquid. Dark and shiny as if covered in a sheen of oil, each many-jointed finger six inches long, tapering points with no nails or claws.

It snapped shut around my wrist.

This time I screamed.

providence or atoms – 2.7

The mitten saved me. Raine helped.

The Dark Hand gripped my wrist, but simple screaming terror wrapped around my heart. No need for paralysing supernatural force to immobilise me. Here was an unspoken fear from the darkest nights of my ruined childhood: Wonderland reaching out to snatch me away.

Bone-freezing cold soaked through the mitten and into my flesh.

The Dark Hand pulled.

Raine already had me, arms hooked under my shoulders from behind.

She'd reacted first, faster even than the Hand. Beating my reaction times isn't exactly a challenge, but I'd thought we were all slow and sluggish after the soul-battering from the Eye.

She held on, planted her feet and tried to haul me back as the Dark Hand tightened its grip.

It was much, much stronger than Raine. For one heart-stopping moment I became the rope in a tug of war, shoulder wrenched near out of the socket. I snapped out of paralysis, kicking and screaming, trying to scramble away.

Then my hand slipped out of the borrowed purple mitten. I yanked my arm back, left the Dark Hand clutching nothing but the glove.

Raine and I won the tug of war and crashed into an armchair. I elbowed her in the stomach and our heads cracked together. She let out a winded oof of breath, but didn't stop, quickly disentangled our legs and jumped to her feet. I stayed half-collapsed in the chair, too shaken to get up.

The Dark Hand snapped open and dropped the mitten.

“What the fuck is that? What the fuck is that?” Twil shouted from behind us. Evelyn backed away in panic, shaking her head.

A Dark Arm followed the Dark Hand, reaching across the table until it found a grip on the edge. A shoulder emerged, made of glistening black night.

The owner of the Dark Hand began to climb through into our reality.

Raine slid something slender and sharp out of her jacket pocket. I wasn't paying much attention to her, or the yelp from Twil. I only figured out much later that Raine had palmed a silver letter opener. Didn't matter much anymore.

“Evee,” Raine raised her voice. “Hope I don't need to say this, you should probably close that gate.”

“I can't!” Evelyn said. “There's no gate, there's nothing to close! I don't ... I don't understand.”

Our uninvited guest slid out of the aqua vitae in the silver plate, inch by slow inch of dark oil-slicked flesh, contorting itself to fit through the eighteen-inch opening, like a rodent cramming itself through a crack in the wall.

A nightmare parody straight from the imagination of any medieval diabolist.

No face, no sense organs, no skin – just one flowing surface of pure darkness, without blemish or break. No claws, no hairs or rough patches, no knobbly joints or bunched muscle. Humanoid, but gangly and so tall it assumed a crouch atop the table as it emerged. Limbs as long as my entire body. Head a blank tapering ovoid big as an anvil, topped with a pair of curved horns. Huge wings stretched from its back and a long sinuous tail lashed behind it, thick as a mooring cable.

This was nothing like the Bone-thing Raine had killed in Evelyn's house. That had originated Outside, belonged to some alien taxonomy, but it had been material. It had bones and skin and a mouth. It had bled and it had died.

The Dark Visitor wasn't even remotely biological.

Not eyes, but I knew it was staring at me.

"Nuh-uh," Raine said to it. "She's not for you."

She put herself between me and the nightmare, and slid into a knife-fighter's stance. Until that moment, I couldn't have told you what a knife-fighting pose was meant to look like, but Raine made it seem second nature. She raised the silver knife in one hand and thrust her other palm forward.

A grin played across her lips. Tension in every muscle. I couldn't believe she wanted to fight this thing; it was simply too large, too other, too intimidating. Her knife looked so small.

In that moment, I loved her for it.

The Demon – I couldn't think of it as anything but a classical demon – finished climbing through into our reality, planting both slab-like feet on the table and squatting in a gargoyle's crouch. The wood creaked under its weight. It leaned forward and craned its head to look around Raine, to look at me.

"Back off," Raine said, loud and clear.

An echo of alien thought brushed against my mind.

I swallowed a gasp, but the thought slipped off, like an oil-soaked hand trying to grip my consciousness.

Raine shifted her balance onto her back foot; I scrambled up and cringed away from the impending violence.

“No, no, don’t touch it, don’t touch it!” Evelyn cried. “I think I know what it is. Do not touch it.”

Raine froze. Didn’t take her eyes off the demon. It bobbed its head to stare at me over Raine’s other shoulder.

“It’s-” Evelyn swallowed hard. “*Kerykeion nichta*, uh ... *Noctis macer*. I’ve seen one before. Once. I think.”

“Don’t care what it is,” Raine almost growled. “It needs to leave.”

“Yes, yes, I think it will! It’s a messenger, that’s what they do. Look, it’s not attacking us. Don’t touch it.”

Another phantom thought skimmed the surface of my brain, wordless impulse and sense-impression: crushing cold, bone-shattering, blood-freezing cold; entrapment and imprisonment, such a tiny, tiny space and no way out, no way out; the human mind turned inside out and put back together piece by piece. Loneliness, abandonment, darkness.

“I-it’s in my head,” I stammered. “It’s trying to get in my head.”

“A message, it’s trying to deliver a message,” Evelyn said. “Maybe we let it, maybe it-”

“Bugger that,” Raine said. “Take your message and shove it up your arse. Get out of my girl’s head.”

Evelyn swore under her breath. “From The Eye? There was no gate! I don’t understand!”

“Fuck this,” Twil said. “Just fucking kill it already.”

The Messenger made its move.

With one huge hand wrapped around the edge of the table, it leaned forward and reached out for me. I squealed and stumbled backward from the grasping fingers.

Raine lashed out so fast I don't think even the Demon knew what happened.

She rammed the knife into the Messenger's night-black arm and twisted the blade on the way back out. Three times in quick succession. She made it look effortless, a quick repeated motion, practised a thousand times, executed with perfect precision. On a human being she'd have opened arteries and veins, torn flesh and cracked off bone.

She may as well have stabbed a bucket of sand.

The night-flesh didn't even need to suck back together, it closed seamlessly after the blade. No wounds, no response, no sound greater than a gentle hiss.

The Demon stopped reaching for me and paused for a moment, as if trying to work out what just happened. Raine yanked the knife out a final time, grinning in full flow. She rocked back in a sort of predictive feint and then went for the Demon's throat.

It took the knife from her. Plucked it right out of her fingers and made it vanish. Raine was so surprised she almost buffed at it with her empty hand.

"Raine!" I yelled.

She snapped back, quickly hopped away from the creature, one arm out to shield me. She took a great shuddering breath, still grinning but now shaking her head in disbelief. Evelyn was reciting words in Latin, shouting commands, instructions, insults. Inviting it to afternoon tea for all I knew.

"Okay, back up, keep away from it-" Raine got out, before before Twil bounded past us.

Twil didn't look very human, but I didn't exactly have the presence of mind to catalogue her wolf-form. All I saw was a blur of fur and teeth, mid-leap.

The Demon Messenger travelled without moving, two feet to the left. The trick made my eyes hurt, drew a pained gasp from Evelyn and a wince from Raine. Twil flew right through the spot it had occupied a moment before. She crashed headfirst into the old bookcases on the other side with a horrible thwack of snapped bones.

“Exitus. R-revertere, a-a quo f-factum est.” Evelyn’s voice shook and stumbled.

The Demon reached for me again. Raine, in one of the bravest and stupidest gestures I would ever witness from her, put her fists up.

It moved her aside.

The motion was impossible to comprehend, at least with human senses. One moment Raine was between me and it, then the Messenger reached out with a dark hand and adjusted her position. Suddenly she was fifteen feet away, on the other side of the room.

Raine reacted instantly, picked up her feet and ran for me.

That dark hand reached for my face.

The backs of my legs hit the chair and I very almost fell over in blind panic. Nowhere left to go, nobody left to stand behind, only a split-second to think. I’d never had to defend myself before. I was weak and slow and unarmed. Best I could manage was to bat ineffectually at the Demon’s hand, probably invite the awful freezing grip around my arm once more.

Oh.

My *arm*.

The mitten hadn’t saved me; Raine hadn’t broken the creature’s grip in a tug of war; my solitary resistance to the Eye had not come from prior experience or presence of mind.

The Noctis Macer’s hand closed around my face, inches from my

skin. Alien thoughts found purchase on my mind, sick, freezing sense-impressions screamed the loneliness of the void into my heart.

I tugged my sleeve down with shaking fingers and held up my forearm.

Showed it the Fractal.

The Demon stopped, statue-still.

“Go away,” I hissed in a rush of panic and fear, more an animal sound than real words, but it did the trick.

The Demon, the Messenger, Noctis Macer, whatever it was and whatever it intended, retracted its hand and rocked back on its heels, as if considering a polite request. The probing thoughts withdrew. Evelyn’s stream of Latin and Greek and worse stuttered to a halt, and Twil hauled herself up against the bookcase, shaking herself like a dog.

Raine almost slammed into me, skidding to a halt and brandishing a heavy book she’d pulled off the shelves in lieu of a real weapon. She gaped at the Fractal on my arm, then broke into a huge grin at the creature.

“Yeah, that’s right, go on, off with you!” she shouted.

Raine put her free hand on my elbow, her other around my waist, held me and propped me up. I’d never been so glad for the support.

She gently eased me forward.

“Raine, no!” I hissed.

The Noctis Macer flexed like a cat rising from a nap, unlimbering gangly limbs and unfolding itself from the table, too tall to stretch to full height indoors. Its other hand uncurled and flicked a crumpled ball of fabric onto the floor at my feet.

We all watched in razor-sharp silence as the Demon stepped down

from the table and backed away from me – from the Fractal.

“It’s okay, it’s shit-scared of you, see?” Raine muttered. I managed a terrified nod. I don’t think it was *scared* at all.

Raine and I backed it all the way to the windows. The creature’s tail probed behind, tapping at the floor and the heavy blankets over the windows, finding no egress. It paused and flexed its wings.

Twil growled through a mouth not all human. “Don’t corner it, for fucks sake.”

“It’s not animal, you idiot,” Evelyn said.

“Twil, pull the curtains down.” Raine said softly.

“What?”

“Just do it. Rip them if you have to.”

Twil grunted as she understood what Raine was getting at. She slid down the edge of the room, at the boundary of my peripheral vision, a hunched figure with far too many teeth in her snout. She reached out slowly with a fist made of claws, took a good handful of the blankets over the windows, then jerked it sideways with one swift tug. Thumbtacks and pins popped out of the thin plasterboard wall and the whole mass of makeshift curtain tore away.

The last dying rays of the day’s sunlight bathed the room in deep orange glow. The Messenger turned to look outside, across the deep concrete shadows of the campus and the city beyond. Its tail tapped and slid across the surface of the glass. Could it even sense light? A tiny, ever-curious part of me filed that question away for later.

Most of me, however, just wanted it gone.

“Twil, get the window latch,” Raine said.

“Are you mental?”

“Stop whining. You’re the most robust here.”

“Look,” I said.

The Demon Messenger fumbled with the window, as if it didn’t know how glass worked. Which, to be fair, it probably didn’t. Huge hands roved across the edges of the window, looking for a catch or mechanism. When it found the latch it paused, touched, paused again, those horrible long fingers cupping and pinching and probing the metal.

“It’s going to break the window,” Evelyn huffed, as if this was any concern at all.

“It can break the wall for all I care,” I said. “As long as it goes away.”

Finally, it figured out the latch, clacked it down and spent another moment sliding the window wide. Cold evening air flooded the room, blew past the Messenger and touched my face. The Demon mounted the windowsill with one huge toe-less foot and paused again, turned its head to look at me one last time.

“Shoo,” Raine shouted, and threw the book at it.

The Demon leapt into the air and fell like a brick. The book sailed out the window. A moment later a crack of leather sounded below – unfurling wings catching the air – and the Demon Messenger soared off between the spires of Sharrowford university, toward the heart of the city, an ungainly, heavy smudge of darker colour against the dimming sky.

I let out one long shaky breath, my whole body a lightning rod of tension and disbelief.

“Heather, hey, it’s gone, it’s gone,” Raine said.

“I know. I can see that.”

Raine eased my elbow back down. My arm ached terribly, despite

her support. I'd clenched my fist so hard my nails had drawn blood from my palm.

"Are you okay?" Raine asked.

I was about to say no, obviously, I'm not okay, we just faced down a true monster, some unthinkable thing from Outside, sent by the Eye to kidnap me or wipe my brain or do God alone knows what. I was shaking and exhausted and far beyond fear. Twil slammed the window shut and Evelyn sagged as she examined the broken magic circle on the table.

Raine had thrown a book at it. For me.

I sketched a very shaky smile, the best I could manage under the circumstances. "Actually, yes. Yes. We won, yes?"

"That we did." Raine grinned. "Sure you're okay? You should sit down."

"Well, no, but ..." I glanced around the room, unable to phrase it while so emotionally drained. Turned out facing down your darkest fears was a lot easier with a little help from your friends. Even if Twil wasn't quite a friend. Yet.

"Where the hell is it going?" Twil asked. She peered out of the window after the dwindling dot. "I can't believe you did this, Saye. Let something like that loose in the city. What were you thinking?"

"It wasn't me." Evelyn sounded as exhausted as I felt. She gestured at the silver plate, the aqua vitae, now inert. "There was no gate. The window was already closed. Somebody or something else opened that, sent it through."

"Yeah, right." Twil squinted at her in disbelief. "You lost control. Face it, you're not the hot shit you think you are."

Evelyn sighed and shook her head.

"What are you gonna do about it, huh? This is your fault. You can't

leave that thing out there, it-”

“It will leave reality by itself,” Evelyn raised her voice. “That’s what they do. *Noctis Macer*. Messenger of Darkness. *Unbekante Orte* has a dozen such names for them. Bigger, more powerful beings use them as messengers, errand-runners. I’ve seen one once before, I told you.”

Raine put a hand on my back, steadying, warm, here. “What if it doesn’t leave?” she asked. “What if it comes back for Heather again?”

“It won’t.” Evelyn almost spat. “It’s a messenger, not an assassin. It’s been refused. Quite comprehensively.”

Twil raised her voice again. Raine told her to shut up. Evelyn started in about ritual process and gates and magic, but I wasn’t following. Past the shaking exhaustion and the after-shocks of fear, I realised that Evelyn was right. If that demon – the *Noctis Macer* – had really wanted to hurt me or kidnap me, it probably could have, Fractal on my arm or no. If it needed skin contact, it could have snuck that tail up from behind and wrapped it around my throat.

I remembered, all of a sudden, that the Demon Messenger had delivered something after all: it had dropped a piece of fabric.

Amid the argument and the blame and the yelling, I looked down and found it. I stepped away from Raine and bent to pick it up.

Intellectually, I recognised the item of clothing before I touched it.

My mind fled from the implication.

I lifted the child-sized tshirt off the floor and stared at the faded strawberry design.

Maisie and I had this game we played as children. We had a lot of games. All kids who grow up close have private, secret games, but the games twins play with each other are built on a special understanding, that unique bond between two people who the

world confuses with each other. Sometimes even mum and dad couldn't tell us apart. Mum tried all sorts of techniques: different haircuts, dressing us differently, even clothes with our initials on the front or back. Nothing worked because we swapped everything, shared everything, became each other.

One day – I think when we were six or seven years old, I didn't remember exactly because I'd spent so many years convinced those memories weren't real – we decided to finger-paint our names on our tshirts. Mum was furious so we produced crocodile tears and giggled about it later. We kept the ruined tshirts and used them to have silent conversations across the room, writing more and more words in every blank space. We swapped them back and forth, so my words became Maisie's and Maisie's words became mine and in the end we couldn't remember whose thoughts had belonged to who.

A child's pajama top. Thin and faded. Collar and cuffs ragged.

A single word was written on the front, letters daubed with a fingertip dipped in a dark and tarry substance, still sticky-fresh.

HELP

“Heather?”

Her tshirt. The one she wore that night. Some details, you never forget. I brought it to my face and sniffed, but there was nothing of her – of me – left there, only the black ash and ruin stench of Wonderland.

“Heather?”

I blinked back slow tears, numb to my core.

“Heather? Hey, Heather?”

I jerked my head up, shaking all over. Raine stared at me with naked concern. Evelyn and Twil were still yelling at each other. How did the world continue to turn, how did we not all simply fly

apart into atoms, if this thing in my hands was real? The most horrible promise, the worst kind of proof.

“Look.” I held the tshirt up, to her, to the room, to reality. My hands shook, my voice did worse. “Look. Look at this. What is this? How- how-”

Raine looked down at the thing in my hands, this obscene, beautiful living proof in my grasp. I imagined ugly thoughts in her head. I’d spent so long, so many years denying Maisie even existed that now I projected that outward, confused and lashing and incoherent.

It wasn’t real, it was a trick, you can’t be certain, Heather. You can’t be certain of anything, can you? You little damsel in distress, you let Raine deal with it for you. Keep your head down and stay safe. Forget what you saw. Coward. Coward. *Coward*. You left her behind, you left her behind and she’s *not dead*.

Raine met my eyes. She reached out and folded her fingers around my hand, held on hard. Nodded once.

“We will,” Raine said.

Her meaning failed to penetrate my survivor’s guilt. I blinked at her, shook my head. “I-I don’t-”

“Help.”

I let out a huge, choking breath and scrubbed my tears on one arm. I hadn’t realised how badly I’d needed Raine to believe, in that moment. She gave me so much more than bare belief.

“How- how- how can we possibly-”

“Don’t think about that part yet. We’ll figure it out.” Raine cracked a smile, a notch down from her usual rakish grin. “I doubt it’s something we can do in an afternoon.”

Evelyn and Twil had fallen quiet, my distress cut through their argument.

“Look.” I held the tshirt out to them as well, my hands shaking.

“ ... ah,” Evelyn murmured.

“What?” Twil frowned. “What am I looking at? What the hell’s wrong with her now?”

“Long story. Shut up,” Raine said.

The full meaning of the Demon Messenger’s visit began to weigh on me, as I realised what had just happened.

“How do they deliver their messages?” I asked Evelyn.

She shook her head. “I don’t ... there’s only speculation.”

“How? Just tell me, I don’t care if it’s speculation. How?”

“I don’t know,” Evelyn said, frowning at the proof in my hand. “Some kind of mind-to-mind contact, I assume. Communication means different things to different orders of being. It could-”

“It was trying to touch me,” I muttered. “It needed to touch, because of the Fractal, blocking. It had a message from her and we chased it away.”

That crushing cold, that endless isolation, that darkness. Was that Maisie?

“Heather?” Raine wrapped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed, to keep me here, keep me grounded. It didn’t work. “It doesn’t matter what-”

I pulled away from her and hurried over to the window, clutching the soiled old tshirt to my chest. Raine joined me, but I had no attention left for her, too busy peering out after the Messenger – Maisie’s Messenger. It had vanished into the light pollution and shadows of a Sharrowford evening. I scanned the sky with mounting frustration greater than I’d ever felt, gritting my teeth,

the thread slipping through my fingers.

“Heather, hey, look at me for a second.”

“I can’t- I-I have to find it.”

“There are easier ways to track than with the naked eye.”

I turned to her and got a full-face blast of Raine at her most focused. No grin, no patronising I-know-better, no humouring the hysterical poorly-adjusted girl. Not even a please-calm-down. Here to solve problems. It was beautiful. I could have thrown my arms around her, kissed her, if I wasn’t so messed up.

She nodded sideways at Twil.

“Oh, tracker dog,” I said.

“Hey!” said Twil.

“Stuff your pride,” Raine said to her. “You’re so worried about Heather, well then, it’s time to help. You can track that thing by scent, right?”

“What?” Twil was still lost, way behind. “I guess so. Shit, I don’t want to, it reeked like a chemical factory.”

“Yes or no,” Raine barked. “Can you do it?”

“Why are we after it now? We only just got rid of the thing.”

I thrust the tshirt toward Twil, holding up Maisie’s message. “My sister isn’t dead! Maisie isn’t dead!”

Without a doubt, the most beautiful and terrible words I’d ever spoken. I wasn’t sure if I should laugh or cry. I made a compromise and hiccuped.

“Okay, yeah, sure, that explains everything,” Twil said.

Evelyn spoke up. Two words.

“It’s bait.”

My mind edited them out, unwilling to hear. I was too busy glancing out the window again, along the route the Messenger took toward the heart of Sharrowford.

The exact route.

I broke for the door without a second thought, pulled at the latch and stumbled out into the top floor corridor of Willow House before the others realised what I was doing. I wasn’t trying to leave them behind; the only thing I cared about was getting out there before the aftershocks passed, before the trail went cold. Raine called my name, right on my heels.

Lucky for us – and my dignity – that Willow house was almost empty this late in the day. Classroom doors yawned open onto the darkness outside. The stairwell lights flickered on as I plunged down the steps two and three at a time.

“Heather, slow down, you’ll trip.”

I didn’t stop until I hit the ground floor and pushed my way through the brown glass double-doors. Cold evening air ran whispering fingers through my hair as I craned up at the sky. I must have made quite a sight there in the middle of campus, wearing one purple mitten and a half-unravellled scarf, flushed in the face and out of breath, eyes red from crying. Raine and Twil bundled out of the building behind me.

“Want me to grab her?” Twil said.

“Heather, speak to me. Tell me what you’re doing. If you have plan, I need in.”

“There. Right there.” I pointed across campus.

The Messenger’s wake had driven the spirit world into a frenzy.

Where it had passed, pneuma-somatic life writhed and twitched like bugs in wet earth under a lifted stone.

A blue-and-red lizard the size of a house lay curled around itself in a protective dome, huge swivel-eyes dilated in fear. Bone-faced figures hunched along the campus walkways, clutching their heads and wailing, tripping over each other and sprawling across the ground. One of the insectoid leviathans on the library roof kicked and jerked limbs in the air, as if fighting ghosts. In the sky, a Roc of fire and stone flapped and hissed and spat, hurling sparks and trailing loose feathers of flame.

Then I remembered nobody else could see them.

Falling prey to one of my lifelong fears; here was the crazy girl gesturing at invisible monsters in public, imbuing them with private meaning, following their secret ways.

I realised I didn't care anymore. Maisie was more important.

"The spirits, they're reacting to it. It went that way."

Twil looked at me, then at Raine, as if we were both mad.

"Just trust her," Raine said. "She knows what she's doing."

They couldn't have held me back. I'd have hissed and spat and clawed just to be allowed to follow that spirit trail across the sky. A near-fugue state gripped my mind and heart, and we followed a track that would have been schizophrenic delusion a month prior.

We left campus quickly, heading west into Sharrowford proper.

Bluebell Road roiled with spirit life, howling at the sky and clawing at each other in overstimulated distress. A thousand scuttling shapes mobbed and packed in the shadows and dusk between the pools of orange streetlight.

I led us down into the student quarter, across suburban streets littered with spine-covered mollusk shells, their inhabitants

retracted inside to shelter from the Messenger's passing.

On Downtruff road, a giant form shifted uneasily against the sky overhead, adjusting pillar-legs and plates of chitin to carry it away from the Noctis Macer's destination.

We climbed cobblestone streets up Mercy Hill where I spotted a nightmare of eyes and tentacles clutching the distant spires of Sharrowford Cathedral, against the backdrop of the city centre lights.

My knowledge of the city ran dry beyond the student quarter, but Raine knew Sharrowford inside out. Our leadership began to switch back and forth. I'd point, she'd forge the way, then I'd change direction and she'd know a shortcut, a better route. When the tortured spirit life gave out and the trail ran cold, Twil sniffed the air and bounded down the streets until she caught the scent on the night wind.

Raine did her best to hold my hand but I wasn't the most affectionate partner right then, always pulling free to point in the next direction, my other hand too busy clutching Maisie's soiled tshirt to my chest.

I only realised much later that Raine was trying to minimise our bizarre spectacle, to make sure my behaviour didn't draw the attention of the curtain-twitchers or a passing police car. A crazy girl staring and gesticulating at the air, leading the way as two other college girls hustled after her, hanging on her every move.

It was a miracle nobody stopped us.

On the edge of the city centre the Demon Messenger had turned north, skirted the shopping district and the ring of roundabouts, brushed up against the fringe of industrial development walled off with red brick and razor wire. For a long moment I stood on the edge of a pedestrian crossing, next to one of the larger roundabouts, cars passing and lights changing from red to green, because I couldn't work out where the Messenger had gone.

Raine laid a hand on my shoulder. "Heather? Take a moment, you're out of breath. We're going to catch it, one way or the other, I swear."

She was right – I was out of breath. The ache in my chest, the soul-gap below my diaphragm, was on fire. I rubbed at my sternum, but the pain didn't matter. I'd never felt so driven in my entire life.

"We look like a bunch of fucking nutters," Twil said. "Bet this'll do wonders for my rep."

"Let Heather do her thing," Raine warned.

We were about to look much worse.

A spirit squatted on the concrete island of the roundabout.

A gorilla crossed with slime mold, leaning on fists the size of wrecking balls. A mouth of slab teeth hung open, drooling black mist onto the ground. Long thin fleshy tendrils sprouted from its back and waved in the air. A few tendrils had gripped the roundabout's signage, rooted there and begun to spread a kind of throbbing meat-moss across the metal.

It was disgusting, the exact sort of thing I'd spent ten years going out of my way to avoid. If it had stared at the sky, I could simply have followed the direction of its gaze, but its bull-shoulders were hunched tight at the Messenger's passing, head down.

Any other day, any other cause, and my courage would have failed me.

I hurried over the road onto the roundabout; hardly green cross code compliant. Raine dashed along after me. Twil was a second too slow, got stuck waiting for traffic to pass.

"Heather, holy shit, slow down!" Raine called.

"It's fine, I looked both ways."

I walked right up to the hunched Gorilla-spirit.

Raine caught up, put one hand on my waist and looked around, waiting for the inevitable shout from a confused motorist. Two college girls standing in the middle of a roundabout, obviously drunk or playing some immature prank – or insane. She didn't hurry me.

I opened my mouth, closed it again, hiccuped twice.

Let the world think what it wanted. I pushed away a decade's worth of taboo. My sister was alive.

I spoke to the spirit.

“Where did it go? What direction?”

A shudder passed through the Gorilla-plant-thing, a reluctant quiver of muscle and tendon. Those giant shiny black eyes swivelled to look at me. It was a huge, hulking beast of intimidating power, ugly as sin, ridged and gnarled. An instinctive animal part of me screamed about running away and climbing trees. I shook very badly. Raine spoke my name and squeezed my shoulder.

It didn't matter. It was immaterial, literally. I had flesh. It didn't.

I stared back.

The me of a month ago would be mortified beyond thought. That other, younger Heather, she still clung to the safety blanket of insanity in the back of my mind, the little voice which still denied that all this was real. I think that moment finally ended her. Here I was, standing in the middle of a traffic roundabout under the streetlights, demanding answers from a monster that nobody else could see, clutching to my chest a message from my kidnapped twin.

Yes, sceptic Heather gave up on that concrete island. I told her it was all going to be okay.

“I demand you tell me where it went. Point.” I tried to sound commanding, to summon up a little of Evelyn’s tone of unquestionable contempt. My voice emerged in a squeak.

The spirit lifted one wrecking ball paw toward the north.

providence or atoms – 2.8

My stamina gave out long before we caught the Demon.

I'd never been very fit. Scrawny legs, no real strength. Hadn't gotten any serious exercise since childhood.

Raine had insisted we not run. Hurrying along Sharrowford's canted, hilly streets for over an hour was more than enough to drain what little reserves I had. I gave in on the corner of Harries Road, slowed and stumbled to a stop and doubled over with my hands on my thighs, sucking air through a raw throat. The ache in my diaphragm burned and throbbed like a punched bruise.

The promise of Maisie's message had kept me going far beyond empty. My knees shook, I was ravenously hungry, and I knew I'd pay for this tomorrow.

Raine hooked an arm under my shoulders and helped me stand straight.

"You have to take a moment," she said. "Stop and rest."

"I- I- can't-" I panted.

"You're not gonna corral a big scary monster if I have to princess carry you the rest of the way, right?" She sneaked a sidelong grin at me. It almost worked, almost got me to sit down and take care of myself.

I couldn't. I levered myself off Raine's support and pointed ahead, to where the houses ran out before the bridge over Samter Street, Sharrowford's abortive excuse for a ring road. A flopping amalgamation of white rubber flesh and wings made of broken light lay in distress across the bridge, downed by the Messenger's passing. The spirit shredded its own feathers with talons made of glass and lightning, screeching at the sky. Cars passed through its

pneuma-somatic flesh, drivers oblivious to the spirit world all around them.

I took a step forward and one knee gave out.

Raine caught me and held me up. "Heather, you're tapped out. Sit."

"Yup, looks about ready to drop," Twil said. "That's it then? You gonna take her home and put her to bed? We done?"

"No, no I have to- to carry on- have to-"

I put up a token struggle, but Raine was right; I was done. She helped me wobble over to one of the low garden walls which fronted the dilapidated semi-detached houses lining Harries Road.

We'd just turned off one of the tiny high streets in this end of Sharrowford, studded with Indian takeaways and shuttered storefronts. A few evening pedestrians glanced at us from across the road, one of them shouted something ugly. Twil stuck both middle fingers up at him. Nobody cared enough to pay attention to three strung-out college girls. The silver lining of England in the 21st century, I suppose.

Raine sat me down on the wall.

"Please, I have keep going. I have to catch it. I-"

"I know. And we can. We will. But you need to rest or you're gonna do yourself an injury."

Damn it all, I knew she was right. I was running on fumes, helpless and frustrated. Raine smiled and spoke soothing words, but I clenched my jaw, wringing my fingers together, nowhere to lash out but at her. I almost did.

"I can catch it," Twil said.

We both looked at her. She was one hundred percent human now, had been since the moment we left Willow House, right down to the

tips of her fingers and the ends of her curly black hair. She shrugged. "I can follow the scent a lot faster without you two in tow. You're both slow as shit."

"You're serious?" I asked. "You can?"

"Sure can," Twil drawled through a lazy, smug smile. "I could cross the whole city in half an hour and be back before you got time to worry. Nobody'll see me either."

"Yes." I nodded. "Yes, do it, please, please. You'll be straight back?"

Raine held up a hand and fixed Twil with that intense, uncompromising stare. "If this is a setup-

"Raine!" I said, horrified.

"Oh fuck off. What, you think I rigged that bigass fuckboy to lead us out here? This lovebird drama is sad, that's what it is. I'm not gonna steal your girl, okay? I'm not even interested." Twil put her hands on her hips. "We're chasing major bad mojo, right? I don't get half of what's going on but screw it, we're on a hunt, right? It's got my blood itching. You can't set me to find prey and expect me to drop it."

Raine and Twil stared each other down for a heartbeat.

"Raine," I hissed.

"Alright, go."

Twil sketched a mock-salute – to me, not Raine – and then she was gone, off at a dead run. When she got far enough ahead of the streetlights, beyond view of casual observers, she slipped into a long, loping, rolling gait. I caught a flash of clawed wolfish foot kicking off the paving slabs.

My goodness, she could move.

Raine watched her go. She puffed out a long sigh and rolled her

shoulders.

“Anyone approaches us, says anything, pretend you’re drunk. Student hijinks, yeah?”

I nodded and rubbed at the burning ache in my chest, wishing I could massage my own diaphragm. Raine stood as if on guard over me, hands in the pockets of her leather jacket, glancing up and down the street.

A feeling of embattled, bitter defiance fought up from my heart, because I thought I knew what she was thinking.

Getting my breath back broke my single-minded focus, gave me the mental space to feel truly and fully awful, really ramp up the self-loathing. I’d never felt so pathetic and useless. Maisie was right there, on the other side of reality, alive and alone and cold, and I was too weak and broken to drag my sorry carcass halfway across a provincial English city. Pampered, atrophied, useless. I called myself far worse things in the privacy of my own mind. The ache in my chest was not entirely physical.

Was this what Raine wanted? A damsel in distress? Because I felt like living filth.

I was endlessly thankful to her, yes, for believing me, for following me, even for the little things like the borrowed scarf and the one remaining mitten. The first shades of night had fallen over the city streets, chill wind in the air leeching residual heat from the concrete and asphalt. If it wasn’t for the extra layers, I’d have been shivering after a few moments sitting still.

Maybe this was what Evelyn had warned me about.

Raine looked down at me with a thoughtful expression and a gentle smile. I was doing a fantastic job of hiding my turmoil behind the veil of exhaustion, but I just couldn’t bear that smile.

“Don’t say it. Not right now.”

Raine raised her eyebrows. "Say what?"

"I ... I don't know, exactly. Whatever you were thinking." I had to look down at the pavement. "Maybe we can talk about it later. Right now I don't care, I can't deal with it. I have to ... have to ... "

"Heather?"

"Just don't. Don't say it. Don't treat me like this."

A pause, one of those dreadful heartbeats where history could have gone either way; if Raine had been anybody else, we'd have derailed.

She crouched down so we were eye to eye. I tried to avert my gaze.

"Not even gonna ask what you meant by that. Totally doesn't matter," she said, and I felt myself shrink, ashamed and trapped. "But I am gonna take an executive decision."

I looked up at her and saw the smile. Not the usual rakish flash but a more subtle quirk to her lips, the confidence of certain knowledge.

"W-what? Raine, what?"

"When I was looking at you, I was thinking how I can't possibly imagine what's going through *your* head right now."

"... I ... okay?"

Raine hesitated so slightly, gave her words a little emotional push. "I'm an only child, no brothers, no sisters. You probably could have guessed that. My parents – I've not told you this, but my parents hate me. Haven't spoken to either of them in two years. So this," Raine touched the tshirt still clutched in my hands, Maisie's pajama top, then folded her fingers over mine. "I can't imagine."

"Raine, there's no need-"

“But I do get it, how much this matters to you, what it must be doing to you. If I’m not showing it, that’s only because we’re on the hunt. We can figure all the details out later, over a nice curry in a warm kitchen, with all of Eevee’s expert headspace to help. But right now, right here, we’re after our big spiky boy. You can do this. I’ve got your back.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, and had to look down and wipe my eyes on my sleeve.

More shame, but such relief. I was such a fool. I carefully folded up Maisie’s tshirt and put it away in my coat pocket, just to move my hands for a moment, just to think. I put my arms out toward Raine, stiff and awkward.

“Give me a hug,” I demanded.

She did, and it was good.

Raine laughed softly. “Hey, hey, it’s okay. Come on, can you stand yet?”

“Yes, yes I think so.”

Twil – all human once more – came jogging back down the street as Raine helped me to my feet. She pulled a face and frowned at us. “Get a room, you two.”

I didn’t care about the implications right then. Raine was correct: we were on the hunt.

How exciting. How cliché. How very Raine to frame it that way.

Didn’t do us any good in the end.

“Did you find it or not?” I asked.

“You best believe I did.” Twil broke into a huge shit-eating grin. “Guess what? It’s gone to ground.”

= =

Sharrowford dribbles out north of the Samter bridge. Not into fields or moorland, but into one of the worst unfinished developments in the whole country, two dozen rows of glass-fronted luxury flats, wreathed for years with industrial tarpaulin and temporary cladding, protected by twelve-foot chicken wire fence and decayed plyboard. Toward the west, these apartments had been finished, a few filled and lit up against the night sky, but down this end they towered in darkness, shabby monuments to the absurdity of the English housing market.

Twil led the way between the unfinished buildings. Streetlights thinned out and we walked through increasingly wider patches of shadow. Nobody else braved these half-made streets in the dark. Nothing to be here for.

I would never come to this sort of place at night. If I'd been on my own, I suspect I'd have been scared witless, though the most dangerous inhabitants were probably just rats. Raine held my hand and this time I didn't let go.

Twil nodded toward one of the apartment blocks, one that had never sprouted more than a couple of floors. She kicked to a halt next to a locked and chained gate in the security fence, then pointed at the yawning dark mouth of an entrance ramp leading down, into an underground basement car-park.

"It's down there, no doubt."

"Are you certain?" I asked.

"Yeah. Circled the block twice, scent doesn't lead anywhere else. Either it's in there somewhere or it flew straight up and didn't come back down." She pointed at the sky and shrugged.

I tried sniffing the air like Twil, but all I could smell was damp concrete and mouldy wood.

“What do we do when we catch it then?” Twil asked. “Hog-tie it and ask it questions?”

“Heather touches it first,” Raine said.

“ ... uh, you sure about that, skipper?” Twil said.

“Heather touches it first.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said.

I didn’t believe my own words. Now we were close, I realised how ad-hoc this was. I wished Evelyn was here, or that we had time to call her, to ask advice, but she was still back in the Medieval Metaphysics room. God alone knows what our mad dash across Sharrowford would have done to her legs. I tried to trust my instincts, and Maisie.

“It’s locked, how are we going to get in?”

“Fancy a little breaking and entering?” Raine asked, in the same tone one might ask if it was time for a cup of tea.

Twil grinned wide and toothy, grabbed the chain around the gate in both hands, and tore the links apart with a sound of wrenching metal. I flinched, then blinked at her as she rattled the chain free and swung the gate open. “After you, ladies and ... uh, ladies.”

“Show off,” Raine said.

“Flaunt it if you got it.” Twil winked. “Not like I get many chances to do that.”

“Werewolf nonsense,” I muttered.

A shallow ramp of asphalt led down into the only finished, accessible part of the structure, an underground parking garage. As we approached, I realised it wasn’t as dark as it had seemed from the street; orange work-lights glowed down there, reflected off the

pitted concrete and puddles of rainwater.

Twil stepped ahead to go first.

“Hold up,” Raine said.

I thought for a moment she was going to quibble about who got to lead us, some stupid chest-thumping conflict with Twil. I turned and opened my mouth to tell her off, to say Raine, we need to hurry, it’s right there, it might get away.

The complaint died on my lips. Raine was frowning hard. She looked left and right down the the length of the structure, then stared at the mouth of the parking garage.

“I smell a rat,” she said. “Why are the lights on?”

“ ... I’m sorry?”

“Twil, you smell anything else round here except our big demon lad?”

Twil squinted in confusion, sniffed the air and shrugged.

“Raine, come on!” I said, lost for a moment, the reason for delay escaping me. “I have to-”

“It was heading for the city centre.” Raine spoke quickly and quietly. “Maybe for one of the old canals, maybe to hide, I don’t know. Then it turned, hell of a right angle, and made a bee-line for here, for this. Why change direction? No. Somebody called it. We need to leave.”

“Raine!” I couldn’t believe those last four words.

Comprehension crept over Twil’s face. She jerked a thumb down the dark ramp. “You think-”

“Maybe,” Raine murmured.

"I don't believe this," I said. "What? You think somebody else is down there, talking to it? You think somebody's beaten us to the punch? You can't be serious."

Raine met my eyes, serious as a head wound. No joy in an upcoming confrontation. No Knight Errant play-acting.

"Yes," she said.

"I-I still want to go down. This is so important, Raine."

"It could be dangerous."

"I know."

"... stay behind Twil and I. Don't make a sound. Do exactly what I say."

I nodded.

Twil walked back over to the gate and lifted the length of broken steel chain. She offered it to Raine, but Raine shook her head. Twil shrugged, held one end of the chain in her hand, and wrapped it around her forearm.

Oh great, I thought, we're onto the improvised weapons already.

Hardly the worst cause for alarm I'd seen today.

= =

We crept down the ramp in silence, enclosed by concrete. Twil led us over a pair of never-used speed bumps in the road. An arm-barrier loomed out of the shadows and we slipped around the side of an empty toll machine. The ramp seemed to go down and down and down, deeper underground than necessary.

I didn't think anything of it at the time.

“Stop,” Raine hissed, just before we reached the end of the wall which separated the entrance ramp from the car park itself. I could see a little of the floor beyond: bare concrete, support pillars, breeze block walls. The builders had never gotten around to painting the parking spaces.

Raine was right – the lights shouldn’t have been here, or been on. Pools of stagnant rainwater, lichen colonies, rat droppings in the gutters. This place was all but abandoned except on some hedge fund balance sheet. The orange work-site lighting shone from an unseen source far across the floor, casting strange shadows up the walls, dancing across the sodden concrete.

Twil raised an eyebrow. Raine held up a hand for quiet.

Water dripped. I tried to control the thudding of my heart, one hand pressed to my chest. Rats scurried in the shadows.

Whispered voices echoed in the dark.

Not us.

Twil bared her teeth in a horrible predator’s grin as her wolf-muzzle formed out of thin air and snapped shut. I was suddenly very glad she was on our side.

“Wait here,” Raine mouthed.

I nodded. “Oka-”

“Screw that,” Twil hissed. “I can take them-”

Raine rounded on her, angry – genuine anger, the like of which I’d never seen from her before. Tightly controlled by the need for silence, spoken more in the language of muscle and posture, there was no question who was top dog. She grabbed Twil by the front of her hoodie and spoke through clenched teeth.

“Wait.”

“Okay, okay, shit.” Twil pulled herself free and straightened her clothes. “Bloody hell.”

“And stay quiet.”

Raine crept out of cover, keeping low through the deep shadows as she searched for an angle to see what was happening out there. She stopped about twenty feet away and peered around a pillar.

A distant, methodical part of my mind filed that mental image away in a folder marked ‘Raine’, and I told it to shut up. Now was not the time to admire her.

Twil leaned over my shoulder for a better look. A shiver went up my spine at that werewolf muzzle so close. Raine stared across the car park for a moment, then quickly crept back. She straightened up, stony faced and tense, every part of her wired to spring.

“Is it there?” I whispered.

“Yes, but no. I’m so sorry, Heather. We need to leave. This is a lost cause.”

“What?” My voice cracked. “No- no, the message, my-”

“Shhh.” Raine put a finger to her lips, then took my hand. “We can’t. We need to go.”

Twil straightened up, flexing her hands into claws. “It’s them, isn’t it?”

“Twil, be quiet,” Raine hissed.

“Them – who?” I asked. “Who?”

“I can’t be certain, but I think they might be from the Sharrowford Cult. We have to leave.”

“I ... no, I have to see.”

I needed to know who was stealing Maisie's message from me.

Raine started to say something sensible, something with my safety in mind, something realistic and sane and smart.

I jerked my hand out of hers and slipped forward into the shadows before Raine could stop me. I'd done this a thousand times before in far worse places, on the other side of a Slip, made myself silent and small and hidden, Outside, avoided the attention of far worse creatures than anything Sharrowford could hold. This was one thing I was good at – hiding. Raine hissed my name and followed. I crept to the pillar she'd peered around, braced myself, and looked.

We weren't the only ones interested in a wayward specimen of *Noctis Macer*.

No time to process what I saw.

Twil bounded past me, all teeth and claws, full wolf-woman form. She slammed a foot into the concrete so hard it cracked, and roared "Hey bitches!" through a mouth full of fangs.

A flashlight swirled in our direction. Raine bundled into me and shoved me behind herself, then turned and reached one hand into her leather jacket.

"Nobody move!" she yelled.

Pretty sure she was bluffing. Could have convinced me.

I'd never been in a Mexican Standoff before.

That makes it sound an awful lot more glamorous than it was. Mostly it was just frightening, that moment of explosive meeting and tension, eye contact and hands reaching for concealed weapons. The dim work-site lights, the filthy concrete, the multiplying echoes. Four people caught in a tableau around the towering form of the Messenger Demon stretched to its full height, twelve feet of dark night-flesh and unfurled wings like a woodcut

demon gleaming in the torchlight glow.

It stood in the centre of magic circle easily twenty feet across, drawn in red paint on the concrete floor.

Certainly made for an appropriate introduction to Sharrowford's most dangerous people.

They didn't look anything like my mental image of cultists, not the way Evelyn and Raine had used the word, and for a split-second my brain struggled to catch up. I'd expected robes, ceremonial knives, stone altars in the woods.

Four of them. Two men, two women.

The men could have passed for normal.

An older gentleman with stringy grey hair and wire-frame glasses held some kind of jury-rigged electronic device in one hand, all exposed circuit board and twisted wire and a tiny LCD screen. He blinked at us in naked surprise, a mole-rat blinded by searchlights, and patted at the pockets of his waxed coat.

The other man looked for all the world like a very misplaced librarian. Younger, maybe mid-twenties, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up and wearing a waistcoat and tie, wellington boots over immaculate trousers, a flashlight in one hand.

No shock from him. Little surprise. Cold regard.

The third figure – a woman – could not have walked down a Sharrowford street without comment. Tall, six and a half feet at least, wrapped from head to toe in a trench coat, hands in her pockets and a heavy hood pulled up to shadow her face. A scarf concealed her nose and mouth, left only her eyes exposed. Not an extra inch of skin showed. She turned to regard us with robotic slowness.

Then there was Lozzie.

Of course, I didn't know her name then, but I'd learn it soon enough.

Stood in the centre of the group, inside the magic circle, we'd interrupted her in the act of reaching up to touch the Messenger Demon's faceless head, to cradle it as one might a favourite pet.

Small and slight, she was dressed in a dark purple-and-grey striped hoodie with the ends of the sleeves pulled over her hands. Messy blonde hair reached all the way to the backs of her knees.

She wore a goat skull over her head, like a helmet, complete with horns. Except, goat skulls didn't grow that large.

For a moment I couldn't figure out what I was looking at – she was covered in motion, tentacles waving, obscene shapes attached to her body.

She writhed with spirit life.

It was all over her, actually touching her flesh and clothes. A tentacled squid-blob clung to one shoulder, a twisted lizard lay flush against an arm. A mass of slender plant-like roots had wrapped around her midsection and jellyfish feelers floated out behind her. A pair of hounds sat at her heels, fever-dream direwolves crossed with deep-sea fishes. Huge plate eyes, skin like old leather.

She turned and looked right at me, tilted her goat-skull mask.

I was so shocked I almost forgot to be outraged. How dare she take Maisie's message?

The Standoff collapsed all at once.

"You will leave now," the younger man called in crisp clear tones. "You saw nothing."

Twil laughed, picked up her feet and rushed at them, unwrapping the chain from her arm.

The older man with the straggly hair and the wire-frame glasses clicked his fingers at the tall woman in the trench coat. She shrugged, but the younger man glanced at her and spoke a few words. Loud, blunt, cut-off words in no human language. The tall woman rolled her shoulders and strode toward Twil.

The girl in the goat-skull withdrew her hands from the Messenger and waved at me with the end of one sleeve.

“Bye bye!” she called.

The Messenger folded itself out of reality, as if sliding through an invisible doorway. It burned the eye to see.

“No!” I shouted.

Twil leapt.

I didn’t see what happened next, because Raine grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and almost picked me up off my feet, pushed me toward the ramp and made me run. We scrambled back toward the entrance as the most awful noises came from below, animal screeches and cracking concrete and the sound of meat hitting meat. I stumbled and flinched, terrified and hiccuping. Raine pulled me on and up, and didn’t stop moving when we burst out into the clean night air above.

“What- what-”

“Time for that later.” Raine hustled me through the gate and into the street. “Just walk, breathe. We’re in the open. They won’t do anything. They won’t follow.”

“What just happened? What-”

“Don’t think about it. We need to leave here, quick as we can. One foot in front of the other, keep moving.”

I was too frazzled to resist. Raine took me back up the street in the

shadow of the unfinished luxury flats. The noises from the parking garage had long-since faded, muffled by concrete and asphalt. I turned to look, half-expecting to see Twil stumbling along behind us. The road was empty.

We crossed back over the Samter bridge. The normal streetlights and passing pedestrians of a Sharrowford evening didn't feel real, not after what I'd witnessed back there, not after those sounds and that bizarre girl and-

"Is she- Twil, she's-"

"She'll be fine, she's practically invincible. And they'll be clearing out ASAP." Raine turned and shot me a grin, a dose of that boundless confidence. "Don't worry, we'll be fine. Here, gotta mess with them."

Raine halted next to a battered old pay phone by a bus stop, covered in graffiti and spotted with dried up chewing gum. I found I was shaking, partly from the cold and partly from a burst of adrenaline, too confused to process experience right now. Raine lifted the receiver and dialled 999, then held her nose and spoke in an old-lady voice.

"Yes, police please. Yes, yes, I saw these three young lads trying to set a fire. These young fellows, yes, yes, yes of course." She gave the address of the building site. "They had boards for a bonfire and I swear I saw wires sticking out all over the place. Oh no, dear, I can't stay on the line."

Raine hung up without another word, cleared her throat, then grabbed my hand and walked on.

"Did you just spoof call the police?"

"Bailing Twil out. Probably doesn't need it though. Sirens'll light a fire under the crazies."

"What if she's hurt? Raine, you left her behind! We left her there!"

Raine caught the look on my face, the distress, the connections I was making, if only subconsciously. “Twil is literally unstoppable. Believe me, I’ve seen her shrug off a lot worse than anything those wannabees can throw at her. They could cut her head off and it wouldn’t make a lick of difference. She’ll be bruised and sore and angry, but she’ll crack some heads and get out. I promise.”

“Did you know those ... people, back there?”

“Never seen them before, but it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to recognise it when you see it. Kinda like porn, I guess, know it when you see it.”

“W-what-”

She flashed me a grin. I realised she was trying to keep me from freezing up. I nodded and forced a tiny laugh, the best I could manage. As we walked, she fished out her mobile phone and called Evelyn. Under the circumstances I didn’t feel guilty for listening in.

“We need to go to the mattress,” Raine said down the phone. “Yeah, right now, luck of the draw. No, just bumped into them. Twil went off on one. Yeah it was dark, I doubt they got a good look at us, but does that matter? I think they’ve got one of those bastard zombies up again. You wanna take the risk?” She paused, then answered with a laugh in her voice. “Of course I’m bringing her, Eevee, what do you take me for?”

She killed the call and glanced at me. “Do you have class tomorrow?”

“I ... uh ... no, I don’t think-”

“Good.” Raine squeezed my hand and grinned, that brilliant rakish flash she could have used to convince me to do anything. “Fancy a friendly little sleepover at Eevee’s place? Lazy day in tomorrow, call it two nights maybe. All three of us.”

Any other time, any other place, I’d have thrown myself onto that baited hook.

“I-I mean I wouldn’t say no, but, Raine, what, all this-”

“Just to be on the safe side.”

My mind caught up.

Evelyn’s house, of course, was the most supernaturally defensible position in Sharrowford.

Raine called it a sleepover. I knew a better word.

Siege.

providence or atoms – 2.9

Anticlimax is often far more challenging to accept than the release of action. All the best stories build up and up, then explode from sheer pressure. We expect our lives to work that way.

For years I believed in my own special susceptibility to that lure, the temptation to see one's life as a story, with myself cast in the role of the hounded, persecuted protagonist; paranoid schizophrenics slide down that slippery slope with such ease. But we all do it, contort ourselves into narratives, each of us our own hero, expecting the dramatic climax which never comes.

Which was my theory for why Raine couldn't sleep that night.

After the standoff in the underground car-park, Raine had route-marched me back to campus to pick up Evelyn. Her cheery exterior and borderline dirty jokes failed to cover up the backward glances, the firm grip on my hand, the wire-tightness in her every muscle. My adrenaline ran out, spent, dissipated by the regular pedestrians and streetlights and the sounds of early evening drinking on campus.

I was dead on my feet by the time we got back to the Medieval Metaphysics room. I'd half thought to sit down for five minutes, rest my legs and my mind together, but Evelyn was ready to leave and Raine made sure we didn't linger. She hurried us out into the corridor, then paused before locking the door.

"You've booby trapped this, right Evee? In case-"

Evelyn turned a cold shoulder. "Of course I did," she snapped.

Down the stairwell and back out into the night, my hand in Raine's and my reserves sputtering on empty, eyelids heavy and feet like lead. We left campus and skirted the northern edge of the student quarter, past old redbrick Victorian houses and flickering

streetlights. The second time I'd taken this route hand-in-hand with Raine. Exhausted notions fluttered through my head. Didn't I need clothes, a shower, my toothbrush? I felt unclean, sweat-soaked, stinking.

But I was too tired to care – physically, emotionally, spiritually. My other hand gripped Maisie's tshirt, stuffed in my coat pocket.

Raine noticed, bless her. She squeezed my hand. "You holding up okay?"

I almost said 'what do you think?', but restrained my exhausted sarcasm. She'd asked a practical question. Raine was nothing if not practical that night.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You've gone real quiet, that's all."

"I'm tired."

It was the truth.

I had a companion in sullen silence. Evelyn had barely spoken since we'd picked her up. Stormy faced and shoulders hunched, she stomped on a few paces ahead of us, walking stick clacking against the pavement. Was she used to this panic and flight, this interruption of routine? Or was it my fault again, an imposition, a threat brought down on us by my stupid, needy naivety?

Spirit life ebbed and flowed through these rotten streets, wolf-faced monsters and ghoulish apes and worse, lurking at the ends of the roads. They trailed us, closed ranks as we passed, watched and followed and stalked – but at a further distance. A respectful distance, I thought.

They still left me queasy. Ingrained habit and discipline made me avert my eyes. But the old fear bothered me less than ever.

Just exhaustion, I told myself. Too tired to care.

Evelyn's house, at least, offered sanctuary. Number 12 Barnslow Drive loomed out of the night, as weed-choked and leering as I remembered, dark and brooding in grand disrepair.

She unlocked the front door, slapped the lights on, and almost slammed her walking stick down against the wall. Raine steered me inside and deposited me, wobbly legs and all, as she slipped back outdoors.

"Just to check," she said.

Evelyn slipped off her shoes and stomped over toward the stairs, saying nothing as I struggled to unlace my trainers. Raine returned, locked the front door, checked the locks twice, then turned to both of us and clapped her hands together.

"Right, we- Eeve? Where are you going?"

"My room." She did not turn around.

"Eeve, we need to prep the place."

"This house looks after itself well enough."

"Eeve-"

"Leave me alone. Wake me if they drive a car bomb up the garden path."

She waved a hand over her shoulder in dismissal, then mounted the stairs. Raine sighed and flashed an apologetic smile at me. She actually looked a bit lost, for once.

"I'm going to sit down before I fall down," I said.

"Yeah, good, good, you do that. Drink some water, hydrate. I need to ... go deal." Raine nodded at Evelyn's retreating back.

I had zero energy to act as peacemaker or indulge my immature

curiosity about their relationship. Taking my shoes off presented challenge enough. Raine ruffled my hair and then hurried upstairs.

Rudderless and aching, I wandered across the junk-filled front room, past the stain on the floorboards from two weeks ago, through the darkness in the kitchen, and into the most comfortable place in the house besides Evelyn's bedroom.

Once a drawing room or dining room, it had since gone to seed and fossilised, but remained warm and cosy. Two radiators worked hard against the encroaching evening cold. A huge, ancient CRT television lay dead in one corner, probably last switched off in the 1980s, joined in retro-junk aesthetic by the fossilised lava lamp on the mantelpiece, over the very empty and very bricked-up fireplace.

Two cramped bay windows peered out across the front garden, both heavily curtained, one wide windowsill filled with the disinterred contents of a nearby box, mostly wooden masks and weird little soapstone figurines.

A brave soul had mounted a half-finished attempt to re-colonise the room, sometime in the last year. She'd cleaned away the worst of the dust and piled some books on the wide slab of table, half-finished physical reading lists both academic and otherwise. Handwritten Latin translation projects lay next to stacks of Japanese manga. I swear the table was some kind of antique, probably worth thousands. And Evelyn used it as an overflow bookshelf.

Two battered sofas formed a shallow L-shape either side of the door, draped with blankets to hide their sorry state. I sank down into one, then used the last of my energy to peel my coat off and fling it over the sofa's arm.

My feet ached like bruises. I sat cross-legged and rubbed my arches, wincing and grumbling to myself. Upstairs, Evelyn was shouting at Raine – at least, I assume she was; I couldn't make out the words, just the tone. A shout, a slammed door, some knocking, another shout.

Raine came back downstairs and popped her head around the door-frame.

I remember that clearly. She asked if I was alright, if I needed anything. I said yes and no, and then she was off again, I think to check the windows were locked. The last thing I heard was her rattling about in the kitchen, through the fog of oncoming sleep.

= =

I woke with a gasp, in darkness and silence.

For one very dehydrated moment, I could summon no memory of where I was or how I'd gotten there. Jagged alien shapes loomed out of the shadows, ghostly fingers brushed my throat, and my legs hurt like they'd been squeezed through a clothes press.

Tick, tick, tick.

The slow, regular echo of the grandfather clock in the front hall brought me back. I rubbed my eyes and sat up on the sofa, swallowing on a dry throat. All the lights were off, the room illuminated by ghostly streetlight glow leaking in around the edges of the curtains.

A mystery admirer – no prizes for a correct guess who – had tucked a blanket over me and propped a pillow behind my head. I rummaged in my coat for my mobile phone. The screen backlight almost blinded me.

5.47 in the morning. I'd slept all night.

Filthy and fuzzy-mouthed, I stood up and stretched – and discovered the unbelievable muscle ache in my legs, punishment for the trek across the city yesterday. I sat back down and gingerly probed my thighs, wincing and hissing. Wonderful. My stomach added a complaint too. Hadn't eaten a bite since yesterday morning.

My mysterious benefactor had also left a tall glass of water on the table, along with a sandwich wrapped in cling-film. I downed the water and unwrapped the sandwich – peanut butter – and silently thanked Raine as I all but inhaled it in four bites.

Delicious quiet and calm enveloped the house, ordered by the regular ticking of the grandfather clock and the distant passing of cars deeper in the city. After the frantic rush of yesterday, I loved the comfortable darkness. No spirits to bother me. Space to think, decompress. I closed my eyes for a minute and just soaked in the feeling, as I flexed my aching calf muscles.

I wasn't the only early riser, apparently. The other sofa cradled the remains of a second makeshift bed, a couple of cushions and a crumpled blanket. Cold and empty now.

"Raine?" I said out loud, but she was elsewhere.

The womb-like enclosing heat of the house had ebbed away, but I didn't want to put my coat back on, didn't want to banish this comfy feeling and start thinking practical thoughts just yet. I kept yesterday at mental arm's length. Time enough later. I pulled the blanket off the sofa and wrapped it around my shoulders.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive was laid out in a big interconnected circle with a few rooms jutting off as dead ends. I wandered into the front room, poked my head into the disused sitting room, peered around in the kitchen. Was I alone? Had Raine and Evelyn been abducted by space aliens or werewolves or creatures from dimension X?

I raided the fridge. A couple of cheese sticks and a piece of bread kept me going, washed down with apple juice. I unearthed a bottle of mouthwash in the downstairs bathroom, did the best I could without a toothbrush.

At last, I found Raine, in the long back room behind the kitchen, a hiding place for a few modern appliances and exposed plumbing. A long window and a glass-filled door looked out on the jungle of the back garden and the huge tree rustling in the wind.

Raine was sat on an old brokenbacked sofa, staring outside.

“Morning,” I murmured.

Raine looked up in surprise, then brightened into a smile. “Morning yourself. Can’t sleep?”

My word, did she look good. Perhaps it was the low light, or my own state of mind; maybe for Raine it really was that effortless. She’d shed her jacket and left the black polo-neck on underneath, trim and athletic. She ran a hand through her chestnut hair, took a deep breath, stretched. I enjoyed the sight very much. Didn’t say that out loud though.

“Just woke up,” I said. “Quite well rested, actually, I think. Legs ache like crazy though.”

“You haven’t eaten since yesterday morning, have you?”

“I found the sandwich, thank you. What are you doing in here?”

Raine’s smile turned self-mocking with a sideways slide of the eyes. “Watching the back garden in case somebody climbs over the fence.”

“Are we really in danger?”

“No, no I don’t think so. I probably overreacted. But, hey.” She shrugged. “That’s what I’m for.”

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

Raine started to rise. “We should go back to the sitting room, it’s warmer in there.”

“No. I want to sit here, with you. In secret.”

Raine raised her eyebrows. “Sure thing.”

She scooted over to make room. I joined her on the sofa and screwed up my courage.

“Are you cold?” I asked.

“Mm? No, I’m fine. I’ve been up and walking about, and I did nap a couple of hours. Don’t you worry about me.”

“I mean, would you like some blanket?” I flapped a corner of my blanket-wrap at her, heart in my throat.

“Oh! Oh yeah, yeah of course.” Raine failed to suppress a cheeky grin.

I hid my rising blush as Raine shuffled in close, a token amount of blanket draped over her shoulders. She kept an inch or two of personal space between us. A bold, needy part of me wanted to ask her to cuddle, to hug me, but that wasn’t enough. I wanted physical comfort, but I needed something else, something I couldn’t put words to.

“Those people yesterday,” I said instead. “They weren’t dangerous then?”

“Oh, they totally were.” Raine leaned into the sofa and hooked an arm over the back, behind my head. “But they didn’t get a good look at us, and Evee and I have been flying under the radar for long enough they wouldn’t know where to start, whoever they are, Cultists or another mage or whatever. Our local knob-head altar-boys probably know about this house, but knowing doesn’t get you in.”

I shook my head. “So, what now? We all just go back to normal? Forget we saw that?”

“Pretty much, yeah. That’s the name of the game, don’t get involved. Bottom line: you see any of those people again, you don’t approach them. Leave, call me, whatever. Especially the thing in the trench coat, though the smart money says they never let that out in public.”

“What was she?”

Raine shrugged. “Some kinda monster. Bet Twil gave it something to think about. That’s the other reason I reckon we’re alright – Twil’s like the local rabid dog. They’ll be fixated on her, not us.”

“Oh! Twil, she-”

“She’s fine.” Raine fished her mobile phone out of her pocket, thumbed the screen and showed me the call log.

“‘Furry trash bait’?” I read the contact name out loud: the last call, several hours ago.

“That’s Twil. She bit my head off.” Raine grinned. “Guess I deserved it, but she’s fine. She’s back home already, walked the whole way down the motorway embankment and along the train tracks. Totally hardcore, gotta hand that to her.”

“I still can’t deal with the whole ‘werewolf’ thing. It’s so ... unnecessary.”

“Don’t think about it too hard. You’ll get used to it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I muttered. “How’s Evelyn?”

Raine turned her eyes to the ceiling, as if she could see through brick and wood and plaster into Evelyn’s bedroom. “Honest truth, I’m not really sure. I’ve known her long enough, seen her beat herself up over mistakes before, but this is different. She wouldn’t even talk to me. Threw her leg at me and all.”

“She ... I’m sorry, what?”

“Yeah. She hasn’t done that since we first met.”

“... excuse me? Did I hear that correctly? The first time you and Evelyn met, she threw her prosthetic leg at you?”

Raine turned a grin on me. “Yeah! Bit smaller back then of course, we were only fourteen.”

I looked away and back again, trying not to say anything rude.

“Heather?”

“What on earth did you do to her to warrant that?”

Raine laughed. “Why have I gotta be the baddie? Maybe she overreacted, you don’t know.”

I gave her a look.

“Okay, you got me. I broke into her house.”

“You did *what*? This house?”

“No, where she grew up, down in Sussex. To be fair, it wasn’t the first time we met, though it was the first time we spoke. Long story short, I saw her outside – one of the few times she was allowed outside, anyway – because I’d climbed the wall of the Saye estate for a peek. I was actually looking to nick stuff from the garden. It’s this great big old farmhouse, sort of thing you’d be into.”

“What were you doing in Sussex? I thought you grew up in East Anglia.”

“Running away from home. Story for another time.”

“I ... ” Curiosity grabbed me. “O-okay?”

“So after I saw Evee outside, I had to know more, I had to know who she was. It’s not every day you see a girl with one leg missing. She wasn’t like she is now, either. She looked a lot more ... well, messed up. I didn’t have anything better to do right then, and just the sight of her, made me want to help, you know?” Raine patted her own chest, over her heart. “Stirred my noble spirit and all that.”

“And you broke in?”

"I broke right in, yeah. Dodged her family and the uh, things they kept in that house, and found her. Bit of a crash course."

"Let me guess. She screamed her head off and threw her leg at you?"

Raine laughed. "Yeah, spot on!"

"I think I would have done the same," I lied. If Raine had appeared in my bedroom when I was fourteen I'd have thought she was a walking fantasy. "What happened after that?"

"That, well, that's not really my tale to tell."

"Oh, Raine, come on, you can't leave me hanging there."

"I'm serious." She spread her hands. "You told me off once before, for breaking your trust, for spilling the beans about you in front of Eevee. And you were totally correct, hundred percent, had me dead to rights. I'm trying not to be a hypocrite here. I don't want to lose your respect."

"Oh ... yes, yes. That's a good point."

I was such an awful, intrusive gossip. Raine must have seen it on my face, because she hesitated and smiled. "Short version is I helped her with her family issues, and she helped me not, you know, end up on the streets."

"I want to know more about you," I blurted out, then blushed and rushed to correct myself. "I-I mean, about your past, you two. I feel like I don't have a way into it."

"You're already in, Heather."

I sighed. "Evee said some things about her mother yesterday, I made the mistake of asking a question."

"Oho. She blew up at you?"

“Thought she was done with me for good. For a moment.”

“She hates her mum. Maybe start smaller than that?”

I eyed Raine, her bright look, her fluffy hair, the way she sat so comfortable and obviously not aching all over like I did. “Aren’t you exhausted? Yesterday afternoon was far too much for me. Is this what you and Evelyn get up to?”

Raine laughed with genuine amusement. “No. Totally not. That’s the sort of thing we try to avoid.” Her amusement faded quickly as she studied my face. “I’m so sorry we messed up, Heather. What I said yesterday, I meant it. I know what that all meant to you.”

I shook my head. “Feels difficult to process now. My sister might be alive, yes, but what does that mean? Grief was one thing. This is ... uncharted territory.”

“Your first instinct was rescue,” Raine said. “I’d say that’s pretty damn well charted.”

“Survivor’s guilt. Panic. I don’t know. I left her behind. If ... if there’s anything left to rescue ... ”

“What’s she like?”

Present tense. Thank you, Raine. Thank you.

“Like me, I guess. We were-” I took a breath. “We *are*, twins. I was very different, before Wonderland. I guess she’ll be different too, now.”

“Can I see that tshirt again? The one with the writing on it?”

“Later. I don’t want to get up, this is too comfy.”

Raine held my hand under the blanket. She didn’t need to speak. Everything I’d ever wanted in a friend. A partner?

What was I to her?

I was useless, by any comparison I cared to make. Raine was the quintessential action girl, capable and practical, good in a crisis. She was violent, a fact which still sent a strange sexual thrill through me when I thought about it in private. And Evelyn? Evelyn could do magic. She was half-crippled and spiky and acid-tongued and took no nonsense from anybody.

What was I? Weak. I whined about pain and got scared of a little adversity.

“Yesterday, I was worried you might ... think poorly of me.” I struggled to express myself. “I could barely keep up. Maisie – she reached out. Evelyn did the magic. You’re heroic.”

“Heroic?” Raine broke her silence. “I’m just an overconfident dyke with a Robin Hood complex. But thanks, that’s sweet.”

I cleared my throat and tried to focus, tried not to blush. “Compared to that, what do I have to offer?”

“Everything,” Raine said.

I looked up into her eyes. No guile there. No humouring me. I shrugged and felt lame, no answer to her sincerity.

“I’m gonna break my word now,” Raine said. “When I first met Evee, she was resigned to her own death. She was terrified of me, of course, but once I broke her shell, I realised there was very little left inside. She was absolutely convinced she was dead within a year, two at most, and she was probably right.”

“ ... what? What was happening to her?”

“That’s the long story, the part I won’t go into. It’s her business to share or not. But the important part is that I didn’t save her. I’m just a catalyst. Sure, I might be a hero.” Raine cracked a grin. “It’s cool that you think so, but you’re just as heroic as me.”

"That's nonsense," I said. "You did actually save me. Maybe you don't realise-"

"Heather. Read my lips: I think you're cool."

"... don't be silly." I had to look away, blushing and confused. I wasn't strong, or useful, or cool, or anything else Raine wanted to call me.

Raine was right about one thing: she was a catalyst, for a question I'd lacked courage to ask. I had no more guts this morning than over last two weeks, but now all my defences lay in ruins, frazzled by the last 24 hours and besieged by Raine's attitude toward me.

With clarity came the risk of rejection. I glanced at her and away again, twice, before I managed the words.

"Raine ... do you- do you like me?"

She blinked at me in mock-innocence. "Do I like you?"

I sighed and almost rolled my eyes. "I mean, a-are you into me? I can't figure it out. Figure you out, I mean. I'm not used to it, used to other people in my life. I never had teenage years to figure any of this out, figure out other girls, navigate ... you know. When you told me about Twil, when I thought she was your ex-girlfriend, I ... I felt jealous. I-I don't know what that means."

A unstoppable, badly suppressed smile crept onto her face. "Do you want me to be into you?"

My heart tripped over itself. "Oh, don't do that."

"Do what?"

"*That*. You know what. Don't tease me."

"I can't help myself."

Raine leaned in close and slid her arm across my shoulders,

bringing her face inches from mine. I caught her scent, of leather and hand soap and the subtle spice of her body. My mouth went slack, my heart fluttering.

“R-raine-”

“Heather, I have spent almost every day for two weeks as close to you as I can get without freaking you out. We cuddled on your bed while watching movies. That didn’t give you a clue?”

I felt frozen, hypnotised, heart going a million miles an hour. I managed a strangled whisper. “I ... I’m not sure.”

“Yes, you huge idiot, I like you a lot. I find you fascinating, from your face to your earnest, unguarded intellectualism, from the way you tuck one foot up under your lap when you’re concentrating, to the well of courage I don’t think you know you possess. Part of me ... ” Raine looked off to one side and wet her lips with her tongue. I felt like a mouse before a snake. I had visions of us doing it – *it* – right here on this battered old sofa in the soft darkness. My chest tightened. I couldn’t breathe properly. “Part of me wants to show you how good I could be for you.”

She leaned back and straightened up, took a deep breath and smiled. Normal Raine again.

“But I’m not going to,” she said.

“W-what?” I spluttered at the anti-climax, slightly offended in a new and bizarre fashion. “Why? Why not?”

Raine laughed and held up her hands. “Heather, I’m not going to fingerbang you on this sofa, because of exactly what you just said. You never had teenage years. We can take it slow. Know your own heart first. I ain’t gonna take advantage of you.”

“Don’t be so absolutely ridiculous.”

There is no other point in my life, I believe, when I could have done what I did next. Exhaustion made me capable – not sleep

deprivation like I was used to, that bone-shattering tiredness which robbed me of all decision making power, but an emotional exhaustion, a lack of any more will to care, a knife through my inhibition and trepidation.

I jerked forward and kissed Raine on the lips.

It was bad. Really bad. Clumsy and short, a fumbling moment of mashing my lips against hers, lucky we didn't clack teeth. I ended the kiss as fast as I'd started, blushing beetroot red and unable to breathe. Raine stared at me in blinking surprise.

"Well." My voice trembled. "There you go. Deal with that."

Raine did. She leaned over me and cupped my cheek. My heart was ready to burst out of my chest. I thought I was going to have a panic attack right there.

"Like this, Heather," she said.

She was much better at kissing.

When Raine pulled back I had to put a hand to my heart. My breath came out in a shudder. I blinked rapidly at her, then hiccuped. She laughed softly.

"Hey, take it easy, Heather, easy. Breathe, yeah?"

"I am breathing, dammit. Didn't expect it to feel like that."

"You sure do know how to inflate my ego."

"Shut up. Shut up and do it again."

Afterward, we cuddled on that sofa for a long time, talking about everything and nothing, my head on Raine's shoulder. We talked about that old house, all of Evelyn's bric-a-brac, and how Raine wanted to take me clothes shopping. She confessed she'd been up most of the night, prowling the house, checking the windows, waiting for the assault which never came. I told her how much I

enjoyed the comfortable darkness, she told me how cute I looked while asleep.

And told me she thought I was brave.

“I don’t know about that,” I said.

“You managed to surprise me just now.”

“I keep surprising myself. I ... I think I don’t know myself very well, in a way. I don’t feel very brave though. I don’t think that’s in me.”

By the time the first grey fingers of dawn reached across the sky, Raine had fallen asleep with her head tilted back on the sofa.

What had I done to deserve her?

If I’d believed in karma, I’d have rationalised this as payback for all those years of horror. I snuggled closer, but didn’t have the courage to reach up and run my fingers through that beautiful thick hair. She was warm and toned and strong. I recalled her body in motion: Raine with a nightstick in her hands; Raine slamming Twil up against the door; Raine creeping through the shadows last night.

I was attracted to the violence, on some level. Perhaps merely that she could.

Sleep did not return. I snuggled with Raine as dawn struggled to break, but caffeine dependency and my bladder conspired to keep me awake. Wriggling out of her embrace and the blanket was easy, but leaving her behind was not. I tucked the blanket over her legs and up around her chin. She would know, if she woke without me.

Raine hadn’t actually answered my question earlier. She’d kissed me, but were we an item? Did she really like me, or was she just humouring me? What on earth did she see in me? Compared to her I was scrawny and small, weird and pallid, permanent bags under my eyes and more baggage in my soul.

Her damsel in distress. In need of saving.

“You’re far too hot for me,” I whispered.

There would be time for snuggles later, and more if she pushed me. All the time in the world. Right now, I felt strong and empowered, lifted up by oxytocin and serotonin, warm and right and supported.

I could do this.

Raine had my back.

I found a jar of instant coffee in one of the kitchen cupboards, so old it had probably belonged to Evelyn’s dead mother. It sufficed for now, along with another cheese stick. Back in the ex-drawing room, I needed light, so I cracked one of the curtains on the grey morning. Spirit life churned all the way down the road, a hundred unnameable ghoulish forms, mouths full of teeth, ratchet-limbs and slaving jaws, canine packs and slippery lizards. Perhaps this was part of what made the house the most supernaturally defensible place in the city, a vortex of pneuma-somatic life.

The old fear had faded. A decade of terror, gone pale.

I knew why. I’d spoken to one of them, made demands, been obeyed.

Well, that spirit had been largely immobile, frightened of the Demon Messenger. Not some slinking, stalking thing which made my shoulderblades crawl.

I switched on one of the lamps on the drawing room mantelpiece and angled the bulb toward the table, where I shifted some books to clear a space. Evelyn owned some tempting titles between the comic books and old paperbacks: *The Conquest of Gaul* in Caesar’s original Latin, and a beautiful hardback copy of *The Iliad*. Time for those later, as well.

I extracted Maisie’s tshirt from my coat pocket. Cradling it in both hands, like the relic of a saint, I carried it to the table and carefully unfolded it, laid it out, tried to think clearly.

HELP

How, sister? How?

Maisie's tshirt did not smell of her, or of me. I sniffed it again to confirm.

Neither did it seem like it had been subjected to ten years of washing machines and dresser drawers, which at least made sense. The strawberry design was not faded with wear, just utterly filthy. I rubbed the fabric between my fingers. It felt real enough, pills and thin patches and all. The washing instructions on the collar label were clear as day, in English. Tumble dry low, do not bleach, wash with like colours.

HELP, written in black.

Blood? No. It didn't smell of iron. It had dried hard, more like tar than heart-blood. Were those Maisie's fingerprints whorled in the substance? Couldn't tell.

HELP

I lifted the hem of the tshirt and peered inside. A scrap of black caught my eye. I lifted further, turned it inside out.

Found the rest of the message.

Half-mangled in a child's fingerprint scrawl, nowhere near as large and neat as the single stark word on the front. Horror grew in my chest as I read, tears brimming in my eyes.

'I want come come out now. please come back and let me out. heather. heather I miss you. heather. where did you go? I want to see the sun again. I want to eat food. I want to stop thinking. stop thinking stop thinking. please heather. please reach. please I love you please. I miss you I miss life I want to leave please let me die stop thinking stop'

The message resumed in a different hand, as if picked up again in a period of stability. A more mature hand?

‘I don’t know how much time I have left. I can’t think clearly when I’m not using the numbers, but with the numbers I know there’s less and less of me every time I think. you probably killed yourself years ago. or maybe you’re in a nuthouse. if you’re not, you’re the last link I kept. no time left.’

Maisie had added a date below the message, 364 days from now, a year from yesterday. Was this her time limit?

It was. I knew. Deep inside, I knew.

I scrubbed at my tears and stopped crying.

HELP

“Okay,” I whispered.

How, I didn’t know yet.

But I knew where to start.

Stuffed in the same pocket as the tshirt was the pamphlet Evelyn had given me earlier yesterday, *Notes Toward a Unified Cosmology*. If I’d believed in fate, I’d have taken that as a sign, but I required no further encouragement.

That pamphlet was the water and sunlight to the seed of an idea planted in my mind two weeks ago, when I’d Slipped on purpose, when for just a moment I’d forced my spongy, delicate human mind to comprehend the levers of power behind reality’s surface, and yank them toward my own ends.

I couldn’t do that again, I knew. The bruise in my chest would split me in two. To even think it was to invite nausea and pain and icepick headache twinges behind my eyes.

But the pamphlet gave me somewhere to start.

Cracking the pamphlet open right there was a terrible idea. Even a glance at the equations inside stirred terrible nausea. I began to half-plan a strategy of empty stomach and sick bucket. A difficult and disgusting task, but the Fractal protected me from real danger. If I took it slowly, I knew I could do it, for Maisie.

But I was hungry for knowledge now, for a foothold now, and the first time I'd visited Evelyn's house I'd gotten one short look at a lure designed exactly for somebody like me: the study upstairs, full of books.

Darkness still lay heavy in the upstairs hallway, some of the windows shuttered as well as curtained. Floorboards threatened to creak, and I dared not fumble for the light switch. I didn't want to wake Evelyn. Not because I felt guilty, but because I figured she really needed the sleep.

I picked the wrong room at first, opened the door on a barren bedroom, just a frame with a mattress, quite sad and lonely. I crept further along the hallway and located the correct door, the one with a brass handle.

Light flooded out as I pushed it open.

Evelyn looked up from the desk. Furtive, blinking, flinching.

"Oh! I- sorry."

I'd surprised her in our shared natural environment, surrounded by tightly packed bookshelves along every wall, the smell of print and paper in the air. The desk, a meaty slab of wood large enough to sleep on, was littered with notes and old tomes and Evelyn's notebooks open on page after page of shorthand and diagrams. Two small reading lamps haloed her with light. She was wearing pajama bottoms and a huge shapeless jumper.

"Evee?" The pet name slipped out. She looked like absolute hell.

She sniffed. Her eyes were dry but rimmed with the raw red that

only comes from a whole sleepless night of torment. I knew, I'd seen that look in the mirror often enough. She avoided my gaze, showed me a shoulder and shuffled notes around on the desk, just to occupy her hands. She glanced back at me, defeated and sagging.

"Do your worst," she muttered.

I was completely lost. " ... excuse me?"

"You're here to yell at me, I know. Get it over with. I don't deserve any better."

providence or atoms – 2.10

If a team of expert psychologists drew up a list of the worst people from whom to seek stable emotional support, then after the obvious abusers and narcissists and sociopaths, I would rank pretty high on that list.

Evelyn did not have anybody else in that study with her. She had me. I did what I could.

My first instinct – were I capable of such courage – was to throw myself at her, hug her, tell her it was okay, whatever it was; Evelyn was my friend and she was in pain, and I felt it too. But I had a distinct impression she would lash out like a wounded animal.

“ ... I ... I’m not here to yell at you, Evee.”

She narrowed her eyes, confused, lost. A half-shake of her head.

“I came up here to look at the books, actually,” I said. “I thought you were still asleep.”

“I don’t deserve sleep.” She jerked a hand at the notes on the desk, gritting her teeth and grimacing. “At least this way I’m not a complete waste of skin.”

“Evee, no, you ... ” I groped for the right words. I had only Raine to imitate. “J-just take a deep breath. Breathe slowly. It’ll be okay. Start at the beginning, tell me what’s wrong? D-did something happen?”

“Did something happen?” she echoed, voice dripping with bitter mockery. She didn’t take that deep breath. “You saw it all. Where am I supposed to begin? You want an itemised list of my failures? Want to rub it in?”

“Evelyn,” I snapped her name, scared by her distress. “Stop talking

like that about yourself. Stop it. Right now.”

She blinked at me as if slapped, eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot.
“Why?”

“Because ... ” I swallowed. “Because it’s not healthy.”

“Why should that matter? I’m a useless waste of effort, and I know it. I can’t get a single thing right. I messed up everything, I always do.”

“Evee, no-”

“I’m just a leftover shell. I should have been there last night with you and Raine, I could have prevented- but I couldn’t, could I? I couldn’t even follow, because I’m a cripple with a stump.” She thumped at her own thigh, and only then did I realise she wasn’t wearing her prosthetic.

The right leg of her pajama bottoms flapped loose and flat. She’d hobbled here from her bedroom on her stick and withered left leg.

Self-harm.

She’d probably been hurting herself all night.

“I screwed up, okay?” she snapped. “I know it, I know I screwed up. I always screw up. Can’t get anything right, can’t do a single thing correct. You warned me about the Eye, oh yes, I but thought I knew better, smart little Evelyn Saye with her twisted education and her need to prove herself right and her fucking mother issues.”

She shouted the last three words and slammed one hand across the desk, scattering papers into the air, sending a notebook flying, almost toppling the lamp. I flinched. Stray pencils clattered to the floor.

Evelyn began to sob. She hid her eyes behind a hand, sagging, defeated, spent. “Go away, for fuck’s sake. Leave me alone.”

“ ... no. Eevee, no, I won't. I- I can't leave you like this.”

“Go away,” she whined out between sobs. She threw a balled-up sheet of note paper at me. It bounced off the floor and rolled to a stop against my foot.

I'd never dealt with a crying person. A crying friend. I'd listened to a fair share of weeping and wailing in psychiatric hospitals, often much worse than this, but I'd never had to comfort somebody. I'd never wanted to before, never wanted to make a friend's pain stop.

My mouth worked silently through a double-dozen empty platitudes, words Raine would have made brilliant and meaningful, but in my head they all rang hollow.

“Y-you know, this house is really amazing,” I said. “It's- it's not like anywhere else I've ever been.”

Evelyn peered out from behind her hand, eyes red and full of tears. “What?”

“I mean, it's so old and it's not been renovated. It's full of these cosy little corners and decades of stuff. I-it's amazing, I love it. I'm sort of jealous, in a way. You've seen my flat, it sucks, it's horrible, a concrete box. I grew up in this awful modern semi-detached, freezing in the winter and boiling in the summer. Tiny, tiny square-footage compared to this place. You could fit five, six people in this house and it'd never feel cramped. There's a basement and an attic too, isn't there?”

“ ... uh, yes, yes there is.” Evelyn sniffed and wiped her eyes on the back of her sleeve.

I kept rambling.

“Take this room. A study! You have an actual study. A personal library. I'd kill for a study, a room just for reading. It's the sort of thing I used to fantasise about having one day, my own study. Professor Morell and all that nonsense, it'll likely never happen.” I shrugged and forced a little laugh. “It's incredible. You could

probably do with a more comfortable chair than that though.” I nodded at the ancient wooden swivel-chair, no wheels on the feet. “And ... um ... do you have blueprints, floor plans of the house? I’d love to see them sometime, if you do. Often those get kept, for older buildings like this, if you’re lucky.”

Evelyn blinked at me. I thought I’d lost her, gone too far, but then she waved a limp hand. “Top shelf, one of the box files, I think.”

“That’s great. I’ll take a look later. Thank you.”

Evelyn’s tears had stopped. She wiped her nose on her sleeve. Score one for distraction Heather.

I looked away as she blew her nose and dried her eyes, then I patted her shoulder, careful, gentle. Besides her circa-1950s desk chair, only a tiny stepladder and a rickety old wooden chair offered anywhere to sit. I pulled up the chair – cast adrift from a kitchen table, probably – and sat down, my knees weak from tension.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like that,” Evelyn said. She stared at the floorboards, voice low and dull. “Years since I cried in front of anybody. Pathetic.”

“No, Evee, please. It’s so bad to keep it bottled up. I know I’m hardly one to talk, but it’s fine to cry. You’re only human.”

Evelyn shrugged. “I barely count as human.”

“Evee-”

Evelyn continued before I could tell her off. She looked up into my eyes with a sad, defeated expression. “That makes three times. Twice you’ve rescued me from my own idiotic mistakes, and now you’ve dealt with me having a tantrum.”

“Don’t call it that, that’s not fair on yourself.”

“I couldn’t even call the Noctis Macer back. Couldn’t keep up. Evelyn Saye, her mother the best in a generation, having a tantrum.

You keep helping me, Heather, and I can't repay you because I can't get anything right. Because I keep failing. I am a failure."

"You shouldn't say those things about yourself."

Evelyn sighed. "Why not? It's true."

"Well ... well, I don't actually know, but I'm pretty sure you shouldn't."

She puffed out the faintest imitation of a laugh. "At least you're honest. I know it's unhealthy. Everything I do is unhealthy."

At least she'd calmed down. I'd snapped her out of the emotional crisis, but I had no idea how to help. I wasn't Raine, I didn't possess the right words.

We were, however, in a library.

Bookcases lined the walls of the study, full to bursting, with space left for only the door, the desk, and a small high window which admitted a shaft of grey dawn light across the ceiling. The study was a shade closer to my imaginary picture of an occult library, except ninety-nine percent of the literature here was completely mundane.

I glanced up and saw textbooks of natural history wedged next to modern novels, collections of plays stacked with back issues of mid-century magazines and comic books. Leatherbound, hardbound, floppy dog-eared paperbacks. Some shelves had been left to gather dust for years, but cleaner patches showed through where Evelyn had cleared space, re-organised, re-colonised.

An emotional handhold presented itself with the clarity of a light bulb illuminating above my head: a three-volume complete works of Shakespeare. I stood up and eased one of the books out from between its siblings, blew the film of dust off the top, and cracked it open.

"What are you doing?" Evelyn asked.

“One ... one second. Ah, here ... ” I wet my lips and raised my chin, muttered the first few words of the passage I’d located, then warmed as I went, into full, flowing speech as I quoted: “But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, nor made to court an amorous looking-glass; I, that am rudely stamped, and want love’s majesty, to strut before a wanton ambling nymph; I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion, cheated of feature by dissembling nature, deformed, unfinished, sent before my time into this breathing world, scarce half made up ...”

I trailed off, looked up, and bottled it completely at Evelyn’s puzzled frown. At least my antics had banished her surface depression.

“Was that meant to be a comment on me?” she asked.

“No. On myself, actually.” I shook my head and closed the book. “That’s Richard the third, talking about his deformity. I used to ... I still do, sort of, identify with that. It’s comforting. Sorry, that probably made zero sense to you.”

Evelyn shook her head. “No, I get it. I do.”

I smiled at her. “Evelyn, Eevee, I was actually ready to be a little angry with you. But not for the reasons you think. Mistakes don’t matter, we’re friends. I was angry when you sprung Wonderland on me without warning.”

Evelyn stared at me for a long moment, mouth half-open, then looked down at her hands and let out a huge sigh. “I’m just like my mother.”

Oh dear. No, reverse course, wrong direction, back up, back up.

“I very much doubt that,” I said quickly. “And you can make it right, by apologising. I would like an apology, for that, specifically.”

She jerked her head up, blinking, frowning, only halfway there, as if I’d presented some radical, alien concept. For a moment I thought

I'd lost her, that she'd shuffle back into her pit and never come out. But then she swallowed and nodded slowly. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Heather. I know, it was ... disrespectful. I don't want to treat you like my mother treated me. I'm sorry."

"Then I forgive you."

She looked at me as if I'd slapped her, vulnerable and blinking.

We shared one of the most awkward hugs humanly possible. I don't think Evelyn was made for comforting embraces. I put my arms around her shoulders and she hesitated to do the same, stiff and cold, but it seemed to do the trick. When we let go of each other, she took a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"Would you do me a very big favour, Heather?"

"What is it?"

She cleared her throat and gestured at the door. "Would you please fetch my leg? It's on the floor in my bedroom."

"Of course I will. Don't, um, don't self-harm while I'm gone."

"I won't."

Evelyn's prosthetic wasn't difficult to find. It lay just inside her bedroom door, below a small dent in the wall, the source of the loud thump I'd heard last night, the final word in Raine and Evelyn's argument.

Heavier than I'd expected, six or seven pounds of matte-black carbon fiber and shiny articulated knee. White rubber thigh-socket stuck out from the open end. I tried not to stare, equal parts embarrassed for Evelyn and overcome with delicate care as I cradled her leg. This was one of the most intimate things I'd ever held. This was, in a way, part of her body.

Evelyn's bedroom spoke of a very different side to her; I'd not gotten a good look the first time I was here, half conscious as I'd

been.

Pastel sheets and blankets turned the bed into a den of pink and lilac. Plush animals conferred together on the chest of drawers, some of them old and tatty, childhood memories perhaps, but several of them new and expensive-looking, along with a handful of stylised anime figurines, all girl superheroes with candy-coloured hair and outfits. Not something I'd expect Evelyn to enjoy.

Back in the study, Evelyn accepted her prosthetic with both hands, murmured a thank you, and began to roll up her loose pajama leg.

I gestured to the door. "I'll just ... "

"Watch if you want." She shrugged. "Raine's seen it often enough. I don't care."

Leaving felt ruder than staying, so I watched with mounting fascination as Evelyn reattached her leg. It was quite a process.

Her stump was an ugly gnarled knot of old scar tissue, crisscrossed by angry red stitch-marks and indents from surgical staples. Not a clean amputation. She rolled her pajama leg up to the middle of her thigh, then reached into the socket on the prosthetic and extracted a sort of thick truncated sock. She pulled the sock onto her stump.

"Did-" I started, then stopped. "Sorry. I'm curious, but I don't want to intrude."

"You're going to ask how I lost it."

"Oh, no, not at all. I assume that wasn't ... normal. Actually I was surprised by the scarring. Did they try to save it and make it worse?"

A smile tugged at the corners of Evelyn's mouth – that's when I knew she was going to be okay. "Could put it like that. The doctor was drunk."

"... I'm sorry, what?"

Evelyn leaned back, the unattached prosthetic held across her lap. She tapped her stump. "This wasn't done in a hospital. No NHS guidelines for me. I was nine, and the last thing my mother wanted to do was present me for treatment. She'd have been arrested in a heartbeat, I'd have been taken into care. But the leg had to come off. Gangrene, mostly. The doctor was an old associate of my grandmother, good at keeping her mouth shut, willing to take payment under the table. They pumped me full of morphine, got me to hold a pillow up so I wouldn't see the bone-saw going back and forth."

"Oh Eevee, I can't even imagine ... "

She waved me down. "I don't need pity. I took my revenge, for that and worse. It's just the way it was." She rapped a knuckle against the carbon fiber prosthetic. "I'm lucky, in fact. My father paid for this, for previous versions of it, for physical rehab. Not everyone who loses a limb gets to be a cyborg, you know? Some make do."

"Your dad? Is ... I mean, I don't want to pry again."

Evelyn considered, then sighed and shrugged. "A weak fool who couldn't stand up to my mother. It's mostly his way of dealing with the guilt, but at least he tries to do right. I don't talk to him very much."

She set the prosthetic on the floor and wriggled the rubber socket up around her stump, making a dozen minor adjustments as she pulled the contraption snug.

"Do you want me to ask?" I said. "Why you lost the leg?"

"Why do you think?" She set her artificial foot down with a clack. "Same reason I can't straighten my spine. Same reason the muscles are withered in my other leg. Same reason I'm short a few fingers and hooked on painkillers. My mother did not merely teach me magic, she *used* me for it. I ... I don't want to talk about it. Ask Raine if you must, she knows."

I smiled a little. “She told me to ask you. Said it wasn’t her place to divulge.”

Evelyn’s eyebrows attempted to leave her face. “Really? Well, fancy that. What *have* you been doing to her, Heather?”

“I-I think it was because I told her off.” I almost blushed. “Nothing else.”

“And she listened to you?”

“Yes. I think. Maybe. It’s hard to tell with Raine.”

“Mm. I’m sorry I left you two to your own devices last night. I take it she put you up in her old room?”

“Her ... old ... room?”

“Ah, that didn’t come up? Never mind, forget I said anything.”

“Oh, not on your life, Evee.” I almost laughed. “Raine used to live with you, here? Are you absolutely sure you and her didn’t have a thing together?”

“Absolutely.” Evelyn made it sound very final. “Living together was only sensible, when we first came to Sharrowford. She had the room on the other side of the hall, out there. Then we had a ... ” She struggled, grimaced. “A disagreement, about six months back. She moved out. I thought she’d told you all this.”

“Not a word, no.”

“Typical.”

“Typical Raine.” I smiled involuntarily. “What was the disagreement about?”

“ ... I didn’t want her around.” Evelyn paused and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Possibly a mistake. Maybe I should have people in my life more, not less. It goes against every instinct I have, but

here you are.”

I smiled, felt blessed, flattered. “I have it on pretty good authority that’s what friends are meant to be for.”

Evelyn huffed a minimalist laugh and we shared a glance. We weren’t so different.

“Maybe yesterday didn’t go exactly to plan,” I said, before she could shore up her self-loathing again. “But one way or the other it delivered to me the first proof in ten years that my sister might be alive. You did that. Thank you, Evee.”

Evelyn’s expression frosted over. “The tshirt.”

“Yes, the tshirt.”

“It-”

“Wait,” I held up one hand. “I found more words inside it this morning. The rest of her message. I think I should show you, you need to see.”

Evelyn squinted, then sighed heavily and nodded.

“It’s downstairs, I’ll go fetch it.” I rose from my chair.

“No, I’ll come down with you,” Evelyn said. “I can’t fester in here forever. Besides, I have something to show you as well.” She reached over and slid a bookmark into one of the crumbling leatherbound tomes on the desk, then folded it shut. “Help me up, will you? My hips are sore as hell.”

= =

Maisie’s tshirt caused a huge argument. I hadn’t prepared myself for that.

Downstairs, we found Raine had just woken up. She was stretching in the kitchen, halfway through a routine, yawning as she pressed both hands against the kitchen table, muscles tensed and one leg braced out behind her. She carried on while we talked and it was exquisitely distracting, but I wasn't about to complain.

"Hey!" She straightened up and flashed a smile as we appeared, rolling her neck and shoulders. "I was just coming to find you. Surprised you'd gotten up, everything okay?"

"Sorry I left you there on the sofa," I said. "I had a thought. I had to do ... a thing."

Evelyn stomped past me, the big leatherbound book clutched to her chest with one hand. She grunted.

"S'fine, I needed the sleep," Raine said. She pantomimed a duck-and-cover as Evelyn passed her. "So uh, Evee, am I still in the firing line?"

Evelyn avoided her gaze, filled a glass of water and muttered a barely audible apology.

"Don't gimme the grumbly face," Raine grinned. "I can tell you're in a better mood."

"Oh, I suppose I am," Evelyn said. "Look, Raine, I'm sorry I blew up at you last night."

Raine blinked as if Evelyn had grown an extra head. Her mouth fell open. I almost giggled.

"We had a bit of a heart to heart," I said.

Evelyn winced. "Don't call it that."

Raine grinned from ear to ear. She carried on through her stretching routine, hooked one arm and then the other behind her head, pulling on alternate wrists to stretch her deltoids. I stared.

“And wipe that stupid grin off your face,” Evelyn told her.

“No chance!” Raine laughed as she stretched both arms over her head, side to side. “How’d both of you fancy going out for some breakfast? My treat.”

“Wouldn’t say no,” I muttered, far more concerned with the way that pose showed off Raine’s hips and waist.

Our kiss earlier seemed to have knocked a screw loose in my head. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t looked at Raine before, admired the way she moved, appreciated her toned athleticism and clean-limbed flexibility, but I hadn’t felt exactly like ... this. Whatever *this* was. She stretched her quad muscles, by lifting each ankle in turn and grabbing it behind her backside with one hand, balancing herself against the kitchen table with her other. I felt the most unaccountable urge to reach out and goose her hipbone.

Clarifying the nature of our relationship had awakened an aspect of myself I wasn’t very familiar with. I turned away to hide a rising blush.

We had bigger things to deal with right now than my libido.

“I thought we needed to play at being hermits for a day or two?” Evelyn said.

Raine shrugged and pulled a self-mocking face. “I think I jumped the gun. My fault, my bad. Nothing’s happened. Odds are they had no idea who we were. Might not even have been the Cult. Also, I could eat a horse. What do you say?”

“I assume dog-brain made it out alright?” Evelyn asked.

“Twil? Yeah, she’s fine. Sore head’s about the worst of her problems.”

“I have something I need to show you, Raine,” I said. “Both of you.”

= =

We gathered around the table in the ex-drawing room. The big overhead light was missing a few bulbs, lost to the ages, casting fuzzy illumination up the walls and across the floor. Evelyn munched her way through a cereal bar, but Raine was too focused on me to eat anything. She'd picked up on my tension.

I unfolded the filthy tshirt on the table, hiked up the front, showed them Maisie's hidden message.

I didn't need to say a word.

Raine's lips moved as she read the first line, then she trailed off and shook her head. Evelyn stared in silence, sucking on her teeth.

"Bloody hell," Raine muttered. She put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Surprisingly enough, yes. Maybe I'm just numb, or maybe nothing shocks me after yesterday."

The truth was too hard to phrase: I felt a steel ball of resolve in my chest. Pain had been transmuted. Raine shook her head again and swore softly as she stared at Maisie's message, at the crazed scrawl, the plea for my help.

"You're absolutely certain it's hers? 'Maisie'?" Evelyn pronounced my twin's name with exaggerated care.

I nodded. "Some things you never forget."

"Bloody hell," Raine repeated. She hooked her hands behind her head and started to pace up and down. Evelyn levelled a very steady gaze at me, and I knew what she was thinking. For a moment I thought she might not say it, might try to be gentle with me, hold back.

She came through, respected my intelligence.

"It's bait," Evelyn said.

"I know."

"It- what?"

"I accept that possibility. It's not hard for me. You forget, Eevee, I've spent ten years intentionally crushing my own hopes on a semi-regular basis. I'm quite used to the psychological discipline."

"Oh, well, good-"

"But I still want my sister back." I took a deep breath as my veneer of stability cracked, as a lump formed in my throat. "You can't know how it feels. Nobody else even remembers her. She's not in any photos, it took her bed, her clothes, everything. My parents they- ... they didn't forget, but the Eye made it so they never knew. As far as the world is concerned, Maisie Morell never existed. Except for me. I'm the only link she's got. I miss her so much. I miss my twin. I owe it to her, even if this is bait."

Evelyn thumped the book she was carrying down on the table, almost glaring at me.

I tried to steady my voice. "And if it's not bait-"

"The Eye knows your mind inside out, Heather. It knows your desires, your needs, your darkest secrets and fears, it knows the exact object with which to bait you into throwing yourself onto its hook."

"Hear her out," Raine said.

"What's to hear?" Evelyn spread her hands in a dismissive shrug. "What I said yesterday still stands, we can't fight this thing. My idiotic mistake should have proved that, at the very least, or have you already forgotten what it felt like to have that thing rooting around in your skull? It didn't even need a stable gate to do that."

Raine raised her hands. “But what if-”

Evelyn ignored Raine, turned to me. “I know its name.”

“... I’m sorry?”

“Your ‘Eye’. It has a name. The experiment yesterday was an abject failure, yes. I’d intended to find out how it was contacting you, find a way to close off those pipelines, identify and categorise and lock down. That fell apart when it saw us – God alone knows how it did that. But now I know what it is. I sat up all night trying to salvage something from my own failure, trying to figure out how it sent the Noctis Macer through, trying to find anything, anything at all. And I found it.” She tapped the huge leatherbound book. “It’s in *Unbekannte Orte*.”

She flipped the tome open and turned the page toward me, jabbing a finger at the relevant passage. “There’s your Eye.”

The book was a horrible thing.

I didn’t think it possible for a book to feel wrong; it seemed so lovely. Heavy yellowed parchment pages, many repaired and held together with special tape, between cracked leather covers so very old and strangely pale, with handwritten notes in the margins and beautiful illustrated initial letters. There was only one problem.

“I can’t read German,” I said.

“Oh, right, yes.”

Evelyn cleared her throat and began to translate.

“Of the seventh and final inhabitant of the outer rim I have little to tell,” she read, finger tracing the words. “For such a thing is terrible and awesome to behold and left me bedridden with shaking and sweating for weeks thereafter. Though Malthus carried me swiftly through that place, his wings beat upon such a thinness of air and could not find purchase to leave once more and the very Earl of Hell himself dared not look upward upon the countenance which

fixed us with its gaze. Malthus-”

“Who’s Malthus?” I interrupted. “And who’s the speaker here?”

She shrugged. “Malthus is the name of a demon, probably not a true name though. This part of *Unbekannte Orte* is an account by a medieval monk, claimed to have bound a demon to show him the limits of creation. The book is generally pretty sound about most things, but I’m not just working on trust. Here.” She continued.

“Malthus put aside his usual attempts to tempt me from the safer path, and advised me not to look upon the lord of this realm, for he knew well as I that neither man nor damnation could escape this place alone. I made a mistake of such grave proportions that to this day of writing I often dream of a giant eye, not of the godly ordained form of man but rather akin to a vast beast of the sea, Leviathan itself in the waters before the word. I can only be thankful to God almighty that in my terror and haste, I failed to apprehend the form of a body behind the single eye. Like those I have summoned to teach my poor mind natural law, this eye whispers the secrets of mathematics to me and I must purge myself after any such visitations.”

“Oh,” I breathed. “Oh. Right. I-”

“There’s more,” Evelyn said. She wet her lips and spoke slowly. “Malthus informs me that the being is properly named-”

It was not a word.

It was an un-sound that made my eyes water and my ears pop. The temperature dropped by a perceptible few degrees and a crackle passed through the air at the edge of hearing. Raine flinched shook her head like a startled dog. Evelyn coughed and winced.

“A true name,” Evelyn said.

“Does that give us power over it?” I asked. “Somewhere to start?”

Evelyn shook her head slowly. “No. But I can use it for the next step

of what I was planning in the first place. Sealing you off from the Eye. It won't be as elegant as what I had in mind, but it will work." She watched me, the implication plain.

"That's not as important to me anymore," I said very quietly.

Evelyn sighed and leaned heavily on her walking stick, fixing me with the sort of look one gave to a child who wanted to play in traffic.

"This isn't the kind of monster you summon to do your bidding," she said. "It's the kind people build religions around, the kind that ends civilisations. I felt that stare on me yesterday, we all did. Across the membrane, from Outside, and it still almost scooped our minds out on a whim, in a second. I had the strongest, most complex magic circles I know, the fruits of my mother's work and more. Magic is not enough, magic is pissing into the wind." Evelyn punctuated her words by rapping her walking stick against the side of the table. "This. thing. cannot. be. fought."

"What about by me?" I said.

Evelyn halted and narrowed her eyes.

"Self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics," I said. "What do you imagine I've been thinking about all morning?"

"What's this?" Raine asked.

"My uh, brain-math." I gave her an awkward, guilty look as I tapped the side of my head. "Apparently that's the technical term."

Evelyn frowned up a thunderstorm. I managed to hold her gaze, but then my eyes flickered over to where I'd left the pamphlet on the table. She followed my look.

"You'd need a lot more than that," she said with a huge sigh.

"Probably." My voice shook far worse than I'd hoped it would, gave away how frightened this line of thought made me. I touched my

fingers to my forehead. "But it's all up here, isn't it? You say the Eye is like a god, that it can reach from one dimension to another? Well, so can I. It taught me everything, a million things I didn't want to know. I can dimension-hop. Who knows what else it showed me how to do?"

Evelyn ran a hand over her face. "I shouldn't have told you anything. Should have kept you at arm's length."

"I deserved to know."

"You're going to get yourself killed."

"Not if you help me, Eevee."

Evelyn opened her mouth on harsher words, but stalled out, emotions fighting across her face. She looked away and scowled, then closed *Unbekannte Orte* and tugged at the bookmarks as she thought. Raine picked up the pamphlet, flicked it open and peered inside.

"I'm not talking about rushing into this," I said. "Even if ... even if there is a time limit." I eyed the last line of Maisie's secret message: her deadline, a year from now. "I mean ... it seems absurd right now, but I have an essay due next week. The real world moves on without us, I can't just abandon university for magic. Besides, I have you and Raine, don't I?"

"I can hardly refuse you," Evelyn said. "You saved me twice already."

I felt a spike of terrible guilt. "That's not—"

"Shut up. Let me think."

I did. I looked to Raine for support, but she stared at Evelyn in equally deep thought, arms folded, the pamphlet in one hand. I was rapidly sinking beyond my depth, once again painfully aware of how much better these two knew each other than I ever could. I was on the verge of a minor outburst, of saying forget it, I'm sorry,

I'll drop it, I'll do it myself, and a hundred other excuses.

"Assuming the tshirt is genuine, and therefore your twin is alive, we are presented with three problems," Evelyn said. She stared at the tabletop as she talked, then paced to the head of the table, pushed a stack of books aside, and sat down with her chin in her hands. "One is the Eye itself. It can't be defeated or killed, not in the way we define such concepts. I would need to find – or more likely, develop from scratch – a way to avoid the thing's gaze, to hide, to be unseen."

I nodded. "R-right."

"Second." She counted off on her fingers. "Is locating your sister. Which will either be incredibly easy or incredibly hard."

"Why's that?"

"Because of the third problem. Nothing human can survive out there for long."

I blinked at her. "What ... what do you mean?"

Evelyn sucked on her teeth. "It's not impossible that Maisie sent the Noctis Macer herself. I'm not entirely sure what that would imply about the state of her humanity."

I nodded, slowly. "Okay. I understand. I still want to try."

Evelyn pulled a funny expression at me, half-smile, half resigned fatalism. "I don't even know where to begin. This is beyond uncharted territory. Beyond anything ... anything my mother ever did. I suppose I need to hit the books, do some experiments, but the heavy lifting will be on you, on self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics."

"I know."

"And you're not even in a state to begin." She jerked a finger at Maisie's shirt. "It's lucky we have a year, because you're going to

have to do that part yourself, and I don't really know how to help you."

"I can start small, read that," I pointed at the pamphlet – still in Raine's hand – and forced a smile, forced myself to feel confidence I didn't have. "And ... and face some of the things in the back of my head, m-maybe." I swallowed down a bubble of nausea. The Eye's impossible equations reared their many-mawed heads inside my mind.

Back down, I told them, I'll deal with you later.

"Hold up," Raine said. "You're suggesting Heather root around in more of this shit the Eye crammed into her head?"

"Hardly my suggestion," Evelyn said. "Perhaps you should listen to her."

Raine turned a concerned frown on me, all worry. I stumbled over my words, over my own forced enthusiasm.

"Yes, yes. Fight fire with fire," I said. "It's given me all the tools, even if they're awful to use. I can try- I-I have to try, I can't just leave Maisie out there. I can't."

Raine waited for me to finish, then smiled as gently as she could.

"Last time you did it, it nearly killed you," she said. "You didn't see yourself, you were dead on the floor. I've ... well," her smiled turned self-conscious. "I have been that worried before, about a certain other person." She nodded toward Evelyn. "But it's not an experience I wanna repeat, not with you, Heather, you get me?"

"M-maybe that doesn't have to happen again," I said. "I can start small, I can-"

Raine said the worst possible words. The last thing I ever wanted to hear from her. The culmination of all my paranoia and repressed self-loathing.

If I hadn't spent the last 16 hours dealing with one of the worst shocks of my life, I probably would have been able to talk it through. But I was still emotionally exhausted, the ache throbbing through my diaphragm in the background, hungry and in need of real food, probably a little dehydrated as well. My legs were weak and I needed a shower, sticky and greasy and stressed and holding myself together with the power of my friends' support, masking the most terrifying suggestion of my life with bland optimism that I didn't really believe.

"Let Eevee and I deal with this. Leave it to us," Raine said.

"I-I can't, Raine. She's my sister, my twin. She needs me. I-I can't just-"

"Oh dear," Evelyn muttered under her breath.

"Eevee, I thought you had my back on this one?" Raine said.

"Excuse me?" I said, horrified at Raine's tone.

"I owe her, Raine," Evelyn said. "She's saved me twice so far, clearly her judgement's sounder than mine."

Raine sighed and turned back to me. "You heard what Eevee said, we can cut this thing off, give you your life back. Leave it to us." Raine smiled and reached out for my hands. Comforting Raine, safe Raine, all the support in the world I'd ever needed.

I pulled away from her.

"Is that what I am to you?" I swallowed hard, lump in my throat.

"Heather? Eevee and I can handle this-"

Evelyn huffed a laugh. "No we bloody well can't."

"- there's no need to hurt yourself for this."

"Some things are worth it," I said, drawing myself up straight,

gathering my battered dignity. "Some things in life you try even if they might kill you."

"I sure as hell know that," Raine laughed. "But you're hardly out of options. Your back isn't up against the wall here. You don't have to blow up your own head to get this done."

"I'm sick of being useless! I've run away and hidden for ten years!" I snapped. "I'm sick of it, I'm sick of hiding! I left her behind, Raine! I'm scum. I can't just let other people do this for me. It's not- it's not just about-"

It's not just about Maisie.

I couldn't say that, of course. I could barely face it myself.

I needed this.

For me.

Raine tried to smile, explain herself, but I didn't give her time. In my own private hell of paranoia and pressure, I didn't give her time.

"You called me brave," I spoke over her. "Was that a lie?"

"No! Heather, no, not at all. I just don't want you to get-"

"It doesn't matter what you want me to do. I'm not your damsel in distress."

I marched over to the sofa and grabbed my coat, but ruined my hasty retreat by my need to scoop up Maisie's tshirt from the table. I crammed it into my coat pocket and turned to Evelyn, trying as hard as I could to control the lump in my throat and the heat in my face and my eyes.

"Evelyn, t-thank you, for-"

"Heather, hey-" Raine moved to take my arm, to put a comforting

hand on me, but I jerked away from her.

“Oh bloody hell, the pair of you,” Evelyn snapped. “Don’t do this.”

I all but ran for the front door, mortified and humiliated. Raine followed me the whole way, only a few steps behind as I stamped into my shoes and burst out into the wan grey Sharrowford morning. Raine struggled into her boots and shut the door behind us, hurrying up the broken garden path to catch me.

Out in the street, spirit-life roiled in the thin morning fog, a mirror up to my heart. Wolf-things snapped and prowled and stretched snake-necks to the sky, gibbering tentacled slop lurked in the alleyways between the houses, packs of ghoulish creatures furred in burnt moss and topped with skull-faces danced and capered. They seemed reluctant to cross the wall of Evelyn’s overgrown front garden.

Raine reached for my shoulder. I folded my arms and turned away from her.

“Where are you going? I’ll come with.”

“Home,” I grunted. “Alone.”

She hadn’t meant half the things my own mind had supplied, I knew that.

Didn’t I like it when she treated me as vulnerable, in need of protection, saving, to be looked after and helped and supported? I did. I loved it. She cared. She was afraid I’d hurt myself – and she was right. Digging up the Eye’s lessons and playing with impossible physics did mean hurting myself. Badly. Perhaps irreversibly. Maybe I’d die choking on my own vomit, or pulled apart inside by the impossible black machinery of reality, or maybe my head would explode.

The kiss, the romance, had made it that much worse – had given me something to hold onto, filled me with a hundred new doubts.

I was scared, and I'd lashed out at the nearest target.

"I wish they'd all just move," I said.

"Eh?"

"Not you," I frowned at Raine, then looked back at the monsters, the ghouls, the faces of bone and flesh and staring eyes, the lizard-heads and dripping ichor. "Them. My *hallucinations*. I wish they'd just get out of the way," I snapped, raised my voice on the last few words.

They did. Parted. Scattered. At my command.

For a long moment I just stared at the street, shocked out of everything by the effect of my own words. My anger. My will.

Raine took my hand. I shook her off.

"Leave me alone."

"Do you really mean that?" she asked softly.

I shrugged, then shook my head.

I'm so easy.

providence or atoms – 2.11

For the first couple of years after Wonderland, after my trip down the rabbit-hole, after losing my twin, after the doctors and the hospitals and the drugs and the dislocation, I did speak to spirits.

Mostly I screamed at them to go away. Twelve-foot figures of dripping neon had stalked the nighttime hallways of Cygnet Children's Hospital. Often they'd wander into my room, ghosting through the door and crawling up the walls and watching me in bed, too terrified to sleep. I'd scream and rave and the night duty nurse would ask what was wrong, then I'd get sedated and wake up to the same monsters in the hospital's dark corners the next day.

By the time I returned to school, I'd learnt to believe the monsters weren't real. Difficult, to listen to a doctor tell you the hallucinations aren't real, as they leer at you over his shoulder.

I trained myself not to look, not to pay them the slightest shred of attention, to keep my distance. They weren't real. Don't address them. They're not real. Don't look. Not real.

But once, one time, I held my nerve.

So many years ago, I'd almost forgotten.

It happened at home, on the day after discharge from hospital following a period of 'improved mental cohesion', encouraged by my parents' desire to have me in a familiar environment, to have me with them, to let me be normal.

I was drugged up to the gills on anti-psychotics, and trying very hard to hide that I still saw monsters in the street outside, in the family sitting room, lurking in the kitchen, lurching past my bed as I slept. They hovered around me and clutched at my clothes and I could not make them go away, not so much as squeak, because I'd get told off for being insane.

I held myself together all day long, desperate not to get sent back to hospital. Maisie had never been real – so I thought, back then – but at least if I was at home then I could pretend, I could remember, I could have something to hold onto.

My parents had put me to bed that night, I'd faked sleep, then cried under the covers in silence the way only a lonely, sick child can.

Of course, I had to get up to use the toilet. In the dark. A universal childhood trial by fire.

Except my monsters weren't only under the bed – they were everywhere.

The spirit in question lounged across the corridor outside my bedroom door, more mouth than body or head, a maw large enough to swallow a cow, stuffed with a dozen different sizes and shapes of teeth. It breathed out fire-fed wind, hot and fetid. Tiny beady eyes had turned to regard me as I'd crept out in front of it, pillow held across my body in the only way I knew how to protect myself.

“Go away. You're not real,” I'd whispered.

It had.

It had humped and slithered and slid like sandpaper on rock, along the corridor and down the stairs, thump, thump, wack, wack – and gone.

I'd never repeated the feat.

Until now.

= =

“Correct me if I'm wrong here, but I'm pretty sure this isn't the way to your place,” Raine said.

“Not going home.”

“Okay, where we off to then?”

“ ... ”

“Heather?”

“I’m not talking to you right now.”

I was more angry at myself than Raine, but I didn’t know how to reverse gear.

Between the fear and my crippling teenage under-socialisation, I had no idea what to do except put one foot in front of the other, until I reached a place I could think clearly. Raine tagging along like a determined hound dog made me feel awful, guilty, but also so relieved, and then guilty again for feeling the relief.

A vicious circle. Bad, under-socialised, self-contradictory Heather. I told myself off, told myself I had to stop and talk to her.

Pneuma-somatic attention did not help matters.

Since the moment I’d shouted at the spirits outside Evelyn’s house, it seemed every twisted monstrosity in Sharrowford had decided to come pay me a visit. Giant slack faces peered over the rooftops at us, packs of wolf-hogs and lizard-foxes raced past as if trying to spook me, malformed limbs unfolded from manhole covers and drain gates to wave in the wind like branches of flesh.

Without the Fractal on my arm, I suspect they would have mobbed me.

“Ahhh, the old silent treatment.” I heard the grin in Raine’s voice. “Say no more, I respect the urge, I know the deal. Been here a few times before.”

I shot her a side-eye glare. “Upset a lot of girls, do you?”

“Oho, silent treatment didn’t last long.” She grinned over at me.

I huffed and folded my arms tighter. My feet led me along the northern length of the student quarter, slow and steady, still achy and wobbly from yesterday’s city-crossing trek. Raine started to whistle, utterly tuneless. No handholding on this trip.

Indigo and cerulean spirit-wisps whipped overhead, the tail-feathers and trailing tentacles of house-sized floaters. Charred, blackened heads of gristle and grit paused in their scurrying to watch me pass. A monster gestured to me from across the street, a combination of sloth and lizard, speaking alien sign-language with paws the size of dinner plates.

“The ghosts and ghoulies are givin’ you lip, aren’t they?” Raine said.

“Ghosts and ghoulies?”

She shrugged, then very gently tried to take my hand again. This time, I let her.

“They are,” I admitted. “It’s ... really bad. I think I stirred them up.”

Raine cracked a grin, not at me, but at the dozens of monsters she couldn’t see. “I’ll chase them off with a baseball bat if I have to. Go on, bugger off, the lot of you! She’s mine, you can’t have her!”

The spirit life paid no attention, but an old man looked up from his garden down the street. I flushed with embarrassment.

“Raine!” I hissed, jerked my hand out of hers. “I don’t need your- I don’t-”

Raine raised her eyebrows, genuine curiosity, not a shred of hurt or offence. I swallowed, put my head down, and forged on.

Raine followed me all the way between the library stacks before she made her move.

To be fair, surrounding me with books is one of the more reliable ways to calm me down, which is why I'd walked to the library in the first place. Despite Evelyn's Spider-servitor lurking in the basement, Sharrowford University Library was still a source of instant comfort and reassurance for me. Most of the spirit life stayed firmly outside, though a few multi-limbed climbers nosed at us in the third floor stacks, bodies like elongated wingless dragonflies as they clambered and peered. I glared at them in turn and they retreated, slunk back to their hidey-holes.

"Even in here?" Raine asked.

"... what in here?"

"Spirits. Right? They bothering you right now?"

I paused and half-turned to Raine, not sure what to do with her. She'd followed me into a sort of nook at the back of the third floor, at the end of a pathway between two long sets of book racking. The library's architecture pinched tight before opening out again into a reading area full of low tables and book-return trolleys. Almost empty this time of day, only a few students sitting there, reading and studying. None faced us. Brutalist concrete wall-support blocked the view in the other direction.

"No," I said. "They ... I think I got them to leave. Peace and quiet, except for you."

Raine stood with her hands on her hips, her head tilted slightly to one side. A strange ghost of a smile played across her lips, as if she knew a secret I didn't.

"Feeling any better?" she asked.

I shrugged, then stopped and realised what that look on her face

meant. My chest tightened.

“Ah, don’t-” I managed to get out. Raine took a step forward, so close I edged back, mouth suddenly dry and heart hammering. She looked left and right as if for eavesdroppers before turning a knowing, teasing smile on me.

“Raine, not here!” I hissed.

“Where else, then?” she murmured. “I can follow you around all day. Unless you straight up tell me to leave, and mean it. Say it if you want, I’ll go. I promise.”

“You’re violating the sanctity of the library!” I whispered. Raine struggled not to giggle. “Don’t laugh!”

She cleared her throat – softly, at least. “Heather, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’d never, ever call you useless. Never even think it.”

I dropped my gaze to her boots. “But that’s what you like, isn’t it?”

Silence.

I glanced back up and got a face full of extremely confused Raine. She blinked at me, all her smooth words derailed.

“Uh, what?” she said, far too loud.

One of the students in the reading area looked over at us with a frown. I grabbed Raine’s sleeve and pulled her deeper into the private nook, out of sight of irritated library users. Raine apparently found all this extremely amusing, couldn’t keep a grin off her face. I put a finger to my lips.

“Shh!”

“Heather, please, please explain, where did that come from? I promise I’m not going to be mad, when- how- how did I ever give you that impression?”

I averted my eyes and bit down on the guilt. “Evelyn, uh, Eevee, visited me yesterday morning before we went to the library. We talked. About you. A bit.”

Raine raised her eyebrows and waited. I felt like a terrible friend and a far worse lover.

“She said, and I quote.” I swallowed, needed real effort to squeeze the words out. “That you need a damsel in distress so you can play at being a knight errant.”

“ ... ow.”

Raine puffed out a breath and put a hand over her heart. A flicker of genuine hurt passed across her face, the power of her usual grin showing through but battered out of shape.

“Raine? I-I’m sorry, I-”

“Ow, geeze, Eevee. That smarts. Damn.” Raine mock-wincing between her teeth. “Maybe don’t take everything Evelyn says at face value, yeah?”

I was mortified by the power of my own words.

Apology wouldn’t cut it now. Radical measures were required.

“Oh for pity’s sake, we can’t do this in the library.” I grabbed Raine’s hand and set about dragging her off somewhere I could actually speak my mind.

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“Hey, Heather, just breathe, just take a moment, okay? We have all the time in the world.”

I was terribly out of breath. I’d pulled Raine all the way from the library, blushing and flustered at my own decision, and led us up

every one of the hundred and seventy six steps of the back staircase in Willow House, to the pokey concrete landing outside the Medieval Metaphysics room. I'd intended to head inside, but had to stop and let go of Raine to put my hands on my knees and concentrate on getting my breath back.

Raine rubbed my back until I could stand straight, but I made a conscious effort to step away from her. She deserved my unencumbered honesty. I did my best to push my hair out of my face and into an approximation of decent order. Raine watched me patiently, thumbs hooked into the pockets of her leather jacket, a curious look on her face.

"I ... I don't even know how to phrase this." I sighed and rubbed at my eyes. "I've never had a conversation like this before."

"Start wherever you like. I'll keep up."

"Why do you like me?" I blurted out. A grin fought to surface on Raine's face as I raced to cover my tracks. I held up a hand. "Don't-don't answer that yet."

"Okay. I could write an essay on it if you want though."

"What Evee said – is it just because I'm vulnerable? I don't want to think that, but I don't understand what you see in me, Raine. I'm not pretty, or particularly well turned-out. I'm small and scrawny. I'm a coward-"

"You're not."

"Let me finish. I'm not a very interesting person, either. I suppose I'm not a complete idiot but that's about all I have going for me. I'm no fun to be around. I'm hard work. Look what I've done this morning. I don't get you, Raine."

Raine nodded, sagely and understanding, taking me very, very seriously. That look on her face was enough to start me on the road to feeling better. I managed a shaky smile, was about to admit I knew I was being unfair on myself, unfair on her, I knew there must

be things in me that I couldn't see. I began to compose an apology.

"Evee's right," Raine said.

"... what?"

She met my eyes without a hint of shame. "I know what I'm into, I know what I find attractive. I can't help that. I guess it's a little bit messed up, but likely not in the way you're thinking. I'd never force a role onto you, Heather."

My mouth hung open. Couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"You mean you ... " I gulped. A bitter, borderline hysterical smile twitched onto my lips. I hiccuped. "I knew it. You don't want me to be brave, or—"

Raine shook her head. "Uh-uh. My turn."

"Wha—"

"I'm scared for you," she said, and put up both hands in surrender. "Regardless of whether or not we make out after this, or never touch each other again, I'm scared for you. I know what the message from Maisie means to you. I mean, hell, Heather, if I was in your shoes I'd do the same. I'd probably already be throwing myself at the Eye. Elbow-deep in it. Probably be dead. I get it – and I don't want you to get hurt."

She cut through every extraneous detail, right to the heart. Raine was a miracle, and I was not worthy.

"I'm scared too," I admitted, sniffed, and realised I was almost tearing up. Raine reached forward but I put a hand out. I had to say this stuff. "But I can't- I don't want to be weak anymore, hide anymore. That's worse than fear of pain. Much worse."

"It nearly killed you the first time. The brain-math stuff."

"Maybe it doesn't have to! Maybe it can be mine, instead of

inflicted on me. This isn't all about Maisie. It's about me, too."

A change came over Raine. She raised her eyebrows and nodded. "Ah. Ahhhh. There it is. Thereeee it is. You know what, Heather?"

I was trash, I was awful, a coward and a traitor, I left Maisie behind, I didn't deserve Raine, I didn't have it in me to hold any of this together.

"W-what?"

Raine cracked a grin. "You've convinced me. I'm in. I'm on board."

I shook my head at her, lost.

"Count me in. I'm still scared for you, I don't want you to bleed from your eyes or chuck your guts up, or worse. But, if I tried to stop you? I think that would hurt you more. So, I'm in." She shrugged. "After all, protection is what I do. If you'll have me."

"That ... thank you ... " I sniffed and wiped away the transient tears. "I do, Raine, I want ... I like *us*. I really, really like you, but I still don't understand what you see in me."

Raine wet her lips, slowly, and took a step toward me. An aspect of her posture cut me off, the set of her shoulders, the way she moved, a new angle to her I'd never seen before.

"Slow it down, Heather. Lemme explain."

"O-okay?"

"Yes, your vulnerability is part of the reason I like you. Not the only part. Not in the sense I want to exercise power over you or dominate your life. That would just make me a scumbag, and pretty unremarkable." She cracked a grin, leaned in closer, her voice softer and softer. "And hey, I know I'm nothing if not remarkable."

"R-Raine, what-"

Raine put her hand against the wall next to my shoulder, boxed me in, emphasised the height advantage she had over me.

“Look at you.” She smiled, bit her lower lip, really *looked* at me in a way that made me blush hard and bright red. “You’re small and mousy, you’re so careful with what you say, you’re so nervous about almost everything around you. It’s so cute I could eat you. I think I will.”

I spluttered. Very elegant.

“But I won’t stop you from being strong,” Raine said, quieter and softer. She leaned in, dangerously close now. “No matter how much you change, you’re always going to be Heather. Yeah, so maybe you learn to cut through solid steel with your mind, or command demons, or fight a god, but at the end of the day you’re still gonna need a hug. You’re still going to be shorter than me, and I’m still going to be able to pick you up and princess carry you, and you can’t do a thing about it.”

Raine winked – and swept me off my feet.

Literally, she ducked and grabbed me behind the knees too fast for me to react, tipped me back and lifted me up. I yelped in surprise, caught between a put-me-down wriggle and clinging to her for support. Raine laughed and held me up easily, grinning like a mad woman.

“And I would be honoured, lady Morell,” she said. “If even after you have ascended to Time Lord status, you still look to me for that hug.”

I’d never blushed so hard or felt so flustered. One arm around Raine’s neck, the other flailing for outside support, I goggled at her, barely able to catch my breath.

“Oh my God, put me down!”

She laughed again but did exactly as I said, tipping and then depositing me straight onto my feet. I shook all over, but not with

fear or adrenaline. A bizarre species of arousal gripped me even when Raine took half a step back, gave me space.

I didn't know what to do with my hands. One of them had fluttered to my chest, over my heart, but the other seemed this useless blob of meat, fingertips tingling as I gaped at Raine.

"Don't do that again without warning me," I managed.

"Can't make any promises there." She cracked a grin and I gave her a death-glare. "You loved it, come on."

No response there. I *had*, despite my better judgement. She'd made her point incredibly well. She could see it in the way I averted my eyes, the way I swallowed down my growing arousal, the way she made me feel when she handled me like that.

"So, Heather, are we together or not?"

"... can we be?"

"Why not?"

"Because our relationship is off to such a great start, isn't it? First kiss to first blazing row in under three hours. That's gotta be some kind of record."

"You'd have to do a lot worse than that to put me off."

Raine waited, apparently nothing left to say. I hesitated, still terribly flushed, one moment forcing myself to look at her, the next unable to even contemplate the smug, in-control expression on her face. Was this how relationships worked?

"I ... well, I do want to ... "

"Say it. Tell me what you're thinking. Put it into words, Heather. As clumsy as you like."

I looked at her. Really looked at her, let out all the stuff I'd barely

been able to express even in the privacy of my own mind.

Raine was a masterpiece of athletic femininity. I hadn't been able to keep my eyes off her these last two weeks. How could she possibly feel the same way about me? From her collarbone to the way she flexed her calf muscles, from the subtle curve of her hips to the feathery chestnut of her hair, she was like something out of one of my teenage fantasies.

She could have anybody she wanted – it was terrible and wrong to think, but a weird, jealous, bitter part of me was convinced she could have any *straight* girl she wanted, let alone the eager partners she'd find in any lesbian bar. The city did have those, right? I had no idea, I was so isolated and behind and cast adrift.

Anybody she wanted. Big boobs, big laugh, big heart, any quality she desired. But instead, Raine had picked me, a scrawny weird little disaster lesbian with a supernatural sword of Damocles hanging over my head and a growing desire to dedicate myself to a lost cause.

"I'm not exactly a low maintenance girlfriend," I said.

Raine shrugged. "I don't give a shit."

"And you deserve better. I'm not fun, I'm not attractive-"

"You are! Hey, don't put yourself down like that." Raine pointed a finger-gun at me. "If we're going to be together, I'm making an executive decision. Every time you say something bad about yourself, I'll tickle you for sixty seconds."

I frowned at her. "Absolutely not."

She broke into a grin. "Are you ticklish? I haven't had a chance to test yet."

"Don't you dare," I said, feeling that odd aroused pull in the pit of my stomach again. "Look, Raine, I'm ugly and I'm scrawny, there's nothing of me, at least not compared to you."

Raine cocked an eyebrow and looked down at herself, grinned and puffed her chest out. "What, you jealous of my bomb-ass rack? S'yours if you want."

I gaped at her, blushing terribly, totally overwhelmed. After what felt like an eternity I managed to look away. "I ... Raine, take this seriously. I want you, I really do, but I-"

Raine touched my chin. I looked up at her. "If I've been taking things too slow for you, too slow to show you what I think of you, we can go as fast as you like."

She kissed me.

It wasn't gentle this time.

She all but pushed me against the wall. Raine wasn't crude enough to shove her tongue down my throat, it wasn't like that. It was the way she handled me, moved me into position, took charge.

Nobody was around to see, but I was mortified anyway. Mortified and powerfully turned on. When she let me go, I put a hand to my chest and hiccuped twice.

"T-that wasn't like this morning," I squeaked. Raine smiled, warm and confident, back to normal.

"Different kind of kiss," she said.

"I gathered."

She gave me a moment to recover. Rubbed my back. Tucked my hair behind my ears for me, gentle fingers against my cheeks.

"Wanna go back to your place?" Raine asked. "Breakfast can wait, Eevee can entertain herself for an hour. Or three."

"Raine, neither of us has showered since yesterday. We're both disgusting. I need to go home and shower, not ... not do anything

sexy.”

Raine’s smile turned smug and teasing. “You’re saying we both need to shower?”

“Yes, yes we do.” I almost huffed.

“I can think of a way to save time doing that.”

My heart stopped. I swear, my heart stopped. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to slap her or let her pick me up again.

“ ... my-” I squeaked, took a deep breath, and put up as much token resistance as I could muster. “M-my flat’s shower is too small for two people.”

“Showering together?” Raine mimed mock-shock. “Heather, so bold!”

“You-”

“You said it, not me.” Raine raised both hands.

“You were heavily implying it. You insufferable wind-up.”

Raine laughed, a big good-natured belly laugh. “Well, the shower at my place isn’t the best, but it’s one hundred percent big enough. Fancy a walk?”

My hands shook like doves and my heart was gearing up to fly out of my chest. My face must have been bright tomato red. I’d never done this as a teenager, never fumbled through the first few steps of physical romance, had no idea what the proper etiquette was or how I was supposed to act toward Raine. Weren’t we supposed to, I don’t know, go on a date first?

My body said no. No wait. Now. *Now.*

I nodded. That was all I could manage. Raine slipped her hand around mine and squeezed.

“Hey, relax. It’s just a shower,” she said.

“Oh, shut up.”

We didn’t even make it out of Willow House before last night caught up with us.

I was far too busy imagining a million embarrassing things involving Raine in the shower, to notice how many steps we took and how many sets of double-doors we passed through. Too preoccupied with the feeling of her hand in mine, my own palms sweating, my heart ready to leap out of my chest, to notice the lack of other students or the eerie quiet in the top floor corridor of Willow House.

Raine stopped before the doors to the main stairwell. I looked up, expecting a flirtatious joke or a teasing wink.

She was staring back the way we’d walked, a frown on her face.

“Uh?” was all I could manage.

“That’s odd,” she muttered.

“What, what’s odd?”

“Corridor seemed longer. Stairwell should have been back there, one set of fire doors back.”

“Oh, Raine,” I sighed. “What are you talking about, it’s right here.” I let out a nervous, breathy laugh. She was as excited as me, losing track of space and time.

She didn’t laugh.

In the stairwell, I stopped laughing too.

“Where are the windows?” I murmured.

Willow House's main stairwell should have been walled with a bank of windows on every floor, grubby brown glass set in concrete surroundings, gazing down across the main square on campus. At this time of day the stairwell should be flooded with at least weak sunlight and echoing with the distant sounds of other students shuffling or hurrying up and down the building.

Blank white breeze-block wall. No windows. Strip lights hummed.

"Did we get turned around?" I said. A veil of dislocation floated down over my brain.

Raine let go of my hand and stepped forward to peer over the railing. My heart almost missed a beat, and not in a good way. I scurried along after her.

"Huh," Raine grunted. "Ain't that unique."

I looked down, over the railing.

Big mistake.

A wave of vertigo rocked me on my feet and swirled through my head. I clutched Raine's hand and held on tight.

The stairwell extended forever in an endless spiral, down and down and down, until the flickering strip lights gave out and darkness swallowed an impossible depth. Mile after mile of identical repeating steps and banisters. I looked up – the same, a dizzying height repeating into infinity. I closed my eyes and my breath came out in sudden ragged gasps.

"Hey, Heather." Raine squeezed my hand. She was so calm, so collected, so together. Held me back from the brink. I opened my eyes and saw her perfect confidence. How was she not shaking in panic, how did she deal with that abyss above and below? "Ease down."

"I-I can't-"

"You can. Hundred percent. When weird shit happens, the best thing to do is stay calm."

I nodded. I knew that, in theory. "I'll try."

She gestured at the alien stairwell around us. "Did you uh, dimension hop us by accident? Got a little too excited?"

"... do you see blood coming out of my eyes? This wasn't me."

"Right." Raine pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket and looked at the screen. "Okay, good news, we're still in Sharrowford."

"We are?"

She showed me the phone screen: full signal.

I fumbled out my own phone and opened Google maps. It showed us located in Willow House, exactly where we should be.

"The other best thing to do when weird shit happens is call Eevee." Raine held her phone to her ear. I shuffled on my feet and tried not to look at the yawning, impossible abyss as we waited for Evelyn to answer.

"Eevee, it- yeah, yeah, it's fine, I- listen, listen, Heather and I have stumbled into some kind of ... loop, in Willow House. Closed space, I dunno, like- yeah. Is this the surprise you left last night, for our cult friends?"

A flush of relief washed over me. This was Evelyn's magic. Just a mistake. We'd stumbled into a trick meant for other people. She'd wave her hands and mutter some Latin and everything would be back to normal.

I heard some very exasperated noises from the phone. Raine winced.

"Yeah, okay. No, no don't come here, no." A long pause. "Yeah. Don't keep us waiting. Bye for now."

“What did she say?” I asked. Raine stared at the phone, and I realised she was psyching herself up. She shot me a grin, overlaid on tension.

“This isn’t Evee’s doing. She rigged the door of the Medieval Metaphysics room to give any intruders instant explosive gut pain. Not uh ... not this.”

“ ... where are we then? Raine, where are we? What is this?”

Raine’s smile died. She fixed me with a serious expression. She didn’t let go of my hand. “You know how I said I’d probably over-reacted last night? That those weirdos probably didn’t even know who we were?”

“Yes?”

“Think I may have been wrong. We’re in a trap.”

providence or atoms – 2.12

First, we retraced our steps.

More accurately, Raine retraced our steps and led me in her wake. She left no question as to who was going first, back through the double-doors to the corridor of Not-Willow-House.

A familiar transformation came over her – watchful, alert, tense. My hand felt clammy in hers, my heart in my throat. In the fake corridors she eased each set of doors open with the tip of her boot, waited for any nasty surprises to jump out at us before proceeding.

The Medieval Metaphysics room was gone. As was the back staircase and all the windows; each set of internal double-doors led to another identical stretch of whitewashed corridor, with four classroom doors on each wall and a noticeboard full of philosophy department flyers. Raine tried the door handles, but they didn't even turn.

After seven identical corridors, the doorway to the main stairwell appeared on the left again. We checked, same endless abyss up and down.

“ ... is this the same set of stairs?” I asked. “We went in a straight line, how can we be back here?”

“Time for an experiment, I think.” Raine pulled a Swiss Army Knife and a pen from her jacket.

“We don't have time to muck about, Raine, we need to get out of here.”

She held up a finger and smiled, beamed that endless confidence directly into my brain. “When lost in the woods, the most important thing is ... ?”

I shrugged. "Shout for help? Oh, no, pick a direction and stick to it?"

"Good guess, but not quite enough for the biscuit. Most important thing is: don't panic. Take a drink, eat a cereal bar, calm down, get your bearings."

"We don't have any of those things. Also this isn't the woods."

"Yeah, but it's basically the same principle. Thank Ray Mears for that one. I'm dead serious, the most important thing is don't panic."

"I'm ... actually not panicking now." I frowned at myself, took a deep breath. "I've done this too many times before, it may as well be routine. At least I'm not alone this time."

Raine reached over and squeezed my shoulder. "Like a Slip?"

"I guess. This doesn't feel like one though."

"Here, time for science."

Raine cut a big X on the inside of the stairwell door with her knife. I grimaced, because it still looked exactly like Willow House. Vandalism irked all my well raised sensibilities.

Back in the looping corridor, Raine tugged one of the flyers off the noticeboard.

"Ah, weird."

"What? What is it?"

Raine showed me the flyer. "Guess they can't copy fine detail."

"What are you talking about ... "

I blinked at the flyer. Total gobbledygook. Backward letters, jumbled words, sentences on top of each other. A photocopy error from hell, as if an alien had seen human writing upside down and

from a distance, then recreated it with no understanding of form or purpose. Every flyer showed the same manic mash of text.

Somehow that disturbed me far more than being trapped.

“Put- p-put it away.”

Raine tore down the rest of the flyers. In the next stretch of identical corridor they were pinned back on the noticeboard, but in the seventh – next to the stairwell entrance again – they lay scattered on the ground. Raine’s minor vandalism had not been magically repaired.

We checked the stairwell; X still marked the spot.

“We’re inside a loop?”

“Right, don’t worry.” Raine squeezed my hand. “Evee’s working on this. If I can’t find a way out, she’ll have it solved in no time. Like being stuck in an lift together, just with far less opportunity for necking in secret, eh?”

Raine flashed me a cheeky grin. I tried to smile back and enjoy the joke, but my damnable curiosity had lighted on a point of principle, perhaps to distract myself and keep the panic tamped down.

How does a physical loop work?

“Like a ... mobius strip,” I murmured.

My imagination summoned an image of the structure, ruminated on how a corridor could follow a straight line yet also loop around to the same point. The implications of a closed spacial loop teased at dangling threads in the back of my mind. A physical impossibility, but one I could just about picture, if I dug hard enough.

Raine was saying something, as the answer bubbled up from the oily depths of my subconscious.

“Oh,” I said. “I think I know how they made this-”

A blinding spike of pain rammed into my head, right behind my eyes. I let go of Raine's hand and doubled up, chucked the contents of my guts onto the carpet. Lucky I'd barely eaten anything this morning.

Of course I knew how this loop worked – the Eye had taught me.

Stupid, stupid Heather. Those concepts are radioactive waste, poison, death.

"Heather? Heather, what's wrong? Heather?"

I sucked in air and clutched my aching stomach as I forced the thought back down. Raine's helping hands pulled me upright and held on hard as I clutched at her for support.

"Are you Slipping?"

"No, no." I shook my head and wiped my mouth on the back of my sleeve. Disgusting, but I had no other choice right now. Hardly the best time to need a bathroom, while stuck in a pocket dimensional loop set up by dangerous people. "I- ugh, my head."

"Take a moment. Breathe."

"I know how this place works. I think. The math- the principles underlying it. The Eye's lessons, it's in there somewhere." I tapped my head and groaned again.

"Hey, it'll be okay, I'm gonna get you out of here."

"I think-" I swallowed. "I-I think I can get us out, but-"

Another wave of nausea slammed into my gut. I leaned forward and struggled to force the thoughts down, don't touch, *don't touch them*. Buried deep in the layers upon layers of the Eye's lessons lurked the exact mathematical operation required to translate Raine and I out of this space, but it was white-hot to the touch.

I cringed, terrified of pain, of my own suggestion.

When I'd saved Evelyn, dragged her back from Outside, that had been life or death. This? We were just lost.

"Heather, no, don't try it."

"But I can," I whined. "You said you wouldn't stop me from being strong. Y-you-"

"And you will be." She rubbed my back, helped ease the nausea out. "But right now you're untrained or unpractised or un-whatever-you're-going-to-be, and this is a trap. If you try the mind-magic and it doesn't work, I'll have to carry you. Even if it does work, we don't know what it'll do to you. Start small, remember?"

"What if we can't get out?"

"Keep it as an emergency back-up option. In the meantime, you can rely on me, okay? It's okay to rely on me."

I nodded, and felt such secret relief and secret shame both together.

"Think about all the things we're gonna do later today," Raine said. "When we get out of here, yeah?"

"How about bathe and sleep? And wash my mouth out."

Raine laughed. "Sure thing."

She waited until I was steady on my feet, then set about phase two of her experiment to get us out. She flicked open the screwdriver head on her Swiss Army Knife and set to work unscrewing the hinges from one of the locked classroom doors in the fake corridor. I watched her wiggle the screws out as I tried to clean the taste of vomit from my mouth, occupying my mind with anything except how this place worked.

"Raine? Do you think this is about me?"

“Can’t speak for anybody else, but most things I do lately are about you.” She cracked a grin and I warmed inside, even if I didn’t have the energy to blush.

“Oh don’t, not right now.” I tutted. “I mean this place. This trap. Is this for me?”

Raine frowned, took my question very seriously. My thoughts were already racing.

“I mean, those people yesterday, the cultists,” I said. “They did this, right? They lured the Demon Messenger for some reason. Is this revenge for interrupting them or ... or what?”

Raine shook her head slowly. “Smart money says the Sharrowford Cult has no idea who you are, and I aim to keep it that way. Last night, my guess is they knew precisely zip until we were already in deep.”

“What makes you so confident?”

“This kinda thing?” She gestured at the corridor, the loop, the trap. “This is why I’m here. My guess is this was meant for Eevee.”

“... if you say so.” I mulled over the idea as Raine finished dismantling the door’s lower hinge. She dusted off her hands and stood up.

“Job’s a good’un. Let’s find out what’s behind door number one.” Raine grinned at her own dumb joke and waggled the door hinges free. She wedged her fingertips into the thin gap around the frame.

I had a sudden terrifying vision of a howling void on the other side, of Raine sucked through by decompression, of a hand reaching for us from the darkness revealed.

None of those things happened.

Behind the door was a blank brick wall.

“Goddamn.” Raine grunted and let the door fall with a clatter. The noise set my teeth on edge. “Guess we’re in a cartoon now. Huh.”

“Great.”

Raine tapped the bricks with her knife, but for all we knew the wall was a mile deep. She shrugged and shot me an ironic smile, then unfolded the blunt bottle-opener attachment on her knife and dug it into part of the door-frame. She ran it up and down, wiggled it back and forth, until she yanked part of the frame away – a length of steel rod. She weighed it in one hand, swished it through the air, and nodded approval.

My chest tightened. “Do you really think you’re going to need that?”

“Never know. Better safe than sorry.”

Raine had an idea. She took my hand and we walked back out to the endless stairwell. I averted my eyes from the sight as she stared into the abyss.

“Up or down?” she asked.

“ ... you’re asking me to choose? What’s to choose?”

“Serious answer? On one hand, your guess is as good as mine, but on the other, you’ve been outside reality on the regular, I haven’t. So, considering everything you know – up, or down?”

I sighed at Raine and held her gaze for a moment, but she seemed completely serious. “Um ... down gets dark, and that’s not good. Obviously not fit for human habitation. Up is at least slightly less unsettling.”

“Up it is then. Just focus on your feet, or on mine, don’t look over the side. We’re gonna be fine.”

She led the way up the flight of stairs to the next floor, my clammy little hand tight in hers. I was fairly certain that Raine had no idea

how to escape this place, and I was also fairly certain all this activity was just to keep me occupied, stop me from panicking while Evelyn did the real work to get us out. I appreciated it all the same.

“How are you not scared?” I asked.

“Ahhh, I’ve been in far worse places than this. Like Evelyn’s house, the one she grew up in. At least this place isn’t full of monsters.”

“Don’t tempt fate, please.”

“Fate can taste my boot leather. We’ll be fine.”

The next floor was identical to the previous, the same entrance to the same repeating corridors, the same flickering strip lights, the same X Raine had marked on the door with her knife. A perfect loop.

Except for one rather significant addition.

No monsters.

Worse: people.

Five young men waited with their backs to us as we emerged into the fake corridor. Alerted by the sound of the door swinging open, they all jumped and turned and stared. One put his fists up, then shook himself and lowered them again. They looked almost as confused as I felt.

“Stay behind me,” Raine whispered.

As if I would have done anything else. Groups of strange men were not at the top of my list of approachables even in normal situations. What did she think I was going to do, ask for directions?

They didn’t seem anything like the sort of people one might encounter inside a dimensional pocket trap; they’d have been more at home standing around on a street corner in one of the rougher

parts of Sharrowford, admiring a blinged-out car, all baseball caps and pints of hair gel and too much gold jewelry.

Each one wore a high-vis vest, stretched over a puffer jacket or shrugged on around a hoodie. One of them had draped it over his shoulders like a cape, and another had wrapped his around his arm.

On every vest, the Fractal.

Evee's cavalry?

No, I quickly corrected myself. The symbol only *looked* like the Fractal. Different design. I'd memorised every last angle of the Fractal by now, refreshing it on my left arm every night. The symbols on the vests had been scrawled in a hurry, with marker pen, a different arrangement of lines from a branch shaped the wrong way.

One of the men turned to the others and thumbed over his shoulder. "I thought she was meant to come from that way?"

"Definitely not her."

"Yeah, there's two of them for a start."

"Shitshow already, this job."

"Everyone shut up," one shouted over the rest. He stepped toward us. A habitual leader, I guessed. Chunky fellow, overweight but not sagging, stubble on his chin and big blunt fingers raised in an open-handed gesture. He turned an easy, friendly smile on us. "Alright, you two? Lost like we are, yeah? Funny old bloody place, innit? You uh ... just you two, yeah? Seen anybody else around here?"

"Yeah," Raine said. "There's a girl passed out downstairs, actually."

The fat guy's forehead creased into a frown. One of his friends in the back piped up. "She's having you on, Mark."

"Fuck's sake, no names. No fucking names," the fat guy snapped

over his shoulder.

“Where’s the way out?” Raine asked, low and soft.

The fat guy shot a glance back at his posse. One of them shrugged, another suggested telling us, a third one had a disgusting glint in his eye. Even with Raine holding my hand, with her by my side, with my knowledge of what she could do, I felt an animal need to be elsewhere, not stuck in a confined space with several large, threatening people. My heartbeat pulsed in my throat and cold sweat broke out down my back.

“Raine,” I whispered, barely able to raise my voice above a trickle. She ignored me as the men conferred. My throat tightened. “Raine.”

“Who’s gonna miss two kids, Mark?” the wise guy in back said.

He pulled his weapon first. That broke whatever inhibition had held them back. They were all armed – three big knives, a baseball bat, and an optimistic pair of knuckle dusters.

Raine grinned and idly raised the steel rod she’d pulled off the broken door.

“Alright love, come on,” fat guy said, same easy smile as he opened his arms wide, despite holding a knife. “Put that down now, don’t be silly, we just need to make sure you’re not hiding anything. Then you can be on your way, yeah?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He lunged at Raine.

I think I screamed.

Five seconds, maybe ten, and it was all over. Too fast for me to think about. This was nothing like killing the monster in Evelyn’s house two weeks ago, or the scuffles with Twil yesterday, or even Raine’s brave attempts to do violence on the Messenger. This was a real fight, nothing like in books or films, no flourishes or heroics.

Blood, the sound of impacted meat, the strangely soft crack of

broken bones.

I think Raine killed two of them. She didn't seem to care. We didn't hang around long enough to find out.

She was very, very good at it.

They barely touched her, a glancing blow to her upper shoulder and a brief handful of her jacket, which she punished with broken fingers and a shattered collarbone. When it was done, four of the men lay on the floor, two of them not moving. The fat man, the leader, was slumped face down with the back of his skull caved in like an egg. Blood soaked into the thin carpet. The last man standing backed away and dropped his knife, knuckles bleeding and split from where Raine had smashed his hand.

"Alright, alright, okay, yeah, okay, alright," he was repeating, over and over.

Raine grinned.

She was flushed and breathing hard, bobbing from foot to foot like a boxer, weighing the metal rod in her hand again. She stooped down and pulled the baseball bat out of one of the men's hands, kicking away his limp attempt to stop her. She hefted the bat and let out a long, shuddering breath.

I was shaking all over, hand to my mouth. I'd unconsciously backed away until I'd hit the door, adrenaline and panic clawing at my stomach and chest.

"Raine?" I squeaked. At least one corpse blocked my route to her.

"I'll be right there. Promise. Gotta finish this," she said.

"No, no you don't have to," the last survivor said, his hands out to ward her off. He backed away toward the rear double-doors. "It's cool, we're done. They're not paying us enough for this, you're not even the kid we're meant to find. Alright? Alright?"

“Who are you meant to find?” Raine snapped off.

He frowned and thought it over for a second, so Raine raised the metal rod and grinned all the wider.

“Okay, okay! Fuck! Fucking hell, you- okay, shit. A blonde girl, uni student, uh, one leg, missing hand, uh, I-I-” He kept backing up as he spoke, one hand groping for the doors behind him.

“Who sent you?”

“Ugh, Adam Gore. He’s just a fixer though. I don’t know who this job is for, okay? I swear, I don’t know. Don’t fucking hit me.”

“How do we get out?” Raine said.

He pointed at his high-vis vest. “They gave us these, right-”

The double-doors behind him burst open and a hand swatted him aside with the power of a wrecking ball. His head bounced off the wall with a sickening crack and he collapsed to the floor

I realised in a rush of horror that these men had been a mere layer of ablative meat, to slow Evelyn down, until the real killers could arrive.

The tall woman in the full-body trench coat, from last night, stepped through the doors and lowered the hand she’d used to murder our would-be attacker. She moved with robotic slowness. She was even taller up close. I revised my estimate, perhaps almost seven feet from tip to toe. Only her eyes showed, between a scarf around her face and a hood pulled low over her head. She fixed on us with cold empty precision.

“Uh, Heather.” Raine took a step back. “Back up, through the door, now.”

I couldn’t move, not without Raine.

The tall woman was not alone.

Nightmare hounds nosed through the door behind her, gathered at her ankles, amalgamations from the worst depths of my pneumasomatic visions, built along canine principles but from parts of the wrong creatures; some showed metal rivets and stitching between grey lizard-flesh and shaggy hide, plastic hinges at komodo-dragon jawlines, steel-reinforced legs and eyeballs of incorrect size rolling loose in their sockets. Dripping stingers whipped through the air and drool looped from muzzles unable to close properly.

The tall woman jabbed a gloved finger at Raine and then at the floor.

“You want me to drop these?” Raine hefted the metal rod and her stolen baseball bat.

A nod.

“Think I’ll hold onto little slugger here, but you can have the other one, sure.”

Raine span and hurled the metal rod at the tall woman’s face, a full-body javelin throw with every ounce of her strength. She overbalanced and caught herself at the last moment.

The tall woman jerked her head aside in a sudden flicker of speed. The metal rod clattered against the door. The hounds surged forward.

Raine span on her heels, leapt the corpse or two between her and I, and bundled me through the door so hard I almost went sprawling in the stairwell.

“Heather, up, up the stairs!”

“Where- where do we even go?!” I cried.

“Just up!”

Raine pushed me and I went, but we didn’t get more than three

paces before the first hound burst through the doors and went for Raine, snapping and growling. She turned and dashed its brains out with a swing of the baseball bat. The hound yelped, a pitiful, terrible sound, and went down in a heap of limp meat and muscle.

I tripped on the stairs, shaking with fear and adrenaline. The next couple of minutes descended into a blur of terror.

I could barely keep my head on straight, let alone form a coherent plan. If you've never been in the middle of a genuine melee then you can't imagine what it feels like. Everything happens too fast, no time to think and react. I scrambled up the stairs, banging my knee and scuffing my hands.

Raine held the hounds off, setting about herself with the bat and her boots, kicking heads and breaking legs and smashing rib cages. She caught one hound by the throat with her free hand and shoved it bodily over the railing, sending it tumbling into the abyssal stairwell. Another one she hit so hard it bowled down two of its fellows. The stairwell filled with the sound of wood hitting meat and twisted canine yelping.

Raine didn't come away unscathed this time – the nightmare hounds took a couple of chunks out of her, a bite in the leg and another in her forearm, leather jacket turning away the worst of the teeth.

In the heat of the moment I thought her brave.

No, it wasn't bravery. It was joy.

She was grinning and covered with sweat and one hundred percent in her element. Totally focused, a state of perfect flow, like this was what she was made for. After six hounds dead or wounded, they backed off, slinking away and growling from the corridor.

Raine swept a hand through her hair and let out a long breath.

"Y-your leg." I pointed. She was bleeding badly from the bite wound, the thigh of her jeans soaked through with crimson.

“Just a scratch,” she said with an ear-to-ear grin. “Heather, I’m loving this, but even I can’t keep it up forever. We uh, we gotta leave.”

I knew what she was asking me to do.

Inside, I cringed away from the Eye’s lessons, but we had no choice. The wound in her leg made it real, raw, life-threatening. We had to leave, right now.

I can do this, I told myself. I’d done it before, in equally as dangerous circumstances, twice in a row, while brain-numb and bleeding. This time I was much more in control, right? Right. Breathe, focus, get us out.

My stomach clenched with anxiety as I summoned a mental image of the loop, pictured in my mind the mathematics to punch an exit back to reality. Nausea rolled through me and a spike of headache pain tingled on the edge of my scalp. I reached out to touch Raine.

A metallic click from above us interrupted my thoughts. It interrupted everything. I looked up.

Several floors above us, a woman aimed a rifle down at Raine.

Whipcord-tight, shaved head, dressed in outdoor hiking gear. The rifle was an old bolt-action thing, her eye to the scope, stock tucked tight against her shoulder. I’d never seen a gun in person before. It didn’t seem real.

Raine began to turn, to follow my gaze. Too slow, much too slow.

The woman pulled the trigger.

From a standing start, I’d have been useless. But I was already knee-deep into the Eye’s impossible equations, my mind on the verge of plunging in. If I’d had time to think, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. The Eye’s lessons offered me a hundred ways, a million ways, and choice would paralyse me with fear of pain, fear of failure, fear

of loss.

The very urgency of a bullet in motion allowed me to act at the speed of thought.

I ran through a dozen equations in a split-second, principles I'd never dared touched before, concepts which burned my mind with white-hot searing fire even as I put them into action. I broke physics and gravity and a dozen laws human science had no names for, and paid for it with a bleeding, quivering of my own mind. Momentum, velocity, mass, speed, all deformed like putty. It was clumsy, brute force, inelegant and wasteful and incredibly painful.

So much for starting small.

I turned the bullet away from Raine.

It hit the stairwell wall with a puff of pulverised concrete.

My vision fogged black and I doubled up, vomited onto the stairs, my head pounding like I'd driven a railroad spike into my forehead. My nose streamed with blood and a sticky feeling gummed at my eyes. My knees gave out a second later. Urgent hands caught me, held me up and dragged me. I twitched and kicked, almost insensible.

My chest throbbed inside like my lungs had burst. I fought for breath, gasping and spluttering and vomiting a second time. I tried to say Raine's name. We had to get away from here, because the woman with the rifle was going to shoot at us again and I had nothing left, I was spent, on the verge of unconscious oblivion.

Raine – I knew it was her, somehow – propped me against a wall on my backside. I forced my eyes open as she spoke, as she tried to speak comforting words, but then she broke off and spun, baseball bat raised for a swing.

The Tall Woman stepped past the reluctant hounds and came for us herself.

Raine did not fare well.

The Tall Woman moved like quicksilver, ducked and weaved and jabbed too fast to follow. Even if I hadn't been mind-screwed from emergency hyperdimensional mathematics, her motions would have left me dizzy. Raine's baseball bat bounced off her like she was made of granite, though Raine hit her enough times to extract a deep grunt of acknowledgement. She landed a glancing punch to Raine's stomach, which made her hunch and wheeze and slow down.

I heard the metal click of the bolt-action rifle again, echoing in the endless stairwell.

Half-conscious, propped up against a wall next to the corpses of terrifying monster dogs, with Raine bleeding and hurt, there was no decision to make. I did not think, I merely acted.

If we left, at least Raine would live.

I summoned everything I had left, hurled myself at Raine and tackled her from behind. Too weak to do more than unbalance her, but I only had to make contact.

"Close your eyes!" I shouted.

"Heather, no!"

The Eye's impossible equations jabbed molten fingers into my brain. Neurons burnt out. My chest wrenched like my ribs were shattering.

Reality folded up.

conditions of absolute reality – 3.1

Peace.

Such infinite tranquillity.

Obviously, I was meant to be here.

Lying on my back on a hillside of soft yellow grass, beneath a sky whorled with the most beautiful bruised purple, shaded by an unrolling blanket of night. Warm wind caressed my face and I dug bare toes into the dry soil. Muscles soft as butter, skin tingling, clear-eyed.

How had I gotten here?

Memory moved at the speed of cold honey. I flexed my legs and smiled at nothing.

The last thing I remembered was ... staying the night at Evelyn's house? No, after that, Raine and I had gone off together, and talked a lot, and she made me feel good and wanted and believed and all sorts of other emotions far too complicated for the Heather on the yellow grass hillside.

Then we'd decided to visit her place, to ...

To have sex?

I should have felt embarrassed, or at least self-conscious, but the thought wafted by without affect, a notion I could choose to observe from a distance, or not at all.

Not at all. Yes, I let the idea go and watched it float away on the humid air, wisps of spun glass fluttering on the warm wind. Why

hold onto anything, in this place? I sighed and rolled the back of my head against the soft grass.

Where was Raine, anyway?

Ah.

No.

Something else had happened. Something bad.

The veil of calm dropped away and I sat up, blinking and squinting and rubbing my eyes. My vision blurred, as if the image was lagging, as if too much attention had revealed the artifice of the world around me. Yet I felt no panic, no dislocation, no sense of being lost somewhere Outside, only a vague confusion. Even my emotions crawled at a snail's pace.

Dark yellow hillsides unrolled to the horizon. The sky extended forever, lit from below in soft glowing purple. No sun. Two moons.

And sitting to my left, her.

The girl in the goat-skull mask.

She sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, head tilted back to gaze up at the sky, so the curled horns of her mask pointed at the ground. No spirits attended her now, not like in that dirty, stagnant Sharrowford car park. She wore the same clothes, a dark striped hoodie with the sleeves pulled over her hands. Her long blonde hair trailed out over the grass.

"Where is this?" I asked. "Who are you?"

She turned to me. The skull's eye holes showed only darkness. Then she reached up and removed the mask.

For a split-second, in my heart of hearts, I expected to see Maisie.

It wasn't my sister.

An impish smile greeted me, set in a delicate featured, mushroom pale face. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, as if half asleep. I realised she was younger than me, perhaps only sixteen or seventeen. She brushed stray strands of that endless wispy hair out of her face and held the goat skull up again, pantomimed hiding behind it, then giggled and tossed it on the ground.

Fey and elfin, like some faerie apparition from a cautionary fireside tale.

I'd learn soon enough, I wasn't far off the mark.

"You're in a dream, dumbos," she said.

"... okay? I am?"

"We've been here for hours. Are you only just coming round? Jeeze, you're so slow." She let out a big theatrical sigh and flapped the loose ends of her sleeves. Her voice was high and light, perpetually amused. "Whatever."

Through the thick, cloying blanket of numb emotion, I decided she was probably telling the truth.

This did feel like a dream. No idea where I was, no idea if Raine was safe, sitting with a nightmare figure from the Sharrowford Cult, but all I mustered was a detached floaty frustration.

"You can call me Lizzie." She offered me her hand, pale white fingers poking from the end of her sleeve. "Or Loz. Or Lorrie. Lorry? Or late for dinner."

"You want me to ... "

She sighed again, took my hand and shook it up and down. "There. That's all proper and sealed then. This is the first time we're meeting and all. Last time didn't count."

"Last time? Oh."

More memory returned. I squinted as the heavy ropes of deadened affect lifted from my shoulders and worry snagged in the top of my chest. My head swam: Raine and I in Willow House, endless repeating corridors. Dead dogs and a baseball bat and stairwells and dead dogs and Raine kissing me and dead dogs and-

“Where’s- w-we were trapped. I- I have to find Raine-” I stared at the bizarre, elf-like girl next to me. “Where the hell is this?”

“I told you, it’s a dream!” Lozzie laughed and kicked her legs. “Did you forget already?”

“No-”

“Tell me your name before you wander off and wake up again? Hanging out here is cool and all, but I’d rather, you know, do stuff.”

“ ... Heather,” I muttered. “Yes, this is a dream, isn’t it? Which means I’m asleep? Safe?”

“Heather! Wow. You’re named after a bush!”

Lozzie found this hilarious. She flopped forward in a bone-defying stretch, palms flat out in front of her as she laughed. She trailed off into a big sigh and looked almost sad for a second. “I did try to warn you, but getting through was kinda hard. I’m so glad you didn’t die and all that. I heard they even tried to shoot one of you.” She tutted. “Should have known that doesn’t work anymore. And thanks for not hurting Zheng. It’s not her fault when they tell her to do things. I’m so fond of her, please don’t be angry with her.”

I blinked at her, trying to process her words. If this was a dream, then she wasn’t real, right?

Lozzie hopped to her feet and bounced on one foot, full of energy. She bit her bottom lip. Almost cute, if I wasn’t so confused.

“So, Heather. Heather. Hey-ther. Where do you wanna go?”

“Go?”

“Yeah! Where do you wanna go? The whole universe is at our fingertips, you know? Here.” She held out her hand to me.

“Home. Or- Wherever Raine is. Awake. How do I wake up?”

Lozzie puffed out her cheeks in a moment of teenage sulk. “Boring.”

Before I could mount a defence, she pounced on me, bundled into me and knocked the air out of my lungs. She grabbed my hand, interlacing her fingers with my own. She was laughing and giggling, long hair everywhere. Her other hand wrapped around my waist and held on tight.

“Chocks away!” she yelled.

Reality blinked in slow motion.

Awake, I would have screamed. Dream-logic threw a protective barrier around my sanity, so I was spared witness to the truth of the process. When the blink finished, dark dusty red plains stretched off in every direction, under a high milky grey sky.

Still laughing, Lozzie picked herself up and dusted her hoodie off. I got to my knees, shaking and breathless from the transition.

“There, wow.” She broke into an innocent smile and waved her arms at the horizon. “It’s sort of barren and ... dumb, but there it is. Who else gets to see this?”

“What? See what?”

“Mars. We’re on Mars. You’ve never been?”

“I ... no. I’ve never been to Mars.”

Sluggish thought finally dropped away like a crust of dried tar. Great engine-plates of cognition revolved back to speed inside my mind. I stumbled to my feet and backed away from Lozzie, if that

was even her real name, if she was even real. My breath caught as panic set in.

Her face fell with genuine disappointment.

“Awwww, come on, don’t go,” she said. “I thought you were ... you know. Like me.”

“Like you?”

My heartbeat thudded in my chest. A pulse ran through living veins. Skin flexed. Breath flowed.

The dream shattered into a million shards.

= =

For reasons which may be obvious I was never much of a morning person, but waking up from the dream of Lozzie was difficult on a whole new level.

Physically I was awake, the slow reanimational alchemy of bodily function and firing synapse, but for a long time I could not have moved if the Devil himself had shouted in my face. Awareness dawned with tentative creeping fingers, of bed covers bunched up around my stomach and a pillow underneath my head, and a familiar smell all around me.

I let out a very long groan. Then another.

Everything hurt.

A half-hearted attempt to roll onto my side transformed into a slow journey to a sitting position. I still couldn’t open my eyes, but I flopped at the covers to extract one arm so I could rub at the ache behind my sternum, a dull throbbing pain which seemed now to fill my entire chest cavity.

By slow degrees, I knuckled my eye sockets and cleared my vision.

“ ... what.”

I was wearing a tshirt a size too large, with a logo on the front for a band called ‘Bikini Kill’. I’d never heard of them. Smelled like I’d worn it a little too long. Also shorts, but no underwear.

This wasn’t my room.

I’d never been here before.

Panic had only a split-second to work its magic, because I didn’t take long to figure out where I was. It wasn’t rocket science.

The double bed – new and plush and very comfortable – was by far the nicest thing in the room, except for the pile of philosophy books on the floor, but I’m biased when it comes to the merits and attractions of piles of books. One small window let in sunlight around a tatty curtain, which fell on ghastly old peeling wallpaper. The bedroom’s usual occupant had covered the walls with posters, mostly for bands, along with a pair of questionable saucy pinups of video game girls, and a huge map of the UK studded with thumbtacks and towns circled in pink highlighter.

A cute little set of coloured hand-weights lay in the corner, along with resistance bands and discarded exercise clothes. The room’s desk was made of bare MDF and fronted by a very battered swivel-chair, but on the desk itself sat a small laptop and some dog-eared college textbooks, next to a gigantic plush dinosaur, a hairbrush, and some nail files.

Raine’s leather jacket was draped over the chair.

I relaxed instantly.

I’m so easy.

“Raine?”

Raising my voice was a mistake; some joker had replaced my throat with sandpaper. I coughed and cast about for water, found none and attempted to get out of bed.

A singularly bad idea. I almost fell on my face. My legs worked, but not as I recalled legs were meant to. I sat on the edge of the bed and kneaded feeling back into my thighs for several minutes before I could stand. I checked myself over and found nothing amiss: no blood caked on my face, no missing fingers, no shaved head. The Fractal looked reassuringly fresh on my left forearm. My hair felt greasy and my bladder was full.

As I shuffled away from the bed, I almost tripped up a second time, on a tangled mess of blankets and cushions. Somebody had been sleeping on the floor. No prizes for guessing who.

I cracked the bedroom door and peered out into a stubby corridor, dotted with several other closed doors and terminated by a right angle turn to carpeted stairs, going down.

“Raine?” I croaked again, and kept one hand on the wall as I tiptoed forward.

The thin old carpet scratched at my bare feet. Somewhere down below a washing machine was thumping through a spin cycle. I reached the only window in the corridor and looked out on a street lined with terraced houses, half of them with windows boarded up. Potholes pockmarked the road. A sad, abandoned fridge stood on the pavement corner. Spirit life flitted and leapt across the old red slate rooftops, and on the other side of the road a sort of bulging ambulatory mushroom was busy climbing one of the houses.

I didn't recognise this part of Sharrowford. A rough part. My earlier relief was wearing thin. Where was Raine? A dozen dark possibilities presented themselves.

A spirit flopped against the window.

I flinched, too wiped out and groggy for real shock. It was an ugly thing, like a bat but many times too large, face stuffed with dozens

of eyeballs pointing in every direction. It scabbled along the window glass and hissed at me.

“Shoo.” I showed it the Fractal. It took off sharpish.

When I looked round, another spirit was watching me too – inside the house. A bald green head, with six tiny pinprick eyes, peering around the edge of the wall where the corridor turned into stairs.

“You can go away too,” I said out loud.

It did.

It ducked back. When I reached the stairs, it had vanished back from whence it came. Thankfully.

“Raine?” I called down the stairs, then coughed and hacked and clutched at the ache in my chest.

She found me before I got much further.

Footsteps hurried up the stairs, taking three or four at a time, and Raine appeared in breathless rush. She was in tshirt and pajama bottoms, bare feet and a big smile.

“Heather, hey! You’re up? You’re actually up?”

I felt the sweetest wave of relief, so strong I sagged against the wall and smiled back at her. Raine was whole and not shot in the back of the head or pulled apart by tall women in trench coats. I stumbled forward and all but fell into her arms, pulled myself into a very selfish hug and buried my face in her shoulder.

God, but she smelled good. Warm faint body-scent. I put my arms around her middle and let out a groan. Raine laughed and rubbed my shoulders and let me flop against her for a minute before she eased me upright and peered at my face.

Her expression told me all was not right.

“W-what?” I managed.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“ ... ”

“How many fingers am I holding up?” she repeated, exact same easy tone to her voice.

“Three.”

“And now?”

“Two.”

“And how about now?”

“You’re making a fist. Raine, what?”

She breathed a sigh, but it didn’t sound like relief. Wetting her lips with a flick of her tongue, she gently guided me back into what I’d correctly guessed was her bedroom. Raine sat me down on the bed again and gently touched my hair.

“Heather, stay right there, okay? Don’t move, I’ll be right back.”

“I saw a spirit indoors,” I croaked.

“You saw what?”

“I saw a spirit.”

“Oh, yeah. This room is warded, but the rest of the house is free-range. Best just sit there now, okay?”

“Mm.”

“I’ll be right back. I promise.”

She was gone for only a minute, rapid footsteps down the stairs and

back up again, and returned with a glass of water and a flashlight. She waited as I drank the water, then shined the flashlight in my eyes and peered at my pupils. I squinted and grumbled.

“Okay, right, that’s good,” Raine muttered more to herself than me. “Heather, what’s your full name? Say it for me, please?”

“Heather Lavinia Morell. I’m nineteen years old. I have a twin sister called Maisie. You’re Raine and I’m in your bed.”

A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. “That you are. Not in the way I wanted you though.”

“Oh, shush.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like hell.”

Raine held up three fingers again. “How many?”

“I’m not concussed. Just unspeakably groggy.”

“Yeah, of course. But I have to make sure you’re actually back this time.”

“ ... what?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

I furrowed my brow. This was too hard right now. “I had a weird dream. Uh, before that ... I did brain-math again. You were fighting a scary tall woman. I grabbed you and ... we went poof. I assume I passed out?”

Raine sat down on the bed and touched my knee. I liked that very much. I would have liked it more without the expression as if she was about to deliver news of a terminal illness.

“Heather, you’ve been out cold for two days.”

“What? Raine, what?” I gaped, suddenly a lot more awake. A sinking feeling pulled at the base of my stomach. “And you didn’t take me to a hospital?”

“You told me not to.”

I blinked at her. She shrugged and smiled in sheepish apology. “Out cold is probably a little dramatic, I admit. You were waking up to use the toilet, and you’d eat or drink anything I put in your hands, but you were like a sleepwalker. You barely spoke. Your eyes were unfocused all the time, lights on but nobody home. You just slept and slept. And you said no hospital. You don’t remember any of that?”

A horrible sense of lost time and missing memory settled over me. “I don’t remember a thing.”

Raine put her arm around my shoulders. She smelled so good, I wanted to lean into her. “I doubt the NHS has standard treatment guidelines for supernatural brain-strain.”

“I guess so.”

“Hey, Heather.” Raine spoke quieter than before, intense and serious. “Thank you.”

“W-wha-”

“That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen anybody do, including myself.” She broke into a grin. “Just don’t do it again, okay?”

I shrugged and averted my eyes. Found it very hard to feel like I’d done a brave or clever thing. I was just glad she wasn’t hurt. “I might not wake up next time. Yes, I get it.”

“You’ll wake up and knock ‘em dead next time.” Raine kissed my forehead. I felt myself start to blush; everything was still in working order then. “I need to call Eevee, let her know you’re awake.” She got up and found her phone on the desk.

Their conversation didn't last long.

"That's it?" I asked.

"Trust me, Evee's glad you're okay," Raine said, and I heard a sigh behind her voice. "She's uh, busy. Her particular way of showing she cares. Don't worry about it right now."

I should have had a million questions, should have been buzzing with tension and fears, but before I had time to think about anything else, we discovered I was hungry enough to eat a live horse.

"I've got microwave chicken nuggets downstairs," Raine offered. "Chocolate cookies too, or I can whip you up a killer sandwich or two. If you want something more, there's a Greggs like five minutes away, but I don't really want to leave you alone."

"Please don't."

The ache in my chest felt so bad that walking to the bathroom and back was quite a challenge. Apparently Raine's housemates were all out at the moment, but I was more concerned about the spirit life which might be hanging out in her kitchen. She suggested I lie back down and nap while she made food.

"No. I've slept enough."

"D'you want coffee then?"

"That would be heavenly."

She left me with another affectionate kiss on the forehead.

"Shout if you need me. Feel free to rummage, if you get bored." She nodded at the pile of books on the floor, winked at me, and gently eased the bedroom door shut. A couple of minutes later I heard her bustling around in the kitchen.

For a while I simply sat and soaked in my aches and pains, but then decided I needed a distraction. I pulled myself slowly out of the bed covers again to poke through Raine's philosophy books. They were all second-hand, battered old paperbacks and ex-library books, filled with highlighter lines and pencil notes. *Critique of Pure Reason* lay on her desk, the same one I'd seen her reading on the morning we first met. It was filled with torn post-it note bookmarks. Next to it lurked a dog-eared copy of *The Conquest of Bread*, only slightly less inundated with yellow tags.

My bare feet felt freezing. An anaemic trickle of warmth ran from the modern radiator underneath the window. I padded over to Raine's cheap chest of drawers, told myself I wasn't intruding, and went diving for a pair of socks.

She owned a lot of band tshirts, some very comfy looking polo neck sweaters, and a pair of highly impractical leather trousers which I marvelled at for a moment. I blinked past underwear and bras and reached into the back of the top drawer for a pair of thick black socks.

My hand brushed cold metal. I peered underneath the socks.

A handgun.

Raine had a pistol stuffed in the back of her sock drawer.

A weird little snub-nosed thing, black and metallic. I stared at it for a long moment, then selected a pair of socks and closed the drawer.

Raine returned a few minutes later with the promised double plateful of chicken nuggets and chocolate cookies. She ducked back downstairs to fetch coffee for both of us, came back and handed me a steaming mug, kissed my forehead again, touched my hair.

I tried to imagine her holding a gun, shooting a person.

It was surprisingly easy.

She sat crossed legged on the bed, opposite where I'd tucked the

covers up around my knees, told me to eat and take it slow, take it easy, we didn't have anywhere to be today. She didn't have to encourage me, I was so hungry my stomach growled at the smell of food.

"Borrowed your socks," I said, and poked one foot out from the covers to show her.

"Oh yeah?" Raine leaned forward to goose my toes. I giggled involuntarily and jerked my foot back.

"Raine! No tickling!"

"That is one promise I am unable to make."

"I couldn't help ... I mean ... I saw your ... Raine, there's a gun in your sock drawer."

"Is there?" She raised her eyebrows and paused in thought. "Oh yeah, there is, isn't there. Forgot where I put that."

"You *forgot* where you hid an illegal firearm? Raine, truncheons and knives are one thing, but that gun is illegal to even own. You could go to prison. Where on earth did you get it?"

She waved a dismissive hand. "I've had it for years. It's fine, Heather, it's just insurance."

"That's what you said about the truncheon. Not two hours later you beat a monster to death in front of me. Don't jinx us again."

Raine nodded, as if my paranoia made sense.

"I mean," I tried to explain. "I'm not scared by it, I just don't understand why ... "

Oh, but I did understand why Raine owned a gun.

Three days ago I wouldn't have, but I did now. Exhaustion and hunger and chest pains had conspired together to smother the

emotional impact of the Willow House Loop, but with food in my belly and caffeine in my veins and socks on my feet, the weight of memory landed on me like a ton of bricks. I put down a half eaten cookie and swallowed, suddenly short of breath. Yes, I understood very well why Raine might need a gun.

Raine recognised my reaction before I figured out what was happening. She scooted over next to me and put her arm around my shoulders, forced me to meet her eyes. "Hey, Heather, Heather, it's fine. We're safe, it's over. It's over. And hey, if it happens again, I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

I nodded at her. Forced myself to take big deep breaths. "I'm fine, I'm fine, just ... shock. Finally hit me."

"I wish I'd had the gun. Haven't carried it around in years." She cracked a grin. "Could have just shot tall dark and bitch-face in the head and be done with her."

I rallied a small laugh. Big effort. "Have you done that before? Have you ever used it?"

"Couple of times. Long story. Didn't go well, but better than the alternative."

"Thank you, yes, thank you." I eased away from her arm. "I need some space to breathe. This is a lot to process. It just ... hit me all at once, that's all."

Raine stood up and pulled over the chair from her desk. She sat on it sideways, facing me. "Don't think about it for now, yeah? We're just two girls hanging out, nothing more to worry about. Eat some junk food, then we can go downstairs and play video games. We've got a PS4 hooked up to the telly in the sitting room, s'pretty cool, I've actually got this one game I think you'll love."

"What happened after I passed out?" I asked. "Did you carry me here? This is your place, right?"

Raine winced and cleared her throat. "Yeah, it is my place. Long

story short, I had to think real fast. You were out cold, we were both covered in blood, I needed to clear your airways. We popped out right in the middle of the street, miles from campus.” She blinked. “Uh, weird, weird feeling, your dimension-hopping voodoo. Span my head right around.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be! You saved us. Anyway, miracle I even got you back here without getting stopped and questioned. No princess carry, sadly, so you didn’t miss any fun. Managed to avoid awkward questions from my housemates too. Once you were here, I didn’t want to risk moving you. They probably think I’ve been keeping a sex slave up here the last two days.”

“Oh! Oh, your leg!” It came back to me in a rush of concern, a tightness in my chest. “You were bleeding so much. You-”

“Ahhh it’s fine, barely a scratch.”

Raine tugged down the waistband of her pajama bottoms and cocked one leg toward me. I swear, my eyes almost popped out of my head. I didn’t know where to look – the curve of her hip, the soft white of her underwear, the edge of her pubic mound, or the extensive bandage-and-gauze wound dressing wrapped around her lower thigh.

“W-w-what about, uh, um i-infection?” I completely failed to keep my cool.

“Once you were safe, I just rocked up to A&E at Sharrowford general, told them I’d been bitten by a strange dog. Cleaned it out and gave me a shot and some antibiotics. Muscle’s a bit stiff but the scar’ll look cool as hell.” She grinned, then caught the look on my face. “Heather?”

“M-maybe don’t flash your panties at me?” I blushed furiously. “I mean, do, yes, please, but warn me first?”

Raine laughed and pulled her pajama bottoms back up with a snap

of waistband elastic. “Oops. Bit too much stimulation, yeah?”

I shook my head and huffed. “Oh shut up.”

I couldn’t bring myself to voice the other obvious question, whether I had stripped and dressed myself in Raine’s old clothes or if she’d had to do it for me. My dignity already lay in tatters but I clung to what I could. She’d laundered my other stuff and my coat, and found my apartment key to fetch me a spare set, but I couldn’t summon the energy to get changed yet. Raine also presented me with Maisie’s tshirt, carefully sealed inside an extra-large food bag. I thanked her but asked her to put it away, I didn’t have the mental bandwidth for that right now.

“Where did you get the gun, really?” I asked, an effort to occupy my thoughts. “I thought it was supposed to be impossible to get handguns in England?”

Raine bit a chicken nugget in half and raised her eyebrows at me. “Serious question?”

“Yes.”

“It’s easy if you’ve got the right connections. I don’t anymore, but I did for a couple of years. Round when I met Eevee. I bought it off a dodgy man in a pub in Crawley, down in Sussex, for about two hundred quid.” She ate the rest of the nugget and shrugged. “Strictly speaking, Eevee bought it. Was her money. Or, uh, her dad’s. Haven’t thought about that in a while. Weird, huh?” She raised an eyebrow at me, then smirked. “Heather? See something you like?”

I realised I’d been staring.

“I’d never seen anybody do that before.” The truth behind my feelings slipped out.

“Do what?”

I opened my mouth, struggled to put it into words, tripped over the

few points of reference I had. “Fight. What you did, I ... ”

She was beautiful, muscle in motion like poetry. I clutched memories to me, of her swinging that length of metal pipe, her flushed face, grinning and loving every second of it. She gave me a terrible case of the shivers, and not in a bad way.

God help me, Raine was irresistible.

I felt in my chest, in my gut, and – forgive my crudity – in my crotch.

If I hadn't been wiped out and stuffing myself with food, if I wasn't three days unwashed and brain-strained by hyperdimensional math, if my chest didn't ache like a abused drum, I would have been powerless to resist the urge. I was in her house, her room, her bed, wearing her clothes. I had no courage, of course, couldn't have jumped her myself even if well and whole, but I doubt she would have given me much choice in the matter.

On some instinctive, animal level I knew her concern and care for my wretched state was the only reason she wasn't trying to screw my tiny little brains out of my head right now. I felt it in the way she touched me, the unadorned sensuality of the way she looked at me, the closeness of our bodies. Simple, blunt, universal things I'd never experienced before. Felt like my nerves were wired with electrical current. Only the weight of exhaustion and chest pains kept me from dissolving into a blushing, stuttering mess of sexual tension.

The fact she wasn't even trying made it so much worse.

Raine was nothing like the sort of girl I'd spent my teenage years assuming I'd be attracted to. She wasn't my 'type', though I'd barely had the psychological freedom to spend much time thinking about personal preferences. I'd always imagined a girl more like Evelyn, or at least how Evelyn had first seemed to me, fluffy and cuddly and tucked away with her books. Raine was the polar opposite of everything I'd ever expected of myself.

I was turned on by her violence; I finally faced that fact.

“Hey, everybody’s good at something,” Raine was saying, a sheepish grin on her face. “I just happen to be good at kicking arse and taking names.”

“You killed those people,” I said softly.

Raine sobered up in a heartbeat. Her grin died and she nodded at me. “They were going to hurt us, Heather, or hand us over to people who would. It was us or them.”

“I know that. I know that, rationally. But they must have had ... I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Parents, families, friends. They were people, and now they’re not. I don’t know how to feel about that.”

“It’s my responsibility,” Raine said. “I made the choice. Not you.”

I sighed and almost said that wasn’t helpful, but then I realised: Raine had done this before, hadn’t she? She’d been protecting Evelyn for years before she even met me.

“Would you have killed Twil?”

Raine grimaced and shrugged. “I don’t think I could. I mean, I could have a silver bullet made, but honestly? I ain’t sure even that would put her down.”

“In principle, would you?”

“If she was going to hurt you or Evee? Absolutely. No question.” Raine took a deep breath. “But it turns out she’s not. I was wrong about her. And hey, I wouldn’t have just bumped her off without being sure. I’m not a cold blooded murderer.”

I stared at her and thought very carefully. Stared at those big warm brown eyes and the soft curve of her cheekbones, the rich chestnut hair and the way her hips curved under her pajamas.

“Do I scare you?” Raine asked. I looked up and expected a touch of

swagger on her face, but instead found straight laced sincerity.

“No, no you don’t. That’s what worries me,” I said.

Raine raised her eyebrows in silent question.

“It ... I find it attractive,” I admitted. “Not the killing itself, I’m not that broken, and I don’t think you genuinely enjoy that part either?” I spoke those last few words slowly, haltingly, one eye fixed on Raine. She shook her head. “Right, well. I don’t know what it means. I never liked action girls or anything before. This is entirely your fault.”

Raine couldn’t keep a stupid grin off her face. She pantomimed a bow with a flourish of one hand. “A blame I am destined to shoulder.”

“Oh, shush.”

She straightened up again, most of the tension gone. “Look, seriously, Heather. I don’t want my, uh, talents to mess with your head. Beating up those guys, maybe I did kill a couple of them, but it was my responsibility. If that makes you uncomfortable, we can talk about it, I respect that. But it was not – and will not ever be – your fault. It’s mine.”

“Does it bother you?”

She shrugged. “Not really.”

Not for the first time, I wondered if Raine was a psychopath.

I also decided I didn’t care.

I never claimed to be smart.

conditions of absolute reality – 3.2

Raine had already decided I wasn't going home that day.

I nibbled at more chocolate cookie in a vain attempt to recapture normality, as much normality as one could feel after a frank discussion of terminal violence, but we weren't over the hump quite yet. An intimate question, an inevitable question, forced its way up and out of my mouth.

"Do you have a body count?"

Raine stopped mid-bite, lowered her own food, and spoke very softly. "You sure you wanna know?"

"Yes. I think. If you and I are going to be together, I can't pretend not to see the real you."

"Good point, fair enough. Well, not counting the two I may or may not have put down inside the loop?"

"For now, okay."

She nodded for a long moment, sober and calm.

"Three and a half."

"Three and ... ?" Relief and horror fought in my chest: Raine had only killed three people. Also, *Raine had killed three people*. "Half?"

"The one Evee and I did together. Shared responsibility. Not my place to talk about that."

"O-oh."

"I can tell you all about the others though, if you really wanna hear." Raine broke into an awkward grin. "Not exactly what I imagined for pillow talk with the cutest girl I've ever wrangled in my bed, though."

I blushed, despite the topic. My first time in another girl's bed – except for Maisie's – and we were discussing homicide instead of bonking like rabbits.

"At least ... the first?"

"Ahhh, that was the messiest one." Raine leaned back on her hands and relaxed. "Happened a few days after I ran away from home, weeks before I met Eevee. I was outside a train station, some half empty town in the London commuter belt." She pointed at the big map of the UK over her desk, with the highlights and thumbtacks. "S'up there somewhere, but one of the few places I don't remember the name. It was night, I was alone, looking for somewhere to kip, and this guy just attacked me. Grabbed me from behind. I probably looked like an easy target, fourteen year old girl wandering about by herself at night."

"Oh, Raine."

"S'fine. Didn't bother me. Didn't even really scare me, he never had a chance. I knocked his brains out with a spanner I'd been carrying in my pocket, just in case. Left him there on the pavement, thought he was unconscious. Next day the corpse was in the news. Oops."

"That- that definitely does sound like legitimate self-defence." I nodded, felt my heart go out to her, to that fourteen year old Raine alone on a dark street.

But sympathy smuggled danger through my better sensibilities. Raine liked me, I wanted her; of course I was going to accept her justifications.

It was self-defence though, right?

"They've all been self-defence," she said. "That first one for me, the

other two for Evee. Those were later on, after we got thick as thieves, part of the power struggle after her mother's death."

"Bet that's quite a story."

"Yeah, and maybe one for another day. I think you've had enough excitement for the moment. You need food, rest, and probably a back rub."

"Raine, why did you run away from home?"

She shrugged. "Parents."

We ate for a while and I finally let talk turn to inconsequential matters. Raine sat cross-legged opposite me as I propped pillows behind my back, to take the edge off the lingering full-body ache.

I asked about the posters on her bedroom walls. Raine acted all mock-embarrassed and apologetic about the video game pinup girls, but I honestly thought they didn't look too bad, except for the huge boobs. She told me about the thumbtacks and highlights on the map of the UK, a visual history of everywhere she'd been. The line snaked from a Suffolk town to meander through Essex and Kent, then snapped into the heart of London before swooping down across Surrey and into Sussex. Pins clustered around a post-it note which read 'Here be Dragons' – the Saye estate, Evelyn's real home. Wild, unconnected excursions marked a couple of far-flung spots – Cumbria, Devon, neither of them good times according to Raine. The main route jumped halfway up the length of England – one long train journey, apparently – and finally settled in Sharrowford.

"What about you?" Raine nodded me toward the map. "Where have you been? Wanna draw your history up on there?"

I sighed and raised my eyebrows at her to cover for the small lump in my throat. "Mine would be very sparse. I've only ever lived in three places, and one of those was a children's mental hospital. You know that by now."

"Everybody's gotta start somewhere." Raine stood up and

rummaged around on her desk. She held up a fist of highlighter pens, yellow and blue and green. "Pick a colour."

"I'd really rather not."

"Go on, pick a colour, you have to. We can fill in the rest of the map, as much as you like. Got a whole lifetime to do it in."

My sceptical frown carried little conviction. That was one of the sweetest things anybody had ever said to me. For years I'd not really expected to reach thirty, let alone plan a future.

A future alone, without my other half, without Maisie. Now I'd been awake for a few hours, my mind bent inexorably toward her once more.

Raine climbed onto her desk chair and slapped the map with one hand. "Right, 'fess up, where do you wanna go?"

I blinked at her, certain I'd heard those words before, recently: "Where do you want to go?" Who had said that to me?

"Heather? Come on, don't just gape at me."

"Uh- careful, don't fall."

"Me, fall?" Raine cracked a grin and planted a foot on the chair's backrest. She shifted her weight, rocked the chair so far that my heart tightened in my chest.

"Raine!"

She winked at me, then landed the chair safely on four legs once more. "Heather, I'm dead serious. I can take you anywhere you want."

"No, you can't. You have responsibilities."

Raine cleared her throat. "I mean, in the future. Come on, anywhere you like, what do you wanna see?"

“ ... castles.”

“Castles?”

“And Cathedrals.”

“*Castles?*”

Raine was blissfully unaware of the Pandora’s box she’d opened by pressing that question. Over the better part of the next hour I regaled her with a long, winding list of all the most beautiful castles I wanted to visit, from little islet keeps in Scotland to the well-known London tourist traps of The Tower and Westminster, to the great sprawling monster castles in Eastern Europe that I could never hope to scrape together enough money to see.

She lugged her laptop over to the bed and looked up each one as I went, our heads close together as we peered at stonework I’d admired for years. Every now and again Raine reached over and squeezed my thigh or rubbed my knee, and I did my best to concentrate on what I was saying.

Somewhere along the way, she made the fatal mistake of getting me started on architecture.

“I mean, that looks plenty gothic to me. Look at those towers.”

I huffed and shook my head. “Gothic is a specific style, not just a feeling. Go back to the previous page. Yes, that, that’s Gothic. The other one was just a shell keep, that’s a ... R-Raine?”

A twinkle had entered her eye, a subtle smile on her lips.

“Go on!” she said. “This is the kinda Heather lore I crave.”

I tutted and blushed and managed to forge on into the differences between early Norman castles and Concentric designs. Raine nodded along, apparently fascinated by my amateur flailing. My right hand kept creeping up to rub at my sternum, the ache inside

suppressed only briefly by talking.

“Good job distracting me, by the way,” I said.

“Ah, am I that obvious?”

“A little. I needed it, I guess. Better to talk about castles than ... well. Everything yesterday. Uh, two days ago.” I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. Lost time was biting hard.

“Everybody’s gotta decompress sometime. I think we earned it.”

“What happened, Raine? In that loop, what was that all about? Are we supposed to ... run? Hide? What do we do now?”

“What do we do now?” Raine cracked a grin. “I think video games are in order, and there’s a Chinese takeaway place one street over, opens at five. If you feel like some fresh air and you’re well enough for a little walk, then we could pop down there together, or I could just call in delivery. I think we’ve got a menu downstairs in a kitchen drawer somewhere.”

I sighed, impressed by her gall but not her angle. “That’s not what I meant.”

Raine laughed in defeat. “I know, I know, but can’t we just take one day off? You need it, you’ve earned a break, we can think about serious stuff tomorrow.”

“What if we don’t have time for that? What if they’re looking for us now?”

“They’re not. Evee’s dealing with it.”

“She is?”

“Really really.” Raine wet her lips and let out a little sigh. “Trust me, she’s gone off on one, if you know what I mean. She’s taken this personally, big time. Whoever they were, Sharrowford Cult or not, Evee’s giving them much bigger fish to fry right now. In fact, uh, we

should totally go check on her tomorrow, make sure she's not burning her fingertips too badly."

"Mm." That worried me too. What I'd seen of Evelyn's track record with magic was unfortunately terrible.

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll meet up with Eevee. I don't want to risk anything happening to you while you're still feeling so rough. We're perfectly safe here, I promise."

I felt a fragile smile peek through. "Okay, okay. I guess I'm still frightened."

"Hey, nothing wrong with that. I was scared too."

"I even dreamed about one of them. One of the cultists, I mean."

"Oh yeah?" Raine stretched her legs out and hooked one of her ankles over mine.

"Briefly, before I woke up. I think it was about the girl in the skull mask. Do you remember her too?"

"Yeah, that was weird, wasn't it? I gave Eevee descriptions of all of them over the phone, best I could, but she didn't recognise any. That girl could have been anybody." Raine chewed her way slowly through a cookie as she spoke. "Heather? Was it a bad dream?"

"Hm?" I looked up, realised I'd been frowning to myself. "Oh, no. She didn't have much to say, I think. I don't really recall the details, it's all slipped away ... "

"I'll take your mind off your dreams."

"What?"

Raine cleared her throat and wiped the smirk off her face. "I think you should stay here tonight. Take it easy. Rest up. Have some nice food. Nobody's getting through me. Tomorrow, we can get back to some kind of normal routine-

“Oh! I’ve missed class.” The bottom dropped out of my stomach and I put a hand to my mouth. “Oh, God. Oh.”

“It’ll be fine.” Raine laughed and raised her hands. “You were ill, I was looking after you. Don’t sweat it. Damn, Heather, people miss class all the time, and with much crappier excuses than yours.”

“If you say so.” I had sudden visions of disappointed professors. There was little worse than the disapproval of those you looked up to intellectually.

“Don’t mind another night in my bed, do you?” Raine cracked a grin.

That snapped me back to the present, back to sharing a bedroom with the girl I’d been crushing on hard for weeks now, the girl I’d made out with two days ago. I opened my mouth but no words came out. Raine raised her eyebrows. I swallowed and forced myself to take a nice deep breath.

Maybe serious magic nonsense could wait a day.

“Please tell me this house has a shower.”

“Sure does. You wanna ... ?” Raine gestured between me and her.

I blushed heavily. Embarrassment beat temptation. “Raine, I’m filthy, I stink like a pig. I-I just need to shower ... thank you for the offer. Just shower.”

The rest of the day was a gift. I half-expected the spirit life to show up and ruin everything, creeping down the corridor or lurking in the bathroom, but apparently my message earlier had gotten through to them. I caught sight of a few in the street, but oddly enough they left the house alone.

I showered and changed into the spare clothes Raine had fetched from my flat. She took me downstairs to the dilapidated sitting room, where threadbare sofas squatted before a game console

hooked up to a stolen telly, where I spent a very pleasant few hours curled up on the sofa, a blanket around my shoulders, while Raine sat cross-legged on the floor so she could show me a video game she was playing. Something about alchemists. The characters were all cute girls, so I wasn't entirely out of my depth, but there was a lot of dialogue and running about. I barely paid attention, more intent on Raine's reactions, delighted to be shown something she enjoyed.

And intent on the house.

The place was pretty run down, and not in a charming way like Evelyn's house. Badly scuffed door frames and thin partition walls, ancient floral wallpaper peeling and cracked, carpets worn down to almost nothing. Clean, but poorly maintained.

"So, where are we exactly? I didn't recognise the street when I looked outside."

Raine glanced up from the game. "I'd be worried if you did. We're off Dereham Road."

I frowned and pursed my lips, cleared my throat gently. "I don't actually know where that is."

"Past the south end of the student quarter."

"... oh, next to the council estate, yes?"

"Ex-council estate," Raine said as she clicked through the game menus. "Wouldn't be so bad if not for the ex part. It's not like, stab-happy land out there, but it's not great either."

"Oh."

"But hey, you can't beat free."

"... free?" I blinked, lost.

"Zero rent."

“I ... don’t understand? Zero rent? How?”

Raine turned a grin on me, unaccountably smug. “It’s a student squat. Abandoned property. Bunch of us did the place up and put locks on the doors. You’re on stolen land, Heather. How’s that feel?”

Raine’s housemates turned up later in the evening, after darkness began to creep down the streets. I felt terribly self-conscious but none of them paid me much attention, or seemed to care that Raine was monopolising the television.

After Raine’s sneaky revelation about this house being a student squat, I expected druggies and drop-outs and dangerous people, the sort of people Raine could deflect with practised ease, but would put the wind up me like nothing else.

My prejudices ashamed me. Two of the other occupants turned out to be a pair of extremely flamboyant gay men – a couple? I asked Raine and she shrugged. The third was a tiny redhead law student who talked about vegan cooking and high-fived Raine when I was introduced as a ‘girlfriend’, and the fourth was the law student’s very tall boyfriend, who was studying environmental science. He hung out with us for an unexpected hour to discuss the finer points of Raine’s video game.

Raine ordered the promised Chinese food and we sat around on the sofas and old chairs, eating straight out of the plastic takeaway boxes. I had to use a fork like a normal person but Raine showed off with a pair of chopsticks.

It all felt so different, to my life. Normal.

I could almost imagine the events of two days ago hadn’t happened. Almost convince myself, for the span of one evening, that Maisie’s tshirt was not crammed into a bag in my coat pocket.

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Night came, and so did the inevitable.

I'd started to nod off in the sitting room, so Raine had pressed a fresh toothbrush into my hand and steered me upstairs to the bathroom. She'd asked if I wanted a change of pajamas and I'd said no, I'd only showered a few hours ago. I felt clean enough, though very groggy and slow, the ache in my chest still sending its slow throb through my diaphragm with every breath. Raine had excused herself and left me to finish up. I flushed the toilet, washed my hands, and made my way back to Raine's bedroom.

She was waiting for me half under the bedcovers with the lights off, on her side, the sheets turned down to invite me in.

Thankfully, she was still dressed. Otherwise I would have died right there.

"Oh, oh Raine no, I don't t-think I can handle that. I-I just- I just- I don't know if I- if I-" I stammered and swallowed, red as a tomato, hands out as if to ward her off.

Raine laughed and sat up. "Woah, Heather, Heather, slow down, slow down. It's fine, it's cool, it's just me. It's just getting in bed together." She held out a hand. "I don't bite, I promise."

I let out a huge breath and managed to shut the door properly, my hands clammy and shaking, plunging us into the comfortable shadows. I stepped closer but I absolutely could not take Raine's hand. Part of me wanted to. Part of me wanted to do a comedy dive into the bed and shove my face into her chest, but that part of me was very small and easily vetoed, by the executive council of sensible Heather, repressed Heather, and nervous Heather.

"Raine, I- uh ... I don't know." I had no idea what to do with my hands, wringing my fingers together. "I don't know. We- we barely- we've barely been properly together for three days. I've been unconscious for most of that time. I- ... "

To my surprise, Raine stopped laughing. She nodded and sat up

properly, knees tenting the covers. "Heather, I am inviting you to cuddle in bed. Nothing more."

"It's your bed! With you! We haven't even ... even ... "

"Even what?"

"I don't know. Isn't there supposed to be some step between kissing and ... and sharing a bed?"

"Maybe. Does it matter?"

I didn't know. My mouth was dry and my heart was fluttering like an escaped bird. I shrugged.

"We don't have to take each traditional step one by one," Raine said. "There's no proper order. Do what feels good with each other. If you want to come cuddle, come cuddle. Otherwise, I can sleep on floor again, I really don't mind doing that."

"Just ... just cuddling?"

"I promise." Raine's smile crept back. "I'm not going to rub you off under the covers unless you very specifically ask for it."

"Raine!" I blushed harder than I'd thought possible, could have sworn steam shot from my ears. She laughed again and held up both hands.

"My hands stay above your waist," she said.

I was shaking, my knees ready to give way. I was certain this kind of stress was not good for me after breaking my brain with hyperdimensional math, but my goodness did I want this.

"Okay," I whispered.

Tentative, my hands freezing cold and my heart in my throat, I slipped into bed next to Raine, on my side, sliding my legs down into the warm cocoon of the covers until our bare feet found each

other. Raine tucked an ankle between mine, pulled the covers over our shoulders, and wrapped an arm around my waist. She purred and shifted her entire body against me, close, soft. I shivered at the feeling of her breath on my neck and her hand on my stomach.

This was not exactly relaxing.

“Good, huh?” she murmured.

“Very,” I managed.

Minutes later – a few or two dozen, warm and together – Raine’s breathing had softened, quietened.

“Are you awake?” I whispered into the warm darkness.

“Mmhmm.”

“Maybe ... maybe do that thing you said.” My chest tightened up. Breathless. Heart racing.

“Hmm? Thing I said?”

I would have rolled my eyes in exasperation if we’d been facing each other. My throat almost closed up on the words. “The thing you said you wouldn’t do unless I specifically asked for it.”

A long, long pause. Raine’s hand moved against my stomach.

“You sure?” she purred.

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“ ... so then the bear exploded! It just keeled over and boom! Blood and guts, everywhere, all up the walls, on the ceiling, the silly little benches, the podium thing, everything. Isn’t that amazing?!”

Lozzie rocked back in her chair, howling with laughter and kicking

her legs in the air. She was laughing so hard she started to cry. I was laughing too, giggling with a hand over my mouth. Her story was just so funny, so ridiculous, I couldn't believe it had really happened to her. I-

I stopped laughing

Another dream.

Lucidity washed over me like a wave of Arctic seawater, dousing me with sudden sober clarity. A heartbeat passed and I couldn't remember the story Lozzie had been telling, couldn't remember how we'd gotten here, couldn't remember a thing.

Lozzie wiped tears of laughter off her mushroom pale, elfin face. I stared for another heartbeat, then turned, and saw.

A wave of vertigo punched the breath from my lungs. I would have fallen over, if I hadn't been sat down nice and safe in this ancient wooden armchair.

We sat atop the battlements of a truly titanic castle. Snow-capped mountains to awe any romantic reared up on either side of us, the castle itself wedged into the valley between, walls marching away in giant stone blocks to meet the mountainsides. Towers rose in solid, square vaults to our rear, stone and painted wood, wind-whipped by freezing air and linked by covered walkways. Distant figures passed here and there, some armoured in strange uniforms. I heard the crack of leather wings, distant and heavy, the bellow of creatures that might live in a place like this. Snow whirled in the valley beyond, coating a landscape hundreds of feet below.

Lozzie and I sheltered under a stonework overhang held up by pillars, sat on chairs and bundled up in comfy layers and huge fur hoods. Between us lay a small but merry fire burning in a grate, next to a pitcher of dark liquid and two glasses.

Tears welled in my eyes. It was the most beautiful place I had ever seen.

"Is this a real place?" I whispered.

"Yeah, of course it is." Lozzie smiled at me in the afterglow of her laughter. "What did you think it was?"

"Isn't this a dream?" I turned to her, barely able to tear my eyes away from the castle which surrounded us.

"Duh." She rolled her eyes. "But it's gotta be a real place, right? Belo-whatsit. I forget what it's called. Who cares! You love castles, right?"

"I do. I-" My blood froze, all my lovestruck awe turned to venom in an instant. "Wait. How do you know that? Were you listening? Were you spying on us, on me and Raine?"

"You told me! You told me all about it. We were having so much fun, don't get moody now. Anyway, I wasn't finished. So the bear is dead, right, and the priest turns to me and-"

"I'm not going to remember this, am I?" I muttered to myself and ran a mittened hand over my face. "It's a dream, of course you know I love castles, you're a dream."

"What? ... Heather?" Lozzie looked crestfallen. "What do you mean, you won't remember it?"

I stood up from the chair and cast about. "Of course dreams aren't real," I snapped, to myself, not Lozzie. "You're schizophrenic, Heather, you-"

I slammed to a halt. I wasn't crazy, not anymore. I blinked and swallowed and reminded myself of that, hard as I could, reminded myself of the last few weeks of my life, of Raine and Evelyn and Maisie and magic and demons.

Lozzie stood up too, almost bouncing to her feet, face worried and panicky. "Heather, Heather don't go again, we were having so much fun! Please!"

I screwed my eyes shut, held them hard, clamped down and tensed every muscle and grit my teeth.

And woke up.

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Darkness – but not silence, and not cold. I lay in Raine’s arms, on the edge of awareness, listening to her breathing. Another bad dream? The details drifted away.

Raine shifted against me and murmured in her sleep. My goodness, this did feel good. I still ached a little, in new and interesting ways.

Closed my eyes, went back to sleep.

Maybe I’d dream about castles.

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We both had class the next morning. Raine decided it was best we try to have a normal day before we visited Evelyn.

How could anything ever be normal again?

“Heather? What are you grinning about?”

“Nothing, nothing! Just ... I feel good.”

Goofy smiles kept sneaking onto my face all morning, as we woke up and ate breakfast and got dressed. I had sex last night, with a girl! I felt like a dopey teenager. I wanted to do it again.

From the moment I woke up in Raine’s arms the whole world felt different – and yet also the same. Raine and I shared constant touches, now imbued with secret meaning: the way she steadied me

when I struggled out of my socks, the hesitant way I put my hand to her elbow, the gentle scratch of her fingers through my hair.

She got changed in front of me; I nearly lost my mind, hid behind my hands and peered out through my fingers, blushing terribly – then marvelling over her.

“You have abs.”

“Sure do,” Raine said. “Didn’t you feel them last night?”

“I wasn’t really paying much attention to your *stomach*.”

“Wanna touch?”

I thought I was going to have actual heart palpitations. I screwed up my courage and did what I must. I had the most unaccountable, uncouth urge to honk her boobs.

“I-I’m going to blow a gasket, Raine. Please, please, put some clothes on.”

Raine was the most smug I’d ever seen her. She relented and finished getting dressed while I swung my feet back and forth on her bed.

“Did that-” I stopped, afraid of sounding silly.

“Hm?”

“ ... did that count as having sex?”

Raine raised an amused, puzzled eyebrow at me. “What else would it be?”

“I-I don’t know.” Another goofy grin took over my face and I had to hide it behind my sleeve.

Happy did not last the length of the road.

My own clothes seemed insufficient after last night, like squeezing back into shed skin. I didn't say as much to Raine, concerned she might take that sentiment a little too seriously – but she saw the hesitation in my eyes as I picked up my own jumper. She offered me one of her polo necks, ever so slightly too large for me, and I felt the sweetest comfort as I pulled it on over my head and snuggled my face against her scent in the fabric. Swapping clothes carried a strange, unbounded intimacy I'd never thought possible before. I was wearing Raine's things, in public.

We left the house together and once again I balked at the condition of the street: large untreated potholes and discarded cigarette ends, moss between the pavement slabs and empty beer cans in the gutter. The quiet of early morning rendered this place as placid as a wilderness.

Except for the spirit life.

As soon as we'd stepped from the front door and down the stubby little garden path – not much of a garden, scraggly untended weeds – twisted creatures had begun peering around corners and over brick walls, staring at me. I avoided eye contact with the tree-legged thing leaning over the opposite row of houses, ignored the trio of headless armless women floating in the next-door garden, turned my face away from the ape-like raw-red hooting ghouls gathering at the end of the road.

Raine must have seen the look on my face. "You holding up okay? We don't have to walk if you're not feeling up to it."

"I'm fine, it's not the ache." I shook my head, one hand drifting unconsciously to my sternum. "How would we not walk, anyway?"

Raine gestured to one of the beaten-up old cars parked by the side of the road.

I frowned at her. "You're suggesting stealing a car?"

"What?" She smirked and laughed. "No, what do you take me for? That's mine."

“Oh,” I managed, distracted by a clutch of pneuma-somatic tentacles waving from a nearby garden. “I didn’t know you could drive.”

“We can, if-”

“No. I need to walk.”

I would not be intimidated.

The spirit life did at least keep a respectable distance, as Raine and I walked hand-in-hand along the route to campus. The Fractal still worked. But apparently now I was the focus of utter fascination, in a way I had not been for almost a decade. All manner of unspeakable things paused and turned to watch us pass.

A few broke off from their ineffable routines, to follow.

“Heather?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” I wasn’t. I was seething with growing frustration, my earlier happiness turning to lead in my stomach.

“It’s the ghoolies, isn’t it?”

“ ... yes. Since ... since I spoke to that spirit on the roundabout, when we chased the Messenger, they’ve been ... I don’t know. More curious than before. There’s a small crowd following us. Following me.”

I whispered the words, afraid any random passer-by would think me mad. Likely nobody cared. Not about me or Raine, or the fact we were holding hands, and certainly not whatever I muttered under my breath, but I couldn’t shake that decade-old injunction to not appear like a madwoman.

Raine stopped and looked over her shoulder, as if she could see them too.

“Off with you,” she said out loud.

“Raine!” I hissed.

She winked at me. “It’s the only way they’ll learn.”

“They won’t listen to- oh, for goodness sake.” I grit my teeth and stopped halfway down Barner’s street, between an Indian grocer’s and a shuttered hardware store. I turned around slowly.

My unwanted entourage had grown to five strong.

None of the really big ones. I wondered if that was related to mobility, or perhaps level of intelligence, then reminded myself they weren’t even biological. They didn’t have brains. Or did they? I knew nothing about pneuma-somatic life, how they worked, how they thought, what they were for. Evelyn didn’t know, so what chance did I have?

Two wolf-like things with lizard hindquarters and shaggy snouts formed the core, flanked by a big lumbering anteater-analogue made of crystal and nails. In the rear lurked a floating gas-bag, like a jellyfish, trailing venomous looking tentacles in a rainbow of sickly colours.

They had a leader, up front.

She – I instantly thought of it as a *she*, despite the absence of visible breasts or hips – was slender and poised like a dancer, humanoid figure cast in pitch-black flesh made from slick protoplasmic tar, bubbling and roiling, faintly luminous. A mass of thick tentacles rose from her back, waving in the air, tipped with pincers and stingers, sucking orifices and coiling fingers.

She had no facial features except for huge black eyes. Deep-sea fish eyes.

I squeezed Raine’s hand and fought to stare back.

“Heather?”

“Is there anybody around?” I hissed. Raine glanced up and down the street.

“Couple of blokes down the road. Not close enough to give a toss.”

I summoned every ounce of acting power I had, not much. Tilted my chin up, like Evelyn in her worst – or best – moments. Slid one foot out, widened my stance. Straightened my back, attempted to channel Raine’s confidence via sexual osmosis, as imperious as I could.

“Leave me alone.” I raised my voice. “Tell your friends to do the same.”

It worked. The spirit life dispersed. The wolf-things loped away under the pressure of my disapproval, while the gas-bag jellyfish just dissolved into thin air. The anteater monster lumbered away and slumped against a nearby traffic bollard. The Leader stared longer than her fellows, with those pelagic eyes, then seemed to incline her head and slink back off the way she’d came.

I breathed out and almost fell down, my knees shaking. Raine rubbed my back and asked if they were gone.

We went to class.

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When her own seminar was finished, Raine waited for me outside two separate lecture halls for most of the morning, walking me between them, eating overcooked chips together in the too-bright, too-clean campus canteen. I made my apologies to bored professors for missing classes. They didn’t care. The university knew my medical history.

We went to see Evelyn, and my entourage returned.

Not the same spirits as before. Stilt-stalking watchers and pustulant bears and skittering balls of chitin, a crowd behind Raine and I as we took the route to Evelyn's house. I kept my backward glances to a minimum, hid my growing nerves and my bitter, biting frustration.

"They're back, aren't they?" Raine murmured softly.

"... you can tell?" I sighed. "I'm sorry, I wanted to relax with you. I felt so good this morning, best in years. I'm sorry."

"Hey, Heather, it's not your fault. Why not wave the warding sign at them?"

"I-I don't know, Eevee told me to keep it covered and I-"

Raine's mobile phone rang and she fished it out of her jacket pocket. "Huh, speak of the devil." She answered the call. "Hey Eevee, we're almost there."

I sneaked a backward glance.

The Leader was back. She of the many tentacles and the roiling black protoplasmic tar-flesh. Staring at me. A mouth slopped open in what on a human would be her chest. No teeth. No lips. Just a hole. It wavered and wobbled and began to form silent words.

"Uh, Raine?" I tugged at her hand.

"Heather? Wait a sec, Eevee, she's- yeah, yeah okay, bye." Raine killed the call and frowned down at me, concern written on her face. "Heather, uh, I don't really understand this, but Eevee- ... Heather, what's wrong?"

"Just walk faster." I did my best not to look back.

"Heather, they can't hurt you. Not with the warding sign on you. Not with me here."

"You can't even touch them," I hissed.

I looked back. The Tentacled woman had pulled ahead of the crowd, closing the distance between us. The mouth in her chest sucked and slapped, speaking at me.

“Quick, before we get to Evee’s,” Raine said. “She said to tell you to be careful about spiders. She wasn’t really very clear, but said you’d made her promise to warn you?”

“What?” I blinked at her, trying not to look behind us. “Oh, uh, r-right-”

The Tentacled Woman reached out toward me with one of those sucker-covered tentacles.

“Walk- walk faster,” I hissed.

“ ... we can run, if you like?” Raine said.

I shook my head, set my lips in a tight line. “No. No more running. I refuse to run.”

By the time we reached Evelyn’s front gate, I was panting and out of breath, the ache in my chest throbbing like a migraine in my diaphragm. Raine kept trying to get me to either slow down or run the rest of the way, and even offered to just pick me up and carry me. That last prospect was painfully tempting, but I would not run from this thing, or any other spirit, ever again.

I’d made no resolution, couldn’t pinpoint the moment my attitude had changed, surprised even myself.

Behind the apparently safe barrier of Evelyn’s low garden wall, bent over with my hands on my knees, I watched the Tentacled Woman walk right up to the boundary, staring at me and mouthing unwords from the dripping hole in her chest.

Other spirits clustered behind her, flapping pseudopods against the wall, yawning their drooling maws at me, snapping beaks shut on the air, until a crowd of pneuma-somatic life roiled and rioted.

I'd give them something worth seeing. Oh yes. Yes I would.

"Heather, woah, take a deep breath, okay?" Raine wedged her arm under my shoulders to help me stand straight. I nodded my thanks but didn't look away from the spirit, the leader, whatever on earth she was. "What is it? Heather, talk to me, tell me about it."

I told her. She followed my gaze.

"And what's it doing?" she asked.

"Waiting."

"Let's go inside, we can get Evee to-"

I pushed away from Raine, gently peeled myself off her and forced my spine straight. I walked back down the garden path. I'd like to say I walked right up to within arm's reach, but I didn't. I stopped a nice safe distance away from the Tentacled Woman and my crowd of abhorrent admirers. Raine shadowed me the whole way, ready to catch me if my weakened knees gave out.

I rolled up my left sleeve and held out the Fractal.

The crowd recoiled as one. The Tentacled Woman backed up a step. The mouth in her chest continued flapping.

"Shut up!" I snapped.

The mouth stopped.

I took a deep breath, teetering on the verge of hysteria. Hadn't wanted to snap like that, needed to be calm, contained, careful.

"Don't follow me," I said, my voice rising. Anybody who saw me could go file a complaint. "Don't watch me. Don't haunt me. Leave me alone. Or I shall begin to consider ways to hurt you." I paused, had to ignore the pounding of my heart. "I don't know if I can teleport you Outside, but I will find a way to try. I got laid! Go

away!”

With Raine’s hand on my shoulder and the brooding hulk of Evelyn’s house at my back, standing in the weak grey autumn sunlight dappling the street, I waited as the crowd of pneumatic life finally got the message. They loped and flopped and skittered and hurried away, scattering wide across the street and into the shadows and down the alleyways. I told myself I was defiant and powerful, protected and untouchable, but I just felt scared and confused.

The Tentacled Woman did not leave. She crossed to the far side of the road and sat down.

If she’d been a human, I’d have sworn she was sulking.

“Good enough,” I muttered. “They’re gone.”

Raine smirked. “You got laid, huh? That’s your big scary anti-demon weapon?”

I turned a mortified blush to Raine. “I’m sorry, I just- it slipped out- it seemed- It made sense in the moment.”

“Done wonders for your self-confidence.”

I sighed. “I think I need a hug.”

conditions of absolute reality – 3.3

Monsters. Monsters everywhere. Everywhere I turned, more monsters. I'd spent ten years seeing monsters around every corner and lurking in every shadow, convinced they weren't real, trying to unsee them, forget them, ignore them. Now I'd accepted they were real, and I seemed to be getting to know them a lot more intimately than I'd ever wanted. In my dreams, in the street – in my bed too, I suspected, a very different kind of monster.

Another waited for us in Evelyn's house.

At least this one was cute.

Raine helped me to the door and unlocked it without bothering to knock. The ache throbbed tight in my chest, like the worst case of heartburn in the world. A wave of comfortable indoor heat greeted us. Raine shut the door as I stepped gingerly out of my shoes. Floorboards creaked from deeper in the house, followed by the clack of a chair and the muffled but unmistakable sound of Evelyn's voice.

I had to steady myself against the wall and rub my sternum, massage the ache down. With adrenaline draining away I realised once more how brain-math afterglow and two days of sleepwalking had taken a lot out of me, left me weak and shaky. I needed to sit down. I wanted a nap.

"Evee, it's us," Raine called as she walked across the front room. She stepped over the stain on the floorboards, from where she'd killed the Bone-thing. I wondered if it would ever fade.

A woman stepped primly and smartly through the kitchen doorway.

Not Evelyn.

Blue.

Skin and shoulder-length hair shaded in the most subtle blue of glacial ice. Perfect skin, no expression, spine ramrod straight. Heels together, shoulders back, hands clasped daintily in front of her like a 19th-century maid. She was dressed in Evelyn's clothes, a thick soft pullover and long comfy skirt, huge army boots on her feet. Age impossible to guess, anywhere from fifteen to thirty.

Blank eyes; no pupil, no iris, no veins. Only milk-white sclera.

Despite the obvious artificiality, my first thought was how darned cuddly she looked. She filled out Evelyn's clothes very substantially.

Raine didn't agree. Her eyes widened in disbelief, muscles tensed, feet backpedaled.

"Hello?" I ventured.

"Evee!" Raine yelled at the top of her lungs. She reached into her jacket and drew the handgun.

"Raine! Oh my God."

I'd managed to briefly forget about that little nugget of illegality. Certainly didn't suspect she was carrying the thing. It looked so wrong and blunt in Raine's hands, weird stubby twist of black metal. She pointed it at the Blue Lady.

"Back up," Raine said.

No reaction. The Blue Lady stood stock-still and unresponsive, a servant awaiting orders.

"Back. Up."

"Stop shouting, you absolute bonehead," Evelyn called.

She thumped out of the kitchen doorway and into the front room;

Raine jerked the gun away and pointed it at the floor. Evelyn tapped the Blue Lady's leg with her walking stick and muttered 'shift yourself'. Words proved more powerful than Raine's pistol; the Blue Lady sidestepped from Evelyn's path.

"Put that nonsense away before you blow a hole in the floorboards." Evelyn frowned at the gun. For me, her expression softened. "Heather, I'm so glad to see you up and about. I never doubted your constitution for a moment."

"Uh ... thank you? Eevee, who is this?"

"This?" Evelyn side-eyed the Blue Lady, then snapped at Raine. "Close your mouth, you look gormless."

Raine shook her head in disbelief and puffed out an unimpressed laugh. "Eevee, have you lost your mind? Did I step into backwards universe this morning?"

"Apparently. You seem to think that spud gun would make a blind bit of difference. Put it away. Makes me nervous, you'll do one of us an injury."

"I never took the safety off. It was a ... bluff ... " Raine frowned hard at the Blue Lady, as if expecting sudden movement, but then she sighed and shrugged and tucked the pistol back into her jacket. "I hope I'm not gonna have to do more than bluff."

Evelyn walked over to peer at my face. Dark bags ringed her bloodshot eyes. "You do look pretty rosy-cheeked. I'm going to assume that's a good sign?"

"Oh, um, I think so? I-"

"Any lingering effects?"

"I do feel quite fragile. My chest aches more than before ... Eevee, who is this?" I opened a hand toward the Blue Lady. Evelyn used the tip of her walking stick to poke our discarded shoes into a neater position by the front door.

The Blue Lady stood stock still, unmoved by all.

Raine put hands on her hips. "Evee-"

"What? Well, what, Raine? I needed help, didn't I? You've been busy – rightfully," Evelyn added an aside nod to me. "I needed muscle, protection. I had to send something out there to figure out what those bastards are doing to my city. In my back yard. What was I meant to do? Sit and wait for you, pretend everything was normal? Is that what you're going to tell me? The same sort of thing you've been feeding Heather?"

Raine blinked at her. "I didn't think you'd make a zombie though."

I cleared my throat. "When you two have quite finished, can one of you please explain who ... this ... *zombie*?" Exasperation crept in at the sides of my head and I let out a huge involuntary sigh. I met the Blue Lady's eyes – no small feat, eye contact with blank white. "You did not just say that word."

Raine winced. "Best not do that. Don't get its attention."

"Oh don't be ridiculous." Evelyn marched back over to the Blue Lady and pinched her cheek like she was a small child. Zero reaction. "If it was at all dangerous, we'd already be dead. You think I would make that sort of mistake? Your confidence in me is touching, Raine, thank you."

"It?" I echoed, faintly disgusted. "She looks like a human being to me."

"Believe me, it's an it," Raine said. "If I'm right about what I'm looking at here, Evee?"

"Oh, stop being so bloody dramatic," Evelyn said. "And no, it's not a zombie. Nothing so crude. Where on earth would I even get the corpse? Can you see me slipping into a morgue and dragging a body out? I'd end up on the evening news."

“Will you two stop pulling another Twil on me? Who-” I bit down and huffed out a sigh. “*What* is this woman?”

Raine smirked. “Pull a Twil?”

“Keeping important facts from me.”

“Over to you, Frankenstein’s daughter.” Raine deferred to Evelyn with a raised eyebrow.

“I used a mannequin,” Eevee said. She stared hard at Raine, as if daring defiance, then glanced at me. “It’s a demon, from Outside, bound in a shop window display dummy. I know what you want to say, Raine. I’m getting more like my mother every day.”

“Hey, no, never.” Raine’s voice softened, the same voice she used for me. “I’d never say that. You know that.”

Evelyn sighed and looked away, suddenly interested in the pile of old cardboard boxes along the edge of the front room.

A demon?

“Does she have a name?” I asked.

Raine opened her mouth, then paused and raised an eyebrow. “Does it? Eevee?”

“*Her*,” I insisted.

Evelyn frowned at both of us. “What?”

“Did you name it – her?” Raine caught the look in my eyes and corrected herself.

“W-what? No, of course not. Don’t be obscene.”

Raine laughed and raised her hands in surrender. “It’s not such a leap. You’ve made an anime character, Eevee. You even gave her blue hair.”

"I thought it was comforting, alright?" Evelyn stared at the floor and poked a box with the tip of her stick. "I have enough bad memories of these damned things without making them like my mother did, understand?"

"... you made an anime girl. I mean, no shame no blame. Whatever floats your boat."

"What? You think I'm going to sleep with the damned thing?"

Three days deprived of Raine, and Evelyn had made herself a new companion. Literally. A soft, feminine, cuddly companion, bound at her will. Guilt and embarrassment fought in my chest – second hand embarrassment on Evelyn's behalf, and guilt on my part for monopolising Raine's time and attention.

All through the escalating argument, the Blue Lady – the bound demon – hadn't moved a single muscle or blinked once, though she did appear to breathe, heavy chest rising and falling in slow rhythm. I peered at her, then stepped closer for a better look. She didn't seem anything like a mannequin.

Raine broke off. "Hold up, Heather, don't get too close to it."

"Your doubts really do wonders for my self-esteem, too," Evelyn carried right on. "Thank you for this constant stream of support. You ... I ... " Evelyn juddered to a halt along with Raine. Probably at the very unimpressed look on my face.

"So, she's a demon, an Outsider, whatever," I said. "Possessing a life-sized doll?"

"Yes, a very minor demon," Evelyn said. "The technical term for this thing is a *Gelus Praeministra*. The demon doesn't look like that in its natural state, it's bound and piloting the vessel at my command. It follows my orders, but it has some room for creative interpretation and problem solving. It's quite a feat, actually, perfecting this sort of work on dead wood or plastic."

“Gelus? Gelus. Or ... Praem. That’s a good enough name. Praem. Sounds a little French.” I shook my head, trying to assimilate all this.

Raine and Evelyn both spoke at once.

“You can’t give it a name-”

“Please don’t-”

I folded my arms and waited for the complaints to subside, spoke into the opening of silence which followed. “You cannot have something that looks like a person and treat it as an object. I refuse. Tends to be a rather bad idea? Tends to lead to treating other people like objects too? Bad things happen?” My other protest went unsaid: Evelyn didn’t need a doll, she needed friends.

Raine shrugged and nodded. “Fair enough. She’s got a point, Eevee. That is sort of unhealthy.”

“It’s not a person,” Evelyn said with a grimace. “It’s from Outside.”

“But you said it thinks, right?” I asked. “It ... you’ve enslaved this thing and-”

“It’s not slavery. I commend your sense of ethics, but it’s not slavery.”

“Was last time I checked.” Raine began to laugh, but the laugh died young. “Eevee ... it is, right?”

“This one wants to be here. I made sure.”

Raine’s expression froze.

“We made a bargain,” Evelyn said.

“Eevee-”

“You think I’d sign my soul away? I’m no idiot. I am a Saye, after

all, we know how to do these things. I made a specific, limited bargain. Cheap and easily fulfilled.”

“Feed me a cat,” Praem said.

We all stared at her – at it – at such an inhuman voice. High, whispering, icebound, like the rustling of snowflakes on winter wind. She stared straight ahead, hands folded in perfect poise.

“It’s winding us up,” Evelyn said. “Wait here.”

She stomped off into the kitchen and returned with an open plastic tub of supermarket strawberries. She fingered one out and held it up. “Hand.”

Praem raised one hand with mechanical precision, palm up. Evelyn gave her the strawberry. Praem paused, then very slowly and very carefully she placed the strawberry in her own mouth.

This was a wooden mannequin? I saw lips, teeth, a tongue – all tinted that same ice-blue – and she certainly seemed to relish the taste of strawberry, chewing with measured slowness until a visible bob of her throat indicated she was done.

“See?” Evelyn allowed herself a smug smile. “You try finding a demon that wants to eat strawberries. I think I’ve outdone myself.”

“Where did you get the mannequin from?” I asked. Evelyn gestured at a very big amazon delivery box flattened out by the door.

“Evee, that was ... crazy cute,” Raine said. “I’m still not convinced you aren’t sleeping with it-”

Evelyn made an angry grumbling noise.

“- but for real, there’s no way this thing is safe to have around.”

“Pity’s sake, see for yourself.”

Evelyn grabbed the hem of Praem’s sweater and hiked it up over a

soft human belly – a belly covered in looping, winding Arabic script which surrounded a magic circle, all drawn in marker pen. The circle contained a set of angular symbols painful to the eye. The doll, the demon, whatever she was, didn't react. I turned away, suffering terrible second hand embarrassment.

"The binding is perfect," Evelyn was saying. "Any interruption and it gets sent right back where it came from."

"I dunno. Don't these things get ... twitchy?" asked Raine.

"Yes, of course, when you use real flesh and live subjects. My mother's corpse-puppets had a much greater range of sensory input and expressive output, but she had far less control over them."

Raine laughed, humourless and dark. "I remember that part."

Evelyn tapped the side of Praem's head. "This is still just wood underneath the glamour. It's got barely a better sensory setup than a normal human. Slow speed of thought, too. My control is perfect. I wouldn't have made it otherwise."

"I-I'm sorry, Evee," I blurted out before I could stop myself. "I'm really sorry."

Evelyn looked blank. "What?"

I stumbled on, caught between mortified embarrassment and heart-aching sympathy. "I mean, this. You didn't have Raine, she was busy with me and you ... you made a friend ... I ... "

Evelyn blinked tired eyes at me, utterly lost. I couldn't have been more wrong. I trailed off and felt exceedingly small, muttered a tiny apology.

"That's not what this is about, Heather. Don't worry about me. I've got you, haven't I? We're friends.

"We are, yes, yes. Why- why make Praem at all? What ... "

To my surprise, Evelyn's lips creased in a knowing smile, back in her element.

"I've been busy."

Praem the demon-maid stayed on guard in the front room. We circled through the kitchen and the back of the house to the ex-drawing room where I'd spent an exhausted night asleep on the sofa. Seemed like only yesterday. Lost time ghosted on the edge of my consciousness. I barely felt coherent enough for this, even less so when Evelyn stopped short of the door to tell me a giant spring-loaded spider lurked inside.

"You made it very clear I am to warn you. I wish to honour that request."

"... do you think it'll jump out at me like the other one?"

"No, no I don't think so. Took six hours of shouting just to wrangle it down from the attic. Can't get the blasted thing to go back. I don't think it gives a damn what goes on around it. Might have gone senile."

"You moved it here on purpose?"

Evelyn shrugged.

"Giant spider?" Raine grinned.

"You won't be able to see it," Evelyn waved her away and hustled me into the ex-drawing room. "Just don't stand in the circle unless you want a nasty shock."

She'd turned the space into a war-room.

Both the sofas had been pushed back against the walls, the floor cleared for a half-full inflatable paddling pool and two magic circles drawn on huge sheets of stiff card. One circle was very complex and contained a sort of entry port on one side, corners weighed down with bricks. The other was only half-finished, attended by a detritus

of candles, a ritual knife, two bottles of strange powder and what looked like a human femur bone. I recognised Evelyn's books – both *Unbekannte Orte* and *Inprencibilis Vermis* – lying open on one of the sofas, copious notes scattered on the cushions.

The state of the far wall left no question as to what piece of magic took pride of place. Evelyn had mutilated the wall with a screwdriver, scored the outline of a doorway into the paint and plaster.

Surrounding the imaginary door in a fan shape, like a madhouse mandala, she'd covered the wall with magical symbols, bits of Latin, scraps of non-human language, interlocking magic circles, sprawling mathematical formulae, and a dozen other unclassifiable additions. All seemed to refer back to the blank space of the doorway.

I had to look away. My head swam.

A giant Spider-servitor was indeed clinging to the ceiling, wedged in a corner. Smaller than the one in the library basement, more dog-sized, it shared the same clustered head of crystalline eyes and body of hard black chitin, studded with heat-exchanger stacks, though this one was free from scars and old battle-damage. It seemed somehow distressed, legs drawn up tight at an awkward angle.

I suppose I'd have been distressed too if Evelyn had shouted at me for six hours.

"Poor thing," I muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Sorry."

Evelyn walked over to the table, gait unsteady. She put more weight on her withered leg than her prosthetic, and leaned heavily on her walking stick.

How many hours had she been awake?

Gone were the piles of books on the table, unceremoniously shuffled off into the corner under the spider. In their place, a huge ordinance survey map of Sharrowford lay unfolded on the table. A date printed in the corner proclaimed the map was about twenty years old, so Evelyn had pencilled in corrections and missing housing developments, but the real work she'd done on the map was in red highlighter pen.

Evelyn tapped the map. "That closed space you two walked into was not an isolated aberration."

City centre landmarks highlighted in red, linked by kinking lines that corresponded to no physical roads. Entire suburban streets circled and numbered, cross-referenced on a nearby pad full to bursting with scribbled notes. Odd twists and turns down Sharrowford's back alleyways, seedy estates, industrial wastelands, all traced with red highlighter, question marks, no entry signs. Red for danger. Red for blood.

The whole mass of map-work was crowned by a great question mark hovering over the south of the city.

"Why red?" I asked.

"Seemed appropriate, under the circumstances," Evelyn muttered.

"What are we looking at here?" Raine asked.

"I think I can take a guess," I said.

"It's a whole network." Evelyn jabbed at the map, at one of the spiderwebs of interconnected red highlighter.

"Of what?" asked Raine.

"I don't know. Extra-temporal, extra-dimensional spaces. I don't have the language for it. This is new, undocumented. It's a fucking nightmare, is what it is." Evelyn shrugged as her earlier gloss of smug satisfaction fell to exhaustion and disgust. "Portions of the

city copied into looping spaces. Buildings, streets, but imperfectly, out of different materials, and they lead somewhere deeper.” She tapped the huge question mark to the south. “I haven’t been able to get down there, not through the loops. They keep shutting me out, pinching routes off, shoving monsters in my way.”

“You’ve been investigating this alone?” Raine asked. “Going out, alone?”

Evelyn gave her the sort of withering stare which only comes with hard sleep deprivation. “Yes, after what happened to you two, I thought the best course of action was to wander around by myself and poke my head into magical rabbit traps.”

“Ah, uh.” Raine cleared her throat and smirked. “Sorry, sorry.”

How could Raine smirk, in front of this? I couldn’t look away. The map was a nightmare. A shadow-city.

“Of course I didn’t go out myself. What do you think the huge bloody scrying pool is for?” Evelyn waved a hand at the half-full paddling pool. “I’ve had the *Gelus Praeministra* remote sending.”

“Praem,” I corrected her softly, more to have a handhold to clutch than to insist on names.

Evelyn suppressed a tight huff. I left it at that, but already felt guilty.

“Is that what you were trying to use the Spider-servitor for?” I pointed into the corner, at the awkwardly cowering spider.

“Um ... yes. Sort of.”

Raine followed my finger. She looked at the corner, then down at the circle with the entry port on one side.

“I wouldn’t bother if I were you,” Evelyn said. Raine grinned and stepped into the circle, then furrowed her brow and squinted.

“He’s a bit ... fuzzy, isn’t he?” she said.

“It took me four hours of meditating just to see the outline. I told you not to bother.”

“Evee, why not just make a Servitor?” I asked. “Why make a ... Praem?”

Evelyn looked awkward, then sighed and shrugged. “I barely know where to start with Servitors. I can make one that would fall apart in a strong wind, but I needed something physical, mobile, capable of independent thought. I can’t even make that blasted spider move outside.”

“Hmm. That does make sense.”

“I started on ... on ‘Praem’ the minute after Raine called me, after you and her escaped. It- ... *she* can sense more than I can, and faster. Sent her to Willow House as soon as I got the first couple of strawberries down her. No trace. Nothing there. So I had her walk about.” Evelyn gestured at the map, traced some of the circled streets. “Imagine my bloody surprise. Lots of these lead nowhere, but some of them are linked into a greater whole, a warren that runs deeper than I’ve reached. Not all of them are properly concealed either. That car-park you two blundered into, chasing your sister’s message, that was one of them. You’re lucky you didn’t go any deeper, you may never have come back out. Likely there’s been an uptick in missing persons cases, homeless people vanishing, that sort of thing.”

“Is this ... ” I started, then trailed off, an idea tugging at the back of my mind. “Is ... I mean ... is this naturally occurring?”

“Absolutely not. This is the Sharrowford Cult’s doing. Didn’t Raine tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Yeah, tell her what?” Raine added, genuinely mystified.

“The woman who shot at Raine, we’ve seen her before.”

“Hey now,” said Raine. “I didn’t exactly get a good look at her. I was too busy duelling a giant zombie.”

“How many murderous psychopathic women with shaved heads do we know?” Evelyn asked. “Take a wild guess.”

“If the answer is more than one, I want out,” I said. I’d intended it as a joke, but my own dry swallow undermined any humour.

“Exactly,” said Evelyn. “We had trouble with the Cult when we moved to Sharrowford. Raine butchered some zombies, put a few other things down. The woman with the shaved head, she was there, as were some others. She’s the link. It’s the Cult.”

“So ... so w-what do we do?” I asked. My voice felt so small, out of my depth.

“I’ve started shutting down the entrances I can, closing them off or collapsing them, but some of the principles ... escape me. It’s like an excavated space behind the real Sharrowford, in the existing bedrock of Outside.” Evelyn gritted her teeth in disgust and anger as she stared down at the map, at the shadow city. “These people, these fucking *vermin* should not be *able* to do things like this. This is a major working, a huge project, the kind of thing a mage could spend a lifetime bringing to fruition, and they’ve slipped it under my nose in the space of months. I don’t even know how long. In *my* city.”

“Evee,” Raine said, a little too bright and loud. She stuck out her thumb and little finger, waggled them in the universal telephone gesture. “Did you ... ?”

“Yes, I called my father. No break-ins. Nobody’s been down there since us.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I blinked at Evelyn.

“Don’t worry about it, Heather, ancient history,” said Raine. That

earned her a miniature glare from Evelyn.

“She has a right, Raine, she’s as involved as either of us.” Evelyn turned to me. “Raine told me the thugs you met inside the loop had vests with the warding sign on.”

“Oh! Yes, the Fractal. But it wasn’t the Fractal.”

“I know. It wasn’t the warding sign, but it came from the same source. Which meant either somebody burglarised my childhood home and stole my mother’s ... legacy, or the Cult has done to some poor sod what my mother did to me.”

“Ah. Uh, okay.”

“I don’t know which is worse.” Evelyn shook her head. “That kind of magic, the kind on your left arm, it’s extremely stable and very useful. That’s the only way I can explain what they’ve achieved.”

A thought teased at the edge of my mind. What if the Cult had a person like me? A brain-math dimension-jumper, to dig out their shadow-city behind Sharrowford?

“Heather?”

I blinked, frozen verge of speaking. “Ah, s-sorry.”

Raine peered at my face. “You holding up okay, Heather? Wanna sit down? Hell, this is pretty heavy stuff, shall we go make some coffee, have a snack, take a break?”

“I’m ... fine.” I shook my head.

A person like me? Where had I gotten that idea?

Evelyn was working herself up again, staring down at the map with a darkness behind her eyes. “Bastards, utter bastards. Could have left us all well alone after you stumbled onto them in that underground car-park, but no, they decided to try their hands at assassination, bump me out of the way so they could complete this

insane work. Bit off more than they could chew when they met you though, didn't they?" She shot me an approving glance.

"I didn't do anything, Evee."

"Raine told me you stopped a bullet with your mind. That's not nothing."

"It mostly just hurt." I didn't want the approving glance. I didn't want to think about what I'd done with my mind.

"Well, now I've got them. All this has been going on right under my nose, like rats in the walls, but I've got them now. No more hiding, eh?" She spoke to the map, not to us.

I felt terminally out of my depth. I hadn't bargained on any of this. Evelyn was fighting the opening moves of a shadow war and Raine was treating it like an everyday occurrence. Terrifying people had tried to kill all of us; in the world I grew up in, that meant you called the police, probably? I'd never called the police for anything.

Raine was staring at the ceiling in thought, arms folded. She nodded to herself as Evelyn spoke, apparently arriving at a conclusion.

"Maybe we should leave Sharrowford for a week or two," she said.

"What?"

"Oh, maybe that's a good idea," I said – but they were off.

"You cannot be serious," Evelyn snapped at Raine.

"Well, we could skip town, or call your dad again, ask for help?"

Evelyn looked at Raine like she'd suggested we all join the circus. "So he can do what, come up here and cluck at me?"

"What's your suggestion then? Lay it out for me."

Evelyn jabbed her walking stick at the far wall, at the madhouse mandala and the fake doorway, the great unfinished work. “That. That is my suggestion. The more of their intrusions I shut down, the more I learn, and that is going to take me straight to the heart of whatever nonsense they’re building down there.” She tapped the big question mark on the map, over the south of the city.

“Straight to the source? Decapitation strike? Kill all their leadership and blow up their shit?”

“Exactly!”

“You and what army?”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes. Raine didn’t say a word, just fixed her with that genuine-question, zero-judgement look she’d deployed so accurately against me, used to batter down all my resistances.

It didn’t work the same way on Evelyn. She glared back.

Raine sighed. “I know what you’re thinking of doing.”

“You haven’t the faintest idea.”

“I can take an educated guess.” Raine nodded at the half-finished magic circle. “I don’t know the jazz voodoo half as well as you do, but even I can guess what that’s for.”

“You-”

“Disco gorilla or Mister teeth?” Raine asked. Evelyn shut her mouth and swallowed. “Come on, Eeve, gotta share your plans, even if they’re crazy. What are you gonna summon?”

“... *Haereticis decollatio*,” Evelyn muttered, guilty and averting her eyes.

Raine pulled a face. “The thing with the huge scissors? Damn.”

“Probably more than one.”

“Evee.”

“I don’t know what’s in there.” Evelyn gestured at the door again. “You don’t get it, this has to be shut down before it gets worse, before-”

“It’s too dangerous. You know that. You know I’m only trying to stop you from hurting your-”

“Oh, you want me to send you through, with your pop gun and swear words?”

And like that, the argument was off to the races. I sighed inside and stepped back from the table, out of the firing line as Evelyn snapped and shouted and stamped with her walking stick, as Raine laughed and shook her head and did, indeed, try to coddle, slowly losing her own steadfast temper.

“I’ll go make some coffee, shall I?”

Neither of them paid the slightest bit of attention as I left the room, even when I closed the door to keep their argument contained. I wandered back into Evelyn’s kitchen, into the dusky light of a Sharrowford afternoon falling through the window.

I could still hear them. I sighed and ran my hands over my face.

Too many things to think about, on top of listening to those two argue: the spirits, my magical coma, the loop, scary cult people, brain-math, Maisie.

Yes, that’s why I was here, who I was here for. My twin sister.

Well, the fact I’d slept with Raine did factor into my decisions too. And I did have a friendship with Evelyn, she was right. But I’d had enough of intervening in arguments, in wondering when those two were going to finally break at each other. Raine didn’t seem to need my support on this. They needed to work this one out for themselves.

True to my word, I did brew up some coffee, from the ancient tin of instant tucked away in the back of a cupboard. I reminded myself I must buy Evelyn some real stuff, if we're going to be friends. Boiling the kettle at least drowned out the noise of the shouting match for a minute – still raging back there, but now punctuated by short, brooding silences.

For the sake of peace and quiet, I took my mug of coffee into the front room. I half intended to go upstairs and browse the collection in the study, centre my mind with the help of Shakespeare and whoever else I might discover.

Praem stood right where we'd left her.

I stopped and looked at her. Really looked at her – at it? At her blue-ice complexion and all-white eyes and perfect proper prim poise.

“Uh, hello again.” I waved awkwardly.

No reply, of course.

“Praem,” I said. “That’s your name now. If you can understand what I’m saying?”

Silence.

“Do you have any idea how I can get those two to stop clawing at each other? It feels like herding cats.”

Praem did not have any suggestions, about that or any other matter.

I hadn't any time for a good look earlier, not with the hustle and bustle and Raine pulling a gun, but now I peered a little closer. As close as was polite. She did have doll-like ball-and-socket seams, under her chin and on her hands, but only when examined very carefully.

“I'm ... I'm going to poke your cheek, is that okay? Okay then.”

I reached up and pressed a fingertip gently against one cheek. Very soft, very smooth, very human. I pulled my hand back and muttered an apology.

My musings turned uncharitable. Praem was built so very voluptuously, with wide hips and a rather heavy chest. Had Evelyn used the word 'mannequin' to avoid other, more accurate connotations? I decided not to check the details on that amazon box.

"You know, those are really impressive," I said, staring at her chest and shaking my head. I caught myself, blushed and blinked and turned away, asked myself what the hell I was saying.

What had come over me? Was it because I'd lost my virginity last night, or because I wasn't treating this demon-possessed doll as a human being?

Odd to stand in front a person who doesn't react at all. An immature, horrible, weaselly little part of me wanted to hug it – her – give it a nice big squeeze, consequence free. The comfy clothes didn't help. I frowned and told myself off. She was a person, sort of. There was a thinking, sentient being in there. Which was neither human nor strictly alive.

My carnal reaction raised a far more important question.

"Is Evee a lesbian?" I asked out loud. Praem offered no opinion.

I knew Raine was. She'd proved that last night with her head between my thighs. A goofy smile worked it's way onto my face again.

But what about Evelyn?

I'd assumed not, after she'd assured me she wasn't into Raine. Perhaps subconsciously, I'd drawn a line between 'not into Raine' and 'not into girls', which raised some interesting avenues of inquiry about my own tastes, but Praem's appearance made me

reconsider.

Evee had made herself a soft, thick, motherly cuddle-doll. Motherly? Oh dear. On second thought, maybe I shouldn't think about this. That wasn't a depth I wished to plumb, not without permission and a dry-suit.

"Is she sleeping with you? Does she hug you?"

Praem did not reply.

"Suppose you only take orders from Evee, hmm?"

"Feed me."

I blinked in surprise and almost fell over.

Oh, but that *voice*. That was not a human voice, no fool could mistake it for one. She whispered in the rustle of ice crystals and the tickle of wind.

Two minutes later I held the tub of strawberries in front of Praem. I took one out, then paused and pricked up my ears, listening carefully to the sounds of the ongoing argument in the front room; Raine and Evelyn had stopped shouting but the house still murmured with a background of angry conversation.

"Alright, give me your hand."

Praem didn't move.

"You have to hold your hand out."

I asked myself what I was doing. Having fun? A bit of harmless play? I clamped down on that thought. Bad Heather. This wasn't harming anybody. She'd asked to be fed, she'd made the request.

"At least open your mouth. Hurry up."

Praem obeyed that one. She parted her lips with a soft click. I

frowned at her. Was she-? No, she couldn't possibly be. She was an Outsider. Not human.

I reached up and fed her the strawberry. Pushed it past her lips with a fingertip. A fleeting moment of contact.

When I finished, I was blushing and flushed.

"Oh," I muttered. "Oh dear. Well, uh-"

Praem chewed and swallowed.

"Oh, I don't think I should do that again." I swallowed on a dry throat and focused on closing the lid of the plastic tub, a tremor in my hands. I was terrible. Absolutely terrible. Why couldn't I stop blushing?

Why was I aroused by feeding a strawberry to a demon?

"Are you at least going to answer the question? Does Eevee hug you and ... stuff?"

Praem answered with a smile.

That smile was a bucket of cold water over my arousal. A mere tugging of muscles and curve of mouth. Nothing in the eyes; cold and empty.

"... right. You're not human. Right."

"Heather?"

Raine spoke my name and I almost jumped out of my skin, fumbling the box of strawberries. I narrowly avoided dropping them all over the floor. She tilted her head at me from the doorway. I hadn't noticed the argument wind down, but now I could hear Evelyn grumbling to herself and thumping about.

"Oh, oh goodness you made me jump."

Raine half-grinned and nodded at the box of strawberries. "That thing isn't a pet, you know? It might look cute, but it would eat you if it could."

I blushed all the harder and let out a huff. Raine was exactly the sight I needed right now. She was much more attractive than some unrealistically thick doll.

"I've just learnt that, I think. Thank you."

Raine cocked an eyebrow in silent question, but I didn't want to elaborate. Explaining to my girlfriend of literally one day that I'd been turned on by feeding a strawberry to her physical opposite was not a smart course of action. Even I knew that, as inexperienced as I was.

"So," I started instead. "Have you and Evee patched things up? Come to some kind of ... " I trailed off. Raine's face made her answer plain. "You haven't, have you?"

"I just wanted to come check on you."

"Raine, *I'm* fine. *You* need to go talk to Evee."

"Ah? Heather?"

I did the only thing which made sense; I put the box of strawberries down and marched right up to Raine, took her by the shoulders and tried to turn her around. She laughed but offered only token resistance.

"Heather, what? What- what is this?"

I put my hands on her back and steered her toward the front room. I felt like a Terrier pushing a Great Dane. "You and Evee need to talk. Talk."

Raine sighed, her amusement flagging. "We did, we-"

"Raine, you're wonderful and I think I might be falling in love with

you.” Goodness me, did I really just say that? “But you and Evelyn need to stop arguing. Deal with each other. Right now. Go back in there and sort this out. You’re old friends and she needs your support and ... go. Back in there. Go. Go!”

I shoved Raine the rest of the way, under no illusion that I’d be able to if she’d resisted. She grinned and shook her head as I pushed her through the door. I caught a glimpse of Evelyn’s thunderous frown and deep confusion, then shut the door on them.

“Don’t come out until you’re friends again!”

I waited a beat, my heart hammering, but neither of them burst back out to tell me off or shout at me.

Had I just done that? Where had that courage come from? Was this me?

I think it was.

I sighed and rubbed my sternum, then wandered back into the sitting room to return the tub of strawberries to the fridge, then picked up my lukewarm coffee and took a sip, frowning at Praem.

“So, orders from Eevee only,” I muttered.

I froze on a crazy thought, mug halfway to my mouth. Did I have enough courage to try that? Was it even a worthwhile experiment? If Eevee needed an army to take on the Cult, what might I need to rescue my sister?

Because I did know a monster or two which might listen to me, didn’t I?

conditions of absolute reality – 3.4

She of the Many Tentacles was exactly where I'd left her – just like Praem.

Out in Evelyn's front garden, I hugged myself against the hint of winter in the air, as I walked down the cracked pathway in the lowering afternoon sunlight, to the low boundary wall. I'd slipped my shoes on but not bothered with my coat, Raine's borrowed polo neck kept out the worst of the chill. This would only take a minute.

Nothing remained of my earlier entourage, dispersed to the winds and replaced with the usual spirit life. Scuttling ghoulish hounds and apish pack creatures lurked down the alleyways and mobbed in the street. Dark faces and staring eyes peered my way, but with mere fleeting curiosity, there and gone again. Back to normal.

Normal. Right.

Barnslow Drive was a desolate place. I suspect that's why I'd come to like it so much. The house to the left of Evelyn's was truly abandoned, windows boarded, front door chained shut. To the right lay a hundred feet of weed-choked lot before the next house, occupied but quiet and dark. The road was old tarmac, no potholes, but ridged and riven from beneath by unseen questing roots, from the trees on the far side of the street, covered with rain-matted leaves and puddles of standing water.

The Tentacled Woman still sat on the opposite pavement, in the shade of a gnarled oak tree. The tentacles from her back waved and bobbed in the air, like a human twiddling her fingers. I stared, and realised with an odd shock of recognition that she had her chin in her hands.

"That better not be an act," I murmured.

She was staring right back at me, with those huge glassy black eyes.

I took a deep breath, looked up and down the street one last time for casual observers, then twitched my left sleeve back to expose the edge of the Fractal. One step carried me through the boundary of the open garden gate.

Many reasons should have kept me in the house – random witnesses, unseen watchers from the Cult, potential disaster, the simple cold and being alone, fear.

Fear. That was the one I wouldn't give into anymore. That was why I'd come out here, alone and unsupported.

I wet my lips, tilted my chin up, and raised my voice.

“Come here.”

The Tentacled Woman obeyed.

She rose to her feet in a single sinuous slide, nothing like a human standing up. I assumed no actual muscles were involved. She peered at me from deep-sea eyes set in a face of slow roiling tar, then crossed the road toward me.

I risked a quick glance left and right; no other spirits were responding to my order, which was a relief. If they had, I would have freaked out and scurried back indoors, forever regretted my lack of courage. With one – this one – the Fractal was enough. I kept the fingers of my right hand on my left sleeve cuff, the edge of the Fractal peeking out from underneath, like a gunslinger with a hand on her revolver.

What a joke.

I struggled to stand my ground. My pulse throbbed in my throat and my heart fluttered against my ribs, cold sweat broke out on my forehead and I badly wanted to sit down.

The Tentacled Woman mounted the pavement, her tentacles waving and winding through the air, tracing unseen contours above her head. The mouth in her chest sucked open, lip-less hole forming words heard as drumming echoes at the limit of perception.

“Shut up,” I snapped, then told myself to breathe and control the tone of my voice. Command. “Stop there.”

She obeyed again, the mouth pausing along with her stride, about five feet from me. A nice safe distance. She turned her head and looked away; on any human that would be a haughty pout.

Right then ... now ... oh.

What now?

What the hell was I doing? What was my aim here? Proof of concept? I’d mounted this experiment on a whim of courage, without a proper plan, and now I was too deep to back out.

“Why ... ” I swallowed and let out a slow breath. “Why have you been following me?”

She dropped the haughty pout. The mouth in her chest resumed flapping and sucking, whispering drumbeats on the far side of nowhere. I frowned and concentrated but couldn’t make out a single word.

“We can’t actually communicate, can we?” I said.

Her chest-mouth slurped to a halt. She stared, face more inscrutable than the most stoic human mask. Praem had nothing on Miss Tentacles.

I sighed. This experiment was probably a wash. Talking to a spirit in the middle of the day, absent a crisis or real reason, was making me jittery and jumpy. What if somebody drove past, or looked out of a window, saw the crazy girl speaking to herself?

At least I *could* do it. Small victories, Heather, small victories.

“I suppose we’re done-”

She whipped one of her tentacles through the air, a lash and coil of dripping black, scything for my face. I flinched and swallowed a yelp, yanked my sleeve up on the Fractal as I stumbled backward into the garden gate.

She froze. The tentacle-tip – a slick sucker-covered rope of flesh – hung in the air, pointed at me.

“W-what?” I heaved to get my breath back, right hand half-concealing the exposed Fractal on my forearm.

She wiggled the tentacle in a little circle, then pointed it back at me again.

“ ... you ... you want me to touch? Shake hands?”

I wasn’t going to make the same mistake I had with Maisie’s messenger. I raised one finger. She waited, tentacle-tip steady.

“If this is a trap, or something, I will mind-zap you into some hell dimension. Take that as a warning.”

She pulled the tentacle back and slid away from me.

“No, no, wait,” I said. “If it’s not a trap, that’s fine. I ... I think I want to communicate. Please?”

The Tentacled Woman did not accept my invitation. She backed away to her own safe distance, then simply watched me.

“Ahh shoot.” Stupid, stupid Heather. You’re trying to make friends, not threaten. “Look, I’m sorry, I’m just scared. You don’t understand that, do you? I’ve been scared of things like you since I was a child. Talk, please?”

I offered her my hand. She backed away, like a spooked cat.

“Heather?” Raine called from the front door. “Oh thank God, there you are.”

I turned to find Raine hurrying down the garden path, as if I was a confused old person who’d wandered off. I lowered my hand, feeling silly and oddly guilty.

“It’s fine, it’s okay, I’m fine.”

“What are you even doing out here?” Raine touched my shoulder, brow creased with concern. She looked up and down the street. “What did you see? Did something happen?”

“I’m- I’m talking to a spirit. Or, I was trying to.” I gestured at the road, at the figure Raine couldn’t see. A blush coloured my cheeks. “Everything’s fine, nothing happened. I’m sorry- I mean, I just wanted- ... needed to do this.”

Raine’s face lit up. “Oooh, any success?”

“ ... uh ... a little, yes. I think I scared her off though.”

“Her?” Raine smirked. “You making special friends without me?”

I rolled my eyes, then cast a glance at the Tentacled Woman. She’d backed up beyond safe distance, settled down in a squat, black ichor dripping from her tentacles. “Oh don’t be silly, you have nothing to be jealous of.”

= =

Raine insisted I come back indoors because of the cold, but I wasn’t stupid. I saw the way she watched the ends of the street like a hawk, the ready tension in her shoulders, the hard flint in her eyes. She was no good at hiding that from me, and I liked the sense I had a protector. But was that necessary here? Surely nobody would come to the house.

“Did you two make up?” I asked, once we were back inside the warm wooden womb of Evelyn’s house.

“Uh, mostly. Mostly, yeah. Gonna go with yeah.”

“ ... and what does that mean?”

She spread her arms in an expansive shrug. “It means we’re all yelled out for the moment.”

We discovered Evelyn had fallen asleep, sat at her map in the ex-drawing room. Cheek in hand, elbow on table, eyes closed – snoring softly. Raine started to laugh but I put a finger to my lips.

“She’s exhausted,” I mouthed.

“Sleeping there’ll mess up her back worse than usual,” Raine whispered, then spoke out loud. “Wakey wakey, sleepo.”

Evelyn jerked and gasped, blinking her eyes and clearing her throat. My heart went out to her; I knew that feeling too well. She grabbed at her walking stick and directed bleary, bloodshot eyes at us.

“What?” she croaked, then rubbed her forehead. “What? I nodded off. What are you staring at? Oh God, sod this, I need coffee or something. I have so much to do.”

“No, no I don’t think you do,” I said, surprised myself.

“What?” Evelyn’s eyes emerged squinting from behind her hand.

“I’ve seen that look on my own face a thousand times. How long have you been awake?”

“Since ... I don’t know. I wasn’t keeping track. Maybe four, this morning.”

“On how much sleep?”

Evelyn grumbled under her breath and averted her eyes. She

rubbed at her thigh, approximately where the socket of her prosthetic attached.

“How much sleep, Eevee?”

“Three hours. Give or take.”

“Three hours? Three hours. Okay. Do you need to shore up a front that’s about to collapse out there?”

“ ... what? Wha-”

“Are we in imminent danger of being undermined and detonated from below? No? Is this all going to collapse if you leave it alone for a few hours?”

“Well ... no, not at all, but-”

“No buts. You need a proper meal and a long sleep. You can’t fight a war exhausted.”

“Zhukov did.”

Raine burst out laughing. “Eevee, shut the hell up. Heather’s got you on this one. You’re wiped out. I haven’t seen you this tired in years.”

I turned on Raine, hands on my hips. “And you should have said this to her earlier. She’s your friend too, Raine. You should have noticed.”

Raine blinked at me. “Ah, well, I-”

“What do we have in the fridge?”

“I- sorry?”

“Food. Food! What do we have? Eevee, what do you have on hand?”

Evelyn visibly attempted to rouse herself, pinching the bridge of her

nose and inhaling deeply. “Not much. Not much at all. I’ve been snacking through it.”

“Right then, Raine,” I snapped back to my now slightly-taken-aback girlfriend. “There’s that corner shop about five minutes away. Go get some curry or something. And a jar of instant hot chocolate”

Raine hesitated a beat, then grinned and saluted me. “Yes ma’am.”

I blushed. “Don’t. I’m just ... you two seem incapable right now. We can’t all carry guns and summon monsters. Some of us have to remain normal.” I shooed Raine toward the door. She laughed on the way out, caught my hand and kissed my fingers.

= =

By the time Raine returned carrying a shopping bag full of comfort food, the sun had crept low to the horizon, wan late afternoon light sneaking shadows into the kitchen’s nooks and crannies. I’d herded Evelyn into a chair, just to get her out of the occult workshop she’d made of the old drawing room. She’d almost limped, heavy on her walking-stick, and winced when she sat down.

“Oh, bugger it all,” she’d muttered, rolled up her pajamas, and started to remove her leg.

I busied myself by rummaging for a snack in the cupboard, washed out my coffee mug, and checked on Praem in the front room. Three days ago I’d watched Evelyn put on her leg, but that had been at invitation, a moment of recovery and regeneration. No sordid routine of pain. She grumbled and massaged her stump, and I offered her an awkward hug.

Raine raised her eyebrows at the sight of Evelyn’s prosthetic stood up in the corner of the kitchen, but she didn’t comment, hustling and bustling and slinging microwave curries at us, clearing the table and acting like the world’s most athletic waitress. I puttered around the edges, trying to help, until Raine sat me down by the shoulders

and took over.

Dinner – a little early – was chicken curry and microwave rice, followed by three packets of chocolate chip cookies, far more than I thought we could hope to put away between us. I was wrong. Evelyn picked at her food at first, and I worried she was nauseous, but she gathered speed and slowly slipped into a satisfied, full-belly slouch, half-awake as we chattered about inconsequential things, university and literature and the state of her old house.

Praem didn't need to eat. I asked about that and got a very clear answer.

"Raine told me you were having trouble with the pneuma-somatic life on your way here."

I shrugged, mouth full of chocolate chip cookie. The sun bled orange dusk through the window, and we'd long ago turned the kitchen lights on, our empty plates pushed toward the middle of the table.

"Seems a little academic now," I said. "I think I got rid of them."

"Did the Fractal drive them off?"

"Mmhmm."

"You should have seen her," Raine said. "If she'd threatened me like that, I'd have run away too."

I blushed a little and shook my head.

"Well, there you go then," said Evelyn. "Nothing else to do, unless you want to live inside a sealing circle all the ... time ... " She drifted away on a private train of thought, sucking her teeth. "There's an idea."

Raine cleared her throat and put her elbows on the table. "Maybe we should lay low."

Evee snapped back in an instant, eyes narrowed and hard, though dogged by a full stomach and shared warmth.

Still, I needed to head this off.

“No arguing.” I raised my voice. “Be civil.”

Evelyn held Raine’s gaze for a moment, then sighed and shrugged. “Let’s hear it then.”

“Maybe it makes mutual sense,” Raine said. She spread her hands. “Maybe Heather and I managed to scare them off. We nailed their hired thugs, we duelled their assassins or kidnappers or whatever, and we got away, then you’ve started picking at the edges of their project. Maybe *they* want to lay low too. Maybe we back off, let things calm down, don’t push our luck.”

Evelyn shook her head slowly.

“They had a firearm,” Raine continued. “They had hired local muscle. If you keep pushing it they might come for the house.”

“Thats-” I started, then swallowed as they both turned to look at me. A cold feeling crept up my back, a violation of all the safety of this afternoon. “That’s a good point, actually. The ... zombie woman, the tall one, whatever she was, what if they just send her here?”

“I’ll gut and skin her before I’d let her touch a hair on your head,” Raine said. It wasn’t a joke. “Either of you.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Well, there you go then. What are you bellyaching about? You can just play the big strong protector and we’re all good.”

“I’d rather not take the risk in the first place.”

“A serious, practical answer to your question, Heather,” Evelyn said, ignoring Raine “Is that this house is a deathtrap for anything opposing me, opposing the Saye family. Those Spiders are not for

show. The Cult's zombie, golem, whatever that was, this place would take her apart. I don't care if she's an emissary from Hell itself, she won't last five minutes."

"I thought you said the spiders were senile?"

Evelyn waved my concern away.

"Alright, so, we're gonna do this?" Raine said. She put both hands flat on the table. "We're really gonna do this, this is what you want, Eevee?"

Evelyn fixed her with a tired gaze, but behind her eyes lay a steely determination. "Yes. Sharrowford is mine, people like this have to be kept under control. It's just me, my mother and grandmother are gone."

"It's not just you," I said. "It's us too."

"I- yes, yes, Heather. It is. I-"

"What about getting some outside help?" Raine said.

Evelyn directed a blast of contempt at her. Raine laughed and spread her arms.

"Come on, Eevee, if this is for real, you may as well ask for help. How about calling Aaron? He's alright, isn't he? Or Fliss, if you can stomach her for five minutes?"

"No." Evelyn's mouth twisted. "No other mages. Not here. Not in Sharrowford. This is my territory. Mine."

She spoke softly and quietly, but with all the conviction of a fist slammed on the table. I began, in that moment, to understand what the Cult's intrusion meant to Evelyn. An ideology lurked behind her words, one which worried me so much more than the worst shouting match.

"That doesn't sound healthy," I said, and expected to regret my

words, but Evelyn just shrugged..

“It’s no big shame to ask for help.” Raine sighed, apparently surrendering at last.

“No, no of course it isn’t,” Evelyn agreed. “That’s why I want you to move back in.”

Raine paused – a real, long, frozen pause, rare and unfamiliar to her. She opened her mouth, closed it again, and broke into a confused grin, gesturing helplessly. “I ... Eevee.”

“Heather too,” Evelyn said, and I blinked.

“Me?”

“For safety. In many ways, this house is the safest place in the city. Maybe in the whole north of England.”

“And rapidly filling up with monsters,” Raine said, then laughed and shook her head. She glanced at me, genuine discomfort in her eyes. “I guess, if they’re after Heather?”

“No. That closed loop was a strike aimed at me,” said Evelyn. “It was planned and executed to kill a mage. You won out because they didn’t expect a violent lunatic, and nobody could account for Heather.”

“Bit of the old ultraviolence works wonders,” Raine murmured through a smirk.

“Quite.”

“I’d love to live here,” I said before I had time to really think. “That ... ” Living with friends? With Raine? In this wonderful – if slightly spooky – old house? It was a longer walk from campus, but it would be miles better than my anonymous concrete box. To live with people, to be together. I felt myself lighting up inside – and then dimming again. “Oh, I’d have to explain to my parents. I mean, they pay my rent, but we’d only need one bedroom and- oh!” I froze and

looked up at Evee.

She rolled her eyes. "Told you so, didn't I? It's always that way, with Raine."

"Told her what?" Raine asked. I shot an embarrassed frown at her, but for once she seemed genuinely innocent of the implied meaning.

"N-nothing," I muttered. "It doesn't matter."

"You are wearing Raine's jumper. I am aware of that."

Raine lit up and started laughing. I couldn't keep the blush from my face, stammering out a terrible excuse even as I smiled like an idiot.

"And you're going to need a safe workspace," Evelyn continued right over us. "Somewhere you can concentrate, somewhere close to me in case of emergencies, close to Raine, simply for comfort. A place you can pass out, ruin the floorboards if you need to."

My self-indulgent embarrassment slammed to a halt. A ball of lead settled in my gut.

"Heather?" Raine murmured my name.

"I ... yes, of course. I'd managed to ... almost forget, you know?"

Evelyn nodded, sober and serious. "I understand. I was there too, once."

I shook my head. "No, no, you never had a sister to rescue. I have to start on it, don't I? Self-implementing-"

"- hyperdimensional mathematics," Evelyn and I finished together.

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Lozzie giggled and slid another blunt plastic knife into the board game.

“Your turn! Heather, it’s your turn! You have to put a knife in.”

“ ... do I? I don’t think I really want to play this.”

On every side the dream landscape unrolled in desert dunes, ochre and cinnamon, terminated by a line of mountains so large they were impossible under earth gravity. I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut, considered for the millionth time the need to wake up.

Lozzie pouted. She wound loops of her long blonde hair around her hand and chewed on the ends. “Don’t be like that. We’re having fun, aren’t we?”

We sat in the shade of a clutch of bulbous, creaking trees, on beautiful carved wooden chairs. I rummaged through half-remembered dream impressions that Lozzie had summoned them from somewhere, along with the dozens of board games abandoned in the sand around us. Dice and chess pieces lay on the ground, counters and chips had rolled away, boards and manuals dumped off the spindly table between us.

Lozzie had hung onto a chess piece, the white Queen. She fiddled with it as I pondered where to put the little plastic knife for the board game, or if I should simply give up playing altogether.

“You picked the game,” she said. “Don’t be sore now because you lost at chess.”

“I’ve never been good at games. Chess is too difficult. Too strategic. Also, I’m not sore.” I looked up and offered her a smile. It was easy. After all, this was a dream. I may as well enjoy the company, even if she was a bit erratic and difficult to deal with.

I’d noticed things about Lozzie as the dreams had recurred: the freckles, the crooked front teeth, the way she bit at her fingernails. She cocked her head at my reply and slowly broke into a fascinated smile, eyes widening.

“W-what?”

“You’re different,” she said. “Oh wow, Heather, oh wow, you’ve been fucking, haven’t you!?”

I just blinked at her. “Uh ... I ... I did lose my virginity. To- to a girl.”

Lozzie bounced out of her chair, took me by both hands, and dragged me to my feet, the board game forgotten as we knocked the table over. Laughing and whirling, she spun us both around, kicking at the sand, hugging me, swinging my hands back and forth until we both fell over onto our backsides. I let myself flop onto the sand as Lozzie sat up. Shade cooled my face, sun warmed my feet. Dreaming wasn’t so bad, even if I never remembered these ones.

“That’s awesome. You’re so cool. I wish I could do that,” Lozzie said. She produced the white Queen chess piece from somewhere, turned it over in one hand and stared at it. “But you’re going to have to learn strategy, you know? Can’t be all cuddles and shagging.”

“What? Learn strategy? Why?”

“He’s after you now. He doesn’t always get what he wants, but he’s going to try. He didn’t know about you before, I didn’t tell him. Please don’t think it was me.” Lozzie met my eyes, a little sad, a lot worried. “He knows because you did that thing with the bullet, because you escaped. He’s working it out, he’s going to work it out.”

“What?” I sat up and stared at her. “Lozzie, what are you talking about? Who’s after me?”

“My brother.”

“Your-” I swallowed and took a deep breath, reminded myself where I was. “You’re a dream, Lozzie. You’re kinda cute, but you’re a dream. Stop scaring me.”

“You should kill him if you can,” she whispered. “Kill him.”

conditions of absolute reality – 3.5

“Show me,” Evelyn said.

“Now? In here?”

“No reason to wait. I thought you’d be eager, what with your sister’s time limit.”

“Of course, yes, of course. I ... ” I glanced past Evelyn to the calendar I’d pinned up on the kitchen wall. Dawn cast a rectangle of sickly grey through the windows, but hours would pass yet before the light touched those days.

Evelyn cleared her throat and pulled a face. “I know, I’ve hardly been upholding my end of our debt. I need to get a better idea of what you’re doing. Please, show me.”

“It’s not a debt, Eeve. We’re friends.”

She shrugged bland acquiescence. “Please, Heather?”

“It’s far from perfect, and I don’t want to make a mess.” I looked to Raine for support. She was leaning against the fridge, stuffing a half stale pastry into her face.

“You won’t mess it up,” she said. “You can do it, you’re ace. You’ve got this bastard right under your thumb now.”

“That’s not true. Not even close. You had to carry me home.”

Evelyn eased back in her chair, nursing a cup of tea with both hands. Neither of them said anything, a silent double-team. They surrounded me without even communicating.

“ ... alright, okay,” I said with a sigh. “Let me go get my notebook, I can’t do it blind.”

Three weeks after Raine had moved into Evelyn’s house, and one day after my greatest experiment yet, we were all gathered once more in the kitchen, once more discussing matters of supernatural import, once more all very hungry.

Wrapped in a dressing gown and half-awake, Evelyn had stumbled onto Raine and I still recovering. My rain-spattered coat still lay by the front door where I’d dropped it, next to Raine’s mud-covered boots. We’d slept fitfully last night after a long shower. Raine had wanted me to sleep in, but I still felt queasy and a headache hovered at the back of my skull, so I’d dragged myself downstairs to sit and contemplate the effort required to keep down a sad plate of buttered toast. Evelyn had appeared, frowned at both of us, then asked why I looked wiped out and why Raine looked like I’d borne her a litter of kittens.

Now it was time for show and tell.

I trudged upstairs and fetched my notebook. Raine had a steaming mug of coffee ready when I returned, but I politely pushed it away, already regretting the breakfast which now sat like lead in my stomach.

“I’ll just bring it back up, you know that.”

“You won’t,” Raine said. “You didn’t last night.” I shook my head and sat down, flipped my notebook open and cast around for a likely candidate. Coffee mug? Used spoon? Evelyn’s plate?

“You need to be bloody careful with that.” Evelyn stared hard at my notebook. “You leave it in the wrong place ... ”

“I won’t. Besides, who’s going to understand it but me?”

She grimaced at the cheap, spiral-bound notebook in my hands. I’d picked it up from the university bookshop two weeks ago and already filled it cover to cover, with endless mathematical notation

stamped as neatly as I could between the ruled lines. To be fair, I'd had to rip a few pages out, paper flecked with vomit or blood, whenever I'd begun to transcribe concepts too incendiary for my fragile brain and stomach.

"Okay, so, I'm going to need-"

I glanced down at the math unprepared, winced, and averted my eyes. Big mistake.

Raine recognised the signs instantly. She grabbed my shoulders and dug her thumbs into the muscles, kneaded me hard to pull my mind away from the equations. She rubbed my neck, my scalp, smoothed my hair back from my forehead. She'd had plenty of practice these last three weeks. We'd discovered this early on; touch worked. Between her help and a few deep breaths, I fought down the wave of nausea.

"You good?"

"Yes. Thank you," I breathed. She eased off. "So, right, let's get this over with. I need an object we're not going to miss."

Evelyn frowned. "You mean you can't bring it back?"

"Not always. I told you, it's not perfect."

"Not yet, maybe," said Raine. "Should have seen her last night. Like that." She clicked her fingers. "She doesn't actually need all this prep, she's just psyching herself up. She could stop a speeding train if she tried. Regular comic book superhero, our Heather."

"Don't, Raine. I'm- I'm honestly not comfortable doing this in here. What if I get it wrong?"

"You won't."

Raine rummaged in the kitchen drawers and found an old spoon, spotted with rust. She clacked it down before me with a dramatic flourish.

I stared at it for a moment, then back up at Evelyn, then at the figure behind her.

“Are you sure she should see this?” I asked.

Evelyn raised a curious eyebrow and glanced over her shoulder at Praem Number Two, standing prim and proper, silent and motionless, in the corner of the kitchen. Praem Number One was out, running some errand for Evelyn’s secret war, closing another Cult rabbit hole. Praem Number Two was identical to the first, right down to the brand of doll. Evelyn had explained they were actually the same demon, breaking causality in ways decent people like us shouldn’t think about too much.

The only way to tell One and Two apart was how Evelyn dressed them. Two wore cargo trousers and a puffy coat, totally at odds with her ice-blue skin and hair. Her blank white eyes stared at nothing.

“Why?” Evelyn asked. “Does she still make you nervous?”

“I think we’re beyond that, aren’t we? No, I just thought ... I don’t know. Forget it.”

I took a deep breath, then reached out to touch the spoon. One fingertip was sufficient.

Raine was correct in some aspects of her praise. I didn’t actually need to do any of this mental prep. I could fumble through the equations at the speed of thought, though at the cost of a nosebleed and probably my breakfast.

Proper breathing helped. Preparation helped, to aid quick mental execution. The faster I self-implemented the equation, the less time I had to spend with the numbers.

I think that’s what Maisie meant, in her message: the numbers, what they do to you.

I skimmed my notebook for the necessary line. Bile rose in my throat and my stomach contracted as I slotted each piece of the equation into place, fast as I could, mind shaking as if playing with electricity and fire and radioactive waste, the Eye's impossible principles rearing up and crashing down in a wave I had to outrun and-

Out.

The spoon vanished.

"Ahhhhh." I let out a groan, grabbed my head in both hands, and tried to curl up into a ball around the ice-pick behind my eyes.

Raine was ready with a wad of tissues for my bleeding nose. Her other hand was already kneading the side of my ribs, trying her best to bring me back. I held onto the roiling in my stomach, forced slow steady breaths. Not going to be sick, not going to be sick. Neither of us could do anything about the ache in my chest, the throbbing, humming pain. I sat very still and breathed very carefully, until the pain ebbed away.

Evelyn got to her feet and inspected the place the spoon had existed a moment earlier.

"Impressive," she murmured, running her hand over the table. "Didn't take a chunk out of the wood either. Not even any varnish. Remarkable."

"At least I'm precise." I managed a weak laugh. Raine handed me a glass of water and resumed rubbing my back. Her hands made it easier to forget.

"Does size make any difference?"

"Hell no," Raine answered for me as I was drinking, a proud smile on her face. "Why do you think we went down the junkyard last night? She did the same thing to an entire wrecked car."

"And nearly passed out," I said. "Yes, size makes a difference. And I

haven't tried it on a living thing, not since you, Evee."

"Mm, yes." Evelyn arched an eyebrow. "And you've no idea where it's gone?"

"Not really, no. Outside. Some random dimension, I guess. I can't target. There's no frame of reference. Can't even get to Wonderland yet."

Maisie felt as far away as ever. What had I imagined, if only subconsciously? That we'd all go on a magical journey to Wonderland in the space of a week or two? Raine would punch out the Eye, I'd save my sister, and we'd all be home in time for Christmas? The real world did not work that way. Raine *was* a hero, but this was more logistics than heroics, especially with the lion's share of Evelyn's attention consumed by her shadow war against the Sharrowford Cult.

I'd bought a calendar and numbered the days, backward from the date in Maisie's message. A countdown. Evelyn didn't seem to mind when I pinned it up in the kitchen to remind me, to remind us. We had a year. A year to save my twin.

Or what was left of her.

Three weeks ago, before Raine even finished moving into Evelyn's house, I'd begun my study of the pamphlet, with a sick bucket and an empty stomach.

My first attempt ended in sobbing, retching failure. I'd sat on the floor of my flat with Raine by my side in case the worst happened. It hadn't, but I'd barely been able to struggle through a single line of formulae in the *Notes*.

Each mathematical principle dredged up old lessons from the Eye, nightmares I'd tried to forget and bury, ways of looking at physics and reality not meant for the human brain. I'd vomited bile and blood, suffered a migraine to end thought, almost choked on nosebleed. Three hours of trying to comprehend a single line; I gave up. Raine had to drag me into the shower and hold up me under the

hot water, half-conscious and swearing I'd never try it again, I wouldn't, I couldn't. Part of me swore I'd give the pamphlet back to Evee. I couldn't do this. I wasn't strong enough.

The next attempt went a little better.

The third, not as messy. I didn't miss the bucket that time.

Little by little, night by night, I read the first three pages of maths in *Notes Toward a Unified Cosmology*.

I began my own notebook. Somehow that came easier – finding ways to transcribe the Eye's impossible physics. Capture, define, limit and categorise. Centring my thoughts on specific tasks bounded the maths, made it possible to control, if only just. I borrowed math textbooks from the library, started to collate, understand the tiniest sliver of what this alien god had fed into my mind for the last decade.

Through nosebleeds and pain and herculean concentration, certain limited feats became possible.

Raine took my empty glass and walked over to the sink. "Heather's a lot faster if you surprise her though. It's kind of impressive."

Evelyn frowned. "... I don't want to hear the details of your sex life."

"E-Evee, that's n-not-" I blushed; Raine laughed.

"Also true."

"Raine!"

"But also not what I meant." Raine clacked the glass down on the kitchen counter, turned in a flash, and whipped her arm out.

She'd flubbed the delivery: I knew it was coming, which defeated the point. I didn't bother to try.

The ping-pong ball bounced square off my forehead. I blinked.

“Oh! Oh shit, I’m sorry!” Raine raised her hands, caught between laughter and mortified horror. “Heather, I’m so sorry.”

“Duly forgiven.”

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. “You two can do this in the privacy of Raine’s room, you know?”

I fought down further embarrassment and kicked the ball back toward Raine. “Do it again.”

“You sure? S’not a surprise now.”

“I may as well show Evee. Go on, try to hit me again.”

Raine wound up a pitch, then held back. Perhaps she was trying to introduce an element of uncertainty, regardless of how much I was prepared. At least this was easier than banishing objects to other dimensions.

“Get on with it, then,” Evee said.

Raine tooted little fanfare from the corner of her mouth, took a step back, and bowled the ping-pong ball at me overarm, probably hard enough to sting.

I deflected it with my mind, with maths, a swat of reality-bending physics.

The ball hit the ceiling instead of me, then rebounded and bounced off the floor at an angle. Evelyn ducked and the ball hit Praem Two in the face, then landed in the kitchen sink with a sharp metallic ting. Raine put on a one-woman round of applause, Evelyn frowned in fascination, and Praem didn’t react in the slightest.

I stemmed my resurgent nosebleed with the wad of tissues, wincing around a spike of renewed headache.

“Interesting demonstration,” Evelyn murmured.

“I got the idea from the ... ” I had to pause, take a deep breath, concentrate on not being sick. “The ... the bullet. If I could ... ” I waved a hand vaguely, withdrawing into my pain and discomfort. Raine touched me before I had to call for her, hands kneading my back and scalp, taking me away from the monsters inside my mind.

“We got the idea from the bullet-stopping trick,” Raine finished for me. “Turns out it’s pretty easy, especially if Heather’s surprised.” She leaned down to me. “You holding up okay?”

I nodded and made an effort to relax as Raine coaxed me back to normal. She reheated my coffee and slid a freshly toasted chocolate pop-tart in front of me. I sighed, gave in, and nibbled around the edges of the chocolate as the last of the nausea abated. Evelyn sat back down and considered me slowly over her cup of tea.

“You’ve been doing all this back at your little flat? Why?” she asked. “There’s more than enough space here. It’s not as if I care about ruined floorboards.”

“Psychological quarantine, perhaps. I felt self-conscious, didn’t want to make too much noise. You’ve been so busy, so stressed, I didn’t want to distract you further.”

“You two make more than enough noise anyway.”

I blushed furiously and took a bite of pop-tart. In the corner of my eye, Raine grinned, smug beyond words.

“She’s a real screamer, ain’t she?” said Raine.

“Raine!”

“One night I did wonder if you’d snuggled a hippopotamus into your bedroom,” Evelyn added.

“Evelyn! Oh my God, shut up.” I put my head on the table and buried myself underneath my arms, blushing red as a beetroot.

Raine ruffled my hair and I half-heartedly squirmed out of the way, trying not to feel absolutely mortified.

“I’m joking,” Evelyn deadpanned. “Worst I hear is bedsprings.”

“Mmm.”

“You deserve to be proud, Heather,” Evelyn said. “Hold your head high.”

“W-what?” I uncovered my head and stammered at her. “E-Evee, I mean, that’s sweet of you but-”

She waved a hand and huffed. “I’m not talking about you and Raine. I’m talking about self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics. No magic or magecraft can stop a bullet in the air without significant preparation. Not from a standing start. You’re performing miracles.”

“Don’t say that. It doesn’t feel like miracles, it feels like ... barely enough progress at all.”

“Hey, Heather,” Raine said, ruffling my hair. “You’ve only been at it for three weeks, cut yourself some slack.”

“Maisie has less than a year.”

We all lapsed into silence for a long moment. Raine stroked my head.

“Targeting the dimension-hopping,” she said. “There’s a way, isn’t there, Evee?”

Evelyn stared back at Raine with a sudden hard look in her eyes.

“There is?” I asked.

“Sure is,” Raine said. “Evee knows what I’m talking about. Same place the Fractal came from.”

“You want me to expose her to that, Raine? You’re seriously suggesting that? You want me to blast your girlfriend’s mind into pieces? It might leave her a gibbering wreck.”

Raine laughed. “I’ve seen it and I turned out alright.”

“Yes, by certain metrics.”

“Expose me to what? What are you talking about?”

Raine cracked a grin. “Evee’s got a map of the universe.”

Evelyn shot a darkly withering look at Raine. “Both parts of that statement are incorrect. It is not a map of the universe, and I do not have it. It is a hundred and fifty miles away in a basement in Sussex, where it belongs.”

“Yeah, but we could go take a look at it. We could make a trip of it over the Christmas break, proper road-trip down south, stop off somewhere along the way, stay overnight. We’ll have plenty of time.”

“Oh, certainly.” Evelyn lashed the sarcasm. “I’ll just leave Sharrowford for a week, shall I? Let the freaks take over.”

“What if that’s all over by Christmas?” Raine asked. “We could all go together. We’ll make it fun.”

Evelyn’s irritation drained away to reveal a layer of naked discomfort. She looked around the kitchen, as if searching for purchase.

“Evee?” I said. She focused on me, hesitated, and nodded.

“Raine is correct. It’s not a map of the universe, but ... it might help you. Might give you a frame of reference. It’s a difficult thing to face, but it won’t fry your brain. I suppose you’ve seen worse, haven’t you?”

“Suppose I have.”

“It’ll be fine,” said Raine.

Evelyn swallowed. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

“This ... map,” I said. “It’s at your house, where you grew up, isn’t it?”

Evelyn nodded and looked away. “I don’t want to, Raine. I don’t want visit, I don’t want to see it, I don’t want to go. You and Heather can go, if you must. I’ll call ahead, let my father know, but I am not coming.”

“Don’t be daft,” Raine said. “I can’t leave you here alone. It’s all of us or none of us.”

“All for one and one for all,” I said. I’d meant it as a joke, to lighten the mood, but the words seemed too real as I spoke them.

“Even if I did want to, I can’t leave Sharrowford. You think I was joking?” Evelyn gestured behind her, past Praem Two, toward the ex-drawing room. “I have miles to go, much more to do in there before this is under control.”

I hadn’t set foot in the drawing room in three weeks. She’d turned it into a mage’s atelier, and Raine had done her best to keep me away from the worst of what Evelyn was up to. The rest of the house was free game, from Raine’s new bedroom and the delights of the study, to the abandoned old sitting room on the opposite side of the house and the dank cellar filled to the brim with boxes and cobwebs.

“When it’s all over then,” Raine said. “We’ll take a trip, together.”

Evelyn stared into her tea. “I’ll think about it.”

We all had class today. Evelyn grumbled about the need to keep up a front of normality. She downed some breakfast and stood up to vanish into the ex-drawing room for a couple of hours.

“Evee?” I stopped her before she left. She turned and raised an

eyebrow at me.

"I know, Heather, I know. Your quest takes first priority once I'm-"

"No, it's not that." I shook my head. "Are you okay?"

She regarded me for a long, silent moment. "I'm used to this."

Raine told me not to worry about Eevee. Raine certainly didn't seem to be doing so. I sat at the kitchen table for a long time, working my slow way through a second pop-tart. I tried to focus on the essay I needed to write over the next week. Sixteenth century poetry and Shakespearean dialogue served as a weak bastion against the lessons of the Eye. By the time I'd made my way back upstairs for a morning shower, I had to pause and brace myself against the wall with one hand, scraps of impossible math struggling to the surface of my mind.

Breathe. Steady. Focus on breathing, in and out, in and out. Only breathing.

I didn't hear Raine climb the stairs behind me, didn't know she was there until she grabbed me by the shoulders. I squeaked in surprise.

"Raine-"

She pushed me against the wall, firm but gentle, smug look on her face as she held me there and leaned in.

Raine flushed the impossible math from my consciousness far more completely than I ever could alone, when she clamped her mouth over mine and shoved a hand down the front of my pajama bottoms.

"You need it?" she purred when we broke apart.

I managed a nod.

Turned out the trick to beating the Eye's lessons was to bonk like rabbits. We'd done so for the last three weeks.

Intimacy was incredible. Not since Maisie had I felt so close to another person. Raine taught me the reality of many things I'd spent years fantasising over. What surprised me the most, after a week or two, is that it didn't change me, not really. Intimacy healed wounds, lifted me up, but sex isn't magic. 'Eating pussy' – as Raine so crudely phrased it – did not rewire my personality. In the morning, I was always the same Heather. I was *more* Heather. More me.

She hadn't let me move in though.

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Raine had moved into Evelyn's house – simply 'the house' in our increasingly shared vernacular – the following day after Evelyn had extended the invitation. She moved back into what I took to be her old bedroom, quickly filled it with posters and her stacks of philosophy books and a few other odds and ends wrangled from the squat, including the game console, set up with a 'borrowed' television. Raine and I had taken the last journey from her old place together, piled into her tiny, rickety car, a miniature adventure down Sharrowford's streets.

Her new – old – room was much bigger and comfier, with space to push armchairs up against one wall and roll off either side of the double-bed as one pleased. She dragged an old desk from one of the other upstairs rooms. Really spread out. No need for me to take another room. We could share this one, together. Evelyn made obscure jokes about lesbian second dates, which I totally didn't understand, but to my incredible surprise she made Raine blush.

Instead, we had our first real argument.

Not a blazing row. Neither of us was capable of that.

"This place is going to fill up with monsters, Heather. Eevee could turn this into ground zero," she'd said.

“Nothing’s happened! It’s been nearly a week, nothing has happened. And if we’re all going to die suddenly, I’d rather do that in the same bed as you.”

“We’re not going to die-”

“Then why can’t I move in?”

“Because it’s too dangerous. I don’t think anybody is after you, and I’d rather keep it that way. I just want you to be safe.”

“Oh, so it’s safer to just visit here every day instead? Walk back and forth where anybody could see me, without you?”

“Heather, I’m with you as much as I can be-”

“Then I may as well be here all the time!”

We never really resolved the argument, practicality and hormones did that for us. Evelyn scolded Raine terribly for it and told me to ignore her, but I didn’t need to; Raine wanted me over all the time anyway. I spent almost every day there and vanishingly little time at my own flat, which felt cold and alien and empty whenever I went back, mostly to pursue brain-math and read from the *Notes*. In those three weeks, I spent every night but two in Raine’s bed, and slept better than I had in my whole life.

She was used to this impermanence, moving from place to place, but for me it was a huge change, one I could barely contain. At first I felt guilty about the way my clothes and books and the thin detritus of my life began to colonise Raine’s new bedroom, but then I realised she liked it, despite what she said, so I let it happen.

She was right though; the house did fill up with monsters.

Evelyn had been busy, up at strange hours of the night, reading and making notes from her disturbing tomes, locked away in the ex-drawing room scribbling magic circles on the floor and peering into her giant scrying pool. Praem One and Praem Two were out more

often than not, and sometimes returned with torn clothes and oddly bloodless physical damage, woodgrain visible inside their wounds, from fighting monsters inside the Cult's rabbit holes. Evelyn repaired them with magic and poly-filler.

She summoned three monsters. Outsiders, not spirits, hard and corporeal. The first one was quickly confined to the basement. I never saw it, but Raine assured me it was down there, contained and bound for a future purpose.

She called up the second monster in the dead of night on a Friday, and only emerged from the drawing room twelve gruelling hours later, wan and exhausted but smug and victorious. Raine and I had heard her talking and debating in at least four different languages that entire time, replies and questions addressed to her in an unspeakable, twisted voice from the pit.

The third monster she sent out into the city, a new front in her secret war. I caught a glimpse of it, unintentionally, coming downstairs as Raine had stood by while Evelyn directed it out of the back door and into the night. A gangly ape demon, knobbly joints and knuckles like cricket balls, jaw running vertically down its entire head.

I'd seen worse. At least it left the house.

"What can I do, then?" I'd asked Evelyn the next day.

"You can keep doing what you're doing, work through the pamphlet I gave you. Learn. Focus on your sister."

"... I mean to help you, Eevee. To help."

She'd stared at me. "This isn't your fight."

Every day I looked at Maisie's tshirt message, now carefully laundered and cleaned after being transcribed and photographed, though the tarry black finger-writing refused to vanish.

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For pity's sake, sit down, I willed. Sit down before you fall over.

Tenny wouldn't sit.

I doubted bubbling-goo spirit-life understood busses anyway. I suffered in silence and fought a most irritating urge to whisper to her, tell her off, but I could hardly raise my voice in public to speak with a monster nobody else could see. That was beyond the pale.

The Tentacled Woman swayed and staggered in the middle aisle of the Number 37 bus, on the route from Sharrowford University to the city centre. There were plenty of open seats. I had almost the entire left side to myself.

I hadn't grown comfortable with pneuma-somatic life. One does not get 'comfortable' about decade-old taboos and traumas in the space of three weeks, or even three months, even when a flash of the Fractal on my left arm was more than enough to clear my path.

But the Tentacled Woman had never left. I named her Tenny. A name made her less upsetting.

She'd hung around Barnslow Drive like a stray cat, prowling the street and the back garden, following me to campus and my flat, but she never again risked coming closer than a few feet, no matter how much I coaxed and cooed in private. I'd told Raine and Evelyn, received unhelpful jokes and a terrifying magical suggestion respectively. Evelyn had taken steps to confirm Tenny wasn't a Servitor, and I'd settled on just letting her follow me around. After a week, I almost managed to forget she was there.

Tenny did not appear to comprehend chairs. The bus rounded another corner and she staggered, lost her balance, tentacles reaching up to anchor herself against the roof of the bus.

At least she was a good distraction from the lump in my throat.

I glanced down at my phone, at the text-message conversation with Raine.

Raine is typing ...

I'd waited until I was on the bus, fare paid, sat down and committed, before I'd sent Raine a text message to let her know where I was going. I'd hoped for a 'be safe, have fun', but my mind had played out an embarrassing scene of her dropping everything and sprinting across campus to catch up. The reality was only marginally less upsetting. I couldn't stop myself rereading the message log and making myself feel guilty.

'What do you mean, into town? You're on your own? Where are you now?'

'Already on the bus! It's fine, I'm going to the bookshop. I'll only be a couple of hours.'

'It's not safe!!!' Three exclamation points, I'd never seen Raine do that before. 'I can come with you. What bus are you on?'

'It's fine, I'm fine, it'll be fine. Please, it's fine.'

Fine, fine, fine. I swallowed and forced myself to turn the phone screen off.

Two days after my demonstration to Evelyn, I was seeking a much-needed psychological balm: book shopping.

It was the middle of the day and Sharrowford's main high street thronged with shoppers, nothing to be scared of amid the busy crowds, except for the spirits and monsters hunched atop the rows of buildings, snapping at each other as they skirmished for territory. The press of humanity somehow kept them mostly away from the busy road, the passing busses, the traffic lights and the bright window displays pretending to be clean amid the city's grime. I stepped off the bus and Tenny followed, tentacles probing passers-by.

My phone vibrated – kept vibrating. I stepped out of the pedestrian flow next to a shop front, then sighed in exasperation when I saw Raine was calling me. I answered.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” I tried to keep my voice steady, tamp down the guilt.

“Hey, Heather,” said Raine. “You don’t need to go out alone-”

“You’re supposed to be in a lecture, Raine.”

“Ahhh, it doesn’t matter. Come on, where are you at? I’ll come join you.”

“And you have to walk Evelyn home after class, don’t you?”

Raine had spent the last three weeks juggling both of us. I don’t know how she did it. She walked me to and from campus, and she walked Evelyn everywhere. She turned up after lectures and raced back home to pick whoever was alone. She split herself both ways and somehow never seemed to tire, on top of a part-time evening job behind the bar in the student union.

But over time, inevitably, she came to prioritise Evelyn. I don’t know if it was years-old habit, or merely because she thought Evelyn was in more danger, despite the intimacy she shared with me, intimacy I was certain she didn’t share with Evee.

Which is why I was off to browse books on my own, with only pneuma-somatic stalkers for company.

Raine paused for a long moment on the other end of the phone. In my mind’s eye I saw her struggling with the decision: keep it light, or get serious?

“Evee can wait in the Medieval Metaphysics room,” Raine said, choosing the latter as her voice hardened. “It’s not safe out on your own. Let me come get you.”

I sighed, a tightness gripping my chest. “Raine, it’s the middle of

the day. There are dozens of people around. Nothing has happened in three weeks. Nobody is going to clock me over the head in broad daylight. Go back to class.”

“You never-”

“Didn’t Evelyn already clear out the city centre?” I lowered my voice.

“Yeah, but-”

“Raine, I love it when you’re my knight in shining armour, but you don’t need to be right now.” Saying no to Raine was difficult. Refusing her care and attention and endless doting affection was not easy. I swallowed a hiccup. “I’ve got the charm in my pocket. It’s broad daylight.”

Evelyn had given Raine and I slips of stiff paper, stamped with a symbol very much like the Fractal, told us to keep them on ourselves. A sort of lock against wandering into another concealed entrance to the Cult’s shadow-city.

“ ... Heather, please?”

“I’m fine, I’ll be fine. I’ll be home in under two hours. Please relax. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, okay.” Raine’s tone made it clear she was fighting with herself. “Be safe, okay? Call me if anything happens. I’ll see you at home. Take care.”

We said goodbye and I ended the call; my mood was in the toilet. Tenny hovered nearby, peering at me. Pedestrians walked right through her.

The city centre *was* perfectly safe, nothing to be scared of. I believed every word I’d said to Raine, otherwise I wouldn’t be down here, but I still hated crowds.

I felt stiff and awkward out in public, around so many people,

already regretting the decision to do this alone even without the impact of Raine's worry. Even well-rested and together, cared for and sane, I was still a jittery mess.

Raine had first taken me down here two weeks back, to shop for clothes. That trip had been bliss.

We'd visited one of the bigger department stores together. Raine had coaxed me into trying on clothes I'd never normally have dared, things that felt like they weren't for me, weren't meant for somebody like me, were meant for people far more comfortable, not incomplete phantoms missing half their souls.

She'd bought me a high-waisted skirt and coloured tights – things I could never bring myself to wear in public – along with a new jumper and a wonderfully comfortable pink hoodie. Hoodies weren't me, let alone *pink* – or so I'd thought. Wearing it made me feel oddly self-conscious but also safe and enclosed, feminine and warm, ways I'd always wanted to be allowed to feel. Raine's gift helped me feel more like me.

I wore the hoodie now, under my coat for extra layers in the growing winter cold, along with one of Raine's tshirts against my skin, plucked still warm from her bed this morning.

Down the high street and off through a side road, past The Coachman's Arms and the tiny video game store where Raine knew the staff by name. Another turn, another, and then finally down an alleyway, thin and crooked and paved a hundred years ago.

All my trepidation and jitters fell away at the sight of Mount Emei Secondhand Books.

Sharrowford boasted three bookshops, if one did not count the obligatory student bookshop on the university campus, which mostly stocked overpriced set texts for naive undergrads such as myself. The big chain store in the shopping mall was too bright and too new, books crowded out by DVDs and endless special offers, colourful displays and unnervingly jolly staff. A charity bookshop sat like a boil at the top end of the high street, stuffed with the

dregs of popular hardbacks.

And then there was Emei, tucked away like a hidden gem. Raine had shown me it as a gift.

I had to duck slightly as I entered, the doorway cramped even for me. Tenny followed, whipping her tentacles in behind and then stilling at the atmosphere inside. Even a spirit felt this.

Emei Secondhand Books was a rickety four-story structure, carved out of what had once been a terrace tenement house a century ago. Bare wooden floors, leaning racks stuffed with all manner of books, low ceilings and narrow aisles. The shop smelled of incense and paper, dry and clean, despite the huge peace lilies and spider plants on every tilted creaking floor.

The owner was a tiny old Chinese lady made out of leather and steel wool. She could often be found pottering between the stacks, attempting to impose some order on this endless mass of texts. If you engaged her in conversation – as Raine had – one discovered a sharp mind and a dirty sense of humour. The lad behind the counter this morning, pierced and tattooed like a punk band front-man, nodded and smiled a hello to me as I shuffled inside, and I actually smiled back.

Heaven. Second only to the library.

I had little money to spare, but in here five pounds could net me two or three paperbacks. I figured I'd earned it, I'd earned a moment's respite from brain-math and horror and university essay writing. I'd be no good to Maisie if I burnt out.

I spent a lovely half-hour browsing through the books, discovering strange titles I'd never heard of, thumbing through fifty-year-old copies of classics with creased spines and dented corners. I found a second edition of *Watership Down* and almost purchased it right then, but forced myself to leave it behind for now and worked my way up the staircases, to the even more cramped fourth floor with the low ceiling beams and tottering stacks of specialist literature: religion and philosophy.

Raine would understand these books. Half of them went over my head. I plucked Hegel off a shelf and peered inside, lost in the text as a few other would-be antiquarians shuffled books and sniffed and departed back down the stairs to the lower floors.

My phone buzzed with a text message. Raine again.

‘Just got out of class. Please tell me you’re okay?’

Oh, she was so sweet it hurt. I felt terribly guilty. Now I’d had time to unwind, I questioned why on earth I’d done this, why had I come alone? I could have waited until later this afternoon, gone together with her. I loved doing things with Raine. Was this passive-aggressive behaviour on my part? Getting back at her for prioritising Evelyn?

It was, wasn’t it?

I need to apologise. In person. I sighed to myself and sent a reply, along with a quick picture of the row of philosophy books. ‘I am fine! All is well! Look what I found!’

A moment later, Raine sent me a huge ASCII art image of worried face. I almost giggled and felt even worse – it even looked a tiny bit like her. Had she made that?

As I puzzled over a reply, or perhaps a resolution to head home already, Tenny reappeared.

She’d followed me out of the stairwell onto to the fourth floor, but then she’d stalked off around the opposite side of the room, like an inquisitive dog sniffing for interesting scents. She’d vanished behind the shelves, perhaps to investigate the other customers in the bookshop or for some unfathomable ends of her own. I’d put her from my mind, but now I looked up as she slid around the side of the nearest bookcase.

“What do you think?” I whispered to her. “Shall I buy a book for Raine? A present to go with my apology ... ”

I froze.

Tenny was pointing back down the stairs with all her tentacles.

She bobbed and weaved her strange wiry body, staring at me with those huge deep-sea eyes, black tar-flesh quivering. One tentacle whipped over her head to point in the other direction, into the depths of the bookshop shelves, then whirled back to jab down the stairs.

“ ... oh that’s definitely communication,” I murmured, wide-eyed. “Hello you.”

I glanced around quick, made sure no other customers were close by. Tenny pointed again, the mass of ropey black tentacles retracting and bunching up like a squid before arcing toward the stairs.

“Trying to suggest a book I missed?” I whispered. “What do you-”

Tenny shook herself, tentacles flexing and vibrating. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have sworn she was expressing frustration.

She stepped closer to me than she’d risked in weeks and stuck out the tip of one tentacle. I blinked at her.

“You want to talk?” I said out loud, then caught myself and looked around again in embarrassed paranoia. Nobody had heard; nobody cared. She and I were alone in this corner, secluded behind a wall of old books. I smiled at my strange spirit stalker, almost delighted, confused at my own reaction. All my life I’d *hated* these things.

The centre of her chest split open into that black, lipless mouth I’d seen before, slapping and flapping. A drumming noise echoed from the limits of perception.

She flicked the tentacle-tip closer, all caution apparently abandoned. A dripping tarry black pseudopod, covered in suckers. Too shocked for disgust, I reached out a finger, fought with a

moment's hesitation, and touched Tenny.

Contact.

The distant drumming sharpened in time with the slurping of her chest-mouth, first into mere sound, sucking and wet like thick mud – then into words. Non-human words through a non-human mind. I waited a beat, but they made no sense, mud-words, tar-words, wet and liquid.

"I don't understand," I whispered.

"-person here master leave."

I blinked in shock.

"Bad follow person here master leave," Tenny said through the mouth in her chest.

It wasn't English, the shapes, the sounds, the motion of the mouth. But that was what I heard, in a slopping mud-voice, unmistakably feminine and – perhaps it was mere projection – in a tone which made me think of an eager hound.

"Bad follow person here-"

"I heard. I heard you," I whispered, my every nerve on edge.
"What- master? Me?"

"Bad follow. Leave. Leave."

My stomach tightened. The mere fact of communication had dazzled me; the meaning had sailed right over my head at first. I pulled my finger away from the tentacle and slowly looked around, peeking through the gaps in the shelves. How many other people were up here on the fourth floor with me? Two? Three? A blob of pneuma-somatic tar dripped from my fingers and turned to smoke as it hit the floorboards.

Tenny was jabbing and pointing down the stairs again.

What did she mean, ‘bad follow person’?

I inferred the worst.

Tenny’s suggestion was easily followed and cost me nothing, except peace of mind and a sliver of my sanity. I walked stiffly down the stairs to the third floor, holding the handrail the whole way. She brought up the rear, guarding my back.

Absurdity and paranoia. On the third floor I took a deep breath and steadied myself. Tenny could have been reacting to anything – another spirit, a person she didn’t like, a figment of her imagination. Could she imagine? Do tar-flesh spirits dream of pneuma-somatic sheep?

A couple of other customers were browsing the military history and cooking sections. A harmless grey-haired man and a rotund middle aged lady. I was in a bookshop, in the middle of the day. Nobody was following me, that would be absurd. I slipped between the shelves and glanced up at the books. In public. Perfectly safe.

Tenny was having none of it. She surged around me, bobbing and weaving like a pouting octopus made of tar and rubber. A tentacle-tip touched my shoulder.

“Bad follow. Bad follow.”

“What does that *mean*?” I hissed, mortified that somebody might hear me talking to thin air. I pulled down a book, cracked it open and stared at the words.

“Bad. Bad. Lozzie say get you out before find.”

“ ... Lozzie?” I blinked at my tentacled friend.

Why did I know that name?

Who was Lozzie?

Footsteps creaked on the stairs, descending from the fourth floor.

I kept my face buried in the book, forced myself not to turn and watch the doorway. A person entered, crossed behind me into the stacks. I waited a minute, then turned and left, shoulder blades crawling as I took to the stairs again.

Footsteps followed me, down to the second floor, then to the first.

Tenny was right.

I was being stalked.

conditions of absolute reality – 3.6

My beautiful retreat was violated. I left Emei Secondhand Books in a hurry, ignored the polite goodbye from the lad behind the counter as I rummaged for my phone with shaking hands.

Tenny backed out behind me.

Her presence offered a bizarre source of comfort, but I had neither time nor wit to stop and think about her. She hovered at my back, a good doggy, trying to hustle me on and protect me, though I knew she couldn't even touch anybody except myself. Moral support was better than no support.

Out in the alleyway, tripping over my own feet, I cast glances back at the cramped bookshop doorway. Any moment a monster would emerge, unfold itself like a blossoming nightmare, and see me. My chest wrenched tight and my hands quivered, I couldn't move fast enough, breath shaking in my throat.

In my panic, I'd turned the wrong way – away from the high street. Round a corner, down another alley, narrower and dimmer in the shadow of the buildings, between a dark-fronted jewelry store and an abandoned hairdressers.

Behind me: a grunt and a scrape of shoes on cobbles – footsteps, clacking fast, catching up.

Tenny surged out, tentacles wide, a cat making herself look big. I almost dropped my phone, fumbled and caught it again, clutched it to my chest and readied a scream.

Twil turned the corner, curly dark hair and stupid blue-and-lime coat and all. She hooked her thumbs into her jean pockets. I gaped at her.

“Yo, big H,” she said. “You know you’re being followed, right?”

“Yes!” I almost shouted. “By you! Oh my God Twil, you terrified me. Why didn’t you say something, you- you-”

“Not by me, you numpty. You’re being tailed by some skinhead bitch.”

My anger drained, along with the colour in my face. I hiccuped.

“W-what? Not you? F-following me?”

“Me?” Twil snorted a laugh. “If I wanted to stalk you, you’d never know I was there.”

Tenny was jabbing and feinting at Twil with her tentacles, blocking my view in the cramped cobblestone alleyway, a totally ineffectual attempt to menace a person who couldn’t even see her.

“Stop that!” I snapped. Tenny halted and bobbed back, tentacles drooping. She looked at me like a scolded dog.

Twil blinked.

“Not you, Twil,” I spluttered. “There’s somebody following me? There’s actually a person stalking me? You’re certain?”

“She’s been on your arse since the high street, followed you into that bookshop,” Twil said. “You didn’t notice?”

“I-I- sort of, yes.” I swallowed on a dry throat and peered over Twil’s shoulder. “She’s not- wait, you were following me too?”

Twil shrugged. “Well yeah, duh.”

Fresh fear crawled in the pit of my stomach.

I reminded myself what Twil was, who she represented; this teenage girl, short as me, with a face straight from a glossy

magazine cover, fluffy dark hair and a bad girl attitude stamped over a middle class accent – she could clothe herself in wolf-flesh at will. I'd seen her pull a steel chain apart with her bare hands and crack concrete with a kick. She'd recovered in moments from a laundry list of broken bones and in half an hour from magical torture. She'd fought monsters when Raine and I had fled, and could catch me in a second if I tried to run.

And I'd turned down a secluded alleyway.

Stupid, stupid Heather.

Raine had bought me one last present when we'd gone out shopping together. She'd purchased it without my input or knowledge, then given it to me back at the house, so as not to spoil our fun day out. About the size of an egg, made for a quick and easy thumb-grip with an accidental-press-proof button right in the middle. Disarmingly and disgustingly pink. She'd made me promise to carry the thing.

I shoved my shaking hand into my pocket and pulled out the personal attack alarm.

Twil's eyebrows climbed. "Woah, is that a tamagochi?"

"I ... sorry?"

She frowned. "Wait, what is that?"

"An alarm," I managed through my closing throat. "Why were you following me, Twil?"

Twil blinked through a moment of dumb incomprehension – then her face twisted, genuinely offended, mouth half open. "I- you- I can't fucking believe you. Fuck you, Heather. I played fucking rearguard for you and Raine, got my fucking head split open, hurt like a bitch, and you treat me like I'm- fuck. Fuck!" She spread her arms and swore some more.

"You were following me! Twil, you scared the piss out of me! I'm-" I

lowered the alarm. Twil did not possess enough guile to fake such outrage. "I'm sorry, okay? You terrified me."

Twil dialled back and frowned, then cracked a thin self-satisfied smile. "Yeah, I did, didn't I? Fair cop. I'm good at that."

I took a huge, shaking breath. "I-I still don't- just explain, okay? Why were you following me?"

"Caught Raine's scent in the high street, didn't I? I don't know yours well enough. Thought I'd come say hi." Twil sniffed the air as if to make her point. "Where is she anyway- oh. Ohhh." Her eyes lit up with a dirty smirk. "You're wearing, like, I dunno, one of her unwashed tshirts or something, aren't you?"

"I ... " I hugged my coat around myself. "I am. And that's none of your business."

"Aw, come on, that's awesome. I said you were her girl, didn't I? She made it official and-"

"Why are you here in the first place?"

Twil rolled her eyes. "Don't get like Saye with me, alright?" She pulled a plastic bag out of her coat pocket and showed me the contents: a video game box, still in the shrink wrap. "You try ordering stuff online in Brinkwood, dickheads'll nick any package left on your doorstep. S'why I come up Sharrowford, release day, innit?"

My head swam. I huffed with exasperation. "Right. Video games. And- and somebody is following me?"

"Yeah, some skinhead girl. Bloody criminal, Raine letting you go off on your own. This city's full of basket-cases and I figure you're like a lamp to moths or some shit. Look, I'm here now, you want me to help or maybe like walk you home or-"

My mind filled with high-pitched whine: skinhead girl. Shaved head. Rare enough. What were the chances of a coincidence?

“Heather? Yo, Earth to Heather? Come in, cosmonaut girl?”

I blinked at Twil waving a hand in front of my face. Tenny had moved to my side, protective but useless against real flesh and blood.

“Is-” I swallowed on a dry throat. “Is she still after me?”

Twil frowned at the very real panic on my face; or perhaps she saw the other emotion underneath, a feeling I couldn’t process yet, new and smoldering and hot.

“I dunno,” said Twil. “D’you wanna find out?”

“ ... what do you mean?”

Twil smirked again, dangerous and wolfish even without her transformation. She grabbed my hand. “I’ll show you some master hunting tricks in action. Come on.”

Despite everything Raine had once said about this crazy little werewolf, despite her very strict instructions to call her if anything happened, I let Twil lead me out of the alleyway, around a corner, and back into the high street among the afternoon shoppers. The crowd had thickened with groups of lads, young mothers with pushchairs, and a gathering numbers of secondary school kids. It was after three now, the schools had let out.

Twil was quick and snappy compared to my panicked confusion. She checked over our shoulders with casual ease and weaved through the crowd with apparently zero effort. She led me about forty feet up the high street and over a pedestrian crossing, toward the big department store wedged next to Sharrowford’s only indoor mall.

Squatting the open space before the department store and the mall, a very ugly and ill-considered piece of modern sculpture reached toward the sky, a fountain with a huge rotating steel ball planted on top, the size of a bus. No idea what it was meant to represent. Four

stone benches ringed the exterior, dotted with a couple of old men sharing a cigarette and some schoolkids making noise. Twil rounded one of the empty benches and turned to watch the way we came. She scanned left and right, moving her eyes more than her head.

Tenny caught up with us and crouched in front of me. A lone tentacle brushed my hand and a word reached my mind: "Leave? Leave?"

"I-I have to call Raine."

Twil frowned. "No time for that, gotta keep your eyes peeled. Come on, help me out here."

I stared at the moving flows of people. "Why- why here? Why not wait in the alley?"

Twil pointed all her fingers out at the crowds. "Sight-lines, duh. You can't see? This is the best place to watch for her, she can only come from there, there, or there," Twil pointed.

"... I don't follow."

Twil glanced sidelong at me, obviously unimpressed.

"I spend most of my life reading books, not environments," I said.

She shrugged. "Short version: we'll see her in a sec, cos' if she tries to go all the way around behind us, she'll risk losing your tail. Unless she's doing some weird magic shit." Twil muttered the last two words under her breath.

Waiting was impossible. My fingers itched, my head felt light with adrenaline. I glanced down at my phone, began to call Raine.

"Got her," Twil said.

"What? Where?" I expected her to point, but she just nodded vaguely, eyes fixed and staring hard.

“There.”

“Where?”

“Between the fat old guy with the awful shirt and the front of that coffee place. Right there, she’s looking up the street now. Amateur, totally lost us in the crowd.” Twil tutted and shook her head.

My blood froze; it was her.

Shaved head and whipcord tight. She was dressed differently from in the Willow House Loop, jeans and an open raincoat. Ears full of metal piercings, a tattoo crawling up the side of her neck. She turned and looked the other way down the street, not a subtle stalker.

“You know her?” asked Twil.

I swallowed, found I was shaking slightly, and forced myself to take a deep breath. “She tried to shoot Raine three weeks ago.”

Twil’s amusement did not linger. Her face darkened. “You serious?”

I nodded.

The Skinhead Girl turned and started up the street. At that angle, she’d miss us completely. She’d lost us. Twil turned and stared, wolfish predation in her eyes.

“Wanna fuck her up?” she muttered.

An unnameable, alien emotion burst into my chest in full colour. That woman, she’d tried to kill Raine. She’d very nearly succeeded, if not for my brain-math hell-magic that hurt my soul to use. I didn’t even know who she was, what she believed in, why she’d done it. She’d tried to kill Raine. I was afraid, almost shaking, but I’d lived with fear all my life, in a million different subtle shades and flavours. I lived fear inside out. It couldn’t stop me.

This was new.

Anger, bright and sparking.

“ ... yes,” I hissed.

= =

What's worse than being stalked?

Being bait.

Twil did the planning, quickly and without explanation.

I didn't fully trust her, but I also didn't have time to second-guess. The Skinhead was going to get away. She'd walk to the end of Sharrowford high street and disappear for another three weeks or three months, and then maybe she'd come back and I wouldn't have a convenient werewolf to sniff her out, and she would do something horrible to somebody I loved.

A small voice screamed panic in the back of my head, wailed that I needed to call Raine. I needed to call my knight in shining armour. I needed to get out of here, get back to the house – to home, and tell Evelyn what I'd seen. Call the cavalry and hide. Leave. Get Raine.

Instead I let a cultist werewolf girl tell me to walk down the street in plain view of a woman who'd tried to murder my lover.

“Try not to look back, it'll tip her off. Just walk straight into the place.”

“What if you're not- what if-”

“I'll be there ten times faster than you. Go, before she reaches the lights,” Twil hissed. She pushed me forward. I staggered, feet and legs resisting this insane plan.

Then I put my head down, crossed my arms, and walked.

The first part was the hardest, to the pedestrian crossing and over the road with the trickle of foot traffic, knowing that the Skinhead girl would notice me at any moment. She'd see me in profile and recognise me, turn to follow, stalk me. The moment one comes under the eye of a watcher is always the worst.

I realised, with a slowly dawning shred of confidence, that I'd done this before, dozens of times, Outside. I'd slipped below the notice of terrible things a hundred or a thousand times my size, had to hold my nerve and creep past the gaze of much scarier creatures than one murderous bitch.

At least that's what I told myself, as I turned my back on her line of sight and walked up the high street.

The pavement rose with a shallow incline, toward the cluster of roundabouts at the end of the high street. The shops thinned out and I took a left, exactly as Twil had told me, onto Grimmer Street. Fewer people here. Sad, leafless greenery wilted on a bank in the middle of the road. A multi-story car-park loomed in the middle distance.

A pub – The Dog and Duck – squatted another hundred paces ahead, tiny metal-latticed windows looking out between black beamwork and redbrick.

I'd never seen the place before. I walked up to the faux-rustic wooden door and pushed my way inside, over the scruffy old welcome mat and into the dark, warm interior, into the smell of stale beer and slate floor tiles. Shadows washed over me as my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. I'd been into pubs with my parents a few times, when they dared take their unstable daughter out for the occasional nice meal of fish and chips, and I had vague memories of much happier meals with Maisie too, gastropub beer gardens in summer evenings in the south.

The Dog and Duck was not a gastropub.

It was rough and dingy and smelly, stained by decades of tobacco smoke and spilt beer. A couple of grey weathered old men propped up the bar, watching a football match.

Twil sprang to her feet from the nearest table and grabbed my hand.

“H-how did you get here so fast?” I asked

“Ran, didn’t I?” She grinned, a touch smug. “She behind you?”

“I assume so. I didn’t turn around to look.” My shoulder blades itched. I stepped away from the door. Twil got the hint and hustled me deeper into the pub. The bloke behind the bar raised his eyebrows at us.

“You two want a drink?” he called.

“We’re waiting for a mate!” Twil called back with a wink and a real laugh in her voice.

“Fair enough,” the barman said.

He wouldn’t have been half as friendly if he knew what we were planning to do in his pub.

“Here, you sit there and watch the door,” Twil said when we reached the booth table furthest in back. She hopped onto the opposite bench – hard, uncomfortable wood – and slid down so her head was below the level of the backrest.

“What ... what are you doing?”

Twil rolled her eyes and smirked. “I’m hidden, duh. She’ll walk in, see you in the corner, and walk right up to you. Then I’ll clock her one and drag her out the back. It’s perfect!”

I lowered myself into the seat and pulled out my phone, hands still shaking and heart in my throat. My pulse was all over the place. The table stuck to my elbows, probably not cleaned in years.

“ ... I need to call Raine.”

“Yeah yeah, good idea.” Twil nodded.

A figure stepped through pub’s door and I almost jumped out of my seat and dropped my phone again. Black tar-flesh and waving tentacles; I breathed out and rubbed at my chest, adrenaline strong enough to make my heart hurt. Tenny stalked halfway toward us and then circled the pub’s tables, as if looking for the right angle to help me watch.

The moment I’d jumped, Twil had peered over at the door. Now she frowned at me as if I was crazy.

“What is your deal, anyway?” she said. “I never got to ask proper, before.”

“I can see spirits.”

“Like ... for real?”

“For real’,” I echoed carefully, then sighed and tried to steady my breathing. My chest felt tight and my head hurt. “I’m not cut out for this.”

“You gonna call Raine or what?” Twil asked.

“I ... yes. I’m going to be in enough trouble as it is without further delay.”

Twil frowned. “Trouble?”

“With Raine.” I waved her down and focused on thumbing open my contact list. Pitifully few entries – my parents, Raine, Evelyn, the university medical centre.

“She giving you shit?”

“What?”

“She’s treating you right, yeah? You and her are bumping uglies, aren’t you? She’s not like ... a shit, is she?”

“No, no, she’s perfect. I’m just an idiot, I-”

The Skinhead girl walked into the Dog and Duck.

To my surprise, I didn’t jump this time. Some buried animal instinct of self-preservation told me to stay very quiet and very still, though I was sat right in her line of sight.

“She there?” Twil hissed in a stage whisper. I nodded, cold sweat down my back, pulse racing in my throat.

The Skinhead girl glanced around the pub. Her gaze slid over me, uninterested. She nodded to the barman, walked over to him and spoke, dropping a few pound coins on the counter. He poured her a half-pint and slid a packet of crisps toward her.

“ ... what’s she doing?” Twil whispered.

“Uh ... ” I swallowed; could I be wrong? “At the bar. She’s got a drink.”

Twil squinted in confusion. “You sure it’s her?”

I nodded. It was the woman who had shot at Raine, no mistake. Flint-eyed and cold-lipped, body like a marathon runner, all hard corded muscle. She picked up her half-pint and turned toward me; eye contact at last.

Her gaze asked a silent question: are you going to run?

“Ah, fuck it,” Twil grunted.

Before I could say another word, Twil pulled herself up and leapt out of the booth, skidding across the tiled floor. The Skinhead girl took a step back, surprised and wary but not shocked. Twil straightened up and growled.

All eyes in the place – the barman and the two old men – turned to look at Twil, startled and blinking.

“Gotcha, slag!” Twil shouted at the top of her lungs. She grabbed a barstool and swung it wide.

The Skinhead girl bowled her beer at Twil’s head. Glass shattered, Twil howled, blood splattered across the floor and down her face, but it took more than a barroom glassing to slow Twil down. She wound up the bar stool and hurled it after the Skinhead, who was already fleeing for the door. Twil slammed outside in pursuit before the stool had even finished clattering to the floor. The barman and the two regulars gaped after them.

It was all over in seconds, so fast I couldn’t react. Tenny flowed over to guard me like a faithful hound, I had to squeeze and bumble past her to get out, almost tripping over my feet with panic as I trotted for the door.

“What the blazes was that about?” The barman called after me. “Hey, you need a hand, love? Want me to call the police?”

“It’s fine.” I hiccuped as I pushed my way back outside into the Sharrowford afternoon.

Twil was already a hundred meters down the road, feet slamming the pavement, heading the opposite way from the high street. The Skinhead girl slid out of sight ahead of her, ducking into an alleyway.

“Twil!” I shouted, suddenly scared to be left alone, even though it was the middle of the day and the busy Sharrowford high street was barely two minutes walk away. A few pedestrians glanced at me, at the crazy shouting girl in the middle of the street, but Twil didn’t look back – she chased the Skinhead into the alleyway.

I picked up my feet, a few hesitant fast steps, then a trot, then ran as best I could, clumsy and heavy-footed.

Twil was so fast, there was no way the Skinhead could escape. She'd catch her in that alleyway and then-

And then *what*?

The alleyway was empty except for some metal rubbish bins and back doors. Twil was already hurling herself out the other end. I called her name again, hoping any witnesses would ignore me as I slipped in after her.

Seconds, minutes, no clue how long the chase took; after the first few heaving breaths I lost track of both time and my body, struggled to haul myself around these backstreet corners and across roads stuffed with parked cars. We plunged between iron-fenced industrial lots and dark moldering office spaces.

I finally caught up with Twil as she was dropping down the other side of a tall spiked fence. The Skinhead girl sprinted away from her, deeper inside the industrial property they'd both broken into. She ducked around a corner and vanished.

No way I could follow in there.

"Twil!" I shouted again and ran up to the fence, but she was off at top speed, bouncing around the corner after the Skinhead. I caught a final flash of wolfish claw and wondered how she dare use her transformation out in public.

In public?

Heaving to catch my breath, lungs pumping like bellows, I turned on the spot. Redbrick walls and dark windows stared down at me, damp pitted concrete spotted with lichen and moss, secluded from the world outside. A tangled conjunction of back alleys and abandoned buildings converged here in a wider space. Tenny padded up to me and stared – apparently pneuma-somatic life doesn't suffer the vulgarity of an overtaxed respiratory system – but other than her and a few spirits on the rooftops, I was utterly alone.

And I had no idea where I was.

“Ah, oh God.” I put one hand on my aching chest and struggled to stay on my feet, reaching out blindly to grip the fence. “Twil, you idiot.”

Tenny nosed in closer. I raised my eyebrows at her.

“You think-” I started, then froze.

Running footsteps echoed down the tangle of alleyways, impossible to judge distance – then a young man burst into the little makeshift back-alley courtyard. He skidded to a halt at the sight of me, opened his mouth, and held up a hand.

He didn’t look threatening. Perhaps the same age as me. Perhaps a university student, with floppy hair and a compact build running to flab.

“Wait,” he said, pointing a shaking finger at me. “Wait right there, you, uh, just wait right there. You’re ... you’re not supposed to be here. Yeah, that’s right, you’re in trouble. Just stay there.” He spoke with a slight lisp. He held a phone up to his ear, call already connected. “I’ve caught up to her, what do I do?”

Unathletic and permanently exhausted, with a supernatural bruise throbbing in my chest, out of breath and terrified, I found hidden reserves at the sound of those words. I picked a direction, any alleyway out of the tangle, and hurled myself away from the fence, away from this man.

“Oi, fuck, I said stay put!” he yelled and barrelled after me.

He grabbed a fistful of my coat.

Physical struggle is difficult to control, unless one is trained, and trained well – or like Raine. One becomes an animal, pure instinct and adrenaline, kicking, hissing, biting, clawing, even if one is naturally timid. Or you go limp, you can’t believe it’s happening to you, too shocked to react.

Luckily, I turned out to be the former, but I barely recall the details.

He stopped me, yanked me back. Didn't hit me, but tried to hold me still, pin my arms. I gave him a bad time of it, I think, went for his eyes and his throat without thinking. He seemed reluctant to hurt me, awkward and unsure of himself at first.

Then he realised how much stronger he was than me, and started to laugh.

"Give it up, hey, he only wants to talk to you. I can't let you run off now, don't be stupid."

Like this was all some big joke, as he grabbed my wrists and almost pulled me off my feet. I think I screamed, kicking and pushing and trying to get him off me. I landed a flailing knee between his legs. He let out a noise like a steam-whistle and wasn't laughing anymore.

"Ooof, you fucking bitch, ow, Jesus Christ, fuck-"

He shoved me at the floor, sent me sprawling and pinned me down with a knee in my gut.

He was shouting into his phone when Tenny stabbed him in the head.

That I remember, very clearly.

She reared up behind him like an angry squid, tentacles bunched and arced back for a strike. Relief filled me, before despair as I remembered she couldn't touch him, couldn't touch any flesh, she was literally bodiless. She jabbed all her tentacles together at once, spikes and stingers and suckers passing right through the back of his skull like the touch of a ghost.

He jerked up and sneezed, shook his head. "What was that?" he blurted out.

Tenny's distraction gave me the split-second I needed to muster a

reaction beyond the pure animal – and to yank my arm free. I mashed my hand into his ugly, stupid face.

His eyes went wide.

“Oh shi-”

Hyperdimensional math slotted into place, a spinning puzzle box in my mind, ratcheting spikes of pain behind my eyes. My stomach clenched, my body rebelled, but with my brain I gripped the black levers of reality and twisted them toward my own ends, along the angles of extra-dimensional physics.

The man vanished.

Instantly I rolled over and vomited, spewed my guts across the concrete and felt a nosebleed run down my face, coughing and spluttering. My chest was on fire and my head pounded like an expanding ring of red-hot steel lay beneath the surface of my skull.

No time to whine, no time for pain.

With more effort than I’d thought myself capable of, I struggled to my knees, then to my feet. Retching and staggering, I wiped my bleeding nose on my sleeve. My hands shook, my chest shook, everything shook. I spat vomit-flavoured saliva onto the floor. Over everything, absurdly, I felt terrible about my new pink hoodie getting spotted with stomach acid and flecked with blood.

My vision throbbed, edged with black, and I had to keep squeezing my eyes shut. Tenny stared at me like a concerned dog.

“It’s okay,” I mumbled through numb lips. “It’s- it’ll b-be okay.”

I fumbled my phone out more by touch than sight, and curled up around my aching chest as I listened to the ring.

“Heather?” The sound of Raine’s voice down the phone almost made me sob. “Hey, you heading home? Everything-”

“Raine,” I whined her name, couldn’t stop myself. “I need help.” I snorted back the nosebleed, then staggered as weakness gripped my knees. Had to hold myself against the wall.

“Heather? What happened? Heather?”

“I’m ... I’m okay now, I’m okay. I had to ... I think I killed a man ... come get me, Raine? Please?”

“Where are you? Where are you exactly, right now?”

“I was- Twil showed up. It’s not- not her fault. It’s not. I-”

A hand plucked my phone from shaking fingers. Barely needed to fight me for it. I turned and gaped, so wracked with pain and nausea that I hadn’t even heard the footsteps approach. Raine’s voice, tinny and distorted, was carried away from me.

The Skinhead girl pressed the end call button.

She took a step back, away from me, beyond arm’s reach. We stared at each other, me bloody-nosed and wide-eyed, her cold and dispassionate.

“Heather Lavinia Morell?” she said. “My boss wants a word with you.”

conditions of absolute reality – 3.7

My phone buzzed in the Skinhead's hand. Raine calling back.

She took her eyes off me without much concern, rejected the call, and held down the off button. Perhaps she knew I couldn't run; my knees shook, my guts roiled, my head throbbed with pain in rhythm with my heartbeat. If I moved too fast I'd double over and vomit again.

“ ... g-give- give me that back,” I croaked.

She fixed me with a cold gaze again. Nothing behind her eyes. “Catch.”

I caught the phone, a miracle I didn't fumble and drop it on the concrete. I gripped it to my chest and stared at the Skinhead.

She kept her hands free, by her sides, rather than tucked away in her raincoat pockets, or in the grey athletic top she wore underneath. Tacky tattoos peeked out from her neckline – Chinese dragons and bat-wings and tribal swirls. Older than me, maybe late twenties, or perhaps prematurely weathered by hard living and bad luck. Even through the pounding in my head and the aftertaste of bile in my throat, senses dulled in brain-math aftershock, she radiated danger.

I felt it in my gut, an animal response to the thousand subtleties of musculature and poise. A dark twin to the way Raine looked in the moments before violence.

“Don't turn that back on,” she said softly.

“Why not?” I managed to sound a lot more brave than I felt.

She didn't answer.

Tenny had been content to hover next to me, her tentacles waving lazily in the air, no help at all, but now she began to creep across the pitted asphalt, on a trajectory to circle around behind the Skinhead. My eyes flicked to her back.

She'd stabbed that man in the head, hadn't she? No time to process what that feat implied, but I swallowed and prayed all the same. If she could land another distraction, maybe I could gather myself and ...

And run? I needed time, to recover. I'd just fall flat on my face.

The Skinhead followed my gaze, peered around and saw nothing, then glanced back at me with a tight professional frown.

"Right," she said, and took a step back.

Her body language blinked from passive threat to sudden motion. I flinched hard, coughed bile and blood in surprise. She reached into her raincoat and whipped out a small metal cylinder, shiny machined steel stamped with symbols that made my eyes hurt. A plug of black wax capped one end. She held it out at arm's length, pointing into open space, and dug her thumb into the wax seal.

A gap in the air poured from the end of the cylinder, like uncorking a bottle under pressure. A scribble, a tear in paper over an abyss, expanding as it unfolded itself from inside the tiny metal prison. Twitching and shaking, it stood up. Nine feet tall, knot-faced, knife-point legs and arms waving like seaweed in an invisible current.

The Scribble-monster. The thing that had been stalking Raine on the morning we met.

No, this one was smaller, slightly.

And far more purposeful.

No orders needed, it folded itself in the middle like a length of

intestine and jerked toward Tenny.

“No!” I shouted, fumbling with my left sleeve to expose the Fractal, to make the Scribble-thing go away.

I needn’t have bothered; Tenny burst open.

It was one of the most violent and disgusting things I’d ever seen a spirit do. Also incomprehensible. For a moment I thought she’d died, that the Scribble-monster had reached out with some invisible power and ruptured her like overripe fruit. But the process didn’t end, it grew and grew – and so did Tenny. Her tar-flesh boiled and bubbled over, iridescent globes growing on each other, popping and roiling, limbs and tentacles and eyes and mouths growing and dissolving at blinding speed in the protoplasmic mass. Thick chemical stench and a wave of biological heat washed over my face, made me squint and gag.

The transformation ended, quick-drying putty pulled to a new shape.

No longer a flat, lithe approximation of a human female, Tenny reared up as a chimera the size of a car, a dozen different animals melded together in tarry black imitation flesh, from snake-tail to lion-head, eagle-wings and goat-horns, a mantle of tentacles lashing above her.

Tenny and the Scribble-monster slammed into each other, slicing and biting, tentacles whipping and stabbing. It tore great slopping holes in her flesh, which closed with the slow, slick motion of cold tar. She ripped chunks from its limbs, sending them spinning and fading to ash in the air.

I shrank back and swallowed a scream, wincing and squeezing my eyes shut as they rolled together, two giant creatures tearing into each other feet away from me. Long-buried primal instincts made me want to hide, probably up a tree.

The Skinhead didn’t react – even when the pneuma-somatic fight rolled straight through her. She couldn’t see them.

Wide-eyed, hands over my mouth, I watched in sickening despair as the Scribble-monster drew Tenny away. She kept trying to circle back to me, but it threatened her at every turn, herded her down one of the alleyways leading out of this secluded tangle, until I lost sight of them. Rending and ripping sounds echoed down the pathways of the concrete jungle, the only evidence they were still hacking at each other.

“That’s taken care of your little helper, hasn’t it?” the Skinhead asked, her voice too soft for her face.

Hands numb, I groped for the personal attack alarm still in my pocket. I held it up, thumb on the button. “S-somebody will hear. We’re not in the wilderness, this is the middle of Sharrowford.”

She nodded slowly, utterly unmoved.

“Let me give you a piece of advice,” she said. “I’m the gentle touch. The good cop. The carrot.”

“W-what?”

“Your best option right now is to come with me, have a friendly little chat with the boss in a public place. Nothing else is gonna happen.” She inclined her head at the alarm in my shaking hand. “Or you press that button. You’ll get away today, sure. But he won’t be sending the gentle touch next time. You’ll get the bad cop. We know where you live, we know your daily routine. My boss will send the big stick to rip your front door off in the middle of the night, and the little chat won’t be in a nice public place. Or very friendly.”

A bluff? Even with all my faculties about me, I wouldn’t have been able to read her. I felt like hell, ready to vomit again more from fear than from the aftereffects of brain-math. I wanted to curl up around my chest and lie very still for several hours.

“I-I can zap you into another dimension,” I said. “You-”

"I know that. I'm not going to risk touching you. I'm not stupid." She made a show of glancing about. "I see Jake's missing. His fault for not following instructions. Shouldn't have tried to rough you up. No hard feelings, yeah?"

"What ... what happened to Twil?" I asked.

The Skinhead smiled, thin and dangerous. The expression failed to reach her eyes. "The Brinkwood werewolf? She's not as good a hunter as she thinks. She's not coming to help you."

I swallowed and tried very hard not to believe her. "A ... a public place?"

"Food court in the shopping centre. Public place, like I said, for a little talk."

At the very least, I had to stall for time; Raine knew I was in trouble. She'd have a hell of a job finding me crammed in this back alley. The shopping centre was in full public view. And the more I moved around the better chance of Twil catching my scent.

I nodded and levered myself up off the wall. "O-okay. But if you try anything, I'll grab you and-"

A wave of dizziness passed over me. I snorted back more nosebleed, coughing and spitting crimson bile onto the floor.

"Fucking hell." The Skinhead extracted a packet of tissues from a pocket and tossed them at me. "Clean yourself up."

= =

She wasn't a liar, at the very least.

The Skinhead led me back to the high street and down the road, to the glass-and-chrome entrance to Sharrowford's only shopping centre, the unimaginatively named 'Swanbrook Mall'. Fake marble

floors and shiny open shop-fronts and – this time of day – clumps of teenagers hanging about, for want of anything else to do.

She maintained a safe distance from my side, beyond arm's length, so I wouldn't be able to lunge and grab her, send her spinning off into the horror of a trip Outside. Not that I could have lunged or leapt. Every scrap of my energy was consumed in putting one foot in front of the other. Adrenaline and willpower held my body upright, knees weak, head still pounding, the taste of vomit in my mouth. I'd wiped the worst of the blood from my face. Nobody gave me a second look, a depressive college girl with her arms crossed and her head down.

I knew I could have refused, stood still and not walked another step; public place, she couldn't do anything. But then we'd lose her, lose her 'boss', and they'd come for us in the middle of the night and that time I might not be fast enough or well enough or in the right place at the right time.

I snuck glances over my shoulder, hoping and praying that Twil would find me again, or Raine would come around a corner and save me, or even that Tenny would roll up, disgusting tentacle-mass and all.

We took the escalators up through the shopping centre, past clothing shops and half-empty music stores, gaudy kiosk stands and glitzy displays. I'd always hated malls. Crass, consumptive, pointless modernity. Anonymous, bland, meaningless. I could think of no better place to meet such horrible people.

We emerged onto the top floor, the food court, strangely empty for this time of day. A few tables were semi-occupied near the most popular fast food places, but most of it lay empty and open, echoing and bright beneath the huge glass skylight roof, ceiling criss-crossed with metal supports, exterior covered in bird droppings and green scum.

The Skinhead stepped past me without a word, and made for the back of the food court, a dead-end with a trio of shuttered and failed food outlets. At first I didn't follow, so she stopped and stared

at me.

“We’re almost there,” she said. “No sense in turning back now.”

I nodded and followed, and told myself I could run whenever I wanted.

A lie, I could barely walk.

The last store in the dead-end row was a fancy coffee shop, named ‘Iluskov’, according to the shiny yet unlit sign above. It was closed, metal security shutter three-quarters down, the inside mothballed and emptied and left to gather dust, chairs stacked on tables, containers and racks empty behind the counter.

The lights were on, a lone table cleared and wiped clean, chairs laid out. A single steaming cup of coffee stood at the edge of the table.

Two people waited inside.

One was the Tall Woman in the trench coat, wrapped from head to toe like before. Only her eyes showed. She lounged in a empty booth, spread out and relaxed, feet up on the table, so tall she didn’t fit properly. She didn’t bother to look at us, lost in some private place behind those dead eyes, or perhaps incapable of independent thought.

The other person met my eyes and smiled.

“Please, do come in,” he said. “There’s plenty of free seating.”

The misplaced librarian. The young man from the standoff in the underground car-park. He sat at the clean table, hands folded before him.

My unwanted Skinhead companion lifted the metal security gate up by a couple of feet, then nodded to me. “Inside. Duck under.”

I hesitated; this was rapidly becoming very much not a public place.

“There is nothing be afraid of,” the man said, pleasant and reasonable, the voice of a junior professor or a good psychiatrist. “Miss Stack should have taken the time to explain that to you. Did you not do so, Amy?”

“I did,” the Skinhead said.

“Then there is no problem. You will come in. You will sit down.”

The Skinhead – Amy Stack, he’d called her – glanced back the way we’d walked. With a spark of hope in my chest, I followed her gaze, but nobody was there. No Twil. No Raine. No Tenny.

“Best not to keep him waiting,” she muttered, so only I could hear.

I blinked at her.

“Get inside,” she said out loud.

I did as I was told, ducked down and straighted up again inside the half-empty coffee shop. The motion and effort made my head throb and my vision swim. Stack followed me and pushed the security gate back down, almost to the floor. The Librarian gestured to a seat opposite his own.

“Please. You will sit.”

Heart in my throat, hands numb, almost unable to move my feet, I walked across the coffee shop and steadied myself on the back of the chair.

“Don’t move the chair,” said Stack. “Just sit down.”

The Librarian tutted. “Amy, Amy, your concern for me is most laudable, but I hardly think it’s warranted. This is no interrogation, or unpleasant confrontation. We are merely having a nice little afternoon chat.”

“You’re not immune, sir.”

I realised what she meant – the chair intended for me was placed at the limit of lunging range, grabbing range. A safe distance from my power to send him Outside.

A battered spark of confidence sputtered to life, and forced back the fear and violation.

They were cautious of me.

They knew what I could *do to them*.

But they didn't know I was spent. One defensive brain-math use was about my limit, as I was rapidly discovering from how weak and shaky I felt, how ready to curl up and sleep. I could send him Outside, but I'd probably pass out or choke on my own sick afterwards. Or his minions would carry me off. Or just kill me.

"Please. You will sit," said the Librarian.

I lowered myself into the chair, smoothed my coat over my knees, and tried to control my breathing, control the terror. I risked a side glance at the Tall Woman in the trench coat, her huge, powerful body at rest like a predatory big cat. She'd tried to kill Raine too, but right now I felt no pressing need to confront her. Stack took up station by the security shutter, hands behind her back.

"Amy," the Librarian said. "Where has Jake gotten himself to?"

"He got handsy with her. Was gone by the time I got there."

"Ahhh." The Librarian turned to me. "I shall assume he is beyond punishment?"

I nodded once, tried to make myself seem cold and uncaring. I had zero time right now to think about how I'd probably killed that man.

"I hold you no ill-will for that," he said. "Jake was merely a first stage initiate, of little importance. My subordinates should know better than to have manhandled you." He turned back to Amy with

an indulgent smile. “You took longer than expected.”

“Ran into the werewolf. Sent her off chasing her own tail. Had to pop the Geist as well.” Amy nodded toward me. “She was protected, up-close.”

“Really now? How fascinating,” the librarian said as he looked at me. “In time I absolutely must hear all about it, all the little details, but first – coffee? I have taken the liberty of selecting a brew for you. I believe I know your tastes.”

I eyed the steaming cup on the edge of the table and folded my arms across my chest. Sitting straight was very difficult, my chest hurt so badly, but I forced myself to stay upright. “No, thank you.”

“Oh, you think we’ve drugged it. Very smart. Very sensible.”

I just stared at him.

“You do not know my name,” he said. His expression burst into a smile of genuine delight and pleasure.

His face was shiny, young, chin perfectly shaved, his head of tousled blond hair thick and recently cut. Dressed in a suit with patched elbows, waistcoat and tie; a long coat lay over the back of a nearby booth. He fussed with one of his shirt cuffs as he smiled at me. He made me feel sick. I wondered if this was what Raine would call a ‘punchable face’.

I had the distinct impression I recognised him, but I couldn’t work out why.

“Heather Lavinia Morell. Nineteen years old, almost twenty,” he said. “Born on the seventeenth of January. Parents’ names are Samantha and Gregory. Your father is a minor engineer for Network Rail. Your mother is a bank clerk. You have no siblings and no other close family to speak of, though you briefly knew your maternal grandfather before he died of a heart attack when you were six. You spent three years in and out of Cygnet Children’s Hospital in London between the ages of ten and thirteen, but you

did attend school, and went on to complete your A-levels – one A and two Bs – and are now a student of English Literature, at our fine university here in Sharrowford.”

He smiled as he went, satisfied and sickly-warm. A cold hand of violation crept up my back.

“How do you know all that?” I murmured.

“Knowledge is open to any who know how to ask. Was I correct? I was, wasn’t I? I do so love to be correct, I-”

He cut off and blinked once.

He was wrong about one thing; I was not only child. I clutched Maisie to my chest, to my secret heart, and loved her all the more.

“How can I be wrong?” he demanded. His good humour crumbled into confusion. “How can I wrong about even a shred of that? Which fact was incorrect? You will tell me.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“You *will* tell me.”

A tug in the forefront of my brain. My mouth opened. “I have a-” I bit down and winced, blinking at him in shock.

“Ah, you resist. You would be good at that, yes. Skilled, perhaps. I have misplayed my hand.” He sat back, jovial and warm once more. “Very well, you have scored a point, and it is to my shame. My name is Alexander Lilburne, and my business is the total liberation of the human mind.”

He paused, as if expecting a response. I gave him none.

“Now, if you would be so kind,” Alexander continued. “Please inform me as to which aspect of your life I have catalogued incorrectly? I am so maddened by inconsistency, you see. We cannot get down to business before such matters are cleared up and

I have you placed firmly in your correct context.”

“Stuff your context,” I managed.

He smiled and laughed, a soft, blubbery sound. “Now now, there is no need for that. I am not going to do anything nefarious with your secrets. I have no need for blackmail, and you have nothing worth taking. I-”

“You don’t know anything about me,” I hissed. “I’m not an only child. I have a twin. And you can’t have her name.”

Alexander frowned, deeply puzzled. “You do not. A lie. Why lie to me?”

“It’s not a lie!” I almost shouted. I wanted to hit him. I’d never wanted to hit anybody before.

“ ... no, no, I can see that, it is merely a truth you believe. But the records do not attest to a sister, let alone a twin.” He sighed and spread his hands. “I do so detest dealing with the mentally ill.”

“I’m not ill. Go to hell.”

“I probably shall, but not for many years yet. Let us agree that you believe you have a sister, and leave it at that.”

I glowered at him, my fear almost overrun with hate, almost able to forget how much danger I was in. He’d dredged up the one thing I’d protect above all others.

“Now, let us move to far more intriguing personal matters. Lavinia. *Lavinia*.” He rolled his tongue over my middle name, savoured the sound. My skin crawled. “Do you ever go by your middle name, Lavinia? You should consider doing so. It is a saint’s name, among what passes for the world of secret truths. The name of a saint and martyr, though ancient history now, and completely unrelated to you or us. I wonder if your parents knew. Doubtful, of course.”

I had to keep stalling, but every word he spoke deepened my detest.

He liked the sound of his own voice. I swallowed and forced myself not to grit my teeth.

“What do you want?” My voice came out tighter and harder than I’d intended.

Alexander laughed again, that deep, rubbery sound. “Oh, but that is not the question, that is not the question at all, Lavinia. The question is, what do *you* want?”

He opened a hand toward me and waited, invited an answer.

A rhetorical trap.

I could take an educated guess at his thought process, and it made me angry. He sat there assured that he knew everything, in a secluded private place with a naive and terrified nineteen year old girl he was about to browbeat and talk over. My next line was obvious: ‘I want you to leave me alone, I want to go home’, so and and so on. I refused to snatch the bait.

“A million pounds,” I hissed.

Alexander blinked, then smiled that sickening smile an inch wider. “Is that your price, Lavinia? Do not undervalue yourself. On the other hand, if that is a serious answer, I believe we can come to an agreement of cash payment.”

“ ... what do you mean?” I frowned at him, off-balance.

“You see, you are a unique thing.” He spread his hands. “Or at least very close to unique. I personally know of only one other person in the entire world capable of doing as you do, of operating reality with your mind, but she is unfortunately far beyond the event horizon of her own sanity. Quite apart from your potential value to my organisation, I wish to understand, in every part and every way, how you do what do you. We are willing to pay any price, fulfil any desire, to have you join us. Name it, please. Name your price, Lavinia.”

“Another ... another person capable of ... ” Another person who could do what I do? Another brain-math savant? Another victim of the Eye? I opened my mouth, but I would not speak Maisie’s name to this man.

“Please, Lavinia, don’t concern yourself with that. My younger sister is much like you, but not with your clarity of mind and-”

He went on talking. Not Maisie. Nothing to do with Maisie.

“- and I am serious when I say *name your price*. Let us open negotiations, see what we can do for you.”

He disgusted me.

“You people tried to kill Raine.” I glanced at Stack.

Alexander raised his eyebrows in polite interest. “Who?”

“My ... ”

“Saye’s minion,” Stack supplied quietly.

“Ah, yes, the Saye family. You’ve been spending your time with the daughter, associating with her in public, visiting that sad old house. Learning from her too, no doubt. Evelyn is her name, I believe, but that is a fact not worth knowing. Now, her mother, I knew her mother very briefly. Brilliant woman. Her death was a terrible loss to our world.”

“Raine is not Evelyn’s minion,” I said. “She’s her friend. And my girlfriend.”

I glanced again at Amy Stack, let her see what was written beneath my face. If being scared was useless, I may as well hate. She frowned ever so slightly, as if she’d begun to work out what I meant.

“You should hardly be wasting your incredible potential on the Saye girl,” Alexander continued. “However pitiful and sympathetic

her condition has rendered her, she can do nothing for you. She is at best a dabbler, running a – what did my uncle call it, Amy? He used such a colourful phrase.”

“A Mickey Mouse operation, sir.”

“Yes!” Alexander slapped his knee in delight, as if this was a hilarious joke. “A Mickey Mouse operation, indeed. The old man has it in him yet, not quite all spent. Unlike Miss Evelyn Saye.”

“Stop.” I bit back, as much from the throbbing pain in my chest as from fear. Alexander waited for me to continue. I had to take a deep breath. “Stop insulting my friends.”

“Insulting?” He frowned gently, pursed his lips as if talking to a naughty child, and shook his head. “You misunderstand. I am merely offering objective critique of her situation – and by extension, yours. Saye can offer you what exactly? A bed under her dubious roof. Some musty old books. I, on the other hand, am here to offer you and your unique talent a place in an organisation with a future, with human liberation at its core. I, my uncle, and a few other like minded sages, have embarked on the greatest project in human history. I need brilliant minds and shining talents, and I am asking you to name your price, Lavinia.”

“Stop calling me that,” I snapped. He smiled and opened a hand toward me, so very reasonable.

“Everybody has a price, secret desires even I cannot divine. You must tell me. See what we can do for you. Money? We have money, more than you can imagine what to do with, I’d think. Enough to solve any lifelong problem. We can give you power, of various sorts. Knowledge of magic, magic itself. Sex? I take it you are some kind of ... sexual deviant.” He smiled a horrible rubbery smile. “A willing, pliant partner, multiples of such, if-”

“The only thing I want is my sister back.”

Alexander sighed. His smile collapsed into dull unimpressed boredom. “An impossibility. You never had a sister-”

“I do.”

“Be reasonable now. Try to understand the magnitude of the offer I am making. We can do almost anything to satisfy your desires, and this is not an offer we extend to many. Ask Amy there. Amy, do tell Lavinia why you are with us, what we offered you?”

Stack – the ice-cold Skinhead – hesitated. “Sir, do you really-”

“You will tell her.”

She sighed. “Purpose. That’s all they gave me.”

“All we gave you,” Alexander echoed. Behind his amused smile lay power offended. “Indeed. So you see, Lavinia, we offer you so much more.”

A strong suspicion entered my mind: I was not getting out of here, he would not take no for an answer. I’d never before encountered a person so comfortable in the position and appearance of power, but I knew exactly what he was, because I’d encountered plenty of things like him that weren’t people.

This was exactly like being Outside, like a Slip. I had to stall and hide, wait with my breath held in perfect stillness, behind a outcropping of rock, for the gaze of some vast intelligence to grow bored and turn away from me.

I hid.

I drew myself up in my seat and raised my chin, put on all the airs and mannerisms of Evelyn at her most offended and self-righteous. The effort was staggering, to ignore the creaking aches and pains in my wracked body, the swimming vision, the throbbing head. I unfolded my arms, opened up that last line of physical defence. I tapped my knee with one hand as I let the other wander to my chin, an ostentatious display of thought.

How I pulled it off, I don’t know. Fear, adrenaline, the needs of the

moment. Or perhaps my friends had rubbed off on me enough that I felt the tiniest sliver of what I pretended.

“Who is *we*?” I asked.

Alexander raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth, but I had to really sell this, put on a show.

“I’m being offered a job, basically?” I spoke before he could, and kept most of the quiver out of my voice, screaming inside. “I’d like to know who I’d be working for. You’re cultists, right? The Sharrowford Cult.”

“Cult? What a quaint word. I’m afraid Miss Evelyn Saye has been reading too much of Mister Lovecraft. The real world does not offer us such simple and neat definitions. Are we a cult, Amy?”

“Most certainly, sir.”

“Well, there you have it, we are a cult. From the horse’s mouth. I much prefer to think of us as a sort of practical research group, plumbing unseen depths.”

Stack cleared her throat gently. “Brotherhood of the New Sun.”

Alexander’s amusement vanished in a dash of cold water. He almost rolled his eyes, but appeared to catch himself at the last moment. “On second thought, perhaps we should refrain from using the old man’s terminology too much, yes? Lavinia, please, think of us as a brotherhood of like-minded explorers in secret matters.”

I committed his every word to memory, because I was going to help Evelyn kill this man.

Keep hiding, *keep hiding*.

“Hasn’t Evelyn been giving you a run for your money?” I said. “She’s been messing up your closed loop spaces and invading your shadowside city. She’s going to stamp you out soon enough. She’s set on killing you all. I think she will.”

Alexander chuckled and waved a hand in dismissal. "Saye has been making her problems our problems, I will admit. It's such a parasitic way to live. But no, her efforts have been totally useless. Nibbling away at the edges, really? She has no idea of the kind of work we're doing and she's not even close to disrupting us."

"And what is it you've been doing in Sharrowford, with these ... closed loop spaces?"

"Ah. Ahhhh." Alex smiled broad and warm, waved a finger and tutted. I didn't like the look of that at all. My stomach clenched up. "I see what you are up to, Lavinia. Very clever, very clever, but you are dealing with an adult here. You have to make a commitment before such details can be shared."

"I-"

"And if you are that eager, perhaps a one-way tour of our work is in order. There are such sights, waiting just on the other side of the air itself." He waved a slow hand above the table, then gestured to Stack. "Amy, I do believe our guest is going to come with us. Prepare the entryway, if you would be so kind. And make sure that thing is awake." He nodded at the Tall Woman in the trench coat and then smiled at me again. "We have been building quite a project. You are going to have contributions to make."

I'd gone too far.

Time to leave.

Time to Slip.

My heart hammered in my throat and my stomach rebelled at the mere thought, but it was the only option I had left; I'd been preparing myself this entire time, in the back of my mind where I didn't have to look at what I had to do. A gamble, yes, that I'd be spat out somewhere I could be safely unconscious in a pool of my own blood and sick for hours – but Slipping on purpose was better than being kidnapped by insane cultists led by a cut-rate Patrick

Bateman wannabe.

The first layer of impossible math slid into place in my mind. I winced.

A black tarry figure stepped into my peripheral vision, in front of the coffee shop – and then straight through the metal security gate.

My heart lit up. I slammed the math to a halt.

Tenny.

I forced myself not to look at her, not to give the game away as she stepped across the half-empty coffee shop, around the stacked chairs, tentacles waving in the air like a halo of tar. She was back to normal size, vaguely humanoid once more.

Nobody else could see her, but if she could just-

The Tall Woman sat bolt upright and stared right at Tenny.

“Zheng?” Alexander snapped. “What is it?”

‘Zheng’ did not answer. She stared like a pointer dog, then turned with robotic slowness, to regard Alexander with her dead eyes.

Stack backed up from the security shutter, suddenly alert and tense. “It’s her Geist again, I think. Ours couldn’t do for it.”

“T-there’s nothing there,” I said. I made a show of glancing around, but my carefully constructed front fell away at the prospect of help. My hands were shaking, my throat tight.

Tenny was not whole; the fight with the Servitor had taken great chunks out of her tar-flesh, rough wounds, the edges reaching toward each other in a struggling effort to close. Several tentacles had been torn off or severed, stumps wagging in the air and dripping ichor. She stared at me and stalked closer.

“Zheng,” Alexander repeated, harsh and angry, going red in the

face. “Answer me.”

Zheng just stared. He snapped off a series of hard, guttural words, some ear-aching non-human language.

“Small. Unimportant,” Zheng said from behind the scarf wrapped around her face. Her voice was like granite.

“Get rid of it then.” Alexander made a shooing motion with one hand. “Throw it outside.”

Zheng rose to her feet, mechanical and slow. A horrible sight, to watch so much muscle and tendon in motion. She was a giant, she could pull a human limb from limb, and I didn’t need to see a demonstration to know that. To be so close was to be in the presence of death. She didn’t need to expose more than her eyes to prove that. Stack shrank back too, impossible to resist the intimidation.

“But-” I said.

Zheng rounded on Tenny and grabbed her by the throat, living flesh touching pneuma-somatic life.

“No!” I cried out.

Tenny writhed and jerked, as surprised as I was, kicking as Zheng lifted her bodily off the floor. Her tentacles lashed, battering at Zheng’s head and shoulders, rearing back to strike – and bouncing off. Tenny made no sound but Zheng rumbled like a rock slide in her throat. Laughter or a growl, I couldn’t tell.

“Throw it outside, Zheng, don’t play with your food,” Alexander said.

“No, you can’t! You-”

“Found you,” came a whisper of snowflakes on winter wind.

All eyes – except perhaps Tenny’s – snapped to the front of the

coffee shop.

Praem stood in front of the metal security shutter.

Praem One or Two, I couldn't tell, because Evelyn had changed her clothes again, into a practical windbreaker and a pair of jeans, ice-blue hair tucked up out of the way in a ponytail. She stared straight ahead with those blank white eyes.

"Naughty puppies," she said.

My heart leapt.

"What is that? Who is that?" Alexander said, standing up, and raising a curious eyebrow at Evelyn's wooden demon-host. Zheng had half-lowered Tenny, who was still scratching and flailing at her side.

Praem continued her perfect refrain. "Huff and puff and blow your house down."

She wrapped one hand worth of ice-blue fingers around the security shutter.

"It's locked," Stack said to her. "You can't get in. Go away, this is a private-"

Praem pulled upward. Metal snapped and bent and the locking mechanism gave way with a tortured screech. The security shutter rolled upward.

I hurtled out of my chair so fast I thought I'd snapped a rib, my chest wrenched so badly inside, heaving with the effort of pushing my shaking carcass at sudden speed. I slipped and skidded and cracked my hip off a table. Amy reached for me, braced for a tackle. I stuck out a hand toward her, my intent plain, enough to make her hesitate. Praem took a step inside the coffee shop, coming to meet me halfway.

"Zheng, hold her still," Alexander said in a bored drawl.

Zheng dropped Tenny and came for me.

One second of being chased by that giant of a woman almost made me lose control of my bowels. A screaming animal fear gripped every cell in my body. I stumbled back and tripped over a chair, sprawled and cracked my head off the ground, scrambling away and choking down a scream.

She was *too big* as she loomed closer, *too fast* as she leapt a table, *too strong* as she rounded on me. Praem was strong, she was a demon, she was under Evelyn's remote command, but this, this monster was beyond anything I'd seen this side of reality. She reached down toward me with one gloved hand. Why wasn't Praem helping? I cringed back, following an instinct to make myself small, curl up into a ball, hide, go away, go away!

Zheng's head snapped up. She snatched her hand back. Jerked away.

Too slow.

Wolves are generally not ambush predators, but Twil made it work.

From her hiding place just around the corner of the coffee shop entrance, Twil exploded like a cannonball. She kicked Zheng in the face with enough force to shatter steel. The giant zombie-woman went flying, crashed into tables and tumbled over the back of a booth. She landed with a splinter of breaking wood, in a tangle of limbs and chairs, face down.

"How you like that payback, huh?" Twil shouted. "That's what you get, bitch!"

conditions of absolute reality – 3.8

Zheng did not stay down.

No living thing should have moved again after that kick to the face. I was clutching at the pain inside my chest, struggling and slipping to get my feet underneath me – when her arm twitched. One hand jerked up from the pile of splinted furniture, and grabbed the back of a booth. Surely her face would be pulped, I thought, bones shattered inward and eye sockets pulverised, jaw broken and teeth lost. She was just a puppet, right? The only reason she still moved was her strings.

The zombie heaved herself to her knees and raised her head.

Not even bruised.

Twil's kick had twisted her scarf, now scuffed with boot-print, and finally knocked down her hood, to reveal a mop of greasy dark hair. She stared past me, dead eyes boring into Twil.

“Come on, up, get up,” Twil grunted. She dragged me to my feet, hands under my armpits. I staggered and clung to her, gasping for breath as my head swirled.

Praem took a step in front of us, her pose still perfectly prim and proper. Tenny, dripping black tar from her wounds, scrambled up and over to my side, jabbing a few afterthought tentacles at both Zheng and Stack, touching neither.

“Ahhh.” Alexander smiled with the satisfaction of a man who knows he will always win in the end. He opened a hand to Twil. “The bestial provincial. Have you come for a rematch, perhaps? I think you will find us all amply prepared this time. Zheng, if you please, put this thing out of its misery at last.”

Zheng did not move.

“*Zheng*.” Alexander clicked his fingers at her. She turned her head to him. Blinked once. “Pay attention when I speak to you.”

“Boss,” Stack raised her voice, sharp and quick. “That made a lot of noise. This isn’t the strip, we’re in public. We need to-”

Praem walked smartly over to the wall, raised one precise finger, and pressed the regulation mandated fire alarm button, set in its neat square of red plastic.

A deafening siren wail burst across the entire shopping centre for three seconds, deep and echoing and electronic, then cut out, replaced by a smart female voice booming over the mall’s public-address speakers: ‘Attention please. Attention please. This is a fire alert. Please make your way calmly to the ground floor exits.’ Sirens thundered for another three seconds, then the recorded message again, on a loop.

Twil stuck two fingers up at Alexander, howling laughter over the din of the fire alarm. He ignored her, barking words at Zheng, no response from her except that dead-eyed stare.

“Boss,” Stack said. “We need to leave.”

Alexander’s surface irritation dissolved into a bored shrug. He nodded at Stack and gestured vaguely toward us. She frowned at him, frowned at Twil and I, then frowned at Praem as the bound demon put herself directly in the way.

Stack nodded once, body language shifting.

She reached inside her raincoat and produced another cylinder, very much like the one she’d used to summon the Servitor, cold metal stamped with painful symbols. She feinted to Praem’s left, then ducked right, her arm arcing out to touch Praem with the cylinder.

Even flush with adrenaline and clinging to Twil and deafened by the alarm, I could make an educated guess what might happen to Praem if that device made contact. I tried to cry a warning, but choked on my own spit, spluttering and coughing.

I needn't have bothered.

Praem caught Stack's forearm as it came, one hand on wrist, one hand on elbow. Stack's eyes wide went for a split-second as she began to pull away, to twist into some judo throw that would send Praem flying.

Without apparent effort, Praem snapped the woman's arm.

Stack didn't scream, but otherwise the transformation was instant. She gasped, her face drained of colour, waxy and ashen. The metal cylinder with the horrible symbols clattered to the floor. Praem let go and backed quickly away, toward us. Stack crumpled up around her broken forearm, half of it pointing the wrong way, the wrong angle. She tried to touch it, sinking to her knees, squeezing her eyes shut and gasping in tightly controlled pain.

Alexander watched us go, an unimpressed curl to his lips. Twil flipped him off again on the way out.

Zheng was still staring at her master. Dead eyes bored into his back.

= =

Extracting me from Swanbrook Mall turned into a debacle all by itself, even without the Cultists and the giant zombie-woman and the random acts of grievous bodily harm. Despite being barely half-full, the shopping centre turned into a shoulder-to-shoulder scrum, people trying to get out. The fictional fire and the bleating alarm whipped the crowd into one heaving mass, a single panicked beast with thousands of limbs.

Staying on my feet took every ounce of effort I had left, let alone

fighting the weakness in my knees or the throbbing pain in my head. Twil all but dragged me as I clung to her, and once we made it out of the food court the flow of people threatened to pull us apart, two shorter than average teenage girls crushed and buffeted by the press of bodies. Praem vanished somewhere in the melee, lost ahead or behind us, and we didn't find her again until we tumbled out of the ground floor exit onto Sharrowford's main high street.

Half the road had stopped to gawk, traffic at a crawl, blocked by a fire engine parked across the pavement. Shopping centre staff and a fire crew and a couple of uniformed policemen directed people out of the building, counting shop worker heads. People were crying, some lads were laughing it all off, several others filmed the spectacle on their phones.

I had to stop to be sick on the pavement.

Twil and I had no trouble slipping away in the general mayhem. Nobody missed two teenage girls, one obviously overstimulated by panic, in need of a proper sit down for her hysterics.

Occasionally, stereotypes can work in our favour.

Tenny caught up with us shortly after Praem, ghosting out of an alleyway as we turned the corner at the top of the high street. I flinched as she appeared, not exactly difficult to startle right now. She waved her tentacles at me in a back-and-forth fan pattern; laughter or relief, or a victory dance? I had no spare energy to think. I managed a nod of thanks at her, and hoped she'd understand somewhere inside that alien mind.

None of us said anything until we cleared the cluster of roundabouts, passed the little redbrick industrial district, and found ourselves halfway down one of Sharrowford's pitiful attempts at leafy suburb.

"Those utter fucking cunts," said Twil.

"Language," I squeezed out, then winced and curled up around my

chest.

“What? Oh, yeah sorry. Swear like a sailor sometimes. My mum’s always telling me off for it too.” Twil smiled awkwardly and then drew us to a halt. “Bloody hell, you’re really messed up, aren’t you? They didn’t make you take something, did they?”

She adjusted her supporting arm under my shoulders. Praem stopped too, but turned her head to stare back the way we’d walked, at the few other pedestrians visible at the end of the road. We’d left the chaos of the high street far behind.

I shook my head. “This is just- ugh, it’s just me. I did this. Special head magic.” I felt a wave of nausea and bent forward to retch, stomach muscles clenching but bringing up nothing. I coughed and forced myself straight again. “Thank you, Twil, thank you. You came back. Thank you.”

“Ah, it’s nothing, I-”

“We must keep moving,” Praem said. She raised a hand and pointed.

Zheng stood in the shadow of the last house in the row, hands in pockets, hood up, staring at us. Tenny shrank back and sheltered behind me, as if I offered any protection whatsoever. Twil rumbled a growl deep in her throat, a sound to make me cringe and shy away. Twil was on my side, no doubt, but that did not disarm her unsettling nature.

“I’ll have her, I swear, I’ll have her right now.”

“Not in the open,” Praem said, her voice empty of inflection. “You carry Heather. Do not put her down.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Stick to the plan, blah blah.” Twil grimaced, then snuck a wink at me. “Don’t worry, I won’t drop you. I’ll be good.”

We walked the entire way. I was ready to curl up and die, right

there on the pavement; as soon as Twil let go, I was going to collapse and expire from exhaustion. I kept pulling her to a halt so I could catch my breath, close my eyes as the waves of nausea and muscle spasm passed through me. We stopped by a corner shop so I could spit bile into the nearby rubbish bin.

Zheng followed us without moving. We never saw her walking, trailing us, stalking us down the suburban streets and through the connecting alleyways; she'd be already stood in the shade of a shuttered shop front on the other side of the road, or waiting in statue stillness at the far end of a street. She vanished for long minutes at a time, long enough to let us think she'd given up, when one of us – mostly Twil, with me so focused on my pain – would spot her.

Along the black wrought iron fence which marked the boundary of Osten Park, down the long hill which connected to Abbots Lane, clustered with its takeaway joints, past the Aardvark and into the student quarter. By then I could barely find the energy to lift my head, staring at the pavement, sagging against Twil as she pulled me along.

“Oh hey, heads up, your girlfriend's here,” she said.

“What? Where?”

Raine had come to meet us.

She was still halfway down the street when our eyes met. The sweetest relief. Almost an injustice to my actual rescuers. Twil and Praem and Tenny had done the work, the violence, and in Tenny's case the getting beaten up.

Raine sped up and jogged the final stretch to me, my own legs giving up from emotional overload. Twil let me go and I fell into Raine's arms, utterly uncaring of the spectacle we presented for the few daytime pedestrians.

Neither of us spoke. She held me, held me up. I buried my face in her shoulder and whined.

“One tiny lesbian delivered,” Twil said, and flicked a mock-salute. “Safe and ... uh, almost sound, I guess. Dunno what’s wrong with her.”

“Heather?” Raine spoke my name.

“Had to do brain-math,” I groaned. “Self-defence. Everything hurts.”

“You’re safe now, it’s okay, we’ll get you home.”

“I’m sorry, I ruined the new hoodie. Got ... blood ... sick ... mmm.”

“It’ll wash right out, no worries.”

Raine rubbed my back and squeezed me, almost too hard. Despite the embrace – which I needed so badly – she was tense all the way through, staring over my head, down the length of the street. She’d augmented her leather jacket with black gloves and a tote-bag. I didn’t care to speculate as to the contents.

“I owe you one, Twil,” Raine said. “Big time.”

Twil pulled a goofy grin and actually blushed. “Ahh, it was a team effort, you know? Couldn’a done it without uh ... ” She eyed Praem, frowning a little. “You know, I never did ask your name, did I?”

Praem stared at her with those blank white eyes.

“Tenny helped too,” I managed. “She’s hurt.”

“She is?” Raine asked, surprise in her voice. “It fought for you?”

“Mmhmm. Tenny friend.”

“Who?” Twil said. “What?”

“Twil,” said Raine. “Don’t jump out of your skin like a cartoon character when I say this, okay?”

“What?”

“That’s not a person.” She nodded at Praem. “It’s Evee’s bound demon.”

“*What?!*” Twil almost did jump out of her skin, wide eyed and alert at Praem. She took a very deliberate step back.

“The blue skin didn’t give it away?” Raine asked.

“Her name is Praem. Call her Praem,” I mumbled.

Twil boggled at the pair of us, as if we were all insane. “Right, okay, teach me to ask too many questions. Look, we don’t have time for sodding tea and cake out here, we’ve got some lumbering jackass on our tail. Haven’t seen her for a few, but she keeps popping up, some real spooky nonsense.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Raine. “We can’t stay here.”

“You know?”

“Remote viewing.” Raine nodded at Praem again. “Evee’s been seeing through her eyes this whole time. How do you think I knew what route you were taking?”

“Oh, uh, I guess.” Twil squinted in a deeply confused frown, putting two and two together a little slowly.

Raine went very still. “There she is.”

For a confused moment I thought she meant Evelyn, and raised my head to look.

Zheng lurked at the end of Abbots Lane, standing in the mouth of an alleyway next to an Indian takeaway place. Hands in her pockets, eyes staring, unmoving. Raine raised one hand in a wide gesture, pointed two fingers at her own eyes, then jabbed one at Zheng.

For a moment, just a moment, Raine radiated menace. Murderous intent, the will to violence thrumming through every muscle. If I hadn't been so utterly wiped out, I don't know how that would have effected me – arousal or cold terror.

Zheng stared a moment longer, then turned and vanished down the alleyway.

Twil flexed her hands like claws, but she refrained from transformation out in public. “Oh I'm gonna go rip her spine out. Bitch. Still haven't paid her back.”

“Wouldn't do that if I were you,” Raine murmured. “Odds on that's a trap. We're all carrying seals against blundering into their closed-loop spaces, but you're not.”

“... what?” Twil looked like she'd been asked to comprehend a page of quantum mathematics. “What is even going on here? I mean yeah, the Cult's bad business and all that, but like, stalking and kidnapping in broad daylight? Something's up, isn't it? Did Saye piss them off?”

Raine considered Twil very carefully, then raised an eyebrow at Praem. “You get all that, Eevee? Can we let her in on this?”

Twil visibly bristled. “Hey, I just saved your girlfriend's arse from-”

“Evelyn is unsure,” Praem informed us.

“Saye can shove it-”

I whined. “I just want to go home.”

Raine and Twil looked at each other over my head.

“What now then?” Twil grunted. “Am I coming or not?”

“You heard the lady,” said Raine.

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"This ... this is the Saye House? Look, I-I know was all ballsy about going in there before, but maybe I should just call it a day and go home." Twil stared up at Number 12 Barnslow Drive and shook her head.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "It's a lovely house."

"Wait a sec, this is *home* for you? You're living in there?"

"Yes? Well, mostly."

"I get Raine and Saye, but ... damn."

"Whats'a matter? Too spooky for you, Scooby-doo?" Raine said. She pushed the garden gate open, my hand tight in hers.

"S'not that." Twil swallowed. She didn't even rise to the dog joke. "It's ... this is the *Saye House*. Isn't it full of like, ghosts?"

"Ghosts?" I said.

"Yeah, ghosts and monsters and stuff?"

"... you're a pretty scary monster in your own right, last time I checked."

"Yeah, but I'm a nice one. Friendly neighbourhood werewolf. This place is a hell house."

My physical condition had improved slightly over the final stretch home, perhaps due to the placebo of Raine's presence. Now I could walk mostly unaided, at a pace faster than a shuffle, but I still very much needed a sit down, a large glass of water, a bath, and a sixteen hour nap.

Twil hesitated at the garden gate as Raine opened the front door.

Praem did not stand on ceremony, she went straight inside. Tenny was still reluctant to cross the garden wall, but she ghosted around the side of the house, heading for the back garden.

“It’s not scary inside, at all. Either come in or go away,” I said to Twil. “Make up your mind, I must sit down.”

Twil gritted her teeth, plucked up her not inconsiderable courage, and stepped onto the garden path. She looked exactly like a wary hound, shoulders hunched, head down, each footstep carefully measured. Raine rolled her eyes and laughed. She ushered me indoors first, eager to get me out of the open.

The heat was on full blast inside, dousing me and my aching chest with a muscle-melting wave of warm air. I steadied myself against the wall.

“Get that door closed!” Evelyn snapped.

She scowled, looking almost as bad as I felt, eyes ringed with tension, knuckles tight on the grip of her walking stick, mouth a sour line. She hissed a command to Praem without turning. The demon-host stepped into the kitchen.

Twil stuck her head through the front door and peered around. “Is-”

“In or out,” Evelyn snapped. “You’re a dog, not a cat.”

Twil bared her teeth and growled, but then caught the smirk on Raine’s face and stepped inside with a sigh. Raine threw the locks and bolts and rattled the door handle, then closed her eyes, and let out a long sigh.

“That’s it. We’re all in,” Evelyn said. She let out a huge sigh too and drew one hand over her face.

A spike of guilt worked its way between my ribs, tender and raw even over the exhaustion and residual brain-math pain. Evelyn looked that way because of me. Raine had worried and feared because of me, because I made a stupid mistake and put myself in

danger. Perhaps it was the delayed emotional impact of a failed kidnapping attempt – I started to choke up, bit my bottom lip and sniffed. Tears filled my eyes.

“I-I’m sorry,” I stammered, gulped down the lump in my throat. “I’m sorry Evee. I-”

She marched up to me, face set, walking stick clacking on the floorboards, and I was certain she was going to shout at me or slap me. Raine seemed to think so too, turning and putting out a hand to stall Evelyn, a gentle rebuke on her lips.

Evelyn threw her arms around me and hugged me tight.

Best as she could, with her bad posture and unstable legs and walking stick in one hand, she gave me a hug. It was awkward and difficult, and I stained her shoulder with my stalled tears, but she made it count.

“You absolute fool,” she said, face hidden over my shoulder. I think she was choked up too.

Even Twil had enough sense not to ruin the moment with dumb jokes. She and Raine busied themselves by taking their shoes off, and Raine even politely asked if Twil wanted to hang her coat up. By the time they were done pretending to be normal, Evelyn had pulled back, covertly wiped her eyes on her sleeve, and told me it was okay.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise,” said Evelyn.

“I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I do. You were thinking you’re still living a normal life. You weren’t thinking like a mage. Raine isn’t my bodyguard just for show.”

“Really?” Raine pulled a grin. “And here I thought you kept me

around for my stunning good looks.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. I sniffed and managed a small laugh. Raine winked at the both of us, a covert hand on my back.

“Is this it?” Twil’s voice echoed from the kitchen. She was poking her head around the door frame, then turned back to look at us. “This is the Saye House? This place is a dump.”

“Excuse me? It’s lovely. Don’t be so rude,” I said.

Twil shrugged and puffed out one cheek. She padded over to the disused sitting room and peered inside there as well. I nudged limply at one shoe with my other foot, well aware I’d fall over if I bent down to unlace them properly, doubly aware that I’d never muster the energy to stand up if I sat. Raine held my hand and supported me as I shoved my shoes off. Praem reappeared with a glass of water and a blister packet of co-codamol, and held them out to me. I muttered a thanks.

“What were you expecting then?” said Evelyn.

Twil shrugged. “I dunno ... spooky stuff.”

“Indulge me. Use your imagination, if you have any. Think of it as the toll for entering.”

“I dunno! Bleeding walls? Echoing voices? Weird faces in the ceiling? This is just an old house.”

“I’m so terribly sorry to disappoint you.”

Twil rolled her eyes. “Why are you always so goddamn rude to me?”

“I’m not. Thank you for saving my friend.”

Twil gaped. “Woah. You-”

“And now you’re here, do I have to have you murdered, or are you

going to keep your hands off my books?”

“Evee!” I squeaked on Twil’s behalf.

“I’m joking,” Evelyn said. “A little self-satire.”

“Ha ha.” Twil snorted.

“Touch my books and I will put a leash on you though.”

“Hey! I won’t, what do you think I-”

Twil cut off first, but we all felt the change in the air, the rising of the little hairs on the back of one’s neck, the chill from a hidden door – though I was the only one who could see the cause.

Two of Evelyn’s Spider-servitors scuttled into the front room.

They’d entered at the same moment from two different directions, one hanging upside down from over the stairs and the other creeping around the kitchen doorway. Segmented limbs blurred and paused and readjusted, bunched crystalline eyes swivelled and fixed, until they had Twil flanked from both sides.

“... what the hell is that?” Twil whispered, eyes wide and flicking over everything, apparently too shaken to move more than her eyeballs. She spoke through gritted teeth. “This place is fucking haunted, it totally is. You lot feel that too, don’t you? There’s something watching me, I can feel it.”

“You know what, I think I do. Freaky.” Raine put her hands on her hips and glanced about.

“Um ... Evee?” I said.

The spiders edged closer to Twil, stinger-tips quivering, as if they expected her to run.

“Ah, hmm.” Evelyn frowned at me. “Security system, yes?”

I nodded. "Two spiders."

"*Spiders?*" Twil jerked as if prodded with a cattle goad. "What spiders? Spider-ghosts? You're kidding me." She growled low in her throat and ceased to be entirely human, arms and hands overlaid with that flicker-wisp wolf flesh. Her face elongated into a snout.

"Stop that," Evelyn snapped, then turned to me. "Point."

I did. Both hands.

"Hmm," she grunted. A nasty smirk crossed her face. "On second thought, perhaps it would be funnier to let Twil fight something she can't see."

"Saye!" Twil growled through her canine snout. "I swear I'll—"

"I'm joking."

Evelyn raised her chin and reeled off a long, complex sentence of Latin, followed by a pause and another sentence. She looked at me for confirmation.

"Um ... that did not work. No change."

Evelyn scowled, adjusted her grip on her walking stick, and banged it against the floor. She barked something in Latin which was almost certainly not a ritualised command or high-minded construction, but more of a colourful suggestion. I winced too and prayed I'd never give Evelyn cause to yell at me.

The Spider-servitors jerked back and reconsidered, scuttled away to the edges of the room and slowly retreated the way they came.

"Oh." I blinked. "I guess they decided Twil is less scary than you."

"As they well should," Evelyn grumbled.

"Haunted bloody madhouse, I told you so." Twil growled through too many sharp teeth, huffing and puffing behind a veil of hair.

“Put yourself away,” Evelyn said.

Twil did, straightening up and sweeping her hair back from her face, human again. She shook herself and puffed out a long breath. “What the hell, Saye? What the hell is going on? Fucking demons and monsters and Heather getting snatched off the street? What’s this all about?”

Raine began to help me toward the kitchen, but Evelyn stood stock still, staring at Twil.

“What? What?” Twil demanded.

“I’m deciding how much I can tell you.”

“About *what*?”

= =

“I’m sorry, Heather. I’m really, really sorry. I mean it. I tried, I really tried to stop them, please don’t hate me. I don’t think I could stand it if you hated me.”

Dream-awareness blossomed in my mind.

Lozzie was hugging me tight. She was sniffing, crying with her head buried in my shoulder. She smelled of shampoo and strawberries, but then this was a dream, she could smell however she chose to – however my mind chose for her. We were both on our knees in a dark place, arms around each other. I blinked and found I was crying too, gripped by the alchemy of shared emotional release, whoever and whatever she was. I hugged her back, patting her shoulders, feeling awkward but touched.

“It- it’s okay,” I said.

“It’s not okay!” She pulled back and showed me a face that could

move a heart of stone. That fey, elfin face, running with tears and red around the eyes, wisps of blonde hair in disarray. “They’re not allowed to do those things to you, they shouldn’t! I hate them all, especially my brother. I hate him so much, I wish he would die!” She kicked out in frustration. Her foot connected with a pile of books and sent them scattering across the wooden floor.

I looked over at them. Then up.

And up.

And up.

The bookcases stretched up forever, until they vanished into the dark far above. Crisscrossed with wooden stairways and ledges, balconies and rails, looped around each other, to offer access to any of the billions of volumes. A vast canyon, which Lozzie and I sat at the very bottom of, on a polished wooden floor at least a mile across, littered with thousands of stay texts.

Vertigo touched my head. I looked back to Lozzie.

“Where is this place?”

She sniffed and looked pitiful. “The library at Carcosa. I thought it might cheer you up. You love books and stuff, right?”

“I ... I do love books. It’s ... ” I risked another glance up. “In a way, it’s beautiful, yes.”

“So, you don’t hate me?”

“What? No.”

“Oh, Heather!” Lozzie hugged me again, clung to me and buried her face in my shoulder. “I hate that they scared you. I hate him so much.”

“Him ... him ... ” Gears turned in my mind, realisation clicking into place.

“My brother. I hate him.”

“You told me about him ... *before*, before it happened. In a dream. How is that possible?” I muttered.

“He thinks he can stop us, thinks he can stop us going places, stop us living, control us.” Lozzie pulled back and met my gaze, her eyes burning with conviction. A smile crested her face through the crying. “But you can go anywhere you want! We can go anywhere, Heather. Like here!”

She waved up at the titanic bookcases, and I made myself look again. Made myself see the tiny shuffling figures on the walkways, with robes and lanterns and faces made of tentacles and spines. I noticed the hanging cages filled with dessicated, inhuman corpses, saw the confluence of vast meter-thick chains which held an unspeakable monster, bound high in the air between the two rows of bookshelves.

“Like here,” I echoed.

conditions of absolute reality – 3.9

The very next morning I moved in for real.

Raine wouldn't let me go anywhere alone. I didn't want to, anyway. I'd barely slept that night, ragged with adrenaline, chased by aftershocks of paranoia, plagued by incessant throbbing pain in my diaphragm. I finally conked out from sheer exhaustion after midnight, snuggled up to Raine to keep the dark at bay.

We used her rickety car to empty my flat. Truly empty it, as per Evelyn's emphatic instructions. Clothes and books shoved into plastic carrier bags, university notes and course paperwork jammed into my little-used backpack, my laptop wrapped with jumpers and hidden in a sports bag alongside my few valuables. Toiletries, kitchen utensils, mugs, everything of mine. Raine even pulled the sheets and sad flat pillow off my mattress.

"A strand of hair for a voodoo doll is not quite accurate, that little won't matter. Shouldn't matter," Evelyn had said, earlier that morning, when we'd gathered around the kitchen table. "But we don't want them getting anything that belongs to you. Anything with a strong emotional connection."

"Why? What could they do?"

She'd shrugged. "I don't know."

"Better safe than sorry," Raine had added. "And better now than later. Let's get it done."

The sum physical total of my life seemed small and pathetic in the back of Raine's car. A few bags, not enough to fill the boot. I didn't even have that many books, not ones I really owned. At least this way I'd finally be adding myself to the house, with Raine and

Evelyn, a true accepted part, but as I stood by Raine's car and glanced back at the impassive grey block of flats, I wished this had happened in any other way.

"Don't tell me you're actually going to miss this place?" Raine asked. She was leaning on the roof of her car with the door open, ready to leave.

I shook my head. "Not in the slightest. Horrible impersonal box. We're not meant to live alone in concrete cells."

"I'm sorry, Heather." She swallowed, a tiny catch in her voice. "I'm sorry I made you stay here longer than you had to. I should have had you at the house from the word go. I should have been there."

"Don't," I said, a little too hard. "We've already been over this. It was my fault."

Raine opened her mouth again but thought better of arguing. Her confidence and her smile flowed back by easy degrees. "Ready to go, then?"

"Suppose we shouldn't stay out in the open for too long, hmm?"

"Heather, I'm right here with you. You are always safe."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry I said that, I ... I feel normal, I guess. I'm just being bitter." I shrugged. The shock had worn off, normality had reasserted itself. Wasn't I supposed to be a flinching sobbing mess? I'd almost been kidnapped. How was this meant to feel?

"You can always tell me if you-"

"Let's go. Let's go home and cuddle. Please?"

Raine cracked a grin. "You're the boss."

"*Evee* is the closest we have to a boss. Don't flatter me. However much it works."

“Whatever you say, boss.”

= =

Last night, after the failed kidnapping attempt, Twil had been furious.

Absorbed in my own pain and desperate need to rest, I'd failed to notice at first. Raine had half-carried me upstairs and ran a bath, while I dozed off sitting on the floor. She'd pulled me back to my feet, to much of my own grumbling and groaning, but I hadn't thought to question why she seemed tense. She helped me undress – a decidedly unsexy encounter, believe me – and made me get in the bath. The water revived me somewhat, especially after I dunked my face and head to scrub off the remaining flecks of blood and wash away the taste of sick. Raine stroked my wet hair.

“I can't tell you how glad I am that you're safe.”

“Mm.”

“How do you feel?”

“ ... numb? Numb. I'm sorry I caused all that, Raine.”

She shook her head. “Don't be. You survived. Self-defence, whatever it was. You called and we came. God alone knows how you kept those bastards talking as long as you did. You're good at that, you know?”

“I am?”

“We saw everything from the moment Praem turned up, through the scrying pool, but Evee'll want you to fill her about on the rest. Don't think about it for now, okay? You concentrate on soaking yourself. Will you be okay here on your own for a few minutes? I need to go downstairs, just a couple of minutes.”

“I’m not going to fall unconscious and drown.”

She watched me carefully, the same way she had when she’d thought I might have been concussed. I raised my eyebrows in silent question, all I could manage at the moment.

“That’s not what I meant. Are you going to be okay being *alone*?”

“Oh, uh ... I ... I think so. I’m in the house. We’re all here. The door’s locked. I’m fine, I’m fine, go do what you need to do.”

“Shout if you change your mind.”

I very nearly did.

Raine’s footsteps creaked down the stairs. I was alone with the steam and the silence and the drip of water from the bath tap. The heat had unknotted my muscles and begun to make inroads on the exhaustion, blunt the sharpest edges of the day. I should have been relaxed and warm, felt safe and cared for, surrounded by friends.

So why was I shaking?

My hands shook. I squeezed them into fists, felt my breath catch in my throat, shivering all over. My mind replayed disconnected snippets of memory – the feeling of being grabbed and pushed to the ground, the bowel-loosening terror of Zheng advancing on me, the oily sound of Alexander’s voice. I gulped and sniffed and drew my knees up to my chest, then dipped my head into the bath until I was chin-deep, squeezed my eyes shut and made myself small, a tiny scrap of flesh hanging in warm water, trying to be still.

A shout and a crash from downstairs jarred me so badly I whacked my elbow against the bathtub, wincing through my teeth. My heart leapt from zero to sixty.

“Raine!” I shouted. “Raine?”

She shot up the stairs in record time and slipped back into the bathroom, almost out of breath, one hand out. “Nothing’s

happening, it's fine, I promise."

"What was that? What's going on?"

"Evee and Twil are having a ... " She hesitated, then sighed and shrugged. "Jurisdictional disagreement."

I shook my head.

"They're biting each other's heads off," she said.

My eyes went wide. "Raine, last time they had an argument, they almost killed each other."

"Exactly!" Her smile turned sheepish. "Which is why I-"

"Go, go!" I shooed her back out the door with one hand. "I'm fine, I'm-"

"You sure?"

"I'm sure! Go stop our friends from knocking the walls down!"

There was a lot more shouting, punctuated by one or two loud thumps – hands slapped on tables, perhaps – but no more crashing and banging. The bathwater had begun to cool by the time Raine returned again.

"An unexpected peace has broken out," she said.

"Thank God for that."

I needed a hand out of the bath to avoid slipping and landing on my face, and appreciated the company as I tugged on pajama bottoms and a nice big fluffy sweater, the minimal requirements to stave off further shaking and shivering.

Downstairs, our resident mage and teenage werewolf stewed on opposite sides of the kitchen table, a peace offering of tea half finished on Twil's side and barely touched on Evelyn's. At least they

hadn't thrown fireballs or claws this time, and weren't so self-absorbed as to ignore me when I shuffled in. They both spoke at once.

"Heather, how are-"

"There you are, Raine got you up-"

"I said we'd need you here-"

"Can't believe this bullshit-"

"Have you two quite finished?" I mumbled. Didn't have the energy to raise my voice. They both stammered to a halt. Evelyn shot a sidelong glare at Twil, who shrugged and flopped her hands.

"Told you she'd be pissed," Raine added. I fell into the chair she pulled out for me.

"Actually I'm not angry. I think you two making all that racket staved off a panic attack."

"What?" Raine said, a gentle hand on the back of my head. "Panic attack? Heather, are you okay?"

I shrugged. "I'm fine. I think I started to have a panic attack in the bath. I don't know."

"Not exactly a surprise," Evelyn said. "Perfectly normal, considering the circumstances."

"Yeah! You almost got snatched in the street. Anyone'd piss themselves." Twil eyed Evelyn. "Snatched by something I should have known about though."

"Stop your whining."

With the invaluable assistance of microwave Chinese food, and the tribute of two offerings from Raine's secret stash of chocolate bars, I told them everything, from the top, starting with Tenny's warning

and ending with as much of Alexander Lilburne's disgusting monologuing as I could remember. Details eluded me, memory fuzzy and heavy. The physical confrontation in that tangled back alley was the hardest part to recount.

Raine picked up on my mood, stood behind me and rubbed my back, but Twil didn't understand what I was getting at. How could she? She'd been invincible and untouchable for years.

"What do you mean, you made him vanish? Just like, poof, into thin air?" She raised an eyebrow at Evelyn. "Is that even a thing?"

I looked away, a lump in my throat; didn't want to think about that right now.

"For Heather, yes," said Evelyn. "So it does work on living things."

"I don't ... oh." Twil's eyes widened and her voice dropped to a hushed whisper. "Wait a moment, you mean you can send people to like, the other side?"

"Outside," I muttered.

"Yeah, that's what I said. Holy shit. You're not kidding, right?"

"Could you please not?"

Twil didn't press any further, but she frowned at me like I was either crazy or a walking neutron bomb. Maybe she was right. Evelyn asked endless questions about the Cultists. She got me to describe Alexander Lilburne in as much detail as I could.

"Didn't you see him, through Praem?" I asked. Evelyn shook her head.

"Not a good look, no."

She wrote down what I said, dismissed their names as probably fake, and descended into dark brooding. She stared at the tabletop, chin in her hand, consumed with thought. "Call me useless, call my

work useless? Must be a bluff. They know I'm close. Knew my mother? Nonsense. Who is he? God dammit all, I may even have met him once, when I was a child, or seen him at a distance."

"Are you going to kill him?" I asked.

"Heather?" Raine said, surprised at my tone. I didn't meet her eyes.

"I think that's a fine suggestion," said Evelyn. "Yes, threaten my friends, in my city? I'm going to feed him to a creature he couldn't even imagine."

"That's cool and all," Twil said, kicking back in her chair, rocking it onto two legs with her hands on the table for balance. "But still I've gotta tell my parents about this."

"No," Evelyn snapped, hard and blunt. "You don't. Twil, how many times-"

"Don't start up again," I said. "Or I shall be angry."

Twil smirked and mock-cowered from me. "You're real scary when you're angry, you know?"

"As if I could scare you."

"You can make people vanish. That's pretty scary."

I curled up a little tighter in my chair. Evelyn was glancing back and forth between us, her discomfort visibly mounting.

"Must you-" she cut off and shot an apologetic look at me before resuming with Twil. "Must you run to your family with your tail between your legs over every little thing?"

"Oh, yeah." Twil's voice dripped sarcasm. "I'll go ahead and forget Sharroford might be a fucking supernatural warzone, that these weirdos might take over-"

"I am not in the habit of *losing*. I beat my own mother, a mage ten

times, a hundred times more powerful than these petty amateurs. This is pest control, at best.”

“Then why haven’t you won yet?”

Evelyn’s glare could have frozen the sun.

Twil rolled her eyes. “I came into town to buy a video game today. Any of my family could wander in here by accident. I didn’t even know this was going on. I’ve gotta warn my parents, Saye, don’t be bonkers. I’ve gotta tell the Church. You’d do the same, come off it.”

“Then you can tell them to stay out of it too. Make that clear.”

“You sure? I dunno, Saye, maybe we could ... you know.” Twil shrugged, the very picture of a sulky teenager.

“I know *what*?”

“Maybe we could pitch in?”

“Your lot? Don’t make me laugh. I’d like to see you try.”

= =

The Sharrowford Cult waited less than forty eight hours before they began to stalk me.

Raine was a saint, she really was, I don’t know how she put up with my grim mood; I started that week in a downward spiral of grumpy and jittery, and only got worse with every passing day. Finally moving in together was what I’d wanted all along, true togetherness, a new measure of safety, for Raine’s bedroom to be *our* bedroom — but I felt restless, irritable, not entirely like myself. I gave myself a break from the pamphlet and my brain-math training, a much needed period of recovery for my aching diaphragm. I pretended to be normal, worked on my end of term essays, tried to impose some order and cleanliness on the house’s

ancient rambling kitchen.

The first goat statue greeted me in the university library. Raine was only ten feet away, at the end of the row of shelves. I'd stepped away from her to replace a book I didn't strictly need, and there it was, standing in the gap I'd pulled the book from only minutes before.

An ugly little thing made of pewter or thick discoloured porcelain, only an inch tall from wide base to horn tips, it stared at me with holes for eyes. A cheap gewgaw, poor approximation of the real animal. Real goats were sort of cute – this thing was horrible. I didn't want to touch it, as much from physical disgust as the odd sense it had appeared from nowhere.

A student prank, I told myself. Somebody had walked past and slipped it in here. Perhaps it had some obscure political meaning. I was hypersensitive, hyper-vigilant, still in shock. The goat figurine meant nothing.

I used the book to shove it into the depths of the shelf and said nothing about it to Raine, forgot it by the time we left the library.

The second one turned up the next day, in the ladies toilet, on the edge of the sink when I went to wash my hands.

It hadn't been there when I walked in. Nobody had followed me. Raine was right outside the door.

I almost screamed.

Raine balled that one up in her jumper and took it home for Evee to investigate, a trip which had me walking on needles the entire way, Raine's head on a swivel for unseen watchers. It was a trap, I knew it, a contact drug or a magical trick or a disguised monster or-

"It's inert. Nothing. Just a bloody china figurine," Evelyn said two hours later, as she scooped the goat statue up with bare hands from the centre of a magic circle.

“But it wasn’t there when I went in. It wasn’t, I swear.”

“I believe you. But it’s also inert.”

“We should get rid of it anyway. Please?”

“We should,” Evelyn agreed.

“On it,” said Raine. She took the bus into town and dropped the goat in the river.

Another one appeared the next day, in the library again. This time none of us bothered to touch the thing.

Why stalk me, I thought, why not Evelyn? Because I’m an easier target, because she’s the big scary mage, because she’ll notice the sleight of hand and catch the culprit. I just have to cower and run.

The goat brought friends – odd scraps of paper with a single eye design on them, staring and watching. I saw one pinned on a university noticeboard, another one on a telephone pole on the route home. Raine ripped them both down, but it made no difference. I felt like I was being watched, in the library, in the campus canteen, everywhere but at home. The worst was in lectures and seminars, when I wasn’t with Raine.

Neither Evelyn or I went anywhere alone. Raine became my shadow, the need for coordination that much sharper. I did a lot of waiting around – less in the library and more in the Medieval Metaphysics room, a safe bolt-hole where I didn’t feel that creeping sensation, reading books and writing paragraphs about *Hamlet* and Joyce, immersing myself in literature to forget what was happening to us.

Evelyn had Praem escort her most of the time, and once she sent the demon-host to the library to collect me without warning. I’d jumped and swallowed a shriek when I’d noticed her waiting in silence behind my chair.

Twice I caught half-hidden glimpses of a figure watching the house

at night, down at the end of the road.

The first time I'd been getting up to use the toilet, and my sleep-addled mind passed by the sight through a window, a half-remembered impression, forgotten in the light of the morning. The second time I'd been unable to sleep, reading in Evelyn's study, pacing up and down to tire myself out, when I'd looked up through the window and seen the figure motionless at the end of the street. I'd watched for a minute, two minutes, not a twitch, frozen in paranoid fear. The first time had come rushing back to me, and I'd gone rushing to Raine, to wake her up.

She'd gone out into the night with silent feet and a kitchen knife in her jacket, but by the time she reached the end of the road the figure had vanished.

Evelyn sunk into a deep, dark, brooding sulk, more and more time spent in the ex-drawing room, just staring at the doorway mural and swapping sigils and bits of design back and forth, trying to crack some incomprehensible code.

I kept putting off calling my parents, debating what to say. They'd need to know I'd moved, cancelled the rent, either be delighted or terrified if I told them I was 'living with friends' in a 'shared house', all that nice clean sanitised language of young people at university.

The truth was impossible to share. They felt distant, unreal, part of an old life.

Hi mum, hi dad, I'm learning how to rescue my lost twin sister from an alien god. What's that? No, it'll probably kill me before I'm done, if I don't end up as collateral damage in a war between a mage and a bunch of cultists. The mage, oh no, she's my friend, we're all friends here, except the one I make out with every day.

That was one truth I could tell them, almost as scary as letting them think I'd gone off the deep end: I'm living with my girlfriend. Lines of interrogation ran over and over in my mind. Yes, mum, girlfriend. Yes, I'm a lesbian. Yes, I'm sure, because she's beautiful and amazing and she makes me orgasm like a bomb going off every

night.

Things I could not say to my parents. Concepts I didn't want them to think about. Ever.

On the eighth morning after the failed kidnapping attempt, I woke from an awful nightmare.

Not an Eye nightmare; we kept the Fractal fresh, made it into a nice little shared ritual before sleep every night, my left arm laid across Raine's lap as she traced over the lines with the body art pen. No, it was a normal nightmare, one that had me kicking and thrashing myself awake in bed, elbowing Raine in the stomach and choking on a mouthful of my own saliva. A nightmare about being grabbed and held down, about towering, indistinct figures, stronger than me, about being trapped, taken away to dark places, about horrible goat faces and the feeling of being watched and followed.

I was monosyllabic, foul-tempered, and cold, all day; Raine deserved me better than that. Deserved better than me using her for a hug and struggling to express myself.

That evening, when Evelyn had vanished into the ex-drawing room and I was about to drag myself up from a finished plate of chips, Raine thumped a bottle of vodka down on the kitchen table. I looked up at her, framed by the shadows and the early sunset through the kitchen window.

"Raine?"

"You and I are going to drink together."

"What?" I blinked at her, then at the bottle.

"Cossack vodka," she said with a proud smile. "Genuinely not that easy to get hold of. No idea why, not like it's expensive or anything. Goes down a bit smoother than the supermarket crap, thought you might find it a bit easier."

I started to shake my head, a lump growing in my throat. "Oh,

Raine, no. I'm sorry, I know I've been awful all day, but I can't solve that with alcohol."

"You're not going to. We're gonna drink, together."

She left the bottle in front of me and fetched glasses from the kitchen cupboard. I ran a finger over the condensation on the bottle, crisp and cold.

"I haven't drunk any alcohol since you gave me that one shot of vodka. I don't know if can, if I should risk it."

"Well, you don't have to think about that, because I ain't giving you a choice."

Raine clacked the glasses down on the table. I huffed and frowned at her.

"That's hardly healthy. My lover forcing me to drink. You don't have to get me drunk to have fun with me."

"It's not about that," she said softly. "You know it's not about that."

I cleared my throat, felt sheepish, looked away. " ... fine."

"You don't have to drink much." She poured a finger or two of vodka into each glass. "Just sip it. Don't try to keep up with me, seriously, you'll end up under the table."

The vodka in my glass caught the light as the sharp ethanol scent tickled my nose. I picked it up and felt my saliva glands tingle in anticipation. "I suppose-

Raine slammed back her shot and poured another. I goggled at her but she just laughed and shrugged.

We discovered that even in small smooth sips I still couldn't drink the stuff. The taste made me cough, made my eyes water, a lava-flow of heat crawling down my throat. Raine relented and we came up with a compromise. I made a pot of strong tea and she added a

slug of vodka to my mug. That was much easier, along with the can of nuts Raine produced for the occasion.

One mug of vodka-laced tea later my head began to feel both heavier and lighter, my eyelids like wet paper and my chest warm inside. Raine didn't look the slightest bit worse for wear.

"You had an utter screamer of a nightmare last night, didn't you?" she asked.

I sighed a huge sigh and drained the dregs of my drink, then stared into the bottom of the empty mug.

"Did I cry out in my sleep?"

"Nah, but I could tell. You were so shaky this morning, I wanted to make you stay home, but ..." She smiled, indulgent and a little sad.

The alcohol cut through all my inhibitions, my paranoia, my fear.

"I feel violated," I admitted.

Something hard unknotted in my chest, a deep-rooted tension beginning to unwind. Raine raised her eyebrows and nodded for me to go on.

"The rest of it – the coffee shop, the brain-math, the giant zombie-woman whatever – that was scary, yes, that was all terrifying. But the worst part was the bit in the back alleyway, with that ... that ... b-bastard who grabbed me. I keep replaying it in my head. Keeps coming back to me. I hate it."

"Hate is okay."

"It's not, it's unhealthy," I said. "I feel vulnerable. I've always felt vulnerable, but this is new. It's not ... it's not that I don't like you coming everywhere with me, Raine. I love it when you hold my hand. I love you being there and being around. For the first time since Maisie I'm not lonely all the time, but I wish ... I wish it wasn't a necessity. I wish I didn't have to feel paranoid. Why are

they stalking me? What do they want with me? Bastards. Fuckers.” I sniffed and frowned. “What else can I call them? Help me with this.”

Raine had some colourful suggestions. She poured me a second mug of tea and vodka. I sipped at it, unsure what helped more, the booze or the talking. I felt more relaxed than I’d been in days, even as I aired these dirty bits of my psyche. She got up and hugged me while I sat.

“I thought I was supposed to feel scared. Jump at loud noises. That sort of thing, but I’m mostly just ... angry.”

“That’s normal, I think,” Raine offered.

“What am I supposed to do about this?”

“This.” Raine grinned and raised her empty glass. “I don’t have a magic bullet for trauma-”

“It’s hardly trauma.”

“It is. It totally is.” Raine frowned. “Some dickless wonder assaulted you and scary people tried to kidnap you, and if I could get my hands on them I’d kill them all. It’s trauma. And there’s no magic solution, but talking helps. I learnt that together with Evelyn, and you’re easily as tough as she is.”

“If you say so.” I grumbled and sipped more tea.

“I do say so. And you know what else I say?” Raine sat back down with a smile and knocked back another shot of vodka – and slammed her glass on the table. “I fucked up!” she shouted.

“R-Raine?”

“I failed, you know that? I messed up, big time. I wasn’t fucking *there*.” Her voice caught. “I failed to protect you. What good’s a bodyguard if she’s not there to help you when you need it. That’s what I’m good at, that’s what I do, and I wasn’t there when you

needed me.” She sniffed, and I finally realised that the alcohol was affecting her as much as I. Tears brimmed in Raine’s eyes. She downed another shot of vodka and grinned at me. “So this little shared drinking session is for me too.”

Now it was my turn to get up and hug her, put my arms around her. The alcohol made me slow and floppy. She clung to me and we both started crying together, not the big wracking sobs of true despair or pain, but an odd weepy emotional release, sniffing and smiling and laughing at each other as we tried to stop crying.

“You don’t have to protect me all the time!”

“I want to! Because you’re you! Don’t get kidnapped, you’re too important to get kidnapped. I can’t go back to cruising for girls now, Heather, I’m hooked on *you*, I want you, I want you safe and on my lap and-”

“I want that too!” I declared at the ceiling.

Evelyn thumped on the connecting wall three times. We both burst out laughing, wiping away our tears. I did a huge ‘shush’ motion, and Raine mouthed a ‘thank you’ as I slowly sat back down. Raine wavered slightly, slow to blink and flushed in the face as she rolled her empty glass across the table.

“You did kill that guy, though,” she said.

“That doesn’t help.” I put my head on the table, emotionally wiped out but no longer so twisted up inside. “Actually I think maybe it makes it worse. He’s dead, I killed him. I didn’t even really mean to, I wasn’t trying to kill him, just wanted him to stop.”

Raine puffed out a long sigh. “I don’t know if I can help with that one. I wish I could. It’s never bothered me before, the few times I’ve had to do it.”

“No.” I grumbled and rubbed my cheek on the table. “That’s the problem. I don’t care either.”

“Ah?” Raine blinked at me.

“I don’t care that I killed a person. But I care that I don’t care, if that makes sense.” I paused and frowned. “Is this what being drunk is like?”

Raine laughed. “No, you’re barely buzzed. You’re such a lightweight, it’s cute as hell.”

“Lightweight. Yes. I weigh a hundred and five pounds fully dressed. I am drunk.”

We drank more – or rather, Raine did, cranking back the booze until she sat loose and lounging in her chair. I stared at her from the table as she sniffed and seemed to rouse herself toward some difficult topic.

“You know, Heather, I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“Don’t!” I whined. “Don’t say that while drunk.”

“Ah ah.” Raine tapped the table. “I didn’t say ‘I love you’, I’ll say that bit sober. I said I think I am falling. That’s different.”

“Mmmmm,” I grumbled, pouting.

“I’ve never been in love before. Been in lust a lot, but this is way different.”

“What, you don’t lust for me?” I smiled a little, felt oddly cheeky. She grinned back.

“What do you think?”

“I think, you are, a bit of a slut.” The words left my mouth before I could stop them, a bad dirty joke which made me blink, sit up, and cover my mouth in mortified horror. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean- I didn’t mean that. It was-”

Raine started laughing and couldn’t stop, slapped the table and

pointed at me. "It's the booze, Heather. It's loosened you up."

"I don't think you're a slut! I *don't* think that! Oh my God."

"But it's a good joke. I have slept with a lot of girls, that part's true."

"But that doesn't- there's nothing wrong with- oh, blast it."

"Does that bother you? That I've eaten a metric ton of pussy before?"

"No! No. It's actually sort of hot." I looked away, confused and reeling at myself.

Raine grinned. "Call me a slut again, see what happens."

I stared at her, flushed and breathless. "You're too drunk for sex."

"Sure, but not too drunk to come over there and tickle you."

"You wouldn't dare."

We didn't drink any more, but we did get louder, the jokes getting weirder, until Raine had me laughing so badly I got a stitch in my side and she kept banging the table to punctuate her points. I'd never felt like this ever before. Days of tension slid off me, off us, and I could almost see it leaving, flowing down into the floor and away under the house.

The door to the ex-drawing room opened by a crack. Evelyn peered at us as she emerged. "Are you two making enough noise out ... here ... oh bloody hell, you're drinking."

"You are wrong. We have finished drinking," Raine corrected her with a wave of one finger. "And we are now drunk."

"I'm sorry, we were being so loud." I pulled myself up and made an effort to sit straight, to look sensible and sober, but then snorted with laughter at my own act.

Evelyn stepped into the kitchen and raised an eyebrow, not exactly impressed but not scowling either. "Is this a mating ritual?"

"Nooo!" I whined.

"Yeah, I'm way too sloshed to take her upstairs now." Raine yawned and stood up, poured herself a glass of water, then pressed a second one into my hands. "Drink up."

"I don't need-"

"Yes, you do," Evelyn snapped. "I'm not having you two hung over tomorrow. We have work to do."

"We do?" I asked, and almost spilled water down myself as I drank.

"Work? What's this slave-driver stuff?" Raine grinned. "Tomorrow's a Friday, Heather's the only one with a lecture."

Evelyn snorted. "While you two were stress-testing your livers, I've been working on a few little tricks. A portable viewing circle, some barrier pieces, even a potential permanent *Invisus Oculus* — something my mother never figured out, but which you've given me the pieces for, Heather."

I shared a glance with Raine. She shrugged, downed another glass of water, and put what was left of the vodka safely away in the fridge.

"Which means what?" I asked, trying to sober up for real.

Evelyn smiled a smug little smile, that sharp edge appearing around her eyes. "We're going to do some veterinary care."

"... on ... on what?"

"Your little friend."

"You mean Tenny?"

“Exactly.”

conditions of absolute reality – 3.10

Spared a morning hangover by the thin mercies of biology, and with the worst of my mood lifted, Evelyn and I coaxed Tenny into the house.

We shared a strong pot of coffee, tucked away in the utility room as we waited for Tenny's erratic circuit of the property to bring her into the overgrown back garden. Raine was still upstairs, soaking in a long bath and subjecting herself to a gruesome hangover cure by eating a pair of lemons.

When Tenny appeared, slinking along the perimeter of the sagging wooden fence, I walked out to speak with her. The sky glowered at all Sharrowford that morning, dark and gravid with the threat of rain. Heavy clouds were the only thing keeping the temperature up.

I was finally wearing my new pink hoodie again, feeling warm and much more like myself. It had been clean for a week, but only felt right again after the release of last night.

"Tenny, Tenny, over here. Here ... here girl."

I still felt ridiculous raising my voice to a creature only I could see, even in the seclusion of the back garden. Tenny stopped, turned, and came toward me. Good doggy. I think she liked the sound of my voice.

Her wounds showed as jagged rents in her tarry black flesh, holes and chunks bitten and ripped out of her. They'd been inching shut over the last few days, the edges trying to knit together. Her tentacles bobbed and waved like seaweed, but the severed ones were not regrowing, mere waggling stumps.

I almost choked up; she'd suffered those wounds to protect me.

I wasn't afraid of her anymore, or disgusted.

Good doggy.

Parts of the house had to be systematically de-warded to allow her passage, a task which involved lots of paper sigils slapped on the door frames and Evelyn muttering entire pages of Latin at the junctions between walls. She'd locked the ex-drawing room to keep the downstairs Spider-servitor inside, like a big dog which might scare off a skittish stray.

Even with my vocal reassurances, and one jarring moment of unexpected hand-to-tentacle contact, Tenny still took almost an hour to approach the back door. She crept across the garden by my side, beneath the huge old tree swaying in the tortured wind. Evelyn watched from the back doorway. Raine reappeared with a damp towel draped over her shoulders, swigging from a sports drink. She couldn't offer any help, except to stand around and look pretty, though she supplied plenty of peanut gallery commentary with her customary gusto.

"Safe? Safe? Safe?" Tenny repeated in that wet-mud voice, touching one tentacle-tip to my shoulder as we walked together across the uneven matted grass.

"Safe, yes."

"She thinks it's not safe?" Evelyn huffed. "It's the safest place in the city."

Once inside, Tenny seemed to relax – if a creature made of ectoplasm and soul-flesh could relax. She investigated corners, peered around doors, and turned her eyes on Raine and Evelyn as I directed them around her. I felt uncomfortable at the thought of them simply stepping right through her. She studiously avoided the ex-drawing room door; perhaps she could sense the Servitor inside.

The old sitting room, our intended destination, was located on the opposite side of the ground floor from the ex-drawing room. It lay

abandoned and empty in a much sorrier state than most of the house.

No lovely piles of books here, no beautiful aged oak table, no eighties holdover appliances, just a trio of dusty armchairs, and a huge sofa which probably weighed as much as a dead elephant. About as comfortable to sit on, too. The carpet was a century old, worn down almost to the lattice-layer in places. The front end of the room was occupied by a pile of wooden storage crates and three dismantled vacuum cleaners, abandoned partway through some bizarre process of recombination.

“Meaningless,” Evelyn had said. “Probably something my mother was doing twenty years ago.”

Evelyn had spent all morning and some of last night prepping the old sitting room. She’d unrolled a huge piece of canvas across the floor, then painted a massive double-layered magic circle. This circle was twenty feet across and contained a miniature copy of itself in the very middle. For paint she’d used chicken blood cut with coal dust, applied with a brush taped to the end of a broom-handle, so she could do it herself without bending over or kneeling, both postures very difficult for her. I’d offered to work under her directions to save her the effort, but she’d insisted.

Evelyn hurried ahead of us to take up her station in the outer layer of the circle. I followed her into the old sitting room and Tenny drifted after me. Her tentacles explored the door frame, the storage crates, the feel of the carpet and the texture of the curtains. She padded around the edge of the room, satisfied this was indeed a safe place.

“I assume she’s in here now?” Evelyn asked.

“Yes, she’s right there.” I pointed. “Tenny, Tenny?”

Tenny wagged a clutch of tentacles at me. Evelyn stared at a point several feet to Tenny’s left, frowned, and sighed at the interlocking symbols and whorled designs of the magic circle.

“A swing and a miss?” Raine asked from the doorway. She started stretching her back muscles, hands reaching up against the top of the doorframe. “Got your wires crossed?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “No, it hasn’t worked, but that’s only the first stage.”

“How come I could see the big nasty gribbly Spider that one time? With a much smaller circle, less voodoo and all that?”

Evelyn shot her a bored, unimpressed look. “Don’t ask questions when the answer would hurt your brain.”

“Evee,” I scolded, gently as I could. “It’s a fair question. I’d like to understand as well, actually.”

Evelyn cleared her throat and frowned down at the circle. “Oh, I’m just winding her up. The Spider is a Servitor. Some theories say that means it’s made of different stuff. It’s embodied intention, whereas pneuma-somatic life is just life. I thought ... oh, damn and blast, never mind what I thought, it was wrong.” She tapped the smaller magic circle with the tip of her walking stick and pulled an awkward smile to herself, forced and half-frozen. “She needs to stand here. Right here.”

“Evee, are you okay?” I asked.

“What?” She blinked at me. “Of course, of course I’m okay. I’m just tired, Heather. I’m very tired. I ... here, right here.” She tapped the smaller circle again. “Then we can all see her.”

“You wanna make a bet on that?” Raine asked, a carefully innocent look on her face.

“You’re on. Ten pounds.”

Raine blinked. “Oh. You’re, uh, confident.”

“You can’t back out on a bet,” I said, a smile on my face. “That one was your fault, Raine.”

Raine crossed her middle and index fingers on both hands and struck an action pose. I almost giggled.

“In the circle, if you please,” Evelyn said. “Just lead her right through it.”

“Um ... Evee?”

“The circle is perfectly safe for you,” she said. “It’s not connected to anywhere, it’s not summoning anything, it’s entirely local. You can step over the lines, you can step *on* the lines, nothing will happen.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. My last experience with one of these wasn’t exactly positive.”

Manoeuvring Tenny to cross the two-foot wide inner circle became quite the task. Holding my hand out or calling to her didn’t work; she much preferred to cross the room by stalking around the edge, tentacles exploring the furniture and walls as she went, like a blind groping squid. I tried to explain to her what we needed, first out loud and then while holding the tip of one tentacle for mind-to-mind contact, speaking slowly and carefully so she might understand.

“Please, Tenny? Please?”

“Take your time, no need to spook her,” said Evelyn. “We have all day.”

“She’s not spooked, she doesn’t comprehend. I don’t even know if she understands me.”

In the end I led her by a tentacle, pulling ever so gently, the rubbery flesh uncoiling and stretching, my skin crawling at the gooey feeling under my hand. She stared with those huge glossy all-black eyes, dumb and blank, but she followed me onto the canvas step by slow step as I walked backward over the inner circle. Tenny placed one foot inside, then the other, tentacles trailing after her.

Evelyn gasped, sharp and short. Raine let out a low whistle.

“You can see her now?” I asked.

“That is one gnarly wee beastie,” Raine muttered.

“Yes, yes, it’s worked perfectly ... perfectly.” Evelyn swallowed, visibly shaken, and stared at Tenny. “Well ... well. I’d um ... I’d thought you were exaggerating. About the tentacles, I mean.”

“I try not to exaggerate.”

“Still.” Evelyn gathered herself and took a deep breath. “Still. The possibilities this offers ... ”

Tenny began to take another step forward, to leave the circle again. “Oh, she’s-” I let go of the tentacle. “Tenny, stay, stay girl. You-”

Suddenly her humanoid body halted at an awkward angle. Her tentacles bunched and flattened, right at the line of the inner circle, as if against a curved invisible wall.

The tentacles spread out, sliding and tapping across the surface of an invisible cylinder. She turned, tried to head back the other way, but her probing tentacles quickly found the limits of her prison, two feet wide.

“Evee!” I squeaked. “You didn’t say you were going to trap her in there.”

“Did I not? I explained this, all of this. And it’s not a trap, it’s like a cat carry box. You have to restrain the animal if you’re going to do surgery.”

“This thing helped save Heather,” Raine said. “You make a good mad doctor, sure, but don’t you play guinea pig with this thing.”

“She has a name, Raine. Please use it?” I asked.

“Sorry.” Raine raised both hands. “S’cute, you know, you giving

cute names to gribbly monsters.”

“She’s not a monster. At least, I don’t think she is.”

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes, utterly exasperated with both of us. “I’m not Josef bloody Mengele. I told you, this for her own good. That’s why you need to stay here, Heather, keep her nice and calm.”

“You promise?” I asked – and instantly regretted the word, the lack of trust. “I mean-”

Evelyn frowned at me. Not the expected glare, the prologue of a snapped comment or a withering insult, but a flicker of uncertainty, almost guilt.

“I am trying to help,” she said, slowly.

“I’m sorry. I just ... I’m paranoid. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said, almost pained. “It’s fine. Let’s get on.”

Tenny didn’t seem to need a lot of calming down. I reached into the circle – no barrier to real flesh – and took hold of a stray tentacle-tip. She curled it happily around my hand and wrist, holding on gently.

“Safe? Safe?” she asked in her sucking mud-voice.

“Very safe,” I said, hoping it was the truth. “My friends are going to help you, okay? Just stay still for now, don’t worry, you’ll be out of there soon.”

“She spoke?” Evelyn frowned. “I didn’t hear a thing. Raine?”

“Nope, nothing here either.”

I explained. Evelyn then spent several awkward minutes attempting to hold the end of a tentacle, as Tenny flopped them about and explored the inner dimensions of the circle-pen. Evelyn’s fingers

passed right through her, like trying to grasp thin air. I couldn't quite express the trick.

"I've never had to think about it before," I said. "You have to focus on believing it's there, more than on touching it. It's just ... natural, to me."

Evelyn grumbled and kept trying. She eventually established a brief hold with thumb and forefinger only, but apparently Tenny didn't want to speak to her. Or perhaps had nothing to say.

"So much for communication." Evelyn dropped the tentacle. She couldn't see the pneuma-somatic tar-goo dripping from her own fingers. "I'll get started, get a better look at those wounds. Keep her calm and relatively still, best you can. Must she touch every last surface like that?"

"I think she's just curious. Seems to be in her nature."

"As am I!" Raine announced. "When do I get a turn to play with her? She looks like she needs a good belly rub and some treats. You never were good with animals, Eevee, no wonder she won't warm up to you."

Evelyn sighed and directed a withering stare at Raine. "When I am done. This is an important piece of research, and potentially medical care, not playtime with a pet."

"That's where you're wrong, Eevee. S'always playtime where I come from."

Evelyn got down to work, pad of paper over one arm, chewing at her lower lip in concentration. Tenny seemed to understand what was required of her. She tried to cooperate at first, turning face-on as Evelyn sketched. Details of Tenny's wounds filled the pad in pencil drawing, their positions, estimated size, shape, all noted down in neat handwriting. Counting her tentacles proved a strange obstacle; Evelyn listed six of them severed down to stumps and another two damaged or cut further up, but each count of the healthy tentacles resulted in a different number – fourteen, seven,

twenty three, sixty five. We gave up after a dozen goes.

Raine stifled a laugh at the result on Evelyn's pad, and even I had to smile. Evelyn wasn't much of an artist.

"It's not meant to look aesthetically pleasing," she said. "It's a reference."

"A reference to your terrible skills, maybe," said Raine.

Evelyn glared and pointed with her pencil. "Go. Kitchen. Fetch me a drink. And get Heather some coffee."

"I'm fine," I said.

"Get her some anyway."

Raine returned with coffee, juice, and hastily assembled bacon sandwiches – two for her. She seemed to need it this morning, along with downing prodigious quantities of water and energy drink. I didn't blame her after last night's vodka consumption. At least she wasn't clutching her head or calling for silence. She held a plate next to me while I ate, so I could hang onto Tenny's tentacle as Evelyn worked around us.

A third magic circle began to take shape under Evelyn's slow and meticulous brushwork, in that revolting combination of chicken blood and coal dust. She propped her notebook open on the nearby sofa, glancing at it and mumbling under her breath as she added the jagged lines of a interlocking double pentagram, the angles cupped by Latin commands.

"This is all so riveting," Raine said after a mouthful of bacon and brown sauce. "Can't we play hide and seek with her, or at least fetch?"

"Nobody is making you stay," Evelyn drawled.

"I am," I said. They both looked at me. "What?"

Evelyn smirked and went back to her painting. Raine turned away to hide a similar look.

“What?” I demanded.

“She’s got you wrapped around her little finger, Raine.”

“*Excuse me?*”

Raine laughed. “I know, right? I love it.”

“I have not!” I whined. “Our relationship is completely not like that. Evee!”

“I’m only calling a spade a spade.”

I fumed silently, unwilling to let myself get peevish while trying to keep Tenny calm.

Evelyn straighted up and propped the broom-handle brush against the wall, then nudged the low dish of blood-mix-paint away from the canvas. “Right. Both of you step away, I don’t want to burn your eyebrows off.”

“Burn? Is this safe for Tenny?”

“I have complete control and understanding of everything here.” Evelyn swept one hand to indicate the magic circles. She made very pointed eye contact with me. “I am neither going to invoke an unexpected effect, nor allow a runaway process. I can promise you that.”

I nodded. “Okay. I-I’m sorry, Evee. I don’t mean to doubt you.”

She swallowed, broke eye contact, and turned away with obvious discomfort. “I understand. Please step out of the circle, let me work.”

I turned to Tenny, for all that she seemed to understand me. “I’ll be right back. Be good now.”

Her tentacle slipped out of my hand. At first she tried to follow, bumping her head off the barrier, but then she returned to her never-ending process of exploring the inner dimensions of the invisible cylinder. The sight tugged at my heart. I'd never had a pet, but I think I understood now. Evelyn stepped up to the edge of the outer circle and cleared her throat.

"Icito alacritas."

Nothing happened.

"Wish I'd bet on that one instead," Raine said.

"Wait for it," Evelyn murmured.

"Eh?"

"Wait for it."

One glance at her told me everything was not as it seemed; this was suddenly all very wrong. Evelyn was holding her breath, jaw clenched, knuckles white on her walking stick. Cold realisation settled in my gut.

"Wait for what?" I asked. "Evee? Wait for what? What's going to happen? Evee!"

Evelyn swallowed hard. She refused to look at me. "... I'm sorry, Heather."

Tenny's flesh began to smolder, steaming and smoking, as if her pneuma-somatic body burned with unseen internal fire. She went still and stiff, tentacles suddenly all straining at the invisible barrier. Panic shot through me. I took one step toward Tenny before Raine threw her arms around my waist to hold me back.

"No! Let me- no!"

"Evee!" Raine yelled. "Turn it off!"

Evelyn wouldn't look at either of us. She shook her head.

Tenny exploded into motion, tentacles whipping and slapping against the invisible wall, body thrashing, human hands scraping at the circle's barrier. She twisted and kicked and went down in a heap on the canvas, jerking and flopping, huge clouds of thick black steam rising from her body and vanishing as they touched the ceiling. She was being boiled away.

I went limp in Raine's arms, staring with horror at my faithful spirit. "Wha- what ... I ... "

"Evelyn, you call this shit off right now," Raine said. "I swear I'll pick you up and-"

"Shut up!" Evelyn snapped, stamping her walking stick on the floor. "Shut up and watch."

I did not have to be told; I couldn't tear my eyes away.

The great billowing clouds of black steam ran thin and finally guttered out. Relief filled my chest as Tenny curled back into a standing position, nothing like a human being getting up. She flowed to her feet and stared at Evelyn, then at me, and then her tentacles fanned out to resume tapping at her prison walls once more, as if nothing had happened.

Evelyn let out a huge shuddering breath. She almost laughed, a low, hesitant, half-hysterical sound as she cast about. She didn't seem to know what to do with herself. She wiped her mouth on the back of one hand, and sat down quickly on the huge uncomfortable sofa. Her eyes flicked to Tenny.

"You pass, little ghost," she said.

"I think that means she's alright," Raine offered. "She is alright, isn't she, Evee?"

Evelyn nodded. She stared at the floor, taking deep breaths and

rubbing at her hips. I watched Tenny for a moment until I was satisfied she wasn't going to keel over and expire.

"I ... I thought you said this was safe," I managed.

Evelyn puffed out an utterly humourless laugh and shook her head. "I think you will find I never said it was safe for *her*."

"You mean you *lied*, on a technicality, by omission. Evelyn, I can't believe this." I found I was almost shouting, a lump in my throat. I forced my voice down. "Are you absolutely sure you haven't hurt her? She's-"

"Completely fine," Evelyn said. She reached forward with her walking stick to bunch up part of the canvas and rub away some of the pentagram. "Look closely. Should be some fresh regenerative growth in her tentacles."

She was right; Tenny's stubs showed knobbly regrowth at the tips, glistening and shiny. Less than an inch, but it was a start. Tenny waggled them at me when I approached.

"Can we at least let her out now?"

"Of course, of course, yes. Just scrunch up part of the canvas to break the circle, it'll collapse the field. Raine and I won't be able to see her anymore, but I might have a permanent solution to that soon enough."

"Um ... break the circle, right."

"I'll do it," Raine said. "Anything jumps out at me, I'll put it in a headlock."

Raine folded part of the canvas over on itself. Tenny didn't pounce at anybody but she did leave the inner circle very sharpish. She touched my shoulders and the back of one hand with her tentacles, then returned to her prowling route around the walls, a curious animal stuck on some long-forgotten routine.

I turned on Evelyn.

“What if you’d lost control? Eevee, what if you’d made a mistake? That- that looked like it could have killed her, you ... ”

Evelyn met my eyes, somehow sad and defeated. She spoke very softly. “I would not have lost control.”

“But what if you had?”

“It took very little control. That was incredibly easy, pretty much out of my hands once I spoke the words.”

“It ... it didn’t look ... ”

“I intended it to be lethal.”

I gaped at her, lost for words.

“Trojan horse?” Raine murmured.

“Exactly,” Evelyn admitted. She flexed her back, popping compacted vertebrae and wincing. “That spell was potentially lethal – *if* our mysterious tentacled friend was anything other than what she appeared to be. Trojan Horse, walking time bomb, demon in disguise, whatever, it would have boiled her like a lobster in a pot. I didn’t tell you because you wouldn’t have agreed. Measures had to be taken. As she is what she appears, she is unharmed.”

I cast about for help and shrugged uselessly, betrayal burning in my chest. “Why can’t you simply tell me these things? You’re still treating me like I’m ... an idiot. A child.”

“She’s got a point there, Eevee,” Raine said. “I feel a bit sore too.”

“You’d been in direct mind-to-mind communication with the thing, exposed, in contact, possibly subverted without knowing it. She began speaking to you on the very same day, the very same hour that the Cult tried to kidnap you.” Evelyn’s voice rose in sour certainty, snapping and biting off her words. “I have not been

exactly well predisposed toward her. She has, in fact, been at the top of my list of potential vectors for the Cult stalking you.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me?” I spread my arms. “Because you’re the big bad scary magician? You have to do everything alone? You don’t have to! You-”

“If I’d told you,” Evelyn barked over me. “And she was something else, then she might have gotten it out of you. Or detonated. Or done God alone knows what. Put you in danger. I’m not going to apologise, dammit, I’m not. It was a necessary deception. I will not allow some Outsider to hollow out your head because I dropped my guard.”

I swallowed and half-turned away, hurt – but not confused. I hated to admit it, burning with indignation and insult, but Evelyn was right. I would never have agreed to this, and if my good little spirit had been a demon or a Trojan Horse, she would have gotten it out of me, very easily.

“I will not apologise,” Evelyn repeated. “But I will-”

“Hey, Eevee, maybe drop it for now,” Raine said softly. “I think we’re all a bit-”

“I don’t want an apology!” I snapped out at nothing, at the world. “I get it, okay? I get it. I just feel ... small and vulnerable and useless again. Kept in the dark.”

“We’re all in the fucking dark,” Evelyn said. To my surprise, I heard her breath catch in her throat. “All right, fuck it, I’m sorry.” She swallowed hard, sniffed, and controlled herself with a visible act of pure willpower. “The whole reason I did this is because I’ve been getting nowhere, absolutely nowhere. No progress, no ideas, no leads – I can’t crack the Cult’s extra-dimensional bullshit, I can’t finish building that door, I can’t even find the bloody people who tried to snatch you. It’s like none of them exist. Grasping at straws. I thought Tenny, maybe, she might be the vector for the Cult stalking you, at least I could figure that out, trace her back to them. I can’t even stop these vermin from harassing my friend.”

She ended in a shouting rant, a long intake of breath, and her face in her hands.

“It was necessary,” she said to the floor.

Raine held my shoulder with a gently restraining hand. Perhaps she believed she was holding me back from more anger, from snapping at Evelyn, from digging us all deeper. Nothing could have been further from the truth. I frowned at Raine and shrugged her hand off, then went to sit down on the sofa next to Evelyn.

“Evee. Evee, look at me.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted.

“Evee, for pity’s sake.” The aftermath of anger lent me a little brash courage; I awkwardly peeled one of her hands away from her face, to expose her guilty, battered expression.

“You can say whatever you want, I know, I’m-”

“I don’t want necessity to make monsters out of us,” I said.

“That’s what magic *does*.”

“No. This is going to sound crazy and probably technically wrong, but I think you should have told me. You’re not in this alone. You’re not under siege alone. If Tenny had been a ... Trojan Horse, we could have dealt with it together, because I *trust* you. Or, at least, I want to.”

Evelyn sniffed and looked at Raine for help.

“She’s got you dead to rights there,” Raine said.

“Look.” I sighed. “You’re so afraid of becoming like your mother – and no, I don’t know all the details – but I can add up the pieces. I’m not going to let you be something you don’t want to be. Next time something like this happens, you tell me. We’ll deal with the

consequences together.”

Evelyn nodded slowly. “I’m ... I’m sorry, Heather.”

“Good. I forgive you.”

She grimaced and looked away sidelong, at nothing. “You shouldn’t say that.”

“Accept my forgiveness or I shall ... bloody well slap you one,” I said. Evelyn quirked a frown at me. Raine laughed. I huffed. “Well, it’s not like I have much else in my toolbox of persuasion.”

“Your ultraviolence is rubbing off on her, Raine,” Evelyn muttered.

“Oh, no.” Raine mock-frowned. “Don’t say that, she’d be lethal.”

Evelyn accepted my forgiveness with an awkward nod and a mumbled word. She sighed and leaned back, the worst of her self-loathing dropping away in layers of stress and tension. “I’m surprised,” she said. “Lying made me feel awful. I’m quite good at that, you know, when I want to be. Had to be. But it’s never made me feel so ... ” She trailed off and shrugged. “I need a bath.”

“I hate to stir the pot again, but none of that explained why you didn’t tell *me*,” Raine said.

“You expect me to believe you’d have kept that from Heather? You two share bodily fluids without provocation, let alone secret plans.”

They both fell quiet, and after a moment I realised they were watching me watch Tenny. I blushed in a moment of intense self-consciousness, and almost gave in to the urge to shelter my face with one hand. “Don’t. That feels weird.”

“I like making you feel weird.” Raine grinned.

“Shut up.” Evelyn tapped her on the back of the knee with her walking stick, which drew a mock-yelp from Raine as she hopped out of range. “We’ve done all we can for ... ‘Tenny’, I think. Those

wounds don't seem to be causing her any distress."

"I don't know if she can show distress," I said.

"Mm, quite. Unfortunately, I've still no idea what she is." Evelyn frowned. "You're quite sure she called you master?"

"Yes, absolutely. She used that exact word, twice, definitely in reference to me."

"Maybe she just took a liking to you," Raine said. "I can get behind that."

"That's very flattering, but not everybody thinks like you, especially not about girls like me. If they did, the world would be a slightly odd place."

"A better place. Except for all the competition I'd have."

"It's as good a guess as any, at this point," Evelyn muttered.

"But you never know about the tastes of a tentacle monster, right?" Raine looked around as if she could still see Tenny, who was now nosing along the far wall. "Absolutely disgusting, but mega cool. And she ... slorp, with the tentacles, right?" Raine mimed the moment I'd told about her, Tenny defending me. "Wish I could have seen that."

"I hope you never have to."

"Well yeah, she won't need to do it again, because I'll be there."

"And she's not disgusting," I said. "She's kind of cute."

"Cute?"

Even Evelyn gave me a doubtful side-eye.

"Yes, cute. Maybe I'm just imprinting favourably because she saved me."

“Am *I* cute?” Raine asked.

“ ... do you even have to ask that? Let’s not talk about that right now.”

“Hmmm.” Raine squinted one eye and pulled a thoughtful face, then performed a theatrical turn toward an imagined adversary – Tenny was nowhere near the target of Raine’s exaggerated look. “Seems like you and I need to have a serious talk, Tentacle Lady.”

“Tch, Raine.”

“No, I’m serious. I need to thank her, for rescuing you, then make it crystal clear you’re mine.”

I rolled my eyes. “Raine, I’m not going to get seduced by a blob monster.”

“Just gotta make clear who’s boss here. Establish dominance. As long as we understand each other, right Tenny?”

Tenny actually reacted to that last one, staring at Raine. She pulled a double-loop with a bunch of tentacles and wiggled them up and down, then turned back to examining cracks in the wall.

“What?” Raine saw the look on my face. “What did she do?”

“I ... I’m not sure. I think she may have laughed. Maybe.”

Raine threw her arms in the air and whooped. “Universal language!”

Evelyn paid no attention to our antics. She sat forward with her chin in her hands, back badly bent, focused on the Latin inscriptions and repeating whorls of her magic circles, eyes far away.

“Evee.”

“Mm?” She looked up.

“Could the Cult have sent her, somehow?”

Evelyn studied me for a long moment, half bent-up like some sluggish, unblinking bear fresh from hibernation. She sighed and shook her head with a grimace. “That’s what I thought, but no. She’s not a Servitor, she’s far too complex for that. She appears to be a completely ordinary spirit, which means she either is – or she’s so advanced I can’t tell the difference. It’s almost as if ... as if she’d been trained. Or raised? Domesticated.”

A lost memory snagged in the back of my mind.

“She said a name.”

“What, just now?”

“No, no, when I was in the alleyway, or ... in the bookshop?” I frowned down at my hands, digging for memory. “I must have forgotten about it in all the panic afterward. She said a *name*. She said somebody had sent her ... no, told her? Told her to get me out, get me out of there. Lozzie. That was the name.” I looked up at Raine and Evelyn’s mystified faces. “Lozzie.”

“Lozzie?” Raine repeated.

“Short for Lauren,” said Evelyn, shaking her head. “I don’t know any Laurens.”

“I’ve known a few, but none of them relevant. Secret admirer?” Raine cracked a grin.

“I know of no mages by that name. Doesn’t mean a thing, of course. Could be false, a fake, throw us off a scent. A red herring.” Evelyn’s eyes went down to her maimed hand, frowning hard.

“Mean anything to you, Heather?” Raine asked. “Somebody you used to know?”

“I feel as if I’ve heard it in passing, but ... no.”

Lauren. Lozzie? The memory of a dream teased on the tip of my tongue, a ghost lurking in the depths of my memory.

We asked Tenny. All three of us, while I held a tentacle for the answer – but she didn't want to tell us anything. At the sound of that name – Lozzie – she pulled her tentacle out of my hand and resumed her unfathomable routine. We attempted another two times, my only answers blank stares and mind-silence.

“Not exactly a rare name, Lauren,” said Raine. “Real popular about thirty years ago, if I remember right. A cover, maybe?”

Evelyn stood up suddenly, teeth locked together, brow furrowed. She marched halfway to the door, then turned back and got halfway to the sofa again before halting. Her expression was exactly the one she might adopt if forced to eat excrement.

“God, I really do not want to do this,” she hissed.

“Evee? Oh.” Raine smiled a grim smile.

“What? What is it?” I asked.

“She's gotta make some phone calls.”

“Oh, don't make it worse than it already is,” Evelyn snapped, then focused on me. She waved a hand vaguely at the rest of the room. “A trained, raised spirit, like a hound? Somebody *sent* her. To Sharrowford, to me, to you, I've no idea. No idea at all.” She almost spat, furious.

“I can do it,” Raine said. “Gimme your phone. Lemme help.”

“Don't be absurd.” Evelyn stomped toward the door. “We'll do it together. In the kitchen. At least we can get out of this dust hole and have some tea.”

Evelyn's mobile phone lay on the kitchen table before her, next to a second steaming mug of tea. She'd drained the first so quickly I'd feared for her throat, but she didn't seem to feel the scalding heat. She stared at phone's dimmed screen, open on a sparse contacts list.

"I can do this for you, just say the word." Raine leaned against the fridge. I sat at the table, slowly nursing my own cup of tea. Tenny lurked in the doorway, more interested in the front room.

"I assume these people you're going to speak to are other mages," I said. "You're not calling your dad or something?"

Evelyn's eyes flicked to me. I felt a trickle of guilt, smothered beneath a tsunami of fascinated curiosity.

"Other mages. Yes."

A wider world, beyond Sharrowford's sordid little conflicts and bizarre happenings. *Other mages*. Other people like Evelyn?

People like her mother?

I didn't need to wonder why she felt uncomfortable.

I reached over and took her hand, her maimed hand, the one she'd grabbed me with when she was sucked Outside. She blinked, surprised at the sudden intimate finger-locked contact, and nodded a silent thanks. We didn't need words.

"The two people I'm about to call both tried to kill me, in the aftermath of my mother's death," she said.

Raine opened her mouth; she didn't get past the intake of breath; Evelyn silenced her with a raised finger and a glare.

"They did," Evelyn said. "I know what you're about to say, and they did try. You scared Aaron off just by being you, that's why you think he's harmless. Fliss, I said some things to her you never heard,

things I will not repeat. Either of them would have put me in a shallow grave.”

Raine smiled in defeat and raised her hands. “Aaron wouldn’t hurt a fly. Last I checked he’s a pacifist vegan, works for a charity. Fliss, yeah, I’ll give you that, she’s ... odd.”

“She’s a sociopathic pederast demonophile.”

Raine shrugged. “Just trying to be diplomatic.”

“These sound like reasonably scary people.” I sighed in exasperation. “Why can’t you have a nice friendly mage who wants to, I don’t know, magic ice cream out of thin air? Are they always like this?”

“Mostly,” Evelyn grunted. “All right, I’ve had enough tea, my back teeth are floating.”

She switched the phone to speaker and placed the first call. Soft ringing filled the overcast dark of the kitchen, the phone a patch of brightness on the shadowed table. Clouds sat fat and grey in the sky beyond the window.

A click and a buzz – call answered. Background noise, chatter, a busy place. A lively male voice piped up, full of amusement, open and friendly even over the artificiality of the phone connection.

“Hello hello, who’s this calling me then, hey?”

“You know who it is,” Evelyn said, staring at the wall with her arms folded. “Hello, Aaron.”

“And a very good afternoon to you as well, young lady. Caught me on my lunch break, you did, but I’d have made time anyway. Haven’t heard from you in well over a year, Evelyn. How’s-”

“One question. That’s the only reason I’m calling. Answer it truthfully or I’ll send an Outsider to kill you in your sleep.”

Aaron started laughing, a real laugh, a little derisive, exactly as a normal person might react to such a threat delivered via phone call. "Evelyn, Evelyn, you always were over dramatic. What's the matter, hey? Do you need-"

"I think she's serious, Aaron," said Raine. "Hi, by the way."

Aaron went quiet. Background noise filled the call. Raine raised her eyebrows and spread her arms, surprised at the power of her own voice. I nodded, had to admit, that was pretty obvious.

"Oh, uh, hi, Raine. Hi. Glad to know you two are still close," Aaron said.

"Did you or did you not send something to Sharrowford?" Evelyn asked.

"Send something? No, no, I've not sent anything your way, nothing at all. Swear it, serious, I wouldn't wind you up on this."

"Goodbye, Aaron."

"Hey, you do believe me, right? I wouldn't-"

Evelyn killed the call.

"He was telling the truth," Raine said instantly. "Also, wow, he really is scared of me, isn't he?"

"Told you so."

"And here I thought he was actually sort of a nice bloke." She shook her head, mystified.

The second call went unanswered. Twenty seconds, thirty seconds, a full minute of ringing. Evelyn hung up and tried again. And again. And again.

"Who doesn't have voice mail these days?" I wondered out loud.

"Felicity uses a landline. No reception out in her rotting manor house."

"Manor house?"

"Long story, never go there," Raine said. "For serious."

"Pick up, you evil bitch," Evelyn muttered.

Click. Line connected. Dead silence on the other end.

"Felicity? It's Saye."

Silence crept from the phone, like black waves, filling the room.

"Is that you or your pet?" Evelyn asked.

"Pet? Is that what you think I am?"

The voice from the phone was not remotely human. A nightmare approximation of young girl, squeezed through sulphur and darkness, high and giggling. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

"I'd take offence if you weren't so easy to tease," it rattled on. "My little *beurre sucré*. Bet you thought I'd forgotten all about you, didn't you? You-"

Evelyn slapped a hand over the phone's speaker. She rolled her eyes and waited for the sound to stop, then removed her hand.

"Evelyn? Evee? Evee?" A different voice was asking, low and soft, a hushed half-mumble. "Are you still there? Evee? Please-"

"Yes," Evelyn hissed

"It's me, I'm sorry about that. I was napping, she got to the phone first."

"I have a problem," Evelyn snapped. "Are you the cause?"

“Never. For you, never. Can I help?”

“No.”

A long, long pause.

“Goodbye, Felicity.”

“Be safe, Eevee.” A small choke entered Felicity’s voice. “Can I see you-”

Evelyn killed the call with a jab. Her shoulders shook ever so slightly. More history lurked here than I’d imagined, dark things or tender things, things I didn’t know how to touch.

“You holding up okay?” Raine asked.

“I’m fine.” Evelyn huffed. “That’s the worst of them. I suppose I could call Gabrielle too, she’ll probably offer to post us a cake, or something equally as stupid.”

Raine’s phone went off and made us all jump. She laughed at herself and fished it out of one pocket, then frowned at the screen.

“It’s not her calling back, is it?” Evelyn’s voice dripped with contempt. “I just blocked her again. She doesn’t even have your number.”

“Nope. It’s our friendly neighbourhood shape-shifter.” Raine answered the call and tried to say hello, cut off instantly by agitated werewolf. “What? Twil, slow- what do you mean, you’re outside? Yeah, we’re all here. What are you up to? Oh.” Raine lowered the phone. “She hung up.”

A loud, polite knock sounded at Evelyn’s front door.

We all shared a look. Evelyn rolled her eyes and muttered something about Twil’s irredeemable idiocy.

"I'll get it." I stood up, wanted to stretch my legs anyway, get out of the gloom and claustrophobia in this kitchen, with these dark words and dark thoughts. A dose of Twil might be exactly what we all needed right now.

"Tell her to go away," Evelyn called, not entirely sincere.

Raine followed me into the front room, of course. In the back of my mind I was dimly aware this might be serious, another chapter of panic and madness to add to the last few weeks. I hung back and quashed my frustration as Raine stepped forward to unlock the door. Twil was standing on the doorstep, with an awkward smile on her face.

"All right, you two?" Twil said by way of greeting. "Uh, can I have a word with Saye?"

Twil was utterly incapable of concealing even the mildest of emotions, let alone the deep discomfort and social anxiety written all over her body language. She looked like a dog about to be put through a degrading training session. In addition to her usual big coat and white hoodie, she wore warm fingerless gloves and a scarf, with her great mass of dark hair tucked down the back of the coat.

"Hi Twil!" I said, bright as I could manage. I'd come to rather enjoy the sight of her. More positive imprinting after she'd rescued me, I guessed.

"All right, yeah." Raine frowned past her, missing nothing.

Twil had not come alone.

A great big four wheel drive was parked in the road, sides splashed with mud. Two figures stood at the end of the garden path, this side of the wall, inside the property boundary – the supernatural boundary too, if spirit behaviour was anything to go by.

One was a tall man with close-cropped hair and muscles like he knew his way around a gym. The other was a short tidy older woman who shared an unmistakable family resemblance with Twil.

She had her hands folded demurely before her, waiting patiently as she watched Twil on our doorstep.

“I see you’ve ignored my request.” Evelyn thumped across the front room to glare daggers at Twil.

Twil grimaced like a beaten dog. “I’m sorry, Saye- Evelyn, I mean. I told them you wouldn’t like this. That’s why I came too, please don’t go out there and get violent. Please.”

“Nobody is going to get violent,” I said. A gut reaction. Twil nodded at me.

“Yeah, thanks. Listen to big H, yeah?”

“Big H?” Raine grinned. “What?”

“Uh, Heather.”

“Who are they?” Evelyn asked, voice flat and hard. She stared past Twil at the pair waiting at the end of the path.

“Uhhhh.” Twil looked like a deer in headlights. She pointed vaguely over her shoulder. “That’s my cousin, Ben, and um, my mum.”

“Your mother.”

“Yeah, my mother. Yeah.”

Evelyn’s gaze swivelled back to Twil.

“High Priestess of the Brinkwood Cult, your mother?”

Twil winced. “Please don’t get violent. She’s my mum.”

conditions of absolute reality – 3.11

Evelyn possesses, even at the best of times, a short and bitter temper. I believed I was familiar with her anger by now, directed at myself, at Raine, at her missing leg and crippled body, at the memory of her mother, at every trespass against her; she wielded anger as a cudgel against the indignities of life, and I had begun to find it charming in an obscure and difficult way.

I had never seen her this angry before.

She stared at Twil like she wanted to commit murder.

Perhaps the stress of making those phone calls had gotten to her, or perhaps she still felt guilt for lying to us about the experiment on Tenny, or perhaps – I wondered as my chest tightened – Twil turning up on our doorstep with her mother in tow really was a terrible transgression.

Twil cringed away from the look on Evelyn's face. She half-raised her hands as if to ward off a blow.

"Evee," Raine said in a soft voice. "Dial it back, yeah? Let's be rational."

I didn't make a sound, silence born from a deep-rooted desire to avoid Evelyn's blinding rage.

"Look," Twil started. "Saye-"

"Well, Raine?" Evelyn hissed through her teeth without looking away from Twil. "Be rational. Shut the door."

"Aaaaand what if those lovely, lovely people waiting in the garden decide to not go away?"

Twil slapped a hand on the door to hold it open. "Just hear my mum out, okay? She wants to talk to you because she wants to help, and-"

"I should never have let you in here, you idiot mongrel," Evelyn hissed.

“Hey! Knock off the pissy attitude for five minutes, okay? I’m trying to keep this all calm, right? She wants to help.”

“You don’t have the slightest comprehension of what your mother is. Raine, shut the door.”

Twil growled low. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean, huh?”

Raine did not shut the door; she tensed up. She was still in post-bath clothes, tshirt and jogging bottoms, unarmed – until she unhooked her leather jacket from beside the door.

I stepped back, mind racing, seconds to defuse this. The last thing we wanted was a scrap in front of Twil’s mother, who may or may not be some kind of terrifying magician, or worse. Evelyn’s voice rose into a shouted insult and Twil growled louder.

“She can take her help,” Evelyn snapped, “and shove it up her rotten cu-”

I scooped my shoes off the floor, one in each hand, swung them wide and slapped the soles together as hard as I could.

Bang!

The first bang served only to raise the noise level; the second drew a flicker of attention from Twil; the third made Evelyn jerk and glare at me, and the fourth finally got Raine to look away from Twil’s centre of mass. She smiled at me in confusion. I stared at the ceiling and kept going well past the point at which this had ceased to be a good idea. When I stopped, they would expect an explanation. Nine, ten, my arms were getting tired. Eleven, twelve, my hands hurt. Thirteen, fourteen – stop.

“What the hell-”

“Not the time for this-”

Twil and Evelyn rattled on, so I gave them more shoe. Bang bang bang bang *bang*. Raine shot me a thumbs-up and shouted “Encore!”

I stopped again, they’d gotten the message. Evelyn’s glare had simmered down from murderous blinding rage to mere smoldering irritation, whereas Twil had lost the worst of her cornered-dog expression, puzzled by my antics.

“Right, well,” I said, sniffed, and took a deep breath. “Is there any rational, sensible reason we can’t go talk to Twil’s mum? Act like

the adults we are supposed to be?”

“These are dangerous people,” Raine said. She shrugged and gave me an awkward grin. “For real.”

“But they’ve come to parley. To talk, yes? They’ve even waited at the edge of the garden, where we could do, well, anything to them. I think they *know* they’re threatening.”

“Of course they know it,” Evelyn almost growled through her teeth. She glared at Twil. “This is intimidation. Amateurs. I could have them where they stand.”

“Oi!” Twil barked. I talked right over her, trying to control the tremor in my voice.

“Then they don’t pose a credible threat to you? To us? Is this some weird territorial thing? Or are you mad *because* it’s Twil?”

Evelyn hesitated, shoulders sagging. Twil spread her arms in a what-did-I-do gesture.

“Do they pose a credible threat to us?” I repeated.

“ ... no. Not here. Not on home ground. Unless the car is a bomb, or something equally stupid.”

“Twil,” I said, turning as politely as I could to her. “Is the car a bomb?”

“ ... what are you on-”

“Yes or no. Please, Twil.”

“No.” Twil grimaced, offended and outraged. “It’s not a sodding trap.”

“I’d say I have pretty good reason to trust Twil’s word,” I said. “It can’t hurt to find out what her mother wants.”

“Twil wouldn’t be in on it,” Evelyn grumbled.

“No,” Raine mused. “No, she would have to be.”

“Yes, exactly,” I said. “Twil is almost definitely the most dangerous thing they’ve brought with them, and I don’t think she’s capable of faking being our friend. She’d have to be in on any plan they have.”

“Yeah, just talk about me like I’m not here, sure.” Twil rolled her

eyes.

"You've sort of earned it this time," I said to her. "I'm going outside to meet to your mum. Raine, will you come with me?"

"Yes ma'am. Right away, ma'am."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Evelyn grumbled. She looked ready to spit. Instead she called into the depths of the house as she struggled into her shoes. "Praem! Here! Now!"

Praem took only seconds to appear, gliding on light footsteps. One or Two, I couldn't tell. She was still in the same clothes as when she'd rescued me. Evelyn tapped Praem's leg with her walking stick.

"Stay by me."

Evelyn did not wait. She drew herself up to her full height, stood as straight as she could force her spine, and strode right out the front door. Twil scrambled aside then hurried to follow. Evelyn's walking stick slammed down before her with each step.

Raine raised her eyebrows at me and mouthed a silent 'well done' as she shrugged her jacket on and patted the pockets. I shrugged, brief burst of confidence dissipating now Evee had taken charge. I felt embarrassed and silly with my shoes in my hands. I quickly slipped them on, light-headed and unsteady.

"Are you ... " I looked Raine up and down quickly. She was the only one of us three in a fit state to receive visitors right now. Evelyn and I were both members of the daytime pajama club today. "Are you armed?" I whispered.

She answered with a noncommittal turn of her head, halfway out the door.

"Really," I said. "Maybe ... leave it behind?"

"Not on your life, Heather. Literally."

No time left to argue for caution and diplomacy; Twil and Evee were already halfway down the garden path. Raine offered me her hand, I took it, and she pulled the door ajar behind us as we stepped outside. Tenny brought up the rear, padding along in silence to find out what all the fuss was about.

I whispered to Raine from the corner of my mouth. "We need to have a word with Evee about her thing for Twil."

“ ... you’re joking?”

“Just a hunch.”

Evelyn halted at a careful distance from our two visitors, head held high, eyes unreadable, walking stick jutted forward a few inches like a weapon on display. Praem stood ready by her side, staring at a point in the far distance, hands folded as if demure and gentle. Twil looked ready to vibrate to pieces, opened her mouth but then thought better of speaking. Raine and I hurried to catch up before any of them put spark to tinder.

Twil’s cousin and mother did seem threatening, to my sensibilities, but I was biased after my experience with Alexander and the Cult.

The cousin was rather imposing, I’ll admit. Six feet of badly dressed muscle shown off in short sleeves, hairy forearms crossed over his chest. He must have been freezing without a jacket or jumper on. The rest of us were all wearing layers against the cold seeping down from the dark clouds. Performative macho stuff, I suppose. He had one of those soft doughy faces that couldn’t quite grow a beard, but the fuzz on his chin put up a good fight all the same.

Twil’s mother, on the other hand, was positively inviting. She wore a long patterned skirt and a shawl draped over her shoulders. Family resemblance shone through; she and Twil shared the same short, compact stature, the same sharp features and dark hair – shot through with long streaks of grey. That surprised me. So rare to see an older woman with undyed hair, age on display. Heavy crow’s feet crinkled the corners of her eyes from too much smiling.

She used one on us, a warm smile.

“Oh, four of you?” she said. “That’s more than I was expecting. I suppose I don’t need to guess which of you is miss Saye. I’m Christine Hopton, Twil’s mother, though I don’t doubt she’s already told you that. Shall we shake hands?”

Christine’s voice was soft and resonant; nothing like her daughter’s. She offered Evelyn her hand.

Evelyn stared at her, then down at the proffered hand. In the corner of my eye I noticed Raine reach inside her jacket – the cousin noticed too, watching her. He unfolded his arms. My heart clambered into my mouth, pulse hard in my throat.

"She's not gonna trick you with a handshake," Twil said through gritted teeth. "Come on, Saye, this is my mum."

"Twil, dear, please?" Christine said.

Surely they all knew we couldn't have a fight here, in the street outside a suburban house, no matter how run-down and empty the road was.

Why had I encouraged this? A stubborn belief in non-violent solutions? That hadn't survived the coffee shop encounter. If Alexander had turned up in Evelyn's garden I would have happily sicced Praem on him.

No, we were out here because almost a week after I had been nearly snatched off the street in broad daylight, we had done nothing. We had gotten nowhere. We hadn't retaliated, we hadn't made ourselves safer except by caution, we hadn't even found the people responsible. I was being stalked and harassed and we were hiding away, stuck, waiting for the Cult to make their move. We'd ceded the initiative.

We needed help.

"I'm sorry I didn't call ahead, or send a message with my daughter," Christine was saying. "I assumed I would be rebuffed, for all the wrong reasons, so I thought it better to simply turn up, to show good faith. Please, miss Saye, may I call you Evelyn?"

"What are you doing in my city?" Evelyn hissed. She barely moved her lips.

"Your city?" Twil's cousin rumbled.

"Ben," Christine warned, ice running underneath her gentle voice. He shrugged.

"Leave," Evelyn said. "Get out of-"

I jumped in, forced a smile I didn't feel, and grabbed Christine Hopton's hand. My body seemed to have forgotten how to do a handshake. "Hello! I'm Heather, and yes, you're right, this is Evelyn. That's Raine, she's my girlfriend, and uh, that is a demon bound inside a wooden mannequin. We call her Praem. Also Tenny is wandering around over there, but none of you can see her."

Christine stared for a heartbeat, then caught up and followed my

lead, her smile very warm indeed. "Hello, Heather, a delight to meet you. Always nice to meet Twil's friends."

"Heather," Evelyn hissed.

"What? What? I am being polite. It's normal."

"You are giving away every advantage we have."

I stood up to Evelyn's withering look, and reminded myself she was my friend. "Evee, I think if these people were here to assassinate you, they wouldn't do it in full view from the front garden."

Ben snorted a laugh and rubbed his chin. Raine made a thinking face. "Probably right," she muttered.

"Indeed, we are at quite a disadvantage here," Christine said. She raised her eyes to the front door we'd left ajar. "It is much like being before the maw of an unknown beast, deep in the jungle."

"Right," Ben grunted. "Said we shouldn't be here."

"Ben," Christine warned. "I will make you wait in the car. I will. I will go in there alone."

Ben cleared his throat and turned away,

"Better. So, Heather, and Raine, was it? I've heard about you from Twil. And this is ... Praem?" Christine pursed her lips. "Yes, I can see now. She's not really here, is she? She's blue, as well. How strange I didn't notice. And, Tenny?" She cast about a little and then looked to me for guidance. "Should I greet her too or is she ... ?"

"I don't think she pays much attention."

"That's quite alright, dear." Christine smiled at us and gestured at Twil's cousin. "This is Ben, my nephew, he's just here to look after me. I'm sorry about his behaviour. And in the interests of full disclosure, we have a manifestation with us too, for safety, considering the state of Sharrowford right now. Though I do not know where it is exactly. I don't share your gift, Heather."

We all looked around, but of course I was the only one who could see the thing. Nothing on the street or behind the car; I thought she was bluffing – then I looked up.

Almost invisible against the background of dark grey cloud, size

difficult to gauge, it bobbed in the air about twenty feet up, a mass of translucent spheres like soap bubbles, constantly sliding over each other in an endless process of rearrangement. As I watched, I realised that's how it moved – it tracked itself through the air by moving each individual part over the other bubbles.

The motion was remarkably disgusting; watching made me feel queasy.

“Heather, what does it look like?” Evelyn asked

I told her, best I could make sense of the creature. “Nothing like any other spirits or Servitors.”

“Oh, it's not a construct. None of us know how to do that.” Christine's smile widened. “It's a bud, or an angel, if you like, sent from our god.”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes, then looked slowly up and down the street.

“They're alone,” Raine said. “I already checked.”

“Where's your father, then?” Evelyn said to Twil. “You don't expect me to believe this is it? Your mum and one dumb slab of muscle?”

Twil squinted a frown at her. “At work, duh. It's the middle of the afternoon. We can't all live like students.”

“Mm.”

“Now we've all been introduced,” Christine said, “please, miss Saye, hear me out?”

“What do you want?” Evelyn grunted.

Christine's expression softened into a look I could only think of as motherly. “My daughter has informed me you are fighting a war. Alone.”

“None of your business. I don't need charity.”

“Nevertheless, what happens in Sharrowford affects us in the Church of Hringewindla too. I've come to offer help, yes, but think of it as self-interest on our part, if you prefer.”

Church of what? I frowned, wanted to interrupt, ask her to repeat that word. I'd read Beowulf, swore that word sounded like Old

English.

Evelyn stared at her for a long moment. I glanced at Raine but she just shrugged with her eyebrows, deferring to our mage, still unwilling to remove her hand from inside her jacket – on her gun? I swallowed, forced myself to reach out and take Evelyn’s free hand, and earned a sidelong glare for my trouble.

“We do need help,” I said.

“We-”

“Are you any closer to a solution?”

Evelyn said nothing and turned back to Christine. She let her eyes rove over the pair of them, over the car, down the street. “What does your tentacled friend think of them?”

“You mean Tenny?”

“Mm, good judge of danger, at least to you, isn’t she?”

Tenny was prowling along the edge of the garden wall, looking up at the floating bubble-monster as her tentacles stroked the grass and bricks and stray leaves. She seemed entirely unconcerned by Christine and Ben, these members of the Brinkwood Cult.

“I think she’s okay with them.”

Evelyn grunted, stared at Christine. “You touch nothing. You leave your phones in your pockets. You step out of line for even a second and my security will eat you alive.”

She extracted her hand from mine, turned on her heel, and marched back up the garden path with Praem in tow. I gaped after her.

“Well. Quite a young lady,” Christine said.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “Please, um, do come inside.”

Twil grumbled in the back of her throat. “Total bitch, more like.”

“Twil. Language,” her mother said.

“Ahhhh, it’s fine.” Raine ruffled Twil’s hair. Twil squeaked and jerked away in surprise. “She’s not wrong, sometimes.”

Ben gestured for Christine to go first. She nodded a thank you and got a few paces down the garden path before he moved to follow.

Raine stepped in front of him and held out a hand.

“Sorry mate, I think you’re staying in the car.”

“Scuse me?” he said, unlimbering his hands. He towered over her, over all of us.

“What, you wanna square up?” Raine began to grin. My heart leapt into my throat.

“Raine!”

“Ben,” Christine said, measured and gentle. “There’s no need for that.”

Ben shook his head and let out a disbelieving laugh. “And what, you’re gonna go in there alone? No way.” He turned back to Raine. “Saye said-”

“I have a veto,” Raine said. “You ain’t coming in, mate.”

“And you’re going to stop me?”

Raine just grinned wider.

“Don’t-” I squeaked. “Please don’t give her an excuse. She’s not joking. She will, she really will.”

Ben frowned at me, then visibly relaxed and backed off, somehow without stepping away.

“Raine, stop playing guard dog,” Evelyn called from the doorway. “He comes in too.”

“But-”

“I want him where I can see him. Hurry up, before I change my mind.”

= =

“This is such a lovely house, not at all what I was led to believe. And you three girls are living here together?”

“Trust me, mum, it gets plenty weird if you set a foot wrong.”

Twil’s judgement earned her a reproachful frown.

“Twil’s right,” Evelyn snapped.

The ex-drawing room was strictly off-limits, not only as Evelyn’s

workshop but also due to the massive killer spider currently locked inside. The abandoned sitting room was full of dust and chicken-blood paint and probably esoteric trade secrets right now, so we all gathered in the kitchen, with the lights on full and mugs of tea all round, supplied by Raine's quick thinking.

Evelyn and Christine sat opposite each other. I took a third chair, but scooted it back clear of the firing line. Ben stayed standing by the door, so Raine did the same, sipping her tea by the counter. Twil hovered near her mum. Praem took up station to one side of Evelyn, the very picture of a right-hand-woman. Tenny had floated back in, but she quickly lost interest.

Thankfully, the disgusting bubble-Servitor had stayed outside, contenting itself with floating over the house.

Evelyn stared across the table with all the stubborn, sullen power of a feudal ruler in the heart of her realm. She was, if nothing else, exceptionally well-protected in here.

I listened with rapt fascination, teetering on the edge of a world I still knew so little about.

"Led to believe?" Evelyn said. "By who?"

"By my late father-in-law, mostly," Christine answered. "I think he had some contact with your grandmother, several decades ago?" Evelyn grunted, noncommittal. "This house – the Saye house – it's been somewhat of a bogey man for us in the Church, for a long time. Bigger on the inside than outside, full of gates to other places, under the eye of monstrous guards, that sort of silly thing."

"The last one is true."

"Oh, yes, I suppose it is." Christine glanced at Praem.

"You're right to be afraid of me," Evelyn said, level and emotionless. "Afraid of this house. Afraid of my family. Why take the risk to come here?"

Christine put down her tea and folded her hands together on the tabletop. "Because we took a vote, after Twil told us about what was happening, and I volunteered for the task of contacting you."

Evelyn laughed softly. "Vote? Your cult votes?"

"*Cult?*" Ben spoke up.

Christine closed her eyes briefly. “It’s just a word, Ben. Be quiet.”

“What does that mean though,” he rumbled. “Cult?”

Christine shot him a stern look; he shrugged and went back to his tea.

“We vote, yes, on certain matters. There are less than thirty of us, it’s more of an extended family than an open organisation. In this case, the vote was held between me, my sister, and my husband – our leading triumvirate. This isn’t the bad old days anymore, miss Saye. We’re not blood-soaked witches dancing in the woods and kidnapping children at the behest of an abusive old man.”

“Mum,” Twil hissed. “Don’t.”

“You were not there, dear. Hush now.”

“Why volunteer?” Evelyn asked. “Wanted to see the freak show for yourself?”

“No, not at all. Not only because this had to be done, but for personal reasons as well. The vote carried two to one. The one against was my husband. He thought it too dangerous, any contact with the Saye family too dangerous. I know a little of your family history, I know your mother is gone, you have no guidance, no gods, no outside help, and now you are fighting a war by yourself, against some very dangerous people.”

“Which I will win,” Evelyn said.

“Good. We in the Church would very much prefer you do win.”

She paused – a bait pause, for Evelyn to ask the follow up question, to begin a real dialogue. Damn, she was good at this. I could learn a thing or two.

It even worked. Evelyn raised a silent eyebrow.

“What happens in Sharrowford affects us too,” Christine continued. “Affects all of us in the Church. All who have been touched by Hringewindla. We cannot decamp to another place, flee to another part of the country if Sharrowford ends up under control of a hostile power. Hringewindla cannot be moved. We will be forced to defend ourselves, and will we likely lose.”

“Who-” I started, so excited and jittery I didn’t catch myself in time. Both women turned to look at me and I felt my cheeks flush. “May I

ask a question?"

"... you never have to ask me for permission," Evelyn said.

"Right, well. Mrs Hopton-"

"Call me Christine, please. We're not in school, dear."

"Christine, then. That word you keep using, that's Old English, right?"

She blinked at me several times in delighted surprise. "Why yes, it is. A very attentive mind on you, dear. Hringewindla is a self-chosen name, in simply the first human language our god encountered. Its own language is ... *difficult*, for the human soul to bear."

"It's their name for their crippled Outsider," Evelyn said.

"Hringewindla is not a cripple," Christine said, in tone of gentle warning.

"It's also not a god," Evelyn snapped back.

Ben visibly bristled. I suppressed a flinch. He seemed far too big in this kitchen. He directed a dark frown at Evelyn, and failed to notice the way Raine's body language had shifted into a threat response, her eyes flicking between his hands, the centre of his chest, and a point between his eyes. She flexed her fingers.

"If you have been touched by Hringewindla, as we have," Christine said, "you cannot for a moment doubt the plain divinity of intent and form. It is a transcendent experience. If you choose not to respect that, well, I ask merely that you respect our religion, as you would any other."

"Ha!" Evelyn barked. Christine took a deep, calming breath, and to my surprise Twil looked terribly embarrassed, grimacing and studying the view through the kitchen window. I suppose anybody would, hearing their own mother talk like that.

"Be that as it may, let's not get too far into the weeds just yet. We too had a run in with the Sharrowford 'Cult'." Christine pronounced the word with great and exaggerated care. "Brotherhood of the New Sun, they called themselves. Quite an inventive name."

"That's right," I said, nodding. "I remember that- that's what ... yes."

“Twil told me what happened to you, dear. I’m so sorry for you.”

I shrugged. “I’m ... fine now.”

She graced me with a smile, then turned back to Evelyn. “My sister, Twil’s aunt, is our most advanced ... practitioner. Of all our family, she has spent the most time learning from our god. She visited Sharrowford by herself about three weeks ago. She was approached, aggressively so, and drawn into a similar situation as Heather here was. She escaped, but since then we have seen at least two suspect people in Brinkwood itself. We are being watched.”

I frowned. “Um, if you had trouble, why was Twil in the city?”

Christine sighed and adopted that unique mixture of disappointment, exasperation, and helpless acceptance that only the parent of a teenager could express. She glanced at her daughter. Twil shrugged, utterly mystified.

“Twil did not inform me where she was going. Twil believed herself immune to harm.”

“But I am,” said Twil.

“All teenagers think they’re invincible, dear.”

“I am though.”

“She did save me,” I said.

“Yes, and I’m very proud of her for that. She has a wonderful heart, especially for her age.”

“Mum!” Twil blushed terribly, then turned away and busied herself drinking her as-yet-untouched mug of tea.

“My daughter also informed me that what progress you are making against the ‘Cult’ is either slow, or running into troubles. That is why we wish to offer help. Why I want to offer help. It is much, much better for us, our Church, our god, if Sharrowford is held by friendly hands, or at least neutral hands, rather than the kind of people who openly engage in kidnapping, murder, and worse.”

Evelyn stared at her for a long time, with a perfect poker face.

“I don’t trust you, and I don’t like you,” she said eventually.

Christine smiled and frowned at the same time. “You don’t even

know me, miss Saye. But we don't have to be strangers."

"You gave up your own daughter to a mage's experiment. That's everything I need to know about you."

Oh.

Oh.

I winced, inside and out.

"That was a long time ago," Christine said, measured and tight. "And Twil was unharmed."

"Fuck you, Saye!" Twil barked.

"Twil!" Her mother barked much louder at her. "Language."

"I think I've heard enough," Evelyn grunted. She began to gesture a command at Praem.

I grabbed her hand, and hopped up onto shaking feet.

"Evee! Evee, I must talk to you outside in the corridor. Um, front room, I mean. In private. Sorry, sorry everybody," I stammered and flustered, dragging Evelyn to her feet by sheer force of bluster and bluff. "Raine, entertain our guests for a moment. Won't be a minute! Promise, right back! Yes!"

I didn't wait for a response, pulling Evelyn along into the front room, past where Tenny lurked. Evelyn offered no complaint when I finally drew us to a halt, just inside the abandoned sitting room, well beyond earshot. I wet my lips and found I was shaking; did I have the courage to say this?

"You could have been more forceful. Don't show these people any fear," Evelyn said, then sighed and smiled. "You could also have just whispered your council to me. Go on, out with it."

"First off, she's not your mother."

We both froze, Evelyn with shock, I with fear.

"What-" she almost spat, then lowered her voice and squinted at me. "Heather, *what?*"

I took a deep breath and tried to keep my cool. "It doesn't take a psychology degree to figure out what you're projecting here. Whatever Twil's mother did to her is *not* the same as how your

mother treated you.”

“I’m ... I’m not ... I ... ” Evelyn frowned hard.

“She’s not your mother. Don’t take that out on her.”

Evelyn huffed and gritted her teeth. “All right, okay, maybe I was ... I don’t know. But that doesn’t make a lick of difference. I don’t want those people in this house a moment longer than necessary. That woman in there is barely human, Heather. She’s a walking agent for an Outsider.”

“And she’s offering to help us. The enemy of my enemy is my friend?”

Evelyn made a derisive snort. “We’re being baited.”

“What about Twil? Has she just been a ploy all along? I don’t think she’s capable of that. She’s sweet, but not the smartest.”

“Twil is sane and her soul is her own *because* she’s a werewolf, not in spite of it – it’s kept her out of the worst, because she’s dangerous. They probably keep her well away from their god. I may have to rethink her grandfather’s motives.”

“She’s ... still offering us help, Eevee.”

“We don’t need help.”

“You *do* need help!” I snapped, and finally all the pieces came tumbling into place in my mind. “Fine. Screw those people in there. Screw Twil.” Evelyn blinked at me in surprise. I put a hand to my mouth. “Goodness, I can’t believe I said that. Look, you do need help, from me and Raine. Between now and this morning, I’ve realised what you’re doing – you’re trying to do it all yourself. You said it this morning, you’re making no progress, you’re stuck, you can’t break the Cult’s extra-dimensional thingy. Forgive my lack of my proper terminology.”

“You ... you don’t even know how to help.” Evelyn said, a little softer. “And Raine couldn’t do magic to save her life.”

“That’s not the only kind of help,” I hissed, and risked a glance back into the front room. Nobody had come looking for us yet. “Three heads are better than one. Let us in, Eevee. Literally, let us in the drawing room, let us at the plan. Let Raine at the map, let me at the door-gate-portal *thing*, maybe I can do maths at it, I don’t know. It’s

better than this. Let me help you.”

Evelyn swallowed, looked away and back again, struggling with words. “This isn’t your fight.”

“It so is,” I said. “I was kidnapped in the street. They tried to snatch me, in broad daylight. They’re stalking me everywhere I go. I killed a person, Eeve. It is my fight now.”

“You- you shouldn’t-”

“And even if none of that had happened, you’re my friend. That means something. I’m still trying to figure that out, but I’m pretty sure that means this is my fight too.”

Evelyn really struggled. She pushed hard on all those psychological stumbling blocks her mother’s abuse had baked into her, the fight plain on her face. She managed a small, tight nod, then a deeper one, and then it all came out at once in a huge release of held breath.

“All right. Dammit, you’re completely right. I’ve been an idiot. Okay. Okay, Heather, okay. I get it. I get it.”

I smiled, and we shared an awkward hug. A very Evelyn hug, as I was coming to think of these, odd-angled and hampered by her twisted spine, but no less real.

She covertly wiped her eyes after we let go, and said, “So, what do we do about bright-eyed and enthusiastic in the kitchen?”

“Honestly, she doesn’t seem too bad? Apart from the weird god stuff.”

“Mm, exactly. You’ve really no idea what she’s trying to pull, do you? You can’t even guess?”

I shrugged. “Convert us?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Evelyn smiled a thin smile. “I can guarantee what this is all leading up to – she’s going to suggest I come talk to their Outsider, to solve my magical problem, and hope I’m stupid enough to do it.”

“So it can ... ?” I frowned.

“It just wants more human minds to ride along with. You probably have to open up to it willingly, that’s why their cult is so small and

stable. Subverting me would be quite the coup.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Okay, maybe you’re right, but also maybe you’re wrong.”

“It’s not worth the risk.”

“I’m not suggesting we risk going to their ... *thing*.” I waved a hand. “I’m suggesting we hear them out. She might not be trying to bait you at all. Between Raine, Praem, your spiders, and, well, me, you’re incredibly well protected in here. Just listening to them isn’t putting you at risk, right? Correct me if I’m wrong. Can she do some weird mind-magic at you?”

Evelyn frowned and sighed. “No. No, she wouldn’t be able to do that. Keep a watch for their Servitor though, that might be dangerous.”

I nodded. “It didn’t come inside with them.”

“Mm. Hear them out?”

“If you let Christine into the drawing room, show her the map and the door, would any of that be dangerous?”

“No. Worst thing they could do is finish my own work.” Evelyn shrugged. “Get into the shadowside themselves. Which would help me, regardless if they get killed or not. If I show her the map, eh, I guess they could avoid them most dangerous parts of the city.”

“No harm in that, is there? Helping them avoid dangerous places?”

Evelyn frowned. “I suppose not. How about we make a bet, Heather?” Evelyn leaned toward me with a funny little smile on her lips, hunched over her walking stick. “She brings up talking to their god, I win. She doesn’t, you win.”

I smiled back, despite the gravity of the diplomacy. “You like gambling, don’t you?”

“A little, I admit. My father bets on horse racing. Doesn’t do very well.”

“We’ll have to make it fair though. Promise not to lead Christine into the idea of talking to her Outsider.”

“Promise. Fair and square.” Evelyn nodded seriously. “If you win, I’ll give you ... five hundred pounds.”

My eyes popped out of my head. “What?!” I caught myself and glanced into the front room, then lowered my voice. “Evee, no, that’s so much money.”

“I can afford it.”

“I *can*’t. I-I’m sorry.”

“I’m not expecting you to. If I win, I’ll buy you an animal onesie, a ... cat, I think, and you have to wear it for a whole day, on a weekday, to class and everything.”

I boggled at her, not sure if I was hearing this right. “E-Evee?”

“I’m deadly serious, Heather. I will hold you to it.”

“I-I’m not sure I can-”

“Put your money where your mouth is.” Her lips quirked with a concealed, dark amusement. “If you don’t want to, I can just shoo Christine and her muscle out the door.”

I sighed and frowned at her. “You have unexpected depths, Evelyn Saye.”

“This is what you have to deal with if you want to be my friend.” She shrugged, then broke into a smile – a real, big smile, one of the first and most genuine I’d seen on her.

“Oh all right. I’ll dress up as a cat for you, if that’s what you want. You’re not trying to make Raine jealous or something, are you?”

She laughed. “No, I suspect she’ll enjoy it much more than I will.”

I blushed. “Evee.”

“Right then, if we’re agreed, it’s time to go save Raine from having to play host.”

conditions of absolute reality – 3.12

Deception set my head spinning; when Evelyn stomped back into the kitchen with me scurrying behind her, to be met by polite but confused looks from our guests, I couldn't tell how much of her ire was real and how much was acting.

Gone was her conspiratorial amusement from our private moment, replaced once more with a hunched, scowling, lash-tongued performance. Lots of “against my better judgement” and “do not mistake this for weakness”, ending on a warning not to even dream about stealing any books, an injunction which drew a snapped complaint from Twil, and earned Twil a sharp rebuke from her mother.

I was cast in the role of the bowing and scraping adviser, the voice of cool-headed diplomacy, the one to thank for this chance, and I played along as best I could, trying to look harried and put-upon and twitchy. Not exactly difficult.

Evelyn unlocked the door to the ex-drawing room and showed Christine Hopton – High Priestess of the Brinkwood Cult – what she'd been up to these past weeks.

The rest of us mere mortals – plus Twil – hovered around the doorway as the mages conferred.

“Not you, I don't think.” Raine put out a hand. Ben stopped. He'd been about to step through the doorway after Praem, to where Evelyn was pointing at the map and muttering to Christine.

“I thought we were all friends here now,” he said.

Twil elbowed him in the ribs. “Ben you stupid cunt, give it a rest. Mum's fine.”

Ben winced. He frowned at Twil, at Raine, over Raine's head at Evelyn, and then lastly at me, before drawing a hand over the cropped stubble on his head. “I don't trust any of this.”

“Likewise,” Raine said, then flashed a grin and stepped aside. “On second thought, you wanna waltz in there flexing your muscles, be my guest.”

Ben smelled a rat. He stayed right where he was. I sighed.

“Don’t,” I said. “Raine is trying to get you to aggravate the um ... security.”

“Aww, don’t tell him!” Raine slapped me on the back, laughing. “Spoiling my fun.”

“Wait,” Twil said. “The invisible spider is in there, isn’t it? Don’t go in there, seriously don’t.”

“All right, all right.” Ben shook his head and wandered away from the door, back to the dregs of his tea. He took a deep breath and seemed to relax, leaning against the table. “Anything happens, you’re up, Twil.”

“I’m always up.” She rolled her eyes.

None of us risked disturbing the uneasy peace, or the slow movements of the meeting in the workshop. Snippets of hushed conversation reached us, as Evelyn explained the impenetrable tangle in the south end of Sharrowford, the city’s shadowy double on the other side of nowhere. Her map was covered with much more red than when I’d first seen it.

They puzzled together over the mandala of the inert gateway, the doorway outline cut into the wall plaster. Christine kept touching the symbols, nodding a lot as Evelyn explained long-winded concepts under her breath, answered a number of pointed questions, and tapped the blank doorway with her walking stick.

Raine leaned over to Twil, a smirk hidden beneath her face, and whispered, “Your mum’s kinda hot.”

Twil did a double-take at her. So did I.

“Raine,” I hissed under my breath, and smiled despite myself.

“You know, if you’re into the whole mommy thing. Older women. All that.”

Twil bared her teeth. “I will ... fucking ... end you.”

Ben snorted laughter.

The conference in the workshop came to an abrupt end. Christine gestured toward the kitchen and spoke up. "Shall we? I feel quite overwhelmed by all this. I do believe I need a little air." Evelyn grunted and clacked her walking stick across the floorboards and back into the kitchen. We made space, Ben hauling his massive frame over to lurk by the door again. Raine slid a hand across my back and stayed close.

"I am certainly impressed," Christine began as she lowered herself back into one of the kitchen chairs. "I had no idea of the extent of ... the size ... how much they've ... " She swallowed. "That map is accurate, of course?"

"What do you think?" Evelyn asked. She waited for Praem to pull a chair out, then sat down, as straight-backed and high-headed as she could force her spine.

"I think you are a remarkable young woman. I didn't understand even a fraction of your working in there, that 'gate' you're constructing in the wall."

"Neither do I. That's the problem."

"Yes, yes, I quite understand." Christine inclined her head. "Which is why I believe we may be able to provide the missing pieces of the puzzle."

Evelyn's gaze flickered to me and away again; here it comes. "Oh?" she said to Christine, and waited.

"The angular principles, the gate and the key, the ways between the spheres. This we know, or some of it, though in a different form to the one expressed in that magic on your wall. We know it, because Hringewindla knows it."

A sinking feeling settled in my belly. The threat of dressing up as a cat for a day served to distract only very slightly from the fear this meeting was about to erupt into violence.

"I believe if you were to commune with Hringewindla, and ask honest, intelligent questions, he may be able to provide the missing pieces for your working."

Evelyn sighed, a sardonic smile on her lips, and turned to me. I shrugged and swallowed. Raine raised an eyebrow at me and I whispered to her. "We made a bet, I just lost. Tell you about it

later.”

“If you need to discuss this amongst yourselves, I completely understand,” Christine said, eyes halting uncertainly across our private exchange. “I realise it may seem daunting, but-”

“What’s to discuss?” Evelyn asked, leaning back with sneer on her face. “How long it took you to bait your hook?”

“I ... I’m sorry, I don’t follow?”

“I see you, and I see your plan, you vile little thing,” Evelyn said.

“Hey!” Twil barked. Evelyn ignored her, staring at Christine. I felt myself shrink back as Raine flexed her hands and rolled her shoulders, the musculature of impending violence flowing into position. Ben had gone very still.

“I’m not talking to you, *Christine*,” Evelyn said. “I’m talking to the passenger riding along inside your mind, to Hingle-crinkle-whatsit, even if you don’t know it’s there. I see you, and I’m no fool. If you try something like this again, I will find a way to put you down.”

Christine stared in shock, mouth hanging open. Twil wasn’t far off, more bewildered than angry. Ben was the only one ready to burst.

“How dare you?” He shouted. I flinched so hard I almost fell over. Raine steadied me. Goodness, but I was not used to people shouting. My heart rate shot through the roof. “You don’t know anything about us, you little bitch, you-”

“*Benjamin*,” Christine snapped at him. She pointed at the door. “Outside, outside right now, you take that language outside.”

“But she-”

“I don’t care. I do not care. Go outside and have a cigarette if you must.”

Ben glowered at Evelyn but obeyed his aunt, stomped off toward the front door and banged it shut on the way out.

“Wise,” Evelyn purred.

Christine took a deep breath in an effort to centre herself. Twil seemed unsure what to do, caught between anger and confusion, one hand briefly on her mother’s shoulder, before looking away with a snarl caught between her teeth.

"I realise you don't trust us," Christine said. "What you must think of us, what you must assume we are. From your family, or your mother, what you think of people like us. Yes, a piece of our god enters us and we carry it with us always. That I will not deny, but my mind is my own, and this is not a ploy, not some trick to ensnare you and-"

"Okay," Evelyn said.

Christine blinked at her. I stared. Raine burst out laughing.

"Okay, sure, I'll come talk to your Outsider. How's, I don't know, ten in the morning on Monday? Too early? Is he a late riser? Does one of you do an alarm call for it, breakfast in bed and all that?"

Christine pursed her lips. "You are mocking us."

"No, I'm deadly serious. But I have one condition. Heather comes with me."

"What?" I blurted out.

"Yeah, what?" Raine said.

"I ... don't ... see why that would present a problem?" Christine raised a polite eyebrow at me.

Evelyn let that low, lazy, sharp smile fill her face, a nasty glint beneath as she allowed the moment to stretch out, savouring her victory. That's the only reason I didn't raise further protest; I could tell this was an elaborate bluff, partially at my expense.

"Heather is a *blinzelnzauberin*," Evelyn said.

"I'm a what now?" I felt laughter threaten in my throat, the tension of the last few minutes begging for release.

"It's German. You probably don't even know what the word means," Evelyn said to Christine. "But your passenger certainly will. Do I need to say it in Latin, or Old English? I might need to fetch a dictionary for that last one, I doubt they had a word for the concept."

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, miss Saye." Christine attempted an apologetic smile. "Your friends are as welcome as you are."

"You think I'm bluffing? Ask Heather. Not you, Christine. I'm

talking to the Outsider in your head.”

“I-I’m pretty sure she is bluffing,” I said. “I have no idea what that word means either.”

Christine studied Evelyn’s expression, then looked at me, down the length of my body and back up – the sort of look which made me feel like a piece of meat on a slab – a reducing, searching, probing look, the last thing I’d expected from such a soft-spoken, agreeable middle-aged woman. I opened my mouth on a hesitant protest, and froze as our eyes met.

A shadow moved behind her iris and sclera, there and gone again, vast and distant, like a planet hiding itself behind a cloud.

The little hairs on the back of my neck and my forearms all stood on end.

Until that moment I’d thought perhaps Evelyn really was over-reacting, maybe this was all an outpouring of her paranoia, of a worldview inculcated by her mother’s methods; I’d decided to let her play it out, that getting her to let me and Raine inside – both the workshop and her heart – was far more important than any help Mrs Hopton might offer.

“You can do magic with your mind, my dear?” Christine asked.

“Oh, t-that? I-I can.” I found my mouth dry, my hands clammy. “S-sort of. It’s complicated.”

Christine frowned at me, sceptical and a little alarmed. She turned the frown on Evelyn, who shrugged and kept smiling that sharp smile.

“So,” Evelyn said. “Monday at ten? We’d best take the train down from Sharrowford station, Raine’s car wouldn’t survive those backwood roads, certainly not this time of year with all the mud, so we’ll need picking up, of course.”

“We- we have paved roads, you idiot,” Twil said. “You’re not taking a boat to the Shetlands.”

For once, her mother did not scold her. Christine merely watched Evelyn, wary and silent, outmanoeuvred.

“I think, perhaps,” she said, slowly. “We’d all do better to respect your *initial* decision. Meeting a god can be an overwhelming

experience, after all. Perhaps I can speak to Hringewindla in your place.”

“Mum?” Twil said, voice filled with confusion.

Evelyn snorted derision. “I’m talking to it right now, aren’t I? Come on, old fellow, can you solve the gate problem or not? Got the missing pieces to my equations, or was this all so much bullshit? Go on, Raine, fetch her a piece of paper and a pencil, I want to see this.”

“Right you are, boss.” Raine rummaged around in the kitchen drawers.

“I see no reason to continue this further in the face of your beliefs about us.” Christine rose to her feet. “Thank you for the tea, and thank you for the tour of your work. I wish you all the best, miss Saye, and I do hope you win.”

Evelyn stayed sitting, but Praem stepped forward to usher our guests out.

“Mum? Mum, what- what-”

“Not now, dear,”

Evelyn’s smile sharpened. “Get out of my city.”

Twil scurried after her mother. I twitched a hand out to her, unwilling to abandon the trust she’d earned from me. She’d rescued me from the Cult, she’d fought a giant zombie off me, she’d dragged me home, with no benefit to herself except a job well done.

“Let them go, don’t show any weakness,” Evelyn said out loud.

“But-” I cut off at the sound of the front door slamming, winced at Twil’s raised voice outside on the garden path. “But it’s *Twil*. I don’t care about the other two, but she’s ... that’s her mother? I saw ... in her eyes, I saw ... ” I swallowed.

“She’ll be alright, she’s bloody invincible,” Raine said, patting my arm as she passed. She ducked into the front room and rattled the locks on the door.

The big car started up outside, engine coughing and rumbling. I was still shaking my head.

“I don’t know what I saw,” I muttered to myself.

“*Hringewindla*,” Evelyn grunted. “Bastard fucking thing. At least I have a name for it now.”

“And that’s Twil’s *mum*.”

Evelyn’s grimaced and shrugged. “It’s her problem.”

“Evee, how can you say that? When ... I mean, when you-”

“It’s her problem,” Evelyn said, harder. “She doesn’t want to be helped.”

= =

“What was that word you used, earlier? About me?” I asked without looking away from the sigils and inscriptions which covered the wall. “Blinzen- blin-”

“*Blinzelnzauberin*,” Evelyn supplied, then sighed and shook her head. She stomped over to the table in the ex-dining room and sat down heavily in a chair, massaging her thigh where flesh met prosthetic. “It’s not a real thing and you’re not one. It’s German, comes from a very old book which nobody has an intact copy of, only parts, called *Das Wissen um Gott*. My German is a little rusty. *Blinzelnzauberin* means uh, I suppose, speed of thought ... ” She waved a hand.

“Blink witch,” Raine said. She looked up from the map spread out on the table. “Right?”

I turned to stare at her. “Am I the only one around here who doesn’t speak eight languages?”

Raine laughed. “I know a tiny, tiny bit of German. I have to, I’m supposed to be a philosophy student.”

I sighed. “I suppose. It’s a very effective way of making me feel inadequate.”

Evelyn pulled a grimace. “Mm, ‘blink witch’ would be the literal translation. It’s used to mean a sort of prodigal child who can perform magic at the speed of will, without difficulty, usually refers ... to ... ” she slowed down and trailed off, staring at me. “To twins. Ah.”

“Oh,” I said, very softly.

“Well, it’s still not you. Medieval nonsense. Point is, Higgly-wiggly

inside her head knew what I meant, probably terrified you might pose it a real threat, so no dice. Meeting cancelled. Verboten.”

“As long as it doesn’t get any bright ideas about Heather,” Raine murmured.

“It won’t,” Evelyn said. “It’s been stuck in a hole in the ground for several thousand years, at least. Old English, *really*,” she snorted. “All it wants is willing hosts and no enemies. I hate to admit it, but these bastards are far more difficult.” She gestured at the map. Raine looked back down at the web of red highlighter and nodded slowly.

The ex-drawing room drummed with the sound of pounding rain, pattering on the curtained windows and hissing soft static against the roof. The gathering storm had finally broken a little while after Twil and the Brinkwood cultists had left. Fat raindrops had speckled the cracked flagstones of the garden path when I’d stepped outside, with Praem in tow and Raine on point, on a circle of the house, to make sure their disgusting bubble-Servitor had left along with them.

Raine had brushed water droplets from my hair after she’d shut and locked the front door, then turned all questions, burning with curiosity about how I’d changed Evelyn’s mind during our few short moments in private – but Evelyn herself had answered for me, with a grunt, and said, “Three heads are better than one.” She’d pointed at Raine and then over her shoulder. “You’re going to look at my map. In.”

Raine had boggled at Evelyn, then me, back and forth until her puzzled expression teased a giggle from my lips. “Don’t look so surprised, Raine. I’m learning I’m sort of good at this.” I blushed a little, worrying I was inflating the size of my own head.

“You’re good at lots of things,” she’d said. “But, what exactly ... ?”

“At changing minds.”

“Flirt later,” Evelyn had grunted, and led the way into her magical workshop.

The air in the ex-drawing room had thickened, turned stuffy and dusty after weeks with the door almost always shut; cracking a window was out of the question, so I fetched an electric fan from upstairs and pointed it out of the doorway. I dug out a dust-cloth as

well, to do some cleaning, treat this room like any other, but the contents made that exceedingly difficult. Most of it I had very little desire to touch.

The human femur bone I'd seen weeks ago now held pride of place, propped up on one end with a chair all to itself. Every inch of the yellow-white surface was covered with scrimshaw markings, hundreds of tiny magical symbols carved into the ridged bone.

A large stoppered bottle of dark red syrupy liquid sat on the table. Not blood; that would have coagulated. Next to the bottle lay a series a series of feathers underneath an upturned glass bowl, too broad and flat for any earthly bird, their colours iridescent and shifting, difficult to focus on.

Several more magic circles lay on the floor and propped against the walls, inked or painted onto wide sheets of stiff card or expanses of dirty canvas. One in particular drew my attention, the largest, a ring of interlocking circles like a venn diagram, scorch mark in the middle, surrounded with writing that seemed different when caught in my peripheral vision.

"Hmm? Oh, that." Evelyn waved the question away. "A long chat with something that would have preferred not to speak."

Maps now covered most of one wall as well as the table, hand-drawn additions and notations everywhere, in red and green and black. Evelyn had attempted to map out isolated pieces of the Cult's shadow city, lined them with estimates of distances and sizes, surrounded them by notes about pits and open spaces, danger marks where Praem One or Two had encountered resistance, all pinned up with thumbtacks and tape.

More of the bulbs in the overhead light had given up, plunging the room into dim shadows with the rain outside.

Only the identifiable signature in the disorder kept me from backing out in disquiet. To the uninitiated it would seem a madhouse, a schizophrenic scrawling, and to me it was further proof I'd well and truly left behind the world I'd been born into. But it had Evelyn written all over it. And she was my friend.

We'd been in here almost an hour now. I didn't want to turn back to the designs on the wall; they made my head swim. I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed my arms.

"What you've got here, Eevee, is a classic stalemate," Raine said into the moment of shared silence. She straightened up from the maps and stretched, hooking her arms behind her head and pulling on her wrists. A much nicer sight than all those magical symbols.

"We know that." Evelyn shot her an unimpressed look. "Anybody could tell me that. My dad could tell me that."

"Yeah, yeah, but hey, let me armchair this out for a moment. Take off your generalissima hat and let me try it on for size, yeah?" Evelyn puffed out a humourless laugh and made a hat-doffing motion. Raine shot her a wink and tapped the map, on the impenetrable tangle of the south of the city. "So what do you think this is?"

"It's a thicket," Evelyn replied. "The loops and extra-dimensional pockets are either impossible to break through, or turn back on themselves, go nowhere. I think they've run out of monsters, mostly chaff, but there's no route through. I could spend months searching."

Raine kinked an eyebrow. "But what do you think it is?"

"Drop the good teacher act. What answer are you fishing for here?"

"It's a fortress, right?" Raine said, she glanced at me too. "Like a Japanese castle, layers and traps and choke-points and crossfire zones, instead of big walls and a moat, you get me?"

"Oh!" I lit up, sort of liking the idea, then remembered these people were our enemies. "Oh."

"All right, and where does that lead?" Evelyn asked.

"Castles are strong-points," I said. Raine nodded. "For protecting things, basically. Leaders or garrisons or wealth. Or for controlling territory."

"The territory in question being Sharrowford, okay, go on," Evelyn said, nodding in agreement.

"Ahh, but it's a done a piss-poor job of that," Raine said. "You've driven their weird pocket-dimension tricks out of everywhere else. So what are they protecting? And from what?"

"Themselves," Evelyn grunted. "From me."

"No," I said, hesitant at first, then louder. "No. When I spoke with

Alexander ... when he spoke at me, he seemed unconcerned with you, like you were a side-issue.”

“A bluff.”

“Nah, I think Heather’s right,” Raine said. “If our crazy cultist friends can dig magical caves behind reality, then they can probably make a place like this.” She pointed up with both hands. “Any isolated house’ll do, proper wards, bing bang bong, got yourself a nice little fortress. Somewhere you or I have to walk up to the front door and kick it in to get anywhere. That’s probably why we can’t find them. And they’ve got muscle, zombie muscle, so what are they afraid of? Why build a fortress outside reality?”

Evelyn stared at Raine with a tight frown, then at the map.

We all fell silent for a long time. I listened to the sound of raindrops against the windows. Eventually Evelyn nodded and took a deep breath, then turned to me. “Any insights yet?”

“Maybe.” I glanced over my shoulder, at the wall. “It makes my head hurt. I think I’ll have to come at it with an empty stomach and a bucket. Sorry.”

Evelyn nodded, her eyes roving over her work behind me.

“You’ll crack it,” Raine said with a grin. I suspected her good humour was entirely for my benefit. “You’re a bloody miracle-worker.”

I shook my head. “Shush you. Don’t call me that.”

Raine just grinned.

The doorway mandala – Evelyn’s wall of symbols and equations and magical workings, radiating out from the blank doorway scored in the plaster – left me disgusted and frightened.

The doorway outline was intended to be a gate. The magic described how it would open, and also define the destination. A wormhole. A portal. Simple enough, Evelyn assured me, but the difficulty was connecting to the Cult’s fortress of unreality, a point that did not exist here or Outside, but in some impossible, liminal, between space. She’d had to examine how their dimensional pockets worked just to begin the definitions.

She’d spent ages trying to explain it in plain language, mostly lost

on me. I'd concentrated and stared at the magic circles instead, the overlapping esoteric symbols, and felt the stirrings of the Eye's decade of lessons, the principles behind this work floating unbidden to the surface of my mind, swallowed back down on a wave of nausea.

That wasn't what scared me, not anymore. The mandala itself disgusted me, like looking at a dead animal sewn together from spare parts.

"There is another way, to learn any magical secret," Evelyn said quietly.

Raine's good humour froze, then slid off her face as she read Evelyn's expression.

"What?" I said, loud enough to snap them both out of it. "Don't get all cryptic on me, either of you."

"Evee's suggesting massive self-harm as a way of solving her problems." Raine raised her eyebrows at me. "We might have to stage an intervention, hog-tie her in her bed, feed her wine until she forgets the idea." She tried to crack a grin, but then looked back at Evelyn and faltered. "Damn, Evee, I actually will do that."

"Why are you surprised?" Evelyn swallowed. "They shot at you, they threatened Heather. Fuck them. I'll lose the other leg if I have to."

"No you absolutely will not," I said, almost offended at the idea. "What on earth are you suggesting?"

Evelyn turned to me, oddly guilty as she swallowed and looked away. "When I was a child, my mother ... used me, for a very specific magical operation. She used it to learn certain secrets. I could ... do it to myself ... " She trailed off and swallowed, a old, haunted look in her eyes.

"I can fix the gate, Evee," I said. "Even if I can't, you're worth more than that. Please don't think that way. This is ... " I gestured at the mandala and felt sick, deep down inside, but did my absolute best not to let it show on my face. "This is nothing, it's fine. I'll try. I promise."

Evelyn met my eyes, hesitated, then sighed and nodded. She opened her mouth to speak.

A dull hammering on the front door interrupted us, and made me jump.

“Again?” Raine almost laughed.

Evelyn scowled up a storm and got to her feet. “I swear, if that’s them come back for another go, I’m going to have Praem walk out to Brinkwood and slash their car tires.”

It was not the cultists.

It was Twil, alone, soaked to the bone.

When Raine opened the door – backed by Praem, with me and Evelyn hanging behind – Twil stood there dripping water all over the doorstep, hair plastered to her face, clothes sodden. The storm lashed about in the wind behind her, blowing little eddies of rain across the floorboards. She didn’t speak, just stared at her feet. Evelyn opened her mouth on an angry remark, but even she faltered at the sight of Twil looking so utterly pathetic.

Twil sniffed, and blinked raindrops out of her eyes. “Can I, like, crash here tonight?”

The answer was an unequivocal yes, between Raine’s effortlessly cheery invitation, Evelyn’s grunted acknowledgement, and my efforts to fetch a towel. I’d half expected her to shake herself dry like a dog, but she slouched in a puddle on the doormat. She draped the towel uselessly over her hair as she shucked off her coat and scarf in a wet heap, followed rapidly by her white hoodie, which she struggled to pull off her head, arms stuck in the wet fabric.

We managed to herd Twil into the little downstairs bathroom before she started stripping off the rest of her clothes, then Raine hurried about fetching a spare tshirt and pajama bottoms. Twil accepted with one pale naked arm stuck around the bathroom door. I bustled about making her a cup of tea and a toasted pop tart, trying to make myself useful, to repay her help. Evelyn stared silently at the bathroom door, frowning in thought.

When Twil emerged again she slumped quietly in a chair, face half-hidden behind a towel and her damp hair.

“Here, I made you some tea, and something to eat. You must be frozen through after all that rain,” I said.

She nodded a weak thanks. “Invincible, remember?” she muttered.

"It's kinda sweet," Raine said, leaning on the table. "That you'd come back here, you know? Thanks, despite everything."

Twil's slump deepened. She didn't touch the tea.

"So, why were you all wet?" Raine asked.

"Raining, isn't it?" Twil shrugged.

"No, I mean-

"I walked. For a laugh."

"All the way from Brinkwood?"

"No."

"You argued with your mother, didn't you?" Evelyn asked, voice oddly soft.

Twil dragged the towel down over her face and curled up in the chair, hiding from the world.

She looked so different from her usual head-up shoulders-back swagger, in a borrowed short-sleeve tshirt and old pajama bottoms. Small like me, though a little better filled out; I could tell she'd left her bra behind in the downstairs bathroom, soaked through with the rest of her clothes, and had to avert my eyes.

Dark spirals wound across her shoulders and back, outlines just visible through the white fabric of the tshirt – her complex of tattoos which Evelyn had once mentioned and Raine had seen before. No words, no symbols, nothing which hurt my eyes. One long line spiralled and whorled and wound in on itself over and over again, a snake eating its own tail forever. The edge of the tshirt rode up, the bottom end of the tattoo peeking out from below, dark green. Jade trapped inside her skin.

Would have been vaguely erotic, if she wasn't so distraught.

"Twil?" Raine said, almost giggling.

"Don't laugh at her," I said.

"I wasn't. It's fine. We-

"Is there really something in my mum's head?" Twil said, small and muffled.

Raine and I shared a glance.

"I'm sorry," said Evelyn. "You didn't deserve to find out like that."

Twil shrugged beneath the towel, the fluffy fabric rising and falling. "I always knew, really. Some ... sometimes ... " A hard gulp, a sniff.

Evelyn looked at Raine and me, then sighed. She got up and ushered us toward the door with her walking stick, lowering her voice. "Let me talk to her."

"Ah. Ahhh," said Raine.

"Are you sure?" I hissed. "Don't you two ... you know ... not get along?"

Evelyn shrugged with her eyebrows. "We have certain things in common."

"Oh! Oh, yes. Yes, I see." I nodded. "If you need help, please."

"Ahh, aha," Raine continued, barely suppressing a grin. Evelyn tapped her on the leg with her stick.

"And you can shut up. Go upstairs and neck or something."

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Lucidity seeped into the dream in layers, across inch by slow inch of brain matter, as I wriggled out of bed and left Raine's sleeping form behind.

I ventured into the dark corridor on bare feet, and felt my way along the wall to the stairs. Distant and floaty, my body still knew the location of each creaky floorboard, how to tread to avoid waking either my lover or my best friend, as I wound my way downstairs in the darkness.

Halfway down, my addled mind asked why I was dreaming about the house.

The question wasn't urgent, filtered through layers of dream-logic and emotional detachment. My body felt both lead heavy and light as a feather at the same time, moving like some abstract extension of my mind; like seeing one's own disembodied tongue wiggling in a mirror, back and forth, back and forth.

Why the detachment?

Perhaps because Lozzie was absent for this dream. Where'd she gotten to? I hadn't seen her in a while, had I?

Had I?

My hand on the banister, my toes curling up against the cold of the front room, goosebumps on my exposed forearms and the back of my neck.

I stepped into the kitchen. The dream details were impressive, I had to admit, from the weak moonlight outside. through the dripping remains of the storm, to the the dirty plates and utensils from the late meal we'd all eaten together. Twil hadn't been too happy, but she'd been recovering, managed a couple of jokes, a little light ribbing with Raine.

Twil and Evelyn had spoken, for over an hour, without any raised voices. Twil had seemed better afterward, if only by a very small degree.

I wondered if the dream had replicated her too. I wandered over to the utility room to check.

Yes, there was Twil, curled up on the old brokebacked sofa beneath a heaping of blankets, which Evelyn had insisted on bringing downstairs. Eevee had offered her a spare room, but our little werewolf, she liked the look of the sofa, the way it sagged in the middle.

Her curly dark mane spilled from under the sheets. Idly, pretending disinterest, I did something I'd never be able to do awake, if this was real; I stroked her head and felt the luxuriant softness of that hair. Poor little werewolf. Came to us almost crying. It's okay, I'll be your friend, and so will Evelyn, but I won't let you sleep with Raine. She's mine.

I picked up a lock of her hair and sniffed it; rainwater, sweat, Twil-scent.

Not like a wet dog at all.

I giggled in the moon-touched darkness, then covered my mouth, not wanting to wake her. A good girl, yes, even in a dream, my mind reminded me. Reminded me, my mind. Minded me, it did. I giggled again and quickly tiptoed out of the room.

Raine was in this dream, she was upstairs, I'd just left her behind.

How silly was that? If I was going to dream about Raine, I may as well have some fun with her, right? Maybe I could bring dream-Raine down here and-

A snuffle. A gasp. Choked sobs, somewhere out in the dark.

Layers of detachment and distance peeled off me as if flayed. I stopped giggling.

Why was I dreaming about the house?

I followed the crying sounds into Evelyn's magical workshop, the ex-drawing room. Silhouetted against the far wall and the unfinished gateway by the backwash of moonlight, a small, slight, elfin figure glanced over her shoulder at me, eyes filled with fear.

"Lozzie!" I hissed. "What are you doing ... here ... "

Her hands were covered with ink and paint, as was the wall around the gateway, a hundred corrections and additions made to Evelyn's work in finger-paint scrawl.

Lozzie turned back to the wall. She swallowed, reached up, and drew another symbol.

"Lozzie? Hey, Lozzie?" I crept closer. She mumbled, hunching tighter, shrinking away from me, her long blonde hair limp and greasy. "Lozzie, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry, Heather, I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. I'm sorry!" Her voice rose to a whine, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

"For what?" I said, then glanced up at the wall, at the doorway outline scratched into the plaster.

In the dream, I could tell; almost finished. Ready to open.

"They ... he ... " Lozzie swallowed again, looked at me sidelong and cringing, as if she expected me to hit her. That look wrenched at my heart. I wanted to hug her. "They made me do it. They said- he said he'd kill you, otherwise. I had to do it, Heather, I had to. I had to." Tears welled up in her eyes, big sad tears as her bottom lip wobbled and she sniffed, shaking all over. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Please don't- please don't hate me."

I shook my head, breathing faster as wave upon wave of lucidity crashed into my mind. "But this is a dream, right?"

Lozzie nodded. She finally faced me, looked me in the eyes, nodding urgently. She grabbed my arms and I held her too. "Yes! It is! You've got it! You have to wake up! You have to get the others, your friends. I-I don't know their names, I can't- the- you have to- Please, Heather, please come help me! I've messed it up on purpose, see? I've put a back door in, for you! Please, please come get me!"

"S-slow down," I managed.

I wanted to step away from the outline scratched in the plaster, as if it was the mouth of a creature we might inadvertently wake. It seemed to loom larger next to us.

Lozzie nodded and sniffed and squeezed her eyes shut before answering.

"You need to wake up," she said. "Before you finish."

"Before I finish ... ?"

"Wake up!" she yelled. "Wake up, Heather!"

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I woke up.

Standing, barefoot in the dark, my shadow cast upon the wall of Evelyn's workshop by moonlight backwash.

Blinking sleep from my eyes, my hands covered with ink and paint, sticky between my fingers.

Took a step back and bumped into the table, groping for a chair. Looked up and felt my stomach twist at the hundreds of additions and corrections I'd made, to Evelyn's work on the mural around the gateway, the doorway, the portal, in finger-painted equations and magic circles. Breath caught in my throat. Could barely breathe.

How had I gotten here?

Too stunned to run, I watched in numb fascination as the gateway opened.

It was a beautiful thing, a subtle ripple of matter, as if the plaster of the wall had been transmuted into water, then plasma, then air, and then pierced with the smallest pebble, so the shock wave passed outward in slow concentric rings.

The first ripple removed the plaster, replaced it with smooth, featureless black, a true void. The second ripple, moving an inch slower, produced shape, colour, light. The third ripple sharpened the image from a mere blur into crystal-clear reality.

A corridor stretched out beyond the doorway, brown and vaguely institutional. High ceiling. Pipes along one wall. Shiny floor.

The Tall Woman, the zombie, Zheng, in her trench coat and hood and scarf, stood just across the threshold.

I filled my lungs to scream.

She reached through the gateway and grabbed me by the head.

conditions of absolute reality – 3.13

I'd won the first real physical fight of my life – against a cultist thug in a dirty Sharrowford back alley – kicking and biting, spitting and hissing. He'd been unsure of himself, unsure of violence, and much stronger than me. In the end I had powers he didn't understand, and an animal willingness to use them, but up until that moment we'd been the same; unevenly matched, but both human.

Zheng did not play by human rules.

She didn't need to muffle my scream. One huge gloved hand gripped my head, another whipped out like a snake around my forearm. I hadn't even finished recoiling in horror when she simply yanked me off my feet, so fast my stomach lurched and my shoulder popped.

I tumbled forward through the gateway, into the corridor beyond, into Zheng's grasp.

She caught me against her front, knocked the wind out of me with the impact, held me by neck and one wrist with irresistible strength. Her dead eyes stared down at a point to the left of my head.

Reason fled. I screamed my lungs out, kicked and spat and pulled and clawed. The only rational part of my mind – a cloistered core of self-preservation – was painfully aware this was nothing like the dirty little back alley fight. No Tenny to save me, nobody to hear me screaming, Zheng's sheer size and strength more than enough to immobilise me and hold me down or just snap my spine and leave me dead.

A pair of men stood a little way behind her in the corridor, both in long cream-coloured robes, heads exposed, middle aged and portly. One of them held a coil of rope.

“Turn her around,” one of them said.

Zheng obeyed, attempted to turn me over. I kicked and struggled, wrenched my own joints and almost choked myself on her hand

around my throat. I clawed at her eyes, but missed and grabbed the scarf over her face, pulling and yanking and screaming and kicking.

She didn't even blink. Like fighting a wall. Despair filled me, an unspeakable feeling of inevitable violation. Trapped.

One of the robed men raised his voice. "Hold her still, for God's sake. We need to be out of here."

Zheng got me turned around, facing away from her, looking at the dark rectangle of the gateway. Moonlight bathed the ex-drawing room on the other side; the house was right there, so close.

"Raine!" I shouted. "Raine!" Zheng pinned one arm behind my back. I winced and gasped as she twisted my shoulder. She reached over to grab my other wrist.

No rescue. Nobody was coming for me. I went limp.

Zheng's hand closed around my wrist in the time it took me to complete the equation.

Hyperdimensional mathematics slotted into place, each principle hissing and burning on the surface of my consciousness, molten metal in my brain, so much sharper and hotter to cut through the terror and panic. My stomach clenched up and my head split with razor-sharp pain. Impossible physics blossomed open inside me, dark and dripping and muddying my soul as I gripped the levers of reality and pulled.

Out.

Nothing happened.

Well, nothing happened to Zheng.

I vomited onto the floor and almost passed out. My vision throbbed black, ice-pick pain stabbing at my head, chest seizing up. My knees gave out and I sagged in the giant zombie's grip, gagging and coughing, nose streaming with blood.

Death-panic gripped me even through the pain as my body tried to shut down. Why hadn't it worked? Why was Zheng still here?

"Get her tied up before she tries that again," one of the men said, his voice dim and distant.

"You're joking, I'm not touching her. Zheng can do it."

“Just get it done. Toss her the rope.”

“No, not here. If the Saye girl turns up now, we’re dead. We’ll close the gate first, get clear.” He raised his voice. “Zheng, pick her up. Quickly now.”

Nothing left to give, nothing left to resist with. The gateway back to the house was a mere six feet away. Raine and Evee were both upstairs, sound asleep. Twil lay sleeping just in the next room. So close. Right there. My throat constricted, my face dripping with blood and snot and tears. I tried to scream again, but managed only to cough and snort out blood.

Zheng began to pick me up, to hoist me by the waist, to throw me over her shoulder. To take me away, down into the underworld. I could barely flop an arm against her, managed to half-twist in her grip, get a good look at her face and the two ruddy-faced men hesitating behind her.

In the pit of panic and despair, I did the only thing I could think of.

As if she was a ping-pong ball, but a thousand times larger.

I lashed out, a fumbled mess of impossible physics, so fast and so violent, so disorganised and unplanned I thought my head would explode and my eyeballs would pop from the vice of pain. I aimed vaguely at Zheng – as much as such a thing could be aimed – to push her back, to force her away. No plan. Just wanted her off me.

It hit Zheng like a wrecking ball and tore off her left arm at the shoulder.

She dropped me and crashed backward into the cultists, her severed arm flying through the air in a welter of blood. It bounced off the wall and slopped to the floor.

I hit the ground too, winded and clenching up to vomit again, white-hot stabbing headache filling my consciousness; no energy to marvel at what I’d just done. Shattered bone and torn fabric hung in a ragged mess from Zheng’s wound, crimson stain spreading down the side of her trench coat. She sagged and hunched, silent, face lowered. The pair of cultists scrambled to their feet. One of them gaped at Zheng, eyes wide. The other took off running down the corridor.

My whole body shook as I gathered the last scraps of adrenaline to

push myself to my feet. My eyes felt sticky, gummed with red. The world span.

Had to get up, had to get out of here. Zheng wasn't dead, I hadn't stopped her. I heaved for breath and snorted back blood and saw her move again. She stood up straight, chin level, staring ahead at nothing. Then she looked down at her severed arm. The remaining cultist swallowed and tried to speak to her, but his words were drowned out by the pounding inside my head.

"Up, up," I tried to hiss to myself, but managed only a whine in my throat.

I failed to stand up. Failed to even get to my knees. One hand slipped.

I passed out before I hit the floor.

= =

Pain stabbed me awake, sharp and throbbing, with a gasp from my closing throat.

A black shape bent low over me, indistinct and featureless, blurred through my sticky eyes and swimming vision.

No energy to scream, let alone crawl away. I was lying on my side in a pool of my own sick. My breath came in ragged gasps and hiccups, sucking down air filled with the scent of blood and stomach acid. My body was freezing through my pajamas, shaking all over, face smeared with still-wet blood and stringy bile.

Nothing happened.

Nothing moved except my racing heart.

I blinked and screwed up my eyes, managed to lift one arm to rub the sockets and scrub away the blood. I opened them again, squinting at the dark shape above me: chitin, ridged and bumped. Too many legs.

One of Evelyn's spider-Servitors was crouched over me, a terrifying hound protecting an unconscious master. Its crystalline eyes pointed down the corridor, stingers raised in perfect stillness.

Zheng was gone, along with her severed arm. One of the robed cultists lay smeared against the wall, crumpled and ruined in a pool of his own blood, recognisable only by the cream robe and one

exposed hand. I stared for a moment and felt sick somewhere deeper inside than my stomach, had to look away. A trail of blood led down the corridor, staining the brown floor, into the depths of this non-place.

I dragged myself out from under the spider, lay on a clean patch of floor, and passed out again; seconds or minutes, I couldn't tell. I came around spluttering with adrenaline, hauled myself to my knees and fell against the wall, sat there shaking for a very long time, breathing in ragged gasps and muttering under my breath. The spider hadn't budged an inch.

"Get up, get up," I hissed. Stared at the gateway, at Evelyn's workshop, the moonlight, five or six feet away. "Everyone's just over there, okay? Get up, get up. You have to get up." I hiccuped and sniffed and felt sick again, then pulled myself up against the wall with one hand, the other wrapped around my aching stomach. My limbs felt filled with lead.

Step by painful step, I went home.

Stumbling into the ex-drawing room on shaking knees, I crashed into a chair and almost fell over, desperate to get away from the open gate and the crawling sensation between my shoulder blades. I caught myself on the table, straightened up as best I could – not much – took a deep breath and hacked and coughed and snorted back blood before trying again.

I screamed Raine's name at the top of my lungs.

She wasn't first on the scene – that achievement went to Twil, who skidded into the ex-drawing room on clawed feet, full-wolf and half-awake and wide-eyed at the sight of me shaking and bloodied and the open gateway behind me – but I'd never been so glad to see Raine, fresh from sleep with her hair stuck up in all directions, switched on and alert, shiny black metal truncheon in one hand.

My energy gave out; I gave up, only dimly aware of the next couple of minutes after I collapsed into Raine's arms. She sat me down on something but I couldn't unclench my body, curled up around the pain in my chest, every muscle wire-tight. Cool hand on my forehead, interrupted by bewildered, snapping voices. Shaking, shivering all over. Raine murmured nearby, couldn't make out the words. Hands on my stomach, probing, are you hurt? Who did this? Raine's hands on my head, feeling for lumps. Who did this? Hands

on my arms, hands on my hands.

"You did this?" Evelyn's voice cut through the haze. I blinked up at her, still in her pajamas, looming over the sofa, as she held my right hand and frowned at the paint and ink all over my fingers.

"Evee, hey," Raine said. "Let her-"

"Heather, you opened the gate? You completed it? How?" Evelyn demanded. She looked pale, green with nausea.

"I-I don't- it was the zombie- I don't-"

"How?" Evelyn snapped.

"I don't know," I whined, flinching back.

"Evee-"

"You must know," Evelyn said, casting a hand behind her toward the open gateway and the dozens of adjustments and additions to her magic mandala. Praem stood nearby now, on guard, as Twil peered through into the corridor beyond. "That's your work, Heather, it's on your hands, how did-"

"A dream!" I screamed in her face, hysteria ripping from my raw throat. "I did it in a dream! I sleepwalked and woke up and it was done and- and-" I hiccuped and felt myself begin to hyperventilate. Raine was on me again, murmuring words that didn't matter. Evelyn turned to the gate, ordered Praem inside, and began shouting Latin at the spider-Servitor.

Raine pulled me to my feet and half-carried half-dragged me into the kitchen. She slapped the lights on and I blinked sensitive stinging eyes. She lowered me into a chair and made sure I wasn't going to slide to the floor. I sniffed and clung to her with one hand.

"Don't-" I hiccuped. "Don't go."

A hand on my filthy hair. "Heather, I'm going to get you a glass of water and clean you up. Okay? I'm not even going five feet from you. Promise."

I nodded weakly.

Raine had this down to an art by now. Warm water and a sacrificial kitchen towel to wipe the blood and bile from my face and hair, a glass of water pressed into my shaking grip – which I drank with

much spluttering and coughing – and the constant presence and pressure of her hands, reassuring, stroking, telling me it was going to be okay. I stared at her through slack vision.

Shouted Latin echoed from the drawing room for a while, then trailed off. My mind kept replaying Zheng over and over again, the unspeakable feeling of being grabbed and immobilised, of struggling against unbreakable strength. I blinked and gritted my teeth, looking down at my hands smeared with ink and paint. I'd woken up from a sleepwalker's dream, just before the gate had opened, just at the right moment, because in the dream-

I'd had help.

"Heather? Heather?" Raine was saying. I blinked up at her. "Who did this to you?"

I shook my head and swallowed. My voice came out thick and clotted. "Need to think."

"You said it was the zombie. Zheng?"

"She was there on the other side, when it opened. She didn't ... " I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut. "I can't remember. It was in a dream."

Evelyn bustled into the kitchen, followed by a bewildered looking Twil. She stared at me, frowning and confused, carrying the scrimshawed thighbone under one arm.

"Hey," Raine said, straightening up. She kept one hand on my shoulder. "Is it closed?"

Evelyn frowned at her. "No, of course not. Don't be absurd."

Raine cracked a grin. "Evee, you go back in there and you close that fucking gate or I swear I'll spank you 'till your arse glows in the dark."

"Absolutely not. This is our chance. I seriously doubt I'll be able to get it open again. I don't even understand half of the ... *modifications*. Heather, how did you do that?"

I shook my head, still staring at my hands.

"More like why did she do that?" Twil asked. "It's the middle of the bloody night. Is this what she does?"

“Evee, there is a direct line to cultist fun-land in the middle of the house,” Raine said. “Heather just got attacked by a giant zombie.”

“Praem One and the Spider are both guarding it,” Evelyn grumbled. “Two’s on her way home right now. I’m not throwing this opportunity away, Raine. Don’t be such a dullard.”

“I’m about ten seconds away from grabbing a mop and a bottle of bleach to scrub that wall clean myself.”

“Fuckin’ ‘ey,” Twil said.

“No,” I almost spat, jerking upright in my seat. “No, you can’t. You can’t close it.” Everyone looked at me. I shook my head, struggling for words, breathing too hard. “We have to go in there. I have to go in there. I-I have to help ... I-” I frowned, confused at these half-memories, broken impressions.

I had to help? Who? Who did I have to help? Where had that come from?

“Heather, it’s okay, it’s over now.” Raine ran her hand across my sweat-soaked back.

“No! I have to- Raine, I woke up and it was already happening, already opening. Sleepwalking, something, I don’t know.” I held out my hands, ink and paint still visible despite Raine’s ministrations. The Fractal stood out bold and stark on my left arm, my protection, my shield, unblemished and complete. “But it wasn’t *me*. I had help. Somebody helped me.”

Raine stiffened. “Inside the house?”

“No, no, inside my dream, inside the sleepwalking. Guiding my hands.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know!” I felt a hysterical scream catch in my throat. My heart ached for this lost memory, this piece of myself.

“Okay, okay, it’s okay, I believe you,” Raine murmured. Evelyn was staring at me, brows knitted.

“Somebody told me to wake up, before the gate opened, before Zheng got me. They saved me. And they asked for help too. Whoever it is needs- needs us to- me to-” I squeezed my eyes shut and forced a deep breath. “I can’t recall properly, but this was a

trap, and somebody sabotaged it so I could escape. And now they need help too.” I looked up at Raine. “Please?”

Raine hesitated, then sighed and grinned. “Guess you know better than anybody that dreams can be real, huh?”

“Oh yeah, just bite down on this huge bait worm, right, cool.” Twil threw her arms up. “What’s if it’s just the cult messing with Heather’s head?”

“No,” Evelyn murmured. “This house is a fortress. That applies to our minds too. Something like the Eye could certainly brute force its way in, but not the Sharrowford Cult, no matter what they’ve got into. They’d need something like ... well, like you, Heather.”

“Good point,” Raine said. “If they could break in here, why not, you know, just murder us all?”

“The sister,” I said, blinking up at my friends as a light went on in my head. “The sister!”

“The what?” Raine frowned.

“Ah,” Evelyn said.

“When he tried to kidnap me, Alexander Lilburne, he mentioned a sister *like me*, remember? What if ... ” I trailed off and shrugged, still shaking all over.

Raine sighed and nodded, a resigned smile on her face. Evelyn scraped a chair back with her walking stick and sat down, placing the scrimshawed thighbone in front of her. “Start from the beginning,” she said. “You woke up in front of the gate. Step by step. This is important.”

I nodded, did my best to gather myself, and told everyone what happened.

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“You were terrified,” Raine said. “You’re only human.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” I coughed and winced, pain shooting up inside my chest. “I did the brain-math perfectly, it made me sick, it almost made me pass out, but *it didn’t work on her*. That’s why I had to do the ping-pong trick, but a hundred times bigger. Thousand times bigger.” I trailed off, feeling vaguely sick as I recalled the moment of violence. “And like I said, it cut her arm off.

She dropped me, one of the men ran away, and then I passed out. You know the rest.”

Raine nodded as she rubbed my back through the borrowed hoodie. She’d managed to coax me into a warmer change of clothes, distraught and worried by my shivering. “You’re only human,” she repeated.

Evelyn watched me with her chin in her hand. Twil glanced between all of us in turn with a look like she wanted to be far away from here. I couldn’t blame her. I curled up tighter in my chair.

“Ping-pong trick,” Twil echoed quietly. “So you uh, knocked the big bitch’s arm off and um ... pulped ... that guy in there?”

“Wait, hold up,” Raine said. “There’s a dead guy?”

“You didn’t see?” Twil grimaced. “Past the gate. Totally minced.”

Evelyn swallowed and looked rather green. “Can you please refrain from being disgusting?”

“Was kinda busy with more important things.” Raine nodded sideways at me.

“No, no, that wasn’t me,” I shook my head and sniffed, trying not to picture the gruesome state of the corpse. “He was still standing when I passed out.”

“So like, the zombie killed him?” Twil frowned.

“The Cult may control her through a full-body binding of some kind,” Evelyn said in a quiet murmur. “Tattoo perhaps, like yours.”

“Ugh.” Twil pulled a face. She rolled her shoulders and leaned back, self-conscious of the way her tattoo showed through the thin white tshirt, now she looked fully human again.

“Remove an arm and part of the binding is broken,” Evelyn continued, nodding to herself. “They may have lost control of her. Lost control of their trump card. Well done, Heather.”

I gave her such a glare, born of pain and exhaustion. She cleared her throat, inclined her head to me, and stood up, clutching her walking stick in one hand.

“Nevertheless, the gate is open,” Evelyn said. “Finally. If I’m right about the changes you made to my work, it should indeed lead us

into the heart of their stronghold in the south of the city. I do believe it's time to get rid of the Sharrowford Cult."

"Why stalk me and then just try to kidnap me like that?" I murmured. "What was the point?"

"Smart money says internal power struggle," Raine said. She shrugged. "Right hand not talking to the left, all that."

"They appear to have no plan B," Evelyn said. Her lips kinked with the beginning of a devious smile. "They haven't sent anything through the gate, it's a clear shot. I'm clearing them out, tonight. Or," she glanced at the kitchen clock, "this morning, I suppose. Before sunrise, in any case."

Twil snorted. "It's a stonking great trap, anybody could see that. Come on, Saye. What are you going to do, walk in there by yourself and challenge them to a punch up?"

Evelyn gave Twil a dark smile of growing certainty. "I have a bound demon in two bodies, robust and obedient, either of them capable of outfighting anything the cult have left to throw at me. They've run out of monsters, they don't have anything. I have a dozen hidden trump cards. I have my magic, I have my mother's goddamn legacy at my fingertips," she reached forward and tapped the scrimshawed thighbone. "I have ..." she paused, glanced at me. "You want to help this mysterious benefactor of yours, Heather?"

I nodded. "Yes, absolutely."

Evelyn turned back to Twil. "I have my friends. I have Raine. Heather's already disabled their greatest weapon, and very likely set it among them like a fox in a hen-house. Do we have you, Twil? Are you in or out?"

"In," I said, then coughed and wheezed at the pain in my chest. Twil stared at Evelyn, lost for words.

"Relax, Heather, come on, relax," Raine murmured.

"Are you in or are you out?" Evelyn repeated. "Are you with your family, or us?"

Twil blinked in surprise, then scowled, dark and hurt. "That's not a fair choice, Saye. Fuck you."

"It is, however, a practical question, and we are now on a time

limit, before they regroup or discover what's happened. Us, or not?"

"You, then," Twil grunted and folded her arms. Evelyn smiled that smug, devious smile again.

Raine looked at all of us in turn, a resigned look on her face as she finally turned to me. "I don't even need to say it, do I? I really don't like this. We're talking about walking straight in there."

"I have to go, I have to."

"I believe you. But, Heather, love, you can barely stand right now."

"I can stand just fine," I lied, and forced myself to my feet, hands gripping the edge of the table. Deep breaths, in and out. Raine caught me by the elbow and helped me stand straight. My knees shook, weak and unsteady. My chest ached as if every single muscle had been pulled, from collarbone to abdomen.

"No you bloody well can't," Twil said.

"I feel a lot better than I have in the past," I said, and held my head high. "I'm getting better at this."

Raine couldn't keep the dubious look off her face; I knew her too well by now, saw right through to the deep concern and worry underneath, the fear that fragile little Heather would get hurt, that she'd lose me. It was entirely justified; but if I acknowledged it, I'd give in to the fear.

"Then carry me," I blurted out. My calm veneer slipped and I screwed up my eyes, banging my own skull with one fist. "It's right there, Raine. I can feel it, I just can't remember the details. I have to help, and I have to know, there's a piece of my mind missing and I can't stand it. I'm serious, Raine. Carry me if you must. You want me to stay here you'll have to tie me up."

Raine took a deep breath. No grin. She met my eyes head-on and nodded once. "Alright. I'm with you."

I opened my mouth to thank her, to tell her I knew, I understood, to tell her I'd follow all her instructions, that this mattered and thank you, but she put a finger to my lips.

"If we're gonna do this, we do it properly," she said. "My way."

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We suited up.

I stayed in Raine's hoodie, wrapped in big comfortable protection. She made me prove I could walk upstairs, then helped me tug on a pair of jeans. She held my hand for support on the way back down, loaded me up with co-codamol and ibuprofen and a couple of little tablets from Evelyn's unlabelled collection, which seemed to settle my shakes. She dug out one of Evelyn's spare walking sticks for me, not a lovely warm piece of polished oak, but a metal and plastic NHS-issue crutch, with a pad for under the shoulder. I found a window and tried to catch a glimpse of Tenny wandering in the garden, but it was too dark and rain-soaked to see her.

"We'll be back later," I muttered to the cold glass.

Twil dragged her clothes out of the dryer and shrugged them on. She rolled her sleeves up, exposed hands making and unmaking those ghostly wolf-claws, as if limbering up a spiritual muscle.

Raine found her jacket and filled it with death.

She checked the handgun, made sure the safety was on, and slipped it into an inside pocket. She found her truncheon and laid it on the table, sized up a few kitchen knives, then hopped upstairs and returned with the most terrifying blade I'd ever seen – a combat knife. Eight or nine inches of matte-black metal, slid into a clean leather sheath. She tucked it away and shot me a sheepish grin as she pulled on a pair of black leather gloves.

"Insurance," she said.

"Sure you got enough pointy things there?" Twil asked.

"I'd prefer a shotgun and a riot shield, but hey, you make do with the tools you've got."

Praem Two returned via the back door, somewhere during our preparations, and silently took up station in the ex-drawing room next to her body double.

Evelyn finally reappeared from upstairs, fully dressed, in boots and a coat for once instead of a comfy sweater, her pockets laden down with a trio of notebooks, a collection of little bottles sealed with wax, and that awful carved thighbone.

She had another notebook tucked under one arm – mine. She handed it to me with a nod. I tucked the notebook into the hoodie's

front pocket.

“You going to be all right?” she murmured, while the other two were occupied.

“I think so. Thank you, Eevee.”

She nodded. “I hope we find your mystery helper.”

We gathered in the ex-drawing room, among the magical detritus of Evelyn’s workshop. Raine hovered by my side as I hobbled along on the crutch, taking deep breaths as I went. I did keep up; it wasn’t that difficult. I really was handling the aftermath of the Eye’s impossible equations better than ever before.

In that moment, I didn’t have time to stop and consider what that meant about me.

I’d expected the open gateway to glow, or give off some kind of inner light. A magical gateway through space, to a place that shouldn’t exist. Surely the surface should wobble or shine or pulse? Instead it showed that brown institutional corridor, as if through a perfectly normal open door.

Praem One and Two stood nearby, along with the spider-Servitor, now backed up from the inexplicable intrusion into its years-long routine. Evelyn took a deep breath and muttered something to one of the Praems. Twil flexed her hands into wolf-claws. Raine glanced at me.

“You do exactly as I say, okay?”

I nodded.

“We’ll be fine,” Evelyn announced. “This is a simple mopping up. They couldn’t even muster a few people to come through this gate. Most likely we won’t have to do a thing except chase off a few sad old men. Let Praem take the lead, find out what they were doing, and bring the place down on our way back. Don’t show any fear.”

“That means you too,” Raine stage-whispered and elbowed Twil in the ribs.

“Oi!”

I suppressed the smallest laugh, winced at the pain in my chest, then smiled at Raine.

My heart could not decide between paralysed terror and shaky confidence. On one hand, who on earth did we think we were, doing this? Four young students, all girls, on half a night's sleep, with a old handgun and a knife between us, Evelyn and I both barely able to keep up if we had to run. And we were going to put down an organised supernatural mafia group.

On the other hand, who were we really? A mage, a virtuous psychopath, an indestructible werewolf, and whatever the hell I was becoming. We had a demon at our disposal, in two bodies strong enough to break limbs and bend steel. We had magic and monsters of our very own. We had each other.

We were pretty damn scary ourselves.

"Right," Evelyn started. "Praem, if you please, go first. Bring the-"

"Wait," I said. "Wait, do we have string. A ball of string?"

Evelyn frowned at me. Raine blinked, curious and bright.

"... you didn't think to bring string?" I asked.

"What are you going on about?" said Evelyn.

"Theseus? The Minotaur?" I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Nobody reads anymore. Where would you lot be without me?"

Raine nodded slowly, a grin spreading across her face. "A maze. Eevee, what if we get turned around in there, or can't find our way back out? Heather's got a point."

Evelyn shrugged. "Then we'll come out somewhere else in Sharrowford. A walk home."

"You'll get a sore hip again," I said, then turned back to the kitchen. "String, or a ball of yarn, surely you have something around here."

She did. Raine found an old ball of string after a little digging in the cupboards, and put it in my hand. My responsibility. I hobbled out into the front room and tied it to the sturdiest thing we had – the house itself. I looped the string around the banister on the stairs and tied a tight little knot, then unwound the ball behind me as I walked back to the ex-drawing room.

"There. Our way back."

Praem went first, her twin identical bodies stepping through the

gate one after the other. Twil followed behind them, shoulders hunched, eyes probing. Evelyn stomped ahead, radiating stubborn confidence.

My feet hesitated regardless of my heart. I felt a catch of breath in my throat and the crutch digging into my shoulder, as I leaned on it with all my weight. What if Zheng wasn't the worst threat waiting for us? What if I wasn't strong enough, what if I weakened and collapsed and slowed everyone down? What if there hadn't been a mysterious helper in my dream, and this was all trap?

What if I was wrong?

A hand slipped into mine and squeezed. I looked up to find Raine – not grinning, for once.

“I'm with you, Heather. I promise.”

I nodded. Squeezed back.

We stepped through the gate together, as the others waited for us, just across the threshold to the underworld.

the other side of nowhere –

4.1

“At least he’s dressed the part,” said Raine, as she examined the dead man.

She lifted a flap of torn robe with her truncheon, trying to find his pockets. Twil wrinkled her nose in disgust. Evelyn was forcing herself to watch, going pale and green, knuckles tight on her walking stick.

We were only a few meters inside the gate, into the hollowed-out un-space behind Sharrowford. I wasn’t sure how to picture it. A loop, a shadow city, a pocket dimension? I fiddled with the ball of string and adjusted my weight on the crutch, to distract myself from what Raine was doing. Praem – in her two identical bodies – stood on point a little way down the shiny brown hallway, untouched by the spectacle of gore. Beyond her stood a pair of large double-doors. Little windows in their top halves showed dense grey fog beyond.

The air smelled awful – blood and excrement.

I hope most people will never have to see a corpse quite like this one. Whoever the cultist had been – a middle aged man with a comfortable paunch and a big nose – now he was pulped meat. I couldn’t look without feeling a sick catch in my stomach and clammy sweat on my back. Zheng had shattered his head, smeared brain jelly up the wall, and ripped his belly open. Snakes of ruined intestine and unspeakable fluids lay over his lap and thighs, in a smaller puddle of filth amid the crimson mess.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Evelyn asked, and swallowed loudly.

“Something Heather mentioned a while back,” Raine said. “Bloke looks like a proper cultist, doesn’t he? Robes, shiny dome head, nothing to identify him by. Except all the guts hanging out.”

“Ugh.” Twil straightened up, holding her nose. “Dunno about you lot, but he reeks. Can’t we get on? What are you even doing?”

“Looking for clues.” Raine said, still poking and prodding at the corpse. “Investigating, you know?”

“The zombie did it,” I deadpanned.

“Ahhh yes, but did she knock his head off first and then pull his guts out, or the other way around?” I saw Raine grin in the corner of my eye. Nobody laughed.

Evelyn closed her eyes and looked away, breathing carefully through her mouth. I reached over and took her hand, gave it a squeeze.

“I don’t like it either,” I whispered.

“Ah ha!” Raine shouted. She stood up and held out a wallet and keys, thankfully not soaked in the dead man’s blood. She flopped the wallet open and rifled through the cards. ““Credit cards, debit cards, junk, junk.”

“Are you robbing a dead man?” said Twil.

“Bingo.” Raine grinned and presented a card to Evelyn. “Driver’s license.”

Evelyn lit up and peered at the card. “Len Greyson,” she read out loud. “Could be fake.”

Raine shrugged and thumbed at the corpse. “Not as if we can match it to his face anymore.” She jingled the bunch of keys. “But we might find his car somewhere.”

“I knew it, you are robbing a dead man,” Twil said.

“A lead?” I asked.

Evelyn nodded slowly. “Maybe. If it’s real, this man had a real life out there in Sharrowford, not completely absorbed in the cult yet. Amateurs.”

“We all good? Right? Then let’s keep moving.” Raine slipped the loot into her jacket, for safe keeping. “Evee, keep your cuddledolls up front, don’t get too far ahead of us.” She stepped away from the corpse – a sad sack of forgotten meat now – and walked over to squeeze my shoulder. Evelyn rolled her eyes and sighed at the ‘cuddledolls’ remark, but she kept her peace and turned to direct Praem forward again. I couldn’t resist one last glance at the dead body, another nightmare I couldn’t ignore.

“Is that how they’re all going to end up?” I heard myself say. All three of my companions looked at me, but in that moment I had eyes only for Evelyn.

“If Zheng gets to them before us, certainly,” she said.

“No, I mean are you going to kill these people?”

Evelyn hesitated, then shrugged. “I don’t know. Not all of them. That Alexander fellow, absolutely, if he’s in here. The rest of them ... cults generally don’t grow very big. I’d guess there’s maybe a dozen, all weak-willed, conned, or desperate. I ... ” She frowned. “We can put the fear of God into them, make them shit themselves and leave. Get to the centre of their stupid little fortress, find out what they’ve been doing, and then collapse the entire pocket dimension on the way back out.”

“What if they won’t leave?” I asked.

Raine cleared her throat. “That’s what I’m for, yeah?” A shiver passed up my spine.

“Me too,” Twil said, almost a whine in her voice. Evelyn sighed and shot her a sidelong look.

“You’ve never killed a person,” she said. “You’re here for shock and awe.”

Twil opened her mouth to complain, then halted. “Shock and awe?” She grinned. “Cool.”

Zheng’s wound had left us a trail of blood. We followed it to the end of the corridor, the Praems up front and Raine and I in the rear. Strange to see Praem One and Two together in the same place, identical twins with their ice-blue hair and frost-touched skin, dressed in the same huge army boots on their feet below loose skirts and ribbed jumpers. I had to remind myself ‘they’ were in fact one being in two bodies, moving and acting independently.

Praem One eased the double-doors open. She peered into the fog beyond, then turned back to us.

I knew Praem was capable of facial expression – she’d smiled that empty smile at me once before – but I had no idea she could communicate anything more subtle, until I saw the hint of apprehension behind that impassive face.

“Oh dear?” I said out loud.

“Oh. Dear,” Praem One echoed me in her ice-wind voice.

“What? What is it?” Evelyn demanded, frowning sharply at her bound demon. Praem merely opened the door wider, fog swirling beyond. Her other body stepped through first. Twil followed but paused on the threshold, wary, shoulders hunched. Evelyn swept past her. Raine seemed unconcerned, except at my shivering, which prompted a reassuring murmur and a hand at my back.

A chasm waited for us.

The door opened onto a broad walkway, made of stone and concrete and linoleum and wood and a dozen other patchwork materials, lined by a parapet wall made of the same jumble. Stairs descended and rose, overlapping, twisting, winding up and away in uncontrolled spirals, climbing up the sheer concrete face that we’d emerged from, to join other walkways. Several of the stairs and walkways were upside down. The wall seemed to both climb and drop forever, an endless cliff-face with top and bottom shrouded in dense grey fog.

Another wall faced us across a hundred feet of yawning chasm, filled with sluggish fog like rotting treacle. Pale light lit the fog from within, casting an unreal glow over Evelyn’s face as she frowned at the vast open space.

Zheng’s trail of blood led across a bridge – the only bridge – over the chasm.

“Huh,” Raine grunted. “That looks like the Sawwell Bridge.”

“Another copied piece of the real Sharrowford, yes,” Evelyn muttered, shaking her head. “This is ... a little larger than I was expecting.”

Twil leaned over the parapet and spat a glob of saliva. It vanished into the sucking fog.

“It’s a moat,” I said.

“A moat?” Evelyn squinted at me.

“This is the cult’s fortress, castle, whatever, yes?” I said. “Then this must be a sort of moat. A last perimeter.”

Evelyn shook her head, eyes tight and watchful. Her maimed left

hand tapped at the scrimshawed thigh bone, then she used it to point at the trail of blood.

“If the cult lost control of their zombie, she’ll be heading back to get revenge on them. If they didn’t, she’ll be retreating for repairs. She’ll lead us right to them.”

“A hunt,” Twil growled. She sniffed the air. “At least her blood’s normal.”

I let the ball of string play out as we crossed the bridge, our footsteps dull and muffled in the fog.

Sticky with dried night-sweat, tired and aching from the aftermath of frenzied self-defence, I knew I should have been ready to collapse, should have desired nothing more than to curl up and go to sleep. Raine hovered by my elbow, ready to catch me when I stumbled or sagged against the crutch, but I felt somehow stronger than I should have done.

I told myself I was strengthened by the sense of purpose, or the companionship of my friends, or maybe I felt better because I’d already passed out once, like purging rotten food from my belly.

Purpose, yes, that must be why. I was on my feet and moving forward because of the need to know, because of lost time like the absence of a tooth, a wet bleeding socket I couldn’t help but probe; because somebody had helped me, and I needed to return that trust and support and love.

Love? Where had that thought come from?

I turned my mind away from the other possibility: that I was simply becoming inured to the reality-breaking contusions of the Eye’s brain-math.

I was getting used to this.

The trail of blood entered a wide doorway on the other side of the bridge. We crept through in distant pursuit.

Endless corridors and numberless crossroads wormed through this un-place; I gave up counting after the first dozen twists and turns. Each hallway was made of a different material – breeze block, wood, cement, brick, metal – each copied from a different building, schools, hospitals, office blocks, homes. Scratchy carpets transitioned into squeaky plastic supermarket floors, melted

together at the edges. Wooden office block side-doors were replaced with metal prison hatches, then hospital swing-doors, then another, and another, and another, on and on, in an endless swirl of stolen architecture. None of the side doors opened. We barely spoke.

Fog filled the labyrinth, thick and still, creeping into my lungs and clothes and hair, cold and heavy. The dull light washed colour from our faces. The Praems looked almost drained, white phantoms in the mist. Twil seemed a beast from some feral fairytale, even if she refrained from full transformation. The fog made her movements appear slow and predatory. Evelyn's face looked pinched and tight. Raine whistled, loudly.

We all stopped together when we found the paradox.

The string I'd been laying out behind us was now in front of us, running from left to right across a crossroad junction, each end vanishing into the fog. Zheng's trail of blood – thinner now, a few wet droplets every few feet – crossed the string.

"Great" Evelyn muttered.

"Wait wait wait," Twil said, her voice hushed in the fog. She glanced back over her shoulder. "We've doubled back? How did we get turned around?"

"Don't think about it too hard. You'll hurt yourself," Evelyn grunted.

"Hey!"

"She's serious," I said. Raine nodded too as I swallowed and continued. "These places don't conform to the physical laws we're used to, and I don't want to think about it too closely either. Unless you have a sick bag to hand."

Twil puffed out a long sigh. "What do we do then?"

"Heather?" said Raine.

"You're asking me?"

Raine grinned. "I'm in charge, but you're the expert."

Evelyn opened her mouth to protest. "She's hardly-"

"I can unravel this place, if I have to." I swallowed again. "I don't want to, because it'll hurt and I'll probably pass out again, but we're

not stuck. I say we keep going, find the zombie.”

Evelyn nodded approval. Raine smiled a resigned smile at me.

We found the body of the second cultist. He'd been attacked from behind, shoved to the ground, his spine snapped and bowels dragged out, left in a huge puddle of his own blood amid the heavy fog. Zheng's own thinning blood trail, beyond the corpse, was now joined by sticky red bootprints, her stride erratic and wavering.

I leaned against a wall and closed my eyes and thought about bed and books, as Raine repeated her ghoulish performance and extracted another wallet without getting her hands dirty. No car keys this time.

“That's what he gets for trying to kidnap my girl,” Raine said. Nobody laughed. “Heather, how much line we got left before we're out?”

I gathered myself, blinked down at the much reduced ball of string. “I can't tell. Thirty feet, perhaps? Twenty?”

“Right, we get to the end of the string and then we turn back. I think this was probably meant to be some kind of trap, but Heather disarmed it when she fought off the zombie. I doubt it goes anywhere now, and-”

Thump.

We all jumped, except for Praem. My heart leapt into my throat. The impact, dull and heavy, echoed from deeper in the fog, distorted by the twists and turns of the labyrinth. Evelyn drew the scrimshawed thighbone from under her arm and placed her fingers at several precise points on the design. I felt tension flow through Raine next to me, as she rolled her shoulders. I was suddenly and horribly aware how vulnerable we were, blinded both in front and behind by the slowly swirling fog. I clutched the crutch and felt myself shrink behind Raine.

Thump.

No closer than the first time.

Thump.

We all looked at each other. Raine held up fingers and counted in silence – one, two, three, four, *thump*. She repeated the count and

got the same result, about five seconds between each impact.

Twil bared her teeth. Raine shrugged.

Evelyn ordered Praem to go first. Along Zheng's bloody bootprints, around one corner, following the dull thumping sound. I hesitated as the string finally ran out, and let the ragged end fall from my fingers. Raine reached down and took my hand instead. We followed around another corner into a corridor of bare breeze block and plasterboard.

Mist breaking around her over sized body, facing the wall about twenty feet from us, stood Zheng.

With painstaking slowness, the zombie pulled her head back and banged it against the wall, hard. *Thump*. A thin trickle of blood seeped from her forehead, staining the concrete.

Blood soaked the trench coat all down her left side, dripping onto the floor from the ragged mess of her shoulder. She held her own severed left arm in her right hand, by the wrist. Slim tentacles of skinless bleeding muscle had sprouted from the stump and her shoulder, waving in the air and questing toward each other like a mass of blind snakes.

Her hood had fallen down and the concealing scarf had twisted away from her face, to reveal unhealthy pale skin, strangely delicate features, and a slender jaw. She didn't seem to notice us at all, paid no attention when Praem One and Two drew to a halt at a safe distance, didn't react to Twil's warning growl, or Evelyn's sharp intake of breath, or my choked gasp as the sight of her brought back an uncontrollable physical reaction. My heart slammed against my ribs.

Not fear alone; an unfamiliar sensation, thick and sweet, like drugged and rotten honey in my belly. I stared at the ruin of her wounds, the severed arm, the blood.

I'd done that.

Shoving a man Outside had been undoubtedly fatal, but had left no visceral evidence, no blood-soaked proof. This monster, barely human despite the deceptive form of her body, so terrifying I'd almost wet myself when she'd come after me, I'd torn her arm off. With a thought.

Was this was power felt like? I felt a little sick.

“Shit,” Evelyn hissed.

“What? What?” Twil grunted, looking to her for help. “What the hell is she doing?”

“Self-repair. Malfunction. Probably trying to get out of that body,” Evelyn replied in a whisper, eyes glued to the zombie’s great, swaying form as she banged her head on the wall once more.

“She’s not safe, I’m guessing?” Raine muttered.

“Absolutely not,” Evelyn hissed back. She raised the carved thighbone in one hand, her fingers twisting into position. “Here, I might be able to-”

Zheng lurched away from the wall. Twil bared her teeth and let out a growl. Raine slid in front of me, nightstick in one hand, that knife suddenly in the other. The Praems closed up around their mistress as Evelyn shrank back.

Zheng sagged, knees bent and back askew, head lolling. She thrust her severed arm up into the air, the stump-tentacles struggling toward each other, slapping and twisting around their counterparts. Her face was speckled with blood, dark hair matted and greasy. She reared back and I caught a flash of her eyes – hard and dead.

Then she whirled, so unsteady she almost toppled over, and hurled herself down the corridor.

We gave chase, my legs aching and Twil in the lead and Evelyn wincing, half-trotting half-running down one corridor, following the receding footsteps, then down another, then one last turning. Twil skidded to a halt and swore loudly. Raine burst out laughing.

A blank wall.

The trail of bloody footprints cut off, as if the wall had slid into place only a second ago. Zheng was nowhere to be seen. Only fog and bricks. Twil pressed a hand against the wall and shoved.

“Don’t touch it!” Evelyn snapped. She yanked Twil back by one shoulder, the werewolf blinking in surprise and almost overbalancing. Evelyn tutted and sent one of the Praems to run her hands over the wall. She scowled when the investigation proved fruitless. “Solid wall. Nothing.”

"This is so definitely a trap," Twil said. "We are extra-level lost now."

"No we're not," said Raine, radiating calm confidence. "That zombie was proper messed up, that was no trick. Let's retrace our steps."

We couldn't.

We couldn't find the spot where Zheng had been bashing her own brains out against the wall, or the dead cultist and the bloody bootprints, or the end of the string I'd dropped. It was all gone, turned around behind a blind corner or an invisible angle between the walls. We walked empty fog-soaked corridors in tense silence, until Raine called out, "Hold up."

I should have felt lost and afraid, but I'd done this so many times before, alone in the dark on some alien plane of reality. Now, I wasn't alone. We had each other. I took a deep breath and started thinking.

"Now do you agree we're fucking lost?" said Twil, rounding on Raine. She swallowed, eyes edged with panic.

"Possibly," Evelyn murmured.

"It's this place," I said.

"Maybe this doesn't lead anywhere," Raine mused. "Maybe it's just a labyrinth."

"And we're stuck in it!" Twil almost shouted.

"Woah, Twil, easy," said Raine. "Last time I checked you're meant to be a big scary werewolf. You've got the least to be worried about here."

"I don't like being lost," Twil said through gritted teeth. "There's nothing to follow. I can't smell anything in here, it's all just fog. The blood was the only trail, and now she's gone. Fuck this. I don't mind fighting monsters, but this is messing with my head. I want out."

"We go on," Evelyn said, loud and clear. "We have to find a way through. I'm not throwing this chance away."

"How?" Twil spread her arms. "We're *lost*."

"I can do it," I said. "I can get us out, lead us to an exit. I think. This place must run on certain mathematical principles, like the loop we got trapped in. It'll have to conform to certain rules, even if those rules aren't ... human, or sane, or easily grasped. I'd like to try."

"Out the way we came, right?" Twil asked.

"... no, Twil. There's somebody I need to help."

Twil grit her teeth and looked away.

"You sure?" Raine asked.

I shrugged, sighed, a wave of exasperation passing through me. "What other choice do we have? Twil's right. We're lost."

"You need me to hold you up?"

"If I fall down."

Raine pulled me into a hug to help calm my nerves; I needed the contact, the moment of warmth amid the strange fog and endless corridors. I knew I could do this, grasp the principles long enough to envision how this place worked, but first I had to dredge the math from the silt-pit of my soul. The correct set of equations, the relevant lesson.

Raine rubbed my back as I closed my eyes. I couldn't shuffle through the Eye's lessons directly, even if I wanted to. Too many of them lay locked behind nightmare memory, repressed by terror and pain, a sure route to vomiting and passing out.

Instead, I worked backward: I thought about mazes.

The string we'd impossibly crossed, the blank wall Zheng had vanished into, our inability to retrace our steps; how to achieve those results, using more than three dimensions of space? Not a loop. A maze. In which one could take a right and a left and another right yet end up in the same spot, or take three rights and find oneself on a different path.

"Not random," I muttered out loud. "It's not random."

A trickle of pain leaked in behind my eyes; I winced and gasped, then hacked and coughed and felt myself choke on the revelation. The crutch under my arm slipped. Raine caught me, her voice in my ears, pulling me away from the edge, away from the filthy, dripping levers of reality.

“Heather? Heather, it’s okay, breathe, take a deep breath.”

“A-” I coughed and blinked my eyes open to find I’d hunched up against the wall, Raine supporting me. “A conch shell. A spiral, a double spiral. It’s like a-” I winced again and felt my stomach turn in rebellion.

“A shell?” Evelyn asked.

I nodded. We spent several precious minutes waiting for me to recover, as I tried extremely hard not to think about what I’d just figured out. Eventually I could stand unaided again, though I stayed glued to Raine’s side.

“It’s a sort of spiral, with only two ways in and out. I think I know how to get to the other exit.” I hiccuped and almost laughed. “I-It’s sort of silly really, you just ... ” I waved a finger back down the corridor; human words could not express the concept. Breath caught oddly in my throat.

“Heather, hey.” Raine squeezed my hand. Brought me back.

“Okay, okay.” I nodded. “I can- okay. I’m here.”

The trick was unthinkable – literally, none of us would have ever figured it out. We wandered until we found a four-way junction, a crossroads amid the claustrophobia. I directed us, voice steady as I concentrated on instructions, rather than risk contemplating what we were doing. Twil’s frowning confusion helped, the way she cocked an eyebrow at me in the middle of my seemingly ridiculous directions. I managed a smile. She was so pretty. I focused on that. Pretty girl in the mist. Don’t think about the spiral.

We went left from the crossroads, then back to it and left again, then back and left again – and found it was a different crossroads. Back and left, back and left – now the crossroads were a T-junction. Back and left, back and left.

The fog peeled away as we retraced our steps one last time. A straight corridor, no junction.

Stairs, leading up.

“Bugger me, that actually worked,” Twil blurted out. She laughed. Raine grinned and ruffled my hair.

“You’re a goddamn genius, Heather.”

"I'm exhausted, that's what I am," I grumbled. My head ached and my stomach felt tender. I knew Raine had painkillers in her jacket, but it was too soon for me to take more of them. I felt no sense of victory, not yet.

"Thank you," Evelyn said, nodded to me once, then directed Praem up the stairs.

Up through the thinning fog, the soles of our shoes squeaked and scuffed against the vinyl steps. A fresh-air chill touched my face and hands, crept down the collar of the borrowed hoodie, the leeching cold of open spaces. A pair of huge oak doors, copied from a cathedral, lay wide open at the top of the stairs, showing pale grey beyond.

"That doesn't look like sky," Twil said.

"I ... I don't know. Maybe ... " Evelyn muttered.

Praem went first, one soul in two bodies. Nothing attacked her or made the slightest sound. One Praem stuck a hand back through the doors – safe, come on up. We ascended into open air, fog, and cold, on a sort of hilltop.

"Oh dear," one of Praem's bodies said.

Raine seemed least affected the by the sight – other than Praem – but even she managed only a shake of her head. Twil stared, open-mouthed, but it was Evelyn's reaction which set my heart hammering, after I managed to look away myself. She was stunned and lost, no wiser than the rest of us.

Spread out below us in fog-wrapped murk lay an entire mile of copied Sharrowford.

Buildings and streets, road signs and pavements, every surface jagged and distorted, warped by alien pressures. It was all built with what looked like tainted jade, dark green stone shot through with creeping layers of rotten black and ashen grey. The circular mile of city was encircled by deeper, denser fog which spread away in every direction forever, horizon lost and blurred. Empty streets, dead streets; no cars, no people, no trees, no sound. Nothing grew here. The ground beneath our feet was dry grey earth.

Terrible forms hung and drifted in the fog-drenched sky, half-glimpsed shadowy jellyfish balloons trailing tentacles thick as train

carriages, floating whales encrusted with gargantuan barnacles. Not spirits; I wasn't the only one who stared up at them. Several darker globes further out were perhaps moons, or planets low in the sky, all obscured by the endless fog.

We had emerged from a copied cathedral front wrought from rotten jade, on a low hill at one edge of the bizarre mock-Sharrowford. Another hill reared up from the centre of that fog-ringed urban slice, and on it sat the only building not copied from the city.

A castle.

Built from that same tainted stone, but more grey than green, like a living thing that had died and ossified, with crenellations and arrow-slits and even a couple of towers, it seemed to float above the fog as the mist parted and swirled around the hill.

"Are we-" I swallowed on a dry throat. "Are we Outside?"

"Outside what? Sanity?" Twil whispered. She needn't have bothered, the fog swallowed our voices.

Raine rummaged for her phone, showed us the full signal bars. "Still connected, still in Sharrowford. We ain't Outside. This is another one of their pocket dimensions."

"Evee?" I said. "Not what you expected? Evee?"

Evelyn opened her mouth and said nothing, shaking her head, staring at the dark fairytale castle.

the other side of nowhere –

4.2

The bulk of the fake cathedral offered no shelter from the omnipresent grey glow. Venturing down into the city was an easy choice – the only choice, I told myself.

Evelyn sent Praem first, both bodies. One of them waved an arm over her head to test if the giant gasbag jellyfish things floating in the sky would react, descend upon easy prey or droop those massive tentacles down to sting with alien toxins. They did not. Praem stepped from grey earth onto the jagged lip of imitation road, walked past the first of the twisted jade outcroppings pretending to be buildings, and stood on a street corner, at the very limit of visibility in the slowly shifting tendrils of fog. Her other body turned to look back at us.

“Down we go then,” said Raine.

“Hate this place already,” Twil hissed.

So did I. This place felt so fundamentally *wrong*, even to me, and I’d spent half my life getting dragged outside reality on the regular.

Our footsteps returned muffled echoes as the copied city streets rose around us. One of Praem’s bodies took the lead in the churning murk, scouting down a row of what were probably meant to be semi-detached houses.

All these normal everyday shapes – buildings, street signs, pavement – warped and bent and rough-edged, surfaces jagged and misaligned, as if approximated by an alien with terrible eyesight and a fetish for sharp corners. Every surface of dark green stone seemed to hide untold depths behind the rotten veins of grey and black, an optical illusion that tempted me to stare harder and harder with the promise that eventually I might see through to whatever waited on the other side of the ground itself.

I realised with a sick feeling that the entire place was seamless and unbroken; not even a hairline crack between pavement and brick,

every object and structure melted into the greater whole in a flow of stone – like bone.

Like the copied city had been extruded from the ground, secreted in layers. I shuddered at the thought of touching anything here. My skin began to crawl and I found myself hunching closer to Raine.

Twil wasn't faring much better than I. She'd wrapped her hands in those ghostly wolf-claws and looked ready to jump at her own shadow. Even Evelyn seemed smaller and reduced amid this mutated architecture. This place bore down on us in some obscure psychological fashion, made me want to curl up and hide; every wrong angle and defamiliarised building told me to *get out*.

Only Raine seemed normal – well, normal for Raine. She was on the highest of high alerts, clear as day even if I hadn't been holding her hand, vibrating with anticipation of sudden violence. She stayed fixated on the limits of visibility, the edge of the fog, as if a hundred monsters were about to come rushing at us.

Anybody trapped in this Godforsaken place absolutely needed rescuing.

"We're way too exposed out here," Twil hissed through her teeth. We were halfway to the castle, deserted battlements peering down through the shifting veils of fog.

Raine shook her head slowly. "Nothing to be exposed to."

Twil looked like she wanted to punch her. "We're out in the open. There's no people, no crowd to hide in, we're in the middle of the street. Fuck, is this even a street?" She scowled at the rotten-jade ground. "What the hell is this stuff? What the hell is this place?"

"A death-trap," Raine said.

"I meant the road, dumbass."

"I know you did, but that's not important," Raine grinned to herself. "This place is meant to be a death-trap, a killing-ground around that national trust wannabee up there." She nodded at the castle. "When they trapped Heather and I inside that looping space in Willow House, they had dogs and their super-zombie. I don't see no dogs. I don't see anything. I think they're spent."

Evelyn grunted in agreement. "They've no monsters left for us."

"May I make a suggestion?" I said, much softer than I'd intended, cowed by the bizarre surroundings. I cleared my throat.

"Always," Raine said.

"I don't think they're aware we're here," I said.

"Oh, yeah," Twil said. "We're totally not walking into an ambush, because Heather says so."

"Nobody could have escaped that labyrinth without brain-math," I said. "Whoever guided me put that back door in, one only I could find. Nobody knows we're here."

"Not yet, at least," said Raine. Twil grumbled under her breath and flexed her claws.

I stared up at the castle as we got closer, frowning and chewing on my lips.

"You recognise it?" Raine muttered to me.

"No. I don't think anybody makes castles out of jade."

"Well somebody did," Raine said, and cracked a grin for me.

I sighed and shrugged, a little difficult with the crutch tucked under one arm to support my weight. "Maybe it's a copy of one in reality. Does Sharrowford have a castle?"

"Don't think so. Any idea who we might find in there? Anything come back to you yet?"

I shook my head and felt a shadow of guilt pass over me, for dragging my friends into this, for insisting. "I don't know, I-I'm sure there's ... "

Raine squeezed my hand. "Heather, if the person who helped you is up there, I'm getting them the hell out." She flashed me a grin, utterly devoid of artifice. "Can't let myself get upstaged by your secret admirer."

"Right, right."

I felt myself smile. Amazing how much difference that grin can make.

Lights began to bleed through the wall of fog, at first illusory and wavering, then clearer and clearer as a line of tiny flickering points.

The light bled into the stone, made the dark veins dance and writhe, pulsing from within. Raine hissed a halt and we waited for several tense moments, but the lights neither advanced nor dimmed.

We crept forward.

Candles. Thick as an arm and a foot tall, each set on a metal pole – stainless steel, the first normal objects we'd seen in this place. The bollards were mounted in the middle of a road, the stone cracked and chipped where they'd been bolted to the ground. The line of candles stretched off in either direction, until the lights vanished into the fog.

Just this side of the line, a monster had been impaled on a wooden stake.

"Recognise him?" Raine asked.

"Of course I do," Evee hissed. She gulped and had to look away. So did I.

"What? That's yours?" said Twil. Evelyn nodded.

It was the gangly ape demon she'd summoned up and sent out into the city weeks ago. The knobbly joints were rigid in death, vertical jaw lolling open, huge tongue limp, eyes glassed over, flesh dry and dessicated. It had been impaled through the backside and the stake emerged from its shattered chest, pushing broken ribs outward. No blood on the ground, merely a little dried and flaking on the stake.

"At least we know what happened to the poor bastard," Raine said. "Sorry mate."

"It's a warning," Evelyn said.

"To who? The things up there?" Twil pointed at the giant mute jellyfish shadows in the sky. "There's nothing *here*. Thing's not even had birds or flies at it. This place is dead."

"To whatever's out there," Evelyn said softly. She gestured with her eyes, off into the distance.

"What?" I said.

"Yeah, uh, Evee, what?" Raine added.

"I think I was wrong."

“You, wrong? Never,” Twil tried to laugh at her own jab but managed only a hollow chuckle.

“The Cult didn’t build this place,” Evelyn said. She sucked on her teeth before continuing. “The labyrinth and all the looping pocket dimensions, yes, that’s them, and perhaps they even made that bloody great castle, somehow. But this space itself? I suspect they found this, re-purposed a small part of it, connected it to the city. All this, what we’re seeing, could be a ... a sympathetic reaction, an allergic reaction, I don’t know.” She nodded at the metal bollards with the candles on top. “That’s to keep out unwanted visitors from the depths beyond.”

Evelyn’s words chilled me, should have made me look over my shoulder into the swirling fog, with all the lurid possibilities and lurking horrors. But the dead ape demon, hanging there next to us, was so much more real.

The dead men in the labyrinth had been victims of sudden terrible violence. The corpses had turned my stomach and upset me on that deep level of flesh’s sympathy for other flesh. But the ape demon, impaled on a spike? That implied a medieval capacity for calculated brutality, so much worse than any outburst of destruction.

“Heather?” Raine said. “You holding up okay?”

I nodded, tried to focus. “This is by far the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen,” I said, half exasperated, half trying to play it down.

“Eh?” Evelyn frowned at me.

“Occult road bollards. Traffic calming for monsters.” I shook my head.

Raine laughed, but Evelyn sighed and gestured Twil toward the row of bollards and candles. “Right, stick a hand past the barrier, see what happens.”

Twil goggled at her. “You’re having a laugh. Why me?”

“Because your flesh regrows in minutes. None of ours will.”

“What about the ice blues here?” Twil nodded at Praem. Both bodies stared back at her, an impassive rebuff.

“They don’t regenerate, they’re made of wood. Stop whining, it’s only pain.”

Twil grumbled and eyed the line of flickering candles. She edged up to the barrier, gave Evelyn a terrible scowl, then gingerly poked a finger past a bollard. Nothing happened. She extended her hand out, then her arm, then stepped over.

She shrugged. "Feels normal. Nothing doing, I guess."

"That was a little cruel, Eevee," I said.

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes, then stepped up to one of the bollards and tapped it with her walking stick. She knocked the candle off the top, let it hit the ground in a splat of wax and puff of extinguished flame. "Pull it out," she said, then glanced up at Twil when she didn't jump to it.

"Do you want me to get blown up by a magical booby-trap or what?"

"No. Praem," Evelyn gestured to her bound demon. "You do it. Pull it out."

Praem grabbed the bollard and wrenched it out of the ground with a loud crunch of breaking stone. Tiny chips of grey, dead jade flaked off from the bolts. She held it up and stared at the underside.

"Made in China," Praem said.

"Huh. That's one hole in their perimeter," Evelyn said.

A hundred meters further on we hit a second barrier, a second ring around the false jewel of the castle – a triple-layered magic circle made of complex overlapping angles, all in white, painted straight onto the jade ground.

The circle was unfinished, cut off at one end, the other vanishing off into the fog. The air smelled of fresh paint.

"I don't recognise the technique, the symbols, any of it," Evelyn said. "Could be for anything."

"Doesn't hurt to look at," I said.

"Wait 'till it's finished," Evelyn muttered.

"Maybe this is what they were gonna use Heather for?" Twil suggested. "Maybe she was meant to be here when they finished it, up in that castle thing?"

A cold shiver went up my spine. We all looked at each other – except for Raine, who stared off into the fog. She had a smile on her lips and a cold look in her eyes.

“Raine?”

“Wanna go find out if they’re still working on it?” she asked.

They were.

We crept along the curve of the magic circle for a couple of minutes before a kneeling figure drifted out of the fog. A young man in cream-coloured robes, down on his knees with a fat paintbrush in hand as he worked on extending the circle. Around him lay a tray to catch stray drips, some newspaper, and two cans of white paint. He looked up in wide-eyed blinking incomprehension.

Two other figures stood over him, both older men with scraggly beards and wild hair, expressions slack and eyes glassy, dressed in scuffed jeans and old coats and too many layers for what they so obviously were. Their heads swivelled toward us, machine-like and precise, empty of expression.

“Oh, oh, oh shit, oh, no no no,” the cultist stammered as he stumbled to his feet. “Y-you’re not meant to be here. You- you- none of you. Oh, um-”

“Hey, buddy,” Raine said. “No harm no foul, just drop your shit and put your hands up, yeah?”

The cultist glanced at his attendant zombies and gestured at them, clicking his fingers and stammering out a snatch of Latin. They seemed to stiffen – then stepped toward us. With a renewed flush of confidence the man smiled and raised an arm at us too, said a few more words in Latin.

Raine’s truncheon got in the way and knocked out a few of his teeth.

I shrank back involuntarily, but Evelyn stood her ground, radiating contempt; these zombies were not like Zheng – Twil and Praem made short work of them.

Twil slammed into one zombie in a tangle of limbs and claws, gnashing and snapping and growling, bouncing it off the ground with a crack of breaking bones. Praem simply grabbed the other one by the head and twisted; I squeezed my eyes shut at the

horrible ripping noise. A few moments of shouting and scuffling and it was all over. I nodded when Evelyn gently touched my elbow, trying not to look at the pair of roughly decapitated zombies. At least they didn't bleed – they seemed to be utterly dessicated, just dry bone and tendon under the skin.

“How was I supposed to know to pull it's head off?” Twil was saying, exasperated, mostly human again except for her claws, her clothes twisted around from rolling on the ground.

“I didn't know either,” Evelyn said, frowning down at the corpses. “It was a guess.”

Raine grinned down at the cowering cultist, his face bruised and lips bleeding. “Should have taken my first offer, yeah? Hope you're a good little squealer. How many of your mates are hanging around here? Don't make me hurt you for it, not in front of my girl.”

“Oh shut up, Raine,” Evelyn drawled. She raised the scrimshawed bone in both hands, elbow balancing her walking stick. “Get out of the way, unless you want to soil yourself.”

Raine glanced over her shoulder. “Eh? Oh. Geeze, Eevee, that's much worse than smashed kneecaps. Come on, give the old fashioned way a chance?”

I saw the man on the ground gather himself, realised he was about to try something stupid. Perhaps I'd spent too much time watching Raine, watching the way she moved, the hundred little tells which came before a moment of violence.

“Don't you dare,” I said out loud.

He glanced at me and hesitated – just long enough for Raine to draw her handgun and point it at his face. He gulped and flinched, one hand out in a gesture of surrender. Raine tutted and shook her head, stepping back out the way of whatever Evelyn was about to do.

“N-none of you are supposed to be here,” he said. “If you leave now, you can still get out, m-maybe-”

Evelyn ran her fingers over the carvings on the thighbone, completed her infernal circuit.

The ambient temperature plummeted by several degrees in an instant, enough to draw a surprised gasp from me, despite the

enclosing warmth of Raine's borrowed hoodie. Static electricity cracked across our clothes.

The man fell silent with a strangled choke. His lips quivered and his pupils contracted to tiny black dots. His skin drained of all colour, dripping with sudden cold sweat. He shook, teeth chattering, and a puddle of steaming urine spread from under his robe.

A strange sick fear twisted in my chest, made me take a step backward where suddenly it lifted again; backwash from Evelyn's spell. Raine sniffed and shook her head. Twil grunted and backed way up too, kicking at a zombie corpse on her way.

"Do you know my face?" Evelyn asked. The cultist nodded, numb and staring at Evelyn with awe born from pure terror. "Do you know my family name?" He nodded again. "Speak it."

He couldn't.

"Speak it or I will feed you to a demon."

I caught Raine smirking in the corner of my eye. Was she laughing because that was a bluff, or was she taking pleasure in this unspeakable spectacle?

"Saye," the cultist managed to choke out.

"Correct. How many of you are here? In the castle?"

"... a ... s-ssss-seven."

"Is Alexander Lilburne here? Is he your leader?"

He nodded, jerky, desperate to please.

"More zombies?"

Another nod. Evelyn clenched her jaw with closely controlled anger.

"How many?"

He shook his head. Evelyn frowned, frustration plain, and suddenly the man babbled out nonsense words, non-words, baby-talk efforts to explain or excuse, to persuade this avatar of fear to pass over him. It made me feel vaguely sick. How many times had I felt that way, lost Outside before something utterly beyond me? He stared at Evelyn the way I might have stared at the Eye.

The man collapsed, forehead to the ground, prostrating himself in utter submission. Evelyn sighed and twisted her fingers against the thighbone again. The spell broke with an audible rush of warm air and discharge of static. The man scrambled to his feet, blinking rapidly. He'd lost control of the muscles in his face, as if he'd suffered a stroke, working his jaw and grimacing.

"I-I- what- what did you- you-" he stammered.

"My turn now?" Raine asked. She drew her knife and kept the handgun trained on him.

"Ugh," Twil grunted.

"No, no! Fuck, no, okay!" The cultist held both hands out, warding us off. "You've won. You win. You win. I'm out, I'll leave, I swear, I'll leave."

"First you're going to tell me what this place is, what you degenerate fools have been doing here," Evelyn said.

"I don't know!" he said. "You think they tell me anything? I'm a goddamn drop-out, okay? I'm nobody important. I signed up for the money, and the Brotherhood- the Brothers, they taught me ... stuff, stuff I don't want to know. Look, I know they've been killing people, but it terrifies me too. I want out, okay? I mean, look," he gestured at the unfinished magic circle, the splatter of white paint where he'd dropped the brush, next to bloody spittle where Raine had knocked him down. He tried to smile at us through his bloodied mouth. "They've got me doing the monkey work. I'm nobody."

"Monkey work," Evelyn echoed. "Constructing a circle of this scale."

"Yeah. I-I don't know how it works."

"She hates liars, you know?" Raine grinned at him.

"Is there an exit up here?" Evelyn snapped. "A way out?"

"Yeah, a couple." He nodded, smiling that broken smile again.

"Where? Be precise," Evelyn snapped.

"That way," he nodded. "There's a Church at the intersection, it's a door back to-"

The cultist raised one arm to point – and twisted his fingers one

over the other, in a gesture that stung my eyes and burnt the air in the back of my throat. His words turned into a bark of inhuman language. Twil yelped, Evelyn winced.

The two decapitated zombie corpses jerked, as if trying to get to their feet.

For a split-second the young man's face was no longer the sobbing, desperate drop-out, conned into a cult with promises of easy money; instead, raw dominance, victory, pleasure in inflicting pain. 'Got you' his eyes said.

Then Raine shot him in the head.

In movies and video games – the few violent video games I've watched Raine play – if a human gets shot in the head, their skull sort of pops or explodes, cartoon gore like a burst balloon. Reality is far less final, far less pyrotechnic. The crack of the gunshot was much softer than I'd imagined, but I flinched all the same. The cultist's head jerked to the side, blood and brains spurting from a small exit wound. He flopped to the floor in a heap, twitched and jerked as ruined neurons fired at random, then lay still, blood pooling around his skull.

"Holy shit," Twil said. She gaped at the body.

Raine blew out a long breath. She blinked at the gun in her hand and shrugged. "Did he think I was bluffing?"

"Maybe he thought it was a fake," I offered, and found my voice very small and weak. I turned away and took several deep breaths, holding on tight to the borrowed crutch.

"Great," Evelyn was saying. "*Great.*"

"Never had to actually pull the trigger before," Raine said.

"Are you ... okay?" I asked.

She flashed a grin, clicked the gun's safety on, and tucked it back into her jacket. "Hundred percent. More concerned about you, wish you didn't have to see that."

I shrugged. "That's not even the most violent thing I've watched you do."

Raine grinned again, as if my words had been a compliment.

“Stop flirting,” Evelyn snapped. She was having Praem turn one of the dead zombies over, and pointed at it with her walking stick. “You know what this means? You know what this *is*?”

“A zombie?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

“Not as fun as the ones your mum used to make,” Raine said.

Evelyn shot Raine a death-glare. Twil laughed, thinking it was a joke, but then caught the look on Evelyn’s face.

“They’re fresh,” Evelyn said. “Probably no more than a few weeks old, not enough time to settle into the body. Can’t believe they’re using corpses for this. Sheer insanity. This is worse than anything we’ve found so far, worse than this bloody place,” she gestured around us with her eyes, at the fog and twisted buildings.

“Eh? Why? They went down easily enough,” said Twil.

“Yes, *now* they did. A couple more weeks, a month, two, and these amateurs will lose control of them. Real demon hosts. Not like Praem.” She jabbed the dead zombie with her walking stick. “we have to find them all, put them down.”

I was still staring at the emaciated zombie as Praem stood up and stepped back.

“They look like-” I said, then cut off and reconsidered. “They look like a pair of homeless people.”

“They probably were,” Evelyn grunted. “Nobody missed them. We find the zombies, put them down, and Raine shoots their maker in the back of the head. No questions.”

= =

Up close, the castle was supremely ugly. From a distance the fog had encouraged an illusion of dark masonry set atop an unassailable peak, a fairytale fortress from one of my less comfortable daydreams. We halted at the foot of the hill, to the sight of a jagged crown of dead grey jade trying to approximate crenellations and towers, shot through with blackened veins like a body in the final stages of a disgusting exotic disease.

A pair of huge metal doors were set in the gatehouse, shining with condensation from the fog.

We waited at the foot of the hill as Evelyn sent one of the Praems on ahead. I held my breath as she probed for traps or a hidden ambush, but nothing moved amid the thickly churning fog. Not a single person gazed down from the battlements or peeked out from the arrow slits.

A few stray blood splatters on the road surface offered the only colour in all the grey – Zheng’s path back to the castle?

Praem reached the huge stone doors and turned back to us. She waved a hand.

“What now?” Twil hissed.

“We go in,” Evelyn said, raising a questioning eyebrow at her. “What else would we do?”

“I dunno, dynamite the place?” Twil said. Evelyn barked a laugh of approval and said something else, but I barely heard the words.

The fog, thick as treacle, seemed to drape itself over the battlements in layers, obscuring details as it shifted and swirled. Greyed jade blended into the fog, making it hard to see where structure ended and sky began. I squinted into the murk as my friends began to debate our next step.

And I saw her.

A little elfin face, long blonde hair tugged by the fog, like seaweed underwater. A girl up on the castle battlements, staring out over the mile of false city, chewing on her nails.

A thicker bank of fog rolled over and hid her from view.

Cold sweat broke out down my back. My throat tightened and my chest constricted. A ringing sound throbbed in my ears. I felt myself take a step forward, then another, and another. Hands caught my arm, my waist, and voices said my name, but I pushed them away, pulse roaring in my head. I fumbled with the crutch as I pushed myself up toward the castle.

“Hello?” I shouted into the thick silence, raised my free hand, stared up at where I thought I’d seen the girl. “Hello?”

No reply. Raine caught up with me and took me by the shoulder.

“Heather? Heather, what is it? What’s wrong?”

I shook my head and almost growled. “Quiet.” I’d never felt so impatient in my life. Twil jogged up alongside us, peering off into the fog as if my voice had stirred up a nest of vipers.

A reply floated out of the fog at last, a call, my name. “Heather?”

Raine and Twil both jumped, stared up at the battlements with me. I started to hyperventilate.

None of this made the slightest bit of sense. “ ... who ... ” I managed to squeak. My head hurt, a dull ache like a tight tendon. “H-how ... ”

“Heather, is that you?” the voice called again.

“Y-yes!” I cried out. “It’s ... yes!”

A break in the fog, and there she was again, two dozens meters up and half cowering behind the crenellations. Our eyes met. The strange girl lit up in bright, manic relief. Her hair hung in a great fog-teased mass.

“Heather! You came!”

The two halves of my mind, awake and dreaming, bifurcated until now by the wall of sleep, crashed together. My own memories overwhelmed me. I almost forgot to breathe as I gaped up at her.

“Lozzie!” I managed to shout. A hysterical smile struggled onto my face, chased by a hiccup as I clutched my own throat.

She smiled wider – then screamed as she was yanked down below the battlements. The sound pierced the sky like needles, the horrible yelp of a small creature overpowered and immobilised.

“Lozzie!” I shouted again. “Lozzie!?”

More struggle, a thump, a second scream – distant now, muffled behind the walls. Another voice reached us through the fog, deep murmurs on the air. Then silence.

Dream-memories pummelled me. Raine spoke but I couldn’t hear a word, squeezing my eyes shut in a vain attempt at control. The memories were all there. They’d been there all along, on the other side of a conceptual leap I couldn’t possibly have made alone. The places she’d taken me in the dreams – the great winter castle, the desert, the library, a dozen others. *Mars*. She’d shown me the surface of Mars and I hadn’t remembered. We’d cried together,

talked for hours, days, cuddled and held each other – were we friends, or more? A seed of guilt nagged in the base of my chest, but I crushed it down and ignored it for now. Bigger things to worry about.

I knew Lozzie, if only from dreams. And I knew better than anybody else alive that dreams could be completely real.

“I have to help her! We have to get in there.” I blurted out, clutching at Raine’s arm.

“I heard that name,” Evelyn added as she joined us, frowning at me. “*That’s* her? The girl from the cult’s bloody ritual? You knew all along?”

“The fuck does that matter?” Twil said. “I just saw some lass dragged off somewhere. Heather’s idea sounds good, yeah? Let’s go.”

“No, no,” I said. I dropped the crutch from shaking hands, barely able to get the words out. “In dreams- she’s been- I didn’t remember until I saw her- oh God, it’s been going on for weeks, weeks and weeks, she’s been right there, I-I ... she’s like me. She’s like *me*.” I hiccupped, tried and failed to steady my breathing.

“Heather,” Raine said, crisp and clear as she grabbed my hands. “That girl, Lozzie, she’s your friend?”

“I don’t- I think ... well-”

“Heather. She with you, or not?”

“Yes, yes she’s my friend.” I stammered but I got it out, nodding and holding on tight.

“And she’s the one who asked for help? She woke you up just before the zombie got you?”

“Yes! Yes, she did, it was her.”

Raine turned away without a moment’s hesitation. For the merest split-second I thought she was turning away from me in disgust and confusion – jealousy. A word caught in my throat. Pure projection.

“Right, we need those doors open. Right now.” Raine pointed at the massive metal front doors on the castle. “Twil, move your arse, see if you can shift them. Eevee, get your other sex zombie up there too, in case Twil’s elbow grease isn’t enough.”

The guilt grew until I could have choked on it; Raine trusted me, fought for me, and didn't even demand the full story. Lozzie *was* my friend, and my word was all Raine needed.

Twil picked up the borrowed crutch, handed it back to me, then ran for the doors.

"Raine, I-"

"Don't worry, we'll get to her," Raine said. She scanned the top of the battlements, squeezed my hand, and took a step forward. "Come on, better not let Twil get too far ahead of us."

"Okay, but Raine, I'm sorry."

"For what?" She blinked at me, then grimaced over my shoulder – she'd seen Evelyn's expression.

"What is this?" Evelyn hissed, staring at me. She was flanked by a Praem, neither of them moving a muscle to help Twil. I glanced over at the werewolf as she braced her shoulder against one of the metal doors.

"Evee," Raine said, a soft warning.

"Don't you 'Evee' me. What is going on here? Heather? Is this some kind of elaborate bait?"

"How could you even think that?" I blurted out, already on the edge of hysterical panic myself. "She's been visiting my dreams for weeks and I didn't even know. I couldn't remember anything. She needs help, Evee! She asked me for help."

Evelyn frowned all the harder. "She's one of them. These fucking vermin in my city. These-"

A cry cut through the air, across Evelyn's vitriol and the fog alike – my name from Lozzie's throat.

"Heather! Heather!" Lozzie flung herself against the battlements overhead, half-visible in the mist, mouth bloodied and hair wild and eyes staring as she leaned over the edge. For a terrible moment, I thought she was about to jump. I moved on instinct, jerked forward before Raine caught me around the waist.

"No!" I said, panic in my heart.

Instead of pulling me back, Raine stepped in front.

“Do it, jump!” She called up to Lozzie. “We’ll catch you!”

“We’ll *what?*” Twil shouted, backpedaling from the castle doors.

“Evee.” Raine whipped around. “Come on, I need your plush demon for this. Get over here and help me or this girl’s gonna snap both her legs.”

Two dozen feet above, Lozzie’s face lit up. She clambered up onto the battlements and wet her lips. Evelyn hesitated.

“Evee, please!” I almost whined. Running footsteps echoed from inside the castle, a scrambling and a puffing of breath. Lozzie glanced back over her shoulder. Her bare toes peeked over the edge of the castle wall.

“I’m never leaving anyone behind,” Raine said, softly, meant for Evelyn alone. “You know that.”

“Bloody hell,” Evelyn snapped. She prodded Praem One with her walking stick, and our friendly pet demon leapt forward next to Raine. She looked up and spread her arms – it didn’t seem enough.

“Okay,” Raine shouted up to Lozzie again. She gave her a double thumbs-up. “You ready?”

“Y-yes!”

“Then ju-”

Lozzie squealed. A pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her back down behind the battlements, followed by sounds of kicking and struggling. She screamed again, her frustration and despair wrenching at my heart. I think I called her name. Muttered, angry conversation floated down through the fog, then a loud slap of flesh on flesh and a pained yelp.

“Dammit,” Raine hissed. Twil bared her teeth and growled.

Four faces appeared up on the battlements. Lozzie, her arms pinned behind her back by one beefy cream-robed cultist. The man had a squashed nose and thinning hair. Another, a young woman, blonde and blinking and fretting and staring, biting her lips hard enough to draw blood, frowned at us as if we were an invading army.

And Alexander Lilburne.

If looks could kill, we’d all have been struck dead. He stared at us

like excrement found on his boot, utter disdain and disgusted contempt. He was in shirtsleeves, rolled up as if he'd come straight from some unexpected physical labour. His cheek twitched. I made myself stare up at him. Yes, that's right, you slimy, disgusting *thing*, you tried to kidnap me and now we're here to destroy your work. I reminded myself who I stood next to, all four of us – five if you count Praem – and the fear stayed manageable.

"That's him," I hissed. "That's him."

Now I understood why I thought I'd recognised him before. Side-by-side, him and Lozzie, the resemblance was plain. Brother and sister.

He raised his voice, loud and clear through the fog.

"You will leave this place."

Twil gave him a double middle-finger. "Come down here and fight me one-on-one, you massive cunt," she yelled. He curled his bottom lip in disgust, then opened his mouth again, and I remembered.

"He can do a thing with his voice," I said quickly. "Evee, he can do a mind-thing with his voice-"

"You *will* leave," Alexander called out again.

A tug in the forefront of my brain, sharper and more insistent than when he'd tried the same trick in that deserted Sharrowford coffee shop. Why didn't we leave? Evelyn could collapse the place from outside, surely? We'd never rescue Lozzie now, it was hopeless. What would we do with her anyway? I-

No! I shook my head. Those were not my thoughts, that wasn't me, it was him.

Raine blinked and winced. Please, no, don't listen to it, not you too, Raine. Twil frowned down at the floor, as if seriously considering the command. Her clawed wolf-paws dissipated to reveal the pale human hands beneath.

I spluttered. "No, we have to-"

"Is that all?" Evelyn barked with laughter.

Her resistance broke the spell. Raine snapped to, took a deep breath. Twil shook herself like a wet dog, angry and confused but catching up fast. I felt the tugging lift from my mind. Alexander's expression soured even further.

"I've been compelled by worse than you," Evelyn shouted up at him, and I swear I saw Lozzie smile at that, under her curtain of hair. "I've out-thought demons in my own head. You, Alexander, if that's even your real name, I am going to feed you to my pets."

"Oh, don't be such an utter bore," Alexander drawled. "I have never been much for all these amateur dramatics, certainly not from a failure and a cripple. Leaving would be for your own good, at least then you would live out the remainder of the year. Or perhaps you want to become a martyr, perhaps-"

Suddenly Lozzie jerked against the man holding her, kicked and pulled and thrashed. She almost made it, almost broke free, straining for the edge of the battlements to throw herself over. Alexander turned and struck her across the face, almost as an afterthought, and the big cultist held her head down against the wall to pin her in place.

"Stop it!" I called out.

Alexander whispered to Lozzie, quiet and close, and the words made her shrink away, retreat back down inside herself.

"Can't you shoot him?" I hissed to Raine.

"Not confident at this range," she muttered without taking her eyes off him. "I might hit her instead."

Alexander straightened up from his sister. As he did, I took a step forward, suddenly resolved, a feeling of desperate, unfamiliar strength in my heart.

"Give me your sister and we'll leave," I shouted.

Alexander met my eyes. His expression shifted and a shiver crawled up my spine. Wrong tactic, Heather, utterly wrong. All his irritation and anger seemed to drain away as he raised his eyebrows and ran his hands over his hair, as if to check every strand was in place. He raised his chin and the ghost of a smile played across that shiny, clean-shaven face.

"Lavinia wishes to make a deal? How interesting," he said, and turned to Lozzie. "How do you know Lavinia, dear sister? When, in all the permutations of time and reality, could you possibly have shared each other's company? Hmm?" He leaned down close to his sister and cupped her chin in one hand. "How curious."

“Oh shit,” Raine hissed.

“Lozzie!” I called out. “Why can’t you- jump out, teleport, like we-”

“I can’t!” she wailed. “We can’t leave from here! I’m stuck!”

That’s why the brain-math hadn’t worked on Zheng. No route to Outside from here. A pocket, cut off from reality. This non-place, this shadow city, there was only one way back out – to Sharrowford itself. I could do that math, I’d done it once before in the Willow House loop, but could Lozzie do it? Did she know how?

“Then back to the city!” I called, gripped by panic as Alexander turned back to us with a satisfied look. He muttered something to the two cultists and they began to drag Lozzie away, back down into the castle. The woman hissed something in Lozzie’s ear.

“Heather!” she called out.

“Lozzie, no- you-”

“We’ll come get you! Hold on.” Raine called louder and clearer than I ever could, as the cultists and Lozzie vanished down into the castle. The young woman returned with a clatter of feet to spit at us over the castle wall, then disappeared again.

“I do believe I’ve changed my mind about your little visit,” Alexander said. He took a deep breath and leaned forward, his hands on the edge of the castle wall. “After all, Lavinia was supposed to join us tonight. This merely opens up further opportunities, all far more interesting. Dear dear, I will have to hear all the details in due time, yes, I will know how you damaged our ... valuable asset, shall we say?”

“Your big zombie?” Raine called. “Next time Heather’ll knock her head off.”

Alexander spared Raine the briefest of glances before returning his attention to Evelyn. “In fact, I should be thanking you, Saye, shouldn’t I? Now I can both remove an irritant and gain a valuable addition to our stock in the same stroke. But that is mere logistics. The opportunity between you and I is far greater, isn’t it, Saye? Here we are,” he spread his arms out to indicate the entire fog-soaked pocket dimension. “Not an uninformed soul in sight, with all our powers at our command, all our little monsters and grand techniques. I have so ached for a real duel with another as skilled as

I, even if it will be a little disappointing to match wits with such a ... ” Alexander allowed his smile to broaden. “Reduced shell of a person.”

“You’re not worth my time,” Evelyn said, flat and unimpressed. She ran her fingers across the scrimshawed thighbone as she raised the ugly thing out in front of her. Raine tensed, and I sensed she was ready to grab me and haul me out of the way.

Alexander held out one hand.

“Ah, wait, do wait. Indulge me?”

Evelyn paused.

“You will not win this one, Saye. In the spirit of good sportsmanship, I am going to give you a free shot.” He held up a finger, still smiling. “You have one completely open attempt on my life, right here. After all, I am a grown man, and you are a cripple of a girl. It would hardly be fair of me to overpower you without giving you at least a sporting chance, a real opening to win.”

“I could scale the wall,” Twil said. “Take me a minute or two. Rip his head off and have done with it.”

“One shot, Saye. I promise, I will not defend myself,” Alexander said. He smiled that maddening smile, so reasonable and self-assured.

Evelyn, to my surprise, turned to Raine.

“Well? Why have you been carrying that thing around all these years?” she hissed.

“Me?” Raine asked.

“Yes you. This,” she hefted the thighbone, keeping her voice low, “may as well be useless. A thousand pounds says he’s protected. You do it.”

“Confer all you want,” Alexander called out. “It will not help you to victory, you-”

In one single fluid motion, Raine drew her handgun, clicked the safety off, and shot Alexander through the chest. The crack of the bullet echoed out across the fog.

Alexander blinked in surprise. He looked down.

A patch of crimson spread across his shirt from a little dark entry wound. My heart leapt – and then my throat began to close up. Alexander shook his head slowly, sighed with indulgent amusement, then smiled at us and wagged one finger.

Tut tut.

“My turn now, young lady.”

the other side of nowhere –

4.3

Fireballs and wands, black cats and broomsticks – I wish magic really was like that, sanitised and safe and suitable for small children.

I'd known Evelyn long enough now to dispel any naive notions; magic was raw and bloody, brute equations of flesh and will. How could I possibly think otherwise, when she'd been openly carrying around a human thighbone for the last couple of hours? Raine had lived in this world far longer than I, years of this, and Twil was subjected to otherworldly reality every time she looked at her own body.

Atop the castle battlements, Alexander Lilburne raised his hands to the sky, and surprised us all by almost killing us.

He spoke one word, a guttural twist of sound that scorched the air with heat haze and drew blood from his mouth. He raised his eyes with a self-satisfied smile, as if to watch the word race upward through the fog.

Raine steadied the handgun to shoot him again, unfazed by Alexander's lack of reaction to the first bullet punching through his chest. Evelyn hissed frustration, hands playing over the scrimshawed thighbone as she muttered an incantation of her own. Twil rocked back on braced legs, as if to launch herself at the rotten grey castle wall.

And what could I do? Nothing. Useless and incapable compared to my companions. Couldn't fight, couldn't help, not even a decent cheerleader. All I could do in that moment was watch and hope.

Twil heard the sound first, a full second or two before our mere human senses. She stumbled, suddenly clamped her hands over her ears, and screamed through her teeth, eyes screwed shut. Made me jump, heart leaping into my throat.

"What-" Raine had time to say before the shock wave hit.

I felt it in my bones, a ripple in the air so deep and so low it shook the jelly inside my eyeballs.

Then – a tidal wave of noise, a buffeting downward torrent of howling from the sky, the reply to Alexander's word.

The sound was unspeakable. Whale-song imitated by a mountain of steel. I thought we'd all go deaf, that this intolerable, soul-destroying noise was intended to simply blow out our eardrums in an act of petty sadism. I shrank and cowered, struggling to stay on my feet.

Evelyn screamed and tried to cover her ears, not easy when you're carrying a walking stick and a human thighbone. The two Praems were unaffected, so one of them gently slid her hands over Evelyn's ears for her.

Twil swore, very creatively, and I realised I could hear her perfectly over the din. Her words should have been drowned out. I heard Alexander's laughing too, as he wiped his bloody mouth on his sleeve and grinned at the sky. Raine stared upward as well, following his gaze, arms around her own head.

Raine turned pale – the worst sign I could imagine. I looked up too, into the ceiling of grey mist.

Covering your ears didn't help, because this wasn't sound. Sound was merely the best way our fragile human senses could interpret the input.

The shadows of the great jellyfish and sky whale creatures were scattering through the fog, tentacles writhing and fins whirring, a shoal fleeing before a shark. Beyond them, higher in the void, the shapes at the very limit of the sky, the darker globes I'd thought were moons or planets, were moving. Circling, quivering, rocking.

Getting bigger.

Descending.

My mouth hung open and I felt a trickle of drool from my numbed lips. The sound pounding inside me drained some vital force from my consciousness. Couldn't look away. The impossible sense of scale – hundreds or thousands of meters up? Was this sound their voice? Their screaming? A product of their attention? Dread settled over my soul like rotten velvet.

“The voice of a tamed god!” Alexander shouted, arms held wide to the sky. “Is it not the most beautiful sound?”

“-know you don’t take orders, but grab her or we’re all dead,” I heard Raine shout somewhere on the edge of my fraying consciousness.

Raine broke the paralysing rapture by scooping me up. I yelped in surprise, clutching the borrowed crutch to my chest as she hoisted me in a princess-carry and ran for the metal doors of the castle, where Twil stood gaping up at the sky. Raine tumbled me to my unsteady feet below the overhanging lip of the gatehouse. She grabbed my head in both hands and forced me to look at her.

“Heather? You back with us?”

“I think so, yes.” I nodded, gasping for breath.

Raine didn’t waste a second; she turned and cuffed Twil round the back of the head. Our werewolf spluttered and jerked and shook herself. Raine shoved her at the castle doors, but Twil didn’t need telling twice, she braced her feet and put her shoulder against the metal. I tried to ignore the hellish whale-song shaking my bones. It was getting louder.

Praem One and Two had to drag Evelyn over.

She was blinking and shaking, trying to push them away, grasping at her walking stick. “Evee, Evee hey, hey,” I said as I caught her, helped to hold her up. “It’s okay, Evee, we’re- we’re going inside, we-” I couldn’t keep my voice steady, not while assaulted by this sheer noise.

A vast shadow fell over us. Raine and Twil both heaved at one of the great metal doors, but it moved barely an inch, grinding on uncoiled hinges.

I half raised a hand, entertaining a mad notion that I might blast the door in with brain-math.

Praem One and Two stepped past me. I hadn’t heard Evelyn order them to do anything. They moved as one body and lent their not inconsiderable strength to the task. I had no illusions who really opened that door in the end. Raine may be strong enough to hoist me up or hold me down, but her muscles meant nothing compared to a werewolf and a pair of demons. The Praems made no sound at

all as Twil grunted and heaved, and the door squealed open inch by painful inch.

My ears popped with pressure change, as if a great mass was bearing down on us, displacing the air. Evelyn stared up again, eyes wide and vacant.

Raine stuck her arm through the gap between the doors – not wide enough. Twil shoved her out of the way, braced both hands in the opening, and heaved the doors apart with a strangled cry.

We all tumbled through together, into a vast echoing hall of dying jade. Raine caught me before I sprawled onto my face. Twil tripped and went flying and cracked her head against a wall, Evelyn fell over with a thump, barely cushioned by one of her wooden demons.

A vast curl of tentacle-limb descended to touch the space we'd all occupied moments before, just beyond the doorway. Solid grey, pitted and pockmarked, the size of a train carriage. The cosmic whale-song throbbed to a final crescendo, loud enough to split atoms.

The sight of that thing blotted out all thought. I felt a tugging inside, on my soul.

Then it passed, rising again. The gap between the doors showed only swirling, disturbed fog. Vast shadows turned on the ground outside. Thick stone walls dulled the unspeakable noise, unpleasant but at least bearable now, whale-song ebbing and flowing as the planet-sphere-things moved around the bulwark of the castle.

“Ha, missed!” Raine barked. I breathed out for the first time in what felt like minutes.

“Fucking shit. Bitch ass cunt motherfucker. Ow,” Twil spluttered from the floor. She probed a nasty gash on her forehead, blood smeared down her face and her nose bent at an angle.

“Language, Twil,” I muttered. “Werewolf, not swearwolf.” She goggled at me and I managed a shrug, shaking with adrenaline and shock.

We'd retreated into a sort of grand entrance hall, devoid of decoration but for the veins of green and black reaching through the grey stone. My expectations wanted a great table in the middle of the room, a roaring fire in the back, tapestries and paintings

adorning the walls, thick rugs underfoot. Instead, echoes and dust, and modern electric light bulbs strung along the floor on jerry-rigged wiring. Their weak illumination failed to reach the dark vault of the ceiling.

Arched doorways led off in all directions, into cramped stone tunnels and other rooms barely visible in the gloom. A great stairway swept upward to a balcony floor overhead. All was shaped from the same rough surfaces of rotten jade, as if extruded or grown rather than cut. I loved castles; I wanted to feel even the tiniest spark of fascination beneath the adrenaline and panic and fear.

This place was disgusting. As if we stood inside the bowels of a dried-out corpse.

Twil cracked her broken nose back into place with a throaty grunt.

“We all in one piece?” Raine asked. “Heather?”

“I’m- I’m all here. Mostly.”

Evelyn, on the other hand, was not all here. She sat where she’d fallen, breathing in jerky gasps and blinking too hard, over and over as if she couldn’t focus her eyes. Her skirt had ridden up to expose the matte black surface of her artificial leg. She’d dropped her walking stick but clutched the thighbone in a white-knuckle grip. The Praems stood either side of her as if on guard, staring off toward the dark doorways which led to the rest of the castle interior.

“Evee? Evee, what’s wrong?” I let go of Raine and knelt down next to Evelyn, one hand on her shoulder, my own crutch forgotten. “Evee? Evelyn?”

She shook her head, still blinking.

“They’ll be on us any second,” said Raine. She did something mechanical and precise with her gun, checked how many bullets she had left, then tucked her truncheon into her waistband and drew that big black knife instead.

“No kidding!” Twil said, leaping to her feet. “Shit, Saye- Evelyn, come on, get up!” She joined me, grabbed Evelyn by both shoulders. “Hey, come on, snap out of it!”

Evelyn shook her head again, screwed her eyes shut, hissed through gritted teeth.

“Come on, Evelyn, call me an idiot or something for smashing my face up, yeah?” Twil was saying. “Look- look at me, yeah?”

“Evee,” Raine added, voice soft. “It’s not that hard to kill a magician. You and I both know that. We can do this.”

Evelyn growled in the back of her throat. “God dammit all,” she grumbled – and seemed to snap herself out of the fear, back to anger. Her breath still shook but her expression hardened.

“Evelyn? Saye, come on, look at-”

“I am looking at you, you undersized mutt.” Evelyn turned her eyes on Twil. She took a deep breath and stuck out a hand. “Help me up, both of you. For God’s sake, this floor is freezing.”

Twil and I dragged Evelyn to her feet. I pressed her walking stick back into her hand. She nodded a thanks, grumbling all the while under her breath. She shook off Twil’s concern after a moment. “For God’s sake, I’m fine. Help Heather, she’s the one about to fall down.”

“W-what?” I stammered.

“The adrenaline is making you numb to your own weakness. You’re shaking.”

“I ... I am.” I pressed a palm to my juddering heart, felt the weakness in my legs, realised I was half hunched up around my stomach. “Oh.”

“I can’t hold her up right now,” Raine said. “Got my hands full of sharp stuff.”

Evelyn huffed and clicked her fingers at Twil, gesturing at the crutch I’d dropped. I took a moment to steady myself, crutch wedged under my shoulder again as Evelyn spoke.

“I underestimated our opponent. Assumed he was a mere dabbler, gone too far.” Evelyn drew herself up and took a deep breath. “Likely he’s the centre of this. A real mage. I have to kill him.”

“We have to kill him,” Raine said.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“It’ll be a good team building exercise, you know?” Raine cracked a grin. “We’re all in this together.”

"I did see that correctly out there, yes?" I asked Raine. She barely glanced away from watching the room's many exits. "You shot Alexander in the chest, but he ... ?"

"Sometimes mages get hard to kill," said Evelyn. "Whatever Alexander Lilburne is now, he probably hasn't been human for quite some time." She grimaced and looked like she wanted to spit. "God dammit." She tapped Praem One on the leg with her walking stick and gestured toward one of the doors.

The demon didn't move, didn't obey, just stared back at Evelyn for a moment, and then in the same direction Raine was looking, at the shadow-shrouded balcony at the top of the huge staircase. Evelyn frowned at her bound demon.

"So how do we beat him?" I asked.

"Cut his head off," Raine said. "Scoop out the brain and heart, burn them to ash, throw the ash into the sea. Works with vampires, right?"

"That or death by volcano," I said, and tried to smile. The weak joke failed to smother the fear in my belly. This was insane. This was far, far beyond us.

"Enough physical trauma should suffice," Evelyn muttered, staring at Praem with a deep frown.

"What the hell was all that?" Twil asked. She wiped blood off her face, then bloody hands on her hoodie, then tutted at herself. The gash on her forehead was already closed up. "Why are you all talking like we weren't just chased by flying tentacle moons?"

"I've seen weirder things," I admitted.

"I haven't," Raine said. "That's a new record."

"I have," grumbled Evelyn. She muttered to Praem in Latin, but the demon still refused to move.

Twil began to creep back toward the crack between the doors, craning her neck to risk a glance upward.

"We're trapped in here, aren't we?" I asked, surprising myself with the steady clarity in my voice. I certainly didn't feel that stable right now. Panic edged my thoughts.

Raine and Evelyn shared a glance. Twil looked highly

uncomfortable.

“Yes,” Evelyn admitted – at the same moment Raine said “Maybe.”

“Couldn’t we make a run for it?” Twil asked.

“What, you gonna distract those things out there with a headbutt?” Raine asked. “Pull the other one.”

“And get away from the door, you complete idiot,” Evelyn snapped over her shoulder. She stepped in front of Praem One and met the demon host’s staring, blank expression. “Why aren’t you moving, damn you? I’m in charge, you know that. You’re bound inside a wooden doll, you’re not getting anywhere without me.”

“Evee,” Raine warned. “Your cuddle toy hears something we don’t.”

“That’s entirely beside the point-”

“It’ll be okay,” I said, to myself. “We have to find Lozzie first, we have to rescue her.”

Twil’s attention snapped round suddenly.

“What is it, Lassie?” said Raine.

“Uh ... a lot of footsteps. A dozen? Maybe? No, more than that.” Twil began to grin, showing too many teeth. She shook her herself all over and summoned her claws, flexing them and rolling her shoulders. “I think it’s rumble time.”

“Evee, get behind us,” Raine snapped, then reached out a hand and grabbed my arm. “Heather, behind me. Now.”

For a fleeting moment we stood together, with breath stilled and ears straining, Raine and Twil and both Praem’s bodies shielding Evelyn and I – a touching, perhaps instinctive gesture, but in the end only a gesture. We had nowhere to run. My heart felt like a bird trying to escape my chest.

I could hear the footsteps too now, a clunky, disordered dragging shamble echoing off the stone walls. We all took Praem’s lead, eyes on the top of the staircase.

“We need to move. We can’t stay here,” Raine hissed. She glanced left and right, but couldn’t pick a direction.

“Sod that,” Twil growled, raised her voice to anything that might

care to overhear. "I've had enough of creeping through fog and bullshit, I wanna fight something!"

"What if they have a gun, like before?" I hissed.

"I can deal with that," Evelyn muttered. I heard her gulp. "So can you."

To my surprise, Evelyn wormed her free hand into mine. Her palm was clammy and her grip weak. I squeezed, hard. She squeezed back.

"Heads up," Raine said.

Casting jerky shadows, each motion mechanical and truncated, as if their muscles were filled with sand, the first of the zombies appeared at the top of the great staircase.

Zombie. Funny word. What does it bring to mind, for those of us spared the secret truths of reality? A shuffling gait, slack jaws, drunken motions, and the occasional low moan of hunger for brains. Raine and I had watched *Night of the Living Dead* a few weeks back, after a debate over her use of the term. She couldn't believe I'd never seen the film. A classic, apparently. It hadn't really frightened me – what was so scary about walking corpses? I'd seen far worse things in my nightmares.

But these zombies made my breath catch in my throat, turned my stomach, made me heart-sick. Two or three dozen, traipsing down the staircase and spreading out to surround us, eyes empty and dead. I wanted to grab the back of Raine's jacket just to hold on.

They frightened me because of who they'd been made from.

No question where the Sharrowford Cult had harvested their raw materials. Scraggly grey beards, unkempt hair, frames ravaged by malnutrition. Most were middle aged men, but a few young women showed among the dead faces, skin stretched and translucent, dressed in thick coats, filthy jeans, too many layers. One had been made from a teenage boy, dirty orange hair plastered across his forehead. Sharrowford's missing homeless.

Raine raised her handgun but didn't seem to know where to aim.

"Wait," Evelyn said through gritted teeth. Twil hissed and flexed her claws. "Wait, both of you, dammit."

Two living people brought up the rear of the zombie mob: the pinch-faced blonde lady who'd spat at us from the battlements, and a younger woman scurrying along at her side, hunched and unhealthy. The blonde lady sneered when she saw us, and raised her chin. The younger one ignored us, her eyes rolling wild in their sockets, a constant stream of low muttering in her throat, pausing only to wipe her hair out of her sweat-soaked face.

The blonde lady opened her mouth and tried to look imposing. "Throw down your weapons and perhaps I won't have you beaten."

"Ignore her. Shoot the other one," Evelyn hissed.

"Duh," said Raine.

Raine took the shot.

And missed.

I didn't know she'd missed, not until much later. All I saw was Raine raise the gun and the scrawny zombie-conductor woman scrambling back and tripping over her own robes. Raine pulled the trigger and the crack of a bullet split the air.

Then all hell broke loose.

A general melee is impossible to recall or describe with any level of clarity. Memory simply fails, or weaves fiction to fill the gaps. A back-alley scuffle or an attempted kidnapping, those can be recreated in the mind, step by step, after much thought and careful consideration of experience best left buried, but the sheer confusion and terror of a wider brawl devours all relevant detail. At least it did for me. All those superhero movies where the characters execute perfect techniques in big set-piece battles – reality's not like that, not at all.

The zombies rushed us, reaching, grasping, clawing. I recall unimportant things – cracked dry skin on the back of a single hand, one face with terribly bloodshot eyes, the sight of a zombie missing his left shoe.

Lots of shouting – Evelyn's voice projecting fragments of a dead language. Raine must have lowered the gun because I remember her laying about with the knife and maybe the nightstick, pulling me by the arm to keep me in her wake. Struggling to stay on my feet.

Don't fall, don't slip!

Did she say that to me, or did I think it to myself?

Another gunshot, or just the sound of a skull cracking off the ground. Raine's voice in my ear. A split-second glimpse of Twil wrenching a zombie's head off, caught forever in freeze-frame in full bestial transformation, gore-stained claws raised and then buried as two more zombies piled uselessly atop her. Another glimpse, of Evelyn, one I'll never forget, looking as terrified as I felt underneath her fragile defiance, pale and shaking and wide-eyed as Praem kept the zombies off her.

Raine lost her grip, and I fell over.

I remember that moment, that part, with painful clarity. What would have happened if I'd never lost my grip? A road untaken. A different history.

My hand slipped from hers as she yanked me from the path of another jerking clockwork revenant. I overbalanced and tripped and sprawled on the floor, scuffed my hands and knees and lost the crutch as it skidded away. The bottom of my stomach dropped out.

Evelyn's shouting peaked in a trio of impossible prehuman words, and half the zombies spasmed as if in the grip of a mass epileptic fit. Some stood rigid as if struck by lightning, muscles locked iron-hard, vibrating with internal pressure. Others crumpled, thrashing limbs against the floor. One fell right next to me where it battered my head with a sudden flailing rotten hand. I screamed, I think, and tried to scramble back.

Evelyn's trump card had come too late. Praem could barely keep the remaining zombies off her. I crawled away on hands and knees and hauled myself up against a wall, panting and casting about for Raine.

Too slow, too stunned, too stupid. I shouldn't have been there.

A zombie lurched toward me and wrapped thin bony hands around my throat.

I remember that moment like a kick in the head, even if it didn't last long. The zombie pinned me to the wall and squeezed, rotten breath floating from a slack mouth, dessicated eyeballs rolled into the back of its head. It had been a woman, once, maybe in her

twenties, now bedraggled and sad with skin like paper and tendons like steel.

Somebody shouted “Not her, you idiot!” One of the cultists. They wanted me alive.

I kicked at it, squealed, pushed, hissed and spat, dug my fingernails into its hands and tried to pry them open. Too weak.

Raine came out of nowhere and tore it off me. I think she used her knife a lot, because there was blood on my hoodie afterward. She tried to get me up, my hand in hers, but another zombie barrelled into her. She threw it at the wall and knocked its brains out, kicked it away. Two more came for me, got in between us.

No time to think about what I was doing, I’d already backed into a side-passage, leading away from the great hall. I think I was calling Raine’s name, calling for help through a wall of reanimated flesh. Dead hands groped for my throat.

I must have turned the Fractal on them, because later I found my left sleeve tugged down, the angular sign exposed. Must have kept them at bay for a second, given me time to back away down the dimly lit passageway and through an open metal door. I remember cold fingers at the back of my neck. I remember shoving the door closed and throwing a bolt. I remember hearing them hammering on the other side, and the sight of the thin metal beginning to buckle.

“Raine! Raine, I’m in here!”

Thump thump *crack*, the door began to bend inward. The hinges looked solid enough but the grey jade stone itself was cracking and flaking under the zombies’ strength.

“Raine!” I called out again, backing up from the door.

My mind said stay here, wait for Raine, she’s two dozen feet away and she *always comes for me*. A dark passageway led off into the depths of the castle, ceiling low, light bulbs few and far between. It could be another maze. I needed to stay here. What did they always say to do when lost, when a friend or parent might be looking for you? Stay where you are, good little children, stay in a public place, because if you do go wandering off you really might get lost and never come back.

With a tortured screech of rending metal, one of the zombies punched through the door, shredding its own dessicated flesh as it began groping for the bolt.

“Raine! Raine, I have to run! Raine ... ” My voice trailed off as I backed away. I glanced over my shoulder, at my only route of escape. “ ... Twil? Eeve? ... nobody?”

On shaking legs, I turned and hobbled away, fleeing into the unknown depths.

the other side of nowhere –

4.4

The next few panicked, scrambling minutes, fleeing further and further from safety and my friends, into the bowels of this hideous place, ranked among one of the worst experiences of my life.

Not because I was alone and scared in a unnatural place outside reality; that old fear was all too familiar. And not because of the mounting pain either, the echoes from brainmath not three hours ago, the dull ache in my diaphragm and my weak unsteady legs, no borrowed crutch for support now. Not the pervasive gloom, the way my eyes stung from squinting into the dimly-lit corridors of the ugly castle-thing, as I scurried and stumbled away from the sounds of zombies shuffling through the passageways behind me.

None of those things. The cringing void where my heart should be, that was because I didn't know what had happened to the others.

My subconscious had convinced itself that Raine was unstoppable – if I called for her, she'd always come for me. My retreat had stalled at first, halfway down the corridor as I'd stared at the buckling door, thinking at any moment Raine would smash the zombies apart, dash their brains out, rescue me. Any moment I'd hear her calling my name, because she always comes for me.

But the zombies burst through the door and shuffled into the tight grey passages of the castle. I had to hide behind the next corner, hurry to the next turn, through the next cramped room. Raine's name was strangled in my throat for fear of being overheard by the things pursuing me.

The last glimpses of my friends haunted my imagination, fed by the darkness and echoes. Evelyn had looked terrified, pale and panicky, eyes wide, and Twil had been buried under a pile of zombies, invincible werewolf or no. Why hadn't Raine come for me after we'd been separated? Please, please God – I hadn't prayed since I was a child, since before Wonderland – please let her be okay.

I couldn't bear the thought of her injured, because to stop Raine

you'd have to hurt her so very badly.

And now I was all alone. Like every Slip over the last decade of my cursed life. This hurt so much more, because I'd been with the others and now I wasn't. I reeled and hid in the darkness, struggling to quiet my breath, trying to stay silent when I cracked a shin against a stone door frame.

I was never meant to be alone.

Not just here, in this insane misadventure, but at all, ever. I was born a twin, with another half, a mirror-image, I wasn't made to be alone. As I was cut off from my friends and companions and my lover in this contorted trap, all I could think is that I should be dead.

Maybe it's not like this for other twins; perhaps they don't feel this strongly, perhaps they have separate lives and identities, instead of this gaping hole inside. I should have died without Maisie, we should have withered when apart. I wasn't meant to be alone, I couldn't function. I was a ghost, a phantom of half a person, and I'd spent a decade learning how to pretend I was still alive.

A few weeks, a couple of months of support and friendship, had filled the gap in my soul. And now I was alone again, and dead.

Abusive self-negation must have been some kind of survival mechanism, because eventually it cut through the panic.

I realised I hadn't heard the zombies in a while. A minute or two maybe, I'd lost all sense of time. I stopped and sagged against the wall of a passageway, just beyond another castle room. Shaking and panting, tears drying on my face, I forced down a deep breath and pressed a hand over my heart.

I couldn't do this. I could not do this alone. No following footsteps, but plenty of distant echoes, warped by the winding interior of the castle-thing, sinus passageways in a fleshless skull. I was inside a corpse, alone. Panic pressed in like a vice on my head and lungs. I clenched my teeth as a full-body shaking fit passed through me.

Hunkered down against the wall, I gathered a handful of the hoodie I was wearing – Raine's hoodie, black and borrowed – shoved my nose into it and sniffed. Closed my eyes. Raine's scent, familiar sweat. Breathed out slowly, my own breath a warm pocket under my clothes.

“Okay,” I whispered to myself, swallowed and tried again, voice shaking. “Okay, Heather. You can sit here and wait to die, or you can get back to Raine. The others too,” I added, a little guilty. “But mostly Raine.”

What would Raine do?

I wiped the tears off my face and pricked up my ears, tried to tune out the thudding of my own heart. No footsteps, nothing following me – at least, not close enough for me to hear. Had the puppet zombies retreated, or had my friends killed them all? Was Raine even now ricocheting down the corridors, calling my name, searching for me? No, I’d hear that, even twisted and distorted, even above the ever-present planetary whale song still pounding through the walls of the castle, filtered through two dozen feet of dead jade.

“Phone!” I hissed, fingers trembling in a burst of hope. Of course, Raine had her mobile phone! She’d taken it out earlier, when we’d arrived in the fog, showed it was still connected to the network, we were still in Sharrowford, technically.

Hope turned to ashes with a stabbing pang in my chest. My pockets were empty except for my notebook full of brainmath. Evelyn had handed me that before we’d left. My own phone was still sat next to my side of the bed, a million miles away in the real Sharrowford.

I resisted the impulse to curse myself and call myself an idiot, I could do that later. Instead I wet my lips and opened my mouth, Raine’s name in my throat as I stood up straight as I could – and touched the wall with my bare hand.

I flinched back, flesh crawling, biting down on the instinct to scream.

I’d thought of it as jade, as stone, even if gone grey and strangely rotten, but one brush of my hand on the material of the castle, the material of this entire pocket dimension, and I found it impossible to consider it as stone anymore.

Ossified tissue, dried insect husk, shrivelled cartilage.

I tore my eyes and my mind away from the rough surface of the wall and the dark veins inside, back to the stretch of dimly lit passageway. I wet my lips again and took a calculated risk.

“Raine!” I called, cupping a hand to my mouth. “Raine! I’m over here!”

My own voice returned a riot of echoes.

And a reply.

A howling, from a dead throat, garbled un-words from Outside, one of the demons riding along inside those zombies letting me know that it heard me. Saying hello.

“No no no no,” I whispered to myself, feet already backing away. “Raine, Raine where are you? Where are you? I can’t- I can’t-”

Another howl, a little closer.

I turned and plunged deeper into the gloom.

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In retrospect, the chance of our group getting split up in the exact manner we were was infinitesimally small. What if I’d not fallen down, not slipped from Raine’s grip? What if I’d ducked left or right instead of retreating into that hallway? What if I’d risked self-defence via brainmath, or tried to dodge around the zombies and back toward Raine? What if I’d not thrown the bolt, not thought to run away?

When I found the tunnel leading down, I began to suspect all was not as it seemed.

I’d stumbled into the wide room half-blinded by sudden light. This room in the corpse-castle was properly lit, with tall freestanding lamps pointed at the walls, like some kind of archaeological dig site. I glanced about, heart in my throat, but the place was empty of life. Mess lay about the room – some lengths of rope and tarpaulin, a pair of jackhammers and circular blades for cutting concrete, a few power tools on a box, a discarded half-eaten sandwich in a plastic bag. That last detail made me stare in dislocated confusion; a supermarket carrier bag, in this place.

A hole dominated the centre of the floor.

Not a natural orifice in the flowing, disgusting structure of the place, but a wound, cut and pulled wide. The cultists had cut shallow stairs leading down, reinforced their tunnel with metal poles, lit it with lamps and emergency chemical glow-sticks taped to

the walls.

That tunnel drew my attention like a sound on the edge of hearing, like a flicker in peripheral vision. I stared down into the open wound of dead jade.

The slow academic Heather in the back of my mind posed uncomfortable questions to the panicked exterior. What was the chance of me stumbling upon this? Of taking every correct turn in the winding passageways, like through porous bone? I could have ended up anywhere, been caught, or lost, or wandered forever.

I hadn't been thinking on the Eye's lessons, mapping this place with impossible mathematics. I was far too weak and exhausted for that.

Weak, exhausted, alone and scared. A vulnerable, suggestible mind.

The Sharrowford Cult had harassed and stalked me for weeks, tried to kidnap me – but I doubted they wanted me in here unsupervised, discovering their secrets alone, on my own terms. They didn't want me to find this.

Had I been led here?

No. I swallowed and forced a deep breath, screwed my eyes shut and tried to clear my mind. That was paranoia speaking, and that way lies insanity. I was alone and needed to find my friends, we needed to beat these people, I needed to help Raine find me, and the best way to do all those things was not by lingering in a maze of twisty little passages, but by finding something important – like whatever was down this hole – and breaking it, loudly, with lots of fireworks.

That's what Raine would do.

Pity I wasn't good at breaking things, except myself. The discarded power tools wouldn't offer much help, and there was no way I could carry one of the jackhammers. In the end I scurried over and found a small hand chisel among the tools. Blunt, short, pointless, barely enough to make me feel safer, but at least I had something to hand other than my notebook full of painful equations.

At the mouth of the tunnel I ripped one of the glow-sticks off the wall and hurled it down the stairs. It bounced maybe fifty feet then illuminated a sharp turn. I pulled off another and held onto it, clutched the chisel tight in my other hand, and took the first step

down.

Didn't even question the urge to descend. Should have listened to the paranoia.

The cultists' tunnel led down in a broad spiral, low ceiling comfortable enough for me. Flakes and chips of dead grey littered the steps, little piles from drilling or sawing into the substrate to mount lamps or insert the metal bracework. It sounds so simple, walking down a set of stairs, but I had to keep a firm hand on my own barely suppressed terror, tell myself that this was the right thing to do, that my friends were not dead or in pain and I'd see them again soon. I trod as quietly as I could, every sense straining for the sounds of anybody ahead of me, so absorbed in alertness that I didn't notice the slow change in the light until it became obvious.

After somewhere between three and five right-hand turns, the grey walls weren't so grey anymore. The jade green began to return, as if the tunnel descended through dead outer layers to penetrate living flesh beneath.

At first a few scraps of distant green crept like buried creepers of mold. Then whole sheets flowed in frozen waves up through the dead rock, shot through with deeper, darker branching structures of viridian.

No more grey. Green, green everywhere, laced with capillaries somehow dark green and dark gold at the same time.

Inside the walls, green-gold light pulsed and flowed in bright veins.

The light stung. Any attempt to reconcile the two clashing colours together made my head hurt. I blinked and hiccuped, tried to concentrate on my feet. The light contaminated my eyes – or my brain – with after-images, ghostly alien nerve systems impressed on my sight.

At the bottom of the tunnel was a cave.

At least, that's what I called it in my head; perhaps a biological term would be more apt. I called it a cave, so I didn't have to think about it.

The cult's tunnel emerged onto a sort of ridge of the jade stone-flesh, upon which they'd laid metal walkways, anchored with heavy

bolts, walled off with waist-high railing and ropes and stretched tarpaulin and sacking, and lit with hooded lamps at irregular intervals. My heart juddered. I felt so very small as I crept into that vast space, cowed by the impression of great gnarled columns and spires of living jade looming in the darkness. The metal walkway snaked off between them. The walls of the cave were lost in the darkness, except for the faint pulsing of that impossible green-gold light in deep veins.

Immediately I wanted to go back, wanted to leave, wanted so very badly to not be here. Whatever was down here, I could no more break it than I could break the Eye. I was shivering all over, barely daring to breathe lest the place itself heard me.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I peeked over the railing – another mistake. The darkness went down forever. Bottomless pits are impossible, I reminded myself, but I saw impossible things with tiresome regularity.

A split-second later I squinted in confusion and realised I was wrong, the pit wasn't bottomless. A single point of light winked down in the void, almost like a star in the night sky, the same impossible green and gold as the pulsing light in the walls.

The more I stared, the brighter it seemed, yet it stayed set in a void. How could it be so bright yet cast no illumination?

An unwelcome revelation pressed in on my mind. An uncontrollable shaking started in my lungs, spread to my hands, my breath.

“Heather!”

I jumped out of my skin – the whisper saved my sanity.

I bit down on a yelp and spun in surprise, chisel and glow-stick thrust out, as if they could protect me from anything that might lurk down here. And there she was, a little way down the metal walkway, peering around a column of dark jade.

“It's me!” Lozzie hissed. “It's me!”

“Lozzie!”

She scrambled toward me and launched herself into a half-tackle half-hug, heedless of the sharp object in my hands. She needn't have worried, I'd already let the chisel fall from my numb fingers. I caught her and hung on tight, too shocked to say anything as she

clung to me, too overwhelmed by the sudden shared body heat, the squirming limbs, the scent of another person. She whined low in her throat like an animal, and buried her face in my shoulder. The relief, the unbelievable relief of not being alone in this unnatural place, of finding one friend, at least.

I'd never have been able to hug her so uninhibited under any other circumstances. Right now I was so glad to see anybody I could have cried.

After a moment we both pulled apart, as if by mutual agreement. Lozzie held onto my hands and swung our arms together from side-to-side, like we were a pair of schoolgirls standing in a playground. She lit up in a huge smile.

"I found you! I really found you! Are you okay, did you get hurt? You didn't get hurt, did you? Where are all- all your friends? You're alone now, okay, that's not good, but we can work with it, we can fix that." She vomited up a torrent of words, breath shaking as she spoke, nodding and rocking, then caught herself and almost giggled, lowered her tone to a whisper. "You really shouldn't be down here, Heather. It's super super not safe. I'm actually really scared right now even if I don't seem it, you know?" Her smile quivered as she bit her lower lip.

The real Lozzie was not as perfect as her projected dream-self.

She was greasy and unwashed, though I didn't give a damn about that right now. I probably still smelled of sweat and vomit myself. Her nails and cuticles were chewed to ragged stubs, dotted with little scabs. She wore two long sleeved tshirts one over the other, and a pair of old pajama bottoms, her feet bare, toes curled against the cold of the metal walkway. Her endless wispy hair was a matted mess and a livid bruise marked her face where her brother had hit her earlier. She looked borderline malnourished, too thin and pale, a half-starved teenager held together with manic twitchy energy.

She had something wrong with her eyes – her lazy, heavy-lidded look from our shared dreams was held in reserve behind panic and fear, but it was still present, a slackness in her extraocular muscles.

Guess I hadn't been entirely myself in the dreams either.

"You're ..." I trailed off, overwhelmed by the solidity and physicality of her. I squeezed her hands, stopped her swinging our

joined arms. "You're real. You are real. Okay."

"Ahh? Heather?" She blinked at me and tilted her head rapidly from side to side. "Of course I'm real? What are you talking about? Don't be silly, not now, we're in a seriously scary place!"

It was her. No doubt about it. The same fey, elfin little face, underneath the fear and the abuse. I could worry about dreams later, Lozzie was here and now, with me, in this, together. I needed to deal with it.

She had blood in her teeth.

"Lozzie, are you bleeding?"

"What? Oh." She suppressed a mad giggle, a glint in her eyes. "Had to bite somebody to get away."

"You- okay."

"Don't look so surprised! I had to! Oh, don't judge me, please, I had to. Not you, Heather, not-"

"I'm not, I'm not," I stammered out in a whisper. "There's just- there's a lot to deal with right now. I thought you'd been hurt, that's all."

"I have been," she said with a strange gulp, then her expression crumpled into tears, cringing, small. "I thought you'd been hurt too! Oh, Heather, I'm so sorry, I had to do it, I couldn't- couldn't say no- but I gave you that back door, and- and- nobody got hurt, right? Please don't hate me, please."

"I don't, I don't," I said, and I meant it. We hugged again, by shared impulse. "It worked, I came to find you. It worked."

She sniffed, wiped her face on her sleeve. We parted again and she smiled once more, a little more broken than before.

"What did you mean, I'm real?"

I couldn't stop myself from giving her a bit of a look, despite the circumstances. "You didn't exactly make it easy to believe that at first. Why the dreams? Why not ... I don't know, call me or come visit or ..." I trailed off as I realised my own idiocy, and began to stammer an apology. Lozzie just shook her head, a sad smile on her face.

“They don’t let me out very often. I learned about you from the messenger your sister sent – all about you! I knew we were the same, we could be friends, I knew you might, you know, be able to help me.”

“My ... my sister ... a- has- had a message? Yes, right.”

Even now, in the middle of a crisis, outside reality in the core of some unspeakable corpse-nest, whispering to avoid the attentions of that blinking star in the deep, those words needled my heart.

“Yeah!” Lozzie hissed. “For you. Like, it wasn’t *words* but it wasn’t hard to figure out. Don’t you remember-”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” I hissed at her. Lozzie blinked and recoiled, a startled fox. “It was- from Maisie, I-”

“I did! I did!” Her hands went up. “You don’t remember? It was the first thing we ever talked about in the dream. I told you. She needs help. She was asking for help. Like me.”

“Like- ... ” I opened my mouth, closed it again, gently took her hands. She let me. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Lozzie. When you- with the Messenger, in that underground car park- I ... I thought you were stealing the message from me. It hurts to think about my sister. I can’t talk about this now, not here. It’s not the time to talk about this.” I risked a glance up and around, at the cave. “Is it?”

Lozzie shook her head, then nodded – I found the dual gesture so endearing that in any other time and place it would have made me laugh. “Leaving is a very good plan, yes!” she hissed. “Make like a tree and split!”

“Of course. Absolutely. So how do we get out? Brainmath teleport doesn’t work from in here, right?”

“*Brainmath*?” Lozzie hitched an eyebrow. I tapped the side of my head.

“The thinking magic. Sorry, that’s what I’ve been calling it. The math.”

Lozzie stared, sniffed and rubbed her nose, winced at the bruise on her face. “It’s not maths for me. But yes, yes, no happy jumping from inside the scab. That’s why they keep me here. I ran away from home once and when I came back – click click, wheee.” She made a locking gesture and threw away an imaginary key. “They

had me on a leash when I saw your twin's messenger, you know?"

"Scab?" I echoed.

"This place, yeah. It's a scab. Long story. A proper long story that you tell at night with hot chocolate and a nice view of the stars – not here. Not where it can *hear*." She nodded over the side of the railing, into the depths.

I glanced down without thinking, at the star in the void. Lozzie put her hand up to my face, blocked my view.

"Best not to," she said, a manic shaky smile on her face. "It won't feel very good if you pay too much attention to it."

I swallowed, throat dry, took Lozzie's hand and lowered it from my face. "Okay. Thank you. Okay. So ... what do we do? We have to get back to my friends."

"Did you kill my brother?"

"Um, not yet."

Lozzie bit her lower lip, hard, eyes creasing with worry.

"Raine might," I said.

"She's the one who said I should jump, yeah? I liked that. Clever!"

"She is. And brave. And-" I swallowed. "Oh God, I hope she's okay."

Lozzie squeezed my hand. "She'll be fine, I'm sure she will. She's like, chief arse-kicker, isn't she?"

I nodded. "She's got a gun, too. It-"

"Didn't work on him!"

"Yes, we discovered that. Evee's here too, she's a magician. And Twil, she's a werewolf. They must be able to do something to him."

Lozzie blinked at me. "Werewolves are real?"

"I know. Stupid, isn't it?"

"Are you kidding? That's so cool. I love it!"

I swallowed, unable to share her amusement. "I'm so worried about them. We got cut off, I- I'm no good on my own. I don't know what to do." I looked over my shoulder, at the way I'd come. "The way

back is full of zombies, I couldn't get back to Raine."

Lozzie peered over my shoulder too, then bit her lip and looked up at the distant ceiling, lost in the darkness.

"What does your brother – the cult – what is it they want with me?" I asked, unable to bear the silence.

"Hmm?" Lozzie met my eyes, seemingly distracted. "Because you're like me. All he's done for years is try to make more of me." She glanced back the way she'd came, half turning on the spot and chewing on the stub of a fingernail. "We could go back through the underground, but ... don't look down at it, okay? And try not to listen. Stay close, okay? It's really good at getting inside your head and making you think you want to listen." Lozzie shot me another shaky smile, then tugged on my hand to lead us deeper into the cave.

"Don't listen? To what?" I whispered.

"My brother already hurt it earlier," Lozzie muttered, a sad pinch in her voice. "When he set it on you and your friends outside the castle. It's hurting a lot now, it needs somebody to listen, but we really, really shouldn't. Try not to, okay? Try not to."

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Perhaps it seems strange that I would so readily trust a person I'd met in a dream. A vestigial part of myself, cradled in my heart, asked again and again if this wasn't a symptom of insanity. Wasn't this the exact behaviour I was supposed to watch myself for? That I'd spent years punishing myself for, terrified that at any moment I might slip over the edge, talk to people who weren't there, scream at invisible monsters, retreat into a world of my own imagination?

That part of me was obsolete now, proved wrong, but I didn't shout it down or bottle it up; I soothed that terrified, battered part of myself. It was okay, her watch was over, and now I had to be brave in a very different manner.

Being brave wasn't easy in this place.

I'd never been in a cave before. Not exactly a good family day out for a girl with schizophrenia and night terrors. I clung hard to my initial sense of this place as a *cave*, a natural formation in rock. Geology – not biology, no matter the impression of organic

structure in all the looming shapes in the darkness.

Lozzie and I held hands as she led us creeping back along the metal walkways. The pulsing green-gold light lent her face a sickly, contagious pallor, turning her into a half-starved plague ghost. I must have looked terrible too, twitchy and frightened and doing a bad job of hiding my fear. We made quite the horror-movie couple, a pair of scrawny, unhealthy apparitions one might encounter in a dark, forbidden place.

Lozzie paused before each turn, each corner around another projecting spar of living jade. She held her finger to her lips, craning up on tiptoes and peering around rock outcrops.

The first time she did this, I whispered as quietly as I could, "Is anyone down here?"

"Doubt it," she hissed, and shot me a mad smile over her shoulder, half-hidden behind the sleeve of her filthy tshirt. "Lost them all upstairs, but a zombie might wander down. Nobody else would be stupid enough – not like us!"

I trusted her completely, not in spite of her obvious mental illness – I could recognise that now, with the clarity of my waking mind – but because of it.

We'd been together in far worse, far weirder places than this, by choice and for the sheer joy of fascination, but always cushioned by the dream logic. Always with the knowledge that if anything really went wrong, we could simply join hands and leave, go somewhere else. Now we were in it for real, truly together.

The cult's pathway branched several times, vanishing into unlit dead-ends or unfinished drops onto the jade substrate itself. We passed a gigantic branching stalagmite of green-gold glowing rock, a monolithic tree in the heart of the cave, and I spotted a wide metal platform far ahead of us.

Wedge underneath a convenient overhang of rock, on the platform stood structures I couldn't quite make out at this distance – a few tables perhaps, bundles of rags, tools and debris and-

"Lozzie," I murmured, squinting. "Up ahead, are those ... cages?"

"Yeah!" she hissed. She must have caught my expression in the corner of her eye, because she turned to me and smiled that shaking

smile again. "Oh, it's totally okay, you don't have to look at them. Just concentrate on your feet when we pass by, yeah? Or look at me."

"What?" I said in an empty whisper.

"It's fine, it's fine, I'm our eyes right now. Okay? I'll navigate."

No courage to push the question, but neither could I look away from the cages up ahead. Six foot cubes of steel mesh. Dog cages?

Lozzie tugged on my hand. "You don't have to look!"

Don't look up, don't look down, don't look at what was right in front of me; I began to feel a little like Perseus in the Gorgon's lair.

The act of thinking about it – the core of this place – drew my eyes over the side of the railing, to glance at the shining star-thing in the void below.

We seemed closer to it somehow. No longer a point of light, I saw – or imagined I saw – a faint impression of roiling energy through a gap in a cracked shell. I still held the glow-stick in my free hand, and suddenly felt the most bizarre urge to toss it over the railing, so the falling light might reveal the smallest fraction of the true shape below.

"Heather, Heather? Hey, no no, here here!" Lozzie touched my face, brought me back up and around. I drew in a sudden deep breath and blinked at her frowning face.

"Oh, that was weird. I was-"

"You mustn't let it distract you. It's really good at that. I don't blame it, it's lonely and mad and in pain, but you mustn't listen – you're too good, Heather. You're too good a person, too kind, too nice. Don't let it talk."

"O-okay, okay." I took another deep breath and shoved the glow-stick into my pocket. "I'm really ... it's hard to think clearly right now, that's all."

"Talk to me then! We'll drown it out together."

Lozzie beamed at me as she dragged me onward. The metal platform lay only a few hundred meters ahead now. I struggled for the words to distract myself.

“Um, well, why the goat skull mask? What was that all about? When I first saw you, I mean.”

“It’s a skull!” Lozzie almost giggled. “It looked super cool. Plus nobody can tell where I’m looking when I have it on. I like masks.”

“You- oh!” I lit up inside, a genuine moment breaking through. “You sent Tenny, didn’t you? That was you. You sent her to help me.”

“Tenny?”

“The spirit with the tentacles. Thank you. I never thanked you for that, in the dreams or anything. She used your name once, even. I get the feeling she wasn’t supposed to give that away, but thank you. She saved me, weeks ago, it’s kind of a long story.”

Lozzie paused and blinked at me. “Oh, that.” She frowned softly. “I made that from spare parts, I totally didn’t think it would find you. Wow!”

“I’m sorry, you *made* it? You can do that?”

“Yeah. Can’t you?” Lozzie looked at me with a mystified expression, tilting her head to one side, as if we were talking about baking a cake rather than constructing a spirit monster.

“I don’t think so ... ” I trailed off and swallowed. This wasn’t the time. I had to focus on getting back to Raine, getting out of here. I had to focus on the here and now.

On the platform ahead of us the cages were clustered at the rear, against the jade rockface.

Too late to take Lozzie’s advice now. By the time we stepped onto the platform, I was already staring. Couldn’t look away, a far stronger pull than the thing in the void under our feet. The cages, the bundles of rags within, the table, all sharpened into too-perfect clarity on the surface of my mind. My insides went numb.

“You don’t have to look, Heather! Come on!” Lozzie’s raised voice warped into distorted echo. My feet stuttered to a halt. She pulled on my arm, both hands around my wrist, tugging on my sleeve. “Look at me, focus on me!”

“Lozzie, stop!” I snapped, and winced at the echo of my own shout, shaking off her grip. I glanced at her stricken expression and back

at the cages, my breath tight in my chest. “What is this?”

“They’re dead. They can’t feel anything anymore. We can! Don’t worry about them, okay?”

“Worry?” I almost spat, shaking my head. “I- ... ”

“Don’t think about it, okay? Off, off!” Lozzie waved her arm in the air, as if trying to shoo away a flock of birds. She screwed her eyes shut. “Out of sight, out of mind!”

I ignored her, only half by choice, and tried to comprehend what I was looking at.

The platform in the depths was not a big place. Not grand, except for the surroundings of the vast cave. At one end of the platform a stout metal table faced the void, complete with restraints to hold a person and channels to collect spilt blood. It was covered in dark stains. A helmet made of copper was anchored to the head of the table, and inside I could see little patches of scalp and burned hair. A thick cable of bare copper and woven rope descended from the helmet, led off the side of the platform, into the void below. A triple-layered magic circle in stark clean white ringed the table, surrounded by the ghost images of dozens upon dozens of old, partially erased circles.

A shrivelled twist of cooked gristle lay atop the table, like a piece of meat left too long over a fire, no larger than a cat.

The cages were full of corpses.

Perhaps a dozen, if I could have counted. Dried, dessicated, preserved from rot by some quality in the air. Some were bound and gagged in death, others curled up and shrunken. One had gnawed off his own fingers – I doubted rats were responsible, down here. Several had their eyes bandaged as if blind, the dressings caked with dried blood, the faintest green-gold glow showing through the fabric. All were lumpy and misshapen under their filthy clothes, as if changed in hidden ways. None could have been older than twenty. Several were small children.

Lozzie spoke, waved her arms about, grabbed my hand, but I didn’t really hear her.

I wasn’t surprised. I’d seen the prelude to this discovery, the zombies made from kidnapped homeless people, the ape demon

impaled outside the castle as a warning. The fruit of cruelty.

I'd never seen evil before. The Eye wasn't evil – it was alien. Despite everything it had done to me, to my sister, despite the torture of having my mind altered, my reality bent and broken, the Eye was not evil. The star in the void wasn't evil either, nor were the nightmare spirits I saw every day of my life, nor the inhabitants of the hundred Outside places I'd been to.

This little space, this thing done by people, this was evil.

This filthy secret, this felt like the centre of what the Sharrowford Cult was doing.

I didn't need to be a genius to connect the dots; the corpses to the table, the helmet, the cable dropping into the depths, down to that thing in the void.

Forced communion.

“- and if you dwell on it, it'll eat you up, it'll take every piece of-”

“Can we destroy this?” I interrupted Lozzie's rambling, swallowed, forced myself to feel and move again. I looked right into her heavy-lidded eyes. She juddered to a halt and blinked at me, then sketched a shaky smile and nodded sideways into the pit.

“We'd have to kill that down there,” she said. “This stuff's just stuff.”

“How? How?” I glanced down into the void, then pulled my eyes back to Lozzie. It was easier, with this coldness inside me. “How?”

She shrugged. A laugh jerked out of her mouth. “I don't know. A nuclear bomb? A- a- a god? Drop god on it. Right. That'll work.”

“Point taken.” I squeezed my eyes shut. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay. It's okay.” She swallowed and sniffed, eyes twitching and flickering over all the evidence she'd tried so hard to get me to ignore.

“Maybe Evelyn can stop it. She's a magician,” I muttered, more to myself than Lozzie. “I have to tell her. Lozzie, what is this, what's it for? How do we break it?”

She shrugged. “I don't know! I'm the only one it ever worked on.”

“W-what? You mean-”

“You can’t just rape it and expect it to give you a piece of its mind. They can’t make another me, because they just wanna take and take and take and there’s nothing left down there, it gave me all it had.” She screwed a finger against the side of her skull. “It was a present, a gift, a- a- all it had. You get it, right?”

I stared at her, horror building on horror. But I nodded. “Yes. Yes, I think so.”

“I wish we could kill it.” She sniffed, tears in her eyes. “Put it out of it’s misery.”

“Maybe there’s a way. Maybe Evelyn knows a way. Maybe we can-”

A silent blur launched itself up and over the side of the platform railing.

Lozzie and I both screamed and jumped, grabbing at each other like small frightened animals about to clamber over themselves to get away. A heavy hand twisted against the railing, a long coat whipped through the air. Boots hit the metal in front of us.

Zheng landed on the platform with all the grace of a drunken elephant.

Her left side was still soaked with crimson, half-dried into a sticky layer down her coat and trousers and all over her boots. Her left arm – the one I’d torn off – had completed the disgusting reattachment process we’d witnessed earlier in the fog labyrinth. It hung slack at her side, naked and covered in a winding mass of occult tattoos so dense they turned her pale flesh to almost solid black. Her shoulder wound formed an angry jagged expanse of pulped, re-knitting flesh.

Seven feet of zombie muscle straightened up, cracked her neck, and turned dead eyes on Lozzie and I.

She was all there.

For the first time ever, I reached for the hyperdimensional mathematics without even thinking.

Maybe it was the memory of her grabbing my face and holding me immobile, maybe the shock of her dramatic entrance, or maybe I was finally turning into something beyond human. I grabbed at the

impossible equations held so gingerly in the back of my mind, broke the seals, clenched my teeth as I spun the numbers into place, each lever of reality tar-slick and burning white-hot inside my brain. Knock her clean off the platform, burst her skull, blast her into steaming meat – could I do any of that?

I could. In that moment of panic, I knew I could.

Might kill me, but I could.

I sagged in Lozzie's grip, my head and guts on fire, half a second away from an equation to rip reality asunder.

the other side of nowhere –

4.5

“Zheng!”

It was the tone in Lozzie’s voice that stopped me.

Not fear or warning, but *relief*. Lozzie broke into a huge beaming smile at the giant zombie woman.

She hadn’t noticed or understood what I was doing, spinning up my reality-breaking mathematics, setting fire to my mind. As far as she knew, I’d sagged and stumbled against her in pure shock at Zheng’s arrival.

Perhaps we weren’t so similar after all.

One heartbeat of hesitation; hyperdimensional mathematics stalled, stuttered, guttered out, blinking and flickering across the surface of my consciousness. My eyelids spasmed and my jaw locked up. I shuddered, snorted down a tide of nausea. Curled up around my belly, almost fell over, but Lozzie held me up.

It felt like holding back a sneeze – or an orgasm.

I’d worked for weeks to smooth the flow of the impossible equations as much as possible, an inevitable sequence from first principle to the end result, to spare me the pain. Now I strangled an equation at the last moment, fought it back down into memory and brain-stem.

“Heather? It’s okay, she’s fine if I’m here, I can tell her to do whatever I want.” Lozzie beamed at me, then back at the impassive, staring zombie. “What happened to your arm?” A silent pause, except for my whining. “... Zheng?”

“That was me,” I croaked out. I hung off Lozzie’s shoulder, my knees shaking. At least I wasn’t bleeding, yet.

“What? Heather?”

“The arm,” I said.

“Ahh? No, they wouldn’t send Zheng, that- oh.” Lozzie’s face fell

and she looked back at Zheng with a sudden shake to her smile. She rattled out something in a language I'd never heard before. "*Ta bidniig dagaj baisan uu?* Zheng? Has he ... oh, oh no. *Namaig sonsooch!*"

Whatever she'd said, Zheng wasn't listening. The zombie raised her right hand and pointed with one long finger, over our heads, up.

"That looks like an order," I managed.

"Zheng? Come on, please, listen to me. It's me!"

"Walk," Zheng rumbled. Dead lips barely moved. Voice like granite.

Lozzie swallowed and wiped filthy hair away from her face. "I think my brother's got her. Like, fully. He's not supposed to, no! Zheng, you're not supposed to listen to him!"

"Walk," Zheng repeated. She took a step forward and we both stumbled back, still clinging to each other.

"I think your brother wants to see us," I said.

"Yeah. Yeah," Lozzie whispered.

Zheng took another step.

Lozzie tried to back away again, a tight animal whimper caught in her throat – but I held onto her and held my ground. My stomach hurt, my head throbbed, my lungs ached. I stared Zheng right in the eyes, watching those dead, glassy orbs for any reaction.

"Heather!" Lozzie hissed. She tugged on my arm.

Zheng stared back at me.

"You don't frighten me. Not right now."

Took me a moment to realise I'd spoken, those were my words – and they were true. Goodness, I'd actually said those words to this hulking seven foot demon-host monster-thing.

The calm in my own voice surprised me, but this wasn't courage. I didn't feel brave or defiant. This calm grew from somewhere else, a cold, slow, numb place. Perhaps I'd feel the raw terror later, like a bruise. I let my eyes drift over to the cages once more, and the dessicated, bound corpses inside.

Back to Zheng, back to those eyes. May as well be empty sockets.

She took another step forward, loomed over us, body language as empty and mute as the rest of her. Lozzie dug her fingers into my arm and shoulder, breathing in panicked jerks.

“Why don’t you just grab us?” I asked the zombie.

No answer.

“You’re strong enough and fast enough. We’re two, but we’re both small. And apparently I didn’t wound you that badly.”

Zheng lowered her right arm, the one she’d been pointing with, but that could have meant anything. I wasn’t sure if my words were getting through, but then she twitched the fingers of her reattached left arm. Once, twice, three times. Her mangled shoulder spasmed.

“That’s right.” I nodded slowly. “That was me. You remember, don’t you?”

Twitch, twitch. She managed to bend her thumb inward.

Beneath the coating of drying blood, Zheng’s exposed left arm was covered in the most detailed and complex tattoos I’d ever seen. Looping, whirling, spiralling lines in a jumbled thicket upon the corded muscle, each line formed from thousands of tiny letters, overlapping so many times that her skin was like re-used parchment, each layer of inscription faded or improperly erased. I didn’t want to get close enough to find out, but I suspected the pattern covered her whole torso.

“I might not be able to zap you Outside from here,” I continued, low and quiet. “But I can hurt you again. You understand that, don’t you?”

“What?” Lozzie murmured. I glanced sidelong at her, found her eyes as alarmed as they could be under those permanently droopy lids. The bruise on her face was so livid up close.

“You can’t do that? With your mind? With the math?”

Lozzie shook her head. “Please don’t. Heather, please. She’s ... sort of my friend.”

I shook my head too, still numb inside. “Not right now she isn’t.”

“She is,” Lozzie hissed. “She is. She’s still in there. Zheng?” Lozzie tried again, voice weak.

The zombie just stared.

"I hope you're thinking what I'm thinking, whatever you are," I said to Zheng. "Can you even give me a reply?"

I wasn't thinking about those dead children in cages. I wasn't angry about them or motivated by them, nothing so clean and clear; that came later, a retroactive justification. A good one, yes, the right thing to do, but it wasn't why I made the decision in that moment, numb and shaking from the suppressed brainmath, in silent, unspoken negotiation with a demon inside a barely human shell.

Zheng looked up, the way she'd been pointing. A good enough reply for me.

"Okay. Lozzie, I think it's time we went to see your brother," I said. Lozzie stared at me for a moment as if I was the mad one. Perhaps I was.

= =

My resolve didn't hold.

The zombie herded us along the metal walkways, down the route we'd have taken anyway. Or perhaps she was merely following us now, though I found I didn't care. I didn't care if my impulsive, half-formed idea had worked or not. I had no real plan, just a drive.

Zheng wouldn't have needed to tackle us or grab us anyway, there was only one path and she was too large, too strong, too fast to dodge around or outrun, even if I hadn't been clenched up tight around the echo of pain in my guts and head.

"Don't you wanna get out of here too, Zheng?" said Lozzie. "*Zozz! Tuniig khaya!*"

Lozzie was being a very good sport, arm under my shoulders as we hurried ahead of the zombie's advance. She didn't complain when I stumbled and clutched at her for support.

Zheng didn't even really watch us, as she forced us away from the metal platform and back among the spars and spears of green-gold rock. She stared at a point above my head, expression empty. I felt a guilty relief in getting away from those cages, those corpses, that evidence of cruelty, when the platform finally vanished out of sight behind too many twists and turns. But I knew it was still there, unrecorded and unmarked, and in some ways that was worse.

"You don't have to listen to my brother," Lozzie whined to Zheng, voice returning distant echoes from the vault above and below. "Remember all the things we said to each other, when I took you to Lemuria, in the dream? Weren't we supposed to be ... you know ... you and me, right?" She tapped her ribs, just over her heart, face torn back and forth between fear and betrayed sorrow. "Use your own willpower. Come on ... please ... "

"I don't think she's listening," I croaked.

"But- she-" Lozzie shook her head, almost in tears.

"It'll be okay," I said. "Everything will be okay."

I was terrible at reassurance. I was no Raine, all smiles and confidence and heroic gestures. I knew I sounded cold and hollow, but as I spoke I realised I was talking to myself, shoring myself up. My numb conviction was beginning to ebb.

What on earth was I thinking? I had no real plan, no idea where my friends were, no idea if I had the resolve to see this impulse to the end. The journey through the cave gave me too much time to think, to second-guess myself, to realise what I'd done.

In a moment of shock and fear I'd gone straight for the hyperdimensional mathematics. A reflex, self-defence.

My certainty hollowed itself out as we tracked through the cave, less in touch with that moment of instinctive mathematics, that tension held tight on the edge of the possible, ready to break physics in a dozen ugly ways, with no care for consequences. Could I really do it – pulverise Zheng into steaming meat? Maybe, yes, and I'd pay for it with vomiting and pain and unconsciousness, but that wasn't the question.

Could I do it in cold blood?

"No, no it won't be okay. Oh, Heather, she was so close." Lozzie sniffed and wiped at her nose. "We'd gotten her so close to ignoring him. I don't know how to break it, but I had her so close. She was going to strangle my brother for me, if you couldn't, you know."

"Mm," I grunted.

Zheng forced us around a final right-hand turn. A monolithic wall of green-gold towered above us, wounded by an entrance to another cult-cut tunnel, rough steps vanishing upward through the glowing

rock.

The way up was far less regular than the first tunnel. I guessed this one had been dug as exploration rather than access, with long straight stretches, tight hairpin bends, a snaking progress upward out of the green depths. The walls slowly lost their brilliant light, faded into the dead grey of the castle-corpse, until the tunnel finally burst through the floor into open air.

Lozzie and I stumbled to a halt together; my legs burned with the effort of climbing, knees trembling and stomach clenched.

She'd had to almost drag me the last few dozen steps, her twitchy energy holding out where mine was spent. I hung onto her shoulders for support. At least keeping me standing seemed to take her mind off her own fear.

We'd emerged into a long gallery with a high ceiling, the walls more open window than grey jade – though without any glass or glass-analogue to fill the openings. Tendrils of fog lapped at the windows. We were high up above the copied mile of Sharrowford, sunk in the mist far below.

Vast planetary shapes stirred in the shrouded firmament above, and I realised with tentative relief that the cosmic whale song noise had stopped.

Lights, bedrolls, a bucket of tools, a closed laptop on an overturned crate; this part of the castle was obviously inhabited. Another gallery marched off on the other side of a connecting doorway. Muffled sounds of soft conversation floated through from beyond.

A cultist scrambled up from his vantage point at one of the windows, where he'd been bent over a cheap telescope.

"You!" He said at us. "Oh, oh hell, uh."

He looked more like a student teacher than an evil cultist, a young man with mousy hair and a baby face, his cream robes open on a shirt and trousers, as if he'd come straight from work. A distant part of me wondered if Alexander imposed a dress code on his underlings.

The cultist slapped at his robes, then at his trouser pockets. I couldn't help but notice he had a bloody bandage around one hand.

I gave him the best stink-eye I could.

“Don’t try it. I’ll kill you. You know I can,” I said, heaving for breath.

He stared at me in utter confusion.

“Yeah, fuck off, Lucas, ‘less you want me to bite you again!” Lozzie screeched at him.

We never had to find out what Lucas was not going to try, because he sighed with sudden relief; Zheng emerged behind us. She stopped as soon as she stood free of the wound in the floor, a robot waiting for further input.

“Oh thank the gods beyond, you found her,” he said to Zheng. “Wait, down *there*? Bloody hell ... ” He rubbed his hands together, then thumbed over his shoulder. “Go on, he’s through there, he’ll want to ... I don’t know ... oi, can you hear me, or what?”

Zheng made no response.

Was this my moment?

Flagging resolve fumbled against years of habitual conflict-avoidance, against the timid, reclusive Heather, against the me that wanted to sit in comfortable libraries with beautiful books and forget about the rest of the world, against the me curled up in bed waiting for Raine to get home. I tried to focus, numb and cold and slow – but this wasn’t Alexander, this was not the head of the snake. Not yet. That was my excuse.

The young cultist – Lucas – glanced over his shoulder at the doorway, and Lozzie took the opening. She let go of me, no warning, and I almost tumbled to the floor as she flew at him, one hand raised to claw out his eyes or throat.

She was half his size, but she was ready to bite his face off.

Zheng moved like quicksilver. She lashed out and caught Lozzie by the wrist. Lozzie yelped, like a dog on the end of a choking leash. Her feet left the ground with her momentum and she scrambled for purchase. Zheng held her struggling at arm’s length.

“Zheng! Zheng no! Come on! Argh! Let me go, let me-”

Zheng shook her, rattled her brains, Lozzie’s feet skittering against the floor and head whipping around. I flinched at the violence. Lozzie yelped and spluttered, then stared at Zheng, panting in quiet

panic.

The cultist let out a sharp sigh. “Crazy little bitch,” he said, then glanced at me. “Are you going to give us trouble too?”

I shook my head.

“Good. Now, we’re all going to go talk to Mister Lilburne. Nice and slow, and nobody does anything stupid. Got that? Right?” I nodded. He pointed at the doorway to the adjoining gallery. “Good. You go first.”

I tried to catch Lizzie’s eyes, but she’d shut down. She hung limp from Zheng’s grip like her strings had been cut, hidden by a curtain of hair. I murmured her name.

“She’s faking it,” the cultist said. “Come along now. You first.”

Alone, alone, even Lizzie had left me behind, in a way. Alone – except for the Eye, always in the back of my head. I had nothing else to hold onto.

The next gallery had fewer windows, corners lost to the shadows unfilled by weak electric light. At the far end, carved into the grey surface of the wall, surrounded by expanding concentric rings of white-paint magic circle and layers of jumbled, mad inscription, stood a gateway.

Just like the one Evelyn had built to bring us here. It was closed right now, deactivated, showing only blank stone in the wide door-shaped middle.

“Where does that lead?” I asked out loud. No idea how I found the courage.

“What? That’s none of your business, is it? Turn right, through the door there. Go on.”

I did as I was told, hobbled along, half crouched for support, wanting so desperately to sit down. Zheng dragged Lizzie along behind me. I stepped through a wide doorway, pulled myself up a short flight of stairs, and emerged into the Sharrowford Cult’s true inner sanctum.

“Ahhhhhhh, Lavinia, there you are.”

A sigh, deep and satisfied, made my skin crawl.

It was a throne room, or maybe an audience chamber, with a raised area toward the rear, flanked by tall ceiling-height empty windows. Grey light flooded through the windows, lit everything with a half-dead look.

Magical workings dominated one side of the room. A series of interlocking magic circles and looping Sanskrit words had colonised the floor and part of a wall, as if projected at an angle. Glancing at it made my head swim far worse than before, like I was standing on a wall and looking down at the floor.

Several large chunks of the green-gold stone formed fulcrum points or anchors for the pattern. A mess of partially dismantled medical machines lay in a pile nearby, stolen from a hospital or some disused dental office, pieces of their mechanical guts added to the magical design – radioactive sources, bits of laser lens? Somehow I doubted even Evelyn could make sense of this one.

A pair of folding tables stood at the rear of the room, littered with hypodermic needles and bags of drugs, bits of hand-drawn map and bottles of unspeakable fluid, a ceremonial knife and a human skull, a closed book and an open first aid kit.

Two cultists looked up as I entered, as Zheng pulled Lozzie up alongside me. A small, wiry gentleman with glasses and brilliant ginger hair was bent over the tables. The heavyset man with the squashed nose, the one who'd been on the battlements with Alexander, had been speaking softly. He wore medical gloves, hands full of gauze, bloody towel over one shoulder, as he tended to his master in the middle of the room.

Alexander Lilburne himself sat on a stool, stripped to the waist, digging around inside his own chest with a pair of pliers.

"It's me, it's me," our cultist guide, Lucas, said as he trotted past us. "She just came up from the core with them, but no sign of the rest. Boss?"

My mind clung hard to those last few words – no sign of the rest!

"Oh, my wayward sister, how you always return to me," Alexander said.

His mouth curled into a smile as he regarded us, as if delighted to see old friends. His cheek twitched as he pulled the pliers from the hole in his chest with a sucking sound. "And Lavinia, I see you have

decided to join us. Yes, very good, very good indeed. I think it's high time we turned this unpleasantness to our mutual advantage." He turned to the young cultist. "Thank you, Lucas. How are the god spawn?"

"Calmed, I think. They've stopped wailing, at least."

"I can hear that part for myself. Or – not hear it, as it were." Alexander smiled at his own terrible joke.

"... bullets won't kill you, right," I said, very quietly.

No calm voice now. That numb illusionary courage did not survive the sight of him.

Alexander was covered in his own blood, smeared across his soft, flabby chest and down his belly, all over his hands and hairy forearms, in fingerprints and palm-marks. Some sensible soul had spread towels underneath him, but they were soaked through by now. He'd widened the bullet-hole Raine had put in his chest, peeled back his own skin and strips of muscle, exposed the white of his rib bones and the bellows-fluttering of a lung, just visible through the ragged wound. Fragments of shattered rib lay discarded at his feet, dug out from the bullet's path.

He showed no pain at all.

With exaggerated care, he placed the pliers on the table next to him and raised his eyebrows at me.

"I'm sorry, what was that? I didn't quite catch your words. Do speak up, Lavinia, please, I am not feeling my best at present, and I am understandably a little distracted with concern for my poor sister here." In the corner of my eye, I saw Lozzie shiver and try to make herself smaller.

"I said ..." my voice shook. I clamped down hard on that tremor and forced myself to straighten up, to look him in the eye.

'No sign of the rest', which meant Raine and Evee and Twil were still free, unaccounted for.

Stand up straight, Heather.

"Bullets won't kill you, will they?" I repeated.

Alexander's trio of cultist underlings found this rather amusing. They laughed silently, shook their heads, shared sidelong glances.

Alexander went through a laborious performance, looking down at himself and acting surprised at the gaping fist-sized rent in his chest.

“Oh, this?” He asked, then laughed, that horrible blubbery baby-laugh. “No, no, far from it, indeed. Don’t you worry about my health, Lavinia. I will still be up and walking around when the bones of all these fine fellows here have fallen to dust.”

The wiry cultist and Lucas both looked uncomfortable, but the stocky one tending to Alexander’s exit wound merely rolled his eyes, as if he’d heard that one a hundred times before.

“Still, rather irritating,” Alexander continued. “I already know everything there is to know about the workings of my own body, self-repair is such a bore.”

“I hope it is as irritating as possible,” I said. I tried to feel that anger, cold and slow, but it wouldn’t come. “I hope you get shot many more times.”

“Regardless.” Alexander waved a hand. “That is all beside the point right now. Shouldn’t get too far off topic, should we?”

I was not vulnerable; that’s what I told myself, that’s what kept me on my feet and my spine at least vaguely straight. I could kill everyone in this room with a thought, I could, I told myself I could, I knew I could.

Couldn’t I?

“First off, I think some congratulations are in order. Well done, Zheng.” Alexander reached over to the table and picked up a small metal cylinder, covered with occult runes. A stopper of black wax at the top showed a hole in the middle. He wagged it in her general direction, an amused smile playing across his lips. “I’ll just get rid of this, shall I? We won’t be needing it, will we? Or perhaps ... I’ll hold onto it for now. We’ll see what happens next.”

If Zheng felt anything she didn’t show it. The zombie stared at a point on the far wall. Every now and again, Lozzie twitched or struggled in her grip, eyes glazed over, breathing hard and ragged.

“Now, sister?” Alexander clicked his fingers twice. “Pay attention now. *Lauren*,” he snapped, and Lozzie’s head whipped up as if slapped. She blinked and panted, staring at her brother. He sighed

and shook his head, gave her one of those sickly-warm smiles that turned my stomach. “I am very unimpressed with you. I’m sure you know that already, as I am certain you anticipate punishment. You do deserve punishment, for bringing these people here. You know that too, I hope?”

Lozzie’s teeth chattered. She tried to shrink back, but Zheng held her fast.

“Now, Zheng, if you would bring her here, I-”

“I’m going to kill you,” I blurted out.

I didn’t just want to hurt him, I wanted him to know I wanted to. I told myself I wanted to.

Alexander glanced at me, blinking several times in mock surprise.

“Why isn’t she restrained?” The wiry copper-haired cultist asked. “I thought this one was meant to be dangerous?”

“Not here, she ain’t,” the big one grunted. “Can’t do zip, can you, dear?”

“Try it,” I managed to squeak.

“Ah ah ah ah.” Alexander raised his hands. “As we have already discovered, Lavinia does not respond well to physical encouragement. In fact, it gives her the courage to defend herself. Isn’t that right, Lavinia?”

“Stop calling me that.”

“You can’t kill me,” he said, raising a finger. “In here you can’t send me – or anyone – to the beyond. You are powerless, exactly as you would be in the real world against somebody of my place and standing and wealth. You must learn to listen, Lavinia, to negotiate, even from a position of weakness. Threats will get you nowhere.”

They didn’t know.

Lozzie hadn’t known I could do anything except teleporting, dimension-hopping. They must have remembered I could turn away a bullet, but I had a wrecking ball in my mind and they didn’t know.

Was that an advantage, or not? I had no idea what to do with this secret. I needed to use it, somehow.

Alexander must have taken my quiet hesitation as acquiescence.

“Now, Lauren, sister,” his voice gentled but never lost that smug undertone. “Despite the things you do, despite the things you have done to our family, I am still, as always, your loving brother.”

Lozzie whined, sniffed, hanging from Zheng’s arm.

“I forgive you,” he continued. “I forgive you for letting these people in here, for betraying me, for getting me shot by one of them, for causing me problems. As I have always forgiven you, for our parents, for ... yourself. For you and I are all we have, aren’t we? *Aren’t we, Lauren?*”

That worm in the brain, that catch in his words. I suppressed a wince and glanced over at Lozzie. She gulped and bit her lip, small and dirty and cringing. She jerked her head up and down, once, twice. A nod.

“Lozzie, you don’t have to listen to him,” I hissed. She shook her head and looked at me sidelong, guilty and afraid. I could almost see the lump in her throat.

“If Zheng lets you go,” Alexander said. “Will you be good and come here, come to your brother?”

Nod.

“Zheng, if you please.”

The zombie did as she was told. Lozzie crumpled the moment she was free, fell to her knees, sobbing gently. I moved to catch her shoulders, to put my arms around her before she could give in and go to her brother, but Alexander twitched a finger in command and Zheng’s arm shot out like a snake to bar my way, so quick I flinched back in surprise.

“Come here,” Alexander repeated.

“Lozzie, don’t,” I hissed.

“It’s nothing compared to family, Lavinia. Nothing at all,” he said.

Lozzie nodded, wiped her nose on her sleeve, then picked herself up and slunk over to her brother, head down like a whipped dog. Now it was my turn to feel a lump in my throat. I couldn’t bear the sight of this.

“Now, now, there was no need for any of your earlier behaviour, was there?” Alexander said to her. “No need for all that tantrum and nastiness. You’re such a sweet girl when you simply relax and allow yourself to be.” He reached out and cupped her bruised cheek – the bruise he’d left on her. His bloody hand left a crimson smear on her skin. Lozzie shivered, her eyes down. I’d never felt such indignant disgust. “I know what you really want, what you really crave, and I will give it to you. You will have as many playmates as you desire – in time. Now, sit at my side. No, not on the blood, no need to get messy. Just there, there we go.”

Lozzie folded herself cross-legged on the floor by his side, hunched over with arms folded to protect her belly, eyes lowered in shadow.

In the last moment as she sat down, in the split-second that Alexander’s eyes left her and began to move back to me, her hand darted out and palmed something glinting and sharp out of the open first-aid kit on the table. She slid it up her sleeve.

I froze, inside and out, expecting one of the trio of cultists to raise a voice, or tackle her, or Alexander to notice what she’d done.

None did. They’d been looking away, embarrassed by the exchange of sickly-sweet false sibling affection. I’d seen, Zheng must have too, but the zombie didn’t react. I let relief flood me.

We were still on.

Equal parts disgust and hope – pretend courage. I forced my trembling fingers to pull the brainmath notebook from my hoodie’s front pocket. I felt the glow stick in there too, but what use could that be?

“Ahh? What is this?” Alexander asked. “Are you going to take minutes?” He reached down and stroked Lozzie’s hair, without taking his eyes from me, leaving another bloody streak on her.

“This is what I’m going to use to kill you,” I said, and forced my chin up.

Defiant, confident, unafraid. I was none of those things, but I pretended.

He sighed. “And I supposed that’s how you managed to do serious damage to Zheng? You hit her with a book?”

“Yes, I hit her with a book.” Completely straight faced.

Alexander's amusement dimmed. "You understand it is very important to me that I learn how you and your ... associates, managed to inflict real damage to a mature revenant. I assume the same method was used to kill the two men I sent with her? You can answer me now or I can find out in other ways, but I will know, all in good time. I will know everything, all details, relevant or otherwise. Nothing can hide from me, not for long."

"I did it," I said, flush for one wonderful moment with power over this man.

Very quickly, I wished I hadn't spoken. Alexander stared for a moment – then a shrewd fascination lit up his features, staring at me with something akin to awe. I felt a terrible shiver.

"You are telling the truth," he breathed. "Tell me."

I swallowed, tried to hold onto that moment of confidence. "I can kill everyone in this room with a thought." A bluff? I didn't know. As I glanced at the other three cultists, they certainly seemed to share their master's belief, faces clouded with concern. "That's how I hurt your zombie."

"Then do it, please, show me," Alexander leaned forward, dripping gore from his chest wound, deep desire written on his face. "Show me! I have waited so long for my sister to show the slightest ability of true control, of manipulation, of understanding. Show me!"

I stared back at him.

"... no? Lavinia, I know you are not lying, but ... ahhh." He frowned. "I see. You can't."

"I can."

"No no." He raised a finger. "You can, that is the truth – but you can't. How odd. You do perplex me, Lavinia."

"Good."

"You tell impossible truths, at least ones that you yourself believe, and then lo and behold I discover that some of them are rooted in fact." Alexander raised his chin, that shrewd, questioning exterior crust over a barely-concealed ocean of self-assurance.

"Is this conversation going how you imagined it would?" I managed to say. "Why do your whole megalomania act? Because you get off

on it? Does it make you feel big and powerful? Why not just take what you want from me?"

He didn't take my bait – it was weak, I was scrambling for time, playing catch-up. Hoping my friends would turn up, that Raine would rescue me. The more this went on, that clean, clear impulse felt further and further away.

I had a plan, I just couldn't do it, not without the protection of that soul-numbness I'd felt earlier. Not without the need for self-defence. I wasn't Raine.

"You see, it is entirely my fault we are at this unfortunate loggerheads with each other," he continued. "I misunderstood you. Your desires, your drives – your personal history. If I had known, I would have taken a very different approach to you, Lavinia. And now I know you have gained some measure of real control, well, I would have told you what we are doing here, the importance of our work, what it means."

"You mean the importance of dead children in cages?" I asked, and finally felt a good clean anger – that was better. "I saw your dirty secret down there."

"The ends justifies the means, Lavinia. I'm sure you, of all people, will agree, once you understand those ends."

"I don't want to know what this place is for." A lie. "I can guess."

"Ahh?" Alexander still seemed genuinely fascinated. "And what is your guess?"

"You've forced people to talk with that thing you have underground."

"Thing? Thing. A very precise word, Lavinia. That *thing* is a yoked god. Caught, drawn here by my – our," he gestured at the trio of cultists, "trap, twenty years ago now. To learn from it, to take all that outside knowledge for our own. But, I am getting ahead of myself."

"It's a scab," Lozzie muttered.

"Yes, yes, a favourite word of our little Lauren's. More like an impact crater than a scab. All this, this place, this dimensional pocket is like ... mis-aimed camouflage. A wounded chameleon with misfiring neurons, trying to hide itself."

"I don't want to know," I repeated.

"It is important you understand. You see, I have done a little more research into you, Lavinia." A sickening smile crested. A triumph, a trump card flourished from a rhetorical sleeve. He paused, savouring the moment.

I stared. Said nothing. Didn't give him the satisfaction. Considered spitting on the floor, but nineteen years of being a good girl sort of ruled that out, even here.

"You see, I have asked relevant questions of those entities correctly placed to know," he continued. "I assumed – ah, so wrongly, such arrogance on my part – that you were mentally ill, or misled, or had constructed an elaborate interior life that never really was. But then I discovered."

"Discovered what?" I hissed, to cover the pounding of my heart.

"You *do* have a twin sister. Or, did."

Violation.

Maisie's space in my heart, my greatest source of strength, the one thing this horrible man hadn't known about me, hadn't torn bleeding from my past, lay open for all to hear.

My head felt hot, tight, a pinching pain in the back of my mind.

The other three cultists, they knew as well now, they'd heard those words, and it meant nothing to them. The big man was too busy fussing over the exit wound on Alexander's back. Violation, my most secret thing casually exposed without so much as a fanfare.

"What was her name, Lavinia?" Alexander asked.

I blinked, swallowed, forced myself to focus through the impotent anger. I wanted to punch him, but that wasn't enough.

"Her reality," I said, haltingly, then swallowed and forced myself onward. "Should burst your eardrums, make you bleed from the eyes, kill you. Where we went, where she still is, I can send you there, you know? If you want to learn her name."

"Not from here, you can't. Her name, if you please?"

I had no more comebacks. I'd never felt so angry, but that wasn't enough – my fingers opened the brainmath notebook, but I couldn't

look down at the pages. He had me hooked; in the back of my mind, in a quiet, selfish place that I would never admit, I knew where he was going with this.

“I know what happened to you and your twin,” Alexander said. He took a deep breath and leaned back, then winced, the first sign of pain I’d seen on his face. The cultist tending to his wound grumbled, tore off a piece of gauze and set to his work again.

I hoped it hurt.

“No you don’t,” I said. “Or you’d go mad.”

He laughed, bubbly and disgusting. Lozzie sniffed behind her curtain of hair. She started to speak, a half-word.

A crash, distant and very loud, somewhere below us in the castle. Like stone on stone, and a muffled shout.

Alexander frowned. The cultists all glanced at one another.

“Lucas, Adam,” Alexander said with a flick of his fingers toward the doors. Lucas and the wiry cultist hurried out of the room together, footsteps vanishing into the passageway beyond.

“My friends are coming to kill you,” I said.

“No, I will have Zheng kill them all,” he said. “And yes, I do have some vague, sketched general idea of what happened to you. And it doesn’t take a psychologist to understand what it’s done to you.”

“Shut up. Stop talking.”

“You have experienced first hand how vulnerable we really are – we human beings, all of us – when exposed to that outside our limited sphere, the reality of the universe, the wolves that lurk just outside the door, a door that ninety-nine percent of the human race cannot even see. We’re so short-sighted, so wrapped up in our animal concerns, we barely see fifty years into the future, or to the country next door, let alone into the spheres beyond our own fragile little globe.”

He loved the sound of his own voice – but he was right, about that part. Wasn’t he?

“Get to the point.”

Alexander nodded. There was something serious about him now, a

glint in his eye.

“What happened to you can happen to anybody. Wouldn’t you want to stop it ever happening again? To all humanity? Because that is what we are doing here. We are growing strong, we are stealing secrets from the gods, we are making difficult sacrifices for the greater good. We do not have to bow to these outside principles as gods, we do not have to accept a future as ants. Imagine, if you will, that the things you have experienced, one day, come to our reality *en masse*. What would that look like? What would our future look like, Lavinia?”

He raised an eyebrow when I didn’t answer, gestured for me to speak. I shrugged.

“I am serious,” he continued. “It is a serious question. I don’t know, yet, exactly what you experienced beyond the boundary of our reality, as a child, and I would like you to tell me, in time. But we are all children here. Imagine, all of us, all the people you know, exposed to the same thing. What would our future look like? Please.”

“ ... there wouldn’t be one. Where are you going with this?”

“You are a vision of a different future, a glimpse into the potential future of the species.” He leaned forward, earnest, face brimming with zeal. “Do you understand what I am saying? Our future, human future, is a choice between eventual destruction and madness, or change, evolution, into ... ” An open hand, a smile. “Something very much like what you are becoming, what my sister is halfway toward. Do you understand? Answer, please. I am trying, so very hard, to make you understand.”

I wanted to say ‘and I am trying to kill you’, or spit at him, or tell him he was wrong.

He was wrong. Wasn’t he?

The anger, the relief, all of it was flagging now, gnawed by a scared part of myself, a part that wanted more than anything to feel safe and strong. My greatest unsolved problem was how to combat the Eye, how to actually rescue my sister. I was weak, small, fragile.

What if there were a dozen of me, or a hundred? What if I knew how to make this dripping-black mathematical hell work for me? What if I could be strong?

Would the end justify the means?

He saw it on my face, and smiled. "I'm not going to treat you like some stupid, petty little follower, to be expended for a temporary advantage. I'll even let your friends live – Saye may prove difficult, she won't agree with this, but I promise. I will make it work. Join me in this effort, try to understand, and I won't kill them. Do you understand what I am offering you?"

I shook my head, numb, trying not to answer. Trying to focus.

"I am offering you a chance to make sure that what happened to you and your sister never happens again."

the other side of nowhere –

4.6

Can noble intention remain untainted, no matter the method used to reach the goal?

Alexander finished his proselytising, and I knew he wasn't lying. Too much passion in him for this be an act, to get me to drop my guard. Besides, what did I have that he couldn't take by force? I'd rarely felt so weak and small, with Zheng towering beside me, lost in this un-place. My friends might be about to rescue me, but Alexander's pitch wasn't a ploy to save his own skin. He shone with confidence. If Raine and the others made it here, he was certain he could kill them.

This rotten blood-soaked ogre perched on a stool, this eater of children, he wanted to convince me he was right.

And he was.

The stocky cultist tending to Alexander's exit wound cleared his throat. "Boss, we–"

"Shhh, shh shh shh." Alexander hushed him with a delicately raised hand. "Lavinia is considering our offer. Let's not interrupt her calculations, that would be so terribly rude."

I knew Lozzie was trying to catch my eye, peeking out from behind her mass of filthy hair, from where she sat on the floor next to her brother. She had a plan, didn't she? A sharp trick up her sleeve. Was I still part of that plan?

Alexander was right. Maisie and I had been kidnapped, stolen, torn apart, and I'd been left half-alive. Now I had a few friends who understood that, who understood me. A ragged band of fools, and we were planning to – what? We had a few vaguely sketched intentions, all of which relied on my mastery of an abyss I barely understood and which nearly killed me every time I dipped into it.

But the Sharrowford Cult? These people had trapped and bound an alien god. They tapped it for power, commanded its spawn, and

built their own pocket dimension around a wound in its hide.

“You are right,” I said, so softly, barely a whisper.

Alexander broke into a grin, the most satisfied I’d ever seen a human face.

“And I’m still going to kill you,” I continued.

Can you use an evil tool, and yet remain unchanged?

Not only the dead and mutated children in the cages underground, but also the homeless people turned into zombies, each one of them was or had been somebody’s missing person, somebody else’s Maisie.

Yes, these people had bound a god. Allying with this monster might be the best chance I’d ever have of actually rescuing my sister, and I had to say no.

Alexander sighed with theatrical disappointment.

“This idiotic bravado is unbecoming of you, Lavinia. Be realistic now, you are not going to kill-”

“The end does not justify the means. The means determines the nature of the end.”

I made myself believe those words, no matter how weak my voice. When I rescued my sister, she would see me, not a self-loathing monster in my place.

Alexander rolled his eyes, as if I was wilfully ignorant, a naive and idealistic girl, an idiot on the way to self-destruction. Perhaps he was right about that too.

I felt a pinprick of real confidence, real conviction, not so slow and numb anymore. He rolled the little metal cylinder in his hand as if bored, his eyes leaving me and drifting to Zheng. I tensed up, expected her to grab me at any moment – but I forced myself to concentrate, to look down at the notebook in my hands. I flipped past a page of irrelevant mathematical notation. I knew what to look for now, I knew what to do.

In cold blood, I had to do this. Nausea crept up my throat and a spike of pain jabbed the back of my head as I hurried through the equations.

“You think I’m ... ” Alexander gestured with the metal cylinder.
“*Bad?* A cartoon villain, to-”

“You’re evil,” I said.

“Evil? *Evil?* Look at the world around us, Lavinia.” He stabbed with his voice, hard and angry now, the anger of a powerful man spurned. “Our world, the human world. I snuff out a few lives, yes, for an explicit purpose – knowledge, advancement, human survival. Not for the sake of my own enrichment, not for national power or personal prestige or for corporate profit, but for all of us. For a higher cause. The world is full of people far worse than I. Lavinia, *look at me.*”

I winced and fought to keep my eyes on the page.

“I said, *look at-*”

A shout echoed from somewhere below us, distorted by the winding sinus-like passageways of the corpse-castle. Was that my name I’d heard, was that Raine shouting for me?

Then, unmistakable, a gunshot. Far away.

“Boss,” the stocky cultist raised his voice in warning.

Alexander jerked a hand up to silence his underling. His eyes tightened in strangled frustration.

“Humankind is a dead end, Lavinia. Being human is a dead end. If not from climate change and resource depletion, then from the beyond. Your very way of thinking, this insistence on an archaic system of ethics and morals will serve you nothing in the long run. It will see you dead, your bones dust. What use is this way of thinking, if it leads you to failure? You cling to it only because it makes you feel good, but it ensures you cannot kill me.”

I found the right lines of mathematics and swallowed hard. The correct re-purposed dregs of the Eye’s lessons, separate scraps I was going to weld together with my mind; my stomach clenched up.

Alexander was speaking again. I interrupted him with the first words I could think of.

“Why not get into that machine yourself then?”

“Machine?” He paused. “The mind-interface device? I did! I have. It didn’t work on me. I am loathe to admit so, but it gave me nothing.

Is that not right, sister? Did it work on me?" In my peripheral vision, I saw Lozzie shake her head. "You think I would sacrifice your precious innocents before myself? Lavinia, you are only trying to convince yourself to do what you know you cannot – you cannot kill me without convincing yourself I am a monster."

Noises echoed through the gallery behind me now, shouting and crashes, a ripping sound, a scream; but I couldn't just wait for rescue. I'd never forgive myself.

I had to prove Alexander wrong.

"If you admit it now, I will let your friends live," he said, voice a touch softer, a smugness returning to his lips as he spread his hands in mock mercy. "If you persist in this nonsense, I will set Zheng on them when they arrive, and if by some miracle they survive that, I will do it myself." He pointed vaguely at the ceiling. "Do you forget what I can command?"

My eyes tripped along the next line of equation and I felt the beginning of a white-hot burning inside my skull. My breath jerked, harder and sharper. The hyperdimensional mathematics began to slot into place, irresistible and unstoppable now, held tight in my mind. I grit my teeth, felt a nosebleed start, and finally looked up at Alexander.

"Shit, she's doing it. For fuck's sake," the stocky cultist said. He dropped the bloody towel he'd been holding, but hesitated as Alexander showed no fear.

"You can't kill me, Lavinia. You simply won't do it."

"Lozzie," I hissed through gritted teeth. "Move. Aside."

Lozzie half-rose, unsure and skittish, her eyes darting between her brother and I. The stocky cultist frowned at her. I kept my focus on Alexander, felt the levers of reality slick and burning under my hands. He sighed and rolled his eyes, glanced at his nervous underling at last. "She can't hurt you. Settle down."

"Yes, I can."

I could barely speak. My head felt like it was going to explode and my eyes ached with fire, but I held on even as I trembled and struggled to stay standing, as I felt blood drip from my nose and leak from the corners of my eyes; I pushed the equation further,

complicated it, added layers. Bullets wouldn't kill him, this needed to be final.

"No, you *can't*," Alexander snapped, the last word spat in rage. He rose to his feet and pointed at me. "Because you won't, because you are tied to a moral system which admits no legitimate breaking of human boundaries. This is a farce." He grinned and threw up his hands. "Here, I will make your surrender even easier. I will let your friends live regardless of the choice you make. You will all walk free. There, I have taken away even that excuse to kill me. You have no enlightened self-defence, no principles to stand on but simple moral outrage. You cannot kill me, because you refuse to become anything other than a human be-"

The stocky cultist lunged to tackle me.

Lozzie leapt to her feet, yanked the hidden scalpel out of her sleeve, and landed on the cultist like a mad pixie. I think she got the knife into his throat, but it all happened too fast for me to react. They went down in a tangle of limbs and slippery spurting blood. I flinched and shied away so hard I almost tripped over my own feet.

Alexander sighed. He snapped three words in some angular, painful non-human language, a command at Zheng.

With almost superhuman effort, through blood clogging my nose and dimming vision, I interrupted him – by pulling the glow stick out of my hoodie's pocket and hurling it at his face. I missed, badly. It sailed past him, but distracted him just enough, made him trip over a syllable.

"You will *not*!" Alexander screamed at the last second.

Then I let go.

This was no reflex, no scramble of self-defence, no fumbling in the ineffable dark. I lashed out with hyperdimensional mathematics fully conscious of what I was doing, after almost a minute and a half of painstaking, bleeding, brain-burning work. I made a *decision*, eyes wide open, and I followed it through.

Heat, light, and a god-awful tearing noise – perhaps a hiss of superheated air, I never figured it out. A backwash of oven-heat, a millisecond of sharp blue glow.

It hit Alexander like a train.

I barely understood that moment of destruction. It was so fast, too fast, and my vision was already throbbing and edged with black.

A terrible sound deafened me – the instant shattering of every bone in a human body, the floor around Alexander cracking into a million shards, the stool he'd been sitting on splintered to nothing, the table next to him smashed aside. A wrecking ball of invisible force flung a pulped bloody wreck against the back wall of the throne room, smashed the wall itself open, and carried what was left of Alexander Lilburne out into the grey fog and down over the side of the castle.

Wish I'd heard the splat.

I blacked out before I'd even begun to fall over.

In that last moment of shock and release, with the throne room spinning around me and my head splitting open with white-hot fire, with vomit forcing its way up my throat to choke me, I had only one thought.

I win.

= =

I was out cold when my friends burst into the room, but I'm told it was suitably dramatic.

= =

Pain rolled in the pit of my stomach, torturing me back to consciousness. My eyes were gummed shut. My mouth tasted of iron and bile.

I was collapsed forward against a warm, firm surface, my neck lolling, legs dangling, something digging into the underside of my thighs. I was jerked to one side then the other, the sensation of motion, stopping, moving again. No energy to roll sideways, no energy to even moan. Muffled voices trickled through my dulled senses. Angry shouting, a huge clang of metal, a grunt.

The reason I didn't panic is because I could smell Raine.

Her sweat, mostly. Realisation filtered through the brain-fog; she was carrying me on her back.

"That's enough. That'll do for them." Evelyn, snapping, nearby.

“One more!” Twil, shouting through too many sharp teeth.

A loud twisting tear of metal, nails down a blackboard.

I fought the aching muscles and the crust of blood around my eyes. Cracked my eyelids a millimetre or two, vision painful and blurry. Thick grey fog and copied Sharrowford buildings swirled and swam.

We were outside the castle, beyond the cult’s barrier of occult bollards. A dozen of the squat metal poles had been ripped out of the ground and strewn about. A wolfish form was busy uprooting another one. Twil. She ripped it from the ground and hurled it at indistinct figures in the fog.

I tried to move my eyes and suffered a wave of nausea for my efforts. I don’t know if it’s possible for an optic nerve to hurt, but mine did. I stared at what I’m pretty sure was Praem. She held a smaller figure in a double arm-lock.

“Twil, come on,” Raine said, right next to my head.

Parted my lips. Throat was so raw.

“ ... -one ... okay?”

“Heather?” Raine turned her head, but she couldn’t meet my eyes at this angle. Her profile was so clear through the haze. “Heeey, you’re awake. She awake? Lozzie, her eyes open?”

A small elfin face bobbed into my vision. I stared, half dead inside, unable to muster a reaction.

“Uh huh! Hey Heather!” Lozzie said. I managed to blink, once.

“ ... okay?” I hissed again.

“Yeah. That would be a yes,” Raine said, loud and clear. “Nobody’s dead. It’s okay, we’re all gonna be okay. We’ll be out of here in no time, I promise.”

“Yaaaay,” I murmured.

I closed my eyes again. I think I may have been delirious.

I was certain I’d passed out, but I felt Raine moving, hurrying, the sound of many footsteps and the clipped anger of a short, tense argument. One voice I didn’t recognise.

A static crackle; a breath of cold against my face; a change of light

behind my eyelids – a sudden blossom of soft warm orange.

“Goddammit all to hell, I don’t know how to close the blasted thing,” Evelyn snapped.

“Break the wall, break the wall, knock it down!” That was Lozzie.

“Right on,” Raine said. “Fuck that wall right up.”

“Me? Ugh, fine,” Twil grunted.

A crack of shattering brick. Somebody let out a huge heartfelt sigh, followed by soft swearing. For a long moment I heard only distant birdsong and the thrum of far-off traffic.

“I trust we’re all in one piece?” Evelyn asked eventually. “Excepting the obvious.”

“Yes ma’am. Present and correct,” Raine said, a grin in her voice.

“Here!” Lozzie chirped.

Twil growled. “Broke my fucking hand. Fuck, that hurts. Urgh.”

Blacked out again for a handful of seconds. Next thing I knew Raine was setting me down, sitting me upright on a cold wooden surface. I groaned and tried my best to cling to her, arms too weak. Couldn’t force my hands to grip. Raine steadied me by the shoulders, brushing my sweat-soaked hair out of my face, touching me to bring me back. I tried to open my eyes again, painful and stinging against the light.

“Hey, Heather, it’s okay, it’s okay. We’re out, we made it out.”

Raine smiled down at me. Her face was side-lit by the apricot and peach light of sunrise, as were the trees behind her and the beautiful arc of the sky and the silken morning clouds. Raine was sweaty and dirty and her hair was a mess and she had a smear of blood – mine – drying on her neck and all down the shoulder of her leather jacket.

“... best thing ... seen all day ... ” I managed. Speaking hurt.

Raine actually laughed, half in disbelief, shaking her head. “You are invincible, Heather. Have I been rubbing off on you?”

I did a tiny shrug and wrapped my numb, weak arms around the pain in my belly and diaphragm. My head lolled, couldn’t keep my

neck straight.

“Hey, hey, hold still for me, love. I need to look at that bruise on your head,” Raine said, soft and coaxing, hands gentle and intimate on my face and forehead.

“Bruise?” I muttered.

Lozzie wriggled onto the bench next to me, warm and close, hands on my back and head against my shoulder.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “Wasn’t fast enough to catch you when you went down. Crack, bang, wallop. I’m sorry, Raine, I’m sorry I hurt your girl. Really, I’m sorry, please-”

“Hey, you stabbed a dude in the throat for her. You’re cool with me, pixie dust.”

Lozzie giggled.

I grunted as Raine gently probed my forehead. I felt for it too, despite her warning, and winced when my questing hand found a bruise the size of an egg. “Ow.”

“Looks worse than it is.” Raine sighed with relief. “Was worried for a minute you’d fractured your skull, but you haven’t. Here.”

Raine rummaged in her jacket pockets and I took a deep breath, forcing it down my raw throat. I struggled to sit up enough to look around, to take in the aftermath of our journey to nowhere. Numb, empty, exhausted, I felt like the living dead.

We were in a park, at dawn, next to a dilapidated children’s play area, with a couple of sad looking plastic slides and a rusty climbing frame. A wall for ball games lay half-toppled into the thin grass, fragments of strange symbols still visible on some larger pieces of shattered brick. Orange dawn glow suffused the line of sheltering trees and the distant rooftops beyond. A few spirits went about their unknowable business, waving tentacles and undulating lizard-skin, stalking through the trees and clambering over the roofs. None of them paid us the slightest attention.

I’d never been so happy to see Sharrowford, or to feel the sun on my face.

Twil lay on her back, spread-eagle on the grass, scuffed and spattered with other people’s blood. She closed her eyes and took a

deep breath, savouring the air. Evelyn steadied herself against the opposite park bench to the one I was sat on, sagging over her walking stick, but she was smiling with grim satisfaction. Praem stood a few feet away, expressionless and prim and straight-backed despite her battered and bruised look, clothes torn and filthy – and there was only one of her. The second body was gone.

She had a young woman restrained in a double arm-lock, the zombie-conductor cultist from the castle, the scrawny woman Raine had shot at and missed. She was wiry and terrified, watching us all, her face bloodied from a punch, cream-coloured robes half twisted off to show jeans and a thin tshirt beneath.

“Here, Heather, try to eat some of this, okay?” Raine said, as she pressed an unwrapped chocolate bar into my numb hands. “Emergency rations, in case you needed to get your jazz on.”

“Good thinking,” Evelyn grunted, though she was staring at Lozzie with a curious frown.

“Hey, I plan for everything. Only thing I’m any good at.” Raine allowed herself a little grin and a wink. I managed a tiny nibble of chocolate. Nodded the smallest thank you. Raine crouched down and peered at my eyes, marvelling at me.

“How are you even conscious right now?” she asked.

“Maybe ... adapting?” I croaked.

“Turning away a bullet required much more complex physics,” Evelyn said. “This time she just hit somebody. Very hard.”

“We won,” I hissed.

“That we did,” Raine said, and her smile lit up my soul.

“That’s right, fuckers!” Twil yelled up at the sky. “You swing at the king, you best not miss.” She trailed off, then heaved herself up into a sitting position. “Anyone recognise where we are? That portal could have come out anywhere.”

“Park,” I croaked. Twil puffed out a token laugh. Lozzie giggled and hugged me tighter, cheek pressed against my own. I didn’t have the energy or heart to tell her that hurt, and the shared body heat felt nice.

“Maybe we’re not even in Sharrowford,” said Twil. “Or in England.

How screwed up would that be?”

Evelyn just sighed.

“You okay?” Raine asked me softly. I nodded more with my eyes than with my head, and Raine straightened up, though she kept one firm hand on my shoulder as she produced her mobile phone. “Let’s ask. Hey Google, where are we?” She waited a beat, then raised her eyes at the map on her phone’s screen. “Oak grove park, apparently, almost out of the city, right on the southern edge. Never been down here myself. Home is ... ” She looked up, oriented herself, and pointed over the trees. “A long walk that way. That over there, I think that’s the old brickworks. And oh, what luck, there’s a police station about five minutes away.” She flashed a smile around. “We really want to run into a bobby on his morning beat right now, yeah?”

“Shit,” Twil said, glancing at the still-terrified cultist woman in Praem’s unyielding grip. “What do we do with surrender monkey here?”

“Don’t-” the woman stammered, her eyes darting back and forth. “Don’t kill me. Please. Please don’t. You don’t want to.”

Evelyn rounded on the captured cultist, still unsteady on her walking stick. “Give me a good reason not to. Making zombies, in my city. I should put you in the ground.”

“I never killed anybody, I never killed anyone.” The cultist shook her head, eyes wide. “I swear, they just trained me and brought me bodies to work with. I never killed anybody. Lauren?” The cultist glanced at Lozzie. “Lauren, tell them, I’m not a murderer. Lauren, please ... please, please.”

Lozzie looked away.

“Is she telling the truth?” Evelyn asked Lozzie.

“Um ... ” Lozzie bit her lip, returned Evelyn’s sudden scrutiny with upturned eyes. “You’re Evelyn, right?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

Lozzie turned her head one way and then the other, the picture of a crazy person distracted by a cacophony of thought – or at least, that’s how she must have appeared to the others. I saw something quite different. She was glancing at the spirit life in the park, at a

pair of canine shapes pacing along the edge of the trees, at squirmy little creatures edging up the children's climbing frame, at a translucent floating squid-thing bobbing through the air.

More spirits than a minute or two earlier.

"Lozzie?" I croaked. "Are these-"

"It's okay, it's okay, they're my friends. My friends," Lozzie whispered for me, and squeezed me again. Then she spoke up, to Evelyn. "I don't care if Flowsie lives or dies, but I don't think she ever killed people."

"See? See? You all heard that, right? You all heard that," the cultist said.

"Flowsie'?" Raine asked with a smirk.

"I-it's not my real name."

"I should still put you in the ground," Evelyn said.

"Uh, hello?" Twil stood up and spread her arms wide. "We're in a park in the suburbs? We gonna leave a corpse here?"

"Yeah, yeah, I-listen to her."

"I can't kill her, Evee," Raine said. "She did surrender. She had zombies left and all, she could have kept fighting, and she led us out. I'm not going to break the Geneva Convention in a Sharrowford Park."

Evelyn let out a slow sigh. "Fine. I still have to do something with her though. We can't just let her go."

"Mmm, fair point." Raine nodded. The cultist woman shuddered as Raine turned to consider her.

"Yeah," Twil said. "Let's just argue about it until a morning jogger comes along, sees six girls covered in bruises and blood. Great plan."

"... you have a life?"

Everyone glanced at me, including the cultist.

"Do you have a life?" I repeated, my voice broken, throat raw, mouth still thick with the taste of blood. I stared at her with exhausted, heavy eyes. I wanted so badly to sleep. She gulped and

stammered, glanced around at the others.

“Don’t look at me,” Raine told her. “The lady of the hour asked you a question, I’d answer if I were you. She’s probably your best chance right now.”

“W-what do you mean?” the cultist stammered at me.

“Other than the cult. A life.”

“T-the brotherhood, you mean?”

“*Brotherhood?*” Twil snorted. “You’re not even a man, dumb ass.”

“I-it’s a figure of speech.”

“I will shove this walking stick up your arse,” Evelyn grumbled.

“How’s that for a figure of speech?”

“A life?” I repeated.

“No. Not ... not really.” She gulped and averted her eyes, sagging in Praem’s grip. “I don’t have ... anybody important, if that’s what you mean. I’m not important. I’m a nobody.”

“ ... real name?”

She blinked at me. Mid-twenties, older? Mousy and scrawny. A little like myself.

“Kimberly,” she muttered.

“Job? Home?”

“I work at Poundland,” she said very quietly.

Raine laughed. “The Poundland Necromancer. Wow. I love it.”

“Go home. Be normal,” I croaked. “Make trouble – I’ll find you, send you Outside. I already killed your boss. You know I can do it to you.”

“Heather?” Raine said my name very softly, but I didn’t look at her.

The cultist – no, Kimberly, a young lady with a poorly paid job and little to live for – stared at me from behind bruises and blood. If I’d been more awake, less exhausted, the look in her eyes would have made me shiver.

Fear and reverence.

She glanced round at all the scary people, Raine and Twil and Evelyn, all people who could kill her, then settled back on me. She nodded. "Thank you," she murmured. "Thank you. I won't- I promise I won't go against you."

Evelyn sighed and shrugged. "Alright, alright. We don't need the whole sob-story. One last thing. The big zombie, she didn't stop moving with your other ones. Why?"

"W-what? I don't ... I don't understand."

"Zheng?" I croaked, frowning as I realised. The giant zombie woman wasn't here with us. Of course she wasn't.

"She jumped straight out that hole you made," Lozzie said. "Right after my brother."

"Ah. Thank you." Evelyn nodded somewhat awkwardly at Lozzie, then turned to the cultist again. "Why did she do that? The others gave up when you did, but we saw her leaving through the fog, going somewhere else. Were you lying to us?"

Kimberly shook her head, shaking against Praem's arm-lock. "Zheng's not mine. S-she's way too much for that, I couldn't make something like her. I-I should be flattered, but- no, we inherited her."

Evelyn raised an eyebrow to Lozzie in silent question. Lozzie nodded. "She came from my parents. They got her somewhere else. Zheng's real old."

"High time we let her go, Evee," said Raine. She was busy rearranging her handgun and knife inside her jacket for proper concealment. "We are in public now, technically. Twil's right."

Evelyn's jaw tightened. "I'm still not happy about this. I need insurance."

"Fine, fine, fine," Raine said, grinning to herself and shaking her head. She stepped away from me and up to the cultist.

Kimberly cringed and tried to pull away, to shrink back from Raine, but Praem held her firm. What had she seen Raine do in that castle, to react like that? She started to shake.

"Hey there," Raine said, still smiling. "I don't even have to say it, do I?"

“No, no no, I won’t- I won’t-”

“I need your address. Phone number. Whatever you got. Hey, don’t worry, I mean you did surrender, right? That was serious, you meant it. Yeah?”

“Yes, yes, yes I swear.”

“Then we’re cool. You and I. We’re cool. Unless you want me to have to find your address by myself. Kind of a bother, you know?”

Kimberly stammered out an address. Raine put it into her phone. Twil crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, muttered ‘psycho’ under her breath.

When it was done, Raine nodded to Evelyn, who sighed again, then then tapped Praem on the leg with her walking stick. Praem let the girl drop.

Kimberly didn’t linger. It probably took every ounce of her courage not to run away from us. She scurried off toward the edge of the park, after stripping off her robe. She balled it up and shoved it into a nearby public bin. She glanced back twice. We watched her go, until she was out of sight.

Twil broke the tension first. She stretched both arms over her head and yawned like a bear. “Well, what do we do now? I’m wiped the fuck out.”

“Dunno about you,” said Raine. “But I could murder some breakfast. I think we’re all in a fine state to go hit up the Aardvark, right?” Evelyn rolled her eyes and Raine relented, grinning. “Okay, serious, it’s time to go home and have a bath.”

“Several baths,” I croaked.

“Are we actually ... you know ... in the clear?” asked Twil. “Is it over?”

Evelyn shrugged at the pile of shattered bricks, the exit point from the cult’s exit gateway. “We’ve wrecked their containment, ruined their fortification, killed all their stockpiled zombies, and Heather apparently blew up their leader. So, maybe.”

“Easier than the first time we killed a mage, right?” Raine cracked a grin. Evelyn shot her a look that could have frozen a lava flow.

I opened my mouth. I needed to tell them all about what I’d seen

below ground, about the star in the abyss, about the cages and the corpses, but I was too tired to confront all that right now. “Um ...”

“Heather saw more,” Lozzie said.

Slowly, gently, after hugging me softly, Lozzie climbed to her feet. I tried to hold on as her hands slipped away. Didn’t want her body heat to part from mine. Perhaps I knew, deep down, what she was thinking.

With clumsy but heartfelt formality, she bowed her head to all my friends. “Thank you, thank you, for coming for me.”

Raine lit up with the kind of smile she usually reserved for me, and to my surprise she reached out and ruffled Lozzie’s filthy hair. “S’what I do. Any friend of Heather’s is a friend of mine.”

Lozzie beamed back at her.

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “Yes, certainly. This has been quite the enigma. Heather?”

I made a grumbling noise in my throat. Evelyn didn’t seriously expect me to explain all this right now, did she? She fixed me with a pinched frown, then seemed to get the message, shrugging to herself.

“Hold up a sec.” Twil said. “Who exactly the hell is this?”

“I’m Lozzie! Hi!” She beamed at Twil. “You’re the werewolf, right? That’s so cool!”

“Oh, uh, thanks.” Twil couldn’t keep a smirk off her face.

“Long story,” I mumbled.

“Yeah, I figured,” said Twil.

“One I think we all need to hear,” Evelyn said, her voice a little tighter than I could deal with right now. “At home, not here in a bloody park.”

“Right you are.” Raine put her hands on her hips. “We gonna walk home, or ... hmm.” She cocked an eyebrow, took in our bloody, battered little group. Lozzie and Praem were the worst, splattered with drying blood, and Twil wasn’t far off. God alone knows how bad I looked. Besides, there’s no way I could walk, and Evelyn looked pretty unsteady too. “Guess not, huh? I could call a taxi,

make some poor driver's week when he sees us rocking up."

Lozzie was glancing back and forth between Raine and myself and the others, her mouth hanging open a little, eyes still heavy-lidded but widened in some private realisation. Evelyn noticed, nodded toward her.

"She doesn't have anywhere to go. Does she?"

"Sure she does," Raine countered, smiling at Lozzie. "You're coming with us, no question about it. You are five hundred percent welcome. Right, Evee?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Right."

Lozzie stepped away from the bench and onto the grass, leaving petite little footprints in the morning dew. She turned, looked over all of us, chewing on her lower lip and then gnawing on a ragged fingernail.

"Oh, oh ... I didn't ... I didn't think ... "

"... what's wrong?" I managed.

She scampered back to me and threw her arms around my shoulders. She hugged me tight enough to hurt a little, and I did my best to return the embrace, my arms still weak and shaky.

Lozzie sniffed into my shoulder, and I realised she was holding back tears.

She pulled away and planted a quick, hesitant kiss on my cheek. Not a romantic kiss, nothing erotic about it at all. A fleeting touch of intimacy.

"I have to go," she said.

"... what?"

"Aren't you coming with me, Heather?" I heard the catch in her throat. She tried to smile but only got halfway there, a strange melancholy fighting with her natural twitchy energy.

Slowly, dull and half-dead, I shook my head, wishing I didn't understand. But I knew exactly what she meant, all too well.

She slid out of my arms, stood up and stepped back, still trying to smile. She curled her bare toes into the grass.

"I have to go," she repeated louder, then took a deep breath and smiled up at the sky. "I think. Yeah, yeah I think I do need to. You killed my brother, and ... thank you, Heather. Thank you, all of you. I'm free now. Thank you." She sniffed and wiped brimming tears on the back of her hand, and looked round as the spirit life began to approach her.

Lozzie smiled at the warped hound-things which padded out of the tree line, trotting across the grass to sit at her heels. She held out a hand to the half-dozen squirming, wriggling bundles of chitin and claw that scaled her pajama legs and up her back to perch on her shoulders. She turned to welcome the bobbing jellyfish crowding around her head. She murmured soft little words to them all, but the picture was incomplete without the goat skull mask over her face.

The others glanced between her and I, by turns confused or tense, because of course they couldn't see what I was seeing. Twil pulled a face like this was crazy, but I think Evelyn and Raine had some idea what was happening.

"Go? Where?" Evelyn asked, frowning sharply.

"Yeah, hey, what's going on here?" Twil asked.

"You mean Outside, don't you?" said Raine.

Lozzie and I both nodded.

"Beyond!" Lozzie lit up with this huge beaming smile which failed to cover the sadness beneath. "Are you sure you don't want to come? Heather?"

I opened my mouth and couldn't answer. No, no, of course I didn't want to – but deep down inside, I understood the desire. After so many dreams together, so many wondrous places, I got it.

"Why? Why not stay here?" Evelyn asked. I saw her fingering the carved thighbone in one hand. Raine tilted her chin, waiting patiently.

"Because I'm not really meant to be here," Lozzie said. She took a deep breath, filled her lungs as she looked up and around, at the beautiful morning glow breaking over Sharrowford. Her long, shuddering sigh and the melancholy of her forced smile cut me right to the quick, even through the exhaustion. "It's so lovely, it

really is, but ... I'm like a deep sea fish too close to the surface."

"No. Lozzie, no," I managed to croak at her. She looked at me, then around at the others again, and I could feel her wavering.

"Besides," she shrugged. "My uncle will be after me now. I couldn't bear to be caged again. I need to fly."

"Uncle?" Evelyn growled softly.

"Mhmm," Lozzie nodded, distracted by the spirits clustered to her, her idle hand trailing down to rub the head of one of the nightmare hounds at her feet. "The rest of the brotherhood will go to him now, probably. The followers, you know. He probably took control of Zheng, too, that's why she didn't ... *couldn't*, follow me." She swallowed, shook her head gently, holding back tears.

"There's another mage?" Evelyn asked through gritted teeth.

"Evee," I managed, waving a mute hand at her to shut up. Lozzie blinked at her.

"Um ... kind of. He's not like my brother. My brother was the brains but my uncle was the organiser. He always found the recruits, the bodies, the ... the kids," she whispered, then tried to smile. "He'll be after me now, and he's already seen all of you once, when he tracked Maisie's messenger. If I stay here ... "

I opened my mouth to say a dozen different things.

"Where can I find him?" Evelyn said, hard and cold.

"Ahh?" Lozzie blinked. "You've all seen him before. In that parking garage." She turned her head to pay attention to another little spirit on her shoulder, a cross between a squirrel and a bat, tiny teeth bared as she tweaked its nose.

Evelyn pinched the bridge of her nose. "Great. Fucking great."

"Evee," Raine said softly.

"Where is he?" Evelyn demanded. "Is he in Sharrowford?"

"I don't know. I think so. His name's Edward, a Lilburne like me. He never cared about my brother's stupid project." Lozzie shrugged. "He's good at finding things, finding people, but now I can go to places he can't follow. Tell him the truth, when he finds you. He'll leave you alone."

She was trying to convince herself. I could hear the struggle in her voice – I suspected all this stuff about her uncle was mere justification.

Part of her wanted to go, part of her wanted to stay. Two natures in one body.

“We can protect you,” Raine said, not missing a beat. “Take a moment, look at us – or hell, just at me. It’s what I do. Like I said, any friend of Heather’s is a friend of mine.”

“Yeah, like to see this fucker try,” Twil said, cracking her knuckles.

“Damn straight,” said Raine.

Evelyn grunted.

But Lozzie shook her head. She backed up another step across the damp grass, forcing herself away from us with the spirits trailing in her wake.

“Thank you. I know. I know you could. But I still have to go. I don’t belong here.” She pulled a weak smile, then seemed to hesitate for a moment.

“ ... only just found you,” I whispered.

Lozzie met my eyes – and lit up, a real smile, with a spark of joy underneath. She raised her arms to encompass the whole world, sending spirits scattering and scampering.

“Heather, I can help you now! I can go everywhere! Anywhere! You helped me, you freed me, and now I’m going to help you and Maisie.”

I shook my head.

“But I want to!” she continued. “There’s places I can go that you don’t even know about, Heather, places in the beyond. Outside. Places I can’t take anybody else, not even Zheng, because I’m not really human anymore, you know? I haven’t been since that thing used my head as a life raft. There’s things I can talk to, questions I can ask, help I can enlist, for you. Please? Please Heather, please let me help.”

If I’d been whole and well-rested, I would have stopped her, stood up and grabbed her and held on tight. Lozzie was a very special kind of friend, and I didn’t want her to go alone into dark places.

But in that moment, listening to all her justifications and reasons and excuses to leave humanity behind and go Outside, through my exhaustion and the echoing pain and the melancholy of her leaving so soon, I saw a vision of myself.

Was I going to end up like that? Torn between being human and – not?

She took my hesitation for agreement. How like her brother, in some ways.

“Oh, Heather.” Her face fell and she shook off her retinue of spirits to run back and hug me one more time. She clung on hard and buried her face in my shoulder. “It’s not like I’m leaving forever or something. Just until it’s safe, until ... until I can help you. I’ll be back, I’ll come back to visit, I promise. Sooner than you think.”

I nodded. Hated myself for it, but I nodded.

Lozzie stood up and danced back into her little crowd of spirits. She turned to us and bowed her head. “Thank you.”

“Stay one day, at least,” Raine said. “You need a bath, a change of clothes. Have dinner with us. Come on, one day won’t hurt.”

“I don’t need any of those things,” Lozzie said, an odd smile on her face, refilled with that twitchy energy.

Twil was just completely lost for words, but to my incredible surprise, Praem had turned to watch as well. She’d bowed her head every so slightly in response to Lozzie’s gesture. I don’t think anybody else noticed, and I only saw it because I was so numb.

“We’ll kill your uncle too,” Evelyn said.

“Please don’t get hurt. I couldn’t bear it if he hurt any of you. Please, please.”

“I’m the one that does the hurting round here,” Raine said. She shot Lozzie a wink. “We’ll be fine. You change your mind in five minutes, tomorrow, next week, you know where to find us.”

Spirit life climbed back onto Lozzie’s shoulders, crowded around her legs, touching her with two dozen pseudopods and feelers and claws and muzzles. She waved to us.

“Bye bye for now. See you later.”

“See you,” I managed.

And then, she simply wasn’t there. The spirits vanished with her.
Outside.

All she left was footprints.

I was too numb to cry.

the other side of nowhere –

4.7

The others stared at the empty space where Lozzie had vanished, at her footprints in the cold morning dew.

Lozzie's departure hurt, yes; I'd always been useless at making friends, and now I'd made one literally in my sleep. But Lozzie had better things to do than spend time with me. Things I didn't want to imagine. Outside things.

That cut me far deeper. Had I seen a vision of my own future, if I kept staring into the abyss?

Too exhausted and numb to face any of that right now, so I just closed my eyes.

Apricot colours of dawn glowed through my closed eyelids, transforming to burnt yellow as clouds veiled the sun. Fingers of crisp cold air brushed my face. Distant sounds of birdsong and the waking city lulled me over the border of sleep for a second or two. One of my friends spoke softly. I was safe now, drained completely, shutting down.

"I'm sure she'll be fine, Heather."

"Mm?"

I forced my eyes open again. Raine sported a rare smile, for her – pained sympathy lurking beneath the confidence, at a loss, a nothing-can-be-done sort of smile. She always knew how I felt, even when I was too tired to feel it myself.

"She seemed like a lot of fun, if you stay on her good side. Hope she comes back to visit soon." The tone in Raine's voice, that shining certainty, almost made me believe it.

"Mm. Sure."

"Uhhh," Twil made the universal noise for utter bafflement. "What the fuck did we just see? Where'd she go?"

“Outside,” I grunted.

“ ... Outside? Outside *what?*”

“Reality,” Evelyn said with a sigh.

“ ... right. Okay. Okay then. “ Twil nodded to herself, very much not okay. She sucked on her bloody knuckles, where her torn flesh had finished re-knitting. “Fuck me.”

“No need to swear,” I grumbled, then let my heavy eyelids close once more.

Somebody let out a huge sigh. Somebody else flapped their arms. My body ached for sleep, and I didn’t care that I was on park bench, covered with my own blood and vomit.

“Right then ladies and demons,” Raine said, “if there’s no last-minute objections, I’m going to call a taxi.”

Twil snorted. “Yeah, and the driver’ll call the police the moment he sees us. We look like we’ve been in a slaughterhouse.”

“You have a better proposal?” Evelyn grumbled. “Heather’s not walking home in her state.” A long pause, then a frustrated huff. “All right, all right, and neither am I. I’m in pain, yes. Happy?”

“W-well no, ‘course not. I could ... like ... carry you?”

I didn’t hear Evelyn’s response, but I didn’t need to; the silence spoke volumes.

“Plus,” Twil went on, “what about your ... you know?”

Denied the peace of sleep, I opened my eyes again. Twil was thumbing over her shoulder at Praem.

“What about her?” Evelyn asked.

“She’s *blue*. How you have her walking around in public, I don’t-”

“Do I have to explain basic concepts to you?” Evelyn snapped. She frowned at Twil from beneath furrowed brow. “Nobody sees that unless they’re expecting it. She’s completely fine, she-”

“Doesn’t look so blue to me,” I croaked.

Stopped short, Evelyn blinked several times. “What on earth are you talking about?”

I shrugged my shoulders, or tried to. Seemed obvious. Evelyn's magical servant, the demon from Outside possessing a wooden mannequin, her perfect expressionless face and bloodless wounds, her scuffed clothes, had won some colour. Several hours ago her skin had been like pale ice, but now she had lightened, as if flushed with heat and life underneath the surface.

"Praem's not blue anymore," I mumbled.

Praem turned her face toward me at the sound of her name, the name I'd given her. She merely stared at me. Demons riding dolls or corpses seemed to do a lot of that, I noted.

"Thanks for helping," I managed.

Evelyn peered at Praem with a dark frown. With the panic and chaos of the last few hours, perhaps she'd only noticed the change when I pointed it out.

"Trust me," Raine was saying. "We're miles from the worst a Sharrowford taxi driver's seen. We'll be nice and quiet and polite, nobody has to freak out, and I'll tip a fifty. We stay here any longer and we really are gonna run into somebody."

Twil shrugged. "I guess, whatever. I'm still gonna walk though, I feel fine now."

"You not coming back to the house with us?"

Twil stalled for a second, then puffed out a big sigh.

"Nah, nah. I should ... " She flexed her right hand, looking down at the mended bones, then swallowed and glanced at Raine and me with obvious discomfort in her eyes. "I should go tell my uh ... my mum ... about all this. Family needs to know, you know?"

"You sure?" Raine asked. "You alright doing that?"

Twil shrugged. "Been a busy day. I should go home."

Evelyn turned that dark frown away from Praem and hit Twil with the full force of her glare. "If your mother – or the thing riding along in her head – gives you the slightest bit of trouble about what happened yesterday, then you can bloody well tell her that I ... " Evelyn stalled out, mouth half-open. She took a second to gather herself and looked away. "That I've always got a spare room for you." She glanced back at Twil, frowning up a storm.

“Understand?”

“Aww, Evelyn!”

Evelyn could not match werewolf speed. Twil pulled her into a heartfelt hug, though Evelyn did her best to resist.

“Get off me, you mongrel!”

Twil laughed and let her go, darting away to avoid the rap of Evelyn’s walking stick against her ankles. “You didn’t mean that.”

“Don’t push your luck,” Evelyn snapped.

Twil grinned. “You love me really.”

“I love all of you,” I said before I realised I was speaking.

Perhaps it was the exhaustion talking.

= =

Recovery was ghastly. To kill Alexander Lilburne, I’d pushed my grasp of hyperdimensional mathematics right to the limit, and this time the aftermath lacked the merciful unconsciousness of a fugue state.

Still, after we got home that morning – and got clean, though Raine had to hold me upright in the shower – I slept for fifteen hours straight.

Lethargy and the ghost of nausea haunted me for a full week, along with the chronic pain of stubborn headaches, fluttering tremors inside my chest, stomach cramps and muscle weakness. Raine encouraged me to dip into Evelyn’s private stash of painkillers, and I did, more than once. The hard stuff, the codeine and others, provided at least some relief. Evelyn and Raine had a hushed argument about drug dependency when they thought I was out of earshot, and about how to find me some cannabis on the university campus, though Raine knew I would never take that.

I caught myself staring into space or at the kitchen tabletop for minutes on end, or trailing off in mid-sentence until Raine said my name, my mind defragmenting itself after too much intimacy with the mathematical truth of reality. I shuffled around that creaking old house like a real zombie. Once I blanked out on the toilet for almost fifteen minutes.

On the fifth day Raine had a bright idea. She stuck a favourite book in front of my nose – *Watership Down* – and forced me to read it to her out loud.

She sat and listened for as long as I needed, until mechanical repetition of words shaded with the delight of the story, and of sharing it with her. That seemed to do the trick.

By the end of the week I was uncomfortably well reminded that I had an end-of-term essay due soon, on either *King Lear* or Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I chose *Lear*, popped more painkillers, and did my best to focus. Stubborn old men and bloody intrigue I could deal with. Imaginary realms full of sucking fog and personifications of death, not so much right now.

I told Raine and Evelyn everything, of course.

About Lozzie, about the dreams I'd been having and forgetting for weeks, about what I saw underground in the cult's castle, the corpses and the bound god in the abyss – Evelyn didn't seem surprised about the sacrifices. She'd seen that sort of thing before, I suppose, from the sharp end. I explained what happened in the throne room, what Alexander and I had discussed, but I couldn't express why I'd needed to prove him wrong.

It touched too closely on the wound of Lozzie's departure, on why I'd needed to remain myself.

"Don't tell me you feel *guilty* about it?" Evelyn had asked, frowning at me over the kitchen table.

"No. Not guilty, just ... " I'd shaken my head, hesitated over what to say.

"Of course she doesn't," Raine answered for me, rubbing my shoulders from behind. "Pure self-defence, right? It was you or him, when it came down to it. You absolutely did the right thing, Heather. And hey, if you hadn't done for him, I would have shot him in the mug about twenty seconds later, so in a sort of way you never really had a choice. Think about it like that, if it helps."

"Killing him was the only solution," Evelyn had grumbled, waving a dismissive hand. "Too far gone, a mage like that. Left him alone and he'd have come for us sooner or later."

It wasn't self-defence, and it wasn't about removing a threat, not to

me; I withered inside under Raine's emotional support and Evelyn's practical justifications.

Raine had rescued my notebook of hyperdimensional mathematics, scooped it up from the floor of the throne room at the last minute, after she'd pulled my unconscious body onto her back. When she returned it to me I almost couldn't accept the thing, half hateful, half a source of strength, but it was merely a symbol of what I carried in my head.

Here was the instrument by which I might save my sister; here was the abyss in which I might lose myself.

When I was no longer quite so exhausted, Raine and I spent a quiet few hours refreshing the Fractal on my left arm, watching cartoons together. I relished the alone time, the attention, the slow intimate touch of her hands, and especially the part when she made me put my head in her lap – but there was a distance between us now, a barrier.

Lozzie dominated my thoughts.

She felt like a dirty secret I'd kept from Raine.

How responsible was I, for the convenient amnesia after every shared dream? Even the real Lozzie, bruised and dirty and twitchy, possessed an undeniable elfin beauty. I didn't think I was attracted to her, she wasn't my type, but how much had that beauty, that intimacy, influenced me? My secret bit on the side. Made me sick.

One night that week I woke from a dream about her. We'd been building a sandcastle together, an elaborate citadel of crumbling spires and collapsing gatehouses, and had watched hand-in-hand as the sea rolled in to lay siege to our work. I'd woken with tears on the pillow, and realised she hadn't visited me. Just a normal dream.

Raine wanted to know everything about her, in total innocence she just wanted to know about my friend. And I couldn't explain what it had felt like to see Lozzie for real, those minutes together underground, the need to hug her and know she was real. A weird, twisted little part of myself *wanted* Raine to be jealous, wanted her to suspect the worst of me, wanted her to claim me as hers all over again to absolve me.

Instead, she'd never been so attentive. Bringing me food, coaxing me to sleep, massaging away the aches and pains. She helped me

with the end-of-term essay, listened to my woefully pedestrian undergraduate ideas, encouraged me and told me I was getting better. She was so gentle with me, too gentle, but I didn't have the words to tell her what I needed.

Stupid, selfish Heather. So focused on myself, I didn't spare a thought for what was going on in Raine's head, for why she followed me everywhere, why she needed me to fall asleep before she could, why sometimes I found her sat up listening to the sounds of the night.

= =

Autumn guttered, blew out, and winter cold descended.

Tenny didn't seem to feel the chill or the rain. I went to see her a couple of times in the overgrown back garden, with Raine by my side. She didn't respond to questions about Lozzie, didn't seem to be much perturbed by our brief absence, too busy exploring and probing with her tentacles, waving the slowly regrowing stubs at me. I watched her capture a vole or a shrew, hold it immobile on the ground, turn the terrified thing over and over in her tentacles, before gently letting it go again. Her presence had driven off most of the other spirit life around the garden and the patch of street immediately in front of the house. Her territory now.

The cult really was gone; I began to suspect Lozzie's mysterious uncle didn't exist. Evelyn had repaired Praem and sent her into the city every day, investigating the cult's little pocket dimensions and loops and hidden passages, but they were all collapsing like shrinking cysts, vanishing into whatever layer of reality they'd been carved from. The main pocket remained – the wound around the cult's captured god – but in Evelyn's delightful metaphor it had 'gone native'. Not a place for unprotected human beings anymore.

Evelyn asked very little about Lozzie. I failed to realise how little she was talking to me. Chalked it up to her focus on Praem's odd changes.

I should have noticed the warning signs.

Twil came round to visit once, not for any special reason. That brightened the day. Not because of the silly werewolf herself, but for Evelyn's reaction, the surface bristling which I suspect even Twil herself was beginning to find rather transparent.

I tried not to think too much. I reread King Lear and added to my essay, went to the library with Raine to look up reference books.

She encouraged that. It got me out of the house, got fresh air in my lungs, worked the weakness out of my legs, occupied my mind with something I loved. Wrapped up in my coat and that beautiful pink hoodie she'd bought me, scarf around my neck against the cold, she never let me go alone. Things were returning to normal – whatever 'normal' meant anymore.

How could I read books and walk around, eat breakfast and pretend everything was normal, after a night spent in a pocket dimension full of zombies and monsters and atrocities, after killing a wizard with my mind?

What else could I do? I didn't want to fail a class, so I worked. It was that or curl up in bed and never leave. Once, I would have thought that a real option.

I knew in a few weeks I'd have to tackle the brainmath again, think about Lozzie, take charge and sit my friends down and talk about the plan. But for now, I needed to rest.

Of course, if you knew anything about me, you knew the library was the most likely place to find me, other than at home.

So that's where they found me.

= =

A quiet corner desk on the third floor of Sharrowford University Library, flanked on one side by a pitted concrete support column and the open vista of windows looking over the back of campus. The gentle rustle and soft footsteps of the library at mid-morning. Buzzing strip lights compensating for the overcast gloom. One of my favourite spots.

Raine was nearby, maybe fifteen or twenty feet away, off somewhere between the library stacks. She was looking for a book she needed for her own university work. I wasn't paying attention. She'd come get me if she needed to go much further away. I had two books open on the desk in front of me: *Reading Lear* and a literary journal with a fascinating essay called *Dragon Fathers and Unnatural Children*.

I was turning a page of the latter, mentally drafting the conclusion

to my essay, when I happened to glance up. Why? I think it called me, lurking in my peripheral vision.

A tiny goat statue on the opposite side of the desk. A hateful little thing with a twisted satyr face, looking at me with pewter eyes.

Hadn't been there when I'd sat down.

To my credit I didn't freeze up. My heart leapt into my throat, but I turned, about to call out for Raine, her name on my lips – but I stalled for half a second, damned by library etiquette. Had I ever raised my voice in a library? Surely not. Oh dear.

In that half second, a person cleared their throat, right behind me.

Well, yes, *then* I froze up.

A woman stepped into my field of vision, at arm's length from me – old raincoat over an athletic top, layers failing to conceal the flow of wiry muscle beneath. Cheap tattoos peeked out from her neckline and on her exposed wrists. She picked up the goat statue from the table with her good left arm. Her right was encased in a plain white orthopedic cast with the hand left free, her raincoat's arm hanging slack because she couldn't get the cast through the sleeve. A shaved head nodded a greeting to me, and I met the cold, flint-hard eyes of Amy Stack, the Sharrowford Cult's skinhead assassin.

"Alright?" she murmured, at proper library volume.

I hiccuped. My eyes flickered toward where I thought Raine was standing. Couldn't see her, she was on the other side of the library shelves, visible only as the corner of a leather jacket.

"Relax," Stack said. "I'm not here for a fight."

I felt like a mouse in front of a snake. Frozen solid but vibrating inside, preparing to launch myself from my chair and scramble away. Would I make it? Should I shout for Raine? I was still weak, stuffed with painkillers, and Stack radiated that slow potential for violence, that economy of movement so similar to Raine, that wound-spring effect in every muscle.

"How dare you?" I hissed, and surprised myself. "This is a library. I am trying to work."

She blinked at me, once. Point scored.

My anger surprised me – I'd clung to essay writing and literary

theory this last week because it was solid, it was certain, it was something I'm good at, something not magical or full of monsters or so dumb it shouldn't exist.

"Caught you at a bad time?" she asked.

"*Quite*. And you are not a student. Do you even have a library card?"

"... no, I don't."

"Then you're not supposed to be in here." A tremor in my voice. Chest constricted, palms sweaty.

Stack stared at me like I was the idiot. Then she nodded very slightly. "Fair enough. I won't come back again."

"See that you don't."

"We need to talk. You here alone?"

I shook my head.

"That's good. Call your friends then." She inclined her head. "Saye?"

"No, Raine."

A slight frown. "Who's that?"

"The woman you tried to shoot." Oh, how I relished those words. I wish they'd had more effect on her. She raised her eyebrows in mild interest.

"Call her then."

"Raine," I said at normal volume, broke the most cherished library rule. Then I hiccuped again.

Raine heard it in the way I said her name. She was round the end of the shelves in two strides, her eyes taking in Stack and myself and the distance between us with a single glance. One hand slid inside her jacket before Stack could open her mouth.

"Not here!" I hissed. "Not in the library!"

Raine paused, eyes glued to Stack, and tilted her head in silent question. Stack stared back at her, eyebrows raised, unconcerned, or at least pretending unconcern.

Like watching a pair of tigers sizing each other up.

Even now, flushed with adrenaline, part of me filed away that look on Raine's face, in the sort of mental folder one only opens in private. I wanted her to look at me like that.

Slowly, carefully, each movement wide and exaggerated, Stack turned out her pockets to show they were empty, rolled up her right sleeve, and lifted the hem of her top to reveal her empty waistband, turning once to prove she had nothing tucked into the back. Then she nudged the opposite chair away from the desk, and sat down, staring at Raine the whole time.

"Just here to talk."

Raine watched her a second longer, then crossed to me, touched my shoulder, and asked a silent question with her eyes. I nodded and swallowed, and Raine dragged over a chair from the desk behind us.

She placed it forward of me, between Stack and I, then adjusted it again, forward by another couple of inches. She sat down very slowly. Posturing. I would have rolled my eyes at any other time, but right now she was perfect.

Stack watched Raine with strange interest. "You're like me, aren't you?"

"Eat me, baldie," Raine said in a soft murmur. "Let's get something real clear, just between me and you. Forget her for a sec," Raine gestured at me. "I'm not like you, I'm not like you at all."

Stack raised her eyebrows. "S'that what you think? You're in denial."

"See, you've got it all turned around. It's not that I'm like you. That's a fundamental misunderstanding, a category error." Raine broke into a grin. Not the sort of grin she used on me. A different type, one that made my skin crawl. "The similarity between you and I, that's because you're a very, very, *very* little bit like me."

Stack nodded slowly. "Interesting theory."

"Stop it, both of you," I hissed. "A psychopath penis measuring contest, really?"

Raine just grinned wider. Stack shrugged her shoulders.

“Only here to talk,” she said.

“Yeah?” asked Raine. “So who are we talking to? You?”

“My boss.”

“I punted your boss through a wall,” I managed, and felt much better for saying it, though I followed the words with a loud hiccup when Stack stared at me. I made a point of nodding at the cast on her left arm. “I broke all of his bones, instead of just one.”

“New boss, same as the old boss,” Stack said. I didn’t have a comeback to that, and Raine just stared her down – amazingly, it worked. After a moment, Stack let out a sigh and looked out the window. “Yeah, there’s been some restructuring. You know, change of management. Change of goals. I work for a slightly different person now.”

“Edward Lilburne,” Raine said, grinning as Stack turned to look at her. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

Amy shrugged. “He doesn’t want to meet you. He’s a coward.”

“Really now?” Raine raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah.”

“Funny way to talk about your boss.”

They stared at each other again, and this time I really did roll my eyes. “Amy, can I call you Amy? What does your boss want?”

“Couple of things,” she said, taking a deep breath and leaning back. “First one’s for you. Where’s Lauren?”

“She’s gone Outside.”

Amy’s eyes scrunched up in this weird tight quirk, like she hadn’t quite heard me right. A pinch of a frown, a little disbelief, almost a touch of fear, if she hadn’t been incapable of feeling that emotion.

“Pardon?” she murmured.

“She left,” I said.

“Buggered right off,” Raine added.

“Mm. Alright. Second question’s for Evelyn Saye. Wanna call her here?”

Raine snorted a humourless laugh. "If you want her to torture you to death, sure. She'll do it. She's crazy, our Evee. Better pray you don't bump into her."

"Fine. Can we coexist?"

Raine and I actually shared a glance. I shrugged. Raine straightened up and sat back, let out a long theatrical sigh and stroked her chin. It was quite the performance, but it was wasted on Amy Stack as an audience.

"Not really up to me, that one," said Raine. "I'm not the one in charge here."

"Where's Zheng?" I blurted out.

Amy turned her slow regard on me.

"Yeah, Heather's more in charge than I am," Raine murmured. "You wanna make a deal, might be best to do it with her. She can bite your head off, you know."

"The zombie's done a runner," Stack said. "Not a peep."

"... are you lying?" I asked.

Stack shrugged, wide and eloquent. "Doesn't make any difference to you either way. This next part is between me and you, alright?" She looked at Raine, then back at me. "Or between me and Saye, take it however you like. My new boss probably isn't going to mess with you. He's scared shitless of Saye, and terrified of you, miss ... Morell, right? Not Lavinia."

"Yes. I'll thank you not to use my middle name, please."

She nodded. "He won't even risk a phone call via my cell, in case you or Saye do something with sound, fry his brain or whatever. I don't pretend to understand half of it, playing with fire if you ask me. He doesn't really expect me to return from this little meeting."

"Oh, I think we could prove him right on that count," Raine said.

"I think otherwise," Amy said gently. "You can even follow me when I leave here, but I've got instructions not to meet up with the rest of them, not for the next three weeks, and not in Sharrowford city limits. They're too afraid. You broke 'em. So, I think we can all coexist. Get me?"

"They?" I echoed. "Aren't you one of them?"

Amy shrugged.

"You kept well out of that whole castle thing, didn't you?" Raine murmured.

"Only been there once. I'm no idiot."

"Oh? No? Could'a fooled me."

"Still alive, aren't I?"

"Point," Raine said.

"I don't think we can coexist," I said very quietly, dredging up that core of conviction I'd felt in the castle, during those slow, numb minutes underground. "Edward Lilburne, Lozzie's uncle, he was ... responsible, for what was in the castle, wasn't he?"

Stack raised her eyebrows. I just stared at her – no small feat, looking back into those stone-hard eyes. My heart fluttered and my stomach tightened, but I held her gaze. Eventually she sighed and nodded.

"S'a pity," she said.

"Here's what's gonna happen," said Raine, and scooted her chair even closer to Stack. "You come against us again and I'll kill you."

"Obviously."

"No no, I don't mean I'll fight you and win, or stab you to death or something. I owe you. Shooting at me, eh, I can forgive that. Kidnapping my girl, that's different. I'll find where you sleep, or who your family are, or maybe you have a kid."

Stack actually smiled, and a little puff of laughter escaped her. "You can try."

"Or maybe you don't care about anything except yourself." Raine spread her hands. "I can work with that too."

"I'm sure you can."

Slowly, making no sudden movements, Stack got out of the chair and stood up. She nodded once to me, and once to Raine.

"Sit and swivel, slaphead," Raine said.

“Same to you.”

She stepped away from the table, and without looking back, stalked off between the library shelves, light-footed despite the boots on her feet.

Raine and I watched her go. I didn’t breathe again until she vanished toward the stairwell, behind too many books.

“Are you ... are you going after her?” I asked, swallowing on a very dry mouth.

“Nah, s’pointless. She wasn’t lying.” Raine sighed and looked at me. “Oh, Heather, hey, hey, it’s fine, we’re fine.”

She leaned over and wrapped her arms around me. I was shaking very badly, my breathing unsteady. My heart was hammering at a hundred miles an hour.

“I’m okay, yes, I’m okay,” I lied, then hiccuped. “That was kind of scary.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was.”

Raine rubbed my back and held on for a while, then let me go so I could gather up my dignity. I concentrated on closing the book I’d been reading, and on placing both my hands flat on the tabletop to stop the shaking. Raine reached over and squeezed one of them.

“We need to tell Eevee about this,” I said. “What- what do we do now? I thought that was the end of them, I thought ... ”

“How much of that essay you got left?”

“I ... I’m sorry, what? Raine?”

She looked right at me and repeated the question, completely unshaken, as if this was exactly the right thing to talk about after a brush with an assassin. I just shook my head.

“Serious question. How much work you got left before you can turn it in?”

“Um ... I don’t know. Maybe four more paragraphs. And then I need to move a few parts around before I proofread it, I’m not happy with the beginning.”

“First draft isn’t the only draft?”

“Raine.” I tutted. “What are you getting at?”

“It’s almost Christmas break. I think we should get out of Sharrowford for a bit, the three of us. Well, four of us if you count Praem, I suppose. Can’t leave her here all by herself, no knowing what a demon riding around in a sex toy will get up to by her lonesome.” Raine lit up, beaming that endless confidence right into my brain.

I shook my head, stunned.

“We’ll go down south, go see where Evee grew up,” she said. “Trust me, you’ll love the place.”

no nook of english ground –

5.1

We'd been southbound on the M1 for about an hour when I nodded off in the back of Raine's car.

She let me sleep until we stopped at a service station on the outskirts of Leicester. Evelyn got out to stretch her muscles in the early December cold and glare at the world; climbing in and out of the car wasn't the easiest thing for her. We all bought terrible petrol station sandwiches and a huge bag of cheese and onion crisps to share. Praem stayed in her seat with her hands folded in her lap, though when we squeezed back into Raine's beaten up old car and pulled back onto the road, the doll-demon turned her head to stare at the passing farmland and skeletal winter trees.

There wasn't much else to see on the motorway, the endless asphalt ribbon carrying us out of the North. I wondered if Praem saw what I did, the pneuma-somatic spirit life infesting every nook and cranny, tentacled masses of flesh dragging themselves along underneath the concrete overpasses, leering wolf-things loping down the hard shoulder, towering giants cresting the horizon between the towns and villages. At one point a moth as big as a bear alighted on the roof of the car in front of us. It watched the sky for a second, antenna twitching, then took off again in a blur of wings.

“Look at that lad, that is a hell of a car. Wonder how much all those mods cost him. Absolute beast. Hey, there's a slogan etched on the back window, what does that say? Heather, you've got the best eyes here, can you read that from back there?”

“ ... ‘The Piewagon’, it says.”

Raine burst out laughing. She slapped the steering wheel.

She'd kept up a heroic one-woman effort at conversation while she drove, and I did my best to help, but Evelyn brooded in dark silence. She'd spoken less than a dozen words all day.

At first it had all seemed an adventure, as we'd taken the winding

route out of Sharrowford's warren of streets that morning, and the grey rotting city had receded in the rear view mirror when we hit the motorway. This was the kind of adventure that university students were meant to have, a road trip in a rickety but reliable old car, a few changes of clothes in the boot, and the company of real friends. Stiff legs from sitting too long, cold hands tucked up into my sleeves, on a journey together that was neither dangerous nor suicidal. Normal. Explicable. Safe.

I didn't understand the first thing about cars, but even I could tell that 270,000 miles on the clock was rather high, even for what Raine had affectionately called an 'old banger'. But her driving made me feel perfectly safe. She was defensive, deliberate, decisive. If Raine said it was safe, it was safe.

Safe, yes. Raine was making me feel a lot of that, this last week.

And not much else.

I tried not to think about what that might mean.

Long car journeys were all bad childhood memories for me. Trips to or from the mental hospital, rocking and crying to myself at the things I'd seen following the car. Between hallucinations and blackouts my parents had quite understandably vetoed me learning to drive. My father had driven me up to Sharrowford at the beginning of fresher's week in August, the start of term, and spent a whole day checking out the university with me, making sure I was settled in, that I wasn't on the verge of a relapse. Cars were just another extension of the medicalisation of my life.

Except this trip. This was a road trip with my smoking hot girlfriend, our rich best friend with a family home in the country, and a demon possessing a dubious internet-bought sex doll.

At least, that's what I reminded myself, while the car filled with the tension of Evelyn's black mood and my inexpressible sexual frustration.

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Evelyn had stewed in her foul temper for days, ever since Raine and I had returned from the unexpected confrontation with Amy Stack.

"You did say you'd think about it," Raine had said to her, lounging in a chair by the kitchen table. "And we both know you need some

real down time, as much as Heather does. You've been running yourself ragged for weeks now, and yeah, guilty as charged, I'm sort of responsible for letting you do that. Heather won't let me live it down if I don't stage an intervention sooner or later." She glanced over at me with a grin. "Right? I promise, one hundred percent I won't hold it against you if you disagree. Don't you think we all need five minutes out? We should get out of the city, just for a few days."

"I ... " I was lingering by the doorway, caught between the desire to support my girlfriend and an urge to flee the threatening storm clouds on Evelyn's face. I was still frazzled after the ambush in the library, my mind still on Stack and Alexander, on giant zombies and my missing friend, my Lozzie.

Hadn't quite adjusted yet to the implications of visiting Evelyn's family home down in Sussex.

Evelyn glared from behind a thin barricade of dirty mugs. I believe she was dreaming up ways to murder Raine. Hunched down in her seat, glowering silently, she reminded me of a crocodile lurking beneath the water.

"I'm not so sure," I said eventually, tried to put some steel into my voice. "What if Lozzie tries to contact me, or comes to visit? She won't know where I am."

Raine paused and nodded. She took me seriously, but Evelyn rolled her eyes in a moment of incredulity, one that would needle me for days before I admitted it.

"She can find you in dreams, can't she?" Raine asked.

"I guess she can ... "

She hadn't so far. Not so much as a peep.

"We could leave a letter for her as well, right here," Raine patted the tabletop, then caught Evelyn's glare again. "Loosen your grip for five minutes, Eevee, I'm serious. Come on, we won."

"We *had* won," Evelyn corrected with a snap. "Until you two were accosted by an assassin in the bloody library."

"Hey, she's only an assassin when she's doing the assassinating. Today she was a messenger. A crap one at that."

“From another mage, in my city.”

“Apparently not in the city, like I said,” Raine spread her hands and smiled. “That’s good news, right?”

“You never cease to amaze me. Your stupidity is matched only by your credulousness.”

Raine shook her head and laughed without humour.

I risked Evelyn’s ire by clearing my throat, forced myself to speak when she turned that glare my way. She seemed equally as irritated, no special softening for me. “I think I agree with what Raine said earlier.”

“My condolences to your brain cells,” she grunted.

“*Evelyn.*” I put some gentle scold into my voice

She looked down at her lap with a long suffering sigh. “My leg hurts,” she muttered, scooted her chair back, pulled up her skirt to the middle of her thigh, and set about removing her prosthetic leg in full view. I blinked, taken aback for a moment, unsure if this was a passive aggressive gesture or if she really was in pain.

“Evee, hey,” Raine said, leaning forward, apparently unperturbed by the sight of Evelyn rolling the rubber socket down her thigh, and wiggling her stump out of the black prosthetic knee. “I know why you don’t want to go visit home, and-”

“Do you?” Evelyn snapped without looking up. “Do you really?”

“You two need to stop. Both of you,” I said. “Maybe we can all take a step back and ...” But Raine raised a finger toward me and I trailed off.

She stared at Evelyn. I shut my mouth, frowning and fuming in silent protest – what was Raine pushing for here? The silence stretched out as Evelyn massaged the muscles in her truncated thigh. I thought of a dozen excuses to leave the room. An explosion was brewing.

Eventually, Evelyn glanced sidelong at Raine.

“Yeah, I think I do know why,” Raine said very softly.

“Oh yes,” Evelyn snapped back. “Because my father is just going to love seeing you at the house, isn’t he?”

“S’not about me,” Raine said, just as softly. How she kept her cool in front of that razor tongue, I don’t know.

Evelyn glared for a moment longer, then she finally broke, a hard swallow making her throat bob.

“Hey, it’ll be fine, I promise,” Raine said, that beaming smile slowly breaking across her face. It didn’t seem to work on Evelyn. “We scoured that house from top to bottom, you know it’s probably the safest place in the whole country-”

“Safety there is not the issue,” Evelyn growled.

“And Heather and I are gonna be with you the entire time,” Raine continued. “It’s not like you’ll be by yourself, I’d never make you do that, I’d never even suggest it. I wouldn’t let you even if you wanted to. All three of us, together. Take Praem too, for insurance, or if you need a bed-warmer. It’ll be *fun*, and we don’t have to linger there for long. We can swing by Heather’s parents’ afterward – hey,” she turned to me with a big smile. “I gotta meet your mum and dad sooner or later, haven’t I?”

“Oh.” The bottom dropped out of my stomach. That was far worse than Evelyn’s glare. “Um, I suppose you should. You should.”

“The answer is still no,” Evelyn said.

“And we need to show Heather the map,” Raine said, as if it was an afterthought.

“Ah. The – the map,” I echoed. “I’d forgotten.”

“Evee’s map of the universe. Gonna have to do it eventually, so we may as well kill two birds with one stone. We can peep the map and then chill out, do whatever we want. We don’t even have to stay there more than one night. I promise.”

Evelyn let out a heavy sigh, mood sinking rapidly. “Is that what this is really about? The map? You two go if you must. I’ll call ahead and tell my father you’re coming, he can show you the blasted thing himself.” She shot a dark look at me. “You’ll come running straight back to Sharrowford, trust me. Won’t even make it through the front door.”

Raine laughed. “Evee, Evelyn, I love you, and there’s no way in hell I’m leaving you here alone.”

“Then I’ll invite Twil to stay for a week. How’s that, hmm? Does that satisfy you?” Evelyn snapped. “Will you *allow* me to drop out of your absurd trip then?”

“Twil’s got school, Eevee.”

Evelyn waved a dismissive hand. “I am not leaving Sharrowford when there’s still these vermin infesting my city.”

“We’ll only be gone a few days,” Raine said. “Your spiders have got this house on lockdown, nobody’s getting in here uninvited short of a driving a tank through the front door. You know that, come on Eevee. Stop deflecting.”

“Alright!” Evelyn exploded in Raine’s face. I flinched and could have sworn I jumped six inches back. “I. Do. Not. Want. To. Go. Alright?” She punctuated each word with a jab of her fingertip against the tabletop. “Is that what you wanted to hear? I don’t want to. God. You got me out of there, why make me go back again? I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

Raine adopted an expression I remembered all too well, one I associated with the most emotionally comforting moments of my short life, that unconditional compassion and penetrating understanding, the look she’d used with me in that dirty Sharrowford cafe on a cold and lonely morning. The look that had won me.

If I’d known what she was about to say to Evelyn, I would have hidden behind the door.

“Maybe visiting the grave will help,” she said.

Evelyn’s glare sunk into frozen darkness. For a moment I thought she was about to hurl her prosthetic leg at Raine. I opened my mouth and did my best to save them both, the only way I knew how.

“Eevee,” I said her name as confidently as I could. “Don’t listen to Raine, she’s bullying you and I don’t understand why. You don’t have to come. Twil can keep you company.”

“Heather, I’m not bullying her,” Raine laughed it off. “She-”

“*Raine*,” I scolded.

Evelyn turned that abyssal glare on me. Oh dear, I thought, that

was not what she needed to hear. I've completely misread her and I'm a terrible friend. Her mouth snapped open to bite my head off and I stiffened, ready to take the abuse, let her shout at me – but she stalled at the last moment, trailed off, left it all unsaid.

She seemed to shrink, retreat down inside herself. She covered the stump of her leg with her skirt and stared at the cold mugs on the kitchen table.

"Of course I have to bloody well come. You'll fry your brain without me," she muttered.

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The vibration of my mobile phone woke me up again, just as we were turning off the M25 to take the long dual carriageway down into Sussex, as the London greenbelt sped past under the fitful clouds of the afternoon sky.

I blinked at my phone screen and rubbed my eyes, then started as a follow-up message made it buzz in my hand. I clicked the phone onto silent with an embarrassed glance at my friends in the front seats.

"Why not give her a call right now?" Raine asked, without taking her eyes off the road. "You could pass the phone forward, I'll say hi."

"Absolutely not," I said. She didn't even need to ask who it was from. "You'd say a lot more than just 'hi'. I'd die of embarrassment."

"No way, I'll be on my best behaviour! I could introduce myself, we'll get all the awkward stuff out of the way on the phone. By the time I actually meet your parents they'll be totally adjusted to the idea. I'm serious, call them back."

"I see that grin. I know what that means."

Raine took one hand off the steering wheel and mimed speaking into a phone. I rolled my eyes as she put on her best good-girl voice.

"Good afternoon Mrs Morell, it's lovely to meet you. I'm Raine, yes. Your daughter calls me mommy too."

"*Raine!*"

I blushed terribly and wanted to thump the back of her seat. Raine laughed out loud, but the mirth didn't last, drained away by the tension in the car. Evelyn didn't tell us to knock it off, she didn't even snort with derision or tut under her breath. She just ignored us, staring at the road.

Deep down I knew Raine was trying to help. My stomach churned again when I reread the text messages from my mother.

'Let me know when you get there, dear, and send me the address,' the first message said. The second continued: 'I do wish you'd have told me about these friends earlier. You know how you can get.'

I closed my eyes and resisted the urge to rub the bridge of my nose. Thinking about Raine meeting my parents felt almost as bad as hyperdimensional mathematics.

Two and a half weeks ago I killed an invincible wizard with the power of my mind, and now I was scared of telling my parents I was gay.

"Who cares what your mother thinks?" Evelyn grumbled from the front passenger seat. "She can like it or she can keep it to herself. If your parents won't accept their own daughter they can ..." She trailed off and muttered something under her breath. I think it was 'go fuck themselves'.

That was the most Evelyn had spoken all day. Raine glanced over in obvious surprise. "Hear hear," she added.

I braced for a follow up, but Evelyn folded her arms and slipped back into silence.

"I don't think they'll have a problem," I muttered. "It's just ..."

All very well in principle, but what exactly was I supposed to say to my parents? That I was a lesbian? Okay. That I'd known I like girls since I was eleven years old? So far so good, sure. But that confession was far less daunting than presenting them with Raine. Here's my girlfriend, and yes, you may indeed notice she's obviously and vastly out of my league, and I still don't comprehend what she sees in me, except that having a person to protect appears to press all her buttons. Why yes, I'm regularly overwhelmed like I'm standing next to a raging inferno of pure sexuality.

Oh, that gleam in her eye? Please ignore that she's probably a

psychopath, and occasionally kills people for me. Why yes, I have watched her shoot a man in the head, how did you guess? In fact, in my most private moments I get turned on by the memory of how she moves when she's beating monsters to death. But we haven't had sex in nearly two weeks because suddenly she's handling me like I'm made of spun glass and won't-

My own thoughts juddered to a halt. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the trees and fields passing by outside the car.

Won't *what*? What did I want from Raine?

Did I want her to be Lozzie?

No, no it wasn't that. I didn't *want* Lozzie. I wanted Raine, oh yes, I knew that much, that was easy. Raine was treating me exactly like a responsible person should treat a trauma victim, so why did I feel this way? I couldn't put it into words.

I thought I felt Raine's eyes on me – my guilty conscience – but when I glanced up at the rear-view mirror she was concentrating on the road, still being a sensible driver, doing what we all needed. I sighed inside. I didn't deserve her.

Then I flinched.

Praem was the one I'd felt staring.

The demon-doll was staring down at my phone, reading the message from my mother. Could Praem read? I'd never thought to ask. The phone screen chose that moment to fade to black. Praem tilted her gaze to meet my eyes, wordless and without expression, then turned her head away to watch the landscape roll past.

I didn't find Praem creepy or off-putting, not in the slightest, though I knew I should have. I'd volunteered to sit in the back with her, to give Evelyn more legroom up front. I hardly needed the extra space, I was scrawny enough. I still felt a deep gratitude toward the taciturn demon, for when she'd turned up in time to thwart the cult's attempted kidnapping.

Her inexplicable changes had made it progressively more difficult to keep in mind that she was not a human being.

Ever since we returned from the Sharrowford Cult's pocket dimension, Praem had been changing colour, like a ripening fruit. Evelyn had repaired her wounds with epoxy and wood filler, and

Praem's exterior tactile glamour had fully reasserted itself – but her skin had continued to shift toward fresh healthy pink, her otherworldly blue now a mere underlying pallor. The icebound shade of her hair had lightened into a cold blonde.

Evelyn had spent an evening or two locked away in the ex-drawing room with Praem, trying to bring her to heel or bind her with stronger magic, but it obviously hadn't worked, and Evelyn wasn't talking about it now. The little human-like tics and gestures had only increased in frequency.

Was Praem modelling herself on Evelyn? Aesthetic osmosis?

I chewed on the idea for a while, glad for the distraction, and wondered if Praem was capable of selecting her own clothes. She was dressed for the trip in a turtleneck jumper – which left little to the imagination, she was too busty for it and I did sneak a guilty glance – one of Evelyn's skirts, and some big boots. Her hair was pinned up in a loose bun to keep it out of the way, Evelyn's only concession to humanising her.

Praem must have sensed me staring, because she turned to look at me again with those blank milk-white eyes. Even without pupil or iris I could somehow tell she was looking right at me.

I smiled at her.

"Yes?" she intoned, voice like the resonance of a gently struck icicle.

"What was that?" Evelyn snapped, twisting in her seat to frown at the demon.

"She speaks!" Raine laughed. "How you doing back there, Praem?"

"Doing," Praem echoed.

"Sorry," I said. "It was nothing. I only smiled at her."

"Then don't," Evelyn tutted. "And you keep your mouth shut," she added to Praem.

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"Almost there, aren't we? I don't remember this junction." Raine squinted through the car's windscreen, at the lichen covered road sign by the village crossroads. "Left at the green, then we take the road out toward Little Ropley? S'that right, Evee?"

“Mm.”

“Hear that, Heather?” Raine said over her shoulder. “We’re almost there. You awake?”

“Quite awake, yes.”

No more sleeping for me, I was all napped out. Besides, after we left the main roads the landscape had become too enthralling to miss.

We’d wound through tiny little villages and clusters of houses clinging to the base of the downs, the ridge of hills which dominated the skyline, and then plunged into the deeply wooded parts of the county.

On a map the woods didn’t seem like much, not a real forest. They broke and crested, thinned out and reformed around towns and villages, or opened out entirely into the fields between, strung along ridge tops or huddled in dark copses. One was never really that far away from civilisation anywhere in England, especially in the South, but as tall trees crowded the road they penned the sky into a ribbon of dying light overhead; I could entertain the illusion of being deep in some mythical *uberwald* full of werewolves and fairies.

Of course, I knew the real werewolves shopped for video games in Sharrowford town centre.

Perhaps Raine had been correct, this was exactly the sort of decompression time I needed, to take my mind off Lozzie, off killing Alexander, off everything. But I felt guilty for enjoying the woods, the soft blanket of lowering dusk between the trees, the strange hidden places one might find in the undergrowth.

Evelyn was so obviously dreading our arrival. I could hear the tight hitch in her breathing, feel the discomfort radiating from the seat in front of me as she brooded. We turned off down a country lane between high banks of packed earth, and I leaned forward.

“Evee,” I said, softly. “We’re both here for you. You’re not alone, okay?”

A moment of silence. She shifted in her seat.

“You are not in my good graces right now,” she hissed.

“... me?” I began to say.

Then the trees broke like a wave. The Saye estate loomed out of the gathering gloom, and took away all my words.

Weeks ago, Raine had described it as a ‘great big old farmhouse’, and I’d taken that description to heart. My subconscious had summoned images of thatched roofs and twee little windows, smoke rising from a chimney, set amid neat fields and picturesque hedgerows. Somehow I hadn’t internalised the darker implications – that as a teenager Raine had climbed a wall to get inside, that Evelyn had spent years imprisoned here, that this had been a fortress and magical atelier for more than one generation of her family, that it had once brimmed with monsters, and worse.

It was part mansion, part restored farmhouse, part rich man’s folly in the cleared woodland; vast expanses of discoloured pale brick between black oak beams the width of whole trees, topped with water-stained slate roofing. Two sprawling stories, plus cramped attic space, of double-winged structure like a hunched toad, pockmarked with tiny staring windows, much of the glass set in ornamental metal latticework.

“You are joking,” I murmured.

“Wheey, told you it was impressive,” Raine said, as she turned the car onto the sweeping driveway of poured tarmac.

The house itself was set far back from the road, and the driveway crept through an opening in a wall of irregular bare stone, probably once meant to look fashionable, now crowded by creeping weeds and draped with overhanging trees from the encroaching woods, the mortar crumbling away in wide patches. Black iron hinges stood bare, the gate itself long since removed.

Outbuildings crept into view as we approached, a squat garage with three automatic doors, a couple of tucked away sheds in once-tasteful stained wood, probably filled with groundsman’s tools and gardening equipment, and a dilapidated structure off to one side which had once been a stable, now abandoned to the elements.

A beefy silver four by four was parked by the house, the only other vehicle present.

Wide lawns and a sketched attempt at a garden stretched off behind the house, falling toward a dark expanse of still water barely visible in the failing light, and a dense tree line at the edge of the property.

Even in the falling dusk it was obvious the gardens weren't really maintained anymore. Somebody had made a paltry attempt at fighting back the overgrowth, but roused little beauty from the threadbare lawns and thick moss.

Old stones, old money, old secrets. On an intellectual level I'd always known that Evelyn came from wealth. She lived in a family-owned house while she attended university – but she lived like the rest of us. She loved her much repaired comfortable clothes, watched Japanese cartoons on her beaten up old laptop, never turned her nose up or acted too good for anything. The most expensive thing she owned was her own leg.

Raine pulled the car to a stop in the semi-circle of tarmac in front of the house. She killed the engine and turned to grin at me.

“Amazing, isn't it? No wonder I wanted to burglarise the place.”

I stared up at the looming bulk of the house, only the very top of the roof still lit by the setting sun.

“Heather? Told you you'd love it, didn't I?”

I nodded, a little numb. “It is ... impressive. Sort of beautiful. The architecture, I mean.”

Of course, they couldn't see what I saw.

The place was crawling with spirits – or Servitors, left behind by Evelyn's mother and grandmother.

Dark hunched things with spindly grasping claws and shuddering leathery wings dotted the roof and walls of the estate, sunning themselves in the dying light or retreating into the shadows like sleepy lizards. Scuttering shapes darted and cavorted beyond the tree line, imitations of woodland animals, half-glimpsed hide and bristly hair peeking out of the darkness and then hiding again as I peered back. Something like a squid made of bark and stone sprawled inside the ruined stable building, blinking six huge eyes with incredible slowness, drifting tentacles through the air as if becoming more plant than animal.

Raine popped her door and climbed out, stretched her arms, rolled her shoulders, and took a deep breath. The chill air crept into the car, but that wasn't why I shivered.

“Let's get in then. That your dad's car, right?” she asked Evelyn,

thumbing toward the big silver four by four.

“I assume,” Evelyn grunted.

Getting myself out of the car wasn't as difficult as it might have sounded; at least none of this pneuma-somatic life was paying me any attention. And I wanted a better look at the monstrosity crouched over the house's main entranceway, guarding the steps up to the front door.

It was a spider-servitor, kin to the one outside Evelyn secret occult collection in Sharrowford University library. That one had been bad enough, big as a horse, an encounter I would never forget.

This spider was the size of a fire engine.

It was also visibly much older. The armoured black body was mottled and greyed in places, flaking and ridged like the rusting hull of a great ship. Two of its legs – thick as trees – ended in ragged stumps, and the servitor's carapace was covered in pits and gouges, old battle scars. The bio-mechanical vent stacks on its back lay cold, emitting no whisper of heat, and the giant stingers were wrapped around itself in the way a tired, aged cat might tuck its body into the crook of its tail.

Many of the spider-servitor's crystalline eyes were dark and extinguished, but I felt a vast cold attention, felt the servitor stare back at me as I looked.

The passing scrutiny of an old hound. Though it was completely, perfectly still, I somehow felt it lose interest in us and settle back into its borderline coma.

This old creature, to borrow a phrase from Raine, had no more fucks to give.

“Didn't you call ahead?” Raine was saying. “Your dad is home, right? We're not blundering into the place when only his weekly cleaning lady is here or something, right?”

Evelyn straightened up as she clambered out of the car, steadying herself on her walking stick and massaging her leg with one hand. She shot Raine a silent glare.

“Hey, I'm serious,” said Raine. “We don't wanna freak out some poor maid.”

“I haven’t been back here in almost two years,” Evelyn snapped. “How would I know? If he has a maid he’s probably screwing her.” She frowned at Praem through the car window. “Get out.”

At least the house was lit – well, some of it. A handful of the windows in the middle portion and the right wing glowed with soft light from behind closed curtains, and a porch light glowed above the main entrance, only a little obscured behind the bulk of the giant spider-servitor clinging to the front of the house. The old tarmac beneath my feet was crumbling and cracked, but in other places it had been patched recently.

Something sleek and small slipped around the edge of the house, then stopped and stared at us. For a moment I thought it was another spirit, but then I recognised that wonderfully curious vulpine face. It was a fox – a countryside fox, well fed on woodland prey, bold as it stared me down. I smiled to see the thing, then felt my smile die as the fox bounded away, replaced by one of the hunched servitor things as it crawled down the side of the house.

I shivered in the cold air and slipped my hands deeper into my sleeves.

As Praem got out of the car and Raine busied herself hauling our few bags out of the boot, Evelyn eyed me with a sidelong look. She didn’t need to say a word, she knew what I must be seeing.

“Maybe ... maybe it’ll look better in the daylight,” I said.

Evelyn snorted.

“What? What’s wrong?” Raine asked, peering around the open car boot.

I shook my head. “It’s no worse than Sharrowford. At least everything here seems ... quiet.”

“Hey, anything gives you trouble, I’ll swing for ‘em.” Raine said, then turned with a grin and talked to the empty air, to the spirit life beyond. “Hear me, fuckers? Don’t mess with my girl.”

I managed a token laugh and a little roll of my eyes, but Evelyn didn’t see the humour. She was staring at the house, and I’d never seen her look so small and hunched, so grim-faced, so unapproachable.

I started to realise what we might be doing to Evelyn by dragging

her here.

“Evee, I’m- I’m sorry.”

“For *what*?” she grunted.

Then the front door opened, spilling light across the steps, and a giant strode out to greet us.

no nook of english ground –

5.2

Evelyn's father was indeed at home.

He was a huge bear of a man. Despite the initial shock at three hundred pounds of six-foot-five blonde bearded viking bounding down the estate's front steps, I warmed to him instantly.

"Evelyn!" He boomed, arms wide, ruddy face lighting up in a huge smile beneath a squashed boxer's nose. "You should have called! I had no idea."

"Yes, well." Evelyn gave him a very level look. "Here I am."

He laughed, a jolly, rolling sound. "Here, give your old man a hug!"

He strode up to us and lifted Evelyn right off her feet. I had to suppress a flinch. That would have been terribly rude of me – this man was no monster, just uncommonly large, in every direction. I contented myself with a small step backward, though I needn't have bothered; he was completely absorbed in embracing his daughter.

"Don't pick me up, you oaf!" Evelyn spat. "Put me down!"

He weathered his daughter's outrage with more jolly laughter, and set her down very gently.

I couldn't help but notice he held onto Evelyn for a moment longer than necessary, to help her find her unsteady feet and brace her walking stick firmly against the ground. He'd swept her into that hug many, many times before. I wondered if he'd dropped her once, how often she'd stumbled and fallen over as a child, unused to her prosthetic leg and the chronic pain.

"Here, let me get a good look at you, I haven't seen your face for months," he said, hands on her shoulders. He pulled a theatrical expression of careful scrutiny, bunching up his bushy eyebrows. "Mmm, yes, I suspected so."

"Suspected *what*?" Evelyn snapped.

“That you are as fantastic as the last time I saw you, my dear.”

“You’ve been drinking.”

“Two glasses of wine with dinner, that’s all. No harm in a little lubrication now and then.” He chuckled through Evelyn’s very unimpressed look.

“A little,” she growled.

“Oh, Evelyn, Evelyn, you really should have called ahead, I would have put something in the oven for you and your friends. You’re lucky I was even here, I spent yesterday night in the city. We just won a big case, and I went out drinking with the judge afterwards – all a bit hush hush on that though.” He winked broadly and put a stubby finger to his lips for a moment. “So, tell me, how long are you and your friends planning on staying? The university term is just ending, isn’t it?” He cast a cursory glance over myself, Raine, and Praem, and didn’t seem to take us in before he looked back to his daughter. “All the way ‘till Christmas? I was supposed to be taking Christmas dinner with Angeline, but I can change plans, we could have your aunt and uncle over. It’ll be wonderful, the house will be full up for once!”

When Evelyn had opened up about her past, she’d called her father a ‘weak fool’. No description seemed less apt for this animated giant of a man, the wide sweeping gestures of his ham hock hands, the weight of muscle beneath his gut. He should be striding across some ancient battlefield in a Norse Saga, hefting a war axe – not squeezed into suit trousers and a neat shirt with the sleeves rolled up, in 21st century rural England.

Father and daughter shared little resemblance – except for the glorious golden blonde hair. Evelyn had inherited that from him, just as wild and thick, though her father was going grey from the temples upward.

Everything else must have come from her mother.

“I’m not staying long,” Evelyn grunted.

Her father did a poor job of concealing his puppy-like disappointment, though he did try, and I believe in that moment I came to completely understand the man.

“Well! Well, however long you’re planning to stay, first off you

should probably all come inside and get out of this dammed cold!" He laughed at his own simple wit, playing the gregarious host, making big gestures with his hands as he looked around at the friends who had brought his daughter home.

"Bloody right," Evelyn muttered, but she made no move toward the front door.

He wasn't exaggerating. A biting cold was creeping up on us. Even sheltered by the bulwark of the house and the density of the trees, the December night's chill cut through my pink hoodie and sapped my strength, leeching away the lingering heat from the car ride. I seemed to feel the cold more acutely these days, as if the repeated use of hyperdimensional mathematics had turned me partially cold-blooded. I did rather desperately want to get indoors.

One of my greatest flaws, I was too polite to make a move before our host did. I scrunched up the ends of my sleeves around my hands. At least my teeth weren't chattering, yet.

"Have you eaten on the road?" Evelyn's father was asking, as he gestured at the house. "I've got leftovers, all sorts. Some cold lasagna in the fridge, probably some part-baked garlic bread to spare too. I've got some, um ... " He nodded in recognition to Raine, who smiled back at him. "Raine, yes, uh, glad to see you're well."

"Always doing great, thank you." She hefted our bags in one hand and closed the car's boot. "And how have you been?"

"Oh, fine, fine, yes, quite." He swallowed, purging himself of a nasty taste. He turned his smile on Praem and I. "And who are you two young ladies? You must introduce us, Evelyn."

"This is Heather," said Evelyn. "She's my ... friend."

"A friend? An actual friend? Well, blow me down with a feather." His eyebrows climbed like a pair of fat caterpillars and he grinned with genuine delight and stuck out a hand toward me. "Very pleased to meet you then, Heather. You have no idea how much of a relief it is that she's finally making some friends at university."

He presented a strange sight, this giant of a man framed by the bulk of the spider-servitor behind him, that he couldn't see. What was it like, living in this house, in the unseen wreckage of his dead wife's work? Two minutes earlier I would have found him intimidating,

but now I felt sorry for him. I gave him my best smile and shook his hand.

“Heather Morell,” I said. “That’s me, I mean. Mister Saye?”

“Do call me Lewis, please.”

“She’s one of us,” Evelyn added.

“Ah.” Lewis Saye’s smile froze for a fraction of a second; another fumbled attempt to suppress his gut emotional reaction, and this time it made me feel awful. For an eye blink, so short I would have missed it if I hadn’t been shaking his hand, this viking throwback was *wary* of me.

Then the moment passed, and he was all welcoming and big smiles again.

“Ah, well.” He shrugged, then burst into a good natured belly chuckle. “I shan’t hold it against you.”

I was gripped by the most bizarre urge to apologise. Instead, for once in my life, I managed to say the right thing. “Evelyn’s a great friend to me. She really is.”

“Ahhh, I expect no less of my girl.” He beamed at me, though in my peripheral vision I saw Evelyn roll her eyes. “That’s wonderful, wonderful. And who might this be?” Before anyone could stop him, Lewis Saye turned to Praem and stuck out his hand. “Delighted to meet you as well, I’m sure ... I ... oh.”

Praem stared back.

That little ‘oh’ was so small and defeated. His bluff and bluster fell at the hurdle of Praem’s eyes. Lewis Saye’s smile died, leaving only numb shock. He retracted his proffered hand and took an uncertain half step back from the doll-demon. Praem just stared, a few strands of her long blonde hair loose in the wind.

Lewis looked to his daughter for help, tried to form a question, managed only to swallow.

“Oh for God’s sake, yes.” Evelyn scowled. “It’s exactly what you think it is. Deal with it.”

“She,” I corrected softly. Evelyn let out a huff.

Lewis was absolutely lost. He blinked at Praem with a shadow of

the expression I had imagined for my mother's face when I presented her with Raine, but tainted with equal parts fear and surrender. The look of a man who knows he is powerless to avoid certain horror.

"She's made of wood," Raine said quickly, stepping up to fill the gap with her effortless confidence – and literally, stepping forward and handing Praem one of the bags, looping the strap over the demon's shoulder. Praem adjusted to the weight, tilting slightly. "A life size doll, you know, like a shop mannequin. We've had her for weeks, she's perfectly safe. Not that bright, either."

"Her name is Praem," I added.

Lewis blinked at me. "Na- name?"

"Y-yes. Yes," I said, and felt especially lame.

He turned back to Evelyn. "In- in the house? You want it ... to come in?"

In the tremor of his voice I heard an echo of how he must have been with her mother; this was what Evelyn had called weak. My heart went out to them both.

"No, I thought we'd station her out here to stand around and scare off the birds," Evelyn said. "Of course in the house, what's the point of having her otherwise? You lived most of your life with far worse under your feet." She shouldered past her father's wavering hand and trudged up toward the house's front door, leaning heavily on her walking stick.

"Have things-" he turned to Raine, a distraught frown on his face. "Have things gotten that bad in Sharrowford?"

Raine smiled that endless confidence and shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing major. We had to deal with a couple of problems, that's all. Praem's just insurance."

"*Nothing major?*" I couldn't stop myself. Raine had the good grace to look a little sheepish as she shot me an apologetic smile.

"I-I thought ..." Evelyn's father shook his head, casting his eyes across the semi-circle of tarmac and the thin grass beyond as if searching for help. "I- I should- she can come to me about anything. She- ..."

“About our kind of stuff?” Raine asked.

Lewis Saye stared at her blankly. Then he swallowed and turned away, to follow his daughter up the steps to the front door, underneath the overhanging bulk of a giant pneuma-somatic spider he couldn’t even see.

When he was beyond earshot, I let out a huge sigh. “That went less than well.”

“Give him about twenty minutes, he’ll be right back to normal,” Raine murmured. “Hey, he’s a hell of a bloke, he spent twenty years dealing with her mum. You don’t marry a mage for two decades without pretty thick skin.”

“Raine, that is a deeply traumatised man,” I muttered under my breath. “How much does he even know?”

“Oh, he’s totally clued in. Sort of.” She shrugged. “He doesn’t like it. Seriously, twenty minutes, he’ll be cracking bad jokes again. Even if Evee starts an argument with him. Hell, *especially* if she starts an argument with him, that’ll perk him right up.”

I shook my head, watching as Evelyn stepped inside the house with her father at her heels. The last dregs of sunlight drained from the sky, orange sunset snagged on the very tips of the distant trees. Darkness closed in tight behind us – rural darkness, no streetlights or urban light pollution out here. The windows of the great house cast the only illumination. Darker shapes scuttled and scurried in the deepening night beyond. When I looked up, I could see so many more stars than I usually would.

“Feed me a strawberry,” Praem intoned.

“Someone’s hungry,” Raine said. “Where’s Evee keeping the zombie food?”

“In her bag, I think. Later,” I added, glancing at Praem’s impassive face.

Raine gently touched the back of her hand to my cheek. Her fingers were so warm. “Hey, Heather, you’re freezing. Let’s get you inside, yeah? You know, the house has a couple of actual fireplaces, we could get some wood, light one of them up. I bet you’d love that.” She smiled and took my hand in hers, moved to lead me up the steps.

“As long as there’s no madwoman in the attic.” I let out a little sigh. “I suppose I don’t have a choice now, do I?”

Raine cocked an eyebrow at me. “You always have a choice, Heather. Always. You could tell me – right now, right here – to get back in the car, get Eevee in with you, and drive out of here. And I’d do it, through the night. I would. If you feel unsafe, if you feel wrong here, I’d do it. I swear.”

“Raine, don’t be ridiculous.”

“You think I’m exaggerating?” she asked, dead serious, and stopped two steps higher than me.

The addition to her already considerable height advantage intimidated me in an obscurely pleasurable way – I ached to tell her so, and stumbled over a response.

“Of course you’re not exaggerating, but it’s still ridiculous. Why don’t you tell *me* what to do for a change?”

I hoped the darkness would hide the blush in my cheeks. I hadn’t meant to say that, and I didn’t entirely know what I meant by it.

On the steps of Evelyn’s house, beneath a giant pneuma-somatic spider, was not the place to have this particular conversation. I eyed the giant servitor hanging above us, attached to the side of the house. The size of the thing sent a little animal tremor through my chest, but somehow I couldn’t summon any deeper fear of the battered, ancient creature.

This place was done, a long time ago.

“Heather?” A curious grin broke across Raine’s face. “Should I be-”

“Besides,” I spoke a little too fast, a touch too loud. “This place isn’t scary. Not really. Like you said, it’s got beautiful architecture.”

“Mmmhmm, mmhmm, sure,” Raine nodded and eyed me with a quirk to her lips. “Come on, we should get inside. You need to eat something before you konk out, at least.”

I nodded, but turned to look behind me one last time, still hand-in-hand with Raine.

Praem had remained unresponsive amid all this drama, staring out into the darkening garden. At first I thought she was locked in silent communion with the night, and I was going to call for her to follow

us, but then I realised something was staring back at her.

That fox again, barely twenty feet away.

It caught wind of my attention, huge vulpine ears swivelling to listen to all the little sounds of the night. It was beautiful, far more beautiful than the house; that sleek pointed face and deep russet fur, the way it locked eyes with me for a skittish heartbeat.

Then it bounded away. Praem turned her head to look at me.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” I said, talking about the fox.

“Beautiful,” she echoed, her icicle voice lingering on the air.

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We didn’t last two hours until Evelyn went missing.

Raine was correct, Lewis Saye did perk up in record time. His transformation back to gregarious mirth was so fast and so complete that I would have suspected him of sneaking off to pop some pills, but he was around us the whole time for that first hour, not so much as five minutes in the toilet to fortify himself. Evelyn had forged ahead alone, but her father bustled back to the entryway all small talk and big laughter once more, to usher us deeper into his grand echoing shell of a home.

In the short walk from the front door to the main kitchen, the house revealed precious little of itself; from the white plaster and old tile of the entryway nook, we crossed the house’s main corridor, a kinked spine with a partial skeleton of exposed dark beams. Shadows lingered in the unlit depths to our left and right. Thick carpets soaked up the sound of our footsteps.

Lewis Saye was true to his word, he had a wealth of leftovers in his well-stocked fridge. He plied us with pasta reheated in an expensive microwave, fresh crusty bread and newly opened packets of fancy chocolate biscuits.

There was something wrong with that kitchen. Something out of place.

My mind chewed on the problem, as Evelyn brewed in sullen silence at the far end of the wooden table, as Raine dumped our bags on the floor and set about assisting Lewis with the food, much to his obvious discomfort.

"Please, please, do sit down, it won't be a moment, won't be a moment. Neither of you are allergic to anything, are you?" He boomed about, clattering plates and cutlery to fill the silences. "Never can tell these days. No? Healthy young women all of you, then. Double helpings!"

"I'll drink to that," said Raine.

The kitchen didn't feel real – none of this did.

All faux-rustic brick and shiny chrome fittings, thick slab shelves and tan slate flooring. None of it could disguise the tilted set of the walls, the cramped ceiling, the tiny windows. A modern skin over a reality far older and far less grand. Nothing in here looked really used, like the kitchen in a holiday house.. Even the food in the fridge was too neatly wrapped in cling film, no half empty packets of sandwich meat or forgotten bags of cheese.

I sat down at the table, distracted, and Evelyn met my confused look with a dark frown.

"Why do you look so gormless?" she muttered.

"I ... don't feel like we're really here." I shrugged.

"Lucky you."

Her tone could have etched steel.

A few minutes later Lewis was in full swing again, once he'd sat down at the table and I'd worked out the best way to politely phrase my real question, between mouthfuls of lasagna sauce.

"Oh no, I don't do the cleaning myself," he boomed with a grin. "You're quite right, it's far too much house for that. Even if I wasn't such an old brute! Ha! Yes, I have a cleaner in twice a week. Though, of course, there's places she can't go. Of course, you all understand all that. Of course." He waved a hand and smiled with boyish guilt. "The whole east wing is mothballed, in fact, pipes drained, furniture covered. Must keep the property price up, you know? Can't be having it go to seed."

Evelyn snorted at that, picking at her food.

Her father glanced at her fondly and allowed himself an indulgent chuckle. Perhaps complete tolerance was the only coping mechanism he knew. Had he learnt that from dealing with her

mother?

The man did love to talk. I discovered he barely lived here, gathered he was a lawyer by profession, spent more time in London than out here in the ancestral pile – though he'd been the one to marry into it rather than the other way around. He punted easy question after easy question at his daughter. How was university going? How was the Sharrowford house faring? Was she getting any exercise? Did her leg need a replacement yet? All surface level. He didn't even ask how she'd met me.

Evelyn fielded the conversation with monosyllabic disinterest, so Lewis made the effort to include Raine and I, asked what I was studying, where I was from, what my parents did.

What did any of those things matter?

"It's a pity Angeline wasn't down here with me this weekend," he said. "I'm sure she would have loved to see you again, Evelyn. I know, I know, it's a little strange for you, and she can never ... um ... well, you know. Family and all that."

"Dad."

He blinked. I froze up. It was the first time she'd used that word.

"Yes?"

"I don't even remember who she is," Evelyn growled.

"Oh, oh no, that can't be right. You met her, when I came up to Sharrowford last year." He grinned awkwardly and turned to Raine and I. "My lady friend. She was from another city firm. Rather a bit of drama about all that. A long story."

"I remember her face," Raine said. "Twenty years younger than you, right?"

"No, no! Certainly not!" Lewis blustered and harrumphed, then burst out laughing. "Ten years. I know, I know, I'm a lucky man."

"You old dog," said Raine.

I kept hoping he would launch into questions about goings on in Sharrowford, ask why we were towing a demon around, question how exactly I was 'one of us' – but he didn't. He never asked a single real thing. He dealt with Praem by completely ignoring her.

Pretending we were all normal people.

Your daughter and I spent a night in a pocket dimension full of soul-eating monsters, where we killed an evil wizard. Why is this not important to you?

The sense of unreality grew worse, and I realised it had been lurking there in the back of my head for two weeks. This inane conversation over a bizarre meal was a mere catalyst. Why did I feel like I wasn't really there, in that too-clean kitchen, surrounded by hollow talk?

I should have paid attention to Evelyn, small and shrunken in her seat, staring at nothing. She was hurting. But I didn't belong here.

I belonged Outside, didn't I? With Lozzie.

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"We shouldn't be here," I said.

After the meal, Lewis had hustled about finding us a spare room suitably near Evelyn's old bedroom. Not that the house lacked for spare rooms. By that point I was flagging hard, dragged down by a belly full of food and a need to curl up and shut the world out. Perhaps if I slept then this feeling would go away.

Up a staircase with two small inset landings, through more corridor of bone-white plaster and dark brown beams. I glimpsed a servitor or two lurking down the hallways of the great house – a spider the same size as the ones back in Sharrowford, and some kind of monitor lizard in a cold fireplace, but they paid me no attention beyond a passing look.

Once Raine and I were alone – Lewis having hustled off somewhere down the corridor – I'd sat, then flopped backward onto a clean white bedspread. We had a double bed in a high-ceilinged room, panelled in dark wood, dim wall lights sculpted as fake candles. Like a room from an early twentieth century detective novel.

Raine had rummaged in our bags for a toothbrush and a change of pajamas, said something inane about how I must be sleepy.

I'd pulled myself back into a sitting position, hunched inside my hoodie with my arms folded, and spoken.

"We shouldn't be here."

Raine raised an eyebrow. There was something dark and smoky about her in the low light, in this antique room. "I meant what I said earlier. The moment you feel unsafe, we can be out of here."

"No, no," I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut, partly to clear my mind and summon what scraps of focus I could. "It's not that. Where's Evee gone?"

"Ahh? Her old bedroom, I think. It's just down the end of the corridor." Raine gestured over her shoulder at the half open door, then pulled a sheepish, toothy grin. "Didn't you notice? I tried to go with her, but ... " she shrugged.

I gave her the best hard look I could manage.

"Heather?"

I sighed, then set about struggling out of my hoodie. Suddenly it felt constricting. I got it halfway off my head before I felt Raine's hands on my arms, helping me take it off. I shook myself out and smoothed my hair down.

"I know, Evee's having a rough time of it," Raine was saying. "Give her five minutes alone and we should go on a charm offensive, cheer her up a bit, get-"

"A 'rough time of it'?" I echoed – exactly as sharply as I'd intended, puffed up with indignation as I hunched on the bed. "She hates this place. It's hurting her. I can't believe you bullied her into coming here."

Raine laughed it off, my pink hoodie limp in her hands. "Bully Evee? I don't think either of us could bully her into anything."

"You did, Raine. How can't you see it? It's like forcing me to go back to Cygnet hospital for a scenic weekend."

"She ... " Raine glanced away from me, her smile flickering. "She needs to face it. It's therapeutic."

"Raine! That's not your decision to make!"

"Ahh ... I mean ... yeah. I ... "

It hit me the split-second before Raine crumpled, before she let out a huge sigh and slid down with her back against the wall until she was sitting on the floor, face in her hands – I'd never seen her so conflicted, never seen her struggle like this. I could barely believe

the impact of my own words.

“R-Raine?”

“Ahhhhh shit. I’ve been a right fucking dick, haven’t I? I’ve really fucking messed up this time.”

“Raine? It’s okay, it’s not the end of the world, we can- A-are you okay?”

She looked up with a sad smile, defeated but not broken, and raised both hands in surrender. “I’m fine, I’m fine. You’re completely right. It wasn’t my decision to make, and I’ve ... really hurt Eevee this time. And now you think I’m a nasty bitch too,” she gestured at me and puffed out a mirthless laugh. “Bang up job, Raine old girl. Well fucking done. Can’t even pull off protecting you two without screwing up.”

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, that rich chestnut hair, a few errant locks standing up in bold loops.

I’d never seen Raine vulnerable before, not really; with the strange alchemy that lay in the junction between emotional distress and sexual attraction, I suddenly wanted to get up and go over to her.

She wasn’t doing it intentionally. I don’t believe she was aware of the effect.

I shook my head, trying to concentrate. “Raine, I don’t follow. Protecting ... ?”

Raine gestured vaguely, at the house around us. “An old magical fortress. One of the safest places in the whole country.”

“Not for Eevee, it isn’t. Raine, you ... you ... ” Realisation dawned with a sudden click. “Wait, is that why we’re here?”

Raine dipped her head, an instinctive bob of pleading for forgiveness.

“That’s why we’re here,” I said. “Oh my God. Raine.”

“I may have been economical with the truth,” she said.

“You thought the Sharrowford Cult was going to attack the house!”

“Maybe.”

I stared at her in disbelief.

"If I'm right," she continued, "then the house gets hit, the spiders deal with it, and none of us get hurt – not you, not Eeve. Maybe she has to spend a few hundred pounds on a new front door, but that would be the worst of it. If I'm wrong, then hey, we needed to do this trip sooner or later anyway. You have to see that map if we're ever going to rescue your sister. We can leave tomorrow, I promise."

"Why ... " I swallowed, my throat dry, but Raine already knew the question. Why lie?

"I never would have gotten Eeve out of Sharrowford. If I'd said I thought the cult might come for the house, she'd have boarded the windows and barricaded the door. You know how she is. Hell, I get the feeling you know her better than I do, these days. We both love her for it, don't get me wrong, but she's stubborn as an ox."

"You- you didn't have to-"

"I'm sorry," she said, and I saw a tightness around her eyes. "I know, I'm a shit, but I have to keep you safe. Both of you. And I'm not doing a very good job of it lately."

"What? Of course you are. Raine, I'm angry because you lied, not because I think you make a poor protector. For pity's sake, I watched you shoot in a man in the head for us."

"That doesn't count for much."

"Of course it does, don't be absurd," I hissed.

"After that woman in the library ... all I could think about is how I wasn't there. She could have done anything to you, and I wasn't there. Blind luck that she wanted to talk. I wasn't there, Heather, I wasn't at your side. I wasn't there for you in that castle. We got separated, and you were alone. I wasn't there for you when that bitch of a zombie tried to snatch you again. I wasn't there. I had to lie to get you two out of the house, out of Sharrowford, just for a few days. And I would do it again. I'm sorry. This is me." She shrugged.

The intensity in her words, the passion, the iron-hot conviction; I felt myself shiver, and not in a bad way.

My lover had lied by omission. I should have felt hurt, betrayed, insecure – instead I was turned on by her justifications. This was

vastly unhealthy, and I couldn't make myself care, because I wanted to feel turned on.

Vastly unhealthy. Story of my life.

"You ... " I stumbled over a response. My words felt limp. "You could have told *me* the real reason, at least."

Raine shook her head gently. "I would have been asking you to lie to Evee, and I can't make you do that. This fuck up is my responsibility."

"No, it's not," I hissed. "Killing for me – fine. Lying for me? No, never."

Raine blinked in surprise, as if she hadn't expected that. Truth be told, neither had I, and I was too caught between irritation and arousal to consider the implications of my words. Raine nodded, puffed out a humourless laugh and smiled at me.

"I'm sorry, Heather. You've been so stressed, ever since we came back from that weird castle place. Like you've been ill, or at one remove from everything. I didn't want to stress you out any more than you already-"

"Is this why you haven't been screwing me?"

Raine slammed to a halt.

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. We had more important things to think about – not least, whatever pit Evelyn was stewing in, all alone – but I couldn't help myself. A hot blush rose in my cheeks. I forced myself to stare at Raine.

"I- Heather?" Her distress lifted just a fraction, a grin edging back onto her lips.

"Oh God, it felt good to say that. That's the most real thing I've said in days." Suddenly I hiccuped. "So? You've been handling me like I'm a dying swan." Another hiccup.

"We've ... I mean ... we *have*-" Now she couldn't keep the grin off her face.

"Not in the good way." Hiccup.

"The 'good way'?"

I rolled my eyes. “You know exactly what I mean. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

She spread her hands in a shrug. “You want me to pin you to that bed and hold you there for an hour?”

Oh, damn her, that grin made my stomach flutter – that was more like it, that’s what I’d needed for weeks. This was *real*. With every second that passed, the bubble of unreality deflated further, and I felt more human again, less cold-blooded.

I gave her a bit of a look – more to cover up the pressure of my volcanic arousal than to tell her off for flirting.

“Come on, Heather. Yes or no?”

“Yes, obviously yes. You know that.” I shook my head in a vain effort to clear the pink mist, and hiccuped again. “Raine, I haven’t ... haven’t felt completely human since whatever I did to kill Alexander. Since Lozzie left. Like I’m still there in that castle, in that moment I killed him. It’s always there. And I’m always cold.”

Raine wiped the teasing sexual mirth off her face instantly. She got up from the floor and crossed to the bed, sitting next to me without a trace of her former distress. She reached out, a silent question in her eyes. I answered with a little nod, and she stroked my head.

“You’re right here, Heather. You feel that way because it was a traumatic night, and you made a difficult decision. You’re right here. I promise.”

“Then why haven’t you been ... ” I averted my eyes, blushing again. Courage had fled me.

Raine smiled. “I got it wrong. I misjudged all your signals. I thought you were feeling fragile, needed a gentle touch. You need the opposite?”

I nodded, deeply embarrassed, biting my lower lip.

“It’ll make me feel more human,” I said in a tiny voice.

“Sure thing,” Raine purred.

“Not right now though,” I managed, then swallowed. “We need to talk to Eevee, tell her the truth.”

“That’s gonna sting.” Raine winced and sat back. “No less than I

deserve, I suppose. It'll have to be a proper apology. I'll have to fetch my genuflection mat, flatten my forehead a bit."

"We could have left her in Sharrowford with Twil for three days. That might have been therapeutic for her."

Raine smirked – back to normal. "What, getting her laid?"

"O-obviously."

"I still think you're off the mark there. Twil's not into her."

I held out a hand for my hoodie. "Here, give me that back, please. I feel cold without it."

Raine did one better than that, she helped me wriggle back into the fuzzy enclosing warmth of the hoodie, pulling it down over my body and sneaking her hands up inside. I squeaked and squirmed and felt myself flush. The little physical rituals of disarmament after a brush with conflict escalated too quickly. Raine got one knee between my thighs and suddenly I was on my back on the bed and-

Praem chose that exact moment to push the door open and step into the room.

Raine and I sat up and parted, brushing hair back into place, like guilty teenagers caught necking. As if Praem cared. I hadn't realised how close we'd gotten, how flushed my face was, how we'd been inches away from grabbing at each other.

"Hey there, doll-face, what's up?" Raine asked, including me in a curious look. I shrugged.

Praem stopped two steps into the room, facing us. To my surprise she actually made eye contact – or what passed for eye contact when one didn't possess pupils.

"I have lost Evelyn," she announced, voice like a tone struck from a wall of ice.

"What? What does that mean?" I blurted out.

"It just means Evee's wandered off," Raine said, frowning at the demon as she stood up. "I'll go find her."

"We'll both go find her. I could do with a little walk."

"Walked for fifteen minutes," Praem interrupted. Her head adjusted

to regard me. "I have lost Evelyn."

Raine and I shared another look.

"Praem just doesn't know the house, that's all," Raine said slowly. Her frown gave the lie to her words. "She's like a dog in a building that used to have lots of bigger dogs living in it, so many strange lingering smells everywhere that scream 'threat' – but no actual threats."

"Implying I am afraid," Praem intoned.

She did not sound impressed.

no nook of english ground –

5.3

The first and most obvious place to check for Evelyn was in her old bedroom.

Praem trailed behind as we made our way down the twisty, cramped hallway, and I found myself hoping that she'd merely gotten confused. Perhaps the house had befuddled her inhuman senses in some obscure fashion. Perhaps we'd find Evelyn sitting right in plain view, death-glaring at us and ready for a nasty argument. Raine would apologise to her, and that was going to be messy, we had some serious issues to work through, but she would be right there. She had not gone missing. The alternative did not bear thinking about.

"Evee? S'just us," Raine called, knocking before she opened the door, a slab of polished wood with creaky hinges. "Evee? No Evee. Under the bed? No? Worth a shot."

I followed her in, and put an involuntary hand up to my mouth.

"Her bag's still here," Raine was saying. "And, yup, here's her phone, so I guess we won't be calling her. Hey, hey, Heather." Raine must have caught the look on my face. "There's nothing to worry about. She's probably gone back to the kitchen, scarfing down comfort food, or stepped out to clear her head. We'll find her in minutes, okay? Come on." She offered me her hand.

"Raine, look at this room."

"Ahh?"

"This isn't a childhood home for her. Not even one full of terrible memories. This is an open wound."

Evelyn's bedroom – her childhood bedroom – was like a little girl's princess fantasy. A regular sized sitting room could fit in here quite comfortably. Heavy curtains veiled a pair of deep windows, three spindly chairs ringed a little oaken table, and a huge vanity mirror and double bed dominated the far wall.

The room had been gutted.

I'd seen the effect on a much lesser scale, in my own bedroom at home on the last day before I'd left for university. Treasured possessions missing from their customary places, practical necessities removed, empty gaps instead of living memory.

The bed lacked sheets, a chest of drawers stood open and empty of clothes – except a lonely pair of mismatched socks – and the walls showed dark rectangles where posters had once occluded the light. A low bookcase held only a dictionary and a copy of *The Lord of the Rings*, rumpled as if tossed down in disgust. I could picture the spots where Evelyn would have stacked soft toys, the way she would have piled the bed with quilts and pillows, the enclosing comfort so evident in her room back in the Sharrowford house. This place felt anonymous, nothing of her in here.

Raine gave me a pained smile. “Yeah, yeah I know. I helped her strip the place out. Never thought we'd have to come back.”

“It's horrible. Raine, she can't stay in here.”

Raine nodded and puffed out a slow sigh. “Maybe she went to get some bedsheets?”

I gave her a capital-L look.

“Yeah.” Raine cleared her throat. “Probs' not.”

= =

Over the next half hour I came to know the Saye family mansion, as one might know an intricate and broken torture device, designed by a sadistic genius.

A simple inventory of the house might look perfectly sane on paper – x number of bedrooms, y number of bathrooms, one grand dining room and so on – but could never do justice to the way the snaking corridors kinked in on themselves as if built around the rooms.

Old darkness had saturated the beams and corners down the centuries, lurking in the back of brick fireplaces and underneath heavy wooden furniture, never fully retreating each time Raine slapped about for a light switch on the walls. Blind corners and shadowy recesses were always sneaking up on the unwary explorer – that would be me.

Many rooms joined to others via side doors and little cubby closets. Other than an obvious effort to fight back the dust, most of them looked as if they'd been left untidy for years. Cushions discarded haphazardly, furniture pushed back in strange configurations, beds hastily stripped with the sheets still in piles on the floor. One room struck me as particularly ominous; a side-door had been barricaded with a pair of upturned chairs, long ago left to gather dust.

We peered into empty sitting rooms with cracked leather sofas, and wandered the circumference of a great dining table in a hall with tall windows and tarnished silverware on the sideboards. We wormed our way back to the kitchen and peeked out into a repurposed utility room, with a little walled-off outdoor courtyard for the bins. We found a locked study where Raine peered through the keyhole. We heard Lewis singing in the bath, and assumed Evelyn was not in there listening to her father butchering *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

We also passed several tired, listless servitors, hibernating things wound down and curled up, their orders long forgotten.

I'd thought I loved old buildings, such venerable beauty from a different age. This mansion was the exception which proved the rule, cold and vast, too much akin to an impersonal concrete box on a larger scale. The house told me that my tiny flickering life could never fill this void.

I couldn't think of this as Evelyn's home. That honour belonged to the house in Sharrowford.

"What if we don't find her?" I asked as we retraced our steps along the ground floor's main spinal corridor, my voice an unbidden whisper. "The last time Evelyn went missing, she got lost in another dimension."

Raine shook her head and shot me one of her easy confident smiles. "She'll be around here somewhere, might be hiding from us though. This old hulk sure is a good place to play hide and seek, full of nooks and crannies. We might be at this for a while yet. You holding up okay, wanna go sit down?"

"What if she's hurt herself?"

"On purpose? She'd never do that, not our Evee."

"Raine, she self-harms constantly. It might not be razor blade marks

on her wrists, but the way she punishes herself is just as real.”

Raine paused with an oddly thoughtful frown, then nodded. “Yeah, yeah there’s places she could go here that would mess with her head. We should check out the mothballed wing, that’s where her mother used to keep all the hocus pocus, but I asked Lewis and he told me it was all locked up. Here, back this way.”

Creeping around dark corridors together had smothered my earlier arousal, given me time to watch Raine and think uncomfortable thoughts.

Raine had lied to me.

She’d lied to Evelyn and I, manipulated us – yes, ostensibly for our own safety, in her self-appointed role as bodyguard, and I did believe that justification. Or at least I believed that she believed.

I couldn’t help how that had turned me on, made me feel safe, made me feel right. Even thinking about it now I felt a little shiver of attraction. Raine’s elemental nature pressed all my sexual buttons, buried my anger and frustration under a tidal wave of arousal. She hadn’t even meant to do it.

From the first day I’d met her, I’d let Raine get away with so much, because she was hot and she liked me and her unhealthy behaviour made me feel *good*.

Sooner or later I was going to have to deal with the realities of being desperately head-over-heels in love with a sociopath.

Praem wasn’t reassuring company right now either. She’d lapsed back into her habitual silence, lurking a dozen paces behind Raine and I. Several times she’d made me jump when I’d turned around and she’d been standing there in the shadows, staring at nothing. At least she was easy on the eyes. I could ogle her chest through her jumper all day long and at least she wouldn’t try to manipulate me.

“Heather?” Raine called.

“Mm?”

I turned away from the voluptuous doll-demon. I’d gotten distracted, as Raine had pulled ahead a few paces.

“She say something?” Raine asked.

“No, sorry. I was just admiring the view. So to speak.”

Raine quirked an eyebrow in surprise, and I felt a sudden blush colour my cheeks. Oh dear, I had actually said that out loud, hadn't I?

"W-what?" I tried to meet Raine's amazement with smoldering indignation – and the feeling came far too easily. "I can't look at her? I'm sure you must do, on occasion."

Oh no, oh Heather, what are you doing?

Baiting your girlfriend into an argument, because you're angry and can't express yourself properly, because an argument with Raine is a hundred times easier than dealing with how Evelyn has vanished into her ancient crumbling ancestral home full of exhausted spirit life and the wreckage of her family.

Let's have it out, Raine, right here in the middle of this absurd old house with my best friend missing and a demon watching us. Let's have a blazing row about sexual attraction and basic respect and I'll break down at you for lying to me and you'll try to win me back by screwing my tiny stupid brains out but I'll shout at you before you get the chance and-

Raine laughed.

"Course you can look at her. She doesn't give a damn, and her jugs are out of this world." Raine grinned, cheeky and confident and a little dirty. The sort of grin that made me melt. It faded when I failed to laugh at her joke. "It's just, you know, you never say stuff like that. You're horned up real bad, aren't you?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"Ah." Raine swallowed and dipped her head. "Right, yeah, you've got every right to be mad at me."

"I'm-" Not mad? I looked down at my feet and crossed my arms, so I could tell the truth. "I am mad. And aroused, and pent up. And worried and hurt. I want you to not lie to me ever again."

Raine took a step closer, in my peripheral vision. "I can't make that promise. You know I'd only lie to you to get you out of harm's way."

"And I hate that I'm okay with that," I hissed.

"Do you hate me?"

Not a shred of accusation in her voice. No bitterness, no uncertain tremor. We'd shared each other for months now and she was utterly unafraid of rejection. How did she do it? She took another step closer.

"Don't be stupid," I said to her feet. "I'm in love with you. I just wish ... "

"Wish what?" Raine murmured, and touched her fingertips to my folded arms.

I pulled away.

"Don't. You'll turn me on again and I'll forget what I'm trying to say. You want to be my protector? Well then. Oh dammit," I snapped, as much at myself as at Raine. "Are we really having this talk right now, with Evee missing, in a dark corridor in the spookiest house ever? Raine, if you want to be my protector, then you may need to protect me from aspects of yourself. You need to never lie to me again."

I forced myself to look up and meet Raine's eyes – a mistake. Deep, rich brown, always so expressive and intelligent, and right now creased with such confused conflict.

She almost shattered my hastily constructed defences with a mere shake of her head.

"Heather, I never meant-"

"And don't say it was to keep me safe, because I *like it* when you say that, it makes me feel good, and I don't want to feel good about you lying to me. You can't do that to me, Raine."

Raine drew herself up with a deep sigh and closed her eyes, as if cleansing herself, and suddenly I was the one wracked by fear of rejection.

Was this what Evelyn had warned me about, so many weeks ago?

My mind raced a hundred miles an hour. Of course Raine was going to lose interest sooner or later. Look at me, small and scrawny and weird, compared to this amazonian beauty, the simplest of my emotions tied up in knots in front of her blazing clarity of purpose. If I wouldn't serve those purposes, she'd move on, as soon as all my complaints could no longer be drowned out with sex.

I did my best to harden my heart.

I did not do a very good job.

"You're right," Raine said, eyes still closed. "You are completely right, Heather. Yeah, I know I'm not very good at seeing these things. Promises don't mean much if they're easy to keep, so-" She opened her eyes and juddered to a halt at the sight of me.

"Heather? Woah, woah, Heather, it's okay, you-"

"Finish what you were saying," I managed to squeak.

"Are you-"

"Finish!"

"Sure thing, boss," she almost laughed, amusement covering her concern. God, I loved the way she could laugh anything off, even when it infuriated me. "It's a difficult promise, but a promise I have to try – I'll never lie to you again. Even to protect you. Might have to make some forced tactical errors, but you're right, you're more important than that. I'm kind of a fucking idiot that you had to explain that to me. Some philosopher I am."

I nodded. Had to look away from her.

"Heather? You really look like you need a hug right now. Can I?"

"You may," I whispered.

Raine wrapped her arms around me and I buried my face in her shoulder. Oh, that was better. That was much better. Silly, paranoid Heather; Raine was an impossible sociopath, but sometimes it was easy to forget she had chosen me, even if I didn't understand her reasons. She rubbed my back in muscle-melting circles. Neither of us spoke for a long moment. I listened to her heartbeat.

"Thought you were about to break up with me," I eventually croaked.

"*What?* No fucking way. Oh Heather, I'm still kind of a mystery to you, aren't I?"

"I suppose you are." I managed a little shrug.

We let go of each other after another moment of shared comfort, but Raine made a point of holding my hand and ruffling my hair. I sniffed and nodded at her smile, and then she raised her eyes past

me.

“Hey Praem,” Raine said. “Sorry for all the drama.”

How embarrassing, to have an audience for such a personal moment. At least Praem wasn't capable of caring. I glanced over my shoulder at the doll-demon – and found, to my incredible surprise, that Praem's milky white eyes were creased by a subtle tightness. She stared for a heartbeat, then spoke.

“Find. Evelyn.”

“ ... is she pissed off with us?” Raine asked.

“I think she is. I'm sorry, Praem. And also she's right, we do need to find Evelyn. I can't believe we stopped to have a miniature relationship crisis in the middle of all this.” I rolled my eyes to gesture at the absurdity of the house all around us.

“Right you are then.” Raine rolled her shoulders. Always a good sign.

“You have a fresh idea?”

“Smart money says she's either gone out to the car, in protest, or she's hiding, maybe pressured her dad into unlocking the east wing. We'll check out the front first, then go find Lewis. He's probably done with his bath now. We'll just have to hope we don't get an eyeful of naked old man.”

“Ew.”

“Come on.” Raine grinned at me and turned to set off.

I glanced back at Praem one more time. “Do you have suggestions ... for ... ”

Praem did not have any suggestions, but perhaps she would have if I'd been able to finish the question.

A fox was sitting behind her.

Right in the middle of the corridor, those cute little black-furred paws pressed neatly into the carpet, golden eyes glinting in the gloom. We made eye contact; I froze in shock.

A tug on my hand, Raine attempting to lead me onward. Suddenly the fox stood up, twitched its ears, and raced away down the

corridor on silent paws. It slipped around a corner, a flash of russet in the dark.

“Heather? You getting one more dose of Praem’s rack?”

“No! No, Raine, didn’t you see that?”

Raine shook her head, eyes flicking down the corridor on instant high alert. “A spirit?”

“No. It was a fox, it was normal. It just ... Raine, where does that hallway lead, around that corner?”

“That way? Couple of connecting rooms between the two wings. All the stuff on the far side’ll be locked though, Eevee wouldn’t- oh.”

“Oh? *Oh*? Don’t ‘oh’ at me and stop.”

Raine shot me a pained smile. “Oh as in ‘oh shit’. I know exactly where Eevee is. Come on.”

I struggled to keep up, even hand in hand. Raine’s stride threatened to break into a run, though we walked less than fifty feet. Hurrying down the side corridor where the fox had vanished, thinner and more claustrophobic than the main spine, we climbed a small set of stairs. Raine paused with a sharp frown at a trio of doors. I gulped down air to get my breath back.

“Where is she? Raine, where are we going?”

“This uh, reading room thing. Place. I should have known, but she hasn’t been back there, ever.” Raine remembered the correct door, grabbed the handle, and led me through.

A short stub of corridor, with only one door at the far end. Raine let go of my hand and raced ahead. She burst through the door all in a rush, raising her voice. “Eevee? Eevee, it’s us. Evelyn?”

I crept in behind her, my heart in my throat.

Reading room, right; Raine did display an occasional talent for understatement.

We’d emerged through a side-door into a space more akin to a library hall or great viewing chamber, or the study of a master inventor from the age of discovery. The vast room occupied both floors of this part of the mansion. The upper floor formed a wide walkway around three walls, ringed with meticulously organised

bookcases, reached by a staircase at one end. The echoing space was poorly lit by wall sconces, half the bulbs burnt out or missing. A pair of free-standing lamps put up a valiant defence against the oppressive gloom. The towering curtains were caked in old dust.

All dark heavy polished wood, several tables and desks stood at different points around the room's bare floorboards as if for separate projects, stacked with all manner of bric-a-brac in a state of terrible disarray: disassembled electronics, a half finished oil-paint canvas of a landscape scene, an entire deer skeleton laid out bone by bone, a series of anatomical specimen jars filled with cloudy liquid, a set of grotesque clay statues of worms with wings and teeth, and a half-dozen other mysteries too complex to take in at a glance.

One table was on its side, contents strewn across the floor. It had been that way for a long time. Dust covered every surface, including the floor, except for a single pair of dragging footprints and the trail of a walking stick.

A part of one wall was cracked and cratered, the plaster scorched black around the edges, the damage blurred by time and dust.

Evelyn was sitting in a chair, hunched over with her chin in her hands.

She'd been staring at the old scorch mark, but she looked up as Raine and I blundered into the room. Even before she opened her mouth, even with that thunderous frown on her face, relief flooded my chest.

"Evee!" I said.

"Stop shouting, the pair of you," she snapped. "My ears work perfectly well."

Raine sighed through a smile, relief plain as she shook her head.

"What?" Evelyn demanded.

"Evee, are you okay?" Raine asked.

Evelyn pulled a face as if Raine had suggested she take up molesting animals. She glanced at me. "What have you been doing to her now? Are you both high on mushrooms? What an utterly idiotic question. Do I seem alright? You tell me."

“Of course you don’t seem alright,” I said before Raine could put her foot in her mouth. “Praem couldn’t find you, we were so worried. I-I thought maybe you’d- I don’t know. I was worried about you, Evee.”

Evelyn snorted and looked away.

“Wow. Well. This sure is the last place I’d think of to look for you,” Raine said, as she crossed to the nearest of the heavy old desks and cast an odd look around the room, at the scorched crater Evelyn had been sitting and staring at. I realised there was a huge stain on the floorboards nearby, a years old splatter that had stripped the polish and warped the wood. Two more scorch marks, like meteor trails, had chewed into the floor not far away. “What on earth are you doing in here, Evee?”

“Sitting down,” Evelyn drawled. “To enjoy my holiday.”

Raine dipped her head in silent apology. Evelyn frowned at her like she’d gone mad.

“Is this where it happened?” I asked softly. They both looked at me, Raine with a frozen wince and Evelyn with deep shadows in her eyes. “I apologise for asking, but under the circumstances I think it’s better to have it in the open. This is where your mother died, isn’t it?”

Evelyn nodded and made a grumbly throat-clearing noise. She followed my awed glance at the cratered wall. “Not there. That was where she tried to stop me.”

What on earth could one say to that? ‘I see’, or ‘I’m sorry’, or some other useless platitude? None of that would help Evelyn.

“Why hasn’t any of this been cleaned up?” I asked instead.

“Nobody’s set foot in here since.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t be sitting alone in the room where your abusive mother died. If you want to sit here, I’ll pull up a chair too.”

Evelyn looked like she wanted to slap me for that one. I didn’t blame her, and I’d take it too. Some wounds never close.

Praem chose that moment to join us, crossing the room to stand next to Evelyn’s chair, prim and proper and very straight-backed

indeed. Evelyn eyed her with open suspicion, until Praem turned her head to meet her mistress' gaze.

"You required help," Praem intoned.

"Shut up. Not another word. God dammit, I specifically told you not to ... " Evelyn trailed off in barely contained frustration, with a telltale guilty glance at Raine and I.

"Wait a moment," I said. "Did she lie to us? Praem, did you know where Evelyn was this whole time?"

Raine raised her eyebrows and let out a low whistle. "Clever girl. Very impressive. She found a way around your orders, Eevee."

"She's getting worse," Evelyn hissed. "Should never have made her."

"Evelyn," I said. "She saw you were in pain and went for help. That's not evil voodoo zombie territory, not at all. Thank you, Praem. Was that you, with the fox back there?"

Praem turned to stare at me, in silence.

"What fox?" Evelyn asked. "What's she done now?"

"Back in the corridor?" Raine asked. "Heather saw something, I thought it was a spirit, and then I worked out you'd come here."

"I-" I struggled to phrase the words. It hadn't looked anything like a spirit. "Sort of, I don't know. Praem?"

Evelyn slapped Praem in the leg with her walking stick. "Answer."

"Not I," Praem said, icicle cold.

Evelyn shrugged with shoulders and eyebrows, more than a little unimpressed.

"Did you see a fox come through here?" I asked her.

"A fox."

"I'm serious. Eevee, don't look at me like that, stupid things happen to us all the time. Woodland creatures walking through walls is relatively minor compared to half the things I've seen since I met you two. Yes, I turned around to ask Praem if she had any ideas about where you might be, and I saw a fox in the corridor. It went around a corner, and technically it led us to you. Is there any reason

there would be a magical fox in here?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes and spread her hands. She couldn't have looked more exasperated if I'd enquired as to whether bears defecated in the woods. "This place is lousy with magical echoes and leftovers. It could have been anything. A pneuma-somatic fart."

"Okay, good. Thank you. I'm sorry for snapping." I swallowed and felt a little sheepish.

"Could Praem be telling another porky?" Raine asked.

"Truth," Evelyn snapped her fingers.

"Not I," the demon-doll repeated.

"It was probably just a spirit." I was trying to convince myself as much as my friends. "I'm not used to them looking like real animals. That's never happened before."

"Hey, maybe Lozzie sent it," Raine suggested. I demurred with a silent frown; I'd love that, but it seemed unlikely.

"Yes, that would be all we need, wouldn't it?" Evelyn grumbled, venom in her voice. "More unexplained visitations from your mysterious *friend*. Let's complicate matters as much as possible, shall we? Raine can seduce my father's latest romantic prospect, and I'll go play with my mother's unfinished work."

I let it wash over me. Evelyn was in a kind of pain neither of us could share, and we needed to make this right.

"Evee," I said with a meaningful glance at my girlfriend. "Raine has something she needs to tell you."

Raine cleared her throat and straightened up. Evelyn's frown thundered back onto her face.

"Oh no, don't tell me you two have decided to get fucking married?"

"What? N-no. Evee, no, it's nothing to do-" I halted, blushing. "Raine, stop grinning, you're meant to be apologising to her."

"Yes, yes, ahem. Evee, Evelyn, I've lied to you about something. To you and Heather. She figured it out, and made me realise I owe you an apology, because I'm a shit and I've hurt you. I ... I think the Sharrowford Cult was about to hit the house, so I lied to get you

and Heather out of the city for a week. I'm sorry. It's my fault you're here, dealing with this." She gestured at the echoing hall all around us. "We'll leave tomorrow, we'll get out. I've been a dickhead."

Evelyn listened with a raised eyebrow until Raine was done. "Repeat that last part."

"I've been a dickhead?"

"Again."

"I'm a huge dickhead."

"Mm, you are." Evelyn allowed herself a thin smile. "But you're also not half as clever as you think. It's not a very good lie if I see through it before you finish telling it."

"You knew?" I asked, gaping at her.

"Of course I bloody well knew." Evelyn shot me an incredulous look. "You didn't? Raine's awful at lying. One of the few things that makes her tolerable."

"Ow," said Raine.

"I thought she bullied you into coming."

Evelyn scoffed. "Not likely."

"So I'm the only one who didn't know. Lovely."

"I assumed we were all in on it," Evelyn grumbled, then shot Raine a look. "You must be armpit deep in the doghouse."

"Evee," Raine tried to stay on course. "You're my best friend, and Heather made me realise that maybe I'm jeopardising that, regardless of our history."

Evelyn gave her a long, silent look. "You get points for fessing up. Barely." She sighed as if letting go of something, and pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know, Heather, she never would have apologised in the past. She'd just have lied and moved on. And no, I don't want to fucking be here, but you didn't bully me into it. The filth in Sharrowford are broken, I accept that, they won't touch my territory again. I came because I owe Heather a proper look at the map." She cracked her eyes open and shot a bitter, sidelong glance at me as she spoke. "What the hell are we doing back here, Raine? I

waited years to get out of this Godforsaken hole.”

“Like I said, we can leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s too far away,” I said, and made a snap decision.

“Evee, you’re sleeping in the same room as us tonight. Not in your old bedroom. I saw it, and just, no. I won’t let you. I’ll sleep in an armchair, you and Raine can have separate sheets on the bed.”

“Don’t be-”

“Evelyn Saye, you are not spending this night alone.”

Evee blinked at the force in my words. She turned away and nodded. “Fine.”

“I’ll take the chair,” Raine offered. “Come on Heather, you need the bed.”

“And you drove all the way here. You take the bed.”

“I can sleep in the Goddamn chair,” Evelyn grumbled. “But if you two start humping I’ll have Praem turn the garden hose on you.”

= =

Winter sunlight woke me, and I woke alone.

Evelyn’s absence I’d fully expected. A night in an armchair is uncomfortable for anybody, let alone with Evelyn’s catalogue of ailments, but I hadn’t wanted to spark an argument by insisting she take my spot in the bed. I’d had just as much trouble sleeping in the unfamiliar surroundings, with all the creaking sounds of the house’s ancient frame settling in the cold weather, so I’d had plenty of chances to see Evelyn curled up in the chair as I’d tossed and turned in bed.

Doubtless she was up and about, dealing with her aches and pains. Her bag was still by the chair, along with a spare skirt and thin jumper draped over the arm.

“Raine?” I called into the silence, sitting up and drawing my legs to my chest under the unfamiliar covers. Then I tutted at myself. This was a safe place, I didn’t need her for every little thing. I disentangled myself from the sheets and climbed out of bed, winced in the cold and the lance of harsh light through the room’s one small window.

My mobile phone had one new message – from Raine.

It was a picture of me asleep in bed, sent about an hour ago, with a pink heart shape drawn in the corner. I'd rolled over to hug the pillow in lieu of Raine herself. She'd attached a message.

'Looked like you needed the extra sleep! Gone for a run around the grounds, need to work out the kinks. As I type this, Evee's downstairs eating breakfast with her dad, big score!!!'

I smiled at the picture and blushed, enjoying the feeling. I looked terrible, drooling on the pillow. This was better, this was how we were supposed to be.

When I turned around to find my clothes I almost jumped out of my skin.

"Don't sneak up on people like that! Oh my God." I put a hand to my chest. "... what on earth are you wearing? No, that's perverse, this must be a joke. Praem?"

Praem stared back at me from just inside the now open door. She must have opened it and stepped inside in perfect silence as I was reading Raine's message.

Praem was dressed in an utterly immaculate, perfectly pressed, rigorously starched maid uniform. Not some faux-saucy fetish outfit, but a full-length black skirt and those stupid ruffly shoulder straps which crossed over the middle of her back. She even had a pair of shiny black shoes on her feet, though her long blonde hair was still in the same messy bun from yesterday, exactly like she was a teenage girl in low-effort cosplay. The whole ensemble served to emphasise her already sizable chest, and I did find myself staring for a moment, before I shook my head. I suddenly felt a little exposed, in rumpled sleep-smelling tshirt and pajama bottoms.

"You should not be wearing that," I said. "It might suit you, but signalled servility is no virtue. Who dressed you?"

"I am not servile," she intoned, in that ice-cold knife-sharp enunciation of every word. "I am saying good morning."

I boggled at her. Was that the longest, most complete sentence she'd ever spoken?

"Good morning," Praem repeated.

“Good- good morning, Praem.” I swallowed. “I do need to get dressed now, so if you could ... ”

Without another word, the doll-demon turned on her heel and marched back out. Her head briefly reappeared around the door frame. She stared at me, and closed the door after herself.

“We really do need to get out of this place,” I muttered to myself.

no nook of english ground –

5.4

The old mansion didn't look any more welcoming by the light of day. Different, but no better.

Fortified in my jeans and pink hoodie once more, I wandered in the general direction of the stairs, surprised by the depth of lingering shadows in the kinked and twisted hallways.

Small windows and heavy beams conspired to limit the stark winter sunlight to a few slim handholds, leaving most of the corridors and larger rooms as a haven of shades. The house clung to a fermenting darkness, and I felt the most intensely domestic urge to start dusting, pulling curtains, opening windows. Family circumstances aside, growing up here would be morose for any child. When we got back home to Sharrowford, I swore I would help Evelyn banish any remnant of melancholy from her bedroom. We'd put up posters, go shopping for plush animals, paint the walls if we had to.

Praem followed me.

I'd discovered – not much to my surprise anymore – that she'd waited for me in the corridor, standing with her hands clasped before her in that absurd maid outfit.

Where had she even found it? Was this how Evelyn's mother had dressed her own terrifying zombies, back in the day? I pictured a dozen creatures like Zheng, stalking this shadowy maze while dressed like domestic servants.

Okay, yes, that would act as a pretty effective deterrent. I knew Raine could be brave to the point of stupidity, but I still marvelled that she'd once snuck into this house, as a teenage runaway. The place hadn't been empty back then.

Nobody was in the kitchen, but for the first time since we'd arrived it contained real signs of life. Dirty cereal bowls in the chrome sink, a few crumbs by the toaster, and this month's issue of *Anime UK* magazine on the table; Evelyn's area of interest, though that didn't

seem like the sort of magazine she'd read, due to – or despite? I wasn't sure – the candy-haired cartoon girl on the cover. Neither did the shiny magazine look like it had spent a car journey crammed into a backpack.

Praem was staring at the dirty bowls in the sink.

"Do you want to wash them up?" I asked after a moment. "Are you trying to be a real maid, or is this just an aesthetic experiment?"

Praem turned her head to look at me, then back at the sink, then back at me, then the sink again. I stifled a laugh.

"Praem, why aren't you with Evelyn right now?"

"She has sent me away," Praem intoned, her voice clear and almost musical.

"Sent you away?" I echoed. "From where? What does that mean?"

Praem turned to stare at me again, this time in silence. I studied those milk-white eyes, but her expression betrayed nothing.

"You don't feel like answering that one?" I mused out loud. "Or maybe some questions are too complex for you? You can't parse the context, or the web of meaning required to ..."

Praem tilted her chin downward, as if to fix me with an unimpressed glare over a pair of imaginary glasses. Her expression didn't change, but the intent was crystal clear, and I hurried to correct myself.

"Oh, okay. I'm sorry, yes, you're more intelligent than that, aren't you? Perhaps you ... don't like to answer certain kinds of stupid question?"

Praem straightened up, back to normal. I sighed and set about making myself some toast to quieten my rumbling stomach – normally I'd feel terribly intrusive making myself at home in somebody else's house, but the Saye mansion didn't feel like a real home. Praem returned to staring at the dirty dishes in the sink, so I formulated a fresh question between mouthfuls of toast and jam.

"Praem, where is Evelyn?" I adjusted my phrasing as the demon-doll turned to me. "Or, where did you last see her?"

"In the garden," Praem said.

I glanced at the small window inset in the top of the kitchen's back door, at the sliver of visible lawn and the dark trees beyond. The grounds had looked quite extensive when we'd pulled up in the car last night, there was no way I could spot Evelyn or Raine from in here.

"And why did she send you away?"

That earned me another silent stare.

"Okay, um, what did she tell you, exactly?" I tried. "What were her words?"

"Why don't you fuck off and make yourself useful? Go see if Heather is awake or something. Go on, shoo," Praem quoted, empty of emotion or emphasis.

"Oh. Indeed. That does sound like Evee."

I frowned in thought as I chewed my toast, looking up and down Praem's immaculate maid uniform again. Assuming she hadn't lied to me – which seemed unlikely – she'd just demolished my top theory for why she was dressed in that ostentatious outfit. I'd suspected, deep down in a dirty unspoken part of my mind, that Evelyn had squeezed her into the uniform; this must be part of what she got up to behind closed doors with her cuddly obedient demon-host, and Praem had wandered off before Evelyn could stop her.

But that couldn't be right. Evelyn would never send Praem off to 'make herself useful' while the demon still looked like an extra from a raunchy B-movie.

In the cold light through the kitchen windows I had to admit that servility didn't seem like Evelyn's thing.

"Did you dress yourself in that uniform?"

She didn't answer that one either.

If Praem was a human being I could have guessed a dozen possible motivations for that outfit – a sex thing, a bit of silly fun, a joke, an experiment with personal identity, a penalty for losing a bet. If Raine had turned up dressed like that I'd have understood her intentions precisely. If Lozzie had appeared to me dressed head to toe as a maid, I would know for a fact she was just messing about.

Praem was not human, and wondering about the maid outfit made

it easier to keep that in mind. Her increasingly bizarre behaviour didn't worry me exactly, though I was vaguely aware that perhaps it should.

At least she didn't have two bodies anymore. I doubted I'd be able to deal with identical twin maids. Far too high-level for my twitchy, starved sexuality.

"Yes?" Praem intoned after a few moments of my half-amused scrutiny.

"I'm sorry for staring. I was thinking about you, that's all." An impulse took me; with Praem so much more talkative, perhaps I could begin to understand how she thought. "Praem, do you know what you are?"

"Do *you* know what *you* are?"

I blinked at her. The emphasis was unmistakable. I sketched a shrug, wrong footed. "A human being. Homo sapiens. Female. Nineteen years old, almost twenty."

"That is the most essential classification from which to understand and interpret your actions. You do the things you do and think the thoughts you think because you are a human being. Indistinguishable from all other human beings."

My mouth opened and closed in shock. I tried to process what she'd actually said, rather than the fact she'd used big words. She really was more intelligent than she let on.

"Are you ... are you being sarcastic?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Point taken. I suppose it would be terribly rude if somebody asked me what I am. I'm sorry if I offended you."

Praem dipped her head very slightly. Apology accepted.

"So, who are you, then?" I asked gently, though I doubted she cared about tone of voice.

Another silent stare for another stupid question. I flustered and tried to rephrase – when she finally answered.

"You should know that," Praem intoned. "You named me. I am Praem."

Now it was my turn to sigh and look unimpressed. “That doesn’t really answer who you are. ‘Praem’ is just a designation. I’m Heather, but that doesn’t tell you anything about me, does it? Did you have a name before ‘Praem’? You had a ... an existence, before Evelyn summoned you, didn’t you?”

“Do stars have names, before humans give them such?”

Praem smiled.

It was no better than the first time she’d smiled, when I’d made the mistake of feeding her a strawberry many weeks ago. She could contract and relax the correct muscles – or the tactile illusion of muscles wrapped around a core of inanimate life-sized doll – but that was all, mere mechanical motion. Nothing behind the eyes.

She was trying her best. I forced myself to smile back.

“You don’t have to pull a face,” I said. “Cool and composed suits you better.”

She switched the smile off as quickly as it had appeared.

Her words had reminded me rather uncomfortably of how classical demons were supposed to work, the power of true names. Had I somehow redefined Praem’s nature by naming her?

I sighed at myself. Judeo-Christian demonology was unlikely to apply here – ‘demon’ was just a word we used for an Outsider. Praem was neither fallen angel nor one of Satan’s lieutenants, she was something from outside our own reality, crammed into a physical shell and offered simple rewards. Old literary myth was not a reliable instruction manual for real magic. I needed to ask Eevee. I should probably tell her how much Praem was talking, if that wasn’t why she’d shooed the doll-demon away this morning in the first place.

“Feed me a strawberry,” Praem intoned.

I resisted the urge to shrug, feeling a little overwhelmed. “Doesn’t Eevee have them?”

Praem glided over to the fridge, her neat black shoes clicking against the kitchen’s slate floor. She opened the door and looked pointedly at me. I’d missed the transparent plastic tub of strawberries when I’d rummaged around for jam earlier.

“Oh.” I took the box from the fridge and opened the lid before the obvious struck me. I squinted at Praem. “Can’t you take one for yourself?”

“Feed me a strawberry.”

“Yes, yes, okay. I suppose there wouldn’t be any point to your deal with Evee if you can just scarf them all down whenever you like.” I selected a nice fat juicy strawberry for her, and held it up, the scarlet fruit cool against my fingertips. “Don’t make this weird now, not like last time.”

Praem’s lips parted with a soft click, and I pushed the strawberry into her mouth, careful not to touch my flesh to hers. Not because I believed it would have some nefarious magical effect, but simply because it embarrassed me. It had last time. Whatever Praem was inside, her exterior was a very voluptuous young woman, and my basic instincts still responded to that.

“Or maybe it’s the act of being fed that matters?” I mused as she chewed. “Somehow, I suspect you’re unlikely to answer that one.”

Praem swallowed. “The fridge air is escaping. It is cold.”

“It is, yes.” I started to close the tub of strawberries when an idea struck me. I watched Praem’s face carefully. “If I give you another strawberry, will you tell me why you’re dressed in that uniform?”

“Yes. Feed me a strawberry.”

“Oooh, not immune to bribery, are you? It’s a deal, okay?” I almost giggled as I picked out a second helping for her, feeling very mischievous indeed. “We’re making a deal, one more strawberry, then you explain, best as you can, okay?”

“Feed me a strawberry.”

I popped the second strawberry into her mouth, then watched her chew as I put the box back in the fridge. She let the door swing shut. Praem swallowed, staring at me. Perhaps I imagined the faintest ghost of amusement passing beneath her features.

“Well? Why are you dressed like a maid?”

Silence.

“Praem?”

“I lied.”

“You ... ” I tutted and sighed. “Praem. You lied to get another strawberry? You’re worse than a cat. I think we need to go see Evee.”

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Out in the grounds of the Saye estate the winter sunlight felt harsh and crisp in the cold air. I was very glad for my hoodie, and the larger tshirt I’d borrowed from Raine’s bag.

Rather than slipping out the kitchen’s back door, I’d retraced my steps to a place we found during last night’s search for Evelyn, a set of wide French doors more glass than frame, which looked across the lawns behind the mansion. I’d stepped out onto a long low patio of grey slabs, neat brick stairs leading down to the lawns. A pathway snaked off between islands of droopy flowers and patches of thin grass, sloping toward the placid surface of the dark lake at the back of the estate. Trees crowded the far bank.

All the brickwork badly needed pressure washing, at least to dislodge the moss and lichen growing in the cracks, though I rather liked the effect. An old-fashioned charcoal barbecue stood off on one side of the patio, next to some rain-warped wooden garden furniture.

I made my way gingerly down the steps, but Praem lingered by the doors. The old brickwork path forked off in two different directions, one vanishing into the trees far to my right.

“You won’t be disobeying Evelyn by showing me where she is,” I said.

Praem stared at me, unmoving. I let out a little sigh.

Above her, the towering exterior of the mansion still crawled with spirit life. The local fauna looked far less ominous in the daylight, hardly the coal-black leering gargoyles my mind had supplied under the cover of darkness. Most of the creatures clinging to the roof tiles and chimneys were small and twisted, scaly green, blinking large slow eyes at the weak sun like lizards in torpor.

They mirrored the house itself, uncomfortable and confused to discover itself still standing to witness yet another dawn. Last night the place had seemed to radiate such grim grandeur. By day it

looked huddled and wounded, an aged behemoth with a wasting disease.

I cast around the grounds again, trying to figure out where Evelyn might be, and spotted Raine instead.

She'd just emerged around a copse of trees far off to the left, jogging alongside a visible stretch of the estate's perimeter wall. Of course, I couldn't actually make out her features at that distance, but I'd never mistake her fluid athletic gait for anybody else. I raised a hand over my head and waved.

The tiny figure in the distance raised a fist in reply, and Raine changed direction, jogging across the thin lawns toward me.

Even in the nipping chill, with my hands tucked into my armpits, I felt a deep warm flush accompany the smile on my face, as Raine jogged up and pulled to a stop.

"Morning, you," she said between deep breaths, rolling her shoulders and flexing her neck. "I'd give you a hug, but I'm pretty ripe. Get my message?"

"Yes, thank you. And it is a very good morning, indeed."

Raine was dressed – or perhaps 'stripped down' – in a tight white athletic top and a pair of shorts, absolutely drenched in sweat and panting hard, a big grin plastered across her face. She'd dragged her hair into a short ponytail to keep the sweat from her eyes. How did she bear the cold like that? I had no idea, but I was very appreciative of the sight, and the way she stretched her arms over her head when she caught me staring.

"Like what you see, miss Morell?" she asked, a cheeky glint in her eyes. "I do breakfast delivery, you know? Does it still count as your breakfast if I eat you?"

I rolled my eyes but couldn't keep a smirk off my face. "You brought exercise clothes with you? Really?"

"Hey, it's a great place to run." Raine didn't stop moving. As she spoke she began to bounce from side to side on the balls of her feet, shadow boxing with the air. "Better than a treadmill, no cars, ground's nice and springy, don't have to worry about pedestrians. May as well get some exercise. Plus, you know, clearing my head." She shot me a wink.

“Are you going to be alright to drive again later today?”

Raine stopped bobbing about and straightened up. “Absolutely. Hundred percent. We can be out here soon as we’re ready. Shower, lunch, Evee shows you the map, we’re gone.”

I nodded absently. We had serious matters to think about, but I couldn’t keep my eyes off the way Raine’s sweat-soaked top clung to her abdomen and sports bra. Perhaps it was mere imagination, but for a moment I could smell her over the countryside scents of earth and leaf mulch and damp brick, that spicy hot feminine sweat.

“Heather? You feeling cold?” Raine grinned and thumbed over her shoulder. “Wanna join me for a lap around the lake? It’ll warm you up. I’ve got some spare joggers upstairs, you don’t have to ruin your jeans.”

“Are you serious? Raine, there’s no way I could keep up with you. Don’t be silly.”

She shrugged. “We’ll go at your pace.”

Weeks ago, Raine had coaxed me into accompanying her on one of her trips to the university gym. Once. I’d lasted less than ten minutes on a standing bike before my stamina had given out, sweating and heaving and red in the face. A complete disaster. I’d expected at least a little teasing, but Raine treated me as if I’d subjected myself to the same hour-long punishing treadmill routine as her, not to mention the weights she’d lifted first. At least I got to watch her working out, and she made it very worth my while when we got home and got in the shower.

I hesitated, genuinely considering her offer. Raine pulled a wide windmill stretch with both arms.

“You work up a sweat, I’ll scrub it off you.” She grinned.

I let out a shaking sigh and closed my eyes for a second, to avoid the temptation of her body. I knew I was blushing rather badly. “That would be lovely, but I really need to talk to Evee. I don’t think we should be getting all worked up with each other right now. But thank you. You ... you look great, Raine.”

“You know I do.” She winked at me again. “Evee’s over by ... the ...” Her eyes drifted up and past my shoulder.

Praem clicked neatly down the steps from the patio to stand next to me.

“Good morning,” she intoned.

Raine stared at the flawless maid uniform, running her eyes up and down Praem, mouth open in disbelief. She glanced at me and I pulled a yes-I-know-I-see-it-too face.

“Good morning,” Praem repeated.

“And a good morning to you too.” Raine burst out laughing.

“Bloody hell. You got something you need to tell me, Heather?”

“It wasn’t me, I didn’t dress her like this. It’s not really my sort of thing.”

“She looks like an escapee from a fetish porno. No offence, I mean, you look great, yeah,” Raine added as Praem did that unimpressed head-tilt in her direction.

“I take it you’re not responsible either, then? She won’t tell me.”

“If I’d done that I’d be parading her around.” Raine let out a low whistle. “Wouldn’t say no though. Hypothetically. If she was human I’d say she needs a reduction to save her back muscles.”

“I *know*. It’s- they’re- yes. A-anyway, I assumed Eevee had dressed her, but the more Praem said the less likely I find that explanation.”

“Said?” Raine raised an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged, unsure how to explain, and eyed Praem sidelong. “We had an actual conversation, much more extensive than the good morning she gave you. She’s talking. Not quite like a person, but almost there. I think it’s this place, perhaps it’s waking her up.”

Raine frowned and a sudden shift flowed through her body language, one I knew very well by now. She peered closer at the demon-doll. Praem stared back, perfectly level, expression empty.

“You’re alright, aren’t you?” Raine murmured. “You’re on our side. Or you better be.”

“Yes,” Praem answered.

Raine straightened up and shrugged, relaxed and loose again.

“She’s what I need to talk with Eevee about,” I said. “Among other

things, I suppose. You've seen her?"

"Yeah. Spat fire at me though, so, you know, duck and cover. Might not be quite as bad with you." Raine looked off to the far side of the estate's grounds, along the brick pathway which vanished in the trees. "Actually, I dunno if either of us should talk to her right now."

"Raine, we can't leave her alone while we're here. It's not fair on her."

"It's cool, she's not alone. Her dad's with her. He took the day off work, spend some time with his daughter, you know. Lucky he can do that. She was ... thinking. It's sort of the spot for that."

I peered down the pathway too. Beyond the trees, if I squinted, I could just make out a jumbled grey shadow, like fallen masonry.

"That's where she is?" I asked. "What's over there?"

"Trees mostly. Leaves. Dirt. Probably a bird or two."

"*Raine*. What's over there?"

Raine gave me a pained smile "Evee's mum."

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Despite the dilapidated neglect, I rather warmed to the grounds of the Saye estate. I'd never spent time in the countryside before, not the real countryside, as far as you could get from a proper town anywhere in England. I was a city girl at heart, by habit and history, even if the cities were small and provincial.

Few cars passed on the distant main road, and I had to listen closely to hear them. Birdsong was intermittent but everywhere, and as I made my way through the little wood, the occasional pigeon lurched into the air from the trees above.

Roots had undermined the brickwork pathway, cracked and buckled it from below. The wooden edging had long since rotted away to stubs, overgrown with moss and long grass. These trees had probably once been well-tended, now choked with lichen and creepers, the rich earth between them colonised by a thicket of ferns.

I liked that, for a strange double reason; nature reclaiming imposed order looked good, but more importantly this had all been left to

fall into disuse because Evelyn's mother was dead.

Perhaps she'd enjoyed this garden, perhaps she'd want it to endure. It would not.

The trees parted and fell back. The path continued on, into the Saye family's private graveyard.

When Raine had told me what lay beyond the trees I hadn't believed my ears. She'd had to repeat herself, and eventually I'd rolled my eyes and imagined a scene from a gothic horror novel. Exactly what this disaster of a trip needed, the cherry on the cake of stupid spooky house – a private family graveyard full of dead wizards. I'd pictured marble mausoleums, gnarled trees, maybe one of those awful suffering statues with frozen stone tears running down its cheeks, let alone whatever pneuma-somatic guardians the Saye family had left behind. What denomination was a family of hereditary mages likely to follow? Somehow I doubted they were domesticated Church of England types.

The graveyard surprised me. A low masonry wall enclosed less than a dozen headstones, along with empty space for perhaps two dozen more, all the stonework clean and much of it relatively new.

Only two graves at the rear looked truly old, slabs of plain granite, but the inscriptions were still legible. The grass was trimmed and neat. Trees formed a sheltering enclosure on three sides, even without their leaves. The fourth side opened out, the land dropping away in a slow hill with a view of the dark waters of the lake.

There was a mausoleum, but it was tasteful, small, in cream stone with a plain cross on the permanently sealed doors.

Not creepy at all. A peaceful place, very well chosen.

Evelyn was sitting on a stone bench halfway down the graveyard, her walking stick resting across her legs, her back to me. Lewis Saye stood nearby, in the middle of saying something to his daughter. I hesitated at the entrance, suddenly feeling like an intruder on a intimate moment.

Lewis spotted me in the corner of his eye, broke into a big smile and waved one huge hand. "Hullo there! Do come over, don't be shy."

Evelyn looked at me over her shoulder. She grunted a good morning

as I approached.

“Good morning, Eevee, Mister Saye.”

“And a good morning to you too!” Lewis boomed at me, shattering the peace of the graveyard. “I do hope you slept well? The place does tend to creak like a leaky old ship at night, I do know.”

“Tolerably well, thank you.” I forced a smile. Poor man deserved to feel like a good host.

“And you helped yourself to some breakfast, I trust? Can’t have growing girls going without a good breakfast. If you’re still hungry – either of you – I’ve got some bacon in the fridge, I could do omelets for lunch, there’s ... there’s ... ”

I saw, on both their faces, the exact moment Praem emerged from the trees in my wake.

Lewis Saye did a pretty job of hiding his reaction after the first second of confused shock, and from that moment onward he didn’t even look at the doll-demon again. I realised too late what the sight of her might be doing to him, if Evelyn’s mother had indeed dressed her zombies up as a mockery of domestic help.

Evelyn pulled such a frown. A frown like, well, like Praem had just turned up in a maid outfit.

“She’s following me. I’m sorry,” I muttered, and didn’t know where to look. “I should have made her stay indoors. Sorry.”

Lewis Saye clapped his huge hands together before anybody could reply. “Well, I should really get started on marinading the chicken for dinner, especially if Angeline manages to get away from work early. She’s going to try to make it down to see you again, Evelyn, and I’m sure she’ll be delighted to meet all your friends too. Evelyn was just telling me about you in fact, Heather. All good things though, I assure you, haha!”

The laugh ever so slightly too loud, the grin ever so slightly too forced.

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said, to have something to say.

“Don’t let her stay out here too long, will you?” he asked me with a theatrically serious frown. I caught Evelyn rolling her eyes. “She does tend to mope, my girl. You two come back indoors and I’ll

have something hot from the oven quicker than you can get your boots off.” He clapped a hand – gently – to Evelyn’s shoulder, then let go and strode down the pathway back toward the house.

“Dad,” Evelyn snapped.

“Yes? Yes dear?”

She raised a hand. “Keys.”

Lewis hesitated and swallowed. He glanced at me. “Is it really ... really necessary?”

Evelyn huffed. “How am I supposed to show Heather the-”

“Yes, yes, I suppose you’re right, you’re completely right.” He blustered over Evelyn’s specifics with a smile. “You’re out-thinking me already. I’m getting old, I swear, you’ll be running rings around me in no time, just li- yes, yes. Quite.” He cleared his throat and extracted a keyring from his pocket, fumbled around to unhook a barely-used spare, before striding back and handing it to Evelyn. He closed her fingers around the key before she could withdraw.

“Now- I- I mean-” he struggled, voice low. I felt like I should turn away, close my ears. “Now Evelyn, you know you mustn’t- mustn’t-”

“Mustn’t what?” Evelyn snapped. “I’m not going to turn into her by spending twenty minutes in her dungeon.”

Lewis Saye straightened up and nodded, big smile strained with effort. He smiled my way as well, nodded again, and then walked off, pointedly stepping around where Praem now stood stock-still behind us.

Evelyn watched him go. I’d rarely felt more awkward in my entire life. Neither of us spoke until he’d disappeared into the trees.

“I’m really sorry I interrupted that, Eevee.”

“It’s not as if anything important ever comes out of his mouth.” She caught the poorly disguised shock on my face and sighed sharply, waving me off. “I know, I know I’m harsh with him. It’s hard not to be. He was never there.”

Evelyn looked a little brighter and healthier than she had yesterday, as if the countryside air was doing her good, her face a little less wan, her back slightly straighter. Freshly showered, a clean change

of clothes, and I could see she'd even waved a brush in the general direction of her hair. She wore a thick grey fisherman's jumper, far too large for her, so enclosing and heavy it could have kept out a bullet, let alone the cold. Her hands were half-lost inside the sleeves.

There was a bitter defiance in her face and the way she held herself, moreso than usual.

I suppose I would have felt the same, sat where she was.

"Is this Raine's sick idea of a joke?" She eyed Praem's maid uniform up and down.

"No, it wasn't her, or me either. I assumed you'd put her in it, but then I realised that was quite unlikely, to say the least."

"It's grotesque."

"I think it suits her. I mean- it-" I swallowed, withering under the force of Evelyn's unimpressed frown. "It makes her boobs look amazing. She seems to have a good sense for that."

Evelyn huffed and shook her head. "Where did you find that, hm?"

Praem turned to stare at her, but declined to reply.

"She wouldn't tell me either," I said.

Evelyn clicked her fingers. "Answer."

"In a cupboard," Praem intoned. Evelyn fixed her with a steely look, but then sighed and gave up with a shrug of her hands.

"Maybe," I ventured, softly. "Maybe she's acting more like a person, because we've been treating her a little bit like a person?"

"That's not a good thing. She's going completely off the rails."

"Make myself useful," Praem intoned.

"See?" I said before Evelyn could snap again. "I think she was only following your orders, the best way she could. She came to say good morning to me, too."

Evelyn frowned at me. "Wait, how do you know what I told her to do?"

"She's been talking. Almost like a real person. We had an – almost

normal – conversation. I thought I should tell you. I asked if she knew who she is, and she replied by saying I should know that, because I named her; she's Praem. I think she's made that her identity, Eeve. I think she's trying to be a person."

Evelyn looked between Praem and I, then squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Great. Wonderful." She opened them again and shot Praem a look fit to fell an elephant. "I should have you destroyed and sent back where you came from."

"Eeve!"

"You won't," Praem intoned.

I blinked at the doll-demon in surprise, but Evelyn seemed to expect that reply. She knuckled at her eyes. "Yes, *thank you* for telling me, Heather, but I can't do a damn thing about her now. I've lost control, called up what I cannot put down. Be thankful I used a mannequin to make her, otherwise we'd have yet another cluster-fuck bearing down on us."

"Eeve, I really do think she's on our side."

"She's not on any side. *She*," Evelyn spat sarcasm. "It. It doesn't have sides."

I wet my lips and decided to let this one drop for now. Here, in front of her mother's grave, was perhaps not the best place to convince Evelyn of anything. Maybe I could find some way to help Praem prove herself, but not right now.

"She," Praem said.

Evelyn frowned at her, then sighed and glanced back to me. "What did you want, anyway?"

"To see you?"

"Can't imagine why," Evelyn grumbled.

"Eeve, you're my best friend, and you're having a rough time – and yes, I know that's a strong contender for understatement of the decade. Of course I want to see you, I want to help you. I want to get you back to Sharrowford as soon as possible."

Evelyn looked away, glowering at nothing, but she did nod ever so slightly.

"You're my ... my friend too," she muttered. "Yes, that's right."

"May I join you?" I asked. She nodded and sniffed, so I sat down on the stone bench next to her. It was exquisitely uncomfortable. "Isn't your bum cold sitting on this?"

"Course it is. Easier than standing though. I wanted ... needed to be down here, to ... " She waved a dismissive hand at the gravestones in front of her, at one in particular. A slab of black marble, scrupulously clean, the inscription picked out in gold leaf.

I had no doubt who was buried beneath.

'Loretta Julianna Saye', the inscription read. '1965-2014'

'God Grant She Stay Dead.'

"Goodness me," I struggled. "Those are quite the words to put on a headstone."

"I chose that," said Evelyn.

I sighed, more at the world in general than this specific moment of absurdity. "Anywhere else I'd assume it was just bad taste, but I'm going to guess in this case it might be literal?"

Evelyn looked at me sidelong to see if I was serious. "She's in a sealed lead coffin. The burial was a compromise, I wanted the body burned."

"You mean cremated?"

Evelyn shrugged. "My father insisted she have a proper burial. At the time, I was in no state to stop him, and he could easily have had Raine arrested if he'd wanted. I wouldn't have survived without her, but he didn't understand a fraction of what was going on. He never fucking did. Put it out of his mind. Pretended we were normal, even when he was surrounded by all her constructs. The first couple of days after her death, she did attempt to migrate."

"... migrate. Okay."

"Mind transfer. Best with a pre-prepared vessel or a close blood relative, before the magician slips away entirely. So she would inherit my body, crippled as I was, but young and alive, while I would be trapped in her corpse." Evelyn stared at the grave as she spoke, her eyes boring holes in the packed earth. "She failed, because she hadn't expected to die, so she'd spent years exposing

me to exactly the kind of thing which taught me how to resist. And that's why she's the one rotting in the *fucking ground*," she shouted the last two words at the grave. I flinched, and Evelyn slipped back into silent smoldering hate.

Very, very carefully, I put one hand on Evelyn's back, as gentle a pressure as I could. A calculated risk, even if only to let her know I was here, within touching distance. She was not in the ground. She was here.

"That's one of the most monstrous things I've ever heard," I murmured.

She didn't shrug me off. A minor miracle. Instead she let out a long sigh, and I knew she was trying to let go. The anger drained out of her muscles, the tide receding to reveal a cold bleakness in her voice.

"Mm. So yes, to answer your question, the inscription is literal. The lead coffin isn't for her benefit. I found things in her notes, in some of the books, about how the flesh of a mage might imbue certain qualities on the very grave worms themselves. A back up plan, another way out. But she's never coming back. I got her. I won."

We skated very thin emotional ice here, and I could see two possible paths. On one path I rubbed Evelyn's back, I spoke soothing pleasantries, I did everything that one was supposed to do with a friend in intractable emotional pain.

On the other path, I went digging.

All I had to do was speak a few words, prompt her in the right direction. She'd do the rest, if she needed it. How much had Evelyn ever spoken about this? It wasn't as if she could visit a therapist, what on earth would she say?

Would digging make me too much like Raine? Manipulative, underhanded, trying to manoeuvre a friend into emotional vulnerability, even if it was to help her? Even if my intentions were pure?

Despite no idea what I was doing, I'd spent weeks dragging Evelyn into a real friendship, by following my gut; I had no reason to change tactics now.

"You don't sound too happy about that," I said.

Evelyn eyed me oddly, almost hesitant. I could feel the tension bunch up in her shoulders. "I'm not sure you'd understand. I'm sorry, I know you ... you mean well ... I-"

"I'm not stupid, Evee." I plunged into the risk, my heart rate spiking. "I can put two and two together, from the things you've said, from the way Raine spoke about it. You killed your mother, didn't you?"

Evelyn let out a huge sigh and nodded slowly, staring at the grave. "She was a monster. A real one."

"She was. From everything I've heard, she was."

"It was self-defence. It was, Heather, it really was. She took my leg. She ruined my spine. She would have used me up and moved onto another, maybe had another child or adopted one. She was a monster, and I put her down."

Evelyn turned to look at me, biting her bottom lip – I don't think she was aware of that, I'd never seen that look on her face before. Her eyes were so bleak.

"So why do I still feel guilty?" she murmured.

no nook of english ground –

5.5

Life continues to confront me with difficult questions, over and over. Did I ever really have a twin sister? Do I have the courage and strength to rescue her? Am I willing to love a sociopath? Is magic real, or am I just insane?

Sitting on a cold stone bench before a wizard's grave, sheltered by the skeletal winter trees, Evelyn needed answers to a question I couldn't even begin to unpack.

Why *did* she still feel guilty for killing her own mother?

Doubtless she didn't expect a real answer from me, but the weariness on her face wrenched at my heart. She was groping for a handhold, from the bottom of a very deep pit. She'd been doing so for years. I struggled to summon the right words; it wasn't your fault, you had no choice, she forced your hand. She crippled you, she was going to kill you. She was evil.

Evelyn didn't need to hear any of that. Raine had probably said those exact words to her a hundred times before.

I hesitated, my lips half-forming the first word of a dozen different sentences. I'd tried to play therapist and waded far out of my depth. Great job, Heather. Some friend I am.

Evelyn turned away with a little shake of her head. "Never mind," she murmured. "You don't need this."

"But you do, Eeve. It's always okay to ask for help."

"Doesn't make much difference." She shrugged. "Not a day goes by I don't think about this, at least a bit. If I can't figure myself out, how could you? It's unfair of me to ask."

I felt her slipping away, slipping back into performative grumpiness and the comfort of her barbed tongue. Any moment she'd change the subject, wave a hand at her mother's grave with a bitter comment, smother the pain under sullen aggression. I had to buy

time.

Luckily, my hand was still on her back; so I did the first thing that came to mind.

“Regardless,” she huffed. “At least the old bitch-”

“W-wait, Eevee, don’t- don’t say anything.” I held up a finger. “Just- just stay perfectly still, don’t move, stay right there.”

“Heather?” She frowned hard, looked me up and down briefly. “What are you going on about?”

“Just, just stay. Stay sitting.” I hopped to my feet and stepped behind the bench, behind Evelyn, shivering a little in the corona of cold air. She peered at me like I’d gone mad. “Please, you can face forward, how you were. It’s okay, I’m not going to do anything weird.”

“What *are* you going to do?”

“I ... I’m going to touch your shoulders. Please Eevee, you trust me, don’t you?”

“ ... that I do.” She didn’t sound very certain, but she did face forward once more. Perhaps I’d piqued her curiosity.

The next step required no small amount of courage. Evelyn was not a touchy-feely sort of person. Hugs did not come easily to her, and her body was a litany of aches and pains, old injuries, bone problems and joint issues, before one even considered her prosthetic right leg or the missing fingers on her mangled left hand. But I was committed now, I had to see this through.

Gentle but firm, so she knew what I was doing, no surprises – I wrapped my fingers around Evelyn’s shoulders. Beneath the thick grey jumper I could feel her muscles tight with permanent tension. I tried to recall the basics of Raine’s technique. I had to get this at least partially correct or it would be pointless, and I didn’t possess anything near Raine’s grip strength.

“And?” Evelyn asked. “Is that it? What happens n-”

I pressed down hard with both thumbs and squeezed with my fingers.

“Ahh!” Evelyn winced open-mouthed.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" My hands flew to my mouth, mortified. *Idiot*. I hiccuped. "Evee, I'm so sorry, I wanted to—"

"Don't stop now," she snapped. "Get on with it."

"Oh ... um, okay. Right." Hiccup. "Right then. I'll just start with ... okay."

My hands fluttered as I hesitated, as I touched my fingers back to the thin muscles in Evelyn's shoulders. I pressed down hard, put my back into it. She grunted. This time I didn't stop.

We took several minutes to find a comfortable rhythm. Evelyn growled and hissed, grumbling under her breath as I dug in with my thumbs, telling me "left a bit", "down, no, further down", or "press harder" when my grip slackened. Her shoulders were terribly knotted with old strain, bunched and uncomfortable. Her habitual slouch probably didn't help.

Eventually she stopped wincing and grunting, and I felt the stress drain from her body inch by slow inch. She sighed deeply, sagged on the bench, and moved her walking stick off her lap to support her weight. Working my hands and arms chased away the worst of the chill air, or perhaps it was just proximity to Evelyn. Skinship does wonders for homoeostasis.

I'd bought time, now I needed to wheel the big guns into position. I wet my lips, weighed my options, and did the only thing I was certain of: I talked about myself.

"It's not on the same scale," I began quietly. "But I didn't feel any special relief or sense of justice after I killed Alexander."

Evelyn was silent, so I carried on.

"In the moment I won, I was satisfied, yes, I think so, in a brute sort of a way. But afterward? I still suffer all the same anxieties, still feel the same way about myself. He was a monster, he kept people in cages and fed their minds to his Outsider. The world is a better place with him gone, certainly, and I did what I did to protect myself and my friends, all of you. We defeated an evil wizard in his magical castle, put his monstrous minions to flight, and freed his captive. Aren't I supposed to feel victorious? What did I prove, in the end?"

As I spoke, a weight lifted inside my chest. I hadn't realised it was

there. I'd bottled this up for weeks, barely expressed a word of it to Raine, couldn't make sense of it to myself. It didn't hurt, not like Evelyn did, but I did struggle to keep a catch out of my voice. This wasn't for me, this was for her.

"Proved him wrong," Evelyn murmured.

"Exactly. So why do I feel this way?" I asked. "I don't feel big or strong, I certainly don't feel like a hero. All I did was commit murder. A necessary murder, perhaps, but I still made the decision to kill a person, clear headed, not in the heat of the moment. And I don't feel any different. I'm still me. That was me, all along." I had to take a deep breath. "I'm still terrified of ending up ... other, different, that the brainmath will make me inhuman. All I proved in the end is that I had the strength to kill him, that's all. It's self-referential."

Evelyn nodded slowly. "I know. I know exactly what you mean."

I let out a controlled sigh and resumed rubbing Evelyn's shoulders, simply to occupy my hands.

"It was important," Evelyn muttered after a moment. "To me. That you were there. In that castle. You, Raine. Fuck it, even Twil, I guess. Even that thing," she gestured at Praem with a sideways nod. "I didn't have to do it alone. Thank you, for that."

"That's what friends are for." I tried to sound bright. "Or so I'm told."

"I'm ... " Evelyn cleared her throat. "I'm learning that too, yes."

"I very much doubt I would have been friends with your mother, Evee. Goodness, it's no wonder you worry about ending up like her, she tried to take over your mind. You're not her. You'll never be like her."

"Mm."

We were deep in the core of it now, the most dangerous part, and I had to push on. "Killing one's own mother, even in self-defence, is going to mess anyone up. Let's forget for a moment that we're all neck-deep in supernatural doodads, that she was a monster, a magician, all of that. Boil it down to the fundamentals: you had to kill your own mum. You had to. Even without everything else, without the magic, without all the other stuff she did to you, that's

a choice she inflicted on you. Of course you're going to be wounded by that. Anybody would be."

Evelyn frowned. "I suppose so."

We slipped into silence. I focused on rubbing her back, kneading out the deeper knots.

"Serves you right," she mumbled.

"Evee?"

"Mm, pardon." She cleared her throat and straightened up, nodding at her mother's grave. "That was directed at her. She's sludge in a box, and I'm getting a shoulder rub."

"You're very welcome. I think you rather needed it."

Evelyn sighed. "Never used to like it from Raine. She gave up trying years ago."

"You do tend to get the claws out for her."

"She deserves it."

"So, you're saying I give better back rubs than her?"

"I'm saying I'm ... oh I don't know. More comfortable with you, I guess."

"Should I take that as a compliment? I think I shall."

Evelyn grunted, still staring at the grave. She hesitated over a word, opening her mouth before thinking better of it and lapsing back into silence. I squeezed her shoulders harder, enough to draw a wince from her gritted teeth.

"Uunh."

"I-I'm sorry." I blushed. "I don't know why I did that, I'm getting carried away."

"Then you should get carried away more often." Evelyn twisted her back to one side, producing a trio of pops from her spine. She let out a throaty grumble. "I want to tell you how it happened."

"How ... how what happened?" I hedged my bets, though I could guess.

"Don't be obtuse, Heather, it doesn't suit you. How I killed my

mother, what else?" She spoke in a very matter-of-fact way, like we were discussing the weather. "I've never told anybody. No point telling Raine, she was right there when it happened, all the way through the whole bloody business."

"Okay then." I swallowed, steeled myself. "I'll try not to be squeamish."

"Not much to be squeamish about. I stopped her heart." Evelyn made a squeezing gesture with her left hand – her maimed hand, the one with the missing fingers. "That was the end of it, the final move, checkmate. We'd be out here all day if I told you the entire story, but that was the end. It's not easy, forcing cardiac arrest, not something I could pull off these days, not against another mage. I was ... different, then. I had help, of a kind."

What on earth does one say to that? "Wow," I breathed, then flustered and hurried to correct myself. "I-I mean–"

"Wow is right. It's okay, Heather."

I swallowed. "Okay. You had ... help?"

Evelyn shrugged. She was absently tapping her artificial leg, right where the stump ended and prosthetic began. "It's complicated. Raine, in part. It was messy, you have to understand that, not a clean dramatic confrontation. It wasn't like I declared my intention and challenged her to a duel. We were planning to kill her, but we didn't chose the moment, or the day. It just happened. Raine's always insisted we bear joint culpability. Nonsense." Evelyn sighed and shook her head. "She was too busy keeping the zombies off me. The real ones. She never put a scratch on my mother, not in a way that mattered, though I do distinctly recall Raine attempting to brain her with a log at one point, but that can't be right, there was no fireplace in that room."

"Sounds like Raine to me," I added, feeling far too flippant for this subject.

"Yes, quite." Evelyn sucked on her teeth. "Always the enthusiast for a bit of fisticuffs."

"Are magicians always so hard to kill?" I asked. "Alexander didn't seem bothered by a bullet, but ... and I mean this in a very good way, Evee, but you don't seem as robust as that."

“Good,” she grunted. “What’s the first thing a ruthless person does with power? Hm? Protect themselves, that’s what, but if you want to be invulnerable, you have to make sacrifices. Leave certain things behind.” She let out a sudden, sharp sigh. “Ahh, Heather, I can’t say I haven’t been tempted, sometimes. If it wasn’t for Raine, or ... for you, maybe I would have given up on being human, just to feel a little safer.”

I squeezed her shoulders. “I for one am glad you didn’t.”

She nodded, sniffed. “My mother wasn’t like Alexander, not exactly, but she did have ways of defending herself. She couldn’t have survived a bullet through the chest though. God, that would have been so much easier. So, yes. I stopped my mother’s heart, and I had a hundred good reasons to do it. I was right, and I saved myself. But I still feel guilty.”

“It’s okay to feel that way. And to talk about it.”

Evelyn grunted. This wasn’t something one simply ‘got over’, I couldn’t ‘solve’ it for her, to presume so would be awful. She’d carry this for ever, but at least I could be here for her. At least she knew I understood.

As we’d spoken, I’d spotted furtive movement on the far side of the graveyard, in the undergrowth between the trees. Slowly, as I’d been concentrating on Evelyn, a black nose and sleek russet snout eased out from beneath the ferns. A cautious, skittish fox emerged into the cold sunlight, raising his head and looking about.

“Evee, do you see that fox over there?”

“Yes, yes, I see it too. It’s just a fox, not whatever you saw last night.”

I glanced over my shoulder, to where Praem still stood at attention with her hands clasped. “Praem? Do you see it too?”

“Fox,” she intoned.

The fox caught wind of us, or perhaps Praem’s voice carried a little too well between the gravestones. His head jerked in our direction, yellow eyes flashing in the sunlight, and then he scurried away, hindquarters vanishing into the undergrowth with a swish of his tail.

“The wall’s always been full of holes and gaps,” Evelyn said. “All

sorts of things get in and out.” She rolled her shoulders with a grimace. “Thank you, Heather. You can stop now. I feel ... ” She waved a hand. “Buttery.”

“Buttery?”

“Soft. Oh, I don’t know. I’m no good at this. Sit down, will you?”

I almost giggled as I slipped back onto the bench next to her, despite or perhaps because of the weight of our conversation, the release of tension in my gut. Evelyn blinked at the grave one last time, then finally lifted her eyes to the sky. I felt closer to her now than I ever had.

Close enough to ask the question that had lingered on my mind, during the unquiet night of tossing and turning.

“Evee, yesterday, in the car, you said something that got me thinking.”

“Hm?”

“You said you weren’t very happy with Raine or I – which makes perfect sense, considering where we’ve dragged you.”

“We’ve been over this. You didn’t drag me.”

“Be that as it may,” I tried to stay on topic. Despite the strange bonding session we’d just shared, I felt I was verging on unsafe ground, but I had to clear the air. “I’ve been really selfish the last couple of weeks, completely wrapped up in myself. When I thought about it, about why you might be angry at me, I realised you’ve barely been talking to me lately, and some of the things you’ve said-”

Evelyn cleared her throat and turned her face away from me.

“Heather, it’s not your fault, it’s nothing you’ve done.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes! Yes.”

“Evee, you’re the last person to pull your punches, but I still get the impression I’ve angered you in some way.” I made an effort to keep my voice steady, to hold onto my courage. “You can tell me. I promise.”

Evelyn directed a tight frown at me, her lips pressed together. I did

my best not to falter.

"I'm serious," I said.

"Surely you've figured out by now I'm an extremely difficult person? You really want to open this can of worms?"

"Of course I know that." I couldn't help but smile a little. "And I'm still serious."

Evelyn let out a long sigh. She looked off at the lake in the distance, and spoke haltingly, as if selecting each word with great care. "You're the first real friend I've ever made."

"Raine doesn't count?"

"I don't know." Evelyn shrugged. "You tell me, does she?"

"I like to think so."

"We met under rather different circumstances, and she's always been ... *Raine*." Evelyn gave me a sidelong look.

"Yes. She is. Very."

"You're my first real friend. I think. And then your mysterious bloody dream pixie comes along and ... "

Evelyn threw up both hands and huffed in frustration. I blinked at her, and incredibly enough she began to blush, shooting me a mortified sidelong glance before averting her face, hiding her eyes behind her hand.

"Evee ... you're saying ... you're jealous? Of Lozzie?"

Evelyn shrugged, still hiding. "I don't bloody well know. All right? I rather took your words to heart, all that stuff you said weeks back about not keeping things from you. Well. Here it is. I'm impossible, I know. It's unhealthy, but I can't help it." I was about to reply, to tell her it was okay, when suddenly she emerged from behind her hand and launched off again, flushed in the face and embarrassed to her core but still strong-voiced. "Why did she get to waltz into your life, monopolise your time? Raine, I understand; you sleep with her and I want no part of that, but unless I've utterly misread you I'm pretty certain you weren't going wrist-deep in your Lozzie."

"Um, wow." I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks too. "You're right, no, I didn't do, um, *that*."

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad we rescued her. She looked like a wreck. Perfect case for Raine. But ... ” Evelyn sighed sharply and threw up her hands again.

“Evee.”

“I know, I’m a bitter, twisted weirdo. Evelyn Saye, turbo-bitch. Of course you can have other friends. I have no idea why I feel this way.”

“Evee, don’t talk about yourself like that.” A smile tugged at the corners of my lips. Evelyn looked away again, so I got to my feet and stood up in front of her, tucking my hands into my hoodie to keep the cold at bay. “I don’t exactly have a lot of experience at this friend stuff either.”

“More than I do,” she grunted. I saw she was about to retreat behind her hand again.

“Why don’t we watch some of your anime magical girl shows together?” I asked.

That earned me her attention, an incredulous frown; gave me guts, for once.

“I’ll punish you in the name of the moon.” I said. “All that stuff?”

Evelyn squinted at me like I’d gone completely off my rocker. Perhaps I had. “That’s from *Sailor Moon*. I don’t even like that show. And you don’t even watch anime. What does this have to do with anything?”

“Then introduce me to it. We can do regular, normal friend things together, Evee. I’d enjoy that, I really would. Not everything has to be life-or-death magical shenanigans all the time.”

“I-” Evelyn came up short, frowning to herself. “I guess I can think of a few you might like. Something with lesbian romance in it. I suppose.”

“Good. I’ll look forward to it.”

Evelyn shook her head, still mired in disbelief.

“While we’re on embarrassing personal subjects, I’m going to take a huge risk,” I said, plunging ahead before I had time to stop and rethink. If I planned this out I’d never ask. My heart thudded against my chest and my mouth went dry. This was absolutely

going to get me shouted at, but I doubted I'd get another good opportunity, perhaps ever. "This question might make you angry, Eevee, but considering what you've said, I think I need to ask it, because you deserve some good things in life."

"... I'm not going to like where this is going, am I?"

"Are you attracted to Twil?"

She blinked. "What? No."

"Because, the way you act around her-"

"No. *Nullum*. Twil? Have you lost your senses?"

I faltered, babbling to explain myself as my cheeks flushed. Oh dammit, I'd gotten this wrong. "M-maybe I've been misreading the situation, but it's in the way you treat her. I admit, I'm ... incredibly gay, so maybe I'm reading a meaning into your actions which isn't there, maybe you like men and that's fine and maybe we need to get you a boyfriend instead, but I can't help-"

"Do you really call Raine 'mommy'?"

"No! Oh God, that joke in the car. No. No ... *once*." I blushed beet-red. Felt like steam was coming out of my ears. "It was really weird and I doubt I'd ever do it again. Not my thing."

Evelyn merely raised an eyebrow.

"Mommy," Praem intoned.

"Don't you start on that too," I said to her. "You've hardly got room to talk, you're wearing a maid uniform."

Perhaps it was my flustered imagination, but I swore I saw a hint of amusement on the doll-demon's face.

"Fascinating," Evelyn muttered.

"S-stop deflecting, Evelyn. I know what you're doing. Is that really your answer? I'm wrong, you don't like Twil in that way, at all? Look, I-I'm sorry for asking, but I had to know."

I saw the barbed joke gather on her tongue – but at the last second Evelyn stopped, the ghost of a frown creasing her forehead. "Twil hasn't been playing silly buggers with you, has she? Made a stupid joke along these lines? Is that what brought this on?"

I shook my head. “No. Nothing.”

Evelyn watched my face intently. “You’re sure?”

“Quite certain.” I declined to share my impressions of Twil’s private feelings. “Would it make any difference if she did like you?”

“I don’t know. I *don’t know*. I don’t know any of this. Will you take that for an answer?”

“You mean, you don’t know if you’re attracted to Twil, or you don’t know what you’re attracted to in general?”

“It’s not a topic I spend a lot of time thinking about.” She sounded deeply unimpressed.

I was about to apologise, withdraw the subject, allow Evelyn her privacy – we were close friends, but maybe this was difficult for her. Not everybody felt such clarity about their sexuality as I did. Perhaps she was asexual, and perhaps that was none of my business.

Before I could say anything, Evelyn suddenly let out a huge sigh. She attempted to rally her forces once more, but then gave up and spread one hand in the ultimate lazy shrug. “I don’t know, Heather. I don’t know if I’m ...” She grumbled in her throat, covering awkward embarrassment. “If I’m into girls, like you are. It’s not as if I think about cunts all the time. But I have looked at those,” she made a wide gesture at Praem, and I assumed she was talking about the demon’s impressive chest. “Men ... I don’t know. I don’t even know if I have a functioning sexuality. At all. Half my body doesn’t work, my brain’s a mess. My mother broke more than even I understand. Fuck it, do you seriously want to hear all this?”

“If you want to share, absolutely. We’re best friends, Eevee. If we can’t talk about this then who can we talk about it with? If we can discuss murder and dead mages then I’m pretty sure I’m comfortable talking about what gets you off. Or, what doesn’t. I’m not going to judge you.”

“Of course you won’t, don’t be stupid, I’m not worried about that.” She huffed, then put her weight on her walking stick and held out a hand. “Help me up, my false leg’s gone numb.”

I gave her my hand. In the corner of my eye I saw Praem twitch, as if she wanted to help instead. Evelyn levered herself off the cold

stone bench and brushed off the backside of her long skirt. “Was that meant to be a joke?” I asked.

“Sort of.” She shared a grim smile. “I think it’s time I showed you something.”

I stared at her. “Not a ... not a porn collection?”

“*What?*”

“I-it’s what we were talking about! I assumed ... ahhh.”

Evelyn snorted with laughter. “No. But keep that lightness of spirit, Heather. It makes you wonder-...” She cleared her throat. “It’s good. We’ll need that where we’re going.”

I asked a silent question with my eyebrows. Evelyn nodded through the sheltering trees, toward the bulk of the mansion towering over the landscape, the roof still visible even from this woodland grotto. “Raine already knows all this, she was here. She’s seen it all. You’re weren’t, you don’t understand. But you’re right, you’re my best friend, and I want you to ... ” She shrugged. “Whatever. It’s time I showed you what my mother used me for.”

There was no good answer to that except to follow her.

As we left the graveyard behind, Evelyn did not glance back at her mother’s grave, but I looked over my shoulder to check Praem was following.

She was not. She was locked in a staring contest with a little russet snout that poked from the undergrowth on the far side of the graveyard. Yellow eyes glowed back at her. How bold. I suppose it had little to fear from people, out here.

“Praem.” Evelyn clicked her fingers. “Stop dawdling.”

The doll-demon turned away, shoes clicking to catch up. The fox slipped back into the wild.

I put the animal from my mind; just a fox.

= =

Back inside, shrouded once more in the oppressive shadows of the mansion’s heavy beams and solid brick, Evelyn led the way down the kinking spinal corridor. The heavy carpet soaked up the sound of our footsteps and muffled Praem’s escorting tread. Somewhere

off in the depths of the house I could hear the pipes gurgling, a boiler running; perhaps Raine was taking a shower after her exercise. We passed by the kitchen, Lewis happily clanging pans around inside, humming to himself as he worked on tonight's dinner.

The locked door to the mothballed east wing didn't look particularly special, no different to any other door in the house. Solid, stout, dark wood. A little dust had gathered on the handle.

Evelyn produced the key she'd browbeaten out of her father, and fitted it into the lock. My throat and my guts both tightened.

I forced myself to take a deep breath. Evelyn wanted to show me her past, she needed me to understand. I had to focus past my natural anxiety. There was nothing to be afraid of here, this place was dead and done. Besides, we had Praem with us. Only Raine made a more effective bodyguard.

Evelyn frowned sideways at me. "We're not even down there yet."

"I'm okay. I'm fine." I smiled, a little embarrassed. "Please do lead on, Evee."

She did. She pushed the door wide, left it open and unlocked as we ventured beyond. For some reason that reassured me.

The mothballed wing was saturated in darkness, far denser than the rest of the house. All the curtains in the corridor were shut tight, some of them double-layered, all covered in dust. What sort of prying eyes did they hope to keep at bay, out here in the back of beyond, in the woods? Evelyn found a light switch, apparently from memory. Nothing happened when she clicked it up and down.

"Tch. He's removed the bloody light bulbs," she grunted. "Idiot."

"Is it safe to open a curtain?"

"Eh? Why wouldn't it be?" Evelyn used the tip of her walking stick to sweep one of the heavy curtains aside. Dust billowed into the air. Weak winter sunlight crept over us and filtered down the long barren corridor, catching the edges of wooden door frames and metal handles. The light didn't reach far, soaked up by the darkness.

"I thought perhaps there was a reason they're closed? It's hardly an unreasonable assumption in here."

“The reason is wilful ignorance,” Evelyn muttered as she squinted along the corridor. “This’ll have to do. You,” she clicked her fingers at Praem. “Open them as we go.”

Praem stepped ahead of us to obey. She grabbed the next set of curtains and drew them wide. Sunlight touched her face, highlighted those milk-white eyes.

“Light,” Praem intoned.

“Yes, light,” Evelyn grumbled.

Most of the mothballed wing was closed up, doors shut, a couple of rugs rolled against the corridor wall. We passed a few open doors, the rooms inside stacked with furniture beneath ghostly transparent dust-covers. A stale smell hung in the air, with undercurrents of harsh cleaning chemicals and aged wood. Evelyn strode with a purpose, walking stick swinging, shoulders hunched, knowing exactly where she was going. I followed a step behind. The shadows retreated before us.

Eventually the corridor ran out, terminated by a stout oak door. This door looked older, shorter, the frame a little crooked. Evelyn clacked the handle down. “Mind your head.”

The room inside would have been beautiful under any other circumstances, a long sitting room with a very low ceiling and a wooden floor, covered in thick rugs. A pair of cracked leather sofas faced each other over a slab of glass and metal trying to pass itself off as a coffee table, all draped with dust sheets. A huge soot-blackened fireplace dominated the entirety of one wall, crowned with a marble mantelpiece, bare except for a skin of dust.

Evelyn ignored all of it, and my curious look. She stalked across the room to a door which hadn’t been apparent until she pushed it open, hidden as it was behind a column of load-bearing wall. Darkness yawned beyond.

I peered over her shoulder. Wooden steps descended between whitewashed concrete walls.

“A hidden door to a secret cellar,” I sighed. “What’s next, eyes in the back of portraits? When does Scooby Doo turn up to solve the mystery?”

Evelyn wasn’t laughing. She shot me a sidelong look. I didn’t blame

her, the joke was a weak attempt to push back my own trepidation. I mumbled an apology.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “Place is fucking ridiculous, I know.”

“It really is.”

Evelyn slapped a switch and a light guttered on far below.

“Too gutless to go down there and remove the bulbs, I see,” she grunted.

“Evee.” My voice caught, and I had to swallow. “I don’t mean to sound worried, but I’m getting *deja vu* doing this.”

“Hmm? For what?”

“You led me to a semi-secret underground magical treasure trove once before. You may recall I had a very uncomfortable face-off with a giant spider? Is there anything down there I need to know about, preferably before it surprises me with a giant stinger?”

Evelyn grunted, taking me seriously. “Nothing pneuma-somatic. My mother would never have things she couldn’t see so close to her most important work. The whole place is warded. Best not touch anything though. Raine and I cleaned up everything ... ” she waved a hand, searching for the words. “Everything *independently mobile*, but there’s plenty of sights you won’t want to see, remnants of her constructs. Just follow me.”

I nodded. “Okay. I trust you, Evee.”

“Mm.”

She led the way down the stairs, walking stick clacking. We were spared the cliché of ominous creaking wood – instead the stairs echoed, a hollow space beneath them. The echoes multiplied as we descended to the cellar floor.

Surprisingly spacious, the cellar was filled mostly with empty wine racks, containing only a few moldering old bottles, half-blocking several doors. A sort of butcher’s counter stood in the middle of the space, stacked with old metal kegs, casting a long shadow as the single bare light bulb struggled to illuminate the rear of the space. Modern concrete gave way to mortared stonework, open archways leading off into deeper darkness.

Dank cold air crept down the collar of my hoodie, dark and

somehow unclean. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself.

“How old is all this?” I murmured. The whitewashed concrete surroundings multiplied even the beating of my heart, let alone Praem’s precise tread as she brought up the rear.

Evelyn cocked an eyebrow. “Old enough. Don’t fret, we’re not going back there.” She gestured for Praem. “Open that.”

I felt a modicum of relief as Praem headed for the nearest door, modern and clean, but stared and felt a shiver again when I realised it was hewn from a solid block of stainless steel, with several arm-thick bolts on *this* side. The doll-demon opened it without effort, on perfectly balanced, silent hinges, then reached inside and clicked a concealed light switch. Harsh bright florescent illumination flooded out, the bulb buzzing in the echoing cellar. Evelyn let out a shuddering breath. I realised her knuckles were white on the handle of her walking stick, her jaw clenched hard.

“Evee?” I reached for her hand, very gently. “Evee it’s okay. I’m right here, okay? We can- why don’t we got back upstairs, wait for Raine too?”

She swallowed hard and shot me a frowning look. “It’s just a Pavlovian response. There’s nothing here anymore. Not really.”

“If you’re certain. Whatever you need.”

“I’m bloody well here already, aren’t I?” she spat. “Fuck it, let’s go.”

Evelyn led me inside, through the steel door. Praem swung to follow us without instruction.

I wasn’t even remotely prepared.

It looked a little bit like one of the less savoury rooms at Cygnet hospital, and a little bit like a torture chamber. A real one. Not a medieval parody; no iron maiden, no rack, no table of rusty implements. That would have been easier, cartoonish.

No, it was a sordid little place. A sour taste filled my mouth as I took in the implications.

The floor and walls were tiled, white, sloped slightly toward a drain in the corner. Easy to hose down. A tap jutted from one wall. An interior wall of thick steel bars split the room a few feet in – a cell, allowing an observer to watch in safety. The cell door stood open,

the bars buckled and bent.

Inside that tiled cell, every single inch of wall and floor was covered with a vast, intricate magic circle, in deep midnight black strokes, like dried tar instead of paint. Four layers of magic circle. Between each, entire passages had been written in a script I'd never seen before, ugly and angular.

My head swam at the sheer complexity – but it didn't hurt my eyes or make me feel sick. The design had been ruined, disarmed. Several sections had been wiped away, smudged, a few tiles shattered.

In the centre of the circles stood a chair.

A little like a dentist's chair. Reclined. Bolted to the floor. Plastic, wipe-clean. Leather restraints for the forehead, ankles, wrists. Somebody had torn at the armrests, ripped out bits of stuffing.

The chair was child-sized. I swallowed a hiccup.

Evelyn took three steps into the cell, staring at the chair, then turned her head to watch me, watch my reaction. Her breathing was steady, controlled, expression dark but not distressed. She seemed to have mastered her memories. I followed on numb feet. Praem stepped forward to stand a few feet from Evelyn, prim and straight-backed. Only later did I realise she'd positioned herself between Evelyn and the chair. Perhaps she felt protective.

I didn't even have to ask the question.

"It doesn't work anymore," Evelyn said, matter-of-fact. "It's defanged, no power source, and I ruined the circle."

I shook my head, glancing around again, then back at her. "But ... Evee, what is this? Was this ... you were down here?"

Evelyn wet her lips with a flicker of her tongue, and I realised she'd rehearsed this moment. How many times had she relived whatever had happened in this horrible little room? How long had she waited to unburden herself? Raine knew it all, what could Evelyn tell her that she didn't already know? I steeled myself as best I could. She needed somebody to listen.

To my surprise, she nodded toward Praem. "So, she's started talking."

“ ... yes?” I felt a catch in my chest. “She has.”

“Why do you think it’s taken her so long?” Evelyn reached up with her free hand and tapped the side of Praem’s head with a knuckle. Praem turned to look at her. A glare? Evelyn ignored her, kept speaking. “Wood. Praem had nothing to work with. Summoning an incorporeal Outsider into a vessel is relatively easy, but Praem didn’t start with a human brain to run on. She had to bootstrap herself, mimic, learn how to think in our reality. Adaptation is slow. The visitor takes time to remember itself, even with a simple thing like Praem here. You following this so far?”

Her voice echoed off the tiles. I nodded, and in my heart I began to see where this might be going. “I think so. Okay.”

“Remember the zombies in the Sharrowford Cult’s castle? Actual corpses. Barely functional, maybe a week or two old, easy to beat and not very clever, certainly not sentient, let alone lucid. Their potential was greater in the long run, yes, dangerously so. A brain, nervous system, sinews, it all gives the demon something to work with, a framework to base itself on, though the shock is greater. With time, every single one of those zombie would have been lethal.”

“Like Zheng?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Perhaps. I don’t know how she was made, or how old she is. A demon that strong would need a very short leash. She might just be stupid, intentionally crippled.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry for interrupting, go on.”

“Even with a real corpse, there’s no electrical activity in the brain, nothing to hijack, nothing to communicate with, to teach it how the mouth works or what words mean, to give it context for what it’s being asked.” Her voice lowered, quiet, almost to a growl. She hunched her shoulders, leaning heavily on her walking stick. The dirty little tiled cell seemed to press in on us.

“I think I see where this is going,” I murmured. My head felt tight, almost feverish. A high-pitched whine threatened at the edge of my hearing.

Evelyn eyed me. “Do you?”

“I’m sorry.” I hiccuped, the horror of this almost too much. “I ...

this is ... please. Tell me. I'm listening. I promise.”

Evelyn nodded. “A real Outsider, a hundred times more complex than Praem, something not far off your Eye – summon it into a corpse, it won’t be able to speak properly for weeks, maybe even months. By that time it’ll have burnt out whatever vessel you’ve crammed it into. Certainly it won’t be able to share secrets from Outside with a ruthless bitch of a mage, no matter what deals she tries to strike with it. No. You want to make deals with a real Outsider, an alien god, you need it sentient from the word go. This,” she glanced at the chair, then stared at me. “This device was made to invite possession of a living human host.”

“Evee. Oh, Evee.”

Evelyn put her maimed hand to her chest. “No prizes for guessing who.”

no nook of english ground –

5.6

The claustrophobic echoes of Evelyn's voice ebbed away as she concluded her tortured confession, reflected off the dirty tiles in the horrible little cellar room. I hiccuped out loud. Disgust clutched at my guts, and I shook my head at the child-sized dentist's chair.

"Evee." My voice cracked.

"Mmhmm. I know," she grunted.

Dank subterranean cold leached residual heat from the safe embrace of my hoodie, and wormed icy fingers up the back of my neck. I wrapped my arms around myself, felt awfully sick. The crushing press of the broken magic circle above and around us seemed to hang poised like open jaws. We stood in the maw of a dead beast.

Suddenly I very much needed to be out in the sunlight, but I wouldn't flee and leave Evelyn down here alone with her memories, not even for a half a minute. She looked rooted to the spot, set and solid, sheltering inside that over sized grey jumper and leaning on her walking stick next to Praem's impassive form.

"... I, Evee ... that's horrible, I-"

"Tell me something I don't know," she grumbled.

I shrugged, quite lost for words.

"Scared of me yet?" she asked, an oddly sarcastic quirk to her lips. I blinked in confusion.

"Um, should I be?"

Evelyn sighed and sketched an uncomfortable half-shrug. She deflated, shoulders slumping, and I sensed she'd run out of carefully rehearsed words. She'd confessed, but now she needed to actually talk. "No. It was a bad joke, a bit of gallows humour – implying the demon is still in my head. Get it? Trying not to get too grim, that's all."

“*Evee*, don’t joke about that. I’d never think that about you. Why would I be scared of you? You’re sweet, and lovely, no matter what you think of yourself.”

“Yes, well.” Evelyn cleared her throat and averted her eyes. I didn’t care how embarrassed she felt when praised – it embarrassed me too, but it was true. No wonder she felt barely human half the time. “I got rid of it five years ago. Sort of what precipitated killing my mother. Trust me, the demon wouldn’t want to return even if it could.”

“Good. *Good*.” Unfamiliar vehemence entered my voice. “God, fu... fuck your mother.”

“Fuck,” Praem echoed.

Evelyn raised an eyebrow, ignoring Praem. “That’s rare enough, from you.”

“I think your mother deserves a bit of foul language.” I huffed and shook my head. “Why did she even do it? Her own daughter.”

“So the Outsider she summoned could talk and think from the get go, trapped in a bound vessel. So she could force it to share it’s knowledge. It got a functioning human brain and a human consciousness to pattern itself on. The process went very fast, though I wasn’t exactly ... coherent enough to observe,” she spoke with such bitter scorn lurking in her voice. “It had full sentience in a handful of hours, then found itself strapped to that damned chair, in the body of a nine year old girl, at the tender mercy of my mother.”

I wet my lips and took a deep breath, struggling to master the high-pitched ringing in my head; it wasn’t magic at work, just disgust and the anger of empathy for my friend. “That’s not the why, not exactly. Why do it at all? What did she hope to gain?”

“Real knowledge, from Outside.”

I spoke a question with my eyebrows, still stewing in second-hand outrage. Evelyn continued her explanation.

“Magic is unreliable, extrapolated from scraps in old books, written by insane monks and murderous desert cannibals, a thousand years ago. Trial and error can be lethal, you and I both know that from experience.”

“Too true, yes.” I sighed.

“I managed to teleport myself Outside, completely helpless when I got there. Remember?”

“Evee, of course I remember.”

“Mm, Well. So, my mother figured that maybe there was some kernel of truth, to the old stereotype of medieval wizards summoning demons, binding them with God’s language, forcing them to divulge their secrets – all that dark ages nonsense. Turned out she was right. Imagine an Outsider, something almost like your Eye, trapped in a weak body. Imagine it. If you had the stomach for the act, imagine what clarity you might extract from it, what magic it could teach.” She shrugged. “I think she tried other methods before deciding to use her own flesh and blood, but she didn’t hesitate when the time came.”

Evelyn seemed to run dry at last. Her breath shuddered on the final word and her eyes slipped toward the chair, like water sucked down a drain. Before I could stop her or summon the courage to pull her into a hug, her maimed hand reached out and touched the wipe-clean plastic headrest. Her fingers shook ever so slightly.

“Evee, you shouldn’t-”

Praem grabbed Evelyn’s wrist.

I froze. Evelyn shot the doll-demon a razor-sharp frown. Praem didn’t pay the slightest bit of attention to our surprise and disapproval, staring right back at Evelyn. Gently but firmly, she removed her mistress’s hand from the chair.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Evelyn hissed.

Praem released Evelyn’s wrist, folded her offending hands neatly in front of her, and returned to staring straight ahead.

“She’s trying to help,” I blurted out before Evelyn could explode. She whirled on me instead. “I don’t think you should be touching it either, I really don’t. Except maybe to pull it to pieces. Isn’t that right, Praem?”

“Nonsense,” Evelyn spat. “What does she care? She – *it* isn’t even capable of understanding.” Evelyn rubbed at her wrist.

Praem declined to answer. I sighed at her.

“You need to learn when to help your own case,” I said. “Please?”

“No touching,” she finally intoned.

Evelyn whacked the chair’s base with her walking stick. “It’s completely inert. This whole set up is inert. It’s harmless now.”

“Not emotionally,” I said quietly. “Not to you.”

“Yes,” Praem added.

Evelyn glared daggers at the doll-demon, shot a stormy look at me, then huffed and rolled her eyes. “I suppose you’re right.”

“It’s a hateful thing. Even if I didn’t know what it was used for.”

Evelyn withdrew from the chair by half a step, shaking her head. “She never kept me in it for long. A few days at a time, four at most, then maybe a week to recover between sessions. Longer than that with a demon at the controls and the physical changes would have been too much, it would have taken over and broke free, or I would have expired.”

“You mean, died?”

“Yes. And then she’d have to procure another child.”

I reached down and squeezed Evelyn’s maimed hand. She didn’t squeeze back, but she didn’t let go either. She shot me a look of resigned understanding, then glanced down at our interlocked fingers.

“Possession,” she muttered. “Possession by a vast outer intelligence takes a heavy toll on the human body. Makes changes as it settles in, adapts the shell to suit the inhabitant, but it never got to finish any DIY on me – my mother was ripping it back out every few days. It’s nothing like – what’s that film, *The Exorcist*? Nothing like that, more like what we saw with Zheng. Perhaps it tries to do impossible things with human muscles, pushes them too far, breaks bones and fixes them wrong, or forgets to pump blood and lymph to an extremity.” She tapped her prosthetic leg with her walking stick, a dull clunking sound in the little tiled room. “Hardly matters with a corpse.”

“You’re not a corpse, and you won’t end up as one,” I said with all the certainty I had. Evelyn cocked an eyebrow at me and half-smiled.

“What, ever?”

“When you’re a hundred and two. Not a day earlier.”

She snorted, then frowned at me. “Have I told you I have a detached retina? I can’t recall. Here, the left eye.” She opened her eyes wide. “Another legacy of my unwelcome cranial passenger.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I can see any difference between your eyes.”

“Mm.” She turned away and resumed staring at the chair, the instrument of her past.

“We should go back upstairs, Eevee. Thank you, for sharing with me, but I don’t think it’s good for you to linger down here. It creeps me out rather badly as well.”

“I haven’t reached the point yet,” she grunted.

“Ah?”

“Twil.”

“Um ... ”

“Twil. What you asked me. My ... ” She grumbled low in her throat. “I’m getting there.”

I looked at her sidelong, then reluctantly let my eyes slide over to Praem.

Ah. Finally this was all falling into place, or so I thought. Demons in her head at the start of puberty – was Evelyn about to confess that’s what she found attractive? Had I finally, after weeks of speculation, uncovered the real reason she’d wrought her doll-demon in the image of a cuddly voluptuous motherly type? I swallowed, and held my tongue.

“It had a name.”

“ ... it?” I blinked, catching up.

“The demon – the Outsider my mother housed in my body. I can pronounce it, in theory, but it’d make my throat bleed and my tongue ache for a week. Probably make you chuck your guts up. Not because it’s you, Heather, sorry,” she added quickly. “The sound of its name would make anybody ill. Do you understand what

that means?”

I shook my head, feeling three steps behind.

“Because it told me its true name. It hated my mother almost as much as I did. It didn’t want to be here, not like her,” Evelyn nodded toward Praem. “She’s game for a few strawberries, and apparently dressing up like a fetish object. She’s barely more complex than we are.”

Praem turned her head to stare at Evelyn.

“She doesn’t mean anything rude by that,” I said.

“Rude,” Praem echoed.

Evelyn ignored the banter. “It was like a king, or an emperor – a crap metaphor, but the closest I can get. It resented the sheer indignity of being summoned, of my mother’s demands, of being forced to speak, but most of all it resented this.” She tapped her chest. “Imagine yourself trapped in the body of an insect. It felt such *revulsion*.” Evelyn all but spat the word. “We came to an understanding, it and I, over the span of, oh, three, four years, in what passed for the privacy of my own head, despite ... despite ... ” Evelyn swallowed, hard, and screwed her eyes up for a second.

I squeezed her hand. “It’s alright. You’re not there anymore.”

“You want to know why I call Praem an it, Heather? Because I’ve had one of these things in my head. Because it is *alien*. It taught me things it withheld from my mother, made sure the secret knowledge it did share with her was subtly flawed. It showed me how to cast it out and keep it out, and how to kill her. When it finally left, in the space it had occupied, stuff was missing.”

“Stuff?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Bits of memory. Some bodily functions it had taken over – I was incontinent for a week after. Disgusting, mm?”

“Not- not at all. That’s hardly your fault.”

“It was disgusting. Anyway,” she sighed and waved a hand down at herself, at her abdomen. “I’ll let you in on a secret. I’ve only had two periods in my entire life, when I was twelve. If anything still works down there, I don’t know. I ... ” She frowned, cleared her throat. “As far as I’m aware, I’m incapable of orgasm. I don’t know

who or what I'm attracted to, and I don't know if that's just me, or if my capacity to feel such things was ripped out, overwritten." She turned to look at me, shrugged with her eyebrows, very matter of fact. "There's your answer."

I took a very deep breath, glanced around the horrible little tiled cell, and then locked eyes with Evelyn. "I think it's high time we got out of here. I'm going to take you upstairs and give you a very big hug now."

Evelyn started to shake her head. "Heather, I'm—"

"No ifs or buts. Up. Up!"

I held fast to her hand. Luckily she didn't offer much resistance as I dragged her from the room and back into the main cellar, then up the stairs, clonking on the hollow wood. Praem followed smartly behind, and to my immense relief she shut the steel door. She clomped up the wooden stairs as I pulled Evelyn back into the sitting room, with the huge fireplace and the low ceiling. Already I began to shrug off the cold, the dank smell of the cellar replaced with dust and winter sunlight.

"Shut that door, Praem, if you please," I said, and she obeyed, closing the door to the cellar.

Evelyn wormed her hand out of mine and clacked her walking stick against the floorboards.

"I'm not looking for sympathy," she said. "I didn't tell you all that to—"

"Evee. Shut up."

I gave her the very big hug I'd threatened to. She made a half-hearted attempt to pull away, but I wrapped my arms around her knobbly shoulders and held on tight, refused to let go.

I'd never had a friend like Evelyn before; I'd never really had any friends before, except a few fleeting teenage moments during my least bad times. I'd never felt this way about a friend before either – shared her pain, outraged at her mistreatment, aching to help.

I wanted, in my weak, circuitous fashion, to protect Evelyn.

How silly was that? She was a mage, she was far more in control of her powers than I, she had a supernatural bodyguard and Raine and

the weight of family history behind her, not to mention money. It was not in the least bit romantic or erotic – despite how soft and fluffy Evelyn could be when one got past her thorns – but I did love her.

Evelyn grumbled and I felt her blushing, but after a moment she returned the embrace, awkward and hesitant.

The handle of her walking stick pressed against my back. She let me take her weight, for once.

“I’m fine,” she muttered. “This is all old stuff, history. I’m fine.”

“You are,” I murmured.

Eventually she cleared her throat and set her walking stick against the floor, and I let her go. She turned away, sniffing and rubbing a thumb under her eyes. I spared us any further embarrassment with a bit of quick thinking.

“Praem,” I said, lifting the corner of one of the dust covers on the nearest of the two leather sofas. “Help me get one of these off, will you please?”

“Heather?” Evelyn frowned as Praem crossed to help me.

“I’d rather not sit in the dust, and I assume you wouldn’t either?”

Praem ‘helped’ by whisking the entire dust cover off with one sudden jerk of her arms, the sheet billowing out with a crack of displaced air.

I flinched; hadn’t seen her move that fast since the chaotic fight in the cult’s castle. With a wince I braced for the heavy plastic sheet to slam against the wall and slide to the floor – but, at the precise moment of maximum extension, Praem flicked her wrists to fold the cover in half in the air, her maid uniform’s skirt twirling as she turned and pinched the edges together and folded it again with a whipping motion. She caught the neatly stacked bundle on one outstretched hand, paused for a single heartbeat, and then placed it on the coffee table.

She resumed staring straight ahead. Several long strands of hair had escaped her loose bun.

“Um, thank you?” I managed.

“Bloody showoff,” Evelyn grunted, then covered her mouth as she

coughed in the cloud of settling dust.

“Yes, very impressive. Though a gentler touch would perhaps have produced less of a mess?”

Praem tilted her head upward. The milky white of her eyes juddered back and forth rapidly. Was she counting the dust particles?

“Suppose I don’t have a choice now.” Evelyn coughed again, then batted at Praem’s ankles with her walking stick. “Shift yourself.” The doll-demon did as she was told. Evelyn settled uncomfortably onto the sofa, rubbing at the place her thigh joined her prosthetic. “Am I the only one sitting down or what?”

I shook my head. Praem took the question as an order, and perched on the opposite sofa, right on the dust sheet. We both watched her for a second, but she seemed content to stare into space.

“Actually, I’d like to do a thought experiment first,” I said.

“Thought experiment,” Evelyn echoed. “Why does that phrase make it sound like a profoundly bad idea?”

“It’s nothing embarrassing. Or it shouldn’t be, at least.”

Her eyebrows climbed her forehead. “I never said anything about embarrassing.”

“Just close your eyes. Please, Evee? I want to try to ... get you to imagine something.”

“If you creep up and shout boo in my ear I will thump you, Heather, friend for life or not.”

I huffed and put my hands on hips. “Would I do that? I’m not Raine.”

Evelyn relented with a sceptical frown, and closed her eyes.

“Okay, now just relax, try to ... try to release as much tension as you can. Breathe deeply.” I had zero idea how to accomplish this, too far out of my wheelhouse. I didn’t even have Raine’s examples to go on, but we had to start somewhere.

“Breathing deeply,” Evelyn grumbled, unimpressed.

“I want you to picture Twil.”

“Oh bloody hell, you’re serious.”

“Play along, please? Ignore the sexual aspect, all of that. Let’s pretend for a moment that none of the magical stuff exists, either, forget that she’s a werewolf, all of it.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Please try. Please.” I paused, to let her think. “How does thinking about Twil make you feel?”

Silence.

“Imagine her ... ” I gulped, a little embarrassed. “Imagine her hugging you.”

Evelyn cracked one eye and frowned at me. “That’s all you’ve got? Bit tame, isn’t it?”

“Just do it!” I flustered. “Close your eyes. Imagine her putting her arms around you.”

Evelyn grumbled but closed her eyes again, fingers playing with the handle of her walking stick. I bit my tongue, in case she was taking this seriously. I didn’t want to disrupt any rose-coloured imagination with the jarring of my awful scratchy voice.

Eventually Evelyn sighed a big sigh. She opened her eyes again and stared at me like I was a quack doctor.

“Well?” I prompted. “Anything?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Twil ... she ... she’s irritating. And stupid.”

“Oh Eevee, she’s not stupid. That’s hardly fair. She’s impulsive, and passionate, and straightforward.”

“She’s dumb as a brick.”

“She’s going to university to do bio-medical science next year. That’s not stupid,” I said. Evelyn grumbled under her breath and looked away, but I pressed on. “And even if she was stupid, it’s beside the point. Do you want to hug her for real?”

“How am I supposed to know the answer to that?” Evelyn growled. I sensed I was losing her.

“Okay, how about ... how about this? Imagine that you can hug

her, for real – but!” I held up a finger as Evelyn scowled at me. “But afterward she won’t remember it, and nobody else would know you did it.”

I let the suggestion – rather underhanded and creepy, I admit – hang in the air for a moment, and hoped I hadn’t given Evelyn the mage any nasty ideas. She opened her mouth to reply, then stopped and frowned, then blinked twice and looked down at her lap.

“Ah.” I lit up. “Did that-”

“Don’t you breathe a word of this to Raine. Not a word,” she snapped, then frowned left and right before rubbing her eyes, an expression of mild panic crossing her features. She began to blush, and covered her mouth. “Fuck.”

“Evee, it’s okay, it’s okay.” I struggled not to giggle, to respect the moment.

“Goddammit, what am I supposed to do now?” She demanded. “What does that even mean?”

I slid onto the sofa. “Whatever you decide it means. You don’t have to act on it if you don’t want to. It’s just ... something to think about. Something nice?”

She sighed and glared at me. “You and Raine make it all look so easy.”

“Oh, Evee, no, it isn’t. It absolutely isn’t. Even between us it’s pretty complex, most of the time.”

Evelyn leaned back into the old cracked leather of the sofa, trying to find some physical comfort to ward off this fresh confusion. I did feel a little guilty; the last thing she needed was more dilemmas in life, but at least this one contained potential pleasure for her, and took her mind off the cellar beneath our feet.

“Does she scare you?” Evelyn said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Raine. Does she scare you?”

“Oh.” I blinked. “No, not at all. Though, ah, I am aware that sometimes perhaps I should find her a little scary. That’s something I’ve been discovering about myself. I don’t like violence but ... when she does it, it’s different. It’s part of what I like about her.

That's terrible of me, I know."

"She scared the shit out of me when we first met," Evelyn admitted.

"I'd heard."

"Mm."

"You're deflecting again, by the way, Eevee."

"Mm," she grunted. "What else am I meant to do? I'll ... think about Twil, alright? I'll give it some thought. Maybe I can ... can ... " She waved a hand vaguely. "Maybe next time I talk to her, I can ... see."

"Whatever you decide, I can always help."

Evelyn gave me a sceptical frown. "You're not exactly a lesbian Casanova."

I shrugged. "It's me or Raine, and while she is lovely I don't think she's a reliable source of romantic advice."

Evelyn snorted, and we fell into comfortable silence. Her gaze drifted down, until she was staring right at the floorboards. My mind wandered backward through the last half hour, through other ways I might help, might protect.

"Why is the chair still down there?" I asked, softly, loathe to ruin the moment but sharply aware we might never get another opportunity.

Evelyn shrugged. "Bolted to the floor."

"Then smash it apart."

She glanced sidelong at me, then did a double take when she saw I was serious. "I ... how? It weighs a ton. We'd need industrial machinery to get the bolts out. It's not as if anybody's been down there in years. Let the damned thing rot."

"With ... I don't know." I cast around. "Is there a sledgehammer anywhere on the estate?"

Evelyn looked at me like I'd suggested we go skinny dipping. "A sledgehammer."

"I don't know, for building fences? At least one of those outbuildings is full of garden tools, isn't it?"

“Heather, I am relatively certain neither you nor I can lift a bloody sledgehammer. We’re both noodle-arms. I’d ruin my back.”

“I can try. For that, I’d try. Praem certainly could.”

Evelyn paused mid-word, then frowned thoughtfully, an unfamiliar aspect lighting up inside her. Her eyes slid over to look at Praem. “... I suppose she could. She could.”

The doll-demon seemed to catch wind of what we were brewing. She stared back at Evelyn, then at me, then stood up and brushed her skirt neatly over her backside.

“Sledgehammer,” she intoned in her bell-like voice.

Evelyn and I shared a meaningful glance.

= =

“Raaaine! Over here!”

“We’re in the kitchen.”

“We’re in the kitchen, Raine!”

“We’re eating cake without you.”

“Evee! No, shhh, shhh.”

By the time Raine followed our voices, picked her way down the mansion’s spinal corridor, and rounded the kitchen door, Evelyn and I had descended into a fit of giggles – well, I had. Evelyn retained a touch more self-control than I possessed, but even she started laughing at Raine’s bewildered grin.

Raine pointed finger-guns at us and leaned against the door frame. “I see that I’m missing cake, but I *hear* that I’ve missed a hot-boxing session. What’s got you two so giggly?”

I shrugged, trying to control my laughter. “Just feeling nice.”

“It is a good day,” Evelyn announced, and jabbed her little fork back into the chocolate sponge cake her father had dug out of the fridge about twenty minutes ago, when Evelyn and I had bumbled into the kitchen, badly in need of celebratory food. “It is a good day to be alive, and it is a good day to eat cake. Rest’s in the fridge if you want some. And grab the strawberries too,” she added, waving vaguely at Praem behind her.

Raine, however, wasn't listening – cake and laughter could only distract her for so long from the sledgehammer in the middle of the kitchen floor, balanced upside down so perfectly on its own steel head.

“Hello, this wasn't here an hour ago. Think I would have remembered that. We having an emergency?”

“Only a dire lack of whipped cream to go with the cake,” Evelyn said, and flourished her fork. I spluttered with laughter again, despite the fact it wasn't even funny – I felt wonderful. Released.

“I've missed some serious fun, haven't I?” Raine ran a hand through her damp hair, grinning. She was still pink and slightly raw from her shower, wearing pajama bottoms and a baggy black tshirt with a cartoon kangaroo on the front, feet bare. I wanted nothing more in that moment than to hug her and touch her all over, but there was Evelyn and cake and explanations to linger over first, and we did have more important things to do than make out.

“Fun,” Praem echoed.

“So what's the sledgehammer for?” Raine asked.

“For hammering!” I broke into giggles again, but spluttered to a stop when Praem's voice echoed a half-second behind, “For hammering.”

“I smashed up the chair,” Evelyn said. She sat up straighter and raised her chin.

“The what?” Raine's eyebrows shot up. “Oh, bugger me sideways, it's still there? The-”

“The chair. The demon engine. It's gone, in a hundred pieces. Heather helped.”

“Praem did most of the hard work,” I admitted. Evelyn grunted, but even that didn't seem to dent her good humour.

Evelyn and I had landed one symbolic hit each. She'd required the extra support of my arms around her waist and Praem holding the hammer head up in the air for her. I'd barely been able to lift the hammer from where we'd found it in the garden tool shed, let alone swing the damned thing, but I'd put my whole body into the motion and managed to half-drop half-flail the heavy steel head into the chair's right arm.

I'd squealed, Praem had to catch the hammer, it was all very awkward and embarrassing, and I'd feel the muscle strain tomorrow morning, but it had all been worth the effort. The doll-demon had done all the heavy lifting, no matter how glowing and sweaty Evelyn and I felt, after kicking pieces of the chair across the floor of that horrible little chamber.

"Blow me down with a feather," Raine said, shaking her head at us. "I didn't even know it was still there. You should'a told me to get rid of it years ago."

"It's fine. It was a bonding experience."

"It was," I agreed.

"Cool stuff. Anything else need hammering before we scoot?" Raine strode forward and lifted the sledgehammer with one hand, caught the haft in the other and hefted the weight, grinning to herself. I sighed inside at the way her muscles flowed and tightened, the easy strength on display. Praem had lifted the hammer just as easily, but it wasn't the same. She was cheating. Raine's muscles were real.

"We can be off whenever you like, by the way," Raine said. "Shown her the map yet? Probably best to get away before dark, unless you both want to sleep in the car."

"We can stay as long as we need." Evelyn's voice was suddenly sober.

"... we can?" Raine blinked. "We can. What?"

"This is news to me as well," I said slowly. "Evee?"

"We're staying another night. Perhaps two," she declared, then cleared her throat and smiled a grim sort of smile. "Got to show Heather the map, sure, but I'm also going to clear out the whole bloody lot. Everything of mother's in the east wing. The project room, the dungeon rooms we left, the clockwork man, all of it. Destroy anything I can't appropriate. Put some flowers on my grandmother's grave. Have dinner with my father's squeeze, whatever."

"Evee. Right on," Raine said with a surprised grin. Evelyn waved her off.

"This house will be mine eventually," she said, and gestured up and around with her eyes. "These servitors, they're older than my

mother, they're family property and she's not family, not anymore. This is mine. It doesn't belong to her bloody ghost."

= =

When I was a little girl I'd never been afraid of creeping to the toilet at night, because I never had to do so alone. I never did anything alone.

The constant presence of a twin blinds one to certain aspects of life. One is never alone, not really, though in retrospect I believe Maisie and I were even closer than twins usually should be. If one of us woke and needed to pee, the other would often wake without prompting. A familiar hand to hold makes a big difference to a small child groping her way down a dark corridor. We knew, in that strange shared childhood heart, that no shadow creatures or bogeymen could touch us when we were together.

That all ended after the Eye took her. Teenage Heather hated leaving the dubious safety of her bed covers at night, let alone braving the nightmare-haunted hallways of the family home. I developed a borderline complex about getting up alone in the night, and still felt a touch of the old discomfort even in the heavily-warded Sharrowford house, with its creaky floorboards and strange old corners.

So it was that I found myself shivering in the frigid air, gum-eyed and drowsy, bladder very full, as I dug myself out of a blanket nest on the armchair.

This was not going to be an easy journey, in this spooky echoing mansion drenched with century-old darkness; I couldn't even recall exactly where the nearest bathroom was.

Evelyn was curled up right on the edge of the double bed, wrapped in a cocoon of sheets. Moonlight crept silver around the curtain, picked out the jut of her hip. I'd taken the armchair tonight, and not brooked any argument from either of them. Raine slumbered on, snoring softly, spread out on her front. I suppressed a sleep-addled urge to grab one of her ankles. Bad Heather.

I would not demean myself by waking Raine to request an escort. I was a big girl and I could go to the toilet by myself.

The hallway was almost pitch black. Moonlight struggled to reach down here with those clean silver fingers. A tired old servitor –

some kind of articulated mantis-creature – shifted in the deep shadows, and I forced myself not to flinch. Suddenly I felt considerably more awake.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s the ultimate safe place, Heather,” I whispered to myself, fingertips of my left hand brushing the wall as I traced my way down the corridor. “Fortress and refuge. Castles are spooky too, aren’t they? You love castles.”

I groped for the bathroom, stepped inside and clicked the light on, blinking sore eyes against the sudden light on tarnished chrome and old porcelain – and realised what I’d missed.

Praem hadn’t been standing guard by the bedroom door.

I frowned in thought as I sat on the toilet, eyes closed, half asleep. Perhaps Evelyn had set the doll-demon to a specific overnight task. Eevee had been a whirlwind of activity since our impromptu ritual exorcism of her mother’s memory.

She’d stomped all over the house, pointing at things with her walking stick, rifling through the big project room we’d found her brooding in the night before, Praem carrying bin liners and a plastic tote behind her. Lots of staring at alien objects and nodding, muttering to herself, making a list in a little notebook she’d commandeered from her father. Eventually Raine and I had let her get on with it, made ourselves scarce but available.

Evelyn even put in a proper showing when her father’s lady friend had pulled up to the house that evening. ‘Angeline’ turned out to be exactly what I’d expected – a high-flying city lawyer in her late 40s, exceptionally well-groomed, talkative and slim, all easy laughter and more glasses of wine, eager to regale us provincial college girls with tales about growing up poor and black in north London. Lewis had laughed and boomed and shared a couple of utterly ineffable legal world anecdotes of his own.

I’d even accepted a glass of red wine myself, after some coaxing by Raine. Hadn’t liked it much, but it did make me relax.

An hour of two of pretending we were all normal.

Except, of course, for how Angeline’s gaze had slid right off Praem, even though she’d stood behind Evelyn the whole time.

I finished up, flushed the toilet, and suffered the indignity of ruined

night vision when I turned off the light and stepped out into the corridor. Squinting at the silvery spill of moonlight helped a little, though the window at the end of the corridor was obscured by a shifting curtain.

A curtain that turned to look at me, two milky white orbs floating in the darkness.

I almost jumped out of my skin, a half-hiccup half-squeak caught in my throat. My body screamed with a pulse of adrenaline and only the absurd maid uniform stopped me from either running or screaming for Raine.

"Praem!" I hissed, a hand to my chest. "Don't ... stand there in silence! Oh my God, you frightened the life out of me."

Praem turned away, resumed her vigil at the window.

"Praem?" I whispered again, and crept forward, to peer over her shoulder.

Rural night and a clear sky. A beautiful sight. The thin lawns had transformed into a shadowy dream realm of half-glimpsed shapes under the bulk of the house, the trees a darker bulwark before the mirror-like silver expanse of the lake. The moonlight dusted Praem's face with a ghostly sheen, but she betrayed no hint of wistful longing or quiet contemplation. She stared. Hard-edged and intent. Down.

Another fox. Almost invisible in the moonlight, russet fur a dark blotch against the grass.

It sat on its haunches barely ten feet from the rear of the house, and stared up at Praem.

I sighed and resisted a desire to roll my eyes. "Once, twice, maybe three times, I could have accepted as coincidence, but this is getting silly," I muttered. "That's not a fox, is it?"

"Fox," Praem echoed, at full volume. I winced.

"Praem," I said her name very carefully. "If it's not just a fox, I think Evelyn or I or Raine should know about it. What is it?"

Praem turned her head to me, then back to the fox, then took a sudden step back from the window and marched off down the corridor, long maid's skirt swishing around her ankles.

“Praem? Praem, wait!” I hissed, and scurried to catch up.

She made the stairs, and managed to click her heels the entire way down without thumping her feet. I felt clumsy and awkward, groping through the darkness behind her. By the time I stumbled onto the ground floor, she’d turned away around a corner. I really didn’t want to be alone in the maze of corridors, menaced by the shadows in the kinking corners, at real threat of getting lost. I hissed her name again and hurried after her.

I found Praem at the back door onto the patio, the very same one I’d led her through that morning.

She was pulling the door’s bolt and turning the key, her hands moving with exquisitely inhuman slowness of intention. Her eyes were locked on the moonlit lawns beyond the door’s inset glass, at the fox staring back at us, a silver ghost.

“Praem, what are you doing?” I hissed, hugging myself, curling cold toes against the carpet. Should have put my socks on before I left the room.

Praem straightened up, the door now unlocked, and slowly wrapped one hand around the door handle.

I saw the fox sit up, fur bristling, eyes alert and intelligent. The canine snout inched backward.

Praem eased the door handle down.

“Praem, not- ... not ... ” Not alone? What was she going to do, catch the fox with her bare hands? I didn’t have time to think, my head still too heavy from sleep, my guts tight with sudden anticipation.

“Not?” she asked. Her hand paused.

“What are we doing, Praem?”

“Opportunity,” she intoned.

“For what? What?”

“Hunting,” she intoned. “Opportunity.”

She was waiting for approval. The fox backed away, paws slinking across the field of moonlit grass – and slowly, so slowly, a horrible, unspeakable notion entered my mind.

Earthworms and the things which ate them. My mouth went dry, my heart fluttered in my chest; maybe we'd never get another chance.

"Okay, do it," I hissed.

The fox bolted, a shadow in the dark.

Praem reacted so fast I flinched hard enough to almost trip over my own feet. She slammed the door handle down and shot out into the night, a dead sprint from a standing start, beyond what any human could achieve, certainly not in a full-body maid uniform. I flew to the door, staring after her. Cold night air sucked the breath from my lungs, slammed the heat right out of my thin pajamas.

The doll-demon sprinted across the grass, like a machine, going full pelt. A dark blur bounded ahead of her.

I stumbled out onto the patio, freezing my toes off, teeth chattering. The cutting cold whipped around the sides of the house, trees swaying in the distance. I was fully aware I should be yelling for Raine or Evee, or locking the door and staying inside, but it all happened too fast. The possible implication of that fox made my head spin, clutched my guts with a deep sickness.

In the back of my mind I repeated a mantra: this was a safe place. Safe place. Nothing to fear here. Just don't touch anything suspicious.

Praem tackled the fox halfway across the lawns in a tumble of splayed skirts. A strangled animal screech split the night. She rolled twice, lay very still for a moment, then stood up and walked back toward the house.

As she mounted the stairs to the patio I put a hand to my mouth.

She'd pinned the fox with an expert's grip, an iron hard vice, as she clutched it to her chest, back legs and head both immobilised.

The poor animal's front legs twisted and lashed, desperate to scratch, the torso bucking and heaving, fighting exactly like the cornered fox it was, but the doll-demon's strength came from a place other than mere muscle. The fox couldn't move. Praem's wonderfully pressed maid uniform was scuffed with grass fragments and a smear of dirt, and her loose bun of hair had finally given up, loops of blonde hanging down in disarray.

“Fox,” she intoned, staring at me.

I gulped and tried to think, tried to focus on the animal she’d caught. It whined, letting out these awful, pitiful yelping noises, and I think it had urinated down her.

I thought back to what Evelyn had said in front of her mother’s grave, about worms and the flesh of dead mages, about lead coffins. I thought about apex predators and mercury and DDT, about food web contamination, and imperfect hazard containment.

The fox foamed at the mouth, yellow eyes wide and rolling.

“Is it just a fox?” My heart was still pounding. “How do we tell?”

Praem stared down at the animal in her grip. “Kill it,” she intoned.

“No, no,” I held up a sudden hand. “It’s just a fox, don’t. It doesn’t deserve this. We need to ... ” I swallowed, blew out a deep breath, and gathered my thoughts. This was crazy. “You stay right there, Praem. If you ... hurt an innocent animal, I won’t forgive you, okay? Okay?”

Praem stared at me again.

“Just don’t hurt it.” I repeated. “I need to go wake Evee, she needs to see this and make a decision. Yes, Evelyn’ll be able to ... work it ... out.”

Every hair stood up on the back of my neck. My skin crawled.

At the sound of Evelyn’s name, the fox had gone still.

Not limp. Not an animal giving up to conserve strength.

Still. Watchful.

“Oh,” I breathed. “Oh, it-”

With a sound like a clicking tongue, the fox was suddenly no longer in Praem’s grip. It reappeared twenty feet away, hit the lawn running, and raced off under the moonlight.

“Oh no. Oh no no no,” I blurted out.

Praem didn’t miss a beat. She whirled on the spot and sprinted after the animal. I picked up my feet and stumbled after her.

no nook of english ground –

5.7

Keeping up with Praem, let alone catching a live fox, was far beyond my pathetic physical limits. I don't know why I even bothered stepping off the patio.

Well rested, wearing comfortable running shoes, beneath warm sunlight, with some form of Raine-based reward at the finish line – then perhaps I could have finished a distant third in this foot race, albeit with much huffing and puffing and stopping to rest. Woken in the middle of the night, barefoot on freezing wet grass, surrounded by moonlit darkness and whipping cold, alone except for a demon rapidly out-pacing me? I stood a snowball's chance in hell.

I staggered to a halt a quarter of the way across the lawns, bent double with my hands on my knees. The sudden exertion had wrenched something loose inside my chest. Delicate muscles long-bruised by brainmath flared up into a terrible ache.

I wheezed for breath, shaking all over, teeth chattering.

Praem plunged ahead, sprinting after the scurrying fox. Legs pumping, long black skirt fluttering behind, loose hair caught by the wind. She was like a machine, each stride exactly the same as the last. No lungs to heave, no muscles to tire. How could any animal move faster?

The fox slid across the ground, a blur in the moonlight.

The chase headed for the lake at the rear of the estate, toward the dark halo of trees which surrounded the silver water.

I clutched myself, shivering so hard I thought I might have a seizure. The chill had wormed its way inside me, soaked into my bones, turned my feet into blocks of ice. With a petite frame and low muscle mass I'd always been susceptible to the cold; ever since the strain of killing Alexander I'd struggled even more to stay warm. Brainmath had somehow leached a fraction of a degree from my body's core temperature.

I straightened up – a considerable effort – and accepted I was not going to catch them. This was in Praem’s hands now.

I had to wake my friends, I had to get Raine out here, Eevee had to figure out what was going on.

That plan expired when I turned back to the house.

Dark reptilian shapes and twitching insect shadows were detaching themselves from the Saye mansion, descending from the exterior walls or unfurling gossamer wings as they hurled themselves from the roof. Moonlit pneuma-somatic life – spirits or servitors, I couldn’t tell the difference – skittered and galloped across the lawns in a bedraggled wave of half-formed nightmares. I gaped at them and flinched as several passed me by. They raced after Praem and the fox.

“What are you-” I stammered into the cold darkness. “Where are you all going!?”

A mantis-limbed monster brushed past me, low to the ground, so close I felt feelers trail across the back of my calves. I shuddered, gasped down a mouthful of lung-searing cold air.

I doubted the Saye family servitors were hurrying to assist us.

“You!” I raised my voice, jabbing a finger toward the nearest spirit – a mass of rubbery grey tentacles attached to the back of a lean hyena-like quadruped. “Stop running! Stay!”

To my immense gratification the spirit stumbled over its own legs in haste to obey – or perhaps mere surprise. It tumbled over in a tangle of limbs and tentacles, sliding to a halt at my feet, before staggering up and backing away. A cluster of goat-like eyeballs on a stalk whirled between me and the chase. Trying to decide who to obey?

Against the biting cold, I pulled myself up to my full height – not much – and fixed the spirit with the best glare I could muster, imitating Evelyn.

“I said stay, and I mean it,” I snapped out as best I could, between chattering teeth and panting for breath. I turned on another passing spirit, at the tail end of the wave. “You! St-”

A distant yip from the fleeing fox cut through the air, and confirmed my worst suspicions.

The first spirit I'd halted relocated its courage and shot past me.

"Hey! I said ..." I huffed. "I said stay. Oh dammit."

Praem had run the fox right to the tree line before the lake. They vanished into the woods. I caught one last moonlit glimpse of Praem vaulting a bush, and then darkness. The wave of spirit life bundled in after them.

Panic in my throat, I half-turned back to the house; in the time I'd waste stumbling indoors and raising the alarm, the spirits would reach Praem.

Would they try to hurt her? Would they even be able to touch her? Could she fight back?

I could – I could threaten them.

"Raaaine!" I cupped my hands around my mouth and screeched at the top of my lungs, hoping my voice would penetrate both the thick walls of the mansion and Raine's sleepy head.

Then I turned and ran after the doll-demon.

Struggling my way across the damp lawns, puffing and wheezing, plunging into the heavier shadows beneath the trees, I was keenly aware how insane this was. A few months ago, back at the start of the university term, a situation like this would have left me paralysed. I'd have curled up in a ball, retreated beneath my bedsheets, praying for the monsters to go away.

That Heather still lived in the back of my mind. She was screaming bloody murder, telling me to turn back so bigger, stronger, braver people could take over.

I wasn't that person anymore, not really; I had things to protect besides my own fragility.

I could, however, have made a better show of my resolve than blundering into the woods in the middle of the night. Visibility plummeted to almost nothing, moonlight dimmed by the tangled winter canopy. In seconds my feet were filthy, slick with mud, grazed by twigs and bits of stone. I skinned one elbow on a tree and scratched my forehead along a hanging branch, then skidded and almost toppled onto my backside.

A pair of spirits whispered through the undergrowth and I stumbled

after them, pajamas snagged on branches, ferns clutching at my ankles, cobwebs in my face and hair.

An instinctive terror as old as biology gripped my heart, no magical explanation necessary. My brain stem shouted in the language of cortisol and adrenaline that I was a vulnerable little ape and the woods at night were not safe.

“This is a tiny copse of trees in rural England,” I hissed to myself, the sound of my own voice staving off animalistic panic. “You’ve visited infinitely worse places, Heather, you are probably one of the most dangerous people within a hundred miles. You are *fine*.”

My words failed to convince my own evolutionary history. My hands shook and I broke out in cold sweat. My legs almost refused to move.

I gasped with shaking relief when I finally burst through onto the far side of the trees. The ground sloped down toward the shining expanse of the lake, a stone’s throw away.

Relief crashed out and I scrambled to a stop. This time I did slip over, thumping my backside onto the wet grass.

Servitors and spirits thronged the clearing. Dozens of them.

Though so eager to answer the fox’s cry, the spirit life was apparently too scared to rush the doll-demon. They hung back in a rough circle, jerking forward in ones and twos before veering away again, scythe-arms and sucker-tentacles menacing but never connecting.

The fox must have tried to hide in the undergrowth on the edge of the trees, giving Praem the opening to catch up. The animal – or not-animal – had failed to account for Praem’s inhumanly accurate senses. Through the crowd of pneuma-somatic life I caught the aftermath of her second or third unsuccessful lunge toward the fox. She dived and rolled, once-immaculate uniform smeared with dirt.

The fox slipped away inches from her fingertips. Yellow eyes flashing in the moonlight, it bounded away toward the lake.

In that moment, I finally processed the meaning of what I’d seen the do fox earlier. When Praem had it pinned, it had simply vanished from her arms and reappeared again at a distance – but I didn’t believe it went Outside. The trick had been instant, a click of the

fingers. Foxes don't do math.

Perhaps that gave me an angle to exploit.

"Praem!" I yelled from bursting lungs as I picked myself off the ground. "Th- behind- there's servitors everywhere!"

Praem paid neither them nor I the slightest scrap of attention. She jackknifed to her feet in one fluid motion and sprinted after the fox. Could she even see the spirits?

They crammed after her in a shoving scrum, a wall of ectoplasmic flesh.

One servitor shouldered through the mob and hurtled toward Praem on four galloping legs, a bizarre fusion of horse and lizard topped by a human-esque head without any eyes. It reared up behind her, to a full eight towering feet.

Perhaps I'd learnt the signs from so much time spent with Raine, the foreplay of real violence etched so indelibly on my sexuality. Or maybe year after year of exposure to spirits had taught my subconscious to read them better than I suspected.

This one wasn't bluffing.

The horse-lizard servitor lashed out with a clawed hoof.

I yanked my left sleeve back, exposed the clean black lines of the Fractal on my forearm, and threw my arm into the air.

"Part!" I yelled, shocking even myself.

Eight in ten of the spirits threw themselves aside, parted at my command. The rest were swept away by the others, knocked down or sent flying.

I harbour no illusions of real authority. I'm neither big nor scary enough for that. I hadn't expected the command to work, but fear compacted my voice into a hard-edged shout. The magic of the Fractal undoubtedly did most of the work.

Blinking dumbly at my own success, shaking with cold and adrenaline, I barely took the opening before the spirits began staggering back to their feet.

"You! Stop!" I shouted, still too far from Praem to make any difference. Success had robbed my voice of the unstudied steel, and

this time nothing listened to me. “Praem, behind-”

My warning came too late; Praem wasn't listening, anyway.

The spirit slammed into her from behind – rather than passing through as it would a human being. The weight of pneuma-somatic flesh bore her down in a tangle of limbs. They rolled, horse legs and maid uniform and slicks of muddy lake bank and all. I scrambled to catch up. I think I was shouting something inane, ‘get off her’, ‘leave her alone’, probably a threat to send it Outside.

Silly me. None of that mattered.

When they rolled to a stop, Praem was on top. Completely unshaken, except for her hair now in terrible disarray.

She jerked a fist back with machine-piston speed, and slammed it into the spirit's face.

It made the most terrible sound. Half screech, half pulverised jelly under a pneumatic press. My eyes went wide, bile clutched at my throat, and I had to turn away as Praem wound up a second punch. Hoofs flailed at her head, buffeting her side to side, but she didn't even blink. I didn't stay to watch.

The other servitors lost their nerve also, scattering before the doll-demon's sudden violence.

I stumbled after the fox.

Amid the confusion, the animal had reached the water's edge and turned to stare, decided I was less of a threat than Praem. No need to run from out-of-breath Heather, confused and slow, a mere human being lost in the dark.

“Stop running,” I panted. “Stop running, I have to ... I have to ... either we catch you here, or we'll have to get rid of you. Just- stop.”

The fox began to slink away. Despite the impossibility, I lunged for it.

A worse than useless gesture. All I managed to achieve was to lose my footing.

I slid and slipped, feet going out from under me, bumped both my backside and head on the thankfully sodden ground, and squealed as I slid bum-first into the icy cold lake.

Luckily the edge of the water was less than a foot deep. I splashed down, gasping in the cold, pajamas soaked and muddy, freezing my unmentionables off. I think I swore, rather loudly too. Second time falling over in one night, chasing a magical fox. Some holiday.

The fox stopped less than four feet away and turned to stare down at me. Most animals cannot laugh, but I swear it looked amused. Was I really so little of a threat? A slapstick joke?

Slowly, deliberately, never looking away from those yellow eyes, I placed one hand against the slick earth of the lake's edge.

"Got you," I said through chattering teeth. "Got you now."

The fox tilted its head.

Only seconds to pull off this trick – the fox would flee as soon as Praem stood up again. She was still busy beating the spirit to death, the sound of pounding jelly reverberating through the air.

"I can think faster than you can run." I hoped against hope it understood English. "And I can teleport everything within twelve feet Outside. You, me, the mud, the water. *Outside*. Outside, you understand what that means?"

It did. Oh, that fox understood me loud and clear. I saw comprehension in the blink of its eyes, in the single raised paw, the sudden tensing of muscles.

"T-then I can teleport myself back," I hurried, shaking all over in the freezing water as I climbed to my knees, hand still pressed to the muddy bank. "And I'll leave you there. I will, I will do it, to protect my friend. If you're what I think you are. I will."

I was bluffing, but the not-fox didn't know that. Myself I could certainly zap Outside. The fox, yes, if I could touch it. But a sphere twelve feet across, ground and all? I'd give myself a brain aneurysm.

The fox suddenly craned its neck to where Praem still straddled the beaten spirit.

"Excuse me, I'm talking to you," I said. The fox jerked back to me, ears swivelling. "You don't believe me? All right, I'll demonstrate."

I'd executed more complex hyperdimensional mathematics under far more stress, and paradoxically the lack of preparation cushioned

my mind again the white-hot searing pain – a little. I slipped the equations into place, winced so hard my vision blurred, and shoved the levers of reality just enough before my nose began to bleed.

Beneath my hand, a football-sized chunk of mud and grass vanished Outside. Water slopped into the sudden gap on the bank. The fox stared, eyes wide and alert. I bent forward to empty my stomach into the lake.

Praem slammed into the animal with a diving tackle while I was busy being sick.

The gambit had worked, given the fox just enough pause for Praem to creep closer. She landed in the water with a huge splash and came up with the fox pinned length-ways, both of them dripping with greenish lake mud and soaked through to the bone. The fox tried to snap at her wrists but she pulled it taught from forepaws to back legs, drawing a horrible pained yelp from the animal's snout.

It went very still.

"No! No escaping, no," I spluttered as I pulled myself upright and thrust a hand toward the animal. My head pounded, I couldn't feel my fingers or toes, but I had to make this credible or it would just teleport out of Praem's grip again. "I'll do it, I swear, I will."

The fox moved again. It whined and writhed, foaming at the mouth. Yellow eyes rolled to fixate on my hovering hand.

It twisted to bite. I flinched, and yellow teeth snapped shut on empty air. Praem shook it.

"Stop, stop, Praem stop!" I said. "Just stop. Oh, God."

The doll-demon looked up from the fox. I could barely make out her expression in the moonlight, but her milk-white eyes were clear enough.

"Victory," she intoned, voice carrying across the dying ripples on the lake.

"Yes." I heaved a huge breath, teeth still chattering, and wiped my mouth on the back of my arm. Even the vomit was cold. "Victory. Right. What do we do now?"

Praem looked down at the fox, then back at me, then down at the fox again.

“Removal.”

“No! No, Praem, we don’t know what it is, not really, we don’t. We have to-” I went to push my hair out of my face, but managed only to smear more cold mud on myself. “Ugh, tch. We need to get back to the house. You don’t even feel the cold, do you?”

I glanced past the trees, to the looming bulk of the mansion in the middle distance. The spirits had mostly fled, but a few lingered to watch from a safe distance.

“Why did you all try to help it?” I yelled at them, but no answers were forthcoming. “Why?”

“Removal,” Praem repeated in her clear bell-like voice.

I shook my head, rapidly going numb, and sniffed back a slow nosebleed.

“Removal.”

“No!” I whirled back to Praem, my toes sinking into the disgusting mud. Praem’s maid uniform was ruined, skirt bedraggled, the frilly crosspieces limp, top twisted sideways, smeared with mud and lake silt. “It- it- ... it helped us, back in the house, remember? The fox led Raine and I to where Evelyn was brooding on her own. We don’t know what it is. We have to ... to take it back ... oh, damn.” I focused on the fox, caught in a decision I didn’t want to make. The animal was panting hard, twitching and flexing to search for the tiniest bit of slack in Praem’s grip. “There’s no way to tell. No way to tell.”

“Removal.”

“We can’t just make the decision on our own.” I squeezed my eyes shut, shivering all over. My head was killing me and I felt like being sick again. “We have to show it to Eevee.”

Praem didn’t answer. Only the fox’s panting and the slow slap of water broke the silence of the night.

“She was so happy,” I hissed. “Eevee was so happy. I can’t- I can’t bring this to her.”

“I can.”

I bit my bottom lip and nodded. “We both will. I can’t kill that fox and pretend this didn’t happen. I can’t lie to spare her feelings. Or

I'd be the biggest hypocrite in the world."

= =

"It's not my mother."

I tore my eyes from the caged fox. My teeth started chattering again. "You're certain? How can you be certain?"

Evelyn sighed and shook her head. Puffy-eyed from sleep, she hunched in the spindly old chair like a hibernating toad, blanket draped over her shoulders. "A single animal brain is too small, not complex enough to contain the human soul, mind, whatever you want to call it. It would just ... " She opened her fist and made a dismissive squelching sound with her mouth.

"But you said- by her grave- you said- about *worms*? Didn't you?"

"Heather," Raine purred, encouraging my drooping hand back toward my mouth. "More drinking."

I nodded, took Raine's advice, and took another sip from the third steaming mug of hot chocolate she'd pressed into my hands.

My fingers burned with that unique sensation, skin warmed too quickly after exposure to the cold – as did my nose, toes, cheeks, and the back of my neck, all reddened and chapped. My skin stung all over, buffeted by the warm air pouring from a portable space-heater. Where Raine had found that I had no idea, but she'd wheeled it into the echoing magical project room and parked me firmly before it, brooking no complaints.

The fox – or not-fox – watched us from inside a makeshift cage, constructed in a hurry from parts of an old chicken coop subjected to the tender mercies of Raine's quick thinking, lashed together with duct tape and garden twine. The prison sat atop one of the tables, swept clear of assorted junk.

An equally hasty magic circle surrounded the table, drawn onto the floorboards with marker pen and crayon.

After Praem and I had blundered back into the house, raising the alarm, I'd barely been able to stammer out an explanation. Between the shivering and the adrenaline, the vice of cold gripping my body, and my muddy dripping clothes, stringing together any words at all was challenge enough. Faced with Raine's confusion and worry, I found it nearly impossible to express the truth of my suspicions.

My absence had woken Raine before my shouting. My tone had prompted her to grab the handgun from her bag. My state – covered in mud, frozen to the bone, out of breath, next to Praem clutching a semi-catatonic fox – had left her momentarily speechless.

Such a rarity. Not one I relished.

I'd nodded and shuddered with relief when Raine had grinned, called me a 'brilliant mad bastard', and leapt straight into practical problem solving mode.

Vindication quickly turned to guilt.

Stupid Heather, what did I expect? How would I react, had the roles been reversed? Raine had one priority above all others, but she controlled herself and took charge, as Evee stomped down the stairs to glare and frown, as I repeated my threat to the fox and impressed on my friends that we couldn't dry off or warm up until we had it contained.

Praem and I had stood side-by-side in the cathedral-like space of the project room, surrounded by the half-cleared magical detritus of Evelyn's mother's long-ago halted work. I was filthy and shaking, despite the towel Raine had wrapped around my quivering frame. We held the fox – physically and metaphysically – as Raine and Evelyn built cages of matter and magic.

As soon as the animal was properly incarcerated, Raine's attention had turned to me.

Not a word of admonishment passed her lips. Not a frown, not a single tut. That wasn't her way.

She did all but manhandle me to a bathroom, despite my protests that we needed to stay and see what happened, that Evee needed our help, we couldn't leave her alone with that thing.

Raine had laughed, more amazed than amused, shaking her head. I hadn't understood, shivering and frowning. She gently shushed me and I was too cold to resist. She stripped off my sopping wet clothes and got to dunking me in a lukewarm bath as quickly as possible. My skin began to tingle and my toes started to ache, and only then did I realise how terribly worried she must be.

"Warm water, not hot. Warming you up too fast is a mite dangerous," she'd said. "Don't you dare touch that tap, Heather.

You sit, right there, and I'll be back in a jiffy. Stay right there. Wave some soap around if you like, but no rush."

"Raine, I'm sorry, I-"

"Woah, hey." Raine raised her hands and half-shook her head. "No apologies in order, not that I know of. Should there be?"

"I've made you worry. I'm- I'm sorry, I-"

That made her laugh again. I boggled at her, confused, wracked by guilt and wilting in the overlarge bathtub, my head still pounding from brainmath. Muddy runoff had stained the water brown.

"Heather. Heather, words don't do it justice. You don't even realise how brave you are. I'm proud." She shrugged. "Hell, what am I gonna do, tell you off? I'd have done the same. Probably swam after the thing on my own and nudded it one in the skull. Let's get you warmed up, hey?"

She'd been grinning, but she'd also run upstairs and back in quite a hurry. She returned with fresh clothes – hers, a size too big but none more comforting in all the world – and a large fluffy blanket liberated from some forgotten bedroom. It smelled of dust, but at least it was clean.

"We really do need to go help Eevee," I'd complained.

"Mhmm, we will, sure. Hundred percent. Lower your head, love, close your eyes."

She'd showered the mud off me, hand in my hair, then rinsed the nosebleed from my face, cleaned the cuts on my forehead and elbow and feet, drained the bath and filled it all over again, until the water finally ran clear.

"Raine, if the fox is ... we can't leave her to deal with it alone." I'd tried to stand up and blunder out of the room, half-dressed and woozy. Raine had smiled and sat me down on the floor, hands on my shoulders.

"Eevee's got Praem. Praem's a lucky girl, she doesn't get frostbite. Sit for a moment, yeah?"

"Frostbite?" I squinted at her.

"Please, Heather? For me?"

She personally inspected my feet before slipping socks over them, pinching my toes to test for sensation and wrapping my cuts in antiseptic gauze. I sighed it off at the time, impatient and worried, but later on I realised I'd run a very real risk of bacterial infection. That lake was filthy, and I'd been wading around with open wounds.

Praem had fared both better and worse than I.

Her skin was, after all, a type of illusion, tactile pneuma-somatic flesh wrapped around a wooden core. Immune to frostbite, untouched by the cold, easily repaired with wood glue. She didn't even have goosebumps.

The mud and water was a different story. She stood off to one side of the echoing project room in a bedraggled mess, wrapped in a mantle of old towels – entirely for our modesty, not hers. I don't think she cared about being naked. Her blonde hair hung in dirty rat-tails, splashes of mud on her face and hands.

Her wonderfully bizarre maid uniform was ruined, dumped in a corner.

"Evee. Evee, Praem's still filthy," I'd blurted out when Raine had led me back into the room. "Aren't you going to-"

"Later," Evelyn grunted. She was scrawling in a notepad, staring back at the fox. It sat on its haunches, watching. "She can wait."

I watched Praem, trying to catch her eye. She stared straight ahead, expressionless, hands folded as if nothing had happened.

"Praem?" I tried. "What about your- what about your maid uniform? We can clean it."

Praem turned her head to stare at the sad pile of clothes.

"Praem?"

"Necessary sacrifice," she intoned.

Raine was trying to get me sat down in a chair, but second-hand outrage brewed strong and wild in my chest. I wasn't going to let Praem linger filthy and cold when we'd just had each other's backs out there in the confused midnight melee. The only thing she'd ever shown personal interest in had been ruined, she'd thrown it away to protect her mistress, to protect Evelyn, and now it sat in a sad

sodden heap.

“Can’t you go wash yourself? Eevee, can’t she at least wash herself?” I’d asked. Praem swivelled her head to stare at me. “Order her to? Eevee.”

“What? What are you on about?” Evelyn’s head jerked up from her work.

“Wash myself,” Praem echoed.

Evelyn waved Praem away with a huff. “Yes, yes, off with you, whatever you want.”

Praem traipsed out, towels and all. I finally allowed Raine to manoeuvre me into a chair and tuck the fluffy blanket around my shoulders.

“Is it safe now?” I’d mumbled. Evelyn grunted, waved me quiet.

I drifted, nodding with exhaustion, adrenaline finally wearing off. Evelyn added twisting symbols to the exterior of the magic circle. Raine returned again to rouse me with hot chocolate and heat.

Brainmath aftereffects and mild hypothermia fed on each other. My head was killing me, a tight ache as a counterpoint to the dull throbbing around my diaphragm. I sipped hot chocolate when told, drowsed heavy and slow, though I woke a little when Evelyn’s father blundered around outside the room. Evelyn stomped out there, stern-voiced, told him nothing was happening, go back to bed.

Perhaps he was used to that kind of treatment. Ignore your wife and daughter doing strange things at odd hours, if you wish to retain your sanity.

I made a fuzzy mental note to apologise to him personally in the morning. We needed to clean up all the mud we’d tracked in; somehow I got fixated on that, drifting on the edge of sleep.

Ah, but Raine was two steps ahead of me, ushering Evelyn back into the project room and apologising to Lewis. No need to worry about this mess, all our fault, we’ll clean it up first thing in the morning. Promise. Don’t want to make more work for your house keeper, after all, do we? Always so smooth, my Raine, always with the right thing to say.

A third mug of hot chocolate, fuzzy blanket tighter around my shoulders. Raine stroked my hair, rubbed the back of my neck. I roused myself from the edge of sleep as Evelyn slumped into a chair nearby and slapped her notebook down on the floor.

That she'd announced her verdict.

I finished that sip of hot chocolate and repeated myself.

"Evee, you said about how worms could ... i-in dead flesh, a-and-"

"We'd know if the worms had gotten to my mother," she snapped. "Because they'd be walking."

I looked down and focused on another sip of hot chocolate. Evelyn sighed and made a wide gesture with both hands, trying to indulge me but lost for words. I could only imagine her turmoil right now.

"Also because we'd all be dead, right?" Raine added with a grin.

"Right," Evelyn grumbled. She nodded toward the fox. It stared back at us, very unlike a caged animal. Unblinking, still except the occasional twitch of an ear. "If that was her you'd be dead. Or worse. I don't know. It's not her."

"Then what is it?" I asked gently. Evelyn shrugged. I shook my head, confused. "You mean you can't find out?"

"Short of vivisectioning it, no."

"Bottom line for me: is it dangerous?" Raine asked. She stroked my hair one last time and took several steps toward the caged fox. The animal regarded her with quick yellow eyes. She leaned forward and bared her teeth at it in a mock-growl.

"Oh yes, absolutely lethal, a deadly mortal foe," Evelyn said. "If you're a rabbit."

I blinked at her. Raine snorted and shook her head, then made a rapid tongue clicking noise at the fox. That made it react more like a fox, tilting its head and swivelling those big ears.

"You ... um, Evee," I struggled. "Er, what?"

"It's a fox."

"It *teleported*. It understood your name. I'm pretty certain it understood English too. Half the spirit life in Sussex ran to defend

it. How can it be just a fox?"

"Yeah, look at it now, hey?" Raine added. She moved to watch the stoic animal from different angles, and the fox tracked her as she circled the cage. "I'm not exactly Ray Mears but I'm gonna bet this isn't normal fox behaviour right here. Shouldn't it be having a bit of a panic?"

Evelyn sighed and spread her hands. "It's not a fragment of my mother, and it's not anything else. The very first thing I did was have Praem see if it's one of her kind, a simple demon riding an animal body, a spy, a ... I don't know. But it's not that either. It's not an illusion, it's not an Outsider, it's just a fox."

"But y-your m-"

"Heather, we are not the centre of the world. Not everything we encounter is about us."

"Teleporting magic fox, then," Raine said.

"Sure, great. Why not?" Evelyn glowered at everything and nothing.

"Could ... could Lozzie have sent it?" I asked, mouth dry, headache making me wince.

Evelyn shot me a withering look, and despite myself I shrank down before her glare, wishing I could vanish inside my blanket. Suddenly I felt small and stupid. Perhaps I'd caused all this ruckus for nothing, gotten wrapped up in a fantasy of protecting my friend, dug up her past and pulled Praem along with me. Heather Morell, a bad influence on impressionable young minds. Who'd have ever thought?

Raine gave up inspecting the fox, with a final mock-growl at the caged animal. Perhaps she'd noticed the emotions I tried so hard to keep from my face, because she crossed back to behind my chair and reached down, firm hands slowly rubbing my shoulders. Feeling awkward, I almost tried to move away.

"I don't think it's from Lozzie, no," Evelyn said, her voice more gentle than I'd expected. "Look, this place is much older than my mother. There are things underground that probably even she didn't understand, from my grandmother's time, or earlier. Who knows. This fox, this ... whatever the bleeding fuck it is, it could be anything. Perhaps it's always been here, and I never noticed. Or

maybe it's just a fluke. Too much exposure to my family. Your guess is as good as mine."

"It did help us," I added in a hesitant voice. "That first night here. It led us to you."

Evelyn nodded and pulled a resigned smile. "I don't think it's any threat. It can't even escape that circle, and that's not exactly my best work. If it wanted to hurt me, or take over my brain, it would have done so when I was ... " She cleared her throat. "Feeling worse."

"Good. Poor little bugger." Raine cracked a grin. "You must have given it the fright of its life. Heather, master of the hunt."

I sighed. "Oh, don't call me that, I ... I know. I ... "

Evelyn glanced at me sidelong. "You over reacted."

A terrible little wretched voice whispered in my chest. I'd made trouble for my friends, caused a huge mess, assumed everything was about us. Jumping at shadows. I couldn't concentrate past the headache and the pain, the echoes of cold in my bones, the sense I'd gotten this wrong, but I tried to pull myself up and look Evelyn in the eye. "What was I supposed to think? I can't tell what's dangerous and what isn't anymore. Frankly, since I met you two, erring on the side of caution appears to be a requirement for merely staying alive. I ... " I lost my train of thought. Hadn't realised how strongly I felt that.

Evelyn started laughing.

Slowly at first, a suppressed chuckle, then a full-body laugh which made her put one hand over her eyes, that usually so-sour mouth curling into a real smile. She laughed quietly in her chair, panted for a breath, leaning forward in a vain effort to control herself.

"E-Evee?" I stared at her.

"Woah," Raine whispered.

"Oh, do shut up," Evelyn barked over her own mirth. She forced down a deep breath and shook her head, carefully controlling her smile until it faded to an amused echo. "I am capable of seeing the humour in all this, you know. I'm not made of stone."

"She's never had a proper laughing fit," Raine said to me. "S'a first."

"It is most certainly not a first. You don't see everything I do in

private, Raine.”

Raine shrugged in theatrical defeat. Evelyn cleared her throat.

“A requirement for staying alive”, she echoed me. “Quite right, Heather. ‘You over reacted’ was not critique. You’re learning, at last. It’s my fault too, I filled your head with horrors, and you acted on them, because ... because you have a good heart.” She cleared her throat again, and I think I even detected a tiny blush in her cheeks. She shrugged.

“Damn straight,” Raine added.

“Praem did all the hard work,” I said, shrinking inside my blanket again, but for the opposite reason from before. “She actually caught the fox, I just threatened it.”

“She has no independent initiative,” Evelyn said. “She wouldn’t have gone running off into the night without you putting the idea in her head. She doesn’t *have* ideas in her head.”

“I don’t know about that ... ” I distracted myself with a long sip of hot chocolate. Now was probably not the time for this conversation.

“I do,” Evelyn grunted.

I glanced over to the ruined maid uniform, a sad sodden pile in the corner, and chewed on my bottom lip.

“She did rock that look,” Raine said, following my gaze. “Specially the tits.”

“Raine.” I rolled my eyes. “She- yes, she did, but I was thinking more about how much she enjoyed it.”

“Yeah. Pity, I was gonna get you to try it on as well.”

“Me?” I squinted up at Raine, almost choking on a mouthful of hot chocolate. What on earth was she thinking? I could never pull off that look. For a start I was far too scrawny, not to mention inelegant; not only would I barely fill out the uniform, I’d be mortified. I blushed and stammered. “R-Raine, d-don’t be absurd.”

“You’d be dangerously cute.” She shot me a wink. Despite the cold, I squirmed inside, and not in a bad way.

Evelyn rolled her eyes let out a big sigh. “Don’t make me get the garden hose. And for the record, Praem cannot *enjoy* anything.”

“I-I- Eevee.” I rounded on Evelyn, half at Praem’s defence, half to avoid my own squirming embarrassment. “Is it possible you could be wrong? I still believe she was making this her identity. She liked it. It’s the only thing she’s shown any organic interest in.”

Evelyn huffed, exasperated but still trying to indulge me. “She can’t have interests.”

“She went after the fox because I thought it was threat – to you,” I said quietly, but my words stopped Evelyn cold. “She did it for you. The least we could do is clean the uniform for her. Or get her a new one, somehow? Please, Eevee?”

“She is good eye candy,” Raine muttered.

Evelyn grumbled low in her throat. “That lake is filthy. It’s been stagnant for years, probably more rat piss than water. God alone knows what bacteria are breeding in there.” She looked at the pile of crumpled clothes. “Those are a bio hazard. We should burn them.”

I folded my hands around my empty mug and waited. Evelyn frowned into her lap, then risked a glance at me. She averted her eyes and shrugged heavily.

“I suppose my father could ... ” she muttered quietly. “He knows some proper tailors, in London. I could ... you know.”

“Eevee,” I murmured. “Thank you. I’m sure Praem will thank you as well.”

“She bloody well better not,” Evelyn snapped.

The little side-door into the project room opened, admitting the whisper of soft feet against the waxed floorboards. Raine craned around to look first.

“Speak of the devil.” She lit up in a crooked grin. “Here she – heeeey, what. *What?*”

Raine burst out laughing. Evelyn stared, open-mouthed with disbelief. I smiled in delighted surprise.

Praem rejoined us. Freshly showered, I assumed, as her skin shone and her blonde hair hung clean but badly in need of brushing. She strode back into the room with precise but oddly gentle footsteps, deftly avoiding every hint of the muddy footprints from earlier. Not

surprising. She had good reason to take care.

She'd found another maid uniform.

It wasn't identical to the first outfit. The skirt was an inch or two longer, with a hem of folded lace and a high waist showing off the flare of her hips, while the sleeves ended in tight cuffs around her forearms. No shoes to go with this one, unfortunately, but she had located some very high denier-count black tights to warm her feet and legs. I rarely wore tights, but in that moment I felt the ghost of envy – they looked rather comfortable.

"What. What. How-" Evelyn spluttered. Raine couldn't stop laughing. I lit up inside and out.

"Oh Praem, oh, oh that's wonderful. Good on you." I clapped my hands together, excited despite myself.

Praem marched over to her customary spot, diagonally behind Evelyn. She resumed her usual pose, hands folded before her, staring straight ahead. I put a hand to my mouth, almost giggling.

"Where the hell are you *finding these*?" Evelyn demanded, outraged.

"Maybe she's making them!" Raine supplied.

"Answer." Evelyn clicked her fingers. Praem turned her head to stare at her mistress, blank white eyes betraying no emotion.

"Around," she intoned.

Evelyn huffed and shook her head. "Sod the tailor then."

"Evee, please, try to be happy for her," I said. "She likes it! She's trying to be human, I'm pretty certain of that."

"Succeeding," Praem intoned. "At being fabulous."

We all stared at her, I with a giggle on my lips, Raine and Evelyn both amazed.

"Well, sometimes you can't solve every mystery," Raine said eventually. "Where does Praem get her fetish gear? Is this animal actually just a fox? As long as nobody's attacking either of you, I'm good. I'm great. Two thumbs way up."

"You would be," Evelyn grumbled, glaring at Praem. She turned back to me. "We'll release the fox in the garden tomorrow, if it

hasn't teleported itself away before then. You need to get some sleep, Heather. You've got an ordeal ahead of you tomorrow, unless we want to spend all week in this house."

"Ahhh, right you are," Raine said, and squeezed my shoulders again.

"What?" I blinked. "I have?"

Evelyn's eyes inched downward, toward the floor, and what lay beneath. "We've got to go back down into the cellar, deeper this time, and I'd like to get it done before any of us lose our nerve."

"Hey," Raine said, mock-offended.

"Yes, yes, we all know you'd crawl across broken glass for a pretty face," Evelyn said, and cut Raine's joking retort off with a raised finger. "The map, Heather. That's where my mother kept it. Her life's work."

"Oh. Oh, yes. That is why we came." I swallowed.

"Comprehending the map is not a ... gentle experience," Evelyn said. "And I have no idea what it'll do to you in particular, but if we want to stand any hope at all against your 'Eye', you need a way to navigate the Outside, rather than random teleporting."

"It'll be fine," Raine murmured, one hand soft against my forehead. "I'll make it fine."

I nodded, a sober chill running down my spine. "Yes, yes of course. To ... get to Wonderland."

Evelyn shrugged. "Time we all got some more sleep, if you two can keep your hands off each other for five minutes."

"Hands off," Praem intoned.

no nook of english ground –

5.8

Contrary to Evelyn's dire warning, confronting the map was only the second most terrifying challenge I had to face that following day.

"Before you hit call, let's hash out a plan, yeah?" said Raine from next to me on the bed. She even raised a hand to stall me, as if I'd located my courage somewhere between my quivering pile of nerves and my inability to grip the mobile phone straight.

"A plan," I managed. My mouth felt so very dry.

"Yeah. You're not just gonna shout 'hey mum, I'm super gay' down the phone, right?" Raine couldn't keep the amusement off her face. I failed to see the humour in the situation. "You know me, I tend to leap before I look, but I figure you'd be more comfortable with a bit of a script."

I gave her the best glare I could muster. Weak and shaky, under the circumstances. "Oh yes, good idea. Great idea. And here I thought I'd just say whatever, muddle through. You know me," I echoed her.

Raine snorted with poorly concealed laughter. I attempted to glare a hole in her head.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh, it's just so cute." She reached out and squeezed my shoulder. "Heather, it's gonna be fine."

"What if it isn't?"

"Then I'm right here. Always." To her credit, Raine killed the smirk at last.

I forced out a shaky breath and gestured limply with the phone.

"It's alright for you," I said. "You don't have to make the call. I hate making normal phone calls, let alone dramatic ones."

"I totally can, if you want." Raine held out a hand for the phone,

and I knew this was no rhetorical gesture. She'd do it if I asked. "Hell, it was my idea. I'll rip the plaster off, you can do the aftercare. We'll one-two punch 'em. We can show off how we make a great team, as well."

"Raine, I don't want my parents' first impression of you to be a voice on the phone asking 'Guess who's banging your daughter'."

Raine lost her composure and started laughing again. "I won't say that! I won't. Cross my heart and hope to die. Best behaviour."

"Your face tells me otherwise."

Her offer was extraordinarily tempting. I really didn't want to do this, however much sense it made. My guts churned and my chest felt like a vice, my heart fluttering in my ribcage like a dove trying to escape. If I delayed much longer, I was going to get light-headed.

Let Raine shield me from reality, from unpleasant tasks, from life itself? No, she was here to help but I had to do this myself, I couldn't avoid it forever.

I still wasn't all recovered from last night, a little wobbly and unsteady, drained inside, even after several hours wrapped up warm in bed with Raine as a hot water bottle. She'd helped change the dressings on my feet this morning, but they still ached from all the little cuts and scratches. I'd eaten too much breakfast – great big slabs of toast and jam and a helping of scrambled eggs – but now the food sat like lead in my stomach.

I stared at my phone's contact list, trying to decide between my parents' land-line number or my mother's mobile. Slim choice.

According to our original rough itinerary, my parents were expecting us at their leafy suburban house in Reading tomorrow morning. They expected myself and two friends, for a little stay in the few days leading up to Christmas.

I doubt they were prepared for their only daughter to stage a full-blown closet evacuation.

Nor could anybody prepare for Raine.

I could just about picture myself stammering out to my mother that I was a lesbian, and yes it's not a phase, and fielding the inevitable invasive questions and idiotic assumptions, but deep down inside I was terrified of what they'd think of Raine.

Even if she passed muster as a ‘normal’ person – rather than a dangerous sociopath entangled with an occult underworld – I was afraid they’d see the leather jacket, the short hair, the cocky smile and rippling athleticism, and see a predator who’d poached their vulnerable, mentally ill daughter. The same assumption I’d first made, the assumption I’d liked and gone along with.

If either of them said anything like that to Raine’s face, I don’t know what I’d do. I hated confrontation. I might be able to kill an evil wizard with my mind, but a shouting match with my parents? Absolutely not.

I think Raine figured that out before I did. That’s why she suggested the phone call.

After breakfast that morning, Evelyn had said she wanted to try a further magical experiment on the caged fox. A boring experiment, to hear her tell, which would involve a lot of reciting Latin at the poor animal, and drawing several more magic circles, in an effort to tease out whatever supernatural shard had embedded itself in the fox’s brain. I’d been all ready to go with her, as a peanut gallery or to sit quietly, but Raine had declared quite firmly that she and I had a matter to attend to.

“Ah yes, I see, starved for each other’s attention,” Evelyn had drawled. “Don’t let me get in the way of a good shag.”

“Evee!”

Raine had burst out laughing. “I wish, but no dice. We gotta call Heather’s mum.”

The bottom had dropped out of my stomach. “We- we have? *We?*”

“I think we better. Give her a bit of advance warning. Only fair.”

“Ah. Good luck. Shout if you need ... help, I suppose.” Evelyn shrugged.

She took Praem with her instead, all prim and proper in her new uniform, after assuring Lewis we’d all still be here when he and his lady friend returned from London that evening.

So that’s how I ended up cross-legged on the bed, cradled by residual warmth, rubbing my feet through thick socks to ease away the little pains. Raine had sat me down, rubbed my back as she explained her rationale: it would be easier on them and me if I told

my parents now, give them a day to process – or let us read the signs that we shouldn't turn up at all.

Better to avoid the cliched soap opera moments. Parcel things out in bite sized chunks. Fair warning.

None of that helped the crippling anxiety.

"Then you gotta have a plan," Raine was saying. She leaned against the bed's headboard, one foot rubbing my shin. "Do you wanna hit them with the big shock first, a rapid attack, and then flank them up with some softer stuff so they can't over-focus? Or go in nice and slow, lead them on with a couple of gentler strikes before you drop the hammer?"

I squinted at her. "Raine, this isn't a battle. What on earth are you trying to say?"

"What's going to shock them more, that you're gay and have a girlfriend, or that you've moved out of your old bedsit?"

"I ... I don't know. I don't even know where to begin."

"What's the worse case scenario?"

"Raine, please don't. I don't need that on my mind."

"You absolutely do, so we can defeat it," she said. She wasn't joking. She'd finally wiped away even the shadow of an amused smirk, replaced by sober concentration. She met my eyes and I couldn't look away from that all-knowing certainty, that confidence burning like a bonfire. "What's the worse case scenario? Try to put it into words. As clumsy as you like."

"They ... they could shout at me. Tell me not to go visit them. They wouldn't though. N-no, wait ... the worst thing would be if they treat it like it's not real, not legitimate, something you've pressured me into, a thing girls do at university, something like that."

"Gay 'till graduation. Right." I could hear the eye-roll in Raine's tone.

"Exactly. That would hurt."

Normally Raine would take a cue like that to pull me into a hug, tell me it's all going to be okay, play the bold angel on my shoulder. Instead she fell silent, looked up at the ceiling, nodding slowly.

“Raine?”

“That would be the worst, yeah. Thinking about whether I should tell you a little story or not. Last thing I wanna do is put the wind up you, but ...” She shrugged with lazy theatricality.

I sighed at her. “You could not be more obvious with your bait if you tried. Go ahead, say what you have to say.”

“Who says I’m not trying?” Raine shot me a slow, knowing smile, but then she pressed her lips together and brought it under control. Her tongue lingered at the corner of her lips. “I never had to come out to my parents. I was way too obvious.”

I blinked at her in surprise – Raine never talked about her family. She waited a beat, watching me, and I thought she wasn’t going to continue.

“You’re rather obvious these days, as well,” I said, hoping it would prompt her.

She nodded and laughed softly. “Yeah, just the way you like it, huh?”

“I won’t deny that part.”

Raine looked up at the ceiling again. “I think my mum and dad liked to pretend I’d grow out of it, but I can’t be sure. Never mentioned it, never brought it up. Never got the bird and the bees speech either, any of that.”

“Tch,” I tutted. “That’s so irresponsible.”

“Par for the course round where I grew up. By the time I ran away from home, maybe a third of the girls in my school class had gotten themselves knocked up. Like thirteen, fourteen years old. Place was a shit hole. Probably still is.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I’m drifting. Point is, my parents didn’t know even half of what I was up to. What they did notice, they pretended not to.”

“Things you were ... up to?” My imagination raced, filled in the details of Raine as a young teenager. She saw the look on my face and laughed, reached over and goosed my knee.

“Yeah, you best believe I was a walking scandal,” she said with a grin. “The tween dyke terror of Beetham Comprehensive. Watch out, Raine’ll get you alone in the changing rooms and pop your

cherry. Don't call her a lesbo or she'll deck you. Don't you know she fought a dog once? Scary bitch, that girl."

"Are you ... you're serious?"

She shrugged and half-shook her head. "All teenage crap, but it feels different at that age, you know? Though I did fight a dog when I was twelve, that really happened. Long story. I did make out with girls at school a few times, and I got in a scrape – twice – over other girls. I had this whole love-hate thing going on with one of the preppy crowd. She was trying to hide it from her friends. Super repressed, I was trying to help, you know, my Robin Hood act? Doing it even back then."

"Raine." I wasn't sure if I should be impressed or not. "Goodness, I'm glad I didn't know you. I would have found you terrifying."

She laughed again, almost self-conscious. "Stupid drama, you know? Nothing serious, nothing permanent. Until my parents caught me necking with a girl, and everything blew up. In my own bedroom, mind, not in public. She was half-naked, I was, you know. Not the sort of thing they could pretend not to see. That was about a week before I ran away from home."

"That was why you left?"

She nodded. "My dad said some things nobody should ever say to their own kid."

"Oh, Raine." For once it was my turn to lurch into a clumsy, reassuring hug.

"Ahh, it's fine, I'm fine." She laughed and rubbed my back. "I broke his nose for it."

I pulled back, staring at her. "You *what*?"

"I broke his nose. Er, not exactly my proudest fight. Had to use a chair."

"You broke your own father's nose? With a chair? At fourteen years old?"

"Yeah." She cracked a grin. "Hey, I gotta have some talent in life other than making you happy."

I sat back and nodded, still processing these scraps of my lover's history. "You deserve so much better than that."

“Got it now, haven’t I?” She winked at me.

I sighed and felt myself deflate a little again. “Flattery will get you everywhere. How much of that story was told in aid of taking my mind off calling my parents?”

“Some,” she admitted. “Point being, there’s no way your parents are gonna react worse than mine did. If your mum gets ugly, you can put the phone down. Just put it down. Block her for a couple of days, give them time to think it over. You’re not a teenage girl trapped in her bedroom with her dad about to hit her. You’ve got us, and you’re free.”

I sniffed back the edge of a threatening tear or two. “Okay. Thank you, Raine. I’ll ... ” I waved the phone vaguely, trying to control the tremor in my hand. “Stay here, okay? Please don’t wander off while I do this.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Here I uh ... here I go then.”

I selected my mother’s mobile phone number, took a deep breath in a vain effort to control my racing heart, and pressed the call button.

She picked up on the fourth ring.

“Heather dear, is that you?” My mother’s voice, higher-pitched than my own, a little pinched with age and stress, practised and smooth from almost two decades of a customer-facing job.

“Yes, of course, um, hi mum.”

I glanced sideways at Raine, received two thumbs up and a big grin of encouragement. My pulse throbbed in my throat, so hard I was certain my mother would be able to hear it down the phone line.

“And how are you, little miss gallivanting around the countryside?” my mother asked. “Are you having a nice time with these friends you still haven’t told us about?”

Truth be told, my mother and I didn’t look that much alike. Samantha Morell was bigger boned and a little heavysset, especially around the waist, where her twin daughters were slight and petite. My and Maisie’s phenotype had apparently jumped a generation from my grandmother. I could picture her perfectly from her voice, the practical and serious expression on her face, the slight frown of

curious attention, the hint of ironic disapproval behind her words.

“Yes, uh, y-yes, we’ve been having a really nice time. My friend, um, she’s got this really big house in the countryside. It’s nice here.”

On top of the messy lie, my words sounded lame and limp. I felt myself shrivelling already.

“Well, you should send your father and I some pictures, shouldn’t you? You do have a camera on that phone, and you almost never use the thing. Sometimes it’s as if you’re on the moon, dear, rather than at university.”

I let out a little sigh, trying to rally. “Yes. Sorry, mum. L-look, I have something I need to tell you about. It’s important.”

A moment of silence, then: “Yes?”

One word, and I set off shaking again.

My mother’s tone was all too familiar, the same detached waiting she’d always used when I was struggling to deal with a particularly gruesome hallucination, when I was on the verge of expressing the horror out loud, whenever my mental illness threatened to issue forth into the real world.

Raine was right, I should have planned. I needed a script, a set of correct pronouncements.

“Mum, I-” I swallowed.

I almost pulled the phone away from my ear and handed to it Raine. Almost. My arm twitched. Dammit, Heather, you’ve faced otherworldly monsters and alien gods. You’ve saved friends from hell dimensions and out-thought evil wizards. You’re friends with magicians and werewolves and your lover is a murderer. *Dammit.*

“Mum, I’m- I’m gay. As in, a lesbian. I thought you should know.”

Halting and hesitant, but once it was said I felt such a weight lift inside me, head throbbing with adrenaline, light with release. I let out a slow, shuddering breath.

For a long moment my mother didn’t say anything. I began to tense up again, braced for the worst.

“Don’t be stupid, Heather, of course I know you’re a homosexual.”

I blinked, at nothing, then over at Raine. She was close enough to hear my mother's voice from the phone – grinning like a maniac, she mouthed 'homosexual?' in real or feigned outrage, I couldn't tell which. I shook my head, struggling to concentrate on what I'd heard.

"B-but, mum, y-you-"

"Parents know things about their children, dear." My mother actually tutted. "Of course we know. The signs aren't exactly subtle, if one is merely a little attentive."

"What- I- *signs*? I-I showed signs?"

"Of course you did. All sorts of things down the years. Don't you remember that one trip to the hospital, when you were, oh, about twelve, I think, and you really liked that one nurse? You kept saying you hoped she would come back, you wanted-"

"Mum!" I flushed beet-red. "Oh my God, that's so embarrassing, stop."

Raine was laughing so hard she had to roll her face into the pillow to contain the noise. She kicked her legs against the bed.

"Or the sorts of posters you used to put on your bedroom walls," my mother went on. "Never boy bands or strapping young men, absolutely not, no boy-crazy years for you. Really, you think your own mother wouldn't notice these things? I deserve a little more of your faith, I think. You must get this from you father, he's likely to be a little confused by all this too, but read my lips, it's obvious."

"O-okay, um, g-give me a moment. I didn't expect ..." I took a deep breath, and a vindictive part of me reared up inside. "Mum, also, I've moved out of the flat you and dad picked at the start of term. I've moved in with a friend, and my g-girlfriend."

This time I felt my mother's frown before she spoke, a hundred miles away. "Heather!" she snapped, and I flinched. "You ... I can't believe you, you moved out without telling us? What were you thinking? Who are these people you're living with, the same friends you're with now?"

"Yes. Yes, mum it's fine, it-"

"You know how you get, you know you can't let peer pressure dictate your behaviour."

“Mum, I-”

“Of all the irresponsible things. Heather, I thought we had a handle on this.” She huffed, tight and exasperated. “Between your medication and the-”

“I’m not taking my medication any more,” I blurted out, before I had time to think.

“ ... Heather?”

Oh dear. I sat there on the bed, head pounding, at a sudden loss. I almost flinched again when Raine took my shoulder. She nodded once, gently. I swallowed and opened my mouth, and let the words flow.

“I know you don’t like it when I talk about being mentally ill, but ... mum, listen, I don’t see things anymore. At all. Not a single hallucination, for months now. No more lost time. No more nightmares.” Technically every word of that was true. I’d never hallucinated in the first place. There was no need to tell her the truth of what I saw every day, or that a magical symbol inked on my forearm held the nightmares at bay. “I’m healthier than I’ve been since.” Since before I lost Maisie, before the Eye. “Since I was little. I’m *well*, for the first time ever, and I owe part of that to ... to taking steps for myself.”

“ ... well, well, that is ... good news, certainly.” My mother slipped into silence for a long moment, then sighed down the phone. “Perhaps it’s something hormonal, perhaps the end of puberty. Changes to your brain chemicals. Well, I’m very glad you’re having fewer problems, but I really want you to go back to doctor Merile before you flush all your pills down the toilet.”

“I know, I know, but-” I felt a little steel enter my voice. “Mum, I’m never going back to the hospital. Not Cygnet. I don’t need to, and I won’t.”

“Mm, we’ll see about that.” From my mother, that was as good as surrender. “So, don’t keep me waiting, what’s her name?”

“Her ... ” I blinked. “Um, I’m sorry, whose name?”

In the corner of my eye I saw Raine light up with a cheeky, knowing grin. She kept far better track of this conversation than I could.

“You used the word ‘girlfriend’, very distinctly, and I’m not going to pretend I didn’t notice, and you’re not one to make up things to brag about. So. This girlfriend of yours,” my mother said. “What’s her name? How long have you been going out? How did you meet? Is it serious?”

“Very, very serious. Uh.”

Raine radiated smugness. She cracked a cheesy open-mouthed smile and pointed both index fingers at herself. I went to swat at her but she wriggled clear and hopped off the bed.

“And what’s her name?”

“Her name’s Raine. Raine Haynes.”

Raine struck a pose, hands on hips, chin inclined.

“Well, your father and I are going to have to meet her, aren’t we? Don’t you have any pictures of her? You can keep us informed about things like this, you know, you don’t have to hide them. We get very nervous when you hide things, you know that.”

“Uh, I-I don’t have any. She’s right here though, I can-”

“Oh? Put her on the phone then, I want to talk to her.”

My throat closed up and I thought my eyes were going to pop out of my head. I covered the mouthpiece and stared at Raine with mounting panic. “She wants to speak with you! What do we do?”

Raine stuck her hand out. “Wow her with my sheer charisma.”

“Raine! Don’t you dare use any innuendo. Please.”

Raine feigned with her right hand, then swiped the phone from me with her left, dancing back beyond my reach.

“Raine!” I hissed, but she gave me a capital-L look, which under any other circumstances would have me melting at her feet. Instead I shut my mouth and clamped my hands in my lap, about ready to vibrate out of my skin.

Raine drew her spine up straight, composed her expression, and put the phone to her ear.

“Mrs Morell? Good morning. I’m Raine, and first I must apologise for any unintentional eavesdropping on my part. Oh, no no, that’s

quite alright. Let me say though, even if we're not face to face, it's a delight to meet you."

For one mind-bending moment I thought Raine had been replaced with a doppelganger, so artificial was her good-girl voice, then I heard the tinny sound of my mother asking a question and Raine flashed a huge grin at me, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Yes," Raine replied, voice still imitating a bright-faced innocent maiden. "Yes, more than anything. I am taking very, very good care of her, I promise."

Burning with embarrassment, I buried my face in the bed and crammed the sheets over my ears.

Raine was talking to my mother! Ninety percent of what Raine and I did together was absolutely not for parental consumption. Even the non adults-only stuff. I'd rarely felt so awkward, desperate to drown out the one-sided conversation. After a minute or two of agony, Raine gently tapped me on the shoulder and waggled the phone at me.

"I'm to leave the room," Raine said with a controlled smile. "Your mother wants to talk to you alone."

I accepted the phone and Raine went to the door, then turned back and mouthed 'I think she likes me'. I waved her away, still flushed in the face.

"Mum?"

"A sweet young lady, very well spoken. We will still have to meet her, Heather, I'm not entirely comfortable with you doing this sort of thing on your own."

"Mother, I'm an adult," I hissed, surprised at myself. I'd never spoken to my parents like that in the past. "I can make friends and l-lovers by myself, thank you."

"Mm. Has she left the room?"

I glanced up. Raine waved at me from just beyond the doorway.

"Yes."

"She knows your ... " My mother lowered her voice, as if the neighbours might overhear. "About your *issues*, yes?"

“Yes, she knows all about my history of mental illness. She doesn’t care about that. She’s helped.”

Raine beamed at me.

“Mm. Well. You and her are dropping by tomorrow morning, yes?”

“And my other friend too. She’s called Evelyn, we’re very close.”

“Oh yes. Making friends.” My mother sighed. “Heather, I know I’m an old worrywart, but I do like that you’ve spread your wings a little. You’ve grown. You never used to play well with others as a child, you were always on your own. You seemed so happy, until ... well, until all the unpleasantness.”

I wilted inside, lost for words in the moment. This minor victory, this understanding from my mother, passed beneath the shadow of a far greater dislocation; I’d never been alone as a child. Me and Maisie, always, always together. I bit my tongue.

It didn’t matter how accepting my parents were. They remembered the wrong history.

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“I have a theory,” Evelyn said.

“Oh?”

“It’s your theory really.”

“I’m sorry, a theory about what?”

“About fantastic mister fox, what else?”

Evelyn looked resigned, that same slow acceptance she sometimes displayed when her guard was down. She adjusted her feet and her weight on her walking stick, and returned to peering down the cellar stairs.

We stood side by side in the dusty sitting room at the far end of the mothballed east wing, the concealed cellar door wide open before us, weak illumination creeping up the wooden stairs from below. Raine had insisted we remain up here while she checked on the doors we’d have to pass on our way to the map, and Evelyn had sent Praem along with her. The work of a few minutes, apparently, so Evelyn and I waited, kicking our heels and feeling surplus to requirements.

“My theory?” I said, terribly awkward at bringing this up again. “My theory was that it was your mother.”

“Contamination, pollutant build up, all that stuff.” Evelyn waved a hand. “I still can’t tell what that fox is, only what it isn’t, and that got me thinking. With the tools I have I can find pneuma-somatic life, demon possession, translocated minds, stray Outsiders, all the stupid brute stuff of magecraft. Whatever’s in the fox is too subtle, below my notice, not in the old books. Not worth the time and attention of a power-hungry magician to study and record, because it’s not useful.” She shot me a glance and cleared her throat. “My mother isn’t the only Saye family mage buried in that graveyard.”

“You mean it might be somebody else?”

“A piece of some ancestor, or perhaps all of them, accreted over time. My mother, she ... the things I found in her notes, about failsafes against death, those were intentional. She wanted to be immortal, she wanted to come back. The fox, it’s hardly brimming with power. And I’d like to think not all my ancestors were monsters. Perhaps the spirits around here think so too. Whatever’s in the fox probably doesn’t even know it was human once. Like a gut parasite.”

“A disgusting metaphor,” I said with a bit of a forced laugh. “I’m quite sure they weren’t all monsters. They produced you, after all.”

Evelyn smiled ruefully. She shrugged.

“Have you set it free yet?” I asked.

“The fox? No.” Evelyn frowned, hesitated. “I’m trying to decide on killing it or not.”

“Oh, that’s ... that’s your call, I suppose.”

“I’d rather not. Can’t be certain.”

“Maybe it’s best not to anger the ghosts of your ancestors?” I suggested, half-serious.

“No such thing as ghosts,” Evelyn grumbled. I relented. I could barely imagine the difficulty of the decision, but I wanted to be here if she needed a sounding board.

“Praem did seem quite intent on killing the fox last night,” I said. Evelyn regarded me with a pinched frown, and a sudden sinking

feeling tugged at the base of my stomach. “Oh. Oh you don’t think she knows more than she’s letting-”

“Absolutely not,” Evelyn snapped. “I can compel truth out of her, understand? She doesn’t know what it is either. She said she wanted to kill it? God dammit, the last thing I want is a trigger happy demon. Where’s she picking this up from?”

“From-” I swallowed. “From you?”

Evelyn huffed and waved me off. “Maybe.”

“Evee, I- what if-” I took a deep breath and tried to put all the pieces together in my mind. I had them all to hand, but expressing this in the face of Evelyn’s ire was not easy. “I think Praem’s just being protective, of you.”

Evelyn’s expression fell into unimpressed gloom. “Heather, how many times do I have to repeat it? She can’t care. What possible motivation would she have?”

“She did hear everything you told me, Evee.”

Evelyn squint-frowned at me.

“When you told me all about your mother, at the graveside yesterday,” I said. “Praem was standing there behind us the whole time. She can overhear conversations, yes? And then down there,” I nodded at the open cellar door. “She heard every word from you. Everything you told me. Is it so implausible she might have felt the same way I did? Jumped to the same worried conclusions about the fox?”

Evelyn frowned tighter as I spoke. “She can’t feel, Heather. They don’t think like that.”

“A-and,” I tried my best to forge on through Evelyn’s scorn. “She has us for role models.”

“What? Role models?”

“Whatever monsters your mother made, they only had her as an example. The ... demon, the one she put in you, the impression it had of human beings was entrapment, hate, torture. I’m no expert – that’s your area – but Praem’s had us. You, me, Raine. She met Twil, she helped us save Lozzie. We’re not so bad.”

Evelyn stared at me for a long moment, frowning hard. I assumed

I'd lost her again, though I believed every word I'd said. Eventually she grumbled low in her throat and shrugged.

"Maybe."

"I'm not surprised she might want to protect you. You brought her here. To her, maybe you're ... sort of ... a ... surrogate-" Evelyn frowned like thunder and I cut off the final word of my sentence, put my hands up in surrender. "Sorry, that's a little distasteful, yes."

"Bloody right it is." She tutted.

"Hullo!" Raine called from below, voice echoing up the cellar stairs. "You two still up there?"

"We are!" I called back in relief.

"Dead zombie storage is clear and locked," she called. "Come on down."

"Dead zombie storage." I raised an eyebrow at Evelyn.

"Semi-literal," she grunted.

= =

The cellar vaults extended much further beneath the Saye mansion than was entirely sensible.

Praem took a vanguard position and Raine held my hand, a heavy-duty lantern torch in her other. We quickly left the main cellar room behind, with the stacks of metal kegs and pretension toward modern concrete. Raine had to duck as we passed underneath the open stonework archway at the back of the room. Our cluster of footfalls echoed off the centuries of stone, vanishing into the subterranean darkness of the T-shaped hallway beyond.

Dank air seeped into my clothes, but this time I was prepared for the journey – three tshirts, two of which were Raine's, my pink hoodie, and a pair of very comfortable gloves Evelyn had lent me. I'd tucked my hair down the back of my hoodie too. Every little helped.

I still shivered, but not because of the cold.

We clattered down the short stone corridor. Half a dozen heavy wooden doors led off on either side, all shut tight, then we crossed what seemed like a much older storeroom – filled with the rotten

stubs of ancient barrels and some shattered pieces of furniture.

The only modern object was a huge cork pin-board mounted on a stand, covered with the corners and scraps of once extensive notes and anatomical diagrams. Bulbs struggled along the ceiling on metal brackets hammered into gaps in the stonework, half of them dead and the other half too weak to matter.

“This certainly is appropriately creepy. I’ll give it that much,” I muttered.

“It’s fine,” Evelyn said, at full volume, the depths returning her voice as a dozen twisted echoes. “Everything down here is dead or deactivated. We’re almost there. Praem,” she called a few paces ahead. “Don’t touch anything.”

“No touching,” the doll-demon confirmed.

The door loomed up out of the shadows. The Door, capital D.

“Oh, you have to be kidding me.” I let out a long-suffering sigh. “That is absurd.”

“It does look kinda overkill,” Raine admitted.

The door which barred our way to the map was straight out of a dungeons and dragons adventure, or one of those role-playing video games Raine is so fond of.

Hewn from a slab of oak, banded with black iron, sealed with a trio of huge stainless steel padlocks, it looked ready to withstand a battering ram. A magic circle ringed the door frame, spilling onto the stone floor, cut directly into the surface with a chisel or acid. Whatever was in there was not getting out, and nobody unwelcome was getting in.

“I hate magic,” I muttered under my breath.

“So do I,” Evelyn grunted, and set to work.

Unlocking the door was quite a performance – thirty seconds to remove the padlocks, the clunk of their mechanisms echoing in the stone confines, followed by a long drawn-out two minutes as Evelyn traced her fingers over precise points of the magic circle, muttering Latin and worse beneath her breath. Some of the words hurt my ears, made me wince. I felt my heart in my throat, and took a steady, calming breath.

Eventually Evelyn stepped back and spat a gob of bloody saliva into the corner.

“Evee?” Raine asked. “You okay?”

“It’s nothing,” she grunted. “It’s unlocked now. You first,” she nodded at Praem.

The doll-demon grasped the door’s iron handle and shoved it open. Raine raised the lantern, squeezed my hand, and we shuffled inside.

I’d expected an actual map, perhaps something pinned up on the wall. Or a huge scrawled mural, a magical design so complex and so insane it would make me quiver inside with disgust and recognition in equal parts.

Instead, the underground chamber contained a kind of secret study. A small, neat desk sat against the back wall, a pair of thick modern notebooks stacked before an uncomfortable chair. Evelyn flicked at a light switch and a few sad little bulbs guttered on above us, chasing the shadows into the cracks between the stones. One low table contained some magical detritus, a half-finished circle on some canvas, stubs of chalk, a sheaf of notes.

A second low table played host to a box. A tall, rather intricate box, standing on its end.

Dark lacquered wood, decorated with floral gold leaf. Tiny brass hinges crowned the top and split the design at regular intervals down the length. A puzzle box, closed and locked.

“Right, the trick is not to look at it in your peripheral vision,” Evelyn said as she crossed toward the box. “Either keep it in full view, head on, or don’t look at it at all. If you have to look away, it’s easier to close your eyes first.”

“Is that it?” I glanced from her to the puzzle box.

“This? No, this is some old Chinese tourist trap nonsense my grandmother picked up in Shanghai. Simple good fortune it’s about the right size to hide the map from an accidental glance.” She tapped the black wood with the head of her walking stick, then met my eyes. “I’ll open it up whenever you’re ready.”

“Wait, wait, I need to- that’s- We’re just going to- I’m just going to go ahead and look at it?” I swallowed, throat dry, and glanced between Evelyn and Raine for help. Praem stood prim and proper

by the doorway, no help at all. “W-what should I expect? I’m feeling a little intimidated here.”

“S’a sculpture, basically”, Raine supplied. She let go of my hand and unfolded a pair of extra-large plastic food bags from her back pocket.

I stared at the bags. I didn’t even have to ask the question. “Right. Sick bags. Great.”

“Just in case.” Raine made a pained smile. She slipped her arm around my waist, for support.

“This is the fruit and purpose of my mother’s demon summoning,” Evelyn said quietly. “This, in this box, this is the great secret she traded my health for, the truth she wrung from an unwilling demon, over the course of years. It’s ... ” Evelyn glanced away and took a sharp breath. I caught an odd, almost wet look in her eyes. Gone when she tilted her face back into the light. “I’d never considered before that it might actually be worth something. Something real. If this works, if you can locate Wonderland, if we can save your sister ... well, it’s the only good that’s ever come from that dead bitch.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, the faster we do this, the faster we get out of this hole. It’s freezing down here.”

“O-okay.” I tried to take another deep breath, but my lungs quivered.

“Heather,” Raine said my name softly. “I’ve seen it before. It’s tough, it might mess with your head, but I wouldn’t let you do this if I thought it was genuinely dangerous.”

“But if you two have seen it already,” I said, struggling to resist the urge to back out, to panic. “What am I meant to-”

“I don’t know exactly what effect it will have on you, I admit,” Evelyn said. “But from what I know about how the map works, and your self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics, I think you’re going to understand this in a way I never could. In a way my mother never could. An Outsider made this thing, with my hands, but with Outside logic. You have those principles living in your head. Read the map, Heather. See if you can.”

This time I managed to suck down that deep breath, nodding slowly. I leaned back into Raine’s arm. I reminded myself why I was doing this, the reason I was even here: Maisie.

“Go ahead, open the box.”

Evelyn nodded, and grasped one of the hidden seams on the puzzle box. “I’ve stared at this thing enough in the past. I’m going to look away, alright?”

“I’m going to stare into the sun right along with Heather,” Raine announced. “Nothing to it.”

“Do it,” I said. “Before I lose my nerve again.”

Evelyn opened the box. Folded down the dark wood. Let it splay itself like a flower.

Inside was the most intricate and most delicate sculpture in all the world.

Metal, perhaps stainless steel, shining and bright – but could any steel be wrought as thin as spider silk? Three feet tall, a foot and a half wide, it contained a hundred million feet of space, folded and folded and folded again.

Spars and bridges of metal connected tiny perfect spheres, razor-edged cubes, fluted columns, in such fragile miniature, all embedded in a base of more metal flowing outward like a slug’s foot. My eyes roved across the structure almost as if I couldn’t control my hunger for more detail. Thousands of those little spheres and cubes, a hundred thousand spider-webs linking them. Rough metal joints, scratches, pieces bent out of shape – none of it could mar the perfection of the whole.

For five or six seconds, I merely stared, amazed at the detail and beauty of the object – then I began to feel queasy.

Beautiful, yes, but deeply unnatural. Angles of metal vanished in on themselves. Spans of silk-delicate steel threaded behinds spheres and cubes, seemingly connected to nothing. Spirals of spheres and cubes ascended or descended, yet formed perfect loops. A million optical illusions all at once.

I felt Raine tense up next to me with the same gut-sick reaction. To run one’s eyes across the shining bridges of metal, to consider the sheer number of little spheres, try to count them or to trace a route from one spot to the next was to invite a head-spinning nausea. Cold sweat broke out on my face.

“I don’t-” I said, as I tilted my head to look from a different angle.

And I saw what I was really looking at.

How could one possibly describe the majesty of a sunset to a person who's never seen the sky?

This sculpture, made by a tortured captive demon, held a layer of meaning that only I – and perhaps Lozzie, and somewhere out there my twin sister – had the contextual framework to comprehend.

Oh, it was beautiful. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

My eyes ran faster along the metal, tracing routes with increasing speed, tripping and skipping ahead as my mind completed the leaps before the structure expressed them. There was the Fractal, a part of the map, and wasn't that funny? A piece of the structure of reality was inked on my arm, keeping the Eye at bay. And there was Wonderland, represented by one of those little spheres. How small, how unimportant, compared to the whole.

Raine tried to hold me back as I leaned forward, stumbled toward this shining truth, but I barely felt her grip. I saw the ways between the spheres, and it was *so obvious*. How had I not realised this before? How had I not figured out the maths by myself? All reality lay here, at the tip of my brain, for the taking. All I had to do was reach out.

I slipped along, faster and faster. I was panting, cold sweat soaking my clothes, hands shaking uncontrollably – and I didn't care.

I could find Lozzie with this. I could go anywhere. If I could just memorise every single link, run my eyes down every single filament of wire, the mathematical perfection would complete me, in some fashion I'd never known I was lacking. Who needed friends, or help? Who needed to live, or be human? With this in my brain, I wouldn't even need my twin back, I'd be-

It wasn't Raine's hands or Evelyn's panicked voice which ripped me back. It was that thought – I wouldn't need Maisie?

That was stupid. I wasn't a person without Maisie. I was half a person.

I reeled away from the map, spluttering and gagging, and for a fraction of a second I saw the sculpture in my peripheral vision.

The shining metal expanded, building more of itself in the blink of an eye, unfolding to fill all space, all time, until it crowded around

the edge of my vision and filled all the world with a cacophony of endless complexity, except for a tiny tunnel left to my fragile human perception. Black and dripping on the utmost rim of reality, the insight a red-hot bolt of pure pain in the centre of my head.

That was the real map – of Outside.

I ripped my eyes away from it.

Raine caught me, held me up as I scrabbled for one of the plastic food bags in her hands. I got it in front of my mouth and doubled up and squeezed every muscle tight and screwed my eyes shut. I think I made a keening noise through my teeth. I'm not sure, and I certainly don't recall what Raine and Evelyn were saying, because for once, for the first time ever, I held on.

I shook and my stomach muscles clenched up but I held on.

I didn't vomit.

I refused to let that feeling master me – that illusion of true comprehension I'd felt, the seductive temptation of understanding it all, of mapping Outside. Such arrogance. To try was to burn out my senses. I'd grasped enough.

"Heather? Heather? Hey, come on, deep breaths, try to stand up straight. You're okay, you're completely okay."

"I got- I got it- I did," I gasped, eyes closed as I made absolutely sure I was not facing that infernal sculpture. "I saw it. I can- I saw it."

"Saw what? What did you see?" Evelyn snapped.

"Let's get out of here first, yeah?" Raine said. I felt her hands, strong and firm, on my back and around my waist.

"It worked?" Evelyn snapped. "Raine, wait. It worked?"

"Sight. Gave me sight," I muttered, nodding.

"Sight? To where? Of what?"

"Evee, come on, let her-"

"Outside. To anywhere," I panted, and knew with sickening certainty I held that map in my brain now. The byways and secret passages of the castle we all lived in. "To Wonderland."

and less pleasant places –

6.1

I've been told, repeatedly, that I must possess a rather high tolerance for pain.

This is not true.

"I really do think Praem is too big for this," I said, then shot a guilty look at the doll-demon. "Sorry, I didn't mean any offence by that."

Praem turned her head to stare at me, but if she was capable of interpreting my words as a comment on her plush physique, she didn't say anything. What did an immaterial creature from Outside care about body weight? I assumed pain also meant nothing to her.

No, the approaching pain was going to be all mine.

A lump in my throat, a tremor in my chest, a churning in my gut – my body knew what to expect. I twisted my hands together inside the warm gloves borrowed from Evelyn, watching the soft white leather bunch and crease. Strange, how the mind can magnify attention on such tiny details, when one is trapped in on the precipice of panicked anticipation.

"She's no larger than me," Evelyn said with a shrug.

"Cept up front," Raine muttered.

She smirked, but even Raine couldn't quite conceal the worry behind her expression. I saw it plain in the tightness around her eyes, the way she jiggled one knee up and down, her tight grip on the edge of the table. If I shied away now, Raine would support me all the way, she'd let me put this off for another day, three days, a week, a month.

She'd let me, but that wasn't what I needed.

I did love her for trying, but even lewd comments about Praem's chest couldn't take the edge off my nerves right now.

"Yes, Eevee, but bringing you and I back from Outside took quite a

... ” I forced myself to swallow. “Quite a toll on me, if you remember? What if I can’t- on the other side, what if I can’t-”

“That’s why you’re going to take Praem,” Evelyn said, calm but blunt. “I remember what it felt like, yes, like being run over by a bus. Praem won’t feel that. If you’re incapacitated, we don’t want you to be alone.”

She shared a glance with Raine, who nodded and pulled a reassuring smile for me.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” Raine said, then added, to Praem, “You best look after her if she needs to sit down and get her breath, right?”

“Promise,” Praem intoned.

“*Get my breath?* Oh for the- I- oh, dammit all to hell.” I huffed and stripped the gloves off, shoved them in my coat pocket, and unzipped the coat down the front, desperate for fresh air as I unwound the scarf from around my neck. I felt trussed up like a small child about to venture outdoors to play in the snow. “I’m burning up in all these layers, this isn’t necessary.”

Not entirely true. Nerves and stress raised the heat under my collar, not ambient temperature. We had the ancient iron radiators cranked up to full, but Evelyn still wore a big heavy jumper and nursed a steaming mug of tea at her fingertips. Even Raine wore two t-shirts, one long-sleeved, to banish the dense January cold gripping Sharrowford.

Freezing wind, scudding clouds, barely a scrap of sun all week. I wasn’t used to this, soft southern girl I was.

Sometimes it really is grim up north.

We – myself, Evelyn, and Raine – were gathered in the ex-drawing room, Evelyn’s magical workshop. Not exactly the warmest place in the house with its broken radiator and clutter and half-working lights. We all itched to get back upstairs or at least into the kitchen, but if everything went to plan none of us would have to sit here for long.

Yes, the plan. I wished I’d never committed to it.

I longed instead to resume the anime marathon Evelyn and I had finally begun two days ago, ensconced in front of the television,

watching her bootleg dvds of *Symphogear* – all brightly coloured transformation sequences and plucky teenage girls punching monsters. Most uplifting. Or perhaps I could get back to working through the new term's reading material, *Frankenstein's Monster* and *Wuthering Heights*, prepping for next week's lectures.

Who was I kidding? Right now I'd settle for curling up in bed with Raine, shutting out the world for skinship and affection.

Instead I stood in the middle of a mage's atelier, with a sheet of painstakingly transcribed hyperdimensional mathematics to hand, shaking in my cheap trainers.

Praem didn't care about the cold. She did what she was ordered to do, and right now she'd been ordered to accompany me Outside.

"Heather, hey." Raine left her spot by the table and gently took my frantic hands in hers. "You said it was cold there, right?"

"What I said was 'I thought it might be chilly'. I also went there in a dream, does that mean I should wear pajamas?" I bundled the coat down my shoulders. Raine relented and helped me. "I'm only going to be there for a couple of minutes. I don't need this."

"All the same, just in case, yeah?" Raine smiled that maddening smile, the one she kept in reserve purely to make me feel better. She handed my coat off to Praem, and the doll-demon folded it over her own arm without question.

"I can do this alone," I said in a quiet voice. "It'll be easier that way. The less I have to teleport, the less strain on my mind. We know that by now, you know I'm afraid of ... of passing out." Of choking on my own vomit, I meant.

Raine smiled again, indulgent but unyielding. She shook her head. "You gotta take Praem with you. Simple choice, it's her or me."

"It's not as if you could stop me," I snapped, and instantly regretted my words.

"Oh, sure, you're right about that," Raine purred. A dangerously playful tease reared up in her tone. I quivered at that sound – *that* certainly took my mind off the coming ordeal.

"R-Raine, now isn't ... *Raine*."

Raine leaned in close and put a hand against the wall, boxing me in

from above. Sometimes I forgot how tall she was compared to me. "I might not be able to stop you, sure, but when you get back, I'll have a punishment waiting for you, for being a little brat and putting yourself in danger."

My breath stuck in my throat. If this had been any other moment, if Evelyn had not been sitting ten feet away rolling her eyes out of their sockets, I probably would have replied with a squeak and said something deeply embarrassing. Yes please, Raine, please punish me for being bad.

Under the current circumstances I stared right back into Raine's eyes, transfixed like a mouse in front of a snake, and managed to swallow. "Raine, I am in c-charge here."

She let me go, backed up with a smirk and both hands raised. "Right you are, boss. In charge it is."

"Good. Good." I had to take a deep breath.

"Won't be when you get back through."

I tried to play that off by rolling my eyes, but I felt more than a little flushed in the face.

How much of that ultra-aggressive flirting was solely to take my mind off all this? I didn't care. It helped, a lot. I thanked Raine silently, but I'd thank her properly later. When I got back.

"If you two have quite finished your mating ritual," Evelyn drawled, "are we doing this today or not?"

"Just ... just let me think for a moment. All right?"

Squeezing my eyes shut and focusing inward wouldn't help at all. I had no more thinking to do, only procrastinating, so instead I paced.

Over to the heavily curtained window, with my arms folded across my chest, where I could peek out into the damp Sunday morning in the street beyond. A few distant spirits roved across the Sharrowford rooftops, going about their ineffable business. Onward, to the end of the room, to the wreckage of the cult's doorway-portal-mandala, and then back to the table, where my neatly printed sheet of deadly notepaper lay safely contained beneath a heavy book.

“Putting it off isn’t going to make it any easier,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Let her think,” Raine said.

“Evelyn’s right,” I whispered, and moved the book aside. The sheet of notepaper lay face-down, another thin barrier between me and the clarity I’d spent three days inscribing in cheap biro. “Putting this off is pointless. I know that. I’m just ... ”

Terrified.

One could be forgiven for thinking hyperdimensional mathematics had become routine for me, that it didn’t – shouldn’t – scare me anymore. Hadn’t I mastered it? Used my ill-gotten powers to defend myself, to resolve crises, to kill an evil wizard? I could threaten spirits and monsters from Outside, I could deflect a bullet, I could commit murder. This power was mine now.

What nonsense.

The scraps I could wield without frying my own brain were the deceptive shallows of a black sea of infinity. Evelyn’s cosmic map had reminded me how small I was.

My fingertips brushed the notepaper; warm to the touch, like fevered flesh.

This equation – or set of equations, a conch shell of hell-math, re-contextualised by the map’s insight – teetered on the edge of the abyssal currents. Merely writing it down had taken hours. I could only form one or two figures at a time, as the full impact always threatened to overwhelm what little mental control I could muster.

I’d had to cover my previous work with a book to stop me seeing the whole. Raine had to keep dragging me into the kitchen, forcefully distracting me, feeding me hot chocolate, mop up the leaking nosebleed. At one point she’d taken me to bed and kept me there for three hours, and that was the only thing that really helped, kept it all at bay.

I’d used this equation once before, yes, but that had been in a dire situation, driven on and protected by the heat of the moment.

Now I had to perform cold. I was desperate for any excuse to put it off; do it tomorrow, do it next week, wait until February. My birthday was soon, on the 17th. Why not wait until I turned twenty, finally out of my teens? Surely I’d feel different, this wouldn’t be so

daunting, a *real adult* wouldn't feel so scared?

I didn't really believe any of that, but I still entertained the thought, if only for a moment or two.

The 17th was Maisie's birthday as well.

I forced myself to pick up the sheet of paper – and turn to the bucket next to it.

"I'll take Praem," I said, to nobody in particular. "It's just a test. Just like sitting an exam. I'm good at exams."

"You can do it," Raine said, suddenly loud and clear in the close quiet of the ex-drawing room. "This is nothing, Heather, this is a flick of the wrist for you. You'll be right back, and then we'll go take a bath. Together, yeah?"

"Don't forget to bring something back," Evelyn said. "Or you'll have to do it all over again. A book off the floor will be fine. Half a book."

I nodded; didn't need telling that again, she'd repeated it enough times over the last week.

"Praem, come here please," I said, hand outstretched, not trusting my legs to carry me to her. Praem joined me, heels clicking, my coat still over her arm, her skirt swishing around her ankles. I'd pinned her long blonde hair up in a braided bun for her earlier that morning. I think she liked it. She stared at my proffered hand for a moment. "You have to take my hand, or this doesn't work. And hold on."

She unfolded her hands and slipped her warm little palm into mine. All too human.

"Don't you get any funny ideas now," Raine warned her, still trying to crack jokes.

"Okay, I'm ready, um ... "

"You want a countdown?" Raine asked.

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Oh for all the-"

"Yes," I blurted out. "Yes, yes I would. Please, Raine, go ahead. Do that. Count me down."

“On zero? Cool. Here we go then. I’ll see you in a minute or two, Heather.” She held up three fingers. “Three. Two.”

I counted with her, chest tight, palms sweating, animal terror crawling in the back of my head.

“One,” we said together. Evelyn joined in too, and even Praem spoke the word.

My mouth was so dry. Raine closed her hand, made a fist.

“Zero.”

My courage held. I flipped the piece of notepaper over. I read the equation.

My mind plunged into boiling tar. I grit my teeth, ignored the nosebleed that streamed down my face, and forced myself to concentrate on each piece of molten truth as I slotted it into place. Shaking hard, wincing, throat raw. Preparation and experience helped – but only to a point.

I hunched forward around my clenched stomach, holding on hard and trying not to vomit. I wasn’t going to use that bucket. I was *not*. I was better than this, I was stronger, I was-

The equation burned, rose to a shining crescendo of pain, an expanding iron vice instead in my head.

I had to use the bucket.

Praem held me up, an arm under my shoulders, as I shook all over; but I made it, I got there in the end.

Last piece. Exactly the same feeling as the first time, the same violation of natural law, the same slipping black levers under my hands. A snapshot of insane kaleidoscope before I slammed my eyes shut.

Reality crumpled under its own weight, and went out.

The difference?

This time I knew where I was going.

= =

When we’d arrived back in Sharrowford at the end of the previous week, we discovered that number 12 Barnslow Drive had not been

raided, vandalised, marked, egged, or otherwise violated by the Sharrowford Cult.

Evelyn was correct, they hadn't come anywhere near the house. We couldn't find hide nor hair of them.

That hadn't stopped Raine from making us wait in the car. I'd felt increasingly ridiculous as Raine crept up the garden path and unlocked the door, slipping her handgun from inside her leather jacket once she was over the threshold, but I suppose it was necessary. She'd checked over the house, the back garden, and even up the street. Nothing.

Once inside, the familiar scents – exposed floorboards, old iron radiators, tiles in the kitchen – had coaxed a bizarre feeling from me, an emotion out in the no-man's land between nostalgia and heartache. Two weeks away from the house had lent it a touch of the welcome uncanny.

Raine had bustled about and Evelyn set to making tea, but I'd crept around from room to room, waved hello to the spider-servitor in the ex-drawing room, and even opened the door onto the back garden to check on Tenny. She wiggled her tentacles at me, but wouldn't come inside.

The Sharrowford house smelled like home.

How very strange, after spending time at my parents' house, my childhood home in Reading. That was supposed to be home, wasn't it?

A few days with my parents had felt exhausting.

They'd been effusive with their protestations that my friends were very welcome, but I'd picked up on their caution, their one-step-remove, their exaggerated politeness. Or was that me, projecting my own feelings? I hadn't had time to consider that, let alone think about the abstract concept of 'home', between worrying about every little thing Raine did, fielding my mother's endless questions, and dealing with the uncanny sensation of my new friends in my old house.

That was the most exhausting part – not fretting over drama, or being amazed when Evelyn got to discussing actual medieval philosophy with my father. I had to deal with all the memories of my sister rushing back again, with Raine and Evelyn aware and my

parents oblivious.

Raine got it, or at least pretended she did. We talked it over, alone in the old back garden, recounting all the little things I remembered about my twin.

Evelyn did a magical test in my old bedroom, of course. The bedroom where Maisie and I had wiggled down the rabbit hole to Wonderland a decade ago, where every trace of her had been erased. Whatever had happened to us had left no echo, no clue.

Recovering from the map, at least that was easy.

In the end, Evelyn had let the fox go, with much grumbling.

I'd been weak and disoriented that afternoon, sat on the patio as she'd freed the animal on the back lawns of the Saye mansion, sipping from my hot chocolate and trying not to think about the structure of reality. The fox had scarpered off right quick, as Raine put it, and left Praem holding the empty cage as it bounded toward the lake and the trees. It hadn't looked back.

We spotted it twice more before we left the following morning for my parents', a russet snout watching us from the bushes, a tail whipping back into the gates of the estate as we'd pulled away down the cramped country lane.

I wished it well, if it was indeed what Evelyn thought it was.

= =

Two days back in Sharrowford, with the new university term about to start, we'd had a meeting.

None of us had 'called a meeting', nothing so formal. We'd drifted toward it naturally, after a day of recovery from too much socialising with my parents.

"I could get some paint, cover the whole thing up," Raine's voice drifted into the kitchen. I bit into a pop tart and followed the sound as she spoke. "Wouldn't take five minutes. Might need a second coat though, some of this looks pretty thick. Is this bit carved into the plaster? That needs some polyfiller."

I poked my head around the open doorway to Evelyn's magical workshop, and saw Raine standing with her hands on her hips as she surveyed the wreckage of the cult's doorway-portal-thing. The

huge mandala, complete with Lozzie's modifications, still dominated the entire wall.

"Absolutely not," Evelyn grunted from a chair by the cluttered table. "I'm keeping it."

"You aren't worried they'll like, bust on through one night?" Raine turned and saw me peeking, two freshly toasted chocolate pop tarts on a plate in my hands, half of one already in my mouth. "Hey you, did you get bored? Come and join us, we're talking shop."

"Mmm-mm," I grunted, then swallowed, with some difficulty. "I was waiting, I thought you were coming back upstairs."

Raine pulled this big theatrical wince. She'd taken to doing that sometimes that in lieu of saying sorry, and it worked quite handily on me, because it was incredibly attractive. "I got totally sidetracked when I saw Evelyn talking to herself in here. My bad."

"Talking to yourself is entirely healthy, thank you very much," Evelyn said. "You know what isn't healthy? Leaving your girlfriend alone in bed in the middle of ... whatever it is you two do behind closed doors. Go on, shoo, the pair of you."

"We were playing a video game, that's all." I felt myself blush, but only a tiny bit, and shook my head as Raine laughed.

"Yes, and I ran a marathon yesterday," Evelyn muttered. "And no, Raine, I'm not worried about the cult using this again. The network it connected to is collapsed, there's nothing left. I've got Praem out on Bowder's street now, poking her nose into the last of their pocket spaces. They're done. But this, I can re-purpose this, I'm certain, if I can figure out the last few bits of Akkadian."

I crossed the threshold into the ex-drawing room, feeling curious and attentive, though I'd much rather return to watching Raine seduce video game girls who were also dragons. I glanced up at the spider-servitor, upside down in its corner, watching the room with that head of crystalline eyes.

The sight of it still unsettled me on a visceral level – the black carapace, the heat-exchangers, the poised stingers – but then again so did Tenny, and I felt a measure of odd affection for the spider. It had, after all, crouched on guard over my unconscious body after Zheng had tried to kidnap me, and I had no illusions about who would have won if she'd decided to come back and fight it.

I gave it a little wave of greeting, but got nothing in return.

“Heather?”

“Mm?” I blinked around at my friends, and then flushed when I remembered they couldn’t see what I was waving at. “T-the spider, I was just ... saying hi.”

“Oh yeah, big leggy up there,” Raine said. “How’s he hanging?”

“Fine. Healthy. I mean, as far as servitors experience health?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Good question.”

“Y-you said Praem’s gone out?” I hurried to change the subject. Even now, after all these months, the old instinctive habit still held a lot of ground inside my head – don’t let on that you see things other people don’t. “Is she still wearing her- oh. That would be a no, then.”

Evelyn answered by pointing to the back of a nearby chair. Praem’s beloved maid uniform was neatly folded over the back. “Certainly not. I’m not sure psychological self-correction can account for a maid wandering around Sharrowford. I ordered her into jeans and a coat.” She caught the look on my face and sighed. “She’s free to wear whatever she likes when she gets back.”

“That’s okay, I-I wasn’t being-”

“It’s fine,” Evelyn grunted.

It obviously wasn’t fine. Still sore about her demon’s sartorial tastes. I busied myself chewing on another mouthful of pop tart.

“If I saw her walking around in that getup, I’d hit on her,” Raine said.

“So would I,” I said softly, and Raine spluttered with laughter. I blushed and shrugged and took another bite. Of course I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t have the courage, but I’d like to. I swallowed and spoke into the silence that followed, asked the question that had been lurking in the back of my head, the real reason I’d stepped into the room. “So, what do we do next?”

Raine raised her eyebrows at me. “You wanna head out for some lunch before it rains again? That Indian deli place is open again.”

“Don’t be so bloody obtuse,” Evelyn snapped at her. Raine had the

good sense to look mock-sheepish. She'd known exactly what I really meant. Evelyn turned in her chair to regard me. "I thought the answer to that was obvious – you need to test what you can do."

I stepped up to the table and put my plate down, stomach turning, sugary breakfast treat sitting like lead. That was what I'd been afraid of – the fear itself. "I know that part. I mean ... how ready are we?"

"For Maisie?" Raine asked.

"For Wonderland," Evelyn corrected her. "Not in the slightest."

"Yes, yes, I know, I know. I'm asking ... " I sighed and shrugged. "I don't know what I'm asking."

Evelyn held up a hand, four fingers, and lowered them one by one as she made her points.

"One, you can get there, in theory."

"In theory," I agreed.

"Alone, spewing your guts out, and bleeding from your eye sockets. Hardly ideal. And you haven't tested it yet. Two, some of the circles and methods I used to allow Raine and I to perceive Tenny *might* function to conceal us from the Eye's awareness. For how long, how effectively, that's anybody's guess, fuck knows," she shrugged.

"Three, we still have no way to locate your sister, on an entire Outside plane of reality. I don't know about you, but I don't fancy a hike over that terrain we saw."

"True 'nuff," Raine added softly.

"Four, if the Eye resists our interference, itself or with its minions, we don't have much to fight back with. You absolutely aren't ready to go toe-to-toe – or mind-to-mind, as it were – with the Eye, are you?"

"Right," I nodded, deflating inside. "Definitely not."

"So, I would say we're not bloody well ready at all."

When she put it like that, I struggled to see light at the end of the tunnel. We had, what, eight or nine months? How on earth could we achieve all that in eight or nine months?

I'd proposed to fight an alien God for my sister's life. I'd found it's

address in a cosmic phone book. Now what?

“What if we ding-dong-dash it?” Raine asked.

“What?” Evelyn squinted at her.

“You know. Ding-dong-dash. Knock and nash,” Raine said. “Knock on its front door and run away? Good way to see how it reacts to us rocking up to mess with it, yeah?”

Evelyn gave her *such* a look. Raine shrugged, don’t-blame-me style. I was barely paying attention, lost in my own thoughts.

I should have been listening. Raine’s idea was golden, but none of us would work that out for weeks yet.

The map had gifted me with insight, but not an insight I cared to examine in too much detail.

The afternoon after I’d exposed my mind to the map, we’d tried a couple of small experiments. Raine had fetched a couple of small stones from down by the lake on the Saye estate. She’d wanted me to wait, to recover until I didn’t feel sick and shaky, but I’d insisted. I had to try it then, see if it worked, see if I could put this knowledge to use. Grasp a rock and send it Outside – send it somewhere specific.

The first rock I sent to the grand winter-bound castle which Lozzie had taken me to in the dream.

It hurt like hell.

Dialling in a specific location – plane, level, dimension, whatever flimsy inadequate human word we use for Outside – took a toll on my concentration. I’d dredged up the geographic principles from the map and wedded them to the Eye’s impossible physics. The rock had vanished from my hand, and I’d curled up around my aching stomach and lungs for an entire hour, nursing my pounding head and bleeding nose.

The rock had gone exactly where I’d intended.

How did I know that?

It was like throwing an object down a long, lightless corridor, through a doorway I knew stood at the end, deep in darkness.

The second rock, I sent to Wonderland.

A risk, certainly. Would the Eye notice? How all-encompassing was its awareness? Could it somehow trace an inanimate object back to me? Let it try. I was protected, by the Fractal on my arm and my friends and Eeve's magic and my own growing mastery.

Right?

None of that sheltered me from the thought of that rock. Lying awake in bed snuggled between Raine's arms, still cold inside despite her borrowed body heat, it haunted me. A pebble from a lakeside in rural England, lost beneath that rotten sky, amid the broken walls and otherworldly monsters of Wonderland. And it would never, ever come back. Who could find a tiny, pointless pebble, amid all that madness, beneath the gaze of the Eye?

I will award no prizes for unravelling the subconscious metaphor.

"If Raine is quite finished with her helpful suggestions," Evelyn said, the sound of her voice bringing me back to the ex-drawing room. "I may have a solution to that first problem."

"Which one, sorry?" I asked with a sniff. Raine crossed the room and pulled a chair out for me, encouraged me into it and started rubbing my shoulders. She'd probably seen the look on my face, figured out I needed physical contact.

"Getting to Wonderland and back," said Evelyn, and gestured at the doorway mural. "The door. If you bring an object back from Outside, anything at all, I believe I may be able, in theory, to re-purpose the doorway to connect to that particular point."

I blinked at her. "Um ... "

"Window on ye olde Eye didn't go so well last time," Raine said before I could.

"Yes, absolutely. It was a disaster," I agreed, frowning with concern. "I thought that was the entire purpose of showing me the map. So I could ... get us there."

"Alone and passing out, as I said," Evelyn repeated. "Look, I'm certainly not suggesting you ... what do you call it, Slip? Don't Slip to Wonderland, that's stupid and you'll probably die, or worse. No, we need to test this first, in as controlled conditions as we can get. Where can you go? We need somewhere safe."

"Safe, Outside?" I sighed. "Mm."

“Relatively.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “There’s places Lozzie and I went in the dreams which weren’t *that* bad, or at least quiet, but I always got the feeling that Outside was less dangerous when accessed via dreams. I don’t know.”

“You’ll have to ask your Lozzie about that one, I have no idea,” Evelyn said.

“I suppose ... ”

But I couldn’t ask Lozzie, could I? She’d been gone for weeks. I’d hoped, in my own childish way, that she might return for Christmas, come back all smiles and giggling. I didn’t even dream about her anymore. The thought of her Outside formed a lump in my throat.

Raine squeezed my shoulder. “She’ll be back, Heather, I’m sure she will.”

I nodded, chewing on my lip. Raine couldn’t possibly be sure, but I let her convince me for now. My mind finally alighted on the sort of place I associated with safety and quiet, security and pleasure.

“There was the library,” I said.

“Library?” Evelyn’s eyebrows pinched together, sudden sharp interest.

“She took you to a library?” Raine asked, and mock-tutted. “Trying to get one up on me. I’ll have to have a word with Lozzie about that, muscling in on me.”

“One of the places Lozzie took me in the dreams, yes. She called it the library of Carcosa, I think. It didn’t seem too ... ah, Evee?”

Evelyn squinted at me in fascination. I hadn’t seen that look on her face since she’d marvelled over my self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics.

“Carcosa?” Evelyn breathed. “Carcosa. You’re certain she used that name?”

“I think that’s how it was pronounced, yes. I take it that’s important?”

“Potentially,” Evelyn said, with great care. Her eyes bored into me.

“I wish you’d told me before. Can you get back there?”

I shrugged. “In theory, I can go anywhere. Why’s this important, Eevee?”

Evelyn took a deep breath and banished the worst of her fascinated look with an obvious effort of will, bringing herself back down to the level of us mere mortals. “Carcosa is a city, of a sort, mentioned by name in more than a few of the grimoires I have access to. There’s a whole five page passage in *Unbekannte Orte*.” She wet her lips, and I swear I saw her tremble slightly. “The library. There may be ... relevant books. Ones lost here, lost to reality.”

“You want to visit a library, Outside?” I tried to laugh, but the look in Evelyn’s eyes told me she was dead serious. She opened her mouth, but snapped it shut again, clamping down on something inside herself. “Eevee?”

“I can’t.” She took a deep breath and forced a humourless laugh. “You need to understand, Heather, this presents me with a dangerous temptation. A selfish part of me, perhaps the part I inherited from my mother-”

“Eevee, no.”

“- very much wants to visit that library and pilfer as many books as I can,” she carried right on, raising a hand. “If I was being ... mercenary, I would tell you there might be books there we can use, things that might help us locate your sister, even more so if you’re not going to be able to pit your mind against the Eye. And that wouldn’t be a lie.”

“Oh.” That pang of guilt.

“Eevee, come off it, that is being mercenary,” Raine said. “But hey, if it might help?”

“Perhaps,” Evelyn admitted. “But you do need to test the map, and I need to test the door. The library, well ... ” Evelyn shrugged.

“What Eevee’s saying,” Raine added, still rubbing my shoulders. “Is that it’s your choice, this is your circus, Heather.”

I took a deep breath and tried to sit up straight, tried to feel big. I did not.

“I am large and in charge,” I said, closed my eyes and nodded. “I’ll

do it. A trip to the library.”

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Head throbbing like an open wound, diaphragm aching, guts throwing a terminal-stage riot. Praem caught my weight as I sagged forward.

My feet skittered for purchase against the polished wooden floor, kicking at stray books and loose pages, the sound echoing into the vast space overhead. A sticky, gummy feeling seeped around my closed eyelids as I hacked for breath and heaved again. Praem quickly pressed a plastic bag into my hands and I voided my stomach once more, wiped my lips and dropped the bag, and failed to stand up as my knees gave out. Praem had to catch me again. She held me up with effortless ease.

“We are here,” she intoned, voice echoing off into nothingness.

I didn’t need her to tell me that.

I was Outside, under my own power. My second ever intentional Slip. Went off without a hitch – except for all the pain and the vomiting and the bleeding.

“Book,” I croaked. “Need a book. Back- back out.”

That was right, back out, back to reality, back to Raine and that bath together.

“Book,” Praem acknowledged, but then I realised she couldn’t bend down without letting me tumble to my knees.

With stinging effort, I eased my eyelids open, rubbed at the blood around my eye sockets, and squinted so I could see.

Mercy of mercies, I had at least brought us to the right place.

The library of Carcosa looked exactly as I remembered it from the dream Lizzie and I had shared. We stood at the bottom of a wide canyon of bookcases at least a mile across, the floor covered with thousands of discarded texts. The bookcases vanished into the dark, far far above, crossed and looped by hundreds of wooden walkways and balconies. Billions of books. Beyond counting.

Without the cushion of the dream, I did not like it one bit.

All was shrouded in soft, unnatural light and deep amorphous

shadows. I concentrated on the floor, at the discarded books – not at the tiny robed figures shuffling along the walkways above, their faces made of tentacles and spines, or at the hanging cages that contained inhuman skeletons, and certainly not at the giant chains and the nightmare shape they held suspended in the far middle of the canyon.

“Book, book, any book,” I croaked, and bent forward, scooping up the first volume that came to hand. Praem helped me straighten again, and I stared at her for a second. “None the worse for- for wear at all, are you?”

“None the worse,” she echoed, milk white eyes steadfast, uniform utterly unruffled.

“Shhh, shh, don’t want to ... ” I gestured vaguely, but nothing out there seemed to respond to the echoing sound of Praem’s voice.

My stomach turned again, knees wobbling as I struggled to stay standing. Quickly, I let the book flop open in one hand – no language I recognised, but it was indeed a book, black marks on white pages, rather than something else disguised as a book. I handed it to Praem and lifted the piece of notepaper again, now crumpled and squeezed, stained with nosebleed and a few flecks of vomit.

Strictly speaking I didn’t need the equation on paper to get back. I could run through the whole thing from memory, from instinct, from a decade of the Eye’s lessons. But the notation would help, make it gentler on my mind.

I needed so badly to sit down.

A little more pain, and it would be over, I told myself; back to Sharrowford, home, and my friends.

I turned the paper over and my eyes flickered down the equation, the first red-hot iron pokers slamming into my skull.

That’s when I spotted her.

Maybe half a mile away. How did I see her so clearly across the floor of that library-canyon? Half hidden behind a banister at the edge of a staircase up into the stacks? Staring at me. Maybe it was the long blonde hair, messy and unkempt, or the way she folded the ends of her sleeves over her hands, or simply the outline of her

skinny form against the shadows.

Lozzie.

My eyes jerked up from the paper, halfway through the equation; her name on my lips, certain she hadn't been there a second ago.

Her face half a mile distant, but inches away; every feature in the right place, but nothing like itself.

Something wearing her skin.

I lost my train of thought.

Hyperdimensional mathematics fell apart inside my head, a nuclear meltdown which made me clench every muscle in my body, vision throbbing black around the edges. I cried out, pain and blood in my mouth, eyes stinging like acid. My head felt like it exploded.

Praem caught me as I passed out. The last thing I saw was Lozzie. She turned, and walked away.

and less pleasant places –

6.2

Praem brought me round by slapping me in the face.

Consciousness returned, sharp and cold. I gasped, and Praem stopped. It was neither the most painful nor the most panicked awakening I'd experienced, but it was far from pleasant. At least it beat waking up in a puddle of my own sick.

Spluttering for breath through the taste of bile, I peeled my bloodied face off the floorboards and flailed as I tried to sit up, confused, unsure where I was, lost behind blurred vision and eyelids sticky with blood. Halfway to a sitting position a gasp of pain seized my raw throat; my diaphragm ached like my insides had been flayed and my head pounded so hard each throb made me want to vomit again. I curled up around my stomach, wheezing, struggling to look up at Praem and wipe the blood-stuck hair out of my face.

She'd rolled me into the recovery position and covered me with my coat. Good demon, yes, thank you Praem.

The doll-demon straightened up and quickly looked away, her attention elsewhere. Her right hand was smeared with crimson where she'd been slapping my cheek. I reached out, numb and woozy. Had to get to my feet. Had to get up. To find- to find what?

Where were we? My mind whirled, fuzzy and slow. Outside, yes, the test, the plan to bring back a book, the library of Carcosa, then-

Lozzie.

Memory slammed back into place and I pushed my feet underneath me, forced shaking legs to take my weight. I could barely stand, and blundered into Praem. She was fast enough to give me her arm for support, a handhold to cling to, but my head still swam with throbbing pain, vision edged with black. I hung on to Praem for what seemed an eternity, head down, fighting the pain. She picked up my coat again and draped it over my shoulders.

“Leave,” Praem intoned, loud and clear. I winced through clenched teeth.

Leave, now? Absolutely not.

Lozzie was here, just beyond the shadows and my own blurred vision. She’d turned and walked away, up into the winding maze of the library staircases, but I’d seen her, I’d seen-

I’d seen a face twisted into alien emotion. Barely her.

Lozzie’s facial muscles had all pulled in the wrong directions, tensed and relaxed in the wrong order, at the wrong angles, like an inhuman hand puppeting her from beneath the skin.

No no *no*, Lozzie, no! If I hadn’t been wracked with brainmath-fumble aftershocks and a headache fit to kill a bear, I believe I would have wept.

How could this happen to her? She’d insisted she was *meant* to be out here, to be Outside. She was supposed to be safe, from her uncle, from the cult, at home in the inhuman wilderness – and what had happened to her? Even worse, too unthinkable, had she invited this change?

I couldn’t bear it, couldn’t bear what it implied, for both of us.

I had to find her.

If I’d had a clear mind, I would’ve posed myself a much more pertinent question: how had I seen all that detail at half a mile distant? Impossible. A side-effect of the throes of brain-math? If so, that was new.

Should have been paying attention.

Frantic, still not certain what I’d seen before passing out, I heaved myself round, desperate to find any scrap of Lozzie, and managed to almost fall over again. Praem caught me under the shoulders to stop me landing on my face, and hauled me as upright as I could stand.

“Need to leave,” she said, voice clear as a silver bell.

We had company.

Several inhabitants of the library of Carcosa had descended into the bookcase-canyon, to see what all the fuss was about.

Four figures, maybe a hundred meters away. Tall, perhaps six or seven feet, lean and humanoid beneath long ragged robes – but lumpy and rippling, as if they possessed unspeakable concealed appendages in addition to their grayish hands and forearms. Great masses of ropey grey tentacles hung and twitched in place of faces, set between long spines like those of a sea urchin, no eyes or mouths or noses, though their faces pointed at Praem and I as if watching through human eyes.

The boldest of the librarians, creeping forward at the head of their group, carried a large book tucked into its armpit – and a barbed metal cattle-crook in the other hand.

The others didn't look as confident as they approached. They were empty-handed except for one carrying a pair of books, as if the tentacle-face had been busy sorting volumes, its work interrupted by a human girl noisily passing out on the floor. The rearmost figure seemed wary, craning to look over his companions' shoulders. Another knot of the creatures was descending a staircase at the edge of the canyon, a couple of them pointing toward us.

"How did they-" I croaked, forced myself to swallow. "How long was I unconscious?"

"Thirty seven minutes, twelve seconds," Praem said.

"Half an hour? Oh, oh God, I ... " My stomach turned over.

"Leave," Praem intoned.

"But- but Lozzie, she- she was right there- I have to-"

I lurched out of Praem's grip, toward the stairs where I'd seen Lozzie. Half a mile distant, through some of the most bizarre creatures I'd ever encountered, on legs that could barely carry me half a meter, while bleeding from my eye sockets. The plan lay in tatters.

None of that mattered. It wasn't courage, or stupidity, but a kind of desperate selfish panic; I had to find Lozzie, I needed to know what had happened to her.

I made it two paces before Praem threw her arms around my waist.

She held on tight, hugged my back. I squirmed to pull free, but in my current state I couldn't have escaped a wet paper bag, let alone Praem. Raine was strong, much stronger than me, all well-trained

toned muscle; she could hold me down without breaking a sweat, pick me up without much effort, and swing a bat hard enough to break bones. Praem's strength was so far beyond Raine, they weren't even comparable. She had bad leverage and a poor angle, but she gripped me like a granite statue.

"Praem, I- she was-" I heaved with nausea for a moment, on the verge of emptying my guts a second time. She understood, let me bend forward. "Lozzie, it was Lozzie! Didn't you see? I have to- I have to!"

"We must leave."

"But didn't you see? Damn you-" I pulled at her arms again, on the verge of hysteria. "That was her, wasn't it!?"

Praem stared past me, impassive, up at the spot Lozzie had so briefly occupied, then at the approaching tentacle-faced people.

"I saw," she said.

"Then let me- Let's go after her! Please, Praem, please! You can fight these monsters, can't you? I know you can. I have to get her- I have to- I have to know-"

"Promised," Praem intoned. "Best look after her."

That dumped a bucket of cold water on my mounting hysteria: Raine's words to Praem, back in Sharrowford.

The doll-demon had promised to look after me. Raine and Evelyn were waiting, with no idea why I was overdue. Raine would be worried sick. She'd never show it, never let on in the moment, and as soon as I got back she'd be all practical care and tender smiling encouragement. She loved me, and perhaps the way I felt about Lozzie right now was a shade of how she worried for me.

"You can't- you can't make me," I muttered. Voice weak, my heart wasn't really in the words.

I did hold the real power here, I determined our return. I'd dropped the notepaper with the equation, now lost amid the mess of discarded books on the floor, but I could perform it all from memory, at the speed of thought, at the cost of a little more agony.

Praem said nothing, arms tight around my waist, taking my sagging weight on her front. Together we stared at the approaching

tentacle-faces, the librarians. They'd reach us in a minute or two, and even though they looked uncertain and wary I would rather they keep their distance.

A crazed part of me wanted to refuse, make the doll-demon choose between fighting the tentacle-faces or picking me up and running, give her no option but to help me find Lozzie.

I couldn't. Didn't have the heart, couldn't stop thinking about Raine. Left my sister behind for ten years, and now Lozzie's lost herself Outside and I can't even go after her.

I choked back a sob.

"Leave," Praem repeated.

"Okay. Okay, yes, yes. You- you have the book, don't you? I'm not doing this again."

Praem waggled one of her hands to show me, the book still firmly in her grip.

"Hang- hang on tight, okay?"

"Snug," she said.

I closed my eyes, shut out the library of Carcosa, the tentacle-faces, the spot I'd seen Lozzie, my own wordless horror, and began once more the set of mind-searing, neuron-shattering equations to take us home.

= =

"It wasn't her," Evelyn said.

Slowly, eyelids still heavy as lead, I blinked up at Evelyn from where I sat on the floor, propped against foot of the sofa in the ex-drawing room. Raine looked up too, another piece of dark chocolate in her hand, paused halfway to my mouth.

"Mm?" I tried to grunt, managed only a slightly louder puff of breath. Felt like I was dead.

"It wasn't your Lozzie."

I blinked again. My eyes ached, my head throbbed with every beat of my heart, and my chest felt like a gaping hole where my lungs should be.

Upon returning from Outside – slumping against Praem and spitting blood as reality crashed back – I’d spent the last shreds of my energy trying to explain what I’d seen. I’d blurted out sentence fragments, spluttering and coughing, even as Raine had jumped out of her chair to take me from Praem’s arms.

“You’re late!” Evelyn had snapped, sitting bolt upright, face a mask of thunder.

I’d managed to say Lozzie’s name, summoned enough numb-lipped incoherency to mutter about ‘something in her skin’, and ‘have to find her, all wrong’, before I’d all but collapsed onto the floor, with Raine’s hands cradling my head.

Praem had come to my rescue. As Raine had propped me against the sofa and checked my airways were clear, Praem had turned to Evelyn and begun to explain in her clipped, clear tones.

“We saw Lozzie,” she’d said. “Awaiting us. She was all wrong.”

“Wrong?” Evelyn had snapped, glancing between the doll-demon and my vacant expression, Raine already tending to my face with a warm towel and a tub of water. She clicked her fingers at Praem. “Explain. And hand me that book, that’s it? That’s what you picked up?”

I’d drifted. Not the pleasant oblivion of long-awaited sleep, but identical to the first time I’d returned from an intentional slip: numb, distant, my body a shell I inhabited at whim, a whim I was on the verge of forgetting. All my panic about Lozzie turned to mist in the wind. I felt Raine’s hands on my face and forehead, wiping the blood and the bile from my lips, telling me I was home, I was safe, and it was all okay – but I wasn’t really there. She tended to a thin veneer over a void. The void was me, I was it, and it was all.

She lifted strong lukewarm coffee to my lips and forced me to sip, fed me tiny nibbles of dark chocolate. The taste – and perhaps the caffeine and serotonin – began to drag me back up into my own body, into my senses. I took a deep breath and coughed once.

“Hey, hey there Heather,” she murmured, stroking my hair. “You did good, you did real good. I’m really proud of you. You’re not hurt anywhere, are you? Heather?”

“Everywhere,” I croaked. Raine smiled and sighed with relief. She recognised a joke when she heard it.

Evelyn entered my field of vision, frowning down at me with rare naked concern. She tapped Raine with her walking stick. "Don't stop feeding her, you negligent reprobate. Give her the whole bar if you have to, there's plenty more in the kitchen."

"Yes ma'am, don't have to tell me twice." Raine lifted the square of chocolate to my mouth again.

"Feed myself," I muttered. I tried to take it from her, but raising my arm all that way was too difficult. I let my limp hands fall into my lap, let Raine feed me, concentrated on the taste and the orchestra of aches and pains reminding me I was alive.

Evelyn had resumed her chair, and that's when she decided I hadn't seen Lozzie.

"It wasn't Lozzie," she repeated, frowning, tight and thoughtful, as if watching my reactions very closely.

Raine nodded at Praem. "She sounded pretty conclusive to me."

Evelyn shook her head. "Am I the only one here with two brain cells left to rub together?"

"Unfair," I croaked.

"You saw what looked like Lozzie, yes, that much I accept, of course I do," Evelyn said. "Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, but the chances of her and you running across each other Outside are infinitesimally small." She paused and spread her hands. "Am I talking to myself here?"

The horror of seeing Lozzie in that state came creeping back, a cold hand up my spine, digging fingernails of ice into my flesh. I shook, breathing harder. "But she- what- what-"

Raine placed a hand on my forehead, cool and soft. "Shhh, shhhh, Heather, we can figure all this out, I promise. Eevee, this can wait."

"No, it can't," I spluttered. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it wasn't her." Evelyn frowned at me like I'd turned into an idiot. Perhaps I had. "Think it through, for five seconds. You saw her at that exact spot, a place you chose from dozens of possible locations you'd visited with her. And she was waiting for you? At the *exact minute* you chose to go Outside? And she doesn't call out for help or run to you, she walks off, into the unknown? And you

really believe that was her?" She glanced up at Praem. "What about you, you believe this nonsense?"

Praem offered no opinion.

"She was there-" I had to pause for breath. "Because it was somewhere we went-" Pant, pain. "Together. She was ... waiting to ... ask for help."

"It was an anglerfish. It was *bait*." Evelyn spat the word.

"Evee, hey now, come on." Raine raised both hands. "Heather, you need a hot bath thirty seconds ago. I know how much Lozzie means to you, and I promise we-"

"It was her!" I yelled at Evelyn, but managed only a wheeze and an awful, body-racking coughing fit. I curled up around my aching chest and whined through my teeth.

Evelyn didn't deserve my anger. I was lashing out in fear and frustration. She was merely the closest target. She looked taken aback, blinking at me and averting her eyes. She opened her mouth but I waved one weak hand at her, trying to apologise.

Lozzie's fate mattered to me on so many different levels I could barely unravel them while lying awake in bed, let alone in pain and infinite numbness, eyelids still sticky with blood, trying to sort through what I'd seen.

Lozzie and I had shared so much, experiences I couldn't share with anybody else, even Raine. She'd shown me Outside through eyes unclouded by horror, filled with wonder and otherworldly beauty, a vision I still couldn't reach on my own. And I cared about her, deeply, on a level I didn't fully get. She was like a little sister or a cousin I needed to take care of. She'd been abused and used and hurt and I wanted her to be safe, she had to be safe, I *needed* to make her safe.

Because she was like me. And if she could lose herself Outside, what did that mean?

"Heather, hey, hey, it's okay, just try to breathe, focus on your breathing." Raine helped me sit up again, stroked my hair uncaring of the blood, gentle fingers rubbing the back of my neck. "Just focus on breathing."

"Am I going to end up like that?" I wheezed. "Is-"

I couldn't voice the rest, the real question.

Raine and Evelyn shared a glance.

"There's no reason to think like that," Evelyn said quickly. "Of course not."

"You're right here with us," Raine added, her voice a soft purr just for me. "You're completely safe, Heather. The only reason you're ever going Outside is to get your sister back, right?" She grinned, all brimming confidence. "There's nothing to be afraid of. And I'm sure Lozzie's fine."

"What you saw was not Lozzie," Evelyn repeated. I squinted at her.

"Not her," Praem echoed.

"See?" Evelyn thumbed at Praem. "It was something native to the library, most likely. It plucked a relevant fear, a relevant desire from your mind. An anglerfish's bait, a light to lure the unwary. Why do you think it was Lozzie, hm?"

"Anglerfish," Praem echoed.

I shrugged, drained, utterly exhausted.

"Because if it had been Raine, or myself, you would have known instantly it wasn't real," Evelyn said, as if explaining a principle to a very slow child. She sighed heavily. "You're obviously worn out. You panicked. Any of us would, of course. Whatever it was, it chose Lozzie to lead you on. It wasn't her, not the real one."

"She's probably on some tropical beach with her feet up. Or playing with spirits," Raine said, and cracked another grin as she glanced up, at the house, at the Sharrowford cold and the Sharrowford rain beyond the walls. "If I could go anywhere, it'd be the south of France for both us, not this."

"Somewhere hot," I croaked, nodding.

Their argument made sense. Praem agreed too. Bait, a thought plucked from my mind.

Perfect sense.

My eyes burned, hot and wet, vision blurring again. I sniffed hard, and felt tears run down my cheeks. I choked back a sob, crying because I missed Lozzie, and didn't know where she was, if she was

safe, or dead. Or worse.

= =

By the following weekend – and two days after my twentieth birthday – I'd not forgotten about Lozzie one bit, but I had managed to convince myself that Evelyn was correct.

I couldn't sleep right. Not the bone-shattering exhaustion of the terminal weeks before I'd first met Raine, no nightmares or terrors, not reluctant to face what lurked on the other side of unconsciousness. Instead I found myself restless and awake in Raine's arms, an unquiet mind in the night, or getting up to wander the house and sit in the still darkness, reading in Evelyn's little private library, or watching Tenny out in the garden before the cold drove me back under the covers.

Lozzie alone wasn't enough to keep me up at night.

I was terribly worried about her, yes, of course I was, even if that thing I'd seen Outside wasn't her.

When she'd left, after we'd freed her from her brother, I'd tried my best to accept her decision, but now I'd been Outside again, lost to my friends for half an hour, Raine and Evelyn left behind to wonder what had happened to me. That sharpened the hurt all over again. I missed her.

That vision in Carcosa, Lozzie puppeted by an alien presence inside her skin – even if it wasn't real, please don't let it be real, God, please – I couldn't get it out of my head. Couldn't stop thinking about what it implied.

Months ago, when we'd first sketched our plan to save my sister, Evelyn had cautioned against hope. The memory of her words kept me up at night.

Nothing human can survive out there for long, she'd said.

How much of Maisie was left to save?

Despite the supernatural underworld we inhabited, in the end I was still a university student, with few responsibilities except lectures and essays. Lucky me. I caught up by sleeping in late, or napped at Raine's insistent encouragement.

I was worrying her, especially on the two occasions she woke and

came looking for me at night, uncertain where I'd gone, uncertain – perhaps – if I was still present in reality at all. The second time that happened she made extra sure to remind me that I was very much accounted for in the physical. I got even less sleep that particular night, but I didn't mind.

And so, that's why I was curled up in bed at eleven in the morning on a Sunday, two days after my birthday, dozing and fretting, surrounded by Raine's lingering scent, when I managed to embarrass myself.

"Heather!" Raine called up the stairs. There was a laugh in her voice, floating through the open bedroom door. "Wakey wakey, sleeping beauty. Somebody down here's got a present for you."

I rolled over, certain that the 'present' was Raine's metaphor for bacon and eggs, or at the long odds that Tenny had brought a dead mouse to the back door, or Praem had sewn me a maid uniform. It couldn't be that Evelyn had made any progress with the doorway-portal; that would hardly warrant a laugh.

"Heather? You awake up there?" Raine called again.

"Awake," I echoed back. "I'll be down ... in a minute."

Still, I was most unwilling to exile myself from the warm bed. Eventually I sat up, rubbed at my face, and grumbled most ungratefully about how breakfast in bed would be easier. I didn't really mean it though. I wasn't that spoiled.

At least now I had a new and wonderfully comfortable method to keep the cold at bay. No need to pull on thick socks, or wrap myself up in a hoodie. I took my heat with me, carefully guarded. I even popped the hood up and set the ears standing, playful for Raine's benefit, as I padded quietly down the stairs, across the front room and into the kitchen, following the scent of fresh coffee.

"Here she is, queen of the hour," Raine said, from over by the kettle. One coffee for me, and tea for her – and one mug for our guest.

"Hey Heath- ... er-"

Twil did a double-take at me.

At my luxurious, brand-new, calico-pattern cat onesie.

"Oh." I yanked the hood down, blushing terribly, trying to smile.
"T-Twil. Good morning, yes, hello. Hello."

Twil looked me up and down, mouth open, then back to where Praem stood in her maid uniform by the door to Evelyn's magical workshop. " ... Oh ... 'kay. One I can deal with. Two, I ain't so sure."

"It was a present!" I blurted out, blushing red as a tomato, trying to sort out my terribly messy hair all bunched down the back of the onesie. "A birthday present. And it's warm! And- and really comfy. Really."

"A present, right." Twil glanced at Raine, looking very uncertain, ready to bolt. "From you? ... is this some weird furry shit? And why is the demon dressed like a porn star again? No uh, no judgement, though. You do you, all'a you."

Raine burst out laughing, shaking her head and almost dropping the teabag she was extracting from a mug.

"From Eevee," I corrected her with a huff. "It's absolutely not a sex thing. It was because of a bet, but it's actually really comfortable. It's ... " I shook my head and sighed. "Raine, why didn't you tell me we had company? I would have gotten dressed properly."

"I did tell you," Raine said with a smirk, placing the mugs on the table. I sighed and reached for my coffee. "And hey, Twil doesn't count as company-"

"Oi!" Twil barked.

"- she's one of us," Raine finished, with a raised eyebrow at Twil.

"That's- yeah, right, that's better." Twil cleared her throat.

"And Praem," I said with a gesture toward the doll-demon. "Is dressed in the clothing she prefers. She discovered that herself, while we were visiting Evelyn's house. Doesn't she look good? It suits her."

"Uh ... uh, yeah."

"Much preferred," Praem added, staring straight ahead.

"That's the only reason. We're not doing anything funny," I said. Twil held her breath for a long sceptical moment. I sighed and put one hand on my hips, trying to disregard how silly I must look

dressed as a giant cat. “Twil, this is me we’re talking about. You know me by now. Would I willingly dress up as a cat for ... *weird* sex, and then let you see me?”

Twil frowned, then seemed to let go of the breath. “No, no you wouldn’t. Right you are, totally not your style. Cool onesie, actually. It’s kinda cute.”

She lit up with a big, unguarded smile at last, and my goodness, I had forgotten how beautiful Twil could be.

I wasn’t attracted to the werewolf on a personal level, but I hadn’t seen her in several weeks. Absence can have quite the effect with a girl as good-looking as Twil. Her dark curls fell over the collar of her clashing blue and lime green coat, and she’d picked up a new hoodie somewhere, a deep cream colour that went well with her angelic features and sharp amber eyes.

Twil’s unintentional illusion of delicate femininity had been shattered long ago for me – or perhaps accentuated, in some obscure way – by seeing her turn into a whirling ball of tooth and claw, break most of her own bones, and pull zombies apart.

I was always quite relieved the werewolf was on our side.

“Cute as hell, isn’t it?” Raine added with a smirk. “I like the little ears on the hood.” She snuck past my guard to flip the hood back up, messing up my hair, before darting away beyond range of my swatting hands.

“Raine!” I flustered and yanked the hood off my head. “Stop it!”

She shot me a wink, sat down, and gestured for Twil to make herself at home. Twil pulled out a chair, then remembered something and dug around inside her coat. She presented me with a garish little glittery gift-bag, only slightly squashed.

“Cos it’s your birthday,” she said. “Or, it was. Yesterday, right?”

“Friday,” Raine corrected her gently.

“Oh, oh you shouldn’t have, Twil.” I accepted the bag with a gentle frown. “I really mean that, you shouldn’t have. There’s little I want for.”

She shrugged. “We’re mates, aren’t we? Happy late birthday.”

“We are friends, yes.” I beamed at her. “Thank you, Twil. You’re

sweet.”

I swear I saw her blush as she sat down.

Twil had bought me a bright pink and white scarf, the nice thick ribbed kind of scarf good for securing over one’s mouth and nose on the coldest days of midwinter. A little flashy, too much colour for the Heather of six months ago, but I had much more courage in self-expression than any past version of myself.

“I shall wear it to campus, tomorrow,” I said.

Raine had pulled out all the stops on my birthday, two days ago. She’d made me breakfast in bed and baked me a cake when we’d gotten back from lectures, a thick slab of chocolate and cream that tasted of bliss and clogged arteries, introduced with a rousing – if mortifying – round of ‘happy birthday to you’, which even Evelyn had joined in with, though quietly, and all washed down with full-fat milk.

When Evelyn had given me the cat onesie, I’d blushed like a beetroot. I’d completely forgotten about the bet we’d made in the heat of the moment, on that afternoon when Twil’s mother had turned up at the house. Events since then had rather overtaken my attention, but Evelyn hadn’t forgotten, and the loser’s punishment was still very much on the cards.

I loved it regardless. She knew I was having trouble with my body heat, always feeling the cold, and we set the cat onesie to work right away, after a bit of token resistance and awkward embarrassment. It was so very warm.

Raine bought me two thick jumpers, a pair of fancy reusable gel hand warmers, a box of chocolates, a video game – one I’d apparently like, but had never heard of before, the cover an illustration of an attractive witch leering over her bubbling cauldron – and an item of clothing that I will absolutely not relate to anyone else, ever, as long as I live.

I’d return those kindnesses when the time came, because it mattered. Evelyn’s birthday wasn’t until spring, and Raine was a summer child. I hadn’t had a birthday so nice since I was little, but not because of the pampering and the presents, not even because of being surrounded by my friends.

For the first time in ten years, it wasn’t my birthday alone.

Outside, somewhere, Maisie was turning twenty as well.

“Where’s Saye at, then?” Twil asked, blowing on her mug of tea. I was playing around with the scarf, trying it out underneath the fluffy collar of the onesie, but my attention perked up at her question. Twil nodded at Praem. “She’s never too far away, right?”

“I think she’s in her workshop at the moment, but she could do with some light exercise. You should go say hi, Twil,” I said, trying to sound as innocent as I could.

Twil eyed the door to the ex-drawing room, exactly like a wary hound. “What, in there, with the giant invisible creepy-crawlies and the portal to the fog-dimension?”

“That’s been closed for weeks. Go say hi!” I said. Twil frowned at me like I was bonkers. “She’ll ... appreciate the polite gesture. You are in her house, after all.”

Good save, yes. *Go on, Twil, I willed, she wants to see you.*

“Heather?” Raine said my name, a curious quirk to her eyebrows. I made eyes at her when Twil glanced at the door again. Don’t spoil my match-making attempts!

“She must be able to hear us out here,” Twil said, “she just doesn’t wanna say hi. It’s cool, I don’t wanna rile her up or anything.”

“You won’t. Twil, go and knock on the door. Really.” I nodded and smiled. Nod and smile.

Twil narrowed her eyes at me. Oh damn, she smelled a rat. Did werewolves possess a heightened sense for danger? If so, hers was misfiring. I smiled wider.

“You’ve set up some kind of prank, haven’t you?” Twil asked slowly. She turned to Raine to check her expression. “I’m gonna knock on that door and a ruddy great praying mantis is gonna fall on my head.”

Raine laughed and raised her hands. “I’m none the wiser here. I dunno what Heather’s playing at.”

“I’m not playing at anything. I’m just saying it doesn’t hurt to be polite and say hello. I’m sure Eevee would love to see you.”

The door to the workshop cracked open. Out peered a very unimpressed Evelyn.

"The only prank here is your ..." she snapped, but her sharp tongue trailed off, staring at Twil. She swallowed.

"My face?" Twil completed the insult, rolling her eyes. "Yeah, hey to you too, Evelyn. Told you she could hear us out here."

"Good morning, Eevee." I beamed at her. "Look who's turned up. It's Twil." I felt like leaping up out of my seat and clapping my hands together, but I restrained myself. Raine raised her mug in greeting.

"I do have eyes, yes." Evelyn shot me a withering look, stomped into the kitchen, and glanced around the mugs on the table.

"You want a cuppa?" Raine asked. "Didn't want to interrupt you. Kettle's still warm."

"Mm," Evelyn grunted, and stared at Twil again.

The werewolf shrugged. "What?"

"It's nothing," Evelyn hissed, and turned away, as if trying to remember what she'd stepped in here to do. I tried to catch her eye.

"What?" Twil repeated, frowning, bristling at the unexplained scrutiny. "Fuck's sake, Saye, I thought we were cool, you sent a merry Christmas text and everything."

"Yes, yes," Evelyn snapped. "We're 'cool', we're fine, nothing is wrong."

Twil spread her hands and looked at me for help. "What did I do now?"

"You can call her 'Eevee', you know," I said, forcing myself to pretend I was none the wiser. "Friends can use pet names for each other. Surnames are a little too formal, a little too distant, don't you think?"

"Idiot mongrel," Evelyn muttered.

"Hey! Come on, Evelyn- *Eevee*?" Twil attempted, looking at me out of the corner of her eye for approval. I gave her a covert thumbs up. "You like me really, we're friends now, aren't we? We were getting on great. That was you sending me messages from your phone last night, right? You're not like ..."

"Just drink your bloody tea," Evelyn said, and thumped over to the fridge. She opened it and rummaged around, loudly.

I felt like squealing. *Messages?* What was going on? Oh, Evelyn, well done!

“Drink your tea,” Praem echoed.

Raine blinked theatrically several times. “I can’t believe I’m witnessing this. Heather, quick, pinch my arm, I think I’m dreaming.”

“Witnessing *what?* Did you all go off your rockers down in Sussex?” Twil looked so lost, I felt sorry for her, but they had to do this on their own.

I bit my lips together and silently swore I’d only step in if a genuine misunderstanding unfolded, or one of them was at risk of getting hurt. Of course, that didn’t mean I couldn’t talk to Twil in private later, plant an idea or two in her head, perhaps. I caught Raine’s eye and somehow managed to communicate my intention, because she clacked her mug down, cracked her knuckles, and leaned forward to change the subject.

“You turned up right on time, by the way,” she said to Twil. “I was about to give you a ring, ask a favour.”

Twil tore her eyes off Evelyn’s back, still frowning and confused. She blinked at Raine for a second, putting her thoughts back in order. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“How’d you fancy a spot of B&E?”

“B and E?” I echoed softly. Raine pulled a half-smile, half-wince.

“Breaking and entering, right?” Twil supplied before Raine could answer, and started to grin. “What’s going down, we gotta smash some place up? What have you lot got into this time?”

“Yes, Raine, what’s going on?” I said, my voice somewhat sharper than I’d intended.

Raine raised both hands in stalling surrender. “Nothing. Yet. Probably.”

“Yet?” I gave her a bit of a look. Undoubtedly weak, dressed as I was in a fluffy cat onesie.

Raine tilted her head to me. “I haven’t been keeping anything back from you, cross my heart and hope to die. S’only this morning I got wind of this.”

Twil leaned back slightly in her chair, as if she sensed invisible tension in the space between me and Raine. Evelyn peered at us as she shut the fridge. I cleared my throat and blushed slightly. "I didn't mean to imply ... or mean that you were ..."

"It's okay, Heather, I know," Raine said softly, then took a deep breath. "Long story short, do you remember our wayward friend, little Miss Poundland necromancer?"

"Oh, her, yeah," Twil said. "The one you put the wind up, right?"

That got my attention. I recalled her all too well, the prisoner we'd dragged out of the Sharrowford Cult's pocket dimension, a mousy, scrawny young woman who I'd been determined to let live. I remembered her face, terrified of us, and the way she'd looked at me with fear and awe.

"Her name's Kimberly," I said. "If I recall correctly. Why?"

"Kimberly Kemp," Raine said. "Got her full name out of her, and a bunch more stuff besides."

"Cute name," Twil added. Evelyn snorted in derision.

"Anyway," Raine continued. "I've been checking up on her, a couple of times. Once before we left over Christmas, then once the day after we got back to town."

"You mean you've been intimidating the poor woman," I said. "Raine, she was terrified of you the most. That's so cruel."

"Bloody right, damn," Twil said. "Psycho."

"Had to be done," Evelyn grunted. "What's the bitch done now?"

Raine laughed it off, and I almost bristled at her. She pulled a what-could-I-do type of shrug. "Nothing, nothing. I think. Hey, I made it clear as day I wasn't going to hurt her. Like Eevee said, it had to be done, we had to be sure she wasn't gonna get picked up by the cult again."

"Oh ... oh, I suppose so, yes, from that angle." I dialled down. Fair enough.

"Helps that you got to play Knight Errant, I'll bet," Evelyn muttered.

"Duty of care and all that," Raine admitted with a tilt of her chin.

"Anyway, so, I called her, went round her little flat – over on

Whingate and Headly, she's in one of the towers – and I didn't threaten her, I swear. I was there five minutes, no more. Asked her how she was, if any of her old comrades had been in contact, told her to come to us if she had any problems like that."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "I'll bet you did."

"*Evelyn*," I almost snapped at her. Raine was a lot of things, but unfaithful she was not. Evelyn grimaced a silent apology and waved Raine on.

"Second time, I drop by uninvited the day after we got back from down south. All was well. She was a bit surprised, and yeah, okay, probably shit scared of me, but it had to be done. Then I tried a third time, last Friday. And I couldn't."

Raine paused, let that hang.

"What happened to her?" I said.

"She wasn't there, was she?" Evelyn asked, a dark turn in her voice. "Fuck."

"Fuck is right," Raine said. "Didn't think anything of it at the time, she's a busy girl, got things to do, life to live. So I called her, left a message to call me back, but got nothing. I called her again on Wednesday. Still nothing by the weekend, so I go round there yesterday, knock on the door, thinking maybe she's sick of us now, moved on. No harm, no foul. No answer."

"She could be doing anything," Evelyn hissed.

"What if she just left?" I asked, but my voice felt weak. A sinking feeling dragged at the pit of my stomach.

Raine raised two fingers. "Hold up, this isn't the end of it. This morning, while Heather was having a lie in, I got the bright idea to go round her workplace, the Poundland on Castle Street. They open early on a Sunday, for some dumb reason. I pretended to be her friend, turned the charm on max for the girl behind the till. Turns out Kimberly called in sick last Friday, and then not a peep. Nobody's heard from her since."

Last Friday – a week and two days ago. The same day I'd been busy slipping Outside. The sinking feeling settled as a ball of lead in my gut. A coincidence? It was on Raine and Evelyn's faces, but nobody voiced it. How could that be a coincidence? What were the odds?

“Oh,” I bit my lip. “That’s bad, isn’t it?”

Raine nodded. “Could be. Could be she just did a runner, shackled up with a guy somewhere, or she’s dead in a ditch. But that flat’s still occupied, I’ve checked. Curtains drawn, front door locked. Don’t know who’s in there, if anybody, but they’re not answering the door.”

“It’s our fault. It must be. It’s the cult again. Or perhaps she’s just terrified of us.” I shook my head, groping for any reason, anything that wasn’t connected to me.

“Shiiiiit,” Twil said. “Could be, could be anything though.”

Raine nodded. “Either way, our Poundland necromancer’s gone missing. You and I, Twil, we’re gonna break into her flat.”

and less pleasant places –

6.3

Raine often proposes solutions that are themselves new types of problem. Before I met her, the idea of breaking into a person's home to *resolve* a situation would have seemed utter madness; nowadays it felt merely inevitable.

I let out a huge sigh and put my face in my hands.

“Heather? Hey, hey, it's okay, I- ahhh.” Raine paused, and I could picture her pained smile in my mind's eye. “Hey, she's probably fine. I just was thinking worse-case scenarios. Most likely this is all a misunderstanding. Maybe she left Sharrowford and didn't tell us, didn't want to be followed, and hey, I wouldn't blame her. Best thing for her really, start a better life elsewhere, without the cult and all that hanging over her.”

I sighed again, sat up straight, and gave Raine a deadpan stare. “Breaking and entering.”

“Yeah!”

“Elucidate for me?”

“Yeah, me too, hey?” Twil added. “You have got a plan for this, right?”

“It'll be easy. No problems.” Raine leaned back, getting comfortable in her chair. “Her place is in one of the two old towers on Headly. Shared entranceway, so we can wait for somebody else to hold the door. Failing that, the lock should be easy to force, all you need's a screwdriver. Kimberly's own front door is pretty secluded, floor fourteen, number 62, last one in the row.”

Twil shrugged. “What do you need me for then?”

“Cos I dunno what's in there. Could be nothing, could be a man-eating tiger. I'd take Praem, but I don't want to leave Evelyn here alone without her.” Raine gestured at me with her eyes. “And I think Heather might kill me if I went by myself and got in trouble.”

I tutted. “No ‘might’ about it.”

Twil crossed her arms and frowned. “As long as this isn’t gonna turn into a whole ... thing. I have got school tomorrow morning.”

Raine nodded. “Lock-picks, not door-smashing. It’s an old cylinder lock, I’ll have it open in a couple of minutes at most. I do the breaking, you do the entering.”

“Mmm,” Twil growled, uncertain.

I flinched.

It had been a few weeks since I’d last heard that sound. She’d probably meant to grumble in thought, but the noise from Twil’s throat came out low, resonant, bestial – not a human vocalisation at all, let alone what one expected from a slender teenage girl. A thrill passed through me, suddenly aware of the exact distance between us.

Then Twil puffed out a breath and shrugged, and she was all human again.

“Take Praem if you must,” Evelyn said. She clacked over to us but didn’t sit down, tossed an open packet of chocolate digestives onto the table and extracted one for herself. “This is important. Find out what the necromancer is doing, or where she’s gone. Today.”

“Breaking and entering,” Praem intoned.

Twil jumped in her seat, startled, then frowned at the doll-demon. “Bloody hell. She’s too quiet, I keep forgetting she’s there.”

“I am precisely as quiet as I wish,” Praem said. Twil frowned at her, the suspicion of a canine for an unknown animal.

“Don’t engage with her,” Evelyn said. “Not unless it’s necessary.”

“You’re not thinking of coming with, are you?” Raine cocked an eyebrow at Evelyn. “It’s a bit of a hole round there.”

Evelyn shook her head and tapped her walking stick against her artificial leg, a dull thunk. “I don’t fancy running away if anything goes wrong, no.”

“What’s the time, getting on for twelve?” Twil asked. “We gonna do this now?”

“Whenever you’re ready,” Raine said.

“Wait, wait.” I held up a hand, feeling like I was the only sane person in the room. “What if somebody sees you breaking in, and calls the police?”

“Ahh?” Raine laughed gently. “Heather, nobody’s going to do that, trust me.”

“Round Headly? In the towers?” Twil squinted at me. “I’m from Brinkwood and even I know that no bugger’ll call the rozzers in Headly.”

“Rozzers?” I echoed. “Twil, you live in a rural village, you don’t talk like that.”

Twil grimaced and scratched the back of her head.

“Twil’s right. Whingate and Headly’s the roughest council estate in Sharrowford,” Raine said. “The other tower’s condemned, has been for ages. Police only go there in threes, or not at all. Our girl lives in a rough neighbourhood.”

“Yes, I gathered that part,” I said. “But are you certain nobody will call the police?”

Raine shrugged. “Ninety-nine percent.”

Even I’d heard of Whingate and Headly — before I moved to Sharrowford. One of those names that turned up in national crime statistics, television news pieces about knife crime and youth stabbings, a turbulent spot in the otherwise placid surface of Sharrowford’s desultory attempts at regeneration. I didn’t like the idea of Raine walking around a place like that, but she’d been there three times already and this time she’d be taking Twil. The pair of them together would probably be the most dangerous thing on that council estate. I distracted myself by grabbing a chocolate digestive, and focused on avoiding crumbs as I bit into the biscuit.

Twil stood up and knocked back the rest of her tea. Evelyn eyed her for a moment, opened her mouth and closed it again, until Twil caught her staring and spread her arms in an exasperated shrug.

“I was going to ask how things have been with your mother,” Evelyn snapped, averted her eyes, and added in a much gentler voice, “professional curiosity..”

"Weird," Twil said. Evelyn shot her an offended frown. "I mean with my mum, not you asking that. Simmer down, jeeze."

"Evee's concerned for you, Twil, she cares," I said. "We all do. She just has a funny way of showing it."

"*Funny way?*" Evelyn muttered.

"We don't want to pry," I forged on, doing my best to ignore Evelyn's ire, though I almost flinched. "But after what happened when your mother visited, well, we all hope your family life is going okay."

"Ehhhh." Twil shrugged and glanced out of the window. "Like I said, weird. Not much more weird than usual though. I mean ... she's still my mum, even if she's ... timesharing her head, I guess. Nobody in the Church will talk about it. I guess some of them are the same, yeah, got the god riding along upside their skulls?"

"Most likely," Evelyn said, her voice tight.

Twil stared out of the kitchen window, a moment too long for comfort, watching the leaden sky and the threat of rain, the wind plucking at the unkempt grass.

For all my involvement with the supernatural, I couldn't even begin to imagine how Twil felt about her family, about the pseudo-religion she'd grown up with, or the crippled Outsider they worshipped beneath the ruined Church out in the woods. It was like the plot of a bad horror film: a cult in the wilds, a hidden secret, a young and vulnerable girl – except Twil was anything but vulnerable. She knew all their secrets and she was still very much alive and untouched, and untouchable, as I'd seen so many times.

What on earth could I say to show her I cared? They and their 'god' didn't seem so bad now, not when compared to the Sharrowford cult or Evelyn's past. When Twil's mother, Christine Hopton – the high priestess of the Brinkwood Church – had visited Sharrowford to offer us their dubious help, she'd been sweet and personable, hadn't creeped me out at all until the moment I'd seen something moving behind her eyes. She was still herself, still a person, just hosting a guest in her mind.

Perhaps to Twil it was normal. Or perhaps not.

"They won't do it to you," Evelyn said suddenly. Twil turned to

look, eyebrows raised. “I mean they *won’t*, you’re probably too dangerous for the cu- ... for your Church’s’ god.”

Twil puffed out her cheeks and flapped her coat. “More werewolf advantage, huh? Cool. Dunno how I feel about that, really.”

“You should feel safe,” Evelyn grumbled, then picked out another biscuit, chewed on it for a moment before she continued. “My offer still stands, and don’t you forget it. You can stay here if you ever need to. You come here, to me, at the first sign of family trouble.”

“There won’t be any.” Twil looked at the floor and shrugged. “But yeah, thanks. Wouldn’t mind hanging out over a Friday night sometime.”

Evelyn grunted and turned away. I gave Twil a covert thumbs up, but she only raised a confused eyebrow at me.

“We should crack on now if we wanna get this done before dark,” Raine said, and stood up. She stepped over to me and ruffled my hair, exploited the instinctive urge to close my eyes whenever she did that. “Meanwhile, you better eat some proper breakfast, Heather. You haven’t had anything since six last night. Go back to bed if you need, yeah? Don’t wait up for us, we won’t be long, it’s probably nothing.”

“And if it’s not, what are you going to do?”

“We find anything, we’ll call. You’ll be the first to know, I promise.”

“I guess so ... ”

Raine kissed me on the forehead and then flipped my onesie hood over my hair as she skipped away, left me flustering and blushing as Twil guffawed at the pair of us.

They didn’t waste any time. Raine dragged on her leather jacket in the front room, and Twil began to boast that she could run her way to the old council estate faster than a bus could take them. Evelyn didn’t show much interest, wandering back into her workshop without so much as a friendly goodbye to Twil, but I followed into the front room, hesitated, then gathered my courage and spoke up.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Heather?” Raine finished stashing something black and metallic back inside her jacket. I didn’t have to guess what that was. She

smiled and shook her head. "You haven't eaten breakfast yet, come on."

"Then I'll take a cereal bar. I'm coming with you."

"Uhhh," Twil made an idiot noise. "No offence, but Headly council estate might be a little like, out of your depth?"

"I have been in much scarier places, thank you very much."

"Girl's got a point," Raine said. "She sure has."

"Still, s'not the same, is it?" Twil shrugged. "It's not exactly transferable skills. You can't explode some tweaker chav with magic in broad daylight, you'll get in right bother."

"You can if you're good enough at it," Evelyn called from the kitchen.

"I'm coming with you," I repeated. "No ifs or buts."

"No butts, huh? Speaking of which, I could always take you upstairs," Raine said, her voice dropping, dangerous and low. "Leave you unable to walk straight for half an hour. Then you won't be coming with us, after coming with me."

If she expected to defeat me with embarrassment and sexual innuendo, Raine was sorely mistaken. I felt a blush rise in my cheeks, to hear her talk to me that way in front of Twil – who was blinking at us in confusion, not sure if she was following – but I raised my chin at Raine. I had her in checkmate.

"But you want to get moving right away, don't you?" I said lightly. "If I hold out, it'll take you quite a while to render me incapable of standing up."

Raine burst out laughing, boggling at me in surprise and raising her hands. "Alright, alright you got me. I'm just playing."

Twil grimaced at us. "Bloody hell you two. Is this just an excuse to flirt? Hey, Evee! They do this all the time?"

"Yes," Evelyn called back. "It's obnoxious."

"I'm not flirting, I'm serious," I said. "I'm coming with you. That's final."

Raine opened her mouth, and began to half-sigh, half-laugh, but

then she must have caught the resolve behind my eyes, the reason I was demanding this. She killed the laughter and tilted her head at me. "Why? Either the flat's empty, or she's hiding in there. Anything else is unlikely, you're not going to miss anything important."

"Because I'm responsible."

"For?" Raine asked.

I wet my lips and sighed, had to think. The initial desire had been pure gut feeling, unpacking it was a challenge. "Kimberly Kemp, I'm responsible for her. From what she said when we let her go, the cult was all she had in life. No family here, and a grinding, low-paying job. You've met her since, do you think that's accurate?"

Raine nodded slowly. "Yeah, yeah, it is, I think."

"Then I destroyed what little support network she had. I'm responsible. Don't you remember the way she looked at me? The ..."

I almost shivered with distaste at the memory. "The awe? I was the one she pleaded with, I gave conditions, for her life. I'm responsible. I'd like to see her again, maybe talk to her, especially if she's scared of us, say ... I don't know. Something. Apologise, maybe."

"Apologise?" Evelyn drawled from the doorway behind me.

"I'll think about it on the way there."

Raine nodded, all trace of playful humour gone. "Okay, sure, you're with us then. But find a cereal bar first, or three. You need to eat."

"You sure about this?" Twil looked very doubtful. "Heather, like, I get what you mean, it's cool, poor girl's probably scared as shit, but it's really rough round Headly. Like, scary rough."

"I can handle that."

In truth I was barely considering where we were going.

Raine shrugged. "We'll all be together, it'll be fine. Headly's rough but it's hardly Afghanistan. And there's probably nothing in that flat but mouldy bread. It can't hurt." Raine fixed me with an intense look, a no-questions-do-what-I-say look. "As long as you stick to exactly what I tell you to, and stick with us, right by my side. Wander off alone and you'll have fourteen-year-olds trying to sell

you drugs in five seconds, propositioning you in ten.”

“Yes ma’am.” I imitated the tone Raine used when I bossed her about, stood up straight and pulled a mock-salute. She grinned, winked at me, and Twil rolled her eyes. “Frankly, if we do find Kimberly,” I added. “It might be a little easier on her nerves if she sees me, instead of you two.”

Twil frowned, gesturing at herself. “What’s wrong with me? Raine I get, she’s a psycho, but me? Me?”

I sighed. “Twil, she watched you dismantle her zombies with your bare hands.”

“Well ... yeah, she did! That was her fault.”

I gave her a look. “And that makes you less frightening how, exactly?”

“Oh, alright, fine.” Twil shrugged, doing a poor job of hiding her brief smile. I suspect she rather enjoyed the feeling of being big and scary whenever she wanted. She came up short, frowned, and looked me up and down. “Uh, you are gonna change out of that cat onesie, right? That might scare our Poundland Necromancer for a whole different reason.”

I huffed out a sigh and put my hands on my hips. Raine started laughing.

“Yes, Twil, I thought I’d wander down there in the onesie, really get the locals’ attention. What do you think?”

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Headly council estate – a truncated double-crescent of squat brick flats between Whingate road and the distant motorway embankment, laid out like crab pincers, lined with cramped windows, pockmarked with air-conditioning outlets and little satellite TV dishes, scarred with the shadows of badly cleaned graffiti, its rot frozen by the cold – unsettled me worse than I’d expected.

Sharrowford was not in general a rough town. Every city has forgotten pits, neglected areas full of people who’ve fallen through the cracks, too poor and ground down to claw themselves out. I’d grown up in Reading, more sheltered than most due to my ‘mental illness’ and teenage isolation, but even I, mousy little Heather who

never went out on the weekends, knew the reputation of places like Southcote or Whitley among my peers.

Even with Raine on my right and Twil on my left, as we walked up the long concrete pathway on the green, this place unnerved me.

Not the same way as Outside, otherworldly realms on the razor's edge of human comprehension, or being lost in the Sharrowford cult's pocket dimension, but a sensation more animal discomfort than fear. An itch between my shoulder blades. A tightness in my chest. A need to look everywhere all at once, but also make myself small and unremarkable.

The green between the two rows of flats was covered in scraggly brown grass, not doing too well in the winter, scarred by tire-marks from bikes and littered with empty cans and cigarette ends in any convenient corner – plus several dessicated dog turds, and more than one or two used condoms. Several half-dead trees struggled up from their potting gaps between concrete slabs.

We passed a few people, teenagers – and young adults dressed like teenagers – all greased hair and imitation jewelry, smoking cigarettes in the shelter between two of the blocks, glaring out at the world as if looking for a fight. Old women made entirely of boot leather. A trio of muscled, tattooed men hanging around on a corner, one of whom had a huge, stained dressing over one eye.

Twice, brave souls offered to sell us 'smack' – though I didn't know what that was – or rather, they offered it to Raine, who turned them down with a shake of the head and a 'nah thanks mate'. Once, a lad hooted something rude at us, trotting in our direction across the grass, and I'd struggled quite hard not to flinch.

Twil glared at him, barely growling, and he made himself scarce.

Terrifying god-aliens from outside reality? Sure. Evil wizards and giant zombies? No problem. Urban decay? Perhaps I'd better stay home.

Nothing was going to happen to us, not in the middle of the day, despite the low grumbling sky. Three of us, in public, with Raine radiating such a frigid aura. Nothing was going to happen.

A tiny, mad, dangerous part of me enjoyed this experience, but not for any sensible reasons.

Raine and Twil were positively intimidating.

None of it directed my way, of course. If they ganged up on me like this, I would probably pass out in mortified arousal. The feeling of being guarded, looked after, sandwiched between two of the most attractive women I'd ever known, either of whom could lift me off my feet — well, I stored those feelings away for later.

Raine held her shoulders squared, chin up, hands in her pockets, an exaggerated casual swagger to her walk, as if we were exactly where we were supposed to be. I realised I'd never seen her put on this particular front before, a defensive wall, don't-mess-with-me. Twil, on the other hand, had somehow descended a notch or two toward her wolf-like state, but without any physical changes; a dark glower in her eyes, a subliminal threat in her musculature, an animal roll to her shoulders.

And then there was me, twitchy and nervous.

"Which tower is it? Left or right?" Twil asked quietly, as the shadow of the council estate's crowning glory fell over us.

"The one on the left," Raine said, her tone deceptively casual.

"That's Gleaston tower. Glasswick tower's on the right, that's the condemned one. Wouldn't wanna go in there for love nor money." She glanced down at me. "You finished all those cereal bars, right? Warmed up a bit?"

"Mhmm." I nodded, then cleared my throat, fighting the urge to stay small and silent, my face tucked down inside my new scarf.

"Yes, I ate them on the bus. I'm fine, I'm doing fine."

A white lie. No matter.

"Not long 'till we get inside," Raine murmured. She pointed ahead and up – and up, and up. "You can see Kimberly's place from here, the corner flat on floor fourteen. Curtains are shut, but I swear that's a light. Bathroom window, maybe. See it?"

I tried to count the floors, to follow Raine's finger, but the pollution-stained concrete defeated my eyes.

Living in Gleaston Tower sounded like my idea of hell.

Twinned concrete monoliths, the Headly towers – Gleaston and Glasswick – sat at the point the low rise flats stuttered out onto open ground. Thirty floors each of thick concrete slab, once-

fashionable apartments, dingy windows and cacophonous graffiti, they tore at the sky's underbelly over Sharrowford's west end.

They could be worse, at least to my sensibilities. Better the texture of aged concrete than the too-clean surfaces of steel and glass such things would be built from these days. At least these had life, of a kind. Some of the higher flats in Gleaston tower sported window boxes, sadly empty this time of year, or big houseplants visible behind the glass, a pleasing counterpoint to the grey exterior. One flat near the summit flew the Cross of St George from their window, and another two the ram's head colours of Sharrowford Football Club.

Glasswick – the condemned tower – looked awful. Every window up to the tenth story had been boarded, the wood damp and rotting from weather damage. The glass higher up had been smashed. Weeds sprouted in the cracks and lichen had colonised big patches of concrete, a building with a skin disease.

The police had nailed a man-sized plastic notice in big bold letters to the boarding over the entranceway. Keep out, building condemned by order of Sharrowford council, entry punishable by £500 fine, so on and so forth.

The notice was caked with graffiti, and a board had been kicked in next to it, an entrance to the lightless interior.

At least the local spirit life seemed unruffled by the state of the place. Pneuma-somatic creatures treated Headly much the same as the rest of Sharrowford. A beefy thing like a gorilla made out of charred meat was busy climbing down the side of one of the towers, and a pack of wolfish ghoulish monsters lurked around the connecting alleyways, chased by and sometimes chasing a tentacled lurker with a trio of huge stalked eyes, which occasionally waved over the buildings.

We crossed the junction of pathways that marked the boundary between low-rise and the tower-blocks. I checked over my shoulder, as I had every couple of minutes since we'd stepped off the bus.

I did a double-take and shuffled to a halt, pulling on Raine's sleeve.

"Raine. Raine, she's stopped," I hissed.

"Tenny's stopped?" Raine looked back, as if she had any hope of seeing our invisible fourth companion.

Tenny had indeed stopped, right at the boundary between the towers and the rest of Headly council estate, with her deep-sea black eyes upturned to gaze at the top of the condemned tower. She kept putting one tarry-black foot forward and withdrawing it again, hesitant and uncertain, her lithe, androgynous form slowly shifting as if adjusting her footing before a sleeping predator. Her tentacles waved slowly, tasting the air.

After we'd returned from down south, Tenny had resumed her habit of following me to and from university, though only about half the time. She loved to explore everything we passed, fascinated by every little detail of the world – pavement, weeds, passing dogs, glass windows, campus carpet. If Lozzie had created her, I suppose she was indeed very young. Curious and innocent?

As we'd left the house this morning, she'd ambled out of the garden to accompany us, and Raine had decided her presence was a good idea. Just in case.

"I don't know why," I said. "She doesn't look comfortable with this."

Twil stopped a few paces on, frowning hard. "Your uh, weird tentacle thing? She gone all canary on us?"

"Don't say that. She's not a canary. And she's not a *thing*."

"What's she doing?" Raine asked softly.

I shook my head. "She's not blocked, there's no magical boundary here. She's just ... uncomfortable. Tenny?" I raised my voice very slightly, but she didn't respond.

"Can you ask her what's wrong?" Raine said.

"In public?" I pulled a face. "Here?"

"Not like you'll be out of place," Twil laughed.

"I don't know." I felt hot under the collar, increasingly concerned, but unwilling to talk to the air in the middle of Headly council estate. Tenny just kept staring up at the tower.

"This might be important," Raine said. "Please, Heather, for me?"

I glanced around, biting my lip and weighing my options. I didn't like this one bit, but Raine was right, and I suppose I could make it look like I was talking to her. I nodded, swallowed my pride, and

walked back to Tenny. Raine stuck to me like glue and Twil trailed along, both of them looking suitably dangerous and performatively combative.

“Tenny?” I said her name again, voice soft, as I reached out and concentrated on the act of touching one of her tentacles. The pneuma-somatic flesh went right through my glove, but I caught the appendage in my hand, smooth and oddly warm, and I held her softly. “Tenny, what’s wrong? Why don’t you want to come with us?”

Her reply came in that low, bubbling mud-voice, inhuman words at first, filtered into comprehension in the back of my head.

“ – too big too big swallow me whole.”

“The tower?” I whispered, glancing up at the concrete spar.

“Big and dark and a big mouth to swallow me whole,” she said, and I got the distinct impression she was talking to herself.

“We’re not going to that one,” I whispered to her. “It’s condemned, nobody goes there. We’re going to the other one. Tenny, over there.” I tried to point for her, show her the way with her own tentacle. She came around slowly, as if taking a risk by looking away from the condemned building.

“She doesn’t like Glasswick?” Raine asked. I shrugged.

“Don’t blame her for that, s’a shithole,” Twil said.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” I said, mouth dry. “Why would she react this way?”

“You know why it was condemned, right?” Twil asked. I shook my head. “There was a triple-murder up there, years and years ago, like 2003 or 2004 or something. Guy went door to door with a knife and stabbed anybody who answered, but it turned out he was actually killing people who’d got his wife addicted to heroin, plus a bystander. Straw that broke the camel’s back, lots of people moved out after. Maybe she’s picking up on bad vibes, bad history?”

Raine nodded. “Bad vibes, perhaps.”

“Bad vibes. Right.” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“We’ll stay on our toes,” Raine said, deadly serious. “If she freaks out again, the smallest twitch, you call stop and we stop, no

questions. Got it?”

I nodded. “It’ll have to do.”

Tenny seemed less agitated now. When I let go of her tentacle, she followed us once more, all the way up to the shared entranceway of Gleaston Tower.

We stood around for a minute or two. Raine kept up a steam of chatter as we waited for a resident to open the door so we could tailgate in behind, but when none appeared, Raine casually palmed a screwdriver from inside her jacket.

My nerves shot through the roof, butterflies in my stomach. This was it, we were on the cusp of doing something very illegal indeed.

To my surprise I was deeply excited. A small part of me screamed about how I was meant to be a good girl, a good citizen, and good people didn’t break into tower blocks they didn’t live in.

I counted my blessings, and reminded myself I had committed murder. Not such a good girl anymore, and never innocent.

Raine jammed the screwdriver into the gap between door and frame, blocking the action with her back. She jerked it up and down, then swung the door wide for Twil and I. We hurried inside, out of the winter cold and into the entranceway, all sticky laminated flooring and stippled plaster walls. Tenny crept in last, slipping inside as Raine let the door swing closed.

Wide staircases led upward into the tower on our left and right. A bank of four lifts stood at the far end of the room, their call buttons glowing noxious green. Everything reeked of that unique damp concrete scent, with hint of wet dog and tobacco smoke. I wrinkled my nose, feeling delicate.

“Right, you’ve got a decision to make,” Raine said, rubbing her hands together.

“Me?”

“Unfortunately, yeah.” She winced in apology. “I forgot about this part.”

“This place stinks, ugh,” Twil grimaced.

“S’not that bad. Bit of local colour,” Raine said, then caught my eye again. “Kimberly’s flat is fourteen stories up. Twil and I can manage

the stairs, I've done it before, but I don't want to force you into a long climb without warning you first. It's a long way up, your legs are gonna get tired."

"Why can't we take the lifts?"

"We can, but they all stink of piss." Raine shrugged.

"Ugh, count me out, fuck it, I'll climb," Twil grunted. "Floor fourteen, right?"

"There is a third option," Raine said. I detected the hint of a smirk. "I could carry you most of the way up."

I sighed and closed my eyes for a moment. Raine was being completely serious. "While I do adore your efforts to spare me life's little indignities, I am a big girl and I can hold my nose for two minutes. We'll take the lift."

Raine laughed softly and nodded. "Right you are then."

Twil pulled another grimace. "Wouldn't even touch the call button if I was you. See you two up there, then? Hey, you wanna have a race? I reckon I can beat the lift." She broke into a toothy smile and bounced on the spot, limbering up.

"Fourteen stories?" Raine almost purred, low and mocking. "No way. Not even you, lassie."

"Sure I can. S'easy." Twil winked at her, then at me. "What do you think, Heather?"

"I think this neither the time nor place," I muttered, covering for how attractive I found this sudden competitive clash.

"You're on," Raine said. "Loser buys lunch?"

"Threetwoonego!" Twil barked, laughed, and sprinted off in a dead run straight up the stairs, coat flapping behind her, feet slapping against the concrete steps. I swear I heard her bounce off a wall, an animal grunt of effort echoing down the stairwell.

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Knock knock knock.

No answer.

Raine rapped her knuckles against the front door of number 62,

Gleaston Tower, Kimberly Kemp's tiny flat. The sound echoed down the dingy tile-and-concrete corridor, lost around the sharp turn under the buzzing strip-lights. Twil leaned in close, listening for movement inside. I bit my bottom lip a little too hard, nerves churning in the pit of my stomach.

"Nothing?" Raine mouthed to Twil. The werewolf shook her head.

Raine knocked again, and called through the door. "Kim, it's me, alright? I'm worried about you, yeah?"

"Won't-" I hissed, then bit my lip again as Raine put a finger to hers. "Won't somebody hear us?" I whispered.

Twil shrugged. "Nobody cares. And nobody's doing bugger all in there, not that I can hear."

Raine straightened up and slid a little folded sheath of plastic from her pocket. "Alright. We go through with the plan."

Twil had won the race, met us on floor fourteen as the lift doors had opened, grinning from ear to ear and puffing for breath after a dead sprint up all those flights of stairs. Raine had insisted her victory didn't count, as not only had we waited for the lift, but I'd made Raine hold the doors until Tenny joined us, tentacles crammed inside. Twil had laughed and punched Raine in the shoulder, demanding her prize.

Our shared mirth died off quickly. Raine led us into the bowels of Gleaston Tower, down the narrow connecting corridors between the flats. A few spirits lurked here and there, but nothing out of the ordinary. We'd passed only one other person, a young mother pushing a buggy toward the lifts, who'd pretended not to see us. Did we really look that dangerous?

I suppose we were.

Raine unrolled the plastic sheath and extracted a pair of slender steel tools. My heart climbed into my throat. She knelt in front of the door's lock and set to work, tongue in the corner of her lips, eyes staring at nothing as she felt for the resistance of the pins inside the mechanism. Her fingers moved with such delicate care.

"Never knew you could pick locks," Twil said.

"I can do a lot of things," Raine muttered, distracted. "Fruit of a misspent youth."

She squinted in concentration, grunted “there we go”, then used the thicker of the two tools to turn the lock. A solid click sounded from within the door. Raine hopped up, slid the lock-pick away, and tried the handle – very, very carefully.

The door opened an inch, hinges silent.

“You’re up.” Raine nodded to Twil. “Heather, you stick behind me, okay?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak without squeaking. To my surprise, Tenny was sticking behind *me*, as if I offered any protection whatsoever. She peered over my shoulder, stray tentacles drifting in my peripheral vision.

Twil eased the door wide and crept into the flat.

Raine followed, every muscle tensed and ready, one hand inside her jacket, with me in her wake.

The next few moments felt both a tense violation of social norms, and somehow farcical.

Kimberly Kemp’s flat was neither large enough nor spooky enough to warrant this kind of treatment. Small, cramped, but nicer than my old bedsit, it consisted of a very short tile entranceway – enough to spare the carpet from one’s shoes – a tiny combined kitchen and sitting room, and two doors which presumably led off to the bedroom and bathroom, the former of which was wide open on an unmade bed and some discarded clothes.

Twil’s shoulders hunched like a wary hound. She paused every pace to sniff the air, stepping into the open area of the sitting room and eyeing the doors to bedroom and bathroom.

“Knock knock,” Twil said out loud. “Anybody home?”

“Heather, close the front door behind us, please,” Raine hissed, so soft but so loud in the silence. Hands fumbling, I pushed the door shut with a resounding click, and winced.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“S’fine,” Twil said, straightening up. “There’s nobody in here.”

Tenny slid past me, investigating the kitchen space, tentacles running over the cheap heating rings and ancient dishwasher, before she lost interest and circled around Twil.

“Can you smell her?” Raine asked, voice still soft. “Smell when Kim was last here?”

Twil gave Raine an unimpressed frown. “Of course I can smell her, she lives here, you twat. She’s not a cat, and neither am I. S’not like I can tell when she last rubbed her scent on everything, can I?”

Raine shrugged an apology and moved forward into the room as well. She craned around without approaching the bedroom, trying to see inside, then slid forward and poked her head through.

“Nobody here. What about the bathroom?”

“I don’t hear nothing,” Twil said. “Lemme guess, you want me to go first?”

I followed them into the sitting room area. I didn’t find it too difficult to calm my racing heart; the decor subdued my nerves.

Kimberly had spent a lot of effort making her little flat comfy and welcoming, though I was less sure about her taste. Besides a beanbag chair and a small television with a battered video game console plugged into it, the place was done up like a new age grotto. The walls sported hanging posters of majestic looking wolves in suitably fantastical forests and mountains, and a few fancy coloured crystals decorated a bookshelf, accompanied by a tacky statue of a rearing dragon.

Of the books themselves, I recognised a few titles from the fake collection of occult junk in the Medieval Metaphysics room — volumes with silver pentagrams on the front, written by people with pen names like ‘Sky Raven’ and ‘Coven Mistress Dahlia’. Through Kimberly’s open bedroom door I spied a huge poster of a rainbow-clad unicorn, in pride of place above her bed.

It would almost be sweet – if I hadn’t seen her commanding those zombies for the cult. I had to remind myself of what she’d been involved in.

A smoky, musky scent seemed baked into the air. I wrinkled my nose, sniffing.

“You smell that too, huh?” Twil asked with a wry smirk.

“What it is? I think I recognise it, but I’m not sure.”

“Weed, lots of it,” Raine announced. She pointed toward the low table in the centre of the room, the sort you’re meant to kneel at,

complete with a few purple cushions and a blanket. Alongside a licked-clean microwave meal box, the table held a plastic bag full of dried green plant matter, a tab of roll-up papers, and a bag of cigarette filters. Two completed blunts lay on a small plate. "She was toking up last time I visited, didn't think anything of it."

"Oh, cannabis?" I blinked at the stuff on the table. This was out of my depth.

"Hey, hey, wait a sec," Twil frowned at the drugs, shaking her head. "Nobody'd leave that much weed behind. Maybe she-"

Scratch-scratch. Ka-thunk.

We all froze. My heart leapt into my mouth. Twil flexed claws instead of fingers, and Raine pulled a familiar black metal truncheon from inside her jacket, span it in one hand.

That sound had come from the bathroom. A pair of feet kicking across a tiled floor and knocking an object over.

"Kim?" Raine called. "It's me. Is that you in there? You need to say something, right now, 'cos we don't know-"

The bathroom door burst open.

Kimberly Kemp, wide-eyed and screaming, lurched at us with a knife in her hand.

Of course, in the panic and terror of the moment, I wasn't able to piece that together anywhere near as neatly, especially as Raine grabbed me first and shoved me clear. All I knew for several pounding heartbeats was adrenaline and fight-or-flight response, my own back against the wall, Tenny rearing up in front of me at the perceived threat, Twil and Raine both shouting.

For a split-second, amid the confusion, I saw Kimberly's face – and I knew we'd gotten this all wrong.

She was more terrified than I'd ever seen a human being. Except for myself.

Eyes wide, bloodshot and red-rimmed, ringed with heavy dark circles of exhaustion, shaking like a leaf, Kimberly Kemp didn't really see us. She saw whatever she'd expected to break into her apartment, whatever she'd spent the last week hiding from.

"Stop, stop!" I shouted.

She lashed out with a half-blunt kitchen knife, to ward us off. Raine must have understood what I meant, because she tried to backpedal, the nightstick a poor defence against a manic blade if one wasn't willing to cripple or kill — but Raine didn't want to let her at me. The space was too cramped, too tight, Kimberly too wild, lost inside her own head, not really aiming for any of us. Raine raised one arm as the knife came down, to take the blade on the leather, to take the strike instead of me.

Twil caught the knife.

With her hand, point-first, right through her palm.

Metal through meat; the sound turned my stomach. I yelped, a hand to my mouth.

“Fuck!” Twil howled in pain, ripped the knife out of Kimberly's grip, and shoved her so hard that Kimberly stumbled into the wall and sat down in a heap. “Fucking shit, fuck fuck fucking ow fuck!”

Bleeding all over the carpet, knife stabbed halfway through her hand like a Halloween prop, Twil filled the apartment with some of the loudest swearing I'd ever heard.

“I-I didn't-” Kimberly blinked and stammered, trying to scramble back up to her feet. “Don't- don't hurt-”

Raine was on Kimberly in a split-second, shoving her onto the carpet, face down, a knee on her back, wrists pinned. The woman was shaking and crying, eyes whirling between us. She saw me and stopped, stared. I hiccuped, at a total loss.

“Don't don't don't no no no-” she blubbered, trying to kick herself free. Raine trod on her ankle.

“Stay down,” Raine snapped.

“I- ... I-I ... unnh- uuh-” Kimberly whimpered through her teeth.

“We're not going to hurt you,” I said, as loud and clear as I could make myself, voice shaking with adrenaline shock. Gently I took one of Tenny's tentacles and encouraged her to stand down, to stop waving them like an enraged octopus. “Kimberly. *Kimberly*. We're not going to hurt you. Do you understand?”

She panted, staring at me, eyes puffy, but I think I got through to her.

“Speak for yourself,” Twil growled. “Fucking bitch oh motherfucker this hurts, holy shit, fucking cunt arse fuck *shit*.” She screwed her eyes shut and grit her teeth, letting out a long grunt from deep in her throat. “Uuurrrghhh, fuck. Goddamn, fuck knives. Fucking shit.”

“Twil, you good?” Raine asked.

“Do I look fucking good?” Twil almost roared back at her. “Fuck. You got her under control now or what?” Twil didn’t wait for an answer. She stomped over to the little kitchen and held her bleeding hand over the sink. “Uuurggh, I gotta pull this fucking bitch out now. Fuck me.”

“Then do it,” I snapped. “Or ask for help.”

Twil scowled and growled at me, but I’d hit the right nerve – pride. She pulled a savage, pain-filled grin and yanked the knife free, howling through clenched teeth. The blade clattered into the sink, followed by a thick flow of Twil’s blood. She clenched and unclenched her fist, accelerated werewolf healing already sucking the wound shut. “Never had a fucking knife in my hand before. Fuck.”

“Thanks for the assist, yeah?” Raine called to her. “I mean it.”

“I didn’t mean-” Kimberly blubbered. “I didn’t- I- but you sent- I-”

“Kimberly,” I said, struggling to keep all these spinning plates from crashing down. “Please stop trying to explain yourself. I’m sure you have a good reason.”

“She fucking better,” Twil grunted.

“Okay, let’s all slow way, way down. Okay? First off, Heather, you okay?” Raine said, her voice pitched low and gentle. That tone did more than all of my words could. I nodded, and she turned back to Kimberly. “Kim, I’m gonna take my knee off your back now, and you’re not gonna attack us again, right? Can you promise me you’re going to sit up, nice and gentle?”

“Yes, yes, I- yes. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, sorry-” she hiccuped, still crying in fear. “Sorry, I’m *sorry*.”

Raine let off, slowly. Kimberly sat up and scrambled against the wall, still panting, staring at us, making herself as small as possible. Small and mousy, auburn hair sweat-matted, dressed in unicorn-

pattern pajama bottoms and an over-sized pastel pink tshirt with a cartoon dragon on the front. She looked rough, older than she really was, a lost soul at the end of her rope. She met my eyes again and stared, utterly terrified of me.

"There's no need to apologise," I said.

"Yes there fucking is!" Twil snapped from behind me. "To me, for that!"

"I'm sorry!" Kimberly blurted out. "I thought you were Stack, I thought she'd come back again- I-"

"Amy Stack?" Raine asked gently. "From the cult?"

"The bald bitch?" Twil asked.

"Mm." Kimberly nodded, frantic. "Yes, yes, her."

"I called through the door," Raine said. She stayed crouched, at eye level with Kimberly, watching her carefully. "Why would you think I was Amy Stack?"

Kimberly blinked at her. "But- because- she was here. She was-"

"She came here?" Raine shared a look with me. A cold hand trailed down my spine, and suddenly I didn't blame Kimberly for locking herself away all week. Stack terrified me. "Why didn't you call me? I told you we'd handle it if they contacted you again. You must have heard it was us out here, why come at me with a knife?"

Kimberly stared between us, frozen for a moment, as if we should already know this.

Or as if we were trying to catch her out with a trick question.

"It's okay," I said. She glanced at me, and I decided to gamble, play the part she might need. She'd been in Alexander's cult, easily led and easily dominated. Perhaps she needed a firm hand, a commanding voice telling her what to do. I put on the best Evelyn impression I could muster, still shaky inside. "I'm in charge here. You know who I am, and what I do – what I can do, and I'm not going to hurt you, and neither is Twil."

"Oi!" Twil snapped.

"*And neither is Twil,*" I repeated, forcing a hard bite into my voice. I winced inside, I'd need to apologise for that one later. "What did

Amy Stack want with you, and why did you attack us? I promise, I don't already know. None of us do. I'm not trying to gaslight you, or toy with you. Please."

Kimberly shook her head at me. "H-how can you not know? She was here for- on Saturday, last Saturday, she was looking for Lauren. I-I made a mistake, I wanted to- she must have seen me me go-"

A cold fist slid into my gut. A high-pitched sound rang on the edge of my hearing.

"... Lauren?" I heard myself ask.

"Lauren Lilburne. Uh, Lozzie. You sent her here, right? She's with you lot now, isn't she? I d-don't know what you did to her, b-but it's none of my business, it's okay, I don't care, please don't-"

"*When?*" I demanded. Kimberly flinched.

"W-what?"

"Heather," Raine murmured, and stood up, one hand on my shoulder. She squeezed, but I felt nothing.

"Lozzie," I repeated. "When was she here?"

"L-last Friday. I thought- I thought she was with you. I thought that was your message, how she'd been, um, *changed*." Kimberly rushed to explain herself, running over her own words, but I soaked up everything she said, my mind racing at a thousand miles an hour. "I let her in b-but I was too scared to ask her anything, I'm sorry, I should have- I thought you were showing me what you'd done to her. Like a ... a t-threat."

"Lauren Lilburne is my friend," I managed, going numb all over. "I'd never- never do anything bad to her."

Twil snorted, a humourless laugh. She didn't know. "Yeah, fuck off, we don't do that kinda thing. You're too used to your cult freaks. I don't get it, so Lozzie was here? So what? I thought she was like, 'outside' right now?"

"She was," I murmured.

My blood ran so very cold.

and less pleasant places –

6.4

Numb.

A weight pressing down on my chest.

Hands quivering, a high pitched ringing in my ears. Ashes in my mouth; the taste of inevitability.

Raine and Twil both spoke, but they sounded so far away, as if I was underwater. I screwed my eyes shut, and when I opened them again I realised I was staring right through Kimberly, still cowering on her sitting room floor.

“When Lozzie was here-”

Kimberly flinched at the sound of my voice – stretched tight, to breaking point. I struggled to focus.

“When Lozzie was here, you saw her- was she- she was ... ”

“Y-yes?” Kimberly squeaked, so eager to please.

I squeezed my hands into fists, digging fingernails into my palms. Must stop shaking. My head swam, hot panic forcing its way up my throat. Too many questions, and I already knew the answers. Nowhere to go. Nothing I could do. I felt so helpless, a wave of strangled frustration super-heating itself into black despair.

“Heather, hey,” Raine murmured, squeezing my shoulders, trying to catch my eye. “None of this means a thing yet. We all need to slow down and figure this out, okay?”

“What did she do? What did she look like?” I snapped at Kimberly, too hard, enough to make her start in fear again. “Was it really her? Was it *her*?”

“Heather.” Raine put a firm hand on the back of my neck, fingers in my hair. “Hey, look at me.”

“Don’t you understand?” I whirled on her. “If Lozzie was here, that means-” I stopped short, as if giving voice to my horrified deduction

would make it true. I rounded on Kimberly again. “What did she look like? *Exactly*, what did she look like?”

“Like, um ... I-I don’t-” She raised her hands to ward me off. “Please don’t be angry-”

“Did she look like herself? Like the Lozzie you knew?”

Slowly, hesitating, eyes locked on mine, Kimberly shook her head.

“Did she ... ” I could barely squeeze the words out. “Like something was pulling her around, like a puppet??”

Kimberly bit her lower lip and glanced at Raine, who graced her with a reassuring nod. “It’s okay, you can answer. Nobody’s angry with you.”

“T-that’s a pretty good way of putting it, yes.”

I shook off Raine’s grip, suddenly claustrophobic and constricted, too hot in my scarf and coat. I pulled them away from my throat. Breathing too fast, almost hyperventilating. Needed more air, couldn’t breathe, had to take action, had to do *something*. I cast around the room for a handhold, anything at all, my eyes glazing across Twil still at the sink, staring at me, Raine speaking, her words lost to the ringing in my ears, Tenny waving her bunched tentacles, agitated by my panic.

“Lozzie, what have you done to yourself?” I whined, and bit down on my lips to still my voice.

“Heather, hey, hey.” Raine tried to catch my frantic hands as I tugged at my scarf. “Heather, slow down, breathe. You’re having a panic attack.”

“A justified one!” I snapped at her.

“Uh, did I miss part of this?” Twil asked, wide eyed, still flexing her blood-smeared hand to shake off the remains of the knife-wound.

“Could say that, yeah,” Raine answered.

I turned on Twil. “Can you smell if Lozzie was in here? You can do that, can’t you? If she was here a week ago you must be able to pick up her scent. Was she here?”

“Uhhhhhhh.” Twil stared at me, frozen, balanced on eggshells.

“Was she here? Twil, please, please try.”

“Heather, Heather look at me,” Raine said, soft and coaxing, but I couldn’t, I couldn’t think of anything else right now. If Lozzie had been here, then I was right, and Evelyn was wrong.

Twil made a show of sniffing the air, then shrugged, still frowning at me like I was an explosive pressure-plate. “Kinda hard to tell with all the ganja smell, and it was a week ago, yeah?”

“Then she wasn’t? It wasn’t really her?”

Later I felt awful for putting Twil on the spot like that, subjecting her to my wild demands. Desperate for the slimmest handhold, I pleaded for her sense of smell to prove my worst fears incorrect.

“I uh, I dunno. I never knew her for long, not enough to learn her scent proper.” Twil pulled a pained grimace. “Look, I can’t smell Lozzie, so maybe it wasn’t her?”

“I’m not lying!” Kimberly almost shouted. “I’m not lying, I promise, I wouldn’t lie to you. I promise, promise. N-not lying.”

“Nobody’s accusing anybody of lying,” Raine said, and finally grabbed me by the wrists, holding my hands down. “Heather, *look at me.*”

She used her voice like a steel whip, the kind she never directed at me, enough to make me flinch and obey from sheer shock. I blinked back at her, almost panting.

“Heather, breathe,” she said, soft and serious. “Focus on breathing. You’re in the middle of a panic attack, okay? Just breathe with me, in and out. Slow right down, yeah?”

“Raine,” I whined. “What if I saw the real Lozzie, Outside? What if it was her? What else can teleport between dimensions except her and I? If she was here, if what I saw Outside was here, it must really be her.”

“Then right now Lozzie might need you, and she needs you to be thinking clearly. I know how much she means to you. We will find her, I promise.”

I shook my head. “More than that. It’s more than that. I-I can’t put it into words.”

“I know,” Raine murmured.

And in that moment, staring back at her boundless confidence, she made me believe she knew all my fears, the ones I couldn't voice, the terror of leaving myself behind. For a moment, she made me believe, and it worked.

I knew she didn't, not really. But it did work.

"Take a deep breath, Heather. Do it now, okay? Just one, for me, come on."

I nodded, managed to suck down a deep breath, and another, and another, slowing, steadying. The numb, hot panic began to ebb away. I nodded again, tried to still myself. "I have to do something. I have to find her."

"We will. But first, let's get some information, okay?" Raine cracked a smile for me. "Look before you leap isn't exactly my style, I know, but I think this is your show now."

I managed another nod.

"Hey, don't look at me," Twil said, and I turned to see she was addressing Kimberly with a shrug. "I don't know what this is about either. Second time they've pulled this on me, I'm in the dark here." She gave us both an unimpressed look.

"I'll tell you, but first I really must sit down," I said.

Raine raised her eyebrows and pointed a thumb at the kitchen. "Cup of tea, anybody?"

= =

Not the most relaxing cup of tea I'd ever had, but it did the job.

Kimberly needed that space and time as much as I did, to calm down, and it provided a good excuse for us to all sit around the little floor-height table and pretend, if only for a couple of minutes, that we were normal people. A group of young women visiting a friend on a Sunday lunchtime, for a chat and a cup of tea.

The truth sounded like the setup to a bad joke: a sociopath, a werewolf, and a mathematician all prepare to interrogate a necromancer.

None of us expected to laugh at the punchline.

Raine made the tea, not Kimberly, who seemed to require every last

scrap of courage to merely sit cross-legged at her own table without bolting, though some of that may have been embarrassment at the rather sad state of her kitchen. She only owned two mugs, one of which was badly chipped, so instead I was allotted a measuring jug, and Raine was going to drink out of a cereal bowl.

The waiting was so awkward that – perhaps paradoxically – it helped me calm down further.

Twil stared at Kimberly, grudge written on her face, and Kimberly stared at the tabletop, frozen in fear. Now that Kimberly was no longer waving a knife around, Tenny had decided she approved, and stopped trying to interpose herself between us, wandering off to run her sticky black tentacles over the contents of Kimberly's flat. I thought it better not to mention Tenny, and I could have stayed quiet while Raine took thirty seconds to brew the tea, but my frayed nerves couldn't take the tension in Twil's omni-directional scowl.

"Twil," I said. "You're death-glaring. Stop it."

"Uh huh, am I?" Twil grunted, not looking away from poor Kimberly. She slapped her hand on the table, palm up, flexing the fingers and wincing through clenched teeth. "Still stings like a bitch, you know?"

Her palm was blemishless. Werewolf healing had sealed it up already.

I rolled my eyes. Panic had turned to exasperation – we had more important matters to deal with.

"Hey, so, Kim," Raine piped up from over in the little kitchen.

Kimberly flinched, eyes jerking up as if to obey an order. "Yes? Yes?"

"If you don't remember names, here's some for you," Raine said, as she filled the mugs and substitute-mugs with hot water over teabags. "The very pretty short one to your left is Heather – she's kind of in charge, so listen to what she says – and the one with a face like a smacked arse, that's Twil."

"Oi!" Twil twisted and barked at her. She waved her hand in the air. "I got fucking stabbed here."

"So you're going to sulk, like a big baby?" I asked. Twil boggled at

me. "You're invincible. I assumed you caught the knife on purpose, to spare Raine's arm."

"Well, yeah! But it still bloody well hurt."

"I am so very sorry," Kimberly said.

We all paused at Kimberly's quivering apology. In the moment's silence that followed, I looked at her – really looked at her, for the first time.

She was a wreck, much worse than the scared woman I recalled from the aftermath of the cult's pocket dimension. Her clothes were clean enough – and actually quite cute, between the unicorn print pajamas and the bubbly, goofy cartoon dragon on her tshirt – but Kimberly herself looked far from healthy or whole.

Her face was pale and drawn, gaze downcast, eyes ringed by dark circles of exhaustion. She'd been chewing and biting her lips, mangling her own flesh in a nervous tic that must have been going on for weeks, spotted with dried blood and half-healed cracks. An irritated scab had formed on the side of her neck, from incessant scratching, and her chin was bruised where Raine had thumped her to the floor. I had the distinct impression her auburn hair was naturally much brighter, as if the colour had been leached from her.

She looked weary – a weariness that even adrenaline couldn't shake.

I'd know that look anywhere. Here was a woman who hadn't slept properly in a long time.

Had we done this to her, or was this the backlash from her own memories, payback for being part of what I'd witnessed in the cavern beneath the cult's castle? My heart went out to her, but I hardened it a little, on purpose. Lozzie had vouched that Kimberly had never killed anybody, but that was all.

"Yeah, bloody right you should be sorry, you-" Twil barked.

Kimberly shuffled back from the table. At first I thought she was retreating from Twil's shout, but then, shaking like a leaf, hands clasped tight in her lap, she bowed her head until her face was level with the floor.

"... you ... should ... uh, hey, don't- uh-" Twil trailed off, frowning. "What are you doing?"

"I apologise for harming you, and I'm very sorry for attacking you all. I am very s-sorry." She swallowed, her effort not quite enough to keep her voice steady. "Please accept my apology. I'm not worthy, and I'm not import-"

"Stop, stop. Bloody hell." Twil squinted at her in horror. "Don't do that, just say sorry. You don't have to grovel."

Kimberly didn't move. She stared at the floor.

I think I was beginning to understand her. Perhaps she didn't deserve my heart to be quite so hard.

"It's alright, you can sit up," I murmured to her. "You don't have to treat us like that, we're not like the Sharrowford Cult. Your apology is accepted. Isn't it, Twil?"

"Eh? Oh, uh, yeah. Sure. As long as you don't do it again."

Kimberly still didn't move a muscle, except a hesitant glance at me from the corner of her eye.

"Kimberly, sit up," I ordered.

She stayed frozen for another moment, then slowly straightened up, blinking at us like a cornered animal.

"Look, no harm done, yeah?" Twil smiled and held up her hand, flexed her fingers like claws. "S'already healed, just like that. Cool huh? Bet you wish you could do that."

Kimberly nodded. "M-most impressive."

Raine bustled over with the tea, clacking mugs and substitutes down on the table, settling herself on her knees across from me. Twil gulped the stuff down like it wasn't piping hot, and Kimberly seemed to rejuvenate slightly after a sip or two. She began to breathe a little steadier. I forced myself to drink, still flushed and unsteady from the panic attack, still trying to distract myself from the million questions and gut-wrenching worries, still a useless lump without a way to help my friend.

"Ahhh," Raine sighed, big smile on her face. "There, isn't that better? Nice and civilised now. Best thing about a brew."

I nodded, not trusting myself to answer properly, and focused on another sip of tea.

“So what’s all this about Lozzie, then?” Twil asked, first me, then Raine. “Is this another one of Evelyn’s big secrets?”

Raine shook her head. “Bit complex. Heather’s seen her, that’s all, or something pretending to be her.”

“Yeah, I kinda followed that part, I think.”

I took a deep breath, trying not to let the panic back in. “Outside,” I said. “I saw her Outside. And she was all wrong. Not herself.”

Twil’s eyebrows climbed. She stared at me in exactly the way I didn’t want to be stared at. “Right. Right then.”

“We don’t know it was really her,” Raine added, for my sake – but it had the opposite effect.

“If she was here as well, that means it’s the same thing I saw Outside,” I snapped, then shuddered as I forced a deep breath. “That means it’s Lozzie. Don’t treat me like a child, Raine. I can deal with this.”

“I’m serious,” Raine said, and I could see she was. “We don’t know it’s really her.”

I had to avert my eyes. My panic had transmuted into anger – a determination to do something. But there was nothing I could do. Hard but brittle, determined but rudderless.

I’d suffered a panic attack once before, in the bath after the failed kidnapping attempt, and I remembered it all too well. The shaking, the replaying memory, the shortness of breath. I knew it didn’t mean I was a coward – though I was, for other reasons – it was a physical response that I had no control over. But this time was different, nothing had happened to me, no bottled trauma bursting forth.

I felt utterly useless.

Useless.

Turned out I was more similar to Raine than I’d always assumed. I’d learnt that over the past few months; to my enduring surprise, I could be good in a crisis – but only when a clear action presented itself. A person to flee from, or run to, a foe to defeat, a friend to save.

But what could I do here, now, for Lozzie?

Nothing. I didn't even know how to locate her. She was out there somewhere, in God alone knows what state, maybe even worse than dead, and I was sitting in a nice warm room having a cup of tea. I cursed myself for a fool. Perhaps I didn't care enough, perhaps that was the truth; Lozzie was a stand-in for Maisie, or for myself, and I was terrible. Half a person, and a bad friend.

I had to find her – how?

“You're the ... ” Kimberly murmured, interrupting my rousing self-hate session. She took another sip of tea to steady herself, and addressed Twil again. “Please excuse me for using a crude term. You're the Brinkwood ... w-werewolf, aren't you?”

Twil grinned like a cat that got the cream. Kimberly was about to stammer out another apology.

“Your reputation proceeds you,” I said. “Lucky you, Twil.”

“Haha!” Twil barked with laughter. “Yeah, you know it. That would be me, yeah. Your lot – sorry, former lot – knew all about me, huh?”

“You did come up in conversation several times.” Kimberly swallowed before adding: “As a person to be wary of.”

“Rarr.” Twil made a silly monster noise and mock-menaced with her hands, laughing. Kimberly managed to pull a very, very hesitant smile.

“Twil's a huge numpty, she's not scary at all,” Raine said. “And neither is Heather,” she added before Twil could launch off on one at her. “We're all friends here now, right?”

“I'm not a numpty, you dick,” Twil muttered.

“... sure,” Kimberly said, and I saw her throat bob as she swallowed. “Friends.”

“Raine.” I sighed. “Couldn't you phrase that in a way which doesn't make you sound like a mafia enforcer?”

“Ah?” Raine laughed. “I'm serious though. We're taking it nice and slow, having a cup of tea, all friends now.”

“Kim, can I call you Kim?” I asked, and Kimberly nodded hesitantly. “Raine is incredibly stupid sometimes too, and I'm sorry for how intimidating she can be. She didn't bother you the first two times

she came to visit, did she?"

Kimberly glanced at Raine from the corner of her eye, then shook her head. "Not at all, no, not at all. I understand you have to ... be sure of me. I just ... I just want out." Her carefully guarded front slipped, her face falling before she took a shaky breath and pulled herself back together. "I'm sorry. I understand."

"How's your chin feel, Kim?" Raine asked, and gestured a little too close to Kimberly's chin with her bowl of tea. "Bumped you pretty bad there, sorry about that."

"Oh, um." Kimberly probed the bruise on her chin, which was rapidly turning purple. She suppressed a wince. "No, no I'm fine. Thank you."

"Raine." I gave her a look. "I might not be able to speak your private language of subtle physical intimidation, but even I can read that. Stop it."

"Stop what?" Raine spread her hands. "Hey, I'm sorry, really."

"You didn't sound it."

"It's okay, I'm okay," Kimberly blurted out. "Really, I'm fine, please. Please don't ... don't ... don't fight."

Raine and I shared a glance, equally embarrassed. A lover's quarrel, at a time like this? I sighed.

"We're not," I said. "I'm scared for my friend, and it's making me irritable. I'm sorry too."

Kimberly stared at me, uncertain how to accept that apology.

"Shall we start at the beginning then?" Raine asked. "Take it in your own time, Kim, tell us what you saw."

"The beginning?"

Raine raised her eyebrows, then looked at me.

I did not feel in charge. I felt lost and useless – but I had to be strong, somehow. Marshalling my thoughts, I tried to start at the beginning.

"What time did Lozzie show up here?" I asked.

"Oh," Kimberly mouthed. "The ... beginning. Yes. Okay. Okay."

Kimberly's fragile composure came tumbling down. She opened her mouth, closed it again, swallowed very hard on a dry throat and took a long draft of tea, hand trembling. Nervously, she glanced at our faces, then pointed at her little plastic bag on the table, the one full of dried cannabis, next to the hand-rolled cigarettes on their protective plate.

"May I- I'm sorry, this is very difficult for me. Do you mind if I ... ?"

"You wanna toké up?" Raine asked. Twil snorted to herself.

Kimberly nodded, seemingly embarrassed. "It's the only thing that helps anymore."

"You can't sleep," I blurted out, a moment of true empathy.

Kimberly stared at me. "How did you know that?"

"It's sort of obvious. I'm not a mind reader or anything, don't worry. I know the feeling, that's all."

"Obvious, mm. You're right, I can't sleep, things keep running through my head. Things, um, all the time. I can't stop thinking about-" She came up short, lost and distracted. "I wish I could delete all memory of the last six months. I'm sorry. I-I don't want to be blowing smoke in your faces. I can go to the bathroom window, or something?"

"Is that when you joined the cult? Six months ago?" Raine asked. I heard a hint of cold in her voice, though I doubt any but me would have noticed.

Kimberly shook her head, hugging her arms around herself protectively. "No, no, that was earlier, last February, but it didn't get bad until I realised I couldn't leave. I-I can tell you all about it, if you like?"

"Lozzie first," I said, softly, and Kimberly nodded, resigning herself to the task.

"Well, I don't mind thirty minutes of second hand smoke," Raine said. "Any tobacco in that?"

"Oh, no, no."

"What about you two?" Raine asked Twil and I. Twil shrugged, and I shook my head, too focused on thoughts of Lozzie to care right now.

Kimberly bowed her head, muttered a thank you, and plucked one of the hand-rolled cannabis cigarettes from the little plate on the table. She dug around under the plastic bag full of weed and located a lighter, flicked the tiny flame on, and lit up.

She didn't smoke very much of the reefer – I've been informed by Raine that's the correct term – one short puff to start her off, then a long, deep drag which made the end of the roll-up glow like embers. Kimberly closed her eyes, held the smoke in her lungs, before carefully blowing it out the corner of her mouth, away from us. Still, the smoke filled the air with a heavy, musky scent.

Perhaps it was a placebo effect, but I swear I saw her muscles begin to relax, saw the tightness around her eyes let up, saw her become more human and less a terrified animal. She blinked several times and knuckled at her bleary eyes, then awkwardly offered the reefer to us.

"Would you like some?"

"Nah," Twil grunted.

"Oh, uh, thank you, but no." I shook my head. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"I would," Raine said, "but I gotta keep a clear head on my shoulders. Wouldn't wanna be all floppy if Stack turns up right now, would I?"

Kimberly's eyes widened at Stack's name. Suddenly her gaze flicked up, over Raine, toward her front door. "Did you lock the door? You did lock it, didn't you?"

"When I made the tea, yeah. Made sure. No worries."

Kimberly nodded. She took one more long drag, then put the cigarette out with great care, gently stubbing it on the little plate, then pinching the end with her fingers to make sure it had stopped burning.

"Better?" Raine asked.

"Getting there, yes, thank you," Kimberly closed her eyes again for a long moment, concentrating on the contents of her own head – and bloodstream, I assume. Raine and Twil shared a wry look, but the whole process had fascinated me, and I couldn't help but wonder what she felt like now, what kinds of pain the drug took

away from her. When she opened her eyes again she looked almost relaxed, and younger, her real age, less haggard and run-down.

“Your hair is longer than I remember,” she said to me, voice a little loose, and even managed a small smile. “Suits you.”

“Oh, um, thank you.”

That was the last thing I’d expected. Kimberly was right though, my hair was longer than on our first, brief meeting. My hair hadn’t seen scissors since I’d moved to Sharrowford, getting on for almost seven months now, the ends of my tresses well past the base of my neck. I hadn’t thought about that in months, until a random stoned compliment from a ex-cultist.

Raine laughed. “We’re onto the stoner talk already?”

“I’m sorry,” Kimberly blurted out. “It’s only to take the edge off.”

“Will you tell me about Lizzie now?” I asked. “Please.”

Kimberly nodded. “Are you going to help her? She’s a good kid, she never deserved any of this. I-it’s a good thing you killed her brother. I never thanked you for that. I should. I think.” She frowned to herself, suddenly lost in confused thought.

A lump formed in my throat. “I’m going to try. I have to find her first.”

“Start at the beginning,” Raine prompted softly. “What happened?”

Kimberly sniffed and stared at the extinguished blunt for a heartbeat. “She wouldn’t stop knocking.”

“... what?” I breathed.

“A knock on the door doesn’t happen much around here, not to me anyway. There’s only a few people who might knock on my front door, and the door frame won’t hold a chain properly, so I have to call out. You know, ‘who is it?’, and hope they don’t decide to break in.” She pulled a weird little smile. “That’s never happened before, by the way, so well done.”

“I didn’t break the lock,” Raine said gently. “Picked it. It’ll work fine.”

“So, I get home from my shift about half five last Thursday night, and then there’s this knock on my door. Right away, like somebody

had followed me up the stairs, right behind me. Only I hadn't seen a soul. I'm very careful. I have to be." Kimberly took another deep breath, hands gripping each other tight in her lap. "So I called out, but there wasn't any reply, just another knock. The first couple of times, I thought it was kids messing around, I thought they would run off when I came to the door. So I ... I-I stood there, to listen. And I heard this ... this *breathing*."

"Through the door?" Twil said. "S'pretty thick."

Kimberly nodded, shaking slightly. "I've seen some weird things, with the Brotherhood, things I don't want to think about again, and when I heard that breathing I knew something was standing out there, something that shouldn't be. Waiting for me to ... to ... I don't know, to stop paying attention, so it could hurt me."

"What made you feel that?" Raine asked. I couldn't say a thing, hanging on every word.

Kimberly shrugged. "Intuition? The breathing sounded wrong, like she couldn't pump the air in and out of her lungs properly."

"But you opened the door eventually, right?" Raine said.

Kimberly closed her eyes, radiating regret, before she nodded again. "I couldn't take it anymore. It was dark out, and getting late, and she kept waiting longer and longer between knocks, and then hammering on the door all at once. I figured if it was the Brotherhood, then they'd be more direct, so maybe it was a junkie or something, just somebody from the estate messing with me. Then I got this idea in my head, that maybe one of my thralls had survived, come back to me, just for somewhere to go."

"Thralls?" Twil squinted at her.

"She means zombies," Raine said.

"Zombies? Oh, oh, I suppose so, yes. That's a good word. Anyway, I thought maybe that wouldn't be so bad. I mean- I didn't want to think about them again, I-I'm never going to do it again, I swear, I swear to the Goddess. But ... at least I could put it to rest. I thought maybe I'd get it safely inside, then call you, maybe Saye could put it down. Send it back? I don't know how that part works. I was sure that's what it was, but I was just making myself feel better. I took a knife from the kitchen, hid it behind my back, just in case, and opened the door. And it was her."

Kimberly stared at nothing for a moment. The weed and the tea wasn't enough to hold back what she'd seen.

Lozzie, what had you done to yourself?

"Kim?" I almost couldn't whisper. "Please, I have to know. She's really important to me."

Kimberly swallowed and pulled herself together again. "Lauren-Lozzie, she wasn't herself. I'd know her anywhere, she was always so sweet to me. She tried to step inside. I didn't say a word to her, I couldn't, but I didn't want her to touch me, not the way she looked, so I just backed up and let her in. I wanted to scream. The knife, that was stupid, stupid, pointless."

"What did she look like?" I whispered.

"She just stepped inside and circled each of the rooms, it was so weird. Have you ever seen a cat in a new place?" Kimberly jerked round at us suddenly, eyes wide and blinking. "When they don't know where they are, they'll circle around the edge of the rooms. It was like that. Mapping? I don't know, I have no earthly idea what she was doing."

"Kim, please."

"She looked wrong, alright?" Kimberly blurted out. "Like you said before, like something else was pulling strings connected to her muscles. I think she was trying to smile at me, but Goddess, it didn't look like that, she couldn't pull the muscles right. She walked like a machine, all her parts wrong, and I was so afraid she was going to touch things, like my bed, and everything would be contaminated." Kimberly was tearing up, squeezing the words out. "I don't know why I felt that. She wasn't human anymore, but it wasn't like a thrall, it was something else and it was *filthy* and wrong and it wasn't supposed to be here."

"Filthy ..." I echoed, and let the word hang in the air, in my mind, the idea wrenching at the inside of my chest.

Raine reached across the table and took my hand, squeezed hard. "It wasn't her. Heather, we don't know if it was really her."

"She spoke," Kimberly said. "Once."

"She spoke?"

"If you could call it speaking. When she finished circling the rooms, she stood right there." Kimberly pointed at the middle of the floor, staring at me. "Her voice, it was like she couldn't inflect the words, didn't know how to say them. In a way, it wasn't her, you're right. It wasn't Lauren Lilburne at all. She said 'back to school', and then she left."

A moment of silence stretched out over the low table. Twil puffed a big sigh and muttered, "That's some creepy shit alright."

"Back to school?" I echoed. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know, I don't want to know," Kimberly said, burying her head in her arms. "I don't want to know any more about magic, I don't. It's not real, none of this. Please, I don't want to know."

'Back to school'. The phrase echoed inside me, down into the abyssal depths, until it found suitable material with which to resonate.

The Eye, the Eye's lessons – I'd never questioned before why I thought of them as *lessons*. Back to school? Had the Eye gotten to Lozzie somehow? Why would it? Why would it care about her? What did that mean?

What if it was directed at me?

A cry for help.

'Back to school'.

In the black silt-layer of my soul, I began to make a plan. I sent the first tentative mental probes down into that lightless abyss where I buried all those years of the Eye's lessons, where I tried not to think about them. The first tremors of nausea and the pinprick tingling of a headache reared up slowly, the heads of a watchful hydra, as I posed a question of all that inhuman knowledge: I had to find Lozzie – there had to be way. How?

My fingers strayed unconsciously to the Fractal on my left forearm, underneath my sleeve. Time to dredge the depths.

"What did Lozzie look like, other than the obvious and creepy part?" Raine asked.

"What?" Kimberly emerged from behind her arms.

"What was she wearing? Was she clean? Glowing blue and purple?"

Rainbow socks?”

“Oh, yes, that’s what surprised me. That’s why I thought she was with you, c-clean, I mean, not glowing or whatever. Taken care of, you know? I don’t remember what she was wearing. Uh, jeans, maybe? A coat? But she was clean. Hair was all brushed. She was even wearing shoes. That’s not like her.” Kimberly sniffed. “Do you mind if I smoke again?”

“Go right ahead,” Raine murmured, more concerned with me than Kimberly. She raised an eyebrow at me, a silent question.

I realised I was sweating, eyes scrunched tight, trying to hide the mad thing I was doing.

“I’m fine,” I lied, then forced a strained smile and a deep breath. “I’m just thinking.”

I wasn’t fine. Even the effort of defining the right question of the Eye’s lessons was enough to make me feel like vomiting. I had a map of the universe in my head – our reality, Outside, everywhere – and the tools to use it, but I could barely touch them without searing my mind with white-hot fire, let alone rummage through them for such a specific purpose.

“When she left, where did she go?” Raine was asking Kimberly. I squinted, trying to think of another way.

“I don’t know,” Kimberly said. “I didn’t follow her. Look, I know I’m falling apart, but I’m not crazy, I wouldn’t have followed her for anything. I locked the door and ... cleaned up, and then I hid, alright? In bed. Anyone would have.”

“Mm. Maybe.” Raine nodded, trying to keep it light. “Maybe I would have too. Still, you should have called me.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry.” Kimberly’s head twitched, on the verge of another scraping bow, but she caught herself at the last second. “Stack came the next morning, I-I couldn’t.”

Finding Lozzie with hyperdimensional mathematics would be the most complex thing I’d ever attempted. This was no bending or breaking of physical laws, no bullet-deflecting or teleporting a handful of dirt. This was metaphysical. How could I even specify her, define her? Her body? Her soul?

Did I have the mathematics to describe the human soul – a

particular human soul?

I winced. A spike of pain jabbed into the back of my skull, just from thinking of that idea. Too deep, too toxic, too dangerous. Perhaps I could find the correct equation to define the human soul, but I'd cook my brain long before I got there.

There must be another way.

"Did she leave anything behind?" I asked. The others all looked at me. I sniffed and wiped my forehead. "Lozzie, I mean. Did she leave anything behind?"

"No. No, nothing at all."

"Heather?" Raine asked.

"I'm fine," I lied again. "I'm just worried, and ... hungry. It's been a morning, hasn't it?"

"Why don't we all go out and get something to eat?" Raine asked, and nodded to Kimberly. "I'll treat you too, yeah?"

"Not yet. Let's finish this first," I said quickly. We couldn't leave the room now – I had an idea, and I needed to be in here for it to work, or so I thought.

Raine frowned at me. "Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

"I'm fine, Raine. What happened with Stack?" I asked Kimberly, to get the conversation moving again, to take everyone's attention off me. "She knocked on your door too?"

Kimberly nodded. "In the morning, at dawn. The knocking woke me, though I hadn't really slept. When I asked who it was, she said it was her, completely open. She said, uh, she said if I didn't open up, then she'd wait on the estate for me and find me when I came out and ... do things, to me. I believed her. She would. She would really do that. She asked the same things you did, about Lauren. And told me not to tell anybody else."

"Meaning us." Raine frowned.

"I-I didn't tell her I'm in contact with you, because she didn't ask. Believe me, please, if she had, I would have. She only cared about Lauren's visit, and then she left. Now she ... if she knows you came here ... I ... oh, Goddess, please, I don't want her to come back. She'll kill me, she'll really do it." Kimberly shook, barely able to

hold her reefer without dropping it. “The others, they’ll call me an apostate, be angry, but Stack, there’s nothing inside her.”

My mind was a million miles away, elbow-deep in the mud at the bottom of my soul. I tried to hide it, sit upright, hold back the mounting pain in my skull, resist the urge to clench up around my stomach.

An equation, wedded to the map, not to find Lozzie – but to find whatever was in this flat last Thursday night.

Time, that was definable, I could just about do that without being horribly sick everywhere. Space, well, I had that right in front of me, Kimberly’s cramped sitting room. All I had to do was rewind, track backwards, find that ‘Lozzie’ who was here and use her as a reference point.

So simple, put into words. Just like that, just rewind time inside my head, pinch the loose threads left behind by a passing entity and follow them to their current destination.

It was the most complex piece of hyperdimensional mathematics I’d ever attempted, and I couldn’t even touch each component as I prodded them into place. I’d put it together all at once, when it was ready – and try not to foul Kimberly’s carpet with the contents of my stomach. I glanced up, at her open bathroom door. Yes, I’d make it there in time, it was only a few paces. I’d apologise afterwards. I had to do this now. Lozzie needed me.

Raine leaned back, watching Kimberly’s face with shrewd attention. That’s the only reason she failed to notice what I was brewing. “We might be able to help with Stack, maybe, depending on ... well, you see, when you were trying to explain yourself to us earlier, Kim, you said that Stack must have seen you ‘go’.”

Kimberly blinked up at Raine, frozen for a second.

“Ahhh, what’s this?” Twil grinned. “Been up to no good again?”

Kimberly shook her head. “No, no, I-”

“Go where?” Raine asked, low and gentle – and then happened to glance at me. “Heather? *Heather?*”

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Twil asked.

“Oh,” Kimberly mouthed, and scooted back from me.

I felt a bead of blood leak from my nose and trickle down to my lips. I couldn't speak.

"Heather, what's-" Raine's eyes went wide – she knew what this looked like, by now. "What are you doing?"

"Fi-finding- Lozzie," I squeaked.

"Heather, woah, woah, stop!" Raine reached for me. I rocked backward, away from her. All I needed was another few seconds.

I nudged that final essential piece into place, that conceptual assumption, the one I hadn't questioned: who did I need to find? Whoever was in this flat last Thursday.

The definition in place, I saw, as a molten spire of pain erupted up my brain-stem and into my skull. Described in mind-melting hell-math, I saw.

And the thing I'd defined – *the thing in this flat last Thursday* – stared back at me through the equation I'd built, and caught me looking.

and less pleasant places –

6.5

I'd built an equation to find Lozzie – via locating Kimberly's mysterious uninvited guest – jury-rigged from scraps of half-understood hyperdimensional mathematics, so certain that the worst possible outcome was mere failure and pain, vomiting and unconsciousness. Not exactly unfamiliar. A risk worth taking, a punishment worth subjecting myself to. What kind of friend was I if I wasn't willing to endure that for her sake? How could I ever hope to rescue my sister if I couldn't muster the courage to find Lozzie?

But the subject of my search had found me first. An awareness, staring back at me through the cracks in the equation, summoned by the act of giving it definition.

It was not Lozzie.

I didn't see it with my eyes, of course. I *saw* nothing. I suspect I'd have gone screaming mad on the spot if I had. My physical eyes still looked at Raine as she reached for me, frozen in an elongating moment as if caught on the edge of a black hole, the time inside my mind stretched out to infinity by the instant of terrible contact.

Meaning coalesced out of the mathematics, greater than the sum of the equation's parts, true definition found in the spaces between. Like the moment an autostereogram – a magic-eye picture – resolves into an image, or one flicks on the light at night and does a double-take at a coat over a chair, thinking it's a person.

I see you, it said.

Not in words, but via that unspeakable feeling crawling inside my skull – the feeling of being caught looking.

I felt like a mouse, wedged inside a rotting tree trunk on the forest floor, peeping out through a crack in the wood at the undergrowth and damp leaves, as something huge and reptilian slithered along the ground outside and put a great, unblinking eye to the window in my hidey-hole.

Such sensations were sadly – and fortunately – not alien to me. The Eye’s attention, in my horrid memories and the old dreams, had felt much the same way, except magnified a thousand times more than this, a scrutiny that peeled away one’s skin and bone and neurons and atoms. I was perhaps the one person in the world who could endure this attention without losing my mind, because I’d had worse before.

How it saw me, I had no idea, but I knew what to do: I let go of the equation, let it unravel, like cutting a fishing net loose when you’ve accidentally caught a shark.

Then I felt the rest, the trailing sensations behind ‘*I see you*’: recognition, familiarity, knowledge.

I see you, *Heather*.

And I can dance like that too! Watch!

The Lizzie-thing, the Outsider in her head, whatever in God’s name it was, it came scuttling up through the equation I’d built, using the collapsing strands of my own work as a ladder to reach into my mind, spanning the gaps with its own hyperdimensional mathematics. Like a spider spinning webs to mend the holes in a rickety scaffold, it scurried across the fabric of reality, toward me.

A trap.

This whole thing was a trap, aimed at me.

All that happened in a split-second, at the speed of thought, in the time it took me to blink, as Raine reached across Kimberly’s little table to grab my shoulders.

“Stop,” I wheezed – and slammed the brakes on the equation.

Bits and pieces of hyperdimensional mathematics span off like an exploding combustion engine inside my head, seared my mind with fragments of white-hot metal, shook my soul like a storm in a bottle. The throb of a truly earth-shattering headache washed over me in a wave of pain.

I jerked forward, an involuntary spasm, banged my face into the table, then reared back up with a ragged choking gasp, and noticed I’d left a bloody smear on the cheap wood.

“Holy shit,” said Twil.

"Oh Goddess, oh, what, oh-" Kimberly stammered, scrambling to her feet.

With the equation dead, that scuttling awareness finally receded into the abyss.

"Toilet," I squeezed out between my roiling guts and the icepick lodged in the back of my skull. My mouth tasted of blood. My vision swam, black at the edges. My legs shook as I tried to stand up, banging my knees on the table and sending my empty measuring jug of tea skittering across the carpet. Even Tenny sensed something was desperately wrong, bunching and retracting her tentacles like a panicked squid. "T-toilet-"

Then Raine had me. She pulled me to my feet and into Kimberly's cramped bathroom.

She held my hair while I vomited.

Only once, only a little, and that only bile and tea. I clenched up so hard I strained my stomach muscles, determined to keep my breakfast down, to master this. It hurt, but I didn't give in, though I did kneel in front of the toilet for a long few minutes, breathing slowly and trying to process what had happened, what I'd seen.

"That's it, breathe real slow, Heather. Take it slow, take all the time you need, I'm right here." Raine's free hand rubbed the base of my neck.

"The hell was she doing?" Twil asked from the bathroom door. "Shit, Heather, you alright?"

I gave her a sarcastic thumbs up from down by the toilet bowl.

"Give her a minute," Raine warned.

"You found her, didn't you?" Kimberly asked, voice barely a whisper. "You found Lauren, and it wasn't her, was it?"

"I said, give her a minute," Raine repeated, but I shook my head, wiped my body nose on the back of my hand, and felt tears threaten in my eyes.

"It worked," I croaked. "And it was her. It was Lozzie."

= =

Three glasses of water for the lost fluids and to wash out the taste of

blood, a blanket around my shoulders for the clutching cold inside me, and a bag of frozen peas from Kimberly's tiny box freezer for the bruise around my right eye. That last one would be interesting to explain if anybody at university asked, let alone any concerned staff. Yes, I head-butted a table, thank you for asking, and no, my girlfriend doesn't hit me.

"It was Lozzie because it sounded like her," I repeated for the third time. "I'm certain."

"I thought you said it was just like, maths?" Twil squinted at me. I'd lost her minutes ago, but I was too drained to come up with a proper metaphor. "And hey, Kimberly, you said this thing didn't sound anything like Lozzie at all, right?"

Kimberly nodded to Twil, but her eyes watched me. For approval.

She'd been staring at me with renewed awe since the moment Raine had helped me stagger back out of the little bathroom. It made my skin crawl, especially after spending minutes on my knees, delivering a technicolour yawn into her toilet. How could she look at me like I was some kind of pagan idol? She understood even less about what I'd done than Twil did, but incomprehension didn't stop Kimberly hanging on every word I'd said in my halting, confused effort to explain what just happened.

Didn't want to know any more about magic, did she? Kimberly was lying – perhaps to herself, too. Moth to a flame.

She couldn't hold my stare though. If I hadn't been so emotionally wiped out, I probably would have avoided her eyes in sheer mortified embarrassment. Instead, I stared back, dull and frustrated, and she had to look away.

I pulled my knees tighter against my chest, so small and vulnerable. We were all tiny, squishy, fragile little mammals compared to that *thing* which had seen me looking, that construct of pure mathematical principles; even Raine seemed fragile right now, by comparison. An awful thing to feel.

Raine had insisted I sit in the beanbag chair, the comfiest place in the whole flat, save for Kimberly's own bed. I wasn't so bad that I needed to lie down. After all, I hadn't actually gone through with the equation, not the whole way. Raine rubbed my shoulders, on her knees behind me, trying to massage the tension out of my

stress-knotted muscles, and Tenny crouched nearby, an attentive dog to her wounded master. Her ropey black tentacles kept drifting down toward my head and face, touching my hair or brushing my cheek, concerned, confused.

Sweet, yes, but getting on my nerves.

I eased the closest tentacle away with one hand. "Tenny, stop that for now, please?"

She tilted her head left and right, and her tentacles drifted up, toward the ceiling. Yes, quite, you don't understand what happened either, do you? At least you listen to me though. I gave her a smile, though I still wasn't certain if she could read human expressions. "I'm fine, I'll be fine," I muttered to her.

Kimberly stared at me again, wide eyed at the empty air to which I'd spoken.

"She talks to invisible monsters sometimes," Twil informed her, with a very serious nod. I didn't have the energy to correct Twil before she continued with her theory. "So, uh, maybe it wasn't Lozzie here in the flat, but it was Lozzie you found?"

"It sounded like her," I groaned again, and winced at the bruise on my face. The makeshift ice pack wasn't doing much good, and I tossed it onto the table in frustration.

'And I can dance like that too!' – so undoubtedly Lozzie, the exact phrasing she might use, her bright mind and playful expressiveness bent to alien purposes. It had been her voice, but she hadn't been the one speaking.

"Why didn't you tell me what you were doing?" Raine asked with a softly indulgent laugh, her thumbs kneading the muscles of my shoulder blades. "Could have gotten Evee to help, back home, could have been ready for it."

I shook my head and waved a dismissive hand. "Lozzie needs me."

"Mhmm. She also needs you conscious and healthy, if you're gonna help her."

"I know!" I snapped at her, wallowed in guilt all over again. My impatience and self-loathing wasn't Raine's fault. She was the best antidote to it all. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm being awful."

"It's okay, I know how it feels," Raine said, so softly that only I could hear. At least that's one thing we shared completely: was this how she felt about me, all the time?

"I have to find her," I muttered, but all my certainty was gone. I could try the brainmath again, but that thing would be waiting for me this time. The thought made me shudder inside.

"We have to find her," Raine corrected gently. She stopped rubbing my shoulders and moved around to my side, so I couldn't avoid her gaze. She raised a hand to my chin and gently tilted it to examine my face. "Hooooo, that bruise is gonna be a nasty one, you really nutterd that table."

"First class head-butt," Twil added with a nod. "Coulda knocked somebody out with that."

"As if that helps anything right now," I muttered.

"Heather," Raine said, her voice pitched low and serious, the kind of tone that made me sit up and pay attention. "I'm going to ask you a hypothetical question, alright? Pure theory here, it's not a request or a suggestion. The brainmath you just used, how you made contact with Lozzie – or not-Lozzie – do you think you could do it again?"

"Yes," I answered, then hesitated. "But ... it fought me. With the math. The same thing I can do. I don't know if I can- if I'm good enough to- I don't know, fight back? I have no idea how that would even work. If I hadn't stopped, it would have reached me."

Raine nodded slowly, her face etched with deep focus. I knew that look all too well. She was making a plan.

I loved her for that – but I hated myself for wanting it. Raine cooking up a way to save the day, to save me, yet again. To save her useless girlfriend, again. Because I couldn't do it myself, because I was an unprepared coward, and a terrible friend.

"I guess Lozzie wouldn't try to fight you, would she?" Twil asked. "Or is that something you two did?"

"It's Lozzie *because* it tried to fight me," I said, patience running thin. "It knew how to use hyperdimensional mathematics. I've never felt that before, anything like that. It must have learnt from her mind. And it knew me, it recognised me, it was expecting me. It's

her – it's got her, I mean. Everything she is."

Twil shrugged. "I remember what that ... that bloody great Eye felt like." She shook herself once, a theatrical shiver, but I didn't blame her. She'd been exposed, once, to the briefest moment of the Eye's attention, filtered through Evelyn's magical observation window, across the boundary between here and Outside, when we'd performed that ill-fated experiment in the Medieval Metaphysics room, so many months ago. "Who's to say it couldn't send something here, with all its stuff, to get you, like?"

"If it could do that, I think it would've done a long time ago," Raine said for me. "And why wander around Sharrowford, why come to Kim? Unless it was Lozzie, trying to say hi to an old friend."

"I was never her friend," Kimberly murmured. "P-please don't- I didn't- never did ... "

"Or setting a trap for me," I hissed.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking." Raine's voice dropped to a low growl. She stared at me with a kind of slow contemplation. If I'd been less bruised by brainmath the attention would have made me feel self-conscious. "Heather, I want you to make me a promise."

"Now?"

"Right now, yeah. Promise me you won't do that again. Don't try to find Lozzie a second time."

"But ... no, Raine, I can't. I have to-"

Raine put a finger to my lips. "You have to do one thing, for me: be careful. Whatever this thing is, it wants you. It's not getting you. Promise me."

I couldn't look at her. I didn't deserve to. Raine was giving me exactly what I wanted – a way out, a refuge, an excuse not to dive back in and confront that vast, slithering awareness I'd felt. Raine didn't need my promise, I knew she was right, and secretly I was terrified and disgusted on a level I couldn't process: I'd never had hyperdimensional mathematics turned on me before. I felt so violated and offended on Lozzie's behalf. That was *her* gift this thing was abusing, and I was powerless to take it back.

Raine offered me a way out, and I felt like a coward.

"Please, Heather? You were taken by an Outsider once, perhaps there's some desirable quality in you." She cracked a grin. "Hey, I know that part's right. Worked on me."

"Raine." I muttered her name and rolled my eyes. "It's hardly the time for that."

"It's always the time."

"... I won't try again. I promise." A lump formed in my throat, and I sniffed back the threat of more tears. Coward, you useless coward, backing away from this. "I doubt I'd win, anyway. I can't help her."

Raine leaned back and took a deep breath, completely unembarrassed by our shared private moment. Twil was still frowning at me, but Kimberly had at least pretended to look away.

"I wouldn't say that yet," Raine almost purred, a twinkle in her eye. "If we can't find Lozzie ourselves, we need to enlist somebody who already did."

With deliberate slowness, Raine turned to regard Kimberly again.

"M-me? What do you- what do you mean?"

"Ahhhh," Twil grinned, and underneath the table she stretched out one foot to poke Kimberly.

The poor woman almost jumped out of her skin, flinching and jerking up.

"Steady on. S'just playing," Twil said, hands up. "Relax, damn."

"I-I-I'm sorry. Sorry."

"Kimberly," I croaked. "Stop apologising."

"Yes, yes, I'm s-" She stopped, swallowed, staring at us.

"So, Kim," Raine said, easy and relaxed as she leaned forward to put one elbow on the table, idly playing with an empty mug. "You didn't think I'd forgotten in all the excitement, did you?"

"I'm- pardon?"

"Where did you 'go'? Where'd Amy Stack see you?" Raine asked, then smirked.

Kimberly froze up again, but only for a second; perhaps the

experience of seeing me do brainmath, the awe and reverence I'd inspired, had some bizarre effect on how much she trusted us. Trusted me. Or maybe she'd merely decided our mercy was a better bet than Amy Stack.

She'd be right, of course, but Raine's stare implied otherwise.

"Yeah come on, what were you up to?" Twil asked, a little too hard.

"Nothing- nothing bad," Kimberly blurted out. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath, reached for the stub of her reefer but then decided not to light up. She cradled her hands in her lap instead. "I went back to the Wiccan coven. That's all. But I shouldn't have."

"The what?" Twil squinted

"Wiccan coven?" Raine asked.

"Wicca. Right," I muttered.

I should have guessed, considering the new agey pagan books lining Kimberly's shelf. I tried to keep my exasperated sigh to myself, told myself not to judge, but my reaction must have shown on my face, because Kimberly suddenly gave me a wounded look.

"Coven?" Twil repeated. "You mean like witches?"

"Yes, like witches," Kimberly said, the hurt plain in her voice.

"*Back* to the coven?" Raine asked.

"Hey, hey." Twil pointed at Kimberly. "I thought she said no more magic. I thought that was bloody point, you-"

"It's not real magic, Twil," I said gently. "Wicca's a new-age pagan revival movement. A religion. And not like yours."

"Oh. What, like the druid guys who go to Stonehenge?"

Raine smirked and nodded. "Yeah, like druids."

"I know it's not real," Kimberly hissed. "How can I believe in anything anymore? After ... after everything?"

As she trailed off, eyes downcast, she seemed so small and lost, and in that moment I think I understood Kimberly a little better.

I'd never really believed in anything much before I met Raine and

Evelyn – except the power of a good book. My parents weren't religious. Having faith is challenging when you believe your brain is broken, and you've spent half your short life terrified of the unimaginable monsters that nobody else can see. A merciful God would not curse me so.

Kimberly had believed in something – kooky nature Goddess something. Easy to scoff at, perhaps, but it had clearly been important to her. Meaningful. Comforting. Real.

Then the Sharrowford Cult had shown her the truth behind reality, and taken all that away.

“Kimberly, I didn't mean to insult you,” I said. “I apologise.”

“Apology accepted,” she muttered.

“You don't have to accept it. Why not tell me I'm rude?”

She blinked at me, as if this might be another rhetorical trap, and I hated that. I hated that I made this woman afraid. I smiled at her, best I could through the residual headache pain and the guilt.

“... y-you're not,” she managed. “It's only fair. None of it was ever real. I don't even know why I went back, I just wanted some ... some community again. Anything.”

“Stack saw you going there?” Raine asked. “But not to work? Why?”

“Because the coven is how I found the Brotherhood,” Kimberly said. “Because one of them must have told her I came back.”

“Ahhhhhh,” Raine sighed. “Now, I did wonder how a person ends up in the Sharrowford Cult. Guess that's one way.”

“Yes.” Kimberly nodded. Beneath the hurt and the exhaustion and the fear of us, I saw a black smoky curl of real bitterness in her eyes.

“Tell us about this Wiccan coven then,” Raine said. “The truth, all of it. Because we need to find Stack.”

“Wait what, we do?” Twil asked.

“We ... yes, yes we do. Raine.” I felt myself light up inside as I put the pieces together. I could have hugged her, but Raine stayed deadly serious, staring at Kimberly.

"We do, yeah," Raine nodded. "Because she was here, at this flat, less than twenty four hours after Lozzie. And from the sounds of it, Lozzie just popped in right outside Kim's door, yeah? If we find Stack, and I get my hands on her, then we discover how she knew Lozzie was here. And hey, if I get to Stack fast enough, maybe she won't be in any state to come back for you, Kim. So tell us the whole truth. You might get to live."

Kimberly let out a shuddering breath and nodded. "The coven, they're completely normal, except for one person, that's who you want, I swear. Uh, there's this shop off St. Helen's Road, the-"

"*Grey Magicks*, right?" Raine asked.

"... y-yes. How did you know that?"

"Checked it out before." She looked to Twil and I. "Back when me and Eevee first moved to Sharrowford. Had to make sure it was regular old occult stuff, not a front for the real thing. Full of stuff like this." She gestured at Kimberly's pentagram-stuffed bookcase, the crystals, the dragon statue, the wolf posters.

"It is, it is," Kimberly agreed. "Except for one person, the woman who leads the coven. Everyone else there is normal, I-I think, even the owner of the store. It's just where we meet."

"How's a nice girl like you end up casting spells?"

"I joined a couple of years ago, and it was really nice, really nice. I never used to take any of this stuff seriously, I just liked the aesthetics, but I was going through- I mean, I needed ... people. And they were really welcoming. Really positive."

"So you did what, rituals and stuff?" Twil said.

"Mhmm." Kimberly nodded, earnest and open. "Nothing scary at all. Candles, chanting. We had these little ceremonies for the lunar cycle, it was lovely. It was really good energy. And I got really into that side of it, the witchcraft. I knew- I mean, I thought I knew that none of it really worked, but I sort of wanted to believe, and it helped. I led a few circles, made sigils and stuff, for health and- a- and I made friends. One member, she was so sweet, her name was Hannah, she ended up in the hospital, pregnancy complications. I went to visit her and we did a spell together, for easy delivery and- I know, I know it didn't do anything, but she pulled through. She had that baby, and it felt good to ... " Kimberly stopped herself,

took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "This isn't what you want to hear."

"It's cool," Twil said. "I get it."

"Mm," Raine grunted, nodding seriously.

Kimberly gathered herself. "The ... uh ... the High Priestess, that's what you call a coven leader, an experienced witch. She's still there, Catherine Gillespie. She took an interest in me, took me under her wing. Told me I could go further, that I had a special knack."

Kimberly's voice dropped, quiet and bitter. "Told me she wanted to introduce me to some people."

"The Sharrowford Cult," Raine said.

Kimberly nodded. "Their magic really worked, but it ... it hurt. The um ... " She glanced at Raine. "The woman you killed in the castle, her name was Sarah Pince. She taught me ... well, taught is being a bit generous. She showed me. A-and then when it got too much, she forced me."

"Magic," I croaked, then swallowed to clear my throat. "Real magic requires you to already be broken. Already exposed. That's the knack. How did you have that?"

Kimberly stared at me, shaking her head. "I don't know. I saw a ghost once, when I was little. Does that count?"

"Maybe the High Priestess," Raine suggested. "Maybe one of those rituals was real, did something, maybe that's the point, using an overt Wiccan coven to find fresh meat."

"I was already broken. I know that much," Kimberly muttered, then realised we were staring and struggled to regain her composure. "I mean- I was going through a bad time. I-I had a stalker, an ex-boyfriend. I wasn't well. I'm not well now, I know."

"Maybe that was enough," I said.

I failed to sound comforting – because I wasn't sure if I wanted to.

Now that we discussed the Sharrowford Cult once more, I couldn't shake the memory of what I'd seen in their castle, what Kimberly had been a part of, no matter how small or how unwilling. Had she really been pressured into doing magic because she had the talent, abused and used up? Or was this a sob-story, an attempt to absolve

herself of her involvement? Everything so far pointed to the former, that she was a victim too. Why couldn't I fully accept that?

Because we were scary, and we had her in a corner – she'd tell us whatever we wanted to hear.

"This coven, they have a name?" Raine asked.

Kimberly nodded eagerly, climbed to her feet and went over to the bookcase. She returned with a cheap looking pamphlet, little more than a few pages stapled together like a student magazine. She handed it to Raine and we all leaned over to see. The front cover sported a stylised design of a statuesque nature goddess, wearing wreaths of blossom, stood in the centre of a pentagram made from living ivy. A title crested the top of the page, in a fanciful, flowery font.

Shadow of the Moon, introductory workings for any Sisterly Coven, by Catherine Gillespie.

Twil wrinkled her nose. "Crap name."

"What did you do?" I asked. "In the Sharrowford Cult?"

My question caught Kimberly in a half-crouch, straightening up from handing Raine the little book. She stared at me for a second, as the question reached deep down inside her, how I'd intended it to. She stood up, but didn't seem to know what to do with her hands, letting them flop against her unicorn-print pajama bottoms. But she did meet my eyes.

"I raised corpses from the dead," she said, a choke in her voice. "You know that."

Such a surreal phrase, in these surroundings – a cramped high rise council flat in northern England – and even stranger to know it was the truth. I sighed without meaning to, at the never ending parade of impossibility my life had become.

"Mostly homeless people, yes?" I asked. I *did* know that already. What was I doing? I couldn't stop myself.

Kimberly's face fell, slowly, as she tried desperately to keep it together. She nodded, but only halfway, an odd downward jerk of the chin.

"And what about those cages I saw?" Cold fingers crept through my

gut, and came out through my mouth. “The dead children in the cages. Did you know about them as well?”

Kimberly didn’t look up. She nodded again, and mouthed a word or two under her breath.

Why was my heart racing? It made my headache so much worse, why was I doing this? Surely Raine or Twil were about to interrupt. Raine was going to put a hand on my shoulder and get me to ease down, back off, let this go, because I was too weak from the brainmath, too addled by my panic over Lozzie, and deep down I knew she’d be right. I was wound up and frustrated, displacing my helplessness, finding a person to blame for the very real crime I’d witnessed.

I’d punished the man responsible, the head of the snake. I’d killed Alexander.

Wasn’t that enough?

To my surprise, Raine stayed silent, watching me carefully, and Twil looked on with all the attentiveness of a wolf waiting for her pack’s cue.

“I didn’t quite catch that,” I said.

“I know,” Kimberly choked out.

“Did you know about the dead children? Kimberly? Did you?”

“I know it’s my fault!” She shouted in my face – the clearest and strongest thing she’d said since we’d broken into her flat – then she coughed, her throat not up to the task as she fell apart again, eyes full of tears. “I know, I know! I should have taken a knife and stabbed them all, I know! I could have strangled Pince, or- or stabbed Alexander, something, anything! I would have died, but I should have put my body in the way. I should have helped Lozzie escape. Or gone to the police. They would have thrown me in the loony bin, but at least they might have saved a couple of those kids. I know I’m a coward. I should have died instead. I know.”

Kimberly’s confession drained what little strength she had left. She sat down suddenly, almost a collapse, drew her thighs up to her chest, and wept behind the shield of her arms.

Raine gave me a look, a sympathetic shrug which said it was my show, my choice, fair enough. Twil pulled a pained grimace, and

silently mouthed ‘wow’.

I sat there blinking at Kimberly like the idiot I was. What had I expected? Her wet sobbing and collaborator’s guilt didn’t sound fake, but how could I know?

A insidious voice whispered in the back of my head: of course there’s a way to be sure. I could drag Kimberly back to the house, and have Evelyn interrogate her with magic. Evelyn was no stranger to that, she’d done it before, she’d probably agree with the idea. Or do it myself, threaten to send Kimberly Outside and leave her there until she told the truth. That would be just as effective, because in the end it amounted to the same act, the same monstrosity.

Torture.

Lying or not, Kimberly was not very robust anymore, if she had ever been. She was a fragile young woman suffering a loud and messy kind of post-traumatic stress disorder, and there were no therapists who’d listen to her, not on this side of reality.

If I wanted to believe she was lying, and I hurt her enough, she’d tell me anything I wanted.

I cut that impulse off and dug out the root, disgusted with myself for considering it, even for a fleeting moment. My natural inclination to help this poor woman made me uncomfortable, because I couldn’t know for sure what she’d done. I wished I had an authority to turn to, a ‘real adult’ to take this off my hands, absolve me of the responsibility.

I thought back to what Evelyn had said to me, all those months ago, after I’d pulled her back from the underside of reality.

There is no community of mages. There’s just us.

And right now I didn’t have a clear mind or a clean heart, filled with guilt over Lozzie, and worse guilt over being useless, and I’d taken it out on Kimberly without knowing what I was fishing for.

Maybe she was right, she was responsible, on some level. But her pain was real enough. I decided to believe her.

“You didn’t deserve that,” I said with a sigh at myself, the words oddly difficult to say. “I’m sorry.”

Kimberly didn’t respond at all. She kept crying into her knees, her

thin frame shaking from the sobs.

Raine gestured toward Kimberly with both hands, and raised her eyebrows at me in silent question. I nodded, embarrassed at what I'd caused. Raine was much better at this sort of thing than me. I should have left it to her from the start.

"Hey, hey, Kim," Raine murmured, low and soft, the same voice she used with me sometimes. She crossed over toward Kimberly, knelt down, and reached out slowly. "I'm gonna touch your shoulder, okay? Don't jump, it's only me."

Kimberly flinched anyway, hard, the precursor to fleeing, but Raine quickly took her by both shoulders, gently rubbing her upper arms. I clamped down on a bizarre spark of jealousy, hardly appropriate right now.

"Kim, it's okay, it's alright," Raine purred. "None of us think you're a criminal, none of us think you killed anybody."

"Yeah," Twil said. "Me neither. Right."

Raine gave Twil a slyly unimpressed look. Twil shut her mouth and cringed.

"Surviving alone was hard enough," Raine continued, her soft tone more important than the words themselves. "And you managed that, you don't have to feel guilty. Heather's just very cautious. She saw more than us, most of the same things you probably did. We're not gonna use you up and then decide to get rid of you for something that wasn't your fault. That's something I can promise, at the very least."

Kimberly managed a jerky nod, still hiding her face. Her crying had dried up, except for the occasional sniff.

"Need a tissue?" Twil asked, jumping to her feet. "Here, uh, um ... there!"

She bounced off and back again, returning with a half-empty box of tissues, and slid them across the table.

Slowly, carefully, Twil and Raine pried Kimberly back out of her shell. She blew her nose and wiped her puffy eyes, as Raine rubbed her back. The weeping seemed to have cleaned her soul, at least for the moment, changed her in a way I couldn't identify. When she risked eye contact with me again, she seemed empty, calm, waiting.

I frowned when I realised why.

"I'm not going to pass judgement on you," I said, feeling vaguely disgusted. "Don't look at me like that. For pity's sake, I'm, what, five or six years younger than you? How can you look at me like I'm going to decide your fate?"

"Because you are?" she ventured.

"Hey, only you decide your own fate around here," Raine said, cracking a smile.

"Quite right," I said. "I'm not a ... I'm not whatever you're looking for, Kimberly."

Kimberly nodded to herself. She pulled more tissues from the box and blew her nose again.

"So, Kim," Raine said, gentler than earlier. "This High Priestess, this Gillespie woman, she's the one in contact with the Sharrowford Cult? You're sure about that?"

"Was," Twil corrected before Kim could answer. "We smashed them, right? Heather killed their boss and the rest of them are – poof! Scattered."

"Amy Stack's still lurking about," Raine said. "At the very least. And don't forget Lozzie's creepy uncle."

"He left the city!" Twil said.

"People can come back into Sharrowford, you know?" I said. Twil grumbled and shrugged.

"Yes," Kimberly said. "Yes, Catherine Gillespie, she's the one who introduced me to the ... um, the cult."

"Better get used to that word," Twil said. "They call my lot a cult too."

"Don't suppose you'd happen to know where she lives, would you?" Raine asked. Kimberly shook her head. "Worth a shot. So, the Sisterly Coven, Shadow of the Moon, whatever they call themselves – when do they meet?"

"Usually Saturday evenings, but also sometimes alternating Tuesdays. This Tuesday too, I think," Kimberly said. "You're going to go there, aren't you?"

Raine's face split with a dangerous grin.

"Oh, Goddess. Please, I- there's good people there, f-friends I had, normal people, they don't have anything to do with all this ... this awfulness."

Twil barked with laughter. "What, you think we're gonna go in there and slash everyone up?"

"That is what we did last time," I deadpanned.

"Yeah, but this is like, in public, in the middle of Sharrowford," Twil said. "Not in some weird spooky fog-world."

"That's it then," Kimberly said, her voice resigned and hollow. "I've lost everything, haven't I? I've probably gone and lost my job by now as well. No more friends, no more coven, it's all gone." She put her face in her hands, but this time she didn't cry. She looked dead.

"We're not going to kill anybody," I said. "We're not."

Kimberly nodded, but I could see she didn't really believe me.

"Might be able to square things up at your job," Raine said. "They already know me, I went round there and told them I was your mate. Here, come on, you go back to work tomorrow morning and I'll come with you, have a little word with your boss. We'll figure something out. Say you've had awful flu and you've been delirious for days, and I found you asleep on the toilet, yeah?"

Kimberly shook her head. "You won't be ... oh." She shuddered at the look in Raine's eyes.

Raine nodded slowly. "When I say 'have a little word with your boss', I mean I'll *have a little word with your boss*."

"Raine does have her uses," I said. "Nice to have somebody like her on your side, isn't it?"

Kimberly swallowed. "Oh-okay. Thank you, very much. Please don't hurt anybody though."

"I won't. Promise. But in return, you're going to do something for us," Raine said.

"Raine," I tutted, but she held up a hand.

"It's cool, nothing crazy. In fact, it'll let us find Stack easier, and the

quicker we do, the better, yeah?”

Kimberly nodded, hesitant and afraid, her eyes seeking help from both me and Twil.

“This Catherine Gillespie, Mrs High Priestess,” Raine said. “Do you think she’d recognise any of us three?”

“Um ... I ... I don’t know,” Kimberly frowned in thought. “Maybe she’d know about Twil, but ... probably not yourself, or you, um, Heather. But maybe she does, I’m not sure, please don’t rely on what I say.”

“We can still work with that, oh yes we can indeed. Now, listen close, ‘cos I’ve got a cunning plan.”

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?” I asked.

“Ooooh, she’s got a plan, has she?” Twil said, grinning from ear to ear. “I’m game, been a few weeks since I got some real exercise.”

Even Kimberly followed the undertones, and managed a shaky smile.

“You’re gonna go to that Tuesday coven meet, Kim,” Raine said, squeezing Kimberly’s shoulder in a gesture that made me irrationally jealous. “And you’re gonna pretend to be Heather’s new girlfriend.”

and less pleasant places –

6.6

Two days later, on an evening of clear black skies and frosty pavements, Raine pulled her car to a stop in the Foxenden Road multi-story car park, set the handbrake, killed the engine, and turned to Kimberly and I in the back seat.

“Was gonna ask if you two feel ready.” Her grin was almost lost in the concrete gloom. “Don’t need to, do I? You look ready.”

“As much as I’ll ever be,” I muttered. I wriggled my hands into the white leather gloves I’d borrowed from Evelyn, and tucked my scarf around my throat.

Kimberly nodded and exhaled slowly and steadily. She didn’t look too shaky in the dim orange light cast by the car park’s overhead lamps. I suspected she had some cannabis in her bloodstream, but I didn’t blame her one bit. Everything tonight rested on the strength of her nerves – and her acting talent.

She didn’t need to hold it together for long; two hours from now this would all be over, one way or another.

“It’ll be okay,” she said. “I’ll be okay.”

“Focus on the fun part, hey?” said Raine. “You get to hang out with some of your actual friends for a bit, right? The messy part, that’s all me and Heather. You don’t even have to stay and watch that part if you don’t want to.”

“That’s very kind of you. But ... I’d rather not walk home by myself. Please.”

I cleared my throat and shot Raine a look. “You won’t have to.”

“Sure, no problem, we’ll give you a lift.” Raine shrugged. “I’ll even walk you up to your flat, make sure there’s nobody lurking about. Sounds cool?”

“Yes. Yes, thank you.”

I treated Raine to another few seconds of my best glower. She just grinned at me, attractive and infuriating in equal measure.

What Kimberly didn't know – and what left me so irritated before we'd even begun the evening's absurd plan – was that she wasn't going home tonight. She was coming back to number 12 Barnslow Drive whether she liked it or not. Supposedly half for her own safety, but also half because Evelyn had demanded they meet. I suspect Evee wanted to interrogate the poor woman herself.

Raine had insisted we treat Kimberly's nerves with cotton wool, which meant lying to her, so as not to spoil our chances of pulling off this mad escapade. The deception tasted like rotten bile in my mouth. I had an entire paragraph-long apology to deliver, not to mention some choice criticism for my friends when we got home.

I checked the contents of my pockets: purse, lipsalve for the five minute walk through the biting cold, mobile phone for emergencies, personal attack alarm for bigger emergencies, and Raine's most recent present for me – a slender black palm-sized can of highly illegal pepper spray – for absolute emergencies.

"Wanna go over the plan one last time?" Raine asked.

I shook my head. "It's not exactly difficult. Kimberly?"

"I'm fine too."

"You've got to sell the girlfriend angle," Raine said. "Stop high priestess spooky smelling a rat. We've got to get her alone. She suspects anything, then I'll have to do this all in a much uglier way."

"And how do you suggest we do that, Raine?" I asked. "Make out in front of the Wiccans? Dress in rainbow flags?"

I'd heard all the reasoning, three times over, but I still huffed and crossed my arms. Kimberly swallowed, and I felt even more sorry for her. She was the one who'd have to fake a lesbian relationship in front of all her old friends and acquaintances.

She hadn't raised a squeak of protest though. Privately I wondered if she'd made this about atonement.

At least we were dressed the part. I'd played up the clean-cut student angle, a thick cream-coloured polo neck borrowed from Evelyn under my coat, and a long skirt over a pair of burgundy

tights. Raine had helped me choose, helped soften the nasty bruise around my eye with foundation and concealer, and helped me do my hair too, brushed it smooth and teased the ends up. A fake date night outfit, far beyond the usual limits of my courage, but this was for Lozzie's sake.

Kimberly still looked deeply unhealthy, but she'd cleaned up well, her auburn hair twisted back and pinned up with a pair of chopsticks, the worst of her dark eye-circles hidden with a little makeup, neat sky-blue polish on her nails. Comfortable denim jeans drew attention upward, to her hips and her showy tshirt visible through her open coat, the front printed with a rearing unicorn locked in combat with a dragon.

"Hold hands, stick close to each other, make eye contact," Raine said. "And Kim, introduce Heather as your girlfriend. That's all. S'easy. Just don't make a move 'til you see me. I'll be right there the whole time, in case things get too weird. You won't be in any danger, either of you."

"What if you can't get inside?" Kimberly asked. "I know you can pick locks, but ..."

"Then I'll text Heather, like I said. Anything doesn't go to plan, the smallest nut or bolt, then I text Heather, and suddenly you both have to leave because of family in hospital, or your car's been clamped, or one of you has the shits. Walk out without explanation if you have to. We'll be right there." She turned to the fourth member of our little team. "Ain't that right, Praem?"

"We shall," Praem intoned from the passenger seat, staring straight ahead, hands folded in her lap. She'd peeled herself out of – or *been* peeled out of – her maid uniform, dumped unceremoniously into a pair of ugly cargo trousers and a big puffy coat.

I did feel sorry for her, but one could hardly conduct occult espionage dressed like a domestic servant.

"Bear with it for now, Praem," I said. "Won't take long."

"Bearing," Praem replied, a musical lilt in her voice.

Raine cocked a curious eyebrow at me, but I waved her down, too jittery and impatient to explain. She shrugged, smirked, and twisted around to wave a hand in front of Praem's eyes. "You tuned in as well, Evee?"

“Evelyn says she is watching,” Praem replied.

“Have fun with Twil while we’re all away, yeah?” Raine winked at Praem, or more accurately she winked at Evelyn, watching through the doll-demon’s eyes via a paddling pool full of water in her magical workshop back home, while Twil kept her company and guarded the house.

If we’d been doing something less mad, I would have rather enjoyed the thought of those two alone with each other for several hours. I did so hope Evelyn found her courage.

“Stop wasting time,” Praem said, and I could tell those weren’t her words, the doll-demon’s musical tones warped by Evelyn’s cadence. “Fashionably late is one thing, but really late is going to look suspicious. Shit or get off the pot.”

“Right you are, right you are.” Raine laughed and rubbed her hands together, then leaned back over the seats and kissed me once, hard, on the forehead, and patted Kimberly’s shoulder. “You won’t see me, but I’ll be right behind you.”

“I still can’t believe this doesn’t make you jealous,” I said.

Raine winked at me. “Break a leg.”

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Sheltered from the worst of the cold by the close-leaning commercial buildings of the city centre’s edge, the five minute walk from the car park to St. Helen’s road was still punishing in the January evening.

We walked hand-in-hand through the pools of orange streetlight, without speaking. Kimberly’s hand felt clammy and limp in mine, as she led me past closed sporting-goods stores and office supply places. When we rounded a corner, I looked up, and caught a brief glimpse of Sharrowford Cathedral in the distance, the beautiful stonework lit from below, before we turned down a less-used side road.

Along the pavement and leaf-choked gutter, past a hole-in-the-wall sandwich place and a greasy little pawn shop, and there it stood on the last corner before a half-lit dingy residential street.

Grey Magicks, the shop sign read, in big jagged letters faded by the weather.

I assumed the font was meant to resemble runes. It looked tacky.

Besides the unfortunate sign, the exterior of the shop struck me as quite charming. The door was short, stout wood, with an iron knocker shaped like a lion's head. A bank of narrow, metal-latticed windows looked out on the street, overhung by oddly thick walls and glowing with soft light inside. A chalk signboard sat out the front, advertising, of all things, 'self-confidence, good energy, and love of nature!!!!' Each exclamation mark was written in a different colour.

Nothing gave the casual observer any idea of what the shop actually sold. Not the sort of place one wandered into without already knowing what one was in for.

"This is it," Kimberly breathed. Her eyes darted up and down the darkened street as we stopped on the opposite pavement. I did my best to conceal my own nerves. The last thing the star of tonight's show needed was my second-hand jitters.

"We're late, but that's fine. That's part of the plan. Everyone else must already be here."

"I was-" She swallowed and sniffed. "I wasn't looking for others. I was looking for Raine."

Kimberly hadn't really led me here, of course, and she knew that too. Raine would never leave such an important factor to chance. We'd used Google maps to check out the route, the layout of the surrounding streets, and even dug up a picture or two of the interior of *Grey Magicks* – although I seriously doubted I'd remember any of the details in a crisis. For now though, I knew exactly what to expect, inside and out. No surprises.

The last 48 hours had not been easy, not on anybody except Raine – she hadn't been able to suppress her relish at embarking on this kind of mischief, which for once didn't put me in explicit danger.

I, on the other hand, had spent every spare minute since Sunday wracking my brains for another way to find Lozzie. It wasn't that I didn't have faith in this plan, but I couldn't bear the waiting, the not knowing, the dwelling on what Lozzie might be going through as I pretended everything was normal, went to university classes, slept and ate and felt useless.

Could we go back to the little park where she vanished Outside,

could I somehow trace her from there? Did Evelyn have a way – her answer was not encouraging: maybe, perhaps, with the right tools, if, if, *if*. Could I somehow follow her trail Outside, do it myself, alone, unprotected? That line of thought terminated last night, with me sobbing in the bathroom, the door locked behind me, as I'd tried to summon the courage. Raine had found me first, of course.

Which part of Sunday's news got to Evelyn so badly, I was never really sure. She didn't care much for Lozzie, I knew that, but I trusted in the basic goodness of her heart, and I chose to believe at least part of her frantic attitude was born from care.

She'd demanded to speak with Kimberly, ranted and raved about an Outsider loose in Sharrowford, locked herself in her workshop for the whole of Sunday night and emerged again to interrogate me about Lozzie's behaviour. She couldn't wait either, but neither did she have a solution.

"Espionage," I whispered to myself as I gathered my wits and prepared to cross the road. "If only my mother could see me now."

Kimberly attempted a smile. She was shaking.

"Just remember what Raine said," I murmured, squeezing her hand. "Act like nothing's wrong."

She nodded. Her eyes were unreadable dead pools of sterile blue ice. "I won't let you down. I promise."

I did have some inkling of what she was bottling up, didn't I?

I nodded toward *Grey Magicks*, at the faux-rustic building, and completely failed to make my point properly when I opened my stupid mouth. "You know, I'm pretty sure Evelyn Saye believes in God."

"... I ... o-okay."

I sighed, both at myself, and at Kimberly's meek acceptance of my non-sequitur. "That didn't come out right. And it's not entirely accurate, either. I *think* Evelyn believes in God, on some level. She told me this complex metaphor once, for reality, about a castle, and how, well, a castle has to have a builder. I'm not saying she's Christian, that would be absurd, but she believes in something." Kimberly eyed me warily, so I forged on, trying to explain myself. "I'd never really thought about it before, but considering everything

people like us have seen, perhaps it's difficult to *not* believe in something, at least. What I'm trying to say is ... all that stuff, in there," I nodded toward *Grey Magicks*. "It's as valid as anything else. Perhaps you don't have to give up on it."

Kimberly blinked several times and looked away. "I don't know ... "

"I'm sorry. This probably isn't the best time to discuss that."

"No. No, it's okay. Maybe you're right. I don't know anymore. I wish I'd never found religion."

I squeezed her hand again, and this time she squeezed back, no longer so limp.

"Nothing more to do out here," I said, my heart fluttering too hard in my chest. We were perfectly safe. Raine was nearby, and so was Praem. All we had to do was pretend for an hour or two, and then we'd have a talk with Catherine Gillespie.

A little chat, that was all.

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The Wiccan coven meet was technically called an 'esbat', although I wasn't informed exactly what that word meant.

It was also exactly what I expected it to be, and despite my best efforts it all felt quite silly indeed.

Fourteen regulars were in attendance on this Tuesday evening, though apparently the coven proper was over double that size. This was only a bi-weekly extra, for those who had the time and inclination on a week night. I spotted a few faces I very vaguely recognised from campus, but not all the Wiccans were young impressionable hippie-adjacent women, not by a long shot.

A trio of older ladies – and one much older gentleman – formed the emotional bedrock of the congregation, and they looked the part to absolute perfection. All long grey hair and faces crinkled from lifetimes of smiling, wearing pentagram pendants and comfortable cardigans, fanciful old tattoos on liver-spotted arms. They were already sitting and chatting in comfortable chairs toward the back of the store's floor space, in a nice large cleared area before a desk which obviously served as the shop's till while open, but was now covered with a white cloth and several ritual items – wooden bowls, a blunt knife, a silver mirror, lots of scented candles.

The rest of the coven was a mixture of fresh-faced bright young things, and middled aged women, though to my shameful surprise it wasn't all women. Why had I expected that?

Three other men were here, one a huge barrel-chested giant of a man with enough hair to drown an elephant, who was meditating quietly when we entered, sat on the floor with his eyes closed, legs crossed, hands balanced on his knees.

Four of the younger Wiccans in their 20s – Kimberly's old friends from before the Cult got her, as I was about to discover – were wearing crowns of fake ivy, and despite myself I thought it looked sort of sweet, especially as they were the ones to perk up and greet Kimberly first. We'd barely gotten through the door and out of the cold, when we were suddenly surrounded by a storm of attention.

"Kim! You're back again!"

"Oooh, who's this with you? Hello!"

"Give us a hug, Kim. Here, don't be a stranger."

"Thought we'd lost you yet again when you weren't here Saturday. Can't stay away, eh?"

"I'm- I- yes." Kimberly managed a shaky smile, and gave the requested hug to a particularly plush looking friend of hers. "I can't stay away, you're very right there, yes. T-this is Heather." She held up my hand, still in hers, and her friends took her nervous awkwardness in their stride. "She's- she's my girlfriend."

"Oooh, lovely to meet you, Heather."

"Yes!" One of them clapped. "Well done, Kim, about time you found somebody again."

"Is this your first visit?" Another asked me. "Have you ever been to a Wiccan esbat or sabbat before? You do look a bit nervy, it'll be fine, promise. You don't have to do anything."

"Oh, look at her, she's so cute! You're tiny! How tall are you?"

"Um, not- uh- not very." A terrible blush crept up my cheeks, though not for the reason Kimberly's friends assumed; for a split-second Kimberly was not the liability here – I was, and I almost cracked.

All I could do was smile and nod.

But that's what I'd do if this situation was for real, wouldn't I? Brought on an awkward date, surrounded by kooky neopaganism, intimidated by a gaggle of older girls.

I smiled, and I nodded.

"Heather," Kimberly continued, with a real smile on her face now as she indicated her friends one by one. "This is Ginny, and this is Kate. The one who is about to hug you, that's Natalie, and last but not least, this is Spike."

"S-spike?" I stammered, already forgetting which names went with which faces. Unlikely I'd ever seen any of these people again after tonight.

"It's a nickname," 'Spike' said, and the others all laughed. She didn't look much like a 'Spike', with long curly brown hair and big glasses. I smiled and nodded, and went with the flow.

"Come along you two, now you're here. It won't be long now, they're about to start," one of them said.

We all wandered down the length of the shop together, past bookshelves and wooden racking, glass cases and display tables, all filled with glossy 'occult' texts, fancy ritual tools, crystal balls, statuettes, robes, and all manner of pagan knick-knacks. At one point a large orange cat got under our feet, purring loudly and looking for attention. One of the girls picked him up and carried him along with us.

Over the next ten minutes of settling down in a rough ring of chairs and stools in the cleared portion of the battered old store, I couldn't help but notice that Kimberly positively transformed as she spoke to her coven-mates. She smiled without forcing her expression, sat up straighter, spoke without being spoken to – and not only to her old friends either. Almost everybody greeted her by name, and some asked if she was coming back for good this time. The much older gentleman in one of the comfortable chairs actually stood up and crossed the circle, and Kimberly all but bounced out of her seat to give him a friendly hug.

"Are you staying this time, Kemp?" he asked her. "We've all missed you dearly. You know that, don't you?"

"I'm ... I'm sorry, Jerry. I hope so, yes, I do hope so," she said after a moment, then turned to me. "Heather, this is Gerald Hower. He's

been here the longest, and he owns the shop. Jerry, Heather. She's my uh ... mine."

Couldn't quite lie to the old man, could she? A surrogate father figure. Better than Alexander, at least.

"Oh. Welcome, you're very welcome." He nodded to me and beamed the sort of smile that only genuinely kind old men can. "I hope you decide to come back too. Might be a bit spooky, your first time, but don't you worry." He gave me a broad wink.

"I'm quite good with spooky," I said, and smiled. At least in that, I could speak the truth.

A middle aged woman – perhaps in her fifties, wearing a rough-spun green robe over her clothes – stepped up behind the table with the white cloth and rung a tiny silver bell. All fell silent, and my heart climbed into my throat. She smiled at everyone present, open and welcoming, crow's feet in the corners of bright eyes, as she raised both hands. Loose dark hair fell about her shoulders, and she wore more makeup than most, heavy lashes and long false fingernails.

"I declare this esbat, begun," said Catherine Gillespie.

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She didn't recognise my face, didn't know me, was none the wiser – and didn't seem surprised to see Kimberly still alive and breathing.

Or perhaps Gillespie had plenty of practice concealing her true feelings.

I wasn't as singled out as I might have felt, because there were two other first-timers in attendance that night: a young woman about my age, and the twelve year old granddaughter of another coven member. The little girl was certainly much more nervous than I, even though when this was over she'd be off home to bed, whereas I'd be staying behind to do things both illegal and cruel.

The proceedings felt very silly to me, from the moment Gillespie led the group in a prayer – though they didn't call it a prayer – to 'beseech the Goddess and God for help and comfort, love and support', all the way through the whole hour and a half of greetings, coven news, and then a great big ritual they organised in the middle of the floor. Chalk pentagrams with candles and

lacquered wooden offering bowls at the corners, lots of chanting and flowery language, a blunt silver ritual knife and cups of spiced wine.

Despite my assumptions, the ‘high priestess’ didn’t actually lead the ritual. That was left for the older gentleman, Gerald, who I gathered had been doing this sort of thing for a long time indeed. To my surprise, he invited Kimberly to help him.

She lit up so much, waving around those bowls of rose-scented water.

The ritual was a petition for aid, a “magical working to encourage the good health and speedy recovery of one of us who cannot be here today,” Gillespie said. One of Kimberly’s friends leaned over to me and explained that one of the younger members of the coven was in the hospital. Leukaemia.

At least these people’s hearts were in the right place. I was starting to understand why Kimberly valued this, no matter how silly it felt.

Would my reaction have been any different this time last year? What I felt was not the mere embarrassed scepticism of a lifelong agnostic, or the usual polite British distaste for ostentatious displays of religion, but a much deeper absurdity, one which only emerged in full once the coven started their ritual.

As they chalked their pentagrams on the floor, I couldn’t help but compare this to the very real magecraft I’d witnessed over the last few months. The blood and pain, the eye-searing magic circles, the languages that were never meant to be spoken with human mouths. This was like children playing dress up in adult clothes, and it made me uncomfortable – and more than a little sad.

I did my best to seem attentive and interested, sitting on the sidelines with the other observers, as I focused all my real attention on watching Catherine Gillespie.

Twil hadn’t liked that our target was named Catherine. “S’mum’s name, isn’t it? That’s just weird. Ugh,” she’d complained.

“Maybe we put the wind up her bad enough, she’ll change it for you,” Raine had said, elbowing Twil in the ribs.

Gillespie didn’t look like the sort of woman who would funnel vulnerable victims to the likes of Alexander Lilburne and the

Sharrowford Cult. An icy shard of doubt settled in my gut as I watched her smile at the other coven members, exchange encouraging words with her flock, counsel those who looked up to her. Her whole bearing radiated motherly kindness.

Could this be a trap?

Could Kimberly have lied to us?

No, paranoia. Nothing more. My eyes flickered to the back of the cramped, junk-packed store, to the two doors that led into the back, to where Raine likely now lurked.

The ritual ended with an offering – cake and wine – lifted on a tray over the pentagram, dedicated to their deities, and then laid down on the table to be shared out among us mere mortals.

The atmosphere descended into something more like a party than a religious gathering.

It was utterly exhausting.

I've never been a social butterfly, or even a social moth. Pretending to be Kimberly's girlfriend, and interested in Wicca, and keep track of Gillespie, and ready myself for the moment we put the plan into action? I felt ready to spin apart.

One of Kimberly's friends pressed a cup of spiced wine into my hands. I pretended to sip, pretended to follow the chatter, gave answers that I forgot as soon as I'd said them. Had to keep my wits about me. Kimberly returned, all smiles, but faltered when she caught the look in my eyes.

"Heather. I'll uh, yeah. I'll go have a word with her. I'll be right back. Right back."

I watched Kimberly in the corner of my eye, pulse heavy in my throat, heart tight inside my ribcage, as she slipped back through the crowd to seek a private word with Gillespie. She found her high priestess and took her briefly to one side. I heard Kimberly's words inside my head, the ones we'd rehearsed.

'I brought Heather tonight because our ... mutual friends, they suggested to me that she should be introduced, through yourself.'

This was the fulcrum on which the plan turned. The entire reason for this absurd setup.

We had to get Gillespie alone, but the problem was how. If she really was connected to the Cult, she'd be cautious, and possibly paranoid of discovery. We needed her curious – why had Kimberly come back again, who was this with her? – but not spooked by the obvious, open threat of somebody like Raine turning up.

I readied myself to break for the front door, for the plan to crumble, but Kimberly held her nerve. Gillespie glanced my way, and put a reassuring hand on Kimberly's shoulder, and nodded to herself.

Kimberly made her way back over to me and took my hand for real, not just for appearances sake. Her smile was frozen, her palm clammy. I squeezed, and she squeezed back. I watched for Gillespie to pull out a mobile phone or disappear into the back, but she did neither.

Slowly, agonisingly, the gathering wound down. People began to dribble away into the night in ones and twos. Kimberly's friends asked if we would walk with them.

"We're going to stay, actually," Kimberly jumped in for me. "Heather wants to ask Catherine about initiation."

That earned me many approving noises and another hug, but it didn't help our cause. If even one person lingered with us, the plan was off. We were counting on Gillespie's assumed need for secrecy.

Eventually, when there were only half a dozen people left inside *Grey Magicks*, Gillespie came to see me.

"Heather. Heather Morell, yes?" Her voice was soft and slow. She greeted me with a big smile and an extended hand, which I shook. Dry and cool. "Kim's told me a little about you, that you're very interested in us, in perhaps joining the coven? I'm delighted to hear that, we're open to all here. Have you enjoyed today?"

"Yes, quite," I nodded, and looked at Kim. "We both have."

She smiled broadly again. "I hear you're also ..." She paused, the air pregnant with unspoken meaning. Another coven member called to her from the door, interrupting us. Gillespie raised a hand to wave goodnight. Only two left to leave now, a pair of women talking over by the table. Gillespie turned back to me. "I hear you're also interested in certain ... *deeper* mysteries, yes?"

"Oh, yes." I tried to look awestruck and naive, widened my eyes,

nodded eagerly, and hated it. “Yes, yes indeed. Kimberly told me you might have ... ways.”

Oh damn it all, I wasn’t pulling this off. I sounded like an extra from a bad Hammer Horror movie, the sort Raine liked to laugh at. A young woman in a white dress about to be drained by a vampire.

But it worked.

“Ways and means, yes, ways and means,” Gillespie purred. “Witchcraft can be a rewarding path, and there are others with so much more knowledge and wisdom than I. If you like, I can set up an introduction.”

“Perhaps we should-” Kimberly almost squeaked, then took a shaky breath. “Talk about it somewhere. In private?”

“A lovely idea, Kim, certainly.”

Gillespie turned to the two lingering coven members, told them she was going to speak with us about initiation – a sensitive, personal matter, individual to every aspiring witch. They bowed out, with much approval and serious promises to be here on the coming Saturday. The front door of *Grey Magicks* closed with a soft click. Gillespie went over to turn the latch.

“We do have much to discuss, girls, much to discuss. Shall we?”

We had her now. I tried not to shake with nervous tension.

Gillespie ushered us into the store’s back room, and I discovered that twenty-first century witches still need computers. It was far less fancy than the front of the shop, despite a pentagram on one wall and a fertility goddess mural on another. A compact office space with a dusty computer on an old desk, cardboard boxes full of excess stock on the floor – and a single open doorway connected to a cramped, dark storage area.

Our host settled herself into the old wooden office chair next to the desk, and gestured with a smile at a trio of plastic chairs opposite. “Please, girls, please do sit down. Make yourselves comfortable. I can’t offer you any tea in here, sadly, Jerry doesn’t believe in kettles.”

She had her back to the open door to the storage area. Perfect.

Was Raine ready? She needed to be, needed to make her move now.

I couldn't wait any longer.

Couldn't wait any longer? For what?

Oh.

A shard of ice, a remnant of an old feeling, wormed it's way into my chest.

"T-thank you, Cathy," Kimberly said, and half sat down before she realised I wasn't moving a muscle. She straightened back up, eyes glued on me, going white in the face.

"Kimberly, dear, whatever's the matter?" Catherine asked, frowning gently. "Now, I thought you were-"

"Do you know a man named Alexander Lilburne?" I asked.

The words came out low and easy. Not part of the plan, not at all.

Gillespie blinked in polite surprise. So measured, so reasonable, so kind.

She disgusted me on a level I hadn't time to process. She'd all but confessed her involvement with the Cult already, and I seethed inside with a cold certainty I hadn't felt since I'd faced Alexander. No more delay, no more waiting, no more pretending.

"Yes," she said at length, then drew herself up straighter, gathering her confidence again. "Yes, that name belongs to an old friend of mine, in fact, if you're referring to the same person. Do you happen to know-"

"When's the last time you saw him?" I said.

She frowned, and her mask finally began slipping, that slow motherly benevolence falling away. "... who are you, exactly?"

"The woman who killed him."

Gillespie's face froze, but only for a second. She rose to her feet in a rush, thundering at us with an outraged frown. "Who on earth are you? Kimberly, who is this girl? And don't be so absurd. Lilburne, killed by some- some- whatever you are?"

Behind her, a shadow detached itself from the doorway into the darkened storage area, rippling into the light with razor-sharp precision, every muscle held tight.

Raine slipped toward Gillespie's back on silent feet, eyes glued to her target, matte black handgun held casually at her side.

If I hadn't been so focused, that sight would have given me the shivers, and not in a bad way. With an effort of will, I resisted the urge to look. Kimberly failed, and her wide-eyed stare gave the game away.

Gillespie turned – but Raine was faster. The high priestess found herself staring down the barrel of a gun.

"And a good evening to you," Raine said to her, face splitting with a grin. "Now be nice, and sit yourself back down."

"Who- who- what are you? Who- what-" Gillespie went white in the face.

Praem stepped out of the back stockroom too, hands clasped, eyes staring at nothing. I let out a shuddering breath and realised how badly my knees were shaking. Kimberly backed away a couple of paces, swallowing loudly. We hadn't warned her about the handgun.

"Hey there you two," Raine said to us without taking her eyes off Gillespie. "Took your time. We almost ran out of things to talk about, didn't we, Praem?"

"Hey yourself," I managed to breathe.

"Who- who are you people? What is this?" Gillespie asked.

"I thought I told you to sit down?" Raine asked, smiling, all calm and casual. "The next question you ask, I'll break your nose. That's a promise. Sit. Down."

Gillespie sat down, slowly and carefully, eyes wide with terror, hands shaking as she grasped the chair's armrests. I would have felt sorry for her, if it wasn't for what came out of her mouth next.

"I'm no apostate!" she cried out. "I've not breathed a word to anybody, I've kept every secret, I swear! I've not spoken to the police, my husband, anybody. Nobody knows. Nobody."

"Knows about what?" Raine asked, grinning.

"The ... the ... "

"Answer her," I hissed.

“The supply agreement. The *scum*. Is it not enough? I can always find more, there’s always more out there. Don’t, please don’t!”

Raine raised her eyebrows, feigning polite interest. “Sounds like we got the right person.”

“Yes. We have,” I managed, staring at this unassuming woman. The Sharrowford Cult’s supplier.

“Unfortunately for your future health prospects, we’re not from the Sharrowford Cult,” Raine said to her. “We’re more like a wild card. About to get wild all over your face, if you don’t tell us what we want to know.”

Gillespie frowned, and her panic drained away as quickly as it had mounted. She tugged her robe straight, and then to my utter amazement she stood up again, ignoring the handgun pointed right at her.

“Kimberly,” she snapped. “This is completely unacceptable. Your masters will hear of this behaviour, I swear they will.”

“No they won’t,” Kimberly said, voice filling with unaccustomed nervous confidence. “Because they’re all dead. Weren’t you listening?”

“Don’t be so insulting. You expect me to believe-”

“You’re not talking to her,” Raine said, amused. “You’re talking to me. Sit down before you hurt yourself.”

“Absolutely not. Who do you think you are, ordering me to do anything?” Gillespie drew herself up and tried to look down on Raine – which didn’t work, because she wasn’t tall enough. “If you’re not with the Brotherhood, then you should know I have Alexander’s personal protec-”

Raine punched her in the nose.

Gillespie sat down, sudden and hard, crying out in pain with one hand cradling her face. “Ah- ahh- ow- ah!”

“Who do I think I am?” Raine grinned. “That counted as a question. Did warn you I’d break your nose. Fair’s fair.”

“Fair’s fair,” Praem echoed from the doorway. Gillespie stared at her for a second, wounded and shocked, bleeding down her face.

Raine loomed over the high priestess. “Look, Gill – can I call you Gill? Maybe you’re not scared of the gun, maybe you think this is a toy or something. It’s not, and I will shoot you in the head if you keep giving us shit. We’ve got plenty of other ways to find out what we want to know, you just happen to be the easiest. If you make it harder, we’ll take the next easiest. Get me?”

Gillespie’s eyes roved the room, as if searching for help. She settled on Kimberly and I.

“She’ll do it,” I said.

Kimberly nodded, and did her part with commendable gusto, though I suspect she didn’t need to act. “She has- she’s s-shot people before, right in front of me. Please. Please give her a reason to. I hate you.”

Gillespie straightened up, slowly, gathering her dignity and poise again, and looked us all in the eye one by one, nose bleeding. “You may address me as Catherine. What is it you want to know?”

Raine glanced at me. I was supposed to ask the question, that was the script – but I couldn’t speak, gripped by a growing cold anger inside my chest. I hadn’t even flinched when Raine had lashed out, I could only think about one thing.

What had Gillespie meant by ‘supply agreement’ – and ‘scum’?

I knew, didn’t I?

“You have a way to contact the Cult – or what’s left of them, since we tore them up. We know that,” Raine said eventually. “Kimberly came back to your Wicca happy hour, and you told your contact, because then she got hassled. Maybe you even know where they hang out these days, and you’re gonna tell us.”

“I have *a* contact, who visits me, not the other way around. I have no way of reaching them outside of that, which I cannot predict, or direct. I don’t know what it is you people want, but you’re meddling in things you don’t understand.”

“Shut up,” I hissed. “Answer the questions.”

Gillespie scowled at me.

“Who’s the contact?” Raine demanded. Gillespie crossed her arms.

“Alexander Lilburne cannot possibly be dead. Don’t take me for

some fool, I know how the world really works. Killed by some slip of a girl? Don't make me laugh, this is ridiculous. I shan't answer a single further question, and I shall call the police."

She reached for the battered cordless phone on the desk, but Praem was there first, hand on the receiver. The doll-demon stared into Gillespie's eyes, and the high priestess recoiled at what she saw there.

"What- what are-"

Raine sighed and levelled her handgun at Gillespie's head, an unimpressed smile on her face. "I wasn't bluffing, you know? Don't make this difficult."

"What are you going to do, shoot me?" Gillespie almost spat. "Here, in the middle of the city? A dozen people will hear the gunshot, and you'll never get away with it. You children have absolutely no idea how the world works, how your coddled little lives are kept safe – by people like me. You won't shoot, you can't possibly do it. Get that thing out of my face."

Raine's tongue poked out of the corner of her mouth, and for a split-second I thought I saw her finger tighten on the trigger – but that wasn't why we were here. She glanced at me, smiled sadly, and shrugged.

"I did say no killing," I muttered, cold creeping out of my chest and into my brain.

"Don't you worry, we came right prepared for that." Raine lowered her gun. "Praem, hold her down."

"What?" Gillespie swivelled in her chair. Raine dug a sock out of her jacket pocket, one that I knew was loaded with a bar of soap in the end. "No, don't you dare! You-"

"Stop," I said, barely able to get the word out. "Praem, you too. Don't touch her."

"... Heather?" Raine raised her eyebrows. "We talked about this. You don't have to watch us hit her."

I shook my head, and took a step toward Gillespie. She scowled at me like she'd found me on the underside of her shoe. "That's more like it," she muttered.

“What did you mean, when you said ‘scum?’” I asked.

She blinked at me. “I don’t recall-”

“She means me,” Kimberly blurted out, voice blurred by bitterness and suffocated anger. “People like me.”

“I most certainly do not mean you, my dear. You’re a valuable addition to the Brotherhood of the New Sun, aren’t you? You’ve found purpose, and acceptance, and something useful and important to do with your life.”

“Answer the question, or I will do to you what I did to Alexander.” My voice emerged with a shake, a strange, cold anger. It rushed through me, almost beyond my control.

“Don’t be so sanctimonious, you know exactly what I mean. The Brotherhood does good work, necessary work. Have you seen the filth-filled tent villages growing like mushrooms by the motorway? There’s no helping those people. They’re all drug addicts and illegal immigrants. You saw my coven, this night, you saw the sorts of decent, vulnerable girls those animals prey on, and now you’re blaming me for helping clear them off the streets?”

“You funnelled the homeless people to the cult.” Raine nodded slowly. “Makes sense. You look pretty non-threatening.”

Gillespie raised her chin. “As I said, necessary work. Don’t you dare look at me like that, none of you have the courage.”

I took another step toward her. “I saw dead children. In a cage.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed. “Don’t be so absurd, you saw nothing of the sort. And where? Where exactly did you see this? You, you are play-acting. Virtue signalling. Who do you expect to convince, here?”

“I’ve changed my mind. You don’t get to live.”

I moved before the others could react, before Raine could stop me, before the cold certainty abandoned me to doubt. It took only a split-second, clarity and speed born of indignant rage.

I reached out and grabbed Gillespie’s wrist.

Out.

The equation, the one I knew so well, spun into place with a

wrenching of my skull and a heaving in my guts. I grasped the dripping black levers of reality, and pulled hard.

Gillespie vanished.

I reeled away and almost fell over, clawing at the edge of the desk before Raine caught me. Blinking through stabbing headache, nose bleeding, I groped for the office's waste paper bin, into which I promptly vomited.

"Oh Goddess, oh, oh-" Kimberly was panting.

Raine helped me sit down on the floor, bin between my knees as I spat bile. I shook all over, half from the brainmath and half from adrenaline. Raine passed me tissues from a packet to wipe my bloody nose, as she gently smoothed my hair out of my face.

"You okay? Heather? Breathe slowly, yeah?"

"Ehh," I croaked. "Been better."

She handed me an almost empty bottle of water, and I sipped the dregs to wash the taste of sick from my mouth. "Gotta admit, Heather, I didn't see that one coming. Would'a brought more water along if I'd known you were gonna do that."

"You were homeless once," I croaked.

"Sure. I just thought, you know, we were meant to be bluffing?" She looked over at the now empty chair with a rueful sigh. Kimberly walked over and touched the chair's arm, then stared at me.

"That's our lead gone then," Praem intoned, and I knew it was Evelyn speaking through her.

"We are bluffing," I grumbled, blew my bloody nose into a tissue, and squeezed my eyes shut. "I can bring her back. The map. S'possible now."

"If she survives," Praem said.

"She'll be fine. As long as she closed her eyes on the way, I suppose."

Raine raised an eyebrow at me, rubbing my back. "You sent her somewhere specific, didn't you?"

I nodded. "Place I slipped to as a teenager. Windowless metal halls,

darkness, things moving. It's bad. Everywhere Outside is bad. This won't kill her. Leave her there for ten minutes, should be enough."

"Right." Raine nodded. "Right you are then."

We spent those ten minutes going through the office, just in case, though the only thing we found was Gillespie's handbag, which contained nothing incriminating or out of the ordinary. Well, Raine did that, while I sat in a heap and tried not to be sick again, and Kimberly vibrated with terror and awe.

"Time's up," Praem said, and it felt far too soon, but I nodded and closed my eyes.

"Do you need to go touch the chair?" Raine asked.

"No. I only need to concentrate. And this is going to hurt, come touch my head, please."

In truth the hyperdimensional mathematics was relatively simple, at least in theory. Now I had the map, the pathways, the vectors through which matter could pass, all I had to do was reverse the equation – but I'd never done it before. I wasn't one hundred percent sure I could bring Catherine Gillespie back.

I hadn't really been bluffing either, but I kept that to myself.

Catherine Gillespie did not deserve to live. I knew I had no right to judge, certainly not to torture her by sending her Outside, but I'd done it anyway.

Alexander may have been the head of the snake, but by himself he would have been nothing. Dark Lords only exist in fantasy stories, real people need support networks. Alexander Lilburne had willing helpers, followers, people who turned a blind eye, others bribed or bought out for the price of their humanity, along with those who rationalised evil to themselves – as Gillespie had done so openly, right to our faces.

Slamming my mind back through the equation, clenching up hard on the roiling in my guts as I pieced it together with the map, I wasn't certain I even wanted to bring her back.

Had I thrown away our only lead to Lizzie, in order to satisfy my righteous anger?

I was turning into something I didn't like very much.

“Unnn,” I grunted, grit my teeth, endured a spike of pain battering through my forehead.

I dragged the high priestess back from Outside, back to our reality.

Then I vomited into the bin again, whining, my head throbbing.

Gillespie had fared far worse.

She was curled up in a ball on the floor, panting and shaking, cringing in on herself like a wounded insect. Perhaps she’d found a corner in which to wedge herself, out there. Her face had turned bone pale, eyes wide as saucers, makeup running from her tears. Strange sticky white dust covered her shoulder and one arm, where some Outside creature had brushed against her, investigated this terrified fragile ape. She’d lost control of her bladder, too.

Her eyes whirled between us, sanity hanging by a thread.

“You deserved that,” Kimberly hissed. Raine just rubbed my back, shaking her head, not even bothering to level her gun at the broken woman I’d brought back.

“Can you speak?” I croaked, quashing my self-directed horror. I’d done this thing, now I had to make it worthwhile. For Lozzie.

“I-I-I c-can! Yes! Y-yes. I’ll tell you- anything- anything. Yes, y-yes.” Gillespie lurched to her feet, unsteady and shaking all over. Raine rose too and covered her with the gun, but there was no need. The high priestess stared down at the sticky dust on her shoulder and arm, an empty thousand-yard stare glassing over her eyes. “Oh. Oh G-goddess. Where was that? Where- An illusion, you- no, no that wasn’t real, can’t be real-”

“Do you want to go back there?” I asked.

“No! Please! Please no, not again.” She scrabbled for her handbag on the desk. “They gave me money- paid me well. Lots of money. I’ll give- give- give-” Her open purse spilled from her fingers as she tossed banknotes on the desk.

I sighed. “Tell us about the Cult.”

“Cult. The Brotherhood of the New Sun. Yes. Yes, I-”

She told us everything, most of it both useless and horrifying, about the supply line she’d established for the Cult, luring vulnerable homeless people with promises of help or shelter. She babbled

every secret she had in sheer animal desire to never, ever go back to the place I'd sent her. I'd broken this woman, tortured her, and while I managed to keep my expression neutral, self-disgust boiled inside me.

She deserved it, part of me whispered, and it was *right*.

But I still felt sick.

"T-the visits, that wasn't a lie. I-it's only once every few weeks, and never the same time. I can't lead you to them, I don't know where, please- please don't-"

"Who visits you?" Raine asked. "Give us a name, or a description."

"Stack," Kimberly said.

"Amy Stack, yes, a-a s-sort of thug, or something. I swear, I don't really know-"

"We know of her," Raine said with a nod. "Keep going."

"She came here last week, and of course, I told her about Kimberly returning. She didn't care, though. She was asking after Alexander's younger sister, but I don't know anything about that either, I swear, I swear I'd never heard of the girl before. I do have an emergency phone number. I'm not supposed to ever call it, ever, only if the police catch wind of- of- you know, yes, yes, you know. For an emergency only."

"Write it down," Raine said. "And it better be correct, or ... " She trailed off, with a meaningful head tilt toward me.

"O-of course, of course, y-yes, yes. You can have the number, here, here, take it!"

Gillespie had to write it three times before she could control her shaking hands enough to form legible numbers. Raine tucked the slip of paper into her jacket.

"This isn't enough," I muttered.

"I swear, I-I- I don't have anything more to give! Please-"

"Hey, you heard the lady," Raine said. "She's in charge here. She says it's not enough, it's not enough."

"That's not what I ... " I murmured, and trailed off. I'd meant this

wasn't enough to justify what I'd done. A phone number, was that all?

"They had a- I mean, I know of a couple of places in the city where they did ... unsavoury things. They might have ... retreated there?" Gillespie said. She was blinking rapidly, her eyes wild and all over the place, wracking her brains for any scraps that would save her hide. "One was on that- uh- that terrible council estate, in the condemned tower, uh-"

In the corner of my vision, I saw the blood drain from Kimberly's face. Her mouth hung open in silent horror.

"Glasswick tower?" Raine asked. "The Cult have a hideout in Glasswick tower?"

"Yes, yes that's the name." Gillespie nodded, smiling and desperate, so very thankful. "Glasswick tower."

and less pleasant places –

6.7

“Bloody unlikely there’s anyone up there,” Evelyn said.

Exhausted by extrovert acting and hasty brainmath, coming down off the high of strangled righteous anger, and still choked by the oily toxin of self-disgust, I managed only to lift my eyes across the kitchen table to where Evelyn sat.

“How’d you figure that?” Raine asked for me.

Evelyn frowned at her, then at me, then over at Twil.

“Anybody? Really? Am I the only one with two brain cells left?” Evelyn huffed. “The Sharrowford Cult wasn’t naked screaming madmen, they were otherwise normal people, with homes, jobs.” She flung an irritated gesture toward Kimberly, who was still sitting quietly in the corner where we’d deposited her. The untouched mug of tea in Kimberly’s hands betrayed her nerves, and she flinched so badly she almost spilt some. She quickly averted her eyes to avoid her share of Evelyn’s glare.

“It’s alright, she doesn’t bite,” Raine said to Kim.

“I certainly do,” Evelyn snapped. “Why would these vermin ‘hide out’ in an abandoned building? This isn’t a cheap murder mystery novel or noir film. We’re looking for Amy Stack, and guess what, she probably lives in suburban Manchester.”

Raine raised her eyebrows and pulled a ‘fair enough’ face.

Twil laughed. “Evee, what are you talking about? They had a *castle*.”

Evelyn let out a slow sigh and fixed Twil with a capital-L look.

“What?” Twil spread her arms and tilted her chair back on two legs with perfect balance. At least one of us was in high spirits. “They did! Why not Glasswick tower block? S’not where I’d go, I’d go get lost in the woods, but these people are wackjobs, right?” She tapped her temple.

An internal struggle passed across Evelyn's face. I wasn't privy to what she and Twil had talked about while Kimberly and I had spent two hours pretending to be Wiccan girlfriends, but I recognised Evelyn fighting to swallow one of her usual scathing responses.

"Go on then," Twil said. "Call me a dumbarse, tell me why I'm wrong."

"You are not only astoundingly stupid, you're capable of missing things right under your own nose," Evelyn said, then sank into a very private glower. Oh dear, I suspected that comment had more meaning than Twil knew. "They had a castle because they were doing magical experiments, in their own pocket dimension, hidden from me. They wouldn't be able to hide for long in an old tower block. It's useless."

"I told you already," I said, and bore Evelyn's glare with ease for once. "Tenny reacted, when she saw the tower. She didn't like it at all."

"... oh, *fuck*, alright," Evelyn spat, and all but threw her empty mug at the tabletop. It bounced once, and Raine snatched the mug out of the air before it could shatter on the floor, muttering 'mad skills' under her breath.

"I don't want to believe it either," I said. "It's too silly."

"It's absurd," Evelyn said through gritted teeth. "That's what it is."

That was all I could muster for the moment. I screwed my eyes shut in a vain attempt to control the lingering headache inside my skull. All I wanted right now was to curl up under my bed covers and forget this entire evening, shut out the echoes of pain and the awful awareness of the line I'd crossed. None of the others seemed to notice the difference. Even Raine treated me as if nothing had changed.

"Surprised you didn't know about the place, right next door to you and all," Twil said. I eased my eyes open to find she was addressing Kimberly.

"I-I didn't. Nothing." She shook her head. "I knew the castle, that was it."

"I find that exceptionally hard to believe," Evelyn said. Kimberly froze up and swallowed on a dry throat.

She'd been white faced and quiet since the moment Gillespie had finally spilt the beans about Glasswick tower. Huddling in the back of Raine's car on the return journey, the only thing Kimberly had said was a tiny, terrified plea to please let her come with us, that she couldn't go home, not now, she had nowhere to go, they'll get her and they'll-

"Course you can come with us," Raine had said, not missing a beat. "Wouldn't dream of sending you off alone, not now."

At least that was one problem less, no need to coax or threaten poor abused Kimberly into coming back with us. I'd almost rolled my eyes to hear Raine play knight in shining armour for another girl, but there was no real jealousy in my heart. I didn't have the emotional bandwidth.

She hadn't taken much convincing to come inside either. To her eyes, number 12 Barnsloew Drive was another run-down Victorian redbrick in some forgotten Sharrowford street. She wasn't informed enough, important enough, involved enough, to know about the Saye house – and she'd been coerced into much creepier places before. Evelyn had glanced her up and down in the front room, grunted, and told Raine to park her in a corner.

"I believe her," I said, summoning myself back to the present, tearing myself away from the guilt. The last thing we needed was Evelyn going off on one. "Kim?"

"Y-yes? Yes, Heather?"

"You've never been in Glasswick tower, and you don't know what the cult did or does there? Tell me the truth." My words felt so fragile, having to play both enforcer and diplomat, Kimberly's magical idol and Lozzie's only link.

"Yes, I promise. I've never been in there, I don't know anything about it. If I did I would tell you. I would tell you, Heather."

Evelyn grumbled in her throat, unhappy but disarmed for now.

"Maybe Alexander's in there?" Twil suggested.

"He's dead. I killed him," I said.

She shrugged wide. "Seriously? We never saw a corpse, and the big fucko zombie woman made off like a ghost afterward, right? Tch, it's like you lot don't even have basic instincts. If you don't see the

kill, it might have run off.”

“Don’t say that. Twil, don’t say that.” I shook my head and sighed. “That is the last thought I needed preying on my mind right now, please.”

Raine squeezed my shoulders. “Hey, Heather, why don’t we go upstairs and get you changed out of this outfit? You feel pretty cold still, could do with some thicker layers, yeah?”

“No, not yet, I ...” I caught Evelyn’s expression – hard, staring, taking Twil all too seriously.

“Think I’m right?” Twil asked with a smirk. “See? I do have good ideas.”

“Unlikely,” Evelyn murmured, then cleared her throat. “Mages are hard to kill, but they’re not invincible.”

“Heather put him through a stone wall,” Raine said. “That’s a lot of broken bones.”

“That wasn’t stone,” I reminded her.

“Good as. Through a stone wall, down like five stories, and then a hard landing – splat. Not even counting what she did to him first. If the bastard lived, he’d have no bone unbroken, no muscle unpulped. You’d be healing from that for years, even with magic to keep his brain fluid from slopping out his ears.”

“Yeah, true, he’d be a sack of mincemeat now,” Twil said. “But maybe that’s why they need an abandoned building. Keep him hidden. Wouldn’t take him to a regular hospital, would they?”

“Unlikely,” Evelyn grunted. She stared at nothing, eyes far away.

“Don’t,” I hissed. Raine squeezed my shoulders again.

Evelyn drew herself up, sharp and resolved. “The last time we confronted these people in their lair, we were completely unprepared. Miracle none of us died. This time we’re going to do it right, or not at all. We’re in no rush, we’re not rescuing Lozzie – she’s popping in and out of reality somewhere, doing God knows what, so forget her.” She tapped the table. “*If* Alexander’s blood-sodden corpse is in that building – which it isn’t, because they won’t have anything in there at all, and he is *dead* – I’m going to bury him in a mountain of rubble. I’ll demolish Glasswick tower

myself. It's well overdue."

"With ... magic?" Twil blinked at her. "You can do that?"

"In theory."

That raised of an entire level crossing worth of red flags. "Evee, you can't be serious," I said.

"Deadly serious. We do this right."

"Evee, they demolish buildings like that with explosives. Careful explosives. And they evacuate the surroundings first. None of us understands the first thing about controlled explosions." I gaped at her. "Uh, unless ... " I glanced up at Raine.

She burst out laughing. "Heather, that is so flattering. But no, blowing stuff up isn't in my skill set."

Evelyn frowned at her. "Don't lie. You built a bomb once. I watched you do it."

"... I did?" Raine looked bemused. "Oh, the petrol bomb. Come on, I made that with a plastic bag and stolen diesel, and it didn't work. Teenage stupidity doesn't count."

"Evee, I'm serious," I pushed on. "I think demolishing a building might be a little beyond us."

"How hard can it be?" She scowled at me.

"Pretty hard. One brick wrong and Glasswick tower could fall and hit the other tower, or fall on people's homes. And there's bound to be a few homeless people camped in there, too. Evee, no."

"Yeah, uh, look," Raine cleared her throat. "I know I have pretty flexible ethics, and I'm all for anything that keeps us out of danger, but we're not gonna take the risk of killing a thousand people with a magically induced industrial accident."

"Please don't-" Kimberly squeaked, swallowed, tried again. "Please don't destroy my home."

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes.

"I could go check the place out," Twil said. "Poke my head inside, run up the stairs. It'll take like ten minutes tops once I'm there. Anybody freaky shows up I'll knock 'em sideways and we'll be

done.”

Evelyn looked at her like she was an idiot. “Do you have the memory of a goldfish?”

“Eh?”

“Do you not recall the sorts of things in their little pocket dimension? You want to get eaten that badly, hm?”

“Yeah.” Raine nodded. “Even without that, the inside of Glasswick’ll be a nightmare. Even for you, big bad wolf. No lights, lots of blind corners, those big stairwells. Too many angles, too many hiding places. A gun would be the least of our worries. Kim, you weren’t the Cult’s only trainee mage, not by a long shot, right?”

Kimberly swallowed. “Yes, that’s right. At least three others, t-that I knew of.”

“I rest my case.”

“What could they do?” Twil laughed. “I’m invincible! None of you have to come wi-”

“You are not fucking going in there!” Evelyn exploded. Of all of us, only Raine didn’t flinch. Kimberly nearly fell out of her chair. Even Twil herself jerked back in shock as Evelyn shouted at her. “Not now, not later, not alone, not with us, not at all. I will have Praem tie you to that fucking chair with steel wire if I have to.”

“Alright, alright.” Twil put her hands up. “Fuck. Be cool. No need to shout. If you care that much, alright, I won’t.”

“I shouted because your idiocy is only outstripped by your ... ” She huffed and screwed her eyes up, hand to her forehead.

“It’s okay, Eevee, we know,” I said. I’m not certain Twil did know. “And I agree. Nobody goes in Glasswick tower. We’re not doing that all over again.”

“If not me, why not send Praem?” Twil asked gently, words on eggshells. “She’s ... well.”

“Don’t you dare say expendable,” I hissed.

Twil winced. “S’not what I meant. I mean like, she’s, you know, you can just put her in a new body if you need to, right?”

Evelyn huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, scowling down at the tabletop. "I'll think of something else. But we're not setting foot in there. Absolutely not."

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Praem already had her own task to carry out, complete with its own risks, and we waited for her to return home before we placed the phone call. Just in case.

I'd retreated from the crowded kitchen to the sanctuary of upstairs, the familiar textures of wooden floorboards and old rugs under my feet, with the intention of shedding the skirt and tights, wiping the foundation off my face, peeling myself out of the sticky, uncomfortable shell I'd worn all evening. I'd never been to a party, not a real one, but I assumed this was what the aftermath might be like if one had a very bad time indeed, bedraggled and upset with oneself.

Raine found me ten minutes later. Still in all my clothes, squinting into the bathroom mirror as I tried to scrub the foundation away from around my eye, wincing as the bruise still stung underneath.

"Hey you," she said, came up behind me and gently caught my hand. "Hey, hey, let me do that. Soap and water won't do the job so well, you need some of the good shit. Here." She grabbed one of the bottles from by the sink and sprayed the contents onto the wet flannel I'd been using, turned me around to face her, and began wiping the makeup off my face. Gentle fingers traced my cheekbones.

I felt like a small girl having her grubby face cleaned, and for a reason I couldn't admit yet, I felt awful.

"Heather? Hey, it's okay. You really pulled it off tonight, you know? It was hard, but it's over now."

"I'm fine." I shook my head. "Well, no, that's a lie, I'm not fine. I'm ... emotionally exhausted."

"Let's get your face clean first, yeah?" Raine set back to work on me. "I was getting Kim a bit more settled, that's why I was a few minutes. She's freaking out 'cos all her stuff's back in her flat and she's gotta go to work in the morning. I'm gonna give her a lift though. She'll be alright here overnight."

“Mm.”

I allowed Raine to lead me over the creaking floorboards to our bedroom, to the fresh pajama bottoms and a blanket we'd left draped over the old iron radiator. I craved the heat, but somehow I knew it wouldn't touch the ice inside me. I went to sit down, to tug the skirt off, but Raine stopped me, lifted one of my hands by the fingers, looked me up and down, and smiled.

“What?”

“You look really good in that getup. Those tights, oooh.” She pulled an approving face. “Killing me.”

I sighed, not up to blushing or feeling flustered right now. “Raine, I was vomiting an hour ago. I feel disgusting.”

“When we've found Lozzie, and things quieten down again, we're gonna both get dressed up and go on a real date. Just you and me, screw everything else for a day. We could go to that noodle place, the fancy one in the shopping centre, and that bookstore you like, and anything else you fancy.”

“Raine, anything-”

“Shh.” She pressed a finger to my lips. “You don't get to say no to this one. I gotta get you in colourful tights again, 'cos it makes me randy.”

“Raine.” I rolled my eyes. I knew what she was up to, but it did the trick. The cold in my chest finally began to thaw.

She helped me out of the skirt and tights, rubbed my freezing cold feet, and I wriggled back into the warm pajama bottoms as she wrapped my shoulders in the blanket. I closed my eyes and luxuriated in the heat for a moment, or at least I tried to.

“Snug as a bug in a rug,” Raine said.

The words spilled from me before I could stop them. My voice didn't shake or shiver, only sounded hollow. “I shouldn't have done that.”

“Heather? Done what?”

“I crossed a line tonight. One I didn't even know was there.”

“Heather? Hey, hey.” She sat next to me on the bed, arm around my

shoulders. "I'm not gonna pretend I don't know what you're talking about, but the last thing you should do is beat yourself up about it." I met her eyes, silently sceptical, and she replied with a smirk. "Come on, I know you inside out by now. You feel bad about what we did to that Gillespie woman."

"I tortured her. Me. I did that."

Raine let out a big sigh and her smirk dialled down. "I was about to do the exact same thing. Who knows, maybe a trip Outside was less traumatic in the long run than me whacking her in the stomach a dozen times."

I shook my head. "I sent her Outside. I tortured her with an experience I've been through. Self-defence, that was one thing, but ... how could I?"

"Hey," Raine said. "She deserved it."

"I know she did," I whined. "I know. She deserves worse. She should be locked up, for life. But I tortured a person."

"You were justified. You had good bloody reason. We had to find out what she knew, and she'll never see any other punishment for what she did with the cult. If it was up to me, she'd have gotten off a lot less lightly."

"It wasn't *lightly*, Raine. I broke that woman." I felt an awful choke in the back of my throat. "How can you not see this? You're a philosophy student, you've studied ethics. Is torture ever acceptable? Is it? I did it without thinking, in the heat of the moment, and it was an awful thing to do."

I buried my face in her shoulder and tried to shut out the world.

"So you made a mistake," she said, in a tone of voice that would have made more sense if I'd left the oven on or spilled coffee on a carpet.

"Ugh," I groaned.

"Everybody makes mistakes. I'm not great at judging these things, it's up to you. If you think you did wrong then that counts as a mistake. Learn from it, think it over, so next time you'll act differently. And hey, when it came time to think carefully, you didn't kill her."

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I didn't kill Gillespie, that much was true, but it hadn't been an easy decision.

Cringing up at me from the chair in the back office of *Grey Magicks*, she'd stared in utter terror when I'd pronounced her sentence.

"You're going to leave Sharrowford. Tonight," I'd said.

"Leave? I- no- no no please not again-"

"Shut up." My lips still tasted of vomit and my head rang. Raine had to hold me up, arm around my waist, but I felt no less vengeful for being weak. "I don't mean where I sent you. I mean leave the city. The cult gave you money, didn't they? I don't care how much you've already spent, or how much debt you have, or anything like that. Leave. I don't care if you die in a ditch somewhere. If I ever see you again in Sharrowford, I will send you Outside, and nobody will bring you back."

"Oh, I- t-thank you, yes, yes I promise, I won't ever come back. I promise, just- yes."

"It's better than you deserve!" Kimberly hissed at her. I jerked a hand at her to shut her up too, this wasn't her fight anymore.

"What if she talks to the cult?" Praem intoned – Evelyn speaking through her. "We can't just let her go, don't be stupid."

"Yes we can," I spat.

"I- y-yes ... m-my husband, he-"

"I don't care. No sob stories. You're leaving."

"Heather, we need some kind of insurance here," Raine murmured softly.

"We're letting her live," I said. "I'm not- I'm not- oh, fine. You want insurance?"

I forced my feet underneath me, still shaking from the brainmath, shoving Raine's help away and bracing myself with the corner of the desk. Gillespie stared at me. Her eyes went wide. I reached out one hand toward her and she screamed, tried to scramble away until Praem caught her, tears streaming down her face. She babbled nonsense, pleading, begging, tearing at her own clothes.

"Shut up!" I shouted at her, my throat raw, and lowered my hand.
"You see? You see that? I don't have to explain myself."

"Saw," Praem said. That was her, not Evelyn.

"Take her mobile phone if we have to, take her ... does she have an organiser, a phone book in her bag? Do you?"

"Yes, yes! Take it, take it!"

Praem did as I suggested, stripping phone and other important things from Gillespie's handbag on the desk. "Praem, you can go with her to her home, make sure she leaves. Tonight." Gillespie had fallen to her knees again. I stared down at her. "You understand what I'm trying to do? Because I'm trying really hard to win this argument with myself. If you talk to anyone from the cult, you set foot in Sharroford again, you do anything, anything – I'll send you back Outside."

"I understand! I do! I promise, please- what if- what if the Brotherhood-"

"That's why you're leaving."

"The cult gave you money, yeah?" Raine asked slowly. "How much money?"

"I ... uh ... e-enough. W-why?"

Raine smirked. "Just curious. Praem, she got a chequebook in that bag?"

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"I'm gonna make a guess, Heather, a bit of a shot in the dark," Raine said. My head was still nestled against her shoulder, and I felt the words vibrate through her chest.

"Mm?"

"Are you afraid of changing? Becoming something you don't recognise anymore?"

"That's hardly a guess," I said, and sat up so I could see her face properly. "And no, for once you're wrong." I gave her a little smile, the best I could manage. "Killing Alexander didn't change me. This won't change me either. It's ... who I was all along, I suppose."

“That doesn’t have to be a bad thing, not unless you make it that way.”

“Says the woman who’s killed several people right in front of me.”

She grinned and shrugged. Couldn’t help it, could she? “Hey, when it works, it works.”

I sighed. “Maybe we should have killed her. All those homeless people ... every one of those zombies, every one was a person. Maybe that’s what bothers me more. Removing one exploitative monster – even Alexander – doesn’t change the world, doesn’t affect anything, all that real horror going on out there.” I gestured vaguely at the window, at Sharrowford beyond. “It doesn’t make a difference. I can’t even save one person.”

“Yes, you can. You have. And we will.”

“I hope so,” I muttered.

= =

“You originally from Sharrowford, then?” Twil asked Kim, as we all sat about in the kitchen waiting for Praem.

Evelyn had left the door open to her magical workshop, serenading us with the sounds of her stomping about and leafing through books. Raine kicked out a chair next to me and put her feet up, then dug out the slip of paper with Gillespie’s ‘emergency number’ and tossed it on the table.

A few figures on a torn piece of note paper, and I’d tortured a woman for this. I hugged the blanket tighter around my shoulders, but at least I didn’t feel so damned cold anymore. Raine produced her phone and muttered something about checking the number.

“Um, yes. Born and bred.” Kimberly tried a smile, but it didn’t last long.

“Where’s all your family about then?” Twil said.

“Both my parents died, six years ago, and five years ago. My dad went first, and my mum didn’t outlive him by much. They couldn’t live without each other.”

“Aww. Sad. Yeah, yeah I get it,” Twil said, nodding. She reached over and awkwardly nudged Kimberly in the shoulder.

“It was a fifth of my life ago. It’s fine.”

“It seemed to me that you had plenty of family tonight,” I said, dragging myself away from dark thoughts. “You should go back to the coven again.”

“I don’t ... I don’t know if I can, I ... I don’t know.”

I sighed and let myself sag against the table. All I wanted to do was curl up in bed, to not think, but this night wasn’t over yet. “Do I have to command you? Is that what you need?”

“Heather, oi.” Twil frowned at me. I shrugged.

“You should have seen her,” I said. “She was a completely different person.”

Raine looked up from her phone and grinned. “Maybe you should be the new high priestess. A hostile takeover.”

“No, I ... I couldn’t. But maybe you’re right.” Kimberly stared into her untouched mug of tea. “Jerry can’t do everything on his own, maybe ... with Cathy gone ... ”

When Kimberly didn’t resume her train of thought out loud, Raine clonked her phone down on the table and stretched her arms above her head. “Well, it’s a Sharrowford number, for sure, and it’s real. Shows up in listings and stuff, but not who or what it’s registered to. Could be anything.”

“You think the old bitch might have lied?” Twil asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “She was too afraid to lie to me.”

Raine reached over and squeezed my shoulder.

“Mmm,” Twil grunted, shrugged, then turned to Kim again. “Why’d you like being Wiccan, anyway? What’s it like?”

“Why are *you* so interested in her life story?” Evelyn drawled from the doorway to her workshop. She had a face like a thunderstorm. “You know what she was.”

“Ey?”

“Evee,” Raine sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Kimberly squeaked “I-”

“Et tu?” Evelyn snapped at her, rattling off Latin at sudden speed.
“Quid de te? Intellige quae dico?”

“I-I don’t- I only know a few words, only the things I needed for the spells I was taught. That’s all, I promise.”

Evelyn stared at her like she was trying to bore holes in Kimberly’s head, then grunted a dismissal. She shoved discarded mugs out of the way with her walking stick, unrolled a piece of canvas from under her arm, and laid it down on the table. A magic circle drawn in hasty marker pen stared back at us, and set a tingling feeling in the back of my skull.

“Precautions.” Evelyn held her hand out. “Whose phone are we using for this?”

Raine’s phone, apparently, which she carefully deposited in the centre of the magic circle.

“Who does the talking?” Twil asked.

“Me obviously,” Evelyn grunted as she sat down, rubbing her thigh where her prosthetic attached. “I’m the only one who can credibly threaten them over a phone line.”

“Can you ... ” Kimberly asked. “Can you really do that?”

Evelyn gave her a withering stare. “What do you think?”

I caught Evelyn’s eyes, asking the same question without words. She sighed and shook her head ever so slightly. So, we were powerless.

Praem returned a few minutes later, a smart click as she unlocked the front door and let herself in. Raine went to check she locked up again properly, and Praem glided into the kitchen. She took her usual place a few paces behind Evelyn.

“Success, or not?” Evelyn grunted at her.

“Success,” Praem intoned.

“In my account?”

“Success.”

“Went off without a hitch?” Raine asked, coming back in and grinning at the doll-demon. “She really did it, huh? How much did she have in her bank account?”

Praem's musical lilt all but sung the number out. "Thirty three thousand seven hundred and twenty two pounds."

None of us said anything for a long moment. I believe my mouth hung open. Evelyn snorted, Raine laughed.

"That is so much fucking money. Fuck," Twil said, gaping at us. "What- how-"

"Thirty thousand quid. Bugger me." Raine grinned.

"What are you going to do with it all?" Kimberly asked.

"That is so much fucking money," Twil repeated.

"It's not that much," Evelyn tutted.

"Yeah, and you're rich. You don't get to weigh in," Twil said. "Fuck. Fuck."

"We could buy a boat!" Raine laughed.

"It goes to Shelter," I said, gathering my wits. I put some steel into my voice. "We can keep a little – a *little* – but it goes to Shelter."

"Who? What?" Twil blinked.

"The homeless charity," Evelyn said, nodding. "She's right."

"Oh. Oh, right."

"And- and the Trussell people, the food banks," I added. "Gillespie preyed on the homeless. Her money goes to helping them. None of us are anywhere near that desperate."

Nobody argued, thank God. Thirty thousand was more than I'd expected. We had to be very, very careful with this. No time to think it over right now though.

We turned all the lights on. No sense doing this in the dark, Raine said. No sense making this more creepy than it had to be. Carefully, Evelyn reached over and set Raine's mobile phone to speaker mode, then punched in the number, and let it ring.

Five rings, six rings – seven, eight, still not going to answer-phone.

"Please, please," I whispered.

"It is like, almost midnight," Twil hissed. "Whoever has it might be asleep."

“Or dead,” Raine offered. “Might be we slapped ‘em back in the castle.”

“Or they’re not stupid enough to fall for this,” Evelyn sighed, and reached forward to kill the call.

Click.

The call connected. Evelyn whipped her hand back as a voice whispered out from the phone’s speaker.

“Who is this?”

Soft and measured, drained of affect, a gauze-thin layer of supreme detachment over the promise of quick violence. My stomach clenched up with instinctive recognition.

“Stack,” I mouthed silently.

“Bingo,” Raine whispered, wiggling her eyebrows.

In the corner of my eye I noticed Kimberly tense up in the way a small animal might do. Evelyn nodded her understanding, took a breath, drew herself up, and raised her chin.

“This is Evelyn Saye. You know who I am, and I know who you are, and you know that if you put the phone down I can hurt you much faster than you can escape. Understand? Are you listening to me, Amy Stack?”

Silence. Slow, brooding silence.

“I hear you,” Amy Stack said eventually. Like she didn’t even care.

“You’ve been tracking Lauren Lilburne. She’s been back to this side of reality. You’re going to tell me how you’re doing it, or where to find her.” Evelyn raised her eyes to meet mine. I nodded, heart in my throat.

Another long pause. So long that Raine raised an eyebrow and Twil bared her teeth.

“Mm,” Stack grunted. “Can’t tell you that.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” Evelyn snapped.

“Can’t,” Stack repeated. She drew in a long breath and sighed slowly, the sound distorted by the phone connection. A creak – settling into a chair, or back on her bed? Had the call woken her? “I

can't tell you that, because it's not Lauren we're trying to catch."

"Not Lauren?" I blurted out. Evelyn shot me a pinched frown, but I'd convinced myself I knew what I was doing.

"... miss Morell. No, if you've seen the same thing we have, it's not Lauren Lilburne."

"She could still be in there," I hissed.

Silence.

"Who is 'we'?" Raine asked.

"Mister Edward Lilburne and his associates."

Evelyn barked a derisive laugh. "Another cult. Don't put on airs, you sad little thing."

"As you say."

My patience ran thin as stretched skin. Was *this* what I'd tortured a human being for, this stonewalling? Evelyn and Raine were busy making silent eyes at each other, debating how to proceed, while Twil scowled at the phone as if it had offended her. Kimberly was no help at all, curling smaller and smaller on her chair in the corner.

"I need you to talk to me, Stack," I said, summoning up the shredded reserves of my determination. "I tortured a woman today, I sent her Outside and brought her back, because I thought she might lead me to Lizzie. And right now I think you're the next link. I don't care what I have to ... "

The words died in my throat. Instinct told me Stack didn't care about threats.

Another long silence before she spoke again, reptile thoughts at reptile speed.

"I need to talk to my boss," she said. "I'm going to have to put the phone down."

"Oh no you don't," Evelyn hissed. "You tell me right now, exactly what you people have been up to again in my city."

"Mr Lilburne may decide to share certain facts with you," Stack said. "Otherwise I wouldn't suggest I ask him. And he's too much of

a coward to talk to any of you himself. I'll call you back on this number, likely within fifteen minutes. Do we have a deal?"

"... deal," I mouthed, nodding. "Deal," Raine whispered. Evelyn grit her teeth. Twil shrugged, Kim stayed silent.

"Deal," Evelyn said out loud.

The call disconnected. None of us spoke for several seconds, until Raine shook herself and blew out a long breath. "What's the odds on her actually calling us back?"

"Slim," Evelyn grunted.

"It's worth a try," I said, throat tight.

"It's a bloody good thing I have this in place." Evelyn reached forward and tapped the magic circle on the piece of canvas. "Her boss is probably about to try something stupid. This is a fool's errand. Best case, she feeds us a pack of lies. Our next step is Glasswick tower, but fuck me if I know how."

"I," Praem intoned.

Everyone looked at her, but Praem stared straight ahead.

"Was that meant to be you stepping forward?" Evelyn asked. "Yes, for your information, of course I've thought of using you. What do you think you're here for?"

"Going anyway," Praem said. Evelyn frowned at her.

"For Lozzie?" I asked.

Praem turned to stare at me, but said nothing. I nodded a silent thank you. Raine chuckled softly and shook her head, opened her mouth to speak, when the phone on the table rang softly and made me jump. Evelyn put a finger to her lips, waited a beat, and pressed the answer call button.

"It's me," Stack's voice floated from the phone's speaker.

"You again, indeed." Evelyn eyed the magic circle, tension plain on her face, but nothing started glowing or hissing or sparking, my vision didn't swim and my head didn't hurt any more than it already did.

"My boss has decided it's better you're informed than not."

“Oh, lucky us,” Twil sneered.

“ ... I don’t recognise that voice,” Stack said.

“You wanna get to know it, bitch?” Twil asked.

Evelyn swiped a finger at Twil, a silent shut-the-hell-up gesture.

“Never you mind who that is. Now why would your boss want to share anything with us at all? Convince me this isn’t a trap, if you can.”

“Better you deal with this than we have to,” Stack said. “Mr Edward is a much more sensible leader than his late nephew. Less ideological, more practical. Terrified of everything. Whatever it is wandering around Sharrowford and the surrounding countryside, if you want it, you’re welcome to it.”

“It is Lizzie,” I hissed.

“No, it’s not. I’ve seen it up close. It’s a passable facsimile at a distance, but it’s not Lauren Lilburne. It’s pretending to be her.”

A spark of dark hope kindled in my chest, but I couldn’t believe it, not from this source. “You’ve seen her?”

“That’s a lie!” Kimberly said. “I’ve seen her too, I know it’s her. It looks like her!” She clamped a hand over her mouth, wide-eyed.

“ ... is that who I think it is?” Stack asked softly.

“You leave her alone, slaphead,” Raine said, low and dangerous. “Or I’ll be the thing going bump in the night on your skull.”

“Mm,” Stack grunted. “She’s wrong. It’s not Lauren. It visited us, in broad daylight, to speak with Mister Lilburne, except it didn’t say anything that made sense.”

“What exactly did she say?” I asked, and could almost feel the shrug from the other end of the phone.

“Nonsense words. Nothing with any meaning, like a old person with advanced Alzheimer’s. Then it left.”

“Where’d it visit you?” Evelyn asked. “In Sharrowford? Over in Manchester? Where are you, exactly?”

“Nice try.” Stack’s tone said it wasn’t a nice try at all. Evelyn snorted.

“How do I find her?” I asked. “How did you find she’d gone to Kimberly’s flat?”

“Mister Lilburne is unwilling to share his techniques.”

“You-”

“But,” Stack said, soft and affectless as all her speech – but something new lurked behind her words. “Pretty sure it’s the same method he used to to detect your extra-dimensional messenger. Back in the autumn, I believe?”

“Maisie’s messenger?” I breathed. “You have a way of picking up things entering our reality from Outside, don’t you?”

“I don’t know. I’m no magician.”

We all shared a glance with each other. Evelyn grit her teeth and shook her head, powerless over the phone line for all her threats and bluster.

“I think it’s looking for things from Lozzie’s life. Locations. People. Maybe trying to imitate her better, who knows.”

“Is that your boss speaking, or you?” Raine asked. She must have picked up the same undertone I heard.

A very long moment of silence. I half-thought she’d put the phone down without us realising it.

“Let’s keep this line of communication open. If he ... ” She paused. “If we detect it again, we’ll call this number. You catch her, you let us know.”

“We’ll let you know both bull and shit, skinhead,” Raine said, a smirk in her voice.

“Wait,” Evelyn growled. “Glasswick tower. What do you know about it?”

“Glasswick tower? Wouldn’t go there if I wanted to keep my skin. Alexander Lilburne had a project in there, something ugly. Needed a few bodies for it. I never went up.”

“Are there any of you lot left in there? Any of your idiot ‘Brotherhood’?”

“We’re not with them anymore. That’s all.”

“You tell us-”

“That’s all. Good hunting.”

and less pleasant places –

6.8

Sleep lay light on my consciousness, despite the late hour and the exhaustion of a long and difficult evening; when Evelyn knocked on our bedroom door, Raine was the one who roused herself to answer. She disentangled herself from my arms and clambered out of bed, but I followed her up the steps of lighter slumber too. I rolled over under the covers, grumpy in a deprived animal way at Raine's sudden absence. I groped for my phone.

"Evee?" Raine whispered. She angled herself to block the faint light from the hallway.

My phone's back-light blinded me, and I read the time through a squint. Barely four hours of sleep. "S'five thirty in the morning," I groaned.

"That it is," Evelyn said from the doorway.

Cold tension in her voice made me sit up in bed, rubbing at my puffy eyes. Raine tried to usher Evelyn out into the corridor. "Hey, Heather, go back to sleep, you need it. I'll be right back, okay?"

"No you won't," Evelyn grunted. "And Heather deserves to see this too. May as well show everybody at once, I'm not running through this multiple bloody times."

"See what?" I asked. "Evee, what's wrong? Have you not been to bed?"

Evelyn shook her head. She looked how I felt, with an added layer of tightly controlled worry around her eyes, mouth set straight, knuckles white from gripping the handle of her walking stick too hard.

"I sent Praem to the tower block."

"Evee, Evee, Evee," Raine sighed and smiled, shaking her head. "You said you'd wait at least another day. We're all exhausted. 'Cept for Twil, I guess."

"I couldn't sleep. Thought I may as well do something useful. Deal with it."

"Alright. Dealt with, forgiven, no worries. Now what? What'd she find up there?"

Evelyn hesitated.

"Evee?" I prompted. Her worry was infectious.

"The busses aren't running this time of night. It took Praem a while to reach Glasswick on foot. I've already sent her up, inside, seen it all for myself."

"Cultists?" Raine asked.

"No, I ... nothing alive. You both need to see." She glanced at me. "You especially."

"Evee, what's up there?" I said.

Evelyn swallowed, a chill passing over her face. "I have only theories."

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"Thought you said she was already up in the tower?" Twil asked.

She squinted downward, at the contents of a half-full inflatable paddling pool on the floor of Evelyn's magical workshop – at the Praem's-eye-view in the still water.

Praem was currently looking at the boarded-up front entrance to Glasswick tower, lit by distant orange street-lighting. The view through her eyes was crystal clear, but quite disorienting.

Evelyn's remote viewing setup was barely believable, but I reminded myself I'd witnessed far weirder things. I'd seen all this the first time she'd ridden Praem at a distance, but I'd never watched it working before.

A child's two-tone blue paddling pool, filled about halfway, with a magic circle written in permanent marker onto the plastic itself, maddened black scrawl extending below the waterline. A delicate ring of ice had formed around the edge, a by-product of the magic. Twil was the only one of us not wrapped in extra layers against the lingering cold. I had a blanket around my shoulders, while Evelyn wore two jumpers, a shawl, and gloves. She'd been at this for hours

already.

"I pulled her back out." Evelyn settled into a chair in front of the remote viewing setup, grimacing as her leg gave her trouble in the cold. She turned the grimace on Twil as she rubbed at her thigh. "I wasn't going to leave her up there without instruction while I fetched you lot, I'm not a complete fool."

"Alright, fair do." Twil raised both hands in surrender.

"Uh, Eevee," Raine said. "I'm a bit more concerned at the ruddy great beastie over yonder."

"Yes," Kimberly breathed from the doorway, unwilling to come any closer. "What- what is that?"

At the back of the ex-drawing room, Evelyn had cleared another wide space for a second large-scale magic circle, on a piece of unrolled canvas. Glancing at the circle made my head swim and my heart constrict, the arcane symbols and scraps of inhuman language clutching at the part of my mind which recognised them – but the content of the circle was so much worse.

Trapped inside the circle, a creature of shadow and claw twisted and brooded, chitinous plates gliding over leathery flesh as it hid inside a veil of darkness. Filmy, oily black eyes peered out at us now and again before vanishing back into the murk.

Evelyn's Spider-servitor clearly hated the thing, whatever it was. Clutching its habitual ceiling corner, the Spider's mass of crystalline eyes were fixed on the writhing shadow-creature.

I'd already guessed what it was for, and tried to ignore it.

"Never you mind what," Evelyn snapped at Kimberly, then turned to Raine. "It's for clearing what I've found in the tower. I'll need several of them, probably. Three or four should be enough."

"As long as it doesn't stage a breakout over there," Raine muttered. She glanced about, located her nightstick propped against the wall, and picked it up.

"It won't. It's mine. I already bound it," Evelyn said, rapidly losing patience, nodding at the view in the paddling pool's water. "Pay attention."

"Can she hear us?" I asked. "Praem?"

“Heather,” Praem intoned from the other side of the water, clear as ever, miles away on the other side of the city. Evelyn huffed and gestured as if to say there’s my answer.

“Nobody beyond her can, but she can hear anything we say here,” Evelyn explained, then clicked her fingers. “Back inside. Make your way upstairs.”

“What did you find? Was there anyone in there?” Twil asked.

“Shut up and watch.”

Praem crossed the pathway toward Glasswick tower’s boarded up front entrance. Her gliding pace lacked the nauseating small motions that one might expect from, say, a person with a camera strapped to their head. Her eyes stayed locked on specific points rather than flicking around, like those of a human being. Still, looking down into a pool of water and seeing straight ahead did afflict me with the gentlest touch of vertigo. I had to keep glancing away.

She climbed through the shattered hole in the damp boards over the entrance, past the huge police notice threatening a £500 fine on trespassers, and everything went dark.

“Get the torch out, shine it ahead, same as before,” Evelyn ordered, then muttered to us. “She can see in the dark. We can’t.”

“Speak for yourself,” Twil muttered.

A light flicked on and a compact maglite lifted into view from below, held in Praem’s small, deceptively soft hand. The torch beam played over the filth in the entryway. The space was identical in layout to its twin in Gleaston tower, but heavy boards had been nail-gunned over the lift doors, and the stairwells had been blocked with walls of plywood. The only access to the stairs – a small door in one of the plywood sheets – stood open.

People – and likely a few animals – had camped here at some point, but they were long gone now. Water damage, a few dirty bedrolls, a gutted tent collapsed in one corner.

“Head up, stop at the fifth floor and give us a quick look there,” Evelyn said. Praem turned, slipped through the little door, and started her way up the stairs.

“Were there no people? No homeless people?” I asked in a whisper.

Evelyn shook her head.

“None. Some had been here, I think. I’ll show you.”

“That’s a red flag, alright,” Raine grunted.

“Mmhmm.”

“What do you mean?” Twil hissed.

“Concrete building. Shelter, isn’t it? And the police don’t give a toss, not out there,” Raine said, still watching Praem’s slow ascent up the echoing, dark stairwell. “The lower couple of floors should have a few people trying to live there, at least, even if just shooting up or sleeping. Why keep away?”

“Uh ... huh.” Twil nodded slowly, frowning to herself.

“The kids, around ... ” Kimberly started, and crept a few paces into the ex-drawing room, terrified eyes glued to the horror in the magic circle at the back of the room.

“Kim?” I prompted. She swallowed.

“The kids around the estate,” she said, rallying. “They wouldn’t go in there either. They used to dare each other, I think, but they stopped for some reason. I’m sure I heard a silly urban legend about it being haunted.”

“Ha,” Evelyn barked with humourless laughter. “They’re not wrong.”

“Haunted, by like, a ghost?” Twil’s eyes went wide. “You found a ghost?”

Evelyn sighed and shot a withering look at her. “It’s a metaphor, you idiot. I’d prefer I had found a ghost.”

Praem stopped at the fifth floor and walked a few paces from the stairwell into one of the tower’s residential corridors. The light from her torch slid over closed and locked front doors, but a few hung open, kicked in or broken down.

“Poke your head into the first couple,” Evelyn ordered her. “This is all normal, all like this, all the same, up to the fifteenth floor. Most of the flats are locked tight, but there’s a few that people have obviously tried to live in, at some point. Maybe there was still running water, who knows?”

Praem showed us the evidence, and it didn't amount to much. A few lost possessions in otherwise stripped-bare concrete boxes, places that had once been homes. A few candles had burned down to long-cold stubs. Discarded food wrappers. A condom in a corner. Nothing spooky, except the claustrophobic dark and the spectre of poverty.

"What's at floor fifteen?" I asked.

"That ... is beyond my powers of description."

Praem returned to the stairwell and continued up, her precise footfalls echoing down the long concrete tower, the torch beam ascending the stairs ahead. She passed the landing for the tenth floor, above the level of the boarded up windows, and the cave-like darkness finally abated. Light pollution leaked in through the smashed glass, catching jagged concrete corners and the metal handrail. Snatches of night-time Sharrowford passed by on the edge of Praem's vision. Sunrise was still hours away.

"Wonder if she can see us from up there?" Twil mused.

"Don't be stupid. We can't see the towers from here," Evelyn said.

"Hey Praem," Twil spoke up. "Flash your torch out one of the windows."

"No," Praem intoned, her voice echoing off the concrete.

"See?" Evelyn snorted. "Even she knows not to listen to you."

"S'just a joke." Twil huffed and crossed her arms.

The stairwell beyond the fifteenth floor was blocked off by another construction-site plywood barrier. The only way through was another one of those flimsy doors. The beam of Praem's torch caught on three thick steel chains lying on the floor, complete with big chunky padlocks – all three locks crushed and broken, metal sheered and shattered.

"Stop there," Evelyn said. "Show us the chains."

"Lemme guess, they were like that when you got there?" Raine asked.

"What? No. I had Praem rip them off. But they're all new. Look, no rust on them." I peered forward at the image in the water. She was right. Compared to everything else so far in the crumbling,

abandoned shell of Glasswick tower, the padlocks and chains were conspicuously shiny and new. “Combined with the general pattern of wet footprints lower down and a track relatively free of dust, somebody’s been coming up here, regularly.”

“Should have been a private eye, Eevee. You’ve got the knack,” Raine said.

“Knack, nothing,” Evelyn snapped. “I’ve got magic, and that’s cheating. Praem, show them where the sign was.”

Praem’s viewpoint swung out, torch beam passing over the wooden barrier. Another ‘no entry – condemned’ sign lay on the floor, nails recently yanked free.

In the space it had occupied on the plywood. a magic circle stared back at us.

Raine whistled. Twil grunted a ‘huh’. Kimberly swallowed.

“Good thing I thought to have her check behind the sign,” Evelyn said. “Had to disarm it. No idea what it does. You recognise that one, Poundland?”

“Eevee, don’t call her that,” I scolded quietly, as Kimberly blinked in confusion before she realised she was being addressed.

“No, no I don’t. I-I’m sorry.”

Evelyn grunted. She didn’t have the ire to spare for Kimberly right now. Somehow that worried me more than anything else. “The real treat’s further up. Praem, on you go, same route as the first time, but stop at the final corner before ... before you see it. Stay alert.”

Praem continued up. She didn’t even reach the next floor before we all noticed what was wrong.

“The hell’s going on with the walls?” Twil asked.

“Optical illusion?” Raine suggested.

“No,” Evelyn grunted. “It gets progressively worse further up. Praem, pan your torch a bit, give us a view as you go.”

“It looks like it’s ... ” I swallowed, struggling for the right word. “Diseased?”

The concrete of Glasswick tower had contracted an infection, a

warping sickness, a mutation. In places it looked like a frozen sculpture of living muscle pushing from underneath the concrete surfaces, in others it was ridged and bumpy, or raised like flexing tendons beneath an inorganic skin, on a huge, tower-block scale, as if melted and re-set along distinctly biological lines.

Evelyn was right, the further up Praem climbed, the worse it got.

Praem climbed through the ossified corpse of a mutated whale cast in concrete. Kimberly had to turn away as the effect worsened, a nauseated look on her face. Twil pulled a grimace, and even I felt a little ill at the sight of this architectural violation.

Then the stairwell suddenly opened out, the interior walls fell away. Stairs still continued upward to the remaining floors, but around Praem a wide darkness yawned. She showed us what lay within, pointing her torch left and right.

“Holy shit,” Twil breathed.

“Shit is right, but there’s nothing holy here,” Evelyn grunted. “I think it’s five floors worth of space, semi-hollowed.”

Pieces of concrete wall and floor remained, but shot through with gaping, organic-looking holes and gaps, twisted into disturbingly biological shapes – ganglia and nerve bundles, sinews and cartilage – as if the building had tried to become part of a giant body, and failed. Steel rebar poked from shards of cracked wall, piles of concrete grit lay everywhere, shed as the structure had crumbled and buckled. Whatever this was, it had died – or failed to be born.

Praem strode into the space, up a sort of walkway of concrete, toward the centre of the cleared floors. She approached a corner, and the leading edge of her torch beam caught what could only be the heart of this place, a nexus of bunched imitation muscle-fibre, tendons, and nerves.

The core of this thing was not the grey of dead concrete, but distinctly crimson, and glistening.

“Stop,” Evelyn snapped. “Praem, stop there.” She turned to me, and sighed a deep sigh. “Heather. I think you should sit down. This is going to upset you the most.”

“What?” I blinked at her, then back at the view in the pool. My stomach turned over. “It’s not ... no, it’s not Lozzie, it-”

"No, of course not. Bloody hell. I wouldn't do that to you. If I'd found her, I would have ... well, I wouldn't do it like this." She waved a hand. "Sit."

"Okay, okay sure, I-"

Raine already had a chair for me, pulled from the table. I sat down, a little shaky, and Raine gave Evelyn a measured frown.

"Evee, drop the suspense act," she said. "Heather's plenty tough, but I don't think any of us want to get surprised by something horrible, yeah?"

"It's gruesome, yes, alright? Turn away if you're suddenly feeling squeamish," Evelyn said. "But that's not the point. I just ... I ... look, if I just say it, you'll all freak out. I need to show you the proof. He's dead. Praem, go ahead."

"He? Evee, who ... "

The question died in my throat, as Praem turned the final corner of knotted concrete. She walked the length of a projecting spar, up to the centre and purpose of this disgusting aberration, and played her torch over her discovery.

Meat.

Like a heart – no, I corrected myself, like a tumour. Muscle fibres of frozen concrete converged on a central point, blood and meat colours fading in as they approached, as they wound around and merged with the figure in the middle. Minced flesh, spars of shattered bone, ribs exposed and cracked from awful crushing force, limbs clad in charred shreds. Head a burst melon, a few scraps of blonde hair clinging to flaps of scalp. Once-red blood was now dried and black, shiny like tiny beetles.

The wreckage cradled by a concrete harness was barely recognisable as a human being – let alone as Alexander Lilburne.

"But I killed him," I breathed. A terrible, numb feeling came over me, an emotional violation. I'd dealt with becoming a murderer, and he was still here? My breath caught in my throat, stalling the more animal reaction to this awful sight. "I-"

"I was fukkin' right!" Twil pointed at the image in the still water. "I called it!"

“No you didn’t, he’s dead,” Evelyn snapped at her. “Heather, listen to me. He’s dead.”

“Heather?” Raine squeezed my shoulder, hard, and put a hand on my forehead. “Heather, hey. Eevee, dammit, you could have picked a better way than this.”

“What else was I supposed to do? You’d all have insisted on seeing the corpse anyway! We’d be playing Chinese whispers. At least this is fast.”

Their words didn’t make sense. I shook my head, staring at Alexander’s broken jaw and the glassy emptiness of his single remaining eyeball. I was vaguely aware of Kimberly hurrying out of the room, retching sounds coming from the kitchen.

“But I killed him. It’s not fair. It’s not-”

“*Heather*,” Evelyn snapped. I jerked around to meet her eyes. “He’s dead, yes, you killed him. Well done.”

I stared at her for a moment. The words finally went in, even as paranoid scepticism rolled up for its turn at my strings. “How can you be sure? He’s a mage, he could be doing anything, he-”

“Does that look anything like alive, to you?” Evelyn thumbed at the human wreckage on display. “And I already had Praem check. No pulse, no heartbeat, no breathing. He’s stone cold, he- Praem? Praem, stop, you-”

Praem was walking the final few steps toward the mangled corpse. “Heather,” she intoned, and suddenly I knew exactly what she was doing, for me. She ignored Evelyn’s instruction, and lifted Alexander’s head with one hand. His dead, empty eyeball stared at nothing. Evelyn sighed.

“Point taken, thank you for the demonstration,” she grunted. “He’s dead. We won. He’s not coming back.” She waved her hand in front of my face. “You with us?”

“Eevee,” I tutted at her, pulling myself back together. “I- yes, I- how did you expect me to react?”

“Like that, mostly,” Evelyn grunted.

“You’re fine, Heather, you’re fine.” Raine murmured, for me alone, and squeezed my shoulders.

I shook my head and sighed. My gaze drifted back over to the view through Praem's eyes. She'd stepped away again, allowed the corpse's head to droop. Alexander Lilburne looked like he'd been run over by a tank. "That's what I did to him?"

"You killed him super dead," Twil said, then frowned. "Why's he not, you know, rotted an' all?"

Evelyn cleared her throat. "I can only presume what we're looking at right now is an attempt to prolong his life – a failed attempt. The flesh is preserved, but nothing else."

"Yeah, I'm no doctor," Raine said. "But that looks like major brain damage. His bone dome is cracked right open, I see brains. He dead."

"Right," Evelyn grunted. "His people must have brought him here, or maybe his big zombie did, as a sort of final act of devotion. Plugged himself into whatever the hell they were already working on, but it didn't take. It wasn't exactly guarded well, I can only assume they've abandoned him."

"What was he doing? Turning himself into a building?" Twil asked.

"Heard of weirder fetishes," Raine added, shrugging. "Maybe he was into that."

"What?" Twil squinted at her. Raine laughed. Always trying to keep it light. How could she laugh at the sight of this?

"Evee," I said, gently, carefully, while glancing at Twil. I doubted Evelyn wanted her to hear the details, but I had to ask this. "What if he was doing the same thing you mother tried to do?"

Evelyn's eyebrows rose. She nodded, taking me seriously, thank God. "I already thought of that. It's vanishingly unlikely he had access to the same resources she did. And anyway, he lacked the essential component: an emotionally and psychologically dominated close relative. You can't just – poof." She made a gesture from the side of her head. "Takes years of preparation. Lozzie's a lot of things, I gather, but she's not cowed or submissive. No."

"Okay," I nodded, trying to take a deep breath. "I'll try not to worry about that part."

"What's this?" Twil asked, frowning.

“Never you mind,” Evelyn grunted. “S’personal.”

I noticed Kimberly peer carefully into the room again, her face pale and drawn. She turned away at the sight of her former master’s shattered corpse, but Evelyn wasn’t about to let her go. She raised her hand and clicked her fingers.

“Kimberly. Yes, you, I see you lurking there. Any idea what he was doing? Any insights to share?”

“N-none. I’m sorry, I-”

“You must have some idea. Use your brain. They were training you as a mage, you must have heard something. Part of a plan, an overheard conversation. Think.”

I opened my mouth to tell Evelyn off, to get her to ease off Kimberly, to tell Kim it was okay – but then I noticed an oddly familiar shape hanging in the darkness above Alexander’s corpse.

My blood went cold in my veins.

“Praem,” I said, my voice on autopilot. “Please ... please step back a pace and pan the torch upward. And to the sides as well. There’s more.”

Praem moved the torch as directed. Evelyn frowned at me, at the shake in my voice, and then she saw what I saw. We all saw it.

Above and to both sides of Alexander’s shattered corpse, his followers, his cultists, whoever had put him here, had drawn a trio of identical murals on large flat pieces of uncorrupted concrete. Daubed in charcoal or tar, black dried flaking blood, and a brown substance I’d rather not speculate on.

Eyes.

Each mural showed a single great lidless eye. Black. Expressionless. Six feet wide. They all gazed at a point in front of the body, as if positioned to regard a supplicant or worshipper before this twisted altar.

Graffiti, drawn in natural – if abnormal – materials. That was all. Nothing special. But somehow this urban cave art captured the faintest echo of the unspeakable feeling, the unyielding, crushing attention. For a split-second I was a child again, naked in the dark, my skin and flesh and neurons and atoms peeled back by the

watching of the Eye.

Then the feeling passed. A memory of trauma, sinking back into the abyss.

Just murals – horrible ones. Placed there by a supernatural cult.

Oh dear.

“I didn’t see these before,” Evelyn muttered, leaning forward, brow knotted. “I was so focused on the corpse I didn’t see them. Praem, step closer, get me a better look. Do not touch them.”

“I-I don’t recognise those,” Kimberly hurried to say. “I don’t, I swear.”

“It’s the Eye,” I managed to say, my throat closing up. “It’s art, of the Eye.”

“Heather, it’s okay, it can’t hurt you. It’s okay,” Raine murmured. She squeezed my shoulders, tried to keep me from getting lost in my own memories.

“Could be a coincidence,” Evelyn said through gritted teeth.

“No. No it’s the Eye, it is. I can tell, I-”

“Alright, okay. I believe you,” Evelyn snapped. “Don’t know if that helps us figure out what he was doing, though.”

“He must have ... he made contact ... he ... I don’t know.”

“They magical? They do anything?” Twil asked.

Evelyn shook her head. “I don’t believe so. I don’t see any magic circles, no workings connected to them. Nothing. They’re just ... art.”

I nodded, trying to let go. “What if the cult ... what if ... ”

“If they made contact with your ‘Eye’?” Evelyn finished for me. “I don’t know. What I do know is we destroy this place, tonight, and smash those images.”

“Burn it down,” Raine said.

“Oh, please,” I said.

“A tower fire is easy, if we get enough petrol in there.”

"It's ninety percent stripped," Evelyn said. "There's nothing to burn."

"At least this doesn't have anything to do with Lozzie, does it?" I asked.

Evelyn took a moment, then shrugged. That didn't fill me with hope. "Certain kinds of magic are stronger when family is involved – blood family, I mean. I doubt very much it's a coincidence that the brother is enmeshed in this ... *this*," she waved a hand at the whole awful concrete mutation. "And the sister is wandering around with some Outsider living in her head. This is connected. We need to clear the place out, the upper floors may contain more nasty surprises, or hopefully some way to find who put him here, somebody we can beat until they tell us what we want."

"Bloody right," Raine said.

"That's what my little nasty back there is for." Evelyn thumbed over her shoulder at the shadow-creature in the magic circle at the back of the room. "Three or four of them, clear the whole place out, the upper floors, and burn Alexander's corpse, yes, to be sure. Just in case. Can never be too careful. Praem, time to leave again."

"Hold up," Twil said. "Why not be sure right now?"

"What do you mean?" Evelyn grunted at her.

Twil looked at the pool, at Alexander's limp corpse, then back at Evelyn. She gestured with both hands, as if it was obvious. "Pull his fukkin' head off."

"Pull it off," Praem echoed from the other side of the water.

"Yes, please, please do," I added. Raine snorted. "Make sure he's dead."

"... sometimes, you big dumb mutt," Evelyn said. "I really like how you think." She favoured Twil with a nasty smile. "You heard her, Praem. Twist his head off."

"Mind your sleeves on the blood," I said, trying to focus on anything except what those eyes might mean.

Praem held the torch between her teeth. The circle of light jerked as she grabbed the sides of Alexander's head – his corpse's head, I reminded myself, that is a corpse – put her back into it, and twisted.

A dry crunch, the sound of tearing meat. His neck put up little fight against Praem's inhuman strength. I squeezed my eyes shut. I hated the man, but I couldn't watch that. Kimberly made a pained noise in her throat and turned away. Twil winced and let out a little 'urgh'. Evelyn sighed, trying to conceal the way she turned green in the face.

"That's him done then," Raine said. When I turned back, Praem was holding up Alexander's severed head in one hand, pointing the torch at it with her other.

"Done," Praem echoed.

It wasn't much of a head, with the skull cracked and the jaw broken and teeth missing and one eyeball burned away. I tried not to dwell on the threads of tendon and tail-like spine dangling from the neck. His remaining eye was stuck looking up and to the left, forever.

He deserved this. An evil man, come to an evil end.

"Where be his quiddits now, his quilleets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?" I whispered.

"What?" Twil blinked at me.

"I'm going to guess that was Shakespeare," Evelyn said. "Mm?"

"Yes. Hamlet. It seemed ... appropriate, that's all."

"Oh. Poetry? Right."

"Quite right," Evelyn grunted. "That's him done. Even my mother wouldn't have survived a good guillotining. Dump that skull and come on home, Praem."

In the moment the head began to tilt from Praem's hand, Kimberly was still turned away, Raine must have been looking at my face, and Twil had glanced upward.

That saved them.

Evelyn and I were not so lucky.

I saw it because I was still staring at his eyeball, thinking about what I'd become by taking on responsibility for this. Evelyn saw it because she was directing Praem.

As Alexander's severed head fell from Praem's hand, it passed

through the precise intersection point of the invisible gazes of those three eye-murals.

Behind that glassy, dead eye, embedded in its bruised, puffy socket, I saw a ripple of motion. The settling of a vast underwater bulk, as seen through a tiny porthole. It reminded me of what I'd witnessed moving behind the eyes of Twil's mother – a passenger inside a human mind, but unlike that one. A vast, dark attention turned on us. A split-second was all it needed.

Alexander Lilburne was dead – but nobody said an Outsider needed an *intact* human brain.

The attack – and in light of what unfolded in those remaining thin hours before sunrise, I do believe it was an attack – was quick and sharp. Pain blossomed inside my head, in my frontal lobe, through the vector of my own sight. I think I screamed, clamped my hands to my skull, and fell out of my chair.

For a few moments I knew nothing but darkness and pain. Awareness returned slowly with a throbbing intensity, my thoughts struggling up through thick tar, everything muffled and too loud at the same time, panicked voices, hands on my shoulders. I sat up suddenly as if freed from a net, panting, my heart racing.

“What- we-”

Raine took my head firmly in both hands, and peered into my eyes. She glanced over her shoulder and back, saying something – Twil's name, a command to calm down, muffled by the pounding of my own blood in my ears.

An awful keening sound filled the air, interrupted by a repeating heavy thump; the summoned thing in the magic circle at the back of the room was going berserk, throwing itself at its invisible cage over and over, clawing and hissing and spitting, a mass of whipping black limbs and boiling dark fog. Kimberly was over there, snatches of terrified Latin drifting across the room as she fumbled with a book.

Raine peered into my eyes again, and I realised I'd never seen her so worried before. For once, she couldn't hide it.

“Heather. Heather, you with us? Oh, thank fuck.”

“Yes- yes, Raine, I- it was-”

"It's okay, it'll be okay. You were out cold for a few minutes there. How many fingers?"

"... two. Now three. Raine, what-"

The image in the paddling pool had gone out. Just water.

Evelyn had been a few inches further forward than I. She'd taken the brunt. She must have slid out of her chair. Twil had caught her before she hit the floor, and now held her gingerly, wide-eyed, clearly with no idea what to do.

Evelyn was unconscious, her breathing erratic and laboured, eyes rolling under their lids, blood-flecked froth on her lips.

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"Why won't she wake up? Come on, Saye, why won't you wake up?"

"Twil."

"I don't get this. She's always so fucking stubborn. How can she be out like this? E- ... Eevee?" Twil grabbed one of Evelyn's shoulders and shook her gently.

"Twil," Raine snapped. Twil rounded on her, turning away from Evelyn's unconscious form laid out on the sofa, baring her teeth in a growl. "Give her some room. Don't crowd her."

Twil straightened up, still baring her teeth. "Oh yeah? Like that's gonna work? She won't fucking wake up, Raine! She's in a fucking coma!"

"I'm thinking," Raine said.

We'd done what we could. Or rather, Raine and Twil had. More than enough muscle between them to lift Evelyn onto the sofa and make her comfortable. Raine had fumbled around under Evelyn's skirt to remove her prosthetic leg, in case she'd hurt herself somehow. Her breathing had stabilised but her eyes twitched and flickered as if she was in deep REM sleep.

Almost half an hour later, we couldn't wake her.

I was able to sit upright, hunched in a chair, but I felt awful, as if a fist had reached into my head and punched me in the brain, left me weak and woozy. If I hadn't been so scared for Evelyn – not to

mention Praem – I would have happily curled up in bed and passed out for twelve hours.

If I hadn't been so terrified.

"Thinking, fuck. We need to *do* something." Twil cast about, settled on Kimberly. "Kim, come on, don't you know anything? Isn't there some magic you can do, or ... "

Twil trailed off as Kimberly shook her head. She looked almost as bad as Evelyn, slumped against one wall, a thin trickle of bloody drool leaking from one side of her mouth.

None of us knew exactly what had happened with the smoky-dark creature Evelyn had summoned. Perhaps her control had broken when she'd been knocked unconscious, or perhaps it was trying to protect her. The latter seemed unlikely. Whatever the cause, the thing had gone feral. Not one of us had known what to do, except let it free and have Twil or the Spider-servitor rip it apart, but for all we knew that might not work.

Kimberly, with her tissue-paper knowledge and abuse-learned skills, had stepped in, cringing and terrified of the very thing she was trying to banish. I suspected she'd only succeeded because Evelyn's notes and books were nearby, already open to the relevant pages, but that didn't diminish the act of courage. The magic circle was empty now. She'd been spitting blood into a wad of tissues since – the words had hurt her mouth and throat.

"I'll fucking kill him all over again, fucking Alexander, I fucking will," Twil said through gritted teeth.

"It wasn't him," I said. My voice felt thin and weak. "It was something inside him. It was the Eye. It was those murals, the graffiti."

"It'll be okay," Raine said, squeezing my shoulder. "It can't get us here, it can't do that again."

I shook my head. She didn't know anything, no more than I did.

"Oh yeah?" Twil spread her arms. With every fury-driven word she looked less and less human, wisps and fragments of her wolfish transformation gathering to her arms and face. "Crush that fucking severed head of his, I bet that would work. Fuck, are we just gonna sit around? We need to take Evelyn to a hospital, now, call an

ambulance or something. Come on!"

"That might not be a bad idea," I said, nodding my agreement, clutching for any shred of normality here.

"And what do we tell the doctors?" Raine asked. She wouldn't look away from Evelyn, staring, frowning.

"Tell them fucking whatever!" Twil spat.

"And what if they can't help her?" Raine shook her head. "No, we need a mage."

"... we ... we could take her to my family." Twil swallowed. "My mother, she'll get this, she knows stuff. There's gotta be something they can do."

"Not sure we trust your family, not with Evee."

"Fuck you!" Twil shouted at her.

"Twil, please, stop," I said, but I had no steel left for my voice. The Eye, it was the Eye. It had gotten to Alexander, somehow – how? He'd known about my sister, hadn't he? He'd know about Maisie. He'd made contact, somehow? My mind whirled. I couldn't stop shaking.

"If you're just going to stand there, I'll take her back to Brinkwood myself." Twil bent down toward Evelyn, preparing to lift her.

"I said, I'm *thinking*."

Twil froze. Kimberly stared at Raine, spooked-animal style. A tremor of adrenaline shuddered through me. Raine had crammed such threat into those four simple words, without moving a single muscle. Twil straightened up, slowly, staring at Raine as if she couldn't believe her ears. She bared her teeth and let out a growl, a deep, thrumming sound. Raine finally looked away from Evelyn's unconscious form, and met the eyes of a very angry werewolf.

"This time last year you would have been happy to see her dead," Raine murmured.

"Yeah, well things change, don't they?" Twil thumped her own chest with one hand. "We're fucking friends now, and that means something to me, yeah?"

"Good. 'Cos we're gonna need some of that. I'm not your enemy

here, big bad wolf, but the one thing you're not doing is carrying Evee out of this house."

"I don't believe you, Raine. Still, you don't fucking trust me? Now?!"

"Raine, it's Twil," I managed to murmur.

Raine shook her head. "Trust's got nothing to do with it. I'm cool with you these days, you're with us, you know that. Drop the anger. I don't like to admit it, but we're real vulnerable right now. You get me?"

Twil blinked at her. Claws faded back into human hands. "What?"

"Evelyn's always been her own best asset. Not me, not her reputation, not even this house – which, right now, might be the only thing keeping her safe. If this was a trap, a set-up by the cult–"

"It was the Eye," I hissed.

"Yeah, maybe it was." Raine glanced down at me, tried a smile. For once, it didn't land. "Maybe that's what the cult's doing now. They might have a line on her, know she's helpless. Might be on the way here. I don't think they're stupid enough for that, but they *might*. And this house – the wards, the servitors, everything her family left here – is the only barrier we've got. Following me now?"

Twil stared for a moment, then cast about as if lost. She nodded and scratched wildly at her own head. "The hell do we do then? Wait for her to wake up?"

"Could wait for Praem," Raine said. "But being realistic ... don't think she's coming home."

I felt a sob catch in the back of my throat.

"That's it then?" Twil said. "We just fucking wait?"

"No, I said I was thinking." Raine nodded at Evelyn. "There is one person who'd drop everything and come running to help her. Evee'll kill me for it, but I can make a phone call, and I think we'd all rather have her awake and breathing fire, yeah?"

"Who are you talking about?" I asked, confused.

"Remember back when we were trying to figure out Tenny? Remember the phone calls, the other mages? Remember Felicity?"

“ ... a little. Vaguely. I thought she was dangerous?”

“Not to Evee, not in that way. Long story. I’ll get my phone. If I tell her what happened, she’ll be here by nightfall.”

“Nightfall?” Twil gaped. “Fuck, Raine, that’s too long. I can’t- I have to- shit. Fuck it, I’m going. I’m gonna smash that bastard’s skull apart.”

None of us could have stopped her. Kimberly couldn’t even rise to her feet without shaking. By the time I managed to get myself out of the chair and through the kitchen, Twil was already in the front room, shoving her arms into her coat and stamping into her shoes.

“Twil, I’ve never asked you for much, but right now we need you here,” Raine was saying. “The house gets hit, we’re gonna need you. You care about Evee? She needs you here.”

“I can *run* to Glasswick in fifteen minutes!” Twil all but shouted in her face. “Up the stairs in five, thirty seconds to find the head, and then-” She swung a fist into her own palm. “And then she wakes up. Right?”

“What if it gets you too?” Raine asked. “Only thing spared us is we weren’t looking.”

“I’m fucking invincible, remember?” Twil clacked her knuckles against her own head. “Like to see ‘em try.”

“It won’t make any difference,” I heard myself say.

Twil blinked at me. Her determined expression collapsed. “I gotta do something. I don’t want her to die, I ... she ... You lot’ll be safe for fifteen minutes. Come on, you’ve got a gun, right?”

“Yeah ... yeah I have,” Raine murmured. “Twil, please, hey-”

But Twil wasn’t listening anymore. She unlatched the front door and bolted into the night like a racehorse, more wolf than human. She vaulted the garden wall, and sped off into the darkness, footfalls echoing in early morning hours of Sharrowford before dawn. Cold tendrils of air reached my face, but I couldn’t shiver any harder.

“Raine,” I whined.

Raine stared after Twil, then quickly shut and locked the door.

“Wait here,” she said, and hopped up the stairs, three at a time. She

returned as quickly as she'd left, the matte black threat of her pistol in one hand, a sheathed knife in the other. "I should go after her. I really should go after her," she said, grinning. "But no way I'm leaving you and Eevee here alone." She tucked the pistol into the waistband of her pajamas – a image I'd probably never forget – and pulled her mobile phone from her pocket. "I'm gonna make the call now. This might get weird, you don't have to listen."

"I ... Raine ... " I swallowed, terrified, but I knew what I had to do. "I have an idea."

Raine's eyebrows climbed. "Heather?"

"I want to try to use brainmath – hyperdimensional mathematics – to wake Eevee up. Break whatever's been done to her."

Raine lowered her phone. "You think you can do that?"

I shrugged, and my voice shook a little. "I have no idea. In theory, I can do anything, if I can endure the pain. It'll hurt, it might go wrong, I'll ... I'll definitely pass out, but it's worth trying. Isn't it?"

"Heather, hey," Raine tucked her phone and the knife away, and then gave me a hug. Goodness, I needed that. She wrapped her arms around me and for a moment I felt that tiny little bit better, that shred of safety in the one place I'd found real security in life. She sighed. "I don't want you to hurt yourself too"

"It's worth trying."

"Okay, okay, I get it, yeah." She pulled back, glanced at the kitchen door. Kimberly was bracing herself against the doorframe. "Kim, you holding up alright?"

"I think so," Kimberly croaked. "May I ... may I get some water?"

"Course you can. We're gonna try to wake Saye. We might need you nearby, I don't know, this isn't my-"

Knock knock.

The room echoed with a knocking on the front door. All three of us stopped and stared.

"It's Twil, she came back," I said.

"Maybe." Raine stepped away from me and drew her gun, held it low, in both hands. She transformed in a split-second, from

comforting softness to whipcord-tight tension in every muscle. “Both of you get in the kitchen, behind a wall. Somebody watch Evee.”

“Raine, be careful.”

“Careful’s not in my vocab. I’ll try,” she hissed. She stalked toward the front door, but kept herself off to one side, listening to the deafening silence. Kimberly put a hand on my arm, tried to encourage me to hide with her.

Knock knock knock.

Raine pointed her gun at the door.

“That you back with us, Twil?” she called out.

The reply came after a long silent pause, as if the speaker had to think very carefully about how to form words, how to use its lungs and larynx, mouth and tongue. It didn’t do a very good job.

“*Open up, open up, three little piggies,*” it said, in a nightmare imitation of Lozzie’s voice.

and less pleasant places –

6.9

That voice was an awful thing – because it still sounded like Lozzie.

Even muffled through the thick wood of the front door, it was a noise from the pit, a discordant mockery of human speech that set the little hairs standing up on the back of one's neck. Like hearing a foreign language for the first time, the brain stumbled to render raw vocalisation into comprehensible words. The sounds were all wrong.

The inflection, the cadence, the timbre – wrong, wrong, wrong. Not merely not-Lozzie or not-human, but not even biological. A hissing of breath over dessicated meat, the crackle of static, rusted metal on cracked stone.

My brain refused to accept that I'd heard actual words. I broke out in a cold sweat. Kimberly's hand tightened on my arm like a vice.

“Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin,” Raine called back.

For a confused, horrified moment I had no idea why she'd said that. The words made no sense. Had my language processing centre been corrupted by that terrible voice? Was Raine losing her mind, too close to that thing on the other side of the front door?

Three little piggies.

I blinked, came back to myself. The three little pigs, of course – though there were four of us in here – and the wolf at the door. Lozzie's sense of humour.

Raine had talked back to that voice. Her eyes glued to the door, handgun held steady, muscles whipcord-tight. I could barely squeeze a breath down my constricted windpipe, but Raine had talked back.

What was the next step?

I'll huff and I'll puff, and blow your house down.

“Don’t open the door,” I hissed. I clutched the blanket tighter around my shoulders.

“Ain’t gotta tell me that,” Raine murmured.

A second passed, two seconds. Next to me, Kimberly trembled like a sapling in a storm. “Heather, w-we should ... we should hide,” she whispered, but I was rooted to the spot.

Was it really Lozzie out there? I couldn’t imagine that voice issuing from her throat, it was unthinkable, even possessed by a demon from Outside. My skin crawled at the thought of that thing getting inside the house. A bone-deep panic settled into my marrow as I realised what was happening, as I realised what I was truly afraid of.

The cult didn’t know that Evelyn was unconscious and Praem was gone and Twil had run off – the Eye did.

Or at least, its servants did, between the graffiti and Alexander’s corpse. And now this thing pretending to be Lozzie had come for me.

“Lozzie,” I heard myself say out loud, calling to her. Where I found the courage, I had no idea. “Lozzie, please ... please don’t come in ... please ... ”

No reply.

Three seconds. Five. Ten.

“That all you got? No comeback?” Raine called out again – and received no reply. She crept up to the door on silent feet, gun still pointed at approximately where Lozzie’s head would be on the other side.

“Raine!” I hissed. “Don’t-”

“Shhhh,” she hushed me. I bit my lips, tried to convince myself that Raine knew what she was doing. She pressed her ear against the door, then backed away again. “Nothing.”

“Y-you can’t hear her breathing?” Kimberly stammered.

“Nothing,” Raine repeated. Reluctantly, she glanced over her shoulder, at Kimberly and I. “Kim, I need you to do me a favour, quickly. Go-”

“Me?” Kimberly’s face looked like that of a condemned woman. “I’m not going out there, I’m not, I can’t, I-”

“Go upstairs. The corridor.” Raine said, clear and firm. “Second window on the right has a view down to the doorstep. Call out what you see.”

“I-I-”

“If I know what’s there I can shoot it through the wood,” Raine said, in the same tone one might discuss assembling furniture. “I need a spotter. Upstairs, now.”

“Raine, no!” I hissed. “You can’t-”

“Okay, okay, I’m going.” Kimberly scrambled away from me and up the stairs, unsteady on her feet but doing as she’d been asked. I stared at Raine in mounting horror, shaking my head, trying to form words.

“You can’t, Raine, you-”

“It got her to go upstairs,” Raine whispered. “Besides, that ain’t Lozzie out there. No way.”

Kimberly’s footsteps stumbled and hurried across the upstairs floorboards, then stopped. A horrible two seconds of silence.

“Kim?” Raine called.

“There’s nothing there!” Kimberly’s frightened voice called back. “S-she’s gone.”

“The back door!” I hissed.

“It’s locked,” Raine said. Her eyes roved over the house, seeing the walls beyond the room as she calculated. “Windows too. I made sure after Eevee passed out. Plus, the house is warded. This is a fortress, it can’t get in.”

Cold realisation clutched at my guts. “... I could.”

Raine raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t you remember? When I saved Eevee? I could get into the house. Go around the door, around the walls, come in from Outside.”

Raine paused, assimilating this new vector of threat in a split-

second. She crossed the front room to my side, eyes flicking between the doors to the kitchen and the disused sitting room and up the stairs, gun still in both hands. “Kim, get back down here,” she called, then turned to me, a bad attempt at an easy smile on her lips. “We need to stay with Eevee, all together in one place. This thing comes for us, we’ll be-”

“It wants me, Raine. It’s from the Eye.” I couldn’t stop shivering. She grabbed my shoulder and squeezed – stable, firm, so confident, whatever situation we found ourselves in. I wish I could feel such courage.

“It’s not getting you,” she said, then turned and raised her voice. “You hear that, out there? You can fuck right off back where you came from, she’s mine!”

“W-what?” Kimberly clattered halfway down the stairs, blinking at us.

“Talking to the nasty, never mind. New plan, Kim, we’re all going back to wait with Eevee while I make a couple of phone calls. I think we’re safe inside the house, for now, but we need-”

“Heather?”

My name in that thing’s mouth.

It stepped out of the corner of the room, as if it had been standing there the whole time.

In an instant, I understood why Kimberly had hidden in her flat for a week after this thing had visited her. Uncontrollable revulsion took me, every muscle responding on a pure animal level. I must have backed away, because I recall my shoulders bumping against the wall. Raine span and pointed her gun, but even she took several involuntary steps of disgusted retreat. Kimberly screamed and tripped over her own feet as she scrambled back up the stairs.

Stack had told the truth – this thing was not Lozzie. It could not be. I refused to believe such violation was possible. The alternative was to go mad with horror for my friend.

Perhaps if you’d only ever met Lozzie a few times, distracted and pressured by the Sharrowford Cult and the nightmare of your own life, perhaps if you were terrified out of your mind and alone and scared, and unwilling to examine her too closely. Perhaps if you’d

only ever seen Lozzie in her wretched, abused state, rather than the bright, energetic girl I'd known in the dreams. Perhaps then, you might mistake this mockery for the real thing.

The Lozzie-thing walked toward me, limbs jerking and muscles pulling as if connected to a puppeteer's strings. The mouth – a slash in a plastic bag pretending to be a face – pulled and twitched into an alien approximation of a smile.

“Heather,” it repeated.

Skin and face like plastic, without a single blemish or pore, bunching as it moved. The hair long and straight and limp, nothing like Lozzie's wild tail of floating gold. The clothes – jeans, tight shoes, a tshirt – moved as if extruded from the skin beneath, not fabric at all, and failed to conceal the flawed operation of the lungs in the chest. The eyes, empty and dead, pointed at me but contained nothing inside.

It was so deep in the uncanny valley, it should have flown apart or fallen down under the conditions of our reality. To breathe the air it exhaled was to risk contamination.

It stretched out one hand toward me, every fingernail a precise arc of white.

“Back to school,” it sang.

I shook my head and tried to back up into the wall, willing the plaster and brick to swallow me. I couldn't think with this abomination bearing down on me. I couldn't even scream.

Raine stepped away, gave it clear passage.

In that moment, I didn't blame her. The only thing worse than letting it touch me would be for it to touch her. Once it had me, it would leave. Evelyn and Raine, people I cared about, at least they would remain uncorrupted by this thing's mere presence.

Raine took one more step to the side – yes, get away from it while it's still ignoring you, Raine, please, don't let it take you too – then two quick steps *toward* the Lozzie-thing.

She raised her handgun and shot it in the head.

The deafening bang-crack of the gunshot sent a whip of reaction through my adrenaline-tightened body.

The shot passed clean through the Lozzie-thing's skull. No puff of blood and brain, only a jerk of the head to one side from the kinetic force of the bullet. It paused mid-step, as if it was trying to decide whether a bullet through the head was fatal or not. Raine held the gun ready for a second pull of the trigger, but even her hands were shaking. Stepping closer to that shambling thing went beyond bravery and into madness.

Then the Lozzie-thing crumpled. It clattered to the floor in a tangle of limbs, eyes staring at nothing, and lay completely still.

"Fuck," Raine said.

My breathing returned too fast, lungs sucking down great heaving gouts of air as my head span. I wrapped both arms around my chest and squeezed, tried to stop myself from hyperventilating.

"Fuck," Raine repeated. She looked at the gun in her hand, then at the dead thing on the floor, then at me. "Heather, I'm so sorry, I had to-"

"It's not Lozzie!" I almost screamed. "Make sure it's dead."

Raine nodded, levelled her gun, and shot the Lozzie-thing in the head a second time. Another bang-crack to make me jump and jerk. The corpse didn't even twitch.

"It- it's dead. It's stopped moving. It's not moving anymore, and that is great." Raine blew out a long breath, recovering much faster than I could. "I am super happy that thing is not moving any more. Top of the world, in fact. And yeah, it ain't Lozzie. S'not her. Look at it, no way."

"Raine," I whined.

That pulled her together, the sound of me still in pain. She was on me faster than I'd been prepared for, half-hug, half-lift, bundling me away from the Lozzie-thing's corpse on the floor. "Hey, hey, breathe, yeah? It's dead, I got it. And it wasn't Lozzie."

"No, no no, it wasn't, there's no way, no way-"

"It's okay. Don't look at it. I know, I know, it's not as bad now it's not moving, but-"

"It was never Lozzie, couldn't have been." I couldn't take my eyes off the thing. Now the animal terror was beginning to subside, the

deeper fears surfaced. "Couldn't have been. It's nothing like her."

"Heather, Heather? Hey, look at me."

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I lied, nodding, pulling the blanket tight around my shoulders, shivering inside and out.

"Hey, it's alright to admit it," she said, and the grin – that endless, confident grin – eased back onto her face. "Neither of us are okay right now, you don't have to pretend otherwise. But we will be. We need to deal with this." She squeezed my hands, pressed them to my chest, and turned away. "Hey, Kim?" She called out. "It's dead, I domed it, get down here."

Kimberly appeared from the top of the stairs, wide-eyed and ashen-faced. She stared at the 'corpse' on the floor.

"You ... you shot Lauren?" she asked, voice so small.

"It wasn't her. Not really,"

"Oh."

I shook my head, and bit down on the sob in my throat. I couldn't be certain, but I had to convince myself that this was not Lizzie, had never been Lizzie, that such a beautiful friend could never, ever be violated like this. It wasn't her. It was a trick, from the Eye, or the cult, or both somehow. I tried to draw myself up, not look at the thing.

"Wait," I murmured. "Wait, why didn't Evee's spiders respond?"

"Hm?" Raine quirked an eyebrow at me.

"The Spider-servitors. They're supposed to, when there's a threat in the house. They came for Twil that one time. Where are ... ah."

The spiders had responded – two of them. One of the Spider-servitors lurked behind the kitchen door, frozen in place. The other was upside down just beyond the stairs, mass of crystalline eyes fixed on the Lizzie-thing's corpse. Until that moment, I'd considered the spiders incapable of showing any form of emotion, but somehow in the set of their many legs and the limp, retreated poise of their stingers, I read their feelings exactly.

"They're here?" Raine asked.

"... as terrified as we were, apparently," I said, then murmured,

“Thanks for the assist, guys. Not that I blame you.”

“Evee’s gonna kill me for that,” Raine said, nodding at a new and prominent hole in the skirting board – a bullet hole, from the first shot, after it had exited the Lizzie-thing’s head. The round itself was likely embedded in the wall, or in the ground. Raine sighed, smiled, and turned to us, a light in her eyes. “Somebody’s gonna have heard those two gunshots. Maybe they call the police, maybe not. Maybe the police knock on our door, maybe they don’t. If they do, the one thing we don’t want them to see is that,” she pointed at the body. It didn’t look much like a corpse – it wasn’t even bleeding. The head wound was round and dark, like an unlit room seen through a hole in a piece of paper. “And I don’t think any of us wanna touch it. Right?”

Kimberly nodded. “R-right.”

“Absolutely not,” I breathed.

“Kim, there’s a tarpaulin in the corner of Evelyn’s workshop. Green, about yay high, rolled up. Grab that, check on her, call out how she looks, then come back here.” She turned to me. “Heather, the old utility room. There’s a broom and I think a pair of gardening gloves in there somewhere. If you can’t find the gloves, get me bin bags, the whole roll. Actually, scratch that, grab the bin bags regardless.”

“Got it.” I nodded. God, it felt good when Raine took charge. Her direction scraped away the outermost layers of panic and worry, gave me something to focus on.

“I’m gonna stay here, keep an eye on the kill.” She waggled her gun at the corpse. Kim turned and started for the kitchen. I hugged my arms around myself and moved to go after her as Raine called out. “Keep talking, keep shouting to me and each other, okay? We’re all here, we’re all together, we’re not going any- ... ah. Ahh.”

Raine trailed off, eyes rising to the ceiling. We all heard the sound out in the road, the distinctive thrumming of a large car engine pulling up and then sputtering into silence.

A car had stopped in the street outside the house. At seven in the morning. This morning.

“Oh, I don’t believe this,” I said.

“Yeah, we’re all bloody well here alright, aren’t we?” Raine growled

to herself. "If that's a coincidence, then I'm the Pope."

"What do we do?" Kimberly hissed. "What do we do?"

"We keep the door shut," I said.

"What if it's the police?"

"That quickly?" Raine shook her head, a sardonic smirk on her lips. "Nuh-uh."

"They must have been following her- *it*." I couldn't make myself nod at the corpse. "Maybe it's Stack?"

"I hope so, I owe her a hole in the head. Kim, back upstairs, same window, tell us what you see."

"Again?"

"I'll do it," I hissed, desperate to get away from the corpse on the floor. I hurried up the stairs, hands shaking, into the shadowy darkness of the upstairs corridor. Floorboards creaked beneath my socks as I peeked around the edge of the window, into the lingering night.

A long black car squatted beyond the garden wall like a battering ram. Four people were climbing out and carefully shutting the doors behind them – three men and one woman, none I recognised, age and details blurred by distance and darkness. Staring up at the house, glancing down the street, their hands in their coat pockets. No robes or magical symbols, no visible weapons or lurking servitors, just coats and gloves against the cold. Stamping feet, tense shoulders.

The woman pointed to the side of the house and spoke a few words. The others nodded. One of the men went to the back of the car, opened the boot, and lifted out a long cloth-wrapped package.

My heart leapt into my throat. My brain said *gun*, but then the man slipped a pair of baseball bats out of the cloth and handed them to his companions.

I scrambled back down the stairs. Kimberly had scarpered off somewhere. Raine already had her phone to her ear, still covering the Lozzie-thing's corpse with her pistol.

"Not police," I said all in a rush. "Four of them. They're armed, but I didn't see any guns. I think."

Raine nodded at me and gestured with her eyebrows for me to get into the kitchen, get out of the way, get safe. Then her call connected.

“Twil,” she barked down the phone. “Get your furry arse back here, now. We’ve got all kinds of trouble. Need you to knock some heads together.”

I stopped in the kitchen doorway – what was I doing? Why was *I* going to hide? I could stop bullets with my mind, let alone a baseball bat. I could threaten those people out there with a fate worse than death, and it would be no bluff. I turned back, and took a step toward the front door.

“There’s no time, dumb-arse,” Raine continued into the phone. “You’re supposed to be a good sprinter, right? Get back here ... Heather? Heather, where are you going?”

“To get rid of our visitors,” I said, and swallowed.

“Twil, hey, shut up a sec, you- Twil? Okay, cool, great, *now*, yeah? You don’t hurry, I’ll tag them all, none left for you.” Raine lowered the phone. “She’s on her way. We’re gonna be fine, Heather, but please, please get back in Evee’s workshop, it’s the safest place in the house.”

“I can help. Fuck these people!” I put a hand over my mouth, surprised at myself. Horror had transmuted to outrage. Raine’s eyebrows shot up. “They- they’re with the Eye, somehow. They hurt Evee! It can’t be allowed, Raine. They want to make murals to the Eye, they can all go to Wonderland and stay there.”

Raine grinned. “Sure thing, after I’ve got them gut-shot and hogtied, okay?”

I opened my mouth to complain.

Bang bang bang – a fist, hammering on the front door.

“Open up,” a man’s voice called out.

“Unless you’re police, you can stuff it up your arse, mate,” Raine replied, her grin widening. We were back in her territory now. She knew what to do, and I trusted her utterly to do it right.

“Yeah,” he replied through the door, voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’m a regular policeman, me. Now open the fucking door or I’ll

break it down.”

“It’s a diversion,” Raine hissed. “One’ll be going round back. Think the spiders’ll go for ‘em?”

I looked around for our pneuma-somatic arachnid friends. The one by the stairs was now halfway down the wall, creeping toward the door. The one in the kitchen had vanished – toward the back door, perhaps?

“Yes.” I nodded. “Yes, they’re with us.”

“Nice.” A savage grin pulled at Raine’s face, the sort of look I’d seen on her so many times before, the anticipation of violence written in every muscle. She gave me courage, gave me something to hold myself together with. We’d get through this. In a couple of hours it would all be over. She checked her gun, then dragged the big black combat knife from her waistband and flicked it out of its sheath. Cold metal, sharp in the morning chill. “This is gonna be a huge mess, but they don’t stand a chance. Here’s the plan, you-”

The Lizzie-thing got back up.

Perhaps it had been waiting for the moment Raine’s attention wandered. Perhaps the men hammering on the front door had pressed the issue. Or perhaps it had finally chosen to give up its ridiculous attempt to pretend it was a human being. It didn’t stand – it writhed to its feet, every joint pointing in the wrong direction, as if it had never risen from prone before and wasn’t certain which bones were meant to turn which ways.

Raine reacted faster. She did everything right. She backed up, one-two, raised her gun again, trigger-hand braced on the opposite wrist.

Smooth and calm and correct. Everything she was supposed to do. The Lizzie-thing lashed out with one failing hand, fingers all turned in the wrong direction, and Raine should have been able to dodge at that distance, she was already ducking away, lining up the shot. She was good at this. She was meant to win.

But the Lizzie-thing cheated.

Elbow and wrist moved at impossible angles, writhed around into the space Raine was about to be instead of the space she’d just vacated. A miracle of instinct, really, that Raine understood what

was happening, that she managed to turn and shove her big black serrated knife up and into the thing's throat, through imitation windpipe and imitation brainstem.

The Lozzie-thing's palm slammed into Raine's chest.

A crack.

I remember the cracking sound – the sound of one of Raine's ribs snapping. All else was panic, contextless snippets of memory in a sea of adrenaline.

Raine sliding down against the wall, unconscious, the force of the blow more than mere physical impact.

The Lozzie-thing stepping toward me again, wheezing “*back to school*” through a ruined throat.

Kimberly, in the kitchen doorway, screaming and scrambling away, dropping a tarpaulin on the floor, which I promptly tripped over.

The hammering on the front door, again, again.

I think I grabbed a chair in the kitchen – no, I know I grabbed a chair from the kitchen. I grabbed a chair and tried to throw it at the Lozzie-thing, the un-thing, the thing that should not be, shambling toward me, the sheer physical pressure of its mere existence enough to crush all thought and reaction down into a singularity of disgust. Me, weak little Heather, who didn't have the upper body strength for a dozen push-ups, throwing an old heavy chair.

The chair bounced across the floor. The Lozzie-thing smashed it aside.

It grabbed my wrist – that un-skin, fingers like alien bones, flesh without human warmth or prosthetic logic – and smiled, and wheezed “*time to go home.*”

Reality folded up.

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How quickly one can lose everything. Reduced to thin clothes and lingering body heat. Friends, defences, ideologies, all shed in an instant, leaving behind an ape whimpering to itself on the ashen ground of an alien dimension.

“*We are home,*” the Lozzie-thing said.

I didn't need to open my eyes to know where she'd taken me.

As reality reasserted itself, I crumpled to my knees and refused to open my eyes. Perhaps if I didn't look, I could retreat to a safe place inside myself, and everything that was about to happen would happen to another person – but I knew that was impossible. In a few heartbeats, I would be denied any coherent sense of self.

A great pulse of awareness, from the sky above. My lips formed 'no no no' over and over and over.

The Lizzie-thing still gripped my wrist. A leathery shard of myself said *fight, get up and fight*, but any strength I had was drowned out by a childhood nightmare screaming up out of my memories. Ashen wind robbed the heat from my skin, wriggled invasive fingers through every gap in my pajamas. The smell of this ruined place filled my nostrils, and I remembered. If despair could have a scent, it would smell like this. Darkness and ash.

I felt ten years old again, and I was back in Wonderland.

My eyes wouldn't stay closed, of course. The first teasing barbs and hooks of pressure snagged at the edges of my consciousness, flensed layers of thought from my mind, forced my eyelids open.

Rubble and ruin stretched away across an endless plain, to a horizon of broken teeth I remembered from every nightmare. Mists like shadow drifted across the wreckage, obscuring snippets of looping alien script on every broken wall, words that made me wince with pain. In the distance, life – of a sick, malformed kind – crept through the hollows and beneath the fallen monoliths. Jellyfish creatures bigger than whales pulsed through the air, and in the distance the terrible mountain-sized watchers stared upward at the sky in mute devotion.

Up, up, up – to the sky that was not a sky. To the vast ridged eyelid that filled all creation.

The sky cracked down the middle, a hairline fracture on a sea of infinite night, as the Eye began to open.

Tendrils of alien thought wrapped tight around my mind, pushed through the whorls of my brain, began to take me apart – in the most fundamental sense of *me*.

The word 'pain' fails to do justice to the Eye's attention. It was

beginning an examination, an awful rifling through my neutrons and atoms. I was naked and alone on the altar of an alien God.

Sobbing, whimpering, bleeding from nose and eyes and even from my hair follicles, tugging on the Lozzie-thing's grip to get away, I did the only thing that made any sense. I groped inside my own mind for the familiar equation, the piece of brainmath that spelled O-U-T, that would let me wriggle free like a greased fish, escape back to reality, away from this living nightmare.

The first few pieces slipped into place, as yet beyond the Eye's deepening reach. My head pounded with a sudden spike of pain – and then the Lozzie-thing tightened her grip on my wrist.

“Stay,” it rattled, Raine's knife bobbing in its ruined throat.

The equation fell apart, trickled through my fingers.

Writhing, choking on the pain, sobbing, I howled through my teeth in despair. That's why the Eye had made this mockery of my friend. That was her purpose. To stop me using what it had given me.

This wasn't how I'd imagined myself returning to Wonderland. I was supposed to be ready, prepared for anything, surrounded by friends and shielded by magic and knowledge and love, to rescue my twin sister. In the private, quiet hours of the night, sometimes I'd imagined myself armoured – though I couldn't have defined exactly how. Nonsense, a fairy-tale to soothe a lifetime of anxiety and sickness. This was always my fate in the end, wasn't it? Cold and terrified, dressed in my pajamas, my mind flayed down to nothing until I was a screaming ape in the dust, the same as ten years ago. No escape. Even if I'd lived to see seventy years, there was no escape.

Was this how my life ended? After not even six months of warmth and meaning. At least I'd be with my sister again soon.

We were all the way down now, from the rarefied heights of firearms and friendship, heroics and hyperdimensional mathematics.

I was just an ape – an ape with a sharp rock in its hand.

My free hand had moved on automatic. There wasn't enough of conscious Heather left to make a plan, the Eye had already displaced too much. But a tiny, warm part of my mind held out for

a few precious moments – a part nurtured and fed and encouraged by Raine week after week, day after day – the part that still believed in myself, that I deserved to live, that this scrawny messed-up scrap of flesh called Heather was going to win.

That part of my mind had found a piece of shattered masonry within arm's reach. A leftover shard of whatever had inhabited this dimension before the Eye had arrived, or been born, or been wrought by some magical insanity.

You can sling all the alien math you want, but at the end of the day a rock can still bash your brains out.

A Raine-approved course of action.

The Lozzie-thing was busy staring up at the Eye, communing, communicating, whatever. Ape-Heather didn't care. Ape-Heather lifted the rock up and slammed it down as hard as she could on the Lozzie-thing's wrist. Slam slam *slam!* I wasn't really there, it wasn't me doing that, I was pure animal by that point. I spat and screamed and howled my little defiance at the Eye's tendrils worming their way through my brain, and I shattered whatever the Lozzie-thing used for imitation bone.

I pulled free, fell back onto the ashen ground. The Eye was open another sliver – a million miles wider, up there in the firmament. Its thoughts were in my soul, the pressure of its massive tentacles strangling all thought, let alone emergency brainmath.

I believe I tried to throw the rock at it.

Then, a light.

A light that touched my mind, my soul, the tiniest bright spot from amid the vast probing darkness of the Eye. The smallest, weakest ebb against this tidal wave of pressure. It passed over me, like a lighthouse searching for a reply, and for a second I was myself again.

I did have one ally here in Wonderland, didn't I?

I think I managed to speak my sister's name. I'm not sure.

The light passed away from me. Only a second's pulse of relief, and I felt the Eye's attention gathering to crash back down. Relief had served as false hope. Neither of us could hold this back for long.

A tiny pop of displacing air, the crunch of gravel under shoes, and a “Wah?”

Maisie hadn't been calling to me. She knew we had no hope here. She'd been calling for help.

Lozzie – the real Lozzie – stood there on the ashen dark ground of Wonderland, five feet away from me and her abominable double, eyes wide, a chocolate brownie halfway to her mouth. She dropped the brownie in surprise.

How could I ever have mistaken a fake for the real thing? Lozzie was beautiful – though part of that was the relief speaking, the relief that she was neither dead nor possessed. She looked healthy, no more bruises or bloody scabs. She was wearing flip-flops on bare feet, a plaid skirt, and a pink poncho. Somehow, she'd had a hair cut, fringe a neat line, trailing ends tidied up. How in God's name did one get a hair cut Outside?

“It's me!” She blurted out at the double, then saw me. “And you!” She lit up – then looked up. Her face fell. “Oh ... oh dear.”

“Lozzie!”

The Eye's tendrils pierced my brain again, thoughts peeled back. Lozzie winced – she felt it too. The double turned toward her.

“Kill it!” I managed to scream.

She blinked, and said, “Oh, right,” in the sort of tone one might use when asked to please put the laundry on.

Lozzie raised her hand, clicked her fingers, and pointed at the imitation-thing. The gesture seemed superfluous at the time – only later did I realise it resembled the manner in which one might issue a command to an attack dog.

Lozzie's attack dog did not disappoint.

Burning chrome and lightning-etched steel – shining armour. A bulwark of metal – a tower shield. A shining star – the point of a lance. A helmet, no visor for eyes. Seams in the armour but not cut for a human. It rose behind Lozzie, twice her height in pneuma-somatic spirit flesh.

A knight.

Under the circumstances, my brain simply accepted what I saw. A

knight, why not? We were beyond the rim of the sane universe out here, it was hardly the weirdest thing around. If the knight had removed its helmet and introduced itself as King Arthur reborn, I would not have complained.

The lance took the imitation-Lozzie full in the chest, threw the creature fifty meters to crash down in the rubble and dust.

The knight raised the tower shield over its head to shelter us both – I gasped, spat blood and bile, and drew in a shuddering breath, suddenly myself again. Bruised and bleeding, my sense of self was intact once more. The Eye’s invasive thought-tentacles had been blotted out, cut off, held back – for a second.

The knight’s shield was melting fast, its armour burning and buckling as it absorbed the weight of the Eye’s attention. As it melted, I caught a glimpse of what lay beneath that armour, what manner of creature wore that suit of pneuma-somatic metal, and couldn’t tear my eyes away.

“We gotta go!” Lozzie yelled, and bundled into me, dragging me to my feet and hugging me tight. She grinned in my face, then in an act of pure absurdity she waved upward at the Eye. “Buh-bye!”

“Lozzie! Yes!” I yelled back. “We have to-”

Wonderland dissolved into a kaleidoscope, folded up, and collapsed into nothing. I screwed my eyes shut and clung to Lozzie with all my strength.

All my strength was not enough.

Dead hands grasped my ankles.

= =

Cold, hard, rough – bare concrete beneath my cheek.

I gasped awake and sat up in a rush, confused and dehydrated, eyes gummy with dried blood. Everything ached. Tried to move my right hand to my face and found I couldn’t. My wrist clinked, caught, stopped.

My right wrist was handcuffed, the other cuff attached to a radiator pipe in a concrete wall. Left hand still worked, rubbed at my face, made me wince as I touched my bloody scalp and eyes and nose. Freezing cold, shivering, one sock missing from the feet I drew up

toward myself, curling into a ball, back against the wall.

“Where-” I croaked, swallowed.

For one long moment I didn’t care where I was or how much I ached or why I was handcuffed – all I knew is that this was not Wonderland. Sweet, blessed relief. Tears made tracks on my cheeks. Maisie had called Lozzie, and Lozzie had saved me.

“I love you, I love you,” I whispered, eyes closed, thinking of my sister. “Thank you, I love you, thank you.”

And then Lozzie and I had been pulled apart?

By the Eye? Dimly, I recalled a sensation like dead hands on my ankles, dragging me out of Lozzie’s arms as reality had un-blinked. We were both back in reality, but in different places? Or was this some other Outside dimension?

I couldn’t think, everything hurt and my heart felt strained, like I’d put my body through too much in the last few hours. Where was I? I blinked and rubbed at my eyes, brought my blurry sight back into focus.

A concrete room. No furnishings except for the door, the radiator bolted to the wall – to which I was handcuffed – and a second, empty doorway on the left, leading off into what looked like a stripped kitchen. A single window above the radiator let a shaft of thin winter daylight into the room. Dawn, perhaps.

A figure stood in front of the door. Guarding me. Seven feet of zombie muscle, dressed in her trench coat and boots.

Zheng met my eyes, and said nothing.

At least I was back in Sharrowford.

that which you cannot put down – 7.1

Handcuffed to a radiator in an empty concrete room, in only my pajamas and underwear, dried blood crusted around my nostrils and eye sockets and the edges of my scalp, aching and cold and missing a sock, with only a terminally taciturn seven-foot tall zombie for company.

Still an improvement over Wonderland.

I stared back at Zheng, met those empty, dead-fish zombie eyes, but she didn't move. Apparently my regained consciousness didn't warrant a response.

"Hi, Zheng," I croaked, then cleared my throat. So dry. "Don't suppose you'd know what I'm doing here?"

She said nothing. What had I expected?

Reluctantly, I tore my eyes away from the huge zombie, and inventoried my various aches and pains. I probed my face, my tender hairline, my sore nose, rubbed flakes of dried blood away from my eyelids until I could blink freely without too much stinging. To my surprise I'd sustained only a couple of external bruises – probably acquired fighting the Lizzie-thing, as well as a nasty livid purple mark on my wrist from where she'd grabbed and held me.

Internally was a different matter, fragile and tender.

My soul, my sense of self, the coherency of electrical impulses in my brain, whatever you wish to call it – that felt bruised and bloodied. That was why my heart ached, why I felt so cold inside, brutalised by the Eye's rummaging. My connection to my own body was thin and torn, and slow to repair.

I tucked my knees in closer to my chest, shivering, desperate for some warmth.

"Shouldn't you ... I don't know, go fetch whoever's in charge of you

now?" I asked Zheng.

She stared back at me, eyes empty, face devoid of expression. No body language, like a shop dummy or a sculpture. Her statue-like inhumanity seemed worse than before, but I wasn't in a state to catalogue exactly how. If her eyes hadn't moved to meet mine, I'd have assumed she wasn't in there anymore.

I sighed and tutted at her, and glanced around the room.

Shouldn't I be terrified? Panicking? Pulling on the handcuff, sobbing and shivering? Crying out for somebody to come help me? That was what young women tied up in cellars did in television and movies. This was supposed to be everyone's worst nightmare; kidnapped, restrained, by parties unknown. An empty concrete room, even. How cliché.

I'd just survived my worst nightmare, for the second time in my life. A sort of numb euphoria still cushioned my mind. What could be worse than the Eye? This was nothing.

Mostly I felt irritated, cold, and thirsty.

Real fear – for my friends – tickled the back of my consciousness, but I crushed that down under the practicalities of the moment.

I examined the handcuff. Shiny, new, with a rigid black plastic midsection, the metal cuff itself cinched tight around my thin wrist. I tried to squish my thumb down and wriggle free, but couldn't squeeze through. No getting out without the key.

"Feel like coming over here and crushing the mechanism in here for me?" I rattled the cuff as I asked Zheng. "No? Didn't think so. May I get up, then? Yes or no? Blink once for yes, twice for no."

She didn't blink at all. Spoil-sport. I began to ease myself to my feet. Zheng's eyes tracked me.

"I'm going to look out of the window, figure out where I am. Shouldn't you be trying to stop me? ... alright then, don't say I didn't ask permission."

Uncurling made my teeth chatter. So cold in here, inside this bag of wet meat I was dragging around as an excuse for a body. The handcuffs limited my range of motion, but I managed to slide them up the radiator pipe, stand up straight, and look out of the window.

Up – dawn. Grey skies. The North in winter.

Down, and a touch of vertigo clutched at my legs. Sharrowford spread out below like a concrete-and-brick skid mark, caught in the vulnerable process of waking itself up, shaking off the shadows and cobwebs. Streetlights flickered off and cars passed in the distance.

Below us, so very far below us, lay Headly council estate.

“Oh, great,” I sighed.

If I craned my neck to the right and pressed my face close to the filthy glass, I could see the corner of the other high-rise tower. I didn’t need to guess which one I was in, or how high up I was. Intact glass, beyond range of the concrete-warping effect of Alexander’s corpse, in a stripped flat.

Glasswick tower, top floor.

I tried the window, but they’d thought of that – the catch was closed and locked, with a key. If I found something heavy to smash the glass, I could wave my arms and shout to attract some attention, but why bother?

Time to leave.

“Well, um, nice seeing you again, I suppose?” I said to Zheng, then took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

The bravado wasn’t entirely false. Whoever had handcuffed me here had no idea what I was capable of. Physical restraint couldn’t hold me, not in this reality.

I’d have lost my nerve if I’d stopped to think about the risks. I felt more fragile and paper-thin than any other time before; I could be about to collapse and pass out in some Outside place, choke to death on my own vomit, or perhaps my body would finally give up. The alternative was to sit here, thinking about what might have happened to Evelyn and Raine. Unable to help. Far away, and alone.

No. Much better to Slip, to take the risk, than wait in this empty room for whoever – or whatever – had imprisoned me.

Considering where I was, I could make an educated guess.

Familiar by now, almost deceptively smooth, the first pieces of the equation slipped into place. Pain spiked in the back of my head. I

grit my teeth, tried to hold my breathing steady, focused on the rest of the hyperdimensional mathematics that would get me out of here and my wrist out of these handcuffs. Another piece slid into place, white-hot metal burning a passage through my brain.

Dead hands found my ankles. Held on tight.

Held me here.

I gasped out loud, opened my eyes, and dropped the equation – on purpose this time, carefully, though it still stung like star-fire and made me curl up around my stomach, wincing and wheezing pained breath through my teeth. I blinked down at my feet, but no skeletal hands clutched my actual flesh. Where had that sensation come from?

“That wasn’t ... you? Was it?” I asked Zheng, but she didn’t look like she’d moved in weeks.

Shaking, confused, with real panic rising up my throat, I tried again.

I got further that second time. Pushed right up to the edge, stomach heaving on nothing but bile – and the feeling of bony, dessicated hands wrapped themselves around my ankles, held on tight, clawing at the periphery of my soul.

Crumpling to the floor, hacking and coughing flecks of blood onto the bare concrete, exhausted by the effort of failed brainmath, I whined in horrified frustration. The calm and lack of fear slipped through my fingers. I scratched and scrubbed furiously at my ankles, trying to wipe away the memory of that awful grasping.

“Get off me, get off me!” I hissed. “Let me go!”

I couldn’t Slip.

= =

My captors came to check on me ten minutes later. Felt like eternity.

Turned out the reason I’d been so unafraid was the assumption I was able to Slip away, use brainmath, get out of here. As soon as I couldn’t, it all came crashing down.

Nothing to do except think, huddled against the wall, going around and around inside my own head, faster and faster. I needed to get

out of these handcuffs and break the window, but with what? How? Could I get past Zheng? Hit her with a wrecking ball of force again, like I did before? I'd pass out afterward, and then I'd end up right back where I started, unless I took the top off the entire building.

Nobody was coming to rescue me. Raine had been knocked out, maybe worse. Vulnerable. Acid burned in my throat – Raine, made vulnerable.

Chest tight, shivering in the cold. Evelyn too, in a magical coma, alone and unprotected, except for Kimberly, and she'd run away. Didn't blame her. How long ago had those strange men been hammering on our front door? An hour? Two? I needed to get out of here, they could be anywhere, anything could be happening. The Eye could be coming back for me.

What about Lozzie? Why wasn't she appearing to help me? Was she trapped here too? Nearby, tied up like this, unable to Slip out because of dead hands grabbing at her feet? Was she scared too?

The radiator was bolted to an exterior-facing wall, so I couldn't hammer on the concrete. The best I could manage was to stretch out a leg and thump my heel on the floor.

"Lozzie!" I yelled at the top of my lungs, throat hoarse and raw. They should have gagged me. "Lozzie?"

Dust and echoes.

I wanted to cry, but I was alone, no heroic Raine coming to rescue me, no friend about to appear around the corner to help. Alone. I did cry, a tiny bit. I'm not ashamed to admit so.

No, not like in films or television at all. Sometimes there's no way out, unless you cheat.

I focused on Zheng, and started thinking like a mage.

Last I'd seen the giant zombie woman was in the Cult's ridiculous castle, in the last moments before I'd killed Alexander Lilburne. She looked as if she'd been treated to at least a perfunctory wash since then.

Clean boots, new denim trousers, greasy black hair sticking up in all directions from a pale scalp. Her trench coat was mercifully free of blood – but was still missing the left sleeve where I'd knocked her arm off, the reattached limb still exposed. The arm looked much

healthier, her shoulder no longer a mass of pulped tissue, now all clean, lean, toned muscle.

Unlike every previous time we'd met, her trench coat hung open. She wore a thin white tshirt beneath, and obviously no bra.

Also unlike every previous time, I finally witnessed the true extent of Zheng's tattoos.

I'd seen the tattoos on her left arm before, in those terrified moments when she'd confronted Lozzie and I in the cult's castle, but I'd had neither time nor presence of mind to examine them.

Now I had nothing but time and fear, and Zheng stood there, unmoving, the white tshirt doing little to conceal either modesty, muscle, or body-art.

The looping, winding, spiralling black of the tattoos covered her entire muscled torso. Emerging from below the waistline of her jeans, reaching the rough terminus of her wrists, scrawled on her heavy breasts and washboard stomach, crawling up her throat and across her bold collarbone, in a design so complex it stung the eye not with magic but with sheer visual confusion. A thick mass of infinitely tiny text, in dozens of languages, formed into symbols, whorls, loops – but mostly spirals, so many spirals, etched into the skin over corded muscle.

All of it was faded, some more, some less, some almost to nothing – from different times, different ages, inscribed in different hands, some on top of older designs, some interlocking with them. Zheng's skin carried a multi-generational work of art.

Among the faded, blurred tattoos, one unmistakable addition stood out, bold and clear.

On her exposed left forearm, the one I'd injured, a half-complete spiral shape interlocked with a much older part of the design. The ink looked fresh.

"That's new," I said to Zheng, meeting her eyes again. "And you didn't do that yourself, did you?"

A mad and dangerous idea took root in my mind, based on too many assumptions. I wet my lips, weighed my courage. Better than sitting here. If I could only reach her.

Then, I realised I was an idiot.

“The cuff,” I said out loud, and sighed in sudden relief. “I’m so stupid. Heather, you’re so stupid.”

Heart fluttering with nervous tension, I grabbed the rigid middle of the handcuffs with my free hand. If I couldn’t go Outside, then these could – and the glass in the window could, too.

A key rattled in the door, interrupting my small nervous victory.

Jerking to my feet, heart in my throat, I rose as best I could to meet whatever had come for me – Alexander’s walking, headless corpse, or the Lizzie-thing with a hole in its chest, or robed cultists with knives and chanting. I kept my hand on the cuffs, but internally I began to prepare, painfully and with some reluctance, for a very different kind of brainmath. Whatever they wanted, whatever came through that door, I was going to fight.

The last thing I expected to step into that barren concrete room was three very ordinary looking people. A woman, and two men.

The woman was the leader, I think. She stepped inside first, with a pause at the threshold and a curious raised eyebrow at me.

“You gonna to try to kill me?” she asked.

“ ... I don’t know,” I managed. “Should I?”

She shrugged and strode into the middle of the room, but stayed well beyond my reach, ignoring Zheng and watching my eyes. Short and trim, severe in the face from too much shouting in her life, perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties, with a long shock of black hair and the fine-boned, classically pretty features of a British Indian or Pakistani. Long grey coat, high leather boots, and exhausted. She looked as if she hadn’t truly rested in several days, kept on her feet with a cocktail of determination and spite.

I recognised her. This was the woman who’d been outside number 12 Barnslow drive, directing the men.

The two who followed her into the room, however, had not been at the house. The first was exceptionally clean-cut and very young, perhaps no older than me, not a hair out of place on his blonde head, in a crisp white shirt and a plastic smile. He had a large notebook open over one arm and a pencil ready in the other hand, and went straight to Zheng, peering down at her exposed arm and making ‘hmm’ noises.

The second man looked like a teenage drug-dealer or pothead who'd aged badly into his twenties. He squinted at me from under scraggly twists of hair escaping from his beanie hat, and played with an unlit cigarette held in grubby fingers. For some reason, he made me think of a badger.

Neither of them looked like capable muscle. The woman scared me much more than either of them.

She sighed and cast about the room. "Well, she's still here."

"Mm. You owe me twenty quid," the badger man said.

"Later," she grunted.

They watched me for a second, in silence, though the clean-cut man was absorbed in taking notes as he examined Zheng's tattoos. Their looks felt nothing like the pressure of Alexander Lilburne's infinite self-satisfaction. His gaze had been like a snake waiting for a twitch. This lot looked more like they weren't sure how to proceed.

As a second turned into two, then three, then five, I realised the look was no act – they genuinely had no idea what to do with me. If they were hoping I'd say something, they didn't know what.

"Would you leave the zombie alone?" The woman hissed at the clean-cut man. "For five fucking seconds?"

He ignored her and lifted Zheng's wrist, to examine the new tattoo up close. Zheng didn't even glance down at him.

"I'm speaking to you, Marcus," the woman snapped. "For fuck's sake."

"The new sigil is taking properly," Marcus murmured. "Despite the constant changes in her binding. This is good, this is good news."

"This is also not the time," she hissed through gritted teeth.

"This is important work, you know that."

"Uh, maybe we shouldn't use names in front of ... " The badger-like man nodded toward me.

"What fucking difference does it make?" the woman asked him. He shrugged.

"Who ... " Had to swallow, my throat was so dry. "Who are you

people?”

The clean-cut man – Marcus – turned away from Zheng and pointed his plastic smile at me, before the woman could answer.

“We are the favoured and the blessed,” he said, his voice floaty and not-quite-here. The voice of a missionary, or of drugs crossing the blood-brain barrier.

“We’re what’s left,” the woman answered – measured, quiet, and filled with hate.

“Left of ... left of what?” I swallowed again, playing for time, for information. I couldn’t make myself confident here, but I could make myself seem oblivious.

“Don’t be obtuse,” the woman said.

“The Brotherhood of the New Sun.” The badger man snorted an empty laugh.

I glanced between the three of them, but there was no joke in their eyes. The woman sighed and shrugged.

“Just ... just you three?” I asked.

“I’m not completely stupid, I’m not going to tell you that,” the woman said, then narrowed her eyes and smiled in a thin, dark way, voice turning sarcastic and mocking. “No, in fact, there’s dozens of us, hundreds even. All of us exist purely to torment you, because you’re the centre of the Goddamn universe.”

“Hey, Sarrry ... ” the badger-man muttered, half reaching for her shoulder, and then thought better of it. She ignored him.

Undignified, dressed in my pajamas and ugly with my own blood on my face, I tried to turn vulnerability into the only form of strength I could grasp. I pulled on my right wrist, let the handcuffs clink against the radiator.

“I’m the one cuffed to a wall.”

“Yeah, that’s right. You are. So why the hell are you still here?”

“She’s run out of juice,” the badger man said. “Too tuckered out, eh?”

“That,” the clean-cut young man raised his pencil. “Should not be

possible. That never happened with the younger Lilburne. She was irrepressible. Something else is keeping our guest here. Reluctance, perhaps? Maybe she's seen the light."

"Maybe," the woman drawled. She sounded unconvinced. "She looks pretty tired to me. You feeling tired, Heather?"

I blinked at her. Too many things to take in at once, struggling to hold onto every scrap. Every piece of information could be valuable, could get me out.

They didn't know why I couldn't Slip. They didn't know about the dead hands.

"I'm thirsty," I said, instead. "And how do you know my name?"

"We all knew your stupid name. Alexander wanted you on the team, so we all had to fucking know about it."

"Then you appear to have me at a disadvantage," I said, raising my chin.

I don't know how I put so much haughty weight into that sentence. Half an impression of Evelyn, half stolen confidence from their petty infighting. I couldn't see a way out, yet, but I knew there must be one. These people were tired and bitter and not what I'd expected.

"Why not, hey?" the woman said. "Why not pretend we're all regular fucking human beings? I'm Sarika, and this is Nate. Marcus you heard earlier."

"Call me Badger," Nate said. "Not that we'll know each other for long." I blinked at him, not quite believing my ears. "Yeah, you were thinking it weren't you?"

"I ... yes."

"This is our chance," Marcus said, eyes shining with zeal. "This is our opportunity, to prove ourselves, to Him. She can't leave, or she's unwilling to go, and the construct – well, the construct is missing. So we send her, ourselves. We send her back to Him."

"Mm," Sarika grunted, staring at me. "Sounds good."

"We must. We must do it!"

"Alright. We will. Hold onto your pants," she grunted.

“What?” I asked, stomach sinking, but I didn’t really have to ask. A cold shiver ran down my spine and into my blood. “Send me where? You ... you people work for the Eye now, don’t you?”

“ ... ‘Eye’?” Sarika raised an eyebrow. “That’s what you call it?”

“Makes sense.” Badger shrugged.

“He has a name and His glory should not be diminished by our fragility,” Marcus said, raising his head and closing his eyes.

Then he spoke the Eye’s true name.

A not-sound with no business issuing from a human throat. My eyes stung and my ears popped as a static crackle passed through the frigid air. I assume the temperature dropped, as it had months ago when Evelyn had spoken the Eye’s name to make a point, but the bare concrete room was already too cold to notice. Sarika jerked and winced, gritting her teeth. Badger grunted and screwed his eyes up.

Zheng blinked.

Marcus raised his voice, a little blood on his lips. “We speak His name and embody His will and-”

Sarika grabbed a handful of Marcus’ collar and got up in his face, bearing her teeth. “If you do that again without warning me first, you little shit, I will have her,” – she jabbed a finger at Zheng – “split you from your cock to your throat, and feed you your own steaming guts. You’ll die with a mouthful of your own shit. Do I make myself clear?”

“She’ll do it, man. You know she will,” Badger said.

“I will not apologise for my devotion,” Marcus said through his plastic smile.

Sarika let go and pushed him away – then gestured at Zheng.

My heart leapt into my throat. For one terrible moment I thought their leader was about to make good on her gruesome threat. Zheng came to life all at once, whirling into motion, one hand grabbing Marcus by the shoulder and shoving him at the wall. He bounced off – but Zheng stopped at a click of Sarika’s fingers.

“Want me to keep going?” Sarika snapped.

Marcus straightened his shirt and turned his plastic smile back on. He tilted his head down in the smallest gesture of submission. Sarika sighed, and Zheng returned to her waiting pose, eyes locked back on mine again. Badger took a deep breath and swallowed.

“Right, now that’s over, we don’t want her to die in the meantime,” Sarika muttered. “You said you’re thirsty?”

“Yes,” I answered after a moment. “Very much so.”

“Here.” She dug around in her coat pockets and pulled out a plastic bottle. She tossed it to me, and of course I couldn’t catch it with one hand cuffed to the wall. I crouched to fetch it off the floor.

Half empty. Seal on the cap already broken. I met Sarika’s eyes.

“ ... what?” she huffed. “You think it’s drugged? We don’t need to fucking drug you, we can have Zheng drag you wherever we want. Drink it or not. I’m beyond caring.”

I didn’t touch the water, but I placed the bottle on the windowsill.

“So you people do work for the Eye? I don’t understand, how?”

“‘Work’ is perhaps a little too optimistic,” Sarika sneered.

“What’s to understand?” Badger said with a shrug. “We’re here, and none of us are getting out.”

“We serve Him now, as we always should have,” Marcus added.

Great. The Eye, my childhood nightmare, my twin’s jailer, and the ultimate foe of everything good in my life, now had a real-life doomsday cult in Sharrowford. I could connect the dots even if I didn’t know the details – Alexander had found out about Maisie and my past, somehow encountered knowledge about the Eye. And now his former followers had decided to worship the thing as a God.

I’m certain Evelyn could have told about a worse possible outcome, but right then I couldn’t see one.

“How did I get here?” I asked.

“A wonderful question,” Sarika said. “One we were hoping you could answer, in fact.”

“ ... what?”

“We found you on the floor in front of Alexander’s body. That’s

what.”

“Where’s the construct?” Badger asked me.

“Mm, yes, that too. We know it came for you,” Sarika added. They were getting into the swing of this now, back and forth, hitting me with questions – but only because I’d given them the opening, ceded control of the tempo. Marcus may have been a loon, lost to the Eye, but these two had at least some brains cells to share between them. “In fact, I’m pretty certain it got you. Got there before I did, and spirited you away. So how the fuck’d you get free from it?”

“It should be coming for her right now,” Badger muttered. “Should be here already.”

“Yeah, and it’s not.” Sarika shivered. “Thank fuck.”

“It is otherwise occupied,” Marcus said, nodding to himself. “It is His creature and His ways are not our ways.”

“You mean the thing that looks like Lozzie?” I asked.

Sarika tried to laugh, but it didn’t take an expert on body language to read the shudder in her face. “Yeah, the *thing* that looks like Lauren Lilburne. The construct.”

“It’s dead,” I said – and relished the looks on their faces.

“A lie,” Marcus said.

I didn’t respond, though more because I wasn’t actually certain it was dead than any calculated intimidation tactic. He frowned at me.

“She ain’t lying,” Badger clicked his tongue. “It’d be here if it was still walking about. They must have killed it before it took her.”

“Killed it *after* it took me. The Eye can’t hold me,” I almost spat at them. “Sending me back would be pointless, because I’ll just escape again.”

“Okay, that’s obviously nonsense,” Sarika said, sighing. “If it had you, you wouldn’t be here. I’ll accept you killed the construct, or your friend with the gun did, but there’s no way you escaped the ... the ‘Eye’.”

“Him,” Marcus corrected.

“You think it has a fucking gender? Really?” She shook her head.

“The Eye can’t hold me, and you can’t hold me.” I managed to sound much more confident than I really felt, shivering cold and restrained in front of these people. “I could kill all of you with my mind, right now, and there’s nothing you could do to stop me.”

Except that I’d pass out for hours and freeze to death on the floor. I didn’t say that part out loud.

“Oh yeah? Just like you and your friends did to Alexander?”

Sarika’s voice twisted with disgust – and a strange touch of sorrow, a catch in the back of her throat. “Did to my friends? You gonna kill me too, now, huh? Go on. Bitch.”

“We should be thanking her,” Marcus said. “For acting as the catalyst of our revelation. Without her actions, rash and destructive as they may be, we would never have found Him.”

My turn to frown at this fanatic – what did he mean, my actions?

“She doesn’t know,” Badger said with a sad chuckle.

Sarika blinked at me. “You really have no idea, do you? You don’t think about the consequences of your actions, people like you never do. You just do violence, and then swan away. I hate your type, I really do.”

I stared at her. Couldn’t quite process the words. She was outraged – at me?

“What do you think happened, hmm? After you and your friends killed Alexander? Killed the best visionary I’ve ever known? Cut off our fucking head? My ... ” She paused, pressed her lips together.

“You found a bigger monster to follow?” I tasted bile in my throat.

Sarika regarded me for a moment, bitter and silent, then spoke. “He didn’t die right away. Lingered maybe three or four hours, I don’t remember exactly. I don’t remember much of that night very well. Zheng brought him back here, he was just ... limp meat ... and he ... ”

“He gave us a God,” Marcus said, his eyelids fluttering half-closed

“He made a deal. A shitty one, with this ‘Eye’,” Sarika continued, gritting her teeth. “With the *Magnus Vigilator*. It was supposed to save his body, put him back together, but I don’t think that thing

understood the meaning of human biology well enough. In return he gave it raw material. His memories of his sister, I assume, to form an avatar, a puppet, a ... I don't know how it works, alright? I don't care. Something that can move back and forth between our reality and the Beyond, the way the real Lauren had done. An abomination, no? All that's left of him, all I've got left of him, and it's a walking nightmare."

She couldn't keep the emotion out of her voice. I wasn't certain what Alexander Lilburne had been to her, but it had been more than a follow-messiah relationship.

I think I was talking to the ex-lover of the man I'd killed.

Oh dear.

"You forget the most important aspect of our ascension," Marcus said, his plastic smile tinted with smugness.

Sarika sighed heavily, bringing her emotions under control. She displayed remarkable restraint in not thumping Marcus across the face. "Yes. Yes, how could I possibly forget? He gave it another bargaining chip too, to spice the deal. Us."

"A God is no God if it is not deserving of worship," Marcus said. Badger cleared his throat, lowered his eyes.

"You?" I blinked at her, not quite getting it.

"We've all ... *communed* with it now, we all dream about it. That was the deal." Sarika said. "It's in my head, when I close my eyes. It's in all our fucking heads, girl, and in a way that's your fault. Yours and Alexander's, and I can't throttle him."

"It is a blessing," Marcus admonished her. "The vistas of thought that open before the human mind, if one is but willing to accept, are beyond words."

"Sure is that," Sarika grunted. "This thing Alexander found, when looking into you, Heather. Your background. It wants you, and I am fucking well going to find a way to give it what it wants. Nothing personal, understand?"

I almost – almost – didn't blame her.

"You don't have to listen to it," I said, but my voice shook too much to sound convincing. "I'm going to ... to defeat it."

Sarika started laughing.

“Why not just park her back in front of Alex’s corpse, like we all had to?” Badger asked. “Let it in her head?”

“You want to risk touching her?” Sarika shook her head, laughter dying.

“Ehhh.” Badger shrugged. “She’s out of juice.”

I raised my chin, stood as tall as I could, and tried to stop shivering. “I can still send you Outside – Beyond, whatever you call it – if you let me touch you. You want to meet your God, in person? I can send you there.”

Marcus’s eyes flashed with a split-second of interest, but the other two merely stared at me, thinking.

“Come on, we need to hit the books, find a way to send her back,” Sarika said eventually. “And Marcus, you need to go pray again, figure out if there’s something He wants done with her. There’s got to be a way. Make another construct, I don’t know.”

“What if we get her to go willingly?” Badger muttered.

“Hmm?”

“What?” I said.

Badger wet his lips, swallowed, and played his hand.

“We’ve got your friends. All’o them,” he said, nodding. “We could hurt them, cut bits off’o them, until you just ... poof, go back to the ... ‘Eye’. And then we’re all free, and your mates go free too. Or we can hurt ‘em. That’s a promise.”

A sudden weight on my chest. Sick and blinking through a flush of heat in my face. They had hit the house, Raine and Evelyn had both been unconscious, and I doubted very much that Kim could have put up much of a fight. I tried to focus on the tone of the man’s voice, to read his expression.

“You’re bluffing.” I shook my head.

“No I’m not,” he replied, too quickly.

“We picked up Evelyn Saye, and her bodyguard, and the Brinkwood werewolf,” Sarika said. “We were following the construct, got

brave, got lucky. You've got nobody left."

Relief pulsed through my chest. A tiny, borderline hysterical smile curled on my lips. "You couldn't hold Twil," I hissed. "That's a bluff. And you missed somebody else. How'd you get past the invisible spiders? How many people did they kill?"

That struck a nerve. Badger frowned and grit his teeth – perhaps Evelyn's Spider-servitors had hurt one of *his* friends.

"Alright, we have one of them," Sarika admitted with a sigh and a side-eyes glare at Badger. "You think you can do that, Nate? Torture some fucking kid? Cut off a finger?"

Badger shrugged. "Yeah. You know? Yeah."

"No," I said, clinging on. "No. Who, who have you got? You're lying. That's a lie, it–"

Sarika tilted her head, slowly. She had me now, and she knew so.

"*Who?*" I almost screamed at her.

"I wouldn't tell her if I was you. This is working," Marcus announced. Sarika sighed and ran a hand over her face.

"Torture it is then," she grunted. "We'll let you stew a bit, have a think if you wanna save your friend. We'll be back with a finger, or an ear, or ... fuck knows. Come on you two, out."

They turned to leave.

"Wait!" I said, scrabbling for a handhold, for anything. If they'd broken into the house and had time to take only one person, I knew exactly who they had, and I did anything to deny that reality. "It's Praem, isn't it? You've got Praem. She was here, she came to the tower. You can't hurt her, she's not even human, she's made of wood."

Sarika squinted at me. "Praem?"

"She means the zombie we found," Badger grunted.

"Oh, that thing. Yeah, we've got her too." Sarika smirked. "Don't worry, she won't be mounting a rescue anytime soon. She's in a bottle. Corked."

My world shrunk, walls closing in, head throbbing with more than

simple pain. Sarika was last out, and I stared at her as she left.

“Try to keep warm, yeah?” she said. “Don’t freeze to death up here.” She closed the door, turned the key, and locked me in.

They had Raine. I knew, in my bones, they had kidnapped Raine.

My Raine, my beautiful Raine, handcuffed to a radiator pipe like this? What would she be doing – planning a way out? She’d have a plan, of course she would, she was probably already free, right? There was no way she’d let them hurt her, I could barely imagine it. She’d fight like a cornered fox, she’d find a way, she’d break free.

Wouldn’t she? She was only human, and perhaps she was as cold and drained as I was. Unarmed. Alone.

In the dark watches of the night, in my most private, isolated moments, I’d feared a time like this would come – ever since Raine had slid into my life over the top of a bathroom stall, and made the choice to help me, defend me, become part of me. Feared that if the certainty of her confidence was ever taken away, I’d crumble to nothing. I was a half-person pretending to be real, an emotional dependent, a weakling. So afraid that without her, I’d relapse into retreat and reclusion, give up, give in.

Shaking all over, eyes wet with tears, I did the opposite.

As soon as the door was locked and I heard the cultist trio’s footsteps vanish, I didn’t even think. I grabbed the rigid centre of the handcuffs with my free hand, grit my teeth and tensed to stop myself vomiting, and jammed the familiar old equation into place so fast that my eyeballs hurt.

Out.

The handcuffs vanished.

Reeling, spitting blood, doubling up with pain as my stomach spasmed and my head pounded like an explosion, I clung onto consciousness – and my stomach acid – with pure force of will. Forcing myself to breathe, breathe, in and out, I straightened up, made my legs take my weight.

Zheng stared back at me. Seven feet of statue-still zombie muscle.

“I think it’s time we test some assumptions,” I said, voice shaking.

It wasn’t courage. I’m not a courageous person, I refuse to believe

so. I simply lacked any other options. Sit in this room and wait for those awful people to return, with a magic circle or Raine's severed index finger? Smash the window and shout and wait for Zheng to stop me? Try to Slip Outside again, and leave Raine – or somebody else, if I'd gotten it wrong – behind?

Those weren't options. Easier to stop breathing than pick one of those, no matter how much this new plan terrified me. Not courage. Blind and unthinking, the only choice.

"Assumption one – you didn't attack me. That night. And you ... a-and you ... dammit, Heather." I swallowed, sniffed, forced steel into my voice as I spoke to the towering zombie. "And you stood by when I killed Alexander."

I took a step toward Zheng, and she didn't move.

That awful night when the Sharrowford Cult had mounted its last attempt to kidnap me, the night I'd knocked Zheng's arm off, broken the integrity of her tattoos, she'd gone berserk. She'd killed two of the Cult, eviscerated them, left their corpses behind as she'd careened off into the labyrinth.

But she hadn't attacked me.

That night, I'd regained consciousness underneath one of Evelyn's Spider-servitors, and I'd assumed that it had protected me from Zheng. Perhaps, but perhaps not. She'd also not attacked us when we'd stumbled across her in the labyrinth. And, in those final moments in Alexander's throne room, she'd seen what Lozzie and I were doing. She hadn't stopped us.

"Assumption two." My eyes flickered down to the new tattoo on her forearm, black spiral half-complete. "That's how they control you."

Another step toward Zheng. Her eyes tracked me.

A major assumption, that. One of Evelyn's theories, not my deduction. Please, Eevee, please be safe, please be well. I hope Twil found you in time.

Another step. God, but Zheng was so *tall*. An animal part of me quivered, told me to back away, out of her arm's reach. But I stepped closer, almost close enough to touch her.

"Assumption three. You hate these people," I hissed. "And if I'm right, you deserve this."

I lunged for the door.

A very poor lunge, on exhausted, shaking legs and slippery feet, at the wrong angle and without enough reach. I wouldn't have touched the door handle even if Zheng hadn't decided to move. She didn't so much grab me as catch me around the middle to stop me falling on my face. One huge hand whipped out like the jaws of a snake, hauling me up and back.

Quick as I could, flailing and missing once, twice, heart in my throat – third time lucky! I wrapped a hand around Zheng's exposed left forearm. Directly over the new tattoo.

Out.

No time to plan the equation, to minimise the pain. I'd never attempted such physical finesse before, such delicate mathematical selection of what I was touching. Not skin or muscle or bone, and certainly not the whole of her, clothes and all.

Only the ink, under my palm.

The effort almost blacked me out. A second of oblivion as I reeled away from Zheng, a second of sagging and choking, as I spat a string of bile onto the floor, gritting my teeth and holding on and holding on and-

An intake of breath, sharp, surprised, deep. Not mine.

Blinking through the darkening edges of my vision, I braced myself against the radiator to avoid a rapid meeting with the floor, as I boggled at what I'd done.

Zheng exhaled, and life blossomed on her face. She blinked three times, eyes wide. Her gaze lowered as she lifted her arm, to examine the small palm-shaped blank spot where I'd erased a section of her tattoos. I'd removed the new one entirely. Good aim. Cleaner than severing her whole limb, at least.

She flexed her arms, rolled her shoulders, let out a *grunt*.

I'd expected a change akin to Praem's growth over the last few months, but simply accelerated – a few subtleties of expression, a little more willingness to communicate, the power of independent decision making – but this wave of physical awakening surprised me. With every second that passed, Zheng looked more like an actual human being rather than a demon possessing a corpse.

She lifted her eyes, no longer dead and empty, but alive and alert, expressive even. The colourless pallor in her skin was flushed away with those first few hungry breaths, returning what I assumed had once been her natural colouration, a dusky light red-chocolate.

She made eye contact with me.

And grinned.

My stomach contracted, my entrails tried to climb up through my chest cavity, and all the hairs stood up on the back of my neck.

Wide, wider, baring row upon row of teeth suddenly much, much sharper than they had been a few moments ago. A shark's grin.

Zheng took another deep breath, relishing the taste of the air. She grinned at me, and spoke.

"Yaagaad ve? Yaagaad, jijig shidten?"

Voice like granite, deep but unmistakably feminine, the question filled with confused wonder.

"I don't-" I squeaked. "I'm sorry, I don't understand you."

Her grin twisted. She flexed her jaw wide, clicking and grinding, limbering up, and tried again.

"Why?" she repeated, in perfectly accented English, as if this seven-foot monster had lived in the North of England her whole life.

"Why, little wizard?"

The key in the door interrupted my frantic grasping for an answer. A click, and the door eased open. A face peered inside – Marcus, the fanatic, returned for some private reason.

Zheng didn't bother to turn and look at him, still staring at me, still grinning like a shark. He glanced at her from behind. He didn't see the transformation.

My heart, hammering in my chest. He must have seen the fear on my face, but misread the reason.

"Still here? Good. Perhaps we can convince you yet," Marcus purred as he stepped into the room, carefully shutting the door behind him. He carried an emergency space blanket over one arm, the kind that you might find in a first aid box or survival kit. He stepped past Zheng, favouring me with his plastic smile.

He didn't see the way she turned her head to fix the grin on him.

"Here, for you. Catch," he said, and tossed me the blanket.

I caught it awkwardly in my left hand, trying to hide that I had freed my right.

"I don't want you to die of hypothermia. Malice is not our purpose here, death is not our purpose. You must return to your benefactor, and for that, well, you need to stay warm. I can get you some fresh clothes, too, and ... oh, you've defeated my handcuffs. Ahhhh. Yes, yes, I think we can indeed convince you to go back of your own accord, can't we? Zheng, hold her wrists still, please, I must do an experiment."

Zheng exhaled, warm breath through her shark's teeth.

"Zheng?"

Marcus looked over his shoulder. Saw the grin. His eyes went wide.

"Ret-", he managed. Half a word of Latin, I suspect.

Zheng moved so fast it confused my eyes, her limbs whirring like animated quicksilver. One hand grabbed his head. The other shot forward into his mouth, breaking several teeth. A jerk and a twist, a choking cry of pain from Marcus, and a scrap of wet pink flesh dropped to the floor from the zombie's fingers.

She'd ripped his tongue out.

"No more chains from you, wizard," she growled at him.

"Oh my God, oh-" I clamped a hand over my own mouth.

She picked him up by the head, blood streaming from his face. No time to look away, no comprehension of what she was doing. Zheng spun her whole body, one clean arc, and slammed his skull into the concrete wall. Once was all it took. Like a burst melon. The most awful sound.

I must have squeezed my eyes shut – and crammed myself as far back against the wall as I could – because I remember the sounds that followed, not the sights. Zheng's breathing, huge and rough and urgent. A ripping of fabric, then of meat. A pop, a crack – was that bone? Then a sound like peeling.

"Unngghhh. *Meat.*"

Zheng grunted, through a very full mouth.

Shaking, horrified, I opened my eyes to the sight of her eating the dead man's leg.

She'd ripped his trousers open and had somehow torn his leg off at the knee, then peeled part of the skin away to reveal the bloody muscle beneath. As I watched in abject horror, she crammed another handful of torn flesh into her mouth.

She chewed and swallowed, blood down her face and throat and tshirt and pooling around the man's shattered skull.

"S'been so long since meat." She almost purred, like a huge sated tiger.

Then she remembered I was there.

For a split-second I considered throwing myself out of the window. No, I reminded myself – then I would die for certain, whereas Zheng was still a gamble. A gamble with human flesh in her teeth.

No, no, she'd killed Marcus, not me. Stand fast, Heather. Don't show too much fear. She'd looked at me and asked a question. If she wanted me dead, I would be dead.

None of that mattered when this blood-splattered giant stood up, grinning like a demon from hell, towering over me.

I actually cowered. It's a very specific sensation. I was caught between trying to make myself as small as possible, and trying to prepare to zap her to another dimension when she got too close.

She dropped the severed leg and stepped toward me, eyes fixed on mine, turning her head one way and then the other, as if not quite sure what to make of me – or waiting for me to scream and mess myself in terror, a response not entirely off the table. The grin split her face, wider and wider. She came close enough to touch, muscles moving under her bloodied tshirt, breasts hanging downward as she loomed overhead.

She slammed both hands into the concrete on either side of my head.

Deep down in my lizard brain, an animal part of me sat up and paid attention – the same part that had paid attention when Raine had first pulled out a nightstick and called it 'insurance', the part that

had shivered in arousal when I'd watched Raine beat a monster to death, the part I tried so often to ignore, that found violence attractive.

Oh no. Oh no no no no, not this, not *this*, I told it, not now. This was not Raine. This zombie had just eaten human flesh, right in front of my eyes. She was seven feet tall and terrifying. She was exceptionally dangerous and I had made a terrible miscalculation.

That part of my mind quite liked Zheng.

I told it no. Absolutely not. Not now. *Down*.

"Why, little wizard?" Zheng purred down at me, eyes wide with savage amusement above her bloody grin. "Why take the risk?"

"What ... " I swallowed, trying not to panic, trying to prepare the brainmath to make her go elsewhere, permanently. "What risk?"

"Freeing me."

that which you cannot put down – 7.2

Zheng's question made perfect sense, both rational and reasonable – why had this trembling scrap of humanity decided to set her free?

My brain, held in a death grip by fight-or-flight response, cowering and cringing beneath a seven-foot tall monster leering over me with a mouthful of bloodstained razor-sharp teeth, squeaked an answer through my closing throat.

“Personal space, please.”

Zheng tilted her face-splitting grin and leaned closer. She sniffed me – fear-sweat, dried blood, and the lingering ash taint of Wonderland.

“Scared?” she purred, as a tiger would.

My head jerked in a nod. “I ... I n-need you to straighten up, or ... personal space.”

Zheng placed one huge hand on top of my head. “Hmm,” she rumbled.

How did I stay standing? How did I, tiny weak Heather, not collapse to the floor and curl up in a ball?

Because Wonderland had acted as a paradoxical inoculant.

Zheng was terrifying, yes, but her terror was all reassuringly bodily and terrestrial. She moved with the barely-veiled violence of a predatory cat at rest, but like a living being should do, not the awful click-clack ratcheting of the Lozzie-thing. Big – very, very big – and dangerous and scary, but not an affront to my senses or an invasive dismantling of my consciousness.

With every passing second my lizard-brain arousal liked Zheng more and more, and that probably helped too, loathe to admit it though I was. If we'd met under any other circumstances she'd have easily reduced me to a stuttering, blushing mess.

I closed my eyes, felt my fingers twitch, and took my mind to the edge of the equation to send her Outside.

She let go of my head.

“Personal space. Room to breathe. That enough for you, little wizard?” Her voice was like granite wrapped in silk. I opened my eyes and found her still far too close. She’d straightened up and eased back, kept only one hand against the concrete wall.

I took a shuddering breath and felt a sudden deep appreciation for still having all my vulnerable extremities attached.

“Still scared?” Zheng purred.

Somehow, from the God-forsaken black pit in my soul, born of a death-wish or sheer exasperation, or perhaps with fear blotted out by my worry for Raine, I managed to level a capital-L *look* at Zheng.

She laughed, a low-throated chuckle of real amusement.

“Of course I’m scared,” I managed. “You’re huge.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“And you’re not what I expected.”

“HMMMM? Expected something more like your little demon? Barely awake, an idiot and half-mute? I’ve been here a long time, you monkeys have rubbed off on me.”

A long time? I almost asked her age. Was that a rude question, when speaking to a demon from Outside?

Still clutching the reflective space-blanket Marcus had thrown me a few minutes ago, trying not to think about the poor man’s cooling corpse several feet away, and also trying to ignore the overwhelming urge to inch away from Zheng, I did my best to see through the crimson gore on her face and read her as a person, as I did with Praem.

Sharp-edged intelligent eyes, a wide and mobile mouth, and that thatch of greasy dark hair sticking out in all directions.

She didn’t make it easy, almost like she was showing off. As I watched, Zheng looked away and unhinged her jaw, working it from side to side as if the muscles were sore from disuse. She swallowed, grunted, and ran her tongue over her bloody teeth – a

tongue easily twelve inches long, tapered to a point, a wet red tentacle of muscle.

The tongue retracted back into her mouth, and I breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“Praem. You mean Praem,” I said. “And she’s not an idiot.”

Zheng’s awful grin widened again. She made a head-tilt radiate more threat than a entire room of professional thugs. “What does it matter what I call your pet demon?”

“Because-” I swallowed. My mouth was so dry. “Because it’s her name. I gave it to her. And she’s not my pet, she’s my friend.”

Zheng made a ‘hmm’ noise that sounded like a tiger turning over in its sleep.

“Don’t ... don’t you have a name? Zheng? T-they’ve been calling you-”

“Zheng is *a* name. And we’re both mangling it.” Her grin faded to sullen boredom. “No ‘zz’. More like ‘jyung’, quicker.”

Her pronunciation sounded vaguely Chinese to my ears, though the amount of spoken Chinese I’d heard in my life amounted to almost nothing. Zheng did look somewhat East Asian, but in a way I couldn’t place. Her skin, light chocolate with a hint of red, gave me few clues. Not Chinese, I’d thought, but then again China is a very big place.

“Then I apologise,” I stammered. “I didn’t mean to say your name wrong. I-”

“Doesn’t matter. Call me whatever you want.” She grinned again. “Could teach you my real name, but I’d have to break your jaw in three places and split your tongue, or you’d mangle that too.”

“Of course,” I sighed, unable to control my exasperation. “Of course your true name would collapse my windpipe or blow out my eardrums or something. Obviously.”

“Smart monkey,” she purred.

“You are a demon, yes? The same as Praem?”

She shrugged, a huge gesture from her. “I’m not from here.”

“Clearly. Zheng, then?” I did my best to say it right.

“Mm. Can you answer me now, wizard? Have I satisfied your little monkey brain that I’m not going to eat you too? Is your heart pumping a few paces slower?”

“ ... yes, yes, no,” I almost squeaked. “In that order.”

That extracted another grin from Zheng. She liked it when I shot back, and that gave me a few more scraps of courage to work with, to keep me on my feet, to keep up with her.

“Why free me?” she rumbled. The grin grew across her face once more, toothy and bloody.

I allowed my eyes to flicker toward the door, the now-unlocked door, the key presumably still in Marcus’ pocket. I tried very hard not to look at his ruined corpse on the floor with its burst-melon skull. “Aren’t you worried they might ... come back? You ... we ... ”

Zheng stared at me, grin fixed like the smile on a skull.

“Zheng?”

“No.”

“ ... no?”

“No, as in you and I are doing this right now, little wizard.” She leaned in close again, slow this time, a snake hypnotising a quivering mouse. I tried very hard not to be that mouse, to keep my spine upright and my knees straight. “You freed me, and we’re in trouble, you and I. Deep in enemy territory, both woefully friendless. I need to know why, so I can choose between picking you up and carrying you out of here, or crushing your skull against the wall behind you.”

A lump in my throat. My limbs turned to water. I couldn’t control the shaking.

“A-alright, I- b-because you were guarding me. And I need to get out of here. That’s why.”

The grin widened. “No, that’s not the real reason,” she purred. “I’ve seen what you do, little wizard. You-”

“Heather,” I squeaked.

“Hmm?” A tilt of the head.

“That’s- that’s my name. Heather. Not ‘little wizard’. I’m not even really a mage.”

Perhaps I was merely buying time for the moment I would brainmath her into oblivion, but I told myself that if she knew my name, she might be less inclined to murder me.

Zheng tilted her head the other way, thoughtful. “Exactly. I’ve seen what you do, watched how you killed the old chief of this pathetic milk-blooded rabble. I’ve been gagged for years, but nobody’s been able to blind me for decades. I remember you, Heather, and I think you could have dumped this body” – she tapped her own chest, bloody fingertips sticky against the crimson-stained tshirt – “anywhere you liked. Exploded my head. Taken my arms and legs off, left me to roll around like a turd. But you didn’t. Why take the risk?”

“I ... I don’t know ... I-”

Twitch my fingers, get ready to reach out and grab her. All I needed was a second. Oh, this was such a terrible mistake. Why was she demanding an answer to this question? This was more like it, wasn’t it? A classical demon wrapping the summoner in riddles, toying with me like a cat with crippled prey.

“Not good enough,” she purred.

“I freed you to ... to free myself!” I blurted. “Because I’m trying to escape, a-and I thought maybe you would want ... ”

“Naive, or stupid? Not stupid, no. Naive? Maybe. Why did you free me, little wizard? Dig deep, and speak truth. I can’t defang you, your magic works differently, but I can shatter your brainbox faster than you can touch me with that little hand.”

My eyes went wide. Zheng made her point – she grabbed my wrist just to show me just how unafraid she really was. She held me like a gentle vice, iron-strong but without squeezing.

“The things you were saying to me mere minutes ago, *Heather*. Those *assumptions*. I liked those. I liked those very much. Were they lies?”

I could have executed the equation right then, with her skin touching mine; despite all her threats I knew I could unweave the

fabric of reality at the speed of thought.

She was bluffing.

Terror peeled back. A seed of doubt sprouted.

The shark-toothed grinning, the lazy intimidation, the riddle-like question she'd accept no rational answer to – was this her survival strategy?

She knew I could obliterate her with a thought, send her Outside and strand her in some alien dimension, even if that's where she was originally from. So the only way for her to live through the next few minutes, after murdering – perhaps justifiably – one of her former slave-drivers, after giving into her hunger for meat right in front of me, was for her to intentionally trigger all the animal fears in my soft mammal brain, remind me that I was small, keep me guessing, make me think she was totally unafraid – all while skirting the line at which I'd resort to self-defence.

She was trying to forge an understanding. And doing an awful job of it.

"Oh, dammit," I swore softly, right in her face, shivering all over. "If you're going to kill me, at least I'm going to die warm." I huffed and shook off her hand – luckily, she let me go. I would have been rather out of face if she'd decided to hang on. I tugged the space-blanket around my shoulders and pulled it tight, hugging myself against the interior cold.

Zheng did this thing with her eyebrows, a quizzical kink so deep it would have been comical if she wasn't covered in blood.

"I freed you ... " I started, then made myself meet her eyes and stand up straight. All my body rebelled, but it was either this or murder her. "I freed you instead of getting rid of you, because you were a slave. Nothing that can think for itself should be a slave."

The grin returned, a wall of teeth. "I'm no djin, no friendly genie," she rumbled. "Freeing me doesn't win you infinite wishes."

I glared at her as best I could, a mouse staring down a tiger, as I wriggled one arm free and pointed at the door. My hand shook. "Then go. Go wherever you want, do whatever you want. I have things to do."

Zheng shook her head. "No wizard would ever say that to me. I'm

the greatest prize this side of the Volga.”

“And I barely even know where that is. I’m serious.” I wagged my finger at the door. “Go. Go on. Leave. I won’t stop you.”

Zheng’s grin faded to nothing. She clacked her teeth together, still shaking her head. Her breathing turned rough and urgent, halfway between confusion and desire. She squinted at me, incredulity and wonder around her eyes.

“I’ve been a slave for a very long time,” she purred. “The leash, sometimes short, sometimes long, often muzzled, but never withdrawn. Until now. Any other wizard would *want* me.”

“I already told you. I’m not even really a mage.”

Zheng nodded slowly, regarding me with a strange fascination in her eyes. Her silk-and-stone voice dropped to barely a breath, to caress an ancient reverence.

“Shaman, then,” she said.

Shaman; that word meant something important to her. If she’d been human, she would have shivered, her arms covered in goosebumps. I got the shivers instead, and they had nothing to do with how cold it was in that room.

I stared back, eyes wide at the awful, hungry way she looked at me.

“Z-Zheng, I’m not-”

“Prove it,” she grunted. She yanked up the hem of her bloodied tshirt in one fist, to bare her tattoo-covered washboard abdomen and heavy breasts. It was like being flashed by an Olympian Goddess, she was big in every sense of the word. I swear, my eyeballs almost popped out of my face. “Take it all.”

“... I ... uh.” It took an effort of will to close my gaping mouth, to look up at her eyes again. “I ... what?”

“The binding. Take it all,” she said between clenched teeth.

“... your tattoos?” I swallowed and tried to see past Zheng’s impressive physique, tried to ignore the boobs shoved in my face.

The mass of semi-faded, layered tattoos on Zheng’s torso really did cover every square inch of her dusken skin. One could spend hours unravelling and cataloguing even a single hand-span. I saw Chinese

or Japanese in there, and stranger writing-systems which while not alien, were so foreign in time as to be utterly unknown today. My parents had taken me to museums when I was younger – Maisie and I, when we were little girls – and the artwork on Zheng’s flesh reminded me dimly of the relics of a lost antiquity, seen under the harsh electric lights of the modern age, robbed of all their context and culture.

Zheng was a work of art in more than one sense.

I shook my head, lost for words. “It’s beautiful, I-I can’t destroy -”

She leaned in close, fast enough to make me flinch. “It is a chain,” she growled. “You freed me, shaman. Either you want me free or not, or was that talk about slavery so much flapping meat?”

I focused on the tattoos again. Wet my lips. Trying to think. I’d been right about Zheng, despite everything. Despite the gruesome cannibalism and the ugly threats, I’d been right. ‘Zombie’ was a fancy mage word for slave. How could I blame her for asking this?

“Zheng, Zheng I *can’t*.” I raised a hand to stall her snap-toothed rebuke. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m freezing cold. I’m dehydrated, I’ve been through an ordeal, and if I push myself too far, I could pass out and die.”

“I will catch you,” she purred, softly. “I will look after you. I know this place, this tower. They have rooms up here, their usual mess, but there’s a heater, emergency supplies. Food. And you won’t get out of this building intact, little monkey, not without help. Not past the corruption downstairs.”

I cast about for some way to explain myself. “But we need to get out of here first, we-”

“No.” She edged even closer, almost pressing herself to me. “Not later. Now. You remove this, all of this, because as long as this remains I can be re-bound with the right spells, the chains laid again, and I cannot trust you or yours yet, little shaman. I want to believe you, but I would sooner take my chances crushing your skull and slipping into obscurity. I will live under rocks and eat rat-meat, naked and free, rather than risk it again.” She bared her teeth. “Finish cutting my chains.”

“I can’t!” I shouted back in her face. Couldn’t believe myself, not courageous but desperate. “I have to rescue my friend – my lover.

You heard what they were saying, the- the- them! The Eye cultists! She might be here right now, and they're going to hurt her. I have to help her now, not in an hour after I pass out." A spark of thought snagged in the back of my mind. "And Lozzie too, don't you remember her? She liked you, she said you were her friend. She might be here too."

"Lozzie ... " Zheng rocked back, blinking, dropping the hem of her tshirt as a strange confusion came over her features. She looked away, at nothing. "Lauren, little Lauren. Yes ... I ... I dreamed of her. I was free in my dreams." Zheng's attention whipped back to me. "Is she here too?"

"I don't know!"

"Then trust me, damn you, you hooting ape. Unchain me and I will find her, and your lover too. I will kill in your name. We'll have a deal, I'll be yours, in the old way, not in this false flesh." She grabbed a handful of her own skin.

I ran my eyes over her imposing frame, over the tattoos beneath her flimsy tshirt, over her muscles and what she represented.

I couldn't find Raine by myself. Zheng was our best chance.

"Alright, okay. What is the minimum amount I can remove to make it safe? Safe for you, I mean?"

Zheng bared her teeth in a growl, a sound to make the bowels quake and the knees weak. She yanked up her tshirt again, craning her neck to look down at herself – then she exploded with frustration. She shrugged her trench coat from her shoulders, dumped it on the floor, and then ripped the tshirt off over her head in the most impressive act of disrobing I'd ever seen.

I'd like to say I found nothing sexual about Zheng's nudity in that moment, but that would be a lie.

Stripped from the waist-up, she twisted and turned and lifted her arms to examine her skin, flexing the chords of toned muscle beneath. Quite a sight.

"Here, this spiral here," she circled a portion of her belly with a fingertip, then traced upward and across. "To here, under my armpit, and here, below, that needs to go too. The shoulder blade, this stuff, and this, and these."

I stared at her, trying to follow all the twists and turns she mapped out across her own flesh.

“This one as well, this is the root, this has to come out. And-”

“Wait, wait, stop,” I held up a hand. “Slow down, I need to ... I’m going to have to do this in one go. I need a mental picture. Turn around again, let me start from behind.”

Zheng grunted her acquiescence and twisted to show me her back. The part I hadn’t said out loud was that her back was easier on my libido, less distracting. My eyes traced the patterns she’d indicated, and my hand wandered up, throat dry with anticipation. Could I really do this? It would be far more complex than selecting only the ink under my hand.

Gingerly, I touched Zheng’s muscled back, and began to nod as I linked the various structures together in my mind. Her skin felt hot, as if her body temperature ran several degrees above human.

“Alright. Turn back around. Show me again, slower, and trace some connections too. I don’t think I can do multiple places at once unless they’re part of the same ... pattern. Object. Thing.”

Zheng nodded. She turned around and I tried not to marvel at her breasts. “Here, this spiral is the root,” she pointed. “And here, and here, then up here. And here, then here. That is the minimum. After that, any wizard wants to bind me, they’ll have to find a way to pin me down and write their name on my flesh. Can do you this for me, little shaman?”

Already half-rummaging through the necessary equation in the black abyss of my mind, I nodded, distracted by the technical questions of the task. “I think ... I ... how do I know you’ll really help me afterward? That you won’t just leave?”

“You don’t. I’m a demon.” She grinned. Combined with her top-half nudity, the effect was a little too heady for me. “You have to trust me, monkey.”

I made myself frown at her, made myself look like what she thought I was. This wasn’t my life on the line – who cared about me, what happened to me? At least if I died of exposure in this concrete room, I’d never see the Eye again. This was about Raine, this was about my friends.

Zheng's grin died. I'd made my point.

"You're Lozzie's friend," she purred. "You killed my former master, and freed me. I owe you, in the old way, the real way. Finish freeing me, and I'll repay the debt."

A tiny and intensely rational part of my mind screamed that Zheng was a demon, an Outsider walking around in an ancient corpse, that her expressions and words were mere imitations of human communication. She'd follow her own unfathomable ends as soon as she'd gotten what she wanted. Perhaps she was lying to me, perhaps every part of this was a trick toward some incomprehensible end. She was alien. She wasn't supposed to be here.

Praem was a demon. I trusted Praem, I stuck up for her, and she'd come through for me.

Before I could second-guess myself, I pressed my hand against Zheng's abdomen, just above the waistline of her jeans, and stared at her tattoos.

"Should I do anything?" she rumbled.

"Stay still," I hissed. "And quiet. And ... and if I go, catch me before my head hits the concrete."

"Mm."

Hyperdimensional mathematics with my eyes wide open, trying to describe the delicate tracery of Zheng's tattoos in mathematical terminology, to excise specific chunks of ink, was infinitely more difficult than I'd imagined. To remove what lay under the shape of my own palm was one thing, but the math required here made my eyeballs ache and an ice-pick headache tingle at the back of my skull before I'd even begun.

I needed a better way to define Zheng's chains.

I closed my eyes. Chains, bindings, ropes around her soul – that's what I was really removing. The ink needled under her skin was only outward representation. I dug with my mind, tried to define and see Zheng in mathematical representation, the same way I had done during my ill-fated attempt to track the Lozzie-thing in Kimberly's flat.

The ink itself, old and faded, in a hundred languages; Zheng's skin, hot and supple; thick muscle and iron bone, cords of sinew and

tendon, appropriated from her vessel and adjusted in a million-million inhuman ways too deeply biological for me to understand, filled with new structures and cells and impossible additions.

Deeper, much deeper, past matter and blood, I found Zheng.

A writhing shard of starlight, in chains.

The whole picture, every layer described in hyperdimensional mathematics, held still in my mind. In that final instant before execution I felt hot crimson dripping from my nose and across my lips.

I really needed to start taking iron supplements.

“You’re ble-” Zheng said.

Out.

= =

Warm temptation lulled me back to the edge of sleep, but I found only shark-toothed grins and terrifying giants waiting there.

I struggled up through layers of unconsciousness and jerked awake, gasping for air and scrubbing at my own eyes.

“Welcome back to meat-world,” Zheng’s voice greeted me.

“Where-” I croaked, pulling myself into a sitting position as my feet found the floor. I’d been curled up in a low chair of some kind, wrapped and warm, loose canvas cradling my weight – a beach chair? A jumble of shapes and colours faded back into focus through my blurry vision. More plain concrete walls, but not the same room as before. “I don’t rememb- ... I need water.”

A shape detached itself from the corner, rising and unfolding, and Zheng walked over to me. Rough but gentle hands took mine and pressed an open bottle of water into my weak, shaking grip. I didn’t care if it was stale, drugged, or actually a bottle of lighter fluid, I put it to my lips and drank like my life depended on it. Which, to be honest, it probably did.

Coughing, spluttering, my vision returning, I looked up – and up, and up – and met Zheng’s eyes. Blue. She’d washed the blood off her face while I’d been out.

“I feel like death,” I groaned.

"You'll live," she purred. "Seen plenty of you monkeys die, and you're not there yet."

Zheng looked like a wheat field after a UFO visit – her tattoos were covered in crop circles. She'd donned her blood-stained tshirt again and draped the trench coat back over her shoulders, but that couldn't conceal the transformation I'd wrought on her body-art. Wide circles of blank untouched flesh now punctuated the black mass of ink, each circle connected by at least one clear line of unblemished skin.

Whatever I'd achieved with brainmath at the end there, it had erased almost all the spirals from Zheng's tattoos.

She grinned, the same unnerving shark-toothed grin as before. "Thank you, little shaman."

"You're welcome, I think?" What on earth does one say to a newly liberated giant zombie animated by a spirit from outside reality? I cast about the room instead, squinting through a real monster of a headache and trying to figure out where I was now. "Sick of passing out and waking up in other places," I muttered.

I tipped a little of the bottled water into my cupped hand and splashed it on my face, rubbing the corners of my eyes, before I downed the rest to wash the taste of blood and bile out of my mouth.

Zheng had wrapped me in a pair of filthy blankets, apparently warm enough to stop me from freezing. A hissing gas-powered space heater poured warmth into the concrete room, rubber hose plugged into a free-standing cannister, like some sprawling industrial spider dredged up from a nightmare of the 1970s. Well done, Zheng.

"Where ... " I gestured vaguely.

"One of their lairs," Zheng purred. "Top floor. You passed out, easy to carry though. You weigh nothing, shaman. Need to eat more protein."

One of the cult's lairs – the Eye Cult now, I suppose – and it looked the part as well. Another stripped concrete flat in Glasswick tower, whether the same unit or a nearby one I couldn't tell. Once a sitting room, perhaps. Light entered through two filthy windows in the longest wall.

The room was full of supplies and equipment: a first-aid box, a plastic tote full of bottled water and cereal bars, a couple of crowbars against a wall, binoculars on one windowsill, rolls of tarpaulin, a tin of paint, and a dozen other innocuous everyday items, though I did wonder at the expensive fishing rod propped up in a corner. A magic circle had been inscribed onto the floor at the far end of the space, in black paint, surrounded by a few odds and ends – a bundle of feathers, a small knife, a single leather glove. An empty glass bottle stood in the middle of the circle. Whatever magic had been performed there, it wasn't active anymore.

Another two beach chairs stood near the one Zheng had placed me in. Along with the space-heater and a small stack of paperback books, they gave the distinct impression of a sort of watchtower or guard room.

Zheng had caught one of the guards.

A thin young man with a face like a seagull, wearing jeans and a zipped-up athletic hoodie, had been roped to the room's radiator much like I had, but with far more medieval sadism. A rope ran from each of his wrists to loop down under his groin, then up around his neck from behind, then to the radiator pipe and up to an old rusted curtain rail. The arrangement forced him to stand on tiptoes if he wanted to keep breathing. A dark blotch of urine had stained the front of his trousers. Terrified eyes met mine.

"Help me," he whined, tears on his cheeks. Appealing to a fellow human being. "Please!"

"... are you one of them?"

He stared, half-shaking his head, not understanding my question.

"He is. I remember him well enough," Zheng grunted. "Jacob something. Unimportant."

"She- she's going to eat me!" Jacob pleaded.

"Will you?" I asked Zheng.

"Be a waste if I didn't." She shrugged, and turned a nasty grin on the bound man. "Still full after the first course, but I've got room."

Jacob closed his eyes in mortal resignation, trying not to weep. I looked away, didn't have the bandwidth for this right now. I was painfully aware I'd made an unspoken pact with something cruel

and violent, which liked me for reasons I didn't entirely understand yet.

My eyes alighted on a bundle of discarded clothes and a coat on the floor nearby, wrapped around strangely curved and spiked pieces of polished wood, lying as if dragged there. I blinked, couldn't quite make the connection, a sick feeling in my stomach.

"You want the bad news or the good news first?" Zheng rumbled.

"What?" I blinked up at her, my jumbled thoughts all lining up suddenly. "Raine! Did you find-"

Zheng shook her head. "Bad news. She's not here. Neither's little Lozzie."

A wrenching emptiness settled in my chest. "What? No, they said ..."

"Top two floors." Zheng squatted down in front of me, lowering her incredible height so I didn't have to crane my neck. She looked almost apologetic. "Been right down to the line where the corruption starts, but no further. I don't have safe passage through that anymore. You've seen that place?"

I nodded urgently. "I-I know what you mean."

"Good news: he was the only thing here," she nodded toward the bound man. "Sarika and her sad hound must have left, gone downstairs, gone home. Doubt they'd keep any prizes below the line, besides the dead master's corpse itself."

"No, no they must have her somewhere else, you ... you know all their safe houses, all the places they use, don't you? You know where she might be? You know how they think, you-"

Zheng pulled a shrug with her face. "Less than I know you, shaman. Furniture doesn't get the need-to-know."

"You mean you don't know anywhere they might be?" I started to shove the filthy blankets off me, wanted to stand up, felt so drained and weak, but had to do something. Had to find Raine, get back to Evelyn, call Twil. Something, anything.

"Not doors I'd knock on without knowing what's behind them," she rumbled. "But yes, three 'safe houses' I can think of, maybe, perhaps, if we're very lucky."

“Where? Zheng, tell me, where?”

The grin crested her features again. “Why don’t we find out for certain?”

“ ... what?”

She stood up without explaining herself, and met the eyes of the terrified man tied to the radiator.

“No, please!” Jacob blurted out before either of us asked him anything. “I don’t know anything! I don’t know- I don’t- I don’t- I-”

His pleading dissolved into babbling as Zheng did what I suspect she’d first been designed for. The grin spread on her face as she opened her jaw, wider and wider, taking each step toward him with slow purpose. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth, inch after obscene inch, fat and thick and wet, extending far below her chin. The man cringed, closing his eyes and trying to press himself back from her without choking himself on the rope around his neck.

“Zheng!” I snapped. The tongue whipped back into her mouth, and she turned to regard me, oddly neutral. I had the sudden and unmistakable feeling of getting between a dog and its food. “What are you doing?”

“You want to know where your lover is?” she asked.

“Yes, of course I do, but ... don’t ... ”

“Do you have a better suggestion?” She took the final step toward the terrified man, and grasped his chin in one huge meaty fist, ignoring me once more. “First I will take one of your eyes,” she hissed. “Then a hand. Which do you use to wipe your arse, worm?”

Zheng only did her thing for a few seconds, but it made my stomach turn and my blood run cold. She slid up close to the shaking, cowering cultist, her hot breath in his face, hissing something between her teeth about how he had to open his eyes, an obscenity I will not repeat here because I don’t wish to think about it ever again. Her teeth in his face, her frame radiating animal threat and lust and hunger all at once – she was going to eat him. She *wanted* to eat him, every cell in her body screamed it out loud. He was crying, panting, babbling denials, when her tongue extended again, a rough tentacle crawling up the side of his face, daring him to close his eyelids.

“Actually,” I managed to say out loud. “Yes.”

She stopped. The tongue whipped back into her head again. She didn’t look at me. “Yes?”

“Yes, I have a better suggestion,” I said. My voice shook, but I got the words out. Zheng tilted her head one way, then the other, a low hiss of frustration in her throat. “I’m not- I’m not telling you what to do, but I’m going to politely request that you not eat parts of that man. Please.”

Zheng sighed, shrugged, and let him go.

The cultist – Jacob – looked at me like I was an angel. I glared back. “I’m not saving you from her,” I said, only half a lie. “I’ve got an ultimatum.”

“Anything, anything- I- they just pay me!” he said. “I’m hired to watch the room, I-”

“I don’t believe that,” I said.

Zheng grinned.

“But it doesn’t matter,” I continued. “I assume you’re not a mage, at least, or Zheng would have pulled your head off by now.”

“Mhmm,” the zombie grunted.

“Well, believe it or not, I’m worse than her. I can do a lot worse than kill you or torture you.” I managed to get to my feet, hugging one of the blankets around my shoulders. I felt wobbly and ill, a hollow pain inside my chest, bones fragile as fine porcelain. “Do you know who I am? Tell me the truth, or I’ll ... I’ll ... or Zheng will eat one of your eyeballs.”

Had to swallow, to keep the bile down.

He glanced at Zheng, then back at me, feet adjusting to keep the rope from closing his windpipe, and nodded once.

“Then you know what I can do,” I said. “I will send you to meet your new God, the Eye, whatever you people call it now. I will send you there, and you will not come back, unless you tell me what I want to know.”

A horrible realisation dawned on his face. Zheng had terrified him, but the prospect of meeting his God sent claws of soul-horror raking

across his beaten mind. His face went grey and his jaw went slack.

"I don't-" he choked out.

"Don't is not the word I want to hear," I managed. Deep down in the back of my mind I felt like a monster, like something hatching from a misshapen shell, but I would do anything to find Raine.

"I don't know!" he almost screamed. "I don't know where they took the other girl, I swear! I swear, oh God, please no, no, I swear, I-"

"You must know, or you're going to meet your God."

His eyes darted back and forth, sweat on his brow, shaking all over.

Then he tried to kill himself.

He did a little hop on one foot and kicked his own legs out from under him; the rope snapped taught with his weight, and almost snapped his neck. Luckily for all of us, Zheng had seen this coming. She moved like greased lightning, and hit about as hard, grabbing the ropes that ran from the cultist's wrists and under his groin in the split-second before his entire body weight slammed through his spine.

Instead of breaking his neck he jerked and writhed, choking for air, squealing like a stuck pig. Zheng reached up and unhooked the top rope from the curtain rail, and poor Jacob crashed to the floor in a sobbing, retching heap.

I stared, numb, lost for a moment, trying and failing to convince myself he had deserved that. My threat had made a man want to die.

"So eager to leave this mortal coil, monkey?" Zheng rumbled down at him, grabbing a handful of his hair. "At least let me do it for you."

"Alright," I snapped out, before Zheng could pick him up and eat his fingers. "Alright, I believe you, you don't know where Raine is."

The cultist nodded, clutching at his bruised throat, trying to squeeze himself away from Zheng. His eyes found me like a drowning man clutching for a piece of driftwood.

"But you're going to tell me every place your cult has, every place she might be. Addresses, details, any-"

He didn't take much convincing. I suspect he was broken long before Zheng tied him to that curtain rail. As he babbled out a trio of targets – a place on the riverfront, an old pub out west I'd never heard of, a suburban address he swore was Sarika's – he broke down slowly, all energy fleeing his body until Zheng finally let go of his hair and he curled up on himself like a wounded insect. He slowed, words deadened, eyes drained of vitality.

"That's all? Just those three places?"

He nodded. "Those are the only- only ones I know. I know they took another girl, I don't know who, I never saw. If I had, I would ... I ... I-I never agreed with ... with ... "

He trailed off at the look on my face. "Whatever you have to tell yourself," I said quietly. "You're not worth killing."

"*She's* not going to kill you," Zheng corrected me. The man flinched, but that was all. The horror of the Eye had drained the life from him. He'd given up. Zheng tutted, unimpressed with the lack of reaction.

"What about Praem? Where is she?" I asked.

Tink. A clink of metal on glass, a fragment of gravel on a window, too faint to notice beyond the subconscious.

"Who? What?" The cultist blinked at me.

"The zombie. Who came here last night? Sarika told me you people captured her too, unless that was another bluff. She's my friend, where is she?"

Blink blink. Incomprehension. "Last night? Oh, you- you mean that."

He nodded past me at the floor, and for a moment I thought he was being funny or we'd pushed him so far he'd lost his mind. He was nodding at the bundle of clothes and polished wood.

A sick pressure mounted in my chest. I took a shaking step toward what resolved itself as a splayed figure, wrapped in a pair of ugly cargo trousers and a big puffy coat. The boots. I recognised the boots, I'd seen them so many times before. Another step and I fell to my knees, shaking my head. Reached out with one hand, but stopped, confused. To touch would be only further desecration.

“Shaman?” Zheng purred.

“It’s her,” I managed.

A wooden mannequin, ball-jointed, of the kind only found in the most expensive and exclusive boutiques or the workshops of fashion designers. Evelyn had spared no expense in making Praem, but the wood had been warped by the effects of Praem’s inhabitation. Little spars and anchor-spikes jutted from the limbs, threads like a nervous system or frozen blood vessels lay just below the surface, and many of the joints had been added to with sheaths of wooden sinew or strange adjustments to their ranges of motion. The head was a blank oval, the wood grain twisted in impossible ways.

I shouldn’t be seeing this. It was like looking at a friend’s bones.

“Praem?” I whispered.

Tink.

Only in the silence of impending grief did I hear the little clink of metal on glass. I cast about with sudden wild hope. “Praem? Pra-”

Clink. Clink clink.

“Ahhh,” Zheng purred, and pointed at the magic circle, at the empty bottle standing within. “Found her.”

Careless of the danger, stupid and rash, I scrambled over to the magic circle on freezing feet and scooped the bottle up in shaking hands. A cork filled the neck, trapping a piece of fishing line so it dangled down inside the glass enclosure. A bead of lead, like a fishing weight, hung at the end of the line.

Inside the glass, I could see the faintest suggestion of a rainbow discolouration shifting and curling, like oil on water transmuted into the slimmest wisp of smoke.

“It’s-” Jacob spoke up. I stared at him with too much anger and steel, made him flinch and cringe; right then I wanted to murder him. I wanted to get my hands on the person responsible for this and slap them.

“This is an obscenity,” I hissed at him.

Zheng snorted mean-spirited laughter. “Got herself corked.”

I whirled on her and, without meaning to, vented cold anger at the

target she'd presented. "Don't you dare laugh. You were like this, an hour ago! You were as good as in a bottle!"

She blinked once, and lowered her head to me in acknowledgement.

"It- it's one tap for yes, two for no," Jacob stammered out, nodding at the bottle. I turned back to it, shaking my head in denial.

"Praem?" I whispered.

The piece of lead jumped, as if caught in a breeze, and clinked against the side of the bottle.

Tink.

that which you cannot put down – 7.3

“It’s alright, Praem, I’ve ... I’ve got you. It’s going to be alright, you’ll be alright.”

Meaningless reassurances, spoken to a near invisible wisp of oily-rainbow smoke trapped inside a glass bottle.

Tink, went Praem’s lead weight against the glass. One for yes.

One for yes Heather, I trust you, you’ll save me, you’ll get me out of here, won’t you? One for I’m helpless and tiny and vulnerable, my strength stolen and my flesh banished. One for please, don’t leave me here.

A veil of red descended inside me, along with a shaking that had nothing to do with the cold, my jaw tight and my breath coming fast and hot. I turned to the cultist – Jacob, still hunched on the floor with his hands bound.

“How do I put my friend back in her body?” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“I don’t know, I’m not trained. It’s not my ... ” He trailed off when he saw the anger boiling behind my eyes. If the bottle in my hands hadn’t contained Praem’s soul, I would have smashed it across his head. I bit my lips and swallowed too hard, struggling to find an outlet for this awful rage.

I felt rather than saw Zheng’s grin, the shark-toothed smile in my peripheral vision.

She reached down and took the end of Jacob’s rope, dragged the cultist to his feet, and pulled him close. One of her hands encircled the top of his head to hold him immobile.

“Looks like the shaman is angry,” she hissed in the man’s ear. “Dangerous when she’s angry, a large bite for such a small jaw.”

Her huge tongue slid out of her mouth in silent threat, a wet pink tentacle that made my heart squeeze. Jacob cringed away, his eyes

pleading with me for relief.

“And you can stop with the theatrics,” I snapped, too angry to care about Zheng’s sadistic needs. The tongue whipped back inside her mouth and slowly she turned to regard me. I ignored her, thrusting Praem’s bottle at the cultist. “Did you have anything – anything at all – to do with this ... this violation? Did you?”

A tiny part of my mind, trying to calculate and analyse even now, noted that the lead weight inside didn’t swing as I moved the bottle. External force was cancelled out, only Praem’s spirit could affect the line and the attached weight.

“No! No, I don’t know how to!” He pleaded. “Really, I can’t- it was-”

“Did he?” I asked the bottle – asked Praem.

Clink-click. Two for no.

“Lucky you,” Zheng growled into his face and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Praem, can you ... I’ll get you out, I promise. I promise,” I told the bottle.

Tink, the little lead weight jumped. The oil-on-smoke wisp curled about itself, impossible false colours shifting and turning, glowing faint as a daylight moon.

“Can you ... you can hear me, yes? You can hear everything I say to you?”

Tink.

“What about other people, you can hear them? Things happening beyond the ... the bottle?”

Tink.

“Can you see?” I waved a hand in front of the glass.

No response. The lead weight didn’t move.

“When they were up, they were up,” Zheng growled in a slow, sing-song voice. “And when they were down, they were down. And when they were only halfway up they were neither up nor down.”

I boggled at her.

“Halfway up.” She pointed a finger at the bottle. “Meat-senses aren’t the same.”

“Yes, thank you so much for the metaphor. Do *you* know how to put Praem back in her body?”

Zheng shrugged, a performance of disinterest.

“T-there should be-” Jacob started. “There should be a way, to get it out, I mean. Marcus was saying things like- uh- telling her she’d be free if she answered- h-he was asking her questions about you- t-the Saye girl, all sorts. Really, real talk, he was interrogating her, offering her a way out. H-he would know, Marcus would know. It’s him you want.”

Zheng let out a growl of laughter.

“Marcus put her in this bottle?” I asked, and he nodded. “Praem?” I asked her.

Clink.

And Marcus had died a violent and painful death. Why didn’t that make me feel any better?

Because Praem was still trapped in the bottle.

I swore, worse than I’d ever sworn before, a short train of vile words borrowed mostly from Evelyn, culminating in a choice scatological paradox. In a way I was glad only the demons were here to witness that.

“I ... I know where he lives,” Jacob hurried on. “I think. Or Sarika might. If you make him show you how-”

“He’s dead,” I said.

“ ... o-oh.”

“I ate him,” Zheng purred, a nasty grin spreading across her mouth.

“I-I ... I don’t- here!” Jacob blurted out. “You should call Sarika! Take my mobile, it’s in my back pocket, her number is on there. She and Marcus, they both know how to do things like that.”

Zheng hitched an eyebrow, turned our captive around with a shove, and extracted a mobile phone from the back pocket of his jeans. He babbled something inane about how we could keep it.

“Thank you, Zheng.” I held out one hand – but Zheng held onto the phone. She watched my eyes with the slow judgement of a predatory reptile. At any other time that look would have reduced me to pudding, but my indignant rage ran too deep and too hot right now to be quenched by even a seven-foot tall Amazonian goddess. “... what now?” I snapped.

“You need allies, yes, but this one comes at a high cost,” she purred. Her eyes indicated the bottle in my arms.

I squinted at her like she was an idiot. “Praem is my friend, not an ‘ally’. You can eat me before I’d leave her behind. Really. Kill me then.”

Zheng growled, exasperated or unimpressed or merely thinking, it was hard to tell. “What can she do that I can’t?”

Clink-clink. Tink, went the lead weight inside Praem’s bottle. *Tink-tink*. Practically a tantrum.

“We absolutely do not have time for a- a- demonic territorial pissing contest,” I said. “Please, Zheng, give me the phone.”

“Time, exactly,” Zheng growled. “You make this phone call, and Sarika – I shit on her name – will move against you. She’s sharper than her predecessor. Less mad.”

“... and?”

“Do you have a plan, little shaman?”

I shook my head, bewildered. “For what? Talking to Sarika?”

Zheng shrugged, sullen and watchful.

I opened my mouth to say no, of course I didn’t have a bloody plan. To tell the giant zombie that a plan didn’t matter. Hot anger and inner cold and intense worry ate at my mind. I had to get Praem back into her body, or out of here; I had to find Raine, get home and make sure my friends were safe. A plan? Sod plans! I was ready to scream threats down the phone at Sarika until she gave me what I wanted. The only answer was *act*.

Zheng hadn’t been allowed to make plans of her own for a very long time indeed. A slave, always forced into other people’s designs. Watching monsters like Alexander Lilburne stumble and crash, good intentions leading to hell and worse. All her former masters were

dead. Now she was free, she could choose to have none.

She was also correct: I was exhausted, worn out, and now blind with anger.

Her approval was a tightrope.

“All right,” I said – and left.

I left Zheng and the sad, defeated cultist together by the radiator, the last thing either of them expected me to do.

Cradling Praem’s bottle gently in my arms, I padded back over to the beach chairs and settled the bottle in one of them, so it couldn’t be knocked over by accident. I had no idea what smashing the glass or popping the cork might do, and I didn’t want to take that risk yet. I regained the filthy but warm blankets, pulled them around my shoulders, and shuffled over to the tote box full of bottled water and emergency cereal bars.

Not the most appetising, but I took two, and another bottle of water to wash it all down. Then I got myself settled in a chair, folded my legs to keep my feet warm, and commenced eating.

Zheng levelled a slow stare at me. Jacob seemed confused too, slack-jawed.

“What?” I said after a swallow, and held up one of the cereal bars. “Peanut and chocolate, not bad but not terrible. Would you like one?”

“What are you doing, shaman?” Zheng purred.

“Getting more protein, like you suggested. One can’t make a good plan on an empty stomach.”

Zheng snorted a laugh. “Monkeys.”

“This monkey needs to eat.” I drank some water to drown the embers of my indignant rage. It sort of worked. Sitting still and going through the mechanical process of putting food in my mouth did drain away the hottest thoughts, give me a moment to pause and think, begin to scrape together the scraps of the plan Zheng demanded.

I was in charge here, I was in control, this was my responsibility. At least that’s what I told myself to stop anger decaying into panic.

Zheng dropped Jacob's rope, and in lieu of tying him back to the curtain rail, she gave him a horrible silent grin instead, one that left no question as to what would happen if he dared try to escape. Even all the way on the other side of the room, I flinched as well, and the cultist cowered against the wall, curling up tighter.

Zheng grabbed a cereal bar from the box. With a dubious look on her face she peeled the wrapper, gave it an experimental sniff, and wrinkled her nose.

"Not to your taste?" I asked.

"No," she growled. She did pour a bottle of water down her throat, though not before crushing the cap with a twist of her hand.

"Don't suppose you have any painkillers up here? Paracetamol, anything at all?"

Jacob took a moment to realise I was speaking to him. He blinked several times and tentatively shook his head. I tutted and sighed. No longer cushioned by either sleep or anger, a splitting headache was brewing inside my skull, the product of dehydration or brainmath or stress, who knew? I settled for drinking more water. Zheng wiped her mouth and squatted down on her haunches to watch me – which almost rendered me unable to eat. Like being observed by a hungry six-hundred pound tiger.

"Before I freed you," I said to her. "You said you'd 'be mine', in the 'old way'. What does that mean?"

I'd expected a grin and a glib comment, perhaps a laugh. Instead, Zheng shrugged, and a subtle discomfort crossed her features, a twitch or a tic akin to a suppressed wince at the pain from an old wound. "Means I'm still here."

I nodded, let it drop. "Fair enough. Thank you."

She grunted.

"So what about you, do you have a plan?" I repeated her own question. "To get downstairs, past the 'corruption', as you called it?"

Zheng looked over at the lead-grey sky visible through the dirty glass in the room's windows. Sharrowford lay below, hidden by the wall. "Jump out the window?"

Clink-clink, Praem disagreed.

“Right, I’ll take that as a no then.” I sighed, took a deep breath, and drew myself up. “But you know more about that than I do. You work on that part, getting us downstairs.” Zheng raised an eyebrow. My turn to shrug. “I can’t do everything on my own now, can I?”

“Mhmm,” she grunted agreement, and her brow furrowed in thought.

“I have three problems,” I continued, letting it all flow out, the real plan assembling itself at high-speed in the back of my head. “One, getting out of here. Two, putting Praem back in her body. Three, finding Raine – my lover – and possibly Lozzie too, though the more I think about it the more I doubt she’s anywhere near right now. One is your job. Two and three, well, I need to get home, find Eevee, the others, but while we’re here we have two options. Option one, we could force him,” I nodded toward Jacob, “to call Sarika for us, lure her back here, but he could spoil the whole thing with a single word.”

“If he wants his heart eaten.”

“Or,” I corrected her gently. “They might have a code phrase to use in emergencies, which means we wouldn’t even know.”

“Mmmmm. Clever.”

“I’m going to go with option two, which is more work and quite difficult, but may yield better results.”

“Which is?”

“A series of threats and lies.” I held out my hand for the phone again, and to my surprise it wasn’t shaking. “Don’t say a word while I call. Don’t let them know you’re free. That could be useful later.”

Zheng grinned in approval. She handed me the phone, and I did a pretty successful job of concealing my anxiety. I felt almost like Raine, competent and clever and quick, decisive and devious and – well, no, not dashing. In my best moments I can almost manage cute, at the right angle and in the wrong light, but I will never be *dashing*. I hoped she would be proud of me, proud of this plan, proud of how strong I was trying to be. I hoped with all my heart I’d get to tell her about this.

Sarika’s number wasn’t hard to find among the two-dozen Jacob

had in his contacts list. He stayed silent and Zheng stayed squatting before me, as I placed the call.

Sarika picked up on the third ring.

“What is it?”

That same voice, thin and tight with bone-deep exhaustion.

“Jacob?”

“He’s alive,” I answered. “For now.”

A long pause, stretching out the seconds. I think she was trying to spook me, get me to break first and offer information by accident, but I harnessed my cold anger and my cold toes, lost myself in the numb sensations inside my body.

Eventually, Sarika let out a big sigh down the phone. “Got free in the end, did you?”

“I’m going to find you. If you touch one hair on Raine’s head, I’ll do far worse than kill you.”

“Raine? That’s her name? She wouldn’t tell me that. Thank you for that one, makes my job easier.”

I mock-hesitated as I shot Zheng a tiny, wavering smile of triumph. Sarika had taken my bait. They did have Raine, no question about that now. They knew of Evelyn, Kimberly had once been one of them, and they’d never be able to hold Twil – but Raine? She’d give them nothing, not even her name.

“Let me speak to her.” I didn’t have to work hard to make myself sound nervous.

“Or what? You don’t have any leverage.”

“My leverage is that when I find you, I’ll only kill you, instead of sending you to the Eye. The best thing you can do right now is let my friend go. Drive her back to the house and let her go, and then there’s a small chance that you can get out of Sharrowford before I and Saye find you. Twil – that’s the Brinkwood werewolf to you – I know she’ll be after you already, and I doubt you want her to catch you.”

I heard Sarika cover the mouthpiece on her end, muffle a question beyond earshot. She came back to the phone and spoke quickly.

“How’d you get past Zheng?”

“Sent her Outside. If she’s not dead she will be soon. Marcus too.”

“Fuck you,” Sarika snarled. Zheng grinned like a skull, laughing through silent teeth. “God fucking damn you, Morell. You don’t understand anything. You think I put that monster up there to just threaten you, is that it?”

This time I didn’t have to fake the hesitation. I glanced at Zheng, and wondered what that grin really meant.

“What ... what do you mean?” I said.

“You think Zheng’s going to stay outside, with Lauren Lilburne running about? She’ll be back here within hours, and that girl will be holding the leash. Trying to! Do you understand what that fucking means? Do you know what that *thing* is or what it’s capable of? Of course you don’t. Alexander could barely control Zheng, his little sister certainly can’t. That thing gets free, you and I are the least of each others problems in this city.”

Zheng winked at me. I stared back and shivered, and not in the good way.

“You’re bluffing.” I held my voice tight and steady. “You wouldn’t-wouldn’t put Zheng in a room with me and not expect me to get rid of her.”

“I *expected* you knew better than that. That was the whole point! She was mutually assured destruction!”

“I’m not a mage.”

“Evidently,” Sarika spat. “Thank you for the heads-up. Fuck this.”

The plan was running through my fingers. Had to think on my feet, think past the headache and the fear and the suspicion about Zheng. What would Raine say? A bombastic threat, probably. What would Evelyn do? Get angry and call these people filth. What would I do? What should I do?

Lie. I was good at lying. I’d lied to myself for ten whole years.

“Let my friend go,” I all but stammered. “And I’ll bring Zheng back from Outside and deliver her to you.”

A thinking silence, stinging sharp. Zheng’s grin twisted with sadistic

mirth. She mouthed a phrase at me, one that contained the words 'eat' 'skin' and Sarika's name. I nodded.

Sarika finally spoke again. "You'd have to provide first. Get us the zombie, then I'll think about letting your friend go. But what happens after that?"

"We go our separate ways."

"You know I can't do that, Heather. The Eye wants you. How about you give yourself up in exchange for your friend? You care so much, and I can't back down without my ... " She paused, pain in her breath. "You, of all people, you understand this, don't you? It wants you, every time I close my eyes. Same for all of us. I can't tell it no. I can't even tell it to fuck off. Stay where you are, we'll loop back to pick you up, we're not far. In exchange we'll let your friend go, I promise. We'll bring her with us, and we'll let her go right in front of you."

"No. The zombie for Raine, that's what you get. Or you say no and I send you all to meet the Eye instead."

Sarika sighed. "Alright, alright, but this 'Raine' girl is our insurance now. You come after us before we get Zheng, and we'll hurt her, got it?"

"You-" I almost snapped out the words 'you started it', reduced us to the level of a playground fight. "I know where you are, and I know how to find you."

"Try me, bitch. Zheng wasn't the only zombie we've still got."

We were both bluffing now, playing both ends; why threaten me with zombies if they would hurt Raine? I tried to think through the bluster, to predict the Eye Cult's real next move.

"Okay, deal, as long as you don't hurt her," I said, heart thumping, playing this out as far as I could. "But listen, I'm going to need help."

I heard the sneer in Sarika's voice. "From-"

"Not from you. Don't be stupid. Praem, I've found her ... " I swallowed a throat full of bile, and tried not to look at the warped-wood mannequin splayed out on the floor, tried not to think of that as Praem's bones. "The bottle. How do I get her out, put her back in her body?"

Tink went the lead weight in Praem's jar. I smiled at it, then recalled she probably couldn't see my face.

Silence on the line.

"Sarika?" I prompted.

"Your zombie? Just smash the bottle, that should work."

"... smash the bottle?" I repeated. Zheng bared her shark's teeth and shook her head. *Tink-tink* went Praem, two for no.

"Yes, smash the bottle near the vessel she arrived in," Sarika repeated. It didn't take a master of deception to know not to trust her. She rushed her words and spoke them flat. A bad lie.

A naked lie. Which meant the fake deal was already so much rubbish.

Zheng held her hand out for the phone. She whispered at me, silk rustling through fire. "You've lost, shaman. My turn."

I hesitated, a mistake; Zheng surged up from her squatting position, a mountain of muscle in motion, and plucked the phone from my grasp. Her other hand gently gripped my head for a moment – a warning love-bite from a war-hound – then let me go. She stood tall and lifted the phone to her ear.

"Sarika," she purred. "Sarikaaaaa. Guess who?"

Then she laughed, long and low, bowel-quaking and chest-constricting. When she lowered the phone again, the line was dead.

"Zheng!" I almost screamed at her. "I'd- she'll- I'd gotten her to agree! To not ... not hurt ..." I trailed off at Zheng's raised eyebrow, and forced down a shuddering breath. Impressive how much this inhuman zombie could communicate with mere expression. "She was lying," I said. "Of course."

"Mhmm."

"Yes, yes she was lying, yes," I said, trying to convince myself as much as agree with Zheng. "She would still hurt Raine if she needed to, she knew the deal meant nothing. Now she knows you're free, she'll be more cautious, she'll be afraid."

"Shitting herself," Zheng growled with obvious pleasure, and dropped the phone back into my lap.

“Yes. Good ... good move. Yes. She might think if she hurts Raine, I’ll let you eat her. Or something along those lines.”

“You think that’s why I did it? I just wanted to make her scream.”

Zheng grinned, wide and mocking.

I stared at the zombie for a second, trying to figure out if that was sarcasm, or something much darker. Had Sarika been telling the truth about Zheng? What exactly was this demon-possessed corpse capable of, that had made Sarika so worried? Could I trust Zheng?

Trust, maybe not, but I didn’t have a lot of choice right now, no other friends and no support, and even if I wanted to go it alone from here, I doubt very much I could have made Zheng leave.

She must have caught the incredulous curiosity on my face, because she grunted and pointed at the phone. “Why not call your friends now?”

“I can’t.” I sighed and let the phone flop against my leg. “I’m terrible at memorising numbers. I can’t even remember Raine’s number, not off the top of my head. I could call my mother at home, I guess, I still remember my home’s landline number. But that’s not going to help.”

“Sarika’s clever, you know?” the cultist said.

I turned to look at Jacob, surprised he’d spoken up. Zheng just growled, but to my surprise he kept talking, still rubbing his throat where he’d almost strangled himself earlier, sparing Zheng only a flicker of attention before he focused on me again.

“She’s kept us alive, since the ... since ... ” He tapped the side of his head with one blunt paw of a hand. “She’s kept us together, given us something to work towards. Stopped us from killing ourselves. Most of us. Look, I don’t have anything against you, I don’t even really care, but I can’t ... I can’t live with this in my head.”

“A solution to that can be provided,” Zheng rumbled. She didn’t bother to look at him.

“The Eye,” I said.

“If that’s what you call it.” Jacob nodded.

A terrible notion wormed into my mind, a suspicion I hadn’t the time or energy to consider until now. “You dream about it, yes?

That's correct?"

He nodded, half-shrugged.

"Does it ... " The words caught in my throat. "Does it teach you things? Mathematics?"

"What?" He blinked at me. "No, no nothing like that. It just ... it wants things. It doesn't speak, it doesn't do anything, it- it- it just *is*. It is, all the time, behind the- the-" He groped and gestured helplessly at the air, face contorting with the effort of expressing the ineffable. Behind the fabric of reality.

Whatever deal Alexander Lilburne had struck with the Eye, he'd given it a pipeline to these peoples' minds – but it wasn't using them in the same way it had spent a decade tormenting me.

Why? Why not hand them the same tools it had given to me? Why not take one of them to Wonderland instead?

"Stop. Stop," I said. "I know what you mean. Look, here."

Not sure why I was doing it, I rolled back my left sleeve to expose the thick black lines of the Fractal. Raine and I had last refreshed it a week ago, a shared ritual I relished every time. I held it up to show the cultist, proud of the ink on my skin. Zheng frowned and tilted her head at it too.

"This keeps the Eye out of my nightmares. Do you have a pen?"

The cultist's face lit up with fragile hope, frowning, uncertain as he realised what I meant. He cast around for something to write with, settled on a black marker pen discarded near the magic circle at the back of the room. Still tied to the radiator, eyes asking permission, he reached out with a foot and hooked the pen toward himself.

"Make sure to get the angles correct," I said, as he furiously scribbled the Fractal on his arm. "Memorise it, write it down, I don't know."

When he was finished he gripped his arm tight, staring at the design, then at me. "Will- will it-"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Good luck, I guess. You probably deserve to die, but ... maybe you don't deserve the Eye. That's all. And don't thank me, ever."

"Monkeys," Zheng grumbled.

“Sarika said she had more zombies. Is that true?”

“I-I’ve never seen them,” Jacob said.

“Yes,” Zheng purred. “Nothing as old as me. Leftovers from the castle, a few months old at most. Closer to her,” she nodded at Praem’s jar.

Clink-clink went Praem’s disagreement.

“Okay. Okay.” I stood up, shed all but one of the blankets as a final defence to keep out the cold, and scooped up Praem’s bottle. After a moment’s thought I wrapped it in a blanket too, in a sort of protective sling.

Briefly I considered trying to put her back into her body myself; hyperdimensional mathematics could do anything – in theory. In practice, I was capable of performing the magical equivalent of tying a sharp rock to the end of a stick. Returning Praem to her physical vessel would be more like restarting a nuclear reactor.

“I have to get her home,” I said to Zheng. “To Eevee, to ... to Eevee. She’ll know what to do. I can’t carry all of her.” I allowed myself a lingering glance at the grotesque and beautiful sight of Praem’s altered wooden bones. “I’m not strong enough, but you are.”

Zheng raised an eyebrow, watching me.

“She’s my friend, Zheng,” I said. “You claim to know how humans work, you’ve got to understand that. I am not leaving her behind. Please, help me carry her.”

“What’s it worth to you, shaman?” she purred.

I played the card, the trump card which might mean nothing. “ ... are you with me or not?”

Zheng shrugged, bent down, and lifted the limp wooden doll over her shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“Right, getting home means getting out of here,” I said. “Do you have a plan yet?”

Zheng grinned a dark and ugly grin. “We walk. Down.”

= =

Zheng took the lead into the dark bowels of Glasswick tower. I crept

along in her wake, clutching Praem.

Thankfully for life, limb, and my threadbare dignity, Zheng hadn't insisted on killing – or eating parts of – our captive cultist. We'd left poor Jacob tied to the radiator for his comrades to find, head between his knees, staring in silence at the jagged Fractal he'd scrawled on his arm.

This was not the time to examine my feelings, trapped at the top of a magically corrupted tower block with only a murderous cannibalistic demon for help, still covered in my own dried blood and desperately worried about Raine, but as I followed Zheng into the concrete gloom I couldn't stop thinking about these cultists, about what they might not deserve.

Marcus had been a true fanatic, potentially very dangerous, and I was glad he was dead. But Jacob? Even if he had been part of the homeless-killing zombie-making operation, having the Eye screaming at you in your dreams was worse than any punishment I could think of. No torture would compare.

I'd made the threat several times this bleak morning: could I actually send any of these cultists to meet the Eye? Was my heart that hardened?

Alexander, I could have done it to him. Sarika – no, this wasn't the same.

But what if they hurt Raine?

I wanted to feel anger like before, clean hot razor focus, but I'd drowned that heat in order to think and plan clearly. All I had now was the sodden dregs of fear, scared of losing Raine. Revenge meant nothing if she was-

No, that train of thought would paralyse me, and Raine needed me moving forward. I pushed the toxic idea down, bottled it up, and focused on the problem at hand: getting out.

The old stripped flat the cult had been using as a guard room was situated right next to the top-floor entrance to the stairwell, a tube of echoing concrete draped with shadows. Shafts of winter sunlight probed through the windows on one side of the stairs, but left pools of deep darkness stretching off on the opposite side, into the forbidding unknown of the residential corridors.

Two floors down from the top of Glasswick tower, on a mid-way landing before the next set of stairs, Zheng stopped.

I almost blundered into her back in the gloom. Praem's wooden body, held over Zheng's shoulder, stared at me with an accusing blank face.

"What is it?" I hissed, peering past the zombie. "Oh."

"Mm."

We'd reached the edge of the corruption.

Frozen ridges of concrete muscle pushed up through the floor of the next landing, as if emerging from wet tar. Structures like tendons jutted from corners, vanishing back into the building at sickening angles. Scales and bone spars and protrusions like teeth dotted the walls, all cast in concrete. The windows above the next flight of stairs looked puckered and rounded, the metal frames half swallowed by metastasised concrete growth.

"Alright," I said, trying to tear my eyes away from the sight. Praem's transmitted vision through Evelyn's remote viewing setup had not done this place justice. It made my skin crawl. "Alright, what's your pla-"

"Shhhhhh," Zheng hushed me. She reached into her coat pocket.

Before we'd left the flat-repurposed-as-guard-room, I'd taken several cereal bars from the stash in the tote, just in case. Zheng had filled her coat pockets too – with anything and everything. Pens, bits of paper, all the ritual detritus around the magic circle, discarded wrappers, a small paperback book. She'd even torn up pieces of one of the blankets and shoved those in her pockets too. When I'd asked why, and she'd explained the first step of the plan, I'd wished I hadn't said anything.

Now she extracted one item from her magpie-collection – an old shoe – and threw it underarm, down the stairs.

Tap-tap-tap it went, then rolled to a stop amid the warped concrete below us. Zheng watched it like a hawk, eyes fixed, every muscle held in perfect stillness. She didn't even breathe, and I wasn't certain she needed to.

Thirty seconds went by, perhaps, and she finally grunted. I let go of a breath I hadn't been aware of holding.

“You follow, shaman?” she purred.

“Yes. Yes,” I nodded. “So it’s ... ‘asleep’ for now? Or it would have reacted?”

“No idea. Maybe it only sees souls. Maybe it’s a trap. Clever enough to let your demon get up here before it did for her. Or maybe she shouldn’t have gone around pulling heads off.” Zheng broke into a grin. “Don’t blame her though.”

Ting went the lead weight in Praem’s bottle.

“Like a Venus fly trap,” I muttered, and hugged Praem’s bottle to my chest. In a way it was comforting to know that the cultists hadn’t taken Praem out – the building itself had, letting her get deep enough that she’d be unable to escape. Or, at least, that was Zheng’s theory. “What is it, exactly?”

Zheng shrugged. “An echo in matter. Thinks it’s him.”

“Alexander?” Disgust twisted inside my chest.

“Just processes, no mind. We stay silent, we tread softly, it’ll take longer to react.”

“Is there a plan B, if ... if we’re noticed?”

“When.” Zheng grinned a nasty grin. “Not if. No plan B. The lower down we get the better plan A will work.”

I sighed, couldn’t help myself. “Zheng. Zheng, what is plan A?”

Her grin widened. “We both live, that’s plan A. More I tell you, more scared you’ll get, and my part gets harder. Come on, shaman. And touch nothing.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” I hissed, rolled my eyes, and scurried along behind Zheng as she descended the stairs.

Creeping down the corrupted concrete stairwell was a singularly disgusting and unreal experience, with my heart in my throat and my every extremity tingling with adrenaline despite the cold.

Surrounded by biological shapes cast in looming, bulging concrete, pitted and cracked like concrete should be, but shaped by the hand of a mad giant sculptor. Nausea took me at the sight of gigantic muscle and tendon emerging from the walls in frozen curves, and at the feeling of rough uneven surfaces beneath my one sockless foot.

Microbes inside a corpse, we trod across empty blood vessels down an architectural trachea.

The windows on one side of the stairwell made it worse. Far below lay Sharrowford, normal and dingy on an overcast morning. The sun was up behind the clouds and the city moved on as normal, oblivious to what had taken root in Glasswick tower.

Zheng walked with the silence of a stalking cat; how could somebody so big move so quietly?

I felt like a blundering elephant by comparison, my padding footfalls and shaking breath echoing up and down the cylinder of warped concrete.

Two, three, four floors further down, we must have been nearing the hollow floors which cradled Alexander's headless corpse, when Zheng stopped and tilted her head, like a dog listening for a distant sound.

"What is it?" I breathed in the barest whisper.

She stayed like that for a few seconds, then grunted softly and gestured for me to follow again. We made it another four steps down the stairs before a groan filled the air.

A groan like layers of concrete sliding over each other. Like a building taking a deep breath.

Zheng froze, statue-still. I froze too, but shaking all over, clutching Praem's bottle tight under the blanket. With an effort of will, I kept my lips closed, and made not a sound.

Silence didn't save us.

Invisible at first, mere bumps on the concrete walls indistinguishable from the rough and knobbly surface, then growing, pushing out, extruding and extending, with thick bases and flared ends. From walls, ceiling, and floor, tentacles of shiny wet concrete felt their way into the throat-like cavern of the stairwell.

Neither very thick nor very long, about three feet in length and as wide around as my arm. In retrospect there weren't very many of them, but I defy anybody to stay calm when a building sprouts cilia with which to digest the people inside it.

I did, to my credit, successfully resist the urge to scream. I bit down on my lips.

Ducking, squeezing, making myself small, trying to hold my breath in silence as the tentacles probed and tasted the air – it worked. For once in my life, being tiny and scrawny helped me survive, because the tentacles couldn't see. They groped blind. I crammed myself as tiny I could get, heart hammering, holding on tight to Praem's vulnerable, breakable jar, untouched.

Zheng wasn't so lucky. Too big, too unwieldy. She gritted her teeth in naked frustration, seven foot of muscle too large to hide amid the reaching feelers. She dodged and twisted, tried to step between them, and failed.

I stared, helplessly, too scared to even whisper, as one of the tentacles caught her arm.

A brush, the merest touch on her coat's sleeve, and the slick-wet tentacle shot forward to wrap around her arm. Every other tentacle went berserk, straining toward her, whipping for her face and feet. In a second three more had her, then six, then ten, then a dozen. In moments they had both of her legs, her throat, her ribcage.

Zheng fought like a titan, pulling and ripping, digging in her heels, roaring like a goaded lion. She dropped Praem's wooden body to the floor with a clatter but the tentacles ignored it, ignored me as I put a hand to my mouth, ignored everything but constricting the giant zombie woman like a dozen pythons.

She pulled tentacles apart with sheer force, tore handfuls of concrete out of the floor as they dragged her along it, toward the wall.

The wall slopped open like a mouth. Toothless and wet, gaping and dark, from floor to ceiling.

"Zheng!" I couldn't stop myself now. Luckily the tentacles were too focused on the difficulty of reeling her in. "What- what do I do!?"

"Stay still!" she shouted.

"What about- what was plan A?"

"This!" she managed to roar – and then tentacles of concrete closed over her mouth and covered her eyes, and heaved her into the obscene wall-mouth.

The wall closed like poured concrete, slurping and slapping and then going still, as if the mouth had never been there.

Glasswick tower swallowed Zheng whole.

Silence fell, broken only by my racing heartbeat. The concrete tentacles calmed, but didn't retract. Their purpose now fulfilled, they waved lazily in the air.

Hand to my mouth, tears on my cheeks, I clenched my jaw and forced myself not to panic. A single mistake, a single misstep, a single sound could end my life. I hugged Praem's jar close to my chest as if to hide her.

'Zheng?' I mouthed in silence. The nearest tentacle twitched ever so slightly, and I quashed the urge to speak.

No Zheng.

Between the spot I stood and the next landing, two dozen tentacles dotted the floor and walls. More waved in the gloomy stairwell below.

No choice, no way back. I had to protect Praem, and I had to get out of here; her body was unrecoverable now. Even well and whole I couldn't have dragged all that wood down Glasswick tower without making a sound.

I took the first careful step, threading my way between the tentacles, cringing and shaking, a sob held tight in my throat. The urge to run was almost unbearable.

The air I displaced betrayed my presence. The nearby tentacles twitched toward me, exploring and groping. A scream clawed up in my throat.

A scream echoed by a roar.

Zheng burst out of the wall.

In a shower of concrete and dust, seven feet of avenging god exploded through rock and rebar like it was paper. Bleeding thick red from a score of cuts, covered in fragments of concrete, her coat and tshirt torn, she slammed back into the stairwell like a tank shell. She spat a mouthful of crushed concrete and a savage grin tore across her face.

Blinking, coughing, half-blinded by rock dust, I saw the tentacles

react with panic, rushing to close the hole in the wall, whipping and lashing over the gap like a wound.

In one swift motion, Zheng scooped Praem's wooden body off the floor and hauled it over her shoulder, then took two steps forward past me and kicked the glass out of the nearest widow, her boot sweeping the shards aside and smashing the frame open to the cold air.

"What—" was all I had time to say before she swept me up too. Over her shoulder in a fireman's carry, one arm pinning my rump.

"No, no! Zheng, no!" I screamed as I figured out what she was about to do.

Zheng laughed, loud and exuberant and utterly bonkers. The tentacles were writhing back toward us, snaking for Zheng's ankles and my face as she climbed through the window. She braced herself against the slim foothold of the exterior windowsill, as the clean air ruffled my hair and whipped out her trench coat. I twisted, half to look and half in an animal-instinct attempt to wriggle out of her grip. My head whirled at the view below. So very far below. A wave of vertigo sent my stomach flopping end-over-end and turned my legs to jelly.

"Plan A was always jump, shaman!" Zheng roared.

And jump she did.

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Falling out of a high-rise tower block is a rare experience, but then so is having your toenails pulled out, or being attacked by a polar bear. Placing little value in this terminal lesson, I decided to close my eyes and forgo the once-in-a-lifetime sight of the earth rushing toward me from twenty five stories up.

Well, no, that's a lie. I didn't *decide* to close my eyes. I screwed them shut because falling out of a building is terrifying.

Clinging to Zheng with one arm and clutching Praem's soul-bottle with the other, with the wind whipping past my ears – and whipping Zheng's coat into my face; with Praem's wooden bones rattling, and out of breath with which to scream, that fall took a lifetime. An adrenaline junkie's dream, to be certain, but not one of mine. Free fall was not fun or exciting, because I was convinced

that I had put my life in the hands of a homicidal, suicidal demon, and I was about to die.

Over the sound of Zheng's mad laughter, my brain groped in panic for a relevant equation.

Later – much later, weeks later, with the terror safely behind me – I actually sat down and calculated how long that fall took. About 5 seconds, give or take the effect of Zheng's coat on wind resistance, and how much Praem weighed without her pneuma-somatic flesh.

Five seconds.

Not enough time to dredge for hyperdimensional mathematics when I didn't even know what I was looking for.

Hitting the ground knocked the wind out of me, forced a gut-deep 'oof' from my lungs, and bruised my stomach muscles for days afterward. A loud crack, a softer crunch, a moment of shock and sudden stillness.

Shaking all over, clutching both Zheng's flesh and Praem's bottle in a death-grip, I found that I was still alive. Still held over Zheng's shoulder, her arm an iron-hard restraint over my hindquarters.

With no little difficulty I got my eyes open. I must have said something akin to 'put me down' because Zheng dutifully planted me back on my feet.

Of course I fell over onto my arse right away, because my legs muscles now consisted entirely of custard.

I did, however, not drop Praem's bottle. Panting, dizzy, apparently with nothing broken, I couldn't get any words out. Luckily I'd had my head at the right angle when we'd landed, or whiplash would have broken my spine.

Zheng straightened up. I heard several distinct cracking, crunching sounds from her legs. She'd stopped laughing, but wore a triumphant grin. Her feet had made a sort of dent in the ground, embedded into the compacted dirt by several inches.

She'd absorbed the impact.

I just shook my head at her.

We'd come down on the rear side of Glasswick tower, in a bit of scrub-ground that had once been a common green area, now a mass

of weed trying to climb the graffiti-caked concrete, inside an old metal security fence that was supposed to block access to the lowest level of residential windows. Some old raggedy bushes and a electrical junction box hid us from the little-used, run-down road along the rear of Headly council estate.

Out of the tower. Mercifully, beautifully free, under the open skies of Sharrowford.

With company.

A young boy in a school uniform and coat, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, with russet hair and freckles and a face upon which puberty was not being kind, had been busy spray-painting one of those ghastly graffiti tags on the wall.

His eyes like saucers, mouth hanging open as if we'd fallen out of the sky. Which, to be fair, we had. We were also both covered in blood, carrying a stripped wooden mannequin and a huge faintly glowing bottle. And Zheng was seven feet tall, can't forget that.

The spray can he'd been using dropped out of his hand, and a wad of chewing gum fell out of his mouth.

I swallowed, coughed, made sure my voice worked, and said the first thing that came to mind.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" I asked.

"I'm ... I'm bunking off," he managed.

"That's not good. You'll get in trouble. Stay in school, yes?"

"Boo," Zheng rumbled.

He nodded once, backed up several paces, and ran away.

Sensible lad.

that which you cannot put down – 7.4

In a minor miracle of grip strength, I'd managed to hang onto the filthy blanket during our rapid descent from Glasswick tower. Which was lucky, because a January morning in Sharrowford was no place to be out of doors dressed in only one's pajamas.

"We should uh ... we should ..." I mumbled. "We should ... yes ..."

Bloodstream still awash with the receding floodwaters from a tidal wave of adrenaline, I attempted to get to my feet, and discovered my bruises.

"Ah!" I winced. "Ahh, oh God, okay. Ow. Ow, my stomach." I bit my bottom lip and squeezed my eyes shut. Our landing had tenderised my abdominal muscles. How was it possible to be this bruised without breaking any bones? I sat very still, breathing very gently.

"Best I could do," Zheng rumbled. She still grinned with success, but had her head tilted to one side, as if listening to a distant sound on the air.

"No, it's fine," I said. "I'm alive. That's what counts. That counts."

Ting, agreed Praem, the lead weight jumping inside her bottle. I felt a bizarre urge to press my face against the glass.

I spent a good minute figuring out how to stand up without using my stomach muscles or dropping Praem's bottle. In the end I had to put her down, turn over and use my hands to lever myself off the ground, then tucked Praem back into the crook of my arm underneath the blanket around my shoulders.

"How am I not concussed?" I said, blinking hard at my own left hand. "Am I concussed? I should absolutely have a concussion."

Clink-clink. Praem didn't think so.

"I paid the meat price," Zheng purred. She didn't bother to look at

me.

Her meaning failed to penetrate my adrenaline-addled brain. I touched the back of my neck as if expecting to find protruding bone, gingerly rotated my head on my shoulders, swallowed and blinked and searched for damage. “Shouldn’t I have whiplash? That was like a car crash.”

“I am smarter than a seatbelt.”

I nodded automatically. As the adrenaline drained away, my teeth threatened to chatter. “We should go, we should really go. We can’t stay here.”

“Should,” Zheng echoed.

“That boy might alert somebody. Parents, police, I don’t know. And Sarika could be on her way, she said she was coming here. We’ll need to keep out of sight, both of us. How do we do that? We can hardly take the bus.” I spoke more to myself than Zheng, trying to marshal my thoughts and reboot my brain after the fall. “If somebody spotted us falling ... well, we’ll make the strange and unexplained news. I don’t know how we’re going to get home without being seen, I ... what, what is it?”

Zheng had turned her shark-toothed grin on me as I rambled on.

“Zheng? We really should go, we need to leave before-”

“Should and could. Different things.”

“ ... I’m sorry?”

“Seven fractures.” Zheng tapped her left thigh, then her right. “Four fractures.” Her finger rose to the wide swell of her hips inside her jeans, to her pelvis. “Two fractures. One in my spine as well. Structural. I take a step, I fall down.”

“Oh.” Suddenly the cracking sounds I’d heard earlier made sense. Iron and rock she may seem, but even demon-altered corpse-born flesh and blood was still only flesh and blood. “Oh Zheng, I’m sorry. You- for me. Thank you. I-”

“I’m fixing it.”

“Fixing? ... oh, yes. You can do that, can’t you? Like when I ... ” I trailed off, wincing in slow motion, gratitude and guilt mixed into a heady cocktail by the rush of still being alive. “I never apologised

for severing your arm before. So, I'm sorry. And thank you. Thank you, Zheng, I ... thank you. I still can't believe you jumped out of a building."

Zheng shrugged, rattling Praem's wooden body on her shoulder.

"How long will healing take?" I asked. "Sarika might be on her way here. And, well, people might see us." I glanced around at the thin barrier of old bushes and partially dismantled security fence, the twin concrete cliffs of Gleaston and Glasswick towers looming over us. Nobody had chanced by yet, but it was only a matter of time. "You look like you stepped out of a Greek myth. Plus we've got quite a bit of ... red, on us."

"Fifteen minutes, give or take. Bones need time." Zheng shrugged again. "Don't run off alone."

"Believe you me, I am not going anywhere."

I tugged the blanket tighter around my shoulders and adjusted Praem's bottle. The road beyond the secluded patch of scrub ground was deserted for now, the gap between the towers hostile with graffiti and broken bottles, but it would only take one passer-by to glance down here at the wrong moment, one stay-at-home mum in Gleaston tower to look out of her bathroom window, and we'd be the subject of a very bizarre phone call to the police. Headly council estate might be numb to vandalism and pretty drug crime, but I doubt they'd shrug off the sight of a seven-foot-tall monster covered in dried blood and concrete dust, accompanying a shell-shocked college girl in her pajamas.

But despite what I'd said, I didn't care.

Perhaps it was the adrenaline, or the joy of not being dead, or the sheer madness of surviving a twenty-five story fall, but for once in my life I simply couldn't bring myself to give a damn.

I filled my lungs with frigid air, and didn't care how much it made me shiver. I was alive and I was free, and my bruises would heal.

My only witness – other than Zheng, her eyes tilted to the sky, her attention focused inward – was the omnipresent spirit-life, the pneuma-somatic background noise to my life. From where we stood on that half-hidden patch of scrub ground I could already see a dozen different spirits; a blob of tentacles and orange suckers climbed Gleaston tower, a clump of creatures all stalk and eye

picked their way across distant rooftops, a Roc-sized bird of black fire hovered low over the city to the east – and a pair of hound-ghoul things snuffled down the nearby road, barely thirty feet away.

An idea struck me, one I would never have dared fifteen minutes ago. That was the old Heather, who had not yet survived death with her eyes wide open.

Well, eyes screwed shut in terror. Still counted.

“Zheng, I-”

“You feel invincible,” Zheng said before I could finish. She lowered her eyes to meet mine. “Maybe you are.”

“I ... how did you know that?”

“Go out in a storm.” Zheng’s voice dropped low and quiet, a tiger-purr in the night. “Naked and alone, and climb to the highest point you can find. The trees shake, the rocks shiver. But you shout back at the thunder and the lightning, defy the Gods to kill you. Maybe they do, maybe you die. But if you live, you’re invincible. That’s how your kind do it. The old way.” She took a deep breath and her grin broke the spell. “Or it’s just how you monkeys get when you cheat death. Endorphins.”

“Yes, probably that second one.” I took a deep breath as well. “I’m going to ... it’s hard to explain, I’m going to take a risk. Please trust me for a moment.”

Zheng shrugged. Couldn’t help but notice she kept her legs and hips and spine rock steady as she moved.

The two spirits nosing at the road hadn’t moved too far along yet. I wet my lips, wrapped myself in false courage, and opened my mouth.

“You,” I said in a level voice, far too quiet to carry from our hiding place.

One of the spirits looked up at me. Goat-like eyes in a pale lupine face. Its companion stopped too, and they stared at me like a pair of wolves examining a baited trap.

“Come here,” I said. “Or don’t. Your choice.”

A hesitating first step turned into a trot, and the pair of spirits

edged up toward the patch of scrub ground, pacing back and forth.

Supremely ugly, a unnatural combination of wolf and ape, leathery hands instead of paws and scraggly fur like old man's hair sprouting in clumps on their rubbery skin. Big loose jaws full of blunt teeth worked silently on empty air. Eyes too large and too far apart kept sliding over at Zheng, unwilling to venture within her range. That's right, I'd seen her pick Tenny up by the throat once before, hadn't I? And Praem had wrestled that spirit at the Saye estate. Demons could touch them, hurt them, and they knew it.

"You know who I am, or what I am." I raised my voice slightly and reminded myself I'd done this before; I'd spoken to spirits, I'd pressed them for information, I'd even commanded them – briefly. This was unlikely to work, but I had nothing to lose by trying. "I have a task for you."

Pacing, back and forth, back and forth. No indication they cared.

"There's a magician approaching this tower, a mage, understand? She'll be here soon, and she might go up inside the tower. Follow her when she emerges again, follow her home. Then come back to me, and show me where she hides."

Both spirits stopped, sat on their haunches, staring at me. A demand, a refusal? This wasn't working.

"In return ... I ..." I what? I couldn't think of anything.

Before I could get out another word, both spirits leapt up and ran off with a skidding and skittering of feet, nipping at each others' faces and hides. I puffed out a long sigh. A failure. I'd think of something else. I had to.

Zheng was watching me with quiet fascination.

"I thought it was worth a go," I said. "I can see ... uh, spirits, it's-

"Of course you can see them, shaman."

That word again. She'd called me that over and over since I'd freed her, but now she imbued the word with that awful reverence once more, a dark intensity in her eyes.

I sighed to cover my discomfort. "I do hope we didn't scar that boy too badly. Not to be rude, Zheng, but you're the sort of thing that causes recurring nightmares."

Or wet dreams, if one was like me, but I didn't say that part out loud.

"Thank you." Zheng grinned in savage delight, back to normal. She rolled her neck and one shoulder, then twisted her torso and hips sideways in a slow motion that produced a machine-gun sound of every spinal vertebrae popping in sequence. She coughed, flexed her thighs, bent a knee, went up on tiptoes, produced more popping noises as her joints realigned. She coughed again.

"Almost there?"

"Mm. Minute," she grunted, coughed a third time, then opened her jaw wide and fished a chunk of concrete out the back of her throat. "Huh."

Zheng didn't strike me as remotely in need of what we mere mortals thought of as dignity, but I averted my gaze all the same. I looked up at Glasswick tower, at the vertical dungeon we'd escaped, and tried to spot the window we'd jumped from. Couldn't see it from all the way down here, not at this angle.

"Did you know that would work?" I muttered. Zheng grunted an interrogative, busy rotating her ankles. "Jumping that far, I mean?"

"Fallen further before," she rumbled.

"Carrying a person?"

"Three goats." She broke into a grin, enjoying the look on my face. "Off a cliff. They lived too."

"Goats. Glad to know I'm in good company."

Clink-clink-clink went Praem. Three times? Was that laughter? I frowned at the oily smoke in the bottle.

"They were good goats," Zheng said. "Good meat."

"I'm certain they were, but I better not be."

Clink, went Praem.

"Yes, thank you," I sighed, and stared up at the tower again.

The corruption, the tentacles, the imprint of Alexander Lilburne's mind – none of it was visible from the ground. Nobody knew it was there, except for me and my friends, and a bunch of cultists

dedicated to my worst enemy.

Zheng took several steps, rolled her torso around in an arc from her hips and drew herself up to her full height, swapping Praem's wooden body from one shoulder to the other. She stretched, a tiger preparing to sun itself. "Ahhhhh. Much better."

"I'll be back for you," I whispered to the tower, hugged Praem's jar, and turned to Zheng with a question on my lips.

"Shaman."

"Zheng. Are you ... " I cursed my hesitation. Zheng was a demon and a monster, but I couldn't think of a better way to phrase the question. "Are you certain you're coming with me?"

"My legs work again. *Bones*," she grunted amused disapproval.

"No, I mean are you comfortable coming home with me?"

"Mmmmm?" she purred, watching me carefully.

"The house – my home – it belongs to Evelyn. She's my best friend, I love her, but she's a mage. I understand if you'd rather not go there. You don't owe me anything. I'm pretty sure I can get home on my own if I have to. If this is where we part ways."

Zheng shrugged. "I'm still here, shaman."

= =

Walking all the way home took almost three hours.

Zheng and I stuck to less-used roads, back alleys, side streets, with much stopping and starting, on a circuitous route to avoid the city centre, the shops, the homeless camps under the motorway, anywhere with people. Peering around corners, listening for footsteps, lurking in back alleys; a painstaking trek through the concrete jungle, all the way to the other side of Sharrowford.

My fears were proved justified a couple of weeks later. A grainy picture of Zheng and I surfaced on the internet, snapped from the window of a passing car with a shaking phone camera, along the motorway embankment near one of the clusters of tents. Nothing visible to recognise me by, only the back of my head atop a shapeless lump of blanket – but Zheng was clearly far too tall. Supernatural sighting or trick of perspective? Photoshop or clever stunt? Luckily enough, the responses to the photograph descended

into jokes about giant Yorkshire-men escaped from the moors. I'm certain some amateur paranormal researcher has glanced at my awful matted hair and hunched shoulders, and wondered about some obscure species of Northern English gremlin.

My unshod feet plagued me, sore and hobbling after the first hour, one sock-less soft sole bleeding by the third, so Zheng picked me up and carried me. Princess style. Twice. An experience my body didn't forget in a hurry.

She carried me until I could walk again, and I didn't reject the help, despite the quasi-sexual discomfort and Praem's fleshless wooden bones bumping alongside me.

Raine needed all the help I could get. From any quarter, any monster.

By the time number 12 Barnslow Drive finally hove into view I was back on my own two feet, ready to drop, dehydrated, and shivering with cold.

Home, this cracked and weathered redbrick leviathan, roof tiles patched with tarpaulin. wreathed in shrivelled ivy for the winter, squinted at me from dark windows and made my heart soar.

I hurried the final stretch, feet stinging, bruised abdomen complaining, and pushed through the garden gate with an unbidden smile on my lips. Praem didn't say anything from within her bottle, and perhaps it was only my imagination, but I swore I felt her respond as well. This was the place she'd come into our reality. Her home too.

"This one?" Zheng purred from behind. In my moment of relief, I missed the warning note in her voice.

"Yes," I sighed. "Yes, we're home."

And not a thing out of place. I stopped on the garden path and bit my bottom lip.

Front door intact and sturdy, not smashed in as I'd half-expected. Raine's battered old car still squatted next to the pavement a few feet down the road, where she'd last left it parked. No lights showed around the cracks in curtains, all was dark and quiet under the brooding winter sky. The inside of the house sometimes felt like a cocoon or a womb, sealed and guarded from the city beyond.

“Question is,” I murmured. “Who exactly is at home?”

Click, agreed Praem.

I finally tore my eyes from the house to glance back at Zheng, and realised she hadn’t crossed the threshold of the front gate. Spirit-life lurked in the street behind her, at a respectful distance. All the way here the pneuma-somatic wildlife had given us a wide berth, as if Zheng was one of their natural predators. One of them – barred from the Saye house as they were?

“Zheng, you can come inside, can’t you? I didn’t think to mention, the property’s warded. I actually don’t know what that means, but ... can you?”

“Signs won’t stop flesh,” she rumbled, and stepped through the invisible barrier, stalking up alongside me like a panther, without once wavering from her staring contest with the house. She watched the building with a slow, wary regard, tilting her head one way then the other, as if getting a good view through each separate eyeball.

No dark amusement, no face-splitting grin. Not amused.

“What’s wrong?” My words emerged as a whisper. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Zheng, what’s wrong? You’re spooking me. Do you see somebody?”

Slowly, she shook her head. “I see this place. Not so different to the tower we ran from.”

I sighed and resisted an urge to roll my eyes. “I did tell you it’s an old magician’s house. Everyone’s so upset by it – you, Twil, the Brinkwood people. Why weren’t the cult scared? None of this would have happened.”

“Because they’re fools,” Zheng purred, gaze still locked onto the house.

“Zheng, I’ve known you for one morning, and this is the second time you’ve wanted to fight a building. Unless you’re secretly intending to murder Evelyn or steal her books, I don’t think the guards will pay you any attention, and the house won’t care. It’s not a haunted house, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

The shark-grin returned to Zheng’s face, directed down at me. “Afraid? Perhaps you should be afraid of this house, shaman.”

“Well, I’m not. It’s home, it’s treated me well, and it’s where my friends live. Speaking of which, Zheng, you ... I don’t mean to imply- and I do want to just get indoors already, but-”

“Spit it out.”

“You won’t get violent with anybody, will you?”

“Anybody?” Zheng purred.

“Any of my friends. You know what I mean.”

“And if the house bites?”

I huffed, curling my freezing toes against the pathway flagstones.

“Bite back.”

And without further ado, I marched up the path and knocked on the front door.

Luckily for my remaining credibility, Zheng decided to join me, a tower of muscle at my shoulder ready to threaten, kill, or eat anybody who wasn’t supposed to be here. If she’d hung back, well, I would’ve had to retreat and try again. Maybe go around the back, find Tenny. I’d check on her as soon as I could.

Nobody answered my knock. The house echoed with a long pause through which dark things crept in silence. I rattled the handle and knocked again.

“It’s me!” I called out. “I don’t have my key, for obvious reasons.”

My mind backed up a step and I looked at the door properly – and my heart crawled into my throat. Number 12 Barnslow Drive had indeed been broken into, quite expertly. The keyhole showed a scuffed ring of fresh metal amid the decades of old scratches, and the thick wood had been dented slightly, about level with my head; the lock been forced, a shoulder rammed against the door? After Twil had run out into the night, had Raine closed the bolts? I didn’t recall. If only we’d locked it properly, if only-

A rapid patter of feet sounded suddenly from inside the house. I jumped, my heart leapt, and my stomach dropped. Somebody – something – bumped into the door, turned the lock and rammed back the bolts with a clatter.

“Oh.” I backed up, right into Zheng. She put a hand on my shoulder and put herself in front of me, just as the door flew open.

Sharp amber eyes in an angelic face, wide and blinking in surprise.

“Twil!” I half-shouted her name in a shudder of relief. Suddenly my knees felt weak and rubbery.

Twil didn’t hear me, not from behind seven feet of zombie muscle; I scurried around Zheng to hug my friend, not even thinking, but then things got tiresomely predictable.

Twil catapulted herself backward from Zheng in a feat of canine gymnastic shock. I flinched and swallowed a yelp. She landed already bristling with fur and claw and the elongating snout wrapping itself around her human face, growling deep and loud through clenched teeth – not a warning, a war cry.

“Twil! Twil, it’s me, it’s fine, it’s me!” I blurted out as I hurried over the threshold. Praem agreed with a *clink* from inside her bottle. Wolfish eyes caught me and Twil’s entire body jerked as she aborted a forward charge.

“Heather?” she growled through a snout of ghostly wolf-flesh.

“Yes! Yes it’s me, I’m here, and I’m- well, I’m not okay, but I’m unhurt- wait, no, that’s not accurate. I am hurt.” I almost laughed at the absurdity of the moment, an edge of hysteria in my voice. My strength was draining with relief, my body knew I was home. This warm dark cavern of old wood and familiar scents, of our shoes by the door and the unique way the light through the curtains dusted the front room with plush shadows. A wall of warm air washed over me, the heating still turned up against the cold outdoors.

And under it all, the faint iron scent of blood tainted the air. Blood, and cleaning chemicals.

Zheng had to duck to follow me through the doorway, then straightened back up to her full height. Twil’s eyes flicked between me, the giant zombie, the huge glowing bottle in my arms, and the twisted wooden mannequin over Zheng’s shoulder. Much more of that and she’d make herself dizzy.

“Twil, it’s okay,” I almost laughed again. “It’s okay, we’re all friends here.”

“Yeah right, sure, fuck,” Twil managed.

Like a huge jungle cat squaring off against a rival, Zheng showed all her teeth, and grinned at Twil. “*Laangren?*” she purred.

“And you can knock that off!” I snapped at Zheng, emboldened by finally being home. “And please, shut the door before somebody sees us. Please?”

Zheng closed the door without removing her eyes from Twil. My werewolf friend growled back as Zheng’s grin widened again.

“Please, both of you, please,” I repeated, exasperated. “I am exhausted, we are in a crisis, *please*.”

“Heather?” Twil asked through gritted teeth. “You’ve gotta be joking.”

“I freed her,” I rushed to explain. “Zheng, I mean, I freed her. She’s on our side – my side, sort of. Zheng, this is Twil, *please*.”

“We’ve met,” Zheng rumbled. “Never got to have a proper fight, did we, skinchanger?”

Twil reacted like a startled hound, blinking and shaking her head. “Hey what, you talk proper now?”

“I have a mouth, I must use it.”

“She saved my life this morning,” I said to Twil. “Yes, she is extremely dangerous, but not to us. I think.”

“Your trusted are mine, shaman,” Zheng purred, but her grin stayed fixed on Twil. “But don’t you want to feel it too, *laangren*? I haven’t had a good fight, a real fight, in decades. We’ll both walk away, no real skin in the game, just the sheer joy of it.”

Twil blinked at her. “... later. Maybe. Fuck’s sake.”

Zheng grumbled like a tiger having a dream, but finally allowed her shark’s grin to simmer down to a dark smolder. She shrugged, and Praem’s wooden body rattled on her shoulder. “I’m up for a round with you anytime, skinchanger.”

“Not indoors you’re not.” I tutted.

A ripple of change passed through Twil’s transformed musculature. Her wolf-flesh melted away, wisps curling and vanishing into nothing as she tilted her chin up at Zheng, all human again. “Beat you last time, didn’t I? What, you want a rematch between my foot and your face?”

“No,” Zheng corrected her. “You ran away.”

Twil frowned, not quite following. “Fuck it, whatever. Who cares.”

That should have alerted me to how dire the situation was – Twil refusing to rise to the bait. Instead, she stepped forward and pulled me into a fierce hug.

“Ah! Ah, careful,” I winced as Praem’s bottle was squished against my abdomen. Sometimes Twil didn’t know her own strength.

“Stomach, stomach’s very bruised. Ow.”

“Sorry. Sorry, Heather. S’just, you know, shit’s so fucked up. Welcome home, yeah?”

“Yes,” I managed. “Thank you.”

A wave of emotion welled up in my chest, but I swallowed it down. My body said rest, you’re home, everything’s going to be alright; I told it no, we still had miles to go.

Twil pulled back to look at my face. “God, fuck this morning. I’m real glad you’re okay, Heather.”

“‘Okay’ is a relative term, but I am alive. Thank Zheng.”

Twil glanced up at the zombie, frowning hard. Zheng shrugged and stepped away from us to prop up Praem’s altered wooden mannequin on some of the many boxes of junk Evelyn kept stacked in the front room. Better than dumping Praem’s body on the floor, I suppose, but it still hurt to see.

“The hell is that?” Twil asked.

“Luggage,” Zheng purred.

“Praem’s body.”

Twil gaped at me.

“Oh, oh, don’t worry,” I hurried, and held up the bottle. “She’s in here, this is her, for the moment. Say hi.”

“Um ... hi, Praem?”

Clink, went Praem.

“I think we can put her back together,” I said.

Twil nodded, frowning, quite lost indeed. “The hell happened, Heather, where were you?”

“Bad places, then the ground. Long story. Twil, where’s everybody else? I’m worried sick, I think they took Raine, at least that’s ... that’s what they ... ” The look on her face made it obvious. “She’s not here, is she?”

Twil winced and shook her head. “Hoped she was with you.”

“The cultists kidnapped her. I think.”

“Shit!” Twil swore through her teeth. “Last night, I got back here as fast as I could, I really did, I promise, but you and her were both gone already! I’m sorry. Eevee won’t wake up. Kimberly, she- I think she was hiding somewhere, under a table or some shit, and-”

“Kim’s okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Twil nodded. “Scared, you know? But yeah. We put Eevee upstairs in her bedroom, and Kim’s been doing stuff, you know. Magic? Trying to get Eevee to wake up. I called my mum too, but she says none of them can come into town right now, not with this going on. My folks are in full panic mode, I’m supposed to be at home, but sod them. Eevee won’t wake up. Heather, I can’t wake her up.”

I looked at Twil – really looked at Twil, and realised she was closer to the edge than I. Face puffy with lack of sleep and panic, eyes wild, still in the same clothes she’d been wearing when she’d torn out into the dark last night. Her easy exterior was cracking. Nothing to chase, nothing to punch, a faint shaking in her chest and face. She didn’t know what to do.

I did.

“We’re going to wake Evelyn up, and I’m going to find Raine,” I said, and surprised myself with the conviction in my voice.

In truth I had no idea if we could do either of those things, but if we wanted a ghost of a chance then Twil had to believe, because I might need her, so my job was to make her believe.

“ ... yeah,” Twil mouthed.

“Twil. We will. We absolutely will. I will do *anything*. Understand?”

Clink, agreed Praem.

“Yeah. Yeah, we will, we can do this.” She nodded, going along with me. “Right. We can ... oh!” Her face suddenly lit up. “You can

make things vanish! Right?”

“I ... I can, yes?”

“Oh, fuck me. Lifesaver.” Twil let out a huge sigh of relief.

“Heather, you are a lifesaver. I didn’t know what to do with the corpses!”

“The ... ” I blinked, rewound, replayed that word. “I’m sorry, Twil, the what?”

“The corpses,” she gestured at the floor – and the wall behind me, and the door-frame. And the inside of the door. In all the excitement I had failed to notice the wood was slightly damp, and still stained faintly in a way recent scrubbing had failed to completely eliminate. The whole area was punctuated by several patches of damage that looked like impact craters from railway spikes. I reconstructed the scene in my head: blood on the floorboards, blood up the walls, blood up the door.

My eyes travelled upward, and I flinched. One of Evelyn’s spider-servitors still hung over the doorway, in an ambush position, so well-concealed I hadn’t seen it when I’d stepped inside.

The Eye Cult had paid a high price for invading my home.

“Thank you,” I said to it. “Next time, don’t let anyone take Raine, please.”

“ ... is it ... it’s not one of the invisible spiders, is it?” Twil whispered, as if it might hear her.

“Yes. It is,” I sighed.

“Ugh. Well, yeah then, I guess that must have been it. When I got here, there were these two dead guys on the floor. Huge mess. Put them both in the kitchen, but uh-”

Twil wasn’t exactly a master of misdirection, or of concealing her emotions. Her eyes flicked to the closed door to the disused sitting room.

I followed her gaze. “I thought you said you put them in the kitchen?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah I did. They’re both still there, you know, getting cold and stiff. It’s just, um, there’s- it’s been a bit of a complex morning and we’ve got, um ... ” Her eyes wandered over my

shoulder, frowning at Zheng.

I sighed. "We can discuss this in front of Zheng. She's on my side, and yes, she's also a violent cannibalistic demon-"

"Cannibal implies the same species," Zheng purred, almost as if distracted. "I'm no monkey."

"-but she saved my life twice this morning, and I think she wants to help."

"Uh, no." Twil pointed. "I mean, what the fuck's she doing now?"

"I can hear you, *laangren*," Zheng rumbled.

"What? She ... oh."

Our friendly neighbourhood flesh-eating demon had also noticed the Spider-servitor, and was now locked in a staring contest. The spider's head of crystalline eyes rotated to return Zheng's look, both of them frozen in the moment of eye contact. Two supernatural beasties vying for who was bigger and scarier.

"It's fine," I said with a sigh. "She and the spider are squaring off, just like you did too. I'm pretty sure it doesn't care. It's okay, Zheng, I ... I think."

"I have eaten spider many times," Zheng purred.

"Not one of those, I'd wager," I said.

"A first time for every kind of meat."

"I'm extra glad I can't see any of this," Twil said, hands up in surrender.

I stared at Zheng for a moment, trying to figure out if she was serious. The last thing we needed was a demon getting into a death match with what was left of our security system.

"Look, Heather," Twil was saying. "It's just, we've got a situation to deal with. Uh, a really ... *delicate* situation, and maybe like, she should go somewhere else for a bit?"

Caught between a territorial zombie and Twil sounding worryingly un-Twil like, I frowned at the latter in confusion. "Delicate situation? What are you talking about?"

Her eyes slid to the sitting room door again. She winced and

struggled over a word or two. I was about to tell her to get on with it, I'm too tired, I need to sit, I need to wash my sore feet, I need to eat, and we need to save our friends – when a cry of delight split the air. My name.

“Heather!”

My name, from the most unexpected source.

Thundering down the stairs in a clatter of bare feet, flying the distance between us in a twirl of plaid skirt and pink poncho, throwing herself at me in an uninhibited tackle-hug, here came Lozzie.

I almost couldn't believe my eyes – and barely remained standing when she hit me, that flying hug not just for show. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, squeezed all the air out of me, and nuzzled her face into my neck. Pulling back, laughing, making me laugh back at her in surprised delight, wheezing from the bruises in my stomach but not caring. I almost dropped Praem's bottle, but Twil reached in and took it from me, like sticking her hands between a pair of wrestling ferrets.

“You're here! You're here! You came back!” Lozzie laughed at me.

“You too,” I croaked, speechless, smiling all over. “Ow.”

“Mmm!” She made a sound like a small excited animal, and hugged me tight. I went ‘ow!’ again but I didn't care.

“Yeah,” Twil added. “And your spooky friend is here too. Turned up outta nowhere.”

“Why didn't you say anything?” I asked Twil over Lozzie's shoulder, hugging her hard as I could stand.

“Other things on my mind.”

Lozzie pulled back again, half-dancing on her bare feet. God, she looked so healthy, her elfin face glowing, well-fed and clean – though still pale and mushroom-like, as if her skin had seen no sun in months. Which made sense if she'd been Outside, beyond the reach of terrestrial light. Where'd she gotten the clothes? The plaid skirt was so her, and the pink poncho had a cute little hood with floppy rabbit ears. Her hair was everywhere as she raked back wisps out of it out of her face. She smelled of foreign bath soap and medical moisturiser, mango and Vaseline. And underneath it all, the

lingering taint of Wonderland ash.

"I have so many things I need to ask you," I said, overwhelmed by emotion.

"Heather, Heather, where did you go? Why did you go?" She laughed, bewildered with me. "I was getting you out."

"Somebody – something grabbed me. Pulled us apart! Lozzie, I wouldn't leave, not ... not when ... I thought you were gone."

"Ahhhh," she sighed, nodding and smiling. "Same thing. I can't leave! Have you tried? I can't get back Out, it's so weird."

"You ... you tried to leave again?" An unexpected barb of pain twisted in my chest.

"To find you! You were supposed to be here!"

I swallowed and focused. "Hands on your ankles? Dead hands?"

"Yeah! You too?"

"Mhmm."

"Weird, huh?" Lozzie smiled at me, a bouncing, happy sort of smile, and hugged me again.

"Ahh, ow. Lozzie, I'm sore, I'm so sore." She'd come back to me. She was healthy and whole and safe. I laughed, and realised I was crying too. "You got me from Wonderland. You got me. Thank you, Lozzie. Lozzie." The tears came on full now, I couldn't stop them, and my voice emerged as a whine. "Lozzie, I've lost Raine. They took her somewhere. I can't- I-"

"No!" Lozzie pulled back, her face set in a serious little frown.

"They can't do that! I'll help! You love her, this is important! We'll get her back, I have an idea already!"

"You- you do? Of course you do." I took a shuddering breath, sniffed, and managed to stop the tears. Lozzie nodded and helped wipe my face. I had to focus. Lozzie likely did not have any ideas that made sense in this reality, but her sheer blinding enthusiasm helped hold me up.

"Little ... little Lauren," Zheng purred, almost a whisper, and we both looked up.

Zheng wore an expression I hadn't thought her capable of, a lost fragile wonder, her staring contest with the spider forgotten. One huge hand reached out and brushed the top of Lozzie's head, the gentlest gesture I'd seen Zheng make.

"Oh!" Lozzie lit up again. "You're awake! Hi, Zheng." She gave the zombie a little wave. "How's it feel?"

"This is ... I spoke to you, little Lauren, in dreams," Zheng purred, the stone of her voice softened and blurred. She blinked heavily. Can demons cry? "You gifted me with dreams where I was free."

"Uh huh, yeah, it was fun!" Lozzie wriggled out of my arms – leaving me more than a little unsteady on my unsupported legs – and threw a hug at Zheng, as unafraid and uninhibited as she had been with me, utterly unintimidated by this rippling giant of barely suppressed violence. Zheng looked as surprised as I felt. Lozzie danced away again, panting and red in the face with excitement. "Did you get her out, Heather? How did you do that?"

"Um, I just removed some of her tattoos. It was ... well, it wasn't easy, it made me pass out. But it was simple enough."

Lozzie tilted her head back and forth quickly, as if this feat was beyond her imagining. "Wow, cool. Heather, you're so clever! I could never figure it out."

"Little Lauren, little ..." Zheng grinned again. "Hahhhh. I remember now. My little mooncalf."

"Mooncalf?" Lozzie pulled a face, stuck out her tongue and pulled down on one lower eyelid. "Ruuuuude."

Zheng rumbled a low laugh – then froze.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," a tiny voice came from the kitchen doorway. Kimberly, one shuffled step into the room, staring at Zheng with poorly concealed horror, then at me with an uncertain smile. "Heather, hi. I'm- I'm glad you're alright. I'm sorry."

"It's alright, Kim," I said, trying to sound soft. "I'm glad you're okay too, you-"

Zheng moved like a foxhound after the scent of blood. She pounced past me in a blur of uncoiling muscle made of quicksilver and lightning. I flinched and gasped, Lozzie let out a little 'oop' and

hopped backward, Twil growled like a startled dog – and Kimberly wasn't fast enough to scream. Zheng picked her up by the throat and slammed her against the back wall, knocking all the breath out of her lungs.

"Little wizard," Zheng hissed through a shark-toothed grin.

"Aw fuck," Twil shouted, first off the mark – but she had no idea what was happening.

Legs kicking, eyes wide in naked terror, Kimberly opened her mouth to scream. Zheng's other hand whipped out like a snake and darted forward into the opening, fist jamming Kimberly's jaw wide open.

"Zheng, no!"

Luckily for Kimberly's tongue, I got there first, one hand on Zheng's arm. I knew that all the strength in my body wouldn't be enough to stop the demon's little finger, but the tone in my voice worked better than any physical restraint. Not a shrill cry, not a scream of panic. A command. A command given to a freed slave.

Slowly, her hand still ready to rip Kimberly's tongue out at the root, Zheng turned her flesh-eating toothy grin on me.

She radiated cold malice. She thought Kimberly was a threat, but I'd *offended* her, in probably the single way anyone could.

"Zheng."

"... shaman," she rumbled through her teeth.

"Kimberly is my friend." Keeping my voice steady was impossible. I let it quiver. I was terrified, why pretend otherwise? I glanced at Kimberly, pinned to the wall and staring back at me, panting through her nose. She moaned a muted scream around Zheng's fist, her feet scrabbling at the wall for purchase. In the corner of my eye I saw Twil circling to Zheng's other side, half-transformed, ready to take her up on that offer of a rematch. "Twil, don't," I said out loud. "Zheng, Kimberly is mine. Understand?"

"I recall this one, skulking and worming, filling her grey meat with secrets. Making more like me."

"What she did in the past does not matter. Or what she was forced to do. Now, she's mine. And free, like you."

Zheng let out a growl, a nasty one, like a mountain disagreeing with me. I hiccuped.

“And,” I added, shaking all over. I hiccuped again. “You said that removing your tattoos guaranteed no wizard can bind you with words. I heard you say that. Was that a lie? Is Kimberly dangerous to you? I don’t think she is. She’s helped me. She’s with me. Are you with me?”

Zheng grimaced. She turned a hateful gaze on Kimberly, made the poor woman squeeze her eyes shut, still fighting to breathe.

“Don’t hurt Flowsie, she’s harmless,” Lozzie said. Her little blonde head appeared over Zheng’s arm, peering up at Kimberly. “She’s kind of boring, and stiff, but she’s harmless. Sweet if you catch her alone.”

Zheng looked down at Lozzie and the awful toothy grin died in an instant, as if it couldn’t touch her little mooncalf. The fury in Zheng’s frame dropped away. She levelled a mere nasty look at Kimberly instead, and her huge tongue slowly inched out of her mouth to brush Kimberly’s cringing cheek, before whipping back again.

“Woah shit what,” Twil muttered.

“One betraying twitch from you, wizard,” Zheng purred in Kimberly’s face, and clacked her teeth together. Kimberly tried to nod – difficult with a fist in your mouth – and Zheng dropped her to the floor and stepped back.

“Back further, you big fuck,” Twil growled. Zheng grumbled, but amazingly enough she did as she was asked.

Hacking and coughing, wheezing for breath, shaking and crying, Kimberly flinched as I went to my knees and put my arms around her. “I’m so sorry, Kim. I’m sorry. I didn’t ... I didn’t think ... I didn’t think, that’s it. I’m sorry.”

“I hate magic so much,” Kimberly whined.

“Good,” Zheng purred.

“You shut the fuck up,” Twil snapped at her.

“Yes, Zheng,” I added quickly. “Please just ... just leave it alone.”

Zheng grumbled and refused to look at anybody.

"It's okay, Flowsie, I don't hate you." Lozzie patted Kimberly on the head too, but I suspect that didn't help. Twil, still eyeing Zheng like an unexploded bomb, fetched Kim a glass of water, which went down without obstruction and was quickly followed by another. It took us a while to get the poor woman back to her feet, by which time Zheng had retreated to the other side of the room, brooding like a moody teenager.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be here," Kimberly kept saying. "I keep screwing everything up, I-I can't."

"You don't screw everything up, and that wasn't your fault," I said.

"It was," Kimberly hiccuped. "I deserved it. The zombie's right, I did so many terrible things. And now I've screwed up everything here too. We can't wake miss Saye up, and I hid when you needed help. And it's my fault that we've got ... " She trailed off at a look from Twil. I glanced between them.

"She thinks the police woman's her fault," Lozzie said. "Typical Flowsie."

"... police?" I echoed, going cold inside. "Oh no, what is this? Twil?"

"Oops!" Lozzie bit her lips. "We're not talking about that?"

"I was, like, getting there. Okay?" said Twil.

"I'm so sorry, it's all my fault," Kimberly repeated. "I shouldn't have opened the front door in the first place."

"*Twil?*" I demanded.

Her eyes slid to the closed door of the disused sitting room.

With terrible inevitability and a growing sense of unreality, I stepped over to the door, turned the handle, and opened it on the curtained and shadowed room inside.

I'm not certain exactly how long I stared. It felt both too long and too short at the same time. Mortified, my mind racing at a million miles an hour, yet unable to process the implications of what lay in front of me. A pair of solidly stoic eyes stared back at me, neither accusing nor pleading, but quite afraid.

I closed the door, paused, then turned the handle and opened it again, hoping that something different might be inside. Nope, still

the same. I closed the door a second time. Straightened up, took a breath, let it out slowly.

“Heather-” Twil started.

“Please, Twil.” I raised a finger. “Please, please tell me that is not a real police constable we have bound and gagged in there?”

that which you cannot put down – 7.5

“Well, actually no, not a *constable*,” Twil said, her throat bobbing with an uncomfortable swallow. “If she was a regular old bobby she’d be in uniform, right?”

I stared at her, lost for words, and also just plain lost in incredulous disbelief. “Twil, what does that mean? Lozzie said police woman, quite clearly,” I pointed at Lozzie, who dutifully nodded. “Did I imagine that? Am I hallucinating from stress? Please, please tell me that woman in there is a cultist, or at least a random member of the public. Please.”

“Uh, no. Kim, what did she say, at the door?”

I turned to Kimberly – she cringed away at the look on my face, but for once I couldn’t soften my expression. “ ... well?”

“She ... she introduced herself as ‘detective sergeant’,” Kimberly all but squeaked, her voice still raw from Zheng’s hand squeezing her throat earlier.

For a moment I refused to believe my ears, staring, blinking, but not seeing. Kimberly bit her lip and lowered her head as I glanced between her and Twil. “ ... and did she volunteer this information before, or after you decided to tie her up?”

Twil pulled a teeth-gritting grimace, ducking her head and hunching her shoulders like a flinching hound; pained, sheepish, embarrassed, and mortified all at once. Normally I found her mannerisms endearing, almost kind of sweet; in her best moments I very much understood what Evelyn saw in Twil, but right now I felt myself ready to explode in her face. I bit my lips to control myself.

“Before!” Lozzie chirped with a smile. “I was listening in.”

“It’s not like we had a choice.” Twil spread her hands. “Our scrub job around the door is pretty bad, and hell, it stinks of blood, right? Even you lot can smell it, can’t you? It reeks in here.”

“A little,” I managed.

“Rancid,” Zheng grunted.

“She was asking questions about ‘the noise’ last night, but then also about who owns the house and all this other shit. I couldn’t keep up with it, I’ve never had to deal with coppers before. Then she tried to walk into the kitchen, and there’s fucking bodies in there, Heather. She saw them, and she ... well, she didn’t freak out, not until I had to hold her down.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Assault as well. Wonderful.”

“I had to!”

“She talked really fast, but it was all surface, no depth,” Lozzie added, almost to herself. “She was really good at talking. I didn’t like her, she wasn’t genuine.”

“At least she’s by herself,” Kimberly said.

“And that makes it better how, exactly?” I snapped at her. I didn’t mean to, and she didn’t deserve that. Kimberly flinched, her hands jerking up to shield herself from my anger. Zheng let out an approving chuckle. I hissed a tut at myself through my teeth, but I didn’t have the mental bandwidth to care right now, let alone apologise.

“That’s why I didn’t answer the door right away when you knocked,” Twil said. “Thought it might be another one. Or, you know, a follow up.”

“Twil. Twil, you are absolutely sure she’s what she says she is? You’re certain?”

“Uh, yeah. Here,” she pulled a compact card wallet from one of her coat pockets and held it up, black leather with a Sharrowford Police crest on the front. “Her badge is real. Warrant card? Whatever you call it.”

I let out a shaking breath. “Great. Great.”

“I’m really sorry, I’m so sorry, it’s all my fault,” Kimberly whined.

“Nah, it’s fine, fuck, I should have run her off somehow,” Twil said. “I dunno what the hell to do with her, she’ll call the police. Uh, I mean, she is the police, but like the rest of the police. You know what I mean.”

“ACAB!” Lozzie half-laughed.

“I don’t like police either,” Kimberly said. “But we can’t do this. We can’t. We’re going to get in so much trouble.”

“We’re already in-”

“Please, just show her we’re-”

“I could take her Out! Show her- oh no, wait-”

“Police meat tastes as good as any other, shaman. Ten minutes alone, then burn the clothing-”

I tuned them out, the growing argument between Twil and Kimberly, Lozzie’s inappropriate laughter and Zheng’s disgusting suggestions. A high-pitched ringing sound echoed in my ears. My breath tightened in my chest. A tremor took my hands.

A panic attack lurked on the edge of my consciousness.

“Heather?”

No Raine would catch me if I fell. No time for warm tender recovery and a cup of tea. Yes, I was surrounded by friends and allies – yes, more than one of them carrying their own flavour of risk, but friends and allies all the same – but without Raine, and teetering on the edge of an abyss.

If the police got involved, it was all over.

Obstruction by the normal, sane world of human activity and institutions, day jobs and the scientific method, would destroy any hope we had. Evelyn did not need a hospital, she needed a mage. Raine didn’t need a missing persons report, she needed me.

“Heatheer? Woo?” Lozzie waved a hand in front of my face. I met her eyes but didn’t really make contact. She squeezed my shoulders in a hug, gentle and careful with my bruised stomach. My own arms responded on automatic until she let go again and she turned away to reply to something from Twil, as the argument spiralled onward.

The police were already involved. It was too late.

The police detective bound at wrist and ankle in the disused sitting room, gagged with an old tea-towel from our kitchen – I struggled to hold onto the important fact that she was a person, the fleeting impression of a few scraps of pinned-back blonde hair, a dark suit,

piercing eyes. A person, a human being, like me.

But she was also the first exploratory feeler of a bureaucratic leviathan every bit as inhuman as anything from Outside.

What do I do? Imitate Raine? She'd know what to do, with her confidence and her lightning-fast plans, her voice never leaving room for doubt, always pulling me back up to my feet when I felt lost. I wasn't Raine, I couldn't be like her. I couldn't even be like Evelyn. I was me, little Heather, and what could I do?

Ah.

The dark glimmering of a solution presented itself, like a poisonous flower unfolding in the back of my mind.

"No, absolutely not," I murmured.

But I would do anything to save Raine. All the problems in the way must be excised. Which meant I had to work hard now, to avoid becoming a monster by the time I saw her again.

Panic fell away, replaced with a cold, shaking focus like a icicle grown inside my chest. I shed the filthy blanket from my shoulders, straightened up, and filled my lungs.

"Everyone shut up! Stop talking," I yelled, then added, almost as an afterthought, "please."

It worked. Four pairs of eyes – flinching, surprised, amused, and hurt in turn – all looked at me as I took another breath and gathered my thoughts.

"... Heather?" Twil ventured. I raised a finger and made a face.

"That means stay quiet," Zheng rumbled for me. "The shaman is thinking."

"It goes for you too," I hissed at her, then turned to Lozzie, "I'm sorry Lozzie, it's fine. I love you, I'm not angry with you."

Lozzie nodded and blinked, biting her bottom lip, like a child caught in adults' crossfire.

I filed away that 'I love you' for later, a burst of truth in the heat of the moment; I did love Lozzie, like a little sister I'd never had, but this wasn't the time to think about the million questions I had for her. This was the time for practical solutions.

“How long?” I said, my voice quiet but my tone steady, not through effort of will but sheer necessity. “How long’s the police detective been tied up in there?”

“Uh.” Twil’s eyes went up and left, thinking. “Bout an hour, bit more?”

“And you did confiscate her mobile phone, any pocketknives, and, I don’t know, pagers? Bent paper clips? Lipstick?” I waved my raised finger at Twil when she frowned with incredulity. “No, I know what you’re going to say, and no. Assume for a moment that we’re dealing with a master detective, the protagonist of her own bloody television program. Is there any way she can escape?”

“I don’t think so. I emptied her pockets, and she’s tied up with gardening wire. I couldn’t find anything else so I, you know, used my elbow grease, bent it round.” Twil rummaged in her jacket pockets again and produced an expensive-looking smart-phone. “This was hers.”

“Is it switched off?”

“Uh ... ”

“Switch it off, then wipe your fingerprints off it,” I said. “Are there any other problems I don’t know about? No more surprises, from any of you. If you tell me now, you have amnesty from being shouted at later.”

“Stack knocked on the door round about dawn,” Twil said – to her credit, without hesitation.

I stared at her for a second, not certain if I believed my ears. “ ... Amy Stack? The ex-cult assassin Amy Stack?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. The bald bitch.”

“Right. Okay. What ... what did she want? Did you take her head off, by any chance? Please, that would be wonderful.”

“Nah.” Twil shrugged. “I mean, I would have, but by the time I got to the door she’d backed up all the way to the garden gate, like she knew it was risky. She wanted to talk, I think, but I chased her off, and she had a car parked nearby, so ... ” Twil pulled another guilty grimace. “I didn’t want to leave Evelyn alone here, ‘case it was a trap.”

“Good. Good thinking,” I forced myself to say, to compliment Twil, to keep her head above water. “It’s a pity you didn’t get her, but you did the right thing. Thank you, Twil.”

Of course she didn’t give chase, not after the object lesson of last night, after she left the house. Twil must be feeling terrible guilt, feeling responsible.

“I’ve ... ” Kimberly started, then stopped and looked down when I paid attention to her. “It doesn’t matter, but I was supposed to be at work four hours ago. Probably lost my job for real this time. Like I said, it doesn’t really matter, compared to ... everything else.”

“It does matter,” I managed. “I’m sorry, Kim. We’ll do something about that. Just, not right now.”

Lozzie raised her hand up high, elbow straight.

“Yes, Lozzie?”

“I put Tenny into her cocoon.”

“ ... you ... what?”

“That’s what you called her, right? It’s a real cute name! With the tentacles and the black goo? When I made her she was supposed to pupate on her own after she’d grown up a bit, but she didn’t and I don’t know why, but I found her out in your garden this morning and just gave her a little nudge along, and poof! She’s up in the tree in the garden, she’ll be fine, it’s not really a problem but I thought I better tell you in case you wonder where she is. Or if you look out there. It’s kinda cute!”

Lozzie smiled a very Lozzie smile.

“Yeah,” Twil said, looking askance at her. “She just ran out there and waved her arms in the air for a bit.”

“ ... okay, I’ll ... thank you,” I said. “We’ll ... later.”

Clink agreed Praem, from where Twil had left her bottle on the floor.

Cocoon? *Pupate*? Was Tenny going to turn into a pneuma-somatic butterfly with a twenty-foot wingspan? I put that firmly to one side for now. Bizarre, but not a crisis. Not yet, at least.

“Alright, my turn,” I said. “The cult isn’t dead, obviously, Alexander

Lilburne did some last—ditch deal, and he's dead but now they're worshipping the Eye. None of you really know what that means—"

"I do!" Lozzie raised her hand.

"Yes, except Lozzie, because she saved me from it this morning. The fake version of her is dead, by the way, she killed it."

"Wham bam," Lozzie whispered. Zheng cocked an interested eyebrow.

"And Glasswick tower looks like the inside of an intestine because it thinks it's Alexander's body. According to Zheng here." I gestured politely over my shoulder.

"Cool," Twil grunted, eyeing the zombie again.

"And here's what we're going to do," I said. "First, Kimberly."

"M-me?"

"Yes, you. You've been trying to wake Evelyn but it's not working, is that correct?"

"I- yes. I'm sorry. I only know the things I was taught. I-if I had time with her books, maybe—"

"See that bottle? That's Praem, the cultists tore her out of her body, which is also right next to you."

Clink, went Praem.

Kimberly's eyes went wide and she turned her head slowly, as if expecting to see an actual corpse lying next to her, then froze for a second at the sight of the twisted wooden mannequin laid out on the boxes.

"You used to put Outsiders into bodies for the Sharrowford Cult," I said. "Can you still do it?"

"I-I- in theory." She frowned, swallowed, looking very uncertain. "I'm not sure, I—"

"Can you put Praem back into her body for me? Without, I don't know, losing her somehow?"

Kimberly stared at the bottle for a second, her brow creasing in a frown that turned from confused to thoughtful and then much darker. She chewed on her lip. "Maybe. I'm not sure. We used ...

you know what we used, not wood.” She cringed, voice shaking a little on that last word. “Heather, I- I don’t know ... I can’t ... I don’t know if I can face doing that again.”

Behind me, Zheng rumbled, purring like a disturbed tiger.

“Please try.” I pulled out the big guns, a real Raine-ism. “Kim, you’re the only one of us who can do this, none of us know how this works and Evelyn is in a coma. We need all the protection we can get right now, and that includes Praem.”

Kimberly’s eyes went downward, a hollow space revealed behind them, and for a moment I thought she was going to break, but then she nodded, once, twice, a third time more firm. “Alright,” she whispered.

“Good. Take the bottle into the workshop. Keep it off the floor though, Praem needs all the comfort she can get.”

Kimberly gathered the bottle up in her arms, frowning down at the wisp of oily smoke inside.

I turned to Zheng. “Do you need to ... rest?”

“HMMMM?” Zheng rumbled.

“We walked for three hours, Zheng. I’m ready to collapse. Are you?”

She shrugged, but it meant no. It meant don’t be so stupid, you weak little monkey, I could walk for thirty hours if I so wished.

“Good then. Would you please carry Praem’s bones for Kimberly? Lay them on the sofa in the workshop, it’s the room to the left of the kitchen.”

To Kimberly’s credit she moved pretty sharpish once she realised she was about to have Zheng bringing up her rear. She scurried through into the kitchen as if the hounds of hell were on her heels, but she needn’t have bothered. Zheng didn’t move and stared at me instead, an eyebrow raised, darkly amused.

“Shaman.”

“You don’t have to help, but if you’re not going to, then keep out of the way. Go raid the fridge or something, but don’t you dare slow me down.”

Zheng broke into a big shark-toothed grin, dangerous and

approving, the first since I'd peeled her fist out of Kimberly's mouth. She bristled with implied challenge for a moment, then strode past me, scooped up Praem's wooden bones, and followed Kimberly.

"And don't threaten her again!" I called. "And come back here, I need you for something else as well! Now, Twil."

"Yeah?" Twil blinked at me, a bit lost in all this sudden decisiveness.

"Just before she got taken, Raine was using her mobile phone. Is it still here?"

"Oh, yeah actually." Twil nodded. My knees went weak with relief but I tried not to show it. The moment I let myself feel normal, I knew I was going to collapse. I had to keep moving forward. Don't stop. "Her phone was on the floor. I think I put it in the kitchen?"

"Good, I'm going to need that. But first, you're going out into the street to find that detective's car."

Twil's eyes went wide. "Oh, shi-"

"Yes, exactly. She's a plainclothes detective so the car will be unmarked, which means you're the only one who can identify it." I tapped my nose. "Can you sniff it out?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be too hard."

"Cover Barnslow Drive and every street within a five-ten minute walk. Find that car, but don't touch it. I'll have to deal with it myself if-" I bit down. If the worst comes to the worst. "Find the car."

"Right, got you, no problem." She nodded and gave me a thumbs up, trying to be reassuring, then jerked her head at the closed door to the disused sitting room. "What we gonna do about her then? What's the plan?"

"What is the plan indeed," I sighed. "That's the question."

"Eh?"

"I'm getting there. Believe it or not, other things have more pressing time limits. The police officer you assaulted and kidnapped is not the top priority here."

“She’s ... not?” Twil blinked at me.

“She’ll keep.”

“I ... guess ... she will?”

Zheng appeared through the kitchen doorway again, ducking her gigantic frame with one hand on top of the door, thankfully free of any fresh blood. “Zheng, you’re going to watch our captive.”

She straightened up. “Sounds familiar.”

“Please. Go in there, watch her, make sure she’s not escaping or cutting her bonds or something, but for the love of God, please do not make things worse for me by eating bits of her.”

“Uhhhhhhh,” Twil let out a noise like a printer error. “Heather, are you sure?”

“Zheng is the only one I can spare right now, but more importantly she’s by far the most intimidating thing within a hundred miles. That is a message we need to send.”

“Flattery gets you everywhere, shaman.” Zheng purred in approval, like a tiger getting belly scratches.

As the towering zombie strode toward the old sitting room door and opened it on the shadowed interior, an evil voice whispered to me from the darkness in the rear of my skull. If Zheng did eat the detective, the decision would not be mine to make, my hands would clean. Had my subconscious chosen Zheng for this, to shield me from consequence? Zheng pushed the door wide, and I caught a glimpse of the detective’s trouser legs, slender ankles tied with green gardening wire.

“Zheng.”

“Shaman?” Zheng turned before going inside, one hand on the lintel as she ducked.

“I mean it. Don’t eat her.”

The detective made a muffled cough of surprise through the makeshift gag. Couldn’t blame her, really.

Zheng paused for a moment too long, those dark eyes boring into mine with all the slow perception of a jungle cat. Could demons read minds? In the past I’d often gotten the sense that Praem

understood more than she let on. Zheng nodded slowly, straightened up inside the room, and closed the door behind her.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to regain the sense of fleeting clarity I'd had moments before.

All this confident order-giving was an act. Fake it until you make it, pretend to know what you're doing, and convince everyone else to believe. Ignore my racing heart and sweaty palms and churning guts. Doubt would crush me in an instant if I let it in.

I bet Raine didn't feel like this all the time. I couldn't fill these boots.

"Heather?" Twil said.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine."

"I don't think you are," Lozzie said in a small voice. I made myself smile for her.

"And you. Lozzie, you ..." I said – and almost choked up. Lozzie, with her healthy face and silly-cute rabbit poncho, almost broke me. The truth slipped out, or as much of it as I could bear right now. "Promise me you won't leave again. Not before we have a chance to actually sit down and talk, properly. Please. I can't deal with it if you vanish again. I'll go to pieces."

Lozzie did a double-blink, very theatrical, and pulled a sort of teasing smile with her eyes rolled upward. "Promise-promise."

"Good. Twil, get moving. Lozzie, help me up the stairs and into the bathroom. I think I can spare five minutes to wipe my face and sit on the toilet."

= =

"Are you sure about this?" Twil asked.

"Sure? No, I'm sure of exceptionally little right now. Moreso than usual." I sighed down at Raine's mobile phone in my hands, at the contact listed as 'Fliss – land line only'.

Raine had typed those words, along with every other contact in her list. Random shops in Sharrowford, takeaway joints we'd eaten from, Evelyn, Twil, a mechanic's shop on the other side of the city, the university dentist, the student union bar, a number labelled 'not home', another with the name of one of her exes – all things I'd

scrolled past while clenching my heart, to find the mysterious Felicity.

“Then it’s a risk, right?” Twil said. “Last thing we need is more risks, come on.”

“Everything’s a risk. Leaving her like this is a risk.” I nodded at Evelyn, unconscious on her bed.

“Living’s a risk,” Lozzie said, nodding sagely.

“True that,” Twil murmured.

Evelyn looked as if she was asleep, her face a little waxy as she suffered through troubled dreams behind unquiet eyelids. Her breathing came steady and slow, but she wouldn’t wake up.

In a touching gesture that I refrained from commenting on, Twil had not merely carried Evelyn up to her bedroom and laid her out. She’d cleared a space on Evelyn’s plushly overstuffed bed, and tucked Eevee under two layers of warm blankets. She’d wiped Eevee’s face and placed her prosthetic leg nearby, perhaps on the optimistic off-chance that Evelyn would wake when none of us were there to watch over her.

We were invaders in this haven of comfort, watched by Evelyn’s jury of plush animals and the judgemental faces of her anime figurines. Twil perched on the bed with her furrowed concern, Lozzie lounged against the far wall biting her lip, and I sat in the desk chair, in all my rotten glory.

Twil had followed the detective’s scent right to her car – an old BMW parked two streets away – and in the ten minutes she’d taken doing that, I’d managed to clean myself up enough to feel approximately human. Lozzie had helped me hobble upstairs to the bathroom, where I’d gulped down pints of cold water, wiped the worst of the dried blood from my face, and ran my bleeding foot under the hot tap in the bathtub, wincing as I’d scrubbed it clean to ward off infection.

I’d replaced my stinking pajamas with Raine’s dirty clothes instead, an oversized black band tshirt and plaid pajama bottoms, plucked from the floor of our bedroom. Wrapped myself in her scent like a suit of armour. Socks too, over the hastily applied bandage around my savaged sole.

Between the blood and the fear-sweat and the Wonderland ash, I probably reeked like an abattoir fire, but I didn't care right now.

Evelyn was on a time limit, one perhaps more pressing than Raine's. None of us had any medical training, any knowledge about what to do with a person in a coma. If she stayed like this for much longer she'd need an IV drip for hydration, she'd need to be turned to prevent bedsores, and I could only imagine what being bed-bound would do to the already acute pain problems in her back and hips. We had to wake her, fast.

"We need a mage," I said, and realised I was trying to convince myself.

"We've got Kim," Twil said from the corner of her mouth.

"A real one. Apologies to those absent."

"Yeah, I know, okay? Kim's tried stuff, nothing works. Who the hell is this Felicity woman, anyway?"

"I don't rightly know. Back before Christmas, we were trying to figure out where Tenny came from – that's the spirit that's been following me around. Turned out Lozzie sent it," I nodded toward the culprit, who lit up with a little satisfied smile. "But before we knew that, Evelyn called around people she used to know, from her childhood, or teenage years, I think. Mages. One of them was Felicity. It was a ... weird phone call."

I suppressed a shudder at the memory of that strange voice which had answered first, that whisper of sulphur across the humming phone lines, but I didn't mention it out loud.

"Scary?" Lozzie said, all the same. "Was she scary?"

"Not really," I lied.

"I don't give a shit about scary, can we trust her?" Twil asked.

"Evelyn had some choice words for her," I admitted. "I got the impression she didn't like Felicity very much, but Raine seemed to think it would be safe to ask her for help. Safe for Evee, I mean. I trust Raine's judgement, often more than I trust my own."

My thumb hesitated over the call button. There was still time to turn back, to admit we did have another option, one I'd already thought of last night. Last night, with Raine still at my side.

Hyperdimensional mathematics could wake Evelyn.
Hyperdimensional mathematics could do anything. In theory.

But I could also fail, and pass out, for hours on end. I knew I was fragile right now, I felt it in my bones and the hollow in my chest, the floaty sensation in my skin, like it was too big for me. Any use of brainmath might put me over the edge – and I had no other way to find Raine. I had one shot at that, and spending it on Evelyn might cost me everything.

Silently, in the guilt-wracked privacy of my own mind, I apologised to her. I told her I cared, as much as I did for Raine.

But I still made the choice.

I pressed the call button and put the phone to my ear, listening to it ring. Twil shifted to the end of the bed and leaned in close. Lozzie tilted her head, only half-interested, her eyes elsewhere.

The phone rang and rang and rang. Echoes in the darkness. On and on, my heart tightening in my chest, hoping I got Felicity first and not that other voice.

Click.

A moment of silence stretched out, as if the line had connected to an abyss, a marine trench of lightless pressure.

Something inhaled as if waking up.

“Tannerbaum house,” a woman’s voice answered in a clumsy half-mumble.

“Hello, good morning. Is this ... ” I stumbled. I’d only ever heard Felicity once before, her voice on speaker-phone and fighting against Evelyn’s contempt. “Am I ... we don’t ... we don’t know each other, but am I speaking to Felicity? I’m sorry, it’s rude of me, but I don’t know your surname.”

“Yes? Yes, this is Felicity speaking,” came the hesitant half-mumble once more. “Nobody ... nobody uses this number. Who are you?”

“My name is Heather. Heather Morell. I’m not a mage but I’m in the know, and I’m a friend of Evelyn Saye.”

“Oh.”

So much in that little sound. Deadened surprise. Old pain, the kind

of ache that never really heals. Loss, of a sort I knew. Felicity, whoever she was, had reacted to Evelyn's name with an echo of how I might react to Maisie's.

"Hello? Miss? ... Heather? Hello?" Felicity asked into my shocked pause.

Twil caught my eyes, boggling at why I wasn't answering. I wet my lips and gathered myself.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'm Eeve's friend, maybe her best friend. Listen, she's been hurt, magically, and I'm led to understand that you might be able to help. Might be willing."

"Eeve's been hurt? How? What happened?" Felicity asked, her voice urgent but still blurred by the mumble, as if she couldn't open her mouth properly. I'd assumed the phone call had woken her, but now I wondered at some other, darker cause. "Where's Raine, why isn't she calling me instead?"

"Raine is indisposed at the moment."

"Who- no, who are you? This is a trick. Who are you?"

"I'm Raine's girlfriend, alright?" I snapped at her. "I'm not trying to con you. Evelyn's in a coma, and she won't wake up. The cause is too complex to explain. Magic. Can you help, or not?"

A long pause, a thinking pause, during which Felicity swallowed then burped gently. "I'm sorry. I have ... I have to be paranoid."

"Yes," I sighed. "I'm familiar with the mage lifestyle."

"Of course I can help Eeve, I'd do anything for her," Felicity said. I heard her stand up on the other side of the phone, and caught a hint of falling rain on thin windowpanes. A scuffle of paper and pens, the scrape of a chair on a stone floor. "But ... well ... do you know ... I don't know where she lives now. I don't think she wants me to. Which is ... I'll need an address."

"Sharrowford. Do you know the city?"

"I've never been there, but it's a few hours drive at most, if I leave now. Which I will ... Heather? Hello?"

"Before I give you the address, there's something else first."

"... yes?"

“Evelyn, when she called you a few months ago, she described you to me as a ‘sociopathic pederast demonophile’.”

Twil’s eyebrows well near left her forehead. She gaped at me. Lozzie put her hand over her scandalised smirk.

“ ... oh,” Felicity said. Hollow, hurt, old pain.

“I don’t care what you are,” I said. Twil was mouthing an outraged ‘What?!’ at me, but I carried on. “I’m just letting you know that I don’t entirely trust you. I want my friend to be safe and well again, and I don’t care what you are or what you did in the past, as long as you’re coming here to help Evee. Raine seemed to think you’re okay. If you’re not-”

A sigh on the other end of the phone. “None of those things are true.”

“If you’re not,” I repeated. “If you’re a threat, I’ll get rid of you. I’ve killed mages before.”

“ ... what? I thought you said you were-”

“I’m not a mage, no. I’m much worse. And I have to be paranoid too, for Evee as well.”

A swallow from the other end of the phone. “I understand. I suppose I deserved that, didn’t I?”

“She’s told me nothing about you, Felicity. I don’t know who you are.”

A sad puff of laughter. “Doing what I never could, huh? Standing up to something like me. She’s lucky to have you, Heather.”

“I hope so. Here.” I gave her the full address for number 12 Barnslow Drive, postcode and all, and heard her scratching to write it down as I rattled it off.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can, look for me in three or four hours, I think. I drive an old range rover, so don’t blow it up when I get there, or whatever it is you do.”

“I won’t. Thank you. Please be fast.”

“Try my best.”

The moment she hung up I let out a huge breath and started

shaking all over, hiccuped twice and felt bile threaten to escape my throat. Fake confidence shed from me all at once like melted skin. I sniffed hard and hugged myself, dropping the phone onto Evee's little laptop desk with a clatter. Lozzie was suddenly on me, squeezing me hard.

"Ah, ow, ow, bruises," I said, and she eased off just enough. I hiccuped again.

"Bloody hell, Heather," Twil said. "Where'd you get all that from?"

"I can be kind of scary, when I want," I managed, resisting the urge to curl up and hide.

"Yeah. Nice. Good job, yeah." She nodded along, believing we were going to be alright. I'd made her believe.

"You're not scary, durr," Lozzie said. "You're Heather."

"I still don't like the sound of that woman," Twil said. "If she smells wrong, she's not going anywhere near Evee. And she's definitely not being alone with her."

I nodded in mute agreement, no emotional energy left for argument. "That's one down."

"One?"

"One of many problems."

"And a bitch ain't one," Lozzie said in a sing-song voice. Despite the situation, despite herself, despite everything, Twil burst out laughing. Lozzie laughed back and they descended into a moment of shared giggle fit as I stared on in bewilderment.

"... I'm sorry, what?"

"It's a rap song," Twil said, sniffing to control herself. "I got ninety-nine problems but a bitch ain't one? Kinda famous? Come on, Heather, you must know that one."

I shook my head. "No, actually. Sorry."

Twil shrugged. "Right you are then, boss girl. What's next?" Twil hopped up from the bed, cast one last glance back at Evelyn's sleeping form, and looked to me – looked to me for directions. For orders. For confidence.

“Boss girl needs to eat,” Lozzie said.

I held myself back from the answer I wanted to give. Next should be Raine, the great unknown. To whom anything could be happening. But that wasn't sensible, that wasn't smart, I couldn't burn myself out before we were ready, before we were safe, before my effort might mean success.

I drew myself up and clenched down on the shaking. Time enough for that later.

“Next we deal with the old bill.”

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The officer's name was Nicole Webb, and she lived up admirably to my mental image of a lady police detective.

Short and compact, hair up in a tight blonde bun, in her mid-to-late-thirties but trim from half-marathons, martial arts, and a sensible diet. No jewelry, and minimal makeup on a tightly alert face. Her legs were drawn up as best she could with her ankles bound, the gardening wire biting into the fabric of her suit trousers, her back against the sofa's footrest. Intelligent, watchful eyes looked up at me the moment I opened the door on the shadowed room.

She was angry and scared, projecting the anger to hide the fear. Hiding it well, yes, but I was somewhat of an expert on fear. Not surprising, after an hour alone in a room with Zheng.

We'd gotten her name from her police badge, which I now held before me like a talisman, the key to her mind.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled at me, arms crossed, radiating boredom. “Is there meat in your fridge?”

“Uh, yes, Zheng, I think there's some chicken,” I replied without taking my eyes off the detective. “I'm sorry for making you stand here all this time.”

“You don't make me do anything,” Zheng grunted, and ducked through the door, stomping off toward the kitchen before I had a chance to stop her. Twil and Lozzie both hopped out of her path, then gathered at the door again.

“Would hardly be fair for me to sit in a chair,” I said, and gently levered myself down to the floor. I got halfway there before I

remembered my stomach, and rather spoilt the effect as I winced and straightened back up, then had to awkwardly sit down with far too much use of my hands. "Ahh, ow. Ow, okay. Okay, sitting. There we are, here on the same level."

The detective and I stared at each other, until finally her eyes left me and took in Twil and Lozzie hovering in the doorway. The anger in her eyes melted away, replaced with a tentative curious frown. She'd probably been expecting a man to come in here and shoot her twice in the back of the head, but instead she got a dishevelled college student and two teenage girls. Her frown went through a most interesting transformation; she didn't know how to play this situation. She didn't know what we were.

Her brow was sticky with dried sweat. Another sigh escaped me.

"Um ... Twil? Can you get this gag out of her mouth? Why is she gagged, anyway? Why was *that* necessary?"

"So she couldn't scream for help? Seemed pretty obvious to me," Twil ventured, then grimaced when I gave her an unimpressed glare. She crossed the room and undid the knotted tea-towel serving as a gag, and revealed the rest of Nicole's face: a small, neat mouth and a very mobile jaw, which Nicole instantly worked up and down to relieve the stiffness.

She watched me, and watched Twil, and even watched Lozzie still lurking in the doorway, as she wet her lips and took several deep breaths. Finally, she seemed to settle on me.

"Alright, I'll go first then," she said. "You obviously want to talk to me, or you wouldn't have removed that gag. What do you wanna talk about?"

My heart hammered in my chest. Why was this, of all things, so nerve-wracking? I'd faced down a flesh-eating monster this morning, and almost been eaten by a building. This should be nothing.

"What's your name?" she carried on. "Mine's Nico-"

"Nicole, yes, I know," I almost snapped. "Nicole Webb, detective sergeant, Derbyshire Constabulary."

She smiled a little. "You got that off my badge, didn't you?"

It was how she used her voice, soft and measured, gentle and

coaxing. She was rigid with tension, but doing an incredible job of controlling her breathing, of playing the part she thought would get her out of here. She made me feel every bit what I actually was – an ill and exhausted young woman, not a supernatural mastermind.

“We did, yes,” I managed, trying to stick to the script. “My name is Heather Morell, and I do have a question for you, yes.”

“Ask away, please,” she said quickly, before I could continue. I knew exactly what she was doing, building rapport. She caught my pause and carried through again. “I’m all ears, Heather, please.”

“Are you a real police detective, or ...” I trailed off, my heart hammering like a deer trying to batter itself to pieces against a fence. “Oh hell, I can’t do this,” I spat.

“Heather?” The detective spoke very quickly now. “Can’t do what? What are you being forced to do here? Talk to me, please, I can help-”

“Heather?” Twil hissed. “The- we need to-”

“Wrong end of the stick,” Lozzie chirped from the doorway, then let out a flighty little sigh.

“This isn’t going to work,” I said. “She doesn’t have the slightest clue what she’s walked into, and Zheng hasn’t made the impact I hoped.”

“What have I walked into?” Nicole asked. “Please, help me understand, and I can help you. Your big friend didn’t say a word to me, no, but she sure is big. She coming back too?” Nicole lowered her voice. “Or are you sort of glad she’s not listening in right now?”

I shook my head, at a loss, trying not to face the inevitable even as I said it. “I do not have time to deal with you. I just don’t. We can’t do this, I don’t know how.”

Nicole’s front finally cracked – just a little. She frowned, and that was real, an unrehearsed, unglossed, genuine quirk of confusion. “Heather, yes?”

“Yes. That’s me.”

“Are you in charge here?”

I blinked at her, paused, my mouth open like an idiot. “... yes. Yes, I suppose I am. Right now, I am the closest thing this bunch has to a

leader, yes.”

“You’re all a bit young for this sort of thing, aren’t you?” Nicole tried another smile, wet her lips. “Any of you a day over twenty?”

“I am, in fact. A couple of weeks ago,” I said.

“Hey, Heather, happy birthday!” Lozzie lit up behind me. “I had mine too. We should do a double party when this is all over.”

“This sort of thing?” Twil echoed, frowning.

“Covering up a double murder. Striking a deal with a detective,” Nicole said, oddly casual, though the tension in her eyes gave her away. “I assume that is what you’re trying to do?”

I sighed and put my face in my hand. “Nobody here’s committed murder. Not today.”

Nicole puffed out a long breath and pulled a if-you-say-so sort of face. “I did see two bodies. Hiding a body is a lot of work, you know, and ninety-nine percent of the time it’s not successful, pieces get found, forensics turns stuff up. Is one of you covering for a relative? A father? An uncle? Some sort of fight gone wrong? Look, all three of you girls are in trouble, I’m not going to lie, but I can help you. You feel like you’re trapped, like you’ve got no choice, but that’s not true, you-”

“What do you think Zheng was?” I asked.

“... she’s a professional, isn’t she?” Nicole’s voice dropped to a hushed whisper, her face into a serious frown. “She’s watching you three, while you wait for a real clean-up crew? Or she was involved, she killed those two men? If that’s right, you need to untie me right now and-”

“She’s a demon,” I said. “And my friend.”

“Ahhh fuckin’ ‘ell.” Twil grimaced.

Nicole paused for a lot longer than she needed to, then nodded slowly. “Alright, we’ll go with that. So ... is she ... uh-”

“The bodies you saw were killed by a servitor – that’s a kind of spirit, which you can’t see – put here by the grandmother of the owner of this house, who is currently upstairs in a coma, because we’re having a crisis.” The words tumbled out of me, as I tried to avoid what I had to do. My voice shook, the plan all coming apart.

"Multiple crises, in fact. And that is why I do not have time to deal with you. I need to find my partner, who has been kidnapped by actual evil cultists who worship an alien god outside of our reality. Are you following me so far?"

Lozzie caught the upset in my voice and made a noise like she wanted to hug me, but she hung back. Nicole was doing a very bad job of concealing her conclusion that she was surrounded by not just murderers and criminals, but mad ones.

"Right," she said. "Right. Okay. This ... 'servitor', uh, where is it? Does it look like a person? Is it here now?"

"Oh come on!" Lozzie demanded of her. "Use your noggin, think! Think!"

"What did you think happened to you when Twil overpowered you earlier?" I asked. "Was that normal?"

"... that was just ... bad luck. Props to you, by the way," she nodded to Twil. "Twil, is it? Had me bang to rights with that armlock."

"Uh, thanks."

"She's a werewolf," I said.

"*Heather*," Twil whined, then almost grinned to herself. She loved it really, the showing off.

"Fuzzy," Lozzie said with a cheeky grin, then darted behind the door-frame to escape Twil's little growl.

"A ... werewolf?" Nicole's eyebrows went up. "Okay."

"No, not okay. It's not okay, because you need to accept it, and I don't know how to make you do that. And what about Zheng? You think she's tall? She's nearly seven feet, can't you see that isn't normal? People don't get that tall, not built like her."

"What are you trying to tell me here? I've stumbled into a bad urban fantasy novel?" Nicole smiled as she spoke, but she failed to keep the incredulity out of her voice. Now she thought I was just messing with her. I wished I was.

"Pffffffft," Lozzie blew a raspberry from the doorway. "No imagination. She's never gonna get it."

“We have to make her get it. We have to show her,” I said, my voice tight and shaking with the racing of my heart. “Or I have to kill her.”

that which you cannot put down – 7.6

Making credible threats did not come naturally to me, but lately I'd become worryingly good at this.

“Or I have to kill her.”

My ultimatum hung in the late-morning shadows of the old sitting room, on a dingy winter's day. A self-directed expression of horror. An admission to myself of what I had to do. A half-apology to the police detective, Nicole Webb: ‘look, you’re just doing your job, but you’ve stumbled onto something too far beyond your sphere of experience, and it’s going to be the end of you, unless you start believing in fairy tales.’

Perhaps she read the certainty in my voice. Maybe she used that detective experience to deduce that I'd committed murder before. Or more likely the whole being bound at wrists and ankles thing did the trick.

Nicole Webb took my words as very credible threat indeed.

“Hey, hey hey hey now,” she said. Her widening eyes betrayed her struggle to stay in control. She raised her wire-bound hands and wet her lips. “You’ve already got me exactly where you want me, you can make any demands you like, any deal you want, and I can’t say no, right? I can’t say no. This doesn’t have to end poorly for any of us, does it? There’s a dozen better solutions we can come to, before doing something you can’t take back.”

“I- that wasn’t- I know that.” My thin resolve buckled under Nicole’s obvious fear. “I don’t have anything against you, I don’t want to make you suffer. I just ... I need you to not exist.”

“Ahhh shit.” Twil grimaced. “Heather, are you serious?”

“What do you think?” I tried to snap at her, but my words trickled out, slow and cold. “What do you think happens if we let her go, Twil? You think Felicity will be able to help Eevee if we’re all in a police station holding cell? You think we’ll be able to find Raine?”

The ... detective here can ruin everything.”

Twil grit her teeth and cast about. “Yeah but, we don’t have to murder her.”

“Yes, listen to her,” Nicole said, wetting her lips again and speaking fast this time. “I understand you’re panicked, you’re in a corner, you’ve got this personal crisis going on – but the last thing you want on your hands is a dead police officer. I wasn’t lying about bodies being hard to hide, it’s exceptionally difficult. Plus you’d have to find my car and get rid of it, and there’s a paper trail at the station that points to this house. If I go missing, my colleagues start following leads.”

“We already found your car,” I said, looking down and picking at the threadbare carpet. “Why am I even talking to you?”

Nicole swallowed, loudly. “Look, Heather, you seem like a reasonable person, and you too, Twil, and um ... ” Nicole’s eyes went over my shoulder.

“I’m a secret,” Lozzie said.

“Okay. Look, nobody here has to get arrested, not today, not tomorrow, not a year from now. None of this has to go anywhere. I can pretend I didn’t see anything.” She managed to pull a smile, shaking beneath the surface. “If I’ve got a choice between being a bent copper or ending up in a landfill, I’ll choose being a bent copper every time. I’m not a superhero, yeah? I’m just doing my job here. I’d like to go home at the end of the day.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and hunched over, curling up around the dull ache in my stomach muscles and the tighter ache in my heart; I had to do this, but I couldn’t.

Homicide in self-defence, or murdering a real monster in Alexander Lilburne, or even killing those who would send me back to the Eye, those I could do. Threatening Catherine Gillespie with death, a woman who deserved at least life in prison, that cost me no sleep. For those things I could find justification somewhere in my messed-up little heart.

This? A bystander was pleading for her life. She had nothing to do with those who wished me ill, no responsibility for anything that had ever happened to me. She spoke perfect sense, but I was going to send her Outside, to die alone and unmarked in an alien place.

"You're too much of a risk," I hissed. "It's impossible. Twil, Lozzie, please leave the ... the room ... Shut the door. I-I can't-"

Lozzie fell on me like a blanket fresh from the tumble dryer. "Oh Heather, no, no no," she whispered. "No."

I opened my eyes and found a very distraught Lozzie staring back at me. She'd fallen to her knees and wrapped me in a hug, biting her bottom lip, big eyes filled with wild horror.

"I don't want you to watch this," I said.

"No! Heather, no!" She shook her head emphatically, wispy blonde hair flying everywhere. "What's gotten into your head? We have to get it back out!"

"Lozzie, I have to get rid of her. She's-" I glanced at Nicole, who had gone very still indeed. "She's dangerous. She'll-"

"Dangerparty is our default setting. I'm dangerous, you're dangerous. We can all be dangerous together."

"You don't understand." I felt so distant, so isolated. Even Lozzie didn't get it, wasn't able to shoulder the responsibility. "I'm sorry, but sometimes ... we have to ... do things that aren't right, because-"

"I've heard all that before! That's what *he* used to say."

My mind hit a brick wall, from sixty miles an hour to nothing in the blink of an eye. "Your ... your brother?"

"He had good intentions too. At first." Lozzie sniffed back tears, nodding and biting her lip.

I shook my head, still clinging to this false resolve. "You're the one who asked me to-" I couldn't finish. You're the one who asked me to kill your brother, Lozzie. You began this, didn't you?

"I'm sorry," she squeaked. "You shouldn't do it when there's other ways?"

Not an instruction or a demand, not even a suggestion. A halting, confused question from a girl who didn't live in this reality ninety-five percent of the time, and it made more sense than all my justifications. One should probably not kill people, if there's any other way.

Drawing back from the edge was harder than approaching it. I'd convinced myself that being a leader meant making tough choices, just like Raine, but I'd gotten it all wrong. All turned around.

I hiccuped once, and hugged Lozzie back.

"Since when are you my moral compass?" I said, sniffing back tears of my own and half-laughing. Lozzie sobbed once into my shoulder, little hands pressing at my back. "I'm meant to be the normal one around here."

When Lozzie and I finally disentangled ourselves from each other – wiping our eyes and holding hands for a fleeting moment – I knew we'd shredded any credibility in my threat to Nicole's life.

But I didn't care.

The detective watched us warily, as I turned back to her. Anybody else would have been stupid enough to say something at that point, a 'so, not going to kill me now?' or 'thank you, Lozzie', or some other inane, gloating statement that mistook real moral fibre for weakness. But Nicole swallowed, dipped her head in a nod, and waited.

This was the actual tough choice.

"We're going to do this the hard way," I said, and saying it felt so much easier. "I'm sorry, in advance, for what I'm about to do to you."

"Aversion therapy," Lozzie stage-whispered, and flipped up the hood on her poncho, the attached floppy rabbit ears falling down over her face.

"Hey," Nicole said. "If you need me to believe that you're all werewolves and wizards or whatever, that's fine, we can work with that. That's somewhere to start. I'll- I can try to accept that, if that's what you need."

I sighed at her and shook my head. "Humouring us isn't enough. If you've never been exposed to the supernatural, then your mind always finds a way to explain what you've experienced. Unless it's extreme enough or sustained enough to break you, make you accept it or go mad. And then you're in, and you can never really go back."

Nicole's eyes tightened with obvious scepticism. "You're telling me not to trust my own senses? Forgive me, but that's a classic

manipulative trick.”

“No, I’m saying the opposite. You’ve ignored your senses twice this morning, and you didn’t even notice yourself doing it. Twil could hold you down – how? She’s not exactly heavily muscled.”

“Ey,” Twil muttered a complaint.

“She’s a slender teenage girl, you’re a veteran police officer,” I continued as Nicole looked Twil up and down. “How’d she do that? And you’ve seen Zheng. She’s seven feet tall. Seven feet.”

Nicole sucked on her teeth. “So what, you’re going to keep me tied up until I develop Stockholm Syndrome, believe the things you believe?”

I sighed, harsher this time. “No, I need you to accept it now, because we’re in the middle of multiple crises.”

“Hold up, hold up,” Twil interrupted, a nasty grin at the corners of her mouth. She cracked her knuckles. “You know what? This looks like a job for me.”

“We need to do this gently, Twil, she could lose her mind.”

“She’ll be fiiiiine,” Lozzie said, peering out from behind those cloth rabbit ears. “Fuz-zy, fuz-zy,” she began chanting, pounding the floor with her fists.

“Yeah, don’t worry big H. I’ve got this one.” Twil stepped up as if on a stage, raising her chin, cracking a nasty smirk. “Plus, I’ve always wanted to do this. Bet you’ve seen a lot of shit, right, copper? Dead bodies and stuff? Gunshot wounds? Car crashes?”

Nicole looked to me and Lozzie for help as Twil rolled her shoulders and took a deep breath. “... yes? I’ve seen my share. Where is this going?”

“Somewhere bad,” I warned her. “Brace yourself.”

“Fuz-zy, fuz-zy, fuz-zy!”

“I’d keep your eyes on the prize if I were you, copper.” Twil pointed at herself with a thumb. “On the count of three – three!”

Twil showed no mercy. Human to full-on werewolf in a heartbeat, no partial transformation and no holding back. She summoned her ghostly flesh into full solidity, wrapped it around her own skin and

clothes like a collapsing whirlpool in fast forward. Five-foot-two of wolf-girl bristled with fur and claw, amber eyes flashing as she stretched jaw wide on a maw full of fangs. Lozzie jerked and yipped. Even I flinched, and I was far too exhausted to be frightened of what I'd seen before.

Nicole started screaming.

She tried to shove herself away from the sudden monstrosity in the middle of the room, kicking out with her bound feet, hands raised to ward off the impossible, eyes wide and bulging in incomprehension. She saw, completely and without a filter, while the fear overrode her conscious mind.

Lozzie decided this was the perfect moment to bounce back to her feet and launch herself at Twil in a flying tackle-hug that landed like a wrecking ball. Her hooded head hit Twil in the ribcage and nearly sent both of them flying.

"Oof!" went Twil. Gently but firmly she peeled Lozzie off and held her at arm's length. A wolf and a rabbit, how appropriate. "What-"

"Touch fluffy touch fluffy let me let me!" Lozzie whined. "Please please please!"

"Um," Twil growled, wolf snout twisted in disbelief. Nicole was staring now, panting hard, and flinched like a struck dog when Twil glanced her way again. "Um, oops?"

"No, this is good," I said. "This is what we need. Nicole, detective, what do you see? Say it out loud."

Nicole managed a shake of her head, but that was all, paralysed and goggle-eyed.

"Twil hug me, hug me like that pleeeeeease!" Lozzie whined again.

"You may want to turn it off now," I said.

Twil growled again and flicked her head back – back to human. The summoned spirit-flesh dissolved in an instant, leaving behind a slightly flustered Twil instead.

Lozzie pouted and gave up trying to bundle herself into Twil. "Aww."

Nicole couldn't stop staring. She was plastered with cold sweat, face turned ashen white, blinking rapidly as her mind tried to reboot.

Her mouth worked as if trying to speak, but no sound came out, shaking her head back and forth in a gesture of hopeless repeating denial.

“Detective? Nicole?” I tried, but she just kept shaking her head. “Twil, are you certain nobody’s ever seen you like that in public before?”

She shrugged. “Like, from a distance. They probably just assume I’m a big dog or something.”

“You’re so fuzzy holy shit please,” Lozzie said. “Please please please I want.”

“I’m not a petting zoo,” Twil told her.

“You could be!”

“What-” Nicole managed, and we all looked at her. She kept trying to look away from Twil, her head moving as if to make eye contact with me, but her eyeballs refused to obey, locked onto this source of contextless threat. “What- what- what was that?”

“A werewolf,” I said.

The wrong thing to say, apparently. The word ‘werewolf’ acted as a catalyst. With an effort of supreme willpower, Nicole pulled herself back together; the on-the-job detective mask slid back down like a steel wall behind her eyes, and she finally managed to look at me.

“There’s no such thing as werewolves,” she said.

“You just saw one!” Twil said, outraged.

“Yes, I know it’s completely ridiculous,” I said. “I reacted in much the same way, and I already knew about magic and monsters. *Werewolves* are just silly, right?”

“Yes!” Nicole snapped. “Yes they are.”

“Oi, I’m standing right here.” Twil put her hands on her hips.

Nicole flinched as she looked at Twil again, as if expecting to see something other than a mildly grumpy teenage girl. “That was a trick,” she said. “It had to be. With mirrors, or ... a ... a projector. You people are a cult and you’re trying to convert me.”

“Oh thanks, great. Fuck you too,” Twil told her.

“Detective,” I said. “You’re denying the evidence of your own senses.”

Nicole stared at me for a good five seconds, then back at Twil. She shook her head. “Werewolves don’t exist.”

“God dammit,” I whispered.

“Fuckin’ do it again if you need,” Twil huffed.

“No! No, thank you, no.” Nicole swallowed hard and took a deep breath. Twil snorted with derision. “That couldn’t have been real, that wasn’t real. Werewolves don’t exist. You are not a werewolf, you’re a con artist, you-”

Twil transformed again.

No warning this time, fake countdown or otherwise, though she was prepared for Lozzie, catching the smaller girl’s flying hug in mid-leap with one arm. Nicole started screaming her head off – and increased in volume when Twil reached for her. Failing, kicking with her bound legs, one mis-aimed strike thwacked Twil full in the snout. The werewolf jerked back, growling.

“Twil, stop, it,” I snapped. “The neighbours are going to hear her.”

Twil growled again – but dismissed her transformation, the flesh leaving her in slow wisps of pneuma-somatic matter. She raked her fingers through her curls and rubbed at her face where Nicole’s shoe had connected with her jaw. “Ow, shit.”

“Don’t do that again!” the detective shrieked at her.

“Don’t do what, huh?” Twil sneered. “Thought I wasn’t real.”

“You’re so *fluffy*,” Lozzie said. “Heather, isn’t she so fluffy?”

“She can be,” I admitted.

“That was *not real*,” Nicole said. “You are- f-fucking with me. With my head, somehow. Let me go. Let me go!” She shouted, wild-eyed, pulling against her bonds. Her hair was in increasing disarray, strands of blonde escaping the tight, ordered bun. “Look, you’ve successfully frightened me, well done. I won’t tell anybody, I’ll- I’ll falsify my travel reports for the day. I don’t care, just don’t- don’t do that again! I don’t care.”

“Aw come on, she’s so cuddly and fluffy?” Lozzie blinked at her.

“Don’t you wanna touch too?”

“Lozzie, I do adore you,” I said. “But your standard for what’s frightening is a little ... unique.”

“Mmmmm.” Lozzie pouted.

“It’s not like I was gonna bite you,” Twil grumbled.

“Let me go. Okay?” Nicole repeated. “You’ve made your point, okay?”

“Twil, maybe wait in the front room for a minute,” I said.

“What? But I didn’t do-”

“Please?”

Twil huffed and shook her head, but made the compromise of stomping over to stand in the doorway with her arms crossed. Nicole watched her, visibly relaxing as Twil put distance between them.

“Nicole. Detective?” I said, as hard I could currently muster, trying to get her to look at me. “Do you believe me now?”

She hesitated, trying to say no, unwilling to say yes. “You could be ... could be doing something to me. I’m drugged. Or ... ”

I sighed and put my face in my hands, then took a deep breath and sat up again, straight as I could with all my aches and pains. I’d made my decision and we had to keep going. “Lozzie, would you do me a really big favour, please? I’m sorry to ask, but I’m too fragile and exhausted to do it myself right now, I had to sort of overuse things earlier.”

“Mmm?” Lozzie took her hood’s bunny ears in her hands and flapped them at me. “Anything.”

“Would you send an object Outside in front of our guest here? You can use a spoon from the kitchen, or something. It doesn’t matter what, nothing important though, obviously.”

“Hmm? Mmm?” Lozzie made a sound like a confused bird.

“I’m sorry, I know- ... well, actually, I don’t know. It always seems easier for you.”

“What are you two talking about?” Nicole demanded. “Send what

outside where?”

“I can’t do that.” Lozzie shook her head.

I blinked at her, lost for a second. “ ... I ... I’m sorry, what?”

“I mean, I can’t do *that*. I can’t move *stuff*. You can, Heather?”

“ ... y-yes?” I frowned at her, confusion increasing. Was I losing my mind? “You can’t?”

“No! Only people, and the *kami* of course, but they’re like people too. Dead matter doesn’t go anywhere, unless I’m holding it when I go!” She smiled at me as if this was the coolest thing in the world. “Clothes come with people, and stuff in my pockets, and I’ve never figured out why that is – but just stuff? Nope! You can do that, Heather? Serious?”

“Yes ... yes I can. We came to this by different ways, didn’t we?” I muttered to myself, no time to analyse this now. Lozzie smiled and nodded. “I suppose I’ll have to do it myself then.”

“Sorry,” Lozzie said, and she did genuinely look it.

“That’s okay, it’s not your fault you’re less messed up than I am. Twil, would you please fetch me something expendable?”

“Right you are, boss,” Twil muttered under her breath, more sarcastic than serious, and stomped off to the kitchen.

She returned a few moments later with a cardboard tube from a roll of paper towels – which I suspected she’d fished out of the bin – and a grimace on her face.

“ ... Twil? What’s wrong?” I asked as she handed me the cardboard tube.

“Your big friend is making a right mess in there. Like ... never mind.”

My stomach lurched. “She’s not eating the corpses, is she?”

“What?!” Nicole almost exploded.

“Ugh, no, fucking hell,” Twil said. “Is that a thing she does?”

“Yes, actually. I think. To be fair, she only did it once, and I think it was a heat of the moment thing. Maybe.”

“Maybe? Oh great, wonderful.”

Nicole looked more worried than when she'd thought I was going to kill her. I cleared my throat and held up the cardboard tube.

“Forget about that, please, detective. I'm going to make this vanish.”

“Oh yeah? And then pull rabbits out of a hat?”

“I'm already out!” Lozzie chirped, fiddling with her floppy rabbit ears again. “And out.”

“It's not stage magic,” I said, exasperated and at the end of my patience. “I don't know any stage magic. Even if I did, look at me, look how tired I am. Where exactly can I make this tube vanish to? Up my backside? I'm wearing short sleeves, there's nowhere for it to go. I'm not going to misdirect you, or make you look away, or pull any trick at all. I'm going to use something called hyperdimensional mathematics, to rewrite part of reality. I don't understand it all myself, I just know I can do it. It's a long story. Now watch.”

“ ... I'm watching.” Nicole frowned.

The brainmath came rough and jagged, like walking on sore muscles and skinned feet; I was running on empty, only just able to do something this simple. A droplet of blood ran from my nose as I struggled to fit the pieces of the equation into place. A second was too long, two were torture, and three set my brain on fire.

Out.

The tube vanished. I doubled up around my roiling stomach and let out a whine.

Lozzie didn't know what to do. She came to my side but her hands fluttered around, uncertain and confused by my pain. Slowly, panting through my teeth, I held onto to contents of my stomach, and sat up.

“Where ... ” Nicole managed, staring at me, at my empty hands.

“No. No.”

“I sent it Outside. Outside our reality. Beyond, into another dimension. Call it what you will. I can do it to anything, if I'm prepared to endure considerable pain.”

In one of the most fascinating moments of human observation in my

life, I actually saw the precise moment Nicole's mind buckled.

A survival strategy, that's what it was, not open-mindedness or a tendency to believe in the occult. Until now, Miss Webb had been a straight-laced, 21st century woman, a child of the enlightenment, the scientific method, technology, and very normal, sensible, four-dimensional maths.

But her primal lizard-brain knew only that she was in danger, and it would do anything to survive. Eventually, with enough evidence, it shouted down her ossified frontal lobe, and she accepted the impossible.

A subtle change crossed her face, falling through incomprehension and denial until landing like a burst melon in plain fear and wonder. The evidence of her senses finally rewrote some fundamental element that kept her grounded in normal reality. If she'd been free, I have no doubt she'd have found some way to rationalise everything she'd seen – a clever sleight of hand, a stress-induced hallucination, drugs and torture. She'd have forgotten us in a month or a year, and gone back to her life. But I trapped her here forever, with us.

I was ready for her to break down, perhaps weep, maybe go into a kind of shock. This was always a gamble, one she might lose.

Nicole Webb was made of sterner stuff than that. The fear and wonder hardened into outrage, and she stared at me like I was responsible. Which in a way, I was.

"I fucking hate Harry Potter," she spat.

Twil started laughing between attempts to say 'what?'. Lozzie stuck her finger in her mouth and made a vomiting noise.

I blinked at Nicole. "... okay?"

"You're a wizard? A witch, whatever. Fuck you. Don't you tell me I'm living in a stupid series of children's books. Absolutely fucking not. Argh." She spat a noise of pure frustration. "I can't fucking stand this. You- fuck you. And you, fucking *werewolf*, stop laughing, it's not funny!"

And with that, she was off to the races. Nicole spat and ranted, angry in a way I'd never seen a person angry before, an adult's tantrum of pure disgust, directed not at us but at the whole world.

Twice she used her bound hands to punch herself in the leg, and several times kicked at the floor, gathering speed as she heaped insults on children's books about magic schools and – I quote – their 'vulture, class-traitor, illiterate authors'. Her furious tirade was surprisingly coherent, though she repeated the same points several times once she began to run out of steam.

We all deal with supernatural revelation in different ways, I suppose. Not everybody has a missing twin and survivor's guilt.

"Alright then, Miss wizard," Nicole eventually hissed. "You're telling me I don't need to account for the two bodies in your kitchen, or whatever else you've done, because you've got your own ... I don't know, magical police? Your own authorities are going to deal with this? I've blundered into your world, and ... and what?"

Lozzie rolled her eyes so hard I swear she was going to dislocate her spine.

"Um, no, not exactly," I managed.

Twil snorted. "You think somebody's like, in charge? Good luck."

"What does that mean?" Nicole demanded. "What the hell does that mean?"

"There's no ... council of mages," I said, shrugging, trying to keep my voice calm and collected, casting my mind back through the months to when Evelyn had conducted this exact same conversation with me, albeit in far more relaxed circumstances. "There's no secret world, no secret power structures except a few cults worshipping things they shouldn't. There's mages, a few, as far as I know. Sorry to use the analogy, but there's no 'Ministry of magic'. Nobody's in charge. Nobody even knows much. There's just people."

"... that's it?" Nicole asked, squinting with indignant frustration.

"That's it."

Her anger finally began to subside. She stared in silence at a point on the wall, taking deep breaths and shaking her head in disgust, slowly pulling herself back together. I tried to look sympathetic.

"I know what it's like," I said. "At least you're getting it all at once, and you're an adult. I was a child."

She sighed heavily, still shaking her head. "So, don't tell me you lot are busy saving the world, and I've held you up?"

"Uh, no, not that either. We're not really important."

"You're wizards!" She almost blew up at me again, exasperated disbelief on her face. "How can you not be important? That's ridiculous."

I shrugged. "Because we're not. I'm here, involved, because my twin was kidnapped by a ... something from Outside. It's a long story, and you don't care. But no, we could all vanish tomorrow, and the world would go on much the same without us."

Nicole let out one sad laugh and pulled a self-pitying smile – a real smile, sardonic and grim, not the easy fake smile from earlier, not the detective's smile. "Just my luck. Bunch'a nobodies, hey? Well, that's a start, we've got that in common."

"Nobody's important unless they're loaded," Lozzie said. "Loads a money makes you big."

"She's got her head on straight." Nicole nodded at Lozzie, and got a beaming smile in reply.

"You've got no idea," I muttered.

"Great. So what happens to me now?" Nicole asked. "What am I supposed to do? I can hardly call those bodies in if ... I dunno, you'll turn all the responding officers into frogs or some shit."

"I ... hadn't actually thought this far," I said. "I didn't expect this to work. Why were you here in the first place? Was it the gun shots last night?"

"Gun shots?" Nicole started laughing, the edge of hysteria in her voice. "Fucking hell, thanks for that freebie. They were gun shots then, for real? Was that how those two poor fuckers in the kitchen died?"

"No, I already told you, it was a servitor – which really does exist, yes. The gun shots, well, the thing that got shot got up again, and it's not in this dimension anymore."

"Okay, yeah, right, I forgot the whole teleported to dimension X part." She rolled her eyes. "And yeah, the gun shots led me here, but that wasn't why I knocked on your door this morning."

I frowned at her, confused. "I'm sorry?"

"A neighbour of yours two streets over put in a noise complaint last night," she began, smiling with ironic detachment. "Said they might have heard gun shots, but this is a nice part of Sharrowford. Nobody's going to send out a squad car out here at five in the morning because some old dear heard a car backfire. But your address, this address? It goes in the system, along with a half-dozen others the noise could have come from. And, what do you know? Ding!" She held up a finger, bound hands together. "It gets flagged, because the address is in some stupid file I've got, and this morning that noise complaint is on my desk. I think, bugger it, I wanna stretch my legs. Seems like a good excuse to swing by and see who really lives in that old house. Best case it's squatters, and I get a free baggie of weed. Worst case, it's empty. But maybe, just maybe, the occupant owns the house, and I get a lead."

"A lead?" I asked, my mind racing through the dozen possible crimes any of us might have committed over the last six months. "On what?"

"Property tax fraud."

"... what?"

Nicole laughed again, self-pitying and defeated. "You thought I was homicide? For years, yeah, I was. But I'm a major screw-up of a human being, let alone a detective. I'm in a financial crimes unit. A unit that consists of me and two even worse screw-ups, in an office the size of a cupboard, with no real budget, to keep us out of the way. Most of my days I get to spend at a desk while two alcoholic old men wait to collect their pensions. A punishment detail. I haven't done any real police work in almost five years." Her voice turned bitter as she spoke, she couldn't hold it back. "First time I try, hey," she gestured at us with her bound hands. "Look what I find. Fucking *wizards*."

We all stared at her. Even Lozzie was wrong-footed.

"Property tax fraud," I echoed.

"Yeah. This address? Part of a tax fraud scheme, a really old one, going back fifty, sixty odd years. Small enough to avoid notice, big enough to be dangerous to poke. That's why I'm here."

"I ... I'm sorry. If it's ... I mean ... I can give you contact details for

the man who actually owns the house. I think.”

“Oh yeah, is he a wizard too?”

“No, actually. He’s a lawyer, works in London. My friend, his daughter, she’s upstairs right now in a sort of magical coma. We’ve called somebody to help her.”

“Lawyers, great.” Nicole rolled her eyes. “Practically just as bad.”

“So.” I swallowed, gathered myself. “Is it safe for us to untie you now?”

Nicole gave me a thoroughly defeated look. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean you believe us, what we are, what we’re involved in? The bodies in the kitchen, they’re cultists, and they came here to kill us or kidnap us. That ... reporting everything you’ve seen would be a disaster, for us, for you? That I can let you go, without ... well.”

“I believe what I’ve seen. She’s a werewolf,” Nicole glanced at Twil, wary and frowning. “And you’re a wizard, or whatever, and you can make things vanish with your mind. You ever use that trick on a person?”

“ ... in self defence.”

Nicole looked me up and down, all five foot nothing of me hunched over my aching stomach, my scrawny limbs and messy hair and bloodshot eyes, wrapped in Raine’s unwashed baggy clothes. She nodded. “Yeah, I bet,” she murmured. “Is that what you’ll do to me as well, if I try to put cuffs on you?”

I stared back, reluctant to answer, but I knew what I had to say. “I could make you vanish too, yes. Send you Outside to some alien dimension you’ll never return from. You’d die of hunger or thirst, or get eaten by something unspeakable. If we let you go and you call this in, I’ll vanish the responding officers, the car they put me in, the cell door, the whole bloody police station if I have to. Because my lover has been kidnapped by a cult, a real one, that worships something from Outside, and nothing is going to stop me from finding her. Not the cultists, not exhaustion, not you or the rest of the normal world.”

“Me too,” Lozzie stage-whispered.

Nicole shook her head. “You’re telling me a young woman’s been kidnapped by religious nut jobs, and the police aren’t supposed to get involved?”

I pulled a face. “Yes, I know that sounds stupid.”

“It does. Look, even if I believe everything you’ve told me, there’s still the matter of two corpses to deal with. If I don’t report what I’ve seen, if I lie, and bits of hair and flesh turn up in your drainpipes three months from now, I will get shat on from a very great height. I wasn’t lying when I said bodies are hard to dispose of, unless you ... can ... ” she trailed off, blinking at me, then let out an exasperated sigh. “You can.”

I pulled an apologetic smile. “Yes, exactly.”

“Poof!” Lozzie smiled and spread her hands like a stage magician concluding a trick. “And the evidence is gone!”

= =

Two dead bodies, a mess of cleaning supplies, bin bags full of entire rolls worth of paper towels and soiled rags, two buckets of pink-tinted grimy water – and Zheng. The kitchen looked like a bomb had hit it.

Blood still stained the floor tiles from where Twil and Kimberly had dragged the corpses from the sitting room. The less said about those the better. I tried not to look at the lumpy humanoid shapes laid out on an old bit of tarpaulin and hastily wrapped up with bin bags. The rest of the floor was littered with the entire contents of the cupboard under the sink, bright pink and yellow cleaning products everywhere, along with a trio of sponges that looked like they’d last been used on a car that had survived a fire. A sad pair of rubber gloves hung over the side of the sink, flanked by some exhausted brillo pads, and some kind of electric scrubbing brush that I’m pretty sure was broken before any of us were born. Everything stank of blood and bleach.

Zheng had her boots up on the table.

I couldn’t summon any words for the mess, let alone ask Zheng to put her feet down.

“Heather, it’ll be alright,” Twil said, grimacing. “We’re like, halfway through cleaning up.”

“Okay. Okay?” I said. “Okay. Sure. Okay. Yes.”

Nicole, still massaging her wrists where Twil had removed her bonds, stared at the giant zombie with an impressively stoic expression. Zheng stared back, calm and slow, like a sated jungle cat.

Sated she better be, because she’d emptied our fridge of every last scrap of animal protein. Before her on the table, like a mound of offerings to some pagan god, lay three empty sandwich meat packets, the wrapping from a trio of raw chicken breasts, and the remains of a block of cheese. She’d even devoured the week-old chili from the bottom of the fridge, which if she’d been human, would have struck her dead with food poisoning.

Twil picked up a long grey coat from the back of a chair, and held it out to Nicole. “Everything’s back in the pockets.” Her eyes flickered to me. “Your phone too.”

“It’ll be fine,” I repeated for the fifth time since I’d asked Twil to untie the detective, though I felt less sure after seeing the kitchen. “We have an understanding now.”

“Yeah, yeah, right,” Twil murmured.

“So what are you supposed to be, then?” Nicole finally asked Zheng.

Zheng grinned, slowly, as if trying to reveal each and every perfect razor tooth in turn. “A nightmare.”

“... fair enough.” Nicole sighed and took her coat from Twil, shrugging it on and checking her pockets. She was made of sterner stuff than I, if she could ignore Zheng. Then again, she probably had a lot of experience in concealing when she felt intimidated.

“It’s probably best to ignore each other right now, you two,” I said, suppressing a sigh of my own. “Zheng, like I said, we’ve come to an understanding.”

“I know, shaman. I was listening.”

“Of course you were. I’m sorry to have to ask this, but you didn’t ... you weren’t ...” I gestured awkwardly at the corpses in the corner.

Zheng raised an eyebrow and managed to look disgusted. A new one for her. “Shaman.”

“I- I needed to ask, to be sure.”

“The dead monkeys are spoiling with their own shit and gut bacteria. No.”

“You know, I think I agree with the uh, whatever the hell she is,” Nicole said, eyeing Zheng. “Can we crack on with this? The less time we spend in a room with corpses, the better for all of us, on every level – legal, medical, and gastronomic.”

Her dignity restored and standing on her own two feet once more, Nicole Webb looked every bit a television police detective, albeit after some minor pre-watershed escapade, dangerous but still suitable for younger viewers. Tight and serious around the eyes, with several strands of hair having escaped her blonde bun, and a small bruise forming on her cheek from where Twil had done some damage during their initial meeting.

The long grey coat over the dark suit and open top button of her shirt lent her an air of both authority and distance. She wore her role in society like armour, and she'd let us in on the secret that it was rusted on the inside.

“Please!” Lozzie agreed, peeking around the kitchen doorway from front room. “The sooner the better!”

I turned to her and she gave me a very uncertain smile.

“Lozzie, are you sure you're ... ” I started softly, then had to self-edit. “Doing alright?”

“Mhmm! It's okay, I'm not going anywhere, promise promise,” Lozzie said, seeing right through to my real question. “Just don't want to see, don't want to see the dead people.”

“Alright, well, we'll be as quick as we can, okay?”

“Then it's time for more cleaning!” she chirped. I nodded and turned back to the kitchen, and tried my best to believe Lozzie would still be in this reality when I wanted to see her.

“So how does this work?” Nicole asked me. She'd stepped over to the corpses, frowning down at them through the veil of bin bags, her hands in her coat pockets. “You lay hands on them and then they're just gone?”

“Basically, yes. At least that's what you'll see.”

“Mind if I take a look at them first?”

“Why?” Twil demanded, doing an exceptionally poor job of hiding her suspicion.

“Seriously?” Nicole shrugged. “In case I ever come across this again. Just from what you’ve told me, you lot aren’t the only wizards or mages or bugbears running around Sharrowford. Maybe I want to see what the wounds from a ‘servitor’ look like. No objections?”

“I don’t mind, but-” I started.

“Yeah, I don’t like the sound of that,” Twil half-growled.

“Twil, stop,” I huffed. Twil blinked at me. “What I was trying to say, detective Webb, is that I don’t mind, but the servitor that killed those men is – as far as I know – the personal handiwork of a woman who’s been dead for a long time, the grandmother of the girl in a coma upstairs. You’re unlikely to find them anywhere else.”

“You think that, or you know that?” Nicole asked.

“I think.”

“Then I’d still like to have a look.” She rummaged around in one of her coat pockets and pulled out a wad of pale blue surgical gloves wrapped up with a rubber band, extracted one, and wriggled it on with a snap. “May I? With permission, Miss wizard?”

I nodded and looked away from the gruesome spectacle. Nicole squatted down to peel back the bin bags from the lumpy, misshapen forms that had once been two human beings. Twil puffed out a long sigh and looked away too, but Zheng craned her neck to watch. I knew I’d have to touch them soon enough, but the less I thought about that the better.

Nicole was quite silent for a good minute or so as she examined the corpses, except for the initial moment as she turned her head and audibly suppressed the urge to be sick. I didn’t blame her. Eventually she covered the bodies again, stood up, and snapped the surgical glove off her hand.

“Well. Well,” she said, holding the glove for a moment as if she didn’t know what to do with it. She’d gone pale and waxen.

“You can just put that in the bin. Gotta burn it all anyway,” Twil grunted.

“Yes. Quite.”

“Learn anything useful?” I asked.

Nicole opened her mouth, closed it again, and shook her head.

“Wild animal? Bear? Industrial accident? I’ve never seen anything like that. Like they were ... there’s no way I can see this ‘servitor’, right? You said it’s invisible?”

“I can see it, nobody else. There’s a magic circle we can use, but we’d need Evelyn to be awake.”

“Your friend upstairs?”

I nodded.

“Why you?” Nicole asked. “Why can you see these things? Why not the werewolf, or the other girl, Lozzie?”

“You don’t know my name, pig!” Lozzie called from the front room.

I sighed and gave Nicole a level stare. “Because I was abducted by an alien god when I was a little girl, and my mind was violated, changed somehow, and sometimes I suspect I’m not meant to exist in this reality anymore.”

“You are!” Lozzie called. I closed my eyes and thanked her in silence.

Nicole nodded several times. “Fair enough.”

Getting rid of the bodies was both easy and difficult. The brainmath was simple enough, the same thing I’d done so many times in so many different situations, complicated only by the presence of two separate objects to shunt Outside, a problem I solved by conceptualising it all – meat, tarpaulin, bin liners – as one single charnel mass.

The difficult part was getting onto my knees next to the corpses and touching them. Lumpy, hard, cold beneath the thin plastic. I’d seen corpses too many times in the last six months, but I’d never touched one before. The sensation made my gorge rise in my throat. I felt ready to be sick in a whole new way.

Teleporting such a large object finally broke my winning streak. I raced through the equation, slammed it into place with an impatience born of disgust and determination; the corpses vanished, cut-price death shroud and all, and I instantly doubled up and added to the mess all over the kitchen floor.

Sagging, half-choking, whining at the taste of blood and vomit in the back of my throat, I refused to collapse or pass out, hauling myself up to spit stomach acid into the sink.

Lozzie was there a second later, little feet pattering across the kitchen toward me, holding me up. Twil was there too, arm under my shoulders. I wretched and spat and wiped my mouth on the back of my hand.

“Good enough for you?” I croaked at Nicole.

“Think she’s suitably impressed, yeah,” Twil said. I managed to lever myself around to find Nicole staring at the spot the corpses had lain, now painted with the contents of my stomach.

“Are you going to look the other way now, detective?” I croaked again and cleared my throat, feeling like death and letting my friends take most of my weight.

“ ... bit more than a cardboard tube,” she muttered, then blinked and drew herself together, met my eyes. “Really messes you up too, huh?”

“How could you tell?”

Slowly, to my surprise, Nicole smirked. “No, I’m not going to look the other way. Ah- ah-” She held up both hands and flinched, as Twil bristled with implicit threat and Zheng tilted her head to watch. “No, no, wait, before you turn me into a frog or something. I’m not going to call this in, I won’t report anything I’ve seen, I realise it’s pointless. Plenty of DNA evidence, but nobody to link it to. I’ve got no bodies, they’re ... fucking gone,” she let out a single laugh. “But you’ve told me there’s a cult of crazy people operating in Sharrowford, in my city. They’ve kidnapped a young woman, your girlfriend. The least I can do is fudge a missing person’s report, but there’s got to be more. I could take this to my bosses, all the way up the chain, if there’s a plausible conspiracy to commit. What else have they done? Who are these people? Names, addresses. Anything you got, I can use.”

“They’ve done plenty, yeah,” Twil said, nodding. “This lot are nasty.”

“Kept me in a castle,” Lozzie said. Nicole frowned at her.

“Plenty of things, yes,” I echoed. “But you’re not going to convince

anybody of this. That's not how it works. I had to break you with the evidence of your senses before you even risked belief. You're not going to get through to your superiors, detective."

She smiled – the false easy smile she'd worn earlier. "You don't know that."

"Yes I do, I-"

"What if this sort of thing gets out? Blow the lid on it. You people could change the world, you-"

"Don't wake the sleeping tiger," Zheng purred. We all looked at her.

"Oh, I know this one!" Lozzie said.

"Mooncalf knows. Have you ever seen a mob, watchman?" She asked Nicole, speaking slow and quiet. "Peasants with fire and pikes? Reality doesn't penetrate your monkey brains until you're ready for it, but fear does. You, and I, and the shaman, we're all in a locked room with a tiger, and if we make enough noise the tiger will wake up, and instinct doesn't care for allegiance, or right, or words. The tiger doesn't know what we are and it doesn't care, but it will still eat us, and shit us out, and the shit will be very normal, and nobody will change the world." Zheng broke into a grin. "I lied. The tiger will eat you, but I am indigestible."

Zheng's tone – spoken from undoubted experience – worked on Nicole in a way the protests of three young women didn't. Nicole stared at her for a moment, then sighed deeply and nodded.

"Nobody believes until they're broken," I said. "And you got lucky. Most go mad, or spend the rest of their life trying to forget. Or so I'm told. That's how it works."

"Alright, so I can't go to my bosses. You can't call the police. But as of right now, I'm a bent copper whatever I do." Nicole looked at me, a strange fire behind her eyes. "So tell me everything anyway."

that which you cannot put down – 7.7

Supernatural revelation is one thing; it is another entirely to know in exhaustive detail just what sort of things are going bump in the night in one's hometown.

Terror, denial, paranoia, these are all extreme responses, yes, but they are also rational. Few of us are truly suited for this side of the world, and there is no shame in it. Some days – even when we're not in the middle of a crisis – I can barely deal with what I know, I want to curl up and hide, pretend none of it is real. Kimberly shouldn't be involved at all, jumping at shadows and skirting a nervous breakdown. Often I suspected Evelyn herself would be much happier if she'd never known the truth behind reality. We all deal with it differently.

Detective Sargent Nicole Webb took notes.

"Let me get this straight-" she said.

"Not gonna find much o' that round here," Lozzie stage-whispered.

"You're telling me these people," Nicole continued, gesturing in little circles with her pen. "This esoteric mystery cult, right here, 21st century Britain, normal people walking around in the Goddamn street – not only are they doing real magic, but they're after you. You specifically, Heather."

I sighed and felt an unaccountable urge to apologise. "Yes."

"Because – and stop me here if I've missed an essential building block – because you were abducted by a giant alien eyeball when you were nine, and it gave you magical powers?"

"That's not ... " I sighed again. "Yes."

"And now you seriously expect me to believe that you're not some kind of chosen one?" Nicole chuckled and shook her head. She leafed back through her notes. "Bugger me."

"The world doesn't work that way."

“Bloody well hope not.”

“If it did, I’d be considerably less afraid.”

Nicole glanced up from her notes, a tiny leather-bound pocketbook. She caught the look in my eyes and stopped laughing. “Right. Scared for your ... Raine, was it?”

I squinted at her. “Yes. You do have her name spelled right?”

“Course I have. Attention to detail, it’s part of the job.”

We’d decamped to the disused sitting room once more. Brainmath effort had left my knees weak and my stomach tender and my head throbbing. Had to sit down, and the soiled kitchen was no fit place for a civilised conversation, what with the bloodstained floor and Zheng sprawled all over like a sleepy sun-drenched jaguar. The food in her belly and the lack of anything to fight, kill, or eat seemed to have put her into a lethargic holding pattern. She’d waved off my invitation to join us, claiming she could hear perfectly well from where she sat.

Lozzie and Twil had helped me onto the old sofa, and somebody had the bright idea of handing me a bowl of cereal to calm my stomach, which worked admirably, the first real food I’d had in hours. Twil had returned to the kitchen to attempt more evidence removal, while I unfolded Sharrowford’s nighttime secrets, but she’d rejoined us again toward the end, brooding at Nicole from the doorway.

The detective had taken a seat on an ancient, half-collapsed armchair, and cracked jokes about how she needed “just the facts, ma’am”. One leg crossed over the other, back straight, chin high as she listened. She even let her hair down and re-tied it into a well-contained doubled-up pony-tail, the bun abandoned for now.

Somehow, she regained all her dignity, with no sign she’d been tied up in this same room not an hour ago.

“Yes, here she is,” Nicole confirmed. “Raine Philomena Haynes. I’ve got all the details I’ll need.”

“Read it back to me,” I croaked, then added, a touch too slow, “Please.”

Nicole raised an eyebrow, but did as I asked. “Twenty years old, twenty one in July. No known next of kin. Address is here, number

12 Barnslow drive, Sharrowford. She's a student at Sharrowford University, studying PPE. No full time employment, but she does take some shifts in the student union bar. Short brown hair, brown eyes, about five eleven in height, athletic build."

Hearing her reduced to such a cold description made me want to be sick. "That's Raine."

"Text me a picture of her and it'll save time. You've got my number now, right?"

"Right," I murmured.

Twil, lounging against the door frame in picture-perfect girl-gang thug mode, arms crossed and scowling, let out a sudden low growl.

Nicole visibly suppressed a flinch. "Wish you wouldn't do that, werewolf girl."

"Why?" Twil said. "Does it bother you?"

"I know you don't like me, and you want to intimidate me, and yes. For your information that is *very intimidating*."

"It is so not," Lozzie chirped from her spot on the floor. Despite the ample space next to me on the sofa, Lozzie had chosen to sit cross-legged on the floor at my feet, pointed at Nicole and watching her face intently the whole time we'd been talking. "If you can say it's scary, it's not really scary."

Nicole allowed herself a small, controlled laugh. "Interesting logic."

"It's not logic." Lozzie pulled a disgusted face. "Blergh."

Twil growled again.

"Drop it," I snapped at her, then sighed and forced myself to be reasonable. "She's helping us, Twil. I appreciate your feelings and your worries, but playing guard dog doesn't help right now."

"I don't like that she's keeping notes," Twil said through clenched teeth. "Notes on us."

Nicole shrugged with the notebook. "How else am I supposed to keep track of all this shit? Any detective worth their salt is going to be keeping notes, though I'll admit it's an unusual choice of subject matter."

Twil frowned at her, thinking. "What about like ... photographic memory?"

"That's only on telly," I said.

"What if somebody finds it and reads it?" Twil pressed.

"Nobody'd believe any of this anyway." Nicole shrugged. "Worst case, I take a spell in the loony bin."

"Don't say that!" Lozzie squeaked.

"Besides, it's not like I'm writing down your whole bloody cosmology, just things I can do something about." She tapped a page with the end of her pen. "This Sarika woman, for example, I'd very much like to have a word with her, though she's gonna be hard to pinpoint. That's not exactly an uncommon name for British Indian women. Hell, I know a couple of Sarikas at the station. Your description wasn't very remarkable either."

"My apologies," I croaked, but Nicole ignored the sarcasm.

"So, not much chance of finding her. Except ... " Nicole smiled thinly. "Except for mister Alexander Lilburne. Now that's a man with quite a footprint."

"A dead one," Lozzie said – then smiled to herself.

"Yes, but I might be able to trace some of his contacts, the old-fashioned way. If I can turn up Amy Stack – if that's her real name – I can lean on her. Somebody like that's gonna have plenty of priors. If this Sarika was close to Alexander, or had any regular business dealings with him, she might crop up, if we're lucky." Nicole caught my eye and shot me a wink.

I nodded, but privately kept a steady hand on any hope. Finding Raine was still my responsibility, my method had the best chance of working. A washed up ex-homicide detective and a missing person's report stood in distant third place. I wasn't going to turn her down though.

"Would be a lot easier if your friend here could remember more details." Nicole said, nodding toward Lozzie. "If Sarika was mister Lilburne's girlfriend, and Lauren here is his little sister, then-"

"I was in a castle!" Lozzie repeated for the third time this last hour. "And you don't know my name! Sstzzzz!" She made a zipping sound

and drew her fingers across her mouth.

Nicole raised her hands in surrender. "Alright, castle, yes, right. Bet you're glad to be out of there, Rapunzel."

None of us laughed. Lizzie stared at the detective as one would at a misbehaving cat. I sighed and rubbed at the bridge of my nose.

"Tough crowd, okay," Nicole continued, glancing back at her notes. "As for the rest of it, well, sounds like you've already shut down this conspiracy snatching homeless people off the streets. Wish you hadn't chased the ringleader out of the city, I could have her charged with something." She paused and sucked her teeth in thought. "Not like there'd be any evidence, I suppose. Does solve the mystery of the spike of missing persons cases over the last year, at least."

"Cold comfort for the dead," I croaked.

Nicole caught the chill in my eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, then thought better of it and nodded instead. "I know. I'm sorry. My bedside manner's shot to hell right now."

"Bedside manner?"

"Yeah, you know. How you talk to the public, victims, that sort of thing."

"... so you don't really care," I said. "You don't care that the cult were killing people? Because they didn't matter, because they were homeless?"

"Of course I care." She frowned at me. "Why else would I be sitting here asking you about it? Look, you work homicide for any number of years and you have to learn how to bottle your emotions up, or you'll lose it. Yeah, look at me, I'm hardly some beer-swilling institutional racist who thinks all the bums deserve what they get."

"ACAB," Lizzie whispered.

"Yeah, I hear you," Nicole grunted back.

Why had I goaded her? Why did I care what she thought? Detective Webb was not my friend. At best she was a potential ally, an asset; at the very least she was a diffused land mine. If she exited our lives and never came back, I'd count that as a good outcome.

"Detective ... no ..." I scowled at myself, trying to think past the

fog of exhaustion and too many hours strung out on adrenaline.
“Nicole, why do you care?”

“Why do I care about dead homeless people? I dunno, maybe because I’m not a monster?”

“No, why do you care about any of this? Thank you for agreeing to file the missing persons report for Raine, but why are you interested in the rest? Why do you care?”

Nicole blinked twice and me and laughed, this time not controlled at all. “You prove to me that magic exists, and you’re asking why I care?”

“Ah ... um ... hmm.” I cleared my throat. Twil snorted a laugh at my expense too. “Well, yes, but that’s not actually what I meant.”

“I know what you meant, I’m just messing with you,” Nicole said. “Look, I’ll spell it out, I’m interested because I haven’t done real police work in years. My life’s a dead end. I got fuck all to live for most days except good weed and MMOS.” Nicole managed to say that without looking the least bit pathetic, in her long coat and her mask of professionalism. “Was thinking about quitting the force this year actually, but I wouldn’t know what to do with myself. PI work I suppose, but I doubt I’ve got it in me to follow cheating spouses and do light industrial espionage.” She tapped the notebook. “This all seems pretty damn real to me.”

“Magic is not a good choice for a mid-life crisis. You really don’t want to be involved, not unless you have to.”

“Maybe I do have to.”

Twil growled. Nicole flinched again and shot her a look. “And what was that one for?”

“You think I’m scary?” Twil said. “You ain’t seen nothing.”

“You’ll get eaten,” Lizzie added.

“Maybe.” Nicole shot her a wink. Lizzie turned her nose up and made a ‘humph’ sound. “I’d like to think I’m smart enough not to walk into Glasswick tower, after what you’ve told me is up there, but I almost have to see it for myself.”

“No. No you don’t,” I said, sighing and resisting the urge to put my face in my hands. “This is exactly what I meant.”

“You’re gonna diii-iiie,” Lozzie sing-songed.

“Your Evee girl had the right idea about Glasswick tower,” Nicole said, dead serious. “Good instincts on her. Like to talk to her, once she’s up and about.”

Twil blinked at her. “ ... what right idea? You mean blow it up?”

Nicole nodded. “Demolition.”

I stared at Nicole for a moment as my mouth struggled to make sounds. “I ... you ... you can’t be serious.”

“Perfectly safe if you do it the right way.” A slightly mad smile crested Nicole’s face as she spoke, the detective’s mask dropping away before a moment of excitement. “Set up whatever you need to, cast your spells or whatever, then call in a fake bomb threat from a burner mobile phone, preferably from way over in another county, or drive to Scotland or something. Further away the better, bounce it through a VPN over the internet, call from another dimension. Can you do that?”

“No,” I grunted.

“Sorry. Anyway, a fake bomb threat gets the other tower nice and emptied out. You wait for the police cordon to go up, but before the bomb squad goes in. Not difficult, we don’t have local resources for that anymore, not since nearly twenty years back. So you wait until it’s clear, and then-” she clicked her fingers. “Boom.”

“ ... you’re a police officer. You’re not meant to instruct teenage girls how to blow up buildings.”

“Would that actually work?” Twil asked with baited breath. “Fuck that place.”

“This seems like a good exception to an otherwise sensible rule,” Nicole said to me. “Assuming you’re not lying, which is an interesting question, isn’t it?” She suddenly stopped, made a ‘hmm’ noise, and frowned at me in a speculative sort of way.

“What?” Twil bristled instantly, unfolding her arms.

“Yes, what do you mean?” A sinking feeling dragged the pit of my stomach. Had all our work been for nothing?

Nicole held up a hand to stall us. “No no, don’t get me wrong, I believe you about all the magic stuff. You’ve convinced me, you

don't have to call Gandalf over and turn me into a frog. You're all wizards, mages, werewolves, whatever. We all live in a very stupid universe, fine, I'll probably have a nervous breakdown about it this evening, but for practical purposes we're past that." She paused, raised her chin, and pointed at me with her pen. "But what if you're not the good guys?"

"Ooooh! Ooooh, she's clever!" Lozzie lit up, clapping her hands.

I realised exactly what Nicole was doing; the way she spoke almost compelled an answer. Was it her tone of her voice, or the way she made eye contact? Or something more subtle, some aspect of her body language I couldn't read? She'd built a rapport, and now out came the tripwires and traps, waiting for one of us to blunder into them. It took a considerable effort of will to keep my mouth shut.

Twil wasn't so resilient. "Fuck you, we're the ... we ... what? What do you even mean?"

"What if you're actually just as bad as this cult you've been telling me about?" Nicole's eyes moved to each of us in turn, watching our reactions. Lozzie stuck her tongue out. "Or they haven't done half the things you've said they have, and you're feeding me a pack of lies to get me on your side? Police detective stumbles into a situation, maybe you decide to make the best of it, present yourselves as the victims, and I can't verify anything. Hell, Heather, you've admitted to two cases of homicide, one murder and one manslaughter. I should be putting you in cuffs and taking you down the station."

I watched her carefully too, with a lump in my throat. She let her last statement stand for itself, a threat or a warning, I couldn't even tell – it worked as one, but not in the way she intended.

Earlier, when she'd been bound and gagged, I'd leapt straight to killing her as the only answer. Only Lozzie had made me see sense. A potential was awake in me, and I didn't like it.

"But you won't," I said – and hiccuped once.

Nicole raised both hands. "It's just a hypothetical. For the record, I do sort of trust you're telling the truth. For now."

"Hey!" Twil barked at her.

"Twil, down," I grumbled.

“So, other than you three, the girl upstairs in a ... ‘magical coma’,” Nicole pronounced those words very carefully. “And the giant in the kitchen, that leaves the girl hiding in back. Didn’t think I’d forget about her, did you?”

I frowned through the growing haze of exhaustion. “What?”

“The one with the cute hair. Short. Scared of everything. What was she, a ghost?”

“Leave Flowsie alone,” Lozzie chirped.

“Oh, Kimberly.” I took a deep breath and pulled myself together. “She’s a mage, but inexperienced. She was with the cult, and we ... well.”

“Rescued her,” Twil growled. Didn’t take an animal behaviour expert to read that warning note – back off, detective.

“ ... right,” Nicole said at length. “Rescued, I see.”

“She’s already told us about everything she was involved in,” I said. “Don’t make things harder for her. I’m reasonably sure she has some kind of PTSD.”

“What?” Twil blinked at me. “She does? Kim?”

Lozzie stuck her tongue out and rolled her eyes at Twil.

“What do you think?” I asked, and Twil grimaced.

“I’m trained in exactly this sort of thing,” Nicole said, her voice losing its edge. “They used to send me into interview rooms when we had a semi-cooperative witness, scared and difficult. Soft touch, you know? I might be able to get her to talk about things that you haven’t.”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “Not now. She’s working.”

Nicole acquiesced with a nod. “Maybe some other time.” She puffed out a breath, tucked her notebook back into her coat pocket, and stood. “Suppose it’s time I got back to work anyway. Sooner or later people are gonna be asking where I’ve got to.”

“Just like that?” Twil grunted. “You’re done?”

“Just like that.” Nicole shrugged. “You lot are fascinating people, I’m sure, but some of us have day jobs. That is unless you want an

extra pair of capable hands around, when this other wizard shows up to treat your friend upstairs?”

“We’ll be fine,” I grunted, and picked myself up as well. Lozzie bounced to her feet too. “If you want to help, look for Sarika. If not, if you want to go back to your life ... ” I ran out of words, stopped myself from saying ‘please don’t’, ‘please look for Raine’, help.

“Better than pushing papers,” she said.

“I like pushing papers.”

Nicole laughed. “Then you’re in the wrong vocation, aren’t you?”

As we watched Nicole leave, walking down the garden path and along Barnslow drive with a glance back over her shoulder, her long coat swishing around her legs, Twil growled a question half to me and half to herself. “What if she dobs us in anyway?”

“Then several of her colleagues will die, Outside,” I said. Twil blinked at me, brought up short.

“ ... wasn’t that like ... a bluff?”

“I don’t think so,” I murmured. “I don’t think it was.”

= =

Not quite the same as being ripped raw and bleeding from the Eye’s clutches, but Lozzie saved me a second time that morning. She found me nodding off on the toilet.

‘Found’ is perhaps putting it a bit too strongly. I doubt she strayed from the bathroom door the whole time. She probably heard me sit down, heard the sigh escape my lips, and the long silence as my prediction came to pass; as soon as I relaxed all the exhaustion of the last twelve hours came rushing up to overwhelm me.

“Heatherrr? Heatherrrr?”

I blinked awake to the sight of Lozzie sticking her head around the door, her poncho’s hood hanging down with her hair, elfin face peering at me.

“Mm!” I inhaled sharply and sat up from where I’d been drooping. “Loz- wha-” I blinked, bleary eyed, breathing too fast, feeling a hundred times worse than when I’d stepped into the bathroom. My head was throbbing and my chest felt fragile as thin porcelain. “ ...

Lozzie, I'm on the toilet."

"I know! I knocked."

I blinked at her – and put my knees together, self-conscious despite Lozzie's complete lack of embarrassment.

"Your eyes were closed," she said.

"Mmm. Mm, they were. Let me finish, okay? ... please?"

Lozzie pulled a pouting careful thought. "You need sugar," she announced, and promptly shut the door again. I heard her patter across the hall and tumble down the stairs in a staccato of footsteps.

Getting myself moving again was more of a challenge than I was up to. Part of me seriously advocated for more sleep right here.

I hadn't felt this drained in months, not since my last – and, God willing, final – bout of nightmares sent by the Eye, the grinding sleep deprivation that Raine and the Fractal had finally banished. Too much had happened since last evening, between the home invasion and Wonderland, Zheng and the long walk home, our uninvited guest and my unconscionable knee-jerk solution. I'd pushed brainmath out when I knew I shouldn't, and I'd finally run down all the adrenaline in my body. Now, I was ready to drop.

Couldn't even finish up properly in the bathroom. For a long time I just stared at the wall, a limbo state like being ill in bed, unable to move but unwilling to sleep. As I dried my hands, I put my forehead against the cool surface of the wall and closed my eyes. A moment later the bathroom door opened again, but I couldn't summon the energy to respond.

"... Heather?" Lozzie ventured a few seconds later.

"Mmhmm."

"Is that comfy?" she asked.

"No."

"Then you shouldn't do it." One of her hands found my head and gently patted my hair.

"Just a moment. Just rest for a moment. I'll be ... be fine."

"Mm-mmm, mm-mmmmmm," Lozzie chirped with agreement –

then took my hand in hers and gently peeled me away from the comfy sleeping spot on the cold hard wall. I grumbled, but allowed her to guide me the few paces out of the bathroom and across the creaking hallway floorboards, though I drew the line when she tried to pull me into my bedroom.

“No- no, I need to stay on my feet,” I said, blinking and trying to rouse myself. “This Felicity woman will be here soon, I can’t rest.”

“Yeah okay!” Lozzie lit up with her bouncy smile and held a bottle out to me. A neon-blue energy drink, one of Raine’s, the label proudly declaring how much caffeine it would dump into my bloodstream.

I hadn’t actually expected Lozzie to agree, let alone egg me on. I was so used to Raine seamlessly coaxing me into looking after myself, that for a moment I didn’t know what to do.

Then I accepted the bottle, twisted the cap off, and took a deep, glugging drink. Wiped my mouth on my sleeve. Burped. “ ... thank you. Can we get coffee? Coffee would be divine right now.”

Lozzie pulled a big wince. “Kitchen smells of blood.”

“I can make coffee. I’ll need to take a shower before all this is over anyway. You don’t have to follow if you can’t stand it.”

Lozzie nodded thankfully. “Keeping safe distance, hands inside, mind the gap.”

And make coffee I did, two mugs of it one after the other. The first lukewarm and downed without pleasure, the second hot, extra-strong, loaded with sugar and little regard for what this concentration of caffeine was doing for my health.

I had to keep my head together, deal with Felicity, and then find the reserves of energy to locate Raine. Shaving a few years off my life was a small price; if I’d never met Raine in the first place, I was certain I’d have been dead by thirty anyway.

Lozzie stayed safely in the front room while I brewed what she called my ‘go-faster bean-juice’, and I didn’t blame her. Twil was still trying to clean up the worst of the mess, but she’d obviously reached the end of her motivation. Getting blood off a slate floor was harder than it looked, let alone figuring out what to do with all the soiled sponges and rags, especially when one had to contend

with a seven-foot mouthy demon trying to bait you into accepting a duel.

"I am doing no such thing, shaman. It is not 'bait'."

"She called me a fucking poodle!" Twil said. "Overgrown bitch."

"Save for it for when we're not in the middle of a crisis, perhaps?" I said. "That's just a suggestion, by the way."

Zheng grumbled, stretched, and crossed her ankles on the table. At least she'd finally taken her boots off.

"Maybe help Twil clean up?" I shot back over my shoulder, as I carried my coffee into the front room, eager to get back to Lozzie.

That precipitated another sniping match between Twil and Zheng. If I'd been less tired and less focused, I probably would have intervened, but something in Zheng's body language told me she was only playing now, like an older cat toying with a younger one. She didn't ripple with the tension of real violence, all her musculature exhibited an economy of motion, a bone-deep relaxation.

Lucky her. Zheng didn't care, not really, not in the way we mere monkeys did.

When I stepped into the front room with my coffee, Lozzie was gone.

No mistaking her absence from the soft shadows, no place for her to hide even among the piles of old boxes, no wispy blonde hair or the light touch of her feet crossing the floorboards.

Her absence woke me more than any amount of caffeine.

"Loz- ..." My voice came out strangled. My heart stopped. My eyes felt wet. She'd gone. She'd gone again. I couldn't believe the pain, more sharp and sudden than I'd expected. "... Lozzie?"

"I'm up here!" A hand poked out from around the top of the stairs, and Lozzie came pattering down. "This house has the best windows but they're all in funny places, why is there one at the top of the stairs like that but none next to the front door? You can't see who's creeping up on you, it's really silly, it's like the house was built for things except living in. Which makes sense, right? It's a magician's house, isn't it? Heather? ... Heather?" Lozzie bobbed to a stop in

front of me, tilting her head back and forth and peering at my eyes.

“ ... I’m fine, I’m sorry. I ... I thought you’d gone ... somewhere.” I sniffed and wiped my eyes, and covered my emotional mistake by sipping my piping hot coffee and almost burning my tongue.

“I double promised! That’s twice as powerful as a regular promise. Haven’t you ever done a double promise before?”

“ ... no, as a matter of fact, I haven’t.”

I’d learnt Lozzie’s way of thinking, back in the dreams we’d shared, and allowed myself a moment of comfort in simply regarding her and recalling the sensation of those dream-land meetings. Carefree, uninhibited, unafraid. She looked back at me with her permanently sleepy gaze, her eye muscles never quite working right.

“Heather?”

I had so much to ask her. “I’m fine,” I lied. “I was just thinking about you.”

Another bouncy smile leapt onto her face. “I think about you a lot too!”

“You ... Lozzie,” I sighed at her. If we’d been in any other circumstances, I may have blushed, though I know she didn’t mean it in that way. “Thank you, I think? Oh, Lozzie, I have-”

“-so many questions-”

“-to ask-”

“-you!”

I blinked at her in shock as we finished each others sentences. Lozzie giggled and bit her lower lip, then flipped up the hood on her poncho and waggled the attached rabbit-ears.

“ ... I have to admit, that was a little bit creepy,” I managed.

“Noooo! No no no, not creepy!”

“You’re not in my head somehow, are you?”

“No! We just know each other really well, I think? Of course you have lots of questions, I would! I do! But you-”

“-want to-”

“-keep them practical-”

“-for now. Yes.” I clamped a hand to my mouth, as if trying to catch my own words. Lozzie giggled. “Uh- maybe, maybe don’t do that again. Please. That’s ... ”

“You did it that time, though,” she pointed out.

“I did? I did, yes. Okay, no, that’s not normal.”

“You mean Raine and you never finish each other’s sentences?”

“Sometimes. Not like that.”

“But you have sex together! She’s in your head more than I am. I’m just really, really good at not thinking, and that means I can think your thoughts too. There’s no magic to it, I promise!”

I gave up and took a long swig of coffee instead. Deciphering the inside of Lauren Lilburne’s head could wait; she was right, I needed to stick to practical questions – the dreams, where she’d been all these weeks, her contact with Maisie, all of that could wait.

“Lozzie, what was that thing you used to save me from the Eye? The ... *knight*?”

“Oooh, yes! That’s what I should call them!” Lozzie bounced on her toes and clapped her hands together in delight. “Didn’t it look cool? And it *worked*, which is the really important bit, yes. Doesn’t matter if something looks cool if it breaks ... but ... mmm,” Lozzie’s frowned in difficult thought. She bit her lip. “I suppose he did break, in the end.”

“He? ... he did?” I stammered, lost for a moment “It?”

“He.” Lozzie nodded. “Wasn’t it cool though?”

I tried to picture the shining apparition in armour, but it proved difficult. Mostly I remembered the Eye’s tentacles inside my mind, and that brought a wave of nausea up from my guts and made my heart rate spike, until I closed my eyes and forced it down. All I could recall was an impression of living steel animated by lightning. “I was a bit preoccupied at that particular moment.”

“You were, yes! I’ll wanna show you all the rest of them, but we can’t get to them right now.”

“There’s more of them? Wait, Lozzie, back up. You made that

thing?”

“Mmhmm!” She nodded, then shook her head. “I made the shells, but the *kami* inside want to help, because I’m me. I told you I’d get help, and it worked! One alone is sort of weak though, hmmm.” She bit her lower lip in thought, eyes far away for a moment.

My brain struggled to catch up. “You made ... knights, with pneuma-somatic creatures inside? To block out the Eye, in Wonderland?”

“Yeah!” Lizzie threw both arms in the air. “Praise me!”

“ ... I love you,” I said, an unbidden smile coming to my face, despite everything, despite my best friend in a coma and my lover missing and my world crumbling apart. Lizzie let out a little ‘oop!’ noise as I pulled her into a spontaneous hug, giggling and hugging me back. When I let go I had to wipe my eyes on my sleeve.

Couldn’t let myself think about Maisie right now. Couldn’t let myself hope. Focus.

“Can you ... ” I struggled, swallowed. “Can you bring one of those knights here? We need everything we can get to save Raine, every little ... no?”

Lizzie’s stage-perfect wince made her answer crystal clear. “They don’t work up here, they fall apart. Like a deep-sea fish brought up to the surface, they’ll just – plop,” she made a popping noise with her mouth and spread her hand out. “Sort of like me, you know?” She giggled, nervous and awkward all of a sudden. “And I can’t get Outside right now anyway, not with mister handsy whenever we try to leave.”

“Yes, yes that’s a good point.” I nodded, putting the issue of Lizzie’s Knights of the Spooky Table to one side for the moment. “What about ... what about Tenny? You said-”

“She’ll be fine!” Lizzie chirped. “She’ll be out of the cocoon in a couple of days, I think, but it might be longer because she stayed in larval form too long and absorbed waaaaay too much information. I don’t know what that does?”

She stopped – an actual question.

“Neither do I?” I tried. “Lizzie, I can’t do the things you can. I can’t manipulate spirits.”

She pouted. "It's not manipulation. She's growing."

"Okay, so what's going to come out of the cocoon?"

Lozzie shrugged, then frowned at me in sudden strange worry. "You did treat her nice, didn't you?"

"Ah, yes. Yes, I think I get the idea." I cast my mind back to when Evelyn had trapped Tenny inside a magic circle, and decided not to mention that. I took another swig of my almost-empty coffee, and realised my hand was shaking. I knew what I had to ask, and how it was the first step on a long chain that might lead me down to dark places – failure, or worse.

"Lozzie, I'm almost afraid to ask – uh, actually I am afraid to ask. Very. You said you might have an idea about how to find Raine."

"Mmhmm!" Lozzie nodded. She swept one arm back to indicate the front door. "We can just ask."

"... ask who?"

"The *kami*, who else?"

"Oh. I actually tried that this morning, and they ignored me."

"Mmm?!" Lozzie made a sound like a surprised chimpanzee. "What? Why?"

"I don't think I'm very popular," I said in lieu of a real explanation.

"But I am!"

= =

Beyond the boundary of the garden wall Sharrowford's pneumatic life skittered and slithered, stalked and strutted, floated and flitted, a natural world – if horribly unnatural at the best of times – carrying on as normal, while we jumped-up apes had our crises and dramas.

"I just hate the idea of stuff I can't see, you know? It's creepy as shit," Twil said, staring at Lozzie out in the middle of the road.

"Trust me, seeing doesn't make it any less creepy," I replied.

"Huh." Twil walked a few paces along the top of the garden wall, keeping level with Lozzie.

We were quite conspicuous – Twil standing on the waist-high wall, on lookout like a gargoyle with her hands in her pockets, me fretting and shivering on the pavement, wrapped in coat and scarf in a bid to keep warm, and Lozzie standing in the middle of the street, speaking and gesticulating to unseen entities, unseen to everyone except me – but Barnslow drive was dead quiet, only stagnant puddles and moldering leaves to witness three strange girls going about some very strange business. I looked and felt like hell, but if the need arose I could pass myself off as a university student with a terrible hangover.

“How much longer she gonna be?” Twil asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never done this before.”

“Wanna get back inside already,” Twil all but growled through her teeth. “Don’t like Evee being alone.”

“Zheng’s inside.”

“Yeah.”

Kimberly was in the house too, but I dropped the subject. We’d looked in on her before we’d stepped outdoors, hidden away in Evelyn’s magical workshop, down on her hands and knees drawing a magic circle on the floor around Praem’s wooden bones. She’d looked dead-eyed and drained, scrubbing away incorrect portions of the circle and muttering to herself as she worked.

“What’s it look like?” Twil interrupted my chain of thought.

“... weird.”

Over the last few minutes, Lozzie had called together a growing gaggle of spirit creatures, mostly via waving her arms and whistling, pointing at one or two warped monsters like they were cheeky puppies trying to hide from a vet’s visit, touching scales and brittle fur and stroking things that made my skin crawl. They mobbed her ankles, sat to attention, listened attentively to her whispered greetings and requests. As we watched, two spirits – a blobby humanoid with skin like dead slugs and a bird-like monster with three spindly legs – peeled off from the group and vanished into the depths of the city.

“I think it’s working,” I muttered, trying not to hope. “She’s making progress, she-”

“Car coming,” Twil snapped. I looked up the road, following her nod.

“I see it too. Lozzie? Lozzie?” I raised my voice, but she went on talking to the spirits, waving her arms and pointing, drawing a map in the air with her fingertip. “Lozzie, there’s a car coming. Lozzie!”

“Uh, Heather,” Twil said, and hopped down off the wall. She jerked a thumb at the approaching car. “I think this is our girl. Old range rover, right?”

“Oh, oh shoot, now? Lozzie, get out of the road,” I called, splitting my attention. “Twil, I can’t- I can’t wade into that. There’s too much, and you can’t see it. Please?”

“Right you are,” Twil nodded. She stepped out into the road. I averted my eyes from the gruesome spectacle of her passing through pneuma-somatic flesh to take Lozzie by the arm. Lozzie giggled and went “oops!” and then they both clattered back onto the pavement beside me. I turned just in time to see the pack of spirits scattering in a dozen different directions. A hound-ghoul thing sprinted right past me on all fours, racing down to the far end of Barnslow drive and the task Lozzie had set.

“Ooooh, that was nice, seeing everyone,” Lozzie chirped, a great big smile on her face. I frowned at her, but we didn’t have time to discuss the philosophical implications of that.

“Think we should get inside?” Twil asked. She stepped in front of Lozzie and I, watching the car as it slowed.

Part of me wanted to say yes.

“We’re fiiiine. We’re surrounded by friends,” Lozzie said, gesturing at the rooftops and trees.

The approaching car was exactly the sort we’d been told to look out for. A battered old range rover in dark green, the edges of its bodywork eaten by chains of rust and caked in the sort of dirt patterns that came only from sitting in place for months on end. Once a luxury item but now undoubtedly a nightmare to keep running, despite the healthy purring of the powerful engine as it pulled to a stop a safe distance from us.

The side windows were tinted, but the windscreen was not.

“ ... you ... you think that’s her?” Twil asked.

I stared too, confused for a moment as the woman in the car examined us. She looked over at the house, then down at her hands or into her lap, seemed to take a steadying breath, and finally killed the engine.

“Yes, Twil,” I said. “I think it’s safe to assume this is her.”

“I already don’t like her,” Twil hissed.

“*Twil*,” I scolded, half-aware of Lozzie scurrying behind me and clinging to my shoulders, peering around me. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“No, it’s not the- shit,” Twil grimaced. “It’s not the way she looks, it’s ... I dunno.”

The woman in the car reached over into the passenger footwell and lifted a large sports bag over her shoulder. She partially unzipped it and stuck a gloved hand inside, keeping it there as she opened the car door and stepped out onto the pavement.

“Hello?” I tried. “Felicity? You are- oh.” My voice caught in my throat. I hiccuped.

She kept her eyes on us, kept one hand on the half-open door – and kept the end of the bag pointed in our general direction.

Twil grit her teeth and bristled with threat. “Hey! Hey, what the fuck is that? What are you doing?”

The woman didn’t say anything, but she did flinch, quite hard. Her single good eye flicked between us.

Felicity Amber Hackett – her full name, as I learnt a little later – wore a heavy dark cardigan with obvious repair at the wrists and high neck, a pair of thick comfortable jeans, black leather gloves, and sturdy boots. She also had the most extensive visible scarring I’d ever seen in real life. Even with her pointing a concealed weapon at us, my heart went out to the human being in front of me. One cannot witness such a sight and not feel the echo of old pain on one’s own skin.

Fully one half of her face was consumed by burn scar.

The left half. Old, very old, the skin rough and ridged. The scar stretched from where her hairline should be, down across brow and eye and cheek and jaw and throat, narrowly missing her nose, and

vanished down inside the neck of her cardigan. Impossible to hide, and she made no effort to, except the way her reddish-brown hair fell naturally about her face. Beneath her hair, I could tell she had no left ear.

Her afflicted eye was a milky-white, sight burned away long ago. The mystery of her mumble was solved too – the left corner of her mouth was engulfed in the scarring, a small portion of her lips missing. Perhaps speaking normally was uncomfortable for her. Perhaps it was painful. I felt awful for assuming some dark supernatural cause.

Beneath the scarring, Felicity was hardly an intimidating person. Tall, maybe six feet, willowy but brittle-looking, as if moving did not come naturally to her. Mid-thirties perhaps, or older.

The healthy side of her face showed an unguarded skittish softness, better suited to owning a cosy bookstore or a flower shop, not being a mage.

Perhaps I was projecting.

“Hey-” Twil barked again.

“Felicity, yes?” I spoke quickly, struggling to disarm this before it got worse. “I’m Heather, I’m the one you spoke to on the phone. We’re not here to intercept you, we were doing something unrelated. Don’t point that at us, whatever it is.”

“Pointing is rude,” Lozzie chirped over my shoulder.

“It won’t work anyway, I can pluck bullets out of the air,” I forced myself to say, leaving out the fact I’d only done it once.

“She can! It’s true!” Lozzie cheered for me.

Twil just growled again.

Felicity let out a sudden hard breath. She swung the sports bag away, but still kept her right hand inside. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Precautions. You understand? You must understand.”

She spoke in that same half-mumble. I was right about her mouth, she spoke mostly out of the right side,

“Fuckin’ ‘ell,” Twil said, aghast. “Three girls in the middle of the street, what kinda ‘precautions’ do you need for that?”

"I don't know what any of you are," Felicity said, her tone almost apologetic. "And yes, yes, I'm Felicity. Heather, yes?"

"Yes," I repeated. I stepped forward and offered her my hand, with Lozzie in tow. Felicity hesitated, then closed the car door with a soft thump, and slowly let go of whatever she was holding inside the bag. She shook my hand. Strong grip. "This is Lozzie, she's ..."

"You have really nice eyes," Lozzie said. Her tone left no room for doubt as to her sincerity. A genuine compliment. Felicity blinked at her.

"It's complicated," I said. "And this is Twil, she's a werewolf, so you were probably right to point a gun at her."

"Hey!"

"She only bites on command," I said. Twil spluttered.

"I take it this is the place then?" Felicity glanced sidelong at the house. "It does look the part. Very Saye."

I nodded. "Yes it is, and it does. Thank you for coming."

She stared at me, and swallowed. " ... I have to warn you first. Uh," she struggled for a moment, wetting her lips and casting about at the three of us. "Just you three? Three kids, is that it?"

"We're all adults here," I said, leaving out the issue that I actually didn't know Lozzie's real age.

"Damn right," Twil grunted.

"And we should get inside," I said. "Because I've had an incredibly stressful morning and it's very cold out here. And Evelyn is waiting."

"Of course she is, of course, I- I'd love to see her- I-" Felicity let out a long sigh and raised a gloved hand. "Listen, this is very important, before I step foot in that house." She paused and glanced back at her car as if expecting to see something there, before turning to us again. "While I'm here, regardless of how long, if it's three hours or three days – if you see a little girl, dressed in black, don't approach her, and don't talk to her."

"What."

"It-" Felicity struggled, deeply uncomfortable. "It's something that

follows me.”

“What the fuck.” Twil said. “Heather?”

I stared at Felicity, at her guilt and self-horror, her awkward discomfort. “This is the thing I heard on the phone. When Evee called you months ago, yes?”

Felicity nodded. “Only while I’m present in the building.”

“The house is warded,” I said.

“I don’t think that’ll make any difference.”

“Is it dangerous? Fuck!” Twil turned and spread her arms, as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “This is all we need.”

“Dangerous emotionally. Just don’t engage it in conversation. It’ll try to upset you, but it won’t initiate unless you do. Look, it probably won’t even show itself, I just have to warn you.”

“Why didn’t you mention this on the phone?” I asked, harder than I’d intended. Twil was right, we didn’t need more complications.

“That you’re carrying some supernatural parasite here?”

“... because then you might not have asked me to come,” Felicity said, with an apologetic shrug. “Because then Evelyn might die, without me having tried everything I can.”

that which you cannot put down – 7.8

Framed beneath the crystal eyes and waving stingers of Evelyn's spider-servitor, Felicity politely wiped her boots on the doormat.

"Is it safe in here?" she asked. "You mentioned the house is warded?"

The spider wasn't reacting to her, not beyond an initial tracking glance as she'd passed over the threshold. Felicity followed the direction of my gaze, back over her shoulder, and saw nothing there. She gave me a silently curious look, her posture a touch more stiff than before.

"It's nothing," I sighed. "Safe, yes. For a given value of safe. It's not impregnable to battering rams or baseball bats. If it was, then none of this would have happened in the first place."

"Safe from that too, while I'm around," Twil said.

"Yeah!" Lozzie added from her position half-behind me, still watching Felicity like a spooked cat. "Twil's big and scary, so you better be careful!"

"Yeah," Twil grunted.

Our Twil was none too happy. She stood with her arms folded, scowling narrow-eyed at Felicity, unable to conceal her suspicions after our confrontation in the street and the unwelcome news of Felicity's mystery extra passenger. Watch out for a little girl dressed in black? What was this, the plot of a 19th-century Gothic novel? I struggled to contain my own exasperation.

"Yes," I said, a little too hard, and rubbed the bridge of my nose. "I'm certain that right now, this house contains enough frightening and dangerous people to run off half the city."

Felicity ducked her head in an awkward nod. "Just being cautious. Used to being behind thick walls. I don't get out much."

"Yeah no kidding," Twil grunted. "Looking like that."

"Twil." I shot her a look of genuine outrage. Twil was usually so cuddly, I'd forgotten how hurtful she was capable of being; when we'd first met in the midst of misunderstanding, she'd called Evelyn a cripple.

Twil blushed. "I mean pointing guns at people! In the street! Not the- the- argh ..." She gestured vaguely at her face and pulled a grimace.

"Perhaps, in future, be a little more careful in selecting your words?"

"Yeah! Yeah, cool, okay, yeah." Twil nodded, hands up, desperate for me to drop the subject.

"I apologise on Twil's behalf." I turned back to Felicity. "She tends to ... speak ... before she ... Felicity?"

If Felicity was bothered, she gave no sign. She was running her gaze across the front room, the boxes of junk, the stains on the floorboard, the shoes by the door. Counting how many of us were here? I tried not to think like that, tried to make myself believe she was here to help. She craned her neck to peer up the stairs and past us into the kitchen.

Her booted feet stayed planted on the doormat. One gloved hand rested on the open zipper of her overstuffed sports bag.

"I don't care," Felicity murmured without missing a beat. She'd given no impression of switching her attention from the room back to us, no minor startle of the absorbed brought back to a conversation. Was her momentary distraction an act? The learned behaviour of a gruesomely disfigured woman ignoring an all-too-familiar insult – or a carefully constructed illusion of obliviousness?

Twil and I shared a glance. Twil shrugged.

I cleared my throat, trying to keep us on track. "I do have a question for you, if you don't mind. When is your parasite likely to appear?"

The left side – the burned side – of Felicity's face twitched around her milky, blind eye. A suppressed wince? "It's not a parasite. And it's unlikely to appear at all."

"Yes, but we've already got multiple crises unfolding here," I said. "I don't need another one."

Felicity wet her lips and winced openly this time. "While I'm here, it might try to speak to those alone for extended periods, especially in the dark, or at night. So ... don't walk down dark corridors alone."

"This thing isn't a sodding ghost, is it?" Twil asked, a note of panic in her voice.

"Spooky scary," Lozzie whispered.

"No. Not quite," Felicity said. "And to answer your next question, yes, I am armed. I suppose it's only the polite thing to do, before I ... " she glanced down at her shoes.

"Take your shoes off!" Lozzie chanted. "Take your shoes off for the girls."

"Lozzie's just enjoying herself," I said in answer to Felicity's raised eyebrow. "Let her. And yes, it was rather obvious that you're armed in some capacity."

Felicity cleared her throat and had the decency to look ashamed.

"Duh," Twil said. "You got a gun in there, or what? Also, like, sorry. I really didn't mean-"

"I don't care," Felicity repeated. She shifted the weight of the open sports bag on her shoulder, and tilted it forward to show us the contents.

A viper of black metal and dark wood lay length-ways inside the bag, swaddled in an old towel. A sawn-off shotgun.

Lozzie made a disapproving whimper. Twil breathed 'fucking hell' under her breath. I felt a chill in my gut and a lightness in my head. She'd pointed that thing at us? She had, with her finger on the trigger.

Felicity must have caught the accusation and alarm on my face. "The safety was on," she said quickly. "It was only a bluff. Besides, it's not even really meant for you. I go everywhere armed, in case of emergencies."

"In case of what, a bear?" Twil said. "Or if you fancy a spot of bank robbery on your way home? What the fuck are you doing with a shotgun?"

"It's different, living out in the woods."

“We can hardly talk,” I said, swallowing my exasperation. “Raine does that too. I’ll thank you not to discharge that indoors, though. We’ve already got two bullet holes in the floor. I don’t want Evelyn to wake up to more holes in her house.”

“Yeah, we don’t wanna bring the rozzers running again,” Twil said.

Felicity froze. “You’ve had the police here?”

“A tame detective. It’s dealt with.” I nodded at the gun inside her bag. “Are you going to put that down, or ... ?”

“Yes. Yes, I should.” She nodded. “I’m sorry. I said I don’t get out much, but that’s an understatement. I don’t like being so exposed. That’s all. I’m fully aware I’m jumping at shadows, but I do want to help Evelyn.”

“Well, you best take your boots off then, and we’ll go upstairs to see her.”

Setting down her bag – and her weapon – revealed an internal ordeal for Felicity. She hesitated for a long moment, swallowed, then nodded and finally placed the sports bag gently on the floor. She nodded again, as if convincing herself, then squatted down to unlace her boots. Her fingers seemed clumsy and blunt.

“Should we tell Kim about the spooky little girl that might show up? Don’t suppose Zheng’ll care.”

“Yes, I suspect Zheng might give any surprises a nasty surprise of their own,” I said. “Best warn Kim though, yes.”

“Zheng cares!” Lozzie said.

“There’s others here, besides yourselves?” Felicity asked. She wiggled one boot off, revealing thick and unflattering thermal socks.

“A few,” I said, then stopped myself before explaining further. I was exhausted, but Felicity’s arrival had sparked what remained of my reserves of energy and focus. I held myself back. Twil picked up on it too, shutting her mouth before she blurted out all our secrets.

“A ... few?” Felicity caught my eyes.

“I feel like I should apologise for being rude, but I don’t entirely trust you, Felicity,” I said. “Not yet. There’s more of us here, that’s all.”

“Ooooh,” Lozzie made a sound like she was about to see a cat-fight. Twil tried to look tough, nodding along with me. Not difficult.

“Well, good,” Felicity said, more to herself to us, then pulled an awkward smile. “Shouldn’t trust magicians. Very wise of you.”

“You did get here much quicker than we expected,” I said at length, thinking as I spoke. Felicity’s fingers paused on the laces of her other boot.

“Well spotted. I lied about travel time, to give myself an advantage if I needed it.” She waited, as if for accusation or forgiveness, the faintest hint of ironic self-mockery in her one good eye.

Getting an accurate read on Felicity proved exceptionally difficult, even for me. Over the last few months of strange experiences, I’d learned that about myself, far more surprising than the brute facts of the supernatural – I possessed a good eye for reading other people.

But I couldn’t join up the separate parts of Felicity’s behaviour. Skittish and soft, yet I felt half of what she showed us was mere performance, to herself as much as us. Underneath the exterior of tatty clothes and hesitant gestures, it took a certain kind of twisted guts to point a loaded shotgun at another person. She didn’t look haggard or run-down, not brittle or afraid, merely delicate and wrapped in armour. Was she a little like Raine, minus the self-confidence and grace?

Or was it the burn scars, throwing me off? I found it almost impossible not to stare at Felicity’s scarring, at the way the flesh twitched out of sync with her expressions. Was I being unfair?

No. She was a mage, and she’d made it halfway into her thirties. She was dangerous, if only by necessity.

“Figures.” Twil rolled her eyes.

Felicity held my stare for a moment, then lowered her eyes and resumed untying her other boot. She slipped it off, set it next to its twin, and straightened up.

“Can you really pluck bullets out of the air, or was that a bluff too?” she asked.

“She can!” Lozzie said.

“Yes, but it’s a long story and we don’t have time for it,” I said. “We need to go see Evelyn, but I think we could all do with a cup of tea while we do. Twil, will you do the honours?”

“Eh?”

“Tea, coffee,” I said, voice more tight than I intended. “Lozzie and I will take Felicity upstairs, you let Kim and Zheng know about the-”

“I know, shaman,” came a deep purring.

Zheng ducked through the doorway into the front room.

Felicity went wide-eyed at the sight of Zheng, at her seven feet of muscle, bloodied trench coat, and the mass of dense tattoos visible beneath her thin tshirt. Zheng fixed her with a lazy, predatory interest.

“I know all about this one’s familiar,” Zheng purred. “I can smell it.”

“Yes, thank you for the dramatic self-introduction,” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm from my voice. “Felicity, this-”

Felicity moved so much faster than I’d thought her capable of, with her willowy awkwardness and clumsy fingers and single functioning eye. She ripped her sawn-off shotgun from the towel nest in her bag, braced it with both hands, and pointed it at Zheng.

“Woah, woah! Fuck!” Twil yelled. My stomach lurched and I stumbled back. Lozzie clung to my shoulders, half-hiding behind me, half holding me up.

Zheng broke into a shark-toothed grin at the double-mouth of the shotgun barrels.

“You didn’t say anything about this!” Felicity yelled.

“You think that little musket can stop me, wizard?” Zheng purred, obviously enjoying the moment. “If I wanted you dead, I’d be eating your flesh already.”

“Oh yes,” I snapped, surprised at the force of my own eye-rolling disapproval. “This is exactly what I meant when I asked you not to fire that thing indoors, thank you. And Zheng, stop it, don’t taunt her.”

Zheng ignored me, watching Felicity’s hands shake.

“Yeah, fucking back off, hey?” Twil suggested.

“No, no no no,” Felicity was repeating, shaking her head in desperate denial. Her good eye brimmed with hollow horror, far beyond any rational response to Zheng.

“No? No what?” I asked. “Felicity?”

“How could she? She- she would never- Evelyn wouldn’t do this. No.”

“Yes, you’re quite correct there,” I spoke quickly. “Evelyn did not make Zheng.”

“What?” Felicity risked a glance at me. A mistake. One flick of her eyes was enough time for Zheng to jerk forward, moving like quicksilver. The playful aborted charge of a big cat, stopping well short. Felicity flinched like she’d touched a live wire, her back slamming into the front door. She pointed the shotgun firmly at Zheng’s head once more. I half-expected the spider-servitor to react, but it hung there utterly uninterested. I guess Zheng didn’t count as worth protecting.

“Don’t you move!” Felicity snapped. “Don’t you move a muscle.”

“Zheng!” I scolded.

“She’s too fun, shaman. See how she jumps?” Zheng’s extra-long tongue rolled out of her mouth, to taste the air and tease our poor guest.

Felicity had none of the confident poise of Raine with a weapon. She visibly shook, despite the firm grip on the shotgun, one hand on the trigger mechanism, the other holding the barrels. She displayed none of what Raine called ‘trigger discipline’, her finger already in place inside the trigger-guard. Her face had turned waxy with barely controlled fear – but it was controlled. For now.

“I said,” repeating myself, raising my voice. “Zheng is not Evelyn’s work. Eevee didn’t make her.” I put two and two together, and took the risk. “She’s not following in her mother’s footsteps.”

Felicity took a moment to process what I’d said. “Okay,” she breathed. “Okay. That- that’s good. That’s really good to hear. Okay. But I’m still looking at a mature demon-host. Why?”

“You can put the gun down,” I said. “Zheng is ... friendly. Safe.”

Felicity laughed a single humourless laugh. "Are you mad? I've seen these things before. They are never *safe*."

"Yes, I know she's intimidating. I freed Zheng this morning, I've know her for literally less than twelve hours, and she's already saved my life. Twice, I think. I'd thank you not to point a gun at her, for a start."

"... freed?" Felicity frowned.

Zheng slurped her tongue back into her mouth, and grinned wider then before, showing even more teeth. They seemed to extend forever into the back of her skull. "I am my own, wizard."

Felicity's fear suddenly ebbed away, giving way to naked fascination. Her good eye filled with a kind of hunger, one I'd seen before on a very different face. With a shock of recognition I realised Evelyn had given me the same look whenever she'd talked about the potential of my hyperdimensional mathematics. Felicity's mouth hung open. The shotgun sagged in her grip. "... you're unbound? Then why are you still here?"

Zheng shrugged. "Enjoying the moment."

"... oh my God," Felicity whispered. "How *old* are you?"

"Ruuuuude!" Lizzie hooted.

"Old enough to know lead shot won't tickle me," Zheng rumbled.

"Also true," I added quickly. "Zheng fell out of a building this morning, and she wasn't much the worse for wear."

"Shaman," Zheng purred. "I did not fall. I jumped."

"Point being, I very much doubt you can damage her anyway. Please, Felicity, put the gun down."

Felicity frowned, considering carefully.

"Go ahead, wizard," Zheng rumbled. "Pull the trigger. Shoot me. Prove it to yourself."

"This isn't loaded with lead shot," Felicity said very quietly. "It's cold iron."

Zheng's expression shifted ever so minutely, intrigued – and excited.

"Yes, that's right," Felicity continued in the same soft murmur. "I

know how your kind usually work. I can't kill you because you're not really alive, but I can cause you a great deal of pain."

Zheng tilted her head slowly, listening.

"You're old, very old, aren't you?" Felicity continued. "Decades in that body for so much fine control, let alone your ... modifications. How long has it been since you felt pain like us?"

"Can you pull the trigger faster than I can move, wizard?" Zheng purred. "No depth perception. Interesting handicap."

"I can."

"Would you bet an ear? A hand? Your liver?" Zheng slid her tongue out again.

I stepped forward – not quite into Felicity's arc of fire, I wasn't feeling suicidal – and put every ounce of frustration into my glare, at both of them. "How about we just don't? Hmm?" My composure almost buckled instantly, because Lozzie decided to peer over my shoulder and imitate my expression, a little scowling elf to undercut my exasperation. "Can we perhaps not have another bloody fight, here, now? We are on a time limit – two people's lives are on a time limit."

Felicity shook her head. "I'm speaking to an unbound demon–"

I let my eyes flash at her. "I don't care! I don't care what she is. What is it with you mages and being spooked by these zombies? She saved my life twice this morning. I watched her eat a person, but I don't care right now. If she wanted you dead, you would be. She's faster than you can imagine."

"I don't have to imagine, I've seen it before," Felicity hissed.

"Then there's no point trying to shoot her, is there?" I asked. "Either put the gun down and help us with Evelyn, or I make you leave."

Perhaps it was the tone in my voice, the undercurrent of certainty that I would find a way to make her leave. Or perhaps I made her see sense. I know which I prefer.

Felicity's good eye travelled back and forth between Zheng and I. She let out a long breath, and then slowly lowered the shotgun. For a drawn-out moment, she and Zheng watched each other like a pair

of Old West gunslingers at high noon.

“Boo,” Zheng said.

Felicity shook her head. Shaking fingers clicked the safety on. “I’m not going to apologise this time.” She nodded at Zheng. “This is absurd. This is the last thing I expected to find. What’s your game, demon?”

Zheng rumbled a bored, disappointed sound.

“And you!” I turned on her. “Stop trying to fight everything.”

Zheng shrugged. “It’s my nature, shaman.”

I gave her a capital-L look.

“She started it,” Zheng said.

Before I could give Zheng a look like a primary-school teacher breaking up a playground fight, Twil stomped over and got right in Felicity’s face, finger jabbing at her chest. “You’re not going anywhere near Eeve after that bullshit. You’re having a laugh.”

“Twil,” I sighed.

“I think under the circumstances-” Felicity began.

“Not good enough,” Twil let out a growl – a real one, a full-throated animal threat. Felicity flinched backward and the shotgun jerked upward once more, but Twil caught the business end in one hand.

“You got some silver in there too?” she growled in Felicity’s face.

“Twil,” I snapped. She shoved the shotgun barrel down and away, and stepped back to glare at Felicity.

With a metallic click, Felicity broke her shotgun open and fumbled out the two loaded shells. They looked so incongruous, shiny red plastic set in a brass base. She tossed them into her bag, and offered the unloaded weapon to Twil.

“Uh ... ” Twil blinked down at the gun, mouth hanging open.

Felicity shrugged. “You made a good point,” she spoke softly. “If our roles were reversed, I wouldn’t let me anywhere near Evelyn either. Take it, please.”

“The polite thing would be to accept, Twil,” I said.

“Yeah, get your fingerprints all over it,” Lozzie giggled.

Gingerly, Twil took the gun, holding it by the truncated wooden stock like a live eel.

“Either I trust you or I don’t,” Felicity said. “Please, show me to Evelyn.”

= =

Up the stairs we went. My mind wired with caffeine and the thin shreds of adrenaline, I sketched two mental models of how Felicity might act once she saw Evelyn. The tone in her voice over the phone – an old and painful loss – left me with no doubt. I thought back to when Evelyn had called her months ago, the pleading way Felicity had asked “Can I see you?”

Wistful longing, or jittery possessiveness. Fifty-fifty. Flip a coin.

At least she’d handed over the gun.

The former I told myself I would tolerate. We would all put up with that for the sake of waking Evelyn from her coma. But the latter? In my darkest imagination I saw Felicity trying to stroke Evelyn’s unconscious face, or worse, and knew Twil for one would react with justified violence. Twil and I had worked out a signal – just a wink, nothing special – to use in case we thought Felicity was throwing up red flags.

Both models were wrong.

Felicity treated the threshold to Evelyn’s bedroom like a portal to her own private hell, and the sight of Evelyn’s face like a God condemning her to the pit.

She hid it well, but I was all too familiar with the signs of self-loathing and self-torture, from my own face in the mirror over a decade of personal horror. I read it in the way she crossed her arms tight and protective over her chest, as if trying to hold herself together. I saw it in the way she shook ever so slightly, a tremor deep inside her body. The hollow guilt in her face made it plain.

For a moment I thought she might start crying. I looked away, an intruder on some inexplicable, alien emotion. Even Lozzie pretended not to notice, and Twil looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Evelyn, wrapped up under her plush bed covers, behind a bulwark

of pillows and cushions, couldn't have cared less. Her eyes twitched beneath closed lids.

"The hell is wrong with you now?" Twil grunted, and crossed over to the bed to check Evelyn's temperature, hand to her unconscious forehead.

Felicity screwed her eyes shut. She murmured to herself, for her ears alone.

"Pull yourself together. It's not her," she said.

"... Felicity?" I ventured, wary for some new development. "Are you up to this?"

"I'm perfectly fine," she said, quick and curt. When she turned to me, her expression was clear and clean, business-like. "You've tried to wake her every other way you've access to, yes? She's not out cold with the flu, or merely passed out, correct? If she wakes up and sees me, she'll likely attempt to kill me."

"Yeah! Alright? She won't fucking wake up," Twil said, brushing Evelyn's hair back from her face.

"Yes, we're certain," I said. "It was magic."

"What happened to her?" Felicity said. "Start from the beginning."

"Loooong story," Lozzie said, with a sagely nod.

"Yes, that will make an exceptionally long story indeed," I said.

Felicity frowned. "How long?"

"... to explain what did this, I have to start a decade ago."

"That's fine. Tell me while I work."

Felicity stepped over to the bed and dumped her sports bag. Twil glared at her with open hostility, like a hound guarding its wounded master. Felicity ignored the scowl and bent over Evelyn's unconscious face, peering closely. She showed nothing except professional interest – then glanced back up at me.

"The sooner you start, the better, Heather. I need to figure out what's keeping her unconscious. She's moving her eyes, which means REM sleep, which means at least her brain isn't scrambled. More information, and I can start to make educated guesses."

“Okay. Okay, uh ... ”

“Meanwhile, I’m going to examine her, but I respect her hatred of me too much to handle her myself. I need one of you girls to expose her throat and both wrists, but obviously try to keep her warm. She’ll be losing body heat while asleep. Twil, is it? If you would, please?”

Twil narrowed her eyes in a scowl. “Why does she hate you? What did you do to her?”

“Twil ... ” I said, but with no conviction in my voice. It was a fair question.

“People hate for lots of reasons,” Lozzie said with a sad note.

“You don’t want to know me, you don’t want me to be your friend,” Felicity said to Twil. “She hates me because I deserve it, because I’m toxic, and I’m a coward. She knew it, and I’m not going to lie about it. Let me work, let me wake her, and then I’ll leave.”

“Too fucking vague, waaay too fucking vague,” Twil said.

“ ... she hates me because I helped her mother with something, about twelve years ago now.”

Twil squinted. “What does her mother have to do with anything? I thought her mum was dead.”

“That’s for Evelyn to tell,” I said firmly. “Twil doesn’t know Evelyn’s family history.”

“Ah.” Felicity blinked. “I’m- my apologies. You do, though?”

“Some,” I said, shrugging.

“Then you understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That this is penance,” Felicity said.

Twil didn’t like it, but she trusted my judgement. She busied herself pulling the covers back from Evelyn’s sleeping form, hiking up her sleeves to expose her wrists. They made a strange team, as Felicity slipped into a bedside manner almost like a real doctor. She rummaged in her sports bag and produced various tools – a miniature hand-torch, an overstuffed leather-bound notebook, two

plastic food containers full of tiny bottles of powder and liquid, a piece of thick canvas rolled into a tube, several lengths of brass rod, a box of plasters, and a dozen other seemingly unrelated nick-nacks.

She used the torch to check Evelyn's pupils, had Twil daub tiny amounts of an odd amber liquid on Evelyn's wrists and throat, touched the top of her head with brass. None of it made any sense. Like watching a witch-doctor at work.

I sat in Evelyn's desk chair, and explained for the second time this morning, dragging myself through the words as if through mud. The Eye, Alexander Lilburne, Glasswick tower. I left out personal details, kept quiet on brainmath, Lozzie, and Maisie.

I'd grown to expect bewilderment, but Felicity listened – and asked intelligent questions.

She had me repeat what I'd seen during that flash of horror before Evelyn and I had both passed out, asked me why I'd woken up but Evee hadn't. She asked probing question about the Eye, about the limits of its power, questions I had no answers for. She asked about Evelyn's health, about her diet, about her sex life – “None”, Twil growled.

She asked about the inside of Glasswick tower, about the Lozzie-thing that had been following me, about the aims of the cult.

She asked about Praem, and the shadow behind her face showed exactly what she thought.

“Praem is *fine*,” I said, feeling a surge of protective fondness. “I gathered from your reaction to Zheng that you don't like these Outsiders being here, and in Zheng's case I ... I get that. But Praem is a sweetheart. She's done nothing but good for us. Don't you dare.”

Felicity cleared her throat gently. “I've had bad experiences. She's had bad experiences too,” she glanced down at Evelyn. “I thought she knew better, that's all.”

More tests, scraps of Latin read aloud from Felicity's notebook to no effect, and Twil was asked to poke and prod and listen to her chest. Eventually Felicity stepped back, failing to conceal the defeated look on her face.

“Nothing's working, is it?” Twil asked, a tremor in her voice.

Felicity shook her head. "I think she's possessed."

"... you what?" Twil blinked at her.

"Possessed?" I asked. "By an Outsider?"

"The thing that touched your minds – this Eye, as you called it, or one of its agents – I think it tried to leave something behind. That would explain why *you* woke up, because it has other designs for you. Perhaps your mystery 'Lozzie-thing' was made the same way, rapid modification of an original human host?" Felicity mused, more to herself than us, then her voice snapped back into focus again. "Point is, this isn't hypnotic suggestion or instruction, Evelyn is far too ..." she cleared her throat. "The Evelyn I knew, even as a child, was too strong-willed to succumb to that."

"I agree," I said. "Putting it lightly."

"Yeah. Yeah, right," Twil said. "So it's not that? I don't ... I don't get this?"

"It's not hypnotic suggestion, or neural damage. Forceful possession, from beyond, by force, should be impossible," Felicity explained patiently. "But the fact she won't wake up ... well." Felicity glanced at me, seeing if I was following.

"Well what?" Twil asked.

"I think I understand," I said, nodding.

"Some weak shard of the Eye, an independent factor, a bud, a spore," Felicity shrugged. "But she's been through this once before. She has experience throwing out neural invasion. To use an immune-system metaphor, she's already got the anti-bodies. So instead of taking over, all it's managed to do is render her unconscious, while she fights it."

"She's wrestling a demon for control of her body?" I asked.

Felicity nodded. "It is the only thing I can think of."

"Shit," Twil said, and looked down at Evelyn's unconscious face, her eyes twitching in sleep.

"She may not even be aware of it," Felicity said. "More importantly, I believe I can do something about it."

"Wait a sec, what do you mean she's been through this once

before?” Twil asked, frowning at Felicity, then at me too.
“Heather?”

“ ... it’s really not my place to say,” I said. “Evee’s probably, um, a little reluctant to share her past with you in detail. Not- not because she doesn’t trust you. It’s complicated.”

Twil shrugged, vaguely hurt. No time for that right now, little werewolf. You can patch things up later.

“We need a young priest and an old priest,” Lozzie announced.

Felicity actually laughed, the first time I’d seen a genuine smile from her. She nodded at Lozzie approvingly. “Yes, an exorcism. We need to perform an exorcism.”

“What, ‘the power of Christ compels you’, and all that?” Twil said.

“No, the real thing is less clean, and takes a very long time. I’m going to need a lot of clear space, and a lot of coffee. And I’ll need to make a phone call, I won’t be going home tonight.”

“How long is this going to take?” I asked, a lump growing in my throat.

Felicity shrugged. “Twelve hours, fifteen hours. I don’t know. I’ve only done this once before.”

“Twelve hours,” I whispered to myself. In the corner of my eye, I saw Lozzie bite her lip. She knew what I was thinking. “There’s no ... other way, is there?”

“Heather, I can totally stay here for twelve hours,” Twil said, nodding. “I’ll do it.”

“ ... there is something I could do,” Felicity said, frowning tight, her reluctance plain. “Only because it’s her. None of you three are mages, correct? That wasn’t a lie, or anything else, was it? I don’t care if it was, but I’ll ask you to leave the room now, before I try this.”

“None of us,” I said. “Kimberly is, but she’s downstairs.”

“Mmmm.” Felicity considered for a moment, then sighed and got down awkwardly on her knees next to Evelyn.

She rolled back her right sleeve, and revealed a sheath of tattoos crawling up her forearm.

Nothing like either the Fractal on my arm or the intricate binding which covered Zheng's flesh, Felicity's tattoo was a gossamer tracery of straight lines in dark purples and pinks, blues and greens, intersecting in right angles and meeting at rounded junctions. Precise, ordered, mathematical; the design terminated midway up her bicep.

The lines caught the light and stung my eyes, as if the act of seeing was to run one's brain along the edge of a razor.

When she removed her right glove as well, the unity of the design came into focus. The lines joined and thickened along her palm and the back of her hand, formed a solid mass of colour on her fingers. A crossbreed of opera glove and circuit board, in ink and magic.

"What is it with magic and tattoos?" I muttered.

"Hey, I've got some too," Twil said.

"Yes, I know, Twil."

Felicity flexed her fingers, examining the design as if for blemishes, then hesitated. "I am going to have to wrap my hand around Evelyn's throat."

"What."

"Okay no, fuck off with that," Twil said.

"Think of this like a surgical robot," Felicity said. "It's not going to hurt her."

"Oh yeah," Twil grunted. "Like that helps." She put an arm over Evelyn to ward Felicity away.

"Not the most reassuring metaphor you could have selected," I said.

Felicity sighed and wet her lips. The scarred flesh twitched around her unseeing left eye. "I mean in this particular use, think of it as a surgical robot."

"What is it, really? What does that even do?" I prompted. "What are you going to do to her?"

"... none of you are mages, none of you would understand."

"I will," Lozzie said.

"I might," I said.

“Yeah, try us,” said Twil.

Felicity hesitated. “There is a natural inclination not to share one’s secrets. I can’t simply *tell* you.”

“Sure you can,” Twil grunted.

Felicity let out a heavy sigh and closed her eyes for a second. “It’s a sixth sense, built from parts of my own sense of touch and a ... borrowed non-biological nervous system. But that’s like calling a car a metal horse. That is not what this is, and I cannot put it into words for you. If I’m right, I may be able to make some kind of rudimentary contact with whatever this Outsider of yours left behind in Evelyn. If it understands human thought. Maybe.”

“ ... and then what?” I asked.

Felicity shrugged. “I make it leave.”

I stared at her for a long moment, and one kind of guilt overcame another. “You’re serious, aren’t you? I told you what the Lozzie-thing was like, and you want to convince a similar Outsider to leave, just like that? This is staggeringly dangerous. No, I think we can do the twelve-hour plan instead.”

“Yeah. Fucking yeah,” Twil said. “You’re gonna root around inside Evee’s head? No way, you-”

“Dangerous for her, Twil,” I nodded at Felicity. “Not Evee.”

“Oh.”

“I’m willing to try,” Felicity said softly.

“And then this thing fries your brain,” I said. “And we’re back to square one, with yet another body on our hands.”

“Another body?” Felicity murmured, but she didn’t push the question.

“Twelve hours,” I repeated to myself. “Alright, I can deal with this. Twil, you stay up here then, I’m going to make coffee and- ... and get anything else we need. Lozzie, are you-”

Lozzie was staring into space, glassy eyed.

“Lozzie? Lozzie?”

“Mm!” Lozzie blinked and snapped to. I had the uncomfortable

impression of a puppet pulling its own strings tight. She stared at me for a moment with a smile on her face.

“Lozzie, are you alright?”

“I’m sleeeeeepy. We’re all sleepy, aren’t we?” she asked nobody in particular, eyes wandering across the wall.

“ ... yes. We are.” I frowned at her. “More coffee, like I said.”

“I’m still willing to try the riskier method,” Felicity said.

“Please refrain. It’s not worth the possibility of-”

Clatter clatter clatter went feet down below, rushing across the front room and piling up the stairs. We all stopped and looked at the open doorway to the corridor, and heard Kimberly calling “Wait, wait!”, breathless and panicked, and assumed she meant us.

“Kim?” I called. She finished clattering up the stairs, floorboards creaking under her feet.

Felicity hurried to cover her tattoos. I didn’t think there was much chance of timid and traumatised Kimberly stealing any of her secrets, but I didn’t say anything. I was too busy rolling my eyes and crossing to the door, ready to put down another problem before it bloomed into a crisis.

“Kimberly, what’s wrong now ... ” I trailed off as I stuck my head around the door.

My eyes went wide. I think I blushed.

What was wrong was Praem – back in her body, full and fleshy and alive once more, gliding down the upstairs hallway toward me with her near-silent graceful tread and perfectly poised expressionless face. Kimberly panted for breath at the top of the stairs, hands on her knees, bent double. Somewhere down below, Zheng was laughing. I could only assume Praem was making a bee-line for Evelyn, for her unconscious mistress.

Praem was, to coin a phrase, fresh from the summoning circle.

As in, stark naked.

that which you cannot put down – 7.9

Against all prior self-estimation, I have discovered I am quite good at standing my ground. Me, scrawny little Heather with my five foot nothing and noodle arms – against demons, monsters, assassins, literal evil wizards in dark fairytale castles, Raine – but as Praem strode toward me in the nude, with her spine straight and chin high, I fell back.

“Praem! Praem- yes- o-okay- okay!”

My hands raised, a blush in my cheeks, I stumbled back into Evelyn’s bedroom. Praem followed over the threshold.

I had seen Praem nude once before, after our nocturnal fox-hunting session down in Sussex at the Saye estate, after she’d slopped back to the house bedraggled with stagnant lake water and slimy mud and had to strip off her ruined uniform. But back then she’d been dripping and cold, wrapped in towels, and we’d all been preoccupied.

The Praem that stepped into Evelyn’s bedroom was fresh and warm, her skin pink-clean and glowing, as if she’d come straight from the bath, completely uncovered. Her hair was curled up in a loose knot behind her head, the one element of her appearance she cared about enough to set right before marching upstairs.

She stopped, and stood there with perfect proper prim poise. Back straight, chin up, toes forward.

Twil’s eyes all but popped out of her face. She turned as red as I felt. Lozzie hid an open-mouthed gasp behind one hand.

“P-Praem, yes, wel-welcome back,” I heard myself saying, relief and happiness fighting with crippling embarrassment and not a little bit of awe. “It’s- it’s- it’s good to see you. Oh! Oh, I didn’t mean ... oh God, um. Okay- maybe- maybe put some clothes on? Yes, yes, definitely with the clothes. Please?”

Praem stared at me for a heartbeat. Blank white eyes gave nothing

away. Then her head swivelled to Evelyn, unconscious on the bed.

“This is the other demon-host?” I heard Felicity say.

“Yes, yes,” I managed. “This is Praem.”

Twil attempted to answer as well, but out came a splutter. Lozzie muttered under her breath, an appreciative and awestruck “Wow.”

‘Wow’ was right. Praem wasn’t really my type, I’d decided or deduced that long ago; she was also an alien Outsider in a body of hardened pneuma-somatic flesh wrapped around a life-sized wooden mannequin. She was also my friend, I think, and oh so sweet beneath her expressionless exterior, and did not deserve to be ogled by several teenage girls and one questionable older lady.

She was also very plush, and very cuddly.

The effect on the one confirmed and non-comatose lesbian in the room – myself – was undeniable, even under the current circumstances.

I didn’t know where to direct my eyes, caught between guilt, instinctive pleasure, natural curiosity, and sheer bloody-minded relief that she was back on her feet.

Kimberly finally caught up, almost slamming into Praem’s back. “Ahh!” She caught herself on the door frame, still panting. “I tried to stop her! If only to- to get her dressed. She just took off-” Pant, pant. Slow down, I willed her. “As soon as she was ready- she- ahh, umm. It worked, though! She even said thank you.”

“Praem, please, *please*, clothes?” I repeated, trying not to stare at her boobs. I cast about for something of Evelyn’s for her to wear, and caught the look on Felicity’s face.

Like a bucket of cold water over my head.

With mild surprise and a curious frown, but certainly no blush, Felicity was looking Praem up and down. Not in the manner of a confident lech appreciating a nice surprise, but with the cold appraisal of an anatomist or horse breeder or a buyer at a slave market.

In the back of my mind, I’d formed an educated guess at what Felicity probably was, at where she fit into the puzzle of Evelyn’s past. She’d given us enough clues, I could fill in the rest. Saving

Evelyn was penance for her, or redemption, but I didn't care, as long as she did it.

But that look on her face, I would not stand for that.

"Felicity," I snapped her name, my blushing embarrassment draining away.

"Yes, what?" She glanced at me, then nodded at Praem. "This is the one Evelyn made? It's certainly different, I can tell from here."

"Felicity," Praem echoed, intoning the mage's name in her clear, bell-like voice.

"It's still learning, too? How young is it?"

"She has a name," I said. "And she is a *she*, if you please, not an it."

"Yes, yes, of course, of course," Felicity muttered. Her eyes were glued to Praem – but not the places I'd be staring. "Wood base, you said? Remarkably life-like, in that case. And it doesn't understand the implications of being naked? Rudimentary, yes." Felicity sighed as if in relief. "Rudimentary."

Praem glided toward the bed on precise, measured footsteps. Felicity tried to rise to her feet, assuming she was about to get a better look at this promising specimen – but Praem invaded her personal space.

"Hey-"

Felicity stepped back, stumbling as Praem kept pace, thrown off by the natural attempt to not touch a naked person suddenly in one's face.

"What- what's it doing?" Felicity spluttered.

"Tellin' you off, that's what," Twil said with a smirk. "Don't you be dissin' our girl."

"No, Twil, I think that's only half right," I said.

"Eh?"

Praem forced Felicity back another step, then another, inches away but never making contact, until our clever doll-demon was able to step sideways to interpose herself between Felicity and the bed, between Felicity and Evelyn.

The mage's back hit the wall. Praem stopped an inch or two from her, statue-still, staring.

"I mean ... I meant no ... insult?" Felicity tried, her one good eye darting at me. "Can you call it off, perhaps?"

"Oh!" Twil figured it out before Felicity did. "You're messing with her maker. She doesn't think you're cool. Good instincts, Praem, yeah."

I sighed. "Not if you keep calling her *it*. And why aren't you scared of her? You were terrified of Zheng."

Felicity began to edge along the wall, as if trapped by a large and inquisitive dog. "What? And no, this is different. 'Zheng' is mature. This one is only a few months old, and it's not even real flesh. She's under a binding from Eevee, isn't she? And rudimentary, too."

I swear I saw, in the corner of my eye, a hardening of Praem's empty expression. Felicity flinched, hard.

"I don't think she liked that," I said.

"*Praem*, Praem, alright," Felicity said, her hands up. "Praem is not rudimentary. Fine. I ... apologise."

"Praem, it's okay, Felicity's going to help us cure Evelyn. She's safe, for now. If rude."

Praem relented and stepped back. Somehow, even with no true expression on her face, she gave the impression of dismissing Felicity as unimportant. She turned to Evelyn, and stared down at her unconscious face.

We all took a moment to get our breath back, for various different reasons, and I realised Praem wasn't exactly the same as she'd been before. She'd reverted somewhat.

Her hair had regained more than a touch of its original glacial ice-blue, shimmering beneath the blonde when the light caught it at the right angle. Doll-like ball and socket joints were visible on her wrists and ankles and around the base of her skull, faint after-images of the wooden bones beneath her summoned flesh.

"And I believe she does understand," I said.

"... I'm sorry?" Felicity asked.

“Praem does understand the implications of being nude.”

“Evelyn,” Praem intoned. Not a call to the unconscious girl on the bed. Agreement.

“Yes. She just doesn’t care right now,” I said. “How would you feel if you’d lain helpless and immobilised, while your mother was maybe dying?”

“*Mother?*” Felicity’s face twisted with disgust, the expression strangely warped by her burn scars.

“Mother?” Twil echoed too, looking at both Praem and Evelyn. “Oh, right.”

“Awwww,” went Lozzie.

“That is a little ... a little bit weird, isn’t it?” Kimberly said, still hovering in the doorway.

Felicity caught my frown and controlled her face, drawing herself up and swallowing carefully. Halfway to a confused apology, she trailed off without having said a word, eyes glued to Praem once more.

“ ... Not rudimentary then, no.” Her brows knitted in thought. “Not rudimentary at all.”

“Felicity?”

She glanced around and settled on Kimberly, who suppressed a flinch at the cold calculation filling Felicity’s single shining eye. “You, you’re the other mage, yes? Kim? You put this demon – *Praem*, sorry – back in her vessel, correct? You re-made her?”

“ ... I ... yes?”

Kimberly looked at me for help, and I nodded for her to continue. She was safe here, even if she didn’t feel it.

“Yes,” she repeated, still short of breath despite the passing minutes. “It took me most of the morning, but ... there she is. I did it. It wasn’t ... um ... easy. I’m sort of worn out, mostly.”

“But you did do it,” Felicity hissed, her good eye in a tight squint. “You have experience with creating hosts? You understand the principles? Not just corpses, but inanimate vessels too?”

"I-I ... some of it." A hollow look entered Kimberly's eyes. "Only what I've been taught."

"Kim doesn't like to think about magic too much," I said. "Where is this going?"

"She's given me an idea."

"I have?" Kimberly asked.

"This doesn't have to take twelve or fifteen hours." Felicity's good eye darted back and forth as it alighted on the fast-moving contents of her own mind. "Three or four hours at most to draw the circle and assemble appropriate apparatus. You," she pointed a gloved finger at Kimberly. "Kim. You're going to help me."

"I-I am?"

"I know precious little about summoning, so we must pool our resources."

Kimberly, wide-eyed and swept away, glanced to me for help again.

"It's okay, Kim. You can do this," I said. "Felicity, what are you planning? What's the idea?"

"We don't have to perform an exorcism at all." Felicity drew herself up. She seemed different from before, absorbed in problem-solving. "We don't have to make the Outsider leave, we only have to make it *leave Evelyn*."

"Eh?" Twil grunted.

"Unpack that, please?" I asked.

"We confuse it, we trick it. It hasn't been here long, hasn't had time to adapt to human biology, and Eevee, bless her, she's probably got it more confused still. It doesn't understand what it's inhabiting. In theory – in *theory* – it should be possible to move the Outsider from one vessel to another. Easier than casting it back into the beyond."

"How?" I asked.

"How, yes, that is the question. How?" Felicity nodded, more to herself than us, eyes wandering off along private convolutions. "Going to be very messy. Yes ... messy ..."

"Messy?" I almost sighed.

Felicity snapped to, fixed me with a look, dead serious. “First things first. How much horse dung can you get hold of?”

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The spell to save Evelyn turned out to require far more esoteric ingredients than a pound or two of literal horse-shit, but we also needed a lot more floor space to work with. We returned downstairs, half at my direction and half at Felicity’s, as she listed the items she needed, asking what we had access to and what we could lay our hands on at short notice.

Zheng directed a grin at me as we passed through the kitchen, still lounging with her feet up on the table. “Where’s your streaker, shaman?”

“Putting her clothes on, this time. We hope.”

Zheng rumbled. “Pity.”

Over the next half-hour, Felicity’s spell began to take shape. We commandeered Evelyn’s magical workshop, had Twil shove the table and the sofa back to clear as much floor space as possible, while Kim scrubbed away the remains of the spell she’d used to restore Praem. The bottle my doll-demon friend had occupied now lay on its side, uncorked and empty. Amid the hustle and bustle I tucked it away behind a stack of papers and books. I doubted Praem would enjoy a reminder of that experience.

The task of drawing the magic circle fell to Kimberly, with Felicity directing and interrogating her threadbare knowledge. I did my best to follow their obscure conversation, but it mostly consisted of comparing scraps of Latin and different kinds of angles, and debating over tiny variations in eye-watering magical symbols.

Felicity herself ventured back out to her car, and returned with a heavy canvas-wrapped bundle which contained a mass of hollow brass tubing. She was stronger than she looked beneath her awkward, willowy exterior, and I kept a close eye on her for more than one reason.

She spent the next hour setting up those brass tubes, constructing a ceiling-height pyramid of copper globes and curved rods.

“Is that gonna need lifting over the ... uh ... circle-thing?” Twil asked.

“No, over Evelyn,” Felicity replied, distracted. “Here, take this piece, slot it into one of the double-width ends. Lift it up for me, here- no, no, here, pay attention. Hold it steady until I get this other piece in.”

Twil growled softly under her breath, but helped all the same.

Lozzie had delegated to herself the task of encouraging Praem to wear some clothes. When the pair of them finally rejoined us, it was Lozzie-first, bouncing through the kitchen with her nose pinched shut and her eyes screwed up against the lingering smell of blood. She smiled at us – well, at me and Twil, the only ones paying proper attention – and waved a flourish with one arm.

“Ta-da!” she announced with perfect timing, as Praem rounded the corner.

Praem was dressed once again in her re-appropriated maid uniform, ankle-length skirt and silly frills and neat little black shoes. She walked with her hands clasped in front of her, and I swear I saw in the depths of her expressionless face a touch of relief. Perhaps she felt normal again. Comfortable. Herself.

Lozzie’s introduction was somewhat spoilt when Praem paused in the kitchen, to share a silent staring contest with Zheng. The giant zombie stared back, slow and easy, as if she owned everything she surveyed.

“Trussed up like a cake,” Zheng purred at her, half-smiling like a sleepy cat. “Idiot, or slave, which is it?”

“Uh oh,” Lozzie chirped.

“This isn’t the time,” I raised my voice. Neither of them looked at me. “And Praem is not a slave.”

“Idiot, then,” Zheng rumbled.

“Feet. Off. Table.”

Zheng blinked once at Praem’s words – an order that brooked no argument, delivered in the voice of winter wind sliding around the icicles in one’s heart. Twil stepped away from the circle-building work, ears pricked with animal awareness of a brewing fight.

“Make me, idiot,” Zheng purred.

The staring contest continued for several heart-stretching moments.

Felicity and Kimberly stopped working too, the former looking on with barely concealed twitchy concern.

“This is not the time,” I repeated, louder. Praem walked around to the opposite side of the table without breaking eye contact. I had a sudden terrible vision of her flipping the table in Zheng’s face or whipping it out from under her feet. “Praem. Praem, what are you-”

But of course, our perfectly poised and proper doll-demon would never do such a thing.

Praem carefully pulled out a chair, sat down with a smoothing of skirts under her rump, and placed her right elbow on the table, hand forward.

Zheng roared with approving laughter. I stared, open mouthed as I realised. Twil laughed too, and Lozzie let out a little whoop.

“What? What are they doing?” Felicity stammered “What is this? Heather is correct, we don’t have time for this.”

“You can ignore them if you want, I don’t think it’ll affect us,” I said with a sigh. “Don’t break the table though, either of you. Evelyn will be most unhappy.”

“But what are they doing?” Felicity demanded.

Zheng took her feet off the table and sat forward, hugely muscled shoulders hunched over as she mirrored Praem’s pose. Elbow on the table, right hand out. They made me think of stags about to lock antlers.

“You are made of wood and thought, idiot,” Zheng purred. “What are you next to real flesh? Hmmmmmm?”

Praem waited. Said nothing. Zheng rumbled low in her throat.

“They’re arm wrestling,” I said.

It was no contest.

Not the first time, nor when they wordlessly went to best of three, then five, then seven – by which point Felicity had lost interest, turned back to her work and dragged Kimberly back to it as well, despite Twil’s hooting and hollering and Lozzie’s open-mouthed oohs and ahhs. We clustered around the doorway to the kitchen, an audience at safe distance. I shook my head when the demons went to best of nine, and resolved to put my foot down and stop this

before best of eleven. They'd left a dent in the table by that point, a battered and bloodied indentation in the wood, and the slamming noise was getting on my nerves.

Thankfully I was saved from having to get between them, by the resounding snap of Zheng's wrist bones.

She let out a grunt, not quite pain, and finally gave up on the immovable object that was Praem's hand. Zheng's knuckles were bloody and bruised, her finger bones likely riddled with micro-fractures. She'd exerted so much force that last time that she'd snapped whatever was left of her wrist. Sweating, heaving for breath, hunkered down – but she grinned all the same.

Not a single one of Praem's hairs was out of place. She'd not moved an inch except to slam Zheng's hand to the table nine times in a row.

"Ding ding ding," Lozzie announced.

"You been bested, you great big lug," Twil called out, grinning like a loon.

Zheng reached over with her other hand and wrenched her own bones back into place, rotating her bruised wrist, bones grinding. She clicked her tongue. "Meat."

"Yes, I hope that issue is settled now," I said. "Is this some kind of demonic pecking order ritual? Do you always have to challenge each other when you meet, or are you just both being insufferable?"

Prim and proper, Praem stood up, brushed her skirt smooth with a single motion of both hands, and tucked her chair in. "Feet off table."

Zheng grinned even wider, chuckling under her breath. Her shoulders rolled, a note of wild joy in her eyes. For a heart-stopping moment I thought she was about to launch herself at Praem; my whole body twitched – not away, but toward, to get between them. I caught myself halfway there, heart racing, as Zheng relaxed back in her chair.

"Very well," she purred. "Demon."

Praem turned and glided toward us. We all cleared out of her way and let her into the magical workshop. Lozzie reached up and patted her on the head as she passed. She took up position next to

the door, settled her hands in front of her, and stared straight ahead.

“That was fucking awesome,” Twil said. “Kicked her arse.”

“You next, *laangren*?” Zheng purred from the kitchen. Twil cleared her throat and grimaced.

“Praem?” I spoke softly, and felt a strange catch in my throat. Praem turned her head to regard me, and I surprised everyone including myself, by giving the doll-demon a hug. A proper hug, a good squeeze. There was a lot to hug, but she didn’t return the gesture. I wonder if she knew how, or if I’d finally managed to embarrass her. “I’m so glad you’re alive,” I said.

“Alive,” Praem echoed.

I let go and stepped back, and had to wipe my eyes a little. “Well, alive. You know what I mean.”

“Heather,” Praem intoned, bell-like and clear, then returned to her ramrod-straight position, eyes forward to watch Felicity work.

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On one hand none of us trusted Felicity. I believed I understood her motivations, but what I knew of Evelyn’s childhood still invoked a latent horror at the mage’s presence in our home. The only thing I knew for sure is that when Evelyn woke, Felicity was absolutely not to be the first thing she saw.

And Evelyn would wake up. Of course she would. I had to keep repeating that to myself.

On the other hand, I finally had another capable adult in charge of at least one crisis. The relief was an almost physical thing, a lightness in my head and gut. But it didn’t last long. I had other tasks waiting.

“If we can’t get the dung, we’ll have to do it the other way. Blood.” Felicity dusted her hands off and stepped back to look at her contraption. “I’ve got clean needles in my bag, shouldn’t have to draw much, but-”

“From Eevee?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, who else?” Felicity waved vaguely. “But-”

“You’re gonna take blood from Evee?” Twil frowned like a wary dog.

Felicity blinked at her, wrong-footed. “Obviously. We are hoodwinking a demon, remember? What’s the soil like around here?”

Twil blinked at her. “ ... Soil? I have no idea, what?”

I shrugged. “I’m not a Sharrowford native, sorry, I don’t know either.”

We all glanced at Kimberly, down on the floor on her knees, hands shaking over occult symbols as she focused on painting them directly onto the floorboards. “Um ... you need clay, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Felicity said. “And lots of it, enough for a life-sized human figure. If the soil around here is clay-heavy, we could use it straight from your back garden. Save us time.”

“My ... friend, I suppose,” Kimberly said, carefully tucking a loose strand of auburn hair behind one ear. “Ginny, she runs an arts and crafts supply store. You met her, Heather, at the coven. I-I could call her, ask how much she has right now? Modelling clay, I mean.”

Felicity clicked her fingers. “That’ll do. That’ll do. Can any of you drive? I can’t leave this alone while we finish it,” she gestured at the magic circle. “Somebody needs to go haul clay.”

“Twil, I think that’s on you,” I said.

“Eh?” Twil squinted. “What are you on about? I can’t drive.”

“You can run fast and carry heavy loads.”

“She can?” Felicity asked. “Perfect.”

Twil huffed and rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m tired and flippant and terrified for Raine. The quicker we can do this, the better. Please, Twil?”

Twil glanced sidelong at Felicity, who already considered the problem solved. She was stooping down to supervise Kimberly’s work. “Heather,” Twil hissed between her teeth. “I can’t leave Evee here. What about ... you know? I know you’re not, like, defenceless, but ... ” She nodded sideways at Felicity, as awkward and conspicuous as an informant in a bad noir movie.

“Present,” Praem intoned from where she stood by the door. Twil jumped, startled, as if she’d forgotten Praem was there.

“I think Eevee has a capable enough bodyguard for now,” I murmured.

Forty five minutes later, Twil returned huffing and puffing. Hauling three massive sacks of modelling clay halfway across Sharrowford on her shoulders had sapped even her strength. She’d nabbed a huge bucket in which to mix the stuff too. With time barely to catch her breath, Felicity set her to work kneading the clay with a pair of rubber gloves on both hands, a garden trowel, and elbow grease.

“Double, double toil and trouble,” I whispered to myself, leaning against the wall and watching as the other ingredients went into the bucket. “Fire burn and cauldron bubble.”

Lemon juice, iron filings, several strands of Evelyn’s hair, a quarter-pint of motor oil and an eighth-pint of full-fat milk. And from Felicity’s bag – if she was to be believed – a dash of salt water taken from the Dead Sea, and ash from an Old Testament Bible consumed by fire.

Last but not least, a single syringe worth of Evelyn’s blood.

Felicity wanted to extract that herself. Twil stood in the way, barring the door.

“I’m the only one here with any medical experience,” Felicity said, her blind eye twitching. “You risk snapping the needle off in her arm if you pull it out wrong.”

“Still don’t like it,” Twil growled.

“It’s a clean needle. It’s never been used. I’d ... ” Felicity swallowed, struggled to get the words out. “Never try to hurt her, even unintentionally.”

“You don’t have to like it,” I said, the confrontation not helping my nerves. “Twil, let her work. We need to get this done.”

“Yeah, but-”

“And face it, either of us probably will snap the needle off. You’re jittery and worried, and I’m exhausted.”

Felicity moved to push past. A growl started in Twil’s throat.

Like an animating statue, Praem stepped forward and deftly palmed the empty syringe from Felicity's hand before any of us could react. She marched out of the ex-drawing room and up the stairs, leaving the rest of us exchanging surprised glances. Twil leapt after her. They returned less than a minute later, holding up a plastic tube filled with thick crimson.

"Blood," Praem announced. Felicity thanked her with an awkward nod.

In went Evee's blood. The clay took on a red sheen.

Two hours had turned into three, and the circle Felicity was building began to hurt my eyes and make me feel sick. The stench of clay and blood and citrus didn't help either. Or at least, that's what I told myself, leaning against the wall and downing more coffee. That's how I distracted myself from what I had to do, kept it bottled up until the right moment.

Eventually, I asked the question. "Is this going to take much longer?"

Felicity didn't bother to look up. "Another hour, perhaps. I'm working as fast as I can."

"An hour?" Twil grunted. "Fuckin' 'ell."

"Yes, an hour. Depends how fast you can slap together a basic human figure with all that clay. Time to get to it, I think."

I levered myself away from the wall and turned to Praem, on guard at the kitchen doorway.

"Can you ... " I started softly, not wanting to disturb the mages at work, but unsure what exactly I was asking, or why. Praem had proved herself capable already, she knew Felicity had to be watched. "I ... um ... "

I needed permission. Guilt clutched at my throat. Evelyn was still in a coma. Could I leave my best friend in other people's hands? A lump formed in my throat, thick and almost painful.

Praem met my eyes. A white emptiness stared back at me.

"Yes," Praem intoned, clear and loud. The others glanced up, and I flustered at the attention.

"It's nothing," I lied. "I'm just going to check on Lozzie. I may be

some time.”

“Right, well, yes,” Felicity said, already turning away.

Praem was still looking at me.

“Thank you,” I whispered, and slipped past her.

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I found Lozzie upstairs, curled up on the foot of my bed, dozing like a cat.

She’d excused herself from the magical workshop over an hour ago, with a whispered, intensely personal reason. She didn’t like to see that kind of magic. Reminded her of bad things, bad times, and bad people. I’d trusted her not to vanish Outside, if that was even possible right now, and she’d proved my trust well founded.

“Lozzie?” I murmured her name as I sat down on the bed, the floorboards creaking. “Lozzie?”

“Mmmm?” She made a sleepy sound, but her eyes stayed closed.

I almost laughed – hysteria threatening to break through my wire-tight nerves. “How can you sleep at a time like this?”

“Nap time, nap time,” she murmured. “Can’t help, so nap time.”

“Lozzie?” I swallowed, throat dry, almost unable to ask. “Do you know if your spirits have found anything yet? Anything about Raine?”

“Mmmm ... I’d know,” she mumbled. “Soon? They’ll be in the garden, maybe, in a bit.”

“... so, no then. Okay, okay.” I closed my eyes and blew out a slow, shaky breath.

I’d fetched the little plastic waste bin we kept in the bathroom, and when I placed it on the floor my hands started to shake. Just the caffeine. I tugged a corner of blanket over Lozzie’s shoulder, and pulled my legs up underneath me to keep my feet warm.

I’d hoped to do this alone, where I’d not be missed for an hour or two, but I was too nervous and too afraid to summon the focus to wake Lozzie.

Instead I reached down and adjusted the plastic bin.

There. Perfect position to catch vomit.

Outdoors, the sun was drooping toward mid afternoon on a winter's day, sending thin grey light through the window of the bedroom Raine and I shared. I could have locked myself in the bathroom and sat in the tub, but I needed to be here. With her.

The evidence of Raine's life was all around – her discarded clothes on the floor, crumpled jeans over the back of a chair, a very plain bra dropped carelessly next to the bed. Her books were stacked in a trio of loose piles, some fallen like discarded masonry from a crumbling tower, invaded and occupied by several of my favourites. Her posters adorned the walls, some old and dog-eared, from that far-away childhood home I'd probably never visit. A playstation controller sat in front of the television, undoubtedly and invisibly stained with the oils from her hands. Her scent was worked into the bedsheets, the smell of her hair on the pillows.

I knew all her textures here. The way she pulled a tshirt over her head. The way she'd hold a book open while reading it, bending the spine ever so slightly too much for my sensibilities. The way she sat when concentrating, cross-legged and serious, or when teasing me, leaning back on her arms. I saw her beaming confident smile in every blink of my mind's eye.

If I was to define Raine with hyperdimensional mathematics, this was the place to do it.

I closed my eyes, and began.

In retrospect, I made an incredibly stupid decision. I was exhausted, running on fumes and coffee and sheer stubborn determination and – I like to think – love, which is often the stupidest thing of all. Another two or three hours and perhaps Evelyn would be awake, perhaps there would be another way to find Raine, a way that did not involve crushing my consciousness in a vice of fire and acid. I knew I was fragile, on the edge of a collapse, the last of my energy used up to dispose of the bodies that morning. If the Fractal hadn't been on my arm, I'd have sworn I was close to a Slip. I felt halfway out of reality already, shaky and disconnected.

Just the coffee, I told myself.

Every minute without action was torture. I'd done my best to contain myself, dealing with crisis after crisis, but now other people

had taken over and I couldn't wait any longer. Neither could Raine. My heart quivered, because I was about to discover if I was strong enough to find her.

And if she was alive.

I'd thrown this brainmath together before, of course, when I'd searched for the not-Lozzie that had visited Kimberly's flat. The relevant equations still lurked in the depths of my unconscious mind. How to define time, space, position, how to use Evelyn's map of reality, how to weld it all together into a tool for my purposes. But I was missing one element, and that I would have to build from scratch.

I plunged my arms into the mud in the sump of my soul.

At least this time I didn't need to hide the pain. I cried out, gritting my teeth and whining at the white-hot daggers inside my skull as I pulled together the hyperdimensional mathematics I would require. Curling up, I tensed every muscle in my body to hold onto the contents of my stomach.

Time, space, they were simple, came to me with the ease of sticking a knife into my guts.

Quickly, quickly now, I told myself, before it overwhelms me.

Raine's scent in the air and her face in my memory and every facet of her life at my fingertips. Reduced, redefined, laid out in hell-maths from beyond reality.

Over a threshold of pain I hadn't known existed, quivering and choking on the air itself, my eyeballs on fire, I defined a human soul in hyperdimensional mathematics.

Raine.

A frozen explosion in my head, pain poised on the edge of an abyss, ready to drop me into darkness and oblivion – and it all happened then, all at once, a nano-second of consciousness expanded to infinite awareness.

Sharrowford itself laid out in alien terms. A thousand possible places, a million, a billion, more than I could account for with my my mind screaming and quivering like flayed meat. Not a process, because time meant nothing in that state. An instant of knowledge

of every possible place Raine had been or would ever be.

There.

Maths, describing a monkey. Every detail of meat and breath and chemistry and thought, but nothing of *Raine*, not in the way that I knew her. Not in the human way. A construct of energy and matter and time. That's all she was in the end. All any of us are.

Alive.

Should have felt relief; couldn't feel anything. Time meant nothing, so what of human emotion?

I had a location. Nothing so irrelevant as an address, the knowledge was far more pure than that.

Paused in that moment of frozen time, dimly aware of the pain and the crash waiting for me, I tried to push further. Scraps of brainmath suggested themselves, rising from oily depths, half-forgotten pieces of the Eye's lessons connecting up as I stared at this construct that was Raine, and realised I could bring her back.

I could select her, define her, and make her be here. We didn't have to rescue her at all, I could simply fix reality.

All I had to do was try harder, plunge myself into the abyss, drink the Eye's lessons in full and accept what I was changing into.

Why not? What did I have to lose?

I pushed that little bit further, and for a blink of time, I forgot what it was like to be a person.

Raine's lingering scent in the air saved me. Our bedroom saved me, the memory of what it felt like be fleshy and real, to cuddle with Raine in bed at night, her arms around me. Flawed and warm. I wanted that again, I wanted it so much, to be messy and sweaty, wanted to eat food and make out with Raine and get cold fingertips and have orgasms. Wanted to feel sun on my skin and hair under my hands and smell strawberries and get ill and stub my toe. Wanted to exist, with Raine.

I saw a monkey on a bed, a weird scrawny little thing full of chemicals and proteins, expiring in eighty years or less, her eyes screwed up, doubled over in pain and about to fly apart.

Oh, that's me, I thought.

And thinking made it so.

Gasping, shaking, my heart pounding hard enough to burst, breath heaving in and out on the verge of hyperventilation, every inch of my skin drenched in cold sweat, I was back. For the first time in my life, pain had never felt so sweet.

I managed to hit the target, vomited into the bin I'd placed earlier. Heather one, brainmath nil.

Then I whined like a stuck pig.

My head throbbed, my vision turning black at the edges. I curled into a ball and began to sob, overwhelmed, hiccuping and laughing and hugging myself. The pain was incredible, but so was the relief that Raine was alive – and that I was still here.

I could save Raine right now. The price was not death, the price was to leave behind being a person. Being flesh. Being me.

For a long time I laid on the bed, panting for breath, waiting for the pain to subside, staring at Lizzie's peaceful face. How had she slept through all my pitiful noises? Her eyes twitched under their lids, and she made a sleepy noise in her throat. Good Lizzie. If you're safe, this is all easier. I'd wake her in a minute and tell her where Raine was, how to find her, in case I passed out when I tried to stand up.

"You have to become a monster if you want to save her. You know that, don't you?"

A nightmare imitation of a little girl's voice in sulphur and ash, reaching from behind me, creeping over my side like skeletal fingers clutching at my ribs. A weight shifted on the bed behind me, where nobody should have been.

"Don't you want to save your girlfriend?" the voice continued, mocking and hissing. "It's not so bad, being like me. Give it a try."

The voice laughed, a horrible wet bubbly sound, a child's laugh as imagined by a serial killer.

"... Felicity's parasite?" I managed to croak, too drained to even turn my head to look. Instinct told me I was lucky to be so exhausted.

"Tssss, ugly word," the voice hissed, then purred as if through a

mouthful of drool. “Think what Raine would feel, if she knew you couldn’t do it.”

that which you cannot put down – 7.10

“Isn’t that what Raine does for you, Heather?” that little girl’s voice crackled behind my head, dripping darkness and acid. “Rescues you?”

A giggle like a chorus of nails down a blackboard.

“You’d be dead without her,” it continued. “And without her, you’ll be dead. Why can’t you take that final step, I wonder? So attached to your illusion of ego that you can’t let go for five minutes? Oh, but no, of course, it doesn’t take you minutes, it takes you seconds. Let go for five seconds, and you could save her – why not? Afraid?” A tickle of breath on my ear, the scent of dark chocolate in my nose. The voice dropped to a whisper forced through a mouth full of knives. “Maybe you like being helpless. You enjoy all the fuss. You want to be weak little Heather, pinned to the bed and *fucked* by your big strong dyke. You care about that more than you care about Raine.”

She – whatever she was – finally trailed off. A weight shifted on the bed again, as she rearranged herself.

My heart beat slow now, and everything ached, recovering from my brush with the border of ego-death. My eyes felt sticky, gummed open. The sun tilted through the window, bathing the bed in weak late-afternoon orange. Faint voices carried from downstairs, where the others still worked on saving Evelyn. Lozzie’s eyes twitched behind their lids.

“Are you done?” I croaked.

“... pardon me?”

“Are you done talking?”

I coughed, then winced in slow-motion from the sheer effort of expelling breath.

Over the course of a strange and unique life I have become

intimately familiar with exhaustion. Not run-of-the mill tiredness, or a healthy empty-tank after a hard day's work, but true exhaustion, usually known only by those going through chronic fatigue syndrome or tuberculosis or the brutality of chemotherapy. I knew the ins and outs of my body's limits, how far I could push myself, when to read the signs of collapse – and when to ignore the feeling.

Once you've spent enough time dead on your feet, you get a sense for when it's safe to lie still for five minutes, and when one simply must respond to a threat.

With my throat raw and stinging from bile, my head pounding like a jackhammer, my every fibre fragile and thin as my vision throbbed black and red, this petty little demon did not warrant the energy to roll over.

Which was lucky for me, because even lifting my head would take everything I had.

"Am I ... am I *done talking*?" the voice asked in disbelief.

"Are you going to help me or not?" I forced out, staring at Lozzie's sleeping face.

"Help you?"

"Yes? Obviously?" I coughed again, winced and wheezed. "Unless you're going to help me rescue Raine, there's no point talking to you. Far less listening."

A dainty sigh, a petulant little huff. I could almost feel her rolling her eyes.

"Oh, you're so boring," she drawled in the same hissing mockery of a little girl's voice, but with all the malice drained. She shifted on the bed again, and in my mind's eye I saw a little chin resting in a little hand, a little pout on a sullen face. "None of you are as fun as my Fliss. Completely unrepressed. If only I could get Kimberly alone, she might prove some sport. Or Evelyn. Oh, Eevee, so wrapped up in all her fears and desires. What she thinks she wants isn't what she really wants at all." The demon-voice sighed again.

"M'working on that," I mumbled.

"What was that, dearie?"

“Working on that.”

“Oh, are you now? Tch, you’ll probably screw it up. Or it’ll have a happy-little-ending, and we’ll all go home feeling sick.” Another huff, more old woman than little girl. “I do hope you fools and deviants don’t let her die, that would be so droll.”

I tested my neck muscles, lifted my head. An inch off the bed and my vision swam, but I clung hard to consciousness. Had to help Raine. Got one arm half underneath me and had to stop, panting for breath despite the hollow ache in my chest.

“Oh come on! Don’t pass out now, I won’t have anybody to play with,” the voice whined. “What am I supposed to do here, talk to the arachnids? They’re even worse than you humans, they don’t want to do anything but eat and sleep. Did you know you’ve got rats living under the house, a family of seven? They want to get in but they haven’t found a way yet. And there’s a pair of great big crows eyeing your chimney. Even the wildlife in the city is boring, boring, boring. And that great big idiot you have downstairs is guarding the fridge, I swear she knows I’m here and she’s winding me up. You’ve got so many sweets in there and I can’t get at them-”

“If you’re not going to help me,” I hissed, struggling to keep my head up, “I’ll make you.”

“Oh, I’ll help you, Heather.” The parasite rolled her eyes again, I swear I could feel it without seeing. “At least I can get a good love-triangle out of you if you try hard enough. Or a love-square? Is that a thing? Love rhomboid. Love-”

With herculean effort, I swung myself at the source of the voice. Not a tackle, just controlled falling over, almost collapsing onto the bed as I grasped for her. I’d grab her and brainmath her into whatever I needed; I’d done it to Zheng, I’d do it to this thing. I knew where Raine was and I would press-gang every last bit of help I could. Explanations could wait.

Nothing there.

I landed on the bedsheets, badly. Sharp spike of pain up my spine. Winced through my teeth.

Defeated, I lay on my back for several heartbeats, staring at the ceiling, kept conscious only by pain.

“Parasite?” I eventually said, but she did not return.

Another six or seven heartbeats and I forced myself to sit up again, inch by painful inch; couldn’t afford to fall asleep or unconscious now. I knew where Raine was, and I had to communicate it to the others. Wake Lozzie. How had she slept through that scratching, sticky voice?

Perhaps she hadn’t heard it at all. Perhaps that was the point.

“ ... Parasite?” I eyed the corners of the room. “Did you make me angry to keep me awake?”

No answer.

For a long moment I just sat there, kinked awkwardly, unwilling to lie back down but unable to lift an arm to wake Lozzie. When I finally worked up the energy to rub my stinging, aching eyeballs, the pain reached all the into the back of my head, as if my optical nerve itself was singed. My hand came back sticky with blood. I’d left a stain on the sheets.

I let out a tiny laugh.

I’d never been so happy to feel so much pain. To be alive, and me, and bleeding. My brush with the outer limits of hyperdimensional mathematics made reality seem as fragile as a soap bubble. I, Heather, the me I knew and understood in human terms, was a thin ghost of electrical signal and chemical reaction, skating across a bulb of grey meat inside my skull.

But right now, I was sitting on a bed in the orange sunlight, alive. Raine was alive, and the relief was like morphine.

And here was Lozzie, warm and dozing.

“Lozzie,” I croaked. “Lozzie.”

“Mmmmm?” she grumbled.

I waited another minute, or perhaps two, or ten, it was hard to tell, gathering my strength. Then I used far too much energy to give her a hug. An awkward one, yes, with one arm and no leverage, but I had to do it, remind myself I was here, in the flesh. I straightened back up and shook her shoulder as best I could.

“Lozzie.”

“Mmm—mm—mmmmmm—mmm,” she made a sleepy noise, distorted by the shaking.

“Wake up. I need you.”

That did the trick. Lozzie cracked one eye open, showed a hint of white.

“Didn’t you hear any of that?” I asked. “Lozzie ... Lozzie?”

At first I thought it was only her eye problems acting up, the permanently droopy eyelids of damaged extraocular muscles that I must ask her about someday.

“ ... Lozzie?”

Her eyeball swivelled and her head jerked, her body following half-way to a sitting position – a puppet rediscovering its strings. She made a soft throat-clearing sound, blinked twice, and finally I was looking at Lozzie again, bleary from a nap.

“Lozzie? Lozzie, what was that? Are you okay?”

“Mmmm-mm? I’m fine. Energy-saving.” She pulled a big sleepy smile, rubbed her eyes to clear her vision, then realised what she was looking at. Her mouth fell open. “Heather! Heather’s all bloody, no no, no.” Vibrating with worry, she lifted the hem of her pink poncho to wipe the blood from my face. I screwed up my eyes and winced.

“It’s fine. I had to do it,” I said, too weak to resist. “Lozzie- Lozzie, stop-”

“No, no more blood, it’s all okay, all okay now.”

“It- it is.” Gently, I took her hand. Couldn’t have held her back if she’d pushed, but she understood and relented. “Lozzie, I need you to listen. I know where Raine is.”

She sat up, rigid as a mongoose spotting a snake. “Where?! Where where where?!”

I could have laughed at the sound she made, but we both jumped at the sudden noise of heavy booted feet stomping up the stairs. Only one person currently in the house walked like that, but the bedroom door opened to reveal a surprise – Zheng stooped to peer at us both, and Praem waited primly by her side. Not a combination I’d expected.

Zheng raised an eyebrow at me. “Shaman?”

“I’m okay,” I croaked.

“Oh!” Lozzie lit up. “Is it time?”

“Preparations complete,” Praem intoned, then turned and marched off down the hallway, apparently satisfied I wasn’t in any real danger.

“Yes!” Lozzie beat a celebratory drum roll on the bed with both hands. I winced.

“Time for what?” I asked.

“The wizards are ready,” Zheng purred, then stepped into the bedroom and straightened up. The huge zombie directed a quizzical look in all directions, then wrinkled her nose.

“Zheng?”

“I smell a rat,” she rumbled.

“Yes,” I sighed. “That’s about right. The parasite said hello.”

“Ahhh?” went Lozzie. “Ahhhh?”

“Is that why you’re covered in your own vital fluids again, shaman?”

I shook my head. “I did a thing. I need to tell everyone. Now.”

“Time,” Praem intoned again as she stepped back into view. She carried Evelyn in a close embrace, one arm under my unconscious friend’s knees and the other supporting her back. Evelyn’s head lolled on Praem’s shoulder. She was drooling slightly. Even wrapped in blankets pulled from her bed, she looked so small and vulnerable, as fragile as I felt. A blank space hung where her right leg should be, and her withered left provided precious little body weight.

My heart could barely take that sight. I bottled it up, for now.

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“She’s there. Right there. Right there. I know it.” I jabbed the map with my finger again, then collapsed back into Zheng’s waiting arms, my body begging for rest.

The others all clustered around the drawing room table in Evelyn's magical workshop, save for Praem, still cradling Evelyn in her arms, standing by the completed device and waiting for the rest of us.

"Don't know that bit of Sharrowford." Twil clicked her tongue, peering close at the near-indecipherable map spread out on the huge table. She ran a finger along the street name – Barrend Road – and referred back to google maps on her phone, trying to match image to place. "Third house, third house along ... wow, this all looks real swanky. Yeah, look at this, rich people houses. This the place, Heather? Number seven?" She waved the phone under my nose, but my eyes were already fluttering shut.

"I can't- I only know position," I tried to explain again. "I don't know what it looks like."

Lozzie peered over my shoulder. "I know that place!"

"You do? Serious?" Twil asked. The phone was withdrawn.

"Mmmhmm, mmhmm! Lived there for maybe six months when I was reeeeeeally little. Family place."

"Your family? Like, your brother?" Twil asked, then huffed through clenched teeth. "Shit."

"Maybe!" Lozzie chirped.

"I-I think I saw it too, once," Kimberly ventured from somewhere behind us, a safe distance from Zheng. "Never went inside though. Some kind of safe house, maybe."

"Won't be safe, little wizard," Zheng purred. Her voice reverberated through the back of my skull, my head against the base of her chest. "Not for the likes of you or me."

Our only map that wasn't on a computer screen was unfortunately Evelyn's, the one she'd used to track the cult's pocket dimension spaces back during our first brush with them. Still covered in her red ink and scrawled notation and crossed out buildings and danger zones and connections, it barely resembled the city of Sharrowford at all, but I hadn't been up to squinting and scrolling on a phone. Zheng had carried me downstairs the same way Praem had carried Evelyn. I'd ignored everyone's shock and surprise at the bloody stains around my eyes, and demanded to be set down in front of the map.

Now I'd done all I could, and my body screamed for sleep, rest, to let go. Zheng held me up on my feet, one huge arm around my chest, the other under an armpit.

"Don't care about safe," I croaked. "I need her."

A moment of silence. I felt glances passed back and forth, and cracked my eyelids to see.

"We can get her," Twil said with a guilty grimace. "We totally can. But if we wake Evee first, she'll know what to do, right? She can help."

I shook my head – *no, dammit* – and the world span with it. Without my asking, Zheng scooped me up again – a dizzying trip into the air – and gently deposited me on the sofa, where I curled up and clenched down to halt a wave of nausea and dissociation. My vision wavered in and out of focus for a moment, then came back, along with everyone's voices.

"– in no state to be mounting a rescue, is she?" Kimberly was asking. "We need to wake Saye."

"We do, but ..." Twil said, hanging her head, wracked with guilt.

"I could do it!" Lozzie chirped. "Oh–"

"What about calling the–" Kimberly never finished.

"Evelyn," Praem intoned.

"Yes, yes, Evelyn," I hissed, my head aching. "But Raine's alive, I *have to*–"

"What I don't understand," Felicity's half-mumble somehow cut through the rest of us, clear and sharp despite the distortion of scarred lips. "Is how you did whatever you did. How can you know so accurately?"

"Just do," I hissed.

I looked up at Felicity's one staring eye. She had her arms crossed, a curious, cold expression on her face. Judging and weighing meat on the slab. Had Evelyn seen that face, staring down at her with a syringe in one hand and a saw in the other?

"You're no mage, Heather," she mumbled. "What are you?"

Incoherent anger welled in my chest, over-compensation for guilt. Flung out to the edge of my little monkey brain – as Zheng would call it – by exhaustion and fear for my friends, I bared my teeth at her.

“Um?” Felicity blinked at me, and the cold curiosity passed, replaced with trepidation and confusion. “Heather?”

“She does magic with her head, no wands required,” Twil grunted. “S’just how she works. Can we focus on waking Eevee now?”

“She does what? I’m sorry?”

“Me tooooo,” Lozzie hooted from her safe distance in the kitchen doorway, trailing off quietly.

“Raine,” I insisted. Her name was enough to make my point. “I need to-”

“We won’t be at this much longer than another half hour,” Felicity said.

“I have to-” I panted, squeezing my eyes shut, thinking of Raine, alone and trapped, alive for how much longer? “Somebody has to-”

“Ahhh shit,” Twil said. “She’s right, come on, fuck it.”

“We could split our forces,” Felicity said gently. “If I have any say in the matter? Send the demons for her.”

“*Evelyn*,” Praem intoned again.

“Delegate, shaman,” Zheng purred, so softly only I could hear, and a light bulb went on in my mind.

“Everyone shut up,” I croaked, worked a hand out in front of me and gave the entire room an unintentional glare. “Hand me my phone.”

Zheng raised an eyebrow – this wasn’t what she’d expected when she’d advised me. I ignored her, no energy for debate right now. Somebody pressed my phone into my hand. I pulled up the contacts list, pressed the most recently added, and let it ring on speaker-phone, too tired to hold it up to my ear.

“Didn’t think you’d contact me so soon,” detective Webb answered on the third ring. She lowered her voice, and in the background I heard office murmurs, the clack of a keyboard, muffled speech far

away. "Or are you just testing my number? That is you, Heather?"

"Yes," I croaked. "I found my girlfriend."

"Oh. Oh, that's good news then, right?" She laughed, half-exasperated. "Won't be needing the missing person's I literally just put in. Great. Hooray."

"Not hooray. I know where she is. In a house. Kidnapped. We can't go right now. Doing ... um, magic."

"... probably best you stick to that part then." Her voice dropped to a hiss. The background noise dimmed to nothing as she cupped the speaker. "Where's the address?"

"Address. Twil."

Twil held her own phone in front of my eyes. I rattled off the address, heard the scratching of a pen. Twil read it back to make sure.

"Hey there werewolf," Nicole said. "Yes, I know the street. That's a ... 'nice' neighbourhood. I'm gonna have to play this safe, no warrant, but I can fudge things a bit if I can get eyes on something – or someone – relevant."

"Please," I grunted. "You'll have company too."

"Oh?"

"Soon as we're done."

"Gotcha. Call you if I see anything ... weird. Or your girl."

"Please."

She ended the call. Before I even lowered the phone, Zheng growled.

"I'll go." She surprised me by crouching down on her haunches, eye-to-eye. "I will go to this house, shaman. When we're done here."

I frowned at her. "... why do you care?"

"Because I'm with you, shaman – that would be a lie." She grinned slowly, showing all her teeth. "No, because I want to catch Sarika before your tame police woman does. They'll throw her in a cell. I want to eat her heart."

Behind her, Twil pulled a face. Felicity frowned at Zheng as if watching some cartoon jungle savage, and Kimberly turned a little green around the gills. Over past the kitchen door, still keeping a safe distance from all the upsetting magical detritus, Lozzie looked away too.

I didn't care.

Raine's safety was more important than who or what rescued her. If it took a tame police detective and an emancipated demon, so be it. I did not have to be present. I only had to ensure it happened.

"Why not now?" I croaked.

Zheng cast a glance at the magical apparatus which filled the room. "You may have need of me."

"This is going to work," Felicity said. "Perfectly."

Zheng shrugged and stood up, talking to me. "Do not count on me, shaman. There will be things in there, like me and unlike me. I go to scout, not to conquer." She gave me a slow, serious nod. "Wake your magician friend. Let us both hope she is as skilled as you imply."

"You seriously gonna go back out into the streets looking like that?" Twil asked.

"Looking like what, *laangren*?"

"All bloody and stuff."

Twil had a good point. Zheng still wore the clothes she'd arrived in, covered in dried blood and concrete dust, one arm of her trench coat missing. She was seven feet tall and built like a muscle worshipper's wet dream, and there was no way she'd pass unnoticed down a Sharrowford street.

"Moving without travelling," she purred. "Without the shaman in my wake."

"... spooky," I grunted, not really caring right now. Zheng shrugged, huge and rippling, and stepped away to lounge against the wall.

"That's it then?" Twil asked. "We ready to rock?"

"To rock," Praem agreed.

I cast a judgemental eye over Felicity's completed mechanism, as much as I could stand with the pain in my head and the weakness inside my chest.

The spell to extract Evelyn's unwelcome visitor consisted of two components. The first, the ceiling-height pyramidal brass cage, had blossomed while I was upstairs. Many of the spaces between the pipes were filled out with thin copper slats, each of those punched with holes in precise, geometrical patterns. It had something of an antique computer about it, a difference engine with all the moving parts missing.

In the open space beneath the pyramid's square base, a nest of pillows waited to receive Evelyn's unconscious body.

The second component was inside the magic circle Kimberly had spent hours painstakingly painting onto the floorboards, parts of it patched and altered with masking tape, other bits scrawled on sheets of pinned paper in blood or other fluids. The unbroken triple-ring of esoteric symbols and inhuman language stung my eyes, but it was only a means to an end. A real cage.

Inside the circle lay a clay figure on its back. Wet and rough, flat and genderless. Not quite life-size, maybe only four feet tall, with tube-shaped arms and legs and a ball for a head, finger-poked holes for eyes and a slash for a mouth. Twil had spread a sheet underneath the thing, but I think the state of the floorboards was a little beyond saving at this point.

"Is it safe?" I asked.

"Safe?" Kimberly echoed. "That- that's a good question. Is it? Should we all stay in here, o-or leave?"

Felicity caught the direction of my gaze. She nodded at the circle. "The circle will contain it, whatever it is, and giving it a body will allow us to uh ..." She cleared her throat and waved a hand.

"Smash it up," Twil said.

"Yes, well put. Giving it a body will allow us to destroy it. Or question it. Or whatever you like, really. I only suggest not breaking the circle. We know this Outsider got into Evelyn via a remote connection which you were both looking at, which means it might have some kind of sight-transmission vector, but the circle will block that too."

“Yeah, I get to punch a golem to death, cool,” Twil said. “Can we start now?”

“Yes,” Praem said, voice ringing like a bell.

“Almost.” Felicity held up a gloved hand. Her good eye slid across me, hesitated, then turned to Kimberly. “There’s one last thing we’ll need, just in case. Kim, I’d like you to go to my car, please, and bring me the toolbox from the back.” She held out her car keys.

“Um ... okay?” Kimberly took the keys like a bundle of spiders.

“Twil, if you please,” Felicity continued. “It’s probably best if you go with her, too. It’s not safe out of doors right now, is it? Unless you happen to be a demon-host,” Felicity gave a little sigh and tried to smile, but she was bungling this trick. Even exhausted beyond words, I saw through it a mile away. Thankfully, so did Twil.

She squinted at Felicity. “I can go get your toolbox. Toss me the keys, Kim.”

“No, no.” Felicity cleared her throat. “Kimberly should go. I’m going to ... to ... make one last alteration to the circle, and it may prove upsetting to ... uh ... sensitive minds.”

Twil squinted harder. Felicity was too obvious.

“You’re a bad liar,” I croaked.

“Pants on fire!” Lizzie shot from the doorway.

“Yeah, the hell is your game?” Twil asked.

Felicity cringed, shrinking back, a vampire exposed to sunlight. She shot an uncomfortable look at Zheng, who was eyeing her with silent predation. “I ... oh, alright. I would like to speak to Heather alone, for a few minutes, without an audience.”

“You’re having a laugh,” said Twil.

“What about?” I asked, curiosity piqued. “We’re still on a time limit.”

“No, I am not ‘kidding’.” Felicity swallowed. She glanced at Praem, still holding Evelyn, and at Zheng. “They can stay, if you want some kind of insurance that I’m not going to betray you. This is between me and Heather, but I don’t care what a demon-host thinks.”

Twil opened her mouth to complain, but I got there first with a wordless hiss of frustration. "S'fine."

"Heather, come on," Twil hissed.

"I want to hear what she has to say. Praem and Zheng will be right here."

"Here," Praem echoed.

"Shaman."

"There you go. Lozzie," I called to her softly. "You too. Just for a minute."

"Mmm? Mmm! Right-right."

Felicity raised her chin in defiant shame as the others went in to the kitchen. Twil gave her one last warning glare before she shut the door on us.

"How well does this house insulate sound?" Felicity asked, eyeing the door.

"Well enough. Say your bit."

Felicity fixed me with a stare, as intense from her blind eye as from the healthy one. For a moment, the words stuck in her throat.

"She appeared to you, didn't she?"

I raised an eyebrow. Or at least I thought I did, almost too worn out to tell. "She?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Your parasite."

Felicity swallowed, controlling herself with an effort of will. Fear? "What did she say? How much did she tell you?"

"How can you tell I met her?" I asked.

"I just ... I felt it, when she decided to manifest. What did she tell you?"

I shook my head, squinting at Felicity's borderline panic, too tired to draw her out with a cruel lie. "Not much. Tried to taunt me about Raine, then ... went off on a tangent. Seemed kind of petulant. Is that all?"

Felicity blew out a long shuddering breath. She nodded. "That's all. I- ... she- she exists to torment me. I thought she may attempt to turn you all against me, that's all."

"Mmmhmm," I grumbled. "While we're alone, I have a question for you, too. Might not get another chance."

"Yes? Yes?" Felicity blinked at me, distracted by her own relief.

"You're the doctor, aren't you?"

And with those few words, all Felicity's focus of the last few hours drained away, along with the colour in her face. She went grey and pale, a hollow space forming behind her good eye, the same way she'd looked when she'd first set eyes on Evelyn this morning.

"I ... never finished medical school, if that's what you mean. Not a doctor, never made it."

"Evelyn said the doctor who performed her amputation was an associate of her mother's. Operated drunk."

Pain, shame, self-loathing, all twisted and attenuated by Felicity's unique scarring, as if cut off halfway across her face. It gave the terrible illusion that she could only half-feel, never concluding, never ending, no closure.

"You try taking a bone saw to a nine year old girl while sober," she hissed at me, voice barely above a whisper, jaw clenched. She swallowed, hard, as if she couldn't get her own saliva down.

"You could have-"

"Could have what?" she hissed again, eye flicking at the closed door and then at Praem, at the wrapped bundle in her arms. She ignored Zheng completely. "Refused? Her mother would have done it herself, given her too much morphine or failed to tie off an artery. I had no choice."

"You wanted to save her," I said, not unkindly, my own anger blunted in the face of this toxic self-hate.

"I saw myself in her." Felicity sniffed, gestured at her own burned face, gave a sardonic laugh. "It's not exactly difficult. I was supposed to be an older sister, something like that, but my courage failed. I tried to swan back into her life after her mother's death, but she knows what kind of monster I am. I can't make it right."

This,” she gestured at the spell she’d built to save Evelyn. “Doesn’t make it right. But I’m doing it anyway. I understand, you care, you need to know why. But why doesn’t matter.”

“Just that we do it regardless,” I said.

Felicity nodded, couldn’t meet my eyes.

A knock sounded on the door. “You two done yet?” Twil called out.

“Almost,” I croaked.

“I’m glad she got to grow up,” Felicity murmured, looking at Evelyn’s face. Praem said nothing, no hint of accusation in her eyes as she watched the mage. “I only wish she hadn’t taken after her mother. At all.”

= =

Nobody *likes* magic.

Hyperdimensional mathematics is scary enough, and that’s confined to the inside of my own head. With ‘true’ magic, the mechanics are all on display, violating reality in full view of our five senses, smuggling the principles of Outside into our world through the cracks in the programming, God’s mistakes, the rat-holes in existence. Even the smallest and most simple magical spell comes with a cost to both sanity and physics – let alone on the scale of complexity Felicity was about to attempt.

With Evelyn deposited beneath the brass pyramid and tucked up safely inside her sheets, Felicity had advised the rest of us to step back to a safe distance, though Praem silently refused and Zheng scoffed. I didn’t have the energy to move from the sofa, clutching my mobile phone in hope that detective Webb would call back and tell me she’d found Raine. Somebody gave me a spare blanket, wrapped it around my shoulders and neck. Lozzie, I think, before she retreated to peer from the kitchen doorway again, more wary than the rest of us.

Felicity closed her eyes and muttered a few words under her breath. For a moment I thought that was it, that she’d begun without ceremony. Then she took a deep breath and asked, “Is everyone ready? Once I start, it’ll be dangerous to stop.”

I realised Felicity had been offering up a prayer. To what, I never found out.

“Yeah, go, go,” Twil said.

“Get on with it, wizard,” Zheng rumbled. Felicity flinched.

“I don’t wanna waaaatch,” Lozzie stage-whispered from the doorway.

“Alright.” Another sharp sigh of self-preparation. “Alright. Here I go.”

She was true to her word; from the first scrap of Latin out of her mouth to the final sweating, blood-spitting hiss of pain forced from her raw throat, the whole process took less than fifteen minutes, according to the clock on my phone.

If Felicity had come here seeking punishment for the past, she got it, but the backwash hit the rest of us too.

She started with Latin, a string of commands followed with a sort of repeated mantra that rose in her throat to a droning sound, vibrating inside my skull. Both her hands gripped specific points of the brass pyramid. Twil winced as the sound grew, and Lozzie retreated almost completely into the kitchen, hiding behind the door like a cat spooked by a vacuum cleaner. Kimberly hunched, shaking and turning her eyes away before the main event arrived.

Felicity left Latin far behind, skirted the limits of the human vocal apparatus with a language that sounded as if spoken by a monster, from underwater, while gagged. Glottal stops, clicks, rolling rattles. The air seemed to hiss as if trying to reject the words. Lozzie clamped her hands over her ears. Zheng grit her teeth and made fists.

The temperature in the room began to drop.

Felicity had to pause more than once to spit gobbets of bloody phlegm into the bucket we’d used to mix the clay, her breathing distorted by what the magic was doing to her lungs and throat. She wiped her mouth on a handkerchief, forged on through the next verse as flash-frost formed on the brass and our breath made plumes of steam in the growing cold.

“Can’t take this,” Twil hissed, one eye squeezed shut with the other half-open.

“Mm,” I grunted.

The effect was unique. Felicity's voice never rose a single decibel above normal speech. She didn't work herself up into a frenzy of chanting, seemed almost affectless as she recited the invisible mechanics of her spell, but it *hurt*. It hurt my ears, it hurt the air itself, it hurt reality.

Towards the end, Evelyn began to choke.

Jerking on the floor, snorting from the world's worst sleep apnea. Praem had to catch Twil around the middle to prevent her interrupting. The choking didn't bother Felicity, and Evelyn did not start to turn blue.

The change was so subtle, almost invisible.

I'd expected something to emerge from Evelyn. Perhaps a spider would climb out of her mouth, or a black cloud of evil-looking mist would issue from her lungs, or a silent film phantom would rise from her body. I should have learnt by now, magic did not work like that. No fireballs and black cats, no neat answers to one's expectations.

A trickle in the air. A distortion, like heat haze. It reared up like a snake, but I'm not sure all of us saw it. Felicity did, because she flinched. Like water drawn downhill and into a drain, it slid across the room and burrowed into the waiting vessel of clay.

A tapeworm. A real parasite. That's what it reminded me of.

Evelyn sat bolt upright, eyes still closed, snorting out a terminated snore. Half in surprise and half in exhaustion, Felicity let go of the brass pyramid and fell over on her backside.

"Evee! Did it work?!" Twil pulled free of Praem – let go, I suspect. "Shit, is she ... herself?"

"Yes." Felicity nodded, staring at Evelyn, trying to get to her feet on shaking legs. "Yes, it's in the- in there." She pointed at the clay figure. "Won't be able to get out."

Still sitting upright with her eyes closed, Evelyn made a sound that the uninitiated might have mistaken for non-human, a groan like an irritated bear exiting hibernation far too early. She pushed and twisted an arm free of her sheets and rubbed numbly at her own face.

Her mouth opened. A dry click. We all held our breath.

“ ... I have to take a shit,” Evelyn croaked.

“Evee!” Twil lit up. “Yeah that’s her. Evee!”

Twil went down on her knees and all but shoved the brass pyramid off Evelyn, then grabbed her around the shoulders in an unexpected hug.

“Argh! Get off me, you bloody mongrel.” Evelyn half-fought, struggling to free another arm and push against Twil’s embrace. Discreetly, Felicity picked herself up off the floor and backed away, caught between staring at Evelyn and a hasty retreat, a shy and pained look in her eyes.

“Evee,” I added, too exhausted and too flush with relief to realise what would happen when she opened her eyes. “Welcome back.”

“Wel- what? What is- argh, I said get off!” Her eyes squinted open, sore and unused against the sudden light. She pulled a grimace to end all grimaces. “Why am I-”

“You’re okay!” Twil said “Fuck yes, you’re okay-”

Kimberly put her hands together. “Oh, it worked, oh, oh thank the Goddess.”

Praem seemed unconcerned, having moved to stare at the now-inhabited clay golem. Zheng was staring at it too.

Evelyn blinked several times, struggling to get her eyes around what she was seeing – the huge brass cage towering over her, Twil ecstatic with relief, seven feet of worryingly familiar zombie muscle, Lozzie’s elfin face peering through the doorway. To her credit, she took all that in her stride, scowling and dehydrated as she was.

“Some freaky shit’s been going down,” Twil was trying to tell her. “But you’re alright, you’re gonna be alright.”

I turned to Felicity, far too late, and hissed, “Leave the room.”

“Heather?” Evelyn said, and saw my exhausted, blood-rimmed eyes. “You look like how I feel. And ... ”

And Felicity, caught in the act of trying to back out of the room, but too enraptured by the sight of Evelyn awake. The two mages made eye contact.

Felicity's hands went up and her head went down. "I'm leaving, I'm leaving, I'm leaving."

"Yes, that would be for the best," I hissed.

Evelyn froze, but for a moment I thought it was all going to turn out okay. After all, she had just woken from what I assume was the single longest sleep of her life, in desperate need of food and drink and a sit on the toilet. She was out of energy, befuddled and drained, wrapped in a sheet and luckily with nothing close at hand to throw, no lethal weapons nearby, and certainly no magic at her fingertips.

"Not a dream then," she whispered.

Evelyn damn well near managed to throw the whole of *Twil* at Felicity.

that which you cannot put down – 7.11

“Get out!”

“I’m gone, I’m gone, yes. I’m so sorry Evelyn, I’m so sorry, I-”

“Out! All of you, out!”

“Evee.”

“Out!”

“Evee, what- ow- fuck- don’t-”

“Evee,” I tried again, too exhausted to raise my voice above the pandemonium.

Felicity was obeying the screeched command without protest, stumbling into the kitchen to avoid the white-hot fury croaking from Evelyn’s sandpaper throat – and to avoid her own shame. For once in Evelyn’s life, anger failed to cover her real reaction, defensive fear and shaking panic. The sight of Felicity’s face had succeeded where confusion and disorientation – and Zheng, towering over her – had not. Despite nearly 12 hours of demon-possessed coma, for twenty seconds Evelyn fought like a cornered fox.

Twil had not expected to be used as a makeshift projectile, and that was the only reason Evelyn’s meagre strength managed to push her halfway across the floorboards in a clatter of detritus and surprised werewolf. She’d tried to return. Evelyn lashed out.

“Get off! Get off!”

“Evee, it’s me! It- ow. It’s me! It’s Twil!”

Evelyn stopped trying to hit her, staring, blinking, throat bobbing with a swallow dry as the desert. She tried to draw her legs up, then realised one of them wasn’t there, slipped, half-fell. Twil caught her.

“Get off me! I said get out, are you deaf?” Evelyn screamed in

Twil's face. "Out!"

"Alright, alright!" Twil threw her hands up in surrender. Evelyn glared at her, at Kimberly, at me, at the walls, at the open doorway to the kitchen. Twil retreated and Kimberly scurried past her, almost as terrified as Evelyn but hiding it far better. Lizzie ducked out of the way, vanishing into the kitchen, covering her head as if under bombardment.

Evelyn cast around, wild-eyed, propping herself up on one hand. "Where the bloody hell is my leg?"

"Upstairs," Praem intoned. Evelyn flinched, jerked around to find the source of Praem's voice. The doll-demon stood perfectly still, staring down at the clay golem. Zheng was doing the same, though with a little less stillness.

"Then get it!"

Praem did not obey. Praem did not move a muscle.

"Praem. Damn you, I-"

"Evee," I croaked at her again.

"I said out!" Evelyn whirled on me, lurched on the spot, clutching the blanket around her shoulders. She blinked once, almost as if surprised to see me. "Let me- you- I can't-"

"Shaman?" Zheng purred.

"Yes, that means you too, you ruddy great *thing*," Evelyn spat, turning on her. "Kill me or get out." She jerked an arm at the door, muscles not working properly.

"I stay right here, wizard," Zheng purred.

"Evee," I tried again.

"Get-"

"Evee, I can't walk unaided right now."

Evelyn opened her mouth to shout at me again, then closed it and swallowed, wincing at her dry mouth. She looked from me to the brass pyramid, to the huge magic circle on the floor, to the clay golem and up at Zheng, brows knitting in thought. She even looked at Twil with her hands up, waiting at safe distance in the doorway,

then down at herself. Her brain finally allowed her to see what was in front of her eyes.

"Makes two of us," she said, eventually.

"Mm," I grunted.

"Are you like, safe to approach now?" Twil ventured.

"No," Evelyn snapped, then faltered. "I-I, not ... right now."

"Okay. Cool, we're cool," Twil said. "It's gonna be okay. We're okay."

"What is *she* doing here?" Evelyn hissed through clenched teeth. I didn't have to ask who 'she' was. Evelyn's eyes flicked to the doorway again, and the implication of Felicity hiding out there beyond sight.

"It was the only way," I said. "I'm sorry. We thought you were going to die."

"Of *what*? All I remember is the ... dreams like- ... this was Raine's bloody idea, wasn't it? Where the hell is she?"

"Kidnapped."

Evelyn didn't have anything to say to that. She stared at me, a slow change coming across her face, a falling away of the anger as distraught horror peered back at me. She looked at Twil. Twil nodded. She looked at Praem, Praem looked back. She looked at Zheng.

"And what in all hell is this thing doing here?" she asked. "And talking?"

"Wizard," Zheng rumbled by way of greeting.

"Best not call her a *thing*," I suggested.

"Yes, yes," Evelyn waved a vague hand, then rubbed the bridge of her nose. "What the hell is going on? No, no, not you," she pointed at Twil. "Heather, you tell me. Explain."

I told her.

As I told her, the clay golem began to steam. The matter could not contain what now lay within. Praem and Zheng both stood on guard, one impassive, hands folded, back straight, the other

brooding and flexing her hands and then finally squatting down like a Russian gangster about to threaten a late-paying debtor.

Short, to the point, the skeleton of facts bare of details. Everything since she'd passed out last night. So absurd when put into plain language, but I lacked the energy for editorialising. Whisked away to Wonderland, but saved by my lost sister and Lozzie. Woke up in a building possessed by the memory of Alexander Lilburne's body, and freed a giant zombie. Wave hello to Zheng, yes, that's right. Raine's been kidnapped and we had two corpses on our hands and oh by the way we have a Sharrowford police force detective on our side now, because I broke her mind. Felicity was our only choice for waking you from a coma and there's a demon in that lump of clay behind you. Any questions?

Evelyn did not have any questions.

"Then you woke up," I ended. "And threw Twil."

"Yeah. Ow," Twil added.

Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut and put a hand to her face. "I can't deal with this all at once."

"Yeah," Twil said. "You're telling us."

"Evee. Evee, I'm glad you're okay. That's what matters."

"Yes, well," Evelyn huffed. "That remains to be seen, doesn't it?" She eyed the gently steaming clay golem. "Hopefully this cunt hasn't tried to rewire my lungs to breathe methane, or routed my piss into my spinal fluid."

"We'd probably know that by now."

Evelyn tried to stretch her shoulders and let out a grunt of pain. "Thought it was all a bad dream."

"You were aware?"

"Oh, shit," Twil whispered.

Evelyn waved a hand, brushing the cobwebs away from her mind. "Fever dreams, I ... Twil, you want to make yourself useful?"

Twil visibly perked up. "Yeah. Yeah, what do you need?"

"Go get my leg."

“Right you are.”

“Please,” Evelyn added as Twil left.

“Evee?”

“Not in front of her,” Evelyn hissed. “Fever dreams, but- but yes. Wasn’t like when I was little. Not conscious, no communication, just ...” She waved incoherently at her own skull. “And then I wake up and see *her*, and none of it was a dream.” Evelyn swallowed hard again, dry as sand. “Think I was winning though. Bastard thing.”

“What was it like?”

“I wasn’t playing chess against it in my head, that’s for sure.”

We shared exhausted silence for a long moment. Evelyn squinted in dehydrated pain, trying to hold together the shreds of her dignity. Out in the kitchen, Lozzie peered around the door frame. Evelyn looked up and Lozzie froze.

“Oh. You,” Evelyn croaked.

Lozzie retreated again. I took several deep breaths and roused myself.

“Zheng,” I said. “Time to go.”

Zheng didn’t respond to me, but instead looked up at Praem. A silent communication passed between the demon-hosts, and Praem resumed watching the unmoving golem. Zheng stood up and rolled her shoulders like a mountain shrugging. “Shaman.”

“Extra points if you bring her back,” I managed.

Zheng flashed a crescent of teeth, and stalked out of the room. I saw Lozzie scurry after her briefly, heard a muffled exchange of voices, and the front door open and close, locks rattling.

“You are going to have to explain her in more detail,” Evelyn said.

“Yes.”

“A lot more detail.”

“I know.”

Evelyn disentangled one arm from her bundled sheet and held out a hand to me. “Help me up, you’re going to have to be my hobbling

stick. I can't wait for my leg."

"Evee, I can't stand up unaided right now."

"Oh. Oh, yes. Well." She glanced over at Praem instead.

"And I think she's occupied with guard duty," I said.

"Quite." Evelyn grimaced. "That wasn't empty rhetoric earlier. I need to get up or we're going to have another crisis."

"Hm?"

"I'm dying for a shit."

"Oh." If I hadn't been so tired, I would have laughed.

"And I'm not going alone. Not with *her* inside the house. Her and her vile demonic pet."

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Over the next half hour the group drifted apart, human wreckage flung far and wide by centrifugal force, denied the anchor of coherent leadership with me out of commission.

Twil helped Evelyn to the bathroom, to the sound of much complaining and grumbling, half of it performative and half of it real. Kimberly vanished upstairs somewhere, as far from the magic as possible, to light up and fill her bloodstream with THC. Didn't blame her. Lozzie flitted about, airy and distant, a confusing half notion on the edge of my vision.

Felicity kept her head so far down she was practically subterranean. I think she actually went outdoors to sit in her car.

Pressure and time brought us back together, two things we now had in abundance.

Pressure, time, and morbid fascination.

At first it was only Praem and I. Me hunched over on the old sofa, clutching my phone in nervous hope, trapped halfway between exhausted sleep and sleepless fear; Praem stood on guard over the occupied magic circle, her eyes locked on the gently steaming clay golem as it began to change.

Lozzie came next, venturing back into the magical workshop to rouse me with water and a peanut butter sandwich. My little angel

in a poncho, bringing protein and hydration. I drank the water, and forced down several bites of the sandwich, though it tasted like cardboard and sat in my stomach like lead. I assumed Lozzie would be driven off by the sight of the thing in the circle, as it slopped and slid and pulled itself into a sitting position like a drunken paraplegic, but I'd underestimated her constitution, how she was used to all this.

She settled on the sofa, head against my shoulder. "It's like claymation," she whispered, as if we were watching a film and she didn't want to talk over the dialogue.

"Mm."

The Outsider in clay began to explore the limits of its prison, trapped inside the triple-layered magic circle. Were the changes a response to imprisonment, or was it warping its vessel into something approximating its true form?

More importantly, how could we sit there and watch it happen? Distantly I knew I should be more afraid, more disgusted, but I didn't care.

Perhaps because Praem was unconcerned. She knew the circle would hold. I trusted her judgement.

Nothing to do with Lozzie nuzzling my neck, her hand slipping into mine and our fingers intertwining. Nothing to do with the scent of her, her body heat pressed against my side, her knee in my lap. Lozzie and I snuggled and warmed each other like a pair of small animals while we watched a horror from another world unfold itself in clay.

Touches only Raine and I would normally share, stripped of any sexual meaning, my mind too fuzzy with exhaustion to question the skinship. Of course, there was one other who I'd touch like this, one other with whom I'd share my body without a single hint of sexuality, without hesitation, without even thinking.

I was treating Lozzie like nine-year-old me had treated my twin sister.

Lucky me, too tired to feel guilty.

Eventually we heard Evelyn stomping around again, grumbling at Twil, her walking stick and unshod prosthetic foot clacking against

the floorboards. They clattered around in the kitchen and the microwave came alive with a slow electric hum. A face looked in on us briefly, then froze, eyes going wide at the contents of the circle.

“Um,” Twil said, and made it sound like ‘oh fuck’. She bristled, a hound surprised by a deep-sea creature.

“S’fine,” I croaked.

“Yeah, it’s perfectly fine!” Lozzie chirped.

Twil couldn’t tear her eyes away from the circle. “Uh, is it, like, safe? That does not look safe. This is not safe.”

“Safe and sound,” Praem intoned.

“It’s trapped inside the circle,” I said. “Kim’s better at this than she gives herself credit for.”

“Twil?” Evelyn’s voice called from the kitchen. “Twil, what are you doing?”

“Right, right then,” Twil muttered. “Um. Just ... shout? If it-”

“*Twil.*”

“Yeah, yeah, coming.”

Lozzie and I slipped back into our wordless skinship, and I slipped down into dark thoughts, cushioned by the physical reality of Lozzie’s hand on my belly and her head on my shoulder. She anchored me, as inanimate comfort could not. I drifted on the very edge of consciousness, one eye on my mobile phone, one eye turning inward.

“Ugly bastard, isn’t it?”

“What? Oh.”

Evelyn stood in the doorway, leaning on her walking stick, looking more worn-out and shaky than I’d ever seen her before. She wore a fresh – if not clean – change of clothes, armoured in an over sized sweater and pajama bottoms and slippers. She’d been standing there for minutes, slowly working her way through some microwaved delivery mechanism for salt and fat, watching the Outsider in the circle. I hadn’t noticed her.

“Ugly,” Praem agreed, voice clear as a bell amid the static in my

brain.

"I think it's kinda cute," Lozzie said.

Evelyn eyed her too. Lozzie went stiff. I grunted a complaint, but Evelyn was either too grumpy or too tired to care.

"How do I treat you, then? Lauren, Lozzie?" she asked. "What are you?"

Lozzie bobbed her head, halfway between animal submission and a sitting curtsy. "... Heather's ... friend?"

"Yes," I grunted.

Evelyn chewed slowly, swallowed, and sniffed. "Good enough."

"Yes," again.

"Yes, yes." Evelyn dismissed the concern with a jerk of her chin, indicating the disgusting thing trapped inside the circle. "Are you sure you want to sit there, watching that?"

I grunted an affirmative. Evelyn cocked an eyebrow.

"Thinking," I expanded. "Hard to explain."

"If you change your mind, Twil can carry you upstairs. I understand you've been awake and going for too long, Heather. I can ... you know. Take over now?"

I shook my head. "Where is Twil?"

Evelyn shrugged. "Sent her upstairs. Digging for my pills."

"Pills?"

Evelyn stomped into the room and very carefully joined Lozzie and I on the sofa, easing herself down with a pained wince. She rubbed at her hip and flexed her back, sore from hours lying in bed.

"Bastard thing could at least have grown me a new leg."

"Can they do that?" Lozzie asked, all innocent eyes.

"It's a joke."

"Be cool if they could."

"Mm."

We all stared at the demon in the circle. Three fragile little apes

clustered shoulder-to-shoulder, while Praem took point.

The Outsider had begun to work on its clay-based prison even before it had figured out how to sit upright – simulating muscle fibres inside the clay, I assumed, similar to what I'd seen earlier that morning in Praem's exposed wooden bones – but the process had accelerated, the steam trickling off into a thin trail as the golem left behind even the rudiments of human form.

Legs and arms had been absorbed into the trunk. The head had joined the neck, no distinction between the parts. The mouth had vanished but the eyes had deepened into cracked black pits that seemed to open onto depths far deeper than the clay could possibly provide. The torso lost all coherence, flayed ends fluttering like tattered cloth in wind, and the back had sprouted a double-dozen hooked tentacles, all of them probing and feeling the boundary of the Outsider's magical cell.

It looked like a ragged sheet dragged over a bundle of rotting squid.

Disgusting and weird, yes, but not disturbing to the senses. Clay molded the Outsider's true form into a cartoon of itself, softened the effect. Lozzie was right, it did look a bit like claymation.

I suspected that access to real flesh would have resulted in a far less endurable sight.

Is that what it would have turned Eevee into, if she hadn't been already immune?

"Clay's easier to work with," Evelyn said, as if reading my thoughts off my face. "Faster, but rougher. Nothing up here to base itself on," she tapped her forehead. "It's defaulting to its own norm."

"Eevee," I managed after a moment. "Are you ... okay?"

She looked at me, one eyebrow raised. Coughed. "No. No, I am pretty far from okay."

I nodded. "Stupid question."

"But I am alive. Which is good, all things considered. Thank you."

"I was so worried about you," I croaked, let my eyes close for a second of rest.

"Yes, yes. I gather everyone was."

“Welcome home,” Praem said. We all stared at her. Evelyn frowned. “You had a similar experience, no?” she asked, but Praem just stared back.

“Praem was very protective-” I started

“Tsss,” Evelyn hissed, frowning and embarrassed. “I know, I know. Twil told me already.”

The bundle of rotting squid inside the circle lashed its tentacles back and forth, reaching up to the ceiling and filling the invisible cylinder of its prison, before subsiding in defeat once more, having found no egress.

“Can it hear us?” I asked.

“No ears,” Evelyn said. “Unless it figures out how to grow some. Or maybe it has other sensory apparatus. Maybe those tentacles. Who gives a shit right now? Your Tenny doesn’t have ears, but then pneuma-somatic life isn’t the same as things from Outside.”

“Wish I could ask it why it’s here,” I murmured.

Evelyn frowned at me like I’d suggested skinning my own face. “If you want to lose your mind, go right ahead.”

“It’s from the Eye. It’ll know things.”

“*Things*? Yes, I’m certain it will, but I’d sooner rummage through the thoughts of a cannibal psychopath.”

“I think I should try,” I said quietly. Evelyn shook her head, huffed, and crossed her arms.

After all, here was an emissary from my true foe.

The Sharrowford cult was nothing really. Incompetent and subverted, couldn’t even hold onto their greatest asset – Zheng – while I escaped their clutches in a single morning. They had Raine, yes, and that terrified me still, but in a normal way, a human way, a fluke, a stroke of bad luck. If the Eye’s Lizzie-thing-impersonator hadn’t attacked us they’d have never gotten past Raine with their kneecaps intact. Sarika worried me a little. Wasn’t like Alexander. He’d been full of himself and his power, and that arrogance had ended him, but Sarika wasn’t a megalomaniac. Potentially capable, potentially cunning.

But she didn't matter either. Darkness loomed behind her.

Ever since Raine had first drawn the Fractal on my arm and the dreams had stopped, I'd assumed the Eye was done, blocked, passive. We'd firewalled it off from my mind, kept it at bay, bought time and life so I could prepare to save my sister.

But now? Now it sent the Lozzie-thing to take me away. It infested the minds of what was left of the Sharrowford cult, left a tripwire trap in Alexander's corpse, disabled Praem and sent one of its minions to possess Evelyn.

One opening. Alexander Lilburne had given the Eye one opening, made a bad deal, and it had almost managed to destroy me and mine in less than twenty four hours.

If there was a way to communicate with this Outsider, this shard of the Eye, its minion, and unfeeling animal, whatever it was, I was going to find out.

And I was going to hurt it until I understood why.

"I screwed up, didn't I?" Evelyn sighed heavily. "I got arrogant, and I got ... well, *got*."

"Wasn't your fault," I croaked.

Lozzie bit her lip and watched, chin still on my shoulder, her weight and heat against my side.

"Yes it is," Evelyn grumbled. "I underestimated this, all of this. Broke half my own goddamn rules. Never, never underestimate. Never."

"We didn't know the Eye was involved," I said.

"Doesn't matter. I got sloppy. I don't deserve to be alive, I should be dead."

"No you shouldn't," Lozzie said softly. Evelyn just grunted and waved a hand.

I pulled myself together as best I could, brought my thoughts back to the present, reigned in my fears, and said, "I'm sorry about Felicity."

"Oh, fuck Felicity," Evelyn spat. "Who cares? What are you doing about Raine?"

I blinked at her for a moment, then waggled my mobile phone. "The detective. And Zheng. Remember?"

"Of course I bloody well remember. Hard not to remember seven feet of zombie. That's it?"

"It's not like I can stand up."

"Mm," Evelyn grumbled her disapproval, scowling into empty space, radiating irritation. She crossed and uncrossed her arms, rubbed at the place her prosthetic leg attached to her flesh, lay her walking stick across her legs and put it down again, and then finally turned back to me. "Where is she now?"

"... Raine?"

"No, Felicity," Evelyn snapped. "Who else would I be talking about?"

I shrugged, slowly, painfully. "Think she went out to her car. Hasn't come back in."

"Good." Evelyn took a deep breath, blew it out slowly. "Good. She better stay there. You hear me, Praem? She comes back in you throw her out. Throw her into traffic, even better."

Praem did not respond.

"I'm really sorry, Eevee," I said. "I didn't figure it out until five minutes before she did the spell."

Evelyn hit me with a frown like a sledgehammer. "Figure what out?"

I squinted hard, tried to read the shivering signs underneath Evelyn's exterior. "The ... she ... she was the doctor who took your leg, no?" I lowered my voice, shot a nervous glance at Lozzie.

"True," Evelyn said, voice tight.

"Eevee?"

"What story did she feed you?" Evelyn hissed. "Altruism? Forgiveness? She tell you what she really is, hm? Heather, that woman was obsessed with me, when I was a child."

I went cold inside. "She ... Eevee?"

"No, not like that," she hissed.

"She- she was never alone with you," I blurted out. "Always one of us here."

"Good."

We lapsed into silence. My mind raced.

"Evee, I would never have let her into the house, if-

"Yes, yes, I'm not angry at you, Heather, I'm ... " Evelyn swallowed a mouthful of acid. "Finally got her chance, didn't she? Pretending that she's anything but a blood-soaked butcher."

"She said-"

"I don't want to know what she-"

"-that saving you won't make it right," I finished.

Evelyn glared at me, then at the clay horror in the circle, then seemed to shrink and retreat into herself. "Bloody right it doesn't. She can fuck off and die."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Evelyn sighed heavily. "I'm alive, aren't I? You do know what she is though, don't you? Her and her vile little demonic sex pet?"

"Yes, I told you, I met- wait, what?" I found, in the depths of physical and emotional exhaustion, that I could still feel surprise.

"Evee, I'm sorry, 'sex pet'?"

"She carries on a relationship with it." Evelyn rolled her eyes.

"What, she didn't tell you? Why am I not surprised?"

I recalled that dripping sulphur voice, speaking through a mouth of knives and darkness, a little girl from hell, and seriously adjusted my impression of Felicity. My skin crawled. "You must be joking."

Evelyn just stared at me, as exhausted as I was.

"You're not joking," I said. "Oh. God."

"Yes."

"Evee, ew."

"Yes."

The sound of Twil descending the stairs mercifully forestalled any further speculation.

"I'm going to have to apologise to her," Evelyn murmured. "I hit her, didn't I?"

"Twil? You did."

"God damn it," she hissed.

"She'll understand," I tried. "She'll forgive. She's good at that. Just tell her the truth."

"The whole truth?"

"If you feel like it."

She swallowed. "Deserves a lot better than the likes of me," she hissed, so quietly I barely heard.

Twil appeared in the doorway and held up a small pill bottle, a lopsided grin on her face. "Found it! Your bedside table is uh ... a bit of a ... train wreck." She trailed off, distracted again by the bundle of squid in the magic circle. "Fuck me, it looks worse than before."

"Harmless. Caged," Evelyn grunted, and held out a hand. "Give those here."

"Right you are."

Evelyn popped the lid off the pill bottle, shook two unmarked white tablets into her hand, and swallowed them dry. She tucked the bottle away in a pocket.

"That thing is so weird looking," Twil was saying.

"Thank you," Evelyn whispered, far too quietly

"Eh?" Twil looked round. "Sorry?"

"She said, thank you for bringing her pills," I spoke up, too tired to watch these two do this dance right now, all my caution to the wind. "She's grateful, and she likes your company, and is relieved to be alive, and I'd even wager she's happy you were there when she woke up, and-"

"*Heather*," Evelyn spat, going red in the face. Twil blinked in surprise, eyebrows halfway up her forehead. Lozzie practically

vibrated with tension, I think she understood instantly. “I- you-”

I stared back, numb and uncaring – or at least telling myself I was numb and uncaring. “Raine has been kidnapped and might die. Stop stalling. Tell her.”

“Not-” Evelyn hissed. “Not now.”

“Then when?” I asked. “It’s right in front of you, Evee. When are you going to reach out and take it?”

Twil frowned like a dog confronted by algebra. “What the hell are you two talking about? Hello? Can we focus on, like, the squid monster we’ve got in here?”

“Later,” Evelyn grunted at me, then scowled at Twil. “And that thing doesn’t matter, no more than a lump of removed earwax.”

Twil snorted and shook her head. “Right. Sure.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes, then nodded down at the mobile phone still clutched in my hand. “You’ve got this police detective on finding Raine, haven’t you?”

“I hope.”

She shook her head. “A police detective. My mother would have shit herself blind at that.”

“Her name’s Nicole,” I said, trying to distract myself from thinking about Raine. “I think you’d get on.”

“A police detective, really?” Evelyn’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“She’s very ... bitter.”

Evelyn cocked an eyebrow.

“Like I said, I think you’d get on.”

Evelyn snorted, a derisive dismissal from anybody else, practically affection from her. Lozzie stifled a giggle.

“Sounds about right,” Twil muttered.

“We can organise,” Evelyn said. “Give me a minute to sit still, wait for my pills to do their job, and we’ll organise. You know where Raine is, and we’re going to go get her. Though ... anything I can call up pales in comparison to what you’ve already sent.”

“You mean Zheng?” I asked.

“What else could I possibly mean? I’m certainly not talking about Sharrowford’s police force.”

“Is she really that dangerous?”

Evelyn managed to give me a look like a incredulous schoolmarm.

“What do you think, Heather?”

“Well, I think she’s a seven foot superhuman cannibal, yes, but ... ”
I struggled through the last twelve hours of memory, blurred by exhaustion and coffee. “When I freed her, and then I called this Sarika woman to try to intimidate her, she acted like freeing Zheng was ... ”

“Irresponsible?” Evelyn offered.

“Yes. Yes, quite. Is it?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Most likely. How old is she?”

“Quite old. I think. I haven’t asked.”

“You can’t be rude to a demon.”

“I think you can,” I protested.

“Mm. Maybe. Point is, something as old as her should have gone mad long ago. That’s what happens to these demons, Heather. They can’t deal with reality, with our reality at least. They get unstable, or obsessive, or their minds spiral out over time. The things my mother used to make ... well. I’ve seen it enough.”

I glanced at Praem, suddenly concerned. Evelyn shook her head, half-grimacing.

“Will that happen to her? Eevee?”

“Praem’s alright,” Twil put in. “Isn’t she?”

Evelyn shook her head again. “Think of them like turtles.”

“Turtles?” Twil pulled a face.

“Turtles?” I echoed. “Eevee, I’m too tired for a metaphor.”

“Turtles are cute,” said Lozzie.

“Baby turtles on a beach,” Evelyn continued. “Hundreds hatch,

dozens die before they reach the sea. Dozens more die in the shallows, eaten by predators. Dozens more die deeper out. A tiny number survive, grow big and strong, get nice hard shells. Invincible. That's Zheng, I suspect. One turtle out of hundreds to survive all the psychological dangers of hijacking a human corpse. Which means her shell is nice and thick, and she's got all those obsessive tendencies or instabilities, but she functions all the same." Evelyn cocked an eyebrow at me. "She called you 'shaman'. An affectation?"

"Um, yes. She started that when she realised I could free her."

"You be bloody careful about that, Heather. You don't want one of these things obsessed with you."

"I ... I-I will. Okay?" I glanced at Praem. "What about-"

"Praem's like a turtle hatched in the zoo," Evelyn said. "S'why I used wood. Nothing up in her skull to trip her, no predators. Stable state. Or meant to be, at least. She's been outstripping my expectations."

Evelyn raised her eyes as she spoke, and I realised with a little shiver that Praem was looking back, having briefly interrupted her guard duty to meet Evelyn's gaze.

"Expectations," Praem echoed.

They stared at each other. I couldn't tell how much was affection and how much confrontation.

"I still don't understand how all that makes Zheng dangerous," I said. "Being obsessed with me doesn't make her any more dangerous than Raine. Does it?"

Evelyn sighed, shook her head. "Stopping her, physically or otherwise, is goddamn near impossible. If she has a developed obsession – say, eating human flesh? – she's going to pursue that above everything else. You're not dealing with a human being, Heather, but with something built from external impressions of human beings, and I don't know if you've looked at the world lately but we're mostly a bunch of monsters. Our species is not a good role model. Not sure we should let her back in the house."

"How do you do that, if stopping her is impossible?"

"Near."

Evelyn let that hang in the air.

"I could do her," Twil said, cracking her knuckles. "I heal faster."

"Maybe," Evelyn grunted.

"She's been ... helpful," I said. "Protective. Almost reasonable. I know I've only known her a single morning."

"You're a single minute to her," Evelyn said. "Tread lightly."

I didn't have anything to say to that. Why did I trust Zheng? Because she was big and bold and triggered all my fuzzy feelings about dangerous, violent women? Because she'd rescued me? Because I'd freed her? How could I explain that bond we'd made in that one moment, when I'd given Zheng her freedom? Maybe if I'd been more awake, I could have made Evelyn see.

"Raine will be alright," Evelyn said suddenly, voice stronger than before. Firm, almost a command. "She always is. These vermin have bitten off more than they can chew."

"Yeah ... yeah!" Twil added, nodding.

"She's probably already freed herself. Brained a couple of them with her fists and teeth. She'll be knocking on the front door any minute, clutching a handful of scalps."

"I hope," I croaked, and almost managed a smile.

"I am right," Evelyn said. She drew herself up, tried to sit up straight despite her twisted spine and a suppressed wince on her face. "You'll see. Raine is going to be just fine."

Evelyn sounded like she was trying to reassure herself, not me. Could she go on without Raine? They'd known each other so long, relied on each other in ways I didn't come close to, no matter how barbed Evelyn's tongue could get, no matter that I was the one who slept with Raine.

"We end whatever's left of the Sharrowford cult this time, completely," she said, and started to get up off the sofa. Twil moved to help, but Evelyn shooed her away, levering herself up with her walking stick.

"Eye cult now, more accurately," I suggested.

"Quite."

“What about wobbly over there?” Twil thumbed at the squid-bundle in the circle. “You just gonna leave it?”

“It’ll keep,” Evelyn said, stomping over to the table and frowning down at the map. Jerky and awkward, she used one arm to sweep a space clear. “Raine first.”

“Raine first,” I echoed.

Evelyn yanked a piece of paper off a nearby pad, found a pen, and began to draw a sketch of a magic circle. “Tell me about Sarika. No surname?”

“Detective Webb said she’d look for Sarika,” I said.

“Yes, Sharrowford’s ‘finest’ can look for a mage, but they won’t find anything. I’m not interested in divining her next of kin or where she holds a day job, I want to know how to counter her. Heather, details. I need details. I’m not getting caught flat-footed again. What did she look like? Normal? She talk much like Alexander did? You mentioned you suspect she was his partner?”

I started to answer, squinting and rubbing my eyes to keep me awake. Twil found Evelyn a chair. Evelyn took notes, pulled books from her stacks, told Twil to dismantle that awful brass pyramid still crowding out a sixth of the room. None of us noticed at first, but eventually Kimberly appeared in the door, red-eyed and sleepy.

“Kim,” I broke off by way of greeting. She stared at me with bloodshot eyes.

“There’s a monster upstairs,” she said.

“Sticky-sweet evil voice from behind your head?” I asked. She blinked at me again.

“Yeah. Told me I’ll never lose my virginity.” Her eyes wandered over to the squid-mass in the circle. She frowned. “Oh, bugger that.”

We all looked at each other. Kimberly went back into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and rummaged. Loudly.

“Is she stoned?” Twil hissed.

“Looks that way,” Evelyn grunted. Then sighed. “I need to thank her, don’t I? I-”

My phone buzzed in my hand and my heart leapt into my throat. Detective Webb was calling me back. Lozzie reached over and pressed the answer call button for me, because my own hands were shaking too hard. A speaker-phone buzz filled the air.

“Heather.”

“Nicole? Detective?” I managed. “Have you found her?”

“Not yet,” Nicole answered.

Something was wrong. Nicole’s voice was tight with tension and adrenaline. Near panic.

“Nicole?”

“I ... ” A loud swallow. “I-I’m in my car right now, outside the address on Barrend Road. No, I haven’t seen your Raine, not yet. Which is probably a good thing.”

“What has happened, detective?” Evelyn raised her voice.

“Who was that?”

“Evelyn,” I grunted. “The girl in the coma. We fixed her.”

“Oh. Oh, great, yes. Great. Great.” Nicole took a deep breath.

“What’s happened? Uh, nothing, yet. Your sodding giant showed up, she’s over the back wall of the property, I think she might try to break in, but ... Heather. Evelyn. Whichever of you is in charge. I have to call this in. I have to.”

“Then call it in,” Evelyn said. “Our friend is in there. Do your job.”

“I got up to a window,” Nicole was saying. “Ground floor window, the only one not curtained fully. Rest of the place is locked up tight as a duck’s arsehole. I could see one room, part of another. Seven bodies. Partial bodies. Bits. A lot of blood. Blood and guts. Up the walls!” She laughed, halfway to hysteria.

We all looked at each other. Twil went wide eyed. Evelyn mouthed ‘Raine?’

“Don’t- don’t call it in yet,” I said. “Please.”

“Oh I’m not fucking going to,” Nicole answered. “I don’t know what the hell we’re walking into here. This is your area, you wizards. This is yours.”

“Did it look like a single person could have done it?” Evelyn asked, calm and collected.

“Absolutely not.”

“Shit,” said Twil.

“Something happened here,” Nicole said. “Recently, this afternoon, last few hours? I don’t know. This is a fancy suburban house, in a nice part of town, and I *have to call this in*. Do you understand? I can wait, I can stall, but I have to call this in sooner or later. I don’t care if your friend is in there slaughtering cultists or what. I can turn a blind eye, I can turn a whole blind surveillance suite, but you wizards need to get down here and deal with this. Now.”

that which you cannot put down – 7.12

Barrend Road was not the sort of place where magic happened.

Not the sort of place anything happened, except dinner parties, dreary Sundays, and domestic violence. Large houses brooded ugly and proud behind old trees and high walls and imitation wrought iron gates. Garages and gravel driveways, intercom buzzers and CCTV, heavy curtains and high windows, and big gardens full of trampolines and electric barbeques and privacy.

Number Seven – ‘Tunsdale house’ according to the faux-wooden plaque next to the gate – was a perfect specimen of the type. A still-functioning aesthetic subroutine in the back of my mind had retched with disgust when we’d pulled up next to the house. A new build, probably less than twenty years old, three tapering stories of clean white frontage and mismatched windows, vomited up from the pen of some mercenary architect at the whim of a banker or lawyer with more money than sense, and a belief that clutter translates to style. Flourishes and detailing clashed at every corner. No line of symmetry but no balance of asymmetry, like the house had been thrown together at random, a pile of rectangles stacked by a toddler. Purposeless columns flanked a front entrance buried so deep one could barely pick it out. A garage door stood off to one side, dressed up in fake hinges and painted brown, pretending to be a rustic barn.

All the worst aspects of architectural modernity. Nothing like Evelyn’s beautiful old house, Victorian redbrick folded in on itself, a warm womb to shelter our secrets.

Not a place where magic should happen.

“There’s no spirits,” I croaked.

“Doesn’t look so bad.” Twil peered at the house through the back passenger window of Nicole’s car, cupping her hands around her face. The tips of the slanted roof still caught the last of a watery sunset, but down below we were already deep into the gloom as the

streetlights flickered on. The settling cold of a late winter evening leeched heat from the thin metal shell of the car. The BMW's heater struggled to keep up.

I don't think Twil heard me.

"Lot better than that freak show castle last time we did something like this," she said.

"Castle," Nicole said with a sigh. A statement, not a question.

"Yeah, a castle. Long story. We all going straight in then, or what? Praem and I could do it alone, you know? What's the plan?"

"Good question," Evelyn said from the passenger seat, and looked pointedly at Nicole. Her face was side-lit in the darkness by distant street-lighting, like a monster in a puppet-show.

"Hey, that's up to you wizards," the detective said, raising her hands from the steering wheel. She looked more rumpled and shaken than when I'd last seen her, as if she'd spent the last hour being violently ill. "That's why you're here, right? You deal with whatever ... caused that," she thumbed at the house. "Then I call in the cavalry for the mundane stuff. Isn't that the plan?"

"What I mean, detective," Evelyn said. "Is we need more information first."

I opened my mouth to repeat myself, but a sudden wave of dizziness took me, a throbbing pulse of blood in my head.

Shouldn't be here. Even with caffeine and pills and bloody-minded determination, I was fading, I was weak, and I was a liability.

"... right. Right. Information. That's something I can do." Nicole nodded, took a deep breath. "Evelyn, right? You look pretty together for a woman who was in a coma this morning."

Nicole offered Evelyn her hand, and to my surprise Evelyn shook it.

"Trust me, detective, I feel like living shit," Evelyn grunted.

"Why didn't we get handshakes this morning?" Twil asked.

"Seem to recall I was too busy screaming," Nicole said. "Or trying to arrest you on suspicion of murder."

Evelyn snorted and shook her head. Even I could tell the humour

was forced.

Nicole glanced back at me, the fragile thing shivering and swallowing in the back seat. "So uh, who's in charge right now? Heather or you?"

Evelyn caught my eye. I shook my head.

"... nobody's in charge," Evelyn said hesitantly, then cleared her throat. "We decide as a group."

"So who's this then?" Nicole twisted to look at Praem. Our doll-demon sat in the middle back seat, sandwiched between Twil on one side and me on the other. I would have enjoyed the squeeze a lot more under any other circumstances, but right now that part of me was asleep, energy-saving, didn't care one bit. "You a wizard too then? You-"

"There's no spirits," I repeated, loud as I could.

Nicole blinked at me. Evelyn twisted in the front passenger seat, hindered by her spine and walking stick, and frowned hard.

"There's no spirits," I said.

"On the house?" Evelyn asked. "Then it's warded somehow. Potentially bad news for us, but not entirely unexpected."

"No, no." I shook my head. "The whole street. Last few streets. As we drove up, they thinned out. Heading away. Animals fleeing a forest fire."

Evelyn went quite still. Nicole looked between us, confused and lost.

"Uhhh," Twil made a sound like a broken speaker. "That's bad, right?"

"No, it's wonderful," Evelyn said. "Great news. The local fauna is fleeing, that means nothing untoward at all. What do you think, Twil? Hm?"

Twil raised her hands in apology.

"Heather," Evelyn snapped. "Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"Because I'm exhausted and scared and thinking about Raine. We

need to go in there, Evee. We need to get her out. Quickly.”

Evelyn swallowed hard, then sucked on her teeth. “We still need more information. Detective?”

“Spirits. Fleeing animals. Okay,” Nicole echoed me with a sigh. “What does that mean?”

Another throb of blood in my head, like I’d run a marathon today. I winced.

“Information, detective.” Evelyn clicked her fingers. “What did you see?”

“I already told you on the phone. Seven bodies, I think, or parts of them at least, in a sort of lounge on the left side of the house. And a lot of blood. Some on the walls looked ... intentional. Hand prints, I think. Look, I’ve seen my share of grizzly murder scenes in homicide, but this wasn’t anything like those.” She swallowed and put a hand to her mouth, looking away into the darkening street. Suppressing nausea. A gesture I’d know anywhere. “More like a massacre, a war-zone. I don’t know.”

“And that’s all you’ve got?” Evelyn asked. “That’s all? No observations to share? Nothing useful?”

Nicole managed an upturned glare across the seats. “Don’t take it out on me, alright?”

Evelyn clicked her tongue and shook her head.

“Where’s Zheng?” I croaked.

“Still in there, I think.” Detective Webb nodded toward the house. “Heard a window break about twenty minutes before you lot turned up. Think she climbed in. Expected screams a minute later, but,” she shrugged, “nothing.”

Nothing – I tried to ask, but my head throbbed again, twice this time. I blinked past it, clenched my muscles, cursed my failing energy.

And noticed that Praem had turned her head to look at the house, at the exact moment I’d felt that pulse in my head.

“Praem?” I hissed.

“Nothing?” Evelyn was echoing Nicole already. Nicole shook her

head.

“No commotion, no banging and crashing, no screams. Didn’t hear a thing.”

“Bodes well,” Evelyn said, dripping sarcasm.

“Oh shit,” Twil hissed. “She said she wasn’t gonna go inside, right? Something changed her mind? Hunting?”

“I almost admire your blind, idiot optimism, I really do,” Evelyn said, twisting in her seat to glare at Twil. “But-”

“Hey, don’t take it out on me either!” Twil said.

“I am *not*– you- ... what the hell is she looking at? Praem?”

Another pulse of blood, another wave of dizziness while Evelyn was speaking; Praem’s head twitched at the same time, adjusting her eyeline to a different part of the house.

“Oh no, no it’s not just me,” I managed. “It’s not in my head. Praem feels it too.”

“What’s not in your head?” Evelyn demanded.

“Don’t you feel it? Wait, it’ll happen again.”

“What-” Twil started, but Evelyn silenced her with a frustrated wave.

We waited in silence, in the dark, listening for a sound that was not sound.

Throb. Like a rush of blood to the head, but exterior to oneself.

Reality, wincing.

“I felt that,” Twil said, wide-eyed. “I felt that, what the hell? What was that?”

“I think I felt it too, yeah,” Nicole said. “Kinda have to concentrate, but yeah, that was definitely not my imagination.”

“Praem?” Evelyn demanded. “What is that? What are you looking at?”

“Motion,” Praem intoned, the first word she’d spoken in Nicole’s presence, the ringing of a distant, icy bell.

“Motion, what? What does that mean?” Evelyn asked.

“Motion.”

“In the house?”

Praem declined to answer the obvious question.

Evelyn sat back in her seat, frowning up a storm. Nicole stared at the doll-demon, more confused than the rest of us. Inside, I started to shake. This was supposed to be quick. We were supposed to have Raine out of there by now.

“What’s ... ” Twil started, swallowed, spread her hands. “What’s to think about? What does this change? We’re still gonna bust in there and get Raine, right? I could go right now, what are we waiting for?”

“Yes,” I hissed. “Please.”

“I am thinking,” said Evelyn.

“I mean, you said that Raine probably killed those people herself, right?” Twil asked. “I could break down the front door right now, be in and out before they even know what-”

“I am changing my mind based on available information.” Evelyn spoke through her teeth. “Perhaps you should try it some time?”

Twil blinked. “But-”

“No spirits within several streets of this place. A demon far more powerful and proficient than Praem entered that house and did not come back out. And something in there is pinging our flesh with magical sonar. Let. Me. Think.”

We sat in the dark, and Evelyn did her thinking.

Quietly, privately, I began to panic.

Strictly speaking, Evelyn and I were supposed to be surplus to requirements. Both of us were exhausted by our experiences. This was meant to be a smash and grab, in and out; send Praem in the front door or Twil up through a window, break heads and kill zombies and find Raine and bring her back to the car and leave. On the way here I’d half-hoped we’d turn the corner and see Zheng out in the street already, carrying a bruised but otherwise unhurt Raine, confused and shaken but whole and well. Quick and easy, in and

out. I'd prayed and I'd prayed and I'd gotten it wrong.

Evelyn hadn't had time to summon anything, but at least she had her scrimshawed magical thighbone clutched under her coat. What did I have to contribute?

Dead weight, a spent mind, and Raine's handgun hidden in my hoodie.

I'd dosed myself up on more caffeine before we'd left home, and accepted Evelyn's offer of two pills from her mysterious little bottle. I didn't care what they were, only that they got me on my feet and kept me there for another couple of hours, and they achieved that with surprising efficiency. My mind worked and I could walk unaided, though probably not run. My body was due for one hell of a crash, and I kept coaxing it, keep going, please keep going, later, we can rest later.

We'd left Lozzie back at home, along with Kimberly and strict instructions to keep the doors locked. I hadn't liked that, hadn't liked the feeling of leaving Lozzie behind when we'd spent so many weeks apart already, haunted by the creeping notion she might be gone when I returned, but I wasn't going to put my Lozzie in harm's way. Didn't care how much I was treating her as a surrogate for my sister. Lozzie was bright and bubbly and wonderful, and utterly useless in a fight like this. Stab-happy with a scalpel in the heat of the moment, but currently robbed of the ability to Slip away Outside, to defend herself in the way she knew how. Kimberly hadn't taken any convincing to look after her for a bit, though I suspected the emotional support and care would be the other way around.

I should have stayed with them, half-dead and held up by pills and determination.

"So, uh," Nicole cleared her throat. "Who's number four here? Praem? Interesting name. You a wizard too, or ... " Praem turned to look at her, blank and empty. Nicole squinted. "No pupils? Alright then."

"She's a demon," Evelyn grunted. "Possessing a life-size wooden doll. My ... helper."

"Praem is safe," I croaked.

"Safe," Praem agreed.

Nicole blinked three times, turned to face forward, and blew out an exasperated breath. “Explains the voice, at least.”

“Deal with it,” Evelyn said. “We don’t have time for squeamishness.”

At least Praem wasn’t dressed as a maid right now. We’d convinced her to change into outdoor clothes during our confused and hurried exit from Evelyn’s house, her habitual uniform replaced by a practical pair of baggy jeans and one of Evelyn’s comfortable jumpers. Remaining relatively inconspicuous out here on a public street was not going to be too easy, but Praem marching about in her full regalia would have made it nearly impossible.

Though if she’d refused to leave her uniform behind, none of us would have stopped her.

We owed her a debt. We’d commandeered Raine’s car, neither Evelyn nor myself in any condition to walk the two-mile long journey across half of Sharrowford to reach Barrend Road, but none of us could drive. None of us, until Praem had finished helping me into the car and Evelyn had ordered her into the driver’s seat. The doll-demon had performed like a precision-engineered mechanical auto-pilot, sliding the gears without a single squeak, sticking like glue to the speed limits.

“When the hell’d you teach her to drive?” Twil had hissed from the back seat, as we’d crept through the dying streaks of rush-hour traffic.

“Didn’t,” Evelyn grunted. “It’s simple observation, mechanical application. They’re good at that.”

Raine’s battered old car sat behind us now – and behind that, further out in the shadows, lurked Felicity’s hulking range rover.

Nobody had dared suggest asking her to drive us.

“No time, yeah, no time,” Nicole echoed. She put her hands on the car’s steering wheel and squeezed until her knuckles went white. “I do need to call this in before, you know, some civvie notices something wrong.”

Evelyn agreed with a wordless grunt. She glanced up and down the street beyond the car’s windows. “Whatever we do, we do it carefully, without attracting attention, at least until we leave. All

these houses. Only takes one person to get suspicious and they'll call the police, and this could turn into a clusterfuck. More of a clusterfuck, rather. No offense."

"None taken," said Nicole.

"Think we've already got attention," said Twil.

"Who's who? What?" Nicole followed the direction of Twil's nod and saw nothing through the car's windscreen. Neither did I.

"That. Right there." Twil extended an arm over the back of the passenger seat, and jabbed a finger. "That second car, there's somebody sitting in the driver's seat. They just moved. Are you all blind?"

Nicole squinted into the gathering dusk. The car Twil had indicated was barely visible, maybe a hundred feet down the road, parked carefully in a shadowed gap between pools of orange street-lighting. Dark and cold was plenty of cover for an unseen watcher.

"Twil," Evelyn hissed from the passenger seat. "There's-"

"Begging your pardon, miss wizard," Nicole said slowly, eyeing the other car. "But she's right. I've not done many stake-outs, but if we've got a tail, we need to deal with it now."

"How didn't you notice before?" Evelyn asked with a huff. "Isn't this your job?"

"Apparently I don't have ... " Nicole sighed sharply. "*Werewolf* senses."

"What do we do?" I croaked.

"Depends who it is." Nicole took a deep breath and blew it out, suddenly calmer. Having a natural, practical problem to solve settled her mind. "We can't proceed if we're being watched. All these houses are a bad enough liability, let alone some bugger lurking with a camera. If it's one of the uh ... 'cultists', then we should figure out how to detain them. A curious member of the public, I can drive off. Chances are it might not have anything to do with us."

"Slim bloody chance, detective," Evelyn grumbled.

"True. Still, we need to be careful."

"We need to be fast," I complained as hard as I could, my voice a wheeze. "Raine is inside there. We need to get rid of this person."

"Praem could do it," Evelyn said. "Fast and-"

"No, not in public, not like that," Nicole said. "You kidding?"

"Heather's right. Sod this," Twil hissed, opened the back door, and catapulted herself out of the car. She hit the pavement at a low, lurking run, and vanished into the shadows. A wave of cold air pushed back the hard work of the BMW's heater, and I shivered despite my coat and hoodie and three layers of tshirt. The cold was inside me, and not warming up.

Praem reached over from the middle seat and closed the door with a thump, then settled back, her hip slightly less crammed against my thigh now Twil wasn't taking up a third of the back seat.

"Thank you," I said, half to Praem, half to Twil who couldn't hear me now.

"Bloody hell." Nicole ran a hand down her face.

"Yes, that's generally how we do things, detective," Evelyn said.

"I gathered."

We all watched with baited breath as Twil ghosted through the shadows, but our mysterious watcher caught wind of her a few moments too early. Headlights came on high then dipped their beams, catching Twil in the act of slinking closer, lighting her up like a suspect in a Noir film. A compact engine rumbled to life and the driver put the car in reverse, tires giving a neat little squeak as it backed away, turned in the road, and roared off.

Twil slunk back to Nicole's car a minute later. She couldn't contain herself long enough to climb in and shut the door.

We monsters and mages weren't the only people interested in Number Seven Barrend Road.

"It was her!"

"Who?" Evelyn snapped. "Twil, who is 'her'? You could be referring to fucking well anybody. Was it Raine?"

"Baldie! You know, the scary one?"

“Amy Stack?” I croaked.

“Yeah, yeah, her.”

“Get in and shut the door, for pity’s sake,” Evelyn said.

“Yeah, yeah.” Twil did as she was told, but still wide-eyed and keyed-up, raring to bare her teeth. “Second she saw me she bolted, but I saw her face, right? It was like she didn’t even care. How does she do that? She’s like a statue.”

“Sociopath,” I muttered.

“Bloody right. Creepy shit.” Twil shook her head.

“I’m sorry, could any of you wizards inform me who the hell you’re talking about?”

“Amy Stack, professional hitman or assassin or thug, we’re not sure,” Evelyn said. “I’ve never had to deal with her, Heather has. Doesn’t work for this lot anymore, or at least says she doesn’t. Splinter group. That all?”

Nicole paused. “Wizards need hitmen?”

“Some.”

“Do you think she did it?” Twil piped up. “Baldie went in there and killed them all?”

“Always missing the obvious,” Evelyn was muttering. “Always. No, Twil, of course she didn’t. She’s not stupid enough to walk in there. Not like us.”

“Uh, are you three – four? Does she count?” Nicole pointed at Praem. “Gonna come up with a plan, or what?”

Evelyn looked up at the house, darkness gathering under the eaves, windows closed to the world beyond, deceptively clean and wholesome.

“Burn it to the ground,” she said.

“Raine-” I started.

“I know Raine is in there,” Evelyn snapped, a sudden whipcrack of voice that made even Nicole jump. “If she wasn’t, we wouldn’t be sitting here. I’d have sent Praem with a jerry can of petrol and a box of matches, and a bag of salt for the earth afterward.”

"You're joke- ... you're not joking. Oh, great. Murder *and* arson." Nicole put her face in one hand.

"Absolutely not a joke," Evelyn confirmed. "The Sharrowford cult, whatever they serve now, they got in too deep. We're not prepared for what's in that house. I'll stake ten thousand pounds on that."

"Evee?" I croaked. "We have to."

"Yeah, uh, we are gonna bust Raine out, right?" Twil asked. "I'm not leaving without her."

"Me neither," I said.

"I'm not certain we can," Evelyn continued, her voice cold and controlled.

"We will," I croaked.

"Ask yourselves the obvious question." Evelyn raised her chin, her voice slipping into that school-mistress teacher mode that I found so false and infuriating. Why now, Evelyn? If I'd been more energetic I could have slapped her in frustration. We needed to be breaking down that front door now, calling for Raine.

"What question?" I almost growled.

Evelyn turned and met my eyes, utterly unabashed. "Where's the retaliation?"

"... mm?"

"Eh?" Twil joined me.

"Am I the only one capable of thinking strategically?" Evelyn asked us. "Heather escapes from these people this morning, leaves one of them dead and the other tied up, and steals one of their greatest assets – Zheng. They likely knew we were scattered and weak. And you didn't expect them to strike before we could regroup?"

"But ... but they haven't," said Twil.

"Exactly. And you never wondered about this, not for one second?"

"I did," I croaked.

"Uh, was kinda busy." Twil scratched the back of her head. "With you, mostly."

“Yes, well,” Evelyn waved her down. “I missed the obvious too. Where’s their counter-strike, where’s a person walking up to our front door with a machete, where’s the magical construct breaking all our skulls? Absent.” She jabbed a finger at the house. “What’s happened in there, hm? Internal schism, they killed each other? Maybe. Lost control of something like Zheng? Possible. You know what’s more likely? They were planning something, to strike back at us – you, Heather, specifically. Putting something together toward that end. Seems a bit of a coincidence that we’d find a house full of bodies first.”

“... you mean like,” Twil ventured slowly. “They screwed up some magic?”

“Understatement of the year, yes, Twil, well done. They may have ‘screwed up some magic’ in the same way that a nuclear accident is ‘screwing up a safety test’. Alexander Lilburne’s booby-trapped corpse may only be the tip of the iceberg. They dabbled in stuff that hijacks the human brain through vision, and that was a trap laid for nobody. They’re in contact – of a kind – with Heather’s ‘Eye’. Whatever happened in there, we’re all better off not knowing about.”

“We get Raine,” I said. “I don’t care.”

“Yes, we will,” Evelyn said through gritted teeth. “The question is how.”

“I could go,” Twil said. “I’m invincible, remember?”

“Have you heard a word I said?” Evelyn turned on her, eyes blazing. “You think Zheng was any less invincible than you? Your head works the same as mine.” Evelyn reached forward and actually tapped Twil on the forehead, hard and angry. “I don’t care if you can cut all your limbs off and regrow them, you are not invincible in the way that counts.”

“What about Praem here?” Nicole suggested. “She’s not human, right?”

“She’s not-”

“Invulnerable,” I said.

“Expendable,” Evelyn said at the same time. We glanced at each other.

“Can Heather do her thing all over again, check to make sure Raine’s actually in there?” Nicole asked. “Werewolf, can you climb? If she’s up in a top-floor room, maybe you don’t have to go through the whole house.”

“I’ll die if I do it again,” I croaked, and left unsaid the real reason. I needed what energy I had for one last brainmath trick, just in case. “I’m pretty sure.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Evelyn hissed through her teeth.

“Walk in there,” I croaked.

“Heather, your dedication is touching, but you sent a seven-foot, centuries-old demon-host in there, who by your account survived a fight with a building this morning. She has not come back out.”

“I’ll go.”

I began to reach for the car door handle. It wasn’t a bluff. I didn’t care how exhausted I was, or what was in that house. I was going to fetch my girlfriend.

Without being ordered, Praem gently took my wrist and stopped me. I pulled, ineffectually, and Evelyn sighed.

“I’m not saying we don’t try,” Evelyn said. “I’m saying let me think.”

“Evee-”

“Heather, she is my best friend, and I love her almost as much as you do. Shut up and let me think.”

That stopped me. In the depths of my exhaustion and panic I hadn’t read the tightness around Evelyn’s eyes, or how she grit her teeth when she spoke. She’d never have said that out loud if Raine could hear.

I nodded, and let her think.

“Paint,” she said after a moment. “Paint and ... and ... a mirror.”

“Paint?” Twil squinted.

“Yes, a bucket of paint, and a mirror. It’s the best we can do. Limit visual exposure.”

I caught on instantly, my mind already running ahead. “Perseus.”

Evelyn nodded. Twil frowned.

“Greek myth. Perseus and the Gorgon. Use a mirror so you don’t turn to stone,” I explained. “And we don’t need a mirror. Use our phones.” I mimed holding up my mobile phone. “Look at stuff through your phone screen at an angle? Anything there you shouldn’t look at, take a bucket of paint, splash, cover it up.”

Nicole let out a soft laugh. “Oh this is some sci-fi bullshit. You’re kidding.”

“No, it’s our best shot. Extreme care,” Evelyn said. “Treat anything and everything in there as potentially lethal, a cognitive hazard. Kill anything that moves. Find Raine as quickly as we can, avoid anything else. Then we burn the place to the ground.”

Evelyn’s gaze wandered upward, past Twil and Praem and I, out through the back window of the car. She frowned, and Nicole followed. With more effort than I’d have liked, I twisted in my seat too, and looked back along the road.

“Idiot,” Evelyn hissed. “She’s going to get the whole street looking at her.”

Felicity was half out of her car, door standing open, waving at us with one raised arm.

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“I’m sorry, but I have to go. I have to. I can’t- I have to go,” Felicity babbled at Twil and I through the open driver-side window, her one good eye wild with panic, the burned half of her face twitching. She’d already climbed back into her car as we’d approached. “Don’t let Evelyn go in that house, please. Promise me.”

“You’re leaving now?” Twil gaped at her.

“You’re not going to stay and help?” I hissed, outraged.

In the end, Twil and I had made the short journey down the pavement to Felicity’s car, while Praem set off in the opposite direction on a twenty minute walk toward the nearest hardware shop, on a quest for paint, petrol, and matches. Evelyn waited with detective Webb.

Out in the street, my layers and my coat barely kept the cold at bay, and the ugly metal lump in the front of my hoodie felt even heavier.

I could have stayed in the car, let Twil do this. She was more than capable of asking what was wrong, and perhaps slightly better inclined toward Felicity than I felt, but I was determined to stretch my legs, keep my muscles warm, determined to be useful.

“I- I *can't*.” Felicity tried to apologise with every word. “I have to go.”

“I don’t believe this,” I said, shaking my head. “Evelyn was right. You were right. You are a-”

“She said she promised to help you, Heather. She’s- she’s not meant to be corporeal, not for this long, not for more than a few minutes, but she’s *stuck*. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

A cold feeling settled on my throat. “She? Who are you-”

Perhaps unconsciously, Felicity’s one good eye flicked sideways, not quite a glance into the back seat, but close enough for me to follow the gesture.

‘She’ lay across the back seat, half hidden underneath a heavy blanket, hissing and twitching in the darkness.

The parasite did not look remotely like a ‘little girl in a black dress’.

Perhaps Felicity had used that description to cover for the awful reality. Or perhaps the thing was trying to be more human, in the same way Praem was trying to be a maid, but Felicity’s parasite was having far less success.

Beady black eyes like something dredged up from the ocean floor, peering at me from within deeper pool of oily night. Distant street-lighting caught on a maw full of tiny serrated teeth. Panting and shaking beneath the blanket, like an animal in pain. A bone-stretched hand with black nails shapeshifted from cat-claws to talons to little stubby fingers as I watched, then quickly bundled up underneath the blanket again.

Another throb went through the air, through my head, and Felicity’s parasite – her demon familiar, her torturer, her pet, whatever unthinkable and disgusting category it fit into – flinched and whined.

A hiss lingered in the air. Twil finally noticed too, and went wide-eyed.

“Holy shi-”

“She got back to the car, but she’s in pain,” Felicity said. Her mask of professionalism had worn paper-thin over a welter of emotion. “I-I have to do something.”

Something thumped the back of her seat. Another hiss, a wounded snake. Felicity closed her eyes and bit her lip.

“What happened?” I ignored Felicity and pressed my face closer to the back window. “What was inside?”

“I don’t think she can communicate right now,” Felicity said. “She’s not supposed to be physical for this long. I don’t understand how this is possible.”

“Para- ... you,” I demanded, unable to use such an insult toward a creature in such obvious pain. “What was in the house? Please.”

A limb – not an arm, a blackened thing of shifting oil and stripped muscle – met my face at the window and made me flinch, before vanishing back down into the bundle below.

“Aym,” Felicity said – a name, a name cradled with more care than should be possible for this inhuman writhing lump in the back of her car – and twisted to look at her parasite. “Aym, it’s going to be okay. I promise. You’ll be okay. I’m going to- I’ll fix you.”

Another two thumps on the back of Felicity’s chair. Her exterior was rapidly crumbling.

“You need to look after your pet,” I said. Not a question.

“She is not a pet,” Felicity said, and I felt as if that was the first time I’d heard her tell a whole truth. “She’s all I have.”

From the darkness in the back seat, a hissing laugh. Mockery? Victory? Hysterical pain?

“I don’t have time to think about you or what you are,” I said to Felicity’s face. I pointed at the road. “If you need to go, then go.”

“Don’t let Evelyn in that house,” Felicity pleaded. She turned the key in the ignition and the car roared to life, but she hesitated as she wound the window up.

“*Good luck*,” a voice came from the back seat, wet and sharp and evil, spoken through a sucking wound.

Felicity turned to the road, eyes hollow, and left.

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Twenty minutes later, five furtive figures slipped through the open iron gate of Number Seven Barrend Road. The house rose above us in the thickening darkness. Not even six o'clock yet, but the sun was gone. A few lights burned inside the house, trapped behind heavy curtains, but not a whisper of movement reached us down below.

Nicole went first, the face of professional normality walking up to the front door, raising her hand and knocking. More for appearance than practicality. Twil and Evelyn followed, the latter struggling with her walking stick, legs still not quite right after her long unconsciousness. Twil carried a bucket of paint and a trowel-like scoop. I followed in their wake.

Last came Praem, carrying another bucket of paint in one hand and a sloshing jerry can of petrol in the other.

Nobody answered the door. Nothing stirred inside the house – except three pulses of that blood-to-the-head dizzy feeling. In the distance, somebody slammed a car door. Laughter caught on the wind. Trees rustled above us.

“Praem,” Evelyn hissed.

Praem stepped forward, drew back her free hand, and shattered the lock on the front door. Punched it almost clean through the wood. The sound was awful, splintering and tearing, metal sheering. She pulled her hand back and the entire brass-and-steel mechanism came with it.

“Wait!” Nicole hissed, one hand up. “Wait.”

We waited for the inevitable curious neighbour, the passer by, the curtain twitcher. Three, four minutes passed, and nothing happened.

“In the clear, right?” Twil hissed.

Evelyn shot her a glare. “We’re stepping into a haunted house. So, no.”

Nicole already had her phone out, using it to peer through the gap left by the ripped-out door handle. The rest of us followed her example and took out our phones – except Praem. She was staring

at a random point on the wall.

“More motion?” I asked.

“Motion,” Praem intoned.

“Shhh!” Evelyn hissed.

Getting inside Number Seven was quite the performance. Easing the front door open, poking phones around the corner to check for nasty surprises that might fry our brains or implant squid-monsters into our skulls, staying silent and stealthy. I’m quite certain Nicole’s instinct was to announce herself with a cry of “police!”, and I was bursting to shout Raine’s name at the top of my lungs.

The house’s foyer was unoccupied. We crept in.

As ugly as the exterior. Cream-white walls and shiny skirting boards. A wide doormat protected marble floor tiles, which gave way to thick carpets that looked as if they’d seen less than a week of foot traffic. High ceilings, fake-gold and thin-glass light fixtures, a bowl of fake fruit on a sideboard.

Nobody lived here. Existed within the walls for a brief time, perhaps, but this was not a home, just a shell of a house decorated to give the impression of high-class life. A holiday house, a showroom, a rich man’s bauble. A thin layer of dust but no real dirt, no wear, too clean – except for the two dozen pairs of shoes clustered by the door.

Three yawning doorways led off in different directions.

A huge pool of blood had soaked into the carpet of the room straight ahead. The source was out of sight, around the corner. I stared at the crimson stain through the screen on my phone, my guts going cold.

“Reeks in here,” Twil whispered, wrinkling her nose.

“Shut the door,” Evelyn hissed. “And keep your voice down.”

One did not need to be a werewolf to smell the awful scents of iron and effluvia, of voided bowels and torn meat. The air was thick with it, drowning out the smell of potpourri and carpet shampoo. Twil closed the door behind us as quietly as possible. Praem set down the can of petrol, but readied the paint. Somewhere in the depths of the house, I could hear a distant hum, the heating system

perhaps, and a faint *scratch-scratch-scratch* like the skipping of an old-fashioned record player.

And below that, a high-pitched whine on the very edge of hearing. Nails down a blackboard. Only audible if one concentrated on the silence, but enough to make your eyes water.

“What is that sound?” Nicole whispered.

“Not really a sound,” Evelyn whispered back. “Ignore it.”

“Right ... right. Right.”

“Keep it together, detective,” Evelyn hissed.

“Right. Which way first-”

A giggle rose from deep in the house, a wave of manic, hyperventilating humour, echoing like in a cave. The laughter rose to a hysterical crescendo, then faded, died, and just when we were all about to breathe once more, a staccato of running footsteps sprinted across the second floor, thumping on the ceiling above our heads. The footsteps raced on – and on and on, as if running far further than the actual distance possible inside these four walls. The footsteps receded into the distance.

Silence returned. Except for the high-pitched whine.

“Guess somebody’s still alive in here,” Nicole whispered.

“Nobody. Freak. Out,” Evelyn hissed. “Stick to the plan. That room first. Twil- no, I’ll do it. Here-”

Throb, went my head.

Reality winced like an eyeball squeezing shut, so much worse inside the house. We all winced. Graphical glitches marred the image on my phone, jarring the picture sideways.

And a song rang out from somewhere nearby.

“The road goes ever on and on, down from the door-”

I knew that song. From *The Hobbit*. Such a familiar thing, a childhood thing, sung in a forlorn voice, echoing from behind a corner or every corner or just behind one’s head.

Throb, and the singing cut off. Gone.

A muffled scream, somewhere deep in the house, panting and high and frantic, more like sex than pain.

Silence. Thirty seconds. A minute. None of us dared move.

“... what the fuck was all that?” Nicole hissed, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn whispered. She’d gone pale and drawn.

“The singing,” I managed, had to swallow to speak more. “That was Sarika’s voice. That was her.”

Evelyn glanced at me, doing a poor job of hiding her fear. She wasn’t cut out for direct confrontation. “They’ve broken reality in here,” she said. “They’ve abused it and snapped it in half.”

“We find Raine,” I said.

“Why am I even in here?” Nicole said, voice distant. “This was meant to be a job for you wizards.”

“Leave if you want,” Evelyn hissed at her.

The detective swallowed hard. “... nah. Young woman’s been kidnapped. Pile of bodies. Criminals breaking reality, gotta be illegal, that.”

Struggling for a moment with my hoodie, I manoeuvred Raine’s handgun out of my front pocket. The ugly metal felt cold and wrong in my hands. I offered it to the detective. She stared at me.

“... I’ve never fired a gun before,” she said.

“Me neither,” I whispered. “Better you than me.”

She took it gingerly, as if it were a live scorpion. She frowned at it for a moment, experimenting with holding the gun and her phone at the same time, then found the safety and clicked it off.

“How many bullets are in it? I don’t want to eject- is that the right word? Eject the magazine, in case I can’t get it back in.”

I shrugged. “Don’t know.”

Nicole wet her lips. “Better than nothing. Good for a bluff, I suppose.”

“I doubt that thing will be relevant here, detective.” Evelyn pulled the scrimshawed thighbone out from inside her coat, and placed her

free hand around the shaft, fingers in precise places. Nicole's eyebrows climbed her face.

"Right. Right. Magic wands," she said, and tried to laugh. It didn't work.

"Twil!" Evelyn hissed as Twil moved. "I said I'll-"

"I'm doing it," Twil grunted, no room for argument as she crept forward to check around the doorway ahead. She kept to one side and slowly inched her phone around the door frame, moving it up and down to take in the ceiling and the floor, every possible place the cult – or the Eye – could hide a cognitive hazard. She pulled a disgusted face, then froze and frowned.

"Um ... "

"What?" Evelyn hissed. "If there's something there, throw paint on it. That's the point."

"There is ... but ... " Twil glanced back – at me.

"Let me see," Evelyn said, and went to Twil, careful not to clack her walking stick too loudly. Praem kept at Evelyn's shoulder without being ordered. Evelyn peered at Twil's phone screen and went a little green around the gills. A dead body inside the room, I assumed.

They both looked back at me. The bottom of my stomach dropped out.

"It's not-" I could barely get the words out. "It's not Raine."

"No!" Evelyn hissed.

"Is it safe?" Nicole asked.

"Exceptionally," Evelyn said through gritted teeth.

Twil led us through.

It was a kind of reception room, with a low glass table in the middle and a pair of leather sofas either side, for the endless dull coffee mornings and casual social occasions of upper-middle class Sharrowford. Cream walls, porcelain knick-knacks over an imitation fireplace, faux-oak end tables with vases and dead flowers.

Four dead bodies.

One looked like it had exploded from inside, or been pulverised by a wrecking ball, stuffed into a corner and splattered up the walls. Barely recognisable as human, let alone male or female, young or old, more meat and bone than person. Zheng's work? I could barely look without feeling sick, and Evelyn kept her eyes firmly averted, until Praem moved to stand between her and the carnage.

The second corpse was almost worse, if that was possible. An older gentleman lay half-collapsed over the sofa, his clothes roughly stripped and cut back to reveal masses of pale overweight flesh. Blood matted his beard and bow tie and gaudy suit jacket.

A symbol had been carved into his flesh, over and over again, crimson lines dry and crusted now. The bloody scissors next to his hand suggested he'd done it to himself.

Shaking, unable to believe my eyes, I recognised the symbol.

The third corpse – a blonde young man – had slit his own wrists with a jagged piece of glass. The pool of blood we'd seen from the entrance belonged to him. The fourth had used the blood to make art, and lay face-up, staring at the ceiling, no visible wound on him but quite dead, dried bloody foam at his mouth and nostrils.

It was the man from Glasswick tower. The cultist Zheng and I had spared. I couldn't recall his name.

His sleeve was rolled up to show the unwise gift I'd given him. He'd tried to flay the skin away from his flesh, remove it from his arm, but pain or interruption had stopped him halfway.

"Heather," Evelyn was hissing. "Heather, what did you *do*?"

"I don't ... I don't know. I-I didn't-"

On the wall, a symbol, eight feet tall. The same symbol as the one carved into the old man's flesh, the same as on the cultist's arm. In the blood of the man who'd slit his wrists, soaked into the paint and plaster, every angle precise and mathematical, a branching tree-limb of comfort and protection, the same as on my left forearm.

The Fractal.

They'd daubed it on the wall, in blood.

that which you cannot put down – 7.13

The Fractal, eight feet from tip to tail, painted on the wall with a dead man's blood.

"Do I recognise this?" Twil asked in a stage whisper. "Isn't this, you know, the one on Heather's arm?"

"Yes," Evelyn hissed through her teeth, ashen-faced and wide-eyed. "Yes, it is. Heather, what did you do? You *gave* it to them?"

My mouth moved, numb and mute.

Few discoveries could have been worse for my psychological state – Raine's corpse, perhaps. A cluster of branching lines on a wall added up to a violation of the stability we'd so painstakingly applied to my life over the last few months. The Fractal was one of the first gifts Raine had ever given me, after an ear to listen and a shoulder to cry on, the first evidence of the supernatural she'd shoehorned into my tiny, crumbling, pathetic life, the one tool that had finally shut out the Eye.

We refreshed it together every few days, Raine re-tracing the lines on my left forearm with a black body-art pen. Our little shared ritual of care and comfort, the one piece of magic that was neither scary nor unnatural, just Raine cradling my arm and drawing on my skin to keep me safe. Intimate and personal. Bedtime normality.

Eight feet high. In blood. At the centre of a massacre.

I hiccuped, felt my throat closing, my eyes filling with tears.

"Heather," Evelyn hissed. "You gave it to them? They took it off your arm, they copied it?"

"Duh," said Twil. "But why?"

"... I ... to block out the Eye," I heard myself say, as if far away. "I thought- it was him-" I managed to nod down at the cultist Zheng and I had spared, the Fractal half-flayed from his own arm, hanging loose in a flap of bloody skin.

“God damn you, Heather,” Evelyn muttered.

“I didn’t want to kill him!” The words burst from me, the truth. “Nobody deserves the Eye, Eevee, nobody, I thought- I thought it would-”

Another hiccup. Shaking all over. A squeezing pain in my left arm – I was gripping my forearm where the Fractal lurked on my own flesh. Gripping so hard my fingers hurt.

“Stop panicking,” Evelyn snapped.

“I-I don’t think I can.” Another hiccup. I squeezed my eyes shut, but it didn’t help. The stench of blood and pulped meat was too strong. I dug my fingernails into my sleeve, into my flesh, willing myself to bleed.

“I am trying to establish what happened. Heather, dammit, pay-”

“Not your fault,” Praem intoned, her voice a clear bell in the listening quiet of the house.

Evelyn whirled on her and hissed “shhhh!” but the doll-demon ignored her mistress. Praem stepped toward me.

I flinched, almost stepping into the squelching blood-soaked carpet, my mind recoiling from paranoid fantasies of Praem ripping the skin off my own left arm to remove the offending magic, shoving my face against the bloody wall to rub my nose in what I’d done, an avenging avatar of my mounting guilt. All this death, this suffering, it was my fault; I’d spread the Fractal, given these people the tools to butcher themselves. Praem was always so honest, saw with a clarity we humans lacked. She reached for me and I cringed away. But I deserved it.

Quickly, carefully, gently, Praem took my left elbow and my right wrist, and peeled me off myself.

“Ah ... ow.” The fingers of my right hand ached where I’d squeezed so hard.

“Ow,” said Praem.

Empty white eyes stared into mine. She felt no need to repeat herself.

“... not my fault,” I echoed. “Not my fault.” I nodded, tried to get a grip on my breathing. Praem lowered my arms for me. “Not my

fault. You were there, yes, Praem, you knew I was only trying to help. Thank you. Yes.”

“Yes, thank you, Praem,” Evelyn added.

“Not my fault,” I lied, one last time.

Guilt later. Raine first.

I managed to look at the symbol on the wall and carved into the flesh of the man dead on the sofa without feeling soul-sick.

“Yes, Heather, it’s not your fault,” Evelyn still tried to keep her voice down, a hushed half-whisper. “That doesn’t matter. I am trying to establish how they got their hands on it, and what the hell they’ve done with it.”

“I gave it to him.” I pointed at the cultist Zheng and I had spared, his dead eyes staring at the ceiling. No mark on his body. What had killed him? “He was so desperate, so broken. Eevee, nobody deserves the Eye. I thought the Fractal would block out what the Eye did to them, what Alexander did to them. But ... I don’t get it. It didn’t work?”

“On the contrary,” Evelyn grunted. Her left hand was white-knuckled on her walking stick, her jaw tight. “It worked far too well. You free yourself this morning, and lucky boy number one here flees to this safe house, tells the others the good news. Some of them rush to it, the ones who never wanted to be part of this. The lifers, the true believers, they reject it, refuse. A philosophical disagreement turns into a schism, a fight breaks out ... ”

Evelyn trailed off. She cast a reluctant glance at the exploded corpse in the corner, and another down at the dead man at our feet. No visible wounds. Brain or nervous system or soul burned away.

“Yeah, nah,” Twil said what we were all thinking.

“Doesn’t look like any fight I’ve ever seen,” Nicole put in.

Our tame police detective showed surprising self-control amid the blood and guts and unexplained magic. A little green around the gills, but professional and alert. She kept the handgun pointed at the floor, her eyes high and watching, on the way we’d came and the other two exits from the plush little reception room – an open doorway into a long hallway, and a half-closed door to a larger and more decorative sitting room. Twil was on high-alert too, the tin of

white paint and her phone forgotten now, hands wreathed in ghostly wolf flesh, fur and claw.

“So this occult doohickey drove them all crazy?” Nicole asked.

“No!” Evelyn snapped. “ ... maybe. I don’t understand *how*.”

“Well, it did something to them, right?” Nicole pressed. “I think I’ve been able to follow that much.”

“Nothing. It does nothing. That’s the point,” Evelyn hissed, impatient and scowling at the blasphemous blood mural, at the paradox it represented. “It doesn’t do anything because it’s the opposite of action. Enforced inaction, a firewall, a blast door between here and Outside. This is probably the safest place in the whole house, unless they drew an even bigger one. That ... dead man over there, his mind should have been practically untouchable.” She waved a vague hand at the carved corpse on the sofa, the older gentleman with the Fractal cut into his flesh over and over.

“That- that is true,” I whispered to myself. “Meant to be safe. Safe. Not your fault, not your fault.”

Twil spared me a concerned frown. I looked away, embarrassed.

“What if it didn’t work?” Nicole asked. “They got desperate, made a bigger one to protect themselves.”

“Makes sense?” Twil tried.

“No it doesn’t,” Evelyn hissed. “Don’t talk about things you know nothing about. A single instance of the warding sign on a door or wall or this idiot’s arm would be more than enough. You don’t need to scrawl it on a wall in human blood, it’s not like other magic. It’s coded into reality at the base level. Like a right angle. This *works* as it is.”

Nicole shook her head, an almost indulgent kink to her mouth. “Think about it from their perspective, miss wizard. If you’re a crazy cultist and things go bad, maybe drawing a big fuckoff magical sign in your own blood does make sense.”

Evelyn didn’t have anything to say to that. She scowled at the Fractal in silence.

“You mean, like, it doesn’t mean anything?” Twil asked.

"It means something went wrong," Evelyn said. "I need to know what."

"This doesn't change the plan," I said. "We still need to find Raine."

"Yeah, sooner the better," Twil grunted. "I want out of here."

They were just corpses. Grisly corpses, of people who died horribly violent deaths they probably didn't deserve, but that's what we expected to find here. The Fractal changed nothing. They'd turned, in their last moments, to the only hope they had. In the part of my heart that could still feel amid the nervous affect-deadening of the situation, I hoped the Fractal had given them some solace at the end.

Evelyn nodded, drew herself up, adjusted her grip on her walking stick. "And quietly. Whatever happened here is still happening. Twil, Praem, check around that door first. Twil, don't forget to use your phone."

Throb.

A rush of blood to the head as reality flinched sideways. I winced hard, the sensation almost painful. Evelyn hissed through her teeth. Even Praem blinked.

"Six-hundred seven, six-hundred thirteen, six-hundred seventeen, six-"

Sarika's voice, from the room next door.

Throb.

"-hundred eleven, nine-hundred nineteen- ... God fucking dammit!" she swore, right inside the room.

Throb.

Another reality-crunching blink of missing motion, and there she was, hunched forward on the sofa opposite the carved man. The same high boots and tight jeans and long black hair as this morning in Glasswick tower. The same fine features, same bone-crushing exhaustion around her eyes, same weariness heavy across her slumped shoulders.

"- worst part of it is I can't anchor myself," she was already speaking, staring at her hands. "Never long enough to get my bearings. It's like being trapped in a hospital bed, pumped full of

morphine, but the pain doesn't stop. You keep waking up and slipping back and waking up and-"

"Holy shit." Twil froze, eyes wide.

"What- what-" somebody else was saying – Nicole, I think.

Praem moved to cover Evelyn.

I stared, and felt sick.

Sarika was broken.

Her hands and arms and head left jerky after-images as she moved, a glitching animation on a broken television screen, outlined in iridescent burning colours. Parts of her decohered and snapped back into place, flickering in and out of reality, an image ruined by static interference. The effect made one's eyes water, reached back into the brain-stem, triggered shivering disgust and nausea.

She was a ghost, a human soul unanchored from her flesh, a lost signal.

Her voice seemed to carry through flesh and bone, as if speaking from the centre of my own head. "- like climbing a steep hill and you can never get to the top. You keep blacking out and rolling down and picking yourself up, but the path is always fucking absent or changed or not a path anymore. I keep repeating stuff, lines from books, maths – that doesn't work – my name. My name, that's going to be-"

And then I felt it, behind her, through her, like a searchlight the size of the sun trapped on the far side of a mountain range.

Sarika was not the signal; she was the static.

I don't think the others felt it. Or perhaps they did, but weren't as familiar with it as I. Shivering, my guts clenched in animal fear, I felt myself shrinking, fighting the desire to curl up in a ball, to make myself small and pray the sensation would pass over me, miss me, forget me.

A vast awareness, peering down through her like an eye through a microscope.

Throb.

And Sarika was gone.

We all looked at each other, speechless.

“What- what the hell was that?” Nicole asked first, rubbing her eyes and blinking rapidly. “Was that an illusion? A trick?”

“Sarika, that was her,” I said, my voice cracking. “That was definitely her, a-and-”

“You’re certain?” Evelyn disentangled herself from Praem’s protective grip. The doll-demon had bundled her out of the way, put her arms around her mistress. “Heather, you’re certain that was her?”

“Okay. Haunted house,” Nicole said. “That wasn’t a figure of speech. Haunted house, I can deal.”

“It’s not a ghost,” Evelyn snapped “It’s a- she’s a- I don’t know.”

“Evee-” I struggled to speak, my conscious mind too slow to catch up with the implications. “Evee, didn’t you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

Throb.

“It’s not fucking rocket science, you jumped up little shit. Figure it out,” Sarika snarled at the exact spot Evelyn had been standing a minute ago, talking to the wall, a figure in disjointed freeze-frame. Her outline flickered with impossible colour, like cities on fire.

That vast awareness pressed down on my mind once again, as if spotting us from another angle. An eyelid opening above us.

“Figure what-” Evelyn started.

Sarika’s jittering, flickering form lost what little coherence it had, reduced to static and chaos as the real signal intensified.

All of us felt it then. Impossible not to. A crawling in the guts and up the spine, an evolutionary relic from the days of avoiding predators on the Savannah. The feeling of being watched.

Evelyn spluttered to a stop, eyes wide and lips quivering. Nicole pointed the handgun at nothing, head swivelling. Twil growled, then whined low in her throat, backing up, backing away from a sensation she couldn’t place.

Darkness and pressure, the walls closing in, breath in short supply

and sanity slipping.

I think I gibbered. Somebody did.

Raine saved me again – at least by proxy. As my mind fell into instinctive terror, I clung hard to the reason we were here, grabbed my left sleeve and ripped it down.

The Fractal on my flesh, exposed to the air, a gale of clean wind.

I think I shouted something inane, like “get against the wall!”, my own back already thumping against the huge blood-mural Fractal. My shoes were sticky with the dead man’s blood, squelching on the carpet. Almost tripped over the corpse.

It wasn’t a heroic moment. Those kinds of moments never are, that only happens in movies. Reality is always a messy animal scramble to preserve one’s life, more chance and panic than flashy victory. Twil tripped and skidded on the floor, blood on her fur and clothes, whining like a kicked dog. Evelyn was incapable, eyes screwed shut and panting as Praem hauled her off her feet. Even the doll-demon was affected, her motions stiff and imprecise as she slammed herself into the wall next to me, cushioning the impact for Evelyn in her arms. Nicole clawed at her own face, whimpering and confused, but she made it to safety.

Crammed in behind me, between my Fractal and the one on the wall, my arm turned against Sarika – against the thing using her remains as a vector – we all lived. For now.

“It knew we were trying to rebel!” Sarika screamed like a banshee.

Throb.

Silence; no more Sarika, no more pressure.

I fell over. On my backside. Onto the blood-soaked carpet. Not the most dignified of victories, but hygiene was the last concern on my mind.

Sarika’s parting words hung in the air. Strong hands found me and pulled me to my feet – Praem, the quickest of us to recover. She held me upright while I got my breath back. Evelyn stared, trying to form a question, all her usual bluster and protective irritation shed in wide-eyed horror. Nicole wiped sweat and tears from her own face, raking her hair back where it had escaped its bun. Twil bared teeth and claws at every corner of the room, turning and growling

like a wolf surrounded by hunting hounds.

"The Eye," I said after a moment. "That was the Eye."

"The *what?*" Nicole blurted out.

"The alien God-thing that's after me." I swallowed, and found my nose was bleeding slightly. I wiped it on the back of my sleeve.

"That didn't feel the same," Evelyn managed. "As ... in the medieval metaphysics room, that one time ..."

I nodded, though it barely seemed to matter. Why were we even discussing it? Apes, trying to rationalise a hurricane.

"Think," Evelyn snapped. She must have caught the meaning on my face. "Heather, think. You know more about this than anyone. That was different. Why?"

"... I ... I don't-"

"This is deathly important. Think."

I blinked. She was right, it wasn't the same feeling as the time we'd peered into Wonderland and found the Eye staring back. Direct contact, face to face, had been like standing under a lightning strike. Being in Wonderland for real was to forget how to be human, how to be oneself, nothing between one's fragile little mind and the vastness of the Eye.

What we'd just experienced was filtered, using the broken soul of a dead woman as a lens. Even then, the Eye's awareness was still more than enough to crush unprotected thought.

Twice in one day, I thought to myself. To borrow a phrase from Evelyn, I hated this bastard thing so much.

"It's ... I don't know," I said. "Using Sarika as a conduit. A way in. To reality. It's looking through her, what's left of her."

"Great," Evelyn hissed. "Great. That means nothing to me."

"What do we do?" Twil growled. "We gotta get away from this, right? Can't stay here. Can't stay."

"What happened to that woman?" Nicole asked. "I don't understand."

"I got it wrong," Evelyn admitted with a shiver. "The cult didn't try

to retaliate against us at all. They tried to free themselves from the Eye, break the deal Alexander Lilburne made with it. They tried to fuck it over.”

“And it didn’t work, I gather?”

“Clearly,” said Evelyn. “It fucked them first. Look around us – they lost.”

“Can’t stay here, can’t stay here,” Twil repeated, her shoulders hunched tight, claws flexing.

I stood up straight, puffed out my chest, and took a deep breath.

“Raine!”

Evelyn winced at my shout. So did Nicole, but Twil joined me, raising her wolfish snout and shouting Raine’s name into this void of ghosts. What was the point in stealth anymore? The house, the Eye, Sarika, whatever was here, it knew we were here too.

“Raine!”

“Raine! We’re here!”

“Raaaaine!”

“Where are you? Raine!”

Thump-thump.

“Raine!”

“Shhhh, shhhh, Twil, stop, stop.”

“Rai- what?”

“Listen, listen!”

Thump-thump-thump.

A dull, distant hammering, far far above us. A boot heel or a fist against a load bearing wall.

“She heard us. She’s upstairs.” My heart expanded, fit to burst with relief I could barely feel.

“She’s upstairs!” Twil all but whooped, a shaky grin on her face.

“How do we know that’s her?” Nicole asked, eyes on the ceiling.

"It's the best bet we have," Evelyn hissed. "Fair enough, we can try to-"

Throb.

Sarika appeared behind the other sofa, staring down at the carved man. A flinch went through us, a group motion, a pack of animals startled by the probing tentacle of a leviathan.

I threw my left arm up, the Fractal outward.

"I envy him," Sarika was saying. "He got to die as a human. Cowards, all of them, gave up before the end, but I should have done the same. We all should have. That's always been my problem, not enough of a coward, never reading the warning signs. Bad boys and bad habits, always my fucking problem. Should have listened to my mother, the old-"

She flickered, outline shattering into a million static fragments, a ghost smeared across an invisible pane of glass. The Eye's awareness turned on us once again, an insistent pressure plunging us miles underwater, held at bay by flimsy black lines drawn on my fragile skin.

Sarika's ghost turned, mere static-wash against a background of void, and looked at me.

Hate. Personal and unquenchable, hate.

Throb.

She vanished.

Everyone gasped in relief, except Praem of course. I lowered my arm, shaking and shivering inside.

"No!" Evelyn hissed. "Wait, wait, dammit."

Praem reached out and helped hold my arm up, her gentle hand supporting my elbow. We waited, a minute, two minutes. Time stretched out, but Sarika did not return.

"Maybe she's done for now?" Twil ventured.

"She can't see us, she's not actually reacting to us," Evelyn said.

"Evee, she is, she looked at me," I said quietly. "We need ... we need to move, we need to get to Raine. And get out."

“Find some stairs, right!” Twil said, and bounded toward the open door at the back of the little reception room, the one that led through into a sumptuous lounge.

“Twil!” Evelyn snapped. “She’s not the only thing in-”

The house proved Evelyn’s words right before she finished saying them. Roused by Twil’s sudden motion or perhaps merely emerging from hiding after Sarika had passed, a writhing mass of limbs scuttled out from underneath one of the sofas.

A bundle of severed arms, fused together at the elbows in a twisted mass of melted bone. No head or central body, just limb. The whole thing scurried up the side of the sofa like a spider. Evelyn screamed. Nicole aimed the gun.

I sighed.

After the Eye, this thing was refreshingly mundane.

Twil got to it first – whirling at the sound of Evelyn’s scream – and pounced on it, all wolfish fang and claw, driven by adrenaline and the need to fight a physical foe. She tore the thing in two so fast the rest of us barely had time to blink. One half dropped to the floor, twitched, and lay still. She flung the other half at a wall. It hit with a splat, slid to the ground, and stopped moving.

“Fuck!” said Twil.

“... fuck is right, what the hell is *that*?” Nicole still pointed the handgun at the arm-thing.

“As I said,” Evelyn repeated, struggling to keep her voice steady. “Sarika – the Eye, whatever – she’s not the only thing in here. Heather,” she nodded to me, eyes on the exposed Fractal on my arm. “You lead. Carefully. With that.”

I nodded. “I can lead. I can do it.”

= =

Our original plan lay in tatters. We crept from room to ugly echoing room, past corpses and wreckage and distant furtive sounds, my arm and the Fractal held up in place of the mobile phones we’d planned on using as protection. Only Nicole still observed through the screen of her phone, belatedly checking around corners. Twil flanked my shoulder, ready to sideswipe any monsters that lurked

in the hallways of plush carpet and cream walls.

None did.

Unseen presences moved out in the depths, like abyssal marine life beyond the reach of a diver's lamp. Footsteps crossed the ceiling above our heads, doors creaked closed, furniture squeaked on floorboards. Less frequently, things crashed and banged, sudden explosions of motion hidden behind the walls. Twice, insane laughter ratcheted through the house from some forgotten corner; the first time it trailed off into a whooping, leaping cry. The second it cut out in choking sounds, and did not return.

"Whatever's left of the cult," Evelyn hissed under her breath.

"Burning themselves out. Probably don't even care that we're here."

"Come out and fight me!" Twil snarled at nothing.

"Keep moving, keep moving," I whispered, then raised my voice.

"Raine!"

Thump, from above. Still there. Keep moving.

More nightmare amalgamations of crawling flesh lurked in corners or behind open doors, like the fused arm-spider. None of them attacked us. Mindless and blind, they dragged themselves in aimless circles. Constructed from internal organs, bits of limb, fragments of articulated bone, flopping and slapping bits of lung and liver against the carpets. A detached foot, a piece of shoulder. Most of them seemed to have come from the exploded corpses, which we found in almost every room, tumbled over each other or cowering in corners from some unseen pursuer – Sarika? The Eye?

Sarika did not reappear.

We stumbled across two more Fractals, thankfully neither of them drawn in blood. One was cut directly into the plaster of a wall, with a pocket knife, unfinished and flawed. The cultist responsible lay slumped beneath, a stern and capable looking young woman. No wound on her body, her empty face retained a hint of the anger she must have felt at the end. Bloody froth coated her lips.

The second Fractal was hidden in a bathroom, highlighter pen on the white tiles. Two bodies embraced in the tub beneath, huddled together, a pair of young men barely out of their teens.

A strange, grudging respect kindled inside my chest as we searched

the house; these people had been my enemies, they'd served a monster more than once, they'd attacked my home and hurt my friends – my family? – but in the end they'd rebelled against the same thing that tortured me.

And with all their numbers, their expertise, their willingness to commit atrocity, they'd still lost.

I crammed that thought away for now. Raine first.

Eventually, after ugly sitting rooms and long hallways, past a game room with pool table and dartboard, around the remains of a actual murder – one cultist stabbed to death with a knife still protruding from his sternum – we found the kitchen.

As ostentatious and superfluous as the rest of the house, a space bigger than some entire apartment floor plans, tiled in marbled white and split down the middle by a projecting island full of displayed crockery and little pantry cupboards. A huge slab of dining table dominated the side we'd emerged into, surrounded by cushioned chairs. On the other, a pair of gigantic ovens with hot-plate tops and lots of bells and whistles filled the wall.

One of the cupboards lay open, bottles of whiskey and vodka and other spirits clustered on the worktop beneath, surrounded by a riot of glasses, some still half-full, a few smashed. Liquid courage, to fortify the cultists for their doomed uprising.

Another two unfortunate corpses lay on the floor at the far end, looking as if they'd burst from inside. Detonated.

The space extended out toward the rear of the house, opening onto an attached greenhouse full of expensive show plants like an upper-class version of a conservatory.

And through the open double-doors next to that, stairs, leading up.

“Yes!” Twil hissed, one hand on my back.

“Alright, but how do we get back down?” Nicole said. “When-”

Throb.

We all winced, hard. Heart in my throat, I cast about for Sarika's ghost, my arm raised, turning on the spot, the others trying to get behind me.

“Why didn't it do this to you, Heather? A good question, a good

bloody question, but I have a theory,” Sarika’s voice dripped with scorn. I almost tripped over my own feet to turn around – she was behind us, in the hallway we’d just left. Out of sight. “Because it can’t.”

“Keep moving,” Evelyn hissed. “Ignore her.”

We all backed away together. My feet felt awkward and clumsy, trying to hold my arm up and walk backward.

“Because it took you, kidnapped you, but you escaped. We were given to it, gift-wrapped with worship and ceremony and bullshit. It understands that. Servility, ownership, dominion. We human beings don’t have much common ground with this fucking thing, but it understands that part of us well enough. Is that enough to penetrate your skull, you pampered little bitch? You’re free-”

Throb.

And then she was inside the room, right behind us. Like a furnace to one’s back, panic and doom leering over my shoulder. This time, I did trip over my own feet. Exhausted and spent, I went over, flailing to face her with the Fractal on my arm.

Praem caught me.

Twil yanked Evelyn off her feet and got behind me. Nicole hesitated with the handgun. A pointless gesture, as that terrible awareness rolled over us like a blanket of shadow and a ocean’s worth of freezing water. I shivered and shook, my teeth chattering with effort. Praem held my arm up, held me up, her embrace tight around my waist.

Sarika was crying, her face in her hands.

“I never really believed all his bullshit,” she sobbed. “All that guff about-”

Throb.

She blinked thirty, maybe forty degrees to the left. Praem turned me, my feet skittering for purchase on the floor tiles. The others clustered behind.

“-transcending the human, how we had to leave this behind to have any chance,” Sarika continued. “All his high-minded nonsense, and I didn’t really care. All I wanted was him. The rest of it, who gave a

toss? It was all lies, anyway, right? Right? It was supposed to be lies, a game, a fantasy – I didn't know, I didn't know. Fuck him. Fuck you. All of you."

"Ignore her, ignore it!" Evelyn gasped. "We- go around her-upstairs."

"Around that?" Nicole hissed. "Fat chance."

"And now, here I am," Sarika sobbed, sniffing back tears as her voice twisted with rage. "And it's worse than he could ever imagine, the fucking bastard, the cunt. I loved him, I loved him and look what he left me with, look what he did!"

She screamed, turned to static and abstract shape spread across space-time. A data ghost lost on the tide. A million tons of pressure slammed down on me – the Eye, trying to find us.

Blood ran from my nose. My limbs shook with the effort of existing. Praem, rock-solid with inhuman strength, held me steady.

Sarika's eyes peered out from the chaos and met mine.

She hated me so much.

Throb.

She was gone. Panting, gasping, all of us confused and blinking like moles in the light. Praem held onto me still. I tried to nod a thank you.

"Upstairs, now," Evelyn managed. "She can't sync up with us if we keep moving. We-"

"I need to help her," I blurted out.

"... are you mad? Yes, yes, you're mad, of course. Praem, carry her, please. Put her over your shoulder if you have to."

"No, no, nobody deserves the Eye," I insisted. "Evee, nobody deserves that. I'd kill her myself if it would save Raine, but nobody deserves the Eye. Look what it did to her."

"Heather's got a point," Nicole said. "This thing is using her, right? Maybe we can ... Sarika," she raised her voice, strong and loud, a hostage-negotiation voice. Evelyn grit her teeth in a wince. "We want to help you."

“Detective,” Evelyn hissed. “If you’re standing there in a few more seconds, she’ll be on you.”

“I understand you’re in pain, you’re hurting, you need help,” Nicole continued.

Silence rang out – interrupted by a thump and a crash from somewhere upstairs, the sound of breaking glass and crunching plastic, cut off by a tortured squeal half-way between human and pig. Nicole flinched at that. Twil bristled. Evelyn clucked her tongue.

“Look, I’m a police officer,” Nicole continued. “I don’t understand even half of what’s going on here, but these people with me do, and I’m sure at least one of them can do something for you.”

Nicole shot a look at Evelyn, a raised eyebrow in silent question.

Evelyn shrugged, shaking her head. “Do what?” she mouthed.

“I don’t know,” Nicole whispered back. “Reverse whatever’s happened to her.”

“Detective, an alien God did this to her. Help is not within our power. I wouldn’t even know where to begin. Praem, get moving. Twil, up the stairs.”

“She won’t let us – let me,” I said. I knew it in my bones, from the look on her static-washed face.

The Eye wanted me, but Sarika hated me.

Throb.

Sarika, six inches from Nicole’s face, screaming the rear half of a truncated sentence.

“- doesn’t work! You see? It doesn’t work!”

A kitchen carving knife in one of her hands, dripping crimson, her arm ratcheting back and forth in a freeze-frame of lost motion, limb trailing impossible eye-searing colours. Blood poured from a ragged tear in her own throat, lost in static. Meat ripped as she rammed the knife back in again. Sarika stabbed herself in the throat and neck and even made a jab at her temple, pushing metal through hair and flesh and scraping bone into desynchronised grey matter as she flickered and jerked across the screen of reality.

"It won't let me go!" she screamed. "It doesn't work!"

Throb.

She reappeared on the other side of the room, at the foot of the stairs, no knife and whole again. Weary and confused, I raised my arm. Praem helped, holding me tight, a frame for my exhaustion.

"That scrap of darkness, she tried," Sarika said, and I realised she was talking about Felicity's parasite. "But it broke her too, forced her into her own body and beat her blind and deaf. You think you can do better? You don't even understand, you only care because I make you care, you-"

Throb.

Behind us again. Dizzying, swaying, barely able to stay on my feet, Praem swung me round. Without the doll-demon's strength we'd have been dead or insane or worse, but she held my arm up high. Kept the Outside where it should be, the thinnest of layers between our flesh and the Eye. Twil yelped, dragged Evelyn into the slim cone of safety. Nicole stammered, tried to speak, got nowhere.

"-fault, Heather. It's his responsibility, but also yours. If you didn't exist, none of this would have happened-"

Throb.

Six feet closer, rage leaking through the static. Praem took a step back, pulled me with her. Sarika's face screamed at me, a distorted oval, fine features blurred and smeared by interference.

"- while my friends are all dead. Can't mourn, can't even snatch time to think. My name, I can't remember my name-"

Throb.

In our faces now, howling. I was insensate as Praem pulled me back, limp meat in the demon's grip.

"-and you get to live. You're beyond lucky," Sarika cursed me. The Eye rose behind her, unseen but as real as nuclear fallout on the wind. "You have power and you don't deserve it, because you won't use it. You get to live and we get to suffer. You think that's-"

A crash, a roar, and the sound of tearing meat, from a distant part of the house.

Sarika flickered out.

Silence fell. I heaved for breath, like coming up for air with bursting lungs. We stood there, stooped and shivering and sweating, waiting for the onslaught to resume. Only Praem stood tall, with me in her arms, my head lolling back on her chest.

“... think she’s had enough?” Twil growled after a minute. Her eyes darted left and right, watching for an ambush.

Evelyn waved an impatient hand, but she leaned on Twil’s arm all the same. “Didn’t you hear that? She was interrupted. And it wasn’t like before, she just ... faded. No popping ears that time.”

Praem tried to prop me against the massive kitchen table, but I clung to her for support. Nicole sat down suddenly on a chair. None of us were in any state to take this opening and go rushing up the stairs.

“She’ll be back,” I croaked. “She won’t let me go.”

“Is it personal?” Nicole asked. “Why, what did you do to her?”

“Not about what I did ... ” I shook my head, couldn’t put it into words. “What I *can* do.”

“And what would that be? Help me understand here, if we’re going to ... negotiate, with that thing.”

“The shaman,” a voice rumbled, “can do whatever she puts her mind to. Even for her enemies.”

A giant ducked into the kitchen.

“Zheng!” I felt myself light up with relief. What a strange, impossibly stressful day, to be so delighted by the arrival of seven feet of blood-drenched rippling zombie muscle. Bizarre, and more than a little worrying, the depth of security I felt rushing into my chest as Zheng straightened up inside the room and flashed that shark-toothed grin.

Zheng looked like a vision from hell. She’d lost her trench coat, reduced to that flimsy tshirt and her jeans, both garments torn in several places and covered with splatters of blood, though a hunch told me none of it belonged to her. The exposed skin on her arms and face and belly where her tshirt rode up glistened with the kind of sweat that only comes from long exertion. Gore covered her

mouth and chin.

She *steamed*, hot tarmac in the rain.

“Shaman,” she purred.

“Oh great, it’s her,” Twil grunted, unimpressed. “That’s all we need.”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Evelyn grumbled. She nodded at the gruesome object dangling from one of Zheng’s hands. “I take it you’re responsible for our reprieve?”

Zheng grinned wider in smug triumph and predatory satisfaction. She raised her trophy. “Perhaps I am, wizard.”

A severed head. Zheng was holding a severed head, freshly torn from its counterpart neck moments ago, if the trail of blood was anything to go by. Masculine, with a strong jaw and dark hair, eyes blank and glassy.

“... s’that from a demon?” Twil frowned at it. “Ugh.”

“How can you tell?” Zheng purred.

“The horns are a dead giveaway,” I managed. As was the mouth full of needle-point teeth. The head’s owner had most definitely not been human, though probably began life as one. The shape of the skull had been warped, altered, the horns grown from the brow-ridge in jutting spikes of bone, the jaw enlarged, the ears shrunk to gnarled nubs of flesh.

“Cult zombie?” Evelyn asked.

“A little like me, wizard,” Zheng confirmed. She crossed to us and placed the severed head on the table with a wet squelch. She couldn’t get it to stand up, so it fell over on one side. Evelyn had to look away. Praem stared Zheng dead in the eye, still busy holding me on my feet. Zheng tapped the head. “If an ant is like a hornet. Barely awake, vacant now. Staying hidden in the corners and under the floors. *Laoyeh* killed all the monkeys, burst them with the pressure of their own souls. Left the demons intact, but hollow. Filled them up. *Laoyeh* is using them as relays.”

“Laoyeh?” I echoed.

“Relays?” Evelyn squinted.

"That is a severed head," Nicole said quietly. "I'm looking at a severed head. It's got horns."

"*Laoyeh*," Zheng repeated, and the way she said it left no room for doubt. She meant the Eye. "Relays, yes, wizard."

"What have you been doing all this time?" I blurted out, half-disentangling myself from Praem's grip and almost falling over. I caught myself on the edge of the table, and a much stronger hand caught my waist. Zheng wrapped an arm around me.

For a moment I was strung between one demon and the other. Praem and Zheng stared each other down, Praem still supporting me, Zheng frozen in the act of scooping me up.

"I'll take the shaman now," Zheng purred.

"You are late," Praem intoned.

"Um, not now, please?" I managed, stunned by the sudden confrontation. "Not now. We have to get to Raine."

Praem let me go. Zheng swept me up, lifting me with ease, hauling me into her arms in a princess-carry. She ran hot, like a fire burned inside her flesh. If this had been any other place, any other time, I would have blushed red as a beetroot. Right now, nobody cared, least of all me.

"As for me, shaman," she purred. I felt the vibration in my bones. "I've been hunting, feasting, fighting, fucking. Avoiding *Laoyeh*."

"Fucking?" I squinted at her. Zheng shrugged. I resolved to never ask about that one.

"Relays," Evelyn was muttering. "For what it's using Sarika for. It's in them, in the corpses, in place of the demons that should be there?"

Zheng nodded, sage-like. "Smart wizard."

"Then ... tearing it's head off disrupted the signal?" I voiced. "Thank you."

"For now."

"Until they triangulate again?" Evelyn asked in a rush. "You've been hunting them? How many, where?"

"You won't catch them, little wizard. I can barely catch them. Both cat and mouse in this game, you and I both. *Laoyeh* hunts us. We should be elsewhere, yesterday."

"Raine's upstairs," I said. "That's elsewhere."

"Good," Zheng purred. She adjusted her grip on me. I clung to her as she took a step toward the stairs. Nicole nodded and stood up, moved to follow in the zombie's wake. Twil, not to be outdone, hurried to catch up. Praem offered Evelyn her arm. Evelyn accepted the help.

Zheng paused. Froze. Rock solid.

"What's-"

"Shaman." Zheng slid her supporting arm around my back, grabbed my wrist, and held it up, facing forward.

A screech across the surface of reality, nails down a blackboard inside my head, a figure coalescing out of nothing in a storm of static death at the foot of the stairs.

Sarika screamed back into existence.

"-and nobody's coming to save me, nobody ever does-"

"Sarika!" I raised my voice above her, above the sudden mounting wave of pressure. Zheng's solidity helped. "Let us go, let me save Raine – and I'll help you!"

She flickered, six feet back up the stairs, then forward again, jumping in and out of time, her form blasted into static as the Eye's scrutiny turned on us.

"-possibly do for me-" a snatch of her voice reached out through the chaos.

"I'll free you," I shouted, squeezing my eyes shut. "You know I can do it, you know what I am."

"Shaman," Zheng growled, a warning tone, a warning that she was about to try something.

Sarika laughed, on our left then our right.

"I mean it!" I shouted.

"Against the Eye?!" Sarika, right in my face – then back on the

stairs again, howling, pulling out fistfuls of her own hair. A banshee, tortured and forsaken, already exploding into static as the Eye hijacked what was left of her soul. “Make it let me go. Can do you that? You liar! You’re like me, a human being. You can’t fight a God-”

I interrupted her, spoke into the storm.

“Sarika, say the word, and I’ll set you free. I’ll make it let you go. A mercy kill. Nobody deserves the Eye.”

that which you cannot put down – 7.14

Sarika – whatever the Eye had reduced her to, angry ghost or neural echo or cruel joke – fell silent amid the static.

Her form flickered and jerked, paused in the act of tearing at her hair.

“- arrogant can you get?” she said. “You can’t fight a God.”

“I can. I will. Even for you.”

A howling storm of static ripped her apart. The true signal intensified, as the Eye probed for us through the connection of Sarika’s soul. An oceanic abyss crushed down on my consciousness, a million tons of cold pressure held at bay by a few black lines drawn on my left forearm.

My head swam, a trickle of blood ran from my nose, and my muscles filled with lead.

Cradled in Zheng’s arms, I felt her bones creak.

“Sarika, say it. If you want, I’ll ... ” I squeezed the words out again, through a reluctance I had no time to contemplate. If there was such a thing as an ‘ethical emergency’, this was one. “I’ll ... kill you. Assist you. Suicide. I promise.”

Her face condensed out of the chaos, smeared like paint on glass, flickering and glitching with incandescent colour as if lit from behind by atomic fire. My eyes ached and burned as I forced myself to squint at her, to make contact with whatever was left.

“- like that, wouldn’t you?” her voice emerged in a broken wave. Even the Eye couldn’t blot out her scorn. “Goody two-shoes gets to be an emotional martyr, and I won’t even leave a fucking corpse.”

“That’s not ... not what I-”

Throb. Sarika jerked six feet closer, limbs and face shattered into a hundred shards, fragments in a hurricane.

“At least admit it,” she spat. “Coward.”

“Shaman,” Zheng gurgled: do something, Heather. Praem had been able to hold me rock steady because she was made of wood and magic. Zheng was flesh, and taking the brunt.

“Nobody deserves the Eye,” I cried out, gasping, sucking breath through my teeth. “I want to help- I can-”

“Do it then, you coward!”

The brainmath came to me easily enough. The execution did not.

Framing the task in my mind summoned the necessary equations from the black abyss at the bottom of my subconscious – define a human soul, apply that definition to what was left of Sarika – but I was running on fumes, almost nothing left to give. My stomach curled up tight in terror and rebellion as a headache burst behind my eyes with icepick clarity. I quivered and choked in Zheng’s arms as Sarika howled in my face.

I’d overlooked an important complication. Sarika was the static, not the signal.

The Eye was the signal – and I dared not touch that barbed probing tentacle of leviathan consciousness, dared not define it in hyperdimensional mathematics for even a nano-second. I was a diver at the edge of a marine trench, trying to snatch a rotten morsel from a tangle of squid-limbs.

But I didn’t need to define the Eye to scrub the static in the signal. The effort would make me vomit and bleed and probably pass out, yes, maybe for days, but I knew I could do it, even on empty.

Unanchored from a body, from space and time, there was so little left of Sarika. Annihilating her would be simple.

But I didn’t.

I couldn’t do it.

In a moment of weakness that had nothing to do with fear of pain, I hesitated.

With a crackle and an ultra-low frequency *thoomp*, Sarika’s incoherent form dissipated like lighting striking the earth. The abyssal pressure of the Eye’s attention vanished, the visual static faded to nothing, silence fell.

"No ... " I croaked into the emptiness. "I was ready, I wasn't-"

"Hngh," Zheng grunted like a bull and finally let go of my left wrist. My arm flopped onto my belly, no energy left to hold myself up. My head lolled on Zheng's shoulder as I clenched down hard with my stomach muscles to hold back a wave of vomit.

"... you killed her?" Twil winced, shaking her head like a wet dog. A trickle of blood ran from her nose. "Heather, you-"

"Unnnhh, not me," I squeezed out, trying to raise my head. "I was about to. Going to do it. Free her. Didn't. Not in time."

"Shit. Never mind, 'ey?"

Nicole wiped her own thin nosebleed on her sleeve and gestured at the severed head Zheng had left on the kitchen table. "You think she ... she lost the ... the thing, again?"

"Thing?" Twil squinted at her.

"Thing. Triangulation? Bloody hell, my head feels like it's been in a industrial vice."

"Walk it off, detective," Evelyn growled through her teeth, her eyes screwed shut, leaning on Praem's arm. The doll-demon alone had been spared the nosebleed and cranial pressure, still standing straight and solid while the rest of us recovered, even Zheng.

"Easier said than done." Nicole tried to laugh. "You think she lost the triangulation again? The, uh, zombies wandered in the wrong directions?"

"Must'a done." Twil slapped her own cheeks and cocked an eyebrow up at Zheng. "What are you grinning about, you brick shithouse?"

"Pain," Zheng purred. "So long since real pain. Exhilarating."

"You know what would be a wonderful idea?" Nicole pointed a thumb at the stairs. "Moving before she comes back again. Before the zombies line up or whatever. God, there's a sentence I'd never have imagined twelve hours ago. Before the zombies line up. Like planets."

"Yeah, yeah right, we should, good call," Twil said. She bristled, her wolf form half-summoned in translucent fur and claw, as she eyed the spot where Sarika had vanished, an invisible minefield between

us and the cream marble tiles and gilt faux-gold of the stairs upward.

“You first, werewolf,” Nicole said. “Don’t you regenerate or whatever?”

“Yeah, yeah, but- Eevee? Eevee, hey, hey!”

Evelyn trudged right past, leaning on Praem’s arm for support, and tapped the bottom step with the tip of her walking stick. “I doubt very much we need worry about aligning zombies, or anything else. She’s gone.”

“She’ll be back as soon as she can,” Twil said, hurrying to catch up to Evelyn. “You heard what Zheng said about the zombies and the-”

“No. No, Heather was quite successful. I don’t believe Sarika will be returning.”

“Wasn’t me,” I croaked, and managed to sit up in Zheng’s arms. The demon-host adjusted her grip, a strong arm under my back. “She vanished on her own, that wasn’t me. I was going to, I was about to do it, but ... ”

Evelyn saw right through my paper-thin self-deception. She made eye contact, and she just knew.

“I think she understood your offer perfectly well, Heather.”

“... then why leave?” I asked. One last try to deny what I already knew.

“Maybe she was afraid you’d actually go through with it,” Evelyn said. “Maybe she doesn’t want to die.”

A heady cocktail of relief and guilt fermented in my chest, when I hadn’t expected either of them.

Sarika’s screaming need to end herself earlier had been real, when she’d stabbed herself in the throat and head just to show us it didn’t work, one of the most real acts I’d ever witnessed. I had no doubt.

Do it then, you coward!.

What had she called me – an *emotional martyr*.

She didn’t want it to be me that pulled the trigger. She hated me too much.

I was the only person alive who could end her suffering, but she'd taunted me and fled. She'd refused, and the burden remained mine. I didn't deserve to feel relief. It ate at my guts, a worm in my belly. If Sarika wanted me to torture myself, she'd done a great job.

It seems so easy in movies or on television, doesn't it? To give a suffering person an end to their misery. A syringe with too large a dose of morphine, a pillow held over the face until the struggles stop, or a bottle of whiskey and a revolver and five minutes alone. All abstractions compared to what I'd offered; the only tool I had was my own consciousness.

She'd been my enemy, she'd chained me up in a small, cold room, she'd threatened to torture Raine, she'd hurt my friends. She'd been lover to a genuine monster, and at the very least she must have been aware of the homeless people, murdered for zombie vessels. She must have known. Sarika was complicit, and probably deserved life in a cell, but she did not deserve the Eye.

I failed. In a moment of weakness, I failed.

And what if Evelyn was right? What if Sarika wanted to live?

There was no way to bring her back, to reconstruct what was lost, that was absurd. That was beyond me.

"Maybe ..." I forced myself to agree with Evelyn for now. We had no time for this. I had an angel to rescue. I raised my head and filled my lungs as best I could. "Raine!" I croaked at the ceiling. "Raine, we're down here!"

= =

"Raine!"

"Hey Raine, make more noise!"

"Raine! It's us! Where are you?"

Thump-thump went Raine's fist or foot in answer, pounded against wall or floor.

I shouted myself hoarse, but Twil's lungs did all the real work. She bounded up the wide spiral stairs ahead of the pack, calling Raine's name. She stopped on the second floor landing, one ear cocked to the ceiling as we caught up, then raced onward to the third floor of this ugly, too-large house. We piled onto the small landing behind

her, beneath a low canted ceiling. Narrow hallways and cramped doors led off in all directions, some open on unused guest bedrooms and dusty lonely storage spaces.

One high window looked out on the streets beyond, on Sharrowford's deep-sea glow of orange street lighting and twinkling headlights in the distance. No dead cultists up here. No blood and guts, only a muffled silence.

"Raine!" Twil cupped her hands to her mouth and yelled.

"Raine, we're here," I croaked. "Where are you?"

"-ther."

We froze, listening. My heart felt like a dove trying to escape a cage.

"Heather?" a distant voice called again, trapped behind a dozen walls.

"That was her!" I said. "Did you-"

Twil stuck her nose in the air and sniffed, darting left and right for a moment, then pointed down one of the corridors. "That way!"

Tucked away in the furthest corner of thick carpet and fake gold light fixtures, at the very end of a narrow hallway meant for third rate guests, trapped behind the only locked door in the entire house, I found my girlfriend.

"Heather?" Raine's voice projected through the thin wood as we approached. "Guys, I'm in here! Here! Heather? Twil, is that you too? I'm in here!"

Memory never works properly in these moments, rushing ahead pell-mell, forgetting to record the details, the heart-race, stomach-sick, head-rush details. By the time we reached that door, I was writhing like an impatient cat in Zheng's arms, begging to be put down despite the inconvenient fact I'd likely just fall over.

I must have been calling to Raine, because I do recall her laughter – laughter of relief. A confident laugh, a Raine laugh.

The cultists had locked her in and misplaced the key, but had also screwed a steel bolt to the exterior of the door – to keep Raine from their throats, I like to imagine – shiny and new, probably purchased from Homebase that very morning. Neither bolt nor lock nor one of

the door hinges survived first contact with Twil's shoulder. Neither did Twil's dignity. She crashed straight through the door and into the cramped room beyond in a shower of splinters and sprawl of surprised werewolf.

Modern housebuilding quality. No excuse.

Raine, still wearing the pajamas she'd began the day in, handcuffed to an upturned iron bed frame, ankles bound together with a length of rope, bruised on her jaw and around her left eye socket, lit up with that unmistakable irrepressible grin.

"Fashionably late to the party, hey?" she laughed.

If Zheng hadn't stepped forward and deposited me straight into Raine's arms, I would have scrambled free to reach her anyway, consequences to my verticality be damned.

"Heather, oh, Heather, fuck me blind, what are you even doing here?" Raine laughed, a trilling note of mania under the confidence, as she hugged me best she could with one arm and both legs restrained. "No, don't answer that, it doesn't matter, one hundred percent does not matter."

Both of us were exhausted and bruised in our own ways. Neither of us had showered in well over a day, we both smelled of unwashed hair and sweat and blood. I was freezing cold inside, and Raine shook in a very un-Raine-like way. We clung hard to each other.

"Found you," I murmured into her shoulder, choking back tears. "I found you, Raine, I found you, I found you."

She squeezed me almost too hard to bear. "That you did. That you did, you miracle, you."

"We sort of, you know, helped," Twil said, as she picked herself up off the floor and dusted herself down. She squatted at Raine's ankles and dug a claw into the rope, sawing back and forth. "Can smell you a mile away right now, you reek."

"No kidding," Raine laughed, still hugging me tight, her head over my shoulder as she spoke to the others. "We still in danger? This looks like an all-hands raid, with some new hands too. You all alright?"

"We are still in danger," Evelyn said from the doorway. "But we've got one more task before we burn this house down."

“And you, Evee, are awake!” Raine cheered.

“And glad you’re still breathing, yes.”

“Hey, likewise.”

“You’ve survived worse than these half-baked fools and amateurs. Never doubted it, not for a second.” Evelyn swallowed hard, past a lump in her throat.

“Glad,” Praem intoned.

Raine laughed again and sniffed, watery-eyed with relief. “And thank you too, Praem, thank you too.” She pulled against the handcuff, clinking metal on metal. “Sooner you get me out of this the better? I feel like a fox in a snare, and it is not good, I’ll tell you that much, it ain’t a good feelin’.”

“I’m working on it,” Twil grunted. “Hold on.”

Zheng reached down for Raine’s wrist, wrapped a hand around the centre of the handcuffs, and crushed the mechanism with a crunch of metal and plastic. Raine raised her freed hand with one half of the cuffs still attached, a very unfashionable bracelet. She let out a low whistle of appreciation.

“Wish I could’a done that six hours ago,” she said, grinning at Zheng. “Always wanted to try out the criminal chic look, thanks.”

“Unsurprised?” Zheng rumbled. She stood behind me, but I swear I could feel her showing her teeth.

“By you?”

Zheng purred a wordless affirmative. Raine shrugged. “You walked in here carrying Heather. Right now I don’t care if you’re the ghost of Hendrix or the Pope himself. You’re in my good books, you absolute unit.”

“Typical,” Twil muttered.

“I’m with the shaman.” Zheng said it slow and low, a big cat in repose, feigning languor as she sized up another predator.

“You on our side now, or what?” Raine asked. “I’m sure there’s a story in that, but later, yeah?”

“With the shaman,” Zheng repeated.

"This is Zheng," I said, and finally pulled back from our shared embrace so I could look at Raine. She grinned at me, big and bright and bold as brass – and bruised. The glancing blow to her chin wasn't too bad, but the bruise around her left eye socket shined livid and purple. She'd been punched in the face. A lump grew in my throat "Oh Raine, those bruises look awful."

"What, these? This is nothing. I got worse falling off Evee's garden wall when I was a teenager."

I sniffed and wiped my own eyes, afraid to touch in case it hurt her.

Raine's grin faltered.

"Raine?"

"Heather, I've never seen you this rough, and I've seen you in a fugue state and covered with blood." Raine looked up at the others. "Should she even be here?"

"I have no idea how she's still on her feet," Evelyn said. "She's on my pills. The hard stuff."

"Neither flesh nor foul can stop the shaman," Zheng purred.

"It's a long story. Stuff happened. Lozzie's back," I said. "I'll rest when you're safe."

Raine paused, stared at me, stared at those words. If I'd been less exhausted, I would have blushed. I hadn't meant it to sound heroic.

"Right. Loud and clear, boss, orders received," she said, grinning. "You look like you need a bubble bath, two thousand calories, and sixteen hours sleep, and by God I'm gonna make sure you get it." I laughed too, small and weak, but real. Raine glanced over my shoulder. "Zheng? Cool name. Didn't I fistfight you once?"

"You had a bat," Zheng purred. "You fought well, monkey. Brief, but well."

"Zheng's on our- my side," I said. "I freed her this morning. She saved my life. Twice."

Raine nodded, slow and serious, and entered a strange staring contest with Zheng, a counterpoint to the demon-host's feline stillness. "I'm on Heather's side too," she said after a moment. "Thank you."

“ ... you're welcome, *zuishou*.”

Twil freed Raine's ankles with a parting snikit of tearing rope fibres as her claw popped free. Raine let out a grunt of pain as she drew her knees up. “Heather, I never want to let go of you again, but I'd love to stand up now.”

“Oh, right, yes, yes,” I flustered, struggling to clamber off her until two strong hands took my waist and provided leverage, Zheng being helpful. Twil gave Raine a hand too, pulling her to her feet.

Raine rolled her shoulders and neck, worked out the kinks in stiff muscles, quickly stretched her legs and jogged four paces on the spot. She swept her hair back and shot a rakish smile at me, brimming with confidence and energy, even in sweat-soaked pajamas, even after being stuck alone and scared in a small room for hours on end with no idea what had happened to us. How did she do it? Zheng, for all her imposing height and taut feminine muscle, the way she made a currently dormant part of me tingle in unexpected ways, was nothing compared with Raine.

Raine winced and her smile broke, gritting her teeth as she probed around her bruised eye socket.

“Oh, oh Raine they didn't hurt you, other than the bruises, did they?” I asked.

“Nah. Just sore joints. Dehydrated, hungry, bored. Been sat on my arse for like twelve hours.” She nodded to one side. “Not that he didn't try, but he didn't get very far.”

I followed her nod. A corpse lay crumpled against the wall of the bare little room, a stocky blunt-faced young man, the only cultist we'd found on this floor. His throat was livid with strangulation bruising, and the side of his head was caved in, hair matted with blood. I'd been so focused on Raine I hadn't even noticed.

“Oh.”

“Hey, hey, Heather no, don't look, you don't have to look,” Raine said, gentle and coaxing, and suddenly her hand slipped into mine, her other arm around my waist, taking my weight from Zheng and holding me steady on my feet. She kissed me on the forehead. “It's alright, you don't have to look. It's my responsibility.”

“I've seen far worse today,” I sighed, melting into her arms. “One

more corpse isn't much."

"You killed that man?" Nicole asked, peering around the doorway. She'd stayed out in the corridor to cover our retreat, though it seemed rather unnecessary at this point. "With one arm cuffed to a bed frame and your ankles tied together?"

"Yeah." Raine shrugged, rubbing the back of my neck like I was a cat. "Shattered his windpipe, I think? Finished him with the corner of the bed frame, had to improvise."

"... okay then," Nicole said. "And here I thought you were going to be the normal one."

Raine laughed. "No such luck. Who are you, anyway?"

"Um, Nicole Webb. I'm a police detective, and I absolutely should not be here. Officially or otherwise. Are we going to stand around for much longer, or are we leaving so you lot can commit arson already?"

"Police?" Raine pulled a special grin, a why-not-throw-in-the-kitchen-sink-too grin. "We all getting arrested after this?"

"No, no I doubt I could explain this to my superiors, not without a lot of LSD." Nicole looked at the pistol in her hands, clicked the safety on, and waved the butt at Raine. "This is yours, right? You want it back? You're probably a better shot than me, on account of having ever pulled a trigger."

"You know what? You keep it for now." Raine squeezed my side. "I got my hands full."

Nicole sighed and shook her head.

"Time to get you home," Raine murmured to me. "Time to get all of us home, yeah?"

"... I suppose so," I said, and felt that guilt rising up to strangle me again. I couldn't leave yet, could I? I'd made a promise, but now I had Raine all other concerns seemed fleeting, except getting us out of here and getting home safely. I'd forced leadership to the fore, but now I felt it receding once again. Raine was safe, and with me, and I was small and vulnerable and exhausted beyond words.

But I'd made a promise.

"Yes, well, this reunion is disgustingly sweet," Evelyn said,

adjusting her grip on Praem's arm and suppressing a wince. Climbing all those stairs, even with support and her walking stick, had done a number on her hip and the socket for her prosthetic leg. "But I at least have one more thing to do before I can leave."

"Evee? What?" Twil stared at her, blinking in surprise.

"Evee," Raine said – not a question, an acknowledgement.

"The Sharrowford Cult loosed something genuinely dangerous here," she said. "Upon themselves, yes, but I have duty to ..." she paused, swallowed, considered for a heartbeat. "Self-preservation, to make sure the remains of whatever they did here is destroyed. And I need details, because the less time I spend blundering around in this nightmare of a building, the better."

"We," Twil said. "We! Fuck, you're not staying here alone!"

"T-thank you," Evelyn said, confused for a moment, then cleared her throat. "Raine, you've been up here all day. What did you hear?"

"You mean all the screaming?"

"... the screaming."

"Yeah, screaming. At first I assumed it was you lot riding to the rescue, but after about twenty minutes it all went quiet again. That was hours ago. Except for this weird pulsing in the air, but that stopped a couple of minutes before you broke the door down."

"Oh," I murmured.

"The *screaming*. Hmm, yes," Evelyn sighed. "Makes sense."

"Come on, can't we hurry this up?" Twil almost growled. "You said it yourself, less time we spend here the better. What are you looking for anyway, Evee?"

"I won't know until I find it," Evelyn snapped, bubbling with irritation.

"Sun was already up when I came round, tied up here," Raine said, launching without preamble, talking fast. "Maybe an hour or two later there was a bunch of swearing downstairs, real anger, hard to miss, and these two goons turned up to make a deal with me. I'm pretty sure one of them was the new boss around here, Indian lady, called herself Sarika, but-

“Sarika, yes,” I breathed.

“You ran into her too?” Raine asked, not missing a beat.

“ ... in a manner of speaking. Later, sorry.”

“Sarika, and this other dude. I forget his name but he looked a bit like a badger. Sarika wanted to make a deal – let me go, but on the condition I lure Heather into a trap. I don’t think they figured out we sleep with each other. Bad intel or what, right?”

“Most would take the deal,” Zheng purred.

“They weren’t at all interested in me?” Evelyn said.

“Nah. Didn’t even ask about you.”

“Tch.”

Raine shot her a grin. “What, you feel left out?”

“Don’t be absurd. No, it means their agenda was completely co-opted by the Eye. Bad sign. Continue.”

“Right, right. Well, Tweedledum and Tweedledumber buggered off, but then a while later the house started filling up with people. I heard a few cars, the front door opening and closing, lots of talk down there,” she nodded at the floor. “But nothing I could make out. Nothing useful for tracking them down now, sorry Eevee.” Raine pulled an apologetic grin.

“Hardly matters anymore, does it?” Twil grimaced.

“Oh yeah?”

“They all died,” Evelyn said. “This house is full of corpses.”

Raine pointed a finger gun at her. “That would explain all the screaming.”

“That it would.” Evelyn sighed.

“Couple of hours later still, things get heated down there. I heard arguments, loud ones, a lot of shouting. And then this dope comes up here,” she thumbed at the corpse against the wall. “Said he was supposed to cut a finger off me, as a threat, I guess? Mafia style. He was all in a rush, like he expected to get interrupted. After I did him in, two others came to check, but they were in a hurry too, and they didn’t even care he was dead. Said they’d be back to let me go free

when 'it was all over'."

"A schism," Evelyn said. "I was right."

Raine shrugged. "By that time all the activity had moved to what I guess is the rear of the house, far corner, that way-ish. Lots of chanting, long pauses, more chanting. You know, cult stuff."

"Cult stuff," Nicole tutted.

"Bingo," said Evelyn.

"Then all the screaming started. Twenty minutes of bedlam. People running all over the place, some weird noises, lots of sobbing, shouting, that weird pulsing in the air, then it all just ... " She shrugged. "Died off. That was maybe three or four hours back. I took a nap, so I'm not sure. What time is it now, anyway?"

"You took a nap?" I gaped up at her, forgetting all my worries for one moment of awe.

"Why not? Couldn't figure out a way to cut the rope. Can't get my teeth to my ankles."

"Rear of the house," Evelyn echoed softly, her eyes far away. "A central ritual, the straw that broke the camel's back. If nothing else, that's where we start the fire, destroy whatever's left there."

"Broke the camel's back?" Raine raised an eyebrow.

"The cult copied the Fractal from Heather's arm," Evelyn explained. "Used it to try to rebel against the Eye. It killed them all."

Raine's eyebrows shot into the stratosphere. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I'm leaning good."

"The Sharrowford cult is dead," said Evelyn, "Two dozen pairs of shoes by the door, but we've seen more than a dozen corpses. Maybe a few loyalists to the Eye refused to participate, perhaps they're still out there, but the cult as a force is done. We've won, for whatever that's worth. Doesn't feel like much of a victory."

"None of them deserved this," I murmured, my voice almost breaking. "A ... a trial. Sentences for ... all sort of things. Not this. Not the Eye, and not ... "

Raine squeezed my hand. She didn't get it. She wouldn't, not unless I explained.

“Myself and Praem will go find the place they did their ritual,” Evelyn said. “Twil, you’re coming?”

“Yeah, not leaving you alone.”

“Then I suggest Raine and Heather, you get out of this house. You’re both exhausted. Nicole, you don’t have to stay unless you want, you-”

“I’m not leaving,” I said.

Evelyn closed her eyes for a moment. She sighed.

“I’m not leaving, not yet,” I repeated. “I made a promise.”

“She’s not going to thank you,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Oh no, this is mad, come on,” said Twil.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled.

“Heather?” Raine asked.

No judgement, no fear, just a question in her voice. She’d been trapped here for almost 12 hours, and I was asking her to stay longer, and Raine’s tone was filled with only curiosity and devotion. I could have cried. Instead I swallowed, and steeled myself for the task.

“There’s a survivor. Sort of,” I said. “Sarika.”

“Survivor?” Twil grimaced and spread her arms in a shrug. “She’s a fucking ghost!”

“She’s not- it’s complicated. I don’t know how to explain.” My throat felt tight, closing up on the words. “Part of her is still here. The Eye, it did something to her, she’s ruined, unanchored from space and time, I-I don’t-”

“What did you promise?” Plain, straightforward, cutting through my hesitation. How did she always do that so unerringly?

“Assisted suicide. It won’t let her go. I think I can do it for her, with ... ” I tapped the side of my head.

“She left!” Twil almost yelled.

“I know.”

“You and Raine don’t have to stay in here any longer, that’s

bonkers. Why are you even talking about this?” Twil gaped at me. “She vanished, Heather, she was taunting you, having you on.”

“I suspect she doesn’t want to die,” Evelyn said, voice tight. “As I already said, once.”

“I know. It changes nothing. Nobody deserves the Eye. Just ... let me come with you, until you set the fire, in case she appears.”

Evelyn grumbled under her breath, but she nodded.

“Can’t you just pick her up and carry her out of here?” Twil asked Zheng. The demon-host shrugged.

“I’m with the shaman.”

“Detective,” Twil turned to Nicole. “You’re meant to be sensible, right?”

Nicole glanced between me and Twil. She looked down at the gun in her hand and shrugged. “This is the most real thing I’ve done in years. I’m staying till the end.”

Raine squeezed my hand again. “Where you go, I go. It’s only another five minutes, after all.”

I nodded, thankful, sniffing back the threat of tears. “I made a promise. That matters.”

“Promise,” Praem repeated.

= =

We discovered the site of the Sharrowford Cult’s final ritual exactly where Raine estimated we would, at the rear of the house, on the opposite side to the main stairs.

The journey took no more than three or four minutes. Without the pursuing terror of Sarika’s presence, the house had descended into a twilight realm of furtive rustles and dragging footsteps. The cult’s hollowed-out zombies tracked us from a safe distance, from behind the walls, the only evidence of them an occasional gibber or giggle echoing down a forlorn hallway, a counterpoint to the slick meat sounds of the bizarre flesh amalgamations flopping and twitching in the corners.

Half of me was flying high. I’d done it, I’d rescued Raine, and nothing was going to take her from me now, not surrounded by

allies and friends.

The other half of me was locked in a paralysis of duty and dread.

“Sarika!”

I paused to call out her name three times into the ocean-floor stillness of the house. Raine waited each time as I clung to her side, more for emotional than physical support. She listened with me, all the others tense with baited breath.

“Sarika, I can help!”

If Sarika heard me, she declined to answer.

But when we reached the conjectured place of the cult’s terminal working, I forgot my haze of guilt and elation. That room served as a dash of ice water to the face.

Twil got there first and faltered at the edge of the thick white carpet, gagging at the smell and holding her nose. Nicole was next, and violently ill, adding to the existing mess on the floor. By the time Raine and I passed through the propped-open double doors, the detective was already wiping bile off her lips. Evelyn stared hard, her natural distaste for violence and gore suppressed only by her outrage.

Praem tried to hang back. Evelyn’s need for support pulled her on.

So did Zheng.

Zheng, one eye half-squinted with tension, reluctant to pass the threshold, kept well clear of the epicentre.

That, more than anything else, more than the actual sight of ground zero for the cult’s destruction, more than the twisted mockery we found there, set all the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

The room was intended for parties.

The largest single space in the house, the ceiling was double the height of all the others by virtue of extension onto the second story. Thick white carpet covered one half of the floor, hardwood the other. Several long low tables stood by for drinks or snacks, a wine rack and spirit collection proud behind a bar made of expensive dark wood. Fancy upholstered bar stools and leather sofas and armchairs pointed at a truly gargantuan television inset into the far

wall, and a sound system lurked discreetly in a corner behind some faux-brick nonsense.

Thick curtains covered the whole of one wall, hiding French doors that would open onto a patio and the back garden, for barbecues in the summer. It even had a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, a ghastly upside-down crenellation of glass and stainless steel.

Raine didn't say a word. She must have felt the horror and disgust in my muscles, in the hitch of my breathing.

"Tell me that person over there is not still alive," Nicole managed to say. She put a hand to her mouth, trying not to vomit again.

Magical detritus littered the low tables and the top of the bar – knives, pieces of drawing charcoal, red paint, odd twists of machine part and scraps of half-finished diagram, even a small stack of books, one of them lying open on blood-flecked pages – but I got the impression this was the first time the cult had used this space for magic. Coats and handbags lay over the backs of the sofas, a single discarded scarf trailed off a bar stool, half-finished drinks lay all around.

They'd commandeered the nearest suitable place, gathered quickly, thrown together whatever they could.

"What the hell did they think they were doing with this?" Evelyn hissed through gritted teeth. "Idiots. No better than a ... a- a cargo cult! What the hell did they think it was going to do?!"

She meant, of course, the Fractal.

They'd drawn it on a dozen full-length mirrors, and pointed them into the centre of a magic circle, itself cut into the wooden half of the floor with a chisel and hammer, rough and jagged. The circle lay inert. Didn't hurt to look at – probably because so much of it was obscured by blood and viscera.

Several cultists had died here, exploded or detonated, cooked from the inside. Three, four, five, six? It was impossible to tell. I didn't want to count. The air reeked of spoilt meat and drying blood.

"Negotiation," Zheng said.

"What?" Evelyn snapped.

Zheng pointed a finger at the magic circle with its ring of mirrors –

at the wet, glistening, twitching mass in the centre. “Negotiation, with *Laoyeh*. That is a mouthpiece.”

“What do we- uh ... what do we do about him?” Twil asked.

“Nobody. Touch. Anything,” Evelyn hissed through her teeth. “Not a dust mote, not a breath. Twil, do you remember where you left that can of paint?”

“Yeah, yeah I think I do,” Twil nodded.

“Get it – and the petrol we left by the front door. Be quick. Quick, and do not get lost, don’t you dare get lost.”

Twil took off back down the corridor, all scrambling limbs.

“We’ve already all looked at it,” I murmured, my brain trying to solve the one problem I could grasp, while I ignored the impossible one, the one that lay in the middle of the magic circle quivering and twitching. “It can’t be-”

“Dangerous?” Evelyn snapped. “Everything here is dangerous. This all needs to be soaked with petrol and *burned*.”

The Eye stared at us from the back wall – in black paint, floor-to-ceiling, angular and simple but utterly unmistakable. The cultists had painted it so the television served as a pupil, tilted to point down at the centre of the magic circle. Tuned to a dead channel, static on the screen.

Considering what we’d learnt from Glasswick tower, nobody was in a hurry to interrupt its line of sight.

“Even him?”

“Because of him,” Evelyn said.

“God, I wish he would stop making that noise,” Nicole said. “Why is he making that noise?”

Slayed in the centre of the magic circle like a flayed dissection specimen, at the point of focus for the Eye-mural and the Fractals on the mirrors, something that had once been a human being mewled and gurgled.

Words don’t do it justice. How can I capture atrocity in this inadequate human language? I can’t. I can tell you it was a thick ring of meat, muscle, nerve and bone. I could say there was a

suggestion of breathing, a fluttering of exposed lungs. I could recognise what was left of a head, a flapping mouth, rolling eyes. Scraps of dark hair clung to it at odd angles. I could tell you about the tentacles of flesh that anchored it to the floor. I could tell you these things, but none of them can summon the awful liveliness of that ruined thing, the flexing and tensing, the way the eyes turned to regard us, blind and unseeing. The wet, weeping muscle. The drooling.

The Eye had modified the offering, like clay. We called it a 'he', but in truth such identification was impossible.

Was this Sarika's body?

In the middle of the ring of flesh, there was a gap. Not an orifice – a gap in space, filled by a perfectly flat surface of darkness, like a still pool of oil no wider than my palm.

"Can we do something for him?" Raine murmured. She was the only one, except for Praem, who didn't avert her eyes.

"There is nothing in magical technique or medical science that can be done here," Evelyn said. "None of you understand what we're looking at. I assumed the cult loosed something awful, and we might need to ... switch it off. Rub out some lines, send something back. Well, this is about the worst possible thing I could imagine. I think that is a gateway, made from ..." Evelyn swallowed. "The Eye must be building it. Widening it. You remember what it did with that so-called one way window in the medieval metaphysics room? Well, that's a full-on *gateway*. That is the most dangerous thing any of us have ever seen. It needs to be burned."

"That's not what I mean, Eevee, and you know it," Raine said.

"I promised," I blurted out. "I promised I would. What if it's her?"

Evelyn opened her mouth to snap something, then slammed to a stop. She hesitated and swallowed. "Wait for Twil. We need to cover that stupid drawing with paint, then ... Praem can do it. Or—"

"Refusal," Praem intoned.

"Wise demon," Zheng purred. "Neither her or I are fools enough to get near that hole. Shaman, step back."

"Zheng, I made a promise."

The demon-host purred her displeasure. She could bottle it up for all I cared, not now.

“Hey, Nicole,” Raine said, and held out a hand. “I’ll have my pistol back, please.”

“Ah? Oh, right.”

Twil returned a moment later, tin of white paint in one hand, the petrol can sloshing in the other. Praem took the petrol. Twil readied the paint.

“Edge around by the bar, carefully,” Evelyn instructed. “Do not touch a single thing. And make sure you cover the pupil, at the very least.”

We all held our breath as Twil crept along the edge of the room, bristling and wide-eyed. She sidled up close to the Eye-mural until Evelyn hissed for her to stop. Twil uncapped the paint, wound up a one-arm swing, and splattered the mural with a layer of white emulsion, blotting out the static on the television.

Nothing happened.

“Did it work?” Twil stage-whispered a moment later.

“It’s the best we can do. The occlusion should ruin any effect it’s meant to have,” Evelyn said. “Grab those books on the bar on your way back, you’re closest. Praem, get that petrol open, now.”

“You want to look away, or ... ?” Raine asked me softly. She disentangled her arm from me so she could use both hands, and I clung to her side. “I can pass you off to Zheng, step forward and do it myself.”

“No. I need to see.”

“You don’t have to-”

“What if it’s her? I promised.”

Raine nodded. Quickly, cleanly, she slid the clip out of the handgun to check the bullets, slid it back in, cocked the slide, clicked the safety off, and levelled it at the mewling thing in the circle, at what had once been a head, a skull, a brain.

“Are you sure that’s gonna make any difference?” Twil grimaced, already hurrying back with an armful of books for Evelyn.

“Better than burning to death.” Raine sighed.

“People are going to hear that for a mile around,” Nicole raised her voice. “As soon as you do that, we have to get moving.”

“Praem, petrol,” Evelyn repeated.

“Do it. Please,” I whispered.

Raine pulled the trigger once. That was all it took. I almost envied her clarity.

The thing in the circle jerked as if struck by electricity, then went quiet and still. The oil-black portal at its centre shrunk instantly and vanished in on itself, folding up into nothing.

And I won't even leave a fucking corpse, Sarika's words echoed in my memory.

“... what if it wasn't her?” I asked in a whisper that nobody heard.

But events outpaced my doubt. Everyone moved at once. Twil dumped the cult's pilfered occult tomes into Evelyn's arms and helped her toward the door, while Praem stepped forward to douse the horrible corpse with stinking gasoline, splashing it over the carpet and furniture, smashing the mirrors with the backside of the can. Nicole slunk toward the door, nothing left for any of us to do here. Raine tucked the pistol into the waistband of her pajamas and tried to lead me out.

“What if it wasn't her?” I asked, a hysterical catch in my throat.

“Heather, it must have been.”

“But what-”

“Shaman,” Zheng purred, a warning note in her voice. I wouldn't have been surprised if she scooped me up right there. The sight of the gateway had changed her mind about going where I go.

“I made a promise. Raine, I made a promise.”

“And you did all you could. You heard Eevee, this place has to be burned, and after that freaky thing, I'm down for a spot of arson too.”

“But-”

“You've tried calling for her. If she won't come to you, that's her

decision.”

“But ... but nobody deserves the Eye. Raine, I can’t leave- even an enemy, I can’t leave a person like that.” I turned back to the room. “Sarika!”

No reply. No Sarika.

Praem dumped the empty can on the floor and pulled out a box of matches. The air reeked of petrol fumes.

“We’re out of time,” Evelyn said from the doorway. “Praem, wait until we’re at the door. We’ll shout, then you light it and sprint, you understand? Don’t get caught in it. You’re faster than us.”

“Understand,” Praem intoned, passing us on the way to obey her mistress.

“Heather, come on,” Raine pleaded.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled from behind me. Raine squeezed my hand. Time to move. Time to give up.

“ ... alright,” I squeezed out. “I’m sorry.”

Praem stood on the edge of the carpet, squelching and soggy with petrol. She raised an unlit match in one hand. Raine helped me past her, out of the door where Zheng joined us.

“Straight shot to the front door,” Twil said as we joined them. “Do we wanna like, call the fire brigade once we’re out?”

Evelyn gave her the look of all looks, the one that said Twil, you are truly an idiot.

“Alright, I just thought, you know?” Twil shrugged. “Like, don’t let it spread and-”

Throb.

Reality winced. My head pounded with a rush of blood.

Howling like a banshee crossed with a storm, screaming the contempt and rage of the wronged, Sarika burst into iridescent static right in our midst.

“- don’t get to be sorry!” she was howling, a half-sentence cut off by a flicker of jagged motion. “You don’t get forgiven! You don’t get to leave while I don’t even rot!”

Her form smeared and blurred into static as she shouted in my face. No space to get my left arm up, to block the Eye with the Fractal. Somebody screamed. Somebody else vomited with the sudden unrestrained pressure.

Somebody shoved me out of the way.

Raine raised her handgun in a uselessly heroic gesture, and pulled the trigger. The bullet entered Sarika's head in a neat little red wound, and did nothing.

"Oh right, ghost," I heard Raine say.

"You don't get to win, and you don't get your satisfaction! You get nothing!" Sarika howled. In the last split-second before the Eye's signal exploded her into static, she whipped out a hand to engulf Raine's head in her decohering mass.

At the speed of thought, I acted.

I had to kill Sarika. I had to use my brain and hyperdimensional mathematics to define what was left of her and scrub it from reality. Deny the Eye the vector, before the signal came through and reduced us all to screaming apes, before Sarika killed Raine.

Had to.

Had to do it.

Still couldn't.

Only in the frozen point of time, my brain already burning with molten pieces of hyperdimensional equations, did I finally realise why I had hesitated the first time.

How could I hope to save my twin sister from the heart of the Eye, if I couldn't tear an enemy from its outer rim?

Sarika was going to live, because it was necessary to me that she did.

To define her in full, I had to define what she was not. I had to define the barbed tentacles that trapped what remained of her soul, I had to grasp this faintest sliver of the Eye's probing consciousness, see it in hyperdimensional mathematics – so I did, and the first brush nearly killed me.

Layer upon layer of fractal equation of infinite complexity,

unfolding in all dimensions, forever.

We called it an alien God, but that was a turn of phrase, linguistic shorthand. For the first time, staring at this tiny scrap of it, defined in the language of reality itself, I knew the Eye was a God. Infinitely more complex than I, in the way I was more complex than an ant. I had to fight its most remote outer rim – a casual glance, a trailing thought, a single whisker – tooth and nail, with everything I had, just to tread water, and *it wasn't even aware of me*.

I was bashing two rocks together in a cave, and that thing was a raging nuclear fire at the centre of a star.

To grasp Sarika and rip her free from that barbed surface was an impossible task. The required mathematics would cook my nervous system and turn my digestive tract inside out. I could see the route, the handholds, the gaps, but I would die before I got there. What was the point?

What was the point, little ape?

I was dimly aware of that ape, of Heather, curled up on the floor and vomiting herself empty, bleeding from nose and eyes, shaking and quivering and paused in a point of stopped time as she cried out a name.

Raine's name. Raine, head half-engulfed by static, trying to aim her pistol again through the pounding cranial pressure. The others held in freeze-frame as I calculated math across reality itself. Zheng, buckling under the Eye's mounting attention. Twil and Evelyn, my friends, caught in the act of turning to look back in horror. Nicole, another monkey I barely knew, telling herself not to flee. Praem, not an ape at all but wood and demon and love, about to light a match.

All of us were about to die, one way or another, unless I could do one impossible thing.

Is that me down there, that quivering ape? Am I that brain? The emergent processes created by that brain?

The process – the math – didn't truly rely on the neuron soup in my skull. I could bootstrap myself beyond squishy vulnerable meat, do the equations on the air where there were no nerve endings to feel pain. All I had to do was reach out and go there.

Earlier that day I'd used brainmath to locate Raine, but I'd pulled back at this same threshold. I'd returned to my body because I wanted to feel touch again, I wanted to hug Raine. But if I went back now, we'd all die.

Hyperdimensional mathematics beckoned from the black pit in my subconscious, beyond the limits of my body, teased me to forget I was a scrawny little monkey on a revolving ball of dirt. To forget how to be me.

I drank deep from the Eye's forgotten lessons, because I would never, ever beat this thing – never rescue my sister – without becoming a just little bit like it.

I pushed over the final boundary of pain and disgust and shuddering revulsion, and plunged into the abyss.

that which you cannot put down – 7.15

“You have to go back,” she told me.

“What? Why? I came such a long way to reach you. And it’s easier like this, isn’t it? No more pain, no more confusion, no more ... ” A sigh that wasn’t a sigh escaped lips that I didn’t have.

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“Of course. I love you too. That doesn’t explain why you want me to go back.”

“Because this isn’t living, not out here, not like this. Because if you could see yourself, you’d be sad. It would hurt. You’ve forgotten how to be human. I had to learn that all over again, by watching you. It took me a such long time to figure that out. Years, I think, and then I couldn’t un-figure it out. I’m sad all the time. I don’t want you to be sad too, I don’t want you to end up like me.”

“ ... I won’t be sad if we’re together.”

“We’re not. Not really. It doesn’t count.”

“Why not? I can hear you, we can talk. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Because I can’t touch you. I can’t hug you. You haven’t been like this long enough to miss it – but you will. I want to snuggle up in bed together, like when we were little, warm and comfy and ... and ... soft? I forget what those are, but I know I want them. I want to hold your hand and feel sunlight on my skin. I ... I don’t recall the taste of food very well, but I think I want to eat. Chocolate. Oranges. Those little dolphin sweets mum used to buy. Tomato soup. Crusty bread. I want to skin my knees and bite the inside of my mouth by accident and get my heart broken and have my first period and stub my toe. Please, please go back, you can’t stay like this.”

Her voice whispered through a crack in a concrete wall, a hole no larger than my thumb. In the dark.

"But I came all this way, for you. To see you. It was so difficult. Can't we stay like this?"

Silence, in the dark, in the cold.

"... where'd you go?" I hissed into the crack.

"I'm here. No, no we can't stay like this. I'm so tired. Running out of words."

"This is making you tired?"

"More than you can know. I'm using everything I've got, because I have to convince you to go back."

Pain. Pain in an organ I didn't have, heart-pain in a heart that was worlds away. "I'm- I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, I-I didn't mean to hurt you, to make it worse. I'm sorry, I only wanted to see you. I miss you, I miss you so much, I'm not a real person without you, I-"

"I know. It's okay. I love you."

"You're going to be okay, aren't you?"

"No. I have to sleep soon, to save what's left."

"What if I wait here? I'll wait for you to wake-"

"No!" A cry in the void, an echo from her prison cell. "No, you still don't understand. It'll know about this crack soon, it'll find this hole and stop it up. You have to come get me, but not like this. Not like this."

"Then I'll ... I'll break the wall down, I'll get stronger, I'll-"

"You're the only reference point I have. If you stay here, like this, I won't have anything to hold onto to keep me ... me. You've had experiences. You got to grow up. All I have is our childhood, and that's hazy now. I'm basically just you. If there's no you, there's no me. You can't stay."

"But- But I-"

"Heather, please go back."

"I'll come back again, stronger, cleverer, I-"

"I'll be asleep, and the hole will be gone. If you try this a second time I won't be here to send you back, to remind you what you are."

We can only talk like this because I made the hole. It took *so long*, and I can't even get my hand inside it. Don't try this again, please Heather, please."

Tears ran from my eyes. My chest hurt. Her words had kindled a strange alchemy inside what I'd become, returned my sense of pain, of recognition that there existed desires other than her, destinations other than this crack in a wall in a cold dark place.

She'd hatched such a little plan, spent all this time making such a tiny hole, and she'd used it up for me. And I didn't have the strength to get her out.

Sniffing, crying, pain wrenching at my chest, I asked, "How do I ... I don't know what to do. What do I do?"

"Look to what you have: everything I don't."

"I don't have you," I sobbed.

"You have a body. You have strength. You have a heartbeat and it's *so strong*."

"None of those help, none of those mean anything to-"

"You have friends. Comrades. Allies. Ask for help."

"Help? But nobody else can do this, only-"

"Heather, you don't have to do this alone," she whispered. "You can bring me back, I know you can do it, before I run out, before there's nothing left of me – but not alone. Don't do it alone."

Leviathan shapes drifted behind me in the abyss, vast intelligences out there in the gulf I'd crossed to reach her. Most ignored me. Others heard my sniffing and sobbing, noticed the change, noticed me. I grew spines and envenomed stingers and poison colouration and toxic flesh and fanged mouths in my back: *you don't want to eat me because I'll spoil your appetite*. A few more moments, I'd fight Gods for a few more moments with her.

I sniffed hard. It hurt to acquiesce. I nodded, then remembered she couldn't see. "Okay. Okay, I'll try. I'll miss you again."

"Go back for her, if not for me."

"Her?"

“Her, or her, or her? I’m not good with names anymore. I can’t match them to people. Her.”

I searched inside myself for names, and found them protected by a pressured cavity lodged in my core. I’d forgotten about that.

“... Raine? Lozzie?” I tried. The names were alien things, meat things, ape things. My things.

“Raine. That was the one?”

“Raine, maybe?” I turned the name over, laughed through my tears. “Oh, yes. When I bring you back, Raine’s going to be so confused. Two of me. Too much for her to handle.”

She giggled too. We both meant it, even through the sorrow of parting. “I wouldn’t mind that.”

“I’ll come back for you. I promise I’ll come back for you.”

“But not like this.”

“In my own body, yes. I promise. I’ll come back for you, in my own body.”

“Bring your friends. They can help.”

“I love you. I miss you, Maisie.”

“I love you too.”

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Of course, that wasn’t how it happened at all. There was no lightless abyss, no hole and no wall, no voice to whisper and no ears to hear. We didn’t use words, we used mathematics. We spoke in the language of atomic force and gravity, of starshine and photons, but I can’t tell you about that. I can’t even tell myself about that.

My fragile meat-brain rendered it down; I remember a crack in a wall, whispers, and crying.

And her advice.

The return was worse than the journey out.

The abyss between the spheres of reality is endless and dark, a place of horrible hungry things that hunt forever in pitch blackness,

of predator and prey hiding and slinking, of silent filter-feeding giants and the echoes of alien thought carried on the currents. Small darting mouths of bottomless starvation, formless crab-hounds that seep through the angles of time, hunters of morsels of stray unwise thought and sensation across the gaps in creation, all of them catching my scent in the water and turning to stalk. Fleeing wisps, lost on the tides, desperate for the warmth and sanctuary of physical form, clutching at my ankles and moaning for help. Things vast and slow, thinking vast slow thoughts in trailing tendrils to entrap the unwary, eating, eating, always eating, growing bigger and thinking harder and trying to make themselves real.

Once, a long time ago, the Eye had begun life as one of those giants.

Perhaps unwise fools had summoned the Eye into flesh, or maybe it had just grown big enough to haul itself out of the abyss and into reality, but it had started life as one of these, in their infinite and terrible variety. I learnt that by observation, because I had to. Because out in the void one must watch and wait and be silent, to learn the ways of the things that would eat you.

The return was harder because now I also remembered pain, I recalled what it was like to feel. She'd used her precious scraps of energy to remind me what I really was.

But in this non-place I was agile, in a way I never had been when cast in mere meat and bone.

Tiny, yes, the smallest of the small; but I was clever, and so very *fast*. Darting and dipping and diving through the abyssal waves, I was grace and speed, wire and sinew, flight and fight.

Poor scrawny Heather, that clumsy blunt fingered ape I'd once been and would be again – she'd chase this feeling for the rest of her life.

I swam like a seal, grew flippers to steer, fins to catch the currents, tentacles to pull myself along the rocks; I opened feathered gills to suck oxygen from the clear cold and slid them sealed to pass through the toxic effluvia of the leviathans; I taught myself anaerobic processes, seeded self-contained reactors to blossom inside my belly.

I ate coral and bacterial slime from the oases of geothermal vents, cracked open mollusks for cold wriggling meat, covered myself in mucus and bottom-feeder ooze to blend in with the ocean floor; I

flickered nictitating membranes across my eyes in the murk to blot out the false lures of bio-luminescence, sprouted suckers to anchor myself to trench walls, hard scales to ward off opportunistic hunters, quills and spines and venom sacks to defend myself; I turned at bay and hissed with maws full of needle-fangs and rings of jagged teeth.

Because Maisie had told me to go back.

Because I trusted her more than I trusted what I'd become.

Because I'd screwed up and made things worse for her, because I'd been a boneheaded stubborn idiot who thought I could do this alone, because she'd spent the last of her energy, down to embers, just to convince me to exist again.

Because – Raine? Lozzie? Evelyn? Who were these people? I'd protected these names in a pressurised cavity in my chest, a bubble of reality in a place that was anathema to reality, but I didn't understand why.

More than once I almost jettisoned that air-sack, to escape a pack of predators or free myself from the trap of some floating jellyfish net. Stings and fangs and claws and paralytic toxins, I protected it from all of them, because she'd given me the idea it was important.

And because I liked this Raine. She liked me.

That was an alien idea in the abyss. Didn't fit the logic of predator and prey. I examined that concept over and over during the journey, played with it during the long silences in the lonely dark. I began to like it, in an abstract sort of way.

When I was almost there, exhausted and colder than cold, so close I could see the faintest hint of shrouded light from above, I swam straight into a mouth the size of a world.

Krill to a whale.

I grew parachute-brakes of flesh to slow myself, scrambled back, kicked at the water with fin and flipper – it shot out a mass of tentacles to squeeze me, drag me down its gullet. I reinforced my bones with iron, covered myself in scales of metal – it burned through me with acid, eating me alive. I sprouted urchin-spikes and filled them with neurotoxin – it battered me with club-sized cilia, knocked me senseless, digested me from the tail up.

Almost gave in. So tired. Why fight so hard just to return to a world where I was small and weak and hurt all the time?

Because if this leviathan digested the contents of my pressurised heart – the knowledge of those names, of Raine and Evelyn and my friends – it would know where to find them, it would learn how to go there. Would our reality end up like Wonderland?

Too abstract, here in the void. The fuel of kindness and curiosity ran out.

No, I fought because my twin sister had told me to.

In the end I used tooth and claw. I bit. I ripped. I chewed. For every pint of me it drained, I took a pound of flesh. It let me go eventually, abandoned this morsel to the cold currents; I'd proved too much work to eat.

Bruised all over, missing mass and limbs and bleeding into the dark void like a beacon for every predator to follow, slow and limping and in so much pain, I reached the edge of infinity. I found the membrane.

Collapsing, passing out, giving it one final push, I crossed over.

I went back.

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'There are no safe paths in this part of the world,' my eyes read, tripping along the page mid-blink. 'Remember you are over the Edge of the Wild now-'

A gasp ripped down my throat and into my lungs – real air into real lungs, obscene wet sacks of folded flesh I felt inflate inside me.

I dropped the book on the tabletop with a clatter, blinded and confused in the sudden bright light, unaware of where I was, when I was, *what* I was. The meat on my face worked up and down, the meat in my throat vibrated the air. Sounds emerged, meat sounds: "Wha- what- wh-" Couldn't remember how I'd got here, where I was a moment ago, what I'd been doing.

Awake, from the worst sleepwalk in history.

"Heather? Heather?" A familiar voice – a warm voice, tight with urgent worry – said my name.

My name! That's you, declared the meat in my skull. Welcome back. Kept your seat warm, all lights in working order. Sorry about the cobwebs.

Hands had dropped that book, fleshy pink fragile hands with fingers like wriggling articulated worms. My hands, shaking in front of me. I looked down at the logical conclusion to those hands: arms, and the rest of me, the soft machine hidden inside skin and a baggy black tshirt and pair of plaid pink pajama bottoms. A messy glugging biochemical factory, the shore upon which I had cast myself, the human body.

"No ... no, no no no." I lurched back and staggered up from the kitchen table, sent my chair crashing to the floor. Uncontrollable shaking gripped my arms as I stared down at myself. "What is this, what is this?!"

"Heather!" A figure shot up from the table, turned and shouted. "Evee! Heather's doing something!"

"This isn't me, this isn't me," I hissed, then swallowed – a big mistake. The muscles of my throat bobbed, my oesophagus squeezed. I'd never felt such disgusting motion.

"Heather, hey, Heather look at me, look at me," the kind voice said. Firm but gentle hands took my shoulders and held me steady, but I was too busy trying to close my throat, re-route the pipes, redefine the slick wet meat as something else, anything else. But my flesh wouldn't obey, this body wouldn't change.

Stuck like this. I started to hyperventilate, hiccuping and crying and stumbling on clumsy ape feet.

"Heather, you're safe, you're at home." The voice turned away to shout again. "Evee, get down here!"

"This isn't me. This has to come off."

I reached up to rip the skin away from my face and throat, to get at the machinery inside. It would be difficult with these blunt nails, but I couldn't stand this feeling. I'd go mad.

"Heather, *look at me*," Raine snapped, just in time.

The whipcrack of her voice triggered a cascade, a spark deep in my belly, and deeper, between my legs. The ape, the body, my body, could not disobey that confidence and power, so I looked up. For a

moment I saw only another hooting ape, an ugly thing puffing out carbon dioxide and leaking pheromones, full of folded meat and packed with rotting shit. Behind the ape, the space was wrong, the angles too small, too constricted, too neat, like I was trapped inside a tiny box.

The cascade rocketed up my nervous system, from crotch to gut to spinal column to lizard brain to burst in my neocortex.

I blinked – and saw Raine in the morning sunlight. The yellowed remains of a days-old bruise ringed her left eye socket. We stood in the kitchen in Evelyn's house, in Sharrowford. England, planet Earth. My dog-eared copy of *The Hobbit* lay splayed on the table.

"Hey." Raine grinned at me, not quite certain. "Heather? Are you ... here?"

"... Raine. I- where was I-"

To frame the question was to invite the memory, and the memory was impossible. A *misericorde* of pain stabbed through my eye sockets and into my brain, as my fleshy thinking meat failed to integrate the memory of how I'd gotten here, where I'd been five minutes ago, what I'd been. In a desperate measure of self-preservation, my imagination wove metaphor and sensation from what little it could understand, rendered the experience down into physical terms – the abyssal ocean, the dark, and the cold.

I doubled up in Raine's arms and vomited onto the floor, gagging on alien thoughts.

"It's okay, it's okay Heather, you're okay." Raine held me up, steered me toward the sink with confident strength. "Get it all out if you have to, don't worry about a thing. I promise you're safe, Heather, I promise. It's alright, it's alright now."

"No, no it's not, it's not, it's not-"

I spat bile and hauled myself upright, panting and reeling and slurring the words in my raw throat.

"She doesn't need another bath, Raine," a second voice drawled from the kitchen doorway, unimpressed and snippish. Evelyn, in a patched cream jumper, her hair tied up in a ponytail. She clutched her walking stick, and the matte-black ankle of her exposed prosthetic leg peeked from under the hem of a long skirt. She

frowned, a look I knew so well. “She clearly doesn’t want it, but I know you’re enjoying every excuse to strip an unresisting-”

“ ... Eevee,” I whined.

She slammed to a stop, mouth open. “Heather?”

“I think it’s her, it’s actually her!” Raine burst into a grin. “She’s come round, I told you she would.”

“And she’s made an impressive mess on the floor,” Evelyn tutted. She clicked her fingers at my face, once, twice, three times.

“Heather, Heather are you in there? Oh, thank God, you are, aren’t you?”

“I came back. I came back! Oh- oh.” My mouth gaped open, silent tears on my cheeks. “I spoke- I spoke to her.”

Cold bloomed in my chest, the cold of the abyss, an abscess in my soul leaking into my flesh. I gasped as if plunged into ice water, teeth chattering, heart racing, blood vessels constricting. I shook, sudden and violent, and sagged in Raine’s arms.

“Heather? Heather?”

“What’s happening to her?” Evelyn snapped.

Raine worked it out. She always does. Trust her to read me with perfection, she knew my body better than I did. She slipped a hand over my forehead and pressed down. My eyes rolled in their sockets. Felt like I was about to pass out.

“She’s gone freezing cold. Radiating it. Heather, don’t close your eyes. Focus on me. Look at my face.”

“What did you do to her?” Evelyn barked.

“Nothing. She wasn’t like this when I put the book in her hands. Heather, look at me. Open your eyes.”

“B-b-brought i-it b-b-back w-with me,” I chattered.

I’d brought a piece of the outer cold back with me, a moon rock from an alien planet. This, I realised with an insight born of my journey in the abyss, was what I’d been doing every time I’d used hyperdimensional mathematics. My body and mind and our reality was like a sealed arcology, a haven of light and life, and beyond lay only the void, cold and dark and full of predators. Every time I did

brainmath, I stepped out into that icy wasteland and let pieces of it back inside with me. The inhuman, crammed into my tiny body.

My eyelids fluttered. The edges of the world went dark.

Raine didn't waste time on explanations. She swept me off my feet.

She sprinted to the stairs and leapt up them three at a time. I barely felt it, numb and insensate as Raine shouldered the bathroom door open and held me upright under the shower, no time to undress, our clothes soaked through as soon as she spun the taps on. She held my mouth and nose clear of the stream of steaming water, soaked my icy flesh with heat, rubbed my back to force sluggish blood through my veins. Slowly, painstakingly, with infinite patience, Raine spared me the oblivion of hypothermia.

Twenty minutes later I sat waist deep in warm water with my arms wrapped around my knees, still shivering. Raine perched on the edge of the bathtub, unconcerned that her own clothes were sodden and dripping all over the floor. She massaged my shoulders with one hand and aimed the shower head at my back with the other, rinsing me with a constant stream of water like a dredged ship.

Lozzie peered over the lip of the tub, sad-faced, occasionally murmuring my name.

"You do know ... you are aware ... Raine, you ..." Evelyn failed to begin a sentence, several times. She stood by the sink and frowned at me with naked fascination. "Immersion in warm water isn't ... "

"Not the recommend treatment for hypothermia." Raine shot her a half-grin. "Evee, this ain't regular hypothermia. Heather? That's it, keep your eyes open, look at me, it's going to be okay. You're already feeling warmer, you're gonna be fine."

Praem had trailed Evelyn into the bathroom, arms loaded down with fluffy towels, spare clothes, and for some inexplicable reason, a bottle of vodka. She waited, prim and proper in full maid uniform, her back ramrod straight. Kimberly peered around her side, biting her bottom lip, eyes wide at the sight of me.

"Make yourself useful," Evelyn snapped, and sent Kimberly off on an errand downstairs, for painkillers and food.

I couldn't stop crying.

"Hey, hey, it's okay now, Heather, it's okay," Raine murmured.

“Just focus on warming up, that’s your job right now. You’re safe, you’re home, nothing’s going to hurt you here.”

“I spoke to her,” I sobbed again. “Oh God, I spoke to her and I screwed up, I did it all wrong. Wasn’t supposed to go. I’m such an idiot. Idiot.”

“Spoke to who?” Evelyn asked.

Raine shot her a look. Evelyn averted her gaze, shaking her head.

“I made it all worse,” I squeezed out through the tears and the heat and the steam. “She spent ten years – ten years! – making this tiny little hole. It was so small. Ten years. And she had to use it for me because I’m an idiot. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” I buried my face in my knees.

“Heather, it’s going to be okay-”

“I made it all worse,” I sobbed to myself. “I made everything worse for Maisie.”

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The house fire on Barrend road had made the national news, after the flames were doused and the fire brigade sorted through the charred corpses. A major criminal mystery in a sleepy Northern city. Millions of pounds worth of property destruction, a bizarre mass suicide, proof of arson, possibly a petrol bomb, and the owner of the house couldn’t be found – a one Mr. Alexander Lilburne, missing, presumed among the dead.

A formerly disgraced local police detective – Sargent Nicole Webb – had become the unlikely hero of the moment. She’d been passing by and gallantly rushed into the burning building to pull a survivor to safety, the only living witness of what had transpired inside.

The local newspapers loved that.

For weeks they carried headlines like ‘fire horror – a British Jonestown?’, ‘true numbers will never be known’, ‘hero copper says “Just doing my job”’, and ‘police appeal for information on shadowy religious sect.’

The incident warranted a single minute-long segment on the BBC news. Two inches on the second page of the Telegraph.

And then the world moved on.

I recalled none of it. Only Maisie, and the abyss.

“Only four days?” I croaked. “Felt like years, like I was gone for years.”

“You weren’t ‘gone’ at all,” Raine said from next to me on the bed. She shared a glance with Evelyn, who stood by with her arms crossed.

“What are you looking at me for? Tell her,” Evelyn huffed. “She saved our lives, I think she deserves all the grisly details and I’m sure she can handle them. Can’t you, Heather?”

“Mmm.” I took another bite of chocolate cookie.

Raine shrugged wide, good-natured, and smiled as I caught her eye. “You’ve been right here the whole time, in body at least. Otherwise I would’a been a bit more panicked. Would have enlisted Lozzie to go find you, out there beyond the final frontier and all that.”

“Final frontier ... where no Lozzie’s been before,” Lozzie mumbled in her half-sleep, one hand in my lap. She’d curled up around my side like a dozing cat. I reached down and stroked her hair. She closed her eyes again.

“Cut the editorialising,” Evelyn sighed.

I finished off my cookie. “I like the editorialising.”

“See?” Raine shot a wink at Evelyn. “She knows what she likes, and that means me.”

“Yes, yes, we can tell it’s definitely Heather now,” Evelyn drawled, “because you’re rapidly becoming insufferable. Tell her, or I will.”

“Alright, alright,” Raine put her hands up in mock-surrender. “Heather, it wasn’t until we got out of that house and back to the car that we realised you were looking sort of vacant. Praem and Zheng knew right away, but hey, you were upright, you were walking, you answered when I spoke to you. We were a bit more concerned with skedaddling out of there before the fire went up and got the whole street out for a gander.” She sighed, an almost sad taint in her smile. “I should’a noticed.”

“Not your fault,” I mumbled around another mouthful of food. “Middle of a crisis.”

“If you say so, boss. You’ve been like a zombie since then. You’d eat

if given food, sleep if I put you in bed, spoke when spoken to, but not a lot else. Had to give you a bath yesterday, 'cause you wouldn't wash on your own. Left to your own devices you just ... stared into space."

"Except the homing behaviour," Evelyn muttered.

"That bit was cute, I gotta admit." Raine attempted to not smirk. "If I left you alone for long enough, you'd come find me. Even mindless, you know who's good for you, apparently. Did spook me the first night. Had to get up to use the toilet about one in the morning, and when I finished up and opened the bathroom door, there you were, standing in the dark, waiting for me."

"Spooky Heather," Lozzie mumbled.

"Spooky," Praem intoned.

"Raine is lying," Evelyn said. Raine did a double-take at her. "There was nothing 'cute' about it. I have no idea how Raine could stand to look at you. I'm sorry Heather, but I couldn't. There was nothing behind your eyes, nothing in there." She swallowed. "I am exceptionally glad you are well again."

I shuddered inside. "I wasn't here. Not really."

"Then where were you?" Evelyn asked, her voice quiet and intense, but not with the professional interest I expected. "Astral projecting? Outside? I still don't understand this marine metaphor, I-"

"Not Outside. In the spaces between."

Evelyn frowned harder. I stared back at her, too emotionally wiped out for embarrassment or sheepishness.

"Your map – your mother's map," I said. "It's accurate but incomplete. It maps the world, here, and all the Outside dimensions, but it misses the ... aqua incognita. The space between. An abyss."

"... what was it like?" Evelyn breathed.

"Evee," Raine said, warning sharp. "Why don't we drop this line of-"

"Like an abyss. Cold and dark. An ocean. I was ... I swam." My jaw quivered. Silent tears ran from my eyes again. Shivering, and not from the cold. "I was so graceful. It was beautiful, and terrible at

the same time. I can't- words don't-" A gasp, a heart-sick pain. "A little bit of me wants to go back. I'm sorry."

What little I could grasp I owed to my twin's efforts to make me human again. I'd lost everything prior to her whispers in the dark, but I'd brought back an unnatural longing.

"No." Evelyn cleared her throat. "I'm the one who should be sorry."

"I think you were right here," Raine announced with a confident lift of her chin. "I think you left an anchor-line behind, Heather, whether you know it or not. You know how I could tell?"

I shook my head, sniffing back the tears, brought back to myself by the feel of Raine's hand worming its way up my back, warm contact driving away the memory of being something other than flesh.

"When I put a book in your hands," Raine said, "you read it. You turned the pages, and put it down at the end. Something of you was in there. Why else did you follow me around?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes.

My chest was getting tighter. Couldn't figure out why. After a moment I took a breath and surprised myself, filled my lungs again.

"Heather?" Raine stroked the back of my hair.

"I keep forgetting to breathe."

Evelyn and Raine shared a glance.

"Breathe," Praem announced, bell-clear, from her post by the door.

"Yes, yes don't ... don't forget to breathe. That tends to be important," Evelyn said slowly. I felt Raine tense with worry next to me, no matter how well she hid it.

"I won't. Won't forget. Body has to catch up."

The tray in front of me presented too many options. Another chocolate cookie or a big sausage roll? I decided on the latter, bit into pasty and pork, chewed slowly as my friends watched me like some alien replacement deposited in their midst.

After Raine had helped me from the bath and wrapped me in dry clothes, she'd settled me on the bed and tucked me up in blankets and duvets. A cocoon for the larval thing I'd become, to incubate

the soul I'd brought back.

Food had repulsed me at first. Fat and protein and carbohydrate were just fuel for this ugly, clumsy, slow ape I'd returned to. I didn't deserve to eat, I deserved guilt. Warm and safe and embodied, while I'd left my twin sister to the outer dark. Again.

But my body had demands. The tyranny of biology would not be denied.

I couldn't stop eating.

Chocolate biscuits, sausage rolls, oven chips. I craved oranges and oatmeal, inhaled an entire packet of cheese, swallowed three peanut sandwiches and wanted more. My stomach rumbled and my blood sugar rode a roller-coaster. I needed more than we had on hand in the fridge, but didn't want Raine to leave my side.

Evelyn sent Praem on a shopping trip to the nearest Tesco Metro. The doll-demon returned with an armful of microwave curries and instant rice and chicken strips and bagged baby carrots. I ate it all, downed two cups of coffee and three of tea and drank enough apple juice to give an elephant diarrhoea. I ate all morning and most of the afternoon while we talked, immovable from my spot on the bed, shovelling fuel into my face.

Couldn't fill my stomach no matter how much I ate.

Between food and Raine's skinship, I felt more and more alive as morning turned into afternoon. Twitchy and fidgety, as I reached inside my duvet igloo to rub my thin muscles, run a hand over my abdomen and hamstrings, as I felt the echo of a lost glory my flesh would never fill.

And I was gripped by the most bizarre and inexplicable desire – to swim.

Hadn't swam since I was eight years old, with Maisie.

I finished my bite of sausage roll, and noticed the odd look in Raine's eyes as she watched me. A lump formed in my throat.

"... do I seem different?" I asked, afraid of the answer. "Am I different now?"

A terrifying pause. But Raine did me credit, took me seriously. She nodded. "Yes, a little bit, like you're thinking about stuff in a way

you haven't done before. But that's what happens in life. I told you, Heather, I told you months ago, I'll still be here to give you a hug even if you turn into a Time Lord. Or a fish person. Gills are cute." She winked.

I laughed, small and weak, but real. The first since getting back.

"Hey," Raine sighed. "After all, if I hadn't got cracked in the ribs by that low-quality Lozzie impersonator, none of this would have happened."

"Not your fault," I croaked.

"Most certainly is my fault," Raine said, dead serious all of a sudden. "I should have been faster, quicker on my feet, never turned my back. Those factors are things I can actually control. That's what I'm good at. But I wasn't good enough, this time. Broken ribs are a good reminder."

"You broke ribs?"

"She most certainly did, and she tried to hide it," Evelyn huffed. "I made her go to the doctor, and believe you me, that was not an easy task. Keep taking those deep breaths, Raine, no lung infection for you."

Raine gave a sheepish grin, and I realised the little winces I'd noticed had nothing to do with me.

"Thank you, Eevee. Bad Raine."

"It's only a floating rib," Raine said. "Five-six weeks, max."

"Bad Raine."

"Okay, okay." She put her hands up, laughing. "Bad Raine. No more snapping bones."

"Mmm."

"Quite right," Evelyn added.

I'd been absently stroking Lozzie's hair the entire time we'd been talking, my hands and arms restless, my limbs aching to unfold in a way I could never unfold them in flesh. Was this how Lozzie felt, all the time? Was this the extra element of her I'd been missing all along? Her sleeping face was peaceful, but slack around the eyes and mouth.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked.

Evelyn and Raine shared a look. Evelyn shrugged.

“I think she might have chronic fatigue syndrome,” Raine said.

“That or she’s depressed.”

“Oh don’t be so absurd,” Evelyn snapped.

I shook my head. “She’s not meant to be here for long. Needs her environment. Needs to be Outside. She’s stuck, we both were.”

“Mm yes, she mentioned that,” Evelyn said. “I cleared out one of the spare bedrooms for her, which was a smart bet because she does almost nothing but sleep. Seemed utterly unconcerned about you being ... off with the fairies.”

“What about everyone else?” I asked, a knot of worry in my gut. “Is Twil okay? I noticed Kim’s still here. Have we heard from Nicole?”

Twil had hung around for a day, then headed home to Brinkwood and her family, her ‘church’ and their God-thing, to tell them what had happened and try to get back to an approximation of normal. She did have school the next morning, after all. Evelyn – not Raine, to my surprise – promised to call her later, let her know I’d recovered. She’d probably head up to Sharrowford in a day or two to say hi, though I suspected and hoped her visit would not be primarily for myself.

Kimberly was indeed still here in the house, too terrified to return to her flat without our continued protection, not while Glasswick tower still loomed nearby, possessed by the memory of Alexander Lilburne. She’d made one careful, reluctant journey home for clothes and personal effects, but until the problem was solved, she was stuck here.

“You like her really,” Raine said to Evelyn with a knowing grin.

“You’ve gone soft on her.”

“Not only did that woman do the grunt work to save me from bloody demonic possession,” Evelyn snapped, “but she also lost her job because of us. She has nothing. So no, Raine, I’m not going to kick her out. She’s foolish and ... not a good mage. But I’m not going to kick her out.”

“Whatever you gotta tell yourself, Evee.”

Felicity had not returned to Sharrowford, to Evelyn's evident relief. Neither had her parasite.

The Eye's squid-thing, trapped in clay, remained in Evelyn's magical atelier.

Nicole had been busy.

"What about the university? I was supposed to have classes."

"I called your adviser," Raine said with a flourish of her eyebrows and a cheeky smirk. "You've had the flu, very nasty. Even put you on the phone and whispered in your ear to make you speak a few words. Very convincing."

I shook my head, sighing, jiggling one restless leg inside my duvet cocoon. The mundane world still turned on without us.

"Not gonna ask about your giant zombie friend?" Raine pulled a smirk.

If there was one person whose safety I wasn't too worried about, it was the seven foot tall slab of cannibal muscle and shark teeth. But I shook my head and frowned at myself in confusion, still jiggling my leg, flexing my shoulders too now. I peeled part of my cocoon open, let the fresh air inside. "I know she's not here. Why do I know she's not here? That's odd."

"You do? Brought a sixth sense back with you?"

"... I ... um-"

"Hey, I was joking."

"No, no I just ... I can tell. She's obviously not here."

Evelyn and Raine shared another worried glance – and Praem stared right at me. I could tell Zheng wasn't in the house. An absence of a quality to the silence, in the way one might know a tiger is no longer watching from the bushes, but has slipped back into the jungle.

"Absent," Praem intoned. I nodded.

"Where is she, then?"

"Gone on the lam, I think," Raine answered, then paused and blinked and cracked a smile.

Evelyn sighed heavily and put her face in her hand. "Please tell me that was intentional."

"Nope!" Raine burst into a grin. "I just said that, just now, unplanned. Wow, I'm good. Come on, admit it, I'm good."

"Urgh," Evelyn grunted.

"On the lam – on the *lamb*. Get it?" Raine grinned even wider.

"No, I don't get it," I said. "Where is Zheng?"

"Gallivanting around the countryside, mutilating cattle," Evelyn deadpanned.

"... what."

"The first night you were all zombie-like," Raine explained, "she stared at you for about twenty minutes, up close eye-to-eye, and you stared right back. Then she got up and left. Just straight out the back door, vaulted the fence, gone. Came back the next day with a brace o' squirrels."

"Brace? *Squirrels*?"

"Yeah, you know, like a brace of pheasants?"

"She'd been hunting." Evelyn sighed and shook her head.

"Yeah, she was crunching on one in the back garden. Bit the head off when I stepped out to say hi. Offered me one too. I think it was a sort of challenge, so I said yes."

My eyes went wide. "You ate a squirrel? Raine!"

"Nah," she laughed. "Didn't fancy the intestinal parasites. I dumped it in the bin after she left again. Anyway, last few days there's been all these news items, news of the weird stuff, you know the sort. Cattle mutilation in the countryside, around Sharrowford, half a dozen sheep. I don't think most people care at the moment, on account of the fire and dead bodies and stuff, much more juicy. Ninety-nine percent sure it's Zheng. Last thing she said to me was she wanted mutton."

Took a while for me to digest that one, chewing my lip and stretching my legs out on the bed, wiggling them back and forth as my cocoon fell away. Raine reached out and rubbed my thigh muscles.

“How has nobody noticed her?” I asked.

“Selective memory,” Evelyn said. “She probably has been spotted – not exactly many giant Chinese women running around the fields – but mundane observers rationalise her as something else, or a trick of the light, or not as tall.”

“I think she’s Mongolian,” I muttered. “We should ... I should ... go get her? Rein her in? No, no, she’d hate that phrasing.”

“We probably should,” Evelyn said. “She’ll-”

“She wants to be free.” I shook my head. “She wants to run and hunt and feel the sunlight and ... and ... ”

And suddenly I knew.

I knew how Zheng felt. I knew why Praem was looking at me. I knew what I needed to do, however clumsy and slow and ugly it was. My body cried out for it.

I shed the last of my cocoon, pushed the duvets off my shoulders and clambered free, across the bed and over the edge onto my unsteady feet. Raine moved to follow, saying my name with a curious lilt in her voice.

“Heather, woah, you’re gonna fall, you-”

“I won’t fall,” I breathed – and moved.

Arms raised over my head, I felt the muscles flex and thrum. No idea what I was doing, never much taken to exercise or even simple stretching before, I just followed impulses. Rotated at my waist, low with my arms out, looking and feeling silly but unable to deny the urge to move. My muscles were inadequate, my flesh static, unchanging and fragile and weak, but I had to try. I had to move.

“What on earth are you doing?” Evelyn asked, then noticed I was crying softly. “Are you ... Heather, are you alright?”

“No, not really.”

I stretched a hand high, fingers trembling, and stood on one leg – wobbly and unsteady but smiling through the tears. I tried to spin – made it! – and swooped my torso low, almost laughing. I swayed to the rhythm of my own body, trying to summon the ghost of that lost abyssal grace.

“Heather!” Raine was laughing, half trying to catch me and move with me, half letting me sway. “How are you dancing with a full belly?”

“I don’t have full belly. I used it all.”

“You’re crying, but-”

“It’s not happiness. I’m just here.”

“Dance,” Praem intoned.

“That’s where you came from, isn’t it?” I asked her, moving my feet now, almost dancing for real. My lungs heaved. My body was so weak. Chasing a feeling I’d never obtain again. “You and Zheng and all the others, the things without bodies. You’re not an Outsider, technically, are you? You’re from the abyss, and being here is-”

“It is a gift,” Praem said before I could finish.

“What? Heather, what?” Evelyn was asking.

I finally accepted Raine’s attempt to join me. She held my hands, mirrored my random movements with ease, so much stronger and fitter than I.

“Where’s the nearest public pool?” I asked. “Does Sharrowford have public pools?”

“Pools? Sure,” Raine said. If she felt surprise she hid it perfectly. “I’ll take you tomorrow if you- oop! Heather, hey, steady on.”

I’d let go of Raine’s hands and ran my own down her front, across the softness of her chest and the tautness of her belly, and lower, gripped by a sudden flush of animal lust. The logic of my body was finally reasserting itself in sweat and hormones, my soul had remembered what it was.

Raine grinned like a loon. “Uh, Heather, Evee’s ... right there? You know? Not that I’m complaining.”

“Also I,” Praem said.

“I- I need- I *need*” I stammered.

“Alright,” Evelyn threw up her hands, a blush on her cheeks as she looked away. “Fine. We’ll continue this later.”

The wave of elation broke. I pulled back from Raine, heaving for

breath because I never got any cardiovascular exercise and I was small and weak and aching with guilt. I sat down hard on the edge of the bed, huffing and puffing with my head in my hands. Sweating and ugly.

"I don't deserve this, I don't deserve any of this," I said. "I failed."

"Hey, hey, Heather," Raine knelt down in front of me and took my hands. "You did what you thought was right, and-

"And it didn't work," I hissed, guilt transmuted in anger. "I failed Maisie. She had to sleep, whatever that really means, to shut down, conserve the embers of herself. Because of my mistake. Because I thought I'd ... be like the Eye? I don't even know. I shouldn't be here. What if there's nothing left of her now?"

"There will be," Raine said, and she blazed with such confidence.

I chose to believe her, because what other choice did I have?

"Maybe," I whispered. "But I still don't deserve this. She should be here."

"And she will be."

"I still feel sick and wrong. Part of me wants to swim in the abyss again." I sniffed back tears. "It was ... easier, in some ways, than living."

"Settle in," Praem intoned. We all stared at her. Raine laughed.

"Well, she'd be our resident expert," Raine said. "You did just come back from an astral voyage. These things take time. You just danced for no reason. That's gotta be a good sign, right?"

I shrugged. Chewed my lip. Felt something harden inside.

Maisie's advice.

Gather your allies, your resources, your tools.

Raine, right in front of me. Lozzie's mysterious Knight she'd called in Wonderland. My new knowledge of what the Eye *was* and what it had started life as. Zheng? The library at Carcosa, Outside, with all the books Evelyn could ever want. Had she learnt anything from the cult's stolen tomes? Could we learn anything from the Eye's squid-monster trapped downstairs?

"I need to know why the Eye did this," I said, slowly. "To me, to Maisie. I need to understand it. I need to learn how it thinks, and why."

"A tall order," Evelyn said, voice tight. "Nobody has ever divined the mind of a ... an alien god. Not that I know of. Not in any books."

"Then I suppose I'll have to write it down," I said. Evelyn grunted.

I looked up at my friends, and felt the mantle of leadership fall on my shoulders again. An almost physical thing, a ghost of how I'd been able to change myself out there in the abyss.

I asked the question.

"What did you do with *her*?"

"Zheng carried her out to Nicole's car," Raine said. "Bit of a surprise, when she popped together and bopped me on the chin, but she screamed and went down like a sack of potatoes, had a fit, a seizure. Zheng had to reach into her mouth to stop her choking on her own tongue. Brutal."

"Good," I said, too hard, too cold.

"Heather? You did an amazing thing, you know that? You saved that woman's life. Me, I would've killed her. I did try, after all," she laughed, but the laugh didn't last. "Heather, please don't beat yourself up. You did the right thing, and that's not easy. I can barely figure out what the right thing is most of the time. You saved the life of a person who was trying to kill you. Just because—"

"None of that matters," I said. Evelyn nodded in approval – not a good sign. "I need to talk to her. She was there, she was in its grip. She'll know things."

"Maisie?" Raine asked, not a hint of hesitation.

I laughed a sad little laugh. "Obviously. But that's not who I meant."

Raine nodded, seemed to steel herself to deliver bad news "When I spoke to Nicole, she did tell me Sarika was pretty messed up. Major messed up, mostly in the head. That bit's not in any of the papers, they can't interview her in the hospital. She can barely talk."

I'd finished my larval incubation, knew what I'd really brought back

from the abyss. Now it was a new part of me, as much as the desire to swim or the guilt for Maisie or the aching need to be fast again. Born of the cold logic of survival, the equation of predator and prey, down there in the dark.

“Barely will do,” I said. “Barely will do.”

Ruthlessness.

covenants without the sword

– 8.1

A week after my return from the abyss between worlds, on an afternoon of reassuringly grey English skies and grey English drizzle, detective Webb met Raine and I in the main lobby of Sharrowford General Hospital.

“Heather, Raine.” She nodded a tight hello, standing up from her seat along the wall of the glass-fronted waiting area. “I’d say it’s good to see you both, but I’d be lying.”

“Gone off us so soon?” Raine replied. She shook out her hood and brushed rainwater from the sleeves of her coat.

Nicole glanced around the waiting room. Late afternoon meant fewer visitors, and the A&E department was on the opposite side of the building, but the hospital still bustled with people. Patients waited alone or with their families, nurses hurried to and fro behind the front desks, and the occasional doctor emerged from deeper in the hospital’s labyrinthine corridors. The glass and chrome of the front entrance reflected the leaden sky above, drained of colour.

“Let’s just say you remind me of things I’d rather forget,” Nicole said. “At least it’s only you two and not the bloody werewolf. Where’s the wizard, Evelyn?”

“Not much for vanquished foes, our Evee,” Raine said with a smirk. “This is Heather’s deal.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you for doing this for us. I mean it.”

Nicole pulled a not-quite-shrug with her face. Her eyes flickered over us, over Raine’s coat and the water-spotted shoulders of my hoodie, my damp hair and the dripping, collapsed umbrella in Raine’s hand. The glance of a natural detective, her eyes soaked up every detail. “You know there’s an attached multi-story, right? Silly to get wet trudging through the car park out there.”

I blushed, mortified, but Raine laughed. “You assume we brought a car.”

"You took the bus? The stop's right out there, under cover, what were you doing to get wet like ... " Nicole frowned. "You walked here, in the rain?"

"All the way." Raine raised her chin, proud of the senseless masochism. She did it for my benefit, pretended it was okay, pretended I wasn't a total basket case.

Nicole shook her head. "Uni students, never a dull-"

"I needed to feel it," I blurted out. "The rain, the water, the ... forget it, please. I'm going through some complicated things. It's nothing to do with being a student."

She blinked at me. " ... alright then, okay. Sorry about that."

"No, no, I should be the one apologising, Nicky. Wait, um," I stopped and winced in frustration. "Is it acceptable to call you that?"

Nicole shrugged and pulled a genuine smile. "Don't see why not. We're a bit past first names, you and I."

"Then, Nicky, I'm sorry I had to involve you in the first place. In any of this."

"Ahhh, don't be. The nightmares are worth the purpose. Haven't felt this real in years."

Raine smirked. "Nicky's a cute name. I like it, suits you."

Nicole cleared her throat and dropped her voice. "Miss Haynes, I do hope you've disposed of that illegal firearm."

The detective looked far neater and more controlled than when I'd last seen her. Blonde hair up in a strict bun, suit jacket and trousers pressed and neat beneath a long coat, a quick ironic flash in her eyes and an upward kink at the corners of her mouth. With her chin tilted down a notch, miss Webb was the very picture of a razor-sharp private eye. Nothing gave away her police status, except perhaps the authority with which she held herself. She looked unquestionably in the right place, and the right place was anywhere she chose to be.

Raine shot her a grin and outshone her instantly. "Haven't a clue what you're talking about, officer."

"That's sergeant, to you," Nicole said, stony-faced – then broke into

a smirk. "Alright, that's enough bullshitting." Her eyes flickered over the waiting room and hospital front entrance once more, as casual as possible, as if we ran a risk of being followed. She radiated cloak-and-dagger in the set of her shoulders and the way she positioned herself, back to the wall, eyes high. "You want to head up there straight away? She's not exactly going anywhere."

"If anyone asks, who are we?" Raine said.

Nicole's eyebrows rose an inch. "Sharp question."

"That's me all over."

"It is a good point," I added.

"Officially? You're a pair of Sarika's friends, here to visit the patient. That's how I've gotten you in." Nicole spoke softly, looking anywhere but directly at us. "Her family – parents, three brothers, one sister – were here this morning. All of them are busy for at least the next few hours, I've checked, so no surprises on that front. Sarika will play along best she can if we do get interrupted. None of her family are, you know." She tapped the side of her head; she meant 'in the know', involved, part of our world.

"She knows we're coming?" Raine asked.

"I did warn her. We don't want her to start screaming. She does enough of that already, apparently. She's got a single room, but I hope I don't have to remind you this is a public hospital, so not too much noise, eh?"

"Got it. Just talk, no fuss."

"You're really not charging her with anything?" I asked, a tiny bit too loud. Nicole shot me a frown and Raine reached over to squeeze my hand. "I mean, she should be."

Nicole shrugged, almost apologetic. "With what? There's no evidence of anything, unless I or one of you lot is willing to speak up about ghosts and goblins. We've hit the jackpot that she's sticking to her story, so it's only protective custody. Anything more and you'd have to be family or her lawyer. Besides, I doubt she's going to cause much trouble from now on."

"Good," I squeezed out, but it didn't feel good. "Good."

"What is her story?" Raine asked.

Nicole turned and gestured for us to follow. We passed through a set of double doors, then another pair marked 'inpatient care', and ventured deeper into the muffled corridors of Sharrowford General.

Down long hallways of blue vinyl tile and 'You Are Here' maps, past open ward rooms of full beds and tired nurses at their stations. Past huddles of junior doctors and treatment charts pinned to boards and cleaning staff swabbing the floors. Medical machinery hummed and dripped and gurgled. Antiseptic smells saturated the air. Televisions played low murmurs to themselves. Trolley wheels creaked.

I'd always hated hospitals.

Mostly mental hospitals as they loomed in my pre-teen memories, full of playroom confinement and big-boned nurses with rough hands, pills for me to swallow and child psychologists to explain away my Maisie.

But after the abyss, Sharrowford General was too bright, too exposed, nothing like safety and security in the dark hollow of number 12 Barnslow Drive. Echoes of alien memories urged me to seek shadows, retreat from light, hide out of sight.

"That she wasn't involved," Nicole said as we waited for an elevator to arrive.

She'd escorted Raine and I all the way to a bank of supplementary lifts at the rear of the hospital, where nobody else was around. A spiral stairwell yawned open on one side, an ascending fluted spine of concrete and metal.

Couldn't keep my eyes off it; the vertical geometry and complex topography called out to me.

"That she doesn't know a thing," Nicole was saying. "She got invited to a party by mutual friends of her ex, a bloke who walked out on her a month or two back. She didn't know these people very well, but there was a lot of heavy drinking and some designer drugs, then things got weird and dangerous. She hid in a closet until the fire broke out."

"Designer drugs?" Raine smirked.

"That's what's in the police report."

"And what's her real story?"

“What’s in the report.”

“Come on, don’t give us the same nonsense from the newspapers.”

Nicole shrugged. “She’s not exactly coherent. They brought in the big guns to interview her, but she’s a survivor, she’s clever. She’s messed up like you wouldn’t believe, but she used that to shut down the questioning. The station’s going to draw a blank on this one, eventually, when the coroners throw their hands up in defeat.”

“Good thing we ... good thing we burned that body,” I murmured, trying to distract myself from the stairwell.

A pained, far-away look came into Nicole’s eyes. She swallowed hard and nodded. “If I could forget ever seeing that, that would be great.” She sighed sharply and glanced between Raine and I. “You two wouldn’t happen to have some time to spare after this, would you? I’d like to talk over some stuff, if you don’t mind?”

“Is that a police officer ‘if you don’t mind’?” Raine asked with a shrewd smile. “Or a Nicky Webb ‘if you don’t mind’?”

“The latter. Nothing to do with police work. Personal stuff.”

“Heather?”

“Mm?”

I couldn’t keep my mind off the stairs. My hands felt restless and my shoulder blades twitched. I pictured how much faster it would be to ascend through the central gap of the stairwell, to haul myself up with tentacles to grasp the handrails and hooked claws to anchor myself in the walls. My skin itched and crawled to change, to adapt, to race. I shuddered with faint disgust at the feeling of phantom limbs that had never existed, metaphors for myself in a place that had not really been an ocean.

“Heather? Ground control to Heather, this is Sharrowford calling.”

Raine’s hand drifted in front of my face. I blinked and gasped, breathed in a lungful of air, snapped to and looked right at her.

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“You wanna take the stairs? Fancy a climb?” She grinned for me, all confidence and reassurance. I shook my head, guilty and confused.

“No I ... I shouldn’t ... ” I sighed as Raine’s knowing smile battered

through all my resistance. “Yes, yes I want to climb, but not the stairs. Up the middle. It would be faster. I would be faster.”

Raine craned her neck to peer up the stairwell, at fire doors and handrails receding upward. “Hey, might be fun? I do need a cool down after the walk here.”

“Don’t be absurd, I’d expire halfway up.”

She looked at me with a twinkle in her eyes. “You don’t know that for sure. Won’t find out if you don’t try.”

Nicole was frowning at me in curious speculation. I looked right back at her and waited for the inevitable.

“You seem different somehow,” she said.

I forced a smile. “I’m still me.”

= =

Raine had taken me swimming two days earlier. The experience had not gone well.

All week since my return my biological rhythms had been out of sync, erratic and overcharged – appetite and digestion, circadian and alertness, hormones and sexual arousal. I ate and ate but never felt full, and put on less than a single pound. My fingernails needed trimming every single day and my hair grew by two full inches. I felt sleepy at strange times, fell unconscious on the toilet or at the table, then lay wide-eyed alert in bed for hours, tucked up in Raine’s arms, replaying Maisie’s words over and over in the dubious comfort of the dark.

Raine and I had sex three times a day for six days in a row. I felt insatiable, like an animal in heat.

She didn’t complain, but I think it was almost too much even for Raine.

Her tall tale that I had the flu was a Godsend; I only managed to drag myself to two lectures at university, twitchy and jerky and restless as I listened to the drone of old professors. I did want to be there, I craved normality, I devoured books, but I couldn’t sit still.

I needed to move. Run, jump, climb – swim. Sex helped, physical contact helped, being around my friends helped.

Phantom limb syndrome did not.

“Why the sudden interest in that?” Evelyn asked.

We’d been in her magical workshop when I’d finally worked up the courage to pose the question. The Eye’s squid-minion, still trapped in its temporary clay vessel, was slumped against one side of its invisible prison. It had begun to dry out, body stiffer than before, cracks in its wet-bag hide. Evelyn had been exploring our options out loud when I’d changed the subject.

“I was just wondering,” I lied, then stammered in mortified embarrassment. “I-I mean, not to treat you as a curiosity. I mean-I’m sorry, Eevee, I shouldn’t have asked. Please forget I said anything.”

“You get to ask me anything, you fool,” she grumbled and sat down, frowning at me with curious concern. “And no.”

“Not at all?”

“Not when I have my leg on.” She tapped the knee of her prosthetic through her skirt. “Phantom pain, certainly, but that’s not quite the same thing.” She watched me for a moment. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m ... I’ve been ... ”

Evelyn waited a heartbeat or two before she sighed. From her, that was respect. “I can deduce the problem, but considering what you’ve been through, it’s best you share your symptoms.”

“I’ve told Raine.”

“Raine is not a mage. And she’s too easy on you.”

“That’s true. She really is.” I smiled, almost sadly. “My ... my mind keeps trying to solve problems with body parts I don’t have. It’s upsetting, makes my skin crawl, but at the same time I almost cherish the feeling. Sometimes I look at a mug of coffee and I try to reach for it with a ... a ... ” I made a gesture from my flank, indicated a limb which wasn’t there, which I couldn’t even describe, which had never existed in flesh.

Gills at my neck stayed stubbornly shut, tentacles refused to uncoil from my sides, spikes of bone would not extend from my back. A bittersweet reminder of lost grace – and a shuddering disjunction of flesh and spirit, moments of dissociation and nausea that I clung to

in awful nostalgia.

Evelyn waited for more. For all her faults and tempers, she was a good listener when she cared to be.

“You don’t know if ... if ... oh, this is a crazy thing to ask. There’s no way to ... grow-”

“Heather,” she barked, and I flinched. “If magic could regrow limbs, I wouldn’t be walking around with eight pounds of carbon fibre attached to a stump. Trust me, I have tried.”

“No, no, of course not. Eevee, I’m so sorry, I just had to ask, I had to-”

She cleared her throat and held up a hand. “You didn’t deserve that. Touchy subject.”

“It was unthinking of me.”

Evelyn nodded awkwardly, wet her lips, and paused before she continued. “More importantly, whatever you’re experiencing is not phantom limb syndrome. Stop thinking of it as such. You need to be extremely careful.”

“It’s not? I do?”

She peered at me, frowning hard. “You said it yourself, the oceanic impression was all a metaphor. Your brain has done this to itself, a defence mechanism. You never had tentacles, or gills, or anything-”

“I know!” I put up my hands as if to ward her off, couldn’t bear to hear more. “I know. I know. But it still feels real. I still feel it.”

“You better be bloody careful, Heather. You inform me if anything changes. Anything.”

“I ... I will. I will.”

“Watch yourself. Promise me.”

“I promise. Okay. Okay.”

I devoured wikipedia articles about marine life and deep sea diving, glued to my laptop for hours, to Youtube videos of jellyfish and sharks and deep-sea monsters with fangs and suckers, uploads of research submarine footage and whale pods and glimpses of colossal squid in the pelagic darkness. I watched *Blue Planet* over

and over again, cried to myself at seals slipping through the waves, felt dull recognition for their fluid grace in the water and clumsiness on land.

Ocean floors and thermal vents made me ache for catharsis. I tortured myself with longing for a place that had never existed in the way my mind interpreted it.

Dark water and cold currents eroded my foundations.

More than once I slipped into Lozzie's new bedroom and curled up with her in the quiet and the dark. I'd always been more comfortable in the shadows – literal, historical, social – than the bright lights of the modern world, but that proclivity increased a dozen-fold. With the lights out and the curtains shut, I could almost pretend I was back in the abyss.

Or maybe that was an excuse to spend time with Lozzie.

I had so many questions for her, was dying to ask how she'd communicated with Maisie to save me from Wonderland, about her Knight, about the dreams we'd shared. I had a list, I'd written it all down like a good little academic – but Lozzie was barely there. She slept sixteen hours every day in her spartan, empty room, and stumbled about sleepily when awake. My half-hesitant questions fell on confused ears.

She couldn't function without the Outside. For me, the merest thought of hyperdimensional mathematics felt like poking my tongue into the raw socket of a shattered tooth. Needed time to heal. Dare not test a Slip, test to see if we even could.

I lent her three changes of pajamas. Luckily we were about the same size, because she owned nothing besides the clothes she'd appeared in, a plaid skirt and her pink poncho with floppy rabbit ears attached to the hood.

Where had that poncho come from – Outside? Soft pastel pink with two bands of blue and one of white in the middle, very comfortable to wear. I even tried it on in vain hope for insight. All I found was a normal laundry instructions tab, 'made in Bangladesh', and a balled up sock in the pocket.

The first time I curled up with Lozzie, we fell asleep tangled together like a pair of small animals.

Raine found us, found me. She sat on the edge of the bed and stroked my hair until I woke up.

I was terrified.

“It’s not a-” I slurred, bolted upright, pulled myself out from Lozzie’s embrace, one leg still wedged between hers. “Raine, it’s not- it-”

“Shhhh, it’s okay.” Raine whispered in deference to Lozzie’s continued slumber. “You can nap more if you want, I didn’t really want to wake you, just couldn’t help myself. S’too cute.”

“It’s not a sexual thing. It’s not.”

“Ahhh?” Raine’s grin was warm in the dark, completely accepting. Part of me wished it wasn’t, almost wanted her to tell me off, to be jealous, but not hurt. A selfish paradox. “Didn’t think it was. But hey, if that’s what you’re into.”

“It just- we just- I’m treating her like Maisie. She deserves better, but ... I ... ”

Raine just stroked my hair. Stroked me into calm silence – then took me back to our bed and pinned me under the sheets until I climaxed three times.

Perhaps it was a sexual thing, to her.

I didn’t need a surrogate Maisie, I need my twin sister. Her words, the first words we’d exchanged in over a decade, replayed again and again in my head – or at least my poor ape-brain memory of them did. I rocked myself to sleep, telling a memory that I loved her. I cried when alone, in the bath, on the toilet, with my own thoughts and her echoes. Beautiful, but sharp enough to cut.

The abyss had been easier.

I made several abortive attempts to talk with Praem, but even past her habitual taciturn style I couldn’t phrase the questions right. She stared back, she understood, she echoed in agreement, but we had nothing to discuss. How does one talk about the abyss in human words? Our only shared reference point was here, embodied, in the taste of strawberries and the feel of sunlight.

I kept nothing back from Raine – not my new interests or the phantom limbs or the paradoxical ache to feel the abyss again. She

kept me sane, but how could she understand?

When I stopped falling asleep on my feet, and ceased eating three thousand calories a day, she accompanied me down to the university gym, to the pool. I wanted to feel my body suspended in water, dive to the bottom of the deep end and close my eyes, brush the faintest shadow of abyssal grace.

Clumsy and slow, I flailed like a cat and sank like a rock.

Couldn't swim.

I hadn't been in water deeper than a full bathtub since I was eight years old. My limbs didn't remember the correct motions. Humiliated, cringing, gripped by a desire to burrow into the ground and cover myself in spines and armour plates, I'd been ready to pull myself out of the water and cry myself empty in the changing rooms.

Luckily, I had Raine.

She'd taken my hands and lent me her patience, a long hour of warming up muscle memory and teaching anew.

Luckily, we'd gone in the middle of a workday.

We shared the pool with only three other people – a man doing laps in the lanes and a young mother with her infant son in the shallows, none about to stare or laugh at a twenty-year-old woman learning how to swim.

Luckily, Raine provided me with plenty of incentive.

She took our outing dead serious, of course. She neither tried to be seductive nor show off. A one-piece in dark navy blue with a couple of red stripes up the sides, simple plain exercise wear – but on Raine, in motion, simple plain exercise wear was dangerous. She swam confident and strong, muscles humming, toned stomach and legs flexing under the water. I'd had to tuck my hair under a swimming cap, but hers was so short she didn't need one, raked back, wet and gleaming. She raced up and down the water like a real fish. She wasn't even a good swimmer but she made it look natural.

I assume I had an effect on her too. I hadn't owned a swimsuit before now, so she'd picked one up for me, same as hers in a smaller size, but I felt like a gremlin next to her, short and flat and

scrawny and weak.

"That's it, keep your body straight, and kick. Kick, higher! That's it, that's it, you're doing it. See? Like riding a bike." Raine beamed at me as I joined her by the underwater handrail again, and touched the bottom with my toes.

"I want to ..." I panted for breath. "I need to go underwater."

She cracked a grin. "Do a length first, prove to me you can. No, better, prove it to yourself."

"I can, I can feel it, it's like a memory from a ... from out there."

Raine laughed. "Length first, then dive. I'll come down with you too, alright?"

I swam that length, puffing for breath at the end as Raine pulled up beside me, jittery with excitement as I clung to the rail and the wall. I stared down into the deep end of the pool, into the echo of a memory of something that was not water.

"Remember," Raine said. "Your head's the heaviest single part of you. Lead with your head, you'll get down there no problem. Keep your eyes open too, try not to headbutt the floor."

"I'm going to do it. I'm going to try." Awkward and clumsy, my heart a-flutter, I manoeuvred my goggles over my eyes, took several deep breaths, and dived.

Ten minutes later I sat in the changing room, shivering and cold, half-wrapped in a towel, trying not to cry.

"It's not enough, it's not enough," I said past a lump in my throat. "It's not the same. Not even a substitute."

"Hey, Heather, hey." Raine sat down next to me on the bench, her own towel shoulder to shoulder with mine, both of us still cold and wet in swimsuits. She put an arm around me. My toes were freezing on the unheated tile. "It's only a first attempt. We'll find something, we'll try again."

"Couldn't stay down for long enough. Ten minutes, twenty minutes, with my eyes closed, maybe that would be enough. My lungs are ... *crap*," I swore, threw the word at the world, at my body.

"Hey, come on, nobody can hold their breath for ten minutes."

"Twenty-four minutes and three seconds," I recited.

Raine let out a single laugh. "Seriously?"

"I looked it up. I was down there for ... "

"Six seconds."

"Six seconds," I echoed. "And I couldn't move right, it was awful, disgusting, slow. Look at these." I held my hands out in front of me.

"We could get you a really long snorkel." Raine's voice admitted no hint of a joke, but I laughed. A tiny sad laugh, but still a laugh.

"It's like drinking coffee to replace a heroin addiction," I said. "And everything stinks of chlorine, ugh."

"Maybe you really should take up deep-sea diving."

"Raine, I'd die. Can you see me in a wetsuit, air tanks on my back, diving?"

She shrugged. "Why not? Plus, you'd look stunning in a wetsuit."

"... because ... because I'm scrawny and bookish. Because I'm weak. Because that's not what ... not what people like me do?"

"See? Feels silly to rule it out, doesn't it? You could do whatever you wanted. Wait for the summer, we'll go down to Devon or something, you can learn to scuba dive."

I laughed again, one sad puff. "Raine, be serious."

"I am serious. You and me, Eevee and Praem. We could invite Twil as well if she'll come, maybe her and Eevee will finally bone down if we get them out of Sharrowford together."

I blinked at her in mild disapproval. "'Bone down'?" I echoed, but she was already off again.

"Eevee can rent a cottage for a couple of weeks, we could go to the beach, go hiking, and you could learn to scuba dive with a real instructor. We'll do it together, it'll be fun. We're students, we've got time to live some."

"Raine, we can't ... we can't sponge off Eevee for everything."

"It'll be for her good too. Get her head out of this for a bit."

"... we can't."

“Then ask your parents for help.”

I laughed again, despite myself. “Oh yes, that’ll go down well. Raine, you’ve met my parents, can you imagine me asking my mum for money to learn to *scuba dive*? They wrapped me in cotton wool for years. They’d go spare.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Won’t know unless you try.”

I shook my head in amazement. She was serious. A spark of cheer had lit in my chest, but it was too weak to push back the cold. “It still wouldn’t be enough. I could dive the Mariana trench and it wouldn’t be enough. It was all just a metaphor. Where I was, it wasn’t water at all, not really.”

She could have pushed, told me it was all going to be okay, told me we’d find a way, but Raine fought with herself for a moment, with that urge to make everything alright for me, and instead she just nodded. She understood.

“Besides,” I said. “I don’t have time. Not for anything. Not while Maisie’s ...”

And that, Raine knew, was where to push. “We’ll get her. I promise.”

She leaned over and planted a kiss on my wet hair. I looked down at my hands, at scrawny exposed legs sticking out from under my cold towel.

“This body is so useless. Hate this feeling. I wish I’d never gone, or never come back, or-” Never spoken to Maisie? Never returned to Raine? Never.

Raine glanced around to make sure we really were alone in the changing room, then dipped her head and planted a kiss on my exposed collarbone.

We decided to shower the chlorine off at home, together.

Still not enough.

= =

Raine looked at the hospital stairwell, then at the lift – just arriving, doors opening with a bright, cheery ding – then back at me.

“Executive decision.” She cracked a face-splitting grin. “No choice,

it's up the stairs for you and me.”

“What? No, Raine, it's okay, I mean it. I'll ... I won't make it, I can't climb all that way.”

“You totally can! You're so much tougher than you think.” She put one foot on the first stair and gently encouraged me on, my hand in hers. I put up a token resistance, but Raine's mad grin and beaming confidence pulled me forward like a magnet. My feet almost danced up the first few steps, tripping out the squeaky music of damp shoes on vinyl floor.

“Is this some domestic issue I don't want to know about?” Nicole called after us. She stuck one hand between the lift doors to stop them closing. “I'm not climbing seven stories with you nutters.”

“You don't have to,” Raine called down from the top of the first flight, the first mini-landing. “See you at the top, Nicky!”

“Oh I'm going to expire doing this,” I huffed and puffed already, free hand to my pounding heart. “Raine, what are you doing to me?”

“Giving you what you need.” She winked, and we climbed.

We ran two flights, almost giggling, but that was more than enough to sap my reserves and leave me heaving for breath, bent double and clinging to Raine's arm. We walked the rest of the way, my thigh muscles aching, feet dragging. Raine made it look easy.

It wasn't the same. Not agile, not fast, nothing like the grace of the abyss – but it was something at least, here in the flesh.

Nicole beat us by many, many minutes, and I had to rest again at the summit.

The rear half of the top floor of Sharrowford General Hospital contained a bank of single-patient low risk isolation rooms. Large and spacious, with their own attached showers and toilets, an NHS relic from a time before efficiency savings and public-private partnerships. The rooms were intended for patients whose unique conditions were so distressing for them – or for others to witness – that they were best tucked away up here, far from prying eyes.

A tall and beefy uniformed police officer stood at the entrance to the corridor, hands tucked behind the small of his back. His eyes slid over us, cold and blunt, then alighted on Nicole. He broke into

a big smile.

“Sergeant,” he said, and gave her a nod.

“Collins, weren’t you here this morning?” she asked. “You pulling double on this detail because you don’t have to move your fat arse too much?”

He pointed down the hallway to the left. “Vending machine’s got chocolate bars. Can see the door from there. Technically, never out of sight of my post.”

“You lazy bastard,” Nicole laughed. Collins laughed too, then stopped himself with a cough and asked Nicole a question with a glance at Raine and I. “It’s fine, they’re fine,” she said. “Here to have a little extra-legal chat with our charge. Give me a shout if anybody from the station shows up, alright?”

“Sergeant.” He pulled himself up rigid and stared straight ahead.

Once we were past and beyond earshot, Raine turned to Nicole. “Did I misread the signals, or is big lad back there sweet on you?”

“Collins? You’re having a laugh. He’s married, three kids. Ugh, no thanks.” Nicole shook herself. “I’m popular with rank and file now, that’s what it is. Made the force look good and showed up the brass at the same time. Hero detective rushes into a house fire, saves a young woman from a crazy doomsday cult massacre. Big hand all round.”

She stopped in front of one of the rooms, one of the few with the door closed. Both rooms either side were empty, but I could hear murmured conversation from further down the hallway, the sound of a television, the clearing of a throat.

“Pity that’s not how it happened, eh?” Nicole pulled a rueful smile. “I could leverage this, get back onto homicide. Nice and straightforward, one-to-one deal, keeps the rank and file happy and I get to have a career again.” She paused. “Not sure I want to.”

I blinked away from the door, away from my trepidation and the unexpected reaction of my body, surprised by Nicole’s hollow tone. “Nicky?”

“I’ve drafted a letter of resignation.”

“What?” Raine grinned in disbelief. I blinked at her too. Hadn’t

expected this. "But you're the hero of the hour."

"Can't say that part doesn't feel nice, yeah." Nicole shrugged. "But how do you go on, knowing what you know? How do you do participate in ... in ... what we did? Real, bleeding-edge real – and then go back to policing, I dunno, pub fights gone too far and domestic violence? Makes me sick. I can't talk to anybody about what I saw, about you lot, about ... " She blanched in the face, swallowed, steeled herself. "Talk to my dog, mostly. Dunno how you do it."

"We have each other," I said.

Nicole stared for a second. "Huh, yeah. Yes, I suppose you do, don't you."

"Don't be a stranger, Nicky," Raine said. "I'm not joking. You'd get on with Evee, better than you think."

She snorted. "You're all about ten years younger than me, I'd be a bit out of place." She glanced down the corridor. "How's that other woman doing, the wizard in training, whatever she was?"

"Kimberly?"

"Yeah, her."

"She's doing well," I said. "She lost her job, and she still can't go home, mostly because of us, so we're looking after her for a bit."

"Why, you interested?" Raine asked, a kink in her voice.

"Thinking about going private," Nicole was already saying, speaking without looking at us, as if into the distance. "Private consulting. Industrial espionage would be fun, but I suspect my bread and butter would be chasing unfaithful spouses with a telephoto lens. Sharrowford's a bit small by itself, but between here and Manchester, maybe over Liverpool way too. I'm a bent copper now anyway, whatever I do. Always tried to do the right thing, thought it made a difference. Fucking police." She turned back to us, sighed and forced a smile. "What do you think then? PI Webb, can you see it? Should I buy a fedora, take up chain-smoking, practice my gravelly voice and hang out in shitty bars?"

"Smoking's bad for your health, detective," Raine mock-tutted.

"Knowing you people is bad for my heath."

"You've got the ... the ..." I struggled over the words. Her condition was my fault, in a way. "The skills for it."

"And the police contacts, the goodwill. The other contacts too." She nodded at Raine and I. "Is there such thing as a 'paranormal detective' in your world?"

Raine shook her head. "Not unless I count."

"Well, maybe I'll be the first."

"You're always ..." I hesitated. Nicole was so torn up about this and it was my fault. I'd introduced her to a reality that had undermined her identity, her sense of purpose, her reason for living. True, I'd done it to avoid killing her, but I'd still done it.

But cold abyssal logic fought with natural empathy. A contact on the police force was useful, an asset, an advantage. A private eye less so. Survival instinct said argue her out of the decision, tell her to stay in the job. Everything else I had screamed no, battered me with guilt and shame. Invite her in, as a friend.

"Heather?" Raine leaned forward, tried to catch my eye.

"You're always welcome at the house," I finally squeezed out. "Don't be a stranger."

"Yeah, yeah," Nicole sighed, then turned away, back to the task at hand, the reason we were here. "You ready?"

She knocked softly on the closed door, and led us inside.

Phantom limbs prepped for confrontation with a foe, as I stepped over the threshold of the hospital room. Defences tried to unfurl, spines attempted to sprout, plates and scales and bone ached to armour me. I shuddered, my stomach churning with disgust and nostalgia.

It all fell away at the sight in the bed. Pointless.

Sarika Nilam Masalkar was, by any sane and reasonable standards, human wreckage.

Gone was the sharp-eyed, quick-tongued woman who had threatened me at the top of Glasswick tower. Gone was the leader who had kept the remains of the Sharrowford Cult together, who had masterminded their doomed rebellion. Gone was the howling banshee of bitter revenge from inside the house on Barrend Road.

In her place, propped up on a rampart of pillows in her hospital bed, was a palsied, tremor-wracked, skittish shell of a woman.

She jerked away as we filed into the room, flinched as if to throw herself off the bed.

“It’s me again, miss Masalkar,” Nicole said, putting on her victim-consolation voice and a nice big smile as she closed the door behind us. “With your visitors. I did tell you we were coming.”

Sarika stared, blinking bloodshot eyes – at me.

She still had a glimmer of her old spite. Exhaustion lay like lead weight on her shoulders, in the bags under her eyes, in her hunched spine.

She was still pretty, high cheekbones and delicate nose, though her coffee-brown skin was waxy and pale with stress. Her eyes were rheumy and crusted, her mouth slack. The roots of her long dark hair showed several streaks of premature white. She clutched herself, both forearms covered in a dozen scabs where she’d picked and scratched until she bled. Her lips were the same, bitten and chewed raw. She rocked back and forth, body in the thrall of an unheard orchestra of shakes and twitches. Her breath wheezed and snorted, erratic and stuck in her throat, as if she couldn’t regulate her lungs properly.

One of her arms was pierced by multiple drip-lines, one feeding her saline, the other attached to a bag of morphine and a dose button. An oxygen machine stood by the bed with a hose and mask with straps for the head. An emergency sick bucket sat within easy leaning distance, to stop her fouling her clothes and sheets.

Her family had left fresh flowers and a traditional bowl of fruit on the bedside table, along with a small stack of books and an electronic tablet. None had been touched.

“... told me, told me,” Sarika echoed in a broken half-mumble. Her eyes unfocused and stared elsewhere, past us, past the walls. “Told me, told me. You did. I remem- ... rem- mmmm.”

For a long moment, I just stared at her, at this shivering shape on the bed, this broken woman, this human I’d brought back. I had no memory of how I’d achieved this feat, how the hyperdimensional mathematics fit together, only an echo from across a gulf of memory, lost in the time before Maisie had reminded me what I

was. But I felt such terrible responsibility.

Nicole stepped past us, a tight look on her face. “Well,” she murmured. “She’s all yours. Remember what I said, not too much noise. And the nurses will be doing their rounds. One of them comes in, we’re all friends here.”

“No problem,” said Raine.

“What will happen to her?” I asked. “In the long run, I mean.”

Nicole shrugged. “Her family’s very close, very big. I got the impression she was a bit of a wayward daughter, a little estranged. The parents were obviously really hurting at the sight of her. She won’t be left institutionalised.”

“She lost everything,” I said. Raine squeezed my hand, but I barely felt it.

“You did save that woman, Heather.”

“Did I?”

Shouldn’t I have felt elated? Sarika was alive, I’d pulled her from the Eye’s grasp and rebuilt her from nothing, even if I couldn’t recall doing so. She was living proof it was possible. Now I was here, talking to her almost seemed secondary, an excuse made up by my subconscious purely so I could witness the result of my work.

It was terrible to behold.

Would this be life enough for Maisie? Could I bear to see my twin like this?

Yes, I knew in an instant. Anything was better than the Eye. The abyss was better than the Eye.

Even ruined and broken, I would love my sister. If I had to, I’d dedicate the rest of my life to taking care of her.

“Sarika?” I tried.

Her head jerked round, snapped back to me, eyes sharp and suddenly *present*. We stared at each other, a long moment of contact.

I meant to speak, to say ‘you can probably guess why I’m here,’ or ‘I have questions I need to ask you,’ or just ‘what does it want?’ But I

couldn't get any words out. She'd been my enemy, she'd tried to kill me. In the final moment, she'd tried to kill Raine.

She was alive, and human.

She was a miracle.

She turned away again, panting softly, to stare out of the window at the grey sky and the rain on the glass.

"Sarika?" I repeated, and stepped forward, wriggling my hand free from Raine's grip. She moved to follow me at a slight distance, but Nicole hung back. I approached the edge of the bed. "Sarika, you ... do you know who I am? Can you ... speak?"

"Mm," she grunted. Her legs made tic-like jerking motions under the sheets. Her breath wheezed.

"It's out of your head now, is that correct? All the way out, like before Alexander made his deal? It's gone?"

"... mmhmm."

I lowered myself into a chair by the bed. "There are things I need ... need to know. Things I need to ask."

"Y'know already," she slurred, staring out of the window, sullen and hunched. "Told you."

"You don't know what I'm going to ask."

"Crushed us." She lifted one hand and ground a fingertip of the other into her palm. "Squish."

"Yes, yes, we figured out what happened. That's not what I want to ask." A bizarre part of me desired to reach out and touch her arm or her shoulder, because what I'd brought back was in so much pain. Didn't matter that she'd been my enemy; she'd been tortured like Maisie and I had been, like Maisie still was. "I need to ask about the Eye."

A shudder of pain passed through Sarika's body as her breath hitched in panic, sucked through gritted teeth. She groped for the morphine dose button, jammed it over and over with her thumb as she curled up on herself, like an insect exposed to fire.

"I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry but I have to ask," I said. "I need to know what it wants. Why it wants me. What it's-"

"I c- ca- c-c-c-c-" Sarika made choking sound, like an object lodged in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Oh fuck, I'll get a nurse." Nicole jerked for the door.

"Nnnnnn!" Sarika grunted, pure irritation.

"Wait, wait," Raine said.

"Nnnnn ... nnnnn ... can't. Can't." Sarika panted for breath, slurring her words as the pain passed. "Just run."

"I can't do that," I said. A lump grew in my throat. "I can't."

"No other ... choice? Hide."

"I can't do that either. Sarika, listen to me, please. Listen carefully. I don't know how much Alexander told you of what he knew about me, but I have a twin sister. When we were nine years old, the Eye kidnapped us both. Took us away, to the place where it lives. I escaped. My twin, her name is Maisie. She's still there."

Slowly, gripped by tremors and struggling for breath, Sarika turned her head to look at me. We made eye contact. I felt tears on my cheeks, ignored them.

"She's been there for ten years," I continued. "More than ten years now, because last month was my birthday. The Eye had you for a few hours."

Sarika blinked once. Her brow knotted with concentration.

"I left my body," I said. "That's how I pulled you from its grip. I left my body to find my twin, and I did find her, but I couldn't ... " I swallowed, my own breath shuddering with an intensity of outrage and anger I had never thought myself capable of. "I saved you from the Eye, and I had to leave my sister behind, again. I've been there. I know what it's like. And I had to leave her behind. *Again*."

"Heather?" Raine murmured in my ear. A hand squeezed my shoulder. "Heather, I can do this, if you want."

"No, you can't."

Sarika stared back at me, and understood.

"I would not ask you this to hurt you," I told her. "Because there's no purpose to that. My purpose is understanding, knowledge,

insight. I need to know the Eye. What it wants. Why it took me and Maisie. Why it won't let her go. It had you and the whole cult, enough humans to do whatever it wanted. So why me, why us?"

Sarika grunted. An affirmative.

"Thank you," I said. "Please, try. Whatever you have."

Her jaw quivered with effort as she straightened up. Hands fluttering, she mashed the morphine button again, but she'd already maxed out the dose. She dropped the dosing remote and twitched a bitter smile at me.

"Twins," she slurred. "Explain- explains the feeling."

"The what? What feeling?" I sat forward, on the edge of my seat.

"Half. Half you, half her. Confused it. Suppose we all ... all look the same, to it. Didn't expect two of us to actually be the same." She smiled, then grunted and convulsed once, as if heaving to be sick. "Gods make mistakes. Fuck reality."

"Mistake? What do you mean, what made a mistake? The Eye made a mistake? With Maisie and I?"

Sarika panted, sudden and rapid, and let out a low whine, a horrible animal noise I knew all too well from nights in child mental hospitals, the panic of a person trapped inside their own mind with something that hated them. She hunched tighter into herself, curled up almost into a ball, on the verge of a scream.

"Why don't we back off for a minute, give her some space?" Nicole said loud and clear.

"No, not yet. Sarika? What do you mean, it made a mistake?"

"Can't. Nothing more," she whined, curled up so tight she pressed her face into the sheets. "You think I- I *asked*? It needs the other half of ... of ... you."

"For what? Why?" I was out of my seat, hands hovering over her, desperate for that tiny nugget of meaning. "What for?"

"Prop- prop-" she choked on nothing again. "Propagate? Let you out- adopt you- *cuckoo*. Adop-"

She heaved herself up, turned to the side, and vomited into her sick bucket. One, twice, three times, she spat blood-laced bile, hacking

and coughing, wheezing for breath.

I stepped back. Slowly, painfully, Sarika deflated back onto the bed, drained from the effort of relating what little she'd gleaned of the Eye's purpose and desires. Nicole kept glancing at the door. Sarika turned on her side in the bed, curling into a foetal position as she muttered under her breath. I caught scraps, 'torn apart', 'missing missing missing', 'sorted and catalogued and put back together and ruffled like cards and-'.

Sobbing and dry-heaving into her pillow, her body gripped by tremors, I'd used her up.

Stiff and awkward, my mind racing, I finally stepped back and gave her some space. I backed away, from her, and from what she'd said.

"Heather?" Raine took my hand, tried to catch my eyes. "Heather?"

"Like I said," Nicole sighed. "Not exactly coherent. Any of that make sense to you? Didn't seem very helpful."

I swallowed, stared at the detective until she frowned at me, and then down at my pocket. Hands trembling, I pulled out my mobile phone and thumbed through my contacts.

"I have to call my mum," I said.

"Hey, hey, Heather," Raine said. She understood instantly, put the pieces together almost as fast as I. "That's not what Sarika meant. I don't think that's what she meant at all."

"She might. She might."

"And we can do it at home, you don't have to-"

"I have to ask her now. I have to, I have to." I stammered, voice shaking in my throat. I found my mother's number, pressed the call button, and held the phone to my ear. My heart hammered in my chest.

"Heather, it's going to be fine," Raine said, strong and clear and confident. For once, I did not believe her. "That's not what Sarika meant."

"What if she did?"

"You could wait five minutes," Nicole suggested. "Ask her to clarify, if she can get the words out? What's the rush? I don't follow."

I shushed her with a wave of my hand.

Four rings, five rings, and the call connected.

“Heather? Heather, dear?” My mother’s voice from the other end of the country, tinny and distant on the phone. For bizarre childhood moment I wanted a hug from my mother.

“Mum, yes, it’s me, I-”

“It’s been three weeks since you last called! I left a message two days ago. Look, I’m at work right now, but-” she broke off for a moment, to answer a question from beyond earshot, then returned to the phone. “Heather, it is lovely to finally hear from you,” a hint of sarcasm in her voice, a edge of reproach. “I’m going to make some time here in a moment, and we can-”

“Mum, I have to ask you a question. Right now. And- and I need you to just answer it, not ... not get like you do sometimes.”

“Get like I do sometimes?” Her voice rose by half an octave. “Well, excuse me, what is that meant to mean? What is this-”

“I need you to tell me the absolute and total truth. Mum, mum, I never ask you for anything. Tell me the truth.”

A moment of silence. For the first time in my life, my tone shocked her. In a smaller voice she said, “What is this about?”

“Mum, am I adopted?”

covenants without the sword

– 8.2

“... what!? *Adopted?*” My mother’s voice spiked in shrill disbelief. “Did I hear that quite right? Don’t tell me you’re being serious?”

“Completely serious.”

I heard her hurry away from her desk, heard a door close, caught the intake of breath as she readied herself. My mother’s inevitable expression forced itself into my mind’s eye, a cocktail of outrage and shock. “Heather, what are you talking about? Where has this come from all of a sudden? Adopted? I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Mum,” I forced out. Raine tried to take my hand but I stepped away and shook my head, stared at Sarika’s back on the hospital bed. “I have never been more serious. Please, answer the question.”

A silence.

Sarika’s choked words rattled around inside my brain, loose bolts in a machine about to shake itself apart.

Propagate – adopt, she’d said.

Cuckoo.

My mind supplied the rest. It would explain so much if Maisie and I were adopted. If we were supernatural cuckoo-things, deposited here by the Eye in the guise of human beings, to be raised and then returned when ripe. It would explain my phantom limbs and bitter nostalgic dysmorphia too, perhaps my journey through the abyss had reminded my body of a hidden genetic truth.

Perhaps that was why I’d survived the abyss at all.

The idea gripped my guts with a terrible sickness and my head with a panic like the walls closing in. If I’d been adopted, what was I really? Where had I come from? Had I never been a real person at all?

“No!” My mother hissed. “No you are most certainly not bloody well *adopted*. Heather! Not only are you not adopted, it was a pain in the neck to squeeze you out.”

“I ... what?”

“I’ve never told you that, have I? Thought you’d find it too grisly, or it might upset you or give you ... ideas. Perhaps I’ll tell the story to your girlfriend when you deign to drag yourself home for a visit, embarrass you in front of her, embarrass us both.” Her voice hitched with a note of real hurt, protected behind easy flippancy. “You wouldn’t come out of me! Didn’t want to get out of your first bed. They had to get the awful dilatory forceps to pull you out.”

“O-oh, well ... I-I ... ”

“I was huge with you! I felt like a beached whale for months on end. Your father swore- ... oh, I’ve never told you this, Heather, not with all the unpleasantness when you were little, but now you’re ... you’re doing well these days. When we saw you at Christmas you seemed so much better, so much more normal. Happy, even.” She paused, and gathered herself as if for confession. “When I was pregnant with you, your father swore I was carrying twins.”

I halted my stammering attempts to excuse myself. “Mum? Say that again.”

“Obviously I wasn’t, I was just extremely large, but I certainly did eat for three. You were packed in there like a comfy little Eskimo, double the amount of placental sac as any other baby. So think how I felt all those years later when you had your ... your *episode*. Like you’d dreamed yourself a twin in the womb, like I’d dreamed it for you. Oh, oh, Heather, I do apologise.” My mother sniffed. “I shouldn’t be telling you this story, but – adopted? No! No, you are not.”

I couldn’t speak.

You had carried twins, mother. It was always twins.

The first crack in the Eye’s erasure of Maisie, in all these years.

When I’d first climbed back out of Wonderland and Maisie hadn’t, when I’d sat on the floor of my childhood bedroom and screamed my head off, the Eye hadn’t merely kidnapped my twin sister. It had erased all trace and memory of her. One bed in the room, all her

clothes gone, no second face like mine in family photographs. Nobody remembered her, not my parents, not our primary school friends, nobody.

But the Eye didn't really understand human beings. It had excised my parents' memories of their other daughter, but couldn't magic away the physical history of my mother's body.

She didn't recall giving birth to twins, but she remembered a belly big enough for two.

That, more than anything else, more than the outraged tone in her voice, more than the certainty she'd told me the truth, more than the slow dawning realisation that my parents were not the sort of people to adopt in the first place, convinced me that I'd gotten this one wrong.

"I'm- I'm sorry, mum." I smiled with relief, sniffing, backing away from the edge. "You're right, I'm sorry, I got an idea into my head from a silly place, and-"

"It's not from this girl you're seeing, is it?"

"No! No, quite the opposite. Raine is probably quite unimpressed with me for this phone call." I looked up at Raine, but she beamed at me. Relief as well? "She was telling me I was wrong about this, told me it was silly to call. I should have listened to her."

"Quite right you should!" My mother tutted. "She's obviously far more sensible than you are. I suppose that's some comfort. Put her on, will you? I want to have a word."

"About me?"

"Of course about you, what do you think?"

"Mum, I can ... I ... I'm not sure that's appropriate?"

My mother said something obvious and trite, a huffing and a tutting.

Such incredible relief.

I should have been disappointed, shouldn't I? Adoption would explain so much, provide a solid lead on why me, why Maisie. But I was not some Outside thing, some Eye-thing pretending to be human, even to myself; I was human – or at least I'd started as one. I am my mother's daughter, with all the messy familial implications.

She remembered carrying me in the womb; by a miracle, she remembered carrying Maisie.

A new-minted part of my mind, an unfamiliar strategic Heather, whispered a victory: the Eye is not infallible. It made a mistake. It missed a detail.

"Fine, fine." I smiled through my mother's words. "I'll put Raine on, here she is."

I held the phone out to Raine and she accepted it without missing a beat. She tilted her head up, puffed out her chest, and put on her best respectable-young-woman voice.

"Mrs Morell, hello, I- ... " She paused, laughed. "Samantha then, absolutely. Yes, I am, I promise you that. If nothing else, I am trying my best to take good care of her. Mmhmm. Mmhmm."

Raine made attentive noises. I puffed out a huge sigh, red in the face as relief transmuted into deep, mortified embarrassment. Nicole asked me a question with her eyebrows, and I tried to apologise with a silent look.

"A mutual acquaintance said something hurtful," Raine explained into the phone, serious and measured. "I think Heather took it to heart. Yes, I do know how she can get, but I put a great deal of faith in her."

I blushed harder, frowned at Raine. She stuck her tongue out at me.

"Yes, I will," she continued. "I'll make sure she does, perhaps for a day or two around Easter? We do get two weeks off, after all. Good, great, no problem. Thank you, Samantha, I really do appreciate your confidence, and I understand I have to earn your trust. Here she is." Raine passed the phone back to me. She winked.

"Mum?"

"Heather, you listen to what that girl tells you," my mother said. "I liked her when I met her at Christmas, and I don't think I'm mistaken. She's very sensible, very organised, very together. And no, one more time, you are not adopted."

"Thank you. Look, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'll give a proper call sometime soon, okay?"

"This evening. I want to hear all about how you've been. You never

talk about how university is going. I want to hear about your work, how you're doing, how you're finding it. Yes?"

"Yes, of course. This evening. I'll call you then?"

"Make sure you do."

"Goodbye for now, mum." I ended the call, stared at the phone screen and blew out a long sigh. "Well, now I feel profoundly silly."

I'd panicked. The phantom limbs, the desperation for a reason, meeting Maisie again, all mixed up into an cocktail of panic.

What had I expected? Adoption, really? The existence of werewolves and magic and other dimensions did not mean I was living in a daytime soap opera. Neither fae-born changeling or destined for a mysterious fate. I was, on the grand stage of the world, and the grander stage of reality, not that important – except to my friends.

"You know, the first time we discussed the uh, giant alien eyeball situation," Nicole said, "you told me you weren't at all some kind of chosen one, or special, or any of that Harry Potter junk."

"Yes, yes, I know, I just ... it was a stupid panic."

"Wasn't stupid." Raine caught my eye, dead serious. "The question was worth an ask. True, there's probably a better way than freaking your mum out, but hey." She shrugged and smiled.

I nodded. "What was that about a day or two around Easter?"

"Visiting your parents. You and I. Home cooking, hang out, keep your mother on side."

"Oh. Oh, right. Well."

"Was this all a waste of time then?" Nicole asked.

She stuck her hands in her pockets and looked past us, at Sarika still curled up on the hospital bed with her back to us, wheezing and quivering. She looked so small and fragile, and she'd tangled one arm up in the clear plastic drip lines, but at least she'd stopped sobbing.

"... no," I said at length. "Sarika still used those words – I'm sorry, 'propagate', 'adopt', that's what she said."

Sarika twitched. The ghost of a shrug.

“Maybe it didn’t mean anything?” Nicole suggested. “Maybe she was just trying to hurt you.”

“That’s possible, I suppose.” I frowned at Sarika’s back. I felt like I had all the puzzle pieces, jumbled up, but I needed to know what the picture showed before I could put them together.

Didn’t want to hurt Sarika again though, the first time had been terrible enough. No matter what she’d done, I couldn’t inflict pain at will.

“Hey, Sarika?” Raine said, bright and clear. She strode forward and leaned on the bed, leaned over to make eye contact. Sarika’s head adjusted, and Raine flashed her a smile. “Can I call you – what, Sarry? *Sari*? Hmm, nah, that doesn’t sound right, does it? Sa-ri-ka, three syllable beat, almost musical, yeah.” Raine nodded, smile turning rakish. “You don’t need a pet name, your regular one is good enough.”

“Saaa-” Sarika slurred through a mouth thick with saliva. “Sari’s what- what *he* called me.”

“Girl, you can do miles better than Alexander.” Raine spoke as if we were all sitting in a coffee shop, bonding over love-life trouble, not in a hospital room with a trauma-crippled shell of a human being. “Come on, when you got down to it he was a total asshole.”

“Was. Mm.”

“Didn’t give a toss about you, did he? Threw you to the wolves. Dangerous to know, and not in the fun way.”

“S’what- what I like. Liked?”

“Ahhhhhhhh. Ahhh, I get it. Yeah, that’s rough. Can’t help what you’re into.” Raine glanced back at me and winked.

Dangerous to know. I suppose that described Raine, in a very different sort of way.

Nicole looked utterly baffled. I shrugged too, and nodded to urge Raine on, though I had no idea where she was going with this.

“Look, forget all of that,” Raine told Sarika. “Forget him. Think about the future, about how much better you can do.”

A snort, a single derisive laugh. Sarika managed to flop a hand, the arm with attached drip-lines of saline and morphine. The gesture spoke a thousand words: nobody would want her now.

“Pffft, nonsense,” Raine blew theatrical dismissal. “Woman like you? Think about how much better you can do. Think about all the hot guys who’ll be lining up around the block for you. Now me, I’m not much help in that department, cos’ I eat mountains of pussy, but I’m sure you know what I’m talking about, right?”

Another puff of laughter, less derisive. Gently, Sarika shook her head.

“Yeeeah, there you go,” Raine said. “You know what I’m on about.”

Perhaps it was Raine’s irrelevant change of subject, or perhaps Sarika’s reaction. Gave my subconscious a moment to chew on the problem. Like a magic-eye illusion snapping into focus, the pieces came together.

“So here’s the deal, Sarika,” Raine was saying. “You keep thinking about your veritable buffet of buff dudes, and I’m gonna ask you a question. Just nod or shake, no need to think-”

“It was the other way around,” I said.

Raine stopped and looked at me. Nicole raised an eyebrow.

Sarika nodded.

“Found a cuckoo in its nest,” she croaked, then flinched. Her breath hitched and she curled in as if to close herself up. “Tried to raise-raise it anyway.”

“And tried to raise it anyway,” I echoed. “Oh my God.”

“Heather?” Raine said.

“I’ve figured it out. Raine, it was the other way around. The Eye didn’t send Maisie and I here as cuckoos, it was the *other way around*.” I spoke so fast I almost babbled, couldn’t contain myself. “The things in the abyss, it’s so obvious, I-”

“Hey, hey, Heather, slow down,” Raine laughed.

“The things in the abyss, the leviathans, they bootstrap themselves via thought. That’s how they grow – they think! So ten years ago Maisie and I go to Wonderland – maybe the Eye drew us there, or

maybe it didn't mean to, or maybe it was all an accident, it doesn't matter – and what does the Eye see? Human children! We take so long to grow, our minds take twenty years to fully develop, so slow, absorbing knowledge like a sponge, endless curiosity. To the Eye we must have looked like ... like ... I don't know. Like an infant version of itself. Or a promising candidate?"

Slowly, rocking herself back and forth, Sarika covered her ears. She didn't want to hear anything about the Eye, ever again.

"We're the cuckoos," I said. "To it. Or we were. And it must have figured that out, but tried to adopt us anyway."

"A giant alien eyeball thinks it's your mother?" Nicole asked.

"Sort of. More like a teacher."

Because discovering a cuckoo's egg in your nest doesn't matter if you propagate by thought, if what makes you *you* is hyperdimensional math, if you don't have DNA, if your biology is an abyss-born nightmare of will-formed flesh.

A cuckoo in your nest doesn't matter – if you can take the little cuckoo chick and reforge its mind to be like your own.

"Except it couldn't tell Maisie and I apart," I murmured. "We only got half. It thinks half escaped? It's trying to put us back together? I don't know."

Sarika heard silence, and gingerly removed her hands from her ears.

Raine squeezed her shoulder. "Hey, hey, thank you. You did great. I mean it."

"Do you-" I spoke up. "Sarika, do you know anything about the dead hands?"

Sarika turned in the bed, so much effort for such a small frame. She stared at me, slack and spent.

"Lozzie and I can't slip – can't go Outside, beyond, whatever you call it. A feeling like dead hands on my ankles stops me every time. We're stuck here. I thought it might have something to do with ... what you all did."

"Lauren ... Lil- burne?"

Oh. I'd given that one away for free. I suppose it didn't matter

anymore. "Lozzie, yes. She's with me now."

"Alex- little sister." Sarika sniffed hard. A thin trail of tears ran from one eye, soaked into the pillow beneath.

"He treated her terribly. You were his lover. You must have known, don't- don't give me that."

"Safe- safe?"

"Yes." I nodded. "She's very important to me. I promise I'll try to keep her safe, as best I can."

Sarika rolled back over, gave me the cold shoulder, stared out of the window at the grey drizzle.

"All my friends are dead," she slurred. "Don't know anything about your hands. Screw you."

Raine left the bed and returned to Nicole and I.

"Better?" she asked, slipped an arm around me, kept her voice low and soft.

"Yes, thank you." I bit my lip, still mulling over my new hypothesis. "I need to talk to Evee about all this. We need more information. Confirmation. It does make sense though. The Eye taught me and my sister in order to make another of itself."

"Well it buggered that up, didn't it?" Raine grinned. "You're you, Heather."

"Still doesn't answer why us."

"Hurricanes and floods don't have motivation," Nicole suggested. "They just happen to people. Maybe you got unlucky."

I didn't like that idea, but it was most likely. We make stories of our lives, but often reality is less sensible than fiction. A reason would make too much sense. Blind chance was cruel, but realistic. I stared at Sarika's back, thinking.

She'd been complicit in so many horrors, but now she was broken. With the threat from her passed, I no longer felt like I could play judge, jury, or executioner. She deserved punishment of some kind, but I couldn't measure it. Not this.

"Can I come back to visit her again?" I asked.

“Uh, I mean, if you want to?” Nicole answered, on firmer ground now. “If she doesn’t mind. Protective custody, police protection, it’ll get lifted in time, when it becomes clear this ‘cult’ doesn’t exist anymore.”

“I might do, then. I might do.”

Nicole gave a very glad-that’s-over sigh. “Well, if you two are ready, I’d like you to sit back down. I’ve got an admission to make.”

Raine sensed the change before I did. Despite the cold survivalist logic I’d brought back from the abyss, I had nothing on Raine’s instincts. She stiffened, shifted her posture onto the balls of her feet, that unmistakable readiness for violence.

“Detective?” she said. “What are you up to?”

“Woah, woah.” Nicole put both hands up. A career of conflict resolution and interrogation rooms had given her the rare tool-set to read Raine’s reaction. “Nothing like that. Think of this as my first assignment as a paranormal investigator. A freebie, for you lot. Please, let’s have a sit for a minute.”

“In here?” I asked. “With Sarika?”

“Yes. It’ll be obvious why, I promise.”

For a heartbeat, Raine didn’t move a muscle, then she seemed to decide Nicole was still on the level. She grabbed a chair from next to the bed for me, while Nicole perched on the hard plastic seat from by the door. Raine stood at my shoulder, radiating threat-posture. Nicole gave her a look, then decided better of it.

“Nicky?” I asked.

She wet her lips, hesitated, then nodded.

“I was approached yesterday evening,” she said. “At my home, by a person who somehow knew we’d be meeting up here today. This person wants to speak with you.”

“What? Who?”

“Go on, Nicky,” Raine said, a dark grin in her voice.

“This person decided to go through me, because apparently you’ll try to kill her if she appears without warning. Which, you know, considering what I saw last week, sounds pretty credible. You lot

aren't above a spot of murder."

"I neither confirm nor deny these allegations, officer," said Raine. Nicole rolled her eyes.

I knew exactly who she was talking about. My eyes flickered around the room, behind the medical machines and to the door of the attached toilet. My skin itched and crawled with the desire to defend myself, to grow toxic spines and poison sacs, curl into a corner and armour myself in chitin plates, sprout tentacles to constrict and eyes to see in every direction.

"Is she-"

"Yes," Nicole said quickly. "She's here. I'm acting as a guarantor of no violence. We're in a public hospital, I'm a police officer. There's another uniformed officer right down that hallway, so nothing is going to happen. You don't attack her, she doesn't attack you. Got it?"

"Nicky, Nicky," Raine grinned, dark and sardonic, shaking her head. "You sneaky little fox."

"She got here before you did. I've already searched her, given her a pat down. She's not only unarmed, she's carrying bugger all. A wallet with a single twenty pound note and a fake ID, and a stripped down phone with no contacts listed. Nothing else." Nicole tried a smile. "So no violence, alright?"

"She's not going to hurt Sarika, is she?" I asked.

"No. Sarika agreed she can be here. Anything happens to Sarika a month or two from now, that draws police attention as well."

"Where is she?" Raine asked softly.

"In the room across the hallway. I'm gonna send her a text message." Nicole took out her mobile phone. "Let her know she can come in now. We good? No violence?"

"I won't if she doesn't." Raine shrugged.

I swallowed, my heart racing, struggling with phantom limbs and a screaming survival need to flee.

The door to the hospital room opened, wide and slow.

She paused an inch inside the threshold. Wiry muscle shifted and

adjusted beneath an athletic top and a tight grey hoodie. Like a living knife, whipcord thin and spring-loaded. Palms open to show us empty hands. Tattoos climbed her throat. Flint-hard shards of rock peered out from gaunt sockets.

Amy Stack, the ex-cult assassin, nodded her shaved head in greeting.

“Morell, Haynes.” She made eye contact with me and Raine in turn, slow and steady and utterly expressionless. Then Nicole. “Detective.”

“Slaphead. Fancy seeing you here.” Raine’s face split into a maniac grin. She shifted her footing and slid a hand inside her coat. “How’s the arm?”

“Hey, I said no violence.” Nicole stood up, eyes on Raine’s covert hand. “And close the door, please.”

My body made it hard to focus. The ghost echo of iron scales and toxic defences quivered up my back. Amy Stack terrified me on an animal level, because in a way she really was a little bit like Raine, minus any compassion. She was a predator, a pure thing, and the memory of the abyss responded in kind.

I almost lunged out of my chair, gripped by an insane urge to hiss at her with a mouthful of fangs I didn’t possess.

Stack stared – not at Raine and her obvious threat – but at me.

“Scared of me?” I managed.

“Huh,” Stack grunted.

“Hey, shiteater, I asked you a question,” Raine repeated, still grinning. “Not Heather, you don’t even get to look at her. Look at me.”

Slowly, unconcerned, Stack blinked back to Raine. In answer, she glanced down at her right arm, raised it slowly and rotated the wrist. Her broken bone had fully healed since last time we’d met.

“Detective,” I said, trying to distract myself from the phantom limbs, the tentacles in my head. “Are you in on this?”

“No, no,” Nicole answered. “Like I said, she approached me last night. My dog hated her, which is always a bad sign.”

“You have a knife,” Stack said to Raine.

“Good eyes,” Raine purred back.

“Oh, shit,” Nicole glanced between the pair of them. “Come on you psychos, we’re in a fucking hospital.”

“If you draw it,” Stack said, “or rush me, I’ll run away.”

Raine laughed. “Oh yeah? Sounds like a pretty good incentive to rush you then.”

Raine twitched, the very beginning of the motion to draw her knife and drive Stack away. Stack shifted one foot back, about to flee.

“No!” I shot to my feet. “No, Raine, wait.”

They both stopped. A pair of barely domesticated predators caught before a territorial fight. Raine eased off but stepped half in front of me. I looked Stack right in the eyes, swallowed and sweated, struggled to organise my words.

Stack didn’t relax at all. She stared back at me.

“You could have called us if you have something to discuss,” I said. “You have Raine’s phone number. I seriously doubt you’re reckless enough to make an assassination attempt in the middle of a hospital, without backup, in earshot of two police officers, who you’d also have to kill.”

A tilt of her head, the smallest nod.

“Which means this is a show of good faith,” I concluded. “From you?”

“From my boss.”

Edward Lilburne.

Alexander’s uncle. Lozzie’s uncle, the one she’d fled Outside to hide from. The old man I’d glimpsed so many months ago in the underground car park. The organiser behind the Sharrowford Cult, splintered off after I’d murdered Alexander, but before the Eye’s corruption.

“Your boss wants a sucking chest wound too, I can arrange that,” said Raine.

Stack ignored her, spoke to me. “I’m here to set up a meeting. My

boss wants to talk. To Evelyn Saye, and yourself.”

“A meeting.”

Stack nodded, that barely perceptible tilt of her head.

“To discuss what?”

She stared, empty and cold.

Raine laughed. “You could at least try to be subtle about setting a trap, you know? Subterfuge 101, don’t stand there giving the game away.”

“Not a trap. In a public place-”

“Like last time you invited me to a ‘little talk’?” I snapped at her, surprised by the depth of my scorn. Phantom limbs tried to reach out, wrap her head in crushing tentacles, shove her away. I shuddered. “Like that coffee shop? Like then?”

She shook her head slowly, blinked slowly, sighed slowly, exaggerating the care in every motion. Keep us calm, no sudden movements. “You choose the public place. You choose the day, the time. You get there first – or don’t, your choice – and then tell us the location. We’ll tell you the route we’ll take, you can watch us approach from a mile away, make sure we don’t deviate. You bring whoever and whatever you want, as long as you come to talk, not to fight.” She raised her eyebrows, as if admitting a point. “Bring Zheng, if you can keep it under control.”

“Sounds like a square deal to me,” Nicole muttered.

Raine turned her head, raised an eyebrow at me without letting Stack out of her peripheral vision. I shrugged, lost, my mind racing to keep it under wraps that Zheng – our most potent weapon – had not returned from the countryside.

“You boss has this all figured out, huh?” Raine asked.

“Edward is a very methodical man.”

“And what do you care, huh?” Raine tilted her head one way, then the other, made it obvious how she was sizing up Stack. “‘Show of good faith’ or not, why put yourself in harm’s way? What’s Eddy boy got on you?”

“Pays me a great deal of money.”

“Oh yeah? How much?”

“More than you can afford.”

“Stop it, both of you. Stop sparring,” I said. “What if we refuse the meeting?”

Shrug.

Nicole raised a hand. “Look, I’m on the sidelines here, I know. But I suspect, just from having watched, you know, mafia movies and stuff, that refusal means they escalate anyway. Am I right?”

Stack didn’t bother to look at her.

“What’s so important it has to be done in person?” Raine asked. “Except a trap, that’s one I can think of.”

“I’m not meant to say,” Stack said.

“Come off it, you slaphead.” Raine rocked back on her heels and put her hands on her hips. She’d dialled down the threat posture, but still vibrated with explosive potential. “You know you gotta give us something.”

Stack’s eyes gave nothing away, cold and blank as lead. She looked past us and lingered on Sarika’s hunched back as she huddled and panted into a pillow. “The last of Alexander’s experiment can’t get out of her hospital bed.”

“Fu- fuck you, Amy,” Sarika groaned. “Fuck off and- n’ die.”

Stack turned back to me. Waited. Her gaze spoke volumes, *‘you’re supposed to be the smart one, Heather. Figure this out.’*

“Power vacuum,” I said. “There’s a power vacuum in Sharrowford now.”

“There is.”

“Huh, there is, yeah,” Raine added.

“And your boss wants what – to fill it?”

“He wants a truce,” Stack said. “Edward and his associates, Saye and yourself, one or two other interested parties. The invitation is also extended to the detective, as an observer.” She nodded sideways at Nicole, and got a surprised blink in return. “A conference, a treaty. Power-sharing in Sharrowford. Before the

vultures and rats move in.”

“Heather?” Raine asked, deferring to me, to my leadership. For a moment I had no idea what to do. I didn’t want to deal with Stack for a single moment longer than absolutely necessary. A small mewling part of myself said reject this, reject it and hide, get this monster out of your sight, as far away from you as possible, right now.

Cold abyssal logic whispered do it, say yes. Keep these people in plain sight, get them squared away into a position they can’t hurt you.

Set your own trap.

Kill them all.

“... what other ... what other interested parties?” I asked instead, trying to overrule my competing instincts.

“The people in Brinkwood. Your werewolf friend.”

“And why did you come to the house? On the morning of the- you know when. Why were you at Barrend Road, waiting in your car?”

“N-nothing,” a croak came from behind us. Sarika spoke up. “She-fuck you, Stack. Wasn’t there.”

Stack tilted her chin down. A silent thank you?

“I did ask that question too,” Nicole said. “About the house on Barrend Road. I am a professional, it’s drilled into me. She was observing a gathering of a rival group, getting intel. Made sense to me, at least.”

“You have no way of verifying that,” Stack said before Raine or I could jump in.

“Doesn’t explain why you came to our home,” Raine said. “Before the ‘power vacuum’ had formed. Twil chased you off, didn’t she? Not a fan of big dogs, eh?” She grinned a nasty grin.

“Not particularity.”

“Stop avoiding the question, slaphead.”

Stack ignored her, waited for me.

“Answer the question,” I said. “A show of good faith.”

Stack nodded, gave in. "My boss had instructed me to verify Evelyn Saye's condition."

"And kill her if you could," I filled in the rest.

Stack did not answer.

"Fucking hell," Nicole muttered. "You really are an assassin."

Stack pulled the first ever pained face I'd seen from her, if one did not count the carefully controlled gasp of agony after Praem had broken her arm in that coffee shop. A frown with her brow, a curl of the lips, almost a wrinkle to her nose. On her it was practically a grimace.

"Okay, sure, say we believe all this." Raine spread her arms. "Why aren't we making this truce with you, right now? Why can't we hash this out here?"

"Because I'm not a negotiator. Because Evelyn Saye isn't in this room." She let out a big sigh and raised her eyebrows. "Because Edward wants this to work."

= =

"Absolutely fucking not", Evelyn spat. "Are you mad? You are, aren't you? You've finally lost it. Heather's ordeal sent you over the edge and you've taken leave of your senses. Yes, let's go down the pub and have a friendly get-together with a monstrous criminal magician, who apparently tried to have me killed. Wonderful plan, Raine. I love it."

"A pub, heeeey." Raine nodded. "You know, that's not bad idea."

Evelyn's right eye twitched. She'd been shouting for almost ten minutes, started with white-faced disbelief, built pressure through hot anger, working herself up into a good head of steam. She looked as if she might burst a blood vessel.

Raine wasn't the real target.

"Evee," I protested. She ignored me.

I was the only one sitting, pulled up close to the kitchen table while Evelyn stomped back and forth and Raine made four cups of tea. Lozzie hung on the back of my chair, lazy arms over my shoulders. The noise of the argument had drawn her downstairs but she seemed unconcerned, nuzzling the back of my head and blinking

slow sleepy eyes at Evelyn's rant.

Praem stood by the closed door to Evelyn's magical workshop, comfortable and silent in her ostentatious maid uniform.

Dusk had not yet fallen, but cold wind whipped tongues of heavy rain against the windows and roof. The heating was working overtime.

"We have spent months, and blood and sweat and tears," Evelyn slammed the tip of her walking stick against the ground, "to drive these vermin out of the city, and now you want to invite them back?"

"Hey, they made the invitation for a chat, not me." Raine spread her arms, almost laughing.

"Raine."

"Look at it this way, why not hear them out?" Raine finished making the tea, dumped the used teabags into the bin, and slid a steaming mug of peace offering across the counter toward Evelyn. "Costs us nothing but a boring afternoon. You don't like it, tell them to fuck right off, to their faces. At least it'll be clear, in the open. We'll all know where we stand."

"I already know where we stand," Evelyn barked. "In Sharrowford. And they do not."

"Then tell them. Tell them to get on their collective bike and hump it."

"Why are you so set on this?" Evelyn boggled at her. "Am I speaking Latin, do you not hear the words coming out of my mouth? This is a trap. It cannot be anything."

"Evee, Evee, hey, I'm not set on anything." Raine smiled wide and confident, a soothing smile. "If I gotta be honest, I don't think we should all go ourselves." She glanced at me for a second. "Just send Praem, do it remote, something like that?"

"I refuse," Praem intoned.

"See? See?" Evelyn swung an arm at Praem. "Even the demon knows how phenomenally stupid you are, and she's less than six months old."

"Evee." This time, I raised my voice, then flinched as she whirled on

me. “Evee, you’re not actually angry with Raine. Stop shouting at her, please?”

Evelyn opened her mouth to bite, to snap, to heap scorn upon my head – then stopped dead. I wasn’t the real target of her anger either, and she knew so.

“Oh, give me that bloody tea,” she grumbled, and slumped down into a chair.

Raine placed the mug of tea in front of Evelyn like a bloodied haunch of meat before a lion. Evelyn ignored it, crossed her arms, and stared at her mobile phone. Ten minutes ago she’d flung it at the tabletop in frustration, almost cracked the screen. Lozzie disentangled herself from the back of my chair and slid into the one next to me. She settled her head onto her arms on the table, and promptly fell asleep, snoring softly.

“Here,” Raine murmured, and set down cups of tea for Lozzie and I as well. She’d added plenty of milk and sugar for Lozzie, though her tea would likely go untouched until cold.

“Idiot mongrel hasn’t exactly left me with much choice,” Evelyn hissed, staring at the phone.

“Evee, it’s okay to care about Twil’s safety. Neither I nor Raine will tease you for that.” I looked quickly at Raine, made sure she wasn’t about to undermine my words with a laugh or a smirk. She hid her mouth behind her own mug of tea. Good enough.

“She’s invincible,” Evelyn said. “What’s to care about?”

She fell silent, then sighed when nobody offered a riposte. She picked up her tea and took a long sip.

The Brinkwood Cult, the Church of Hringewindla, Twil’s family – they’d accepted Edward Lilburne’s invitation. Twil had just called Evelyn to inform us, and for her trouble she had received an earful of creative insults.

Not her fault she’d called right after we’d broken the news to Evelyn.

Also not her fault that Evelyn cared about her.

Twice in the last week, Twil had found excuses to visit us. First to welcome me back with a big hug, to hang out over biscuits and tea,

and to swap video games with Raine. The second visit had served purely to irritate Evelyn. Raine and I knew they'd been talking, by phone and text message, but I encouraged as little intervention as my curiosity could stand. Let them work it out on their own.

Instead, they'd hung around in the kitchen, spent nearly forty-five minutes on the edge of an argument about nothing, then finally gone upstairs to watch one of Evelyn's favourite anime shows together. Door open, Evelyn in chair, Twil sitting on the bed. Twil had nodded off. Evelyn had been less than impressed.

A start, at least.

Twil's phone call had probably ruined that, for now.

Evelyn thumped her tea back down. "When you went to talk to this Sarika woman, I didn't expect you to come back with much, but I certainly didn't predict one of the most stupid plans I've ever heard. At least Sarika is out of the picture." Evelyn swallowed, a bitter taste in her mouth. "Are you absolutely sure the detective isn't in on this?"

"Yes," I said. "I think I trust her."

"You think. You think." Evelyn shook her head. "She's too clever by half. Doesn't understand what she's getting herself into. We are not walking into a bloody stupid trap, not again."

"Evee, I really don't think it's a trap."

Evelyn glared at me. "Alright. Alright, explain your reasoning. Go on, I want to hear this. It better be good."

"I ... traps are ... Stack wasn't lying when she called Edward a methodical man."

"She's a sociopath. She probably lies as easily as breathe."

"T-that's not what I meant." I groped for the words, wished I could curl up and hide, armour myself in spines and plates. Instead I sat up as best I could. "I mean that we've already observed it's true. He's always been so careful, he won't even speak to you over the phone in case you can hurt him somehow. Grand theatrical gestures, that was Alexander's style. If this man was going to lay a trap, I think he'd do it so quietly, so covertly, that we'd never know it was him. He certainly wouldn't telegraph his responsibility."

“What she said, yeah.” Raine raised a toast to me with her mug.

“Also because Raine is a very competent judge of danger,” I said to Evelyn. “If she thought this was dangerous, she wouldn’t be going along with it at all, no matter what decision I’ve made.”

“Ouch.” Raine mock-wincing and put a hand over her heart.

Evelyn snorted and shook her head. “And Raine’s never gotten this wrong before? Never put you in danger?”

“That’s not fair ... ”

“Come on, I’m hardly a professional,” Raine said. “Mid-market cowboy contractor at best.”

“Why are you so set on it then, Heather?” Evelyn tapped the tabletop. “You’ve seen what these people have done, over and over. You of all people should know-”

“Exactly,” I snapped. Evelyn blinked at me, but I raced on. “Because we need to make a deal, Evelyn. Because I need to get you to the library in Carcosa, so you can raid it for knowledge. Because I need to fix whatever’s happened to Lozzie, get her Outside. I need my friends, all of you, safe. Because I need to find Zheng and I don’t know where to start. Because I refuse to spend another three months of limited time dealing with another cult. Because I need to focus on saving my sister.”

Nobody spoke when I stopped. Rain pounded the windows and roof. Wind whistled through gaps in loose tiles.

“Focus,” Praem intoned.

“I ... ” I swallowed and looked down. The anger receded as quickly as it had taken me. “I’m sorry, I just ... I have to focus on Maisie. I know I’m not the only one here, my problems aren’t the centre of the world. If you want, I can-”

Evelyn cleared her throat awkwardly. She wet her lips, cast about for the right words, rubbed her forehead. “If you really don’t think it’s a trap, I ... perhaps I should trust your ... judgement.”

“We can make sure it’s not a trap,” Raine said. “Serious.”

I nodded. “That’s what I mean, I don’t think we should blunder in. We’ll use an actual public place. We’ll go in numbers. You and me, Raine, Praem. Probably best not to take Lozzie, or Kimberly. Twil

and her ... her *side*, will be there, and they're at least sympathetic to us. The detective too, she'll be like a tripwire, any violence and the mundane world sits up and takes notice. And ... " I swallowed hard. Say it, cold abyssal logic whispered. Say it.

"Heather," Evelyn said, quiet and serious. "This happened once before. When this Stack woman approached you in the library."

"Hey, Evee?" Raine started.

"Shut up, Raine, you're incapable of this part." Evelyn said. Her eyes searched mine. "Heather, you said no to coexistence then, on moral grounds, because of what the cult did. Because of the killings, the kidnappings, the children you found in that castle. You felt very strongly about that. Very strongly indeed."

I nodded. "Yes, I remember, I still do, but-"

"But. Exactly. I agreed with you then. I still do now."

Say it. "But-"

"Dammit, Heather," Evelyn snapped. "You've- you've been trying to show me that some decisions don't have to be made. That magic doesn't mean I have to ... to be like-"

"But we should set a trap of our own," I said.

"Heather?" Raine raised an impressed eyebrow. Evelyn paused, rapt with attention.

"A magical one," I explained. "That's your job, Evee. Either we have this truce, we make a deal – one we can approve of – or we kill them all in a single trap, and it's done with."

Cold abyssal memory whispered to me. Lay the trap, lay in wait, kill them all regardless. Make this bolt-hole safe for you, for your friends. Remove the threat.

"You're serious," Evelyn said.

I shook my head, uncomfortable, my skin crawling. "Don't be surprised, please. This uncle, Lozzie's uncle, I wish we could ask her more about him, but-" I glanced down at Lozzie, dozing on the table.

Her eyes were open. Staring at nothing. Blank gaze, puppet with her strings cut.

“Lozzie?”

She let out a string of mumbles, sleep-talk nonsense, then her voice cohered into actual words “-can’t let him get meeee. Please, please please. Heather, please ...”

“I won’t. Lozzie, I won’t. I promise.” I put a hand on her head, stroked her hair.

She lapsed back into mumbles, then closed her eyes again.

“Mm, quite,” Evelyn grunted.

“That’s the other reason we try to make a deal,” I said. “He stops looking for Lozzie. We- I get space and time to find my sister. Part of any deal has to be no more kidnappings. None. No preying on the weak.” I knew I was trying to convince myself, but I still said the words. Didn’t quite work.

“Perhaps this Edward Lilburne is behind the force keeping you and Lozzie from going Outside,” Evelyn said.

I nodded. “That’s what I was thinking too. Maybe. Except for the thing in Glasswick tower perhaps, and we can’t deal with that alone.”

“Mm.” Evelyn scooped up her phone off the table, hesitated, then pressed the redial button and held it up to her ear. Raine edged away from her and mimed a mock duck-and-cover routine. I sipped my tea. The call connected.

“You,” Evelyn said. “Yes, it’s me again, no- st- Tw- Twil, shut up. We’re in.”

A pause. I caught a snatched word from the other end.

“Yes, we’ll pick the place,” Evelyn continued. “How many of you will there be? Alright. I want you to call me back- no, I want your *mother* to call me back, or your father, or whoever else is in charge, once they’ve decided on a plan. Then I want you to call me as well, and share anything they didn’t tell me, any suspicions they’re planning a trick, or a setup, or anything else. You tell me. Understand? Good. Later.”

She ended the call and slapped the phone back down on the table.

“Well, that’s her told.”

"Evee, she's your friend," Raine said with a sigh and a grin. "She's trying."

"She's a bloody liability, that's what she is." Evelyn huffed. "But I like this idea of a trap."

"I suspected you might," I said. "But we should only use it if we can't make a deal. We have to try. I can't just-" Can't just surrender to the abyssal logic, the cold needs of pure survival.

Evelyn gave me a sharp look. "We need to find Zheng. They'll expect her with us. Her absence raises questions, makes us look weak."

"... yes." I winced and resisted the urge to bow my head with guilt. "Yes, I know."

"She is your responsibility, Heather. You freed her."

"I know! I- what am I supposed to do?" I shrugged, swallowing past a lump in my throat. "Stand out in the back garden and call her name, like a runaway dog? Go camping and hope she catches my scent? I don't have some kind of psychic connection to her. I don't even know where she is."

"Sleeping in trees, eating wild animals," Raine said with an approving grin. "Probably having a grand old time."

"Until she decides to come back," Evelyn said. "And I for one would prefer she does so *before* she forgets how to act like a human being."

I sighed and nodded, knew I had to do something but had no idea what. Apparently there was no magic to locate a stray demon, and hyperdimensional mathematics was still out, too sore, a slow-healing wound.

I raised my eyes and looked through the kitchen window, into the shadows of the back garden.

No solace there.

Tenny's cocoon hung in the tree, huge and gravid, washed by the rain, swaying with the wind.

Of course, only Praem, Lozzie, and I could see the damn thing. I'd been seeing it all week.

Big as a car, wedged between the top branches to keep it in place, anchored to the ground and tree-trunk with long sticky strips of pneuma-somatic flesh. The cocoon's surface was a liquid tarry-black, forever shifting and flowing, just as Tenny's flesh had. Her metamorphosis was taking a very, very long time indeed.

For a while I'd entertained the idea that she'd died in there, that the poor spirit didn't have the energy to complete her poorly defined transformation, but a few days ago I'd ventured out, gotten close to the cocoon. Hadn't even needed to touch the thing. I'd felt a heartbeat stir the air, a deep bass thrum of life running through the sticky black cocoon as I'd stood under the tree.

Praem followed my gaze and turned her head to look as well.

"Overdue," she intoned.

"Yes, quite overdue indeed," I agreed. Evelyn and Raine shared a glance. They knew it was there, but they couldn't see it.

Whatever gestated inside, faithful Tenny or not, I'd feel a lot more comfortable with Zheng close at hand when it emerged.

Striking a deal with Edward Lilburne would also go much smoother if I had a big stick to hand, and I could think of no bigger stick than Zheng.

covenants without the sword

– 8.3

In the end we chose a pub.

Well, Raine did.

The Bricklayer's Arms was located on Sharrowford's eastern edge, where the buildings thinned out. For a brief moment the city could convince itself it wasn't a post-industrial hulk wrapped in a curtain of decay.

Close enough to the university to feel like home turf, but far enough from home to count as neutral territory. Back toward the city, one could spy snatches of university spire or blunt brutalist concrete on the horizon, beyond the semi-detached houses set in generous but bare gardens. In the other direction, copses of trees huddled against the late winter cold. Dank dripping hedgerows wound across the landscape as Sharrowford ran out, and the countryside began.

Secluded – check.

The pub boasted a large open garden in the rear, a 'beer garden' with optimistically clean tables, limp sun-shade umbrellas, and lots of elbow room. It backed onto an empty field that served as a campsite, separated by a gravel path mostly gone to mud. In summer, campers would provide much of the pub's income, but this time of year the campground was empty, patchworked with weeds and thistles.

No angle for a surprise approach – check.

Proximity to the university supplied a steady flow of students, but also meant the Bricklayer's Arms never quite managed to fly the lofty heights of the middle-class gastropub it so dearly wanted to be. Students got rowdy, smoked weed, drank heavily, talked politics and philosophy and other subjects one wasn't 'meant' to discuss over a meal. The pub saw plenty of patrons, but not families, nobody out in the leafy garden for a pub lunch.

Public enough to discourage open violence – double check – but not

too many prying eyes – check.

“Told you it was perfect, hey?” Raine murmured. As we emerged from the warm dark confines of the pub itself, out through the back door, she turned to us and spread her hands in a gesture of presentation.

Our only human observers were a trio of day-drinking math students, hunched under the pointless sunshades around a growing clutter of empty beer glasses and cigarette butts, talking loudly about something called the ‘Riemann Hypothesis’. Only one of them bothered to look our way, a striking young woman with dyed green hair. Her eyes slid off Praem, thwarted. Normal people.

“Still would have preferred campus,” Evelyn said.

“Busy,” Praem intoned.

She obviously did not mean the pub. Raine thumbed at her in agreement. “I’m with Praem on that one. Campus would be way too busy.”

“Yes, yes, it’ll do. I suppose.”

“It’s ... nice,” I managed, trying to ignore the caterpillars gnawing at my guts.

“Heather, you’re too sweet for your own good.” Raine laughed gently. “The Bricklayer’s is a shit-hole. Somebody got glassed here three weeks ago.”

“Got what? I’m sorry, what?”

But Raine was already thumbing over her shoulder. “Nobody ever sits down the back, s’too cold and too far from the bar. Come on.”

We took the pair of tables all the way at the bottom of the garden, where it opened out onto the empty campsite.

Only a few spirits lurked in the garden itself – a huge thing like a bipedal hippo was slouched over one of the tables, and something with too many spindle-like legs crouched atop the pub’s roof – but beyond, plenty of pneuma-somatic life slithered and crawled, chittered and chattered. A pulsating mass of tendrils like a rooted plant stood out in the campground, and several creatures like crosses between chimpanzees and bats stalked in small packs across the open countryside beyond.

A few glanced at me. None lingered, even when I looked back.

It had taken me over a week to notice. Since I'd returned from the abyss, spirit life gave me a wider berth.

Didn't know how to feel about that. I didn't exactly have the emotional bandwidth to think about it much; wasn't complaining, not yet.

"Oh, you weren't exaggerating, it is cold here," I said, bunkered down inside my hoodie and coat as I went to sit at the wooden table. A stand of gnarled oak trees ran all the way down the length of the property and the field beyond. They blocked the worst of the wind, but February wasn't over yet. I looked back up the length of the garden and a sigh escaped my lips.

The pub itself was a whitewashed brick and beam structure, real rustic, practically pre-rustic. Probably been here longer than the city, its predecessors sinking into the clay for millennia. The thatch roof must have cost a small fortune in upkeep. Tiny lead-lined windows peered out into the garden like the eyes of a wizened old woman. The brief moments we'd spent inside as we'd crossed to the garden had been a wonder of dark wood stained by decades of tobacco smoke, a wide bar worn smooth by years of hands and elbows, odd paintings and photographs of local landscapes on the walls, and a tantalising hint of an upper story of creaking floorboards. The whole place looked lopsided, slouched with age and weight.

I'd much rather conduct this meeting inside. At least then I'd have some beauty to dampen my nerves.

"Wait, wait, hold your horses." Evelyn gestured at me to stop before my backside touched the seat, then pulled two small folded towels out of her bag. She handed one to me.

"Um ... "

"For sitting. These bench seats stay damp forever, you'll get piles."

"Ah." I nodded and got settled in. The towel did indeed provide a buffer between my delicate bum and the damp wood. Evelyn took the seat to my left, while Raine just rested the heel of one boot on the edge to my right, too alert to sit down.

Praem had carried a heavy sports bag all the way from home, and

now she placed it in the seat next to Evelyn. Then she stepped back, clasped her hands in front of her, and stood stock-still.

I tried as best I could to ignore the tiny rustling sounds from inside the bag.

“You gonna take it out?” Raine asked.

“Yes, of course I will,” Evelyn drawled. “I’m going to unwrap an animal corpse right here, out in the open, and play with roadkill on the table. What do you think, you blistering idiot?” She nodded at the maths students, all the way at the other end of the garden. “I doubt even that day-drunk trio over there would overlook a fucking reanimated rabbit.”

Raine cleared her throat and barely suppressed a smirk. “Point.”

Evelyn whacked the top of the bag with her walking stick. The rustling noises stopped. “Maybe I should. Let it loose now and get this over with.”

I closed my eyes and forced a deep breath. “Evee, only if we have to. We have to try first.”

Evelyn huffed and grit her teeth, but she nodded. Raine’s hand found the top of my head. Gently, she ruffled my hair.

“S’like we’re really in the mafia, huh?” she mused.

“Mm.”

“Two-o-five,” she announced, checking the time on her mobile phone. “Five minutes ‘till first arrival. You three alright here on your own for a sec?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “Praem’s here.”

“Here,” Praem said.

“No,” Evelyn deadpanned. “The moment you look away from us, we’ll vanish, explode, and be replaced by identical doppelgangers. Yes, Raine, we’ll be fine. Go keep the staff off us. Stick to the plan.”

“Stick to the plan,” I echoed.

“Sticking to the plan, yes ma’am, yes ma’am.” Raine mock-saluted, then marched off back to the pub, to order drinks and a few packets of crisps to keep the staff from bothering us too much. Nothing

suspicious back here, not at all, just a big bunch of friends and family gathering for a drink on a cold, grey day, at the end of a dreary damp garden. Don't stray too close, you might hear some strange things.

The plan was simple. Potentially brutal. Very few moving parts. Little to go wrong.

In theory.

Evelyn had sent Praem here alone this morning, before sunrise, ahead of the rest of us. She'd placed wards at five equidistant points around the property, the campsite field, and the surrounding three streets. The Fractal, cut into the bark of trees, graffitied onto back-alley walls, hidden in the refuse of abandoned scrub-ground; we now sat at the centre of a giant protective pentagram. Nowhere near as strong as the much older wards on Evelyn's house and the Medieval Metaphysics room, a temporary measure which sapped a great deal of Praem's concentration. The spell would alert her to any spirits – or more importantly, servitors – which crossed the boundary.

If this was a trap, if we didn't like what we heard, if we couldn't extract a satisfactory agreement out of Edward Lilburne, Evelyn would speak a trigger word in Latin – *inimicus* – which Raine and I had also memorised.

The thing in the bag would hear that word, through bin-liner and towel and tin foil, and it would wake.

It would memorise the faces and scents Evelyn told it to, then scamper off into the countryside for two weeks to grow strong.

Then it would hunt.

But first, we would try to talk.

Civilised discussion, reasonable debate, compromise. That was what would happen here, I told myself, we would not need to spring our trap. Everything was going to be okay. Ugly, but okay. This is what I'm supposed to be good at. I'm the sensible one, aren't I? Raine hurts people and makes threats. Evelyn does magic and knows things. Me?

Somehow I'd slipped into a natural leadership role. Because I struck compromise, because I stopped people hurting each other, because I

made deals.

Or at least I had, before the abyss.

Instinct fed me contradictory impulses. Phantom limbs urged to me to flee, to hide, to lie in wait with spring-loaded claws and razor-sharp teeth I did not possess. To tear open the sports bag and dump the contents onto the table to establish dominance when our adversaries arrived. To scuttle home and curl up in the dark with Lozzie.

I did none of those things. I sat quietly and sipped an orange juice Raine bought me, trying to act like a person.

Almost exactly four minutes and thirty seconds later, a short, athletic-looking blonde lady in a long dark coat strolled into the pub garden. She spotted us and walked over.

At first I didn't recognise her. I felt my hackles rise, an animal hiss in my throat, a desire to paint myself with threat warning and toxic sweat.

Raine raised a hand in greeting. "Right on time, detective."

"Oh, Nicky," I said, blinking. "Hello."

"Never know what you can find out if you're on time," Nicole said. "Afternoon, you lot, Raine, Heather, Evelyn, uhh ... Praem? Right. And not so much with the titles today, please. I'm off-duty." She shot us all a broad wink, looked Praem up and down, then took a deep breath of the cold air and glanced around the garden. "Interesting choice of venue."

Her clothes weren't too different – jeans and a ribbed grey cardigan instead of a suit, the coat a touch more functional rather than the austere black she'd worn on the job, lots of pockets, a pair of curb-stomper boots on her feet. She had her hair up in a ponytail, freed from the usual iron-hard bun. No makeup, no jewelry, practical and serious.

None of that added up to why I hadn't recognised Nicole. She was 'off-duty' in more than the way she meant. Not only had she shed the institutional armour of her suit, she'd shed her authority too.

In its place stood something else, a quiet cunning, an understated alertness.

"If by interesting you mean shit-hole, sure," Raine said.

"Some poor bugger got glassed in the face here recently, right?"

"Right."

Nicole laughed and shook her head. "I'll go get a drink then. Keep a seat warm for me, yeah?"

She returned with a pint and a packet of crisps a minute later, debated silently, then crossed to our side of the table and sat one space down from Raine. She opened her crisps, crunched loudly, then noticed the way we were all looking at her.

"What?" she asked. "Am I the only one drinking?"

Raine smirked. "I'd rather keep a clear head, for the moment."

"I don't really drink," I said.

"That's a lie, by the way," Evelyn added. "She drinks vodka with Raine on occasion. They make an awful lot of noise, even more insufferable than usual." Evelyn eyed the detective's pint. "Raine has a point though."

"We're at the pub," Nicole said with a shrug. "Which means no fighting, no mucking about, no hard feelings."

"You are frighteningly naive, detective."

"Maybe. That's why I'm here though, isn't it? Can't exactly be a neutral party if I've got no idea what you wizards and monsters are actually up to." She raised her pint in a solitary toast to Evelyn, and got a frowning glare in return. "Where's the other woman, anyway? The cute little redhead?"

"Kimberly?" Evelyn frowned.

"Kim stayed at home," I answered. "This would have terrified her, and she doesn't want to be involved in magic anymore. It wouldn't be fair."

"Oh. Oh, right. Well." Nicole settled down in her coat, a little put out, then smirked as an idea occurred to her "What about the giant? Couldn't fit her in your car?"

"Zheng- ..." I swallowed, caught a side-eyed look from Evelyn. "Zheng would be too conspicuous."

Nicole laughed. “Yes, yes she would be, no joke there.” She took a sip from her pint.

The truth was far messier. We couldn’t find Zheng, and the failure had been eating at me for days. Raine and I had gone over the local newspapers from Sharrowford and nearby, searched for reports of mutilated cattle or ‘news of the weird’ about odd countryside sightings, big cats loose on the moors, that sort of thing.

A sheep corpse gutted and partially consumed here, a missing cow there, an old woman who’d heard booming laughter from over a hillside west of the city, a farmer to the north who swore blind that one night he’d seen a ten-foot shadow fighting an angry ram.

We’d stuck virtual pins on google maps to establish a pattern, but there wasn’t one. If Zheng was out there, she was all over the place.

Nicole gestured with her pint glass. “What you got in the bag there?”

“A dead rabbit,” said Evelyn.

Nicole blinked and looked at the bag again. It was twitching. Evelyn reached over and whacked it with the head of her walking stick.

“Um ... ”

“That’s not a joke,” I said with a sigh. “A dead rabbit, wrapped in a bin liner and tinfoil and ... reanimated. It’s disgusting.”

“Wizard shit,” said Raine.

“ ... right!” Nicole smiled, drank a mouthful of beer, and sat back in her chair. “Wizard shit. Say no more.”

Guilt fought with survival instinct. We’d already agreed – Raine and Evelyn and I – that nobody else needed to know about the trap. It wasn’t like a bomb or sudden violence. It wouldn’t, couldn’t, hurt Nicole or Twil or anybody else that Evelyn didn’t point it at.

But didn’t they have a right to know? It might go wrong, might not prevail, might make this shadow war worse. They’d all be accomplices by association.

Cold logic said no, they might disagree, and then you’d lose your shot at Edward Lilburne.

“One,” Praem suddenly announced.

“Only one?” Evelyn snapped, but didn’t wait for an answer.
“Heather, you keep your eyes open. Spot it before it’s overhead.”

“I’m watching, yes.”

“One what?” Nicole asked.

“One servitor,” Evelyn answered. “Twil’s lot.”

The Church of Hringewindla turned up right on cue. Five people including Twil, one dog, and no surprises. We’d organised it over the phone, made sure we both knew exactly who and how many would attend. No surprises meant no excuses for what Raine would call an ‘itchy trigger finger.’

“Hey, guys!” Twil strode ahead of the others in her awful clashing lime green coat and white hoodie, beaming at us as she trotted forward.

“Twil, hello.” I managed a smile, then resumed scanning the air for the unseen seventh member of their group, hoping it wasn’t somehow crammed inside the dog. I hadn’t thought of that, and well, it sounds absurd, but my life is a constant parade of absurdity.

Raine said hi. Nicole raised her pint and muttered something that sounded like ‘bloody werewolf.’

“Evee, hey,” Twil started. “After this, you wanna-”

“Sit down.”

“But-”

“Sit down,” Evelyn barked. “The sooner you sit, the sooner Raine can make the call, and we can get this over with.” Evelyn’s gaze snapped away from Twil to take in the other four who drew up around her.

“I-” Twil stammered. “Yeah, I mean- that’s cool- I-”

Two I didn’t recognise, a man and woman, though I knew exactly who they were. The woman had a dog on a leash, a large and friendly-looking golden retriever to which I took an immediate gut-level liking. A good dog.

The other two I already knew. Twil’s mother had visited the house before, on the ill-fated afternoon before our trip to Alexander’s castle. Her ‘bodyguard’, Twil’s cousin, was attending as well, a six-

foot slab of muscle and fat by the name of Benjamin, with a doughy face and a slightly more impressive scratch of beard than last time. He stopped by the corner of the table and folded his arms, playing the tough guy. Raine winked at him with a smirk. He glowered back, performatively grumpy.

He wasn't their real protection.

Neither was Twil, an angelically pretty teenage girl who could probably bend steel with her bare hands and sprint at thirty miles an hour.

Their real bodyguard was the disgusting mass of near-invisible spheres which bobbed in the air about twenty feet up. Soap bubbles, ranging in size from pinhead to human head, translucent except for a sheen of pneuma-somatic ichor. The bubbles slid over each other, rearranged in a constant effort of locomotion, adjusting itself through the air as if on self-laid tracks.

"I see the servitor," I said out loud. "Praem?"

"Yes," she agreed, watching it too.

"You keep that clear of us, you hear?" Evelyn raised her voice. "Or I'll have Praem kill it."

The woman I didn't recognise nodded her head. She rolled her eyes back for a moment and pressed her hands together as if praying. The glugging bubble spirit stopped a good distance from the table.

"I'll leave it on overwatch, is this acceptable?" she asked, voice a breathy sing-song.

Evelyn glanced at me.

"Keep it there, please," I said.

"Miss Saye, it's lovely to see you well." Twil's mother said. Christine Hopton was Twil but thirty years older, the same sharp features and dark hair, softened by crow's feet, a warm smile, and a twinkle in her eyes. Right now she looked like she'd been dredged up from a misremembered 1969, dressed in a tie-dyed poncho and a shawl against the cold.

When I'd first met her, I'd rather liked her, until I'd seen what lay behind her eyes.

I had to remind myself that all these people carried a passenger

inside their skulls.

“You as well Heather, and Raine.” Christine nodded to us, inclined her head to Praem, then glanced at Nicole. “But I don’t think I’ve met you before, so you must be our, ahem,” she cleared her throat gently, “friend from the police force?”

“Police,” Benjamin muttered, tutting and shaking his head.

“That’s me.” Nicole raised her pint in a jovial greeting. “Nicole Webb. You gonna introduce us, werewolf?”

Twil suddenly looked stuck. “This is, uh, my mum? She’s ... ”

“Christine Hopton,” Evelyn almost growled. “High Priestess of the Brinkwood cult.”

“Of the Church of Hringewindla,” Christine corrected gently. Nicole nodded. We’d already filled her in, and I cursed the need for all this manoeuvring and positioning. Cold abyssal logic whispered that none of this mattered, everyone needed to pick sides and sit down, get on with it. I squirmed in my seat, restless and itching to extend limbs I did not have, to intimidate these apes into action, or to slink away to hide in a hollow in the ground.

“And when you speak to any of them,” Evelyn continued for Nicole’s benefit, “the crippled outsider they call a god is listening as well, from directly inside their heads. Never go to their Church, unless you want it in yours too.”

“That’s not strictly true, not unless you invite him in,” the other Hopton woman said.

“Then you’d have no objection to Heather visiting, would you?” Evelyn asked.

“Evee,” I sighed.

“May I introduce my sister?” Twil’s mother said. “This is Amanda. Of all of us, she is the closest to our God. She speaks for Hringewindla here.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” said Amanda Hopton. She raised the leash, the golden retriever happily at her heels. “This is Bernard.”

The resemblance between sisters was less than that between Twil and her mother. Where Christine was wiry and dark, Amanda had run into weight problems, sallow skin under her eyes. She looked

older, somehow worn thinner. Her smile held a touch of shaking mania or imminent collapse.

I wondered if Hringewindla was in the dog as well.

“Right. Great,” Evelyn grunted. She looked to the other man, who had not yet spoken. “Which means you’re the final member of the triumvirate, right?”

“Miss Saye,” he grunted. “Ladies. Detective.”

Twil’s father. Twil may have gotten her looks from her mother, but her father answered the mystery of Twil’s aggressive mannerisms. Mid-fifties perhaps, with a thatch of dark hair, radiating peak physical fitness despite his compact frame. His chin was like an outcrop of granite dusted with salt-and-pepper beard. He and Twil even stood the same, feet apart, duck-footed, ready to bristle, absolutely devoid of guile or ability to conceal one’s emotions.

He did not like us, and he was not happy to be here.

“This is my dad,” Twil said. “Uh, dad?”

“Michael,” he allowed.

“Dad, come on, for fuck’s sake. Don’t be an arse.”

“I am not being an arse,” he tutted, then gathered himself exactly like Twil would, trying to reassert his imposing look. He hesitated, then leaned across the table toward Evelyn. “Now you listen here, magician. I won’t be the one that starts anything here today, but-”

“Dad!” Twil yelled, blushing furiously. “You promised!”

Evelyn snapped back. “Oh shut up with your theatrics-”

“-it’s *your* war we’re here to put an end to-”

“Dear,” Christine raised her voice, spoke over her husband, “the people who caused us problems are gone *because* of these young ladies.”

He glanced at his wife, almost tripped on his words, but managed to forge ahead. “-and I’ll expect no more violence, certainly-”

“-you brain-infected overgrown sock puppet-” Evelyn spat.

“-and if anything happens to my daughter, I’ll-”

A hiss split the air – low and angry and dangerous, half-snake, half-insect, all alien. The argument slammed to a halt.

Everyone stared at me.

“Heather?” Raine said my name very gently, as one might speak the name of a cornered fox. I flinched so hard I nearly fell backward off the bench, then stared at her, blinking and confused. Her hand found my back and gripped my shoulder. “Heather, hey? You okay?”

I tried to swallow. My throat felt wrong, twisted up inside. I had to unclench muscles I hadn’t realised I possessed.

“I’m ... ” I cleared my throat, swallowed twice as if to shift a blockage, mortified and going red in the face. “I’m fine. I’m sorry, sorry ... I just ... if everyone could sit down, please? We’re not enemies here, not us.”

Michael Hopton opened his mouth again. An intrusive thought said get up and slap it shut for him. “That remains to be-”

“For God’s sake,” I snapped. “Evelyn and your daughter are practically courting each other. We’re all on the same side and we’re about to meet a real monster. Sit down, or leave.” I pointed back at the pub.

“We’re what?” Twil squinted. Evelyn cleared her throat.

“Heather has made an excellent point,” she managed. “Make your choice. Please.”

The Hoptons decided to sit down. They took the second table, off to the right, but faced toward the back of the pub in the same direction we did. Twil perched on the opposite end next to Evelyn, separated by the bulk of the sports bag. Evelyn wouldn’t look at her.

“Better.” I nodded. “Better. Thank you.”

I looked down at the warped wood of the table, heart racing, head spinning.

How had I made that sound? Raine squeezed my shoulder. Above the beginnings of awkward conversation, I heard the soft click of her lips parting to murmur something to me, words of reassurance perhaps – but when I looked up, I saw Amanda Hopton staring.

Past me. At the bag.

"I believe Evelyn Saye has set a trap," she said with slow, almost dream-like pronunciation.

And with that, our hard-won momentary peace was shattered. Everyone spoke at once.

"What?"

"What do you mean, a trap? Amanda?"

"Mandy?"

"Hey, Evee, what?"

"Woah woah, how can she tell that? How does she know that?"

Evelyn didn't say a word, just stared back at Amanda.

"*Tardus venandi*, yes?" Amanda asked.

"Correct," Evelyn grunted.

Michael Hopton was on his feet. So was Benjamin, looking like he wanted to crack his knuckles.

"Are you serious?" Michael asked. "You brought a trap- we- we agreed no tricks, no-"

"It was my decision," I raised my voice, forced it not to shake. "Not hers."

He blinked at me, perhaps thrown off by this tiny scrap of scraggly looking woman raising her voice. Instinct said stand up, make yourself tall. My legs twitched and tensed – maybe I could climb up on the table? I clamped down on that notion, stayed sitting. It was absurd, an animal's response.

"The people we're about to meet are, at the very least, accomplices to- ... certain crimes," I said. "If I cannot extract from them a promise not to abuse and kill people, then yes, I will pull the trigger, and they will all die."

He frowned at me, put-off and uncertain.

"I think that can be acceptable," Christine Hopton said quietly. "Regrettable, but acceptable. Dear, do sit down. Stop scaring the poor girl. You too, Ben."

Michael Hopton grumbled but sat down, frowning at me, unhappy but cowed. Benjamin awkwardly did the same, but went ahead and cracked his knuckles first. Raine mirrored his gesture, and earned herself another grumpy scowl.

Amanda stared at me now, contemplative and thoughtful.

“She will do it,” she said, then tilted her head the other way. “Who are you, Heather?”

I sighed. “Please, can we just get on with this?”

“I’m gonna call in the goons then,” said Raine. She was the only one still standing, one foot up on the edge of the seat. “We all agreed?”

Nods and murmurs all round.

Raine placed the call. Even using the phone, her posture shifted at the sound of a voice from the other end, her musculature flowing into threat-response, ready for violence, thrumming with spring-loaded energy.

“Alright, slaphead, that you? Good. Here’s where we’re at.” She gave the address of the pub. “Uh huh, uh huh. That quick, huh? Maybe we’ll get lucky, maybe you’ll crash your car on the way here. Don’t die now.” She ended the call and grinned. “Ten minutes, give or take. Anybody else fancy a drink? Round’s on me.”

= =

Ten minutes felt like an hour.

The others managed to strike up a smattering of awkward, guarded conversation, moreso after Raine returned with more drinks.

Nicole asked if the dog was friendly. The answer was yes, and the friendly dog was rewarded with attention, while Amanda got to field soft questions about his breed and age and the time he chased a rabbit but didn’t know what to do when he caught up to it. Christine made an attempt to chat as well, asked how we were all getting along at university, if we thought it would be right for Twil. Even Michael seemed to relax after a mouthful or two of bitter, though Benjamin alternated between glowering into his beer and glowering at Raine.

Twil tried. She leaned over to nudge Evelyn in the shoulder. She didn’t get far.

Conversation dribbled on. I didn't listen, couldn't listen.

All my senses stayed locked on high alert. I watched the approaches, the back door of the pub, the route around the side into the garden. Every passing car made my heart rate spike. Three times I craned around to look over my shoulder, into the empty campsite field.

My shoulder blades itched, my skin crawled, my eyeballs ached. My whole body cried out for change, weak and vulnerable and about to face dangerous predators. I was *too weak*, it whispered. I needed spines and claws and rending teeth. This was not how one dealt with predators. I required protection. Somehow, Raine was not enough, not for what I'd brought back from the abyss.

I spotted Stack before she saw us.

She emerged from the back door of the pub, a knife-slash wrapped in a grey hoodie and lightweight raincoat. Her eyes found us in a fraction of a second, found me – but I saw her first. The psychological edge was intoxicating. *I'm faster than you*, part of me whispered.

She walked across the garden, wound her way around empty tables and folded sunshades, slow and casual. Raine let go of my hand, straightened up, and radiated silent threat. Conversation died away. Stack took her hands out of her pockets to show us empty palms.

When Stack reached our table, she paused to lock eyes with Raine. Unspoken communication passed between them, body language and micro-expression. Then she sat down opposite us. I struggled to control my breathing, felt sweat on my back and under my arms, heart thudding against my ribcage.

"Eight minutes," Raine said, low and grinning. "You're early, you lying cunt."

Stack shrugged, barely lifting her shoulders.

"This is her?" Evelyn asked. "You're Amy Stack?"

Stack looked Evelyn in the eye, cold and relaxed. Evelyn glared back. Twil, off to one side, bared her teeth in a sudden rising growl.

"Twil, dear, please," Christine Hopton said. "We're all here to talk."

"You tried to kill me," Evelyn murmured to Stack.

“No,” Stack replied. “I didn’t try.”

Twil growled louder. Evelyn’s anger, her front, her scowl, failed to cover what lay beneath. Her hands gripped her walking stick with white-knuckle tension.

The pieces fell into place. I’d been so blind. Too wrapped up in myself.

On the morning after Glasswick tower, the only thing between Evelyn and a quick death at this woman’s hands had been Twil. Kimberly had been present in the house too, at least before Lozzie turned up, but I very much doubted either of them would have been capable of running Stack off, let alone stopping her. Twil had chosen to stay, and in that act she’d saved Evelyn’s life, perhaps moreso than the rest of us had with Felicity’s spell.

No wonder Evelyn hadn’t dealt with her feelings for Twil. Eevee, proud and bitter, admitting vulnerability and fear to Twil? She probably couldn’t even say thank you, not in the way that mattered.

They weren’t being stereotypical useless lesbians at all.

And now, here was the rematch.

Twil was going to take Stack’s head off, in public, for Evelyn, unless somebody stopped them.

“Praem!” I turned in my seat and caught the doll-demon’s gaze. In a minor miracle, she understood perfectly what I needed.

Praem stepped forward, neat and precise, to Evelyn’s shoulder. She made the very beginning of a reaching motion with one hand, not even a quarter of the way complete, halting before it even really began.

Stack broke off, visibly suppressed a flinch in her right arm. Twil stopped growling.

Evelyn broke into an evil smile.

“Your body recalls that one, does it?” she hissed. “I should know, I was watching through Praem’s eyes when she broke your arm.”

Stack leaned back and nodded once with that tiny tilt of her head. An admission of defeat, of a point scored. She cast her eyes across everyone present, then settled back on me.

She didn't even need to say it, I saw the conclusion in her eyes: no Zheng. Her stare lingered only a moment, but I felt as if she saw right through me, read my thoughts on my face. She blinked slowly, done with me, and turned to Raine.

"All ready?" Stack asked.

"Send him in, yes, get on with it," Evelyn snapped at her before Raine could reply.

Stack reached inside her coat nice and slow, never once broke eye contact with Raine, and produced a mobile phone. She sent a pre-arranged text message with a flick of her thumb. A moment later, the back door of the pub swung open to admit two more people into the beer garden. Two men. They spotted us and walked over.

I didn't recognise either of them.

This was getting ridiculous. Just how cautious did Edward need to be? Perhaps it was theatrical arrogance. He'd have his entourage sit down one by one, and only emerge last, the *prima donna* swanning onto the stage. I thought back to the old man I'd seen in the underground car park, his stringy grey hair and wireframe glasses.

No, drama didn't seem his style. This was pure paranoia. I couldn't blame him for that.

The man in front carried a briefcase. Maybe in his late forties or early fifties, he had a face like a happy little pet rat, a squished smile, and big blinking eyes, his hair sticking up in little wispy tufts. A little short, portly in a comfortable sort of way, upholstered with good living and little exercise, wearing a comfortable if rumpled suit underneath a sensible, smart coat.

He hurried over to us, smiling, eyes darting about to take us all in.

"Hello, hello, yes, yes, delighted to meet you all, I'm sure, I'm sure, hmmm?" he chattered. He stuck his hand out to shake at each of us one by one, but didn't actually wait for anybody to take the offer. "Mrs Hopton, Mr Hopton, the *other* Mrs Hopton, young master Hopton, little miss Hopton. Officer Webb. Raine- um, no sorry, forgot your one – miss Evelyn Saye of course, miss Morell, you-" He paused and blinked at Praem, like a hedgehog in headlights. "You I don't know! That's fine, fine, all fine, all good. I'm certain everyone who should be here is here! Mmhmm? Mm, yes!"

And with that, he sat down next to Stack. He placed his briefcase on the table and beamed at us.

The second man was younger, maybe late twenties, tall and black and dressed in a far sharper suit, not a single crease about him. He greeted us all with a nod and an ironic smile.

“Good afternoon, ladies, gentlemen,” he said, in a broad north London accent.

I disliked him instantly. Reminded me too much of Alexander.

“Sit down, Julian, sit down.” The hyperactive rat-man waved an impatient hand at him. “Julian is my assistant, you see, still believes in all that standing on ceremony stuff, thinks it’s more important than actually getting down to brass tacks. Hmhm!” He made a funny little closed-mouth titter at his own non-joke.

Julian lowered himself into a seat too, nodding his head in gentle agreement.

“Shall we begin, then, hmmm?” The rat-man asked, clasping his hands together. “We all know what we’re here for, after all, I hope? Our own little Potsdam conference, no?”

“Except we did all the work,” Evelyn almost growled.

“Ahem, well, ahem. No?” He avoided her venomous glare. “No laughs? Well, well, just one of my small jokes, a small joke. Do um, do forgive me.”

“Alright, I’ve had enough of this,” Raine said, shaking her head with an indulgent smile. “We’ve got the assassin and the jester, and whatever you’re meant to be,” she gestured at Julian. “When’s Eddy-boy himself putting in an appearance?”

“He’s too paranoid,” I said out loud, as it dawned on me.

“... I’m- I’m sorry?” The rat-like man blinked several times.

“What’s wrong?” Michael Hotpon asked. Sharp.

“I think we may have been misled,” Christine said, delicately.

Evelyn frowned. She pointed at the rat-faced man. “This isn’t him? This isn’t Edward Lilburne?”

“No,” I said. “No, it isn’t.”

“W-what?” the rat man spluttered. “But of course I’m not? I don’t follow? Slow down, please, I-”

“Where is he?” Raine asked Stack. “Where’s your head honcho? Where’s Ed-boy?”

Stack just stared.

“He’s not coming, is he?” I asked.

“It’s a trap, then,” Evelyn hissed between gritted teeth. She placed one hand on the sports bag.

“Evee!” I panicked. “Evee, wait.” In the corner of my eye, I saw Stack switch to the bag, suddenly on and alert.

“This was supposed to be a straightforward meeting,” Michael Hopton said, on his feet. “Where’s mister Lilburne?”

“Please!” The rat-man got to his feet too, raised both hands in a placating gesture “I assure you, I am fully empowered to act and negotiate on my client’s behalf, with the full force of-”

They both talked over each other. Benjamin stood and glowered. Julian looked quite alarmed, like he wanted to get up and flee. I almost reached out and took Evelyn’s hand, to stop her before it was too late. Twil looked supremely lost. For a moment all was confusion.

“Sneaky bitch,” Raine murmured. She eased back from the table. Her hand reached inside her coat. Stack tensed, a coiled spring of muscle and tendon about to launch itself from a standing start.

And Nicole burst out laughing.

Everyone stopped and looked at her. She shook her head in disbelief at the little rat-faced man. “I thought I recognised you from somewhere.”

He cleared his throat, decidedly uncomfortable. “Well, of course you know me, officer. I never forget a face from business, never ever.”

“I haven’t forgotten your’s either, you dirty fucker,” she said, grinning. “You got the Northcolt Ripper off on manslaughter.” She pointed at him and looked around at the rest of us. “I know this man. I’ve seen him in court. It’s alright, I know exactly what he is, and he’s absolutely here to negotiate. You’re in a very different kind

of trouble here. Put the magic wands down, ladies and gentlemen. Come on, don't make me go back on duty and arrest you all for breach of the peace."

Glances were shared. Muscles relaxed. Everyone backed down – though Raine and Stack stayed locked on each other.

The rat-faced man took a very long breath indeed, swallowed, and wet his lips. He cast a blinking glance sideways at Stack. "I do wish you people wouldn't do this to me all the bloody time. Our good friends here are unaware of the, ahem, specific arrangements?"

"Yes," said Stack.

He let out a long-suffering sigh. "Julian, were you aware of this too? Please, I know you're my client's apprentice as well, but, really now?"

"Unfortunately yes, sir."

I realised with a suppressed shiver that Julian was eyeing the bag with intense curiosity. Only now did he look up and resume the mantle of well-dressed young man, and smile.

"Very well, very well, we will work with what we've got. Let's start from the top, shall we?" The rat-faced man pulled himself up as best he could, straightened his rumpled suit, and smiled like a pet rat getting ear scratches. "My name is Harold Yuleson. I am fully empowered by my client to make decisions pertaining to relations between himself and the two other parties represented here today – supposed to be three, but well, one rejection is acceptable – not inclusive of detective Webb as a mediator and external observer. I am 'in the know'," he made little air-quotes with his fingers, "as we say. That is, I know that half the people here are mages, and the other half are barely human. I myself do not practice, I am very glad to say. I am about as normal as you can get." He grinned, oddly pleased with himself about that.

Raine shook her head. "You pulled one over on us."

"Only a little," Stack replied.

"Who the hell are you then?" Evelyn snapped at the rat-like man.

"A representative. A mouthpiece," Amanda Hopton said.

I sighed. "Exactly."

“Is it ... is it not obvious?” Yuleson asked, genuinely put out and quite worried. I almost wanted to reassure him. He was half endearing in the way a small, nervous gerbil or hamster might be. He cleared his throat and cast about for help, made several ‘mmm’ noises.

“I am certain they will understand, sir,” Julian offered. “We’re all civilised people here.”

“Yes, yes, well,” Yuleson sighed, as if resigned to his lot in life. He finally managed to meet Evelyn’s thunderous glower once more. “Ladies and gentlemen, magicians and monsters, extra-dimensional entities and others – I am Mister Edward Lilburne’s lawyer.”

covenants without the sword

– 8.4

Harold Yuleson, portly and rat-like, stood for a moment with his chin raised and his fingertips tucked into the lapels of his coat, looking off into the middle distance like a painting of some pompous 19th century general.

“... a lawyer,” Evelyn deadpanned.

“An exceptionally good one,” his assistant, Julian, put in.

“Why, thank you, Julian,” Yuleson said. “Your confidence in me is most appreciated.”

“It does- does make- sense,” I said.

I had to force the words out, unclench my teeth with an effort of will. Anticlimax gnawed at the base of my stomach. This was wrong, not meant to be like this, not supposed to go this way.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Twil’s father agreed. Of all the Hoptons, he appeared the least surprised by this turn of events, nodding and folding his arms, making a thoughtful ‘hmmm’ noise as he frowned at Yuleson. Amanda looked out of her depth, uncertain of which way to turn her big blinking manic eyes, gripping her dog’s leash in a tight fist. Poor Benjamin’s frown would have given a Neanderthal a run for his money.

“Does it?” Twil squinted in utter confusion. “What the hell’s the point of a lawyer?”

“To talk,” her dad replied.

Raine was the only one who didn’t react, not to Yuleson. She stared at Stack, and Stack stared back.

“No,” Evelyn spat. “No it doesn’t make sense. What does law mean to magicians? Every person here is technically a criminal, even the bloody police officer. You’re about as useful as tits on a fish.”

Yuleson blinked like a startled vole, shocked out of his satisfaction,

and crashed back down to earth with a hemming and hawing. “Ahem, well, well, that judgement, my dear young lady, is entirely subjective. Transferable skills, you see, transferable skills. I am not here to practice law as such, but negotiation, diplomacy. Who better to grease the wheels than one who understands the nuances of compromise? Furthermore, as I am not directly involved, I have no stake in your, shall we say, *special interests*?”

He smiled an oily smile, opened his hands in a placatory gesture, and I felt the most unaccountable urge to hiss at him.

The sensation clawed up my throat, irresistible animal instinct.

I was so shocked I almost choked on my own saliva in an effort to hold back. A wet cough into my own mouth drew a concerned flicker from Raine, but I shook my head and waved her off. Panic settled in my chest – *hissing* at a lawyer would get us nowhere, it was utterly inappropriate, straight from the imagination of a play-acting twelve year old.

The frustration was valid though. Where was Edward Lilburne? He was supposed to answer my accusations, account for the actions of the cult.

Instead, he’d sent this tubby rat-man.

“Don’t let his front fool you,” Nicole said. “And don’t agree to anything too fast. He’s good at this, the sneaky little bastard. This man is a master of irritating verbal misdirection.”

Yuleson sketched a head-bob bow at Nicole, as if accepting a compliment. He clasped his hands together and beamed at us. “Well, ladies and gentlemen and others, are we all satisfied that we’re going to-”

Misdirection.

I bristled, felt it in the little hairs on the back of my neck and the skin up my spine, sat up as if struck by lightning. Stared at Amy Stack.

Another inappropriate urge gripped my muscles in a pulse of adrenaline, and this one was plainly insane – my body wanted to leap the table and tackle her, attack her. My body was convinced I was faster, that I had a dozen barbed and hooked tentacles to drag out her eyes and lash her skin apart. I took a shuddering breath as

she slowly turned her eyes from Raine to me. Raine tensed as well, read my change in posture and mirrored my readiness.

“Heather?” Raine asked.

Stack kept her hands visible, on the tabletop. No excuse for violence.

“If this is a ... ” I swallowed, my mouth dry. “If this is misdirection, while Edward snatches Lozzie-”

“It’s not,” Stack said. “Calm down.”

My body screamed fight. Kill her. I knew I couldn’t, this was absurd, this reaction made no sense.

“Ahhh yes, yes.” Yuleson lit up like a department store Father Christmas made of rats. “Miss Lauren Lilburne is, in fact, one of the issues which Edward wishes to put on the table here today. The matter of this wayward young girl does need settling, yes?”

“I don’t think she’s lying,” Raine murmured as she studied Stack’s face. Stack blinked, said nothing, stared at me in cold silence.

We’d left Lozzie as safe as possible, wrapped up in bed and fast asleep. The doors were locked, the spider-servitors lay in wait, Evelyn had refreshed the older wards. Anybody who wanted to kidnap her would need to fight all the way from the door, upstairs, and into Lozzie’s bedroom. Snatching an unconscious Raine from the front room in a mad suicidal dash, that was one thing; getting all that way past the Spiders would be much more difficult.

A rational response would be to turn to Twil, ask her to make use of her speed, run home to check on Lozzie. Or pull out my mobile phone and call, call the house, make sure she was safe, even though I knew she’d sleep through the ringing. A sensible, human response would be to figure out the logic or motivation behind a lie, and execute a counter-play.

I didn’t feel any of that. I wanted to leap onto the table and scream and pull Stack’s face off.

I wanted to speak the trigger word for Evelyn’s trap, let it loose, and run back home.

Instead I swallowed hard, forced myself to nod, tried to be human. Raine put one hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

“Yes, yes, this is all above-board and legitimate,” Yuleson said. “You have my personal promise, miss Morell, my personal guarantee, this is not a trick, or a trap. Edward is fully aware that you are as much a player in this negotiation as miss Saye here, and also aware that any attempts to, ahem, prematurely reunite with his niece would be most unwisely-”

“Sit down,” Evelyn snapped.

Yuleson jumped at the whip crack of her voice and all but fell into his seat. In a display of vast disdain, Evelyn then ignored him. She turned in her seat to deliver another walking-stick whack to the rustling sports bag, a satisfying *thwack* of wood on taught fabric. Over on the other table, Benjamin stifled an appreciative laugh.

“Yes, yes, quite, quite,” Yuleson said. “Shall we begin properly then? I take it there are no further objections to these arrangements, or my presence?”

Evelyn gave him a look to fell an elephant. “This is a waste of time. You are a waste of time.”

Raine shrugged in eloquent silence. The Hoptons murmured cautious assent, though Amanda seemed more concerned with petting Bernard’s head; perhaps that’s how she dealt with stress. Twil looked most uncomfortable, like she wanted to bear her teeth and solve this the easy way.

“I object on account that you’re a massive cunt,” Nicole muttered, but then undercut herself by draining the rest of her beer.

I struggled to fold myself away.

Whatever we’d outwardly convinced each other of, my subconscious had prepared for a fight. My body thrummed with inappropriate desires to intimidate, to make myself big, to snap jaws I didn’t have. Useless, against this kind of threat. Useless anyway, from scrawny little Heather. I couldn’t scare anybody, not that way.

“I think we can talk,” I made myself say, forced the words up my reluctant throat.

“Hold up a ‘sec,” Raine said. “You’re a lawyer, sure, let’s believe that for now.” She shrugged, an easy smirk on her lips – and turned to Julian, sitting there with his smart suit and his reasonable face

and neat hair. “But who are you negotiating *for*?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You. Come on, fess up, we all heard that earlier – apprentice. Apprentice to what?”

Julian’s smile turned ironic again, amused by a private joke. “As was stated before, I am mister Yuleson’s assistant in matters of law.” He paused, as if watching to see how well we bought this. He spoke carefully but without any softening of his north London accent, perhaps proud of working-class roots, all broad vowels and glottal stops. “And yes, in addition, I am mister Lilburne’s pupil in matters of magic.”

“Thanks for making it easy.” Raine winked and pointed a finger-gun at him.

“Of course they wouldn’t come without a mage,” Evelyn said.

Julian dipped his head. “A minor practitioner. I am nothing important, miss.”

“But Eddy-boy is, right?” Raine asked. “You, baldie, and a lawyer? That’s it? Come off, it, how many of you are there? What you calling yourselves now? The running away coward cult? Little scared bitch cult?”

“Mister Lilburne doesn’t much like the word ‘cult’,” Julian said. “Silly idea, anyway. We’re ‘is associates. There is no bond of duty, no mystical obligations, no ‘mumbo-jumbo’. None ‘o that.”

“Praem,” Evelyn said. “He does something funny, break his neck.”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Nicole sat up. “In public?”

“As if I care,” Evelyn grunted.

“Yes,” Praem intoned.

Julian spread his hands. Mild and reasonable, his mannerisms made my skin crawl, like he was made out of borrowed gestures and hijacked muscle impulses. “That won’t be necessary. I’m not here to do anything’ but talk.”

“Then we’re all equal, are we not?” Christine Hopton asked.

“Between Evelyn, Amanda, and Julian, each side represented here has brought a magician, of a sort,” she added with a glance toward

Amanda. "This changes nothing. We have Twil, Evelyn has her friend there," she indicated Praem, "and you people have ... well ... " She tried to smile at Stack, but even the ever-motherly Christine found that hard to maintain when Stack looked back at her.

"No," Amanda breathed. Her gaze lingered on me. "No, we're not equal here."

Glances lingered on me. Julian raised his eyebrows in silent question. Raine adjusted her posture, radiated protectiveness.

"Heather is the most dangerous thing here, by a long shot, yes," Evelyn said.

"Evee, don't," I hissed.

Evelyn glanced at me, appreciative and thankful, for something I couldn't control. I felt my skin crawl.

"Ahem-ahem," Yuleson cleared his throat with purpose. "If the matter of – ahem – peacocking and hierarchy-establishment has been quite concluded for now, what say we begin?"

"Begin what?" Evelyn spat. "What is there to talk about? We won, you lost. Why shouldn't I kill you all right now?"

"Evee, please," I forced myself to say, even as my body agreed, yes, kill them all now. Evelyn huffed.

"What does my client want to discuss? It is simplicity itself, I promise you." Yuleson drew himself up, settling into his element. He clasped his hands together on the table. "My client – that is, mister Edward Lilburne – wishes to reside in his own home again, rather than relying on the goodwill and charity of his fellows. He would like to walk the streets of Sharrowford once more, the city he was born in, in which he has lived all but five of his sixty-six years of age. He desires not to worry about being assaulted, or killed, or have his home invaded, magically or otherwise. Put simply, he wishes to make peace, officially and truly and without reservation."

As he spoke, Harold Yuleson's eyes moved over everyone present, included every single person at both tables, even Praem and the grumpy, sulking Benjamin. Even Amanda's dog. The trick was obvious, but it worked; I felt included, appealed to. He fed us images and possibilities, issues on which our minds were ready to chew. Nicole had spoken the truth – he was very good at this.

The rat-like looks and hyperactive chattering served to disarm one's mind against him, file him away as an oddity or a cliché, so when the oration came, one was wholly unprepared.

That wasn't an unreasonable starting position, I told myself. We could talk.

"Fuck him and fuck you," Evelyn said. I could have kissed her.

"Now slow down, miss Saye, please," Michael Hopton said, one hand out. "I do want to hear what he has to say."

"How can we trust any agreement made here today?" Evelyn said. "This vermin still hides from me. Won't show his face, won't put himself in danger. We've taken that risk, he's avoided it. Coward."

"Yes," Stack said. "He is a coward."

"Lost our shot at him," I hissed, thinking of the trap.

"Ahh." Yuleson raised a finger. "But have you really taken that risk? The threat is not equally shared, no no, hardly at all."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Evelyn asked.

"Why, my client has never directly struck at you. He has been a bystander, part of a larger organisation, yes, a reluctant partner to his ... impulsive nephew. Meanwhile, you young ladies have quite expertly dismantled what was left of the, tch, 'brotherhood'. I believe only one known member is left alive, is that not correct, detective? She is in hospital after her run-in with these young women?"

"Um, yes," Nicole answered.

"Then my argument is made for me. You ladies are far more dangerous than my client. How can you blame him for being afraid for his life, when you have taken so many?"

"It wasn't us," Evelyn said.

"I'm sorry?"

"The house on Barrend Road, the dead cultists. Wasn't us. They did it to themselves."

"Yeah, it was fucking weird in there," Twil grunted.

Yuleson blinked, frowning and smiling at the same time in polite

disbelief. Julian had a funny look on his face too, incredulous puzzlement. It hit me, and I leaned over to Evelyn.

"They don't know about the Eye," I whispered to her. "Not in the way Alexander did."

"I can testify for them on that," Nicole said with a heavy sigh.

"They didn't kill anybody in that house. It was – pardon the cliché – like that when we got there."

"It's irrelevant, anyway," Julian said. He gestured at the sports bag next to Evelyn. "You've laid a trap. That much's obvious. Edward was quite right not to come, wasn't he? Only thing stoppin' you from springin' it is that you won't get 'im."

"Ruthless and resourceful!" Yuleson announced. "I admire you young ladies, I do indeed. Now, if we can put the matter of *trust* to one side for a–"

"Why should I let him back into Sharrowford?" Evelyn asked. "This is my city, these people lost. They lost when we got rid of Alexander. This question was settled months ago. This city is *mine*."

"Because you don't 'ave any other choice," Julian said.

"Ah, ah!" Yuleson placed a raised finger between Julian and Evelyn before either of them could speak another word. "What have I told you, Julian? You make facts sound like ultimatums. Threats will get us nowhere, will they now? Not with our–"

"Please drop the act," I said, my chest and stomach almost shaking with the effort of holding back an inhuman hiss. They both looked at me. So did Evelyn, a quizzical raised eyebrow. Only Raine took my lead, nodded along. "That was pre-arranged, wasn't it? It's obvious, at least it is to me. You're going to try a good-cop bad-cop routine." I sighed, rolled my eyes.

"Oh, no no no," Yuleson flustered. "We are most certainly not, we–"

"Make your threats, get it over with," Evelyn growled.

"Yeah," Michael Hopton added from the other table. "That was sort of obvious, come on."

"Get on," Praem intoned.

Yuleson sighed uncomfortably. Julian shrugged. "Looks like we're rumbled, sir."

“Rumbled, pish posh. Miss Saye, miss Morell, what my assistant is trying to express is that peace is not a matter of choice, not for any of us. It is a necessity. The – ahem – ‘brotherhood of the new sun’ was a dominant power in Sharrowford for a long time, nearly five decades, in one guise or another. You have indeed emerged victorious, after the recent unpleasantness, whatever the cause. My client is not a fool – he does not wish himself, his pupils, his associates, and his research, to end up like those poor unfortunates in Barrend Road. You have quite demonstrated your ability to remove your opposition.”

“S’one thing we’re real good at,” Raine said, directly to Stack.

“And now the so-called ‘cult’,” Yuleson made little air-quote gestures around the word, “is gone, it’s inheritors have removed themselves from Sharrowford for the sake of their own safety, and what is left behind? A power vac-”

“Me,” Evelyn snapped. “There is no power vacuum here. There’s me.”

“Yes, yes, you indeed. And I am quite certain you are more than capable of making life very difficult for my client.” He paused, lowered his voice, a theatrical trick that worked regardless. “But do you know what you cannot do?”

He let the question hang with po-faced seriousness. Evelyn frowned at him.

“She can do anything she wants, you fat old fuck,” Twil growled – actually growled, low in her throat, and Yuleson jumped like a startled hamster, one hand to his chest as if to suppress coronary distress. My body twitched, wanted to hiss along with her. “Anything she likes. She’s got me behind her, hasn’t she?”

“Ah, well, yes, yes she has.” Yuleson wagged a finger at Twil, then quickly withdrew it as if afraid of losing a digit to her teeth. “But can you – fast and cunning and strong though you may be – can you be everywhere at once?”

“Eh?”

“Vultures will be here soon,” Julian said. “You know that as well as we do.”

“Mm,” Stack grunted.

“Quite, quite!” Yuleson forged ahead at full speed once more, doing his wide-ranging include-everybody trick again. “Some have already arrived. My client knows for a fact that at least one magician from beyond Sharrowford has been in the city as recently as last week. Something has taken up residence in the basement of Gloston Cathedral, out to the east, and must be removed post-haste. Two members of a group known to us were spotted purchasing certain items from a local ‘occult’ shop, probably nonsense,” he waved a hand, “but you can never be sure, can you? These issues will only pile up. And you, well, you are only three – four?” He quirked a bushy eyebrow at Praem. “Four young ladies, are you not?”

“Watch yourself,” Raine warned with a grin.

“Quite remarkable young women, of course, indeed, accepted. I myself would certainly not want to cross you. But there are only four of you.”

“Six,” Evelyn corrected. Who was she counting? Lozzie and Kimberly? “And a police officer. And- and them,” she nodded sideways at the Hoptons.

“Steady on,” Michael Hopton said.

“Why? Makes more sense than this, doesn’t it?” Evelyn asked him. “A deal between you and I, to keep them out.”

He thought of a second, then nodded slowly. “I suppose so, maybe.”

“Six then,” Yuleson admitted. “That is still a scant number, and only one real magician between you? I understand you are all university students, yes? University presents challenges of its own, it-”

“No,” Praem intoned. Raine smirked and Evelyn snorted. Technically not a lie, not from Praem.

“Well, education or not, you all have you lives to live regardless. Your own ... goals and aims, do you not?”

He spoke those last words to me, with a sick smile. I went cold, shivering inside my coat. How much did this rat know? Did he know about Maisie? I bristled again, swallowed down my inappropriate, animal responses and readied a denial instead, but Yuleson was already turning away, left me floundering in my own choked anger.

“Besides, you are all close friends,” he continued. “My client has no

desire to visit violence upon your loved ones, upon reasonable people, the trauma would be too much to bear, especially at your age,” he said straight to Raine. She looked him in the eye, hard and taut. Yuleson had to look away, but he’d made his point. “And you speak of our friends at the Church,” he said to the Hoptons, “as if they are wedded to your decisions. I understand they are not exactly interested in expanding their influence into the city, am I correct?”

The Hopton triumvirate all glanced at each other. Amanda seemed to think for a moment, then nodded once. “Yeah,” Michael said slowly. “Yeah, we don’t want to babysit Sharrowford.”

“But, but!” Yuleson raised a finger. “You are affected by what happens here, yes? Intimately!”

“We are, very much so,” Christine Hopton said, her tone guarded and soft. “We would like to resume normality, not worry about being harassed again.”

“Indeed! Of course, of course. And I understand your prodigal daughter here is suffering- ah, split loyalties?” Yuleson smiled an oily smile at Twil. She sat up and bared her teeth at him.

“What the fuck does that mean?” she growled. Yuleson tittered and waggled his hands in surrender and I wanted to slap him.

“Why, it means that any agreement we hammer out here today might also go some way to solving related personal issues, no?”

“Yeah, how about no,” said Twil.

“Ahem, ahem, well, my point is this – between us, we represent three reasonable, sensible, rational interested parties, all of whom wish for a measure of peace and security.”

“What do I represent then?” Nicole asked. “The civilian bloody government?”

“Are you not here in an advisory capacity, officer? A sort of ... chaperon, to make sure nobody pulls a knife on each other, yes?”

“Suppose so.” Nicole frowned.

“Ahem, well. None of us can cover Sharrowford on our own, certainly not if we’re at each other’s throats. But, with an agreement to stop attempting to turn each other into frogs or blow

each other up or set zombies on each other, we can make sure that Sharrowford stays ... quiet. Quieter than lately, at least.” He tittered again, a chattering rodent-laugh.

“Man’s got a point,” Nicole said. “You’re not rival drug gangs trying to muscle in on turf. But think about what he’s selling you here, and why.”

“Why?” Yule pulled a hurt and offended face. “Why, officer, I am not selling anything. I am attempting to the best of meagre abilities to bring this conflict to an end.”

“What’s your retainer?” she asked.

“Don’t be silly, you know I’m not at liberty to discuss financial matters.”

“Forgive me,” Evelyn drawled, dripping with sarcasm. “A little hard to believe any of this, from the people who planned to murder me in my sleep.”

“Circumstances change, priorities change,” Yuleson said. “This is your best chance to ensure that doesn’t happen again, can’t happen again, wouldn’t even be an option on the table, unthinkable. And I think we can all agree that sleeping soundly is very important.”

I hated that he made sense.

He was right – if he spoke truth; a loading bearing *if*.

I did need Sharrowford to be quieter. I did need to live my life – because my life right now consisted of the desire to rescue my sister. I needed space and time, and no more interruptions. Tongue-tied and intellectually constipated, I’d come here with a head full of ideas and a nervous system full of tension and the expectation of violence, ready for a confrontation with a monster, accusations to throw in his face, promises to extract. All my resolve meant nothing now. I felt browbeaten and wrong-footed.

Abyssal bodily dysmorphia told me I was supposed to be fast, nimble, to slip and slide through the waves, untouched and untouchable. The way this man talked made me feel pinned, cornered. I needed to retreat, gather myself before I agreed to anything.

“I don’t like this,” I almost hissed. “I’m not comfortable with this.”

“We’re being led up the garden path,” Raine said.

“But he’s right,” I finished. Raine cocked an eyebrow at me. Couldn’t look her in the face.

“Please,” Yuleson said. “Take time to think through the basic proposal, talk it over with each other. We can absent ourselves from the table, give you some space if you like. This is only the preliminary stage, we have specifics to propose, issues to address and-”

“You don’t think I can look after Sharrowford by myself?” Evelyn asked, darkly unimpressed. She indicated Praem with the head of her walking stick. “What do you think she is? Do you think I can’t summon another dozen of her? You know who my mother was, don’t you?” She addressed the last question to Julian, but Yuleson answered.

“Oh, I’m certain you can, I’m certain you can,” he said. “But the real question is – do you want to? The, um, young lady you refer to, I’m certain she is a handful all by herself, no? Do you really wish to dedicate your life to raising and shepherding a dozen, two dozen more? If your resolve is really that strong, miss Saye, I’m afraid we would have to give Sharrowford over to you, yes, yes, wouldn’t we, Julian?”

“Certainly,” said Julian, though he bobbed his head from one side to the other in a curious gesture of denial.

Evelyn’s bluff did not convince, not even me. I knew she’d been reluctant to split Praem back into two bodies like before, I only hadn’t asked why.

“How about I just kill you all now?” Evelyn spat, and my heart sang yes, yes. The trigger word was on my lips. “Get it over with-”

“But are you willing to do that over and over?” Yuleson put in quickly. “Are you willing take such risks, without end? To live that way?”

“You have something in the bag, don’t you?” Julian asked. “Small enough to carry, yet dangerous enough to highlight. Yet ... I feel no threat from you. Interestin’. From the way we know you operate, I would bet some kind of possessed animal.”

Evelyn visibly puffed herself up, chin high, eyes blazing. “You want

this thing to crawl through your bedroom window at three o'clock in the morning? Keep pushing."

"The answer, sir," Julian turned to his boss, "is no. She can't take that risk over and over. That," he nodded at the bag, "likely could kill us all, yeah, but they'll have to put it down afterward. Quite a task. And it wouldn't be able to find mister Lilburne, as he is not present. Smart, no?"

Evelyn ground her teeth together – and opened her mouth.

"*Inim-*"

"Evee," I snapped, a half-hiss, my throat constricting. "Let it go."

She glared at me sidelong. "Heather-"

"Edward will still be out there. We missed our chance," I forced myself to say. Every cell screamed the opposite, end this now, back away, hide. Kill and flee.

"Denied the shot," Raine sighed, then shrugged and grinned. "Oh well. S'always next time."

"I think- I think we should keep talking, at least," I lied. I thought no, I felt no. "Maybe we can ... I don't know."

Yuleson smiled a creased, oily, ingratiating smile at me. His eyes said it all, said he'd won.

My hackles rose, my limbs vibrated with the need to leap up and snap in his face. Limbs I did not really possess ached to strike at him, force him to retreat. I clamped down on all of it, held myself as still as I could, shivering inside my coat, small and scrawny and weak and *human*. Talk was sensible, I reminded myself, made it into a silent mantra in my head. Talk, negotiate, look for an advantage.

"I knew you were the brains out of the outfit, miss Morell, from the moment I saw you," Yuleson said, then paused as if unsure. Stack stared at me, curious and intense.

"She hates you," Stack informed him.

"Well, well, more's the pity, but we can't win them all," he said. "Hate does not come into it. I'm sure you understand, yes, miss Morell? You're an intelligent woman, we can come to some kind of compromise. Always beware the quiet ones, that's what I say!" He made a gesture toward Stack and let out another tittering laugh.

The sound set my teeth on edge.

"I would like to explore this deal of yours as well," Christine Hopton said. She looked pointedly at Evelyn, who could barely conceal her glare of displeasure.

"It's just talk," Nicole said softly. "You don't have to agree to anything."

"Yeah, no," Raine said. "I don't trust this as far as I can throw it – which, hey, maybe not the best analogy, because I could punt this guy halfway across the garden," she nodded at Yuleson. "If we're voting, I vote let's rumble."

"Raine," I said. "I can't- we can't just- you- I can't give in to-"

Raine's eyebrows climbed in surprise as I cut myself off. I'd let it slip, out in the open. Everyone heard. Can't give in to the cold survivalist logic of the abyss, can't act like that here. I felt so trapped. A hiss rose in my throat again and this time I knew I couldn't stop it, a defensive noise of frustration and threat-warning. Get away, shut up, stop, stop-

Stack looked up. Past me and Raine and Evelyn. Past Praem.

An instant snap-to of attention.

"Huh," she grunted.

Wired on abyssal echo and phantom aggression, I couldn't turn to look. My body tensed two conflicted sets of muscles, screamed *trap!* I stared at Stack, one false move away from lunging at her. Suicidal in hindsight, an urge that would terrify me in lonely, quiet moments for weeks after. Small little Heather, tackling a professional killer, because – why? Because I got spooked by my own brain-ghosts.

Thankfully, nobody else was experiencing a terminal identity crisis.

"Who's that?" Benjamin grunted, up on his feet as he followed Stack's gaze. "Are they watching us? Is this a fucking trick?"

"I can't see from here," Amanda said, and her dog sat up too, suddenly alert and on guard. "But that isn't a person. Bernard, down, sit. It's okay, down."

"Oh great," Twil sighed. "It's her."

“Nothing is great about that,” Evelyn said, her voice tight.
“Heather?”

“Mm? Mm?” I couldn’t look away from Stack. In the corner of my eye, I noticed the Hopton’s bubble-servitor-angel-thing adjusting itself, re-orienting toward whatever Stack had noticed.

Nicole was laughing. “You weren’t kidding when you said she’s too conspicuous. She stands out like a scarecrow, they’ll see her from the pub, easily.”

“Heather, it’s okay,” Raine murmured.

Deep down, far deeper than the impression left by the abyss, my body knew that if Raine said I was safe, I was safe. Phantom muscles unclenched, I drew in a shuddering breath, and looked over my shoulder.

At the far end of the weed-choked campsite field, maybe two hundred meters distant, just inside the fence which held back a thick copse of trees, a figure stood, facing us.

I couldn’t see her face. I didn’t need to.

Hooded and cloaked in a long coat, clothes baggy and dark, framed between the shadows of the wood behind and the scudding clouds above. She’d emerged from nowhere, a fairy creature formed by the landscape itself.

“Zheng!”

“Oh. Oh dear,” said Yuleson.

I was out of my seat and on my feet before I knew what I was doing, three paces toward the field before Raine caught my arm.

“Woah, woah, Heather, slow down.”

“I have to- she-” I whirled on Raine. Behind her, Stack leaned over to whisper in Yuleson’s ear.

“Now?” he asked her. “We’re just getting started!”

“She’s become especially protective,” I said to Stack, loud and clear, felt myself puffing up with bizarre pride. “Of me and mine. You better run.”

“Run away,” Praem intoned – but she was looking at me.

"Oh fiddlesticks, this is nonsense," Yuleson huffed. "Miss Morell, I am certain we will all be fine. Is this person really so dangerous? For goodness sake, we're in a pub garden."

Stack ignored him. She stood up slowly, hands carefully visible, and watched Zheng.

I lowered my voice for Raine. "I need to ... I need to talk to her. You know I need to talk to her."

"Cool, I'll come with-"

"No." I shook my head, and a strange seed of guilt sprouted in my belly. I spoke fast, flustering, blushing in confusion and panic. "You need to stay with Evee, don't you? It's dangerous with these people, you can't leave her alone. I'm going in the opposite direction, I'll be fine."

"Evee's got Twil and Praem, she's safe," Raine said softly, for my ears only. She read me like an open book. "Heather, what's wrong?"

"I ... Raine ... I, please, I need to ... I want to talk to her, by myself."

I squeezed the words out in a half-whisper, but I couldn't admit to myself why I said them; I wanted to get away from this entrapment here, this feeling that all my responses were wrong. Zheng called to me. The romance of her figure beneath the roiling grey sky, her solid silence, the way she stood out on the empty plain of the field, on the edge of the woods. It called to my soul, and I couldn't voice why. It was not a human thing.

"She's perfectly safe," I babbled on, covering for myself. "She saved my life, twice. She's-"

"What if it's not really her?" Raine raised her eyes, studied Zheng as best she could at a distance.

"It is her. I can tell. I can. Raine, I can tell."

"What if this is a trap?" She shook her head. "This stinks to high heaven. Come on, she'll be glad to see us both, we'll-"

"*Raine*," I almost hissed at her, an animal need bubbling in my throat. I pulled on my arm, tried to yank free from her grip, and for a terrible moment I thought she was going to hold fast, tighten her hand, that she wouldn't get it. I was mad, almost frantic, a hiss

rising between my teeth.

And Raine let go.

“Woah, woah, Heather, cool, we’re cool,” she said, low and hushed. I stumbled away a couple of paces, shocked at myself.

“What is she doing?” Evelyn snapped. “Heather, what on earth are you doing?”

“Hey,” Raine said, grinning for me. “You gotta do what you gotta do. I’ll watch. Anything happens you don’t like, you turn and run – I’ll be there before you can blink.”

I nodded, shaking a little as turned away from Raine, and stepped out onto the field.

Crossing the off-season campground was not easy on my muscles or knees, not easy for awkward inelegant Heather, in my comfortable trainers and jeans, across slippery, uneven, rutted earth, around clutches of thistle and patches of ragwort. Twice I nearly fell over, stumbled and tripped on rabbit holes. Should have worn wellington boots.

Didn’t care. Moving felt wonderful, working my lungs felt right. Muscles and puffing breath, no matter how weak, brought me out of the hole of entrapment I’d felt back there. I passed the spirit out in the campground, a mass of tentacles twenty feet high, pulsing and throbbing to itself. It bent away from me, a plant avoiding fire.

Couldn’t tear my eyes away from Zheng.

My stomach was full of butterflies.

When I drew close enough to pick out her face beneath the hood of her huge – and probably stolen – coat, she grinned. Her face split across the middle into that unmistakable shark-toothed grin. Deep inside I flushed with warmth.

“Zh- ... Zheng!” I called out.

I’d expected to bristle. After all, Zheng was big and scary, a predator, a threat. The memory of my abyssal form should have arched its back and hissed at her. Instead, I felt a tentative openness, a wary friendship, excited. I all but ran the last few paces, stumbling, and stopped before her, panting for breath. The trees loomed above us, cast darker shade on this already grim day.

“Shaman,” she purred. A voice like granite.

“Zheng. Where have you been? Why didn’t you come back?” I panted. “I tried to find you, but ... ” I shrugged, exasperated. “You’re so difficult to track.”

She laughed, a deep, low chuckle of genuine amusement. “Can’t you fathom, shaman? Can’t you imagine?”

I frowned at her, swallowed, struggled with the desire to – to what? I couldn’t place it. Standing close to her felt good, made me feel small but in a pleasurable way, made me feel understood. Goodness, she was tall. Easy to forget, with two weeks apart, how big Zheng was. I had to look upward.

“Fathom? Fathom what? You ... you look good.”

She did. I doubt the concept of human health applied to a demon-ridden thousand-year-old corpse, but she looked somehow healthier, her red-brown skin full of life, her eyes brimming with slow, tiger-like attention beneath the hood. The clothes she’d stolen or otherwise acquired were shapeless and ugly, an old waxed coat and a huge baggy fisherman’s jumper to replace her lost tshirt, but even they couldn’t conceal the curves and power beneath, the way her every movement hummed with energy.

She had been eating plenty, I suppose.

Zheng grinned wider. At the compliment, or at what she saw reflected in my eyes.

And then she darted forward, a giant in sudden quicksilver motion. I yelped and flinched hard. Doesn’t matter how much I thought of her as safe, there is only one response to being rushed by a wall of muscle. I almost fell over onto the mud in surprise, but Zheng caught me.

She scooped me up and set me back on my feet. The sheer heat of her hands leaked through my clothes, left warm patches behind. Zheng ran hot.

“ ... um ... okay ... uh ... ” I blinked, stammering, trying to steady my knees. Zheng raised her chin, amused at my clumsy ape reactions.

“You should have seen that one coming. A test. Too slow, little monkey, too slow.” Zheng laughed.

I gave her a capital-G glare.

“What’s the matter, shaman?”

“You know what the matter is. Don’t surprise me like that.”

She shook her head. Her grin dialled down to a quiet amusement, a sun-baked tiger sizing me up. “Not that.”

“I don’t know what you’re-” I halted. I did know. I felt it right now. It had drawn me across the field to her, and now it left me flushed and excited in her presence.

The memory of the abyss responded to her – something in me wanted to be around her, and it was not entirely sexual.

Not entirely human.

Standing out here on the edge of the woods with Zheng felt real. Sitting back there in a pub garden, talking, negotiating, hadn’t felt right. None of it. Back there my intellect was at odds with my instinct – the old, clichéd mind-body duality had, for me, become stark reality. Sitting quietly, huddled up in my coat, pretending I would *negotiate politely* for the safety of my friends. My body hated every moment, made demands I could not match.

Out here under the darkening sky, dwarfed by a giant of feminine muscle, on the edge of the woods and freedom and running and rutting, my responses made sense. My feelings made sense.

Shouldn’t have left Raine behind.

“I don’t ... I don’t feel right,” I admitted. “I’m supposed to be sitting in a library, reading a book, not ... ” I gestured helplessly at the mess behind me. “Not this.”

“Mmmmmmmmm,” Zheng made a sound like a sleepy tiger.

“Look, Zheng, why are you here now? How did you find us? Do you want to come back to the house? I-I-I want you to, I-”

Zheng shrugged, a rolling mountain. “Guarding you.”

“ ... guarding me?”

“Mm. You’re easy to find now, shaman. Can smell you a hundred miles away. Doubt I’m the only one.”

“Oh, geeze, thanks.” I tried to laugh, to make a joke of this, but the

sound came out hollow.

“*Shaman*,” she breathed. “You did it.”

The way she said that word sent a shiver up my spine – reverence, fascination, nostalgia. She watched me with a burning intensity.

“ ... did ... did what?”

“You’re even more like her now.” She grinned, chuckled softly.

“You left your body. You’re fumbling, with what you found on your *asurin ayalal*. Stole fire from the gods, but now you don’t know what to do with it. That’s just like her too. Spent a month curled up by the fire, couldn’t wipe her own arse, feed herself, talk. Maybe you’re stronger.”

“Who are you talking about? Zheng?”

“You have to let yourself feel it, shaman. Embrace it, flesh and spirit both. Use it.” She nodded back toward the pub. “Use it on them. Wield it on your enemies, and never doubt it is right. The other way lies madness, you monkeys are so fragile.”

“Like- I’m sorry, Zheng, I’m like who?”

Her grin died slowly. The fire went out of her eyes, replaced with a fleeting melancholy.

“Maybe you are her,” Zheng rumbled. “Maybe you humans get reborn. Maybe the joke is on me.”

“I’m not ... I’m me. Zheng, I’m Heather. I’m not anybody else. Are you talking about somebody you used to know?”

The giant zombie let out a huge sigh. “I know, shaman.”

I had the terrible sense the moment was slipping through my fingers, that Zheng was withdrawing again. She’d slip back into the wood and I’d never find her a second time if she didn’t want to be found. I couldn’t bear to lose this clarity of mind and body. Standing with Zheng on the edge of the wild felt right, in the same way that moving my body felt right, in the same way that skinship with Raine felt right.

Zheng broke back into a grin, her melancholy washed away. She glanced past my shoulder. “You monkeys are all too alike. Can’t tell the difference half the time.”

“Zheng don’t- don’t go.”

A cocked eyebrow. “Don’t?”

“What if I-” I glanced at the woods behind her, felt a burning gut-sick need, half human and half abyssal. I wanted her to pick me up and carry me off. It was mad, mad. I swallowed, mouth dry, hands shaking. “If I-”

“If you leave these monkeys behind, run off with me to have sex in the woods?” she purred.

I blushed like a tomato. With frozen muscles, my heart pounding, I managed to squeak “Not ... necessarily what I meant, but ... ”

“You’re committed, shaman,” Zheng rumbled.

She raised a hand and pointed past me with one finger. I followed it, and saw Raine was halfway across the field, walking toward us.

I turned back to Zheng, paralysed now. Nothing could make me leave Raine, that seemed absurd, but at the same time I needed something I couldn’t put into words, something the ghost of my abyssal self felt in Zheng’s presence, a safety, a comfort, a rightness. Zheng stared back at me, not grinning at all anymore.

“Be what you are now, shaman, or they’ll eat you alive. You have to eat them first.”

covenants without the sword

– 8.5

“Eat them first ... ?”

“Mmm,” Zheng rumbled. The sound reverberated, a tiger’s purr in her chest.

She was indescribably beautiful.

Even wrapped in shapeless, ratty old clothes, soaked in days of sweat and dirt, her hair greasy and stuck to her scalp, a wild woman eating sheep and ghosting across the moors, she was beautiful. Even with her sharp-edged face darkened in melancholy, rejecting me in a way I didn’t fully understand, she was beautiful. Seven feet of iron muscle and honeyed skin like cinnamon chocolate. A scent on the wind like hot spice and healthy sweat. The razor eyes of a true predator, teeth like knives, a taste for human flesh.

Zheng was so beautiful it hurt.

She was a walking wet dream from a fantasy I’d never known I wanted – but what I felt in that moment was more than physical desire. Dwarfed by her, beneath the grey clouds and the tree trunks on the edge of the wild, the memory of my abyssal form stirred with need and nostalgia, kinship and recognition.

Zheng was a thing from the abyss, too. Embodied in stolen human flesh, greater than the sum of her parts. Like me?

That didn’t excuse my lust.

“Oh, damn it all,” I huffed. “This is absurd.”

Zheng raised an eyebrow. Slow amusement worked its way back onto her face. I’d rather undercut her dramatic moment. “Shaman?”

“Love triangles are a stupid cliché,” I sighed. “I can’t believe we’re doing this, now, here, with all ... all that going on.” I gestured vaguely behind me, back toward the pub garden. The sensation of phantom limbs plagued the periphery of my awareness, as tentacles

and feelers ached to reach out and touch Zheng. "You are a problem, do you know that?"

Zheng grinned in full once more. "Am I?"

"Why won't you come back to the house? We need to sort this out, you and I, I think, but not right now, not here."

"Sort what out, shaman?"

I frowned up a storm at her. "You know what I'm feeling, you recognised it already. Don't make me say it."

"You're in heat."

"If you must put it like that." I felt myself blush, cheeks beet-red. "We can't just leave this unsaid and unfinished. Don't run off, please. Raine's already on her way, we can resolve this, it doesn't need to be complicated."

Zheng chuckled. "You monkeys think nothing is complicated."

"Zheng please, stay."

Her eyes flicked past me, over my shoulder.

"I would win," she murmured, a noise like the whisper of a distant storm.

"Winning and losing have nothing to do with it," I snapped, at the end of my patience, for both myself and this situation. "I- I don't necessarily want to run off into the woods and ... and ... do *things* with you, but I do want you to stay with me, please. Zheng? Please." I swallowed, blushed harder, and forced the question out before Raine reached us. "Do you even have a human sexuality?"

Zheng gave me an amused look, her eyes heavily lidded.

"Concentrate, shaman. You have foes at your back. Eat, then fuck."

"You are the last person I should be taking dietary advice from. Can't you help me with them?"

"Don't tempt me."

"Why not? Aren't you with me, Zheng? You said that before, you."

"I am, shaman," she growled. A tremor of fear and excitement passed through my chest and belly and down into my groin. "If I get too close, there will be a fight. I will win, and you will hate me."

Footsteps slapped against the muddy ground behind me. Raine jogged up the last few paces. She touched my back with one hand, and nodded to Zheng. "Hey there, big girl. What's up?"

"Eat them first, shaman," Zheng repeated. "Embrace what you are. Use what you brought back. Don't lose your mind."

And then she left.

Zheng jerked like a lightning bolt, from a standing start to a flowing sprint in the blink of an eye. She whirled on one heel, her back foot throwing up a clod of mud with the sheer power of her pivot. She raced for the woods, coat flapping out behind her like a fleeing suspect in some film noir sequence. Spirit life deeper in the woods scattered before her. She vaulted the fence, landed with the grace of a panther, and vanished between the trees. After three seconds, the woods swallowed even the sound of her footsteps

"... damn her! She can't just run off like that! Oh- I-" I huffed, exasperated. Raine linked our arms together and slipped her hand into mine.

"Looks like she can, and she did. Real flying visit. Sorry, Heather." Raine had the good grace to wince in apology. "I know I said I'd let you talk to her alone, but the way she lunged at you, I didn't like that at all."

"It's not your fault. She was leaving anyway," I snapped, half-hiding my face to conceal my blush. "We need to get back to the others."

"Heather? You alright?"

"I ... no, no, not really. No."

Embrace what I am? What had Zheng meant? I felt as if I had two bodies, my physical form and a yearning abyssal memory of oceanic grace. Both were true, both were real. How could I embrace a mutually exclusive paradox? I was not a thing of the abyss, I did not have tentacles and spines and barbed hooks. I could barely swim. I was in the wrong body, whichever principle I stuck to.

"She say something to upset you?" Raine asked. "Or just, you know, you sad she's gone again?"

I opened my mouth to lie, but instinct betrayed me – I glanced at Raine's eyes, and couldn't look away again. Wind teased the ends of her chestnut hair, brushed it across her forehead. Guilt and fear

fought in my chest, scared little Heather dragged me down and abyssal memory didn't understand. Raine waited, perfectly open and understanding. She always was.

I took the shot.

"I- I can't tell- oh, damn it, there's no good way to say this." I blushed scarlet, breath trapped in my throat. "I'm desperately attracted to Zheng, and I'm going to need your help with that feeling."

"Yeah, 'course you are." Raine laughed.

"... 'course I am?" I echoed, stunned.

Raine shrugged. "Sure. She saves you a couple of times, she's impressive, bold. Those *tits*. Hell, I would be. Nothing to be ashamed of, nothing odd about that. Best not bottle it up, you know?"

"... oh ... kay, then."

Raine's acceptance didn't make me feel any better. Where was the blazing jealousy, where was the wounded suggestion to follow Zheng if I wanted her so badly? Part of me craved punishment, wanted to be told off, told I was wrong. But Raine didn't think like that. Instead, the strange abyssal yearning for Zheng grew stronger, as if given permission. Part of me almost wanted to break for the woods now, try to find her.

Instead, I made myself look back down the length of the campsite field, past thistle and mud, to the back garden of the Bricklayer's Arms. The others – friend and foe alike – still watched us.

"Yeah," Raine sighed. "Gotta go wrap that up, I guess. Let's run them off and head home, yeah?"

"Zheng had advice about that too," I murmured.

"Yeah, culinary, by the sounds of it. When all you've got's a massive set of chompers, I guess all the world looks like meat."

"I feel like we're being trapped. We need a way out. I can't figure out what to do, I ..." A light went on inside me, a dim potential, the faintest shadow of what Zheng might have meant. "... when all you've got's a massive set of chompers ..." I echoed.

Clarity, of a kind, came over me.

This would be a gamble. Evelyn would approve.

“Heeeeeeey.” Raine lit up with a grin. “Is that a cunning plan I see in your eyes? I love it when you get plans, Heather, it’s hot as hell.”

“Raine, you’re a genius and I love you,” I said, as I stared back at the pub garden. I clung to her arm for support.

“True, and true. I am just that awesome. What’s the plan, boss?”

“Eat them first. Help me walk back, please.”

= =

Our return was met by a chorus of curious stares, confused frowns, and inane questions which I did my best to ignore.

“What the bloody hell was that all about?” Michael Hopton asked, his arms crossed over his chest. “Who was that?”

“Dad, I told you already,” Twil tutted, then turned to me. “Why’d she scarper again? What happened?”

Yuleson preened and smiled at me, his hands clutching each other like hairless moles. “Is our digression quite concluded now, miss Morell? If you are ready, may we resume where we left off?”

“No luck, ey?” Nicole asked quietly. I shook my head at that one.

“Who was that, Heather, dear?” Christine Hopton asked.

“Nobody,” Praem intoned.

“Yeah, a big scary nobody who’ll rip your face off if you double-cross us,” Raine said. She moved to help me sit down, but I stayed standing, arm-in-arm with her for support.

“Heather?” Evelyn said.

She managed to cram an entire question into my name – ‘Heather, why did you let the giant rogue zombie run off again?’ I tried to ignore her too. For now.

I ignored Yuleson’s bleating, and Stack’s stare; hired muscle and hired mind, they didn’t matter. I tuned out Twil and the rest of her family, they weren’t my enemy. I attempted to ignore Evelyn turning to once again whack the rustling sports bag with the head of her walking stick. I made myself stand straight, raised my chin, disentangled myself from Raine and took a half-step away from her.

She understood, and let me go.

Easier than before, if only by a fraction. Scrawny little Heather, trying to radiate threat, holding back a hiccup as I stood tall.

Well, as tall as I could get.

I locked eyes with the only foe here who really mattered, past all the obfuscation and misdirection, past Yuleson's slimy words and the extra baggage of inviting a third party, past the element of surprise and anti-climax they'd sprung on us.

Julian met my gaze. Polite and reasonable, smartly dressed, with a question in the quirk of his eyebrows. Edward's apprentice.

What would Zheng do?

Well, she certainly wouldn't hiccup, which is what I did first. Once, then twice, as I swallowed my fear.

Zheng would probably pull out somebody's tongue or bite off their fingers. She wouldn't bluff. She'd apply an object lesson.

I offered Julian my hand.

"Miss Morell? What's this?"

"Shake," I said.

The others fell silent. Perhaps they sensed my intent, even those unaware of what I could do. Julian regarded my hand with an ironic twitch at the corners of his mouth.

"Stack's told us all about how you do what you do," he said. "What are you tryin' to prove?"

"You can shake my hand- hic-" I hiccuped again, clenched down hard on the shaking inside, on the fear. "Or I can have Raine hold you down first."

Julian raised his eyebrows. Stack went very still, though she'd been barely moving before; perhaps it was a shift in her breathing, a minute change in muscle tension. Abyssal instinct screamed to hiss at her, make her back away, but I held off with sheer force of will. I *am* hissing at these people, I told myself. Patience.

"Are you makin' a threat?" Julian asked.

"Yes. Yes, I do believe I am."

Julian's smile worsened, a full-on sighing smirk. "Go on then, give it a whirl. See how far you get."

I let out a shuddering breath, felt my knees going weak. Screaming abyssal demands and my own heady froth of fear mixed together into an awful cocktail. I wanted to plate myself over with armour, hiss at this horrible little man from a safe distance. I planted my feet, forced myself to stay put.

"You've misjudged your position, Julian," I said, and almost kept the shake out of my voice. "If that is even your real name. Your master has misjudged what he's dealing with. We laid a trap, you're correct about that, but the trap is not what Evelyn has summoned."

In the corner of my eye, I saw an evil little smile on Evelyn's face. She enjoyed this, in a manner I was incapable of.

"I'm the trap," I said.

"Oh, come now," Yuleson huffed. "Don't be so-"

"You're all within my range, sitting here. Technically I don't even have to touch you. I can define you, cut you out from reality, send you Outside. Yes, it will hurt, rather a lot. I'll be reduced to vomiting and bleeding and I might even pass out, that's always fun, yes. But I will do it. I will absolutely do it. I have-" My throat threatened to close up around the words. A sense of self-violation slid into my chest, but I slammed myself onto that spear as hard as I could, turned my secrets into a weapon. "I've been beyond reality, to the intercellular space between dimensions. I'm the adopted child of an alien God. And I will flay you, your master, and everything of his, down to atoms, to avert even a single bruise on any of my friends."

Silence.

To one side, I felt Twil wary and on edge, not sure which way to leap. Stack watched me, face a cold neutral. Over on the other table, the Hoptons seemed quite shocked. Evelyn smirked with dark satisfaction. Blushing, quivering, and painfully alone despite Raine at my side, I held myself as rigid as I could.

"We know you're blocked," Stack said, slow and calm.

"No, no I'm not bluffing," I said, pushed past the sudden drop of fear in my belly – how did she know that? "I'm blocked from going

Outside myself, but I can still send other things there. Also, thank you, for revealing you know that.”

“You’re welcome,” Stack replied.

“Yeah,” Raine said. “Which means if you don’t wanna play a game of death-tag, you need to listen to my girl here.” She pointed at me with both fingers and cracked a grin.

“You’re not here to negotiate a necessary peace deal.” I hiccuped loudly, swallowed. “You’re here to beg for your lives.”

Now *that*? That was a bluff.

Abyssal aggression and natural fear finally slid together as I spoke those words. Two ecosystems of thought, alien to each other, merged inside my psyche. Fundamental truth shuddered through me, akin to the moment a magic-eye picture resolves into clarity, and one feels so very silly that one did not see it before. The shaking, scared Heather who felt small and vulnerable, who still relied on the desperate logic of a terrified little girl separated from her sister – she clung hard to the abyssal animal I’d been, and the memory wrapped her in armour, hid her inside a forest of spines, flooded her blood with oxygen and her brain with oxytocin.

Zheng’s advice finally made sense. I embraced *me*.

The phantom limbs and awful bodily dysmorphia did not go away – nothing was ever so easy. But the aggression subsided, wrapped back into my sense of self, ready to be used. For the first time since I’d returned from the abyss, I felt almost whole.

Apparently, according to what Raine told me much later, the way I smiled was most off-putting for our enemies.

Looking a bit crazy is most effective after delivering a threat.

“Hell yeah,” Raine murmured.

Yuleson stood up, flapping his hands. “Miss Morell, I understand you are frustrated, we all are, but these threats aren’t going to achieve-”

“You know,” Raine said, easy and conversational. “I think you should shut up. Check yourself before you wreck yourself. My girl here ain’t playing around.”

“Evee was right,” I tutted at him. “You don’t even matter. You’re-

you're ... 'Tits on a fish'. You stay quiet and sit down, and if you don't, I shall ... I shall slap you."

"What?" Evelyn spluttered. Nicole burst out laughing.

"Oh shit yeah she's good at that," Twil said. "She'll slap your shit right up."

"Don't be so ridiculous," Yuleson huffed. "We're in public, that is the point of this meeting, no? No violence is going to happen here, not with a police officer present and a pub full of ordinary people behind us. Miss Morell, surely you can't see any sense in pursuing this strategy of bluff and-"

"Tch."

Time for the object lesson.

I hadn't used brainmath since my return from the abyss. The Eye's lessons lay at the base of my consciousness, the empty socket of a shattered tooth, full of pulped, tender flesh, bruised and strained by the journey beyond my body – but this was a simple equation, the familiar old equation to shunt matter Outside. I began, summoned up the first few figures of the necessary hyperdimensional mathematics.

Pain. Like peeling a blood clot out of a wound. Exposed bone. Raw nerves. Pain.

Pain, different to the usual, sharp, deep, panic-pain. I recoiled in shock, a split-second wince, and knew in an instant that this would not merely make me vomit or pass out. This species of pain would break me before I could complete even half the equation.

My object lesson was all for nought. All my threats, undermined. Not strong enough to carry out Zheng's advice, not savage enough to eat them first, held back by my weak human body and this prison of vulnerable flesh. Stack thought my brainmath was blocked, interdicted, that I was made safe by some unseen machination, but the truth was far worse: I was still healing.

I couldn't do it. They'd called my bluff.

In a fit of helpless pique, I reached out with my phantom limbs. Bodily illusions that existed only in my mind. If only I was strong, if only I could strangle these three, unleash on them the creature which memory told me I was meant to be.

And in that split-second, I saw what Zheng had *really* meant.

The tiniest piece of hyperdimensional mathematics would suffice, a single variable in the infinite weave of reality. From a zero to a one, from non-existence to being. I could take that much pain. At the speed of thought, it was done.

Mathematics tasted different – *taste* is the only human concept able to capture even a shade of the sensation. Bitter, gritty with bone fragments and impacted gravel in bruised tissue, the flexing of a muscle pitted with infected wounds. Use shook it out, made it bleed fresh, pumped white blood cells to flush out the open sores. Clean and strong and clear, a spike of pain passed in a wave, there and gone again.

Three tentacles of pneuma-somatic flesh sprouted from my flanks.

Visible only to myself – and to Praem, most likely – the ropes of spirit muscle passed straight through my clothes as if the fabric wasn't there, two on my left and one on my right. Pale, smooth, sleek, sunless deep-sea flesh, they strobed with rainbow bioluminescence. As wide as my wrist, each tapered to a delicate point, yet all were infinitely tough and infinitely dexterous.

As they arced along the very lines I'd imagined for them, I felt their roots anchored deep inside my torso, melded to my flesh with pneuma-somatic tendon and cartilage. Such a rush of power and speed and grace.

I shuddered with twinned disgust and euphoria, an ecstasy beyond words. If I'd been alone, I probably would have had an orgasm.

For a split-second, I was once again what I was meant to be. An abyssal thing of infinite and glorious possibility.

"- and bluster, you-" Yuleson blinked. "Miss Morell?"

I'm not certain, but I think I hissed at him.

With one tentacle, I flipped Yuleson's briefcase into his face. It burst open in a cloud of papers, sent him yelping and fumbling. With the second I delivered a hard shove to the centre of Stack's chest, tumbling her off the bench to sprawl on her backside. With the third I tried to slap Julian across the cheek hard enough to leave a welt, but in my inexperience I landed only a glancing blow. Still enough to leave him clutching his face and blinking at the unseen

attack.

So flushed with joy, I missed the way the tentacle seemed to slide off him.

Yuleson's papers fluttered down through the air as he tried to catch them. Stack jack-knifed herself to her feet, one hand inside her coat as Raine readied to draw as well, to protect me. The math students at the far end of pub garden were in the process of standing up, frowning at our commotion. One of them started to say something, hands cupped to his mouth. Nicole was laughing, saying something about how "we're doing poltergeists now, are we?"

Benjamin and Micheal Hopton were both on their feet, staring, lost, couldn't see what to react to. Amanda's dog – poor sweet Bernard the golden retriever – growled at me; without thinking I whipped a tentacle around, ready to knock his brains out. Amanda Hopton stared, wide-eyed in a silent scream, but the Hopton's bubble-servitor did not share its handler's paralysis. It started for me, a bulbous glugging mass writhing through the air. I raised a second tentacle to swat it to the ground.

The third of my tentacles reared back, as I entertained the notion of strangling Stack to death.

And then I crashed. Down and out.

Sudden exhaustion drowned me, as if I'd walked for days. Couldn't get any strength into my knees. My vision swam, the world span, and I reeled back. With my tentacles I made a grab for the edge of the table, but they were withering, greying, shrinking. They turned to ash and fell away to nothing.

An awful nerve-deep pain lanced into my sides where they'd been rooted. A gasp ripped up through my throat. I cried out.

I flailed, tried to catch myself with claws and spines and barbed flesh hooks I did not possess. Raine caught me instead.

"Woah, woah, Heather, hey, hey, I got you, I got you."

I gasped again, doubled over; another stab of pain in my sides, cold fire under my ribcage. Cold-sweat panic pain of bodily error, of fatal chemical factory malfunction. My body screamed that something soft and fleshy and vulnerable was broken.

"Mmmm- ahhh, ahh-" I made sharp little noises, trying to hold the

sensation back. It receded, barely, replaced by a dull throbbing ache like I'd been knifed in the sides.

"That's it, just breathe, just breathe, Heather. It's okay, be sick if you need to."

Far worse than the pain, the feeling of bodily wholeness and rightness ebbed away, left me shivering and small and flawed, rotting and ageing.

I choked on a sob. Such lost glory.

Turns out the creation and maintenance of pneuma-somatic flesh is a great strain upon a physical being. Who would have guessed? Whatever I'd done, I'd done it for the first time, and strained every muscle and sense involved. I could barely keep my eyes open.

"My briefcase!" Yuleson was flapping about. "My- there was- these are important papers, they're everywhere! Oh, my kindle's fallen in the mud. Oh no, oh dear, oh dear."

"Could burst-" I croaked, then forced myself upright, leaning into Raine for support. She steadied me, murmured soft encouragement, took the lion's share of my weight. "Could burst you the same way."

Yuleson boggled at me for a second. Finally, he shut his mouth.

Everyone was staring at me. Christine Hopton's brow was furrowed with motherly concern, while her husband had no idea what to make of what I'd just done. Bernard, Amanda's dog, growled softly in the back of his throat – at me. She soothed him, held him back. Benjamin stared in silence, no longer sullen.

"Fuckin' 'ell," Twil muttered.

"At least it was only a briefcase this time," Nicole said.

"Yes," Stack agreed. Nicole raised her empty pint glass in an ironic mock-toast.

"No," Praem intoned.

"How'd you do that?" Julian asked slowly. He rubbed at his jaw where I'd hit him, though his dark skin showed no bruise.

"Yeah," Micheal Hopton added. "What the hell just happened, what was that?"

“Uh, yeah,” Twil said. “Was that ... was that us?”

Stack asked the question too, though without words. She’d dialled back a notch from drawing whatever concealed weapon she carried.

“It was her,” Raine said with a laugh. “See? Told you, Heather’ll kick all your arses.”

Christine Hopton raised her hand and waved to the three concerned-looking students at the far end of the garden, still watching us with interest. “We’re fine, nothing to worry about!” she called. “Just a little sensitive stomach.”

“That was some kind of trick, somethin’ you set up in advance, right?” Julian continued softly.

“No,” Amanda Hopton answered for me as I started at Julian. “It was her. She grew ... shining limbs, beautiful and ... and ... I’m sorry, excuse me.” She put a hand to her chest, as if in pain. In the corner of my eye I noticed the bubble-servitor retreating again, back to its holding pattern. Praem watched it go.

If frowns could kill, Evelyn would have struck me dead at that moment. She watched me with half-outrage, half-worry. I nodded back at her and mouthed some nonsense platitude I don’t recall.

“Fascinating,” Julian said, chin in his hand. “Fascinating.”

His expression reminded me all too much of Evelyn; naked hunger.

“Yeah you keep being fascinated at a nice safe distance there mate,” Raine said. Julian raised both hands in a gesture of quick surrender.

“Hurts,” I croaked. “But I can do it again.” A lie, but a good one. “Next time I’ll pull your heads off.”

“Shlor-pop!” Raine made an illustrative sound. I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes. We didn’t need that, however gruesome.

“Which means you- you’re going to answer- do-” I struggled, woozy, exhaustion dragging at my limbs. I strangled a gasp as another wave of jagged pain lanced into my sides where my tentacles had been so briefly rooted.

“Is she alright? Heather dear?” Christine Hopton asked.

Evelyn clutched her walking stick and lurched out of her seat. With a glance thrown toward our enemies, she turned her back on them,

and leaned in close to Raine and I.

“Raine, we need to get Heather to a hospital.”

“What?” Raine hissed back. “Explain, quick.”

“No!” I blurted out. “This is our chance, we- we can- make demands-”

Evelyn’s eyes blazed at me, though she kept her voice low. “You think I don’t know what you just did to yourself? Me, of all people? That little stunt may have torn up your insides like a threshing machine.” She snapped back to Raine. “She might have internal bleeding, I don’t know. Hospital. Now.”

“Shit,” Twil hissed. She’d leaned in too, frowning at me in horror.

“I’m fine.” I croaked. “S’only ... only pain. M’not bleeding.”

Raine glanced quickly between Evelyn and I. “Heather, I won’t let you hurt yourself. I didn’t realise-”

“Please. S’only chance.” I struggled to keep my eyes open, to put on a brave face. The pain lingered, sharp and bone deep. I had to end this here, make these people admit defeat, back off from me and my friends and Lozzie, and there was only one path to that now. “Five minutes.”

“Fuck,” Evelyn hissed through her teeth. “Fuck you for making me do this. We end this here, then you take her to the hospital, Raine, whatever she says.”

“I will.” Raine nodded. She held me close, held me up. “Five minutes.”

Evelyn turned back to our mystified audience. “The terms of this meeting have changed,” Evelyn announced. “You answer our questions, quickly, and you do what we tell you to.”

Julian bowed his head and spread his hands in assent, but not once did his ironic smile slip. Yuleson huffed and sat back down clutching his briefcase, his hair in even greater tufty disarray than before.

“Unless you’re threatening violence, miss Saye, I shall have to discuss any agreed-upon action with my client, you-”

“Yes,” I croaked.

“Yes, do that,” Evelyn snapped.

“Toddle off back to Eddy-boy and let him know our demands,” Raine said. Gently, she tried to help me sit, but I shook my head and clung to her, knew that I’d struggle to stay conscious the moment I allowed myself to rest.

“You do know this merely delays an inevitable peace, yes?” Yuleson said. “This is why I never, ever like to work with teenagers, so bloody unreasonable.”

“We can work with this,” Julian said softly. “No worries, Harry. This is a mage’s matter now, I’ll take over.”

Harold Yuleson huffed a little sigh and wiggled his eyebrows to himself, looking off to the side.

“Hurry this up,” Evelyn snapped. “Five minutes and counting. If we don’t have what we want by then, I’ll open the trap.”

Julian ignored both Yuleson’s wounded theatrics and Evelyn’s threat, and instead glanced at Stack. “Amy, you’re not thinkin’ of bugging out, are you?”

Stack had not sat back down. Tension was locked around her flint-hard eyes and across her wiry shoulders. She watched me for a silent moment, trying to read or understand or judge. I stared back, too exhausted to care.

“Amy?” Julian repeated.

“The only reason she hasn’t killed us is because she can’t right now,” Stack replied.

“Mm,” I grunted at her.

“Miss Amanda Hopton,” she said. “How long were those tentacles?”

Amanda cleared her throat, had trouble meeting Stack’s cold gaze. “I don’t- I’m not- maybe six or seven feet, maybe more?”

“Longer,” I croaked, trying to give Stack a nasty smile to remember. “How did it feel?”

“Real.”

“Oh, do sit down,” Yuleson tutted.

“We’ve failed,” Stack said. “We’re done here.”

"You're being serious?" Julian turned to her, unimpressed. He spread one hand in an imperious shrug, another gesture that reminded me horribly of Alexander Lilburne. I should have broken Julian's neck with a tentacle while I'd been able to. "So much for your fearless reputation. This how you acted in the field? Ran away at the first sign of too many jihadis on the horizon? Sit down, Amy."

"I am paid to assess threats. This is too much of a threat."

"You're damn right we are," Raine grinned at her.

Julian's expression twitched in the most curious and uncomfortable way, as if an alien set of mannerisms was trying to push through from under his skin, the ghost of a craggy frown in the corners of his eyes. Then it passed, he controlled the tremor, and shrugged with another easy ironic smile. "We're still alive, aren't we?"

"Alexander negotiated with her," Stack continued softly. "Did his usual. He's dead. We're done here."

"And I say we're not." Julian slapped his palm against the table. "I'm overruling you. I want to hear their demands, I'm very curious."

Stack took a single deliberate step back and to the side.

"I'm out."

"Yeah, go on, gee-tee-eff-oh, bitch!" Twil snapped at her.

"You're what?" Julian frowned at her.

"I'm out," she repeated, but not to him – to me. "I'm gone."

"Well, you're certainly not taking the bloody car with you," Julian said. Raine snorted.

"I'll walk. I'm out."

"Wait," I croaked. "Wait. How did you know – how did you know I was blocked? From going Outside?"

Stack paused, considered a second, then nodded in that tiny, subtle way of hers. "Edward said."

"That's it?" Raine asked. "That's all you got?"

"Edward said."

"We're not responsible for your condition," Julian butted in. "Yes, mister Lilburne is aware of a wide-ranging change in the wall between here and the beyond. A sort of static effect, he called it, but we're not responsible. It was only a theory he had, that it might interfere with his niece's usual ability to ... make herself scarce."

"You stop looking for her," I almost spat. "First condition."

"Condition?" Evelyn hissed at me.

"Condition. Demand. Then we can talk- talk return."

"Oh, yes, quite," Yuleson lit up, a bloodhound back on the scent of a deal. "On the issue of Lauren Lilburne, my client is open to total flexibility. As she is now past the age of majority, she is of course free to choose who to associate with, to chart the course of her own life, and so on. But, her *condition* does make her susceptible to suggestion, to bad influences, and so forth. As thus, he wishes to be allowed to meet with her at least once every-

"I catch you after her, ever, I send you Outside," I said. "No."

"We can relay that to Edward," said Julian, one hand out to forestall Yuleson's bleating. "He won't like it much. I understand his niece does have a very special place in his heart, but we can relay it."

"No more-" I had to stop, swallow, steady myself as Raine held me up. I managed to take some of my own weight on my feet. "No more kidnappings. No more children in cages."

"Excuse me?" Yuleson blinked his little ratty eyes, mouth open. "My- my client has never been involved in-"

"I know what I saw," I croaked, not at him but at Julian. "No more children in cages. You do that, I find you, all of you. Outside. Leave you in some hell-place, starve to death or get eaten. Not more kidnappings. Torture and kill every one of you," I slurred, inflamed by the memory. "No more missing homeless people, none of it. Find out you have- twenty years from now I'll find you and resurrect your corpse and send you Outside."

"A bold plan," Julian actually laughed. "Very bold."

"No more slaves. No more torture."

"You seriously think they'll keep that promise?" Evelyn muttered.

"Ahem. Ahem, yes, yes, quite," Yuleson struggled to regain his footing. "So, stipulations – no contact with Lauren Lilburne, and no more, shall we shall, criminal activity?"

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Nicole said quietly, with all the gravity of real conviction. The look she gave Julian could have curdled milk.

"Yes, I think that is quite a reasonable starting point, don't you, Julian?" Yuleson prattled on. "Miss Stack, please, do sit down. There's no need for all this drama. See? We are talking, we are building a compromise here. Miss Morell and I have managed to make ourselves understood at last, we are getting somewhere. Are you- ahem, Heather? Are you quite alright, there?"

"Twil told us what Heather saw," Michael Hopton put in. "But we weren't quite sure if we should believe it or not. Was this for real, this ... kidnapping business?" He waved a hand, lost for words. Didn't blame him.

"It was," Julian said, with a smile that made me sick. "Alexander went further than any sane sanction."

"That's not what Lozzie told us," Raine mused. "She said Eddy-boy was the fixer."

Julian shrugged with both hands. "We here to debate ethics, or make an agreement?"

"Quite, quite!" Yuleson said. "Recrimination will get us all nowhere fast, not at this stage of proceedings." He smiled, oily and smug once more. "I am certain that all three parties represented here have engaged in unsavoury activities of their own. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone and all that."

"Why Sharrowford?" Evelyn asked softly. "Why not pick up and go somewhere else?"

Julian sighed. "You know why, Saye. You know why."

"Humour me."

"Because Sharrowford's an important place. The walls are thin here. Certain kinds of magic just work better."

"It's hardly the only place like that."

"True, true." Julian allowed himself another ironic smile.

I wanted to wipe it off his face, felt the phantom limbs twitch in my mind with the desire to reach out and slap him again, break his teeth, rip his tongue out. Instead, that awful deep-rooted pain lanced into my sides again. I gasped and almost fell over, only Raine's support kept me on my feet. Evelyn stared at me, hissed 'hospital!' but I shook my head.

"Sharrowford is important to us," Julian was carrying on, "because of the material basis of Alexander's work. You know what I'm talkin' about, the sub-dimension, the pocket behind the city."

"That fucking castle," Twil grumbled.

"Yes, the inadvisable castle. A folly, certainly, but what it was built on is a treasure trove of knowledge from beyond. There's an entity down there, embedded like a comet after landfall."

"Saw it," I croaked.

"Quite. Did you now?" His eyes blazed at me with sudden curious intensity.

"And all those bloody things in the sky," Twil said. "The ... planets? Fucking awful shit."

"Its offspring, as far as we understand," Julian answered. "Our aims are simple, we wish to establish contact, a dialogue, a link with the mind of the poor thing trapped down there. We want to understand." He nodded slowly as he spoke, mostly to Evelyn. "We're not so different, you and I, Evelyn Saye. All we want to do is pursue our study of occult knowledge in peace."

Evelyn looked at him like something she'd found on the underside of her boot.

"Conditions first," I croaked.

"Quite," Evelyn hissed.

"Going to help us," I said. "Glasswick tower, Alexander's corpse-"

"We've been inside," Stack said, low and slow. "The body's gone. Missing."

"Amy," Julian snapped, his ironic facade collapsing completely.

"I said, I'm out." She stared at me, gave me an imperceptible nod again.

“Who took the corpse?” Evelyn demanded.

“I don’t know. I’m leaving now.”

“We’re not done here yet, Amy,” Julian said.

“Yes, yes we are.” Evelyn snapped. Her hand went to the sports bag on the chair. She didn’t need to open the zipper to spring the trap, but it made for a wonderful piece of theatre. All the Hoptons got to their feet. Christine stood where she was but the others backed up, unsure and unsteady. Yuleson yelped like a struck pig. Julian smiled and raised both hands.

“Alright, alright, I get the message,” he said.

“Who took the corpse?” I croaked.

“Heather, come on, time to go,” Raine whispered in my ear. I tried to ignore the awful throbbing pulse in my side. Maybe I was bleeding internally. I could barely bring myself to care. The image of Alexander Lilburne’s corpse up and walking around made me want to be sick.

“I can show you, if you really wanna know,” Julian said. He smiled.

And something inside me clicked with horrible cold precision. Why exactly did this man’s mannerisms remind me so much of Alexander? This man with different coloured skin, of a different age, with a different accent? He wasn’t even the right height, a good half-head shorter than Alexander had been.

Yuleson blinked in surprise. “Julian? This wasn’t in the plan, what are you doing? Julian.”

“You really think you get told everything?”

“I-I- Well! Well, I never.”

“Here, it’s quite simple,” Julian addressed Evelyn and I again. “But I’ll have to take somethin’ out of my pocket. Please, feel free to put a knife to my throat or whatever, if you think I’m about to do somethin’ nefarious.” He smirked now, as if he was still perfectly in control.

Evelyn glanced at me.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” I whispered.

“Heather?” Raine stiffened, I felt the tremor go up her body. “What do you mean?”

“Aha — but who is me?” Julian asked. “I think you have the wrong idea, miss Morell. May I?” He gestured at his pocket. Without waiting for permission, he pulled out a white handkerchief and spread it out on the tabletop, then placed his hand against it, fingers spread, palm down. “You see, the reason you think I might be Alexander – which is absurd, by the way, because ‘e’s dead, isn’t he? – is because I am based on Alexander.”

“Praem,” Evelyn snapped. She took a step back, eyes going wide.

“Not in public!” Nicole said, on her feet too now.

“Saye. Morell.” Julian nodded to both of us. “You’ve impressed me, though we – aha, well, *I*–”

And on that first person pronoun, Julian’s North London accent died; in its place reared something older, more familiar, a local accent from a time when England still had local accents. A Sharrowford accent. His voice itself died too, replaced with a much older tone, the grumbly, reedy rasp of a lifetime of cigarette smoke, fussy and particular and somehow coldly reptilian.

“I have a detailed understanding of your limits,” not-Julian continued, even as Praem jerked forward, as the doll-demon moved to dart around the table and stop him. “And you do not intimidate me. We talk as equals. I shall have to consider your conditions most carefully. Harry, you will find the real Julian asleep in his bed. Give him a pay rise, will you? That’s a good fellow.”

‘Julian’ seemed to melt suddenly, his flesh running and drooping like hot candle wax before any of us could react and grab him, before Praem could cross the few paces and bundle him to the ground. For one horrible moment his face appeared locked in a scream, then sloughed away completely.

For a split-second I saw the true face beneath. Considering his cowardice and caution, it could only have been the image of a distant pilot, not the real thing wrapped in a flesh-suit.

White, craggy, liver-spotted, with big owl-like eyes framed by bushy grey brows like rotting caterpillars. Thin, bloodless lips, his neck a wattle of loose flesh.

“Do say hello to my niece,” said Edward Lilburne. “I’ll be in touch.”

With a comically understated *pop* – echoed by a popping of air pressure in the ears of everyone present – ‘Julian’ vanished, and took Edward’s momentary image with him, snuffed out by the empty air.

He left behind a layer of peeled and bloody skin stuck to the handkerchief, as if he’d gripped frozen metal.

I coughed, almost gagged in shock; was it my imagination, or did I taste blood in the back of my throat?

“Fuck!” Twil said.

“Quite,” Evelyn hissed, jaw tight.

“ ... I ... but I ... I picked him up from his flat this morning,” Yuleson said, staring wide-eyed and slack-jawed at the place his ‘assistant’ had sat. “I don’t- oh, for pity’s- that man does not pay me enough money to act his fool!”

“Huh,” Stack said. “I was not aware he could do that.”

covenants without the sword

– 8.6

After three hours in the A&E department of Sharrowford General Hospital, the doctors couldn't find anything wrong with me.

They took my blood and blood pressure and had me pee in a cup. They poked and prodded and asked me the requisite 'does this hurt?' They ruled out internal bleeding and an x-ray ruled out broken bones. They hemmed and hawed and could not find a reason for the pain.

Except the bruises.

Three bruises, one for each tentacle anchor-point. Two on my left flank, above the outward crest of my hipbone, and one on the right side of my waist, just below the base of my ribcage. Dark mottled purple, almost black with damaged capillaries, not quite perfectly circular but close enough to provoke medical suspicion. Doctors asked questions I couldn't answer. The attending nurse gave me a funny look, saw right through my stumbling, stammering excuses as I sat half-naked, wincing and shivering on an examination bench, trying to keep the Fractal on my left forearm concealed as much as I could.

Raine, bless her quick thinking and boundless courage, pretended embarrassment as she spun a fanciful comedy of sexual errors, to explain both the bruises and my reticence. Her tall tale involved something called a 'doorframe harness', and obliquely hinted that I'd refused to stop, gripped by the heat of my own lust, and thus injured myself. Raine implied that she was bruised too, though far less painfully.

I hung my head and blushed tomato red – I didn't have to pretend – and our mummery appeared to mollify the medical staff. The nurse went from tutting suspicion to barely concealed amusement. They'd probably seen the aftermath of far worse sexual accidents than a pair of young lesbians doing some acrobatic experimentation.

The absurdity of our lie also took my mind off the pain, for a while.

No ordinary bruises, these. Each one felt like a knotted fist in my side. I wasn't exactly physically flexible at the best of times, but now I could barely bend or twist at all without a throb of pain. Even while sitting still, my oblique muscles would occasionally spasm and shudder, echoing a deeper quiver of abused flesh.

The first time the doctors left us alone for a few minutes, Raine asked me a question.

"Were they really tentacles, or was that just poetry?" She held my hand, cracked a grin, distracted me from the ache in my sides. "Am I in for a surprise next time we're in bed?"

"Ha-ha," I deadpanned. "Yes, they were, tentacles. Three, and- ah-ahhh!"

I winced and sucked air through my teeth as jagged spikes of pain lanced deep into my torso. To even think about the phantom limbs was to invite the pain of their thought-echo. On instinct I'd attempted to uncurl limbs I did not possess, to show them to Raine, to gesture with a tentacle-tip and place another in her hand. None of that happened though; pain blossomed anew.

Couldn't stop eating, either. Low blood-sugar made me shake and shiver. Raine brought me hospital vending machine food, and I must have inhaled over a thousand and a half calories before the shakes subsided. My tentacles, however short-lived, had burned a huge amount of energy.

"Nerve damage of some kind, perhaps," a kindly-looking young doctor told Raine and I from behind his square-rimmed glasses, once I was properly dressed again, hunched over and clutching myself as I waited for the painkillers to work.

"Perhaps?" Raine echoed.

"Yes. It's our best guess. I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid we'll have to refer you to a specialist, miss Morell. Here in Sharrowford there's a waiting list, but we could get you over to Manchester as early as next month, St Mary's or the Royal Infirmary perhaps."

"I'll be ... alright. I think." I felt terrible for wasting doctors' time – what I'd done to myself was beyond medical science. "I can wait. Thank you."

"But she's not in any danger?" Raine asked. "It can't get worse,

anything like that?”

“No danger at all, as far as we can tell, aside from the pain itself. The bruising looks bad and is going to hurt, but everything is where it should be. The bruises themselves should heal as normal. In some of these cases, especially for a young person, the pain works itself out on its own, or the painkillers sort of ‘reset’ the system, and it fades over time. Try to stay on them as much as possible, stick to the schedule the nurse wrote up for you, at least for two weeks. You have enough for two months, I think? Good, yes. If the bruises heal but the pain is still there, you could see your GP to get referred to another specialist, or we could go ahead and get you on that waiting list now, just in case.”

“I’ll be alright-”

“Yes,” Raine said. “Put her on the list, please. Just in case.”

The painkillers did work, though they took a while to kick in, to smother the discomfort and inflammation. The hospital discharged me with a big bottle of take-no-more-than-four-times-a-day and a smaller bottle of may-cause-addiction. Nothing more they could do. Raine drove us home, but not before we sat in the front of her car and shared a long, difficult hug.

“I’ll be alright”, I told her. I had the number of a physical therapist, a prescription for more drugs – and a yearning of which I could not let go.

“You will, Heather, yeah. Just bruises, hey?”

In my heart, that moment of glory had been worth all the pain in the world.

= =

“You are not a fish, Heather!”

“I know that, I know-”

“Or a squid, or an octopus, or a fucking orca. I can’t believe you did that to yourself. I told you to be careful, specifically! Did you listen? You’re as bad as Raine.”

“I know. Eevee, I’m sorry, I-”

“Don’t apologise to me,” she snapped. “You’re the one who could have minced her own organs.”

"I didn't though, I made it work. It worked, and it felt-"

I failed to smother a wince and a gasp. A strangled sound escaped my throat. The tentacles had felt wonderful, yes, a euphoria beyond words, but now the memory of them summoned only their painful echo in my flanks. My sides shuddered as I curled up against the burning bruises, the torn muscle, the sharp daggers slipping past the bulwark of painkillers in my bloodstream.

"Hey, hey, don't think about it," Raine purred, one hand on my back. "Focus on me, listen to my voice."

"You were incredibly lucky," Evelyn hissed. She finally shoved a chair out from the kitchen table and slumped down, one hand on her walking stick.

"It's not as if I grew tentacles for real," I struggled past the haze of painkillers and the throbbing in my sides. "They were pneumatic, spirit fl-"

"And I suppose your bruises aren't for real either?" Evelyn snapped. "They don't count. Good to know."

"You know, they don't look too bad really," Raine said, as she peered at my bruises. "I've had worse myself."

Raine had me sitting forward in one of the kitchen chairs, my tshirt and hoodie hiked up to expose my waist. She gently probed my quivering flanks with warm fingers, not on the bruises themselves, but on the unblemished flesh around them. She'd been careful to run her hands under hot water first. Despite everything, Raine's touch helped.

"Raine, this is not external blunt impact trauma," Evelyn all but spat. "She hasn't come away from a bar brawl with a black eye. She's modifying herself. How do you think Zheng got so tall? She didn't start out at seven feet, I'll guarantee you that." She waved a hand at Praem, standing by the door to the magical workshop, dressed in her maid uniform once more. "The only reason Praem is so stable is because she's made out of fucking *wood*. Are you made out of wood, Heather? Well? Are you?"

"Evee," Raine sighed. "Come off-"

"No I will not calm down! You're enabling her, Raine. How do you think you'll feel if she breaks herself, and you encouraged her to do

it? I told you to be careful, Heather. You're a human being, not a demon. You're more likely to break your own biochemistry, contract gangrene, screw up your hormone levels and give yourself a fucking brain aneurysm!" She swung her leg outward with a stomp, her prosthetic leg, and yanked her long skirt up in a fit of frustration, red in the face. She revealed the long stretch of naked black carbon fibre, and the rubber sheath which cradled the stump of her thigh, then gripped her own artificial knee. "You want this? You want something like this to happen to you?! Do you?!"

I blinked at her, shocked by the heat of her outrage. "E-Evee, I ... "

She glared at me, then broke off with a silent curse on her tongue, hurriedly covering her prosthetic again. "Yes, yes, none of us can imagine what happened to you. Of course." Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Evee, I'm sorry," I said, and felt a lump in my throat. "I'm sorry for making you worry about me."

Evelyn jerked a shrug, wouldn't look at me.

"Evee, uh," Twil started from the doorway. "If it's really that dangerous, then-"

"Oh, you can shut up as well," Evelyn grumbled. "Just what we need, advice from a person who thinks she's a dog. She's not a fish, and you're not a wolf."

Twil rolled her eyes and let out an unexpected soft grumble as she refused to rise to Evelyn's bait. "Why can't you just, you know, admit that you care?"

Evelyn gave her a capital-L look, genuine hurt behind her anger. "This *is* caring. If you can't deal with me- with that," Evelyn hastily corrected herself with a guilty glance at Raine and I, "then ... then ... you can- ... argh!" Evelyn waved a dismissive hand, out of words.

While Raine had driven me straight to the hospital, Evelyn and Praem had headed home, with Twil in distant, violent tow.

Evelyn and Twil were both still in the same clothes they'd worn to the meeting, with the exception of Twil's lime green coat and white-cream hoodie, now draped over the back of a kitchen chair. The coat had been slashed open in three places and both garments were

stained with blood – all Twil’s. Every now and then she flexed her right arm and rolled her shoulder, opened and closed the fingers of her right hand, working out the kinks left behind by her rapid healing. Not a mark remained on her bare skin now, but the real wound was deeper. Twil wore her heart on her sleeve.

“Hey, that’s not- that’s not what I meant,” Twil said, low and just as hurt. “Come on.”

They’d been alone together in the house for hours – save for Lozzie, asleep upstairs, and Kimberly, far too timid to get in their way. Whatever had happened between them in that time, the result was less than encouraging.

Raine settled my hoodie back down to hide my bruises again. “Evee,” she said softly. “How much danger is Heather really in?”

“I don’t know,” Evelyn said. “This isn’t exactly well-charted territory.”

“Nothing about this in any of your books?”

“Not that I know of. We could dig, maybe in the library.” Evelyn shrugged. “I doubt anybody has ever been stupid enough to try to grow tentacles before. Or they died before writing it down.”

“Then it’s an educated guess,” I said.

Evelyn’s eyes flashed at me again. “Are you so desperate to find an excuse to warp your own body?”

I swallowed, looked away, and with great difficulty, nodded.

“Heather?” Raine asked, one hand gently on my back again.

“I grew tentacles and it felt good.” I pulled a sad smile. “It felt *right*. And yes, for the record, I do realise how bonkers that sounds.”

“S’how it feels for me,” Twil put in, gingerly at first, then growing in confidence when Evelyn refrained from biting her head off.

“When I transform, I mean.”

“You don’t transform,” Evelyn drawled. “You put on a suit.”

“You know what I mean,” Twil grumbled on. “It feels right. Like ... I dunno ... like eating, or putting on a warm pair of socks from the dryer or something. Or like, popping a limb back into place?”

“Growing a limb which should be there in the first place,” I murmured.

“S’not so different to what I do, right?” Twil continued. “I mean, I had teething pains too, hurt the fuck out of myself the first few times.”

“Your grandfather probably knew what he was doing when he made you,” said Evelyn. “Considerably more than we do. And you’re still a walking disaster.”

“ ... oi, Eevee, come on.”

“You *act* like a canine half the time.” She waved a hand at me. “Even if Heather manages to stabilise what she’s doing, without pulling her own digestive system out through her mouth, what is that going to do to her, hmm? What’s the end result? Squid-woman?”

“It felt right,” I repeated. Evelyn shot a look at me again, and I sighed and shrugged. “I’m not going to deny that. It was disgusting and weird but ... right. I’m not going to be able to resist it again.”

“What was it like?” Raine asked, her tone one of genuine interest, not clinical investigation. “If you can describe it without thinking too hard.”

“Like ... like tentacles. Slim, I suppose. No suckers or anything, just smooth. They strobed with light, like a fish from the sea floor. They were beautiful and- ahh!” I closed my eyes, bit down through the throb in my flanks. Almost time for another dose of painkillers.

The only part of my physical self I’d ever thought of as beautiful, and it wasn’t even real flesh.

“Yeah.” Raine grinned. “I can picture that, you’re beautiful all over. But what was it *like*?”

“Oh. Um ... ” My heartstrings tugged with nostalgia for lost glory. I swallowed. “It just felt ... right. I didn’t even have to think about how to move them, how to use them. It was like they’d always been there. I could have a dozen, a hundred, and instinct would have scaled up, I’m certain. It was like living in a wheelchair, and suddenly getting up and running. Feels like I could have done anything with them, no matter how complex, how hard.”

“Kinky.”

Evelyn put her face in one hand. “You can’t do this, Heather, you’re going to kill yourself.”

“I know.” I said, and felt tears threatening in my eyes.

“Heather?” Raine said my name.

“I know, I know, I just ... it felt so good.” I sniffed, scrubbed at my eyes with the back of a wrist. “I want to feel that again, I ... I don’t think I’m strong enough to resist again. If the moment calls for it, I know I’ll do it. I promised Maisie I wouldn’t go back into the abyss, but I-I ... should have promised her I wouldn’t change myself.”

Raine got up and fetched a box of tissues, then helped me dry my eyes. I nodded my thanks. Evelyn looked away in second-hand embarrassment.

“Promise,” Praem intoned a moment later.

“Eh? I’m- I’m sorry?”

The doll-demon looked right at me, expressionless and blank. Why couldn’t I be more like her? Life as a piece of wood.

“She’s got the right idea,” Raine said with a grin. “Heather, make that promise to us then. Or to me, if it helps. Promise me you won’t hurt yourself.”

I averted my eyes, pulled a weak shrug. I couldn’t lie like that.

“Promise,” Praem intoned again.

“She takes promises serious, don’t she?” Twil mused, watching Praem. The doll-demon watched her back.

“We have to find a way to make it safe for you – isn’t that right, Eevee?” Raine asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. Evelyn shrugged wide, exasperated. “And we will. There’s bound to be something, maybe something like what Twil’s got, maybe we can talk to her family. Maybe something in Eevee’s books. Maybe Lozzie will know. Yeah? Heather? Hey, Heather, look at me.” She took my hands, and I did. “It’s gonna be okay, we’ll find a way. But for now – just for now – promise me you won’t do it again. In return, I’ll promise to do my best so you’re not in a situation where growing magic tentacles seems like a good plan, no matter how cool that sounds.” She cracked a grin. “And hey, they do sound kinda cool.”

I sniffed again, nodded. “You wouldn’t be able see them anyway.”

“Ya’ never know. Promise me, please?”

“Promise,” Praem repeated.

“Yeah,” Twil added. “Come on, don’t hurt yourself.”

“Self-harm is unhealthy,” Evelyn added, cleared her throat. Best I was going to get from her, under the circumstances.

With some difficulty, I nodded. Raine’s confidence helped, and her promise that we’d find a way. We did have plenty of avenues to explore – Twil’s family, books, Zheng, Lozzie, all with their own challenges. For a moment I glanced at the ceiling, thinking about Lozzie asleep upstairs.

“Promise?”

“Promise,” I whispered. “Sorry. You too, Evelyn. I’m sorry, I won’t ... I don’t want to hurt myself. I’ve told you off for it before, so it’s only fair. Thank you.”

Evelyn shrugged, clearly uncomfortable.

“You gotta admit though,” Raine said. “The look on Stack’s face was pretty funny, ey?”

“Yeah.” Twil smiled wide. “Served her right. Wham! Right on her arse. Seriously thought you’d gotten like, mind powers.”

“I do have mind powers,” I said with a sigh.

“Yeah yeah, but you know what I mean. Like, super spooky mind powers.”

“Super spooky,” Praem intoned from over by the doorway. Twil jumped, Raine laughed, and I made fleeting eye-contact with the doll-demon. For some reason, she didn’t seem amused.

Evelyn finally allowed herself to relax a fraction. A slim, satisfied smile crossed her face. “Yes, quite. They never saw that coming. I don’t approve of the danger of the method, Heather, but on that account, well done. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I managed, not comfortable with being the sudden centre of smug attention. “I only wish we hadn’t failed.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “Your methods won us something there, despite, well, everything else.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted. The immediate crisis of internal bleeding and phantom bruises gave way to the wider matter at hand.

“We gave better than we got, at least,” Raine said.

“Wait, what?” Twil asked. “But we didn’t get ‘im. Bastard got away.”

“Indeed,” said Evelyn. “Indeed he did. Why didn’t we just kill them all when we had a chance?”

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After Edward-as-Julian had vanished into thin air, our little peace conference broke up in total chaos.

The bulk of my attention had been occupied by the searing pain in my sides and the struggle to retain consciousness, as Raine had helped me hobble to her car, parked around the front of the pub. As such, I was only aware of a small portion of what happened at the time.

Michael Hopton was demanding answers from Yuleson, who was left all a-flutter like a startled rabbit in the wake of his master’s disappearance. He stammered along as best he could, a staccato background to the rising swell of everyone suddenly talking at once. Amanda still stared at me, spellbound by what she’d seen me do. Her dog watched me like I was some unknown animal. Evelyn snatched the white handkerchief Edward had used off the table, and gestured to Praem. Nicole was on her feet, saying something so very standard about how we should all calm down. Even the math students at the other end of the pub garden could tell a fight was brewing. One of them was on his way over, raising his voice.

Twil had stood up and growled at Stack.

“I’m out,” Stack repeated once more, blank faced as she took a step back.

“You better start running, bitch!” said Twil.

Raine already had me five paces away from the mounting confusion when Twil vaulted the table. Stack dodged by the skin of her teeth. My goodness, but she was fast. Twil hit the ground in a roll and came up growling.

In my pain-addled state I had a horrible vision of the two of them, werewolf and trained assassin, laying into each other in the middle of a pub garden. Evelyn seemed to have the same fear, eyes wide and paralysed for a split-second, an order to Praem frozen on her lips.

But Amy Stack was too professional for that. She turned on her heel and sprinted away, round the side of the pub and out into the street.

Twil was so surprised it took her several heartbeats before she gave chase.

A moment later all we knew of them was the sound of running footsteps receding into the warren of houses beyond.

“She’ll kill her!” Nicole said, moving to go after them.

“I wouldn’t bother, detective,” Evelyn grumbled. Everyone else had fallen quiet in surprise, the sudden explosion of violence more than enough to end the chaos. The trio of curious math students were looking rather shocked. One of them shrugged, and another went back to her drink. In the corner of my eye I noticed that Twil’s parents both had oddly pained expressions on their faces.

“Which way ‘round?” Benjamin asked. “‘Cos I know my cousin’ll win.”

“She- I- ... alright, fair point, I don’t know,” Nicole said.

A still-functioning part of my mind almost laughed; this was the second time Twil had chased Stack through Sharrowford, and I didn’t expect her to do any better than previously.

“Twil will tear her apart,” Michael Hopton sighed, no relish in his voice, scant pride in his daughter.

“Exactly,” Nicole said. “Can’t you ... ”

His look said it all. No, he could not stop her.

Yuleson managed at last to gather himself up, all his myriad papers stuffed back into his briefcase. The last thing I saw before Raine and I hobbled around the side of the pub was the little rat-like lawyer offering firm handshakes all around. He had few takers.

When we at last got home, Twil told us what we’d missed.

Exceeding all my estimations, shaming me for my lack of faith in my friend, she had caught Stack. In a back alleyway behind an Indian takeaway place, between Oldham Street and a row of shuttered light industrial plants, Stack had turned and fought.

“You’re kidding,” Raine had said. “With just a knife? Against you?”

“Yeah.” Twil cringed. From the unimpressed look on Evelyn’s face, I gathered Twil had been over this explanation once already, likely while stripping ruined and bloody clothing off her rapidly-healing arm.

Raine let out a low whistle, shaking her head. “That’s real skills.”

“Never even fuckin’ touched her,” Twil huffed.

Stack had turned and fought, against Twil gone half-wolf in the privacy of a dingy, dirty back alleyway. To hear Twil tell the tale, the fight had lasted only three or four seconds, and ended with Twil howling in transient pain, on her back in a splatter of her own blood. Stack had escaped, off into the city, untouched.

“That’s real knife skills,” Raine repeated. “Glad she quit on her boss so publicly, hey?”

“Yeah,” Twil grimaced. “No rematch.”

I almost didn’t believe it. I’d seen Twil fight zombies by pulling their heads off, wrench a steel chain apart with her bare hands, crack concrete with raw strength. If it wasn’t for Twil’s heartfelt earnest nature – and the blood all over her slashed-open clothes – I would have suspected her of lying, that she’d been caught in some clever trap too embarrassing to admit, or that she’d lost Stack entirely and invented her defeat to cover for failure.

All her strength and enthusiasm hadn’t meant so much, faced with trained skill.

By the time I’d gathered enough brainpower to ask the questions, Raine was helping me to the table to check on my bruises, and Evelyn had started shouting.

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Why didn’t we just kill them all, indeed?

“Because Edward Lilburne wasn’t really there,” I answered Evelyn’s question. “Because killing a nasty old lawyer wouldn’t have

achieved anything useful.”

The instrument of our deception lay in the middle of the kitchen table, a broken square, the fabric torn down the middle to disarm any further magic – the white handkerchief which Edward-as-Julian had produced from his suit pocket.

Upon closer inspection at home, Evelyn had discovered a magic circle stitched into the fabric in white-on-white. Obvious when one looked, but very hard to distinguish during a rushed moment in a pub garden. A faint hand-print remained inside the circle itself, as if the outer layer of Edward-as-Julian’s skin had been left behind in whatever process had allowed him to dismiss his remote mouthpiece.

Our own trap – the rabbit corpse stuffed in a sports bag – was safely contained in the basement. It would keep some weeks, apparently. A nuclear option, just in case.

“Would have made me feel better,” said Evelyn.

“Yeah.” Raine grinned. “Wish we could have stayed and given him a good kicking.”

“What?” Twil frowned. “The lawyer? Beat up an old man?”

“You seemed pretty into the idea of smacking him one.”

“Yeah, yeah, but like ... he didn’t really matter in the end, did he?”

Evelyn waved a dismissive hand. “What about Stack? We should have killed her, taken her off the board. Should have pulled the bloody trigger and have done with her. Not for want of trying, I suppose.”

“Yeah yeah, rub it in, why don’t you?” said Twil.

“She is off the board,” Raine said. “Far as we know.”

“Still should have gotten rid of her,” Evelyn grunted. “Can’t be certain.”

“World’s full of evil people, Eevee. We’re not responsible for all of them,” said Raine. From Evelyn’s pursed lips and silent nod, I got the impression this was a discussion they’d had before.

I let out a huge sigh, arms wrapped around myself, rubbing gingerly at my bruised sides. “We all screwed up.”

Deep down inside, past the exhaustion and the shadow of pain, I was glad we hadn't killed anybody – even Stack.

Intellectually I knew I was right; without Edward Lilburne present, there was no point in springing a trap. The head of the snake would slink off to hide and heal, to prepare for revenge. Leaving them alive but filled with doubt made far more sense. Peel Stack away from her employer. If Julian had been real, perhaps we could have worked on him too. The real Julian was out there, so perhaps we still could.

But that wasn't what I'd felt when I'd grown those beautiful, shining tentacles.

I'd been intoxicated by the power and beauty of them. By the ability to defend what mattered to me. If I'd lasted longer I would have strangled Stack to death, at the very least. Would I have beaten Amanda Hopton's dog for growling at me? Pulled apart the Hopton's bubble-servitor?

I'd have given in to that abyssal ruthlessness, and where would that end?

Maisie needed rescuing, but she also needed me; it would not serve either of us if I turned into a monster.

"Heather, hey, we didn't screw up," Raine said. "Not like that."

"Zheng told me-" I started, swallowed, and came as close as I could to expressing what I really felt. "Zheng told me to eat them first, before they eat me. At first I thought she meant don't bluff, don't take the bait, just ... kill them. Embrace what you are, she said. Then I thought she meant the tentacles, maybe, but maybe I was wrong."

"Cryptic bullshit," Evelyn grunted. "Wonderfully clear advice, yes."

"Yeah, we can hardly take advice from that thing," said Twil.

"Look, at least we put in our demands," Raine said, cracking a smile and looking around at everyone. "We can't find the bastard, so that was the next best move. We made our point, loud and clear."

"And what exactly was our point?" Evelyn asked, a bite to her voice. "That we're too collectively stupid to see through such an obvious trick? That we're too cowardly to do what needed to be done?" She turned away, her gaze focused inward. "What the hell

do I do now?"

"Wait for his answer?" Twil suggested, and earned herself a glare from Evelyn.

"It's alright for you, isn't it?" said Evelyn. "You can run off back to your mummy and daddy-"

"Hey!" Twil bristled, but at the same time, her face fell. Evelyn stopped short, cleared her throat, and took a different course.

"Edward Lilburne will come back at us, I know he will. We've got something he wants." Evelyn pointed at the ceiling, and I knew she meant Lozzie. "Not to mention Sharrowford itself. No, we need something on him, we need to find the bastard and ..." Evelyn grit her teeth and got out of her chair, clacking her walking stick against the kitchen floor. She walked three paces with sudden purpose, then stopped and turned as if lost.

"We could put the squeeze on Yuleson," Raine suggested. "He's a figure of public record and all that, takes clients, not like he's hiding."

"Don't be an idiot," Evelyn hissed. "Even you know threatening a lawyer is an astoundingly bad idea. Even with magic; especially with magic. You want to get arrested?"

"Maybe we don't do it with magic," Raine said.

"Oh for pity's sake, you-"

I retreated into myself, closed my eyes, hugged my aching sides through the warmth and softness of my pink hoodie. Raine and Evelyn talked past each other, Twil made impotent suggestions, Praem stood like a statue but I imagined I could feel her slow thoughts. Outdoors, the sun was going down, letting the shadows creep over the garden and Tenny's cocoon in the tree. I imagined I could feel that too, a vast pneuma-somatic heartbeat. Maybe she would understand how I felt.

"Heather?"

We had too many issues to address to make ourselves safe – Edward Lilburne's next move and the problem of Glasswick tower, Lozzie's slow deterioration and our inability to get Outside, the Eye's squid-thing still languishing in Evelyn's workshop and the giant zombie running wild across the countryside. I was on a time limit, Maisie

was on a time limit, and I could barely make my own hard-won chosen family safe, or keep us on track.

The tentacles, the echo of the body I'd brought back from the abyss, it gave me strength. To defend me and mine? To make us secure so I could focus on my sister?

A poor justification, but tempting.

"Heather? Hey, earth to space cadet H? Come in, this is Sharrowford calling."

I ran my fingers over my own ribs, pressed as close to the bruises as I could stand. Winced. Pain, a source of clarity.

"Heather?"

"I'm listening," I lied, and opened my eyes to find the others all looking at me in various states of amusement and concern. The argument had faded without resolution. Evelyn looked like she'd been sucking a lemon.

"No you're not," Raine chuckled. She reached over and ruffled my hair. "But that's okay. You need some sleep."

"I need to find Zheng," I said.

"Yes, yes you bloody well do," Evelyn grumbled. "She might give us an edge, if you can control her."

I shook my head. Not what I'd meant, not at all. "I think she might know how to make it safe."

"Safe?" Evelyn frowned.

"Ahhhh," Raine let a smirk creep onto her face. "Not the only reason though, eh?"

"It was, um ... I just had a gut-feeling when I went to talk to her, it's hard to explain, but I think she might understand these things. Might know how to ... " I gestured at my sides, at the hidden bruises. "Maybe. Maybe then I could ... grow them for real, I-"

"For pity's sake," Evelyn hissed through her teeth. She turned and stomped off, almost limping, past Praem and into her workshop. She tried to bang the door behind her, but Twil crossed the room in a quick bound and caught it before it slammed shut.

“Evee?” She slipped in after Evelyn.

A torrent of muttered abuse flowed back into the kitchen – I didn’t hear full sentences, but I got the jist of it well enough.

“-not taking this seriously- -more concerned with turning herself into a fish- -going to fucking kill herself-”

I winced inside, wished I could curl up into a ball and vanish.

Evelyn was right; we’d solved nothing. I still couldn’t get Outside, and Lozzie continued to deteriorate. We couldn’t begin to enact the plan to save my sister, not if we couldn’t get to Carcosa to plunder it for knowledge, or ask Lozzie about her mysterious knight that had saved us from the Eye.

“She doesn’t mean half of that,” Raine said softly, stroking my hair. Sometimes I felt like she was the only thing keeping me here.

“Evee’d never admit it, but she’s scared of this. This Edward guy.”

“Are you?”

“What, scared?” Raine cracked a grin. “Nah. I think he’s gonna fold.”

“I have to find Zheng,” I repeated, and tried not to feel guilty.

I had to get myself in order if I was going to rescue my sister. Had to keep everyone together, remove distractions, carry out the plan. Had to rely on my friends? That’s what Maisie had said. Her advice still shone clear and plain.

Was Zheng a friend? Yes.

I had a problem, and a friend who could help. I chose, in that moment, to trust my sister’s advice.

Or at least that’s how I justified the desire.

“You wanna jump her bones?” Raine asked. I frowned at her, a blush in my cheeks.

“It’s not- not like that. N-not entirely, anyway ... oh.” I let out a huge breath. “You’re joking. A joke. Right, yes.”

“Not entirely,” Raine said, but her voice told the opposite. “Tell me how she made you feel.”

The way Raine slipped the question in, right after making me

almost laugh past the pain in my sides, was nothing short of professional grace. No guile, no trick, just open curiosity. If she'd cornered me in our bedroom and said 'we need to talk', or 'can I ask about Zheng', or suchlike, I would have frozen up inside, tried to evade the guilt and her scrutiny together. Instead, she found the one way to unlock the truth.

"The ... the me I brought back from the abyss, I felt *right* to be near her," I said. "Like a kindred spirit, one of my own, a person like me. Which makes no sense, because obviously we're nothing alike. Not even the same species." I sighed heavily. "Raine, I don't think I'm human anymore. Not really."

"Who cares about that?"

"Who ... Raine, excuse me?"

"Who cares if you're human? You're still you. Heather Morell, Time Lord."

I laughed ever so slightly, then winced and let out a 'mmm!' as a spike of pain travelled up my sides. Raine rubbed the back of my neck, trying to distract me. "Thank you," I said. "I think."

"So what's the plan with Zheng? You wanna organise a threesome?"

"*Raine*," I spluttered.

"Hey, had to ask," she said, and couldn't hold back a grin.

"I'm-" I glanced over at the door to Evelyn's magical workshop. Soft murmurs came from within, Evelyn and Twil still talking. I lowered my voice, mortified by the subject matter. "I'm not going to cheat on you, Raine. I couldn't do that to you. Never."

"Cheating doesn't come into it. You need what you need, can't help that."

I blinked at her, didn't understand – didn't want to understand.

"Raine? What does that mean?"

"Means I don't blame you. Means I'm not scared you're going to be unfaithful, Heather. That's not who you are, I know that."

"Oh. Um, fair enough, I suppose. Thank you. The same goes for you."

"So, what's the plan with Zheng?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Find her, convince her to come back to the house? Talk to her about ... why I felt like that around her? Yes, just unpick the emotions of a centuries-old demon living in the body of a Greek goddess. So simple. Oh, blast it all, I sound like Evelyn."

"Gotta find her first," Raine mused.

"Exactly, and how do we do that?"

"Lay out the right sort of bait."

"Such as?"

"You, maybe." She winked. "Let me think on this overnight, Heather. Let me try to get into Zheng's head."

Perhaps tracking live game across the countryside was indeed more Raine's speciality than mine.

nostalgia for infinity – 9.1

My promise barely outlasted the day.

That night, the night which followed the meeting and our trip to the hospital, Raine and I slept especially close.

We usually did, ever since the very first time we'd slept together, tangled up in each other's arms and scent and body heat beneath the bedsheets. I'd had precious little opportunity for skinship over my decade-long purgatory between Maisie and Raine, but these days it all came out. Often we spooned – with Raine always the big spoon – or I'd snuggle up against her side and she'd put an arm around me. In the night we'd shift, semi-conscious, sometimes part and rejoin. Often we'd awaken together for a while before returning to sleep.

Even moreso since my return from the abyss, and the insatiable physical needs I'd brought back with me.

But after the day we'd had, and the strain placed on my body by the seconds-brief demands of my pneuma-somatic tentacles, sex was the last thing on my mind. Raine tucked herself in behind me, gentle and slow, careful to avoid pressure on my bruises. She nuzzled the top of my head, but I'd already slipped through the wall of sleep.

I didn't stay there for long.

A few hours later I struggled up from the depths to find myself adrift in the dead of night. Sore and cold even in Raine's arms, my flanks throbbing and burning, the painkillers worn off, an exhaustion headache churning in the cavity behind my eyes where my brain should be. Try as I might, sleep would not return. I lay awake and listened first to Raine's breathing, then the noises beyond our bubble of warmth.

A chorus of nocturnal sounds crept through the building, as they do in any house as old and as badly maintained as number 12 Barnslow Drive. Snatches of mournful wind whistled under loose roof tiles, aged beams creaked inside the walls as they contracted from the night's cold; the boiler gurgled softly to itself in the basement, and copper pipes carried the almost imperceptible hiss

and glug of hot water to the iron radiators in every room.

Unspeakable need tortured me, tempted me with an opportunity for furtive fulfilment.

I wriggled free from Raine's arms – then held my breath as she murmured and turned over in bed, but she didn't wake.

On silent feet, I cracked open our bedroom door, and padded out into the dark corridor.

The darkness in this beautiful old house is never quite total, unless one cares to venture down into the shallow basement. Only real blackout curtains can hold back Sharrowford's distant light pollution, not to mention the closer glow of the streetlights along the pavement, no matter that two of them within sight of the house had been burnt out for weeks. Diffuse orange seeped around the edges of the windows, provided just enough light for me to shuffle my way to the bathroom.

Just enough light as my eyes adjusted, to outline the doors in the upstairs hallway.

And the dark misshapen thing which lurked there.

A white oval turned to face me.

In the split-second before I recognised Praem – the wide skirt of her maid uniform had complicated her human outline in the dark – a hiss rose in my throat. I almost jumped out of my skin. Phantom tentacles and spines reacted in panicked defence, triggered muscle spasms in my sides, and a gasp of pain cut off the hiss. I winced and curled up, clutching at my flanks, gripping at myself, trying to hold still my own quivering, abused muscles.

"Ahhhhh, ahhh," I hissed through my teeth and crouched down, all but sat on the floor as the wave of pain passed through me.

Praem just watched.

"Praem- ahh," I winced. "That's the second time you've surprised me in the night! Why are you standing here in the dark?"

Dressed in her full maid uniform, Praem had seemed like some moth-winged black ghost caught in the shadows of the hallway. She stood outside Evelyn's bedroom door, as if on guard. I knew she didn't need sleep. At night she usually sat on one of the sofas in the

magical workshop, and over the last month I'd taken to giving her books. She did go through the physical motions of reading, most nights, but I had yet to extract a response from her about the content of anything she'd read.

What she didn't habitually do was lurk up here, spooking me on my way to the toilet.

Praem declined to answer. I eased myself up from the floor. "Is something wrong with Evee?"

"No," Praem intoned – at full volume. I winced and put a finger to my lips.

"Shhhhhh. Praem, everyone else is still sleeping."

"Not you," Praem said in her musical, sing-song voice, thankfully much quieter this time. My spine still itched at the way her lilting words might carry through the closed doors and old walls. Guilt crept into my chest.

"Yes, because I need to use the toilet," I whispered, an easy lie, one I'd told myself as I'd gotten up. "Praem, what are you doing standing around in the dark?"

Blank white eyes stared back at me.

I sighed. "Alright, have fun standing there, I suppose? You do know there's nothing stopping you from taking some blankets and having a lie down? I'm sure Evelyn won't mind. Sleep is relaxing. No? Well, um, I do need to use the bathroom, so ... "

As soon as I made to move, Praem stepped forward. She didn't quite block my way, nothing so obvious, but the intent was clear. Up close now, her perfectly smooth artificial skin looked like milk in the darkness.

" ... P-Praem?"

"Promised," she intoned.

My heart skipped a beat. Mouth went dry. How did she know what was I thinking about?

" ... I'm ... Praem, I'm not-"

"Promised," she repeated. "Heather, you promised you would not hurt yourself. You promised everyone. Don't break promises."

I blinked in surprise. Praem hadn't spoken such a complete statement since our strange encounter just before Christmas, in the kitchen of Evelyn's family estate.

She put me to shame. My cheeks burned with guilt and my sides burned with dull throbbing. I wanted to curl up and vanish.

"I'm not going to ... Praem, I'm not going to try to summon the tentacles again. I just ... I want to look at my bruises in the mirror. I want to ... I need to ... I don't know. I want to think about them. Picture them. It'll hurt a little, I guess, but not much and-"

"Promised you wouldn't hurt yourself," Praem repeated.

"Praem." I tried to huff, but couldn't get it out. I looked away, felt tears prickle in the corners of my eyes.

"Promised."

"Okay!" I hissed. "Okay, okay, I won't, I won't hurt myself. I just want to look. And I really do actually need to use the toilet as well. I'm ... I'm sorry, Praem."

Praem stepped back. Blushing with shame, I slipped past her, past her wide, rustling skirt, and into the bathroom.

For a long moment after I closed the door I pressed my back against the thin wood, in the dark, the closest I could attain to true peace, the abyss echoed in absence.

Then I flicked on the light. Removing my tshirt was made harder than usual by the stiff bruising in my sides, difficult to raise my arms above my head. I finally got free, the night air cold against my naked skin, and looked at myself in the mirror.

The Heather in the mirror examined me in return.

My skinny frame, my pale and pasty skin, an ape kept from the sun. My hair which I hadn't cut in months, now almost as long as when I'd been a child. The bold black lines of the Fractal inked on my left forearm, a secret tattoo hidden from the world. The bruises on my flanks, angry and inflamed.

Scrawny and weird, that's how I'd always thought of myself. Never had much pride in my body, never liked it much, never felt beautiful or even notable, no matter how much Raine told me so. As a teenager, looking in the mirror had hurt. Alienated from my own

body, but at the same time defined by it; seeing my own face reminded me of Maisie. I saw her, looking back.

For the first time in my life, something else crept in.

I had the most bizarre urge to photograph myself.

Not for sexual purposes, oh no, not at all. I wanted to capture the Fractal, record my bruises. A slightly mad, paradoxical part of me hoped that the bruises would leave scars or permanent discolouration. History, written on my body. I liked this, this physical proof that I was defined by something other than how I saw my body in relation to others. Scrawny and slight, reedy and flat – somehow that all mattered less, now.

I raised and flexed my right arm, thought about the way the tendons pulled and the muscles bunched. Tried to flex my side too, but stopped and winced.

Raine had been kind to describe the bruises as ‘not too bad’. Already they seemed darker than before, almost black, ringed with angry inflamed skin where the pneuma-somatic flesh had passed through my own.

My own – the tentacles had been my own as well.

With my breath held, ashamed and furtive and hoping Praem was not listening at the door, I thought about my tentacles. I didn’t try to summon them again. Such splitting of hairs served as my excuse – I wasn’t really doing it, not for real, no promise broken here.

Pain did not care about promises kept or broken.

I recalled the way the tentacles had felt, imagined them stroking the edge of the mirror, touching my own reflected image – and the anchor-points, deep inside the core muscles of my torso, seized and shuddered with searing pain, a throbbing bruise far deeper than the surface of my skin. I could almost visualise them, almost see them, but the pain was too much. I bit down hard on my lips, scrunched up my eyes as my breath shook. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I gave up.

“Ahhh ... ahhh, ow, ow,” I whispered to myself, crouching down and clutching at my sides, tears of stinging pain in my eyes. “Heather, you idiot. You idiot. Idiot. Why?”

Because I wanted it. Because an abyssal body made me strong.

Defend my friends. Rescue my sister. A mad part of me, a growing hybrid of abyssal creature and tribal ape, wanted to fight the Eye, pull it apart like a giant squid might fight a whale. Even in the rapture of my moment of glory, I knew that was simply impossible.

Shivering on the bathroom floor in secret, hurting myself in private, breaking my promises, spinning fantasies of impossible revenge. One of my lowest points in months.

Suddenly, the bathroom door handle rotated. The door cracked open.

"I'm- I'm still in here," I croaked and staggered to my feet. I grabbed my tshirt off the side of the bath and clutched it to my naked front. "I- oh."

Light spilt out into the upstairs hallway to reveal Praem supporting a sleep-addled, heavy-lidded, curious Lozzie. Her long wispy blonde hair hung down in a curtain of gold.

With obvious difficulty, blinking and bleary, Lozzie managed to focus her eyes on me. She broke into a smile. "Heatherrrrrrr."

"Lozzie? Did you wake up?" I asked, and scanned Praem's face for an explanation. Had Lozzie stumbled into the hallway after a random awakening, or had she somehow felt my pain? Or, more likely, had Praem decided to wake somebody up to stop me from hurting myself?

Before I could pull my tshirt back over my head, Praem stepped forward and deposited the sleepy warm Lozzie straight into my arms. She slumped against me in a rough hug, warm from sleep, soft in her borrowed clothes.

"Mmm-mmmmmm," Lozzie made a sleepy sound and rubbed her face into my shoulder. She weighed so little that I had almost no trouble holding her steady, even as Praem withdrew to the doorway again.

I sighed and gave Praem a look. "Emergency Lozzie, is it?"

No answer.

"Sleeeeeeep?" Lozzie murmured. "Come bed?"

"Maybe. Maybe, I- I should be in bed with Raine right now, I-"

Lozzie's nose twitched. She blinked several times and forced her

eyelids wider, but couldn't quite overcome her natural heavy-lidded look. She slid down me. For a moment I thought she was going to slump to the floor, but she stopped at my side, clinging to me for support, her breath warm on my chilly skin.

She stared at my exposed bruises. Tilted her head back and forth, her little elfin face like some sprite conjured from the night.

"L-Lozzie? I'm fine, I'm okay, they don't hurt too badly. Something happened earlier today, but I'm fine."

"Growing little helpers for your help," she mumbled, to herself or my side or just the empty air. "A helping hand, happy helping help hand ... hand."

"Lozzie?"

"Mmm?" She sniffed and blinked and jerked upright again like a Jack-in-the-box. The light of consciousness glowed in her eyes. For a moment, she was all there, excited and smiling. "You're growing new parts! Yay! Did you have trouble, was it easy?"

"... no, no it wasn't easy. Lozzie, how did you know what happened? You've been asleep the whole afternoon."

"Mm-mm." She wobbled her head, blinked heavily, and was gone again, her mind deficient after so long denied whatever sustenance she drew from Outside.

I gripped her shoulders. "Lozzie? Lozzie do you ... do you understand what happened to me? You know what's happening?"

Potentials raced through my exhausted mind. Lozzie knew how to make spirits – make things like Tenny, like the barely recalled monstrosity that had been revealed inside her Knight's suit of armour as it had defended us from the Eye. She could craft and shape pneuma-somatic flesh, though I'd had no chance to ask her how, not since she'd slipped into her semi-conscious state over the last couple of weeks.

Maybe, just maybe, she might know how to stabilise my tentacles.

That is, if she could hold onto a coherent train of thought for more than ten seconds.

"Gotta take all the rubbish and put it in the rubbish bin and take the bin out," she mumbled, sleep-talk nonsense.

“Lozzie? Lozzie, please concentrate. I need your help.”

Lozzie squinted and strained with effort, and let out a grumble of frustration. She blinked at me, her brain addled, trying so hard. From all our abortive conversations over the last couple of weeks, I knew she’d never get a full answer out. Her consciousness would drift away, like she’d been starved of oxygen.

“Mmmmmm-mmmm.” She slumped against me again, dragging at my shoulders with her feather-light body weight. “Heatherrrr.”

“Yes? Lozzie?”

“Take- take me home, home where ... where ... ”

“Home? Lozzie, what do you mean?” I tried to heft her up onto her own feet, the bruises in my sides complaining all the while, but she was like a sack of potatoes, all loose and bony.

A single choked sob escaped her lips. “I can’t live like this anymore.”

I froze. Glanced at Praem for help. The doll-demon’s expression showed nothing, so perhaps I only imagined my shock mirrored in her eyes.

“Lozzie?”

She sniffed, eyes unfocused. “I want to help, I do. Heather? Heather, I can’t *think*. Can’t. Can’t. Heather fix me. Fix please ... nnn-mmm ... ”

Eyes fluttering shut, she trailed off into a snore.

My heart felt fit to burst.

When Lozzie had saved me from the Eye, and then returned to reality, I’d been overjoyed to have her back. Since my own return from the abyss I’d been too preoccupied with myself, my phantom limbs and abyssal needs and the wrenching heart-pain of speaking with Maisie again. Hadn’t thought too closely about Lozzie’s slow deterioration.

We’d all treated her condition as almost cute. Cute sleepy Lozzie, flopping around the house. She ate, she kept herself clean, she wasn’t wasting away; I could cuddle up with her in the dark and feel right. A life-sized cuddle toy. A temporary replacement for my sister. Couldn’t get Outside, didn’t know how to break the

interdiction, so Lozzie's issue was something to solve for later, something to put off until tomorrow. We'd decided without discussion. We could fix it by killing her uncle – except that had failed.

Cute Lozzie, sleepy and bumbling around the house – trapped inside a brain that had stopped functioning.

I was a horrible friend.

“... Lozzie? Oh, Lozzie, we have to get you Outside,” I whispered, furious with myself for letting this continue for so long. I managed to lower her to the bathroom floor where we slumped together, her head lolling on my naked shoulder.

“Mmmm,” she made a sleepy noise.

“This is killing you, isn't it?” I felt hot tears threaten in the corners of my eyes.

She made another sleepy noise, child-like, a tiny mewl of sadness.

“There has to be a way.” I glanced down at the Fractal on the bare skin of my left forearm, then up at Praem, as I cast around for an idea. “There has to be some way of getting through to Outside. If only ...”

If only the lightest touch of hyperdimensional mathematics didn't feel like jamming my fingernails into a barely scabbed-over wound. If only I was smarter, stronger, if only my thoughts would move faster. If only I could define the dead, grasping hands that had fastened around my ankles when I'd tried to Slip, if only I could tear them apart.

If only there was somewhere else I could take Lozzie.

“Somewhere else,” I whispered out loud, as a light bulb went on inside my head. “Somewhere else.”

A different place, a substitute; a place in which Lozzie had once been confined, without access to the Outside, and had retained her faculties.

“Lozzie, you're going to be okay. I have an idea.”

“Idea,” Praem intoned. I nodded at her.

“Yes, an idea. One her own uncle gave me.” I hefted Lozzie's semi-

conscious form. She weighed so little, like a bunch of feathers, but my sides ached with the deep throb of abused flesh, and I was more than a touch worn out. I gestured at Praem with an elbow. "Praem, pick her up and carry her downstairs, please?"

Praem didn't move. I sensed the unspoken question and let out a little sigh.

"I can't sleep and my own body is torturing me. The least I can do is have a good think about a practical problem. I'm not going to do anything rash. In fact, I'm not going to do anything at all, certainly not without Raine or Evelyn awake and helping. I promise. I only want to look, and think it over. Then, maybe I can get some sleep."

Another heartbeat passed and I thought Praem wasn't going to help, but then she stepped forward and bent down to take Lozzie's weight in her arms, pulling her up to her feet in one effortless motion. Lozzie let out a sleepy sound and clung happily to Praem, burying her face in the doll-demon's chest.

I allowed myself a wince as I eased myself to my feet as well, then took Praem's elbow when she offered it in support.

"Thank you," I muttered, and set about the difficult process of manoeuvring my tshirt back over my head with my currently limited range of motion. Oddly, I didn't feel at all embarrassed in front of Praem. She didn't care if I was topless. I'd seen her naked before. More than naked, disembodied.

"Downstairs," Praem said once I was done.

Before I could second guess myself, I leaned over and gave Praem a hug, with Lozzie in the middle. It was most comfortable.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you, Praem. I ... needed that. Emergency Lozzie was a good call."

Praem did not respond. Both her hands were busy holding Lozzie up, and besides, no matter how human or well-developed she'd become, Praem wasn't exactly the touchy-feely type.

Which is why I was so surprised when she gently touched her head against mine, her smooth flat blonde hair against my bird's-nest mess. A laying together of human skull and illusion-wrapped wood. A surprised smile crept across my face.

"Praem?"

“Bonk,” she said. I pulled back and blinked.

“Bonk?” I echoed. “Praem, you-”

“Booooook,” Lozzie sleep-mumbled.

“Downstairs,” Praem repeated.

“Yes,” I sighed, and put aside the issue of Praem’s learnt affection for now. “Downstairs. First things first, I need more painkillers.”

= =

Despite all my determination, I was still no mage. I didn’t understand the first principles of the thing I was looking at.

Mostly it made my eyes water.

“Evelyn said she was going to rebuild this to take us to the library of Carcosa, with that book I brought back,” I said, as much to myself as to Praem. She already knew this. I was merely thinking out loud. “Which means it still functions. Will function.”

I glanced back over my shoulder, down the length of Evelyn’s magical workshop, at Lozzie curled up on the sofa and wrapped in a spare blanket, her heavy-lidded eyes open just a crack. Praem stood by the table, her hands folded demurely in front of her, right next to the open box of strawberries I’d fetched from the fridge. Behind and above them, Evelyn’s resident spider-servitor clung upside down to its corner of ceiling, stingers waving in the air like lazy fronds of seaweed, its mass of crystalline eyes looking nowhere in particular.

“Lozzie?” I said. “You completed this in the first place, do you remember that?”

“ ... mmmmm-mmmhmm.”

“Do you remember how? Could it take us back again? Back to the castle?”

“Mmm ... mmm?” Lozzie squinted one eye shut with the effort of thinking, then closed the other, then chased with a snore. I sighed and turned back to the gateway.

Evelyn’s door; Lozzie’s collaboration. The Sharrowford Cult’s inept trap. The doorway-portal-thing to the foggy emptiness behind the city, where they’d carved their citadel from the protective scab-shell

of a fallen, stranded Outsider. I cast my mind back to the moment I'd watched it open, the matter peeled away by an oily darkness, then replaced by a vision of a long hallway, on that night the still-enslaved Zheng had snatched me through by the head.

Afterward, Evelyn had deactivated the gateway, removed a specific portion of the massive ink-and-paint mandala.

Now it was just the outline of a doorway, scored into the paint and plaster of the wall.

The rest of the fan-shaped mandala was still intact, a complex interlocking mass of magic circles, esoteric symbols, bits of Latin and non-human language, with Lozzie's – or my, depending on how one thought about it – finger painted additions in rough streaks, left to dry where we'd made them. Looking too closely hurt my eyes, made me wince, stirred the echo of nausea in my belly.

In theory, the door could be opened once more by simply replacing the piece of the design that Evelyn had scrubbed away. She'd even photographed it and made a sketch, just in case.

In practice? The pockets and folded spaces the cult had dug were gone now, closed up, had slowly collapsed in on themselves after Alexander's death. Only the foggy sub-dimension itself remained, the wound in reality around the cult's captured god.

Evelyn had sent Praem back there, once, before the cult's hidden byways had vanished completely.

It had, in Evelyn's delightful metaphor, 'gone native'.

Not a place for human beings.

Perhaps we didn't have to stay there for long, especially if we could get straight into the castle. Just long enough to get Lozzie what she needed. Five, ten minutes?

I knew I was bargaining with myself, trying to find a way to help Lozzie, but I lacked any other distractions to occupy my mind.

"Question number one," I muttered, "is can we connect the doorway to the castle directly? Question number two, how dangerous is it there?"

Without answers to my questions, my eyes wandered down and to the left, down to the magic circle on the floor which still contained

the horror in clay.

The vessel in which Felicity had trapped the Eye's minion had all but dried up. It still looked like a bunch of rotten squid covered with an old sheet, but now it was a husk, barely able to move its many tentacles without the clay cracking, shedding fragments all over the floor.

"You're next on the list," I whispered, but of course it didn't respond.

How similar were my tentacles to the ones of this Outside creature? In fact, why tentacles at all? Was the uni-directional tube of muscle some kind of universal principle, more simple and more widespread than the humanoid arm?

A pang of dull pain throbbed in my sides. I clutched myself and tried to suppress a wince. Thinking about my tentacles was a bad idea, unless I wished to overwhelm the painkillers I'd downed ten minutes earlier.

I cast about for a distraction, but kept looking down at the squid-thing in the magic circle.

Was that where my metamorphosis would lead?

"Feed me a strawberry," Praem said. Her sing-song voice carried like a clear bell.

"Ah, alright, okay," I said, and privately wondered if Praem had recognised my distress. I went over to her and selected another strawberry from the open box on the table. Faint traces of juice from the last two still lingered on her pale lips. "Open wide."

Praem opened her mouth with a wet click and I pushed the third strawberry of the night onto her tongue, trying not to blush at the intimacy of the action. She ignored my faint discomfort, and chewed slowly.

"I still don't understand why you can't do this yourself," I told her.

Praem looked me in the eye – somehow I could tell, despite the lack of any pupil or iris in her milky-white, empty orbs – and continued to chew. I sighed.

"I mean, you're my equal," I said. "Evelyn's equal, too. I don't care if you're not human, you're still a person, whatever you were

before. You're no slave. You can take a strawberry, or anything else from the fridge, whenever you like."

Praem swallowed. Her lips parted again.

"I enjoy."

"But, enjoy what?" I mused. "The act of being served?"

"I like strawberries."

"That doesn't explain the ..." I waved a hand. "The ritual."

"Kiss my arse," Praem intoned, in perfect, sing-song voice. My jaw fell open.

"What." Had my ears deceived me? "Praem, I'm sorry? Excuse me?"

Praem declined to expand on her point. Perhaps my imagination was playing tricks on me, but I could have sworn I saw the slightest crinkle of a smile in the corners of her eyes. She hadn't smiled since that one time before Christmas, and I didn't particularly wish for her to repeat the performance.

"Well, alright then," I said. "I'll take that as 'please stop asking stupid questions.' I'm sorry for prying."

"No," Praem said. I frowned, increasingly lost.

At that moment we both heard the soft creak of footsteps making their way down the stairs. Not clunky enough to be Evelyn, and too light for Raine, there was only one person left in the house whose tread that might be. A handful of seconds later, the kitchen light guttered on, visible through the gap we'd left in the workshop doorway. A splashing from the sink, the sound of somebody fetching a glass of water.

Praem opened her mouth.

"Shhh," I hissed. "Don't make her jump."

Praem closed her mouth and looked at me. I shrugged, a little embarrassed, then turned and spoke up.

"Kimberly?"

A gasp, a clatter of mug dropped into the kitchen sink: mission failed. I'd startled the poor woman.

“Kim, it’s only me.” I crossed to the door and pushed it wider as Kimberly’s surprised face hove into view. “I thought you might have noticed the light was on, I’m sorry.”

“I-I, n-no, you made me jump. That’s all,” Kimberly stammered, blinking at me and then at Praem. She had one hand raised to her own chest in an unconsciously defensive posture.

“Kim? Kim it’s me, relax.”

“... I’m sorry.” She swallowed and made a visible effort to lower her hand. She seemed even more skittish and jumpy than usual.

“Are you alright? I’m sorry I surprised you.”

“Yes. Yes, sorry.”

Kimberly was dressed in her pajamas, and I must say she had a very exacting taste in nightwear – bottoms patterned with little round cartoon dragons, and a tshirt with a print of a fairytale castle on the front. Big fluffy socks protected her feet from the cold flagstones of the kitchen floor. She tucked her auburn hair behind one ear, looking self-conscious and trapped. Behind her, the kitchen windows stared out into Sharrowford’s light pollution, Tenny’s cocoon illuminated sidelong in faint orange hue. Around us the house seemed a warm, dark cocoon of its own.

I smiled and tried to crack a joke.

“The last time anybody surprised you in ... your ... pajamas ...” I trailed off. Stupid, stupid Heather, I tutted at myself. The last time anybody surprised Kimberly in her pajamas, yes, she had stabbed Twil in the hand. “I’m sorry, that’s really insensitive of me. I wasn’t thinking, I was trying to tell a joke to ... calm you down?”

“Oh. Oh, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it. I’m just ... I only came down to get a glass of water.” She tried a nervous smile too. “Can’t sleep.”

“Me neither, actually. Want to talk about it?”

She shrugged. “What’s to talk about?”

“I’m sorry?”

Kimberly swallowed and looked guilty. “I just ... what you all did today. Yesterday. I don’t want to risk getting tangled up with Edward Lilburne again. I don’t ever want to see that man again, any

of them. I'm scared, alright? I'm just scared. Of everything." She sighed heavily. "Story of my life."

"Ah. Yes, good point." I tried to formulate an apology, but couldn't summon the right words. Sorry that you're still involved? Sorry you have to be here?

"I was going to ... you know. Light up for a bit. N-not that I'm smoking in the house!" she hastened to add. "I've been blowing it out the window."

I smiled at that, despite myself. "Care to join us for a bit?"

Kimberly glanced over my shoulder, at Praem and the contents of the magical workshop, then noticed Lizzie on the sofa. A note of worry crept back into her voice. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing, actually."

"... " She stared at me, worrying more.

"Um, I mean, I'm just thinking over a problem." I frowned in sudden thought. "Actually, you know, you'd be the person to ask about something that just happened."

"About what?"

"Why might Praem tell me to kiss her arse?"

Kimberly blinked twice, paralysed. I think she was attempting to figure out if I was joking.

"I mean, you rebuilt her – put her back into her body," I said. "You know a little bit about these things, yes? I was feeding her a strawberry, and asked *why*."

I hurried to relate our bizarre exchange, glancing back at Praem, but the doll-demon silently declined the invitation to provide her side of the story. Kimberly chewed her bottom lip in thought. A visible relaxation passed over her shoulders.

"*Osculum infame*?" she said.

"Latin?"

Kimberly blinked at me as if surprised to find me there, then to my immense surprise, she blushed. "Um, I mean, I don't know why she can't eat strawberries herself. I'm ... " She swallowed. "Despite

what I ... *learned*, I'm no expert. Demons should be able to take what they want after they develop enough, the binding doesn't hold for long. It's enough to draw them here initially, that's all. But um ... what she said, it reminds me of *osculum infame*."

"Which is?"

Kimberly blushed harder. "'Shameful kiss.' Medieval Christian mythology stuff. They used to believe that in order to make a pact with Satan, or a demon, a witch would have to kiss the demon's ... um ... " She pointed awkwardly downward. "Rear end."

"Oh. Huh."

"I-I only know that because of reading books about Wicca and stuff." She fidgeted with her fingers.

I looked back at Praem. "Makes you wonder how much truth made it into those myths."

"Feed me a strawberry," Praem intoned.

"Another one?" I asked. "You're insatiable."

"Maybe that's her equivalent," said Kimberly.

"Maybe, yes," I agreed. "Do you want to feed her?"

"I- oh, that's okay, I-"

Praem twitched her head and looked right at Kimberly. "Feed me a strawberry."

"Looks like you need to kiss the devil's bum as well," I said, and couldn't help but smile. Kimberly blushed and hesitated, so I stepped back into the room and left the doorway as an open invitation. I crossed back to Praem and the box of strawberries, selected one and held it up toward Kimberly. "Have you ever done this before?"

Kimberly ventured into the room, casting a curious look at Lozzie asleep on the sofa. "No, um, no I haven't."

"You should try. It's almost relaxing."

"She's not a pet." Kimberly briefly met Praem's staring eyes. "She's a demon."

"A demon that likes getting fed strawberries. Also very friendly."

"She is kind of nice, I suppose." Kimberly sighed as my peer pressure broke through. With a touch of Evelyn-esque huffiness she accepted the strawberry and held it up, unsure where to put the thing. "What do I- oh."

Praem opened her mouth. Kimberly popped the strawberry inside, then withdrew her hand as if she might lose a finger. She, much like I had done my first time, flushed in the face as two fingertips brushed Praem's lips. Praem closed her mouth and focused on chewing.

"... that was ... weird."

"I know," I said with a sigh. "Sorry, I had to share it with somebody. Also helps keep my mind off the pain in my sides."

Kimberly gave me a look of sad sympathy. "Is it really bad?"

"It's tolerable. Just trying to take my mind off thinking about my body, that's why I'm down here."

"Do you ... do you want some cannabis? You don't have to smoke it, I could put some in a brownie or something for you. It really helps with pain. I got into it originally for period cramps, when I was a teenager."

"Thank you," I said. "Not yet, but I'll give it some thought."

"Think about it," Praem said. We both looked at her.

"So, Kim," I said at length. "I'm working on a problem here, and you might also be the person to ask about that too. Well, you or Sarika, I suppose."

"Sarika?" Kimberly's voice caught in her throat. "I-I had very little contact with her, I-"

"It's okay. It's not about her." I pointed at the mandala on the wall, at the inactive gateway. "It's about that, and Lizzie."

I took my time – and why not, neither of us could sleep – to outline my thoughts, my theory about Lizzie's condition, and the open questions about getting through the gate and back to the castle.

"You were involved with this stuff for a long time. Do you have any idea what-"

"I don't," Kimberly blurted out. "I was never involved with that"

part. You know what I was ... what I was doing, what I dealt with. Making ... ” She nodded at Praem instead of saying the words. “I don’t know how they made the portals, or the weird pocket dimensions, and I don’t want to know, I don’t want to think about it.”

“Nothing at all?” I asked, my heart falling.

She looked at the mural – and gave herself away. A second of hesitation before she shook her head, guilt in the bob of her throat and the shift of her eyes. Kimberly took a halting, half-step back.

In a moment I’m not exactly proud of, a stabbing pain lanced into my sides – my phantom limbs, the tentacles that weren’t, had tried to reach out and block Kimberly’s retreat, hold her here, grab her by wrists and ankles. A gasp ripped out of my throat and I curled up, squeezed my eyes shut with the sudden pain.

“Heather?!”

“I’m fine,” I hissed. “Fine. Just a- twinge.” I panted for breath, swallowed hard, tried not to think. Guilt filled my chest; I’d tried to stop her leaving. Brute instinct had taken over, triggered by the hint of a lie in her eyes. Thankfully, I’d had nothing to work with.

“If you say so,” Kimberly said, but she sounded far from certain.

“Flowsie,” a sleepy, bubbly voice floated from the sofa.

“Flowsieeeee.”

We both turned and looked at Lozzie, curled up there like a cute, sleepy little woodlouse. Even Praem turned to look. Lozzie had one eye half open, the lid twitching and fluttering.

“Flowsie,” she repeated. “I know you know that you know. You know. Know. Don’t be a liar, or you’ll get ... layered.”

I don’t know if it was the content of Lozzie’s words, or her ethereal tone of voice, but Kimberly looked terrified. As Lozzie’s eyelid finally slid shut, Kimberly turned to me, stunned with nervous guilt.

“I ... um ... I ... ” she stammered.

I straightened up from my pained crouch. “Why does she call you Flowsie?”

Kimberly all but rolled her eyes, a shudder of relief passing through her. I felt like a snake in the grass, biding my time. “I don’t know,

it's just a pet name. She had funny names for all the people at the castle. Worse ones for those she disliked."

"So she didn't dislike you?" I asked, and sprung my trap. "She trusted you, a little bit?"

Kimberly's face froze. She nodded slowly, then swallowed.

"Because, well," I carried on. "What she said-

"I do know some," Kimberly snapped. Her hands shook. "Just- just bits and pieces I picked up, things I overheard. Once I- I read a book I wasn't supposed to, notes partly by one mage, and partly by Alexander. I can't make those pocket spaces myself, you have to be ... well, not human, really, to do that. You have to speak to the thing in the pit, under the castle. I can't- I can't do that, please don't ask me to do that, Heather, please-"

"I won't, I won't. It's okay, Kim, I'm sorry, I thought you were holding back on me."

"I was." She sniffed and swallowed.

"But can you re-route the gateway?"

Kimberly stared at the mandala for a moment, then let out a shuddering sigh, and shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe. It would take time, and- I don't have the notes. I- I didn't want to tell Evelyn I knew any of this, she'll hate me more than she already does. She- you'll suspect me! I never did anything I haven't already told you all about, I swear-"

"I believe you. And Evee doesn't hate you. We'll explain to her together. Please, Kim, I need to help Lozzie. I need to take her back to the castle, if only for a few minutes. It might make her well again."

Kimberly swallowed. She closed her eyes and nodded. "Alright. I'll try."

"Will it be easier if we get Evelyn to help too?"

"... yes," such a small voice. "I suppose this is better than you bringing Sarika here."

"Indeed." I sighed too. "Kim, I can get you anything you need, if you want to start now."

“Now?”

“The sooner the better.”

She sighed, shoulders slumping. “Not as if I’ll be able to sleep now, anyway.”

“You want some coffee? Tea? I’ll get you some food.”

Kimberly shook her head. “No way I’m doing this without getting stoned first. I need a smoke.”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.2

Dawn took us unawares.

“Heather?”

Raine’s voice drifted down from the upstairs hallway, sleepy and heavy, muffled by the labyrinthine acoustics of the house. I snorted awake, blinked out of my doze on the sofa, confused for a second, and found the ex-drawing room aglow as faint sunrise peeked through the curtains and the kitchen windows.

“Heather?” Raine called again.

“Oh,” I croaked, mouth dry, and pulled my arm out from underneath Lozzie, filled with pins and needles. She made a sleepy sound and cuddled closer against my side.

“Shouldn’t you ... say something?” Kimberly asked, frozen in mid-motion in front of her work spread out across the table, her eyes bloodshot and ringed with dark circles. The upstairs floorboards creaked under Raine’s tread.

“Yes,” I hissed, heart in my throat and awkward guilt where my heart should be. “Yes, I should have gone back to bed. Tch.”

Raine’s feet hurried down the stairs, searching for the presence that should have been in bed next to her – or at least in the bathroom, or answered her by now. I struggled free from the blanket-nest I’d been sharing with Lozzie, pulled my hips from her insistent grasp, and almost fell over onto my face as the bruises in my sides seized up. I lashed out for a grip with tentacles that I didn’t have, winced and hissed through my teeth, but managed to stay vertical. Just.

“Heather? Heather, where are you?” Raine hurried through the front room, her voice tight with focus.

“In here!” I choked. “I’m fine.” I hopped up onto one foot, forcing myself to look calm and presentable. Kimberly had gone wide-eyed, ready to bolt, as if Raine might blame her for my absence. Raine appeared in the doorway seconds later. She stopped as soon as she laid eyes on me.

“Heather.” She let out a big sigh. “There you are.”

“Hey, hi. Morning. I’m sorry I wasn’t in bed, I should have woken up you or something.”

An uncharacteristic flicker of hesitation crossed Raine’s face – then she grinned and leaned against the door frame, at casual ease once more.

“You being up before me is a minor miracle,” she said. “Where’s my morning cuddle-bug?”

Still dressed in the black tank-top and shorts she’d worn to bed, flushed and warm from sleep and search, Raine radiated limitless confidence and easy physicality – especially when compared to my own numb-footed groggy stumbling. Weak sunlight glow slowly filled the kitchen behind her, like static fuzz laid across the textures of the world. In the liminal space between night and day, the house held its breath. Raine was a vision from a fantasy on the edge of sleep, half-dressed and hot to the touch, an invitation to stop thinking and come back to bed. Almost enough to smooth over her moment of incongruous hesitation.

“I’m really sorry you had to come look for me,” I blurted out.

“Hey, hey, Heather, it’s fine. Last place I expected to find you, tucked away down here, that’s all.” Raine’s jaw stretched in a huge yawn. She blinked her eyes to clear sleep-clogged vision. “Morning to you too, Kim. And same, Praem, looking sharp.” She sketched a little salute at the doll-demon. Kimberly nodded a jerky hello from her chair, too uncomfortable to turn back to her notes. She sensed it too; Raine was on alert.

“Good morning,” Praem intoned.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said. I took a step toward Raine, instinct calling me for a morning hug, but my heart told me something was wrong. “Neither could Kim, we decided to work on something, we ... Raine, you’re not okay with this. I can see that you’re not okay with this.”

Raine opened her mouth with a grin, and I knew what was coming – a clever bit of affectionate misdirection. But then she sighed. Her smile turned self-deprecating.

“You know me too well,” she said. “Just, you know, couldn’t find

you for a good couple of minutes. Spooked me out cos'a yesterday, that's all."

I tripped my way along the last few paces toward Raine, and fell against her. She pulled me into a hug and kissed the top of my head. Kimberly finally took the opening and turned away, focused on her notes and diagrams.

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise," I murmured into Raine's shoulder.

"Yeah."

After a minute of warm, post-sleep hug, Raine pulled back and cast a curious eye over the room – over Kimberly with her magical diagrams and slack, stoned expression, over Lozzie drowsing on the sofa, over Praem standing ram-rod straight as if supervising us.

"I would ask if you wanna come back to bed," Raine said slowly, as if experimenting with the idea. "But you lot seem busy. Like, interesting busy."

"We're doing a project," I said, then blushed. "I mean, Kimberly's doing the project. It was my idea, but I'm only helping."

Truth be told, for the last two hours I hadn't even been doing that. I was a bit of spare wheel until Evelyn woke up.

At first, in the wee hours of the morning, I'd provided moral support. Kimberly had begun by drawing up diagrams of the mural, tried to identify the pieces of it she understood, to pinpoint the part of the design which defined the output location of the gateway. I'd supplied her with regular infusions of coffee and a useful ear off which to bounce concepts I didn't understand. I'd nodded along as she'd explained, stoned and slow and thinking hard, muttering disconnected bits of Latin, testing how angles of magic circle might look when drawn on paper – papers that now covered fully half of the tabletop in a mass of rejections and possibilities.

One time, I'd made the mistake of asking how something worked – why *this* angle for the interior lines of *that* circle with *those* words of Latin?

"It's all relative," she'd said, her eyes bloodshot and heavy with the THC in her bloodstream. She seemed calmer when high, made all this easier to face.

“Relative to what?”

She gestured at the sketches, the walls, the room, us. “Everything. That’s how magic works. *Works*, that’s a joke, ha,” a sad non-laugh. She cast a sidelong glance at me, embarrassed by her tiny outburst.

“It’s okay, go on, please.”

“Mm, well ... one object or symbol or angle has no effect by itself. It’s just a thing in the world, normal. It’s only when you bring these things together, they work in relation to other angles or shapes. Stuff interacts in ways we can’t see or understand, at a level beyond physics. Sympathetic resonance.”

“Loopholes in reality,” I muttered.

“Yes.” She puffed out another humourless laugh. “Did you just make that up?”

“Those are Evelyn’s words, actually. She once described magic to me as like ‘exploiting God’s shoddy workmanship’.”

“I wish,” Kimberly said, hollow and sad. She stared down at a mess of squiggles on a sheet of paper. It all meant nothing to the untrained eye. “It’s nonsensical causation. Magic doesn’t make any sense, none of this should work. You have to ... fit your mind around it, and it always feels wrong. I hate it. I hate it so much.”

“Thank you, for doing this, for Lozzie.”

She sniffed, shrugged, and carried on.

After that, I did not ask again.

I did glean one detail of real meaning; Lozzie’s additions were completely beyond Kimberly’s understanding. In all the possible adjustments and replacements she sketched out, never did she change a single one of the dried lines of finger-smeared paint and ink. When Evelyn had removed a section of the mandala in order to deactivate the door, she had done the same, left the unexplained dream-additions untouched.

Eventually, in my uselessness, I’d been relegated to serving as Lozzie’s pillow. She’d nuzzled my side, flowed into my lap, and sleep had claimed me.

“It might not work,” I finished my explanation. “But I think it’s worth a try, if it helps Lozzie. I just want her to be well again.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?” said Raine.

She gave me a smile of beaming pride. I blushed, confused. “R-Raine? I’m barely doing anything, I told you, Kim’s doing all the work. Don’t heap praise on me.”

“L-look, please don’t,” Kimberly stammered out, even more embarrassed than I was. “I-I’m only doing what I can.”

“It’s cool, Kim.” Raine gave her a serious, curt nod. “Keep it up.”

Somehow, Raine knew exactly the right thing to say. Short and blunt worked on Kimberly in a way that effusive thanks or affectionate inclusion didn’t. She nodded several times and turned back to her papers, to sketching out one of her increasingly refined possibilities. Raine reached up and ran her fingers through my sleep-matted hair, and lowered her voice.

“What I mean, Heather, is that you had one hell of a day yesterday,” she murmured. “Thought you’d need to recover, sleep in. Was gonna get you breakfast in bed, run you a bath. But hey, here you are, right back at it. You’re right about Lizzie.” She pulled an almost regretful smile. “None of us were paying attention to her. My bad too, yeah?”

“Thank you, I think,” I sighed, and smothered a bubble of guilt low in my gut. I wouldn’t have done any of this if I hadn’t snuck out of bed to hurt myself in the bathroom, if I hadn’t broken my promise. I swallowed, and told myself I’d confess that to Raine later.

“Although, I don’t think Evelyn will agree with your positive assessment when she’s up and about. I’m going to have a lot of explaining to do. And convincing.”

“Ahh, she’ll be cool.” Raine grinned and ruffled my hair. “She’ll get it, she’ll understand. Don’t worry about it.”

“Raine,” I sighed.

“You’ll see.”

= =

Raine’s confidence was soon put to the test.

The sun spent an hour struggling up into a layer of thick grey cloud, orange sunrise glow quickly smothered by another overcast day of heavy leaden skies and sputtering rain. We’d taken a disorganised

break. Raine had whipped up breakfast, scrambled eggs on toast all round with more to come for Evelyn when she woke up. Raine was busy crunching her way through an apple, lounging on the sofa with Lozzie and myself, when Evelyn finally stirred.

Heavy footsteps stomped about upstairs. Floorboards creaked. We all looked up.

Kimberly went white in the face. "I should- should go wait in the ... in the kitchen?"

"Um, maybe," I said. My own lingering exhaustion was not a good state in which to face a potentially irate Evelyn. I stood up, out of Lozzie's grip again, and brushed a few stray crumbs from my lap. "We should brainstorm what to say. Oh, why didn't I think of this already?"

"It'll be fiiiiine," Raine said. "She's gonna be fine. It's not like we're not allowed in here. We're not naughty kids."

"We shouldn't be allowed in here," Kimberly muttered. "I-I can't stay here, I-"

"Stay," Praem intoned.

Kimberly jerked around to stare at her, transfixed by indecision as Evelyn's heavy tread clomped down the stairs. Raine leaned back on the sofa, projecting a complete lack of concern. To my surprise and delight, Lozzie transferred her sleepy affections to my girlfriend, slumping into Raine's lap. Raine stroked her hair, which triggered the tiniest, silliest twinge of jealousy I'd ever felt.

The clack of Evelyn's walking stick crossed the front room, then changed pitch against the flagstones in the kitchen. She appeared like a drifting ball of wind-blown fuzz, framed by the doorway in dressing gown and pajama bottoms, heavy-eyed and hunched, her hair all askew and flat at the back from sleep. She was muttering under her breath, something about chocolate and breakfast pop-tarts – which was odd, because I knew for a fact we didn't have any of those.

I cleared my throat. Evelyn turned, saw me through the workshop doorway, and stopped dead.

"Um, good morning, Evee."

"Come in and join us," Raine added. "We've been up for a bit

already. Plans are afoot.”

“Afoot,” Praem said.

I think Kimberly squeaked. Wasn’t sure. Might have been a floorboard.

Evelyn frowned as if she’d just discovered a whole herd of talking horses. Slowly, with incredulity written on every line of her face, she crossed the kitchen and stood in the doorway. Raine greeted her with a wave of half-eaten apple. I tried a smile, started to speak, then stopped. Kimberly visibly shrank, as if before a very angry school mistress. Praem stared. Lozzie let out a snore.

“What the bloody hell are you all doing in my workshop?”

“Working,” Praem intoned.

“I had an idea,” I said.

“Nothing, nothing,” Kimberly blurted out.

“It’s fine, Evee,” said Raine. “They’re all on their best behaviour-”

“Pffft,” Lozzie made a sound like a beached seal, trilling and puffing. Everyone stopped talking over each other and looked at her instead, but unfortunately she didn’t continue, only smacked her lips and dropped back into deeper sleep.

“*Heather?*” Evelyn said my name through gritted teeth.

“Yes, this was my idea,” I said quickly, drawing myself up. “I couldn’t sleep, and I had an idea. And I’m sorry for intruding on your private space. I wanted to start as soon as possible. I didn’t think about that when I came in here. I’m sorry.”

“You think that matters?” Evelyn asked – low and strangled. I’d never, ever heard her speak like that before. She stared at me, as if in disbelief. “You think that’s what matters here?”

“E-Evee?”

“Evelyn? Hey,” Raine said, scooting forward to get up. We exchanged a worried glance.

“I don’t believe this,” she hissed.

In the corners of Evelyn’s eyes, I saw tears.

“Evee, I- I’m sorry. I had an idea in the night, let me explain.”

And I did, as quickly and on point as I could, trying to keep the worried shake out of my voice. As I spoke, a change came over Evelyn. The dark horror of tearful disbelief left her, replaced by a reassuringly familiar angry Evelyn scowl. She scrubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, then scowled at me and at Raine, and especially at Praem. Only Lozzie escaped her silent wrath, a strange sympathy on her face as she glanced at the semi-comatose girl on the sofa.

As I trailed off toward an unpolished apology, she hunched her shoulders and transferred her ire to Kimberly.

“And you know how this works?” She jabbed the head of her walking stick toward the gateway mandala.

“ ... a ... a tiny ... tiny bit.”

“You know how this works,” Evelyn growled at her. “And you didn’t tell me.”

“She was afraid,” I said. “She’s helping us now.”

Evelyn sniffed the air and narrowed her eyes. “And you’re high as a fucking kite. I can smell it from here.”

“You can’t blame her for being a little bit spooked by you,” Raine put in. “You gotta admit, you’re pretty scary when you’re angry.” Raine got to her feet. As she stood, Lozzie clung on, dragged to her feet by Raine’s considerable strength. She put an arm around Lozzie to steady her.

“And you,” Evelyn ignored Raine and jabbed a finger at Praem. “You should have woken me up. The moment they started, you should have woken me up. What were you thinking?”

“More sleep for you,” Praem sing-songed at her mistress.

“Tch,” Evelyn tutted like an angry goat, face contorted with frustration. She scrubbed at her eyes again, wiped away the tears that hadn’t quite blossomed, and then turned on me. “You absolute idiot, Heather, you-”

“Evee, that’s not fair,” I said, feeling a lump grow in my throat.

“Yeah, hey, come on,” Raine said.

“- you can’t sleep, you have an idea, you come wake *me*.”

“ ... I ... I’m sorry?”

“I don’t care what kind of bloody awful day we’ve all had. I don’t care if I’m unconscious and have a demon in my head – you need help with magic, you come to me. God dammit, just ask me.” She turned to Kimberly, who flinched like a startled sheep. “And you, stop being so bloody afraid of everything. We’re both ... ” Evelyn ran out of steam suddenly, huffed, and composed herself with some difficulty.

She stomped right past us and over to the table to examine Kimberly’s work, leafing through the loose papers and half-completed magic circles, tossing several aside with unimpressed grunts, glancing up to compare others to the mural on the wall.

“This is wrong, this one is awful, try this one again.” She shoved a particular sheet to the other side. “I don’t know what the hell you think this one will achieve, it may as well send you to the bloody moon for all I know.”

“Sorry,” Kimberly squeaked. Evelyn looked at her and she flinched again, shrinking into herself, eyes bloodshot and scared.

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “Oh for pity’s sake. We’re both mages, even if you are far less experienced. Do you know how often I’ve actually been able to share any kind of practice with another mage? Hm? Take a guess. Wild guess. Go on.”

“ ... mm?” Kimberly managed a squeak, wide-eyed and bewildered.

“Zero. None. And now we’re both right here. We may as well work on it together. Sit down.” She jerked a nod at a chair. Kimberly hopped into it without question.

Evelyn looked around at us again, at my surprise and Raine’s barely concealed laughter and Praem’s po-faced observation.

“Well?” Evelyn demanded. “What are you waiting for? I smell eggs, and I haven’t had breakfast. Both of you are surplus to this task, go put some tea on. Hop to it.”

= =

“Evee, I just want to say sorry again. Just between me and you, where it matters. You’re right, I should have waited, or woken you

up. But I'm also really glad you think this is a good idea."

Evelyn studied me for a long moment, sighed, then glanced back into the magical workshop. Back in there, Kimberly had her head down, puzzling over the final piece. Evelyn lifted a mug to her lips and took a careful sip of the piping hot tea.

"I don't."

"... you don't?"

She studied me again, sighed and shrugged, her shoulders slumped.

Evelyn and I stood together in the kitchen, hours and hours after she'd first rattled down the stairs and had a good shout at everyone. Dark clouds glowered down at us through the kitchen windows and a cold wind blew through the trees in the distance. Evelyn had since replaced her pajamas and dressing gown with a long skirt and comfortable warm sweater, while I'd had a shower and gotten dressed, but all of us felt a touch chilly today, even me wrapped in my pink hoodie and two layers of tshirt.

Kimberly had taken a long nap in the late morning, but Raine and I both had class today, so we'd gone out. At first I'd toyed with the idea of skipping entirely, but getting out of the house had been good for me. A touch of normality injected into the whirlwind of implausible events that was my life. Sitting in a lecture hall for an hour and then waiting for Raine in the library had made me feel almost normal – though I'd had to dose up on painkillers first, and even then still endured a twitching in my sides, in my abused muscles, whenever I spotted an interesting library book I wanted to reach for.

We'd returned home after lunchtime to find Evelyn still hard at work, with Lizzie curled up on the sofa next to her. To our surprise, Evelyn and Kimberly had been thick as thieves, heads almost together as they pored over the details. The topic of their discussion was far beyond my understanding – the correct angles, the right esoteric words, which parts of the mural to attempt replacing. Kimberly still sounded mousy and hesitant, but at least Evelyn didn't snap at her.

"It's necessary," Evelyn said to me with a resigned smile. "Not all necessary things are good ideas."

"Ah. Necessary. Okay." I nodded.

Evelyn held my gaze for a lingering moment, then looked away. I struggled for the right words, any words. A odd barrier still lay between us.

“Evee,” I tried. “When you came downstairs this morning, and you saw us, you-”

“I blew up. I’m sorry.”

I blinked in surprise. She cleared her throat, put her tea down, picked it up again, and couldn’t meet my eyes.

“Well, that’s a rather transparent lie,” I said.

Evelyn frowned at me, then sighed. “How could you tell?”

“A straightforward apology, without preamble, from you? Of course I could tell.”

“Ah. Right.”

“Then ... what was that about? You looked like you were going to cry. Evee, I don’t want to make you cry. You’re ... I mean, you’re my closest friend.”

“Don’t flatter me. Raine is your closest friend.”

“Raine’s my *lover*. That’s different. At least, I’m pretty sure it is.”

“What about Lozzie?” she grunted.

“What about her?” My turn to sigh. “Evee, this is about you.”

Evelyn didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then she sucked on her teeth and shot me a look. “Thought I’d walked into a fucking assisted suicide.”

“ ... you ... I’m sorry?”

“Your tentacles. Thought you’d enlisted Kimberly, with Raine’s encouragement, to ... I don’t know, to mutilate yourself with inexpert knowledge.” She sighed, shrugged, and covered by sipping her tea.

“Oh. Oh, well, no.”

“Yes, obviously I was wrong. Jumped the gun.”

“I won’t lie and say I’m not going to try to find a way, but I won’t do that to myself. If I was going to do that, I’d get the best mage I

know. Wouldn't I?" I added a note of irony at the end, a joke. Evelyn caught it, and huffed a tiny laugh.

"One would hope. Look, I jumped to a conclusion. I'm ... sorry, about that part. Alright?"

"Apology accepted."

"I need to control my bloody anger better."

I smiled. "You said it, not me."

"Somebody needs to tell me off more often," she muttered.

"Could you let Twil do that?"

She waved that suggestion off. "Now's not the time."

"Speaking of Twil, have you called her?" I gestured at the magical workshop again. "She's going to come with us, yes?"

Evelyn drew herself up, much more comfortable with the logistics of a mad magical expedition than the intricacies of her own emotions. "Yes, and no."

"... yes and no?"

"Yes, I called her. And no, she's not coming with us. She's in school today. I don't want to completely fuck up her life. That would be a wonderful cherry on top of my personal shit sandwich, wouldn't it? Twil gets expelled for truancy, fails to get a university offer. My fault. Teaches her what happens if she spends too much time around the likes of me."

"Evee, you don't mean that."

Evelyn shrugged in irritation. "As if I could ever possibly be good for anyone."

"Well, this is just a suggestion," I ventured, putting on my best social worker voice. "But you could start by trying to refrain from insulting her or snapping at her."

Evelyn gave me a withering look, but I refused to wither. "You think I haven't tried that?" she asked. "This is just how I am. What? What does that look mean?"

"I do think you haven't tried it," I said. "Not really."

Evelyn let out a huge sigh and shook her head. I didn't press the issue further, not right now, in the middle of all this.

"Besides, I doubt we're going to get the gateway working today," she said eventually. "It doesn't make sense. Can't decipher what Lauren's additions actually do, and they're the anchor, the bit that makes it really work. They do something, that's for certain, but ... " she shrugged. "Maybe we wait until the weekend. Maybe Twil does come with us. Maybe I play nice and polite, mm?"

"I do hope so. Just talk to her, Evee."

"Yes, yes."

"So, how dangerous it is, really, over there in the ... " I cast about for the right name. "The fog?"

"Sounds about right."

"The fog, then. You sent Praem there one last time, before it closed off, didn't you?"

"Mmhmm, I did." Evelyn paused to sip her tea, then sucked on her teeth for a moment before she answered. "It's uncontained. You were unconscious on our way out, weren't you?"

"Mostly."

"Well then, you might not recall that Twil ripped up part of their fencing, whatever was keeping the presumed fauna at bay, further out in the fog. It's possible the place won't be quite as we remember it, whatever they were doing out there might be uncontrolled, or spent itself, or ... anything, really. You had the right idea, basically, which is what we're working on. Getting into the apex of the castle is our best bet at a safe place. Praem can go first, Raine can bring her handgun. Either we make a little safe pocket quickly, or we leave, also quickly."

I nodded. "I don't know how long Lozzie will need."

Evelyn shrugged. A noncommittal expression passed across her face, made it clear she didn't have much hope.

"... you don't think I'm right, do you?" I asked. "But you said this is necessary."

"Checking the ... urgh," Evelyn sighed. "Checking the 'fog dimension', is necessary. Curing Lauren's condition would be a nice

bonus.”

“I ... don’t follow?”

“If Edward Lilburne wants it, we should take a look first.”

“Ah.”

And suddenly it all made sense.

Evelyn frowned at me, her cheeks flushed. “Don’t look at me like that. I have to be cynical, that’s how I’ve survived this long. Don’t treat me like I’m heartless.”

“I wasn’t, I’m just ... ” I sighed. “Practical consideration trumps everything else? I don’t like thinking that way.”

“Practical considerations keep us alive.” Evelyn tapped her walking stick to emphasise her point. “For the record, I do hope it works, I do hope this helps Lauren – Lozzie, whatever. She is ... ” Evelyn lowered her voice and glanced into the magical workshop, to verify that Kimberly wasn’t listening. “Her state, her past family life, I ... I understand. A little. That’s all.” She cleared her throat awkwardly.

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Eeve. I’m sure she’ll appreciate that.”

Evelyn grunted and waved me off.

“You know, I think we should push it further,” Raine’s voice interrupted. She sauntered through the kitchen doorway and leaned on a chair, then reached over to ruffle my hair.

“Were you eavesdropping out there?” Evelyn grumbled.

“Never!” Raine grinned. “Only the last bit. We should push it further.”

“Which means?”

“We should take the place.”

“Take’ the place?” I echoed. “You mean the castle?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

Evelyn gave her a very unimpressed look. “With what fucking army? Don’t be absurd, Raine. What are you suggesting we do, *occupy territory*?”

Raine rolled her shoulders in an eloquent shrug, let her expression

do the talking. Evelyn frowned harder in deepening thought.

“Oh no,” I said. “You two aren’t serious? This is about Lozzie, for pity’s sake.”

“It is,” Evelyn murmured. “Yes, it is about Lozzie. But if Edward wants this so bad, we should probably keep it out of his hands. If we can’t find him and can’t counter him, perhaps we can deny him what he wants? Which means Lozzie, and the fog, both.”

“Now you’re thinking like a general.” Raine winked at her, and got an Evelyn glower in return.

Speak of the devil and she shall appear – with a rustle of dragging sheets and a patter of bare feet. A groggy-faced Lozzie stumbled out of the magical workshop and into the kitchen, where she stopped and stood still, swaying gently like a sapling in the breeze, her hair all a-waft about her, willow fronds of blonde.

“Ro-tay,” she mumbled.

“What? What’s she saying?” Evelyn asked, taking a step back from the sudden apparition.

“Nothing, I think. Most of what she says is sleep-talk. Lozzie? Are you awake?”

Lozzie nodded but closed her eyes, then bumbled toward us. Evelyn took another step back, but before she could do anything Lozzie walked right into her and put her head on Evelyn’s shoulder. Evelyn froze.

“That means she likes you,” Raine stage-whispered.

“It’s not funny!” Evelyn hissed. She looked intensely uncomfortable, like she’d been trapped by a large, affectionate dog. She turned her walking stick an awkward angle, stiff and stuck. “I can’t hold unbalanced weight as easily as you two, if she drops, I’ll drop with her.”

Grinning, shaking her head, Raine stepped forward and took Lozzie’s weight. She hefted the smaller girl like a sack of rice. Lozzie mumbled under her breath and clung to Raine, sleepy Koala bear style.

“Ro-tay ... tiiii,” Lozzie said out loud. “Ro-tay-tit.”

“ ... ‘rotate it’?” I echoed.

“Rotate what?” Raine asked Lozzie’s sleeping face, raised an eyebrow. “Rotate you?”

“Ah!” A eureka moment, an exclamation of discovery – from Kimberly.

“Kim?”

We all hurried over to the doorway of the magical workshop just in time to see Kimberly reach down and place two fingers on opposite corners of the piece of paper she’d been puzzling over. Mouth open in awe, eyes wide as saucers, she rotated it one hundred and eighty degrees.

“Kimberly?” Evelyn ventured, then frowned over at Lozzie.

“It works,” Kimberly said, but not to us. Her voice sounded so far away. “Rotate it in place.” Quickly, hands shaking, eyes bloodshot with cannabis and sleep deprivation, she pulled other sheets of paper from nearby and sketched in a frenzy, connecting disparate parts of the new design, pencil flying across the paper. Evelyn and Raine and I all shared a glance.

Suddenly, Kimberly stopped mid pencil-stroke, as if broken from a trance. A hysterical hiccup of laughter stole up her throat. She stared at her work, breathing unsteady.

“Could have finished it hours ago,” she muttered.

“Kim?” I said her name as gently as I could and edged forward into the room. Her head jerked up, a sleepwalker disturbed, one eye twitching.

“Rotate it. How did- how did she know that? She didn’t even look at this!” Kimberly’s voice rose to a shout, then she seemed to catch herself, and let out a long, shuddering breath. She pushed back from the table and put her face in her hands, moaning softly.

“Kim, are you-”

Before I could finish, Evelyn marched forward and around the side of the table. She glanced over Kimberly’s work, eyes moving quickly across the whorls and scribbles and conjoined circles, and – with obvious and hesitant effort, hovering once and then completing the motion with a suppressed grimace – she put her hand on Kimberly’s back.

“You’ve done well,” Evelyn said.

“I hate this. I hate this so much,” Kimberly whined into her hands.

“Then stop thinking about it. Praem.” Evelyn tossed her head in a unspoken order. Praem turned and marched out into the kitchen.

“It’ll work. It’ll work now.” Kimberly was muttering to herself, voice pitiful and small. “How did she *know*? It’s like she was in my head.”

“Stop thinking about it,” Evelyn repeated, hard and sharp.

With a lump in my throat and a churning in my guts, I slipped out of the room and went after Praem.

I think Raine must have said my name as I left, but I was too numb in that moment. Praem was busy pulling a thick bar of dark chocolate out of one of the cupboards, but I reached up and found another one as well, part of our special supply in case of moments like this. Praem turned to look at me, and my sudden crippling guilt projected justified accusation onto her blank expression.

“Just ... Praem, just let me take it to her. Please.”

I’d convinced Kimberly, to immerse herself in magic, to help Lozzie, for me – but Kimberly wanted out.

I knew that. I’d argued for it in the past. And still I’d convinced her to do this thing which was crushing her already fragile mental health.

Why? I searched myself but found no answer. Had I ignored that knowledge because of how much I cared about Lozzie? Or was it abyssal coldness, uncaring calculation? I couldn’t tell. I couldn’t tell which ‘me’ had made that decision. I couldn’t even find the distinction between the ape and the abyss anymore.

“Heather? Wooo?” Raine called.

“I’m fine,” I lied, because this wasn’t about me. I forced a smile onto my face with as much acting skill as I could muster – probably didn’t convince Raine – and walked back into the magical workshop before Praem could stop me.

“Kim, here, you should eat some chocolate,” I said, and tried to make amends.

Wasn't enough.

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An hour later, we opened the gate.

We carried out our little experiment with all due precaution, as if about to breach some ancient sarcophagus with no notion of what awful survival may emerge.

Praem did the honours, filled in the final sections of mandala under Evelyn's instruction, as we prepared. Raine dressed in jacket and boots, fetched her handgun and her knife, held the pistol in both hands, ready to raise and point it at the doorway. Evelyn found her coat and her strange, carved thighbone. Between us, we got Lozzie into outdoor clothes, draped a spare coat over her shoulders and helped wiggle her feet into her shoes.

Kimberly had long since retreated, first to the kitchen to put her head on the table, then to the utility room to roll herself another joint and blow the smoke out of the back door.

"Are you sure you don't want to watch?" I'd asked. "It's the fruit of your work, after all."

Kimberly had shaken her head, twitchy and jumpy. "No. No, thank you. I'm ... I'm done. I want to sleep."

"I'm sorry ... " I tried to call after her as she shuffled away, but my words emerged as a whisper, because I wasn't entirely certain if they were genuine. Part of me wanted to follow her, half to apologise, half to flee from my own growing self-disgust.

Instead I took more painkillers, washed them down with water, and tried to quell the unease roiling in my belly.

My body was mounting a rebellion. It did not care why we were going to the castle, nor about helping Lozzie. My nervous system remembered only terror, murder, and the unnatural disgust of the place to which we were about to return. Earlier, in the abstract, I'd felt okay about it, but now abyssal memory demanded armour plates and toxic flesh and protective spines. My flanks quivered and ached with phantom limbs, my skin crawled with biology I did not possess. I had to grip the kitchen counter-top and squeeze my eyes shut, fight the pain down until the pills did their job.

Evelyn and Kimberly were absolutely certain the gateway would

open into the fog-choked dimension behind Sharrowford, and ninety percent sure it would open into the castle – somewhere.

Aiming at a particular point was apparently much more difficult. According to Kimberly's limited comprehension – filtered through my uneducated interpretation of her words – the Cult had used simultaneous rituals here and in the fog as a sort of anchor between two points, allowing them to open several precise gateways. We didn't have that luxury. We had guesswork and an emergency firearm.

How the Cult had gotten over there in the first place, Kimberly had no idea.

Another question for Lozzie. I filed it away for now.

We all stood ready as Praem drew the final set of lines on the wall with a washable green marker. Evelyn leaned heavily on her walking stick with one hand, brow furrowed as she studied the doorway for the first flicker of motion. Raine watched too, alert and ready. I fetched Lozzie from the sofa, pulled her up without difficulty, featherlight weight on my arm. Her sheet of wispy blonde hair hung down in a messy wave in front of her face, so I swept it over her shoulder, loose hairs clinging to my hand like bits of cobweb.

"Out?" she mumbled.

"Yes, hopefully," I whispered back.

"Either it's safe, quickly, or we leave, *quickly*," Evelyn said to nobody in particular. "We are not getting stuck there again. This is not an expedition."

"Agreed," I said.

"Sure thing, boss," Raine added.

"All done," Praem intoned. Neat and precise, she stepped back three paces, capped the marker pen, and placed it on the table.

Raine opened her mouth to ask a question – perhaps a 'what happens now?' or 'how long does it take?' – but even her bravado and bluster faltered before the sensation that crept through all flesh.

The first time I'd witnessed the gateway open, I'd just been shocked awake from a sleepwalker's nightmare, a shared dream with Lozzie,

and was faced with a kidnapping attempt moments later. Hardly the right conditions to appreciate the terrible beauty of unnatural magics. This time I was wide awake, with full knowledge of what was about to happen, but it still sent a shiver down my spine and into my bowels.

On the edge of awareness, before any visible change, a distant window opened. Sounds beyond human hearing teased at our ears, made my eyes water.

The ambient temperature suddenly dropped. Not quite enough for a flash-freeze, but enough to mist our breath in the air. I hunched, huddled up tighter inside my coat and hoodie, and pulled Lozzie's borrowed coat closed around her front.

A ripple passed through the plaster inside the doorway's outline, as if solid had become water. Slow concentric ripples passed through the matter – the first ripple turned plaster to smooth, oily, featureless black. The second, an inch behind, produced an image as if seen through frosted glass.

The third brought clarity. Sharp, crystal-clear, unobstructed.

"Ding ding ding, what's behind door number one," Raine murmured. She stared into the gateway, pistol held low, every muscle taut and tense, coiled like a spring.

The view through the open door showed several feet of clear ground and terminated in a view of a blank stretch of wall – dead grey, rough and osseous, shot through with black veins and an ethereal memory of jade green. A curl of fog edged through the gateway and into the magical workshop.

My skin crawled and I broke out in cold sweat, automatic response. I clutched Lozzie closer.

"Heather," Evelyn hissed. She nodded behind me, at the corner of the ceiling.

"O-oh, right, yes." I turned to check on the spider-servitor. Thankfully it had reacted as expected, as required. The dog-sized spider stared right at the doorway, its mass of crystalline eyes fixed together on a single point, stingers rigid and poised. A faint heat-haze poured from the bio-mechanical vent stacks on its abdomen, as it spun up pneuma-somatic engines, readied itself for rapid motion. "Yes." I nodded. "Yes, he's on guard, he doesn't like it."

“Good,” Evelyn grunted. “Don’t want any of this crap getting into my house.”

“It’s cool. Be cool,” Raine said, forcing calm into her voice. Worked quite handily on me. I let out a long breath. “Be cool, Heather. I won’t let anything happen. In and out, right?”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn grumbled. She jerked her chin toward the open doorway. “Praem.”

The most durable of everyone present, Praem went through first. A lifetime of movies and television and silly special effects still had me trained to expect a crackle or a pop as she crossed the threshold, but the doll-demon stepped through as easily as if into an adjacent room. She paused just over the threshold, looked quickly left and right, then took another three paces and turned around to face us. Creepers of fog wound around her legs and long skirt.

“Nobody home,” she intoned.

Raine went next. I didn’t like that, but I couldn’t help but appreciate the way she moved, a flowing of muscle and tendon, the quick-snap of her head and eyes as she double-checked Praem’s assessment. The way she carried herself made me feel a little safer.

Evelyn stomped into the castle as if she owned it. Perhaps she intended to. Clutching walking stick in one fist and carved thighbone in the other, she marched up next to Praem, looked about, then frowned at something off to the left.

Lozzie and I went last. Raine offered me a hand of support to step over the threshold. I took it, my palms clammy and my heart unsteady, and stepped into that soft, clinging fog-light.

And like that, we were back in Alexander Lilburne’s castle.

“Heather, you holding up alright?” Raine asked quietly.

“Just about.” I tried to smile. Couldn’t quite.

We’d emerged into a short, wide section of corridor, cut – grown? I tried not to think about it – from that dead grey jade substance, the dessicated outer shell of the thing which lay in the chasm far beneath our feet.

The Cult had strung light bulbs along the ceiling here, on bolts driven into the material, but they all sat dark. Whatever portable

generator they had brought here was long cold by now. The light through the gateway cast a warm rectangle on the floor, but quickly faltered, soaked up by the fog – the fog which crept in through the long row of glass-less windows off to the left.

Of the copied section of Sharrowford below, we could see only imitation grey-jade rooftops blanketed in fog. None of us doubted where we were, the apex of the castle. Perhaps close to the throne room where I'd killed Alexander.

But none of us said it. All of us were too busy – listening.

“Nice aim,” Raine whispered eventually. “Have to buy Kim some good weed.”

“What is that *sound*?” Evelyn hissed, eyes wide, knuckles white on her walking stick.

“Singing,” Praem said, and even she whispered.

We all knew exactly what that sound was. We'd heard it once before, amplified and directed at us like a weapon, but it was different this time. Deep and low, passing though the air and the walls and our very bodies in slow waves like undersea currents. A calling, a marine chorus, a cosmic whale-song.

When Alexander had directed the vast planet-things down from the sky of the fog-dimension, their voices had been battering rams of mental force. What we heard now was more like the wind, flowing through us. Omni-present, rising and falling, with a million gradients and subtitles of tone – and undercut by other sounds outdoors, down there in the fog. Chirps and chatters and skitters; wet popping and soft clicking and furtive rustling; mad musical piping as if from a dozen separate flutes.

The gateway must be proof against sound, for surely we would have heard this back on the far side, back in the light and sanity of Sharrowford. Goosebumps rose on my arms, even wrapped up inside my hoodie. My own breathing seemed far too loud. I swore I could feel Lozzie's heartbeat against my arm.

With the Sharrowford Cult in residence, this place had been dead, silent, empty except for themselves.

But now?

Lozzie mumbled a word.

“Life,” I echoed her out loud. “It’s life, I think.”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.3

We'd expected a derelict.

Even Evelyn had privately predicted an empty hulk, despite her dire warnings and sensible precautions; the cult's unyoked creatures fled to the outer wild, the infernal apparatus gone cold, intrusion replaced by an eternity of silence and fog.

Instead, the ruins of the Sharrowford Cult's great experiment echoed to a million alien calls and scuttles from down in the copied streets. A cacophony of strange sounds floated through the empty windows, muffled by fog and distance and the castle walls. The ever-present orchestra of whale-song and flutes washed over it all. Whatever otherworldly jungle of spirit the cult had slashed and burned, cleared and colonised, it had since flowed back in, regrown, reclaimed.

"Life finds a way, huh?" Raine whispered. She stared at the row of empty windows.

"This is not the time for movie references," Evelyn hissed through her teeth. She'd turned pale, a little green around the gills, and I couldn't help but note how close she stood to Praem. Her throat bobbed with a nervous swallow. "Actually, sod it, I would rather be in Jurassic Park than here."

Raine experimented with a smile, but she couldn't make it stick. Deep, sonorous cosmic whale-song filled the moment of silence, a sound that was not true sound, merely the closest analogue our fragile meat senses could invent.

"This doesn't have to be a bad thing," I tried, thinking as I spoke. "Maybe ... "

I trailed off at Evelyn's incredulous look.

"Stay here," Raine said, unquestionable command in her voice. She crept toward the row of windows, her hands deceptively loose and relaxed on her gun.

"Oh yes," Evelyn whispered. "Great plan. Stick your head out, why

don't you?"

"*Raine*," I hissed, but I couldn't reach forward to stop her, occupied as I was by Lozzie slumped against me, holding her up.

Raine reached the windows and looked out – and went very, very still. Not the coiled-spring tension of my beautiful Raine ready to leap into action, but the heart-stopping animal alertness of instinctive fear.

"... *Raine*?" I whispered.

With obvious effort, Raine exhaled a long, steadying breath. She edged closer to the windows, quickly checked right and left along the exterior of the castle walls, then up into the sky – at which she paused again, though for only a heartbeat – and finally down, into the fog-choked streets. All the while, a chorus of ethereal whale-song filled the air. Something down in the fog hooted. A reply came from deeper off, a chittering, chattering, snicker-snacking.

"Alright," Raine whispered, and finally backed away from the bank of windows.

"*Raine*? *Raine*, what was it?" I asked as she rejoined us. Calm, collected, focused, but with a sheen of cold sweat on her brow.

"Strongly suggest we stay away from the windows."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Yes, very informative. Thank you."

"What?" I adjusted Lozzie's weight as she moved in her half-sleep. "Why?"

Raine glanced back at the open gateway behind us, then at me, her face a mask of concentration. On the other side, back in Sharrowford, the spider-servitor still fretted and stared.

"So we won't be seen," she said. "How long?"

"... I'm sorry?"

"How long do you think Lozzie might need? I know you can't be exact, I know we've got nothing to go on, but can you guess?"

"I, um ..." I tried to look down at Lozzie's sleeping face. She hung off my arm like an exhausted child, slumped against my side. She didn't show any change yet. If anything her breathing seemed deeper and slower. I shook her very gently. "*Lozzie*? *Lozzie*? Wakey

wakey, rise and shine? No?” I sighed. “No, I don’t know how long. I haven’t the foggiest.”

Raine laughed softly. Evelyn tutted and rolled her eyes.

“Um, sorry,” I rushed to correct myself. “Maybe not the best metaphor right now. Raine, what’s out there? What did you see?”

Raine opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. “I’m not sure. I think maybe we should call this off, get back through the gate.”

“Surely we can give Lozzie few minutes, can’t we?”

Raine finally managed to pull a proper smile. She shrugged, and her eyes slid back and forth between me and Lozzie, her protective instinct short-circuited by the conflicting needs. “I don’t know.”

“Of course you don’t know. You don’t know your arse from your elbow here,” Evelyn hissed, then jerked her head at Praem. “Go look.”

Without pause or complaint, the doll-demon marched over to the windows.

Raine winced. She put an arm out as if to stop me following, as if to encourage me and Lozzie back through the gateway. When nothing reached through the windows to pluck Praem from her feet, Evelyn bustled up alongside her and took a good look as well. She didn’t freeze like Raine had, but she frowned up a terrible storm, her face dark as thunder.

“Yeah,” Raine said with a sigh. “I don’t think we should stick around here.”

Evelyn swallowed. “It’s just wildlife. I’ve seen worse.”

“Wildlife can still take your head off, if you wander alone in the bush. Never get off the boat.”

“We’re indoors,” Evelyn muttered, gritting her teeth. She eyed the edges of the window, the grey jade walls, the horrible osseous fibre that made up every surface. “For all this counts as indoors. Those things are too big to get in here.”

“Raine, let me see,” I hissed.

“I really do think we should leave.” Raine laughed once, without

humour, and gestured at nothing with her handgun. "This is sort of useless. I can't protect either of you here. Eevee, please."

"Raine!" I snapped.

She glanced down and I saw it in her eyes; Raine would not allow me past. In fact, she'd pick me up and carry me home if she had to, and I had no say in the matter. For a moment, protection trumped respect. She'd been so gung-ho before, about taking the castle for ourselves, even planted the notion in Evelyn's mind, and her rapid transformation both terrified and infuriated me.

"Evelyn is perfectly safe by the windows," I said, cold and a little too sharp. "Why not me?"

The flash of outrage in my eyes must have been too much. Raine paused for a heartbeat, then lowered her arm. Instead, she placed a hand on my back in a gesture of support. "See for yourself. But quietly, yeah?"

"Quiet as a mouse," I whispered, not entirely happy with her.

A moment later, with Lozzie's weight dragging on my arm, I peered out and saw what lay beyond the castle, and understood.

From back by the gateway only the very tops of the most distant of the grey jade structures had been visible, the rooftop outlines copied from a square mile of Sharrowford in some bizarre alien mimicry, blurred by fog and distance. Up close, one could see the way the castle's hill fell away toward the copied streets, the streets themselves choked with fog, the limitless fog stretching out into the distance forever. Above, the wide sky was a soupy grey sea.

I'd expected a distant glimpse of the planet-creatures, the vast sphere-like entities that Alexander had summoned from their rookery in the sky, the children of the crippled, trapped Outsider far below our feet. When I'd first seen them during that encounter, I'd mistaken them for moons. Their cosmic song reached us now, and I expected to see them far out in the fog, lost in the shrouded deeps above.

They'd landed.

The sheer size of the things took my breath away.

"Heather, hey, breathe," Raine whispered. "I'm not going to pretend it's fine, but if they could see us, I think they would have reacted by

now.”

Three of them had settled on the ground, two within the limits of the copied city itself and one further out in the fog beyond, a vague sphere in the mist. The closer ones had crushed the dead jade buildings under their incredible weight, cracked the ground itself, made shallow craters for themselves.

Marbled in ochre and cerulean and violet, their outer shells slowly shifted through a spectrum of colour, in bands and rings like the surface of Jupiter. Each one was easily larger than the castle, a sphere hundreds of feet across, with no visible features, except orifices for tentacles. Tentacles the width of train carriages, grey and pitted, armoured in stony hide.

A high-note counterpoint accompanied the cosmic whale-song, like a hundred frantic, atonal flute players. Perhaps it was the wind, whistling through tiny gaps in those giant tentacles.

Each asteroid-sized being possessed somewhere between eight and twelve tentacles, half of them waving in the air – not with the listless vegetable motion of seaweed, but active, a complex dance that never seemed to replicate into a comprehensible pattern, displacing great slow waves of fog – and half sunk deep into the ground.

Anchors? Or were they digging? Digging for the core of their parent, far below?

I felt, in that moment, a bizarre, unspeakable kinship. A physical empathy beyond words, beyond any human expression. The bruises in my flanks, my own tentacle anchor-points, itched and throbbed as I recalled my own abyssal beauty.

“More things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” I murmured.

“Heather?” Raine hissed my name.

“What’s wrong with her?” Evelyn asked.

“Nothing, I’m fine,” I lied. “Just ... um, coping.”

“Swear I’ve heard you say that line before,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Shakespeare. It’s one I come back to again and again. Given me some comfort over the years, that’s all.” I nodded at the vast

asteroid-things out in the fog. They made me feel so very small.
“Seemed appropriate.”

“Huh. Quite.”

“More things in heaven and earth,” Praem echoed, softly.

The thought of these giants lurking just behind Sharrowford made me profoundly uncomfortable. Separated from our reality not by the near-impenetrable barrier of the abyss, like Outside, but by a membrane so thin even our jury-rigged gateway could get us here. Like descending into one’s basement to discover hyper-intelligent blue whales had taken up residence. As we stared out at the things, the deep, rumbling whale-song intensified, changed direction, and a fourth sphere-thing floated into view. Low in the sky, orbiting the castle at a distance so close I could see the individual pockmarks in its trailing tentacles. The fog parted and swirled back before its vast bulk. It passed across the sky at a crawl. None of us breathed until it vanished around the side of the castle again.

“Evee,” Raine said. “Professional assessment then, are they dangerous?”

Evelyn shot her a look that spoke volumes.

“I mean, actively dangerous,” Raine corrected herself.

“I’ve seen worse, Outside,” I managed with a shrug. “I mean, they’re just sitting there, being all ... plant-like. If they were actively hunting us, I think we would know. I think. Alexander isn’t here to control them anymore. Perhaps they don’t care.”

“Too big to give a toss, right,” Evelyn grunted.

The planet-creatures were far from the only life which had re-colonised the foggy dimension, but all the rest paled in comparison.

In the sky, the huge jellyfish and sky-whales scudded and floated, gathered in shoals and clusters up there in the fog, trailing long ropes of tentacle, opening wide jaws to filter-feed on whatever sustenance they drew from the fog itself. On the ground below, in the copied streets and across the roofs of the imitation Sharrowford buildings, all manner of strange life flopped and flapped, slid and slithered, with all the chaotic variety of pneuma-somatic life back in actual reality. Striding vegetable things made of green sticks, coral structures that appeared to breathe, barnacles of brilliant gleaming

metal, bubbling mollusks and scuttling crustaceans.

“Was it not like this when Praem came here before?” I asked.

Evelyn shook her head, then paused and glanced at Praem. “You told me it had gone wild, you didn’t mention those things.”

“Aloft, then,” Praem sing-songed.

“They hadn’t yet landed,” I murmured. “Something drew them down?”

“We can talk theory later,” Raine said. “Right now, I still think we need to leave. I doubt Alexander’s lot made sure the front door was closed and locked on their way out, and I don’t much fancy the idea of that jungle party in the streets getting indoors with us.”

“Mm, point,” Evelyn grunted.

“I would say we could check the front door, but this place is a labyrinth and the lights are all out.”

I tore my eyes away from the spectacle and looked straight down, to the rise of the hill on which the castle sat. “I don’t see anything by the outer curtain wall,” I said. “Maybe they don’t like it in here.”

“We can bloody well hope,” said Evelyn.

“Still, let’s step back toward the gate, yeah?” Raine said, very carefully keeping her voice measured and calm, but I heard right through it. She was pulled wire-tight. “If we’re not secure, we should leave. Give Lozzie five minutes, see if she improves, and then-”

A shadow passed over the windows. Flitting, writhing, announced by a sudden burst of that mad fluting sound, loud and close.

And all of a sudden we met the musician.

In the split-second before Raine bundled Lozzie and I back, before Evelyn shrieked in shock, before Praem moved to cover her, before any of that, Lozzie opened her mouth and cracked open her eyes.

Before any of us reacted, she *trilled back* at the thing which peered in through the window.

Moments such as these never make sense as they happen, a whirlwind of instinctive flinching retreat, surprised screams, spiking

heart rates. The ancient lizard-brain takes over from the conscious pilot of the neocortex, hijacks the visual input and dumps a pint of adrenaline into one's bloodstream. And that's merely when surprised by mundane physical threat.

All hell broke loose. I nearly tumbled over with Lozzie. Evelyn would have fallen over too if Praem hadn't caught her. Raine, cool as ice, pointed her handgun.

Only once the moment had passed did my brain process the sight: a cross between a cactus, a cone, and a flying squid. It was very green, maybe eight or nine feet tall, with a long head and a tapering cone-like body made of distinct curved staves of tough, leathery plant material. The body ended in a skirt of long tentacles. Recognisable eyes – maybe two dozen of them, with yellow, side-slit pupils – but no mouth. In four of its many, many tentacles it held a long rod of bone, punctured through with dozens of irregular holes. One end of the rod was plugged into its flesh like the junction of a horn. With other tentacles it gripped the edges of the window, peering in at us.

My body reacted in the worst way possible. With pain.

Self-defence, before I could even think. Abyssal memory attempted to sprout spines and flash warning colouration and arm me with tentacles and claws and razor-sharp teeth. Pain raked at my sides and my back, in my gums, in my eyes – and a hiss, a loud, resonant hiss of warning, of go-away, of I'm too difficult to eat, ripped out of my mouth, left my throat raw and stinging.

At that – or perhaps our screaming, or Raine's shout – the Flutist's eyes went wide. Its tentacles raced across the bone-rod, produced a frantic burst of piping, a screeching crescendo of discordant music.

And as suddenly as it had appeared, it let go of the window and scudded away on jets of air squirted from the ends of thicker tentacles. Jerking, bobbing, it turned and regarded us once more, then quickly jetted off back toward one of the planet-creatures.

For a long moment, nobody said a word.

“ ... Heather?” Raine turned to me. “You alright?”

I almost hissed at her. The instinct still lingered in my throat. I clutched my side with one hand, clinging to Lozzie with the other, throat muscles aching and sides throbbing, abyssal echoes of the

body I did not have wracking me with shuddering and quivering.

“No, not really,” I croaked. “Oh, I can’t keep reacting to everything like this. Ow. Oh, this is absurd. That was the stupidest thing.”

“Stupidest thing?” Evelyn spat. “No, I think violent reaction to *that* makes perfect sense.”

“Unn-nuuuh?” Lozzie made a sleepy noise, eyes half open. She pulled at my arm, trying to take a step forward. My sudden pain made her seem so much heavier than normal.

“No, it doesn’t,” I croaked.

“Oh.” Raine lit up. “Oh, right, yes.” She started laughing.

“What the hell are you laughing at?” Evelyn demanded, boggling at her.

“Evee, we just got jump scared by a cat in a closet.”

“We surprised it as much as it surprised us,” I croaked. “The way it turned around and looked back? It was only curious. I think. We- I-” I gestured at my throat, coughed hard. Muscles and tendons felt out of place. “Didn’t you hear Lozzie?”

“Wanna- mmmm,” Lozzie mumbled. She tried to pull away again. I had to lurch to catch her, sending a spike of pain ratcheting up my ribs. Praem and Raine both stepped in to help, propped Lozzie up and into my arms.

“What?” Evelyn asked after I had recovered. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“She replied to it, when it appeared. Lozzie made a noise at it. A weird hoot or something.”

Evelyn blinked at Lozzie, then me, than Raine.

“I think she knew what it was,” I said. “Probably from her time stuck here.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Evelyn said. She frowned at me, but then sighed and shook her head, readjusting her clothes. “Some jump-scare cat. That thing was ugly as sin and I swear it knew what it was looking at. At least it’s too big to get inside.”

She was right about that part – the reason we’d all screamed and

jumped out of our skins was how the Flutist had been so distinct and direct. I was used to bizarre pneuma-somatic life, terrifying amalgamations and mutations; I'd been dealing with their unwanted attention for a decade. But whatever the Flutist was, it had been intensely curious.

Before any of us could suggest a course of action which included not getting ambushed by the Flutist again – such as going home, which sounded increasingly sensible – Lozzie made another sleep-addled noise, puffed her cheeks out, and tried to lurch away from me.

“Ah- Lozzie? Hey- please, Lozzie?” I croaked.

She didn't stop, trying to take another step as I held on, down the corridor toward parts unknown. If I let her go, she'd drop, but I could hardly allow her to wander off into the depths of the castle. She grunted and pulled, and only relented when Praem stepped in to restrain her more firmly than I was capable of. She hung in the doll-demon's grip, limp and grumbling like a petulant child.

“Fresh air and exercise,” she mumbled. “Fresh and washed and farm to table.”

Raine and Evelyn and I all shared a glance.

“Maybe she knows what she needs?” I ventured. Evelyn huffed and grit her teeth.

Raine glanced out the window, down the corridor, and took a deep breath. “Executive decision. Time for real quick poke around. Just down the hallway. Follow Lozzie's footsteps. Five minutes, tops.”

Evelyn opened her mouth to object, then caught my pleading look. We couldn't give up on the reason we came here. Couldn't give up on Lozzie.

“Immediate surroundings only,” she hissed through clenched teeth. I noticed she was gripping the head of her walking stick extra tight, knuckles almost white with pressure. “And you stick close,” she added to Praem.

“Thank you, Eevee,” I said.

“No fear,” Praem intoned. Raine allowed herself a small laugh. Evelyn shook her head.

We strayed not far beyond sight of the gateway. To the sound of our footsteps echoing along the castle's hallways – Lozzie's dragging, sleepy feet, the click-click-click of Praem's heels, and the clack of Evelyn's walking stick – accompanied always by the ethereal cosmic whale-song and the mad flute playing, we spent a few minutes shuffling through the wreckage of the Sharrowford Cult's great experiment.

Detritus lay everywhere, equipment and incongruous everyday items abandoned by the Cult as they'd rushed to leave before getting cut off here – food wrappers and empty plastic boxes, an overturned telescope, a discarded robe, burnt-out candles, a heavy wooden bat, a dead mobile phone with a cracked screen. We passed one of their own inactive gateways, far more elaborate and precise than Evelyn's work. She stopped to take pictures on her phone.

As she did, Raine picked up the telescope and settled it back on its tripod. After a moment's thought, she pointed it out of the nearest window, at the closest of the asteroid-creatures.

"Are you certain that's a good idea?" I asked. Lozzie pulled at my arm, trying to drag me onward. She felt so heavy compared to usual. Was I weak from sleep deprivation last night?

"It's cool." Raine shot me a wink. "Takes more than a giant marble to upset me." She bent down, squinted one eye shut, and looked through the eyepiece. " ... huh."

"Huh?" Evelyn echoed, slipping her phone away. "'Huh', what? Raine, don't go 'huh' in this place. Explain."

Raine looked up at the asteroid-creature with her naked eyes and gestured for us to take a peek too. "Looks like our wibbly-wobbly flute-playing octopus has got friends."

"What?!" Evelyn's eyes went wide. "You mean it's coming back? It-"

"No," Raine said with a grin and a knowing kink in her eyebrows. "If it was heading back with a posse, I'd be carrying Heather to the gateway ten seconds ago, not talking about it. Take a look for yourself."

Evelyn followed the suggestion, and bent down to peer through the telescope's eye-piece. Bending forward looked hard on her spine. Too much weight on her walking stick. She sucked on her teeth, and straightened up.

“Hmmm. Huh, indeed.”

I managed to take a look as well. Praem held Lozzie still for a moment, sleepy heels scuffing at the ground as she tried to walk on.

The Flutist had a whole herd of friends.

Dozens of them flitted and bobbed through the air around the nearest of the asteroid-creatures. Specks when seen with the naked eye, obscured by thick fog and the omnipresent glow. The telescope showed them weaving and dancing, playing their flutes, oblivious to us.

“... at least he’s not lonely, I suppose?” I tried. Evelyn huffed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Heather’s got a good point actually,” Raine said.

“What, that it has friends?” Evelyn’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “Yes, wonderful, I’m sure we’re all very happy for it.”

“Evee, Evee, think tactics for a moment,” Raine said. I could see Evelyn wanted to snap at her. “If it’s got a lot of mates out there, and it wanted us gone, they’d be coming for us already.”

“Yes, obviously. I’m not a complete idiot, despite the state of my life. That doesn’t answer the question of what the hell they’re doing, why they’re here, why any of this ... this fucking zoo is here.”

“I think that creature was from Outside,” I ventured.

Evelyn frowned at me. “Explain.”

“Look at all the stuff down there, in the fog. That’s all pneuma-somatic life, but in the flesh, somehow, something to do with this place. This isn’t Outside. But those things,” I nodded at the huge colour-shifting sphere in the middle distance. “They’re the young, the children, spawn, whatever, of the thing below the castle, and *that* was – is – an Outsider. It taught Lozzie hyperdimensional mathematics, like the Eye did with me. Which means, maybe it came from the abyss. Maybe it made all of this, maybe before the Cult got here. Maybe they drove it all out.”

“Like panspermia,” Raine said.

“I’m sorry?” I asked. Evelyn raised an eyebrow too.

“The theory that life came to earth on a comet. Didn’t Lozzie say something about the Outsider down below having crashed here? Like this is an impact crater.”

“This sub-dimension is an impact crater in reality itself,” Evelyn muttered. “Behind Sharrowford. Good metaphor. The thing below seeded this place with life? But from Outside instead of outer space?”

“Yes!” I felt myself light up inside, despite the shock. “Yes, exactly.”

“I want to believe,” Raine laughed. “We should put pictures of this online. Send the conspiracy types up the wall.”

Evelyn shot us both a dark look, then turned to stare through the nearest windows once again, at the asteroid-sized lifeforms out in the fog. Her dark frown faltered, and for once Evelyn’s Saye’s leathery exterior gave way to a hard swallow, a worried brow, and nothing to say.

“Evee?”

“We absolutely cannot let Edward Lilburne have access to any of this,” she whispered.

= =

Lozzie led us to two corpses.

The first we found in a short corridor, just around the corner from the gateway. The remains of a man were slumped against the wall, little more than a bundle of sticks and dry leather wrapped the cult’s distinctive cream-coloured robes. The corpse was dessicated, denied the natural process of decay, mummified by the air in this unnatural place.

The second corpse was in the throne room where I’d killed Alexander.

It was the body of the heavyset man Lozzie had knifed in the throat during the fight. Alexander’s chief disciple, the one who’d been tending to his wounds. He’d been left to shrivel and dry where he’d fallen, surrounded by the cracked stain of his own blood.

“I’d really rather not go in there,” I said at the threshold, but Lozzie dragged me on, as if she’d been searching for this place specifically. Why come back here? This was the stuff of nightmares.

Raine went ahead first, just in case.

The throne room was much as I recalled it. A wide space flanked by ceiling-height empty windows which let in plenty of the colourless light, with a sort of raised dais area at the rear. Off to one side sat the cult's bizarre magical experiment – a series of interlocking circles, chunks of the green-gold matter mined from deep underneath the castle, and pieces of dismantled medical machinery pilfered from some hospital back in reality.

The rear of the room looked like a bomb had hit it. Which, in a way, it had.

I'd retained only seconds of consciousness after I'd used brainmath to kill Alexander. Hardly time to get a good look at the physical result.

Nothing had been touched, nothing moved out of place since. The folding tables at the rear were still covered in bags of drugs, bottles of strange liquid, hypodermic needles, much of it smashed aside by the blast. Alexander's blood was still all over the floor, dried to a brown crust. Some of the blood-soaked towels had survived. I even spotted the pair of pliers he'd been using to dig Raine's bullet out of his ribs, knocked to the ground along with the table they'd been sitting on, contents scattered wide.

A crater of cracked grey jade, slightly oblong from the direction of force, marked where he'd stood. The wall directly behind – a good twenty feet away, my goodness – was punctured by a gaping hole where I'd blasted him through. The edges of the hole were torn, ragged, splintered like bone.

Raine crept over and scuffed the ground with the tip of one boot. Alexander's dried blood flaked away to dust.

"Almost nothing left."

"Good," I said.

"Admiring your own collateral damage, hey?" Raine grinned back at me. I shook my head and her grin switched off instantly. "I'm sorry, Heather."

"It's alright, I just ... I don't like being back here."

Understatement of the year award, first prize, Heather Morell. Truth was, I tasted bile in the back of my throat, felt a shaking in my belly

and my limbs. To commit terrible violence in defence of one's friends or community is one thing, but to return to the scene and contemplate the aftermath, accompanied by that unceasing cosmic whale-song from beyond the walls, made me feel sick to my heart.

Not to mention the faint nausea. The brainmath I'd done here had been brutal, blunt, violent. The memory of it ghosted at the back of my mind, prodding at that bloody socket I dare not touch. What I'd done here had left an echo.

Was this what Lozzie had been struggling to reach? Even now she pulled at my arm, making sleepy noises, trying to walk deeper into the room.

"Me neither," Evelyn hissed through her teeth. She'd hung back in the doorway and Praem had stuck close to her. "These windows are too big, not to mention that hole in the wall. We're exposed here. Raine, get back in the corridor."

"No! Nooooo- ... ooooouuu ... " came Lozzie's reply, strident denial trailing off into nothing. Her eyes struggled open, lids uneven and heavy.

"Lozzie? Hey, Lozzie, look at me," I tried. "What are you looking for? Please, try to tell me, what?"

As if on cue, a giant shadow fell across the hole I'd blasted in the back wall. It drifted past the upper reaches of the windows, blotting out the diffuse light in a glacial whirlpool of shifting colour, a giant marble of which we could see only a tiny portion. The cosmic whale-song touched us like a foghorn. Vast tentacles trailed behind the asteroid sky-child as it orbited the castle. I suddenly felt extremely small, a rodent inside a rotten log as an elephant strode past. Even Raine seemed to hunch, the gun in her hands a hopeless nothing as the creature passed by.

And pass by it did, off to complete the orbit of the castle. I let out a shuddering breath.

"You know what, going back sounds good," Raine said, backing away toward us. "I think we've had enough."

"Lozzie?" I bent around again, tried to look in her eyes. "Lozzie, can't we go back to the gate?"

"Mmmm-mmm!" she shook her head.

“What do you need, what are you looking for? Lozzie, tell me, let me know.”

She smacked her lips and made more sleepy noises. I felt so helpless. Couldn't tell if this was doing any good for her at all. In my secret heart I'd imagined her waking up after thirty seconds here, or that the atmosphere might act like a bucket of water to the face. With disappointment I began to accept that she'd probably need to spend a whole night in this awful edifice.

She needed to dream again. I hoped she might take me with her, Outside.

“If she needs to stay here longer, we can return better prepared,” Evelyn said. She must have seen the look on my face. “I can whip up a protective barrier, set something up on this side of the gateway.”

“Better prepared,” Praem echoed.

“Maybe,” I sighed. “I don't know what she needs. She won't speak.”

“Help,” Praem intoned – but kept her voice nice and low.

“Yes, that much is clear ... o-oh.” I flushed as I realised Praem had not been competing for the title of Captain Obvious, but was offering to help with Lozzie. “Thank you,” I said, and passed the struggling, sleepy girl off to her. Praem hoisted Lozzie from her feet, ready to carry her back to the gateway.

“Right, yeah, we'll go back, make a new plan,” Raine said, smiling with her beaming confidence as she rejoined us. “Figure it out. Hey, maybe we can just bring Twil, sic her on anything that tries to get in here. She can go fight a whole moon.”

“Yes, wonderful,” Evelyn drawled her sarcasm. “That's exactly how I'd love to spend a weekend with her.”

Raine cocked an eyebrow. Evelyn flustered, blushing hard when she realised what she'd just implied. “Don't you say another bloody word. We need to leave, we don't have time for this. Come on, get-”

Like a cat that had decided it had enough of being held, Lozzie woke up.

She woke up, limbs flailing, baffed Praem in the face with a loose hand – the doll-demon didn't even react – and as if by some miracle

of grease and contortion, extracted herself from Praem's grip. It was like watching a weasel break from a trap. I'd seen Praem restrain a possessed fox, but Lozzie all but fell out of her arms.

"Lozzie-

"Hey!"

"Praem, grab her."

Lozzie got three paces, stumbling, head loose, hair a wild mess, eyes still closed in sleep, before she opened her mouth.

And sang.

It was not the most horrible sound in the world. That trophy goes easily to another. But it was one of the most eerie. Lozzie opened her mouth and sang, wordless sounds, tuneless notes, rising and falling like religious chanting. With a shudder we all realised exactly what she was doing: imitating the cosmic whale-song of the asteroid-creatures. Those sounds had not been made for a human throat, and Lozzie did not exactly do a good job of replicating them, high-pitched and whiny and gummed up by passing air over all that inelegant human meat.

But she sung her little heart out. The only reason Raine didn't grab her was shock, as Lozzie stumbled into the throne room and fell to her knees, raised her head and belted out alien noises.

"Grab her!" Evelyn hissed again.

But the shadow was already returning.

The orbiting sky-child thing had changed direction at the sound of Lozzie's voice, at a familiar call from an unfamiliar throat. A vast shadow of shifting colours fell across the room once more. Panic gripped my heart, and my bowels. We did not want that thing's attention on us. *Hide*, screamed every cell in my body.

But I didn't.

I went for Lozzie.

So did Raine, and Praem. Another pace and we would have stopped, Raine would have bundled me back while Praem retrieved Lozzie, and we would have scuttled away back into the corridor of the castle, back to the gateway, away from the attention of this floating giant.

But the sky-child was faster. Before any of us could reach Lozzie or stop each other, a pitted grey tentacle as thick as a train car probed at the hole in the rear of the throne room. My legs turned to jelly at the size of that thing. My bladder almost let go, an involuntary animal reaction. But it couldn't get in, it couldn't. Too big, its own size worked against it. Raine grabbed me by the waist, made to drag me back.

The tentacle split. First in two, then in four, then eight, on and on in a dizzying multiplication that suddenly surged into the room like a shoal of hunting squid. Grey armoured tentacles filled the air.

Raine dropped me and pulled her handgun.

Praem reached Lozzie, who smiled as she sang, eyes still closed.

I think Evelyn screamed, I don't remember. Maybe it was me.

The sky-child's tentacles reformed, recombined down into three, each as thick around as a oak tree; one went for Lozzie, the second for Praem. The third hesitated, poised; Raine's finger tightened on the trigger of her handgun, and the third tentacle darted for her.

I never had a choice. Raine broke her promise, didn't she? She'd told me she'd make sure I'd never be put in a situation again where growing my own tentacles seemed a like a good idea. That's how I justified it later, but in the moment I followed only instinct, only the need, the body. Pure survival.

Right then, at that moment of the unknown, possible violence, growing my own tentacles seemed like a very good idea indeed.

One variable of hyperdimensional mathematics, just like before, just like yesterday. At the speed of thought I pictured exactly what I wanted to do, where I wanted to reach, what to touch and push and grab and slam. Pictured the limbs in my mind, felt them where they should be attached to my body. One variable, from non-existence to reality.

I didn't even think about the pain. That was for later.

Six tentacles of shining pneuma-somatic flesh sprouted from my sides, straight through my clothes again. I felt their anchor points deep inside my torso – three where they'd been before, and three new.

First pushed me up off the disgusting bone-substance of the floor,

righted me. Second grabbed Raine's gun, turned it to the side with a flick so her bullet hit the wall. Third stretched out and wrapped around Lozzie's middle, held her with tight affection, a safety harness.

I had only seconds. Moments of energy reserves with which to ward off this vast creature.

Had to make myself understood.

My remaining three tentacles, slender as my wrist, ghost-pale beneath the strobing rainbow bio-luminescence, I threw wide. Body language of the predator, the abyss, of marine display and threat. Loud and clear – *I am poison and toxin and acid and I will fight you.*

I opened my mouth and hissed.

nostalgia for infinity – 9.4

Hiss.

An alien giant reached for my friends with tentacles as thick as tree trunks; I threw my own tentacles wide, and hissed – like a little girl in a school playground, pretending to be a dinosaur.

I sounded ridiculous.

It was an absurd response. My defiance was not born of heroism or bravery, because I am neither a hero nor possess any notable courage, no matter what affectionate lies Raine tells me. When faced with predatory mega-fauna the size of an asteroid, any sensible, fragile, cowering ape should run away as fast as its stubby little legs can carry it.

But I wasn't entirely ape any more. The response came from my gut, from the principles and instincts I'd bought back from the abyss, a set of drives that were not remotely human – but which I had turned to human purposes. The ape, the savanna monkey, saw her friends, her family, her tribe, in danger. And the abyssal marine *thing* stepped in with territorial display and a pathetic attempt to make me look bigger than I was.

Or perhaps I hissed because the only alternative was to scream.

A still-rational part of me did try to scream. Blind panic lit up the back of my mind, as I spread my tentacles out in the manner of a cat arching its back. Even over the sudden euphoria and glory of these extra limbs, terror took my heart, took my legs with a tremor, dumped adrenaline into my bloodstream.

Me, Heather, all of five-foot-nothing, a tiny woman hissing her lungs out at a creature the size of an interplanetary body.

Suicidal.

But it worked.

The sky-child reconsidered.

All three of its tentacles paused in mid-air, mid-strike. Giant worms,

pitted and grey, armoured in stony hide. The one aimed at Raine turned slowly, like the head of a snake, to point a tapered tip toward me. The two going for Lizzie and Praem reared back – then drifted.

The trio of tentacles all drifted, like unanchored cables in zero-gravity. To the untrained eye the motion appeared random, listless, meant nothing; abyssal instinct read the message loud and clear.

Posturing, manoeuvring, testing for reaction.

I'd confused the sky-child for only a few precious moments. Now it wanted to see what manner of creature I was, and try to outflank me.

I hiccuped. Could scarcely breathe. My heart pounded in my chest, a panicked bird trapped in a cage, and my head throbbed with my own pulse. Cold sweat broke out on my forehead, my face, under my armpits, down my back. The euphoric echo of my once-beautiful abyssal form paled to nothing before this giant. I had no idea what to do.

One thing was certain, both ape and abyss agreed; if I turned and ran, the creature would be on us in an instant.

Up close, in more intimate detail than I ever wanted to see again in my life, the asteroid-thing's vast tentacle limbs revealed their secrets. They creaked as they moved. Muscles or bones – or whatever it used for bones – produced a soft, meaty creaking which filled the air just below the level of human hearing. The outer layer of stony hide was semi-transparent, like cloudy plastic. Beneath that lay a shimmering substrate, coppery orange.

Somehow, in reference to some buried abyssal knowledge, I knew that coppery sheen was a sensory organ, hundreds of feet long. It could see us, quite clearly.

How complex must the creature's awareness be, to keep track of so much input? Visible through the empty windows as only a great shadowed bulk, the sky-child's main body hovered just beyond the castle walls, a kaleidoscope of slowly rotating colours.

The ever present cosmic whale-song continued uninterrupted. We weren't even important enough to disrupt the chorus.

In panic, I mirrored the drifting tentacles – or, attempted to. I tried

to adjust the position and angle of my extra limbs this way and that, left and right, to cover every angle at once. But the effort sent my head spinning, my vision askew, filled my brain with fog. Bile rose in my throat. One of my tentacles seized up, another drifted aimlessly. I couldn't track them all, I couldn't move them all at once. Throwing them wide, grabbing things, those had been easy, but this wouldn't work. My eyes bulged in panic.

"Heather!" Raine hissed in a stage-whisper. "Let go!"

I felt a tug, risked a glance sideways. One of my tentacles was still wrapped around the barrel of Raine's handgun, keeping it pointed off at the wall, clenched hard like a muscle-locked fist. I'd forgotten about it. How could I forget about part of my own body?

"I get it," she hissed, and how she managed to make eye contact with me instead of staring in terror and awe at the giant tentacles, I don't know. She nodded down, at my pale, rainbow-strobing limb which gripped her gun. "I get it, no shooting! Use another tentacle!"

I managed to jerk a nod, and let go. Raine blew out a sharp breath and backed away toward me, covered by the extra tentacle I now threw into the air to ward off the sky-child's attention. One of the three stony giants tracked her as she edged across the throne room to rejoin me.

"Heather!" Evelyn hissed from behind us, way back by the doorway. Her voice was tight with terror. "For God's sake, back away from it! Praem, get over here, now!"

"I ... "

"Back away slow," Raine said, low and calm. She reached me, eyes flickering over my extra limbs – she could see them! But I barely had the brainpower to speak, let alone process that right now. "Pull Lozzie along with us."

"I ... I can't."

My legs were paralysed.

Knees locked, hips aching, all I could do was stand in place. Maintaining my extra tentacles took every ounce of energy I had, and I could already feel it fading, feel myself going faint, blood sugar crashing out. Moving them – six of them, all at once – took so much concentration that I couldn't even wiggle my toes. For two

whole seconds I forgot to breathe.

What had I said last night, in my post-euphoric bravado? That I could wield a dozen tentacles, a hundred, and instinct would scale up?

Optimistic nonsense.

My brain simply wasn't made to track six extra limbs, each one performing a different function. I felt them anchored deep inside my torso, three on each side now, pneuma-somatic flesh embedded deep inside my core muscles, wrapped around ribs, cushioning organs and infiltrating tissues. Alien muscle attached to my own, forming a new web of neutral connections and signals too complex for the ape to pilot and too fleshy for the abyssal memory to recognise.

Lozzie's limp weight sagged in the only still-occupied tentacle, the one I'd wrapped around her like a harness. I could feel her breathing, feel her heartbeat transmitted down my extra limb. Her wispy blonde hair tickled me.

She was still singing, a reedy mumble of nonsense-sounds.

Behind her, Praem was frozen to the spot, deceptively calm with her heels together and hands clasped in front, out of place in her maid uniform. She'd ignored Evelyn's frantic command.

"Heather?" Raine hissed.

"I can't move my legs," I choked out. "Raine, I'm- I'm going to run out of energy. I can't-"

Raine jammed her handgun into the waistband of her jeans.

"Praem, get ready to grab Lozzie and run," she called out. "Evee, back into the corridor, now. Heather, I'm going to move you. Hold onto Lozzie as tight as you can."

"Raine, I can't hold this up! I can't do it, I-"

"Praem, on three," Raine said, as if they were about to lift a sofa together. Her blind confidence kept me going another few seconds. Raine had a way out, she always had a way out, a plan. "One, two, three."

Raine swept me off my feet.

The tentacles in my flanks made it more complicated than usual,

but she scooped me up in one swift motion, an arm hooked under my knees. My tentacles whipped around with the sudden change of position and the sky-child's massive trunks surged forward into the opening. Raine was already turning, making for the doorway and Evelyn's wide-eyed face beyond.

Praem broke for Lozzie, but even the doll-demon wasn't fast enough. Three strides of dead sprint with artificial muscle was not going to be enough. The trunk-like tentacle would win, reach Lozzie first and – what?

With a scream and a shout and an awful tearing sensation inside my chest, I hoisted Lozzie into the air.

I recall very little of the next few moments. Several things all happened at the same time, and only by later reconstruction could I piece them together.

The sky-child's tentacle that had been reaching for Lozzie slammed through the open space where she'd occupied a moment before.

My chest felt like it was on fire, like I'd torn a hole in my lungs and broken all my ribs.

Raine turned back, staring down at me in horror as I screamed.

Praem jerked to a halt.

The other two asteroid-thing tentacles went for me, arcing through the air as Raine – confident Raine, unphased by anything – stumbled in sheer animal terror at the size of the things. To her infinite credit, she didn't go over, she didn't fall or cower or even scream; she swung me backward with her entire body weight.

For one weightless, stomach-dropping moment I knew she was going to throw me at the door and hope I made it, her own safety be damned.

But with my ape-brain distracted by pain, the abyssal thing in me took over. Four tentacles met the two massive trunks from the sky-child, and held them there for a split-second, wrapped around them, pushing back, exerting a strength that I'm certain took a decade off my life expectancy. My ribcage creaked and I screamed again, awful pain, jagged and cutting, sawed up my chest.

All for one split-second, all because there was no way that I, whatever survival instincts I'd brought back, was going to let Raine

go. It wasn't until later that I realised I'd anchored myself to her with my final available tentacle. I'd wrapped it around her waist and clung on tight as she'd tried to throw me.

The split-second ended.

My strength failed. The power in my extra limbs faded. I felt it like pins and needles, like a leg going numb.

"Wheeeee!"

Lozzie cheered with child-like exuberance. So very out of place.

It froze us all. Even the sky-child – which is what saved us.

She was wide awake.

Wide awake and wide eyed, laughing and giggling, all the way up in the air where I still held her aloft with what little of my strength remained. She twisted and turned in my tentacle-harness, flailing to push her hair out of her face, staring around at the paused chaos.

"Lozzie!" I tried to say – but my breath came out in a broken wheeze.

A tremor of failure passed through my extra limbs, fading, shrivelling, turning to ash from the tips on down, flaking away into dust on the wind.

"Heather!" Lozzie lit up at me.

"No, no no no," I moaned. I hissed, I spat, I felt more like an animal than a human being.

The tentacles gave out. I dropped Lozzie.

Praem stepped underneath and caught her with ease. The first of the sky-child's tentacles was rearing back, attention locked on Lozzie and Praem. I keened through my teeth as my own tentacles finished dissolving, desperately trying to reform them, to perform the hyperdimensional mathematics all over again. Awful stabbing pains lanced into my sides where the tentacles had been rooted, but I had to help, I had to stop it, I had to make Lozzie safe.

"No, bad! Down!"

Lozzie held a finger up at the giant rearing tentacle. She screwed up her brow and turned her delicate, elfin face as stern as she could

manage, as if she was admonishing a naughty puppy. She quickly wriggled out of Praem's grip, though with nothing like the slippery grace she'd shown the first time. Praem helped by setting her on her feet.

"No! Down!" she repeated. The sky-child's tentacles lowered toward the floor, all three of them, in a distinctive bow.

"Lozzie," I wheezed.

She looked back over her shoulder at us and pulled a half-cheeky, half-worried smile of gritted teeth and wide eyes, an 'I-can't-believe-that-worked' smile.

"What now?" Raine asked, sharp and quick.

"We should go!" Lozzie stage-whispered, grimacing as she tiptoed backward from the trio of giant snakes. She kept one finger out to ward them off. They followed slowly, a poorly trained animal testing its boundaries.

"Right on," Raine said.

Of the rest in the castle, there is little to tell. Lozzie and Praem backed away from the tentacles until they rejoined us, and together we all crept to the door, Raine carrying me in her arms, clutching me close as I hissed and spat and writhed in pain. The sky-child's tentacles followed us a way, splitting and splitting and splitting again down into dozens at the slender opening of the doorway back out of the throne room. But even that technique did not allow it to worm its way through the entire castle structure. Even giants have limits.

We made the gateway back to Sharrowford seconds later and plunged through in a rush. Lozzie tumbled into the table, and Praem caught Evelyn by the arm as she dropped her walking stick.

I was almost delirious by that point, uncontrollable in Raine's arms. Awful, bone-deep pain wracked my sides, and a worse pain roiled in my chest. Cold sweat plastered my hair to my forehead and glued my clothes to my skin.

"Little suggestion, maybe close the gate?" Raine threw back over her shoulder as she carried me to the sofa. Lozzie scurried after us, a pale, worried little face bobbing over Raine's shoulder. "No rush, you know, take your time and all that."

“You do not have to tell me twice,” Evelyn snapped.

I caught a glimpse of her back, one arm out as she drew a scribble in black marker pen on the wall, marring the complex perfection of the gateway mural.

It collapsed without so much as a sound. No pop, no flash, no implosion of mirror-smooth surface. One moment it showed a vision of grey jade and fog, the next it was the bare wall of the ex-drawing room, an outline scored into the plaster.

Raine set me down onto the sofa. I clutched at her arm, I hissed, I tried to stand up. I was barely aware of what I was doing.

A gasp ripped out through my throat, and it did not sound right. Wheezy, serrated, like broken glass inside my chest.

“Lost them again!” I whined through my teeth. “No, gone again, no, nooooo.”

“Heather, Heather look at me,” Raine snapped hard, and took my face in both hands. “Heather, concentrate. I need you to stay awake, okay?” She glanced over her shoulder and raised her voice.

“Kimberly! Kim! Get in here!”

I couldn’t focus. Not on Raine’s mask of worry. Not on Evelyn as she stomped over to us, raving about idiot decisions and mortal dangers and ‘what the fuck has she done to herself?’ Not on Praem, straightening her skirt. Not on Kimberly as she appeared wide-eyed in the kitchen doorway.

Lozzie’s face bobbed over Raine’s shoulder, and I could focus on that.

“It worked,” I croaked. “You’re awake. Worked.”

Then I coughed, and up came a mouthful of blood.

“Oh, Goddess, what?” Kimberly’s said. “What- what-”

“Call an ambulance, now,” Raine told her. She turned back to me, and for once Raine failed to cover her fear with confidence.

“Heather, Heather don’t look at it, it’s going to be- you’re going to be fine. You’ve probably torn a lung, maybe. Focus on me. *Heather.*”

I couldn’t. All I could see was my own blood on the hand I’d raised to my mouth. Bright red. Another cough – more half-strangled choke – produced another splatter of crimson. Tasted iron in the

back of my throat.

Inside, my body was trying to *change*, trying to close the wound. The memory of the abyss tried to knit me back together with logic meant for starlight and photons, not flesh.

Impossible, of course. The pain spiked, a hot needle in my lungs, and I screamed again, bucking and kicking on the sofa.

“What do we do?” Raine asked, hard and urgent. “Evelyn, what do we do?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Evelyn shouted. “I don’t know the first thing about healing fucking wounds, let alone internal ones.”

“Hospital,” Praem intoned.

“Yes, yes exactly,” Raine said. “Kim!”

“I’m calling, I’m calling now.” Kimberly had a mobile phone to her ear.

“Surely there’s something we can do in the meantime,” Raine said. “Evee, please, come on-”

“There is!” Lozzie chirped.

Her head suddenly wriggled into view from beneath Raine’s armpit, like a puppy nosing her way into a lap. She smiled a resolved little smile and nodded seriously to Raine.

“I’m going to do a thing to help her do what she’s already trying to do and it’ll replace missing parts for a bit, okay?” she said to Raine all in a rush. “Might hurt though! Like, lots and lots! Don’t hit me afterwards?”

“I won’t hit you, Lozzie. Do it.” Raine took my flailing hand and squeezed tight.

“Heather, it’s me, it’s meeee,” Lozzie said. “And look, now it’s going to be you too!”

Lozzie put her hand on my chest, at the base of my ribcage. I’d love to say that I passed out from the pain, that I didn’t feel what happened next, what she knitted inside the lung I’d torn out of position. I’d love to say that merciful oblivion took me, as it so often did with the pains of hyperdimensional mathematics.

It did not.

I felt every moment of Lozzie's emergency pneuma-somatic 'surgery'. Five seconds was all she took. Fast, I'll give her that.

Five seconds of broken glass, molten steel, and burning tar.

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"It's all my fault! It's all my fault. I'm sorry, Heather, I'm really sorry. It-" Lozzie hiccuped, sniffed, and scrubbed her nose and eyes with her sleeve in a huge wet mess. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"It- Lozzie- it's okay," I said, and tried to smile encouragingly. "I'm going to be okay, aren't I? You fixed me."

"... I fix you and you fix me," she said, smiled a shaky smile, then let out another wet sob and – gently, thank goodness – buried her face in my shoulder. "It's my fault. I was in a dream and I heard them calling and wanted to join in. They'd never hurt me, I know they'd never hurt me! It was all a big mistake and I couldn't tell anybody, I couldn't tell you! Please don't hate me, Heather, please, please."

Lozzie sobbed and shook. No crocodile tears, no childish attempt at invoking sympathy to avoid disapproval. Her anguish was painfully real. I would have cried too, if it wasn't for the bone-crushing exhaustion. Instead, I touched my head to hers.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I said. "It was my fault, over-reacted."

"Hey, me too," Raine put in gently. "I tried to shoot at the thing. I'm sorry too, Lozzie."

"I wasn't-" Lozzie sniffed. "I wasn't awake when you needed me to be."

"Then I forgive you."

"Please don't hate me," she said in a small voice.

"I don't. I won't."

"Does Lozzie maybe want some hot chocolate too?" Raine ventured. "Though I think hers would be sans the vodka."

"Mmmm-mmmm?" Lozzie shrugged minutely. I gave Raine the nod

anyway, but Praem was the one who left the room to go downstairs and whip up another batch.

We were all gathered in my and Raine's bedroom, over seven hours after our return and Lozzie's impromptu surgery. Lozzie herself was tucked half under the covers with me while Raine sat on the edge of the bed. Evelyn was perched in the desk chair, frowning like a hawk, distractedly rubbing at the junction between her thigh and her prosthetic. Outdoors, the sun was almost down, just a thin orange glow on the horizon as the street lamps flickered on. We'd turned the heating up, the radiators struggling.

I'd spent most of those seven hours curled up in a tight ball of pain, caked in cold sweat, at first dissociating heavily in the aftermath of Lozzie's work – not to mention the awful stabbing pain of the bruises in my flanks, old and new.

Of the surgery itself I recalled little.

According to Raine, I'd screamed my head off. I did vaguely remember trying to shove Lozzie's hand away. Raine had to grab my wrists and hold me down by the shoulders, not an easy feat despite my scant muscle mass and small size. By the time Praem had joined, Lozzie was done, and sobbing apologies over and over as I lay there in a shell-shocked heap, wheezing and shuddering.

Raine had fed me sips of water and painkillers, then carried me up to the bedroom and watched me for any signs of relapse.

Only two things kept her from rushing me to the hospital regardless; first, that I'd stopped coughing up blood as soon as Lozzie had finished. My breathing had returned to normal, no longer that awful fluttering, guttering sound. And second, if she did present me for medical treatment, the doctors would find a very curious structure inside my chest, supernatural stitches and staples and surrogate tissues holding my left lung together. I'd become instant medical history; or more likely their brains would refuse to see reality, and whatever treatment they attempted would hurt me far worse.

"No more blood. It's all packed down. It's safe, safe, really, serious. Double serious! I wouldn't guess, wouldn't guess about this!" Lozzie had chattered, sniffing between her tears as Raine had listened to my breathing. She seemed even more reluctant to leave my side than Raine was. "I didn't even do it, not really, it was Heather, all

her, I just encouraged it over the finish line because she couldn't think right then."

Her tiny elfin face, wracked with awful lip-chewing guilt, had watched me from the edge of the bed.

"But how long will it hold for?" Raine had asked.

Lozzie's answer was a whirlwind of overlapping statements and explanations, retractions and loop-backs, how my own cells would replace the 'sticky-fix pollyfiller happy goo' – but that didn't help with the pain. Eventually I'd drifted off into a state of feverish half-sleep. Raine had tucked me in under the sheets. Voices whispered on the edge of my muddy consciousness.

"Thank you," said Raine. "Thank you, whatever you did."

"But it hurt her so much ... "

"And it's kept her alive. Who knows if she'd have made it to the hospital?" Raine sighed heavily. I think I heard her raking her fingers back through her own hair. I'd never heard her sound so shaky. "Thank you."

"... okay."

"Hey, Lozzie, it's alright. We haven't talked much in the past, we barely know each other, but Heather cares about you, which means I do as well."

"Of course, mmhmm," Lozzie said, voice still sad but recovering a little. "You fuck a lot, after all, right?"

"I-" Raine failed to suppress a 'snrk' of laughter. "Uh, yeah. Yes, we do."

"Oh for pity's sake," came a third voice – Evelyn, further away. "This isn't the time. You're absolutely sure this 'replacement flesh' will hold?"

"Mmhmm! Mmhmm! It's her own body!"

"Hmm ... well, when she's awake, I want her downstairs, in a circle. I want to check for myself. Make sure she's not going to bleed out internally one night if she tears something."

"Yes. Good," Raine said. "Do that, please."

Silence fell. I drifted off. Minutes or hours later, voices filtered back in as I turned over, my throat thick and heavy with sleep and the lingering taste of blood.

“- be fine if I can go play with the kids again,” Lozzie was saying. “They’re fun! They’re safe, really! You just have to speak the language!”

“*Fun*, right,” Evelyn said through clenched teeth.

“And that’s what woke you up? Proximity?” Raine asked.

“Mmmhmmm! Like, they remind me what I am, you know? It’s cool, it’s fine, I can go myself if you just open the door.”

“How often?” Evelyn asked.

“Um ... maybe ... no ... um, wait and see?”

I slipped off again as my friends hammered out the logistics of keeping Lozzie awake. Dozed for maybe an hour, maybe two, but not full sleep, only scraps of life’s great feast.

Even hours later I was still shaky and weak, when I finally woke. Raine helped me sit up in bed and pull the sweat-soaked hoodie off my head. Sitting there with my tshirt hiked up, bent forward on the bed, Raine found six bruises this time. One anchor-point for each tentacle old or new, clustered on my flanks between the base of my ribcage and my hips. Each one throbbed, deep and lasting.

“Take it slow, real slow, okay? Try to straighten out, but move slow, that’s it.”

Raine helped me sit upright, as I struggled up through the haze of painkillers and the throbbing ache in my sides, but I froze halfway there.

A foreign object, an alien structure, *tugged* inside my chest.

“Ah! W-what is that? Ah- ahh!” I broke out in panic sweat again, a hand fluttering to my chest. One should not be able to feel one’s own lungs pulling and tightening, like a mass of scar tissue immobile against the elasticity of the surrounding skin. “What is that?!”

“It’s all supposed to be! Supposed to be!” Lozzie leaned on the bed and peered at my chest. “It’s all supposed to be. It’s going to be fine! It’s your own body, it’s okay. It’s just you, all you, all

Heather.”

“I can ... I can *feel* it. I can feel the inside of my own lungs. Oh, ugh.” I swallowed the feeling down.

“Only for a bit. Then it’ll become you!”

I blinked at Lozzie’s elfin face as she swept her wispy golden hair back, trying to comprehend what she’d said and link it with what I felt tugging and stretching inside me. Despite all the words I’d heard earlier, I’d been in too much pain to internalise the meaning. It came to me slowly, in waves of invasive horror; every time I breathed, I felt replacement lung-tissue flex inside me.

“Heather?” Raine murmured softly, one hand stroking the back of my head.

“ ... I grew pneuma-somatic flesh as a replacement,” I said at length. “Right. Okay. I can- I can deal with this.”

I almost couldn’t. As Raine helped me sip from a mug of hot chocolate, I felt too nervous to move, disgusted and flinching at every tug and pull of tightened tissue inside my chest, weak and shaking from hunger despite the biscuits Raine brought me, despite inhaling an entire packet. Lozzie read me like an open book, great big eyes watery and sad, biting her lip in guilt, and then she finally clambered half into the bed to hug me and wail her apologies.

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“You’re saying that thing – that ... ” Evelyn sighed. “We need a name for those things.”

Praem had returned with more hot chocolate. Lozzie sat cross-legged on the bed now, sniffing and snuffling and feeling awful about herself.

“Shitfuckers,” Raine suggested with a smirk. “Okay no, for real. Squid-moons?”

“Squid-moons,” I sighed. “Farcical.”

“Ruuuuude,” Lozzie said, but without any hooting exuberance. “The one we saw ... um ... well, he’s called-”

She made a sort of breathy honking sound which was absolutely not meant to come from a human throat. Whatever else Lozzie was, the piece of her we knew was physically human, so she managed to

sound like an asthmatic duck. Raine was very polite and did not laugh.

“ ... mmm.” Lozzie made a sad little pout of failure.

“S’okay,” I croaked for her. She shrugged and wiggled her backside deeper into a mass of bedsheets she’d pulled up around herself.

“Let’s go with squid-moons,” Evelyn said with a long-suffering sigh. “Lauren, please. You’re saying that thing was, what, playing with us? Like an oversize dog that doesn’t know it’s own strength?”

Lozzie dipped her head, puffed out one cheek, and sketched a sheepish shrug. It was like she felt responsible for their behaviour, for our easy mistake.

“That’s a yes, isn’t it?” Raine asked. For the first time, I got a preview of the sort of tone Raine might use with a child – a gentler version of the usual bursting, overflowing confidence.

Lozzie nodded. Evelyn let out a huge sigh.

“Which means all this was unnecessary,” I croaked. Gestured at myself. “Could have defused it without hurting myself. Stupid Heather.”

“Hey, Heather,” Raine said. She reached over and rubbed the back of my head and my neck. Her touch took my mind away from the pain and exhaustion. “We don’t know that for sure. Right, Lozzie?”

“Um ... ” Lozzie bit her lower lip.

“Thank you for attempting to make me feel better,” I managed. “But I am an idiot.”

We all knew what Lozzie was. We all knew those squid-moon-thing were the children of the dessicated Outsider below the castle. But in a moment of panic and terror we’d simply reacted. Like the stupid, aggressive apes we were.

“Don’t beat yourself up, it’s not-”

“We were all idiots!” Evelyn interrupted Raine with a snarl. She lurched up out of the chair, too much weight on her walking stick and withered left leg. Her prosthetic socket was bothering her, too much stress in the last two days. She stomped to the door, then turned and stomped back again. “We should never have gone any deeper into that fucking place without serious preparation. How

else are we supposed to respond to a giant fucking tentacle monster?! I could have sent Praem, I could have- Goddammit!”

“Evee,” Raine said. “Hey-”

“Don’t you *hey* me,” Evelyn snapped. “This was all our fault, we’re all responsible for Heather’s condition, you as well as me, Heather herself, my-”

“Evelynnnnnn.”

Evelyn cut off at the sound of her name in Lozzie’s mouth. Lozzie straightened up on the bed next to me, and I had the distinct, skin-crawling impression of a puppet drawn up by a set of strings – and then it was just Lozzie again, blinking big wet eyes at Evelyn.

“What?” Evelyn boggled at her. When Lozzie didn’t reply, Evelyn cleared her throat and looked to Raine and I for help.

“Evelyn,” Lozzie repeated with a determined little nod.

“ ... Lozzie?” I croaked.

But she was suddenly busy disentangling herself from the sheets, hopping on one foot as she bounced to the floorboards, hair everywhere, willowy limbs windmilling as she caught her balance. She got both feet down, erratic and clumsy for somebody who had seemed almost puppet-like moments before, and let out a long, almost theatrical sigh. She closed her eyes.

“Lozzie?” I repeated, heart in my throat. This reminded me far too much of when she first left us. The poise and theatre of her movements, the sudden change of attitude. “Are you ... Lozzie, what are you doing?”

“Oh!” Her eyes flew open, and she giggled. “This.”

She put her hands together as if praying, and bowed her head to us, a little Buddhist monk with too much hair and borrowed clothes.

“Thank you,” she said, heartfelt and bouncy. “Thank you. Evelyn. Raine. Praem too! But especially Evelyn, yes. Special thank you, special.”

Evelyn frowned at her in utter confusion. I wasn’t exactly up to speed either.

Lozzie straightened up and let out another sigh, this time with a

contented smile on her face. Before Evelyn could back away to safe distance, Lozzie tripped and hopped across the gap between them and threw her arms around Evelyn in the same way she might hug me, with zero inhibitions and the wild abandon of a person who rarely wears shoes.

“I- what- I- yes, okay, yes, you’re ... welcome?” Evelyn flustered, trying to withdraw. Lozzie squeezed. Raine hid a laugh behind one hand.

“Thank you!”

“Yes, okay, yes-”

“Lozzie,” I croaked. “Let her go. Evee has spinal problems, it’s hard for her to hug back.”

Not technically a lie, but Evelyn looked in need of rescue.

“Okey-dokey!” Lozzie withdrew her arms and pushed her hair back again, trying to keep it out of her face. She did a happy little foot-to-foot bob at Evelyn. “Thank you, Evee!”

“Yes, stop ... stop yelling everything, please.”

“Okay!” Lozzie whispered. “Thank you, for giving me somewhere to sleep, for letting me eat your food, for looking after me and putting a roof over my head. Thank you.”

“... oh, um.” Evelyn frowned again, at a loss for what to say. She frowned and cleared her throat, averted her eyes. Lozzie bowed her head again, a deep bow this time, the ends of her tresses trailing on the ground.

“You are welcome,” Praem supplied the words stuck in her mistress’ throat. Evelyn harrumphed and hemmed and cast about, deeply uncomfortable.

“The least I can do is provide what resources I have at my disposal,” she grumbled under her breath. “Not as if I’m much good for anything else.”

“Not true!” Lozzie chirped, one finger raised. “You are incredibly pretty, you know that?”

“I’m-” Evelyn frowned hard. “Alright, compliments are nice, but that’s a bald faced lie. I’m shrivelled and crippled. Don’t insult me.”

"Mmm—mmm." Lozzie shook her head, a big smug smile on her face, as if she knew something that Evelyn didn't.

I suspected I knew what Lozzie meant. She wasn't talking about the physical world perceptible to the rest of us. Evelyn was a mage, and Lozzie, at least inside, was as non-human as I had become, even if she'd gotten there by a different route. The inside of her head had been forever changed, when the thing below the castle had used her as a way out of its prison when she was little. What did she see when she looked at Evelyn? The rest of us could only guess.

To see Lozzie recovered gave me strength. Up and around, bouncing from foot to foot, well and happy and whole. It made all the pain and terror seem worth the risk, even if it had all been an idiotic mistake. Lozzie was whole once more, and I would protect her, from her uncle, from the vengeful ghost of her brother, from everything and anything that might harm her. Surrogate be dammed, she was not Maisie; Lozzie was Lozzie, and if she wanted to be a little sister to me, I would accept.

"And you're not an idiot, Heather," she said. "You're beautiful too."

"Thank you, Lozzie. You're too sweet."

She beamed at me, and clambered back onto the bed.

"Ahem, well," Evelyn cleared her throat.

"Beautiful," Raine echoed. "But also incredibly brave. Heather, I'm serious, don't beat yourself up for making the decision to protect Lozzie, or anybody, ever. Hey, I should know. You're braver than me."

"No I'm not," I croaked. "You were going to toss me out the door and sacrifice yourself, weren't you?"

"Ah." Raine pulled a rakish grin. "I won't say I wasn't, but hey, turned out we didn't need to."

"Please don't ever do that again," I croaked at Raine.

Lozzie gasped and put a hand to her mouth, mock-scandalised.

"It's what I do." Raine shrugged.

"I protect you too, Raine." The pain made me both bold and bitter. She blinked at me, and I saw the internal denial, the refusal of the premise, in the way she smiled. I frowned. "I protect you too."

She put her hands up. “Okay, okay! I will admit, you getting all territorial, puffing yourself up? Kinda hot. The tentacles were even cooler than I imagined, too.”

“Oh, right,” I grunted, and swallowed down the other pain – the loss, all over again, for the second time in as many days, of watching my beautiful, shining tentacles crumble to dust, of losing that bodily perfection yet again. I curled up around my wounded flanks, and felt like I’d been sliced apart rather than returned to normal. A shudder of suppressed pain passed through my sides, and I winced, hard, as the phantom limbs tried to uncurl, but found themselves seized up, invisible, never born. “You could see them, couldn’t you?”

“It was that place,” Evelyn mused. “All that crap out in the streets, that was pneuma-somatic life, but we could all see it. Same with your ... additions,” she added that word through her teeth.

“You saw them too?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Rainbow strobing. Very flashy. Didn’t exactly seem like your style, Heather.”

“What, rainbows?” Raine asked with a smirk. “Come on, Eevee, do the math.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes.

“Yes, I’m with Eevee on this one,” I croaked. “Just because I’m a lesbian doesn’t mean I automatically sprout *rainbow tentacles*, don’t be absurd.”

“Lesbian limbs,” Lozzie whispered.

“Very cool,” Raine said.

“You should not have done that,” Evelyn grunted. “Any of that. We are all clear on that, aren’t we?” She glanced around at all of us – Praem too – with a thundering frown. “Extenuating circumstances, yes, emergency, yes, but not like *that*.”

“Eevee?” I croaked.

“You could be dead, Heather. You were lucky it was a lung, and not your heart, or your spine. You could have ripped your insides apart right there on the spot, and no amount of pneuma-somatic replacement could save you then. Do not. Do that. Again.”

I nodded. The deepest recesses of my heart tried to deny it, but I'd almost killed myself back there. Evelyn was right.

"You did promise you wouldn't," Raine said gently – and the hint of her disappointment, the gentle reminder that I'd broken a promise, cut me to the quick.

"I won't- I won't do it again," I said, and couldn't look Raine in the eyes. "I'm sorry, I ... I just reacted. It's not an excuse. Never again, yes. Until I can make it safe."

Evelyn grumbled, not happy at that final qualifier I'd added.

But how? I needed to understand biology, my own biology and musculature, how to attach the limbs, the physics, the neural wiring. So much, too much. How could I even begin?

"I can show you how!" Lozzie chirped. "I ... I think!"

"You *think*?" Evelyn asked, dark and unimpressed. Lozzie bobbed her head, utterly unphased by Evelyn's glowering ire.

"I think! I do it a lot, there's a lot of things to think about, you know?"

Raine laughed. Lozzie looked at her as if she didn't understand the joke. Perhaps it wasn't a joke.

"There's so much I want to ask you," I said to Lozzie, and reached over to take her hand. She interlocked her fingers with mine and waved our joined hands back and forth.

"Ask away. Away-away!"

A million questions surfaced in my mind, curiosities and important matters I'd bottled up for weeks or months. The dreams we'd shared – how? Where did Lozzie go for all that time after we rescued her? Why had she trilled at the Flutist creature back in the castle? How had Maisie contacted her to save me from Wonderland? Where did she get her clothes out there? The memory returned to me in a flash; Lozzie with a half-eaten brownie paused on the way to her mouth, standing amid the black ash of Wonderland. Her Knight, her history with Zheng, the nature of the Outsider under the Cult's castle.

A horrible voice whispered in the back of my head.

What if she doesn't last? What if she leaves again?

She won't. She can't, not right now.

What if she goes back to being a vegetable? What if this wasn't enough? She needs to be Outside. She shouldn't be here – you're selfish for wanting her to stay.

“Lozzie ... ” I wanted to ask so many things, but I settled on the practical question first, because my self-loathing didn't fully believe she was going to stay. “Lozzie, we've been trying to find Zheng. We don't know where to start, but you were ... friends, of a kind, with her, weren't you?”

“I was! Am! Zheng is lovely I know she's scary sometimes but she's such a sweetie if you talk, but I had to go inside her head to talk, because she couldn't.”

“Do you know how we could find her?”

Lozzie lit up in a smug smile. “Easy! You have to smell her out. She has a pretty strong smell, you know?”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.5

Trees stretched toward heaven either side of the road, sunk deep in a lake of their own shadows. Open stretches of muddy field and dank hedgerow grew fewer and fewer. We lost sight of the overcast sky for minutes at a time, blotted out by the rain-thickened canopy far above, plunging the inside of the car into ghostly twilight. Triply enclosed – wrapped up warm against the coming hike, inside our temporary machine of metal and glass, and deep in the woods.

How paradoxical, I thought, that leaving the confines of the city can lead us into a far more claustrophobic tangle.

“I suspect this is as close as we’ll get,” Raine said.

She turned the car off the road and into a lay-by, tires crunching across patches of crumbled asphalt. Raine set the handbrake but she kept one hand on the wheel and left the engine running, a soft chattering purr undercut by the sound of occasional raindrops on the metal roof.

The woods marched away either side of us, dark and inscrutable.

“If you go down to the woods today,” I sighed.

“You better go in disguise!” Lozzie finished. She was already twisting against her seatbelt to press her face up against the passenger-side window.

“This is some goose-chase shit,” Twil grunted from next to me on the back seat.

“You just concentrate on your chips,” Raine said. Twil huffed and rolled her eyes, and dug another curly chip from her crinkled bag of fast food treats.

“I see a rabbit!” Lozzie whispered.

“What? Where?” Twil twitched her head around like a pointer dog, craning to see.

“There’s probably fields or isolated houses closer,” Raine said, as she stared out past Lozzie, into the depths of the woods. “But I

doubt they'd overlook four young women driving a car onto their land. This is it then, we need to walk from here. What does our glamorous navigation officer think?"

She shot a glance over her shoulder, at me bundled up in my coat and hoodie on the back seat, and favoured me with a rakish smile and a little wink, for morale.

I felt about as far from glamorous as I could get without being covered in my own vomit. My sides ached and itched, stiff and sore, and I had to keep worming a hand inside my hoodie to scratch at the slowly healing flesh. Every breath I took stretched and flexed the replacement lung tissue inside my chest, impossible to forget about, always there on the edge of my consciousness. My breathing sounded clear, but I felt like I should be wheezing and coughing.

"Um ... " I squinted down at the map on the screen of my mobile phone. "I think Lozzie's spot is ... about ... a mile ... mile and a half, straight that way?" I pointed directly into the woods. "Maybe?"

The map hardly resembled the territory.

Neat yellow lines represented roads that in reality surprised the driver with blind corners, dipped into hollows without warning, were pitted with ancient potholes and dessicated roadkill and crumbled edges churned by muddy ruts from tractor tires. Jolly green rectangles indicated fields choked with spring mud and populated by sad, soggy sheep. Darker green hatching meant trees; great vast swathes of the stuff filled the empty spaces between road and farm, carefully contained and delineated in ink. The map proudly labelled this entire area as 'Berndsey Ancient Woodland (protected)'.

Up close, the tree trunks vanished into chaotic infinity, rooted in centuries of leaf-mulch and ragged undergrowth.

"Spot, spot," Lozzie chirped and twisted the other way in her seat. "It's an area, a whole area." She spread her arms wide, almost knocking Twil's fast food out of her lap.

"Which means brick shithouse could be anywhere out there," Twil said.

"Light rain, damp ground, that's good scenting conditions," said Raine. "I did read up on this before I asked you to track for us, you

know.”

“I’m not a fucking bloodhound,” Twil grunted. “And yeah, you’re right, I’m real good at this, but these woods are full of animals, it’s gonna be like finding a needle in a stack of other needles. More likely to pick up a deer or a badger or something. This is a stupid goose-chase. Come on, Heather’s still too fucked up to spend like three hours wandering around the woods in the rain, right? Uh,” she blinked sideways at me. “No offence, Heather?”

“It’s not stupid,” I said softly. Twil grimaced, hunching her shoulders like a dejected dog. “Please? Lozzie can only tell us the general area, but you can pinpoint Zheng. You’re the only one who can even try.”

“... mmmm,” Twil made a grumbling sound. “Pretty close to Brinkwood. Could just run home.”

“You got your mercenary price,” Raine said with a smirk and a nod at Twil’s bag of fast food. She finally killed the engine. It sputtered out, and the car’s heating shut off. Fat raindrops pattered on the roof, dripping from the foliage overhead. “You ain’t goin’ nowhere, lassie. I’ll call your mum, tell her you stiffed us. Eat your last chicken strip.”

“Tch,” Twil tutted. She dug out her final chicken strip and bit it in half with one frustrated bite.

“I thought you’d relish this, Twil,” I said. “An opportunity to show off your skills. Ah, but Evelyn isn’t with us right now, is she? That explains that.”

Twil swallowed so hard she almost choked on her food. “W-what? Heather, what?” she spluttered, blushing slightly, doing an absolutely awful job of concealing her true reaction.

“... are you serious?”

Of course she was. I shouldn’t have asked. Twil was either genuinely confused or too embarrassed – or in denial.

“Serious about what?” Twil boggled at me.

This was not the right moment for this discussion. Raine was rummaging around in the driver’s foot-well, switching her trainers for wellington boots like the rest of us already wore. Lozzie was biting her lower lip, bouncing on the back of the passenger seat,

head swivelling this way and that to spot things out in the woods.

“Never mind,” I sighed. “I just don’t understand why you’re so grumpy about this.”

“Cos it’s raining, duh,” said Twil.

“Oh.”

“Fuckin’ hate gettin’ rained on.” Twil devoured the last piece of chicken strip with some quick, angry chewing, then noisily sucked the grease off her fingers.

“It’s because Zheng’ll want to fight you!” Lozzie declared with a big serious nod and a big happy smile. She stopped bouncing for a moment to reach out and pat Twil on the head. Twil shrugged her off, but not too aggressively.

“Fuck that,” Twil grunted. “I can take her.”

“Bet you’d want Evee to watch that too,” I muttered, unsure if I should smile or sigh.

“H-Heather, what are you going on about?” Twil squint-frowned at me.

“I like the rain, it makes me feel outdoorsy and outdoorsy is healthy, isn’t that true? That’s true.” Lozzie asked herself – then, before any of us could stop her, she popped her seatbelt free with a click, opened the passenger door, and bounced out of the car. She landed with an unsteady little hop in her borrowed, over-sized wellington boots, with her pastel blue and pink poncho flapping outward. She got her footing then skipped across the asphalt of the lay-by to the edge of the woods, and turned her face upward to feel the rain-mist on her skin.

March cold, the cold of the North in early spring, swept right into the car through the door she’d left open. I huddled up tighter inside my coat and pink hoodie. Twil shook herself and growled. Raine laughed.

“Guess we’ve been decided for,” said Raine. “Time for a hike.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Twil grumbled.

We piled out of the car. I took a long time, even when Raine offered me a hand up. I still had to move slowly so as not to aggravate my bruises. Over the last week they’d turned to great shapeless masses

of black and purple, stiff muscle, knotted flesh, then coloured into a fascinating array of sickly yellows and greens as the healing process had gotten underway.

As I found my feet and thanked Raine, the smell of the woods washed over me.

Organic rot, centuries of dark loam enriched by mountains of leaf and branch; a hint of fungal growth beneath the vegetable overtone; thick-packed clay slick and wet. Spring had filled in the canopy and covered the trees with buds, but not yet fully clad their skeletal appearance in green flesh.

And the mud. So much mud, this time of year.

When we'd prepared for this little outing, I'd thought wellington boots were an over-reaction. I'd had to borrow a pair from Evelyn, great loose rubber stompers which would inevitably make my feet sore. The area around Sharrowford was fractured into a mosaic of farms and woodland, split by hedgerows and the outposts of villages, slashed through by the high line of the train-tracks and the deep cut of the motorway – and none of that was visible out here to the north, deep in the woods. We couldn't even hear any other cars.

But surely the countryside wouldn't be *that* muddy?

Proved how little I knew. The mud was thick and cloying, already sticking to and sucking at the underside of Lozzie's wellington boots as she ventured out past the crumbling asphalt. She pulled her left foot free of a boggy hole with a *slooorp-pop* sound.

I felt utterly out of place. My natural environment was safely ensconced in the heart of a city.

"You sure you're alright for this?" Raine murmured, quietly so Twil wouldn't hear. The werewolf was busy rolling her shoulders, cracking her knuckles, limbering up, her hood flipped up against the rain – barely mist down here under the canopy.

"I'll be okay," I said.

"You get out of breath, you want to turn back, you tell me, Heather. Please don't bottle it up. Not out here. Promise?"

"I said I'll be okay, Raine, really."

I attempted a little stretching of my own. My flanks were even

stiffer than usual from the car journey, though we'd only left Sharrowford about thirty minutes ago. I tried an experimental twist from side to side, then reached over my head with alternate hands. My core muscles complained like overstressed rope. I could practically hear the muscle fibres creaking and crackling. The pneuma-somatic symbiont inside my lung flexed and twitched, and I winced.

"Promise me, please?" Raine asked.

"If I don't feel up to this, I will tell you, I promise."

"Thank you." Raine shot me a smile and the look in her eyes changed, just enough to make me blush a tiny bit.

"... Raine?"

"You look good, s'all."

"Well ... thank you, yes, but not right now." I sighed and tucked my hair back over one ear, still self-conscious about it.

"Suits you."

Yesterday I'd had my first hair cut since I'd started university. Self-administered at first – until Praem had stepped in. Evelyn swore blind she hadn't directed the doll-demon to do anything, hadn't even known. My attempt to tidy up split hairs and deal with stray locks in my eyes had turned into a straight fringe and an inch off all round. So now it was too long *and* too neat.

"I look like a doll," I sighed.

"You look like a girl genius protagonist in a YA novel," Raine laughed, winked, and bent down to fetch a pair of collapsible hiking sticks from the back of the car. She'd found them this morning, God alone knows how, in some forgotten corner of the house. She clicked one of them open with a flourish, locked it in place with a button on the handle, and offered it to me.

I sighed again. "A walking stick, really?"

"It's got a cool spike on the end. For stabbing." Raine grinned and brandished the stick as if fencing with an invisible partner. "Come on, don't you want a cool spike? Stab a motherfucker?"

"That's for grip." I rolled my eyes, but couldn't keep a smile off my face. "But yes, Raine, I would love a cool spike. Thank you."

I accepted the stick and placed the metal tip awkwardly against the ground. The grip-spike clacked against the asphalt.

Was this my future? I'd once swam the infinite oceans of abyssal darkness, swift and graceful, a thing of lean muscle and sharp claw, evading predators and defying leviathans. I had been so *pure*. The memory would haunt me forever, beautiful and unattainable. And now I needed a walking stick to hobble through the woods.

"Hey, Heather, no shame," Raine said. She must have seen the look on my face, though she could never understand the full depth of my longing, the failure of this blunt, clumsy ape-body.

"I was just thinking, this must be how Evelyn feels. Relying on a stick to walk everywhere."

Raine wagged the other stick. "I'm gonna be using one too. Hiking's tough, no joke, even if we're only going a little ways. Might be more if Zheng gives us bother. I'll pass the stick off to Lozzie if she needs it though."

"Oh, I doubt she will."

Lozzie was peering deeper into the woods, like a child escorted to the threshold of adventure. She raised a hand and waved – to something only her and I could see.

We weren't the only creatures in this stretch of woodland.

Spirit life out here was less than in the city; less feral, less frantic, less wounded. Giant stick insects crossed from trunk to trunk way up in the treetops, waving blind limbs. Flat, undulating creatures like manta rays lurked on the forest floor. A giant of shadow and shell drifted past above, briefly obscured the overcast sky.

And standing like silent sentinels deeper out in the trees was a trio of true nightmare monsters. Each was as wide as a lorry, with skin like wet tar and three giant hooved feet, bodies covered in a dozen toothless, slopping mouths. They were crowned by clutches of upward-pointing tentacles, thick dark ropes like they were trying to imitate trees.

Lozzie waved to the nightmares, but they were already shuffling away. Away from me. Away from the abyssal thing clothed in human flesh.

Lozzie wasn't disappointed though. She giggled at the way they

waddled, and then tiptoed forward another few paces in the mud, enjoying the way it squished under her boots. She hugged her poncho tight, though I'd made sure she was properly dressed for the cold, in borrowed t-shirts and a thick jumper too. Her hair swayed as she walked, tidied back into a long, very thick braid which reached past her waist. I'd braided it myself, to keep it out of the way on this trip.

She was so excited, and I wondered if she'd ever been out in the woods before. Had she spent her whole life cooped up inside that castle, or wherever her parents had kept her before Alexander, the dreams of Outside her only escape?

And now she was free. Her joy was my joy. I smiled, for real.

"You really love her, don't you?" Raine murmured.

"Ah?" I cleared my throat. "Love? I don't know. I suppose so. She was a friend to me in a place I had no friends, Outside. She needed help, she ... well, she's not innocent, but ..."

"True that," Raine laughed softly.

"But she's a good person. I want to protect her." Something swelled inside my chest. "The bastards and the monsters won't get her. I won't let them. Not like Maisie."

Raine squeezed my shoulder. "Yeah. Bloody right."

"Thank you, Raine."

"Also 'bastards'? Heather, strong language for you."

"It's a strong feeling."

"Hey, Loz," Twil called. "Don't go too far alone, hey?"

"I'm fine!" Lozzie called back.

Raine raised her voice too. "Lozzie, has Zheng moved?"

Lozzie bobbed her head in an odd little rotating motion, closed her eyes and stood stock-still. Seconds ticked by in silence. I tried to concentrate, tried to pick up the 'scent' in the way she'd described it to me, the way Zheng herself had found me during the meeting at the pub. An abyssal scent, deeper than blood and flesh and bone, a mark left on reality below the level of human perception.

But all I smelled was rotting leaves.

Lozzie whirled an arm out suddenly, pointing back over her own head without opening her eyes. She held the position, then her eyes flew open and she giggled. “Ow!” She shook her hand as if she’d burned it. “Yeah, thattaway!”

“And what does your nose say, oh great hunter?” Raine asked Twil.

“Nose says it’s bloody well raining, isn’t it?” Twil pulled a face and shrugged, then nodded off to the side of the lay-by. “And there’s a dead pigeon over there. Stinks.”

“Yes, I’m certain we all wanted to know that,” I sighed.

“You fuckin’ asked.”

“Right, Twil, you lead with Lozzie, keep your eyes peeled.” Raine clicked her own hiking stick to full length, and gestured me forward, into the woods. “After you, Heather. I’ll bring up the rear.”

“We’re walking in the woods, this isn’t a ... ” I gestured with the head of my stick. “Military operation.”

I didn’t say it out loud, but we hadn’t seen hide or hair of Edward Lilburne or his minions all week. Caution was still our watchword, but nobody beyond our little group knew we were out here. Evelyn and Kimberly and Praem were all back home. We were in Zheng’s territory. To strike now, Lilburne would have to possess perfect intelligence, and also be a staggering idiot.

Raine cracked a grin, dangerously attractive. She looked good too, dressed in a loose raincoat and jeans.

“No, it isn’t,” she said. “It’s a hunt.”

= =

For a week before we set out to find Zheng, we found a new normal – and for me, normal turned out to be incredibly sore all over.

The full extent of my bruises took a couple of days to really set in, both the first three from the confrontation in the pub garden, and the full six from our idiotic fight with Lozzie’s ‘friendly’ squid—moon. The stabbing, lancing pain in my sides faded, became less frequent as my flank and core muscles turned so stiff and tight I swear they should have creaked when I moved. My abdominal and oblique muscles especially felt like one giant bruise, strained from

supporting structures they'd never evolved to account for.

It was a profoundly different pain to what I'd adapted to over the last half-year; after brainmath I always felt distant from my own body, hollow inside my chest, my biological processes rejecting what I'd done with my mind, as if I'd frayed the thread which anchored soul to flesh.

But the result of my ill-advised tentacle experiment was all bodily. I had never before felt so aware of so many small muscles. And they all ached.

Raine made me take several long, very hot baths to unclench the tissues, but I still spent the first half of the week hobbling about the house like an arthritic old woman, moving with great care, guzzling painkillers, curled up in bed while she massaged the stiffness out of my sides.

It wasn't as if we went anywhere, except to class. Edward Lilburne's answer was still pending.

Every day we expected a knock on the door, or a surprise in the street, or Amy Stack. Raine carried her gun everywhere, concealed inside her jacket, and despite my discomfort I did not ask her to desist. At university I felt a curious itching between my shoulder blades on several occasions, buried abyssal instinct trying to tell me I was being watched, but we never spotted the culprit, if there even was one beyond my own paranoia.

Evelyn spent a lot of time in her workshop, still poring over the books we'd looted from the site of the Sharrowford Cult's final, suicidal mass ritual. She kept the door open more often though, as she drew new versions of pieces of the gateway mural.

"We'll need a plan", she told me one morning, as I sipped coffee in the workshop doorway. The non-human book I'd retrieved from the library of Carcosa sat on the table in front of her, rifled through but still impossible to read.

"Of course we will?" I frowned, not following.

"I mean, we need a better plan, Heather. Better than we had when we visited the castle."

"Ah. Yes." I took a sheepish sip of coffee.

"Ah, indeed. Getting into difficulties when we can run straight

home is one thing. Going Outside, for real, even for an hour or two? All bets are off. I will not gamble on anything. No risks. You and I both know that, Heather. We've both been out there. You said the library was inhabited, by thinking beings. The last thing we want is a clusterfuck. We'd all end up dead."

"Yes." I sighed. "If only we could find a librarian."

"Huh," she laughed, humourless. "Indeed."

"A bodyguard may have to do."

"You mean Zheng."

"Zheng and Praem. And Raine. And ..." Me, I almost said. Evelyn frowned.

"Yes, Heather, I'm sure your tentacle display would intimidate the natives for all of five minutes before you bleed out on the floor."

"I wasn't-"

"You were thinking it."

"... I was," I sighed. "It would be so much easier if I could ..." I waved a hand at my head. If I could Slip reliably.

"Quite. We'll see what Zheng has to say about that. If she can go back to Glasswick tower ... mm." Evelyn picked up her walking stick from next to her chair and levered herself to her feet, gesturing at me with a toss of her fingers, then at the magic circle on a piece of canvas in front of the sofa. "In the meantime, take your top off and get back in the circle. I want to look you over again."

"You should probably use that line on Twil."

I placed my half-finished coffee on the edge of the table and wriggled my hoodie off over my head, which took a lot more effort than usual with all my bruises. Phantom tentacles tried to help, to drag the fabric off my head, to disentangle me, and I had to keep pausing to let the pain pass, to ignore the extra limbs which weren't really present.

When I got the hoodie off my head, Evelyn gave me a very unimpressed look, but I was too sore to care.

"Evee, I'm serious. Maybe a little romantic aggression will help?"

She tapped the circle with the tip of her walking stick. "Get."

I sighed and managed to struggle out of my tshirt too, my exposed flesh ruffled into goosebumps by the lingering morning cold. My sides were a patchwork of purples and greens and yellows, bruises in various stages of healing. Shivering a little, I stepped into the circle and closed my eyes – not for any silly mystical purposes, but from a fifty-fifty mix of tiredness and exasperation. And because I didn't want to see what Evelyn was about to look at.

She stomped over to the half-full child's paddling pool she'd set up once more in the corner of the workshop, settled into the chair before it, and muttered a string of incomprehensible Latin under her breath. I kept my eyes tightly closed. The first time she'd done this I'd seen the inside of my own lungs, and the sight of my own fluttering flesh had made me faint with dissociation and nausea.

"Two inches to the left," she said. "And raise your arms ... no, back to the right. Smidgen left. There. Hold still."

"Why *not* just tell Twil how you feel?" I asked. "Tell her to get topless for you."

Evelyn sucked on her teeth.

"Worst that could happen is she turns you down," I tried.

"Far from the worst that could happen," Evelyn grumbled. I was certain I wasn't supposed to hear that, a hiss between her teeth so soft it was for her ears only. She raised her voice back to normal. "Why must we talk about this now, Heather?"

"Because for a few moments, you are a captive audience," I admitted with a rueful smile.

"Tch." She sighed, clicked her fingers, and stood up. I opened my eyes. The pool had faded back into nothing but water, instead of a horrible lightless view of my own insides. "I don't see any tearing or bleeding. Not sure if your flesh is converting it yet, but we'll keep checking. Times like this make me wish I knew a doctor."

We did know a doctor, sort of, but I wasn't about to mention Felicity, not when I'd almost, almost got Evelyn to talk about Twil properly for the first time in weeks.

Slowly, painfully, I pulled my tshirt back over my head. "Evelyn, my dear friend–"

“Oh, great.” She rolled her eyes.

“- are you going to answer my question, or ignore it?”

Evelyn gave me another look, a tired glare. “I can look at you stripped down to your bra, Heather, because I don’t *care* about you stripped down to your bra, I care about you remaining alive and well. Twil may not be ... may not be ... ” She swallowed. A hint of blush coloured her cheeks and she averted her eyes. “May not be so simple.”

“You mean, you like idea of Twil in her underwear.”

“I-” She paused.

“It’s okay to think about it, Eevee. Thinking about these things is how we figure out what we like.”

“Alright, maybe I do!” she snapped. “But what does that mean? I have- I have- it’s not like I don’t think about her, but I can’t make the connection between Twil in here,” she jabbed the side of her own head, “and Twil out here in reality, walking around and talking nonsense and being all ... all ... *Twil*.” She huffed, shook her head in frustration, and I did my absolute best not to giggle.

This isn’t funny, I reminded myself. Your best friend is deeply confused, sexually and romantically. Rightly or wrongly. Render what help you can.

“Eevee, the best way to resolve all these feelings is talk to her.”

Evelyn looked me straight in the eye, and said, “She deserves better.”

“That’s Twil’s decision to make, isn’t it? Plus, she’s obviously interested, how haven’t you noticed? Would it be different if she made the first move, she-”

“Yes, because that’s what everybody wants, isn’t it?” she grumbled, turned away and stomped toward the kitchen. “A bitch of a woman with no future, a terrible temper, and anorgasmia. I’m a real fucking gem, aren’t I?”

As Evelyn stomped out of the room, a tremor passed through my sides, a slow-muscle quiver of limbs that didn’t exist. I winced in silence, and let her go, clutching my sides as my body tried to stop her leaving, wanted to turn her around, make her see.

Sorry, abyss-thing Heather, but you can't solve a friend's emotional problems by grabbing them with tentacles.

Such attempts to uncoil phantom limbs needled me a dozen times every day. Reaching for a mug, trying to hug Raine, washing myself in the shower as I ran my fingers over the mass of bruised flesh. Even in bed, I found myself flinching and gasping with pain as muscles tried to move tentacles which I didn't possess anymore. When I'd summoned those six extra limbs, the flood of information had overwhelmed my brain – but the human brain is wonderfully adaptive. Fresh neural pathways had been laid down, the beginnings of a pattern by which to incorporate the tentacles.

Rather counter-productive when I didn't have them.

Memories of lost glory tortured me. I could have neither tentacles nor peace.

But I did have Lozzie.

And thankfully, she took no convincing to stay at home.

"Where were you?" I asked, that very same afternoon I was recovering from her pneuma-somatic surgery. "For all those weeks, you just vanished. I had no idea what happened to you, where you were, if you were alive or hurt or anything. Why didn't you visit, even just for a few minutes? I needed to know you were safe."

"I was safe! I was Outside! It's the safest place for me!"

"Lozzie ... "

"I couldn't come back because he'd *know*," she lowered her voice to a whisper and glanced left and right, then nodded at Praem standing by my bedroom door, as if we were in a spy novel and Praem was guarding our retreat. "He knows when things plop through from one side to the other – he's got this machine!"

None of us had to ask who 'he' was.

"Machine?" Evelyn had frowned. "What do you mean, machine?"

"He's spent like forty years building it." Lozzie nodded to her, all serious and po-faced. "My brother said he'd been building it since before either of us were born, which is – wow! Wow. That's a lot of screws and nuts and bolts."

"A machine to detect translation from here to Outside, and the

reverse?" Evelyn grit her teeth. "That's impossible. Great. Have you ever seen it?"

Lozzie shook her head.

"Might not even exist," Raine suggested. "Could be a bluff."

"He knew about the Messenger," I croaked, still massaging my chest, trying to rub away the feeling of the shifting, flexing replacement flesh inside my lungs. "Maisie's messenger."

"Mmhmm!" Lozzie nodded several times. "I thought about it some more and he's probably the one keeping us here. Probably maybe. Trying to trap me!"

"He won't get you," I told her. "I won't let him."

"Yeah," Raine said, soft and assured. Lozzie gave me a hug, and I tried to hold it together. It was a minute or two until we parted again.

"Lozzie – this isn't really important," I started a little while later, after I'd wiped the threat of tears from my eyes. "But forgive me–"

"Forgiven!" She announced, one hand raised.

"If you couldn't come back here, where did you pick that up?" I nodded at her comfortable poncho, with the pastel pink and blue bands around a white middle. As soon as I'd been safely in recovery, she'd insisted on finding and wearing it again.

"Oh!" She giggled and flapped it outward. "I love this, isn't it pretty?"

"It is," I agreed. "But where did you get it? Where did you get all the clothes you had on? Your shoes? And you had a brownie ..."

"Oh I could come back here, but not *here* here," she chirped. "The poncho is from London, the brownie was from a shop in ... um ... somewhere south! Somewhere hot! I didn't know the language but I took it from a shop."

"Took it?" Raine smirked. "Lozzie, Lozzie. Learning fast."

"Oh," I sighed. "You weren't carrying any money when you left."

Lozzie shrugged and giggled again. "It's not like I hurt anybody! I just pick up a thing and – poof! Off I go!"

“A budding criminal mastermind,” said Raine.

“As long as you don’t ... well ... ” I sighed. “I suppose you had no choice.”

“Be gay, do crimes,” Lozzie whispered, and did a little twirl in her poncho.

If she’d insisted on tagging along with me to university, or wandering off into Sharrowford by herself, I would have been stressed out of my mind. Perhaps Lozzie sensed that. If she put herself in danger again, I would not be able to deal with it. I wouldn’t stop her, couldn’t stop her from doing what she wanted, it went against everything I believed she needed. But I also needed her to be safe.

She stuck to the house and occasionally the back garden, reading, playing video games – and cleaning.

She had the most bizarre reading habits. She walked while she read, in a circuit of the house with her nose in a book borrowed from myself or Evelyn, eyes wide and skipping across the pages, feet moving on automatic. She would emerge from a doorway with whispered words on her breath, not even looking up to see where she went, sometimes supernaturally graceful, never bumping into a chair or a corner – and sometimes clumsy on her feet, hopping to stop herself as she bumped into a wall.

At other times she parked herself in front of Raine’s playstation, with ample encouragement from Raine herself and a whistle-stop introduction to the small pile of Japanese role-playing games Raine kept on hand. I had the distinct impression she’d never been allowed video games before. Like me, she’d had little exposure, but unlike me she took to it with wild gusto, declared particular characters as her favourites, and had something to talk about with Raine.

The cleaning was most bizarre.

Clumsy, haphazard, sometimes producing more mess than she eliminated. She raided the kitchen for dusters and rags and cleaning spray, tucked her hair up in a big haphazard ball of loops and dragging ends, rolled up her sleeves, and then inevitably got distracted within fifteen minutes. But she kept coming back to the task, over and over.

"This place doesn't need cleaning. We keep the worst of it in order," Evelyn had grumbled toward the end of the week. "She-"

"She's trying to pull her weight," I'd whispered. "She's trying to chip in. Eevee, it's sweet."

"Its ... uurrghh," Evelyn sighed. "Alright. But keep her away from the bleach." She raised her voice, projected it from the kitchen where we stood, to the front room where Lozzie was inexpertly running an old feather dust with half the feathers missing over the stacks of old boxes. "You hear that, Lauren? No bleach. Please."

"But you're meant to put bleach down the toilets to kill all the germs and bugs because poop makes a lot of germs and bugs." She looked up and blinked. "Doesn't it?"

"... yes."

"It's okay, Lozzie," I said. "Please just don't do the toilets. Leave that for me."

And she talked. A lot.

She talked to Kimberly, despite the older woman's nervous tension around her. She cooed and encouraged Tenny's still-closed cocoon when we went out into the garden to see it, telling her to 'get bigger!' She rattled to spirits over the back of the garden fence, but I only caught that once or twice, and whatever language she used was far from human. Lots of soft hoots and little whistles. She even spoke to Praem, though only in private. More than once I caught snatches of one-sided conversation when they were alone together, Lozzie's voice in a long stream of solitary chatter. If Praem was replying, none of us could hear the words.

For the first time since I'd met her all those months ago, as a diminutive figure wearing a goat skull on her head, I had the chance to actually talk with Lozzie, at length, with no crisis to interrupt us, no half-remembered dream logic to cast a haze over my memories.

But she made even less sense than in the dreams.

"Why could I never remember them – remember you – after I woke up? It was so ... I was always so happy and relaxed in the dreams, but they should have been terrifying. We were Outside, unprotected, but half the time I didn't care. Like you'd ... done

something to my mind? Did you? Please, Lozzie, I have to know.”

“It was you, silly,” she’d giggled. “Of course you were happy, dreams are happy if they’re not nightmares, right? Outside’s not scary when you know it’s a dream!”

“ ... I suppose so, but were we not really there, or-”

“Up here!” Lozzie tapped her forehead. She rolled over on the bed, my bed. We’d woken up from a nap together, Raine was off at university alone, and the house was quiet and close around us. I was wrapped up in a blanket around my shoulders in the chair, asking questions that made no sense to anybody but Lozzie and I. She tapped her head again. “We were out there, up here.”

“So it wasn’t real.”

She huffed with a little ‘pffft’ of her mouth, and rolled over the other way, the long blonde waterfall of her hair splaying out behind her on the bed. “Imagination is real! Heathy-Heather I told you all this so many times, in the dreams!”

“I ... yes, I sort of remember, but it doesn’t make sense.” I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Lozzie, what was happening when we shared dreams? Really? Please, help me understand.”

“You can’t understand something that you’re supposed to just feel,” she said, and puffed out a cheek.

“Please try?”

Lozzie flopped her legs against the bed, then spread her arms and held up both hands, far apart, palms facing each other. “So like, there’s you, and there’s *you*. And they’re mirrors, and they see each other but can’t see behind themselves, and that’s why everybody is just a body. Yes?” She blinked big eyes at me, waiting for an answer.

“Yes,” I said automatically, but meant ‘what?’

“But if you turn the mirrors away from each other they can see everything else – but they can’t see themselves anymore! It’s stupid and it doesn’t work! That’s what my brother tried to do.” She sighed, shaking her head.

“Okay ... and?”

“But if you make the mirrors double-sided, you can do anything.” She burst into a bouncy smile. “That’s like us. Then you can have yourself and yourself but not get confused. I learned it a loooooong time ago, but you hadn’t got it yet when I came to see you the first time. I had to teach you.”

“You mean ... I could go Outside, in a dream, without having to go there physically?”

“Mmmm, kinda?” Lozzie bobbed her head back and forth. “But you’re still not getting it, Heathy-Heaths.”

“It doesn’t make a lot of sense to me.”

Lozzie smiled, closed her eyes, and spread herself out on the bed. “You just have to stop thinking so hard.”

= =

The woods thickened as we walked. Fifty feet in, we couldn’t see the road anymore.

We took it slow. We had to, because this part of the woods had no permanent foot trails, no cleared paths. Protected ancient woodland meant no ground-clearing, no cutting back overgrowth, no chainsawing apart fallen trees. We picked our way through a maze of brown tree trunks, across a carpet of mushy leaves compacted into the mud and left to rot for years. The greenery of the canopy swayed in the wind far overhead, but comparatively little light reached the forest floor, enough to nourish a few holly bushes and clusters of fern and some half-dead stands of birch.

Raine carried a torch in her coat, in case this took much longer than expected, but I was half tempted to ask her to switch it on now. Between the thin mist of the rain, the overcast sky, and the enclosure of the woods, we trekked deeper and deeper into a world of strange grey twilight and sucking mud.

At least Lozzie was having fun.

She danced ahead of us by a good twenty feet or so, peering around every tree and looking up at animal noises in sudden interest – squirrels running up the tree trunks, furtive foxes in the undergrowth, birds high up in the leaves. Every couple of minutes she paused and stood stock-still, then nodded and pointed us onward. Twil trudged along behind her, hands in her pockets,

sniffing at the air.

“Picked up anything yet?” Raine asked.

“Mud, badgers, mud, rabbits, mud, rats. Did I mention mud?” Twil shrugged.

Slow going was good for me too. I wasn’t exactly thriving out here.

The hike wasn’t difficult in the way I’d expected, especially with the aid of the stick Raine had given me. The wellington boots rubbed my feet sore, yes, despite the double layers of thick socks I’d worn, and my thighs and hips quickly tired, but I could endure that. I’d endured worse, and I was determined to find Zheng and talk to her, even if I wasn’t yet a hundred percent sure how I was going to convince her to come home. We had to enlist her help – I had to enlist her help, with my tentacles – and I wanted *her*, in some as yet undiscussed way.

No, the walking itself wasn’t too difficult – but my tentacles kept trying to help.

As my legs tired and my feet got sore, my bruised flanks began to shudder and quiver. Tentacles tried to uncurl and grasp at branches to anchor me, to pull me forward, to support my weight. Throbs of dull pain shot up my sides, made me gasp, made me have to stop and close my eyes to halt the reaction.

Because it was a reaction, pure instinct. The tentacles, however short-lived, had adjusted some fundamental neurological assumption. Now my body acted like they should be there, should be available to help, to steady my other muscles. To assist on this hike.

“You just have to plan them properly!” Lozzie had told me. “You gotta feel them with your hands, or do it in a dream so it doesn’t pop you apart. Just plan them and let them do their thing, you’ll be fine!”

Needless to say, I’d kept my promise to Raine and Evelyn. No more tentacles. For now.

We crested a sort of ridge in the woods and came upon the brief respite of an open field, overgrown with thistles and weeds, grass going to seed, old fenceposts sticking out of the clay. A tumbledown barn loomed at the far end. We passed along the edge of the field,

toward a bend back into the trees, and a few crows rose on the wing from around the corner, cawing and calling to each other as they peered at us from the treetops. Raine pulled ahead a little way to keep an eye on Lozzie, and Twil naturally fell back to keep me company, still sulking under her hood. Thin misty rain enveloped us.

“So,” I asked between puffing breaths, raising the subject to distract myself from the pulling, shifting sensation inside my lungs. “Twil, what’s your strategy with Evelyn?”

She did a double-take at me, face shadowed by her hood. “My what? What?”

“Your strategy. For Evelyn?”

Ahead, Lozzie was gesturing to Raine, pointing around the corner of the field to where the woods resumed.

“ ... for ... like ... ” Twil blinked. “What?”

I rolled my eyes and sighed, and gestured with the hiking stick – and suddenly understood why Evelyn did the same thing with her stick all the time. There was a primal satisfaction in having a big stick to wave around. Like swinging a club. Still ape, at heart. “Twil, I’m well aware of what’s been going on between you and her. It’s obvious.”

“Well it’s not fucking obvious to me. What are you talking about?”

I halted and turned to Twil. She looked at me awkwardly, framed by the grey sky and the woods behind. She was painfully pretty, angelic face somehow emphasised by her blunt frown and the roughness of her speech. No surprise what Evelyn saw there.

“You like her. You’re into her,” I said. “And you should probably just tell her, because she’s not going to make the first move.”

“I’m *what*?” Twil gaped at me, wide-eyed. “I ... I ... am I?”

I blinked at her.

“Ahhhh fuck,” she sighed, as her face collapsed into a grimace. “Yeah, yeah shit I am, aren’t I? Awww fuck.” She put her face in one hand. “Fuckin’ shit.”

“Oh. Oh dear. You mean you didn’t know?”

"I ... I dunno! She ... I ... fuck." Twil grit her teeth. "Why'd you have to bring this up now?! I'm meant to be psyching myself up for a fistfight with your weirdo demon friend! Fuck! Heather!"

"I'll tell Evelyn you were both strong and brave."

"Don't do that! Jesus. Oh shit. Oh-"

"Twil!" Raine called. We both looked around. Raine nodded around the bend in the trees. "You gotta see this."

"We can talk about this later," I whispered.

"Uuuunnn," Twil made a grumble of dread and embarrassment. We trudged down the length of the field to join Raine. Lozzie was nowhere in sight, probably just around the corner where the field stretched out to rejoin the woods.

Even before we got there, Twil went stiff. She sniffed the air several times and wrinkled her nose.

"Is that-"

"Not human," Raine answered quickly as we caught up.

"Oh thank fuck for that." She sniffed again. "Sheep?"

"What? What's not human?" I demanded as we rounded the corner.

"What did you ... oh."

On the edge of the woods, four sheep carcasses had been opened and gutted. Blood was smeared all over the grass, splattered up the fenceposts and the nearest of the trees, half-washed by the rain into a pink froth all over the remaining tufts of wool. Crows squawked at us from above, irritated at the interruption of their carrion meal. Bones lay scattered about, with scraps of dark red flesh still clinging to them, though between the original act of predation and the crows' appetites, the dead animals had been stripped of almost all meat. Skin and bone and lots of crimson, guts and hoofs. Skulls.

Lozzie was bending forward to peer at one of the skulls on the ground, hands on her knees, braid tucked neatly into the back of her poncho.

Twil let out a low whistle.

"Yeah, right?" Raine murmured. "Don't think any fox or buzzard is gonna get a whole sheep way up there."

One of the dead sheep – just a ribcage and a flesh-stripped skull – was up in a tree, tangled in the thicker branches.

“What was she doing?” I murmured when I found my voice. “Why ... eating, yes, but this looks more like ... ”

“Stress relief. Taking it out on some sheep,” Twil said. She shrugged at my horrified look. “Some predators kill for fun, you know?”

“I know, but ... ”

I swallowed. What if Evelyn was right? What if Zheng was forgetting how to be human?

“Least it means we’re on the right track,” said Raine. “Looks fresh.”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.6

Twil's wellington boots – silvery grey and well-worn – scuffed to a stop, squelching into the leaf mulch as she raised her nose and sniffed the air.

“Everyone uh ... uh, hold on a sec?”

“Twil?”

I stumbled to a stop too, leaning on my hiking stick and wincing as my phantom tentacles tried to help halt my momentum. Lozzie bounced on a few paces, then turned and scurried back, peeking over my shoulder.

“She's got a scent!” Lozzie hissed.

“Is it her?” Raine asked. “How close?”

Twil sniffed again, a series of short sharp inhalations followed by several deeper breaths. She turned this way and that, craned her head around. A subtle change flowed through the set of her shoulders and the manner in which she held herself. Grumpy, sulky, rained-upon Twil fell away, replaced by a wide-alert animal, eyes swivelling and fixing on tiny movements, nose twitching, ears cocked.

“Twil, hey, don't keep us in the dark,” Raine hissed.

“Shhhh!” Twil hissed back.

The green canopy rustled overhead. A squirrel hopped silently up a nearby tree trunk. The forest floor drummed with intermittent raindrops from the leaves above. My own breathing sounded like a steam engine in my ears.

“Yeah,” Twil eventually hissed through bared teeth. “Gotta be her. Close. Been here in the last ... I dunno.” She sniffed deeply again. “Ten minutes? Nothing else smells like that. That's her. That's Zheng.”

After our encounter with Zheng's leftovers, we'd plunged back into the woods, past the meat-stripped, bone-gnawed sheep corpses and

the murder of crows eager to resume their carrion meal. The forest had closed around us once again, insulated against the wind, consolidated the thin misty rain into an occasional patter of fat droplets. The sky, visible through breaks in the tree cover, grew gravid with rain, a darker, brooding grey. Raine had unfolded the thin anorak she'd brought along for Lozzie, and I'd convinced Lozzie to wear it over her poncho in case the clouds broke without warning.

But the deluge never came.

At the time Twil picked up Zheng's scent, we'd been walking for another fifteen or twenty minutes, and discovered the remains of an old path. It was overgrown, almost invisible but for the high ridge up one side, lined by the ragged remnants of fenceposts rotted down to stubs, a few scraps of rusty barbed wire still affixed, all drowned in clusters of spring bluebells. Further up the ridge a line of sharply angled concrete posts jutted from the ground, covered in moss and lichen, untouched for decades. Each post was almost six feet tall.

"Tank traps," Raine had informed me when she'd seen the curious look on my face, as we'd plodded along. "From the '40s."

"... you're joking."

Raine smiled, delighted to surprise me with something I didn't know for once. "Nah, serious. That angle? Those concrete sticks were meant to snarl up panzer tracks. This whole area – like, the gap between Manchester and Liverpool, and out toward Sharrowford – this was all crisscrossed with wartime defence lines." She nodded up at the old concrete posts. "Not worth the work to remove from woodland in the middle of nowhere. Bet if we searched we'd find a couple of old pillboxes or bunkers too." She shrugged. "Urban explorer types probably have them all mapped out."

"Yeah," Twil had chipped in from a few paces ahead. "There's this old concrete bunker near Brinkwood too. S'pretty cool. Roof fell in when I was a kid though."

History, both ancient and modern, lurked beneath the surface of this landscape at every turn. Scuff at the ground with a boot, and one would likely turn up Roman coins and Victorian tobacco pipes. We forged along that forgotten track until it dipped to meet the

edge of a shallow valley in the woods, with a brook at the bottom, the banks a mess of animal-churned mud and driftwood sticks.

And then Twil had caught Zheng's scent.

"... so like ... what now?" Twil hissed. She looked to me, then to Raine, for help.

"You're the hunter, Twil." Raine grinned. "You're up."

"What?! That wasn't part of the deal, come on. I've never hunted a demon before. What if she ... I dunno, what if she doesn't want to be found?"

"Hide and seek!" Lozzie whispered.

"Then you gotta prove you're the better hunter, right?" Raine said. "You-"

I turned away, cupped my hands around my mouth, and called out at the top of my lungs. "Zheng!"

Raine winced, even past her indulgent smile. Twil growled a grumbly growl. Lozzie danced two paces away from my shoulder and stared around, as if Zheng's answer might come from any direction.

"It's me!" I shouted. "I'm not alone, but it's me! Zheng!"

The woods swallowed my voice, and returned no echoes. Raindrops and wind filled the air.

"Well shit." Twil gave me a look. "If she doesn't wanna be found, she's got plenty of warning now."

"If she doesn't want to be found, we're not going to find her," I said, watching for movement out in the trees.

"Oh great, thanks," Twil huffed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, yeah."

"That's not what I meant, I'm sorry, Twil. I wouldn't insult you, you know that. I mean that I'm here to appeal to her. Not to corner, not to coerce."

"Huh." Twil dipped her head. "Alright, I guess. Sorry."

"Yeah, best refrain from cornering the seven foot killing machine, right?" Raine said. "Trust me, I've been there. She's too fast for you,

Twil.”

“Fuck’s sake, why’s everybody ragging on me?”

“She’s not a killing machine,” I said softly. “Zheng’s a person, whatever she was before she came to our reality.”

A moment of silence passed.

“Ahhh, I’m sorry Heather,” Raine said after a beat. “Silly turn of phrase, that’s all. You know me, leaping before I look.”

“It’s okay,” I muttered, feeling my cheeks flush as I watched the woods. “I just ... well, it’s not as if you’re wrong. There’s fewer spirits here, I suspect they’re keeping well away from her. The only ones I can see are big enough to make even her think twice.”

I cast a glance sideways, across the tree-choked span of the shallow valley. The only visible spirit stood on the other side, another one of those lorry-sized tar-black things with the three massive hooves. It stood stock-still. Pretending to be a tree, perhaps?

“What does she smell like?” I asked.

“What, Zheng?” Twil blinked at me. “Kinda spicy.”

“Spicy?” My turn to frown at her.

“Yeah. Like blood and iron and ... strong? Hot?” Twil grimaced, struggling for for a metaphor. “Mostly human, I guess? Like her body’s human, right? She hasn’t bathed in weeks, so there’s some like, regular stink too. But she’s got a high-meat diet, she’s the biggest carnivore around, and she’s got a higher body temp, so, spicy. Yeah.”

Lozzie cupped her hands around her mouth, and called out into the woods.

“Garch irij baina! Zheeeeeng!”

Twil frowned at her. “ ... what?”

“Come out come out wherever you are,” Lozzie sung the translation.

“Was that Mongolian again?” I asked. She nodded. “Zheng’s native language.”

Twil squinted. “She doesn’t have a native language, she’s some wibbly-wobbly demon in a meat suit.”

“Where she grew up does matter,” I said gently.

“She ain’t comin’, no matter what language we shout in,” Raine said, and set the tip of her hiking stick a pace ahead. “Might be out of earshot, might be asleep. Might be waiting to see if we can find her. Might not wanna be found.”

Or she might not be thinking like a human being anymore.

I kept that grim hypothesis to myself. Zheng was dangerous, we all knew that, but my gut said she’d never harm me. She’d saved my life, she’d gone out of her way to help me multiple times. Lozzie was our trump card. Zheng had treated her ‘mooncalf’ with a tender reverence I’d thought impossible. Whatever fears Evelyn had about her, Zheng was not going to maul us in a fit of animalistic behaviour. To think in such a way was an insult to the trust she’d previously placed in me.

Wasn’t it?

If all else failed, well, Twil was effectively invincible.

“Heather?” Raine prompted. I snapped back to the moment.

“Um. Yes, we should keep going then,” I forced out. “Please be careful. If she ...” I wet my lips and shrugged. We all knew it, but I couldn’t say it.

Raine nodded. Twil bared her teeth. Lozzie didn’t seem to understand.

“Twil, you move as fast as you need to,” Raine said. “We’ll catch up.”

Twil cracked a wolfish grin. “Fat chance, slowpoke. I shit faster than you run.”

Lozzie snort-giggled at that one.

Despite the banter, we slowed to a crawl. Twil led, sniffing and stalking like a hound on a fox trail, nose in the air, eyes darting back and forth to take in every new line of sight around the bole of each tree. She took each step slow, as if noise might disturb her prey. She’d rarely looked more wolf-like without transformation. Eventually she even flipped her hood down and tucked her curly dark hair into the back of her coat to keep it out of the way, and endured the occasional raindrop. Now and then she paused, head

cocked to one side, listening for a pattern in the endless static of rain and leaves. Each time she grit her teeth and shook her head, and resumed the creeping pursuit.

Raine, Lozzie, and I trailed behind. Lozzie stuck close to my side, seemingly impressed by the need for quiet. She wore a serious little frown, lips pursed tight, and moved on exaggerated tiptoes in the leaf-mush. Raine brought up the rear right behind us, head on a swivel, contributing what attention she could.

We left the shallow valley behind, lost the old eroded footpath, and entered an area of the woods marked by several fallen trees. Their root systems lay half-exposed to the air in great ragged masses of woody tendril and crumbly clay, like the open mouths of gigantic mud-beasts, even after years of decay and fungus had turned the fallen trunks spongy and slick.

“S’getting stronger,” Twil hissed over her shoulder. “She’s around here, gotta be.”

As we passed the third such fallen tree, Twil froze mid-step.

Lozzie and I blundered to a halt, clinging awkwardly to each other. I tried to hold my breath, but my sides ached too bad, stiff and sore from all the walking.

Raine froze too. “Twi-”

“Shhh!” Twil stared at a point off in the trees, but I couldn’t see anything except bark and branches and a tangle of holly bush. Twil raised her nose and sniffed the air several times, deep slow breaths. “Reeks of her,” Twil whispered, ultra-quiet, barely a breath. “She’s right nearby or I’m losing my head.”

“You see her?” Raine whispered.

“Fuck, I dunno.” Twil hunched, readying to spring after fleeing prey.

“I’m going to call out to her,” I hissed, then filled my lungs.

Twil bared her teeth. “Don’t-”

“Zheng!”

Something big and brown and skittish flickered among the trees, bounding away in a sudden startled flinch. Something that had been right in front of me but invisible against the tangled background. I

blinked in surprise – and Twil exploded forward.

She went from zero to sprint in an instant, suddenly all wolf all over, her ghostly flesh flowing together as she loped across the forest floor after the bolting prey, kicking up leaves and a spray of loose mud. She sprang with both legs, leapt, and plunged into the holly bushes. The sounds of her feet raced away on the far side, off into the depths of the wood.

Three seconds, and she was gone.

“Was ... um,” I stammered. “Was that a ... ?”

“Oops!” Lozzie chirped.

Raine was too busy to answer, bent over in laughter with her hands on her knees. I couldn’t keep a smile off my face either, trying to cover my amusement behind one hand.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“Give her a sec, she’ll come back,” said Raine. “Less she’s too embarrassed.”

Twil trudged back through the trees a couple of minutes later, blushing hard, dusting bits of leaf and twig off her coat. Tiny scratches from the holly bushes covered her face and hands, already closing with werewolf healing as she wiped the blood away with a thumb.

“Having fun?” Raine asked, a huge, shit-eating grin on her face.

“Yeah yeah,” Twil grumbled. “I was on a hair-trigger, alright?” She sniffed the air. “Place still stinks of her, she must have been round here a couple ‘o minutes back or something. We gotta be right behind her.”

“Did you catch it?!” Lozzie asked.

“What?” Twil blushed harder. “Nah, ‘course not.”

“Twil, I’m sorry,” I said, “but did you just chase a deer?”

Twil sighed, shoulders slumping.

“We should set you up a track rabbit, like for greyhounds,” Raine said. “Let you get it out of your system.”

“Yeah fuck off,” Twil snapped. “I couldn’t help it.”

“You know,” I said, as an idea occurred to me. “That’s not a bad starting point.”

“What?” Twil frowned at me. “Heather, you’re cool, but you can fuck off too.”

“No no, that’s not what I meant. I mean, Twil, maybe you need somebody to chase around now and again?”

“Heather! Fuck! Shut up!”

Twil blushed even harder, stammering a defence. Lozzie giggled. Raine pretended polite incomprehension. I opened my mouth to expound upon the point as much as propriety would allow.

And Zheng dropped out of the sky.

For a split-second none of us knew what was happening. Too fast, too sudden, too *big*. Zheng fell as a blur in a rapid leap from tree trunk to tree trunk so she hit the ground at less than leg-breaking velocity. She landed right on top of us, a whirlwind of flapping coat and dead leaves thrown into the air, boots slamming into the mud and shaking us like a beaten drum.

She must have been hiding in the treetops, statue-still, perhaps not even breathing, with the hood of her stolen waxed coat turned up to conceal the dark thatch of her hair.

I shrieked in surprise and flinched so hard I almost fell over. Phantom tentacles rushed to help, to hold me up, and managed only to pierce my sides with convulsive pain. A gasp caught in my throat, but Lozzie caught me, interrupting her own yelp of shock.

Twil’s ghostly wolf-flesh flowed back together, a growl in her throat.

Raine moved to step in front of me, one hand reaching into her coat.

“No, it’s-” I started.

But in the split-second it took me to scream and stumble, Raine and Twil had read her correctly. Zheng straightened in a flicker of motion, seven feet of rippling muscle wrapped in a baggy old jumper and ragged jeans, face hidden deep inside the shadows of her hood. I expected a rumble of greeting, a laugh, a purr, for her to turn to me and call me ‘shaman’.

She whipped around with one hand out, so fast she blurred, and grabbed a fistful of Twil's coat.

My heart lurched.

Raine drew her pistol.

"Zheng, no!" I screamed.

Zheng lunged and I saw the trajectory her fist would take, where momentum would carry her strike – right into Twil's skull.

Worst case scenario. Zheng had attacked us on sight. Evelyn was right.

Twil tried to backpedal with a fighting growl in her throat, but she wasn't fast enough. She lashed out with a clawed hand and missed, snapped at empty air with a snout full of teeth as Zheng bore down on her, towered over her. Raine tried to aim her handgun, barely a split-second of time to draw a bead on Zheng. Everything was going too fast, they all needed to stop, this was a terrible misunderstanding. Zheng was my friend, my ally, I'd freed her, this couldn't be happening, if only I had time to say something. My flanks shuddered with pain as phantom limbs tried to reach out and stop her, bind her, as instinct told me exactly how to end this. I almost let them, I almost gave in.

But Lizzie was laughing.

Twil slipped in the mud and her feet went out from under her. The giant zombie had her, fist about to crack her skull, ghost-flesh or not.

At the last second, Zheng executed a perfect pirouette and span *past* Twil. She used the motion to tear Twil's coat off in one fluid tug, and sent a very confused werewolf tumbling into the mud.

As she spun, I caught a flash of face-ripping, shark-toothed victory grin.

"Fuck, wha-" Twil spluttered.

Zheng landed the twist with a slam of one boot, facing away from us. She threw back her head, let out a roar of laughter, and sprinted for the cover of the woods.

She leapt a fallen log in a blur of coat and boot, and vanished among the trees. A heartbeat later the sounds of her crashing

through the undergrowth simply stopped. She'd melted back into the forest. Gone, silent and invisible.

"God fucking- what- what the fuck!?" Twil staggered to her feet, all human once more, a great big slick of mud down her back and bum. Her hoodie was all askew and she tottered off-balance from being spun like a top. "She took my fucking coat! You bitch!"

"It's the trophy game!" Lozzie chirped, a big smile on her face.

"The what!?" Twil boggled at her.

"Raine, I think you can put that away," I said, swallowing down the pain in my sides as I forced a deep breath. Raine glanced at me, her handgun still aimed off into the woods where Zheng had vanished. She looked from me, to Twil, to her gun, then lowered the pistol and puffed out a held breath.

"Sorry. Thought she might ... you know."

I nodded. "I know. She won't. She was laughing."

"The trophy game," Lozzie repeated, still braced against my side. "It's from where she grew up – um, grew ... in? Whichever! We played it once, in the dreams, and she won by taking all my clothes!"

"What."

Raine and I shared a glance. Lozzie giggled.

"Not like that! It's a game! Nothing happened after, sillies."

"She's fucking shitting with me," Twil said.

Lozzie shook her head. "No, you have to try to win too."

"I do hope we're not all playing this game," I said. "Twil might be able to endure the cold out here if she gets stripped further, but the rest of us are all a bit more fragile."

"Speak for yourself," Raine said.

"Hey!" Twil bristled. "She's not gonna strip me naked. You hear that, you giant fucking cockhead?" she shouted into the trees. "Try that again and I'll take your fucking head off!"

"Don't be a sore loser, Twil." Raine smirked. "You're only one point down."

Twil spread her arms at the dripping canopy. “She took my fucking coat! I’m getting wet here!”

“You have to take it back,” Lozzie chirped.

“Four on one is pretty good odds,” Raine said with a doubtful click of her tongue. “But she got the drop on us real good. We need a better plan of attack. Split up, multiple directions? What do you say, Twil?”

“Fuck her,” Twil grunted.

“More than four on one,” Lozzie said, then turned her head and hooted into the woods.

She hooted, whistled, and clicked in a rapid-fire refrain of non-human language. Raine and Twil both stared at her. They hadn’t heard this before, hadn’t been out in the back garden with us when Lozzie had spoken to the pneuma-somatic life. Lozzie trailed off and waited with an expectant little smile.

“It’s okay, she’s calling for some help,” I said. “I think. Lozzie, do you have a plan?”

“Mhmm! They can be a distraction!”

“Okay, I ... um ... Lozzie?”

My breath caught in my throat at the approach of the nightmares she’d called from the woods. Two of the lorry-sized black tarry creatures stomped through the trees, their three massive hooves thudding against the ground, audible only to Lozzie and I. A dozen toothless mouths flapped open and closed across their hides. Thick tentacles reared overhead like imitation trees.

Lozzie clicked and whistled in greeting.

I took an involuntary step back, mouth dry. My voice shook.

“Lozzie, are you sure these are safe?”

“Heather?” Raine said my name. She raised her handgun again, pointed it at where I was staring. Twil went tense all over, claws of ghostly flesh forming up around her forearms.

“Yeah?” Lozzie blinked at me over her shoulder. “They’re friendly? Of course they’re friendly.”

“Um ... ” My guts clenched up as the creatures drew closer. They

towered over us, at least eleven or twelve feet tall from hoof to tentacle-base, perhaps another ten feet of tentacle above that. I heard a faint whispering on the edge of my consciousness, as if those sucking mouths were hissing foul secrets into the air.

A deep throb of pain passed through my flanks. Phantom limbs attempted to uncoil, to throw up a warning display. I winced and curled up, free hand clamped to my side.

Both the nightmare things stopped dead. Despite the lack of eyes or other visible sensory organs, I had the sudden impression both spirits were looking right at me.

And they did not like what they saw.

"They're fine!" Lozzie chirped, and skipped right up to the pneumatic blobs, a tiny scrap of humanity next to their tarry bulk. "Fine fine fine! Here-" and she exploded once more into a cacophony of little hoots and whistles at them, waving her arms about.

"The fuck is she doing?" Twil hissed, looking everywhere but seeing nothing.

"Enlisting-" I hissed, and had to close my eyes for a second to fight down my need for territorial display. "Enlisting help. Raine, put the gun away. You can't shoot something that's not made of matter. And they're more afraid of me than I am of them."

"Right," Raine said. "Right you are, boss."

Lozzie finished her rapid-fire explanation, and I opened my eyes to see the two giant monsters stalking off into the woods again, one going left and the other right. Lozzie turned to me.

"They're going to flush her out for us!" she chirped. "Or get round behind, if we get her first."

"Like beaters for pheasants," Raine said. "Smart."

"What, invisible monsters are gonna scare her?" Twil boggled. "I am like, the only sane one here?"

"Zheng can see spirits," I said. "Praem can too. Good plan, Lozzie, thank you."

Lozzie beamed with pride. I made a mental note, she need praise, she needed encouragement. She needed something to set her mind

to. She was intelligent and resourceful and a friend to anything she wanted. She deserved better than being cooped up and directionless.

“Then we best get moving before these invisible lads get too far ahead, right?” Twil asked, already setting off the way Zheng had escaped. “I’m gonna get my fucking coat back if I have to fight her myself.”

= =

The next twenty minutes dissolved into a farce.

We simply could not catch Zheng. She ran rings around us. Even with the somewhat dubious help of Lozzie’s friendly pneumasomatic monsters, Zheng taunted us and evaded us with all the expertize of a chimpanzee in the jungle treetops.

The spirits did indeed flush her out, force her to move before she could surprise us, but she could relocate so fast it hardly mattered. The great stomping monsters were too slow to catch her themselves, only able to alert us when Lozzie or I could see them directly, their tentacles grasping upward at the bole of whatever tree Zheng was hiding in, or stomping toward a clutch of bush or holly where she slunk and crept at ground level. But she evaded them every time, ran off into another part of the woods, and taunted us with laughing roars of good-natured defeat as she was found.

We couldn’t keep up. Twil ranged ahead at speed, all wolf for minutes at a time, racing across the carpet of leaves, almost fast enough to catch Zheng but eluded and misdirected at every turn. Once she even slammed face-first into a tree like in a classic cartoon, led blind through a stand of fern while Zheng escaped.

Twice Twil attempted to climb after her, but Zheng simply leapt to another tree, far beyond the werewolf’s abilities.

Lozzie and I were both out of breath. Raine had little to contribute except her eyesight. This wasn’t a fight, not a real one.

She hit us four more times, dropping from a tree, stepping out from a concealed hiding spot, lurking in the undergrowth. She stole Raine’s hiking stick, tugged on Lozzie’s braid, and in a gesture of heart-stopping intimacy, managed to place one massive hand around the back of my neck for a full three seconds, purring with animal affection.

I'd blushed hard, a quiver in my throat and belly as she'd vaulted away that time. Twil had sailed through empty air in a frustrated attempt to tackle her, landing hard in the mud and leaves.

"Fuck! Give me back my fucking coat!"

"She's counting coup," Raine said after that last successful attack, grinning with approval despite the way she hovered protectively at my shoulder. "And she's damn good at it."

"Counting what?" Twil asked through a snout of too many teeth as she got up, covered in mud and twigs.

"Counting coup. American Indian thing, I think. Rather than fight a battle, you prove your bravery by touching the enemy with your hand, and escaping unscathed. Lots of variations on it. She's proving a point to us."

"No," I said, my mouth dry with embarrassed excitement.

"No?" Raine raised an eyebrow.

"She's having fun!" Lozzie said.

"Yes." I nodded. "Proving the point is secondary. The way she keeps laughing, this is pure elation for her. She loves a good fight, I think. She's not trying to humiliate us. She wants a challenge."

"Hmmmmmm." Raine smiled tight, narrowed her eyes, and glanced up at the trees. "We're not putting up much of a fight so far. Hate to lose five-nil, might disappoint our big friend."

"Fuck her, I almost got her that time!" said Twil.

"Yes, Twil. You almost did," I muttered, my mind suddenly turning the concepts over, looking at the game from a different angle. "But you probably won't."

"Tch."

"We've tried a chase, and cornering her doesn't work," Raine said. "She's too fast for that, and there's too many escape routes."

"I'm going to go talk to her," I said.

Raine shook her head. "Nah, I doubt she'll talk until the ... 'game'? Game. Until the game is done and-"

"No, I mean, *I'm going to talk to her.*"

Raine glanced at me, eyebrows raised, and grinned slowly.
“Heather, Heather, I see a plan in those beautiful eyes. Go on?”

I wet my lips, the idea still forming as I spoke. “Lozzie, call your-
our friends back here. Are they clever enough to follow very
specific instructions?”

“Mmhmm!”

“Twil, can you move through the forest without making too much
noise?” I asked.

“Sure, yeah. I mean, good enough to fool like, a bird or a rabbit.
Why?”

“Okay then, good. Here’s how we’re going to catch Zheng.” An
unfamiliar kind of smile teased at the corners of my mouth. I felt
like I was doing something deliciously naughty. A thrill of
excitement thrummed inside my chest.

Raine must have read the look on my face. “Heather? This one’s
special, isn’t it?”

“I’m going to be the bait,” I said. “And the hook.”

= =

Zheng was too smart to simply blunder into a trap, and too fast to
be caught by one. She could not be ambushed or blindsided,
hoodwinked or misled. She was a hunter at heart – perhaps that’s
what she’d been before flesh, out in the abyss where she’d been
born. Not only was she capable of terrible violence, but she had a
long lifetime of practice behind her, enslaved or otherwise. Twil
might be good at this, but Zheng had been doing this for decades.
Or centuries.

So we made our intentions obvious, we broadcast what we were
doing, loud and clear. Stupid monkeys trying to catch a demon.

And then, inside that first trap, I set a second.

One that did not rely on speed, or cleverness, or misdirection, but
on curious desire.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled. A shark-toothed grin opened inside the
shadows of her hood.

“Zheng,” I sighed. “Finally. You certainly took your time.”

I shifted my footing to ease sore knees, leaning on the hiking stick, shivering inside my coat and hoodie. I'd been standing alone for too long in this little clearing, beneath a thinner patch of green canopy, waiting for Zheng to take the bait.

She grinned wider. Occasional raindrops pattered off her hood. I couldn't see her eyes.

"Here to surrender?" she purred. "Lose the chaperone, shaman."

"It's ... hardly that."

One of the nightmare pneuma-somatic creatures stood just behind me, close enough to make my skin crawl. A subliminal whispering noise filled the edges of my hearing, emitted from those slopping, toothless mouths. I'd steadfastly refused to think about it for the last ten minutes, since the others had withdrawn from the clearing and left me behind. From Zheng's perspective I stood framed and dwarfed by a true monster. A bodyguard.

But not Raine. The real trap wouldn't work, if Raine was by my side.

It was working so far. Zheng kept her distance at the clearing's edge, beyond the reach of the nightmare's tentacles.

"Oh?" Zheng tilted her head and rumbled a question. "No? Isn't it to make sure I don't-"

"So you don't snatch me off my feet and carry me off into the woods to have your way with me, yes, that's why it's here," I lied. I even blushed, though I didn't need to fake that part. "I just want to talk to you."

Zheng threw her head back and laughed.

"Shaman, I am winning. What's to discuss, except terms of surrender?" Her huge tongue slid from between her teeth and into the light, inch after inch, a thick pink rope of muscle – and then whipped back. Her teeth closed with a clack. "Or this is a badly planned trap. You monkeys are always at your worst when you think you're being clever." Her grin faltered suddenly, as if the thought had dredged up bad memories. "Blunt, direct, yes. That's how you'd win this, but you don't have spears and nets. You don't even have mounts."

"I disagree," I said, and frowned for real. "Zheng, I'm not going to

bludgeon you into submission. I would never do that. I'll play by the rules."

"Bah," Zheng growled. "You monkeys are so bad at it. I can already hear them now, trying to creep through this excuse of a forest." She nodded out at the clearing, and I made a show of keeping my expression neutral. "The *kharankhui zaluu* make so much noise on approach I could hunt them blind. The *laangren*, she is fast and strong but inexperienced. Your lover, she ... " Zheng rumbled as she trailed off, then seemed to sigh. "She is as smart as me, but her gun fires only lead."

"What about Lozzie?" I asked. Buy time, Heather, keep her talking.

"My mooncalf?" Zheng chuckled. "If I was asleep, she would be deadly. I am not. None of you can catch me, shaman."

"We're not trying to corner you, or ambush you. I promise. Zheng, I *promise*."

Zheng purred in thought. I couldn't see her eyes, but I felt the narrowing of her attention. "You're not lying, shaman. How can that not be a lie?"

"I am telling the absolute truth, in technical terms yes. There is a trap here but it's not a surprise. You can see it right now. Because I respect you, I respect your intelligence, you're too clever to be caught in a simple ruse, and-" I swallowed. Raine might be close enough to hear now, but she already knew this, and it was a vital part of the plan. Go for the low blow.

"And because I'm wildly attracted to you," I finished.

Zheng moved her head one way, then the other, a predator sizing up a curious new animal, unsure if it was prey or danger. "What are you up to?" she purred. "Clearly I'm meant to try to snatch you, that's what the *zaluu* behind you is for. But I don't see the catch."

"There is no hidden trap here." I spoke the words I'd rehearsed, trying to fit them to the situation, my heart pounding in my chest – why? This wasn't a life or death situation. It was a game. Zheng wasn't going to kill or eat any of us. Why did it matter so much?

Because, as I realised in that moment, I craved her approval.

I craved the approval of a predatory, cannibalistic demon. My body, the abyssal thing I'd brought back, craved her kinship and her

understanding. Inside, I sighed.

“There’s only me,” I continued, voice shaking. At least it helped the act. “Zheng, please, I really want to talk you, but I realise the game has to end first. We’re very close, and I am about to win.”

Zheng looked off to the left, rolling her shoulders as a wave of readying tension flowed through her massive frame.

“The other *zaluu* is circling that way. Your lover skulks toward us from there,” she nodded past me, “along with my mooncalf, which means the *laangren* is over there somewhere,” she gestured off to the right. “I have at most ten or fifteen seconds before I am surrounded, but I can move in the last two and still escape. In the last four I can take you with me, *zaluu* at your back or not.” She grinned at me again with those shark’s teeth, and flickered her huge tongue out.

“Please, do try,” I said, in a pitch-perfect polite voice, despite the flush in my cheeks.

Eyes beneath her hood glinted in the shadow. “But you overflow with confidence, shaman. You *know* you are about to win. You are so certain I will try to take you, but I do not see the catch, I do not see the winning play.”

I had her now, she’d taken the real bait. Had to keep her on the line.

“There is no hidden catch, it’s right here in plain sight,” I said, and allowed myself a smile which burst, uncontrolled, into a grin. I couldn’t keep it off my face. I’d rarely felt so excited. “I am about to outwit you, and I must admit that I am rather enjoying it. Oh dear.”

Zheng rumbled low in her throat, anger or approval or arousal, all three mixed into a heady cocktail that made my bowels and my groin both quiver. A chuckle ran beneath the growl. She shifted her footing, ready to spring into action, or up into the trees, to make good on her boast of speed.

“Of course, maybe I secretly *want* you to snatch me,” I said quickly. Two seconds was all we needed – I saw Twil in full wolf form slink out of hiding to Zheng’s rear. “Maybe this is all a ruse, a convenient excuse to offer myself up like a goat tied to a stake. Don’t you want to try, Zheng?”

Zheng froze for a split second, a heartbeat of doubt. She'd waited too long, fascinated by me and my ruse.

Better than I'd ever hoped for.

Twil took the cue. She let out a deep, low, warning growl and rushed at Zheng, kicking up leaves and mud in a headlong charge with no hope of contact. Raine burst into the clearing at full sprint a moment later, from behind me, Lozzie trailing after and almost tumbling over, a mad laugh on her lips. The second of Lozzie's nightmare spirits bumbled through the trees to the left, exactly as Zheng had predicted.

Zheng span toward Twil like a matador preparing to twist away from a bull.

She couldn't jink left, into the path of the *kharankhui zaluu*, and Raine was about to block her right.

She had three choices – back away toward me, avoid Twil and then run forward, or leap up into the trees. The former would simply reel her in further, the latter two would give me the opening I needed.

Twil flew right past Zheng's dodge, a bundle of incoherent limbs and gnashing teeth as she overshot Zheng and skidded into the mud. Zheng laughed and terminated her evasive spin. She slammed her boot down into the leaves and mud, to give her the instant leverage to push off, to sprint into the depths of the woods.

And my hiking stick slammed against the back of Zheng's head.

Thwack, went the crack of plastic.

Zheng was so surprised she actually flinched, ducking her head and jerking around to stare at me, wide eyed. I smiled up at her through the awful spasms of pain in my sides, clutching at the way my phantom limbs had tried to uncoil and help, had tried to restrain Zheng for me as I'd walked toward her.

As she'd turned to Twil, I'd hurried forward, unnoticed and unaccounted for amid the werewolves and heavily armed sociopaths and giant tentacle beasts. Scrawny little Heather had not been not a factor in Zheng's threat calculations.

Raine jogged up and slipped an arm under my shoulders, helped me stand straight. "Woah, Heather, deep breaths, deep breaths."

I shuddered and winced as the pain in my sides slowly ratcheted down. Zheng stared at me. Twil picked herself up with an angry snarl. The pair of nightmarish spirits lingered on the edge of the clearing, intelligent enough to understand that the game was over.

Lozzie threw her arms up in the air and shouted. "Score!"

"Shaman," Zheng breathed in savage awe, one hand on her head where I'd landed the blow.

"I'm the one you have to watch out for, Zheng," I managed to croak, my chest still pounding with victory. "Me."

A heartbeat of wild-eye stare – and Zheng burst out laughing. She threw her head back and her hood finally fell away to reveal that beautiful red-chocolate skin and thatch of dark hair, greasy and matted. Her sharp eyes glittered with amusement. She roared with belly-laughter, grinned at me, and finally bowed her head.

"On pure points I still win," she rumbled. "But I concede moral victory. A point to you monkeys. Well done, shaman."

"That's right, you shit!" Twil snapped. "Now give back my fucking coat!"

"Victory!" Lozzie chirped. Surprising nobody, she ran right up to Zheng and tackled her with a hug around the middle. Zheng took it like she was made of reinforced concrete, and placed one huge hand on Lozzie's head.

"You fell for the tree trick, *laangren*," she rumbled. "If you want your spoils returned, you shall have to win them."

"Oh yeah?" Twil bristled, and raised her snout of ghostly wolf-flesh. "You wanna go, one on one? No running off again, you-"

"Zheng, give her coat back," I sighed, my high already fading. "Please. And what it is with you and falling long distances? You're such a show-off."

"Jumping, shaman. Not falling." Zheng dug Twil's rolled up coat out from inside her own. "Why the pain, shaman?"

"Invisible tentacles," Raine answered for me. I sighed and rolled my eyes.

Zheng cocked an eyebrow at me, a silent question.

"I've had some ... experiences," I said. "Your advice produced an unexpected result. I'll tell you all about it, later. Twil's coat, please?"

Zheng grunted and tossed the coat to Twil, who caught it in one claw – one claw rapidly melting back into a human hand. Twil's normal face emerged as the rest of her transformation fell away. She frowned, wrinkled her nose, and immediately held the coat out at arm's length.

"Ugh, this reeks, and not just of your dinner. Do you not bathe or what?"

Zheng shrugged. "It is winter. It is cold."

"You're afraid of a little cold?" Twil snorted at her.

Lozzie, who was busy with her face smooshed into Zheng's side, came up for air. "She does stink. Pongy Zheng."

"Mooncalf?" Zheng rumbled.

"It's true," Lozzie chirped.

"Huh."

Zheng fished Raine's stolen hiking stick – retracted into its compact form – out of her pocket, and offered it back to Raine. I looked down at my own stick, sadly buckled in the middle now.

"Cheers, big girl." Raine winked at her. "So how'd we do? Enough of a challenge?"

"Tolerable," Zheng purred.

"What was all that, anyway?" Twil asked, trying to shake the smell of dead sheep and body odour and forest out of her coat. "Why the hell run us around like that?"

"You walked into my woods."

"*Your* woods?" Twil squinted at her.

Zheng shrugged. "I am the scariest thing here. You monkeys don't count, not here."

"Where do you get off on calling us monkeys anyway, huh? Look at you, leaping around in the trees."

Zheng grinned at her. “You’ve forgotten how to do it, *laangren*. You enjoyed it too.”

“Where’d you pick that skill up?” Raine asked. Zheng blinked once at her, slowly.

“Another forest,” she rumbled.

“You know, if you came home, you could have a hot bath whenever you like,” I said. Zheng levelled a curious gaze at me, and her smoldering amusement turned dark.

“*Home?*”

For her, that word contained entire philosophies.

“Yeah,” Twil muttered under her breath. “You don’t have to live like a hobo-demon, you know?”

“My home. Our home,” I said. “Zheng, I’m dying to talk to you, you must know that. About all sorts of things. And I do want you to come home with us. With me. I’m not saying you’re not at home in the woods, but there’s always a place for you. Can we talk now? Surely we’ve won that right, if we could take a point off you.”

Zheng stared at me for a long, brooding moment, with no smile. A tremor of animal fear shot through my belly, drawn tight by her predatory regard.

“You took a point off me, shaman. You lead.”

“She’s good at it, ain’t she?” Raine beamed. Zheng didn’t bother to look at her – or wouldn’t look at her.

“Then, please don’t run off again,” I said. “Can we go somewhere and-”

“We can talk.”

“Good, we-”

“You and I, shaman,” Zheng purred. She indicated the others with a jerk of her chin, Raine, Twil, even Lozzie. “You and I, alone.”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.7

Zheng had made a demand, a challenge, a taunt – but she showed no relish, no savage glee, no laughter. That’s what tipped me off.

Zheng’s stipulation – that her and I could talk, but alone – hung for a heartbeat in the damp woodland air, blurred out by the static wash of leaves and rain. She gazed down at me with dark, heavy-lidded eyes, morose and brooding. A raindrop hit her brow and slid down one cheek. Swaying treetops and snatches of iron-grey sky framed her greasy hair and raggedy old coat. The greater giants of oak, elm and yew seemed to exult this monster in their midst.

Her dramatic figure was only slightly undermined by Lizzie hugging her around the middle.

“Alone?”

“Alone, shaman,” she purred.

“I ... okay, I’m comfortable with that, I think, but why-”

“You gotta know we’re gonna have a problem there, big girl,” Raine said, right on cue. “Why ask, if you know I’m gonna say no?”

I sighed. “Raine, really?”

Zheng’s face split into a shark-toothed grin, slowly spreading wider and wider to show off her maw of razor-sharp teeth. Her eyes blazed at Raine with a predatory intensity to put a Komodo dragon to shame. I shivered with instinctive fear and gut-deep arousal, and clamped down on both. My mouth went dry and my stomach clenched up. Twil let out a rising growl.

“Twil, please,” I hissed.

“Because you are not the shaman’s voice,” Zheng rumbled at Raine. “Because no is not your’s to say, monkey.”

“Zheng,” I managed to squeak, and had to clear my throat. Zheng refused to look at me, locked onto Raine like a tiger with her prey.

“Mine to advise, perhaps,” Raine said.

Raine's composure was a miracle. How did she do it? Zheng's look reminded me of the desperate, dangerous first few minutes after I'd freed her in Glasswick tower, her sheer joy in the anticipation and goading of violence. That look reduced me to jelly, triggered Twil's defensive instincts. Even Lozzie had gone quiet and wide-eyed. But Raine stood her ground with easy calm. She rolled one shoulder in a shrug, the shoulder which wasn't occupied with helping me stand up straight. I clutched her arm too hard, as if to anchor myself against Zheng's effect on me.

"The fuck ... ?" Twil hissed. "Fuck you two facing off for?"

"Ha!" Zheng barked. "The shaman and I were alone for hours in that tower. I carried her. Kept her head from hitting the concrete. Wrapped her up, kept her warm, kept her safe. What else did I do, hmmm?"

"Zheng!" I snapped. "Raine, nothing else happened. She rescued me, and you already know that."

Raine shrugged with her free shoulder and another easy smile. "Heather tells me everything, Zheng, old girl. Dunno what you're playing at here, but it ain't working."

"Are you sure about that, *zuishou*?"

"Zheng, what are you ... playing ... at ... " I trailed off in realisation, let out a huge sigh, and slowly disentangled my arm from Raine. She helped me stand by myself, a hand on my lower back, and I tilted my chin up.

"Shaman?" Zheng's face-tearing grin dialled down into curious amusement.

"I know what you're doing, and it's not necessary. I'm sorry, Zheng."

"Why do you want to talk to Heather-Heaths alone?" Lozzie asked, looking up at Zheng and blinking big blue eyes, still hugging her around the middle. "Why can't I come?"

"Because she doesn't really want to talk to me at all," I said.

"Because she's trying to drive us off, indirectly. Isn't that right, Zheng?"

"Mmmmmmm?" Zheng rumbled low in her chest. A shiver went down my spine, but I forced my words onward, a knot of guilt in

my throat.

“I’m making you do this under duress. You knew Raine would react like that, you’re taunting her on purpose, trying to provoke her. But you didn’t look like you enjoyed making that initial challenge. You don’t really want to talk to me alone – you don’t want to talk to me at all. I’ve put you in a corner somehow and I don’t understand, I’m sorry. Please, don’t make your way out through Raine?”

“Ahhhh.” Raine raised her eyebrows. “Getting shirty, trying to start to fight, all to dodge a ‘we need to talk’ moment, eh? Ouch. Don’t blame you there.”

Zheng stared at me for several heartbeats of brooding silence.

She was too beautiful, a figure from a dream I’d never known I wanted. Even with her red-chocolate skin and bronzed muscles hidden inside filthy jeans and a ragged jumper and a stolen coat, she radiated power and presence. Even dirty and greasy and stinking of sheep’s blood and forest mud, she was majestic. No clothes could conceal the heavy curves of a Greek Goddess, but the attraction ran deeper than that.

“Zheng?”

“Shaman, you barely know me.”

“Maybe, but I feel as if I do. I think I do.” The lump grew in my throat. Unconsciously, I rubbed my flank, kneading the bruises up and down my sides, the anchor-points of phantom limbs, an expression of a different place, a different body. Proximity to Zheng drew the abyssal thing in me to the surface, from the memory of what I’d once been; pain seemed to matter less, my phantom limbs wanted to reach for her, to make contact. “I feel a ... a kind of kinship with you. We both came from the same place, didn’t we? Even if I wasn’t born there, it changed me. Zheng, you’re the only person, other than maybe Praem, who was ... I need ... please? I need your help, not just with this. We need to ... I need to figure out how I feel. And we need your help, and I want you to come home, and ... ”

A subtle transformation passed beneath the surface of Zheng’s face, a taint of awful melancholy and terrible, tender awe. She let out a thick, heavy sigh, like a exhaling bull.

“This is danger for all of us, shaman. You should have left me in the

wild and forgotten about me.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not the sort of person I am. I like to think so, anyway.”

“And I cannot do this again.”

“Do ... Zheng? Do what again?”

Zheng chuckled, a touch of her amusement returned. She shook her head. “But I can’t even begin to do it again, can I? If I fight you, *zuishou*,” she nodded to Raine, “I win, and the shaman hates me forever. I win, but I lose.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch, big girl,” Raine said. “Might surprise you.”

“Ahhhhhh, *zuishou*, you tempt me,” Zheng purred, her voice dipping to a threatening rumble. She flexed her shoulders and spine, opened her jaw wide, clicking and rolling the joints. Firmly but gently she took Lozzie’s shoulder in one hand and moved her back, pulled her out of the hug.

“Uh oh,” Lozzie sing-songed as she tripped back a few paces. “Silly Zheng.”

Twil sensed it before I did, went tense all over, ghostly wolf-flesh forming up around her hands as she quickly dragged her coat back on.

“Stay out of this, Twil,” said Raine. “This ain’t yours.”

“Oh, no. No, don’t you do this,” I warned.

Raine stepped away from me. She shifted her footing, an all-too-familiar change flowing through her posture. She slipped one hand inside her coat.

A grin ripped across Zheng’s face, a rictus of savage joy.

“No!” I snapped, and raised my buckled and broken hiking stick as if I could possibly stall either of these monsters. “No fighting over-”

Zheng jinked to one side, so fast I flinched. A blur of ragged clothes, a dark whipping shape against the forest background. Raine took a single calculated step backward and drew a knife – the big knife, the big black combat knife which I was certain was not legal. She spun it over her palm and raised it in a reversed grip, so focused

and wound so tight she was like a living spring of corded muscle.

Zheng's arm flashed through the air. Raine twisted out of the way and brought the knife round in a shallow cutting arc. My eyes said that strike surely hadn't connected, but Zheng pulled her arm back with a huge gash in the coat and jumper beneath, dripping blood into the leaves and mud.

"Better, *zuishou*!" Zheng roared. "Much better!"

Raine said nothing, eyes locked on the centre of Zheng's chest; but a smile lurked at the corners of her mouth.

She slid one foot back, ready to pounce.

"No fighting over me!" I yelled at the top of my lungs, red in the face with fury.

I stepped right between Raine and Zheng and brandished the broken hiking stick at them. Phantom tentacles tried to help, tried to uncoil and spread in a warning posture, lash out to grab Raine's knife and Zheng's wrists – and my bruised sides exploded with twin lances of pain. I gasped and almost doubled over, wincing through my teeth, but forced myself to stay upright.

"Heather!"

"Oh shit–"

"Shaman?"

"Heather?!"

"No- fighting–" I wheezed.

Lozzie scurried over and got her shoulder underneath mine. I clung to her for support, panting for breath, my forehead covered in sudden cold sweat.

"Sha–"

"You, shut up!" I whirled – well, stumbled and reeled, caught by Lozzie – on Zheng. "No fighting!"

"Heather–"

"Raine! Put the knife away. Now, put it away! No fighting! Absolutely none. I will walk out of here on my own and all the way back to Sharrowford and I will tell Eevee neither of you are allowed

inside. No. Fighting.”

“See, *zuishou*?” Zheng shrugged. Like a tiger which had decided that playtime was over, the aggression fell from her. “The shaman does not want it. So I will not do it.”

Raine cleared her throat awkwardly, wiped her knife on a tissue, and slipped it away again. “Sorry, Heather. You holding up alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” I croaked, trying to get my breath back past the pain. “Why let her provoke you? You knew what she was doing.”

Raine didn’t even try to conceal her smirk. “It’s what I do.”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted. “We are the same there, *zuishou*.”

“What does ‘*zuishou*’ mean, anyway?” Raine asked, taking a beat to get her mouth around the unfamiliar word. “That Chinese?”

“Rival.”

“Ahhh, thought so.”

“Why does it have to be like that?” I asked, still incensed. “Why does it have to result in you two trying to pull each other’s heads off? That would make me very sad, yes. Also, very angry.”

Raine laughed. “We noticed.”

“I told you it would be this way, shaman,” Zheng purred. “Pointless.”

“Can’t we at least talk about it? About this, about ... how we feel? You’re ... Zheng, you’re free to leave. If you really, truly don’t want to talk to me, you can go. If you don’t want to be part of this. And I won’t try to find you again.” I managed to squeeze the words out, past a lump in my throat, as I straightened up. “Even if nothing else, I respect your freedom.”

Zheng stared at me for a moment, then broke into a rueful grin. “Shaman, you are impossible.”

“She is, ain’t she?” said Raine.

“Mm.”

“Okay then, so ... can we talk?” I asked. “Please? Just me and you, I’ll quite happily talk to you alone.” I turned to Raine. “I’ll be safe. I

promise. She was only trying to provoke you.”

Raine gave me an indulgent smile. “Is that a promise you can make?”

“Yeah come off it,” Twil grunted. “This is so bloody transparent. Heather, she’s a fucking *demon*, she’s reelin’ you in.”

“It’s not- Raine, that’s not your choice to make,” I said.

“Sorry, Heather.” Raine had the good shame to wince. “But I’m not sure I trust your judgement here.”

“Mm,” Zheng rumbled in agreement.

“Oh, so this is what you two agree about? That I can’t make my own choices?” I huffed. “Wonderful, I really pick the people who think the best of me, don’t I?”

“What is my promise worth, *zuishou*?” Zheng asked. “What if I promise no harm comes to a single hair on the shaman’s head?”

“You’re a demon,” Twil muttered. “Isn’t lying your thing?”

“Your promise?” Raine made a show of nodding, thinking that over. “Why change your mind though? Thought you didn’t want to talk at all?”

“The shaman will not be stopped, you and I both know that,” Zheng said with a grin. “If I run, she will find me again, and again, and again, until she asks her damn questions and decides what to do about the fire in her loins.”

“True that,” Raine said.

“Wait, what?” Twil said, frowning between Zheng and I. “What- did I- did I miss- what?”

“Love triangle,” Raine said over her shoulder. “Heather’s got the hots.”

“*What?*” Twil boggled at me, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. “Heather, what the fuck? R-Raine, you’re like ... helping?!”

I blushed hard, exasperated and rapidly losing control of the situation. Zheng rumbled with laughter. I sighed. “And this is why I was perfectly happy to talk to Zheng alone, thank you Raine.”

Twil looked like somebody had just walked over her grave.

“Heather? Are you and ... Raine? Oh shit, no, you two aren’t gonna break up, are you?”

“I wouldn’t worry about-” Raine started.

“No!” I actually stamped one foot. The gesture sent a shiver of pain up through my abused, bruised muscles. Lozzie turned as I did, frowning along with me. “It’s not a love triangle. I am not breaking up with Raine. I am not going to *cuckold* Raine. I am not betraying Raine. I am not going to be seduced away from Raine. I am trying – trying! – to figure out what to do about myself and my need to grow bloody *tentacles*. And what to do about Zheng. And yes, part of that is sexual, fine, yes!”

Raine let out a low whistle. My cheeks burned red.

“Then it’s a foregone conclusion,” Zheng rumbled with a dark chuckle. “Your lover has already won you.”

“And stop competing over me.” I turned on Zheng. “I won’t have it. We’re all people, not *prizes*.”

“Yeah! Bad Zheng!” Lozzie chirped.

Zheng raised one eyebrow, then looked over my head at Raine.

“We better do what she says, Zheng old girl,” said Raine. “You know how she gets.”

“What are you setting up here?” Twil asked, still gaping in confusion. “Some kind of weird three-way ... thing?”

“I don’t know!” I snapped at her. “I don’t know. I. Don’t. Know.”

“Alright, alright, geeze. Stop with the Evee impression.”

“I’m sorry, I just ... I don’t know, not yet. I need to talk to Zheng, we have to figure out ... look, this is all going to be so much easier if we can just talk to each other.”

“Mmmm,” Zheng purred, watching Raine. “Then we need a pact, *zuishou*, you and I.”

“That sounds better,” I sighed. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“You and I, we don’t fight each other-”

“Not lethally, anyway,” Raine added with a smirk.

“Ever.”

Raine paused. “Ever?”

“Ever. This is not about us, *zuishou*.” Zheng blinked, dark and slow behind her eyes. “You and I never fight each other, because for the shaman it would be as if her left hand and right hand went to war.”

“Ex-excuse me? Zheng?” The gravity of her language made me flush, deep down in my belly, a level beyond embarrassment. My chest tightened.

“You spent a single morning with Heather,” Raine said. “But you’re her left hand?”

“That is for the shaman to understand.”

Raine glanced at me. Blushing, I nodded. “It ... feels okay. I think.”

“Fair enough.”

“Whatever happens ... *yoshou*, right hand,” Zheng rumbled at Raine. “Neither of us ever harms the shaman.”

“I’ve been driver on that train for months already,” Raine said. “You wanna hop on, be my guest.”

“You trust my intentions now?” Zheng narrowed her eyes. “You monkeys are too changeable.”

“Trusted your intentions right from the start, old girl,” Raine smirked. “You saved her life twice, after all. Figured you out before Heather did. I was just playing along, seeing where you took it.”

“Huuuh,” Zheng rumbled. “More devious than you look. Good.”

“Raine?” I gaped at her.

She shot me a wink. “Just making openings for you.”

“A pact, then, *yoshou*,” Zheng rumbled. “You and I. Here, now.”

“Sure thing.” Raine rolled her shoulders, limbering up. “Seal the deal. What do we do?”

“I cannot believe you two are doing this over me,” I blustered, flushed in the face and unable to believe my ears. “Can’t we just agree to talk? Can’t we-”

Zheng placed one huge hand on my head. “Doesn’t concern you,

shaman. This is between me and her.”

“Yeah. Making a pact with a demon,” Raine said. “That’s my business.”

“Oh I don’t believe you two,” I hissed.

“We need a bear,” Zheng said. “One that has eaten human flesh. We kill it together, share the meat, make the vow.”

“Bear?” Twil squinted. “We’re not in fucking Canada.”

“Yes, you might have trouble finding a bear here,” I said with a sigh.

“Fluids then. Blood,” Zheng said. “You have a knife. We cut.” She drew her hand over her palm. “We shake.”

Raine took out her knife from her jacket and slid it half out of the sheath, then paused with a raised eyebrow. “Dunno how things were when you were little, but the twenty first century’s a little messier. You haven’t got any blood-borne diseases, have you?”

Zheng rolled a shrug. “I have yet to meet a disease that can survive me.”

“It’s a good point though,” I said. “Don’t make yourself ill doing this, Raine. It’s silly enough already.”

“Spit will do,” Zheng rumbled. She raised her right hand to her face and hawked a huge glob of saliva into her palm. Raine smirked, and followed suit as Zheng held her hand out.

Under the rustling canopy, surrounded by the sputtering mist of rain, my lover shook hands with a creature from the abyss, in an agreement to protect me – from myself, or from each other? I wasn’t sure. This situation had left me behind several moves ago.

I couldn’t stop blushing, caught between outrage and a secret, unspeakable enjoyment. On one hand I was almost offended. I, who’d swam the abyss, who’d defied the leviathans of the deep, who had inhabited a body of starlight and mathematics stronger than anything one might find on this plane of reality, did not need my friends and lovers to make a pact of protection.

On the other hand, I was small and scrawny and two of the most attractive people I knew were bonding over me. That lit a white-hot fire in my belly and made me squirm inside. A thrill went down my

spine, and ended as low as it could go.

Bad, mad Heather, I cursed myself. Not the time or place.

Zheng and Raine parted again. Raine wiped her hand on her jeans.

"We are both the shaman's now," Zheng purred. "But alone still stands. We talk alone."

"You're not gonna spirit her away into the woods, though?" Raine asked. "You do that, we got a problem again."

"Monkey nonsense," Zheng purred. "We walk. You and the *laangren* stay out of earshot. You too, mooncalf."

"But why?" Lozzie repeated. She pouted at Zheng and puffed both cheeks out, then let go of me and bounced up and down on restless toes. "You know I know all the things about you, don't you? We talked in the dreams sooo much, I know all about where you were made and what you did for years and years and everything! All the things! You don't want everyone to hear because it's personal and private but I'm already personal and private so why can't I come?"

Zheng blinked three times, then chuckled, a sound like granite rocks being rubbed together. "Very well, mooncalf. You can come."

"Should'a said that at the start," Raine muttered.

"Yaaay! Up? Up!" Lozzie threw her hands in the air.

"Up?"

"Up! Up! Climb?" Lozzie bit her bottom lip, eyes wide with expectant desire. Zheng tilted her head to one side, frowning. I wondered if she had as much issue with the dream-memories as I did.

"Up," she echoed. "Yes, mooncalf. Up you go!"

And without another word, Lozzie suddenly swarmed up Zheng's side, all legs and arms. Zheng bent slightly to accommodate her, to give her a foothold on a thigh, a handhold on a shoulder. With a hup and a heave and a handful of Zheng's hair, Lozzie climbed the giant like a true monkey, swung one leg over Zheng's head, and sat on her shoulders, braided hair swaying.

"Tall now!" Lozzie announced with a giggle. Zheng placed both hands on Lozzie's thighs to keep her steady.

“Hahaha, what the fuck?” Twil laughed.

“The mooncalf gets. Come along, little monkeys. I’ll show you where I sleep. We’ll talk there.”

= =

Zheng led us back into the deep heart of the woods, through the undergrowth and past fallen trees, wrapped in the static of rain on leaves. Far above our heads, held at bay beyond the green canopy, the roiling clouds refused to burst into storm.

Lozzie’s nightmare spirit friends followed us a way, stomping along, their huge tentacles dragging across tree bark and dipping to the forest floor to investigate old stones or fallen branches, but eventually they dropped behind, distracted by the ineffable needs of pneuma-somatic life. Lozzie twisted on Zheng’s shoulders to wave goodbye, almost tumbling off before one of Zheng’s huge hands caught her around the waist.

A tentacle rose from the woods in answer, thirty feet up.

Part of me wanted to wave too, but I don’t think the spirits would have appreciated that.

Raine took my broken, buckled hiking stick and gave me her one instead. She seemed entirely comfortable with how events were unfolding, but if our roles had been reversed I doubted I could have said the same for myself. No hint of anticipation in the way she walked, no concealed discomfort, no worried tension; her faith in me was unshakable. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that. I was about to discuss – among other things – matters of the heart with a person I’d admitted to being deeply, wildly attracted to. Where was the jealousy, the possessiveness, the protective hand?

Twil gave me funny looks the whole way.

“What?” she grunted when I gave her one back.

“I know this is strange, Twil. I’m sorry for dragging you here.”

She shrugged, hands wide. “No judgement. Just, fuck, Heather, and I thought my deal was complicated.”

I sighed. “Your ‘deal’ is crystal clear. It’s not complex at all.”

“Yeah, but ... ” She glanced at Raine, two paces ahead, and lowered her voice. “Feels like it.”

"Evee's not complex," Raine threw back over her shoulder. "You just gotta let her shout it out a bit before you jump her."

"W-what?" Twil went wide-eyed. "Fuck me, does everyone know?"

"It has been extremely obvious," I said. Twil's shoulders slumped. She grumbled, red in the face, and hunched up at Raine's good-natured laughter.

Zheng's route took us back to the edge of the shallow woodland valley, the opposite direction along the near-invisible overgrown path, dotted with ancient fencepost stubs and the looming ridge-line of concrete bars which jutted out from the earth. She led us up the ridge. No easy climb for me. Raine had to take my hand and help me up. We followed the ridge another hundred feet or so, to a place where it turned sharply and vanished into a thicker, deeper part of the woods.

On the sharp turn sat the ruined shell of a wartime pillbox.

"Here," Zheng purred.

Grey concrete, clad in a second skin of dry lichen, had long ago been split by the irresistible forces of nature; a tree had grown through one of the pillbox's foot-thick walls. The roof had partially collapsed, fallen to fill the single, cramped room below and form a sort of sloped floor, open to the woodland air and shadowy light. The fortuitous angle of the ridge prevented any pooling of stagnant rainwater. A bank of packed earth had once protected the sides and rear of the pillbox, but was now covered in a carpet of spring bluebells.

Zheng sprang up onto the ragged concrete wall, and then settled herself down cross-legged on the largest single slab of fallen roof. Lizzie wobbled on her shoulders, arms out for balance, then hopped off with a bounce of one wellington boot, staring around at the shattered concrete shell.

"You're sleeping in a ruin?" Twil asked, peering around the pillbox's now-pointless doorway, choked solid with rubble. "Cool!"

"Slept in worse places, worse times," Zheng purred, a slow smile showing all her teeth. "It is dry, it is solid. It does not roll, and you can't fall out of it."

"You could sleep in an actual bed, if you want," I said, slowly

working my way up the side of the earthen bank with my hiking stick, onto the cracked slope of the collapsed roof. Next to me, Raine tested the concrete with her foot.

“Looks safe enough,” she said. “Packed solid, nothing else left to fall. Better than the mud.”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted. “Alone.”

“Yeah yeah.” Twil rolled her eyes.

“One last time,” Raine said to me, and took my free hand. “You’re absolutely certain about this, Heather?”

I nodded, a lump in my throat. “Nothing to be nervous about, I’m just going to talk to her. About coming home. About tentacles. About ... well, us.”

“She is safe with me, *yoshou*,” Zheng purred.

“I believe you,” Raine said to her, but never broke eye contact with me. Those beautiful brown eyes, alert and intelligent, saw through me in ways I barely understood, despite that Raine and I shared a bed every night. How could she – how could anybody – be comfortable with their lover in this situation?

For a split-second I saw behind the calm in the depths of her eyes. A devotion that made me feel small.

“Raine?” I murmured her name.

The spell broke. Raine kissed me on the forehead. “Alright. Twil and I’ll be just over there.” She nodded off to the side, along the ridge.

“We will? What?” Twil frowned.

“We’ll have a chat of our own. I’m gonna give you some sage advice, little lassie, about how to get into Eevee’s panties.”

“Fuck you! Oh, for fuck’s sake, I’m all just a big bloody joke, aren’t I?” Twil stomped off, throwing two fingers up behind her. “Fuck you, Raine!”

Raine laughed, then in a flash of motion she turned back and planted a surprise kiss on my lips. In full view of everyone except Twil.

In full view of Zheng.

Sudden and rough, forceful and deep, the kiss took my breath away. Raine slipped a hand up my front, quick and hidden by the angle of our bodies. I squeaked into her mouth, and she pulled back, a dark smolder in her eyes.

“R-Raine?” I squeaked.

She let go of me, stepped back, and winked. Before I could splutter for an explanation, she turned away and jogged off after Twil. I touched my fingertips to my lips, my heart racing from her sudden aggression.

Calculated aggression. She’d gotten Twil to turn away, then made her point. To me – or to Zheng?

Had I gotten Raine all wrong, all this time?

She wasn’t comfortable with this at all.

“Oh God, Raine, say something first,” I hissed to myself.

I glanced over at Zheng, but she seemed unconcerned, watching me in slow contemplation. Lozzie was busy wriggling into Zheng’s lap like a small puppy looking for warmth.

“Um ... ” I swallowed, still red in the face. “I’m sorry, I think she was trying to make you jealous, maybe.”

“Jealous?”

“Yes, I-”

“Monkey nonsense.”

“ ... you mean, you’re not jealous?”

Zheng shrugged. If she did care, then she was doing a very good job of hiding her emotions. “Sit down, shaman.”

“Oh, yes, that’s probably a good place to start, right.”

I pulled myself together and decided to take a seat against the trunk of the tree which had ruined the side of the pillbox decades ago. Hardly the most comfortable surrogate chair I’d ever sat in, but the concrete was mostly dry and broad enough for my scrawny self. I smoothed my coat underneath my backside and got settled a little ways from Zheng, at a safe distance. My feet throbbed inside the

over-sized wellington boots, sore from all the walking. Zheng ignored me, stroking Lozzie's hair as the girl snuggled into her lap.

"Say your piece, shaman."

"It's not a piece. Oh Zheng, I don't even know where to start." I glanced off to the left, back along the ridge. Raine and Twil stood about fifty feet away, talking among the trees. Twil had her hood up and her face down, shoulders sulky and glum. Raine was laughing at something. Even at this distance, I recognised that grin. "Zheng, why didn't you want to talk to me? Why is this dangerous?"

"All animals avoid pain."

"I'm going to cause you pain?" I asked.

She blinked a slow blink at me, then sighed, a huge sigh worthy of a giant. An old, aching melancholy came over her, deep in her eyes and in every muscle of her body. For the very first time since I'd freed Zheng in that blood-soaked, empty flat in Glasswick tower, I had a dim, half-seen sense of just how old she was. Of a weight unseen.

Zheng stretched her shoulders and rolled her neck, puffed her chest out. I noticed the gash Raine had cut in her arm was healed already, the blood dried on her sleeve.

"You are too much like her, shaman."

My ears pricked up. "Who? You said that once before. Who is 'she'? Who are you comparing me to?"

"You never stop, you never give in. You plan to make war on *Laoyeh*." She shook her head. "You are too much, shaman."

"Who was she, Zheng?"

"*Ciremedie*," Lozzie said, small and serious. She bit her lip and ducked her head, as if expecting Zheng's anger.

The demon-host chuckled softly and stroked Lozzie's hair.

"*Ciremedie*. 'Little bird'."

"And who was ... Si-rem-a-day?" I struggled to pronounce the name. Not Chinese, that was certain, and the name didn't sound Mongolian either, from what little I'd heard Lozzie or Zheng speak before.

“Ciremedie,” Zheng repeated. “Let it flow, shaman.”

“Ciremedie. Ciremedie.” I tried a couple more times. “I like it, it’s a very pretty name. It’s not Mongolian, is it? I always assumed your first language was Mongolian.”

Zheng shook her head. “Further north, shaman. Much further.”

I pictured a rough world map in my head, and frowned. “Siberia?”

“Mongrel *Rus* word,” Zheng sneered. “It had no name. It was the great forest, and it went on forever, covered the world, for us.”

“Us?”

Zheng shrugged. “Monkeys. My monkeys. The first. As close as I ever came to being one of you.”

“That’s where you were ... brought here? Made? In a Siberian – I’m sorry, I don’t have a better name for it – a Siberian forest?”

“Mm.”

I hesitated, gulped, and gathered my courage. “Who was Ciremedie?”

Zheng stared at me, a molten darkness in her eyes, sullen and reluctant. For a moment I was certain this was the line for her, this was all I was going to get. Any kinship with her would remain theory alone, because even a demon has her secrets.

Then, finally, she sighed another gargantuan sigh. She stroked Lozzie’s head, and spoke to a point on the ground, not to me.

“Her parents named her ‘little bird’ because she was a sickly child. She grew slow, not like the stronger girls in the clan, not even like her elder sister. Something had gotten to her in the womb, leeches her vitality away, poisoned her body. But she was clever, born with a fast mind and obscure gifts. She spoke whole sentences before she was a year old. She saw omens in clouds, in the entrails of dogs, in the pattern of moose prints in snow. She predicted when people would die, and she was right eight out of ten times.”

The forest itself bent to listen. I dared not breathe too loud lest I interrupt.

“The *alma* took a liking to her,” Zheng continued. “Taught her ... huh, monkey nonsense, but some of it worked. Some of it was real.

And raw.” Zheng fell into brooding silence for a moment before she resumed. “When Ciremedie was eight years old, her elder sister died in an accident. She fell in the river and drowned. Useless body, no air and the whole thing stops working, mm? Wearing too many layers of fur and hide, dragged her down, filled her lungs with icy water. She drowned, but they fished her corpse up downstream an hour later. Still fresh. Little bird, she knew things by then, things no adult mind could contain. She convinced the *alma* and her parents that she could bring her beloved sister back from the dead, if only they let her try.”

“Oh,” I murmured, and knew exactly where this was going.

Zheng looked up, right at me, as if only just reminded I was even here. “Those people had none of the tools wizards do. No magic circles, no ritual language, no knowledge to bind or control. They would have if they could, because you monkeys are all the same in the end. But they couldn’t. They could only grope for something to summon back into the dead body. They had mushrooms and smoke, exhaustion and chanting, bent their monkey minds around the truth with brute force. Ciremedie was a shaman, not a wizard.”

Zheng spoke the words like a challenge. Her tone made my throat close up. Even Lozzie looked like she wanted to squeak and shrink away.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, Zheng. Okay.”

“Mm.” Zheng grunted. “Why am I telling you this, shaman? Why must you know? Why do I want to?”

“Because I’m your friend,” I said. A reflex, a truth without thought.

Zheng laughed, a deep belly-chuckle. “A friend! Yes, shaman, you are like her. Ha!”

“If you held her in high regard, I count that as a compliment.”

“She dived into the darkest sea. You’ve been there, shaman. You know the – abyss? That is the word you’re using. Fitting. That place should have devoured her, but she was clever enough to change, to adapt, to leave behind the limitations of being a monkey. She dived into the abyss thinking it the underworld, thinking she could drag back her sister’s soul.” Zheng sat up and breathed out like a bellows. She spread her arms and grinned that shark-toothed grin. “Instead, she caught me.”

I nodded, and found my eyes watering. “Then I have something else in common with her too. I went there to find my sister as well.”

“Mm. You did, shaman.” Zheng deflated again. “Her face was the first thing I saw, lying on her side in a tent full of smoke. The clan had no idea what to do with either of us. I wasn’t the only piece of the abyss my little bird had brought back with her. She couldn’t recall how to be human. Could barely talk. Couldn’t wipe her own arse for weeks.”

Zheng trailed off into the labyrinth of memory. Her eyes seemed so far away. Lozzie bit her lip, worried.

“What happened to her?” I prompted after a moment.

“She was eight years old, small,” Zheng said. “But then so was I, at first. This body was, mmmm, twenty-three? Twenty-four? Didn’t matter. I made it bigger over time, grew into it, learnt how it works. Made my bones strong, my flesh new. Didn’t take them long to figure out I wasn’t the dead girl, I was something else. Ancestor, spirit-lord, sun-emissary, something from the dark. They were afraid to name me. But she called me sister, even though she knew more than any other that I was not. Even when she grew into an adult and I kept growing.”

“She must have been very kind.”

“Mm.”

“So, she was like a real sister to you?” Even as I asked, I knew it was the wrong question, and winced inside.

Zheng shook her head. “No, shaman. Not like a sister.”

“Ah. Yes. You loved her.”

“Mm.” Zheng grunted. “But not at first. At first, I didn’t even know what I was, and neither did the clan. They threw me meat, whole deer carcasses, dogs with their bellies cut open, buckets worth of alcohol. They threw me young men as well, and a woman or two in case I didn’t take, but I had no idea what to do with any of them. Ha! I picked up their language quickly. Monkey chatter, always been easy. I fought a bear – one that had gotten a taste for human flesh, and that was when I became one of them.”

“And ... Ciremedie?”

"I was hers," Zheng purred, but slowly trailed off as she spoke, circling something she didn't want to touch. "I was with her, and for her. She taught me how to speak, how to feel, how to be. How to be like a monkey. She grew up, but she was always crippled, always broken by the fire she'd stolen from the gods, no idea how to wield it, and it burned her. Shaman, yes, and brilliant, but mad, lost. I hunted – bear, deer. Made war on other clans. Lived. My shaman, my ... " Zheng trailed off to nothing.

"... what happened?"

Zheng roused herself and fixed me with a dark look. I shuddered, and none of it was good. Old anger, old, wordless, boundless frustration and rage.

"She did what all you monkeys do eventually, peasant or khan. She died."

"Oh. Oh, Zheng-"

"A very long time ago," Zheng rumbled. She turned her gaze from me and into the woods. Lizzie seemed very small in her lap. For a long, long moment she said nothing, breathing too hard, and then muttered, "I cannot do this again, shaman."

I sat in uncomfortable silence, searching for the right thing to say, for anything to say. I felt like a blistering idiot. Of course Zheng's maker – Zheng's lover? – had died. This was hundreds of years ago, in pre-Russian Siberia. Zheng was older than I'd imagined.

"What ... " I ventured, had to find a way to keep her talking while I processed this. "What did you do? How did you end up ... not in Siberia?"

Zheng shrugged. The melancholy did not leave her, but something simple and blunt and brutal crept over to cover it. She looked at me again as she spoke. "I went into the forest, and I didn't come back. I wanted to be an animal again, didn't want to think like a monkey. Memory, emotion, curses to be endured. I drifted south, through the forests. Five decades, give or take. Time doesn't matter when you lose your sense of self. I drove it away."

"Oh, Zheng."

"The edge of the forest met me, in time. And so did the horsemen."

"The ... Mongolia?"

"Mmmmm," Zheng purred. "On the steppes. They brought me down with nets and arrows and spears. Took a dozen warriors with me, and fifteen horses. Took them three whole days, the bastards! Ha!" She grinned, full of glee at the memory of a truly good fight, but then darkened as she spoke onward. "Then they brought *Song* iron, chains and manacles, bastard mongrel Han wizards whose guts aren't worth shitting in. They dragged me into a camp and used twenty horses to hold me in place as they laid the first lines." She lifted the hem of her jumper to show the toned bronze of her abdomen, the remains of the tattoos I'd ruined, and ran one fingertip along the circle I'd cut from the infinitely dense mass of black tattoos.

"They enslaved you? Why?" I frowned, incensed. This was a long time ago indeed, but Zheng's dark fury was fresh and real.

"Because they were building an empire, shaman. Empires always enslave." She shrugged. "But at first, I didn't care."

"You didn't?"

"The leash was so long it was invisible. All I cared about was eating and killing, and the khans gave me plenty of that. They set me amongst their enemies and I enjoyed it. The *Song*, the *Rus*, the Arab." She smiled again, showing her teeth. "The Magyars, that was where I first changed hands. Monkeys wearing metal shells, ha!" Zheng laughed at the absurdity.

"Knights?"

"Mm. I spent a ... a long time. A century? Mm, in the basement of some monastery, in a magic circle, until a monk divined the correct words to write on my skin to stop me from eating his flesh. Then it began, the long chain of slavery, passed from wizard to wizard when one group died or took over another. Lots of waiting. Years of waiting. At one point I was upside down in a well for seven years. Sometimes my memories get fuzzy, the wards were too strong, but sometimes ... " She grinned a dark, savage grin. "Wizards, always so afraid they would lose control of me. I was so much older than anything they could summon. And sometimes they did, and I killed them. But never freedom. Spent so long leashed and bound. Sometimes the leash was short, sometimes long. But always there." She spoke with broken awe, melancholy and hurt, like a wounded lion. "Until now. Until you, shaman."

"I only ... " I found a lump in my throat. "Zheng, I only did what was right. Anyone would. That doesn't mean I'm your reincarnated lover."

"No, but you are too much like her, shaman. Like her if she came back whole. You are a natural leader, but you don't see it."

"I'm- Zheng, I'm not a leader of anything."

"Wizards make poor leaders, but I've known plenty of others. You monkeys think leadership is about power – or willpower, to bind, to impose, to command. But it's not. True leadership is about love."

I blinked. That was not a word I'd expected from Zheng. "Love?"

"Mmmm," she purred. "Love, shaman. It is why I'm yours. You should have left me in the wild and forgotten about me, because now you'll never be rid of me."

nostalgia for infinity – 9.8

A functionally immortal, seven-foot tall, man-eating demon had just declared that I – yes, me, Heather, scrawny and weird and terminally awkward, who'd probably be dead or in a mental hospital without serious help, an emotional cripple missing half my soul, twisted forever by a trip to the outer darkness – am a metaphorical reincarnation of her centuries-dead pseudo-incestual lover.

It was a testament to how bizarre my life had become that this was not the strangest thing to happen to me lately.

“L-love?”

Unfortunately I had a lump in my throat, my chest felt fit to burst, and my eyes were filling with tears.

“Yes, shaman.”

“Uh, Zheng, s-slow down, please.” I held a hand up. “Take a- I need a moment, I’m sorry, I ... ”

“Mm.”

Zheng’s story had skewered my heart. Perhaps it was the inherent tragedy, or perhaps the thought of her pining for a lost love for hundreds of years, or perhaps the painful devotion in her eyes.

Or perhaps it was guilt, because I finally understood what this situation was doing to her.

She was right; she couldn’t do this again.

I sniffed back tears and rummaged in my coat pockets. My fingers felt clumsy and blunt as I unfolded a tissue and wiped my eyes. The woods around us rustled in the wind, punctuated by the occasional patter of fat raindrops falling from the leaves. Zheng watched me with affectionate intensity as I struggled to regain my composure. Lozzie, still all snuggled up in Zheng’s lap, was biting her lower lip in sympathetic response. She’d heard this all before, extracted Zheng’s past from her in the dreams, but the emotional feedback still affected her.

“Okay, okay,” I said, more to myself than Zheng. “I ... oh, this is absurd,” I sighed with a choke in my voice. “What am I supposed to say to any of that? I mean, thank you, Zheng, thank you, but I can’t be the girl you lost. I’m not your Ciremedie. I’m pretty certain reincarnation isn’t real. And I’m ... I like you, yes, a-and I *want* you in a way I don’t fully understand, but I don’t ... love you, not exactly. I’m sorry.”

“Too late, shaman. We made our choices. You will never be rid of me.”

“Zheng, I don’t want to be rid of you.” I sniffed hard again, trying to hold back the waterworks. An involuntary laugh of emotional overload crept up my throat and burst into an odd giggle on my lips. “I would hardly have spent an entire day tracking you through the woods if I wanted to be rid of you. That’s even more absurd than the idea I’m your reincarnated lover – really!”

An affectionate grin curled the corners of Zheng’s mouth. She flashed a glint of teeth. “With every word you prove me right, shaman.”

I flustered at the look on her face. “You’re- you’re attributing pure intentions to my motives, when they’re anything but. I’m as ruthless as you.”

Zheng tilted her head to one side. “Then why come find me, shaman?”

“Because Heather needs you,” Lozzie murmured, then puffed her cheeks out.

“Because I need your help,” I blurted out. “Because you’re big, and strong, and you came from the abyss, and I need to know things about that. Because Maisie told me to gather my friends, that I wouldn’t be able to rescue her otherwise. Don’t do it alone. So here I am, asking my friend for help.”

Zheng nodded. “I will.”

I faltered, swallowed hard. “Because ... ”

“Not all love is eros, shaman,” she purred. “But if you wish it so, I will gladly take you into the woods and make you squeal.”

I blushed so hard my head span, my sides ached with the pounding of my own heart, my pulse raced inside my flanks, in my bruises, a

strangely satisfying pain. I had to put my face in my hands and take a very long, slow breath, in case I blurted out a 'yes please' in a moment of weakness.

"Zheng, I- ... let's, um ... let's put that to one side for a moment? I can't, um ... I mean, you're a murderous, man-eating demon, I've seen you eat human flesh, and I ... I don't care about that, which is absolutely crazy, but- I ... you're- you're welcome, Zheng, to stay by my side, if that's what you want, if you-"

"Use me, shaman."

Zheng's voice cut hard, all her tenderness banished.

I looked up at her face again, at a brooding darkness in her eyes.

"I-I'm sorry? I'm sorry, Zheng, I'm still struggling to express myself, I-"

"Use me. Shaman, your goals are far in excess of the possible, even for a wizard; you plan war on *Laoyeh*, to recover your beloved. And here I am. Willing and free, I am a greater tool than any wizard has ever known. Use me."

"I ... " I stopped, frowned, and sighed.

"Use me, shaman," she repeated. Artificially cold. No fire in her words.

I was beginning to learn. Zheng was almost as bad at concealing her emotions as Twil was.

Lozzie picked up on it too. She frowned up at Zheng and flapped her arms beneath her poncho, but the demon-host ignored her serious little face.

"Zheng, you are not a tool," I said, a school-mistress tut in my voice. "And I know what you're doing, it's blatantly transparent. I refuse to *use* anybody. You're my friend, at the very least, maybe my-"

With a heave in her throat like a rhinoceros readying for a charge, Zheng surged to her feet. Lozzie scrambled out of her lap as she rose, bouncing up in her flopping wellington boots, pastel poncho and raincoat both flaring out as she almost lost her balance. Zheng towered over both of us, seven feet of muscle staring down at me like a cornered animal. Buried instinct told me to rise as well, to get

to my feet – or make myself small, slink away into some hole beyond the reach of this large, angry predator, but I refused to give in. I stayed sitting, did my best to control the shake in my voice, and clutched my sides as my phantom limbs attempted to adopt a defensive posture.

“Z-Zheng-”

“*Shaman.*”

“Zhengy! No, don’t!” Lozzie chirped. “Bad Zheng, bad Zheng!” She bounced on the balls of her feet in front of Zheng, arms up in the air, but the demon-host had eyes only for me.

“Zheng, I understand what you’re trying to do,” I said. “But that’s not the kind of person I am. I can’t treat you like a tool, I can’t treat anybody like that, I’d never be able to live with it.”

Zheng’s darkness broke as suddenly as it had fallen, in a rolling, rising laugh. She bared all her teeth and laughed herself into a roar of frustration at the treetops, shook herself from the head down like a berserk warrior. For a moment I thought she might tear at her clothes, but she came down in a deep breath, then seemed to sag into herself as old melancholy took hold of her frame once more.

“You name the torture with every word, shaman. You can’t treat anybody like that, neither could Ciremedie. Even a demon standing in her sister’s skin.”

“Heather?”

Raine called my name, her voice cutting through the trees. I glanced down the length of the woodland ridge. Raine had one hand raised in distant question, watching Zheng and I. Twil stared up at us too, hands in her pockets, eyes narrowed beneath the shelter of her hood.

“We’re fine!” I called back, then turned to Zheng. “Sit down. Zheng, please, sit back down.”

With a sullen grumble and a shrug like a sulky teenager, Zheng slumped back down onto the slab of concrete. She folded her legs, waxed coat pooling around her, and levelled a dead-eyed gaze at Raine. Lozzie did a big theatrical sigh, arms flopping to her sides. From down the ridge, Raine flashed a thumbs-up. I nodded to her. Everything is totally, one-hundred percent under control, I lied.

“Devoted protection, shaman. Your right hand is vigilant. Good.”

“She is that,” I sighed, struggling to get my breath back. I rubbed my chest, over the place inside where the pneuma-somatic repair flexed and twitched. The ghost of amusement crept back onto Zheng’s face.

“Put the wind up you, did I, little monkey?”

“You know quite well you did.” I tutted. “And you were trying to.”

“Good.”

“Zheng-”

“Nothing you can say will make this easier, shaman. I am yours now. You are too kind to drive me away or abuse me into hatred. And seventy or eighty years from now your heart will seize up or plaque will fog your brain or your cells will eat your organs, and I will once again wish my little bird had never dragged me from the dark.”

Lozzie refrained from crawling back into Zheng’s lap. Instead she drew our attention by tip-toeing around Zheng’s side, watching the demon-host’s face like one might with a wary dog. Zheng watched back, as Lozzie reached out and awkwardly patted her on the head.

“What about Lozzie?” I asked, grasping at straws. “She made friends with you before I did, she’s shown you kindness too. Why hasn’t she inspired this ... this?”

“She is not you, shaman.”

“Oh.” I felt a blush in my cheeks.

Despite everything, despite the horror and tragedy of Zheng’s story, it is still a heady cocktail to be told you are desired by the object of your own attraction.

“Mm. The mooncalf is a sweet thing, but only a small piece of her is here.” Zheng reached out and wrapped one huge, grimy hand around the back of Lozzie’s neck, then squeezed and kneaded her muscles. Lozzie’s eyes fluttered shut. I swear she let out a purr. “I am all here, shaman. As physical as you.”

“Yes, yes indeed you are.” I sighed. “That aspect of you is especially difficult to overlook.”

A glint of savage joy entered Zheng's eyes. "You like that, shaman?"
"I ... I'm sorry?"

"As a woman – you like?"

Zheng didn't actually move a single muscle, not that I could see, but a change passed through the air between us. It began in her eyes, a deep intensity of predatory intent that radiated throughout her entire body, the heavy weight of her chest beneath the ragged, filthy old jumper, the curve of her hips inside her jeans, the unseen ripple of her abdominal muscles.

"Y-yes. Zheng, my goodness, don't–"

Zheng burst into laughter. I went bright red in the face, overheated and flushed, my heart fluttering in my chest like a bird trying to escape a cage. Lust was not appropriate right now, not after Zheng's story, after her pain – or was it?

She certainly seemed to enjoy it.

"Horny zombie," Lozzie stage-whispered.

I glanced back down the ridge, down toward Raine and Twil, certain in my gut that Raine would see me blushing and she'd know. She'd know I was getting *turned on* by another woman, and I knew that in her secret thoughts she would not be happy.

Twil and her were still talking. She wasn't even looking at me.

"I don't–" I managed, then paused and swallowed. "I don't think Raine is comfortable with the idea of sharing me. I'm- I'm sorry, Zheng, but I can't, I can't hurt her, I won't- I–"

"As if that matters, shaman!" Zheng laughed. "You monkeys, your need for neat solutions. Ha!"

"A neat solution would rather nice right now, actually."

Zheng ended the laugh with a heavy sigh as she came down from her peak. Her amusement simmered down into a resigned ache, like somebody who's been in hospital for too long.

"You understand, shaman? This traps me more completely than any chains, more securely than any magic."

"Zheng, I can't–" I swallowed, tried to stop my voice shaking. "I

can't be responsible for that, for your emotions, for you. I'm not in control of you. Why- why not- why not leave?" I raised one arm, with more courage than I thought I possessed, and pointed off into the darker depths of the wood, where the ridge-line vanished between the thicker, older trees. My throat tightened with awful guilt that I couldn't swallow away. "Get up right now and walk away and- and forget about me."

"Do not be a fool, shaman," she rumbled. "You plan war on *Laoyeh*. You prepare for the greatest fight I have ever seen. You are a beacon to all manner of tooth and claw, mage and monster. You will be lucky to make it to thirty, let alone eighty! Ha! You need more than your right hand to help you get there. A third time, shaman, you will never be rid of me." Zheng's voice grew thick with emotion. For a terrible moment, I thought she might cry. Was she even capable of that? Probably. "I cannot do this again. To laugh with you is torture."

"I know, Zheng, I-"

"No, *monkey*, you do not know."

"I do."

Zheng turned a gaze of such displeasure on me that it made me shake inside. Lizzie did a little flinch too, hopping backward two steps, her wellington boots clacking against the concrete. I swallowed, but sat up straighter.

"When I ... a decade ago ... I-" I struggled to begin. The comparison made me feel dirty and vulnerable, like I was doing something forbidden, but I had nothing left with which to help. "Ten years ago I lost my sister, my twin, my other half, when the Eye kidnapped us both. You know that much already."

Zheng stared at me, slow and dark. I drew in a shuddering breath, and forced myself onward.

"I still don't feel like a real person without her. Despite my friends, despite Raine. Despite my ... what I brought back from the abyss. I'm not a full person without Maisie. I'm just a shell, pretending." My throat tightened. "We did everything together. We had separate beds, but we'd sleep together six out of seven nights. Neither of us had school friends that weren't mutual. We touched constantly, we were- she was the other half of my soul. And it hurts. It hurts all the

time, more than I can put into words. Sometimes I seem like I'm alright, like I'm normal, but she's always there in back of my mind. In the mirror, when I look at myself. I have her face."

Zheng tilted her head to one side.

"If I could reach into your mind," I continued. "And God knows, maybe I can, maybe I can make hyperdimensional mathematics do that. But if I could remove your memories of Ciremedie, would you have me do it?"

"I drove memory away," Zheng growled, low and angry. "For-"

"Yes, but would you do it now? Would you forget her, forever?"

Zheng bared her teeth in a joyless grin, a rictus of conflicted pain.

"Because I would never forget Maisie," I said. "That's what the doctors wanted me to do, what my parents wanted. I was meant to purge those memories, to *discard* her, not think about her, pretend I'd never had a sister I loved. Pretend she didn't exist. Forget, because the memories hurt me." I shook my head with old anger. "Never. Never. I wouldn't trade my memories of Maisie for anything. The pain is worth what I had."

"I was not made for this, shaman. I was born in the dark, where such things do not exist."

"None of us were made for this!" I almost shouted at her. "Are experiences not worth anything if they're fleeting? I'll ... I'll lose Raine one day, eventually, maybe when we're old, I hope. Or she'll lose me first, more likely." I choked up a little as I said that. "I'm skirting the edge of self-destruction all the time, I know that, both with hyperdimensional mathematics and what I'm doing to my body, but that doesn't mean she's willing to abandon me to avoid hurting herself. People die, Zheng, all the time, of disease or accident, it comes suddenly and there's no meaning to it, the meaning is in living, the bit that comes first. When you ... " I swallowed hard, struggled to hold back tears, to keep my thoughts of Maisie at arm's length, if only I could finish what I was trying to say. "When you lose somebody you love, you don't want to regret what you didn't do. Time you didn't spend with them."

I choked back a sob, screwed my eyes shut, and took a deep breath.

Lozzie's little footsteps crossed to me in a patter of rubber. She went

to her knees and hugged me from the side, elbow in my chest, awkward and bony and exactly what I needed right now. I hugged her back with one arm.

“Spending life like that, like an animal,” I said. “Not feeling, not having to feel like a person, it would be like ...” My throat tightened up. Almost couldn’t admit it. “Like deciding to take my medication. Like being back in the abyss.”

A terrible yearning. For freedom, for lack of care, for pure survival easier than living.

“And I get that,” I forced myself to say. “I get that because part of me wants it, wants to go back, wants to be like that again. But pain is the price we pay for being here. For getting to be a person. For getting to love? If you feel so strongly about me, if you want to stay with me, then do it for me, for yourself. This time – us, now! – it’s real. It’s passing but it’s real. That’s all. I’m sorry, Zheng, I’m terrible at putting this into words.”

Zheng regarded me for a long moment, and I saw that my passion was not enough. I’d been on this Earth barely two decades, inexperienced, naive, all too human. She was hundreds of years old. She’d killed dozens of people, at the very least. She ate human flesh and hunted for pleasure. She was a thing from the abyss, a pure predator.

And then Zheng smiled. Showed her teeth, snorted a humourless laugh, shook her head.

“Sentimental monkey.”

“You’re sentimental too, you huge oaf.” I sniffed, and scrubbed at my eyes with my sleeve. “Oh blast, where are my tissues?”

They’d all called Zheng dangerous. Evelyn, Sarika, Felicity, all mages. Warned me that she was inherently unstable because of what she was, that she might wreak havoc if left loose, that she would devolve into a wild animal. But none of that was true, was it? She was dangerous, but mostly to those who would keep her in chains, who refused to treat her as a person.

She was also a cannibal psychopath, yes. No person is perfect.

“You are her, aren’t you? You are my little bird, returned.”

“I’m not.” I rolled my eyes. “Zheng, you can’t treat me like that, it’s

not healthy for you, or me, emotionally. None of this is healthy, but at least we can spare ourselves that as well."

"Shaman."

I had the creeping sense that Zheng had just agreed to disagree.

"Isn't being here fun?" Lozzie spoke up in a little chirp, a question for the demon.

"Being here?" Zheng purred, a grin on her lips. She sighed a big sigh, filled her lungs with the damp forest air. "The taste of meat. The burn of hot muscle. The feeling of victory. Yes, mooncalf, some things are worth being here for."

"Some things are worth being here for, yes," I echoed.

Zheng raised one hand and pointed a finger at me. I felt myself blush again, but huffed at her. She chuckled.

"Is that what you want?" I asked.

"Mm. I'm yours, shaman. Even if you are fleeting. We will make a deal, you and I."

I blinked at her, a sinking feeling dragging at the pit of my stomach. "In the same way you did with Raine?"

Zheng shook her head. "From you, shaman, nothing but the vow."

"A vow to ... what?"

"When your time comes, seventy or eighty years from now, I go first. You do it yourself, you pull the spark from my core and send it back to the deep dark, and I return to what I was for an eternity before here."

A horrible knot pulled tight inside my chest. I felt short of breath. The pneuma-somatic flesh inside my lungs seemed to tighten up in sympathetic panic. Lozzie said my name, but she seemed too far away.

"You're asking me to ... to kill you?"

Zheng shrugged. "Eventually. Can't do it myself. Too robust, too fast to heal. I've had half my brain blown out before." She smiled with a touch of pride. "It grew back."

"What if- what if-" I stammered, searching for a way out. "But what

if I die suddenly, or violently, or—

“You won’t, shaman. Because I am with you.” Then she broke into a real Zheng grin, showed those face-ripping, flesh-tearing, razor-sharp shark’s teeth that made my gut clench. “Or maybe you leave monkey ways behind, shaman. Maybe you come with me.”

I shook my head, numb and overwhelmed. The sounds of the rain-washed forest seemed to fade out, heard as if through a concrete wall.

“Promise me, shaman. Promise me I go first.”

“But ... but you could live for hundreds of years more.”

“You’ve convinced me, shaman. You made your truth, and you made it well. We, now, we are good. Even if we end. The next eighty years will be worth it, and then I will end. Same as you. Or not, in the abyss.”

I gaped at her, struggling to find my words.

“Zheng, I ... I don’t think I can kill you. I- God, I don’t think I’m capable of that now, let alone if you decide to spend the next few decades with me. Zheng, I can’t make that promise. It would be a lie.”

“Your twin still lives.”

My blood went cold. “ ... what?”

“Your twin still lives,” Zheng repeated.

“I ... yes? Yes, I know that. Zheng, what are you trying to say?”

“Zheng, noooo,” Lozzie murmured.

“I know you, shaman. You are a natural leader, and you make yourself unstoppable. If you have to, you will promise anything.”

“ ... to get her back,” I voiced the unspoken part of Zheng’s sentence. “What are you saying? That you won’t help unless I make that promise? Unless I agree to euthanize you?”

Zheng shook her head. “Regardless, I am yours.”

I sighed again. “So you’re pledging your devotion, and there’s nothing I can do about it. You’re making me use you.”

“It is your nature, shaman.”

Guilt grew inside my chest, a tumour of self-loathing. Despite everything I’d said, Zheng was right. If she had been willing to leave, to deprive me of the advantage she represented, I would make that vow in a heartbeat. But Zheng was making this request as a person, asking for a very different kind of respect, not a negotiation, or a bargain.

“So if I don’t promise, I’m a hypocrite,” I murmured.

Zheng shrugged.

“Alright,” I said past the lump in my throat, put strength into my voice. “Then you’re going to help me save my sister.”

“Of course, sha-”

“No,” I snapped. “You’re going to help me save my sister, and I am going to live through it, and *you* are going to live through it. And when I’m old and grey I’ll keep my promise, I’ll send you off first, but damn you Zheng if you don’t get there with me I’ll return to the abyss and drag you back here myself.”

Zheng stared at me, and for once I think I’d managed to truly shock her.

“I mean it,” I said, tears freely running down my cheeks. “I- you- Zheng, you tell me you love me, then manoeuvre me into promising to kill you. That means you’re not going anywhere. Your half of the deal is you stay with me. There. It’s done.”

My fire ran out. I sniffed, scrubbed my eyes on my sleeve, and took a great, shuddering breath. Lozzie hugged me tight, and I screwed up my eyes.

“Can’t believe I’m having an emotional crisis over a cannibal demon,” I managed through the tears. “This isn’t quite the demonic pact I expected to make.”

“Comes with the territory,” Lozzie whispered, nodding seriously.

I almost – almost – laughed.

“A lot can change in eighty years,” I said. “Perhaps you’ll decide you don’t like me very much in the end.”

Zheng snorted. “Unlikely, shaman.”

"I could surprise you. I can be pretty awful."

Lozzie helped wipe my eyes. From down the ridge, I noticed Raine and Twil watching us now. My tears weren't exactly covert. I waved awkwardly to Raine, and she waved back. Eventually the guilt and the horror of what I'd agreed to subsided a little. One weight lifted from my shoulders as another longer-term one settled onto them.

At least I had a lifetime to prepare.

"Shaman."

"I'm fine," I lied. "I'm fine. Zheng, does this mean you're coming back to the house with me?"

Zheng rolled her shoulders in a shrug. "Difficult, shaman. Your wooded isle is no great forest, no wild steppe. Things like me are not accounted for. But I would rather be closer to you. Yes, for now."

"Where does this leave ... well, *us*?"

Zheng tilted her head to one side in silent question. I glanced at Lozzie, as if this wasn't for her ears, but she bit her lower lip with impish fun, mock-scandalised.

"I mean," I tried again, "you can hardly tell me you love me and then not-

Zheng looked away from me, down the ridge at Raine instead, and to my incredible surprise she took a deep breath and called out. "*Yoshou, laangren*, join us."

Raine threw us a wave of acknowledgement and started to jog up the incline. Twil was caught flat-footed. She blinked several times before scrambling after Raine.

"Zheng, we can hardly talk about ... s-sexual ... things," I flustered, going red in the face, "with Raine and-

"What is your plan, shaman?"

I blinked at her, mouth open, paused in my own embarrassment. "My plan?"

"Mm."

"... go ... go home? Go home and have dinner, frankly. Take you,

run you a very hot bath, and continue this conversation. Zheng, I need to ask you about the abyss, about these damn *tentacles* I keep trying to grow. About what we're going to do about-

"No, shaman," Zheng purred. "What is your plan for *Laoyeh*?"

"Hey, hey, Heather, you alright?" Raine asked as she jogged up, a smile on her face as she hopped up onto the concrete, quickly crossed to me, and squatted down at my side. She reached out and touched my cheek with one hand. My eyes were still red from the brief cry. "That bad, hey?"

"I'm fine, for a given value of fine," I sighed. "Just a very emotional exchange, that's all."

"You makin' our girl fuckin' cry, huh?" Twil added, springing up onto the wall of the shattered pillbox in one athletic bound. She tossed her head back, all sudden fronting aggression. Zheng flashed a grin back at her.

"I think we were both on the verge of tears," I said. "Please, it's ... private. Mostly."

"You want a round, *laangren*?" Zheng rumbled.

"Any fuckin' time, you stack of turds."

"Hey hey hey, first things first," Raine said with a smile and a wink on her face. "Zheng, we gonna double-team Heather tonight or what?"

"*Raine!*" I gaped at her, spluttering, red in the face.

"You know, after she's had a good bath first."

Twil wrinkled her nose. "Ugh, get a room."

"Exactly the proposition." Raine shot a finger-gun at Twil.

"Ask her yourself, *yoshou*," said Zheng.

"I- you- Raine! I don't believe you. You can't- it's not the time-you-"

"Well?" Raine asked me, and I realised she was totally serious.

I dropped my voice to a low hiss. "How can you even ask that question when you made your feelings so clear earlier?"

Lozzie put a hand to her mouth, mock-gasping.

“Heather, hey, come on, do you like that idea or not?” Raine asked.

“Yes, you blithering idiot!” I whispered to her, blushing furiously.

“But also no! Drop it before my entire head explodes from mortified embarrassment.”

Raine laughed out loud and shrugged to Zheng. “Guess we’re not on for tonight.”

“Mm,” the demon-host grunted. “Shaman – your plan?”

“Plan?” Raine asked.

“Oh, yes, yes, let’s talk about that,” I said with relief. “Much safer, yes, please.”

“What we planning for now?” Twil asked. “I’m getting hungry again, we’re not straight off on some other wild goose chase, are we?”

“The plan to fight *Laoyeh*,” Zheng purred.

“To rescue Maisie,” I clarified.

“Shaman.”

“... I don’t even know where to begin,” I said. Suddenly the woodland air felt colder, the concrete beneath my backside was too hard, too dead. I wanted to go home and curl up with Raine. Deep inside, I shivered. “Up until a few weeks ago, the last time I’d actually encountered the Eye was as a child. In that house where the cult all died ... you all remember that feeling, don’t you?” I glanced around. “Not you, Lozzie, but you recall it from when you saved me, probably.”

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie spread her arms up high. “Biiiiiig eyeball in the sky.” She touched her head. “Nasty feelings in skull. Ow.”

“Ow, yeah, right,” Twil grunted. “Freaky shit. Why are we talking about this now?”

“The shaman’s plan,” Zheng rumbled.

“It’s okay, Twil,” I said. “Zheng wants to know what she’s getting herself into. Which isn’t much, so far. As I was saying, in that house, and then earlier, when the puppet that looked like Lozzie

took me back to Wonderland ... ” I trailed off, at a loss, and when I spoke again my voice felt very small. “I don’t know how we’re going to fight something like that. How *I’m* going to fight something like that. I thought maybe if I got good enough at hyperdimensional mathematics, I could stand up to it for a while, a moment at least, find the strength to pull Maisie from it’s grasp, but brainmath led me to the abyss, and the abyss was a dead end, and it’s turned me into ... ” I gestured weakly at the current position of my phantom limbs, images that existed only in my own head, images none of the others could see. Not even Lozzie.

For a few seconds, nobody said anything. Lozzie wobbled her head from side to side, aching to speak. Raine rubbed the back of my neck with one hand.

“Concrete plans, shaman,” Zheng said eventually, not unkindly.

“Well-”

“Knights!” Lozzie burst out. “Heather-Heaths, you remember my knight, don’t you?”

“Yes, Lozzie, of course I do.” I smiled at her – and shuddered inside at the memory of that thing she’d summoned to Wonderland. “You said there’s more, Outside, and that’s wonderful-”

“Lots more! Dozens and dozens and they’re all waiting but I hope they didn’t wander off or get bored because I’ve been gone for so long, they shouldn’t though because I told them to stay put if I was anywhere else.”

“ ... right. Okay. And that’s wonderful, but that one I saw didn’t last very long against the Eye.”

“What’s this?” Twil asked with a frown.

“Yeah,” Lozzie said, face falling. “It died. Melty.”

“When she saved me from Wonderland,” I explained, “Lozzie had a ... helper. Something she made. It looked like a knight. Sort of.”

I didn’t mention the thing that had been wearing the suit of pneuma-somatic armour. That was a discussion for Lozzie and I alone, preferably when we finally met her other creations and I could ask her what on earth I’d seen.

“What does *Laoyeh* mean?” Raine asked.

“Lord,” Zheng purred. “Great One, Khan.”

“And what do you know about it?”

Zheng shrugged. “Less than the shaman. It is a surfaced leviathan, born in the same place as I, bearing the logic of the deep dark, not a body like this.” She raised a hand and made a fist.

“What would happen if we like, summoned the Eye into a corpse, like a zombie?” Twil asked.

“Evee would have a fit, for a start,” I murmured.

“Ka-boom!” went Lozzie.

Zheng just laughed, long and loud. Twil looked around as if we were all mad.

“Somehow I don’t think that’s possible, Twil,” I said. “Like squeezing a star into a matchbox.”

“Extra tip.” Raine grinned at her. “Don’t tell Evee you suggested that. She’ll belt you over the head.”

“No she won’t,” Twil grumbled, a little red in the face. “She doesn’t do that. Not really.”

“Concrete plans, shaman,” Zheng repeated.

“Yes, yes,” I said. “Well, we do have a few leads.”

And so, we monsters and mad women and werewolves and serial killers, we sat together in the shell of a wartime bunker, and told a thousand-year-old demon about how we were preparing to fight an alien God. We told her about the plan to visit the library of Carcosa, for Evelyn to plunder it for knowledge, at which Zheng rumbled something unkind about wizards. I told her we still had the Eye’s minion trapped inside a vessel of clay, tentacles and all, rotting away in Evelyn’s workshop, but with no way to truly interrogate the thing.

We explained how Lozzie and I still couldn’t get Outside, and the hypothetical sources of that blockage – Alexander’s ghost in Glasswick tower, or Edward’s offshoot cult daring and edging their way back into Sharroford.

“I will eat that man’s heart and shit into his rotting brains,” Zheng rumbled.

“Agreed,” Raine said. “Well, personally I’ll skip the eating and shitting parts.”

Twil grimaced. “Ugh.”

“You need a stronger stomach, *laangren*.”

“Look, just because I’m a werewolf doesn’t mean I have to eat raw meat, right?”

“Yeah, she prefers fried chicken,” Raine said with a smirk.

“Don’t say that like it’s something bad! More civilised than you.”

“You are not more civilised than Raine,” I sighed. “Say that again when you manage to tell Evelyn how you feel.”

“You- Heather! Fuck! Shut up!”

Lozzie giggled. Raine shook her head. Zheng didn’t care.

And then there was the core of the plan. As Evelyn had already outlined months ago, we had three obstacles to overcome. Getting to Wonderland was solved, in theory at least. The gate would serve, when the time came.

“Avoiding the Eye’s attention, that’s challenge number two,” I said.

“Or blunting,” Raine added. “If I remember Eevee right.”

“Yes, exactly,” I said. “Lozzie’s knights, maybe something else, I don’t know. Not to mention dealing with it in a physical sense. We didn’t see them much when the puppet-thing took me there, but it has physical worshippers and minions, mundane threats, I suppose, if we get that far. Some of them are ... rather large.”

Zheng grinned. Her intent was plain.

“Yeah, that’s what you’re for, brick shithouse. Fighting stuff,” Twil said. “Me too!”

“Don’t,” I said softly, and somehow the quiver of truth in my voice got through to both of them. “Don’t talk about it like it’s a pub brawl. We’d be lucky to survive the first few seconds unprotected in Wonderland. We need more than just ourselves, we need everything we can muster, and even that’s not going to be enough. Evelyn’s pretty certain that with the right techniques, the right knowledge, then *maybe* she can avert the Eye’s attention for long enough for ...

me.”

“You, shaman?” Zheng asked.

“Yes, because that’s the final challenge. I have to actually find my sister. And somehow I suspect she’s not exactly physical anymore. Sarika’s experience taught me that.”

“The wizard,” Zheng rumbled. “Still alive, hmm?”

“Don’t you dare,” Raine said softly, with a subtle smile and a quirk of her eyebrows.

“Protecting the wizard, *yoshou*?” Zheng purred at her, low and dangerous.

“No, don’t,” I huffed. “Please, not now. We have enough to deal with already, without you breaking into Sharrowford General Hospital to murder a patient. Trust me, Zheng, Sarika isn’t a threat to anybody anymore. She’s a shell of the person she was.”

“Mm.”

“My point is – the lesson is – Sarika was partially entangled with the Eye itself, but only for a few hours. I pulled her out, but it took everything I had, and made me cast off being human. I came back, eventually, yes, but ... ” I shrugged. “My sister, she’s been in Wonderland for over ten years now.”

“Yeah, like, a lot more difficult, right?” Twil said into the ensuing silence. Raine gave her a bit of a look.

“So that’s the plan,” I said, struggling to keep my voice from breaking. “I’m supposed to become strong enough – skilled enough at hyperdimensional mathematics – to fight an alien God with my mind, and pull my sister free.”

“You believe it impossible,” Zheng purred.

“Nothing’s impossible,” said Raine, softly, but with such confidence that she stopped me from breaking into tears again.

“Talking about this is going to make me cry for a second time today,” I said, thick-voiced. I wiped my eyes on the back of my hand.

“Embrace what you brought back, shaman.”

"I tried that! All I managed was to nearly kill myself by growing tentacles out of spirit-matter. I tore a lung open and I almost bled to death."

"HMMMM?"

"I patched her!" Lozzie chirped. "Like a spare tire!"

I rubbed my chest, over the spot where Lozzie's pneuma-somatic replacement flesh still stretched and flexed with every breath. "Yes, she did."

"They were very cool tentacles though," Raine said. "Rainbow-strobing."

"Huh," Zheng grunted, but shook her head. "Try again, shaman."

"Oh, that's easy for you to say, you heal broken legs in minutes. I almost died."

"You won't."

"Let's not encourage her to try the tentacles again, hey?" Raine said. "Sort of hoped you might be able to provide some input, Zheng."

"That is my input," Zheng purred. "*Laoyeh* is not pure thought. It is thought made flesh, expressed in flesh, brought into flesh. To learn, you must be like it. You must make thought flesh, and flesh, thought."

"Ew," said Twil.

"No, that ... that does make some sense," I said slowly. "To be ... like it."

"Heather?" Raine said my name.

"So if I want to contend with the Eye, I have to keep risking ripping myself apart." I nodded, sighed, and shrugged in weary resignation. "I suppose I do need to break out the biology textbooks after all. I'm lucky I have access to a university library. No shortcuts, ever. Story of my life."

"Can't we go home yet?" Twil grunted. "You two've worked out whatever your ... thing is, right?"

"Yes," I sighed. "I think we should all go home. Zheng, you are

coming, aren't you?"

"Mmmmm!" Zheng rumbled, and stood up – and up, and up – to her full height where she rolled her neck and cracked her joints.

"Yes, shaman. For now."

"You even housebroken?" Twil asked her.

Zheng shot her a nasty, toothy grin, as Raine helped me to my feet as well, my arm linked through hers. Lozzie bounced up in her wellington boots and attached herself to my other side, hard enough to send a minor shock wave of shuddering through my bruised flank, but I didn't mind. For once, I felt like everything was going at least roughly according to plan. I'd had to make some hard promises to get here, and my life – not to mention my heart – was as confusing as ever, but we were making progress. Finally.

"Want to find out, *laangren*?"

"Ewwww, fuck." Twil wrinkled her nose, then thumbed at Zheng.

"What about those sheep we found? How you gonna keep her fed?"

Raine laughed. "Put her out to hunt. Like a house cat."

"Sheep?" Zheng purred – and went very, very still indeed.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. Ice ran through my veins. Raine sensed it too, suddenly alert. Lozzie made a little 'uh-oh' face.

"Yeah, four sheep." Twil frowned in confusion, the only one of us not yet following. "Up in that field, uh ... like ... that way? Or that way? Sense of direction is screwed in here."

"I know the field, *laangren*," Zheng purred. "I ate there."

"Yeah, and you ate a lot, you-"

"Zheng?" Raine said.

"I ate one sheep," Zheng purred, looking around us, into the woods, with a sharpness in her eyes as her face split into a shark-toothed grin. "Not four."

"What?" Twil squinted. "Then where did the other ... oh. Oh fuck!"

"Oh fuck is right," Raine murmured.

"Something else killed and ate three sheep? Like that?" I asked.

"Around here?"

Zheng laughed, long and low. “I am being used, shaman. Used to cover tracks. Let’s go find what’s hiding in my shadow.”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.9

“Sick o’ stickin’ my face into dead animals,” Twil grumbled.

Hard raindrops hammered her hunched shoulders, swirled through the air between us, dripped from the rim of my hood. Sad, defeated crows sat in the trees above, awaiting an opportunity to return to the last of the mutton scraps. Twil straightened up from the jumble of red-streaked sheep bones which poked up from the bloodstained grass and mud, and turned a hood-shadowed, scrunch-faced frown on the rest of us.

“There’s nout here!”

“Try again,” Raine said from inside the depths of her own hood.

“There’s bugger all scent left in this!” Twil yelled over the sound of the rain. A wide shrug sent arcs of water sluicing off her coat sleeves. Her wellington boots squelched in the thickening mud as she turned and waved a hand at the devoured sheep. “This is fucking pointless!”

“Raine, I think she’s right,” I spoke up through slowly numbing lips. “We’re getting soaked. We need to go home. Lozzie’s getting cold.”

“M’fine fine, finery-fine-fine,” Lozzie muttered, almost a chant. Her voice trailed off into a sleepy sound that clutched at my heart. Not again, not now.

She’d started shivering almost as soon as we’d stopped moving, standing around in this rain soaked field. On the journey back to the sheep corpses she’d seemed normal, but I cursed myself for missing the tell-tale signs of another relapse. She’d grown quieter, her footsteps had lost their bounce, dragging through the carpet of woodland leaves; she’d slurred a couple of times, slow to turn when called. Now Lozzie was huddled close against my side, hood up and face hidden, arms crossed beneath her coat and poncho. Shivering. She felt so small. I hugged her tighter, but her teeth went on chattering.

I wasn’t faring much better. Pelted by the rain, struggling not to shiver, fighting an urge to hunch up and move as little as possible.

My coat had held up until we'd braved the open sky, but now my hoodie felt damp at the neck and shoulder seams.

"I'll crank the heating to full once we get back to the car, promise," Raine said, then turned back to Twil. "Sure you didn't miss something? Anything? Tracks even?"

"Nothing here but her." Twil nodded at the only one of us who seemed to be enjoying the storm.

Zheng stood tall, face upturned to the roiling sky, eyes closed in pleasure. Rainwater had slicked her greasy hair back across her scalp and forehead, soaked her old ragged jeans and jumper until they hung off her like sheets of water themselves. She was drenched to the bone and didn't care.

"This is gonna sound like a crazy question," Raine said with a knowing smirk, "but could foxes have done this?"

Twil squinted at her like she was an idiot.

"Humour me," Raine added.

"Brought down three fucking sheep? No! No way! Eaten the remains, sure, if something else killed 'em and brought 'em here. Nothing around here's big enough to take three sheep. Nothing that should be out here anyway."

Raine glanced along the tree line. She wet her lips with a dart of her tongue. "Escaped big cat, maybe?"

"Pffft, what, Sharrowford's own Beast of Bodmin Moor?"

Raine shrugged. "Why not?"

"I'd smell it, duh. Big cat scent'd be all over the kills." Twil huffed, crossed her arms, and hunched her shoulders against the driving rain. "This is some other shit."

"Mmhmm," Raine hummed in agreement, nodding slowly, staring off into the forest gloom beyond the open field. "Our shit."

"Fuck it, come on Raine," Twil said. "We gotta hunt something, we can do it tomorrow."

"Lozzie is getting cold, and sleepy," I said, my voice harder than I wanted. "I'm getting cold. None of us except maybe Zheng can do anything useful in all this rain. We need to go back to the car, and

go home. Now.”

For a second, Raine didn't react. I felt my patience fraying, was about to explode at her, snap her name; then I realised what she was doing. Without moving her hood so as to maintain the illusion of staring into the woods, in the corner of her eye, Raine was watching Zheng. In a split-second of judgement, the right hand assessed the left.

Then Raine turned to me and broke into a grin, all confidence. “Right you are, Heather. Give Lizzie here, I'll carry her to the car. We'll crank up the heat and drive straight-”

“Can't you feel it, *yoshou*?” Zheng rumbled. “*Laangren*? Don't you feel it?”

We all looked up at her. Zheng hadn't moved. Eyes still closed, upturned to the sky, water running down her face and throat.

“Feel what?” Raine asked.

“The lurker in my shadow,” Zheng purred. “Still here. Still close.”

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On our way back through the woods to the overgrown field and the mysterious, meat-stripped sheep carcasses, the sky had split asunder.

The storm which had been threatening all day had finally burst, into those long slow waves of rain that herald the beginning of two or three grey, wet days. No triumphant cacophony of thunder and lightning to burn itself out in an hour or two, no hope of sheltering under a thick part of the woodland canopy until the clouds parted. This storm possessed the true grinding endurance of a maritime climate. Even if we had been heading straight back to the car, we were in for a soggy ride home.

Instead, we'd all stood around in an open field for ten minutes, scratching our heads and getting soaked as Twil sniffed at sheep bones.

The trees had sheltered us from the worst of the downpour on the walk, but the rain came in gusts and squalls heavy enough to send sudden scattershots of raindrops penetrating through the woodland canopy. A deep gloom had crept across the forest floor, thickening the shadows and confusing the senses.

Twil had grumbled like an old soldier. Raine had taken it in her stride and helped me along with her hand in mine. Lozzie had scrambled down off Zheng's shoulders to shelter in the giant's lee, and Zheng hadn't seemed to care about the wet and the cold one whit. By the time we broke cover back into the overgrown field, we were all huddled up inside our coats, dripping wet, wellington boots caked with mud, squelching and sucking with every plodding step.

My stomach had clenched into a tight knot, my veins touched by an adrenaline ghost. Phantom limbs scrunched tight, a defense against the unknown, a dull throbbing pain in my stiff flanks. I took Zheng's emotional bombshell and the enigma of Raine's urgent kiss, and shoved them into the back of my mind. Had to stay focused.

None of us said it out loud, and Raine was actively groping for any other explanation.

Anything intelligent enough – and supernatural enough – to hide its kills in Zheng's shadow was absolutely our problem.

= =

"Wait, what?" Twil asked, head swivelling to glance around the field and the tree line. "What'd you mean, still here?"

"Whatever killed those sheep is still nearby?" Raine asked. She didn't wait for an answer, she simply drew her handgun, holding it carefully shielded from the rain beneath the curve of her coat.

"There's-" I swallowed hard. Nothing here but us, the crows, and four dead sheep. A sudden gust of wind drove the rain into our faces. Twil growled, flexing fingers rapidly turning into claws. Lozzie shivered harder in my grip. I squeezed her tight. "Zheng, what are you talking about? There's nothing here."

"Yeah," Twil grunted. "Is this some weird invisible shit again?"

I shook my head. "There's no spirits here, no pneuma-somatic life visible, nothing I can see."

"Nothing-nothing," Lozzie mumbled. I ducked down to catch her face; her eyelids flickered in an effort to open wider. "Nothing here, really good hider. Hidey-ho."

"Zheng," Raine said, hard and clear. "What are we looking for?"

Slowly, like a sleeper awakening, Zheng peeled her eyes open and

looked about herself. She gazed down at the sheep bones, up at the crows, out at the field. We all waited, tense with baited breath amid the static of the rain.

“... mmm,” Zheng rumbled. “You don’t feel it? We are being watched.”

“By what?!” Twil snapped at her. “From where? There’s nothing here!”

“Live by tooth and claw long enough, *laangren*, and you will know when you are being watched. It is close. Very close.” Her lips split into that awful, shark-toothed grin.

“What is it?” Raine asked. She stepped out to cover Lozzie and I.

Zheng frowned, eyes roving, slow and watchful. “I do not know.”

“T-this is all the more reason to head back, right now,” I raised my voice, swallowed down the sudden burst of adrenaline. “We can’t find anything in this storm.”

“Uh huh,” Raine murmured. “Hardly home ground advantage.”

“You could find it, shaman,” Zheng purred.

“I won’t be able to do much of anything if I catch cold out here,” I said “Or if ... if one of the cult’s zombies escaped the house fire, and it catches us unawares.”

“Yeah,” Raine admitted with a heavy sigh. “S’what I was thinking too.”

“Nah,” Twil said. “One of those things would stink, it would be all over this place. Hell, Zheng does. No offence.”

“Ha! Correct, *laangren*, this is no puppet piloted by a blind fool. I would see that a mile off.”

“We are going home,” I said. “You all want me to be a leader, well, that’s my decision. We’re not all invincible demons or regenerating werewolves here. I’m getting soaked. Lozzie is falling asleep, and we’re *being hunted*? No, we leave. Back to the car. Zheng, you’re scarier than anything that-”

“I am going nowhere, shaman,” Zheng rumbled. She was staring off into the woods, turning her gaze slowly across the length of the abandoned field, mud and thistles and weeds. “It is right here. Right

in front of us. I can almost smell it.”

“Fuck it,” Twil said. “I’m with Heather. We’re out.”

“Back to the car, without Zheng?” Raine murmured, then shook her head gently. Twil winced. I shivered, squeezed my eyes shut.

“Oh for God’s sake, Zheng, I’m not leaving you in the woods again,” I said. “There’s nothing here.”

Zheng turned on me, baring her teeth in a display of frustration. I almost flinched out of my skin. Raine twitched, but managed to resist the urge to point her gun at the giant demon-host. “There is, shaman. Lingering. Watching us. Hiding?” She tilted her head away, as if listening. “You should be able to smell this, shaman. Use what you brought back.”

A block of ice settled in the pit of my stomach. “ ... what? Zheng, now isn’t the time for-”

“It is all around us.” She nodded at the tree line, the field, the sky itself. “At every angle. We are surrounded.”

“ ... you serious?” Raine asked, with a soft danger in her voice.

“No jest, *yoshou*.”

“Right then, executive decision.”

The command in Raine’s voice left no room for argument; a familiar thrill ran down my spine. She tucked her gun away and pointed to the far end of the old field, at the tumbledown barn we’d passed on the way to find Zheng. It stood there amid the streaming rain, indistinct behind a veil of water.

“We can have this argument in the dry,” Raine said. “C’mere Heather, gimme Lizzie.”

“Good- yes,” I said. “Yes, good idea.”

Lizzie grumbled like a sleepy child as we peeled her out of my grip. Clods of wet mud fell from her wellington boots as Raine hoisted her into the air, princess-carry style.

“You stick right by me, Heather,” said Raine, throwing me a wink and a follow-me sideways jerk of the head. I nodded, almost blushing. “Not a step behind. Twil, you cover Heather.”

“Fuckin’ capital notion there,” Twil said.

“Zheng?” I turned back. “Zheng, please, at least follow us to the barn.”

“Mm. Go along, monkeys.”

We hurried across the field on sucking mud and slippery grass. Lozzie mumbled sleepy sounds into Raine’s shoulder. Zheng stalked backward away from the sheep bones, following us at a distance.

The tumbledown old barn loomed larger as we approached, a bigger structure than it had seemed from all the way across the field. Overlapping boards formed the walls, painted black many years ago, pitted and rotted at the corners from decades of woodland weather. The entire structure leaned to one side. Cracked tile roofing streamed with rainwater, pooling in puddles and ruts which ringed the dirty concrete foundation. A dark slit peered at us from the barn’s side, where a fifteen-foot tall swing-door sat forever jammed in place by collapsed hinges as thick around as my wrist.

“You think that structure is safe?” I hissed to Raine.

“Better than getting sick in the rain and ambushed by an invisible zombie.”

“There’s nothing here. Zheng’s ... excitable.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Raine whispered.

“S’alright, these things are built to last,” Twil spoke up, and went first. She darted ahead, splashing through the puddles, tutting as she sunk ankle-deep into the water and pulled her foot free with a sucking slurp of saturated mud. She hopped up onto the wet concrete lip, twisted sideways, and slid through the slim gap into the barn. Darkness swallowed her whole.

A beat later her hooded head popped back out. She flashed us all a smile. “S’fine, dry too. Bit dark. Come on!”

Raine and I picked our way across the boggy moat of pooled water. Almost there, and my hiking stick stuck hard in a patch of thick mud. I pulled it free and overbalanced, feet slipping out from under me, a gasp tearing from my throat as phantom limbs uncoiled to catch me before I fell into the mud. They scrabbled uselessly, incorporeal and powerless.

Raine broke my fall instead, no small feat while she carried the semi-conscious Lozzie in her arms. She darted around my side with two precise steps and I fell against her, Raine's feet braced in the mud to stop us all going over together in a tangle of limbs.

She flashed a grin. "Slow down, hey?"

"I'm sorry, I'm so clumsy, I-"

"Nah you're not. Here." She offered me her elbow, and I took it. When we reached the lip of the barn's concrete foundation, Raine urged me in first with a nod of her head.

"No," I said, still getting my breath back. "Get Lozzie out of the rain first, please."

"Right you are, boss."

Raine twisted and ducked to manoeuvre Lozzie through the slit in the side of the barn. I glanced back over my shoulder.

Zheng stood amid a dancing curtain of water. Head high, eyes wide, her massive body thrumming with the promise of sudden, terrible violence. She turned every which way as she backed toward the barn, watching for an ambush from a bare field, an empty quarter. Truly, there was nothing here but us.

"Zheng! Come inside!"

She tossed me the slimmest sidelong glance, and went back to her hunt.

I sighed. Zheng was hardly the easiest person to coerce, and she wasn't exactly in danger. With a little wobble and an awkward clack of the hiking stick's metal tip against the concrete, I ducked through the slender gap and shuffled inside the old, lopsided barn.

Deep darkness and dripping gloom covered my sight. Vast shapes reared up from hazy shadows as rain drummed on the tile roof and turned all sound to static; for a moment I felt as if I'd stepped into the mouth of something that had only been pretending it was a corpse. The heavy smells of machine rust and old straw and spilled petrol hung beneath the reek of mud. A predatory figure turned to me in the grey darkness, a vision of primal fear.

Then Twil shook her mobile phone to flick on the built-in LED torch. The light blinded me.

“Ow!”

“Oh, shit, sorry Heather.” Twil grimaced and turned the light away, across the wooden-board and breeze block walls.

“It’s fine, I’m fine, just ... you surprised me.”

She gave me a sheepish look. “Tryin’a find a door or somethin’.
Least it’s dry.”

“Dry, yes.”

I couldn’t suppress the shivers anymore, both inside and out. Cold had settled into my neck and shoulders where my hoodie was damp. My fingers and nose and cheeks were freezing. Could barely feel my toes inside the wellington boots. Water dripped from my coat, from Twil’s too, making wet tracks in the thick dust. Caught in the sidewash of Twil’s light, Raine had set Lozzie on her feet once more. Lozzie was hunched up tight, teeth chattering.

“Raine? Raine, is she- Lozzie, are you okay? Lozzie?” I moved closer, one hand out to take Lozzie’s in mine. Twil’s light whirled off as she resumed her search, leaving us in flickering afterwash.

“She can stand on her own,” Raine said.

“Standy-wandy-woo,” Lozzie sang. She blinked heavily at both of us, eyes struggling to stay open. Then she closed them and grumbled low in her throat, slumping against Raine’s front.

“Lozzie?” I squeezed her hand. “ ... damn this, why now?”

“Maybe she just ran outta juice,” said Raine. “She is very cold though, like her body’s desperate for sleep. You’re right, we need to get her back to the car.”

“I know. Raine, what do we-”

“Aha!” Twil made the sort of sound that one only indulges in after epoch-making scientific discovery. “Here we go, but- ahh fuck it, who cares!”

With a grunt and a crack and a crunch of splintering wood, Twil burst a hole in the side of the barn. I turned just in time to see the hinges give way on a little side-door. Twil barely caught herself as the door popped open, claws scrabbling at the door frame to halt her face-first journey into the mud beyond. The sound of rain echoed up and inside the barn.

“Good job,” Raine called.

Twil grinned at back us and waggled her phone to flick the light off. With the side door wide open, the barn’s interior filled with just enough grayish storm-light by which to see.

The floor was caked a thick layer of dust, scraps of old straw, patches of unspeakable stains in effluviant browns and yellows, some in the sticky rainbow-tint black of petrol, and the tell-tale red of agricultural diesel. A few birds moved in the rafters, wood pigeons riding out the storm. Splatters of dried bird poo marked the corners of the room.

A tractor lay in a partially disassembled ignoble death at the rear end of the barn’s floor space, its engine gutted for parts, the cab doors wide open, tires deflated in great heaps of rubber. Tools had been tossed against one wall, half-rotten pitchforks and a couple of dented shovels. A huge pile of worm-eaten wooden pallets occupied one corner, some of them broken up into loose boards. Nearby on the floor, some of the pallet wood formed a circle of burned stubs. A very old, very cold campfire.

Twil shoved her hood back and shook water off her coat. Raine did the same, brushing at her arms, then noticed that I could only stand and shiver. She pushed my hood back for me, watching my eyes with mounting concern.

“Lovely place, hey?” Twil laughed without humour.

“If it keeps us dry,” I said.

Raine looked very pointedly at the burnt-out campfire in the middle of the concrete floor. “Hey Twil, you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“What?”

Zheng chose that exact moment to join us. She had to duck low as she manoeuvred her massive frame through the slender gap in the side of the barn. She straightened up with a stony look on her face, dripping water from her sodden clothing, hair plastered to her scalp. Twil stared at her.

“*Laangren?*”

“... uh, nothing.” Twil shook herself. “Just forgot how fuckin’ big you are indoors.”

“Huh.” Zheng allowed herself a flash of teeth.

“Hey, heads up zombie girl,” Raine said. She nodded sideways at me and Lozzie. “We can’t stay here long without warming these two up. Me too, to be honest. Decision, now, or I’ll make it.”

“Mmm?” Zheng purred a curious sound. “What ails the mooncalf?”

“She freezing cold and falling asleep, and we can’t stop that.”

“She’s not meant to be here,” I said to Zheng. “In this dimension, our reality. We fixed it before, sort of, but I didn’t think she’d suffer it again so soon.”

“Maybe it’s just an episode,” Raine said. “Maybe she’ll come round. Heather, we’re all here with her, and we’re not gonna let anything happen to her.”

I nodded, my guts churning. “Yes, okay. Okay, Raine, I just worry about-”

“Healthy,” Lozzie suddenly burbled, eyes heavy with unnatural exhaustion. “I’m fine, fine! Just need a snap. A nap. Snap nap. Don’t need Outside for ... a week more? Two double? Mmm.”

Nod nod went Lozzie’s sleepy head. She sniffed twice, then sneezed into her hand. Raine found a tissue and helped her blow her nose.

“We cannot leave,” Zheng purred. “We are surrounded.”

“Define that,” Raine said. “Surrounded by what?”

“I didn’t see, or smell, or hear *shit* out there,” said Twil.

“Something hunts,” Zheng purred. A contemplative look came over her face, the look of a jaguar in the jungle, peering out of the undergrowth. “Watches. Waits, for prey to stumble in.” She sighed, blinked with glacial slowness. “Feels familiar.”

“Familiar?” I echoed.

“As if it has snuck up on me before. This ... slowness, this clumsy lack of concealment.”

“Pretty well concealed if we can’t see the thing,” Twil scoffed.

“Obvious to a predator’s senses, *laangren*.”

“But what is it?” Raine asked.

Zheng shrugged.

“How do we find out?” I said.

Zheng stared at me, paused in a moment of deep thought, then turned away to stare out of the small side-door Twil had smashed open, at the distant tree line.

“It was not present when I butchered and ate that mutton,” she purred, soft and curious. “It has slid here since. Invisible? Incorporeal? Can’t you feel it, shaman?”

I shook my head. “Should I be able to?”

“Probably. You can do anything, shaman.”

“What happens if we just walk out?” Raine asked. “We were here before, we walked into the forest to find you.”

Zheng rolled her shoulders in a shrug. “I don’t know, *yoshou*. Are you willing to risk the shaman?”

Raine glanced at me, then down at Lozzie.

“Raine, she’s freezing,” I said. “We can’t stay here, we-”

“I know.”

“We have to go back to the car, this is absurd. There’s nothing even out there, nothing-”

“Heather, I know. It’ll be okay. Lemme think a sec.”

“Then we need to find out what’s watching us, correct? Lozzie? Lozzie?” I ducked down to try to catch Lozzie’s eyes – but they were both closed. “Lozzie, do you sense – smell? – anything out there? Lozzie?”

“Mmm-mmm,” she grumbled, shrugged, and huddled closer to Raine.

The ghost of panic crept up my throat. My teeth chattered inside my skull. I was shivering hard now.

“I can warm the shaman,” Zheng purred.

“Nice thought,” Raine said, raising one finger, “us all getting in a big body-heat pile, but also kinda inefficient. If we’re not moving, we need heat.”

“Fuck, fuck I don’t know how to make a fire,” said Twil. “Don’t you need like, kindling and shit?”

“That you do, that you do,” Raine said. A tight grin spread across her face. She passed Lozzie off to me, one hand lingering for a moment to ruffle my hair. “Heather, hold Lozzie, you two cuddle up close for a moment. Twil, get your claws ready.”

Twil blinked at her. “What?”

“Get your claws out, girl, you got work to do.” Raine strode straight to the back of the barn, to the pile of old wooden pallets. She planted one mud-drenched boot on a stray outermost pallet, leaned down and tore a board free with a cracking of dry wood, then turned and tossed it to Twil.

The werewolf caught it awkwardly in one half-formed ghostly paw, the false flesh still coalescing into claws and fur. Raine pointed a finger-gun at her.

“Shred that best you can.”

Twil frowned. “Shred ... what?”

“Kindling.” Raine rummaged around inside her coat, in one pocket, then the other, then an inside pocket, then a hidden inside pocket in the sleeve. For a second I thought she wasn’t going to find what she was looking for, then she pulled out a small metal box. With a flick of her thumb she opened the lid of the lighter, and up sprang an inch of clean flame.

“You know how to make a fire, like, from scratch?” Twil gaped at her. I sighed with sudden relief. Zheng grunted her approval.

Raine flashed us all a grin, burning confidence. “How hard can it be?”

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Harder than it looked.

Twil spent several minutes reducing boards to wood shavings and sawdust, snapping them apart with brute strength and shredding them with her claws. Raine pulled fresh fodder off the old wooden pallets, and piled them tight in the centre of the room as main-stage fuel, over the cold fire left so long ago by some unknown passing campers. Why had that first fire been made, I wondered. What

desperate situation – or teenage hijinks, more likely – had taken place out here, in this corner of some forgotten farm?

I hugged Lozzie tight, doing what little I could to share my own body heat. She shivered and chattered, curled in on herself, her head buried in my shoulder. My phantom limbs tried to embrace her too, so I had to close my eyes tight for a few painful heartbeats to control the ghostly impulse.

Zheng ventured back outdoors.

“To hunt,” she explained when I asked her a silent question. “Maybe I find what watches us, maybe not.”

And with that she stalked back out into the wind and rain, lost behind the walls of the barn. For a moment I felt a terrible foreboding, as if she might not return, as if she’d break with everything we’d discussed and vanish into the woods to forget about me.

Perhaps, a tiny part of my heart whispered, that would be easier on all of us.

“It’s not catching!” Twil growled. Raine was down on her knees by the unlit fire, holding her lighter flame beneath a thick pinch of wooden chips. “It’s not hot enough! Fuck, shit, alright, I’ll rub two sticks together, I-”

“Hold up, I ain’t done trying yet.” Raine paused in thought as she flicked the lighter shut with one hand. “We need accelerant.” Her eyes wandered over to the gutted tractor.

“Petrol?” I asked through chattering teeth. “Raine, that’s so dangerous.”

“Yeah, nah. That thing’s been sat there for too long, anything in the tank’ll be long evaporated.”

Twil suddenly jerked. “Ah! Ah!” She bent down and scabbled at the floor, then held out a few scraps of old straw, fallen off the back of some long-forgotten tractor-trailer.

Very old straw. Very dry straw.

“Yeeeeeah!” Raine lit up. “Brilliant, get as much as you can.”

Thirty seconds later Raine had a sizable handful of straw stubs. She flicked her lighter on. We all held our collective breath. Even Lozzie

had her eyes open, heavy-lidded and thick with sleep, as Raine touched the flame to the end of the bundle.

The straw caught instantly in a flutter of orange and yellow. Quickly, no time to lose, she went to one knee and nestled the bundle into the shredded curls and chips of wood, and shoved the whole lot beneath the unlit fire. The kindling smoldered for long moments, and it seemed as if the straw might burn out before anything else caught – but caught it did.

The flames grew, consumed more of the shredded wood down to blackened crisps. Twil shoved more inside. The larger pieces began to catch too, flames licking the darkness as the air filled with little crackles and pops. I watched, fascinated, taken beyond this bizarre situation for a moment by the primal experience of a growing fire. A slow wave of warmth washed over me. Strange shadows danced on the barn's walls.

“Ray Mears, eat your heart out!” Raine whooped.

Twil puffed out a sigh and grinned like a loon. She held up a hand for Raine. “Eh? Eh? Up top?”

Raine high-fived her.

“Thank you, both of you,” I managed though the relief. “I can’t believe we ended up needing to build a fire, this has been absurd. The woods are terrifying.”

“Hey, it ain’t the woods,” Twil said. “It’s the spooky shit following us around.”

“Nah it’s the woods.” Raine smirked. “Screw the woods. They suck.”

Twil rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling.

Getting warm and dry wasn’t as easy as simply pulling up a seat at the fire. The ground was far too filthy to sit down. Twil dragged a pair of intact pallets over so we had some buffer, however minor, between our backsides and the cold concrete. Raine sat Lozzie down at a comfortable distance from the crackling flames and peeled her out of her coat and damp poncho. Lozzie wobbled a little, but sat up straight, eyes half open, smiling in silent thanks. Raine shook the coat out and held the poncho up before the fire to dry and warm it, before helping Lozzie squeeze it back over her head and tuck herself up tight.

“You too, Heather. Let’s dry the hoodie before you get it back on.”

I submitted to Raine’s tender attentions in turn, with Lozzie leaning on my shoulder, her eyes slipping closed as we perched on the pallet together. The warmth was wonderful, but oddly uncomfortable too. Damp patches lingered, and the cold lurked at our backs, not even held at bay by the walls and roof. I still desperately wanted to get home.

Twil crossed to the door to peer out into the murk, a tut on her teeth. “Still running around out there.”

“Zheng? You can see her?” I asked.

“Yeah. Sniffing about.” Twil scuffed her feet along the floor back to the fire, hands in her pockets. “She really thinks there’s something out there.”

“I believe her,” Raine said, holding my hoodie up to dry the shoulders and neck. I had trouble keeping my eyes open, the heat of the fire was so soothing, despite the odd smells in the barn and my worries for Lozzie. But Twil’s next words woke me all the way up.

“You reckon this is fuckboy’s doing?” she asked.

“Fuckboy?” I echoed with distaste. “Excuse you?”

Twil winced. “Erm.”

“Lilburne?” Raine asked. “Don’t think so. Eddy-boy would only hit us if he was sure he wouldn’t miss. This? Seems too random. Nobody but Evee and the others even know we’re out here. What would be the point in a weird trap like this? Why the sheep?”

“Yeah but like, what if it is?” Twil asked, frowning deeper. Suddenly she fished her mobile phone out of a coat pocket. She thumbed the screen open, stared at it for a moment, and swallowed once, hard. “Um ... uh ... Raine, Heather, don’t um, don’t you dare fuckin’ laugh at me, but ... uh ... I haven’t got any signal. Could you ... like ... ”

“Raine, be a dear,” I said softly. “Call Evee to check everything is alright at home? Please?”

Raine paused for a beat. Twil ducked her head to hide her obvious blush.

“Sure thing,” Raine said. She pulled out her own phone. “Wahey,

two bars o' signal. Score."

She dialled for Evelyn. A handful of seconds seemed to stretch forever, in the flickering, rain-soaked gloom around that makeshift campfire. Three seconds was too long for me. Five seconds and I thought Twil was going to bite off one of her own fingers. Then the call connected, and we all heard a faint 'What is it? What happened?' from the other end of the phone, unmistakably Evelyn.

Twil blew out a huge sigh of relief.

"S'only me," Raine said down the phone. She winked at Twil. "Ran into something weird. Not an emergency, but- yeah. Yeah. Yeah, Zheng was fine! We played a game, tell you all about it later, but-but- you- Eevee, hey, listen for a sec, here, something odd's come up." Raine quickly outlined the situation. "Ah? No, course not, I know there's not much you can do from there, just making sure-yeah. Yeah, you know, Twil was worried about you."

"Raine!" Twil hissed, blushing beetroot red. Raine laughed.

"Yeah, sure thing, Eevee. Keep her alert, keep an eye on the front door, but I'm thinking this isn't related. We'll see ya later. Stay safe." Raine signed off with a huge, shit-eating grin at Twil.

"Did you have to-" Twil said. "I mean, she- you- argh!"

"If you won't do it, we'll do it for you, eventually," I said. "And you know that won't impress Evelyn very much."

"Yeah, yeah, don't rush me." Twil glowered into the dancing fire.

"Home front's fine," said Raine. "Nothing's up. Eevee's got Praem on watch in the front room."

"There's nothing even out there," Twil threw a wave at the field beyond the barn's walls. "This is bullshit."

A moment of silence descended, lost in the static of rain on the roof tiles and the crackle of the fire. My head felt fuzzy and slow in the raw heat, my muscles melted buttery-smooth by the warm hoodie Raine helped tug back over my head. Lozzie breathed softly against my side, head tucked into my shoulder, no longer shivering. Her eyes fluttered open now and again.

"Never sat by a campfire before," I muttered.

"S'cool, huh?" Twil said. "Used to do it a lot with family."

"All we're going on here is Zheng's hunch," I sighed, confronting the concern in my heart. I tried to sit up straighter, blink myself into alertness. "Twil, you could be right."

"I trust her on this," Raine said, dead serious. "We made a promise, 'bout your safety."

"Yes ... but ... Zheng's not the most ... emotionally stable person."

"You think she's making it up?" Raine asked, and it wasn't a rhetorical question. The way she looked at me, face side-lit by the fire as she settled down on the other pallet, made it clear she wanted to know the truth, what I really felt.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "It's not impossible, I think, maybe."

"Maybe?"

"She's not even human," said Twil.

"Neither are you," I warned. "And that has nothing to do with it."

"You think she'd deceive you like this?" Raine asked. She planted her chin in her hand, tip of one wellington boot tapping against the concrete floor. "I've seen the way she looks at you, Heather. That big zombie lady adores you. Not as much as I do, but hey, not everybody can be the best."

"Raine," I sighed, and glanced at the open side door, as if Zheng might be lurking and listening at the threshold. "Exactly. That could be the problem."

"Eh?" Twil grunted.

"You think she's delaying the journey home?" Raine asked. "Trying to keep you here?"

"No ... no, she was honest earlier, when she ... " I cut myself off with a swallow, glancing at Twil. I'd share anything and everything with Raine, and Zheng probably knew that, but I doubted all the things she'd told me were for Twil's ears. I turned back to Raine, blushing slightly, frustrated. "Raine, why didn't you ask these kinds of questions earlier? Why didn't you ... why are you being protective *now*? Why not when ... when Zheng and I were, you know, talking?"

"You don't like it?" she asked with a smirk.

“Oh great.” Twil rolled her eyes. “Fuckin’ lovebirds.”

“You don’t have to listen to this,” I hissed to her, then turned back to Raine. “No, Raine, I love it, but why not ... with Zheng ... why-” I huffed, squeezed my eyes shut, tamped down on my bizarre reverse-jealousy. “We don’t have the luxury of time to talk about this right now. No, I don’t think Zheng is lying, not exactly, but something isn’t right here.”

“Yeah. Agreed on that part,” Raine said.

“Fuckin’ ey,” said Twil.

“Twil, when you looked at those sheep bones, was there anything at all out of the ordinary?” I asked. She opened her mouth with a frown, but I carried on. “Or even things that seem ordinary to you, but wouldn’t to me? Anything at all, any detail, no matter how mundane?”

Twil shrugged. “Dunno what to say. They were just bones. Uh, I smelled Zheng a bit, mostly the sheep, the crows too. There was some old rabbit dung in the grass, few snake holes off toward the tree roots.”

“What about the bones themselves? Could you see ... I don’t know, tooth marks?”

“Nah, not really. Stripped. Like, totally sucked clean, most of ‘em. Whatever it was was eating a lot. More than’d fit in a regular stomach, you know?”

“Multiple attackers?” Raine asked.

“Maybe that’s why the brick shithouse thinks we’re surrounded,” Twil said.

“The brick shithouse would find and kill any number of watchers,” Zheng rumbled from the doorway, ducking through in a sudden squall of rain, dripping all over the floor again. “If they could be seen.”

“Nothing?” Raine asked. Zheng shook her head.

“We can’t stay here all bloody night,” Twil said. She glanced at her phone. “I’m gonna miss bake-off if I’m not careful. That wasn’t in the deal.”

“S’lots feeding,” Lozzie mumbled. I turned and found her trying to

talk to me, slurring her words, struggling to keep her eyes open.
“Feeding feeding. Big feed, f’big growing. Biiiiiig.”

“Lozzie? What’s feeding?”

Suddenly Lozzie took a deep breath, filling her lungs as her consciousness surged. She blinked hard, putting in every ounce of effort she could muster into forcing herself awake. She stared at me, eyes wide.

“It’s fine! Heather, it’s fine, you just need to go say hi!” she chirped at me. “She’ll recognise you whatever state she’s in, I promise! She’d never attack anybody close to you, never ever ever!” Lozzie’s eyes wavered as she barrelled ahead. One eyelid twitched with the effort of staying awake. “I didn’t even know she could eat meat and that’s so weird it’s not like it’s supposed to happen but there’s a ... mmhmm ... s’no ... preci- prepiden- ... seee?”

Her burst of energy dribbled out, fell to nothing, and she snuggled up against my side again, half-asleep.

“Well, that answers everything then, yeah, great,” Twil said.

“Actually, I think it does,” I said in slow realisation.

“Shaman?”

“Heather?”

I stared out into the swirling rain. “If Lozzie says it’s safe ... ”

Raine cleared her throat. “Lozzie’s track record on the meaning of ‘safe’ is a bit rough. No risks, Heather, please.”

“I know, I know, but ... ” I wet my lips, my mind racing.

“Something we can’t see. Not in the woods, not in the sky.

Something even I can’t see. If only I could ... ”

As the thought condensed and took shape, my phantom limbs uncurled away from Lozzie, already putting my plan into action. Pointless. They were only extensions of my self-image, they couldn’t feel or sense or touch anything unless I made them real with hyperdimensional mathematics, and I wasn’t about to do that again, not now, not out here, not putting myself at such terrible risk.

I concentrated on a single one of the tentacles, a mental ghost-image I couldn’t actually see, only feel. To anchor it, to give it pneuma-somatic mass, the ability to touch and affect matter, that

was a step too far for me in my current state.

But I didn't need to touch.

I needed to see that which could not be seen, shrouded in a darkness beyond sight, hidden to all our senses save Zheng's predatory intuition.

"Heather? What are you up to?" Raine asked. She leaned forward and put a hand on my knee. Must have recognised the look in my eyes.

"Tentacles weren't the only thing I had in the abyss," I murmured to myself.

A spike of headache blossomed in the back of my skull. An old, familiar pain, like a friend I hadn't seen in a while. I almost smiled at it, as the concepts summoned themselves from the dark, oily sump down in the pit of my soul. The muscles, the mental spaces, were still sore and healing, raw and tender as the socket of a missing tooth. But the flesh would never heal right if I refused to ever exercise.

The mathematical principles presented themselves.

But for once, they were not the Eye's lessons. Oh no. I had learnt this out in the abyss, by myself.

My stomach turned over. I wretched hard as my body rebelled.

"Heather," Raine called my name. "Hey, hey, Heather, what are you-"

"Brainmath," I croaked – and allowed the mental image of that single tentacle to plunge downward, passing through the barn's concrete foundation and into the mud and dirt. Into the ground.

Because that was the only place left to hide.

The equation fell into place as if it was natural. It was not – it was new and raw and it hurt the inside of my head like an icepick through both eyeballs. Natural, perhaps, to a creature in the darkness of the abyss. Natural to the thing I'd been, to a being that didn't use something so crude as physical sight. A pulse, a wave described in pure mathematics, burned my mind like white-hot steel, complex enough to make my nose bleed. A picture of density in darkness and pressure, air pockets and wriggling, crawling life,

roots bundled like frozen lightning.

Sonar, of a kind. A lesson from the abyss, remade here in hyperdimensional mathematics.

And right there at the edge of my perception, at the limit of my range, I found something that should not be.

I gasped and clenched my stomach muscles up tight, my bruised flanks shuddering and quivering as I hung forward with my head between my knees for several long moments. My pulse thudded in my ears, my vision went black – brainmath was still not entirely healed, pushed right to the edge of unconsciousness – and I did finally spit a few strands of stringy bile and stomach acid into the dust and dirt.

“Heather? Heather? Hey, hey, come on, slow now, sit up, sit up and breathe, breathe.” Raine’s hands on my back and shoulders, her voice purring in my ear. Her scent in my nose as she helped me sit. I clung to her. Held on tight.

Hold me here, Raine, because I might slip away. A sliver of guilt entered my chest. At least this made her possessive.

“The hell was that?” Twil asked.

“Real magic,” Zheng rumbled, awe in her voice.

“It’s in the ground,” I croaked. “It’s underground.”

= =

We traipsed back out into the storm and the mud. Raine had to support me, my legs gone weak from the effort of the brainmath, my phantom tentacles uncoiling and twisting, trying to track the movements below our feet, sending spasms of pain up my sides, drawing sharp gasps from my throat. Raine had helped wipe my face too, but I could still taste bile and blood in the back of my throat. Lozzie stumbled along, half-supported by Twil. All of us were dried and warm from the makeshift campfire – except Zheng, striding ahead of us.

“Point, shaman.”

“I can’t. It’s not in one place, it’s a ring. A-a web? It’s-”

“All around us, yes!” She roared a laugh to the heavens as we stopped by the meat-stripped sheep bones. Twil grimaced beneath

the shelter of her hood. Raine held steady, a rock at my side. "Shaman, I do not care. I will fight anything."

"Shiiiiit," Twil hissed, flexing one suddenly summoned claw. "I'm not up for this. What is this thing, the size of the entire field?"

"We disturb whatever this thing is, it could overwhelm us," Raine said over the patter of raindrops on her hood. "Zheng, you distract, we run. Got it?"

"Raine-" I started.

"Heather, I'm not letting you stay here for a fight against something the size of a field. No. End of."

"I don't think we'll have to," I said. "I ... this is crazy, but I think it's ... no, it can't be, but-"

"Twil," Raine said. "Get ready to pick Lozzie up. We run when it starts."

"Monkeys," Zheng rumbled. "Point me, shaman!"

I stretched out one finger and indicated a rough line along the ground. Beneath the churned mud, deep in the earth, twelve or more inches down, part of some unseen web pulsed and throbbed in the darkness.

"Right," Raine said. "We-"

She was too slow.

We'd all assumed that Zheng would probably dig it up and pull it out, that perhaps we'd have a few moments to reach safe distance, that even with her superhuman strength and endurance, she couldn't beat a foot of hard-packed, root-filled earth.

Zheng pulled one hand back and slammed it into the ground, rammed her hand right through the grass and dirt, ripping, tearing, putting all her strength into a single strike.

Raine bundled me back, ducked to sweep me off my feet. Twil growled.

Zheng, elbow-deep in the ground, roared in triumph and ripped upward with all her strength. Her fist, dripping mud, clods of dirt falling from between her fingers, drew something tarry-black and writhing from out of the earth. A pulsing, flexing tube of muscle,

about as thick around as my wrist, the ends of which vanished into the earth below.

Zheng paused, struck dumb with surprise – then roared with laughter at the thing in her grip.

“She miss?” Twil muttered. Raine hesitated. Lozzie made a little ‘ooh’ sound and clapped her hands. And I realised.

Twil and Raine couldn’t see it.

Zheng was laughing, deeply amused. She’d recognised the thing too. With a motion like a fisherman reeling a shark to the deck, she planted her feet and hauled.

Hundreds of feet of the black tentacle whipped up out of the ground, through the earth without disturbing even a blade of grass, a thrumming line all the way along the length of the field and off into the woods. Pneuma-somatic flesh. It passed straight through the ground, torn up by the force of Zheng’s muscles, whirled up into the rain and grey light, exposed.

Oily-black, the surface shifting like wet tar.

It didn’t waste a second. Stronger and more slippery than Zheng, the super-long tentacle yanked her off her feet as it tore out of her grasp. Loops and coils of tarry-black flesh, dripping with oily discharge that seemed to vanish before it hit the ground, stood up like a startled snake. All around the perimeter of the field, the great looped mass of the thing writhed out of the ground and drew back, fleeing from us.

“She got really, really big!” Lozzie threw her hands in the air, all awake now. “Well done!”

“I-I can’t- I don’t- ” I shook my head, wide eyed with shock.

“I can’t see shit! What are we looking at!?” Twil turned on the spot, claws out, eyes wide.

“Your puppy followed you all the way from home, shaman!” Zheng roared with laughter. “I remember her, weak but loyal!”

“Heather?” Raine demanded, on the verge of sweeping me up into a princess-carry. “Heather, what is it?”

“It’s ... it’s fine.” I shook my head, heedless of the raindrops falling on my face. “She’s leaving, retreating, I think.”

“Who?”

“Tenny,” I said. “Those were Tenny’s tentacles.”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.10

Hundreds of feet of tarry-black tentacle looped and coiled and slashed through the pouring rain, dripping with oil-dark droplets of pneuma-somatic ichor. Like a snake eating its own tail, it possessed neither beginning nor end, no tip or termination. With a disgusted roll in my already sensitive stomach, it reminded me of a video I'd once seen, of a live tapeworm deep in the guts of a pig, writhing over itself in a mass of spaghetti-like tissues, a confusion of awful liveliness.

My own phantom limbs reared up in involuntary self-defence, sent a quiver of pain deep into my bruised flanks, drew a gasp from between my clenched teeth.

Tenny's black tentacle whipped away from us in a great spiralling mass, and slid in silence into the gloomy embrace of the woods.

The whole process was over in a heartbeat. Only we and the storm remained.

Zheng was still laughing. Lozzie clapped to herself in solitary celebration.

"Heather?"

Raine's voice drew me back into my shivering skin. My sides burned, my head pounded with brainmath side-effects, the taste of bile lingered in my mouth, and I could not process what I'd just seen.

"Mm?" was all I managed.

"Heather, is it still here?"

"I ... no ... I don't think so." I swallowed, found my mouth dry and my lips numb as I stared at the tree line where Tenny's tentacle-mass had vanished. "It- she- she left. Part of her left. How ... how big must she be now? What did she-"

"Really, really big! She did soooooo good!" Lozzie clapped with childlike glee, wellington boots splashing in the mud, then cupped her hands around her mouth and called out. "Tenny! Tenny! Come

say hiiii!” She waited for a reply, then blinked heavily when none came, head wobbling as sleepiness crept back over her again.

“Lozzie? Lozzie, what did we actually just see?” I asked, trying to catch her eyes as they fluttered shut. “Where’s the rest of her? Is she out there, in the woods? What ... what is she now?”

“Tenny,” Lozzie said, eyes closed.

“Heather, hey, hey.” Raine put her hand on my arm. “Slow down a sec, what exactly did you three just see?”

“Yeah!” Twil added. “Kinda in the dark here, yo.”

“Um ... ” I took a deep breath and tried to clear my head. “There was a single tentacle, or maybe it was several, I’m not sure, but there was a lot of it, an awful lot, hundreds and hundreds of feet worth. And it was Tenny, definitely Tenny.”

“You’re certain?” Raine asked.

I nodded. “Yes, I’d recognise the texture anywhere. I’ve held her tentacles in my hands enough times. It was in a ring, all the way around the edge of this field. As soon as Zheng unearthed it, it just fled.”

“Good then,” Twil grunted. “Don’t wanna deal with that shit.”

“She’s been eating live meat!” I almost shouted at Twil. “Live sheep! How is that even possible? We have to find her, we-”

“Find her, shaman?” Zheng chuckled. “Hunting a slug in the rain, a challenge.”

“Zheng, don’t you dare surprise her. We don’t know what came out of her cocoon, we don’t even know what she looks like now. She can’t be far though, a single tentacle can’t be that long, can it?”

Twil and Raine shared a look. Lozzie giggled.

I sighed and put my face in my hand. “Me saying it doesn’t make it more likely. Please, she can’t have gotten *that* big.”

“Let’s not tempt fate,” Twil said with a grimace. “Yeah? And-”

A black whip of force shot out of the woods to our right, a full ninety degrees from the point at which Tenny’s appendage had vanished, and slammed into the centre of Zheng’s chest with an

explosive crunch of shattering ribs.

The impact threw Zheng to the ground, a rag-doll bundle of flopping limbs and wet clothes in the mud.

I flinched so hard I almost slipped over, a shriek caught in my throat. Lozzie made a comical ‘wah!’ sound. Twil and Raine couldn’t see the tentacle itself, but they saw the result well enough. Twil bared her teeth, ghostly wolf-flesh spinning together across her body, and Raine moved in front of me, knife out in one hand.

Tenny’s tentacle reared back up, a snake readying another strike. It was the tip, finally; it split open on a sucking wet mouth ringed with tiny black barbs.

“Zheng!” I screamed.

Zheng had, for once, actually been caught off guard, but she didn’t stay down for long. She flipped back to her feet with a grin of sheer joy on her face.

“Golog!” she roared with laughter at the tentacle, then spat blood into the rain. “Back for a rematch?”

“Zheng, your ribs are broken, I heard them snap!” I yelled. “Tenny, stop! Oh for- why is it always tentacles? This is absurd.”

They both ignored me, if Tenny could even hear.

Before anybody so much as drew breath, dozens of tarry-black loops of tentacle raced out of the gloom beneath the trees. Half of them darted for Zheng – but the other half threw up a wall between the demon-host and the rest of us.

Tenny tried to ensnare Zheng at her wrists or ankles, jabbed for her throat and eyes, bludgeoned her back and head. Zheng roared with laughter at the top of her lungs and fought back with sheer muscular strength, punching and gouging and stomping. She managed to rip one length of tentacle clean apart in a cloud of black ichor, only for the severed halves to vanish amid the confusion, seemingly none the worse for wear. The mouth-tentacle was lost as well, impossible to pick out from the rest. Tenny landed a solid blow on Zheng’s hip with an ear-splitting crack of fracturing bone.

“Oooh, no no! Tenny, no!” Lozzie whined, in a tone with which one might admonish a naughty dog, not a tentacle-creature attacking a

friend. She rushed up to the wall of tentacles Tenny had thrown up between us and tried to force her way through, but the tentacles gently pushed her back.

“Heather, what is going on?” Raine demanded. Twil was growling now, agitated by the invisible violence.

“She thinks Zheng’s an enemy! Tenny could kill her. Tenny, stop!” I yelled into the woods, hoping to see her main body, whatever it looked like now, whatever she’d become, but the forest darkness and the pouring rain swallowed all. “Zheng is a friend, stop!”

She’d almost won, caught Zheng by one wrist and the opposite knee. Zheng had taken a hard strike to the side of her head, puffed up one eye into a huge bleeding bruise. Her free arm hung limp from the shoulder socket at an unnatural angle. She kicked and slipped in the mud, couldn’t get her footing as another tentacle threw a loop to catch her around the neck.

Tenny was about to pull Zheng’s head clean off, and there was nothing we little humans could do about it.

Then Zheng exploded with another roar of laughter. She lost her footing – on purpose – and slipped beneath the tentacle fishing for her throat.

On the ground, she bit clean through the loop of tentacle restraining her good arm and shook herself free with sheer brute strength, surging to her feet and whirling in the rain like a berserker. She slammed her own dislocated shoulder back in to place with a punch, then caught the next loop of tentacle that tried to knock her brains out. She pulled it apart, ripped the appendage in two like before – but this time she held onto it with both hands, a bullfighter on the horns.

“Fast, but stupid!” she roared.

She was having so much fun, I almost didn’t want to interrupt.

But finally I found my feet and my courage, and stumbled the few steps forward to the wall of tentacles. Raine tried to stop me, then settled for shadowing me when I shook her off. She couldn’t see the wall, of course. I reached out and touched one of the tentacles with my bare hand, raindrops slipping down my sleeve cuff.

Warm and slippery in my grip. Absolutely her.

“Tenny, stop!” I said, with both mouth and mind. “Down!”

A fluttering sound inside my head. Like air passing over feathered gills, a whirring note of surprise and confusion, a strangled yelp from a throat of fanned paper.

All together and all at once, the tentacles disengaged. They pulled free from Zheng and sent her head-over-heels again, whipped back and withdrew from the field in the blink of an eye. Several loops smashed into trees in their haste to leave, scarring the bark, sending outraged crows into the sky in a flurry of black wings. Sucked back into the wood like wet noodles down a drain, the tentacles vanished into the gloom, gone.

I took a few stumbling steps toward the woods, but this time Raine caught me around the shoulders.

“Woah there, slow down,” she said, and this time I didn’t pull away. “What happened? Heather?”

“Pheeeew,” Lozzie did a big puff, bit her lip, and gave me a guilty, sidelong look. “Oopsie.”

Silence descended, broken only by raindrops on my hood and Zheng’s laboured breathing as she got to her feet. Stillness felt so unnatural now. No tentacles, no Tenny. Just a field in England.

“She got me, shaman!” Zheng roared, broke the silence.

“Zheng? Are you alright, you-”

“She got me!” Zheng stomped back over to us, grinning with pleasure. She was bruised and battered all over, her left eye socket swollen and bleeding, dragging one leg. She couldn’t stop laughing, a belly-deep rumble. “Slug, slippery carrion-eater, trapdoor spider, lurking coward, she got me!”

Zheng stomped hard, and something inside her hip popped back into place with an audible crack.

“She’s fucked you right up, yeah,” Twil said, gaping. “You ... you alright?”

Zheng turned away, shaking herself like a wet dog, still laughing. Perhaps it was only the rain sliding down her cheeks, but I could have sworn she was crying tears of joy.

“Heather, I need a low-down here,” Raine said, calm and collected.

“What just happened?”

I looked up at her, my rock, face set and focused beneath the curve of her hood. Raindrops dripped from the brim. I realised she was still poised for action, her entire body ready to spring one way or the other at a hair-trigger touch. In a second she could scoop me up or draw her knife or do God alone knew what else. The sensation sent a shiver up my spine.

“Raine, it’s fine, s-she left after trying to fight Zheng,” I babbled, my knees weak at the look in Raine’s eyes. “She threw up a sort of wall between us too. I think she was trying to protect me from Zheng. Silly, of course she’d think that, she’s never met Zheng except when I almost got kidnapped, poor thing. Oh, Tenny.”

“As long as she’s protecting you,” Raine said. “S’alright by me.”

“Raine, she was going to pull Zheng’s head off!”

“Maybe it was just payback.” She glanced over at Zheng. “All that with one tentacle, huh? Nice.”

“Tenny’s fishing line!” Lozzie said.

“Hey, Zheng,” Raine called. “How you holding up after that?”

“This is nothing, *yoshou!*” Zheng laughed. “Fifteen minutes, good as new.”

“Slow,” Twil grunted with a humourless laugh, but she trailed off into an awkward cough. Twil was brave beyond sensibility, but even she couldn’t fight invisible monsters.

“So, she’s gone again now?” Raine asked me.

“She went into the woods.” I nodded, trying to take a deep breath. “Which is, well, a problem in and of itself. I ... how was ... she ... ”

I trailed off. My eyes went wide. My head felt like it would float away on the wind.

Awe is a singular and strange sensation. Often it arrives slowly, when one reads about the depths of space or vast stretches of time. To those unlucky few of us who have been Outside, other kinds of awe – of the alien, of the vast, of the spaces between – come to mind all too easily. In other instances, awe only arrives after several separate pieces of information converge to contextualise one seemingly minor experience.

Lozzie, Zheng, and I all saw the tentacle rise above the treetops. Slender, thin as my wrist, framed against the storm-tossed sky, visible only due to the tarry-blackness. A tiny thread. A trick of perspective.

Then it dipped back down into the trees.

“What?” Raine demanded. “What is it now?”

“Uh.” I swallowed, glanced over at Zheng. “Was- was that-”

“Ten or eleven miles distant, shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “At least.”

Vertigo washed over me, brought on by the wide cloud-tossed sky. “She’s ... moving very fast then, she-”

Zheng shook her head. “Ten miles, in a few seconds? Even I cannot run that fast. That was another part.”

“ ... she’s *huge*,” I breathed. “Where- I thought she was in the trees, nearby, she ... ten *miles*? She could be anywhere, she-”

“Heather?” Raine prompted. I stared at her for a moment, speechless, then squeezed my eyes shut.

“Why do I feel like I’m in a Godzilla movie all of sudden?” I sighed. “I don’t believe this. As if this hasn’t been enough for one day.”

“Heath-”

“It was a huge tentacle. Very long,” I hissed. “Above the trees, back toward the city almost. Which means she’s ... giant!”

“What?” Twil grunted. “You think she came out of that cocoon and turned into Mothra or something?”

“I don’t know!” I said. “Her cocoon was still there this morning. In the same place it’s been for weeks, in the tree in the garden. I saw it myself, with my own eyes, while I was eating breakfast. She can’t have followed us out here. We’d know if she hatched, wouldn’t we? Lozzie?”

“Mmm-mmmm?” Lozzie shrugged. She wavered on her feet, eyelids heavy, one hand clinging to Twil’s sleeve.

“Heather, hey, slow down,” Raine said. “Maybe she hatched right as we left, followed you out here? That’s what she does, after all, right? She follows you.”

I shook my head, going numb. “That tentacle was too far away, practically back in Sharrowford. And she’s been eating real meat, I didn’t even think that was possible.” A horrible cold fist of ice settled in my belly. The implications did not bear thinking about. “How did she do that? How did she do any of that? She even hit the trees. Pneuma-somatic flesh can’t ... touch ... ”

Of course, this wasn’t the first time Tenny had touched real flesh with pneuma-somatic appendages.

Months ago, in that dirty alleyway where I’d been ambushed by a cult underling before my first meeting with Alexander Lilburne, she’d shoved her tentacles into his head, bought me a moment of distraction. But back then her tentacles had passed through skin and bone and brain, made him jerk and sit up as if surprised. Not battered him to death.

Now she’d hunted living animals, stripped the meat from their bones, and hidden her kill.

“She’s just really reeeeeeally clever,” Lizzie said, then grumbled, knuckling at her sleepy eyes.

“Really clever. Right.”

Raine must have seen the look on my face. She glanced at the dark tree line through the murk of the storm. “You think she’s been eating meat elsewhere? This might not be the first time?”

“Oh shiiiiit,” said Twil. “Like, back in Sharrowford?”

“Oh God, oh no.” My throat tightened up. “You might be right, I don’t know.”

“The pup is too clever for that, shaman,” Zheng purred, still grinning like she’d heard the best joke in all her life. She was rubbing her swollen eye socket with one hand. “Her nature guides her well, sends her to places with no monkeys to see.”

“Sharrowford’s full’o dark corners too,” Raine said. Zheng shrugged.

“Raine,” I said, trying to pull my thoughts together. “Raine, will you call Evelyn again, please?”

“Sure thing.” Raine didn’t hesitate. She rummaged in her jacket for her mobile phone. “You look like a woman with a plan. Wanna share?”

"We need to verify if the cocoon is still there. If it is, then ... then ... " I swallowed. "Then we know where the tentacle retreated to, and that Tenny has just reached across twenty miles of countryside."

"Fuck," Twil grunted.

"Yes, for once that is an appropriate word, thank you Twil," I said. "Raine, please?"

"Already on it." Carefully shielding her phone from the storm with her coat and hood, she dialled for Evelyn. "You wanna talk to her yourself?"

"Please, yes." I held out my hand and Raine passed me the phone. I hunched forward as I slid it inside my hood, against my ear. The line rang three times, then connected with a soft click.

"What is it now?" Evelyn's voice demanded, tinny and distant over the weak signal. "Raine, this had better be you telling me you're on the way home, you-"

"Evee, it's me," I said quickly, trying to keep the shake from my voice. "I need you to do something for for me, please."

"Heather?" I practically felt the blink of surprise in Evelyn's voice, then the bite in her words. "What's happened? Where's Raine?"

"We're all fine, we're all safe. Evee, please, I need you to go to the back door or the kitchen window and look out ... " I halted as I realised my own stupidity.

"Heather? Heather?"

"... oh blast, you won't be able to see it, will you?" I thought out loud. "Evee, can you please ask Praem to look out of the kitchen window for me?"

"What on earth are you-"

"Evee please, please just do it. I need her to make sure Tenny's cocoon is still there. Please."

"... alright." Evelyn grunted. I heard the sounds of her getting up, putting papers or a book aside, shifting blankets off her lap, then the clack-clack-clack of her walking stick, so comfortingly normal. Away from the phone's speaker, I heard her voice. "Praem, you're needed. Kitchen." A moment later her voice returned to the phone.

“Very well, Heather, she’s looking out of the back window. What is she looking for, pray tell?”

“Can you put her on? Please?”

A pause. I felt Evelyn’s raised eyebrow across half the county.

“It’s only a phone,” I sighed, at my wit’s end. “Surely she knows how to use a phone. She put a maid uniform on with no prior experience, and I gather that’s a bit more fiddly. She can handle a phone, please.”

“Point. Here.” Evelyn’s voice left the phone’s speaker. “Hold it up to your ear, you- yes. That’s it.”

A beat of silence.

“Praem?” I asked.

“Heather,” Praem intoned down the phone, a single perfect sing-song note, beautiful amid all this rain and mud.

“Praem, I need you to do something for me, please. Do you see Tenny’s cocoon from where you’re standing? Is it in it’s usual place, in the tree?”

“Yes.”

I thought I’d feel relief, but it wouldn’t come. “You’re certain?”

“Yes.”

“And it’s not ... split or damaged or-”

“No.”

“... would you go out there and check for me, that it’s still alive? That she’s still ... in there?”

Without a word of acknowledgement the phone suddenly emitted a scuffing noise, followed by Evelyn’s voice. “Praem? Praem! You’re going to get wet and- oh, bugger it.” She snapped back to the phone. “Heather, what on earth have you got her doing?”

“Checking on Tenny, we found these- wait, no!” I almost jumped out of my skin. “Evee, stop her from going out there! Stop her!”

“Oooh, yes!” Lozzie piped up. She bounced over to the phone and added her voice over my shoulder. “Best not go out, if she’s still

hungry!"

"Evee, yeah, stay indoors," Raine called.

Evelyn huffed an irritated sigh. "What is this, are all of you—"

"She might get eaten. You might get eaten," I said. "Stay indoors."

"What ... Praem, Praem, stop," Evelyn called out. "Heather says stop too, if my authority really means that little." I heard Evelyn sigh. "What now, Heather? What is this about?"

"Tenny was here, just now. Or at least one of her tentacles was."

Evelyn's moment of silence spoke volumes.

"Yes, I know," I said. "Look, Evee, we found dead sheep, it turns out she's been eating them, probably. Eating meat, real actual meat, physical meat."

"... *what*?" Evelyn hissed. "Heather, that's not poss—"

"It is. I saw the tentacle bounce off the trees, we all did. Evee, we can talk about the implications later. I don't understand, but, if she's still in the cocoon ... she ... well." I swallowed. "She's developed quite the long reach."

= =

Going home was not a simple matter of all piling into the car to endure a soggy ride together. Lozzie and I may both be on the smaller side, but there was no way we could all cram into the back of Raine's car. Zheng was simply too large and too unwieldy. She knew it, and she didn't even make the attempt.

"I'll walk, shaman."

I stared up at her and sighed. We were standing on the edge of the woods, in the asphalt lay-by we'd pulled into so many hours ago. Behind me, Lozzie bounced into the back seat and out of the rain, then swung her wellington-booted feet back out and and banged them against the side of the car to knock the mud off. She hugged herself tight in her poncho, shivering softly, but in minutes we'd have the car engine purring and the heaters turned up full for her.

"... Zheng, it's miles," I said. "Woodland, open fields, then the city, and you have to hide the whole way, don't you? Zheng, even for you that'll takes ages. This is an emergency, it—"

“Could be an emergency,” Raine corrected me, gentle and reassuring. She squeezed my shoulder through my hoodie and coat. “We don’t know what Tenny’s been doing, but she’s been doing it for a while and nothing crazy’s happened yet. S’not like there’s a spate of missing persons in Sharrowford, or a load’a dead pets.”

“You didn’t see that tentacle!” I almost snapped at her. “Raine, it was miles high.”

“And she listened to you when you told her stop, didn’t she?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Plenty of giant *araatan*, shaman,” Zheng purred. “You see them every day.”

“And they don’t eat live sheep!” I almost shouted. “Zheng, she tried to pull your head off!”

“This?” Zheng gestured at the awful bruise down the side of her face, her black eye with the flesh all puffed up. During the walk back to the road, she had healed slightly, faster than any human, but not as rapidly as Twil, her crooked gait straightening out as her hipbone mended. She looked like she’d taken a wrecking ball to the head. Half her bones made grinding sounds as she walked. “A love tap. The puppy was playing.”

I sighed, closed my eyes, and rubbed the bridge of my nose. The return had not been easy, and at one point I had almost asked Raine to carry me. Brainmath had drained me, left me shaky and gifted me with a headache, and the residual adrenaline was running out. My flanks hurt, my head pounded, and I wanted so badly to lie down.

“It could take you hours to reach the house,” I said. “I need you there with us when we approach the cocoon. Please.”

“Your *golog* won’t hurt you.”

“She hurt you, and she might hurt my other friends. I can’t be sure.” I huffed. “I suppose this is why I’m in charge, isn’t it? I’m the only responsible one here.”

Zheng made a grumbling sound. I glared up at her.

“Too proud to ride with your head between your knees for twenty minutes, hey?” Twil asked. She poked her head out of the passenger

side door, hood still up against the stray raindrops scattering through the woodland canopy over the road.

Zheng gave her a slow look, eyes sharp and predatory but strangely at rest. "I dislike these metal boxes."

Raine laughed at that, but put up a placating hand. "Showing your age, huh?"

"Zheng, it'll be twenty minutes," I said. "Surely you've had worse."

"I will race you, shaman. And I will win."

"That a challenge?" Raine asked. I caught a twinkle in her eye. "On wet roads?"

"*Yoshou?*" Zheng rumbled.

"Cos hey, I'm the one behind the wheel here." She reached back and patted the top of the car. "Sure she's no eight-six, but you really wanna take a risk on my skills? You'll look pretty silly when you plod up to the house half an hour after the rest of us, out of breath while I'm sippin' tea with my feet up."

"Uh oh," went Twil, sing-song style, a nasty smirk on her face.

"You propose to out pace me," Zheng rumbled, darkly unimpressed. "In a machine?"

"Damn right I do," said Raine.

"Oh no! No!" I stared at the pair of them. "We are not doing this, not now! This is serious, both of you. We've got a giant monster growing in the back garden and we need to get home as quickly as possible, not-"

I choked to a halt, heart in my mouth when I realised what I'd just said.

"Exactly," Zheng purred.

"Race!" Lozzie chanted. "Race!"

Raine grinned at me with adoring satisfaction. "Heather, I love you so much, you know that?"

"Raaaaine," I almost whined. "It's not safe. Oh my God, no."

"It is with me in the driver's seat. Always."

“Hurt the shaman and I’ll hunt you to the ends of the earth, *yoshou*,” Zheng said.

Raine winked and shot a finger gun at her. “I expect nothing less.”

“Good. Go.”

And with a sudden, face-ripping grin of savage joy, Zheng exploded from a standing start into a headlong sprint, a lightning bolt wrapped in rags that lanced across the road and through the trees opposite, whipping leaves into a vortex behind her to float back to earth. She jinked to one side and vanished into the woods, footsteps quickly lost in the cushion of the forest.

Raine burst out laughing. “Right then, that solves that.”

“Shit!” Twil said. “She can go straight, we gotta take the roads.” She almost leapt out of the car, but Raine held a hand up to stop her.

“Cool it, Twil, cool it. We got all the time in the world.”

“We- what? Come off it Raine, you’re not that good a driver. We’re gonna lose.”

“Good,” I tutted. “Better than breaking all our necks, or getting stopped by the police for speeding.”

“Why pay for the whole speedometer if you’re only gonna use half of it?” Raine asked. I boggled at her.

“You- no, you can’t be serious, you-”

She shot me a wink and I felt my insides melt at her smoldering confidence. She knew something I didn’t, and I knew that was dangerous. “I’ll get us all home safe, promise. You get the front seat, too. Go on, Twil, in back for you.”

I huffed in irritation, but relented, against all my better judgement. This was hardly the craziest thing Raine had ever convinced me into, after all. If nothing else, I trusted she knew what she was doing, but after I climbed in and got settled, I started to doubt again. My stomach clenched up.

Raine popped the driver’s door a moment later and climbed in, shaking stray raindrops from her hood.

“So, this thing is like, souped-up, right?” Twil asked, poking her

head forward between the seats.

“Not as far as I know,” said Raine.

“What?!” Twil gaped at her in disbelief “This car is ancient, what the hell are you thinking?”

“Thinking ahead.”

The engine coughed to life into a steady warm purr, air pouring from the heating vents. I got my seatbelt on, heart in my throat, every muscle tensed and my flanks aching as Raine revved the engine, a teasing grin on her lips.

“*Raine*,” I warned her.

“Race! Race!” Lozzie chanted, curled up comfy in the back seat.

With a kick of the wheels and a lurch in my stomach, Raine pulled out of the little woodland lay-by and onto the road. She put her foot down and I felt like my pulse was going to burst out of my own throat.

“Relax,” she purred.

“I can’t!”

“You’re gripping the dashboard, Heather. Relax. Sit back.”

“I can’t help it, Raine, I can’t believe you’re ... doing ... this?”

“Uhhhh,” Twil made a noise like a printer error. “Raine, what the fuck are you doing?”

“Driving us home.”

She’d hyped it up so much I hadn’t realised until we rounded the second corner, but Raine was in fact driving safely. I glanced over at the car’s speedometer. A comfortable twenty-seven miles an hour. I stared at Raine in profile, not sure if I should laugh or scold her.

“We’re gonna lose!” Twil said.

“Yeah ... ” Lozzie puffed out a cheek in disappointment.

“Raine, *what?*” was all I could manage.

She laughed softly, took one hand from the wheel and ruffled my hair before leaning over to plant a huge kiss on my cheek.

“Eyes on the road!” I squeaked. “Raine!”

She laughed again and took both hands off the wheel for a second, at which I thought my heart might explode, before she relented and replaced her hands at the ten and two positions.

“It’s a ruse,” she said.

“Eh?” went Twil.

“I’m ... sorry? Raine?” I asked.

“I have hoodwinked our big friend. Pulled a fast one. Played a trick. Gone done a ruse on her.”

I glanced back at Twil. She shrugged, as lost as I was. “But we’re gonna lose the race,” she said.

“Small price to pay,” Raine answered.

“Oh,” I sighed as understanding set in. “Oh, that is clever. Too clever. Raine, I can’t believe this. That’s so underhanded.”

“It is,” Lozzie chirped, then made a grumbly noise, pulled her poncho tight, and closed her eyes. A moment later she let out a little snore.

Twil looked at her, looked at me, looked at Raine, then at the road ahead.

“What?”

“So, right now,” Raine explained, “Zheng’s gonna get back to the house ASAP. Faster than we can, driving in this rain, on these roads. Gonna take us, oh, I dunno, least half an hour. But she’ll get there first. Keep an eye on Tenny’s cocoon for us, just in case anything screwy’s going on. Better her than Eevee. Insurance.”

“Oh.” Twil sat back, a bit blank.

“She can’t turn down a fight,” Raine said. “Best way to motivate her.”

“You knew the exact buttons to push, didn’t you?” I asked, shaking my head with disbelief.

“Got her number, yeah,” Twil said. “Wow. Huh.”

“Ehhhh.” Raine smiled a self-deprecating smile. “I think I got her

figured out most 'o the way. Zheng ain't that complex." She glanced sidelong at me with a silent question in her eyes.

I sighed. "In some ways, I suppose not, no."

"So what, all that bragging about your sick driving skills was just guff?" Twil asked. "Figures."

"Hey, I never said I couldn't beat her if I tried."

"Yeah, yeah." Twil scoffed. "Oldest story in the book, that one. 'I could win, I just don't wanna.'"

"Twil," I said. "Please don't tempt her."

"One corner then. This one," Raine said. She nodded ahead, to where the woodland road turned sharply on a downhill curve – and put her foot down. The engine revved higher, a lion's purr trapped under the hood.

"Woo!" went Lozzie, without opening her eyes.

Twil gripped the back of my seat. "What? What?!"

"Raine!" My heart shot back up into my throat. I felt my legs trying to brace against the footwell again. "Raine, don't you dare, you–"

"Hey, I'd never put you in danger," she said, eyes glued to the road. "Trust me. Just this one time."

The corner raced up to meet us, trees and all. I couldn't even squeak, my knuckles white on the sides of the seat. Raine was utterly focused, knife-edge sharp.

We hit the corner and she jammed the wheel all the way to one side until the steering locked and the car almost span out, then shifted gears down and slammed on the accelerator again; I swallowed a scream, my heart trying to explode from my chest as Twil let out a 'woah'. The rear tires squealed like a pig in terror as we rounded the corner almost side-on. I had an awful vision of the car rolling over.

But then suddenly we straightened out as we left the corner, the moment of excitement over as soon as it had begun.

"How about that, huh?" Raine finally allowed herself a grin.

"Fuck me," Twil said, wide-eyed and breathless.

Lozzie let out a loud snore. She'd slept through the whole thing.

I glared at Raine.

"Heather?"

"Raine, I love you, but if you ever do that again I will make you sleep in the garden."

She laughed. "One time only. Promise. 'Less it's life or death."

"I mean it. I'm not joking." I took deep breaths, trying to force down the pounding in my head.

"Yeah, uh, Raine," Twil said. "I think she's serious."

"I am."

"Cross my heart and hope to die, never again," Raine said. "Took your mind off Tenny though, didn't it?"

"... I ... I suppose it did." I sighed. "Sort of."

"Trust me to drive fast now?"

"Within reason. Get us home, Raine, yes, as quickly as you can. Within reason."

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Kimberly met us at the door.

"Did Zheng get here?" I asked.

She was wide-eyed and pale in the face as she appeared in the front room, moments after we all bustled inside, busy trying to squirm out of our wellington boots, shedding wet coats and damp layers. As soon as we'd gotten the front door shut, Lozzie had sat down in a heap on the floor, head nodding, eyelids fluttering to stay open. Raine was helping her out of her boots. Twil had started shouting for Evelyn.

Kimberly's throat bobbed with a nervous swallow. "Yes, she's up the tree in the back garden. Evelyn isn't very happy, the neighbours might see."

Twil strode past her and into the kitchen, making for the back door, tacking mud all across the floor. I shucked off my coat but didn't have the spare energy to peel my hoodie over my head, so I stepped

into my regular shoes and hurried after her, my bruised sides and sore stomach complaining, my skull throbbing with a low-grade headache.

“Heather, wait up!” Raine called after me.

“Waity-wait,” Lozzie said.

Home felt lovely and warm after the long purgatory of the storm outdoors. The heating was cranked all the way up, raindrops drummed on the roof with the certainty of true enclosure, and every room was washed with a gentle glow of grey storm-light filtered through old glass.

When I saw Zheng through the kitchen window, I sighed. I wasn’t going to get to stay indoors just yet.

“Oh, damn her.”

I went through into the little utility room in the rear of the house. Twil was already slipping out the back door and into the garden. I passed the washer and dryer and the broken-backed sofa, pulled the door open, and stumbled out onto the rear patio straight into a confusion of several people’s backs, umbrellas, and a huge scarf.

“Don’t even try, she’ll throw you to the ground and you’ll break both legs,” Evelyn was saying to Twil.

“Don’t even try,” Praem echoed.

“Oh cool, thanks for the vote of confidence,” Twil said.

“No giant tentacles,” I sighed. “Okay, that’s a good sign.”

Evelyn glanced over her shoulder at me. “Heather, wonderful”, she deadpanned. “Don’t suppose you could convince her down from there before we get a visit from the RSPCA in a search of an escaped gorilla?”

“Shaman!” Zheng bellowed at the top of her lungs.

She was, as Kimberly had warned, up in the tree. The storm had finally slackened on our drive home, a brief lull in the days of rain to come, but Zheng was still sopping wet, hair plastered to her scalp, eye mostly healed by now into a mere dark bruise across half her face. Steading herself with one hand on a higher branch, both feet planted wide, she stood tall over Tenny’s cocoon.

It looked exactly as it had this morning. The size of a small car, wedged in place between the thickest branches, anchored to both ground and the mighty tree trunk with sticky strips of pneumatic flesh, like creepers. The tarry-black surface shifted and flowed like liquid moved by an unseen current.

“Probably not,” I admitted to Evelyn.

Zheng pointed down at the cocoon. “Sealed. Intact. Your puppy is still within, shaman.”

“Yes,” Evelyn raised her voice. “As you have told us already. Now get down from there!”

Evelyn stood on the back patio, arms crossed in irritation, scowling up at Zheng. She was wrapped in an hastily assembled collection of warm clothes to keep the cold off, a thick cream jumper beneath her coat, a huge scarf wrapped around her neck, all askew. Praem waited next to her in full maid uniform, holding two umbrellas, one in each hand. Twil had decided to shelter there as well, caught by indecision at Evelyn’s side.

Zheng ignored her. “We need to deliver her, shaman.”

The back door opened again and Raine joined us, with Lozzie hanging onto her arm, rubbing heavy eyes as she gazed at Zheng and the cocoon. Kimberly peered warily around the door frame behind them.

“I won, *yoshou*,” Zheng called.

“Right you did,” Raine called back, then turned to me. “What now?”

“It’s still sealed,” I told her. “No tentacles that I can see.”

“Shaman,” Zheng bellowed.

“Oh, blast it all.” I shook myself, pulled my hoodie’s hood down over my hair, and ventured out into the rain once more.

Zheng watched me from up in the tree as I approached. I craned my neck to look up at her, and found an oddly serious expression on Zheng’s face as she crouched in the branches, next to that giant sticky black cocoon. A deep bass thrumming echoed inside my own head, a rhythm in the air itself, the heartbeat of a whale.

“Her metamorphosis is done,” Zheng rumbled. “She is overdue. We

must deliver her.”

“ ... how do you know that?”

Zheng shrugged. “Pupa do not eat. She sends out feeding tubes, because she is no longer a pupa. But she won’t come out.” She reached over and patted the huge chrysalis.

“That’s not true!” Lozzie said. I turned and found her struggling up through the garden behind me, flapping her poncho. Raine followed on her heels, having borrowed one of Praem’s umbrellas to keep the rain off both of them. Lozzie squinted and struggled with her eyes. “She’ll hatch when she’s ready! She’s just getting big!”

Zheng shook her head, slow and almost sad. “She is starving to death in the womb.”

“We can’t just open it ourselves,” I said. “What if Lozzie’s right? If we open it and she’s still changing, that’ll kill her.”

Zheng stared at me for a moment, then at the cocoon, then up at the sky. “Your choice, shaman.”

“I ... I don’t know, I can’t make that kind of choice, I didn’t ... ”

I didn’t make Tenny.

“Lozzie,” I turned, pleading with her. “Lozzie, is there some way we can be sure?”

Lozzie sniffed hard and closed one eye, struggling to stay coherent. Raine kept her dry with the umbrella in one hand, helped her stay standing with the other. She was trying so hard, but she shook her head, frowning and biting her lower lip.

“Heather, this isn’t on you,” Raine said softly. “No emergency after all, right? We should head back indoors, think this over. Talk to Evee, figure out a way to track those tentacles, find out what Tenny’s been up to.”

“Are you coming down from that blasted tree or not?” Evelyn called across the garden.

“Hush, wizard,” Zheng rumbled.

“I ... ” I swallowed hard, raindrops soaking through my hood. “I’m not-”

Not responsible for this? Not a leader?

Tenny had saved my life once. She was a *good doggy*.

No less than Zheng, Tenny was a friend out in the wilderness. Maisie had told me in no uncertain terms what I should do about lost friends.

"I need to talk to her again," I said, glancing up at the cocoon, an idea growing in my mind. "I've touched it before, but she wasn't communicating through it. She'll talk through the tentacles though, but I don't see any. How could she have-"

Clonk clonk. Zheng tapped the tree trunk with her knuckles, then pointed downward at the ground. "Through the wood."

"Makes sense," said Raine.

"I need to talk to her again," I said. "Zheng, can you dig up part of that tentacle, but don't yank it out this time. I need to touch it, to ... ask her ... I don't know, but it's the only way to be certain."

Zheng rose to her feet and cracked her knuckles. "Open a hole in the tree?"

"No hurty tree," Lozzie whined.

"Yes, indeed, 'no hurty tree', let's not do any more damage than necessary, please?"

Zheng stared at me for a second, deadpan and unreadable, then shrugged and took a step forward. She dropped straight out of the tree and hit the ground with a thump. I flinched and tutted.

"Locate it again, shaman?"

"With brainmath? Um, no. I'm exhausted, if I do that again I might pass out, and I'm pretty certain Tenny will only talk to me or Lozzie, and Lozzie's about to fall asleep. Can't you-"

"Mm," Zheng grunted, and went to work.

She was quick, efficient, and brutal, tearing handfuls of earth out from around the tree in a rough circle, searching for the hiding place of Tenny's feeding tentacle. She threw clods of dirt into the grass behind her as she went.

"Yes, that's wonderful," Evelyn drawled. She'd moved closer to

observe, Praem holding the umbrella over her head and Twil grimacing out at the rain beside her. "Rip up the whole garden, why don't you?"

"Come on, Evee," Raine said. "Not like we take any care of it."

"You best hope it's not deeper, wizard," Zheng rumbled.

"Quite. You'll hit sewage pipes."

We were fortunate. With a deep-throated growl, Zheng unearthed the tentacle a minute later. I hurried over to her side, uncaring of the rain soaking through my hood, as she straightened up and gestured into the shallow trench she'd dug, barely a foot deep. Raindrops sluiced mud down the sides of the hole. In the bottom pulsed a tarry-black cable of pneuma-somatic muscle, about as thick as my wrist.

"Thank you, Zheng," I said, crouching with some difficulty, reaching down to touch the tentacle with my fingertips.

I made contact. Beneath the sound of the rain, beneath my own pounding heart and my laboured breathing, beneath the sounds of Raine and Lozzie walking closer to peer over my shoulder, I heard that rapid fluttering inside my head. Air passed through dry gills, like the vibration of wings.

"Tenny?" Lozzie whispered.

"She's here," I said, and wet my lips. One last time, I glanced up at the cocoon in the tree. What was Tenny now? How big must she be, inside there, if what we'd seen in the woods was merely a pupa-stage feeding tube? "I ... Tenny? Tenny, won't you come out?" I said out loud. "It's me, it's Heather. Are you ... ready?"

A feathery fanning inside my mind, rising and falling.

She used to speak words, even if garbled. Now all I heard was this fluttery rhythm. The rhythms of her new body?

"Tell her it's safe to come out now," said Raine.

"... Raine? Why wouldn't she think that?"

Raine gave me an indulgent smile. "She wrapped herself up in there after you got snatched back to Wonderland, right? Maybe that's why she went. Maybe she needs to know it's safe out here now. Hey, it's what I'd tell her, if I could see any of this."

I slipped my fingers through the sucking mud to grasp the tentacle more firmly. The thud-thud-thud of life reverberated through the air.

“Tenny, it’s me,” I repeated. “It’s safe to come out now. All safe here. The bad things are gone. Zheng’s ... a friend, now.”

The fluttering noise ceased. The tentacle went dead in my hand, limp and lifeless. The tarry-black surface of Tenny’s cocoon ceased all motion, the endless swirl of black on black fixed and still, frozen.

That deep heartbeat in the air fell silent.

“Tenny?” I squeezed the tentacle, shook it a little. “Tenny? Tenny, are you there?”

“Heather?” Raine whispered.

“Oh no,” Lozzie said in a tiny voice.

“She stopped,” I said, and looked up at the cocoon. “She just stopped. Like her heart gave out. Oh, oh-”

With a slick-wet crack like a cross between breaking bone and splitting dry mucus, the cocoon jerked. A hairline fracture appeared on the frozen surface.

Two feelers flickered through the crack – feathery, dove-white, slender as needles – then whipped back inside. The cocoon jerked again, rocked from within, shuddering like a struck bell.

“It’s Tenny!” Lozzie lit up and clapped her hands together.

I stumbled to my feet. Raine caught me to stop me from falling over.

“She’s hatching,” I said, turning to Raine, smiling in relief. “She-”

Raine had her knife out in her other hand, eyes glued to the cocoon – no, to the tree, I corrected myself. She couldn’t even see the cocoon; she, Evelyn, Twil, Kimberly, none of them could see Tenny or the cocoon.

But Twil and Evelyn stared up as well, locked in a moment of surprise. Evelyn had gone green in the face. Kimberly had ventured out onto the back patio, eyes wide, hand to her mouth, looking like she was about to bolt.

“Wha-”

“I could see that,” Raine said, without taking her eyes from the tree. “I saw that just now, Heather. A pair of insect antennae long as my arm, out of thin air. Plain as day, I *saw* that.”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.11

“Raine, that’s not possible.”

At least that’s what I meant to say. What I actually said sounded more like ‘buh?’

Lashed high in the gnarled old tree in the back garden, washed by cold rain in the early spring air, framed by the roiling storm clouds in the sky above, Tenny’s cocoon thumped and shuddered a third time. Branches creaked under pressure, a faint tremor vibrated through the ground, and a scratching, flaking, cracking sound followed, like claws raking across loose rock.

A pair of feelers flickered forth again, through the hair-line fracture in the top of the cocoon, white and feathery, tentative and nervous as they tasted the air and drank the rain.

“There,” Raine hissed. “Heather, right there, I can see those.”

“Ooooooh. Again!” Lozzie called to the cocoon. “Again! You can do it!”

“I don’t- that’s not- you can’t-” I stammered. “Oh no.”

The feelers withdrew. A pause, then the chrysalis shuddered again, rocking against the tree branches, slammed from within by incredible strength.

Raine stepped in front of Lozzie and I, still sheltering us beneath the umbrella, rain dripping from the brim. She held her knife low but obvious in the other hand. I was still too shocked and confused to complain, to tell her to put that thing away. Up in the tree, Tenny – or whatever she was now – had begun to rock the cocoon back and forth, as if she was trying to roll it like a hamster ball. The age and stoutness of the tree-branches held it firm.

“Everyone else saw that too, yeah?” Raine asked over her shoulder without taking her eyes from the tree. “I haven’t just picked up Heather’s talent by sexual osmosis, right?”

“Yeah! Yeah, shit, oh shit,” Twil spat back, claws already out, nose wrinkled in disgust.

“Quite, yes,” Evelyn hissed.

From back by the house, Kimberly made a squeak that probably meant yes, and also probably meant ‘please allow me to leave before I wet myself’.

“Can bloody well smell it too,” Twil said.

Raine sniffed, and so did I. Twil was right. An unfamiliar organic scent had added itself to the storm-tossed cocktail of wet grass and slick mud; an iron-and-mucus smell, a sweat-and-blood smell. Not unpleasant exactly, not rot or disease, but rich and tangy like blood-laced spice in the back of one’s throat.

“Spirits do not smell of anything,” Evelyn said, strangled and urgent, shaking her head. “It’s a- Tenny ... she’s bootstrapped herself a physical body.”

“Is that bad?” Twil asked.

“How am I supposed to know?” Evelyn snapped at her. “Let’s ... withdraw, yes. Maybe indoors. We don’t know what’s going to come out of there.”

“It’s only Tenny!” Lozzie said, turning to everyone else with a little pouty frown.

“Only,” Praem echoed.

Despite the inflectionless bell-tone of her voice, Praem made her scepticism obvious. She took a half-step to the side, still holding the umbrella aloft over Evelyn, and made an ‘after-you’ gesture with one neatly gloved hand.

“Sure it’s Tenny,” Raine said. “But what’s Tenny now?”

The cocoon had stopped rocking, but the scratching sound had resumed, a desperate scritch-scratch-scape-scape, punctuated by weird wet slapping as if from inside a drum. An occasional fluttery fanning teased the edge of my hearing.

“She cannot break it,” Zheng purred.

I glanced up at Zheng’s contemplative look, trying to marshal my thoughts. I was going cold inside, shivering despite my hoodie, and wrapped my arms around myself more for comfort than warmth. “What?”

“No egg tooth.”

“ ... you mean she can’t get out on her own?”

Zheng shrugged. “We could wait and see, shaman. Maybe the shell will fill with rainwater first.”

That sharpened my mind.

Unfortunately, my phantom limbs responded before I did. Tentacles that existed only in my imagination tried to reach up to Tenny’s cocoon with a half-formed mental image of prying her out before she drowned. I gasped as twin lances of pain stabbed into both my flanks. Bruised flesh and torn muscle twitched and quivered as my body tried to guide limbs I didn’t have. I screwed my eyes up tight and squeezed my sides with my hands, trying to quell the attack, trying not to think about Tenny panicking inside her chrysalis, trapped and alone.

“Heather?” Raine called. “Woah, Heather, Heather?”

“Shaman?”

“I’m fine,” I croaked, then sighed. “Damn it all.”

“Yes, quite,” Evelyn snapped. “Don’t you dare, Heather. That’s all we’d need right now.”

“She can’t get out,” I croaked. “She-”

“Good! We should *not* be able to see that, none of us. This- this- this should not exist, not here, this is dangerous and-”

“You are dangerous, wizard,” Zheng purred. “I am dangerous. Every monkey and monster in this garden is dangerous.”

“Yes,” I agreed, gathering my wits, straightening up, wincing as my sore muscles complained at even the smallest motion. “Everyone calm down, please. Raine, would you please put that knife away?”

“Not a hundred percent on that just yet,” said Raine.

“Heather, that is a spirit in there,” Evelyn said. “And we can all see it and *I don’t know what that means.*”

“Then we’re going to be the first to find out, aren’t we?” I said with a sigh.

“We are,” Praem echoed. She stared right at me.

“Praem?”

The doll-demon declined to expand.

Evelyn huffed. “Heather-”

“Evee, need I remind you that you borderline tortured Tenny at one point?” I shot her a look – my best impression of her own expression – and felt like a bad friend for bringing that up, but this wasn’t time for careful debate. “I’m sure whatever she looks like now, she- I don’t care what she-” I pinched the bridge of my nose and screwed my eyes up. “ ... why can you all see her? This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Tch!” Lozzie tutted and sighed, arms sagging, eyes rolling, the very picture of a grumpy teenager. “Because she’s gotten really clever, duh! I keep telling you but you’re not listening!”

“Great, yes,” Evelyn spat. “A hyper-intelligent spirit, after spending God alone knows how long eating live meat, is just about to hatch into an actual physical body.”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s um ... a little unprecedented, I know.”

Evelyn snorted. “And I’m sure we’d all love to meet it in a completely uncontrolled manner five seconds after it’s born. Great plan. Bravo.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Raine.

Evelyn grabbed Praem’s umbrella with one hand and used it like a lead, directing the doll-demon to accompany her on a retreat back up the garden and toward the house. “Don’t come crying to me when you get bitten!”

Twil grimaced, briefly left behind. Rainwater drummed off her hood. “She’s got a point, come on.”

“Tenny recognised me,” I said. “I’m sure ... I’m certain whatever comes out of that ... it’ll ... ” I glanced up at the cocoon again as the scratching noises intensified. I was lying, to both myself and everyone else. The feeding tentacle, the dead sheep, the incredible strength with which Tenny had fought Zheng. None of these were exactly promising signs.

Behind us, the back door banged open. Evelyn stomped past Kimberly and into the house, stamping rainwater off her shoes.

Praem waited.

"She did listen to me," I said. "Tenny listened to me when I told her to stop fighting Zheng. She *remembers* me, it's Tenny in there."

"Yeah yeah, I believe you, right," said Twil. "But like, lets not risk getting between a dog and it's food or something?"

"Ha!" Zheng barked. "You monkeys. Flee if you wish."

"Not everyone wants to fight everything all the time, alright?" Twil rolled her eyes, then slunk over to Praem and took shelter beneath the umbrella.

"Heather-" Raine started.

"Raine, don't."

"Compromise?" Raine said softly, finally looking away from the tree to meet my eyes at her side. "Back up a bit, give her room to breathe. She recognises you, then it's fine, sure, but let's give her room to get her bearings."

"She's stuck in the cocoon, Raine! She can't get out, I have to help, I-"

"Listen to your right hand, shaman," Zheng purred. "She keeps you safe."

"Make up your mind," I snapped at her. "You tell us off for being afraid and then-"

"The *laangren* could stay. You are more fragile."

"Zheng! It-" A light bulb came on in my brain. "Oh, you could-"

"Mm," Zheng grunted. "Would be a pity, to leave such strength to rot in its shell."

She knew what I was going to ask. She'd probably thought of it before I did. Without a another word, Zheng strode forward and climbed the tree again in three quick bounds. She did wobble slightly at the top, taking an extra moment than expected to find her footing, either because of her sodden, unwieldy clothes or due to the injures she'd sustained during the fight.

"Compromise then, please?" Raine asked. "Zheng's on it, we can back up a bit. And for the record, I believe you that it's Tenny in

there.” She allowed herself an indulgent smile, and I was torn inside between a heart-flutter and irritation. “But humour me, please Heather?”

Zheng was already bending down and planting her hands either side of the hairline crack in the frozen-tar surface of the cocoon. Lozzie clapped her hands above her head, swinging her arms up and down like she was following a calisthenics video, chanting ‘Come. Out. Come. Out!’ over and over.

“I’m not leaving Lozzie here,” I murmured. “And I don’t think either of us can convince her to back away.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Raine smirked, then called out. “Hey, Lozz?”

“Mm?” Lozzie craned back, caught mid-clap.

“Let’s give Tenny some room to come out proper, yeah? If she’s really that big, we better give her some space to, you know, unfold.” Raine gestured with the umbrella. “Come huddle up with us.”

“Yes, please,” I sighed, my concerns all piling up in one big mess. “Please don’t get too wet and cold again, Lozzie.”

“Okay!” Lozzie chirped, to my incredible surprise. She hopped back toward us and ducked under the umbrella, and instantly linked arms with me, holding on tight.

Up in the tree, Zheng bore down and pushed, trying to simply force the two halves of the split cocoon further apart. Her lips pulled back in a grimace of exertion, but the shell proved too strong even for her. She wound back one fist and slammed the crack with all her strength, pulled back bloody knuckles and punched it again, and again.

As Raine hurried to lead us back toward the house, Lozzie giggled under her breath and smiled an oddly knowing little smile, just for me. She bit her lip and rolled her eyes and in that moment I realised she knew exactly what Raine had just pulled.

“Lozzie-” I hissed.

“Shhh,” she put a finger to her lips and whispered. “Raine-y brainy worry-wart.”

“... I hope you’re right,” I hissed back.

We withdrew, but not as far as Twil and Praem had retreated. Kimberly stood inside the threshold of the back door now, ready to bolt. Evelyn had returned, scowling. In one hand she carried the carved thigh-bone, the closest thing she possessed to a magical weapon.

“Oh this is a fine display,” Evelyn was grumbling, grinding her teeth as she spoke. “In the middle of the day, in broad daylight-”

“Hardly broad, hey?” Twil pointed at the stormy sky.

“You know what I mean, don’t be dense. Oh, what do you care, running around in the woods covered in fur? I bet you’ve shocked more than a few hikers and you don’t care, they just make up urban legends. You don’t understand the first-”

“Kiss and make up already, you two,” I sighed, too exhausted to care.

“I- Heather- excuse me?!” Evelyn glared.

Twil just dipped her head, cleared her throat, and gestured up at the tree. “Weirdest uh, weirdest mime show ever, right? Heh.”

Zheng had breached the shell at last, forced a tiny gap wide enough to jam her fingertips into, and was busy ripping chunks of cocoon free and tossing them to the grass. The cocoon came away in Zheng’s fists as only part-solid, masses of layered fibres packed with a viscous black goo that stuck fast in great sticky strips, like a cross between a wood-pulp-and-saliva wasp nest and fibreglass soaked in molten toffee. Each chunk steamed softly in the rain, slowly melting to nothingness in the grass.

The smell intensified, wet and rich and biological. But the cocoon was so dense, Zheng’s digging barely seemed to make a dent.

“What is this stuff?” I murmured.

“Metamorphosis,” Praem intoned.

“Yes, but-” I looked at her and halted. Despite the lack of pupils in her milk-white eyes, I felt her attention directly on me. “Praem?”

Up in the tree, Zheng was chanting under her breath, a rolling rhythm in a language I did not recognise, a work-song. She jammed both hands into the hole she’d made, one on either side, and braced her shoulders, a living crowbar.

“True metamorphosis requires pain,” Praem sing-songed.

We all shared a glance. Evelyn frowned at her. “And what do you know about pa-”

Shrrrrrr-sloop.

With a sound like a cartoon snake popping from a garden hose, a thick black tentacle suddenly shot up through the hole in the cocoon, right into Zheng’s face. But Zheng had learnt; she dodged back with a casual flick of her head. The tentacle went sailing past.

It possessed none of the clarity of the giant feeding tentacle we’d encountered in the woods. After missing Zheng, it flopped to one side and slapped about blindly on the exterior of the cocoon, like a person fumbling for a light switch in the dark. Whatever senses Tenny’s pupa-stage had boasted, they’d withdrawn, concentrated, transferred to the thing trying desperately to claw itself free.

Zheng caught the appendage in mid-air, in one fist.

“Stay down, *golog*.”

She let the tentacle go. It instantly whipped back into the cocoon with a loud *pop*.

“Well,” Raine said with grim sort of grin. “Saw that one too.”

“Ugh,” went Twil. “That was like a giant slug. You’ve touched that, Heather?”

“I still don’t understand,” I admitted. “She’s ... she’s turned herself from a spirit into ... real life?”

“She’s a real girl now,” Lozzie giggled.

“Bootstrapping itself from one order of life to the other,” Evelyn muttered under her breath, as we all watched Zheng once again brace her hands either side of the hole she’d made. She put her back into it, bending forward and straining with all her strength, trying to rip the shell open. She bared her teeth, started to go red in the face. The cocoon wouldn’t budge, the crack still not enough to split the two halves. “This is an absolute nightmare, Heather. This is a level-ten fuck up.”

“But ... but it’s Tenny.”

“I don’t know what we’re even looking at here,” Evelyn hissed,

turning to me, eyes blazing. “This is completely beyond my knowledge, this isn’t supposed to happen, I’ve never seen it described, hinted at, anything. Even if what comes out of that cocoon is exactly as friendly as what went in, we can *see it*. Things like Zheng, or Praem, or hell, Twil here, at least they look passably human, but-”

“Aw thanks, yeah,” Twil muttered.

“But this?” She gestured with the tip of her walking stick, up at the tree. “Huge headache, at the very least. It’s one thing for some passer-by on the street to write Praem off as a weirdo in cosplay-”

Praem turned her head to stare at her mistress, but Evelyn ranted on.

“It’s entirely another to explain away a faceless tentacle monster with skin made of tar – or whatever the fuck is going to fall out of that egg!” She blew out a long breath and glared at me, coming down from her little rant. “Why do you keep doing this to me, Heather?”

“I’m ... Eevee, I’m sorry, I-”

“That part was a joke.” She huffed and looked away. “It’s hardly your fault.” She nodded at Lozzie. “More hers.”

“Nyeeeee.” Lozzie stuck her tongue out at Evelyn, which earned her a pinched frown.

“We- we could get her indoors as quickly as possible,” I said. “That is, if she’s ... if it’s safe. I mean, I don’t want to ... I can’t just-” I understood what Evelyn was saying, or thought I did. For all that we were a bunch of monsters and magicians, we all looked human. Even Zheng, even if she looked like she’d stepped down from mount Olympus. “I can’t just ... make her go away.”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn sighed. “You’ve made your point well enough before, Heather. You were right then, and you’re right now, as much as it pains me to admit.”

“You, admitting you’re wrong?” Twil elbowed Evelyn in the side, grinning. “Yeah right.”

Evelyn glared at her until Twil pulled a grimace and looked away, then Evelyn turned back to me. “My point is, I get it, alright? Non-human fr-” she slammed to a halt and glanced at Praem.

“Friends?” I supplied the word. “Non-human friends are friends too?”

Evelyn sighed like we were all pets that had just messed all over the floor. “Why do you always sound so convincing when you spout lines like that? Yes, exactly. Friends, allies, whatever. It’s a responsibility, even. So no, I’m not suggesting we drive Tenny off, assuming she doesn’t emerge as a giant moth and immediately dust all of Sharrowford with poisonous spores.”

“Evee?” Raine asked. “You joking?”

Evelyn shrugged, raised her chin, and readied one hand on the carved thighbone. “We are playing with fire. We’ve been doing it for months. Let’s find out.”

Raine glanced at the back door, then at me.

“Oh no,” I said. “I’m not leaving now.”

“Worst case, we end up with a giant moth corpse to dispose of,” Evelyn grumbled. “Perhaps we could lure it into a fire.”

Up in the tree, Zheng strained harder, using her feet as leverage too now, braced against the branches like some kind of superhuman car jack. Beneath her wet clothes, her muscles rippled like steel cables. Veins stood out on her forehead as she heaved, and the hairline crack in the cocoon appeared to flex wider, but the material itself held strong. Zheng reached her limit and I heard a distinct *pop-crack* of a breaking bone as her left arm buckled. She stood up and sighed heavily, chest heaving up and down as she sucked in great lung-fulls of cold air. With her good hand she reached over and cracked her elbow back into place.

“No luck?” Raine called.

Zheng shrugged.

“Hold, please,” Praem suddenly intoned. She was offering the umbrella handle to Twil.

“Wha-”

“Hold, please.”

“I-”

“Praem?” Evelyn said. “What are you up to?”

“Evelyn will get wet. Hold please.”

“Uh, alright.” Twil took the umbrella, holding it over herself and Evelyn. “But-”

Praem turned neatly on one heel, and marched off toward the tree.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Evelyn snapped. “You- Praem! Get back here! Praem!”

Praem ignored her mistress. Hands clasped before her, she glided across the garden with neat, measured strides, her shoes dusted with rainwater, her hair getting damp, shoulders of her uniform dotted with raindrops, quickly turning soggy in the slow deluge. Zheng watched as Praem approached the tree.

“Demon,” she rumbled. “What do you propose?”

Praem didn’t bother to answer, look up, or even stop, but simply hiked her skirt up and started climbing the tree. She lacked Zheng’s explosive muscular force, but more than made up for that with grip strength, balance, and a comfortable pair of shoes. With careful, confident motions, she scaled the tree-trunk and pulled herself up next to Zheng, a good two feet shorter than the giant zombie.

“Oh yes, you climb the tree as well,” Evelyn huffed. “That’ll go down fantastically if we’re seen.”

“Is she stronger than Zheng?” Twil asked, frowning. “Or they gonna work together?”

“I don’t care what they do,” I said. “As long as they get Tenny out.”

Zheng, one eyebrow raised in amused curiosity, gestured to the cocoon, as if to say ‘fine, your turn’. Praem ignored her and bent forward over the frozen tarry-black egg, head twitching one way, then the other, examining the surface. The cocoon rocked and shuddered as Tenny resumed her panic, or instinctive hatching behaviour, or whatever it was. Praem reached forward and tapped the cocoon with one knuckle, as if on a door. The rocking stopped. She put her ear to the cocoon and tapped again, and again, and again, mechanically testing every few inches.

One minute stretched into three. Three drew out into five. Evelyn ground her teeth. I started shivering, the enforced wait gnawing at my belly. Up in the tree, Praem was quickly soaked through to her wooden bones, but she kept going.

Zheng watched dispassionately, then eventually glanced at us mere humans huddled down in the garden.

“Wizard,” she called. “We need another method. Your method.”

Evelyn screwed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Evee, I know,” I said, feeling her pain. “It’s been a long day, but please, I’m not going to leave Tenny to drown or suffocate in there, please, I-”

“Alright!” Evelyn hissed. “Yes, fine. God alone knows what I’m going to do, I don’t even know where to start.”

Praem stood up.

“Here.”

She touched the tip of one finger against the surface of Tenny’s cocoon, at a point on the side, quite far from the long hairline fracture.

“Mmm?” Zheng rumbled.

“Punch here.”

“Punch? Why can’t you do that, little thing? Feeling weak?”

Praem clasped her hands demurely in front of herself, and resumed her habitual pose of perfect poise – no easy feat when standing on a tree branch, drenched from head to toe. Her hair was dripping wet now, blonde slicked together into long rat-tails stuck to the back of her dress. She stared at Zheng for a moment, then turned on her heel and promptly fell out of the tree.

Again, she lacked Zheng’s muscular power or impact, but possessed a preternatural grace. She landed at the base of the tree with a little squelch on the wet grass, marched away a few paces, turned, and looked up at Zheng.

“Get on with it,” she sing-songed. “Gorilla.”

For a split-second I thought Zheng was going to jump down out of the tree and fist-fight Praem on the spot. Evelyn would have a fit. But then Zheng broke into a grin, barked one ‘ha!’ of laughter, and wound up a fist. She rocked back and slammed a punch into the spot Praem had indicated, put all her strength into one strike.

The cocoon split like a cracked walnut.

The shell exploded into fragments, some falling out of the tree and crashing to the earth, others stuck between the branches, fragments pinging off and bouncing through the leaves. Zheng actually blinked in surprise. A wave of thick black fluid slopped free as the cocoon burst, splashing to the ground, diluted with rainwater but still reeking of that iron-and-mucus smell.

Flesh fell with fluid, a bundle of black meat and white fur, flopping limbs and limp pseudopods, a confusion of fluttering, twitching body parts that slithered to the ground in the middle of the exploded cocoon.

“Yaaay!” Lozzie cheered.

“Lozzie, Lozzie hold on,” I said quickly, holding fast to her arm looped through my own. “Let her ... let her ... ”

Tenny, whatever she was now, lay still in a heap on the grass.

Raine, Evelyn, Twil, Kimberly, none of them could see the cracked cocoon – but they absolutely saw the contents. To them, a bizarre creature had just fell into reality out of thin air, surrounded by her own reeking afterbirth.

“Ugh,” went Twil.

“Well, ‘least she’s out,” said Raine.

“Oh Goddess,” Kimberly squeaked from the back door.

Evelyn stared, wide-eyed, green around the gills again as Praem stepped forward, over a chunk of melting cocoon. “Don’t- Praem! Don’t touch it!”

The bundle of tar-black limbs and quivering feelers twitched and writhed on the ground – and something drew a first breath. A fluttering, flickering, feathery sound.

A strange silence came over us all. I recognised the tension in Raine’s limbs, ready to spring at one wrong move. Evelyn swallowed hard and fingered her carved thigh bone, hand slipping into position. Twil grit her teeth, barely holding back a growl. My stomach clenched hard.

“ ... Tenny?” I called softly.

Soaked in her own viscous afterbirth, twitching and fluttering body parts that had never until this moment felt sunlight or rain, clumsy and confused but very much alive, ‘Tenny’ sat up.

Beautiful. The moment, I mean, not necessarily Tenny. Not a clean sort of beautiful, not the mathematical perfection of a cathedral or the elegance of a perfectly balanced poem, but a raw, instinctive sort of beauty. If you’ve ever watched an animal being born, or a moth pulling itself from its chrysalis and stretching its wings for the first time, that is the beauty I think we all saw in that moment, as this weird collection of alien flesh and quivering membranes sat up and blinked huge black-on-black pelagic eyes at the world.

I recognised those eyes, golfball-sized inky pools of limpid darkness, full of intense, innocent curiosity. But now those eyes blinked with triple lids, a quick flicker of three wet membranes over rolling orbs.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Is it her?” Twil hissed.

“Yes,” I whispered, swallowed, repeated myself louder and clearer. “That’s Tenny, yes. She’s- she’s got the same eyes. Tenny? Tenny?”

Tenny was too numb and too new to respond, head waving slowly from one side to another as she unfolded unfamiliar parts; she had been through quite the metamorphosis.

At least she still had tentacles.

She also retained a head, two arms, and two legs, which was quite a relief. I’d half expected some segmented, chitinous, scuttling beast to emerge from that pupa, with Tenny’s eyes set above some monstrous slavering maw. I had a feeling we’d gotten exceptionally lucky.

Her skin was still the same pitch-black, but no longer bubbled and roiled like the surface of boiling tar. It had set, satin-smooth and slick wet with amniotic fluid, slowly washed by the falling rain, undeniably biological.

Lozzie squealed like an old steam kettle, both hands to her own mouth. “She’s so fluffyyyy!”

Tenny was, indeed, very fluffy. Sort of plump, too.

She’d grown thick tufts of feathery white fur across her thighs, hips,

up her back and belly, over her head, up her throat, across her forearms. The fur formed streaks and swirls, a pattern that seemed to follow some kind of curved geometric logic. As she brought her arms up and stuck a finger – long and delicate but without fingernails or knuckles – into her own mouth, I saw actual muscle fibres bunch and relax beneath her skin. Tendons flexed, skin stretched, individual white hairs separated. A quartet of insect antennae twitched from atop her head, two-foot-long feathery white feelers tasting the rain. She'd turned pneuma-somatic flesh into physical cells.

How many meals of raw mutton had that taken, I wondered.

She'd grown a mouth too, and a nose. In her face, rather than relying solely on the one in her chest, which still lingered as a puckered line across her breast. Tenny looked up as Praem stopped a few paces away, pulled the exploratory finger out of her own mouth, and opened her pitch-black lips.

"Nnnn ... nnnuuuhhh," went Tenny, with the mouth in her face.

A fluttering voice, like dry hands rifling through a stack of papers, warm air drawn over frilled lungs. Tenny closed her mouth, made a child-like popping sound with her lips, and decided now was a good time to attempt the feat of standing up.

She wasn't very good at it. Wobbly and clumsy, no balance, couldn't work her ankles, spent a lot of time staring at them and rotating them before she made them support her weight. Lizzie made another muffled squeal, as if we were all watching a stumbling puppy rather than some nightmare moth-creature dredged up from the other side of reality.

"She wearing something?" Twil hissed.

"No, that's attached to her," I said. "Look."

As Tenny stood, the rest of her unfolded. A sort of cloak structure covered her shoulders, attached at her neck, made of pitch-black flesh and falling about her in a protective layer of pseudo-clothing, all the way to her bare, stubby, toe-less feet.

The exterior surface of the cloak shifted like oil on water, a dizzying, disorienting effect, and for a moment Tenny's outline looked only half there, the cloak almost managing to imitate the tree and the grass behind her – but then she overbalanced on her

unsteady new legs, let out a ‘brrrrfff!’ and the effect rippled away. A clutch of very familiar tentacles shot out from beneath the shoulders of the flesh-cloak, to steady her against the ground and break her fall. She let out a petulant, fluttering ‘naaaah’.

The inside of the cloak was lined with more fluffy white fur, dripping with the womb-fluid from Tenny’s cocoon. As she finally gained her feet, I realised she’d lost maybe a foot of height, a little shorter than Lizzie and I now, but she’d made up for it with mass.

She had hips – imitating us, with secondary sexual characteristics? – and the rest of her looked somehow softer and rounder, but not in the exact way or places a human being would. She’d filled out, but to the tune of her own biology, not in pure imitation of ours.

The flesh-cloak twitched, flickered, seemed almost to vibrate.

“Wings,” Raine said softly. “Them’s wings. Look at thaaaat.”

As if on cue, Tenny flexed and stretched her new wings, the cloak opening out and splitting into four parts, great leathery structures that looked completely incapable of actual flight. They unfurled and unfurled and kept going, each one about twelve feet long when stretched to maximum span.

Evelyn made a choking sound, a word caught in her throat.

Tenny stared at her own wings, looked at her own hands, looked at the sky, Praem, us. Her tentacles reached over and started to groom one of the wings, trying to clean the sticky black amniotic fluid off, like a bird preening itself.

Then she sagged with effort, the wings flopped back down into a cloak, and Tenny sat down in a heap.

“Buuuuullllffff,” she fluttered, a very grumpy child woken from a comfortable nap.

“That,” Twil said, bristling like a dog confronted by a lobster. “Is the weirdest fuckin’ thing I have ever seen.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Evelyn grumbled.

“What do you mean, don’t exaggerate? Look at it!”

“What, you scared of a little bug?” Raine asked with a smirk, and slipped her knife away. “She’s exhausted, just been born, can’t even stand up.”

“She’s so cuuuute!” Lozzie squealed again, and wriggled out of my grip. I doubt anything could have stopped her, certainly not my weak “maybe wait” as she skipped across half the garden in two seconds and fell upon Tenny with a hug.

Luckily, Tenny seemed to recognise her, because she sat looking very confused for a moment before returning the hug with awkward, jerky motions, smearing black goo all over Lozzie’s clothes.

“Can’t argue with that,” Raine said.

“Cute?!” Twil boggled at everything and everyone.

“In the eye of the beholder, I suppose,” I muttered, but my own reaction went deeper, in a way I couldn’t voice. I swallowed, and settled on saying, “she is, kind of.”

“Yes, I’m sure this is all very charming, but this is still very much a worse-case scenario,” Evelyn snapped.

“Noooo! She’s amazing!” Lozzie turned back to us for a second before looking at Tenny again. “Aren’t you amazing? You’re amazing, look at you! You’re so big, you did so well, well done, I love you!”

She was touching Tenny all over, hands in her fur and linking with her fingers, patting her shoulders and ruffling what passed for hair, slipping beneath Tenny’s wings to hug her tighter. Tenny blinked like a cat getting petted and let out another wordless ‘naaaah’ sound.

Tenny’s tentacles searched further than her hands, poking and prodding at the pieces of shattered shell, ignoring them and moving on to the weeds amid the grass. Some of them still showed the wounds from her battle months ago, with Amy Stack’s scribble-monster, severed and burnt, but the rest seemed longer than before. A few split their ends into hungry maws as they explored the garden, full of tiny needle-teeth, biting into stray twigs and trying to eat a flower before spitting out the petals.

I choked up. Not because of some abstract beauty of the miracle of life, but with jealousy.

Tenny had changed. She’d grown. She’d entered a cocoon and emerged with a body closer to that she was always meant to have.

Clumsy and weird and obviously exhausted by the metamorphosis, drenched in her own amniotic fluid, yes, but she looked right. Perhaps I was desperately trying to retroactively justify my gut emotional response, but Tenny had always looked weird, half-finished, sweet and protective yes, but stuck together from spare parts. Now she'd matured. She was beautiful.

And here I was, stuck in my scrawny, slow, ape body.

Jealousy and delight mixed into an awful cocktail. The feeling reminded me of my early teenage years, how I used to feel about other, prettier girls, when I was young and didn't understand my own sexuality, stuck between admiration and desire, jealous need and self-identification. My abyssal memories recognised myself in Tenny.

Phantom pain twinged in my sides with sympathetic need. She had tentacles. I didn't.

Zheng dropped out of the tree again and landed in the grass, amid the broken shards of cocoon right behind Tenny. Our little pet moth-person flinched and jumped, then looked up and around as Zheng loomed over her, meeting a grin full of sharp teeth.

"Puppy," Zheng purred. "Well done."

Tenny reacted like a cat before a snake. She flared and puffed herself up, opened her mouth in a loud *hisssss* of fluttery vocal chords. All her tentacles whipped back to spread out and make her look bigger. If she hadn't been on the floor with Lozzie, I suspect she would have arched her back and lashed out.

"Bad Zheng!" Lozzie yelled. "No! No scaring her! Bad!"

"Mooncalf-"

"No!"

"The pup-"

"No!"

Zheng grumbled. She grudgingly backed up a few paces, and Tenny's panic relaxed, tentacles lowering, though she still eyed Zheng with suspicion.

"Yeah, you tell her, Lozz," Raine laughed.

Twil started laughing too, but a nervous, panicky sort of laugh, like she was trying to convince herself this was all normal. “Right, right ... yeah.”

“It’s a huge fluffy moth person, what’s not to laugh at?” I said with a sigh of exhaustion. Everything ached, my hair and scalp were cold with rain, and I could tell we had hours of work still before us. “At least we’re not doing something absurdly dangerous, for once.”

“Heeeeeaaaaaa,” went Tenny, a whining flutter – at me. Either she’d only just noticed or recognised me, or only just worked up the energy to demand attention. She held her arms out to me around Lozzie.

“I think she wants a hug,” Raine said.

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” Evelyn hissed.

I walked over without hesitation. Raine followed me with the umbrella.

Tenny did look weird and I’m not going to pretend otherwise. She wasn’t an image of human femininity overlaid with a touch of alien exoticism, she was actually slightly unsettling, inspiring the same gut reaction one might have to an unknown insect; was she safe to touch, or venomous, would she bite, would she leave unknown bacteria on one’s skin? She was inhumanly proportioned, her face like some kind of bug-eyed cave creature, her eyes twin pools of void, and now she was fuzzy too, weird insect fur all over her body, an odd smell in the air around her like powder and mucus mixed together, still covered in her own amniotic fluid.

But I’d known weirder, in the abyss. I’d been weirder.

Our little Tenny needed to know we recognised her too.

Lozzie shifted to the side slightly, gave me enough room to reach down and hug Tenny around the shoulders.

It was like hugging a canvas bag filled with pythons, no matter how smooth and soft and fluffy. The musculature under her skin was not remotely human. Did she even have bones in there?

“Alright, this is going far enough. We are moments away from disaster,” Evelyn announced, raising her voice and gesturing at Tenny, Lozzie, and I. “Praem, get them up, now.” She pointed the thigh-bone at Zheng. “You, get the hell indoors.” Then she whirled

on Kimberly, still cowering in the back doorway. “You, get- hell, I don’t know, towels. Run a bath. Quick!”

Kimberly scurried off at double-speed.

“Evee?” I blinked at her in surprise. “What-”

“This is a worst-case scenario and I’d like to avoid it getting worse, Heather. Get Tenny up, now. Or Zheng can pick her up, I don’t care which.”

“It’s ... Evee, it’s fine. She’s safe, I’m pretty sure. I think she’s kind of cute, even, I-”

“Yes, yes, sure, whatever,” Evelyn snapped. “She’s also visible and here and completely alien.” She waved her walking stick at the garden fence, at the not-so distant neighbouring houses. At Sharrowford. “You want to end up on the goddamn evening news? No? Then get her inside. All of you. Now!”

nostalgia for infinity – 9.12

Getting Tenny clean took the better part of an hour, but convincing Zheng to get in the bath took years off my life.

Tenny was smeared head-to-toe with her own sticky black amniotic fluid, like a science-fiction alien, and the rainwater had done little to wash the worst of it from beneath her wings or out of her fur, but by the time we all tramped back indoors, damp and cold and dripping, we weren't much better off. Raine, Lozzie, Twil, and I were all dirty and caked with dried sweat from our day in the woods. Praem's maid uniform was soaked through after her trip up the tree. Lozzie and I had both hugged Tenny, gotten her black goo all over our clothes, and Lozzie had been kneeling in the grass, stained the knees of her jeans with mud.

Only Evelyn and Kimberly had avoided both dirt and rain. Kimberly was busy scurrying back and forth with towels, trying to limit the collateral damage of even more mess as we got ourselves inside.

Zheng was just plain filthy.

By the time we got the back door shut, sealing us in the warm cocoon of number 12 Barnslow Drive, I was sagging with exhaustion. All was confusion, too many things happening at once.

Lozzie and Raine focused on leading Tenny through the house, trying to coax her upstairs and into the bathtub before she smeared every interesting object with black goo on the way there. She dripped diluted black rainwater all over the floorboards. Kimberly hurried ahead trying to put towels down, Lozzie attempted to dry her feet, and Raine held another towel under her wings to catch the worst of the run-off.

Twil got into a brief, pointless argument with Evelyn, something I had trouble following as I stood there in the utility room, my legs weak, my stomach still tender, a headache in the back of my skull. I rubbed my sore eyes with the back of my hand, and managed to get more of Tenny's black goo on my forehead.

"Then go home!" Evelyn snapped at her.

"No, I mean, like, I'm fine with borrowing," said Twil. "I just don't- it's your like- I'm not comfortable with like, your-"

"Shit or get off the pot."

Evelyn turned away from her, and that was that. Twil rolled her eyes and stomped off into the house after the others, still tracking mud from her wellington boots.

"Evee," I tried, but she was already off again, at Zheng.

"Not one step further. Don't you dare." Evelyn waved the head of her walking stick at the hulking demon-host. Zheng had been last in, standing just inside the back door now, dripping water from her sodden clothes all over the doormat, a small puddle forming around her feet. "You smell like a pigsty and you're covered in blood. Is that even your own? It'll be a minor miracle if you're not crawling with lice."

"Wizard?" Zheng rumbled, low and dangerous.

"Evee-" I hissed.

"Heather, you're exhausted. Shut up for once and let somebody else handle things," Evelyn said, without missing a beat. If I'd been more energetic I would have laughed. She glared up at Zheng. "You are not walking through this house like that. You strip off right here and you dump those clothes." Evelyn gestured at the washing machine, already stuffed with Lozzie's black-smeared poncho, soon to be joined by my hoodie and jeans. Praem stood next to it, hands clasped before her, soaked maid uniform hanging off her ample frame, clinging to her curves. "You too," Evelyn said to her. "I have no idea if you can catch cold, but don't risk it. Get all that off, now."

Praem obeyed without a word. She set to unlacing the back of her uniform, dropping her tights, and stepping out of her long skirt. I stared for a moment and felt my cheeks burning, then turned my head to give her some privacy.

"I go where I desire, wizard," Zheng rumbled.

"Not in my house you don't," Evelyn said. "Heather insists you're a thinking, feeling being. Well then, I'm treating you like one. Animals track dirt, guests and family take their shoes off at the door." Evelyn glanced her up and down. "On second thought, those

clothes are not remotely salvageable. We'll burn them."

Zheng let out a low rumble.

"Zheng, please," I said, shielding my libido from Praem's rapid disrobing with a hand next to my eyes. "You stole those clothes anyway, it's not as if they have any sentimental value."

A squeal of alarm echoed from the front room, accompanied by panicked voices, Raine going 'woah, woah, woah' like she was trying to soothe a horse. The squeal trailed off into a long, loud, 'ppppppfffftttt', suspiciously similar to a child sticking their tongue out and blowing a raspberry.

Evelyn whirled on the sound. "What was that?" she yelled.

"Tenny met your spiders!" Lozzie called back. "She's fine!"

"Ha!" Zheng barked. "Fresh from the womb and the puppy already knows how to taunt. Good."

"Yes, surely an important life skill," Evelyn said. She waved a dismissive hand at Zheng without bothering to look at her again, already marching out of the utility room. "I don't have time for you, get on with it. Who tracked all this mud in here? Are these Twil's bootprints? Twil!"

Evelyn left, shouting. Zheng stared at her back.

"Praem, um," I cleared my throat. "Maybe you should find some spare clothes?"

"Clothes," Praem intoned, and followed Evelyn, deftly avoiding the muddy patches with her bare feet.

"Shaman," Zheng said. I glanced up at her, at her filthy, matted hair, at the stains of blood and grease and woodland mud all over her jumper and coat, at her fingernails, far too long, dirt packed beneath them. Up close and indoors I could smell her, like a wild animal, heavy with bodily odour and soil and old meat.

"When's the last time you brushed your teeth?" I asked.

She just raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no. Zheng. No. You have to have a bath, at least."

"Is that your command, shaman?"

“No, it’s a heartfelt suggestion, because I’d like to be able to give you a hug without worrying about stains. And I know what you’re going to say, something about how you don’t suffer tooth decay or gum disease because the bacteria can’t beat you in a fistfight, but the rest of us can still smell that. You’re a walking disease risk right now, and neither Lozzie or I are immune to infections. Please.”

Zheng grinned, a flash of razor-sharp teeth. “Join me in the bath, shaman?”

I froze. Couldn’t get a word out.

“A joke,” she rumbled, then shrugged off her coat and started to pull her soaking jumper off over her head. It got stuck on her shoulders, at which she gave up and just started ripping the jumper open down the middle.

I stared and swallowed and scurried out before I was left alone in a small room with a massive libidinal hazard.

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The next couple of hours dissolved into a blur, my mind and memory dragged down by a cocktail of physical and emotional exhaustion. The bathroom was all noise and chaos, as my friends attempted to bathe a semi-cooperative giant moth woman like a dog which had rolled in dung. The upstairs hallway was no retreat, occupied by Zheng sitting against the wall with her eyes closed and arms crossed, firmly asked to wait outside because her mere presence made Tenny puff up and hiss. Thankfully for my sanity, Praem had supplied her with a huge towel, and set it over her like she was covering a particularly ugly piece of furniture.

Twil stomped about, spooked by Tenny, goaded by an occasional comment from Zheng, fuming silently at Evelyn. Lozzie shed dirty clothes with no care for where they fell, and at one point she sat down in the hallway next to Zheng and fell asleep for five minutes, impossible to wake until she shot up again like a freshly-wound clock. Poor Kimberly scurried about underfoot, trying to avoid Zheng’s attention, looking lost and trapped.

In the end, getting Tenny into the bath wasn’t too difficult. She took to the water with obvious pleasure and curiosity, making little fluttering, purring noises in her chest as Lozzie had soaped up her fur, squinting her eyes shut and shaking herself as Raine had rinsed

her off with the shower head. Lozzie petted her and talked nonsense to keep her calm, but it was probably unnecessary.

We quickly discovered more quirks of her unique biology. Her wings – thick and leathery to the touch – separated into four distinct pieces, two wider ones which covered her sides and front when at rest, and two slimmer ones which hung down her back. The tentacles exited the cloak through either the gaps between the wings just below her shoulders, or by running all the way down to her feet, or out the front. In the bath, with her wings flopped over the sides of the tub, we could see her back, but her shoulders were almost impossible to reach, too far under the wings to see without getting behind and beneath her, blocked by the mass of tentacles which extended between the gaps between the wing segments.

Her tentacles kept roaming the bathroom, knocking over shampoo bottles, inspecting the light fixtures, gripping the bar of soap too hard so it shot across the floor. One of them tried to drink the bathwater and spat it back out. Another chewed softly on Lozzie's shoulder. A third kept fiddling with the taps.

She shivered and made little irritated fluttery sounds when anybody touched the antennae on her head, so we quickly decided not to do that.

At one point everybody except Tenny and Lozzie came tumbling out of the bathroom. Praem was last out, and closed the door behind them.

“Potty training,” Raine explained with a laugh.

“She knew exactly what she was doing,” Evelyn said. “That was not training.”

“Could’a warned us,” said Twil.

“At least we’ve established that she excretes,” Evelyn sighed. “And that she’s not carrying a clutch of pre-fertilised eggs, or something equally disastrous.”

Outdoors, the sun went down behind the rainclouds, true dusk swallowed by the storm into a haze of fading light.

Eventually I found myself alone in the upstairs hallway. Zheng had stomped off, probably to eat everything in the fridge. The others were still washing Tenny, soft voices murmuring in the bathroom. I

shivered inside my tshirt, bruises throbbing in my sides, my damp hoodie in my hands, socks missing. Couldn't recall removing them. I wanted nothing more than to strip off the rest of my clothes, ignore the dried sweat on my skin, and curl up in bed. Evelyn was right, I'd done more than enough leading for one day. Others could deal with the rest.

"Heeeaaath."

Tenny's voice echoed from the bathroom, fluttery and frilled, my name as if spoken by a throat made of fanned paper.

"Heather?"

I looked up. Raine's head had appeared around the bathroom doorway. Splashing noises came from behind her, followed by a weird warbling complaint.

"Was that Tenny?" I asked.

"Yeah. She's alright, just being fussy." Raine stepped out and over to me. Gently, she took the hoodie from my hands and peered into my eyes. "How you holding up?"

I shrugged. "Kind of numb."

"Uh huh, not surprised." Raine brushed my hair back over my ear and cupped the side of my neck. She kissed my forehead. "S'been a long day. You can totally go lie down if you want, you know? Say hi to Tenny, tell her you're going to rest, I think she'll understand."

I stared back into Raine's eyes, needs surfacing through the numbness. I wanted to hug her, but I held back, a knot of unresolved tension twisting deep in my chest. If I'd been less exhausted, I would have let it go, been more logical, put this moment off until tomorrow or the day after, but by then Raine would have me back in bed and feeling normal again, and perhaps she'd pretend that certain things today never happened.

"You've been floating around back and forth, I have noticed," she was saying. "There is such a thing as pushing yourself too far, especially after ... " She trailed off, reading the look in my eyes. "Heather?"

"Raine, we need to talk."

Raine froze.

I was treated to a look I'd never seen from her before, a moment of genuine suppressed panic beneath all her confidence, too powerful to suppress with a grin, too sudden to hide with a glib joke, too real to bush away with her fingers in my hair. Guilt clutched at my heart.

"No, no, not like that. About Zheng, I mean," I said, and it all came out in a rush. I dropped my voice. "But yes, yes also about you and I, about ... I don't understand your behaviour earlier today." I squeezed my eyes shut. "God, why am I asking you this now?"

"Cos you're dying for that threesome," Raine said with a laugh, and there it was, the glib joke rushing back.

I glared at her. Capital G. Raine pulled a theatrical wince.

"One minute you're pushing me at her and you don't seem to care, the next you're marking your territory right in front of her, laying claim to me, and then you're making threesome jokes!" I hissed, fuming. "Raine, I don't know what exactly I want, but I don't know what you want either because you're confusing me, and that's *worse*."

The theatrical wince held for a moment longer, and then Raine's expression crumbled into genuine contrition. She let out a big sigh and ran a hand through her hair. "Ahhhhhhh. I've done screwed up, haven't I?"

"Maybe? I don't know. How am I supposed to know if you won't tell me?"

"No, no, I've screwed up," Raine said. "Because I've made you feel insecure. Which means I've made a stupid mistake." She glanced behind her, at the open bathroom door and the increasingly loud warbling, fluttering sounds. Twil was saying something, drowned out by the noise, and I heard Lozzie too. "You wanna talk right now?" Raine said. "We can leave the others for a bit, go-"

"Raine, do you love me?"

"Yes," she said, no hesitation.

"Then everything else can wait, I'm too tired. I love you too." I fell against her with a hug. Behind us, the warbled complaint finally rose into an angry hiss. A long one.

Twil's voice floated out of the bathroom. "Okay, okay, shit, shit, she

doesn't like it, fine."

"I told you!" Lozzie's voice joined in.

"Hey, I'm just following orders," said Twil.

"Plus I think we're needed in there," I murmured into Raine's shoulder.

"Yeah."

"Try again," Evelyn's voice joined too, dry and disinterested.

We rejoined the others to quite a scene. Twil had her sleeves rolled up past her elbows, dirty water splashed down her front, and a scowl on her face. Evelyn looked like she was trying to hide behind Praem without seeming to hide behind Praem. Kimberly had one hand on her mouth, like she wanted to be sick. Lozzie was half in the bathtub with Tenny, giving her a hug, getting herself covered in black-tinted water and soap suds, her braid half undone and hair everywhere.

Tenny was still hissing, her feathery antennae twitching back and forth.

"No," I said with a sigh. "Don't try again, whatever that was."

"She didn't like it!" Lozzie repeated.

"Like what?" I asked. "What are you all doing to her?"

Evelyn shut her mouth and shook her head, rolling her eyes. Twil glanced to her for help or permission, then shrugged.

"I was trying to get my hand up to her shoulders," Twil said.

"Under the wings like, to see where the tentacles come from, count 'em, you know. I think she's got them coiled up in like, retractable holes."

"Maybe don't physically harass the literal new born sapient creature?" I said, staring at Twil and Evelyn. "I don't believe you two."

"Heeatthh," Tenny fluttered at me. I went to the bathtub and patted her awkwardly on the head. She reciprocated, wrapping a spare tentacle around my wrist.

"It's medically necessary if we're to understand her," Evelyn said.

“We can hardly drag her in front of an x-ray machine or get her an MRI, can we?”

I gave her a look, too worn out for argument.

“But fine, yes.” Evelyn held up a hand. “She doesn’t like it, my mistake. Fine, okay.”

“She’s so weird,” Twil said. “I could like, feel the tentacles going in and out. She’s got no bones, like all of her is just more tentacles inside.”

“Yes, I noticed that too,” I said. “All muscle, aren’t you?”

“Buuuur,” went Tenny.

“She’s strong and cool,” Lozzie said.

I stayed for the rest of the bath, though most of the real work was over. Lozzie got Tenny to her feet and Raine rinsed her off one final time with the shower head, sluicing away any remnants of the sticky black amniotic fluid. As she stepped out of the bath, dripping wet, her tentacles reaching over to groom the fur on the underside of her wings, she left behind a soup of black-tinted water, soap scum, and mud.

Evelyn sighed and said aside to Kimberly and I, “What do you think, skim that stuff off? God alone knows what that crap’ll do to the drainpipes if we pull the plug.”

“I’ll get a bucket,” Kimberly said.

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Five microwaved chicken nuggets; an apple, neatly peeled and sliced; a generous slice of chocolate cake.

We lined up three plates on the kitchen table and stepped back. Well, Raine and Twil stepped back. I was too tired and comfy in my pajamas and Evelyn too stubborn to pull ourselves from our respective chairs, Lozzie was all over Tenny anyway, still drying bits of her with a huge fluffy bath towel, and Praem was already at the back of the room, waiting quietly in one of Evelyn’s jumpers and a long skirt. Kimberly had excused herself, and I didn’t begrudge her the sneaky smoke break.

Twil stared wistfully at the nuggets and let out a little sigh.

“Wait your turn,” Evelyn said to her, watching Tenny carefully. We were all watching Tenny.

Tenny stared at the plates, bare toe-less tar-black feet padding across the kitchen tiles as Lozzie coaxed her into the room. She studied our faces and looked out of the kitchen window for a bit, at the rain lashing down into the garden in the evening darkness. Her gaze wandered back to the plates, tentacles drifting up from beneath the shoulders of her flesh-cloak, waving in the air like a mantle of snakes.

“I’m already missing Bake-off,” Twil tutted. “You could at least feed me.”

“You’re saying you have less control than a new born ... whatever she is.” Evelyn gestured at Tenny.

“Moth,” Praem intoned.

“Moth girl,” Raine said with a smirk.

“We are not calling her ‘moth girl’,” said Evelyn. “She isn’t a superhero.”

“She might be, you never know,” Raine said.

Tenny looked up, blinking huge void-dark eyes at us again.

“Moth?” she asked, in that voice of dry paper and ruffled feathers. “Moth. Moth.” She looked at me for guidance or approval, blinked twice, then sneezed loudly as Lozzie dried some stray water off her face with the towel.

“Shhhh,” I hushed everyone. “You’re distracting her. Tenny, it’s okay. Please, have something to eat.” I gestured at the plates. “Go ahead, it’s for you.”

“Baaaaa?” went Tenny, and crept forward another pace.

She knew we were watching her, waiting for something, but couldn’t possibly understand what. The attention spooked her, perhaps confused her, and I wondered how fast she could learn social cues like this. She’d been able to speak as a spirit, directly into my mind, in a jumble of word-concepts; now she was picking up real words, spoken ones, with surprising rapidity for somebody literally born this afternoon.

Cute perhaps, but not human. We had no idea what we were

actually looking at here.

What did she use for blood? What was her natural sleep cycle? Was she a non-breeding isolate or would she lay eggs in a dark corner? Did she see like us, or in infra-red or some other spectrum? Could she fly, were the wings for show? What did she breathe? What were we to her – friends, pack-members, wise adults, blind idiots? Would she grow further?

Did she know what she was?

Experiments like these were necessary, Evelyn was right. To a point.

“Don’t be scared,” I said to her. “We’re all friends here.”

“Fuuuummm,” went Tenny.

“S’alright for you, sitting here at home,” Twil hissed to Evelyn, but at least she was quieter now. “We were running ‘round the woods all day.”

“You don’t have to be here, you know,” Evelyn muttered. “You could have gone home hours ago. Go have a family meal, home cooking, all that bollocks.”

“Maybe she wants your home cooking, Evee,” I sighed.

“Heath-” Evelyn spat half my name, then cut herself off when Tenny looked at her again. Twil just grimaced and hid behind one hand.

At least it shut them up for five seconds.

Tenny kept squirming, distracted by Lozzie’s attentions. Lozzie caught a stray tentacle in gentle hand and dabbed water from the surface, then took the opportunity to sneak a twist of towel in under one of Tenny’s wings, trying to dry the complex area at the top of her shoulders. Tenny made a face like a cat getting scratches, quivering softly. Lozzie hummed at her, said ‘good girl’, and half-sung the words to some childhood bathtime song which I had the creeping feeling she’d grown up with.

“Lozzie,” I said. “Let her focus for a moment, please. Tenny?”

“Heath,” Tenny said, my name, truncated. Lozzie relented, hopped back a half step and rubbed at sleepy eyes.

“It’s for you, Tenny.” I pointed at the food again. “Take whichever

you want.”

“My money’s still on the meat,” Evelyn whispered.

“She’s a bug,” Twil hissed back. “She’ll eat fruit, right? Sugars and that.”

“Five pounds says you’re wrong.”

Twil simmered in silence for a moment, then growled, “You’re on.”

“She’s looking at them!” Lozzie stage-whispered.

“Mmmaauum,” said Tenny. Her tentacles reached forward along the tabletop, reminding me of the way a small animal might sniff at unfamiliar food.

Our experiment taught us very little – and won nobody any bets – because Tenny decided she wanted all of it.

Three of her tentacles split at the ends to reveal those perfectly sealed mouths full of tiny black needle teeth, and descended on all three plates at the same time. She crunched through the pieces of apple, hoovered up the nuggets, and bit the slice of cake clean in half. Crumbs scattered across the table as one tentacle-tip chased bits of chocolate sponge around the edge of the plate.

An extra tentacle crossed the table and dunked itself into a glass of water, then bulged like a snake swallowing eggs as it drank.

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” Evelyn sighed.

“At least we know she’s not pure carnivore,” Raine said. “That’s lucky.”

“Give it five minutes, see if she vomits it all back up.”

Twil frowned. “Do you think she’d vomit from her mouth? Like, her regular mouth?”

“Can we not talk about vomit, please?” I said.

As her tentacles fed, Tenny seemed to lose interest in the food, as if her tentacles and her main body could focus with ease on completely different matters. She pawed at the towel in Lozzie’s hands, trying to help dry herself. Her human hands lacked the precision and grace of her tentacles, and she fumbled about, making Lozzie giggle as she flexed her wings out slightly and bumped one

against the kitchen wall.

Raine must have noticed my exhaustion more than I showed, because a moment later she was behind my chair, rubbing my shoulders with both hands, kneading out the tension and the knots and pressing the balls of her thumbs into the base of my neck. I let out a little grumble.

"I think that's one conclusion we can be confident about," Evelyn said, flat and dry. "Tenny's respiratory and digestive systems are externally isolated. Elegant solution."

"It's clever!" Lozzie smiled like a proud parent. "I told you she was smart. Aren't you smart, Tenny?"

"Yeeaaaa?" Tenny said.

"You mean like, she can't ever choke on a piece of food?" Twil asked.

"Exactly," Evelyn murmured, frowning softly, one hand toying with her empty mug on the table. She shot a sharp glance at Lozzie. "You expect me to believe you didn't design that? Because that's a design element. A safety feature. I like it."

"Guess it is kinda stupid to have the breathing tube and the eating tube in the same place," Twil said, sticking her own tongue out as she looked down at her mouth. She grimaced, uncomfortable with the thought. "Human body's weird."

"Yes," I murmured. "Don't remind me."

"I didn't do any of it!" Lozzie said. "It's all Tenny. She's smart."

"Mm," Evelyn grunted. "Well, whatever she's using for a brain, it certainly must be quite developed. Attention splitting like this. Even humans have trouble doing two separate tasks with different hands."

As Tenny rubbed her fluffy head with a corner of the towel, her tentacles were still busy at work. One of them extended a tiny featureless black tongue to lick the grease from the chicken nugget plate, while another lifted the other plates to see if we humans had hidden more tasty treats underneath. A third tentacle seemed to be following an interesting scent, across the table and past one of the chairs, winding towards Twil. Yet another tentacle had picked up the now empty glass of water, waving it around near the sink and

trying to figure out how to make the shiny metal spout produce more liquid. Lizzie hopped over and showed Tenny how to turn the tap, and yet another tentacle dipped around her to mimic the demonstration.

I sighed inside, faintly jealous. My mind had seized up at controlling six extra limbs. Tenny didn't even have to concentrate.

"Can't do different things with each hand?" Raine asked, a smirk in her voice. "Speak for yourself. Heather can attest to my mad skills."

A moment of silence passed over the kitchen, broken only by the rain against the windows, the muffled thumping of the dryer in the utility room, and the floorboard-creaking sounds of Zheng adjusting her weight in the bathtub upstairs.

"Don't, Raine," I said. "I don't have the energy to blush right now."

"If that zombie falls through the floor," Evelyn muttered, eyes on the ceiling, "I'll bloody well murder her."

"She's not that heavy," I said. "And she really needed to get clean."

"Should have hosed her off in the garden."

"Maybe if we like, put a couple 'o dozen plates out," Twil said, "we could find out how many tentacles she's really got. Counting didn't work, so why not stretch her skills?"

"I'm not made of money," Evelyn said, still watching the ceiling, listening for Zheng again.

"You may as well be," Twil said.

Evelyn gave her a darkly unimpressed look. Twil shrugged and opened her mouth to say something unkind. I could see it coming, the dismissive comment, the prickly challenge, the bizarre unspoken and perhaps unconscious desire to ruin what little rapport they had by constantly reducing each other to hostile caricatures. I sighed and prepared to scold her, tell her to play nice, maybe even just solve the whole damned thing for them and force them to talk properly for once.

Raine squeezed my left shoulder a fraction of an inch too hard, turned my rebuke into a little gasp.

"Eve's upper middle class rich, not stupid money rich," Raine said before I could gather myself.

“Raine,” Evelyn hissed.

Twil frowned. “That’s still-”

“Her dad does still have to work, and that old family estate’s pretty crumbling. Between maintaining this house, and covering some of the fallout of what we get up to, I can totally understand not wanting to drop a hundred quid on chicken nuggets, to run a test for something that doesn’t actually matter in the end. Isn’t that right, Tenny? Does it matter how many you’ve got back there?”

“Baaaah,” Tenny said to Raine.

“See? She agrees.”

Twil opened her mouth to reply, glanced down at Evelyn and found her looking away, sullen and cold. “Yeah, but like ... ”

“But like *what?*” Evelyn shot back.

Twil looked away too, awkwardly crossing her arms over her chest. “Never mind.”

“Play nice, you two,” I finally said, and felt terribly lame. Evelyn gave me a bit of a look. Twil shrugged.

Lozzie was biting her lower lip, eyes wide as they bounced back and forth between Evelyn and Twil, hands clasped beneath her chin, having finally relinquished the towel completely to Tenny. She looked like she was watching a soap opera.

“Noooo,” she said softly as silence fell. “Don’t stop there.”

“What?” Evelyn squinted at her.

A thump from upstairs interrupted us, followed by an audible slosh and a sound like a short-lived miniature waterfall. Evelyn frowned at the ceiling like it was about to come down on our heads, but Number 12 Barnslow Drive was built to far better quality than some modern mockery of particle board and cheap pre-fab. The floorboards creaked as Zheng climbed out of the bath.

“I still need to find her some replacement clothes,” I said to nobody in particular.

“Hey, uh, what do I do here?” Twil said suddenly, backing up toward the wall. “Guys, uh, um, this isn’t- uh-”

She was staring at the tentacle which had been slowly approaching her for the last few minutes. Tenny wasn't even paying attention to it, but the tentacle-tip was very much paying attention to Twil; it zeroed in on her like a curious kitten, darting one way then the other, as if trying to sniff her out. Twil cringed to the side, then batted ineffectually at the tentacle with one hand. It dodged around her swat, came up inside her reach, and darted for her face.

Twil jumped out of her skin, leapt back in a tumble of limbs as she blundered into the wall, and suddenly the tentacle was facing a maw full of canine teeth. Tenny turned in surprise, big black eyes blinking at Twil.

"No no!" Tenny said. We all stared at her.

"Call her off! Fuck!" Twil growled.

"She's only playing," said Lozzie.

"Yes," Evelyn sighed. "Stop over-reacting."

"She's fucking going for me!" Twil spat. "Like she did with Zheng! Even I'll die if I get my bloody head pulled off!"

"If she was doing that, she'd be considerably faster," I said. "Tenny? Tenny, what do you mean, no?"

"No," Tenny repeated, a weird fluttering noise beneath a flute of air, like a parrot with the lungs of a spider. "No, touch?"

"She just wants to pet you," Evelyn said with a nasty smirk and a shake of her head. "Maybe she likes the smell of wet dog."

"Don't pretend you're any different," I said. Evelyn went red in the face and let out a splutter, but unfortunately Twil was too focused on the tentacle.

"Look, I'm cool with her and all," Twil said. "But I don't wanna get-"

Without warning, the tentacle shot forward, right for Twil's face. Twil yelped, Lozzie gasped, I flinched in my seat through I was halfway across the room.

Praem's hand shot out and grabbed it mid-flight.

Tenny let out a noise like a squirrel hit by a flying rock. The tentacle in Praem's hand turned to face her, but Praem stared at

Tenny's eyes, expressionless and impassive, milk-white eyes meeting void-dark as Tenny looked back, huffing and hissing, a very unhappy puppy.

"Concentrate," Praem intoned.

She let go. Tenny pulled the trapped appendage free, paused, and looked at Twil again. She tilted her head to the side – almost all the way to the side, revealing just how far one could contort their body when not limited by silly things like 'having a spine'.

"Ahhh come on, don't do that *Exorcist* shit at me!" Twil said.

"Calm down, she's thinking," I said. "Concentrating."

"Please," Tenny managed. The word was half-mangled. She couldn't quite get the 'l' sound right, rolled it at the top of her mouth, elongated the 's' too much and repeated the word twice, refining her own speech. "Please? Please?"

The tentacle waved at Twil's face.

Twil grimaced, looked to the rest of us for rescue.

"She won't hurt you, and she's asking nice," said Lozzie. "Promise-promise, yes Tenny?"

"Probably just wants to pat your head or something," Raine said.

Evelyn looked on, unamused. I wondered if she was jealous.

In the corner of my eye I noticed another tentacle, one we'd all missed, creeping across the table and sneaking into the half-finished mug of coffee I'd been drinking from. It dipped inside and sucked up the dregs. A further tentacle slid past and right up to me. I offered it my hand, and it slipped in, wrapped around my fingers and palm and up my forearm. Warm, smooth, soft, but tough; human skin blended with silk and rubber.

"See?" I held up the hand-holding. "A little unorthodox, but she's not trying to eat my hand or anything."

"She bites me, I'm gonna bite her back," Twil hissed through her teeth. "Just like, don't stick it up my nose or anything, yeah? Then we're cool. Be cool, okay? Be cool."

Tenny's exploratory tentacle edged forward. Twil grit her teeth, wincing in slow motion as it drew near her face.

The tentacle brushed against Twil's hair, then twirled several locks of it around the tip, flicking it up and down. After twenty seconds of this, it became apparent to everyone watching that Tenny just wanted to play with Twil's hair.

"Why me?" Twil asked, in the strangled voice one might use while being investigated by an elephant's trunk.

"You're the only one of us with curls," Raine said.

"urls," went Tenny.

"She likes you. Deal with it," Evelyn said, a hint of strange bitterness in her voice, too many layers deep for Twil to notice right now.

"At least she's clean now," I said. "You won't have to wash your hair."

"Clean," Tenny managed, though it sounded closer to 'cream'. Lozzie praised her with much excited patting and negotiated the damp towel back out of her hands after a bit of gentle tugging.

"Okay, uh, right, well." Twil still cringed away from the curious tentacle, but she also reached up and touched it, gently removing it from her hair as she stared at Tenny with a smile of forced politeness. Tenny tilted her head sideways again. "Now that's over, can we like, eat something? I'm starving here."

"I don't like this uninhibited curiosity," Evelyn said.

I blinked at her. "Evee?"

"This," Evelyn pointed at Tenny's smooth dark tentacles, eight of them all over the kitchen by now. One was even worming its way into the utility room in the back, perhaps to investigate the muffled *thump-thump-thump* of the dryer hard at work. "Tenny? Tenny."

Evelyn clicked her fingers. Tenny looked around and stared at her.

"Evee, don't snap at her," I said.

"Are you intelligent enough to understand you can't do this in public, that you have to hide? Can you use those wings for that, are you even aware of that?" Evelyn asked her, then sighed and shook her head when she got no reply but a blank stare. "If she doesn't understand, then we're going to have to keep her confined, in the house. Indefinitely."

“Awww!” Lozzie said with a long face. “But she needs to learn how to use her wings!”

Evelyn turned cold eyes on Lozzie. “And what if she flies over a farm, hm? Spooks some red-faced idiot with a flat cap and shotgun and takes a full load of buckshot in the chest? Or if she gets a taste for live meat again and snatches a child off the streets in Sharrowford? Or hell, if she’s even *seen*, we’ll have every UFO nutter and conspiracy crank in England descending on the city within days.”

Lozzie pouted, sad but not defiant. One hand lingered on Tenny’s neck, fluffing her fur.

“Gaaah?” went Tenny.

I sighed, heavily. This conversation was inevitable, sooner or later, but I’d hoped Evelyn would put it to one side for at least the first night of Tenny’s physical life. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, my eyes aching with tiredness. Part of me wanted to stand up and walk out and just let everyone else figure this out without me.

“What’d somebody ... uh ... ‘normal’,” Twil made air-quotes with one hand, “even remember if they spotted her? Like, what would they actually see?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” I said.

“Cuteness!” Lozzie declared.

Now she was warm and dry and no longer dripping with her own amniotic fluids, Tenny looked even less human than when she’d slopped out of her cocoon. Dove-white, velvet-soft, varying in length from peach-fuzz to inch-thick carpet around her belly and hips, her fur had fluffed up after a good clean and the five or six minutes Lozzie had managed to make her sit still while subjected to a hairdryer. The fur on the inside of her wings was particularly dense, perhaps as insulation against the cold, and the wings themselves moved as she did, making little adjustments as they hung down around her body like a living cloak.

She hadn’t extended her wings to their full span again since the first stretch outdoors in the garden, which was lucky because she’d probably knock half the furniture over if she tried. The front room could perhaps accommodate a good stretch, but only if she stood sideways.

As she moved, her wings seemed to briefly take on the colouration or outline of the kitchen cabinets and open doorway behind her, but the effect was always blurred, half-hearted, incomplete, an autonomic bodily function rather than conscious action.

Her antennae twitched constantly, also on automatic. My private theory was that those functioned as hearing. No ears on the sides of her head.

Perhaps she could hide, if one saw her at night, with her wings pulled tight like a real cloak, concealing the swirls and curves of fur on her midnight skin. And if she wasn't looking at you with those giant black eyes.

Perhaps then, one could mistake her for a human being, however briefly.

"The Sharrowford mothman, most likely," Evelyn said. "Or a bag of carpet cuttings glued to an ambulatory eight-ball. Or they'd remember nothing except a screaming fit, a trick of the eyes, a ghost."

"How far does that kind of mental editing go?" I asked. "Could anybody actually see her for what she is?"

Evelyn shrugged and sighed. "Search me, Heather, I don't bloody well know. Most zombies, demons, whatever, they break down long before they reach this level of ... irregularity." She gestured at Tenny, and Tenny watched her hand in motion, then moved a tentacle closer to Evelyn's chair. Evelyn watched it approach, unperturbed. Above our heads, the upstairs floorboards creaked softly as something massive stalked across them.

"Some may see the evidence of their eyes at first," Evelyn continued, "then later deny what they saw. Others might panic, or remember nothing, not even see her. One or two might see but not react at all, and that would be very dangerous. I suppose we could invite your detective friend over and ask her what she sees."

"I think I broke in miss Webb quite badly already," I said. "We all did."

"What about that super-long tentacle she had?" Twil asked. "She might sneak it out while we're not watching, right?"

"I suspect that was only the pupa stage," I said. "Still pneuma-

somatic. It did go dead in my hand before she woke up inside the cocoon.”

“Yes,” Evelyn tutted. Tenny’s exploratory tentacle finished its approach, and Evelyn put one hand confidently on top of it, pinning it gently but firmly to the tabletop. Tenny let out a noise of complaint, and Evelyn fixed her with a look as she spoke. “A twenty-mile long tentacle would require a much larger physical body, huge support structure, probably a different respiratory system as well, not to mention massive calorific intake. We’re not Outside, our reality can’t support such things, not in the physical. She’s made herself physical and human-sized, and that imposes certain limits. Doesn’t it, Tenny? You might not know this, but the process of your metamorphosis certainly did.”

Tenny puffed her cheeks out – a mannerism I realised she’d picked up from Lozzie – and wriggled her tentacle out from Evelyn’s trap.

“Naaah!” she fluttered.

“As long as we understand each other,” Evelyn said.

“Be nice,” Lozzie said, suddenly small and worried. “Please?”

“I.” Evelyn almost snapped, but Lozzie’s puppy-dog-eyes stopped her cold. She huffed and hesitated and opened her mouth to try again, then sighed and ran a hand over her face, looking away with embarrassment. Tenny’s tentacle darted back, tapped her on the top of the head, and darted away again as she flinched and frowned at it.

Tenny let out a rapid panting, throaty and jerky, like air forced through a paper flute. We all stared, and she trailed off, confused at our confusion.

“Was that a giggle?” I asked.

Startled by the strange, alien vocalisation, we’d all missed the subtle tread of bare footsteps making their way down the stairs. Except Raine. She noticed, and when I looked back on the moment I realised she tightened her grip on my shoulders ever so slightly. She just thought it would be funnier this way.

Evelyn sighed again. “Look, Lozzie, I am trying to be nice. This is me, being nice. I am attempting to figure out how to dissuade Tenny from endangering herself.”

“She can learn,” Lozzie said.

“Can she learn fast enough?” Evelyn gestured at Tenny, then tapped on the tabletop with a fingernail. “Sharrowford is not-” *tap* “the safest-” *tap* “place-” *tap*.

We never figured out if it was the tapping or the challenge. Evelyn swears the former was the cause. Lozzie thinks it was the latter, that Tenny had taken offence.

Personally I think it had more to do with Zheng appearing in the kitchen doorway like a huge, naked ghost.

On the third tap, Tenny’s wings exploded into a blur. One moment she was turning toward Zheng, all her tentacles whipping back to her shoulders, wings wrapping around herself like a cloak in a storm. The next moment she was gone.

“Ooooh!” Lozzie clapped her hands. “Bravo!”

“... woah,” Twil said.

“About time,” Evelyn drawled.

Tenny had created an optical illusion. The space where she stood was now occupied by the shapes and shadows behind her, as if interpreted by an artist mainlining psychoactive drugs and seen through a chunk of glass or crystal. The exterior of her wings – part of which she’d somehow lifted over her head, a hood perhaps? – matched the line of the kitchen doorway, the colour of the cupboards, the fall of the shadows. I found myself blinking, struggling to focus on her. The visual effect made my eyes water, unless I stopped trying and just accepted she wasn’t there.

“Shaman,” Zheng purred, stepping into the kitchen, naked except for a single small towel hanging over her shoulder. A grin split her face. She knew exactly what she was doing. “I need clothes.”

The imitative jumble where Tenny stood backed up a step and let out a muffled hiss.

I tried not to stare at Zheng, and I failed. I’d never seen her clean before. Red-chocolate skin steamed softly, her hair stuck up in all directions, the remains of her tattoos flexed across her abdomen and thighs and chest, marked with huge missing patches where I’d removed their power. A thick dark thatch of hair between her legs made my eyes pop out of my skull, before I mercifully managed to

lower my head, hands up as if to protect myself, red in the face.

“Uh, um, um, yes, clothes, good, yes,” I stammered.

“Bloody hell,” Twil said, and I heard the laugh in her voice. “You’re fucking massive.”

“Yes, very mature, indeed,” Evelyn sighed.

“Discretion, better part of valour,” Praem sing-songed. I wasn’t sure if that was directed at Zheng’s nudity or Twil’s admiration.

Raine was laughing.

“No, don’t scare her!” Lozzie said, not batting an eyelid at this sudden confrontational nudity. Her hands found Tenny’s hood, or whatever it was, and tugged it down. Suddenly Tenny’s white-furred head reappeared in mid-air, blinking those massive black eyes.

“Puppy,” Zheng greeted her.

Tenny hissed at her again, very loud, mouth wide open.

“Shaman, clothes,” Zheng purred, ignoring Tenny and stepping closer. Lozzie managed to get her arms inside Tenny’s wings somehow, holding her back, though several tentacles snaked overhead. “Unless you prefer me naked?”

“I-I don’t- I- maybe we should- uh-”

“Lemme take you upstairs, see if there’s anything in my old wardrobe,” Raine said, stepping back from my chair and imposing herself between Tenny and Zheng, looking the demon-host up and down with a quick nod. “Yeah, I think I’ve got some over-sized stuff that’ll last you the night, but we need to pick up something more your size, right? You can hardly come out shopping with us, but we can do that for you. Me and Heather, at least.”

Zheng gave her an amused look and a flash of teeth. “*Yoshou?*”

“Can somebody get this naked woman out of the kitchen, please?” Evelyn asked.

I stood up too, face burning, mortified and aroused and embarrassed and feeling like the inside of my head was spinning out of control. “Yes, of course, I-”

“Hey, Heather,” Raine said, and her tone was so easy, too easy, layered over an unquestionable command that could have told me to do anything in that moment. She caught my eyes, flint in her own. “Relax, you’ve been going all day. Let me deal with this.”

Let me deal with clothing the giant zombie to whom you are terminally attracted, Heather. You’re not going to be alone with her, not now, Raine’s body language said. Sit down.

I nodded. Averted my eyes. “’kay. Okay.”

We really needed to have that talk.

nostalgia for infinity – 9.13

“Didn’t even think about the socioeconomic angle between those two,” Raine said. “Some PPE student I am, hey? They’re gonna have to talk that out themselves. You think they’re up to it?”

She may as well have been speaking Ancient Greek for all the sense I made of that.

Raine was sat cross-legged on the foot of our bed. She was wearing a pair of shorts which showed off her legs, and the kind of tshirt she only ever wore to sleep – vomit yellow with a faded logo on the front for a band called ‘three arm sally’, frayed a little at the collar, probably stolen from a live music show during her teenage homeless period. Television glow lit her face in profile; she’d booted up the playstation while waiting for me to finish in the shower.

Sound down low, controller loose in her hands, she piloted an unnaturally energetic cartoon girl across some picturesque fantasy woodland, picking up mushrooms and herbs, occasionally pausing to hit a slime monster in a fight. Her fingers worked on automatic, still pressing buttons as she glanced over at me.

Her hair was all chestnut brown disarray, still a little damp from the shower. She looked flushed. I wanted nothing more than to lie down on the bed and put my head in her lap.

Perhaps unwisely, I resisted. I put my bath-towel over my head and hid in the darkness.

“Heather?”

“I understand each of those words in isolation,” I said, muffled under my towel. “But not in that order and not at the moment.” I frowned with sheer mental exhaustion and lifted the towel to peer at her again. No, she was still there, toned thighs and damp hair and all. “What did that mean?”

“Evee and Twil,” she said, and paused the game. “Heather, are you alright?”

“Exhausted, inside and out, up and down. What about Evee and

Twil? Could you explain, please, so I can confirm I'm not having a stroke or something?"

We'd finally finished returning some semblance of peace and quiet back to the house about half an hour ago, and capped the process off with a much-needed pair of overlapping showers, though I'd been far too tired to do anything fun. Just stood quietly under the stream of hot water as Raine had washed my hair.

Finding clothes to fit Zheng had proved easier than we'd thought, though Raine was correct in her assumption that a shopping trip was in order, and soon. An old jumper with a hole in one armpit and a pair of pajama bottoms with a very generous elasticated waistband, they would tide my giant friend over for the night, but I doubt she'd want to be wearing them for long. As an added side-effect, the lack of proper clothes would hopefully keep her from wandering off or returning to the woods, at least until I could snatch enough rest to get my head around her.

Evelyn had suggested we clear out one of the upstairs rooms for her, but by that time we were all spent. Zheng had shrugged and grunted and propped her feet up on the kitchen table.

Lozzie had succumbed to her creeping sleepiness again, at least for now, and Tenny was wrapped up in bed with her. None of us had the slightest clue how much sleep Tenny would require, but she'd seemed entirely happy to curl up against Lozzie's side, her tentacles wandering around the spare room to latch onto the door frame, the windowsill, Lozzie's arm, like a spider suspending itself from a web.

"She'll sleep 'till she's done," Lozzie had murmured when I'd asked, one of her eyes fluttering shut, the other squinting. She had her arms around Tenny, and they looked so comfortable I was almost tempted to join them. "Done-done. She knows not to wake everyone up. Isn't that right, Tenny?"

"Uuuup," Tenny had fluttered. "Up. Up"

"Say goodnight to Heather now. Auntie Heather!"

"Guuuuuaah, Heather," Tenny had managed. If I'd been more awake I think I would have died.

Nobody had seen Kimberly since she'd retreated from the chaos, but Raine took the plunge and checked on her. I'd tagged along. We'd found her sitting knees-to-chest in the chair in Evelyn's study, eyes

red-rimmed with THC, reading a battered, dog-eared copy of *The Mists of Avalon*. We'd left her to it.

The last we'd seen of Twil was from the far side of a massive ham sandwich she'd been constructing in the kitchen, casting suspicious glances at Zheng's closed eyes and regular breathing.

"She's faking it," Twil had hissed. "Probably doesn't even need sleep."

Evelyn was downstairs too, in her workshop. Or maybe she'd gone to bed already. I'd lost track.

"I mean there's a class gap between Eevee and Twil, right?" Raine said as I finished drying my hair. "Twil's family isn't dirt poor, but they're not well off. I guess a small-time cult without active recruiting doesn't exactly rake in clandestine funds. Her dad used to be in the army, but that was years ago, and her mum's a schoolteacher at the primary in Brinkwood. And our Eevee, well. *Technically* her dad's not petty bourge, but," Raine shrugged and pulled an ironic smile. "She is loaded. Twil's right about that."

"Okay, and?"

"And they probably need to talk that out, if they're ever gonna, you know." Raine spread the first and middle fingers of her right hand, and stuck her tongue between them.

I gave her an unimpressed look. She laughed.

I walked over to the bed and flopped down. I'd intended to sit, but my body didn't obey, unfolding across the sheets as I closed my eyes. "No," I said. "No I don't think they could talk about money. They can't even talk about their own feelings."

"Maybe if we lock them in a room together and put up a sign that reads like 'This door will only open if you snog for five minutes.'"

Raine's fingers found my hair. She combed it back, away from my face, then scratched my scalp, hard enough to force a little groan from my throat. Firm and confident, her hand travelled down the back of my neck, and squeezed in the exact way to make me purr.

"No," I said.

"No?"

"No, as in, we're not going to leave it up to chance. We're going to

cut this Gordian Knot for them.” I cracked open my eyes found myself staring at Raine’s bare thigh, the video game paused on the television screen beyond. “On second thought, I’m going to cut the knot. You should stay out of it.”

“What, you think I’m a bad matchmaker?”

I looked up at Raine, her face upside down from my perspective. “You can never resist teasing Evee.”

“Got me dead to rights there, yeah.”

“Plus it’s less like matchmaker, more like peace negotiator. There’s so much tension between those two, they’ll explode sooner or later if it’s not resolved.” I closed my eyes again. Everything felt so heavy.

“You sure you’re alright, Heather?”

I shrugged. “Over-tired. Jealous. Busy day. Sides hurt.”

“Jealous?” Raine asked.

“Mmmm.”

Raine’s hand slipped beneath the collar of my pajama top and found my shoulder, and I knew what would happen next. She would set the playstation controller aside and switch the television off, and turn all her attention to me. Maybe we’d have sex, but more likely she’d just rub my shoulders, my back, my belly, until I fell asleep, and then she’d help roll me into bed, semi-conscious Heather clinging to her like a sleepy Koala bear. We’d snuggle up under the sheets and I’d feel safe and protected and normal and for a few hours of shared drowsing I’d be able to forget everything. I’d wake in the morning, and having put it off for one night I’d put it off for another, and another, and it would fester and grow until a rotten abscess ate at my heart.

But I was so tired. I wanted Raine, and sleep, and not to think.

Luckily for me – and for the health of my relationship – my phantom limbs didn’t give a hoot about how tired I felt.

As I lay there on the verge of giving in, they were trying to push me up into a sitting position. A dull, quivering ache ran along my flanks, a faint muscle spasm below the surface. Five of the six tentacles, ghosts of potential from my memories of the abyss,

uncoiled and pushed at the bed, braced themselves to take my weight. One tried to wrap around my upper body, to pull me up. They couldn't touch anything, but the pain in my sides spiked and prickled all the same. I hissed through my teeth.

"Alright, alright," I grumbled.

The tentacles were right. Ape comfort wanted Raine, but rational thought – cold abyssal survival logic – knew that I had to talk to Raine now, or I never would. I drew willpower from that writhing core of inhuman drive in the core of my soul, sighed, and stole myself for the task.

"Heather?"

"S'nothing," I lied, then reached up, found Raine's wrist, and halted her hand.

"Hey, Heather, you're exhausted, yeah? Let me pamper you, come on, you need to wind down." Raine pulled her wrist free, but I was already struggling back into a sitting position.

Struggling more than I expected.

Couldn't sit up.

One hand slipped and I fell back to the bed, confused with a second of dull panic, muscles not working right. My phantom limbs flailed, sent another shiver of shock up my sides, and I realised what the problem was. They weren't helping.

The tentacles didn't exist, not unless I built them from scratch with hyperdimensional mathematics. They weren't there. They couldn't take any weight, not really – but my brain insisted they should be able to.

"Heather? Heather?"

Raine was saying my name, but I barely heard her; for several long moments I had to concentrate with total focus on the act of sitting up, on the simple motions of my hands and the tired muscles in my back and sides. Eyes squinted, teeth clenched, moving with the mechanical precision of a robot, I pulled myself into a sitting position, trying to suppress phantom pain from limbs that I didn't really have, trying to remember how to pilot this golem of water and protein.

Something alien and invasive and floppy and soft brushed against my face.

Hissssss!

And then perception snapped back, vision resolved into Raine's face. She had both her hands raised in gesture of 'I'm-not-touching-you' caution. I felt my cheeks flush bright red.

"I-I- R-Raine I'm so sorry, I-I just ... I ... I don't know what ... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ... oh God, did I hiss at you?"

Raine kept her hands up where I could see them, and looked at me with open curiosity, as if waiting to see if I'd do that again. Then she broke into a smile.

"You do that loud enough," she said, "Evee's gonna think we're up to some real kinky shit in here."

"Raine," I sighed, felt myself deflate, my horror punctured by her irreverent joke. I put my face in my hand and my other hand against my racing heart. "I can't believe I hissed at you. I-I didn't mean anything by it, I was just confused because I was ... I was trying to sit up, but ... I ... I couldn't remember how, like my body was alien for a moment, I-"

"Shhhhhhhh," Raine hushed me gently. She touched a finger to my lips, and this time I didn't hiss at her. "I get it. I understand. It's just you, being you, and hey, I think that's pretty cool." She trailed her finger downward and cupped my chin. "Gotta come at you from below, not surprise you from above, huh?"

I rolled my eyes and blushed for a slightly different reason, still mortified at myself.

"Here, one sec," Raine said.

She put down the playstation controller at last and stretched across me to reach her bedside table. I wasn't sure if it was intentional, but the sight of the back of her bare legs hugged by the cuffs of her bedtime shorts went rather a long way to soothing my discomfort. She rummaged for a moment amid the detritus of books and lip balm and keys and a handheld torch and her knife, then sat back again holding a very familiar black body-art pen.

Bless her, Raine always knows the right thing to do. We didn't even need to exchange any words, we slipped into the ritual with the

comfort of long repeated habit. I scooted against the wall at the head of the bed, a pillow propped in the small of my back, and Raine settled in at my side. I hooked my legs over hers and pulled my left sleeve all the way up before offering her my exposed forearm.

She took it gently, laid it across her lap, and examined the Fractal written on my flesh.

Raine traced the lines on my forearm with the tip of the pen, and I concentrated on not feeling ticklish. The patter of rain on the window drowned out our own breathing, drowned out my thoughts. Eventually I felt enough like myself again, settled back in my body in this shared intimacy, that I gathered what was left of my courage.

“Raine, we still need to talk. About what I said earlier today.”

She glanced at me, then back at the Fractal, tracing over a line again. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it too.”

My stomach gave a lurch. “You ... you have?”

Raine took her sweet time over another branch of the reality-hacking symbol on my arm, and I couldn’t stand the wait. She finished up, capped the marker pen, then caught my wrist as I went to pull my arm back. She raised my hand to her lips and kissed my palm, watching my eyes.

“Our problem,” she said. “Is that I want what you want. But you don’t know what you want.”

I huffed a huge sigh, disappointed. “Don’t give me that nonsense.”

“Nonsense?” She smirked. “Never.”

“You practically marked your territory in front of Zheng today. That was pretty clearly something you wanted, your feelings, your ... jealousy! That wasn’t you channelling my wants, that was you.”

“Is that what you wanna be?” she asked. From anybody else this question would be a barbed goad; Raine actually meant it. “You wanna be my territory?”

I stared at her in disbelief for a second, then huffed again and pulled my hand from her grip to rub at my eyes. “Aren’t I already? Raine, you obviously weren’t comfortable about me talking to

Zheng by myself, not without making it abundantly clear that I'm yours. So why keep joking about threesomes, why push me toward her like you did? I don't understand this. A relationship goes both ways, you just wanting what I want isn't enough. And I don't believe it anyway."

Raine nodded slowly, as if taking all this in, then asked, "Do you want to have sex with Zheng?"

If I'd rolled my eyes any harder, my retinas would have detached. I could have screamed at her. "That has nothing to do with what I'm trying to say."

"S'got everything to do with it," Raine said, soft and calm, a subtle smile on her lips. Was she enjoying my frustration? "Serious question. I won't be hurt if you do want to, it's obvious she fires you up. Nothing wrong with honest attraction."

I shrugged with my hands, beyond exasperated, almost lost for words.

"Seriously," Raine continued, and flashed one of those grins at me, burning with inner confidence. She looked so easy and relaxed, so unbothered by all this. "I'm not gonna be hurt, not gonna be offended. I know I'm still the best, in or out of bed. Doesn't matter where else you go, I'm always with you. I could beat Zheng in a fight too, I know that now, I've got her number, I've got a read on her, right down to the margins. I don't feel threatened by her, or jealous or anything like that. She's not gonna take you away from me or anything, that's just silly."

"... Raine? Um, okay." Slow and soft the revelation broke inside me. "Oh my God."

"Heather?"

"You are jealous. Raine, you are jealous, deeply. You're just ... expressing it in a very ... *you* kind of way. Oh, wow, okay."

Raine cocked her head at me, curious.

I wet my lips and weighed the pros and cons of putting it into words. Cold sweat broke out on my back, balanced by a dangerous fire deep down in my belly. I had stepped, pace by pace, into a minefield, the limits of which I did not comprehend. When had Raine changed her mind? I raced back through the events of a very

busy day, and settled on the moment she'd scored a hit on Zheng's arm with her knife, when they'd almost fought in the woods. She'd drawn blood, had seemed ready to fight to the death – and then given up that fight, totally and completely.

Raine had resolved her jealous feelings by verifying she could brutally murder the object of my sexual distraction.

She hadn't actually done so. Just proved, to herself, that she could.

"You are jealous. Maybe you don't see what I see here," I said slowly. "Or maybe you're lying to yourself, I don't know, but it's kind of obvious to me. Why else did you mark your territory? Why kiss me like that in front of Zheng?"

"Because I ..." Raine paused, hesitated, so unlike her. "Because I wanted to."

"That's a start. And why did you want to?"

"I want what you want, Heather," she said, and I almost groaned and gave up. "I don't know how else to phrase that. Seeing you happy, or fulfilled, helping you get there, being there with you, that's what I want."

"What if I said I want you to be jealous?" I threw out a curve-ball, a shot in the dark.

An intense, predatory glint slid into Raine's eyes, up from some deep place in her soul, accompanied by a subtle twist to her smile as she watched me. "Go on."

"I ... Raine?"

"Go on," she repeated, and a tremor sank through my belly, heading down.

"I ... I ..." I swallowed, pulled myself together, and it all came out in a rush. "I want you to be jealous because I don't want some platonic ideal of you, I want you. Mess and confusion and all. And if that means you're jealous of the way Zheng unintentionally turns me on, then so be it. You don't have to pretend to be perfect. Being okay with me sleeping with Zheng is not perfect, it's ... I don't know, but it's obviously causing you ... something! Something I can't figure out. If you're jealous, then express it. Let's do something about that."

“Do what?”

“I don’t know! That’s up to you.”

Raine watched me for another second, slow and knowing. My stomach turned over, full of butterflies. I swallowed, hard, and wasn’t entirely sure why.

“ ... Raine?”

Raine disentangled herself from me, got up from the bed, and went over to the door. She opened it and stuck her head out into the corridor – dark now, the night rain pattering on the windows, gentle light from our bedroom creeping out into the gloom. She looked left and right, closed the door again, and turned to me with her back against the wood.

“Do you need to be punished?” she asked.

My eyes went wide and my mouth went dry. My heart rate spiked.

“ ... I’m sorry, what?”

“You heard me, Heather.” Raine smiled, slow and subtle.

“Um ... Raine? What does that mean? I don’t understand.”

Raine pushed away from the door, stalking toward the bed, slow and certain. “You wanna know if I’m jealous or not?”

“Raine-” I almost scooted away from her. She stopped, held up both hands.

“You could walk out of this room right now and climb all over Zheng and order her to eat you out, and I’d never harbour the faintest anger against you. But yeah.” Raine grinned wide. “I might fight her. And I’d win. And you’d need to be punished afterward, for being a little brat.”

“Raine, this isn’t what I meant.” I could barely squeeze the words out. My heart was going a hundred miles an hour. Raine hadn’t even touched me and she had me flushed in the face, something about the way she moved, the way she looked at me, that clear fluidity of muscle. She was already a guilty dream at the best of times with her ruffled hair and rakish smile and athletic frame, but now she advanced on me with all the predatory intent that made my head spin. “I meant- don’t put on act, you don’t have to- I-”

“It’s no act. You want me to be clear? This is me being clear.”

She climbed up onto the mattress, on all fours. I backed away to make room for her – but then Raine caught me in her gaze like a mouse before a snake, froze me to the spot. She straddled me, knees either side of my hips, a hand pinning one of my wrists to the bed.

“Oh,” I managed. “Okay.”

“I want you to be happy, Heather,” she said, close and soft, right above me. “If that means you get a bunch of girls together in a harem, so be it, whatever. I’ll be a little jealous, sure, but it won’t hurt me. I’ll always be number one.”

I nodded, pretty much all I could think of doing.

“But, Zheng, well,” she said. “S’different. Not sure why.”

“Would this-” I squeaked, swallowed, and tried again. “Would this be any different if it wasn’t Zheng? If it was somebody like, I don’t know, Kimberly? Somebody less ... well, less similar to you? Less of a rival.”

“Less of a monster, you mean?”

“You’re not- not a monster.”

“I know what I am, Heather.” She leaned down even closer, inches from my face. “And you fuckin’ love it.”

I could smell her breath, toothpaste fresh from an hour ago. Her eyes pinned me to the bed as securely as her strength. My phantom limbs were paralysed too, trapped between a desire to wrap around her and a confused animal feedback, a cocktail of fear and arousal. My breath came in little gasps.

“ ... you didn’t answer the question?” I managed.

Raine ran a hand through her hair. She pretended to consider for a moment, never once breaking eye contact. “I don’t want you to have sex with Zheng. You can cuddle up with her, you can hug her, you can ride on her shoulders for all I care. But I don’t want you to screw her. Can’t stop you, won’t stop you, but yeah, you’re right, I don’t want you to. Well done, Heather. You cracked my code.”

“That doesn’t- Raine- I- well, thank you for being clear, I-”

“Just remember,” Raine purred as she leaned in close, slipped her

head past mine and whispered in my ear, so close I could feel her breath. Her free hand found my thigh, squeezed roughly, made me jerk and squeak in surprise. "I'm a much bigger monster than she is."

I gasped as her hand moved higher.

"R-Raine, why-"

"You want me to mark my territory? Want me to show you how I feel? Bite the pillow."

= =

Two hours later I stepped out of the bathroom on very shaky legs, and straight into a split-second of pure dissociation.

The warm, womb-like darkness of the upstairs corridor. My own body, still flushed and hot and sore, a lingering ache between my legs. Raine's taste in my mouth and my own sweat-drenched animal smell in my nostrils. The faint spill of artificial, television-blue light from our open bedroom door, Raine back on the playstation while I'd gone to the bathroom. All around me the house was washed with the static of raindrops on windows and roof, filled with sleeping minds around dark corners, quiet minds in the night, lurking as if under rocks or inside little caves. For an illusory moment I felt as if I could sense all the people in the house, slumbering on the edge of my consciousness.

For a moment, a fleeting post-coital illusion, I felt like I was back in the abyss.

Then it passed, and I was just plain Heather again, standing in the corridor as my phantom limbs groped about for handholds in the dark. I closed my eyes and tried to recapture the moment, that peace and familiarity, like I'd been to the bottom of the ocean.

Maybe I didn't need to go swimming at all; maybe I just needed Raine to screw me so hard I dissociated.

"Heather?" Raine's nighttime stage-whisper came from our open door. "You alright?"

"Yes," I whispered back. "Sorry. Was thinking."

I padded down the dark corridor, following the television's glow. Raine was right where I'd left her, lying on her front in a tangle of

sheets, arms sticking out with the playstation controller in her hands. She blinked a bleary smile over at me, caught in the television backwash like undersea luminescence. I think I'd done as much of a number on her as she'd done on me.

"Wanna sleep now?" she whispered.

I glanced down the hallway to the head of the stairs. The faintest light glowed up from below, not the kitchen, but deeper than that. I let out a little sigh.

"I think Evee's still awake," I said. "In her workshop. I'd like to check on her, make sure she's okay." A tiny pinprick of liar's guilt opened a nick in my heart. "Do you want to come with me?"

"You want me to?" Raine blinked slowly at me again. I'd well and truly exhausted her.

"It's okay. I need some water too." I stepped into our room and over to the chair by the desk, pulled out a jumper at random, and found one of Raine's older hoodies in my hands, black and frayed and very large on me. I wiggled it on over my head. The sleeves were too long and it smelled of her and I loved it. I wrapped it close, pressed the ends of the sleeves to my face.

On the television screen, the energetic cartoon girl was jumping up and down over and over. Raine caught my look and laughed at herself, waggled the controller and pressed the jump button again.

"Her boobs bounce when you make her jump," she explained.

"Good for her. Don't wait up for me, I promise I'll join you after I've spoken to Evee, if she's awake. If not, well, I'll ask Praem to carry her to bed."

"What if she's with Twil?"

"... I hadn't thought of that. I suppose I'll leave them to it."

"You're a good friend, Heather," Raine said, paused her game, and rolled over in bed. She closed her eyes, crawled under the sheets. "A good friend and a better partner than you credit yourself with."

"Be back in a bit," I whispered, and set off into the depths of the house.

As soon as I got halfway down the stairs and out of earshot, I sighed to myself.

On one hand, I felt such relief. Raine had finally put her foot down. She'd made clear where she stood, and what she wanted from me. Our relationship now had a boundary, even if it might not apply to other situations: don't have sex with Zheng.

On the other hand, had she done all that only because I'd said I wanted her to be jealous?

I didn't think so, but I couldn't be certain. Raine didn't fake emotions, she didn't pull them from some long-practised library of 'how to pretend not to be a cold-hearted serial killer'. She felt, for real. She was just different. And devoted, to an extent and in a way which I did not understand. I couldn't entirely shake the feeling that her possessive display had been just that – a display.

At least she gave me an easy stipulation to follow. Don't have sexual relations with the violent cannibal demon lady you've just adopted into the household. Easy!

I crept down the creaking stairs and across the darkness of the front room, listening for voices. If I heard Twil and Evelyn speaking, I'd turn around and go back. Though perhaps not before a few seconds of accidentally-on-purpose eavesdropping.

A faint electrical hum lurked on the edge of my hearing, like an old CRT television. I heard the sound of a page turning, and a heavy sigh.

I followed the twilight and the sigh into the gloomy kitchen, and confirmed my suspicions. Evelyn's workshop door was open, a light on within.

Zheng was still in the kitchen, sitting in one of the chairs like a frozen statue, feet up on the table, arms crossed, eyes closed. The huge ancient yellow jumper and green pajama bottoms looked totally out of place on her, like dressing a Greek Goddess in a cheap tracksuit. She should be wearing medieval armour, I suddenly thought.

She hadn't moved in hours. Or at least, looked like she hadn't.

"Zheng?" I whispered, and got no response.

An inquisitive grumble emerged from the open workshop door. A chair scooted back, papers shuffled, and a walking stick clacked against the floorboards. Evelyn appeared in the doorway a moment

later, in cream jumper and long skirt. She raised an eyebrow at me.

“Evee,” I whispered. “You’re up really late.”

“So are you,” she said, not in a whisper. “You’ve had a long day. You should be asleep.”

“So should you,” I tutted.

She nodded at Zheng. “She’s pretending, by the way. We were speaking not five minutes ago.”

Without opening her eyes, Zheng cracked a smile, lips peeling back to reveal her mouth full of sharp teeth. “I was asleep, wizard. You woke me.”

“Really?” Evelyn drawled.

“Zheng, you know you’re welcome to sleep somewhere more comfortable,” I said. “You don’t have to sleep in a chair. I know we’re short on properly cleared out rooms, but there’s always a sofa. I promise we’ll at least sort out a mattress for you tomorrow.”

“I sleep better like this,” Zheng purred.

I shared a glance with Evelyn. She shrugged with her eyes. “Well,” I said. “Have it your way then.”

Zheng grunted. She sniffed the air, then cracked open an eye and looked at me. “You reek of sex, shaman.”

A blush exploded onto my cheeks. I let out a little huff and averted my eyes and didn’t know what to say.

“Oh,” Evelyn deadpanned. “Thought I heard some thumping.”

Zheng chuckled, closed her eye again, and seemed to settle back into an instant sleep. I stood there like a fool for a moment, blushing terribly, wishing I could fold myself up inside Raine’s hoodie and slink back upstairs. Evelyn shuffled back into the ex-drawing room, and for want of anything else to say, I followed her. She settled herself back down onto a chair at the old dining table as I stepped inside, and questioned me with a raised eyebrow.

“I wanted to check on you,” I said. “You’re up super late. I think it’s past midnight, um ... ” I let my eyes rove over the additions to the workshop, and felt my blood go cold. “Did ... did you do this all today?”

“Mhmm, while you lot were out gallivanting around the woods.”

“Is it safe?”

A bulky old CRT television stood at one end of the table, half of its mechanical innards hanging out of the back, loose circuit boards and frayed wiring exposed like a gutted animal. It was contained inside a very fresh-looking but very simple magic circle, a single line with some Arabic text around the circumference, painted on a piece of plain canvas laid out underneath the television. A thick red cable like a car jumper lead emerged from the back of the modified television, crossing the room and snaking across the floor.

The other end of the cable terminated in a massive copper crocodile clip, embedded deep in the clay flesh of the squid-vessel thing which contained the Eye's minion.

It looked as if it had been weakly pulling at the clip for hours without end, two of its dried, flaky tentacles worn down to crumbled stubs, still wagging ineffectually at the cable. The whole thing had moved several inches back, as if trying to cram itself into the corner of the magical circle it was contained within. As I stared, it twitched and flexed another rotten, crumbling tentacle, gesturing at nothing.

“Quite safe,” Evelyn said. “I had Praem do the handling. And this is warded.” She reached out and tapped the magic circle which entrapped the television set. “It can't jump the air-gap and possess me again, if that's what you're worried about. Also I think it might be dying.”

The television was on. I could see the plug, sitting there on the table, most definitely not supplying electricity, yet the television screen flickered with abstract, overlapping, multi-coloured shapes, most of them with dozens upon dozens of sides like some kind of mathematical constructs. They were seen if as through layers of shadows moving across water, some kind of interference with the television's display. The screen flickered and the picture dissolved into a view of a blank wall made of black bricks, then flickered again and the wall was covered with tiny red writing, then flickered back to the abstract shapes again.

“What ... what am I looking at? Eevee?”

Evelyn shrugged and let out a sigh. “The inside of it's mind, I think.

Or it's trying to communicate. I don't know. Sometimes it shows writing, like then, but the language is nothing from our world. This is what I spent all day on, trying to interrogate it." She flicked at the pile of notes she'd taken. "For all the good it's produced."

"That's ... well ... that's an ingenious idea, certainly. Are you absolutely sure this is safe?"

"Mostly." She shrugged at me with her eyes, and gestured at the squid of rotting clay. "Our uninvited guest here is far less complex than, say, Praem, but I think it exists in the same way as her, started out like her, perhaps. Summoned from ... well, elsewhere, but it didn't learn how to think from humans." She glanced at me. "Maybe from your Eye, perhaps. I don't think it can plan, or make independent decisions. If it could it would be trying to break containment now, it's got access to an information vector right here in this telly. But it's not even trying. It's just ... showing me its thoughts."

"You should really sleep, Eevee. It's really late. Thinking about this all day can't be good for you."

"Sleep," Praem intoned, and I almost jumped out of my skin. I hadn't seen her standing there, just off to the right. I stared at her for a moment. She stared back. "Sleep," she repeated.

Evelyn sighed, and turned the television off.

"Perhaps," she said. "Don't feel like it though."

"Me neither," I admitted, and pulled up a chair, sitting down to soothe my still shaky legs. For some odd reason, I didn't want to go back upstairs. Evelyn frowned at me.

"Heather? Are you alright?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes I forget that Raine is a sociopath."

"That's not ... entirely accurate. Did she do something to you?"

"Um ... "

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. "Okay, yes, stupid question. You fucked, we know." She glanced at the door, then at Praem, and without any vocal communication passing between them, Praem stepped over and pushed the workshop door shut with a soft click. Evelyn turned back to me. "Heather, did Raine do something bad to

you?”

“What? No, no, not at all. It’s complicated. Relationship stuff, I guess. Oh, Eevee, I don’t know what I’m doing. Can I talk to you about this?”

Evelyn leaned back in her chair and snorted a humourless laugh. “You want to come to me for relationship advice? Little miss I-just-spent-two-hours-having-sex, and you want to talk to me?”

My turn to roll my eyes. “Evelyn, you are my best friend. And you understand Raine better than I do, I think. You’ve known her for longer.”

“I knew it, she has done something, hasn’t she?”

“No,” I tutted. “I just ... I don’t know how to handle this situation. Where I think she might be taking this.” I glanced at the door again and lowered my voice. “I think she’s jealous of Zheng, but in a way I didn’t expect.”

I outlined what had happened, not just upstairs between Raine and I, but earlier in the day too, the confrontation in the woods, the pact they’d made over me. I repeated Raine’s words about how she could beat Zheng anytime, if she so chose to. Evelyn listened politely, frowning harder and harder as I finished.

“You want to have sexual relations with that barbarian in the kitchen?” was the first thing she asked.

“No! Not ... well, a little bit, but no, not really, I don’t think so. It’s not as if I’m incapable of self control. Look, Eevee, that’s not the point, it’s Raine that-”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn waved me down, then sighed. “Of course she’s jealous, anybody would be.”

“Yes, but only Raine deals with jealousy by deciding she can beat a demon in a knife fight. I hope this won’t go any further, but I’m not sure. I’m worried she’ll ... I don’t know, exactly. Like I said, sometimes I forget Raine can be ... frightening, I suppose. I really don’t want her to get hurt, Eevee. Emotionally or otherwise.”

Evelyn stared at me for a moment, sucking on her teeth. “You’re looking at this wrong.”

“I ... I am?”

“Heather, I told you before, months ago, that Raine wants to be your knight errant. That’s the role she’s dreamed up for herself in life, it’s how she fits together, and she needs a damsel to play opposite her or she goes looking for other causes. I used to be that to her, and I sometimes I suspect if I’d not been a sexual cripple, if I’d showed the slightest interest, she might have made a move on me.”

“Seriously? You’re not-”

“Not her type, yes, exactly.” Evelyn shrugged. “I suspect, that’s all. But then she found you, and you’re perfect for her. Don’t make me spout a bunch of soppy nonsense, but it’s true. You and her fit together surprisingly well. Even now you’ve, well, gained some confidence, she’s still all over you.” Evelyn pointed at the closed door to the kitchen, but really she was indicating what lay beyond, sitting there with her feet up on the table. “But now you have another protector.”

“Yes, but I’m not going to sleep with Zheng. I’ve told her that now, and I won’t break that promise.”

“You’re missing the point,” Evelyn almost snapped. “The romance, the sex, it’s secondary. I think you’re right. If you decided to go kiss Kimberly – or me, or I don’t know, Lizzie – I don’t think Raine would care much. Raine, first and foremost, wants to be your primary protector. That’s the pillar of her psyche. That’s the rivalry which matters to her. Perhaps unconsciously so.”

I sighed and nodded, sagged in the chair and rubbed my face; Evee was just telling me what I already knew, but hadn’t wanted to accept.

“I don’t know how to handle that,” I said.

“Me neither.” Evelyn glanced at the door again. “Stroke of genius by that demon, making her swear a pact in front of you. Otherwise they’d be at each other’s throats.”

“I suppose there’s that to be thankful for.”

“Mm.” Evelyn watched me for a moment. I hugged Raine’s hoodie tight around myself, staring at the floor. “Just talk to her, Heather, I’m sure she’ll understand. She adores you. She’d do anything for you.”

"I know," I said, then glanced around the room, trying to distract myself. "Speaking of talking, where's Twil?"

"She went home."

"In ... " I glanced at the windows, hidden behind thick curtains, but the patter of rain against the glass penetrated the whole house. "In this? At this time of night?"

"She's hardly a wilting violet," Evelyn said, turning to her notes. "She'll be fine."

"Evee. Evee, you let her go?"

"She's an adult, she can make her own decisions. Besides, this house is reaching carrying capacity."

"She could have slept on the sofa or something." I sighed. "She could have slept in your bed. With you. Hint hint."

Evelyn's stare could have sandblasted rock.

"You didn't make her leave, did you?" I asked.

"No ... yes. Maybe." Evelyn straightened up and huffed. "We had a very awkward conversation, alright? Things got ... weird."

I had to resist a very specific urge to put both hands to my mouth. "Did you ... did you tell her what you-"

"Discussed Tenny," Praem supplied in a sing-song voice. "Bake-off. Sleeping arrangements."

"Yes, and that was all, thank you very much, Praem." Evelyn shot the doll-demon a nasty look.

I sighed. "Evee, I don't know why you and her don't just talk to each other. You ... oh wow." I shook my head, feeling my heart catch in my chest, a lightness in my head. Was I really about to do this? Did I have the right? I'd been so sure while talking to Raine earlier, but now I had to force the words out. "I'm really not sure I should tell you this, but ... Twil, well, I'm pretty sure she kind of likes you. In that sort of way. I think if you talked to her about it, she'd say the same things to you."

Evelyn stared at me, deadpan and blank.

"Um ... Evee?"

"I'm not a complete idiot," Evelyn said. "And despite her appearances, neither is Twil. I think after your little display earlier, it was blindingly apparent to everyone present. Even Tenny, and she'd just been born."

"You mean you-"

"Twil knows. Alright?" Evelyn snapped. "She knows that I know, and I know she knows that I know. We both know."

"Did ... did you talk to her about it?"

Evelyn looked away, uncomfortable. "What do you think?"

"You didn't. You didn't?"

"Yes, I'm a coward. You know that already."

"No, you're not. Eevee, you're not a coward. Don't treat yourself like that."

Evelyn threw up her hands in irritation and turned back to the notes and papers and sketches on the table, sorting through them angrily, shoving them into a pile. "Fetch me some chocolate," she barked at Praem. "Sod it, I may as well."

Praem obeyed, opening the door and marching out into the kitchen. Evelyn and I were greeted by the sight of Zheng, eyes open and awake, a subtle grin on her lips.

"Wizard," she rumbled. "The shaman was right, you do like the smell of wet dog, right up in your cu-"

If looks could kill, Evelyn's scowl would have reduced Zheng to atomic dust. "You mock this, demon, and I'll send you back where you came from."

Zheng shrugged and closed her eyes again. "Don't tempt me."

Evelyn stared at her for a moment longer, looking like she was about to lurch out of her seat and have a go at Zheng with the business end of her walking stick, but Praem strode back into the room and offered Evelyn a Yorkie bar fetched from the cupboard. Evelyn tore it out of her hand, ripped the wrapper open, and shoved a segment of chocolate into her mouth, chewing with determination. She swallowed, thought for a moment, and offered the bar to me.

“No thanks, not right now, too late at night,” I said.

“What if I only like her because she’s available?” Evelyn asked the table, then me. “Because she’s what’s here? She deserves better than me and I’m only attracted to her because she happens to be nearby.” She bit into another piece of chocolate, drowning her sorrows in cheap dietary serotonin.

“Raine and I are no different,” I said. Evelyn frowned at me as she chewed, so I carried on. “If I hadn’t settled on university in Sharrowford, if I hadn’t gone to that exact cafe in the student quarter on that exact morning, if I hadn’t been sick, if she hadn’t decided to come after me, we’d have never met. It’s all chance. You have to take what opportunities life gives you, I think. There’s precious little happiness in the world, don’t snub it when it could be yours.”

Evelyn stopped chewing. She met my eyes for a long moment, then looked away, down at the tabletop. For a second I thought she was going to cry.

“Great,” she grumbled. “Just what this house needs. More dykes.”

“Evee, don’t use that word.”

“What? Dyke? It’s what I must be, right? Why can’t I say that?”

“Because you’re using it as a roundabout way to insult yourself.”

Evelyn shook her head, grumbling under her breath.

“That’s not really what’s bothering you though,” I said, and it wasn’t a question.

Evelyn looked at me sidelong, then sighed and shrugged. “She deserves better than me, and I’ll fuck up her whole life. I’m not a whole person. I’m a shell. Most of me was scooped out and never replaced. Just grew ... this,” she gestured at herself, “in its place. Twil doesn’t know what she’s getting into. It’ll hurt her, it’ll hurt me, it’ll fuck both of us up and we’ll come away wounded and bleeding. You think getting into it is the hard part, but it’s not. That would be easy. The hard part is everything else. Especially when you’re Evelyn Saye, grade-A fucking bitch mess.”

I let her finish, and when I was sure she was done, I reached out and squeezed her hand. “Evee, you’re worthy of love too. I think you should maybe say those words – those exact words you said just

now – to Twil. She'll understand. See how she feels."

Evelyn grumbled, shrugged, and finished her chocolate bar.

"Is that why you've been distracting yourself with this?" I sat back and glanced at the television and the squid-thing in the corner with the jumper cable attached to it.

"It's something to do. Figuring out the emissary of an alien God is less frightening than ... " she sighed heavily, "*romance*."

"You and me both."

"You don't feel like going back upstairs?" she asked, straightening up in her chair, then glanced at Praem and nodded to the door. The doll-demon closed it again, shutting us in the magical workshop together.

"Not just yet," I admitted, then frowned to myself and glanced over at the clay-squid thing again, at its faint and feeble efforts to free itself.

"Don't you want to check on Lozzie? Make sure she's not getting her hair eaten by our, er ... pet?"

"Tenny's not a pet," I muttered, half-distracted. "She'll be fine. Eevee, turn that television back on, would you? If it's safe, that is." I turned to her, and felt something I hadn't felt in weeks.

"Heather?"

"Let's put our heads together. I've got an idea."

by this art you may contemplate – 10.1

Knowledge takes two paths.

The first is the eureka moment, the leap of discovery, the flash of a magic-eye picture resolving into a leaping dolphin. Archimedes in his bathtub, Newton under the apple tree, the elegant terror of the splitting atom. Oft romanticised but rarely experienced, the domain of ‘great man’ theory and a history of thought with time for only the brightest of shining landmarks.

The second kind is boring and slow, but we owe it so much more. Methodical categorisation. Repeated experiments. Close reading. Stubborn, bull-headed, constant investigation that grinds along week after week, month after month, year on year, down the centuries from the first pre-human ape bashing a rock to make a sharp edge. The unsung army of semi-literate chroniclers preserving Pythagoras and Aristotle from bookworm and mildew; postgraduate students uncredited by the papers their grunt-work makes possible; drug trial volunteers paid a few hundred pounds to run the biochemical gauntlet.

Or me, giving myself nosebleeds and headaches and vomiting in a bucket, and still getting nowhere.

We didn’t have years; Maisie didn’t have years. She had a few months.

“Again,” I croaked.

Evelyn reached for the television’s on button, but Raine stopped her with a gesture.

“I said, again.”

“Heather?” Raine leaned down and around in an effort to catch my gaze, one hand on my shoulder. I refused to look. If I met her eyes I’d lose my nerve. “Heather, you’ve done enough for one day, you’re shaking. Come on, time for a break.”

“Again, switch it back on. Eevee, switch it back on.”

Evelyn hesitated, looked to Raine instead of me.

“I’m *fine*,” I hissed. “I’m in control. I haven’t been sick in over a week.” I gestured with irritation at the empty sick bucket next to my chair, the one Raine still insisted on for every session. “I can do this, I’m doing fine, I want to do another shape. I can do it. I can.”

“And I believe you,” Raine said. “But you’re also thirty minutes past the time you promised to stop, and when you stand up you’re gonna fall over, vomit or no vomit. You’re spent, Heather. Time to stop.”

I grit my teeth, gripped the pencil so tight it creaked in my hand, arm shaking with effort. Raine was right. I wasn’t angry with her, I was frustrated by my own weakness, my inability to go faster, to make greater sense of any of this. Progress, every day, yes, but toward what end? What use was any of this? I had to trust gut instinct and hope, and that was thin gruel.

“Another- another line, another few-” I jabbed at the notebook on the table in front of me. “Just let me-”

“You’re also about to bleed on your notes,” Raine said.

“What?” I scrubbed at my nose, tutted as my hand came away bloody – and glanced down. A mistake.

The notebook page I’d been working on for the last two hours was three-quarters full of tiny numbers and letters, one long equation that slid in behind my optic nerve and jabbed spears of pain right through to the back of my skull. Had to squeeze my eyes shut, head spinning, stomach threatening rebellion. Hissed through my teeth.

Raine knew the drill. She rubbed the back of my neck and head, raked her fingers through my hair, kept me here in the physical, grounded me.

I pictured her boobs, because boobs beats hyperdimensional mathematics. Another thing I’d learnt, more useful than anything in the notes. Boobs are invincible. Slow, deep breaths. Don’t vomit. Think about boobs. Not sitting here in this chair, not in Evelyn’s workshop, not pulling the secrets of creation from a monster in a plastic washing up tub. Not here. Not here. Boobs. *Boobs*.

“Alright, I’m with Raine,” Evelyn grumbled, sliding her chair back. “That’s the second time this session, we’re done for the day.”

"I can do more," I mumbled.

"You're literally dripping with sweat," Raine said, not unkindly.

"Fine!" I snapped, pulled myself out of her hands, and grabbed the exercise bottle on the table. I yanked up the no-spill tab with my teeth and sucked down a mouthful of lukewarm cherry-flavoured energy drink. Keep my electrolytes up. Raine's idea. I thumped the bottle back down. "Is that enough?"

"Not even close, boss, no can do. Negotiations start from a bath and a meal first."

"Mister Squiddy will be in further residence tomorrow," another voice added itself to the chorus of sensible suggestions, Praem chiming in from the back of the workshop.

"Yeah," Raine said. "Not like he's going anywhere."

'Mister Squiddy' – as Praem had taken to calling our uninvited guest, much to Evelyn's silent disapproval – was indeed not about to run off anywhere, not with the level of luxury he now enjoyed.

As soon as my little project had blossomed, we'd relocated him from the floor into a extra-large plastic bowl Raine had picked up from Homebase. I believe it was intended for mixing paint. That operation had taken hours, a masterclass in avoiding supernatural contamination or exposure, and had necessitated the drawing of several different magic circles to safely move the crumbling clay squid-thing.

He – and I did think of it as a he, because Praem kept calling it Mister – now wallowed in a half-inch of water and a slippery mess of brown smeared up the sides of the tub. Occasionally a tentacle would slop over to the bucket of fresh wet clay next to it, dipping in and scooping more matter to smear over his lashing, writhing form.

The amount of clay was carefully measured. We didn't want him actually growing any larger.

Mister Squiddy still looked like a rotting sheet draped over a bunch of squid, but no longer crumbling and dying. Our attentions had ensured it would live, for whatever definition of life that thing possessed, and also ensured that the workshop was filled with the faint sounds of slippery wet clay in constant motion.

"That's not the point," I mumbled to myself.

"I know," Raine leaned in and whispered. "But you're spent for now. You gotta rest, Heather."

I sniffed hard, kept the tears of frustration inside.

"I hate that we're keeping this thing alive," Evelyn said with a huff, staring at the rotting squid mass. "Have I mentioned that? I believe I've mentioned that. I have right of revenge on this thing, surely. Have I mentioned that?"

"Once or twice," Raine said with a smirk, straightening up, hands on my shoulders. "Can't rightly recall."

I didn't see the humour, not right now. I was disgusted at myself, at my weakness. Every minute I sat here in a comfortable room with my lover and my friends safe at my side was another minute Maisie faded away to nothing in Wonderland. Even if I couldn't see the bigger picture, couldn't see how to apply anything I was learning, I had to keep going. Surely I'd find some application. If it shaved years off my life, so be it.

A stubborn, silly, sly part of me uncoiled an appendage that didn't really exist, not yet, not as flesh or pneuma-somatic matter, only illusion and mental reinforcement and a trick of the senses.

One single tentacle selected from my phantom limbs, the highest on the left side of my hips. I ran through the mental exercises quickly, used to them now, pictured the pale smooth white flesh, the rainbow bioluminescence strobing beneath the surface. I imagined the veins and capillaries and nerve endings, the fat and the delicate tissues, built the limb up from first principles.

Real muscles bunched and contracted inside my torso, tendons prepared to take illusory weight. My bruises were a faint discolouration now, but an echo of the pain remained.

My tentacle reached for the television's on button.

"Hey, Heather, not now," Raine said.

I flinched and looked up at her, blinking in confusion, my mental construct falling apart and back into mere phantom-limb sensation. "How did you- you- Raine, what- how could you tell? I wasn't- I-"

"S'cute when you concentrate so hard."

I blushed terribly, embarrassed at being caught, mortified at the

absurdity; the imaginary tentacle couldn't even touch anything.

"What?" Evelyn frowned. "She was doing the visualisation thing again? Heather? You can't even touch anything with that, you-"

"I know!" I blurted out, hiding behind my own hand, face burning. My forehead was sticky with sweat. "I know, I just ... it just came naturally."

Evelyn and Raine looked at each other. I put my face on the table and covered my head with my arms.

"Hey, hey, Heather," Raine said with a laugh in her voice. She took me by the shoulders, rubbing hard. "That's great, that's a good sign. Means you're getting used to it. Isn't that the whole point? Your self-suggestion jazz is working."

"Doesn't make it any less embarrassing," I muttered into the table.

"It's not embarrassing. It's cool. You're cool."

I struggled up off the table and stared at the dead, blank television screen again. I sighed and cast a final shot. "Five more minutes. Then I'll stop."

"Lozzie needs her dose of medicinal weirdness tonight, if we're gonna pull the big day off tomorrow, doesn't she?" Raine asked. "You keep this up, you're gonna be too tired to go with her. Don't want her to go through without you, right?"

"It's not a 'big day'," Evelyn huffed. "Stop calling it that. It's an experiment, that's all."

Raine raised her fingers from my shoulders in a gesture of easy surrender. "Lozzie's still gotta go for some castle-time though. She wants to take Tenny along this time, too."

"She *what*?" I tried to turn in the chair. "Oh no. No no no. I'm vetoing that. Where is she? I need to talk to her."

"I thought you wanted five more minutes?" Evelyn asked.

"I ... I don't- ... um."

"Well, you're not getting it. You've had too much." Evelyn stood up, massaging her hip, wincing softly as her walking stick took her weight. "I'm cutting you off."

"Last call, chucking out time," Raine announced.

Evelyn did not laugh. She fixed me with a stare that I couldn't ignore. "Don't let this become an addiction."

"It's not. It's not as if I'll keep doing this once these are complete." I picked up the pad of hyperdimensional mathematics and waved it vaguely in the air. "I don't enjoy this, Eevee."

"Can they ever be complete? At what point will you have enough?"

"When I can out-think the Eye."

She didn't have anything to say to that. Neither did Raine, focused on rubbing my shoulders and smoothing my sweat-soaked hair out of my face. Evelyn held my gaze for a few moments, then sighed and looked away.

"Either I warn you off because I'm your friend, or I egg you on because this presents an unmatched opportunity." She tapped the head of her walking stick with her fingernails, then shrugged. "You still need to rest, regardless of what motivation you want me to apply to you." She held out a hand for the notes. "Let me look through those again, see how much I need to transcribe."

"Good luck." I passed her the notes, but when she took the heavy black notebook I held on a moment too long. Evelyn raised an eyebrow at me before I finally let go, surprised at myself, drawing my hand back and rubbing at my wrist. "Sorry," I muttered. "It's silly, you and your family have looked after much older books, for much longer. Of course it's safe with you."

"Mmm." Evelyn stared at me with a curious frown, then flipped the notebook open and leafed through.

I was almost jealous of the way she could so easily look over those figures, my looping scrawl, often degenerating into chicken-scratch and spiderweb in the most difficult moments, page after page after page of it. We had two more notebooks upstairs, filled from cover to cover, tucked away in a safe in the study, plus Evelyn's carefully transcribed versions of my more illegible parts. I'd filled half of this most recent notebook in only the last four days. Evelyn scanned my work unassaulted by icepick headaches or the creeping clutch of nausea.

"In the wrong hands, this would be just as dangerous as *Inprencibilis*

Vermis,” she said. “As anything in my collection.”

“You mean you’re starting to understand it?”

Evelyn glanced up at me and laughed once, a harsh bark. “Not head nor tail, but that doesn’t mean others wouldn’t. We already know you’re not the only person in the world who understands hyperdimensional mathematics.”

“Lozzie’s not quite the same though.”

“She’s just bad at maths,” Evelyn said, snapping the book shut with one hand. “This goes in the box until next time.”

I nodded, sagging inside. This was all so slow, and I had no guarantee that any of it would work. Not for the first time, I asked myself why I was doing this.

Because I had no other leads.

I’d followed Maisie’s advice and gathered my friends, but now what? Even with this breakthrough, with all this technique I was gathering, how could I possibly fight the Eye? I could barely even think about what I was putting down on paper without being sick, it didn’t matter how much of it I could learn unless I could forge it into something useful, something greater, something less fragile than little old me, physical or abyssal.

No idea where to start. Just had to have faith.

Raine must have felt the lurking despair running beneath my skin, because suddenly she squeezed a little too hard, enough to draw an unexpected grunt from me. “Ahhh, Raine.”

“Too hard?”

“No ... no, do that again. Left shoulder, please.”

“You’re pushing yourself too hard,” she murmured. “What would Zheng say?”

“She’d probably probably tell me to keep going, then carry me to bed when I pass out.”

“You want *me* to carry you to bed?” Raine asked. Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes and stepped out with the notebook tucked under one arm. She clacked through the kitchen, out into the front room, and creaked up the stairs.

I didn't answer, too focused on the mental exercise of rebuilding my tentacle. These weeks of practice had made it habit now, the slow process of picturing muscle and tendon, skin and fat, mentally counting the imaginary anchors inside my own body, preparing their creation in hyperdimensional mathematics – but not executing, not yet, by pain of most dread promises to my friends. I saw it in my mind's eye by force of self-suggestion, a solid pale white appendage that uncoiled from my flank and stretched out into the air.

“Doing it again, huh?” Raine asked softly.

“Mhmm. It's getting easier every time.”

“Wanna slap me in the face with it?”

I turned in my seat and stared at her, unsure if I'd heard correctly. Raine concealed her amusement well. She fought the smile for several long seconds, and then lost the battle all at once. I sighed.

“What?” she asked, grinning like a loon. “Thought I'd developed a fascinating and dangerous new fetish?”

“I hope not.”

“Come on, practice! It's not like you can actually hit me with it. Just try it out.”

“I'd ... I don't know ... not right now.” I looked down and let my concentration wander, forgot the tentacle again. “But thank you.”

“Hey, you can try out your tentacles on me any which way.”

This time she didn't even bother to hide the joke. I rolled my eyes as Raine laughed, but inside I flushed with slow-burning relief, the kind she'd been pampering me with. The dirty jokes that lifted my defeatism, the pats on the bottom and the sudden unexpected hands up my tshirt that dragged me back into my body, the kisses that reminded me what mattered, they all helped more than I could express, and Raine had been very liberal with her attention these last three weeks.

Between hyperdimensional mathematics and building myself an extra limb via self-hypnosis, it was a minor miracle I wasn't losing my mind yet. Raine kept me sane.

“Let's get you in the shower, yeah?” she said, helping me out of the

chair. My legs wobbled and I held her hand for support. She slipped her other arm around my waist and held on tight as I leaned into her. "I think you've earned some special attention."

"Special attention," Praem echoed.

Raine laughed. "You keep your ears to yourself."

My mind made several leaps of free association. Perhaps it was the mental exhaustion, or perhaps I was just getting bold – or lazy.

"Where is Zheng, anyway?" I asked. "Wasn't she here this morning? I thought she was watching."

"Went hunting," Raine answered. "Said she'd be back this evening, in time for Lozzie's little outing. Wanna cook her catch again?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Only if it's pheasant or rabbit. No squirrels. And absolutely no badger. In fact, I need to tell her to stop killing badger at all, it's upsetting."

"Hey, squirrels cooked properly are perfectly safe."

"They're also disgusting."

"At least she's helping with the food budget."

Zheng had spent the last three weeks living like a huge semi-domesticated cat, sleeping all over the house in different spots every night, spending every second day out in the woods, hunting game or eating wildlife. I never knew if she was going to be around, but Raine seemed to. Either they were coordinating behind my back, or Raine was watching her every move like a hawk. I didn't know which possibility was worse.

Raine walked me out of the workshop and into the kitchen. My eyes settled on the chessboard on the kitchen table, the pieces frozen mid-game.

"Gonna make a move?" Raine asked.

"Mmmm ... maybe later."

"She's close to figuring this one out, you know. She might beat you this time."

"Perhaps I should let her." I sighed. "No, she'd know that right away, wouldn't she?"

Zheng had yet to take a single game off me, and I wasn't exactly a very good chess player. Strategy was not her strong point, though she occasionally made bold plays that required serious thought. The game had been Evelyn's idea, to everyone's surprise. I suspected she was trying to domesticate the giant zombie. Zheng either didn't care or hadn't caught on, and took me up on the challenge. She was a good loser, sporting, amused – against me, at least.

Praem moved to follow us out of the workshop. At the threshold she turned on her heel with a little click and performed what was becoming her usual routine, one that Evelyn had told her to stop doing.

“Stay,” she said out loud, to the blob of clay rolling and slurping in a plastic tub.

I glanced back, over the shoulder of Praem's maid uniform, past the hateful squirming mass of imitation squid, beyond the table with the old CRT television.

Past all of it, on the back wall, the gateway mandala waited for Evelyn's final touches.

The massive fan-shaped design surrounded the blank doorway shape in the middle. For a moment it seemed to stare back at me like an empty eyeball. It was almost ready, all the other additions laid out on temporary paper, held in place with masking tape so we could switch them back and forth. In a few hours we'd strip them off and replace them with the necessary marks to take us back to the cult's castle again, but then tomorrow loomed.

Tomorrow, we were going to perform an experiment. And for that, we were going back to the library of Carcosa.

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Three weeks had passed since our woodland outing and Tenny's messy, physical rebirth. Three weeks since my midnight notion had borne fruit.

The thing from the Sharrowford Cult's trap in Glasswick tower, the shard of Outsider thought which had been lodged in Alexander's corpse like a jungle booby-trap, the Eye's minion sent to cripple us – whatever it really was, it contained a treasure trove of secrets.

“As long as it's not Pandora's box,” Evelyn had said, that night.

The shapes it was displaying on the television screen were a form of mathematical notation, principles crystallised in the relations between a thousand surfaces and angles. A language of maths dreamed up by an alien with a hundred eyes and a thousand fists. Nobody but I could see that, of course, because nobody had the actual math with which to read them.

It hurt, of course. I figured it out, ripped a principle from one of the abstract shapes, transcribed it onto a sheet of paper with shaking hands as my eyes burned and my nose leaked blood. An eighth of a single puzzle piece in a billion-piece pattern.

But I recognised it. Hyperdimensional mathematics.

“You understand what this means?” I brandished the piece of paper at Evelyn, shaking with cold sweat. In retrospect I must have looked like I’d lost my mind. “Evee, it thinks in hyperdimensional math, that’s what it’s showing us. I-I know this stuff, I look at it and I know it already!”

“Heather, I understand your interest, I really do,” Evelyn told me. “But stop. Think.”

“Ahh?”

“It’s an obvious trap. Think. Put that- put that pencil down, you’re going to put your own eye out. Look, it can’t escape that body, can’t cross the air-gap, can’t use the television to do anything except communicate, and it’s chosen to communicate hyperdimensional math right into your brain, you-”

“It isn’t- guh.”

I choked a little, had to swallow and wet my lips. Praem brought me a glass of water, and Zheng had opened her eyes again, watching us from the kitchen with the interested silence of a big cat observing curious prey.

Evelyn waited for me to recover. I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand, scrubbed at my nosebleed, and gestured at the piece of paper again, at the mass of figures I’d scrawled.

“It isn’t anything new,” I explained, but had to avert my eyes before the thoughts made me nauseous again. “These are principles and equations I already know, I think. Things I’ve already been ... taught. But it’s easier this way. Like when you already know

something but somebody else explains it better than you can. It's so much clearer. Eevee, it makes sense to me already, but it's ... easier."

I stared at the television screen again, at the multicoloured abstract shapes moving within, and it seemed as if I gazed not upon a curved surface of glass, or a three-dimensional representation within, but into an actual space that existed inside the television, a window into some other universe in which all our physical laws were represented in some alien language of space and angle and colour.

The shifting shapes looked like something a computer might generate, part of a model of a hurricane or a tidal wave or an explosion, but moving at a hundredth of the speed, each piece rotating with aching slowness. Each separate shape had dozens upon dozens of sides and angles, and each angle and side corresponded to every other side and angle to reveal a molten-hot piece of hyperdimensional mathematics. If I concentrated – and held onto the contents of my stomach – I could write it down.

Much easier than dredging my soul directly for the same information.

Examining my own mind was a nightmare, the things that lurked at the bottom of my subconscious always caught me with barbed hooks of pain, the lessons from the Eye like boiling tar in my brain. But this? This I could drag from another's thoughts, and render down on paper.

"Heather. Heather!"

"Shaman."

"Heather."

It took all three voices – Evelyn, Zheng, and Praem – to snap me back to myself. I scrubbed at my face, realised my nosebleed had restarted, my head pounding, my limbs shaking, a sickness growing in my belly.

"That doesn't mean it couldn't still be a trap," Evelyn said. "A crude one, improvised, yes, but a trap all the same ... Heather? Are you alright?"

"No."

I almost fell out of the chair that first time. Zheng was fastest on her

feet, into the workshop and catching me before my head hit the ground, strong arms around my back and belly as she hoisted me back into the chair.

Just exhaustion, excitement, and the natural drain of hyperdimensional mathematics, even if I was only interpreting rather than executing. A glass of water and a good sit and five minutes later I felt ready to try again.

“I’ve been wracking my brain for months about how to do this,” I said, looking between a frowning Evelyn and a towering Zheng. “How on earth I’m supposed to fight the Eye, wrestle Maisie from it when even the simplest thing makes me bleed and pass out. This is the first lead I’ve had, the first ... source! I have to try, I have to know what’s in there.”

“The wizard may be right, shaman,” Zheng had rumbled, one surprisingly gentle hand resting atop my head like I was a small child. “It may be a trap. Do not ignore uncomfortable potentials.”

“I don’t care if it’s a trap!” I snapped at her. “If it is, that only means I have to beat it. There’s no other choice.”

Zheng stared, then broke into a dark smile. “Shaman.”

“And I ... ” I swallowed, couldn’t say why yet, a mad notion surfacing in my mind. “I don’t think it’s a trap.”

Evelyn slid an old notebook across the table, toward me. Her hand lingered on it, and a strange look lingered in her eyes as she watched me – I recognised it instantly, but this time I welcomed it, because it meant she was going to back me up.

She looked at me with hunger.

“Try again then,” she said. “Let’s verify this works.”

“Then bed,” Praem had intoned.

“Yes,” I sighed, not quite insane with hope just yet. “Once more, then I promise I’ll go to bed. I promise”

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‘Once more’ had turned into a marathon session the following day, the first of many, during which I’d sat at the table and pulled secrets from the mind of a thing that very may well have been trying to corrupt me.

But it didn't, and my suspicions grew.

Raine insisted I never do this alone. We almost had an argument and I blamed myself for that, my hatred of my own weakness turning barbs outward on her. She settled it in the end.

"Who's going to save your sister if this thing cooks your brain?"

"I- Raine, that's not- I-"

"No. I want to be there every time you dive into what it's showing you, so I can pull you out by the scruff of your neck if I have to. And if you don't like that, I can talk to Zheng and get her to enforce the rule instead."

"She encouraged me, she-"

"We're both supposed to be looking after you. And hey, apparently she's bigger and scarier than me. Either I watch, or Zheng pulls you out of the chair."

My acquiescence was more for the sake of keeping that conflict frozen, not any acknowledgement that what I was doing might be dangerous.

We still couldn't figure out what the other part of Mister Squiddy's show meant – the writing on the wall of black bricks. It wasn't any human language, at least not one that had survived the sands of time. But as three weeks passed, he showed it less and less, and focused more on the hyper-complex shapes. As if responding to me.

The more of the shapes I interpreted, the more pages I filled with obscure notation, the more I began to realise that I *didn't* know all of this. At first each fragment of equation had seemed familiar, in the manner a scent might tease out a half-forgotten memory. But as I dug deeper I found these equations were not only filling in gaps, drawing connections I was unaware of, but were exercising the parts of my mind left bruised and bloody by the trip to the abyss. Hyperdimensional mathematics became less like tonguing the socket of a shattered tooth.

"Perhaps it was sent for me, not Eevee."

"The Eye gave you homework?" Raine laughed.

"Don't joke about that," Evelyn had grumbled. "Something this size could never contain the totality of the Eye's thoughts. It's a carrier

with leftover instructions. Heather, that's what you're re-purposing. That's all."

"Yes, right, of course." I'd swallowed, nodded, tried to believe. The Eye had made a second mistake, that was all. This wasn't a miracle. It wasn't intentional.

At least, I never let the opposite thought reach my lips. This creature had been deployed against us as a weapon, lodged inside Alexander's corpse, summoned by the Sharrowford Cult in their worship of the Eye. It had almost killed Evelyn.

But a little voice whispered to me.

This wouldn't be the first time my twin sister had co-opted one of the Eye's vectors, would it?

Her first message had been just as inscrutable, just as terrifying. The Messenger had been an alien thing. And this one hadn't been noticed by anybody except us.

But this trap had sprung before I'd dived into the abyss. Surely Maisie would have told me if this was her doing, wouldn't she? Then again, she'd had so little energy left to communicate, she may not have been able to. She'd expended everything she had to convince me to return to my body. Maybe she'd slipped this in, piggybacking information via the eye's minion.

The possibility ate me up inside. Deny as I might, in my secret heart I treated it as a gift, from Maisie.

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With the kind of clarity that comes from deep and careful consideration of an astoundingly stupid plan, we'd decided not to commit terrorism for the purpose of demolishing Glasswick tower.

We'd spent an awkward evening trying to come up with a safe way to confirm what Amy Stack had claimed – that Alexander's corpse had been removed – but we kept running into the issue of more traps, or the building waking up and eating one of us as it had swallowed Zheng during our escape. None of us wanted to set foot inside, despite Raine's laughing bravado.

"Praem is not going again, I won't send her. Under no conditions," Evelyn had said. "I won't have her risked."

“You’re going soft on her, Eevee,” Raine teased.

“Yes, I am,” Evelyn deadpanned back.

Praem had said nothing to that.

Zheng solved the problem for us, overnight, on her own, without telling anybody first. I’d spent a very confused hour before bed wondering where my mobile phone had gone. She’d returned in the small hours of the morning, waiting triumphantly in the kitchen in her new trench-coat and boots, baggy ribbed sweater and long jeans. We’d bought her two changes of new clothes, and she insisted on this shapeless, baggy outfit as much as possible. I didn’t blame her. It made for a comfortable hug.

“Zheng?” I’d caught the smug look on her face, even through the groggy layers of sleep packed in my head like cotton wool. She stood there almost steaming from the cold outdoors.

“Shaman!” she bellowed a laugh and tossed me my phone.

Of course I fumbled the catch, dropped it on the kitchen floor where it slid into the wall. Thank heaven for phone cases and screen protectors. I sighed and trudged over and picked it up, then turned a confused look on Zheng. “What were you doing with my phone? I was looking for it all last night.”

“Taking pictures.”

I boggled at her and opened the phone’s photo album. “Why didn’t you ask? You can ... you ... ” I thumbed through picture after picture, trailing off. She’d taken hundreds.

She shrugged. “Forgiveness is easier than permission.”

“What ... what is all this?”

Crumbled pieces of wall, masses of shredded concrete, broken spars of rebar, all of it caught in camera-flash that revealed true darkness in the background like the depths of a cave. A half-demolished interior, fallen to ruin and rubble.

“The tower, shaman,” she purred. “It’s a shell. The wizard’s corpse is gone.”

I stared again at the pictures scrolling past on the phone’s tiny backlit screen, quite unreal in the morning spring chill with the comfortable, familiar kitchen all around. Raine shuffled in behind

me and peered over my shoulder.

"This is where Alexander was? The hollowed out floors?" I asked. Zheng grunted an affirmative. "But this was all ... twisted. Biological."

"And now it's dead. They removed the heart. He's gone."

I nodded, still numb.

"You sound disappointed," Raine said. "S'good news though. What are you sore about?"

"Mm," Zheng grunted. "No fight in it."

"No fight in it?" I gaped at her, then tutted and rolled my eyes. "You wanted to fight a *building* again, of course."

"This time I would win, shaman."

We spent breakfast looking over those pictures, even called Twil round so she could tell her family the news, but there really was nothing to see. If a surveyor or homeless person or urban explorer climbed Glasswick tower, they'd come away with an unsolvable mystery of internal vandalism. Evelyn peppered Zheng with questions. Was there any sign of magical workings left? Any bodies? Could she tell how recently anyone else had been there? Was she seen on the way, or back here? What was she thinking, stalking around Sharrowford, even with her change of new clothes and clean hair?

Zheng got bored, answered in monosyllabic grunts.

In the end we settled on a plan to upload some of the pictures to a major urban explorer website. Raine carefully scrubbed them of traceable information, a process that was utterly beyond me, and then posed as an anonymous concerned citizen. She worried about load-bearing walls and building collapses, asked how this could have gotten so bad, and what was the city going to do about it?

The aftermath of that made the local news. One of the photos even cropped up in a Sharrowford newspaper, put through a grainy filter for some unfathomable reason. They tried to blame homeless squatters, but cooler heads pointed out that level of demolition would require weeks of sledgehammering and powered cutting tools, and no nearby residents had reported any noise. The level of decay and crumbled concrete looked months old. Had the

construction been botched, had water got in, was the concrete bad when it was laid?

Glasswick tower came down six months later, properly demolished, no need for illegal explosives or shady calls to the police. Gleaston tower got a once-over by building inspectors, and was pronounced healthy with little fanfare.

The mundane world moved on.

But I didn't, not quite, always half-expecting the rotten, headless corpse of Alexander Lilburne to show up at the window in the dead of night. At least Lozzie didn't seem bothered, and her continued good cheer helped me, helped us all, I suspect. She never mentioned her brother, wasn't interested in the fate of Glasswick tower, spent most of her time doting on Tenny, teaching her to speak, playing with her in the old disused sitting room, reading books to her.

My time split three ways, across those three weeks. One third went toward university. Amid all of this I still had classes and essays, had to 'pull my finger out' as Raine so delicately put it, and scrounge up a few thousand words on Kafka. I played the good student during the day, attended lectures, tried to take notes. I'd never clung to the hope of a normal future before, so pretending now was not easy. Only a love of books kept me going.

The second third went to Maisie, to dragging the secrets of hyperdimensional mathematics from the squid-thing in the workshop, trying to build some kind of blueprint to combat the Eye, with no notion of how to start.

The final third went into my tentacle.

Tentacle, singular, for now. Once I had one down, the others would be easier, or at least that's how the theory went. In my free time I devoured biology textbooks, pinned human anatomy diagrams to the wall behind my laptop, read about the basics of biochemistry and what muscles were made of. I watched videos of squid and octopus on the ocean floor, pined for the abyss, tried to recall the feeling of a mutable, changeable body.

I understood almost none of it; science was not my favourite subject. My best hope was that my subconscious would retain the details, use it as fodder, fill the gaps in my creative work.

My sketches and diagrams were of equally poor quality. I'll never

be an illustrator, but the point was to give my imagination concrete images to work with. I drew the muscles inside my torso, an approximation of my own ribcage, sketched out where the tentacle should attach inside, the ligaments holding it in place, the cartilage anchoring it safely to a dozen internal points of flesh and bone. One night, Raine even suggested we draw on my body itself, and I was going to take her up on that soon.

Kimberly, of all people, surprised me. She taught me how to visualise.

“Most people use it for spells,” she’d said, alone in the little room she’d made her own, sat cross-legged on lilac bed covers taken from her flat in Gleaston tower. She hadn’t moved back out yet, and Evelyn hadn’t asked her to. “Wiccan spells, I mean. I know you don’t believe that stuff, but you don’t have to. I-I’m not going to ask you to.”

“Anything that might help is welcome. I mean it, Kim. Please, go on.”

Kimberly had glanced over at the open door, uncomfortable at the idea others might be listening in. She’d found a new job at last, and spent as much time out of the house as possible, away from Zheng.

“If anybody bothers you,” I told her. “You can come to me. Zheng intimidates you, I’ll slap her. And she has to stand there and take it.”

She glanced up at me and twitched this nervous little smile, tucked a lock of stay auburn hair behind one ear. “Okay. Okay. Please don’t slap her though.”

“I won’t, that was exaggeration.”

“Well, okay, um ... there’s this other way of using visualisation too. Do you know what a tulpa is?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a Buddhist thing,” she said. “But I’ve seen people on the internet use it to make, um ... ” She swallowed, blushed a little. “Imaginary friends.”

“ ... imaginary friends?”

“Don’t laugh, please, it really does work. A-and it’s not a magical

thing, just a mind-trick thing. You do visualisation over and over again, talk to a person who isn't really there, and if you do it right and reinforce it again and again you sort of ... convince your brain it's real. I thought maybe it would work in a similar way for ... well, your, um, problem."

"Yes, yes I can see how that might be useful." I gestured without thinking, at the phantom-limbs that lurked on the edge of my mind.

"You can't ... you don't like, see them already, do you?"

I shook my head. "They're exactly like mundane phantom limbs. I can feel where they should be, not see them. That's all."

Kimberly nodded. "Um, then, close your eyes? S-sit down first, I mean. Sit down and ... close your eyes, and we'll talk through, um, what they look like. What you want them to look like. I think. I've done this before with girls from the coven, for spells. Apparently I'm not bad at leading this sort of thing, so, I hope ... I hope I'm good enough."

"You are, Kim. You are. It's okay, show me how it's done."

= =

"No flying, no flappy, no floop!" Lozzie said, bobbing her head from side to side with each word. "Repeat after me, no flying."

"No flying," Tenny repeated.

She blinked huge black eyes at Lozzie, then looked up and away, out one of the empty castle windows, into the sunless sky and the thick fog beyond. Her flesh-cloak twitched and rippled, threatening to unfold into wings.

"No, no!" Lozzie put her hands on Tenny's shoulders, tamping down the cloak-flutter. "No flying. No going through the sky, not here, no no."

Tenny looked at her again. Her antennae twitched back and forth, and touched each other. We'd learned that meant she was thinking very hard indeed. "No," she echoed.

"No? ... is that a refusal?" I spoke up. "Or an echo? Tenny?"

She looked at me instead, antennae wiggling.

"No," she fluttered.

“You have to stay on the ground,” Lozzie said. “It’s dangerous out there, okay? The big ones are friends.” Lozzie pointed at the squid-moons, two of them visible, sitting on the ground out in the copied mile of Sharrowford, like mountains blotting out the horizon. “But all the small stuff, mmmm, maybe might not know you. So you have to stay, stay here, stay by me and auntie Heather and auntie Raine, okay?”

“Heather!” Tenny repeated.

My name had rapidly become Tenny’s favourite word. We’d figured out she wasn’t capable of the full range of human facial expressions, but when she looked over at me again I could see the happiness in her eyes all the same, shining through that slick-wet darkness.

“Yes, Tenny,” I managed through the tiredness hanging heavy on my bones. “Lozzie’s right. No flying. Stay here, okay?”

Tenny turned her head and gazed out of the window once more, almost wistfully.

“You know, it wouldn’t be a bad place to experiment,” Raine said. “At least here nobody’s gonna spot her.”

“Don’t,” Evelyn hissed – from another dimension, back in Sharrowford, standing about three feet back on the far side of the gateway. “Don’t tempt her and don’t tempt fate. That’s the least you can do. Let’s get this outing over with.”

Tenny rustled her wings one more time, then turned away and puffed up her cheeks. “No flying,” she fluttered.

Her voice had matured over the last three weeks. Perhaps she’d cleared the remnants of amniotic fluid from whatever she used in place of vocal chords, perhaps her lungs had grown stronger, or perhaps it was merely confidence, but the fluttery paper sound of her voice had mellowed into a soft dry buzz not unlike a cicada with the volume turned down. She looked at me, looked at Raine standing outside the circle, then left Lozzie and paced around the perimeter of our little safe zone.

Her tentacles extended from beneath her wings as she paced, reaching out to probe the osseous bone-like walls of the cult’s castle, but even Tenny disliked the touch of this dead husk-place. Her tentacles touched, recoiled, hovered, and went in search of more interesting objects – the hem of Praem’s skirt, the second

unoccupied camp chair next to the one I was sitting in, and my hand.

She slipped her tentacle into my hand. I gave it a squeeze.

“No flying,” she repeated, then made this little huffing breathy noise. Frustration? “No flying, no flying.”

We all shared a glance. Raine was ready to tackle her at the first sign she was going to launch herself at a window.

“She’s not going to,” I said softly, and indicated the hand-holding. “See?”

We were gathered in the lofty upper reaches of what had once been the Sharrowford Cult’s castle, but was rapidly becoming our patio in another dimension, overlooking a verdant jungle of unceasing alien life. Surrounded by the stomach-turning bone-like surfaces of the walls and floor, tendrils of fog creeping in through the bank of windows, with the gateway back to Sharrowford open behind us, we made the best of it. Raine and I, Lozzie with Tenny, Praem standing on silent watch, Evelyn on the far side of the gateway just in case something went wrong.

The purpose of this outing, like the two before it, was to stave off Lozzie’s supernatural narcolepsy.

She still couldn’t go Outside. She and I were still cut off.

Her limit was about a week, before she started nodding and drowsing, falling asleep standing up, blinking bleary eyes at all hours of the day and night alike. This was our plan for regular treatment. Every five or six days Evelyn replaced the necessary parts of the gateway mandala and re-opened the door into the castle.

The first time we did this we’d all stood around looking tense. I’d struggled to keep a lid on my own sense of the absurd. Raine had openly carried her gun. Evelyn had directed Praem in painting a huge magic circle which encompassed the gateway itself, the wall it emerged from, and a massive section of the hallway. Protection against the unknown.

Technically it shouldn’t be scary anymore. We knew the moon-sized monsters beyond were on Lozzie’s side, or at least not hostile, but we had no idea if any of the life in the copied streets had made its

way inside the castle, or what leftovers lurked in the deeper hallways.

The second time we brought folding chairs, a stool, binoculars for looking out of the window and down at the chaotic churn of bizarre life below. We made it into a whole activity, not something to be feared, despite, well, the fog and the cold and the alien cacophony.

The third time, we brought snacks.

This time we were ahead of schedule. Lozzie was still going strong, but we wanted to eliminate all wild card variables for tomorrow. Lozzie was a crucial part of tomorrow's experiment in Carcosa, if only because she could perform it with a flick of her wrist rather than my minutes of agony of blood and vomit. All would go so much quicker if she could simply confirm our hypothesis with a thought.

Tenny padded around the edges of the magic circle, stopped before Praem, and made little buzzing sounds at her. Lozzie caught up and hugged her from behind, around the middle, giggling, her pastel poncho twirling as she skipped along.

Poor Tenny had been cooped up for weeks.

She hadn't seem bored, exactly, listening to Lozzie reading books out loud, following me around and watching all the things I did, stalking Zheng through the house like a territorial puppy. Despite her blunt expressions and basic curiosity, she'd taken a great interest in the chess game, almost eaten several of the pieces, seemed not to be listening as I explained the rules – and then beaten me a dozen times without even looking at the board. Then beaten Evelyn. Then *Praem*, who nobody else had bested yet. Her tentacles had played all the moves. My little savant.

Raine was right, Tenny did need to stretch her wings, eventually. We hadn't let her fly yet, we had no idea how to make it safe for her. Perhaps this place really would be a better option than letting her into the skies over Sharrowford? I glanced out of the windows as well, huge and empty, at the giant squid-moons and the hint of life churning away in the fog below.

Tenny was shivering slightly in the cold fog. Her flesh-cloak pressed tighter, wrapping her deeper in the interior fur. I hugged myself too. Maybe it was warmer down in the streets.

“Heather?” Raine called my name softly.

“I’m fine, just thinking.”

“You sure? Wanna go back and warm up? Not getting cold down there?”

“A little, but I’m fine. Thank you.”

By ‘down there’, Raine meant the canvas camping chair. I was wrapped up in my hoodie and coat. The fog trailed tendrils of pale mist up my trouser cuffs and down my collar, but the thought of those bodies further out there in the rest of the castle made me shudder inside no matter how well I warmed up. I felt like we were playing at normality here, in our little semi-circle of peace and light. Clearing the castle out, getting downstairs and shutting the front door, may well have been completely beyond our resources.

I was still worn out from this morning, from dredging for hyperdimensional mathematics, and I wasn’t looking forward to tomorrow, a churning nervousness in my guts at the idea of voluntarily stepping Outside again after so many weeks.

But at least we’d have an answer. At least we’d know.

Praem and Tenny were speaking with their eyes, a silent conversation of taciturn creatures. Raine and I shared a glance over that, then she shrugged for me and looked out of the glassless window, down into the copied streets of the false mile of Sharrowford far below.

I saw the stiffness in her shoulders in the moment before she spoke.

“Lozzie,” Raine said softly. “Would you please take Tenny back into the workshop?”

“Ahhh? Mmm?” Lozzie looked up. Praem did the same.

“Back? Back in- inside,” Tenny fluttered and frilled, tilting her head one way then the other. She felt the tension as clear as I did. “Are we ... going? Going? Going?”

I got out of the chair, arms crossed against the cold. “Raine, what is it?”

“Lozzie?” Raine turned, grabbing the binoculars off the other chair. “Now, please, back inside.”

Lozzie tugged on Tenny's arm, guided her back through to our reality. They peered at us from the workshop, and Evelyn frowned, looking like she was going to shoo them away, then sighed and stepped through to the castle. "What is it now?" she snapped. "We can't afford distractions tonight, Raine, not-"

"Looks like somebody's been here besides us," Raine said. Praem stepped up next to her, peering out of the window too.

"You watch the edge of the circle!" Evelyn hissed at her, walking stick clicking across the dessicated bone floor.

"What do you mean?" I asked, heart in my throat. "Raine, is somebody out there?"

Raine put the binoculars to her eyes, stared for a moment. She offered them to me and Evelyn, then hesitated and grimaced. "Actually, maybe best not look."

"Give me those," Evelyn hissed, and pulled the binoculars from Raine's grip. She huffed and bustled up to the lip of the window, jamming the binoculars against her face.

"Corpse," Praem intoned, voice carrying like a cracked bell in the fog. Evelyn turned slightly green, lowered the binoculars with a shaking hand, and couldn't breathe for a second or two.

"Corpse?" I echoed in a whisper.

"Two corpses, actually," Raine said with a grim sort of smile.

"There's a pair of dead bodies down in the street, and they ain't no natives."

by this art you may contemplate – 10.2

“We were last here, what? Wednesday night? Three days ago.” Raine nodded out the bank of empty windows, at the corpses far below the castle. “Those poor buggers weren’t down there three days ago. I would’ve noticed.”

“Yes, quite.” Evelyn stepped away from the window, breath shaking as she struggled to compose herself. “You’re not the only one who can recognise blood and guts, Raine. The rest of us do have eyes, anybody would have noticed that, that- that mess, that-”

“Mystery,” Praem intoned in her clear, bell-like voice. Evelyn shut her mouth.

She wasn’t exaggerating. The view through the binoculars made for a gruesome sight. A crimson mess was smeared at the base of what I thought of as Castle Hill, in the perhaps twenty or thirty meters of clear ground before the jumble of the copied Sharrowford streets full of writhing alien life. The carnage was visible enough with the naked eye, even through the sluggish veils of fog; against the omnipresent grey of the dead-jade landscape, red stood out like an open wound.

But the first corpse was intact, and not so easy to pick out.

I had to brace my elbows against my chest to steady the shaking, wavering view through the binoculars, the metal cold in my hands, tendrils of fog obscuring the details. The corpse was flat on its back, legs straight, boot-toes pointing upward, hands folded across the chest like an Egyptian mummy. Short dark hair, heavily muscled build, probably a man. Like he’d just lain down out there and gone to sleep – in the middle of a magic circle.

The circle was clear as day, even through the fog. The rusty red colour left no mystery as to the medium with which it had been painted.

The second corpse was pulped meat. Gender, age, build, clothing,

all pulverised. Spars of snapped bone, organs burst like overripe fruit, a skid mark of crimson and brown and bile on the ground. A dozen meters from the first corpse, almost as if unrelated. The splattered mess seemed unreal through the binocular lenses, but I couldn't stop staring. Perhaps if I looked for long enough, the horrible sight would reveal itself as an imitation in play-doh and paint.

Distant whale-song washed through my mind, the constant refrain of the monolithic squid-moon-children out there in the mist, their train-sized tentacles still dancing in the upper air, uncaring of the human corpses far below. The other local fauna carried on as normal down in the copied streets, a thousand chittering, skittering, hooting sounds muffled by the fog.

We'd learnt that the strange wildlife avoided Castle Hill. We'd never spotted anything risking the climb. But now they avoided the corpses too, as if the dead bodies had created an invisible barrier. Bacteria in a petri dish forced back by a drop of penicillin.

"Heather? Hey, Heather?" Raine touched my shoulder and I jumped, a gasp escaping my throat as I jerked the binoculars down. "Hey, hey, it's a grisly sight, no need to stare. You saw?"

I swallowed hard. It wasn't as if I hadn't seen corpses before, but this seemed almost unreal. "... yes, yes I see. I saw, I mean. Where on earth did they come from?"

"Vermin," Evelyn hissed through her teeth.

"I'm sorry?" I blinked at her, still numb.

"It's Lilburne," she snapped. "It's Lilburne, Edward or zombie Alexander, I won't try to guess which, trying to muscle back in. That," she jabbed the head of her walking stick at the bank of empty windows. "That out there is a failed ritual. Or God forbid, one that worked. Vermin. Bastards." She fumed, working herself up. "Fool to think they'd ever give us an answer. 'Negotiations' my arse, may as well talk terms with a scorpion."

Behind her, on the far side of the gateway and safely back in Sharrowford, in the light and warmth of the workshop, Tenny flinched. Her antennae twitched rapidly, big black eyes gone wide, tentacles darting about. Lozzie tried to hush her, draw her attention with little private whispers, but she was staring at Evelyn now,

fascinated or alarmed, I couldn't tell which.

"Evee, Evee, s-slow down-" I said.

"Evee's right," Raine said, low and serious. She put a hand on my back and gently but firmly steered me away from the window, back toward the gateway. With her other hand, she drew her pistol from inside her jacket. "Which means we're all leaving, right now."

"Raine, we can't just leave those bodies down there," I protested, my heels skidding across the floor.

"I am not bloody well *retreating*," Evelyn spat.

Tenny flinched again, tentacles whirling like a surprised octopus.

Evelyn planted her feet wide, walking stick wider, held at an angle as she tilted her chin up. She stood like a defiant general on some ancient battlefield. This small woman with her bent spine and twisted leg and prosthetic limb was ready to command an army.

What she had, however, was us.

"Evee-" Raine started, a warning in her voice.

Evelyn clicked her fingers. "Praem, fetch my wand. Please," she added, catching herself. "And call Zheng." She turned and shouted over her shoulder, through the gateway, past Tenny and Lozzie. "Zheng! I have need of you, barbarian! Get in here and make yourself useful!"

I closed my eyes and sighed. That was not going to earn Zheng's approval.

"Evelyn Saye, you get back through that magical door," Raine said. "Or I will pick you up and carry you, and you didn't like it much last time I had to do that."

Evelyn's eyes blazed at Raine. "I am not letting them have this. No. Not this time."

Back in the workshop, Zheng appeared around the kitchen doorway, both curious and unimpressed. I caught her eye and pulled a contrite face, a surrogate apology.

"Shaman?" she rumbled.

"Bodies," I said, then turned to Raine, stumbling over both my

words and feet as she all but manhandled me toward the gate. "Raine, we should at least check. That ... the ... the other one, in the circle, he looked like he was sleeping. Maybe he's not ... you know. Dead."

"And maybe it's a trap. Heather, we can totally leave them here."

"Oh yes, why not?" Evelyn said, voice full of scorn. "We've left plenty of other corpses rotting in this castle. We should drag them all back up here and give them a proper burial, fill the back garden with murder evidence waiting to be found."

"E-Evee, that's not what I meant, I-"

"This little beachhead was a mistake," she spat. "I should have set about securing this place weeks ago. Had Praem go over every nook and cranny and put wards on every door and window. Well, no more mistakes!"

Raine sighed and made a gesture like she wanted to put her face in her hand. Praem hadn't moved a muscle to obey her mistress. Zheng eyed Tenny, who was staring back at her like a cornered cat, tentacles drifting wide to present a united front. Lozzie cooed and stroked her and tried to lead her off to one side, out of Zheng's path, but Tenny kept glancing back at us, rooted to the spot, caught between Zheng and an argument.

"Lozzie," I hissed. "Get Tenny out of the workshop, please, this is upsetting her."

"I'm trying! Try-try. Tenny-tens come come, come on, baaaaack, back we goooo," Lozzie sing-songed at her, tugging on one arm and one tentacle. But Tenny was on high alert now, flesh-cloak twitching and shuddering, void-black eyes blinking back and forth at every cross word.

"Evee, hey, come on," Raine said. "I've spelled it out already. Those dead dudes weren't down there three days ago, which means somebody's been here."

"Yes! Exactly!" Evelyn spat.

"And they might still be here."

Raine let her eyes say the rest. She looked pointedly down the castle corridor, in the direction of the throne room, which we hadn't visited a second time since our run-in with Lozzie's giant, be-

tentacled friend. Then she looked the other way, in the direction we'd never explored. The corridor kinked off into unknown depths lit only by the omnipresent foggy light from outdoors. Then she looked at Evelyn again.

"Oh," I said, a cold chill creeping up my spine.

Evelyn opened her mouth and hesitated, as if reluctant to give ground. She swallowed and finally followed Raine's glance down the corridor, stared for a moment, then swore under her breath.

Zheng strode across the workshop. She passed Tenny without a glance, ignored her rising hiss, and asked me a silent question with her eyes.

"We found corpses." I indicated the window.

Zheng stepped through the gate. Wisps of cloying fog swirled around her legs as she disturbed the soupy air. She shot a dead-eyed, murderous look down at Evelyn as she passed, but Evelyn wasn't paying attention, grinding her teeth and trying to think. Zheng walked to the window and gripped the edge, showing no disgust at the unnatural, dead-thing touch of the bone-like grey jade. She peered down and grunted, waved away my offer of binoculars.

"If this was a trap," Evelyn was saying, slowly and carefully, chewing each word. "They would have made their move already. They'd be up here with a gun, or have planted an IED for us, or ... something. Anything. Praem, what are you waiting for? Fetch my wand. *Please?*" She managed to make 'please' sound like an order, and this time Praem finally relented. She marched past her mistress and back into the workshop. "I am not leaving these idiot amateurs to despoil and colonise this place a second time. We need to find the gate they came in through and shit on it from a very great height."

"There's too many factors here," Raine said, shaking her head. "What if that guy down there isn't dead? Maybe it's a zombie playing possum. Maybe it's a trap to draw us away from the gate up here. We don't know. Here, Heather," she pushed me toward the gateway. "Back through, please? For me?"

"Dead," Zheng purred from by the window. She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath through her nose. "Rotten meat. Old

blood.”

“Which means they’ve been there a while?” I asked. “Raine stop-stop! Raine! We have to come here, for Lozzie if nothing else. I don’t want this place to be unsafe for us, I-” My heart almost leapt out of my mouth. “Zheng! Zheng, stop!”

My giant demon-host had one foot up on the lip of the window, hands braced, about to jump. She stopped at my shout, turned and raised an eyebrow.

Back in the workshop, Tenny reacted too, like a startled puppy blinking and shaking at raised voices. She kept trying to look at all of us in turn, tentacles waving back and forth, unsure where to go, who to attend to. Lozzie hugged her forcefully, whispering something to her, trying to pull her back.

“Shaman?” Zheng asked.

“Don’t you dare!” I said. “That drop is hundreds of feet!”

“Join me, shaman?” She broke into a dark, toothy grin. “You enjoyed the last time we flew.”

“We fell! To escape being eaten by a building. And that happened in Sharrowford, which is not full of giant monsters and alien fauna, not physical ones. Those creatures out there could react to you in any which way at all. Yes, maybe you can repair broken knees in twenty minutes, but what if one of those things out there takes a disliking to you?” I sighed. “Don’t, please.”

“The *tengerood*?” Zheng shrugged. “A good fight.”

I sighed, squeezed my eyes shut, and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“I’m going, shaman. Try to keep up, Wizard,” she growled at Evelyn.

“I- no, Zheng, I- don’t. Don’t. If you jump, I’m going to worry about you. If I worry about you, I’m going to make us all rush down through the castle looking for the front door. If there’s anybody in here, or there is a trap set for us, we could blunder into it.”

Zheng stared at me for a moment, dark and unreadable, then sighed a huge, growling sigh and took a step back from the edge. She rolled a shrug. “Monkeys.”

"You know this castle, don't you?" Evelyn said to her. "You can guide us down there."

Zheng looked at her like something she'd found smeared on the underside of her boot. Evelyn didn't seem to notice – but Tenny did. She hissed, a rapid fluttery sound like a very irate giant moth.

Praem returned at that exact moment, stepping through the gateway with Evelyn's scrimshawed thighbone-baton. She handed it over and Evelyn tucked it under her armpit, hand cradling the other end, like a cavalry commander with a riding whip.

"I am not letting those vermin have this place," Evelyn said. "We go down there, we find what they were up to, we find their entry point and destroy it."

Raine opened her mouth, but Evelyn carried on over her.

"And no, for your information, I am not suggesting we go blundering down there like a bull in a china shop, kicking bodies that could well be bloody traps, I'm not *you*, Raine. I'm going to go over this castle with a fine-tooth comb, I'm going to put wards on every window, every fucking crack in the walls, and I'm going to get that front door closed. If you won't help, I'll call Twil, we'll get this done properly. This is an all-night operation, and it can. Not. Wait." Evelyn went on, almost shouting, punctuating her words by banging her walking stick against the floor. "I might not be able to stop these vermin from infesting the edges of Sharrowford, but I am not letting them back in here! Not at my fucking front door!"

"Evee–"

"And yes," Evelyn spat. "I realise I am being a bitch. I am taking my anger out on you. On all of you, on my friends, on ... " She swallowed hard, let out a huge breath, rapidly losing steam.

"Because I can't believe I've made a mistake like this again. Because I'm a useless cripple, and lazy, and I should have seen this coming."

Evelyn stopped. Silence settled. She couldn't meet anybody's eyes.

"Evee, you're not useless," I said.

"I'm sorry," she barked.

Tenny broke.

Like a faithful hound confused and goaded by the agitation of her

human pack, Tenny decided it was time to help.

She broke free from Lozzie's grip with a boneless wriggle of too much muscle under silken skin, burst through the gateway with a hop and a skip and an excited fluttery hiss. Her tentacles shot out like an octopus pulling itself into a crevasse, a dozen black ropes gripping the edges of the window. Evelyn went wide eyed and stumbled back, losing her balance before Praem caught her. I reached out, a cry on my lips as I realised what Tenny was doing. Zheng rocked back on her heels, dodging out of the way, a grin ripping across her face.

Raine leapt, tried to tackle Tenny to the ground. Too late.

The tentacles acted like the rubber band of a slingshot, Tenny's body the stone to be launched.

With an explosion of muscular force, she shot off the ground and straight through the window, tentacles whipping out behind her.

Raine skidded to a halt and almost crashed into the wall. I stood dumbfounded, until Lozzie raced past me. Zheng was laughing, Lozzie was shouting, and I was still processing what I'd just seen, even as we crowded shoulder-to-shoulder at the window.

Out in the open air, Tenny cut through the veils of fog like a bullet, the mist parting and swirling as she passed. Her tentacles withdrew suddenly, vanishing under her still-folded wings like a cluster of worms retreating into the ground.

"Ahhhh!" Lozzie had both fists clenched, genuine panic written all over her face. "Flap!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "You have to flap your wings! Tenny!"

The fog swallowed her voice, a tiny sound against the extra-dimensional immensity.

A tiny black form now, Tenny reached the peak of her arc and began to fall. For one heart-stopping moment I thought she might not know what to do. Lozzie put her hands to her mouth, white as a sheet.

A thunderous leathery whip-crack proved me wrong; Tenny stretched her wings to their full span, twenty-four feet from tip to tip, and caught the air.

Fog swirled in the sudden down-draft, and her descent slowed.

The softly furred underside ruffled as she flapped once, twice, three times, adjusting the angle, getting it just right. The smaller pair of rear wings acted like rudders, guiding her descent as she turned a fall into a glide. The nearest of the local otherworldly fauna – a cluster of crab-like creatures sunning themselves on a nearby grey-jade imitation roof – began to move away, shuffling down the sides of the building, like prey animals scuttling for cover in the shadow of a hawk.

Tenny went down in a narrow spiral, a daring manoeuvre, kicking her feet out as she neared the ground, the no-man's-land surrounding Castle Hill. She toed *terra firma* with little hopping steps to slow her momentum, finally bouncing to a halt and ruffling her wings, shaking them all over, stretching and flexing the unfamiliar muscles. She folded them back up, back into a cloak, and turned to look at the bodies.

The whole process had taken less than a minute. I was speechless, and only realised I'd been holding my breath when I finally let it go. My head was pounding.

Raine let out a low whistle. "Now that's a shakedown flight for the record books."

"Clever puppy," Zheng purred.

"Tenny!" Lozzie leaned right out of the window. Sympathetic vertigo wriggled up my legs, but Zheng reached out and grabbed a fistful of Lozzie's poncho, her other hand looped around Lozzie's waistband.

"Clever indeed," I said, swallowing on a dry mouth. "She understood exactly what we were arguing about. I think. She's um, solving the problem."

"Well, if there is anybody still here, we've definitely alerted them now," Evelyn grumbled.

"Tenny! No!" Lozzie scolded, her voice swallowed by the fog as she waved both arms out of the window. "No! Come back up here! Bad girl!"

Tenny turned to the sound of Lozzie's voice for a second, her face so tiny from all the way up here in the apex of the castle. Fog banks drifted between us, rendered her hazy and indistinct. Either she couldn't hear Lozzie or pretended not to. Tentacles snaked out from

beneath her wings and one of them waved at us, but the others turned to examine the dead bodies on the grey-jade ground.

“If that’s a real circle, she’s about to breach it,” Evelyn hissed.

“Tenny!” Lozzie shouted again. “Don’t touch! No touch! No!” She terminated her panicked plea with a sound like a steam kettle.

But nothing happened. No explosion, no flash of light, no discharge of magical power, no plummeting temperature as Tenny’s innocent curiosity triggered some obvious trap. Her tentacles crossed the edge of that crimson magic circle and set about investigating the corpse within.

She poked at his face and got no reaction, peeled his eyelids back and leaned over to look the eyeballs. Her tentacles felt around his throat and neck, perhaps for a pulse, and rummaged in his pockets and the inside of his lightweight raincoat. They extracted a few small items and dropped them on the ground. One tentacle looped back to her own face, holding up something small and white.

“Spiral-bound notebook,” Raine said, binoculars pressed to her eye sockets. “She dropped a wallet, keys, phone, some tissues I think. Hard to tell.”

Tenny stared at the notebook, antennae flickering, while her tentacles lifted the dead man’s wrists and let them flop back to the ground.

“Can she read?” Evelyn wondered out loud.

“Not yet,” Lozzie said, voice shaking. “I-I’m trying to teach her letters, she’s doing really really well, she’s so clever. So clever. Tenny! Tenny, leave it alone! Tenny!”

After a moment the tentacle held the notebook up and waved it, as if showing us, then tucked back close to Tenny’s body and held onto it tight. The rest of her tentacles rolled the dead man onto his side, flopping him about before gravity returned him to his back, his arms sprawling and loose.

“No rigor mortis,” Raine said. “Means he’s either been dead only a couple of hours, or more than two days. My money’s on the latter.”

“I said, *yoshou*, rotten meat,” Zheng purred.

“No missing flesh either. The bodies haven’t been touched,” Raine

murmured. “No carrion eaters out there, I guess. Maybe our proteins aren’t compatible.”

Tenny lost interest in the intact corpse. Her tentacles drifted away, toward the shattered one.

“Tenny, no!” Lozzie called. “No! No touching that! It’s dirty!”

Tenny looked up again. Tentacles shivered and bobbed. Her human mouth moved and she waved her arms about, flesh-cloak twitching. A distant trilling, fluttering noise floated through the foggy air. Whatever she was trying to say was impossible to make out at this distance, but she sounded both confident and happy. A puppy, trying to help.

“It’s dirty!” Lozzie yelled. “No touching!”

But she needn’t have bothered. Tenny’s physical transformation had apparently imbued her with a basic sense of disgust, but she’d simply never encountered it before. Her tentacles hovered over the shattered bones and pulped meat of the second corpse, but refused to touch the blood and guts. She took a step back as if confused and the tentacles withdrew too. I couldn’t see her expression at this distance, but her body language was unmistakable: confusion, repulsion, sickness. She stared at the bloody corpse, then hopped and skipped a few paces back up the hill.

“Come back up here, Tenny!” Lozzie shouted. She waved her arms, flapping. “Come back up! Flap flap! Fly back!”

“Tenny!” I added my voice. “Fly back here!”

“Yes, keep shouting, I’m sure that’s doing wonders for our element of surprise,” Evelyn drawled. I turned and shot her a sharp frown, and she cleared her throat with a guilty look. “If she knows how to fly, I’m certain she knows to come back now.”

Tenny looked up and down the castle, then out into the city and the cacophony of weird monsters, then down at her own feet, as if only just realising the reality of her physical position. I sighed in relief when she spread her wings again, stretching her flesh-cloak out into a rippling leathery mass and cupping the air. She did a little hopping run, beating the air with her wings, using the incline of Castle Hill to build momentum. She got her feet off the ground for one wing-beat, skidded on a heel like a plane bouncing on a runway – and then stumbled to a stop.

“Oh shit,” Evelyn hissed.

“Wait, wait,” Raine warned, one hand up.

“Try again! Tenny, try again!” Lozzie called, shrill with wild panic.

Tenny tried again. She ran with her head down, slender legs pumping, wings heaving at the air, but it was like watching an ostrich try to take flight. She stumbled and fell and rolled in a ball, protected by her wings wrapping around herself. She got up again and ran back down the hill, hopping and skipping and unable to generate enough lift. She hissed and whirred and trilled, her frustration carrying through the fog between us.

“Too heavy,” Praem intoned.

“Yes, she’s too heavy for unassisted flight,” Evelyn said, frowning down at the scurrying black figure below us. “Not without a helping hand from gravity.”

“Let her try again,” Raine said. “She’s a baby bird, come on, she can do it.”

“Catapult!” Lozzie called, spreading her hands in rough imitation of Tenny’s explosive launch earlier. “Tenny, catapult, up!”

But Tenny didn’t seem to understand.

“That behaviour may have been pure instinct,” Evelyn said. “She won’t do it again without an obvious method nearby.”

Tenny stopped trying after attempt number five. Winded, bruised, confused. Stuck. She stood next to the corpses and kept looking up at us, making loud open-mouthed trilling sounds, then glancing up the length of Castle Hill towards the where the front door must be, hidden from our position by the bulk of the structure. She hugged herself with both arms beneath her flesh cloak. Her tentacles had drawn in close and tight, formed a spear-wall around her body. She took a few shuffling, halting steps up the hill, probably making for the door.

“Yeah, okay,” Raine said, low and serious. She lowered the binoculars. “She ain’t flying back.”

“Stay there! Tenny, stay where you are!” Lozzie called, waving her arms through the window. She turned to us, eyes wide, gone pale. “We have to go down and get her, we have to go fetch her!” She

turned back to the window, then hopped away, trying to be in two places at once, halted by Zheng's grip on her poncho and jeans. She scrambled for a moment like a hound on a choke-chain.

"Slow down, mooncalf," Zheng purred.

"It's my fault, I brought her here," Lozzie almost wailed, crying now, starting to cry. "I'm so dumb, I'm so dumb, I'm so dumb!" She whirled back to the window, leaning all the way out again. "Tenny, don't move! Stay there!"

A soft trilling sound drifted up from far below.

"No, it's my fault," Evelyn said, hard and clipped. "I lost my temper. I shouted." She huffed at herself and shook her head, face in one hand.

"Please, we we need to go down there and get her!" Lozzie said, crying openly now. "She'll get lost on the way back or ... mmmmm ... " Lozzie's lips shook, unwilling to voice her fears.

"The puppy will be fine," Zheng purred. "She is almost as strong as me."

"Why didn't you stop her?!" Lozzie turned on Zheng, all tiny blazing frown. "You could have caught her!"

"Little ones have to learn, mooncalf."

I'd never seen Lozzie like this before. Even when we'd come to rescue her from this very castle, when she'd been running around down there in the cavernous depths below, barefoot, abused, with blood in her teeth, she'd still retained her bouncy humour, as inappropriate as it had seemed at the time. But now all her coping mechanisms had fallen away. She'd been reduced to lashing out in panic.

Because, in a way, Tenny was her baby.

"Zheng could go fetch her," Raine was saying. "She'd be fastest."

"Don't be an idiot," Evelyn snapped. "Zheng terrifies her, she'll run off."

"The puppy can make her own way back," Zheng purred.

"No!" Lozzie yelled. "I'll go, I'll go, it's my fault, it's all my-"

"It's not, stop saying that," Evelyn snapped at her. Lozzie recoiled.

"Lozzie," I said, and the soft certainty in my voice stilled her panic. She stared at me with red-rimmed eyes. "You need to stay up here."

"But, Heather-

"You need to stay here and stay at that window so Tenny knows we're coming down to fetch her," I continued, feeling myself pulling together inside, like bootlaces tightening around my mind. "You stay here, keep calling to her, keep her from panicking. Praem, you're going to stay with Lozzie."

"Why her?" Evelyn snapped. "I'm not sitting this out, I need to look at those-"

"Stop," I said, calm and soft. "Evelyn, Raine, Zheng, and me, we go find the front door and bring Tenny back up here."

"Heather, hey," Raine started to say. "I don't want you in harm's way-"

"Somebody needs to hug Tenny," I said, sighed, and resisted the urge to squeeze the bridge of my nose. "And hyperdimensional mathematics is always our trump card. Isn't it?"

Raine opened her mouth, then closed it and pulled a rueful smile.

"Good," I carried on. "You wouldn't let me go down there without you, so you're coming. Zheng is our best bet at fighting off anything or anyone inside the castle, and Evelyn knows how to deal with any magical traps. Don't question me please, we need to do this quickly, and there's no time to call Twil right now."

"Right you are, boss," Raine said. From anybody else, in any other tone of voice, it would have been mockery. Raine meant it.

"Praem, please would you fetch the torch from the kitchen, the big one?" I asked. "Give it to Lozzie so she can shine it through the fog."

Raine cleared her throat. "Tactical question. What if this is a trap to draw us away from the gateway?"

"We use the same plan as for Carcosa," Evelyn jumped in. "My spider-servitors hold the gateway from the other side. Praem can manhandle Lozzie back through if anything comes this way."

"I'll brain them!" Lizzie declared, genuinely angry at this prospect. "With the torch!"

"A disappointing errand, shaman," Zheng rumbled. "The puppy can find her own way back up."

I shot a frown up at Zheng's disinterest. "Nobody gets left behind. That includes you too." I didn't need to raise my voice. "I thought you would have learnt that by now."

Zheng stared at me, then shrugged herself into an easy grin, showing all her sharp teeth. "Then we hunt, shaman. In this rat warren? Nothing stands a chance. Boring."

= =

Zheng went first – 'taking point' as Raine called it – striding ten paces ahead of us through the twisting, jinking, rotten-jade corridors of the fog-castle, looking for trouble.

Every few minutes she stopped and cocked her head to listen for sounds beyond the range of human hearing. Deep within the castle, the thick walls of pseudo-bone muffled the cacophony of hoots and grunts and animal calls from the streets outdoors, rendered them down into a ghostly background tease on the edge of one's ears. Even the cosmic whale-song was deadened to an ethereal hint at the back of the mind.

Occasionally we passed near the outer walls and the mercy of open windows, once emerging onto a short stretch of exposed battlement, wreathed in a bank of fog so thick we couldn't see the far end, let alone down to the ground below, but most of our hurried journey plunged through darkness. The cult's source of local electricity – probably some kind of portable petrol generator – was long dead, and their strings of light bulbs did not necessarily follow a logical path down to the front door, but instead spread out through the inner passages of the castle like a sinus infection, rambling off in dead ends and trailing to nothing on unpromising spurs. Zheng's back rolled and flexed in the light from Raine's handheld torch, as Evelyn and I stuck close behind.

Unfortunately, Evelyn's assumption was incorrect. Zheng did not recall the inner layout of the castle.

"Memory as a slave is no simple thing, wizard," she explained. "Emotional details remain strong. Others, not so much."

We could have taken the route Lozzie and I had used to reach the throne room, descended through the shaft cut into the bowels of the castle, down to the vast cavernous darkness and the single distant star in the void below, crossed the metal walkways over the remains of the Outsider which had created this sub-dimensional space. In theory it wouldn't be too hard, and we could ascend back to near the entrance hall. But Lozzie and I had both vetoed the idea before we left. Without Lozzie with us, passing over that thing was too risky for an unprotected human mind.

Evelyn drew a map as we went, scribbling at a pad balanced on one forearm. She slapped blank post-it notes on the walls at every junction, a classic paper trail. I didn't envy her the task, and more than once I caught her shuddering in disgust as her fingers grazed the dead grey-jade substance, undeniably organic despite appearances.

"If there was anybody here in force, we'd know," Raine whispered into the dark. "This place echoes like a bitch. But that doesn't rule out one or two people, stealthy and careful."

"Or a zombie or two that survived," Evelyn muttered under her breath.

"Then let us find them," Zheng said, loud and uncaring, her voice echoing down the twisty little passages. "Come out, little things! Come oooouuuut!"

Evelyn winced. Raine pulled a pained grin.

Zheng's cry trailed off, bouncing down into the depths. She turned and grinned at us over her shoulder, shrugging. "See? Nothing."

"Good," I said. "Now keep moving."

For me this journey was both the retreading and exorcism of a nightmare. When I'd first squirmed and stumbled and fled through these passages and dark empty rooms, I'd been alone, cut off from my friends, pursued by monsters, and that misadventure had culminated in the horror that lay below the castle, the corpses of mutated children, capture, and murder. Now I strode the opposite way, accompanied by power.

We passed a couple of older corpses. A zombie who'd died in the fighting, head pulled off by Twil, and the body of a middle-aged man slumped against a wall. Both were all skin and bone, the

unnatural foggy air of this alien dimension having mummified them inside their own leathery skin. The man's hands had been reduced to claws, still wrapped tight around the handle of a heavy cattle-prod.

"At least I don't need to shoot anybody this time," Raine whispered. She had her gun out as we crept through the darkness, pointed carefully at the ground, safety on.

"Don't jinx us," Evelyn said.

"Yes, let's not count our chickens," I whispered back.

When we finally reached the wide open space of the entrance hall, the relief came as a palpable, physical sensation, a loosening of back muscles, a weakness in my knees. Raine actually sighed, then laughed and shook her head at herself. Foggy light streamed in through the massive open metal doors at the front, still wedged at the same angle we'd left them when we'd forced our way in, months ago. We emerged on the overlooking balcony, right in front of the sweeping staircase.

The floor below was littered with the corpses of defeated zombies, beheaded, torn in two, bullet wounds through the skulls. All of them were dessicated and dry, skin sunken around the bones, most of their eyes open and shrivelled in death. They hadn't rotted properly, no smell of spoilt meat in the air. I stared, confused for a moment, before I realised this was the aftermath of our fight.

"Well, I remember this place," Raine said, then squeezed my shoulder. "Heather?"

"I uh ... " I swallowed. "Haven't actually seen this before."

I'd been unconscious when we'd passed through here on our way out, carried on Raine's back.

"The *laangren* did all this?" Zheng asked, an appreciative smile on her face. She laughed low in her throat. "I have underestimated her."

"Not all of it," Evelyn snapped. "Hurry up, she'll be just beyond the doors."

"Try not to look down, Heather," Raine murmured for my ears alone. She tucked the torch away and took my hand. "Just one foot in front of the other. Here, I'll lead."

“Yes, yes, of course,” I managed, taking a deep breath. “We need to get to Tenny, we’re almost there.”

We hurried down the steps and across the killing field. I tried not to think about it, but I failed – all of these zombies had been homeless people, kidnapped by the Sharrowford Cult, minds hollowed out and replaced with demons.

“They should be buried,” I whispered, a lump in my throat. “We should ... we should do *something*. A- marker ... or let their families ... or ... ”

“Maybe we can,” Raine whispered, and squeezed my hand.

Zheng strode on without a care. Evelyn put a hand over her mouth and tried to conceal her shaking, and I decided to pretend I hadn’t noticed, leave her with some dignity intact. We reached the huge metal front door and Zheng slipped out first, followed by the rest of us, out into the clinging chill fog.

To my incredible relief, Tenny was right where we’d left her, a little black and white figure huddled near the base of the hill, obscured by the drifting fog, arms wrapped around herself, tentacles bristling like spines.

Unfortunately, everything else was right where we’d left it too.

It was like standing on the precipice of a gigantic tidal pool.

Beyond the protection of the castle walls, exposed to the writhing life in the copied streets and the mountains of the squid-moons overhead, we mere humans faltered in our tracks. Evelyn and Raine both stopped, Raine’s hand anchoring me even as I tried to pull forward. Evelyn subconsciously stepped closer to Raine, staring out at the indistinct shapes in the foggy deep.

I was more used to this, after ten years of Outside dreams, ten years of Slipping, but even I felt a drop in the pit of my stomach at the prospect of walking down that hill.

Thirty or so meters from the base of Castle Hill rose the copied streets of a fake Sharrowford, cast in dead grey jade. The buildings themselves were bad enough, familiar shapes made uncanny, but the last time we’d been down here they had not been infested. Among the streets and behind the houses and on the roofs writhed and slithered and hopped and jerked such a multitude of strange

life, like sea creatures squeezed into the cracks in the ocean floor. Multi-jointed chitinous arms rose above the rooftops, terminating in crab-claws and tendril feelers and tiny lamprey-eel mouths. Huge barnacle-things made of metal slid slowly through the streets in herds, leaving trails of thick slime behind. Stilt-legged walkers strode in the middle distance, picking their way carefully over the houses. Jellyfish tendrils dangled downward to catch unwary prey. Shelled amalgamations scuttled in the shadows, snapping at each other with their claws. Soft, squishy, white-fleshed mollusk things flitted behind the buildings as if slipping through water.

And above it all, the gargantuan tentacles of the squid-moons drifted back and forth in an endless dance.

Zheng strode on a few steps, then stopped and turned when she realised we weren't following. "Shaman?"

Down the hill, Tenny looked up. She must have seen us. A fluttery trilling noise added itself to the cacophony of sound from the streets. Her tentacles waved, and she hopped up the hill toward us.

"Tenny! Stay!" Lozzie's voice called from somewhere very high up, rendered ghostly in the fog.

"Carcosa will be worse," I said.

"W-what?" Evelyn muttered, blinking at me.

"Carcosa will be worse," I repeated, then swallowed.

"You're not ... unsettled?" she asked.

Raine took a long, deep breath, and nodded once. "Real pea souper out here, hey?" She pulled a jaunty grin. "Just gotta wade into it."

Evelyn looked at her like she was mad. She was, sort of.

"Of course I'm unsettled, I have no idea how Raine does it," I said to Evelyn, and managed a small, jittery smile. "But you just have to focus on what you're here to do, try to ignore all the ... things, things bigger than you. Things you can't take in. Keep them at the edge of your mind. It's what I always tried to do."

Evelyn swallowed again, then nodded as well. She tilted her chin up and set her shoulders. "I do need to look at those bodies. Waste to come all this way otherwise."

"Monkeys," Zheng muttered, shaking her head.

"You're telling me you'd jump into that?" Evelyn hissed at her, gesturing at the roil of alien life out in the streets. "I don't believe you. Not even you, you bloody great oaf."

Zheng barked a single laugh. "They would flee before I could get started."

"Tenny!" I called out as we finally hurried ahead.

She came trotting out of the fog to meet us halfway, tentacles all a-whirl. She barrelled into me and almost knocked me off my feet, but I held on and hugged her around the shoulders.

"Heath- Heath— Heath!"

"Yes, yes, it's okay, it's okay. It's okay Tenny, we're all here." I held on tight. Hugging Tenny was a uniquely disquieting experience, because part of my mind told me I was holding a sack of writhing serpents, all muscle trying to clamp itself around me, no bones beneath her skin. Her tentacles joined in too, wrapping around to squeeze me tight. I let out a little 'oof' of air squeezed out of my lungs, my face squished against her fur. "Not so hard Tenny, ease down, please."

"Heather!" she trilled.

Ahead of us, Raine held up her torch to the fog. She clicked it on and off three times, in the rough direction of the apex of the castle. Our pre-arranged signal for Lozzie. We all watched as an answering point of light in the high fog flickered on and off. Raine nodded and put the torch away. "Right, that'll be them heading back inside."

"Inside?" Tenny buzzed, blinking big black eyes at Raine. "Back inside? Inside?"

"Not yet," Evelyn said.

She glanced further down the hill, at the corpses and the magic circle. They lay only a dozen meters or so away now. The circle was a single enclosure, wrapped in words that looked like Arabic. A couple of knives and a plastic food tray full of dried blood sat on the floor next to it, along with some crimson-stained paintbrushes and the objects Tenny had pulled from the dead man's pockets.

The corpse in the circle was indeed a man, perhaps in his mid twenties. Tall, with wide shoulders and a barrel chest, muscled but not like a bodybuilder. He wore thick jeans and a raincoat, a

fisherman's jumper on underneath that. Curly dark hair formed a corona about his head, and like every other corpse in this place, he'd not rotted properly. He looked a little dry and pinched, but that was all.

His face seemed intensely peaceful in death, as if he'd died in a moment of utter conviction.

It made my skin crawl.

"Inside?" Tenny repeated.

"Not just yet, Tenny," I said. "We need to look at the dead people."

"Dead," she said.

"Old blood," Zheng grunted, and nodded beyond the dead man, at the bloody, pulped mess of the second corpse. I could only sneak a glance before feeling sick. Mashed meat, pounded into the ground, the jade grey cracked with incredible force beneath the spars of bone and scraps of clothing, as if the unlucky victim had been hit with a wrecking ball.

None of us said it out loud, but we all glanced up, at the drifting tentacles of the nearest squid moon.

"You think ... ?" Evelyn let it trail off.

"No, wizard," Zheng purred. "It doesn't care. Only for the mooncalf."

"You know that for a fact?" Evelyn asked. Zheng shrugged.

"Maybe," Raine said, trying to sound light, and failing for once.

"Maybe not. Ten minutes, max, then we get back inside."

"Agreed," Evelyn answered, then looked at Tenny. "Does she have the notebook still? Give it here."

"Tenny? Do you have the notebook?" I asked, still half-wrapped in a hug by her tentacles and one arm. "Please, give it to auntie Eevee."

"Auntie Eevee," Tenny trilled. A tentacle ventured out from behind her body, still clutching the spiral-bound notepad. Evelyn took it gingerly, as if accepting a treat from the mouth of a dog. The tentacle had left tiny needle-point teeth marks in the cover.

"What's in it?" Raine asked, her eyes doing a circuit of the fog

around us, her handgun still out, pointed low.

Evelyn flipped through the pages, scanning them quickly. She shook her head. "I don't know. Not in English. Poetry, I think, lots of lines crossed out. A poet's private composition book, this isn't important, let's get a look at the bod-" she flipped another page and stopped dead. The colour drained from her face.

"Evee?" I said, a spike of panic in my chest. "Evelyn?"

"What?" Raine glanced round at the tone in my voice.

Evelyn slammed the notebook shut, eyes wide, shaking – and shot a look of cold fury at the corpse lying in the circle.

"Evee? Evee, what is it?" I let go of Tenny with one hand and reached out. Evelyn growled her frustration and flipped the notebook open again, holding it up for all to see.

I choked down a scream.

It was too real. I took several seconds to realise it was drawn in ballpoint pen.

The work of a master, real enough to make my heartbeat race and my guts clench up. Cold sweat broke out on my back, and Tenny must have sensed my fear because she squeezed me tighter, letting out little throaty trilling sounds of sympathetic alarm.

The artist had used nothing but black ink, yet had somehow managed to vary the shading and pressure by such precise degrees as to produce reality, right there on the page. He – assuming it had belonged to the dead man on the ground – had even incorporated the ruled notebook lines into the picture, creating an illusion of space and depth so believable that one's mind was tricked for a few heart-stopping seconds.

Shadowed depths of a static grey sky, the great lid peeled all the way back, the void inside.

It was the Eye.

"Oh God."

"Heather, hey," Raine took my shoulder. "It's a drawing, okay? It's a picture, it's ... fucking weird-ass shit, Goddamn," Raine swore, then forced a grin. "It's a drawing, that's all."

I shook my head, numb. Zheng rumbled, unimpressed. Tenny actually squeaked.

Evelyn brandished the notepad, blazing with fury, and swept an arm wide at the corpse and the circle. “I am not falling for this bullshit a second time!”

by this art you may contemplate – 10.3

“Evelyn, would you please- p-please put that thing away?” I screwed my eyes shut. Shivering. Felt sick. “I can’t- I can’t- can’t-”

Trauma is a paradoxical chimera.

Not a single day passed in which I didn’t think about the Eye, at least a little. Maisie, once locked away in the most private chambers of my heart for ten years, now roamed at will through my mind, no longer a mere ghost of longing for a missing part of myself, but now the painful promise of reunion. To think about Maisie was to chew for hours on fresh fears of being too late. Of losing her a second time, her soul wasting away to nothing out there in the darkness, in her prison cell, physical or otherwise. Every day I thought about how to rescue her, all our half-made plans planting seeds of anxiety in my chest, and it always came back to hyperdimensional mathematics. Which implied, at the end of all thought, the Eye.

It had tortured my nightmares for so long, taught and tormented me in equal value, filled my sleep with confused memories of Wonderland. Kept the pain fresh, the wounds open. The sight of it filling an alien sky had defined the secret underside of my life for so long. Summoning a mental image of the hateful thing was easy enough; a great darkness fills the sky from horizon to horizon, blotting out the stars, the the lid cracking open and peeling back like an ocean parting, mountain ranges of creased flesh revealing the void inside, the void that eats thought, that sees through you, through stone and metal and cloth and flesh and cells and picks apart your neurons and atoms and flays you to nothing.

But memory can never truly record that violation, that rummaging inside one’s brain, the utter atomic nakedness before that solar flare of attention. In memories and plans, it’s just a huge eyeball in the sky. I can think about it, without wanting to curl up in the tightest space I can find and scream my lungs out.

In ballpoint pen scribble on a page of cheap notepad paper, this

cursed artist, whoever he had been in life, had captured the faintest splinter of that sensation.

He'd seen the Eye. He knew it.

Cold sweat broke out down my back, under my arms, on my face. My clammy hands grasped Tenny, clutching her fur as if I was about to fall off the ground and into the sky. Heart thumping, pulse in my throat, head pounding. Sick, sick, sick; wanted to vomit. Years of conditioning told my body I needed to purge this threat, throw it all back up. The abyssal thing I'd once been agreed wholeheartedly, wanted to make me small, fast, slip away, into a crack in the ground. Flee and hide and be very, very quiet.

"Heath! Heath!" Tenny let out little trilling sounds. I felt additional tentacles wrap themselves around my body, hug me tight, looping behind my arms and cradling my back.

"Heather?" Raine was saying my name too, but I could only shake my head. "Heather, it's away. It's gone. It's okay, it's just a drawing, it's just a picture. Heather-"

"Hissss!" went Tenny, right next to my head, low and throaty and alarmed. Feet tripped back, not mine.

"Woah, woah, woah, okay there," Raine said. "Okay Tenny, it's fine, we're cool, it's cool. Cool, okay?"

"Put it away, put it away, please, please-" a voice hissed, and I realised it was mine.

"It's gone!" Evelyn said. "Heather, call her off! We don't have time for this."

I blinked my eyes open, confused and shaking and sweating, to find that Tenny had built a fortress around me.

We'd already been caught together in a half-disengaged hug when Evelyn had held up the drawing of the Eye, but Tenny had pulled me in tighter, wrapped tentacles around my middle and waist, and thrown one of her wings over my shoulders like a heavy, furred cloak that reached down to my ankles, warm and fuzzy and enclosing. My fear and her confusion had triggered her instinctive camouflage, and for a moment my head swam with vertigo at the sight of my own body obscured and hazy, replaced with an image of the grey ground and wispy fog behind us.

The other half of Tenny's tentacles formed a spear-wall again, directed mostly at the notepad and Evelyn, but partly at Raine too.

Evelyn had stepped back, clutching the notebook, frowning with disapproval. Raine looked vaguely amused, but also distracted. She kept one eye – and her gun – on the dubious corpse in the magic circle.

"I-I'm sorry, I- it just- Tenny, it's okay, it's okay, n-no need for that," I managed, putting a hand on one of Tenny's extra limbs and gently easing it downward. She opened her mouth and trilled at me, confused. "I'm fine, Tenny. Evelyn and Raine are always friends, always safe, I'm not- it's the picture in the ... it's fine."

"Maaah?" Tenny vocalised, but she seemed to get the gist of it. Her tentacles drifted lower as she stood down.

"Good puppy," Zheng purred. "You know how to protect your master."

Tenny did a sort of misaligned blink at Zheng, almost sullen, and bleated, "baaaaaah."

Tenny's protective embrace was a bizarre feeling. She wasn't obviously built like Zheng or toned and tight like Raine, but thick ropes of muscle moved beneath the skin of her tentacles and torso, smooth and wriggly against me, cushioned by patches of thick, soft fur. The comfort of her wing over my shoulder was very much welcome right now, and for the first time in my life I got a sense of what it might be like to own a very large, affectionate dog. I focused on that feeling as hard as I could, tried not to think about the Eye.

My own phantom limbs helped, trying to reciprocate Tenny's hug. A pity neither of us could feel that.

"Heather, how you holding up?" Raine risked a quick sidelong glance back at me. "We can turn around right now if you want."

"What?" Evelyn snapped. "No, Raine, we absolutely cannot 'turn around.'"

"That- that image was too real." I swallowed, clinging harder to Tenny to have something to feel, something real under my hands. "I'm ... I can deal with this," I said, and wasn't sure if it was a lie or not.

“Raine, you keep that thing covered,” Evelyn said, nodding at the intact corpse in the circle. She tucked the notebook with its terrible secret into her coat pocket, and pulled the scrimshawed thighbone out from under her arm, settling her fingers into the correct positions amid the designs. “If it so much as twitches a little finger, shoot it.”

“Don’t have to tell me that,” Raine murmured.

“Absolute fool,” Evelyn hissed. I was about to tut at her, but when she carried on I realised she was talking about herself. “Can’t even look at notes without risking my brains getting scooped out through my eyeballs. Some fucking mage I am. Should have burned it on sight.”

She was frowning at the corpse and the magic circle, hard and stony. Tenny’s panic had taken the edge off her fury, turned it cold and slow and practical. A blessing in disguise.

“Do you think this is a trap?” I asked, my voice dropping to an involuntary whisper. “Like with Alexander?”

Evelyn grumbled and shrugged. “I don’t know. That picture was just art, not magic, it wasn’t doing anything. But this? This stinks.” She tilted her head sideways at the magic circle. It was by far the most simple circle I’d seen so far, in the last half-year of occult experiences – despite the rusty red colour and the flaking of dried blood, it was just a single enclosing line, and a thin band of text in what looked like Arabic. Evelyn tutted. “Dammit, that’s not even Arabic around the circle either, I can’t make out a single word. If it’s Farsi I can struggle through with a dictionary, maybe, but anything more obscure we’re up shit creek with no paddle. This needs to be *dismantled*, piece by-”

“O’ great and mighty serpent,” Zheng rumbled, eyes tracing the words. “Accept this unworthy offering, this morsel of immortality, this paltry sign of our weakness and pitiful contrition. Deliver us from evil that we may take unto ourselves the knowledge cast without care from your hide, and find sustenance in the dust of your scales.” She snorted and curled her lips in disgust. “Monkey pleading.”

“What language is it?” Evelyn asked.

“Welsh.”

“What?” Evelyn boggled at her. I blinked too. “Welsh? There’s no magical works in Welsh.”

Zheng gestured at the circle.

“Okay, yes,” Evelyn huffed. “Obviously there’s at least one. Why the hell is it written in Arabic script? What the hell is the point in that?”

“Camouflage?” I tried.

Raine cleared her throat and nodded upward, at the squid-moon tentacles disturbing the sea of fog above our heads. “Maybe that’s what they speak.”

“I didn’t even know it was possible to write Welsh with Arabic, it must look awful,” Evelyn tutted. “No wonder I can’t bloody well read it, that’s absurd. I ... I don’t know what what we’re looking at here. I admit it, fine, I’m lost. This is like walking into the back garden and finding a dead penguin.”

“Back up the hill, to the door,” Raine said, with the kind of softness in her voice that brooked no argument. “Then I’ll double-tap this guy and we’ll see what happens.”

“Oh yes, wonderful plan,” Evelyn said. “You’d be a real bomb squad expert, Raine. Let’s just shoot the detonator and ‘see what happens.’ Suicidal idiot.”

For once, Raine didn’t have a comeback. She cracked a silent grimace of a smile.

“Wait, wait, Evee,” I said, struggling to marshal my thoughts, struggling to resist the urge to hide myself completely beneath Tenny’s wing. “Tenny already handled the corpse. She looked in his eyes, rolled him over, disturbed the circle too. Wouldn’t that have triggered a trap?”

“Yes,” Tenny fluttered.

“And she’s fine. You’re fine, aren’t you, Tenny?”

“Weh,” she said. “Yes.”

“Maybe it triggers off human neuroarchitecture,” Evelyn said. “Don’t touch it again. Don’t touch anything. We need ... ” She swallowed, spat the word. “Petrol. A lot of it. Praem can go fetch some and we’ll burn both these bodies without-”

Zheng strode past us and stepped right over the lip of the circle.

“What did I just say?!” Evelyn all but shrieked. Tenny bleated a warning, all a-flutter, trying to drag me backward. Raine stayed stock still, aim unwavering, pistol pointed at the corpse.

“I would smell one like me, wizard,” Zheng purred. “This is an empty shell.” She scuffed at the magic circle as she passed, and the toe of her boot scored a line through the flaky red substance, breaking the pattern.

“You don’t know that! You-”

“As if any newborn could overcome the inside of my skull, *Laoyeh’s* or not. Let it try.”

Zheng squatted down next to the corpse, grabbed it by the hair and hauled it up into a sitting position. The man’s arms hung loose, hands trailing on the ground. His face was so peaceful, almost smiling. Zheng peeled one of his eyes open and stared at the dull glassy orb within.

She went very still. A bank of fog drifted in, muting the colours and hazing the edges of my vision.

Zheng wasn’t moving.

“Zheng?” My heart climbed into my throat. “Zheng?!”

“Oh shit. Shit,” Evelyn hissed, backing up several paces. She tripped over her own feet or her walking stick, and would have gone sprawling – but Tenny shot out one tentacle and caught her around the shoulders, another tentacle grabbing the stick and pushing it firmly into her hand.

Raine adjusted her aim to Zheng’s head.

“Zheng? Zheng?” I tried again.

“Speak to us, big girl,” Raine murmured. “Stop playing, yeah, stop playing, ‘cos this ain’t funny.”

Zheng’s head turned with aching robotic slowness, like a puppet grinding along rusty wires, until she regarded us through a mask of flesh, blank of expression, eyes dead and empty.

Raine took a step back. Tenny hissed like a snake. Evelyn blurted out a snatch of Latin.

“Boo,” said Zheng – and burst into a roar of a laughter. She threw her head back and laughed so hard she cried a few stray tears, shaking the poor corpse back and forth by its hair. “You monkeys! You fall for the most base of tricks! Never gets old!”

“Zheng,” I scolded, letting out a huge breath. “I can’t believe you. You’re such a child sometimes.”

Raine lowered the pistol and let out a sigh too, a twist of a smile on her lips.

Evelyn went red in the face, mouth opening and closing. “You- you absolute- I can’t- you utter *cow*.”

“Scared, wizard?” Zheng rumbled, still chuckling.

“How could I not be?!” Evelyn raged at her, voice carrying out into the fog, absorbed and returned as ghostly echoes. That brought her anger up short, eyes flickering out at the monstrous shapes in the streets beyond. Evelyn clutched her walking stick and shut her mouth.

“Good,” Zheng purred. “Remember that, wizard. If not for the shaman, I would have already twisted your head off and eaten your heart.”

Evelyn boggled at her, lost for words, mouth hanging open.

“Oh, I don’t believe this,” I said, exasperated. “Now, really? Eevee, you offended her when you called her a barbarian and tried to order her around earlier. Zheng, Evelyn does that sort of thing with everybody, it’s nothing to do with you.”

Zheng grunted, rolled a shrug, and dropped the corpse at last. The skull hit the ground with a dull crack.

Evelyn just stared. “We don’t ... don’t have time for this petty ... this.” She took a slow breath, shaking her head, trying to pull herself back together. “If- if there’s nothing in that corpse, why is he-”

“Poison,” Zheng purred. “His flesh reeks of hemlock.”

“Hemlock?” Raine said. “Real old school, huh.”

Hemlock? Our mystery corpse was no Socrates, that was for certain, but the idea sent a terrible shudder down my back. I didn’t want to consider the details too closely, but the modern world probably

offered far more accessible forms of poisonous death than hemlock.

“A ... ritual sacrifice?” I murmured to myself.

A ritual sacrifice with a drawing of the Eye in his pocket. My mind jumped to the obvious conclusion, that this man might be a survivor of the Sharrowford Cult, one who hadn't stayed for their final act of defiance against the Eye, one who had decided to serve instead of resist.

“Zheng, do you recognise this man? From the cult?”

“No,” she grunted. “But I never bothered to remember most of their faces. Only the wizards. This is no wizard.”

“Yeeeeeeah,” Raine said with a sigh. “I'm thinking the same thing, right. How else would he have that notebook? Eye cultist, which means he would have been after you, Heather.”

“Yes,” I whispered. Tenny's grip tightened on my torso.

“And then how the hell did he end up here?” Evelyn snapped.

“Doing ... this? This circle isn't even real magic. Tenny broke it, Zheng disturbed it, it's in bloody *Welsh*. The circle itself isn't even embellished, it's just a basic enclosure, it doesn't do anything. This whole thing is nonsense. Maybe it was a trap, a more traditional one, meant for us days ago, but they set it up and then got bored. And this poor idiot is just bait.”

Zheng reached out and ran a fingertip along the edge of the circle.

“No, wizard.”

“ ... no?”

“This magic is more real than yours. Raw.” She raised her eyes to Evelyn, then up into the fog, to the nearest squid-moon, giant tentacles drifting through the air far above our heads. “A plea to a God. What could be more real?”

“Pleading for help,” I murmured, and a lump grew in my throat.

“The words around the circle, pleading for help. Maybe he decided he wanted out, and ... ” I trailed off.

“The one on the left,” Raine said softly.

“I'm sorry?”

Raine pointed upward with one hand, gun still held low in the

other. "The leftmost tentacle from here. Look near the tip."

I squinted up into the mist, trying to make out what Raine had seen. Detail was almost impossible at this distance, and we'd left the binoculars up in the castle with Lozzie, just in case. Evelyn squinted too. Zheng straightened up, stepped back out of the circle, and saw it first. She snorted with derisive laughter.

"Plea answered," she purred.

I made it out a moment later. A dark red patch near the tip of one of the nearest squid-moon's tentacles. A smear, gone dry and rusty.

"Offering." Raine pointed at the man in the circle. "Petitioner." She gestured to the ugly mound of mashed meat we'd been trying not to look at. "Rejection." She nodded up at the distant tentacle again, then grinned over at Evelyn. "How's that for a theory?"

"I don't ... I don't know," Evelyn muttered. She looked from the tentacle overhead to the dry red smear of the pulverised corpse nearby, but instantly looked away again, hand to her mouth. "Perhaps Lozzie can speak with her giant friend up there," she said, dripping sarcasm. "Maybe it knows what happened."

"Maybe she can," I said, taking her seriously.

"Dammit, they must have come from somewhere!" Evelyn hissed, her temper fraying once more. "There must be doorway, the remains of a gate, but ... " She glanced left and right along the walls of the copied buildings, the roil of monsters beyond in the streets. I followed her gaze and found one of them looking back at us, a sort of soft-shelled crustacean clinging to the side of a nearby dead-jade house. Four eyes on stalks watched us. I made eye contact and it scuttled away, back down an alleyway, stepping on the shells of a clutch of barnacle-like protrusions.

"Does it need to be on a solid surface?" Raine asked.

"Yes. And it'll leave marks. Obvious ones. A doorway shape burned into the stone, first few molecules of matter scraped off, that sort of thing. Our gateway would have stripped the paint from the wall back home if I hadn't done it myself first. But we can't go out there. How on earth could they have come from *there*? This is hopeless, we shouldn't be down here, we shouldn't. Never again. We close that castle up from the inside, ward every window and door and never come out here again."

“Agreed. Five more minutes and we move,” Raine said, stepping forward. “But first, let’s see if we can dig up any dirt on our boy here.”

“What?” I blinked at Raine. “How are you going to ... oh.”

She tucked her pistol away and crouched down by the items Tenny had extracted from the dead man’s pockets – a half-used packet of large-size tissues, a battered black leather wallet, a heavy set of a keys, and a mobile phone which looked older than me. Raine inspected the phone first, the tiny LCD screen and the blue plastic case.

“Antique technology enthusiast, or drug dealer? Take your pick.” She held the power button down, but nothing happened.

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked.

“Yes, Raine, what are you on about?” Evelyn asked.

“Drug dealer phone.” Raine wagged it at us. “Harder to track one of these, doesn’t use modern apps or anything. Dead as he is, though. Battery must be ancient, probably ran down sitting out here. Might be able to find a charger, see his contact list, but that’s a stretch. Gives me a thought though.”

She reached for the packet of tissues.

From inside a few tissues worth of camouflage, Raine extracted a plastic zip-lock bag of white powder. She opened a corner, sniffed carefully, and let out a low whistle. “We’re lucky Tenny didn’t eat this, she’d be bouncing off the walls.”

“Bwaaaaah,” went Tenny, almost as if she resented the implication.

“I don’t follow?” I said. “Is that caster sugar?”

Raine laughed and gave me a look of such affection that it seemed out of place here, amid the fog and monsters and corpses. “It’s blow, Heather. Coke. Cocaine.”

“O-oh.”

“Not enough to be selling though. Probably just his personal stash. Funny thing to bring along to a ritual suicide, maybe he needed a hit before the end.” She slipped the phone and the drugs into her own jacket and reached for the keys.

"You're keeping that crap?" Evelyn snapped.

"No, I'm going to flush it down the toilet," Raine said with an indulgent smile. "What, did you think I was gonna to sell it on the street? You wound me, Evee."

"Wouldn't put it past you," Evelyn grumbled.

Raine reached down to pick up the wallet and keys, jangling the latter. "Car keys, door keys, some kind of electronic access fob thing, maybe for a work-site. Oooh, got an address tag here." She turned her head sideways. "82 Barksloof Way. Maybe where he lived, there's a lead. Now for the main event, let's find out who you are, hey?"

She flipped the wallet open and stopped dead, and let out a theatrical sigh and tut of disappointment. Empty.

"Bugger," Evelyn said.

"Forty quid in notes, some coins ... ah!" Raine lit up and extracted a little orange card from deep inside the wallet. "Train ticket, from 'Stalybridge' station – that's Manchester, I think – to Sharrowford central, five days ago. No return, one way." Raine slipped the rest of her finds into her jacket and stared at the dead man. "Looks like chunky here did not expect to be going home."

"Then it was suicide. A sacrifice." Evelyn grit her teeth and looked upward again, at the tentacles far above our heads.

"At least we have an address," I said. "That's a clue, isn't it?"

"We're not living in a detective novel," Evelyn grumbled, eyes glued to the motion of the nearest giant tentacle overhead, like watching the weather. "You aren't Miss bloody Marple. This doesn't help us find out how they got in here, or stop them from doing it again."

"I think you'd make a great lady detective, Evelyn. On television," I said. She frowned at me. I cleared my throat, feeling awkward and out of place, trying anything to keep my mind on the moment and away from the Eye. "What I meant is, if we can find this man's flat or house, perhaps that's somewhere to start?"

"Evelyn Saye, consulting detective." Raine cracked a grin, standing up and dusting off her hands. "We can work on a pilot script later though, let's have a look at contestant number two."

‘Contestant number two.’ I almost told her off for that one, but I could barely look without feeling sick.

The second corpse wasn’t far off, but we’d all been ignoring it, pretending it didn’t exist, trying not to look at it. Except Zheng, who I’m certain wasn’t bothered at all. A smear of pulped meat and shattered bone. The one mercy was the lack of smell; the fog and the strange air of this place had dried out the gruesome mass, like smoked meat.

Raine looked at it now without a care. Tenny let out a bleat of protest, perhaps feeling my revulsion.

“Hmmm, on second thoughts, I might need rubber gloves for that,” Raine said.

“There might be ... uh.” Evelyn closed her eyes and put her hand to her mouth again. Even thinking about it made her look ill. “Might be a wallet or a ... card, something, in a pocket?”

“Yeah. Yeah, maybe.” Raine walked over to it, but still didn’t touch the wreckage of flesh and dried blood.

“Squeamish, *yoshou*?” Zheng chuckled.

“Ehhh,” Raine let out the verbal equivalent of a shrug. “A little yeah, not gonna lie. S’pretty grisly. Don’t wanna get this on my cuffs.”

Zheng held no such hygienic scruples. She grunted and strode over to the smeared crimson mess, and set straight to her bloody work.

Raine stood at Zheng’s back, to watch, peer, point, and make suggestions. Evelyn backed up a few paces and I followed, dragging Tenny after me, shielding my vision with one hand. I winced through the waves of disgust at the sounds of peeling dried meat, Zheng scraping bits of human being off the ground. Evelyn actually turned away, hand to her mouth.

“We’ll get back upstairs and you can set about your plan of securing the castle, yes, Evee?” I stammered, saying anything, nothing, just to talk, to drown out the disgusting noises from behind us, to avoid thinking about my lover over there watching without the slightest hesitation. “Evelyn, how does that sound? I think you could do it all tonight, if you’re willing to disturb your sleeping pattern with coffee. I think, um.”

Evelyn just grunted and nodded.

“Yaaaaah,” Tenny trilled agreement. “Coffffff.”

“No coffee for you, I think, I doubt you need it. Do you, Tenny? No, you have lots of energy and, um ... um ... yes, and-”

I caught a snatch of Raine’s voice from behind us. “Is that a piece of pelvis? Look under there, might find a back pocket.”

“And you could even call Twil,” I carried on, louder. “Her family might know something about this, this um, yes. But really it would just be an excuse to have her over for the night. Maybe if she bodyguards you a bit you can work on the courage to ask her to hold your hand or ... mm. Yes, right. Good plan, good plan, Heather.”

Evelyn waved me off.

“Evee, may I ... may I see the notebook, please?”

She shot me a confused frown. “You’re sure?” I nodded. “This isn’t some weird masochistic thing, is it?”

“Not at all. Just ... trying to occupy my thoughts.”

Half a lie. I’d come down from the shaking fear earlier, left a sticky layer of cold sweat on my skin, but the very fact I’d been so afraid in the first place was festering in my guts. With nothing else to think about, my mind turned back to our purpose, to the Eye, to Maisie.

Evelyn frowned harder, but she dug the notebook back out of her coat pocket and thrust it at me. She watched me take it gingerly, watched me flip the cover up. I knew I was quivering slightly, a lump in my throat, and I made no effort to hide my reaction.

“This is a masochism thing,” she said. “Isn’t it?”

“No. No, quite the opposite. I need to face it again. If I can’t even look at a drawing of it, what use am I going to be?”

I flicked through the dead man’s notebook. Evelyn had been right, it was all poetry, lots of lines crossed out and rewritten with slightly different wording, meter and rhythm apparent, though in a language I couldn’t read. I did, however, recognise it right away.

“Evee, this is all in Welsh too. Not with Arabic script though.” I

said. “You didn’t recognise this earlier?”

“Why should I recognise Welsh?”

“Weeell,” Tenny trilled, and made it sound like ‘whale’.

I flipped the final page before the drawing, and revealed the depiction of the Eye once more. A catch in my throat, a quivering in my belly, a hitch in my heartbeat. I stared at it, into the void under the lid, making a conscious effort to control my breathing. Forced a swallow down my throat. Evelyn said something, but I wasn’t listening. Tenny purred, or at least made an approximation of a purr, and tried to hug me tighter.

After several long seconds I began to see past the nightmare image, picked out each individual pen stroke, each twist of the nib, imagined the hand going back and forth to shade in the darkness. I dismantled the image in my mind.

It was, in the end, just a drawing. The whole was greater than the sum of the parts, but the parts were meaningless.

Could I do the same to the Eye itself? Break it down into bite sized chunks?

“Aversion therapy?” Evelyn asked softly.

“Of a kind.” I sighed, looked up at her, managed a small smile.

From behind us came a swishing of material, like a coat pulled tight over a pair of shoulders, and I assumed Raine had turned around and adjusted her jacket – but the sound that followed drew nails of ice down my spine.

A wheeze, a hiss, like cracked bellows before a dying fire, struggling to fill themselves.

It was so bizarre I glanced back before I could stop myself. Raine and Zheng had their backs to us, and Zheng was wrist-deep in gore, lifting up some unrecognisable shredded chunk of human anatomy. Between them and us lay the magic circle and the corpse within.

Not lying down anymore. The corpse of the heavyset man was sitting upright. Eyes open. Arms limp.

Breathing. He took a second breath, filling dry lungs with an awful grating sound.

“Uh ... uh ... R-Raine?” I stammered.

All hell broke loose; Raine span at the sound of fear in my voice, drawing her gun. She saw the man and didn't even blink, aimed at him with unwavering precision. Zheng whirled too, a nightmare vision with bloody hands, hunched and ready for violence. Evelyn choked on a scream, raising her wand of carved thighbone, fingers fumbling over the right place to grasp. Tenny let out a hiss like a king cobra.

But the eye of the storm didn't move.

The corpse in the circle – most certainly not a corpse anymore, if he had ever truly been dead in the first place – didn't react to us. He blinked, slowly and painfully, a dry click over dessicated eyeballs. He twitched his right hand up to his face, as if suffering some kind of palsy, and slapped his own cheek.

“You said it was dead!” said Evelyn.

“It was,” Zheng growled. She took three stalking steps, circling the heavysset man at a wary distance, like a tiger confronted by an unknown competitor. “It still is.”

“What?”

“This is a dead thing still.”

The man swayed at the waist, like he was merely sleepy instead of rising from the dead. He pulled one leg back, trying to get it underneath him.

Zheng was right. It had been months since I'd seen a zombie – apart from herself and Praem, both exceptions that proved the rule – but I would never forget the way they'd moved. The broken shuffling, the misfiring synapses, the jerky muscles; demons in stolen flesh. This living corpse in front of us was clumsy and slow, yes, but like a man who'd awoken from a deep dream, not hijacked by a creature that didn't understand how to pilot the human form.

“Hey there, buddy,” Raine said to him, loud and clear, circling the other way from Zheng. “Hey. Hey, can you hear me? Got a gun pointed at you, friend, because I don't know what the hell you are. Blink, wave a hand, give us a sign there's someone home, yeah? Anything? Anything at all?”

The dead man raised his head of curly dark hair and finally seemed

to see us. A drowsy, heavy-lidded look slid from face to face. His eyeballs were all wrong, dried out. His throat bobbed with a horrible rasping effort to swallow, then his mouth opened and a sandpaper croak spilled forth.

“Oh lads, oh we are in big trouble here lads,” he slurred.

I didn’t know if I should laugh or scream, he was so out of place.

His was not the voice of some hard-bitten cultist performing secret rituals in a hidden pocket dimension, or the whispering death-voice of a lich back from the grave. He spoke like a football fan after a hardcore pub crawl, waking from a hangover in a student dorm.

“Hey, hey.” Raine clicked her fingers to get his attention, pistol still aimed at him. “You talking to yourself there mate?”

“Alright, alright,” he huffed, grimacing, but didn’t look at Raine. “Yeah, pipe down, I get it, gotta scarper, gotta move, move move move.”

“Scarper?” Raine said out loud, and pulled a big showy wince. “Don’t think so.”

“I can take his head off,” Zheng purred. “Better now than later.”

“No!” Evelyn snapped. “We need to interrogate him, not get rid of him, I want to know how he got here, he-”

Evelyn yelped in surprise. The heavysset man had been pushing to get his feet underneath him, head nodding as if drunk, and he finally succeeded with a lurch and a stumble, right toward Evelyn and Tenny and I. Tenny hissed, Evelyn almost fell on her arse, but I couldn’t help but feel completely unthreatened. This man was a wreck. Even I could have probably have pushed him over.

But Zheng thought otherwise. She lunged for him, arms wide, a rugby tackle from hell. No human being could have avoided that, seven feet of toned muscle and quicksilver reflexes charging you down. An Olympic sprinter couldn’t have escaped.

But the dead man lurched drunkenly to the side, and Zheng went sprawling past him.

Raine actually burst out laughing. “Keep up, big girl!” Tenny let out a warble of amusement too, and I almost allowed myself a single, humourless laugh.

Zheng growled, span, and lunged again. On the second successful stumbling dodge, nobody was laughing anymore.

The man stumbled and wobbled like he was in the terminal stages of an alcoholic binge, barely keeping his balance, head wavering, blinking slow, eyes unfocused and half-open at best. But Zheng couldn't catch him – because he wasn't reacting to her. Every dodge and stumble he made seemed like random chance, too chaotic to control or predict. Zheng skidded past him no less than four times, and on the fourth he let out a confused laugh.

“Zheng, this isn't working,” I said.

“Oi oi, lass,” the dead man said, looking at Raine. “You've got my coke. They say you've got my coke, yeah?”

“How do you know that?”

“Um,” the man said, and dodged out of the way again as Zheng tried a fifth time. He bobbed back and almost fell over. Zheng switched tactics, feigned one way to drive him the other, but that time he didn't bother moving, just stood there blinking as she sailed through the spot he should have moved to.

“Stand still!” Zheng roared in frustration.

“I am,” he slurred.

She tried again, and he stumbled out of the way.

“Sorry, sorry,” he held up both hands and almost fell over again as he stumbled backward.

“Either this guy's a bona-fide drunken master,” Raine said. “Or something weird is going down.”

The man stopped again, frowning – at me. Tenny hissed at him, but he ignored her. I met his gaze and his face lit up like a light bulb going on inside his skull. “Oh shit, shit, you're *her*. The witch. Witchy shit, yeah.”

“Who are you?” I asked. “You- you know about the Eye, don't you?”

“Nobody, right. Not important. Nah beef, girl, nah beef.”

“Yeah, that's right,” Raine said. “You've got no beef with Heather, so we're cool. Still gotta tell us who you are though.”

"This isn't funny," Evelyn hissed. "This is somebody messing with us. This is a trap, or a trick, or something we're not seeing. Back away from him, don't get near him. Raine," she snapped. "Bring him down."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

Raine looked at the heavyset dead man as he dodged out of Zheng's bull-charge again, then down at the gun in her hand, then at Evelyn. "With this?"

"Of course with that! What else would I be talking about?"

"Ehhh, Eevee, I'm not really down with shooting a guy who isn't doing anything to us. Hey, mate!" Raine called. "You gonna like, try to kill us or whatever?"

"Oh man," the walking corpse slurred again, one eye closed. "S' nice to hang but we gotta get going. Still here, why am I still here? Yeah, I know, alright? Alright, alright, that's a plan. Cunning plan, like a fox. Smart like a fox, yeah!"

The man wobbled back several steps and hit himself in the head with one hand. I believe he was trying to salute us.

"Later, girlyies!" he slurred, and took off running toward the copied Sharrowford streets.

Well 'running', for a given value of running. He stumbled and overbalanced and barely stopped himself from flying face-first into the ground. Zheng pursued like a bullet, but the chase instantly dissolved into a farce. Every time she leapt for him he fell over, weaved out of the way, landed on his own arse, or just stopped while she sailed past.

As he went he seemed to regain coordination and balance, picked up speed, and got his feet moving. His dodges became less slapstick pratfall and more actual drunken martial art.

"I don't believe this," Evelyn hissed. "He's getting away. Will you shoot him now?"

"Eevee," I tutted.

"In the back?" Raine grimaced. "He won't make it five minutes in all that." She nodded at the monsters roiling and snapping and

slurping out in the streets. “Besides, somehow I get the sense he’d step out of the way.”

“You’d let him go too, Heather?” Evelyn turned on me. “A stray cultist, one who might be after you. Tell Raine! Tell her to shoot him, for God’s sake!”

“I don’t ... Eevee, he’s *running* from us ... I ... ”

Evelyn had a point. I disliked it, but she was right. The absolute last thing we wanted was a servant of the Eye free in Sharrowford, let alone one who Zheng couldn’t even touch. The abyssal ruthlessness nestled in the heart of my soul screamed *kill this man*.

“Heather,” Evelyn hissed.

“Raine, can you-” I swallowed, one half of me fighting the other. “Please shoot him. In the leg, maybe, if you can. Please.”

Thankfully for my nerves, Raine didn’t second-guess the request. She raised the pistol in both hands and steadied her aim, breathed out slowly, and waited for Zheng to make another failed charge before she pulled the trigger. I wanted to close my eyes, but I fought the urge. I asked for this; don’t look away. This is your decision.

In the split-second before Raine pulled the trigger, the heavysset man fell over on his arse. The crack of gunfire split the air, made me jump, and the bullet passed harmlessly over the man’s head.

Raine actually laughed at the absurdity of it. “Told you so.”

“Try again!” Evelyn snapped.

“Eevee, this guy is beyond us. I’m just wasting bullets.”

“Zheng! Zheng, come back!” I yelled, but she was ignoring us now. The dead man was up and running again, and executed a perfect weave-duck motion from the waist as Zheng missed him again.

He finally reached the streets, vaulted over a barnacle-creature of dull grey metal, slipped beneath the roving limbs of some scuttling crustacean, and slipped down a side-street. Zheng plunged after him, ripping through hanging sheets of living mollusk flesh, batting aside a clutch of anemone-like feelers.

“Zheng! Stop!” I called out.

Her blood was up, the puzzle of this prey too much for her. She vanished into the chaos beyond the fog.

by this art you may contemplate – 10.4

Two hours later, Zheng had still not returned.

“Not planning any sleep tonight?” Raine asked, a knowing smile in her voice, as I shuffled back into the magical workshop.

“... um.” I blinked and squinted, trying to figure out what she meant – and trying to see her.

I knew Raine was right there, my lover and ally and closest friend, but for a torturous moment my brain couldn’t digest the sense data from my eyeballs. My mind was running all the wrong routines, too focused on phantom limbs, on abyssal instinct, expecting a world of cold currents and predatory jaws. All I saw was a jumble of ape parts wrapped in hard angles of metal and plastic.

“Heather?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Squeezed them hard, took a deep breath, pictured Raine in my mind’s eye.

When I looked again, I saw her, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Raine stood before the open gateway, on this side, safely in reality. She was wearing an old second-hand motorcycle jacket which she’d picked up earlier this week, padded and armoured inside, all red and black leather. She held her pistol deceptively loose in one hand, pointed at the floor. Her other hand rested atop a home-made riot shield.

She’d spent the last week constructing the thing, scavenging parts from the junkyard. A sheet of metal over a backing board of thick, stiff rubber, with plastic handles screwed into the back, all held together by liberal amounts of duck tape. I think the metal had begun life as a piece of tractor door, now spray-painted black. It looked like flimsy scrap to me, but Raine had tested it, with a knife, a broken bottle, a bat, and Praem’s fist. She had judged it both sturdy and flexible enough for the job.

She also hadn't meant to break it out until tomorrow, until the trip to Carcosa, and then it was only supposed to be insurance.

At least she hadn't put the motorcycle helmet on as well. Without her face, I might have floundered for far longer. It sat on the table nearby, a shiny red-and-white half-dome beetle, next to a pair of goggles, and the packet of cocaine she'd taken off the 'corpse'.

Evelyn's spider-servitors crowded the gateway too. One hung from the ceiling above, the other clung to the wall. Both of them were locked onto the gateway with their banks of crystalline eyes, stingers quivering, faint heat haze rising from the smokestack structures on their backs. Evelyn had tried to order them through, but they wouldn't go no matter what Latin orders she spat, so now they guarded her retreat along with Raine. Hopefully no retreat would be needed, what with Praem and Twil out there with her, on the other side.

Beyond Raine and the spiders, tendrils of fog moved like skeletal fingers in the castle hallway.

"Heather? You there?"

"... sorry, I'm fine. It's just, you look like you're ready for a street fight."

"And you're getting ready to command it." Raine smirked and nodded at my hands.

"Oh." I gestured helplessly with an entire pot of coffee in one fist, an empty mug in the other, then sighed and poured my fourth round of emergency caffeine. "Yes, well, no sleep for the wicked."

"Hey, Heather, if anybody's big and scary enough to look after themselves out there, Zheng is."

"I know that," I almost snapped, tried to dial down. Breathe. Stop shaking. "It's not- she's-"

"She broke out from inside a concrete wall before, right? Don't tell her I said this, but I wouldn't rate the chances of anything in that freak-show out there."

"Raine, that's not ... not what I'm ..."

I shook my head and sipped my coffee. Burning hot. Barely tasted it.

Couldn't concentrate on the right words. Raine would never understand anyway. I struggled to reel in my phantom limbs. Even if I couldn't see them, I could still feel them. Trying to protect me from hypothetical attack, anticipating my next footstep with additional support, groping at a chair for me to sit down in; they used up so much mental bandwidth, and they couldn't even touch anything.

Raine cracked another smile, just for me, the kind she usually showed me in private. We weren't in private right now, but she couldn't see the spider-servitors, and Mister Squiddy slopping around his bucket of wet clay didn't count.

"I'm not gonna lie and say Zheng knows what she's doing," Raine said. "She doesn't, she's like me. Goes with her gut. Improvises. And that's how she'll get back."

I stared down into my coffee, into the dark brown swirl. At the corner of my awareness, one of my phantom tentacles started to imitate the motion, twirling around and around. I focused on that.

"She's like a big ol' house-cat that's slipped out the door to chase a rabbit," Raine was saying. "She'll find her way back when she gets hungry. Hey, maybe we should hang some haunches of lamb from the windows to entice her back up here, yeah? ... Heather?"

"Sorry," I muttered. "I'm trying to calm down."

"Caffeine's given you the jitters?"

"It's not the caffeine." I sipped more coffee. Too strong. Walked over to the table and set the coffee pot down, my mug next to it, then I picked the mug up again, set it down again. Moved to pick it up, stopped halfway. Felt like I wanted to hurl it at the wall.

"How's Tenny holding up?" Raine asked.

"Oh, fine now. She's fine. Still upstairs with Lozzie."

Being kept firmly out of the way, in case she decided to make another dive for the castle windows. Evelyn's new wards might not work on her, we weren't certain, and nobody was in a hurry to find out.

When we'd returned, all in a hurry and feeling like the hounds of hell might be on our tail, Lozzie had thrown herself at Tenny before we'd even stumbled back through the gateway. She'd squeezed

Tenny hard enough to make her bleat, kissed her face and head and cried a little while trying to tell her off for flying away like that.

“No going without an adult!” she’d scolded between the tears of relief. “No-no Tenny, no flying without an adult, okay? You have to promise me now, promise me!”

Lozzie’s emotional release had gotten to Tenny, crossed the species barrier. Tenny couldn’t cry. No tears ducts, Evelyn thinks. But she could shake and whimper in imitation of Lozzie’s tears, wrap tentacles around her, and refuse to let go.

“Lozzie’ll be clinging to her for a week after this,” Raine said. “We gotta find a safe way for her to stretch her wings. She really wanted to go for that, didn’t she?” Raine clicked her tongue.

“Yes, well. Tenny’s her baby.”

Raine laughed. I couldn’t tell if she agreed, or if she thought I was joking, or if she simply liked my phrasing. I wanted to ask for clarification, but that part of my mind drowned under a torrent of gnawing animal fear, a desire to retreat and hide, instincts for a place that was not here. I was holding the coffee mug again, trying to concentrate on drinking more. Locked in place. Staring at nothing.

“Heather? Heather?” Raine called my name softly. “Ground control to space cadet, come in Heather, this is mission control speaking.”

“I’m ... I’m okay,” I lied, and finally gathered myself enough to sit down in a chair. I set my coffee down too. Stood back up. Sat down. Rubbed my thighs and pinched my knees. Needed to run, or climb into a corner. I longed to be underwater right now, curled up in a cave. Or upstairs, with the curtains closed and the lights out. In the dark.

With Raine right here, dressed for war, I still felt isolated and frantic.

I had done, every second since Zheng had left.

“You don’t have to pretend for me, you know?” Raine said. “You can be not okay, even if it’s over another girl.”

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We’d waited down by the foot of the castle for only about twenty

minutes after Zheng had vanished into the copied Sharrowford streets. I'd been shouting myself hoarse into the roiling tidal pool of fog and chitin, calling Zheng's name to no avail, not understanding why I was so panicked, why cold sweat had broken out down my back, why I felt like I needed to grow spines and toxins and hiss at my friends.

The only sign of Zheng and the strange resurrected man was a sort of ripple outward through the motions of the wildlife, a scattering of the shoal before a predator, but our vantage point was too low to follow it for long. The verdant deep swallowed them up.

Zheng had acted as a cork in a bottle, for scrambling emotions I hadn't examined in three weeks.

With her around, the abyssal side of me felt safe. The squirming mutable dark creature I'd been in the abyss felt sheltered in the power of a larger pack member. Zheng was from there. She'd been born out there. She was like me.

When she walked off into that fog, I regressed within seconds.

My throat felt like an alien thing, but it was the only tool I had to call her name, so I kept shouting and shouting until I made Tenny panic too.

She'd begun by trilling wordless noises into the fog as well, louder and louder over half a minute, her chest puffing up. Ropes of muscle rearranged themselves inside her body, permitting her lungs – or whatever she used for lungs – more room to expand. No ribs to get in the way. Pressed against my side in a supporting hug, she felt like an inflating balloon of leathery flesh, and sounded like a moth crossed with a frog.

Her final call was so loud it cut through the fog and echoed off the exterior castle walls. Evelyn winced and shushed her. I blinked, shocked out of my instinctive fear for a second.

"Shhhh, shhhh, Tenny, it's okay, shhhh, no no, I was just ... I'm okay, shhhhh," I hushed her. Maybe Tenny's inhuman form helped; here was something a little like me, at least.

Raine decided it was time to leave.

"We can't stay out here forever," she'd said. "Worst case scenario, our coke-head friend circles around Zheng and comes back with

some nasty mates. Best case, we all get really cold and really tired and Lozzie wonders where the hell we've gotten to."

"Back inside the castle and we seal the whole bloody place up," Evelyn said, already backing away a couple of paces.

I shook my head, numb and confused. "No ... "

Evelyn stared at me with a scold in her eyes. I had to look away, back to the fog and the awful churn of bizarre life within.

"Heather? Heather, you are not thinking of following that huge idiot. You are not."

"Yeah, we're not following her," Raine said. "Not into that."

She backed away too, away from the street, the magic circle, the shattered second corpse – and her body language herded me backward. Tenny understood as well, uprooting my stubborn feet as I tried to dig my heels in. It was like fighting a giant fist.

"We can't!" I snapped, a weird strangled noise in my throat. I felt like hissing at Tenny. "We can't close up the castle with Zheng still out there. She- I need-"

"It's alright, Heather," Raine said. "She'll make her own way back, I'm certain."

"I doubt any of my wards would stop her anyway," Evelyn said. "Stop dawdling, come on."

Evelyn led the way with her walking stick. Raine brought up the rear, gun out. Tenny dragged me. Back up the hill, into the shadow of the castle, then we slipped in through the gap in the huge metal doors, back into the killing ground from months ago. Shelter brought a tangible, physical relief so strong I almost sobbed. Out there in the fog, beneath the vast bulk of the squid-moon-children and the skywhales and giant jellyfish, dwarfed by the chaos of chitin and claw and pale flesh out in the streets, the abyssal creature in me had felt like a terrified scurrying thing clinging to the ground for the illusion of safety.

I wanted to squeeze myself into the deeper parts of the castle as soon as possible, make myself small, and hide. The sensation was overwhelming.

Evelyn clearly felt a human shadow of the same sensation. She let out a huge sigh and eyed the metal doors. "We need to shut these.

Raine?”

“I’m flattered you think I’m that ripped,” Raine said, testing the door with one hand. It didn’t even flex. “Nah, last time I had Twil’s muscle to help. I can’t shift these.”

Evelyn tutted. “Why is idiot brute strength never here when it’s needed? What about Tenny, she ... ”

Tenny was blinking her huge black eyes at the field of zombie corpses. Three of her tentacles hovered over the nearest body, as if sniffing for the scent of decay. Fascinated. Blank-faced. Learning about death.

I pulled together what was left of myself. “Tenny, Tenny no,” I murmured, trying to squeeze one of her hands. “It’s okay, don’t touch them, don’t look at them. They’re all gone. Um, dead. A long time ago. No need to stare. Tenny? Tenny?”

“Mwaaah?” she bleated.

“Heather,” Evelyn hissed. “Tell her to close the doors.”

“Doors?” Tenny fluttered. “Front door. Keep closed.”

“Y-yes, yes Tenny, good girl. That’s right,” I said. Lozzie had been trying to drum that into her – keep the front door closed, no going outdoors alone. “Look, Eevee, what about-” I hiccuped, squeezed my eyes shut, swallowed hard. “What about Zheng? We can’t just lock her out there. I-I know this sounds silly, but couldn’t we leave a note on the door? One of your post-it notes? ‘Please close the door behind you?’”

“A note?” Evelyn deadpanned at me.

“Please,” I hissed through my teeth. Evelyn frowned at me, saw I wasn’t acting normal, even for this situation. “It would be the normal thing to do. Polite thing. If we weren’t in a castle made of bone, yes.”

“Don’t see why not,” Raine said. “If it gets us back upstairs and out of here quicker. Eevee?”

“Oh sod it, yes, we’ll leave a polite note on the giant metal door into the supernatural castle in another dimension, fine. She better well close it. I’ll have her hide if anything follows her back home.”

Evelyn scribbled out a note and slapped it on the door, where

Zheng couldn't miss it.

Our journey back up through the castle took a fraction of the time we'd spent getting down; we followed Evelyn's trail of post-it notes and the rough map she'd drawn, worming our way through the passages like maggots in a corpse. But for me, those minutes descended into a hallucinatory nightmare.

My phantom limbs wanted to pull me along the inside of the corridors, like an octopus in a tube. My body was a constricting shell, the wrong shape for this environment. Instinct screamed at me to grow spines, to sprout claws, to back up into the darkest possible corner. I hadn't been this bad since the days right after my return from the abyss. I thought I'd gotten better, but really I'd just been compensating. Zheng had been a crutch.

I tried to focus on Tenny. She'd developed a unique way of holding hands – she wrapped one tentacle all the way up my forearm to my elbow, the satin-smooth surface of her skin shifting slightly with every step. Wings folded, head ducked, walking very close to my side. She hated these confines as much as I did, though for different reasons.

When we reached the top corridor, Lozzie burst out of the gateway, frantic for Tenny. Evelyn bustled back into the workshop, calling for Praem, for her mobile phone, for a bucket of paint and wellington boots and a box of nails and a good sturdy hammer.

The light and normality of the workshop, of Sharrowford, of home, brought me little relief.

I ached to plunge back into the fog, to grow wings and fleshy sails and trailing feelers, to search for Zheng.

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"Even if it's over another girl?" I echoed.

"Yeah." Raine nodded.

I sighed and closed my eyes. "Raine, I'm not worried about Zheng."

"Really?" Raine waited, but I only swallowed, couldn't summon the right words, so she carried on. "Could'a fooled me. You've got the jitters real bad. Am I mis-reading this here? Is this about the notebook, the picture of the Eye? Heather, anything comes for you, I swear to God I'll-"

"It's not that," I hissed in a strangled whisper. "I- yes, Raine I really like Zheng. But this isn't about that."

"Then what it is?"

"I don't ... I *can't* expect you to understand, because what I'm feeling right now is not a human emotion."

"Try me."

From anybody else I would not have trusted those words, but I opened my eyes and looked up at Raine and knew she meant that for real. She'd been on the verge of cracking a joke, some sexual innuendo about Zheng and me, but she carefully tucked it away and made room for me to speak. Guilt tugged at my heart. Why didn't Raine's presence soothe my abyssal instincts? Burning inside with shame I couldn't place, I gestured at her with my mug of coffee.

"You look really good in all that," I said. Not what I'd intended. I blushed and sighed, annoyed at myself.

Raine broke into a grin and shifted the motorcycle jacket with her shoulders. She'd left it unzipped down the front, and I wondered what it would feel like to slip a hand inside that armoured cocoon. "You like the riot girl look? S'cool, huh? Not quite shining armour, but it gets the job done. Bit sweaty though."

"... really?"

Raine raised an eyebrow.

"Um, not that I- not that-" I huffed and cleared my throat. "I'm sorry. I changed the subject. I shouldn't avoid this."

"I noticed." She laughed. "It's okay, sometimes you gotta use anything you can to distract yourself."

"I need clarity, not distraction." I put my face in one hand. "Of course I'm not worried about Zheng. She's superhuman. I'm not worried about her, I'm ... pining. But it's not romantic. It's animal. Abyssal."

"Yeah?"

I tapped my chest with my fingertips. "The me I brought back. The me out there. It ... I really, really like having her around. Nearby. All the fears, all the weird little disjointed perceptions, the bodily ... wrongness, it all got bottled up with her around. Kept under

control. The abyss isn't a place for alliance or friendship or kindness, it's all predation, all the time, it's darkness and a constant war of evolutionary edge. But, with Zheng, I feel safe again, because she's from there. Survivalist logic, I suppose. She's big and mean, and on my side, so all that can relax."

As the words spilled out of me, I felt my phantom limbs slow in their frantic wanderings. Talking about it helped, made room for the ape to take back the controls. Room for me to get angry.

"And now she's thrown herself into danger," I hissed. "For what?"

Raine just waited, as I gathered myself and let out a big sigh.

"Oh dear," I said, hanging my head. "Oh dear, okay, that wasn't um, wasn't what I expecting to say. Oh dear."

"So in the end, you are worried about her, as well?"

"I suppose so." I shook my head and leaned back in the chair. "She's constantly looking for a fight, just for the sake of fighting."

Raine allowed herself a smile. "I do that a lot too."

"You put yourself in danger for me, that's different. And then you get out of danger and take me with you. Zheng wants to fight, to kill stuff. She couldn't resist following that man, not after he dodged everything she threw at him. How do you sustain a caring friendship with somebody who's determined to destroy herself?"

Raine raised her eyebrows. "You think that's what she's doing?"

"Maybe. I don't know. That's a human worry. The abyssal creature in me, it just wants the pack member back."

Sagging with unexpected release after speaking the words aloud, I stood up from the chair and went over to the gateway, stretching up onto my tiptoes to see through the windows opposite, the windows which looked out on the fog beyond, the copied Sharrowford streets far below. Of course, I couldn't see anything from this angle, let alone any disturbances in the wildlife which might tell us where Zheng was.

"Heather?" Raine put her free hand on my arm.

"It's like we've got the world's largest, spookiest cellar." I shook my head. "Connecting this house to another dimension was maybe not the safest idea."

Praem and Evelyn and Twil were in there right now, off down the corridor somewhere with two buckets of paint and a clutch of brushes. Evelyn was determined to seal the whole place off hallway by hallway, window by window, making extensive use of the same symbol as on my left forearm.

They'd already been all the way down to the left, to the old throne room and a corridor beyond, painting wards around every doorway like separate bulkheads in an ocean liner. The throne room itself had been left as no-man's land, the high windows too tall to reach without climbing gear or scaffolding or hours worth of Twil digging her claws into the walls.

The bank of windows opposite the gateway were each encased by rough magic circles now, simple white designs. The Fractal stared back at me, painted dozens of times all over the inside walls. The paint was still drying. Evelyn and Praem and Twil were somewhere off to the right now, with an agreement to check in every twenty minutes.

Twil had only been here about half an hour, but she'd come running as soon as called, in the middle of the night without complaint – because Evelyn herself had done the calling.

I sighed heavily. "I guess Carcosa is off. For tomorrow, at least."

Raine pulled a sympathetic grimace and rubbed my shoulder. "I can tell Eeve's gonna be up all night at this."

"We can't wait. Maisie can't wait."

"Maybe Monday? We want Eeve with all her wits about her, not sleep deprived."

"You don't think that man we found is the herald of something worse? Raine, he had a drawing of the Eye. I can't let him- I want- I don't want these people interrupting our plans. It's the Eye, trying to interfere. That dead man – dead, tch – is going to cause a problem."

Raine shrugged, with shoulders, eyes, and eyebrows, an oddly innocent gesture for her. "Maybe he does. Or maybe I shoot him in the head when Zheng brings him back, so we can focus on what matters."

With a horrified shiver, I realised Raine wasn't joking. She would

actually do that.

Abyssal instinct flooded me with blind, survivalist relief, drowned out my gut rejection of cold blooded murder. Raine understood. She knew that Maisie came before everything else. The abyssal version of Heather wanted to curl up against Raine and purr. Remove the threat, it whispered.

Out loud, I said, "I hope that won't be necessary."

"Oh, I mean, hey, yeah, me too," Raine laughed herself into a grin. "Look, if he doesn't come back, if he vanishes down there, or gets eaten or whatever, maybe I can go check out the address on his keys. Maybe tomorrow, if we're not crashing a party in Carcosa. You don't have to come, I'll deal with it. In the past, eh," Raine pulled a sheepish look, "I might have done that without telling you. Now? Well, I've learnt my lesson."

"The last time we checked out somewhere like that, Twil got stabbed in the hand, and we precipitated a chain of events that almost killed all of us."

"This time we keep some distance, then. I find Kimberly mark two, I promise to ignore her."

I gave Raine a look. "Raine, you're incapable of not helping a woman in need. I have noticed."

She laughed. "Fair enough. Maybe we let this guy go then, let sleeping dogs lie, if he's not a threat?"

"An Eye Cultist? I ... I don't know, I ... "

Kill him, instinct whispered. A knot twisted in my stomach.

"Then I'll deal with it," Raine said.

That's when Lizzie made us both jump.

"Hi-hiiii," a little voice whispered from the doorway. I flinched like a rabbit. To Raine's great credit she managed to avoid pointing her gun anywhere dangerous, then laughed at herself.

"Lizzie!" I breathed again after what felt like an entire minute. "You snuck up on us."

"Whoopsie-sorry." Lizzie giggled and flounced into the workshop, pastel poncho wrapped tight around herself with both arms. Her

hair was in even worse disarray than usual, tangled up behind her, and despite the flickery smile on her face, I could see the emotional burnout around her eyes.

“Lozzie? Lozzie, come let me look at your hair,” I said, stepping over and raising my arms to her. “You’re all tangled up.”

Lozzie plodded over without complaint and turned around to face away from me. I tutted and combed at her wispy blonde hair with my fingers.

“Where’s Tenny?” Raine asked.

“Went to sleep,” Lozzie explained. “Too-too much excitement for little Ten-Tens. Tucked her into bed where she needs to stay for now.” Lozzie sniffed.

“We’ll find a safe spot where she can learn to fly properly,” Raine said. “Promise.”

“Outside would be best.” Lozzie giggled again, a nervous hitch in her throat. She turned her head left and right, as if searching for something she couldn’t find. “If I could take her somewhere with no people – no people! No people and no beings and no fuss and no mess.”

“Lozzie, Lozzie, please hold still,” I murmured.

“I miss Outside,” she said, very softly, oh so sad. My heart tried to pull in two.

“Loz, hey, got a question for you,” Raine said. Light and easy, her tone cut through the moment. Gave Lozzie something to focus on. It’s not often that Raine makes me fall in love with her all over again.

“Yes?”

“You got any idea what that guy might have been doing out there?”

“Hmm-mmm?” Lozzie blinked big eyes at Raine, half-twitching her head before catching herself. “Gotta stay still, still for Heather,” she giggled. “Doing?”

“With your big friends out in the fog.” Raine thumbed at the open gateway. “Do you think he was trying to talk to them?”

Lozzie made a squinty thinking face.

"You were ill as a child?" I frowned. I don't think this was something she told me in the dreams. I groped for memory, but there was nothing.

"Mmm kinda." Lozzie shut one eye and smirked at me, an impish little toothy smile. "My body suuuucked. Now it's great!"

Lozzie hopped away from me and lifted the hem of her poncho, bouncing from side to side. Her nervous tension had ebbed away. Talking about this was apparently good for her. She danced from one foot to the other, then skipped over to the gateway and reached up to pet the rough, scarred hide of one of Evelyn's spider-servitors. For a second I worried it might lash out at her, but it didn't react at all.

"Good boy, good boy," she chirped.

"Spiders?" Raine asked me, watching Lozzie with fascination. She couldn't see them, of course.

"Good boys. They've got your back!" Lozzie did a thumbs up for Raine.

"Hope they do better than last time," Raine said. Lozzie did a fussy pout and turned her nose up, and petted the spider again.

"Well," Raine said. "Maybe our boy out there was barking up the wrong tree then, if your friends aren't good conversationalists."

"Probably! Dumbos always trying to boss around or get bossed around." Lozzie stuck her tongue out. "Bleh."

Muffled echoes suddenly broke out from the far side of the gateway, warped and distorted by the bone-like grey material of the corridor. A jumble of footsteps and raised voices. The fog swirled, pushed down the hallway by the sudden motion of disturbed air.

Raine went from zero to sixty in the blink of an eye. She readied the makeshift shield. Lozzie hopped and skipped away from the gate. I was caught between them, paralysed for an awful moment as abyssal instinct tugged both ways at once, phantom limbs scrambling to protect me.

"Heather," Raine threw over her shoulder. A warning. Get back. No room for argument.

"What if it's- Zheng!"

With a stomp and a scowl – and a massive lacerated bruise across her face – Zheng appeared around the corner and strode through the gateway. She was drenched from head to toe in what looked like the product of a giant sneeze. Clear mucus was matted in her hair, stuck to her clothes, all over her hands where she'd tried to wipe her face clean. Her boots stuck to the floor with every step, making sticky peeling noises as she lifted her feet. A thin, acrid smell filled the air. Zheng looked most unhappy.

Raine let out a low whistle. "You lose a 90s game-show or something?"

Abyssal Heather didn't care what Zheng looked like or what she was covered with; inside, I soared, felt like a puppy reunited with the pack. "Zheng. Goodness. Okay."

"Shaman," she slurred. Her jaw was misaligned, as if broken at one corner.

The others piled through after her. Evelyn was scowling far worse than Zheng, holding Praem's arm for support. Twil hopped over the splashes of goo Zheng had left all over the floor, grimacing through her teeth. She looked like she'd much rather be in bed right now.

"Stay still, don't you dare move!" Evelyn snapped. "I told you to stay on the other side, for God's sake! Praem, Praem, get- get- oh, I don't know, a bucket of bleach! Boiling water. A flamethrower."

Praem was already marching into the kitchen.

"I am not cleaning this up," Twil said, shaking her head and backing for the door to the kitchen as well. "Nope. No way. Not in it for this. Not it."

"Zheng can do it herself," Evelyn was grumbling, as a cold realisation came over me. "Running off like that was her idea. What did you expect would happen, you-"

"Where's the corpse?" I asked. Looked at Zheng's empty hands. "Zheng? You ... killed him, right? You got him."

Zheng stared at me, dark and sullen.

"You didn't get him," I said. "You didn't get him!"

"Heather?" Raine said.

"I failed, shaman," Zheng rumbled.

“He got away?!”

My words emerged as a screech of disbelief and disappointment. Abyssal instinct welled up inside my chest, but guilt crashed back down even before I finished the sentence. Guilt for snapping at Zheng, for caring more about her prey than her bruise and broken jaw. Guilt for the way she looked at me. A kicked hound.

Guilt at my own rabid aggression.

Everyone was staring at me.

“I ... sorry ... I ... ” I blushed, mortified. “What happened? To your face, I mean. Did he do that?”

“Mmmmm,” Zheng grumbled, and to my relief she pulled a broken grin. “No, shaman.”

“It’s like squid ink, or skunk smell, right?” Raine asked with an open grin. “You ran into the wrong creature out there, freaked it out, and got sprayed, didn’t you?”

Zheng turned her grin on Raine. “I still won. You want to try it too, *yoshou*?”

“No, no thank you.” Raine put one hand up. “I’m sure you’ve done enough zoological fieldwork for all of us.”

“You look like a turtle, hiding in that shell.”

“What, this?” Raine hefted her rubber-and-metal shield. “If it works, it works. Don’t knock it ‘till you try it.”

Zheng grunted an acknowledgement. She eyed me with odd caution, and I felt like living rubbish. Praem returned with towels for Zheng and a bin liner for her clothes.

“Make sure you rinse those off outdoors before loading the washing machine,” Evelyn told Praem. “For all we know that crap will dry like super-glue.”

“So go on then, what happened to our boy?” Raine asked.

Zheng shrugged and grunted, and began struggling out of her ribbed sweater. I prepared myself for another uninterrupted view of her nude upper half, but even that couldn’t distract me right now. Abyssal demands were being made deep in my soul.

"If he got away there must have been a gateway," Evelyn snapped. "This is important. We could still reach it, still find it. What happened?"

Zheng pulled her sweater off over her head and used it to wipe more slime off her face and out of her hair, then dumped it into the bin big.

"Nothing happened, wizard. I made a mistake." She gestured at her bruised face.

"And he didn't?" I asked. "He knew the ... wildlife?"

Zheng blinked as she thought about that one. She rolled her shoulders and raised both hands to grab her own face and jaw, then yanked her skull and her jawbone sideways at the same time. A crunch filled the air, and Zheng work her jaw up and down normally again.

"No," she decided. "He moves like dust on the wind. Invisible currents under his feet. Prey that can see a handful of seconds into the future is no prey at all."

"Is that what he was doing?" Raine asked.

Zheng nodded. "Either he sees the future, or reads intention. Or both."

"Explains how he dodged the bullet," Raine said. "Hmm."

"But where did he go?" Evelyn demanded. She clicked her fingers, then huffed and muttered an apology with a wave of her hand. "This is essential. Did you see the gateway? Any sign of it? Anything at all?"

Zheng shrugged. "He slipped into the mists. I lost his scent. Vanished."

"Through a gateway then!" Evelyn raged. "Shit. Shit, shit, shit."

"Dude could still be out there," Twil offered, quite unsure. "I guess, like, in theory?"

"The way he moved, he could be," I murmured.

"Did you at least close the front door of the castle?" Evelyn asked. "There could be a mystery dead man out there in the fog, there's nowhere else for him to go except through a gateway, or back up

here.”

“Yes, wizard,” Zheng rumbled, fixing Evelyn with a steely look. “The door is shut. Satisfied?”

“Yes. Yes, *thank you*.” Evelyn managed to make ‘thank you’ sound like an insult, but Zheng grunted an acceptance all the same.

“You idiot, Zheng.”

It took a moment for me to realise those words had come from my mouth.

“Shaman?”

“There’s things bigger than you out there. Look at you, your face is ... you’re hurt.”

She shrugged. “Nothing can beat me, shaman.”

“What if you’d gotten stuck? We wouldn’t have been able to get you back out.”

“Your foe is my foe, shaman. The revenant had to be put down. Yes, I failed. Don’t insult me further.”

“I’m not insulting you!” I snapped at her, abyssal fear turning to anger. “I need you with me, you idiot! It hurts when you’re not- when I’m- damn you, Zheng. Don’t leave. Don’t leave me alone.”

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence. I sniffed back unexpected tears and scrubbed at my eyes. Lozzie crossed to me with delicate tiptoes and rubbed my back. Zheng eventually grunted a non-committal noise.

That was one of the most unhealthy things I’d ever said.

Eventually, Evelyn cleared her throat and set her walking stick at an angle. “We need to find that gateway. Or!” She held up a hand to forestall the inevitable objection. “We need to confirm a body. Or that he’s still out there. Yes? Yes.”

“Before or after we finish the paint job on an entire castle?” Twil asked, nodding at the gateway, hands in her pockets, looking tired. “Look, Evee, that’s a huge task in there. And I don’t think any of us fancy tangling with the creepy crawlies out there if they can do *that* to Zheng’s face. I don’t fancy that, yeah?”

“The rest of it can wait,” Evelyn said. “We need to find this man, or confirm he’s gone. Somehow.”

“Alright, girlies,” he said.

We all turned – Twil with her claws out, Raine raising the pistol, Zheng dark and brooding, Praem stepping in front of Evelyn – and there he was. Standing right on the other side of the gateway to the castle, in his raincoat and his pinched, dead skin. He pulled a goofy sort of smile.

A rush of pure aggression passed through me. My throat closed up. Phantom limbs braced, wanted to twist his head clean off. I bit my tongue hard enough to draw blood.

“Alright yourself,” Raine answered, low and dangerous. She pointed her handgun at him. “What’s up?”

“Uhh, well ... ” He looked off to the side, as if listening to somebody else. “Yeah, yeah, right.” Then he turned back to us, grinning and wincing like somebody who knew they were being a bit of a bother. “Mind if I use your front door? S’uh, no other way out. Yeah? Cool, we’re cool, yeah? Yeeeeeah.”

by this art you may contemplate – 10.5

There exists a specific facial expression, rarely encountered in the isolated wilds of university libraries and the lonely teenage years of scrawny young women on anti-psychotics – a smiling mouth with cringing eyes, spiced by a knowing twinkle, on the verge of a defensive laugh. An expression which says ‘I know I am doing something I should not, but I am going to do it anyway, in full view of those who disapprove, because I do not have any other choice, and I shall embrace being a cheeky little so-and-so.’

The heavysset dead man, the risen corpse from the fog, the revenant on the far side of the castle gateway, smiled at us like a small boy about to escape punishment on a minor technicality.

“Just mosey on through, yeah?” he said, pointing vaguely through the gateway, toward the door to the kitchen. “Be outta ya’ hair in five shakes of a dog’s tail. Cat’s tail? How does that go again?” He frowned at empty space for a second, at nobody and nothing. “Lamb’s tail? Bro, what? Yeah, whatever.”

“Oh great,” Twil hissed. “You didn’t mention he was a wackjob.”

“Thought that part was obvious,” Raine said.

“He steps through that gate, he’ll die a second time,” Evelyn muttered.

Zheng watched him with the deceptively detached interest of a waiting tiger.

His flippancy did not help the aggression and adrenaline surging through my veins. My phantom limbs lashed and whirled, impossible to control the abyssal desire to pull his head clean from his body. I was furious, and I didn’t understand why. In retrospect, the source was obvious; this entire diversion was distracting us from the Carcosa experiment tomorrow, from another step in the plan to rescue my sister.

Evelyn’s spider-servitors framed the gateway, hanging above and

beside. One step over and he was finished. I swallowed my anger. Let the spiders do their job.

Eyes blinking out of sync with each other, the dead man took in my glare and the barrel of Raine's gun, and settled on Zheng. He raised his fists in a clumsy boxing stance. "Wanna throw down again, big lass? Or we done? Yeah?"

Zheng blinked once, slowly. A lizard on a hot rock.

It was such a minor detail, one that slid right past my conscious mind, but it should have alerted me that all was not as it seemed; Zheng had stripped off her mucus-soaked top a minute earlier, hair still matted with disgusting drying goo, and stood there bared for all to see, tattoos and abdomen and heavy breasts – but the dead man, despite his laddish speech and jovial act, didn't sneak so much as a split-second glance at her body.

"Nah? Nah? We cool then," the man continued. "Yeah, we cool, dudettes? No probs, no probs, I'll just let myself out, you know?" He opened his fists into a mock-surrender pose, and stepped over the gate's threshold on exaggerated tiptoes.

"It's your funeral," Evelyn drawled.

Then she frowned, when nothing happened.

"What-" I blurted out, confused. Lozzie grabbed one of my arms, held on tight. She must have recognised my bubbling, uncharacteristic aggression. Somehow, her proximity helped drain the worst of it, stopped me from doing something unwise. "What-"

"Heather?" Evelyn hissed. "What are they playing at?"

The spider-servitors hadn't reacted to the undead man at all. As if he simply wasn't there. Stingers waving, crystalline eyes fixed on the gateway, they ignored him.

"... they don't appear to care," I said.

The dead man smiled and wiggled his fingers.

Up close, without the softening veil of otherworldly fog and lacking the distraction of a sea of bizarre alien life scuttling about behind him, he looked obviously like a man on the verge of death. Or was he a dead man on the verge of life?

His skin was pale in the manner of an olive complexion that hadn't

seen sun in twenty years, a few blue veins visible through the papery surface. He looked half mummified, flesh stretched tight over the bones of his face with the drying effect of the fog dimension, but his joints moved without creaking or cracking, no splitting skin or flaking tissues. His big raincoat looked new, extra-extra large to accommodate wide shoulders and a thick waist. His eyeballs were shrivelled like half-dried prunes, and he kept scrunching up the muscles in his face, as if he was in mild pain. Part of me wondered if he would suddenly plump out if dunked in a bath, like one of those just-add-water children's toys.

"Fat lot of use," Evelyn hissed. "I'll do it myself. You think you can just walk out of here?" She took a half step out from behind Praem, her scrimshawed thighbone held carefully in both hands, walking stick tucked into the crook of her arm. Without being asked, Praem extended one hand and held Evelyn's elbow to steady her balance.

"Uhhhhhhhhh, walk out? Sure? Yeah." The man turned up his cheeky smile. "Puttin' one foot forward, then the other. Walking, you know? Oops, but you can't do that. Missing a foot, aren't you? But me, I'm walking here. Right on out, whoooo, yeah."

He made a sideways upward swooshing motion with one hand, mirrored the gesture with the other, and tucked his face into his bent elbow.

Raine snorted.

"Don't you dab on us," said Twil. "You fuckin' weirdo!"

"How do you know about my leg?" Evelyn asked, voice suddenly cold. "Who the hell are you?"

He dropped the gesture and took another exaggerated slow-motion step, like a cartoon character creeping across creaky floorboards. He even did a little side-to-side glance, as if none of us were here and he was watching for observers. It was so absurd I had to shake my head with disbelief.

"Oi, mate, best stop there if I were you," Raine said from behind her homemade riot shield. A sympathetic shiver went down my spine. She spoke as if talking about where to sit in a pub, pitched her voice so casually, yet filled it with such menace. "I've got a gun pointed at you, and I'm a pretty good shot, if I say so myself."

"Yeah, yeah yeah, soz, soz, no beef, yeah?" The dead man waggled

his raised hands.

"You are not going anywhere," Evelyn said, quiet and cold. "I want to know who are you and exactly what you were doing in there. Nobody comes back from the dead without ... without crossing certain boundaries, and you are either an idiot or pretending to be one. So, which is it?"

"Yeah, dumb-arse," Twil added, but looking faintly confused.

"And don't assume your acrobatic nonsense will work with me," Evelyn continued. "There are more ways than physical of enforcing my will."

"Yes," I whispered, abyssal instinct in total agreement. Burn him out, Evelyn, it hissed. Burn him up. I swallowed down my aggression, hands shaking as I clung to Lozzie.

The dead man pulled a mock-scared face, a big toothy cringe, and lowered one of his surrender-posed hands to point at Evelyn's scrimshawed thighbone, looking left and right as if playing to an invisible peanut gallery and a laugh track. He slid one foot sideways, a half-step closer to the kitchen doorway, but nobody backed up to make room for him. The non-threatening act was as complete as it was deliberate.

"Reckon you can dodge all of us at once?" Raine asked, light and easy.

"Probs," he slurred, closing one eye in struggling concentration. Was that an act too? He was certainly more steady on his feet than he'd been down in the fog. "Prob'ly, yeah. I thinks."

"Real drunken master, eh?" said Raine. "You somebody important, famous, somebody we should know?"

"Nobody, really!" He laughed a big deep chuckle.

"You drew the Eye," I blurted out. At my side, Lozzie murmured a little 'Heather, nooooo,' but it was too late.

The dead man's gaze met mine, and for a split-second he was somebody else. Mannerism melted away like ice under a blowtorch. A pained flinch flickered across his face, a single frame of mistake, before his features quickly rearranged back into that infuriating schoolboy smile. He boggled at me with the look of a puzzled idiot.

I went cold inside.

“What was that?” I hissed.

“Wa’ was wa’?” he slurred.

“... the ... the ... the Eye!” I groped for a handhold, my brain slipping off that bizarre moment of transformation he’d shown. “You know what I’m talking about, this-” I fumbled for a moment, waving an empty hand as I realised I’d tried to use one of my non-existent tentacles to pick up his notebook from the table, where Raine had left it, next to the bag of cocaine and her helmet. I corrected, used my actual, physical hand, like a sensible human being, and held up the incriminating evidence. “You drew it in here. Didn’t you? I know it, you know who I am as well, you said so. It’s in your head, isn’t it?”

“Yeeeeeeeah, little lady, I know you ‘cos you’re the freaky one.”

“Freaky?” I frowned, a decade of habit running up against the reality that I was, indeed, kind of freaky these days. “Excuse me. And that’s not what I was asking.”

“Nah like, you know, yeah? Not tangling up with you, nah.”

“What’s your name?” Raine asked.

“Oh for pity’s sake, Raine,” Evelyn hissed. “Who gives a damn?”

His cheeky schoolboy smile intensified, curling up at the corners. “Joe. Uh, surname’s King.”

Evelyn death-glared at him. Twil frowned for a second, then rolled her eyes. Lozzie giggled. Took me a moment to get it.

Raine let out a theatrical sigh, tutted, and shook her head. “Wrong answer, mate. You’re going the right way for a shattered kneecap, you know that?”

Mister ‘Joking’ smiled wider. “You’ll miss, miss shooter. You know it, n’ so do I. Already missed me once, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, that was neat trick,” Raine said. “Fancy sharing it?”

“Naaaaah.”

“I dump the whole magazine into you, maybe I learn by watching.”

“Ahhhhh, but you’ve only got five bullets left!” he laughed.

Raine stared at him for a heartbeat, and I realised with stomach-clenching shock that he'd wrong-footed her. He'd wrong-footed *Raine*.

"Lucky guess," she said.

The dead man did this huge comedy wink and nose-tap – and took another slow step toward the kitchen door. Twil, right in his path, bristled and growled and bared her teeth. Her hands were already swirling into wolf-paws, claws flexing.

"Bullshit!" Twil spat. "You can't dodge bullets."

"He can, *laangren*," Zheng purred.

"Yeeeah, big lass is right," he said. "Come on, girlyies, I ain't got no beef at all, not with you lot. I'll just be on me way, and we can forget all about ever knowing each other any which way-"

"Sod it," Evelyn snapped. "If you won't talk sense, I'll bloody well make you. Dodge *this*."

Her fingers shifted across the pattern on her scrimshawed thighbone, and completed the infernal circuit within.

I'd only seen her do this once before, months ago, and I was not prepared for the effect. Neither was anybody else.

The ambient temperature in the workshop plummeted in a single breath, flash-freezing tiny ice crystals onto the edge of the table and across the metal front of Raine's riot shield. A wave of cold air sucked a gasp from my lungs, slipped chill fingers down my collar, and made poor Lozzie shiver inside her poncho. Static electricity danced across everyone's clothes.

And a strange sick fear twisted inside my chest, a pressure like somebody standing on my ribcage; the backwash from Evelyn's spell.

Lozzie let out a little 'oop!' of surprise. Twil stumbled back, shaking her head like a hound tormented by wasps. Raine, right in the path of the effect, sagged forward and then took several very deliberate paces backward, trying and failing to conceal a wince. I let out a hiss, an instinctive reaction to that crushing feeling. Only Praem was unaffected.

"Wizard," Zheng rumbled, granite-on-granite voice like an angry

mountain.

“It’s not aimed at you, stop being a baby,” Evelyn snapped over her shoulder.

The dead man had gone still and quiet, his eyes unfocused, frozen in that hands-up gesture of surrender. The first time Evelyn had used this particular technique, the cultist she’d interrogated had been unable to retain control of his bodily functions, with predictable results, but Mister Joking appeared to have merely gone slack inside. Like he was suddenly empty. Nobody home.

“Is he ... like ... switched off?” Twil hissed.

“Shhhh,” went Evelyn, frowning at the dead man. She clicked her fingers at him. “You. Walking corpse. What’s your real name? Who the hell are you?”

He blinked once, as if coming back around – and his face shifted.

Nothing about his physical form actually changed, but I had the sudden distinct impression of a much older man. He adopted a mildly irritated frown, totally alien to the laddish comedy grin from before. He adjusted the set of his shoulders, the distribution of weight across his hips, the angle of his chin. He stood up straight, not wavering with drunken energy, eyes open and calm. A totally different person looked back at us, and was not impressed.

Behind him, the spider-servitors finally reacted, as if he’d only just stepped into the room – but then they stopped, poised on the brink of attack. They sensed his intent before he acted.

He extended both hands and twisted his fingers together in a complex pattern.

“Woah, woah, woah!” Raine shouted. Zheng growled, deep and low enough to hurt one’s bowels. Evelyn blinked and took a step back.

I’d never seen it before, but with everything I’d experienced over the last few months, one did not need to be a magician to recognise magic.

“Stop,” I said, quietly. “Stop.”

His eyes flicked to me. He stopped. I swallowed, forced myself to speak.

“You know who I am, which – I hope – also means you know what I

can do,” I managed to squeeze out. “And I am barely holding myself back from doing violence to you. Magic takes time. What I can do is instant, and happens at the speed of thought. No magic. Not in here.”

He slid his eyes from me. His fingers remained locked in place, looking as if they’d break if pushed any further. A Mexican stand-off.

I was only partly bluffing. Moving one’s fingers in a complex pattern? That hardly invoked the instinctive, animal danger of violence that would summon brainmath, push me past the threshold of my own pain. I could stop him, but it would take a second or two. Magic could look so mundane sometimes. So *boring*.

“What ... what the-” Evelyn was hissing. “You- how-”

“*Ni fydd eich dominiad yn gweithio arnaf*,” he said.

“What,” went Twil.

“Ummmm,” I said, frowning as I struggled to make sense of the sounds, let alone the words. Whatever he’d said, it had a lilting, musical quality, almost a sing-song way of speaking.

“What?” Evelyn snapped at him.

“‘Your domination won’t work on me’,” Zheng translated. “Welsh again.”

“*Ie*.” He nodded.

“Answer in English,” Evelyn spat. “Name!”

“*Y tu hwnt i’ch deall*,” he said.

“‘Beyond your comprehension’,” Zheng supplied. “Wizard,” she rumbled – and I knew she was talking to him, not Evelyn. “Wizard, I will learn your tricks, and then I will eat your heart.”

The dead man glanced at Zheng, unconcerned, then back at Evelyn.

“You are out of your depth,” he said to Evelyn – in the richest Welsh accent I’d ever heard. “I have no quarrel with you, Saye, or with the demon. Let me leave, and you will never see me again.”

His accent threw everyone off. Barely comprehensible in English, all elongated vowel sounds and dropped ‘y’s, an accent suited only for

talking about the weather, small woodland animals, and the state of one's flower garden. Utterly different to the man he'd been mere moments ago. To hear a Welsh accent spoken with such seriousness, about magic and demons, was so jarring that I almost laughed in hysterical confusion. He should have been on a BBC regional interest show, talking about bumblebees or mountain climbing. I sensed for the first time the contours of an unexamined prejudice I never knew I held.

Evelyn was visibly struggling to hold onto the spell now. Her breath shook, beads of sweat ran down her forehead, and without her walking stick in one hand she was leaning heavily on Praem.

"Evee, drop it," Raine said. "S'not working."

"Yeah, yeah come on Evee," Twil said. "This is fucking you up."

"God damn you all," Evelyn spat. "No, he-"

"Let go," Praem intoned.

Evelyn huffed, and relinquished her grip.

The spell fell apart with a crackle of static and a rise in temperature. I sucked in a great lungful of air, as if I hadn't taken a full breath in minutes. Evelyn almost fell over too, but Praem caught her, steadying her mistress back to her feet as Evelyn struggled to get her walking stick in place.

The dead man's disapproving frown endured for a second longer, then he seemed to dismiss us with a shake of his head; like a puppet with the strings passed to another hand, he staggered sideways and waved his arms for balance, the cheeky schoolboy grin back on his face. The spider-servitors returned to ignoring him, as if he'd vanished.

"Awww come on bro that stank shit *burned*, you could'a taken some!" he said, his voice returned to the laddish nonsense from before. No trace remained of the sing-song Welsh accent.

He regained his balance with some difficulty, almost blundering back through the gateway. He dusted himself off, winked one eye shut with drunken pressure, and took an unsteady but deliberate step toward the kitchen doorway.

"Who the hell are you?!" Evelyn spat at him.

"I told you, nobody really," he chuckled.

"How many of you in there?" Raine asked.

He shrugged the shrug of a man who did not expect us to believe his ignorance.

"Multiple personalities?" Twil asked. "What the shit is this guy?"

"I doubt it," I snapped, angry as I stared at the strange dead man. "Real dissociative identity disorder isn't like in films and television. That was an act, wasn't it? An offensive one."

He winked at me, and made a sort of clicking noise with the corner of his mouth. I felt myself bristle. We were being played for fools.

"We're talking to a surface-level caricature," Evelyn said. "The other one was real. A mage. This is just a disguise. And he knows me. Who are you, dammit?"

"Is the Eye in there too?" I asked.

That pained flinch returned, and now I recognised it. The Drunkard did not respond to the name of the Eye, but the Welsh Speaker did. The expression passed again, the disguise resumed.

"What? In here?" he tapped his head. "You're the crackers one, little lady. Would I be up and walking around if the big looker was in my skull?"

I frowned, confused. "So you ... you weren't with the cult? You weren't part of what happened?"

"Weeeeell." He pulled a face. "I was, but I wasn't."

"He was no wizard," Zheng rumbled. She watched him like a hawk, his every tiny motion. "I would remember."

He winked and tapped his nose again. "Worked them, didn't I? Remember you though, big lass."

"He infiltrated them, infiltrated the Sharrowford Cult," Evelyn said, cold but oddly impressed. "Pretended to be a simpleton. He's a mage, from somewhere else. You will explain who you are, or I will find a way to make you. You think that was my only trick?"

He pulled that cheeky, drunken, I-decline-to-answer face.

"You mean you didn't end up enthralled to the Eye, like the

others?" I asked. "Why draw it, then?"

"Shhhhhh, shhhh-shhhh." He put a finger to his lips – and took another step toward the doorway. "Why you gotta keep saying that name? Speak of the devil and all that. If you even know the bugger, you're under the gaze. Real rattlebones voodoo, right? Let's not get his attention. Softly softly, catchy monkey."

"If you know anything about the Eye, you have to tell me," I said. "We're not leaving this standoff until you do."

"Naah, I can go whenever I like." He gestured at the kitchen door again. "Gonna be on out. But-" he glanced to the side, talking to his real self again. "I really need my coke back, yo. I do, bro, please! Yeah." Then he looked at Raine directly, then over her shoulder to the bag of white powder on the table. "Can I get my stash? Sneak in a pouch for your boy, yeah? Mercy?"

"If you're so bloody unstoppable," Evelyn said, "why don't you just take your stuff and walk out of here? You're bluffing. You're a mage, in a vulnerable position in another magician's home, and you know what that means. Why even keep up the disguise, hmmm? Why bother?"

"Method acting, babyyyyyyyyyy." He pointed a pair of inaccurate finger guns at Evelyn, face spreading into a goofy grin. "Can't switch off a whole brain partition, can I?"

"Partition," Praem echoed.

"Yes, quite," Evelyn said, darkly smug. "That's a big word for you. Your personas are breaking down, leaking into each other."

"Plus, walking out of here, thas' tha' plan! Thas' the plaaaaaan. I'm not the man with the plan, I'm the man *on* the plan."

The Drunkard took another sliding, comedic step toward the kitchen doorway. He was almost within arm's reach of Twil now, and winked at her.

"Alright lass. Wanna shift or have I gotta squeeze on through?" He put his hands together in a diving motion, aimed past Twil's shoulder. "Just, just get past, yeah? Just wanna get out, out of doors. Out of your hair, like."

An invisible ripple of potential passed through the room.

Group violence proceeds by inevitable, instinctive logic. We're built for it, I'm sad to say, human beings and human-adjacent beings and beings that have learnt too much from humans. I've never had the dubious luck to be at the epicentre of a riot or an angry mob or the viciousness of a real street fight, but it doesn't take experience for one's hind-brain to resonate when one's in-group is about to commit shattering violence. It pulls you along like a strong current, so much easier to swim with it than fight back, and I am not a strong person.

We were all feeding off each other's fear, paranoia, and protective desires. Raine wanted to put him down, for me. Evelyn was incensed by the intrusion on her territory, and now her home, by the threat of another mage. Praem, well, Praem would do anything to protect Evelyn. Twil responded with aggression because the rest of us did.

No single physical signal heralded the frenzy. Small adjustments, of posture and intent. Raine twitched her aim. Twil lowered her head, rapidly transitioning into a snout full of too many teeth. Praem let go of Evelyn and turned to the dead man, hands clasped in front of her, chin high.

And I? My abyssal instincts wanted him dead, out of the way, not a threat; sensible, polite, savanna ape Heather screamed that we needed to question him, but she was overruled. In the back of my mind, I prepared a single digit of brainmath, a single switch from a zero to a one, to make my phantom limbs a pneuma-somatic reality.

He sensed it too. A drunken footstep transitioned into a wobble, a loose-boned waver. He was going to call our bluff, the drunken master would dodge everything we threw at him.

"Stop, monkeys," Zheng rumbled.

And I did.

In retrospect, Zheng was the only person present even remotely capable of calling this off. The abyssal side of me listened to her, in a way it wouldn't with anybody else. Lizzie was hanging off my arm, making this tiny warbling sound in her throat, trying to hold me back, but she wasn't enough. Zheng's growl cut across my thoughts, short-circuited the cold survivalist logic. I took the controls once more.

"Stop, yes, stop!" I added my own voice.

Twil frowned at Zheng, then at me. Evelyn hissed with frustration. Raine – stock-still with her finger on the trigger of her firearm – asked out loud “You want us to take it outdoors?” The amusement in her voice went a long way to still my racing heart. “Roll up our sleeves, get all Marquis of Queensbury on him?”

“No, *yoshou*,” Zheng purred. “You cannot catch this prey. None of you.” I glanced up at her too, expecting a lighthearted jibe at us silly, slow monkeys – but she was staring at the dead man too.

A shiver passed down my spine and through my bowels. If Zheng had looked at me like that, I would have curled up in a sobbing ball on the floor.

She wanted him dead, not in the panicked, group-instinct way we had just done. Her threat to eat his heart had not been exaggeration.

“Thas’ what I said!” the Drunkard protested. “I’m just gonna mosey on out, out of your hair, out of life, off to the skies, yeah.”

“I will catch you and eat you, wizard,” Zheng purred, a tiger’s chest vibrating in the jungle darkness. “I will hunt you and watch you and learn how you work, and I will eat you. Bone and marrow. I have devoured cleverer magicians than you.”

“Fuckin’ ‘ell,” Twil whispered.

The Drunkard pulled a mock-scared face again.

“This is absurd!” Evelyn spat. “He can’t avoid us all, he-”

“You saw what he did earlier,” I said. “Zheng is right. We’ll lose a physical contest, and he’ll leave, he’ll escape, which means we might never find out what was going on down there at the foot of the castle.”

“Come on, this is bullshit,” Twil said.

“You didn’t see him, *laangren*,” Zheng purred.

“I’ll just be off then!” The dead man threw us a rough salute.

“No,” I said. “No, you won’t.”

He turned to look at me, and I saw the other man floating behind his eyes, the Welsh Speaker. The real him. The boss.

“You’re not leaving without answering my questions first,” I said – or rather, heard myself say.

My pulse pounded in my throat and inside my own skull. I felt so small, so ineffective here, in this unexpected contest of wits with a mage. With Alexander, in the minutes before I’d killed him, I’d been right down at the bottom. Now I was home and safe, with a nice haircut and my friends arrayed around me, but I needed to intimidate this man – this resurrected magician – and I am not good at doing so, not good at bluffing, but I was equally certain that nobody else could.

Zheng’s restraint spooked me the most. By not rushing him, not killing this hated example of her most hated type, she’d accepted that right then, she *couldn’t*. And that was terrifying.

Lozzie went to step back from me but I wormed my hand down and found hers, held on tight.

The dead man pulled that irritating smile wider and did a terminally uncoordinated shrug with both hands.

“You might be able to avoid all of us, yes,” I said. “And maybe you’re such a powerful mage that you can stop anything Evelyn might to do you. But you can’t stop me.”

“Reeeeeeeally?” He squinted at me, absurdly over-acting the role. “Really, lass?”

“You can’t stop self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics. Not at the speed of thought. It’s not physical, not something you can avoid by stepping six inches to the left. And you know that, because you know about the Eye and what happened to the Sharrowford Cult. You must have picked up a few details about me. I’m Heather Morell, by the way, but you already know that, I suspect.”

“Aye, lass. I do. Ahhh, re-really really don’t wanna deal with the-with the- spooky, spooky little midgets, nahh, can’t deal with the-”

“Excuse me?” I said, suddenly bristling. “I’m not *that* short.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t piss her off with that right now,” Raine said with a click of her tongue. “She’s getting ready to turn you into a red smear on the floor, like she did your old boss.”

I suppressed a wince at that one, at my history of murder. I had to

make him believe, had to make myself believe.

“Yeah yeah yeah, s’cool, s’cool.” He did this big wince and thumbed at me while looking off to one side, mugging for his internal audience again. Or showing off? I couldn’t figure out how much was real and how much was acting.

“I don’t know if you can read intentions or read the future,” I said. “But whichever it is, read this, read what I’m doing now, and decide if you can dodge.”

With a clench of my teeth and stomach muscles, I dipped a hand into the oily sump at the base of my soul, and began to weave an equation. The first few pieces of molten-hot mathematics slammed through my mind and drew a wince from my throat. Define this man in front of me, define the space around him, something he can’t dodge through. That would hurt me, really hurt, but in my mind I gestured toward it, toward the mathematics to define a three-dimensional space he couldn’t leave.

He raised his hands, eyes wide. “Yo yo yo, I just do what the boss tells me, he makes the decisions.”

“Then-” I winced through a spike of headache. “Excuse me, but may I speak to him?”

The Drunkard pulled a showy cringe. “Ahhh, he doesn’t- you know- he just does the work!”

I slid the next few figures of the equation into place. Lozzie hugged me tight as I shook. A single bead of blood rolled out of my nose and stained my lips.

Playing chicken. Brainmath might actually work, but it was also too risky, in a room full of my friends, with a dangerous magician as my opponent. What if he was fast enough to counter me? What if Evelyn got hurt, or Raine? Or Lozzie? Was it worth the risk?

Deep down, I was willing to let him go, because we had bigger things to deal with. In that, the abyssal creature and the savanna ape were in agreement. Do not waste time on this man, do not let him hurt your friends. Get rid of him, and focus your energies on your sister. If that meant letting him go, the abyssal side of me was willing to accept the compromise.

If he talked.

“Very well,” he said – in a heavy Welsh accent, as he straightened up. As he stilled. As the real man resurfaced.

The transformation from the Drunkard to the Welsh Speaker was unnatural, confusing to the senses, to the basic program of social recognition built into the human animal. Either the dead man was the greatest actor of our age, or whatever he’d done to his mind went beyond mere self-suggestion.

The spider-servitors twitched again, stingers rising. The Welsh Mage locked his fingers together in a complex symbol, on the verge of some esoteric magic, and they paused.

I let the equation go and almost fell over. Lozzie held on tight as I staggered. I got my feet steady, an arm around Lozzie’s shoulders, wiped my nose with the back of my hand and swallowed a mouthful of bile.

Raine pointed her handgun calmly at the Welsh Mage’s head. Twil stood, all wolf, ready to pounce.

“Mutually assured destruction it is then,” said the Welsh Mage.

I nodded. “I’m glad you understand.”

“You twitch wrong I put a bullet in your head,” Raine said.

“You can try,” he replied.

“Enough,” I huffed. “Answer my questions, and then ... then I’ll let you leave.”

“Heather!” Evelyn hissed.

“It’s the only option, Eevee,” I said. “I don’t think we can stop him without risk to ourselves. And despite what he says, he can’t just walk out. He needs to bluff, and that’s failed, so now we talk.”

“How do I know I can trust you to let me leave?” he asked, voice lilting like music.

I shifted myself in Lozzie’s support, standing up straighter. Had to concentrate for a moment to get past the thick accent, so I took the opportunity to study the man’s eyes, shrunken as prunes. His faint frown spoke of superiority and disapproval, but also disinterest. He did want to leave, and was not invested in us. Not the arrogance of Alexander Lilburne, used to being obeyed and bullying to get his own way. He watched me as something to be avoided or overcome,

not as a silly little girl to be browbeaten.

“Because she’s Heather,” Lozzie said, with a little pout.

“Because I care deeply about my friends,” I said. “Which is everyone in this room except you, and you’ve convinced me of your potential to hurt them. If you convince me you’re not a threat after then, then it’s not worth the risk to get rid of you.”

And, I left unsaid, you haven’t actually done anything to us, and I don’t know if I can murder you in cold blood.

Yes you can, whispered abyssal instinct, and I knew it was true.

“It is always worth killing wizards, shaman,” Zheng purred.

“We got a deal?” Raine asked for me.

The man stumbled again, the Drunkard flowing back into his mannerisms. The accent fled – but the fingers locked on the verge of a magical spell stayed in place. “Ahhhhhhh yeah yeah yeah yeah. We gotta do a deal. Deals man, that’s me, that’s me all over! You gotta be smooth, be a little greased, get along, or you know, you get crazy bitches pointing guns at you.” He did a wink and a nod at Raine. “You a crazy bitch?”

“Oh yeah,” Raine said. “The craziest.”

“Good, cool. Crazy bitches are cool. Look, like, look.” He closed his eyes as he spoke. “I’m not superman, yeah? Not invincible. We gotta deal, gotta walk out the door without nobody getting domed. Yeah?”

I frowned at him. The Drunkard sagged and sighed – and straightened back up as the Welsh Mage once more.

“Why do you keep doing that?” I asked. “Why bother with the disguise?”

“*Atblygol*,” he grunted.

“‘Reflex’,” Zheng translated, then continued. “Wizard, your deal is with the shaman, for safe passage. Once out, you’re mine.”

“You cannot find me, demon,” he said. “As soon as I leave your sight, I will be somebody else, and you will not see me.”

Zheng growled. I flinched. Twil jerked around at the noise, agitated.

“Stop sparring,” I raised my voice as best I could. “Tell me why you drew the eye.”

He shrugged, guarded. “An object of study is an object of study. One illustrates fish or birds, why not Gods?”

“It’s not a God,” I snapped. He raised his eyebrows. “It’s not!”

He looked off to the side with a tiny sigh and muttered a string of exasperated Welsh under his breath. Evelyn went stiff and for a moment I thought the man was casting a spell, until Zheng translated his words.

“Is this really the time for metaphysical philosophy?” she purred.

“You believe it’s a God? Why? Why use that word?” I asked, couldn’t let this drop. “Do you worship it?”

He tossed his head. “If you petition something in the way one must an Outsider, is it not a God?” His eyes slid to the notebook in my hands. “I wish that returned. The poems have personal, sentimental value.”

“No,” Evelyn deadpanned. “You did magic in Welsh, we’d be fools to give that back to you. Do you think I’m that much of an idiot? Now, who are you?”

“The truth would make no sense to you.”

Evelyn ground her teeth. “What were you doing down there in the fog? Where’s the gateway, how did you get in?”

“Doing?” He let the word hang. “The same thing as you, Saye. And yes, I know who you are. I know what you seek. Our kind are all the same, are we not?”

“No,” Praem intoned. Evelyn hesitated, wrong-footed by her doll-demon’s devoted defense.

“The same as your mother, too,” the Welsh Mage continued. “She had much the same knack for creating loyal servants. You even speak as she did. The same silver, the same bite. You are almost like Loretta Saye reborn.”

Evelyn turned pale, eyes going wide, all her aggressive bluster blown out like a candle flame in a storm. Praem stepped in front of her, back ramrod straight, meeting the Mage’s gaze with her blank white eyes and prim expression.

“Be quiet,” she sing-songed at him.

“Ah, maybe you are Loretta after all,” he said.

“Who?” Twil was frowning, confused. Oh dear, a small part of my mind filed that away for later – there would be a later, I told myself. Everything was going to be okay.

“She’s not,” Raine said, not amused. “Don’t go there.”

“Who ... who ... ” Evelyn murmured. “You’re not old enough to have known her, not as ... you’re barely older than me. You would have been a child!”

“Even I am a mask,” he said.

“Hey, hey,” Raine said. “Over here, ratlicker. How’d you dodge Zheng earlier? Feel like sharing?”

“Trade secret.”

“You-” Evelyn grit her teeth. This was spiralling out of control. He was playing us.

“What happened down in the fog?” I blurted out. “Who was the other person? The corpse.”

He shrugged. “A double-double cross.”

“You lost though,” Evelyn hissed, blazing with cold anger.

“One must always be prepared for the minor setbacks of death,” he said – and out came the Drunkard again, rolling his eyes and smiling. “One last job for Eddy Lils’, you know? Guess I got fucked! Gonna go fuck ‘em back, cos you know, I’m dangerous, me.”

“You were working with Lilburne?” I asked. “Who was the other corpse?”

“I dunno. Some cow,” the Drunkard continued, hands and fingers still locked in his magical symbol, holding us at bay with the implied threat. “Meant to help me do the thing with the big lads out there but looks like it didn’t work, yeah? Dunno what Eddy wanted, but I got what I needed.”

“We cannot let this man leave,” Evelyn said, glancing back at me. “Heather, no. No, not now. This is no dabbler caught between larger fish, this ... I don’t know! This is a real mage, I am not letting

him go! Raine, shoot him!”

“Dunno if that’s gonna work, Eevee,” Raine said, no trace of humour in her voice. She understood too.

“Ahhh,” he sighed, as he straightened up and the Welsh Mage flowed back into his muscles and mannerisms. “It seems I must break the stalemate.”

“You call our bluff, we’ll call yours,” I warned, putting as much confidence as I could into my voice – but felt none. This magician scared Eevee, put Zheng on the back foot, seemed to ward off the spider-servitors. This had gone from nothing to real, too fast to track.

The Welsh Mage ignored us, and looked up at Zheng. Slowly, purposefully, he trailed his eyes down the length of her exposed torso, down her tattoos and the red-chocolate skin beneath, across the gaps left by my breaking of her chains.

“I see you have been ruined, *senex amica*,” he said. His disapproving frown turned to a subtle smile. “Some of my handiwork is spoiled, and that of my predecessors.”

Perhaps it was the motion of muscles unseen beneath Zheng’s skin that warned me. Or perhaps an imperceptible change in her face. Or perhaps, at sufficiently high levels, one can actually sense the desire to kill, to rend limb from limb. Perhaps when steeped long enough, hate and revenge can become a palpable miasma.

“I shall have you again someday, demon,” said the Welsh Mage.

Zheng rippled, the beginning of a quicksilver motion, a forward surge to tear this mage’s tongue out; she bared her teeth, a razor sharp shark’s maw.

His words had changed her mind. She wanted him dead, and not after a long hunt. No matter the spell ready to go off.

by this art you may contemplate – 10.6

Zheng went for the mage.

She uncoiled so fast my eyes couldn't track her. My optic nerve refused to process the blur. Muscle flowed as quicksilver, lightning in her fists.

Difficult as it may be to overlook Zheng's inhuman nature, harder still is to remember just how *superhuman* she can be, even minutes after we'd seen her set her own broken jawbone with nary a wince of pain. All too easy for the subconscious to consider her still bound by physical limits and mortal constraints, no matter how monstrous her tastes or how titanic her strength or how agile her acrobatics. It is more comfortable to think of Zheng as simply very big and very strong and possessing flesh that heals very quickly, a very foreign mind inside a body that is still basically human.

I'd forgotten how fast she could move.

Down in the fog at the foot of the castle, she hadn't been serious. She'd felt teased and frustrated by prey that wouldn't sit still, indeed. But the dead man, the revenant, he had been a diversion, a mysterious clown. Important to catch, perhaps, but not hated. For Zheng, on some level, running off into the fog after clever prey was fun and games. She was more like a cat than I'd ever tell her to her face.

But now we knew he was a mage. And killing mages was serious business.

A hurricane of razors crossed the ex-drawing room in a single heartbeat.

Zheng was about to rip out the Welsh Mage's tongue, break all his fingers, and most likely eat his heart, bloody and raw. As promised. Nothing and nobody – with the possible exception of hyperdimensional mathematics – could move fast enough to stop her.

Thank you.

Thank you, I had just enough time to think. Thank God, and Maisie, and anything else that cared to listen. I'd barely had time to process the taunt the Welsh Mage had flung at Zheng, but the implications of her sheer hatred were obvious. The abyssal part of me adored her, the human part was still grappling with a love that I couldn't speak; both agreed, kill him. No mercy for slavers.

In the split-second before Zheng slammed into him, the Welsh Mage twisted his fingers – a last twitch of muscle, trying to cast his spell.

Hands locked together in representation of an esoteric symbol, he pushed the curious interlocked shape beyond the angles possible in our reality, forced himself over the boundary of magic. For a horrible moment, the shape of his fingers became an alien thing, and made me feel sick.

Futile, I thought. He'd already checkmated himself.

Even if his spell turned Zheng to lead before she struck, two heaving masses of pneuma-somatic killing machine still hung on the wall behind him. Evelyn's spider-servitors waited to explode into motion and run him through with foot-long stingers. We'd already seen that it took him a moment of disorientation to switch back to the Drunkard personality, and that would be one second too long. He faced too many vectors of attack. One would get through. Probably Zheng.

With a twist and a yank he snapped his own left little finger, a sound like dry wood.

And pointed his hands at me.

Chaos is rarely encoded properly in memory – except in the abyss, where bodies do not rely on such slow, clumsy mechanisms as electrochemical signals and wet meat. Even in the moment, I had almost no idea what was happening until it was all over. Raine and I pieced it together later, encouraged by Evelyn's burning need to comprehend the limits of a unknown mage loose in Sharrowford, after I'd recovered from the physical side-effects of my instinctive reaction.

Five seconds. That's all it took.

One.

Zheng threw herself between the Mage and I, and took the spell full in the face.

Air temperature plummeted by ten, maybe twenty degrees. Flash-freeze sucked heat from my lungs, like Evelyn's magic but dirtier, rougher, torturing the surface of reality. A haze of orange-red burst around Zheng like nuclear sunrise seen from behind a mountain, heralded by a sound that was not a sound, past the edge of hearing, like a great cloud of wasps. Zheng shuddered like a struck oak.

I believe I shouted her name. Can't remember. Raine says I did. Evelyn says I didn't.

Then Zheng swiped a hand through the air in front of her, a blur clearing cobwebs, a machete through jungle vines; the wasp noise cut out with the most awful screeching strangle, as if a billion tiny insect throats had all been crushed at once.

Two.

Evelyn's spider-servitors took the opening. Chitinous legs ratcheted to pounce, stingers whirled back to strike.

But now, Zheng was in an unexpected and unpredicted position.

One of the spider-servitors failed to correct, and crashed into her from the side, toppling her over in a tangle of whirring spider legs and whipping limbs, Zheng roaring in frustration, a pair of monsters locked in a mis-aimed moment of friendly fire.

The second spider took a split-second to re-orient, re-aim, re-plan – and this was all the Welsh Mage needed. He sagged, head lolling and rolling, and stumbled with precognitive drunkenness out of the path of the incoming stingers, a clutch of spears passing harmlessly through empty space less than hand's breadth from his side. He wobbled and jerked and brought his head back up.

And he was somebody else. A third somebody.

Three.

The dead man's face lit up.

Wide-eyed, hyper-focused, with a manic smirk of dangerous amusement. Alien to both of his previous personalities. He locked eyes with me for a tenth of a second – then locked onto the notebook in my hands. His notebook, full of Welsh poetry.

The rest of us were paralysed by confusion. Twil – all wolf now, a growl in her muzzle and claws flexing – looked for an angle to leap at the Mage, but Zheng and the spider blocked her path for a crucial half-second. Raine tried to aim her handgun, but Zheng surged back up, kicking the spider off herself with a roar, tearing an errant pneuma-somatic stinger from the flesh of her arm. The poor spider bounced off the wall, legs scrabbling, dazed and confused as it tried to right itself. Praem was too busy yanking Evelyn off her feet and out of the way.

Zheng was turning toward the dead man, recovering from the spider's blunder, one hand arcing out to rip his tongue from his mouth; but he stepped around her.

He flowed like water over rock.

Amid all that confusion, I remember that one detail as clear as a heart attack. The way he moved, the way his third mask used his body, the actual Drunken Master.

The Lad he'd been down in the fog and at the gateway was not the real thing. He'd probably borrowed his dodging skills from this third personality, as Evelyn surmised later, and turned them into a comedy act, lulled us into a false sense of security, fooled even Zheng into thinking she could take him, if she really tried.

He was a snake of molten metal driven by the wind. He flowed past and around and under Zheng, wove to her side and landed a punch on her gut – for show, ordinary human strength not enough to make her blink – and then kept going, through her guard and out the other side and straight toward me.

Four.

For one second I was alone with a mage.

Surrounded by my friends, in the heart of the house, with Lozzie still clinging to my left arm. Utterly alone.

He wasn't faster than Zheng, or even Twil, or the bullets in Raine's handgun, but the manner and direction of his movement was so impossible, so expert, that it bought him a second of free action while everyone's brains raced to catch up. One cannot react to what one could not even imagine a moment earlier, even at the speed of thought. Even with brainmath, abyssal Heather and ape Heather are still running at the speed of the grey meat in my skill.

The Drunken Master took a step toward me and plucked his spiral-notebook out of my hands.

I could have touched him, I cursed myself later. I could have reached out and touched him and sent him Outside, or gripped the notebook harder, or even just taken a single step back. Anything, any reaction at all, would have foiled him. I blamed myself. Too slow, Heather. Too stupid. Too long out of the abyss.

He reached his other hand for my face or my throat, perhaps to take me hostage or prove the point that we couldn't stop him. Damn me and my stupidity, I could have let him touch me and then sent him Outside.

Adrenaline can turn a clever ape into an idiot – and abyssal creatures think faster even than lizard-brain impulses.

No, in that tenth of a second, I panicked. The abyssal thing I'd been panicked.

Fast threat creature touch bad no stop.

And without thinking, without planning, relying only on weeks of practice and knowledge osmosis to stop myself from ripping my own insides to mince, I flipped that single piece of hyperdimensional mathematics from a zero to a one.

Phantom limbs blossomed into glorious reality. Six tentacles, three from each flank between my ribcage and hips, pneuma-somatic flesh passing right through the fabric of my clothes. They were beautiful, pale and soft and infinitely dexterous, strobing with rainbow bio-luminescence, whirling and lashing. Lozzie squealed in surprise and stumbled clear, almost went sprawling onto the floor. She was one of the few who could see them.

I gasped with bliss and physical invasion both at once, pneuma-somatic anchors growing into place deep inside my torso, twinning with my real flesh, making me the merest shadow of what my soul said my body should be.

Euphoria.

What did this tiny, clumsy ape think he was doing? I was a shark, a squid, a marine thing from the black abyssal depths. I was strong and I was fast and he was threatening my pack, my mate, mine, *mine*, and I was going to beat him to death and leave his corpse for

the bottom-feeders and the slime.

All six tentacles struck together.

Five.

He couldn't actually see the tentacles, but somehow he could sense they were present, sense he was in danger.

The Drunken Master lost his smirk and closed his eyes.

He abandoned the attempt to grab me, rocked back on one heel and slid the other foot out as he twisted low at the waist, ducking under three tentacles. He flipped back up and hopped away from me on tiptoes, head going left and right like a boxer dodging hammer-blows. My brain did not possess the processing power to actually guide my tentacles, and I am never going to be a martial artist anyway – but I could flail, I could lash, I could panic.

And I still couldn't hit him. Even with six extra limbs to work with, all I could do was keep him off me.

I think I screamed at him. Or hissed. Or some combination of the two.

Zheng caught up as well, turning toward him, ready to pin him between us, but he seemed to simply duck and dive through her guard again, head bobbing and twisting, rotating at his ankles in way that surely should have snapped his bones. He stepped directly between two of my tentacles and with a instinctive scream inside my head I realised he was *learning*.

Of course, there was one person in the room who didn't have years of preconditioned expectations, who did not think at the speed of a human being, who did not need to rely on neural connections.

I think Praem panicked.

In three prim steps, she walked straight up behind the Drunken Master and grabbed a fistful of his curly black hair. As if all his weaving, dodging tricks didn't even register for her.

"Cease," she intoned, bell-clear voice cutting through the confusion.

The split-second of arrested motion was enough. I finally hit him in the side of the chest with one lashing tentacle, a blow like a sack of wet concrete slamming into his bones. I felt his ribs crack.

He stumbled, let out a deep pained ‘oof’, and ripped his head clear of Praem’s grip.

“Wizard!” Zheng roared. “Mine!”

In the split-second before Zheng could pin him, he sprinted straight for the kitchen doorway.

Memory resumes at this point in a confused jumble, everybody shouting at once, strange tuggings in my chest and belly, Twil and Zheng almost slamming into each other as they tried to fly through the kitchen door after the mage, my sheer clear-minded joy turning to sudden deep lances of pain in my flanks and chest, Evelyn spitting curses, Raine rushing to my side as my knees give out, and finally my beautiful tentacles turning to ash in the air.

“Stop him!” Evelyn was screaming.

Raine dumped her makeshift riot shield on the floor with a clang that could have woken the dead, and caught me before I hit the ground. Tears of pain and abyssal dysphoria blurred my vision. Reduced back down to this stinking, rotting meat again, just as the adrenaline finally hit me, shaking all over, my sides burning as if I’d been branded.

“Ah-ah- ow! Ow!”

“Heather, woah woah, slow down, slow down, hey,” Raine murmured, cradling me as I flailed, as I tried to catch the falling ash of my tentacles before the pneuma-somatic flesh blew away to nothingness. A second pair of hands caught mine, little hands, as Lozzie joined Raine in holding me up.

I didn’t even care that the dead man was getting away.

“Evee, she’s done it again. She did the tentacle thing again,” Raine said. “Heather, look at me. Heather.”

“Then pick her up!” Evelyn snapped. “And bring her with-”

She cut off at the sound of the front door slamming open. Sprinting feet echoed down the garden path. Then Twil’s shout floated back to us – a confused ‘what the hell?’

“No, no no no,” I sobbed. “I can’t- can’t be back- no- should have grabbed- grabbed him by the throat, s-sorry, sorry, I shouldn’t be here- no-”

“Hey, hey, Heather, shhhh, shhhh,” Raine murmured, trying to stroke my suddenly cold-sweat soaked hair. “Look at me, Heather, please. Please concentrate. Where does it hurt? Heather.”

“Inside,” I whined – but I didn’t mean it in the way Raine did.

“She’s safe inside,” Lozzie said, a serious expression on her elfin little face, blinking big eyes and trying to push masses of floaty blonde hair behind her ears. “Safe inside. Nothing’s broken.”

“You’re sure?” Raine asked her. “You’re absolutely certain?”

“Feels broken,” I sobbed, clutching at myself.

Twil skidded back into the kitchen, knocked a chair over with a clatter, and caught herself on the workshop door frame.

“He vanished!” she said, wide-eyed with disbelief. “Jumped over the garden wall and poof! Gone! What the shit?”

Raine and Evelyn shared a glance. “That’s the boundary of the wards,” Raine said. “Guess he needed out before he could pull a proper vanishing act.”

“Fuck!” Evelyn spat.

“Anybody else get tagged?” Raine checked. “We all okay? What about Zheng?”

“She took off down the street,” Twil said. “Fuck knows why, she couldn’t see him either. What the hell was all that? That was some bullshit. ... uh, Heather alright?”

“She will be,” Raine said.

Raine picked me up and carried me into the kitchen, a secure, safe princess carry which I wish I’d been coherent enough to enjoy. I clung to her, desperate for the skinship, for the relief from this dragging, sinking feeling of being trapped inside my own flesh.

She set me down in a chair and fetched water, wiped my tears and the bleeding nose I hadn’t even noticed. Lozzie hovered over her shoulder, bobbing from foot to foot, saying nonsense things to me. Evelyn was shouting, red in the face with fury, as Twil tried to calm her down and Praem glided through the kitchen and out into the front room. The disorder and noise washed over me and through me and meant nothing. Nothing mattered.

Raine helped me sip some water, then held up three fingers.

“Heather, look at me, please. How many fingers? ... Heather? You in there?”

“She is!” Lozzie chirped. “Heather!”

“Not really.” I sniffed hard, couldn’t stop crying slow tears. “Three fingers.”

My flanks throbbed at the tentacle anchor points, oblique muscles already stiffening with massive circular bruises. Dozens of barbed-wire spikes dragged across the inside of my torso, through my lungs and my guts, where I’d secured the extra limbs inside myself with tendons and cartilage and supplementary muscles of pneuma-somatic flesh. Studying anatomy and biology these last few weeks had paid off – I had avoided ripping my insides apart this time – but the result still left much to be desired, especially when executed in panic and fear.

But the pain wasn’t making me cry. The loss – *again* – was too much. Cut too deep.

My body felt alien, a sack of writhing bacteria and hot meat. Every blink threatened to render Raine and Lozzie’s faces into a jumble of meaningless noise, flat planes and meat-spaces underneath the glow of the kitchen lights. Outdoors, night had fallen, visible through the kitchen window, and some insane part of me wanted to run out there into the welcoming chill dark and huddle down in a shadowy corner where I wouldn’t be found.

“You feel any weakness?” Raine asked, trying to sound light and easy, and failing at it. “Numb at all? Tingling in your fingers or toes? Heather? Concentrate on my voice, okay.”

“I- can’t- I-” I choked out.

“*Concentrate*,” Raine said, and the whip-crack of her voice forced me to focus. I shook my head.

“No ... no, Raine, I’m not bleeding inside. I’m bruised. That’s all. Bruises.”

Raine stared into my eyes for a moment as I blinked past the tears.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out. “It was instinct. I just- he was going to- I said I wouldn’t, but- I just did it- I’m sorry, I’m-”

“Shhhhhh, it’s not your fault. You’re forgiven, okay?” Raine wiped away my tears again, then glanced back at Lozzie. She said something, Lozzie replied, but I was too busy worming one hand down inside my hoodie’s sleeve. I got one whole arm tucked up inside the cocoon of my own clothing, then felt downward, under my tshirt, across my own belly and over to the tender flesh on my flank, hot and inflamed. I grit my teeth and jabbed with a fingernail.

I thought I did quite well to conceal the spike of pain, despite the hiss through my teeth, but I couldn’t hide anything from Raine.

“Heather?! Heather, what was that? Where did it hurt? Heather?”

“I-” I sniffed back tears, poked myself again, clenched my teeth so hard they creaked. “N-nothing, I-”

Raine realised what I was doing and grabbed my hand through my hoodie. I myself barely understood why I was doing it. She met my eyes and I looked down in horrified embarrassment.

“No, no, Heather, no,” Raine murmured, her other hand stroking my hair. “You don’t have to do that to yourself.”

“It- it distracts from the ... the ... ” I let out another hard sob, trapped in this awful parody of the impossible thing I was supposed to be. Physical pain distracted from the emotional pain, from the alienation, the dysphoria.

Why was it so much worse this time? Because I’d worked so hard, and I still couldn’t sustain even a fraction of what I’d been in the abyss. Each taste of mutable glory was torture when it was gone.

Raine held my hand to stop me hurting myself, and hugged me close.

“You must be able to bloody well smell him! Go track his scent! He can’t have turned to fucking *mist*!” Evelyn was shouting at a flinching, cringing Twil, then whirled on Praem as she walked back in. “And what the hell were you doing?! You could have strangled him, broken his bones, fucking clawed his eyes out, but you *grab his hair*? What was that!?” She threw her arms out in a shrug and her walking stick caught a mug by the kitchen sink, knocked an avalanche of dirty plates into the metal basin with an ear-splitting clatter. Evelyn flinched and screwed her eyes shut. Twil caught a bright orange Halloween-themed mug before it bounced right off

the countertop. Lozzie clamped her hands over her ears.

"I am sorry," Praem intoned into the silence that followed.

Evelyn stared at her like she couldn't believe such impertinence.

"Sorry? Sorry? What were you doing, you-"

"Evee, fuckin' 'ell," Twil said. "She panicked, yeah? Calm down."

Evelyn whirled on her, frantic with anger that barely concealed her fear, and shouted in Twil's face. "Do you-"

Twil flinched again, hard, and Evelyn stopped dead. She closed her eyes for a second and took a long, deep breath. Twil glanced at Raine and I for help. Lozzie had all but retreated behind me. Raine shrugged and mouthed 'good luck'.

"I mean ... " Twil tried. "He got away, yeah, but nobody got hurt. That's what matters, right?"

"Do you understand what that man was?" Evelyn asked, voice cold and tightly controlled. Her face twitched, one eye and the corner of her mouth. "Do you have even the slightest conception of what we just let escape?"

Twil sighed and rolled her eyes. "Duh. My family worships an Outsider, remember?"

Evelyn blinked, opening her mouth and closing it again.

"Evee," I croaked. She turned her eyes on me, wide and wild. "Stop. Please."

"... I thought you would understand, Heather. Of all people, I thought-"

"Yes," I said, tears finally drying up with irritation. "A mage."

Evelyn nodded, once, twice, then over and over. "Yes. Yes, thank you. You and I are the only two people in here who have ever had to put one down. Oh, sod all of this." Evelyn seemed to collapse inside, sagging on the support of her walking stick. "This evening has turned into a rinse of what little dignity I manage to retain, hasn't it? Let's get all of Evelyn's Saye's fears on display, dig up every last morsel."

"Is that what the fuckboy there was taunting you about?" Twil asked. "Your, like, mum, or something?"

"That is none of your business," Evelyn said, but she could barely keep her voice steady.

Twil tilted her head at Evelyn, then stepped forward and ambushed her with a hug.

"You- I-" Evelyn spluttered. "I didn't ask for-"

"Shut up and take it for once." Twil squeezed her harder, arms around Evelyn's hunched shoulders and bent spine. "Look like you need it. Just got out of a bad fight, yeah?"

Evelyn blushed a brighter red than her anger. Lips pressed tight together, blinking rapidly, she didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. She looked like she wanted to crawl out of her own skin. A countdown started in the back of my head; Evelyn made it almost seven seconds.

"I do not- this is physically uncomfortable," she managed. "Please let go."

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," Twil said. She let go and stepped back, and shot a split-second guilty look at me.

"And now is not ... not the time," Evelyn said. "That mage got away with his notebook as well. God alone knows what was really in there."

"I mean, you looked like you needed it," Twil pressed on. "Like you were about to cry or something, and you know, you're my- ... friend-"

"Thank you, yes," Evelyn blurted out. "Yes, yes, thank you. Fine. Alright. Now is not the time. And I was not going to cry."

Twil raised her eyebrows. One could practically hear the *dot-dot-dot* of unspoken scepticism, but she kept that to herself. Learning how to deal with our Evee? I hoped so. Evelyn met her gaze, and for a second she looked on the verge of breaking down again. She opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, and I could see the thought forming, the request which would have been impossible as little as a month ago, unthinkable half a year past. Her free hand twitched toward Twil. Maybe this wasn't the right moment, and we had much bigger and scarier magicians to think about, but I was absolutely certain that Evelyn was about to ask Twil for another hug.

And then Zheng slammed the front door and stalked back into the kitchen.

A vision from hell paused in the doorway, still naked from the waist up, hair matted with the dry, crusted remains of the mucus from down in the fog dimension. She was so angry her expression had tripped over into granite-hard cold focus. She vibrated with frustration, her breathing rough, her skin steaming faintly with a sheen of sudden sweat. Her eyes flicked past us, dark with fury, but didn't seem to actually see until she settled on me.

"Zheng," I croaked, a smile in my voice.

Her mere proximity was enough to soothe the worst of the abyssal dysphoria. The creature I'd once seen saw kinship in her, retracted its spines and deflated its toxin sacs, relaxed. I felt a touch less alien.

She blinked once, and stomped toward the workshop doorway.

"Yo, you get anything?" Twil asked as Zheng passed. "What were you even following? Hey, hey, Zheng, where you going?"

"You were running 'round out there with your tits out?" Raine asked, a smile in her voice too. A real one, despite the situation.

"Zhengy ... " Lozzie bit her lip.

"Yes, all good questions," Evelyn grumbled.

Zheng ignored us and slipped into the workshop.

She returned a second later, tearing open the black bin liner that contained her soiled jumper. Thankfully for the state of our kitchen floor, the mucus had quick-dried there too. She scraped the worst of the green crust off and yanked the jumper down over her head.

"Washing machine," Praem said.

"I do not care, little one," Zheng rumbled, then, "Yoshou. Watch the shaman. Keep her safe."

"Always," Raine said, without the smile. "Where you off to?"

"Zheng?" I croaked, a horrible squirming in my belly as realisation dawned. I tried to stand up and managed only a lurch out of the chair, legs wobbly and sides screaming with abused muscle. Raine caught my stumble. I fought her weakly for a second, thinking she

was going to deposit me back in the chair, sit me down and shut me up, and the abyssal instinct in my heart couldn't take that right now – but to my surprise, Raine just supported me, helped me stand, as I blinked and panted at Zheng.

“Where are you going?” I asked, a lump in my throat. My voice shook. My chest constricted. “Zheng?”

“Hunting.”

She wouldn't look at me.

“... but ... no, no not now. Not now. Zheng, I need you.”

“Zhengy, nooooo,” Lozzie murmured, and made a sad little face.

“Zheng yes,” Evelyn interrupted with a snap, eyes blazing as she nodded at the giant demon-host. “Yes. Yes, you understand it perfectly, don't you? This mage has to die. How will you do it? How do you plan to track him? Do you-”

“Shut up, wizard.” Zheng was already striding past Evelyn, making for the front door.

“Do you need any help?” Evelyn finished.

Zheng paused and looked down at her, darkly unimpressed. “Help, wizard?”

“Help, yes. I'm serious. I'm right here, you absolute fool,” Evelyn snapped at her. “I'm skilled. I can do things you can't. I've killed another mage before, and if I've learnt anything recently it's that none of us are alone in this. I'm a mage, and I'm on your side, especially if it involves getting rid of vermin infesting my goddamn city and-”

Zheng leaned down and over, right in Evelyn's face. The same move she'd used on me when I'd first freed her, the same predatory focus and intent, the same animal intimidation grasping at one's guts with clawed hands. Evelyn flinched and shrank back.

“This is not for your territorial pissings, *little thing*,” Zheng rumbled through her teeth.

Twil let out a warning growl at Zheng's back, long and low, and I think there were words in there too, mangled by the sudden formation of a wolf snout. Evelyn turned waxy and pale, cold sweat broke out on her forehead. She took an involuntary step back from

Zheng, shaking, almost unable to grip her walking stick properly.

“Zheng no,” Lozzie repeated. “You don’t have to. You can let it go. Let it go.”

Zheng stepped back and left Evelyn alone. Twil – wolf form dissipating to nothing again, mist in the air – went to Evelyn’s side in an instant, grabbing her free hand and scowling at Zheng. The giant zombie turned away, ignored the pair of them, ignored me, ignored everything and everyone and strode toward the door. I reached out to her, bile in my throat, pain pulling inside my chest. Phantom limbs reached out toward her and muscles in my flanks and torso tried to support them, twitching and pulling against already bruised flesh. I winced through my teeth and sat back down in the chair with a thump, clutching at my sides.

“My-” Evelyn pulled herself up and raised her chin, though pale and shaking. “My offer of help still stands. I mean it.”

Zheng rolled one shoulder, the merest nothing of a shrug as she left.

“Hold up,” said Raine.

Perhaps it was the natural authority in her voice, or perhaps Zheng respected Raine’s input more than she did the rest of us, but whatever the reason, Zheng paused, turned to look, and gave Raine the benefit of a second to explain herself.

Raine raised a finger. “I think we may have been tricked. Perhaps hoodwinked. And quite possibly, bamboozled.”

Zheng frowned. The first chink in her armour of anger.

“Think about it for a sec,” Raine carried on, addressing all of us with a sweep of a hand. “Mister ‘Joe King’ just now, he knew things about us that he shouldn’t – couldn’t, have possibly known. Right? Anybody else catch that part? Just me?”

“He’s a mage,” Evelyn drawled. “Don’t be dense.”

“Exactly. Dead man walking is a mage.”

“What are you getting at?” Evelyn said. “Get on with it. Now is not the time for-”

Zheng made an impatient rumbling noise in her chest.

“Oh,” Twil lit up.

“Yeah. Lassie gets it.” Raine nodded slowly.

“Oi!” Twil snapped.

“Love you too, werewolf.”

“The point, *yoshou*,” Zheng growled.

“Point is, this dude knew about Evelyn’s leg and her family history, and then also about you, Zheng. Something from your past, I’m guessing. Made you think he’s somebody you used to know, right? Now, I’m not gonna ask exactly who you think he is, but I need you to answer this – was he somebody specific? Can you put a name to him?”

Zheng stared. I couldn’t tell if she was thinking, or blanking the question. Then she finally shook her head.

“Right?” Raine went on. “So now you think he’s somebody who used to know you, somebody you want dead, and hey, that’s cool, that’s your business. But back there, in our little standoff, it made you tilt, didn’t it? Broke the stalemate. Dude used your anger to spring a surprise on us. Talking shit at Eevee almost made her break it first, but it wasn’t enough, so he switched to you.”

“Yeah, like, he was making it up?” Twil asked.

“Why not?” Raine shrugged. “What’s more likely, that this guy’s a mage from both Zheng’s past *and* Evelyn’s, that he somehow knew I was the one who lifted the cocaine off his corpse, and exactly how many bullets I had left, which was weird as hell by the way – or that he was playing a con?”

“How would he know any of that otherwise?” Evelyn asked.

“You’re the magician, Eevee,” Raine said. “You tell us.”

A stillness came over the kitchen for a long moment as we all digested Raine’s theory. Even sunk deep in pain physical and spiritual, her idea made sense to me. What were the chances of a mage being related to the pasts of both Zheng and Evelyn? Depends how small the supernatural world is, I thought to myself, and that was an impossible question to answer.

Zheng’s tall frame cast shadows over the kitchen table as she shifted her weight and raised her head. She rumbled like a lit furnace.

“It does not matter, *yoshou*. I hunt.”

“Yeah, that’s cool, go hunt. Good luck, let us know if you eat tasty bits of him or whatever.” Raine pointed a finger gun at her. “But when you find him, just keep that in mind. He might be more con man than mage.”

“Meat is meat.”

“He got you way tilted, big girl. If I’m right, he’ll try it again. That’s all. Stay sharp.”

Zheng stared for a moment, then grunted, neither acknowledgement nor dismissal. She turned on her heel to leave.

“Zheng, please,” I croaked, and stumbled to my feet again. My phantom limbs reached for her as she left, begging her to stay here with me, stay by me. I hunched up tight, pain all down both sides. “I need you ... here, with me?”

“I know, shaman,” she threw over her shoulder. Angry. “I’ll bring you his scalp.”

She stomped away through the front room, making less and less noise as she went, as if adopting a cat-like silent slink. Nothing so big should move with such stealth. By the time she opened the front door she was barely a ghost of motion, a whisper on the air into the darkness and streetlight glow outdoors. She closed the door behind her, without a click.

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Two days later, on Monday afternoon, Raine followed the address on the revenant’s keys.

Evelyn went with her, to disarm any magical booby-traps the mage may have left for inquisitive noses. Praem accompanied them too, for extra body-guard duties, dressed in a green ribbed sweater and a long skirt so as not to draw attention to her maid uniform in public.

And of course I went along as well, because at the end of all things, no matter how twitchy and animalistic I felt, no matter how much I wanted to climb into a dark corner and hibernate, no matter how much my soul said I should have spines and flippers and sharp fangs and should dart off in search of Zheng, in the end, hyperdimensional mathematics was always our trump card.

I’d spent all of Sunday resting, because Raine had made it abundantly clear that I did not have a choice in the matter. No

chasing enigmatic mages, no traipsing around the city looking for Zheng, no ripping the secrets of reality from animated clay vessels, and absolutely no visualising the tentacles I desired so much.

Watching marine life videos on the internet was allowed though.

She was right, I needed it.

My flanks were a mass of overlapping purple bruises again. Nowhere near as bad as the first time, but enough that a long soak in a very hot bath did little to soothe the pain. By Sunday morning I was stiff and sore and slow-moving, and ravenously hungry.

Across Sunday I'd inhaled three packets of chocolate chip cookies, half a block of cheese, breakfast, lunch, and a homemade chicken casserole for dinner with big soft chunky vegetables and roast potatoes, and I still couldn't feel full. By ten at night, Raine had sent Praem out into the city with specific directions to a fast-food place called 'Azarabab's Pizza.' Azarabab is not a real name, as far as I could tell, and his establishment did not serve pizza. I had never eaten a kebab before, and will likely never do so again.

I'd spent the whole day, and most of Monday morning, clinging to Raine. Even if she hadn't wanted me to come along, for my safety, she had no choice.

The address on the keys – 82 Barksloof Way – turned out not to be in Manchester as suggested by the mysterious train ticket, but right there in Sharrowford. Nestled deep in the south side of the city, among brick-and-slate low rises from the 1980s. A sterile slab of commuter belt welded to Sharrowford's underbelly, ablative economic armour for the train station. Scraggly grass greens between blocks of low flats, pubs with pretentious names like 'the Sharrowford Barn' or 'the Rest Stop', crowds of pigeons on every rooftop and power line.

I wanted to slink into a back alley like an urban fox. Hide among the rubbish bins. That's what I was now – a rubbish monster. Couldn't even walk around the city without my gut telling me the open spaces and the light were *wrong*.

I wished it would rain, hard. I would soak in it and pretend I was underwater.

"What's the worst we could find, hey?" Raine asked, as we staked the place out.

Well, if one can call loitering by a park bench for five minutes a 'stakeout'.

"... another corpse?" I tried eventually.

Evelyn grunted. "A bomb."

"Him," Praem intoned.

Twil had school that afternoon, and opted not to accompany us, but only after she and Evelyn had a blazing row over the phone. I caught part of it filtered through the ceiling from Evelyn's bedroom, but the gist was not difficult to follow. Twil was to be a good girl and attend class and not jeopardise her future by skipping school to spend it with Evelyn, and yes, *thank you*, whipped Evelyn's silver tongue, Praem was more than capable of making sure Evelyn didn't stick her fingers in any plug sockets or run with scissors or eat glue. Slam. Done.

The revenant's flat was on the top floor of a three-story building with a single, empty, echoing stairwell. Stairwells were not good for me. I had to consciously resist an absurd and impossible urge to pull myself directly upward, like an octopus ascending a tube, with limbs I didn't have in a liquid medium that was not air.

We passed an old lady making her way down. She smiled at all of us, and Raine smiled back, though the poor old dear's eyes slid right off Praem as if the doll-demon wasn't there.

Getting in was easy enough. Raine had the key, the courage to knock, and a gun in her jacket.

We'd come armed, as much as possible while walking around in public. What would my mother say? For that matter, what would the me of six months ago say? Probably scream and run.

Raine had her gun, and that wicked black combat knife hidden away somewhere. My pockets contained an old present from Raine – a very illegal can of pepper spray, and a little personal attack alarm which I doubted would be any use here. Praem had herself. Evelyn had Praem, and I suppose in extreme need she could always hit stuff with her walking stick.

We needn't have bothered; 82 Barksloof Way was as sterile as its surroundings.

The single room flat contained the detritus of a life lived at speed,

with little to weigh it down or hold it in place. An old steel bed frame in one corner with a bare mattress and dirty sheets, rumpled from a final sleep. A tiny kitchenette overflowing with fast food wrappers and microwave cartons and not one piece of permanent cutlery. Not a single toenail clipping or stray hair lurked in the tiny, suspiciously clean bathroom. Evelyn double-checked that. "Magic. To track him," she explained the interest.

Two weeks of dust lay on every cold surface. The heating was off, the single window shaded by a blind. Old paint showed chips and peeled patches on the walls. Scuff stains surrounded the doorway, no mat for shoes. No shoes either.

Raine spent only five minutes edging around the place, looking for tripwires or odd symbols, but there was nothing.

No magic circles, no hidden books, no loose floorboards with secret stashes. Not even a television. The only objects of interest were a couple of cardboard moving boxes from Homebase, stuffed with assorted junk. Work boots. A torch. A few hastily bundled clothes. An old analog radio.

"Wonder if this was just a crash pad for him," Raine suggested, as she squatted down to dig through the contents of the boxes, pulling out a packet of unopened crayons. She sniffed them and shrugged. "Look magical to you?"

"Don't be absurd," Evelyn grunted.

She stood by the single dirty window, staring out between the slats of the blinds. We kept the lights off, so as not to attract more attention than we already had. Praem watched the door, though there was little need in a room so small.

"This was a front," I supplied, standing as close to Raine as I could without crowding her, hugging myself through my hoodie.

"Somewhere he could pretend to live, for his ... um ... for the people he was fooling, in the Sharrowford Cult. Maybe. I don't know."

"No, no, it's good guess, I think," Raine said, and flashed a smile up at me.

I nudged her side with my knee, very gently. Just a touch. Needed the contact.

Zheng hadn't returned home, not since Saturday night. Without her I felt like a frantic animal caught in a cage-trap, alone. Raine helped, but I'd become so needy. For the last two days I'd been glued to her side, seeking constant touch, constant reminder that I was here, in this body, that it was okay to be me.

We couldn't go to Carcosa like this. I had to pull myself together. I felt so wretched.

"Now the cult's gone and his safe house here's been rumbled," Raine said, working an ancient bomber jacket free from inside one of the boxes. Rotten orange, old train tickets in the pockets. "Maybe we really won't see any more of him."

"We will," Evelyn drawled, a hollow space behind her voice, still staring out of the window. "He's still out there."

"So sure?" Raine asked.

"Him or others like him. Edward Lilburne was right. Sharrowford is going to fill up with rats and vultures, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Pest control," Praem sing-songed. Evelyn laughed and shook her head.

"Thank you, Praem. I needed that."

"Always."

Evelyn raised an eyebrow at her.

"B-I-N-G-O," Raine spelled out loud, standing up with a bundle of black wire clutched in one hand, grinning from ear to ear. "And bingo was his name-o."

"Ahh?" I blinked at her.

"Yes Raine, well done, you've found a phone charger ... oh." Evelyn sighed in defeat as Raine extracted Mister Joking's ancient mobile phone from her pocket, matched the charger to the port on the bottom, and plugged the other end into the nearest wall socket. "Yes, wonderful, that discovery saved us thirty quid on ebay. It's hardly a notepad titled 'my crimes and current location'."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," Raine said. "You never know what you'll find in there."

“That’s not what the saying means,” I tutted.

Raine shot me a grin and a wink. “Let’s just wait for this old steam engine to get itself going, and we’ll see what we can see.”

The battered old plastic mobile took more than five minutes of charging to respond to the on switch. Raine rifled through the boxes some more, but found nothing interesting except for a small commemorative coin, some kind of historical reproduction currency stamped with the head of Oliver Cromwell, kept in a small velvet pouch. Evelyn shuffled around the room, poking things with her walking stick. I got a sinking feeling in my stomach, as if what we’d find on that phone would bring no good.

Raine held the phone and watched the ancient little LCD screen light up with animated black squares. It was too small for Evelyn and I to peer over her shoulder, so we waited as she thumbed through the menus with the clicking buttons.

“No password, no security,” Raine murmured to herself, eyes glued to the screen. “Very stupid, very stupid. Ah, here we ... ahaha, oh bugger me. Okay.”

“What? What?” Evelyn demanded.

“This phone is registered to one ‘Joshua King’. At least our boy was consistent about his choice of surnames. Let’s see who he’s been calling. Worst comes to the worst we could just call these and see what happens.”

“Is that safe?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Evelyn drawled. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“We can take precautions,” Raine said, scrolling down a list. “Don’t recognise any of the names on this contact list. Nothing for the days he was lying there dead, not since the date on the train ticket ... ah.” A slow, wry amusement came over Raine’s face. A fatalistic sigh escaped her lips. “*Ahhh*. You silly thing, should have told us. Well. There we have it. That’s a lead. Can’t leave that one alone.”

“Have what?” Evelyn demanded. “Told us what, Raine?”

Raine pointed the phone’s tiny screen at us. Picked out in blocky black letters were three calls, all made on the same date as the train ticket, the day the Welsh Mage, the revenant, the triple-man in one body, whatever he was, had come to Sharrowford at the behest of

Edward Lilburne.

Two of the names meant nothing to us – ‘January’ and ‘Bikeman.’

The third name was not a pseudonym. He’d also called it twice the night before.

‘Sarika.’

by this art you may contemplate – 10.7

“Sarika.”

Evelyn read the name out loud, blocky black letters on the tiny LCD screen. She pulled a face like she’d swallowed a lemon.

“Oh.” For a moment I couldn’t process the information. Sarika, really? “But ... wait, that doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” said Raine. She flipped the phone back around and resumed thumbing down through the incriminating call log. “Question is, why’d he use-”

“That woman,” Evelyn hissed through clenched teeth, “was to never lift a finger in magic again. She is meant to be incapable. That’s what you both told me. A cripple, useless, can’t even wipe her own arse, nothing bloody well left of her.”

“There isn’t. Wasn’t.” A confused shudder passed through me as I recalled the human wreckage curled up on a hospital bed. “She wouldn’t. Couldn’t. There’s no way. No way.”

“Care to test that hypothesis?” Evelyn jabbed a finger at the mobile phone in Raine’s hand. She didn’t wait for an answer, but turned away in a mounting rage, gesturing with the head of her walking stick. “The only reason that woman is still breathing is because I was assured she wasn’t a threat. That she was done, not a mage, not even a human being anymore, that I didn’t have to worry about yet another goddamn amateur dabbler loose in Sharrowford, but oh no, no, I let myself get *convinced*, didn’t I?”

“Hey, hey, Eevee, slow down,” Raine laughed.

“Should never have let her live. Burned that house down and locked her in cupboard,” Evelyn spat. “Stupid, stupid decision. Always so weak, so-”

“*Evelyn*,” I snapped.

She flinched.

“The only reason Sarika is still alive is because I brought her back,” I continued. “I did that. I decided to do that. You don’t decide if she dies.”

I bristled, bizarrely protective. Sarika was a horrible person who had done indefensible things, but while she did not deserve what happened to her, that wasn’t why I cared. I’d torn a broken thing from the Eye’s clutches, and I had to believe that the effort had been worthwhile. That the technique was replicable. It was important to me that she lived.

“That isn’t-” Evelyn stammered. “I’m not blaming you- Heather, I-”
“And also, we’re not executioners.”

I sounded more confident than I felt, a lump in my throat, hunched and wretched and not entirely certain I was correct. Maybe we were executioners. Raine certainly would be, if I asked her to. I looked down at my feet and hugged myself tighter through my hoodie. My phantom limbs tried to help, but succeeded only in sending echoes of muscle pain up the bruises in my flanks.

“Fair enough,” Evelyn said. Bitter. She didn’t get it.

“Deciding the fate of other people is a horrible thing to have to do,” I said to the threadbare, scratchy carpet. “You’re not weak for not wanting to, Eevee. That’s not weakness. It’s not. Sarika’s on me.”

Raine’s free hand found my back. When I looked up again, Evelyn’s eyes found mine and she didn’t say a word, just swallowed and nodded once, then had to look away as well. She let out a big sigh and cleared her throat.

“Done with your long-jump practice, Eevee?” Raine asked.

Evelyn squinted at her. “What?”

“Cos, you know, really leaping to those conclusions. Olympic standards. Could jump for England.”

Evelyn gave Raine a capital-L Look. Raine just laughed. I couldn’t resist a small smile.

“We don’t know what Mister Joking was calling Sarika about,” Raine said, wagging the phone back and forth, showing us the little screen again. “Look at the timings on the calls, the two the night before. One minute thirty-two seconds, then sixteen seconds. And

those are the first times he's ever called her number, according to the log."

"So?" Evelyn snapped.

"Doesn't sound like time enough to plan much, does it?" Raine thumbed the antiquated buttons on the mobile phone again, the clicking sounds close and alien in the tight confines of the dirty bedsit room. "Then he calls her again on the same morning he bought his train ticket to Sharrowford. Six minutes, still not much."

"Yes, because as we know, all murderous magical plots are put together over the phone," Evelyn deadpanned at her. "I thought you were meant to be good at this, Raine. What if he had a different number, or other associates communicating with her? We are out. Of. The. Loop."

Raine grinned as if she'd drawn a trump card. "You think Bikeman and January are real names?"

"Of course not!" Evelyn snapped. "What are you getting at?"

"Yes, I was thinking that too," I said, a hitch in my throat. "It's so obvious."

"So why use pseudonyms for those two – but not for Sarika?" Raine asked. "Don't you smell a rat, Evee?"

Evelyn frowned hard.

"I mean- I mean-" I struggled to put two and two together, not quite adding up to four. "That would suggest this is a red herring. Bait. He left Sarika's name on there on purpose, but that would mean he intended for us to steal his phone, and that's just ... that's crazy. Raine, no."

She shrugged. "Wouldn't put it past him."

"Don't be absurd," Evelyn said, but she sounded less and less sure as she went on. "He couldn't have known he'd be dead, or that we'd be the ones to show up and find his body ... or that we ... know Sarika ... "

Raine waited for her to trail off, then tilted her head with an indulgent smile. "You wanna know what I think, Evee?"

"Not particularly," Evelyn tutted. "But I don't expect I have a choice."

"Evee," I admonished as gently as I could. She was even more prickly and irritable than usual. Carefully as I could, I disentangled my arms from my security-blanket self-hug, and reached out to place my hand atop hers, on the handle of her walking stick. She sighed, but didn't shrug me off.

"I think we're dealing with a master manipulator," Raine said. "Saturday night, yeah, we caught him a little off guard. Maybe he didn't expect Zheng, or didn't think we'd be crazy enough to stick a gateway right into the house. So he improvised, had to bust out some of his real moves, but I'd bet we didn't see the bottom of the barrel, not by a long shot." She tapped Sarika's name on the phone's screen. "And I think we're still in it."

My skin crawled.

I glanced around the dimly lit bedsit flat again, at the dirty food wrappers and rumpled sheets, at the thin, anaemic light slanting in under the blinds, at the complete lack of any evidence. At the fake. Unconsciously, I took a step closer to Raine, shivering a little inside my hoodie, a creeping between my shoulder blades. Perhaps we hadn't tracked down a safe-house after all. Perhaps we were in the jaws.

"Safe," Praem intoned.

I jumped, then huffed and rolled my eyes at myself, fists clenched against my sides. I'd almost forgotten she was standing there.

"Yes, quite," Evelyn said. "There's no traps in here, magical or otherwise. Unless he's laced the room with anthrax spores, and that's a little beyond us. Calm down, Heather. There's no traps here."

Raine waggled the phone again. "You sure about that?"

"Raine, Raine please stop," I said, my throat closing up. "We should leave. We should leave. If this- this- if you're right-"

"Hey, hey, Heather, I'm sorry." Raine squeezed my shoulder. "I didn't mean it that way. If I thought we were in danger, I'd be carrying you out myself."

"Stop spooking your girlfriend, you colossal idiot," Evelyn drawled. "It's not as if you need to get in her underwear any easier."

"Evee!" I blushed. Raine laughed.

"It's perfectly safe in here," Evelyn went on. "But I would like to go home anyway. Get back to the point, Raine."

Raine cleared her throat. "Right, well. Point is, keys and phone are what anyone would take off a body, right? They've obvious. But hey, remember the cocaine? I bet that was a red herring too. Big deal, finding that on a corpse, yeah? Drug dealer, maybe he had a habit, maybe you could sell it."

"Who gives a damn?" Evelyn said. "He can snort bath salts and drink piss for all I care, he's a bloody mage, that's what matters."

"Yes, Raine, you've lost me here," I admitted. "I don't follow."

"You're not meant to. I'm not meant to. The coke wasn't for us," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "I think this is all contingencies, various different distractions in case somebody found his body before he came back to life, covering every different angle, everyone who *might* have found him. The keys led us here, the phone leads us to Sarika. Maybe these other people he called that morning mean something too, whoever January and Bikeman are. For us, it's mostly Sarika. But you know what? I'm betting Sarika isn't even for *us*."

"The Cult," I said, finally catching up.

"What?" Evelyn frowned, still lagging behind.

"Say a survivor from the Sharrowford Cult found him first," Raine explained. "They check his phone and who do they see? Sarika, the only known survivor of the house fire. Good lead, right? Gonna throw them off Mister Joking's scent. She's a red herring, but maybe not ours alone."

"That makes more sense. I think." I sighed the words, nodding, an odd relief at the way Raine had put this all together.

Evelyn stared at Raine for a moment longer, then at me, examining us as if we'd both just claimed to be from Mars. "You are both idiots and this is all conjecture."

"You got a better one?" Raine asked. "Theory for us, Evee?"

"Yes. The only way to be sure is to prise it out of Sarika herself. Goddamn it all," Evelyn spat, looking away at the peeling paint on the wall, then at Praem, standing ramrod straight with her hands folded before her. "This is a nightmare. We're going to have to go

her house, her family home, and make her talk. Fuck.”

“Evee,” I said. “I really don’t think she’s capable of anything. You were being kind of nasty earlier, but yes, it’s not an exaggeration to say she probably can’t perform basic bodily functions without help.” I cleared my throat at that. “Let alone take part in a magical plot aimed at us. Or anybody.”

Raine slid Mister Joking’s phone back into her leather jacket, and pulled out her own mobile, thumbing open her contacts list.

Evelyn turned on her with a snarl. “And don’t you bloody call her, you fool! She may have been compromised by that mage, there could be anything waiting for us.”

Raine shot Evelyn a wink. She held the phone to her ear, titling her chin up and adopting a shrewd little smile. “One step ahead o’ you, Evee.”

“Kill the call before it connects, you-”

“I’m not calling Sarika. Got a better plan than that.”

Evelyn huffed and put a hand on her hips. “Drop the Sherlock act. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I think it does ... ” I said. It was rather nice, seeing Raine be clever.

“Thinking like a manipulator is difficult and unpleasant,” Raine said. Her little smile betrayed the truth behind her words, a cloaked edge I almost missed. I filed that away for later – was she talking about herself, or somebody else? “Let me deal with it this time, yeah?”

The phone rang three times before the call connected with a soft click. Raine had the handset tilted ever so slightly so Evelyn and I could hear the voice on the other end, tinny and distant.

“Hello, Raine,” detective Nicole Webb answered with a sigh.

Sharp. All-business. Not unfriendly, but not impressed.

“Good morning, officer,” Raine said, a great big grin in her voice. “I’d like to report a break-in in progress.”

“ ... why do I know you’re the one doing the breaking in?”

“Four suspects, all incredibly beautiful young women, armed and dangerous. You should send your most athletic and suggestible female constables to the scene immediately. As many as you can spare. Apprehension may require a struggle.”

Nicole sighed down the phone. “Very well, Miss Haynes, I suggest you call nine-nine-nine, request police, and describe the emergency to them.”

“But you’re a hero, detective. Can’t you help?”

“Ha fucking ha. Did you call to distract me from work with bad jokes, or did you actually need something?”

“Aww, can’t I call just to say hi?”

“You could, but you aren’t,” Nicole said. “You want something, and you’re trying to disarm me with humour first. Good try.”

Raine laughed, tone relaxing down by a couple of notches. “Can’t get anything past you, can I? You at work right now?”

“At the station.”

“Still a police officer, eh? Thought you were quitting.”

“Still. For now.” Cagey. Closed off. Very unhappy.

“Hi, Nicky,” I said, loud enough to carry through the microphone. Evelyn frowned at me and Raine raised an eyebrow, tilting the phone out a little more to catch my voice. “I-I hope you’re well!”

“Is that Heather?” the tinny reply came, much happier. “I’d much rather talk to Heather than you, Haynes. Put her on instead, go on.”

“You gotta get through me first, copper,” Raine said.

“A bridge troll, blocking the way, huh?” Nicole shot back. “Fits you.”

I rolled my eyes, but I was smiling. Even Evelyn had a half smile tugging at her face. Raine’s attempts at starting smooth did not go well with detective Webb. She was much too experienced, much too used to the back-and-forth of verbal jousting and covert manoeuvring.

“Alright, alright,” Raine said, admitting defeat with the tone of her voice. “Seriously, Nicole, are you still keeping an eye on Sarika?”

A silent pause echoed from the other end of the phone, broken by a few snatched words away from the speaker and the sound of a door clicking shut. When Nicole spoke again, her voice had a loftier quality. She'd stepped outdoors.

"Officially or unofficially?" she asked.

"Either," Raine said. "Both."

Soft crunching noises made their way down the phone line – gravel beneath comfortable shoes. "Officially, no. I'm not on the Barrend road case team, and it's practically a dead case anyway. My part in that is packed up and done."

"Unofficially?"

A big sigh. I pictured Nicole, a smallish, very neat woman in her suit and long coat, hair pinned up tight, pictured her letting go of the strict authority for just a moment. It was that kind of sigh.

"Her family are good people," she said eventually. "As far as they're concerned I saved her bloody life, so, yeah, I've been round there a few times. It's not as if she can talk to any of them about what actually happened." Another sigh, less comfortable. "Not that I want to hear it from her either, really."

"She been out much?" Raine asked. "Any strange visitors?"

"You joking?"

"Never." Raine grinned. "You know me."

"She doesn't do much of anything. You saw her, Raine. Or hell, ask Heather. Sarika's broken, inside and out. Barely leaves the house. Spends some time with her family, her brothers are round quite a bit, but that's it. She spends most of her time on the internet or playing Minecraft for hours, far as I can tell."

Evelyn scoffed. I shot her a disapproving look and she had the good grace to at least look away.

"Walks a bit now," Nicole was carrying on. "On crutches, but never very far. Raine, what is this about?"

"Gotta confirm our ex-mage is staying firmly ex."

"Oh yeah? I don't believe you," Nicole said without the slightest hesitation. "There's more to this, isn't there?"

"There is, Nicky," I said, feeling awful. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Raine laughed, easy and obvious. "Look, as you're still a copper, I was wondering if you could do us a favour. Can you look for a man for me?"

"A man?" Nicole asked. "You changing teams, Raine?"

"Never."

"Nicole!" I scolded at the phone. She made an embarrassed throat clearing sound.

"Well, ahem, um. Depends, who? Who am I looking for, and why? Is this more heebie-jeebie shit?"

"Sorta," said Raine. "Maybe. Does the name 'Joshua King' ring any bells?"

A pause. A long pause. The gravel-crunching footsteps stopped. A distant gust of wind caressed the phone line, produced a faint crackle. A chill went down my spine. Evelyn and I shared a glance. She was grinding her teeth.

"You treating me like a mushroom?" Nicole asked eventually. She did not sound happy.

"Keeping you in the dark and feeding you shit?" Raine laughed.

"Yeah. A little. But you're doing the same to us. Right?"

"No, actually. I've been entirely forthright with you, Raine," Nicole went on, all the good banter and humour gone from her voice. "I'm not joking, put Heather on, I wanna talk to her instead. You and Sarika are both playing me from different angles, and I'm not having it. You tell me what's going on."

"Nicky, I'm sorry," I said out loud. "We didn't mean to-"

"Shhh," Evelyn hissed, squeezing my arm.

"Maybe you don't wanna get involved again, Webb," Raine said softly. "You could just tell us what the name Joshua King means to you, and we'll go see Sarika and deal with this ourselves, and you forget all about it."

"I'm already involved. My nightmares are testament to that. Tell me what's going on."

“You first. That name rang a bell, right?”

A pause. A sucking of teeth. Nicole thought about it for a long moment. “You owe me, Raine. You or Sarika or somebody here owes me an explanation, because I don’t like playing piggy in the middle.”

“Please,” I said at the phone in Raine’s hand. “Please, Nicky. Something ... something happened, something hard to explain. We had an- an incident. We need to find this man because he might be dangerous. He’s a mage. Or maybe we can decide we don’t need to find him at all. Sarika might be connected.”

“Alright, alright Heather, okay. I recognise that name because last week, Sarika asked me exactly the same question.”

Raine raised her eyebrows at Evelyn and I. Evelyn scowled up a storm.

“Detective,” Evelyn said, raising her voice. “Explain that statement, please.”

“Is that miss Saye? Hello to you too. Long story short, Sarika wanted me to find this guy, if I could turn up anything on him. Him and two others – a mister Billington Cook, which I doubt is a real name, and a miss Sandy Harrison. But as far as I can tell, Joshua King and his two mates have fallen off the face of the earth. That or they’re all dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“Not in a ditch,” said Raine.

“... oh fuck, oh no,” Nicole sighed. In in my mind’s eye I saw her pinching the bridge of her nose. “You are not confessing to a murder over a police officer’s phone. You’re not. You didn’t just say that.”

Raine laughed out loud. I rolled my eyes. Evelyn huffed.

“I wish I was,” Raine said. “Does it count as murder if he gets up again afterward?”

Nicole paused for a long, long moment. “That wasn’t a joke, was it?”

“Nope.”

“I really hate this supernatural bullshit,” she sighed. “I truly do.”

"I do as well," I murmured.

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Nicole handled transportation. We provided the venue, the security, the tea and biscuits.

If meeting with Edward Lilburne had felt like peace talks between rival mafia families, then setting up for questioning Sarika Masalkar was akin to dragging an international criminal out of a cell at the Hague.

Every turn of every plan hampered us with unexpected and byzantine requirements; we couldn't do this over the phone, because Sarika might be compromised already, or she might lie to protect her associates. Evelyn insisted we needed to physically see Sarika, to inspect her in ways that Nicole was not capable of, to make sure that Mister Joking the mage hadn't done anything to her – with or without her consent. We couldn't pop round her family home and have a five minute chat on the doorstep, because her family would ask questions about these strange young women who came to interrogate her, and because the police would be very interested to hear about us.

But most of all, because that might be a trap.

We couldn't have a friendly sit down in a pub, because after our brush with the revenant, Evelyn insisted on maximum security. We couldn't use Nicole's home, because we couldn't guarantee she was clean either, not if Sarika had been compromised.

Organising the meet took the rest of that afternoon and all evening. Evelyn drove it, did all the talking, because this was about mages now.

Every piece of back-and-forth had to be routed through Nicole, because Evelyn refused to call Sarika directly. Even if she wouldn't admit so out loud, she'd taken Raine's warning to heart; if we'd already been hoodwinked, anything could be a trap.

It wasn't until the following day that we were sure it was going ahead. The pace of normal life – eating dinner, forcing myself to read another long section of *Heart of Darkness*, going to classes in the morning for a lecture on *To The Lighthouse* – seemed so at odds with the urgency of the supernatural truth. But we all have to eat, as Raine said. She even had a shift that evening at her student

union bar job. Life went on, or pretended to, as the secret world lurked at our backs.

In the end, Sarika herself suggested she come to the house, to number 12 Barnsloew drive, right into the mouth of the beast.

"She's mad then," Evelyn had grumbled down the phone at five minutes to midnight, hunched over the kitchen table, eyes red with exhaustion. I'd caught her napping there, upright in a kitchen chair, arms crossed over her chest while Praem wedged a pillow behind her head. Couldn't have been any good for her spine. "Mad to come here. Mad to trust me. I don't trust it."

"She's trying to make a gesture of goodwill," came Nicole's voice from the phone on the table, exasperated.

"She's trying to trick us. I just know it."

"Look, I don't hear that when I speak to her, and I'm willing to bet I'm a better judge of intention than you are. No offence," Nicole's voice floated up from the phone. "She wants to make it clear she wasn't involved in whatever happened. Saye, Evelyn, we are out of options. Either I bring her to your house, or we give up on this. I'm going to bed in five minutes, so make a decision and then we're done. That's it. Done. Dusted. Finito. Kaput."

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Nicole's old BMW pulled to a stop outside the house at almost exactly 5.45pm the following day.

"Right on time," Raine announced from the front room, then called through to me. "Heather?"

Dark windows, dark metal, engine rumbling like a steamship anchored offshore from some primeval jungle. I peered at it through a crack in the curtains in the dusty, disused sitting room, with the lights off.

On the edge of my hearing, muffled through the walls of the house – and God alone knew what magical wards woven into the brick and plaster – I heard the engine sputter out into silence. I imagined the slow cooling of the car's bonnet, the creak and crack of contracting metal. I knew next to nothing about cars, but even I could tell Nicole probably spent more on keeping that old machine running than she would need to pay for a new one.

The car sat. No doors opened. Nobody stepped out.

“Heather?” Raine called again. I blinked hard and rubbed my aching, bruised sides, tried to dispel the feeling of hiding under a rock, fought the instinct to stay silent and still and let the predators pass by.

“Nothing,” I replied. I let the curtain fall back into place, and plodded into the front room and the light and the open space that made my phantom limbs want to pull me back into the comfortable dark. Raine met me with raised eyebrows. I shook my head. “All the spirit life was acting normal. They made way for the car, but that was all. Whatever’s in there didn’t spook them.”

“Hey, that’s a good sign, yeah.” Raine shot me a grin, then winked at Praem next to her.

The doll-demon stood at attention, facing the front door at minimum safe distance, dressed in her full maid uniform getup. Anyone stepping through the front door would see her first, and I had to admit the sight of Praem greeting me upon returning home wasn’t an unpleasant one, especially when she stood so straight-backed, all that blonde hair and ice-blue eyes and great masses of soft huggable flesh. Not that I would. Unless she asked.

The spider-servitor hung above the front door, completing the trap. Carrot and stick. Except that Praem was perfectly capable of acting the stick too.

She ignored Raine.

“It means nothing,” Evelyn said, standing far back in the kitchen doorway. She had her hair pinned up loose behind her head, and was wearing the best clothes she owned, a cream jumper and long dark skirt, no hand-mended seams or ragged sleeves. “Stick to the plan. Step two.”

“Step two it is, yes ma’am, lickety split.” Raine mock-saluted, then winked at me. “You don’t have to stick around out here for this, Heather. Not if you don’t wanna. Go keep Lozzie and Tenny company upstairs?”

I gave her a look. “Don’t be silly.”

“At least go join Evee?”

“I’m fine here. This is going to be fine.”

Step two was an awkward dance of pre-planned phone calls and cautious approaches. Nicole called Raine's phone from the car. Raine called her back and confirmed the number. Nicole got out of the car, shut and locked the door behind her, and walked down the garden path while still on the call. She sighed at the seeming absurdity of the instructions, but played along, knocking three times on the door, waiting a moment, then trying the handle and finding it unlocked.

The front door swung open to reveal Nicole looking a bit perplexed. She'd come straight from work without changing, in a dark trouser suit and a long black woollen coat, short and tight and trim, her blonde hair pulled back into a helmet-like bun. Curious but irritated eyes met us from a sharply intelligent face. Neat, serious, quietly athletic under her clothes.

"Aaaaand now I'm looking at you," she said, her voice doubled from Raine's phone with a micro-second delay. "I'm looking at you, Raine, and you're looking back at me, and this is all very silly."

"Bear with it, yeah?" Raine smirked, and killed the phone call.

Nicole let out a big sigh, nodded, then nodded to me as well. "Hey Heather, nice to see you." I gave her a nervous smile in return. "And Evelyn, back there, hi. And uh, Praem, right?"

"Good afternoon, detective Webb," Praem sing-songed.

"... and a good afternoon to you too!" Nicole lit up with a surprised smile. "Thought you didn't talk much?"

Praem declined to answer further. I glanced at her. "I think we're all a little on edge," I said. "Even Praem. Sorry."

"It's fine, it's fine, take it easy. So am I coming in, or will I burst into flame if I don't turn around three times and throw a pinch of salt over my shoulder?"

"Yeah, you first," Raine said. "Then you go back and fetch Sarika."

"I may as well get her now." Nicole thumbed over her shoulder, at the car. "I searched her, and her crutches, and she's not carrying anything, I can attest to that. Unless we're-"

"You first," Evelyn said, voice tight. She did well to conceal the tremor, but I heard it all the same.

"Please step forward onto the welcome mat," Praem intoned, with a cadence like an airport announcement made of wind chimes and icicles. "Do not step beyond the welcome mat. Keep your hands and feet inside the boundaries of the welcome mat."

Nicole stared at her. "Uh ... "

"Do as she says," Evelyn snapped.

Nicole glanced to me for help. "Am I gonna get like a pat down, or ... ?"

"Sort of!" Raine answered for me. I resisted the urge to look up. Nicole wouldn't see anything there, of course, but I didn't want to spook the poor woman. "You won't even see or feel anything, promise," Raine went on. "We're gonna do the same to Sarika. S'just insurance."

Nicole held up a finger to Raine, not even bothering to look at her. "Heather? I trust you, right? You know that?"

"It's safe," I said with a lump in my throat. "If you're not ... a trap. You're not. I don't believe you are. It's safe."

"Do it or we call this off," Evelyn added.

Slowly, carefully, Nicole stepped over the threshold of number 12 Barnslow drive and onto the scratchy welcome mat. She waited with raised eyebrows, as if for a flash of light or the whir of an x-ray machine. "Now what?"

"Stay still," Praem intoned.

"Evee?" Raine asked over her shoulder. I looked back too, and recognised the moment of hesitation in Evelyn's eyes.

"If it goes wrong, I'll stop it," I said, quietly.

"If what goes wrong?" Nicole said, eyes wide. "Woah, guys, hey, what?"

Evelyn wet her lips and spoke. "*Adspicio.*"

Like a nightmare parody of a mechanical arm, the spider-servitor responded to Evelyn's input code. It ratcheted itself down from the ambush perch above the front doorway, hanging on with half its legs while the other half descended to encircle Nicole. Hand-thick stingers whipped into place, aimed at Nicole's skull and throat and

heart and belly. The spider's bank of crystalline eyes lowered level with her face, staring into her.

The way it moved made my skin crawl, all rapid motion between split-seconds of statue stillness. My phantom limbs scrambled into a reactive defense for a second, making me wince as my bruised flanks twitched and ached, before my body accepted it wasn't coming for me. I had to consciously remind myself that this thing was on our side. Evelyn claimed they didn't really possess the capacity for independent thought, that they were just tools. I didn't believe that last part.

"Something meant to be happening?" Nicole asked. She couldn't see it. Lucky.

"Stay still," Praem repeated.

"Yes, please, Nicky, please stay still," I said, a lump in my throat.

"Oh great, there's some invisible shit right in front of me, isn't there?"

"Heather, is it working?" Evelyn asked. "Did it move?"

"Yes. It's ... it's doing something."

Nicole tried to give me an unimpressed look, but my view of her was blocked by the mass of black pitted chitin and the row of heat-exchanger pipes on the spider's back.

"If I twitch a finger am I gonna lose it?" Nicole asked.

"Please hold," Praem intoned.

The spider-servitor took a teeth-grinding, buttock-clenching thirty long seconds to inspect the contents of Nicole's head, or the colour of her soul, or the flavour of her aura. Truth was, we had no idea what it was really searching. Evelyn had little comprehension of how her home's ancestral, inherited guard dogs actually worked. What she had was her mother's notes, a few control words, and absolute unshakable faith in her grandmother's original handiwork.

When the spider moved again, it did so without warning. It withdrew from Nicole in a burst of scuttling limbs and snaking stingers, so sudden that I flinched, phantom limbs lashing in panic, forcing me to swallow a hiss of pain. The spider settled back onto its legs in the perch above the door, as if it had never moved in the

first place.

“Oh,” I breathed a sigh of relief, hand to my racing heart. Raine took my shoulders in both hands, rubbed the sides of my arms, the back of my neck.

“I take it I’ve been approved?” Nicole asked.

“How can you tell?” I asked, dripping with sarcasm.

“It’s done?” Evelyn asked. “Heather, it’s done?” She held up a hand. “Detective, do not move until we say so. Heather?”

I nodded.

“And it’s back in position?”

“Itsy bitsy spider climbed up the waterspout,” Praem sang.

“... Heather, you have to stop giving her children’s books.” Evelyn huffed, rubbed the bridge of her nose, then nodded and swallowed. “Okay, detective, okay. Bring her in.”

“You lot are worse than security at Heathrow,” Nicole laughed, shaking her head. “What happens if Sarika’s not clean? Does an invisible gorilla pull her head off? I’m not letting a wounded, crippled young woman walk into danger.” Nicole raised a hand to forestall any complaint, raising her voice a fraction too. “No matter who she is or what she did in the past. Yeah? Is this setup you’ve got here safe?”

Evelyn looked away. Raine pulled an awkward grin. Praem said nothing.

“It’s safe for you, and it’s safe for her,” I said, surprising myself, drawing myself up. “Because if Joshua King did anything to her, I will undo it, because ... because she’s my responsibility.”

Nicole nodded, understood how serious I was. “Okay. Alright. I’ll go get her now.”

Detective Webb stepped back out and left the door open. Evelyn grunted and retreated into the kitchen. Raine rubbed my back and squeezed one of my shoulders. I tried not to think about the gun in the front of her jacket, and just how badly the next few minutes might go.

From the safety of the front room, we watched Nicole help Sarika

out of the car. Not an easy process. She couldn't stand unaided, and even once Nicole got the crutches in both of Sarika's hands, her legs refused to work right. The muscles twitched and shivered in random erratic spasms. She had to stop three times on the way up the garden path, her breathing jerky and obviously painful. On the third and final pause, she rejected Nicole's help with a sharp elbow, an angry hiss through gritted teeth, face shaking, eyes glued to her rebellious feet. The detective hovered nearby, but Sarika made the final few paces to the front door by herself.

She stopped at the threshold, adjusted her weight on the crutches, and looked up at last. I did her the courtesy of meeting her gaze.

Determination – and deep, bone-crushing exhaustion. The first time I'd met Sarika she looked as if she hadn't slept in a long time. Now she looked as if she never slept at all, fuelled by spite alone. She did look healthier than she had in the hospital, but that was a low bar to clear.

She was all there behind her own bloodshot, dark-ringed eyes, facial muscles still slack but not empty, and she looked physically clean at least, though her coffee-brown skin was just as pale and waxen as before. She twitched constantly, wracked by a dozen different tics and spasms, misfiring nerve signals that my emergency hyperdimensional mathematics had not quite saved from the ravages of the Eye. She was dressed in a comfortable, loose dark jumper and a pair of pajama bottoms beneath a long brown coat. The visible flesh of her hands was covered in tiny scratches and scabs where she'd obviously been biting and chewing her own fingers and nails. Her breath came in jerky, short bursts, stuck in her throat.

Only a few streaks of black pigmentation remained in her hair. The rest had turned white.

She stared at me and I couldn't think of anything to say. Neither could she, because a change passed across her face, as if she lost track of her spite for a moment, and had to pick up the pieces to re-balance them in her mind. She seemed smaller for a few seconds, then looked away from me, at Raine, then at Praem.

"Good afternoon, miss Masalkar," Praem intoned.

Sarika grunted. A croaky, broken noise.

“Yeah, hey, welcome,” Raine said, pulling out her confident beaming smile for Sarika. “Don’t feel awkward, yeah? We’re all here to have a chat, nothing more, and you’ve got Nicole at your back to ensure that.”

“Hello, Sarika,” I managed at last. “It’s ... I’m ... you’re looking better.”

“No I’m f-f-fucking not,” she stammered around a thick tongue. Her voice was like a drainpipe filled with gravel.

“Please step forward onto the welcome mat,” Praem sing-songed. “Do not step beyond the welcome mat. Keep your hands and feet inside the boundaries of the welcome mat.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sarika croaked, then frightened everyone as her throat made an alarming single-choke noise, but apparently she was used to it. She swallowed and closed her eyes, knuckles turning white around the handles of her crutches as she clenched down on a shaking spell. She began to list to one side, but Nicole caught her before she fell.

“Sarika?” Nicole said. “I told you, we should have brought the wheelchair.”

“Shut up. Fuck the wheelchair.” Sarika slurred, jaw hanging, breathing through both mouth and nose at the same time. The spell passed and she had to make an obvious effort not to sag against her crutches, weakly shouldering away Nicole’s help.

“Please step forward onto the welcome mat,” Praem repeated.

“Alright, y-y-y-es. Get it-” Sarika cut off into another little choking sound, “-over with.”

“They uh,” Nicole ventured, “told me to stand very still when I did it, maybe-”

“The less I know- know ... knooow-” Sarika blinked hard, grimaced as she brought her speech centre back under control. “The better. I can imagine what it is. Shut up.”

She had to look down at her feet again to manoeuvre herself over the barely quarter-inch of steel and rubber seal on the inside of the door frame, lifting each crutch with great difficulty. She swayed in place on the mat for a second as Nicole stood by to catch her.

"Please stand back, detective Webb," Praem intoned.

"Sarika, hey," Raine said, pitching her voice for a smile, serious but calm. She could have soothed a raging bull with that voice. "You ready? Shouldn't feel a thing."

"Get on with it."

Raine looked over her shoulder and called out. "Ready!"

"*Adspicio*," Evelyn said softly from the kitchen.

The spider-servitor did its thing again, dropping down around Sarika, a cage of black chitin and quivering stingers. She couldn't see it any more than Nicole could, didn't bother to look up, just stared at a spot on the floorboards. After a few seconds she closed her eyes, swaying gently, and my heart skipped a beat at the thought of her about to pass out, about to crash head-first into the nightmare spider inches from her face. She started to drool.

"Sarika," I hissed. "Don't fall asleep."

"Fa- fat- fat chance," she spat.

Twenty long seconds passed. Thirty. Forty, and I started to worry. The spider hung unmoving, right in front of Sarika's gaunt face. My phantom limbs responded to my increasing heart rate and the tension in my gut, preparing for a fight, for a explosion of violence. Cold air seeped in through the open door, chilling my nose and the front of my pink hoodie.

"This ... this isn't right," I squeezed out.

"Still going?" Raine asked.

"Itsy bitsy spider," Praem sung. Did she think it was cute?

"Yes," I breathed, a lump in my throat. "It's just ... maybe it's because she came back wrong. Maybe she doesn't ... seem like a human anymore, or-"

And in the middle of my sentence, fast enough to make me jump and stifle a yelp, the spider-servitor finally approved. It withdrew in a blur of whirring limbs, leaving Sarika standing there alone on the mat.

The sudden surprise made my phantom limbs whirl in panic, sending shock waves of pain up through my sides. I clutched myself

and grimaced, curled up, Raine's arm linked through mine for support.

"What?" Nicole looked at me, wide-eyed. "What happened?"

"Itsy bitsy spider climbed up," Praem intoned.

"It's done. It's done. She's clean," I said, swallowing my pain through deep breaths. "She's clean."

Sarika grunted and struggled a couple of paces off the mat. She met my eyes, stared at me. "Y-yeah. Feel it t-too."

"Feel ... ?"

Pain. She meant pain. The physical price of leaving humanity behind. The barest hint of a cruel smile touched the corners of her lips. She liked that I felt it too.

Praem executed a perfect ninety-degree turn on one heel and stepped back precisely one pace, then unfolded a hand and gestured to the kitchen doorway.

"Uh, yeah!" Raine said. "Into the kitchen, please. Let's all go sit down and talk."

Waiting for a person who can only hobble along on crutches is both awkward and painful, with bodily sympathy and second-hand embarrassment. As we watched Sarika struggle to cross the front room, Nicole ready to catch her if she fell, I wondered if I should look away to spare her what scraps of dignity she still had left. Breath jerking, head twitching, muttering low, she dragged herself into the kitchen. We followed. Praem shut the front door, then brought up the rear.

We'd cleaned the kitchen for the sake of this meeting, cleared away the plates and mugs, wiped the table, had the kettle ready to boil. Raine had opened a packet of biscuits and put them on a plate. Civilised. That's what we were going to be, I told myself. We were asking a very, very sick woman some simple questions. Civilised, sensible people who are capable of having a discussion that involved neither threats nor intimidation.

When we stepped into the kitchen, I saw Evelyn, and rolled my eyes.

"Queen on- on her throne?" Sarika asked.

Evelyn had set herself up on the far side of the table, so she faced the door as Sarika had walked in, walking stick in one hand, point placed against the floor. The scrimshawed magical thighbone lay on the kitchen table before her, displayed end-to-end like a polished, loaded shotgun. Evelyn's other hand rested casually on the middle of the magical weapon. A small stack of leather-bound books sat next to the bone, and I suddenly recognised them as the magical tomes we'd saved from the middle of the Sharrowford Cult's final ritual. As she sat there, Praem rounded the table to stand beside and just behind her.

Trophies and threats.

A queen? No. More like a shaman. Physically crippled but magically strong, ensconced here in her smoky tent, surrounded by esoteric tools and fetishes, bones and skulls and the hides of her enemies.

"Not quite," Evelyn replied to Sarika.

"Was this really necessary?" I sighed. "Evee, really. Really."

"Heather, don't. Not now."

"Don't *what*?" I almost snapped at her, controlling myself at the last second. "There was no need for this. Evelyn, you do not need to *establish dominance* over a woman who can't stand without crutches."

Evelyn attempted to continue the staring contest with Sarika, then failed all at once, glaring at me and huffing. "She's been working with another bloody mage, Heather. I think a little intimidation is in order."

"We don't know that yet," Raine said gently.

"Mage?" Sarika slurred. She frowned about at us. "No mage. Fucking- f-f-fuuu," she couldn't get the word out. "Idiots. Not mages. Not."

We all shared a glance. Only Nicole didn't understand the full implications of that statement, lie or otherwise.

"Look, hey, she can't stand up for long," Nicole said. "She's not gonna say this, but she will collapse eventually. Hey?"

Sarika stared at a point on the floor, jaw slack, eyes full of spite.

"Yes, yes," Evelyn grumbled. "Get her sat down. Sit down."

Nicole helped Sarika into a chair. Once sitting, Sarika seemed to curl up on herself, head hanging forward, breathing hard, recovering her strength. Nicole tried to take the crutches from her, but Sarika made an angry grunt and held onto them.

“Is she even ... lucid?” Evelyn grimaced. “I mean ... is this ...”

“Yes,” Sarika herself croaked. “Yes. M’here. Here.”

Evelyn sighed. She shared a glance with me, and I saw a hint of guilt in her eyes, but there was nothing else to do about it now, we were already here. I got myself sat down too, far enough from Sarika that I didn’t feel totally uncomfortable. Raine asked if anybody wanted tea, and the only taker was Nicole. We sat in awkward silence as the kettle boiled, and eventually Sarika found the strength to raise her head and look around.

“More of you,” she croaked.

“Pardon?” Evelyn replied.

“There were ... were ... more of you. The ... wolf?” She struggled for breath for a second. “I remember wolf. And Zheng.”

“She means we’re not all here,” Raine said with a good helping of fake cheer as she placed Nicole’s tea in front of her on the table. “And you’re right, Sarika. Twil’s not around, and Zheng’s out hunting.”

The absences went a step further than that. Lizzie and Tenny had very strict instructions to remain upstairs, away from this, for their own safety, although I wouldn’t be averse to Nicole meeting Tenny once this was all over. Kimberly was safely at work, warned in advance. She’d missed the festivities on Saturday the same way, and seemed glad for it.

If Zheng turned up, we were all in trouble. She’d want to pull Sarika’s tongue out.

“Kill you all,” Sarika slurred. “She will. Demon.”

“She won’t,” I said, compelled. “She won’t.”

Sarika shrugged, not even bothering to look at me, as if she didn’t much care.

“Right then. First things first,” Evelyn announced, raising her chin and tapping the scrimshawed thighbone with one nail. “Sarika

Masalkar, do you know what this is?"

Sarika looked up and stared at Evelyn for a long, sulky moment, then looked at the bone. "Guess. Can."

"Good. I can compel you to tell me anything I want to know, with this. It is the result of a lot of work, mine and my mother's. But I will not use it on a ... sick woman."

"Our Evee's being merciful," Raine added with a wink. Evelyn gritted her teeth. My stomach clenched up. Threats, more threats. Was this really who we were?

"Who knows you're here?" Evelyn asked.

"Me," Nicole answered for her. "That's all. Her family think we've gone out for coffee. They were really happy about that, actually. Trusted me implicitly." Nicole sighed and cleared her throat and sipped her tea. I had to apologise to her later. I really did.

Sarika stared at Evelyn, impossible to read – except for the spite.

"Do you understand what this is about?" Evelyn asked. "Nicole related the basics, but I need you to under-"

Sarika's eyes flashed deep down, a spike of anger rising through her, hitching her breathing. "M'still fucking human. F-f-f-fuck you. Yes, I under- understand. Can hear. Can think. Yes, I get it. You caught King, and Bill, and Sandy," she spat the names with great difficulty, slapping her own mouth in an effort to wipe away drool. "Probably k-killed them too, and now you're drumming up a kangaroo court for me, convince yourself you can kill me too. Fuck you. Should have let me die."

We all shared a glance. Even Raine was shocked. Evelyn frowned at Sarika, not sure what to make of that. Nicole let out a concerned 'uh?' noise.

"That's not what's happening here," Evelyn said, sighing.

"Don't- don't believe you."

"I'm not going to let anybody kill you," I spoke up, surprised myself. "Not because I want to protect you, or have any pity for you, but because more murder is wrong. You're helpless, you're ... you've had punishment enough."

"We did not catch your friends," Evelyn said.

“Not friends,” Sarika croaked.

“She’s in the dark,” Raine said. “Sure as sure. C’mon, Evee, this is not an act. She’s in the dark. She didn’t know what he really is either.”

“Shh!” Evelyn hissed.

“Heh.” Sarika’s lips twitched toward a cold smile. “They pull- p-pull one over on you?”

“Sarika, you are going to tell us everything you know about Joshua King,” Evelyn said, grim and serious. “If you lie, I will use what methods I have. Why did he call you? What was it about? What about the other two? What were they up to, and what was your involvement?”

Sarika’s smile twitched wider. “You get Stack too? H-hope she’s d-dead. Bitch.”

Raine stiffened, a near-invisible change but one I knew all too well, a tensing of muscles all the way up her body. It sent a thrill through my guts too.

“Amy Stack?” Raine asked.

“He c-called me. They all did. Had a plan,” Sarika went on, halting, wheezing for breath. “Escape the- the- the-”

She squeezed her eyes shut and made a choking sound. Face twitching, body shaking, rejecting the thought. She couldn’t get past the concept.

“The Eye,” I said for her.

It took her almost two full minutes to come back. She drooled down her own chin and struggled to wipe it on her sleeve, couldn’t re-focus her eyes without difficulty, seemed like she might vomit if pushed much further. Evelyn looked on the verge of screaming in frustration, but even she was mollified by the obvious physical torture the poor woman was going through for the sake of a single word. Raine was watching the back window. I felt a horrible churning in my stomach, because I knew what it was like, at least a little. Eventually, Nicole helped Sarika sit up straight again.

“Explain,” Evelyn grunted.

“Escape plan. Called me. Came to the house. Three of them, Stack

too,” Sarika slurred and shrugged. “Working for them. Maybe. Escape plan from ... it. Gave them ... doorway, gate, basics. They thought I had- had more. Get into the ... Alex’s castle. Don’t know where. Didn’t want to know where.”

“ ... you didn’t tell me about this,” Nicole said, then turned to us. “She didn’t tell me a word of this. I swear.”

“Y-you would have told them,” Sarika jerked her chin at Evelyn. “They’d have killed them.”

“You could have told me,” I said. “I could have helped them. If they were trying to ... to escape *it*. Sarika, damn you, I would have helped. We wouldn’t have killed them. We wouldn’t.”

Slowly, she turned her eyes to look at me. She hated me. Really, deeply hated me.

“Would’ve been a threat to you, girl. Think they- they’d be able to resist? Resist trying to send you to- to- t-t-t- ... it? Give you to it? Then you would have killed them. Tell me I’m wrong. G-go on. T-tell me I’m wrong.”

The denial stuck in my throat.

“S’what I t-thought,” she slurred – and started to cry, huge wet tears in her hateful eyes. “More dead friends. More dead friends.”

by this art you may contemplate – 10.8

Sarika cried quietly, to herself, hunched forward with her head down; none of us had the guts to interrupt.

I've heard tell in bad poetry and scenes in sappy movies, that a woman can look pretty while crying. Like a wounded swan. Raine has claimed that I still look good when I'm emotionally distraught and bawling my eyes out, but I don't believe a word of it. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and Raine loves me so much it scares me. She'd think me charming while covered in vomit and blood, with half a dozen alien appendages emerging from my flesh. She'd love me even with a mouthful of shark's teeth and toxic quills down my back, even if she saw me as the thing I'd once been, out there in the dark.

Tears of relief, or adoration – or, rarely, orgasm – maybe those can be pretty. Pain, never. Not when you know what's happening inside. It's good for you, for me, for any of us to cry, but it's not *pretty* – though it may be beautiful. The distinction is slim.

Sarika's expression didn't change at all when she cried. Slack with exhaustion, staring at her own knees. Didn't even sob as the tears fell. She truly had nothing left to give.

Not ugly – empty.

Nobody wanted to tell Sarika 'there there', or pat her on the back, or say everything was going to be okay. The 'dead friends' she cried over were members of a murderous cult which had kidnapped people, killed children, and almost managed to send me back to the Eye. I stared at her, defying myself to feel real sympathy. She didn't deserve the state of her body, but I couldn't say she didn't deserve to cry.

But I almost joined in.

Was she right? Would we have killed her friends?

Almost too much to bear, that thought. What had happened to the

other two people with Mister Joking – Billington Cook and Sandy Harrison? Empty, meaningless names without faces. Were they real ex-cultists or hidden mages like him?

For a moment, forget what Mister Joking really was. If three desperate people had turned up at our front door, ex-cultists with the Eye torturing them from inside their own heads, begging for help, would we have killed them? Mages or not, would Evelyn have demanded it? Or would the animal caution inside me lash out at the threat?

You would have vivisected their souls, a dark part of me whispered, *for one hint of how the Eye works.*

But when I looked at Sarika, the abyssal thing in me didn't care. She wasn't a threat. She was barely ambulatory. She couldn't sustain the focus or fortitude for magic, probably never again. My phantom limbs lay at rest; abyssal instinct lurked unstirring. That side of me slept, and I was left without the buffer of ruthlessness.

They'd been right to avoid us, hadn't they? I was terrifying thing, an associate of a mage, a monster from the Abyss, a murderer.

No, I tried to tell myself. If they'd asked for help, I would have tried. Nobody deserved the Eye.

I wasn't the only one made uncomfortable by Sarika's silent, empty tears. Evelyn frowned holes in the top of Sarika's head, but couldn't keep up the pressure. Her frown turned hollow and exasperated. She broke off and looked around as if for help, lost.

Nicole sat there sipping her tea with expert detachment. The product of many hours in interrogation rooms, I'm sure. She could endure any level of awkwardness.

Raine was no help either. That single mention of Amy Stack had sent some alert-signal zapping into her brainstem. She'd unfolded her arms, hands loose and ready by her sides, staring out the back window, face blank with attention as she listened for tell-tale signs beyond the kitchen. Outdoors, the sun was going down, dipping toward the horizon, turning the room faintly orange despite the blazing electrical lights.

Eventually Evelyn cleared her throat. "Well ... well ... be that as it may ... you don't ... oh, bugger it," she snapped, and waved a hand at Sarika. "Praem, fetch her a box of tissues. Please. We can't talk

like this.”

Praem obeyed as if she'd been waiting for nothing else. She fetched a box of tissues from the kitchen counter and clicked her heels as she held them out next to Sarika's bowed head. Sarika scrabbled at the box with a claw-like hand, ripping tissues free. She took a good long half-minute to dry her eyes, making little choking sounds as her lungs and torso twitched. She pulled herself back into an approximation of an upright sitting position, bloodshot eyes ringed with red.

“Sick,” she slurred, looking Praem up and down. “Dressing ... thing up as a m-m-maid. Freaks.”

Evelyn huffed and spread her hands in a hopeless gesture. At least she'd stopped touching the scrimshawed thigh bone. “She chose the clothes. Not I.”

“Y-you let it- it- choose?”

“She's a she,” I managed, pulling myself back from dark thoughts. “Not an it. Her name is Praem. And you have no right to criticise.”

Praem stared at Sarika. Sarika stared back at Praem, into her empty white eyes, then gave up.

“Not- n-not going to kill me, then?” she croaked out.

“What? No,” Evelyn snapped. “No, that isn't what this is about. If I wanted you dead, you'd ... oh, for fuck's sake.” She lowered her face into a hand. “No, I'm not going to kill a bloody cripple, alright? Do you believe me now? Do you know who I am?”

“Saye,” Sarika croaked.

Evelyn opened her mouth, presumably to say ‘exactly’ or ‘so you know I could kill you’, some variation ‘on I'm bigger than you, little thing’. But she didn't, she just sat there like a fish, then turned to me.

She needed help.

She didn't say it out loud. Too proud, too guarded, too careful for that. But her eyes said she couldn't do this alone.

“We're not-” I swallowed, playing catch up, stepping up into the leader's role yet again. Abyssal instinct had nothing to say, and I was on my own “We're not going to kill you, Sarika. I already

explained that, and why. And we didn't kill your friends. We wouldn't have, not if they'd come to us for help. We wouldn't. We're not like you people were. And ... and frankly," I drew myself up. "It would be rude. You're a guest. Have a biscuit." I gestured at the plate on the table.

Evelyn frowned at me like I'd gone mad. I shrugged at her with both hands.

"Yeah, let's have a biscuit," Nicole announced, and took one from the plate. She dunked it into her tea and made an appreciative noise.

"She wants to kill me," Sarika slurred, jerking her chin at Evelyn.

"Yes, yes maybe I do," Evelyn said to her, low and dark. "And you would have done the same to me. Wouldn't you? That night your men came to this house, you would have cut my throat while I was in a coma. I'm glad – fucking *happy* that Heather slaughtered your bastard fucking boyfriend, you–"

"Evee!" I scolded. "Please."

"You c-couldn't," Sarika choked out at her. "I know I- couldn't. Order, mmhmm. Me? Myself? Nah. Couldn't."

Evelyn stared at her across the table. One of her eyes twitched.

"Evee, Evee," I tried to sound strict, rather than panicked and out of my depth. "Stop, stop, please stop."

"Yeah," Nicole added, standing up out of her chair, raising both hands. "Okay, this is getting really fucked up. This is meant to be an information exchange, not an adversarial therapy session. Talk about the dude with the stupid name, not about how you wizard school rejects want to kill each other all the time, right? Right? Can we agree on that? Can we agree to stick to the subject?" She plucked another biscuit from the plate, bit it in half, and raised her eyebrows. "Yeah?"

Sarika looked down into her lap, sullen and slack. Evelyn folded her arms and glared at us both, but nodded slowly.

"Thank you, Nicky," I said.

"Maybe we should cut this short," Raine murmured.

The tone of her voice – that wound-tight intensity – sent an

involuntary thrill down my spine. I clenched my jaw, bit down on the rush. Raine shifted her attention smoothly from the back window to Sarika, and pivoted her weight from one foot to the other, a perfectly balanced adjustment of poise and tension. Unsmiling, focused, ready to uncoil.

“Raine,” I said, and had to swallow, wet my lips, take a breath. “Will you please stop that?”

Raine blinked at me – and broke into a laughing smile. “Stop what?”

“That. Amy Stack is not going to burst through the wall because somebody said her name.”

“Aw, Heather, come on, I was just being cautious.” Raine grinned for me, but for once I wasn’t buying. “She’s the last person I expected to crop up, that’s all. Guess her whole ‘I’m out’ thing was so much guff, eh?”

I closed my eyes for a second, if only to blot out the effect her physique had on my better judgement. Don’t think about the way her toned muscles flex beneath her jacket, or the way they accentuate her curves. Don’t look at the grin.

“You’re ... you’re practically vibrating like you’re about to be in a fight.”

“She is?” Nicole asked.

“I can tell,” I said. “Usually, I quite like it. Not right now.”

Raine laughed, awkwardly rubbing the back of her head. “Hey, you never know what might happen.”

“Actually I think we would know by now,” I said. “And we’re all together, all in one place. Praem is standing right there, and I don’t think Stack would want her arm broken a second time. We have a police officer in the room with us. Stack isn’t going to throw a bomb in here or something. Raine, please. Switch off.”

“Quite,” Evelyn grumbled. “Nothing for you to punch right now, Raine. Quit it.”

Raine opened her mouth to craft another denial, then locked eyes with me and laughed at herself. Like flicking a switch, she shifted her weight and the tension flowed out of her limbs. I had no idea

how she did that, how she could be so *on* one second and then just drop it. She glanced at Sarika again, this time without the flint-hard focus in her eyes.

“Sarika, Sarika, Sarika,” Raine said. “You having a sulk?”

“Mm?”

A sinking feeling took hold in my belly. “Raine, where is this going?”

“Nowhere funny, no worries. Mind if I pull up a chair for a sec though? Get a word in edge-ways, yeah? Here, Sarika, don’t mind me.” As she spoke, Raine dragged a chair out with one foot and scooted in right next to Sarika, a twinkle in her eye and a beaming smile on her face. She plopped herself down and hovered an arm just above Sarika’s shoulders. “Just checking, is it alright to touch you? Just a friendly gesture, you know, but it sorta defeats the purpose if it’s gonna make you scream or shake or something. Yeah? We good?”

Even Sarika, crippled and twitching and with none of her muscles working properly, could not fully resist Raine with the charm turned up to maximum. She grunted a dismissive assent, eyelids twitching as if she couldn’t focus. Raine put her arm around Sarika’s hunched shoulders.

“*Raine*,” I warned.

“No, I want to see where this is going,” Evelyn grumbled. Nicole just shrugged, mouth half-full of biscuit.

“It’s alright, it’s alright.” Raine said. “Just making a few things clear, that’s all. Sticking to the subject. Practical subjects. First off, I gotta ask you a question, Sarika, about Miss – or is it Mrs? doubt it – Miss Amy Stack. She was with these old cult buddies of yours, doing things about our big ocular friend in the sky, right?”

Sarika nodded.

“But see, I gotta know,” Raine said. “I really gotta know. Was she with them, or *with them*?”

Sarika jerked her head once from side to side. “For money. Profesh-fess-”

“Professional. Professional, right, I get it, take it easy, thank you

Sarika,” Raine went on. “So she wasn’t screwed in the head, by our big blinking sky friend?”

“Not with w-with ... no.”

“Ahhhhh.” Raine let out this huge theatrical sigh. She leaned back in the chair, still with her arm around Sarika’s shoulders, and kicked her booted feet up on the table.

“Raine,” I tutted. “That’s unhygienic.”

“Feet off table,” Praem intoned.

Raine ignored us. “‘Cos if she had, that would be a real shame. Sad, actually. She and I, we’ve a bit of a thing going on, every time we see each other. Stack and I, we’re kinda similar, you know? You see, Eevee here,” Raine nodded across the table, leaning in close to Sarika as if this was a covet, one-on-one gossip session. “Don’t let her fool you.”

“Excuse me, Raine?” Evelyn bristled.

“Under all the magic stuff, she’s a pretty normal person. She can be real nice, if you ever have the pleasure of meeting her on a good day. You are too, Sarika. Quite normal, once we peel away all the magical knowledge and the weird cult and all that jazz. At least that’s my read on you. Am I right? Maybe a little bit of a power-tripper or something, but that can be normal too. Heather as well. Heather’s just a real sweetheart, whatever else she is.” Raine paused. “But me?”

Raine grinned, wide, showing all her teeth, and my stomach flipped over. I almost started to shake. Couldn’t tear my eyes away from her. If she’d spoken to me like that, I would have melted in her hands. Sarika stared back at her, sullen and slack, mouth hanging open, her jerky breathing audible in the gaps between Raine’s rambling monologue.

“But I’m not,” Raine said. “I’m not.”

Behind Sarika, Nicole winced in slow-motion.

“See, you can taunt Eevee about murder,” Raine carried on, lower, her voice almost a purr, as if there was nobody in the room except her and Sarika. “Go back and forth with this whole mage brinkmanship shit, dare each other to pull the trigger, to cross more and more moral boundaries. I’ve seen it before, don’t really care

much for it myself. It just messes people up. But hey, that's why I'm here. Me, I'd do it quiet, and quick. I'd sneak into your house at night and you wouldn't feel a thing, and I wouldn't need to front about it either. Wouldn't need to agonise over it, wouldn't leave a stain on my conscience. Just do it." Raine clicked her fingers. "Because I'm not one of you."

"Okay, alright, that's enough," Nicole said with a sudden bark of authority, a please-stand-back-madam voice that made me flinch.

Raine laughed, good natured again all of a sudden. "Hey, hey, I'm Sarika's friend right now. Isn't that right, Sarika? 'Cos you're wounded and you need help, and well, I'm a huge sucker for that. If you weren't straight and I'd never met Heather, hey, who knows?"

"Raine," I managed to hiss, but trying to stop her felt like reaching into a lion's cage.

"This isn't even a threat, really," Raine went on. "See, Sarika? Look at my eyes, go on. Right now. No threat. I'm your friend. See?"

Sarika stared into Raine's eyes as best she could, blinking and twitching. She managed a jerky nod.

"And we gotta clear all this misunderstanding up. You gotta tell us what you were doing with those old cult buddies of yours. With less bullshit. We cool?"

"... c-c-cool," Sarika stutter-slurred, then paused and added, "B-bitch."

"Now that's more like it!" Raine laughed, and catapulted herself out of her chair all at once, sweeping it away and leaving Sarika alone again. She winked at me, ruffled my hair, and leaned back against the counter, warm and good-natured, no trace of what she'd been slinging moments ago. I could only gape at her, and half-wish she would speak to me like that later on.

Praem set about making a big show of wiping down the part of the table where Raine had put her feet up. Well, as much as she can make a 'big show' of anything. I swear I caught her staring at Raine, none too pleased beneath the untouchable expression.

"Haynes, you are a nutter," Nicole said, not amused, shaking her head.

Raine winked. "One of my many hidden talents."

Evelyn scoffed.

“Raine, you really must learn to use your powers for good, not evil,” I said with a sigh, trying to discharge my own tension through lame humour. It didn’t work. “Sarika, are you ... okay?”

Sarika, still sullen and exhausted, had drawn herself up to watch our exchange. She pushed her prematurely white hair out of face, and stared at me.

Raine grinned. “My powers?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” I struggled not to blush. “Don’t turn that on for other girls, unless you’re actually being nice to them.”

“But wouldn’t that make you jealous?”

“That is hardly the issue here.” I huffed, and failed to contain the blush. “It’s entirely inappropriate.”

“You don’t scare me, d-dumbarse,” Sarika suddenly spoke up, slurring at Raine.

Raine burst out laughing. “Yes! That’s what I mean! That is more like it, yes, get some steel in that spine, girl!”

“You can’t d-do anything to me w-worse than what I had.” She swallowed hard. Paused. Swallowed again. “Idiot.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Sarika twisted her lips, eyelids heavy in a slack parody of a thinking face, turning back to Evelyn. For the first time since she arrived, she was putting on an expression for show. “C-can tell you about Josh if you want. Suppose. Don’t understand why. Nobody. But f-fiiii- fiiii- ... ” She paused and frowned, struggling over the word, eyes glued on the plate of barely touched biscuits laid out on the table. “First,” she finally said, slowly and carefully. “I want something in return.”

“What?” Evelyn said. “The whole point of you coming here was to clear your name.”

“Excuse. Y-your excuse. Thought I was coming h-here to d-die anyway. If I’m not ... ” She shrugged. “I want-”

Evelyn slapped the table with her good hand. “You’re not in any position to make demands!”

“ – a chocolate eclair.”

We all looked at each other. Evelyn frowned as if she didn't believe her ears. Raine smirked wide. Nicole put her face in her hand.

“Chocolate eclair,” Praem echoed.

“You get me a chocolate eclair,” Sarika slurred, nodding with jerky motions and a sideways twitch of her head. I realised she was trying to incline her chin, look down her nose. “One from ... Plass- plassi- ... plassi—i-”

“*Plaisir coupable*,” Raine said, in an atrocious French accent. “Pasty joint, next to the big Waitrose, right?” She let out a low whistle. “Expensive tastes.”

“Best,” Sarika said.

“ ... you difficult bitch,” Evelyn spat.

Sarika smiled. Twitching, broken, threatening drool, full of spite and petty revenge – but it was a real smile.

In that moment, I understood Sarika. She'd been crippled, her body wounded in a way that would probably never heal. She'd lost all but a scrap of dignity. She couldn't walk right, or speak without slurring, and certainly would never be doing magic again, at least not for many years. She was utterly, completely powerless, and she knew that whatever we wanted of her, she couldn't stop us, not really. If she refused to speak, Evelyn would rip her secrets out. If she'd not come here, Evelyn would have turned up at her house, or sent Praem, or worse. This petty request was her attempt to exercise what little control she had over this situation.

“No,” Evelyn grumbled. “We are not playing along with a childish and puerile-”

“I think we should be polite to our guest,” I said, and forced myself to smile. Everyone looked at me. “It's only fair. We can get you an eclair, Sarika. Is there a special kind at this pastry shop? Why don't we get a box, we could all have some. That seems nice. Doesn't it?”

Sarika met my gaze. Sullen hate behind her smug look. But she managed a nod.

Evelyn stared at me as if I'd suggested she swallow a live frog.

“Did you hit your head this morning, Heather?” she asked, voice

full of angry disbelief. “Do you need Raine to take you upstairs and shag some sense back into you?”

“Woah, Eevee, hey,” Raine laughed.

“Yes, excuse me,” I added.

Evelyn ignored us, turning back to Sarika. “You can’t seriously expect anything. I can *make* you talk, you-”

“N-not a mage anymore. Don’t give a f-f-f-uck,” Sarika spat. “Gonna torture me? Hm? Huh? Eclair, or send me home. Stuff your hunt for King up y-your arse.”

“Mister King. Josh, ‘Joe King’, whatever,” Evelyn said, staring at Sarika, voice dripping venom. “Whatever his real name, he is not what he appears to be. We found him dead, and he got back up. If you know anything – and I think you do, you were in this long enough – then you know the kind of power that takes.”

Sarika took the bait. Her smug smile wavered.

“Eevee, please,” I said. “I am asking you as your best friend, please let this-”

“He’s not the person he appears to be,” Evelyn carried on, low and soft. “He’s a mage, a real one, not like your dabbling. He did some kind of fucking personality-switching trick. Went toe-to-toe with Zheng. The demon couldn’t even touch him. You understand? Hm? This is bigger than your petty needs. He’s a mage. You live in this city too, you think you’ll get overlooked, if this place goes to hell?”

“... b-bullshit,” Sarika slurred. “Bull- ... mage? No mage, no, no.” She breathed too hard, a twitching tic making her head jerk to an unheard rhythm. “Sandy- Sandy was the m-mage. Josh? No. Josh was ... Alexander liked him. Good dogsbody. Errand boy. Always said- too stupid to stab him in the back. Didn’t like vi-vi-ooo-violence.” Sarika struggled over that word, spat it out, panting between snatches of speech. “The Joe King thing ... name. Was a joke. Always used to make. Made bad jokes. Not a mage. Too stupid. No illumination- in him. You’re lying.”

Evelyn’s lips twisted into a nasty smile.

“Fuck you, Saye,” Sarika slurred.

“You’re going to tell us everything,” Evelyn instructed her.

"Everything you know about Joshua King. What these three were doing, what they called you about, what their plan was, how they-

"No!" Sarika spat. "Eclair. You d-do, do- do ... I want an éclair." She tried to draw herself up again, lips twisted against each other, eyes watering.

"- how they planned to resist the Eye."

Sarika let out the most God-awful noise. Frustration, pain, denial, the name of the Eye torturing her neurons and twisting her up inside. She sagged and drooled and panted, couldn't breathe properly. Nicole helped her, wiped her eyes, held her hand.

"Evelyn Saye, stop," I snapped.

Evelyn whirled on me instantly. "I forgot! Okay, I forgot! I didn't mean to hurt her, but what if this is a trap? Hm? Did you think about that, Heather?"

"Woah, woah, Eeve, hold up," Raine said, raising her hands. "That's hardly fair now, is it? If she was trying to cover for a trap, the cat's out of the bag already. Make up your mind."

"What?" Evelyn boggled at her.

"Eeve," I said as gently as I could muster. "You successfully scared and bullied her into giving information up for free, by using the fact she doesn't know about King. Which is it, a trap, or not?"

Evelyn stared at me, blinking, trying to build up steam again. "... it could still be ... it could still be a trap, don't be absurd. She's trying to peel one of us off. She's even named the location. Next to the Waitrose? It'll be a thirty-five minute round trip at best, anything could happen! Here, or on the way there!"

"I could take the car," Raine suggested. "Won't take me fifteen minutes."

"You will bloody well not!" Evelyn all but shouted. "You are staying put. We are not getting this woman an éclair, trap or otherwise."

"Maybe it's time to stop thinking like that," I said. I was more horrified than angry. Horrified at us.

I spoke softly, but a fraction of my self-hate must have leaked into my voice, because Evelyn drew up short. I took a breath and groped for the right words to continue.

"If ... if you're really that worried, send Praem. Wait, no. Praem, dear, I'm sorry," I turned to the doll-demon. "Would you be happy to go fetch a box of chocolate eclairs for us? You're by for the most difficult to surprise or ambush, if you're worried about that too. And it's not going to happen anyway. That's not what this request is about."

"Chocolate eclairs," Praem echoed. I took that as an affirmative.

Evelyn started to say something, then stopped. I saw an echo of my own hollow feelings reflected in her eyes. She closed her mouth again, chewing her tongue in frustration.

"Get a box enough for all of us, yeah?" Raine asked, a cheery note in her voice.

"I'll have that cup of t-t—t- ... *tea* too," Sarika croaked, eyes still full of tears of wounded pride. She'd recovered enough to sit up again. "C-cool it first. Need a straw."

"Lukewarm tea, with a straw," Raine said, clicking her fingers and pointing finger guns at Sarika. "Coming right up."

"Oh fine, sod it," Evelyn grunted. "Get me a mug as well, but hot. And Praem, go fetch my purse, I expect you're going to need some cash to purchase a bloody twenty quid box of eclairs."

"Thirty," Sarika croaked.

Raine let out a low whistle.

"Tch," Evelyn tutted. "These better bloody well be worth it."

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Armed with a wad of twenty pound notes and unnecessary instructions to come straight home, Praem was ordered back into casual clothes, handed Evelyn's mobile phone, and sent off on her merry way to purchase a puff pastry peace pipe.

"There won't be a trap. That's not what this is about," I said as Raine and I saw her off at the front door. "But please be careful."

"Look both ways when crossing the road," she sang, and left.

Back in the kitchen, one could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. Raine did in fact try.

The aftermath of all that pressure, the slow bubbling self-horror – not to mention the sheer animal magnetism in Raine’s little performance earlier – made me twitchy, tight in the chest, and hungry. I wanted to go upstairs and find Lozzie and curl up in the dark and not think. Instead I occupied my hands with a glass of apple juice, and before I knew what I was doing, I’d eaten a dozen chocolate biscuits. My stomach would not thank me later for that combination.

Sarika and Evelyn both found ways of quietly and passive-aggressively occupying themselves. Sarika dug a surprisingly new mobile phone from one of her coat pockets, hampered and slowed by her imprecise grip, and booted up some kind of mobile game – big numbers and turn based battles, lots of brightly coloured cartoon characters in impractical looking fantasy armour. She kept the volume off, had trouble clicking some parts of the screen, but didn’t once look up. Evelyn sat there fuming softly for a few minutes until she scraped her chair back, stomped out of the kitchen, stomped upstairs, and stomped all the way back holding a battered copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a book which I was certain she’d never read and probably wouldn’t enjoy. She’d likely grabbed the first thing to hand in the old study. She set herself up in her seat and commenced reading with one of the grumpiest expressions I’d ever seen from her, which is saying quite a bit.

Raine decided to lean over the back of Sarika’s chair and take an interest. She provided a running commentary on both the gameplay and the state of undress of several of the female characters, with sneaky winks at me as I stood there munching my unwise mouthful of biscuits.

“Wait,” Raine said, pointing at the phone screen. “Switch her back to the other outfit, the one with the boob armour.”

This did not help.

Raine was somewhat put out when Sarika switched her in-game team to all pretty boys.

“Much better,” Sarika croaked.

Nicole cleared her throat, stood up, and gestured at the dying light through the kitchen window. “I need some fresh air. If I leave you lot with Sarika, you’re not going to turn her into a frog or whatever?”

“S’fine, detective,” Raine said with a wink. “We’re having fun.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose you’ve worked that out, right. So, if I step out into your back garden, I’m not going to get, I dunno, eaten by a giant anaconda or something?”

“Watch your step for the fragments of invisible monster cocoon,” Evelyn drawled.

Nicole blinked at her.

I sighed. “She’s being silly. The cocoon isn’t there anymore. It melted.”

Nicole gave me a split-second of thousand-yard stare, then nodded and sucked on her teeth and made for the back door through the utility room.

“You do know,” Evelyn deadpanned at Sarika, “that it would save us all considerable time if we talk now. I’ll even go first.”

“No. Eclair first. Payment first.”

Evelyn grit her teeth, then returned to staring at the page of her book without reading the words.

Twenty six minutes and counting. I thought being stuck in the Medieval Metaphysics room with Evelyn and Twil had been awkward, but this took a new award, one I hadn’t known existed. I ate another biscuit, and realised I was barely tasting anything.

“I’m just going to ... to check on Nicky,” I announced.

“You sure?” Raine asked. “You want me to come with? That hoodie enough for outdoors right now?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “And you should stay here.” I glanced pointedly at Evelyn. “For the sake of ... blood pressure.”

“Ah. Gotcha. Shout if you need me.”

“Thank you, yes. Always.”

I slipped out of the kitchen and into the cramped, shadowy confines of the utility room. The heat from the old iron radiators struggled to reach back here, so I hugged myself through my pink hoodie, tugged my sleeves over my hands, and breathed a sigh of relief. Outdoors, the sun bisected the rooftops on the horizon, filling the

tiny room with reflected sunset backwash through the thick glass of the door.

Nicole stood on the dirty paving slabs and weeds of the untended back patio, watching the sunset. An unlit cigarette hung from her lips, a packet of them in one hand. She turned in surprise when I clicked the back door open and stepped out to join her.

“Uh, Heather?” She plucked the unlit cigarette from her mouth. “Are things safe in there without you?”

“Are you implying I’d be able to stop anything?”

Nicole tilted her head, dead serious. “Yeah. You’re the real alpha round here, whatever front Raine puts up.”

“Oh, I, uh ... yes? Yes, they’re fine, please don’t worry. Raine won’t actually hurt Sarika, not out of the blue. Not unless ... well ... you know.” I smiled with awkward embarrassment and tucked my hair behind one ear, self-conscious and confused. Alpha? Nonsense. I shut the back door, and tucked my hands under my armpits against the evening chill.

Nicole sighed through a pained smile. “Then I shall defer to your judgement. Couldn’t stand the heat in there either, huh?”

“That is a very mild way of putting it, yes.”

She laughed, a good chuckle that washed the harsh authority from her face. I realised I’d never actually been alone with Nicole before.

Though she was very good looking, I didn’t find Nicole personally attractive. She didn’t act my type. But standing in the orange glow of an overcast sunset, side-lit in her long dark coat and well fitting suit, with that cynical, knowing look on her face, she could have stepped straight from the pages of a romantic noir novel. The glow caught her tightly bunned hair, turned it gold. Quite the heartthrob to the right eyes, the dashing lady detective. Or private eye, I corrected myself. That would be better.

“I didn’t know you smoked, Nicky.” I nodded at the cigarette in her hand, just for something to say.

“Ah? Oh, this.” She held up the unlit cigarette and frowned at it as if it had insulted her. “Yeah, I smoke, but not *nicotine*, if you know what I mean. Er, don’t tell anybody I said that, right? Bought these this morning, first pack of actual fags I’ve had years.”

“Do you ... do you need somebody to stop you?” I asked. “To take them off you?”

“You volunteering?”

“If that’s what you need?” I sunk deeper into my hoodie. Behind Nicole, a gentle wind ruffled the unruly grass and the leaves on the big tree. Houses in the distance caught the dying sun on their rooftops. “I doubt I’d be tempted to smoke them, at least. I’ve never tried.”

Nicole slotted the one cigarette back into the packet, flipped it closed, and held it out to me. “I come asking for those back, you tell me no. Deal?”

“I’ll try my best.” The packet of cigarettes felt so much lighter in my hand than I’d expected. I tucked it into my hoodie’s front pocket.

“Another notch for your belt.”

I blinked at her. “I’m ... I’m sorry?”

“You’re not even aware of it, are you?” She smiled an inscrutable smile. “Natural born charisma, and you don’t even know what you’re doing. We’re all very lucky that you are who you are, Heather. You’d be lethal otherwise.”

“I-I’m ... I’m not, I’m not special, Nicky. I’m really not. And I’m not lethal, please don’t say that.” I struggled to swallow down the lump in my throat. We were *not* lethal. I wouldn’t let us be.

“S’what I said, you’re not lethal. Take the rest as a compliment, yeah?” Nicole reached to her mouth as if to remove a cigarette again, then blinked at her empty fingers before she laughed at herself.

“How have you been lately, Nicky? We haven’t talked since the hospital.”

She gave me an unsmiling ‘what-do-you-think’ sort of look. “I need some serious stress relief. Weed and netflix ain’t cuttin’ it.”

“Oh.”

Perhaps a private heart-to-heart with a washed up, psychologically damaged, bent police detective was about to be more awkward than standing around in the kitchen while Sarika played sexually charged mobile games. Oh dear.

Nicole nodded up at the house behind us, at the upstairs windows with the curtains closed. "Is that redhead girl still hanging around you lot?"

"Ah." A lifeline!

"Ah? That a yes or a no?"

I cleared my throat, thanking heaven for an easy topic, pretending innocent obliviousness. I was very bad at it. "Redhead girl?"

Nicole laughed in defeat and rolled her eyes. "Alright, fine, I totally remember her name. Kimberly Kemp. The cute little redhead with the button nose and the funny walk."

"Funny walk?"

"Cute walk. Does this thing with her hips."

"... I ... I never noticed. Wow. Nicky."

"She around?"

"Not at the moment, sorry. Kim's at work."

"Ah. Shame." Nicole sighed, then looked up at the windows again. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm not holding out on you." I tutted. "Kim's at work, though I think her shift is over soon. Hopefully we'll be done by the time she gets home."

"Oh yeah? Where's she work?"

I frowned gently. Nicole had the good shame to clear her throat and shrug and add, "I'm just taking an interest."

"She found a new job," I said, carefully unimpressed, but smiling inside. "At a florist in the city centre, the one just outside the train station. It's independently owned and they do a lot of business, so it pays a lot better than she was hoping. We're all very happy for her."

"Aww, that's great. Glad to hear it."

"If you do decide to go visit her at work, I don't suggest going dressed like you are right now."

"Ah?" Nicole glanced down at herself, suited and booted, trim and

tight.

"I get the impression that Kimberly doesn't trust police. I think she's had some bad experiences."

"Ahhhh, right, yeah." Nicole cleared her throat. "Yeah. I'm out of practice at this. Don't remind me."

I almost giggled. It was quite exciting, in a way, to hear an older woman – though by less than fifteen years – talk so candidly. For a moment I even managed to forget Sarika, back in the kitchen.

"So, you, um, you like women then?" I asked.

Nicole took a deep breath and blew out slowly into the cold air, as if she'd taken a drag on that invisible cigarette, hands in her coat pockets, looking at me sidelong.

"I bat for both teams," she said. "Does that surprise you?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Though I haven't batted at all for ... fuck." She grimaced. "Six years, give or take. Kim hits my mark, that's all."

A red standard shot up a flagpole in my mind. "The nervous and skittish type?"

"Nah, not exactly. I wanna see what she's like when she's actually happy, you know? The skittish stuff is endearing, but I'd rather make her smile first."

The red flag went down again. "She's sweet. Very caring. 'Girly', I suppose."

"Yeah, exactly, that's the exact word I was hoping to hear." Nicole grinned, then caught herself, sighed and shook her head. "I'm pathetic. Too old for the club scene and one night stands, and my type doesn't crop up in my lifestyle or line of work. You don't meet a lot of himbos or girly girls on the bloody Sharrowford police force."

"Himbos?" I echoed, then held up a hand. "Actually, never mind, sorry, I can guess the etymology."

Nicole laughed and I blushed. I didn't want to think too hard about the detective's private life.

“Look, Nicky, are you seriously going to approach Kim?”

“Oh dear. Am I about to get a stern talking to?”

“I’m serious. I have a responsibility. Don’t treat her as stress relief, or I ... I’ll ... I shall be very upset with you.”

“Loud and clear, mama bear.”

“No, you don’t get it,” I sighed. “What happened to her isn’t on the same level as Sarika, but the Sharrowford Cult broke her just the same. What happened to her was ... she was ... ” I didn’t have the words. This wasn’t the moment, and not mine to tell.

“I’m listening,” Nicole said softly, and she meant it, or at least made me believe it.

“It’s her place to tell you, if she wants, not mine. But they made her work for them, and you can guess what that entailed. She was groomed, trapped, used. And she joined the cult in the first place after she got out of an abusive relationship with an ex-boyfriend.” I nodded up at the house. “Living here is an awful paradox for her. She wants out – out of magic, out of all of this, but she’s really reluctant to return to her flat. I suspect that being friends with us is the first time in years she’s felt safe. Don’t take that away from her.”

Nicole nodded slowly as I spoke, no longer making a joke of this. “Alright,” she said when I finished.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to put you off.”

“Hey, don’t be. Maybe some real sweetness and light is what I need. But ... boyfriend?”

“Oh.” I bit my lip. “Oh, that’s a good point. I don’t know. Her friends at her Wiccan group didn’t seem surprised when she pretended to be my girlfriend.”

Nicole couldn’t suppress a laugh. “What? Heather, oh, I need to hear this story.”

“It’s complicated. Magic stuff. She helped us contact somebody. It’s too long for right now, Praem would get back before I can finish.”

“Bank it for me, I could do with a good laugh.”

“And I’m really not sure she’d be comfortable with a police officer.

No matter how much you think you're a good apple. Don't hurt her, Nicky. Please."

Nicole sighed a big sigh and shot me a sad grin. "Not police for much longer, so that's one less strike against me."

"Ah? Oh, you are going to quit after all?"

"I'm in the process. Turns out becoming a private eye is a lot more difficult than I thought, so I'm hooking up with this ... well, not a company exactly, more like a cooperate collective, over in Manchester. Sharing information, sharing jobs, keeping each other in the loop. This guy I used to know on the force, he's one of them, so I've got a personal connection. They've been getting me up to speed. Then when I'm certain I can land on my feet, in goes my resignation." She shot me a grin. "And then it's chasing unfaithful husbands and dumpster diving for corporate secrets. That's where the real money is, apparently." She nodded back at the house, at the kitchen window. "I keep doing this sorta thing for you people, eventually I'm gonna have to start charging for my time."

"I really hope it works out for you. Good luck."

"Yeah, thanks."

Nicole stared off at the rim of the sunset amid the gathering dark, and suddenly I could see the weighing-up going on behind her eyes, the cogs turning and locking into place. With a sigh, she seemed to let go of something.

"You know what I wanted to be when I was little, Heather? A hero." She spoke slowly. "I wanted to save people. Should have been a bloody firefighter, but I'm probably too short for that. Didn't much care about catching criminals or anything, just the saving part. But the world doesn't actually work that way, you know? That's not what institutions are *for*."

"Nobody's really a hero."

"Oh yeah?" She turned to me, dead serious, and suddenly I felt every year of the gap between us. "You can save people in your own life, if you keep them close. Raine's a hero. So are you."

"What? What- no, no, Nicky-"

"Don't get me wrong, Heather. Real heroism doesn't mean you can help everyone. You have to make choices. My brush with you lot,

well, maybe that's showed me some of those choices make you into something *else* at the same time, and I'm not sure I can deal with that part. I think about you, and your friends in there, and the whole world you inhabit a lot. Because what you're doing is *real*. It's so real it hurts. I can't ignore it, can't switch it off, because it's there and it's real and the whole thing scares me shitless."

I blinked at her. That was the last place I'd assumed she was going with this. She looked off into the darkness, awkward and hurting inside.

"It ... it scares me too, Nicky," I tried. "All the time."

"I have nightmares about that house." I heard a lump in her throat, and I did not need to ask which house she meant. "Not the bodies, not the blood. I've seen worse than that. I've seen dead kids, whatever. No, it was the *feeling* in that place. The oppression of it. Like we'd gone down some dark hole in the ground and found a primordial truth and I'd never be the same again."

She took a long shuddering breath. I reached out and touched her arm gently, uncertain where this was going, where it would end.

"But I can't turn away," she said with a rueful smile, looking round at me again. "'Cos I'm a sucker. Because here it is. It's real. And that means I can make a difference. Maybe only to your redhead friend, but that's real enough for me."

"You don't have to get involved in the supernatural to make a positive difference to somebody's life," I said. "Don't be silly."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess you're right, but I don't make very good life choices anyway. Why break my streak now?" She took a deep sigh and rolled her shoulders, as if a weight had been lifted. "Your friends in there are fucking nuts, you know?"

"Ah?"

"I went along with Raine's bad cop routine, but that was heavy shit. You don't learn skills like that. Not even on the force. She'd be terrifying in a police questioning room, no mistake. Psychopaths and wizards trying to kill each other. Is this what it's always like?"

"Not always," I sighed. "I'm sorry you've had to see all that. I'm really sorry about her."

Nicole snorted with laughter. "You're alright, Heather. You know

why? Because you worked hard to find a way not to kill me. Your friends in there are ... different."

"They're not. Nicky, I ... " A hard lump formed in my throat. My palms turned sweaty. I hunched up tight. Couldn't meet her eyes. Hands shaking, I pulled up the hood on my hoodie and felt like hiding inside it.

"Heather? I hit a nerve?"

"I'm cold."

"Ah."

She let that hang. An expert interrogator. I didn't stand a chance.

"I've killed two people," I said into the sunset gloom. "I'm no different. Yes, both times were self defense, but I'm still technically a murderer. Murderess?" I laughed a little. "Is that still a word? Sounds like vocabulary from a 1930s detective novel. Miss Morell the Murderess."

Nicole just waited, eyebrows raised.

"Alexander Lilburne ... he deserved to die," I said. "I have no doubts about that, but it still ... I still think about it sometimes. But the first one, he was just some guy, some cult henchman probably just as abused and bullied as Kimberly. I just panicked. I wanted him off me. I wanted him gone. Pure instinct. And I didn't pull the trigger myself, but he's dead. He's absolutely dead and that's my fault and it didn't have to happen."

Nicole gave me a moment. She didn't rub my back or purr sweet excuses to me, like Raine would have. Eventually, when I straightened back up and could look her in the eye again, she just said, "self defense."

Somehow, that helped. I shrugged.

"I get the impression it's not the same for your friends," she said with a rueful smile.

Above us, a window rattled open. Lozzie's elfin little face appeared, leaning out from the second floor, a frowning sprite caught in dusken colours. One of Tenny's tentacles snaked out over her shoulders.

"Don't talk to the coppers!" she called down to me.

“L-Lozzie?” I gaped, suddenly laughing.

She turned her serious little frown on Nicole and stuck her tongue out, then grabbed Tenny’s stray tentacle, pulled her back inside, and slammed the window shut. The curtain flicked back into place a second later.

“Um,” Nicole said.

But I was laughing. I was laughing so bad I was almost crying, dabbing at my eyes with my sleeve. “Oh, oh I needed that. I needed that so much. How did she know I needed that?”

“Yeah, um, was that a huge black tentacle behind her?”

“Yes. It’s fine, that’s- that’s somebody else, don’t worry.”

“Oh-kay,” Nicole said, very much not okay. “You alright there?”

“Yes, yes thank you. I just needed a ... a laugh, I suppose.” I took a deep breath, finally able to answer Nicole’s question. “My friends, well. Raine is ... ah, well, you know. But Evelyn, she’s not a casual murderer at all, that’s not true.”

“She’s paranoid.” Nicole spoke as if she knew the signs. “Or worse. That whole performance in there on the doormat. What would have happened if Sarika wasn’t clean or whatever?”

“I would have stopped it all.”

“Exactly. And if you weren’t there? If you were sick in bed with flu? Or sitting on the toilet? Would she have killed Sarika?”

“I don’t know. I admit, I don’t know. I think it would hurt her in a way she couldn’t deal with, and that’s why it’s good that I’m here.”

“Damn right it is.” Nicole cleared her throat and visibly switched tracks. “So come on, what is this all about? You can spill the beans to me, what happened with this Joshua guy you’re looking for?”

“ ... magic and all? Lozzie did just give me some good advice.”

“Magic and all. I’m here, Heather, I’m already arse deep, and not as a police officer anymore. I picked some of it up back there, the gist, but ... ”

Blow by blow, as best I could, I told Nicole what had happened on Saturday night, about the revenant, the three-in-one man, and how

he'd eventually run off into the dark Sharrowford streets with Zheng on his tail. As I spoke, the sun dipped almost fully below the horizon. Night wind crept beneath my hood, and it was only by the light spilling from the house's windows that I could see Nicole's deepening frown as I came to a conclusion.

"So now Evelyn wants to find out where he is," I said. "What he's up to. I suppose.

"Hold on. Rewind for me a sec." Nicole raised one hand. "This guy, from what you've just told me, he never actually did anything to any of you. Zheng got hurt by accident. He took his notepad back, and then he never touched you. I guess he punched Zheng, but, who cares about that, she could shrug off a train."

"He did magic. He cast a spell, at me."

Nicole shrugged. "With Zheng bearing down on him? About to, I don't know, eat his face off? That sounds like justifiable self defence."

"Oh, thank you very much for being on my side, Nicky. He could have killed me."

"I'm trying to be objective here. And the spell didn't even do anything to Zheng, right? Maybe it was a warning shot. You think of that?"

"And he knew things. Things about us. He ... what he said about Zheng, what that implied, that's not forgivable, he--"

"He hoodwinked you. You just said, Heather, you can't be certain if he really was what he pretended to be. So what now, Evelyn's gonna hunt him down and kill him? He ran from you lot, disengaged, deescalated. Smart guy, if you ask me. He bugged out and he's not been back to bother you. And now you and Evelyn and Raine are gonna press Sarika for a way to find this guy?"

"Not necessarily. I don't want it to be like that, it doesn't ... it doesn't have to be. But ... he's a mage ... he ... he'd drawn the Eye ... he's *dangerous*. Evelyn always says that ... that ... "

"Forget the stupid wizard bullshit for a sec, yeah? Imagine this is just a guy. If your friends in there get their hands on him, they'll kill him. Or try to. Does he deserve that? He left, he got out, and in my professional opinion he avoided hurting any of you who

couldn't take it."

"He might!" I blurted out.

Nicole didn't even have to look unimpressed. She just tilted her head.

"He might do. He might ... oh." I put my face in my hand, sighed, squeezed my eyes closed. "Oh damn you, detective. Damn you."

by this art you may contemplate – 10.9

Sarika told us what she knew, and not all of it was predictable.

“We didn’t kill your friends,” Evelyn made the first tentative foray, frowning down at her chocolate éclair as if it might turn into a live eel, too impatient to wait for Sarika’s explanations. On the other side of the table, Sarika was busy forcing her hand and arm muscles into limp obedience to hold her matching chocolate treat, chewing slowly and jerkily through her second mouthful. Between them lay the white floral box from *Plaisir coupable*, still with a generous helping of leftover éclairs beneath the clear plastic window, utterly out of place next to Evelyn’s scrimshawed thighbone and the stack of magical tomes.

“They’re good, Evee, they really are,” I said. “Do try yours, please.”

“Yeah, I’ll have that if you’re not gonna eat it,” Raine said, leaning on the back of my chair, winking at Evelyn.

“No you bloody well won’t,” Evelyn grumbled, and picked up the éclair at last. “You’ve had two already, and I’m getting my money’s worth, thank you very much.” She added to Sarika, “Forgive me for talking business while we eat,” but managed to make it sound like ‘fuck you and the horse you rode in on.’

“Mmm-mmm, mm!” I made a muffled noise around a similar mouthful of pastry, chocolate, and cream, but I was too indecisive, couldn’t figure out if I was telling her off for not waiting another thirty seconds while Sarika ate, or thanking her for the illusion of politeness.

“The other two ex-cultists,” Evelyn carried right on without taking a bite, “we didn’t even see them, and if they are dead I doubt they’re in the castle dimension. Mister Joking – are we really calling him that?” she broke off for a second.

“Arsehole,” Raine suggested brightly, sucking a stray blob of cream off her fingers.

“Zombie man?” said Nicole.

“‘Revenant’ would be technically accurate,” Evelyn grumbled.

I swallowed my mouthful. “Those are all very, very bad. Can’t we just call him King?”

Evelyn wrinkled her nose. “I dislike the implied symbolism of that. Names have power, Heather.”

“Merlin,” Praem intoned from behind Evelyn, comfortably returned to her maid uniform once more.

“Absolutely not,” Evelyn snapped over her shoulder. “You stow that thought. I never want to hear that again.”

My eclair paused on the way back to my mouth, a mirror of my heart. “Is ... was ... was *Merlin* real?”

“Hey, no, please.” Nicole tilted her head at me, then shot a desperately pleading look at Evelyn over the kitchen table, face turning a touch pale under the electric lights. “There’s some things I am better off not knowing. Please don’t say yes, come on, no, that’s so stupid, that-”

Evelyn gave a great exasperated huff and rolled her eyes. “No. Fucking Merlin was not real. Not as far as I know. Pity’s sake, do I look like an authority on dark ages history or something?”

“Oh thank God,” Nicole breathed. I blushed a hot rose colour, a little embarrassed at my stupid question.

“I think King Arthur totally existed,” Raine said. “Not because of any evidence but just ‘cos it would be cooler than if he didn’t. Ontological argument, you know?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes so hard it must have caused her pain. Even Sarika managed a jerky frown at this nonsense. From behind us, lurking beyond the doorway to the front room, came a muffled giggle. Lozzie peered around the door frame and winked when she caught my eye, licking chocolate off her fingertips.

“I do like the idea that Camelot could have been real ... ” I trailed off in further embarrassment.

“Mister Joking it is then,” Evelyn drawled, then turned back to Sarika. “Yes, we found him dead, but he got up again. I would wager my left eye that he’s still very much walking around. Unless

Zheng has caught him. That's what the demon is doing, hunting."

Sarika stared back at Evelyn. Blinking her squinty, mismatched eyelids, a twitching tic forced her head a few degrees to the left every three seconds. She showed only the slow visible pleasure from the taste of chocolate and cream, her strangely white-streaked hair thin and dry under the kitchen's electric lights. Beyond the windows, the sun had finished setting, and darkness reigned.

"So if you have a way to contact him," Evelyn continued, "other than the number he called you from, I strongly suggest you do so. If Zheng catches him, I suspect the menu will be considerably more meaty than eclairs and tea."

Ugh. *That* bite of eclair went down my throat like ashen mucus. I'd made my peace with Zheng's homnivorism, but I didn't want think about it while eating.

The eclairs really were very good, I had to admit. Not thirty pounds good, an amount of money which could feed me well for over a week. A bit of pastry and chocolate icing filled with cream was not worth that money, no matter how delicate and crumbly the pastry, how smooth and dark the chocolate, how rich and soft the cream. At least we had almost a dozen left in the box, even after everyone had claimed one for themselves – two for Raine – and the smell of the confectionery had drawn Lizzie tip-toe hop-tripping down the stairs. Lizzie stayed in the front room for now, well out of Sarika's sight, and had assured me in hurried whispers that Tenny would not follow her down.

Praem was the only person not to eat an eclair, apparently content with the two strawberries Evelyn had fed her.

The doll-demon had returned without incident, almost right on time, while I was still chewing on the perspective Nicole had presented to me under the suffocated sunset. As soon as she was through the front door, Evelyn had been bustling about, questioning her about possible tails, about if anybody was following her, if anything had happened. Praem had presented us with a carrier bag in which lay the eclair box, and that was all.

Who would set a trap in a pastry shop anyway? We weren't living in an episode of *Midsomer Murders*. No, our reality was much worse.

At first I was incapable of eating. I'd sat there like Evelyn, staring at

the eclair on a little plate handed to me by Praem. The enormity of the situation was too much, the other side of the coin that Nicole had just revealed to me; breaking bread – or pastry – with ex middle-management of a mass murder machine.

The others treated it as normal. Nothing much to think about. Nicole was likely aided by the numbing effects of police work, but Evelyn and Raine did so because they'd long ago internalised this stuff. In the end I justified it to myself with simple practicality. We weren't going to kill Sarika, and we couldn't punish her in the way she really deserved, so why not? Besides, the chocolate did smell very good.

After that previous bite had been ruined by memories of Zheng wolfing down human flesh, I took a moment as Evelyn opened her mouth again, expecting her to deploy some equally vile image.

Instead, I almost choked on her gall.

"If he leaves the city," she said, "and stays out, then we'll recall Zheng."

Sarika's jaw paused in the process of chewing, eyes boring back into Evelyn. She resumed eating with exaggerated slowness, swallowed, and smacked her lips.

"Liar," Sarika slurred. "Z-Zheng's ... free." She cast a venomous glance my way. "Can't c-control *that*."

"Yes, that's correct," I said, with a tiny exasperated sigh at Evelyn. "Nobody sends Zheng anywhere anymore. She does what she wants, for good or for ill. It's out of our hands."

"Liar," Sarika croaked at Evelyn again.

Evelyn's lips twisted into a nasty little smile. "Oh well, it was worth a shot."

"D-don't care anyway," Sarika went on, lips quivering with nerve tremors. "Only helped- helped because of-" She rolled her eyes to the ceiling, to the sky beyond, and I knew what she meant, the one thing she didn't want to name. "They were trapped by *it*. N-nobody deserves ... " She trailed off, eyes heavy and far away, then forced a shaking, jerky breath. "If King's some mage, s-shielded somehow, fuck him. W-what do I care?"

"Yes, quite," Evelyn confirmed, cold and clinical. "He didn't seem to

be suffering the same affliction as the rest of your cult ended up with. My theory is he wasn't really committed, not really under Alexander Lilburne's power. I doubt he's truly shielded or immune to the ... *thing*, simply that he wasn't Lilburne's to give." Evelyn sucked on her teeth for a moment, considering Sarika with quiet thought. "Alright, I'll go first. You lack context, and without that context you may skip details that would be useful to me. I am not being nice, understand?" She didn't wait for a nod, but instead turned her eyes to me. "Heather, please allow me to do this, don't add anything I don't ask you for. This is very important." And then with a side-eye at Raine, "And you keep your mouth shut. Thank God Twil's not here. Now, listen carefully, here's what happened."

Slow and steady, Evelyn explained the events of Saturday night. My incredible surprise at her offer of speaking first quickly turned to cynical comprehension; she edited the story down to practical details alone, cut out vast gulfs of information – the location of our gateway, the presence of Lozzie or Tenny, the changed nature of the world out in the fog around the castle, the wards she'd placed, the precise wording of the bizarre Welsh incantation around the circle, the specific taunts the mage had thrown at herself and Zheng. Her words sounded like a recital. She'd planned in advance exactly what to say.

Sarika slowly munched her way through a second chocolate éclair, and it was hard to tell how much attention she was paying. When Evelyn told her about the other corpse, the pulverised one, she paused, but then frowned in confusion when Evelyn revealed that Mister Joking had claimed this was the mortal remains of some sort of handler, sent by Edward Lilburne.

"... Ed ... ?" Sarika blinked, quietly horrified behind her twitching eyes. "They- they d-didn't- tell me that. Was no- no fifth person."

"Yes, I think I believe you," Evelyn replied. "If Edward was backing this little group, he wouldn't want to let on to you, in case you decided not to help."

She did tell Sarika about how the Welsh mage switched between three distinct personalities, and how he'd avoided blows, lunges, and even bullets without really looking, and all about the spell he'd cast at me and Zheng, though she didn't attempt to describe the esoteric shape he'd made with his hands. But Evelyn also focused on details that I would have thought unimportant – an estimation of

the time between Zheng breaching the circle and the resurrection of the corpse, the mage's reluctance to reveal any kind of real name, the cadence of his Welsh accent, the specific colour of the light from the spell he'd cast, his insistence on asking permission to leave over and over again. She told Sarika about the lack of evidence in Mister Joking's ratty bedsit, and how the hairs Praem had ripped from his scalp had vanished without our notice, not to be found on the workshop floor. Sarika sat and listened attentively, except for the way she shook and shivered at random intervals.

"And your name was in that mobile phone," she finished. "The other two names ... the ... " Evelyn huffed to herself and clicked her fingers. "Raine?"

"Mm-mmm-mmm-mmmmm?" Raine made a series of ridiculous noises behind her closed lips. The tension of the last few minutes broke inside me like an overfilled water balloon, and I burst out laughing, spluttering into the elbow of my hoodie, embarrassed. Evelyn stared at the pair of us like we'd gone mad.

"Mmmm-mmmm?" Raine did it again.

"You did say-" I spluttered. "You did tell her to keep her mouth shut, Evee."

"... oh for fuck's sake," Evelyn spat. "Yes, you may open your mouth again! Answer the bloody question."

Raine did this big theatrical gape and pretended surprise. "My gratitude, o' most terrible and merciful sorceress, you have unsealed my lips and freed me from your mystical bindings. How may I serve, o' sparkly fingered magical one?"

Evelyn gave Raine a look to wither cast iron.

"I don't know how you lot get anything done around here," Nicole muttered.

"Bikeman and January," Raine relented with a wink for Evelyn. "Those were the other two names on the call log, both the same morning as you, Sarika."

"Quite," Evelyn hissed, and meant 'I am dying to hit you with my walking stick.' "We did try calling them, with proper precautions, but nobody was picking up."

Sarika squinted in slow thought. "Bill- Cook. He'd been a ... cyclist,

when young. M-maybe. Maybe bike man. S-stupid nickname.”

“Right, right,” Raine said, nodding slowly. “What about January?” Sarika shrugged, so Raine went on. “Makes sense though. Calls his comrades, then calls Sarika. Wonder who they’re bait for, if he left them in the phone?”

“Shh,” Evelyn hissed at Raine with a tight frown, a finger to her lips, then turned back to Sarika. “Now it’s your turn. You tell us everything.”

Sarika’s ‘difficult bitch’ smile crept back onto her twitching lips, and she said nothing. A hot, wet sinking feeling took hold in the pit of my stomach, as if I was about to experience digestive problems. Sarika wasn’t going to talk. She was going to sit there in obstinate silence, to force Evelyn to cross a line, to hurt her, to hurt all of us, because it was the only power she could wield. After the performance with the chocolate eclairs, after the volunteered information, she was still playing this stupid game of mage one-upmanship.

“Sarika,” I said, softly, then hiccuped, hating myself for this. She didn’t deign to look at me. “Sarika, please, if you choose not to talk to Evelyn, then-” I swallowed. “Then you and I can talk alone.”

The difficult bitch smile stayed in place, but Sarika opened her mouth. “What if you ... c-catch him?” she slurred, blinking heavy eyelids.

Evelyn shrugged. “What else am I supposed to do? He’s a mage, loose in my city. He was in my home. What would you do? He leaves, or I remove him.”

Slowly, eyes lowering, Sarika’s smile withered on the vine. With a weak grip and trembly fingers, she nudged her mobile phone from where she’d left it when the eclairs had arrived, and scooted it across the table toward Evelyn. She nodded at it and coughed, “Look at ... calls.”

Evelyn frowned at the phone like it might rear up and bite her if touched. Praem stepped forward, reached over her mistress’s shoulder, and slid open the phone’s lock screen with a flick of one perfect finger. Sarika’s mobile game stared up at the ceiling, paused on an illustration of a purple-haired girl with implausibly large breasts and a man wearing a tiny jacket which showed his abs,

before Praem efficiently banished them to the depths of the machine. She navigated the menus to bring up Sarika's call log. Evelyn leaned forward, peering down at the names and numbers and durations and dates. I craned my neck up too, though I couldn't see much.

"All still there," Sarika mumbled, lips thick. "He called me. N-night before they went."

"You talk about old times?" Raine asked.

Sarika stared at Evelyn, waiting for some sign that never came. "He said hello. I screamed. Threw- threw the phone. Dented wall."

Raine raised her eyebrows. Evelyn raised her gaze from the phone in silent question.

"Why do you think?" Sarika slurred, angry and bitter, shaking more than before. Her head twitched to the left every few seconds, gripped with that distinctive tic again.

"Because he was a survivor," I said.

"Mm!" Sarika grunted, suddenly excited, manic as she glanced my way, eyes blazing in coal-pit sockets. "Anyone who survived that house- the ... the end, left, left before we decided to contact ... *it*, before we decided to say n-no, before the r-ritual. Anyone who left disagreed, still wanted to fucking *serve*."

"Cultists still dedicated to our big ocular pal in the sky," Raine said. "How many people left before the ritual?"

Sarika shrugged. "Wasn't paying attention. Had bigger- worry about. Trying to save our fucking souls." She breathed hard through her nose, face flushed and sweaty as she screwed her eyes shut.

Even Evelyn wasn't cruel enough to voice the obvious barb – 'well you failed at that, didn't you?' – though I saw it in her eyes and heard it in her sigh as we waited for Sarika to come back, to calm down, to focus. Eventually she opened her eyes again and went on, exhausted and so heavy-lidded I thought she might slip into a nap.

"Josh called me," she said, slurring and struggling. "I thought- great, they've been sent for me. Take me back for it. Fuck him. C-calls again, says listen, s'okay, we found a new way to escape. Need help. Please, Sorry, help, Sorry, we're dying, Sorry." She bobbed her head side to side with the rhythm of the words. "Nobody deserves

this. So yeah, talk. Tell me. Calls me again, morning, explains, says they're ready, but need a way in to Alex's old castle. Do I know how? No. Got one of Alex's notebooks though."

Evelyn leaned forward, face a mask of lead. "You had a book of Alexander Lilburne's magical workings, and you did not give it up to us?"

"Fuck you," Sarika slurred, weak and done. "Didn't want to think about magic."

"And where is this notebook now?" Evelyn asked, lips pursed tight because the answer was going to be a bad one.

"Right here, actually, I think," Nicole said, with a frown at Sarika. She reached into her long coat and pulled out a black leather-bound notebook. "She gave me this when I picked her up, for safekeeping. It this it?"

Sarika nodded. Evelyn stared at the notebook in Nicole's hand with naked surprise, then snatched it from her, frowning at the thing like she couldn't believe her luck. She went to flick it open, fingers fumbling, but Praem reached down and pinched the pages shut at one corner.

"P-Praem!" Evelyn spluttered. "What are--"

"Evee, Evee she has a point," I said, nodding at Praem. "Look."

Praem was staring at Sarika in blank challenge. Empty white eyes bored into the ex-mage, but Sarika didn't shrink.

"Fair's fair, demon," Sarika croaked. "Not a trap. N-no point."

Evelyn caught herself, going both cold and red in the face at the same time. She shoved the black notebook into Praem's hands and managed to jerk out a "Check that! Yes!"

Praem raised the notebook to her face and literally flicked the pages past her eyes at top speed, then snapped it shut and presented it to Evelyn again, who took it with wordless embarrassment, still mortified at her near-mistake.

"Evee," I said gently, "Evee, it's what friends are for. You can't be infallible, not all the time."

Evelyn wouldn't look at me. She flipped the notebook open and stared at it with hot eyes, flicking back and forth at random.

“S’the good stuff,” Sarika slurred. “T-the s-stuff that he kept o-only in his head. Trusted me.”

The black notebook did not look the part; it could have come from the stationary shelves at Tesco. I expected a mage’s darkest secrets to be bound in human leather, or glowing, or written on stone. Then again, I could hardly criticise. I kept the secrets of reality-rewriting mathematics in spiral bound flip-pads from the university’s academic supplies shop.

“Right. Yes. Okay, okay, this is real, I’ll give you that.” Evelyn’s voice quivered with excitement. “But how on earth did you keep them from taking it? There’s no way they would have left you with this. You’re a cripple, defenceless, they could have stolen it without a fight.”

“Bluff,” Sarika croaked. The meanest hint of satisfaction crossed her slack face. “Convinced I still had- h-had resources. Let them photograph the r-r-relevant pages. Sandy’s a middling mage, has the knack, only just. She could w-work the gateway. T-they came into the house. King. Sandy. Cook. S-S-S-Stack waited in the street, told me they paid her to come with them, in case. Look after them. S-saw her, through the window. No fifth person. N-no handler. No mention of Edward Lilburne. Freak arse old fuck.”

“Alright,” Evelyn almost purred, subconsciously stroking the notebook’s cover. “And what was their grand escape plan?”

Sarika blinked slowly. “New way to communicate with the ... the big ... ” She waved a hand in a twitching circle. “Sky children. R-round the castle. Said they’d rather be in thrall to them, instead of the ... *it*.”

“That’s a lie!”

Lozzie whirled into the kitchen doorway, elfin face pulled into a serious little frown, hands on her hips beneath her pastel poncho, eyes blazing. Sarika turned with urgent difficulty to look over her shoulder, as Lozzie ignored my frantic shooing motions for her to return to hiding.

“ ... Lozz ... ” Sarika croaked, blinking in shock.

“That’s a lie!” Lozzie repeated. “Also you suck!”

“ ... you’re ... Lozz.”

"It must be a lie," Lozzie continued, looking at the rest of us now. "It's stupid and it's a lie. That's not how the big squiddy kiddies work. They couldn't do that, not like *that*, you'd have to know how to sing and silly nasty people don't know how to. It's a lie."

"Are you- are you- Lozz-"

Lozzie stuck her tongue out at Sarika, with far more grumpy venom than she'd deployed against Nicole. "It's a lie and you suck! But thank you for the eclair!"

"- healthy? Is it- are they- looking after-" Sarika choked the words out, shaking with emotional overload.

"Of course it's a lie," Evelyn drawled, the droll and dross of her voice steamrolling over the growing confrontation. "But I doubt it's Sarika's lie. Edward Lilburne had his own agenda, and from what Mister Joking said, he and the others were unaware of the truth of that."

"Question is," Raine added lightly, "what was Eddy boy hoping to get out of all this?"

Lozzie span on her heel, pastel poncho twirling out in a wave of pink and blue, face screwed up as she ran back into the front room. I got up from my chair and went after her, remains of my eclair forgotten. Sarika stared at Lozzie's wake, limp and hollow as I passed.

"Alright, here's my theory," Evelyn was saying.

"Theory for everything," Raine said, rubbing her hands together.

"The three ex-cultists found Edward Lilburne, or perhaps the other way around, and he offered them a way to escape the e- ... the 'big ocular friend'," Evelyn sighed. "But actually he had his own agenda, not fully shared with them. The Welsh mage was an infiltrator with his own entirely separate aims as well, and I suspect-"

I slipped out of the kitchen and into the front room as Evelyn warmed to her subject, hugging my hoodie around myself, expecting to find Lozzie curled up against the wall, possibly crying. That look on her face, the anger and frustration, made perfect sense considering the relationship Sarika had with Lozzie's late brother. I'd never unpicked that knot, not with everything else my poor little Lozzie had been through. Perhaps it was time, perhaps it wouldn't

keep any longer.

Instead I found Lozzie leaning against the wall, ear cocked to listen to the talk in the kitchen – with an impish, lip-biting smile on her face.

“ ... Lozzie?”

“Shhh-shhh!” She put a finger to her lips and giggled. I boggled at her, crossed the few paces between us, and for some reason I still don’t understand, I touched her head to check she was really there. “Heather?” she whispered in confusion.

“-but we have no idea what Edward was actually after,” Evelyn’s voice floated from the kitchen. “Access to the castle, perhaps. Access to the thing under the castle, which I’ve been assured is pointless without a certain other Lilburne family member. Access to the gate formulas, no, he could have easily taken them from Sarika, so that makes no sense. The death of the handler he sent doesn’t necessarily mean he failed, but he-”

“I thought you were crying,” I whispered to Lozzie. “I thought you were hurting.”

Lozzie muffled another giggle. “Hurts her more this way.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Lozzie did this little dip with her eyes and shoulders, a sulky teenager moment of exasperated explanation.

“I know it’s bad, but she deserves it!” Lozzie whispered. “She let my brother lead her, she did everything he asked. She’s responsible.”

“He- ... yes, well ... but Lozzie, he was abusive, manipulative, he-”

“She could have said no!” Lozzie scrunched up a frown as she hissed. “I always said no.”

Evelyn was still going, her voice a spiked drone back in the kitchen. “This doesn’t give us any idea where he might be, but if we can find these two – January and Bikeman, stupid bloody names – maybe they could give us something to go on. I do not want this man in Sharrowford, I do not want him lurking at our backs, I do not want-”

“I have to go back,” I whispered to Lozzie, gently touched my forehead to hers in a gesture so spontaneous and natural I didn’t have time to think about it, and then hurried back into the kitchen.

Raine caught my eye with a silent question as I returned, but I didn't answer. I'd been thrown off, almost missed my moment, and now my stomach churned with tight anticipation. It was now or never.

Evelyn was in full flow. "-and if we're lucky, very lucky, Zheng will get to him before I have to bother. But if not, it's time to start-"

"Ahem," I said, then actually cleared my throat, feeling a bit silly. Evelyn stopped and raised an eyebrow at me. I wrung my hands together inside my hoodie's big front pocket, hiccuped, and forced myself to step around the table, closer to Evelyn and Raine. Nicole sat still and casual in her chair, another biscuit in her hand; I think she knew what I was up to. Sarika stared at me, bored and exhausted.

"Yes, Heather?" Evelyn said when I took too long to find my courage.

"Yes, well," I managed, wetting my lips with a dry tongue. "Zheng might return with the mage's scalp tomorrow morning, and then we'll all have to find ways to live with that." Let the steaming, beautiful demon perform the act, take the decision out of our hands, eat his flesh and remove the problem. It would be so easy, and part of me prayed for it too. "But I'm going to present a radical notion." I had to stop to hiccup. "And it's going to cause an argument, and I'd like to apologise in advance. And you're probably going to look at me like I'd lost my marbles, and I'm going to ask you not to do that, please."

"Anything," Raine murmured, and she meant it.

"Oh dear," Evelyn sighed. "Why do I get the feeling this is going to a very stupid place?"

"How about," I said, "we let the mage go?"

Evelyn paused, blinked, then turned acid. "Well done, Heather, you have managed to surprise me. It's stupider than I thought."

"Hey, hey, Eevee," Raine said softly. "Hear her out, yeah?"

I made myself stand up straight, voice shaking more than I wanted. "Frankly, I don't even know where to start with this. He might not even be in Sharrowford anymore, he might have left. How would we go about finding him, anyway? Zheng hasn't been home for two

days. If she can't find him, what hope do we have, if he really doesn't want to be found? She's a hunter, a real one, we're ... we're not."

"There are ways," Evelyn said, like throwing a knife at me. I flinched and had to look away from her glare.

"Then- then what are those ways, Eevee? Please, tell me. Are you going to have Praem wander around Sharrowford until she bumps into him?"

Silence. Evelyn's turn to avert her gaze, and I knew I'd hit not too far off the mark. I kept going, pressed the advantage, had to get through to her.

"And how long would that take?" I said. "We could search for this man for weeks and weeks and turn up nothing, because I'm not even certain that what he was up to had anything to do with us. I think he wasn't really interested in us. Eevee, on Saturday night, we had him cornered, and despite everything, in the end he left without causing any of us permanent harm. He left, and he hasn't been back, and I don't think he's going to come back. He deescalated."

"If he wanted to leave, why didn't he just fucking *ask*?" Evelyn spat. She slapped the table with Alexander's notebook, making me flinch.

"Because he's a mage," I said automatically. "Because he was probably just as worried about us as we are about him. And- and-" And here my throat stuck, my reasons ran out, and a shard of truth, barbed but incomplete, forced itself out through my lips. "And because I don't want us to commit murder in cold blood. The fact we're even considering that is mad. I don't want you to have to do that, Eevee."

"Heather," Evelyn said my name in the way one might speak to a very stupid child – but then she must have noticed, in the corner of her eye, how still and calm and unsurprised Nicole looked. She glanced at the detective, then back at me, and then got *really* angry. She went cold. "Oh, I see, the police officer put this idea in your head, did she?"

Nicole raised her hands in surrender, but stayed silent.

"Eevee, no, she didn't put it in my head, I-"

“Perhaps this is my fault,” Evelyn said, voice like a sharpened icicle through the eye socket, going white in the face with fury. “Nicole I can understand, because frankly she knows nothing and is institutionally trained to excuse violence by powerful people, but Heather, you should know better, because you’ve had to do this once before. Perhaps it’s me. Perhaps I have failed to fully explain what manner of *fucking monster slipped through our fingers!*”

She exploded on the last few words, whiplashed from cold to volcanic eruption in a shout so loud I was surprised it didn’t bring Tenny crashing down the stairs in panic to see what had happened. I flinched hard, hands to my chest in shock; Nicole winced, Sarika jerked in surprise, clutching at her crutches. Evelyn went red in the face, staring at me, then at Nicole, nostrils flaring, losing control of herself.

“Evee, Evee,” Raine was saying her name, to no avail.

“Coming back from the dead-” Evelyn swallowed down a fraction of her rage, clenching and unclenching her good hand in front of her as if grasping for words, talking more to the tabletop than us. “It- I cannot emphasise how unbelievably difficult that is, the sheer power that man must have. It is almost impossible, and the price, the price of even the most well-documented methods is- beyond-” She looked like she wanted to spit. “He is a monster, he must be. My mother spent *decades*, before I was even conceived, searching for some route toward immortality, and look how that worked out.” She finally looked up, at me, and behind the anger lurked a writhing, hidden darkness of horror and disgust. “And I don’t even know what that man was.”

“Evee, I’m not suggesting he’s worthy of mercy, not because-”

“We’re not leaving him alive in this city, we’re not. He will come back for my books and my head and anything else he can take, like every other mage would. Maybe tomorrow, maybe ten years from now. But I will get him first. I will get him first.”

“Felicity didn’t try to murder you,” I blurted out. “Neither has Kimberly. Is she going to turn out like that eventually?”

“... that’s not ... that’s not the same, Heather, you know that.”

“Actually Evee, I don’t know that, no.”

“Can you justify this?” Nicole finally piped up, far too calm.

Evelyn turned to her, ready to bite her head off. "Have you heard a single word I'd said, you overpaid thug? This man undoubtedly deserves it, and he's dangerous, in ways you can't possibly even understand, you—"

"No no," Nicole said, and flipped her remaining half biscuit into the air, before catching it with her mouth, chewing as she cocked her eyebrows at Evelyn. "I mean can you justify it in terms of time and material? What if Heather's right, what if I'm right, and this guy was deescalating, but you spend weeks hunting him and doing all your heebie-jeebie bullshit, shaking shrunken heads around for no reason? Haven't you got more important things to do?"

And there it was, the point I'd been trying to avoid all evening.

I closed my eyes and bit my tongue to stop myself sobbing with relief. I let myself feel the truth, and I felt like rubbish.

Evelyn was going off at Nicole again, some rambling aggression about how an ounce of prevention was better than a pound of cure, none of which I disagreed with. Raine interjected too, that she would expend any effort to protect her home and her friends from monsters, which I also liked. Praem said "Self defense" out loud at one point; I silently agreed.

I opened my eyes and spoke into the maelstrom, "Evee."

I had to repeat myself three times before she paid attention, which was fair enough because I wasn't saying it very loudly. I didn't have the strength for that. But eventually she turned to me, other voices dying away, Raine touching my shoulder gently because she must have seen the look on my face at last. Evelyn opened her mouth to spit bile, but my expression stopped her too. That surprised me. I wasn't angry.

"I will do it," I said, quivering, with a lump in my throat. "If he comes back, if we see him in the street, if he appears in the back garden with a shovel, if he so much as visits the university library to borrow a book, I will do it myself. Evee, I will do it myself. If he glances at one of us, I will obliterate him, because I believe you. I will superheat the air and spin atoms so hard they fly apart and I will turn him to a pile of ash, because next time I will know to do so the moment I see him. I promise you, right here, right now, I will do it myself. I will do it. I will be the executioner, because I can do that, because I was once out there in the cold dark where killing is

surviving and I can do it again. You don't have to be an executioner, Eevee. You don't have to do this."

"Heather," Raine said, oh so softly. "It's not your responsibility."

"Raine." My voice went tight. "I'm pretty sure he could dodge a bullet even if the gun was in his mouth."

Evelyn was frowning at me, as if she couldn't follow. "Why?"

"We call off the hunt for him," I said. "We're not doing it. We're not spending weeks on it. We're safe here, in this house, aren't we? With each other, if we stick together and look after each other. But we let this go. We let this go. If we see him, I'll do it. But we let this go and-"

"Heather," Evelyn hissed. "It's not enough to be safe-"

"And we go to Carcosa. No more delays."

Evelyn stopped, mouth open. She hadn't expected that.

"I'm begging you, Eevee. Every day that goes by, there is less and less of my sister to save. If we're not in immediate danger, please. Help me."

And there was the truth. I would take that risk, I would put us all in danger, and I would commit murder in cold blood to pay for that risk. I would take that upon my head, for Maisie.

Evelyn turned a most fascinating shade of white. She tried to bore holes through the back of my eye sockets, but I was already shaking a little with the adrenaline and fear of confrontation, and the cold realisation that I would gladly commit murder for my twin. Raine said something inane to Evelyn, like "have another biscuit", or "think it over", but I didn't really hear her, and neither did Evelyn, who looked down at the table and groped for her walking stick with numb fingers. Praem pressed it into Evelyn's hand, and Evelyn got up. She shoved Alexander's notebook into Praem's grip in return, then crossed stiffly over to the cupboards and fumbled out one of her little pill bottles. She slammed back two white tablets without any water.

"Eevee, hey, go easy," Raine said.

"Easy," Praem agreed, sing-song.

Evelyn ignored them, stared at the doorway to the front room, then

at me.

“We need to talk. Alone,” she squeezed out. “Come with me.” And then she stomped out of the kitchen.

“Hey, Evee-” Raine said, but I was already following.

“And you stay there, Praem!” Evelyn snapped back over her shoulder as the doll-demon began to follow.

I slunk out of the kitchen in Evelyn’s sweeping wake. She’d gone so cold I couldn’t predict her anger, but I was prepared to take anything she threw at me. Lozzie raised her eyebrows at us as we passed through the front room, and she pulled a huge comedy grimace that I really needed. I managed a shaky smile in return, heart racing against the inside of my ribcage.

Evelyn hesitated as if unsure where to go, then stomped into the disused sitting room. I followed.

“Stand there,” she snapped at a point behind her, and I stood there. She shut the door with a bang, closing us inside the unlit room together. Several heartbeats passed, loud in my own ears, during which I assumed we were going to have this argument in the dark, but then she slapped the light switch. Anaemic bulbs struggled to life, illuminating her kinked spine and back, which was rising and falling with sharp little breaths beneath her neat cream jumper.

I hugged myself through my hoodie, hiccuped loudly, and prepared to get very shouted at.

When Evelyn turned around to face me, she was crying.

“Alright,” she said in a small voice. “Alright. We’ll drop any effort to hunt the mage.”

“ ... Evee? You ... you’re-”

“I know I’m crying, I do possess nerve endings,” she said, and sniffed. Tears carved shimmering wet tracks down her cheeks. She kept her face from scrunching up with a sheer effort of willpower. “Shut up and let me try to make a lick of sense. We’ll drop the hunt for the mage. But not because of the rational argument. The rational arguments are nonsense. The moral argument is even worse, I hope Zheng is eating him right now. I would do it, Heather. To protect myself, and- and- and you, and Raine, and fuck it, all right, Praem and Lozzie and whatever.”

"I appreciate that, Eevee," I said when she paused, feeling tears prickle at the corners of my own eyes. Adrenaline and fear had transmogrified to sympathetic release. A kind of magic that required no blood circles or chanted Latin. "I really, really do. It's okay, you don't have to-"

"Shut up. Truth is, Heather, I love you." When she saw the flicker on my face, she quickly added, voice thick with pain: "And not like Raine loves you, dammit, you idiot. You make a joke out of this right now and I will belt you with my walking stick so hard it'll knock you back into your abyss."

"I wouldn't make a joke of your feelings, I'm sorry. I love you too, Eevee, you're my best friend."

She sniffed, hard, and scrubbed at her eyes with her sleeve, cursing softly at herself. I couldn't bear it, Eevee crying, couldn't bear her feeling this bad. I put a hand out to take her arm, but she gestured with her stick as if to knock me away.

"You've saved my life, twice," she said. "I owe you- I owe you *me*, twice over, and I can't ever repay that."

"You don't have to. Don't try."

"So yes, for you, for your sister who I've never even bloody met, okay. Okay, we drop this."

She stared right into me, crying silently, struggling to keep from breaking down. I sniffed too. This time she didn't ward me off when I gently took her hand, the one wrapped tight around the head of her walking stick. I squeezed and smiled for her.

"Thank you, Eevee. Thank you. And I sincerely hope you do get to meet Maisie, soon. I hope she likes you too."

Evelyn finally broke, scrunching up her eyes and smothering a wet sob. I almost moved in to hold her, but she waved me off again with a strangled grunt. She only needed the one sob of release, and then almost seemed to clear, breathing hard. She didn't stop crying, but her face unclenched inside, the effort of will falling away. She let go.

"God, Heather, I'm just so sick of living in fear."

"I know," I said, and meant it. "I know. Me too."

She huffed a humourless laugh and wiped her eyes with the end of her fluffy sleeve. "Of course you know, that's why I'm telling you. You get it. You're here with me. God, this has been such a shit few days for me. Actually, scrub that, it's been shit since the possession, the coma. Fucking bastards almost got me, almost had me. I hate mages, I hate magic, I really fucking do. All of it. Sometimes I wish I could just be like Kimberly, just abandon it."

"Why don't you, then?"

Evelyn gave me a heavy-lidded look through lingering tears. "What else good am I? A cripple and a baby."

"Evee, that's not true!" I almost yelled at her, caught in the moment, blinking back tears. "Don't beat yourself up like that, that's-"

"And because it's an addiction," she hissed. "Once you're in, there's no getting out. Knowledge, understanding, insight. I could burn all my books and notes and I'd still never stop thinking about it. Easier to stop breathing. Too much my mother's daughter."

"Don't say that," I said sharply. "You're not ... "

"It's a metaphor. I won't hurt myself, don't worry. Praem would be inconsolable." She took a great shuddering breath and looked up at the ceiling. "That man invaded my fucking home, Heather. How can I feel safe?"

"Is he ... I'm really sorry to ask again, I do believe you, but is he really that dangerous?"

"I don't know," she whispered, biting her lower lip in frustration. "I don't know. I admit it, I don't know. I want to believe people can be good – that mages are still people – I want to let it go, but I wanted to believe that of my mother too. I wanted it so much. Wanted to believe she actually loved me, kept on wanting to believe it right up till the moment we killed her. But it was never true. She convinced herself too, taught me as if I was going to grow up as her protegee, but when it came down to the wire I was just so much fodder, a vessel to be emptied out. But I got her first," Evelyn grit her teeth. "I got her first. I got her first because I murdered the sentimental lie before she did."

Evelyn sagged a little after that outburst, put her face in her free hand.

“Evee.” I rubbed her arm.

“I can’t stop, Heather. I can’t stop, because then they’ll get me. One of them, or another. Or something I don’t see coming. And yes, yes I know that’s maybe not one hundred percent true because Felicity, fuck her dead, would open her own jugular if I would forgive her. And Kimberly wouldn’t hurt a fly, and- and- and I can’t. I can’t stop feeling afraid. Don’t you breathe a word of this to anybody.”

“I won’t. Evee, I promise.”

She let go another heavy sigh, and roused herself a little. At least the tears had thinned out in her red-rimmed eyes. “And I can’t say this to Raine,” she grumbled with a cynical half-attempted smile. “Because she’ll grin and promise to protect me, and that doesn’t *help*.”

“What if you have a whole family protecting you?”

I blurted it out without knowing what I meant, but the moment I said it, I knew it was true.

Evelyn frowned. “What, Praem, and ... and Twil, and-” Evelyn huffed, a spark of good humour back in her eyes. “Twil can protect me from getting my head caved in during a bar fight, fine, but she can’t protect me one whit from ... all of *this*.”

“I can,” I said, and blushed instantly bright red, hiccuped like an explosion, but I held Evelyn’s frowning look. “I-I really don’t like to say this sort of thing, but I know I’m more powerful than you, Evee. I can do anything with brainmath, if I want it enough, if I’m willing to endure the pain. And I meant that promise earlier. If we see that mage again – and I do mean ‘see’, I don’t mean he has to attack us first – I will kill him. I will do it in cold blood.”

“Heather, you know you can’t. You’re such a softy, you have to build up to it, you-”

“I’m not. Not anymore. Not what came back from the abyss.” I spoke too fast, tripping over my words. “You’re my pack, Evee. You and Raine and everyone else, and I will kill to protect you. I don’t understand how I’ve done it, because it’s probably never been done before, and it’s abominable, I’m an abomination, but it’s like the abyssal thing I was and the ape I am have joined up bits of their thinking.” And then, so I didn’t break down with horror at what twisted and curled inside my chest where once a human soul had

lain uncorrupted. "I'll do it, in broad daylight. I will pop him like a balloon, and it'll get on the national news. Man spontaneously explodes in the middle of a Sharrowford street. Drugs suspected." I giggled, hiccuped, too close to the edge.

"I can't let you take that responsibility," Evelyn sniffed. "Heather, I'm not- you've already done so much."

"Evee, your mother was a monster, and I know you can't forgive your father. I understand, you don't have a family, you don't feel safe. But I will protect you whether you want me to or not, because the instincts I've brought back from the abyss have decided that you're family to me."

Tears threatened in Evelyn's eyes again. "Heather-

"I won't ask you to call me sister, because that would be really, really weird, I know. But if you did, hypothetically, it would be okay."

Evelyn almost started crying again. Her face scrunched up and she blinked back a fresh wave of tears. "Fuck off, Heather," she said, with such affection it hurt.

"No," I smiled back.

"Oh bugged this, I need a hug. Here." She shook my hand off and opened her arms. "Arms around my middle back, not shoulders, please."

We all but fell together. Evelyn clung on tight, small and misshapen and hot and shaking. I was very careful where I put my hands.

"Squeeze harder," she murmured past my shoulder. "Just keep it low enough- yes. Thank you."

Eventually she stopped shaking, stopped crying. We held on for another half minute, and then slowly, reluctantly disentangled. She didn't seem embarrassed, but took a long moment to wipe her eyes and inhale very slowly. I had to scrub my eyes and clear my nose as well.

"So, what are you going to do about Zheng?" she asked, voice a little hoarse, but much more herself again. Evelyn looked calmer than I'd seen her in weeks.

"Wait for her to come home, I suppose, and then ... talk to her. I

don't know if she'll give up the hunt too, it's different with her, different reasons. We don't need her for Carcosa, strictly speaking, but I really want her at my side."

"Mm. Good luck."

I touched Evelyn's arm again. She patted my hand.

"Let's get Sarika out of here," she said with a tired sigh. "I think we've gotten all we're going to get from her, and after this, I need to go watch some mindless anime about girls drinking tea or something. Care to join me?"

"I'm not quite done with her, yet," I said slowly, pulling myself back together for one more task. "I need to talk to her. Alone, I think. We have unfinished business."

"Heather?" Evelyn frowned at me and my heart cringed. "She's nothing, she's not dangerous anymore, don't-

"No. I'm not going to hurt her. I wouldn't, there's no point in punishment for punishment's sake," I said quickly. "No. She's going to help too, whether she likes it or not."

"Help with what?"

"What else is there?" I smiled, resigned. "Rescuing Maisie."

by this art you may contemplate – 10.10

“Do you feel any remorse?”

Sarika stared at me across the kitchen tabletop as if she hadn’t heard my question, dull and slack. Quite the anti-climax. I’d spent the last five minutes strapping shoddy supports to an emotional construct of weary courage and battered determination, but my siege engine availed me nothing against an empty fortress.

She blinked slowly, one eye out of sync with the other, lid sticking shut a second too long. Perhaps she was just exhausted.

“Sarika? I said-”

“Heard you, first time,” she croaked.

We were alone in the kitchen, beneath the flat yellow electric light, surrounded by the debris of empty plates and pastry crumbs. The box of eclairs lay between us, a perversely inappropriate centrepiece.

Behind Sarika, the door to the front room stood sensibly shut. An off-white barrier with scuffed corners and thin, old paint, the wood grain showed through beneath. This was the first I’d seen that door closed the whole time I’d lived here. Long ago it had been wedged open against the hard tiles of the kitchen floor, probably decades back, and had since settled with age like the rest of the house. Raine had given it a hard shove – hard even by Raine’s standards – and dislodged the door with a teeth-grating scrape of wood on stone. The hinges had creaked like the gate to Dracula’s castle in a Hammer Horror movie, as Raine had pulled it shut behind her. With one last nodding look of confidence for me, an ‘I know you can do this’ sort of look, Raine had shut us in.

Raine’s faith shamed me. With no idea what I was planning, she believed in me regardless. Evelyn alone knew what I was up to, and her in only the most general terms. She and I had walked back into the kitchen hand-in-hand – though Evelyn had quickly let go and

glowered at Raine's raised eyebrows. Nicole hadn't wanted to leave Sarika and I alone together, not after the look of frozen fear behind Sarika's eyes when I'd announced my request for a private audience with our guest.

The detective had tried to find a compromise. Could she stay with us, out of the way, and she'll be professional and upright and very quiet? No, thank you, because I didn't want her to witness this. What about Praem, on strict orders not to interfere? But Praem was hardly a neutral third party when it came to the woman who had attempted to orchestrate Evelyn's death.

In the end I had to explicitly assure Nicole that I wasn't "out for revenge."

Saying so made me feel sick, small, and cold. Everyone treated me as if I was some intimidating monster, from Sarika's defiant glare to Raine's confident nod, but in truth I felt uncomfortable as I shivered inside my hoodie. Crying with Evelyn had imparted a curious kind of purgative strength to my mind, but it was a fragile strength, soft and nurturing, not for the threat of violence behind closed doors.

So now it was just me, and Sarika. Small noises crept through the house around us, the evening creak of settling beams, the almost imperceptible scuttle of rats in the foundations, the metal clink as Sarika adjusted her crutches. A distant murmur of voices crept from behind the walls – the others, waiting in the old sitting room, or perhaps they'd gone upstairs to frighten Nicole by introducing her to Tenny.

More likely, Raine had her ear pressed to the kitchen door right now, with Lozzie leaning over her shoulder.

I sat in Evelyn's seat, unhappy with the stack of magical tomes at my elbow. At least Evelyn had taken away the scrimshawed thighbone.

"Take your time to think, if that's what you need," I told Sarika's dull stare. "I will accept whatever answer you give, I just ... I do need you to answer."

Her lips twitched and twisted into a broken sneer as she dug deep into her reserves of spite. One last barbed shot. "Life isn't a ... Saturday morning cartoon. Not gonna fall at your feet, 'n beg forgiveness."

I sighed, and didn't bother to hide it. Should have expected that. The other way would have been easier.

"I know what I did," she forced out, low and bitter.

My pulse throbbed hard in my throat and I had to clench my hands together inside my hoodie's front pocket. This was an ugly and dangerous labyrinth to explore, especially when I didn't really know what I was looking for in Sarika's answers. I did not wish to ask these things, or think about any of this. All I wanted right now was to go watch silly anime with Evelyn on one side and Lozzie on the other, and stop thinking for the rest of the evening. Evelyn had suggested I would require justification, hard and solid and shining, without a speck of doubt or smudge of indecision. But I could weave a dozen beautiful excuses all by myself, without ever asking. Pure clarity was a lie. Only Sarika knew the truth.

Sarika looked like a bruise which had healed wrong and crusted over. I searched her eyes but found no purchase, greenish grey irises set in sagging exhaustion.

"Was it worth it?" I asked slowly, had to wet my lips, fight to keep my voice steady, stay upright, don't hunch over and hug myself. Be a little bit scary. "All the dead people? Not your friends in the cult. I mean the strangers, the homeless people, the ... the children? The mutated children. Was that worth it?"

A slow, sullen blink.

"Sarika, please." I found my arms creeping around myself. Should have kept Raine in here, asked her to do this. "Just give me something to go on here, give me—"

"He was right," she slurred.

Did I even need to ask?

"... Alexander Lilburne?"

"He was right," she repeated. "I d-didn't used to believe in the cause. In all his ... high-minded b-bullshit. Project. Transcending human limits. Evolution. Pffft," she made a weak noise between her lips, rolled her eyes. "Didn't believe, before, when I did ... when I ... participated," she said that word with every ounce of precise enunciation her slack, twitching lips could muster. "Now? Now, I believe. Us," she gestured at me with a limp flick of her fingers.

"Humans, we can't stand. All it'd t-take is one. One thing from out there. The- the ... *it*."

She couldn't even say its name; and the name we gave it wasn't even the real one. The Eye.

"What it did," she struggled onward. "Out there, where it ... beached itself, c-could happen here. Happen to us." Her gaze wavered away, and that awful convulsive tic grasped her head and neck again, twitching her skull to the left every few seconds as she grew more agitated. "He used to say ... used to ... loved metaphors, mm. Used to say we – humans – like a group of c-children, in a cottage, in a dark forest. And we can be s-s-silent, and leave the fireplace cold, and k-keep the door locked. And is t-that any way to live? Didn't believe that. Being human, human is enough," she sighed, suddenly heavy in the shoulders, almost on the verge of tears. "Just want to live quiet, never think again. B-but it doesn't matter how quiet we are. B-because things like you are here." She stared at me, hate like hot coals. "You k-keep its attention here. On us. All of us. Humans."

"You hate me for that?"

"Y-you should have gone to it." Her face twitched with anger, lips quivering, blinking like she couldn't control her eyelids. "Maybe then it would leave us alone."

I was hugging myself now, gave up on trying to seem the least bit intimidating. "Nobody gets sacrificed," I hissed. "Not me, not my sister. I'm going to win, not bargain, not appease. It's-"

She choked out a laugh, almost aspirating her own saliva. "I'd d-do it again, b-because you can't win against a G-G-God, you selfish b-bi-"

"And it is fallible," I spoke over her. "You heard the things I said in your hospital room. It can make mistakes, it's not a God. It's not evil, it's not omnipotent, it's alien and it's not a God."

"I'd k-kill more. Sacrifice a million. To s-shut it all out from our reality."

My neat little plan had fallen at first contact, and I had rather lost control of the conversation. This was not going the way it was meant to. I forced myself to take a deep breath and close my eyes, because getting more angry at her wouldn't help.

“Would you sacrifice Lozzie?” I asked, still irritated.

Sarika went cold all over. Her eyes widened. “You- n-no, you- you w-wouldn’t, no, no don’t-”

“What?” I frowned at her, then felt awful, sick down in the pit of my stomach, repulsed as if I’d stepped bare-toed on a slug. “Oh, oh God, you took that as a threat?”

“Y-you-”

“Sarika, Sarika listen to me. You hate me, and frankly I think you should be facing life in prison without parole. But I love Lozzie like a little sister. The whole reason we went to the Sharrowford Cult’s castle in the first place was to save her from her *bastard* of a brother.” I hiccuped, appalled, grasping for an emotional handhold. “Pardon my language.”

“But ... n- ... you ...”

“I can’t imagine why you care about her, considering how her brother treated her, but no, don’t you dare suggest I would hurt her. That was a rhetorical question, I was trying to illustrate a point. What kind of monster do you think I am?”

Sarika trailed off. Eventually she managed a tiny shrug. “She well?”

“You asked this before, in the hospital. Don’t you recall?”

“Assumed ... lie. N-now I’ve seen her.”

“Well, it wasn’t a lie. Lozzie is doing very well, thank you. I can’t save her from Outside, because she wants to go back, she seems to require it, biologically, but wherever I am there will always be a home for her. Why do you care, Sarika? When you were part of the deaths of ... a dozen, two dozen children? Why care about her?”

Sarika hung her head and didn’t answer for a long moment. I expected another stubborn refusal, but when she finally spoke, her voice was thick with pain. “Didn’t. Good kid. Deserved better.”

I was no psychologist, but I made my justifications in that moment. Either Sarika cared about Lozzie, or to her Lozzie was a symbol of all she couldn’t admit to herself, all she would never voice, all she’d failed to do.

Or she was an incredible actor and liar. Seemed unlikely.

“What are you trying to convince me of?” she slurred. “Let me r-rot. Let me go home and sleep.”

I sighed again. “I’m not trying to convince you of anything. I’m trying to convince myself..”

Her face twisted into the best sneer she could still pull, but it lacked weight. “What, that I- can atone? Feel? Fuck you. Don’t want your fucking p-pity. Bitch.”

“This isn’t pity. And it’s not forgiveness, either, because forgiveness isn’t mine to give. Oh, for crying out loud, Sarika, you don’t deserve atonement.” I huffed. Now I’d made my decision, I straightened up a bit, felt myself frowning at her, fed up with trying to wring blood from a stone. “You deserve a trial, in a real court. A war crime court. But you won’t ever see that, because this insane private world, the supernatural truth ... it’s all so much crap.” I spat that word, my temper fraying, and Sarika seemed taken aback. “And I won’t apologise for that swear word, not that time. It’s no wonder you mages resort to murder and territorialism when there’s no community, no society, nothing, and so much power sloshing around. But I am not going to let my friends become monsters or warlords. We can’t punish you, short of murdering you. And killing you wouldn’t undo what your organisation did, wouldn’t bring anyone back to life. But I’m still going to use you.”

“ ... w-what?” Sarika’s skull resumed the compulsive sideways twitch, eyes wide before the first lapping waves of terror.

“I’m going to use you.” I felt far less confident than I sounded. I’d harnessed anger instead of mercy, and that was not healthy. “Stay very still. I don’t know exactly how this will work.”

“What? N-no!” Sarika slurred, lips thick, almost drooling. Her eyes bulged, complexion turning the grey of rotten porridge. One of her crutches clattered to the floor as she scrabbled at the table in a panicked effort to gain her feet. A scream clawed up her throat “No-n-no! Help! H-”

She wasn’t faster than thought.

Defining Sarika with hyperdimensional mathematics was child’s play – for a demon child spat out of hell’s darkest pit, perhaps. My nose still exploded into a waterfall of crimson, and molten-hot icepicks still jammed through both my eye sockets and straight into

my frontal lobe. My brain twisted and screamed as if dunked in boiling water and my guts clenched into a fist as they tried to escape my body, heavy with half-digested biscuits and chocolate eclair swimming in stomach acid.

I'd used this equation once before, but this trick of perception was considerably easier when not distracted by the cacophonous noise of an alien God.

Ripping Sarika from the Eye's grasp had sent me over the edge and into the abyss, but the definitional equation by itself merely made me bleed from all my face holes and try to vomit up my own kidneys.

A hyperdimensional equation like the heart of a star, a nuclear furnace, compact and dense with a billion overlapping layers of information and meaning. Not as complex as the Eye, in the way one plus one is less complex than Goldbach's Conjecture, but total comprehension of a single human being was still enough to strain my not-so-human mind like a space shuttle on atmospheric reentry.

The equation defined not only Sarika's body, but everything else about her.

The time when she was fourteen years old and got in a hair-pulling, face-slapping match with another girl over a boy they both liked; the composition of her gut flora and the time she last had a truly satisfying bowel movement; the exact position of every floater in her vision; the time she was nine and stole ten pounds from her mother's purse and how she'd lived in fear of being caught for three whole weeks before a tearful confession; the day, hour, and second she'd first had sex and how underwhelming it had felt; the blazing row with a flatmate which had ended in tears; a bad curry she'd once vomited up into a tiny pub toilet.

Too much information. I had a nanosecond in which to act. Any longer risked flirting with the edge of the abyss, not to mention considerable blood loss.

I selected a single kink in the equation, a smeared mess of jumbled parts that the Eye had ruined forever, or I had failed to define properly when I'd ripped her free. A single knot of nerve endings that fed back into each other like a hopelessly tangled fishing line, cross-referenced with a connection between two neurons in her brain.

I barely understood what I perceived.

To write out, on paper, the part of the equation that defined only these scraps of her cellular matter, would fill more tomes than every book in Sharrowford University Library.

In retrospect, what I did to Sarika was wildly irresponsible. I could have caused her a brain hemorrhage, or a convulsive fit, or fed her nerves into the meat-grinder of her own immune system. But her problems were not physical problems. She was riven by kinks and rents and whole bombed-out districts of the soul, of the hyperdimensional mathematics that defined her; if it had been the other way around, Sarika's issues would be for doctors, not a shaman.

I could not fix her, could not write new math of this complexity – but I could join up what already existed.

And I was done before she finished screaming for help.

“-elp!”

But I was the one who cried out in pain. Face screwed up, blood streaming from my nose, the deep-tissue throb of a headache squeezing my skull in a vice of spiked iron. My stomach gave a great heave and I clenched up so hard that my head bounced off the kitchen table and my chair squeaked back across the tiles. Gasping for breath, throat filling with bile and blood, I lurched up and out of the chair and very almost went sprawling in a heap. I caught the edge of the sink with my useless shaking noodle arms and poured every ounce of strength I possessed into not throwing up.

“Not giving up the eclair,” I burbled – then made a ridiculous noise like a strangled seal, a deep bubbly ‘bleeeeeuuuugghhh’ as I hung over the sink, drooling bloody saliva.

I was vaguely aware of the kitchen door creaking open behind me, somebody saying my name, other hurried words, a hand on my shoulder. My vision swam in and out as I watched crimson drip from my face, little red splashes all over the stainless steel.

But I didn't vomit.

Restraining my body's natural rejection of hyperdimensional mathematics apparently caused a great deal more bleeding than before. My eyes were gummed with bloody tears, the nosebleed

wouldn't stop, and a sticky wet sensation oozed out of my ear canals, making the headache worse. As I spat and dribbled bloody mess, a familiar hand reached past me to turn the tap on.

"Raine?" I croaked.

"Hey, hey, don't try to talk," she murmured, and her hands were already on me, holding me up so my knees didn't give out, wiping my face with a wet flannel, helping me blow my nose – blood-laced mucus, lovely – and lifting a glass of cold water to my lips to force me to sip. As my vision cleared I caught Raine's expression, a lopsided smile, almost but not quite exasperated. She caught me looking and winked. "Should'a had me in here for this."

"S'fine," I croaked. "I'm fine. Held onto my- food."

"You did, yeah." She smiled wider, hand on the back of my neck, massaging the mathematics out of my brain. If we'd been alone I would have buried my face in her boobs to make it all go away. "Well done, I mean it, well done, Heather. Did it work?"

I hadn't looked at the result of my handiwork yet, and for one horrible moment I thought I might slide my eyes across the kitchen to find Sarika replaced by a pile of exploded guts. But there she was, right where I'd left her, slumped in her chair and still looking like an unhealed bruise, still slack-faced and struggling to breathe properly and mustering up a scowl at me.

Behind her, the kitchen door stood wide open. Lozzie and Nicole peered through, one face an impish smile and the other politely alarmed. Evelyn stood much further back in the front room, leaning on her walking stick. Her eyes met mine and she nodded once. Approval. I wasn't sure if that was good or not.

"You don't even know what I was doing," I croaked at Raine.

"If you were doing it, it must have been a good idea." She winked at me, and helped me back to the chair.

"Am I the only one concerned about Heather doing more super-magic?" Nicole added from the doorway. "Blood magic, brain super powers, whatever the hell you call it. You said Sarika was safe in there with you, don't make me take her back to her parents in pieces."

"Safe," I croaked.

"What d-did you d-do to me?" Sarika slurred.

"Shut the door," I croaked. "This is ... private. Please. Raine, you too."

Raine considered me for a moment, indulgent but guarded behind her eyes as she stood by my chair. "You gonna do more brainmath?"

"No. Done."

Raine stared at me, then at the doorway, then at Sarika. Then back at me. "I will close my ears, and be your hands."

"Hey, no," Nicole said. "If she's staying in the room, then so am I."

"Please," I croaked. "Just leave me to--"

"What did you *do* to me?" Sarika hissed, face twitching, blinking out of sync.

"Heathy-Heaths!" Lozzie whispered, big smile. "Wow!"

"Lozzie," I moaned, "no. Please, all of you--"

"I'm not leaving while you might slide out of your chair," said Raine.

"Bitch," Sarika spat, spittle on her lips. "What did you--"

"You and I need to talk about the Eye," I almost shouted at her.

She flinched, very hard, shrinking back in her seat as if slapped in the face. Her hands fluttered up to her chest, eyes going wide, mouth moving without sound.

And nothing happened. No spasm. No closing of the throat. No curled up pain running sharp fingers across her soul.

She still shook like a leaf, and sucked down great lungfulls of air, and cried small, broken tears for half a minute. She stared at me in utter loss.

"You fixed her?" Nicole asked.

"No," Evelyn supplied from the front room. She understood already.

"No. I can't take away actual post-traumatic stress disorder," I told Sarika in a bloody croak. "I can't fix your mind, or your body, only pieces of your soul. Even if I could, I think Evelyn would have you

killed if you were fully capable again. I suspect this kind of work is the best I can do.”

“No.” Sarika squinted, spite and suspicion heavy in struggling eyes. “No. N-no, why?”

I tried to ignore everyone else as much as I could. Raine’s hand found the back of my neck again, squeezing and kneading.

“You were with the Eye for a few hours at most,” I said. “My twin sister has been out there for ten years, and I have to accept there’s very little chance she’s remotely human anymore. We spoke in the abyss, and I certainly wasn’t human down there. She may not have a physical body, she could be so deeply integrated with the Eye I have to tear it apart to reach her. She could be ... anything. I have fixed one small part of you, because when I bring her back here, I will make her whole again, human or not. And that means I need to know how. I need practice.”

“ ... I’m y-your- your test subject?”

I nodded. “We can do it again. Not today, not now, I’m spent and if I go again I might lose my eclair, and that would be really disappointing.” I sniffed and wiped my nose on the back of my hand and found more blood. Raine wiped it away for me. “Next I think I can do that tic, the twitch in your head. I think that’s fixable, maybe.”

Sarika didn’t know how to respond. Her face was trapped between bitter hope and deep spite.

“You hate me, fine,” I went on, with courage born of exhaustion and pain. “But you’re going to help me because it’s the right thing to do and you need to start doing right things. You’re never going to atone, it’d take you the rest of your life. That castle is full of bodies, of murdered homeless people. They need to be buried, or marked, or given something to show they mattered. Identification, we can’t do that, but we can give them a burial. And I’m going to make you walk again because you’re going to hold a spade and dig some graves.”

The spoonful of sugar. I was honestly amazed that I managed to keep that part of the plan in place when sagging with post-brainmath exhaustion. The implicit promise that I’d fix some of what was wrong with her, that perhaps one day she would walk

unaided, was more than she deserved. The compromise made me faintly sick.

Sarika made a soft sound with her mouth, and I couldn't tell if was scepticism or derision. "Don't w-want your pity, you-"

Hadn't worked. I expected panic, but I just got angry.

"I am not going to fix you," I almost shouted before she could spit, my justifications spilling out like rotting intestines from a slit belly. "I am not going to make you better. I am not going to be your friend, or your saviour, or your redeemer. I don't pity you, I think you should be dead, but that wouldn't help anybody. I am not appealing to your better nature, which I'm still not sure exists. Nobody deserves the Eye, you said it yourself. That goes for my sister too. You'll never atone, but you can start here, with me, and with Maisie. You're going to help me, like it or not."

Sarika's spite fell apart in her hands. She stared at me so hard her gaze went through me.

"You are the only other person I know of to escape the Eye," I said more gently. "It taught me, but you were in it. You were part of it, being used, like a tool. And now I've broken whatever part of your soul was flinching at it, so we can talk about it without silly euphemisms." Sarika shrank in on herself as I spoke, shaking her head back and forth, shivering and twitching. Nicole moved forward to make sure she wasn't going to choke on her own malfunctioning muscles, but my work had been good, precise, successful. "You were inside it, you must know something."

"B-b-b ... bits and ... pieces- I can't, I can't, no, no I don't want to think about it." Her voice sounded like a little girl. I hardened my heart; didn't quite work.

"But I need you to push through the trauma yourself," I said, and hated my words. "I can't fix that. I need you to tell me everything you know about it, every last scrap you gleaned from the inside, anything, anything at all. Because if I am going to beat this thing, I must know it."

With agonising slowness, Sarika bobbed her head, almost imperceptible, once. A nod.

And so we began.

= =

Zheng came home two days later, and upended my heart.

In the dead of night, I stirred in the enclosing arms of sleep – actually Raine’s arms, wrapped around me from behind, one across my body from hip to collarbone as if to anchor us together, which I should have taken as a sign to stay right where I was – woken by a lingering sound on the edge of perception. Lying still and warm and snuggled up under the bed covers with Raine pressed against my back, bleary eyes staring blind into the dark, I heard nothing except the gurgle of pipes and the creak of old beams and Raine’s steady breathing.

But my body knew Zheng was close.

More a feeling, not a sound. A tingling in my scalp and deep in the base of my belly and tight between my legs. Like I was something soft and vulnerable wedged beneath the safety of a rock, and my pack-mate had slid up alongside in the oceanic darkness, unseen but known by taste and scent.

My phantom limbs were already trying to pull the covers back, to disentangle myself from Raine, to roll her – gently, lovingly – onto her back so I could spring free and scramble downstairs.

With heart thumping and hands shaking and a trembling smile on my lips, I did wriggle free of Raine’s embrace and out into the chill air, dancing on cold tiptoes through my thick, borrowed socks. She mumbled and groped for me, and I made some soft-voiced excuse I couldn’t remember two seconds later. I probably told her the truth, I was so breathless and excited. Fumbling the nearest of Raine’s jumpers over my head – big and black and comfy – stumbling into the corridor, creeping down the stairs into the front room in record-time, head still groggy with sleep, phantom limbs pawing at the banister as I almost tripped over the cuffs of my pajama bottoms, I couldn’t have stopped if I’d wanted to.

“Zheng?” I hissed into the darkness, hugging myself through the thick jumper.

A grunt – low, muffled around a mouthful of food – answered from the yawning darkness of the kitchen. The lights were off. A vague hulking shape adjusted itself in the veil of shadows.

I scurried into the kitchen, my abyssal side trying to bounce and

pant like a puppy, but a small voice in the back of my head set alarm bells ringing.

Why did the air smell like hot iron?

But there she was, a shadow on shadows, details impossible to make out against the night pouring in through the window. No moon tonight. The faintest backwash of Sharrowford's light pollution outlined Zheng's muscular frame, booted feet up on the kitchen table, head high. She held a ragged mass in both hands, and crunched her jaw through a mouthful of food before swallowing.

"Shaman," she purred, with relish and affection.

"Zheng! Zheng, oh it is you, I knew it." I slapped for the light switch, laughing with relief. "I could feel it in my belly like a—"

Lights guttered on. My laugh died with the sound a squeaky dog toy might make if squashed with a road roller.

Zheng had made a most atrocious mess.

A massive hunk of raw, bloody meat lay across one end of the table, still dripping, little white bones visible poking up through torn flesh. Zheng held part of the kill, gore smeared all over her hands, glazing her mouth and jaw with crimson, blood and meat scraps in her teeth as she grinned that shark's grin.

For a moment I thought she'd gotten her man, and brought part of him home. Like a cat.

Then I blinked and saw the grey-stippled, brownish fur, and the single, forlorn hoof sticking out at one end. Perhaps one quarter of unfortunate ungulate lay extremely dead on the kitchen table. A piece of the back end. Rump meat.

"Shaman," Zheng repeated, and sighed low to see me, like granite rubbing granite. She ripped another handful of raw meat off her prey and shoved it into her mouth, shredding and swallowing. "You are a good sight."

The Heather of six months ago would have screamed her head off. The Heather of two months ago might have been quietly horrified, if she could hold her nerve.

"Oh, that is going to leave such a stain," I said, and sighed at the state of the table. "Evelyn will go berserk. Praem will have your

head.”

Zheng rumbled out a chuckle, and showed me even more bloodstained teeth. “Let them try. Perhaps the young one will learn an appreciation for flesh.” She waved a piece of torn meat and cartilage at me. “A bite, shaman?”

“Oh, goodness, no, it’s raw! It’s unhygienic! It’s alright for you, miss iron stomach, but I’m human.” I couldn’t stop a smile regardless, this was so silly. “Zheng!”

“Could roast it,” she purred, and worried another morsel of meat free from the chunk of carcass. Zheng extended her tongue out by an eye-watering seven or eight inches, and used it to snatch the meat back into her mouth. “Need to get a fire going, though.”

“Besides, deer are protected. This is poaching, at best. Zheng!”

Zheng purred, pleased with herself, like the cat that got the cream.

Being near her felt wonderful, this giant of a woman, this demon riding a very old human corpse, looking as flushed with vitality as a Greek Goddess of war and cannibalism and dubious sexual acts. She rippled beneath her clothes as she adjusted her weight in the kitchen chair, those beautifully sharp eyes watching me with the languid ease of a predator at rest. She was absolutely filthy, hair greasy and matted and still a little crusted from the weird alien snot she’d gotten covered in days ago. Her clothes, her jumper, jeans, all looked as if she’d been crawling around in a gutter. The scent of her cut through the iron-blood smell, a thick spice of her sweat in the air.

The abyssal side of me relaxed just to be near her. A knot of tension released, somewhere deep in the hollow space inside my chest. I laughed at myself, helpless.

“Funny, shaman?”

“Yes. Yes, Zheng, what can I say? You’re vastly unhygienic, you obviously haven’t washed in days and I wish you would, you’ve made a huge mess, you’re covered in blood, and I- I like you being here. I like it. It makes me feel ... well ... ” I trailed off, blushing, still heavy with sleep, but not quite able to say what I really meant. “It’s mad. I’m completely mad.”

“Same, shaman.”

“I’m not unhygienic, thank you very much.”

Good cover, Heather, well done. Top notch. Idiot. Zheng wrenched another handful of meat free, then just bent forward to take a bite directly out of the dead deer, teeth sharper than knives. My stomach did a little flip, and not in a good way. I had to put a hand over my mouth and briefly avert my eyes.

“I wish I had a way to contact you, if you’re going to stay out for so long,” I said. “We need to buy you a mobile phone or something.” I gestured at the bloody haunch on the table, still unwilling to step closer lest I somehow get smeared with gore. “Why bring this back here?”

Zheng blinked at me, very slowly, and didn’t have to say a word as she chewed through a particularly tough knot of gristle. I blushed, considerably less slowly.

We stayed in companionable silence for a long moment. Well, silence with a backing of crunching and chewing noises as Zheng worked her way through another few pounds of venison. Warmth glowed from my core. I felt like hugging myself, wrapping my arms around my own head in a paroxysm of childish glee, and compromised by putting both hands to my mouth. And I caught Raine’s scent from the sleeves of her jumper.

“So,” I said, swallowing down nerves as I ruined the moment. “You didn’t get him, then?”

Zheng stopped chewing.

She gave me a look to freeze the blood. Eyes heavy lidded and sharp as time, mouth a set line in a clenched jaw. Only overwhelming attraction and abyssal adoration stopped me from wetting myself right there on the spot.

“Um,” I squeaked.

Then she let out a sigh like a rusty bellows. “No, shaman. I did not.”

“Oh. Oh, right. Yes. Obviously. Sorry. I’m sorry.” I swallowed twice and had to manually locate my lungs.

“Don’t be. Not you, shaman.” She rolled a shrug and went back to eating.

“ ... do you ... I mean, I hope you don’t mind me asking another

question?” Zheng shook her head. “Well, do you really think he’s somebody from your past? Somebody who kept you enslaved?” That word set my guts churning. “God, if he is, I hope he ... expires.”

Zheng barked a laugh, and spoke between mouthfuls of meat. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. Maybe the *yoshou* is correct and it is all a trick. Or maybe a very old wizard can change his face, his scent, the taste of his flesh. Or maybe we hunt a ghost.”

“He did vanish, didn’t he? Twil said he just turned invisible, or disappeared.”

“Mmm.”

Zheng leaned forward and ripped a final mouthful of raw meat from her kill, tilting her head up and scarfing it down like a komodo dragon. She pushed back from the table and stood up, all seven feet of her flexing muscles and and rolling shoulders and rotating her neck from side to side. She made claw shapes with her bloodied fingers and cracked all her knuckles. As she spoke she watched the lines on her palms.

“I do not fail in a hunt, shaman. Prey does not escape me. I once tracked a wizard – a real one, not these pale shadows, but a *Song* traitor at the height of his power – through the southern jungles. Four days of running, and he made the jungle fight me at every step. By the final moves he was dehydrated, starving, and a rot had gotten at his feet inside his sodden boots. He summoned his *od tsus sorogch*. And I ate it.” She grinned wide in ecstatic memory, then let the grin die a slow death. “This wizard, this Welshman, his scent lingers in places he has not been. He taunts with his visage and disappears like mist before sunlight. I have found him six times and six times he turns to so much dust and echoes. He refuses battle. He is a ghost.”

I could barely think of anything to say to that. One day I needed to sit down with a notebook and ask Zheng for her memories.

“He’s still in Sharrowford?”

“Here, then Manchester. Either way I will find him and eat his heart.” Then she grinned over at me, shark-teeth on display.

“Shaman, you revitalise me. Your health is my health. Your appetites, mine. Your body, my temple. Your heart-” She cut off

suddenly, the grin frozen for a second before flickering wider. “Back to the hunt.”

The giant demon-host turned to go, toward the utility room and the back door.

“You can’t just leave all this mess here,” I said. Zheng looked back, eyebrow raised. “On the table, I mean. And you can’t just drop in and leave again, not without ... a ... ” I half raised my arms in a hopeless gesture. “Oh, but you’re filthy,” I muttered. “I can’t.”

“Shaman?”

I let out a huge sigh and pressed my hands to my face. “I’m stalling for time because I have something difficult to ask you,” I admitted all in a rush. “And I’m doing that by avoiding a totally different subject which is marginally more difficult to discuss because it’s embarrassing and emotional. Yes, well done, Heather,” I said out loud. “Excellent plan, why don’t we get stuck in with both hands, really mess this up? Sometimes I’m as bad as Evee.”

“Shaman,” Zheng purred, dead flat, almost made me laugh. I did try, but it came out dry and brittle.

“Zheng, I need to let you know something,” I said, and she turned fully back around to face me, tilted her head to one side. Why were my palms going clammy? “It’s only fair I let you know. You’re part of this too, part of me- mine- my-” I gave up, that one was too complex to unpick. “We’ve decided – that is, Evelyn, Raine, and I, and the others – to give up on hunting this mage.”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted. “A waste of your time.”

I sighed with awful, cringing relief. “Yes, yes exactly. It would be a terrible waste of time and resources when we’ve got so much to do. I can’t let another week go by while we search for a man who we might never see again, not while my sister needs me. Needs us. Me and my friends. And-”

“Then I hunt, shaman.”

“-and you,” I finished over the top of her.

Zheng went very still.

“We’re going to Carcosa,” I rattled on, nerves screeching a warning up my spine. “The experiment on Saturday morning, and then the

actual trip in the afternoon. Evelyn's been so busy, warding the castle, and adding more wards to the house as well. It's a wonder you didn't set anything off, actually. I suppose you just slipped the lock on the back door, didn't you? Physical barriers and all that and--"

"Shaman." Zheng stared at me, unreadable, dark eyes like knives.

My bowels quivered.

"Will you--" my mouth was dry as a abandoned bone. "Will you come with me? To Carcosa? I would feel so much safer, so much happier, with you at my side. I'm sure Raine will protect me, but we're going somewhere that isn't ... human, and ... well ... I-I mean, I'm not asking you to call off your hunt. Or, no, okay, I sort of am." I hiccuped once, so loudly it made me wince. "I'm sorry. I know, i-it's your right to want to kill this man, this mage, if he ... yes. B-but Zheng, I ... I want you to help, I need you, I--"

Zheng was on me in two footsteps of flicker-blink motion.

She moved so fast that I flinched about a foot backward, bumped into the wall, and had to clamp a hand over my mouth to smother a scream. She slammed a hand into the kitchen wall over my head, boxed me in, towered above me, our bodies inches apart. Later on, I could find no dent in the plaster beneath her bloody hand print, so Zheng couldn't possibly have used her full strength, but at the time my mind heard a slam. She vibrated with each heavy breath, blood all over her mouth and teeth, eyes boring into me.

It was like the moment we'd met, all over again – but this time Zheng was not flushed with playful predation, nor the heady euphoria of sudden freedom, nor delicate gratitude toward her natural prey.

"Z-Zheng--" I squeaked.

"You cannot say those words to me," she rumbled, and I almost wet myself for real.

Zheng lowered her face toward me. Shark's teeth lurked behind lips curling into a pained grin. She smelled of raw meat and iron blood, and hot, head-swimming spice on sun-warm skin. I cringed back into the wall as if it might swallow me up, and the only thing that kept me standing was the promises we'd made and the certainty that Zheng would not hurt me. My mind knew that; my body did

not. Half of me screamed *predator* with all the force of a savanna ape cornered by a saber-toothed tiger, while my abyssal half writhed in something close to pleasure. I opened my mouth and out came a wordless squeak.

“I am denied the meat of my foes,” Zheng purred. “And I am denied you, little bird. What direction do I turn? Tell me. Order me.”

Heat radiated from her skin. She ran so hot I could feel her through both our clothes, like a banked fire inside a furnace.

She dipped her head in ever closer, and my heart climbed up out of my chest and into my throat and burst like fireworks inside my head. One of her hands brushed my jawbone, and out rolled the full length of her tongue, twelve inches sliding from her mouth only to snap back through her teeth before it could lap at the stain she’d left on my cheek. Her breath touched my lips, hot and stinking of meat and spice and Zheng and she was inching closer and closer and I wanted it and-

“Bath,” I squeaked.

Zheng stopped. Our eyes stared right into each other.

“Bath. You need a bath,” my voice quivered through profound paralysis. “And brush your teeth. It’s unhygienic. I could get very ill.”

My inane but practical suggestion broke the spell. Zheng pulled away almost as fast as she’d pinned me, a huge face-ripping grin on her lips as she laughed and laughed and laughed, kicking her shoes off and striding out of the kitchen into the darkness of the front room. A second later, soft footsteps mounted the stairs.

Shaking all over, head pounding with my own pulse, barely able to suck breath through my closing throat, I peeled myself off the wall.

I had to get out of there. I needed to scrub Zheng’s bloody fingerprints off my jawline and scurry back upstairs and slip into bed with Raine and hide and hide and hide. Zheng would go back to her hunt and we could pretend none of this had happened.

So why did I stay?

With shaking hands and shuddering breath, I cleaned the deer blood from my face, over the kitchen sink. Hot water sluiced through the pipes upstairs, and I tried not to think about Zheng in

the shower as I wiped her crimson hand print from where she'd slapped the wall. I dug out antibacterial spray and gave it a proper once over. I stared at the raw meat on the table and the drippings on the floor, and did my best with some kitchen towel and a little bleach solution, as the water upstairs shut off. I prayed quietly that all the soft noises had woken Raine and she'd found me missing and was going to come downstairs and take me back to bed.

Zheng gave me almost twenty minutes, and I wasted all of them. By the time she padded back down the stairs with the silence of a stalking panther, I wasn't even cleaning anymore. I was just standing there in the middle of the kitchen, shivering softly, consumed with guilt, flushed inside.

She'd adopted silence, perhaps hoping I'd gone, so she could slip back out into the night, and the hunt.

"Zhe- ... oh." My breath failed on her name as her rippling body stepped back into the kitchen lights.

Zheng was half naked. Thank whatever twisted Gods cared to grace me that we'd purchased her more than one change of clothes, because at least she'd shrugged herself into another one of those huge baggy dark jumpers she liked, but other than underwear – a pair of shorts – she was naked from the waist down, huge toned thighs of buttery smooth chocolate-red exposed to my overheating brain. And she was so clean, hair fluffy and damp, smelling faintly of soap.

She wasn't smiling.

She stared at me for a quarter of a second, then took three paces and grabbed me around the middle and lifted me bodily into the air. I let out a very different kind of squeak, and Zheng planted my bottom on the edge of the kitchen table – thankfully not in the remaining blood from her gruesome meal – so she didn't have to lean down so far. Before I could protest or push her back or even fully appreciate the deep flush in her cheeks, she kissed me.

Full on the mouth. Wet, hot, the taste of spice in her saliva, an electric tingle in my throat – and minty toothpaste.

No blood, no meat. At least she'd taken me seriously about getting sick from raw venison.

Zheng's kiss was urgent and rough, which both immolated me on a

pyre of my own arousal and terrified me. Her tongue, that thick foot-long tentacle, slid past my lips, and for a moment of wide-eyed horror I thought she was going to shove it down my throat, but she refrained from at least *that*.

But I did respond. Oh I did. On instinct. How could I not? I was painfully aware this was like kissing a fistful of knives, that behind those lips were teeth that could bite clean through my tongue, but I responded with the merest flicker of my own lips and she pushed me backward onto the table. Her knee wormed in between my legs until I was almost riding it. I shook all over, panting through my nose, tears filling my eyes, trying to speak through the kiss.

And she pulled back, let me go, as the word spilled out from me.

“-n-no, no- ... n- ... ” I blinked at her, flushed molten in the face, shaking all over like I was about to have a fit. “Z-Zheng?”

“You said no, shaman.” A purr, level and soft, though her eyes smoldered.

My brain had reverted to some pre-human state. It took me a long time to locate my vocal chords. “ ...wh- ... what?”

“You said no. You were trying to say it into my mouth.” Zheng pulled a smile – not a grin, but the softest smile I’d ever seen from her. “I won’t force you, shaman.”

I broke. Badly. Crying, shaking my head, stuck in a loop. Zheng kept pulling back, straighted up, one hand affectionately on my head, fingers in my bedhead hair. “I-I-I can’t, can’t, can’t, can’t betray Raine,” I babbled. “I- no- no, no, I can’t. Zheng, we can’t- I- I wanted, I want-” Shaking my head more, blinking up at her through tears, hot and still aroused, my feet dangling off the table, wrapped in Raine’s clothing, my abyssal side half-entangled with the ape and purring back at Zheng and I wanted her to kiss me again but also I didn’t and there was no way through this minefield and I was stuck. “Zheng, I want you, but not like this.”

That was a lie, and she knew it. I knew she knew. We all knew. Everybody knew that Heather Morell was hopelessly in love – or lust, at least – with two different people, both of them monsters, and she was stuck, stuck, stuck.

“Please,” I whined, arms out to Zheng.

She obliged, in a very different manner to the previous way. Zheng picked me up like a crying child, one arm under my backside, the other around my back and head, as I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and my legs around her waist and clung to her. She was so warm, like she'd been lying in the sun. And my abyssal side felt, for the first time since I'd returned from the deep dark beyond reality, truly at peace.

Zheng carried me into the dark. I buried my face in her shoulder and closed my eyes and went limp in her grip. It was only after a moment that I realised she was taking me upstairs, and I began to panic again.

"Where-" I had time to hiss, before Zheng opened the door to my bedroom and ducked beneath the frame. In the dark, Raine bolted upright in bed, a mere shape against the bed covers. One of her hands shot out and knocked something off her bedside table, and came around holding a knife.

"It's me!" I hissed. "It's me!"

"What- Heather?" Sleep dropped from Raine in an instant. Then, less softly: "Zheng?"

Zheng stepped forward and dumped me onto the bed. I bounced. She laughed. "This is yours, *yoshou*!"

I was shaking with guilt and burning with arousal as Raine's hands found me. I couldn't see her expression, but I could feel the confusion as she slid an arm around my back, as she smelled Zheng on me, the spice of her on my breath. I clung to Raine now, and I knew in my bones that the second Zheng left the room, I was going to jump Raine. I was going to drink her scent and her taste and shove myself at her even if I didn't want to – and I did want to. Nothing could have stopped me.

Zheng turned to leave, a shadow giant in the night.

"To Carcosa, shaman," she purred.

nothing more impotent –

11.1

“Friends, idiots, demons, lend me your ears,” Evelyn said, and managed to instill not a speck of levity into her little joke. “Let me be crystal clear. This is not a stroll in the woods, or a hike on the moors in fog and rain and cold, and it is certainly not a trip down to the local branch library. This will be the single most dangerous place any of us have ever set foot.”

On my lap, Lozzie let out a giggle-snort, and hid her mouth behind one sleeve when Evelyn shot her a sharp frown.

“Speak for yourself, wizard,” Zheng purred.

“I dunno, Eevee,” Raine said in faux-contemplation. “Your house when your mum ran the show? Could give anywhere a run for its money.” Then she shot a nasty wink at Zheng. “Would have eaten you alive, barbarian bitch-bait.”

Zheng ignored her, the same way she had all of Raine’s colourfully creative insults over the last day and a half; small mercies.

“Yeah, I mean, come on?” Twil squinted. “We’ve been to some pretty gnarly places, Eevee. How weird can it be? S’just a lotta books, right?”

“Here,” Praem intoned.

“Wonderland,” I said, and everyone looked at me. I cleared my throat. “Well, it’s true.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and gave her audience a very unimpressed glare. “Alright, fine, Heather and Lozzie have been to more dangerous places, but that’s all. The rest of you are flirting with sheer arrogance.”

Zheng’s mouth creased in a mocking grin, about to wind up Evelyn again, but before anybody could speak, Evelyn went blazing at Twil.

“And that goes triple for you, you ... you ... numpty.” Evelyn

jabbed a finger at our blameless werewolf. “You are not invincible. This,” she gestured at Zheng, “brick shit-house and Praem can perhaps afford a certain laxity, but I don’t care what you’ve got stapled onto your brain, you’re still human. You’re as vulnerable as anybody else. When we’re in there, you don’t move unless I say, you don’t speak unless I say. You touch nothing I don’t put in your hands. Behave.”

Twil stared at Evee like she’d been slapped with a dead bird, then looked around for help.

“Evee, we all know the drill,” Raine said, soft and easy.

“There is no drill,” Evelyn growled. “What do you want me to say? We’re going to camp out? Have tea with the locals? Consult a convenient catalogue to find the books? It’s *Outside*, you bunch of reprobates.”

We six reprobates – myself and Raine, Lozzie perched on my lap, Praem standing prim and neat and laden down with equipment, Twil looking rumpled and lost, and Zheng lounging against the wall with her arms folded – were all gathered around the deactivated gateway mandala in the magical workshop, as Evelyn held court.

Evelyn seemed more organised and ready than I’d ever seen her for anything. She stood before the blank rectangle of bare plaster, walking stick straight and solid in one hand, dressed in coat and boots and sensible skirt and thick, warm leggings loose around the deceptively spindly ankle of her prosthetic leg, her golden-blond hair carefully tied back. Her coat pockets bulged deep with several notebooks, a series of small jars, her scrimshawed thighbone, and a dozen other bizarre magical tools she hadn’t taken the time to explain.

Waiting to her side, Praem carried the rest. She had a big sports bag slung over one shoulder, full of cereal bars, bottled water, a first-aid kit, half a dozen powerful torches, hand-warmer heat packs, glow-sticks, duct tape, a dozen collapsible hiking sticks – not for hiking, this time – and a carrier bag filled with Evelyn’s secret weapon: dozens of heavy iron nuts with short lengths of torn cloth tied to them. For later.

Evelyn had not forced Praem to get changed, except for the heavy, practical boots on her feet beneath her long skirt.

It wasn't as if anything Outside would understand the sartorial semantics of a maid outfit anyway.

We were going to bring walkie-talkies as well, but Evelyn had informed us that they would not only malfunction, but may also present an 'informational hazard', a phrase that made me want to scream.

To my right, Raine had donned her makeshift riot armour, padded motorcycle jacket over her shoulders, helmet hanging from her belt, home-made riot shield all thin metal and rubber backing leaning against the table. The long black threat of her truncheon swung lazily in one hand, but she had undoubtedly tucked away more lethal options inside her jacket.

Raine's other hand slowly massaged my shoulder, which was beginning to irritate me. Even I could eventually get tired of physical contact; barely ten minutes had gone by in the last thirty-six hours without her touching me – not since I'd confessed everything.

I was the only one sitting in a chair, and I'd busied my hands with re-braiding Lozzie's hair while she sat on my lap, in a vain effort to still my churning stomach. Lozzie's pastel poncho spilled out over my thighs, over her borrowed warm jumper and slim jeans. She carried little, but was as ready as any of us, though I suspected she needed it the least. Twil seemed most unready, her hands in her coat pockets, all clashing blue and lime, still a little rumpled and flushed, presumably from whatever had passed between her and Evelyn last night. Good things, I hoped, but I hadn't the spare courage to ask.

I was wrapped up for an outing too, in coat and hoodie, with pepper spray in one of my pockets and warm socks on my feet and a notebook of math hidden in my coat. But all my real weapons were in my head.

Mostly, I tried not to look at Zheng. If I did, she might grin at me again.

At least she was clean. She stood slightly apart, leaning against the wall with heavily lidded eyes as if barely paying attention.

The only person in the workshop not ready for the trip was Kimberly – because she wasn't coming. She sat as far away from us

as possible, on the old sofa at the back, feet tucked up and arms around her knees, trying not to chew her lips too much. It had taken half an hour of coaxing – and Evelyn’s all-too-patient explanations of her safety – to convince her to keep rearguard vigil for us in between checking on Tenny upstairs.

Soft spring rains pattered against the windows and the roof, an almost invisible drizzle against the backdrop of fat grey clouds. A damp, wet, cold Saturday.

At least we weren’t going outdoors.

“Listen to Eevee, please,” I spoke up. “She’s not exaggerating. Raine, Twil, ... Zheng, none of you have been Outside, not even for a minute or two. This isn’t like the cult’s castle, this is the real thing.” I gave a tiny, sighing laugh. “In a way, I really don’t want to do this.”

“Thank you, Heather,” Evelyn said, tight-voiced. “And please do not back out now, you are essential.”

“I know. I know.”

“Okay, alright.” Raine raised one hand in a gesture of helpless surrender, the other still kneading imaginary knots out of my upper back. “How dangerous can this be? Serious question, not teasing. I need to know. You already gave us the whole spiel about the locals not being an issue if we don’t step on the cracks and count to ten or whatever. What are we looking out for otherwise?”

“The shaman, *yoshou*,” Zheng rumbled.

“Great joke, real knee-slapper, well done big zombie, great sense of humour,” Raine replied, smiling razors.

“Raine,” I whispered. “Please don’t.”

“Yes, not now. Both of you shut up,” Evelyn said. She caught my eyes and shrugged, and I shrugged back, helpless, and mouthed ‘I tried.’ Evelyn cleared her throat. “The problem is the place itself. Every step is a risk, and we can’t stay there for long.”

“So how long is too long?” Twil asked. “Like, couldn’t you just set me to run for-”

“I don’t know!” Evelyn snapped. “For you, as short a time as possible. Look, this isn’t just about getting into a fight, or the

physical dangers – which are bad enough – it’s about getting ... ” Evelyn swore softly. “*Overwhelmed*. The only time I went Outside – which, by the way, was one of the most stupid mistakes I’ve ever made, and the fact I’m admitting that should be proof enough – was one of the most indescribable, revolting, alien sensations of my entire life, and I will remind you that I have been possessed by a demon before. I was there, what, an hour before you came for me, Heather?” I nodded, though I couldn’t actually recall how long Evelyn had been stuck before I’d rescued her, so many months ago now. “And everything about that place, the fog, the sounds, the ... ground beneath me.” She swallowed down a wave of revulsion. “These are not places we can remain for long as human beings.”

“It’s not that bad,” Lozzie said in a tiny voice.

Evelyn gestured at her, scoffing. “There. I rest my case.”

“There are many places Outside perhaps not so alien,” I came to Lozzie’s rescue before an argument could start. “Places Lozzie showed me, beautiful places. The Library of Carcosa is not one of them.”

Lozzie turned on my lap to pout at me. “I thought you like libraries.”

I gave her a sad smile. “Lozzie, sweet, it was terrifying. The scale was all wrong. The ... inhabitants. We’re not meant to be there, not in places like that. Body and soul, it’s not for us.”

“Um,” went Twil. “Alright Heather, you’re givin’ me the creeps.”

“Good,” Evelyn grunted.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be.” Twil did this big performative all-body shiver. Zheng chuckled at her. “I think I get the picture. Right. No sticking around.”

Evelyn cleared her throat, her tone slipping into the reluctant teacher. “The Library of Carcosa is one of the most commonly described locations Outside, one of the most well-travelled spheres beyond our own, but it’s still absolutely, inimically non-human. In *Unbekannte Orte*, Paulinus speaks of getting lost in a labyrinth of his own mind, and he was a philosopher, a proper one, not exactly given to flights of fancy. There’s a long passage in *Tote Kugeln*,

where Mechthild recounts the loss of five companions she took with her, all in different ways, one of whom she describes as having ‘her mind devoured morsel by morsel by the very words she dared to utter,’ another who was eaten by a ‘twist of the air’ – God knows what the old bat meant by that – and another which was led off – willingly – by the librarians. Even Abdullah al-Hazrad warned against going there, and he was madder than a cesspit rat.”

“Librarians,” Raine said. Not a question.

“Presumably the tentacle-faces,” I said. “I did see them, both times I went there.”

“Why is it always bloody tentacles?” Twil muttered.

“This is not a colonisable space,” Evelyn spoke over Twil. “We don’t go running roughshod in there like a bunch of nineteenth century aristo twats with gunpowder and Christianity for the natives. Do not touch anything. Do not speak to anything. Certainly do not *read* anything that I don’t explicitly tell you to look at. And do not attack, harass, molest, or otherwise interact with the locals, other than in the exact ways I instruct you to do so.” She jabbed the head of her walking stick at Zheng. “Do not get in a fight. You will put all of us, including Heather, in danger.”

Zheng blinked very slowly. “Where the shaman goes, I go.”

“Not everywhere, rot-breath,” Raine said with a grin at the giant demon-host. “Not bed.”

“They won’t bother us,” Evelyn went on, trying to ignore the verbal slap fight as I blushed into my hand, “whatever they look like, however close they approach, unless we start destroying books or setting fires. Ilduara and Teoda in the *Broken Notes* are very specific about this. Displays to scatter them are fine if absolutely necessary, but you wait for my instruction. If you start pushing them around or bloody well eating them ... ” Evelyn trailed off, shaking her head.

“They wake up?” Twil asked. “Like poking an anthill?”

Evelyn wet her lips, obviously uncomfortable. “I don’t know. I don’t know what might happen. There’s nothing in my books.”

“And if you are wrong, wizard?” Zheng rumbled, blinking sleepy-tiger eyes.

"I'm not." Evelyn stared back at her. "I'm not. There are multiple sources on this. Mages have been to Carcosa before, smarter and better informed than I. Besides, we have what the locals want, they will respond according to ritual, the *Broken Notes* is clear about that too."

"They did advance on me, that one time, with Praem," I said.

"They would have stopped," Evelyn said quickly, then swallowed. "You weren't trying to start a fire or destroy books, they would have left you alone eventually."

"Eventually is eventual," Praem sing-songed. "Uneventful would be preferable."

We all stared at her in surprise. Evelyn shot her a sharp frown.

"What if you are wrong though, Eevee?" Twil asked. "Just hear me out, yeah? What do we do? Get in a huge scrap with dozens of weird beasties?"

Evelyn gave her a level, unimpressed look. "Why do you think you're coming? Not for your scintillating conversation or Latin literacy, that's for certain."

Twil looked a little crestfallen. "Eevee? What- what's changed? Come on, we were like ..." She glanced around at the rest of us, equal parts confused and embarrassed and helpless. "You were ... last night."

Evelyn made a noise halfway between a strangled cobra and an angry badger, a sort of growling shush, going red in the face.

"E-Eevee?" Twil blinked at her. I put my face in my hand for the sake of these two idiots.

Raine started laughing. "Keep up, Twil," she said. "Look, you and I, we're muscle for this trip. Our whole purpose is to deal with shit if this all goes south. Praem too. Three casters," she indicated Evelyn, Lozzie, and I. "One tank," she winked at Praem. "And two dee-pee-ess." She said it exactly like that, 'dee-pee-ess', and I had to ask her later what on earth she was talking about, and even then I didn't really understand. "Plus one ablative meatshield," she grinned at Zheng. "Perfectly balanced party. Our job is keep frosty and don't pull any aggro. Look after Eevee, Twil, s'your job."

"Oh!" Twil lit up. "Alright, that makes a lot more sense. Why didn't

you just say so?” she asked Evelyn, who was busy rubbing the bridge of her nose and looked like she wanted to wallop both of them. “Cool. We’re cool, right Evee? I’ll just keep my head down, unless you need something punching really hard?”

Evelyn sighed, trying to wipe the blush off her face. “Yes, yes, thank you. That is exactly what I need from you. And keep your mouth shut.”

A cheeky grin snuck onto Twil’s face, a dirty-joke kind of grin. “Keep my mouth shut, eh? That wasn’t what-”

“Twil Hopton.” Evelyn made her name sound like a whipcrack.

Twil kept her mouth shut, but the cheeky grin took a while to fade. Lozzie’s eyes shone at the pair of them, biting her lips in excitement, clapping together the tips of her fingers in front of her face.

Evelyn took longer than expected to compose herself. She untied the ponytail holding back her great fluffy mass of blonde hair and carefully retied it while Praem held her walking stick. Raine took the opportunity to catch my eye and knead the back of my neck.

“There may be things present other than the locals,” Evelyn said eventually, with much less confident fire. “Other things like us, searching for reference material. It’s not impossible. Or others, which never left. In that case use your judgement, but whatever you do, do not damage the books. Raine, did you manage to ... ?”

“Not happening.” Raine shrugged. “Deal fell through, last thing yesterday. No boomstick for us.”

“Tch. Pity.”

“Boomstick?” I echoed, wrinkling my nose, distinctly aware that Raine hadn’t left the house all day yesterday. Or used her phone. Or been apart from me for longer than it took to use the toilet. There had been no ‘last thing yesterday’. “Deal?”

“Yeah. Was trying to get us some better firepower,” said Raine, all matter-of-fact when she spoke about something utterly bonkers. “Bloke down the *Nag’s Head* – that’s the *Nag’s Head* on Spittimer Street, not the one down the high street or the one over Potter’s Way – was gonna sell me a sawn-off shotgun.”

I thought my eyes would pop out of my head.

“Woah. Cool,” Twil whispered.

“I think you mean-” Raine span her truncheon as if it was gun and blew imaginary smoke from the end of an imaginary barrel.

“Groovy.”

Twil fell about laughing. “You fucking nerd!”

“Take this seriously, for pity’s sake,” Evelyn hissed.

“One boomstick, special order,” Raine was already going on. “Good for doming pesky deadites and demons and other possessed bodies, if you know what I mean.” She grinned at Zheng, aiming her truncheon-based imaginary firearm at Zheng’s head. “Present company excepted, ‘course.”

“Lead does nothing to me, *yoshou*,” Zheng purred.

“Oh my God, Raine, will you stop?” I blurted out, blushing tomato red. Lozzie put her hands to her mouth, scandalised, then to my face, trying to help, or perhaps trying to cool me off.

“What?” Raine laughed. “I’m just lightening the mood before we go over the top.”

“Offense taken,” Praem intoned, sing-song serious and totally unreadable. Raine slammed to a halt and grinned at her, all aggression forgotten.

“Oh, hey, not you, Praem,” she said. “Never you. You’re a sweetheart.”

“If you two keep this up Outside, I will leave you there,” Evelyn said. “Stop.”

“Yes, stop,” I agreed in a whisper, praying.

Raine shrugged and pulled a ‘not me’ sort of smile, a shit-eating, I-know-exactly-what-I’m-doing smile. Zheng grunted softly and blinked the slow blink of a predator at rest.

I couldn’t decide which was worse, that Raine had attempted to procure a second illegal firearm, right here in Sharrowford, from a dodgy gentleman in a shady pub – or that I suspected the deal hadn’t fallen through at all, and the real reason she’d failed to acquire said firepower was because she’d been unwilling to go out, to leave me alone in the house with Zheng for any length of time at all.

= =

Two nights ago, in the flesh-hot aftermath of Zheng's kiss, things between Raine and I had become very weird, very quickly.

I'd confessed everything within about thirty seconds of Zheng leaving our bedroom. Keeping it from Raine was unthinkable.

The giant zombie had vanished back downstairs into the deeper dark, like a panther slinking back into the jungle. If Raine had stayed in bed, if she'd turned me toward her and given me the slightest opening, I would have jumped her, I would have blotted out Zheng's taste with Raine's scent and the familiar, comfortable intimacy of Raine's hands on my body – but instead, Raine asked me if I was unhurt. I fumbled some barely coherent answer which involved half-trying to kiss her, missing and mashing my cheek against her chin, then she said "One sec, Heather," and clambered out of bed in the dark to shut the bedroom door, and I fell to pieces.

Alone in my own body for all of five seconds as Raine's shadow crossed the room, I shivered in a way that had nothing to do with cold, then hiccuped, then blurted everything out all at once.

It was one of the most horrifying things I'd ever done – and I'd committed murder, swam the ocean void beyond reality, and once written off my own twin as dead.

The guilt did not lift as I unfolded my transgression, but underwent an alchemical transformation, into a sick, rotten feeling of self-destruction.

Raine flicked on the lights at some point I didn't notice, soft and yellow, absorbed by the mass of bedcovers and the familiar contours of our bedroom – *our* bedroom for how much longer? She listened, attentive but unresponsive, and beautiful. Perhaps it was because the kiss had left me burning, but every little detail of Raine's body seemed emphasised by the twilight bubble in the night. Her short chestnut hair, raked back and messy from sleep. The flex of her abdominal muscles. The surprisingly long lashes before those warm brown eyes. I felt tiny. To me, in that moment, she seemed as tall as Zheng.

"-and it was only a kiss, a-and I didn't initiate it, and I wouldn't, and I'm so sorry Raine, I'm so sorry." I hiccuped again. "I-I can only ask for forgiveness and you- you'd be well within your rights to just

... just deny me that and ... Raine?"

But Raine wasn't paying attention.

An all-too-familiar change had rippled through her body, a tightness in her musculature, a coiled-spring readiness on clearer display than ever before, as she was dressed for sleep in only a pair of small black shorts and a tight tshirt with a massive grinning cartoon otter on the front. For a terrible moment I thought her aggression was directed at me, and the pit of my stomach turned to ice. This was it. The serial killer moment. All the love and affection of the last few months was about to come crashing down.

Worse, part of me thought I deserved it.

Raine's eyes touched the knife she'd left on the bedside table, then the bedroom door, then down through the floor, toward the kitchen.

"Zheng kissed you?" Raine asked. "Without your permission?"

Oh good, Raine wasn't going to kill me in a jealous fit, she wasn't like that; *Raine was going to get herself killed duelling Zheng for my honour.*

"No! Raine, no!" I reached out to restrain her, though I felt unworthy of even touching her. "Not like that, she didn't *force herself* on me! Oh, God no. No. There was a ... a ... " I hiccuped, had to keep going. "A moment of genuine ... chemistry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, and she did stop, as soon as I said no. As soon as I said no."

Raine looked at me, blinked once, and brightened instantly. All the killing intent went out of her like a fire doused beneath a wave. "Oh! Well, that's different then. Almost got the wrong end of the stick there." I was nodding in relief, until she smirked and added: "So heeeeeeey, what was it like?"

I think my brain shut down entirely and had to reboot itself piece by piece. I just stared at her, at her teasing, inappropriate grin. " ... a- ... I ... what."

"What was it like?" Raine ran one hand through my hair.

"Carnivore makeouts, huh? Bet she tastes like a badger's asshole."

" ... I ... Raine ... i-it's good that you're not going to fight her, yes, please, please do not do that, but ... Raine, I kissed another woman.

Even if it was for a moment, I was unfaithful. It's one of the worst things I can imagine. You- you don't have to- you should-"

Raine's grin turned dangerous, a twinkle in her eyes. "Want me to call you a bad girl and spank you over my knee?"

I came within a gnat's wingspan of screaming yes, my insides saturated with this awful cocktail of guilt and lust. It probably would have made me feel better – bad Heather, needs punishing, pay debt – but it wouldn't have solved a single thing. We'd end up back here again in a few weeks time, and then perhaps the wound would be fatal. I held back, because part of me knew that saying yes would mean *using* Raine.

"No- Raine, I was-" I hiccuped, twice, out of control. "Unfaithful. How can you- I don't deserve-"

"Hey, hey, hey, woah, Heather." Raine sat down next to me on the bed. She slipped one arm around my shoulders, and the other tightened in my hair. She caught my eyes and wouldn't let me go, suddenly dead serious. "Whatever else you're thinking, let's get one thing real clear. You did nothing wrong. Zheng initiated. You said no. Unless you lied to me?"

I shook my head, eyes terrifyingly dry. "But I stayed behind. In the kitchen. When I knew it might happen."

"Ahhh, but that's not really intent. Heather, you are never responsible for other people's actions. You were not unfaithful."

"But I wanted it! I enjoyed it!" A hysterical hitch cracked my voice. "How can you not be angry-"

Raine leaned in and kissed me.

There shouldn't have been anything remarkable about Raine and I sharing a kiss. We did this multiple times every day. But it felt like coming home. Warm and soft and familiar, I melted into her taste, full of sleep-heat and the scent of her body and the feel of a strong hand on the back of my head. She kissed me long and slow and deep, took control, and for a moment I thought she was going to just push me backward onto the bed and dispense with all this difficult talking. Almost panting through my nose in panic and lust and relief, I returned the kiss, hungry and flushed and vibrating in her arms.

Eventually she pulled away just enough to make me lean into her before we parted. She licked her lips and winked at me. “There. Claimed you back.”

“Claimed ... ” I echoed, and realised I’d stepped on a second libidinal land-mine tonight.

“Mmhmm,” she purred. “All mine.”

One of Raine’s hands was already slipping beneath the hem of the borrowed jumper I’d dragged on earlier. Her warm fingers found my stomach and I gasped in surprise. My voice emerged as a strangled squeak.

“Why- Raine! Aren’t you jealous? I-I’m serious. Before, you ... you said you didn’t want me to do things with ... with her. You were very specific. How can you not feel jealous? A moment ago you were ready to duel Zheng for my honour – which, again, please do not do that, please don’t get hurt.”

Raine squeezed my flank beneath my clothes. “Would that get your engine revved? I would totally duel her for your honour.”

“Raine, stop it!” I snapped at her, pushed her hand back. “Stop that. Stop deflecting. How can you not be jealous?”

Raine’s grin switched off.

It didn’t die slowly, didn’t fade. It just went away.

It was as if the soft machine of her body had come juddering to a sudden stop. She reminded me of a robot from one of those silly 1960s science fiction serials she’d shown me a while back, a robot failing to integrate a paradox. I’d witnessed a shade of this once before, back during our trip to the Saye estate over Christmas, when Raine had admitted to lying to me. But that had been a mere speed bump; this was full halt. For a good two seconds, Raine just *stopped*.

My fault.

“Oh. Oh, Raine, I’m-”

“This isn’t fair,” she said. “Don’t drive me into a corner.”

I’d never seen her angry with me before. It was not frightening for the reasons I’d always assumed it might be – none of the aggressive tension, the violent intent – but for an entirely new set of reasons. I had, in some way I did not yet understand, hurt her.

"I'm- I-I'm sorry?" was all I managed.

"I can be jealous, if that's what you need," Raine said, and the grin slowly worked its way back onto her face, then flickered in confusion again. "But if I push too hard, are you going to leap into Zheng's arms?"

"... no! Raine? I ... I said no to her. I'm attracted to her, yes, I won't lie, and she's important to me, but I said no. Because I love you. Raine, what is this? I don't understand."

Raine swallowed once, unsmiling, then shook her head. "I'm not jealous about you kissing her. I'm not hurt. I am jealous, yes, but not ... "

She paused, a very long pause. Another all stop on the Raine express. I waited with my heart in my mouth.

"But not like that," she finished eventually, dead serious. "You could even kiss her more, if you want-"

"No, Raine, don't say that, I can't-"

She spoke over me. "But I do not wish to be surplus to your requirements. Ever."

"Surplus to my requirements?" I echoed. That way of speaking didn't even sound like her. "Raine, what are you-"

"Just tell me."

"No, you're not!" I didn't even have to think about that one. "Never. You're not. You never will be 'surplus', that's awful, awful. I promise you. I promise. Raine, we- we can ask Zheng to leave the house, if she's still here. I don't have to have her around, I understand if-"

Raine laughed softly as her habitual grin finally blossomed again, as she visibly relaxed, as she reached over and ruffled my hair. She resumed, everything oiled and smooth and running at a comfortable pace once more. "Hey, no need for that. She's one of us, right? And she and I did make an oath. And we need her. And you wouldn't like it if she had to leave, would you? You said it yourself, she's important to you."

"But not as important as you. Raine, if she's a threat to-"

"To me?" Raine clucked her tongue through a grin. "Naaaah. Not to

me. You don't need to worry about that, Heather."

Which turned out to be a huge lie.

In the morning we woke entangled in each others' limbs and bits of sheet and a pillow wedged under the small of my back. Part of me prayed that Zheng would be gone, returned to her hunt, no awkward confrontation over breakfast, no terrible soap opera moments to make my life even more absurd.

No such luck.

Raine's aggressive territorial displays began not long after.

"Hey, Dawn of the Dead reject," she'd said, grinning despite her words, hanging round the door-frame of the workshop to talk to Zheng. The demon-host was half-asleep on the sofa in Evelyn's workshop, huge and still like a lounging tiger. "Next time keep your hands to yourself, or you'll pull back a pair 'o stumps."

"Oh my God," I hissed, face in my hands, mortified as I sat in front of a bowl of soggy cereal in the kitchen.

Evelyn – still groggy with sleep, squinting at the the half-cleaned mess on the table after Praem had just lugged the leftover dead deer into the bins outdoors – raised a curious eyebrow. Praem was still silently bustling about with bleach and bloodied sponges. Kimberly was half out the door, but she froze at the naked aggression in Raine's smiling voice, despite not being the target.

"We made an oath, *yoshou*," Zheng purred. "No fight. You will do nothing."

"Yeah, sure. But this isn't a left hand, right hand thing. This is a Raine Philomena Haynes thing." And my tongue almost fell out of my mouth at the sound of Raine using her own hated last name. "Biggest dyke in East Anglia, Sharrowford, and the whole county of Sussex thing. Hands off my girl unless you want your eyes clawed out. Bitch."

She said it like it was a joke, laughing and easy. From anyone but Raine it would have sounded absurd.

"The shaman is nobody's girl," Zheng purred.

"Oh yeah?" Raine shot back. "Who made her orgasm twice last night? Not you, bucko, you just warmed her up and got cack-

handed before the finish line.”

I contemplated the mechanics of drowning myself in my cereal bowl. Evelyn was grumbling that they needed to take it outdoors, and Praem marched straight into the workshop.

The doll-demon clicked her heels on the floor, and sing-songed, “No more raw meat inside the house.”

“Little thing-” Zheng purred.

“No more raw meat inside the house.”

“You should try-”

“Will try you,” Praem intoned, and Raine started laughing, and that was that.

Twenty-four hours until Carcosa, and my two best protectors had declared cold war on each other.

= =

By that evening, I was going out of my mind, and then Evelyn made it all so much weirder.

“I’m here to borrow your girlfriend.”

She’d stomped straight into our bedroom, walking stick clacking on the floorboards then muffled by the thick rugs around our bed, as Raine and I had been in the middle of playing a video game.

Well, Raine was playing the game, legs stretched out on the bed as she provided commentary and explanation for me. I was lying half-across her lap, emotionally exhausted and more than a little physically sore too, well aware that if I clambered off her to watch from any other angle, I would be mercilessly encouraged back into her lap, or she’d abandon the game entirely to pay attention to me. We were trying to put off the nerves about going to Carcosa tomorrow morning, and I was trying desperately to not think about the way Raine had been acting all day.

“Evee?” Raine raised her eyebrows and paused the game. On screen, a comically well-endowed ninja woman froze in the act of cutting a goblin in half with a giant sword.

“You heard me,” said Evelyn. “I’m here to borrow your girlfriend.”

I glanced between them. "Um ... me?"

"Unless Raine has secretly acquired some crumpet on the side, yes you." Evelyn frowned at me, then addressed Raine again. "This may be for several hours. As long as it takes me to fall asleep."

"What," I said, blindsided.

Raine's face lit up with an awed smile. "You're invoking the deal. Eevee! Never thought I'd see the day!"

Evelyn frowned at this too, suddenly as confused as me. "What deal, what are you blathering about?"

"The deal! The deal. Come on, you gotta remember the deal."

"This has nothing to do with any deal, real or spurious or from your bloody dreams," Evelyn told her. "I want to borrow Heather for a few hours, yes or no?"

"Um, do I not get a say?" I asked, sitting up from Raine's lap at last, brushing hair out of my face. "I'm not property, to be passed around."

"Oh, you are most def' not," Raine said to me. "But see, Eevee and I made this deal once, a little while after we first met, right? If I ever landed myself a beautiful girlfriend, like a real ten out of ten stunner, and Evelyn was high and dry and really needed the company, she could ask for it, anytime, no questions. And I can't say no. Can't believe she's finally calling it in."

Evelyn was giving Raine the sort of look one gives a very stupid dog that has just rolled in its own excrement. "Raine, we were idiot teenagers. I was *dying*. I am not gay for Heather, and if I was, I certainly wouldn't treat her as your property to give away."

"Ahhhh, but you do remember it!" Raine laughed. "It's cool though, feel free, I'll be up to like midnight at this rate. I can entertain myself."

Evelyn rolled her eyes and sighed. "Heather, will you come with me for a while and help me to fall asleep? I would deeply appreciate it. And before Raine says something filthy, I am not being weird with you. It's not like that. You know that."

I glanced back at Raine. She patted me on the bottom and said "Go on then!"

They were both waiting for me to move. I was so surprised, so utterly out of sorts from one of the most emotionally exhausting days of my life, that I just stood up, still clutching a pillow to my chest, and padded after Evelyn in my socks and pajama bottoms. I was in a sort of daze as she led me wordlessly across the corridor and into her bedroom.

I hadn't visited Evelyn's bedroom in a while, and it was easy to forget how fluffy and comfy she kept her personal spaces. The plush animals and magical girl figures on her chest of drawers stared at me like a welcoming audience. Lilac and pink softened every surface, turned smooth and sleepy in the shaded light from her tall lamp. Posters and stacks of books ringed her little desk, the closed laptop quiet and dark. I felt as if I'd stepped into the burrow of a small furry animal.

"Do shut the door," Evelyn muttered once I was over the threshold.

She clomped around to the opposite side of her massive, overstuffed pink-and-lilac bed, and sat down heavily, rubbing her hip with a grimace. She hiked up her skirt around her thighs, revealing the naked black carbon fibre of her prosthetic leg, and the white plastic sleeve which kept it attached to her flesh.

"I said shut the door, Heather," she had to repeat.

"Right. Yes. Right." I did so, closing us in together. "Um, what is this ... about?"

Evelyn rolled the white plastic sleeve off the stump of her thigh and sighed with relief, gently massaging the remains of her leg through the sock-like covering. She leaned back into the snowdrift of pillows against the headboard.

"You tell me," she said.

"... I'm at my wits end," I admitted, my voice breaking softly. "I can't deal with Raine. Today has been completely mad, I just can't deal with her."

"Yes, I noticed that part," Evelyn said, low and grumpy but not with me. "That's why I called you in here. I don't actually need any help falling asleep, though I wouldn't turn down your company if you'd like to stay, if you need some respite. You can stay in here as long as you want. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable in your own home, whatever's happening between you and Raine."

I sighed very heavily and very suddenly and felt like a burst balloon. I had to sit down on the bed too, opposite Evelyn. "You noticed."

Evelyn narrowed her eyes. "One would be blind not to. Anybody would think her hands are glued to you. You two have vanished upstairs together no less than three times today, and that's not counting the hours I was out of the house, in class."

I averted my eyes, and wished I'd had class today. "Four times," I whispered.

Evelyn snorted. "I'm surprised you can still walk."

"It's not as if I didn't want it." I screwed up my eyes in a useless effort to contain a burning blush.

"And the cause does not take a behavioural scientist to unravel either," Evelyn continued. "I distinctly overheard Raine calling Zheng 'overfed bull-dyke guillotine bait', to her face, and that's extreme even for Raine." Evelyn crossed her arms and gave me the tiniest, gentlest glare she could muster. "Heather, we are going to Carcosa tomorrow. Those two need to play nice, or stay home. I am ... " She cleared her throat awkwardly. "Look, I'm not good at this, I barely know how to begin, but you are ... special, to me, so I am 'here for you', as the saying goes. But also, what the hell is going on?"

I told her everything. The kiss, the aftermath, the slide of Raine's behaviour since this morning.

Raine hadn't left me alone all day long. She'd maintained almost constant physical contact – inviting me to snuggle in her lap, touching my neck and my sides and sliding a hand up the back of my tshirt, accompanying me into the shower for the fifth session which I'd left out of my whispered confession to Evelyn. I didn't dislike it, not exactly; Raine's attention was a heady drug, I felt sated and pampered, and I could hardly complain about her attempts to lay firm claim to me after last night. But this was excessive, even for Raine.

And then there was the territorial aggression, aimed at Zheng.

Evelyn listened in tired silence, massaging her thigh above her amputated stump.

“And it’s not-” I hit the heart of the matter, and had nowhere left to go. “How can she say she’s not jealous then act like this? It’s not as if I don’t understand what she’s doing. And she has every right to do it, but I don’t understand why. Her reaction last night was so confusing, I don’t know what to do. Sometimes I feel like she’s just incomprehensible to me.”

“You ... ” Evelyn spoke up at last, then paused to grimace. “You ‘snogged’ Zheng? That is profoundly disgusting.” She let out a huge sigh and dragged a pillow across her lap to lay her hands in. “But I suppose I shouldn’t judge. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If I ever found any courage with Twil, I’m certain it would appear vile to any casual observer.”

“Evee,” I tutted, but didn’t have any excess emotional bandwidth to tell her off for self-deprecation right then.

Evelyn considered the ceiling for a long moment. I heard the muffled sounds of Lozzie’s voice off in the depths of the house, of somebody else moving around in the kitchen downstairs, of beams settling in the gathering cold beyond the walls.

“Heather,” Evelyn said eventually. “You do know Raine.”

I managed a small smile. “Do I really? Sometimes it’s like she-”

“No, Heather. I mean literally.” She stared at me with a teaching frown and her voice took on the same rehearsed cadence as it once had when she’d taught me about magic. “There are no hidden depths to Raine, though there may be a few locked rooms full of junction boxes and loose wiring. With Raine, what you see is what you get. She wants to be your knight in shining armour. If you let her, she will be happy.”

I let out a huge sigh and could not conceal my disappointment. “You said that once before. I really don’t think it’s true.”

“No, I was entirely right about the knight in shining armour part.” Evelyn levelled a finger at me. “That wasn’t just me being a grumpy old bitch. My prediction she would get bored with you afterward, that was wrong, yes. Over the years that I needed Raine less, she ... ‘re-calibrated’, she went looking for another damsel to protect, and eventually found you. I thought she’d treat you the same, if you ever grew strong enough to stand on your own, but I didn’t count on you being a huge lesbian.”

“... excuse me?” I bristled involuntarily. “Evee, what difference does that make?”

Evelyn gave me a witheringly patient look. “Raine and I never went wrist-deep in each other’s cunts.”

My mouth made a little o-shape. “O-oh. Um. Evee! That’s not-”

“She loves you. Romantically. I used to doubt she was even capable of that, but she’s proved it enough times now. That makes your situation different, and I suspect you’re confusing the hell out of her.”

“I am?”

Evelyn huffed a big old sigh, but aimed at herself, at her inability to express her thoughts rather than at my difficulty understanding.

“Raine is loyal,” she said, jabbing at the pillow in her lap with her maimed hand, growing more agitated with each word. “It’s who she is. What she does. She finds a person worthy of her loyalty, and then she is loyal. She needs that, as an outlet or an anchor or something! I don’t know exactly, I’m not a bloody psychologist.”

“Evee, it’s okay, it-”

“It’s what she did with me and it ... it ... oh bugger me, Heather, I can’t-” She lost her temper and all but punched the pillow in her lap. “For fuck’s sake, I can’t say these things.”

“You don’t have to-”

“No.” She jabbed a finger at me again. “No. I do. Because I am not watching you two break up. You are the best thing ever to happen to her. And I suspect the reverse is true as well.” She sighed and visibly crushed down on her irritation. “This isn’t my place to say. It is Raine’s place to say, but if it can keep your relationship healthy, screw it, I’ll break the rules.”

She took another long moment to compose herself – and, I suspected, to compose the right words in the privacy of her mind.

“My memories of when I first met Raine are not easy,” she said eventually. “For both emotional and mechanical reasons. But I have come to firmly believe, in the years since, that Raine’s decision to protect me, to be my friend, to save me from my mother, was as much an act of self-redemption as it was altruism.”

“ ... oh-kay? Okay?”

“I mean by saving me she saved herself,” Evelyn huffed, then frowned sharply at me. “Heather, the Raine that you and I know, that is not the Raine I met as a teenager. The very first time I met her, I was dead certain I was face-to-face with a serial killer, a monster, something far worse than the worst of my mother’s creations.”

Cold blossomed in the pit of my stomach. “Evee? Are you ... you’re not joking.”

Evelyn shook her head. “Don’t get me wrong. She’s still the same person. She’s always had the same boundless arrogance, the self-assurance, always been so very unstoppably Raine. But she was not stable.”

“Stable?” I couldn’t imagine Raine as unstable.

“There was a twitchiness about her. A desperation. I assume she’s told you the story, about breaking into the house to say hello to me? Her ‘finest hour’ and all that?”

“Mmhmm,” I nodded, on the edge of my seat. Every crumb of Raine’s past was like a banquet, and I was starving.

“Did she tell you she knifed three of my mother’s zombies on the way in? No? Didn’t think so. A teenage girl, nothing much of her, against three things not entirely unlike Praem. She was covered in blood by the time she found me, had a dislocated shoulder, one eye swollen shut from a bruise. Gave me the fright of my life.” Evelyn lowered her voice as she spoke. “All just to speak to a crippled, bent-double girl who she didn’t even know. She was at the end of her rope as much as I was. Rail thin, hadn’t been eating, an infection in one foot, absolutely filthy. She was fearless – and desperate for somebody to protect. The moment I accepted her, she put herself between me and everything in that house. And I believe it gave her purpose, and that kept her alive.”

Evelyn took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. I reached over to rub her shoulder, and she nodded a thanks at me, eyes damp with old memories.

“I ... I guess I never thought about the reality of that,” I said.

“Well. She did mellow, over time. After my mother. After we moved

to Sharrowford. When I didn't need protecting as much anymore. I got irritated with her, yes, I ... I made her move out. A mistake. To me, Raine will always be the filthy, blood-covered idiot who saved me when I was almost dead. And I will always, always have her back. No matter what she is, what she does." Evelyn sniffed, swallowed, and looked down. "Don't tell her I said any of that, she'll be insufferable until we all die of old age."

"Promise," I whispered, and put my hand over one of Evelyn's.

Evelyn withdrew her hand and stared at me. "What I'm also trying to say is, well, unique relationship dynamics are your business, but if you are betraying her, if you *cheat* on her with Zheng, I will not be very happy with you. You have been ... my ... salvation," she swallowed hard, "in a way Raine couldn't, and I won't know what to do if you hurt her seriously."

"No! No, Eevee, that's the point. I said no to Zheng. I choose Raine. I do. Over and over, whatever conditions. She saved me too."

Evelyn nodded. She cleared her throat. "Good," she said very softly and patted my hand. "Okay. Good. Right. Let's never mention that again."

"If you like." I smiled for her.

"So my guess – and my guess is a good guess, I'd put five hundred quid on it if I could – is that she can't figure out what you want, because you don't know what you want. If you want Zheng to take you over the kitchen table, I think Raine would happily watch, then trade places with her for a second round afterward."

"Evee!" I squeaked, eyes bugging out at her. "You can't be serious!"

Evelyn shrugged.

"You mean ... both of them?" I asked, boggling at her.

"I believe the technical term is 'polyamory'. I looked it up."

"I can't do that. I can barely deal with one relationship as it is. I'd expire of dehydration. Is that even a ... a real thing? I thought that was only in romance novels. Mostly bad ones."

"You're asking me for romantic advice? Me?"

"What is this conversation if not romantic advice?"

“Raine advice,” Evelyn grunted. “Look, if you want her to slap Zheng with a white glove filled with crushed gravel, she’ll do that too. She will be what you need her to be, as long as you are hers to be loyal to. But you’re pulling her in two different directions. She won’t push Zheng out of your life, because she knows you care. But now she thinks you want her to be possessive and jealous.”

“Oh, Evee.” I felt my shoulders slump, and reached forward for support. We shared an awkward half-hug, leaning over the bed, until I pulled back. “But I want to know what Raine feels, what she really feels. If she’s jealous, she can be. Just ... naturally. Normally.”

Evelyn snorted one humourless puff of laughter. “Nothing about Raine is normal. Don’t tell me you’ve been pretending?”

My turn to laugh as well, just as empty of humour.

We drifted into comfortable silence, side by side as I pulled my legs up onto Evelyn’s plush nest of a bed. Part of me wanted to return to Raine and cuddle up with her, to let her know that of course I was still hers, but another part of me needed this peace and quiet, to think.

Was Raine a shell into which I poured my own emotions? No, I refused to believe so. That was not what I saw in her. She was not a mere sociopathic mimic going through the motions because she’d once decided to save Evelyn, no matter how weird her value system or how she’d arrived at it. I wanted to know, I was dying to understand her completely. Why had she never told me the reality about when she’d met Evelyn? Embarrassment? Trauma?

Maybe I should just trust her, and ask.

“You really are welcome to stay, by the way,” Evelyn mumbled after a while, and I realised she’d been drifting off, half-awake with her head back on the pillows. “I would actually appreciate the company, haven’t had any in a long time. Just ... I should get out of this skirt first. Get under the covers and hold my hand? If that’s not ... too much to ask.”

“Haven’t had any in a long time?”

“Ahhh. Well.” Evelyn roused herself a little, rubbing her eyes. “This is what Raine and I used to do. Platonic, though, you understand? Back when we first met. We shared a bed, for months. It was ... it

helped.” She took a deep breath. “I haven’t needed it in years, but even I’m not terribly comfortable about what we’re going to do tomorrow.”

I considered Evelyn’s face, the tired dark rings around her eyes, the sleepy flush in her cheeks, her mass of blonde hair loose over one shoulder.

“You don’t need me here,” I said. “You need Twil.”

She frowned. “Oh, for-”

“No, I’m serious. She’s got to be here tomorrow morning anyway, why not call her over to stay the night?”

“Because I can’t-” Evelyn snapped,

“Then I’ll call her for you. As a thank you. We’re going to Carcosa tomorrow. If not tonight, when?”

“Don’t say that,” Evelyn hissed, scowling. “Don’t say that like we’re all going to die. The point is to do this without anyone dying.” She folded her arms, glared at me, then down into her lap, then at her mobile phone lying on her desk next to her laptop, then back at me again. “If you want to thank me, you can have a word with your pair of admirers. If Raine and Zheng go at each other in the middle of the expedition, if they won’t work together ... ” Evelyn shook her head. “We’re doomed.”

“I’ll talk to Raine. I mean, I’ll try to talk to Raine. She’ll understand, for our safety if nothing else.”

“And Zheng?”

I swallowed, heart skipping a beat. “I’m not certain I can. She’s been practically ignoring me all day. I might ... might lose myself. Maybe with Raine there ... ”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted.

We fell into silence again. I slowly slid my legs off the bed, eyes on Evelyn’s phone. “I’m going to call Twil. You don’t even have to invite her into bed, just stay up for an hour or two watching anime together. What’s that one with the magical girls who get married at the end? Show her that one. Maybe she’ll get the message.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and huffed. She couldn’t look at me, only down at her lap.

“Carcosa tomorrow,” she muttered, then: “Do it.”

So I got up, and called Twil.

At least somebody would have a nice night before we visited the library beyond reality.

nothing more impotent –

11.2

“We stick together,” was the last thing Evelyn said, before all seven of us stepped through the gateway to the Library of Carcosa.

= =

She had explained to me earlier that morning, after we’d completed the initial experiment, that this expedition was probably best carried out with as few people as possible, to avoid both unwanted attention and the ‘proliferation of uncontrolled variables’.

“By that, may I assume you mean one of us doing something stupid?” I’d asked.

“What other variables are there?” Evelyn had grumbled. “I don’t even want to take Twil along, let alone your giant zombie. Too many things to go wrong. We need absolute discipline out there. Absolute.”

According to Evelyn, the classical ideal was a single intrepid mage, plumbing the occult mysteries and risking alchemical transformation of the self; luckily for us, Evelyn did not possess her mother’s arrogance, and even if she did, her spinal problems and uneven gait and reliance on a walking stick rather precluded a solo journey, let alone a return trip lugging a sack of books back to reality.

Three companions seemed a much more sensible number – Evelyn, to locate the books and navigate the hazards; Praem, as muscle and protection and packhorse; and Lozzie, guest-starring as an emergency escape button.

Neat, clean, straightforward; of course that plan did not survive thirty seconds.

The experiment itself had gone off without a hitch. After the mortifying breakfast during which Raine had insulted and provoked Zheng, after the kitchen had been given a proper clean and we’d all had some time to prepare, we’d gathered in the workshop to watch

Lozzie perform a miracle. Myself, Raine, and Evelyn, with Praem standing nearby on silent watch.

Raine had donned her head-to-toe riot gear just in case, while Zheng had vanished off somewhere – probably to fish the remains of her deer carcass out of the bin and snatch a few more mouthfuls – and Twil was still dozing upstairs, apparently in Evelyn’s bedroom. Heavy sleeper, or sore from the night? I filed that question away for then, too many butterflies in my stomach to concentrate on anything except Lozzie, bouncing on the balls of her feet in excitement, and Evelyn, activating the gateway to the Library of Carcosa.

‘Activating the gateway’ makes it sound absurdly grand.

What Evelyn actually did was take a few lengths of masking tape and stick Kimberly’s and Lozzie’s corrections over the right places on the cacophonous mandala, which surrounded the door-shaped blank section of plaster in the middle. Then she used the tip of a black marker pen to connect the various magic circles and esoteric inscriptions over the empty strips of masking tape.

It all felt very slapdash. Almost inappropriate. Part of me would have been more comfortable if Evelyn wore midnight black robes, chanted some Latin, and used blood instead of masking tape.

That part of me was very silly, and should have been relieved that my magical best friend was happy to do magecraft in her pajamas.

The gate didn’t care either, it opened all the same.

Blank plaster slid through that mesmerising process of shedding matter, first rippling black and empty, then filling in with shape and shade and shadow – and precious little light or colour. Unlike the otherworldly luminous fog of the Sharrowford Cult’s castle, Carcosa glowed with no clean light, only dank amorphous shadows cast by distant starlight, caught on tumbled mounds of discarded books. A sort of cliff or gigantic wall loomed over all, hazy with both distance and gloom.

Evelyn stepped quickly back from the open gateway, half taking shelter behind Praem while pretending she wasn’t doing so. Raine went tense, eyes glued on the other world, the other side, Outside. I endured a wave of vertigo as I stared into the bleak vision through the doorway. It was like looking down into a void beneath the

Earth's crust, a dark forgotten place full of half-glimpsed unspeakable creatures and forbidden secrets. The size and scale of the distant cliff-face – which I already knew was not a cliff – made my head spin. Had to squeeze my eyes shut, then open them again in sudden fear that something might crawl through the gateway while I wasn't looking.

"It's fine," Evelyn said, too hard, either to herself or my fear or Raine's tension. "Nothing can come through from that side to this, not unless I directly permit."

She placed much faith in her own separate additions to the gateway mandala. Evelyn had spent the last few days adding wards around the edge – "The good shit. My mother's shit," she'd called it, working from old, leather-bound notebooks I'd never seen before. Stark clear white, seven neat magic circles painted directly onto the wall, each of which incorporated the Fractal.

The spider-servitors guarded this side of the gate as well, one hanging above, one clinging to the wall. I trusted Evelyn's wards far more than I trusted their ability to stop anything from Outside.

"But the faster we get this test done, the better." Evelyn turned to Lozzie. "Lauren. If you please?"

"You're up, Loz," Raine said. "Break a leg."

I almost reached out to stop the experiment.

But Lozzie was ready. She'd giggled and flapped her poncho, completely at ease with this, and had dutifully flounced through the gateway all by herself. On the other side of the threshold that ancient wooden floor soaked up the sound of her footsteps as she tripped and hopped to a halt.

"Not too far," I said, my voice cracking. "Lozzie, that's far enough."

"Yes, that's quite enough," Evelyn added.

Lozzie paused where she stood, and looked up in smiling glee. Her simple childlike wonder made my heart seize up. She looked so small in that window into infinity, and I was gripped by a vision of her skipping happily off into the deep gloom of the great library, swallowed up by the vastness of Outside. I lurched to my feet, convinced she was about to dive back into her natural environment she'd been so deprived of, stuck here in reality with us. I wouldn't

see her again for weeks, months. Maybe never, unless I followed.

“Lozzie, don’t ...”

She turned to look back through the gateway, back at me, and blinked in gentle confusion.

And vanished.

Just gone. No ‘poof’ sound, no rush of air, no wiggle of her nose. The reality of magic, of hyperdimensional mathematics, was so bland in its cruelty.

“Oh, thank God for that,” Evelyn exploded with a huge sigh. She turned to Raine and I with the kind of savagely triumphant smile she didn’t often have a chance to enjoy, and even included Praem as she spoke, though the doll-demon did not react. “It works, damn my eyes, it works! There’s no way we could risk a full expedition otherwise. This is wonderful news. We can do it, we really can.”

“Seems so,” Raine said, more guarded, then noticed all was not well. “Heather?”

Panic clawed up my throat. I had to wring my hands together to stop them shaking as I glanced around the workshop.

Evelyn caught it and frowned too. “Wait, where’s Lauren? She was supposed to come straight back.”

“Ah,” went Raine. We all shared a glance, frozen in time.

Then – “Here!” Lozzie chirped.

And her elfin little face appeared around the doorway to the kitchen, sporting a lip-biting smile and a cheeky wink.

Evelyn sighed softly and rolled her eyes, Raine laughed and squeezed my shoulder, but I felt like my heart was about to burst with shaking, quivering relief. My knees almost went and Raine had to hold me by the elbow.

“No trouble, then?” Evelyn asked, and gave Praem the nod to deactivate the gateway. The doll-demon obediently stepped forward and pulled off one of the taped-up pieces of mandala. The gateway collapsed instantly back into regular old blank plaster.

“None!” Lozzie said as she skipped into the room.

She stopped on tiptoes, took a very theatrical double-bow to her adoring public, and followed it up with a single floaty curtsy with the hem of her pastel poncho.

“Lozzie,” I was saying, raising my shaking hands to her. “Lozzie, here, please-”

Praem clapped, once, twice, then carried on extremely slowly. From anyone else the applause would have seemed sarcastic. But Lozzie twirled her poncho like a matador or a dashing heroine in a pantomime, and dipped her head in another bow for Praem, with much flourishing of both arms.

“Thank you, thank you, big softy-soft!” she said. I couldn’t help but laugh through my easing panic.

“Encore,” Praem intoned.

“What? No!” I said, then hiccuped loud enough to make Evelyn flinch. “No, please no encore, Lozzie, no. Praem, really.”

“Ahhh?” Lozzie blinked at me several times, batting her eyelashes and tilting her head from side to side like a curious puppy.

“Lozzie, Lozzie you were supposed to come straight back home,” I said, trying not to scold. “Straight back to this room. What was that? You scared me.”

“I went to check on my round table!” she said in a bouncing rush. “They all need to stay in place unless I tell them to but I was worried they’d fall over or get bored but I don’t think they can get bored anymore, which is good for us, but maybe bad for them, but hopefully it doesn’t matter because they were all at the end of their lifespans anyway and offered to help, sooooooooo.” She bit her lip and rolled her eyes upward, thinking about elsewhere. But she did wander over to me and allow me to take her hands.

Her exposed skin felt sun-warmed. No sun today, not in Sharroford.

“Your knights, hey?” Raine asked. “Heather told me all about that. Wouldn’t mind meeting them, myself.”

“Oh, that’s even better,” Evelyn said with sudden shrewd interest. “Even better, yes. Translocation from sphere to sphere Outside works for you, as normal?”

Lozzie nodded and gave a great big thumbs up. “No hands!”

“Then we’re ready,” Evelyn said. “We go to Carcosa. Two hours to eat lunch and prep.”

No dead hands, Lozzie meant. No boney grip on her ankles to keep her from Slipping, not when moving *from* Outside *to* our reality.

The hypothesis had plagued us for weeks, that perhaps the unexplained effect that stopped Lozzie and I from Slipping our own bodies Outside would not apply the other way around. We couldn’t leave here, but if we found another route Outside – say, via decades of magical work stolen and borrowed and cracked open in the form of a working trans-dimensional physical gateway – then we could, if we needed, run home.

And Lozzie had just confirmed it worked Outside-to-Outside as well. She’d jumped from Carcosa to wherever she kept her Knights, then back to our reality, straight into the kitchen in drizzly, cold Sharrowford on a Saturday morning.

Which meant it was time to borrow some library books.

Lozzie was under no illusions about the reasons for her inclusion. She was the emergency exit. If anything went badly wrong out there, Lozzie’s purpose was to call a sing-along circle, get everybody holding hands, then click her heels and chant ‘no place like home’.

Except now it was seven of us, not three. So that sing-along circle might be a little more logistically unsound.

My mere existence had broken the delicate balance of a three-person team. I was not going to let three of my friends, the people who made up my world, step Outside without me, no matter what platitudes Evelyn spoke about stealth and the importance of small groups. I desperately did not want to go, certainly not without the cushioning safety of a dream. The very idea made me want to go hide in the bathroom and purge my guts in terror.

But if they met anything they couldn’t deal with, anything truly alien and impossible – which was likely, out there beyond reality – my friends would need hyperdimensional mathematics.

They would need me.

And after all, it was my sister they were all helping to save.

The unique social conditions of our house then fell in a domino effect. If I went, Raine was coming too, and Zheng. Nobody was silly enough to try to stop either of them. If I was going along, then Lozzie needed to come anyway – what if I used hyperdimensional mathematics and passed out, but we still needed to escape? Twil could not be denied either, not after what had transpired behind closed doors between her and Evelyn last night.

Tenny, at least, was not joining us. Far too risky, and irresponsible of us too. She might get distracted or fly off into the vast canyon between Carcosa's billion bookshelves. Instead she was locked in Lozzie's bedroom upstairs, with a large compliment of children's picture books, several tubs of play-doh which she had already fashioned into a bizarre multi-armed sculpture, and instructions with Kim to visit her as often as possible. Lozzie had explained to our giant puppy-moth in painstaking detail that she had to be good, and we'd be home soon.

We'd saved some chocolate eclairs for her as well. They sweetened the deal.

So there we were, about to plunge ourselves into the literal stuff of my nightmares, the inhuman depths beyond our reality, Outside, to locate a trio of books that may not even exist. With a pair of newly-minted maybe-lovers who couldn't even talk about it in public, a maybe-human girl who thought hell-dimensions were the coolest thing ever and needed them in order to stay awake, and two of the most dangerous people I knew – one of whom I slept with every night – sniping over me at every opportunity.

We were not exactly a professional team. We weren't even Alexander Lilburne's proverbial 'Mickey Mouse operation'.

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"We stick together."

Evelyn enunciated the words as if her voice could carve stone.

"Course we stick together," Raine agreed with a grin and a wink and a click of her tongue, busy checking her jacket pockets one last time. I watched as she pulled out her pistol, silently counted the remaining bullets, and slipped it away again.

The rain outdoors had picked up, a static on the roof and against the windows, cold fingers working their way in through unseen

cracks. Twil was limbering up, rotating her arms and touching her toes as if we were about to run a cross-country race. I'd gotten out of my chair, exchanged a few meaningless murmured animal noises with Lozzie, and held her hand very tightly as my heart raced behind the thin cage of my ribs. Phantom limbs tried to hug her closer, wanted to hold her tight against me for reasons I couldn't examine while gripped with nervous anticipation. Praem had turned to the gateway, laden down with our supplies, and Zheng had merely levered herself off the wall, ready to follow.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Evelyn drawled. "More precisely, what I mean-"

"Come on, don't take my horseplay for backstabbing," Raine said, then shot a wink at Zheng. "Not that I'd stab you in the back, grease-face. If I went for you, hypothetically speaking, you'd see me coming. Full-frontal style."

Zheng raised an eyebrow. For the two-dozenth time today, I hid my face in one hand, mortified. Lozzie giggled softly behind a sleeve-end, gave me a sideways hug of solidarity, then put her own hand over my face also.

"You cut that shit out as soon as we're through that gate," Evelyn snapped at Raine. "Or I will turn this expedition around, so help me God."

"It's helping, isn't it?" Raine said softly.

I almost did a double-take at her, at the subtle smirk beneath the shifting sands of her face. Raine zipped up her motorcycle jacket with a sudden sharp *ziiiiiirrrrrpp*, and wiggled her eyebrows at me. I stared, uncertain if I'd read that right. Was all her aggression just another front?

"What I mean," Evelyn raised her voice, missing the secrets beneath Raine's face. "Is no running off. No breaking off from the group. No hunting. No heroics. No. Running. Off."

"Wanna put a leash on me?" Twil smirked.

"Yes."

Twil's mouth fell open. A slow blush climbed her cheeks. "Uh ... um ..."

"I want to rope us all together, like rock climbers," Evelyn said, and

I couldn't tell if the flirtatious joke had simply gone over her head. "But if we do run into ... *difficulties*, then certain parties will require more freedom of movement. If that was not a concern, then yes, Twil, I would have you on a very short rope tied around my waist."

"Oof," went Raine. "Twil, what have you got yourself into?"

"Uh ... Eevee ... um ... I-I don't-" Twil cleared her throat, on the verge of losing something important.

"There is a concept, in deep-sea diving," Evelyn went on, either oblivious or uncaring, "called the 'incident pit'."

Raine laughed. "Sounds filthy."

"It's a metaphor, you gutter-brained ape."

"How do you know about deep-sea diving, anyway?" Raine asked.

"Because knowing these things is my purpose. Because it's the same metaphor my mother liked." She tutted. "At the top of the incident pit, small mistakes or events slide you down the edge of an emergency. The further into the pit, the more difficult it becomes to extract yourself." Evelyn drew one hand along an imaginary downward curve, indicating the sloping side of an allegorical pit. "One may not even realise one is sliding downward until it's too late to correct, and that is what we must avoid. Small mistakes must be corrected ASAP. If one of us detaches from the group, or gets lost, we risk sending another to find them, and we slide down the edge of that pit, very far from home."

The joking and horseplay faded away, replaced by the static of the rain and the shiver inside my bones.

"What's at the bottom of this metaphor pit?" Twil asked.

"For a deep-sea diver, death by drowning," Evelyn replied. "For us, Outside? Probably worse."

"Plan for the unexpected, wizard," Zheng rumbled, and opened one hand toward the waiting gateway, the shadows and shapeless mounds beyond. "What if."

"Then I will do my utmost best to keep this gateway open as long as I can, from this side." Evelyn pursed her lips as if sucking a lemon, and glared at Zheng. "Even for you. If you do get separated, if you do run off, make for this doorway. If you can."

Zheng grunted and tilted her chin up by a fraction of a degree. Not quite a nod. She blinked heavily and turned her eyes on me in quiet affection, and I avoided her gaze.

“We stick together.” Evelyn repeated. “Stick together, follow my instructions, and we’ll all be home by dinnertime.”

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The Library of Carcosa was a delicious nightmare.

We almost didn’t make it a dozen feet from the gateway.

Raine and Zheng went first – ‘taking point’ as Raine called it – followed by Twil quick on their heels, then Evelyn stomping through, Lozzie and I in tow behind her, still holding each others’ hands. Praem brought up the rear.

My previous two visits to the great library beyond reality had been clouded by dream-haze and pain-panic respectively, but this third time offered no such cushion. I was a tiny scrap of soft-bodied flesh, risking a scurry from my rock-hole into this open void. The drum of raindrops on earthly windows vanished the moment I stepped across, replaced by cloying silence.

Evelyn’s gateway emerged onto what I thought of as the library’s ground floor – the bottom of a wide canyon at least a mile across. The floor itself was made from dark age-polished wooden boards, so sturdy and solid and flush that perhaps they extended downward forever. Discarded books lay heaped in low dunes and carpeted the floor like fallen leaves, thousands within eyesight alone, likely billions of them further out in the shifting, flickering shadows, piled atop each other and tumbled over in ragged fans of torn pages and bent bindings.

The gateway had disgorged us into a sheltered cove between several book-drifts, blessed us with a patch of clear ground, and a single way forward into the open space of the canyon floor.

Unlike my solo visit, however, we had not emerged into the centre of the canyon, but at the foot of one of the two parallel walls. Evelyn’s gateway evidently required a flat, upright surface on which to manifest, and had chosen the very base of the dizzying sixty feet of sheer flat wooden cliff-face which rose up from the canyon floor.

Staircases, switchback and spiral and sweeping and stuttered and

stricken and split, climbed those sixty sheer feet, some strong and sturdy, others spit and spindle, up and up and up, to the first of the library floors.

And the floors went up forever.

“Hooooo shit,” Twil was the first to speak, and she could barely get the words out. White in the face, eyes wide, cold sweat on skin gone waxen. She’d made the mistake of turning around and looking up, at the infinite cliff-face of library stacks.

“Don’t ... ” Evelyn said, breathless. “Don’t look up.”

The canyon’s far wall was the same. Awe and terror drew my gaze inexorably upward, past the limits of my laughable intentions.

A dozen, two dozen, three, four dozen floors, the mind instinctively attempted to count, but lost track as the library vanished upward into the haze of distance and shadows. Looking left and right was even worse. The floors extended forever in both directions.

Each floor was built inside the canyon walls, – or was it that the wooden floors themselves, each separated by another twenty feet of vertical wooden cliff, formed the canyon? A bad question; that way lay madness. This place was simply impossible to build.

Comprehending the geography or geometry was not an exercise for the human mind, because we would not enjoy the answers we might find.

Perhaps, once, the library had been well-organised, whole, and clean. Once.

The Library of Carcosa was lit by hundreds of millions of fist-sized glowing rocks set into the walls, and the swaying lanterns of the inhabitants, but massive sections lay dark, bleeding shadow across whole floors, or plunged into half-lit flickering twilight. Some floors had fallen away, crashed through those beneath, or been gouged and scarred by some titanic flailing. Others had been repaired, routed around, linked up with the spidery mass of walkways that crisscrossed the open air, an endless mass of dead-end ledges, creaking balconies, and thin rails. A few of the thickest walkways even spanned the entire canyon itself, great constructions braced against the walls with single wooden logs so thick they could not have come from anything remotely like a terrestrial tree. Dust lay almost everywhere, in some places so thick it formed a grey

blanket, cut through by worn trails. Hanging cages dotted the walkways – one of the few items here made of metal – and contained oddly inhuman skeletons.

The scale of the place was all wrong. Humans did not build on this scale, and it was not for us. It wasn't even for the squid-faced librarian creatures. A cluster of them had noticed us, three floors up the canyon wall beneath which we'd emerged, and were busy peering downward. They were alien and weird, even at this distance, but, even the most xenophobic eyes would see they weren't any better suited to this place than us. They were just as small and as vulnerable as we.

If the Library of Carcosa had a builder, or an intended patron, they were too far beyond our understanding to even imagine.

But the books.

Oh, the books.

I almost broke into tears.

What little we could see from down there already amounted to billions of volumes, some neatly flush in their bookcases, others overflowing in great avalanches of paper, yet more stacked in little towers that I recognised as a very human habit, or laid out and separated on trolleys made of dark wood. A few were propped open and covered in dust, on neat wooden reading tables, as if abandoned there decades ago, their readers never returned. Others were barely recognisable as books at all, from strange metal hexagons mounted on plinths to jars of shifting, multi-coloured liquid.

Past the terror and the scale and our purpose, Heather the bibliophile, the budding scholar, the Heather that loved books and fairy tales, she was almost seduced by the inherent romance of this great unknown library.

The rest of me did not agree.

The abyssal half of me hated it here. The vast open space scanned as threat. Nowhere to hide. Too *big*. My ape-brain agreed with quivering enthusiasm. Phantom limbs twitched to cover every angle at once, drawing dull pain from old bruises in my flanks, screaming at me to scuttle back through the gateway to Sharrowford or haul myself up the sheer side of the library-cliff and hide, hide, *hide*

among the stacks.

I almost did, or at least tried to – but then Lozzie squeezed my hand, my palm clammy and cold. She anchored me, just as my legs twitched to bolt.

“Heathy,” she hissed. “Stay. Stay. Good girl.”

I had to stare at her and blink several times before she resolved from a mass of meaningless flesh and flaps, back into my Lozzie, almost surprised to find her there. She smiled for me, that elfin little smile on a mischievous face. I managed a nod, squeezed her hand tighter in mind. “Right ... right, yes. Can’t run away, we’re here for Maisie. Yes. We must get moving, we ... oh. Oh dear.”

Nobody was moving.

Lozzie – and to an extent, I – were the only ones immune to the alien scale of the library stacks.

“Is that the ... the ... like,” Twil was still looking upward, her breath shaking as she tired in vain to sound normal. She was plastered with cold sweat. “Is that the ... the librarians? Librarians. Heh, heh, yeah, ‘squid-faces’ was right. Sick. Yeah, sick. Sick shit. Sick. Sick.”

Raine was trying to keep her gaze low and her shield up, but I knew her body language too well not to read the shock in every muscle. She suddenly seemed absurd, a hermit crab wrapped in a borrowed shells that would not protect her from sharks out here. Zheng stood a pace or two ahead of her, at the mouth of the little cove of books, alternately baring her teeth and flaring her nostrils, a predator confronted by a creature it could not understand.

Evelyn stared in mute, overt awe, lost in the sheer size of the library. Her breathing had turned rough. She kept swallowing.

A glance back at the gateway – at the warm soft light of Evelyn’s magical workshop just the other side of reality – and I caught Praem just as frozen. That I hadn’t expected. That almost lurched me straight into panic. She was standing there with her head tilted upward, milk-white blank eyes no wider or narrower than they always were, but she was looking, and lost.

It was extremely important to me in that moment that Praem, of all beings, was not incapable in this place.

“Praem,” I hissed.

“Praem-y,” Lozzie joined.

“Praem.” Harder, a snap. “Pay attention.”

Praem’s head snapped down, and without a word she began what she was meant to be doing. She took one of the old hiking sticks and rammed the sharp metal point into the library floorboards, right next to the gateway. Then she cracked one of the long-life survival glow-sticks, and duct-taped it to the top of the hiking pole.

A light-pole, to guide us home.

She turned to stare at me, expressionless and unreadable. I managed to nod a thank you, then hiccuped twice. That light-pole was so tiny. That was meant to guide us home? In all this vast darkness, this giant catalogue, a cheap camping glow-stick stamped with ‘made in China’ and ‘non-toxic’ was meant to guide us back to safety? We were fools.

Above us, miles up in the overhead gloom, a great shape shifted like a limb passing across a darkened window. Out in the canyon floor, something scuttled across the books, sending pages skittering across the wood. Deeper off in the library, a sound that might have been a laugh reached us at the very edge of hearing. Silence lay on us like a shroud.

I hiccuped again, hard enough to hurt.

“I thought the library was cool,” Lozzie said, her voice all but soaked up by the silence.

“It ... it is, Lozzie, it is. Sort of. We can’t do this, not like this. Raine!” I hissed, sharp as I could.

“He-hey? Heather?” Raine’s head twitched round, eyes wide, a little pale – and on a hair-trigger of terrible violence. She was ready to beat something to death.

“Focus on yourself,” I told her, voice shaking. “On your body. On the things nearby. On me, if you have to. Don’t look at the difficult things. That’s how I always dealt with it, when I Slipped. Don’t look. Don’t think about it. Focus on surviving. I need you, Raine. I need you here, and ... together. Right now.”

The words cost me, but Raine repaid the debt tenfold. She stepped

back, right next to me, quickly propped her home-made riot shield against her hip and took my shoulder in one hand.

“Right you are, boss,” she said. She blew out a long, slow breath and pulled a very artificial but very welcome grin. “Focus on your immediate surroundings. On me. Cool. Here, yo, touch my hand, here.” She wormed her free hand down into mine. “This is real, I’m real, and right in front of you. Look,” she nodded, grin turning genuine. “Lozzie’s here too. Say hi, Loz.”

“Hi Loz,” Lozzie chirped, and smothered a giggle.

“Good,” I said. “Good. Okay, we’re all here. We’re all here.”

“That we are.” Raine puffed another sigh, a sharp one. “Heather, I gotta admit, I am only just keeping it together. This place is *whacko*. But I’m doing it the same way I deal with everything, like you said. Focus close, on what matters. Eyes on the prize.” She winked, and squeezed my hand, and I saw she had broken out in cold sweat too. “Fuck this place.”

“Fuck it, woo,” Lozzie said softly.

“Lozzie!” I tutted, grasping another anchor of normality. “Language.”

“You two both stick real close to me, okay?” Raine said, with a sidelong glance at Zheng’s back. The demon-host was still standing there, issuing a silent, wide eyed challenge at this entire dimension. “I want you right on my heels, the whole time we’re here.”

“Ahhhhh? But Rainey-Raines, it’s fine here,” Lozzie said.

“Do it for Heather,” Raine replied, not unkindly.

“Oh-kaaaaaay.” Lozzie pouted, then puffed her cheeks out. Another anchor, and I mastered the panic attack I’d been trying to ignore for the last few minutes, crushed it down inside me.

I was Outside, but for the first time ever I had my friends with me. We were together, we had a plan, and it was going to work. Whatever Raine had been doing all yesterday, she was still my rock. She would stand in front of me and we’d make each other safe. She’d known to repeat back to me the very reassurances I’d offered her. I leaned on her, she leaned on me.

“Hey, left hand.” Raine raised her voice ever so slightly – soaked up

by the silent gloom – and called to Zheng. “You gonna be alright?”

Zheng did not answer. I noticed she was curling and uncurling the fingers of both hands, making and unmaking fists over and over.

“Zheng,” I said. “I need you. Are you here?”

“With you, shaman,” Zheng purred, so soft it was almost lost in the heavy silence of the library. Raine shrugged and tapped her temple in a ‘she-be-crazy’ gesture.

“There’s no time for that now,” I whispered to Raine.

“Be careful of her, while we’re here,” Raine whispered back.

I did not have time to unpack that, Raine’s jealousy and rivalry and whatever she thought of Zheng. Instead I turned to the person who really did worry me the most.

“Evee,” I hissed. “Evelyn. Take charge.”

“Mm?” Evelyn looked round, quivering gently as she leaned heavily on her walking stick – and I realised with a lurch in my stomach that the fear on her face was far outweighed by awe and hunger.

“Take charge,” I repeated. “Or I will.”

She blinked three times, like a roughly awakened sleepwalker. “Ah ... yes, yes, right. Right.” She suddenly glanced around with a sense of bird-like urgency, sucking on her teeth and inhaling deeply.

“Right, we all made it through. Nobody venture further than this, not yet. Zheng, you stay exactly where you are, not one step further forward before we’ve tested the ground. I need the nuts. Praem, get the light by the- oh, you’ve already done it, good, good, well done. Get over here then, right here, next to me.” Evelyn clicked her fingers by her side, summoning her doll-demon familiar to her side.

“Squid-faces are on the move,” Twil announced.

“What? What now?” Evelyn followed Twil’s gaze upward, to the squid-faced librarians leaning over a banister to peer at us. A large group of them was peeling off from their little huddle, heading for the nearest stairs down, only a little over thirty or forty feet to our left, visible just over the top of one of the book dunes. “Oh, them.”

“What do we do?” Twil asked, wide-eyed at Evelyn, still pale and unsure.

"They are the least of our worries, but keep an eye on them." She clicked her fingers again. "Raine, watch them. Twil, watch the nearest stairs. They'll approach us as soon as they can, and we don't move from this spot until they do, we have to deal first."

"Right." Twil swallowed, nodding slowly. An order from Evelyn apparently went quite far with her. "Right, I can do that. Can do. Will do. Stairs, right. Watch the stairs."

"Are you in charge now, Eevee?" I asked.

"Yes, yes," she hissed back, eyes everywhere at once, on the ground beyond our little shelter of book-drifts, on Praem offering her the first of the cloth-wrapped metal nuts, on Zheng standing there staring out across the canyon, on Twil staring off to the left to watch the stairs. "I'm sorry, I ... I know, you've described all this in the past, Heather, but ... it's ... " She sighed heavily and shook her head. "It's beautiful."

"Kind of, yes," I said, but I frowned at Evelyn, at the way she marvelled at this place.

"It's fucking weird is what it is," Twil grunted over her shoulder. "Sounds don't carry. S'too big."

Evelyn weighed the first of the cloth-wrapped nuts in one hand, looking at the book-strewn floor beyond where Zheng stood. "I'll do the first one, but I don't have the arm nor the aim for this once we get going. This is your job, Praem. A big responsibility, you understand?"

"I trust you, you trust me," Praem sang softly, even her clear, bell-like tones muted by the enforced library silence.

"Right, right," Evelyn said, and had to rub her eyes for a moment.

"Take your time, Eevee," Raine said. "Deep breaths."

"Oh, shut up," Evelyn hissed back. "I'm fine. We're fine. We can do this, it's going to be fine, I'm just ... " She shook her head slowly, allowing herself another awe-tainted glance up the vast canyon-side of library floors. For a heart-stopping moment her gaze seemed to slip away entirely.

"Eevee," I said. "Stay here."

"My mother would have gouged out her own eyes for this," she

murmured, and then a nasty little smile worked its way onto her lips.

“Ew,” went Lozzie.

“I’m not joking,” Evelyn mused, voice low and dark. “This place, places like this. This is why the Sharrowford Cult were trying to re-create somebody like Lozzie, by feeding children to the Star under the castle, why Edward Lilburne was so eager to get Lozzie back. She finished the unsolved portion of the gate equation, after all. All they have is the one to take them to the fog dimension, not truly Outside, not like this. Precise access to Outside opens up such vast vistas of power and possibility.” Evelyn let out a slow, unsteady sigh. “If she could see me now.”

“Getting creepy there, Eevee,” Raine said.

“Oh, don’t be-”

“Yes, Eevee,” I cleared my throat. “Please, don’t ... don’t get lost out here. You said it yourself.”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, I’m hardly going to lose sight of our purpose here. Excuse me for feeling moved. I’m not going to turn into a megalomaniac, relax. Actually don’t relax, that’s a bad idea here. Stay ... stay ‘frosty’, as Raine might say.” She cleared her throat too, awkwardly. “It’ll be easier on all of us once we get up into the floors themselves, but down here is a little too much for the senses to take, myself included. Indeed.”

“There’s no horizon,” said Twil.

Her voice was empty.

We should have realised something was wrong. Twil hadn’t reacted to any of what Evelyn had said, hadn’t joined in with the good-natured ribbing to help talk her down from the edge of rapture. Twil’s voice trickled out, a broken mumble of shuddering confusion. When she turned to us she was covered in cold sweat, her pupils dilated wide. Her form flickered with wisps of spirit-matter, werewolf transformation starting and stopping as she shook all over, baring her teeth, panting too fast.

“Oh hell,” Evelyn said. “You blithering idiot, what did you do?”

Twil raised a hand and pointed off to the left, down the length of the canyon. “It goes- goes- goes- goes-”

“The *laangren* is overwhelmed, wizard,” Zheng purred without turning around. “No place for monkeys or wolves or Gods here.”

“Oh no,” Lozzie said, distraught. “Fuzzy, no. Fuzzy, no no.”

“Goes on forever,” Twil finally squeezed out. “Ever. Ever. How can there not be a horizon? How can it go on forever?”

Twil pressed her lips together and made a muffled ‘nnnnn’ sound inside her mouth, and I knew this place had already come within a hair’s breadth of breaking her.

She had, in fact, followed Evelyn’s instructions to the letter, and craned up on her tiptoes to watch the nearest of the stairways up to the first of the library catalogue floors, waiting for our welcoming committee to pick their way down to the ground. I could see them now over Twil’s shaking shoulder – lean, ragged, greyish figures creeping down the stairs and peering at us with a disconcerting lack of eyes – and I also glimpsed what had upset her.

Past the stairs, past the book-dunes, across the scattered volumes, there was no horizon.

Perhaps there was a wall, a million miles away, but the length of the library canyon simply faded into haze with incredible distance. Whatever we stood on, it did not curve, even on the scale of a planet.

The human mind is extraordinarily adaptable, but that wet circuitry requires time to adjust, or must be born knowing nothing but the conditions into which it is thrust. It was never the gribbly beasties or the blood and guts that got me out here, Outside, during all those Slips across my teenage decade; it was the experiences like that, simple facts of space and scale that the human mind did not evolve for.

“How would- would anyway- would-” Twil was struggling now, almost hyperventilating. “How was this even built?”

“It wasn’t,” I said. “Twil, don’t think about that. Don’t think about it.”

“Fuzzy, touch! Touch!” Lozzie stretched out her hand, but Twil didn’t even look at it.

“I-I can’t- oh fuck me this is weird. This is-” Twil broke into a panting chuckle. “Why I am laughing? Why am I laughing?! There’s

no horizon!”

Evelyn took two quick paces toward Twil, and I winced at an impending slap.

But to my incredible surprise, Evelyn reached up with one hand and grabbed Twil by the back of the neck. She drew the panicking werewolf in close, so close they were almost touching, unafraid of the flickering outline of wolf-snout inches from her own face. A quick, furtive brush of hands passed between them, and Evelyn whispered something into Twil’s ear, soft and lost amid the great silence of the library. When she pulled back, Twil blinked at her several times, took a deep breath, and nodded. She mastered the panic-shift, and was all human again.

“I’m serious,” Evelyn said, and looked deeply uncomfortable as she glanced back at the rest of us. “If you can’t, then I won’t ask you to. Value yourself more than my-”

“Nah. Fuck that.” Twil grinned, shook herself like a dog, and flexed her hands as she shifted them into werewolf claws. “Let’s go all the way, Eevee.”

Evelyn blushed an incandescent red.

“Have we got time for this, you two?” Raine asked with a laugh.

“Not that I’m complaining. Get it on, yeah, good for you, but maybe later.”

“Shut up,” Evelyn snapped at her. She turned away with a flourish of her walking stick, and stomped forward to the mouth of the sheltered cove of book-drifts, but no further than where Zheng already stood. She shot a sidelong look at the zombie, then seemed to mentally put her to one side. “Our little welcoming committee is on their way, yes, everyone concentrate. Praem, by my side, and get the book ready. Nobody react when the librarians approach. Do not touch them. Do not speak to them. Do not do anything. Leave this to me.”

Twil stepped forward as well, to stand by Evelyn, but Eevee hissed in frustration and tried to wave Twil back with her walking stick; Twil caught the stick in one clawed hand. “I can stand still. At your elbow.”

Evelyn stared at her for moment. “Do your werewolf thing.”

“What? But you said-”

“Don’t question me now,” Evelyn hissed. “Do it.”

In the blink of an eye, a ball of teeth and claw and thick, sleek fur stood at Evelyn’s side. Praem joined a second later. Zheng didn’t bother to move. Lizzie squeezed my hand tight, and Raine lifted her riot-shield.

The librarians arrived.

They were not quite as towering as in my fear-packed memories, the tallest of them perhaps six and a half feet in height, the shortest nearer five, but they were every inch as unsettling as I recalled. Humanoid, lean and stringy, with strange lumps and ripples concealed beneath their long ragged grey sackcloth robes. The flesh of their exposed hands and forearms was a leather-thick grey hide, liver-spotted and calloused.

In place of a face, each librarian creature possessed a mass of ropey grey tentacles, like a twitching beard. Long sea-urchin spines emerged from between the tentacles. No eyes, no mouth, no nose.

About a dozen of the grey librarians came shuffling around the nearest book drift. Many of them carried small stacks of books clutched to their chests, as if we’d interrupted them in the process of sorting and cataloguing. A few held metal lanterns with handfuls of crushed glowing rock inside glass enclosures. Two carried the frightening barbed iron instruments I’d seen on my previous visit, hooked man-catchers on long poles, but they didn’t level the weapons at us or make threatening gestures, despite the way Zheng’s face split with a huge, predatory grin at the sight of them, despite the way she rumbled deep in her throat.

“Do. Not. Fuck. With. Them,” Evelyn hissed at Zheng through her teeth.

“Please, Zheng, please,” I whispered.

“They are nothingness,” Zheng purred. “Appendages. Pitiful. Fit only for tearing off.”

“Don’t,” I hissed.

The librarians drew to a halt, far too close for comfort, only about six feet away from Evelyn. I saw the way she shook slightly with the beating of her own heart, the way Twil eased forward to cover her.

“Praem,” Evelyn hissed, fingers twitching. “Praem, the book. Now.”

Praem dutifully placed a familiar slim volume into Evelyn’s hand. Holding her breath, Evelyn offered the book to the librarians, at arm’s length.

Four of the squid-faced scribes all accepted the offering at the same time, with one hand each, like separate arms of an octopus moving in unnerving unison. Evelyn cringed away from the threat of actual physical contact, but none of their hands touched her. The librarians took the book from her, and three of them gave up their claim as the fourth one held it the book up to his non-face. He – I did think of them as male – seemed to examine the book for a moment, though how he did that without eyes, I had no idea.

He brought the book right up to his face, as a very short-sighted old man might.

Then he ate it.

Or at least, that’s how it looked. He pushed the book into his own face and the roots of his tentacles parted without the slightest resistance or gap around the book’s cover. His entire head swallowed the volume as if he’d fed it into a slot. The tentacles closed behind it with a perfect seal, and it was gone. The whole process took less than a second.

“What the,” I breathed.

“Oh. Ew,” Twil growled through a mouth with too many teeth.

“Shhh,” Evelyn hissed, eyes still glued to the librarians.

Suddenly, a different member of the scribe-huddle began to twitch and shudder. He parted his own robes and reached inside, affording us a momentary glimpse of writhing grey organs and supplementary limbs and dry surfaces shifting over each other. His spindly grey hand returned as he pulled the robes closed, holding up the very same book his counterpart had just swallowed.

Untouched, clean, not covered in slime or half-digested. He turned and handed it to a third librarian, who added it to the stack of books he was carrying.

“That was the one Heather took, so we could aim the gate,” Evelyn said, exhaling with relief. “We have just returned our library book.”

"That is one of the weirdest things I have ever seen," Twil growled again.

"Get used to it," I sighed.

"We can talk now," Evelyn said, softly, but without taking her eyes off the librarians. They still watched us in return. "But they might understand us, so don't insult them or suggest anything untoward."

"They speak English?" Raine asked, an incredulous laugh in her voice.

"I doubt very much that their understanding relies on anything as crude as language. Be polite."

"*Fingers*," Zheng purred. "Cells. Slaves. Tear off your bonds, weaklings."

"Be polite," Evelyn repeated, tight and angry. "And we're not done yet. Pray this works, or we're going to have to do this the hard way, and that will take days."

She tilted her chin upward, took a breath, and spoke three words.

The words *hurt*, like nails down a blackboard, like a scrape across the inside of my skull. Twil flinched and shook herself, Raine winced, and even Zheng blinked once. Lozzie giggled – which was worse. Praem offered a handkerchief for Evelyn, who turned and spat blood.

The squid-faced librarians didn't react.

"Guess that means it didn't work?" Raine asked. "What was that, anyway?"

"Asking directions," Evelyn coughed more blood, then wiped her mouth on the handkerchief. "Where to find books written by creatures like us. Maybe I need to rephrase–"

The librarians all raised a hand each, in unison, as one – and all pointed in totally different directions.

"Great," Twil laughed without humour, a strange sound from a wolf's snout.

"Tch," Evelyn tutted. "The hard way, then. We're going to have to set up a circle. Praem has the necessary–"

“No, watch. Look,” I said.

Slowly, with the inevitability of plants turning toward the sun, the librarians adjusted their decision. One of them moved his hand to match another, then a few more joined this slim consensus. Others wavered in another direction, as if some silent, internal debate was taking place, but eventually the dissenters were swayed to the majority opinion. The last few hold-outs gave in with a rush not to be last, until every squid-face was pointing upward, behind us, up the cliff-face of library floors.

Evelyn craned over her shoulder to look.

“Uh, what floor are they pointing at?” Twil asked.

“Up,” I sighed. “Just up.”

nothing more impotent –

11.3

The short strip of pale cloth twirled like a sycamore seed through the library air, dragged onward by the weight of the heavy iron nut.

Praem's throw was strong, her aim precise. The hard nugget of earthly metal flew straight and true between the rows of towering bookcases, miniature cloth pennant fluttering behind. It hit the floorboards with a muffled *thunk*, the sound soaked up by the shroud of silence and the insulation of thousands of books, then rolled to a stop, at the edge of the wide patch of shadow, almost exactly where Evelyn had indicated.

We all stared, waiting for the reaction.

Well, Zheng didn't. She was too busy pulling predatory faces at our gaggle of squid-faced librarian groupies. Neither did Praem, already palming another nut with a length of cloth tied around it, from the bag on her shoulder. Lozzie wasn't paying attention either, turning her head sideways at the titles on the spines of the nearest books – titles which she certainly could not read, written in erratic looping circles like no human language, on book binding made from a substance too peach-soft to be bone.

"Hold off." Evelyn stalled Praem with a flick of her fingers, eyes glued to the metal nut on the floor.

"Verdict?" Raine murmured.

"I'll tell you what my verdict is," Twil hissed, head hunched low, positioned halfway in front of Evelyn as if something unseen might rush her from the shadows ahead. She eyed the darkness, the bookcases, even the books themselves as if they might launch a surprise attack. "We're not setting one foot in the spooky bloody darkness, that's the verdict, not after the last patch. You're not going in, Eeve. I veto."

"You don't get to veto me," Evelyn said.

"Yeah I fuckin' do. You wanna argue when I can just pick you up?"

I'll bloody well carry you over my shoulder instead. Praem and me'll carry you like a bloody sack."

"Like a sack," Praem joined in.

Evelyn frowned. "Be that as it may."

"That's not even a full sentence!" said Twil. "Why the fuck are we testing? Let's just walk round. Come on."

"Because we might learn something," I said, and held back a resigned sigh.

"Indeed," Evelyn murmured, her voice abstracted and distant, still watching the iron nut ahead of us, on the edge of the shadows.

"Heather understands. There is much to be learnt here."

We were paused, less than fifty feet distant from the next set of staircases, a great branching twisted mass that punched downward through the ceiling above like cancerous capillary growth erupting through brittle tissues. The staircases spread out in an organic swirl, some of them far too thin to actually climb, spindly as bird-bone or dead twig; but others joined together like tributaries flowing into a river, sturdy and wide enough to carry us upward, to the next of the library catalogue floors.

The staircases formed an obvious landmark. We'd spotted the explosion of dark wooden growth as soon as we'd reached this floor, no searching required, impossible to miss even with the protective bulk of Raine and her riot-shield getting in my line of sight all the time.

One obstacle barred our route. The lights were out.

A lake of extinguished darkness extended left and right for perhaps a quarter mile through the jumbled maze of bookcases. The glowing light-rocks up ahead lay empty and dark, as if sucked dry, while the ones we stood parallel with still cast their thin, anaemic light without issue. Going around would cost us more time and energy, but privately I agreed with Twil. We all did, except Zheng, who would gladly fight ghosts, inanimate concepts, or her own reflection if given half a chance.

"Learn what?" Twil growled.

"Something useful," Evelyn drawled. "Perhaps if we learn a few things, this will all go so much faster."

We'd learnt three things so far, over an hour of picking our careful way up the first four floors of the Library of Carcosa.

Lesson one was that while each floor might indeed be of infinite length, at least they possessed finite depth. Our exploratory efforts – mostly in hopes of locating staircases upward other than the rickety risks of the nailed-on walkways which scaled the canyon-side – had revealed a back wall to the library, made of the same solid dark wood as the canyon floor.

Raine estimated that back wall lay about two hundred meters in, or as she put it, "Two football pitches end-to-end, I reckon. Hey, at least there's no windows."

"Do not joke about that," Evelyn had hissed.

Lesson two: getting anywhere was still going to take an incredibly long time.

As soon as we'd mounted that first staircase up from the canyon floor, Evelyn had pulled a notebook from her overflowing coat pockets and began making a map. Or at least notes toward a map, complete with her meticulous tiny handwriting and awful drawing skills.

We'd crept through a silent, dead forest of towering, overflowing bookshelves, beneath a claustrophobic sky of dark wooden ceiling thirty feet up. A knot of squid-faced librarians followed behind, and even our footsteps seemed muffled, so if one glanced away, one felt very much alone. I'd tried to keep my attention on myself, on my feet, or on Lozzie's hand in mine or Raine's back directly in front of me, or at the very least on our group cohesion – I slipped into a mantra of counting off all seven of us again and again, repeating names and making sure everybody was still accounted for – but from the moment we entered the confines of the stacks, Evelyn's gaze dredged the library for every scrap of information.

She muttered estimated distances and measurements under her breath, counted shelves and guessed at numbers of books, scribbled down conjecture, copied fragments of titles, sketched out known areas and here-be-dragons in the dark beyond.

"Why does it matter how many meters wide that is?" Twil had hissed to Evelyn during one stop, as Praem threw clattering iron nuts at the floor ahead of us.

“Because precision is important.”

Evelyn had answered without looking, not until Twil jogged her shoulder, and then she'd stared around as if only just remembering the rest of us were there.

“Evee, that's not an answer, hey?”

“Evelyn?” I said gently.

She cleared her throat. “Precision is important, because if the books we need are two hundred floors up, we're not getting this all done in one trip, are we? I need measurements if I am to make a second gate, if we're going to have to come back and resume the journey from where we left off. The more I understand about how this place is laid out, the easier it will be to find the books, too.”

“Of course, it's okay, we're just trying to ... follow,” I'd said, and sketched her a smile – but she'd already turned back to her notebook, indicating another suspect place for Praem to toss a cloth-pennanted nut.

“Where do all these books come from, anyway?” Twil asked. “How do they get here?”

“Bad question, *laangren*,” Zheng rumbled from behind us.

“Hah,” Evelyn barked without humour. “First sensible thing the zombie's ever said. Yes, bad question, because I don't know the answer. Perhaps the platonic ideal of the library accretes them from elsewhere. Or they're brought here by mages and others, in trade for knowledge. Or perhaps there's some ur-collector. Let's hope we never meet it.”

“Oh, I do hope not,” I added.

“How old do you reckon this place is then?” Twil asked with a scrunch in her face.

“I'm flattered that you think I know everything,” Evelyn said. “Now shut your mouth and keep your eyes peeled. Do your job.”

But the map is not the territory.

Some parts of the library boasted neat lines of bookcases, with all their volumes tucked away, spines flush and clean of dust. Little clusters of librarian creatures tended to inhabit those areas, slouching back and forth with books in their arms, dragging those

heavy wooden carts loaded down with stacked volumes, or carefully feeding hardbacks one-by-one into their own faces for re-cataloguing. They ignored us completely, as if the attention of the group which followed us was enough to satisfy the whole of their interlinked consciousness. We saw nothing to indicate that they possessed any living quarters – if they lived at all, in our sense of the word – and that upset me on a level I didn't have the spare energy to process. Did they eat, sleep, defecate? All they did was sort books. All we saw was more library.

"Maybe they just shit in their robes," as Raine so delicately put it.

Jumble, mess, and maze far outweighed the organised parts of the library. Lines of bookcases kinked and twisted, defying straight line of sight down the stacks. Clear ways narrowed, dead ends proliferated, repeating patterns emerged – of crosses or open squares or L-shapes or dizzying spirals we dare not follow. Clearings were few, tight corners many, navigation a slow plod of test and map and probe.

Lesson three?

We were far from alone in the great Outside library.

"Hopping place, isn't it?" as Raine described.

"Bottom feeders," Zheng rumbled through clenched teeth.

"Scavengers. The abandoned and the dead."

The grouped clatter of our muffled stop-start footsteps sent all manner of hidden creatures scuttling off beyond sight as we approached through the stacks. Almost everything except the librarians fled from us, as reluctant to encounter other library users as we were. Thin whispers occasionally leaked over the top of bookcase rows, only for no speaker to be found when we rounded the corner. A skitter of footsteps would reveal no source. Distant voices grew yet more distant if we need venture in their direction.

"This is so fucking creepy," Twil had hissed.

"I won't deny that," Evelyn said. "But it's the best possible outcome. We are being avoided, and that is a blessing, more than I hoped for. It may not last. Keep moving."

"Are we being avoided?" I asked, looking back at the gaggle of a dozen librarians, following at a respectful distance.

“They don’t count,” said Evelyn.

“Slaves and hands,” Zheng purred. “Nothingness in them, shaman. They are empty.”

“As I said,” Evelyn grunted. “They don’t count. Keep moving.”

In some places, books had spilled over into foothills of paper and ink, impossible to scale without tumbling on one’s backside. In others, the cases themselves had been toppled over onto each other into masses of shattered shelves and shredded splinters. Our first encounter with one of these nests of snare-tangled broken wood had proved the efficacy of Evelyn’s nut-throwing strategy.

That technique accounted for the other half of our slow progress. We ventured down no pathway, trusted no footstep, braved no ground – not even that trod without care by the librarians – before Praem had tossed at least one of the exploratory nuts ahead of us, and we had observed it come to rest, untouched and intact. She recollected the ones that fell safely, so we wouldn’t run out. The unsafe ones, we did not approach.

By that method we charted where not to go, the places where the nuts vanished, or fell to rust in the space of seconds, or provoked shadowy fingers to edge out from nearby corners to investigate the sound, or a dozen other bizarre fates that befell our brave little inert scouts. I couldn’t help but anthropomorphise the metal nuts after the first hour, little flags fluttering in the air as they fell by the dozens to unseen threats and pockets of reality not made for us.

We avoided other areas too, places where all the books were missing, or where darkness formed solid walls of lightless reign, or where for no discernible reason our accompanying librarians refused to follow.

Stop-start, stop-start was a constant drain on our energy and nerves. At every stop, Raine would manoeuvre Lozzie and I between herself and a solid bookcase, a temporary fortress. Zheng would silently seethe with impatience and leer at the librarians with all her teeth. And Twil would circle Evelyn, close and protective, which I think was driving Evelyn up the wall.

“Why nuts?” Twil had asked, as Evelyn had instructed Praem to toss a few at the tangle of fallen bookcases, shattered light-orbs, and chewed paper. That nest of broken wood lay at the core of the first

lake of inexplicable darkness we had encountered back on the second floor.

“Terrestrial matter,” Evelyn answered. “Any force that acts on them will also act on us.”

“Yeah, but like, why nuts specifically?”

“Heavy,” Praem intoned. “Easily thrown.”

And she demonstrated, as a cloth-tied nut bounced at the foot of the shattered wood and swaddling shadows.

“You mean there’s not like, a magic reason?” Twil asked. “They’re just nuts? Why the bit of ripped-up sheet on ‘em them?”

Evelyn frowned at her like she was an idiot. “Visibility.”

Twil puffed out a disappointed breath.

“I know how you feel, Twil” I added, from behind Raine’s riot shield. “Somehow magic would feel a bit more reassuring, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Raine chipped in. “Wiggle your fingers and banish the darkness, o’ mighty mystical one.”

“Well excuse me for practical solutions,” Evelyn huffed. She clicked her fingers and waved at the torn-up bookcases. “Praem, another, if you please. We can pick our way over this, it’ll be quicker, but I don’t like those shadows.”

Twil was frowning especially hard now, as if manually oiling the gears in her head. “Isn’t this nut-throwing stuff from like, a video game?”

“It was film first, you philistine,” Evelyn said, without much conviction.

“Actually it was a book,” I said, and laughed a small, nervous laugh, nervous enough to make Lizzie squeeze my hand and murmur my name. “Maybe we could find it here.”

The second scrap of fluttering cloth and twist of iron left Praem’s hand and bounced directly into the shadow-clad tangled wooden shards – and provoked a reaction.

A limb, shining and white and luminous and possessing far too

many elbows, ratcheted out of the nest like a trap-door spider catching prey. A hand with about a hundred knuckles snatched the nut out of the air, and tossed it back at us as a wisp of compressed gas.

Zheng was the only one laughing. She cracked her knuckles. “A fight, shaman?”

“N-no, no, Zheng, no- I-”

“Even you wouldn’t survive that, idiot,” Evelyn answered for me. “And I won’t try to pull you out. We go around this one.”

So we’d gone around.

This second patch of shadow produced a reaction too.

“There, look,” Evelyn grunted, and pointed with her walking stick. “We’ve learnt something useful.”

The nut had rolled to the very edge of the lake of extinguished darkness, but now it lay within the shadow, as if it had moved without any of us noticing. I blinked hard and rubbed my eyes, and Evelyn must have noticed, because she added: “No, I’ve been watching it this whole time. It was just ... over the border one moment.”

And then the nut was gone, faded into darker shadows until there was no cloth-wrapped nut at all, only the unlit floorboards.

Twil shivered. Raine nodded and hefted her shield. Zheng ignored the whole thing because she could neither punch nor eat it.

“No walking in darkness,” Praem intoned.

“Yes, quite,” Evelyn said. “Well put.”

“Could’a told you that myself,” Twil grumbled.

“No,” I forced myself to stand up for Eevee’s methods. “No, this is useful. Between this and the previous time, I think we can conclude that any shortcuts through dark areas are bad ideas. So we don’t need to test them anymore.”

“I will walk through any darkness with you, shaman,” Zheng rumbled, and I flinched slightly. Hadn’t thought she was listening. I glanced at Raine, but she said nothing, still on high-alert, watching the nearby corners and the tops of the bookcases and the blind

spots.

“Yes, we’re all well aware of that,” Evelyn drawled. She looked left and right, along the edges of the lake of darkness, then glanced back at our following of librarians.

They’d accompanied us all the way from the canyon floor, but never closer than about a dozen feet. That may have been respect, or it may have been because Zheng had wordlessly drifted into a rearguard position and spent most of her time grinning at them, whispering things under her breath, and occasionally stalking toward them with a pace or two of menacing display. I’d stopped her after the first of those, with a sharp “Zheng, I need you to not do that,” and she’d grinned back at me hard enough to make my stomach flip over. But she’d done as I’d asked.

“Well?” Evelyn demanded of the librarians now, the latest of dozens of times she’d asked the same question, at every junction and crossroads in the maze of books.

She pointed at the staircase, then left, then right.

The ‘squiddly-diddly scribblers’ – as Lizzie had dubbed them – once more exploded into the proliferation of pointing in wrong directions. One of them even stuck his arm directly back out toward the canyon. But they quickly rearranged themselves as they had the first time, and every time since, until they all pointed off to the left, around the lake of darkness.

“Left it is, then,” Evelyn drawled. “Praem, another nut, please.”

= =

Two floors up and forty minutes later we came face-to-face with another library patron.

Twil spotted him – or her, we never could tell – first, as she stalked a good six paces ahead of Evelyn, into a cross-junction between two rows of bookcases. She froze in sheer surprise, wide-eyed as we all caught up, and then there was much scrambling of feet and hissing to get back, Evelyn snapping out “say nothing!” and Twil growling like an animal. Raine swept me behind her shield, though I craned to see what we’d discovered.

A figure sat cross-legged on the floor with a book open in his lap, hooded and cloaked in yellow robes, bent forward and absorbed in

reading. He did not look up.

“Isn’t it just another squid?” Twil hissed, claws out, already trying to creep sideways to catch a glimpse of the man’s face. Evelyn all but swatted her back with a whack of her walking stick.

“They don’t wear yellow, they wear grey,” Raine said, quick and low. “And there’s no tentacles. And he’s too small.”

“Could still be one-” Twil said. “Ow, Evee, fuck, stop, alright.”

“They don’t read,” I said.

“Heather?” Evelyn frowned back at me.

“They don’t read,” I repeated. “The librarians. We’ve not seen a single one of them sitting, let alone reading. They only sort.” I stared at the hunched man, the all-too-human curve of a back, the rounded shoulders, the skull beneath the hood. “I think that’s a person.”

So after positioning of feet and readying of weapons and clearing of throats, Evelyn called out, first in English, then Latin, then something I assume was ancient Greek, then some harsher, more painful languages that made us all wince and made her mouth bleed. Then Praem tossed nuts until one bounced off the figure’s head, and he still offered no reaction.

We crept closer, with Lizzie and Evelyn and I kept well in the rear, until Praem was near enough to politely bend forward and look under the man’s hood.

“Dead,” she announced.

“Super mega extra dead,” Raine laughed, and nudged back the hood with the tip of her truncheon.

The corpse beneath was a shrivelled brown mummy, papery skin pulled tight around empty eye sockets and peeled back on ancient yellowed teeth, so dry he should have crumbled to dust at the lightest touch. The book in his lap lay open on non-human spider-scribble scratches up and down the page. Beneath his thick robes, the long-dead reader wore white silk embroidered with golden thread. At his throat lay several thick necklaces of the same colour.

“Wooo,” Twil let out a low whistle. “Is that like, actual real gold? He’s loaded down with it.”

“Do not touch anything,” Evelyn spat. “Do not touch him. Better, turn around and don’t look at him. Forget we saw this. File past, keep to the opposite shelves.”

“Think I recognise some of that stuff on his necklaces,” Raine said. “Eye of Ra and a sun disk. Our boney old friend here must be-”

“Ancient Egyptian, yes,” Evelyn hissed, bodily shoving Twil to the far bookcases, away from the ancient corpse. Twil skipped and skidded, but didn’t resist. “And it doesn’t matter. This was a mage, a very, very old one, who stayed here too long. Do not touch it. Faster we’re gone, the better. Move. *Now.*”

Praem followed without question and Lozzie came when I pulled. Zheng gave the corpse a look like she wanted to kick its head off, but we left it behind, to the dust of another five thousand years.

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We were winding our slow way through the seventh floor, toward the distant sight of another set of stairs – a single shaft this time, a dizzying spiral that got wider and wider toward the top – when something vast and unknowable passed down the canyon alongside us.

I doubt it was looking for us. I doubt it noticed us at all.

First awareness came as a rising wave of lightness, a full-body throbbing as if the air around us had lost the ability to contain our forms. I felt it first, or perhaps my abyssal instincts did, twitching with increasing panic into a blinding swirl inside my head.

“Heather’s not the only one, I’m getting it too,” Raine said, squint-frowning in faint pain.

“Feels floaty!” Lozzie chirped, the only one still smiling.

“Ignore it,” Evelyn hissed. “Ignore it and press on. Ignore-”

And then the singing reached us.

Angelic, wordless, beautiful and alien. It crept into one’s hearing and grew louder with alarming swiftness. We all went silent and still – except for Lozzie, who opened her mouth to join in, stalled only by my fluttering hands against her lips.

The singer drifted by, out in the canyon.

Great dark ropes of flesh hung from far above, each as thick as a tree, moving with silent terrible pressure through the canyon like a mass of dangling jellyfish stingers, caressing the wooden walkways with deceptive gentleness. The main body was far above us, but the tentacles were surrounded by a moth-eaten shroud of pale yellow, draped down in vast sheets of rotten fabric. Tatters of golden light like sickly fireflies detached from the mass and floated off behind, turning to dust and ash.

The librarian creatures scattered among the stacks, all tottering and skittering in different directions.

None of us could stand the singing, the sight, the rotten majesty of the passer-by. Twil managed to bundle a paralysed, green-faced Evelyn behind a bookcase, but then she'd gone all wolf, growling and whining as she crouched over Evelyn's shaking form. Praem stood next to them, ramrod straight, and closed her eyes as they filled with tears.

Raine crammed herself, Lozzie, and I all into a corner behind her shield, and I'd clamped my hands over my ears to drown out the singing, my own hyperventilating hiccups, and the awful way Lozzie was still trying to join in with the alien chorus. Raine had gone blank and empty, staring at a spot on the wall. My abyssal side wanted to dig through the floorboards and curl up in the dark, as far away from this leviathan's song as possible. Instead I clung to Raine, and I think I shouted wordlessly into her back.

Only Zheng stood out in the open, arms wide and roaring nonsense, daring the passing godling to pluck her from her feet.

When it passed and the singing faded and the pressure relented at last, I scrambled to my feet and lurched for Zheng.

"H-Heather, woah," Raine was saying, trying to catch my arm, but she was weak with shock and I was using anger to paper over my terror.

"Zheng!" I snapped, my eyes still wet with the confused tears of a small animal penned by a giant, my heart still going a hundred miles an hour. Fear – Outside fear, stripped of human context – made me forget all my issues with my beautiful Olympian goddess, right here in the middle of a tumble of bookshelves. "What were you doing?! You're not invincible, it would have crushed you with a thought! You can't fight something like that!"

“Have faith, shaman,” she purred, staring out into the empty canyon.

“What were you thinking?! What was that? You-”

Zheng placed one massive hand on my head and turned to grin down at me, a shark-toothed smile, marred only by the slow sloping second of profound unhappiness I caught in her eyes, before she muffled it behind a wall of bravado.

“ ... Zheng? What ... you ... I-I don’t understand, were you trying to show off? You ... ”

But our little party was rapidly reforming. The librarians drifted back in ones and twos. They did not possess facial expressions, but their body language was hunched and furtive now; poor things were no more suited to this place than us. Twil and Praem were both helping Evelyn to her feet, Twil twitchy and skittish and baring too many teeth. Raine was already at my elbow, taking deep breaths, and could hear everything Zheng and I said to each other. I trailed off, embarrassed. Those were the most words I’d spoken to Zheng since the night we’d kissed.

“What was that all about, left hand?” Raine asked, neutral and easy.

“I long for a good fight, *yoshou*.”

“You know where to get that, when you want it,” Raine said. “But not out here, yeah?”

Evelyn was still shaking, green in the face, clutching Twil’s arm with all her might, but she had the strength to raise her head. “Everyone keep your bloody voices down,” she hissed in an angry stage-whisper. “We do not want that thing to turn around and come back.”

“Yeah, fuckin’ right, hey?” Twil shook too, eyes going left and right as if a stray tentacle might sneak down through the bookcases at any moment. “Shhh, right?”

“Yes,” came a soft, broken-bell voice.

Tears were drying on Praem’s cheeks; I felt sick.

“Yes, yes!” Lozzie whispered. “Shhhhhh, shhhhhh!” She did finger-to-lips shushing motions at everybody, dancing between us as if the otherworldly singing had put a spring in her step. She shushed

Evelyn and she shushed Raine, she shushed me and ruffled Twil's hair as one might try to calm a spooked hound. She even hopped over to the squid-faced librarians, pulling a random book off the shelves and passing it to one of them. The librarian so blessed by Lozzie's attention immediately fed the book into its own face.

"Stop that!" Evelyn hissed at her. "Do not interact with them! Not even you – especially not you!"

Lozzie giggled, curtsied an apology, and clamped herself to Praem's side. She dried the doll-demon's tears with the hem of her pastel poncho, and Praem stared down at her. Expressionless as always, I couldn't tell if Praem was surprised or offended or thankful, but she didn't push Lozzie away.

Evelyn resumed scolding, but Lozzie took it in good spirits. I turned back to Zheng and struggled over what little I could say.

"Feelers," Zheng rumbled. "Parts. Slaves. So atrophied they cannot feel the mooncalf's regard."

"Ah? Oh."

It took me a moment to realise she was talking about the librarians again. Zheng stared at them with naked contempt, and that allowed me the fractional hardening of my heart the moment required.

"Zheng," I hissed up at her. "We'll talk about this later, when we're back home. But in the meantime-" I swallowed, held down a hiccup by sheer force of will. "Remember you made a promise to me as well. Don't do that again. Don't bait self-destruction. "

Zheng raised an eyebrow over a casually puzzled smile. I held her gaze until she let go of my head, and thankfully Raine didn't ask any questions as I snuggled back in behind the protection of her makeshift riot shield.

Still pale in the face and unsteady on her feet, Evelyn pulled out her map sketches once more, as we re-oriented ourselves, ready to move.

"What do you think that was?" I asked.

She gave me a desolate shrug. "Another library user."

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We found another 'library user' on floor twelve, around which a

shrine had been erected.

This one was obviously – and thankfully – dead, and quite a bit smaller.

We all stood there staring at the thing in stunned, skin-crawling silence for a full minute, still recovering from our earlier encounter, still twitchy and on edge. In the end, Twil cleared her throat, and said “Looks like a crab shagging a Christmas tree.”

Whatever it was, it had died, or perhaps been interred post-mortem, in a large clearing ringed with a circle of bookshelves. A few stacked tomes sat nearby, as if it had died in the middle of scholarly study. One of the many clawed graspers radiating from the cone-shaped body clutched a tome even now, though the books this being had perused were not remotely like human books. They were made of dull metal, shaped as icosahedrons and hexagonal prisms, which fell open in thousands of stiff close-packed leaves.

The alien corpse was maybe twelve feet long, and about as tall as me at the widest part, the very end of the thing. Somebody or something had placed hundreds of wax candles around it, untouched and never lit, along with dozens of shallow tin bowls which had probably once contained some sort of offering, now long dried up or rotted away, except for a thin brown crust.

“Very astute,” Evelyn said eventually, her sarcasm failing. Then, after another ten seconds of stunned silence, she added: “Christmas trees aren’t yellow.”

“It’s pretty!” Lozzie said, then pouted when everyone looked at her. “It is! It’s got all those little sparkly bits. And the round parts, shiny!”

Raine tilted her head. “I think it’s on it’s side. Is that the head, at the end of that stalk?”

“Oh, ew,” Twil wrinkled her nose. “Then that – that’s a huge foot! Like a slug. Ew, ew ew, no.”

“Ew,” Praem echoed.

“I have no bloody idea,” Evelyn said, mostly to herself. “I have not the faintest clue what this is. Was.”

“At least it’s dead,” I sighed, but it emerged as a shudder. “Poor thing.”

Praem readied a nut to bounce off the dead thing's hide, but Zheng was already striding forward, her patience gone. She ignored Evelyn's hiss of warning and planted both hands against the cone-shaped body, then leaned in close and sniffed at it, long and deep. A mocking grin spread across her face. She rapped her knuckles against the material, *clonk*, like solid iron.

"A shell," Zheng said. "Thick, old, empty. No meat left."

"So it is like a crab then," Twil said.

"Would have made a good fight," Zheng purred to herself, gazing down at the triple-lobed head on a thick stalk like that of a palm tree. "Strong claws. So many eyes."

"It doesn't matter," Evelyn huffed. "Leave it alone. Stop touching it, it makes my skin crawl."

Despite her words, Evelyn made a quick sketch of the the dead monster, and marked it on her map before we carried on; Lozzie patted the empty shell as we passed. Our squid-faced entourage ignored it completely.

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Floor fifteen was quiet as a grave, muffling even the sounds of our own breathing, filtering our voices so a level tone turned to a whisper. The effect grated on our already wire-thin nerves – and then the hooves started up.

Afterward, we had no idea how they'd approached so closely before we heard the *clop-clop-clop* on wooden floorboards – perhaps some further trick of the acoustics, perhaps it was their intention, or perhaps they hadn't fully existed until that moment. The first thing we knew of them was the lonely, haunting rhythm of two pairs of cloven hooves slowly clomping along the row of bookcases parallel to us.

We didn't need to discuss halting, we just did it; we all felt and acted like cornered animals by then, all but Lozzie.

"What's that- what's that-" My eyes wide, throat tight, chest constricted.

"Smells like farm animal," Twil growled.

"*Meat.*"

“Hush,” Praem intoned.

“Stay still and *wait*, damn you all,” Evelyn hissed. “It’s heading to the end of the row. If it passes, let it pass, let it go. Say nothing. Mouths *shut*, now.”

At the end of the row of bookcases, a misshapen shadow crept into view, in time with the clack of hooves. I half expected the devil himself to appear, skin red as blood, pitchfork and pointy tail and all. Instead, our waiting was rewarded with a sight so absurd that a hysterical splutter escaped my lips. I had not meant to laugh, and I was not amused. I felt stretched thin by hours in this place.

Across our path stepped a single live goat.

I would have forgiven the animal, if only it had been a big coal-black stereotype, a Satanic vessel with wickedly curled horns and beady intelligence glittering behind its eyes. That would have made sense. That’s what magic was supposed to look like, right? But it was just a goat. Off-white, sort of old, a bit raggedy around the middle. Sure footed but sleepy. It took one look at us, let out a dismissive *snuff*, and vanished between the opposite set of bookcases.

“What,” said Twil.

“That was a goat,” I said, rather lamely.

“Sure was,” Raine said. “Sure, Heather. Identifying goats.”

“I told you,” Zheng rumbled. “Meat.”

The very second Zheng declared the goat’s evident edibility, a great clattering of additional hooves started up from the parallel row of bookcases. We watched in incredulous silence as a whole herd of goats – I counted fifteen more – trotted past the end of the row, disappearing off into the library after their vanguard. Males, females, a few tiny bouncing baby goats too, at which Lozzie let out a pained “Awww, they’re so small!”

They wandered past as if lost in an English meadow, not Outside among dead wood and alien books.

The very final goat, a mid-sized juvenile, stopped to look at us with those weird, sideways pupils, and opened its mouth.

“*Anazitiste kala, mikres kores tis hypervoreas*,” it said, in a rich,

masculine voice.

And then it trotted off. Hoof beats vanished, and the herd was gone.

Evelyn sighed like a bellows and put her face in one hand. I knew exactly how she felt.

“What? What?!” Twil was on the verge of an explosion. “Did it just put a curse on us? What was that?!”

“Goats.” I shrugged, almost giggled, until Raine nudged my shoulder. “Goats.”

“Did you see the babies?” Lozzie almost squealed, and nobody had the energy to rebuff her.

“It wished us good luck, in ancient Greek,” Evelyn deadpanned. “And called us ‘daughters of Hyperborea’. Which means whatever the hell that was, it knew we’re British. I think. I guess. How the hell should I know anything?”

Raine laughed. “Are we that obvious? Am I carrying a Union Jack I missed somewhere?”

“Speak for yourself, wizard,” Zheng rumbled.

Evelyn made a wide ‘stop’ gesture with both palms. “Fuck it. Fuck it, I don’t care. It left, that’s all that matters. If it- they- whatever that was, if it follows us, we’ve having goat stew for dinner all next week. Come on, keep moving.”

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According to Evelyn’s analogue watch, when we finally found books written in recognisably human languages, we’d been climbing for six hours and thirteen minutes.

Back in rainy old Sharrowford, night had undoubtedly fallen, but here in the great windowless library there was only the steady greenish witch-light glow from the luminous rocks set in the walls and bookcase-backs. We had paused more than a few times before, for furtive mouthfuls of cereal bar and water, but now we practically set up camp. We stopped with barely any discussion or agreement, in a clearing or reading area or cavity or whatever it was supposed to be, a rectangular space between two heavy rows of shelves, sheltered far back from the canyon-face cliff-drop, in case something unspeakable should pass by again.

We were all exhausted, and not solely from walking.

The experience of hours Outside had not yet proved as physically dangerous as Evelyn's dire warnings, but the very act of existing in this place had taken an unseen toll. Being away from our reality had consumed some ineffable, indefinable reserve in all of us, in addition to the psychological grind of constant vigilance. Except for Lozzie – who worried me greatly in her own fashion – we were all worn down and haggard, at the thin edge of our collective humanity.

Zheng checked the nearby rows of bookcase-corridors without leaving the group, but she had gone silent, hadn't spoken in over two hours, every step like a stalking predator. Raine propped her riot shield against a bookcase and peeled the sweat-stuck motorcycle jacket away from her shoulders, and then touched me with the same fleeting, repeated contact she'd been seeking as she'd spoken less and less, slipped into high-alert, wordless tension. Even now she couldn't relax, didn't actually look at me, and kept her truncheon in one tight fist.

Twil hadn't fully relinquished her werewolf transformation in hours either, bits of summoned claw and fur marring her outline, eyes squinted tight, shoulders hunched and twitchy as she hovered protectively at Evelyn's shoulder. Our mage fared no better, already running her fingers along the spines of volumes in Sanskrit and ancient Greek and medieval German, wide-eyed and book-drunk, though thankfully she retained the sense not to open any before Praem had checked them first.

Praem seemed most unaffected, as she dredged up some random bits of abandoned, ancient furniture – a chair from a reading desk, a pair of stools – and distributed cereal bars and energy drinks. But she possessed less economy of motion than usual, lingering over her own gestures as if examining the workings of her body. She blinked several times as I watched, far too slowly for her. Lozzie flopped down on the floor next to me, toes tapping and head bobbing, almost brimming with energy, like she could get up and sprint at any moment. I was afraid she would, so I stayed close while I rubbed my exhausted, aching thighs.

My abyssal side's hatred of this place had curdled into quiet survivalist disgust; it wanted me out, but it wanted *all of us* out more.

It – no, *I* wanted my pack intact and safe, kept trying to reach for the others with phantom limbs, to draw them close to a protection my soft, vulnerable ape body could not really offer. Every unnatural encounter made me want to bristle and hiss, make myself toxic and poisonous to the things that would devour our souls, provoked claws I could not extend, spines I could not sprout, teeth I could not sharpen. Only a constant effort of will kept me from acting like an animal, and that supply was growing short.

Our gaggle of squid-faces hovered at one end of the clearing, neither joining us nor departing. Lozzie pulled funny faces at them. Evelyn sat down on one of the stools, with a Praem-approved book in her lap. As we all tried to recover, she began to read.

Didn't take long for Twil to ask an awkward question, after a mouthful of energy drink and a good stretch.

"We are not lost," Evelyn replied.

"I didn't mean *lost*, I mean how do we-"

"Lost would imply not knowing where we are." Evelyn spoke over her. "And we know exactly where we are: floor twenty one, about sixty meters back from the canyon wall, surrounded by ... books."

With great care, Evelyn closed the dusty tome she'd been flicking through, and rose from the stool with even greater care. She winced and put a lot of weight onto her walking stick, swallowing down a grunt of pain. She handed the book to Praem, who slid it back among its fellows as Evelyn massaged her hip. Evelyn nodded at another volume instead, but Praem did not carry out the instruction. She just stood there in mute defiance.

"Yeah, right, cool, whatever," Twil was saying, "but how do we get where we're going?"

"By walking."

"Oh yeah? Before or after your legs fall out of your hip sockets?"

Evelyn shot her a dark, pinched look, dripping with venom, the sort of expression to make a demon think twice – but for once, Twil neither flinched nor backed down. Evelyn's mouth twisted around an ugly insult. "You-"

"You said it yourself," Twil spoke over her, getting in her face, angry with her in a way I'd never seen before. "This might take

multiple trips. Why not stop here? Head back for now, make that second gate or whatever. You're gonna wear yourself raw, you know it."

Evelyn struggled to speak, glanced at the rest of us, blushing and confused. "Not- Twil, can we not?"

Twil turned away, to me and Lozzie. "We good to go back, Heather? Like, now?"

"Um ... " I swallowed. "She's got a point, Eevee. You're having trouble walking, you don't have to pretend otherwise. Twil just wants you to be safe."

"I'm fine!" Evelyn snapped at me. "I can carry on, you can't stop me on my own account. We're so close, look at all this!" She flung a hand at the bookshelves, then wagged an irritated gesture with her walking stick. "How can we stop now? We could be right on top of the exact Latin texts I'm after. We are surrounded, on all sides, by the deepest well of magical knowledge imaginable!" She clacked her walking stick against the bookcase. "We cannot stop now, I will not stand for it."

"The wizard's mind is on thin ice," Zheng rumbled, first she'd spoken in hours.

"Eevee-"

"And it won't be much further, it can't be much further," Evelyn said. "I can endure this, this is nothing. Praem." She clicked her fingers. "What are you waiting for? Fetch that one down."

"Evelyn," I tried again, and kept my voice level with a great effort. "Why are you even reading these books? Do we need that one? You're scaring me."

"Forget the *Invisus Oculus* alone." Evelyn turned back to me with burning eyes. "Forget merely masking our presence, hiding ourselves from the Eye. Heather, the things we could do with the knowledge here-"

"Defeat the Eye. That's why we're here. Eevee."

"Yes, yes, of course," Evelyn huffed. "But-"

"Evelyn," Raine said, and a chill went down my spine, ending somewhere lower than my guts. I'd never heard her say Eevee's

name like that.

Evelyn froze too, blinking at Raine. “R-Raine, relax-”

“How much longer to locate the three books you’re after?” Raine asked, deceptively soft.

“I-I ... I don’t know,” Evelyn admitted, turning her eyes down and swallowing hard. “There’s magic I can use. Locating the precise texts is difficult but not impossible, that’s why I brought certain resources. With Praem, in the bag. I can ... yes.”

“Yeah?” Twil joined in. “How long’s that gonna take?”

“Hours more,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn shot the traitor a dark look – then a darker one at our entourage of librarians.

“Bad service,” Raine cracked a grin.

“Quite,” Evelyn huffed.

The librarians’ group-pointing had led us this far, and over the last two floors of climbing, Evelyn had used any nut-throwing, hazard-avoiding pauses to refine her questions – “where are the books in Latin?”, “where are the books from the 17th century?”, “where is *Beyond the Northern Ice* by Magnhildr Dahl?” – but the librarians hadn’t pointed at all for those ones. Past a certain level of granularity, we were on our own.

“Hey, Eevee,” Raine said, all soft reason once more, her grin easing back. “This place is a living nightmare.”

“Quite,” Evelyn said again. “I do not disagree.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I could do this all night, but Heather needs a hot meal, Lozzie needs to blow off steam, and Kimberly’s waiting for us too. Maybe it’s time to head home in the interim, Lozzie can take us. Make that second door you mentioned, back home. We can pick up right where we left off, load our save point.”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “Video game metaphors again? Really?”

“Incident pit,” I added, softly. “Let’s not slip further down.”

If nothing else had worked, that seemed to finally penetrate the

fermenting fascination in Evelyn's subconscious. She made a big show of huffing and puffing and sitting back down on her stool, nodding along and grumbling under her breath. She pulled the map-filled notebook from her coat pocket. "Right, yes. Of course. Of course. Allow me to ... to figure out the maps so far. We'll take a book from up here home with us. Should be able to ... re-orient the gate ... mmm ... yes, okay. Give me ten minutes, mm."

She trailed off into mumbles, scratching notations with a pencil.

We settled in for a few minutes, the last rest before home, waiting as the silence of the library ticked by beyond our senses. Twil sipped sickly-sweet energy drink and hovered at Evelyn's shoulder, while Praem stood on guard. After some rocking back and forth, Lozzie tottered to her feet and clung to my side, nuzzling my shoulder and making tired sounds in her throat.

Raine leaned against the bookshelf next to us. "Your legs are gonna ache something fierce tomorrow," she said.

"I don't mind." I gave her a smile, and I meant it too. After her territorial displays all yesterday and this morning, in the library she seemed to have reverted to normal. My rock. "Anything for Maisie."

"Anything for you," she replied.

"Listen, Raine," I lowered my voice to a whisper. "What's wrong with Evelyn? Why's she acting like this?"

Raine pulled a rueful smile. "Seen her like it before, couple of times. Just like when she first got unfettered access to her mother's books. It'll wear off, let's just get her out for now."

"I do hope so."

"Trust me. It will. She'll come round. Anyway, how about you? You holding up okay out here? Loz too, you good?"

"Good!" Lozzie whispered with an eyebrow wiggle over at Evelyn, still scratching away at her pad.

"It's ... not so bad," I said, "being along for the ride. I don't have to make any decisions, at least."

Raine nodded, as if she could possibly understand, but perhaps she finally did, after six hours walking the realm of my teenage nightmares. After an odd pause during which she examined my

eyes, she suddenly said, "I love you, Heather."

"I ... I love you too. Raine? Is something wrong?"

"This place," she laughed a sigh, and ruffled my hair gently, and looked over her shoulder with only a hint of aggression when Zheng stalked over to loom above us. My two hands met each others' gaze.

"*Yoshou*."

"Yeah, I know," Raine said. "I can hear it too."

Zheng raised an eyebrow. "Truth? Impressive."

A shiver went up my spine, a finger of ice and bone. "I'm sorry, what's this?"

Raine gave me a smile that curdled my blood, a smile I knew all too well from similar situations, from university hallways that repeated forever and underground car parks full of cultists. A smile that told me not to worry, that Raine would commit all the necessary violence.

"We're being followed," she said, and made it sound like nothing.

"Followed?" I hissed. My heart skipped, in the very bad way.

"Ooooooh." Lozzie lit up.

"What do you think it is, left hand?" Raine asked.

"Mm," Zheng grunted. "It moves in the shadow of our footsteps. Stays at distance, too far to double-back and catch. Two hundred feet distant? A carrion eater, perhaps. Waiting for our leavings. Or for us to slip and fall."

Raine nodded. My mouth had gone dry. I glanced at Evelyn, but she and Praem didn't seem to have heard the import of our hushed conversation. Twil, on the other hand, perked up and wandered over.

"Doesn't matter one bit now though," Raine said with a beaming grin, mostly for me. "We're off home in five, ten minutes tops, and by the time we come back tomorrow or the day after, it'll probably have lost interest."

"You really think, *yoshou*?"

"What is it you can hear?" I demanded. "Exactly?"

“A wheel,” Zheng purred.

“Ah?” Raine raised her eyebrows. “I was thinking spiked shoes or something. Football boots, maybe.”

Zheng shook her head. “Too regular. A metal wheel, spiked, rolling across wood. How long have you heard it, *yoshou*?”

“About three floors ago.”

“Four.” Zheng grinned. Raine grinned back, and I decided I much preferred this style of sparring match. Let them compare hearing or hunting any day.

Twil joined us, knocking back more foul energy drink. “What’s up?”

“We’re being followed!” Lozzie chirped. “Isn’t that exciting!?”

“What.” Twil blinked once. “Oh fuck, what? Shouldn’t we tell Evee?”

Raine clapped a hand on Twil’s shoulder. “Give her a sec to finish working out her maths, then we can tell her. Next time we come prepared, right?”

“No, I think we should tell her now, we-” I glanced over at Evelyn.

Then a double take, as my guts turned to ice and my blood turned to pure adrenaline.

Evelyn was no longer sitting on the dark wooden stool. She stood before the towering bookcase of ancient tomes again. A cracked leather volume was open in her hands, yellow binding a sick vomit-colour against her palms, head down, eyes glued to the words within. Praem stood about five paces away, but a trick of bad luck or unseen machination had turned her head to watch us instead of her mistress. For perhaps as little as twenty seconds, nobody had been watching Evelyn.

The squid-faced librarians had surrounded her.

A jostling scrum of grey robes and liver-spotted flesh and sharp spines, all within arm’s length of Evelyn, and she hadn’t noticed them at all.

Then, as if glimpsed through the momentary parting of a theatre curtain, I saw one of the figures was neither squid-faced nor librarian. Yellow robes instead of grey, rich and deep and flowing in

waves. A solid white mask, expressionless and human, dark eye holes with nothing behind them.

The apparition in yellow reached for Evelyn's shoulder, with one porcelain-perfect, pale hand.

nothing more impotent –

11.4

The apparition in yellow robes reached for Evelyn's shoulder; a peek behind the curtain.

A shiver of disgust and nausea gripped my throat. I was not meant to see this. I had broken an unwritten and unspoken rule. I had trespassed on taboo.

A stagehand's mistake, a director's stutter, an actor caught falling after a slip on the boards. That unblemished pale hand was not intended for my eyes, the ripple of yellow robes in air without wind was not for my disquiet, the mask in place of a face was not for me to recognise. I happened upon this scene by turning at the wrong moment, staring into the hidden space of lost seconds as all eyes were elsewhere.

Or – as I theorised later – was I on the stage as well?

Was I the rebellious pantomime character, who upon the audience's set refrain of *"He's behind you!"*, had refused to play the role of comedic disbelief?

The grey press of librarian bodies jostled against each other, drawing their circle tighter; Evelyn was a stone dropped into an ocean, and that ocean was about to close back over her head. That was for us to witness, but the yellow figure was for Evelyn alone. It would touch her shoulder, she would look up, and I knew with the undeniable logic of dramatic structure, that she would nod in agreement and be engulfed by the grey librarians, and when the rest of us noticed and pulled them apart and shoved them back, Evelyn would be gone, and we would never see her again.

"Evee!"

I screamed her name too late. Perhaps that was part of the performance too, improvised to contain and funnel my intrusion. The pale hand fell upon her shoulder, the drooping yellow cuff brushed the sleeve of her coat. Raine and Zheng both began to turn

at the sound of my panic. Lozzie went up on tiptoes. Twil span on one heel, claws out. But all of them were out of sync with the narrative, denied correct places on the stage.

Evelyn did not flinch at the unexpected touch. She pushed stray golden hairs out of her face and raised her eyes from the page. The librarian creatures surged together in one final ripple of gangly grey bodies, about to obscure both Evelyn and the yellow robes from my sight. I knew as one knows that sunlight will feel warm that when the librarians parted again, the yellow figure and Evelyn would both be gone.

In panic I summoned a jumble of brainmath, a garbled attempt at pure pressure, pure force to push the librarians away, to part the curtain so that Evelyn could not slip backstage. With no time to aim, no time for finesse, that force would knock her flat too, break her bones, snap her walking stick. But it would take only a second for her to look up into the empty eyes of the mask beside her.

Panic was enough. I decided the price was worth paying. Evelyn with broken bones and shattered ribs and a concussion was better than Evelyn gone. I spun the equation together in a single heartbeat, molten-hot icpick through the back of my skull, bile rushing up my throat.

And then Praem was among the librarians like an owl dropped into a box of kittens.

She smashed her shoulder into a knot of the squid-faced creatures, sending them down in a tangle of flopping limbs, shoved another so hard it bounced off the bookcase with a tumble of dislodged volumes, punched a third across the face at the exact angle to break spines and splatter the floorboards with gritty, grayish blood as it flailed backward and dragged down a clutch of its fellows. She span and her black-and-white maid uniform followed, flaring out with a sense of worryingly theatrical display. She slapped the book out of Evelyn's hands, planted one sturdy boot into a librarian stomach, swung another of the creatures with both hands and such force it toppled others like bowling pins. She cleared a space around her mistress with merciless mechanical precision.

No noise, no screams, no grunts of pain; the librarians made no sound but rustle of their robes and the breaking of their bones.

I had to let go of the equation, of course. A waste of blood and

stomach acid, but I would never begrudge Praem getting there first. I spluttered and spat and sagged, caught by a bewildered Raine, holding onto my guts with a force of will as blood streamed from my nose.

Evelyn was white with shock as the wave broke. When she regained enough of herself to scream “Praem! Stop! Down!” the squid-faced librarians had already scattered, dragging their wounded and clutching their bruises, already reforming their group at the far end of the rectangular clearing.

By that time we were all on top of her too.

“Evee, Evelyn, breathe. Breathe. Heather, what-”

“What the fucking *shit* were they doing to you!? What was-”

“Praemy-Praem, it’s okay, you won, they’re gone, gone away, flown awaaaaay-”

I sagged against the arm Raine had under my shoulders, blinking between a shaking, white-faced Evelyn and Raine trying to tend to both of us at once – she had a handkerchief out, wiping at my bloodied nose – and then I shook my head, staring past the confusion and the blood on my own face at the source of a paradox.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled at my shoulder. “What do you seek?”

“It’s gone,” I slurred, lost.

As Praem had broken the ring of librarians, the apparition in yellow had vanished back into the crowd. It had not reappeared among the fleeing stragglers. None of the battered and skittish group of squid-faces wore yellow robes, or carried a white mask. It had slipped backstage.

“I said- I specifically instructed- no- no fighting-” Evelyn was trying for incandescent rage, but too shaken to get there. Her voice came out a jumbled mess, her eyes going everywhere, one hand clutching hard to the front of Twil’s coat. “No hurting them, no fighting! Scattering them only! Praem!”

“Safe,” Praem intoned.

She turned back to Evelyn, spine ramrod straight, heels together, hands clasped before her in perfect demure poise, marred only by the grey blood on her knuckles.

"You made me to keep you safe," she sing-songed. "Do not instruct me otherwise."

"Oh, she's mad at you," Raine laughed. "Evee, you're alright, yeah? They didn't do anything to you?"

"Thank you, Praem," Twil said, shaking with adrenaline jitters.

"Thank you. What the fuck were they doing?"

"They don't seem too bothered by us now," Raine said, and waved her truncheon at the creatures. "Yo?"

"They cannot choose," Zheng rumbled. "They are moved as pieces."

"You sure about that?" Raine asked.

"I can see it plain."

"Huh?" Twil squinted at her. "Who's pulling the strings then?"

"If I knew that, I would challenge it," Zheng purred.

"A-" Evelyn opened her mouth and faltered. "A warning shout would have been ... quite ... how did they get so close?" Her temper fell apart as panic dug in with long claws, as she shook all over, even with Twil's arm around her shoulders. "I was- I- how long were you- there was hardly a need for *that*, was- oh, fuck, fuck, we don't have any idea what that violence is going to precipitate. Why-" And then she saw me, with my nosebleed and my squinting pain. "Heather? What the hell were you doing?"

"Getting them off you," I slurred.

"There was hardly a need for brainmath, you-"

"There was a figure in yellow robes. Reaching for your shoulder. Mask for a face."

My heart skipped a beat as I reduced the unseen sight, the hidden scene, the taboo revealed, down into blunt words. My head pounded like a vice with the aftershock of aborted brainmath, but also with inability to express the ethereal nature of what I'd seen.

Evelyn squint-frowned at me, then at the librarians, then back to me. "Heather, what?"

"Didn't you feel it? It touched you."

"I felt nothing," Evelyn said, sceptical and hard, and angry – with

me. I boggled at her through the throbbing headache, then realised everyone else was looking at me with equal confusion.

“Praem, wasn’t that why you reacted?” I croaked. The doll-demon stared at me with blank white eyes.

“No yellow,” she intoned.

“I didn’t see that either, Heather, sorry,” Raine said, folding the handkerchief in half and wiping my nose again as I sniffed back blood. “Lean your head forward,” she instructed me. “Let it drain.”

“Yeah, I just saw the weird bastards,” Twil agreed. She shot a frown and an involuntary growl at the re-formed group of librarians, now standing a good thirty feet away at safe distance, like a collective whipped dog, shoulders hunched and tentacle-faces turned toward us in mute regard. Twil bared her teeth, and some of them shuffled further back.

“Spooky yellow?” Lozzie puffed her cheeks out, made her eyes wide as she could, and shook her head. “Nope.”

“I saw nothing of the kind, shaman,” Zheng purred.

“But it was- it was right there. It was only a second, but-” I turned back to Evelyn. “Evee, there was a figure in yellow reaching for your shoulder, like it hid itself among the librarians. Look at me, I’m bleeding like a stuck pig, I was going to use hyperdimensional math to knock them all back, I had to, it was going to- I don’t know, take you away, or-”

“Heather,” Evelyn said, through fraying self-control. “I am quite shaken by what just happened, alright? I accept, I made a mistake, I was not paying attention. I am an idiot, a fool, and we need to leave. I admit it. Do not *mock* me in addition.”

“Er, Evee?” Raine said.

“What?” went Twil.

“Uh oh.” Lozzie clamped herself to my side.

I blinked at Evelyn, increasingly lost. “I don’t-”

“You are insinuating we just had an encounter with *The King in Yellow*,” Evelyn spat, still white in the face. “Which is *fiction*.”

“I have no idea what that means,” I said. “I only know what I saw.

Why are you-”

“The King! The King in Yellow! The book? Ugh.” Evelyn rolled her eyes and shook off Twil’s arm, trying to re-settle her walking stick in one hand and not doing a very good job of it. Praem had to take her other arm. “Isn’t literature meant to be your area of expertise? The name of this library – Carcosa – was used in some puerile pulp-era horror fiction. The author probably took the name from some tome he shouldn’t have been reading, but the rest of what he wrote was pure invention, nonsense, fiction. You just described the King in Yellow, an alien god, but fictional, no more real than the ravings of any starving monk or oversexed nun. There is no such thing as the King in Yellow, no such figure is mentioned in any real source, not in *Unbekannte Orte* or by Mechthild or anybody who has written about this place. It’s like believing in Prester John because Ethiopia is a real country. I’ve told you, Heather, keep your nose out of that 1920s crap. It clouds your judgement of reality.”

“ ... Evelyn, I have never read that book. I didn’t know it exists until you just told me all that.”

“You must have! You must have done so, and forgotten you did.”

“No.” I sighed, in too much throbbing pain to indulge her. “Evee, I saw a figure in yellow robes and a pale mask, reaching for your shoulder, and I am not lying or hallucinating or having the vapours. You can’t overturn my life by convincing me to believe the evidence of my own eyes, and then tell me I’m wrong when you’re threatened. I know what I saw. It almost took you away.”

Evelyn stared at me, trying to work her jaw. “That’s ... that-” She glanced over at the librarians. If they had any secrets to reveal, she saw none.

“I believe Heather,” Raine said with a thankful finality. “She sees more than we do on the regular, why should here be any different?”

“Because reality works different here,” Evelyn muttered, but her heart wasn’t in it, voice quivering. “Plus Lozzie, Praem, Zheng, all would have seen it in that case.”

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie chirped agreement.

“Evee, hey, it’s alright,” Twil was trying to say. “I shouldn’t have left you alone, I’m really sorry. Really sorry.”

“Alright,” Evelyn said. “Alright, let’s say you saw what you did, Heather. That doesn’t mean it’s The King in Yellow.”

“Don’t care what the freak was,” Twil said. “It stays the fuck away from you, that’s what matters.”

“Evee, why were you standing up and reading a book again?” I asked.

“Because we need one to re-orient the gate exit,” she huffed.

“Praem checked it, it’s fine, it’s nothing interesting! Any of you can pick it up.” As she spoke, Raine did exactly that, waiting for the affirmative nod from Praem before lifting the nondescript old leather-bound tome in one hand. “It’s just some medieval German nonsense about place names and numerology. The usual, by and for bored monks. This doesn’t change our plans, it doesn’t change a thing, and I am *fine*.” She cleared her throat awkwardly and took a long, shuddering breath.

“You’re right, Evee, it doesn’t change our plans,” Raine said.

“Ladies, we are leaving. Right now.”

“Damn fuckin’ straight,” said Twil.

“Lozzie, ready to do your thing?” Raine asked.

“Yes ma’am Raine miss sir!” Lozzie beamed back and did a tiny salute.

“I haven’t finished the gate calculation yet!” Evelyn snapped.

“There’s no guarantee I’ll be able to do that from back home. We’d have to start all over again.”

“Then we can start back at the bottom floor,” Raine said, and looked to me for approval.

For a moment, I didn’t understand why. Of course we should be getting out of here. We had no idea what the vision in yellow meant, what it wanted, if it would return again. We still didn’t know how the squid-faced librarians would react to our violence. They seemed docile now, but this place did not obey our logic.

Then I realised, we were here for me, for Maisie; but Evelyn mattered too.

“Yes,” I croaked. “Of course. Let’s go, let’s all link hands.” I grabbed Lozzie’s hand as she reached out toward Praem, as Praem reached

for Twil, as I looked in Evelyn's eyes.

"Fine, yes, alright," Evelyn spat. "Everyone out!"

"We can come back," I said all in a rush. "Tomorrow, we-"

Zheng took one step backward, away from the group. She turned with all the fluid grace of a hunting tiger, head high, senses open; the gesture sent all us monkeys into a gut-instinct freeze, except for Twil who bristled and growled.

"Listen," the demon purred. "We are approached."

Metal spikes rolling across wood, a gentle *tock-tock-tock* of steady motion, now close enough to reach mortal ears, creeping through the maze of bookcases to our right.

"Ah." Raine pulled a dark grin. "Our stalker's here."

"Our *what?*" spluttered Evelyn.

"Yeah, yo, what?!" Twil flexed wolf claws, turning to confront this new threat.

"We have been hunted, wizard, beyond the range of your attention," Zheng rumbled. "Now the scavenger descends, in our moment of disarray."

"All the more reason to get skedaddlin'," Raine said. She took Evelyn's weakly protesting hand in one of hers, and mine in her other, then tipped her head to Zheng. "Don't be shy, left hand, join up and let's go."

But to my endless exasperation, Zheng stepped away and turned from us. She rolled her shoulders, staring at the opposite exit from our temporary camp.

"Zheng," I said, in a tone that could have frozen iron.

"Ahhhhh balls," went Twil.

"I stay and fight. Until tomorrow, shaman," Zheng rumbled, rotating her arms and letting her face split into a huge, shark-toothed grin. "It has been too long. You can pick me up when you are ready."

"Don't be ridiculous," I snapped, pulling myself free from my own position in the circle. "Zheng, I am not leaving you behind, that is

absurd. There's no need for a heroic last stand, however much you want one, and I have too much of a headache to argue with you. Take my hand, now."

"No last stand, shaman," Zheng purred, easy and relaxed. "Just for fun. See you tomorrow."

"Can't you order her?" Twil asked, looking aghast.

"No, she has a point," Evelyn spoke quickly. The *tock-tock-tock* of wood on metal drew very close now, separated from us by only a bookcase or two. "We leave here, good idea, yes, but whatever this thing is may have the power to follow us. Or it may wait in ambush here tomorrow, and we'll be unable to get a foothold." She wriggled her hand free from Raine. "Everyone get back. Praem, up front. Twil, keep an eye on the squid bastards, I don't want them getting in the way. Heather, I need you next to me."

"That is not my intention," Zheng turned and growled at Evelyn. "Go home, wizard."

"Too late, you've precipitated something you can't control," Evelyn dismissed her. She drew her scrimshawed thighbone from inside her coat. "Zheng has forced our hand. We deal with this here and get rid of it, so it won't bother us on return. Now, everyone, if you please!"

Evelyn's snap of command did the trick. In a few short heartbeats we drew together again. Raine tucked me behind her shield, next to Evelyn behind Praem and Twil, a maid uniform and a miniature hulk of werewolf fur with too many teeth. Lozzie huddled in close to my side, arm around my waist. Zheng stayed where she was, and turned away in disgust.

"Heather," Evelyn hissed, eyes fixed on the gap between the bookcases as the wood-on-metal sound grew louder. "Are you ready? Can do you it again?"

"Yes," I whispered back. "I'm ready. I'll just ... I'll flatten it with my mind, I suppose. Whatever it is. Would that be okay?"

"Good plan," Raine said, low and confident.

"Yes, but wait for my signal," Evelyn whispered. "This might be nothing, like the goats. Might."

Metal on wood approached with the ticking inevitability of a

metronome; mechanical, perfectly regular, uninterrupted. We held our collective breath as a shadow fell across the gap between the bookcases. The caster of that shadow turned, and *tock-tock-tocked* out into the clearing. Thankfully it stopped a few feet later, because none of us had any idea how to react. Zheng stared in stoic distaste. Evelyn started to speak, then stopped. Twil's growl fell away.

Lozzie, under her breath, went "Ooooh!"

Our stalker was a sphere.

A sphere about six feet in diameter, composed from thousands of hand-width rectangular prisms of matte grey material, like carbon fibre or very finely wrought concrete fenceposts. Each individual prism stood perfectly upright and flush against each neighbour, except where they marched back with a sort of stepped pyramid effect, forming a rough spherical curve both above and below. It wasn't rolling, but instead each row of blocks moved downward and back to achieve locomotion, like tank tracks. The spiked wheel sound was produced when those edges touched the floor, but the sphere was clearly too large and too heavy for such a gentle noise. It should have been breaking floorboards as it passed, shattering wood and churning up splinters. No visible mechanisms, nothing to move the prisms; whatever held it up was beyond our understanding.

It was a machine, of that I had no doubt, but a machine wrought by no earthly science.

"S'like lego," Twil said.

"Say nothing. Do nothing. Touch nothing," Evelyn shushed her through clenched teeth. "Wait for it to ... to leave. Heather, if it-"

"I know," I hissed back.

Nothing happened. Just as I was about to suggest we back away to give it room – perhaps it wanted to pass us by – an awful tearing, ripping sound filled the air, a wet red noise, from inside the sphere, as if it had just suffered a terrible internal injury. Then it opened.

The rectangular prisms slid back to form a gap down the middle of the sphere's front, with the eye-watering mechanical precision of a very expensive toy, folding away until they seemed to vanish in on themselves. Inside was a surprisingly well-lit interior of the same matte grey material, but of softly flowing curves instead of blocky

exterior armour.

And on those softly flowing curves, the sphere cradled an occupant.

She looked quite normal, which was extremely worrying.

She – the sphere-woman, the pilot, whatever she was – was long and slender and neat, like a dancer, lounging in the seat of her strange machine as if under the sun of a tropical beach. She had very dark skin, equally dark hair woven into thick masses of braid, and the kind of face given to bubbly laughter and knowing looks, easy smiles and mocking snorts. Her eyes were gentle, creased with laughter lines, but her age was impossible to place. She could have been twenty five or fifty.

She was also completely naked, and covered head to toe in a steaming layer of crimson blood.

“Say nothing,” Evelyn hissed, wide-eyed and going green.

The woman in the sphere glanced down at herself, then rolled her eyes and sighed. Before any of us could say ‘Oh, excuse me miss, but you appear to be covered in gore’, the sphere closed again, as quickly as it had opened.

“What the fuck,” Twil said out loud.

“Shut. Up,” Evelyn snapped at her, on the very edge of her nerves. “Everybody shut up. That is a person in there, and that can only mean one thing.”

“Wizard,” Zheng growled, disgust in her teeth. It took me a heartbeat to realise that insult was not aimed at Evelyn.

“And let me do the talking,” Evelyn said. “Heather, if she so much as looks at any of us wrong-”

But the sphere opened again before Evelyn could finish telling me to kill the mage.

The blood was gone. In its place, the black woman wore a thick-spun red dress which looked distinctly medieval, very little skin on display, extra shawls around her shoulders, a rope-like belt around her waist woven with golden thread, and with golden inlaid patterns across the chest and arms and ankle-length skirt, mostly of ravens in flight. A distinctive crest adorned the right side of her chest, a shield with a speared boar picked out in yet more gold

thread. A necklace lay at her throat, with a heavy golden pendant showing three interlocked triangles.

“Ogh?” she asked.

We all looked at Evelyn. All except Zheng, who looked like she wanted to surge forward and rip the woman out of the sphere with her bare hands.

The sphere-woman smiled at us in a very lopsided, old-lady kind of way. “*Kmal eru fu lidel skotfrel ad gera hiier?*”

“What’d she say?” Twil hissed.

“I ... I don’t know,” Evelyn wet her shaking lips. “I have no idea. I don’t know what she’s speaking.”

“Sounds kinda Scandiwegian to me,” Raine murmured.

“Shut up. You don’t know anything,” Evelyn hissed at Raine, eyes wide on the strange lady. She raised her chin and raised her voice, speaking very carefully. As she spoke, I saw Lozzie reach out and take the back of Evelyn’s coat in one hand. “We do not understand your language, but perhaps you can understand mine, or at least my tone of voice. We mean you no harm. If you wish to pass by, you may do so.” Evelyn paused, forgetting what to do, then took one hand off her bone wand to gesture to the side in a please-go-around-us wave.

The sphere-woman nodded, raised her eyebrows, and made a rotating ‘carry on’ gesture with one hand.

“You want more words,” Evelyn said, and swallowed hard. I reached out and touched her back too, willing her what confidence I could spare. “Very well, very well. Uh, we mean you no harm, we do not obstruct your path. We were just leaving, we will be on our way. We have no interest and no stake in whatever your business is here and wish you-”

The sphere lady clicked her fingers and pointed at Evelyn with the most knowing smile I’d ever seen on a human face.

Then she rammed her hand inside her own head.

No blood, no splattering of grey matter, no cracking of skull. Her hand went straight through the side of her own cranium and into where I assumed she kept her brain, as if passing into water. She

rummaged around for a moment. One of her eyelids fluttered, the side of her face drooped, and she shuddered three times, then pulled her hand back out with a little flourish. It was clean of blood, as if she'd merely removed it from her pocket.

She took a deep breath, wet her lips, and tried again.

"There we go," the sphere-lady said, in perfect if heavily-accented English.

Raine was right, very Scandinavian. "Told you so," she whispered.

"There we go, yes, much better," the sphere-lady repeated. "Now we can have a proper talk, isn't that so much better, much ... " Her face fell. She smacked her lips as if she'd tasted something foul, wincing and grimacing. "Oh, oh no, oh that is not better at all."

"Fuck," Evelyn gasped, hands shifting on her bone wand. "Get—"

"What is this barbarism I'm speaking?" the sphere-lady said to herself, in the exact tone of outrage one would use if somebody had just urinated on one's favourite party shoes. "Oh, oh this is just intolerable, what is this? This language feels like a Saxon peasant dressed up as a Frankish prostitute. Is this what you people speak? This is a real thing? This isn't some expeditionary cant you only use beyond the wall of your redoubt or something? Ugh, ugh." She stuck her tongue out and flapped her hands.

"It's called English," I said, gently offended on Shakespeare's behalf.

"Ruuuude," Lozzie whispered.

"Yes, yes, well." The sphere-lady cleared her throat. "I'm sure your ... ah, noble tongue has ... produced many great poets and worthy sagas. Yes. Certainly. No offence meant. Bleh," she made another face. "Oh I am sorry, poppets. The last language I forced myself into was far prettier, more sparkling. It had all these wonderfully arcane connective propositions, like decorative plumage, it was marvellous." She spread her hands, then sighed. "There's a touch of the old northern speech in here, isn't there? But none of you understood a word of the pure form, so I suppose we're left with this 'English'. Mm." She frowned at us with great pity. "It isn't really even a 'language', is it? More a linguistic chimera. Here, that word was Greek! See what I mean?"

"Some say," I raised my voice, seeing an opportunity for quick

rapport with this strange woman, no matter the gentle bruising to my literary pride, “that English is merely a pirate grammar that has plundered vocabulary from elsewhere.”

“Haha!” The lady in the sphere lit up with a great bubbly laugh. “Well, at least you have a sense of humour about it. Bravo.”

“We mean you no harm and seek no conflict,” Evelyn said without missing a beat, stiff and formal.

“Wizard,” Zheng rumbled through a mouth of knives, but luckily both Evelyn and the sphere-lady ignored her.

“We are strangers here,” Evelyn continued, measuring each word with great care even as she clutched her bone-wand in both hands, walking stick propped in the crook of her elbow, relying on Praem for support. “We are also about to leave. I am a mage of no little power, and my companions are under my protection. You may pass us by, on your business, and we wish you well.”

The sphere-lady blinked at Evelyn several times, suppressing an amused smile at the corners of her mouth. Then she looked around, over our heads at the gaggle of librarians, past our elbows, made eye contact with Lozzie, frowned at Zheng.

“Where’s the pretender, then?” she asked. “It’s not one of you people, is it? No, of course not, that was a joke.”

“The ... pretender,” Evelyn deadpanned.

“Seven-Shades-Of-Sunlight? The Sepia Prince? Lady Tawn? The Jaundiced Count? No?” She boggled at us, as if we were the ones speaking in cryptic reference.

“You mean the figure in yellow robes,” I answered. “Don’t you?”

“Yes!” She lit up, all beaming smile and dancing eyes as she leaned forward to consider me. “Was it you he appeared to? Or ... she? Yes, I think a princess or a noble lady in your case, rather than a prince. Much more likely, from your ... aura, shall we say? So? Yes?” She waved both hands in a go-on motion, bursting with excitement.

“ ... so?”

“So what happened?” She laughed. “I am all ears, please, you must tell me the particulars. I am dying to be part of the audience. You

did see a pretender, yes? Did you not?"

"The King in Yellow," Evelyn said, dripping with scorn.

"The King?" The sphere-lady laughed long and loud and slightly mocking, so much she had to wipe little tears from her cheeks as we all glanced at each other. "Don't be absurd. If you'd met the King, you would know so. Besides, he's certainly not in the library, you'd have to go to the palace. You met a pretender to the throne, I'm certain. There's enough of them to go around."

"We did not," Evelyn almost snapped. "And if we did, it left, we chased it off. This is absurd, there is no such thing as the King in Yellow, it was a fictional invention."

"An interesting theory," the sphere-lady nodded. "You subscribe to the auto-genesis school of thought, then? Or perhaps the illusionist sect?"

Evelyn and I shared a glance.

"This is getting fuckin' crazy," Twil growled low, for our ears alone. "Let's go, she's tryin' to mess with us."

"Yeah," Raine agreed softly. "This is a mind-screw."

"And she wouldn't have left," the lady carried on, crossing one leg over the other, lounging on her seat inside the armoured grey sphere. "Not if she was beginning a performance, not so early in the show. Which means you delightful little ... Englishers? Is that right? You must be more than meets the eye. Even the dumbest pretender wouldn't grace just anybody as an audience. And you're the one who saw?" she said to me. "What's your name, little one?"

"Don't answer that," Evelyn hissed, without taking her eyes off the lady, caution peeled away for naked hostility.

"Oh, don't be silly," the lady sighed. "I'm no demon of the deep, I can no more reweave you with your name than you could me with mine. Here," she placed one hand against her chest and raised her chin. "Saldis Solveig Nyland, that was my name on birth, daughter of *Jarl* Tollak Nyland. Now, you?"

"Still don't answer," Evelyn said. "Be on your way, magician. We do not wish conflict."

Saldis rolled her eyes.

“Forgive our suspicions,” Raine said with a smile. Evelyn turned to hush her, but too late. “But you were following us.”

“Nonsense!” Saldis waved a hand. “I wasn’t even consti- ... hmm, I’m mangling the subtleties of your mongrel tongue, aren’t I? Constituted? Hydrated? ... I was sleeping, let’s leave it at that, shall we? You can hardly blame a sleepwalker for following her nose.” She patted the arm of her chair. “I only get up when I get where I’m going. And where I’m going is the audience of a pretender. Which means whatever performance has begun here, it is still ongoing. But I do wonder, poppets, what is so special about you?”

Saldis frowned gently above her broad smile, and the strangest sensation came over me, as if I was standing on a suburban street before the scrutiny of a sweet old lady, not deep in a labyrinth of books and monsters on the far side of reality. Her eyes flickered over each of us, with a purse of her lips for Zheng and a wink for Praem.

“I suppose you’re browsing the books for the same thing all sorcerers visit here for,” Saldis sighed with disappointment. “Wandering around without protection, all thinking and feeling and seeing without restriction. Barely a human among you, all constructs and amalgams, but that doesn’t explain the interest.” She tutted as if over a puzzle.

Evelyn leaned in close to me, until she caught Lozzie in the corner of her eye too.

“We need to leave,” she whispered through the corner of her mouth, and only then I realised how badly she was shaking. “Now, before this mage changes her mind.”

“Right,” Raine muttered in agreement. “Lozzie, you ready?”

“Can dooooo,” Lozzie whispered back.

“But- Zheng-” I said.

“Exactly,” Evelyn hissed. “Get her over here, or we leave her behind. Quickly.”

Saldis, the sphere lady, the black Norse-woman from a thousand years ago, was still stroking her chin and considering us like a difficult magic-eye puzzle. I turned to Zheng and spoke as casually as I could manage, an effort marred only by the crack in my voice

and the tremor in my chest.

“Zheng, could you please rejoin us over here? Come hold my hand.” I stuck a hand out, and found it quivering.

Zheng arched an eyebrow at me. A slow grin spread across her lips, cracking her face until she showed all of those beautifully sharp teeth. Then she turned back to Saldis.

“Zheng-” I started.

“No,” Praem intoned.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” Evelyn hissed.

“Left hand,” Raine called out, but we were all too late.

“*Wizard*,” Zheng purred. “How sturdy is your chariot?”

“Hmmmm?” Saldis tore her eyes away from the puzzle of why we mattered, and looked Zheng up and down with quick appraisal.

“Sturdy enough to withstand the arm of any *draugr*. Why do you ask? Fancy your chances? I am in a gentle mood, little dead-walker, don’t put me out of sorts-”

Zheng let the old mage know exactly what she thought of her ‘gentle mood’.

The demon-host surged forward like a greased bear trap, a blur against the background of bookshelves, her coat streaming out behind with a leathery whip-crack. One hand formed a wedge, to punch through teeth and jaw and rip out tongue at root, before the mage could utter a spell. Zheng moved so fast I flinched; I think I screamed her name, screamed for her to stop. Evelyn scrambled with her scrimshawed bone-wand and the ambient temperature dropped by several degrees. Raine shoved Lozzie and I back and down, crouching behind her home-made shield.

With a whump and a thump and the breaking of several finger-bones, the sphere closed up, and Zheng’s fist bounced off.

She reeled backward, leaving a bloody smear behind where she’d punched the edge of one of the blocks that made up the sphere. I watched in mute horror as the surface absorbed the blood and fragments of skin, as they vanished into the grey.

“God damn you!” Evelyn shouted at Zheng. “Get over here now, or we will leave you behind, you blathering idiot zombie!”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Twil was saying. “We gotta go, we gotta go before she opens up again!”

“We do, yes,” Evelyn agreed. “Lozzie, link hands. Get us all together. Zheng, you have three seconds.”

Zheng growled at the closed sphere.

“Zheng, please!” I called, even as Lozzie’s little hand fumbled into mine and held on tight. Zheng reluctantly backed away from the grey stone sphere, flexing her broken hand to re-knit the shattered bones.

The sphere opened again like a flower peeling back under the light of the sun.

“Oh, no, don’t leave now,” Saldis said, apparently unconcerned that Zheng had just attempted to pull her face off, talking as if we were exiting a dinner party too early. “I want to make a friendly little deal with you people, just a small one.”

“You have nothing to offer us,” Evelyn said, loud and clear and shaking. Twil grabbed her elbow, the circle almost complete.

“You are meat in a shell, wizard,” Zheng growled.

“Zheng!” I hissed.

“You’re undoubtedly here for the same reason a thousand mages have been before,” Saldis continued, waving an airy and disinterested hand at this notion. “Knowledge, power, all that boring stuff. Now, if you will consent to getting me into the audience for the performance your oh-so-interested pretender is putting on, I will help direct you to the most illuminating, most well-informed, correct and complete grimoires you could imagine. Beyond your wildest dreams, anything you like.”

“We have our own way of locating books, thank you very much, no,” Evelyn said. Zheng took another slow, retreating step toward us. Evelyn put her head sideways against mine and whispered. “We need to go, right now, while she’s still talking.”

“Zheng’s almost-”

“Almost is not enough, Heather.”

“Oh, you mean name-finding?” Saldis grimaced delicately. “What an awful term for it. Your English really is not up to much, is it?”

Anyway, whatever locationary magic you have planned, it won't work here, names themselves don't work properly here. You have to use the catalogue system." She gestured up and over our heads, at the gaggle of squid-faced librarians in their wounded huddle. "But it can be very tricky if you don't phrase yourself right, and-"

"Thank you, and no thank you. We are leaving," Evelyn raised her voice and lost her temper. "Zheng, now, or you are being left here."

"Oh, I can't let you do that," Saldis tutted, and raised a hand.

That delicate dark hand exploded in slow motion – split open like a flayed fruit, skin peeling into springy curls, muscle separating from bone into vibrating staves of wet crimson meat, blood vessels springing apart to branch between them like arcane notation, bones a gleaming white sculpture. Her hand forced itself into a symbol, a sigil that hurt the eyes, that made Twil howl through her teeth and Raine hiss in pain and Zheng flinch like she'd been struck with a whip and-

"Stop that."

I shouldered past Raine's shield, and stepped forward.

Saldis, whatever she was, raised an eyebrow at me, at the certainty in my voice beneath the shake and the quiver and the fear of being so very small. Her writhing, mutilated hand paused mid-transformation.

"Little one?"

"My name is Heather Morell. The mage behind me, she is not the leader of our group, I am," I said, and forced my chin high, my spine straight, my bowels to stop quaking, as I prepared an equation in my mind. "I am the adopted child of the Great Eye. I have swum the space between dimensions, and brought the abyss back with me." I squinted hard as I dug my hands into the sump at the bottom of my soul, as blood began to leak from my nose. "We are looking for specific books with which to save my twin sister, not knowledge or power for power's sake, and I will kill anything that gets in my way. You will lower your hand or I will reduce you and your ... your *ridiculous* ball-thing to atomic paste."

I closed my mouth, and held myself there, vibrating with searing headache pain and blood dripping from my nose, right on the edge of violent climax.

Saldis – to my incredible surprise – lit up with girlish glee. She snapped her wrist and her hand returned to normal, and then she clapped it together with the other one.

“A quest! Oh, you’re on a quest! Oh, I do so *adore* a proper heroic saga. And what could be more heroic? A missing twin? Beautiful! Well, that explains it then, doesn’t it?”

Raine and Praem both caught me as I let go of the equation, as I buckled at the knees and fell back. Even Zheng finally relented in her absurd, costly aggression, and placed herself directly between me and the ancient, horrible, inhuman thing which pretended to be a human being.

“Explains what?” I croaked.

“Heather, shut up,” Evelyn hissed.

“Why you’ve been graced with a performance, of course,” Saldis explained. “All the pretenders take after their patriarch, they all have such a sense for the dramatic. No wonder one showed herself to you personally. Probably Seven-Shades-Of-Sunlight. I have heard she has a taste for sentimental relationships between women, that sort of thing.”

“But it tried to take-” I glanced at Evelyn as I choked back a mouthful of blood, and remembered not to say her name.

“Nonsense, that was for your benefit, lady Morell,” Saldis said, tutting. “Why would a pretender care about some little sorceress? No no, you’re the one who saw it, the show was for you. If you’re the adopted daughter of ... what was it again? Never mind. You’re practically foreign royalty, and on a quest! Seven-Shades wants to teach you something, impart some wisdom, inspire you. This is a wonderful opportunity!”

“I have had quite enough of being taught things by alien gods,” I croaked, too exhausted to humour this woman any longer. Raine dragged me back into our little group, and finally Zheng stepped back too, and put one hand on Raine’s shoulder.

“I would like to offer you a different deal,” Saldis said.

“No,” Evelyn snapped. “Lozzie-”

“Yah!” Lozzie chirped. “Twil grab Praem. Praem touch me!”

"I want to be written into your saga – you are recording it, yes? Somebody must be writing it down for posterity?" Saldis went on, heedless, very excited indeed now. "Make sure to include me, in detail. I'll take you straight to whatever books you wish, name them, please, and in return I want to join the audience for the pretender's show. Oh I do hope it is Seven-Shades, I've not yet had the pleasure of one of her performances."

"Lozzie, are we ready?" Raine asked.

"Yah yah!"

"Everyone close your eyes," I slurred as loud as I could.

"Oh, I wouldn't leave if were you," Saldis said, with none of the casual menace she had displayed earlier, only an irritating, knowing smirk. She leaned back in her seat, utterly at ease.

"Wait," Evelyn stalled Lozzie with a sideways nod. "What does that mean, magician?"

"I mean the performance has already begun." Saldis laughed softly. "The rest of you may exit the stage at will, I'm certain, but ... " She pointed a lazy finger at me, winked, and blew me a kiss. "But the intended audience, well, she is in for the duration, until the final curtain. Whatever stronghold of humanity you are about to retreat to, the show must go on."

nothing more impotent –

11.5

“This train terminates at Sharrowford! Alighting passengers, don’t forget your luggage! Mind the gap between the carriage and the platform!”

Seven pairs of feet scuffed and stumbled on the familiar wooden floor of Evelyn’s workshop, as reality swelled and fattened around our senses like a dry sponge soaked in swamp water. Human smells and human sights and – blessed be, thank God, thank Maisie and the Eye and anything else that cared to listen – human scale. Kimberly bolted up from the sofa in a clatter of books and papers falling from her lap. Raine’s hand squeezed mine too hard, clammy and cold and clinging. Somebody groaned like they’d been gut-punched.

Lozzie was the only one giggling at her own joke.

She wriggled free from our circle of hard-grip safe passage. The engine of our split-second journey home skipped across the workshop and did a perfect, fluttering curtsy with the hem of her poncho.

“Aaaaaand the local time is-”

With a playful smirk and a toss of her braid and a sideways roll of heavy-lidded eyes, Lozzie threw the rest of the line to Kimberly.

“Uh, Lauren, I-I t-think,” Kimberly stammered. “I think everyone needs help.”

She wasn’t wrong.

We’d taken the return Slip for granted. Lozzie was supposed to tap her heels together and whisk us all back to normality and drizzling rain and a hastily ordered takeaway dinner. Like stumbling in from a storm to the radiators turned up full and the smell of cooking on the stove top and a warm hug to welcome you home.

More fool us. Lozzie and I could Slip with impunity, but neither of

us were fully human anymore. Had I been human at all, since the day the Eye took my sister and I? For human minds or trying-to-be-human-minds, unprepared by prior experience or cushioned by the spiritual calluses of hyperdimensional mathematics, the translation across the membrane from Outside was, to put it lightly, an unkind experience.

At least I'd shouted for everyone to close their eyes.

Our circle of shoulder-to-shoulder handholding solidarity fell apart – literally, in Zheng's case. As Lozzie finished her little joke, the giant demon-host lost her grip on Raine's shoulder and toppled over like a felled tree. She sat on the floor in a great heap, shaking her head as if trying to clear a cloud of flies.

Twil bent double, squeezed her eyes shut, and came audibly close to losing the contents of her stomach. She whined, high-pitched and pitiful, more hound than human, shaking hard as if she'd been plunged into ice water. Raine appeared to fare better, but appearances didn't last. She ripped her hand out of mine, dropped her makeshift shield with a clang, and tore her heavy motorcycle jacket off her shoulders as if it was on fire. She flung it down after the shield, shuddering all over, her tshirt beneath soaked through with cold sweat. I reached for her but she held up a hand to ward off any touch at all, closing her eyes and forcing slow, deep breaths.

Praem and Evelyn were almost okay – they'd both been through a Slip before, Evelyn while terrified and exhausted – but Praem dropped the sports bag and the rest of our expedition equipment in a great clatter on the floor, then stood stock-still, staring at her own hands. She hadn't suffered so when I'd Slipped the pair of us to Carcosa and back before; was Lozzie's technique so much worse? Meanwhile, Evelyn's face turned a most fascinating shade of rotten grey-green. She stumbled back and fell into a chair, grunting in pain and flinching at the hip, then put both hands on the handle of her walking stick and lowered her forehead to rest against her knuckles.

And me? Well, I was an old hand at trans-dimensional re-entry.

Despite the dragging exhaustion of two rounds of aborted brainmath, I should have leapt into action. I should have fetched chocolate and water, should have helped Twil up when she sat down in a heap and groaned like she wanted to be sick, should have

checked that Zheng was actually still alive, should have patted Evelyn on the back and spoken to her.

The show must go on, Saldis had said, before we'd left.

Instead, shuddering and shaking and still bloody in the face, I tried to look everywhere at once, and prayed I would not spy a scrap of hidden yellow.

"Oh, Goddess, what-" Kimberly stammered. "What happened, what-"

"Raine-" I clutched for her arm. "Are you-"

"No, it's alright, back in a sec," Raine said, and then went into the kitchen to be loudly sick into the sink. Bless her, even after vomiting up cereal bars and energy drink, caked in her own cold sweat with her tshirt clinging to her, she returned with water and tissues, to help clean the rest of the blood off my face.

"We need, uh, chocolate, right? That's the trick for this feeling. Yeah?" Raine roused herself further, as Kimberly flapped about and Lozzie blinked at everyone as if she didn't understand why we were hurting. "Everyone alright, yeah? All accounted for?"

A chorus of grunts, grumbles, and one soft "Present" from Praem.

"Left hand, you stroked out or what?" Raine asked.

"Here, *yoshou*," Zheng rumbled, eyes shut.

"Oh, oh no," Lozzie was biting her lip as we all fell about like a bunch of hungover college students. "I thought I did it proper. I thought I did it right?"

"You did," I croaked, clinging to Raine with one claw-like hand. "S'okay. S'not your fault."

"Can we come back by gate next time?" Twil burbled.

We spent almost ten minutes just sitting around, trying to feel normal again. Kimberly and Lozzie pitched in to fetch painkillers, water for everyone, and – at Evelyn's mumbled suggestion – chocolate. Lozzie spent several minutes almost literally clambering over Zheng to check she was still working, still here, not suffering some sort of body-soul disconnection. Raine made sure I wasn't about to fall over or pass out, then helped peel the shuddering, sweat-soaked werewolf out of her coat and hoodie, Twil huffing and

puffing all the while.

“Gerroff-” Twil eventually grumbled, shaking off the help once she was down to her tshirt, hints of her dark tattoos visible just under the lilac hem. She staggered to her feet and cast around the room, gums peeled back, too many sharp teeth in her mouth, transformation bristling as half-dismissed mist of fur and claw.

“Woah, Twil?” Raine asked, hands up.

“Where is it, then?” Twil growled. “We were followed, right? Where’s the sheet-ghost bitch?”

“I-” I swallowed. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen anything yet.”

“She was lying,” Evelyn croaked.

Twil blinked at her. So did I.

“The woman, the mage,” Evelyn explained with a heavy sigh. When she raised her face from her knuckles, she looked exhausted, drained, done, very small in her coat with overflowing pockets. “Saldis. She was lying.”

“Yeah, cool, okay,” Twil said between panting breaths. “What if you’re wrong? What if something followed us back? What if something piggybacked on Heather? On you? Eevee, that thing was reaching for *you* and you want me to calm-”

“There’s nothing here but us,” Evelyn said.

“Are you certain?” I whispered, and meant ‘please be right’. Raine must have heard the tone in my voice, because despite her own slow recovery, she dumped Twil’s coat and hoodie on the floor, and returned to put her arm around my shoulders.

“How can you know for sure?” Twil was saying, outraged. “How can you-”

“There are two spider-servitors in this very room,” Evelyn said, with grinding certainty. I could tell she was trying to calm herself first and foremost. “Programmed to take apart anything which shouldn’t be in here. This entire house is one of the most heavily-warded locations in the whole of England, wards laid down by my grandmother. Nothing has followed us. Nothing is here. If it was, I would know, it would be like the alarms going off in a nuclear reactor. Unless it’s literally an invisible ghost, and to the best of my

knowledge there is no such thing as ghosts.” She spat the last word. “Heather, do you see anything?”

I shook my head. Lozzie piped up too, “Nothing but us! All of us, though!”

Evelyn’s eyes flickered to the gate, still standing open in the centre of the mandala on the far wall. The dark doorway still showed the vast shadows and humped book-drifts of Carcosa’s canyon floor.

“Praem, get that closed. Right now.”

Praem did not respond. She was still staring at her own hands.

“Praem?” Evelyn frowned up at her.

“Praem, are you okay?” I asked.

“No,” Praem intoned. But she lowered her hands and obeyed, marching over to the gate and peeling away one of the additional stuck-on parts of paper and masking tape. The gateway collapsed back into bare plaster wall, and Outside stayed outside. Then Praem turned and marched back to Evelyn’s shoulder, and in a gesture I’d never seen from her before, she smoothed the skirt of her maid uniform over her thighs and backside. Though perfectly wrinkle free, she did it again, and then a third time, mechanical and precise.

Evelyn watched her with mounting concern. “Stop that. Praem, stop.”

Praem did it again.

“You did well,” Evelyn said, with no little difficulty. “Thank you.”

“Praem, what’s wrong?” I asked.

Praem smoothed her skirt again. Evelyn grabbed one of her hands before she could start the gesture a sixth time. Praem’s head twitched to gaze down at her mistress with blank milk-white eyes.

“Thank you,” Evelyn repeated. “You and I need to talk, and I need to feed you a box of strawberries. Yes?”

“Yes,” Praem intoned, and finally stilled.

Twil turned to me. “Heather, you don’t see anything? For real?”

I nodded. “Just us,” I croaked. “No ghosts, yellow or otherwise, really. I suspect I’d be screaming, otherwise.”

Twil peered about the room again, as if she might find a figure in yellow robes hiding behind the sofa or beneath the table. Despite my exhaustion and brainmath pain and even the very words I'd said to reassure her, I found myself following along with her gaze. Could I spy a crack in the backing boards of the stage scenery? Would I spot a prop out of place? Was an actor standing in the wrong position?

I blinked rapidly, shuddered, and tried to stop thinking like that.

"Heather?" Raine murmured my name.

"Just gave myself the creeps," I said. "That's all. But- but Saldis said-"

"The mage's words cannot be trusted," Evelyn huffed. "And Twil, will you sit down? You're giving me a headache."

"How can you be so damn sure of everything all the time?" Twil turned on her. "That place was fucking with your head, Eeve! You were getting all obsessed with the books! You keep being sure and getting shit wrong, and what if she was trying to warn us, what if-"

"Warn us?" Evelyn raised her voice with mocking scorn. "That *thing* we just spoke to was far more dangerous than anything which might have followed us home. Her words may as well have been nonsense. And please don't make me shout over you, I'm going to be sick."

"I'm not making you shout," Twil muttered, eyes down and away.

"Eeve, go easy on her," Raine said. "We're all wiped out."

"She wanted us to stay in the library, for some reason on which I do not wish to speculate," Evelyn carried on, heedless to how she'd just hurt Twil. I was too drained to point it out. "And we are incredibly, unspeakably lucky that she let us leave."

"Let us?" Twil squinted.

"Yes. Let us."

"Eeve," I croaked. "I don't think Saldis was lying. I know what I saw."

"And you," Evelyn's gaze rounded on me with hot anger flashing in her eyes, crouched in her chair like a battered general after a Pyhrric victory. "The next time a mage starts preparing to hollow

out our fucking skulls, don't try to *pull rank*."

"... Eevee?" I blinked at her.

"Hey, Eevee," Raine said. "Come on. It worked, didn't it?"

"Wizard," Zheng mumbled, but her heart wasn't in it. She sounded groggy and very far away.

"Why were you along in the first place, hm?" Evelyn demanded of me. "For exactly that situation. And what did you decide to do? Talk at her in your big-girl voice. You should have killed her the moment she started trying to turn us into meat pillars. It was sheer blind luck she was so fascinated by this King in Yellow nonsense."

"Eevee, she- I diffused the- she wasn't- ..."

I couldn't justify myself.

"Do you understand what we just met?" Evelyn asked. "That was a mage who has been Outside for so long she isn't remotely human anymore."

"Looked pretty human to me," Twil said. "Specially before she got dressed."

"That was an *interface*, at best," Evelyn spat. "You think she was riding around naked and bloody inside her giant hamster ball? You all heard the ripping sound. She was *extruded*, for the purpose of communication with us. That *thing* we just met, her motivations and thoughts may as well be nonsense. She didn't lie to us, alright, I could have used a better word. But nothing that she said is trustworthy, because she simply doesn't think like us, no matter how she looked, no matter how whole and healthy, how fucking pretty, how-" Evelyn cut herself off with a grunt of wordless anger. "The only reason we're home in one piece is because she decided to let us go. Heather, you told me you were ready to flatten her – and then you didn't."

In an awful, cold shudder that went from my scalp to the base of my belly, I realised Evelyn was right.

Why had I not killed the mage when her hand had split into a thousand bloody fragments, a sigil to herald some spell to bind us? Because she'd seemed amiable and talkative? Because she offered to help us find books? Because she was pretty and had a nice laugh?

Because she was on the stage with me?

The show must go on.

“Could have killed that wizard, shaman,” Zheng purred from behind me.

“Yes, I- I should have.” My eyes dreaded to settle on Evelyn, for fear a yellow-sleeved hand would creep over her shoulder at any moment. “Then what did I see? What was the figure in yellow?”

Evelyn sighed and softened a fraction. “I don’t know. I don’t know what you saw, Heather. On one hand, Saldis was fascinated enough to change her mind. On the other ... ” Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. “This King in Yellow nonsense, I’m half-convinced it was her doing in the first place, a bit of flashy illusion, a stage trick to misdirect our attention.”

“Occam’s razor and all that,” Raine said. “Seems a bit of a coincidence otherwise.”

“Evee,” I sighed a shuddering sigh. “Please don’t call it that.”

“Call it what? What are you talking about?”

“Stage trick. Don’t use that terminology, please. Not for this.”

I shuddered inside as I recalled the apparition in yellow, the pale hand descending to take Evelyn away from us, the peek through the crack in the stage curtains. Raine squeezed my shoulders and rubbed the back of my head, but physical contact and skinship could not chase away the weight of broken taboo.

“Why not?” Evelyn snapped.

“Because I think that’s what it wants,” I admitted.

“It.” Evelyn pressed her mouth into a thin line. “You’ve bought into everything that monster in a hamster ball said, haven’t you? Great.”

“I don’t think it was a trick, Evee. I can’t shake this feeling, this feeling I saw something I wasn’t supposed to. It wanted to spirit you away, as part of teaching me a lesson or something. I’m serious.”

“What lesson is that?” Twil asked. “Friends don’t let friends get lost in libraries?” She laughed without humour, then stopped and frowned. “Hey, you know, that’s not a bad point actually. You were getting way too into that place, Evee.”

Evelyn stared at me for a long moment, gritting her teeth. "Don't. Heather, just don't. I have enough to worry about with that inhuman mage, without banana coloured ghosts around every corner."

"Hey, we got away, didn't we?" Twil asked.

"I don't know if you've noticed," Evelyn drawled, rummaging in her pockets and dragging out her notes, slapping them down on the table, followed by the dusty tome she'd picked up, the useless one. "But we got away empty handed, without any of the books we need. You know, books? Printed pages with little squiggles in them? Perhaps you should try looking at some."

"You don't have to be a bitch about it ... " Twil trailed off.

"Which means we have to go back. Tomorrow, as planned."

"You think she'll be waiting for us?" Raine asked.

I pictured Saldis' smug, all-knowing smile, still directed at us in the moment we'd finally Slipped away.

"Probably," Evelyn grunted. "And that's my concern, not blanket ghosts. Nothing has followed us. We would know. Between Heather, Lozzie, myself, and the dog-sized invisible spiders, we would know." Her words had the cadence of a practised recitation, a mantra of security.

"The house herself would know," Zheng rumbled.

The massive demon-host levered herself off the floor at last, and stretched like a jungle cat woken from a sun-nap. She yawned, and treated us to a vision down a nightmare gullet. "This house would know any violation. But it lies calm."

"The less from you, the better," Evelyn spat at Zheng. "Tomorrow, you are staying behind. You've made yourself a liability."

Zheng levelled a cold gaze at Evelyn. Twil perked up at that, sensing the silent threat, staring back at the giant zombie.

"Oh, no, not now," I said, raising my voice. "No, don't fight over this now."

"I go where the shaman goes," Zheng purred.

"Then Heather can stay behind too," Evelyn said. "Pointless

bringing her anyway, if she refuses to do the one thing she's meant to."

That stung deep, more after the last week and how close Evelyn and I had grown. Yesterday we'd almost shared her bed. I had half a mind to throw a hug at her, but I had too much respect for her aversion to unbidden physical contact. Instead I reached out one limp hand. Tears prickled in the corners of my eyes.

"Evee, don't, please-"

"You," she jabbed a finger at me. "You are my best friend and I love you dearly but you nearly got us all fucking killed."

"Evee, you nearly got us killed." The words spilled forth in a hot, vile rush before I could stop them. "Did you see yourself out there? The way you looked at the books? You were getting obsessive, falling in love with that place."

"Oh, don't be absurd-"

"We all saw it. That wasn't just Twil being a worrywart. Assume for a moment that I saw nothing, no yellow robes, imagine that it was all so much rubbish. The librarians still surrounded you. That was real. That happened. What did that mean? What were you doing, inside your own head?"

"Wandering in the dark," Praem intoned.

The fire went out of Evelyn's eyes. She cast about as if searching inside herself for an answer, but found none.

"I ... I don't ... it wasn't ..." She tried, got nowhere, tried a different path. "Perhaps ... when we return, I ... perhaps I should not ... perhaps I need to be kept away from the books."

"You heard the lady." Raine nodded at Praem.

"No books for Evelyn," Praem sing-songed.

"Book-free diet," Lozzie echoed, and crossed her forearms across her chest.

"Yeah, good call. Good call," Twil said.

Evelyn gave a deep sigh, and seemed to come back to herself. She rubbed her eyes. "Oh for pity's sake, it doesn't have to be literal. I'm-" She shot a look up at Twil, then blushed a hard, ashamed red.

"I'm sorry, alright? I'm so sick of this. I don't want to do this anymore. If we're to return to the library tomorrow and resume the search, we go prepared, to deal with Saldis."

"Evee," I said gently. "You said it yourself. If she wanted to hurt us, we couldn't have stopped her. I don't think she's going to be dangerous to us."

"I'm with Evee on this," Raine said, loud and clear. "Always like some insurance in my back pocket."

"You could have stopped her, Heather," Evelyn said, measured and careful. "And I understand your reasons, but if you can't do it, then I will find a way. There's always things in my mother's notes I can consult."

"If I'd escalated," I said, "she might have done the same."

"Heather defused!" Lozzie piped up.

"I want options," Evelyn said. "For protection."

"Yeah, fuckin' right," Twil grunted. "Protection, yeah."

I contained my little sigh; I was outnumbered, and I had to admit that Evelyn had a good point. The woman in the sphere was an unknown factor, no matter how charming she'd appeared.

"Every shell has a seam," Zheng purred from behind me. "Even a shell of iron."

Evelyn pointed at Zheng, but spoke to me. "She stays behind. I'm serious."

"Wizard-" Zheng rumbled.

"Zheng, don't," I turned on her, using her to displace my frustration and lingering fear. She was big enough and scary enough, she could take it. "You-"

I stopped before I even began.

There it was again. In the split-second before Zheng rallied a cynical crooked grin to repel my lecture, I caught a glimmer of the unhappy rust creeping along her razor blade. She hid it well, no flowering display of Byronic sorrow.

How could I stay angry at her? Her little bird had rejected her.

“Shaman?” she purred.

“Zheng, we need to talk. Now, before I lose my nerve.”

We had too many fires to put out. This one had to be quenched now, and I was the only one capable, so I did the only thing that made sense. I wriggled out of Raine’s arm and grabbed Zheng’s hand – so much larger than mine, her reddish-brown skin like softest leather, warm like a fire burned beneath but without the sweat and throb of fever – and moved to drag her out of the workshop. She was a demon and seven feet tall and could break bricks with her head, but even she deserved privacy for this.

“Shaman,” Zheng laughed, but allowed me to lead her, then shot back over her shoulder, “Coming, *yoshou*?”

Raine was already moving to follow us. I caught her eye, caught the easy roll of muscles layered over sudden tension.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, this isn’t about that.”

“I’ll keep my mouth and ears shut.” Raine put up both her hands. “But you need-”

“No, Raine, I- I order you.” I pointed with my free hand, at the chair next to Evelyn. “Sit. Sit down and help Eevee. I need to talk to Zheng. This isn’t about *that*. This is ... pastoral care. I’m not going to make out with her.”

“Ewwww,” Twil grimaced. Lozzie clapped a hand to her open mouth in a theatrical parody of a scandalised society lady.

“Heather-” Raine protested, still smiling.

“You want to be my knight, you want to be useful to me?” I squeezed the words out and they felt wrong. Was this really what she needed? “Then do as I ask.”

Raine paused, sighed with an even bigger smile – real, false? I couldn’t tell – and gave me an ironic little salute. “Sure thing, boss. Shout if you need me.”

“Right. Of course. Yes.” I had to re-gather my courage all over again before I could lead Zheng out of the workshop.

We passed through the kitchen all a-jumble with night beyond the windows, and into the front room, where we might win a little privacy for ten minutes, while the others recovered from the

journey back.

The front room was as messy as ever. Bare floorboards from a hundred years ago, stacked crates with fifty years of family junk, a few shoes in a pile below the spare coats on hooks. Night crouched silently beyond the front door, easing fingers of cold around the seams in the wood. I led Zheng to the doorway of the disused sitting room, but she let go of my hand before I could usher her inside. I stepped back, a single pace of minimum safe distance.

“Shaman?”

“I know what you were doing out there,” I spoke up at her, at those razor-sharp eyes watching me with relaxed predatory intent.

Suddenly I felt too hot in the coat and hoodie I’d worn for the expedition. I struggled against my coat like a clinging, living thing, shrugged it off and made a low, frustrated noise in my throat, the kind that my mother used to tell me off for vocalising. Only a decade of being a very good girl stopped me from hurling the coat at the floor in frustration.

Zheng plucked the coat from my hands and placed it gently on one of the hooks by the front door.

“... thank you,” I said, lifting the hem of my hoodie to get some air against my skin. Zheng raised an eyebrow.

“Presenting, shaman?”

“What? Oh. Tch, no.” I blushed and sighed. “Don’t change the subject. And don’t flirt.”

“You have not begun a subject, shaman.” Zheng grinned. I gave her a tiny glare.

Now was not the time to enjoy the way her teasing made me feel. Zheng rolled her head, her high shoulders and heavy chest framed by the dark doorway to the disused sitting room. Behind us, I heard the sounds of the others moving in the kitchen, soft voices, Raine speaking down the phone to order takeaway food we all sorely needed. Kimberly emerged from the kitchen doorway and excused herself with a shy head-bob as she passed us, making a very overt please-ignore-me-I’m-not-listening face before she took the stairs two at a time and vanished into the upstairs corridor.

“Can’t we-” I nodded at the door to the barren sitting room. Zheng

said nothing, watching me like a bored cat. I sighed and pitched my voice low. “We all know what you were doing out there, in Carcosa.”

“Do you, shaman?”

“Don’t act ignorant with me. Zheng, you were trying to destroy yourself. You made me a promise, that you would stay with me, that you-”

Zheng chuckled softly. “Self-destruction was not my aim. A fight, shaman. A real fight. I crave it like you crave sex.”

My cheeks flushed, but I kept Zheng’s gaze. “I want to believe that, but you put yourself in danger.”

“I put all of you in danger, as the wizard said.” Her voice turned ironic, cynical, hurt bubbling below the surface.

“I don’t care about that!” I hissed at her. “Well, okay, no, I do care about that, of course, obviously. But I also happen to care about you, a friend, a-” I swallowed, mouth dry, head throbbing. “More than a friend. Zheng, fighting is one thing, but you tried to fight a giant golden tentacle blimp that would have pulled you limb from limb in an instant.”

“Have faith, shaman.”

“And then you tried to make me leave you behind, Outside! Don’t make me watch you die, Zheng.”

“You did not have to watch, shaman.”

I almost – almost – hit her then. It would have been like a mouse bopping an elephant, and just as pointless. I felt my hand rise, but I controlled myself with a hard internal whipcrack of willpower. Even my phantom limbs joined in, one useless thought-tentacle wrapping around my wrist, though I was already lowering it. To strike her would hurt us both, and fracture what lay between us.

“I will never, ever leave you behind,” I hissed at her, my eyes filling with angry heat, wet in the corners again. “I can’t be your little bird, Zheng, I can’t, I’m not her. I’m me. And I can’t- please don’t-” The tears got worse. “Zheng, I do love you, I think, but I can’t be what I suspect you need me to be. Please don’t throw yourself into self-destruction because of that. Don’t do that again.”

I expected a laugh. Zheng would grumble some darkly indecipherable comment, or growl in the manner of a jungle predator. She would leave and brood and I'd never be sure of her again.

Instead, she stared down at me, then reached out and placed one strong hand on top of my head.

"You shame me, little bird," she purred, with such tenderness my heart felt fit to break.

"Zheng, please," I almost whined, shaking. "I'm not-"

"You are."

A warm smile crept across her face, warm because – not in spite – of the many sharp teeth she showed to me.

"I made an oath, shaman. And I strayed. You have returned me to the path."

"That- that's-" I hardly knew what to say. "Well, that's good, then. I think? Yes. But Zheng, we-"

Yellow, in the corner of my eye.

A glint of dying light on tarnished bronze, a whiff of mustard gas in stagnant air, the colour of headache and thin vomit and infected pus. No scrap of costume left on stage and tugged away by a distracted hand, no tilt of misplaced scenery board, no patch of modern denim caught beneath a period-piece costume.

A scrap of yellow silk vanished around the door-frame of the disused sitting room, right behind Zheng, with a gentle flutter on the air. Somebody had passed us by.

I was meant to see that. No taboo of broken stagecraft. Only art.

Zheng responded not to the sight, she was facing the wrong way after all, but to the look on my face. She spun, ready to intercept whatever terrible sight I'd seen behind her, suddenly hard and tense and ready to pull heads off for me. But there were no heads, only the empty door-frame, at which I stared as if a pale hand might curl around it at any second. Zheng stuck her head through and then looked back at me, frowning. "Shaman?"

I raced forward and peered into the darkened sitting room too. Zheng shielded me with one arm, held me back as if I might hurt

myself. Nothing in there, a cleared stage, actors dispersed and props put away, only the old sofa and the remains of some of Evelyn's experiments. I staggered back, starting to hyperventilate. Zheng caught me.

"Shaman, what did you see?"

Her urgent tone brought Raine from the kitchen, almost running across the front room with her truncheon in one hand. I had no extra bandwidth to consider this meant she'd probably heard most of what Zheng and I had said to each other.

"What's going on? Hey, deadite, drop Heath-"

"It is not me, *yoshou*, lower your metal stick. The shaman saw something."

"We were followed home," I whispered as I went weak at the knees. "There's something in here with us. Something yellow."

= =

We checked the house from top to bottom.

The disused sitting room first, with Twil's nose and my eyes and Evelyn muttering snatches of Latin as she went over the walls with her bone wand in her hand, as if we might find a yellow-blanket ghost hidden behind a false panel of wallpaper, like we all lived in a Scooby-Doo cartoon. Then the front room, the kitchen, back into the workshop, detour for the utility room. Every window and doorway in this house had been warded decades ago by Evelyn's mother or grandmother, by mages far more confident and ruthless than us, with our university coursework and messy relationships.

Was it always like this? For Evelyn's grandmother, for Alexander Lilburne, for Felicity and her unspeakable demonic parasite? Did all mages fumble in the dark, hoping not to stab themselves through the foot with a rusty nail?

God alone knows what the poor takeaway delivery driver thought, when he turned up at the door with curry and naan bread, with us rushing about on emergency footing; Praem answered and paid him and brought the food inside, which either made his day or left him very confused.

At least Evelyn took me seriously now.

"I shouldn't have made light of your fears, Heather." she told me as she traced and re-traced and triple-checked the wards hidden around the old wood of the front door. "I was denying my own ones. I am so very tired of being paranoid."

"S'not paranoid if they really are out to get you," Twil grunted, then went back to sniffing the air.

I said nothing. Eyes peeled. Watched every corner and shadow. Shoulder blades itched.

Raine went room to room with her big black combat knife in one hand, stripped down to a tshirt, on silent bare feet. I crept in her wake down the upstairs corridor. Beyond the habitual circuit of familiar bedrooms and the bathroom and Evelyn's old study-slash-library, it was all too easy to forget how many unused rooms lurked up there, full of Saye family junk and iron bedsteads and dark windows with Sharrowford light pollution lurking beyond.

Zheng stayed glued to my shoulder, silent and watchful, the world's most effective bodyguard soothing my tattered nerves. Lozzie freed Tenny from her safety zone, and the poor moth-girl instantly sensed my discomfort, dispensing many overwhelming hugs with too many limbs. She even forced herself to follow as close to Zheng as she could tolerate.

Twil investigated the house in her own way. "This place is full o' weird smells at the best of times. Er, no offense. But like, there's nothing new here. Nothing that smells like Carcosa did, 'cept us. Sorry."

"Nothing's been broken, nothing's in here," Evelyn repeated, over and over. "Nothing is reacting. Maybe it's in your head, Heather."

"Evee," I hissed, "I know what I saw, I thought you believed-"

"No, I mean literally. Maybe it's in your head."

By the time Evelyn had me standing in the middle of a hastily-painted magic circle, midnight had passed with a vengeance. We were all run ragged from six hours Outside, snatching bites of curry and rice as we'd made sure we hadn't invited a haunting on our own home. Only Lozzie bounced around with too much energy, sitting half-in Tenny's lap on the sofa as Evelyn recited bits of Greek at me and frowned harder and harder. There was nothing in my head but me.

All this reminded me too much of the Lozzie-thing the Eye had sent. Another rule breaker, a creature that had brooked no boundary, even Evelyn's wards.

"Maybe it left already," Twil suggested.

"Go 'way," Tenny fluttered, wagging her legs back and forth, slowly undoing Lozzie's braid with her tentacles. "Leeeeeeave."

"Perhaps it really was stress," I said eventually, hand to my eyes, aching and stinging. "I'm sorry, everybody. I'm sorry. I-"

"Don't go changing your mind now," Evelyn scolded me gently, and I knew she was really scolding herself. "We may have an uninvited guest, though I can't figure out how. We all need sleep, we can't stay awake forever, but anyone sees anything, the slightest thing out of place, scream bloody murder at the top of your lungs. Don't pick it up or follow it around a corner. Do nothing alone. Twil, you're staying in my bedroom again."

Alone, yes.

Deep down, I knew that flutter of yellow silk had been for my eyes alone.

= =

That night was hard because I was terrified.

Tucked between Raine's arms, wrapped up warm in bed, with the soft orange of a night-light spilling across the rugs on the floor, I kept expecting to see a yellow apparition in the corner of my eye, standing in the room with us. I held my breath at every floorboard creak, for fear the door would glide open and in would peer a mask in place of a face, and nobody else would see the figure step into the room as I screamed and sobbed. I lay shuddering with the thought that Raine would wake but see nothing I did. It was all too reminiscent of a decade of ignoring pneuma-somatic life, my constant otherworldly harassers that none other could see.

But none of that happened. Instead of a ghost, Lozzie wriggled into our bed at about two in the morning, wormed in next to me on the opposite side from Raine, so I was bracketed between them. With Raine at my back and Lozzie tangled in front, I finally managed to snatch a few hours sleep before dawn.

We all woke up to find Tenny curled up asleep on the foot of the

bed, like a giant cat seeking warmth.

“Awww, she’s so sweet!” Lozzie dragged herself from the covers and set about petting Tenny’s fluffy white fur.

Less sweet was how she’d used one long black tentacle to hold the door shut by the handle.

That put the wind up me, and prompted Raine to covertly grab her knife to check what might be lurking out in the corridor.

Zheng was lurking out in the corridor, sleeping cross-legged against the wall right next to our bedroom door. Raine laughed, I sighed with relief, Lozzie petted Zheng’s head, and Tenny commented with an almost perfunctory hiss.

“Standing guard, left hand?” Raine asked.

Zheng did not open her eyes. “Sitting guard.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout that, I kept her close,” Raine said. “And warm enough for both of us.”

Zheng declined the bait.

“We wait a day,” Evelyn said over breakfast – a late Sunday morning breakfast, a hangover breakfast of leftover vegetable curry and sour stomachs and heavy eye bags. Twil didn’t appear until past eleven, and when she did, she and Evelyn treated each other with awkward halting silences that set red flags up in my mind. That was not a happy couple who’d snuggled in bed last night. But first things first.

“Wait a day?” I asked. “Evee, we need the books. As soon as possible.”

“We wait a day,” Evelyn said, surprisingly calm and confident. “Because you’re under observation, to make sure you’re not haunted.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts,” I sighed.

“What I believe is subject to change based on evidence.”

“Ghosts, ugh,” Twil did a big shudder.

“We go back Monday afternoon,” Evelyn said, with a tone that brooked no argument, and a dark twinkle in her eye. “With

questions for Saldis.”

More tests while I stood half-naked in a magic circle in the workshop. More naps. More leaving me alone in the bedroom for a while to see if anything would happen. It never did. No King in Yellow, no scraps of jaundiced cloth, no whispers in the dark. No, the show did not go on.

= =

The King in Yellow was a profoundly boring book.

When professor Raymond arrived in lecture hall B-3, I slipped the book back into my bag, and resolved not to think about it again until class was over. The professor – a bull of a man with prematurely white hair and permanently rumpled sleeves – adjusted his owlish glasses and overflowed with apologies for being more than thirty seconds late. Below us, he took to the platform at the base of the lecture hall, dumped his notes on the lectern, and squinted up at the seventy or eighty of us first-year students, arrayed in the seating for yet another lecture in his *Introduction to Modernism* unit.

And Raine.

“Looks like he eats rocks for breakfast,” she leaned over and whispered to me.

“He’s sweet,” I hissed back. “And you’re not even meant to be in here. Shush.”

“Yes ma’am.” Raine winked and settled back into her seat. At least we were relatively alone, up in the third-from-final row of the lecture hall seating.

In truth, I rather liked the professor. Of all the first-year lectures I’d sat through in the six months since beginning my degree at Sharrowford University, his were always the most spirited. He loved his subject matter, as did I.

I liked the lecture hall too, nestled in a semi-basement layer of one of the older university buildings. All dark wood panelling polished by two hundred years of lecturers pacing back and forth, of student bums in solid seats, of thousands of hands leaning on the backs of the chair-rows. The seating formed a sort of descending miniature amphitheatre, falling away to terminate in a wide wooden platform,

on which stood the speaker's lectern. A huge modern chalkboard was bolted to the wall behind; an eyesore, but within tolerable limits.

Comfortable though a little chill, these spaces were not built for modern heating. Venerable and beautiful, with a private history beyond knowing, it took my mind off everything else in my life.

I was safe here, in mundane society, and I intended to make myself feel as mundane as possible. If only for an hour or two, I intended to think about something other than the great library Outside, and our inevitable return that afternoon.

I had, however, been unable to resist *The King in Yellow*.

The library held two copies of the book, a cheap little paperback from the eighties with cover art of a masked man in yellow robes, a silly illustration which looked nothing like what I had seen. I assumed it was meant to be 'spooky'. I'd checked one copy out of the library after asking Evelyn's permission.

"Of course," she'd told me that morning. "It's nothing, short stories. Fiction. Utterly bloody meaningless. You're not going to learn anything."

"But what about the figure in yellow?" I'd asked. "There must be some kernel of truth in there."

She'd frowned, and waved me off, too busy trying to re-rig the gateway in the workshop to return us to where we'd left off Saturday night.

Unfortunately for my time and tedium, Evelyn was correct. I'd sat in the lecture hall as it had slowly filled, waiting for class to begin, and discovered *The King in Yellow* was nothing more occult than a set of rather execrable short horror stories. Though I had no eye for the genre, even I could tell they were not exactly spine-chilling tales of the supernatural. Then again, perhaps my sense of horror was poorly calibrated, for obvious reasons.

Raine had read over my shoulder for a bit, but quickly lost interest.

This wasn't the first time she'd tagged along for one of my lectures. Our set of safety rules still stood, even if we hadn't seen hide nor hair of Edward Lilburne in weeks. Normally Raine would wait for me in the library or the Medieval Metaphysics room, whichever was

closer, or attend one of her own classes if our schedules lined up, but that day I was not to be left alone for even a minute. In case I was haunted.

So Raine was sitting in on a first-year lecture for a subject she didn't study, but they never took attendance at these anyway. A small, immature, girlish part of myself wanted all the people I didn't really know to see me with Raine, and know I was hers, and I got a little flushed inside at that idea. But we settled in to be sensible, me with my notebook and pen, Raine with her curious eyes, one leg crossed over the other, as the professor began talking about Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*.

Professor Raymond was in full flow when reality began to break down.

Or when I began to go truly mad. I'm still not sure which.

"- and the nature of being a body, subject to this impersonal machine," he was saying, "it's not going to teach anybody anything. Being dehumanised doesn't help. That's the excuse, yes? But it's an abandonment of the personal and the communal, replaced by didactic pain."

The wooden platform at the base of the lecture hall was flanked by a pair of small wooden doors. I vaguely knew they led off into the bowels of the building, to office rooms and storage spaces, to the deeper parts where ancient architecture linked up with modern breeze-block above our heads. The one to the professor's left suddenly yawned open on silent hinges, I assume to admit a late-arriving student who had gotten lost in the labyrinth of the university.

Nobody else paid it any heed. The professor did not glance that way, too absorbed in his own words.

In stepped a vision in yellow.

My heart stopped. My head throbbed with adrenaline. My guts attempted to crawl up and out of my mouth. I almost lurched from my seat, halted only by a decade of training myself to ignore the unnatural sights of pneuma-somatic life. Nobody else reacted. The professor did not break off from his words. No screams or shouts, no fainting in the seats, not a whisper.

"-and one of Kafka's points here is that pain and torture cannot

teach,” the professor went on. “The man in the torture device cannot see the words etched on his own skin. It’s a paradox-”

The apparition, the King in Yellow, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, whatever it was – it glided over to stand beside the lectern, then turned toward the audience.

Rippling yellow silks and heavy dark cottons lay over no shape of a body beneath, only more layers of yellow upon yellow that parted and rejoined inside a room without wind. The pale hands were tucked up inside the massive drooping sleeves. The yellow hood cradled a pallid mask, facial features so bland and blank there was almost nothing there. Holes for eyes, open on darkness. A suggestion for a mouth.

“Heather?” Raine whispered.

“You don’t see it?” I hissed back, eyes wide at the figure in yellow down on the stage. Raine quickly took my hand and squeezed hard.

“No. Nothing,” Raine whispered again. “What is it, what do you see?”

“It’s back. It’s down there, standing right next to the professor. Just ... standing.” I forced myself to take a steady breath. “Just like a spirit, I suppose, nobody else can see it. I’m okay, I’ll ignore it best I can. But we need to tell Eevee, we should-”

“And that’s why my assistant here,” the professor was saying, “is going to demonstrate.”

He placed a friendly hand on the yellow shoulder.

My blood turned to ice.

“A few volunteers?” The professor went on, a little huffy. “Come on, this isn’t a magic show, this is serious. It’ll only take five minutes.”

A few tentative hands went up among my fellow students.

“Heather? Heather?” Raine whispered, urgent now. I stared at her, then back down at the professor and the apparition in yellow. It raised a flawless pale hand and indicated several of the student volunteers, moving with the languid ease of oil through water. They got out of their seats and moved to join it on the platform.

“You don’t ... Raine, you don’t see?” I asked, my voice a strangled whisper. “You don’t see something wrong here?”

Raine glanced down at the stage, then back at me, frowning with increasing worry. “All looks normal to me.”

“Oh, bravo,” another voice – an amused voice – whispered from the seat behind us. “Audience participation. How unique. How novel.”

I looked over my shoulder. Saldis, the black Norse mage from the depths of Carcosa, was sitting behind us. Resplendent in her red-and-gold dress, she leaned forward, eyes awed as she gazed down at the show about to begin. She caught me looking and shot me a wink.

“Heather?” Raine whispered again, following my gaze for a second before trying to get my attention. “Heather, what’s wrong?”

“I ... I don’t know ... I-”

“Oh, ignore me, poppet,” Saldis said to me. “I’m not really here.”

nothing more impotent –

11.6

Yellow robes whispered across the wooden boards, and admitted no hint of gait beneath, no kick of feet to free the director from the tripping tangle. A pallid hand invited each volunteer player upon the stage, guided young ladies to their places by raised fingertips, positioned them with feathery touches at elbow, shoulder, and hip. Empty eye sockets in a blank mask gave no taste as to the coming genre; no comedic crinkle of crow's feet, no tragic drawing-in of eyebrows, no melodramatic gathering of tears.

Soundless but for the rustle of yellow fabric, the King – or Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, or a demon that had followed us back from Carcosa, or a maniac dressed in rotten rags – set the actors in their starting poses.

And I appeared to be the only person in the lecture hall who saw anything out of the ordinary.

Professor Raymond had retreated to the edge of the stage, to nod and stroke his chin as his ghostly assistant set up the 'demonstration'. The rest of the student audience watched, with all the curious boredom expected of first-years in an early class with a eccentric lecturer.

Raine's concern was all with me.

"Heather, tell me what's wrong," she hissed.

"Can't you see it?" I whispered back, mouth bone dry, my hand clammy in hers.

"Nothing. Heather, what's-"

"Raine, exactly what do you see happening down there? Describe it to me."

She only glanced at the stage because I was so terrified. She shook her head. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Mister owl chap is standing aside, looks like the students are gonna do a skit or something.

Seems a bit much for a lit class.”

The Yellow Director turned an actor’s arm here, adjusted another’s footing there, rotated a volunteer’s wrist by a few precise degrees. The thin sunlight creeping in through narrow slit-windows at the top of the lecture hall suddenly clouded over. Several of the ugly modern fluorescent strip-bulbs flickered and went out, leaving only the wooden platform lit. Nobody looked up, or remarked on the gathering shadows.

How strange it is, not to trust the evidence of one’s own senses. I believe if any other had been in my place in the Yellow King’s audience that morning, they would have flirted with true madness. But I had ten years of experience in seeing things other people could not. With a conscious effort, I anchored my mind with that brutal fact, and told myself this was really happening.

To do otherwise would play right into those pale hands.

One other pair of eyes did see what I was seeing. But I suspected that Saldis was neither a person, nor actually here.

“What is happening?” I hissed over my shoulder, at the wizard in red-and-gold.

“I told you already,” Saldis answered with breathy excitement and not a little condescension. “The show must go on.”

“Heather, Heather, look at me,” Raine hissed sharply. “Whatever you’re seeing, it’s not happening. Or it’s spirits, pneuma-somatic, the same as always.”

Saldis laughed with a musical tinkle. “Your paramour is not part of the audience, lady Morell, however close your hearts lie. Best quiet her down before the ushers decide to remove a distraction from the stalls.”

That got my eyes off the stage and over my shoulder, if only for a second.

“Ushers?” I whispered.

Saldis shrugged.

“Heather,” Raine hissed, her other hand gripping my shoulder, squeezing to bring me back. “Heather, look at-”

“Shhh,” I hushed her as loud as I dared. “Raine, please stop. Don’t

disrupt the play. I think you might be in danger if you do.”

In a testament to her trust for me – and how quickly she could adapt to the unexpected – Raine did exactly as I asked. She didn’t understand, she couldn’t see; she just dealt with it. She glanced at the stage again, then over her shoulder at the closed doors to the lecture hall. She scanned the other students, the empty seats, the exits. One hand crept inside her leather jacket.

“Right you are,” she whispered, wire-tight and ready to spring. “Do we need to get out of here?”

“I ... I don’t know,” I admitted.

Down on the stage, the Yellow Conductor was making increasingly granular adjustments to the players – bending a finger here, tilting a head there. I noticed with relief that the student volunteers were still acting like students roped into a silly practical demonstration. Trying not to laugh, blushing faintly, sharing amused looks with their friends in the audience.

Eight of them. Six women, two men.

“There’s people involved now,” I hissed. “A-and the ... it’s touching them, it can’t be pneuma-somatic, can’t be. Maybe we should get out, yes, maybe it’ll follow me, leave them alone and-”

The retreat died on my lips. The Yellow Apparition finished the preliminaries, and gifted each actor with a role.

A porcelain hand brushed each volunteer’s face, caressed a cheek, traced a jawline, shivered across a chin. At that touch, each volunteer became somebody else.

There was no actual physical transformation, no terrible explosion of change, no warping of flesh like melting plastic, no ruined puppet flopping upon the stage. In a way, that would have made this easier. At least then I could have shot out of my seat with a scream, or scrabbled together some brainmath to reverse what this stray godling had wrought upon innocent bystanders. But no, the Yellow Intruder’s magic was one we humans knew all too well.

Facial muscles shifted in a million tiny ways, settling into expressions alien to their wearers. Musculature slackened here and tightened there, pose flowed like water, shoulders rolled back and up, or slouched with old pain. Eyes relaxed and fluttered, or

narrowed into hard squints. Grins cracked open on faces that had never grinned like that before. Arms clutched at themselves in mirror mockery. Teeth flashed that were neither sharp nor too many. One of the volunteers ran a hand through her hair and winked. Another chirped a giggle.

One need not be a mage to recognise acting.

Except none of these people were actors. I do not know much about the art, but I do understand it's not just reading the script in the right kind of voice. It's in how you hold yourself, in how you breathe, in tone and glance and how straight your back stands, in every micro-expression and habit and subconscious tell. Acting is to rid oneself of everything that makes you seem like you, and replace them with other parts.

Every single volunteer suddenly displayed the mastery of a classically trained, lifelong veteran of the stage, and they did so without uttering a single word.

"... oh," I swallowed. "Well, that's just obscene."

Raine eyed me carefully.

"It's beautiful," Saldis said. "They have you down perfect. Don't be such a philistine, little Englisher."

The actors' roles were us.

They looked nothing like us, of course. The young woman unknowingly aping Raine's shoulders-back beaming confidence was nowhere near as athletic as the real Raine. She was soft and cuddly around the middle, with mousy hair down to her shoulder blades and an angular face that should not have been able to pull Raine's grin at all, but did. Evelyn was played by a man, which vaguely offended me at first, before I saw the miracle of observational mimicry. He had her hunched shoulders, her awkward spinal twist, the kink of her hips and the uneven set of her artificial leg. He even had her scowl.

Twil, bestial and worried, played by a woman who should have been too willowy and slight, too gentle-looking. Praem was also played by a man, but that made no difference in the face of this supernaturally bestowed skill; straight-backed and precise, lack of expression an expression all its own, there was no mistaking who he was meant to be.

Zheng was absurd, played by a woman shorter even than I, but languid predatory intent lingered in every tilt of her head and kink of her amused lips. Even Lozzie was correct, giggly and flouncy in the body of a woman who probably spent her free time playing rugby, whose muscle mass could have given the real Zheng a run for her money.

As they changed, the lecture hall took on an air of hyper-reality. Every colour seemed more saturated, every line of scenery and clothing sharper, every scent richer. I could see every ripple in the Yellow Godling's robe, every eyelash on the actors' lids, every rise and fall of every chest, every flash of imitation face.

And then there was 'me'.

"Tch," I tutted at Saldis. "No they don't have me perfectly, don't be absurd."

"She has your slouch!"

"She's ten times prettier than me. And about three cup sizes bigger in the chest."

I huffed, trying to triage outrage and fear with my own performance. Playing a character is one thing, but down on that stage were the mannerisms and expressions of real people in my life, people I valued and loved, people I chose to spend my life with. Seeing them stolen and recycled made me angry in a way I couldn't explain. I risked a sideways glance at the real Raine, and saw the same mannerisms right there, right next to me.

"Heather," Raine whispered, gentle but serious, "can I ask who you're talking to?"

"Somebody who's not really here. I think. Saldis. She's behind us but you can't see her."

The pale hand brushed across the brow of the final of the eight volunteer players – a gently pudgy woman with a heart-shaped face and lots of ginger curls. I expected Tenny, or perhaps Kimberly, to sprout into being in pose and gesture, and briefly wondered if the former was even possible. But it wasn't either of them.

At first I didn't comprehend who she became, who the role was meant to be; I did not recognise the bouncy child-like shoulder wiggle, the happy side-to-side bob of the hips, the grope of a small

hand for an absent partner. Neither did I recognise the awkward twitching layered on top, or the starving look behind the eyes. I did not recognise any of it, but my subconscious did.

It was partly me.

Me at eight years old, before Wonderland, and then molded by a different set of influences.

Tears prickled in my eyes. Fear turned to cold anger.

“You cannot show me this,” I whispered down at the Yellow Thing. “You monster, you cannot show me this.”

“Oh, but this is the entire point,” Saldis supplied. Only the fact she didn’t exist stopped me from turning on the spot and slapping her stupid. “Isn’t this the aim of your quest, lady Morell? You can hardly be expected to deduce the true intent of the author without the goal on stage. The show would make no sense.”

“It’s grotesque,” I whispered, my throat thick with emotion. I wanted to leap out of my seat and run onto the stage. Part of me didn’t care if it was an imitation, if it looked nothing like the real person, if it was plucked from my own memories or a connection with the abyss or some unthinkable simulacrum. “It’s violation.”

“All art is violation,” Saldis said with dismissal.

“When we return to Carcosa, I shall slap you for that,” I hissed.

“Blame the pretender, not I,” Saldis drawled. “I’m right here in the audience with you, lady Morell, and I mean no offence.”

“Heather? Heather,” Raine repeated. “We getting out of here or not?”

I shook my head. I could no more leave the performance than I could stop breathing.

The King in Yellow, or Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, or a ridiculous ghost in yellow sheets, had summoned my twin to the stage.

Played by a woman that looked nothing like Maisie or I, but there was more of her down there than I’d seen with my physical eyes in ten years.

“No,” I hissed, and scrubbed my eyes with my sleeve. “No, we can’t leave. I can’t leave, I have to ... I want to watch. I need to know.”

"I've never known a pretender to be so literal, hmmm," Saldis allowed herself a mildly disappointed hum. "Or perhaps a demonstration of power? I suppose you are foreign royalty, after all. Only the most conventional form is acceptable. Unless this is merely a narrative within a narrative." Her voice brightened at that, and laughed another tinkling laugh. "But hush, I will still myself. It's beginning!"

The Yellow Master stepped back, falling into muted shadow as if out of focus, and the players began to move.

I'd only ever seen one real play before, a production of *Macbeth*, alongside the rest of my secondary-school literature class. I did possess vague childhood memories of our parents treating Maisie and I to several Christmas pantomimes, though those hardly count. But I know the theory.

A play is fragile illusion, forged by agreement between actors and audience. Flesh and blood in real time, pretending to be something it is not. Even the worst play captures a glint of that magic, invokes the stage as a place of transformation, invites the audience to believe.

It should not have worked, not on me, not here, not like this. The actors looked nothing like us, I was terrified out of my mind, still not sure if I was going mad, and distracted by trying to see beneath the Yellow Robes at the back of the stage. According to the clock on the wall, the scene the actors played out took no more than Professor Raymond's promised five minutes, and they acted entirely without dialogue, a story of silent gestures and meaningful looks and pure physicality.

It was so powerful it reduced me to tears.

I cannot do it justice. I am incapable; words fall short. It is often said that one cannot simply read Shakespeare's plays, one must see them performed, and that the same is true of any great playwright. The Yellow Pretender was one such genius, and the intended audience was me alone.

The play was a vision – or, I prayed, as I came to understand, a *version* – of what would happen when we tried to rescue Maisie from Wonderland.

Not literal, of course. The Maisie-actor always out of reach at the

edge of our group was not literally in the Eye's clutches, Wonderland itself did not blossom around the actors' bodies. If it had I would have been provoked to intervention, or destruction, or worse. But it was in the actors' forced, mimicked expressions, in their fear and resolve, in the pain and anger on 'my' face. Wonderland was present via interpretation, in panicked gesture and mad scramble across the stage, in a circle of fellowship that exploded under its own weight.

It was a story of how I was going to fail.

Under the pressure of the Eye's attention, Evelyn's efforts collapsed, and she with them, mewling and broken. Praem wanted to help, but she was lost inside herself, redirected to her own lack. Twil became an animal. Zheng and Raine turned on each other – the actors played out a stylised fight, all strike and block and twist with bare hands. Lozzie stayed by my side too long, refused to leave when I told her to go, returned when I pushed her away.

I – the real me – was so absorbed in the personal horror of the story, that I almost didn't realise when the actor playing me started bleeding.

Great slow rivers of blood flowed from her nose, her eyes, out of her ears, stained the front of her tshirt and jumper as she stared upward – me, defying the Eye – and that was no fake blood. She bled far more than I ever did when executing brainmath. A wave of crimson choked out of her mouth.

"Oh, oh no," I whispered, finally ripping my attention away from what was happening on stage in favour of what was *really happening on stage*.

"Heather?" the real Raine squeezed my hand harder.

"Oh no, no no, that's girl's going to die, she's just normal, she can't bleed like that, not without-"

The action reached a crescendo, and exploded into climax. 'Heather' collapsed in a blood-soaked heap, just as she seemed to break through some unseen barrier, her last effort to reach for the Maisie-actor thwarted by her own failing body. The Twil-actor leapt at 'Praem' over Evelyn's prone, still, unbreathing corpse, and awful tearing, ripping sounds came from their frantic struggle. At exactly the same moment, Raine and Zheng's duel ended – the Raine-actor

produced a knife, a real one, huge and sharp, and slit Zheng's throat in a bloody arc of short-lived triumph, disembowelled a moment later by Zheng's death-spasm, guts spilling across the stage like writhing snakes.

Not one of them screamed. Not even a grunt.

The Yellow Nightmare whispered forward, into the wreckage, and engulfed the Maisie-actor in yellow robes. She was gone.

Real blood, real guts, real death. This was no illusion. The mingled reek of blood, sweat, and shit filled the air. Only a decade of self-control kept a scream from clawing up my throat.

"Oh, bravo! Bravo!" Saldis slapped her hands together in wild applause. "Not exactly subtle, but I approve. Real *grand-guignol* treatment, yes! Beautiful!"

I reached both hands into the black pit of my soul, and summoned the Eye's lessons.

Innocent people lay dead, because an alien god-thing wanted to teach me a cruel lesson, but I could re-knit them if I was fast and precise. It would cost me. I could perform miracles, but I would have to run the equations beyond my body, return to the abyss. And that awful, ugly, bloody prediction upon the stage was so convincing that I wanted to leave, go back to the ocean between worlds, be what I was meant to be. What was the point in staying here, if my actions, my plan, would lead to that? Better I become a thing of photons and starlight and black ocean depths, than lead all my friends, my beloved, to that. A trade. My useless, disgusting ape-self for those innocent dead who weren't even part of this.

But then The Yellow Beast reached for one of the fallen players – the Zheng actor, I think – and passed that pale hand over her torn throat.

The wound was gone. Blood vanished behind the ripple of yellow sleeves. The actor got to her feet with a flushed face and sheepish smile, no longer channelling the mannerisms and gestures of my beautiful demon-host. She took a nervous bow and shuffled off the stage.

Seven-Shades-of-Serious-Shenanigans went from actor to actor, raising the dead and spiriting away the mess. A stage trick. Relief flooded me even as I sniffed back a bloody nose of my own, the

product of stalled brainmath. The vanished Maisie-actor reappeared from behind the yellow robes, and followed the others back to her seat.

“Heather, yo, brainmath, now?” Raine hissed. I just shook my head.

“Why ... why show me this?” My breath shuddered as I whispered down at the Yellow Thing. “What was the point? Just to tell me I’m going to fail? I’m going to kill all my friends?”

“Heather, you’re not going to kill all your friends,” Raine murmured, sudden and hard and certain. “I don’t know what you’re seeing, but you’re not going to do that.”

Professor Raymond cleared his throat and returned to the lectern, adjusting his glasses with an awkward smile. “Well, there you have it,” he said. “I hope that made sense. And thank you,” he nodded at the Yellow Mockery.

The King in Yellow turned and glided back toward the little wooden side-door.

“What was the point?” I hissed again, brimming with anger now. I glanced over my shoulder but Saldis was gone, her seat empty once more.

When I looked back at the stage, The Yellow Torturer was still there, on the very edge, about to exit. It stopped and looked directly at me with those dark holes for eyes. I held the gaze. It bowed low – in thanks or mockery or apology – and left the lecture hall.

The door closed behind it. The light bulbs flickered back on. The clouds passed from the sun.

“Right then, where were we? Ah yes, the torture machine,” Professor Raymond picked up exactly where he’d left off.

“Okay, okay, right, okay,” I whispered to Raine, shaking harder than I’d thought, soaked in my own layer of cold sweat as I wiped at my bloody nose with the back of my hand. “I would very much like to get out of here now, yes please. Help me.”

= =

“All I saw was a bunch of students doing a silly skit. But if that’s what you say happened, it happened, and I believe you.”

Raine kept her voice low, in case of random passers-by as we

climbed the stairs in Willow House, as quickly as my shuddering heart would allow.

The long snake of a building was quiet between classes, our footsteps echoing in the whitewashed corridors and stairwell. I'd never left a lecture early before, and even under these utterly mad circumstances a tiny part of myself – the well trained, goody-two-shoes part – felt awfully guilty at skipping out before the end.

"Thank you, yes, but Raine, we need to get home. We need to," I hissed back. "We need Evee to look at my head- and- I can't, I can't do this. I can't let you all end up like that, I-"

"Medieval Metaphysics room is closer." Raine gave me a confident grin. "It's also warded. We'll get you there, lock the door, then call Evee. She'll know what to do."

"Will she?" I murmured.

Raine squeezed my hand tighter, and dragged me onward.

We reached the door to the Medieval Metaphysics room, tucked away in the bare concrete stairwell at the rear of the building. Thin grey sunlight filtered through the single tiny window. Raine had her key ready before we even stopped. She got the door open and got me inside with a minimum of fuss, then left me shaking and shivering alone for a moment as she closed and locked the door behind us.

"Sit down, take a moment. It's gonna be alright," she told me.

We hadn't spent any great amount of time in here lately, but the Medieval Metaphysics room was still a rallying point for us, a main stop on our routine of safety when beyond the walls of number 12 Barnslow Drive. A comfortable room with a kettle and some tea and some nice armchairs, where I regularly waited for Raine to pick me up, or where Evelyn came between her own classes. We'd even had Praem in here a few times, bustling about and making tea.

The familiar sagging bookshelves and the soft light through blanket-covered windows eased my terror, gave me a moment to take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Even the old racking that filled half the room felt friendly. Perhaps the Thing In Yellow had been forced to use the lecture hall because the house was warded, so perhaps we were safe in here, for now. On shaking legs I walked over to one of the shaded lamps and fumbled for the switch, felt better for the

light, then walked back to Raine.

She had her mobile phone out, thumbing at her contact list.

“Seriously, you can sit down, I’m right here, not going anywhere without you.” Raine raised the phone to her ear with a wink for me. “Emergency first, I’ll contact Eevee, then I promise I’ll help you get cleaned up.”

“Yes, yes of course. I just—” I sniffed back the lingering nosebleed, dabbing at my face with a tissue, then let my shoulders slump. “I’ll sit.”

Our backs had been turned to the trio of armchairs and the wide table in the middle of the room, for about five seconds.

When I turned back I screamed and jumped out of my skin.

Raine – bless her, keep her safe, I love her so much – reacted faster than I thought possible. She dropped the phone and drew her big black combat knife from inside her jacket in one fluid motion. With a manoeuvre that felt too gentle for how fast she moved, she took my shoulder and shoved me back, interposing herself between me and the occupant of the chair, who had not been there a moment ago.

Her senses didn’t even register what it was until I was safe, until she was protecting me.

I should have been the one shielding her.

It was Raine.

The figure slumped in the chair was Raine – or at least, a patchwork parody of Raine. A life-size wooden doll with a painted face and fake hair and cheap, scratchy versions of her clothes, which looked to have been sewn together from various different cast-off pieces of spare fabric. The doll itself was all mismatched too, arms and legs of different sizes, with different kinds of joints, made from different colours of wood.

But that face. A masterwork of cruel satire. Her rakish grin, the flash of her eyes, the angle of her nose. It was all there, made ugly and false.

A rusted butter knife lay in the doll’s lap. In one hand it held a length of industrial twine. In the other, a large sewing needle. Two

thick bands of similar twine – one rose-red in colour, the other dark crimson – were wrapped about it, under the clothes and over the clothes and looping the torso and hooked around the limbs. The wire braced it, held it together, kept the doll in one piece.

At least it wasn't moving.

"Raine? You- you see this, right? You ... see ... "

Raine could see it, and she didn't need to tell me so. The point of her knife wavered. She began to form a word, a question, but trailed off into silence, frowning in a way I'd never seen her frown before, as if over a bittersweet pain in her heart. She smiled through the frown.

"Ow," she sighed.

"Ow?" I echoed, panic in my throat. "Raine, are you okay? Are you- its not hurt you- you-"

"I'm okay," she said, steady and careful, keeping her knife up, and I had rarely heard her less okay. "This- this- Heather, could- could you not look at this thing, please? Maybe ... maybe I can deal with-"

I lost my temper.

"Stop it," I snapped over Raine, over her shoulder, at the doll-mockery of her most well-kept secrets, ones I didn't even know.

The doll did not move.

"Stop this right now," I went on at it, voice shaking as my anger grew. "Tormenting me is one thing. You can get away with that, because deep down sometimes I think I deserve it. But you do not get to torment Raine. You stop it, this instant."

Nothing, except Raine's breathing.

"I once ripped a human being from the Eye's clutches," I said to the doll. "You're not as complex as that. If I think hard enough, I can unravel you, no matter what you pretend to be, no matter where you hide. Go away, and leave us alone, or shall we find out what's under those yellow robes?"

The Raine-doll exploded like a dust devil of yellow sand, a tiny whirlwind of jaundice and bile and dying sunlight. With a swirl of fabric and a whirlpool wave of yellow ripple, it resolved into the

figure behind the illusion. We had been admitted backstage.

The apparition in yellow stood before us.

Up close, it was an awful thing. Not the pallid hands which emerged from the dangling sleeves like ropes of dead intestine, not the blank mask of perfect ivory, nor the holes for eyes, nor the bottomless emptiness behind them. I realised, in the way one creature recognises another akin to itself, that the yellow robes themselves were all that mattered. Yellow was the medium, the canvas, and the truth.

Cotton and silk and wool, and fabrics named in no human language. A billion ripples, like an ocean seen from miles up. Patterns formed in sleeve and hood and skirts, slow spirals and mountain ridges, hypnotic and infinite.

Raine almost went for it with her knife.

Bless her, but she can be very stupid sometimes.

I stopped her by stepping past her, past her knife, into her path toward the Yellow Thing.

Pure instinct drove me, not courage or defiance. Raine wasn't merely not on the same level as the Yellow Director, she wasn't even the same manner of being. She may as well try to stab the North Sea.

But me? I was close enough.

Abyssal instinct pushed me forward because my mate was in danger. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd shoved past Raine's shoulder, I'd spread phantom limbs to make myself look big, and I opened my mouth and *hissed*.

Long and loud, sharp and sure. An inhuman sound.

The Yellow King did not move.

It took me a long moment to come back. The wet meat in my throat felt all wrong, shouldn't have been meat at all. The hiss left behind an echo of euphoric rightness. For a moment of adrenaline and instinct, I'd expressed the truth that lay under my skin.

Vibrating with aggression, crashing back into the sagging reality of my own body, I almost sobbed.

“Heather-” Raine whispered from behind me.

“This is-” My voice was so ugly compared to the hiss, I almost choked on it. But I didn’t take my eyes off the Yellow Robes. “This isn’t something you stab or shoot, Raine.”

“Dunno ‘bout that,” Raine said. “Always gotta give violence a chance.”

“You,” I told the Yellow Provocation. “The play is over. You made your point, fine. But I’ve had enough of grim lessons from cruel Gods. You must see what I really am. I’m not bluffing. If you choose to keep tormenting us, I will peel you open.”

The King in Yellow bowed its head, to hide the eyeless pale mask inside the yellow hood. Then it raised those porcelain hands, and peeled the hood away. Beneath, it possessed a head, and a face, and one last torment to inflict upon me.

For just a moment I thought it was-

“Maisie?”

“Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight,” Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight corrected me.

In my voice, with my mouth, set in my face.

The head above the rippling neckline of yellow robes was an exact replica of mine, perfect as a mirror. The bowing motion from before the reveal had even served to reduce the thing’s height to match mine.

“Wha- ... why- ... ” I managed, almost crying with cruel hope. “Why?”

“Uhhh,” went Raine.

“Plenty of people have lost their temper with me over the centuries,” Seven-Shades grimaced, in the exact self-conscious way I might do when having made a nasty faux-pas. “It comes with the territory, and I am sorry. But nobody has ever credibly threatened to disrobe me by force, that’s ... new. So I thought I better show my face.”

“My face,” I hissed. “Maisie’s face. How dare you.”

“Ah. Oh, um.” Seven-Shades winced hard, flustered and awkward. The effect made my head swim with recognition, as she spoke with

my own voice, my mannerisms, my micro-expressions. “Oh dear. Yes. Oh, I’m ... I’m so sorry for the confusion. You’re such a unique case. Or, um, not unique. That’s the point, yes, the exact problem. You’re not unique, there is another in the wide seas of all reality with the same face as you. I do apologise. I’m sorry. That was not my intent.”

Did I really look like that? There was something deeply uncanny about seeing oneself in motion, like a video recording but a hundred times worse. A mousy, scrawny, skittish young woman with thin brown hair, an unhealthy pallor to her skin, and deep-set rings of old exhaustion around her eyes. And the eyes themselves, blinking, twitchy, perhaps warm but terminally afraid.

Yes, I had to concede, Seven-Shades had me down perfectly.

“Again, I’m so sorry,” she was saying. Did I really speak like that, as well? So precise, so polite, but with a tremor of nervous tension. My chest ached with sympathy – for myself? “I chose your face because it’s always easier to talk to a person as their self, especially if they’re really introspective. Which, you are.”

She tried to pull a gentle smile, but it came out very awkward.

Like me.

“Stop it,” I said, more offended than afraid. “Stop imitating me, stop, take it off.”

“I’m not imitating you,” Seven-Shades said, voice a little unsteady with nerves. My nerves. “That would be most disrespectful, both to you, and to the art. While I inhabit your form, I am bound by the limits of your personality. I’m not going to suddenly go all spooky and ... well. You can imagine, I’m sure.”

A humourless laugh escaped my lips.

“You’ve chosen the wrong person to imitate,” I said. “I barely trust myself to do the right thing five percent of the time.”

“I’m sorry.” She winced again, tilting her head. “I could choose one of your loved ones instead, but that would be contrary to my aim here. Sorry.”

Seven-Shades’ imitation did not extend below the neckline of rippling yellow robes. The hands were still long and bony and porcelain perfect, not mine. The robes themselves continued their

ocean-like infinite dance, their half-glimpsed swirling patterns, their admission of nothing beneath. I reminded myself: that was the being I was really speaking to.

“Do I really apologise this much?” I glanced at Raine, just over my shoulder.

Raine was having a harder time with this. Her eyes went back and forth between my face and Seven-Shades’ imitation of my face, her eyebrows jammed halfway up her forehead like she’d suffered a critical software malfunction, her knife limp in her hand.

“... sometimes?” she said eventually.

“Raine, this is incredibly weird for me,” I said. “Help?”

“It’s weirder for me,” Raine said, then forced a grin. “Don’t think I could handle two of you, Heather. I’ve only got one tongue.”

“Raine!” I hissed. “This is hardly the time.”

Seven-Shades cleared her throat too, fighting down an insistent blush and scowling indignation at Raine. My scowl, my blush.

“Yeah, see? You like that experiment?” Raine nodded at the Yellow Daughter. “That? That’s you, Heather. I can’t even tell the difference, it’s so good. This is some extra spooky shit, and I do not like it.”

“My intention was not to disquiet you either,” Seven-Shades said.

“Oh yeah?” Raine gave her a quietly eloquent look. I had never before seen her able to deliver such disapproval and doubt with a smile on her face. Pain lingered back there too, behind Raine’s eyes.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight winced, embarrassed and shamed.

“The only reason I’m not sticking a knife in you right now is because Heather asked me not to,” Raine went on. “But you keep saying things in her voice, with her face, I’m gonna step up and peel it off you. Piss-rag robes won’t stop me.”

“Oh, don’t be absurd, I’m not going to hurt you, Raine,” Seven-Shades told her with my voice, faintly outraged. “Heather can hardly resolve her *ménage à trois* if I remove you from her tale. Then it would just be her and Zheng, and that’s hardly why I followed you. That would be sweet, but boring.”

“Excuse me?” I bristled. “You ... what? *Ménage à trois*?”

“Household for three,” she said with another awkward smile. “Or in your case, perhaps for ... eight? Nine? I’ve lost count, sorry.”

“Why does everyone want me to have a bloody threesome?” I snapped. “This is absurd. An alien God wants me to have a threesome?”

“For pity’s sake, you’re lucky you got me,” Seven-Shades sighed, exactly like me. “Some of my siblings and cousins delight in asking dark questions that lead to awful places. Your quest offers plenty of opportunity for tragedy, or cruel farce, or simple, uh, ‘gorn’,” she winced at that word. “If I hadn’t taken an interest, somebody darker would have. Somebody far less interested in the delicate tangle of women loving women. Count your blessings you didn’t meet The Sepia Prince, or The Jaundiced Child. They’d have you devouring your own intestines by now.”

I shook my head at her in disbelief. “You’re not a person, you’re just wearing my face. Why should you care about relationships, or love, or anything human?”

She blinked at me, hurt. “... my father’s family is very large? One of us has to be a lesbian.”

“Typical,” Raine muttered. “Muff magnet, the pair of us.”

“Then why show me that awful, *awful* performance?” I asked, my anger returning. cold now. “What did that have to do with anything? You made your point, I’m going to fail.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight scrunched my face into an expression of solid determination, serious and small. I’d never seen that expression in a mirror before. The times I pulled that face, I didn’t exactly have a mirror handy. And for a moment – just for a moment – I knew why my friends believed in me and followed me.

“We both know you have no hope of defeating the Eye,” she told me.

If those words had come from any other mouth, in any other tone, I would have spat them back in the speaker’s face. But there was my own worst fear, in my own words.

“You cannot even hope to hold the jaws asunder for a moment or two,” she continued, sad and shaking.

“No,” I said. “No, it’s-”

“Not in your current state. That’s your plan, isn’t it? The one you don’t tell anybody else about. You’re banking on a millisecond’s reprieve, during which you will find your sister, and pull her free. And you know it’s folly.”

“Evee’s ... no. Evelyn’s working on the *Invisus Oculus*. It worked in reverse on Tenny, that’s why we need the books, we’re going to-”

“To make you all invisible to its attention, on the ground of Wonderland itself? For how long? And then what? As soon as you reach out to find your sister, it will know you. You’re setting yourself up for a contest of strength. Or strength of will, at least.”

“I gathered my friends!” I almost shouted at her. Raine took my shoulder, gently, but I shook her off. “That’s what Maisie told me to do!”

“And yet you’re going to wrestle the Eye into the dirt with force of will? What role do your friends have to play in this?”

“I ... I don’t ... ”

Suddenly the awful, bloody, cruel play clicked into place. The Heather-actor, alone in the centre and reaching for Maisie, while all about her my friends fell alone and apart, while my attention was focused on the Eye.

“Your brainmath alone could not peel back my layers,” Seven-Shades said. “You’d give me a rough old time of it, certainly. But you couldn’t win. And I am descended from something very much like the Eye, but also a little like you, a being that dragged itself out of the abyssal ocean, once upon a time. You have performed the same miracle, recently, and returned to a body of flesh. But you refuse to use what you brought back.”

“How? I’ve been trying!” I felt tears on my face now. “All I can do is make tentacles that pull me apart from the inside-”

“Brute force is not the only way to use enlightenment-”

“And it hurts!” I shouted at her, at me, at myself. “All the time. It hurts, being in this body, being *wrong*, and I can never have it again, and ... and ... why? Why tell me to do something I can’t?”

“You have tied yourself upside-down from the tree, put out an eye,

and returned with the keys of self-creation, yet you refuse to use them,” Seven-Shades said, in my voice, almost sobbing and sniffing, reflecting my own pain back at me.

“Refuse? Refuse?” I echoed. “I’m learning, I’m still learning, from the clay-thing my sister sent, from-”

“You could wander the library of Carcosa for a thousand years, sit at my father’s feet for a thousand more, and your methods would still avail you nothing against the Eye, and you know it.”

I stopped shouting at her. She was right. I was right.

“Brute force is not the only way to use enlightenment,” she repeated, sniffing, wiping the echo of my tears from her imitation eyes. “My father and my siblings and I, we have one way. You need to find your own.”

I hated myself for being such a snivelling coward. Left my sister behind. Cut off from the abyss, trapped like this. Won’t give Raine or Zheng what either of them want of me.

“Hey,” Raine said softly. “This is some cryptic bullshit. Tell her what you mean.”

“I am only a question,” Seven-Shades told her. “I’m sorry.”

“Try,” Raine told her.

Seven-Shades huffed through her distress. “In the abyss, Heather was a thing of speed and grace. Grace, friendship, solidarity. These are potential building blocks. Things the Eye can never draw on.”

“What difference does that make?” I said, throat thick with defeat. “You’re right. It’s too much. How can I ever do anything against it?”

“Power is relative to form of expression,” Seven-Shades told me. “Heather, you’ve come to an uncomfortable accommodation with what you brought back. You still think of it as a ‘side’ of yourself, instead of accepting it as just you.”

I shook my head. “Raine’s right, these are nonsense riddles. How would that even help? How would that help save my sister?”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight just stared at me, with my own sad twist of my own little mouth.

“If you care so much, why don’t you help me?” I asked. “You’re an

Outsider, a real one. If you want my ... my 'play' to end well, why not help me?"

She shook her head – my head, with a sigh. "You haven't listened to a word I've said, Heather. That's not what I am. It's not what you are either, but you're trying to bend yourself that way, playing the Eye at its own game. My way is no more suited, and if you won't even listen to yourself telling you these things, then I shall resume the play until you bloody well *learn*." She tutted, like me losing my temper. "It was a mistake to talk to you like this, so soon after mere preamble. I am sorry."

The robes flowed upward as the pallid hands rose to flip the yellow hood back up.

On impulse, I reached out to halt her. Human fingertips recoiled from the edge of the yellow robes, but a phantom limb passed right through.

"Wait!" I demanded. "Why don't you just tell me what you mean?"

"Because I do not know the answer," Seven-Shades said – and her voice was no longer fully my voice, but soft as the crackle of burning paper. The imitation face had taken on a jaundiced, fleshy sepia colour. "I can only pose questions. It is my nature. You should really settle in, for the rest of the play."

nothing more impotent – 11.7

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, the imitation in yellow, drew her hood over her head and stopped being me.

Another stage trick. The hood hid her imitation of my face behind soft yellow ripples like wind across water, then she straightened up as if she had been bowing, and my face inside the hood was gone, replaced by the pale mask with empty eye-holes. A bottomless depth stared back at Raine and I. A hole in the world, fringed in yellow.

I expected her to vanish, to wink out of reality or spin into nothingness with a glint of sunlight on brass and a hint of chlorine gas. She'd made her intention clear, however mangled by the need to express it through my borrowed mouth; the 'play' would resume until I learnt the appropriate lesson. The only force capable of compelling her otherwise lay inside my own head, in hyperdimensional mathematics and heart-sick pain, and I suffered too much of the latter right then to rally the former.

But Seven-Shades stood there, silent and rippling and beyond human communication.

Like a friend who goes to the doorway to leave, then lingers to talk further.

Nasty little *prima donna*.

Seven-Shades had also given up imitating my height, and my head swam with an impossible paradox; I regarded the mask with my neck unbent, but the Yellow Robes seemed so tall that surely they brushed the ceiling. Without the softening appendage of a copied human head, the Yellow Thing was all Thing, a grease stain smeared upon the surface of reality, rotten fabric slithering across dead flesh, bile running from between slack lips. I was staring into the vastness of a yellow gas giant, from orbit, turning slowly in the void.

“What you waiting for, you lanky streak o’ piss?” said Raine.

At the edge of my perception, I felt her tense up, saw the matte-black flicker of her knife.

Without my face in the way, Raine was ready to give violence a chance.

I made an incoherent noise at her over my shoulder that may have been a hiss and may have contained her name, and which definitely meant, ‘I have already told you not to stab this thing, do not make me say so again’.

“She said she won’t hurt me,” Raine purred, voice low and focused. “Why not give it a go?” And I knew from experience that she was a hair-trigger touch away from going at Seven-Shades with her knife.

“Because I don’t know why she hasn’t left,” I hissed back. “And how are you not freaking out at this?”

In the corner of my eye, Raine shrugged.

I almost couldn’t deal with Seven-Shades, not like this, not without my face, not when she’d robbed me of the clarity in anger. Weird pneuma-somatic life was one thing – bizarre animal amalgamations and slime-dripping proboscises and be-tentacled woodland giants striding across the landscape, they were old hat, especially since Tenny. Almost old friends. But Seven-Shades was a level of unnatural that made my ape-brain cringe away as if from a visible sickness.

The abyssal thing in me did not care; it saw an equal. I gripped that as hard as I could.

“Well?” I demanded of Seven-Shades, trying to rouse my temper again through all the dysphoric misery. “I thought you were going to resume the play? Going to conjure up another way of mocking my need for the abyss? You’re not human, you never were human, you’re not even pretending to be human, how can you understand that pain? You-” I almost choked up. “You get to be whatever and whoever you want. Get out. Leave me alone.”

Slowly, with all the solemnity of an executioner with axe in hand, Seven-Shades turned her head, her mask, her hood, to look at Raine.

And with a quick gesture from those pallid hands, she performed

her miracle a second time. Seven-Shades dipped her head, lowered her hood, and shot us both a beaming grin.

Raine's grin.

My heart fluttered in my chest, same as when the real Raine grinned at me like that. Confident and toothy, bright and irresistible, her total attention and a promise of more. The smile which pressed me up against a wall and made me forget the world existed beyond my own body, the smile which told me everything was going to be okay because Raine would take care of it, that I deserved affection and care and love, the smile which had peeled me out of a dirty toilet cubicle last year and bid me to live again.

Stolen. With Raine's warm brown eyes and Raine's short chestnut hair and Raine's fine cheekbones.

The real Raine had gone very still.

"I ... I thought you said-" I struggled. " ... no loved ones ... "

"Ahhhh, well, about that, yeah." Seven-Shades shot me a wink, Raine's wink. "But this ain't for you, Heather. I'm thinking about a parallel production, if you know what I mean. You're not the only one who needs to be down for a three-way. Somebody else needs a play too."

Next to me, Raine adjusted her footing, every muscle coiling like a spring.

"Raine," I hissed at her. "Don't-"

"But for you, Raine?" Seven-Shades told her, with that familiar confident grin. "Just existing? Hoooo, that's already a play and a half every day, ain't-"

Raine lunged, knife out for the kill.

A couple of months previously, Raine had attempted to explain to me the basics of knife fighting, with the assistance of some youtube videos presented by men who seemed like the greatest physical threats they'd ever face were heart disease and hypertension, not blades in the dark. I didn't retain much except for her enthusiasm – and the rather enjoyable sight of her stripped down to tank-top and shorts to demonstrate 'footwork', which gave me lots of excuses to stare at her toned abs. All the stuff about forty-five degree angles and repeated drills and proper grips went over my head. I did care,

but only because she cared, and because it was something she was good at and enjoyed.

But a few of the most basic of basics had lodged in my memory, if only because they ran so counter to what one saw in television and movies – how ninety-nine percent of real knife fights end up on the floor within seconds, that avoiding or retreating was always superior to actual combat, how you should keep your body behind your knife, and the core importance of self-control.

Raine went for Seven-Shades because she lost her temper, and the basics went out the window.

Two steps to close the distance, fast enough to make me flinch and stumble back. Knife twisting, arm positioning for a gut-stab. I watched in open-mouthed horror as the blow landed, as Raine drove her knife into where Seven-Shades' stomach should be, as black steel parted layers of yellow cloth like rancid butter and Raine ripped the knife sideways, tore open a great rent in the yellow robes. Her elbow shot back again and she rammed the knife home a second time, slashed across Seven-Shades' chest, caught the dangling edges of one sleeve. She stabbed and tore and cut, left ragged tatters trailing in otherworldly wind.

It was like assaulting the ocean; beneath each layer of slashed yellow cloth was just more yellow, more ripples, more infinity. I had warned her.

Raine seemed to sense that her fury was spent in vain. She span the knife into a backhand grip and reared up to stab Seven-Shades in the face or throat or through an eye. Her face, her throat, her eye, a mirror staring back at her.

She couldn't do it, couldn't bring the knife down.

"Had enough? Sure you want Heather to see this?" Seven-Shades sighed with an indulgent grin, a knowing grin, Raine's grin.

"Raine, stop," I hissed. "It's pointless."

"Nah, it's cool," Seven-Shades said in Raine's voice, easy and accepting, the very same acceptance Raine gifted to me so often. "Get it all out if you need to. Better than beating yourself up, yeah? Oh, heh, oops." Her grin turned cheeky.

Knife held in out front like a quivering shield, Raine retreated two

unsteady steps and bumped into the table, heaving rough breaths through her nostrils, eyes wide and overwhelmed. Her attack had shredded the robes at Seven-Shades' belly and chest. Great flaps of yellow fabric hung down, strips dangling askew, loose threads stirred by invisible breeze. I half-expected the rippling ocean to close over the bloodless wounds, for the garment to re-knit itself, but it just lay naked, cratered and torn.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight didn't seem to mind.

"Not like you can actually make me bleed," she told Raine. "Cos hey, I'm not a real person."

"I'm real," Raine said.

And I'd never heard her so angry. So thin and cold.

"You are!" Seven-Shades agreed, with all of Raine's confidence behind her words. "You are, Raine, that's the point. But you know what I think? You need a full-blown production to tear down all that messy shit and prove it to your subconscious, so why don't we-"

"I said no more tormenting my friends!" I snapped, and lost my temper far worse than Raine would ever be capable of.

Temptation had almost overwhelmed respect – temptation to allow Seven-Shades to keep talking. But in the end, I loved Raine more than that.

Was this what lay beneath Raine's deflection? Was this a glimpse into her worst fears, as the cruel play and Seven-Shades' authorial exposition had been for me? And I was so hungry to see beneath Raine's surface, to understand what bizarre value system had provoked the only explanation I'd gotten that had even come close, her words that still rattled around in my head every night as we lay cuddled up in bed together, that reminded me I knew vanishingly little about this woman who I was deeply, insanely in love with – "*I do not wish to be surplus to your requirements.*"

But whatever else this was, it was violation. If I had a choice between Raine keeping her secrets forever, or having to watch me stand by as she was filleted and dissected, there was no choice.

Seven-Shades laughed Raine's good-natured laugh at my anger. "Heather, come off it, you can't make an omelet without breaking a

few legs, ‘n you know well as I that she’ll never-”

Words were dangerous and blades did nothing, but I needed neither to give Seven-Shades a ‘rough old time of it’.

Later, after I’d recovered and had time to think, I suspected that was the only thing I did that surprised her. My threat to unravel her, her appearance before us, her wearing of our faces, even our retreat to the Medieval Metaphysics room in the first place, all of it had been predicted – or stage-managed. We had been directed across the stage to produce a specific effect in our own hearts, all for the sake of drama. Whatever Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was beneath the masks and the yellow ocean, she did understand human beings and how to manipulate them.

But whatever descent she might claim, she did not understand the abyss.

We didn’t actually fight, so I don’t know if I would have won. I doubt it, in retrospect; Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was older than me, purer, more in control, not a clumsy half-made thing with a foot in both words, but a true amalgam. But I do like to think I could have given her a good slapping. Perhaps I’m just ‘tooting my own horn’, as Evelyn might say.

But as soon as I made the threat concrete, Seven-Shades made herself scarce, which implied she hadn’t seen this coming.

She ducked her copied head so fast she didn’t even have time for a final word. She drew that hood up with sheer force of motion, and simply stepped sideways, out of my path, away from my anger, and vanished. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight slipped far further backstage than Raine or I could follow, even in my current state. She left us standing alone and shivering in the muted light cast through the blanket-curtains of the Medieval Metaphysics room.

And I felt great.

It took me several full minutes to come back from what I had done to myself to scare her off. By the time I finally made human response to human stimulus, Raine was frantic with worry.

I’d sprouted my full compliment of pneuma-somatic tentacles, built them in visualisation and imagination, anchored them to the deep tissues inside my torso, hooked them to supporting muscle and wrapped their roots snug around my spine and hipbones, made

them real with a wrist-flick of hyperdimensional mathematics, and unfurled them to encircle Seven-Shades with a shiver of delicious physical euphoria. Perhaps where a knife had failed, pneumatic flesh might peel back the yellow layers, aided by brainmath I was on the verge of preparing.

But the abyssal euphoria – the sweet relief of being a touch closer to what lay trapped inside my wet meat – triggered a deeper layer of recognition between myself and the Yellow Interloper. We were alike. And just as I had not really possessed tentacles and fins and gills in the abyss, just as these things were mere approximations reduced to human senses, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was not rippling yellow fabric.

So as my tentacles had whipped out to surround Seven-Shades and she had begun the motion of stepping sideways, I had attempted to *see her*.

I tried to see and hear and smell as I had in the abyss.

Another trick of hyperdimensional mathematics, performed without even thinking about it, let alone pausing to consider the implications. A simple switch from one to zero, from meat-senses of pressure and heat and reflected light, to a sensory suite that I did not even possess in this ape body, indigestible by the soft grey fatty blob inside my fragile bird-egg skull. The wrong input flared like lightning across my brain in random arcs of nonsense.

But I had another mind, another processor.

The abyssal thing in me, it saw. It – me, I? – saw with all the glorious simplicity I had possessed in the abyss.

I saw Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight step sideways, into a fold in reality, the million frills of her trailing skirts an ostentatious display of power and style – yes, *style*, seen through abyssal senses. Style had not existed out there in the oceanic dark, where there was no role for anything but survival and camouflage and utilitarian phenotype. But here, or Outside, what wonders could flourish, when built from abyssal principles?

Canary-soft frills and lemon-sharp grace and butterscotch flesh – or at least, something akin to flesh.

There was no face, no hands, no humanity at all, nothing that would be rendered such in human senses.

But just for a second, as she slipped away, seen through abyssal eyes and without her masks, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was the kind of inhuman beauty upon which religions are founded.

I was not sad to see her leave though; she had tried to hurt my mate. That mattered more, to both ape and abyss. She left, and calm settled, and for a long, quiet moment I just *felt*, because for the first time in quite a while I felt good to be me.

According to Raine, what I actually did was have some kind of fit.

Twitching, spluttering, eyes rolling back, suffering one nasty nosebleed. She rammed her knife into the table, point-down, and caught me as I flailed at random, making weird little hissing and burbling noises in my throat.

I do have vague memories of some indistinct ape nonsense going on at the time, a mouth close to me pushing out gasses and flapping meat against meat, but I was too absorbed in seeing the structural truth beneath the world, the clarity and precision in the dance of photon and electron, the stacked beauty in the core of every atom, the mathematical structure that describes reality itself. Here was the very substrate I manipulated with hyperdimensional mathematics, and it was, to abyssal senses, as lovely as a sunrise.

At one point I apparently stopped breathing for a full thirty seconds; Raine was on the verge of administering CPR and calling an ambulance.

I came back when my body's energy ran out and my tentacles collapsed back into ash. Pain lanced deep into both flanks, then inside my torso in a web of bruising, scraping red-hot poker, leaving behind nerve-compression tingles and a throbbing bone-ache. A flash of cold sweat passed over every inch of my skin, and my stomach opened like a black pit in the centre of my being. By that time, Raine had set me down in one of the armchairs, which was lucky because otherwise I would have fallen over.

The first thing I did as I crashed back into my body was curl up and groan like I had the world's worst stomach ache. Which I kind of did.

"Heather! Heather, hey, hey, say something, hey?" Raine's hands were all over me as she squatted in front of the chair, squeezing my arms and trying to get me to respond. "Heather, come on, say-"

“Back again,” I managed, then groaned a second time. “Ow.”

“Hey, hey, you’re alright,” Raine laughed with relief. “Where’s the pain, is it serious? Are you bleeding? Heather, I need you to concentrate, tell me where it hurts. Listen to my voice: where does it hurt?”

I managed to shake my head like a sleepwalker as the tears started, as the awful dysphoria of loss crept over me like a wave of freezing horror at the wrongness of my own body. “The-” I heaved for a breath. “ ... the usual. S-sorry. Tentacles, and ... shouldn’t have, no, I know-”

“Heather, okay, shut up,” Raine said, strict but not harsh, and took my face in both hands to raise my eyes. “Shut up and look at me.”

I did as I was told. Raine raised my face and looked into my eyes, her hands so warm against my clammy flesh. She smoothed my hair back from my sweat-soaked forehead and used a tissue to wipe the messy nosebleed off my face. She watched me carefully for so long that if I’d been less wiped out I would have been blushing with self-consciousness.

“Mmmm?” I grumbled.

“Making sure you’re all here,” she said with a smile. “Now, where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere. Forever.”

“If you’ve got internal bleeding, I need to get you out of here right now, nothing else matters. Piss-robos can harass us in the hospital for all I care. Heather, where does-”

“No,” I said, and tried to force air into my shuddering lungs. “Pain is ... uh, normal. I can make tentacles without ripping myself apart. That’s not ... not what took ... I rewired my senses,” I admitted. “Um, I didn’t know I could do that. Saw Seven-Shades for real.”

“Oh yeah?” Raine asked. “And there’s no burning pain, no stabbing pain, nothing like that?”

I shook my head.

She stared into my eyes again, felt my forehead with one hand, pressed two fingers to my throat to check my pulse. “Mmm. You seem alright. I think.”

“You’re so beautiful,” I said, and took a long moment to realise that I’d said it.

Raine’s eyebrows shot up and her mouth curled with amusement, but I meant what I’d said – though perhaps not in the way she took it. My sensory processing had changed. I still suffered that lingering abyssal difficulty in recognising what she was. Seeing past the flapping meat and the jumble of ape parts took a twinge of conscious effort, but even without full recognition, she was beautiful on some mechanical, mathematical level. I’d cut a square peg to fit a round hole, made my parts join differently.

“Course I am,” Raine said. “I’m your girlfriend, aren’t I? Only the best.”

Then I blushed. “Uh- I mean- it- I can’t-”

She laughed. I would have laughed too if it didn’t make my lungs ache, but it still helped.

“She’s gone, right?” Raine asked, glancing around as I took difficult sips of water from the bottle she handed me.

“Mm?”

“Piss-robos.” Raine shot me a grin. “Whatever you did, it got her to bugged off right sharpish. Well done. And thanks, by the way. I was kinda losing my shit there.”

“ ... mmm, are you ... are you okay, Raine?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged and straightened up, still watching my eyes with close attention. “Listen, I gotta call Evee, let her know what’s happened. Maybe she can bring Lozzie to campus, get her up here to take a look at you.”

“I can walk, just ... just give me fifteen minutes.”

“Uh-uh, no way. You are not walking all the way home until I’m certain it’s safe. I’d carry you, but I’m not sure if I should even move you yet. Just hold up for now, Heather, okay? Wait right there.”

I took another long sip of water as Raine gingerly left my side, but I was pouring liquid down a borehole. Sustaining pneuma-somatic tentacles for four or five full minutes had drained me to empty, as if I’d run three marathons back-to-back. Low blood sugar cursed me

with fragile shaking. If Zheng had presented me with a live squirrel right then, I would have happily eaten it, bones and all.

Raine pulled her knife out of the table and slid it away inside her jacket, then crossed the cosy little space of the Medieval Metaphysics room to scoop her phone off the floor where she'd dropped it earlier.

"Hey, no cracks in the screen," she said. "Minor miracle there."

"I need food," I murmured. "I-I'm gonna- mm-" I made a good-faith effort to stand up, but that wasn't happening. My head swam. "Oh. Okay then."

"Woah, Heather, woah, take it easy." Raine crossed back to the chair. "Doctor's orders, okay? You go bumping around you might tear something. Here, let's see, see if I've got anything." She gave her leather jacket a quick pat down, then rummaged through the inside pockets, the ones where she kept dangerous things and dark secrets. "Aha, here we go." She produced a rather battered looking fruit and nut chocolate bar. The wrapper was intact but it looked like it had been in that pocket since before we'd met.

I snatched it when offered, tore the wrapper open, and shoved it into my face.

While I embarrassed myself with the table manners of a starving pig, Raine rubbed my shoulder with one hand and called Evelyn with the other. I didn't hear much of the conversation, I was too busy chewing – physically, then mentally once the chocolate bar was all gone and I was washing it down with more water – but I gathered that Evelyn was none too pleased. Raine was not allowed to finish a single whole sentence other than "Hey, Evee, it's me", and Evelyn hung up first.

Raine lowered the phone and shot me an ironic grin. "Cavalry's on its way. We're to stay put and you're not to move, or Evee'll use my intestines for bunting."

I nodded. "Lozzie too?"

"Uhhh, yeah," Raine said, glancing down at the phone. "I think that's what some of the shouting was about. Doctor Lozzie is making a house call, to check you haven't torn your stitches."

"First time for her, visiting campus," I croaked.

“Hey, don’t worry about that. Evee’s nothing if not incredibly paranoid, Lozzie’ll be safe on the way here. Probably make her hold Praem’s hand the whole way.”

Raine gave my shoulder another reassuring squeeze, then left me again to perform a check of the room. Rather pointless gesture, I thought, considering our uninvited guest could come and go as she pleased, doors be damned, but maybe Raine found the process comforting. She double-checked the door was locked, gave the old racking a once-over, and then peeled back the edge of the blanket curtains to peer out into the thin spring sunlight across the university campus.

I watched her, with both admiration and wonder.

“How are you not freaking out?” I croaked.

“Ah?” Raine tucked the blanket curtain back into place.

“At everything that just happened, I mean.”

Raine shot me a grin and shrugged. “S’what I do. Evee asked me the same question once, long time ago now. Couldn’t give her a good answer either. Guess I just have strong foundations.”

I cleared my throat, the iron tang of nosebleed still in my mouth. I gathered what little scraps of energy remained to me; no better time than the present. We were stuck here without distractions, until the others arrived to make sure I hadn’t done myself an internal injury.

“Raine,” I croaked. “What was that all about?”

“Ahhh?” Raine raised her eyebrows. “Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight? Cute enough name, sure, but she’s no genius play director, just a drama hound. Whatever she showed you back in the lecture hall, don’t take it to heart. All the stuff she said in here too, who knows? More like Seven-Shades-of-Shit-Stirring, am I right?”

“No, I mean ... I ... ”

“Hey, you think she’ll try this with Zheng too? Imagine how bad that’ll go. Hoooo.”

“No, Raine. I mean, what was the doll of you about? What did it mean? What did any of that mean?”

Raine’s grin didn’t die; there was no horrifying repeat of her hard stop last week, but her little sigh, the way she wet her lips, the way

the paused was enough to send a tremor of fear up my spine. She doubted her own answer.

“You are real, right?” I asked. My voice shook in a way I had not intended.

“Heather? Woah, hey, what? ‘Course I’m real, what-”

“Seven-Shades said it. One of my worst fears,” the words spilled out, shaky and difficult. “About you, about Evelyn, when we first got together- no, before that, when we first met. That you were too good to be true, everything I wanted and needed. I was afraid that I was locked in a padded room back in Cygnet children’s hospital, my veins pumped full of drugs, and both of you were just a fantasy, a hallucination. But I know that’s not true, I know I’m not mentally ill, at least not in that one specific way. I’m not schizophrenic. But ... but Raine, whatever you are, I accept you. Okay? Whatever that meant, I accept whatever you are.”

Raine stared at me for a heartbeat too long, then allowed a mischievous grin to creep onto her face.

“Raine? Raine, I’m being serious!”

“Hey, so am I. Accepting me? Well.” She did this big theatrical tut and shrugged her shoulders, wandering back to me and perching on the arm of one of the other chairs. “That might be extra difficult, Heather.” She leaned in closer and closer as she spoke, eyes boring into mine, a grin playing across her lips, exuding all the animal pressure and confident self-assurance that made me melt at her touch. I felt myself shiver, and not in a bad way.

“R-Raine, don’t-”

“Because I’m the worst, nastiest creature you can possibly imagine,” she murmured, voice dropping. “A nightmare from the depths, a shadow from a million years ago, the most bloodthirsty horror to ever walk this earth.”

She leaned in all the way, until she filled my vision from horizon to horizon.

“A human being,” she whispered.

I huffed hard enough to give myself a sore throat, shuddering with relief and exasperation in equal measure, and narrowly resisted the urge to belt Raine in the face when she burst out laughing.

“Oh, that is such a ridiculous cliché!” I said. “There are much worse things than human beings. I should know!”

“Yeah,” Raine said through the laughter. “But you get my point.”

“Raine. Raine, really. You almost had me going for a moment there, you terrified me.”

“Uh huh.” Raine’s eyes twinkled as she dialled down her chuckle. “You love it though.”

“I ... well ... I-” I blushed and frowned.

“See it as payback,” she said. “Normally I’d be a bit miffed at having to reassure a lover that yes, I’m real. I’ve had you all over my face a triple-digit number of times, Heather, and yeah, those orgasms were not the work of your own hands, I really *am* that good.”

“Raine,” I huffed, blushing rather harder than before. “You’re doing that thing again.”

“That thing you like?”

“That thing where you use sex to deflect a difficult question. It works because I like it, but ... please?”

“Ahhhh,” went Raine, and to my incredible relief she neither froze up nor found a different way to deflect my actual point. “No worries. I am real, I am a human being, and I am really here. Where to begin? Well, first, I was born at a very young age.” She cracked another grin, then held up a hand before I could tut. “No, seriously. I’m a regular human being. I wasn’t put together in Evelyn’s old cellar, I’m not a demon-host, or a ghost, or a zombie, or anything along those lines. I’ve never lied to you about where I came from, or what I am. Human, all the ugly bits included. Promise.”

I’d become quite adept at telling when Raine was deflecting, and how far the deflection went. This was the truth, but it answered nothing.

“So what did the doll of you mean?” I asked. “You said ‘ow’, that was pain, I couldn’t ignore it, I’m not going to pretend I didn’t see. It made me feel really bad for you too, Raine.”

Raine began to shrug, but then she caught the look in my eyes, the hard-squint of curiosity, beneath even the shuddering, hungry

exhaustion and the throbbing ache down my flanks and inside my bones. She stopped and had the good sense to look sheepish for a moment, then actually took the time to think about her answer. I respected her for that. She was trying.

“You can tell me anything, Raine. You do know that, right? Even when I’m like this.”

She let out a sigh, accompanied by a knowing smile. “Yeah. Yeah, ‘course I can.”

‘I can’ did not mean ‘I will’.

“Seven-Shades showed me literally one of my worst fears,” I went first, blinked first. “That trying to rescue Maisie is going to get all my friends killed, that I’m using you all, for my own ends, one that’s not even going to work. She knew that about me, knew how to hurt me, in here.” I tapped my chest with two fingers, over my heart, then had to lower my hand because my arm felt like it was going to fall off; the calories from a single chocolate bar had only gone so far. “She hurt you the same, even more with the things she said to you.”

“It was an ugly mockery of me,” Raine said, a little too fast. “That hurt, yeah, you’re right, it did.”

“... and that’s all?”

“Have you heard of impostor syndrome, Heather?”

“Um, a little bit.”

“I get it sometimes, you know?” She grinned for me again, all beaming confidence, not the shaking, furious Raine who had lost control of herself and gone berserk at Seven-Shades. “Fake it ‘till you make it and all that, and no matter how good you are at something, sometimes you still feel like a bit of a fake, and you’re just waiting for everyone to discover, and then they’ll think less of you. ‘Course I know it’s nonsense, up in my noggin’. I’m the best at what I do. No worries, just an ugly old thought she shoved in my face.”

Now that, that was a tower-shield of deflection, a nuclear-disaster sarcophagus of compartmentalisation. It wasn’t a lie – Raine wasn’t lying to me, she hadn’t done so in months. I suspect that on some level I had rendered her incapable of lying to me. But Seven-Shades

had made her angrier than I'd ever seen her, made her lose control, and this explanation did not make sense.

But I was exhausted, I was fragile beyond words. At that precise moment I would have gladly traded all Raine's secrets for a roast chicken.

All I could think of was, "Why did you lose your temper with her then?"

Raine grinned, puzzled. "My temper?"

"I did see, Raine," I grumbled, not even trying. I sighed, ready to slump back, preparing a surrender on my lips; if she didn't want to talk about it, she only had to say. I would respect that, if that's what she needed.

But to my horror, it almost worked.

"My life is not a play," she said, with a shadow of that same anger.

She didn't direct that anger at me, but off to the side, as if talking to herself. Pure instinct bid me rise from the chair again, to go to her, but my sides screamed with pain and my lungs quivered and I only managed to shuffle forward an inch.

"... R-Raine? I-"

"What I am is not a play, not a game, not false. I'm real. Everything I've made of myself is real. I count, I matter."

She frowned to herself, harsh and punishing in a way I'd never seen before.

"You do. Oh, Raine," I said. "You matter, of course you do. What is this? Raine, where is this coming from?"

She looked up at me and a rueful smile returned to her face, natural and unforced. She shrugged. "When your formative experience is homelessness, it ... does things to you."

"Oh. Oh, Raine, I never ... I never thought about ... "

I trailed off in private horror. I could tell when Raine was lying, when she was deflecting, and I like to think I had learned to tell when she believed what she said.

She'd just managed to do all three at once.

I had no idea what I was looking at.

“Hey, was that there before?” she asked, and snapped me out of it.

“Raine, don’t change the subject,” I said. “I ... I know you were homeless as a teenager, and it makes my heart ache to think of you like-”

“Heather, hold up,” Raine repeated, harder, in serious mode again, fingers raised to stall my sympathy. She got up from the arm of the chair and took a step around the table, her eyes fixed at a spot on the floor. “Seriously, was that there before?”

I had to lean to the right to see what she was indicating. The movement sent a quiver of bruised pain down my flank.

A strip of torn yellow cloth.

It no longer rippled like an ocean seen from miles up, but lay on the scratchy old carpet like a dead slug, a shrivelled scrap of dried flesh, looking as if it might crumble away to nothing when touched.

“Oh,” I breathed. “When you ... Raine, when you cut Seven-Shades ... ”

“Yeah,” Raine agreed. She slid her knife from her jacket and squatted down in front of the piece of fabric. “Maybe from her sleeve, you think?” She went to poke it with the tip of her knife.

“Don’t touch it!” I hissed.

“Said she wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Yes, but that’s not Seven-Shades, that’s a part of her ... her body, I suppose.” I shivered as I recalled what I’d seen behind the veil of human senses, and not in disgust. “Do not touch it, Raine. It could be dangerous. Wait for Eevee to get here.”

“Right you are then, boss.” Raine stood up, put her knife away, and stepped carefully back from the Outsider material. “Eevee’ll know what to do.”

I sighed heavily, a lump growing in my throat. “Actually I don’t think she will. I don’t think anybody knows what to do with all this. About all this. About what I saw.”

“Heather?”

Now I'd gotten some answers from Raine – as piecemeal and confusing as they'd been – the weight of Seven-Shades' prediction settled on my shoulders once more. Evelyn would get here soon, maybe in the next ten minutes, and I'd have to tell her.

"I have to tell her everything," I said out loud, staring down at my hands limp in my lap. "I have to tell everyone, all of it. That I'm going to be the death of them if they keep following me. The death of you. Everyone has to know, I can't do this to Lozzie either, or Zheng, or any–"

"Tell me first, then."

Raine's tone almost made me sob. She sat down in the nearest armchair, reached over to take my hand in hers, and took me completely seriously. If she hadn't been there, I think I would have curled up in a ball.

And I am an idiot, because that was all it took for me to accept any amount of deflecting she'd done earlier.

"Tell me about the play again," she said. "Before, you were rushing, tripping over your own words. I got the jist of it, but gimme the details. However grisly. Come on, I can take it. Take anything for you."

So I did. While we waited for Evelyn and Lozzie to turn up to ensure I hadn't torn another hole in my lungs or my guts, I told Raine exactly what I'd seen on stage, and why it mattered.

"And I'm too weak," I sniffed. "You- you're so devoted, but I can't ask for that when I don't even have a plan."

"Last I checked, you had a pretty rad' plan."

I shook my head. "Looking for books to make us invisible to the Eye? What's the point? Seven-Shades, oh blast, whatever she is, she was right. I can't ever fight the Eye. It's like planning to fight ... I don't know, the sun. A black hole. What does 'fight' even mean in that context?" I shrugged, wanted to cry but couldn't, too exhausted from summoning my tentacles. "I don't understand what Seven-Shades meant. What else can I do with brainmath? Even tiny things make me bleed from my face like a stuck pig."

"You can give yourself tentacles. That's working."

I managed a weak smile. "And? Growing tentacles is like Evelyn's

artificial leg. It works, functions, but it'll never be real."

"They looked pretty real to me, that one time I saw 'em," Raine said. She cracked a grin. "Pretty cool, too."

"Thank you. Thank you, Raine. But they're not real. They're only an approximation. And look, how would they even help? I could no more defeat the Eye with a few tentacles than I can in this." I gestured at my own body, and suddenly felt weird phrasing it that way. Alienated from my own flesh.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Raine was peering at me in an odd way, with a twinkle in her eyes. "Didn't you just tell me you rewired your senses? That's new."

I shrugged. "Suppose so. It was ... it was beautiful. It was. And Seven-Shades was ... was so ... " I began to choke up. It had been beautiful, to see like that, my place in reality had made more sense.

But next to Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight I was a mewling, crippled thing, dredged from the depths and asphyxiating on the shore.

"Hey, have I gotta be jealous of her too?" Raine cracked a cheesy grin.

"No, oh don't be silly." I sniffed hard, managed a tiny laugh. That was better. "Rewiring my senses was nice, but it gave me a fit. If you hadn't been here I would have brained myself. What's the point, how does that help?"

"You've done miracles before, Heather. Everything you do is a miracle. You just have to find the right way."

I sighed heavily, shaking my head. "Yes, miracles, right. I saved Sarika, that was a miracle, but I had to leave my body to do that. If I go again, I don't think I'll come back. That's what Maisie said."

"Are you certain Maisie's right about that?"

"Raine, don't," I whispered, urgent and hard. "You can't say that to me, you can't tempt me like that. I want to, I want it, but- no, I would- I'd never save her that way. You'd never see me again either, I'd just ... I'd go." I took a huge, shuddering breath. "Why am I even trying? I don't know what the hell I'm doing." I tried to thump the opposite arm of the chair with my fist, but my arms were still shaky and weak with exhaustion. "And I know I'm going to try it anyway. Even if you don't come with me, even if none of you

come with me. I will still go to Wonderland, I will still try.”

“Hey, Heather, I believe in you, I believe you can do this.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t. I don’t know what I’m doing! Raine, you don’t have to dedicate yourself to a lost cause.”

“Evelyn said exactly the same thing to me, once.” Raine shrugged. “Same tone of voice, even. She was a lost cause, nothing left, given up on herself for dead. But she didn’t die. I played a little part, sure, but it was more because she decided to fight.”

I puffed out a humourless laugh. “You make it sound so easy. Like a fairytale. ‘Just have faith’, is that your secret technique, Raine?”

“Grace. Friendship. Solidarity,” Raine echoed Seven-Shades’ words. “Those seemed like pretty clear clues to me.”

“Oh Raine, it’s not a riddle, it’s never that simple, reality is never that simple.”

“Maybe it is? Hey, look at it this way.” Raine stretched out her legs and reached up to rub the back of my neck. Despite everything, I felt my eyelids flutter shut, felt a purr rising in my throat as her fingers kneaded me. “To the people who built the first aircraft, or the first combustion engine – or hey, first nuclear bomb, there’s something to toss at the Eye – those were riddles, right? So maybe Seven-Shades-of-Sucking-Shit was onto something, though she could be less of a catty bitch about telling you. A way to beat the Eye, to keep it on the ropes for just long enough to rescue your sister, how is that any different?”

“... because magic isn’t a science,” I murmured. “Evee taught me that.”

“Maybe not for mages. But for you? Who’s to say you can’t do actual *theory*?”

I blinked several times and pulled away from Raine’s hand, which was a testament to how mad the idea sounded.

“I can barely read my own notebooks on hyperdimensional mathematics without being violently sick,” I said. “How am I supposed to do theory?”

“Rewire your senses?”

I stared at her for a long moment, then at the floor, then at my

hands.

“I mean, it’s just a suggestion,” she went on. “I’m spit-balling, throwing stuff at the wall until Seven-Shades pops back up and I can tell her to shove herself up her own arse. You’ve got a problem, and I’ll do everything in my power to feed you ideas to help solve it. Hell, if I could read the notebooks for you, I would. I will be your eyes, Heather, I will be your hands, if I can.”

I looked back up at her. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“Well then ... my hands, you may resume rubbing the back of my neck, please, while I think about how to rewire my senses without either giving myself a seizure, or giving Evelyn cause to have us both tied up.”

“Anything for you,” Raine purred.

nothing more impotent – 11.8

“So. ‘*Seven shades of sunlight.*’ That’s what it called itself?”

Evelyn used the same intonation one might employ to query a dog as to why it has jumped into a puddle of liquid pig manure.

“And she’s gay,” Raine reminded us. “Don’t forget that part. Seemed kinda relevant.”

Evelyn made a sound like she was trying to crack a walnut with her throat. “Yes, clearly this whole situation is not only dangerous beyond our ability to handle, it’s also astoundingly stupid.”

Not exactly the most encouraging words I’d hoped to hear, not while I stood half-naked in the middle of a magic circle, shivering with exhaustion, hunger, skin-creeping cold, brainmath aftershock, and abyssal dysphoria. All in all, I was not having a good time.

The chill air of Evelyn’s magical workshop raised prickling goosebumps across my bare arms and exposed shoulders and naked belly, despite the overworked gas-cylinder space heater pointed directly at me. Raine had hauled it in here earlier, after Evelyn’s repeated magical failures had dropped the ambient temperature and she’d still insisted I strip down. The gas cylinder powering the space heater weighed an absolute ton, probably hadn’t been used since the 1980s, and also likely constituted a significant fire hazard. The thing poured out heat like an ocean-floor thermal vent, but it still couldn’t drive away the deep-tissue pain in my bruised flanks as they blossomed purple and black.

I managed a sheepish smile, as if I should apologise for how stupid everything had become.

“Hey now,” Raine said. “Stupid? It all happened, Evee, I saw it too.”

“Yes, yes.” Evelyn squinted her eyes shut as if she had a headache, and drummed her fingertips on the handle of her walking stick.

“Stupid is a metaphor, have you never heard of figurative language? I don’t doubt your accounts. Or should I, seeing as this thing can

direct people's behaviour?"

"The shaman has a stalker, wizard," Zheng purred from where she lounged by the doorway to the kitchen. "Be precise."

Evelyn laughed – actually laughed, which would have worried me deeply if I wasn't so physically and emotionally wiped out.

"Why bother?" she said. "I don't know if you've noticed up there on mount bloody Olympus, but I'm a bit outclassed by all this."

"It's not your fault, Eevee-weavy," Lozzie chirped. "I can't see Sevens either!"

Evelyn blinked as if slapped. Her emotional processing could not digest Lozzie-style encouragement, so after a moment she just cleared her throat as if it hadn't happened.

"Eevee," Raine said, gentle but firm. "What's the next step, where are we at?"

"Where are we at?" Evelyn echoed, as if this was the most inane question she'd ever heard. She gestured at me. "Heather has the Outsider equivalent of an insufferable theatre kid following her around, because she wants your prospective threesome to look good in her scriptwriting portfolio. This thing ignores my wards, can wear our faces, is probably lurking somewhere in this house right now, and I can't bloody well find it no matter how hard I prod Heather." She wagged her walking stick at my semi-nudity. "That is where we are at."

"Sorry," I croaked.

"Oh, and yes, before I forget again: she's gay. Whatever 'gay' means in this thing's biological and sociological context. I suspect that knowledge would drive us all screaming mad."

"Gay is gay," Lozzie provided.

"Gaaaaay," Tenny trilled from her safe-distance spot, just over the threshold of the kitchen doorway.

Zheng glanced down at her, which was apparently enough to provoke a soft warning hiss and lazy snapping threat display from Tenny's tentacles. I didn't tell Zheng off – for one I didn't have the energy; more importantly, every moment Zheng spent teasing Tenny was one less moment she and Raine locked eyes across the

room. Their silent face-off had been evolving at the periphery of my awareness, ever since our explanation of events on campus had covered Seven-Shade's opinion on our cold-war *ménage à trois*.

"I know," I croaked, dead-voiced, mostly to myself, indulging in a spot of passive-aggression for which I was too tired to chastise myself. "Forgive me, my standard of stupidity is little skewed lately. My life is a joke."

I must have sounded more depressed than I thought, because everyone else went awkwardly quiet.

Spinning armchair theory – literally – back in the Medieval Metaphysics room, that was all well and good, but hope seemed thinner in my heart after I'd trudged all the way home, bone-tired and shivering, bruises blossoming in my flanks, ravenously hungry and wracked with guilt and abyssal dysphoria. Before we'd left the Medieval Metaphysics room, Lozzie had pronounced me 'all together inside!' and fit to travel, but by the time we came within sight of home I felt like I'd been filled with broken glass and hit with a bus.

Raine had given me a piggy-back ride the last two streets. It aggravated my bruises no matter how gentle she carried me.

At home, the first thing I'd done was inhale an entire leftover meal worth of curry and chips. Very healthy, I'm sure my mother would be proud of her daughter's diet. I'd chased that with half a packet of chocolate cookies and three whole apples, but my body still complained as if I hadn't eaten all day.

Seven-Shades was right. I was small and fragile and weak.

And now I'd spent almost an hour standing in the workshop as the air temperature dropped every time Evelyn muttered grumpy Latin over me. She'd instructed Praem in chalking an increasingly complex magic circle around my feet, adding more symbols here, staggered layers there, erasing parts and trying new ones, as if I was an esoteric contaminant which required successively thicker containment. One piece of magic after the other had failed to any produce results – except to freeze me down to my bones. I'd felt somehow responsible and Evelyn had gotten more and more frustrated, then eventually she'd had me peel off my hoodie and tshirts, reduced me down to my underwear, and begun pressing hastily drawn sigils directly to the goose-pimpled flesh of my

stomach or lower back, hoping that the right scrap of magic would flush Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight out of my system like an exotic intestinal parasite.

I did hope that's not what the containment was for; my dignity was already in the toilet.

Feeling like meat on a slab didn't help.

To say I did not have much confidence in my scrawny, pale, weird little body would be the understatement of my life. Six months ago, the idea of standing half-naked in front of several other girls would have induced a coma. But, well, these were my friends. Evelyn had seen this before; Lozzie and I had curled up to sleep together in less; neither Praem nor Tenny gave a hoot; and for some mad reason I still barely understood, Raine actually found me attractive. No accounting for taste, I suppose.

Only Zheng's attention would have made me blush like a beetroot – if I'd felt human.

After the euphoria of my perfect rainbow-strobing tentacles and the blissful clarity of abyssal senses and the fleeting half-glimpsed beauty of Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, to be stripped out of my hoodie and layered tshirts to get poked and prodded made me feel like a dirty little grub peeled out of my shell. Reduced, bruised, raw.

Half of me wanted to curl up in a secluded dark place.

But the other half of me screamed to *move*. To dance, to jump onto the table, to spin my arms around in circles like a child, though any of those actions would likely end up with me on my backside, and absolutely make me a lot colder than I already was. I kept looking down at myself, at the slowly blossoming bruises on my flanks where my tentacles had been anchored, at the twitching of my stomach, at the way my bones linked together inside my flesh.

I was dying to just feel the motion of my own muscles, the flex of my tendons, the pump of my blood, to capture whatever echo of grace and beauty I could squeeze out of my twisted little ape body. I held fast to that desire. Probably better than the opposite.

Lozzie had sensed my discomfort without having to ask.

As Evelyn had set to work on my exposed flesh, Lozzie had scampered out of the workshop and returned with a big towel.

She'd held it up to shield me, like we were schoolgirls in the changing rooms, trying to mitigate the indignity of P.E.

"No peeking!" she'd chirped back over her shoulder at Zheng, and then at Raine as well, then did a side-to-side head wiggle at Praem. "You too! You're done helping, so step away from the patient and in front of the curtain, pleeeeeease."

Praem had responded by looking to Evelyn, who was busy scribbling the latest of a dozen magical sigils and signs to press against my lower back.

"Yes, whatever," Evelyn had grumbled. Praem had marched over to join Raine and Zheng in the peanut gallery.

"Peeking?" Raine smirked. "I don't have to peek, I get the full-frontal whenever I want."

"Not right now you don't!" Lozzie stuck her tongue out.

"Thank you," I croaked. "Just ... feeling ... self-conscious, right now."

There was no way I could find the energy to explain the intricacies of what I actually felt, so that would have to do for now.

"Your bruises are beautiful, shaman," Zheng purred. "They are proof you grow, proof you are. No need to hide."

I cleared my throat and felt a faint heat in my cheeks; the ghost of normal, healthy self-consciousness moved through me, sexual self-consciousness, not countering the abyssal fascination with my own body but complimenting it, melding like milk in oil. Lozzie must have seen the change in my face. She caught my eye and giggled.

"You just wanna ogle my girl. Admit it, zombie-brains," Raine said with the corner of her mouth.

"I do not see you stopping me, *yoshou*."

Zheng was not ogling me at all, even though all she could see was my head above Lozzie's towel. She'd locked eyes with Raine again.

"Ah, so you do think like the rest of us, huh?" Raine asked. "Guess we got that in common."

"There is nothing unclean in the love of flesh," Zheng purred back.

“Oooh, love.” Raine shot Zheng a look of amused doubt. “Four-letter word, that one. Sure you wanna go there?”

“Mockery cannot touch truth.”

Without either straightening up or looking away from her work, Evelyn said, “Raine, if the next words out of your mouth are any variation of ‘but I love her more’, then I will have Praem knock your heads together. That is not a joke. Now stop, I am trying to concentrate to make sure Heather isn’t fucking *possessed*.”

That told them. Lizzie suppressed another giggle by ducking her face below the towel. Raine and Zheng both did as they were told, though with much wiggling of eyebrows from the former and a silent level stare from the latter.

Helped me though. Even through the aches and pains and echoes of abyssal dysphoria, a certain warmth filled me at the sight of the two most attractive women in my life verbally sparring over me. It sent the weird little part of me that would be forever fourteen years old into a squealing fit of sexual overload, and I felt a little bit more like myself, in my own body, no matter how inadequate it was.

But then they had to be quiet, and I had nothing to distract me from ruminating on what Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had said. Evelyn had given up, erased a wide patch of the chalk-drawn magic circle, and sat down. I’d wallowed in self-pity.

My life is a joke, I’d said.

Now, self-conscious, I said, “Sorry.”

The long moment of awkward silence ended when Evelyn cleared her throat and – to my incredible surprise – attempted a little laugh.

“You think *your* life is absurd, Heather?” She shook her head. “Well, I suppose I should take some consolation. This conversation would make my mother spin in her grave, if her corpse wasn’t bound in irons.”

“Hey, Heather,” Raine said, soft and understanding, everything I ever wanted. “It’s gonna be alright, yeah? We’re gonna make it alright.”

“Not a joke, shaman,” Zheng purred. “You walk the narrow path. You look down. You do not fall.”

“Do not fall,” Praem intoned a perfect musical bell-note.

All I could think was what Praem’s voice might sound like in the abyss.

“Was that supposed to help?” Evelyn asked Praem. “No, don’t answer that, I don’t want to know.” She cleared her throat again and gestured at me with a jerk of her walking stick. “Go on, Heather, put your hoodie back on, you’re freezing your tits off and making me feel cold just looking at you. I can’t find anything wrong with you, this is a waste of time.”

“Floff!” said Lozzie, which was apparently the accompanying sound effect for her wrapping the towel around my shoulders.

The fluffy towel had soaked up much more of the space heater’s output than my permafrost flesh seemed capable of, and the sudden engulfing warmth drew an embarrassing noise from my throat.

I submitted to clumsy intimacy and confused wriggling as Lozzie helped me get dressed. She got my tshirt and hoodie back over my head without pulling the towel away, a feat that surely involved some kind of transdimensional trickery. I kept trying to cling to her body heat; she took the hint and took the opportunity to hug me, sliding hands and arms up my back under my clothes, nuzzling her face into my shoulder. She smelled of coconut shampoo and Tenny’s fur, and her wispy golden hair tickled my nose.

“Stay,” I murmured.

“Heather’s in the clear, then?” Raine asked.

“What? No, quite the opposite,” Evelyn replied. “She’s haunted as all fuck.”

I opened one eye to look over Lozzie’s shoulder, and attempted to say Evelyn’s name, or perhaps some variation of ‘what is wrong with me, dear friend?’, but what I actually did was let out this weird gurgle sound that made everyone look at me. I was too tired and too cold to care.

I tried again, and made a human noise instead. “Haunted?”

“Uh, yeah, Eevee, what does that mean?” Raine prompted. She came over to me and Lozzie and put a protective hand on the back of my neck.

Evelyn shrugged with force enough to invent a new sport that involved throwing heavy objects with one's shoulders. I was vaguely worried she might hurt her back. "How should I know?" she said. "Nothing I've attempted has worked. Nothing is following Heather, or attached to her, or circling overhead like a vulture – or maybe it is, and all my techniques are useless. So why not? Why not blame it on ghosts? Do you have a better idea?"

"Um," went Raine. "No?"

"Wizard," Zheng rumbled. "Try harder."

"And you can shut up too," Evelyn said at her. "If you have a better idea, then I'm a professional long-distance runner."

With much clattering of chair and popping of stiff joints and muttering under her breath, Evelyn levered herself to her feet and stomped over to the kitchen doorway. Tenny let out a trilling noise and scurried clear of Evelyn's path, silken black tentacles trailing after her like jellyfish tendrils in ocean water.

"Evee," I croaked from Lozzie's shoulder. "Am I-"

"We're done here, I need a cup of tea," she shot back without turning around.

"What about the trophy?" Raine asked. I winced inside.

"Droppings," Zheng rumbled. "Spoor, to track by."

"Hey hey hey," Raine said. "That's not a bad idea for somebody with rotten meat between her ears."

They meant the piece of yellow cloth, the fragment from Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

Upon arrival in the Medieval Metaphysics room, Evelyn had treated the shrivelled scrap of yellow fabric like radioactive waste. As Lozzie had checked my lungs and chest and back for internal damage by pressing her hands against me, Evelyn had drawn a magic circle around the mysterious yellow shred. She'd had Praem wrap it up in a plastic supermarket carrier bag, then covered the bag in magic sigils drawn on strips of masking tape – mostly small variations on the Fractal.

When we'd arrived home and I'd been busy stuffing my face with enough calories to kill an elephant, Evelyn had been poking at our

‘trophy’. Now the piece of yellow cloth lay on the table in the workshop, next to the television hooked up to the slowly slopping squid-clay-thing in the corner, and the stacks of notes about re-targeting the gateway.

The cut-open bag and the sigil paper lay about it like the remains of a cracked egg, the slip of yellow a malformed, stillborn lizard in the centre of the debris.

“Yes, I already tried that,” Evelyn grumbled as she stomped into the kitchen and left us behind. Her voice floated back to us. “I’m not completely stupid, despite all evidence to the contrary. It’s nothing. Cotton. Inert. Or maybe it’s a bomb, who knows? Or if you dunk it in water, perhaps it’ll sing. We’ll put it on the telly, get rich. Praem, come here, please. I need that cup of tea before I swallow my own tongue.”

“Evee? Hey, Evee?” Raine half-moved to follow her, but was reluctant to leave me behind. I was still clinging to Lozzie like a wounded animal leaning on a pack-mate.

“Oh dear,” I managed.

“Yeah, somebody’s pissed in her cheerios,” Raine murmured.

“I can hear you!” Evelyn raised her voice from the kitchen.

Raine looked back at me and pulled a pained grimace. I tried to smile, but nothing happened.

“Wanna follow her and go sit down?” Raine asked. “You alright to move?”

“Mm ... mmhmm, yes, I’m ... I’m on the mend. I must sit down now though, yes.”

“This, good idea,” Lozzie whispered.

“Come on then, lets get some more food in front of you,” Raine said, gesturing for us to depart the workshop, away from all the grisly reminders and arcane detritus.

Between Lozzie’s arm around my middle, Raine’s familiar invitation before me, Zheng’s slow predatory look, and a promise of some bizarre argument with Evelyn in the kitchen, I suddenly felt worryingly normal. As if I was about to slip back into a routine rehearsed many times before, a performance I’d played out day

after day. An ephemeral sensation, fleeting as *deja vu*. A shiver went down my spine.

“What if this is what she wants?” I murmured.

“What was that?” Raine asked.

But my eyes were drawn to the scrap of yellow fabric on the table, a new-born dead thing waiting to be cleaned of afterbirth mucus. With no little reluctance I disentangled one arm from around Lozzie, and reached out toward the shattered nest.

“Heather?” Raine took my arm, gently but firmly. “Woah, Heather should you be touching that?”

“The shaman knows,” Zheng rumbled.

“It’s fine,” I murmured, still staring into the yellow depths. “Raine, let go. It’s just ... Evee said, it’s only cotton.”

“Then why do you want to touch it?” she asked.

“ ... because I ... I need more.”

Past me, Raine shared a glance with Lozzie, and in the corner of my eye, Lozzie screwed up her mouth into a thinky-face, then nodded several times.

“Alright then,” Raine said. “If that’s what you need. Lozzie, you ready?”

“Ready!” Lozzie chirped.

Raine let go of my arm, and I picked up the scrap of yellow infinity.

I was not struck blind and deaf and dumb, or paralysed by lightning, or riven with disgust as if handling a live slug. The piece of Seven-Shades was, after all, just fabric, too coarse for silk but not rough enough to be wool. Perhaps it really was cotton, or some unknowable Outside material. It lay limp in my hand, a dried leaf leached of all chlorophyll. There was nothing to see here, nothing to feel.

Heavy disappointment settled on my heart, a tightening inside my chest.

Maisie and I had both always been voracious readers. In the years before the Eye took her away, we’d begun to venture beyond the

walled garden of children's literature, sometimes alone and sometimes together, often without our parents' knowledge. When there were two of us, there was always somebody with which to discuss the story. To continue it in private whispers after dark, to imagine lives for the characters, better endings or other endings or things that happened off screen. But after Wonderland, by myself, alone, in the brief respites between psychiatric hospitals and oft-terminated bouts of school attendance and the never-ending horror of my 'hallucinations', I became intimately familiar with the bittersweet pain of the close of a great story, of the emotional pressure front it leaves behind, the need to retread, to see past the ending.

Seven-Shades' play had left me depressed and defeated, but it was as strong as any beauty in narrative. I needed to see more. I needed to watch it again, and find the gaps in the story. I needed to rewrite the ending.

But the yellow scrap was just cotton. Seven-Shades was not here.

I wondered, what would this piece of cloth look like through abyssal senses? I could find out, if I wanted to give myself another seizure and probably earn a trip to the hospital.

"Hey, Heather, you in there?" Raine asked.

"She's all here!" Lozzie chirped.

"I'm fine," I lied, then scrubbed my eyes with the back of my hand. "It's just cotton. There's nothing here. Not like this."

In the kitchen, Praem already had the kettle on. Raine and Lozzie got me manoeuvred into a chair with a minimum of fuss, while Zheng stalked in after us and upset Tenny without trying, drawing another warning display from her tentacles and a fluttery, retreating hiss as she bounced away on springy, muscled legs, twirling her wings like a cloak. Lozzie told Zheng off with a tut and soothed Tenny by fluffing her fur, then pulled a chair close to me so she could lean against my shoulder. Everyone bustled about, and Evelyn gave a dismissive response to a question from Raine – but I wasn't listening.

All I could think about was this fragment torn from Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. I kept running my fingers over the fabric to feel the loose fibres, rolling it between thumb and forefinger as if that

would teach me what it was made of, half-resisting an urge to sniff it or press it to my cheek.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight possessed a physical form. I was holding a piece of it, no different to a chunk of bloody flesh carved from a human flank.

But she was also an abyssal thing. She was both. Like me.

A slow hunger woke in the back of my mind. A scab, itching to be picked. A desperate need.

Eventually I noticed that a cup of tea had appeared in front of me, along with a microwaved pastry and some sliced apple. My stomach rumbled so I shoved some food in my mouth, barely tasted it, then finally realised that an uncomfortable silence had descended on the kitchen.

Raine and Zheng were staring at each other across the length of the room, expressions still and stoic like a pair of gunfighters in an old western, each waiting for the other to draw first. Steam from Raine's own mug of tea drifted in front of her face. Zheng lounged against the wall with all the deceptive relaxation of a cunning predator, eyes heavy-lidded like some jungle lizard. Evelyn sat opposite me, sad gaze cast down into a mug of oil-dark tea, Praem at her shoulder, perfectly crisp and starched in her maid uniform. Tenny felt the tension with senses keener than human; she'd slunk close to Lozzie and I to sneak a slice of apple with one of her tentacle-mouths, then froze and hunched as if about to wrap herself in her natural optical camouflage.

Cuddled up to my side, almost purring, Lozzie was the only one who seemed unaffected.

The room was like a painting.

"Oh." My heart skipped a beat. "Is it happening again?"

"Heather?" Raine turned to me first and broke the impression. Evelyn frowned my way and I could have kissed her. Zheng did not look away from Raine, but that didn't matter now.

I'd assumed the awkward stillness was the prelude to another act of Seven-Shades' production. The moment of quiet as the lights dim, before the curtain goes up.

"Oh, oh, okay," I breathed, hand to my chest, to my racing heart.

"It's just us all being a disaster. Tenny, Tenny it's okay, it's okay," I called out softly, and Tenny bobbed her head from side to side in curiosity. "Relax, nobody's going to ... do anything."

"Heath," Tenny fluttered. "Errrr."

"Heather, what is it?" Raine asked.

"I thought it was happening again. Another play. The next part of the play, right here. I don't know." I gestured at the room, the yellow scrap still in my shaking hand. "The tone. The aura. It's not though, it's not. She's not here."

"Everyone watch your behaviour for a sec," Raine announced to the others. "Keep your eyes open."

"She's not here," I said, my voice tinged with unexpected disappointment.

"I wanna meet Sevens too," said Lozzie.

A moment of horrible tension crawled up my spine and ran bony fingers across my scalp, even with Lozzie's warmth pressed to my side, as I waited for the telltale flicker of yellow cloth or the glint of sunlight on bronze. But thirty seconds passed, then a minute, and nothing happened.

"No scent," Zheng purred eventually.

"Yeah, nothing doing," Raine confirmed with a sigh. She shrugged. "Guess we're over-reacting, yeah?"

"What are we going to do about this?" I croaked. "We can't just ... wait for it to happen again."

"You think we should check out those people that Seven-Shades used in the English class?" Raine asked. "Might give us more clues."

"*Clues*," Evelyn grumbled, as if that was the most stupid word she'd ever heard.

"I ... I don't know, perhaps," I said. "Do you think there might be lasting damage to them?"

Raine squinted in thought and took a sip from her own cup of tea, waiting for Evelyn to leap in. When she didn't, Raine shrugged and carried on. "Hard to tell. Wouldn't mind conducting a thorough investigation of some of those volunteers though. The short one, she

was cute.

"Tch, Raine," I tutted, but my heart wasn't in it. "Evee? Evee, are you okay?"

"Peachy," she said, in the tone one might use to announce a terminal disease.

"What do we do about Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight?"

Evelyn managed a feat I'd rarely seen from a human being: a full-body shrug, with shoulders, eyebrows, mouth, even her fingertips. "Pray?"

I blinked at her. She took a very long sip of tea and clunked her mug back onto the table.

"What do you want me to suggest, Heather?" She sounded more defeated than angry. "There's a true Outsider loose in Sharrowford, apparently following you around. It doesn't obey the rules of our reality, doesn't give a damn about my wards, and can manipulate behaviour in the totally uninvolved. The fact this thing hasn't already popped our heads like grapes or, I don't know, made us all have an orgy or something, that's probably a good sign."

"Probably?" Raine laughed.

"Honestly, Raine, for once, your guess is as good as mine. The mere fact we're all still alive is probably a good sign, but might just mean it wants to torture us first."

"It was like torture," I admitted. "But I don't think she meant it like that, she had ... a point, a good point."

"Fine, great. Lovely." Evelyn's tone executed a perfect ten out of ten dive into sarcasm. "You've clearly got more of an idea than I have. I'm out of techniques, Heather. This is so far beyond me we may as well be in fucking outer space."

Bound hard in my own guilt and pain, I'd been a terrible friend again. It was only then I noticed how hard Evelyn was gripping the handle of her tea mug. Her knuckles had gone white.

"Evee? Oh, Evee, I ... I didn't think ... you need ... you-

"You're terrified, Evee," Raine said, far more gently than I'd expected, in the kind of tone she'd use to soothe me in one of my worst moments. "Don't be. That's why I'm here, right? If I thought

this thing was a danger to you, I'd have found a way to stab it in the face already."

Evelyn gave Raine a look like she had just grown a second head. "Don't do that, Raine. Don't get weird on me."

Raine shrugged, a wry grin on her lips. "Do what?"

"Speak to me like that. You haven't in years."

"Seven-Shades did something for me too. Reminded me what matters? Yeah, let's go with that. Anyway, this thing only hurt us emotionally, and we all know you're too hard on yourself already for it to find any purchase with you."

Evelyn actually laughed, a derisive snort.

"And let go of your mug, you're gonna hurt your fingers," Raine added softly.

Evelyn did as suggested, hands trembling, massaging her fingers. "Our first expedition Outside and we bring back a stowaway, and I can't even find the compartment it used, let alone contain it. So yes, Raine, it shouldn't come as a surprise that I am rather stressed right now."

"I don't think she wants to hurt us," I repeated.

"I agree," Evelyn said curtly.

"... oh."

"If Seven-Shades of whatever can ignore my wards, she could have done anything she wanted to us already," Evelyn explained. "Her, we may simply have to live with for the moment, until you figure out the right mathematical equation to pull her heart out through her mouth." I grimaced, but Evelyn ignored me and went on. "Outsiders are inscrutable, perhaps untouchable. But mages are not."

"Ahhhhh," went Raine.

"Mmm," Zheng grunted.

"Oh. Saldis," I said.

"Exactly," Evelyn hissed through gritted teeth. "You have more than one uninvited visitor following you around, and her, we can access

her physical body, it's on the other side of the gateway, in Carcosa. I will not have a mage piggybacking on your perceptions, hiding in your shadow. She is basically inside this house, and I will not have that."

"Death to all wizards," Zheng rumbled.

"Present company excepted, I hope?" Evelyn drawled at Zheng, but didn't seem to expect an answer. "We cannot deal with the yellow thing. We can deal with Saldis. So I suggest we do."

"Of course. More violence," I said with a pained sigh and a lump in my throat. "Here's another one of my fears coming true."

"What?" Evelyn squinted at me.

"I think I was hoping, on some level, that you'd know what to do."

I was wretched and small and I did not deserve my friends. I wanted somebody else to take responsibility for once, and chase away the bad things, the ghosts and hallucinations and monsters. If I'd been less exhausted, I might have started crying. Instead, with a supreme effort of willpower that I knew I'd pay for later, I scraped together whatever scraps of energy I had left, and tried to do justice to the people in my life.

"There's something I need to tell you all," I said.

Only physical exhaustion stopped my voice from shaking. Everyone looked at me. Even Tenny understood, slinking closer and wrapping a worried tentacle around my shin.

"But ... oh, um," I faltered at the first hurdle. "Where's Twil? She needs to hear this too, I have to tell everyone. I can't do this twice."

"Better that she's not here," Evelyn said. "At least that way she'll live if our yellow friend decides to murder us all for the sake of *drama*. And it's Monday, Heather, I made Twil bugger off to class. I'm not having her drop an A-level grade because she wants to spend time with her useless older girl-"

Evelyn bit off the second half of that word.

"Wheeey," went Raine.

Evelyn glared at her. "Shut your mouth. I am not in the mood."

"I-I really need to tell everyone," I repeated. "I have to, I can't not,

I-”

“Heather,” Raine murmured. “Just say it if you need to. It’s okay. I will make it okay.”

I tried to swallow away the lump in my throat, looked around at my friends, and said, “I’m going to kill all of you.”

Confused looks and puzzled frowns and a soft trilling noise from Tenny rather undercut my dramatic melancholy, so that I actually tripped over my next intended words with an absurd laugh.

“I meant- I mean- uh, oh dear, that’s not right. I mean I’m going to-”

“Good luck,” Praem intoned.

“Yes, good luck with that.” Evelyn jabbed a thumb in Zheng’s general direction. “How are you going to handle her, drop a nuclear bomb?”

“No-” I couldn’t help but laugh, this entire moment had gone off the rails so quickly. “I-I mean-”

“Heather,” Evelyn snapped. “I have perhaps given you the wrong impression and you’ve taken it to heart, and that means I’ve hurt you and I hate when I do that. Look, if Seven- whatever. Yellow bitch. If this thing was going to kill us, it would have already, and it’s not your fault anyway.”

I stared at her for a second, utterly wrong-footed. “No. Eevee, I mean, I’ll be the death of you all, with this quest to rescue my sister from the Eye.”

“Oh. Oh. Right. Well.” Evelyn cleared her throat.

I sighed heavily. The misunderstanding had robbed me of all my gravitas, and everything came out very matter-of-fact. “The play, what Seven-Shades showed me, it was too real. It’s one thing to make armchair theories about technical points of brainmath, about improving my handling, but ... it’s another to be faced with all the people I watched die on stage, and know it’s going to be my fault.”

“No,” Praem intoned.

We all stared at her. She stared back at me, and declined to elaborate.

"If that is what happens, shaman, then that is what happens," Zheng purred. "I am still yours."

"Not what she needs to hear right now, left hand," Raine replied. "We're going to win, and you better believe that."

"Please never fight," I blurted out, more exasperated than depressed now. "You two, please never fight. I never want to see that for real. Please."

"I did make an oath, shaman."

"It'll be okay, Heathy," Lozzie purred next to me, hugging me around the shoulders.

I sighed again and wanted to put my face in my hands. My friends could not convince me that they were safe from my mistakes.

But one person in the room understood that.

"Look at what you've achieved," Evelyn said.

"... what?"

She gestured wide, in frustration, and she meant us. "In the space of a few months."

"Maisie told me the same thing – 'gather your friends', but I don't understand what good it does. I-I mean I adore you all, yes, but—"

"It means you're not alone, you blithering idiot." Evelyn lost her temper quickly, which oddly enough made me feel a bit better. Getting berated by a silver tongue didn't leave much room for self-pity. "Do I have to spell it out for you? I do, don't I? God, I do hope Maisie is the one with the brains. Certainly seems like it."

"E-Evee?"

"Hey, Evee, come on," Raine said. "Heather's had a hell of a day, leave off, and you're in an adrenaline crash, you need to lie down or—"

"Will you shut up?" she snapped at Raine. "It's difficult enough for me to put my thoughts in order without you being weird at me. Heather, tell her to stop, please, so I can actually finish my point sometime this year?"

I shrugged at Raine, a bit lost. "Um, stop being weird, please?"

“Never,” Raine said, but she did shut her mouth.

Evelyn rapped the table with a knuckle, as if to get my attention. “What have you told me before, Heather? No-” She stopped, thumped her open palm on the table – which made Tenny jump – and grimaced over a restart. “No, no, better; what has your very presence in my life told me? Hmm? Well?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “That I’m not alone, that I don’t have to solve problems alone. You have a technical problem, and you need technical solutions. Raine and Zheng cooing at you might make you feel better in the short term, but what am *I* here for, hm? Look what else you’ve gathered, you think that’s a human being clinging to you?” She gestured at Lozzie snug against my side, then winced at herself. “Bad, bad phrasing, ugh. My ... apologies, Lauren, I am trying to illustrate a point.”

“I get the point too!” Lozzie chirped, apparently not offended at all.

“But ... Eevee, I don’t know what I’m doing, I barely have a plan, I’m going to get you all killed.”

“Yes, your rescue plan is a bit thin on the ground,” Evelyn admitted, and guilt rolled in my chest like a spiked lead ball. “The yellow bitch has a point there. We’ve been too busy putting out fires all the time to see the wider picture, but I had thought the same thing. But you know what?”

She did actually pause there, but not for an answer. Her lips half-formed a few different words as her mind jammed on the next thought.

“Eevee,” I said. “Your help, Lozzie’s help, I-I know I can rely on you, but you always said I was going to have to be the one to fight the Eye. In the end it’ll be just me.”

“Where the fu- where did you get that- urgh.” She held up a hand and made a very frustrated gesture at me. “Heather, yes, you may have to be the one who strikes the blow, whatever form that blow takes, but you don’t have to forge the sword all by yourself. Isn’t that what your sister meant? There. Does that make sense?” She huffed. “Right now you think you have to mine the ore to smelt the iron to *make* the sword – alone! And this metaphor is getting out of hand and I hate it.”

Evelyn sat there, fuming quietly at her own assumed ineloquence,

as I sniffed and nodded and wiped the threat of tears from my eyes.

I couldn't help but feel Maisie's cryptic meaning was more literal than this. Maisie was out there, she thought like an abyssal thing, 'gather your friends' was an instruction from lips that spoke a different language. Evelyn's metaphor was practical, concrete, grounded in the here and now. She wasn't right – but she also wasn't wrong.

"It's a good metaphor," I said past a lump in my throat. "I like it. Thank you."

"Damn right," Raine said softly. "Makes sense to me."

"Metaaaa-for," Tenny trilled. Her tentacle tightened around my shin.

"The shaman knows what she is doing, wizard, though she knows it not," Zheng purred. "But your loyalty is real."

Evelyn cleared her throat and didn't seem to know what to say.

"Good girl," Praem intoned – which saved Evelyn from her embarrassment by giving her a target for a thunderous frown.

"I still don't know where to start though," I admitted. "I was going to rewire my senses again, but I don't know how that would help in the long run. Better control of hyperdimensional mathematics, yes, but I'm still an ant trying to fight an elephant. How do I combat the Eye?"

"Know your enemy," Evelyn said. "And maybe stop thinking of it as a fight? Neither you nor I are particularly good at *fighting*, are we? You've spent too much time absorbing Raine's attitude, everything is to be punched or shot at."

"Not everything," Raine muttered.

I managed a weak laugh.

"Play to your strengths instead. We have a technical problem," Evelyn continued, ignoring her. "We need to do research – about the Eye. With access to Carcosa, perhaps that's possible in a way it never was before. There's bound to be others who've been to Wonderland, other accounts than from a single mad medieval monk. Perhaps Wonderland was something else, somewhere else, before the Eye happened to it. Besides, if I can make a working *Invisus Oculus* with the books I hope to acquire from Carcosa, we

can go to Wonderland ourselves. We can look our opponent in the eye- er,” she cleared her throat. “You know what I mean.”

“But then it’ll know me,” I said. “As soon as I try to save Maisie. Seven-Shades was right, she-”

“Heather,” Evelyn almost snapped at me. “This isn’t a Hollywood action movie. We’re not going to do a daring dramatic raid with no intel.”

“ ... o-oh.”

“Good bloody point,” went Raine.

“Once we’ve figured out how to make an opening, then yes, you may have to figure out what to do with it. But there’s a whole shattered dimension, a ruined world below the Eye, followers in the rubble. There’s bound to be ways to understand it. We can’t do hyperdimensional mathematics for you, but we can help you figure out how to apply it when you do. We can experiment in controlled conditions, here, with me. And I’m certain Lauren has something to contribute there, when you’re less tired.”

“Mmmmmm,” Lozzie made a scrunched up face. “Maybe?”

“That ... yes, that’s all ... that’s all a very good point,” I said. “I uh, I feel a bit silly.”

Evelyn smiled at me, rueful and pained, but very real. “You’re a good leader, Heather, but you’re a poor strategist. My mother would have run rings around you. Allow me to help with that.” She sighed. “When I’ve taken my painkillers and gotten up on the right side of bed, I like to think I’m not bad at that.”

“She can be,” Raine said approvingly. “Should’a seen our Evee back when she was suddenly head of the family, if you know what I mean.”

“Shush, Raine. Not now,” Evelyn said. “Heather? Meanwhile, the rest of the plan does not change. We need to return to Carcosa as soon as possible. We need to deal with Saldis. You want to find a weakness in the Eye to exploit, then I need the tools. We need those books. But ... hmm.” Evelyn frowned. “But I’m not certain that going back to the library is a good idea while you have little miss yellow drama bitch following you around. She presents an uncontrolled variable, and that’s potentially lethal out there.”

“Yes, yes of course,” I said, nodding with a twinge of guilt. “What can we do about her though?”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes at me. Deep in there I saw a dark twinkle. “Control the variable.”

“But how?”

“Heather,” she sighed. “I am so very tired of being afraid all the time. My methods have availed us nothing. Let’s try yours.”

“ ... my ... methods?”

Evelyn raised her eyes to the ceiling, as if looking to the heavens. “We know you’re watching us,” she said out loud. “Come out and talk.”

“Oh!” I lit up, glanced down at the yellow fabric still in my hand, and then looked around the room too. “Yes, yes. Seven- uh, are you there?”

“Here? Now?” Raine asked, going tense. “In the kitchen?”

“Why not?” Evelyn grumbled. “Everything else important in my life happens in this house lately.”

Lozzie disentangled herself from me at last and sprang to her feet with excitement. “Come out come out! Come say hi! Hiiii!”

Tenny let out a long, warbling, fluttery sound of shared excitement.

“Come on then,” Evelyn continued. “You old bitch.”

“I know you’re watching us,” I said to the yellow scrap in my hand. “I know you’re watching us. I want to talk to you again. A truce this time. Please?”

“Show yourself,” Evelyn was saying. Raine was laughing, looking like she wanted to draw a knife. Zheng did not join in, but Lozzie waved her arms and twirled on the spot and raised her voice.

Amid the noise and confusion and appeals to an Outsider Godling, I whispered under my breath, to the scrap of yellow cloth in my hand.

“I need to be like you.”

nothing more impotent –

11.9

“I know you’re watching me,” I said to my reflection.

My face stared back at me from inside the bathroom mirror. I waited for a change, for a smile I did not make, for the twitch of an eyebrow or a lash, or a silent question behind my own eyes. I watched my peripheral vision for a haze of aspirated bile, for a wind-stirred flurry of dead leaves, for scorching sunlight on new bones.

A full minute passed; I counted the seconds in my head, or at least made an attempt to do so, as my heart hammered inside the thin cage of my ribs and my mouth went dry and the stiff bruises throbbed in my sides and hips. I waited for a reply, in the bright cold of the bathroom in the middle of the night with all the lights on.

No reply came. Same as every other attempt we’d made over the last day and a half.

I let out an explosive sigh. “I’m alone, you ... ” I puffed out a failed insult. “It took me a lot of courage to do this, don’t you respect that at all?”

My reflection stayed very much just me, plus a scowl.

“Fine,” I said. “Have it your way. Maybe you require more dignified surroundings than this old bathroom? Well, tough. You should have answered us when we were making a big fuss of you. Now you’re just being obstinate. I am not traipsing all the way downstairs in the dark to light candles and make offerings, you ... you ... high-maintenance old cow.”

Not a whisper.

“Or maybe you’re not watching at all. Or maybe you don’t care, and this is all a mad waste of time and I’m just talking to myself.”

Cursing myself for a fool, I ran the cold tap in the sink for a

moment, letting the water swirl down the drain. I slurped a mouthful from my own cupped hand, and when I straightened up again, my reflection straightened with me.

To be fair to her, this bathroom was indeed not an appropriate venue for respectful supplication, but we'd left respect and humility behind hours ago. The claw-foot tub with the dust underneath, the peeling paint on the walls, the scuffed skirting board and the cracked tiles; at least the sink and toilet were clean, but this was still no place for a negotiation.

I glanced over my shoulder at the bathroom door, sensibly shut, the upstairs hallway and the night held beyond. I'd made certain I was not followed, that no eavesdropper would interrupt this. If Raine woke alone, she'd be calling for me. If Praem noticed anything amiss, she'd knock. Evelyn, well, Eevee would probably approve of this unilateral plan. Maybe. I hoped.

A shadow of guilt passed across my heart, but this was the only way. We had to get back to Carcosa, the sooner the better.

I turned back to the mirror.

"It's just me now," I continued. "Come out, and talk to me like you did before. You and I, we need to make a truce. Though, I suppose we're not at war. I didn't practice this part. An agreement then, we need to make an agreement."

Nothing.

"Please, Sevens. Can I call you that? Sevens? Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight is a bit of a mouthful. Please?"

Only the creak of the house and the distant whisper of wind down Sharrowford streets.

"Alright then. Either you can talk to me now or ... if you interrupt us in Carcosa, I will attack you. If you start the next act of your play, or you try to take anybody away, I will stop it, I will run on stage, I will pry the actors off each other, I don't care. If you interrupt us in a dangerous place, I will come at you with everything I have." My expression frowned back at me from the mirror. "And I ... I don't want to have to do that, but that's the only choice I can make to protect my friends with what we have to do."

In one hand I twisted the the scrap of yellow cloth torn from her

raiment.

"Please talk to me. I don't want to fight you," I hissed at my reflection. " I ... I want to be *like* you."

Talking to myself in the mirror was no magical technique, but simply a psychological trick. I could have done this in the kitchen or the workshop, but seeing my own face was supposed to make this feel less absurd. Seven-Shades had worn me for a few minutes and told me unwelcome truths in my own voice, so the point was to imagine it was her in the mirror.

The technique was backfiring. I felt like a crazy person.

So, normal, for me.

We'd been trying to contact Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight for the last thirty-six hours, and this attempt was not only going no better than all the others, it also made me feel very silly.

She had declined to appear to us in the kitchen, not enticed by Evelyn's huffing entreaties and Lozzie's genuine excitement to make a new friend. She had not risen to Zheng's growled offer of a physical duel – which I had vetoed anyway. She had left unanswered our formal requests later that day and this morning, spurned Evelyn's arcane welcome mat, ignored our humble abode.

Evelyn had broken out certain magic circles which she described as "rolling out the red carpet."

"Most circles I've built are for containment or repulsion, or for some kind of specific examination," she'd grumbled at the chalked mess which filled half the workshop floor space. "But this? This thing is the equivalent of a five-star hotel room with a mirrored ceiling and a mini-fridge full of booze. And she still turns her nose up at it."

"Maybe she's the rustic type," Raine had joked. "Prefers a B&B."

With a level of passive-aggressive grumbling impressive even for her, Evelyn had turned to Kimberly's particular area of expertise, when the poor woman had arrived home from work earlier today.

"But ... b-but Wicca isn't re-" Kimberly had stammered. "I-I mean, religion shouldn't apply to-"

"Mechanically, no, but for the purposes of appealing to the sensibilities of a creature like this, it does apply," Evelyn had

sounded like she'd bitten into a rotten peach. "Just give me something to work with, something that doesn't involve bathing in bull's blood under the full moon, alright?"

"I could steal a goat, wizard," Zheng had purred.

"I am not putting down a tarp so we can slit an animal's throat in here. No. Simplify."

At Kimberly's suggestion we'd added rings of candles, turned the lights down low, and made an offering – of food, thankfully. We didn't have to ask Zheng to poach livestock from the Sharrowford countryside, because the general consensus said a real sacrifice should be something we all valued, something we'd rather not give up.

So we'd offered Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight the most expensive curry we could order – something called a 'Kerala Prawn Kaldeen' from a curry house near the city centre with the wonderful name of *Gulbadan's Gunpowder* – and a full bottle of vodka. Not Tesco value, either. "Proper Polish import," Raine had called it. "None of that French nonsense made from old shoes."

Seven-Shades had not the slightest interest in any of that.

We'd all felt extraordinarily silly, standing there in the dark at a respectful distance from a rapidly cooling takeaway curry which had cost over thirty quid. After fifteen minutes of shuffling and coughing, we'd given up, and Raine had begun sampling both curry and vodka. She pronounced both very good.

"Absolute Goddamn waste of time," Evelyn had cursed, exhausted by the inherent absurdity of trying to attract the attention of an Outsider Godling Daughter with a penchant for lesbian drama. "Give me a spoon of that, Raine. Better be worth it."

"Maybe she's ghosted us," Raine said around a mouthful of rice. "Lost interest."

"I scared her off," I sighed. "It's my fault."

"That's a good thing, though," said Raine. "Right?"

I shrugged. No, it wasn't, but I couldn't say that part out loud, not yet.

Evelyn made a face around her sample spoonful of curry. "Too

spicy.”

“Weak, wizard,” Zheng purred.

“And no, it’s not a good thing,” Evelyn carried on. “We don’t know why this thing isn’t responding. She could have decided to simply wait for her opening. We take no unnecessary chances. We’ll try again in the morning, with ... with ... oh, sod it, I don’t know. I’m out of ideas.”

At least the full-on spooky occult offering routine was less loud than Lozzie’s plan of running from room to room trying to ‘catch’ Seven-Shades in hiding.

“What if we put on a play of our own?” Raine suggested, after downing a half-shot of vodka and smacking her lips. “We could do, I dunno, *Animal Farm*. Zheng can be Boxer.”

“Raine,” I sighed. “And *Animal Farm* is a novel.”

“How about you three fuck?” Evelyn shot back. “Maybe she’ll turn up to watch.”

“Evee, please,” I’d groaned, blushing.

Zheng grunted. In approval or not, I couldn’t tell.

“Ehhhhhhh,” Raine pulled a face.

“No, I’m serious,” Evelyn said, anything but serious. She gestured between Raine and Zheng and I. “Go on. Get in a pile, make out a bit, see if it works. Try sticking your tongue down Zheng’s throat perhaps. Not a good idea? No? Thought not.” She cast me an exasperated glance. “I’ve had enough, I’m going to bed. If you come up with anything, wake me. Or don’t.”

I chose the latter.

Slipping out of bed in the middle of the night had not been easy. The first night after our confrontation with Seven-Shades in the Medieval Metaphysics room, I was worn down to a stub, had embraced unconsciousness long before Raine had guided me into bed. My bruises had woken me in the dim small hours of the early morning, a familiar stiffness in my flanks which blossomed into a slow, creaking ache as I shifted beneath the bedsheets. The pain was deeper this time, rooted in the tissue structures inside my torso where I’d anchored my tentacles. I’d found myself wrapped in

Raine's embrace, her legs tucked between mine. Somehow she'd carefully avoided putting pressure on my bruised flanks, even while asleep.

The idea had come to me as I'd lain in the dark on the edge of consciousness, dreaming of abyssal grace and Maisie's voice.

But even if I'd had the willpower to pry myself out of bed and expose my bruises to the cold beyond Raine's cuddle, I wouldn't have been able to fully suppress the pain, and my fumbling would probably have woken her up. And I had to do this alone – that was the whole point.

So I'd endured a full day of failed experiments in calling up Outside's most prolific lesbian playwright. Then, snuggled up in bed the night after the curry offering, once Raine's breathing had grown soft and regular, I'd clawed my way back from the edge of sleep. Extracting myself from her embrace – with my sides stiff with bruises – took fifteen minutes of stop-start wriggling until I was free.

Secrets in the night. At least this time I wasn't self-harming.

Before I'd worked up the courage to put my plan into action, I'd stood in front of the bathroom mirror, looking at my body. I was wearing lilac pajama bottoms and a pair of long-sleeved dark tshirts borrowed from Raine, a size too big for me and very warm. I'd lifted the shirts up and examined my bruises in the mirror, turned on the spot to watch the way my muscles bunched, ran a hand over the purple-and-black blotches in my flanks.

Zheng was right, in a way; the bruises were beautiful. They were proof I was in this body, that it's mine, that I was here.

Was that enough? To be here, in this? Weak and scrawny, but real.

In the end, after my ultimatum and my pleading, the mirror yielded nothing. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was not going to respond. I sighed at my reflection, shaking my head and planning a sad retreat back to bed. Perhaps Evelyn was correct, perhaps if I snogged Zheng and then Raine together – how would that even work, I wondered? What were the physical logistics? – then perhaps Seven-Shades would deign to descend from her authorial throne to correct our technique.

"This is all so silly." I tutted, and looked down at the scrap of

yellow in my hands. “What was I expecting, a talking mirror? You are such an idiot, Heather.”

“Not an entirely unreasonable assumption, considering the sorts of things that happen in your life these days,” the mirror said.

Damn her, I did jump. I flinched like she’d crawled out of the sink plughole.

In the mirror, my face was tilted to one side, with a pained expression of preemptive apology. The sink, our toothbrushes, the bathtub, all of it was the same as in reality, even the pajamas on my body. All except the expression on my face.

“It’s you,” I said.

She – Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight wearing my face on the other side of a reflection – sighed and nodded with a sad sort of smile, in the exact same way I might do if confronted by one of my friends indulging in a bit of thoughtless emotional self harm.

“Yes, Heather. Despite everything,” she said gently. “It’s still you.”

“So you are willing to talk.”

“For a certain definition of ‘talk’,” she said with my voice, wincing in slow motion. “I cannot make a deal or a truce, not in the way that you and your friends want me to. That’s not what I am. That would be like asking rain to stay up, or wind to cease blowing.”

“Tch,” I tutted and rolled my eyes. “I can’t talk to the wind or the rain. You’re not a natural force, you’re a being. You can make decisions.” I almost closed my eyes to rub the bridge of my nose in exasperation, but stopped myself at the last moment. If I wasn’t looking at her, would she still exist? “And why are you talking to me from inside the mirror? This was just my psychological crutch, I didn’t expect you to really do it. I thought you’d appear behind me or something.”

Seven-Shades smiled one of my smiles, nervous but passionate.

“It just seemed like a bit of fun,” she admitted. “Spooky mirrors, voices in the night, doppelgangers. Raine would call it all very ‘Hammer Horror’, wouldn’t she?”

“I’m not a fan of random spooky things,” I told her.

“Then you’re in the wrong vocation.”

“It’s not a vocation. I didn’t choose any of this.”

Seven-Shades pulled a face that made me want to reach into the mirror and slap myself – a combination of half-squint, slightly pursed lips, and a sideways tilt of the head. Superior scepticism. Did I ever give Evelyn or Raine a look like that? I looked utterly insufferable.

“You sort of did, Heather,” she said. “You could always have kept taking your pills, or did what the doctors told you and abandoned any thought of your sister, or chosen not to push for this confrontation with the Great Eye. You could still do that, you know? You could still take the step back. You could go wake Raine right now, and have a tearful conversation about how you don’t think beating the Eye is ever possible, how you’re too afraid, you love her and your friends too much to risk them, so on and so on. And you know, deep down, that she’d accept it. She wouldn’t even think less of you, not in the long run. She’d get to keep you, alive and in one piece and not slipping off into the abyss.”

“How is any of that a choice?” I asked before I could stop myself, then winced and held up my free hand. “Wait, no, don’t answer that. You’re distracting me with ... developmental personal philosophy. This is what you do. Don’t say a word.”

Seven-Shades leaned forward, as if trying to see her own feet in the mirror. Her eyebrows climbed my forehead. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Oh, as in ‘oh, why?’” She pulled a pained grimace and nodded down, at my other hand. “Is that a um, a piece of me you have there?”

I held up the scrap of yellow fabric from her robes. “Yes. Raine cut it off you, I’m ... I don’t know if I should apologise for that or something.”

“It is a bit like collecting my toenail clippings.” She cleared her throat softly. “That is a ... bit ... weird, Heather.”

“Look, forget that for now. Will you talk to me about making a deal?” I asked.

“Only if you promise not to threaten to unravel me again,” she said with a hint of tutting schoolmarm. “I was quite shocked when you

blossomed.”

“I do not make faces like that,” I said.

“I’m sorry? Oh!” she laughed a nervous little laugh. “Oh, Heather, but you do. I cannot go beyond your boundaries while I wear your role.”

I resisted the urge to prove her right, and instead counted to five inside my head before I spoke again. “Very well, I promise not to threaten to unravel you again, but this goes both ways. This is why I’m alone, this is why I didn’t want you to turn up with everyone else around. You can visit whatever horrors you want upon my mind, as long as you keep your hands off my friends. Away from Raine. Away from all of them.”

“I understand.” She nodded, very understanding indeed, very empathetic. Very me.

And obviously lying. She’d only said ‘I understand’, not promised to do what I asked. Did I manipulate others like that?

“Could I have actually hurt you, before, with my tentacles?” I asked.

She pulled my thinking face. “Perhaps?”

I sighed. Probably not. Perhaps her rapid retreat yesterday morning was just as scripted as everything else. Maybe even this conversation was all an act.

“Will you come out of the mirror, then?” I asked.

She froze, a doubtful frown betrayed in the turning down of her mouth. “Um. I think you may have made a tactical mistake there, Heather.”

“ ... I’m sorry?”

“Why do you need me to come out of the mirror if you’re not going to try to hurt me? We can talk like this, can’t we? Remember, I’m in your role right now, I’m as cautious – some might say paranoid,” she winced, “as you are.”

My fingers tightened around the scrap of yellow cloth and my throat tightened around unsaid words. “I want to ... to see you. Again. Physically. You ... you know all my fears, don’t you? You must understand why.”

Seven-Shades did a miniature sigh of politely suppressed irritation. "I'm not omniscient. I'm not actually a God."

"Oh, for ... alright, fine. Don't say I didn't warn you." I steeled myself and took a deep breath. "You were beautiful. When I switched to abyssal senses, and I saw what you actually are, you were beautiful. I want to see that again."

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, puppeteering my body on the other side of the bathroom mirror, blushed red as a tomato.

The effect was deeply grotesque. I looked like a chinchilla in some kind of mating frenzy.

"Ugh," I made an involuntary noise. "Is that me?"

"Well ... I ... uh ... " she struggled and stammered, couldn't look me in the eye, didn't know what to do with her hands, flapping them about. "That's not how this is supposed to turn out at all. Oh, it's the observer problem all over again, I have changed too much and-

"Stop blushing," I snapped, outraged and horrified, blushing right back at her. "You don't feel embarrassment, you're just simulating mine! Oh my goodness, don't."

"It's not simulation! It's you! Tch, fine!"

Seven-Shades rolled her eyes and huffed, a perfect impression of me in a fit of pique, and then climbed out of the mirror.

Despite explicitly asking for that exact thing, the sight of one's own reflection climbing through a mirror like an open window was not a phenomenon for which the human brain is remotely prepared. For a moment I felt like sitting down all of a sudden as my head swam. The mirror-me on the other side mounted the sink with unsteady feet and uncertain hands and a rather worried look on her face, then stuck her head and shoulders through, grasped the edge of the mirror like the lip of a window, and slowly clambered down on this side, into the real bathroom, reaching for the floor with desperate toes. When she was down, her hands shook with nerves, just as mine would have if I'd tried to scale the bathroom fixtures.

"Oh, that is incredibly weird," I said, wide-eyed.

"It's, um, not as easy as I assumed." Seven-Shades shot the mirror a disapproving look and wiped sweaty palms on her copied pajama

bottoms.

Maisie would have loved this, I thought, like something out of a fairy tale.

And why did I think of Maisie at that moment, alone with an Outsider in the middle of the night? Because it was like standing next to her again, if only I wilfully ignored everything else about the situation.

"I don't mean the mirror," I said with a shuddering sigh. "You're not really me, you're not really in that body. If you'd fallen it wouldn't have hurt you. I mean how you're ... you're all me, this time."

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight blinked at me with my own face, innocent and lost. "I'm sorry?"

Yesterday morning in the Medieval Metaphysics room, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had manifested my head on a body of rippling sulphuric ocean; but now she imitated me from crown to heel, pajamas and skinny ribs and flat chest and all. She had my permanent eyebags, my indrawn shoulders, even the slight inward tilt of my feet in my two layers of socks. A true reflection stood before me.

The only thing missing was the scrap of torn yellow fabric in my hand, the piece of her real body.

A faint yellow miasma haloed her form, an after image of flowing robes rippling in unseen wind, as if over my copied pajamas she wore a memory of her real self, so translucent it was almost invisible, a ghost washed away by the bright light reflected off the bathroom walls. But unless I focused, her yellow mantle remained beyond sight.

"You know exactly what I mean." I tried to make it harsh, but couldn't quite get there. This really was like talking to Maisie, and that hurt.

Except for one difference, a dark and pessimistic part of myself whispered. *Maisie almost certainly does not look this human anymore.*

"Oh, yes, well." Seven-Shades cleared her throat awkwardly. "I have been exploring your role in more detail. Not something I've done in a long time. You are a most fascinating person, Heather

Morell.”

She gave me an awkward smile, the kind I must have given Raine when we’d first met.

“If you impersonate me in front of my friends,” I told her. “In front of Raine, if you use my face to do anything, I’ll-”

“My place is not to interfere.” Seven-Shades held up both hands in surrender, as if I had been about to attack her. “Really! Really. I have no interest in that. There’s no need to be jealous, I-I’m not going to steal your girlfriend, I-I can promise that.”

“ ... well ... quite. See that you don’t.”

She sighed. “The fact you would worry about such a thing in the first place is proof you still don’t understand what it is I do.”

I waited a heartbeat to see if she would continue. When she didn’t, I sighed. “And this is where I’m supposed to ask ‘And what is it that you do?’”

She smiled one of my smiles, fluttering and nervous. “Yes, oh, yes, well done. You do have a sense for dramatic flair, Heather, especially when you’re cornered.” She looked down at herself – at myself, her wearing a mirror of my body. “It’s been over seven decades since I stepped so fully into a role, since I had to feel out every possibility. You are a most tangled web.”

“Is that meant to be a compliment?” I asked. “It doesn’t feel like one.”

She winced with mortified embarrassment. “Oh- no, I didn’t mean- ah- um-”

“Never mind, it’s okay- ... wait, no, it’s not okay.” I tutted, groping for a conversational handhold. I felt as if she kept yanking my feet out from under me, so I flipped the script. “Who was the last person you ‘stepped into’? What happened to them?”

Seven-Shades blinked at me several times, and then her face lit up with the kind of warm smile I usually reserved for talking about my favourite books.

“You ... you really want to know?” she asked, in hushed tones of excited reverence.

Oh wow, I thought, I can finally see why Raine likes *that* part of me.

I almost blushed. Did I really look like that when talking about my passions?

"I ... uh. Yes. I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know."

"A soldier," she said, then paused for effect and bit her bottom lip.

"A soldier."

"Yes. She was no older than you, in fact. She was a member of a crew team for a ... oh, I suppose a sort of gun, yes." Seven-Shades flapped her hands. "On the outskirts of a great city. The city was about to be squeezed between the jaws of an equally great mechanical host. Many young men had died, too many men for the city to bear, so young women were called up to serve instead, filling their roles behind the lines of battle, and sometimes further forward. They were losing. Her culture, her people, all of it was being extinguished in fire and blood. In the darkness in some stinking billet, she reached out for comfort, and found a friend. And me."

At first, as she began to speak, I assumed that Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was losing her grip on my role – because I never spoke like that, with wistful nostalgia for a past glory, a *magnum opus* seen in retrospect. Then I realised I simply didn't have anything to feel that way about; the real me was too young. Perhaps I would sound like that one day. Eventually. If I didn't die first.

"The friend she found – oh, 'friend', what am I saying, they ended as lovers – she handed my girl a book," Seven-Shades carried on. "Not quite *The King in Yellow*, you understand, but something similar, another iteration. She came to Carcosa in her dreams, read books while artillery shells fell around her real self. She loved the woman next to her, but even in the face of certain death, neither of them could reach across the gap to join their hands." Seven-Shades sighed, smiled, blissful in a way I never had cause to feel. "It was beautiful, two tiny lives in the centre of such vast geopolitical drama, cradled in a web of danger and starvation and bullet wounds."

"... are you talking about Earth? Our reality? Did this happen here?"

She demurred with an awkward smile. "Uh, maybe."

I had to consciously harden my heart; she was so intensely joyous

about her purpose, it felt infectious.

“So,” I said. “You made these two people’s lives the subject of voyeuristic drama. That’s what you do.”

Seven-Shades sighed and tutted, exactly like I would if somebody had insulted the very concept of literature. “But I brought them together, in a world that would have torn them apart. They both lived into their eighties, together, after the war was done. Their side won, though of course I didn’t have a hand in that,” she added that clause with an awkward ‘ahem’ at the end. “Is that outcome not worth a little voyeurism? Is love not worth intrusion?”

“ ... maybe. I don’t know.”

“Imagine for a moment that I could guarantee you would get your sister back, that none of your friends would die in the attempt.” She held up a hand, expression creased with apology. “I can’t make that guarantee, but imagine I could. Would you accept my ‘voyeurism’ then?”

“Yes,” I said, without hesitation, a lump in my throat. “But what’s your success rate?”

She winced. Ah. “Define success?”

“Do I really have to?”

She tilted her head up slightly, the hint of a laugh on her lips, a flash of good-natured superiority in her eyes. I felt sick – was this an expression I made? It looked awful. Then I realised, she was about to *quote*. I did do that, I did look like that, and I looked like an infuriating little goblin.

“Do not give your attention to what others do or fail to do; give it to what you do, or fail to do,” she recited.

I sighed heavily. “So your track record is bad. Your interference mostly results in failures?”

She did this look-off-to-the-side huff and I felt like slapping her. No longer a vision of standing next to Maisie, this really was like standing next to me, and I was awful.

“Can’t you be somebody else while I talk to you?” I asked. “I feel so ugly.”

“You’re not!” she tutted. “Oh, Heather, you don’t like yourself very

much, and that's so unfair. You refuse to use what you've got."

"We're getting off track again, you're doing it again," I said.

"You're the one who asked me the questions, Heather."

"Alright, alright, let's not ... " Deep breaths, count down to zero.

"Let's not lose focus. Let's make a deal. You want us to win against the Eye, yes?"

"That's correct." She nodded. "I also want you to get with both of your beloved, but I know that's hard, and-"

"Let's not," I repeated.

She closed her mouth, and set her face in a polite listening pose.

"We need to go back to Carcosa to get the books Evelyn needs," I explained. "And we need you not to interrupt us. It's already dangerous enough out there without you deciding it's time for street improv. Come to think of it, why did you try to take Evelyn away, out there?"

"That was all for you." She pulled a pained expression.

I frowned at her. "Well, you did manage to remind me how much I value her, and I don't need to be reminded of that again. If you try to take her away in Carcosa again, I'll kill you."

Seven-Shades pulled an 'oh-dear' face. Not how I would have reacted to being threatened with lethal force, but the kind of face I might make if Raine threatened to tickle me.

"We need your assurance you won't interrupt us again, not out there," I finished.

"But what if the right conditions present themselves? This is like asking you not to feel curiosity when you see an unread book with a fascinating title."

"If it was to achieve a higher aim – to rescue Maisie – I could resist any urge," I told her. "You should understand that, playing my 'role'. I already am."

Seven-Shades sighed with indulgent compassion, the sort of noise I might make in the face of Evelyn trying to justify hurting herself.

"Heather, you are such an idiot. You have it upside down," she told

me with stinging kindness. “You don’t want to go back to the abyss at all.”

“Oh, poppets, we are getting rather off-theme here, aren’t we?” a third voice asked, from right behind me.

I almost jumped out of my skin. Phantom tentacles twitched in defence-reaction, and real muscles attempted to compensate for limbs I didn’t have, drawing deep throbs of pain from within my bruised flanks and up the inside of my spine. I wheezed and doubled up, vision blurring, staggering to turn around to see-

Saldis. Of course.

The mage from Carcosa was sat on the edge of the bathtub, noble chin resting in one hand, legs crossed under the skirts of her exquisite red-and-gold robes, wearing the most bored expression I had ever seen on a human face.

“You- what-” I wheezed, trying to straighten past the sudden pain.

“Don’t get me wrong, sweets, I’m all for collaborative work,” Saldis said. “But isn’t this part obvious by now?” She pulled a sour face. “Haven’t you looked at yourself in the mirror recently?”

“Sal-” I managed, hands wrapped around my sides, trying alternately to press my bruises and not touch them. “Again?”

“Again”? Oh, I’m always watching, sweet.” Saldis winked at me.

“You are not supposed to be back here,” said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, in the same tone I’d used to threaten Saldis back in the library of Carcosa.

Goodness, did I really sound like that? Ice and steel, from a miniature poodle.

Saldis’ perfectly plucked eyebrows shot up. “Oh. Ah. You have become aware of me.”

“You have neither paid for a ticket, nor joined the audience through the public entrance,” Seven-Shades said. “Who are you, magician? Or should I say *thief*?”

Saldis stood up very quickly, brushing her long skirt smooth over her hips and doing a very good impression of somebody who was just leaving anyway, no need to bother escorting her out, forget she’s even here, don’t want to cause a scene.

"I asked you a sensible question, magician," Seven-Shades pressed. "Who are you?"

Saldis spread her hands. A mischievous smile played at the corners of her lips.

"Oh, I'm not really here," she said.

And then she wasn't.

"I hate it when ..." I finally got my breath back as the throbbing pain receded. "Hate it when she does that."

"Tch. Gate-crashers," Seven-Shades said, in the same tone I reserved for the words 'modern suburban architecture.'

"Can I gate-crash too?" came a whisper from stage left.

That voice didn't make me jump – it filled me with ice. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight reacted the same, a mirror of me. We both stared at the bathroom door with wide eyes like a pair of deer caught in the headlamps of an oncoming train.

We'd been too busy with Saldis' unwelcome intrusion to notice. A certain light tread had crept along the upstairs hallway, little dexterous hands had eased the bathroom door handle down millimetre by millimetre, and a perceptive observer had peeked in through the slender gap.

A heavy-lidded blue eye floated in the slice of dark hallway beyond the bathroom.

"Oh, Lizzie," I breathed.

Lizzie did not wait for an invitation. She opened the door wider and tiptoed over the threshold with all the skittish caution of a young cat investigating new territory. She slid the door shut behind her with a soft click, watching Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight with slow sleepy-eyed curiosity. She was dressed in a borrowed tshirt several times too large for her, and a pair of shorts, her bare legs goose-pimpled against the nocturnal cold.

"Wow," Lizzie whispered, eyes glued to Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. "There's two of you!"

"You are never gate-crashing, little one," Seven-Shades told her, with all the same affection I used for Lizzie. "You go wherever you will. Though you did surprise me."

Lozzie did this side-to-side head-bob, as if trying to examine Seven-Shades from different angles, then crept across the bathroom toward me.

“Lozzie, I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I know I shouldn’t be doing this alone, I- I needed to-”

“Shhh-shh-shh, s’fine fine fine fine,” Lozzie murmured back, without taking her eyes off my perfect imitation.

“ ... how did she sneak up on *you*, anyway?” I hissed to Seven-Shades.

“Because she’s one of us.”

Lozzie came up to my side and linked her arm through mine, cuddling close. She ran her eyes up and down Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, with a kind of performative tight-lipped scepticism. Then she reached out, and before either of us could stop her, she pinched Seven-Shades’ cheek.

“Take this off, silly,” Lozzie said. “I can see you under there. You’re pretty without makeup!”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight used my face to blush bright red, which drew a giggle from Lozzie.

“Don’t encourage her!” I tutted.

“Me or her?” Lozzie giggled at me instead. “Us or we? Are you even the real Heather?” She closed one eye and then the other, peering at me alternately. “I think so!”

I sighed. Lozzie giggled again, bouncing on the balls of her bare feet.

“Lozzie, we were-” I tried, stumbled. “I was trying to negotiate a-”

“I heard!” Lozzie chirped, then fixed Seven-Shades with the most purse-lipped, squinty face of suspicion that she was capable of pulling, which was a bit like a hamster trying to imitate a bulldog. “And for the record, from me, which is the only record that matters, Heather is not an idiot.”

“She is”, Seven-Shades said gently.

“Oh, oh dear,” I cleared my throat. “You ... heard that part then, Lozzie?”

“Mhmm! You want to go swimming again! Next time, I’ll come too!”

“No she doesn’t,” Seven-Shades said with a sigh. “Heather, you-”

“Yes, exactly,” I said. “I don’t want to return to the abyss.”

They both blinked at me, blindsided. Lozzie looked like a startled bird, and Seven-Shades adopted a polite sort of blankness to conceal her lack of comprehension. I cleared my throat.

“What I actually want is to *not* want to return there,” I explained. “I want to be comfortable here, in this.” I gestured down at my own body, scrawny, weak, inadequate as it was. “I’ve tried to change myself, to ... add things, and it’s slow. It hurts. It barely works. But when I looked at you, when I saw you through abyssal eyes, you were beautiful. Abyssal life, but ... here ... and I- I want to be-” I sniffed hard, pulled myself together before I fell apart completely. “You’re both. You get to be both at once. I want to be like you.”

“You already are,” Seven-Shades said.

I blinked at her. “What?”

Lozzie squeezed my hand.

“Oh, Heather,” Seven-Shades tutted. “You’re missing the wood for the trees. You focus on things that *do not define what you are*. You are no less you, no less what you are meant to be, because of the lack of tentacles to wave around.”

“It doesn’t feel that way,” I said, sagging into Lozzie’s support. “If only I could ... be better, faster, I don’t know.”

“Just because you cannot climb up the inside of a stairwell by grasping the handrails with tentacles doesn’t make you any less what you *already are*. Nothing will change that. Not perception, not pain, not dysphoria. The last one, you must find coping methods, of course, but coping is different from *being*, and in being, you will find peace and power in equal measure.”

“She’s right about that bit,” Lozzie whispered to me, as if we were conspiring beyond Seven-Shades’ hearing. “But not that you’re an idiot.” She stuck her tongue out at Seven-Shades.

“The tentacles help. That’s why I do it,” I said. “I don’t risk ripping myself apart for fun.”

“Having flawed flesh is better than having no flesh at all,” she said.

“So what?” I felt tears prickle in my eyes. “You telling me to be happy with what I’ve got?”

“I’m telling you to look at yourself.”

“I am, remember?” I gestured at her, at her mirror-image of me. “Alright, fine, forget it, we still need to make a proper deal about going back to Carcosa.”

“And this is exactly why you need to sit still and watch the play,” Seven-Shades said. “But very well, now I will hold up a mirror for you.”

And as she spoke, she aged.

Watching a mirror image of myself gain fifteen years in a heartbeat was not what I’d expected to witness tonight, and I had been prepared for anything, or so I thought. Grey hairs silvered among the mousy brown, lines deepened around my reflected eyes and mouth, flesh sagged and skin roughened. Seven-Shades-of-Heather hunched, clutching herself about the shoulders, shuddering and shaking, a thin string of drool looping from her slack lips. A thousand-yard stare clouded her unfocused eyes. A version of me, wrecked on the rocks.

“You-” she slurred in my voice, blurred by pain and madness. “Want to end up like this?”

I sighed with exasperation. “I’ve seen worse. I’ve *been* worse. Is this supposed to distress me? You’re going to have to try harder than that.”

“Yeah!” Lozzie chorused with me. “Stupid! That’s stupid!”

Seven-Shades-as-Me nodded, twitching and flinching. “This is not your way. C-correct.”

My denial changed her again.

Seven-Shades straightened up. The wreckage reformed, older than me but not as old as the silly vision she’d first showed. She lost my habitual protective hunch. She crossed her arms over her chest, lifted her chin with an arch superiority, and her eyes grew somehow cold inside. No smile, not a hint, a closed expression. Nothing like me.

“Well?” she asked in my voice, cynical and distant.

For a moment I assumed I was looking at *her*, the real Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, the soul inside the mirrored flesh.

But then Lozzie said, “Heather won’t be like that! Stop it!”

“She might, Lauren,” Seven-Shades said, precise and contemptuous, and I shivered. “It’s not impossible. She will go this far, if she wraps herself in frustrated ambition and brutal calculation. If she continues to ignore what she is.”

“That’s ... me, ten years from now?” I asked.

It was no more credible than the shaking wreck, but it was so much worse. She made me look how I imagined Evelyn’s mother must have looked. A cold maggotty inhuman thing wrapped in an artificial shell of plastic self-control, the truth showing through behind the eyes like parasitic worms.

“Is this who you wish to become?” she asked me.

I shook my head, going numb. “No. No, never, I- no-”

“Then observe the mirror.”

She changed a third time, into truth and beauty, which is the same thing by two different names.

Flesh of peach-leather and dove-down and void-dark, sleek and smooth and sharp. Muscles like oil and butter, tight and trimmed for grace and speed. Six tentacles, elegant and precise, weaving rainbow-strobe patterns in warm water. Clean sharp spines and a mouth of razor teeth and poison threat in every cell membrane. My eyes, in my euphoric face.

Homo abyssus.

And with a blink it was all gone, and Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight mirrored the real me again.

I felt tears running down my cheeks.

“Woaaaaa,” went Lozzie. “Goals!”

“That was beautiful,” I breathed, voice shaking.

“It is what I see when I look at you,” Seven-Shades told me.

I shook my head. "That's ... it's a lie. I don't feel like that. How ... how can I? I ... "

"Look at yourself," she said, and nodded at my body.

And I knew what she meant. I shook my head.

"Do it!" Lozzie chirped. "I'll catch you!"

"N-no, I can't, I'll have another seizure. Lozzie, that is such a bad idea, I- no, I ... "

"If you look at yourself, Heather," Seven-Shades said. "If you look down at your own flesh with your true senses, then I will agree to your deal. While you and yours visit my father's library, I will ... distract myself," she sighed delicately. "If you look."

"I should ... sit down for this," I said, lips numb. "Lozzie, cradle my head, don't let me hit myself."

"Mmhmm! I got it!" she chirped.

I sat down awkwardly, legs shaking. Lozzie got behind me and held me in a hug, my head nestled against her shoulder. For a moment I couldn't bring myself to move, too numb, scared of what I might see.

Then, I looked down.

nothing more impotent –

11.10

“Oh, there you are, poppets! I was beginning to wonder when you’d work up the courage to get back here. I’ll be with you in a moment, just let me finish up this bicep, I have the contours almost *perfect* and I don’t want to lose my vibe ... vive? Vigour? Vitality?”

Saldis frowned as she worked through this linguistic enigma, then give up with a sigh and a tut and a shake of her thickly braided hair.

“Virtue,” Praem suggested.

A billion billion books in unnumbered shelves soaked up the golden bell of Praem’s voice, beyond the rectangular clearing in the Library of Carcosa.

Saldis laughed. She tried to click her fingers and point at Praem, but the wet grey goo clinging to her hands precluded a satisfying snap of thumb and forefinger. She settled for a playful wave instead.

“That is exactly what I am aiming to lose, you wonderfully dressed construct, you,” she said to Praem. “Well, if I had any virtue left in the first place. I lost that a long time ago, trust me. That experience was a lot less delicious than this three-course-meal will be, once it’s all ready and baked and sizzling.”

Saldis snapped her perfect teeth together on the final word. Her tone made me vaguely uncomfortable, like she was perusing pornography in public.

Evelyn did not hush Praem for speaking first, for abandoning the very explicit instructions of our plan, perhaps because our plan had survived all of about five seconds since stepping through the gateway.

To Evelyn’s credit, it was a very simple plan. She’d taken less than fifteen minutes to explain all the possible outcomes, earlier that Saturday morning. She was to open the gateway to Carcosa, we were all to step through, and she was to do the talking. Evelyn’s

plan was to deliver a specific threat in a limited way, and use that credible threat to forge a brief understanding – or at least, a mutual backing-down – between two mages.

The rest of us were supposed to stand around and look threatening, with an eye to a very quick retreat back through the open gateway if anything went wrong. Praem was laden down with gear again, carrying not only the bag of expedition supplies and the metal nuts tied with twists of cloth, but a second sports bag of familiar appearance, heavily padded inside, which kept rustling and shifting beneath her shoulder. Raine stood be-shielded and armed like a spiked turtle, while myself and Lizzie were tucked in neatly behind her, wrapped in coat and poncho and holding hands. Zheng lurked in the rear, a little grumpy after my reverse pep-talk during which I had asked her not to just pull Saldis' head off, but also quietly satisfied that she was essential to my long-term safety.

Twil was not present, because after three days of on-and-off, I'd run out of energy to argue with Evelyn.

We'd stepped back through to Carcosa, a week after our first journey Outside, in full awareness that Saldis might attack us. That's what the bone wand raised in Evelyn's hands was for, and the reason for the secret silent preparation in my own mind, which was threatening to give me a nosebleed. We'd been prepared for Saldis to be back in her grey sphere, or waiting with a mob of the squid-faced librarians, or transformed into a ogre. Or – if we were exceptionally lucky – just absent.

We had not been prepared for her being obviously and openly turned on.

Nor that she might return to her work after a glance and a smile and a wink at us. We were of sideline interest, compared to her *objet d'art*. And return to her work she did, skilled hands gliding smooth and wet over the curve and dimple of artificial flesh, humming to herself.

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Raine, Evelyn, and I shared a glance, and I let go of the half-formed hyperdimensional equation on the edge of my consciousness, blinked past the shadow of a headache, and wiped a droplet of nosebleed on a tissue offered by Lizzie.

“ ... what the fuck are you doing?” Evelyn eventually asked, in the

unimpressed tone of walking in on an esoteric masturbatory technique.

Well, that hadn't been in the plan at all.

In the clearing hedged by tall bookshelves where we'd stopped last time, Saldis' blocky grey sphere machine had put down roots, unfurled its leaves, and blossomed.

The core sphere-shape was still recognisable beneath the curling staircase-stems and wide platforms like flat rain-catcher leaves, dotted with smooth grey lumps and curves that were probably meant to act as furniture. Highlights of colour had appeared amid the grey uniformity: a few piles of books undoubtedly sourced from the library shelves, some flimsy silken discarded clothing on a wide expanse of grey I took to be a bed, and a shocking trail of crimson bloody smear near the central stalk of the unfolded construct. The whole thing rose perhaps ten feet into the air, like a miniature apartment without walls, rendered all in smooth grey, dropped into the middle of an Outside dimension.

A pile of half-melted grey blocks lay on the topmost exposed balcony, as if part of the machine had detached and died. Saldis herself was up there, stripped down to a gauzy scarlet undershirt with her sleeves rolled up. She was using the melted blocks like sculptor's clay, her hands and forearms caked in grey goo as she worked on her masterpiece.

A half-finished human figure stood before her. She'd completed the feet and legs and abdomen and the side of a chest and one arm, all cast from smooth unblemished grey like flawless cement.

Her sculpture was muscled like a Greek deity, lithe and athletic, detailed as any classical statue.

Saldis glanced down at us, at Evelyn's question, and laughed a rosy laugh. "Making a man!" she said, then took a step back from her creation and tilted her head sideways. "Or perhaps a woman, actually, I haven't entirely decided yet." She gestured at the statue's unfinished groin, smooth as a doll's and absent any detail. "Of course I could always just go half-and-half and have both, but I think I'm in the mood for being split open like a pomegranate."

Lozzie let out a snort-giggle behind one hand, eyes going wide and seeking mine. Evelyn huffed a sigh. Raine laughed and went

‘savage, nice,’ under her breath. I didn’t get it.

“Well, actually,” Saldis continued. “Why does that have to be a man? Why, indeed?”

She asked the question of the air, with all the pretentious gloss of a self-defined artist. I finally understood the meaning and felt a blush in my cheeks.

“Um,” Raine cleared her throat from behind her homemade riot-shield. “You got so bored without us, you’ve been making a living dildo? Girl, you need some company.”

“‘Dildo?’” Saldis frowned down at Raine. “Oh, that’s ... that’s an awful word. Really? ‘Dildo?’ Ugh.” She pulled a stricken face. “I do pity you little Englishers, this is not a pretty tongue. Tch, and now you’ve broken my concentration too. Oh well, not like he’s going anywhere.” She affectionately patted the statue’s abdomen, which looked like it had been chiselled from the unrealised sexual yearnings of the terminally repressed. She turned away to descend the whorl of little staircases and platforms which led back to the core of the sphere.

“Deliver your threat, wizard,” Zheng purred softly.

“I know!” Evelyn hissed over her shoulder. “I was only ... distracted.”

“S’one way of putting it,” Raine murmured from the corner of her mouth, barely concealing her laughter. “I was expecting a fight, not to find her making a sex doll.”

“It is not a sex doll,” Saldis said with a tut, as she finished winding her way down toward the floor and stepped out before us. I couldn’t help but notice she didn’t leave the boundaries of the unfolded sphere-machine, her bare feet still in direct contact with an impossibly thin platform of grey material, like a little patio.

“It’s a doll, and you’re gonna fuck it,” Raine shot back. “Or it’s gonna fuck you. It’s a sex doll. Not to shame you though. S’cool. We understand.”

“Do we?” Evelyn grunted.

“Sex doll!” Lizzie squeaked, bright red in the face. If we hadn’t been holding each others’ arms, I think she would have fallen over in pure comedic delight. I wasn’t blushing quite as hard, but this

whole situation had rather left my resolve behind in the dust.

"I'd been asleep for ages!" Saldis waved a hand at the sphere, tutting. "I can hardly be expected to maintain myself in the total absence of a good rut. And you lot were taking your sweet time coming back as well. I was getting bored, especially after I got chased out of the cheap seats by Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight." Saldis' eyes sought out my own and made contact with a half-wince. "Lady Morell, do tell me the truth, is the good director still very angry with me?"

I gathered myself, tried to stop thinking about hand-made grey-clay sex dolls, and shrugged.

"I wouldn't know," I said. "We didn't talk about you, after you left."

"Oh." Saldis blinked at me, blank-faced. "Oh. Well. Hm. Well then. Could you ... put in a good word for me, perhaps?"

"That depends on what you do for us," I said. "Sorry."

Saldis sighed, then narrowed her gaze at me in a twitch of confusion, as if she'd seen a truth behind my eyes.

Perhaps she had. After all, truth did lurk behind my eyes. Behind every inch of my flesh.

I smiled at her curiosity.

"Heather," Evelyn hissed for my ears alone. "That was not the plan."

"Plan's dead," Praem intoned.

"Now, correct me if I'm wrong about this," Raine said, smoothly distracting us all from an argument we could ill afford out here in the library, even with the doorway back to Sharrowford still open right behind us. "But Saldis, woman like yourself could surely find an actual partner, right? No need for that thing." Raine nodded up at the half-finished statue.

Saldis did this wave-like eyebrow wiggle of self-satisfaction at Raine's hooded compliment, the sort of expression I'd imagine usually accompanies statements about how much one is going to get laid that night.

"Well, if I could find anybody out here," Saldis replied. "It's not as if these thralls can provide much company. Even if they were so

inclined. Have you ever seen under their robes? No thank you. I'd rather bed a hound."

Saldis pointed past us with a lazy hand, to where a few of the squid-faced librarians were going about their rounds, dragging their eyeless sight across the regimented book spines. Occasionally one would pause and feed a book into the mass of tentacles and spikes they used for faces, presumably to be routed to elsewhere in the library, and regurgitated from beneath the robes of another librarian. The gaggle of hangers-on we'd attracted last time were nowhere to be seen, perhaps returned to their duties, or simply driven off by Praem's timely physical violence. A few gritty grey bloodstains still marred the floorboards on the other side of the clearing.

The few left here ignored us completely. The anthill paid us no heed.

Evelyn cleared her throat, loud as she dared in this Outside place. "Everyone shut up. Saldis, listen to me."

"Yes?" Saldis heard the confrontational tone and raised her eyebrows with all the unimpressed superiority of a very rich woman who considered herself not to be complained at.

She also put her hands on her hips – hands covered in grey sculpting goo, which instantly ruined her red-and-gold skirt before she realised what she'd done. She looked down at herself and tutted, removing her hands and leaving smears of grey behind. "Oh, bother."

"Will you pay attention?" Evelyn hissed at her. "Perhaps this place is not dangerous for you, but we're all on a timer and-"

"Yes yes yes, I'm listening." Saldis flapped a hand, trying to scrape the goo off her hips on a spur of her blossomed sphere without making the stain any worse. Like a bear rubbing itself on a tree.

Evelyn faltered, going tight around the jaw.

"Evee, just say the line," I whispered over her shoulder. "I don't think it matters at this point, anyway. I think she's ... well. We can all see."

"And you're ready to get rid of her?" Evelyn hissed back at me.

"I don't think it'll be necessary."

“But you’re ready? Heather, promise me this time.”

“Mmhmm. I promise.”

Evelyn took a deep breath and raised her chin. “Saldis. I want you out of Heather’s head. We are carrying a *comedenti* with us,” she gestured at the rustling bag under Praem’s shoulder. “And if I free it in here, I doubt even you could scourge every hiding place in this library before it grows enough to eat you.”

“Hmmm?” Saldis looked up from her hip-wiggle cleaning. “A what? Don’t speak Roman at me, what is that supposed to-”

“I have the corpse of a rabbit possessed by a demon, with a specific feeding deal,” Evelyn snapped. “It-”

“Oh!” Saldis lit up and almost clapped her goo-smeared hands together before catching herself, tutting, and waving them about ineffectually. “Delightful! Yes, I’ll play, I’ll play. And what is it you want, what, uh, what is this about?”

Evelyn gave her a look like she’d just clogged the toilet. “I want you out of Heather’s head.”

“I’m already out!” Saldis tutted, outraged. “Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight has seen to that. I’m not going to do every little thing you tell me, Englisher, just because you threaten me with having to adopt a new pet, but I’m not going to cross a princess daughter of the Yellow King.”

“You already did,” I piped up. Evelyn shot me a look.

“Yes, well.” Saldis shrugged. “That was all out of love for her art, not defiance of a direct royal request.”

“Like pirating a movie,” Raine said.

If that made any sense to Saldis at all, she ignored it.

“You know, miss ... what was it again, Saye?” she said to Evelyn. “You shouldn’t be so judgemental, you look like you could do with a bloody good spot of rumpy-pumpy as well and-” Saldis stopped and pulled a face. “What *were* those words? I will never like this language, that was awful. It wasn’t even obscene in the fun way, just the stupid way.”

Raine was struggling not to laugh. Evelyn had blushed a confused red across her pale cheeks. Lozzie was grinning like we were at a

real comedy play.

“Anyway,” Saldis continued before Evelyn could recover her battered composure. “Where’s your *vargr*? She was your shield before, and you can’t get far before escape velocity as one of us without a shield, and I’m pretty certain she was also your-”

“The werewolf is busy,” Evelyn spat. “Now answer my-”

“I already have! I’m out, I-”

“Then clear off out of our path, or submit to my-”

“I’ve already offered to help, you pustulent little-”

While the mages traded puerile insults from a safe distance, sheltered respectively by arcane grey machinery or loyal loving constructs, I wove myself a tentacle.

Imagination had been encouraged in me at a very young age. In Maisie too, when our mother had taught us to read and given us free run of the local library every Sunday afternoon. My young mind, as yet unafraid of Wonderland and monstrous unnatural things, had learnt to weave from words the worlds I wanted to visit, from the rustic simplicity of The Shire to the mysterious surrealism of *Where The Wild Things Are*, through to the far-too-mature horrors of *Watership Down*.

So when I visited Kimberly’s bedroom every few days, to share visualisation practice with her, I’d found it easy intellectually – but hard emotionally.

She’d made that spare bedroom into a cosy little space, colonised it with pastel bedsheets and her collection of questionably tasteful books on witchcraft, and even less tasteful little statuettes of rearing unicorns, along with all her other possessions rescued from the cramped flat in Gleaston tower, except a few pieces of larger furniture which lay gathering dust in one of the less inhabitable upstairs rooms. Raine had helped out with a few trips back and forth in the car, and then Kim had stopped paying the rent on her old place. I think the whole set up was Evelyn’s way of trying to help the poor woman, after what she’d been through, but nobody ever put it into words.

The visualisation process sometimes made me want to cry. I could weave in my minds’ eye, right down to the connective tissues and

epithelial layers, what a tentacle should look like, and yet know it was never really mine. Kimberly's skittish softness helped somewhat. I didn't want her to worry over my tears, so I always controlled myself as best I could.

But now, standing Outside, in the middle of a place so unnatural that it hurt us to stay here too long, I weaved a beautiful thing, and smiled.

Dexterous point of tapered muscle, shaft of smooth pale dolphin-flesh, core of flexible cartilage links like miniature locking pistons. Bioluminescence in the cell walls, set to strobe and pulse and throb in rainbow brilliance, or slink silent and slow in their own darkness. And where it met my skin, I built transition, not interruption. I hooked anchors deep into my flesh, wrapped them around my spine and hips, toughened the supports with tendons like steel cable and packed them around with brown fat and bone sheaths to cushion the strain.

All in my head, of course. Just my imagination.

Concentrating hard, I stretched out the tentacle toward Saldis. She was in the middle of throwing some huffing, tutting comment back at Evelyn. I was half-tempted to flick the mathematical switch, make the tentacle real, and tweak her elegant little nose.

She might be able to see it though. And if I did make it real pneuma-somatic flesh, Lozzie and Zheng and Praem would all see, and they'd be very unimpressed by the aftermath of aching and bruising and wheezing pain and terminal exhaustion, especially if I expended myself for a childish gesture. Actually, Lozzie would approve.

But I still smiled, because I knew the tentacle was not merely a phantom limb at all.

"Heathy," Lozzie whispered. "We should break it up before they fight, shouldn't we? No fighting, no fighting!"

"Mmm," I agreed, and let the thought-tentacle drift apart.

"A single word keeps your guts in your belly, wizard, instead of between my teeth," Zheng was rumbling behind us. "Scuttle back into your shell, lest I change my mind."

"Don't be silly, you dizzy old *draugr*." Saldis waved a hand at her.

"I'm still inside my walls. Test me if you want to feel the boiling oil, please. I'll re-purpose you as well, I always need more fodder to break down, and there's lots of fodder clinging to your tired bones."

"I will not," Zheng purred back. "Because I am under the shaman's grace, and she has asked me not to kill you. If I judge this is unwise, I will make my own choice."

"No, Zheng," I sighed and raised my voice a little, felt it creeping off into the depths of the library to be absorbed by the books. "It's okay. Eeve, let it go, you too, please. I think we've established what Saldis' priorities are. Sorry, I was ... thinking about other things."

"Quite right!" Saldis said with a tut.

"I will put in a good word for you," I told her before anyone could start again. "With Seven-Shades. If you help us find the books we need."

"... you mean it?" Her eyebrows rose up her perfect high forehead. A wet tongue darted out to slick ruby-red lips. "That's not just a pleasantry, is it? Lady Morell, I will be forever in your debt if you can get me back into the audience. Or ... " Her eyes widened. "Or win me a play of my own?"

"You gotta have a big lesbian drama for that, I gather," Raine said.

"I can't make Sevens do anything," I said. "But I will ask her to allow you back into the uh, 'seats'. If you hurt us, then I'll tell her the opposite."

"Sevens?" Saldis echoed, clapping her hands together for real this time, sending little droplets of grey clay splattering all over the front of her scarlet undershirt. "You are on a first name basis, with one of the pretenders? Oh, oh, I could never- never lay a finger on such an august- no, never. You have nothing to fear from me. But please, please do tell her how much I wish to admire her work. I am a worthy audience, I am."

"Right. Yes." I nodded and cleared my throat, feeling a little awkward.

There was no way I would have been comfortable with Saldis watching what had transpired in that bathroom, after she'd left.

We probably didn't need to make an explicit deal with Saldis, she'd already offered to help find the books before. We likely didn't need

to threaten her either, but I'd let Evelyn go ahead because I'd begun to suspect this was what mages needed. Formal deals, contracts, armed negotiation. Perhaps it was all the spell-casting and demon summoning that did it, or perhaps being a mage simply attracted a certain type of person. Perhaps this was why Kimberly was so bad at the emotional and manipulative side of being a mage – one had to be a bit of an arse first. Evelyn was an arse, though I loved her for it.

"I still don't trust you," Evelyn told her, then spoke sidelong to Praem. "Watch her. One twitch out of place."

"Trust?" Saldis said the word like it was an utterly preposterous notion. "Trust has nothing to do with it, little Englisher. Respect – everything!"

"Think about it, Eevee," Raine said with an amused grin. "Flash stuff here."

"*Flash stuff?*" Saldis echoed, then smiled slowly. "Flash! Oh, I do like that. Flash. But how about ... fabulous! Oooh yeah, now there's an English word worth hanging onto."

"Flash here thinks she's pissed off one of the Gods," Raine carried on. "And she's getting Heather to intercede. What does that make Heather? What does that make us?"

Evelyn let out a grumbling noise, not quite convinced, but did not dissent further. In the corner of my eye, I saw the fingertips of one of Praem's hands sneak over to the back of Evelyn's wrist, and make contact. Evelyn flinched and turned to frown, but Praem was staring at Saldis, betraying nothing inside.

"Gods, pffft," Saldis made a derisive noise. "The Yellow King's get are not Gods, little hound."

"How-" Evelyn cleared her throat, recovering from Praem's unexpected touch. "How would you define them then, hmm? How would you define the Eye?"

"I have met many creatures that claim to be Gods," Saldis said. "But never been face to face with Freya or Odin or even a stray giant, and certainly no demiurge. If the Gods truly existed, miss Saye, do you believe they would allow obscenities such as us to wander the worlds unobstructed?"

“None of us are obscenities,” I said out loud.

The conviction in my voice drew Saldis and Evelyn both to stare at me. Saldis narrowed her eyes again with that piercing cold intelligence. She clicked her fingers at last – an unsatisfying wet snap on her grey sculpting medium – and pointed a finger at me.

“Lady Morell. You know, you do seem different.”

I smiled. “I’m not. I’m still just me.”

= =

Molten cords of tendon flesh a single cell in thickness, fins and scoops and graceful curves for gliding through dark water, throat of brass and eyes of crystal, all wrapped in pressure bubble. Six tentacles, there for when I willed them, a mouth of teeth so sharp and clean, gums of pure-peach health. Muscles trim and smooth and fast, yet changeable into more. A polyhedron shifting faces; a dancing star in my core.

Those words do not do justice to what I’d seen through abyssal senses.

As my insensate body had twitched and jerked in Lozzie’s cradling arms on the bathroom floor, I’d seen the side of me I’d brought back from the abyss – and in the end, it was just me.

Me, translated to the mathematical potential of the abyssal intercellular matrix. Abyssal eyes did not look back at me, because I wasn’t even looking at a reflection. I was merely gazing down at my own body, flesh and blood and bone redefined in wave-particle duality and polymorphic infinity. The only way my mind could interpret the sheer overwhelming euphoria was to turn it into metaphor, the same way it had when I’d swam the ocean beyond.

It was beautiful. I was beautiful.

I’d been such an idiot.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had exaggerated slightly, probably for dramatic effect – I was not the perfect amalgam she had shown me. My physical body was still scrawny and weak, a seed that needed water and sunlight if it was to act as a proper anchor to the real. My shuddering abyssal flesh was still tender and raw, even so many weeks after bursting the membrane back into reality, flushed with vitality but in need of stimulation, acknowledgement, exercise.

But flaws didn't matter. Imperfections were nothing.

Beneath my skin, I was what I was meant to be. I was *homo abyssus*.

I stared and stared and ran hands over my flexing abdomen and shuddering flanks, encircled the roots of tentacles which came and went at will, stroked sharp spines and giggled at the sensitive flesh between my legs. I blinked nictitating membranes back and forth across all-black eyeballs, saw in infra-red and ultra-violet and other spectra we do not know. I cracked vertebrae in limbs I cannot name, measured the levels of chemicals and enzymes and hormones in my bloodstream and my organs, puffed my flesh with toxin, drained it and replaced it with the healing properties of a resonant purr.

Lozzie swears up and down all I did was twitch and judder, but I know what I saw.

I sensed her too, her hands cradling my head, her presence behind me, the hint of shining starlight flesh and the whisper of a fey voice.

I came up for air five minutes later, according to her; it felt more like an hour.

"It's me," I croaked in a weak little voice, tears of release running down my cheeks. "It's me. It was always me."

"It you!" Lozzie giggled, wiping the sweat from my forehead with the end of her sleeve.

The bathroom floor served as a most welcoming place to rest, as I was drained by the experience in more than one way. For a long, long moment Lozzie let me drift with my head in her lap. I stared up at the bathroom ceiling and the old, peeling paint. Eventually, without having to explain myself in words, Lozzie helped me struggle up to a sitting position. Luckily, using abyssal senses had not triggered any kind of sympathetic manifestation of pneuma-somatic tentacles – or worse – so while I was drained and tired, I was not ravenously hungry or about to pass out.

And I was happy.

"Heathy? Are you okay?" Lozzie steadied me with hands on my shoulders as I sat there, wavering and looking down at my body. "Raine will be very upset with me if I let you fall over and bang

your head, so I'm going to be very careful not to let you fall over and bang your head. Okay? Okay. Okay!"

With clumsy hands and numb fingers, I lifted up my tshirts and touched my belly and hips, stuck my arms under my clothes to feel my own physical body, the rush of my blood beneath my skin, the gurgle of my guts, the thudding of my heartbeat.

"... it was me all along," I croaked at myself.

"Of course it was!" Lozzie chirped, bobbing her head from side to side like a curious little bird. "I thought you kind of knew?"

I shook my head, then looked up at her as her words dawned on me. "What Sevens showed us ... is that what you see when you look at me, Lozzie?"

"Mmmmmmmmmmm." Lozzie did a one-eyed squint. "I'm not like Sevens. No two pairs of eyes are exactly the same but I've always thought you're beautiful, Heather! Before the swim, and then after it too! You think you changed, but you didn't! You've always been you, and you has always been good." She patted my chest and forehead and thighs. "And you're pretty and cool and sparkling, whatever you keep thinking inside your head."

"I guess I am pretty, uh, 'sparkling'." I tried to giggle too, not a noise I was too familiar with.

Lozzie and I put our heads together, like a pair of small animals in a burrow, and for the first time in a long time I felt like I made sense. The dysphoria was still present, but now I knew the truth, and nothing could touch that. Even if I couldn't see it ninety-nine percent of time, hidden below the surface of my skin, past sight and sense on the abyssal wavelength of oceanic metaphor, it was there. I was not broken wreckage, not irreconcilably insane from a visit to the abyss. I was *homo abyssus*, my pain came from the mismatch of my flesh, and when seen through the right eyes, I could be beautiful.

Phantom limbs wrapped around Lozzie's shoulders, and I simply let them. They tugged on the bruises in my sides as real, physical muscles tried to compensate for abyssal truth. The pain was sweet – which was a bit of a mad thing to think, but it was true.

"I'm going to go to the gym with Raine," I croaked as Lozzie nuzzled my neck. "I'm going to get fit, and ... and run, and learn to

... you know.” I sniffed hard. “I saw me, Lozzie. I’ve been so, so stupid. How could I- all this time- a-and I have to move, I have to- all this time spent on me, I need to help Maisie, not sit around navel-gazing and-”

“No!” Lozzie tutted and pulled back. “Bodies are important!”

I blinked at her, then nodded, too weak to turn this moment of victory into a self-pity session, or worse, beating myself up for not figuring everything out overnight and rescuing Maisie after breakfast. I gazed at Lozzie for a long moment, and wondered what she might look like through abyssal eyes. I cast my mind back to the periphery of what I’d seen of myself earlier, and recalled hints of something behind me, something made of fragile star-spun glass and the tinkle of tiny stones on metal.

Lozzie just blinked at me with big sleepy eyes, turned her head sideways, and smiled an elfin little smile.

“I should get back to bed,” I laughed softly. “But I think I’m too ... too ‘buzzed’, as Raine would say.”

Lozzie stroked my head, nodding. “We can stay here a while. It’s safe in the bathroom! No spooky creeping night-Praem to find me.”

“Night Praem?” I asked.

Lozzie shrugged, impish mischief on her lips.

“ ... where’s Seven-Shades, anyway?” I asked, glancing around the shabby little room. “I need to thank her, I really, really do.”

“I think you have a truce now!” Lozzie chirped. “I wish she’d stayed though, I wanted to see her with her clothes off.”

I blinked at her in surprise, and Lozzie stuck her tongue out.

“Not like that, dumb-dumb! She’s pretty, I like her. I wanna see under the mask.”

“Um, fair enough.” I turned to the empty air. “Thank you, Sevens.”

“Thank you, Seveny!” Lozzie chorused with me, loud enough to bring the Night-Praem down on us.

Twenty minutes later – or an hour and twenty, I wasn’t sure, I think I fell asleep on Lozzie’s shoulder for a good few minutes – she helped me to my feet and we padded together through the dark

upstairs hallway and into mine and Raine's bedroom. Lozzie tucked me back into bed, but before she could even finish pulling the covers up, I was snuggling into Raine's front not only with my hips and arms, but with half a dozen phantom limbs that I now knew were not mere brain-ghosts, but an echo of the truth beneath my flesh.

And as I drifted off to sleep, wrapped for the first time in months in the euphoria of truth, I knew what I had to do.

I knew what I was; now I must learn to use it.

= =

"We have a truce with Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight," I told Evelyn the following morning.

I told her and Raine a great many things that morning, some of them inexpressible in human language, or at least difficult to express at high speed, especially without the luxury of emotional brakes or anything in my belly. Raine had sensed my manic mood the moment I'd woken up, how I'd wriggled out of bed and grabbed her in a hug, laughing through the painful twinges in my flanks and the way my bruises knocked the wind out of me when I bent over too quickly. Evelyn saw it in my face as she frowned at me over a bowl of cereal, as I all but bounced into the kitchen, feeling like I was channelling too much Lozzie.

"Wait wait, hold up, important part you keep glossing over: there were two of you?" Raine asked, paused in the act of trying to get me to eat a bite of cereal bar. "Full-body style?"

"There's always been two of me!" I felt a giggle in my throat, unbidden, an unfamiliar feeling. "There's Maisie."

"Yeah, but ..." Raine wiggled her eyebrows. "You know."

"Tch," I tutted, but couldn't keep the smile off my face. "You wouldn't. Seven-Shades wasn't actually me. You've changed your tune on her, Raine, I thought you, well, disliked her, after what we saw ..."

"She's put a smile on your face, Heather. I'm not going to pretend to fully understand, but you seem happier than in months."

"It's like she's high on blue skittles," Evelyn grumbled, but then she added, "Good for you, Heather."

"It's simple!" I laughed again, and wouldn't stay still, fiddling with a cereal bowl even though Raine was literally following me around the kitchen with a cup of tea and a plate of toast, trying to tempt me to either eat or sit down or both. "It was always just me. It still hurts, but it's so good to know that I am what I am. Maybe I was always this way, maybe the abyss was just a catalyst, maybe it's the Eye's fault, but I don't care anymore. And I feel ... ready! This is what I'm supposed to be. And it's stupid, it's horrendously silly. I feel like one of those people on the internet who believe they're dragons or ice fairies or something and-"

Raine shot Evelyn a raised eyebrow. "You telling Heather about the dark corners of the internet?"

Evelyn shrugged.

"Me," Praem intoned from by the workshop door.

"Yes, yes," I waved that point down. "Praem was reading things on my laptop on wikipedia, it was very fun. Anyway, the point is, we have a truce now. We need to get everyone together, go back to Carcosa, as soon as we can. We're going to get those books and I'm going to figure out how to locate my sister. Today, yes, we can go back to the library? Is that doable?"

"Saturday," Evelyn grumbled. "I still need time to re-target the gate. And do not tell Twil we're going back."

My enthusiasm hit a brick wall of sudden anxiety. " ... no ... Twil?"

"She has coursework due," Evelyn said, holding my gaze without faltering. She seemed colder than last night, somehow hollow around the eyes. "This week and the next. I have extracted a promise that she will focus on it, mostly by guilt tripping her. Don't undermine that."

"Oh, I-"

"You aren't the only one who had a rough night, Heather."

"Then ... then we can wait, can't we? We can ... um."

"No, we don't want to wait," Evelyn said with a long suffering sigh. "You don't want to wait, do you, Heather?"

"Not ... not really, no."

"Every day we delay is one less day of action, one less day of

working on how to counter the Eye,” Evelyn said. “We go in, we shove Saldis’ head in a toilet, we get the books. Leaving Twil out means nothing.”

“Liar liar, pants on fire,” Praem sing-songed.

“And you can shut up,” Evelyn grumbled at her, too worn out to snap. Something sagged in her expression. Raine finally stopped waving toast at me and noticed that something was wrong.

“Evee?” she asked. “Evee, something happen? What did Twil say, she upset you?”

“Practical decisions, that’s all. And it’s none of your business.”

= =

An hour deeper into the library of Carcosa and we had acquired two out of three books. Now we were closing on the third.

Working the ‘catalogue system’ – as Saldis had described the squid-faced librarians – proved both easier and more disgusting than we’d envisioned. The trick was to feed them books constantly, which Lozzie took to with gleeful giggles, despite my visible concern.

“They’re always in communion, all of them, that’s how they draw on the existing organisation of every volume in the library,” Saldis had explained. She’d requested we interrupt one of the shuffling creatures in the clearing, offer it a book taken from the shelves, to start the necessary chain-reaction.

“Communion with *what?*” Evelyn had asked, voice sharp.

Saldis shrugged and pulled a face. “I do not care to know. Does one observe the butcher at work, or merely enjoy the meat?”

We’d followed her instructions, lured a squid-faced librarian creature with books pulled from the shelves, and watched as it had shoved them into its tentacle-hole one by one.

“The books are not actually moved, you understand?” Saldis went on, with little bored sighs and waves of a hand as she resumed her seat in the sphere-machine’s core. “The internal parts of one thrall are not merely similar to all others, like the innards of one pig resemble all other pigs – they are the *very same innards*. But the active overlap only occurs when they need to move a book from one position to another.”

“... quantum superposition?” Evelyn asked with a professional frown.

“Shared guts!” Lozzie chirped, and handed the squid-face another book.

Saldis waved a hand and pulled a bored grimace. “I don’t pretend to understand, little Englisher, and frankly I don’t feel like vivisecting one of them to find out. One can bash them around all one likes, but insert a single fingertip past their skin, into the organs, and you’re likely not to get it back. Now, see?” She nodded at the squid-face Lozzie had finished feeding, which stood before us in a moment of silent contemplation, as if waiting to be addressed. “It knows the position of all the other books relevant for the re-shelving of the ones it has just communed for the correct location of.” She smiled and smacked her lips. “Now that’s a sentence. Your ‘English’ did quite well there, mmm?”

“Stop yammering, wizard,” Zheng purred.

“Yes, please, Saldis,” I added. “We are on a time limit. Being here is tough on all of us.”

Saldis rolled her eyes and leaned on a hand. “Very well, lady Morell. This is much more reliable than asking a scrum of thralls to dredge up what little scraps they have in their local meat, yes? Go on, ask it for the books. Ask away, and ye shall receive! If not, feed it more until the net catches what you desire.”

The first tome we reached twenty five minutes later, following the slow shuffle plod of the librarian through the endless labyrinth of Carcosa’s bookshelves. It didn’t point our way as the gaggle of followers had, but simply led on, up to the next floor and deep into a spiral tangle of overflowing shelves. Hundreds of books lay in avalanche piles here, thick leather-bound tomes and ancient scrolls and scraps of unbound manuscripts in Latin and Greek and less recognisable languages, but the creature neatly picked its way along a clear path around the textual rockfalls.

Evelyn insisted we continue using the method of throwing cloth-wrapped nuts, testing for that which was not conducive to human life or terrestrial matter. So Praem threw, and our caution was proven warranted – the librarian creature passed unharmed through patches of clear ground that compressed the cloth-wrapped nut into nothing, or whisked it out of the air on dark semi-translucent claws.

On those occasions, we had to find our own route around the obstruction to rejoin our guide.

Beyond the Northern Ice by Magnhildr Dahl was exactly where the creature led us, in the middle row of a stack of early Medieval texts, bound in soft, pale leather which made my skin crawl to look at, written in a tongue not unlike Old English.

"This is not supposed to exist," Evelyn breathed, voice shaking as Praem had carefully extracted the book and cradled it in her hands.

The doll-demon had cracked the cover, checked this was indeed the genuine article and wouldn't hollow out the mind of anybody who gazed upon the words, then laid the book inside the less lethal of the two sports bags, with mechanical gentleness.

"What does that mean?" I asked softly.

"All copies were destroyed," Evelyn said, her eyes following the book with naked hunger as Praem tucked it away. "Dahl was excommunicated, executed by drowning, and ... well. That book shouldn't be." She swallowed hard. "Come on, we have further to go. Yes, much further."

Saldis accompanied us as well, rolling along well behind the rear of the group in her grey sphere-machine. Back in the clearing it had folded up its strange blossoms, sucked the stair-stems and balcony-leaves back into itself like a strange sea creature re-absorbing expelled organs. Saldis' boy-toy sculpture now lay in a side-seat next to her, visible through the peeled open front of the machine as she lounged inside. The sphere clicked along behind us, Saldis only occasionally smothering a laugh at our cautious, creeping antics.

"You think this is amusing?" Evelyn had shot back at her after the third laugh, as Praem had watched a cloth-wrapped nut bounce along the floorboards. "You want to go first for us? I suppose you have some better way of avoiding the hazards out here, do you?"

"Don't mind me!" Saldis waved a hand. "Far be it for me to leapfrog your process. You do you, miss Saye."

Whenever I looked back, Saldis favoured me with an excited smile, but mostly let us get on with our book borrowing.

Les voies des goules – written by an anonymous Parisian magician in 1803 – elicited just as much fascination from Evelyn as the first

book, despite the relative slimness of the cheaply-bound volume, and the absurd cover illustration of a cavorting ghoulish figure with a gnawed bone between its teeth.

“Let me guess,” Raine said. “All copies burned? Author burned at the stake?”

“What? ... no, no,” Evelyn muttered, distracted as Praem handed her the book after checking, and Evelyn greedily leafed through the pages, eyes working back and forth at high speed. “Only three copies ever published. Referenced by other books, but I wasn’t sure it existed. Grave magic, flesh ... stuff ... ” She shook her head and frowned. “The necessary formula for hiding of human flesh is meant to be in here, even from gazes such as the Eye, but my French is atrocious, I’ll have to translate it line by line. This is necessary. We need this. We do.”

“Evee?” I said her name out loud, because she sounded like she was trying to convince herself. Her voice was shaking.

“I’m fine,” she said with a huff, pulling herself together and handing the book back to Praem. “Let’s carry on. Feed our friend here some tomes. The faster we get the last book, the faster we can be out of here.”

By the time we reached the third book, Evelyn was the only one of us not beginning to buckle under the strain of being in this place, of existing Outside. I was getting twitchy, my phantom limbs trying to guard every approach to our little group. Zheng had grown silent and intense behind me. Raine was pulled taut inside her motorcycle jacket, every muscle pumped with stress hormones. Praem kept blinking too much. Even Lizzie had stopped bouncing from foot to foot as she walked, hand-in-hand with me.

Evelyn had that wide-eyed look, that old look, that hungry look, as she stomped on into the darkness.

The last known location of the third and final book – *The Testament of Heliopolis*, an anonymous translation of some ancient Greek scrap – was two floors up and far toward the back wall of the library canyon, where a wide area of the library had long ago suffered some kind of collapse.

As we crept inch by inch through the tangle of bookshelves, an open space revealed itself, like a rubble-clogged crater ahead,

though the rubble was all splintered wood and piles of books in jumbled heaps. Though it did little to alleviate the oppressive air of the library, the slow appearance of a wide open space did ease off the claustrophobia of the library stacks.

“Looks like somebody set off a bomb,” Raine muttered as we drew almost level with the collapsed area.

“I could do worse, *yoshou*,” Zheng rumbled.

“Here ... it should be right here,” Evelyn was saying, eyes roving the nearest bookshelf, across the neatly stacked spines of leather-bound, crumbling books. “This part is alphabetised, but I don’t see it.” She glanced at the squid-faced librarian, who had stopped and turned toward us, waiting for the next instruction. “Has the thing made a mistake? Do we need to feed it more?”

Praem noticed it first.

She stepped past Evelyn and reached for the shelf, into a shadowed gap between two books. It was only then I realised that the dust on the shelf had been disturbed. A book had been removed. Recently.

Praem’s hand drew back the object which had lain in space once occupied by *The Testament of Heliopolis*.

A clean white envelope.

My eyes felt like they were going to pop out of my head. Raine went tense all over, as if it might be a letter-bomb. Evelyn made a choked sound deep in her throat. Lizzie squeezed my hand. Saldis was standing up in her sphere-machine, trying to see. Zheng laughed.

“It’s for us,” Praem intoned after a moment.

Written on the front of the envelope, in messy looping handwriting, with the unmistakable blue ink of cheap biro, was a single sentence.

‘To Miss Evelyn Saye.’

nothing more impotent – 11.11

“If this letter has reached its intended recipient, rather than the unknown hand and eye of an intrepid explorer a million years hence, then I have deduced correctly the current mechanical aim of your undoubtedly many ambitions, Miss Saye. And I have frustrated them. If you are reading this letter, and you are alive and sane, then I congratulate you on the fruit of your work. It is remarkable beyond accounting, but in the interest of my personal safety and the safety of my associates, I have ‘headed you off at the pass’, if you will forgive the playful turn of phrase.”

Praem read out loud, in the gathered silence of our stilled breath.

“You seek to recreate the work of Hennel and Zyfridus, founded upon rumours of the great seal beneath Heliopolis, mentioned in at least two of the books which I know reside in your collection. You seek dominion in a sense that cannot be allowed if you are not to become as your mother was, a metastasising cancer to be cut out by either the body politic or the secret swift terrible hand of God. So, you will perceive that the book you seek is no longer here. I do not know which other fabled tomes you wish to borrow from this miracle of a place, if any, but this one avenue I have closed to you, and will meet you with its weapons if you still seek dominion.”

Praem’s voice, bell-clear and smooth and impassive, could not conceal the amused self-satisfied arrogance dripping from the single unfolded sheet of paper in her hands. An owlish face, liver-spotted and grey, peered back at us from between the lines of ink.

“How have I achieved this miracle, you may ask? By copying yours.”

His handwriting was all messy spikes and loops, like a doctor’s hasty note-taking.

“I cannot take credit for the work that has breached the mysteries of physical access to the Beyond. That glory belongs to your genius, and, I suspect, a touch of help from my clever niece. A certain agent

memorised the shape of your door, the lines of your work, the tools required to cut through the outer wall that keeps us trammelled within our cradle. I had hoped to conceal this theft from you, but you perceive I am forced to tip my hand, to halt you from worse violences upon my person. You may also take this letter as my answer to your two conditions. On the matter of criminal activity within Sharrowford, we are in agreement. Neither I nor any of my associates will commit any crimes, as defined in British law, within the city of Sharrowford, against yourself or any other inhabitant.”

As Praem read, Lozzie began to shiver inside her poncho. I pulled her close and hugged her tight.

“On the matter of my niece, Lauren Lilburne, we are not in agreement. Upon my resumption of her custody, I am willing to share with you such passages in *The Testament of Heliopolis* as concern the limited aims of predefined work, the boundaries of which we may discuss as equals when, and only when, my property has been returned to me.”

“Please, Praem, stop,” I murmured.

“To begin this process,” Praem kept reading, “you may contact my lawyer at his public offices. He has been instructed to expect-”

“Stop,” Evelyn commanded.

She barely got the word out. Evelyn had turned from pale to green to a most dangerous shade of flushed crimson. Her knuckles were white on the handle of her walking stick, her eyes blazing, a twitch in her cheek. Perhaps this wasn’t chief-most in our concerns right then, but I was worried Evelyn was going to give herself a stomach ulcer from sheer anger.

Praem lowered the letter. She’d found no tricks or traps, no poison impregnated into the paper, no magical trigger in the torn-open envelope. It was genuine, and she didn’t need to finish. Only one of us was blissfully unaware whose barely legible signature graced the foot of the page, beneath a bland ‘yours sincerely’.

“Oh dear, dear me, poppets,” Saldis sighed from the open cockpit of her alien machine, further down the corridor of bookcases, waiting at a safe distance from Zheng. “Sounds like you have competent foes. That’s always the worst kind, I much prefer the incompetent ones.”

"It's from Eddy-boy, right?" Raine asked quickly, with the corner of her mouth.

We were all shocked, but Raine was the only one already in action. She'd turned outward toward the far end of the bookcase corridor, where the library floor opened out into the wide space of the collapsed and cratered wreckage of thousands of bookshelves. The unknown. She had her homemade riot shield up and her handgun drawn, eyes alert, head tilted to listen for the tiniest sound.

"Raine, you think this is a trap?" I hissed. As I spoke, Zheng moved past me to flank Raine, head raised, eyes hooded, hands flexing.

"Don't know," Raine murmured. "Everyone speak soft like."

"Eddy-boy," Praem echoed. "Yes."

"Oh, but that's absurd," I said – but kept my voice low, swallowing hard and trying not to shudder. Lozzie had buried her face in my shoulder, clinging to me like a small animal. I found myself listening too, wondering if we'd hear the tell-tale creak of a boot along a parallel stack of shelves. "We're not in Sharrowford, we're not even in reality, we're Outside. How could he have-"

"The *fucking* Welshman!" Evelyn spat.

"Hush, wizard," Zheng purred.

"The fuckboy?" Raine asked.

"Who else?!" Evelyn swung her walking stick and struck the edge of the bookcase from which Praem had pulled the hated letter. The clunk of wood on wood travelled no further than our ears, soaked up by the fabric of the library. "He must have seen our gateway after he stepped through it, that whole home-invasion thing was a set up."

"For all of a single second," I said, shaking my head. "Surely he couldn't-"

"He was a mage, Heather! Photographic memory, remote recording, a fucking magical bird down his underpants, who the fuck knows? Bastard blinked at it for a second – a second! Memorised the whole fucking thing, the papers on the table, everything he saw. He delivered it all to Edward Lilburne, that's the only explanation for this. Bastard. *Bastard, cunt, fuck.*" Evelyn spat and raged, red in the face, shaking all over. Praem reached for Evelyn's shoulder with

one hand, but Evelyn didn't notice as she whirled back on the doll-demon and demanded the letter with her own shaking hand. "Let me read it again, maybe- maybe- oh, what's the point? What's the point?" Her voice broke. "I'm done."

"Hey, left hand," Raine said softly. "Hear anything? Smell anything?"

Zheng blinked once. "Oil, metal, sweat and fear. Fresh."

"You don't think ... you don't think they're still here, do you?" I asked. In my arms, Lozzie shook her head and whined.

"They're long gone by now," Evelyn said. "We have been out planned, out manoeuvred, out fucking thought."

With careful economy of motion, Raine looked round – at the absence on the bookshelf, the empty space where *The Testament of Heliopolis* should have lain, nestled between its leather-bound fellows. She turned back before speaking, but not before meeting my eyes and making sure I was where I was meant to be standing.

"That book hasn't been gone for long. No gathered dust in the gap," she said. "That was taken minutes or hours ago, not days or weeks. Yeah, they might still be here."

"Noooo," Lozzie whined into my shoulder.

"They might still be here," Evelyn echoed, eyes lighting up.

"We hunt," Zheng purred. She flexed her neck, cracking vertebrae, and reminded me of a tiger waking from a nap.

"Oh no, big girl, absolutely not," Raine said, the hint of a laugh in her voice. "We get the hell back home, lickety-split. Lozzie, can you do that for us, right now?"

"They have my book!" Evelyn whirled on Raine, blazing with renewed fury.

"E-Evee-" I said, but she was beyond help.

"Nobody else can have access to this place," she went on, spitting with rage. "They have a working gateway, Raine. They have access to Outside. God willing they'll all get themselves killed before they can do any real damage, but they cannot have this, they cannot have these books, this is *mine*-" Evelyn slammed to a halt and the blood drained from her face. "I mean ... I mean ... they cannot be

allowed to abuse this- ... knowledge- they ... if they're still here ...
”

“Too much of a coincidence,” Raine murmured. “We’re both here at the same time, after we take days to come back? This stinks. Incident pit, remember?”

“Please,” a tiny voice quivered, and Lozzie’s golden head rose from my shoulder. Her eyes flickered back and forth, breath shaking in her slender chest pressed to mine, shivering in a way that tore at my heart. “Please. Zheng, please hunt him, please please please-”

“Quite, we’re not turning Lauren over to her uncle,” Evelyn said with a hard swallow. “Over my dead body.”

“Not even a question,” Raine said, placating but tight-voiced. “But that doesn’t mean we walk into a trap, we need to-”

“Please-”

“We hunt,” Zheng purred. She turned to me, locking those sharp, dark eyes with mine in paralysis. “Shaman, we have this one chance. We have already scented the prey. Command me.”

“I- I don’t know,” I said. I really didn’t. Evelyn was falling apart on some emotional level I didn’t understand. Lozzie was terrified. Raine’s protective instincts were not wrong, but abyssal ruthlessness crept up my spine and forced my lips to linger.

“Heather’s not in charge right now,” Raine said.

“The shaman is always-”

“Please,” Lozzie whined. “Please get rid of him, please, get him now, get-”

Pop.

A firework-pop-crack. Distant and high-pitched. Deceptively soft, truncated and blunt, nothing like in films or on television.

The sound cut through the thick silent shroud that lay over the library. It came perhaps from across the collapsed crater, perhaps deeper, perhaps elsewhere, lost in muffled infinity as the library ate all echoes. It passed through us and over us and the silence returned, heavier and deeper, as if offended by this interruption.

Raine took a step back, covered Lozzie and I with her shield.

Pop pop.

Twice more. Identical.

“Speak of the devil,” Raine murmured.

“What was that?” I whispered, harsh and close, as if to speak too loudly might provoke the silence itself to crash down on us. Some invisible quality in the air of the library had changed. My gut told me that to raise my voice was to invite attention. My phantom limbs, the ghostly mirror of my secret abyssal body, were trying to pull in tight and secure like an octopus cramming itself into a tiny crack. Instinct screamed at me to stay very still and go very quiet.

“Gunshots,” Raine said, and I cringed at the volume of her voice, though she stayed soft. “Left hand?”

“That way,” Zheng rumbled, nodding ahead into the depths of the cratered mass of splintered wood and torn books. “Down.”

“Gunshots?” Evelyn hissed – white-cold in the face. “It’s them, it has to be them.”

Pop pop- pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop.

Individual crack-pops slewed into a mechanical judder-judder-judder that seemed to go on and on and on, tearing through the air with a machine sound alien to this Outside place. Beneath the noise, I thought I heard a shout lost in the depths of the labyrinth, and perhaps a thump, muffled far below. Just when it seemed the metal racket would go on forever, the noise cut out far more suddenly than it had begun.

Then – a shout, a human voice, unmistakable this time. Too far away behind the maze of books to make out the words. Running feet. An impact of metal on wood.

And a crackle.

An awful, spine-jarring crackle, just beyond the edge of hearing, like nails down a blackboard from a closed room.

“A fight,” Zheng purred, smiling sharp.

“A losing one,” said Raine. “That was a mag dump.”

“A what?” I asked.

“Yes, Raine, speak English, for fuck’s sake,” Evelyn hissed.

“Magazine dump,” Raine said. “Somebody firing off all their bullets at once in panic. Eddy-boy’s friends got themselves in trouble.”

“Good,” Evelyn snarled. “Then we can-”

“Never interrupt your opponent while he’s screwing up,” Raine spoke over her.

“It’s not a bloody trap, Raine, it-”

“Yeah actually, I agree.” Raine shot a grin over her shoulder. “They have an automatic weapon down there and they used it before we showed ourselves. That’s not a trap, that’s how you say ‘fuck right off’. If they wanted to bait us they wouldn’t have lit up. But we’re still getting out, right now. Whatever they’re firing at, I doubt we wanna meet it. Look, somebody’s shitting herself.”

Raine nodded behind us, and I looked back to see Saldis’ sphere machine had sealed up its blocky grey front. The mage was presumably inside, and not talking to us. That distant, spine-raking crackle passed through the air again, setting my teeth on edge.

“Coward,” Zheng purred at Saldis’ machine.

“Horndog’s hamster ball decided it’s time to close the hatches,” Raine said. “That means we’re leaving too. Lozzie?”

“They are minutes away from us, at most,” Evelyn hissed. “And they have my book.”

“I reeeeeeally hope he’s dead,” Lozzie squeaked, face white and pinched.

“Hey, we can figure that out later.” Raine shot Lozzie a warm smile. “I promise.”

“My teeth itch for flesh, *yoshou*,” Zheng rumbled.

“We do need that book,” I said out loud, my voice shaking only very slightly. “And I’m not trading Lozzie for it. And Edward hides too well in Sharrowford, we all know that, how hard it is to find him. If that’s him, or his men, and they’re in the middle of making a mistake, then I would very much like to capitalise on the opportunity.”

Everybody looked at me.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “If you know what I mean.”

Raine glanced around at four defiant faces – myself, Lozzie, Evelyn, and Zheng. Only Praem declined to offer an opinion – along with the eyeless gaze of the squid-faced librarian that had led us here, waiting without complaint, as if watching our debate. That awful crackle came once more, a creeping, crawling of spiked ice up the inside of my skull. Even Lozzie winced.

“Fuck,” Raine sighed with a resigned grin. “Alright. Heather, Lozzie, you both stay behind me. Praem, take care of Evelyn, she’s your responsibility.”

“Always,” Praem intoned.

“Left hand, you’re in front,” Raine continued. “I’m guessing you can eat bullets for breakfast if you gotta.”

“What do you think?” Zheng rumbled. “But you do not command me-”

“No, that’s the condition,” Raine said softly, far more dangerous than any empty-headed, boastful insult she’d thrown at Zheng over the last couple of weeks. She twitched, muscles taut in a way that presaged violence, enough to make me flinch and shiver. “We’re walking into a fight, and there’s a gun down there. I’m not having anybody getting shot. I’m in charge now.”

Zheng stared at her in heavy-lidded silence.

“Zheng, please,” I said quickly.

The giant demon-host rumbled in her throat like a tiger disturbed in its sleep. But when Praem extracted a cloth-tied nut to throw ahead of us, when it bounced along the wooden floor and rolled to a precise stop at the end of the bookcase-corridor, Zheng went first on silent feet. The rest of us followed. Raine had her pistol out. I stayed close.

We left our waiting librarian guide behind. Saldis trailed in our rear, wordless and faceless inside her grey sphere.

Evelyn’s estimate was not wrong; as the crow flies, we were perhaps but thirty seconds away from the other library users. If it hadn’t been for the tangled rubble of collapsed floors, we could probably have spied them down below, but the broken spars of shattered wood and avalanche falls of hundreds of thousands of books

blocked both sight and path, forced us into a labyrinth within a labyrinth. This collapsed crater was old enough that the squid-faced librarians had cut new paths through the wreckage, winding like mountain passes between craggy peaks of shattered floor, lit from above by surviving light-globes in the ceiling and from the stubs of wooden pillars, like the broken legs of giants.

Picking our way through this petrified forest consumed perhaps two or three precious minutes, despite applying a sped-up version of our usual process. Praem threw nuts and we left them behind as Zheng raced ahead, stalking like a nightmare from the jungle as she hunched, rounded her shoulders, bared her teeth.

"She'll run into something she can't survive," Evelyn hissed.
"Heather, call her back."

"Guess she's the canary now," Raine murmured.

But Zheng wasn't listening, not to me. She smelled blood.

The fight wasn't over. As we hurried through the shattered mess, clearer sounds reached us – a shouted jumble of words caught on the silence-thickened air, a clatter followed by more of that spine-creeping crackle which made all the hairs stand up on the back of my neck, and made Lizzie whine deep in her throat.

Just before we made contact, somebody started shooting again.

We were close enough to pick out a metallic click and ratchet – which Raine later explained was the sound of expert hands swapping in a fresh magazine and yanking back a bolt. And then the *pop-pop-pop-pop* rip of a finger jammed on a trigger and not letting go. This close, the sound was harsh and horrible, a machine rasp punctuated by the thwack and crump of bullets chewing into paper and wood. Raine shoved me and Lizzie down behind her, behind her shield, and Praem forced Evelyn to duck just in case, but the bullets weren't aimed anywhere near us.

The sound stopped. A man screamed at the top of his lungs. The crackle lashed out like a bolt of lightning.

Ten quick paces and one turn in the path later, we almost slammed right into a line of squid-faced librarians, facing away from us. Zheng scattered them with a low growl, wading through them as they ran in all directions, grey robes flapping. Just beyond where they'd stood was a drop, the lip of a second layer of crater, a scree-

slope of a million books.

We all skidded to a halt. Raine blocked me with her shield, but she didn't need to. Even Zheng stopped, to stare, the fight momentarily gone out of her.

Below us was a wide clear space, dotted with a few toppled bookshelves, a section of the floor beneath the one which had collapsed long ago, spread out beneath us like the boards of a stage. And all around the rim of this crater, peering from between bookshelves and around stacked tomes, shoulder-to-shoulder in eyeless audience, stood hundreds of squid-faced librarians, watching events unfold in jostling silence. This was the line we had disturbed and broken.

It did not take a literature student to see the logic.

"Oh, damn you, Seven-Shades, you *promised*," I hissed.

Three connected scenes were concluding on the floor below, the final acts of a tragic farce playing out its last bloody movements.

A gateway much like our own shone with earthly light on the back wall of the library canyon, down at floor level to our right. Through that door I saw a hint of dark concrete and scuffed hazard-tape. Three figures were scrambling through, back to our reality, in a tangle of blood-slick panic.

In the middle of the floor, a familiar figure of whipcord muscle and steel-wire tendon crouched behind a fallen bookshelf, dressed in grey athletic wear and a military style harness of pouches and webbing, clutching a stubby black weapon to her chest.

Amy Stack, raincoat hood falling back as she turned.

We'd caught her in the act of turning to her fleeing 'comrades', a shout on her lips as they tumbled free of the library, as one of them turned back with an ugly curse at her, which contained words I will not repeat here. Behind him, on the far side of the gateway, another figure – grey-haired and owlish – made quick motions with his hands.

The gateway slid shut, leaving Stack to face her fate alone.

Stage left was a monster, eating a man.

I don't use that word lightly. The old Heather, the Heather of six

months or five years ago, she thought the very spirit life of our own world were monsters, when they can be as kind as I or Raine or Lozzie, just a different form of life. Zheng is not a monster either, despite what I once thought. She is a thinking, feeling being, capable of love and pain and sorrow, and that word presupposes a specific kind of judgement. Evelyn's mother was a monster. Alexander Lilburne was a monster. I had yet to decide if the Eye was a monster.

Black lightning, twelve feet tall.

A little like a tree and a little like a jellyfish, but nothing like either of those things, a fractal shape cut into the air with such angular precision that the lines seemed to hurt the eye.

Moving like a slow-motion explosion, iterating itself forward as its rear folded up into nothingness, jagged branches expanding into the air.

There was nothing animal, nothing living about it – nothing spirit either, nothing translatable to our manner or matter of life. This was not pneuma-somatic. It was not flesh. It was something else.

Outsider.

In truth it was probably more animal than evil, perhaps just curious, or feeding. Had they disturbed it here, in the library of Carcosa? Another experiment gone wrong, at the cost of poor, sad lives? Or perhaps it wasn't from the library in the first place. Perhaps it was like us, a visitor from elsewhere. Perhaps this was all an accident, or a misunderstanding, out here in the unknowable spaces beyond.

It had a man snagged in the clutches of a branch of fractal expansion, attached to his head like electric hair. He was thickset and heavily muscled, wearing a webbed and pouched harness like Stack, but had been caught in the open, or perhaps he had been running for the gateway, or maybe he'd charged the thing. His muscles danced and jerked, boots skittering across the floorboards, bowels voided in a mess at his feet, eyes rolled back, lips running with bloody drool as the black lightning triggered every nerve in his body, rooted his spine and pithed his soul.

All of this I pieced together later, from different aspects each of us had focused on in the moment of violence and horror. At the time it

was impossible, in the black light of that self-iterating soul-eater.

But I think all of us saw Stack's little motion with her gun.

Her gritted teeth. Her cold set eyes. The muzzle she pressed to the soft flesh beneath her own chin, as the black lightning expanded toward her.

Amy Stack was a nasty piece of work, a professional killer and thug, who had evidently lied to us that she was getting out of the business of serving mages in return for money. I had little doubt that if our positions had been reversed, she would have left us to die, or even turned her gun on us to make certain. But in the face of that unnatural flicker of fractal black lightning, the fellow feeling of one living being for another was impossible to ignore.

I would like to say that's why I broke from behind Raine's shield, why I scrambled and slid and slipped down the scree slope of tumbled books, heart in my mouth and head numb with fear. I dearly wish to blame the milk of human kindness for my insane act of running out between a nightmare and a psychopath with a gun, out of breath and shaking with half-healed bruises in my flanks, as Raine sprinted after me and Zheng came barrelling down like a cannonball and Lozzie started *singing*.

I would like to blame how much of a nice person I am, but I am not a nice person. I am half of the abyss, and abyssal ruthlessness told me we needed a live captive.

So with a skid and a slip and a shudder, I stood before twelve feet of black lightning.

I had kept my promise to Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. I had rushed on stage, to interrupt the play.

Tendrils of fractal touch expanded toward my face. This close I could see them splitting and splitting and splitting again, down into fibres almost invisible to the naked eye. This was the source of the spine-raking crackle in the air, as the black lightning moved by tearing reality.

I narrowly resisted an urge to hiss and spit at thing.

Very lucky, because while that would have felt good, it probably wouldn't have worked.

The necessary brainmath sliced sharp and hot up from the sump in

the pit of my soul, as if drawn through a surface of sticky mucus and clinging tar, ripped from the depths at the speed of thought, leaving my mind chafed raw by its passage. This would require no long weaving of hyperdimensional miracle, no complex interplay of the Eye's lessons and deduced cosmic principles; the black lightning creature's body was determined by a visible and obvious mathematics, just as the human body's mathematical form might be obvious to the senses of some other order of being. The equation was simple – leave a number hanging, an addition unfinished, a decimal leftover unaccounted for.

A moment of chaos and confusion was exploding around me as I summoned the equation. Raine skidded to a halt feet away from me, stopped by a shout from Evelyn high up the slope of books – “No, don't touch it!” – as Zheng bounced and bounded like a leaping tiger, behind me, slamming into something and flinging splinters of shredded floorboard up into the air. My stomach clenched in rebellious pain and a pair of icepicks lanced through the backs of my eyeballs, into my skull, a sharp shudder as my soft human meat struggled still with the transcendent truth of reality, as I gripped the black, dripping levers behind mere matter, and pulled them.

Lozzie's singing suddenly cut out, and split-second panic almost broke my concentration.

Black lightning struck for my head, my brain, my nervous system – and snapped.

The creature's perfect fractal expansion exploded in seven places along its snake-like form, losing coherence as its body tried to follow the new principles I had added to its structure, the nonsense I had introduced. It reared back, whipping about like a severed fire-hose, dropping the twitching corpse of the man it had finished killing. Black light lashed across fallen books, across our faces, across the dull brown floorboards of Carcosa and the hundreds of librarians watching in the audience above.

Raine caught me as I staggered back into her arms, my nose streaming with blood, my head pounding like a struck bell. I wheezed and kicked and clung to her.

“Holy shit, Heather, what did you do?” she breathed.

“I think I gave it cancer.”

Eyes whirling across the strobing black, I looked up the slope of books, where Evelyn cowered behind Praem, and where Lozzie stood no more.

“Where’s Lozzie?” I croaked in growing panic. “Raine, where’s Lozzie, where’d she-”

But Raine knocked the breath out of my sore lungs, yanking me behind her homemade riot shield. I caught a whirling split-second vision of the other fight still unfolding behind us – of Amy Stack, blank-faced and flint-eyed, pointing a sleek metal tube past Zheng’s flicker-fast motion, right at me.

All I could think in that moment, dull with brainmath aftershock and adrenaline, was how much of an ungrateful bitch she was.

Pardon my language. Never would say that out loud.

Zheng roared. Raine had me sprawled on the floor. The crackle scratched the inside of my eyeballs – and the Black Lightning Outsider was not done yet.

Like the animal it was, it recovered and lashed out in panic; an explosion unleashed, a radial ball of fractal chaos, iterating itself in every direction at once. Nowhere to shelter. Mere matter would be no obstacle.

Then, a blink of steel.

Wall and lance of mirrored chrome, armour cut for troll or giant, twice the height of Lozzie who had appeared with it, behind it, sheltered in its lee as the onrush of black lightning battered against the tower of a shield.

Another of Lozzie’s knights.

“Make it go away!” Lozzie screamed.

The knight in shining armour – steel rapidly blackening under the lightning’s onslaught, smoke seeping from the joint seams – thrust its lance into the tangled web of expanding fractal mess with an arm like a steam-piston. There was a soft pop-bang sound, the meaning of which would haunt me for weeks. The black lightning whipped back like an animal from a naked fire, like a sea snake from a shark, expansion halted. It fled into the depths of the library with a motion like smoke caught on sudden wind.

Silence fluttered down on us.

“Heather!” Lozzie flung herself at me on the floor, almost crying as she wrapped her arms around my neck. “Are you okay? You’re okay? It almost touched you and touching you is bad you’re not invincible either you’re not supposed to be, you’re soft and squishy and it was my fault, my fault, I’m so sorry I made us all come over here I shouldn’t have he wasn’t even here and-”

Lozzie kept talking as I returned her hug with numb, shaking arms. Her knight stood immobile behind her, armour charred all down front and sides, black meaty smoke pouring from the seams in the metal. A smell like roast pork filled the air.

A flat, focused voice was speaking from behind me, but the words didn’t penetrate my brain. Somebody else was breathing sharp and hard, hissing through their teeth.

“Shaman,” Zheng said – urgent. That almost did the trick.

It took me a further confused moment to realise that Raine wasn’t on top of me anymore. I twisted round on the floor, dragging Lozzie with me, looking for my lover.

Behind us, Zheng had Amy Stack pinned to the ground, face-down, one knee digging into the small of her back, one hand around a wrist, the other hand pressed to the fragile egg of her shaved skull. Evidently Zheng had understood my intention, which is why she hadn’t gutted the mercenary the moment they’d made contact. Stack’s flint-cold eyes met mine.

Her gun – an ugly collection of black metal surfaces and cylinders – lay kicked to a safe distance.

Raine was slumped on her backside, shield abandoned. She was shaking all over as she forced slow, steady breaths through gritted teeth. White as a sheet, covered in a sheen of cold sweat, both hands gripping hard around her own left thigh.

Those hands and thigh were coated in bright blood, a slow crimson wave soaking into her jeans.

“Oh no,” went Lozzie, very small.

“Raine!” I croaked, and staggered to my feet.

“Shot me with her last bullet,” Raine laughed through a trio of

hyperventilating breaths, and pulled a rictus grin. “She was gonna shoot at you, couldn’t let it ... it’s fine- it’s fine! It’s a flesh wound. I’m in shock. In shock. Shock. It’s not an artery, just a flesh wound. Not an artery. I’m fine.”

“You ... no, Raine, you’re not fine, don’t be silly,” I said haltingly, surprised by how calm I sounded, while inside I went very cold. “You’ve been shot.”

“Gotta learn how to take a punch in the face, you know?” she said, wheezing.

This wasn’t Lozzie’s fault, it was mine.

I swallowed a hiccup. “Right. Okay. We all need to get out of here, right now, Loz-”

“Morell,” Stack said, level and blank. “I shot her, and she’s going to bleed out. I’ll do you too.”

“Bleed out?” Raine laughed, shaking and heaving the last few puffs. “Don’t be ridiculous, this is nothing. I’ll walk it off.”

“Shaman,” Zheng snapped. “Shaman, look up. I cannot pin this prize and be elsewhere too. I would break her legs but she will choke herself on her own tongue. Look up, shaman.”

I didn’t hear Zheng’s words. I only saw Raine’s blood running through her fingers as she applied pressure to a bullet wound. A bullet wound! This was absurd. I couldn’t process the fact.

“Kill me,” Stack said. “Go on. Do it. Order Zheng to do it. Snap my neck. Do it. Do it or I’ll kill everyone you love.”

“ ... what?” I blinked at her. “N-no, Zheng, d-don’t, we need her, we-”

Stack twisted in Zheng’s grip like a ferret in a snare, got her other arm free from beneath her body, and drew a compact silvered knife from somewhere deep in her combat webbing. Raine tried to stagger to her feet, assuming Stack was going for me or something equally ridiculous, but the assassin thrust the knife toward her own exposed throat.

Zheng caught the blade in her bare hand before Stack could commit suicide.

Wordless, straining against an impossible strength, Stack went red

in the face, muscles bunching in her neck, eyes staring as she tried to overcome Zheng's grip and plunge the knife into her own windpipe.

"What the- wow. Okay then," Raine muttered, and slipped on one knee. I thought she was about to go over, pass out.

"*Shaman*," Zheng all but shouted at me, like a roaring tiger. "Look up!"

If Zheng had intended to snap me out of panic, she failed; being shouted at by a seven-foot slab of muscle and teeth amid all this madness was more likely to make me wet myself. But the urgency in her words was enough to make me obey, jerk my head, and look up.

Praem lay halfway down the scree slope of tumbled books, looking like she'd been hit by lightning. Which, in a way, she had. Mercy of mercies, she was at least sitting up and blinking her blank milk-white eyes, but she was twitching and flexing, like a human suffering full-body nerve compression, pins and needles in every muscle. Her sheet of blonde hair was singed at the tips, curled up here and there by heat, and her crisply elegant maid uniform was scorched and burned through in several places, the skirt ruined beyond repair, black tights laddered all over. She'd lost a single shoe, which somehow bothered me.

Saldis' sealed grey machine had been struck as well, scorched and sooted across the front with a spider-web of lightning, but otherwise unmoved, up above us, alongside the audience of watching librarians. Sealed, she offered us no help.

The sports bags Praem had carried had suffered too, half-burst open by the attack. A split carrier bag of cloth-wrapped nuts was spilling its contents down the slope in a slow fall of tumbling metal, punctuated by water bottles and cereal bars and the contents of a first-aid kit.

A blackened twist of cooked meat lay at her feet – the corpse of a rabbit, surrounded by the sundered shell of spells and old towels and torn fabric. Evelyn's possessed carnivorous time-bomb. Praem must have thrust it forward, or let it free, at the moment the Black Lightning had reached her. The dead rabbit, or more precisely the demon inside it, had taken the brunt of the attack and saved Praem's life.

And Praem had saved Evelyn's, by flinging herself in front of her mistress.

Evelyn, untouched and unharmed, up above us on the ragged edge of the upper floor from which we had descended.

Evelyn, alone but for the audience of watching librarians.

Evelyn, eyes and head turned away from the stage, away from us, framed like a painting by the wood and the books, as her lips moved to speak an unheard word to an unseen listener, just behind the nearest bookcase. A frame from a silent film, without music or caption, as inscrutable as a missing page.

Evelyn, nodding once as five squid-faced librarians approached with gentle hands and soft assurances, and took her by shoulder and elbow, to lead her willingly off into the library.

"Evee!" I screamed, and surged to my feet.

But she neither heard nor turned to look. She had already seen and heard something which mattered more than everything else in her life. She clacked her walking stick forward on the floorboards with a sound that resonated in the lingering silence, and stepped toward the blind spot behind the nearest bookcase.

I was meant to see. From that angle. At that exact moment. Stage and audience had switched roles.

I began an equation, dredged up the necessary pieces to knock dead everything around Evelyn and blast the bookshelves to cinders and break both of her legs.

Lozzie was wide-eyed and white-faced, putting all of her strength into just holding me up as I shook and shuddered in brainmath aftershock. Raine lurched to her feet again and shouted after Evee, both hands clamped around her own thigh, blood soaking down her trouser leg to the top of her boot. Praem had turned on the slope of books, slipping and sliding as she tried to regain fine motor control and climb after Evelyn, but her strength and speed was slow to return, and she slipped down two feet for each she gained. Climbing the slope would take many minutes. Too slow.

Twil should have been there.

Twil would have healed from a bullet wound in seconds, shrugged off lightning, launched herself up that slope with unstoppable

energy and young love's devotion. But Twil was not here, because Evelyn had insisted.

Had we been set up? Had Seven-Shades said something to Evelyn or Twil, behind all our backs?

One piece of unseen sabotage, and all of us were undone. Pull a single thread, it unravels the whole tapestry. If I used brainmath now, I could halt Evelyn – and wound her, badly, and probably pass out myself. And then who would rally Lozzie to get Raine home before Raine lost too much blood? Who would drag Evelyn down from that slope, or fix whatever was wrong with Praem? Who would avoid losing all of us at once? Who would get us safely home in one piece?

So as Evelyn stepped behind that bookcase, as the sound of her walking stick clacked away down a corridor of shelves and ancient tomes, I made a cold, calculating, abyssal survivalist decision. I let go of the equation.

I let Evelyn go.

Part of me, the soft human part that loved her, that part was screaming. I was shaking, struggling to control the fear of what I'd just let happen, struggling to tell myself this was the right decision, and also struggling not to vomit all over my shoes as the pain of aborted brainmath made me double up and whine like a stuck pig.

Zheng still had Stack pinned to the ground.

"Shaman," she grunted.

"I know," I slurred.

"Shaman-"

"I know!" I put force into my voice, and with every ounce of strength I had, I took Lozzie by the shoulders and peeled her off me, and stood on my own two feet, shaking with the effort.

"Heather Heather Heather! Where- Eevee went-"

The clack of Evelyn's walking stick was still audible, clicking off into the depths of the library, but receding. There was still time.

"Lozzie," I said. "You have to take everyone else back home, right now."

Lozzie's face collapsed into horror. "No, no. Heathy, I can take another knight, I can be there and then here and where Evee is in one step, I know I can, I think I can, I-"

"Evee!" Raine shouted, and I'd never heard her so panicked. She took one broken step toward the slope of books, and I genuinely thought she was going to hurl herself upward with a bullet hole still in her thigh. But she halted and winced deep with pain, gritting her teeth, swearing in a long stream under her breath. A few feet away, Praem slid to the bottom of the slope and stood up, swaying, staring upward after the sound of Evelyn's walking stick.

"Praem," I called, trying to keep my voice free of panic. "Are you able to walk now? Can you?"

"Yes," she intoned. "Evelyn. Now."

"Yes, I know. Lozzie, please," I said, and I hiccuped. Lozzie shook her head, on the verge of tears.

"Not leaving Evelyn behind," Raine wheezed through deep breaths.

"Yes, I am not suggesting we leave Evelyn behind. I'd sooner suggest you shoot me," I said, exasperated beyond thought, then hiccuped a second time and focused on Lozzie. "Raine needs medical attention, right now, a-and she's losing a lot of blood. Zheng cannot let go of Stack, and we need her. Lozzie, you have to take them home. Please, you have to do this for me. I need you to."

"But-"

"Praem and I will follow Evee and bring her back. I may need to use brainmath, Praem can carry me. And we don't have time to spare, and I won't be able to think straight if Raine is hurt, and please don't make me say this all again because I am very terrified right now. Lozzie, please."

Tearing up, biting her bottom lip, Lozzie nodded.

"Grab everyone," I said.

Lozzie whirled away from me, pastel poncho flaring out as she skipped over to Raine and gently took her by the shoulder.

"Heather," Raine wheezed. "No, you- you- Evee- I can't-"

"You know I'm right," I told her, as clear-eyed and clear-headed as I could make myself. "Raine, you've been *shot*. I can't think, I'm so

scared. Let me find Eevee. I've done this before. I can do it. I know Outside."

Raine didn't answer. She tried to smile, for me. A pain deeper than mere physical wound twisted her face into a rictus grin.

Praem staggered up next to me as Lozzie reached out her other hand to touch Zheng's shoulder, to complete her circuit. Beneath Zheng's grip, Amy Stack had closed her eyes in quiet resignation, her knife limp in her hand.

"Are you sure you've recovered?" I asked Praem. "Can you walk? I might be able to do this alone, I-"

Praem shoved two books – the two blasted books we'd recovered from this accursed trip – under Lozzie's arm, and folded her poncho upward to cradle them, then turned to me.

"My purpose is to protect Evelyn. Do not instruct me otherwise," she sing-songed, staring right back into my eyes with milk-white clarity. "Help me."

"You look like a gacha-game reward, girl," Raine tried to laugh, nodding at Praem's torn maid outfit, but the laugh turned to a choke of pain. She curled up around her wounded leg and groaned. In a final gesture that would have made me roll my eyes in any other circumstances, she reached down and scooped up Stack's gun.

"Ready!" Lozzie told me, still white faced, sad-eyed, worried beyond words.

"Shaman," Zheng purred. She didn't need to add any other words.

"Zheng. Tie Stack up and-"

"I do not need to be told, shaman," Zheng purred. She sounded deeply unhappy.

I nodded. "Right. Of course. Sorry. Lozzie, Lozzie promise me to call for help for Raine as soon as you get back in the house. An ambulance. T-the first aid kit is in the cupboard to the left of the sink."

Raine puffed out a laugh. "How do we explain a bullet-"

"I don't care!" I almost shouted at her. "Lozzie, call for help."

Lozzie nodded, very serious.

“And call ... ” I almost didn’t say it. “Call Twil. Call Twil, tell her what’s happened. Get her over to the house. Get her ... just tell her to be there. I’ll be back with Evelyn. I promise I’ll be back.”

“Heather,” Raine croaked. “Don’t do this alone.”

“I love you. Go, I’ll see you later,” I told Lozzie, and could not look at the species of pain in Raine’s eyes.

Lozzie sobbed once.

And with no pop of air, no click of heels, no sparkle or spark or shimmer, Lozzie was gone from the library of Carcosa. She took Raine with her, and Zheng, and Amy Stack pinned to the floorboards, our prize won by a price too high. Guilt rushed in to fill the silence.

Praem and I were left alone together, in the gathering quiet.

The *clack-clack-clack* of Evelyn’s walking stick slowly receded into the depths of the library. The watching ring of hundreds of squid-faced librarians made no sound, alongside the closed grey sphere of Saldis in her machine. Closer to hand, Lozzie’s charred and cooked knight stood dead and immobile, metal ticking as it cooled.

“Evelyn,” Praem intoned.

“Yes,” I said, and leaned on the arm she offered me as support. “Come on, up the slope, after her. You’ll have to drag me a little, I’m sorry.”

“I will drag both of you,” Praem sang.

nothing more impotent –

11.12

With her iron grip around my waist, and my arm about her shoulders, Praem dragged me up the scree-slope of a million books, chasing Evelyn.

Climbing the slope was like trying to walk on a carpet of loose rocks, slipping and skidding beneath our feet, stray volumes sliding down to the abandoned stage-floor below. Even hale and well rested that climb would take me fifteen or twenty minutes, and only Praem's inhuman stamina won us the ragged lip of the wooden crater.

She dragged me up without mercy, pulled on my bruises, scraped my knees. I would not have asked her to do otherwise.

We could ill afford to wait for full strength to return to my legs; the clacking sound of Evelyn's walking stick was already leaving us behind. In the wake of the violence and the shouting and the gunshots, an oppressive silence had settled on the library of Carcosa, broken only by that *clack-clack-clack*. Each distant tap against the floorboards made my heart shudder. Evelyn was sinking beneath the waves; Praem and I could not dive fast enough.

In a moment of absurdity which probably masked growing panic, I was thankful we'd never purchased Evelyn a proper, modern replacement walking stick, with a good rubber tip.

"Thank-" I panted as Praem allowed me to put my full weight back on my own two feet, once we were off the slope, up alongside the squid-faced librarians and Saldis' sealed grey sphere, silent and still. Even with Praem dragging me, the climb had devoured what little energy I had left, after the brainmath earlier. "Thank- you- Praem. Yes."

"Evelyn," Praem intoned at full volume.

"Yes- yes- right now. No- no rest. Give- give me your arm." I groped for her again, caught support, and cast a last thoughtless glance

down at the floor of the makeshift amphitheatre.

The echo of Edward Lilburne's gate in the far wall. The corpse of the unfortunate unnamed man drained and devoured by the touch of the Outsider. The battle damage and bullet holes and patches of lightning-etched floorboard.

I dearly wished I could have tarried to examine Lozzie's knight in more detail. The strange noble shining thing had saved us – and been cooked inside its armour by a brush with the black lightning, like a loyal boar-hound throwing itself in front of its beloved master. Discoloured and scorched all down the front, lance-point embedded in the library floorboards, tower-shield collapsed to one side, visor-less, eye-less, feature-less helmet slumped forward, it would stand here as a monument that none but us would comprehend, and I very much doubted we would ever return to this spot. Would some mage discover it one day, a lonely eternal grave among the toppled bookshelves and bullet holes and bones? Or perhaps a library visitor as unimaginable to us as we had been to the black lightning? Would they wonder what it meant, what manner of creature died here, and why? It had saved our lives, it deserved a better funeral than abandonment, whatever truly lay burnt and blackened inside that armour.

Raine's blood was drying on the floorboards not twelve feet from the dead knight, wet and sticky in the unhealthy light of the library glow-stones.

I didn't need a psychologist's professional opinion; all these fleeting, poetic thoughts about the dead knight were deflection. If Amy Stack's final bullet had passed a few inches further north, it would be Raine's cooling corpse I was forced to leave behind down there.

"No- no no, Heather, can't- can't deal with that right now, can't deal with that right now-" I hissed to myself as I ripped my eyes away from the sight.

"Evelyn," Praem's voice rung like a soft bell. She dragged me on the first of many, many hobbling steps.

"Yes, yes. After Evelyn, of course."

We were in no fit state for this pursuit, but we had no other options. Quite the pair we made. Me, all jelly-limbed and sore-stomached, a pounding headache in my temples, blood smeared all down the

front of my face from an unattended nosebleed I could not have cared less about. Praem's maid uniform was ruined beyond repair, scorched patches burned away from her exposed pale skin, skirt ripped, tights laddered, blonde hair in singed and curled disarray. At least her supernatural flesh itself seemed mostly untouched beneath, except for a few scratches and scrapes and some minor surface burns.

"Glad you're- I'm glad you're alright too, Praem," I hissed as we staggered onward, along the lip of the crater, toward the tangle of smashed floors and shelves.

"I am inedible," she sang, softly.

"Ahaha," I laughed weakly, afraid to drown out the sound of Evelyn's walking stick. "We'll need to get you a haircut when we get back. Eevee can-" I swallowed. "Eevee can buy you a new outfit. Lots of new outfits. Different uniform for every day of the week. More frills. Maybe some gloves. Would you like some gloves? New shoes? Heels?"

"I would like all of that," Praem sing-songed, even softer than before.

I was too focused on Evelyn, too scared for Raine, and too out of my head on adrenaline and pain, to pay attention to the fact that Praem was scraped and bruised like a human being, not an illusion of one wrapped around a core of wood animated by abyssal spark.

At least we wouldn't have to cut our way through the squid-faced librarians. As soon as the drama below had ended, their attitude of enraptured watching had passed. The show was over. They drifted back to their duties alone or in little groups, no longer shoulder-to-shoulder in a silently jostling wall, dispersing like gas.

"Evelyn, oh Eevee, what's wrong with you? What are you doing?" I hissed to myself, as we turned to set off into the tangled wreckage of the shattered library floor. Far away, her walking stick kept up a steady pace.

"Bewitched," Praem intoned.

"Yes, obviously." I scrubbed at the blood drying around my lips. "Damn you, Sevens. We had an agreement. When I find you, I-"

A smooth *tock-tock-tock-tock* from behind us interrupted my

smoldering outrage before it could take flame.

Saldis' grey block-sphere-machine rolled to catch up with us. Praem halted and half-turned, as if expecting treachery. I sort of did too, but I hadn't learnt my lesson about Saldis yet. Evelyn's paranoia was rubbing off on me.

The sphere-machine blossomed open on the front even as it drew to a halt, blocks rolling back like the leaves of some disgusting fleshy egg. From inside, Saldis blazed at us with a pinched frown of irritation, rising from her pilot seat and opening her mouth.

"Go away," Praem told her.

"We don't have time for you, Saldis," I croaked, already dipping a mental hand toward the necessary hyperdimensional equations to just plain get rid of her. "I will stop you without-"

"Sevens!?" She leaned bodily out the open front of her machine and waved a fluttering hand at the wreckage in the amphitheatre below, enunciating her words as if this was a gurning competition. "*Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight*, did *that*? Oh, pet, I do not think so!"

"-hesitation because our friend is-"

"Do you seriously think I would allow myself to sleep through a pretender's performance?" she shrieked onward, vastly offended as only a true aesthete can be.

"-in trouble- wait, what?" I blinked at her furrowed brow, her folded arms, her dismissive huff.

"Evelyn. Now," Praem intoned, tugging on my arm to pull me onward, back into the tangle of fallen floor and smashed shelf.

"It- it was a play, I saw it," I stammered at Saldis, even as my feet tripped and dragged alongside Praem. "I saw the logic, in everything, every movement. In-"

"Lady Morell," Saldis said with long-suffering, performative patience – of which she did not actually possess a single iota. "You are seeing patterns where there are none. Too much time jawing backstage with *Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight* and not enough paying. attention. to. her. work." Saldis punctuated her words with little chops of one perfectly-manicured hand against the opposite palm. "And besides, who would put on a play for these deaf and blind things?" She gestured dismissively at some of the squid-faced

librarians, shuffling off between the distant library stacks. “What’s to teach them? What truths do they need? A new alphabetical sorting system?”

“But- but they were the audience, they-”

“They were a work-gang. Watching a problem solve itself.”

“But- Evee- she’d have no reason to-”

“Evelyn,” Praem intoned – louder, and I staggered to follow, to dive headfirst into the maze of the library, trying to take in Saldis at the same time.

Saldis did a passable impression of a small spoiled girl being asked a question by the most tiresome of school friends; a great huff, a roll of the eyes to blow out the front of her own skull, and a vast flop back into her seat.

“Did you see any *yellow*, Lady Morell?” she asked. “The faintest hint? A whisper? A single highlight?”

I blinked at her.

In all that fight, all that confrontation, even the moment of terror when Evelyn had been led away – which, now I thought on it, had involved only the librarians and an unseen figure – I had not seen a scrap, a speck, a shimmer of that colour.

No yellow.

“No?” Saldis smiled with brittle pleasure. “Well then. There you are, poppet.”

“I ... I don’t understand- then why- she’s walking off! What difference does it make? We have to get her back before ... before ... ”

Saldis did this infuriatingly delicate little shrug with both hands, lips pressed together, a *you-should-have-asked-me-first* look.

“Follow us then,” I snapped at her, coughed some blood up into my mouth, and swallowed it again, iron and bitter. “We can’t let her get too far. Follow us, or sit there and be useless.”

“Oh, certainly, poppets. Certainly.” Saldis huffed and rolled her eyes – but she did follow as Praem and I staggered on, after the sound of Evelyn’s walking stick.

We plunged into the tangle of the collapsed wreckage once more, Praem acting as my support, my crutch, while Saldis' machine clicked along behind us. Her exasperation and outrage had seemed too real for an act – despite her love of the yellow pretenders' art, she herself was no player – but an unknown mage at my back made my shoulder blades itch. We had little choice. She knew the library of Carcosa far more intimately than we did, and if one hint from her mocking lips could ensure we break whatever spell had taken Evelyn, it was worth the risk.

Praem's stride grew strong as she regained her coordination, but I was stumbling just to keep up, my head throbbing with the echo of brainmath exertion, blood still in my nose. Somewhere ahead in the maze of twisty passageways through the towering mess, Evelyn's walking stick called to us, but we couldn't be certain exactly which pathway she and her group of squid-faced guides had taken. Praem had scavenged a few handfuls of cloth-tied nuts from the split carrier bag, stuffed as many as she could into the surviving pockets of her maid outfit, and now tossed them ahead of us as we went, but we didn't slow down to watch and wait as each nut flew and rolled.

"I don't understand," I panted back over my shoulder as we finally sighted the end of the wreckage, the slight climb back up to the more orderly library floor of marching bookshelves and stacked volumes.

"Understand what, poppet? The universe?" Saldis tutted. "The secrets of creation? I don't put much stock in giant cows and infinite salt-licks, I'm afraid."

Praem hauled me up onto the floorboards, where our feet met firmer ground. Here her own tread made a distressing mistimed shuffle-click, between her one remaining smart black shoe and her bare foot shod only in ruined tights. We hurried on, past the end of the bookcase-corridor where we'd found Lilburne's nasty letter, and out into a row of many stacks leading off into the library floor. We'd been here before, not an hour ago, but I could barely remember the way.

All around us, Squid-faced librarians seemed to be shuffling in the same direction, as if also following the *clack* of Evelyn's walking stick.

“Praem,” I said, struggling to keep my voice from quivering.

“I see,” she intoned, and we didn’t need to share that we felt the same fear, the same lack of comprehension at what was going on here.

She dragged me onward, deeper into the stacks, picking up the pace in hopes of catching up with a much larger group of librarians than we were prepared to deal with. We had to walk very close past several of the strange creatures and their shuffling gait, but they paid us no heed. If it came to violence, I told myself I would not hesitate to hurt as many of them as necessary to get them away from Evelyn.

“Evee!” I called out, but the heavy silence of the library seemed to swallow my cry.

I glanced back to see Saldis lounging in her pilot-seat-slash-love-sofa, following close.

“If Seven-Shades didn’t tamper with Evelyn’s mind,” I said to her as I clung to Praem’s shoulder. “If she didn’t set up that performance with Stack and Edward’s men, what was going on? What was that?”

“Well,” Saldis drawled. “You can’t go setting off ... Greek fire, or whatever that awful racket was, in here, around the books, and expect the catalogue not to take notice.” She gestured at the nearest librarian. “I did say you’d lose a finger if you opened up one of these horrible bags of guts.”

A cold realisation crept over me. “ ... what would happen, if you punctured one of them from a distance, with a ... a ... fast moving object?”

Saldis gave me a look of most disdainful disbelief. “I do know what an *arrow* is, little Englisher. I’m not some wood-poor skraeling who makes do with whale bones.”

“Please, Saldis, just- just answer the question.” I screwed up my eyes, desperately trying to clear my head.

She scoffed. “I wouldn’t know, I’ve never been stupid enough to try. Perhaps they summoned help, perhaps they herded another library visitor over, or perhaps the smell of their guts attracted a shark. I’m smart enough to keep my head down when there’s an eater going at-” She paused, blinked, and sighed with a sharp tut. “‘Eater’, is

that really the best your English can do here? No word for the genus, eh? *Matari*?" She pulled a sour face. "Mm, well, even the northern tongue fails occasionally, I suppose. Nobody's perfect."

"You mean the black lightning creature?"

"Is that what it looked like to you?" Saldis considered me with studied disinterest. "I wasn't using this at the time," she waved a hand vaguely at her own face, and with a shudder I realised she meant human senses, eyes and ears.

"... they must have shot one," I murmured in horror. "Praem, Praem we can't hurt these things, not that badly, not if they-"

"Evelyn," was her only reply, as she dragged me onward.

"You could have warned us earlier," I said to Saldis. "Instead of hiding in your silly ball thing. Thanks for the complete lack of help."

"Not all of us are suicidally brave with our immortal souls, lady Morell. I would commend your frank insanity as bravery, but, actually no, nobody who wishes to see sunrise or smell grass or taste salt ever again would willingly expose themselves to an eater. No pillared hall if you go that way, ugh." She sniffed. "I don't understand how you little Englishers are even scurrying about afterward. Besides, the thing was of no interest to me. None of the pretenders would cast such a boor in any production."

"Exit," Praem sing-songed, "pursued by a bear."

Saldis laughed and slapped her thigh. I boggled at Praem's face in profile as she stared straight ahead, looking for any hint or sign of Evelyn's new entourage as the bookcases unfolded ahead of us.

"Praem? When did you read *The Winter's Tale*?"

"All I do is read," she sang softly.

"... are you alright?" I whispered.

"No."

"Okay, silly question," I sighed. "Stupid question, yes. I know, I know, we need to get to Eevee. We will. I won't let any harm come to her, if the worst comes to the worst, I can-"

I could push brainmath past the limit, taste the abyss once more,

define Evelyn and drag all of us back to reality along with this entire half-mile stretch of library and everything in it, books and Saldis and all, at the cost of another swim in the limitless dark. Drop this entire section of library in a field on the edge of Sharrowford.

Perhaps the fear was too much, because a hysterical giggle escaped my lips.

Praem twisted her head to stare at me.

"I-I'm sorry," I caught myself, swallowed hard. "This is all my fault, Praem. I'm so sorry."

It was all my fault, but now was not the time for guilt; I crushed it down, bottled it up for later.

Praem said nothing. Milk-white eyes stared back into mine.

"I know you care deeply for her, I know you're capable of that," I whispered to Praem, very softly. This wasn't for Saldis to hear. "I-I like to think she knows that too. That she- I'm sure she would ... "

Hopeful lies. Praem turned back to our path, and concentrated on the sound of Evelyn's walking stick.

I twisted to look back over my shoulder again. Behind and around Saldis' sphere, dozens of squid-faced librarians were converging on our pathway, shuffling grey robes dragging against the bookshelves, blind tentacles feeling forward from eyeless faces. All around us in parallel stacks, I heard the dry rustle of grey-fleshed feet beneath the library silence.

"Alright," I said to Saldis. "Explain. If Evelyn's not part of a play, what's happening to her?"

Saldis blinked at me, once, twice, in actual open-mouthed shock, looking like I was a child who'd spilt her own guts from her slit-open belly, with no idea what was happening as hot bloody snakes wriggled through her fingers.

"Oh. Oh, poppet, oh no. Don't tell me you've all been wandering around out here without proper protection? I assumed you knew. That your construct here was part of it," she gestured at Praem. "Or- or something. Anything!"

"Knew *what*? Saldis, just tell me what's happening, now, before we

reach-”

“She’s being inducted into the library catalogue.”

“ ... what? What does that mean, what are they doing to her?”

“Turning her into one of them.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Praem- Praem, hurry-”

“Yes,” Praem intoned.

“Where are they taking her?” I snapped back at Saldis. “What exactly are they doing? How long do we have to-”

“Taking her to a junction box, I assume.” Saldis paused, smacked her lips, and frowned. “Oh no, that’s not the right word, not at all, no. Tch. Your absurd sheep farmer peasant tongue doesn’t have anything at all for this. Synapse. Bone marrow. Liver. Middle manager.” She grimaced at that last one. “No, no, no. You won’t call it any of those things if you clap eyes on it, of that I am certain.”

“*Saldis*,” I hissed, taking my panic out on her navel-gazing.

We emerged from the end of a sweeping curve of bookshelves, having followed the *clonk-clonk-clonk* of Evelyn’s walking stick through the strange, lowering silence of the library, and found ourselves suddenly exposed to the vast open space of the library canyon. We’d walked all the way to the front of this library floor. Massive ornate wooden banisters gave way to the spider-webbing of rickety walkways that climbed the canyon wall, reaching twig-like fingers across the mile-wide gap to the far side.

A wave of vertigo washed over me at the infinite floors in the distance, a mirror of the ones on this side, receding into the upper darkness, but Praem’s iron strength kept my knees from wobbling. For a horrible moment I thought the librarian entourage had led Evelyn out onto those creaking, crumbling walkways, and seriously began to contemplate the math to just rip this entire half-mile of library back to our reality – but then I saw the librarians, maybe two hundred feet ahead of us, making for the stairs down.

Hundreds of squid-faced librarians shuffled away from us, packed shoulder-to-shoulder, clogging the edge of the library floor like grey cholesterol clotting a vein. If Evelyn was in the centre of that scrum, she was too short for us to spot.

“Evee!” I called, heard no response. “Praem, Praem, right there-”

Praem dragged me forward, all but marching now.

“Don’t- Praem, don’t hurt them, you heard what Saldis said and we can’t deal with-”

“My point is, lady Morell,” Saldis drawled from behind me, her machine ticking along the floorboards to keep up. “Your friend has decided she wants to stay with the library, rather than face reality.”

“What?” I twisted back to look at her. “That’s ... well, actually, considering Evelyn that’s not completely absurd, but it is also mad.”

Saldis smiled – and a hint of real, genuine sorrow touched her dark eyes, her full red lips, the crease of a noble brow.

“Have you never loved a library, lady Morell?”

“Well, yes, but ... ”

“Have you never abhorred the world beyond books? Wished to stay within that candlelight halo forever, no matter the strain on your eyes? All it takes is a little self-honesty, in one’s heart of hearts, and the library knows you.”

A sound slithered across the blanket of silence, not sudden but slow, slick and sodden and sinewy, louder than the shuffle of grey librarian feet or the *clack* of Evelyn’s walking stick, and undeniably biological. It did not cut the silence, but seemed like part of the quiet had come alive.

Like a huge wet snake emerging from a sewer pipe.

I looked for source of the sound, and Praem stumbled to a halt for a single step – she must have sighted the thing a second before I did, but by the time my eyes had widened and the breath gone still in my throat, Praem was dragging me onward again with renewed purpose, toward the wall of grey librarian backs.

Down on the floor of the library canyon, far far away, a tower of meat was approaching.

One third biology textbook drawing of a virus, one third flesh-stripped nervous system of a flightless bird – and one third giraffe – the thing was a giant pillar of dark red leathery meat mounted atop a collection of far too many crab-like legs, which moved with a disturbingly artificial motion, like a child trying to make their

fingers walk as the legs of a spider. At the tip of the meat-tower the thing possessed a potato shaped head the size of a lorry, with a dull grey beak, and a circular band of sickly green light hovering in the air above.

Orifices yawned in the back of the thing's head. Several long fine tentacles like the feelers of a jellyfish emerged from those dark holes, and a single massive tentacle waved lazily upward in the air, a blunt-ended tube the thickness of a water slide, with a sucking, puckered hole in the middle, easily large enough to swallow a human being.

The sound I'd heard was the emergence of that tentacle.

The thing was so big I could see details clearly from all the way up here. It's head reached the fourth or fifth of the library floors, the tentacle much further – all the way up to us, as it navigated over the piles of books and weaved its way through the cobwebs of rickety walkways without so much as brushing against them.

A cloacal stench reached my nostrils and made my eyes water. Mucus and urine and digestive fluids.

"I ... uh," I almost laughed, panic and hysteria too much. "Why ... why does it have a halo?"

"Ignore it," Praem intoned.

The library canyon suddenly seemed less like the main passageway of a wood-panelled infinite building, and more akin to a cell-wall capillary byway in a creature larger than all reality. And here came a macrophage.

Ahead, the wall of librarians was shuffling to a slow stop, as the meat-trunk-thing began to draw level with us.

"Ah yes," Saldis said, a quiver in her voice. "There's the middle manager, come to remake your friend's flesh."

"What?" I boggled back at Saldis, and found her leaning out of the front of her machine, peering down at the bizarre half-bird half-dried-jerky monster.

"Well, where do you think the catalogue comes from?" She winced. "Or the books? This is not a safe place to be a magician." Saldis shook her head and frowned, quite upset. "Not at all. Mages are vulnerable here. The more books they've read the worse it is. And

they always assume they are untouchable, that their work is more important than mere self-definition. At least I admit I'm a fruitcake full of emotional sinkholes, that's why I stay in my shell." She slapped the inside of her grey-block sphere-machine. "That's the price for staying here and staying me, I live as a snail does."

"What- what is it going to-"

"The books your little Englisher magician knows are about to be rotated out of her mind," Saldis explained. "The liver will pass them back to this rabble, to be added to the library, and then she herself will be, uh, mm," Saldis cleared her throat. "*Reborn*. You'll want to be interrupting this initiation before she's swallowed, yes? Not after. Bit late then. But if I were you I wouldn't-"

I never got to hear what Saldis wouldn't do, if her dearest friend was about to be eaten and processed into a grey-faced slave drone, because Praem decided to do her best impression of a professional rugby player.

She tucked me to one side as if to shelter me from driving rain, pointed her opposite shoulder at the wall of grey-clad backs, and charged.

The librarians went over like cricket stumps hit with a cannon ball, flailing and falling and flapping and fumbling, toppling their fellows with clawing hands, bouncing off the banister at the edge of the floor and scrabbling grey fingers against the bookcases opposite. I had to swallow a scream, half at the sudden, crawling proximity of the masses of writhing grey flesh, my phantom limbs lashing out in a protective but useless corona, as I was dragged along by sheer momentum, clinging to Praem for fear of stumbling and falling – and half at the terrifying prospect of Praem somehow puncturing one of them deep enough, spilling enough blood, enough guts, to attract the attention of anything lurking nearby, another thing like the Black Lightning Outsider.

Praem slammed through the librarians and they scattered before her, hundreds of them streaming away between bookshelves or onto the rickety walkways, parting like sand, then like water, flowing back from the red-hot iron of our sudden intrusion.

"Evee!" I called out – and then we were upon her.

Small hunched shoulders over the crooked spine beneath her coat,

great mass of blonde hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, her pockets overflowing with notebooks and tools and her bone-wand jutting out from beneath the layers, her soft cream jumper with the off-colour thread where she'd repaired the collar herself. Leaning on her walking stick. Prosthetic black visible just beneath the hem of her long skirt.

I had this bizarre moment where I expected her to have been stripped naked, like an offering in some silly old horror movie, but it was just Evelyn. Magic did not work like that. Outside did not follow our badly arranged cultural expectations. She could die fully clothed and standing upright just as easily.

The grey librarians flowed away from her like water sucked back by an incoming tidal wave – or by capillary action – their hands leaving her shoulders and arms and waist. She was side-on to us. Eyes unfocused.

Praem pretty much just dropped me.

I let out a yelp, but adrenaline and fear and love kept me on my feet, kept me staggering the last few paces to my stranded friend. Praem went for the librarians still in proximity, circling Evelyn once, quick and sharp, chasing the creatures back with silent glares and the twirl of her torn skirt and the click of one shoe – and a couple of well-placed piston-fast punches to gut or spined head.

I'd once seen a video of a service dog – a great muscled German Shepherd – trained to protect a small girl, by putting itself between her and a simulated attacker, turning always to keep its vulnerable charge in the shelter of its own body. In that moment, Praem reminded me of that dog, driven by something deeper than mere conditioning.

But one part of the library catalogue did not respond to Praem's threat.

The towering re-maker creature far below had drawn level with Evelyn, and the massive tentacle it had extended upward now bobbed and arced like an elephant's trunk, sniffing for a scent.

“Evee!”

I almost fell onto Evelyn, grabbed her about the shoulders, and promised myself I'd never let go again.

“Evee, Evee what are you- are you-”

Evelyn Saye wore the expression of a sleepwalker, or the victim of mild stroke. Slack lips, heavy-lidded unfocused eyes, staring ahead at nothing. She made eye contact with me and blinked once in slow acknowledgement.

“Oh,” I breathed, heart thudding. “Oh, we have to get you out of here, Evee. Right now. Praem!” I pulled Evelyn into a hug and held on tight. She didn’t resist, limp in my grip. “Praem, grab me, now, and hold on! We have get Evee-”

Praem obeyed with a quick hop and trot, wrapping her arms around me from behind before I finished speaking.

“Okay,” I breathed a shuddering breath, dredging up the familiar equation that would collapse the world, instinctively clenching up in anticipation of the oncoming pain. “And don’t let go, and-”

“I wouldn’t do your plane-stepping trick if I were you, lady Morell,” Saldis’ voice cut across my panic, high and sharp.

Her grey sphere-machine had rolled into the gap left by the scattered librarians, who were already drifting back in twos and threes, the parted sea returning in ebbs and dribbles, all their blind spine-and-tendrils faces turned toward us, toward Evelyn. Saldis was leaning out of the front of her machine, eyes flashing danger, as close to panic as I think she was capable of feeling.

“Not on her, not now,” she continued. “If you lead your friend back across the ice wall firmament, it will be her body only. Her mind is entangled with the catalogue.”

Saldis’ gaze flickered up and to the right, behind me, out into the open space of the library canyon, where the trunk-tentacle was wavering closer.

“How do I undo that?” I asked. “How? What do we do?”

“I haven’t the foggiest, my dear girl,” Saldis said with a tight smile. “All I know is that your friend does not want to leave.”

“Evee?” I pulled away from the tight hug, Praem pressed to my back, and took in Evelyn’s sleep-hazed face. She blinked, once.

“That is all I know, poppet, I cannot help you further,” Saldis said, and collapsed back into the waiting seat of her machine, as the grey

blocks began to fold shut around her, sealing up her shell. At the last moment, she pulled a pained smile. "Wisdom of the gods go with you. Good luck."

The grey surface of Saldis' machine swallowed the dark oval of her face, her grimace the last thing to vanish inside the protective sphere. It began to roll slowly backward, away from the tentacle, away from us, before the press of returning librarians became too much through which to force a path.

"Oh dear," I said, and hiccuped, loudly.

"Talk to her," Praem intoned, right in my ear, as she peeled herself off me and turned to face the giant tentacle. The feeler was almost at the banister now, the puckered opening turned downward as if ready to pinch a morsel off a plate. My phantom limbs itched to fight or flee, setting up an awful deep tissue ache in my flanks.

"Praem, you can't fight that, you're not-"

"Talk," Praem repeated – and I heard a tremor, as if the bell of her voice had been struck at an angle.

I turned back to Evelyn, tried to peer into her eyes, make her see me.

"Evee? Evee, you don't want to stay here. Why? What- What happened? Evee?" My mouth was going dry, couldn't keep my voice steady. "You've always been obsessed with magic, I know, and with the books, with everything ... everything your mother did, but I thought I had you. We're friends, and I love you, and that matters. It- it doesn't matter, this nonsense here, this *crap* with Edward Lilburne, all this mage stuff doesn't matter one whit compared to the people who love you. Evee? You do have a family to go back to, people who care about you. Me, Raine, Praem right here, Lozzie too. Maybe not Zheng, okay, fair enough. A-and Kimberly, yes, you've done a good thing for Kim, you've done good, you're good, you're wanted. Evee!"

Evelyn watched me like she was riding an opiate high. Blank.

I was babbling now, in panic, struggling not to give in to the urge to turn and hiss and raise all my phantom tentacles as the vast feeler approached us. Abyssal instinct screamed at me to turn and fight, to spit poison and make myself toxic to this thing that wanted to eat me – but I was not the target of its hunger, and I could not make

Evelyn safe, and at a deeper level than pure instinct I knew that no empty threat would halt the seeker's purpose. This was no predator of the deep, no tiger to posture and stalk, it was more akin to cellular machinery. If we wanted to stop it, we would have to dismantle the thing entirely, until no part was linked to any other.

"And Twil," I added at last, to Evelyn. "You have Twil. Don't you?"

A fluttering blink passed over Evelyn's eyes. Her lips moved, and she murmured a sound which might have been "couldn't" or perhaps "hood" or maybe a word I refuse to repeat.

And that was all.

"Oh this is ridiculous." I hiccuped again. "When we get home, I'm never letting you live this one down, Eevee. Evelyn! Oh, this is like me and the abyss," I muttered. "Praem, Praem we need more time, we need to get Eevee away from- yaah!"

I'm not ashamed to admit I yelped. The squid-faced librarians had been trickling and shuffling back, the ring of their robes and empty faces tightening around us, but now several of them all reached for Evelyn at once with pale grey soft hands, like dead fish. I didn't get the sense they were trying to wrestle her away from me; they seemed like lepers desperate to touch a queen, that her grace might heal them.

But still I yelped – and then followed instinct and let out a long, high-pitched *hisssss*.

They scattered back from me like startled animals, but did not draw off very far. My heart was pounding in my chest, my spinning head flushed with adrenaline, my back soaked with cold sweat. They crept toward us again. I hiccuped in panic.

"Praem!" I yelled.

The huge trunk-like tentacle was almost upon her. Praem, standing ramrod straight with her hands clasped. What was she planning to do, swat the thing like the paw of an over-curious cat?

"Praem, you can't scare that thing off. Keep- keep the librarians away from Eevee- let me- I can-"

I can do what? Brainmath the thing into oblivion? Not only was it bigger than a whale, its main body was hundreds of feet below us. The kind of brainmath to solve this problem would also likely lay

me out unconscious, and then who was going to get us home? What if another of these things lumbered up to take the place of this one, even if I could burn it to a crisp with atomic fire summoned at the speed of thought?

But it was the only choice. The librarians had regathered too thick to shift now, no room for a running start to plough through them. If they decided to hold us in place, we'd be done for.

"Praem, I have to use brainmath," my voice shook. "Take Evelyn."

Praem finally did as I asked, stepped back as I stepped forward, toward that searching trunk like the feeding tube of a giant alien insect. It was very close now, bumping against the banister only two feet away from me. The puckered orifice shuddered, and that cloacal stink washed over us again, like an open sewer.

I stuck both hands into the sump of my soul. Perhaps if I redefined the air around the trunk, set it alight, crushed it, froze it, perhaps if I held on very hard I wouldn't pass out and-

"You are a better mother than yours ever was," Praem sang behind me.

I glanced back in surprise to see her staring right into Evelyn's eyes, gently holding her mistress by the forearms.

"Do not orphan me," Praem added.

And Evelyn winced like we'd burst into her bedroom in the middle of the night with a high-powered spotlight and a foghorn. She drew in a pained breath and grunted like she had a mouth full of sand and a throat covered in fur. She sounded, in that instant, very hungover.

"No I'm not," she grumbled.

"Oh, Eevee," I breathed in relief.

The questing tentacle-trunk-thing had paused, lost the scent. The squid-faced librarians had lost focus too, milling about aimlessly.

Evelyn clung to the front of the doll-demon's ruined maid outfit with white knuckle pressure, as if she was afraid that gravity might fail her and she'd go spinning upward into the void.

"Yes you are," Praem argued back, bell-clear.

"I make a terrible mother," Evelyn grumbled, almost right into the pillow of Praem's chest, shaking all over with soft tears flowing from the corners of her eyes. "Terrible everything. Failure. Worse than she was. Incompetent. Swiped it right from under my nose. And then everyone's in danger because of me and what do I have to go back to? Nothing works. There's no life there, nothing normal. Everything I was meant to be is a ruin."

"I love you," Praem told her.

Evelyn grimaced, as if this was the worst barb of all.

"Evee," I whispered, tip-toeing away from the shivering, shuddering trunk-tentacle thing.

Evelyn glanced up and around, furiously scrubbing her eyes on her sleeve. She turned green and pale and swallowed a scream at the sight of the thing that hung behind me, and the hundreds upon hundreds of squid-faced librarians all around us, and pressed herself closer to Praem as if trying to hide in her embrace.

"Heather. Heather, oh fuck, I'm sorry, I-" She screwed her eyes up. "I'm such a fucking idiot. Oh fuck, Raine was shot, I need to be there, I-"

"It's okay," I whispered, trying not to think about Raine, stepping close to join the hug and get us all out of here. "I understand. You wanted to stay here, in a moment of weakness. It's okay, this place gets into your head. But it's okay. Just because Edward pulled one over on us doesn't matter, it doesn't make you worthless, never, never-"

"I couldn't orgasm," she said out loud.

"... what."

For a moment my brain didn't process the word correctly. Then, I decided we were most definitely not in the right place for this conversation.

Evelyn opened her eyes and pulled a smile of such desolate self-mockery, bitter tears running down her cheeks.

"Twil," she hissed, shaking and shrugging and smiling that awful smile at herself. "When she stayed overnight. We tried to sleep ... to ... we tried to have sex, and it didn't work. I couldn't ... she couldn't make me ... miserable fucking failure. I hate this. I hate it.

I want to be something else. Somebody else. Anything else.”

“Oh, Eevee. Oh, it’s okay, Eevee. It’s going to be okay.”

“And just for one moment I thought maybe ... ” She sobbed.

“Maybe I’d be better off here. No more pain in this broken fucking body.” She screwed her eyes up tight, ashamed and horrified and afraid. “No, Heather, no I do not actually want to stay here. Take me home. Please.”

I wrapped my arms around her and Praem, and began the equation.

“It’ll be okay, we’ll make it okay. Back home,” I whispered, my head against Evelyn’s. “Not here, never again. Hold on tight now, don’t let go.”

Reality folded up.

nothing more impotent –

11.13

Our tripartite hug collapsed in body – though not in spirit – when home blossomed around us. The magical workshop, full of familiar clutter; rain drumming on the roof; the distant creak of the pipes struggling to heat the iron radiators. A wet Saturday afternoon, in grim old Sharrowford, had rarely felt so welcome.

I fell over and vomited on the floor. Very dignified.

Deep in the conspiracy between nervous system and subconscious, I had planned to leap into action. To whirl away from Evelyn and Praem, to call out for Raine, to locate where Zheng had stashed Amy Stack, to check on Lizzie, to see if Twil had arrived, to make sure we weren't currently under siege by Edward Lilburne in this moment of weakness. To know everyone I loved was alive and in one piece – or on their way to the hospital, or on their way here, or just plain here.

Wasn't quite sure. All I knew was Raine was hurt, and somebody needed to take charge.

But I'd bruised my grey matter with brainmath twice in under half an hour. I'd spent the time between those uses pumped to the gills with adrenaline, and then torn through the membrane between Outside and home – the mental equivalent of using my forehead as a battering ram. Staggering to the kitchen and dunking my head in the sink would have been a challenge. Rallying the troops was akin to a moon landing in a hot air balloon.

If I'd clung hard to Evelyn and Praem I probably could have sunk to my knees and rolled onto my back, but no, I took a single wobbling step away, burped out a syllable that didn't sound remotely like the beginning of Raine's name, and found myself on an trip to make intimate acquaintance with the ground.

Brought up a mouthful or two of bile, then lay there, cheek on the floorboards.

I blacked out briefly, or merely slipped off into a nap which achieved the opposite of rest. At some point a pair of strong capable hands rolled me into the recovery position. I mumbled a noise which was meant to be ‘thank you Praem’. Consciousness slowly filled back in; eventually my lizard brain and abyssal instinct surrendered the controls back to my frontal lobe, which made me wince and groan and try to sit up.

“Lie still,” Praem said, musical and calm.

“No,” I croaked. “No, thank you.”

Getting my own backside underneath me was an interesting challenge. My phantom limbs didn’t even try to help. My body knew on every possible level, abyssal or ape or amalgam or otherwise, that this was the time to lie very, very still, not leap up and shout and look for more problems. But I got there, legs splayed out in front of me, head hanging, eyelids like lead, because I needed to know where Raine was.

“Heather, for fuck’s sake, lie down,” Evelyn said – but her heart wasn’t in it.

She and Praem were sitting on the floor too. My ground buddies. Floor friends. Floorboard family.

Ah, and there was the delirium. Lovely.

Evelyn had collapsed too, perhaps from the stress of cross-membrane journey, perhaps the aftermath of attempted *librarianification*, or perhaps just emotional overload. She sat in a shivering heap of coat and overspilling notebooks and dry tears. Her eyes were very red, and her prosthetic leg stuck out at an uncomfortable angle.

Praem knelt in front of her, somehow prim and proper and resplendently dignified in the rags of her ruined uniform, watching Evelyn’s face.

We three mice had scurried back through a bolt-hole in the walls of reality, back to hallways and rooms built for human sizes and human purposes, filled with human objects and human smells. We had escaped the vast spaces beyond, designed for giants and hive-minds and ancient oversexed magicians who were confined to living inside hamster balls.

Evelyn and I looked at each other for a long moment, both exhausted. Little mice, panting and shaking and alive.

“I am a incredible mess,” she said eventually.

“Me too,” I croaked.

Evelyn nodded weakly. Then, by slow degrees, as if she couldn’t bear to do it all in one go – like bandages teased away from puckered flesh, prolonging the pain, dislodging blood clots, wound flowing fresh and clean – she looked to Praem. First at the floor, then at Praem’s small hands on Praem’s neat knees, then up, to meet those milk-white eyes.

“I ... I’m not ... I can’t be your-” she tried to say.

The doll-demon leaned forward and gently, slowly, with careful fingertips seeking silent consent, eased Evelyn into a hug. Something old and brittle and knotted, like scar tissue, came apart inside Evelyn’s face. Her eyes fluttered shut.

I had to get up.

I had to get *up* and call for Raine. And locate Zheng and Lozzie and find Twil. And without raising my head I could see droplets of crimson smeared on the floor of the magical workshop. That was Raine, had come from Raine, her blood from her veins, and the house was so quiet, too quiet, not even Tenny bumping around upstairs, and I blinked at a single scarlet-smear boot print just by the half-open door through to the kitchen and-

And I lurched to my feet. Scrabbled for a chair, almost knocked it over, clung on like a shipwrecked sailor. Head swimming, vision pulsing black at the edges, I stared at that bloody boot print. My fault.

“Raine!” I called – shouted, croaked, throat cracked and broken. “Raine-” Then coughed twice, spewing blood into my own hand. My nose was bleeding again.

“If she’s got any sense,” Evelyn said, “she’ll have gotten herself to the hospital.”

“Raine rarely has sense.”

“True.”

I had a dozen things to say to Evelyn, several of which involved her

sex life, and one of which was about parenting. At least one of those things was going to be the couples' therapy equivalent of repairing a space shuttle with masking tape and craft glue, and this was absolutely not the time for any of that. But before I could stagger away, I had to be certain she was all here, all Evelyn, that we'd not left part of her behind in that library. At least she wasn't pushing Praem away. Probably a good sign, under the circumstances.

"... are you ... alright?" I croaked.

Hollowed-out, red-rimmed, raw as she was, Evelyn mustered a tiny frown at my stupid question.

"Okay, yes, you're going to be fine," I said.

My shout finally summoned attention. Deep in the house, a door clicked open, creaking on rarely-used hinges. Swift feet skidded over floorboards, slammed into the kitchen and knocked over a chair with a clatter on the flagstones. I held my breath and gathered what mental strength I had left, tried to dredge up the right equation to flatten whatever came through that door, or at least pretend I could flatten it, to bluff and stall until Twil arrived. If Twil was arriving. If Lozzie had contacted her at all.

Twil arrived.

An awful lot of Twil arrived. Teeth bared, panting hard, wild eyes and half-wolf body, Twil yanked the workshop door open, ready to fight monsters. If I'd been a fraction less exhausted, I might have flinched.

"Oh good, there you are," I wheezed.

She burst into a grin, laughing and panting with relief. "Fuck!"

"Apt word," I managed.

"Don't," Evelyn said to me, a tremor of new panic in her voice.

"I wouldn't dare," I said. "That's between you two. But we're going to talk about it, later. Everything is going to be okay."

"What? What's this?" Twil blinked between the two of us, stepping into the room and dropping her wolf-mist-form with a shiver of her shoulders and a shake of her snout. Her face came back up as angelically pretty, framed by her mass of dark curls, but pale and worried like she'd been crouched in a foxhole under fire for hours.

She went for Evelyn without hesitation, took one of Eeve's shoulders and squeezed, though she didn't try to join the hug on the floor. "Eeve! The hell were you doing? Why didn't you call me to come with you this time?"

Evelyn blinked up at her, blank guilt, cornered.

"You don't have to do it right now," I wheezed.

"Eeve?" Twil frowned at her. "Everyone said you got like, hypnotised or some shit?" She waved a hand in front of Evelyn's eyes. "You okay? Eeve? Yeah?"

Evelyn's face hardened into that same tiny, emotionally exhausted frown she'd given me.

To my surprise, Twil neither backed down nor balked nor blushed. She frowned right back and almost snapped in Evelyn's face. "Okay, stupid fuck-arse question, whatever. You got any bullet holes in you? Wounds we need to bandage? Can you walk? You in there, in one piece? Hey, Praem," she turned to the doll-demon instead, the other half of the hug. "Is Eeve okay? Do I need to call another ambulance or what?"

"She will be perfect," Praem sung, softly.

"Okay, cool, thank you Praem." I'd never heard Twil sound so utterly done with a situation. She straightened up and met my eyes, and shrugged with long-suffering exasperation. "You could'a let me know about all this too, Heather."

"Where's Raine?" I croaked.

Twil lit up, anger forgotten, as if she'd only just realised I would very much want to know this one small matter. "Oh, shit, yeah. Hospital!"

"Hospital," I echoed. Cling on tight, Heather.

"Yeah. Lozzie got in the ambulance with her, took her phone too. So she's not alone, you know? Ambulance peeled out like, ten minutes ago. They're fast round here, not like out in the sticks." She pulled a grin. "Don't worry, Raine's tough as old nails, right? She was up and moving around, talking clearly, not woozy or anything. Er, moving around too much actually. You know, how Raine is."

I resisted an entirely appropriate urge to scream. "Twil, please, I

need you to be specific.”

Twil’s grin faltered into the whipped-dog grimace she used when trying to put a good face on something bad and dumb. “Uh, well, she ... she didn’t wanna go to the hospital. Said you and Eevee needed her.”

“Idiot,” Evelyn hissed.

“She was talking like a machine gun – er, bad metaphor,” Twil winced. “Tried to bind up her own thigh with an old towel and go back through the gateway after you. I had to sort of, uh, turn it off to stop her.” She gestured at the gateway mandala on the back wall, inert again, just blank plaster in the doorway. Some of the paper-and-masking-tape parts had been ripped off, and now lay on the floor. “When we finally got her to go, she insisted on walking all the way to the end of the road, so it didn’t look like she’d got shot at home. Said she and Lozzie had to get their story straight.”

“She needs me,” I said, and almost fell over when I tried to step away from the chair, shipwrecked and slipping into deep water. Twil caught me awkwardly under the arms.

“Uh, yeah, Heather, but like, you can’t walk, yeah?”

“Lauren Lilburne should not be out in the streets without protection,” Evelyn grumbled, finally disentangling herself from Praem, who sat back without complaint. Evelyn wiped her eyes on the back of her sleeve, still looking fragile as blown glass.

“She’s not. She’s in an ambulance,” Twil said. “And she’s with Raine.”

“Raine will shortly be in an emergency room operating theatre, up to her eyeballs in morphine, with a surgeon rooting around inside her leg.”

“Oh. Ah. Um.”

“I feel sick,” I murmured.

“Let the NHS do their job,” Evelyn said. “Raine is going to be fine. Heather, Raine is going to be fine, I’ve seen her covered in a lot more blood than that.” She let out a little shuddering breath, gave the lie to her own convincing words. “But somebody needs to be with Lozzie. Somebody capable of deterring a kidnapping attempt.”

Twil went wide-eyed. "You think they're gonna make a move on us?"

Evelyn paused, gaze turned inward, her mind chewing on practical problems; perhaps as a way of avoiding emotional ones. She swallowed and sniffed back the remains of her tears.

"No. No, I don't think so," she said eventually. "Edward didn't plan for any of this, doesn't know where Lauren is. He's cautious and careful, and he made a mistake. And he has, in a way, kept his word," Evelyn grimaced. "He may be expecting us to strike at him. Maybe. But no good strategic thinker leaves an opportunity ungrasped, unless he thinks it's a trap. And he may have other ways of determining where his niece is. Better safe than sorry. Somebody needs to be with Lauren."

"I," Praem intoned.

"No, you don't leave my side," Evelyn said, a soft crack in her voice.

"I have to- I need- at least call Lozzie-" I stammered as Twil propped me up against the edge of the table and stepped back, hands out, like she was balancing a piece of wood. I think she was worried I might vomit on her. "Where's-"

"Zheng's in the basement, with Stack," Twil told me, face hardening. "We tied her up, proper tight like. Actual rope."

"Oh. Um. But- Zheng-"

"Yeah, I think Zheng gets that we're not supposed to like, eat her." Twil pulled a face. "Kim's at work. Tenny's upstairs, apparently asleep, 'cording to Lozzie. S'just us."

"Get me the box of strawberries from the fridge." Evelyn gestured at Twil. "And painkillers, the bottle with the red label on the second shelf in the end cupboard. And water. And chocolate, for Heather. Make her eat it. She needs the serotonin, the quicker the better." Then she added, awkward and rushed: "Please, Twil."

"... right, yeah, sure." Twil lingered on Evelyn for a moment, then hopped out of the workshop in two quick steps. A second later we heard her rummaging around in the kitchen.

I gripped the table hard, trying to take deep breaths, my knees shaking and head pounding. Where was my mobile phone? Where I'd left it before the trip to Carcosa, on the kitchen table. No point

taking it out there beyond reality. I reached for the chair, planning to use it as a large and unwieldy crutch.

“Heather, please do not fall flat on your face and break your nose,” Evelyn said. “The last thing we need right now is more injuries.”

“My girlfriend has been shot,” I croaked at her.

“Twil is bringing you chocolate, and water, and painkillers, and she is going to escort you to the hospital when you can walk, so she can watch Lizzie, and if you go in there with a face covered in blood there are going to be questions, and there are going to be questions anyway, and you need to get your head in order for that and *do not make me do this right now*,” her voice shook into a panicked crescendo. “Raine has been shot, yes. I cannot- I can’t argue- just do as I say.”

I blinked hard, several times. “You- you don’t have to be in charge, Eevee. Not to make light of it, but ten minutes ago you were trying to feed yourself to a giant tentacle. You’re allowed to decompress a bit.”

“I don’t need to ‘decompress’. I need to sleep for a week, and ... ”

“Eevee, you can’t let Twil take me to the hospital, you need her here, somebody here. Maybe it’s silly, but I’m worried you might try to go back. I-I don’t know how far that effect extended into your mind-”

“Everything is different now,” she told me, voice quivering, and glanced at Praem.

“She will not be alone,” Praem sang.

I had nothing to say to that. Standing in the room when they made eye contact with each other felt like I was an intruder on a private moment. Well, a private moment that had played out in front of hundreds of squid-faced librarians on the other side of the walls of reality.

Twil returned with all of Evelyn’s requests, and I did as I was instructed. I sipped water to soothe my raw throat, wiped blood off my face, chewed chocolate with numb lips, until I could finally taste the cocoa and sugar and milk. My senses woke back up and I felt a little more like a living being, instead of a conduit for heavenly mathematics and adrenaline. Evelyn confirmed that the

two books we had liberated from Carcosa were safely stowed away – Lozzie had left them on the workshop table, dumped in panic – and she added Edward Lilburne’s nasty letter to the haul.

My aches and pains and headache stabs slowly stopped being a blanket and became more specific, made worse by the peaks and valleys of the soft argument Evelyn and Twil had decided to begin.

“I’m going to need so much coffee,” I murmured.

“Do as I say,” Evelyn was saying to Twil. “Somebody needs to go with Heather.”

“And what?” Twil spread her arms. “I’m supposed to leave you here with the brick shithouse watching the psycho in the basement?”

“I am here,” Praem intoned.

“I ... yeah ... I mean, you are ... I guess.” Twil frowned at Praem.

“Do not start a rivalry,” I grunted through the headache pain, and past a duet of blushing and stuttering from other sources. “You both love Evelyn in completely different ways. Now either fetch my mobile phone or carry me to it, or I’m going to fall over.”

When Twil finally helped me out of the workshop and into the kitchen, Evelyn was still sitting on the floor with Praem, feeding her strawberries by hand, one by one, until the whole box was gone, and she had only herself left to give.

The kitchen was a much bigger mess than the workshop. As Twil helped me to a chair, I imagined the scene of Raine and the others stumbling in here in panic, bleeding and confused and scared for those they’d left behind. Raine’s homemade riot shield lay on the floor, dumped in a heap with her motorcycle jacket and truncheon and handgun, all smeared with drying blood – A dark and violent version of discarded coats and wellington boots after a walk in the woods. Rain dripped down the kitchen windows, from leaden clouds above.

Amy Stack’s firearm sat on the kitchen table.

Black metal like an alien spacecraft, it dwarfed all mundane clutter, a horrible ugly thing. Reaching for my phone amid the discarded breakfast bowls and debris of pre-expedition prep felt like stealing from a scorpion.

Just beyond the door to the utility room, the little-used cellar door stood wide open, a gaping dark mouth, lit by the thin glow of two naked bulbs from far below. I'd only ever been down there twice. Zheng's rumbling voice teased the edge of my hearing, like rock shifting beneath the earth.

"Let her know I'm okay, please?" I croaked to Twil.

"She knows. Knew the moment you turned up, which was weird. But she won't come up here." Twil shrugged. "She doesn't trust me to watch Stack alone. As if I'm going to let her get away or some shit."

I stared at the open basement door, an invitation into darkness and conspiracy, into an interrogation of Amy Stack that I did not want to initiate.

"She's not going to ... hurt ... ?" I let that linger.

Twil shrugged and looked profoundly uncomfortable. "In the like, ten minutes I was down there, Stack said nothing that wasn't trying to like, goad us into losing our temper with her, but it all sucked. Like, I dunno, she doesn't get how to piss somebody off, not for real."

I nodded and screwed my eyes up, crammed the headache down. "Later. Just ... later. We need to let Raine know about Eevee. And me."

Twil nodded, then slipped down into the basement to make sure Zheng wasn't eating Stack's liver. I pulled up my phone's contact list with shaking fingers, terrified at what might emerge from the speaker as I lifted it to my ear, and waited for somebody to pick up Raine's phone.

Click.

"Raine-"

"Heathy!" Lozzie. Breathless and relieved.

"Is-"

"There's so many doctors and nurses and it's going to be okay I think but I need to keep hiding but it's going to be okay they said only twenty minutes it's not hit anything important but Raine kept trying to get up and she won't sit still and-"

= =

“And you can’t think of anybody who would want to shoot a gun at her? Maybe even by accident?” the policeman asked me – for the fourth time.

He was running out of new ways to phrase the same question, with his big droopy mouth set below big droopy eyes like a tired basset hound, poised over a tiny notebook he’d produced from the pocket of his stereotypical black overcoat. He kept his voice low and casual as he sat across from Twil and I, in the opposite row of uncomfortable sea-green wipe-clean plastic chairs, in the visitors’ waiting area next to the accident and emergency department in Sharrowford General Hospital.

“No. No, nobody at all. I’m sorry,” I lied again.

He nodded, pulled a face like a pouting dog, and pretended to read his notes.

I took a shuddering breath and wrung my clammy palms together. I briefly considered taking Twil’s hand, but that would have entailed asking her to unfold her arms, which would spoil the wonderfully unstudied grumpiness she had adopted from the moment the police officer had walked over and introduced himself – detective Mark Stuggan. And I did not need to act frightened and fragile to flatter detective Stuggan’s authority. Those emotions were real, they just had nothing to do with him.

Twil and I had stepped off the bus two and a half hours ago, but we still hadn’t seen Raine.

Or Lozzie, which gave rise to an entirely different order of concern.

This visit was nothing like when Raine and I had spoken with Sarika in her hospital bed. Back then, Nicole Webb had waved us through the byzantine layers of medical bureaucracy, soft and jagged alike. Here, we were stuck in an A&E waiting room so close to the panic and blood and beeping machinery. Night had not yet arrived with the split eyebrows and finger bone fractures and drunken fights of a Saturday evening, though the sky beyond the windows had turned inky-dark, held at bay by the too-bright florescent hospital lighting. But the waiting room was busy anyway, with minor injuries and strange stomach complaints and hollow-eyed, silent children with their worried mothers.

We'd had to go up to the desk, ask for Raine, explain who we were, sit around, go to the desk again, sit some more. Time crawled at a second per minute; tedium turned fear into chewed nails. Twil bought crisps and chocolate bars and fizzy drinks from a vending machine, under strict orders from Evelyn to make sure I ate, but my stomach was mounting a very successful insurgency.

I'd called Lozzie instead.

"But where are you?" I'd hissed down the phone at her manic giggle of greeting. "Lozzie, we're in the waiting room, you need to come join us, it's not safe for you to be alone—"

"I'm with Raine!" she'd hissed back. "Shhhhh!"

"But Raine's in surgery, isn't she? Or- or recovery or—"

"I'm hiding in plain sight because plain sight is the best place not to get asked my name because my name might be on lists and lists are the first thing the pigs will check and they'll talk to Raine but I'll make sure they don't check. Okay? And they'll talk to you too so I can't be there."

Lozzie's voice whispered off into fairy-dust, as if tugged away on the wind before she hung up.

They didn't think to tell us Raine was out of surgery, not until Twil went up to the desk a third time. We waited more. My headache got worse. I wanted to stand up and scream. Or go to sleep.

Then detective Mark Stuggan turned up and proved Lozzie right.

He'd ambled up to the front desk and exchanged a few words with the nurse on duty. She'd pointed at us, and over he had wandered. A very tall man, gangly like a tree with an exotic fungal disease, dressed in dark suit and long coat and sensible shoes. May as well have been a uniform.

He'd wanted to ask us some questions. Routine questions. Very serious questions. Small questions. A random drive-by shooting like this, with no motive? The police wanted to trace the firearm, get it off the streets, catch the criminal. Very important. Very serious. We understand, yes? Not under arrest, of course not. We understand. We'd done nothing wrong. Raine had done nothing wrong. But we might know something that would help.

He'd folded himself into the chair, too small for his limbs.

“Somebody presents for treatment with a fresh bullet wound, the hospital quietly lets us know,” he told us through his big droopy smile that was not a smile at all. “Not that this happens much in Sharrowford, but we get some spillover now and again. You wouldn’t believe the number of times somebody takes a bullet on Merseyside or in the Manchester suburbs, and gets driven out here to sleepy Sharrowford because they think they’ll avoid notice.”

“I weren’t there,” Twil had grunted. “Just here as moral support for Heather. S’her girlfriend, you know?”

“Does she go to a lot of parties?” he’d asked, about six different ways.

“Not at all,” I’d told him. “She spends almost all her time with me, or in class.”

He smiled that hangdog smile again. “Don’t worry, I’m not narcotics, I’m not gonna take her down to the station for an ounce of weed. But drugs make people crazy for money. If she was buying stuff at a student party – and hey, we know it happens – then she might have owed somebody money.” He frowned, fatherly in a sleepy sort of way. “She could be in trouble. It’s better we get to that trouble before something worse happens to her.”

“She definitely doesn’t owe anybody money. And she doesn’t take drugs.”

“Mmmm.” He’d made a little note, in his little book. “And who does she hang out with?”

He said it like an afterthought.

“Just me.”

“What about ‘Evelyn’?” he asked, faux-casual.

“Evee. That’s the other girl we live with, yes. Evelyn’s practically a hermit and she’s afraid of loud noises, let alone drugs.” Then, because I was tired and frightened and angry and wanted this man to go away, I added, “I know where Raine is all the time, officer. She’s mine. If she was doing things with bad people, I would know. And I wouldn’t let her.”

The detective didn’t even raise an eyebrow at that. He pulled the corner of his mouth up in that droopy not-smile.

“Everybody keeps secrets, miss,” he’d said. “Even from their loved ones.”

“Not Raine,” I lied. “Not from me.”

He knew I was lying, about knowledge of who’d shot Raine and why.

I looked like a wreck, though I’d wiped the blood off my face and fortified my mind with coffee, hastily brewed back home before we’d left for the hospital. Perhaps he could see that my stress and tension was not merely the result of my lover being hospitalised with a serious wound. But the truth would have upended his mind.

He was a lot sharper than he looked. Perhaps the look was intentional, but his face lacked the tell-tale puffiness and broken capillaries of an alcoholic, or the dark eye-bags of a depressed divorcee, or the emptiness of a man going through the motions. He treated us with respect, as adults, didn’t call us ‘you girls’, phrased his questions carefully and intelligently and found a dozen different angles from which to repeat them, and that made him dangerous. He was not entirely different to Carcosa’s squid-faced librarians. A representative of an institutional – rather than literal – group mind, which could process and destroy us as gruesomely as any nightmare cellular machinery from Outside.

I was painfully aware that our home was full of criminal evidence which made no sense – Raine’s own illegal weapons, her bloodstained clothes, and a room full of occult madness. Not to mention a hostage tied up in the basement. And here I was, poorly deflecting a police detective who made a living of appearing to be a stereotype.

“I am sorry to keep pressing you, miss Morell, under the circumstances.” He finally raised his eyes from his notebook. “But any little detail might be important.”

“Frankly, officer, talking to you is at least distracting me from having to think about the fact my girlfriend has been shot in the leg.”

Twil smothered a snort. Not my intention, but I was too exhausted to care.

“Well, how’s about this for a distraction?” He smacked his lips once. “Our ballistics guys have told me they can’t find the bullet.”

He let that statement hang in the crowded waiting room air. Twil shifted, probably looked guilty.

“So? What does that mean?” I asked. No need to fake my total lack of understanding.

“Well.” He scratched his chin. “When I interviewed Raine, she told me she was shot about where the ambulance picked her up. End of Scotswalk street. But-”

My heart caught in my chest, on a net of barbed wire. “You’ve spoken to her?” Is she-”

“Shhh,” he raised a finger and lowered his voice. “I’m not supposed to divulge patient information, that’s for the doctors. But between you and me, she seemed alright. The nurses don’t let us talk to patients if they’re not in any fit state for it, anyway. I think your girl’s gonna be just fine.”

A sigh of relief shuddered through me, a knot of horror loosening in my chest – but I knew this was a ploy. A way in through my emotions, or to judge the truth of my words. I nodded and thanked him and shared a smile with Twil.

“But,” he said. “There’s no bullet, despite an exit wound. Should be in the pavement, the dirt, somebody’s garden wall. But it’s not. Which means maybe your, uh, girlfriend, maybe she walked a way after getting shot. Which happens more than you’d think, people often try to keep going. But still, funny, isn’t it? If we can’t find the bullet, it’s that much harder to trace the gun.”

“I don’t know what that means, detective. I do know Raine is very tough, and she never quits. She was probably trying to walk home.”

I also knew the bullet from Stack’s gun was embedded in floorboards in the library of Carcosa. Beyond a world away. At least they’d never find it.

“Your Raine,” he said, turning grave. “It’s not impossible she’s trying to protect the person who shot her-”

I almost laughed.

“- or protect herself from further retaliation, or protect you perhaps.”

The only person protecting Amy Stack was me. I was the only thing

between her and Zheng's teeth.

He misunderstood the shake of my head. He shrugged and smiled, and reached inside his coat to pull out a little laminated card. Handed it to me, and I just held it awkwardly. Two phone numbers were printed on it, beneath the shield-and-feather crest of the Sharrowford Police.

"If you're worried about Raine," he was saying, "if anybody approaches her with threats related to the shooting, or she's making phone calls and hiding them from you, or you remember anything at all, call that number. Goes straight to my desk." He reached forward and tapped the card. "If she's involved with dodgy people, if you think somebody might be putting her in danger, don't hesitate to give me a call. In absolute confidence."

"I'm the only one who puts her in danger," I let slip out loud, a sob threatening deep in my throat.

That finally drew a curious twitch of his eyes, because it made zero sense. What did I look like, to this man? A mousy, skittish, scrawny college girl, a prey creature attached to a slightly older and much more dangerous predator.

"S'not your fault," Twil muttered, and nudged me gently in the side. "Hey, Heather. It's not. Yeah?"

"Why would it be your fault, miss?" Detective Stuggan asked, a snake creeping through a chink in my inexperienced armour.

I sniffed away the ugly threat of tears and wiped my eyes on the back of my sleeve – one of Raine's hoodies, black and baggy, two sizes too large for me, smelling of her and our bedroom and sleep. Couldn't very well wear the same clothes I'd taken to Carcosa, bloodstained from my own nosebleed.

"Should have made her stay at home," I managed.

Good luck making sense of that, detective.

He opened his mouth to lay some tripwire, but my eyes went past his shoulder; pastel-pink and pastel-blue and a band of white, fluttering through the double-doors which led deeper into the warren of the hospital, mixed with the starch of nurse uniforms and the tired-eyed doctors.

Lozzie, up on tiptoes to wave her fingers at us across the waiting

room.

Detective Stuggan began to turn. Twil's eyes went up too. My heart leapt for news of Raine and for Lozzie to hide before the police saw her – but then there was a nurse next to us, standing over us, getting our attention with a sharp clearing of her throat, distracting all three pairs of eyes away from the wisp of tri-colour pastel that vanished back into the crowd.

“Are you Heather Morell?” The nurse was saying to me, wide and middle aged and very practical, pinch-faced and strict around the mouth. “You and your friend here are here to see Raine-” She broke off to check the clipboard tucked under one arm. “Haynes. Yes?”

“Yes, yes that's me. I'm Heather. Is Raine-”

“You can go in to see her now. She's awake and on the mend, and we've moved her out of intensive care.” My heart soared and a great breath went out of me. Twil put a hand on my shoulder and the nurse managed a practised, grey smile. “Room two-two-four, just down the corridor there and into the second left, almost at the end of the row. Just follow the numbers, you can't miss them.”

“Thank you, thank you.” I looked at the double doors. Lozzie had vanished completely.

“She's got a private room, since, well.” The nurse cleared her throat and glanced at the detective. “But that's all over and done with. Miss Morell, are you going to be taking her home?”

“Uh ... yes, yes, of course I will, what-”

“We should be able to discharge her in three to four hours. We don't expect she'll have to spend the night, but she's a walker, that one.” The nurse gave me a purse-lipped look as if Raine's behaviour was my fault. “And she'll tear out all her stitches if she tries to walk home.”

“I'll take her home. On the bus.”

“One of the doctors will be in with proper aftercare instructions shortly, but I suspect miss Haynes is going to need external motivation to keep her off that leg. Do you live at the same address?”

“I'm her partner,” I said without missing a beat. “She does what I tell her. I'll make her rest.”

Standing up and gathering myself after hours of waiting set my stomach churning again, made my head throb with renewed tension headache, my knees weak. My hands were shaking, so I shoved them into the front pocket of the too-large hoodie.

“Call me if you remember anything,” detective Stuggan said, rising with us. “Thank you both for your time. Miss Morell, miss Hopton.”

He shook our hands, then ambled off toward the front desk again. I was too numb and nervous to think, so Twil steered me toward the double-doors with a gentle hand on the small of my back. We plunged into the monastic labyrinth of the hospital corridors, oddly hushed between the pale plastic walls and squeaky floors.

“Never tell the police anything,” Twil grumbled under her breath. “You did cool though, Heather. Kept it cool.”

“You sound like Lizzie,” I managed a weird little laugh, voice shaking.

“Where’d she go, anyway?” Twil hissed, looking over her shoulder and into every open doorway we passed.

“Back to Raine, maybe.”

By the time we reached room 224, at the end of a blue-floored corridor lined with similar doors and reeking of antiseptic cleaner, I was ready to vibrate out of my own skin. Abyssal instinct ached to sprout a dozen tentacles to pull me down the hallways in a headlong rush, screaming at me to rescue my mate, find my other flesh in this place that brought back so many bad memories of other hospitals.

On a conscious level I was afraid for Raine’s health, but paradoxically also scared to see her, as if contact would catalyse a change I was unprepared for.

Raine’s pain in Carcosa, that unique pain on her face, more than mere physical. Worse than a bullet in her leg.

The door to 224 was closed. I hesitated but Twil didn’t notice. She knocked twice and pushed it open.

Inside was a cramped hospital room, dominated by one of those overcomplicated adjustable beds with side rails. Clean white walls made it feel like a cell. A little dispenser for hand sanitiser was bolted to the wall beside the door, and a pair of chairs made it feel

less sparse. A bundle of Raine's clothes lay on one of the chairs, the possessions she'd been admitted with. Wide windows looked out across a jumble of hospital buildings and car parks, shrouded deep in the oncoming night, dotted with little lights.

In the space between one heartbeat and the next, I thought I saw a shimmer in those darkened windows, a reflected glimmer in headache yellow.

But then it was gone. A trick of the light.

A cluster of drip stands with electronic readouts and bags of saline and other fluids accompanied the machine-like hospital bed, their lines currently stretched out near maximum extension, to-

"Raine!" I breathed in relief, an unbidden smile bursting on my face – and then freezing. "Raine, what are you ... doing?"

"Oh for fuck's sake," said Twil, striding forward.

Raine blinked at us, a rabbit caught in car headlights.

She wasn't resting. She wasn't even in bed. She was halfway across the room, thin green hospital gown hitched up over a truly impressive mass of dressing and bandage and gauze, wrapped expertly and neatly around her upper left thigh, otherwise bare-legged and bare foot. We'd caught her in the attempt to wriggle one arm out of the garment, her dirty bloodstained tshirt in her other hand, ready to pull it on over her head. Her weight was distributed all wrong, leaning on her good leg, half-balanced against the wall. Chestnut brown hair wild and messy, eyes ringed and stress-dark, skin gone grayish.

She looked so vulnerable. My heart broke.

Then Twil reached her and took the tshirt off her with a curse, and I was in front of her, trying to touch her arms but afraid to embrace her lest it hurt her somehow. Raine was blinking back and forth, confused and startled, as if she didn't know exactly where she was and-

"Heeeeeeeeeeeey," she lit up with a huge shit-eating grin, the shutters coming down, the walls going up.

"You've been shot, you massive pillock," Twil was saying at her. "Get in bed and stay there."

“Raine, Raine are you-” I was babbling. “Well of course you’re not okay.”

“Heather!” Raine said my name with such exuberance my heart did a little flip, but the grin on her face kept flickering and jerking, like she wasn’t sure if I was real. She pulled me into a hug, then quickly thrust me back again, eyes shooting past me to the open door.

“Where’s- where’s Evee? Is she- Heather, you-” She grinned at me again, then paused and swallowed, emotions glitching out.

“Evee’s safe,” I said gently. “She’s at home, I brought her back fine. We called Lozzie, she said she told you this. She did tell you, yes?”

Raine blinked at me as if struggling to focus, breathing a bit too hard. Her pupils were dilated, too wide. “ ... yeah. She ... she did. She told me that. Right. Yeah!”

The grin struggled back.

“You need to lie down or you’re gonna fall down,” Twil said. She shrugged the backpack she’d been carrying onto the chair with the rest of Raine’s possessions. A change of clean clothes, a bottle of water, toiletries because we’d expected an overnight stay. “Heather, tell her to lie down. You know she only listens to you.”

“You do need to lie down, Raine.”

“They took my trousers!” Raine told me, still trying to grin. “Cut them off me and wham bam, gone! Wanted those, not every day you get a gunshot trophy.”

Twil caught my gaze and tapped her own temple.

“Yes, I know, she needs to rest,” I said. “Raine, you need to lie down, they’re going to let you go home in a few hours.”

“Can’t keep me here,” she said through the grin. “I’m invincible. I feel great, I am great.”

I gave her a look, and either my intent or the depth of my exhaustion penetrated her panic mania, or whatever this was, and she obediently took me by the shoulder, righted herself, and glanced at the bed, a little sheepish around her sunken, manic eyes.

“Wait up,” Twil said. “Where’s Lozzie?”

“Canteen,” said Raine. “They got lasagnaaaa-aaa-ahhhh-ahhh!”

Twil shook her head and grumbled under her breath. "I'll go look for Loz. Heather, just get her to lie down."

"I'll call a nurse if she won't. Twil, please find Lozzie, I can't deal with two ... two, of this."

"Yeah, I know," said Twil.

"I'm going, I'm going!" Raine said, hobbling toward the bed, forcing me along with her as support, propping her up. "Look at me, going all the going-ness-thing, yeah, back to bed, bedtime for Raine."

Twil rolled her eyes and hurried back out of the hospital room, pulling the door gently shut behind her.

I helped Raine limp over to the bed. She listed to one side like a ship in a storm, wincing softly whenever she put weight through her injured thigh muscle. She sat down on the edge, but when I went to help her lie back, she wouldn't go. She gripped my arm and glanced through the wide windows at the darkness outdoors, as if something had caught her attention, then back to me, blinking and swallowing and panting softly.

"Raine?"

"I ... yeah, I'm here." The grin flickered back on, then off, interrupted by a heavy blink. "Let me get some, uh ... just get up and ..."

She tried to rise again but I pressed down on her shoulders, awkward without leverage. Could she still overpower me, injured as she was? Probably. Raine could carry me without breaking a sweat.

I'd never seen her so vulnerable, not even when she'd been tied up in the Sharrowford Cult's safehouse, enduring hours of unknown fate and the screams of the cultists dying downstairs. She wasn't merely worried about me or Evelyn; some essential fulcrum of emotional regulation had slipped. Like she was trying to smile through the verge of a panic attack, or having a manic episode during a crisis, or didn't really believe that Evelyn was safe and just had to escape to go help her old friend. But also none of those things. Those things I could have said something to, reasoned with. She was in shock of a kind that I did not understand, having a hard time coming back, out of her element, hurt, and would not stop.

"Raine, just sit down, please."

She obeyed, breathing slower with concentration, then laughed softly. "It's- it's the morphine. I am hiiiiigh as a kite, Heather. Out through the stratosphere, with Venus and Mars. Space cadet first class." She sketched me a salute with one hand, brandishing the dosing button on her drip-line with the other, pressing it and pretending to shiver as the morphine hit her veins. Maybe it was real. My heart ached for her. That was Raine, that was normal, but not like this.

"I-I'll take space cadet, over ... " Tears threatened, at memory of Raine's blood. "Over-"

"Hey, hey, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay." Raine hugged me awkwardly around the shoulders, almost slipping off the bed until I pressed her back. She relented with a wink and gestured at the dressing on her bare leg. "Doesn't hurt much, not with all the drugs in me. And it's far better than it going in you." She poked me in the shoulder.

"But you got shot. Raine." I had to blink back the waterworks.

"Ahhhhhhh, it's nothing. Serious, they told me it was pretty shallow, missed everything important."

"No it didn't. It hit you."

"I'm gonna have a limp for a few weeks and it'll hurt like a bitch, maybe ache in the cold when I'm old and grey. Gonna have to change the dressings myself, and come back for tugging all the stitches out – five in front," she pointed. "Six in the side where it came out. But that's all, no rehab, nothing. I'm gonna have the coolest scar, Heather."

She already had scars on her thigh. Shallow rakes across the front and side, wounds from our confrontation with Zheng and the Cult's awful hound-things, in the folded space inside Willow House. Months ago. Another scar, taken for me.

A few tears escaped my control as I stared down at her thigh.

All my fault. I'd taken her Outside, and she was only human.

"I love you," Raine told me suddenly, voice weak and breaking soft. "I love you, Heather."

"I love you too, Raine. And I'm sorry."

She started to lie down sideways, eyelids flickering halfway shut. I shifted the pillow for her. "What happened, after I ... you know. Evee?"

"It's really complicated," I said. "Which is the understatement of Evelyn's life, I think, and mostly her business. But I got her home in one piece."

Raine's eyes drifted shut all the way. "I thought I was going to lose ... had lost. Both of you. Both of you," she mumbled, voice fading, drug-addled and exhausted. "Useless, violence for violence sake only goes so far. No purpose. Run myself out, run myself dead. Can't function without you, not with both of you gone. Couldn't be me. Wouldn't be anything."

"... pardon?"

I froze, inside and out, as Raine's eyes fluttered back open, as she crested the wave of painkiller high and came back down to earth, as she realised exactly what she'd just said, and that I'd heard every word.

Lucid, all here, she stared back at me, *caught*.

"Raine?"

"... it's just the morphine talking." No grin, no energy, no bright Raine.

"I ... R-Raine I can't let that one go. What did you mean?"

And then she grinned and laughed, and I thought I'd lost her again, but she said: "Okay, that was a real transparent porky, I respect you more than that."

She pulled herself back up into a sitting position and ran a hand over her face, let out a sigh that sounded like she'd been holding it for years. She was actually shaking, shuddering, quivering with opiate high or fear or something less comprehensible. "Ahhh fuck."

"N-no, no. Wait." I held up a hand in panic. I wanted to know, wanted to know everything about Raine, but I was terrified everything would change. "You're sick, you've been shot, you need to rest, it doesn't-"

"And hey." She shrugged. "You've got Zheng now, maybe you don't need me-"

“Raine!” I snapped, anger flaring from somewhere hidden and secret. “Stop thinking like that. Right now. I love you, you idiot.”

She met my eyes as if surprised to hear that, then sighed her way into a smile, nodding slowly but still shaking. “That’s good. Yeah. It is good, because without you there’s no such thing as me. There’s flesh and blood, sure,” she nodded down at the dressing on her leg with an attempted ironic smirk, but it dissolved into the cracking pain of her voice. “But there’s no Raine without a reference point.”

nothing more impotent – 11.14

Raine was never fearless.

Perhaps back when we first met, her burning confidence in the face of the unnatural could have convinced me otherwise, in my falsely sheltered naivety. But we'd shared too much intimacy for me to elevate her to that particular pedestal. I had become all too familiar with the mechanics of self-risk, of sacrifice, and of deciding that certain things are more important than fear. To believe Raine's bravery effortless would do her a grand injustice.

I have watched Raine face down monsters without flinching, and fight them without a second thought; I have cowered behind her while she stood between me and certain death and I listened her laugh without care; I have followed her stride into dark places without hesitation, seen her challenge ancient undead creatures and professional psychopaths alike to knife-fight duels, and heard the ring of unstoppable burning certainty in her voice.

And she did all of that without magic, or regenerative tissue, or pneuma-somatic tentacles. A soft, squishy, vulnerable human being. She knows fear, as truly as I do.

But that is not true courage.

A wiser person than I once said that courage is not a man with a gun in his hand. I admire Raine, for standing up to creatures and sights and places that any sensible human being should run screaming from. But that is not what is most remarkable about the woman I love.

Far more worthy of awe was her decision to invite me into her life in the first place.

She has trusted me with – *almost* – everything. Me, Heather, a traumatised mess, not pretty, and not much fun. Fussy, stuffy, weird little Heather, who brought into Raine's life mostly just danger and problems, who might not even be human anymore, who wanted to

grow alien limbs and swim the infinite dark and pit myself against a outer being I could never hope to best. I was quite possibly the most high-maintenance girlfriend imaginable, but she hadn't hesitated. Not once. She had given freely of herself.

She had loved me, with only one final reservation. And now she was at her most vulnerable in the one way I believe truly counted for her – not because she'd been shot in the leg, not because she was in hospital, not because her back teeth were swimming in morphine, but because the foundations of her identity had been threatened. She did not know what to do, had no way out, and no route forward.

She thought she was beaten before she'd even started.

But she'd done it anyway. She had revealed herself as a sculpture of spun glass in my trembling grip, and trusted me to be very, very gentle.

That was bravery.

"There's no Raine without a reference point?" I echoed back at her.

Raine, dressed in a pale green hospital gown that looked about as flattering as a mat of anaemic seaweed, her eyes bloodshot and ringed with the kind of dark internal exhaustion I usually only saw in the mirror, pupils dilated wide with opiate painkiller in her bloodstream, face drawn and pale, her hair a wild mess, a bullet hole in her leg closed with stitches and gauze and bandage, one arm hooked up to drips and machines, managed a nod.

She was shaking. All over. Tears brimmed in her eyes, her breath came in little jerks and starts. Even that nod had cost her.

I pulled her into a hug.

It was a little awkward, with her sitting on the edge of the hospital bed and me standing up, my knees bumping against the thick plastic railing that could be raised to stop a patient rolling out of the covers. It was odd feeling taller than her, with her chestnut-brown hair tickling my cheek, her arms going around my waist and gripping hard. It was weird the way my pneuma-somatic tentacles tried to help, to enclose her in a safe warm cocoon of me that she couldn't feel. But it didn't matter how awkward this was; we could both have been filthy and covered in blood, and I would never have let go. She shook in my grip, so I squeezed and squeezed and

squeezed and felt her tears making a wet patch on my shoulder.

After what seemed like minutes, I said, “We can just stay like this, if you want?”

“And ... ” Raine swallowed, and tried again with a quivering smile in her voice. “And crab-walk home? Local dykes vow to never let go, impossible to get anything done.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“I can’t,” she murmured.

Slowly, carefully, and very reluctantly, Raine pulled away. She did not want to leave the hug, but seemed almost pulled by some inexorable counter-force inside her own muscles – but then she gripped my forearms instead. Anchored herself on me.

She shuddered like a derailed train, or a clock shaking itself apart because some tiny gear had slipped out of position. The soft machine of Raine’s body did not know what to do, stuck between an impossible return and painful forward motion, and for once this was a problem she couldn’t solve by readying herself for violence.

Seeing her like this hurt. Seeing my dashing, heroic, rakish Raine crying and wounded. I wanted to take her home and feed her healthy foods and tuck her into bed. I wanted to tell her everything was going to be okay, she didn’t need to lift a finger, physically or mentally. She needed to rest, to close her eyes and not think too hard. I wanted to stroke her hair until she fell asleep and listen to her breathing to make sure she wasn’t having any bad dreams. I wanted to take responsibility for changing the dressing on her leg, preparing her meals, running her a bath – could she bathe, with her leg like that? I would do it for her then, sponge-bath style, and I wasn’t even remotely joking.

I wanted to lie, say I’d forget all of this, if only she would rest.

But that would be a betrayal of the trust she’d placed in me by speaking. I was so scared of hurting her.

“No Raine without a reference point,” I echoed a second time, gentle, trying to cushion her with my words. “I’d love to know what that means. Do you want to share?”

Raine took a great shuddering breath – and started crying in earnest. She didn’t sob, but tears began rolling down her cheeks.

She swallowed hard and shrugged, as a half-laugh accompanied a terrible mockery of her usual confident grin, a twitching broken thing that flickered onto her face.

“Yes ... and also no,” she managed. “Never have before.”

Then she picked up the morphine-dosing button attached to her drip-line again, and pressed the big red button to ask the machine for more not-caring juice.

“Raine, Raine, it’s okay, it’s going to be okay.”

“Ahhh, who am I kidding? I’m obvious. Eevee’s probably got me all figured out anyway.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. I don’t think Eevee knows everything about you.”

Raine’s awful rictus grin flickered up again. “Lady of mystery, am I?”

“Sometimes.”

I said it as affectionately as I could, but that wasn’t enough. Guilt and pain deepened behind Raine’s eyes as she raised the morphine button again.

“It’s a trap, you know?” she said, crying and laughing and shaking all at the same time. “The button doesn’t actually give you more unless it’s time for the dose. S’just to stop you calling the nurses.”

She kept pressing it anyway.

“Raine, Raine, here, Raine.” I tried to take her face in my hands, to wipe away her tears, but she was flying apart in my embrace.

“Raine, you’re not going to break us. You’re not going to break our relationship by opening up. I won’t *let* you. I love you, and ... and you took a bullet for me, you idiot! I don’t care how complicated or confusing or weird or unique you are inside. I ... I don’t care if you’re a ... a,” I hiccuped. “A sociopath. Or if you’ve got really bad dissociative identity disorder and there’s a dozen of you in there, or if you’re ... I don’t know, a lizard in a person-suit. Yay lizard people, in that case.” It sounded funny, but I wasn’t laughing. “I can probably extrapolate some of it myself, but I don’t want to get it wrong, I don’t want to get *you* wrong, you deserve better, and you’re not going to break us. I’m not going to reject you.”

Raine forced down three sharp breaths like she was drowning.

“No,” she said. “I’m not afraid o’ that. Come on Heather, we both know I’m far too hot for you to ever give me up.”

“Raine.” I tutted gently.

“Hey, I’m deadly serious. No, really. You think I’m joking?”

“I ... ” I rolled the dice. “I think you’re trying to deflect with humour, maybe trying to get your defences back up so you can feel safe again. But you don’t need defences, not with me. I promise. Raine, I promise.”

Raine laughed through her tears, unstable and warbling. “Not deflection. It’s all just me. All me, all over, all the time. Twenty-four seven, three sixty five. Every second I draw breath, it’s me. That’s not what’s messing me up, Heather. I’m not scared of you rejecting me. I’m scared of breaking *myself*.”

I hiccuped. Loudly.

“Then I won’t let you do that either,” I said.

To my surprise, Raine blinked at me and nodded – and took a long, slow, steadying breath that filled her lungs but somehow seemed to deflate her at the same time.

She wiped her eyes on her arm and looked away from me, out of the darkening windows. The rain had picked up again, plunging the city beyond into true night an hour or two ahead of schedule, forming streaks down the glass against the backdrop of Sharrowford streetlights. Raine glanced at the closed door to the hospital room. She was orienting herself in space, trying to peel back the layers of opiate high and opiate fog and opiate cushion. The subtle sounds of the hospital reached us, beeping machines and shuffling feet and soft voices and television chatter, muffled by dozens of walls and miles of insulation and pipe and cable and wipe-clean wall and the living bodies of hundreds of people.

This should be happening at home. But important things rarely happen where they should. Raine needed help, right now, and if I spouted some weak platitude about how I was always there for her, then she might never reach for help again.

Still, a thorn of guilt lodged in my chest. Was this the only way to have this talk? While she was on morphine?

Her eyes lingered on the door.

“If Twil returns with Lozzie, I’ll make them wait in the corridor,” I said, trying to compensate for the guilt. “Out of earshot. If Lozzie eavesdrops I will get angry with her. I mean it, I’ll shout at her. I’ll be furious, and she’ll cry and I’ll tell her off anyway and-”

“S’alright,” Raine murmured.

Like a puppet with her strings tugged, she suddenly drew herself up and took a deep breath. She rolled her shoulders back and tilted her chin up and looked me right in the eye, and suddenly I was the one feeling a little touch of fear, as she woke her physicality, her muscles, her taut stomach and the tilt of her chin, the flex of her biceps and the power in her back as she puffed her chest out. She reached up and ran a hand through her hair, opened her mouth with the kink of a grin, started to say a word.

And fell apart all over again.

This mock-up of her usual self collapsed back into a single shivering sob. She lost it, groped for me again, clutching for support. Tears ran down her cheeks as the words stuck in her throat. She shook so hard I thought she was about to have a seizure.

“Raine, it’s okay, you don’t have to pretend to be-”

“I am a conscious and deliberate construction.”

She panted the words out hard and painful, like regurgitating a jagged rock.

“Always have been”, she carried on with superhuman effort.

“Everything I do, everything I am, is something I choose. All the time.”

I waited, nodding, wide-eyed both inside and out. But that seemed to be all. “ ... okay?”

“Ahhhhhhhhh,” she let out a huge sigh and grinned – a real grin at last, not through the tears and the shaking but part of them, effortless, as if saying those words and drawn back all her confidence. “Oh wow, it’s real, what they say. Truth really does set you free. Never said these things out loud before.”

I blinked at her, but that seemed to be the long and short of it. Apparently that was meant to make full sense.

“Okay. Okay, that’s ... that’s okay,” I tried. “Raine, I won’t think any less of you if you admit to feeling scared when you’re protecting confidence. That’s normal, I think. You can be a mess and scared and weak and I still love you. I don’t care if your ... your ‘hero-thing’ is a front, and-”

“No,” she snapped – actually snapped. “No, I am not a *fake*.”

I almost jumped out of my skin, would have stumbled back if she hadn’t been gripping my forearms, her fingers digging into my flesh. Raine, angry, losing control, blinking at me through hot tears in suddenly clear eyes.

“O-okay, Raine, I-I’m sorry, I-”

“It’s not a front over some ‘real me’, it is me. I feel, I think, I am.” She almost struggled to say it, to believe it herself. “None of me is fake, nothing I’ve chosen to do is false, or a front, or an act. None of it. Choosing doesn’t make me any less real. I’m real. I am.”

I’m real.

She’d said that once before.

In the Medieval Metaphysics room. To a certain theatrical Outsider.

A ball of lead settled in my belly. Shock turned to a shiver of cold sweat down my back.

Raine must have seen the change on my face, because she let go of my arms and held her hands up, horrified, like she’d caught herself about to hit me. I stepped back from her and turned my head to look out of the window, at a memory of less than a reflection. At the shimmer of yellow I’d seen when we’d opened the door to this secluded hospital room.

If this was Raine filtered through morphine and stress, that was one thing. We could deal with that, together. But if she had been pressured into this emotional breakdown, I was about to write a very sharp theatre critique.

“H-hey, Heather, I’m ... I’m sorry,” Raine was saying. “You didn’t deserve that. I know you didn’t mean that, it just set me off.”

“What?” I blinked back at her, my mind already moving seventeen steps ahead of where she’d fallen before I realised what she must have assumed. “No, Raine, no, you’re fine. You didn’t upset me.

Listen, very carefully. Did anybody visit you here, in this hospital room, before I arrived?"

Raine blinked her tears away and all her shaking stopped. She focused on my words with an effort of will. *Bless her she is incredible*, I thought to myself. Even in the middle of what might be the worst emotional crisis of her life, my tone of practical concern, of dangerous mystery, of potential threat, sharpened her mind to a razor's edge. Raine deals with stuff, that's what she does. Even with a bullet wound in her leg and a hole through her heart.

"The doctors, a couple of nurses," she said. "Lozzie was in here. That's all."

"Nobody said anything ... odd, to you?"

She shook her head. Her eyes flickered to the door, alert and ready.

"No, no," I sighed and stepped back to her and awkwardly touched her head to make her look away from the door. "Don't ... don't do that. We're not about to be in a fight. It's not that."

"... oh." She smiled an ironic, self-deprecating smile. "Pity. Would'a helped, probably. Not that I've got a knife on me. You didn't bring my knife, did you?"

"No, I didn't fancy getting arrested if the detective decided to search me."

"Why would he frisk you?" she laughed, a little weak.

"Well, I am carrying that little can of pepper spray you gave me." I sighed. "Which is illegal enough in the first place, so I may as well have brought the knife along too, I suppose."

"Heather!" Raine smiled, impressed. "We'll make an urban commando out of you yet."

"Listen, Raine, I'll just say it plainly. You are telling me all this of your own volition, yes?"

"Yeah," she said. She wasn't crying anymore, but the return to topic drew the smile from her face and put a quiver in her voice. "I want to. Even if this is the end for me. Even if it destroys me. Better to go out with a bang, hey?"

"I won't let it."

She pulled this pained smile, and I realised that Raine had finally encountered something she believed was beyond me.

"I thought Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had gotten to you," I said. "Gotten into your head, perhaps."

Raine raised an eyebrow at me. "Oh. Nah. If she'd insulted me again, about this, I would'a done for her. Knife or no knife."

"I can believe that."

Raine nodded, and glanced down at her hands, making and unmaking her fists. She didn't try to sit up and look cool this time, she just let the tension flow out of her shoulders. She relaxed, consciously, muscle by muscle, until she was throttled all the way down to the lowest possible ebb, idling to keep the engines ticking over.

I had the sudden terrible and certain knowledge that in that precise moment, Raine was just as dangerous as she was at full tension with a knife in her hand. It was like standing in front of a coiled cobra.

My mouth went very dry.

"I've never hidden anything from you, Heather," she said. "I just haven't told you ... " A big sigh, a sad smile. "Where the hell do I start?"

"I'm pretty sure you've been hiding some real emotions. Some. Poorly, I might add."

Raine laughed softly, and hooked one bare foot around the back of my calf. Under the circumstances, it made me shiver – and not unpleasantly. She tugged me closer, and I obeyed.

"Emotions, no. You get me raw and unfiltered, believe it or not. Like I said, I'm no act. A constant ongoing process of self-creation. All the time. But no act."

"Okay," I allowed, and did my best to believe.

"But I've told you one lie. Told it to Evelyn too. Told it to everyone who's ever asked."

"... and that lie is?" I hiccuped. "Raine, please."

"Remember when I told you my parents kicked me out? That's how I ended up homeless before I met Evee?"

“Yes?”

“Well, they didn’t.”

I blinked at her. “That’s your big dark secret?”

“Yeah. I mean, hey, they were probably about to. But I beat them to the punch, left before they could get around to it. ‘You can’t sack me, I quit’. Anyone asks about my family, that’s what I tell them – parents kicked me out because they found me necking with a girl. They hated me enough to do it, stuck-up little-Englander God-botherers with a butch dyke daughter, ‘course that was gonna end bad. Best of my knowledge they’ve never looked for me. An easy lie, because most of it’s true.”

“Whatever else you’re about to tell me,” I managed. “F-fu ... *fuck* your parents.”

“Heeeeeey.” Raine grinned and laughed. “That means a lot, from you. What is that, your entire year’s swearing allowance?”

“I’m making an exception for them.”

“Thanks. Really. Even after like, wow, what, seven years now? Nearly. Even after all that time, that’s nice to hear.”

I squeezed Raine’s shoulder. She kissed my wrist and rested her head against the inside of my arm for a moment.

“But that’s not why I left,” she said.

“Then ... why?”

“Because I had no purpose,” Raine said. “Without purpose, if I’d stayed, I’d probably have killed them both.”

Raine’s eyes bored into mine, and I realised she’d stopped smiling. My throat closed up, I couldn’t swallow. Was she watching me for the correct reaction? Part of me attempted to pull an ironic smile, puff out a little laugh, as if she’d cracked a bad joke. But I couldn’t even twitch my lips.

“I dunno, maybe I should have done.” Raine rekindled her smile and shrugged. “Maybe they deserved it. Maybe I’ve got a little brother or sister I don’t know about now, dealing with their shit all alone ‘cos I’m not there. Maybe I should’a killed my parents. But it wouldn’t have had any purpose, and that’s worse.”

“ ... you’re not even remotely exaggerating, are you?”

Raine cocked an eyebrow at me. “I know what I am, Heather. You used the word earlier. Used it before too, I bet. Maybe even said it to Evee?”

“I-I don’t think you’re a-”

“A sociopath?” she finished for me. “Maybe not. Sociopaths aren’t supposed to have any impulse regulation, any empathy. But I got both of those. At least, I know I do. Because I choose to.”

I nodded, guilty in my own relief. “Yes, yes, you’ve never seemed like a real sociopath, not really. But you ... I mean, you can ... you’re able to ... you know.”

An echo of Raine’s smug grin ghosted behind her bloodshot eyes.

“Violence,” she said. “Yeah. Comes easy for me, and I enjoy it. I do. I enjoy it because I’m good at it, because it’s what I was made for – but only when I have a purpose.”

Raine reached up to brush a lock of hair away from my cheek and tuck it behind my ear. Perhaps she was testing to see if I would shy away from her touch, perhaps she just wanted to let me know she was still mine, or perhaps the gesture had no meaning at all, merely an animal reaction to being face-to-face with her mate, her lover. I did not move away.

“Does that frighten you?” she asked, smile a little sad. “Do I frighten you?”

I let out a gigantic sigh I hadn’t know I was holding and gave her an eye-roll worthy of the grumpiest of teenage sulks, mostly to cover for the way she was making me quiver inside, how the spark of her words and her easy intensity had set a low fire burning deep down in my belly.

“Don’t be so perfectly absurd,” I said.

She blinked twice at me, genuinely clueless.

“It probably should frighten me,” I carried on. “It’s supposed to, any sensible girl would run a mile, but no. You know full well that I’m *turned on* by that sort of thing, that I’m ... I don’t know!” Blushing furiously, I averted my eyes. “If you’re weird and unique and deviant, then congratulations, you found the one girl who fits you

like a puzzle piece.”

Raine’s grin blossomed across her face. She didn’t say a word, she didn’t need to. I blushed and huffed.

“None of this explains ‘no Raine without a reference point,’” I said. “You said you don’t know where to start, why not try the beginning?”

“Ahhhh, the beginning, yeah.” Raine nodded and managed to keep a straight face as she said: “I was born at a very young age.”

“Raine,” I tutted. “That’s the second time you’ve made that joke.”

“And I didn’t speak a word until I was eight.”

That drew me up sharpish. I blinked at her, trying to work out if she was joking.

“Selective mutism,” she said, soft and calm and a little sad.

“Technical term, s’what the doctors said. But they got that wrong, because, hey, they didn’t know what they were looking at. Kids with selective mutism, that’s from trauma, or an anxiety disorder, and I wasn’t anxious. There was no *me* to feel anxious.”

Slowly, feeling a desperate need to be closer to her, I sank down until I was sitting on the bed at Raine’s side, still touching. “Go on.”

She shrugged. “I dunno how to explain it. Don’t think you’ll find it in any diagnostic manual.”

I tutted. “That doesn’t mean anything. I should know.”

Raine smirked. “I guess it was like being dissociated, all the time. Maybe I did have some kind of rare identity disorder, I dunno. It was like I had no ego. I knew I was different to other kids, that bit was kind of obvious. Parents thought I might be autistic, but it’s not that either. It’s just ... me. Over time I started mimicking things I read, and bits of other people, but it was all conscious, I had to do it deliberately. I had to build myself, and I chose every brick.”

“Then you chose some good bricks,” I said, because I wanted Raine to feel good about herself.

“You know it. Once I built enough to be a real person, that was about when I realised I’m real good at violence.”

“Oh.”

“Cut my teeth on school playground bullies. Never pulled the wings off flies or tortured cats or anything, so I thought hey, can’t be a psycho. But then there was this incident. I was ten, I think, and I broke another kid’s ribs. Bigger kid, actually. Some unimportant fight, he was bullying some other boy, just kids being kids. Didn’t even matter who. But I just thought ‘hey, if I keep hitting him, he can never do this again’, so I did.”

“You broke somebody’s ribs at *ten*?” I gaped at her.

“I mean, I had a rock.”

“ ... okay.”

Raine laughed. “It’s no different than what I do for you.”

“I ... I suppose so.”

I tried to imagine tyke-sized Raine, beating the snot out of some other kid, a rock in her hand, until the dry crack of shattering rib bones. It was all too easy. Made me shiver, and for once *not* in the good way.

“He lived. I didn’t kill him or anything. Two ribs broken. Things got kinda messy after that,” she said. “But the school dealt with it. When I got a little older, I realised I like girls, and that made things easier.”

“I can relate to that part.”

“Bet you were never like me though.” Her eyes flashed darkly amused even through her emotional exhaustion. “I was wild.”

I laughed softly. “I can imagine, Raine, I-”

“No, Heather, hey. I’m serious. If you’d met me back then, I would’a scared you off, and you’d have been right to run. The me here now would not want the old me anywhere near you, no way. Got borderline predatory, and I had no shame, didn’t give a fuck. I never forced anybody, nothing like that, never crossed that line, because that would be cross-purposes with the entire ‘me’ I was trying to build, but I am pretty sure I taught more than a few girls how to kiss. Pretty sure a lot of them weren’t even remotely lesbian.”

“Okay. I ... I suppose that’s ... I ... hmm.” I felt myself blush.

“You’re thinking something like ‘I wouldn’t have turned that down’.

Trust me, you absolutely would have done.”

“If you say so.”

“I needed violence, Heather. Violence or sex, or at least sexuality. Those were the only things holding me together. And neither was enough, neither was purpose. I couldn’t finish building me, and I was ... spinning faster and faster.” Her voice got shaky again and she had to blink away the memories. “When my parents were gonna throw me out, I thought that might be what I needed. Get away from all these in-groups that weren’t really in-groups, get myself alone so I could figure out what was me and what was just adaptation, what I was supposed to do, what my purpose was. I wanted to know what I was for.”

“And you were for Evelyn?”

“Not at first.” Raine’s voice had taken on that breathy quiver again, the weight of memory pressing on her chest. “I wasn’t just homeless, though that’s bad enough. Ask anybody who has been. I went ... feral. I stopped thinking. It was like being a kid again, there was less and less of me to hold onto. Turns out without any reference points, without an anchor, I just slip away.”

“Raine.” I wanted to hug her, but she needed to keep going.

“And then I found Evee, yeah. And I knew this was the only way to function. The thing I’d been missing my entire life, the thing I should have been born with. Somebody to protect. Purpose.”

As she spoke, she brightened like a sword in the forge, hot enough to burn to the fingers, eyes like molten steel. My heart skipped a beat.

“I was almost gone when I first saw Evee,” she was saying. “I think that’s why I accepted all this magic shit so easy, when it was right in front of my eyes. I was already ... vestigial. When I rebuilt myself alongside Evee, I was just re-incorporating that stuff. That’s why it doesn’t bother me much, I think. I still remember the moment. I was sitting on the wall of that estate, gonna break in, don’t recall why. She’d been allowed out into the garden to walk around, chaperoned by ... well, by two somethings not unlike Zheng.” A smile, almost manic, flickered on Raine’s lips, an echo perhaps of how she used to be. “And then I saw her. Small, fragile, limping, hunched. And she didn’t like those zombies at her side, oh no, she

didn't want to be there at all. She was as close to destruction as I was. And I *knew*." Raine leaned in close, eyes wide, and gripped my shoulder. I'd never seen her like this before, in the throes of an almost religious ecstasy. "I knew. My violence, everything I am, has a purpose, a purpose I could choose for myself. Protect this girl I didn't even know. That's what I'm for."

Speechless, I just nodded.

"And I felt the same thing when I first saw you," she told me.

Raine came back down with a full-body shudder, like the tail end of an orgasm. She let go of me, then patted my shoulder with a shaking hand, as if she didn't know where to go after that.

"My knight errant," I murmured without meaning to – then blushed tomato-red, stammering. "I-I, s-sorry, Raine, I don't mean to make light–"

"No, exactly." She lit up with a grin. "Exactly. Heather. It's what my violence is for. It's what all violence should be for." She laughed with self-conscious irony. "Protecting those who cannot protect themselves. That thing back in Medieval Metaphysics room, remember that? The doll dressed like me? The thing Seven-Shades made?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, it wasn't wrong."

I thought back to that cruel mockery of Raine, dressed in patchwork, wrapped in garden-wire.

"The wires ... the two red wires wrapped around it," I spelled out slowly, as much for myself as Raine. "They represented what, sex and violence?"

"No. Oh, Heather. No." Raine shook her head and smiled with hot tears returning to her eyes, such pain I wanted to kiss it off her lips. "The wires holding me together are you and Evelyn."

My heart did a little flip. "Oh. Yes. Of course."

"Generalised sex and violence, sleeping around, getting in pub fights, none of that is enough. It's like style without substance. Empty calories. It'll kill me. I have to have a reference point, a foundation to build myself on. An in-group to protect. A ... a

family? I don't know. There's no me without being needed. I never expected you and I to turn out like this, but I fell for you, Heather, hard. And now I need you, I need to be what you need."

Raine finished with a sigh like the world leaving her. She didn't wait for me to reply, didn't expect anything profound, but only laughed a sad little laugh as she wiped her eyes on the shoulder of her hospital gown. She groped for the morphine dosing button again and pressed it a couple of times, but the machine failed to deliver.

"Well," she said eventually, into the growing silence which I could not fill. "Well, there I am. That's all of me. Sorry, Heather, for having to show you behind the curtain and ruin your-"

"Raine, shut up."

I grabbed her face in both hands and kissed her.

I kissed her in the kind of way that two people in a hospital room should not be kissing, lest an unfortunate nurse walk in on them and drop her tray of medical instruments like a cartoon. I kissed her in the kind of way one cannot fake, with a frantic need to communicate a concept that cannot be put into words, a desire to inhale her scent, taste her mouth, consume and imbibe and drink in everything that made her. Raine would have called it 'necking', if I'd let her come up for air. Later on, I called it emergency affection.

We parted, both panting, Raine flushed in the face and blinking at me. I touched a fingertip to my lips, her taste still in my mouth, shocked at my own response.

See how you like being taken by surprise for a change, I thought.

"Have you ever read *Robinson Crusoe*?" I asked.

Raine blinked at me again, and mercy of mercies, blessed be the contours of her face and the beating of her heart, she smiled in bemused incomprehension. "Um?"

"I promise it'll make sense, just trust me to get there," I flustered. "This is the only way I have to explain this. Have you, or not?"

Raine shrugged, still smiling. She wasn't crying anymore. She was interested, excited to listen to me being a weird literary goblin who couldn't explain half of what was in her own head without referencing a book.

"I know the story," she said. "Kinda. Much as anybody does."

"*Crusoe* is a fantasy. A total fantasy." I babbled at high speed, losing control in my desire to make her see what I saw. "He's shipwrecked but he builds a shelter, a house, he creates this whole mini-version of European society *alone*, just exploiting the island and his surroundings and other life and it's a *lie*, Raine. Do you know what happened to the kinds of real people the novel was based on? Real castaways on real islands? They mostly ended up very, very mentally ill from isolation. Living on lichen and rats, drinking seal blood, sleeping in caves – at best. It's all a fantasy. Nobody is an island. Nobody stands alone. Not even you."

Raine blinked at me, and I realised she was blinking back more tears, softer this time.

"... ah."

"You've had to do consciously what most people do without thinking about it," I carried on. "We all have to make identity, and nobody can do that in isolation." I felt like I was reaching into a well, to pull her up, like our fingers had just brushed and I had to strain a little further. "Nobody's an island, Raine. Isolation drives anybody to insanity. And I mean that literally, that's not colourful language. You're just describing a more extreme version of what everybody does, and I don't love you any less for it."

"But will you still need me?" she asked, quiet and grim.

"Raine, even if you were an invalid, if you couldn't walk, couldn't hold a knife. If I had to wipe your bottom for you and spoon feed you, I wouldn't stop needing you, because I'm in love with you. And maybe you're the one not understanding this. Love is a choice too."

"No, no, Heather, it's not, not a choice like I have to make all the time, of what to be—"

"Yes it is! Raine, it is a choice. I made it. I can't unmake it." I looked down to the mass of bandage and gauze around her left thigh, and very gently touched the edge of the dressing, and realised my fingers were shaking. "This. This is my fault, Raine. You got hurt, Evelyn got hurt too. Taking Lozzie, or Zheng, or ... or even Praem, Outside. That's one thing. But you and Evee, you're just human beings in the end. Not like me. You got hurt. You can protect me, yes, but sometimes I'm going to protect you."

Raine opened her mouth, tears shining in her eyes, and for the first time I could remember, she closed it without knowing what to say. She bit her lip, struggling inside, the machine trying to shunt itself back onto its own tracks with emergency power and elbow grease. She needed one final shove.

When she said the words, they came out so tiny, so small, the truest of her fears.

“But that’s not what I’m for,” she said.

“But it’s what I need you to be.”

I had to wring my own hands together to stop them shaking as I waited for the shot to land. I’d taken the best option I could see, grabbed Raine as hard as I could, braced my legs to pull her up from the hole she’d fallen into, but she had to want it, and she was staring at me, wide-eyed and blank faced, bloodshot and the lowest she’d ever been and what if I’d misunderstood, what if I didn’t get her at all, what if I’d hurt her or failed or-

And suddenly she laughed and coughed at the same time, panting with a hysterical fragility. She smiled and shook her head and wiped the threat of tears away on her arm.

“Does that ... ” I couldn’t help myself. I hiccuped. “Does that help? If you need, I could take that ba-”

“No!” Raine came up in a huge grin, shaking her head. “No, you never get to take that back. Never. Heather, you are too clever by half.”

A nervous little smile pulled onto my lips too. “And that’s why you love me.”

“One of many reasons, my dear. Shall I enumerate the stars in the sky?” Raine’s grin grew self-consciously theatrical and before I could stop her, she was getting to her feet, standing up and turning to face me with a ironic little bow like a courtier, absurd in her green hospital gown. Her eyes were shining, no longer with tears. “Thine beauty and wit are beyond counting, the strength of thy limbs and the spirit of thy brow ... something something,” she collapsed into laughter, “I’ve lost my train of thought, Heather. Thank you.”

“Raine,” I tutted softly, blushing. “Improvised ‘ye olde’ poetry is not

the way to win my heart.”

“I’ve already won it, haven’t I?” She winked.

“And you need to rest,” I tutted.

“I need to dance, more like. I could dance with you right now, you know? Spin you round the room and sweep your off your feet.”

“Don’t. But also, good. Are you feeling-”

“Never better.” She sighed and shot me a little salute. “Your psychopath construct girlfriend is ready to resume being herself.”

“Raine! Don’t say like that you’re going to ... close up.”

“I’ve never been closed. And this ain’t no act.” She leaned forward, planted her hands either side of my thighs on the bed, and drew in close, suppressing a wince as she put weight through her wounded leg muscle. The position made my heart leap, even more inappropriate than the kiss earlier.

“It’s just me,” she said.

“... we ... we need to talk about us.” I went squeaky in front of her sudden aggression. “Sometime. And jealousy. And ... Zheng. But not right now. You’ve had enough for one night.”

“Oh?” Raine’s lips kinked. “I don’t think I’ve had anywhere near enough of you.”

“Now that is the morphine talking,” I squeaked.

A knock on the door – three short raps – forced us apart like a pair of teenagers in a bad melodrama, or at least it would have if Raine had been able to straighten up fast enough, or cared enough to try. I was left to do all the work of making it seem like we hadn’t been about get intimate on a hospital bed, scooting back and sideways.

The door opened on cue and Twil stood there in the doorway, paused, and raised her eyebrows.

“... Heather, you were supposed to put her *to* bed, not bed her,” she said.

“I’m not!” I blushed a deep red as Raine straightened up and laughed.

“Yeah, Twil,” Raine shot back. “Get it right. I’m the one doing the

bedding here.”

“Raine!” I hissed, and swatted at her arm.

“Whatever. Save for it home,” Twil grunted. “No coppers coming back to talk to you two in a minute or something, right?”

“Nobody else has been in yet,” I told her. “Why? And where’s Lozzie? You did find her, didn’t you?”

Twil sighed and shrugged and looked back over her shoulder, down the length of the hospital corridor, and gestured with a nod.

A second later, Lozzie appeared in all her fluttery, flouncy glory of pastel poncho and bouncing braid, happy to see us from beneath her heavy eyelids. Both of her arms were hidden all the way inside her poncho, folded around her midsection as she hunched forward, as if nursing a stomach ache.

“Oh, Lozzie, there you are,” I sighed in relief. “Are you okay? Are you feeling sick or something?”

“Sneaking mission success!” Lozzie announced with a fey little giggle. She skipped into the room and Twil pulled the door shut behind her, closing the four of us in.

“Found her in the canteen,” Twil said. “But I had to hang around to uh, play lookout, like. I think hiding from the rozzers has got her kinda hyper?” She was trying to sound unimpressed, but couldn’t quite get there. I blinked, uncomprehending.

“Lasagna!” Lozzie announced.

She straightened up and used an elbow to flip up the hem of her poncho, like a stage magician revealing an animal beneath a cloak. Cradled in her arms lay a stack of four transparent plastic food containers, the kind one might obtain from a hospital canteen. Each one held a very sloppy and meaty looking lasagna.

“Lasagana. Lasaaagaaa,” went Lozzie.

“Did ... did you steal those?” I asked.

“No! I charmed a lunch lady! She was very pretty!”

“... you mean you sweet talked her, yes? You didn’t hypnotise canteen staff or something? Lozzie?”

"She was very convincing. And technically didn't lie," Twil told me, as Lozzie set about tucking the boxed lasagnas into a carrier bag she'd apparently lifted from elsewhere. I boggled, Twil shrugged, and Raine went: "Lasagna!"

"You seem more with it," Twil said to Raine. "So, got shot, huh?"

Raine winked and pointed double finger-guns at Twil. "First tiiiiime!"

"Last time," I said with an unintended whip-crack in my voice. Raine pretended to flinch and salute – then winced hard.

"Ow. Okay," she said. "Still bruised from where I fell over after the bullet. Feels like I've been kicked in the arse with a steel boot. Morphine only does so much." She waved off my useless gesture of comfort – what would I do, anyway? Rub her backside?

Twil rolled her eyes. "You need to be in bed, fucko. And not with Heather."

"Do as she says, please, Raine," I told her.

"Yes ma'am, right away ma'am, my pleasure ma'am," said Raine – but she finally sat down, with a wince as she grasped her leg, and let out a long breath as she stretched out on the bed. I put my hand in hers.

"We still waiting for the doctors, right?" Twil asked. "To give Raine her marching orders and all that?"

I nodded. "I'm staying right here with Raine until she's discharged," I said. "And I suggest you both do as well. And then we're all going home. We have a lot of pieces to pick up."

"Where's Stack?" Raine asked. "Under lock and key?"

"Under Zheng," I said. "Don't think about her yet, please."

"I'm going to eat so much lasagna," Lozzie stage-whispered.

Twil twisted her head sideways to look at the dressing on Raine's leg, and let out a low whistle. "S'a big one alright."

"Yeah, might have to borrow Evee's stick for a few weeks," said Raine.

They were looking at each other, Lozzie was looking at her pilfered

food, and for a brief moment only I was looking at the wide windows out onto the night.

Our reflections stood in the darkness, broken up into static by rain and the distant lights of Sharrowford at night. Lozzie, Twil, Raine on the bed, and me, sitting, looking back at myself.

My reflection winked.

‘Good show,’ mouthed Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight as-me, in private silence.

water of the womb – 12.1

We went home.

Bruised, bandaged, and bullet-holed; aching, exhausted, and adrenaline-crashing; laden down with replacement dressing and gauze and cotton wool, a prescription for antibiotic ointment and a very impressive bottle of painkillers; carrying a hospital-issue crutch and a glossy instructional pamphlet with the inviting title *How to care for your surgical wound* – not to mention smuggling a stack of stolen lasagna – we finally left Sharrowford General Hospital, six hours after we'd arrived.

No police questioned us. No mysterious figures in yellow approached us. No spirits dared irritate me.

We took a taxi, which Evelyn quietly paid for over the phone. A real one, like a tiny bus, with more than enough space in the back for the four of us. Sharrowford's public buses were perfectly serviceable, but the stop nearest to home would still have left Raine limping and hobbling for half a mile to reach our front door, zonked out on morphine.

"God bless the NHS," was the last thing Raine muttered, before she fell asleep on the way home.

Nobody stopped the car. No pallid mask smiled back from my reflection in the taxi's window. Lozzie did not disappear.

It was just us and the slowly passing lights amid the darkness of Sharrowford at night, seen through the back windows of a very ordinary taxi, driven by a very ordinary middle aged man, with a very ordinary radio station playing softly in the front of the car. Raine's sleepy head lolled on my shoulder. Twil chewed her tongue and watched for threats that did not appear. Lozzie protected her haul of stomach-threatening food in her lap, now and again raising her fingers to wave at some roadside pneuma-somatic life, making eyes at giant insects which clung to the sides of buildings, smiling at stalking abominations lurking in alleyways, winking at tree-like tentacles which rose above distant houses.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive rose into view like a dark hillock

growing from a forgotten gap in the orange street-lighting, all shuttered and closed and thorny, camouflaged by ivy and crumbling brick and cracked roof tiles backed by grimy tarpaulin. In a more popular neighbourhood, our home would be the subject of childhood urban legends, the house full of witches and ghosts.

We woke Raine up and helped her out of the car and up the garden path, as she hobbled along and laughed at her own clumsy inexperience with the crutch tucked under her left shoulder.

Home.

Through all my teenage years, my family home was never a true refuge. Home meant punctuation between stays at Cygnet children's hospital, or the long stagnation between the few opportunities to go to school. Home meant taking my medication on time, pretending I didn't see monsters, and trying to make my parents happy. Home meant denying Maisie ever existed. Home was not unsafe, but neither was it mine.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive was a fortress.

A Saye fortress, perhaps an outpost of that greater, older, semi-abandoned fortress down in Sussex, that estate full of magical secrets and rotten memories that Evelyn would one day inherit. And we'd cross that bridge when we reached it, I would help her clean out that old manor house and banish her mother's ghost, if that was what she wanted. But this fortress here in Sharrowford was, for the moment, ours. Warm, full of the people I love, protected from the nightmares that had plagued half my life, and quite possibly the safest place in the world from which to sally forth and rescue my sister.

Praem opened the door and spilled light across us as Raine limped up the steps. We got her over the threshold and into the warm soft-lit familiarity of the front room, and once that door was closed stout and sensible against the night outside, locked and bolted and double-checked, once we were in and home and safe, I felt so much better.

I'd lived there for only six months, but this beautiful, tumbledown, creaking old house felt more like home than anywhere else I'd ever known.

We had little spare energy for decompression or sentimentality,

busy dropping bags and handing off medical supplies, Lozzie trotting off to stash her lasagnas, us bumbling about to help Raine get her shoes off, Praem holding her under the arms to keep her steady.

But Evelyn had been waiting too.

She greeted us by walking up so close to Raine, with such a conflicted expression on her face, that I thought she was going to give her old friend a hug.

But then Raine roared “Evee!” with a bouncing grin, and Evelyn stopped short.

“Yes, Raine, hello,” Evelyn sighed. “Glad to see you’re in one piece again.”

“Evee, Evee, Evee, you know a bullet’s not gonna stop me. I eat lead for breakfast. I defecate lead.”

“She is on a lot of painkillers,” I said.

“Evidently,” said Evelyn.

“And what about you, yeah?” Raine asked. She attempted to gesture with the crutch, but she wasn’t anywhere near as experienced as Evelyn, and if Praem hadn’t been holding her, I suspect she would have fallen over and dragged us all down in a tangle and probably popped her stitches open. “Feeling better? You better not go walkies again. Next time we’ll set Twil on you, and she’ll sniff you out right quick, ‘cos she’s got your scent, she’s got it goooooood.”

“You’re so lucky you’re on drugs,” Twil muttered, blushing.

“Raine,” I coaxed from down below, still trying to get her shoes off. “Lift your right foot now, come on.”

Evelyn was giving Raine a slow look up and down. Her gaze settled on the ugly grey NHS-issue crutch wedged under Raine’s left armpit.

“In some ways, I am better now than I have ever been,” Evelyn said. She nodded at the crutch. “Those things are terrible. If you’re planning on using it for more than a day or two, you’re going to want to wrap a hand towel around the armpit cradle, and keep it in place with tape, or eventually it’ll chafe when you walk. And the handle gets slippery, you’ll want something on that too, but I don’t

know if we have anything.” Evelyn flicked a question at me. “How long is she supposed to go without immersing the stitches in water?”

“Uh, at least three weeks,” I answered, finally pulling off a shoe. Raine wiggled her freshly un-shod toes against the floorboards. “Then she’s got a check up, they told us not until then, at the earliest.”

“Three weeks, not too bad,” Evelyn grumbled. “I assume they’ve given her tramadol and a dosing schedule? You’ll have to track that, Heather, because Raine’s terrible at it. Make sure she takes them on time, or the pain’ll creep up on her and she’ll pretend it’s not happening.” Then she added, without missing a beat, unimpressed and droll: “Don’t ever get shot again, Raine.”

“Thas’ tha’ plan,” Raine said, and pointed double-finger guns at Evelyn, almost dropping her crutch.

“You are too important to get shot, you idiot.”

“Hey, woah, Evee-” Twil started.

“And you’re too important to walk off into the infinity library, little miss Saye,” said Raine, a manic light sparking in her eyes. “I love you, you dingbat. You super-massive giant arse-fool. You shit-goblin. Evelyn Saye, without you, I’d be dead in a ditch. I’d have eaten my own legs. I’d have bitten a policeman to death and be doing forty years in plastic cell with a muzzle on my face. Don’t walk off into the dark, Evee!”

Evelyn’s face flickered with the spark of a blazing frown, but the conflagration collapsed into a mortified blush as Raine went on, so Evelyn just huffed and looked away. “Yes, we’ve established some rather convincing reasons for that.”

“Hello,” Praem intoned.

“Get her upstairs and into bed,” Evelyn snapped. “Before the painkillers wear off. She looks liable to fall down.”

“Hey, I only fall down precisely when I damn well mean to fall down,” Raine returned with a grin, even as I tried to steer her toward the stairs. “And what about baldie in the basement? We gonna rake her over the coals or what?”

“She’ll keep a night,” said Evelyn. “Go to sleep, Raine.”

"You've got Zheng watching her, right?" The smile dropped out of Raine's voice, her eyebrows drawing together in concentration, pushing past the morphine and exhaustion. "Don't leave her alone, not for a second. I don't care if you break both her ankles and glue her hands together, somebody needs to watch her."

"It's cool, Zheng won't budge," said Twil. "I've tried."

"Yes, yes," Evelyn grumbled. "She's not going anywhere, not ... yes, Lauren?" Evelyn cleared her throat. "What is it?"

Lozzie had spent the last two minutes emerging from the kitchen again and slowly creeping up alongside Evelyn, in plain view, as if approaching a particularly skittish cat, one prone to clawing and hissing. An impish little smile graced her face, and she held one of her hard-won pasta treats in her arms.

"Evee-weavy, want some lasagna?" she asked.

"... what?"

"Hospital lasagna," I sighed.

"Many lasaganaaaa!" went Lozzie, grinning like the wonderful little loon she was.

Evelyn was totally lost, staring at Lozzie as if the younger girl had just grown a second head. "Hospital lasagna?" she managed eventually.

"Yeah!"

She turned to me for help. "Heather?"

I shrugged. "You can say what you want. Lozzie won't be offended."

"I can share," Lozzie stage-whispered to Evelyn. "But don't tell anybody else."

Evelyn stared at her a moment longer, then let out a grumbly noise like a old steam engine breaking down. "Let's just say I have the stomach of a forty year old. No thank you, Lauren-"

"Lozzie!" chirped Lozzie.

"... no thank you, Lozzie. I will allow you to reap the ... benefits of hospital lasagna by yourself. Heather, are you certain you should be letting her eat all this?"

“It’s her choice.”

Lozzie bounced a miniature curtsy and scurried off into the kitchen, followed moments later by the clunk of the microwave door popping open.

We had slunk back behind our castle walls, to sleep and snuggle and play, to lick our wounds and make fresh plans.

The Saye house felt like a castle indeed.

We even had a dungeon.

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“Tenny? Tenny, it’s very sweet of you,” I murmured, “but we have to let auntie Raine sleep now.”

“She’s fiiiiine,” Raine slurred. Her head was sunk deep in the pillow, bleary eyes barely open. “She’s purring. S’nice. Good puppy.”

“Pup-pay,” Tenny imitated in her fluttery trilling.

Raine wiggled a hand out from under the covers and stroked Tenny’s fluffy head, in mirror of how I was stroking Raine’s hair back from her sleep-addled face.

“Yes, Tenny is a good puppy.” I cleared my throat softly. “But you do need to sleep.”

“Purring has healing properties,” Raine said. “She knows what she’s doing. Good girl, goooood girl.”

Tenny’s purring had taken us by surprise. The deep sonorous vibration originated from within her chest, a long back-and-forth trill in sync with her breathing, not unlike that of a puma or a cheetah, more *felidae* than *lepidoptera*. She’d purred a few times before in fluttery fits and starts, back when we’d encouraged her into the bath shortly after her rebirth into physical flesh, but this purring was the real deal. It made her whole body vibrate in soft, slow, soporific waves. Though I was sat on the opposite side of the bed, and above the covers, I could still feel the purr through the mattress.

When I’d finally helped Raine up the stairs, with Twil trailing behind in case we needed extra lifting power, Tenny had emerged from Lozzie’s room like an animal summoned by tasty food smells.

Perhaps that was the real reason, perhaps she could smell Lozzie's lasagna in the microwave downstairs. She'd stared at us for a moment, big black eyes blinking, fluffy white fur bristling, feathery feelers twitching in thought. Some of her tentacles had still been rapidly solving a double-sized Rubik's cube and some others were holding a children's picture book about dinosaurs. She'd dropped both of those, tentacles extending back behind her to dump them in the bedroom, and then she'd gone straight for Raine.

Bless her, she'd sensed something was wrong.

Animal instinct or sentient intellect, I don't know which she was following, but she decided that her top priority was to accompany us to bed, and that her proper place was snuggled up alongside Raine like a living water bottle equipped with a massage attachment. She'd even wrapped several of her silken black tentacles around Raine under the bed covers – gently, of course, laying them across her chest and belly and pressing either side of her wounded thigh. More of her tentacles lay across the sheets, twitching occasionally.

“Goo’ girl?” Tenny trilled, blinking big black eyes at me.

I sighed inside, but smiled all the same. “Yes, Tenny, you’re a good girl. But if you’re going to stay there, you have to be quiet and still, so Raine can sleep.”

“Nap,” Tenny said, and had a little trouble with the ‘p’ sound. She snuggled down tighter, wiggling her bottom, and very purposefully closed her eyes.

How could I say no to that?

“Don’t leave the house, okay?” Raine murmured, eyes closed, right on the cusp of sleep. “Don’t go outdoors while I’m sleeping.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I whispered.

I kept stroking Raine's hair until her breathing softened and deepened, and I was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was asleep. Then I waited for a long time, sitting cross-legged on the bed right next to her, surrounded by the fuzzy edges of the shadows cast by the one lamp we'd left on. Her body seemed so indistinct bundled beneath the covers, curves and lines blurred by the thick duvet. Beyond the warm cocoon of our bedroom, the little sounds of the house at night creaked and ticked, and in the middle

distance I could hear cars passing, far away on one of Sharrowford's main roads.

The ghost of a stress headache nipped at me. My stomach was a numb hole in my midsection. My eyes were full of sand.

My head should have been nodding with exhaustion, after the day we'd had, but I'd passed beyond tired and out the other side.

I made no conscious decision to stay awake when all others were sleeping, but obeyed a dual directive from endocrine system and abyssal instinct, combined together into a lizard brain far more capable than the slow executive decision maker in my frontal lobe. Lizard brain said my mate was hurt, and I needed to guard. Lizard brain said walk the castle walls, look out for saber-toothed tigers and leviathan predators and shadowy infiltrators. Lizard brain said no sleep.

Conscious brain watched for a scrap of yellow in my peripheral vision, but none came. Yet.

"Tenny?" I eventually whispered, and got no response. I sighed and stretched my back, feeling vertebrae pop.

If Tenny hadn't been here, I would have stood – or at least sat – vigil the whole night, which would have justified quite a telling off in the morning. Instead I eased myself off the bed, so as not to wake Raine or disturb her living water bottle, and curled my cold toes inside my socks as I considered going downstairs, to at least put some nutrients into the hole in my face.

At least, that's what I told myself I was going to do, that's what I focused on, to keep my pulse rate down and my stomach from churning.

I tugged on a second pair of socks to keep off the worst of the cold – the rain had weakened earlier as the clouds had broken, but that had served only to deepen the night's chill – and found I really did not want to leave Raine alone, even with Tenny here. I stared back at her on the bed, buried in covers, snuggled up with Tenny, a big black and white purring lump.

"She's not alone, don't be silly," I whispered to myself. "We're all here. We're all home."

I ran my eyes over the single window, the enclosure of the walls,

over our discarded clothes and Raine's desk and the little piles of my books like rock sculptures. In my mind I saw past them, to the beams underfoot, the plaster and brick, the pipes and wires, the secret wards laid down by Evelyn's ancestors and reinforced by her grandmother, the bones of the house unchanged for a century or more.

"Keep her safe," I murmured.

Tenny didn't respond, but I wasn't speaking to her.

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At least one other resident of number 12 Barnslow Drive was still awake.

After I crept downstairs in the dark and picked way through the detritus in the front room – and checked that yes, Twil's battered old trainers were still by our front door – I discovered the kitchen lights burning bright, and ventured inside to find Lozzie sitting at the kitchen table, working on a second helping of lasagna.

It appeared to have defeated her.

One empty sauce-stained container lay on the table, scoured of its contents, but the second one in front of her was only a third gone. She seemed to have given up, eyes heavier than usual, a spoon loose in one hand. She had a book open on the table too, a dog-eared paperback which must have come from the small library in Evelyn's study upstairs. Her braid was half undone, loose hair dangling toward the floor, and she was crouched on the chair like a little pixie gargoyle, her pastel-tricolour poncho over her knees like a tiny tent. Sleepy eyes rose to meet me.

"Heathyyyyyy," she said.

Stack's gun still sat in the middle of the table, like the centrepiece of an altar to industrial death. I tried not to look at it.

"Lozzie?" I said softly. "What are you doing still up? It's almost eleven. You've had as long a day as the rest of us."

"Eatinnnnnnnn-guh." Lozzie elongated the word and tilted her head back in childish defiance.

"Finished eating, by the looks of it," I said. "Eyes bigger than your stomach?"

“Mmmmm,” Lozzie made a grumpy sound and pouted at the unfinished lasagna. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Really, Lozzie, don’t you want to sleep?”

“Night Praem says it’s fine.”

“Night Praem?” I echoed.

“Night Praem,” said Night Praem.

I jumped in surprise at the silver-bell sing-song from over my shoulder. All my phantom tentacles whipped around in protective impulse, one hand clutching my heart and all the breath going out of me before my conscious mind caught up and I wheezed. It was just Praem. She’d been standing next to the doorway and I’d missed her, too focused on Lozzie as I’d walked in.

“Oh, goodness, Praem. I didn’t see you there.”

She stared back at me, milk white eyes in her expressionless face.

With her habitual maid uniform ruined back in Carcosa, Praem was wearing clothes borrowed from Evelyn, a form-fitting grey ribbed sweater and a long purple skirt that I’d never seen Evelyn actually wear before. She had at least managed to dig up replacement black tights, but lacked any footwear, and her blonde hair was still a singed mess, curled up at the ends here and there, burned patches elsewhere. Her neatly folded hands sported a few plasters to cover some scratches, and I very much hoped – and suspected – that Evelyn had taken care of her other grazes and bumps.

“Mmm, well,” I had to take a couple of deep breaths. “When you say ‘Night Praem’, I imagine you dressed up in black lace and heavy eyeshadow, like a ‘goth’, is that the right word? Would you like that sort of look, Praem?”

“Black eyeliner,” Praem intoned.

“We can get you some, if you like?”

“To try.”

I nodded. “It’s good to see that you’re all cleaned up. I mean ... are you ... ” I struggled for the right words. “It’s a been a big day for you too, hasn’t it? How are you holding up, Praem?”

“I am loved,” she intoned.

“Praem’s been telling me all about it!” Lozzie added.

“That’s ... great! Yes, Praem, yes you are.” I smiled at her, happy for whatever she’d decided but somewhat at a loss to answer that. “Where is Evee, anyway? And everyone else?”

“Evee-weavy and and fluffy went upstairs,” Lozzie supplied.

I assumed ‘fluffy’ was Twil. Who else would it be?

“Oh. Oh, that explains ... um ... ” I glanced at Praem and Lozzie giggled. I’d seen a light burning under Evelyn’s bedroom door upstairs, but hadn’t lingered to eavesdrop. Perhaps her and Twil were working things out, or perhaps *working things out*. Perhaps I should have knocked gently and stepped in to mediate. Now I was glad I hadn’t.

“Sleeping,” Praem corrected my blush-inducing assumption.

“Together?” I asked.

“No.”

“Ah. Well.”

“Well,” Praem intoned, and she could not have put it better.

“Kim came home too,” Lozzie said. “Doesn’t like to talk to me though. And Zheng’s down in the coal chute with scaryhead.”

“Scaryhead,” I echoed. “Indeed.”

I felt my gaze drawn sidelong, through the open door to the little utility room in the rear of the house. The cellar door still stood open. Nobody had thought to switch the light on back there, so all was shrouded in thick shadows tainted by the distant orange glow of Sharrowford’s street-lightning. A tiny light glowed deep down in the cellar, beckoning me to my task.

“Heathy?” Lozzie chirped. I cleared my throat and rubbed my clammy palms on Raine’s big hoodie. I was still wearing it, and very glad for it right then. Armoured in her.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just ... ” I looked at the door again.

“*Pbbbbt*”, Lozzie blew a raspberry noise. I blinked at her in surprise and she shrugged, smiling like a little imp.

“I suppose that’s as good a summation as any. *Pbbbbt* indeed,” I

added. Lozzie giggled and bobbed side to side on the chair. “Does ... does Amy Stack scare you, Lozzie? It can’t be good having her in the house.”

Lozzie shook her head, most emphatically, hair going everywhere. “Stack is poop.”

“Poop?” I echoed delicately.

“Poop.” Lozzie lit up with a sneaky smile beneath heavy eyes. “I don’t really know her! She never came to the castle. My brother knew her from somewhere, I dunno how, and she did stuff for money and that’s bad, yeah, but she never hurt me or anything, so I dunno, but she’s working for my uncle now and that’s really bad, a really bad thing to do, he was always worse than Alex. Alex kinda loved me in his own way even if he was bad, and he’s gone now but uncle Ed is different. So Stack is poop.”

“Breakable arms,” Praem intoned – softly.

“We can’t keep her here for long,” I murmured, and turned to stare at the cellar door again. This problem would not go away by itself, this captive in our dungeon.

Lozzie slid the unfinished lasagna toward me. “Bite?”

I puffed out a big sigh. “Oh, why not? I could do with some fortifying.”

“Spoon!” Lozzie held out the spoon as I finally approached her side. “Have it all if you- oh!”

Lozzie chirped in giggly surprise as I bent down and gave her a hug. I buried my face in the shoulder of her poncho, soft and faintly fluffy, and linked my hands across her lower back as she wiggled to return the embrace. She smelled of spicy pasta, strawberry shampoo, and the undeniable lingering scent of dust and old books. Carcosa, brought back with us.

“That’s better,” I sighed.

“Mmm,” Lozzie purred into my chest.

After I had my fill of Lozzie-derived oxytocin, I let go and straightened up, and fully intended to accept the spoon and fill my belly with at least a bite or two. But my eyes met the awful lump of black metal resting in the middle of the table. Our profane trophy.

"I don't like it either," Lozzie stage-whispered.

"It doesn't have to stay there," I said, as firm as I could.

"Didn't want to touch it."

Time to banish the firearm. With a tea towel wrapped around my hands – I didn't want to touch the gun either, feeling vaguely superstitious – I lifted it off the table by the weird metal shoulder bit and the thick cylinder around the barrel, and found it surprisingly heavy. Pointing it at the floor in case it somehow went off by accident, I kept my fingers well away from anything that looked like a mechanism, and held my breath until I deposited it safely onto the kitchen worktop, with the barrel pointed at the exterior wall.

"I'd put it straight in the bin," I said to nobody in particular, "but that would be one awful surprise for the bin men. And I suppose we might need it. Maybe Raine can take it apart."

"As revenge!" said Lozzie.

I returned to the table and accepted Lozzie's spoon, and sat down next to her as I chewed a mouthful of faintly spicy lasagna. The hospital didn't skimp too badly on the canteen food, it was filling and meaty and felt like concrete bricks in my belly as I went for a second and third spoonful. Lozzie rubbed my back, but I stopped eating when I realised the battered old paperback she'd been reading was a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*.

She followed my numb gaze to the book and flipped it shut to show me the cover – an old illustration of a tiny blonde girl talking to the disembodied grin of the Cheshire Cat. At least the grin wasn't yellow.

"I like it," said Lozzie.

"I ... don't," I admitted.

"It's nothing like your Wonderland. It's fun! I wish I could meet Alice. She's smart."

I gave Lozzie a smile and handed the spoon back. She giggled and took another – very small – bite for herself.

"You were very smart today, Lozzie," I told her, "to keep away from the police in the hospital. Maybe you're more like Alice than I am."

“Mhmm!” she mumbled through a mouthful of lasagna, then swallowed and added: “Don’t wanna be found! Can’t do anything about me, I’m an adult now, but I can’t prove it and uncle Eddy could forge stuff and ... mmmm ... ”

She pulled a frowny thinking face, tongue working over her teeth inside her mouth.

Lozzie had nowhere to be except Outside, or by my side. I’d freed her, killed her brother, dismantled the cult she’d spent her life bound to, and I was vaguely aware her parents had not been around for quite some time. Without us, she would be homeless, penniless, and alone, but for spirits and the Outside, and she was currently cut off from one of those. Did she even have a birth certificate? A national insurance number? Was anybody except us mages and monsters aware of her?

As far as mundane society knew, Lauren Lilburne might not even exist.

“You’re sort of unpersoned, aren’t you?” I murmured softly. Lozzie turned to me and made her eyes big in surprised incomprehension, spoon sticking out of her mouth. “Lozzie, I hope you don’t mind me asking. Did you ever go to school?”

“Yeah, primary school!” she chirped.

“Oh.”

“For like a year, mum and dad did try! And I remember kind of enjoying it, but then it was all homeschooling because of the things mum and dad had to do, and then I met the big friend under the castle and everything changed and there was no more mum and dad, just me and Alex.” Lozzie bit her lip as her bouncing tone faltered, tripping on the history behind the words. “He never forgave me for anything. He never sent me to school.”

To her brother, to Alexander Lilburne, had Lozzie at least been a person? Perhaps, perhaps less. But what was she to Edward, to her uncle?

I could bend the fabric of reality to my will, could grasp the slick-black controls behind the world, if I was willing to pay the price in blood and pain and flirt with the edge of the abyss, but even I couldn’t have completed Evelyn’s gateway. I lacked the technical knowledge, the comprehension, the insight.

But Lozzie didn't lack anything. She'd given us the first pieces, back when Alexander had forced her to set up the kidnapping attempt, when I'd been snatched by Zheng so many months ago. Lozzie had finished Evelyn's work in finger-paint scrawl, crying, reluctant, in panic. And when we'd needed to go to Carcosa, Kimberly could not have finished the gate, the true gate to Outside. The attempt had been breaking her, twisting her mind down pathways the human brain was not meant to comprehend – until Lozzie had stepped in, and just done it.

This was what Edward Lilburne wanted. This was why her own brother had imprisoned her in a castle like a captive princess. Lauren Lilburne was a treasure-trove of inhuman knowledge, inherited in desperate love and good faith from the Fallen Star Outsider, beneath the cult's castle.

And right now she was biting her lip, looking back at me with nervous tension in her heavy-lidded eyes.

“Lozzie? What's wrong?”

“Um ... Heathy? W-well, I don't have any other family, so-”

“*Lozzie*,” I tutted, without even thinking. “Don't be silly. You have me.”

She blinked those sleepy eyes and all the strange nervous tension flowed back out of her, leaving behind just Lozzie. She giggled and rocked in her chair and cast her arms around my shoulders.

“Heathyyyyy,” she crooned.

“I don't know what we are to each other, Lozzie, but you're family if you want to be,” I went on, and realised I could only say this without thinking about it because I was so utterly exhausted. “And if you have me, you have Raine too. And Zheng. And ... maybe Evelyn, though I know she can't deal with you.”

“She can!” Lozzie giggled.

“She can not,” Praem joined in.

When Lozzie eventually pulled away and sat back in her chair, she had to wipe her eyes on the hem of her poncho, though she was smiling bright now.

“I didn't thank you for the knight earlier, either,” I told her. “That

was another good call, more smart thinking.”

“Yeah,” she said, then smiled a bit sadly. “He died too. They’re all so good to me, but they deserve better, but they want to help you, they’re *for* helping you. I can’t make them and give them purpose and then tell them no ... but, I don’t like it when they die. I wish I could bring them all here.”

“The house would get a bit crowded,” I said, not unkindly.

“Yeah,” Lozzie giggled.

“I’d like to see them sometime. If you made them to help me, I owe it to them, to ... ” To what was inside the armour, but I needed to stand before the things themselves and ask Lozzie questions, and I couldn’t do that yet. I sighed, my thoughts turning to other problems. “I haven’t attempted a Slip in a while. Have you? Are the hands still there?”

The dead grasping hands on our ankles, that kept us here when Lozzie or I tried to Slip.

Lozzie nodded, wrinkling her elfin little nose. “I wish we knew where my brother’s body went.”

“You really think it’s him?”

I’d suspected the same thing, but didn’t like to put it in words.

Lozzie stared at the tabletop and chewed on her bottom lip. “He used to catch me. After mum and dad were gone. When it was just him and me, and all his followers. I used to escape a lot, go Outside, go everywhere. But every time I came back he’d find me and make me come home. With words and promises and stuff. I was kind of bad at finding food sometimes.” She shook her head. “And then he got me to come to the castle and I couldn’t run away anymore. It feels like him.”

“Lozzie. Oh, Lozzie.” I reached out and put an arm around her shoulders. “We did see his body, Lozzie, in Glasswick tower,” I gently reminded her – then stumbled on the memory of that shattered corpse which I had made, that corpse of which not a single cell had rotted away. “He was, well, very dead. He was just a vector for the Eye. And, um, it’s really gruesome, but ... well ... we ... ”

“Pulled his head off,” Praem supplied.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, thank you, Praem.”

“Thank you, Praem!” Lozzie said – and she was neither disgusted, nor giggling. She really, really meant it, earnest and grateful. “But where did it go? After the tower? Where did all his followers take it? I want to know!”

“Maybe to the house where they did their ritual,” I said. “Maybe it burned.”

“Maybe,” Lozzie said, small and doubtful.

“God grant he stay dead.”

Praem spoke the words in lilting sing-song cadence. I recognised them instantly, a small variation of the epigraph Evelyn had chosen for her mother’s gravestone. Mages, difficult to put down for good.

Lozzie didn’t say anything, but she lit up at Praem in a big smile of mixed gratitude and sadness, nodding emphatically.

“And I can always do it all over again,” I said. “A second time.”

“Heather,” she whined, and pulled me back into a hug and clung on tight. We stayed that way for long enough for her to calm down, to stop shaking and to roll her head on my shoulder with the lazy, full-belly sleepiness of having eaten too much after a long day.

Murder had not been easy, and had brought no sense of satisfaction. But it had kept Lozzie safe. That was worth some portion of my soul.

= =

‘Basement’ was not the proper architectural term for the single underground room of number 12 Barnsloew Drive. The correct word was *cellar*.

Steep flagstone steps led down into gloom and stale air, always the same temperature no matter the time of year, no matter the storms or squalls or baking sun that battered the house above. Bare redbrick walls, no windows, and only a pair of tiny ventilation slits high up near the ceiling, the other ends of which I suspected had been blocked up decades ago. Two bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling, and four thick beams of very old wood helped brace the rest of the building against its own foundations.

Considering the age of the house, the cellar’s original purpose had

probably been coal storage. The remains of an ancient coal-fired boiler stood testament to this history, a grand old thing rambling across one dark corner, cold for a half-century at least. A few empty wine racks against one wall showed the other use to which the cellar had once been put.

Evelyn's family had used this space for more disturbing things, and I did not like to come down here.

The remains of many magic circles showed through as faint lines on the flagstone floor. A pair of long wooden boxes lay toward the back – open and empty, thankfully, of anything but a few scraps of cloth – unmistakable as coffins. A crate in a corner lay abandoned, covered in strange stains and shattered long ago from the *inside*. A twisted metal sculpture sat on a workbench, all blades and points and razor-sharp edges that would make it a nightmare to move, and small rusty-red patches attested to previous unwise attempts to lift the thing. Our own addition had joined the mysteries: a warded and circled wire mesh cage where Evelyn had kept the now-dead possessed rabbit.

A modern electric boiler glugged and hummed happily away to itself, shining a handful of green LEDs across the absurd occult detritus.

Our dungeon.

I'd left Lozzie upstairs with Night Praem and ventured down alone, curling my toes against the chill in the flagstones, half in hope that Lozzie would go to bed and half wishing that they would wait for me to return. I didn't fancy being alone after this, but neither would I subject Lozzie to what might have to be done. My stomach clenched up into a hard ball, and down into the dark I went, stepping out onto the cellar floor.

"Shaman," came a purr.

"Zheng," I breathed in relief. "Hi. Hello. Oh, it is good to hear you."

The giant demon-host was propped up against the wall past the end of the stairs, a silent sentinel in the gloom, wrapped in her long coat, still in the clothes she'd worn to Carcosa, hands in her pockets. Sharp, slow, unsmiling eyes found mine, and she extended a hand, fingers splayed at my head-height.

"Here, shaman."

I went to her, hopping and pattering my feet in vain to spare my toes from the cold. I went straight past her hand as she tried to lay it on my head, and in the way that only a small person can slip into the personal space of a very tall person, I slid my arms beneath her coat and hugged Zheng around the middle.

She was so warm, like a banked fire inside her clothes. I squeezed her and nuzzled her without thinking and laid my head against her chest and tucked the sides of my feet up against her, seeking heat. I didn't care if she hadn't changed since Carcosa, Zheng needed to belong as much as the rest of us. She smelled of dust and books too, but also of hot spiced sweat and warm skin.

I realised after a few moments that she was not hugging me back. I looked up.

“ ... Zheng?”

“Shaman,” Zheng laughed a deep rumble, then finally placed a hand on my head and wrapped her other arm around my shoulders, pressing me to her. “Deft. Quick. You surprise me always.”

It was entirely platonic, entirely safe, but still my heart gave a little trill inside my chest.

“Don't be silly,” I said as I started to blush, only just realising what I'd done. “I just wanted to hug you. It's been an emotional day, and I haven't seen you since we got back.”

“Our catch must be watched.” She pointed past me.

I let go of Zheng and took a half step away, fingers lingering on her heat, and finally turned to face what I'd descended down here to do.

Beneath the thin light cast by the pair of naked bulbs, tied to an old chair with thick ropes and skilled knots, with wrists bound behind her back and a faint bruise on her chin and an expression like a stone carving, Amy Stack stared back at me.

Eyes like chips of frozen flint, her grey athletic wear and thin raincoat scuffed and twisted beneath the ropes around her thighs and belly and chest, muscles like a web of steel cables. The stubble on her shaved scalp was a touch longer than when we'd last met, as if she'd given up on proper grooming or decided to grow it out. As I watched, she flexed a thigh muscle, then her stomach, then a

shoulder. Searching for a weakness in the ropes. The tattoos on her throat shifted as she tested her bonds.

Restrained and rendered harmless, she still terrified me. My heart rate spiked and cold sweat broke out down my back and my mouth went dry. My head felt oddly light, my pulse heavy in my throat. My phantom tentacles hovered in hair-trigger readiness.

“Stack,” I managed. “Or ... Amy?”

“Morell,” she answered, flat and affectless.

“Amy,” I repeated, making my decision.

“How’s your girl?” she asked.

Not the question I’d expected. I had to gather myself before I could answer. “Raine is going to be okay. It was a clean wound. She’ll walk with a crutch for a few weeks, but she’ll be fine.”

“ ... pity,” said Stack.

It was the most fake word I’d ever heard come out of Stack’s mouth. I think she tried to make it sound bitter or full of venom, but it fell so flat one could almost hear it splat on the cold flagstone floor. I blinked at her.

“Okay, well, that was absurd. You clearly didn’t even mean that,” I sighed, deeply unimpressed. “What are you trying to do?”

Stack stared at me, and said nothing.

Apart from the rope and the chair, Stack was also contained by a fresh magic circle drawn directly on the floor, in chalk, a simple spell of only a single enclosure and a few symbols, with some Latin running around the edge. Looking at it made my eyes twinge, but it didn’t hurt. Further away lay the pouches and straps of her military-style webbing, torn off her before Zheng had tied her up.

“Do you really need to stay down her to watch her?” I asked Zheng. “She’s inside a circle.”

“The fox will gnaw off a paw to escape the trap,” Zheng purred. “And this fox has experience, shaman. She has been held by worse than us. She knows how to play dead, when to be still, when to hurry, when to go for the throat. Left to herself, she will be gone in the morning.”

I smiled back at Zheng. "I thought maybe I'd made you angry or something, and that's why you wouldn't come upstairs."

Zheng raised an eyebrow at me. "Worry less, shaman."

"I will." I turned back to Stack. "What's the circle for? Breaking whatever hold Edward has over her?"

"No," Zheng purred. "The wizard came down and tested her. No strings, no tendrils, no hold. This fox is clean and healthy."

"Ah. Right. Right then."

The exact opposite of what I wanted to hear. The worst-case scenario. If Stack had been mind-controlled or hypnotised or puppeted, that would make all the decisions so much easier, free us of the burden of choice, of needing to talk to her.

I left Zheng and went to the a pair of battered old chairs in the near corner of the cellar, and dragged one over.

"Not too close, shaman," Zheng rumbled. "She is not roped to the floor."

"What's she going to do, fall on me?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I'm not that brave anyway." I situated the chair a good safe six feet back from our captive, and sat down facing her.

Amy Stack stared back at me.

I took a deep breath, wet my lips, looked away, looked back again and felt my stomach tighten up as I made contact with Stack's eyes. I was not cut out for this, but I needed to start before tomorrow morning, before the inevitable discussion over what to do with her, before we had to make horrible choices. I tucked my feet up on the seat to keep them off the cold floor, and clutched my hands together inside the hoodie's front pocket.

"Amy," I started. "Amy, why did you keep trying to commit suicide?"

She blinked, slowly, and said nothing.

"You were going to shoot yourself rather than be caught by that ... black lightning thing, and that I can understand, and that's why I

ran down there, back in the library. Or at least half of why. But then you turned your gun on me, to get Raine or Zheng to lose their temper and kill you. Then you tried to goad us, then you tried to do it yourself. Why? You know we're not like Alexander Lilburne, or Edward. You know that. We're not going to do unnatural things to you. You're not in for a fate worse than death. Or even death, if I can find any way to avoid it."

Still nothing. Stack just stared at me, hard and blank. I sighed heavily and cast about for some other way in.

"Look, maybe you think we're-

"Shoot me," she said. I leapt on the opening.

"Why?"

"I've tried to talk to the others," Stack went on, and the sheer affectless level tone in her voice made me shudder. "But you're the smart one, Morell. You have three choices. You can keep me restrained here. You can let me go. Or you can kill me. If you keep me tied up, I will eventually escape unless I am watched around the clock-"

"True," Zheng rumbled.

"If I escape, or you let me go, then I will come back and kill you," Stack said.

"Okay, fine," I sighed. "But why?"

"You cannot be protected everywhere. I will find you at university and shoot you in broad daylight. I will garrote you in a toilet stall. I know how to make bombs. I will drive a truck bomb into the front garden of this house and kill you and all your friends."

"This isn't very convincing when you don't have a reason. Tell me why?"

"Or you can kill me now. Make it clean. I won't suffer, if that matters to you."

I sighed and sagged back in the chair, all the nervous tension going out of me in a wave of uncomprehending exasperation.

"Same thing she told the *laangren*," Zheng purred. "And the wizard."

“Yes, I can tell,” I huffed. “Stack, even if I was willing to just execute a human being in cold blood – which, I’m not, thank you, not even you, even if you did shoot my girlfriend – we still wouldn’t kill you. We need that book Edward took from the library, and right now you’re our only lead about where he might have taken it, where he might be. We do have three choices, but not the ones you’ve described. Either you can tell us where Edward is, where he took the book, or ... or tomorrow morning, Evelyn will come down here with her magical bone and torture it out of you. Or- or- no.” I swallowed hard. “I’m not going to let her do that to herself. I’ll do it, I can just take it straight out of your mind. It’ll hurt me and ... but I won’t let her do that to herself, I-”

“Then take it,” said Stack. “I won’t resist.”

I blinked at her in surprise. “Why not just tell me then?”

“I won’t resist – if you promise to shoot me afterward, take a photograph of my corpse, and send it to Edward’s lawyer.”

“Oh for-” I huffed, threw up my hands, and boggled at her. “No! No, Stack, I’m not going to kill you or take a photograph of your corpse, don’t be so ghoulish. Anybody else might do, but I’m not anybody else. While I am here, we maintain a standard of humanity-” I broke off and looked over my shoulder. “Sorry, Zheng, I mean that in an ethical sense, not a species sense, I’m sorry, she’s made me lose my temper.”

“Mmmm,” Zheng rumbled.

“You left, Stack, you got out,” I said. “Back in that pub garden, you left when you saw what I am. And I don’t think that was an act, I don’t think you were lying? Edward Lilburne can’t possibly be paying you enough money to *kill yourself*. What is this?”

Stack stared back at me, utterly unmoved.

I took a deep breath and frowned at her, trying to think past the nervous fluttering in my stomach, my clammy palms and itching eyeballs.

“You’re a mercenary,” I said slowly, thinking as I went. “You do things for money, not loyalty, or at least not loyalty to this. You were smart enough to avoid the disaster of the cult’s castle, and you picked the right side when Alexander sold them to the Eye. But then you go Outside, willingly? With guns?” I tutted. “Did you even

know what you were walking into?"

Stack blinked, once.

"Yes," she said. "And no."

I laughed, once, and was not amused. "Well, now you do know. Now you know what it's like out there. Would you still have gone?"

She didn't answer, but I sensed an uncomfortable acknowledgement, a yes.

"What has he got on you, Amy?" I asked, shaking my head, trying as hard as I could to channel Nicole Webb, to think of myself as a hard-bitten interrogator who knew exactly what she was doing, not scared and flailing for a hit. "He found a way to make you stay, didn't he? Something that stops mattering to him if you're dead, and there's only one thing I can think of which fits that definition. I do find it hard to believe, I really do. I know what you are, and I have trouble imagining you caring about anybody."

A twitch. In one eye. A tightening in her jaw.

Amy Stack was not made of stone after all.

"Why not tell me?" I asked. "I can find out anyway."

"If I-" Stack started, then cut herself off.

I could barely contain myself, heart juddering. "Oh my goodness, I'm right. I'm right? Amy, am I right?"

"You will make everything worse. I cannot be seen to throw in with you. Take what you need, then shoot me."

"No, no." I shook my head. "You know what he does to people. I saw it in the castle. Lozzie can attest to it as well. If you're dead, then you can't protect whoever it is. You'll be relying on us to do the right thing with the information we take from you. And if you're dead, then yes, Edward has no reason to threaten whoever this might be, but he also has no reason to refrain from hurting them. Tell me, and maybe we can do a trade. We'll help, and then you'll tell us how to find Edward, or how to get the book from him."

Amy Stack stared through me. Not a single muscle in her face had changed, yet she was no longer affectless at all. Her breath came tighter, chest rising and falling against the ropes. Her eyes bored

into me. Zheng's caution of her lurching forward no longer seemed so silly.

Twenty seconds passed, and she finally broke.

"Edward Lilburne has my little boy," said the psychopath tied up in our cellar.

water of the womb – 12.2

“What sort of desperate idiot would stick his dick in *you*?” Raine asked Amy Stack.

I winced and let out a sigh. Perhaps not the most diplomatic opening salvo to get Stack to open up again, but under the circumstances I found it difficult to blame Raine for getting some light psychological revenge. At least she was smiling.

Evelyn was less understanding. I caught her rolling her eyes.

“Like screwing a rat trap filled with broken glass and acid,” Raine went on. “Wouldn’t risk my fingers with you, girl, I wouldn’t get ‘em back. Or hey, who am I to judge? Maybe he was into the whole ‘Eastern European mercenary stuck in a prefab bunker for twelve months’ look you’ve got going on.” She held up thumb and forefinger as if framing Stack for a photo-shoot. “A real romantic epic, straight from the Donbass basin.”

Stack declined the bait, staring back in affectless silence.

“Stop taking your pain out on her,” Evelyn grumbled. “It’s easy, it feels good, and it doesn’t solve anything. Trust me.”

Raine turned in her chair and flashed a grin. “Who said anything about pain? I’ve got enough tramadol in me to kill a bull elephant. I am flying, Eevee. Never better!”

Evelyn returned a look of such blank disbelief she could have given Stack a run for her money.

“Liar liar,” Praem sang.

“Seriously!” Raine insisted a little too hard, turning left and right and over her shoulders, to include me and even Zheng, lounging against the cellar’s back wall, in her unconvincing performance. “The painkillers work great, I’m fine. I’m only having a sit down for a proper chat with our guest here, face to face. I’m doing just fine. Fine. Don’t you worry about me, Stack.” She winked at Amy. “Word of advice, use bigger bullets next time, hey?”

Raine did not look fine. She hadn’t looked fine all morning.

Swaddled in a big fluffy grey dressing gown, with dark bags under her eyes, and a pinched tightness in her face, she mostly looked exhausted.

She was the only one of us sitting down. Except for Stack.

“Raine,” I scolded gently. I was standing behind her, trying to rub the unfamiliar tension out of her shoulders.

Her grin turned into a grimace, at Stack.

“Alright. Alright, yeah,” Raine gave up. “It hurts like a red-sore whipped bitch. Hasn’t stopped aching since the morphine wore off overnight. Constipated ‘cos of the drugs. And I can’t take a shower, which sucks big fat hairy donkey balls. You ever been shot before, Stack? Know what it feels like?”

As she spoke, Raine gripped the jagged machine of black metal which lay in her lap – Stack’s gun.

She’d brought the thing down here to the cellar, laid it across her thighs like a pet cat as she’d sat down to face Amy, and I didn’t pretend to understand why. We couldn’t threaten Stack with it, and according to Raine it was out of bullets anyway. Stack had saved one for herself and then put it through Raine’s leg instead. We’d found spare magazines in her military-style webbing, but they were empty, used up in panic back in Carcosa.

But I wasn’t about to critique Raine’s emotional processing of her bullet wound. Unless she got unhealthy – and Evelyn had already called her out on that – she could carry the gun around for a week, or take it apart and eat it, or sleep with it for all I cared. If that helped.

Raine lifted the gun off her lap with one hand, pointed it at Stack, and squeezed the trigger on an empty chamber – *click*.

I pulled a face, but said nothing. Evelyn tutted.

Stack’s level gaze ignored the gun and travelled down, to Raine’s left thigh, to the spot Raine kept unconsciously touching when she wasn’t paying attention. The dressing was a vague bulge beneath fluffy robe and pajama bottoms.

“Waterproof tape and a plastic bag,” Stack said to the hidden wound. “Good enough for a shower.”

Raine lowered the gun and raised her eyebrows. "You serious?"

"Worked for me."

Raine laughed through her grin, shaking her head. A real laugh. She was incapable of that bitter lack of humour which anybody else would probably have shown to a person who had shot them yesterday. Bizarre, perhaps, but her laugh made my guts unclench.

"Guess that answers my question," she said.

"Great," Evelyn grumbled. "I'm so glad you two have established something in common."

Raine balanced the gun upright, resting the stock – according to her that is the technical name for the bit you put against your shoulder – against her good thigh as she gripped the 'barrel shroud' – another technical term I could happily have never learnt – and gazed upon the collection of black lines and shaped metal like it was an object of transcendent beauty. She sighed and shook her head, almost sadly.

"Bet you weren't shot with a gun like this though," she said. "I am not in good company on the business end of this thing, am I?"

Her admiration for the killing machine made me vaguely uncomfortable.

"It's just a gun, Raine," I said.

Raine twisted to look at me over her shoulder, a rakish grin bursting through the chronic ache around her eyes. "Just a gun? *Just a gun*? Heather, I've been shot with a genuine *antique*, let me have this."

"Oh great, here we go," Evelyn muttered.

"What?" I blinked down at the twinkle in Raine's eyes. "Do I ... do I want to know?"

"Unless I am very much mistaken, this here is a Sten submachine gun," said Raine. "A mark two maybe, though more likely three, considering we heard her fire off, what? Two whole mags on full auto without a jam? Which means it's sixty years old, at least. Maybe older! This little gun may have started life being pointed at actual card-carrying Nazis. How cool is that?"

I blinked at the gun, then at the pleasure in Raine's face, and did

my best to share her strange glee. “Um ... well, that’s something to brag about, at least?”

“This machine kills fascists!” Raine laughed. “Maybe that’s why it couldn’t get me, huh?”

“Fetishism saves no warrior,” Zheng rumbled.

“Ahhhhh, come off it big girl.” Raine grinned at her. “Let me have my fun.” She turned back to Stack. “Where the hell did you get this anyway, rob a museum?”

Stack stared back, unmoved.

“Seriously,” Raine carried on. “I’m not looking to rumble your criminal contacts or whatever, I’m just dying to know. Does the Imperial War Museum have some inventory missing or what?”

As if she couldn’t be bothered, Stack looked at the firearm. She opened her mouth with a tiny sigh. “The weapon is ex-IRA. *Decommissioned.*”

Somehow she managed to make the word sound sarcastic without changing the tone of her voice. A good trick, if you can manage it.

“... fuck me,” muttered Raine, and glanced at the gun again, much more sober now.

“Great. Doubly illegal,” said Evelyn. “The gun shouldn’t even exist.”

“What?” Raine looked up, a little manic around the eyes. “No, Eevee, you don’t get it. This is the coolest thing I have ever gotten my hands on. With the exception of Heather, ‘course.”

“Raine,” I tutted. Evelyn rolled her eyes.

Raine laughed again, laid the gun back across her lap, and shook her head at Stack. “Ex-IRA weapons and mercenary for a monster. Does your little boy know what mummy does for work? Can’t believe you’ve got a kid, Stack. You must make a terrible mother.”

“That’s why he lives with his father,” Stack said.

Raine, Evelyn, and I all shared a surprised look. Zheng let out a thoughtful, rumbling purr from where she lounged against the wall behind us, a sleepy tiger in the dark. Only Praem didn’t react, standing guard a few paces to Stack’s side.

That was the most Amy had opened up again since last night.

After she'd confessed to me that Edward Lilburne 'had' her little boy, her son, her child – whatever that actually meant – Amy Stack had clammed up again. As if compensating for a mistake, she'd closed down dropped back into her impassive, stony, affectless exterior, no matter what I'd said to her. And I had said some rather extreme things – mostly promises of help, half-formed questions, bewildered pleas, exhausted sighs.

But she'd responded to nothing, except to say, "Go to bed, Morell."

So I had. I'd checked with Zheng that she didn't need to sleep – "Pleasure, but not need, shaman. My muscles and memory are fuelled differently to you monkeys." Then I'd crept out of the cellar, back into the light, to find Praem and Lozzie waiting for me in the kitchen, Lozzie half-asleep and Praem ready to carry her to bed.

We'd gone to sleep. I'd snatched a few hours.

Raine had woken early. The dull pain in her thigh had kept her from further rest, despite her valiantly stupid protests to the contrary. I'd helped her downstairs in the wee hours of the morning, helped her swallow painkillers and carefully noted down the time and the dose and when she was allowed more.

But sleep had not returned. My lover had a bullet wound closed by eleven stitches, and tramadol was not morphine.

I'd seen those stitches up close, earlier that morning. Raine had put up a token resistance as I'd examined the *How to care for your surgical wound* pamphlet and begun cutting dressing and gauze to the length specified in the doctors' instructions, but I'd shushed her with a frown and a tut. She'd obediently sat on the bed and allowed me to peel off the bandage, pull back the cotton wool and gauze, soaked with a patch of slow-oozing blood, and reveal the wound.

Two ugly, jagged, red lines of damaged flesh, puffy and irritated, surprisingly close together, closed with thick dark thread through Raine's soft skin. She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd called it a flesh wound. The bullet had barely grazed her, passing through her thigh at an angle – but even these little things were messier than I was expecting, these little holes that had made her bleed so much.

I had to very carefully stop thinking about Raine's physical fragility,

and concentrate on applying the prescribed antibiotic ointment. Raine gritted her teeth against the sudden sting, and waited patiently for me to cushion her in gauze and bandage once more. She'd leaned heavily on her unfamiliar crutch when moving around, kept unconsciously reaching for her thigh, and grinned through the grinding pain of a slow-healing wound.

I'd told her about Stack. We'd gone downstairs, found Evelyn eating breakfast with Praem sitting on the other side of the table, and told her too.

And now, very early in the morning on a dreary Sharrowford Sunday, with dozing streets and low sky like a leaded ceiling, with thickly cold air rustling the branches of the tree in the back garden, with the old iron radiators putting up a final last stand against the straggling ladders of spring, we had all descended into the cellar to question Amy Stack.

All but those of us still sleeping. I'd checked on Lozzie, snuggled up beneath her bed covers like a beaver in a dam, sleeping off the lasagna. Tenny had joined her after Raine had woken up. Evelyn assured us Twil was a late riser. I didn't ask which bed the werewolf was in.

The cellar was no more welcoming by day. Even with the door wide open, precious little sunlight reached down into the deep.

Stack saw our reaction and shut her mouth again, as if she realised she'd said too much.

"Lives with his father? Your baby-daddy's still alive?" Raine asked with wide-eyed mock-shock. "Well blow me down with a feather, I didn't expect that. Woman like you should have eaten him after, like a spider does. Lemme guess, he had to tie you up during the act, while you were turned on, so you didn't cannibalise him in the afterglow? Was he into that? Bit of a freak? Takes all sorts, I guess."

"He is a good man," said Stack, level and affectless.

I had to suppress a cough of surprise.

"Oh yeah?" Raine shot back, still grinning. "What counts as 'good' in your books, Amy? Deft hands with a executioner's axe? Body count in the low triple-digits? Blind and limbless?"

"He knows nothing about what I do," Stack replied. "He is not

involved in our world. He is of no interest to you. If you take his location from my mind, do not harass him or hurt him.”

“Or what?” Raine asked.

Stack had no reply to that.

“Amy?” I spoke up from over Raine’s shoulder. “What’s your little boy’s name?”

Stack looked at me, stone-cold empty.

“Ahhh come on,” Raine joined in. “If we’re gonna go in swinging and rescue your kid, we need to know what name to call.”

Stack flexed beneath her clothes and the ropes binding her to the chair, and I realised that she’d bristled, the closest I’d seen to her expressing honest, open anger.

“I am not afraid of you or your polycule-” she said.

“Polycule?” I blurted out, bewildered.

“-and neither is mister Lilburne,” she finished.

Raine was laughing and I didn’t understand why.

“We are not a ‘polycule’,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Are we not?” Praem sang, and Evelyn turned a frown on her – though more delicately than I had ever seen her do so before.

“You people have a tendency to collect others,” Stack said. “You will not add me.”

“We don’t want you,” Evelyn said, quick and nasty.

“Yeah, hey, don’t flatter yourself,” Raine agreed, tamping down her laughter. “We haven’t yet ruled out putting you in a shallow grave.”

“Raine,” I hissed under my breath, though there was no hope of Stack not hearing. “I told you, we are not carrying out a cold-blooded execution here. Absolutely not.”

“She’d do it to us, Heather,” Raine countered. “She will, if we give her the chance.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted.

“We might have to,” Raine said, no longer laughing at all.

I ran a hand over my face and tried to regain control of the situation. “But ... but not yet. Alright. Okay. Amy, we- you know we-”

“William,” said Stack.

“ ... William?” I echoed, blinking at her – but she was staring back at Raine, focused and intense. “That’s his name? That’s very ... traditional. A very noble sort of name?”

“After the fuckin’ prince?” Raine scoffed at her. “Didn’t take you for the type, Stack. Royalist *and* psycho? You got any redeeming features at all?”

“William Stack, then?” I asked, gently.

“William Selani Yousafzai,” said Amy.

Not a trace of gentleness in her voice, like she was reading off a target list.

Raine whistled, raising her eyebrows. “Hell of a name. Bit difficult to believe you’d-”

“English first name,” said Stack – with a touch of actual defiance in her voice, a hidden blade. “Father’s family name. Easier that way.”

Raine put her hands up. “Hey, I didn’t mean to imply-”

“William Yousafzai,” I echoed. “Unique, wow, yes, um-”

“There are very few ways to make me angry, Haynes,” Stack spoke calmly, over both of us. “Keep going and find out.”

“Why you?”

Evelyn’s question cut across all of us, with the tone of an adult tired of listening to children argue over the rules of a made up game.

Stack did Evelyn the courtesy of making eye contact, though didn’t answer. A cold, lizard-stare, locked in place, unblinking.

“I have looked into the eyes of a demon living inside my own body,” Evelyn told her. “You are not intimidating. Answer the question. Why you?”

“Why me what?”

“There’s plenty of thugs out there willing to do violence for

money,” said Evelyn. “And stupid enough to walk through a gateway to Outside. It doesn’t take child kidnapping to convince a warm body to point a gun at something they don’t understand. What’s so special about you?”

“Oh, right,” Raine said under her breath. “Yeah Stack, why you?”

“Experience,” Zheng purred.

Stack looked at Zheng, then at the rest of us one by one, then settled back on Raine. Her natural foe, something like herself.

“There are very few people in this country capable of putting together a team of skilled operators, on short notice,” Stack said.

“Operators?” Raine echoed, laughing. “Listen to you, with this *Call of Duty* bollocks.”

“I have the contacts to do that,” Stack went on. “Certain people I used to work with trust me to be honest.”

“And were you?” I asked, suddenly and darkly fascinated. “Who was the man we saw die, back in Carcosa?”

“Not a cultist. He knew the risks, signed up for the pay.” Stack made eye contact with me and I shuddered inside. “Mister Lilburne wanted a team to go out there and collect certain books. I told them all the truth, about what we were walking into. I ...” her voice faltered, as if confused. “Tried to. They did not handle exposure well. But everyone with me in the ... library,” her voice stalled again, “was a competent professional who understood what they were getting into.”

“No they didn’t,” I said.

“... no, they didn’t,” she said quietly, after a moment.

“You’ll get no forgiveness from me,” I told her. “Not for that.”

Incredibly, Stack lowered her gaze from mine, and looked at the floor.

“Who on earth are you, Stack?” Raine asked, fascination shining in her voice. “Where’d you come from? Ex-military? Organised crime? Professional mercenaries with back channels to continuity IRA groups aren’t exactly common-and-garden critters, not in these here green and pleasant isles, if you know what I mean?”

Stack stared at her, stone-cold again. “Do you have a mobile phone on you?”

“Sure. Not gonna let you make a call though. We’re not playing by those rules.”

“Do a google search for ‘TCAS International Advisory Group.’”

Raine pulled a sceptical, amused frown, but I was curious, and squeezed her shoulder in silent encouragement. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and thumbed the screen open, doing as Stack had asked.

“Ignore the first two results,” Stack said as Raine typed. “Third should be a newspaper article. Morning Star.”

“Morning Star it is, good taste,” Raine murmured, frowning down at the screen as she scrolled, as we both realised what we were looking at. “Fifth result though, not third.”

“Mm,” Stack grunted. “World forgets us quickly.”

Raine opened the article – with that distinctive red banner along the top I’d seen on her phone before – and read the title out loud. “‘Westminster concealing funds to private military companies in Helmand Province.’ August third, two-thousand ten.”

“There’s a picture,” Stack said. “Scroll down.”

Raine scrolled down.

In the middle of the article, as an eyecatch for the inattentive reader, was a photograph of a place on the other side of the world.

Soaked in baking sunlight from a sky of iron-hammered blue, shrouded in that mantle of wind-teased dust which I remembered on television news from when I was a child, a group of about a dozen people stood facing the camera. They looked half like ramshackle robots, half like an amateur football team, and all terrifying. Gathered around some kind of dun-brown armoured transport, some pulled cocky show-off smiles, some were grim behind mirrored shades, some sported helmets, some wore bushy beards. All of them were white, all of them carried webbing and over-complex black-and-dun rifles, nothing like the ancient lump of metal on Raine’s lap, modern things with sights and plastic stocks like over-designed kitchenware. Between body armour and camo-print and makeshift head-scarves and the way they were festooned

with guns, none of them wore anything that could be mistaken as a uniform.

A caption below read: 'Private contractors caught celebrating in a candid moment, somewhere in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Passed anonymously to our sources by one of the men pictured.'

The group contained two women. One stood at the back. She was looking off to the left as if she'd just seen something, through wraparound shades beneath the shallow peak of a camo-print helmet. In her arms was some kind of long-barrelled rifle with a funny wide bit at the end. She wore a flinty, affectless expression, unmistakable even at the grainy resolution of a phone camera circa two thousand and ten.

"Oh," I breathed.

"Let me guess," Evelyn drawled, not bothering to lean over to look at Raine's phone. "She's in the picture?"

"Uh huh," Raine grunted, and raised her eyes to Amy, cold in a way I had not often seen Raine cold before. "You were an actual PMC soldier. A real-life merc'. The real thing. Fucking *Afghanistan*?"

"I never fired on civilians," said Stack. "Never murdered anybody who wasn't already trying to kill us."

"Yeah, that's what they all say," Raine shot back, not laughing.

"Wasn't me, guv', just a few bad apples, please don't convict me of war crimes your honour sir. Shit, Stack, I think I will shoot you."

"Raine," I hissed, but my heart was going too fast. We'd lost control somewhere.

"It was not a few bad apples," Stack said, slow and level and unconcerned. "I was in an operational unit."

"Cut the clean speak," Raine said, the confrontation sharp in her voice. "What does that mean? Tip of the spear?"

Stack nodded. "The company – TCAS, Tactical Command and Security – was mostly hot air. They brought in under trained staff from sub-Saharan Africa, paid them ten pounds a day to guard stuff for civilian contractors, stuff the army didn't have the manpower for. But we were the real thing. Most of the men were ex-military, enjoyed it too much, should never have been allowed to hold a gun again. South Africans, some Russians, couple of Americans. We

babysat local politicians, dug out agitators, sometimes went into situations the army did not wish to be seen in. They kept the official MOD photographers away from us. Yes, I saw war crimes. I am under no illusions.”

“How long were you there?” Raine asked.

“Two thousand eight, for most of the year. Went back in twenty ten, stayed three years without leaving. I learnt to be what I am. Made a lot of contacts. Which is why mister Lilburne needed me specifically.”

Raine was shaking her head. “Why not just join the army, hey? You really wanted to go shoot-”

“The army treats women like shit,” said Stack. “The army doesn’t put women in combat roles. Fighting was the only thing I was ever good at. The only thing which gave me purpose. And I wasn’t going to rot on a council estate for the rest of my life.”

It sounded like a justification, an excuse – or a reason. But Stack’s low, affectless voice gave us nothing to work with, nothing at all.

Raine tilted her head as if considering Stack from a different angle.

“Shoot me and get rid of me, Haynes,” Stack was saying, calm and easy. “I am exactly what you assume I am. Shoot me. Get it over with.”

Raine laughed again and shook her head. “And your son’s got an Afghani surname? What, you bring back a piece of exotic man-meat as a souvenir?”

Before that last word had even exited Raine’s mouth, Stack jerked forward in her seat, face a mask of burning stone, and strained against the ropes in a sudden spasm of undeniable anger.

I flinched and yelped as she almost got to her feet. Praem was on her in a split-second, hand on Stack’s head, pushing her back down so the chair-legs clacked against the cellar flagstones.

“Stay,” Praem intoned.

“Oh my goodness,” I heaved out a panting breath and hiccuped, loudly.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled – at my shoulder, making me jump a second time. She’d moved forward too, as if to sweep me up at the

first sign of danger.

"I'm fine, I'm fine-" I lied.

"Still feel like dying, Stack?" Raine asked, very quietly. "Or have I finally pissed you off too much?"

Amy Stack did not answer. Her affectless look burned inside with naked flame. Raine had succeeded in making her exceptionally angry.

"Raine, there's no need to be insensitive," I managed, tutting. "Not ... *racially*, not like that. I thought better of you, really."

Raine had the good grace to flash a sheepish wince back at me. "Ahh, I didn't really mean it. Wanted to see if she cares about anything except money and her own genetic offspring. Didn't expect to hit the mark."

"His name is Shuja." Stack spoke unprompted, voice tight with something akin to anger. "He was a combat interpreter. And they were going to leave him behind to die."

"Who?" Raine asked.

"All of them. The company. The army. The government. He was there when I needed somebody to watch my back, to shoot one of my own men. And I got him out, got him here, got him proper citizenship. I paid my debt. Do not make it sound perverse. Do not look down on him."

Raine let out a sigh, shaking her head in amazement.

I felt totally out of my depth. Amy Stack came from a world I couldn't even calibrate my thoughts to process, let alone coherently judge.

Suddenly, Zheng purred a soft question from behind me.

"Kawal ta muhabbat yee, kakay geedarha?"

Stack stared at her, unsurprised. "Your grammar is terrible. He would correct you."

"Did you, little fox?"

Stack almost shrugged. I saw her shoulders twitch. "No."

"Alright, Amy," Raine said with a sigh. "You'll never catch me

saying this again, but I apologise. For that and that only, mind you. Just trying to press your buttons, see if you had any.”

Stack stared back at Raine. “Shoot me.”

The cellar descended into uncomfortable silence. I looked over at Evelyn, standing there leaning on her walking stick, lost in deep thought behind a craggy frown. She caught me looking and caught my eye, and pulled a resigned smile.

“We need that book, Heather,” she said.

“Do we?” I asked. “Isn’t there some way we can do without it?”

Evelyn shook her head, sighed, and shifted her weight on her walking stick. “I’ve looked over the other two. We have a treasure trove there, indeed. But to make a true *Invisus Oculus*, according to what little I do know, will require certain formulae which other books reference as being in *The Testament of Heliopolis*. And we’re not walking in through Wonderland’s front door with a half-baked approximation. We’re not even sneaking in through the back without the full thing, tested and certain. I can make us invisible to the Eye, I think. But only if I have the resources.”

I nodded, a lump in my throat, and glanced back at Amy Stack, who was locked in a intense, silent staring match with Raine. Both of them ignored us. Like cats.

“I’m exhausted, Heather,” Evelyn went on before I could gather my thoughts. “We all are. Frankly, we all need a good rest. A few weeks with no bullshit, where nothing much happens. This last week, not to mention yesterday ... ” She shook her head and cleared her throat with a grumble. “Raine’s wounded, I’m ... well, me. The last thing I want to be doing right now is organising a mage’s war against Edward Lilburne. I’d much rather spend the next three days taking Praem shopping for clothes.”

“Please,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn cleared her throat and nodded vaguely, but then gestured at Stack. “But we cannot keep her in our cellar for long.”

“I am a problem for you,” Stack said out loud, as if talking to Raine. “Shoot me. Take what I know, and shoot me.”

“What if we solve the problem with her little boy and-” I tried.

"We need that book," Evelyn repeated, staring holes through Stack.

"... I can take what she knows from her mind," I said around the lump in my throat.

"Do it," Stack said.

"No," Evelyn mused. "No, Heather, I don't think you can."

"Evee?"

"She doesn't know where Edward Lilburne is," Evelyn said.

With the slow reluctance of a predator dismissing a rival only to discover its territory had been breached by something so much worse than another creature like itself, Stack broke eye contact with Raine and looked up at Evelyn.

"Oho?" went Raine. "Evee, what's this?"

Evelyn sucked her teeth in thought as she stepped forward toward Stack. Past Raine's chair, past minimum safe distance, into what would have been Stack's personal space if she wasn't tied down. Praem moved to stand at her shoulder but Evelyn gently waved the doll-demon back with her free hand, totally focused on Amy.

"Saye," said Stack.

"You know as well as we do," Evelyn began, slow and measured and unruffled, but tired in every syllable. "The only way to make certain your little boy is safe is killing Edward. If you knew where Edward was, you would have told us, as soon as possible. Your best hope is for us to get rid of him, quickly, before he has time to think about where you might be." Evelyn sighed. "But you didn't. You want us to do it, but you can't throw in with us, because that means committing to finding him, and he has leverage over you, so if that goes wrong then a decision you made gets your boy hurt. If we let you go, you'll have to slink back to him, and explain why we're all still alive, which might get your boy hurt. If you're dead, you have no responsibility. You're trying to take the only way out that doesn't make it your fault if your kid dies."

Stack stared back, face a stone-cold mask. "... I do know where-"

"You're a soldier, not a strategist," Evelyn snapped. "Don't try to keep up with me."

To my amazement, Stack visibly swallowed, throat bobbing. "Shoot

me.”

“No,” Evelyn said, unimpressed. “Come out of your stupid corner and take responsibility.”

“... I don’t know where mister Lilburne is,” Stack said. “Everything was done by intermediaries, and over the phone. The doorway to that library dimension was in a suburban house out in Coltmere village, but we had to bring all the equipment on-site ourselves. There was a man there I’d never met before, an older gentleman who opened the gate for us. Had instructions to destroy it afterward and move all the equipment. The books were to be passed to his lawyer. I don’t know where Lilburne’s been operating from. I have a phone number memorised by which I contact a middleman. Mister Lilburne would then leave messages for me, on my phone, from a protected number. Now I’m here. I’m out of the loop.”

“Thank you,” Evelyn said, dripping sarcasm.

“I know nothing. I am useless. Shoot me.”

“How do we know any of that’s the truth?” I asked. “Not that I wish to disbelieve you, Amy, but ... well ... you are ... um-”

“She’s not lying,” Raine said softly.

“Shoot me. Have Zheng eat me. Send me ... send me Beyond. Get rid of me,” Stack said again, and the chill in her voice hurt to hear.

Evelyn gave her a look, and I could see she was seriously considering the option.

“No,” I spoke up. “We’re not killing anybody if we can avoid it. Cold-blooded execution is a step we can’t come back from, and I cannot believe I am having to say that out loud. Eevee, no.”

“She is a liability,” Evelyn murmured. “Until Edward is dead, she is a liability. And what do we do with her in the meantime, hm? She’s a human being. She needs to eat and drink and take a shit now and again. Are we going to have Zheng brush her teeth for her while we keep her tied up down here? What if it takes weeks for us to find Edward?”

“Then weeks is what it takes,” I said, groping for justification.

Evelyn shot me a sidelong frown. “Have you forgotten what this woman is, Heather? Who she helped? Who she worked for?”

“Not for a second,” I said, and managed to keep the quiver out of my voice. “She is a monster, yes. She deserves trial and conviction, for ... for everything with Alexander, at the very least. For whatever part she had in all those dead people. But she’s harmless to us like this, and I refuse to kill a person in cold blood. And I won’t have either of you do it.” I glanced back at Zheng. “And don’t even offer. We are not *for* this, we can’t be judges and executioners like that. The cost to ourselves is too high.”

Evelyn tutted. “As you’ve said before.”

“This is the same problem as with Sarika.”

“Sarika isn’t dangerous anymore,” Evelyn drawled.

“I will do as you need, shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “But this fox will not lie still in the trap. Quicker to snap her neck.”

Raine laughed a single, humourless laugh and shook her head.

“I think-” I spoke up and hiccuped. “I think I am about to be outvoted. Aren’t I?”

Stack closed her eyes in acceptance. She’d come to the same conclusion.

“We’re not killing her,” Raine said, very quietly.

“What?” Evelyn frowned back at her in surprise.

Raine shrugged and flashed a strange grin. “Executive decision. I’m with Heather on this. Plus, hey, if we can find her kid, that solves it, right?”

“Have you taken leave of your senses, Raine? No, it must be the painkillers, of course, I never thought you were a ...” Evelyn trailed off, eyes distant. I could practically see the light bulb going on in her head. “Yes,” she whispered. “That’s how we’re going to play this.”

“Save the kid, win her over?” Raine asked. “Evee, I’m tending toward mercy for Heather’s sake-”

“Well, thank you,” I tutted.

“-but Stack here is still a psycho, that’s not gonna work.”

Evelyn tutted and shook her head. “There’s been no kidnapping.

Rescue is not how we solve this.”

“Eh?” Raine frowned at her.

“Do keep up, Raine,” Evelyn huffed.

“I ... Eevee? Excuse me?” I blinked at Evelyn. “No kidnapping? She’s lying?”

“Kidnapping a child is a high-risk move, to put it extremely lightly,” Evelyn said, apparently willing to explain for me what earned Raine a condescending huff. “Too many parts of mundane society begin to notice when a child goes missing. Well, as long as that child isn’t already homeless or vulnerable or fallen through the cracks. School, police, social services. Slow machinery, but it does move, eventually. That’s why my mother kept me strictly off the books.” Evelyn pulled a grimace. “If Edward is not stupid – and I don’t think he is – he wouldn’t even outsource something like this. A smart strategist is not going to legally implicate himself with a kidnapping case, even at arm’s length, not with anybody who might roll on him if the police catch up.”

“What if Eddy’s actually a twat?” Raine asked.

Evelyn completely ignored her. “And I can find a mundane missing person, if they’re within about a hundred miles. I have the necessary spells, it’s not hard, assuming we can get a sample of hair, maybe from a pillow, or a nail clipping, or any other cast-off piece of body.”

She looked back down at Stack.

“It would be an extraordinarily stupid move,” she went on. “It would lead us right to him, or whatever legal or extra-legal appendage he’s using. So, Stack, if I offer to find your son, what do you tell me?”

“He has my little boy,” Stack repeated, with a note of horror and defeat creeping into her voice, a hollow sound that made my heart ache, even for this monster. “But it’s not a kidnapping.”

“Bingo. Do share, that’s a good girl,” Evelyn drawled.

Stack stared back, silence.

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Fine. If I offer to protect your son, under my auspices, me, Evelyn *fucking* Saye,” she said with relish, “with

every piece of power I have at my disposal, what do you say, little thing?"

"Take the offer," Praem intoned, softly.

"My boy and his father have an unwanted house guest," Stack said. "I couldn't get rid of it. Neither can you. The day after I tried, I got the first call from him, the request to come back in. The threat was obvious. Shoot me, and Edward might call it off."

Evelyn turned to me with a smile of grim triumph. "And there's the thread we pull to find the puppet master."

"Shoot me." Stack swallowed. "Please."

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Twenty-Seven Meadowfields Road was a squat and grimy two-story terraced house, in a row of similarly squat and grimy two-story terraced houses, set back from the potholed road itself behind a tiny bricked-in garden which had seen neither grass nor flower for many a year. Covered in awful 1960s flat cladding which looked like diseased sand peeled from a beach, punctuated by white plastic windowsills and black drain-piping and the alien spacecraft of a satellite television dish, it did not look like a very nice place to live.

A battered old compact car lurked half-up on the pavement. It was, after all, Sunday lunchtime.

Praem pulled Raine's car to a stop on the opposite side of the road, and killed the engine with deft, efficient motions of her hands. Evelyn sat up and squinted through the passenger-side window, and the three of us in the back craned to see as well.

"His neighbours are probably at home," Twil grunted, frowning and huffing and almost growling with how much she disliked this. "Gotta do this quiet like."

"If anything requires making a lot of noise," Evelyn said, "then we are not up to it. Not right now."

"Speak for yourself, I'm ready to fight a bull," Twil hissed.

"I don't need my legs to pull a trigger," Raine said.

"No gunfire," Evelyn said through her teeth. "This is social work. If we have to remove something by force, best Heather does it." Evelyn glanced at me, sandwiched between Raine and Twil in the

back seat, and I shot her a nervous smile of acknowledgement.

“Good deeds,” Praem intoned.

Twil shook her head. “Can’t believe we left her alive when she didn’t know shit.”

In the end, Stack had given up the address without torture or hyperdimensional mind-rip. I suspected she knew this task was inevitable either way, and she’d rather we go into it with all the energy we could muster. I wasn’t certain if Evelyn had made her see sense, or if she had other plans once we were gone, but Zheng was still watching her, and I had complete faith in my giant beautiful zombie to keep Amy Stack firmly in that chair until we returned home. Then, well, we’d see.

Praem had driven us, a slightly risky decision considering she neither had a licence nor officially existed, but there was no way Raine was going to drive across Sharrowford with one functional leg. I was not privy to the details of clutch and brake and accelerator, but I was assured by Evelyn’s snippy comments that this would have been a bad idea. So Praem took the helm, and we went along for the short ride. She was careful, precise, and drove at a perfectly safe speed.

“She is an asset,” Evelyn said, still watching the house.

“She’s a fuckin’ psycho.” Twil elbowed the back of Evelyn’s seat and got a glare in return. “You can’t be serious, shut up.”

“We are going to ward this house to the gills. We’re going to ward the *boy*. This is my city, my territory, I am not having this happening to a child, not here. And it binds Stack to us. If I get rid of the ‘unwanted guest’ and then ward the house, then a threat to me is a threat to her child. She does care about more than money, and we can protect it better than she can.”

“Why bother?” Twil grumbled.

“Because if these strings don’t lead us back to Edward, then she will do, if properly motivated.” Evelyn glanced into the back seat, at me. “Anything, Heather?”

“I hate this idea as much as Twil,” I said. “Evee, when I said we shouldn’t kill her-”

“I mean, do you see anything?” Evelyn said, with infinite patience.

“Let’s just get this part done. Then we can debate.”

I sighed and looked through the car windows again, to show willing. “Just regular spirit life. There’s ... ”

A cross between a squid and a komodo dragon, scales reflecting grey sky like tiny mirrors, was basking on a nearby rooftop. At the far end of the street, a pack of things like jackals with faces like melted masks were playing some kind of physical game which involved rushing back and forth from each other. A twenty-foot figure of shadow and wings stood a few gardens down, staring up at the sky. Overhead, a whirligig spinning top of rippling flesh bobbed along on invisible currents, trailing thousand-foot tentacles behind it.

“Nothing important,” I finished.

“Right. Raine, make the call.”

Raine produced her mobile phone and brought up the personal number which Amy Stack had divulged. We hadn’t called ahead, in case other parties were listening in and decided to get here before us. She pressed the call button. Four rings, then the line connected.

“Hello?” I heard from the other end – a man’s voice with the faintest hint of a Pashto accent.

“Hello, good afternoon good sir,” Raine launched into her full-blown customer-service good-girl voice and shot a thumbs up at the rest of us. In any other situation I would have burst out laughing, it was so bizarre. I wondered where she’d learnt how to speak like that. “Am I speaking to mister Shuja Yousafzai?”

“Speaking,” the man replied, curious but wary. Even down the phone his voice was worn out and stretched thin. In one of the windows of number Twenty-Seven, a curtain twitched. “Who is this?”

“We’ve come about your pest problem,” Raine said, bright and happy, grinning wide.

“I’m sorry? I didn’t call anybody from any pest control company, I don’t understand. You must have a wrong-”

“Yeah, you don’t understand,” Raine spoke right over him. “An old comrade of yours sent us, to solve your *pest control problem*.”

Silence. A long, horrible moment of silence, during which I shared the cold shiver that must have come over the poor man inside that house, peering out of a crack in his curtains at a world that had sent a monster to haunt his son.

“Ah,” he breathed eventually. “The ... pest. Yes. The pest problem. I will ... I will come to the front door. I have a ... I am armed, if you are ... if you are not what you say you are. Show yourself, I will come to the door.”

water of the womb – 12.3

Shuja Yousafzai did not look like the sort of person capable of dealing with Amy Stack.

But then again, neither did I.

He cracked open the front door of his narrow terraced house just enough to peer out at us from behind thick-rimmed spectacles, blinking and squinting like a furtive nocturnal mammal exposed to sudden daylight, watchful for buzzards and foxes and cats. He showed little surprise at the sight of five young women on his doorstep, beyond his exhausted frown and a wary tightness around his eyes.

“Hey there,” said Raine. She smiled and gave him a curt practical nod, doing her best to stand up straight despite her crutch. “I’m the one from the phone call.”

“Hello sir,” I added quickly. “We’re very sorry to interrupt your Sunday.”

I smiled too, doing my best to look nonthreatening, hands folded neatly in front of me like a good girl scout here to provide aid to the elderly and infirm. I suppose I was the sole representative of normality – at least outwardly. But he’d settled on Raine.

“And who are you?” he asked, and did an admirable job of controlling the quiver in his voice.

Raine just smiled.

“A-at least tell me who sent you,” he said. “At least that.”

“She’s not the one in charge here,” Evelyn said, terse and impatient. “We best talk inside, mister Yousafzai. The responsible parties may be observing us.”

“Yeah,” Twil muttered, head on a swivel as she brought up the rear, glancing up and down the street. “Don’t see anybody right now, but that doesn’t mean shit.”

Shuja swallowed hard on a dry throat, then nodded. “Alright.

Alright, very well, yes, I suppose if you wanted to hurt us, you would ... you best come inside, yes.”

He opened the door and stepped back. Raine moved to go in first but Praem took her place, flanking Evelyn. I gently helped Raine manoeuvre her crutch over the threshold, and Twil entered last. With all the awkward invasive intimacy of stepping into the unfamiliar home of a person who didn't really want you there, we filed in through the front door.

Inside was a short corridor from which the rest of the rooms branched off, carpeted in threadbare brown. Off-cream paint on the walls and skirting board had peeled and flaked with age, showing patches of plaster beneath. Two umbrellas, some boots, and three pairs of child-sized shoes lay next to a bristly welcome mat just over the threshold, along with some coats and scarves and a pair of very small gloves hung on a trio of hooks. At the far end a small kitchen was visible through an open door, just beyond steep stairs which climbed up to the second floor. The top of the stairs were wreathed in heavy shadows that seemed to sag from above. These post-war terraces had been thrown together as quickly as possible, and I tutted inside at the poor use of natural light. So dingy up there.

“Wipe your shoes,” I murmured to Twil.

“Oh, yeah, sure. Uh, sorry.” She cleared her throat and did an awkward shuffle on the mat, as Raine and Evelyn and Praem moved forward to make room.

“Shut the door, please,” Shuja said. “You will let out all the heat.”

He had backed away from us as we'd entered, staying at a safe distance from the unknowns he was letting into his home.

Shuja – the father of Amy Stack's child – had an intelligent face with expressive blue eyes the colour of unspoilt seas, bespectacled and somehow sad, always nudging the thick rims back up his nose with a fingertip. A neatly trimmed goatee beard matched his hair, thick and black, showing a little grey with the onset of middle age. In a big grey fisherman's jumper and old jeans, his height a little shorter than Raine, he seemed like a maths teacher or a PhD student, not a man who had seen war up-close. That judgement said more about my naivety than it did anything about the man I was measuring.

He was holding a wooden baseball bat. Tip-down, half-behind his leg, as if he couldn't decide whether to hide or brandish the weapon. Even I could tell he had no idea what to do with it.

He saw me looking at it. Saw Raine looking at it. Saw the suppressed indulgent smile on her lips and mistook it for something else.

"I have this, yes" he said, swallowing and raising his chin. "And I will warn you, I also have a knife in the back of my trousers."

"Hey what? What? Knife?" Twil whirled as the latch on the front door clicked shut. In three paces she shouldered her way past Raine and I and tried to get in front of Evelyn. "Nobody said shit about knives, mate."

"Woah, woah, hey Twil, it's fine," Raine said.

Shuja flinched at the strange growl in Twil's voice, but stood his ground with planted feet, which surprised me. "I do not know who you are, young miss. I do not know-"

"*Heel*," Evelyn snapped at Twil.

That brought Twil up short, blinking and frowning and almost blushing. "... o-oi, uh ... "

"Think before you open your mouth," Evelyn hissed at her. "We are guests in this man's home. Act like it."

"But he ... you ... a knife-"

"He is entitled to his caution. It's not like he can do anything to us. Apologise."

Twil puffed out a sigh and shrugged at Shuja. "Uh, sorry, mate. No beef. Just don't pull a knife on my girl, alright?"

"*My girl?*" Evelyn huffed under her breath.

Frowning in utter incomprehension at the exchange he had just witnessed, Shuja acknowledged the apology with a polite nod.

"There won't be any need for weapons, sir, I'm sorry," I spoke up. "We're not here to do you or your son any harm. Quite the opposite, in fact. We are here to solve your problem. Or try to."

Shuja's gaze settled on me and I pulled my best nice-young-lady

smile, but he could only frown, lost.

“Who sent you?” he asked.

I shared a glance with Evelyn. She nodded.

“We’re here now,” she murmured to me. “There’s no point keeping it secret. The moment we interfere, Edward will know. We play our hand.”

Evelyn turned to Shuja and raised her chin, expression composed and calm and faintly grim, walking stick held out at an angle, other hand behind her waist. I swore her back was slightly straighter than usual. For this moment, for this purpose, Evelyn was the very picture of the arch-mage, the general, the commander, a cold and competent mind, ready to move her pieces on the board.

“Mister Yousafzai,” she said. “My name is Evelyn Saye. I suggest you remember it-”

“I will not be intimidated in my own-”

“- because you may want to invoke my name,” she raised her voice over him. “To warn off any further attempts on your family’s safety.”

He blinked at Evelyn, taking stock of her anew, and tried very hard to be polite and not look her up and down. Evelyn, with her twisted back and awkward posture, her walking stick and coat pockets laden down with notebooks. What did we look like to him? At least Praem wasn’t back in a maid outfit yet, still dressed in Evelyn’s borrowed clothes. That would have been confusing.

“But ... ” he said. “But ... you are ... ”

“I am very likely the most dangerous person you have ever met,” Evelyn grumbled. “And yes, that includes Amy Stack. She sent us.”

A shuddering sigh of mixed relief and horror went out of Shuja. He nodded, and pressed one hand to his own chest. “More friends of Amy? Alright, okay. Oh, God above.”

“More?” Raine asked sharply.

“More, yes, I-”

“Is there anybody else in the house except for us and your son, right now?” Evelyn’s voice cracked with command. I would have climbed

a tree if she'd ordered me in that tone.

"No?" Shuja blinked. "No, I-"

"Has anybody else except us visited you today or yesterday? This is very important, do not conceal anything, especially if you have been instructed to by somebody else."

"No. No, I swear." He shook his head, catching on fast. "When Amy came before, she brought a friend. More of an associate I suppose, to ... attempt to deal with the ... the ..." He had to pause and take a breath. "The *thing* in my home. That is what I referred to. The only instruction I have received is from her. She told me not to call the police. Which I have not, of course, because how would I explain such a thing?" He shrugged with one hand in utter helplessness, trying to conceal a shiver.

I recognised all too well the hollow space in his eyes when he spoke of the 'thing' in his home. I knew the sleep-deprived fragility in his movements, the tightness in his face, the exhaustion that gave away how this man was holding himself together with pure willpower, strong willpower gone brittle under the strain of exposure to the supernatural.

Whatever his demeanour, Shuja Yousafzai was not a weak man. He was a strong man at his limit.

"We will make it go away," I blurted out. "I can do that. It's sort of something I'm good at. Making things go elsewhere, for good."

He stared at me, and did not believe any of that. After all, Amy Stack hadn't been able to remove this invasive presence, and she looked infinitely scarier than me, scrawny little twenty-year old that couldn't fight her way out of a wet paper bag.

"The people who sent this 'pest' to plague you are my enemies," Evelyn explained, slowly and carefully. "The man ultimately responsible is so cautious of any contact with me that he won't even risk hearing my voice without an intermediary. If I catch anyone working for him, I will torture them for all the information I can and then probably have them killed. If, after our ... 'pest control', anybody is stupid enough to ignore the very clear warnings I will put in place, if anybody bothers you, comes to your door about this, pesters your son, anything, then you give them my name. And then you call me, and we will deal with it."

“... alright,” he said, slowly.

“Best not think about it too much,” Raine said. “Soon as we’re out of your hair, forget we even exist. All this can just be a bad dream.”

“Don’t try to understand,” I suggested.

“I am an expert,” Evelyn went on, “on what you are dealing with. This is Heather, she is another expert. These three are Raine, Twil, and Praem. They are experts on doing violence to those who wish harm upon us.”

“Yeah, that’s me.” Raine cracked a grin.

“Don’t make me sound like a thug,” Twil muttered.

“Good day,” Praem intoned in her sing-song voice, and Shuja blinked at her.

“Mister Yousafzai,” Evelyn used his name like a whip. “Listen very carefully, please. We need to begin at the beginning and this needs to be done properly. First, where is it right now? Which room?”

“It ... it was in the kitchen, last I checked. But, I am sorry, where is Amy? I haven’t heard anything from her since she saw it. Did she explain to you what it-”

He broke off and glanced back over his shoulder, at the open kitchen door, as if the unspeakable presence might be creeping up on him as we spoke. I saw his throat bob as he repeated the nervous tic of adjusting his glasses. Twil went up on tiptoe, peering and sniffing, taking his alarm with utter seriousness. Raine reached inside her leather jacket with her free hand, adjusting her weight on the crutch, but I placed my hand around her forearm and squeezed.

When Shuja turned back to us, he must have caught the bestial cast to Twil’s musculature and pose, because he flinched again, eyes going wide at her.

“She has described it, in general terms,” Evelyn said with a huff. “But she is under considerable strain. Where is it?”

“The kitchen,” he repeated. “But it moves from room to room, and we never see it move. Ever. It goes through closed doors, through walls, through locks. I have tried everything, everything. It follows Will – that is my son – and it ... it watches him sleep.” He hissed those last four words with such vehement outrage, but his anger

subsided quickly below bewildered terror. "Sometimes it watches me sleep, but that is better, in some ways." He shrugged. "I turn around and it is there, where it was not standing a second before."

"Creepy," Twil hissed.

I was not immune to the communal tension. My hackles rose, my phantom limbs bunched tight in a defensive posture. Imagining this unseen thing creeping up on me in the dark gave me the sudden, bizarre sensation that I had stepped into something else's lair, that I was the invader here. I glanced up and behind us, at the corners of the ceiling, as if a watcher might be lurking there – but there was nothing. I sniffed like Twil, as if I could pick the hint of a scaly scent. I stared at the shadow-draped stairs, like a cave in the rock, concealing an ambush predator.

Abyssal instinct fed on savanna ape fear of the unknown, and suddenly did not like this house.

"Heather?" Evelyn hissed at me. "You see something?"

"It's ... nothing." I swallowed the feeling back down. "Not even a spirit in here, it's fine. I'm being paranoid."

Evelyn turned back to Shuja. "When did this start?" she asked.

"Three and a half weeks ago. On a Wednesday. I have counted every day, how could I not?" He ran his free hand through his short-cropped hair and adjusted his glasses again, fingers shaking. "I have found it difficult to keep track of time, to think clearly."

"Hey, we know," Raine offered, surprisingly gently. "You've done great to last so long, seriously. We can take it from here."

"This is normal for you people?" he asked softly.

Evelyn sucked on her teeth and then murmured to me. "Three and a half weeks. Which means this started after mister Joking presumably stole the gate plans. Matches up." She raised her voice again. "Did anything happen before it arrived? Anything at all?"

Shuja swallowed. "Maybe. I don't know."

"Anything at all," Evelyn repeated, harder.

"Yeah, even if it seems wack," Raine added. "Somebody leave a dead bird on your doorstep? Say some weird words at you in the street? Hand you a pamphlet for a new-agey religion?"

"I do not wish to believe in magic," Shuja said. "It cannot have been connected. I keep telling myself it cannot be connected, it cannot-"

"Then it wasn't," Evelyn said. "Describe it anyway, please."

"It was ... so strange, but I thought nothing of it at the time. My son, I was taking him to the park after school, the one off Banner's Street, with the little playground. There were a few other children around. A boy my son's age came up to him and handed him something, and he ... he brought it to me ... it was this ... this ugly thing a child might make, a plastic doll's head with needles pushed through it. I looked for the boy who had given it to him, but he was gone. He didn't seem to have been with any of the other parents there. But little Will, he wouldn't let go of the ugly thing, so I let him carry it until we reached home, and then when he forgot it, I threw it away. In the bin, outdoors." Shuja struggled with the words, did not want to believe. "Then the thing was here, within the next hour. And then I called Amy."

As Shuja spoke, a tiny presence crept out of the darkness and down the stairs at the end of the little corridor. With big wide eyes of flinty grey inherited from his mother, a head of dark hair sticking up in all directions, wearing pajamas and overlarge socks, carrying a huge plush sheep hugged against himself with one arm, little William had decided to come see what his father was discussing with the strange people.

He moved so slowly, so precisely, so silently, definitely his mother's child. He made it all the way down to the floor before any of us actually noticed him.

"Hi there," Raine gave a little wave over Shuja's shoulder as the man finished his strange tale.

Shuja whipped around in surprise, awkwardly hiding the baseball bat behind his leg.

"Will!" he said. "Will, I told you, you must go play in your room. Daddy has important things to do. Please, go back upstairs."

But William didn't pay the slightest attention to his father's words. He walked up and took Shuja's free hand, peering past his father's side at us. His eyes were so wide and staring in that way only an innocently curious child can be, set in a face effortlessly composed and openly expressionless. He looked like his father, but he had a

lot of his mother in him. There was no doubt Stack had told the truth about that. At about six or seven years old, his age lined up with her story as well.

“H-hello,” I said awkwardly.

“Yeah, uh, hey kid.” Twil cleared her throat.

“William,” Shuja was saying, struggling to contain the worry in his own voice. “William, please go back upstairs and stay in your room. You are not being punished, you have been a very good boy, but you must, must stay in your room for now, it is not ... you need ... it is-”

It's not safe in your own home, the father did not want to admit to the son.

“No,” Evelyn cut across Shuja’s dilemma. “If we’re going to interfere with this thing, there may be a reaction. Best the boy stays close for now.” She glanced down at the child, but said nothing.

“Yeah, we’ll look after you, sunshine.” Raine shot him a wink, but William just stared at us, curious and very quiet.

Shuja went wide-eyed behind his thick glasses. “A reaction?”

Evelyn shrugged.

To everyone’s surprise, Praem squatted down on her heels until she at was eye-level with William, smoothing her borrowed skirt over her backside so it didn’t drag on the ground. She made eye contact – or did so as best she could, with those milk-white, empty orbs.

“Good afternoon, young master William,” she said, in her silver-bell sing-song voice, backed by the faintest tinkle of icicles.

Will finally lit up, with the kind of easy smile that should be on a child’s face. “Your voice is funny,” he giggled.

“William,” his father said, swallowing and trying not to stare at Praem in bewildered incomprehension. “That is rude, it is rude to call other peoples’ voices funny. I-I am sorry, he can be quite precocious, I-”

“Daaaaad, I mean it’s pretty!” Will insisted, frowning up at his father.

“Thank you very much,” Praem sang. Will giggled again.

Evelyn cleared her throat awkwardly, not sure if she should be frowning at Praem or praising her. "Yes, well, be that as it may. We need to-"

"What are you all doing here?" Will asked, and Evelyn stumbled to a halt. Shuja opened his mouth, but hesitated as well. A man who wanted to tell his child the truth, but did not know what to say.

"Your mum sent us to get rid of the nasty thing," Raine said, and winked again.

"Oh." William's good humour fled his face. He wrinkled his nose. "The nasty statue."

"Mister Yousafzai," Evelyn said. "Show us, please."

= =

Edward Lilburne had sent a child's nightmare to watch Amy Stack's son.

It was a miracle the boy wasn't traumatised already. Perhaps he had inherited a strong constitution from his mother. I whispered that conjecture to Evelyn as we stood in Shuja's small clean white tiled kitchen, examining the statue from a safe distance.

"Unlikely," Evelyn murmured back to me, without taking her eyes off the lunatic sculpture. "Small children are always more resilient. They accept magic easier. Neuroplasticity. If this had happened ten years later, yes, he'd be traumatised for life. As it is, he'll probably be okay." She frowned. "Though he has been exposed now."

Twil had ventured forward, to within arm's length of the bizarre art. She sniffed the air around the thing.

"Nuthin'," she grunted. "Fuckin' ugly bastard though, innit?"

Evelyn tutted.

"Twil," I hissed. "Don't swear in front of children."

"Oh, uh, shi- I mean, sorry, yeah! Uh." Twil turned and grimaced at Shuja and William. Father and son stood in the rear, barely inside the kitchen doorway as we 'experts' took stock. Shuja managed a disapproving frown, his hand on his son's head, but William blinked at Twil in innocent fascination.

"Those were like, really bad words, yeah?" Twil told him. "Don't

ever say them, okay? Good boys don't say swear words."

"Yes, we'll all be very angry at her later," Evelyn drawled, supremely uninterested, then clicked her fingers at Twil. "Pay attention in case it moves."

"It won't," Shuja supplied. "It never does, not while watched."

For which I was extremely thankful.

The statue had begun life as some kind of clothing store mannequin, made of opaque off-white plastic. Complete with hands and feet, knee and elbow and shoulder joints, a rotating ball-and-socket waist and a featureless oval for a head, the thing would have seemed uncanny anywhere but in a shop window. Its skin – *no*, I had to forcefully correct myself, it didn't have skin, it was made of plastic – had been scored with a knife, carved into great looping spirals and whorls up and down the torso, and the resulting grooves had been filled with red paint, so it looked like a sacrificial victim covered with ritual scars. Barbed wire completed the look, wrapped around the figure's wrists and ankles and then looped around the neck and waist and the featureless smooth groin.

The blank head sported an inexpertly painted face, in black and red. A slash for a mouth, a tick for a nose.

I focused on the eyes, of course – black pupils in black outlines. But they were just badly drawn eyes on a plastic surface, nothing more. Nothing stared back at us. Certainly not the Eye.

The mannequin was currently posed as if leaning against the kitchen counter, but the head was turned toward the wall, in the manner of a person who had heard a sound in another room. I drew an imaginary line with my finger from the eyes to the wall and beyond.

Raine cleared her throat, coming to the same uncomfortable conclusion as I did. "Yeah, he's looking at the front door, ain't he?" she said.

"That is very ... spooky," I settled on, then tutted. How absurd.

"It was not looking in that direction when I left the room," Shuja said softly. "It must have heard you arrive."

"Heather," Evelyn said. "I assume you don't see any *invisible components*?"

I shook my head. Other than us and the mannequin, the plain little kitchen was empty. A single window above the sink showed the back garden, a tiny strip of sad grass bounded by high brick walls.

"I only see the plastic," I said. "Uh, paint and barbed wire too. There's not even anything pneuma-somatic in here."

"Invisible?" William piped up, excited. "You can see invisible things?"

"Will, please, don't ask questions about this." Shuja stroked his son's hair, smoothing it back to soothe his own nerves. "I am sorry, miss Saye, are you really sure he must be in here for this?"

Evelyn frowned at the boy for a long, uncomfortable moment, then took a sharp breath. "The safest place is where he can be protected. Which means next to us. We don't know what might happen when we ... " She gestured at the statue.

"It ... it's putting my hackles up quite badly," I said. Raine gently took my shoulder and squeezed.

"Yeah, me too," Twil growled.

"No, I mean, instinctively." I swallowed hard and tried to clamp down on the feeling. The sensation had crept over me as we'd entered the kitchen, passing under the shadow of the stairs. My phantom limbs – mirrors of the real me, the *homo abyssus* that was the core of my self – were twitching and wary, trying to cover every direction in a defensive halo. A hiss kept trying to climb up my throat. "I sort of want to pull it apart. Very badly. But also not touch it."

"If you can dismantle it, you are more than welcome to," Shuja said, with feeling.

"Have you touched the thing?" Evelyn asked.

"No, I dare not, but Amy did. She couldn't move it, not at all, not even to adjust a joint. As if it is anchored somehow. It did not react then either, it never reacts to anything. It isn't-"

"Twil, don't!" I hissed, mortified at interrupting. "S-sorry, she was going to touch it."

"I wasn't!" Twil protested, caught in the act of creeping closer to the awful thing. "Honest!"

“Do you know mum?” William suddenly asked, looking up at Evelyn with big, curious eyes. “Where is she? She hasn’t been to see us in a while. Is she busy?”

Evelyn stared at the boy again, her frown caught on barbs as she swallowed. She cleared her throat awkwardly as Shuja tried to shush his son again.

“Hello, William,” I said awkwardly, trying to pull a smile appropriate for a child, but I could see the strange suspicion behind his eyes as he looked back at me. “I’m Heather, I’ve spoken to your mum, she’s-”

“Heather,” Evelyn warned.

“It’s okay, Evee, let me-”

“Your mother has been trying to solve this problem in her own way,” Evelyn said to William. She made no attempt to gentle her voice, to descend to his level, to soften the frown on her face. “She has been working hard to keep you safe.”

The boy smiled a sad child’s smile, and nodded as he pressed the side of his head to his father’s thigh. He looked away, at nothing.

“I have changed my mind,” Shuja said.

“I’m sorry?” Evelyn arched an eyebrow.

“You said there might be a ... ‘reaction’.” He swallowed and cast his gaze over us, trying to take us in. “If Amy is still working on this, I would much prefer a method that poses no risk to my boy.” As if subconsciously, he briefly slipped a hand over William’s exposed ear, the one not pressed against his leg, so he could speak things not meant for a child’s mind, so he could show us his anger. “Not in our own home. If you interfere with that thing, will it come alive? Will it try to hurt him-”

“I don’t know-” Evelyn said.

“- or try to hurt me? Is it a trap, or a bomb, set for you, by your enemies, using my family as bait? As-”

“Mister Yousafzai-”

“-as fodder? No, I-” He cut himself off as William wiggled free and made an irritated noise. Shuja took a shuddering breath and forced the gentle anger out of his voice again. “I have changed my mind.

Better to suffer this thing than risk worse. I am sorry, I-

"Praem, take the boy upstairs to his bedroom, please," Evelyn grumbled, and I could tell she was at the limit of her patience.

"Evee, be gentle," I murmured.

"No, no you will not-" Shuja started to say.

"I am going to explain to you why this is necessary," Evelyn said, dead-toned. "And I am not going to do it in front of a child. Praem, please."

"Young master William," Praem sang, and offered her hand to the little boy.

William, utterly unafraid, reached out and took Praem's hand. For a moment, his father was reluctant to release him, but Praem fixed her eyes on Shuja and William spoke up, as if channelling the doll-demon's will. "Daaaaaad," he said, as if embarrassed. "I wanna show her the new spider book. Pleeeeease?"

"I enjoy spiders," Praem intoned.

Shuja let go. Praem led William out of the kitchen. A moment later we heard the sound of two pairs of feet mounting the stairs.

"Never have guessed she's good with kids," Twil said.

"Hey," Raine said softly to Shuja's hollow-eyed look. "Praem's one of the two people here who can break concrete with her bare hands. If this goes wrong and something comes for your kid, it'll run into her first."

Shuja swallowed.

"Yeah, real reassuring, clever-clogs," Twil grunted.

"How much contact do you have with Amy Stack?" Evelyn asked.

Shuja snapped out of his fear. "I'm ... I'm sorry?"

"I am trying to make a judgement about something which you would be better off not knowing, but which you are forcing me to tell you. How much contact do you have with Amy Stack? She is part of why this has happened."

"Oh, oh. That is what I feared." He sighed heavily, took his glasses off and wiped them on the hem of his jumper. "What has she

done?”

“You know what she is?” Raine asked.

He smiled to himself, very faintly and very sadly. “She thinks I am a fool, that I do not know what she does. But I do, or at least some of it, and I try my best not to think about it. I know the nature of what I love.”

I swallowed, unspoken empathy hot in my throat.

“How. Much. Contact?” Evelyn prompted.

“She visits William every two weeks, except when she cannot due to ... work,” Shuja went on. “But she and I do not talk much. We do not really have a relationship. We never did, beyond ... well. We were never married, nothing like that. She ignores me, mostly.”

“Still, impressive,” Raine said, with genuine if completely inappropriate admiration. “Woman like that. Surprised you’re still breathing.”

“Raine!” I hissed, and would have elbowed her in the ribs if she wasn’t recovering from a gunshot wound.

“I am trying to do the right thing, mister Yousafzai,” Evelyn said, raising her chin and looking him in the eye.

“Yes, yes, I do appreciate that, but any risk is too much when-”

“A person did this. A person very much like myself.” Evelyn spoke slowly and carefully, and as she continued I realised with cold familiarity that she had rehearsed these words many times over. I longed to reach out and take her free hand, her maimed hand, but she had clenched it into a tight fist, and I dared not interrupt her as she continued. “He sent this thing in order to blackmail the mother of your child. To pressure her into doing a job. A job she had previously abandoned for reasons of self-preservation, because that job involves fucking with *me*.”

And me, I thought with a touch of nausea, but I kept quiet and let Evelyn work her oratory power.

“Oh,” said Shuja.

“Geeze, Eevee, dial back,” Twil murmured.

Eevee did not dial back. “I am not Amy Stack’s friend. I am very

much her enemy. The job has led miss Stack into a position in which she has very few choices indeed. Her predicament presents me with a problem. She has threatened to kill me. She has threatened to kill my friends and my family. She has threatened, with very specific language, to drive a truck bomb into my house.”

“Oh, oh dear,” Shuja said, hand to his mouth, eyes wide.

“You see that I am left with a choice. Either I deal with the blackmail, I protect your son, I take you and him and this house under the umbrella of my protection, I *ward* him, all of which is going to involve inscribing unnatural symbols inside your home, on the door frames, under your beds, and *on his skin*.” Evelyn paused, and I wondered for a moment how much of this arch-mage act she was mimicking, perhaps subconsciously, from memories of her mother.

“Or, I go home,” she finished. “And have one of my associates put a bullet in Amy Stack’s head.”

Shuja stared at her, speechless as his throat bobbed with a dry swallow. He tore his eyes away and glanced at the rest of us – at Twil’s resigned shrug, Raine’s sigh and nod, my awkward smile.

“I would much rather we not do the latter,” I spoke up.

“Do not ... ” Shuja managed, voice quivering slightly. “Do not make me choose-”

“You do not have a choice,” Evelyn told him. “I will force the issue. I am simply explaining why I am going to force the issue. Mister Yousafzai, I will do my best to avoid any danger to your son, but this has to be done. The man who did this has to be caught, and killed. Do I have your agreement?”

With a shell-shocked look behind his eyes, Shuja nodded.

“Good. Go fetch your boy, then stay close. You don’t have to be in here, the next room is fine. We’ll get started.”

Evelyn turned away from him without another word. Shuja hesitated, but I managed to catch his eye and nod and smile, and he hurried out of the kitchen and up the stairs to find William before the boy could teach Praem too much about arachnids.

Twil puffed out a huge sigh. “Bloody hell. Bit intense, Eevee.”

“Yes,” Evelyn said, voice tired as she squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. She let out a shaking breath. I reached over and touched her elbow and she flinched slightly.

“Evee?”

“I’m fine,” she lied, unconvincingly.

“You did real good,” Raine said, low and serious. “Knew you had it in you.”

“Yes, well, whatever,” Evelyn grumbled and gestured at the bizarre statue. “Save the love-in session for later, we need to get to work.”

“No, hey, Evee,” Twil said, trying really hard to find the right words. “Good on you, yeah? Doing the right thing and all. Putting on your scary face but it’s cool and-”

“It’s not the right thing,” Evelyn grumbled – but her cheeks coloured faintly as she failed to meet Twil’s gaze. “It simply leads us to our enemy. And the fact this poor fool actually loves Amy Stack made convincing him easier. Make yourself useful, Twil, go fetch the bag from the back of the car. I need all my tools.” She waved Twil toward the kitchen door. “Please. Go on.”

“Right you are.” Twil flashed her a smile, and skittered out.

A moment of silence descended on the kitchen, on Raine and Evelyn and I, alone with the awful plastic mannequin.

“Proud o’ you, Evee,” Raine said.

“Oh, do shut up,” Evelyn muttered, squaring her shoulders and crossing her arms as best she could while leaning on a walking stick.

“No, seriously. You’re on a roll today. Haven’t seen you like this in a while. A long while, if you know what I mean.”

Evelyn gave her a look like spent coals.

“Evee,” I cleared my throat and gently touched Evelyn’s elbow again. “It’s fine to need a moment after that act. You were incredible. You really are confident about this, aren’t you?”

Evelyn turned her dark look on me, but it softened and fell apart like ash as I looked back at her. She shrugged.

"I feel confident," she said with a sigh. "Heather, as of yesterday, for the first time in my life, I have living proof that not only am I nothing like my mother – I am her opposite. It has rather sharpened my mind."

"Yeah, she sucked arse, you're kickin' rad," Raine said with a grin.

I tried not to giggle. Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Very eloquent, Raine," she drawled. "Right. Ground rules, mm. I doubt we can get this thing's feet up, which means I'm going to have to draw directly on the kitchen floor. And don't touch it unless I instruct you."

"Am I going to have to ... well, send it away?" I asked. I shivered inside at the prospect of touching the thing. In the end it was just a plastic figure wrapped in barbed wire, but something about it made my skin crawl, made my tentacles retract, forced my instincts rebel against making contact.

"Not yet," Evelyn said. "First I'm going to take it apart, see if I can trace it back to the man who did this. Or at least to somebody who works for him."

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Seven magic circles, two rounds of weak tea, and ninety minutes later, Evelyn finally admitted she had no idea what we were dealing with.

The circles hadn't worked, an increasingly complex series of enclosures around the statue's feet which had failed to produce any effect whatsoever, except for covering the kitchen floor and part of the cabinets in chalk-scrawled Latin and symbols which made my eyes water. They were intended to flush out whatever power lurked inside the plastic, or cut the remote piloting and hand Evelyn the reins, or simply poke the thing with enough magic to force a self-preservation response. She'd tried everything short of physical violence, including one circle which she made everybody back away for, but the thing just stood there, inert.

About twenty minutes into the experiments, we'd made a collective mistake: Evelyn had looked away, I'd been looking at Evelyn, Twil had turned to pick up her cup of tea, and Raine had been sitting in the chair I'd fetched for her and closed her eyes in brief exhaustion, leaning heavily on her crutch. Praem had been out in the corridor entertaining William with a game of 'thumb war' – using a fraction

of her actual strength, I'm sure – taking a break from the work of physically inscribing Evelyn's magic circles.

For about two seconds, nobody had been looking at the carved and bound mannequin.

Then Twil had jumped out of her skin and growled like a startled hound. We'd all whipped around to find the thing had straightened up, moved about eight inches away from the kitchen counter, and turned its painted face to point at Evelyn.

"Fucking cunt bitch *arse*," Twil had sworn.

"Language," Evelyn muttered, fascinated. "The boy can hear you."

Since then, we made sure to keep at least one pair of eyes on it at all times.

But now Evelyn gave up, exasperated at the thing, and told Praem to get up off the floor. The doll-demon stood, placed down the piece of red chalk she'd been using to draw yet another circle, and dusted off the knees of her borrowed skirt.

"Still nothing?" I asked, a little cautious of Evelyn's thundercloud frown.

"It's nonsense," she all but spat at the plastic clothing dummy. "It's nothing. I don't understand. We saw it move, we saw it was in another position, but it's nothing."

"Maybe it's a red herring," Raine mused from her chair.

"We saw it move," Evelyn repeated. "If it moves, it must possess some animating force, but it is not possessed. It's not a vessel for anything, not like Praem. There's nothing in there, no strings, no control. All this, this ... " She waved her walking stick at the spirals and barbed wire, and I got the impression she very much wanted to just give the thing a good hard whack. "This is all so much *bullshit*. None of it does anything, none of it is magic, it's all for show."

"What if something picks it up and moves it around?" Twil asked, squinting in thought. "Like, when we're not looking?"

"Oh don't be so completely stup-" Evelyn cut herself off and frowned at Twil. "Alright, that's possible. You may be on to something."

Twil grinned at the praise. "Go me."

"It's not such a bad idea ... " I said, trailing off as my stomach clenched up tight. I'd seen nothing enter, no pneuma-somatic tentacles adjusting the mannequin, no secret forces moving the limbs.

"Alright, well, I can rule out any adverse effects from the object itself," Evelyn said, huffing as she gathered her patience once more. "Twil, I want you to do the honours."

"The what?" Twil asked.

"Smack it upside the head."

"Oh, Eevee, no," I said, as my phantom tentacles tried to physically pull me backward out of the kitchen. Raine saw me shudder, and put her hand on the small of my back. "I really don't think we should touch it. I really don't."

"I respect your caution, Heather," Evelyn said. "But it's inert. It does nothing. And Stack touched it before, remember?"

"It moved!" I hissed.

Evelyn frowned at me. "You're going to have to touch it too, eventually, to get rid of it. Heather, where is this coming from? Is this an instinct thing? Tell me, it may be important."

"I ... I don't know," I admitted, blushing and confused. "It feels wrong. Like ... like being on the ocean floor and seeing food out in the open, too obvious. Maybe just brainmathing it Outside first is safer, instead of having Twil stick her hand in the fire?"

"Oi," Twil said.

Evelyn considered me, then the mannequin, then Twil. Raine just shrugged.

"You think it's bait?" Evelyn asked, and didn't wait for an answer. "Possible. But getting rid of it will cost us this lead."

"If I send it Outside and nothing happens I can always bring it back," I said. "I'll need a sick bucket, but I can."

"Oi, hey, shut up," Twil said. "If this is a trap, you ain't touching it first. I'm invincible, remember? Danger can sit and swivel. Watch!"

And before we could stop her, Twil reached out and grabbed the plastic forearm, just behind the loop of barbed wire.

I winced and flinched. Evelyn stiffened. Raine raised her eyebrows. Nothing happened.

“Nothin’ to it!” Twil said with a smug grin.

“Twil!” I whined.

“Yes, how very brave,” Evelyn drawled.

Raine gave her a little round of applause and a full-throated ‘wheeeey!’ Drawn by the commotion, William’s little face appeared around the kitchen door, shadowed by Praem, and Shuja behind them both.

“Doesn’t budge an inch though,” Twil said, straining backward and grunting, planting both her feet and trying to shift the elbow joint, or just pull the figure over onto the floor. “Not kidding,” she grunted through gritted teeth, muscles locking beneath her hoodie and coat as she contorted herself for better leverage.

“Curious,” Evelyn mused. “As if anchored in space itself. Perhaps if we cut into it and-”

Shivering threads of light caught my eye.

“Oh,” the breath went out of me. My eyes went wide. The bottom dropped out of my stomach. “Twil, stop!”

Gossamer-thin and steel-strong, invisible when still, catching diamond light when disturbed. Vibrating with the transmitted energy of Twil’s strength, wrapped around the plastic mannequin’s neck and fingertips, pulled taut over our heads and beneath the lintel of the kitchen door and out into the corridor.

Praem was looking up too. None of the others could see them.

Pneuma-somatic spider-silk.

No wonder I’d missed the invisible component. Couldn’t see it until you touched it.

Out in the short little corridor which led to the stairs, a huge shadow – the one I’d assumed had been merely a lack of lighting up on the second floor – shifted like a tapeworm coiled in the guts of the house, a million folds writhing over themselves as the owner parted its own camouflage. A single pale-white insectoid limb, long as two people, furred in the off-white of fresh pus and twisting

every which way with far too many multi-directional joints, groped in upside-down through the kitchen doorway, tracking along the ceiling.

Pneuma-somatic flesh, but unnatural. Each piece of thick chitin armour-plate was too regular to be the product of anarchic spirit life.

I swallowed a hiss.

“Heather?” Raine sensed my fear first, hauled herself out of her chair and moved to protect me from something she couldn’t even see.

“Twil, away from the mannequin, now,” Evelyn snapped. “Heather, what do you see? Praem, what is it?”

“I think Edward made a servitor,” I whispered.

water of the womb – 12.4

“Servitor?” Evelyn hissed an echo of my warning.

I hiccuped loudly, and nodded.

She reached inside her baggy coat with her free hand, and awkwardly drew out her scrimshawed wand of human thigh bone.

No wonder she’d looked so laden down. Evelyn had kept the magical tool close at hand, while sparing Shuja and his son from the grisly reality, but the time for keeping up appearances was over. She wedged her walking stick under one armpit and held the yellowed femur in both hands, running her fingers along the length like an arthritic flutist doing warm-up exercises.

Twil leapt away from the mannequin, teeth bared, ghostly matter coalescing into claws and furred muscle around her forearms. Raine tried to follow my gaze, but saw nothing on the kitchen ceiling.

Praem was very still out in the little corridor, staring upward.

“I am sorry to ask, but what is happening?” Shuja was saying, one hand protectively reaching for his son.

“Heather, are you certain?” Evelyn demanded.

Without extensive experience, one may find it difficult to distinguish between *spirit* and *servitor*.

One is pneuma-somatic life, born from the primordial soup of atomic interaction and aetheric energies and cast-off emotional resonance and ancient crimes and human myth-making – or whatever actually animates the world beyond the boundaries of ordinary human perception, because I don’t know where they all come from. With myriad and often incomprehensible motives, moving on their own plane to their own rhythms, they can interact with true flesh only with great effort and to minimal effect. They scared me when I was a little girl, because they liked that I paid them attention. But they’re not dangerous. They just happen to live here, like we do.

The latter are robots, made from pneuma-somatic flesh cast into

artificial nerve and synthetic muscle. And perhaps robots can learn to feel. Perhaps Evelyn's spiders recognise her as master and carer, not just a series of data inputs; perhaps they define themselves as closer to pets than machines, and I fully invite them to do so. I have not forgotten how one of those nightmare machine-spiders crouched over me as I lay unconscious and bleeding, after the Sharrowford Cult attempted to kidnap me, or how one of them protected our home when we could not.

But I doubted a servitor made by Edward Lilburne was allowed much in the way of independent thought.

In truth, even I couldn't tell the difference at a glance, but the context of the situation left little room for other conclusions. Spirits did not lie waiting in perfect stillness for an unwise hand to brush a series of web-strands. Neither did they drag around spooky mannequins for no reason.

Servitors could also touch physical flesh with impunity. Important distinction.

As I stared up at the limb creeping across the ceiling – a sort of segmented tentacle, a cross between predatory insect and ocean mollusk, easily twelve or fifteen feet long, covered in pale fur and biological armour plate, the tip a blunt hooked claw as if for clinging to bark, each segment an omni-directional joint, kinking and twisting as it felt along the line of spider-silk for the source of the disturbance, toward the immobile mannequin – I realised we may have made a mistake by leaving Zheng at home.

I swallowed hard, struggling to resist the urge to hiss and screech, fighting to keep my phantom limbs under control as I stared up at the awful appendage, feeling like I was pressed to the floor of a tidal cave as a predator groped blindly in dark water. Abyssal instinct screamed fight or flee, prompted me to make myself big, to hide in a dark corner, to flood my meat with toxin because we had drawn the attention of an ambush predator right in the centre of its web.

"Heather?!" Evelyn hissed again.

"Certain? Well, no?" I hissed back. "But I think it's a pretty good assumption?"

"He can't have made a servitor," Evelyn said in outraged disbelief.

“He can’t have that kind of expertise. Describe it. Now. And where is it?”

“It’s ... a ... big tentacle leg ... thing. On the ceiling.”

“Why is it always *always* tentacles?” Twil said, with feeling. “And invisible? This is totally not cool.”

“It is here,” Praem intoned out in the corridor – and pointed up into the stairwell. Little William at her side followed her finger up, but clearly couldn’t see a thing.

“Alright, don’t- don’t move yet,” Evelyn hissed. She was turning pale green in the face.

“We gotta get out, yeah?” Raine murmured, a hand on my back.

“Yes, yes,” said Evelyn. “Everybody listen carefully. We need to back away and exit the house. Shuja, take your son outdoors, right now, don’t argue or ask questions. Raine, get moving, you’ll take ages with that crutch. Heather you-”

“It sees me,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn froze, staring at her.

Twil was shaking herself, still disgusted at the idea of invisible monsters she couldn’t punch – and in the corner of my eye I saw the flicker of diamond-light caught on the dozen strands of spider-silk attached to the hand she’d used to touch the mannequin. The segmented bone-tentacle dipped away from the ceiling, reaching down toward her.

“Twil!” My heart tried to climb out through my mouth. “Twil, you’re- Eevee, the spider-silk is stuck to Twil, it can tell where she is!”

“Bring it on!” Twil yelled. She raised a pair of sleekly furred claws and swung wide at nothing, like a boxer trying to fight bees.

“Don’t be absurd,” Evelyn snapped. “Stay still, stop giving it reason to react. I’m going to try something, stay still.”

Evelyn’s fingers stopped moving, slipped into the right places on the bone wand.

The ambient temperature plummeted by several degrees in an instant, sucking the breath out of my lungs, drawing a surprised

gasp from William, a shiver from Raine.

And we discovered that Edward Lilburne's servitor was programmed to recognise magic as an existential threat.

Three things happened at once. Everything moved so fast, there was no time to think.

The segmented tentacle which had been inching for Twil instead whipped around for Evelyn's head like a barbed club, whirling the mass of its own loops and coils to build enough momentum to shatter bone.

The painted mannequin jerked to life with unnatural fluidity in its plastic joints, pulled on dozens of spider-silk strings, and lurched for Evelyn like a battering ram of barbed wire.

Out in the corridor, a second segmented tentacle shot down from the ceiling – followed by a third, and a fourth, and fifth, turning the hallway into a pneuma-somatic cage for its real prey. Praem scooped William up in her arms and turned her own back as a shield.

Evelyn screamed at the mannequin, the only part she could see. So did Shuja. The boy was giggling, seeing nothing of what was really happening.

Somebody was hissing and spitting like a wild animal – later I realised that was me.

I was a split-second away from what was rapidly becoming my favourite trick of hyperdimensional mathematics – manifesting six tentacles with which to defend my friends. But in the moment before I could switch that metaphysical zero to a pneuma-somatic one, a whirling ball of fur and claw and snapping teeth slammed into the mannequin and sent it flying.

Twil barked a canine war cry as the animated statue bounced off the wall and fell to the floor in a flailing mess of white plastic limbs and barbed wire.

She'd also stepped into the path of the invisible segmented tentacle. Instead of connecting with Evelyn's skull, the hooked bone-club hit Twil in the chest, knocked the wind out of her, and broke several ribs with that awful dry cracking sound like a bundle of twigs snapping underfoot. She yelped and howled and spat blood.

Fully transformed werewolf and segmented tentacle were entangled with each other now. Twil got stuck in with tooth and claw at random, fighting an invisible foe that was trying to squeeze her torso to snap her spine.

Evelyn was shaking all over, waxy with cold sweat as she stared at the awful fight, quivering fingers struggling to re-cast her spell.

The mannequin started to rise.

Raine planted the tip of her crutch on its chest and pinned it the the floor, wincing as she put weight through her wounded leg. I knew that would only hold for a moment.

Out in the corridor, one tentacle was groping for Praem's back and William in her arms. She curled up tighter, caught by the cage of bone.

Too many limbs.

Evelyn's leadership had fallen apart in the face of a thing that could think in twelve different directions at once, at speed, improvising as it went. She was a strategist, not a fighter, and standing in very much the wrong spot, in the middle of a melee.

I, on the other hand, knew exactly what it felt like to have ten limbs and not enough neural bandwidth. That's how I saw the weak spot.

Tearing myself away from my friends took an effort of will almost too much for either ape or abyss. Both sets of instinct screamed at me to get the tentacle off Twil or dismantle the mannequin before it knocked Raine off her feet, or just send the whole thing Outside right now, get rid of it *now*. But I lurched for the kitchen doorway and tumbled out into the peeling paint of the corridor. I ducked below the tentacles which formed the cage of bone, and put myself directly between Praem's back and the groping tendril, beneath the darkness which lurked in the stairwell.

I risked a glance upward, and met a dozen cone-shaped metallic eyes looking back.

The servitor's main body was nestled in the corner of the stairwell like a funnel-web spider the size of a pony. Diaphanous skirts of ruffled rippling flesh formed very convincing camouflage, appearing as mundane shadow, designed to fool the eyes of any being that could see pneuma-somatic life. If only I'd shared my architectural

distaste out loud, we would have realised something was up there.

With camouflage parted to allow egress of its own tentacles, the servitor within was revealed. Part spider, part squid, part lizard. Eight thick climbing limbs attached it to the wall, and I spotted a massive sharp beak at the front, ringed by the array of forward-facing segmented tentacles like a squid. The thing's rear was topped with a bulbous abdomen from which emerged the multitude of spider-silk lines thrumming on the air. Armour plated in pus-white where it wasn't covered in scales and bristles, eyes placed as a spider's but projecting forward as cones like no earthly creature, I had no doubt this thing had been intentionally designed to overwhelm any rescue attempt.

I hissed at it, of course.

I let go. I hissed and hissed and opened my mouth so wide I thought I was going to dislocate my jaw. I followed abyssal instinct and let my phantom limbs throw themselves wide to make myself look big. I had chosen *fight*, and for a bizarre, heady, feather-light moment I felt powerful and threatening. Adrenaline pounded in my head. Consciousness threatened to give way to pure reaction. I hissed so hard I *screached*.

The segmented, armoured-plated, barbed tentacle stopped reaching for Praem's back, and pointed at me instead.

I had the servitor's attention.

Now I had to hold my nerve.

I had to stay still.

Easier said than done. Standing still as the tentacle whipped toward my head took every ounce of courage I had, and the moment would come back to haunt me in dreams, in the shower, in quiet moments for months to come. How odd the mind is. I'd been exposed all those sanity-jarring sights Outside, but this was what stayed with my nervous system long after the danger had passed.

At the last moment, with my eyes wide on a blur of barbed club and a hiccup in my throat, I plunged one hand into the black tar at the bottom of my subconscious, and flicked a value from zero to one.

Six pneuma-somatic tentacles blossomed into reality from my flanks – and caught the segmented limb in mid-air.

Raine later told me I was laughing with manic triumph, a sound halfway between rapid hiccups and the throat-noises of a mutant dolphin.

Rainbow-brilliant in the cramped space of the little corridor, smooth taut muscle anchored deep in my torso, my tentacles hung on tight to the servitor's limb, wrapped around it in unbreakable coils, hooked into the gaps between its armour plates. I'd seen videos of squid and octopus using their limbs like this, and that's how I overcame my lack of neural processing power; I had a model to work from. Fake it 'till you make it, Heather. If I'd stopped to think, I would have failed, paralysed by the conscious effort.

It helped that I was only trying to do one thing – win a tug of war for half a second.

And half a second was all I had. The servitor tried to pull away and almost dragged me off my feet, wrenched a screech from my lips as my tentacles' anchor-points yanked inside my chest cavity like ripping hernias.

But now I had contact.

At the speed of thought, I unfolded a hyperdimensional equation. To execute self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics of this complexity while calm and collected would have given me the mother of all migraines and left me a bleeding wreck for hours afterward, but I was flying high on adrenaline and bodily euphoria and an alien sensation of feeling strong, and I didn't care as the mathematics burned and cooked my metaphorical hands, as ice-picks stabbed through my eyes and into the back of my head, as I doubled-up and vomited two cups of tea onto the carpet of Shuja's house.

I'd done this before with human beings. Never with a servitor.

I defined the servitor in hyperdimensional mathematics, saw the creature as an equation. It was as complex and as beautiful as when I'd defined Raine to locate her or Sarika to fix her. Life seen as logic and mechanics is not a cold thing, not a thing of predation and transaction and lizard-brain simplicity; it is a dance of a hundred trillion tiny machines working in concert, a transcendent chorus in the furnace of biology and soul. The funnel-web servitor was a living thing, but put together without the kinks and redundancies and loop-backs and inefficiencies of something that had been

allowed to grow and think for itself.

So I went looking for a signature.

Any artist or sculptor leaves their signature on their creations, whether they intend to or not. I've heard tell that even bomb makers leave obvious traces of self expression in unexploded examples of their nightmare craft. Edward Lilburne's self-definition would be in here somewhere, his fingerprints, his techniques, the DNA of his thoughts, something with which to track him. I sorted through the mathematical matrix at the speed of thought, in the split-second while a half-choked scream caught on my lips as the servitor pulled on my tentacles.

Instead, I found the man himself.

To our mutual surprise – and his horror – Edward and I stumbled into each other like two bumblers in the dark.

Like the filigree mycelium of cordyceps fungus infiltrating the servitor's brain, he was *in here*, a remote hand nudging the creature's nervous system via a pneuma-somatic neurological back door. He made one confused attempt to extend his control over this strange intruder in his creation's soul, one push with his mind to colonise mine – and recoiled as I bit off his hand.

I closed tentacles around the mathematics that defined his self, and he ran from me.

I burned out his fungal mat, scorched his spores to ash, smashed through the back door he slammed in my face. He panicked, shutting down connections and hurting himself in his haste to escape. A metal iris sealed shut behind him and I pried at the seams of that final portal, melting and corroding it until I reduced his armour to rust – and found nothing behind, just an empty cyst in the servitor's brain.

An echo remained, the faintest mental impression of a liver-spotted owlsh face, forehead smeared with electrode jelly, yanking contact pads off his skull, spitting blood.

All that in a split-second, and I was back in time to finish my scream.

The servitor spasmed as if hit with an electric shock, and fell out of the corner of the stairwell. A mass of black-shadow camouflage

frills and pale furred legs and clacking tentacle parts landed on the stairs with a clatter. From the kitchen I heard a thump and a yowl as it dropped Twil. The tentacle-cage retracted from Praem instantly, whipping back past me and into the cloud of roiling shadow.

“Heather?!” Raine shouted. I heard Twil cursing, Evelyn bustling past, Shuja shouting something behind us.

Before I could react, the servitor wrapped its other tentacles around the base of the one I was still holding onto, and with a wet meaty crunch it ripped off its own limb. Like a spider escaping a larger predator, it left me holding the severed appendage. It quickly righted itself and scuttled up the stairs, up the wall, onto the ceiling – and through, vanishing upward as it decided to simply ignore the minor inconvenience of regular matter.

I span on my heel and almost fell flat on my face. My own tentacles were already flagging and turning to ash as my energy ran out, and pain lanced deep into my flanks as the abused tissues quivered and bruised. I lurched past Praem – still hugging William tight – and Shuja gaping open-mouthed as I bumped past him and almost bounced off the front door, forcing myself past the stabbing in my sides and the huge nosebleed running down my face, the price of hyperdimensional mathematics.

I fumbled with the latch and stumbled out into the tiny bare front garden, then turned and looked up.

The amalgam servitor was escaping across the rooftops, a flapping mass of shadows revealed as translucent black flesh, scuttling on eight legs and dragging itself along with the segmented tentacles. It turned and warbled at a spirit, a soft-bodied slug-thing made of crystals and glass, and I knew in that moment it was acting on instinct. I’d burned Edward’s controls and shattered his back doors, and the thing he’d made was free.

Twil – all human now – bounded out of the front door just in time to catch me under the armpits before I collapsed.

She boggled at me. “What the fuck was that?!”

Twil was an absolute mess, clothes all twisted about, stained with patches of blood, but she had the enviable advantage of werewolf healing. Her bruises and scrapes and cuts were already vanishing

and closing, sucking shut and fading back to pale skin.

“ ... you look how I feel,” I croaked. “Ow.”

I spat a thin stream of blood-flecked bile onto the ground, and choked back a sob at the aching absence left by the euphoric strength of my tentacles, gone again. They were real, I told myself, they were real. That was me, all me, not a lie.

Raine rushed out of the front door a second later, hobbling on her crutch, wincing as the effort pulled at her stitches.

“Hey, hey, Heather, woah,” she said. “Twil, you got her?”

“I got her, yeah, she weighs nothing. Fuck me, what was that?”

“It ran?” Evelyn snapped from the doorway. “Heather, it ran?”

She was pale and green around the gills and unsteady on her feet, but she was standing straight as she could and hadn’t lost the command in her voice. Praem appeared at her side, suddenly followed by little William peeking around her skirt.

“I freed it,” I croaked out. “I think. He was in its head. Ed.”

Evelyn’s eyes went wide.

“But he got away,” I finished.

Evelyn looked like she very much wanted to say a swear word out loud.

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We spent the rest of Sunday afternoon warding Shuja’s house.

Well, Evelyn and Praem spent the rest of Sunday afternoon warding Shuja’s house. Twil stalked from room to room sniffing the air, peering out of windows and doing circuits of the nearby streets, occasionally returning to hover at Evelyn’s elbow until she was shooed away again on another patrol, our early warning system in case Edward Lilburne decided retaliation was in order.

I spent that time huddled in a big old armchair in Shuja’s cramped but comfortable sitting room, wrapped in a pair of blankets against the inner cold frosting my heart and lungs, nursing a sextet of deep bruises in my flanks and a stubborn post-mathematics headache behind my eyes, and generally feeling like I’d been sat on by a

gorilla. Raine brought me cups of hot chocolate from the kitchen and made endless cheese sandwiches for me to inhale in three bites each. She wielded her crutch like a comedy third leg to make William laugh. The boy sat on the floor in front of the television, and we all watched cartoons together, endless reruns of *Spongebob Squarepants* and *My Little Pony*.

Raine took her painkillers on time, at my grunted insistence. She'd almost popped her stitches earlier in the general melee, but I couldn't get her to sit down with me. She called home to check on Lozzie, made sure I was warm, took my pulse and my temperature.

"That was reckless and brave and also incredibly hot," she whispered to me while William was distracted by the television, and kissed my forehead. "I hope you know that."

"Mm. Not brave."

As soon as I'd broken Edward's control and the spider-squid-dragon had left, the ugly mannequin had fallen to the floor, strings abandoned in a dissolving puddle of silvery pneuma-somatic goo. Wrapped in tarpaulin, bound in rope and wire and three magic circles, the thing was crammed into the boot of Raine's car, awaiting dissection back home.

The severed servitor leg lay next to it in the boot. Praem had to carry that one, because only her and I could see it, and I certainly wasn't lugging it around.

I don't think Evelyn had much hope there. She focused on protection, not detective work.

She hadn't exaggerated the work required to ward the house. After combing the place for further evidence of Edward's magical intrusion – and finding none – Evelyn set to work. She inscribed secret symbols in the corners of every door-frame, beneath the unscrewed backing-plates of every door handle, on the underside of bed frames and the insides of cupboards. She had Praem knock fist-sized holes in the plaster to scratch magic circles on the brickwork behind, undo light fixtures to reach through and draw in the ceiling cavity, clamber into kitchen cupboards to scrawl on the backing boards. She worked from one of her mother's notebooks, a precious and dangerous resource to carry so far beyond our own castle, full of observations and recordings on the wards and protections which kept Number 12 Barnslow Drive as one of the safest magical

redoubts in the North of England – and other, less sane notes, about the ancient magical work which secured the Saye Estate down in Sussex.

I don't believe she referred to those latter formulae. I don't think she could.

Evelyn couldn't replicate our home, not without several lifetimes more experience and twenty years in which to execute the necessary work, but she did the best she could without blood sacrifice or summoning demons or suchlike.

Shuja followed as Evelyn directed Praem. Evelyn made it clear that he needed to know where everything was, in case something got moved or disrupted, and he needed to repair all the collateral damage she was doing to the walls and ceilings – though thankfully he need not know how any of the magic worked.

Did he believe? I don't know. Evelyn explained as little as possible. At least he took notes.

Afternoon trudged on into early evening, the sun lowering behind the terraced houses and slanting dull orange across the rooftops. Twil was sent out into the gathering darkness on an errand for kebabs and curry – and a loaf of bread to replace the one I'd devoured. When she returned I found myself still ravenously hungry. My appetite burrowed a hole in my stomach at the delicious food smells, as Twil piled the little white styrofoam boxes on the dining table in Shuja's sitting room.

I tried not to sound like an absolute pig as I shovelled curry sauce and thick chips down my gullet. William had his own treat, a child's portion of kebab meat and vegetables. Outdoors, the streetlights were guttering on, and a sense of security had settled over the house. Perhaps via abyssal senses, or perhaps simply because I was finally recovering from my feat of arms, I felt a sense of walls having gone up, of being inside a log-stake camp in the middle of a dark forest.

But were we the people huddling close to the fire – or were we the things from the woods? Shuja and William needed protection, yes, from other things like us.

All of us gathered to eat in the cramped sitting room, as Evelyn completed the final and most delicate stage of protecting Amy

Stack's little boy.

"And this last one is a kind of tracker," Evelyn was explaining. Her own food sat untouched in front of her, as she and Shuja sat around the table along with William and Praem. "If your son was to go *missing*, this will allow us to locate him, wherever he may be. You call me and we will be able to find him, quickly. Far quicker than the police, and in places they cannot go."

"Alright, yes, okay." Shuja nodded. He concentrated on Evelyn's instructions with all the attentiveness of a worried father memorising medical advice. "Should I write this one down too or—"

"No," Evelyn said. "Do not record any of these, not the ones on his skin. Nowhere except in your memory."

Shuja nodded and swallowed, adjusted his glasses, and stared hard at Praem's handiwork as it took shape across William's flesh.

The boy was sat sideways in one of the dining chairs, with his pajama top bundled in his lap so Praem could draw small, precise magical symbols across the exposed skin of his back. She was sitting behind him, using a black-ink body-art pen, not unlike the one Raine used to refresh the Fractal on my own skin every night.

When Evelyn had sat William and Shuja down in here and begun to explain the process, she'd had me roll up my sleeve and show them the hard-edged symbol on my left forearm, to prove this was something we did to ourselves as well, that it wouldn't hurt the boy.

"Does it give you magic powers?" William had asked, fascinated but too hesitant to touch my arm.

"Keeps me safe," I croaked, too exhausted to explain.

"Twil here has them too," Evelyn told Shuja. "Much more extensive, but those are ... private. If you want ..." She'd glanced sidelong at Twil.

"Ehh." Twil shrugged. "I can show the kid, I don't mind. S'all down my back," she said to William with a flashing grin and moved to pull up the back of her coat. "S'pretty cool, you know? Actual tats. Mine are forever. Not like Heather's."

"Tattoos?" William's eyes had gone very big indeed.

"No, no, please, it is fine, please," Shuja had said, waving a hand in

mild alarm. “I ... I trust your ... methodology.” He nodded at my arm and caught my eye. “After your display earlier, miss. Yes. I trust you are at least ... well protected.”

William giggled all the while as Praem had worked on his back, but he did an admirable job of staying still for well over twenty minutes, a big ask for a seven year old. She was on the last of six symbols now – one of which was the Fractal, and three of which were tiny magic circles – ranging from the base of his spine to between his shoulder blades.

Protection, warning, tracking. Anti-magical wards. Remote viewing anchors.

Evelyn could not turn the boy into a walking magical trap – or rather, she could, in theory, but she refused, as she later explained to me. To go further than warning signs and wards, with a living human being, would require crossing certain ‘ethical boundaries’.

Perhaps worryingly, the boy seemed to have taken the events of the day entirely in his stride. He hadn’t seen much, scooped up in Praem’s arms like that, and his eyes had lit up like saucers at the sight of Twil’s rapid healing, but his young mind had smoothed over the logical inconsistencies. With any luck, by the time he’d grown up far enough for this to be a childhood memory, it would all be forgotten.

I saw a little of myself in that child, and hoped he would be allowed to simply forget.

His father was having a harder time. He kept throwing polite but badly concealed glances at Twil, as if trying to judge if she was about to burst out of her skin – and at me. He’d seen me fight the servitor, in what must have seemed like a one-sided invisible farce. But the proof was in the pudding; the mannequin had collapsed after I’d finished screaming and bleeding and being sick on his carpet, so I must have been doing something right.

Chewing the dregs of my curry and chips and wishing there was more, I drifted back to the present, to the sound of Evelyn delivering more instructions.

“You will have to refresh the symbols yourself, by hand, every night, preferably after he’s had a bath,” she was saying to Shuja. “Use a body art pen like we’re doing now. We’ll leave this one with

you. If you make a mistake, it wipes off with makeup remover, but if you use a regular marker pen and make a mistake, it'll be much more difficult to correct."

Shuja nodded along, concentrating hard.

"The first few times, I want you to take a photograph of his back," she continued, eyeing Praem's work as she spoke. "And send it to me so I can judge if you're doing it right. Too much deviation from the symbols or letters will ruin the mechanical effects. I'll come check up personally once a month. And you need to get him exempted from physical education at school. Make up an illness if you must, whatever it takes. We don't want other children or his teachers to see these."

"I can't show anybody?" William himself suddenly piped up, distraught in the way only a disappointed child could be.

"No, Will, you must not," his father told him, but William pulled a little pout, and I saw disaster approaching.

"Young master William," Praem intoned, soft as a silver bell, her pen paused before the final touches. "Please look this way."

He turned to look at Praem over his shoulder, into her milk-white eyes.

"You must not tell," Praem sang. "Because I will know. I will be very sad. And I will cry. Do you want to make me cry?"

William bit his bottom lip, eyes wide and shining. For a moment, it had been all too easy to forget that this solid little boy was only seven. The threat of making his strange new friend cry was too much for him.

"No," he said in a small voice, and reached out to her.

Praem gave him a hug, being very careful not to smudge the magical work on his back.

"Then I will not cry," she said.

We all breathed a silent sigh of relief. Twil seemed especially relieved that we weren't going to witness a small child bawl his eyes out. Shuja nodded a thank you to the rest of us, not sure how to interact with Praem himself. What did he even see when he looked at her?

“How long?” Shuja asked. “How long will he have to be subjected to this?”

“Daaaaad,” William complained, turning back around. “It’s fine! It just tickles.”

“Till we whack-” Twil choked off the rest of her sentence beneath a white-cold glare from Evelyn. “Ahem, I mean, uh-”

“Until we deal with the man who did this,” Evelyn said.

“With a bit ‘o luck, not long,” Raine added, with a wink for William and a grin at Shuja.

Shuja took a deep breath and nodded, checking the notes he’d made in a little spiral-bound notebook. He took his glasses off, placed them on the table, and massaged the bridge of his nose.

“William,” he said, “it is very important that you not wash those pictures off. Do you understand?”

“kaaaaaay,” went William, swinging his legs back and forth over the side of the chair. “Don’t want to anyway. It’s so cool!” He turned to smile at Praem over his shoulder again. “Do you do drawings? Other drawings? Like art?”

“I will do,” Praem intoned. William blinked at this, a little confused.

“And you must not tell anybody what you’ve seen today,” Evelyn told him, then cleared her throat awkwardly, looking away when the boy made eye contact with her. “It ... it will confuse ... ”

“It’s a secret world,” I croaked, still raw and exhausted.

William nodded with the solemn unselfconscious seriousness only a child could show. “Mum told me that.”

Shuja replaced his glasses and let out a huge sigh, then reached over to ruffle his son’s hair “Are we done? Can he put his shirt back on?”

Praem tested the ink with a fingertip. “It is dry,” she intoned.

“Certainly then,” said Evelyn.

William hopped off the chair and wriggled back into his pajama top, head of messy hair popping out even messier than before. “Dad, can I get an ice cream from the freezer? Please?”

His father gave him a gentle frown. “You have already had a lot of kebab, and that is a big treat for a small stomach, are you not full yet?”

“I can fit more!”

“That’s the spirit,” Raine said.

Evelyn cleared her throat and caught Shuja’s eye. “Perhaps Praem can take William into the kitchen for a few minutes, while we discuss other matters? You don’t happen to have any strawberries in your fridge, by any chance?”

“I’m sorry?” Shuja blinked. “No, but ... but yes, Will, you may have an ice cream. Only one, mind you.”

“Only one,” Praem echoed. She stood up and followed William as he hurried out of the sitting room. A moment later we heard the freezer open in the kitchen, and the sound of William burbling some happy explanation to Praem. Raine reached over and pushed the sitting room door almost shut, closing in our voices.

“Miss Saye, please, before you say anything further,” Shuja started. “This *thing* is gone from my house, yes? You say it was ... invisible, yes, so how can I be certain it does not return as soon as you leave?”

“There was a man controlling it,” I croaked. “He can’t anymore. I burned him out.”

Shuja stared at me.

“If anything odd happens,” Evelyn told him. “Anything at all, you call one of the numbers I gave you. I don’t care if it’s three in the morning and chucking it down outdoors. We will be here to remove the problem and plug the gaps.”

“Yeah mate,” Twil piped up with a cheesy grin on her face. “*Who you gonna call?*”

“Oh, and I was a nerd for the *Evil Dead* reference?” Raine shot back.

“We can both be nerds, s’cool,” Twil said.

Shuja’s eyes followed the conversation back and forth, with considerable doubt as to our professionalism.

“What if ... *people* come to my door?” Shuja asked. “What if men

come to kidnap us? Sent by this 'enemy' of yours?"

"We deal with that too," Raine said, soft and sharp at the same time, even full of painkillers.

"Maybe call the rozzers," Twil put in. "If like, somebody's tryin' to break in, you know? They gotta be good for somethin'."

"Then call us later," Raine finished for her.

"I would wager ten thousand pounds that you have little to worry about now," Evelyn said, calm and collected, though she hunched in the chair, exhausted by the slow grinding effort of the afternoon. "Anybody who is part of ... " she cleared her throat, "'our world', who tries to interfere with your home, or your boy, is going to see the equivalent of a warning sign fifty feet high, with my face and death threat. Besides, there is only one man behind all this, one man with any interest in harming you, and I believe he already got what he wanted. I doubt he will make a return attempt, considering his caution. The traps I have placed are simply too risky for him to disarm."

"Are they really?" Twil asked.

Evelyn shot her a withering look and Twil had the good sense to pull a grimace. But then a flicker of a smile, of dark satisfaction, tugged at the corners of Evelyn's lips. "Yes," she said.

"How can you be satisfied in this? You do not understand what this is like," Shuja said softly, fighting against a crack in his voice as he lowered his face into one hand. "You are too young, you do not have children."

"Yes I do," Evelyn answered without hesitation.

"Wait what," went Twil, wide-eyed and gormless. Evelyn gave her a darkly embarrassed look.

Raine cracked a grin. "First I've heard of this too."

Shuja totally didn't follow either.

"Not all children are born," I croaked – and that made no sense to poor Shuja, but Twil lit up.

"Oh!" she went. "Oh right, damn. Holy shit, Eevee. Like ... for real?"

"Later," Evelyn snapped at her. "Mister Yousafzai, I have to ask you

one final question before we get out of your hair. Are you going to hold it together?"

Shuja stared at her. "I ... don't understand?"

"You've been exposed to things that break lesser minds. There is no shame in admitting you need this out of your thoughts. Repair the holes in the plaster, I'm sorry about those. Forget about the wards, forget we were here. Forget any of this happened."

Slowly, Shuja nodded.

"What do you do, mister Yousafzai?" Evelyn asked him, slowly and carefully.

"I am sorry?"

"Your job. What do you do?"

"Oh. I teach mathematics and French, at the comprehensive, King's Way secondary school."

"Maths and French at the same time?" Raine asked with a cheeky grin.

Shuja managed a small laugh. If Raine and Evelyn had been tag-teaming a return to normal subjects, they could not have planned it better.

"No, no," he said. "Simply multi-disciplinary."

"I thought you looked like a maths teacher," I croaked. Shuja glanced at me, vaguely pleased with that on some level I didn't understand.

"It is my understanding that Amy Stack makes a lot of money," Evelyn said. "Doing what she does." She glanced up at the ceiling, at the house in general. The tiny old terraced house that hadn't been renovated in at least thirty years, wrapped in a shell from the 1960s with neighbours wall-to-wall on both sides. "Do you not see much of it?"

"She pays into a trust fund, for William," Shuja said, and cleared his throat as if deeply embarrassed.

"Right noble of her," Raine said – and couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "Kept some back for herself though. Gotta pay for bullets, you know?"

“Raine,” I croaked. “Don’t.”

But Shuja nodded at Raine. “I am so sorry. Was she the cause of your limp?”

Raine pulled a non-committal face and dropped the subject. I wormed a hand out of my blanket-lump and found hers, and squeezed.

“I am the sole trustee,” Shuja explained further. “Amy does not have access to the money she sends. William is attending Milcastle primary, and I am planning on sending him to the best private school I can find, perhaps here in Sharrowford, perhaps Manchester if he can handle the train every day when he is of age. I make no secret that will be expensive. He will have every opportunity, and yes, I owe his mother for that.” Shuja sighed. “I do not want him to have the life I have led, nor that of his mother. He can grow up to be whatever he wishes.”

Evelyn nodded – and I could see she didn’t care about the exact words, the plan to get Shuja’s mind on other topics had worked perfectly. “We’ll be out of your way shortly, mister Yousafzai. Let us pick ourselves up and ...”

“Shuja, please,” Shuja said.

Evelyn nodded. “Perhaps you better go check your son hasn’t convinced Praem to allow him more than one ice cream. She’s soft like that.”

Shuja nodded and rose from his chair, taking the hint without question. He stopped at the doorway and turned back. “Thank you, miss Saye. Thank you, uh ... Twil, was it? I understand you took ... injuries ... but-”

“Don’t think about it, mate,” Twil said.

“Yes, yes, quite. I shall try not to. And miss ... Heather?” his eyes lingered on me. “Well, thank you, indeed.”

He turned and hurried away, before I could tell him things that might haunt his mind the rest of his life.

Twil blew out a long sigh. Raine reached over and rubbed my upper back, trying to distract me from the lingering ache in my sides. Evelyn turned to me.

"Heather, tell me again what you saw," she said.

"... um," I croaked. "I didn't 'see' exactly, it's not like that, the image from the brainmath is interpretation."

"Can't this wait, Eevee?" Raine asked. "We're all tired as hell, s'been a long weekend."

"You know what I mean," Evelyn said to me, ignoring Raine. "You're certain it was Edward?"

I nodded. "He was controlling the servitor. Directly. Like some kind of brain interface, I think? I don't know what I saw, not really."

"It wasn't a true servitor," Evelyn said. "Not if it needed him to control it." She sighed in frustration, frowning tight and hard. "It may be he can build a pneuma-somatic body and grow a mind, but not a programmed one. Not like our spiders." She trailed off, then snapped back. "And you're certain he was rigged up with wires? To a machine?"

"That's the impression I got ... "

"Could it have been a visual metaphor?" she pressed.

"Like a brain-scan thing?" Twil asked. "Or a ... what are those big magnetic things in hospitals?"

"Cat scan," said Raine. "Isn't this gonna be your thing, Twil? Bio-med science degree candidate doesn't know what a cat scan is?"

"I'm not there yet, you twerp." Twil rolled her eyes.

"I ... I don't know," I said. "Eevee, why does it matter?"

Evelyn sucked on her teeth, gaze intense, spine hunched with mental exhaustion. "Machinery and magic is an odd combination. Actual machinery, electrical machinery, used as machinery. I don't know, it's not something my mother ever dabbled in. Machinery as parts, as conduit for magic, certainly, but ... mm." She trailed off, lost in thought.

"Whatever," Twil declared. "I can break machines as easily as skulls."

"Speaking of cracking heads," Raine said, and let the implication linger. I shuddered.

Evelyn took a deep breath and nodded. “Our success here today turns miss Amy Stack into a guided missile.”

“Evee,” I scolded, as hard as I could in my wheezing, croaky voice. “Must you?”

Evelyn looked at me, and I caught the exhausted practicality in her gaze, the admission that I was right, but that this had to be done.

“Heather, I commend your compassion, but you misunderstand. Yes, this potentially makes Stack into a weapon, but it also *keeps her alive*. It has given us an alternative to executing her.”

“Oh. Oh, I think I see, but ... ”

“Yes,” Evelyn sighed, weary. “Now we get to go home and see if we hold her controls or not.”

water of the womb – 12.5

We called Lozzie twice that Sunday afternoon – and a third time just before we all clambered back into Raine’s car for the drive home – to check that nothing untoward had transpired in our absence, that Stack hadn’t revealed some dark miracle and overpowered Zheng, that Edward Lilburne hadn’t sent large men carrying bats to our front door, that Tenny hadn’t wandered off to take to the skies over Sharrowford and get herself plastered all over the evening news as a stray weather balloon.

“I’m here and I’m queer and everything is clear!” Lozzie answered the phone each time with a cheery little chant. Once I could even hear Tenny in the background, going “Heath? Heath?” as she realised the function and purpose of the old land-line phone, and tried to press her face to the receiver over Lozzie’s shoulder.

Evelyn shook Shuja’s hand. Little William gave Praem one last hug. Raine kept touching her own thigh, in need of more painkillers. I was antsy and tense, eager to be back home in the gathering dark.

The drive across town took less than ten minutes, but I still expected disaster.

What I didn’t expect was Zheng and Stack playing dice.

“Hi hi hi hi hi!” Lozzie greeted us with one rapid-fire ‘hi’ each as she opened the front door of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, beating Praem’s time by about half a second, leaving the doll-demon hanging with the key in her hand.

Lozzie’s beaming face was relief incarnate, but she ushered us inside with bouncing urgency, springing on the balls of her feet and biting her lips and wiggling her head from side to side. She couldn’t wait to get the door closed and locked and bolted behind us again, and did so with alarming speed.

“Lozzie? What’s wrong?” I croaked, still holding onto Praem’s arm for support, my legs weak despite hours of post-brainmath recovery.

“What’s happened?” Evelyn snapped. Next to her, Twil had gone tense, sniffing the air.

“Ahhhh? Wrong?” Lozzie whirled away from the front door, poncho twirling outward. “Nothing’s wrong! I’m just going to miss the ending! But thank you!”

She threw her arms around Raine in a sudden hug – then broke off just as swiftly and hugged Twil next. “Thank you fuzzy wuzzy,” she murmured. Then she grabbed me – gently – and kissed my cheek, squishy with the giggles. “Thank you, Heather, I love you.” Praem received the next surprise hug, a big wordless squeeze that made it look like Lozzie was sinking into a pillow. “Thankeeee.” Finally she paused with arms half-open in front of Evelyn, a silent question in her sleepy eyes.

“I’m not the hugging type,” Evelyn huffed. “Oh, alright. Make it quick. And don’t touch my spine.”

“Eeee!” Lozzie let out a sound like a miniature steam kettle. She followed Evelyn’s instructions to the letter, and gave her the most fleeting of affectionate hugs. “Thank you Evee, thank you, thank you.”

“Yes, yes, but for what? What is this?”

“For beating up Edward, duh.” Lozzie almost rolled her eyes, but she was smiling too hard. She bounced away on the balls of her feet, and fled back into the kitchen. “I’m missing the endiiiiiiing!”

A moment later we heard the sound of Lozzie’s feet pattering downward, into the cellar.

“Um,” went Twil.

“Uh oh.” Raine grinned, leaning heavily on her crutch but trying to hide it. “Think Zheng got hungry?”

“If that zombie ruins everything ...” Evelyn hissed. She started toward the kitchen, walking stick clacking on the floorboards.

“If Zheng had done violence,” I croaked, “Lozzie would not be *watching*. She hates that.”

“Yeah, right,” Twil said. “But shouldn’t we better ... check ...” She trailed off, cocking her head with a look like a hound catching a distant sound.

I heard it too. One did not need canine senses to hear Zheng’s voice rumbling in the deep.

Our plan had called for a brief regroup before confronting Stack a second time, if only to drink a glass of water and get our bearings. But now, consumed by curiosity and the magnetic pull of Lozzie's enthusiasm, we made for the cellar. Fingers of shadow pressed in at the kitchen window, heralds of the night creeping across the floor to join the lurking darkness which spilled from the cellar door.

At the top of the steps down we found a much friendlier kind of darkness. Tenny was crouched on her haunches, tentacles wrapped around handrail and doorknob as if to anchor herself. She was so enraptured by the words floating upward that she spared us barely a glance, peering down into the cellar. I patted her on the head as I passed by, and she replied with a soft fluttery trilling noise. Two tentacles rose to momentarily grasp my hand and wrist as we descended.

"- but that was the last night the temple stood," Zheng purred in the gloom.

"Samaya went out onto the mountain pass the next morning, to meet Xiang Shui's army. Alone, unarmed, half naked," she was saying, as we clattered down the stairs, past Lozzie who was sitting on the final step, listening in awe, arms tucked into her poncho. "I still remember the sky. Have you ever seen the sky from the roof of the world, little fox? Blue as old ice, but thin, so thin. The *Song* cowards were terrified of old Samaya. He screamed at them for three hours. Cursed them to seven lifetimes as worms, told them their cocks would rot off, called Xiang Shui a cuckold and a dung-eater." She paused to chuckle. "True *smyon pa* ... mmmmmm."

Zheng trailed off in a soft slow purr as we reached the cellar floor. Heavy-lidded sharp eyes turned to greet us, like a sleepy tiger seen from the jungle's edge.

The demon-host was lounging in a chair taken from the kitchen, kicked back on the two rear legs like a teenager showing off her perfect balance. She'd dragged over one of the ancient wooden coffins and turned it upside down to use as both footrest and table. A dozen dice were scattered across the surface.

She rolled another three dice between her knuckles, and as we watched, she span them over her fingers in a trick of almost supernatural dexterity.

"I know for a fact you got those from my bedroom," Raine said,

indulgently irritated.

“Sorry!” Lozzie hissed. “Was me!”

“Ah well that’s different.” Raine shot her a wink. “You’re cool, little Loz. No worries.”

“Shaman,” Zheng purred at me. “Care to listen?”

“Zheng ... um,” I croaked, a little bewildered. “Are you ... having fun?”

At least Amy Stack was exactly where she was meant to be, and still possessed the same number of parts. She was still tied to her chair in the middle of the room, still cold as dead stone behind flint chips for eyes. She’d sat up a little straighter as we’d entered, betraying her interest.

“I have to roll for her,” Zheng purred, gesturing lazily at the dice. “But *akarakish* is not a game of secrets, it is a game of wit and guts, and the little fox plays well. She cannot have known the rules before this afternoon, but I have taken more defeats than victories.”

“How wonderful.” Evelyn dripped sarcasm. “Made a friend, have you?”

“A brief understanding,” said Amy Stack, cold and level.

Evelyn shot her a pinched frown. “Delightful, I’m sure.”

“Never seen this one before,” Raine was saying, head tilted sideways as she hobbled over to Zheng’s makeshift table and considered the number of dice. “What’d you call it again?”

“You wouldn’t have, *yoshou*,” Zheng purred back. “The inventor of *akarakish* taught me how to play. A very bored monk, with a brilliant mind wasted on prayer, and no friends who could understand his game, only the half-dead thing locked up in the crypt.” Zheng nodded past all of us, up the stairs to where Tenny crouched. Tenny saw the look and replied with a tiny hiss. “The puppy would play well, if she could overcome her fear of me. She has the mind for it. Though,” Zheng sighed, “she has nothing to wager, not yet.” Zheng rolled the three dice between her fingers again, as if doing a magic trick.

“Stack,” Evelyn said. “Let’s get this over-”

“No, wizard,” Zheng rumbled with good natured amusement. “You

cannot slay the little fox yet, I have not finished telling my tale.”

“Oh for fu-” Evelyn hissed at Zheng. “You can’t be serious. You’ve had the whole afternoon.”

“You cannot send her off without the ending of this tale.” Zheng flashed a toothy grin. She knew exactly how irritating she was being. “I lost the round, I owe the story, and I fulfil the oaths I make.”

“You were betting stories?” I asked, fascinated. “Is this some kind of *One Thousand and One Nights* ploy?”

“It’s been soooo good,” Lozzie stage-whispered.

“Wagering tales, shaman,” Zheng said, and opened her palm to show me the three dice, all sixes. “The game relies on stories, true or otherwise. A listener levies penalties if they perceive a lie.” She glanced sidelong at Lozzie. “And so we are compelled to speak truth.”

“Lauren Lilburne is very perceptive,” Stack agreed.

Lozzie giggled and wrapped herself tighter in her pastel-striped poncho.

“The little fox has good tales,” Zheng purred with obvious appreciation. “Warrior’s tales. Slum tales. Blood tales. At first she embellished, but she quickly learnt not to. The truth is so much stranger than fiction.”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing some of your life stories, big girl,” Raine said to Zheng with surprising affection.

But Zheng slid a heavy-lidded look over Raine like the flat of a knife. “Then you must wager and win. Do you have tales to stake, *yoshou*?”

Raine grinned back, leaning forward on her crutch. “Plenty. But what about Lozzie? She got them all for free, right?”

Zheng shrugged. “The mooncalf is as the shaman. She has no need to bet, I owe her already.”

With a great huff and rolling of her eyes and a string of curses under her breath, Evelyn stomped a few paces deeper into the cellar and cast around for one of the spare chairs to sit on. Twil scrambled to help, and Evelyn thumped down into the offered seat with a

sharp wince of indrawn breath. She sagged, leaning on her walking stick with both hands, clearly exhausted by the effort of the afternoon's work.

"Get on with it then," she snapped at Zheng. "I have an appointment with a very long, very hot bath, and I would like to get this over with. Finish your bloody story."

Zheng rocked back and grinned, opening her mouth like a cabinet full of knives. Praem helped me toward another chair, close to Zheng's side.

"Wait," Stack said, hard and urgent as she stared at Evelyn. "My little boy?"

"Is very sweet," Praem intoned before anybody else could answer. "We read about spiders."

"Your son and his father are both alive and well," Evelyn grunted. "They are expecting a phone call from us soon. You can confirm it for yourself then."

Stack was perfectly still for a long moment, level gaze meeting Evelyn's grumpy scowl. Then she nodded, just once, so curt and shallow as to be almost invisible. She turned back to Zheng in silent assent.

"Mm," Zheng grunted. "Where was I?"

"Old Samaya, shouting," Stack supplied. I listened too, fascinated.

"Mmmmm. Three hours he cursed the army in their camp, from a little mound before the temple," Zheng purred slow and soft once more. "Three hours while Xiang Shui's officers made the men draw straws, to make up a crossbow volley to shut Samaya up. Half the chosen men fainted the first time he was hit, and he kept spitting fire even as he lay bleeding out in the dirt! Ha!" Zheng roared with laughter. "They tried to find a volunteer to cut his throat, but by then all the other monks were gone, escaped down the stone stairs. I left too. Over the mountainside hand-over-hand, while they burned the temple. They won, but they lost their courage." She sighed a great sigh. "I took Xiang Shui's head a year later, but that is another tale."

"What happened to the white bear?" Stack asked, with genuine interest running beneath her cold voice.

Zheng shrugged. “The *mi dred*? I never saw it again, not after it ate the assassin. I hope it lived long and ate well.”

Stack nodded – and to my incredible surprise she took a deep, cleansing breath, closing her eyes for just a moment. “Thank you,” she said.

Lozzie started clapping.

Raine nodded sideways at Stack. “You actually respect her, don’t you?” she asked Zheng.

“She won many rounds. If I cannot eat her, and cannot fight her ... mm.”

“Are we done here?” Evelyn drawled.

Zheng stirred the dice on the upturned coffin, dropping the trio from her hand among them. “Debts are paid, wagers settled. The little fox is all yours, wizard.”

“Mind if I play a round?” Raine asked with a shrewd grin.

“You need painkillers and a long sit down,” I told her, unimpressed. “No.”

“I can have both of those while I gamble childhood stories, right?” She flicked a wink at me. “How about Heather acts as our listener and lie-judger?”

“Raine, you’re-” I bit my words off. Raine’s childhood stories? She’d baited me, hook and line and all. “I- I mean ... later-”

“Yes, later,” Evelyn grumbled. “We’re here to deal with Stack.”

“I am listening,” Stack said.

“Good, because I’m far too tired to indulge your need for intimidation theatrics. We’re done, the pest has been removed. That’s it.”

“My boy-”

“Is under my protection,” Evelyn said – and left that hanging. She and Stack stared each other down like a pair of lizards.

In the corner of my eye I saw Lozzie hop up from her seat and quickly skip up the cellar stairs, taking Tenny gently by the hand and a cluster of tentacles, to lead her back out into the light and

warmth of the house above. I didn't blame her. This part was not for young minds.

"Phone call," Stack said.

We'd planned this bit with Shuja. Raine produced her mobile phone and placed the call. To his credit, Shuja picked up on the second ring. Poor man had probably been waiting since the moment we left his house.

"Yes? Yes, hello?" his voice emerged, made tinny and quivering by the speaker as Raine held the phone up.

"It's just us again, Shuja, right on time," Raine said, easy and relaxed. "Your-"

"It's me," Stack said out loud.

"Amy? Are you ... no, no, I need to-" Shuja gathered himself with an audible deep breath. "These people, they have removed the ... the problem. William is well. Will, say hello to your mother."

"Hiiii!" went a tiny, further-off voice.

Stack's throat bobbed once. She stared at the phone like it was a star.

"Amy, can we talk soon?" Shuja asked.

"That'll be all, Shuja," Evelyn spoke up. "Thank you."

"... yes. Yes. Alright."

Raine ended the call. Stack stared at nothing for a long time, then turned back to Evelyn. "You can't hope to stop Edwa-"

"Yes I can," Evelyn snapped, in a sudden flare of temper. "We removed the pest, and the servitor controlling it – which you didn't even know about, I might add. Shuja's home is now warded, extensively. The boy himself is warded, with warning signs and triggers that will light up like a Christmas tree if Edward touches a single hair on his head. Your child – and by proxy, his father and the house they live in – is now under my protection. I have deployed every trick I have, short of summoning demons to hide in their attic, and tomorrow ... " Evelyn trailed off.

Twil cleared her throat. "Tomorrow I'm gonna talk to my mum, get the family involved." She jutted her chin at Stack. "You know what

we're about, right?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes.

"Evee? You didn't mention that part," I said.

"In extremis, one must call upon all one's resources," Evelyn grumbled. "Even idiots with Outsiders living in their heads."

Twil opened her mouth with a frown, as if to take offence, but then shrugged. "I guess."

Stack stared at Evelyn and Twil for a moment longer, then turned with the glacial slowness of a freezing sea to look at me.

"... Amy?" I croaked.

"Morell."

The tiniest tilt of her head. A question, communicated as pure body language and clear as diamond, driven by an understanding gifted from the depths of the abyssal ocean. Perhaps Zheng understood too, but she let me answer.

"It's the truth," I said.

Stack blinked once.

"I bit off Edward's hand, too," I added.

That made Stack blink in an entirely different way. Zheng raised a silent eyebrow at me too.

"He was there, sort of, remotely, running the servitor," I explained. "I ... interfered with it. I ... it's not as simple I'm making it sound, obviously, but I may have damaged him. Somehow. Maybe."

Stack just stared. Was she taking this in, readjusting her strategy – or just paralysed?

"Don't worry, baby killer," Raine added with a grin. "Kid's under our wing now, whether you like it or not. Tough shit."

"Until mister Lilburne is dead-" Stack began.

"No," Evelyn snapped. "The deadline is *my* death. The boy has been exposed to our world, and I aim to make sure that doesn't happen again. This child is going to be safe. He is not going to end up like any of us. No more traumatised children. No more dead children.

You hear me?"

Stack turned to lock eyes with Evelyn. The air in the cellar seemed to thicken. My own breath turned to treacle in my throat, as if the slightest sound would provoke one of these two great reptiles to lash out. Even Zheng went very quiet and very still.

"I am going to make you an offer," Evelyn said with slow and exaggerated care – she'd rehearsed these words, I could hear it, but when? "There is a place you can hide, with your son, and with Shuja if he wishes. My ancestral home, in Sussex. With a word I can have my father put you and your son up for months, until this is all over, all dealt with."

Raine pulled a pained grimace, but kept her mouth shut. Twil went "uhhh," out loud, and received a sharply raised finger in reply.

Stack stayed locked on Evelyn.

"You wanted out," Evelyn continued. "I am offering you an exit that Edward Lilburne cannot follow, even if he wanted to. We both know he's obsessed with Sharrowford, with what he could gain here, perhaps with certain members of his family. If I hide you on the other side of the country, in the magical equivalent of a nuclear bunker, I don't think he'll even bother trying to find you." Evelyn tried to shrug with a touch of Raine's eloquence, but her twisted spine held her back.

"Why?" Stack asked.

"I told you why," Evelyn grumbled with genuine venom. "Were you not listening? Ears full of cloth? Your boy lives, not because I am making a calculated move, but because it is right. You're a hunter, Stack. You're a professional. And I've made my enemies into your enemies – but I am offering you an out. No questions asked. You can leave Sharrowford behind, leave this life behind. You are not bound to me – your boy is, and ultimately it is we who are now responsible for his safety. Not you."

"Congratulations, old girl," Raine said, coldly mocking through her grin. "You being dead or alive makes no difference now."

"Then why not kill me?" Stack asked.

"I might, but let me finish first," Evelyn drawled.

"I didn't tentacle-wrestle a servitor just to execute you anyway," I

snapped, and struggled back up to my feet, clutching for support. A strong hand – Zheng’s hand – took me by the waist to hold me up. “Don’t be so selfish, Amy.”

Stack just stared at me. I shivered.

“The sins of the mother do not pass down to the child,” Evelyn said quietly.

Stack turned to Evelyn and stared holes right through to the back of her skull, trying to read Evelyn’s thoughts through flesh and bone.

It didn’t work. Evelyn managed to look positively bored.

“Sometime,” Evelyn began again, “in the next six months – and more likely sooner rather than later – myself, Heather, and the others here are going to carry out one of the most dangerous tasks I could ever imagine. The task itself is stupid, reckless, near-impossible – and totally non-negotiable. To do it in a way even approaching correct, we need that book you stole for Edward. You probably worked that part out already, we’re not all complete morons, despite appearances.”

Twil frowned behind her, unsure if she was the target of that one.

“But without the book,” Evelyn continued, “we will probably try it anyway, which will significantly increase our chances of dying. Our chance of succeeding and returning with all our body parts in roughly the same places will be *greatly improved* if we are not being interrupted all the time. Do you understand?”

Stack stared. The unspoken message was crystal clear. I found myself digging my fingernails into my own palm, willing Stack to accept the implication.

“Describe the task,” she said.

“We’re going Outside,” I spoke up, the words spilling forth like old vomit. “To a place much worse than the library. To find my twin sister, and bring her back.”

Stack blinked at me. “Alexander was telling the truth?”

“Hard to believe, I know, but yes, I have a twin.”

To my surprise, Stack dropped her eyes from me and stared at a point on the floor. Several long heartbeats passed before she looked at Raine, then at Evelyn, then at nothing again. Twil opened her

mouth with a soft click, but Evelyn made a covert chopping gesture with one hand, and Twil thought better of interrupting.

Stack's expression was that of an exhausted animal caught in a snare trap, knowing it was dead, knowing escape was impossible, but unwilling to submit to the approaching hand of the hunter. Dying was no longer a way to take responsibility. She had to act.

"Need I repeat myself?" Evelyn murmured.

"No," Stack said.

But the seconds drew onward, and it slowly dawned on me that Stack could not make a decision. Perhaps this was the kind of choice she had avoided all her life, the choice between accepting defeat – or hunting, not for money, but for herself.

Raine hobbled forward, rubber-tipped crutch squeaking once on the cellar flagstones.

"Raine, don't!" Evelyn hissed, but Raine ignored her. She walked right up to Stack, well within the danger zone.

"Raine, what- oh!" My eyes went wide, as Raine reached inside her leather jacket and drew out her handgun.

"Amy, hey," she said softly. Stack finally looked up, and met Raine's strangely serene smile. "I get it. Rest 'o them here maybe don't. Not even Heather. But for me? Yeah, I know you. All you gotta do is say the word, one more time." She clicked the safety off and pressed the muzzle of her gun to Stack's forehead. "I'll do it, promise. Just say the word, go on. I promise."

Evelyn had frozen, white-faced. Twil was going "hey hey hey!" and Praem was about to step forward to intervene. Zheng grinned like a tiger.

All I could think about was the way Raine and Stack locked eyes.

They understood each other *perfectly*.

"Untie me," said Amy.

Raine's serene smile spread into a knowing grin – and she lowered the gun.

Evelyn bit her bottom lip so hard she drew a bead of blood. If a picture could speak a thousand words, Evelyn's face was a portrait

of some very colourful swearing indeed, but she held herself back. No sense appearing unprofessional in front of our 'guided missile'.

"So," Evelyn cleared her throat. "Right. So. Can we just untie you and see you out the front door, or do we need to release you like reintroducing a bear to its natural habitat, throwing rocks and sticks at you?"

"No way to treat a bear," Zheng rumbled.

But Stack and Raine both ignored Evelyn. Raine slipped her gun away and rather awkwardly pulled out her big black combat knife instead, struggling a little to draw it from the sheath with one hand occupied with her crutch. She crouched slightly, never once breaking eye contact with Stack, and slipped the blade of the knife between the ropes keeping her left leg secured to the chair.

"Ummmmm," went Twil, stepping pointedly in front of Evelyn.

"Is this strictly a good idea?" I asked, trying to keep the quiver out of my voice.

"Raine," Evelyn snapped. "We have *not* yet established-

"Yeah we have," Raine said, soft but somehow undeniable. She used the point of her knife to work the knot apart, freeing one of Stack's legs, then the other. Then she straighted up with a wince, stepped behind Stack – finally breaking eye contact – and freed her hands. "Yeah we have."

The ropes fell away.

Despite appearances, I could feel Zheng tensed like a spring next to me. She'd shifted one foot back, all the better to uncoil across the room in an instant. Praem was ready too, unassuming and prim and straight-backed.

Stack brought her hands slowly round in front of her and massaged the ugly red rope marks on her wrists. Even the smallest movements of her body set my teeth on edge. The muscular predatory intent in every gesture and adjustment sent my phantom limbs twitching in an effort to cover her, counter her, pull her head off. Like a wolf uncertain why its cage had been left open, she watched all of us in turn, and very slowly stood up from the chair, trying to rub feeling back into her numb legs.

Raine took a step to the side and they made eye contact again.

The moment stretched out. My heart was fit to burst from my ribs like a dying bird. Raine grinned. Stack's fingers twitched.

"I could still take you," Raine purred, and it was one of the most attractive things I'd ever seen her do. "Even with a bullet wound."

And with that, Stack turned her eyes away, and all the tension flowed out of her.

"If I locate mister Lilburne, I will prioritise a kill," she said, smoke-soft. "Not your book."

"If you find the bastard, let me know, preferably *before* you get yourself killed," Evelyn said. "I believe you already have a contact number for us."

"Mm," Stack grunted. "Same in reverse?"

Evelyn raised her chin. "If I find him, I will let you know. But I'm not saving the kill for you, no absurd indulgences like that."

"Save the head."

Evelyn frowned.

"As- as proof, I assume?" I asked. Stack nodded.

"Gnarly," said Raine.

"Tch. Ugh," Evelyn huffed. Zheng rumbled out a laugh. Twil raised a warning growl as Stack cracked her neck from side to side.

"Not getting your gun back though," Raine said. "That's mine now."

"*Raine*," I sighed, exasperation hiding the way I was shaking inside with the release of tension – and at Stack's unnerving proximity. Even with this apparent truce, I wanted her out of here, right now.

"Fine," Stack said.

"Can't believe we're trusting this bitch," Twil grunted.

"We're not," said Evelyn. "We're trusting her self-interest."

"Mm," went Stack.

"Now get the fuck out of here, war criminal," Raine said. "Before I change my mind and light you on fire."

"Gladly," Stack said, cold and blank, and looked at the stairs.

“Alone?”

Zheng did the honours of providing an escort. She clacked her chair down and stood up, unfolding herself to her full height, and crossed to Stack with a razor-toothed grin. To Stack's credit she managed to limit herself to a single small flinch, as Zheng placed one massive hand on top of Stack's head and the other around Stack's throat, and sniffed her like she was judging a piece of meat. After a few moments Zheng let the smaller woman go.

“Up, little fox,” Zheng purred in her face. “Time to hunt.”

They left the cellar together, Stack in front as Zheng watched her from behind. Raine followed too, perhaps for some final comment at the door.

As soon as they were beyond earshot, Evelyn let out a deep, shuddering breath and drew her hand over her face. Even across the cellar gloom, I saw the moment she broke out in cold sweat. Praem crossed to her side as if to help.

Twil stared after the departing trio, gormless in disbelief. “We actually doin’ this? Damn.”

“I cannot believe that worked,” Evelyn hissed.

= =

By the early hours of the following morning, the old radiators were struggling against a spring chill blown in off the Irish Sea. Cold grey drizzle blurred the first sheets of dawn, forcing us fragile little apes to burrow deeper into our warm beds.

Which is why I was so surprised, on my sixth trip downstairs, to discover Praem and Evelyn had appeared in the kitchen.

“Oh. Oh no, I do hope I didn’t wake you ... both?” I asked.

Shrouded in the grey static flooding in through the kitchen window, sitting at the table with the lights off and wrapped in pajamas and a dressing gown, Evelyn turned red-rimmed, sleepy eyes on me, through the steam from a fresh cup of tea. Praem wasn’t standing to attention at her shoulder or by the doorway as usual, but sitting diagonally across from her in one of the kitchen chairs. Straight-backed, hands folded neatly in her lap, dressed in Evelyn’s borrowed clothes, hair still singed here and there and curled up at the ends. Milk-white eyes turned to stare at me with her habitual

impassivity.

“What, stomping up and down the stairs five times?” Evelyn grumbled, nodding at the contents of my hands – Raine’s empty plate and the bottle of painkillers.

I blushed, mortified. “I-I don’t stomp!”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “I’m winding you up, Heather. I’m sorry. You’re light as a feather. And no, I only heard you because I was already awake.”

“Oh.” I swallowed my blush. “Well. Uh ... I had to ... Raine’s ... ” I crossed to the sink and put down the plate and pills.

“Breakfast in bed,” Praem intoned.

I almost laughed. “Not quite. She’s finally asleep again after another dose of painkillers.” I wandered over to the table and nudged out a chair next to Evee. “Do you mind if I join you? I don’t want to risk creeping back into our bedroom and waking her again.”

“It’s your house too,” Evelyn said.

I sat down and smiled at her, trying to overcome my own tiredness. Raine and I had both slept like logs for the first part of the night, until ...

“The pain keeping her awake?” Evelyn asked, with grudging sympathy born of long experience.

“It woke her up about an hour ago.” I sighed heavily as my worries spilled out. “I want to let her doze now, at least. She’s not got any classes today, but she’s supposed to go to work at the student union bar later, and that means hours on her feet, and she can’t do that in this state. She needs to call in sick. This weekend, Carcosa, everything, it really took a lot out of her. More than she lets on. Not to mention getting shot.”

“Mmmm, yes.” Evelyn fixed me with a curious, penetrating frown. “Took a lot out of all of us. Understatement of the year.”

“Evee?”

Evelyn looked surprisingly good in the grey dawn haze, with her mane of blonde hair in post-sleep disarray, soft and comfy within her many layers, flexing her back in the hard chair. I suddenly wanted very much to give her a hug, to feel how warm she was

beneath her clothes, to sigh together in our mutual sleepiness – but she held me pinned with that searching look.

“Tea?” Praem suddenly asked, her voice a bell-note to break the silence.

“Oh, I, uh- I wouldn’t say no?” I said.

Praem got up from her chair and stepped swiftly over to the kettle.

“Tch. Praem, don’t,” Evelyn snapped – but softly, as she groped for her walking stick. “You’re not a domestic servant, I can-”

“Remain seated,” Praem intoned.

“-get the tea myself-”

“*Sit.*”

Evelyn paused, then huffed and abandoned her stick again, looking at me with an exasperated shrug in her eyes as Praem bustled about making more tea.

I almost giggled. Evelyn sighed and sipped from her own cooling mug of tea.

“Is Twil still here?” I asked.

Evelyn gestured at the ceiling with her eyes. “She’s got class. A full day. I’m going to have to wake her in an hour if she’s to have any hope of making it back to Brinkwood in time. Shouldn’t have let her stay.”

“Did you ... ?” I cleared my throat.

“Between my spine and my leg, I never sleep without pain as it is,” Evelyn grumbled. “And she’s a ... ”

“Cuddler,” Praem supplied.

“Yes, that,” she said. I suppressed a smile and tried to look as if I was taking this all very seriously. Evelyn caught the twinkle in my eye anyway, shook her head with a huff, and sipped more tea.

“Might try to get more sleep in a bit,” she said. “But ... too much to think about.”

I could have made a joke. I could have dived into a heart-to-heart about Evelyn’s love life. I could have brought up the inorgasmia elephant in the room. But a far sharper topic was on my mind, so I

ruined the moment.

"I doubt I can get back to sleep either," I admitted. "I keep thinking about Stack."

Evelyn raised an eyebrow.

"About the decision we made," I explained, twisting my hands together on the tabletop. "Are you worried she'll betray us?"

Evelyn placed her mug down with exaggerated care and drew herself up. Perhaps it was subconscious, but the transformation was remarkable. Sleepy, cuddly, warm Eevee, a friend with whom I would gladly share body heat and snuggles, turned into miss Evelyn Saye, lethal and mysterious mage. But she was still Eevee, beneath it all.

"No," she said. "We found her fulcrum."

"... okay?"

"If she was going to attack us, she would have done it when Raine untied her. Think about it. If she was set on her plan of performing loyalty to Edward Lilburne – in effect, begging for her child's life – she would have fought us right there and then. If she won, she could slink back to Edward with our heads. If Zheng pulled her limbs off, then she'd have died doing Edward's work. What's she going to trade to him if she goes back to him now? He already knows where we live, he knows we're protecting the boy. Siding with us is the best bet for her boy's life." She sighed and shook her head. "Raine took a hell of a gamble. Even I wasn't certain until the moment came."

"What would you have done otherwise? What if she took the offer of going down to Sussex?"

Evelyn laughed, once, without humour. "I would have honoured the deal. I meant it, Heather, I meant everything I said, even if half of it was *also* a tactical play." She shot me a resigned look. "Don't be surprised if Stack takes Shuja and William and simply vanishes, though. That's another possible outcome. Planted the idea in her head, just in case, a backup option to give her a way out in case she's cornered, stops her turning on us. But I hope she does go for Edward. Even an unsuccessful attempt on his life is good for us."

Evelyn trailed off into contemplative quiet in the grey gloom. I

glanced over at Praem, who was watching the tea steep.

“Evee, you’re really good at this,” I said.

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. The look she gave me was not entirely happy.

“Evee? What’s wrong?”

She sucked on her teeth for a moment, then sighed. “This is the exact sort of game my mother used to play, how she kept her web of advantages. Layers of implication and blackmail and protection rackets, with other mages, with mundane people, with my father. She was very, very good at it. It is part of what made her such an effective monster.”

“Oh. Oh, Evee, I didn’t mean to imply-”

“Of course you didn’t, Heather, you’re too sweet, you never would. I’ve never been comfortable with the idea before, that’s all. Which is, well, stupid, because I’m such a screw up at everything else in life-”

“Evee-”

“You are not,” Praem said in her sing-song voice as she clacked a steaming mug of tea down in front of me, and slid a plate of biscuits in front of Evelyn. She gathered her skirt, and sat back down.

“But I’m not like my mother.” Evelyn’s voice thickened as she gazed at Praem. “I know that now, beyond a shadow of a doubt. I ... I think.”

“You’ve hardly had time to stop and think about that,” I said gently. “To process you and Praem, I mean. It’s okay to do that.”

“What’s to process?” Evelyn drew in a great sigh.

“An awful lot,” I tutted at her.

“My mother had a daughter, and treated me as a tool. I tried to make a tool, and now I have a daughter.” Her voice cracked on that final word, and she had to dip her head to wipe her eyes on her sleeve. She let out a weak laugh. “Look at me, like this, idiot that I am. Twenty-one years old is too young to have a grown up child.”

“Evee, hey.” I patted her hand.

"I didn't grow her in my womb – fuck knows if that thing even works – but she is my child, isn't she? I made a body for her and I brought her into the world. I did something deeply irresponsible without thinking about what it meant. A demon isn't just a pre-existing entity, it's a kind of blank slate, no experience of here, of thinking, of being a ... an adaptive system a- fuck!" she spat. "A person. And I told others not to treat her as a person."

"Evee, you couldn't have known. Not with what you'd been taught, your experiences. It takes a village to raise a child, we filled the gaps. I think we did pretty well?"

"Well," Praem intoned.

"Heather, Praem hasn't been properly bound since Kimberly put her back in her body." Evelyn looked up at me, serious and angry in a slow, deep way, like a river with rapid depths. "There's nothing holding her here. Nothing holding her to her behaviour. And she hasn't erupted into psychosis or cannibalism or mass self-harm. She is *nothing* like the zombies my mother made, and I am forced to confront that most of what I assumed I knew was complete *bollocks*."

"We've treated her like a person."

"No thanks to me," Evelyn scoffed. "But it's not only that."

Praem looked on in placid silence, even when Evelyn glanced at her.

"Think about a zombie, Heather. Imagine knowing you were brought into the world by an act of murder and the desecration of a corpse. Imagine you could feel the electrical echoes of the person who used to inhabit your stolen shell. Fighting a battle to comprehend your new body before too many parts of it rot off. Getting it wrong. Never being whole. Being commanded by iron dictate of infernal contract, to commit violence, and *that* is your entire experience of human beings." She shook her head. "No fucking wonder the things are dangerous."

"I ... I never thought about it like that."

"Me neither," Evelyn said through gritted teeth. "And I did everything I could to differ from my mother's methods. I selected a body of wood, thinking that would slow the control, thinking control mattered. Stupid. I followed old instructions to make a

‘maid’, an obedient thing, a doll, something that couldn’t possibly think itself human. Blue! Do you remember when she was blue, Heather? Nonsense! That had nothing to do with what she was, where she came from, it was all imposed.”

“I like blue,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn blinked at her. “Do you actually? Or is that something I’ve inflicted-”

“I like blue.”

“She likes blue,” I echoed.

Evelyn nodded. “And then you treated her as person, Heather.” Evelyn’s voice cracked again. “Which I should have done from the start.”

“You’re doing better at it now,” I said, and meant it.

“You are,” Praem agreed.

Evelyn’s cheeks turned red, and she tried to cover with a frown. “I ... I don’t feel ... oh, dammit all.” She glanced at the front room, at the stairs, and up at the ceiling, as if worried she was being overheard. “With a human child, you’re biologically programmed to ... to ...” She grimaced around the word. “To love it. Nobody would put up with the blasted things otherwise. But I made Praem out of wood and words. I ... I ... ”

“I love you,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn grimaced. “I know. I just don’t know if I’m capable of being ... ”

“Love is a choice,” I said before Evelyn could hurt herself further.

Evelyn turned a bewildered frown on me. “What on Earth does that mean?”

“Love is a choice you make every day, with every action,” I said, fumbling my way through something I barely understood myself. “It’s a feeling, certainly, but that feeling isn’t always there. Sometimes it runs dry, sometimes you feel frustrated or awkward or difficult. Passion runs out eventually. Duty or obligation only go so far under pressure. But you can always make the choice to love a person, and that’s real.”

"That's ... " Evelyn cleared her throat, blushing and looking away.
"That's silly."

"Evee."

"Oh, alright. It's not silly." She huffed. "But it feels that way."

"Do you *want* to love Praem, as a mother?" I asked.

"Deeply," Evelyn whispered.

Praem got up, walked around the table, and leaned down to give Evelyn a hug. Slow and careful, with probing fingers to request consent. Evelyn said nothing, but hugged her back and took a great shuddering breath, hiding her confused tears in Praem's shoulder.

I didn't say a word, just gave her the space and time to dry her eyes. Praem stepped away too, to attend to breakfast things on the kitchen counter. Eventually Evelyn settled back again and sighed.

"Not a word to Raine," she said.

"Bit late for that," I said with a pained smile. "She's going to make 'milf' jokes at you eventually. It's inevitable."

"Urgh." Evelyn rolled her eyes, then caught mine. "Wait, since when do you know what 'milf' means?"

"I'm not completely innocent!"

"Yes, but Raine should not be teaching you about internet filth."

I frowned in growing confusion. "Milfs are from the internet?"

Evelyn gave me such a look.

"W-what? I ... Evee?"

"What exactly do you think ... " She paused. "Actually, no, I'm going to let Raine deal with this. I suggest you ask her for a more exact definition of the word." Evelyn's tone left no doubt; that line of inquiry was cut. I mentally shrugged, and sipped my tea.

Praem bustled about for a few minutes, making breakfast, as a companionable silence settled over Evelyn and I. After a moment I risked a glance up at the ceiling.

"So, what are your plans?" I asked.

"Mm? Oh." Evelyn dug around beneath her dressing gown and to

my surprise she pulled out a familiar-looking lump of white quartz – the psychological invisibility stone I hadn't seen her use in months. I recalled how she'd used it when I'd first met her, to place herself temporarily beyond my perception when I'd slipped into the Medieval Metaphysics room. She placed it delicately on the table. "Even without the book from Edward, I can still begin the work. This is the basis. Might take me a month. Or I might complete the work, and go blind and deaf and eat my own fingers the first time I look at it. Who knows?" She shot me a wry smile. "First I am planning some serious downtime. And I am taking Praem shopping."

"Oh. Um. I meant plans about Twil."

Evelyn raised an eyebrow at me. "More importantly, Heather, what about *your* plans?"

"I ... " I sighed, feeling useless. "I don't have the foggiest idea about how to get to Edward. There's ... well, I have some theories, about things I might do with brainmath, perhaps, maybe."

"Mmmmm," Evelyn purred, staring at me with sharp curiosity. "Not what I mean."

"... I'm sorry?"

Evelyn narrowed her eyes again, and a creeping sensation crawled up my back.

"Heather, you executed extensive, experimental hyperdimensional mathematics yesterday. And the day before you ripped the three of us back from Carcosa. Not to mention you pulled off your little tentacle-summoning trick again yesterday, and had a tug of war with a servitor. Feeling at all sore?"

"Oh, yes, very." A hand wandered to my side, to the circular bruises along my flank, muscles stiff and aching whenever I moved.

Evelyn frowned in fascination. "Have you really not noticed?"

"... noticed what? Eevee, please don't get cryptic on me."

"Growing," Praem intoned.

"Exactly," Evelyn purred, peering at me like a specimen on an examination table. "Heather, in the recent past, any one of the feats I just mentioned would have left you weak and shaky for days. But

here you are, running up and down the stairs multiple times this morning, with fist-sized deep-tissue bruises in your sides. You've been recovering faster."

"Oh." I blinked in surprise. "I ... have I?"

"Whatever you are, Heather, you're getting better at being you."

water of the womb – 12.6

Evelyn was correct.

Between the trip to Carcosa, Raine's gunshot wound, dealing with Stack, and tidying up Edward's servitor, the weekend had demanded too much from us. It was a minor miracle nobody had suffered worse injuries, physically or emotionally. We were all worn down, even if some of us didn't show any outward signs, and even if certain rewards were worth the exhaustion. I was intimately familiar with the creeping weight of true exhaustion, how a little more would seep into one's limbs and guts and head every day. I'd been deep in that mire too many times before. We needed a break, a rest, time to think. A return to normal – whatever passed for 'normal' between the walls of Number 12 Barnsloew Drive.

She was also correct about me, which was less reassuring.

My vitality and energy were undeniable; I was recovering faster, from both tentacles and brainmath.

I hadn't suddenly developed an immunity to bruises, much to my disappointment. I still felt like I'd been given a going over by a kangaroo holding a pair of rolling pins. Twenty four hours after my tug of war with Edward's servitor, the six circular bruises in my flanks had stiffened, turned deep purple and black, aching and pulling whenever I moved. The inside of my own torso felt tender and sore where I'd anchored my tentacles to real muscles, and if I lay very still and very quiet I could feel my entire body throb to the beat of my heart pumping blood through damaged tissue, pushing protein and platelet for the repair process. Intercostal muscles twinged and cramped in stabbing pain between my ribs, abdominal wall complained when I sat up, obliques screamed down my nerve endings when I reached over my head. I wasn't exactly about to touch my toes or do a dance routine.

But there I was that Monday morning, creeping up and down the stairs, using my body without a second thought, and I hadn't noticed how odd that was until Evelyn had pointed it out. Weak and tender, yes, and I suffered through the occasional aftershock of nausea the rest of that day, but I should have been curled up in bed

around my bruises, or shuffling about like an old lady, head spinning with brainmath echoes.

Instead I felt young and healthy and euphoric with the memory of intoxicating strength.

The feeling scared me. A paradox – I was infinitely fragile, a scrap of ape-flesh anchored to the membrane of reality by biochemistry and neuroelectrical flicker, a pale shade of the abyssal truth I'd once been.

Why was I recovering faster?

How had I changed?

“Raine,” I whispered in our shared warmth that night, as she lay dozing before the wall of sleep, minutes after taking her painkillers but not quite over the edge yet. Selfish, stupid Heather, hoping to catch her off guard. I didn't need to mug Raine for the truth, I could have asked her any time.

“Mm?” Her eyelids moved, but didn't open.

“If I grow actual tentacles, if I ... change, how will I-”

“I'll kiss them,” she murmured, and pulled me in close where I couldn't speak but into her chest.

That week crawled by in a haze of attempted normality. I read a lot, worked on essays for university, and found myself restless with the need to run and climb and squirm into small gaps. Evelyn watched a lot of anime – several old favourites, apparently – and invited Praem to join her, though the few times I looked in on them I had no idea if the doll-demon was enjoying it or not. Praem haunted the study, the workshop, the kitchen, and started leaving books about the house, mostly non-fiction. She also hauled the servitor's severed leg from the car, along with Edward's barbed-wire mannequin, both dumped in the workshop for examination.

Raine cracked jokes, called in sick from work, and hobbled back and forth from campus whenever I went to class. She played video games while I worked, then sometimes lost interest and listened to me read out loud.

Lozzie slept a lot, so we activated the gateway to the fog castle one morning and spent twenty minutes watching the alien life in the streets below. Lozzie and I invented names for the most interesting

creatures.

“They’re not bloody *pokemon*,” Evelyn had grumbled, unsure how to deal with Lozzie’s bouncing enthusiasm.

Lozzie returned perked up back to normal, re-charged with whatever strange sustenance she drew from Outside.

We heard nothing from Stack. Edward made no move. Shuja sent Evelyn the requested pictures when he refreshed the wards on his son’s back.

And I took to examining myself in the shower. Not that I was the sort of person to remain a stranger to my own body, but I started to inspect myself for changes. I probed the bruises in my flanks, swallowing the pain, feeling for raised bumps that might be the green-shoot flesh buds of tentacle growth. I held my eyelids apart in front of the mirror and looked for nictitating membranes. I rubbed and scratched at my neck, checking for the slit-formation of gills. I flexed my fingers and toes, watching for any extension of webbing.

“Sevens,” I spoke to my reflection in the mirror. “Show me again. Show me *me*. Please?”

Of course I found nothing, and Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight wasn’t responding. I didn’t know if I should be disappointed or relieved.

Yes, Evelyn was right. We all needed downtime. We all had things to think about.

But some of us were on a time limit.

The notion returned to me slowly, first as undirected anxiety, then as creeping guilt. It burst into full bloom in the small hours of Friday morning, when I was snuggled in next to Raine in bed, trying to alternately cling to and chase away thoughts of bodily euphoria, and dreaming up ways to find Edward Lilburne.

It hit me in the pit of my stomach, and I rolled over onto my back.

“What if he just leaves?” I asked the darkness.

Raine stirred and sighed in her sleep, but I didn’t wake her. She needed to rest, she was still downing painkillers like smarties, and the crutch had become a permanent fifth limb. Instead I slid out of bed, consumed with worry rapidly unfolding into a multi-layered plan of panic and counter-panic, of whispered self-reassurance and

lip-chewing fear. I paced back and forth on silent feet, wiggled back into bed, then left again when I knew sleep was impossible. I was half-tempted to go wake Evelyn and explain my worries, or seek solace in Lozzie's bed – but Evee needed sleep too, and I didn't wish to plague Lozzie with thoughts of her uncle.

That night, five days after Carcosa, I wandered alone in the warm womb-like darkness of our castle, chewing indigestible fears into a fibrous pulp that wouldn't go down no matter how many times I swallowed. Wrapped in my pink hoodie and two pairs of socks, I descended from the cramped and crooked upstairs hallway down into the front room, to stand helpless and lost amid the boxes of old junk and the solid barrier of the front door.

“What if he leaves Sharrowford? What if we can't get the book back?” I asked the gloom.

I slipped through the waiting stillness of the kitchen, into the magical workshop among the detritus.

Walking alone in the dark solved nothing, but it felt right, and soothed my nervous system. I let my phantom limbs rove free, touching door frames and handles, probing behind chairs and trying to rifle through Evelyn's papers. The mental constructs set up a sympathetic ache in my sides as my bruised muscles tried to support limbs which weren't really there. I winced in silence, bit my lip, and savoured the sweet pain of truth.

I had to do it, didn't I? I'd told Evelyn I had some ideas about how to find Edward Lilburne with brainmath, but then she'd scared me.

Was repeated use of hyperdimensional mathematics – and manifesting my tentacles – beginning to force changes to my biochemistry?

Was I becoming closer to the euphoric reflection – *homo abyssus* – which Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had shown me? The thought of looking like that in reality haunted me as temptation beyond a whisper, a prospect I dare not breathe out loud, equal measure both exciting and terrifying. I wanted it, I wanted to be that, in the way one wants food or sex or warmth.

But I wasn't completely naive. This wasn't Outside. I couldn't walk around Sharrowford waving tentacles and blinking brass-coloured eyes and smiling through a mouth of needle-point teeth.

I'd felt so powerful during my tug of war with Edward's servitor, doubly so as I'd rooted him out. I shivered in the dark, not in cold or fear, but with the echo of adrenaline as the moment came back to me, as I'd stood before the rushing bone-tentacle as scrawny little Heather Morell, with no muscle mass, five foot nothing, and then unfolded myself.

Into me.

Euphoria was worth the pain.

But was it worth being like Tenny? Never able to walk the streets in the open? Or like Zheng, just the wrong side of normal to move among mundane people without being wrapped in clothing from head to toe? Was that my future if I kept going, hidden inside coats and scarfs and hats?

Even if I wanted to, I couldn't back away from brainmath now.

"Anything to save Maisie," I said out loud.

A glint of molten amber and smooth butterscotch twisted in the corner of my vision, like the hem of a skirt ruffled by fingers of wind. I flinched and turned, and caught a ghostly yellow sheen vanish around the corner of the kitchen door.

I sighed. "Being creepy doesn't work when I know it's you, Sevens."

No reply.

"What am I supposed to do, follow the hint like this is a haunted house?" I huffed as I slipped through into the kitchen. "Yes, please, do make my life as absurd as possible, thank you."

A ribbon of honey yellow receded into the thin opening left by the utility room doorway.

"If you jump out at me and make me scream, I am going to ... spank you," I hissed, nudged open the utility room door – and found nothing but Zheng.

No yellow anywhere, no vanishing ghostly hint of dusk, no whiff of fresh butter and sunflowers. The cellar was tightly shut, the night poured in through the window set into the back door, and Zheng was fast asleep.

She was sprawled out on the broken-backed sofa, feet up on the top of the washing machine opposite. At least she'd taken her boots off,

and wasn't sleeping in her coat either, down to her thick baggy jumper and jeans. Her arms were crossed over the vast expanse of her chest, and she breathed deeply like a sleeping giant in a cave.

She'd been hunting after sundown – wildlife or farm animals or stealing from a butcher's shop, I didn't care to know which – and the air around her smelled faintly of blood and meat, mixed with the heady spice of her sweat and the hot sensation of her reddish brown skin.

The bloody scent teased at my instincts.

I felt an ache in my jaw and an itch in my fingertips, as if I should be sprouting fangs and growing claws.

Surprised and confused but almost seduced, I pulled my eyes away from Zheng's dark sleeping bulk and stared out of the window set into the back door, at the old tree in the garden, and felt the most absurd desire to step out there and scurry up into the branches.

"You're not a squirrel," I hissed at myself.

But instinct insisted. Step out into the cold spring air. Wake Zheng and go together. Run through the woods and leap the suburban roofs and sniff out Edward Lilburne like a snake hiding in a burrow. Zheng and me, a pair of mongooses. The need crept up my spine like a warm hand encouraging me to stretch my limbs. Edward Lilburne was old and his body was not strong, and the abyssal side of me had gotten a taste of him when I'd cornered him in the mind of his own servitor.

Blinking, going hot in the face, I took a confused step back, and realised that Zheng was so warm her heat soaked into my side even when standing a foot away from her. I sidled closer, then held one hand inches from her flank. Instinct purred at me to squirm into her lap and convince her to take me outdoors to-

"Heather," I tutted softly at myself in the dark. Zheng shifted but didn't wake, sending a thrill through my heart. "If Zheng can't find him, you can't either," I whispered. "You're not tracking by scent along ocean bed currents here."

"Shaman," Zheng purred, thick and sleepy. She cracked one eye open. I froze like a rodent in an owl's descending shadow.

"... Zheng," I squeaked. "... I was just ... couldn't sleep ..."

Her eye swivelled down to my hand, which still hovered inches from her body. I braced, heart racing, for a sleepy razor grin and a comment like 'you can touch if you wish', already preemptively blushing and preparing a stammered denial. But Zheng's slit-sharp gaze met mine again, slow and intense with the heat of the air between us.

"Y-y-you know you don't have to sleep down here like this," I stammered. "You live here too now, you can have a b-bed if you-"

"Your body cannot lie to me, shaman," she purred. "Or to yourself."

"... I don't know what's come over me," I whispered.

Zheng's face split into a grin at last, a set of razors at rest. She shifted herself to present more easily the expanse of flank over which my hand still hovered, and simultaneously leaned forward into my personal space.

"You want to *hunt*, shaman," she purred. "I can take you."

I swallowed, hard, frozen to the spot.

Zheng slid her tongue from her mouth, as if to taste my scent in the air, twelve inches of wet red muscle flickering back between her teeth. "You would enjoy it, shaman."

"I ... I can't- not- Raine-"

"It is not unfaithfulness if we do not rut. I am not asking you for that."

For a long moment I was a hair's breadth from clambering into her lap, and I suspected that if I did, I would surrender to instinct in more ways than one. Instead, with an effort of will, I closed my fingers and straightened up and blew out a shaking breath, quivering all over and red in the face.

"It wouldn't work," I managed to squeak. "We wouldn't find him. However he does it, he's too well hidden."

"Mmmm," Zheng purred, rolled a shrug, and leaned back with a note of slow disappointment in her eyes. "You have domesticated me, shaman. I should just take you."

She closed her eyes, and instantly fell back asleep. Or at least pretended to.

I scurried out, blushing like the sunrise, and ran the kitchen tap so I could splash water on my face. I'd left Raine upstairs in bed with a healing wound and here I was flirting with Zheng.

But in my heart I admitted the truth – if Zheng's way worked, I would have surrendered myself completely, if only it would lead me to the book.

I'd spent a week pretending to be normal, and Maisie was waiting. I would try anything.

Upstairs again and at my bedroom doorway, still shaky and a little flushed from my libidinal risk-taking, I turned the opposite way and cracked open the door to Evelyn's study, hoping to locate some Shakespeare and cool my head in old familiarity.

But I wasn't the only one awake in the night.

Praem was sitting at the desk, in the little pool of light spilling from the lamp. Straight-backed, prim and proper even in the middle of the night, she had a book spread out before her, a thick tome which I recognised as Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Raine's copy, I think. Praem had not been able to replicate her trick of summoning a fresh maid uniform, like back at the Saye Estate, so she was still wearing Evelyn's borrowed clothes, at least until the shopping trip planned for Saturday.

Tenny was dozing against Praem's legs, wrapped in a bundle of sheets very obviously dragged across the floor in a disorganised heap, tentacles idly winding and unwinding around the doll-demon's ankles. She reminded me of a sleepy child who had refused to go to bed.

Praem looked up and met my eyes in passive silence.

"Ah," I said. "Night Praem."

"Night Heather," she intoned – but very softly. Tenny stirred against her legs, eyes still closed, feathery antenna twitching. To my surprise Praem reached down and stroked the white fuzz on Tenny's head.

"Fair point, yes, I should be sleeping," I whispered back, then stepped inside and pushed the door shut behind me. Instinct tugged at me to stay at the limit of the lamplight, to stay crouched in the dark. I overcame that urge with a frown and wandered forward,

nodding at the book. "Are you enjoying that?"

"No."

I blinked at her. "Oh. Well. Um." I shrugged. "Philosophy."

"Philosophy," she echoed – and I caught the faintest hint of amusement in her softly ringing voice.

My eyes wandered to Tenny, dozing and snuffling. Then I searched along the bookshelves which lined the walls, until my eyes alighted upon the three volume collected works of Shakespeare. I pulled down the third volume, and let it fall open in my hands on whatever page fate chose.

"'The time is out of joint'," I read out loud. "'O cursed spite, that I ever was born to set it right.'" I sighed heavily and turned to Praem with a self-deprecating smile.

"Explain," Praem intoned.

"Oh, um." I blinked, hadn't expected that. "It's *Hamlet*. I pick at random and the book gives me the indecisive prince." I sighed again. "What if Edward leaves with the book he took from Carcosa? Or what if Stack ... gets him," I said delicately. "And then she leaves, and we never find where he was hiding? I don't know what to do, and the ways forward frighten me."

Praem stared. Tenny stirred to wakefulness, perhaps at the anxiety in my voice. She blinked several times, eyelids out of sync, and smacked her lips before she noticed I was there.

"Heath?" she trilled. Silky black tentacles rose toward me.

"Yes, hello Tenny." I smiled, then looked back to Praem again.

"Maybe he doesn't know the significance of the book. Or maybe he does. Maybe that's the real leverage he has, not the things he put in the letter to Evelyn. Maybe he knows I need that book, and why, and thinks I'm cruel and heartless and monstrous enough to trade Lozzie for Maisie."

"No," Praem intoned.

I smiled at her. "Of course. I'm sorry, that was rhetorical. I'm ... I'm trying to make a decision."

Tenny reached me with her tentacles. One wrapped around my thigh and touched my belly. Another brushed the book and my

hand. The third stroked my cheek and nose and lips, like a blind person feeling the face of their beloved, and then patted my head and made me laugh. Tenny watched me with big black eyes, and probably no idea what I was talking about.

Gently, I caught one of her tentacles in my hand. She wrapped it around my wrist in return. My own phantom tentacles tried to meet hers, but simply passed through.

“Heath?” she fluttered, rolling sideways and resting her head on Praem’s thighs.

“Why aren’t you sleeping with Lozzie tonight?” I asked.

“Woke,” she trilled. “Water. Night Praeeeeem.”

She elongated Praem’s name as if trying to sing – then *giggled*, a wonderful bouncing trilling sound like an otherworldly insect seen through veils of fog, a sound on a lost island in a Greek myth. Praem stroked Tenny’s white fuzz again, and Tenny unfolded into a big cat-like stretch, legs vibrating as she worked her strangely bunched muscles, yawn opening beyond the limits of a human jaw to show black tongue and coal-dark throat.

She flexed her fuzzy-lined flesh-cloak, her wings, muscular sheets rippling just beneath the surface of her silken dark skin. Her cracking yawn forced a trilling noise from her alien lungs. Big dark eyes squeezed shut and blinked open again.

“Tenny,” I murmured with a sigh. “You’re so beautiful. Do you know that?”

“*Burrrrr*?” she went.

Tenny was a miracle, however she’d been made. She was quite possibly unique, yet totally comfortable in her own skin. If I had my way, she would never be given cause to doubt that.

Could I be the same?

Growing up as I had, caught in the cloying grasp of mental illness and the Eye’s lessons and the loss of my sister, I hadn’t spent a lot of time daydreaming about the future. Truth be told, I hadn’t expected to make it to thirty years old. But since meeting Raine, I had begun to entertain fleeting thoughts about the rest of my life. After Wonderland, after the Eye, after rescuing Maisie – if there was any normal life on the other side of being aware of magic – maybe then

I could finish my degree, maybe I'd do well enough to enter a postgrad program. At least my parents would support that.

"Hard to plan a life if I'm waving extra limbs around," I said out loud. "But Maisie's worth any sacrifice, and ... I want it? I do."

"Pbbbt?" went Tenny, curiously rocking her head from side to side. Praem just watched as I smiled back.

"I'm sorry, Tenny. It's nothing for you to worry about. I'm just deciding if I'm going to look a bit like you, one day."

"Can't go ouuuut," Tenny trilled, and a lump caught in my throat.

I was about to say no, that's not true, of course you can go out, we're going to find a way, it's all just been so busy lately. We'll take you out to the woods and you can fly there, Tenny, you can stretch your wings, you will. I promise we're not keeping you indoors because we don't understand. A hundred pained apologies rose unbidden to my lips.

But then Tenny hopped to her feet, bouncing on her springy ankle bones – which probably weren't bone at all – and in one quick movement she vanished inside the shifting camouflage of her flesh-cloak.

Where she'd stood had turned into a wavering vision of the desk and wall and books behind her, an impressionist dream of light and colour. My eyes watered and I had to squint.

"Tenny, oh no, Tenny I didn't mean ... "

The camouflage flickered. My words trailed off and my eyes went wide.

"Bravo," Praem intoned, and gave Tenny a polite little clap of fingertips against palm.

On the exterior of her camouflage, Tenny projected a version of herself – as a human.

A rough approximation, still with huge all-black eyes and skin the colour of dark satin, her musculature and fat closer to the mark but still distributed all wrong for a human being. But the illusion had finger nails and toe nails, shoulder-length white hair, and no wings. As I watched, antenna flickered and vanished on the illusion's head, as if Tenny was still learning how to get the look right. The illusion

shifted and wavered like heat haze, but I clapped too.

Tenny's head – her real head – popped out of her cloak, and she smiled in obvious pride and went "Haaaaa!"

I laughed. "Oh, Tenny. That's good! Have you been practising?"

"Loz showing me how," she replied.

"As long as ..." I struggled to chart the right course between encouragement and caution. "As long as you know that the *real* way you look is beautiful. An illusion is only for cover."

"She knows," Praem intoned.

Tenny puffed her cheeks up, a gesture I'm certain she'd learnt from Lozzie.

"M buuu-ful," she trilled.

I laughed again, and a wet click of tension released deep in my chest. "Yes, you are, Tenny. Thank you."

"Thank you?" she fluttered back at me.

"We can both be beautiful."

= =

Which is how I found myself sitting on the floor of the magical workshop ten hours later, with an ordinance survey map of Sharrowford spread out in front of me, and a clean bucket wedged between my knees.

Deep breaths, in and out. Nice and slow, count to ten, then take another deep breath. It's going to be fine, I told myself. It's going to work.

It's going to hurt like hell, whispered a scared part of me.

"What if he's not in Sharrowford?" Evelyn asked.

My palms were turning clammy, and I didn't know where to put them. I tried to focus on the map, on the shape of the streets, the urban weave and everything it represented. I wanted to visualise the city as if from above, from a birds-eye view. My heart was going too fast and my guts were churning and I hadn't even started. My brainmath notebook sat face-down next to me, ready to turn over once I wanted to begin the pain.

“Heather?” Evelyn repeated. “What if he’s not in the city? Beyond the edge of the map?”

I swallowed. Tried to answer. Couldn’t. Paralysed.

“Get a bigger map, right?” Raine said.

“Do you not understand the point of this? I doubt we’ll get anything useful with a larger scale,” Evelyn drawled. “We need a house, an address, a street at least. God alone knows how he’s hiding himself, but if Heather just points us at Manchester or something that’s hardly useful, is it?”

“Maybe we can get the neighbouring ordinance survey maps then,” Raine suggested. “Clear off one of the walls and pin them up side by side, until we’ve got a big enough area. Heather? Heather, hey, you holding up alright down there?” Raine reached forward and squeezed my shoulder.

I nodded, and glanced back, aching for support – but I was the only one who could do this.

Evelyn had taken a seat on the old sofa, with Praem standing prim and ready next to her, while Raine was right behind me in one of the chairs, her crutch leaning rakishly against one shin. I suppose she wanted to be close in case I needed help, but we’d prepared for that too; sofa cushions taken from the disused sitting room formed a sort of crash mat behind me in case I fell backward, and Lozzie crouched on her haunches ready to catch me in case of something completely unexpected.

“What do you think, bigger map?” Raine asked.

“It won’t help,” Evelyn grunted.

“Can you just let me try this one first, please?” I asked them both, trying to keep the tension out of my voice. “I don’t even know if I can do it, yet.”

Evelyn cleared her throat, nodded, and opened one hand in acknowledgement. Raine stroked my hair back from my forehead, and whispered, “Hey, I know you can do it.”

I turned back to the map.

“There is still another way, shaman,” Zheng purred from the workshop doorway. I risked a glance at her, at her sharp-edged eyes

watching me.

Pulled taut by indecision and fear, I took some of it out on her. "Yes, well, If this doesn't work, I suppose you and I can go running around naked in the woods and smear mud all over each other. Fine."

I looked back at the map again with a little huff. Stunned silence followed in my wake.

"Ooooooh," went Lozzie, clapping her fingertips together in scandalised glee.

"Mud," Praem intoned.

"Can I join in?" Raine murmured.

"That was sarcasm, by the way," I stammered, blushing bright red and sorely tempted to put the empty bucket over my own head. My palms prickled. The fear receded a tiny bit, snagged on sexual embarrassment.

"Let her concentrate, for pity's sake," Evelyn said. "This is complex enough as it is, don't-"

I took a deep breath.

"Zheng and I running around naked in the woods covered in mud!" I raised my voice into a shout, blushing so hard I turned molten, wielding mortified embarrassment as a bulwark against fear. I flipped over my notebook with a shaking hand and stared at the equation. "Everyone shut up I'm doing it now!"

And with that I plunged both hands into the tarry sump at the bottom of my soul, and hauled the Eye's lessons up and out into the burning daylight of my conscious mind.

With eyes open and nerves screaming, I attempted to define the entire city of Sharrowford with a single equation.

Defining a living being with hyperdimensional mathematics – a trick I'd pulled off three times before – was difficult enough when I knew what I was looking for. When Raine had been kidnapped, I'd only succeeded because I knew her so well. My body remembered the shape of her body, my fingers recalled the texture of her skin. I knew the sound of her laugh, the press of her weight on my back when we slept together, the colour of her eyes in shadow. I could

effortlessly picture her with perfect clarity upon the dark canvas of the inside of my own eyelids. And even then, locating her had very nearly pulled me over the edge of the abyss.

When I'd done the same with Sarika, I had her right in front of me, I spent long minutes preparing, and I did it as fast as possible. To do the same to the Shadow-servitor last Sunday had required actual physical contact, in the heat of the moment. Collapsing each degree of separation made the trick easier.

And I barely knew what Edward Lilburne looked like.

A faint impression of owlsh age and liver-spots and thin grey hair, a voice like curdled milk poured over wet gravel, and the taste of flesh and blood that was not flesh and blood, processed by abyssal senses into something the human mind was not meant to know. This was not enough.

We'd tried to get something useful from the Servitor's severed leg or the mannequin wrapped in barbed wire, but Evelyn concluded they had gone through the magical equivalent of being wiped down to remove fingerprints. If Edward Lilburne had personally constructed either, he'd left no tell except the strings of control which I'd already cut.

But I knew Sharrowford. I was touching Sharrowford, right now. Defining a whole city would logically contain everybody within it. Including him. I just had to sort through the data.

At least I'd had the foresight to tell everyone about my plan this time, rather than do it alone behind a locked bathroom door.

Sharrowford itself, the living city an organism of concrete and steel and glass inhabited by flesh and thought and dirt and uncounted microbes, unfolded into a billion billion lines of equation and I realised too late that a human city was almost as complex as the Eye. The Eye had dragged itself from the abyss, thought itself into flesh; the city had been dragged by countless hands from neolithic wattle and daub through Roman occupation and medieval peasantry and the stench of early modern gunpowder and the hacking black lungs of industrial coal mining and all of it met my consciousness at once.

Like swimming through a soup of polluted seawater. Oil clogging my gills and toxins seeping into my flesh, data as radioactive

isotopes stuck to the thin moist film of my eyes as every stagnant puddle of rainwater, every soaring tower downtown, every flat tire and crying baby and smear of excrement on a public toilet wall poured into my head in a single undifferentiated mass.

What a stupid assumption I had made. A city is too much for one mind. This place had taken millennia to make.

I came up a heartbeat later, shaking like a leaf, caked in cold flash sweat, icepick headache digging at the centre of my skull – and promptly vomited up the bile from my empty stomach. Good thinking on the sick bucket, Heather, well done. You had prepared to make a huge mess, and then followed through on that promise.

“Woah, woah, Heather, it’s okay-”

“Breathe, deep breath, woo-”

“Keep her nose forward-”

Droplets of blood ran from a nosebleed and dripped into the bucket. I clenched my teeth, raised my eyes back to the map of Sharrowford, and shrugged Raine’s hand off my shoulder. Guilt tore at my chest.

“Again,” I croaked.

And back in I plunged.

Or, I tried to. Imagine pulling oneself from an ocean of tar, bleeding from a dozen wounds made by jagged metal hidden in the dark liquid, feet shredded on razor rocks, shaking and blinded and gagging – and then forcing oneself to turn around and jump back in.

‘Oh dear sweet thing, what are you doing to yourself?’ whispered a voice of young fire and beaten gold.

On the edge of my perception in that space-that-wasn’t, a trailing periphery on the equation itself, a million canary-soft frill-folds peered over my shoulder.

My body rebelled, my brain juddered to a halt, the whole equation smashed against itself like a derailed train, and out in reality I hissed and groaned and shuddered as my body had nothing left to vomit out. At least I managed to drool into the bucket rather than onto my own lap. Small dignities.

I found Lizzie’s arms clamped around me from behind, holding on

tight. She was murmuring nonsense song-sounds into my ear. All my phantom limbs had joined her, curled in tight around my body in a protective shell, as if an extra layer of flesh could cushion my stomach and head and straining heart against the pain.

Everyone was talking at once.

“-been in a trance for three minutes, this isn’t normal-”

“She knows what she’s doing, trust her-”

“Shaman,” a purr in the dark.

“Again,” I wheezed.

Third time lucky.

This time I found my courage in guilt made the leap, forced myself over the edge on shattered ankles and torn soles. The equation to describe the whole of Sharrowford unspooled in my hands like magnetic tape made of razor-wire and acid, burning away skin and muscle down to bone and there was *too much* and why couldn’t I hold onto any of it? Surely if I was recovering faster I had to be useful for this, I had to use what I’d been given to find Maisie, I had to. I did not deserve to feel strong, to feel bodily euphoria, not if I couldn’t use that to help rescue my sister.

Of course, there was always another ledge to cross, to leap off, into the deep places where I would sink forever and become real.

Drag my own mind beyond the confines of ape flesh, write burning mathematics in the air.

The temptation was different, this time. Out in reality I had finally begun on some level to be what I was inside. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had shown me that truth. The abyss still called, but I had a piece of it within me now, and nothing could ever deny that.

But we needed that book.

We needed every edge against the Eye.

I had to make this work.

Maisie had told me not to, fear of ego-death told me not to, but I leaned out over that gap, and thought perhaps I could anchor myself on the cliff-face of reality as I drank deep of the cold abyssal waters.

I couldn't. I began to slip, ankles skidding, fingers clawing for purchase, and I wanted to fall. I wanted to go.

'Oopsie-daisy!' said a yellow voice.

Lemon flesh folded outward to infinity and caught my wrist, pulled me back up, and planted me on my metaphorical feet. Buttery fronds and skirts of dying starlight dusted me off, cleaned the gunk from my wounds and sucked out the threat of infection, leaving behind honeyed antiseptic. An eye that was not an eye, which was the opposite of an eye, winked.

'Won't be having much of my kind of fun if you go back down there.'

"Lesbian relationship drama isn't going to solve this," I snapped at Sevens – or thought at her, or wove into a mathematical equation and slapped her with it. I'm not sure which better describes how we were communicating in that frozen heartbeat of time.

'Don't be so sure of that.'

With a guttural hiss of pain and frustration I crashed back a third time, into absolute pandemonium.

Raine was on her knees in front of me, repeating my name, a blurry shape seen through blackening vision as I blinked sticky blood out of my eyes. Evelyn was shouting something about slapping me. Lozzie's hands were beneath my clothes and on my belly, surprisingly warm and comforting as she crooned some wordless song beneath her breath.

"Not enough," I croaked, voice cracking with blood in my throat. "Again-"

A pair of strong hands slipped beneath my armpits and hauled me bodily off the floor as if I weighed nothing. Lozzie let me go with an 'oop!' of surprise. I was so shocked the brainmath slammed to a halt, jaws of my mind crashing shut on nothing, and I had the faintest impression of yellow silk slipping away into the dark.

My legs dangled in the air, hands limp and filled with pins and needles, head spinning, the taste of blood and bile in my mouth. I flinched as Zheng's face filled my vision.

Unsmiling, eyes hard as grey steel.

"Stop," she said.

Panting with animal fear, my phantom limbs stuck between lashing out and trying to hug her, I squeaked out an affirmative. Yes, big scary lady, anything you say.

Zheng adjusted her grip and caught me properly behind knees and around my back, then went down on one knee and lowered me onto the sofa cushions spread out across the floor.

"On her side, one arm- yes, that's it," Raine murmured instructions, until Zheng had me rolled into the recovery position.

"M'not going to be sick again," I croaked, struggling weakly.

"Stay down, shaman," Zheng rumbled.

Lozzie's hands stroked my head and made me still.

"Resty-time for Heathers," she whispered.

Silence descended. The smell of my own blood stuck in my nose. I coughed gently, and whined as the headache pain began to set in.

"Hey, Heather, it's okay, it's okay." Raine's hands appeared with water and towel, and she set about wiping the blood from my face as I moaned and wheezed. I'd pushed myself much too far.

"How is she? Heather, are you conscious?" Evelyn asked.

"Too much information," I muttered. "Couldn't ... process- couldn't-"

"Don't explain," Evelyn grunted. "You did your best. It's okay. Just stop, yes."

"She's not hurt herself!" Lozzie chirped. "She had help."

Big sighs all around. Zheng rumbled something under her breath. Small hands kneaded my back.

"Well, I think we can conclude this is not going to work," Evelyn said at length. "You've never doubted her before, why now?"

I wasn't sure who she was talking to. My hearing felt blurred, my consciousness a thin soap bubble.

Zheng answered. "The shaman has led herself astray. I do not understand how."

"She's just trying too hard and sometimes you have to let go to try

your best,” Lozzie said. Nobody else seemed to know what to say to that.

Ten hours passed. Or maybe it was only ten seconds. Maybe I fell asleep.

“-locating him is theoretically possible, but it’ll give Heather a seizure at best if she keeps going like this. No. Not again,” Evelyn was saying.

“Mmmm,” I grumbled, an awful headache behind my eyes, and without thinking I pulled myself up into a sitting position.

The motion made my head spin and my vision throb, and nearly knocked me out again. Somebody propped me up. I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Do not stand,” Praem sang.

“Maybe we-” I croaked, cleared my throat, winced at how the cough made my head throb, then tried again. “Maybe we should contact the lawyer, what’s his name, and I can raid his mind instead.”

“Heeee,” went Lozzie in amused approval.

Easier than this miserable failure, anyway.

“Raid his offices, at least,” Raine murmured. “I could do that. Here, Heather, take a sip.” She pressed a glass into my hand, and I forced cold knives down my bloody throat.

“Not with that leg you can’t,” Evelyn grumbled. “I was hoping Stack would have turned up something by now, but perhaps we should do this the old fashioned way. We need an expert in finding people who don’t want to be found.”

“Nicky?” Raine suggested. I blinked open my blood-crusted eyes.

Evelyn nodded, sucking her teeth in thought. “Perhaps tomorrow-”

“Tomorrow we’re going shopping,” I gave an angry croak, and drew only surprised silence from everybody else. Even Zheng. “Don’t let my failure ruin anything else too. I’ll feel even worse.”

a very great mischief – 13.1

Praem drew back the privacy curtain, drew her spine up into perfect poise – with the same almost imperceptible hand-flourish she'd used the last half dozen times – and drew a tiny round of applause from Lozzie.

"Here I am," she intoned, and took two steps forward out of the cubicle, into the seating area where we were all waiting for her between outfits.

"Very blue!" said Lozzie.

"Very ... very cuddly," I managed, trying not to stare too much. "Yes, Praem, you look very cuddly."

I fought down a blush when Praem's milk-white eyes located me and stared back.

"Mmmmmm." Evelyn sucked on her teeth. "Much more her style than the hoodie, or the loose blouse, but blue with blue does seem a touch like a rendering error in a video game. Can't we compromise, the same skirt but in white or black?"

"Purple," Praem intoned.

"Purple is good too!" Lozzie said. "Oooh the back is also *also* good." She capered in a little circle around Praem, her pastel poncho fluttering.

"Hold up." Raine pointed a finger-gun at Praem. "I've actually got a question, if you don't mind, of course? Bit personal and all that."

Praem turned her head to direct a silent stare at the request. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up; my Raine senses were tingling. I detected a twinkle in her eye, hiding behind her oh-so-serious expression.

"That a yes or a no?" Raine prompted.

"Yes," Praem echoed.

"Cool, okay. How do those things not give you terrible back pain?"

Her faux-serious expression crumbled a moment later, no match for Praem's poker face.

"Raine!" I spluttered, and swatted her on the shoulder. Blushing, self-conscious – and trying to look anywhere but at what she was referring to – I shot a glance back at the wide entranceway to the clothing shop's fitting area and changing rooms, where it opened back out into the brighter lights and softly muted colours of the display floor. The attendant lady at the service desk didn't appear to have overheard us, more interested in her glossy magazine.

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. Lozzie snorted.

"Come on, she's probably heard worse!" Raine stage-whispered, nodding toward the attendant. "I bet people shag in these cubicles sometimes."

"That doesn't make it okay!" I hissed back.

I glanced at Praem's impassive observation – then spared an involuntary flicker of my eyes down at the source of Raine's comment – and had to avert my gaze again.

However crude her phrasing, I had to begrudgingly admit that Raine had a good point. My eyes had betrayed me.

Praem looked gorgeous. This morning, Evelyn had finally attempted to fix Praem's hair, still singed here and there and curled up at the ends from our crisis in Carcosa. With a pair of kitchen scissors and me hovering nervously within arm's reach and neither of us with any idea what we were doing, we'd been fully prepared to absolutely butcher Praem's beautiful cold-blonde hair.

But then Kimberly had appeared, by chance, and luck, and bless her for that, because it was Saturday and she wasn't at work. She'd seen us from the kitchen doorway, poor Praem sat very still and uncomplaining in a chair, Evelyn frowning in concentration like she was defusing a bomb, the scissors poised to sever an entire springy lock.

Kimberly had all but stumbled into the kitchen, with a "No no no! You need to wet her hair first, what are you doing!?"

"Would you like to take over?" Evelyn had asked her, straightening up with barely concealed relief, then clearing her throat when Kimberly flinched. "And no, that is not sarcasm. I am fully aware I

am about to fuck this up.”

“Please do,” I’d added.

Kimberly had gone in with spray bottle and comb and scissors, and done a much better job than we ever could.

“It’s not that difficult,” she’d told us, snipping off stray singed hairs here and there, fingers and comb working in smooth strokes to isolate split ends. “I’ve never done it professionally, that’s a whole school thing you have to do, but I’ve done it for friends and stuff. I can neaten up a mess. And this isn’t too bad, not really. She’s got a lot of hair and it’s very thick, easy to work with.”

Praem was so impassive and still, it was like working on a doll.

When she was all finished, Kimberly glowed with a satisfied smile, a rare, delicate thing like an exotic flower, a little jerky and nervous, but undeniably happy. She’d jokingly brushed off Praem’s shoulders and said, “Anything else I can do for you, madam? Colour, shampoo, blow-dry?”

“No, thank you,” Praem had said – and Kimberly had jumped about a foot in the air.

Renewed, Praem had pinned her freshly neaten hair up in a loose bun at the back of her head, a big trailing mess of blonde loops and loose strands. She seemed to prefer that, and would accept no efforts to tidy it up.

“If that’s what you want,” Evelyn had sighed.

Most of Praem’s bruises and cuts and scrapes were healed up now too, leaving only a few fading gazes and thin scabs on her knuckles. None of us said a word, of course, that her hair and skin and flesh were all pneuma-somatic, a solid projection created by the abyssal soul inside a doll made of wood. If being human meant healing like a human, so be it.

Which is also why nobody pointed out her hair gained three to four inches of length *after* being cut.

As I said, gorgeous.

Her current outfit – the latest of about half a dozen different combinations she’d been trying on in the shop’s fitting area for our varied opinions – consisted of a long skirt the colour of a clear sky

seen from underwater, with a very high waist that hugged her abdomen. The waistband was a tall expanse of overlapping and interwoven ribbon material over the base fabric. I knew nothing about fashion, I wore shapeless layers more for protection and enclosure than appearance, but even I could tell that particular item was both fancy and probably quite expensive. But the skirt wasn't the problem.

The problem was the thick, ribbed, polo-neck sweater. A beautiful deep blue, tucked into the skirt, and fitting Praem perfectly.

How could a cuffs-to-collar top put such emphasis on Praem's already substantial chest?

"Do *not* make her self conscious," Evelyn growled at Raine. "I will whack you so hard with my walking stick, they'll arrest me for grievous bodily harm."

"Boobage is fine!" Lozzie agreed, puffing out her cheeks.

"Of course it's fine, of course!" Raine held up both hands in surrender. "Suits her, of course, perfect, elegant, beautiful. I'm just, you know, mechanically curious how Praem doesn't get back pa-"

"Because I am much stronger than you," Praem said in her sing-song voice.

Raine burst out laughing. Evelyn rolled her eyes again. Lozzie said "big strong" under her breath.

"Well, that's me told," Raine said. "Fair point, rock on."

"I like them," Praem said, and made me blush beetroot red.

"Could we maybe stop talking about boobs?" I asked.

"Quite," Evelyn grunted.

It was lucky we were in here mostly alone.

We'd been in the changing rooms now for a good twenty five minutes while Praem tried on outfits, a mix and match of various promising prospects. She and Lozzie had piled up exciting clothes from the racks and display shelves out on the shop floor and then checked in with the attendant. Two separate piles had grown either side of Evelyn on the little seating bench – one for items to purchase and one for rejects, next to the few bags of things we'd acquired from other shops.

Slowly but surely we were building a mental picture of Praem's personal style, beyond variations on maid uniforms: plush, smooth, cuddly, and mostly unornamented.

The store was called *Hartellies*, buried deep in Swanbrook Mall, Sharrowford's only shopping centre, an ugly labyrinth of fake marble floor tiles, gaudy kiosk stands, shiny chrome store fronts and too much glass everywhere. The mall sprawled out across two consolidated blocks next to Sharrowford's main high street, with metastasised extensions connecting to a massive M&S department store – in which Evelyn had purchased for Praem precisely ten pairs of socks and six pairs of tights – and the concrete shell of a multi-story car park.

Hartellies struck just the right balance between trendy and traditional – for Praem, at least. I doubted Raine or Lizzie would have found anything to suit them here. The little fitting area was a major bonus, structured to allow exactly what we were doing right now, ringed with curtained cubicles on two sides and larger cubicles with doors in the back, all with full-length mirrors.

It was so far the most successful shop we'd been to. The others on this windy and mild Saturday morning had yielded little to pique Praem's interest.

We'd taken Raine's car. It was barely a fifteen minute drive, and cost a whopping five pounds to park in the multi-story, a sum which made me so outraged I'd spluttered in disbelief as Evelyn had fished about in her purse for the coins, but under the circumstances it didn't seem wise to take the bus. Not with walking sticks and crutches and my lingering exhaustion from failed brainmath yesterday. The psychological balm of a mobile safe place was worth the petrol. Plus, Lizzie and I were quite small, so cramming ourselves into the back seat either side of Praem wasn't that much of a squeeze.

Raine even drove. After a week of recovery she swore up and down that she was well enough to drive, that her left thigh was stiff but functional. She hadn't dialled back on the painkillers, which worried me, but she wasn't lying.

I found it rather intoxicating in the end, watching her drive, watching her be in control, performing with skill.

I was considerably less intoxicated when she needed to sit in the

driver's seat for a full ten minutes after we arrived, waiting for the ache to subside.

"It's cool, you can go on without me," she tried to shoo us out of the car. "I'll catch up, I'm fine. I'll be fine, five minutes. Fine."

"You are a terrible liar, stop trying," Evelyn grumbled.

"Raine!" I tutted. "I'm not *impatient*, you dolt, I'm worried about you. I'm not going anywhere until you can stand up properly. And if you can't stand at all, then Praem is going get behind the wheel and take us right home again."

"Awww, no, come on-"

"No buts."

"No but," Praem echoed me.

So Raine had rested, rubbing her left knee, and we'd not needed to go home.

We'd made a real day out of it so far, a kind of fun I was not used to. 'Shopping' as a teenager had meant timidly trailing my mother around Reading town centre, dragged up and down Broad Street in her infrequent efforts to acclimatise me to places other than home or hospital. I'd certainly never gone clothes shopping with friends, and the strange inherent intimacy surprised me. I'd never even really picked my own clothes before, just worn whatever my mother bought for me.

First we went somewhere fancy, a little boutique shoe store called *Kline*, where I felt deeply uncomfortable and out of place and like everyone was looking at us. Then Evelyn spent almost two hundred pounds on a pair of boots for Praem and the glances changed.

Then we tried *Primark* – a mistake. The place was wall-to-wall with young teenagers, lit up like a football pitch, and the women's clothing selection was what Evelyn derisively described as "disposable rubbish."

"But this!" Lozzie had held up a sort of weird floaty cross between a dress and a hoodie.

"It'll fall apart inside a month," Evelyn grumbled back, her shoulders hunched, grumpy around so many people. "Besides, Praem isn't interested. Are you?"

“Pajamas,” Praem had said, staring halfway across the store. We’d left ten minutes later with a set of tartan pajamas and lots of tutting from Eevee.

“The trick, Heather,” Evelyn explained to me later, after we’d left the mall to head down the high street and into a *Superdry* store which Lozzie had known about somehow, “is that sometimes spending more money upfront costs less in the long run.”

Raine was holding up a black-and red jacket to Lozzie’s front, to their shared interest, but I didn’t like the *Superdry* store. Bright lights but dark surfaces, like my mental image of a nightclub, trendy and hip and covered in clean marketing full of perfect smiling people, nothing like the real lives that came in here for self-presentation.

Though I did like the contents.

“Eevee,” I sighed. “I can’t justify *seventy pounds* for a hoodie, no matter how pretty it is.”

And it was pretty. Dark pink, the colour of shadow-soaked tropical petals, with palm-sized diamond patterning in lighter pink across the shoulders and upper arms, like lizard scales, with the hood and zipper and pockets rimmed in white. Thick fabric, double-stitched seams, the thing was like armour. I loved it the moment I saw it.

Evelyn shrugged and glanced at Praem, who was staring at a selection of beanie hats but otherwise uninterested.

“Say you buy a five pound tshirt from Primark,” Evelyn continued, “and the seams start to go within six months. Or you spend twenty pounds on a tshirt from somewhere like this, and you’ll be wearing it for twenty years. I assume I don’t need to do the maths for you?”

“... well, that’s obvious, but-”

“How old do you think this is, Heather?” Evelyn tilted her chin up.

Evelyn had come out dressed as normal, wrapping herself in too many layers for her frame. She wore pajama bottoms tucked into her socks beneath a long skirt, and a tshirt beneath a heavy cream jumper, coat over the top, though at least the pockets were flat today, all her magical detritus left at home. Today we were as normal as we could get.

She was of course talking about the cream coloured jumper, the one

she wore often. Thick enough to smother an elephant, the collar and cuffs and one armpit repaired with slightly different coloured thread, the thing was obviously a little old.

“I’m not exactly good at fashion. Ten years?” I guessed.

“Twenty five. At least.”

I blinked. “ ... are you serious?”

“Mhmm. This jumper is older than me,” she said, a little pleased with herself. “My mother’s, actually, but I’m not going to let that get in the way of quality. Things last, if you look after them, and you get what you pay for, in the long run.”

I glanced back at the hoodie with the beautiful scale patterns. An echo of reptilian life. Could clothing make up for a mental gap in my self-perception?

“But still. Seventy pounds,” I said.

“I’ll buy it for you, if you want.”

“Evee! Absolutely not. I couldn’t let you do that. Oh, no, please don’t, I-”

“I’m doing it.” She reached over to the rack of hoodies.

“But-”

Evelyn turned an unimpressed, dead-eye stare on me. “Heather, we’ll leave the theory to Raine, but the least I can do with my incredible level of class privilege is look after my friends. Now shut up and let me buy you a present.”

“Well ... I ... I suppose, but- but Raine already bought me a hoodie. This one.” I poked a pink cuff out from the end of my coat sleeve. “It’ll be a bit odd if you’ve both done it.”

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. “Is hoodie purchasing some sort of lesbian mating ritual that I’m unaware of? Are you duty bound to climb into my bed if I get you this?”

I blushed and went quite still. “I-I- I m-mean, you’re- t-taken-”

Evelyn’s expression transformed into a perplexed frown. “That was a joke, Heather. I’m not flirting with you.” She sighed, and added under her breath, “What does ‘taken’ mean anyway? Tch.”

I let out a huge embarrassed sigh, colour blooming in my cheeks. “You kind of were!” I hissed, and cast a glance at Raine, but she was just beyond earshot, watching Lozzie getting excited over an oversized hoodie with a sort of oil-film rainbow tie-dye effect. “I have enough trouble threading the needle between Raine and Zheng lately without you flirting with me too.”

“I thought that needle was throughly discarded by now,” she grumbled, taking down the hoodie and checking the size label. “Small, I assume?”

“Uh, yes, small. Obviously. And yes, I think. I ... I couldn’t use the needle to knit anything anyway. I don’t know how to knit ... this ... weave.”

“We are torturing this poor metaphor to death.” Evelyn checked the hoodie over for loose threads as she spoke, almost deadpan. “Are you bumping uglies with Zheng and I haven’t noticed? I assumed she’d make a lot of noise, or make *you* make a lot of noise. One way or the other.”

“Evee! And no, we’re not!”

“Mm, just thought to check.”

“You’re being as bad as Raine, and no, I can’t-”

“Hat,” Praem intoned from the blind spot over my shoulder.

“Ooooooooh.” Lozzie rejoined us too, eyes going wide at the beanie Praem had pulled down over her hair. Velvet white, high quality, and rising at the top corners into a pair of cat ears.

“Oh, really?” Evelyn huffed and tutted. “That’s so-”

“I want one too!” went Lozzie. Evelyn stifled a word inside a cough, which I’m pretty sure was ‘tacky’.

“Meow,” said Praem.

We left there with two hats, one in white for Praem, and one in pink for Lozzie.

The rest of our route took us all the way down the high street, toward the big pedestrianised ‘town square’, lined with fast food places and bakeries and real estate agents and jewellers, all sterilised and clean, air-dropped in from an external vision of a trendy Northern city. Even the local pneuma-somatic life shunned

the big open area with its clean white frontages and twee cafe seating. The spirits preferred to scurry across the rooftops in the corners of my vision.

The real Sharrowford lurked at the threshold like a ancestral affliction, branching off into the warren of brick-paved lanes beyond the square, where the tall buildings cast deep shadows on unique shops and strange businesses.

One of which was a women's underwear store catering to larger sizes. Evelyn assured me this was "unique enough, believe me."

"Hey, no judging here," Raine said, deadly serious through her smile. "Support's important, you know?"

"Oh, right, of course," I'd said, stifling a blush.

Evelyn took Praem to buy underwear, but Raine and Lozzie and I waited across on the other side the lane, window-shopping in a bizarre little store which sold nothing but hand-carved wooden statues of animals.

Inside, I happened across something remarkable, which had nothing to do with us.

Lozzie took a liking to a carved ferret, about ten times life size, and squealed with muffled joy. She would probably have stolen the thing if she could fit it under her poncho. Raine found a palm-size tiger, and purchased it.

I found a spirit.

Attached to the ceiling with a mass of brown sticky webbing, hanging upside down and shaped like a splash of frozen muddy water caught in mid-air, the thing possessed two dozen multi-joined limbs, spindly and precise, each one terminating in a pneumatic approximation of a carving tool, chisels and knives and little scrapers. Its head was shaped like a CCTV camera, and it hung behind the store's owner – a middle-aged woman busy with the latest of her creations, breaking away only to take Raine's payment. She gave us warm smiles and answered Raine's polite, impressed questions with striking enthusiasm.

A three-foot carving of a crocodile lay on a table behind the cash register, emerging from a block of featureless wood, taking form in slow motion.

And as she returned to her work, the spirit mirrored every motion of her wood-knife and chisel, with each limb copied four times in a whirling blur.

Had this random stray spirit imprinted on this woman? Was it trying to mimic her, trying to create art?

Or was her skill and passion a gift from this unseen guardian angel?

I'll never know. The world is full of strange things, unique things, phenomena which defy classification, which one passes by a hundred times a day and does not know about. My struggles with the Eye and our rivalry with Edward Lilburne did not define even a percentage of a fraction of what went on all over Sharrowford every day.

Praem and Evelyn returned carrying a glossy little shopping bag from the underwear store, which even Raine knew better than to joke about.

But Lozzie had no such qualms. "Can I see later?" she chirped to Praem, in total innocence.

"Lozzie," I tutted gently. "It's private-"

"Not like that!" Lozzie went wide-eyed at me – or at least as wide as her permanently sleepy ocular muscles could manage – and giggled in scandalised mirth.

"You may," Praem intoned.

We made our way back toward Swanbrook Mall, planning to try more stores. Despite a few successes we still hadn't found anywhere for the real staples of sartorial choice. We passed by the alleyway that I knew led to Mount Emei Secondhand Books, and I yearned to spend the next three hours exploring the shelves.

"I'll take you out here in a few weeks time," Raine murmured to me as I cast a longing glance back over my shoulder. "A bookshop day, just for you."

"Oh, I wasn't- wait, how did you know I was thinking that?"

Raine winked, and slipped her free hand into mine. "If I didn't track your book lust, I wouldn't be a very good girlfriend to you, would I?"

"*Book lust?*" I grimaced through a giggle. "Please don't call it that."

I endured the same reaction to the all-too-spotless chain bookstore back inside the shopping centre, but I was a good friend to Praem and did not derail our entire trip to spend half an hour gazing upon hardback copies of books I'd already read a dozen times.

Raine did not let go of my hand. She'd spent most of the shopping trip up until that point with her head on a covert swivel, always in the rear of our little group despite her crutch, always eyes-up and watching the periphery. She did it quietly, without making a fuss, but I knew she was watching to see if we were being followed. Once we got back inside the shopping centre though, she finally began to relax, and I was the self-conscious one, my hand in hers in public.

Nobody cared. Not about the pair of lesbians holding hands, or about Evelyn Saye the magician, or about Lauren Lilburne out in public.

We didn't look that different to any other group of students out on a Saturday. Walking sticks and crutches, Praem's impassive intensity and Lizzie's pastel poncho, my lingering bestial twitches and Raine's bodyguard aura, all of it combined to mark us out as 'very student', as Raine put it, but we wouldn't draw a second glance in the centre of Sharrowford, a city that very much wanted to be what it *thought* we represented.

We'd scouted out a few more likely shops, but kept coming up empty handed – too bland, too expensive, "too bloody middle class," as Raine phrased it – until we found *Hartellies* and Praem had waded in without reservation.

I would have hated this sort of trip by myself. Alienating and meaningless. The last time I was in the shopping centre, I'd been stumbling along next to Amy Stack, on the way to a meeting with Alexander Lilburne. We did avoid the food court, if only to stay away from bad memories, and I was faintly sad that neither Zheng nor Tenny could join us. Too big, too scary, too different to be out in public.

But I was with friends, and that bottled up the failure and the guilt.

I felt unworthy of such a reprieve.

"You want one of those too?" Evelyn murmured, pulling me off the path which led to dark thoughts.

I blinked at her. "I'm sorry?"

Praem had returned behind the thick privacy curtain of the changing cubicle, handed Lozzie the blue skirt and ribbed sweater, and was busy trying on another outfit, while we waited on the little low backless couch seats. I'd been idly drawing my hand across the thick fabric of the ribbed sweater. Lozzie was chattering something to Raine, and Evelyn had leaned in beside me.

"The jumper. Polo-neck seems perhaps your kind of thing?" She frowned over the words, as if not quite certain.

"Oh. Uh." I tried a smile, chasing away the ghost of guilt. "Maybe. It certainly looks comfy, but I doubt I could pull off the look like Praem. I don't have as much, if you know what I mean."

Evelyn frowned. "You're the one who asked us to stop talking about breasts, Heather."

I felt my cheeks colour slightly, but I retained my composure.

"That's not what I meant. I mean I'm not-"

"You could pull off any look you want," Raine added from my other side.

"Listen to your lover, Heather," Evelyn said. "She wants you in that skirt."

"Stop- stop double teaming me," I protested.

That one made Lozzie giggle.

"If you want one similar," Evelyn deadpanned, as if none of this mattered, oddly detached, "I've still got a hundred and fifty pounds earmarked for you."

"What?" My eyes went wide. "Oh, Eevee, no, not after you already bought the hoodie for me, I can't-"

"Yes you can," she *almost* snapped.

"I- I mean- the blue is too much for me-"

"Weren't they in white, too?" Raine asked. "Cream, or black, or lilac? Anything you like."

"I want a rainbow one," Lozzie added. "With a hood."

"Different store for that, I'm afraid," Evelyn sighed, then much to my surprise she poked me in the side. "Go pick one out. Go on."

I glanced at Raine, either for help or permission, I wasn't sure which, but she just winked at me and nodded over Evelyn's shoulder, toward the clothing racks beyond the fitting area. "I can see them from right here. Go on, go grab one and come try it on."

"Oh, fine!" I huffed and stood up. "I'll be back in a moment."

"You'll look great!" Raine called after me as I all but scurried out of the fitting area and back under the lights of the shop floor. I cast a backward glance at the young woman at the attendant's counter, feeling like I was doing something wrong, but she didn't look up from her magazine.

Raine hadn't exaggerated, the display shelving with the ribbed sweaters wasn't far from the fitting area, and I could see my friends unobstructed. Raine raised a thumbs up and gave me a broad wink, and I responded with a performative little huff before turning to focus on the clothes. These ribbed sweaters did feel very comfortable. Like a hug, warm and tight and thick. I doubted they'd look any good on scrawny little me. I didn't have Praem's plush layers to fill one out. But I picked one up anyway, in white. Not my usual sort of look, but maybe it would work, maybe it would be okay.

I didn't deserve this.

The feeling was sudden and crushing.

I didn't deserve such good friends. I certainly didn't deserve presents or treats or fancy new clothes. I'd failed.

Yesterday, I'd failed to find Edward Lilburne. I'd filled a bucket with sick and blood, over-topped it with pain, gotten precisely nowhere, and had to be rescued. I hadn't told anybody how close I'd come to the edge of the abyss, consumed by an awful sense of defeat. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight knew, but she hadn't appeared to offer help or advice. She'd ignored my pleas in the bathroom mirror last night.

I shouldn't be here, having fun. I should be banging my head against the problem of the Eye until either I cracked it or cracked my skull.

We'd called Nicole's personal number and left a message, to let her know we were interested in employing her very particular skill set. That was, for the moment, all we could do. The best course of

action, Evelyn had assured me. Safe. Detached. Without personal involvement.

But surely I shouldn't be here, pretending to be normal.

"Why did you save me?" I whispered under my breath, to the only person who knew what had happened out there on the edge of cold infinity.

"Can I help you find anything?"

The bright and cheery voice made me jump – half in surprise, half in embarrassment. I turned with an expression like a startled squirrel, and found the young lady attendant from the desk standing a few feet behind me, all polite and proper, with a perfectly plastic customer service smile on her heart-shaped face, framed by a helmet of brown hair.

"Oh, no, thank you," I rushed to reply. "I was just going to try ... this ... on."

I trailed off, deeply unimpressed.

There were two of her.

The attendant was still sat at her little desk next to the fitting area, nose in her tacky magazine, dressed in white blouse and denim jacket and hoop earrings – and the exact same person was also standing in front of me, but wearing a smart one-piece dress, totally appropriate for a shop attendant in a slightly upmarket clothing store.

A yellow dress, with matching yellow shoes, and little yellow sunflower earrings.

There was a tiny percentage chance that this particular clothing shop just so happened to employ a pair of identical twins, and one of them had by chance decided to dress all in yellow, on the exact same day that we ended up here, and then by the pure perverse mechanism of cosmic determinism, walked up to offer me help. This slim possibility sustained my veneer of normality for about a quarter of a second, until I realised the one in yellow had approached me from the exact angle to make the doubled twin impossible to miss.

Perfect theatrical blocking. A professional at work.

“Sevens,” I hissed. “What are you doing?!”

I flicked a glance at my friends, but Praem was stepping out of the changing stall at that exact moment, and Raine had looked away. I had no doubt Sevens had timed that to perfection as well.

The pretty young Service Worker in Yellow batted her eyelashes at me. “I’m sorry, miss? I was only offering assistance, if there’s anything I can help you find? I’m very sorry if I’ve given offence somehow.”

“Oh my goodness, don’t do that.” I grimaced at her. “That is positively creepy.”

Her plastic smile slipped, tainted by simulated nerves. The Banana-Coloured Shop Assistant had particularly mobile eyebrows, involuntarily raised in surprise. “C-creepy?” she stammered, glancing over her shoulder for help.

“You haven’t done something ... something *unnatural* to that poor woman, have you?” I whispered, gesturing with my eyes at the lady she was copying, the one sat at the desk. “I haven’t forgotten what you did to the students in that lecture hall, even if you did reverse the effects. Don’t you dare, Sevens, not here.”

The Precariat in Sunburst looked back at me, throat bobbing, hands clasped just a little too tight, sweat breaking out on her brow, the very picture of a put upon service worker subjected to a unjustified berating by an unreasonable customer. For a horrified moment I came up short, my heart juddering to a stop as one of my worst fears threatened to unfold into reality.

What if this wasn’t Sevens?

What if I was ranting nonsense at some uninvolved woman? Heather Morell, being openly insane and unstable in public. Everything I’d always been trained to avoid at all costs. All the blood drained from my face as the woman in the yellow dress struggled for the right words.

Then, in the split-second between two flustered blinks, the irises between her thick dark lashes flashed from deep brown to the yellow of an electric storm.

“Sevens!” I hissed at her, almost spitting with outrage. “Don’t make me feel like I’m abusing a service worker, that is disgusting!”

Sevens-as-Part-Timer cleared her throat and resumed her plastic smile. "I'm very sorry you feel that way, miss."

"Heather?"

I flinched. I would have jumped, but Raine's voice was far too deeply ingrained as a source of safety and comfort and protection. She was at my shoulder, and I'd been so absorbed in telling off Sevens that I hadn't heard Raine approach, even with her crutch. She leaned on it now, peering at me with curious concern as she put her free hand gently on my forearm. Far behind her, back in the fitting area, Evelyn was casting an idle glance our way as well.

"You okay?" Raine asked.

I spun back to Sevens – and found nobody there.

"Heather?" Raine dropped her voice. "Hey, saw you talking to yourself, is this invisible monster stuff?"

I screwed my eyes up and let out a deep sigh. "No, no, just ... an irritant. It's gone now."

Raine went tense, eyes roving beyond me, over the racks of clothes and neatly folded jumpers and hanging skirts.

"Not another servitor?" she whispered.

I almost laughed. "No, no. Nothing so clear as that. It was Sevens. Being infuriating."

Raine relaxed instantly, and raised an eyebrow at me. "What'd she say?"

"Um, nothing. She asked me if I wanted help finding clothes, bizarrely enough."

"Ahhh, being a weirdo. Gotcha." Raine's mouth tilted into a knowing smile. "Hey, you ever need help scaring off some invisible stalker, you lemme know."

"I will do." I managed a little smile, and felt fake all over.

Raine nodded down at the ribbed sweater I was still holding. "Going for one in white, hey?"

"Oh, yes. Well, I don't know, really."

"I do know. And I know you'd look great in that." Raine shot me a

grin, the sort of heart-stopping rakish smile she'd used on me when we'd first met. It still worked. "I don't tell you that often enough," she lowered her voice. "You could wear anything you'd want and you'd look incredible."

"D-don't be absurd. Raine. I'm flat as a board, this won't do anything for me."

"Nonsense. Hey, no, don't look away," she put the tiniest whip-crack into her murmur, and I had to obey. "I mean it, Heather. You wanna try a different look, do it, I'm on board. Hundred percent. I know you like lots of layers when you're out and about, but if you wanna experiment at home, go for it."

"... I ..." I swallowed and bit my lower lip, my brain caught up on too many different things to put up any resistance. "I suppose I would like to wear skirts more often ... maybe."

"Yeeeeeah, that's more like it. Tell me what you want. Skirts, huh? I got you all those coloured tights way back. Come on, hey, you in a ribbed sweater, a ruffly skirt and a pair of purple tights? Practically royalty."

I laughed, despite myself. "Raine, that sounds so silly. I don't know if I can pull off 'girly'."

"Forget can," Raine. "Focus on want."

I sighed and shrugged.

"Go try that on, at least?" she said.

"Oh, alright. Alright, I surrender. I'll try it on. As long as nobody laughs at me. You must promise."

= =

Three minutes later I was behind the closed door of a changing cubicle, peeling myself out of my coat, alone with my reflection in the full-length mirror.

I stared at myself for a long, long minute, in my shapeless hoodie and jeans. Abyssal dysphoria blurred my self-image.

"I'm just going to look silly in this," I muttered under my breath, and pulled my hoodie up over my head.

"You'll look wonderful if you let yourself believe," my own voice

answered.

I scrambled to get my hoodie off, freeing my vision in a tumble of hair, heart rate spiking – and discovered the me in the mirror had taken the liberty of a full-on top-to-bottom wardrobe transformation.

Ribbed sweater sleek and neat and form-fitting – in *bubblegum pink*, not white – highlighting curves in a way I didn't dare acknowledge I possessed, matched with a knee-length skirt made of at least three different layers of frilly, fluffy, lacy material, flouncing out from my slender hips in dark purple accented with black. My own slim legs emerged beneath, wrapped in white tights and terminating in a pair of pink trainers.

Seven-Shades-of-Heather pulled a nervous, flinching smile I recognised all too well, and did a little hip-jutting hands-out pose to show off the outfit. She slid one foot back and tapped the heel, and the sides of the pink trainer lit up briefly with LEDs buried beneath semi-transparent rubber.

I just stared, open mouthed.

“... w-well?” she said after a moment. “Don't just stare, say something, please.”

“I do not look like that,” I managed. “I could never look like that. Those clothes are too lovely for me, I'd ruin them with vomit and blood. You've made me look pretty and I am not-”

“Heather, how many times?” The Me-In-The-Mirror slipped into that know-it-all diction which made me cringe, sighing and dropping the cutesy pose. “I can only play your role, I can add nothing which you are not already fully prepared for. And you are fully prepared for light-up shoes, believe me, you are so ready for these.” She tapped her heels again, and both shoes lit up in a flashing pattern of pink lights.

“You've got *highlights*,” I said, outrage racing to catch up with the shock. “I would never get highlights, don't be so silly.”

“Don't be so silly yourself,” Seven-Shades told me with my own voice, in my own faintly offended tone. One of her – my – hands went to her fringe in the mirror, to the little blonde highlights in ‘my’ hair. “Raine would eat you alive. Not that she doesn't regularly do that already.” Sevens-as-me flushed slightly and cleared her

throat. Goodness, I was a horrible little oversexed goblin.

I sighed. "This is not the time for that, Sevens."

"It is exactly the time for that. For me!"

"I don't have the emotional bandwidth for your games. Plays, sorry. I don't have the emotional bandwidth to even be here on this shopping trip. I certainly don't have the time to be dressing up like a novelty cake. I should be at home, focusing, trying again."

"And almost tumbling head first into the abyssal waters beyond reality?" she asked with a disapproving press of her lips. Infuriating habit, and all mine.

"... thank you," I said, but with a little huff. "For yesterday. For saving me."

"You are welcome," she said, with genuine grace and a little smile. At least I was polite.

"I thought you weren't supposed to interfere though, beyond putting on your plays?"

"Natures are different in the deep abyss," Sevens told me. "You know that. You're not the same when you're unexpressed in reality. Do you think the same differences don't apply to me? You think a play means anything in the dark? I don't wish to go there either."

"Oh. Um. Okay, fair enough." I frowned. She had a point; Sevens was a thing of frills and light and the crumbly taste of fresh bread, she'd get eaten fast down there. "I suppose you wouldn't last a minute in the abyss."

"Oh, I would last. I would just be very different."

She split my face in a grin which looked nothing like me – to reveal a double-row of razor-sharp shark-teeth in my mirrored mouth.

"Goodness," I breathed, flushing in the face with abyssal envy. "That's more like it, yes."

Sevens closed her abyssal maw again, and her teeth returned to normal.

"Besides, all I did was anchor you." She huffed, exactly like me getting exasperated. "Because you still refuse to use the secrets of creation."

I huffed too. "That is the exact same thing you said before. Along with all your 'I am only a question' nonsense." I waved a hand at her in the mirror, at her making me look pretty and well-dressed. "What sort of question is this supposed to ask?"

Sevens-As-Heather gave me the most infuriating look, a sickening cocktail of condescension and timidity. My own superiority, on ugly display in a nice skirt.

"You cannot address failure through sheer bullheadedness," she told me, with a tone like a schoolmistress, totally at odds with that playful outfit. Did I ever sound like that? "I anchored you once, but I won't be able to do it again. Now that I've done it, now that you're aware, doing it again would cost me dearly. If you must sip from the cold depths, you must be anchored first."

"Anchored? How?" I asked. "I can't push brainmath further without more ... I don't know! More power, more knowledge, more-"

"Must I put on a play to communicate something so fundamental?" Seven-Shades gestured at herself, at me in the mirror. "Not that you have to dress like this at all, actually. Both of them would gladly devote themselves to you even if you were dressed in rubbish bags from an open sewer."

"Both of them ... "

I trailed off, throat closing up, heart rate climbing. I knew exactly what she was talking about.

"Your sister told you what to do," she said.

"Maisie told me to gather my friends! She didn't tell me to have a lesbian threesome!"

"There we go." Sevens sighed. "I know you haven't accepted it, I know you need educating, and I will be producing quite the show for-"

"You mean *polyamory*," I spat. "Yes, I looked the word up, like Evelyn suggested. Were you watching that too? You're saying what exactly? That I'm supposed to emotionally anchor myself by ... with ... well, with Raine ... and ... Zheng too? How is that supposed to work?"

Sevens pulled that smile, my own knowing smile, tight and twitchy, and I wanted to swear quite loudly at her.

“You’ll figure it out,” she said.

“It’s not ... it’s not normal,” I replied, vaguely aware that meant nothing.

“Nothing about you is normal, Heather.”

I sat down with a thump on the cubicle’s tiny built-in wooden bench. “This is absurd. I can’t do that to either of them. I can’t exploit them just to-”

“Choosing family is not exploitation,” Sevens told me with a little frown.

“... don’t make me confront this. Please. Not now.” I shook my head. “I didn’t even know polyamory was a thing until recently. Until six months ago, I’d never had a relationship. I barely know what I’m doing with Raine, I am not the person for this.”

“But do you want it?”

Yes.

“I don’t deserve it! I never expected to be attracted to somebody like Raine. Let alone Zheng. I always thought my type was more ... well, like how Eevee looks, I suppose. Soft and cuddly. Somebody I can build a pillow fort with.” I felt myself on the verge of cracking, a pressure inside my chest.

“Yes dear, sapphic love comes in many forms, yours is not invalid.”

“Besides, Raine ... ”

“Is not jealous unless you tell her to be. Haha!” Sevens-As-Me lit up – and also lit up her shoes again in a little double heel stomp.

I stared at the me in the mirror. At me, dressed up and confident and shining inside. I noticed that Sevens had a sort of semi-transparent aura, a flickering and wavering halo of phantom tentacles, my tentacles made beautiful even in echo.

“I don’t want my life to sound like the title of a vaguely offensive pornographic film,” I huffed. ““Petite lesbian gets gang-banged by two bulldykes.””

“Heather!” said the Other Heather, aghast and blushing.

I blushed too. That was unfair and rude of me.

“Getting into a polyamorous relationship isn’t going to solve anything,” I whispered. “It’ll just create more problems. Big, complicated, emotional problems that I am not prepared to deal with.”

“Ahh, but they will be wonderfully fun problems.”

I gave her a death glare.

The Heather in the mirror cleared her throat, looking suitably chastised. “And I will help you, I will help you make it work,” Sevens said.

“How could I possibly focus on that when a man I don’t even know has stolen the means of rescuing my sister?”

“Sapphic love is the means of rescuing your sister, and nobody can take that from you. Think about it, Heather. You refuse to see what is right in front of your eyes.”

“But-”

“Do you want it?” she said, losing patience. Me, irritated. “Do you want both of them?”

Knock knock came a gentle knock on the door.

I jumped. “Yes?”

“Heathy, okay?” Lozzie’s voice called through the wood. “Need help?”

I glanced back at the mirror. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was gone. It was just me again, staring back in rumpled reflection.

“Yes, Lozzie,” I murmured. “Yes, oh, I do need help with this. I absolutely do.”

a very great mischief – 13.2

“I can’t believe I bought all these,” I said, again.

“Six,” Praem intoned softly, like the striking of a cloth-muffled bell.

“Technically speaking, you didn’t buy anything,” Evelyn said from beside me, punctuating her words with a clack of walking stick on concrete as we descended the pedestrian ramp in the multi-story car park. “I did, and I’m allowed to do whatever I want.”

“I do what I waaaaant,” Lozzie sang under her breath.

“But I still can’t believe it,” I repeated. “I’ve never even really picked out my own clothes before. I don’t feel like I’m allowed to. I can’t believe these are mine.”

“Seven, eight,” Praem continued.

“I really can’t.”

“Nine.”

Raine was at the front of our little group, a few paces further ahead down the ramp. She pivoted on her crutch and walked backwards for two steps, pulling out a quick-draw finger-gun and flicking her thumb down to shoot me through the heart.

“Believe it, cutie!” she said.

“R-Raine ... ”

Self-conscious, embarrassed – and enjoying it on a level I did not care to analyse right now – I choked out a giggle, or at least an awful little sound that passed for a giggle to my ears. I clutched the bag from *Hartellies* tighter against my chest, as if an unseen hand might take it from me, or the cold wind passing through the open sides of the multi-story car park might pluck it from my arms.

Raine shot me a wink, then stumbled ever so slightly as she pivoted forwards again. She hid the fumble well, suppressed the wince as she put too much sudden weight through her still-healing left thigh. She turned the weakness into a rolling swagger-step. But that didn’t stop my heart from leaping into my throat and my feet from

scurrying to catch up with her.

“Raine? Raine, please be careful, I saw that. Please.”

I loosened my grip on my bag of goodies and put one hand awkwardly on her side, in case she needed support, in case the unthinkable happened.

She flashed a rakish grin down at me. “S’all your fault, Heather.”

“ ... wa-wha-”

“I’ve gone all weak at the knees from the thought of your new getup.” She nodded down at the bag with a twinkle in her eye.

I tutted and blushed. If she’d used that husky, private, teasing tone with me in any other context, I would have melted like candle wax under a blowtorch. Inside, I squirmed with barely suppressed pleasure, but this was not appropriate, not when she was deploying the compliment as a shield.

“Raine,” I struggled to phrase a coherent sentence. “I do not appreciate-”

“The deflection, yeah, sorry.” She cleared her throat, not meeting my eyes but looking ahead to where the ramp opened out onto the car park floors. “I don’t like to stumble, that’s all. Thanks for being here.”

“Uh ... of- of course, you’re welcome, yes. Always.”

I hadn’t expected an acknowledgement, let alone an apology, certainly not so quickly. Raine really had changed.

“Still serious about the outfit though,” she added in a faux-casual tone. “Should need a license to be that spicy. You’re gonna burn my tongue and present a choking hazard, if you know what I mean.”

I blushed harder this time, denied the bulwark of irritation. I stared down at my shoes for a couple of paces. “I still can’t believe I did it.”

“Ten,” Praem sang.

“Praem?” I glanced back over my shoulder at Praem, who was carrying the majority of the other bags. “I’m sorry, Praem? What are you counting?”

Praem locked eyes with me, and declined to answer.

Evelyn snorted a single laugh. “She’s keeping track of the number of times you’ve expressed disbelief at your own acquisitions.”

“Yes,” Praem intoned.

“O-oh ... I’m sorry, Praem, I didn’t mean to make this day about me-”

“Us,” Praem interrupted.

She didn’t need to expand that point. I nodded and looked down, chastised by kindness.

Of course, Praem couldn’t possibly know how hard I was distracting myself right now. I would tie myself in knots over my new clothes to avoid thinking about what Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had revealed to me.

“Day’s not over yet,” Raine said with rousing approval. “Gotta get you home and get you in that full outfit, hey?”

“Don’t be disgusting, Raine,” Evelyn drawled. “All these new clothes are going in the laundry first. You don’t wear new things without first ... well ... ” Evelyn trailed off, her eyes lingering on the pink cat-ears beanie which Lozzie was already wearing.

“It’s okay,” Lozzie stage-whispered. “I’m special.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Fair enough. Lozzie gets special dispensation, but you don’t get to make Heather wear anything without washing it first.”

“Dunno if I can wait that long,” Raine said, and flashed me a wink.

I clutched the bag to my chest again, burning and self-conscious, and trying not to think about polyamory.

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The bag from *Hartellies* – or rather, my bag from *Hartellies*, in addition to the two Praem was carrying, along with the rest of our haul – contained some of the most lovely clothes I’d ever owned, not counting the incredible scale-patterned *Superdry* hoodie which Evelyn had forcefully bought for me earlier in the day.

Back in the clothing store, after Sevens had vanished from the

mirror, I'd disappointed everybody by emerging still dressed exactly as I had entered.

"Aww, Heather?" Raine's face had fallen with sweet concern, misinterpreting my stricken state. "It's okay, it's cool. You don't fancy it anymore? We can try another thing if you like. Or just, hey, sit down and advise Praem, yeah?"

"No, I-" I choked on my words, on the sight of Raine's face, on *polyamory*.

"She's fiiiiine," Lozzie stage whispered. "She's changing her mind flipways!"

"Flipways, yes," I gathered myself. Oh, Lozzie, you were more accurate than you knew. Or maybe you did know. But this was neither the time nor the place.

Sevens had one good point amid the madness; if I was going to do this, I may as well feel good about myself while breaking everything.

So I'd screwed up my courage, marched right across the fitting area with Lozzie bouncing at my shoulder like a pixie companion, and spoken to the attendant at the little desk.

And yes, as it turned out, they did have some less popular colours of ribbed sweater in the stock room. Old leftovers, stray returns, abandoned styles.

"Only this one I'm afraid, no other sizes," the attendant had told me, and I'd had to remind myself forcefully that this pretty young woman was not Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight right now. "It's in small. Is that-"

"Perfect," I'd breathed, on the verge of hyperventilating with sheer nerves and brittle courage. "Thank you so much. Yes, I'll take it. Right away. I-I mean, I'll try it on. Thank you again."

One polo-neck ribbed sweater. Tight like a hug. Bubblegum pink.

Raine's face had lit up like a carnival.

The other components of Sevens' sartorial suggestion were far less easy to source. *Hartellies* didn't carry anything like the triple-layered skirt of frill and fluff and lace, it simply wasn't that kind of place. Praem finished up her wardrobe randomisation session and carried

an armful of clothes to the register, so Evelyn could pay, and I added my single sweater at her prompting.

“Are you certain you don’t want to get a new skirt too?” she’d asked me. “Because I will spend that money on you eventually, one way or the other.”

“No bullying,” Praem intoned. The young man behind the cash register had stared at that, at Praem’s musical tone, but his eyes had quickly slid off her.

“Can we save it for now?” I asked.

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I’d like to look for something else,” I said. “Something specific. Probably on the internet.” I shot a nervous glance at Raine, but she and Lizzie were checking out belts while we paid for the clothes.

“I’m going to assume I don’t want to know,” Evelyn said. “Fair enough.”

Evelyn had paid. The figure made my eyes water. Praem received two large, smart, stylish bags stuffed with self-definition.

“How much have you spent today, in total, Evee?” I asked.

“Never you mind.”

“Retail therapy,” Praem added.

By the time we plunged back into the labyrinth of Swanbrook Mall, my burst dam of heart-juddering white-headed courage had run out into a confused jittery trickle. Felt like my head was going to melt. I’d actually bought the thing. Not the jumper which Raine had suggested, not the little personal experiment in style, but element one of three of Sevens’ absurdly girly version of me.

Well, element one of four. But I was not going to dye my hair. No thank you.

Unlike *homo abyssus*, I could achieve this in reality without putting my internal organs at risk. And it was a wonderful distraction.

I wasn’t completely unaware of what I was doing. The events of the previous six months had proved to me that I did possess a certain kind of courage, the split-second decision making of life or death, and I had come through with that time and again. But this was

different, this heady cocktail of self-indulgence and embarrassment and pleasure as fragile as dried petals. This courage was slow, grinding inside my gut like a bellyful of stones, and ultimately born of deflection.

I drew the courage to buy girly clothes from a steadfast refusal to face what Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had told me.

We scouted out a couple more shops in Swanbrook Mall – *Topshop* and *Next* – but Praem seemed satisfied with her selections from *Hartellies*, I couldn't find anything that even approximated the beautiful skirt Sevens' had been wearing, and we were all beginning to slow down. It was high time to drive home and have a big late lunch. I resigned myself to internet shopping, with all the accompanying self-consciousness of Raine inevitably peering over my shoulder.

But then, as we decided to head back to the escalators, towards the suspended walkway which led to the multi-story car park, a vision in yellow led me astray.

We were passing by one of the offshoot corridors, the sorts of wrong turns which terminated in public toilets or service doorways with 'Staff Only' signs, little artificial alleyways lined with stores which had resigned themselves to missing out on most of the mall's foot traffic, places that sold CBD oil or computer parts, with grimace-inducing names like *Ye Olde Crystale Shoppe* or *Tekniks*.

And in the corner of my eye, a figure all in yellow – a voluptuous figure of pure feminine physicality, wrapped in flowing yellow satin and trailing scarves fluttering in unfelt wind – stepped into a store, and vanished.

"Heather?"

I'd stopped to stare down the artificial alleyway, along white plastic walls. Had I seen that, or hallucinated it? A spirit – a sort of slug thing made of raw organs – was inching along the ceiling, but it hadn't cast that bait, it didn't care. I leaned forward and tried to see what manner of shop Sevens was trying to make me notice. The name hung over the doorway in absurd faux-calligraphy letters.

"Scorching Subject?" I murmured. "What now, Sevens?"

"Heather, woo?" Raine waved a hand in my peripheral vision. "Ground control to space cadet Morell? You okay?"

“Ah, um. Sorry,” I said, flustering a smile. The others had drawn to a curious halt a few paces onward, but Raine had come back for me. “I-I got distracted by something.”

Raine followed my previous line of sight and lit up in recognition. “Oh hey, I remember that brand. They’re still around? Wow.”

“Can we take a quick look?” I asked, before I lost my nerve.

Raine raised an eyebrow, faintly amused. “Sure.” She glanced back over her shoulder. “Hey, Loz, you might like this one too. C’mon.”

We ventured down the little corridor, past a shop that sold refurbished record players and a hole in the wall that I gathered used to contain a perfume store, until we stood in front of *Scorching Subject*, and I realised what it was.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Goth jazz.” Raine cracked a huge grin. “Scene kiddies. Teenyboppers. Place must be on its last legs, this stuff went out of style before I hit puberty.”

She wasn’t wrong. *Scorching Subject* looked like a sun baked corpse picked over by vultures and left for the flies. A sign in the window informed us that ‘Everything Must Go!!! Closing Down Sale, all items %75 off!!!’ but the sign itself looked at least six months old. Inside, a high ceiling lined with tacky spotlights picked out clothing racks and spinny turnstile displays, mostly empty now, populated by only the most repulsively silly belt buckles and a few garments a witch might wear to a secret woodland ritual. A single staff member sat bored and distracted at the register, no older than any of us, staring at his phone. At least he looked the part, with his dyed black hair slicked down over one eye and those huge intimidating hoop piercings in both earlobes.

A wisp of yellow, the glint of sunlight on chalk, slipped around the corner of some clothing shelves.

I sighed.

“Yeah, I know, right?” Raine said, misreading my huff. “Kinda sad. I like this stuff, it’s got a place. Should have a place. Goth girls are cute.”

“Yes,” Praem agreed.

“Ugh,” went Evelyn, wrinkling her nose.

“Wheee!” went Lozzie, going straight past us and into the store, bee-lining for a display full of absurd hats.

“Oh, really?” Evelyn tutted.

“We should go in,” I said.

“You serious?” Raine asked me, genuinely surprised. “You want something here? Right on, Heather, go for it.”

“For Night Praem,” I lied. “Isn’t that right, Praem?”

“Night Praem,” Praem replied.

“Night Praem?” Evelyn enunciated so hard I thought she was going to do herself an injury. “What is this, her goth alter ego? Praem, you haven’t told me anything about this.”

But it was too late for Day Praem. I was already wandering into the store, pulling Raine in after me, following Sevens’ breadcrumbs.

To my complete and total lack of surprise, I did not find a tall and shapely woman in yellow behind the depleted shelving, but instead a rather sad looking series of rolling hanger racks full of gauzy tops, spooky tshirts, and belts as wide as my arm.

“What am I supposed to see?” I murmured under my breath.

“We looking for anything in particular?” Raine asked, flicking through some of the tshirts. “Oh hey, you know who’d love these? Kimberly. Here, this one’s got a dragon on it. And this one has a dragon *and* a wizard, score.”

“Sort of just browsing ... ”

I trailed off, relaxed with a long, slow breath, and let my peripheral vision guide me to a small yellow tag poking out between two long black skirts. Tentatively, half expecting Seven-Shades-of-Shop-Attendant to appear from a blind corner, I approached the skirts and parted them, in search of buried treasure.

And there it was. Knee-length, made from three separate layers of frill and fluff and lace, in dark purple like boiling midnight skies, accented with void-black. How this rare find had survived the carrion eaters, I had no idea.

Tacky. Girly. Flouncy and silly and actually beautiful, everything I was not.

I sighed again as I pulled it off the rack. "Really, Sevens? I thought you were making the outfit up."

The layers were like the flesh-skirts of a jellyfish, frilled and ruffled and faintly toxic to the eye. The me of six months ago would have hated the thing; but to the me right then it was an object of desire, even though it embarrassed me to admit so. A faint echo of abyssal aesthetics, the same as with the scale-pattern hoodie Evelyn had so generously bought for me, the same in the colourful display of bubblegum pink sweater.

For a heady moment I couldn't tell what I was doing. Was I distracting myself from thoughts of polyamory by forcing a confrontation with a totally different set of hang ups? Or was I preparing for the plunge?

Secretly, I felt like polyamory was for people with a few relationships under their belt. Extroverts. Party girls. Pretty people.

But anything would be possible, with even a false echo of abyssal aesthetics.

Then I would be beautiful too.

"Heeeeeey, look at thaaaat," said Raine, catching up with me and breaking into a grin. "Where'd you find that? You brainmath your way into a sixth sense for diamonds in the rough?"

"In a manner of speaking."

She caught the wistful conflict in my eyes, saw something was off. "You don't like it?"

"No, it's not my style," I said. "It's terrible, too girly. It's more Lozzie than me. I will die on the spot the moment you see me in it. I'm going to buy it anyway."

"Yeeeah, rock on." Raine lit up, all for me. "That's more like it!"

"Thank you, yes. I shall endeavour to 'rock' to my best."

My abyssal-prosthetic skirt was not the only thing we purchased in the goth clothing shop. Raine and I emerged from the skeletal racking and found that Lozzie had gotten stuck into the suitably gothic selection of novelty hats. Somehow she had convinced or

bullied or simply overpowered Evelyn into trying one on.

“Not a word,” Evelyn deadpanned at us, from beneath the floppy brim of a midnight black witch’s hat.

Raine decided to buy the tshirt she’d found for Kimberly, an extra-long dress-style affair in black, with a graphic on the front of three unicorns galloping across a moonlit moor. And to Evelyn’s curious, sharp interest, Praem had picked up a small box of makeup.

“You want to try on black eyeliner?” she asked Praem, and did a stellar job of controlling her own distaste.

Praem only stared back, so the makeup joined our haul as well.

Between the bubblegum pink sweater hidden in overflow stock and the triple-layered skirt tucked away in a forgotten corner of a store that should have gone out of business, I was beginning to suspect that Sevens wanted me to acquire the entire outfit here, today, right now. But this was my limit. I doubted there was anywhere in Sharrowford one could purchase trainers with LEDs in the soles.

“Light up shoes, absolutely not,” I whispered under my breath as we went up the escalator.

“Heather, sorry?” Raine prompted, and squeezed my hand.

“Oh, um, nothing.”

The last minute detour had put us far past time for lunch, and we’d already agreed to avoid the shopping centre’s food court, up on the top floor. The first and only time I’d been up there was to meet Alexander Lilburne in an out of business coffee shop, and none of us wished to ruin a perfectly nice day with memories of attempted kidnapping. So we made our way back along the route toward the multi-story car park, up to the rear of the shopping centre’s top floor, where fake marble and bright lights gave way to concrete walkway and grubby glass windows suspended three stories up over the roads below.

The enclosed bridge connected Swanbrook Mall directly to a series of shallow sloping pedestrian walkways, which climbed the height of the multi-story car park, separated by automatic doors to keep the heat in. The multi-story itself was open to the fresh spring air, each floor ringed by chest-high concrete bulwark but not much else.

My blush and Raine’s teasing banter died away as we stepped

through, among the thin trickle of other lunchtime shoppers.

“Don’t know about you lot,” Evelyn drawled, “but the first thing I’m going to do when we get home is make lunch.”

“I am making lunch,” Praem said in her sing-song voice.

“You *will* make lunch, you mean,” Evelyn said. “Tense is important, I don’t mean to-” She cut herself off, and frowned at Praem as we descended the wide concrete ramp. “Wait, no, you didn’t just-”

“I will make lunch,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn huffed. Lozzie giggled. I suppressed a smile. Outwitted by her daughter again.

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The car park floors themselves were dingy and grubby affairs compared to the false majesty of the shopping centre, all roughly textured concrete in dirty grey, held up by thick support pillars amid a maze of pedestrian pathways, half-filled parking spaces, smelly puddles, and discarded wrappers. The open sides let in some natural light, but the centre of each floor was dim with orange street lighting from little insets in the ceiling. Lozzie made a game of hopping and skipping ahead, over the walkway markers and crossings. I subconsciously pressed myself closer to Raine, as we crossed the tangled space toward her car parked on the far side.

We were less than twenty feet from the car when Lozzie stopped.

She froze mid-step and her head flicked around like a rodent sighting a snake. She quickly scurried back to me and grabbed my arm, pressing herself so close she almost tripped me. A small animal, looking for solidarity.

“Lozzie? It’s okay, I know it’s a bit grim in here but-”

“Heather,” she hissed – tight and afraid.

She was staring off to our left, at nothing. Ragged rows of parked cars. A few spirits lingered here and there: a dark shadow beneath a van with cartoonish red eyes, a stilt-legged insect walking upside down on the ceiling, a weird amalgamation of deer and bird covered in fractally splitting antler shapes as it flomped down a row of vehicles.

“Yo, what is it?” Raine said, alert, switched on, all here all of a

sudden at Lozzie's fearful tone.

"What's this?" Evelyn prompted, following our collective line of sight.

"I-I don't know," I said. "Lozzie, there's nothing-"

"I know that man," Lozzie hissed. "He was one of my brother's friends."

Oh. A person.

I'd expected a servitor or an assassin or a magic cloud of sleeping gas – or Seven-Shades dressed as a traffic warden, here to give us a comedy ticket – not a regular human being.

The man Lozzie had recognised wasn't the slightest bit interested in us.

A few rows over, just beyond earshot, he was talking on his mobile phone. With one hand on the top of his car and one foot planted on the rim of the open driver's side door, he had the distinct air of calling home to make sure he'd not forgotten anything on his shopping trip. Maybe in his early thirties at the oldest, he looked trim and fit, with artfully tousled hair and a few days of stubble, dressed in jeans and a Manchester United football shirt. Utterly unremarkable.

"Right, I see him," Raine dropped her voice, going very still. "Lozzie, friend or 'friend', is he one of-"

"One of my brother's men." Lozzie nodded rapidly.

A wave of undeniable instinct crashed through my nervous system. Phantom limbs shot out wide into a hunting pattern, tugging on support muscles by sheer psychosomatic suggestion. I felt my pupils dilate, my extremities tingle, my veins flood with adrenaline. My breath fluttered as muscles vibrated with the need to move, move fast, move now. My heart climbed into my throat and my vision narrowed to a tunnel and my thoughts went white-hot with predatory focus, and I very nearly pulled clear of both Raine and Lozzie to tear this man limb from limb.

The urge was overwhelming and terrifying and made perfect sense – and would have been a very bad idea to follow.

If I'd given in and did as my body demanded, thrown myself at this

unsuspecting ex-cultist like a berserker, I was unlikely to actually hurt him much. I was still just me, five foot nothing, with very little muscle. My options for removing threats were brainmath, or tentacles via brainmath, and those required a clear head, equations, and careful thinking.

But instinct screamed.

Parasite carrier. Disease bearer. Agent of the enemy.

Kill it, screamed the cold survivalist logic of the abyss.

I hiccuped.

“Woah, Heather?” Raine hissed, squeezing my hand. My palms had gone clammy, my back coated in cold sweat, and I was shuddering all over. Lozzie squeezed against my other side, somehow aware she needed to anchor me.

“If he was one of Alexander’s men,” Evelyn murmured, putting voice to the logic inside my body, “that means he’s either Edward’s man now – or he’s an Eye cultist who escaped before their defiant ritual.”

A hiss climbed up my throat. I wished with every fibre of my being that Zheng was here.

“And,” Evelyn carried on, “that man does not look like an outsider-ridden tortured shell from here.”

Ape brain took a moment to catch up with abyssal logic.

“Oh,” I breathed. “Of course. Right. Right.”

I could barely think. The predatory instinct was similar to the hunting urge I’d felt when I’d stood alone with Zheng in the night, the pull to run and leap and bare my claws in the dark, but magnified a thousand times, directed at a visible target. Even backing down now, I was shaking and panting.

“Heather, hey, you okay?” Raine tried to catch my eye. “Heather?”

“She will be!” Lozzie whispered.

“... w-we should get to the car,” I managed to hiss. “He doesn’t even know we’re here.”

Evelyn frowned at me. “You heard what I said, this cannot be a

coincidence.”

“You think Eddy-boy is stupid enough to tell his low-level thugs where to find him?” Raine asked. “What say we commit a mugging?”

“No,” Evelyn snapped.

“Maybe it is a coincidence!” I squeaked. “Not everything has to do with us! Maybe he was just shopping?”

“And maybe it’s a trap,” Evelyn grumbled. “Praem, do not even think about it. Nobody approach this man.”

“We could find out,” Raine said, low and soft and lethal, and slipped her free hand inside her leather jacket.

But the ex-cultist chose that moment to end his phone call. I saw a little smile and an ironic shake of his head as he said goodbye to whoever was on the other end. Without looking up at us, he got into his car and shut the door. The engine purred to life a few seconds later, far too quickly for Raine to catch up with him and knock on the window, even without the handicap of her crutch.

His car backed slowly and sensibly out of the parking space, then turned to leave.

“See?” I hissed, then hiccuped so loudly it echoed off the concrete. Cold sweat broke over me and the hunting instinct finally began to ebb away, leaving me hollow and exhausted. “It was just a coincidence, just a ... ”

The car’s route brought it alongside us, creeping along the narrow passageways of concrete and speed bumps and stop signs. My phantom limbs still itched to grab the wheels, stop the car, pull the man out by the scruff of his neck and strangle him on the spot.

And as the car passed us, the man turned to look; slowly, directly, filled with blind purpose.

At me.

Ragged dark bags ringed the haunted emptiness in his eyes. Gaunt cheeks, skin sallow with exhaustion, lips cracked and dry. His hands on the wheel showed nails bitten to the quick, cuticles gnawed raw and bleeding and scabbed. The veneer of normality was a thin and cracking shell on his placid expression. From a distance he had

looked almost normal, but up close, even through the glass of the driver's side window, this was quite clearly a human being out on the lost reaches of sanity.

And he had seen me.

Abyssal instinct coiled up like gooseflesh in freezing air. My phantom limbs wrapped around me in a protective barrier. I had the sudden urge to run away.

Eye contact lasted only half a second, and then the car was past us.

"Heather? Heather, what was that? What's wrong?" Raine was asking, even as she fumbled her phone out, snapping a picture of the number plate.

"Heathy?" Lozzie was squeezing me, her own fear forgotten as I struggled to keep my knees.

"Oh dear," Evelyn deadpanned. "I was wrong, wasn't I?"

I nodded, numb all over.

"What?" Raine asked, looking back from her phone screen and squeezing my shoulder. "Look, I half wanna tail him in the car, but I'm not leaving you here like this, Heather, you look like you've seen a ghost."

"That was an Eye cultist," I whispered. "One who escaped, before the rest defied it. And he knows who I am."

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We spent the rest of the day descending into curtain-twitching paranoia.

The drive home was bad enough. Our good cheer was gone. Raine drove again, so at least she had to focus on the road, but her tension was plain to see every time her eyes flickered upward to check the rear view mirror, expecting a car on our tail at any moment. Evelyn went quiet and intense, frowning into the middle distance as her mind chewed on possibilities and potentials and preventative measures. Praem sat still and straight-backed, her special day rather spoiled, but she didn't complain.

Lozzie sat next to me in the back of the car, stroking my hair like I was a spooked hound – which was exactly how I felt.

Our fashion show plans fell apart once we got home, before we even got in the front door, sacrificed on the altar of security. Raine spent a full ten minutes standing in the garden gateway, propped up on her crutch, watching the end of the road. Half of me grew incandescent with worry, with the way she was suppressing pain behind protective intensity, while the other half of me wanted to scurry into her shadow and clutch the back of her jacket.

“He’s not going to fucking drive up and shoot us,” Evelyn hissed at her. “Get indoors, you idiot.”

“He might. Wait.”

Waiting drew Zheng’s curiosity, and eventually she ventured out under the thin spring skies. We told her what we’d seen.

“*Laoyeh* gropes blind in the dark,” she purred, “but its reach is long and wide.”

“It was a coincidence,” I repeated. Wide eyed. Twitchy. I did not believe my own words.

Zheng put a hand on my head, and I desperately wanted her to pick me up.

“There is no such thing as coincidence for Gods, shaman. But none shall touch you.”

“Well said,” Raine added, staring at the end of the road.

Lunch plans collapsed too. With the front door closed and locked and bolted, we fell apart in our separate frantic directions. Evelyn went to check the Spider-servitors, then clacked about from room to room, doing what she could to reinforce the ancient wards embedded in the walls and foundations of the house. Eventually she ended up in the kitchen, quiet with contemplation, drumming her fingers on the kitchen table and staring into the depths of an untouched cup of tea.

Lozzie went upstairs to find Tenny.

Raine gave me a hug, told me it was going to be okay, and then she could not stay still. She made endless circuits of the windows, staring out into the street, across the back garden, checking the latches and locks, popping painkillers without water.

I loved her for that, but she needed to sit with me.

Abyssal instinct told me to find the deepest, darkest, most secluded part of the house, and curl up in a protective ball until I was certain the vast predators out in the cold water had moved on. The instinct was out of place, of course, no different to the ape imperative to climb trees to escape danger. Instead I spent half an hour haunting Raine's shadow, embarrassed whenever she noticed me and waved me over for a hug, because it was never enough. Abyssal limbs tried to cling to her, but it was not enough. Nothing was enough.

Edward Lilburne was a frightening adversary, but at least he was only a person. Our last brush with the Eye had nearly killed us all.

Zheng left the house, coat collar up, eyes narrowed to razor-sharp slits.

"I go to hunt, shaman. *Laoyeh's* slaves are clumsy."

As she'd slipped out the back door, I'd tried to speak up, to say "please don't go, please stay with me."

But the words had stuck in my throat. Raine had been within earshot. Pathetic Heather, this was the perfect moment to take the plunge, an excuse to ask for both of them to comfort me. Sevens was undoubtedly rolling her eyes in exasperation.

Maybe that's why I couldn't. I didn't want it to be an *excuse*. It had to be real, and raw, and without reservation.

Team effort rescued us eventually. Praem had retained more than enough emotional stability to stand in the kitchen and make a stack of sandwiches, and the first thing to break through my shell of nervous tension was a bite of peanut butter, forced upon me by Praem's insistent stare. Lozzie and Tenny appeared too, and Tenny innately recognised my tension and wound her tentacles around my shoulders and forearms. She stood half-guard with me, until Lozzie's gentle encouragement pulled us all back into the kitchen, our orbits reuniting at last. The lovely new clothes sat forgotten in their bags by the door, until Praem began the laborious process of running the washing machine multiple times.

"They're still around, then," I said, sitting at the table, halfway through a single chocolate cookie, the only thing I felt like forcing down.

"We always knew some might have survived," Evelyn answered, staring into her tea. "In theory."

“Maybe he was the only one.”

“Sure hope so,” Raine said, leaning against the kitchen counter so she could glance out of the window. She caught the hollow look in my eyes, and shot a wink and a grin my way.

“I wouldn’t wager on that,” Evelyn mused out loud. “A splinter faction. Anybody who rejected the rebellion against the Eye, left the house before they did their ritual. From everything we saw, Sarika and the others, anyone who’s survived this long with the Eye in their head must possess considerable psychological resilience.”

“Which means it might just be this guy alone,” Raine said. “Right.”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “Keep up, Raine.”

“He has to have a support network,” I said, filling in Evelyn’s gap. “You don’t survive something like that alone. I should know. He has others, people who understand.”

“Exactly,” Evelyn grumbled. “Did you call Sarika?”

“Yeah,” Raine sighed. “She didn’t recognise the description of the guy. Said she’s not been contacted or anything, but hey, can we trust her?”

“On this, yes,” I said. “She’d scream so loud we’d know from here.”

My phantom limbs tried to curl up tighter. I wanted to vanish in a dark hole.

“Heath, Heath,” Tenny trilled softly against my side.

“I wish Zheng would come home,” I said, and felt Raine’s eyes on me.

Tenny didn’t leave me alone the entire rest of the day. She made herself my security blanket, until she and Lozzie passed me off to Raine at almost eleven o’clock at night, after two hours snuggled up with the pair of them in the warm safe dark in the core of the house. But I couldn’t sleep. Even after Raine had finally relented and ceased her one-woman watch and turned to comforting me, rubbing my back in bed, being the big spoon in the dark, I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t let myself. Every slide toward the edge was arrested, my mind scrambling back up toward tattered consciousness.

Abyssal senses stayed stretched, listening for scratches at the utmost

rim, for probing at our defenses. Or that's what I told myself.

Really I was listening for Zheng, waiting for her to come home.

She would not slink back until the small hours of the morning. Maybe she would return with the severed head of the Eye's slave, or maybe she wouldn't, but I found it hard to care. I didn't want that. I wanted her.

Abyssal instinct demanded her be close to me, and that was all that mattered. And I could not sleep until she was by my side, safe, and mine.

Same as Raine.

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Bodily need clouds the meaning of time, especially deep in the night and deep in the bed covers, curled up tight and warm alongside another soft ape, so intimate and close that one forgets where one's own body ends and the other begins. So it was with Raine and I, that strange night of half-sleep and semi-listening, snatches of nightmare blurring into reality, and reality distorting into dreamlike nonsense.

Her hand was down the front of my pajama bottoms when I woke up, but bizarrely there was nothing sexual about it when I realised the hand wasn't my own. Her hand was my hand. The phantom tentacle wrapped around her waist and backside was not mine, but hers. Our legs were tangled, her ankle between mine, and for a moment I couldn't tell which feet were which. Our breathing had synchronised in our sleep, and I tasted her on my lips without needing to kiss a dry mouth.

But there was third body, a presence on the edge of my consciousness, like a weight pressing on me through several layers of clothing. Impossible to ignore, but not yet part of me.

"Zheng's home," I murmured into the dark.

"Mmmmm?" Raine made a sleepy noise behind me, and I did a tiny, tiny flinch. Hadn't realised she'd awoken along with me. Synchronicity, unspoken and instinctive. I took heart.

"Can feel it," I added, slurring. "Her."

"Mmmmm."

We both slipped back down the steps of lighter slumber. Part of me wanted to leap out of bed and rush downstairs, but I held that feeling in both hands like a glass ball, and tried to examine it for flaws. A dream I dare not grasp too hard lest it shatter and fill my flesh with razor shards.

“Wanna go to her?” Raine murmured.

“Not alone.”

“Mmmm?”

“ ... what time is it?” I asked.

“Mmmm ... ” Raine rolled half over to check her phone on the bedside table. Her motion pulled open a small gap in the sheets, a chasm between us into which rushed a knife of cold air. Suddenly I could not abide that gap. That distance should not exist, should not be. “Nearly six,” Raine slurred, heavy with sleep. “Not bad, s’pretty good sleep for- hey, Heather?”

I squirmed around beneath the sheets until I was facing her, and closed the gap, burrowed in against her front, buried my face in her chest, pulled the sheets tight so no chill air could separate us. I allowed my phantom limbs to embrace her too, though she couldn’t feel them. I felt like a very small animal, seeking warmth.

“Mmmm, hey cuddle bug,” she said, voice reaching me from above the covers as she wrapped her arms around me. “What’s up?”

“How’s your leg?” I asked.

“Aching. Sore. Better though.”

“Will you take more painkillers this morning?”

“You don’t sound too happy about that?”

“I’m not. Your body is mine too, you know that?” I murmured, and only sleepiness gave me the courage. “You’re mine and I’m yours and we’re each other and you have to look after yourself for me.”

“You want me to stop taking the painkillers?” she asked.

“Not necessarily. That’s not the point.”

“I’ll dial them back,” she said, dead serious and awake all of a sudden. “Half dose this morning.” A little laugh escaped her lips.

"This isn't the first time I've been hooked on painkillers, I know my way around the rodeo, but I'll prove it to you."

I wiggled my head up, breached the heat of the covers and gasped in the open air, and met Raine's face, inches away in the dark. She smelled of sleep sweat, mine and hers both. Shadowed in the gloom, I caught her smile.

"You've been hooked on painkillers?" I asked.

"Yeah. Back after I first met Eevee, for a bit. Nothing major, just co-codamol for a few months."

"For a few *months*? Raine, you never told me that."

She shrugged beneath the sheets. "I needed it, at the time. I was homeless for a while, had some physical issues, you know?"

"Of course, of course, I'm not judging you, I never would ... just ... wow." I went quiet, shaking my head in surprise. Raine kissed my forehead and stroked my hair away from my face.

"Half dose," she repeated. "I'll taper down."

I screwed up my courage, before my mind woke all the way up, before a decade of being a good girl supplanted the blended purity of abyssal instinct and ape need.

"Raine," I said. "Did you get around to playing the dice game with Zheng?"

"From last weekend? Nah, not yet. She kinda keeps her distance from me. My fault for being a rude bitch, but it's cool, I respect her for-"

"Have you ever had a threesome?"

Despite the dark, I saw her blink, once.

I thought my heart was going to dance right out of my chest.

Then Raine laughed. "Uhhhhh, believe it or not, actually no, I haven't. Bit of a playgirl in the past, yeah, I deserve my rep, but I'm sort of a one-target-at-a-time type. There was this incident in the first term here at university, where I almost did, but I have trouble splitting my attention."

"Can't imagine you turning it down," I said, trying as hard as I

could to keep my nerves out of my voice. But I couldn't conceal the sudden adrenaline burst, the shaking in my core.

"Hey, Heather." Raine squeezed me. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why you're asking this."

"It's not what you're assuming-"

"If you want to-"

"Please-"

"With Zheng-"

"Raine, stop-"

"If you want a threesome, if it's for you, if it's what you really want, then I'm down, I'm game," she told me.

"No!" I snapped.

I pushed myself away from her and half sat up in bed, thrusting myself out into the chill morning air in the dark, my phantom limbs trailing after me as I felt my eyes blaze, my heart lurch then steady with something I had not realised until now. More certain than I'd ever been before, I stared down at Raine as she pushed herself up after me, half naked and glorious and not getting it at all.

"Heather? Hey, if I'm getting this wrong, tell me, I'm listening. If you want a-"

"No," I said. "No, Raine. We're not going to have a threesome with Zheng."

"It's cool, I'm cool with-"

"Stop. We're not going to have sex with Zheng. We're going to play the dice and stories game with her."

Raine blinked, surprised again. "Okay?"

"This has to be about more than sex. It has to be about what you want too. And Zheng. It has to be." I huffed, shaking inside, but I'd said it. "Besides, I want to try on my new clothes, and I can hardly do that with both of you trying to get up my skirt."

a very great mischief – 13.3

Between sleep inertia, trembling courage, white-hot embarrassment – and a touch of mechanical unfamiliarity – I took over an hour and half to put on my new clothes. Probably some kind of record for dressing oneself in the morning.

“You can do this, it’s going to be fine, Raine’s going to love it, everyone’s going to love it. You’re going to be fine.”

I took a shower first.

Alone, to cool my head and warm my body, muttering jumbled affirmations while I gave my legs a once over with the safety razor. Halfway through it began to feel too much like a ritual cleansing, and I fought down a heady mixture of self-consciousness and ambient sexual anticipation. The heat soaked through my skin and bones, waking me up. As I drew closer to the moment I would have to step out of the shower, my nerves grew into an unstoppable heart-flutter. So I turned the heat up and closed my eyes and stood under the stream of almost scalding water.

“Breathe. Breathe, Heather, breathe. It’s fine. It’s fine. Nobody is going to laugh at you. What are you even afraid of?”

Rejection? No. Raine loved me. Zheng would do anything I asked.

The new clothes waited neatly folded on the bathroom counter: bubblegum pink ribbed sweater, nebula-purple triple layered skirt, the beautiful pink-scaled hoodie, and a pair of white tights that Raine had bought for me months ago.

If Sevens was watching – and if she was, I was going to give her such a slap – she must have been pleased as pudding to see me following her suggestion so closely.

But she might not like what I was going to do with it.

Before my shower, while Raine had dozed in bed after her promised half-dose of painkillers and a brief shared breakfast of toast and tea, I’d slipped downstairs in the slow-growing apricot dawn, to fetch my new clothes from the dryer in the little utility room, and to

check on Zheng. She was asleep in her usual spot, in her baggy grey jumper and jeans, sprawled out across the broken-backed sofa like a tiger on a log. I couldn't spot any grisly trophies, and Zheng didn't smell of blood or meat, so I assumed her hunt had not borne fruit.

To be fair, if she had found and killed the ex-cultist, I fully expected her to leave the severed head on the kitchen table, or bound upstairs to show me like a cat with a dead mouse.

When I crouched down and eased the dryer open, Zheng purred behind me.

"Shaman."

"Z-Zheng? S-sorry, I was ... getting stuff. I didn't mean to wake you."

She cracked open one razor-sharp eye and regarded me from beneath a heavy lid. "Your heartbeat alone could wake me from death, shaman, but you reek of fear and heat, both."

Couldn't hide anything from Zheng, certainly not my physical state, not with her senses. I'd straightened up, arms full of clothes, and gathered my courage.

"I want you and Raine to play the dice and stories game today," I said, every word a guitar string tightened too far. "With each other."

Zheng stared, unmoving and unmoved, a tiger in the baking tropical sun, listening to a chimpanzee hoot and howl.

"*Akarakish*."

I blinked rapidly, uncomprehending, heart in my throat. I was so nervous I'd lost command of my memories. "Wha-what? I-I mean, I'm sorry? Pardon?"

"*Akarakish* is the name of the game, shaman." Zheng's mouth curled into a sleepy, toothy smile. "And the *yoshou* best have stories to wager, or she will have to pledge other secrets."

"No violence. No hurting her. That is the exact opposite of what I want you two doing," I said quickly. "If you can't play it without hurting her, tell me now. Please."

Zheng's stare did not relent. Breakfast turned to lead in my belly. A small, animal part of me which still hadn't internalised Zheng's

indebted devotion wanted very much to squeak apologies and scurry away, just to get out from under her languid predatory attention. But the rest of me, the hybrid combination of abyssal memory and ape instinct, felt her gaze as the warm kinship of a pack-mate. And she would not harm me. So I stood my ground.

“Don’t give me the silent treatment, please,” I managed to say.

“You want us to play nice, shaman.” Her smile turned sharp and unimpressed. “Hnnh.”

“She won’t insult you,” I said, struggling with the complexity. I wasn’t even showered and in my new clothes yet and I was already negotiating the most treacherous broken emotional ground of my life. “If she does, I will be there to tell her off and correct her.”

“Hnnh.”

I rolled my eyes, mostly at myself. “Okay, fair enough, she won’t insult you any more than her standard level of teasing for anybody. A bit of gentle ribbing is part of how she expresses friendship. And she’s been making a real effort lately. And yes, I want you two to get along. I do. I want ... I ... I think we should ... ”

I trailed off, narrowly resisting the urge to bury my burning face in the clothes I was carrying.

Zheng’s eyes snapped wide open, alert and dark in the orange light of the growing dawn. She uncoiled on the broken-backed sofa, staring at me like a big cat surprised to find a rodent had wandered close during sleep. She arched her back, flexing bunched muscles, showing off her Olympian curves, tilting her head up to present an expanse of bare throat – but paused halfway, as if unable to believe what she had scented. Raw physicality pulled me to climb into her lap, snuggle in close, bathe in her heat and scent.

This was, to put it lightly, quite arousing.

But I clamped down. I told myself *no*, and I meant it. I swallowed, took a long shuddering breath, and Zheng somehow sensed the iron-fisted control over my own sexual drive.

“Do not torment me,” she rumbled. “Mean it, or-”

“This is not about sex.”

Zheng paused, cold scepticism on her face. She leaned forward and

opened her mouth and unrolled twelve inches of wet red tongue, then snapped it back between her teeth again.

“You’re in rut, shaman. I can smell you.”

I blushed bright red. “Well ... thank you for that. Alright then.”

“And you have made a decision.”

I huffed a huge sigh, powered more by nerves and embarrassment than exasperation. “It’s not my decision to make-”

“I am yours, and I am still here. Ask. Ask and-”

“Not. My. Decision,” I repeated. “It’s your decision. And Raine’s decision. A-and I can’t think about it right now, and it’s not the decision you’re thinking of anyway, and-”

“We are your hands, shaman. And you are in rut. Use me as you-”

“It’s not just about me!” I almost exploded at her. “I’m not trying to mash you two together like Barbie dolls for my amusement! If there’s three of us, then there’s *three of us*. And we are *not* starting with sex. We’re not even going third or fourth or fifth with sex, to be quite honest. And if you try to make it about sex, about my gratification, then I will ... I will get up and bloody well leave. I will take Lizzie and go sit in the park for the rest of the day and have her teach me how to do cartwheels or handstands or something. We’ll play on the swings. I’ll nap with Tenny.”

Zheng blinked once – then broke into a laugh, a big rolling chuckle that made her hunch forward, raise her eyebrows, and shrug at me.

“I’m serious!” I squeaked.

“You are, shaman. I do not mock you, I laugh at myself. This is why I follow you. Very well.”

She folded herself back onto the sofa again, coiling up like a great serpent hidden in the roots of the house. She rolled her neck and cracked her jaw and wiggled her toes, getting comfortable before she closed her eyes again, and fell still.

“So ... you’ll play the game – *akarakish* – with Raine?” I asked.

“I will. But I will not play nicely with the *yoshou*.”

I sighed. What had I missed? What had I misunderstood? “Zheng, I

can't have you two hurt each other."

"I will be myself, shaman. And I swore an oath not to fight her. I will not break that."

"... ah. Well. Fair enough. Okay." I managed a nod, cheeks burning as I came down from my burst of courage. We were actually going to do this. It was happening. "I'm going to go shower and ... dress. Yes. So, later, okay? But not too much later today or I'll lose my nerve. If you understand. I hope you understand."

"Mmmhmmm," Zheng purred.

"I'll just ..." I gestured with arms full of clothes, but Zheng seemed already asleep again.

I'd backed out of the utility room and scampered across the kitchen like a child running to bed after switching off a hallway light, pursued by imaginary monsters in the sudden dark, by the notion that Zheng might lurch from the old sofa and sweep me up in a skin-hot hug and I'd melt in her embrace. But she didn't, and I'd escaped my own libido with my intentions intact.

Taking the clothes into the bathroom was a masterstroke of self-deception.

I only realised once I was standing there half-wrapped in a towel, covered in goosebumps, wreathed in the collected steam from the shower's heat, and staring at the little pile of colourful clothes which commanded my attention with all the seductive succulence of a carnivorous jungle plant.

Getting dressed in here gave me time and space. Raine would happily have vacated the bedroom to let me get dressed in privacy – or even more happily watched me – but then it would be an event, she would be waiting for me, the pressure would burst my heart and I'd have seized any opening to retreat, any excuse to back down, to put this off until tomorrow, or the day after, or next weekend, or never.

But like this?

My pajamas were already in the laundry hamper. Dragging them back on would waste the freshly showered feeling. I had left myself only one choice.

I spent too long drying my hair, then hung up my towel with

shaking hands, heart juddering in my chest and throat.

“You are allowed to wear these,” I hissed to myself. “Evelyn spent money on them, for you. For pity’s sake, fighting giant spirit monsters didn’t leave you this shaken. Get dressed.”

Easier said than done. Getting dressed had never before proven so complicated. My hands shook through the entire process, and I’m pretty certain I stopped breathing at one point. I’d worn tights before, of course, but always with the intention of looking as smart as possible, donning standard femininity like a suit of anonymous armour. The last time I’d done so was when I’d passed myself off as Kimberly’s girlfriend at the Wiccan coven meeting, and I’d had no time to appreciate how I looked then, no focus to spare on the aesthetics of my own body.

But now I slid the clean nylon up my legs, settled it smooth and snug and tight, and my heart caught in my throat as I turned my attention down at my own legs, wrapped in thick and warm one-hundred-forty denier white.

Not terrible, I suppose. Compact. Slender.

“... concentrate,” I hissed.

I barely recalled putting on my underwear, let alone tugging the triple-layered skirt around my waist or wriggling into the plush pink ribbed sweater. The whole thing was a blur of shaking hands and catching breath and before I knew it I was staring at myself in the mirror, wide-eyed and flushed and numb.

“Oh,” I breathed. Couldn’t think.

On a detached, technical, mechanical level, the outfit fit together surprisingly well; the white tights and bubblegum pink balanced each other out, soft bookends to the ostentatious dark skirt, flaring out from my hips in exuberant display of dusky purple frilled layers. I had to give Sevens that. Whatever showy aesthetic tastes she’d catalysed in me, she had a good eye for symmetry and proportion.

On the other hand-

“I look so silly,” I whispered, cringing at myself.

Lump in my throat, water in my eyes, chest tight with the need to retreat. Confronting this was too much. My hands twitched toward the skirt to yank it down, but I quickly grabbed the hairbrush from

the bathroom counter and began dragging it through my hair, focusing on my face and taking deep, shuddering breaths.

“Have to brush your hair,” I whispered to myself. “Can’t go back out there with messy hair too. It’s gotten longer now, so you have to take care. Take care. Take care of your hair. Haircare take care. Oh dear.”

Eventually, with great effort, I looked myself up and down again.

I turned slightly to the left and right, pivoting on the balls of my feet, and the triple layers of the dark skirt moved like diaphanous membranes floating in ocean waters, brushing my thighs and knees as I moved. A joyous display in the dark. The bubblegum pink ribbed sweater was thick and soft, a supple membrane over my vulnerable tissues, but bright and showy, not covert camouflage. Between the top and the tights I felt almost sleek, as if I was ready to slip through undersea currents with a flick of my feet.

My phantom limbs rose in acknowledgement, at rest, content.

In the abyss I had been a thing of pure survival, of toxins and sharp teeth and raking claws, of corded muscle and speed and stealth. When I had seen Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight through abyssal senses, she had been revealed as beautiful, as a thing of vast display and aesthetic power, and I hadn’t understood.

Now I did, in the tiniest way.

A few stray tears rolled down my cheeks. I wiped them with the back of my hand, not wanting to stain my new clothes. Euphoric joy was too much.

I stood there a while longer, trying out different expressions in the mirror, different poses, experimenting to see what felt silly and what felt right, making my skirt swish and tilting my chin up, but in the end it all defaulted back to me. This was just me, and I could be this if I wanted. I didn’t need to become somebody else to wear clothes that affirmed what I really was.

I felt almost powerful.

What I still didn’t feel was particularly pretty. It was, in the end, just me, and that was a double-edged sword. I wasn’t wearing makeup and wasn’t about to start; that held no affirming power for me. I finally picked up the pink-scaled hoodie and draped it over

my shoulders like a layer of semi-shed snake-skin, framing my chest and belly, and narrowly resisted the urge to drag it on properly and zip it up just to hide the shape of my own body.

I felt more right than I had before, but it was still only little old me, scrawny five foot nothing Heather.

“But maybe scrawny five foot nothing Heather is okay?” I asked myself in the mirror.

My reflection smiled at me, warm and encouraging.

“Exactly,” she said.

“Don’t spoil this now, Sevens,” I blazed at her, surprised at the sudden heat of my anger. “You keep out of this. This is *mine*. Go away.”

My reflection’s expression snapped back to my own. I spent a few moments frowning at myself, watching for an uncharacteristic twinkle in my eyes or a floating halo of yellow about my head, but Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight stayed firmly buggered off.

The nervous heart-shudder flooded back when it came time to leave the bathroom. I lingered by the doorway, taking my time with the final, improvised element of the outfit: a pair of fluffy boot slippers borrowed from Kimberly. Usually I wore thick socks around the house, sometimes more than one pair, and it hadn’t taken me much time standing on the bathroom floor in only tights to realise Raine had not been speaking in metaphor when she said I might get ‘cold feet’. No matter how sleek and smooth and pretty the white tights were, they were very thin compared to a good pair of thermal socks, so I snuggled my feet into the welcoming warm fuzz of the slippers.

“Just don’t give them back to me smelling of Zheng, okay?” Kimberly had asked.

“We’re not going to- ... get physical,” I’d said.

“Okay. Okay then.” Kimberly had nodded and smiled and not believed a word of that.

But I was determined not to mess this up.

At the last moment before I screwed up my courage, with my hand on the bathroom door handle, I felt a final pang of guilt. Here I was

dressing up, preparing to embark on the first uncharted step of creating an absolute drama nightmare of a three-way relationship that might not even work. And Maisie was still out there in the cold and the dark, imprisoned by the Eye, alone.

But Sevens was right. She was right about anchors.

Not about everything – she could shove off with her insinuations I needed to have a threesome.

Sex would be no anchor alone. Sex to the exclusion of love, well, there was nothing *wrong* with that. But it wouldn't make me secure.

When I'd been out there slipping down the edge of the abyss like a foolish diver sucked into a marine trench by an undertow, I had needed an anchor. Somebody to hold my ankles and around my waist so I could lower myself over the edge. Sevens had pulled me up, but she was a half-abyssal thing herself, a creature that understood the logic, the deep, and the math which described it all. When I'd dived willingly into the black waters beneath creation, I'd taken the memory of my friends and their names and their smells and touch and our home together in a pressurised bubble in my core, but even that had served only as guide and curious comfort, not an air-line to the surface.

Diving bell, bathysphere, air-line, anchor. I had to build *something*, and I only had certain materials to hand. Self, math, those who loved me.

I wasn't deluding myself. I had zero idea what I was doing, let alone how I could feed any of this into brainmath, but Sevens' suggestion was better than anything else I had so far. And I did know the first step was to get Raine and Zheng talking.

"Please don't end in a fight," I prayed, and opened the bathroom door.

Raine and Lozzie and Tenny were all waiting for me.

Thankfully they weren't lined up in the hallway like the audience at a catwalk. If they had done that, I might have slammed the door shut and hidden inside and needed coaxing back out with books and chocolate. Instead I took a couple of nervous steps out into the crooked upstairs hallway, with the thin light of a Northern spring creeping in through the window, and found it much the same as always, not transformed into an alienating environment in response

to me simply wearing a few different clothes.

“Heathy!” Lozzie said, making me jump, half-leaning out of her own bedroom doorway. She must have been listening and waiting for me.

“O-oh, Loz-”

My eyes went wide and I almost choked up, but Lozzie bounced and bounded down the hallway in a few quick steps, a whirling pastel tornado, her own version of abyssal display, and threw her arms around me for a very quick, very nuzzly hug, and then just as quickly drew back with a playful elfin giggle on her lips.

“You look great! Yeah! You did it! I thought I was going to have to come into the bathroom with you and help and make you comfy and stuff but you did and it looks so good it’s really really you, it’s your style if you want it to be and I like it and ahhhhh I kinda wanna borrow the skirt already but it’s yours it’s yours give me like six months!” She giggled again, a rapid-fire stream of overwhelming positivity.

“T-thank you, Lozzie. I ... yes, it’s difficult. Thank you.”

Tenny drifted out of the bedroom behind her and wandered closer. Silken black tentacles crept forward to gently investigate the frilled hem of the triple-layered skirt and the texture of my tights. Her face was so serious, blinking with curiosity as she peered into my eyes.

“Heath?” she trilled.

It was very much a question.

“Yes, Tenny, it’s just me. I put a new outfit on. You’ve seen me in different clothes before. Tenny?”

In a moment of mounting awkwardness, Tenny just blinked her massive oil-dark eyes at me, as if she wasn’t sure who I was – but then she broke into a big smile, an extra-level-smile, a Tenny-has-been-copying-Lozzie smile. She read my nervousness and my scent, and bobbed her head from side to side as if *I* was being the silly one.

And then she patted me on the head with one tentacle.

“Silly Heath,” she said, and made a trilling *pbbbbbt* sound.

I laughed, nerves releasing in a flutter of embarrassment, all flushed

in the face. “Of course, Tenny. S-sorry. I-I’m so self conscious right now, I can’t ... I can’t think, I-”

“Heeeeeey.”

Raine’s voice made me jump and twirl to find her in the corridor behind me, leaning on her crutch, like I was a marine scavenger surprised by the sub-vocalisation of a shark. She must have been waiting in our bedroom, resting her leg, and gotten up at the sound of our voices.

She looked me up and down with the biggest smile on her face, and the smile was all encouragement and warmth, her burning confidence lighting me up brighter than the sun.

“Raine,” I squeaked, vibrating so hard I thought I was going to pass out. “How do I ... look?”

She paused, cocked an eyebrow at me, and grinned a grin to stop my heart. “How do you look? Does the sun rise in the morning? Does two plus two equal four? Is the sky blue?”

I blushed hot enough to cook an egg. Lizzie snorted and hid behind both hands. Even Tenny made a fluttery *ffffffttt* noise.

“Raine,” I tried to scold, but it came out as a pleading whine that made Lizzie attempt to put a whole fist into her own mouth.

“You look like the sort of goddess revealed in an LSD trip to heaven,” Raine carried on. “You are every dream I’ve ever had, and all the others I didn’t know I wanted. You look brilliant! Look at you! You’re pulling it off, I knew you could.”

Raine stepped in close and for a moment I thought she was going to do something incredibly sexual, not only inappropriate because Tenny was right there, but because we’d talked about this earlier, about how this was not going to be about sex, not today, not until after the game at the absolute least, that I couldn’t let it be about sex. But I knew that if she slipped a hand up my thigh beneath that triple-layered skirt or slid her fingers across my stomach underneath the ribbed sweater, all my resolution would crumble and my new clothes would shortly be forming a crumpled pile at the foot of our bed.

But she kissed me on the forehead, winked, and leaned back again. “You look amazing. See? You can wear whatever you want.”

“ ... ”

I waited, wide-eyed, vibrating, for the other shoe to drop. For Raine to lean back in and whisper something in my ear that I couldn't resist.

“Heather? Hey, Heather, breathe, yeah? You look good, for real, I'm not just humouring you. Hundred percent.”

But she didn't do it. She respected the request.

I blew out a long breath and nodded, shaking and numb but coming back together. “T-thank you, of course I know you're telling the truth. Thank you, Raine. Thank you. Oh, goodness, I'm so self-conscious, I-I-I'm not sure I can deal with everyone seeing me right now.”

“Then you're in luck.” Raine shot a finger-gun at me. “Evee's at campus for a couple of hours.”

My heart juddered in an entirely different direction. “What? Why? Alone?”

“Not alone!” Lozzie chirped.

“Alone?” Raine cocked an eyebrow. “Heather, come on, I've taken a bullet in the leg, not a concussive head wound. She's taken Praem with her. Right now, yeah, Praem makes a much better bodyguard than me. Can hardly strike an imposing figure with this.” She shrugged the shoulder propping herself up on the crutch.

“Why now though? What's she doing?”

“Going to class?” Raine smirked. “It's Monday.”

“Oh. Oh, of course. Uh, silly me, yes.” I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head, feeling stupid for a moment. “Sometimes it's easy to forget magic isn't her entire life.”

Raine pulled a knowing smile. “She barely needs classes anyway. Probably just wants to jabber in Greek for an hour to clear her head. Anyway, she and Praem are out, Kim's at work, Lozzie's going to ... ?” Raine raised her eyebrows and peered past me, with gentle encouragement in her eyes.

“Play video games!” Lozzie said, arms in the air.

“Vid' gam',” Tenny purred.

"I've lent them my old Gamecube," Raine said to me with a wink. "Tenny's gonna learn about Pikmin and maybe Luigi's Mansion, if she can handle the spooky."

"Handle spookeeee," Tenny trilled, insistent and defiant.

"I have no idea what any of that means," I said. "But that's very sweet of you, Raine."

"Ten-tens, here here," Lizzie murmured behind me, taking Tenny by the tentacles and doing a little dance with her.

Before I could draw in another shaky breath – or ask what exactly *Pikmin* were, a kind of Pokemon? – Raine offered me her free hand with a little flourish, a twinkle in her eye, and a rakish tilt to her grin.

"May I have the honour of accompanying you downstairs to join the third point of our triangle, Lady Morell?"

I'd automatically put my hand in hers before processing what she actually said, and almost recoiled with distaste. "Raine! Don't *you* call me that, that's ... weird."

She burst out laughing. "Sure thing, Heather."

"And yes, let's go fetch Zheng before I completely lose my nerve, please, yes. Lead on."

"Last I saw she'd put her feet up in the kitchen, the moment Praem was out the door."

Raine held my hand high as she led me down the stairs, somehow graceful and smooth even with her crutch thumping on every step as we descended, but I didn't have the spare mental capacity to tell her off for presenting me like we were entering a ballroom. I was far too conscious of the way my skirt looked, the way it made me move, the way it felt against my legs, and the way the scaled pink hoodie over my shoulders hung off me like a cloak. By the time we were at the kitchen door, my heart was fluttering at full speed again, my stomach a hollow void.

"And here she is!" Raine announced. "Our lady of the hour."

Zheng was indeed sitting with her feet up in the kitchen, wide awake, quiet and brooding like a tiger contemplating the coming hunt, waiting for us with a razor-edged grin playing across her lips.

“Shaman!” she roared, clacked down the chair she’d been balancing on two legs, and stood up, stretching to her full height.

“H-hi. Zheng. Yes. I-I got changed.”

Zheng had changed as well – she’d swapped out her baggy grey jumper for a second, identical but cleaner baggy grey jumper, which still did very little to conceal her sheer size. I breathed a silent sigh of relief at that. The fresh clothes were a sign she was taking this seriously.

“The shaman transforms,” she purred.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Raine agreed, with great enthusiasm.

“I’d hardly go that far,” I protested in a stage-whisper.

“A bear’s pelt gives strength, a wolf’s head mask bestows stealth, and crow feathers can be sewn into a cloak so even monkeys can fly,” Zheng said. “As long as respect is given to the bear and the wolf and the crow. Do you respect what you are, shaman?”

I stared at her. “Yes,” I breathed. “Though I’m not sure I follow.”

“You do. Even if you do not know.”

“This is an awful lot of fuss over a fancy skirt,” I tutted, self-conscious and blushing. “You could just say I look nice and be done with it.”

“You look nice,” she rumbled.

“T-thank you.”

“So, big girl,” Raine said. “Apparently you and I are going head-to-head today, and neither of us have a choice.”

“You always have a choice,” I muttered. “That’s the entire point of this.”

Raine gave me the most affectionately ironic smile. “Neither of us has a choice when it comes to you, Heather.”

“I go where the shaman goes,” Zheng purred.

I huffed and rolled my eyes, feeling a little like a child throwing a tantrum in my party clothes – but my phantom limbs twitched and weaved through the air, and the shape of my skirt reminded me of what I was.

“Fine,” I said, with a second huff and a sharp look at the other two corners of my presumptive triangle. “Then I command both of you to tell me right now if you don’t want to do this. And tell the truth.”

Raine shrugged. “I’m game. I’ll also win.” She winked at Zheng. “Hope you’re ready for a whuppin’.”

Zheng grinned like a shark on the scent of a wounded seal. “I go where the shaman goes. You have guts, *yoshou*, and I will feast on them.”

“Metaphorically,” I said, a little too hard.

“Metaphorically,” Zheng allowed.

= =

“A three! Aaaaand a one ... and another one, ooof.” Raine winced as the dice rolled to a stop in the tray. “My loss, yeah?”

Zheng leaned back in her armchair. “You learn quick, *yoshou*. And you lose.”

“Ahhhhh well, can’t win ‘em all.” Raine grinned and leaned back as well, sprawled on the desk chair a few feet from the foot of the bed.

“You had courage,” Zheng purred. “You held your ground. Anything less would be certain defeat. But chance was not with you. No warrior can control the weather.”

Raine shot a lazy finger-gun at Zheng. “Ah ah ah, you keep making excuses for that first round. You want me to believe it was just beginner’s luck, but I surprised you, big girl. I’ll have you zeroed in soon enough.”

“Perhaps. First, you owe a tale.”

“Haaaaaah, that I do, that I do.”

Raine nodded slowly as she looked over at me. I’d made a sort of pillow throne-nest-perch at the head of the bed, in pride of place. I felt her eyes on me, and fought down a rather enjoyable blush.

“You do!” I said, already enthralled by the last half hour. “It’s your turn, Raine. Please.”

“Yes,” Zheng purred. “You must satisfy me, and our judge of truth.”

“True that, true that,” Raine mused, adjusting her sitting position,

drawing one leg up to place a foot against the end of the bed.

“Did you not come prepared, *yoshou*?” Zheng purred, with a hidden mocking edge to her tone.

Raine gave her a mild eyebrow quirk. “I’ve got loads of stories, s’just all my most interesting ones aren’t really mine to tell, they belong to Eevee. All the ones with violence, magic, and plenty of blood. All the ones that meant so much. But hey, I guess Heather knows most of those already. If we’re going to calibrate her truth-telling, I best start with one she doesn’t know. Right?”

“Mmmmm,” Zheng purred.

“Gotta warn you though, big girl, I’m no globe-trotting ancient like you, or baby-killing murderer like Stack. I’ve got some heavy ones in my quiver, some real life in there, but nothing epic, nothing soaring. My stories might bore you a bit.”

“Then tell them well.”

“We won’t be bored, Raine. Really!” I added. “I absolutely will not be, I can promise you that.”

“Alright then.” A mischievous twinkle entered Raine’s eyes. “Let’s start with something light. I’ll tell you about the time I became the devil.”

I could barely contain my excitement.

We were gathered in our bedroom. Well, my bedroom, Raine’s bedroom. Anything more than that was yet to be discussed. Zheng lounged in an old armchair, while Raine sat on the spinny desk chair, legs alternately up on the end of the bed or the desk itself or just oscillating herself back and forth as she thought or spoke or watched Zheng roll the dice. She moved her injured leg slower than she would have in the past, but her range of motion wasn’t too constricted. I was quite comfy, installed at the head of the bed, both audience and observed. I burned with self-consciousness in my nice clothes, especially with the way both Raine and Zheng would switch from focusing on each other to running appreciative glances over me – or was that my imagination, were they just looking at me like normal? – but the promise of good stories kept me from burying myself in embarrassment.

We’d commandeered a tray from the kitchen on which to roll the

opposing sets of dice, which now stood on the foot of the bed between Zheng and Raine, close enough for either of them to toy with the dice between rolls.

As we'd been getting seated and situated, but before Zheng had explained the – to me, at least – mind-boggling rules of holding and raising and betting your hand, Raine had dug around in her possessions and presented Zheng with a set of very odd dice with lots of sides. They were very colourful, some were even little rainbows, or variations on rainbows. I'd never seen anything like them before.

"Dice can have more than six sides?" I'd asked, staring in fascination.

"Wait, hold up," Raine said with a grin. "Heather, you've never seen a dee-twenty before?"

I shook my head, dumbfounded. Raine had kissed me on the cheek in sheer amused delight.

Zheng had declined the opportunity to integrate the special dice into the game, and for that I was exceptionally glad, no matter how pretty they were. The maths of 'walls' and 'scaling' and 'little gods' was difficult enough for me to follow without adding extra improvisation with entirely new sets of numbers.

Raine's special rainbow dice were mine to play with now, and I rolled them idly in my lap as I listened. I felt like a deep-sea mollusk, flushed and colourful with protective toxic display, perched on coral close to the surface to warm myself by the light of twin suns, showing off my frills and pigments, toying with pieces of smooth stone.

I felt content and safe and home.

And fascinated.

I'd purposefully chosen to bring us all upstairs into the bedroom in order to invite Zheng inside, into this intimate space, and Raine had accepted the gesture without question. But secretly even I wasn't quite sure what I'd meant by it. Bedrooms had never been nice places for me, not since Maisie was taken away. My childhood bedroom was forever marred by an open wound that only I knew about, a constant reminder of loss, and my short-lived bedroom for the first couple of months at university had turned into a torture

chamber of Eye-sent nightmares and sleep deprivation, forever stinking of fear-sweat and vomit.

But the room I shared with Raine at Number 12 Barnslow Drive was different. Nestled in the heart of this strangely solid old house, large with a high ceiling and plenty of space for a double bed, desk, armchairs, television and Raine's video game consoles, not to mention my endless little piles of books, it felt more like part of a continuous warren up here in the top of the house, comfortable and known, and ours.

Zheng had – incredibly – lost the first round of *akarakish* to Raine.

In a game of wit and guts and holding one's nerve, Raine excelled at pushing the limit and pushing her luck. She'd raised and raised and raised until Zheng had finally shown a speck of doubt and rolled one too many dice, and lost.

They'd stared each other down, two massive cats sizing up claw and muscle and territory. But then Zheng had roared with laughter, slapped the arm of the chair so hard I was afraid she might snap the underlying wood, and declared Raine's victory a fair one. If rash.

So Zheng had gone first.

She'd told us a story about a man she'd known in the armies of the khans, an important warrior who had wanted Zheng dead – not for being unnatural or eating through enough horse meat to supply ten men for weeks, or even for insulting him by urinating on his tent, but simply because she was strong and he thought himself strongest. He had owned a magic sword. It was a short and bloody tale, almost a fable, which ended with her blunting the man's supposed magic sword on her forearms and beating him to death with the pommel.

She told it with a dark smile and a lizard-like fixation on Raine, and I did not like the thematic undertones. But she looked at me at the end, for approval.

“... um?”

“Truth, shaman?” she purred. “I am telling truth?”

“Oh, um.” I'd hesitated, fascinated and disgusted at the violence, but mostly worried by the unsubtle message she'd sent. “It seems truthful to me, though it was a bit ... fable-like, with the ending and

all. Almost too convenient.”

“Hey, I liked it,” Raine said, grinning. Did she miss the message or was she being polite? “Real hack and slash.”

Zheng had stared at me for a moment longer, and I’d held her gaze, and then she’d split into a wide grin, showing all her teeth.

“Shaman! I cannot deceive you. The tale is true, but the ending is a lie.”

“Oh.” I blinked.

“Jirghadai did bury his sword in my left arm, but I didn’t beat him to death afterwards. I ran off with the sword!” She barked with laughter. “All over the camp, out onto the steppe, and back again. He rode after me, puffing and shouting, but I am faster than any horse. Every one of his friends and fellows was roaring with laughter at his folly. I dropped the sword at his wife’s feet. She was laughing too.”

And so Zheng had scooped up the dice again, plus two more she had to roll as a handicap for her lie. I had a funny feeling she’d fully expected me to pick up on that one, but I wasn’t sure what to make of her intentions now. But she’d won that next round, and here we were.

“So,” Raine began her story, kicking her feet up on the end of the bed and leaning back on her hands. “My parents were very religious. Real serious God-botherer types.”

“Mmmmm,” Zheng purred, eyes narrowed. I perked up at the prospect of anything from Raine’s childhood, as welcome as gold dust.

“Heather knows a bit of this already, but the context’s for you.”

Raine nodded to Zheng. “Not nice cuddly modern CoE types either, or even regular Catholics – er,” she broke off with a raised eyebrow. “Scuse me, Zheng, I’ve just realised, you’re gonna need a tiny bit of Christian theology for this one to make sense. Do you ... ?”

“I spent a century in the deep cellars of a monastery in the Carpathians,” Zheng said. “The monks assumed I was a fallen thing. Tried to make me repent the sin of rebellion. I have heard the Christian book front to back thousands of times.”

Raine winced. “Ouch. My condolences.”

“Mm.”

“Anyway, okay. So my parents were very, very religious, and when I was little we went to Church like clockwork, every Sunday. Not a real Church, mind you, not something built out of stone in the middle ages, but this fancy modern building, all white and ridiculous fake beams and glowing displays. You’d hate it, Heather,” she nodded at me.

“Ugh, probably,” I said.

“But hey, to my parents, the most important thing about going to Church was being friendly with the right people, climbing the social ladder, and though I hate to admit it, they were actually quite good at being a pair of greasy little toadies and sucking up to their ‘social betters’.” Raine did little air-quotes. “And by the time I was about nine or ten – I think that’s when it happened – they were actually pretty friendly with the vicar. Preacher. Whatever. They didn’t call him a vicar because he wasn’t CoE, but it’s basically the same thing, with a touch more insane ranting about modern fabrics causing hurricanes.”

“Tch,” I tutted under my breath.

“One Sunday afternoon my parents stayed behind after a service, for some kind of social call with the vicar and his wife. Some tea and cake nonsense. My parents didn’t want their weird daughter hanging around, so they sent me off into the Church grounds to amuse myself.” Raine spread her hands as a grin crept onto her face. “Now, I didn’t give a toss about any of this. What did I care about? Well, the vicar had a daughter.”

“Oh no,” I said out loud.

Raine laughed and turned to me, holding up a finger. “We were ten. Seriously. S’not like that.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” I said, blushing. “I just ... it is *you*.”

“We’ll get there.” Raine winked. “This girl, her name was Gracie. Not Grace, but Gracie. We were actually in the same class at school, but we were so far apart in playground social status we may as well have come from different planets. She was a real little madam, nose-in-the-air type, spoilt rotten by her parents, owned a pony. Meanwhile, I was a bit of a weird child. Kinda quiet.” She gave me a side-eyes look, and I knew that was all Zheng was getting of

Raine's peculiar personal history for the moment. "So, there we are, two ten year old girls, alone in this stupid looking ornamental garden of a crackpot Church, while our parents amuse themselves discussing whatever adults discuss beyond earshot of their kids."

"Children's games make good stories," Zheng purred in the dramatic pause, and to my surprise, she sounded like she meant it.

"Oh, but we didn't play a game," Raine said, lighting up with slow-building glee. "We decided to discuss theology. A ten-year-old's version of theology."

"Oh dear," I sighed.

"Oh dear is right. I don't remember how it started, probably with a totally innocent question, but seeing as to our vast gap in social status, Gracie got it into her head that she needed to assert dominance."

"Rrrrrr," Zheng purred – low and animal and appreciative. She understood dominance.

"She was pretty, she was popular, she was the daughter of an important man," Raine went on. "She was blonde, she was wearing a nice dress, she wanted a place in the pecking order, and she'd absorbed all this jumbled up religious jargon. So little Gracie decided this made her better than me, holier than me, closer to God than me. And I was a weird little child, I was very quiet and very intense. So as we're wandering through this garden and poking at the ground with sticks, she's telling me this mish-mash of half-remembered Bible stories, like she's trying to instruct me, and I think she read my quiet lack of giving-a-shit as defiance, when I was honestly just listening, because she was kinda pretty and even at ten years old I sort of wanted to hold her hand or be her friend or something." Raine shrugged.

"Awwww, Raine." I couldn't help myself.

"Wait, you won't be going 'awww' in a minute." Raine struggled to control her smile. "So eventually we reach the rear of the garden. It's pretty secluded, there's high walls, vines climbing the brickwork, some tall trees, and an ornamental pond, where we pause for a moment. Gracie's really worked up by now, thinks I don't know my place. She was puffed up with importance because this is her *daddy's* Church, and he's a holy man, and she thinks I'm

not recognising her place, that she's special and one of God's chosen or whatever. So she turns to me and declares with complete confidence that she can walk on water."

I involuntarily put my hands to my mouth, eyes going wide. "Oh no, oh Raine don't tell me she drowned."

"No, no, nothing like that! That would be really dark, I said we're starting off light. Relax."

Zheng was grinning, chuckling softly in the back of her throat.

"Yeah, I know," Raine said. "Blasphemous. Anyway, I was smart enough about metaphor and meaning to know that she was barking up completely the wrong tree, and I told her so. Only Jesus walks on water, right? No, says Gracie, 'my dad says I can walk on water, and my dad knows Jesus better than your dad'. And we were nearly shouting now, how kids do sometimes when they argue, from zero to sixty in an instant. And I was thinking well, she's pretty, but she's kinda dumb."

"Tch," I tutted softly, but I was gripping a pillow now, squeezing it in my lap, on the edge of my seat.

"So I said 'prove it', and I pointed at the pond." Raine mimed the gesture. "And to her credit, Gracie nearly tried to walk on water."

"But she didn't?" I asked in a whisper.

Raine shook her head. "She almost took the first step, but she stopped at the last moment, with her shoe hovering about an inch from the surface of the pond. I remember the way her face changed, it was so subtle. This moment of doubt, the moment she realised she'd talked herself into a corner, and she was going to have to back down or apologise. To me! Little weird Raine, with the stare and the ugly clothes and the slimy parents. She was about to be humiliated, in front of a social inferior." Raine pulled a faux-tragic expression.

"Deserved the lesson," Zheng purred, so soft it was almost inaudible.

"Naaaah she didn't. At least I didn't think so, not back then. I wanted to save her. So I did." Raine couldn't keep the grin off anymore, bursting into full shit-eating life across her face. "Before she could pull her foot back to dry land, I put one hand against her

back and – wufff!”

Raine mimed a hearty shove.

“You pushed a child into a pond?!” I exploded.

“I was a child too!” Raine laughed, then flicked suddenly serious. “And it did save her. It was only a foot deep, but it was full of algae and pond scum and probably rat piss, and she went splashing in face-first. Her dress was absolutely ruined and soaking, water in her hair, she was bawling her eyes out. I jumped in after her and pulled her to her feet, because she was so paralysed by the surprise of it. She was crying in my face, sobbing with, well, I guess embarrassment, asking why I’d done that, why I’d ruined everything, why anybody would be so nasty?” Raine shrugged. “Nowadays I know why I did it, because I figured that a ruined dress was a lesser wound than having to apologise to me, but I didn’t figure for breaking her rudimentary faith. But back then, with this girl crying at me, I didn’t have an answer.”

“Oh, Raine.”

“So I said the first thing that made theological sense. I looked her dead in the eye and said *‘maybe I’m the devil.’*”

Raine paused for effect. I was open-mouthed with disbelief. Zheng was purring like a tiger.

“She wasn’t terrified of me,” Raine went on, more casually. “She just cried a lot, clung to me, let me lead her back to the Church. Didn’t tell her parents what had really happened either, she just went along with my lie that we were playing and fell in. I went home, parents told me off for getting the child of an important person dirty, and I forgot about the whole thing.” Raine paused and mock-hesitated, then shrugged. “Gracie didn’t forget though. Three and a half years later, when word was getting around school that I was a massive lesbo, she cornered me in the gym cupboard and asked me if I was the devil. I said ‘uh, maybe?’, and then we made out for twenty minutes.”

I burst out laughing, I couldn’t help it. “Raine!”

To my surprise, Zheng barked a laugh too.

“I know! I know! It wasn’t my fault!” Raine raised her hands in surrender. “I think I awakened something in her, but I never found

out what. Look, wherever she ended up, I hope she found somebody more suited to play the devil for her. And that's the story. That's the end."

Raine finished, looking at Zheng, waiting for approval or a round of applause or a scoff of derision. But she got none of those. Zheng just glanced at me and raised an eyebrow.

"Shaman?"

"I ... I think it's all true."

"Even the kiss?" Raine asked, surprised.

"Especially the kiss, that's very you." I tutted.

"Point to the *yoshou*," Zheng purred with a sharp smile. "No penalty."

Raine grinned back and scooped up the dice with one hand, holding them in a fist. "Ahhh, but no penalty doesn't mean I can't choose to roll more, right? I'm going all-in, all six starting dice."

Zheng leaned forward, intrigued, predatory intensity awakening on her face. "The odds do not favour that. Better to start small, hold each victory, not pray for strength. You know that, *yoshou*. What is this?"

Raine shook the dice, clack-a-clacking in her hand, and grinned back at Zheng.

"Guts."

a very great mischief – 13.4

“It was at *Mohi*, after the battle,” Zheng purred low and soft, her voice cupping each word with nostalgic affection.

“Another war story?” Raine asked, not unappreciative.

“The battle had been bloody, Mongol and Magyar alike lay dead in their thousands, and victory was narrow. Batu was incompetent, the warriors had nearly broken, they could not deal with the Magyar crossbows, and it was only Subutai’s bravery that rallied them and shattered the Magyar camp in the end. But this is not the story of that battle. I care nothing for great battles. Things such as us do not make a difference on that scale, amid hundreds of thousands of monkeys butchering each other. It was *after*. After the blood, after the Magyar had fled and the warriors plundered, it was then, in the time for crows and starving dogs.” Zheng lowered her voice to a whisper. “It was there I first met the vampire.”

Over on the bed, I stifled a gasp behind a raised hand. Zheng’s eyes slid to me, a faint dark smile playing across her lips, enjoying my unguarded reaction. I blushed. She’d crafted that moment to seize my heart.

“Last I checked, Eeve’s pretty sure vampires don’t exist,” Raine said.

“Does your mage know every corner of the world, *yoshou*?” Zheng asked. “Does she disprove the Gods themselves with lack of knowledge?”

“I want to hear about the vampire,” I said out loud. “Please.”

“Hey, sorry, my bad,” Raine said, and I blinked in surprise at the speed and ease of her apology. “It’s your tale. Go ahead. What’s a real vampire like?”

“*Glorious*.” Zheng grinned with fierce love at the memory. “She lingered with the carrion things, but she was no scavenger. She had moved in neither army’s shadow. She had fought for the Magyar, mounted, wearing metal, carrying a lance, but she was not one of them. She was from deeper in the Christian lands, spoke some forest tribe gutter-tongue. Austrian. German. Mm.”

“Graf Orlok’s great grandma?” Raine murmured with a smirk.

“Raine, shhhh,” I hissed. Raine pulled an apologetic cringe and waved me down.

“She found me in the aftermath,” Zheng continued. “After sundown, amid the crows and corpses and the fires still burning. My leash was so long and thin by then that Batu’s pet wizards had left me where I lay, to tend myself while they drank and looted like the rest. I was sat on a broken beam, pulling crossbow bolts from my flesh, and she appeared before me like a black dog in the dusk.” Zheng’s voice dropped lower and lower as she spoke, her eyes heavy-lidded with memory and strange pleasure. “No mistaking her for some Magyar knight turned around and lost in the rout. She stood on a pile of corpses, sure-footed as a mountain goat, dressed in black and red metal, a strange rose growing in grave dirt. She wanted me to see when she removed her helmet.”

“Beautiful, or bacon-face?” Raine asked. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“The former, *yoshou*. By monkey standards she was a beauty. Shorter than you, but all you monkeys were shorter then. Blonde and pale and clear, youthful and athletic, bright eyed and wide mouthed. But the eyes were red as fresh blood, and when she descended the corpse pile to find a wounded Magyar soldier still clinging to his life, the incisors in her mouth slid out to the length of your thumb, before she bit into his throat.”

“Gnarly,” Raine murmured.

I just swallowed on a dry mouth, wanting to believe.

“But it was not beauty which made her glorious,” Zheng rumbled. “She must have seen me during the battle, surprised and delighted to find something like herself. And I felt the same. She was being polite, waiting for me to finish working the bolt-heads out of my flesh as she drank her bloody meal. When she was done, she cast the corpse down and we watched each other for a long time. She smiled the whole while.”

“Oh my goodness,” I breathed.

“She asked me a question. I did not speak the tongue, but she spoke with such glee, I did not need to know the words to understand her meaning.”

“ ... which was?” Raine asked.

“*You too?*” Zheng said, then roared a laugh. “I grunted yes! And then she came at me, bare handed, and she loved every second of it. We fought eight times over that following year, until the khan left, fled back over the Carpathians because he couldn’t crack the castles. The invasion roiled around us, and maybe she told herself that she fought for Christendom and her monkey friends, but I had eyes only for her, and she would drain and butcher her companions just to face me on even ground once more.”

“My kinda woman,” Raine said.

“She would have eaten you in a single bite, *yoshou*,” Zheng said, hard and sudden. “You are skilled, but you are only a monkey.”

Raine had been gently oscillating back and forth on her desk chair, one hand playing with the almost empty mug of tea and the remains of the Cornish pastry on her plate. At Zheng’s tone she went still, stopped moving, and my heart climbed into my mouth. Raine cocked an eyebrow and leaned forward, musculature shifting in subtle ways that I was all too familiar with.

“You wanna bet on that, big girl?” she murmured.

“Raine,” I said in a gentle warning tone. “Please don’t.”

“Hey, I’m just making a point,” Raine said to me with the corner of her mouth.

“I never bested the vampire either,” Zheng growled. “This is no bragging contest, *yoshou*.”

“Oh!” Raine lit up and instantly relaxed, spreading her hands in a proxy apology. “That’s different then. Wrong end of the stick. My bad, yeah?”

I breathed a silent sigh of relief, fighting down the sudden pulse of adrenaline. Didn’t want to sweat in my nice new clothes. At least not so soon.

“She was older than me,” Zheng continued, staring Raine down. “Much older. She moved like lightning and struck like a falling eagle, even unarmed. And I never won. Not once. That first meeting amid the corpses, we fought bare handed. We pummelled each other to dust, exploring the limits of the other’s strength, and I was found wanting, but I had never fought such a foe, never before felt

such joy in a fight against something I could not beat. My face was broken, my fingers snapped, my muscles screaming, my legs buckled, and I ... ”

Zheng trailed off, watching Raine with a curious look, like a cat uncertain of an alien intruder in its territory.

Raine sensed the change, and just raised her eyebrows.

I knew what Zheng couldn't say.

Of course I didn't know the exact words, but I could imagine, because I was privy to the context that Raine lacked. The natural old-age death of her little bird, her little Ciremedie, had driven Zheng to such a depth of grief that she'd fled from her embryonic humanity, into the wild, and eventually into the arms of the Mongol Empire, where violence had washed away her pain. She hadn't told that story, not to Raine.

What had she said to the vampire, on the verge of defeat?

Finish it, kill me, end this?

“It's okay, Zheng,” I said out loud. “I understand. You don't have to.”

Zheng swung her gaze to me, slow as ice, and let out a tiny grunt of acknowledgement before she carried on.

“The vampire walked away, into the night,” she purred. “I raged at her. It is the lowest act to leave the hunt to bleed out into the snow. Even a child knows to slit the throat of a dying deer, it is the most basic respect due to any prey. I spat at her for a coward and a dung-worm.” Zheng took a slow, deep breath and blew it out like smoke, her lips curling into a smile. “But then we met again in shattered Esztergom, beneath the shadow of the citadel walls. And I felt a flutter of pleasure in my chest. I had misunderstood her.”

“You enjoyed the fight against an equal.” Raine nodded along.

Zheng grinned wide, showing her maw of shark's teeth. “She favoured an axe. Not some woodsman's tool, but a long-handled terror, with a spike on the reverse for cracking armour and bone. She swung it like it was made of straw.” Zheng chuckled to herself. “One fight, our third time together, she broke both my legs in a dozen places with that axe. We were in a Church. Some weeks after Esztergom in some rotting village wedged into a Carpathian valley.

I'd killed the rest of her soldiers but I couldn't take her. She left me panting on my back on the stone floor, pinned my hands with iron spikes to stop me fighting back, then sat on my chest."

"Wheeeey," went Raine.

"Goodness me," I breathed. But thankfully Zheng was amused rather than offended.

"No," Zheng laughed at the pair of us. "It was not for that. She spoke to me, for three hours. In German. I understood not a word, but she had a voice like honey, and the manner of a young Goddess. No restraint. No inhibitions. Nothing to hold her back."

"She didn't want to kill you at all, did she?" Raine asked.

Zheng purred an affirmative. "She wanted the fight, but without the kill. No climax, not against me. She killed countless others, idiot horse warriors who did not comprehend what they faced." Zheng shrugged. "At first I did not understand, but after the Church, I grew fond of her. And if I had won? I would not have killed her either. Perhaps."

"How sweet of you," Raine said with an ironic smile.

"There was one time I almost had her," Zheng said. "The Magyar lands themselves turned on the horsemen eventually. The winter was cold and wet, the earth waterlogged, and I fought the vampire in a fen. It was raining, thick clouds overhead, but it was daylight, and that sapped her strength. So I ... " Zheng tilted her head, as if embarrassed.

"You held back?" I asked, wide-eyed at this unseen side of her, at this unfamiliar expression, almost sheepish.

"Mm. Perhaps." Zheng shrugged. "I had beaten her black and blue, her magic blood stained the swamp itself, and she staggered away while I lay in the mud and waited for my own wounds to heal. I could have taken her then, taken her any way I wanted, but I waited to see what she would do. Knowing her was more important than winning, mm. She drained the other knights of her strange party, killed them like a leech, and was regenerated as if new. We fought for four more hours in the sucking, stinking fen, and eventually lay side by side, panting and wheezing, bloody and filthy from head to toe, until the larger forces caught up to our skirmish and we went our separate ways."

"Oh come on, this is practically a romance," Raine said, almost laughing.

"Do not mock it, *yoshou*," Zheng replied, easy and mild.

"What happened to her?" I asked.

Zheng considered me slowly. "The final time we fought was in some unnamed defile deep in the Carpathians. In the forest. The army was fleeing the weather, giving up, and the Magyars were picking at our tail. Flea bites at best, they were spent. But I spit on horse warriors and monkeys shelled in metal, I went to the rearguard to find her." Zheng smiled with sadly remembered pleasure. "In the end it was just us. She buried herself in the earth, moved like a great worm, burst forth like a spider. I climbed the trees, fell upon her from above. We went all night without pause. By the end we were both exhausted, and there was no approaching army to interrupt us this time. I sat on a log, bleeding, bones broken, blind in one eye. She sprawled on the bare earth, her armour all cracked, covered in blood from both of us. She'd bitten me a couple of times in the fight, won a few mouthfuls of blood, but I was glad to make the donation."

Raine let out a low whistle.

"She said words. I did not know them, but I knew the meaning. 'The war is over.'" Zheng sighed, and spoke slower and slower, savouring the memory. "And I watched as she stood up, and she shed the broken pieces of her armour, and she held out a hand in invitation, and said 'do you want to come with me?'"

"Oh, Zheng," I murmured.

"And so I told her 'Yes, but I am bound. And I do not wish to think.' The vampire nodded, though she could not have understood a word, because I spoke in my first tongue, not Mongolian. She was worthy of true speech."

Raine silently cocked a curious eyebrow. Zheng's tale had touched on matters she was not familiar with, but she held her tongue for now.

"I stood up, and walked away, slowly. Followed the trail of the army over the mountains." Zheng shrugged. "I never saw the vampire again."

“Did you ever learn her name?” I asked, hopeful.

Zheng shook her head.

“I judge it all true, if I must,” I said, wiping delicately at my eyes with the end of one pink sleeve, gripped by second-hand melancholy from eight hundred years ago. I tried to remind myself this story had also contained an awful lot of dead bystanders amid a bloody and pointless war.

“You said she wore expensive armour, right?” Raine asked, sitting up straight and downing the dregs of her tea in one knock-back swig.

“Expensive?” Zheng rolled a shrug. “Perhaps.”

“You remember a coat of arms anywhere on it?” Raine went on. “A device, a symbol, a crest? That sort of thing?”

Zheng blinked twice, slowly, and I could almost feel the sifting of heavy gravel inside her mind, the sheer weight of centuries of memory. Raine waited in polite silence. I bit my lower lip.

“A pair of ravens,” Zheng said eventually. “Maybe crows? Black birds. Flanking a great stone castle. Mountain in the background. On the chest plate.”

“Could you draw it from memory?” Raine asked.

“Raine?” I said. “Where is this going?”

“Mmmmm, perhaps,” Zheng rumbled.

“We could look it up,” Raine said, grinning at me – and then, to my surprise, sharing the bright, confident grin with Zheng too, using it on her in the way she used it on me. “All sort of websites and archives of heraldry these days. Can’t be too hard to find with a bit of legwork. Could be the crest of some kinda old knightly order, and if we’re really lucky it might be a family crest. No promises, but hey, you want me to try? I’m guessing you ain’t exactly had a lot of chances to visit any libraries or get online for the last few centuries, yeah?”

Zheng just stared back at her, unreadable and heavy-lidded.

“Or just, hey,” Raine went on when she didn’t get a reply. “Offer’s always open.”

“While I’m entirely supportive of reconnecting Zheng with old ... friends?” I said, delicately clearing my throat. “I’m not sure we want to make contact with an ancient German vampire right now. We have enough on our plate.”

Raine laughed and spread her hands. “Hey, just saying Zheng might be able to get some closure. If she regrets, you know, not taking up the offer from little miss Carmilla back then.”

“No regrets, *yoshou*,” Zheng purred, and slid her eyes sideways, to where I sat on the bed, surrounded by pillows with my feet tangled in a loose blanket. “If I had gone with the vampire, maybe I would never have met my little bird again.”

Raine raised her eyebrows. “Little bird, huh?” she echoed with infinite curiosity. “Heard you call Heather that a couple of times before. Nice pet name. Got a story behind it?”

A spike of panic went through my heart, but I couldn’t even open my mouth to stammer. Wasn’t this what I’d wanted? If Raine and Zheng were going to communicate – which was the first building block of any relationship, let alone polyamory – then sooner or later they were going to learn each other’s history.

And Raine was going to learn that Zheng believed I was the reincarnation of her dead sister-slash-maker-slash-lover. Her Ciremedie. Her shaman. Her little bird.

Raine caught the blushing panic on my face and raised a concerned eyebrow.

“It’s ... I’m sorry,” I pulled myself together. “It’s not my place to say. It’s Zheng’s.”

“It is your story, too, little bird,” Zheng purred, and a shiver went up my spine. “If you wish it.”

“I’d love to be let in on this,” Raine said.

Slowly, like prying wary prey from a hidey-hole, Zheng plucked her dice from the tray one by one, and made them dance between her knuckles. She watched Raine with dark intensity, and Raine watched her right back, uncrossing her legs and sprawling in the chair, one hand raised in a silent waiting shrug.

“There is a story, *yoshou*,” Zheng purred eventually. “You must win it from me. If you can take two in a row.”

“Awwww, come on!” Raine flung her arms wide, complaining but grinning with the sheer joy of competition. “We’re neck and neck!”

“Two in a row. Prove you are more than a monkey.”

Raine clicked her tongue and grabbed her dice, and Zheng rolled first.

Time had flown by these last two hours, sequestered together in the welcome warmth and familiarity of our bedroom, settled into the routine of challenge and dice and deep memory. I felt like a sponge, absorbing every morsel of history that both Zheng and Raine revealed. Part of me wanted it to never end, to stay up here for weeks, doing nothing but swapping stories and feeling attractive.

That way I wouldn’t have to face the inevitable romantic confrontation, the slowly tightening fist in my belly.

Akarakish – lost to time, itself a relic dredged from the past – turned out to be the perfect game for Raine and Zheng. After Raine’s initial surprise victory and Zheng’s counter-attack, they’d taken wins off each other, going back and forth, neither able to hold the upper hand for more than one round. Raine was always quick to develop a new strategy, a new angle of daring risk; Zheng was always too fast and adaptive for the same trick to work twice, cutting off Raine’s ploy before she could gain a lead, but equally never able to fully predict Raine’s next move. Neither had managed to best the other twice in a row. Not yet.

I could barely follow beyond the opening moves of each round. Gambling mechanics, dice games, numbers, this was absolutely not my forte. I could have improvised some brainmath, plugged the values and the potential outcomes into hyperdimensional mathematical perception, watched Raine and Zheng through a quarter-second of abyssal senses, and known exactly how each round would go.

But that would spoil the fun, and probably ruin my lovely new clothes too.

Instead I got all the rewards with none of the pain. I got to discover more about two people I loved.

Zheng told stories about the Mongols, stories about fighting and conquests in which she had been a tiny cog, but an exuberant cog full of manic life and lust for combat, free of the concerns of the

khans themselves. Bloody and violent, but distant in time. She told a few darker stories too, from later in her life, from the long centuries of slavery, passed from wizard to wizard by trickery or bargain or cosmic mistake. In those stories she was never an active participant, but a dark silent watcher on the periphery, while mages murdered each other in the world's underbelly, or got themselves killed calling up things they could not control, or walked off into nothingness in the voids beyond reality.

"Hold up," Raine said after Zheng had told a story particularly difficult to believe. "I don't care if Heather judges this true or not, I just wanna know what happened to the younger mage, after she put the demon in the bear?"

Zheng shrugged. "Mauled by bear. I have seen this three times."

"What, mages putting demons in bears?" Raine laughed. "This is a thing that happened more than once?"

"Mm. Don't put demons in bears."

Raine's range of stories was tighter, unable to stride across centuries of memory, but to me they were no less fascinating. She made shoplifting a chocolate bar at seven years old sound as exciting as any bare-knuckle boxing match. She told us the story of her and Evelyn first arriving at this house in Sharrowford, two years ago, with no idea what to expect and somebody else's lifetime of junk to sort through, a story that I took particular personal interest in, even if it was a bit uneventful.

She told us of teenage mishaps before she'd run away from home, of her first fumbling kiss with a queen-bee type and the fallout that followed, and the time she'd been cornered in the school changing rooms by three other girls – who all turned out to be into her in various different ways. Or the time she'd fought a dog set on her and some schoolmates by a scorned ex-boyfriend of one of the other girls. Zheng barked a laugh at the climax of that one, and I stared in goggle-eyed disbelief.

"That's not how to scare off a dangerous dog, Raine," I said. "Not at all."

She turned to me with a grin and snapped her teeth together twice. Clack-clack. "Girl bites dog! Should'a been in the newspaper."

"What did it taste like?" Zheng rumbled, deeply amused.

“Mostly just fur and dog smell, it was only his neck,” Raine grimaced. “Didn’t get a chance for a second bite. The dog was so shocked he jumped up yelping, ran for it. Too fast for the lad to catch. He was hopping mad about it though, and I think he would’ve laid into us with his fists, but I snapped my teeth at him and said something like ‘I’ll bite your nose clean off too, mate’, and he scarpered after his dog. He never bothered Jen again, far as I know.”

“Dog-biter!” Zheng roared a laugh.

Only once did Raine slip into a sombre tone, for the only story so far she’d told about being homeless.

About crows.

I don’t think she noticed when her tone changed, the way her words thickened, the way she lowered her eyes as she spoke. I very nearly broke my self-imposed rule of not rising and joining either of them during the story-telling, maintaining my temporary illusion of detached distance. Raine had told me so very little about what it was really like to be homeless.

It was a short story, in which nothing much really happened. She’d been walking parallel to some train tracks, somewhere south of London, heading away from one horrible Surrey commuter belt town in search of another.

“And it was funny,” she explained, voice far away, struggling to anchor herself with a hitch of ironic smile. “After I started dropping raisins, the birds just kept following me. I’d eat a handful, then toss a couple over my shoulder,” she mimed the gesture, “and they’d flap down from the trees and peck up the fruit and join the flock.”

“It is always good to share with the carrion eaters,” Zheng purred with genuine approval.

Raine shrugged. “Didn’t begrudge sharing. Stole the bag of raisins anyway, and I sort of liked the company. Felt more like an animal myself anyway. It was a real quiet stretch of countryside, no trains running that day, and the birds didn’t break the silence either, which was odd in retrospect but I didn’t think about it at the time. They just ate and followed, and gathered. Maybe crows call their friends over when there’s a free meal going.”

“They do,” Zheng said.

“So,” Raine looked up, surfacing from her own memories and struggling to resume the storyteller mask. “Eventually I hit a village along the line, round this little bend before a level crossing. I come round the bend, sharp like, and waiting not thirty feet away at the crossing is a fucking policeman.”

Raine’s voice hitched in a way I’d never heard before, as if she had to catch herself. She blinked once, then took a sharp breath.

“Raine?” I murmured, loathe to interrupt the story but incapable of not responding to my lover showing that kind of distress.

“Police are terrifying when you’re homeless,” she said, plain and unsmiling. “Especially underage and homeless. Takes me back to the feeling, that’s all. Gut instinct. And this guy, he was out of his squad car, hands on his hips, facing the exact way I’d been coming, like he was waiting for me. I dunno, maybe somebody called in the weird ragged teenage girl walking down the tracks. I looked like I needed asking what I was up to. Yeah, sure, I probably could have brained him or outran him, but I didn’t want to. I was fucking tired. I’d been running since London at that point, and I was just done. I wanted to stop.”

“Running from what?” Zheng purred. “That was not the beginning of your story.”

“Yeah that’s a different one,” Raine said without missing a beat. “Anyway, this copper takes one look at me, then looks up, and his jaw drops. Turns white as a sheet and bolts for his car.”

“The birds?” I asked, amazed.

“Yeah.” Raine grinned. “I’d collected a couple hundred crows by then. In the trees, following me, flapping all around. I was so tired, so out of it, so ... dissociated, I didn’t really pay them any attention. I knew they were there, but I didn’t really think about it. But this copper bolts and I look up and I’m like, ‘oh right, I look like the start of a horror B-movie, and this guy doesn’t wanna be the cop who dies in the opening scene.’” Raine started laughing. “So I take my chance and run, while he’s shitting himself or calling for backup to shoot birds or whatever.”

“The carrion eaters know their own. They respect kindness,” Zheng purred.

“I dunno about that,” Raine said. “But they earned mine. I tossed

the bag in the end, threw the whole lot of raisins in the air to thank them, and so the copper couldn't use the cloud of birds to follow me once he got his bottle back. Felt kinda good. Pity there's not more crows round this part of Sharrowford. I sorta like 'em, ever since."

"True," I said immediately. Raine and Zheng both looked at me in surprise, but I held my head high as I blushed. "That story was true. I believe every word of it."

Raine smiled. "I won't lie to you, Heather. Promise."

"Prior oath," Zheng purred. "Unfair advantage."

But she was smiling too, showing her dragon's teeth.

We'd broken for lunch and tea and a stretch, and returned with plates of sandwiches and pastries and steaming mugs. I'd even managed to get Zheng to try a Cornish pastry, and she'd enjoyed the experience, though it probably helped that the pastry was full of beef. Evelyn and Praem had returned to the house, clattering about downstairs, but perhaps Lozzie had intercepted them and told them what was happening, because neither of them interrupted. I'd perched on the bed with my plate and listened to Zheng tell a story, about a doomed romance, between two of the monks in the monastery where she'd spent a hundred years in the basement.

I struggled constantly with a desire to get up and initiate physical contact, with Raine or Zheng or both. Time bred comfort in my new clothes, and the storytelling engendered intimacy, and those combined into a slow need for casual skinship. Part of me wanted to lean against Raine, another part of me wanted to clamber into Zheng's lap, but I couldn't do either in front of the other.

Besides, they had their chairs, and I had the bed. The bed was my realm right now, stretched out with my blanket, but never covered more than a fraction, showing off what I was. Wearing these new clothes indoors almost seemed like a waste, especially after I'd skipped downstairs to the kitchen and back again, skirt twirling, hoodie hanging from my shoulders like a mantle. But there was no way I could go out in public like this. Not yet.

I contented myself with the attention of those closest to me.

Stay where you are, I had to remind myself more than once. The bed is inviolate. Raine can put her feet up on it, and Zheng can lean an elbow on the sheets. But this is yours, and for the moment, you

are separate.

This was not about me. This was about them.

Raine did not win twice in a row after Zheng issued her challenge. To my surprise, and Zheng's, she lost once, then told a comically detached story about a rather awful attempt to take Evelyn fishing when they were seventeen – which I made a mental note to ask Evelyn about, because it sounded exaggerated – and then she lost a second time.

“What is wrong, *yoshou*?” Zheng asked, slow and curious, like a tiger faced with prey lying down to be disembowelled without a fight. “You could have rolled again, not clung to what you had.”

Raine cracked a strange grin. “Maybe I’m sandbagging.”

“Why?”

“Maybe I want to tell you more about being homeless.”

And she did.

A loss was still a loss, even if invited. As Raine began to tell her tale, her strategy suddenly leapt out at me, and I struggled to stay still, stay quiet, vibrating with excitement that she was offering this vulnerability to Zheng, showing her belly.

Or was it a strategy at all? Was abyssal ruthlessness misinterpreting an attempt at genuine connection?

“Before I went south, down into Surrey and Sussex, I spent a while in London,” Raine said. “Shit place to be homeless, London, ‘specially if you don’t wanna go into a shelter. I was underage, social services would’a been on me the moment I sniffed the inside of a shelter, and I didn’t want that. I was too fucked up to go into a shelter anyway, I was ... feral. Sort of.” She spoke without a smile. “The Met are bastards among bastards, even for police. Spent a week or two dodging them, begging, stealing, trying to survive. I was down and out.”

I reached out an impotent hand toward Raine, toward teenage Raine in the past, a presence I couldn’t comfort. She caught the gesture and shot me a smile, and must have seen the look on my face.

“Hey, Heather, it’s okay, I’m here now, yeah?”

"It breaks my heart to think of you sleeping on the streets," I said, my voice cracking. I blinked water out of my eyes. "Sorry, sorry for interrupting."

"S'alright. 'Preciate the thought," she said, and blew me a kiss. "Anyway, I got lucky. For about a month, I found somewhere that I could almost call home." A genuine smile flickered across her lips. "It was a squat. A real one, run by an anarchist commune. Not like the student digs I used to have in Sharrowford. One of those old terraced London townhouses, tied up in legal stuff by some land developer who wanted to do something with it, I dunno what. All those rooms, all that housing, sitting there empty. So they'd taken it over."

"Anarchists?" I asked. I didn't really know what that meant.

"No masters," Zheng purred.

"Yeah." Raine cracked a grin. "Zheng knows what's up. S'where I picked up a lot of my politics. About a dozen of them lived in the place. They took care of it, fixed it up, shared everything, food, resources, bills, work. A real community. I couldn't really contribute much. I mean, what was I? A fourteen year old girl, off her head, no skills except violence."

"It does seem ... dangerous," I admitted.

"Yeah. Living in a squat was asking for trouble. All kinda monsters hang around those sorts of projects if they're not chased off. But these people, they were the real deal, they lived their ideology, and I was safe there. They didn't have a leader, exactly, but they mostly deferred to this one lady. I don't remember her name. I wasn't ... " Raine swallowed. "Good with names, then. Older lady, maybe in her forties. Very kind face. She talked to me a lot, taught me a bit of cooking. Her boyfriend lent me books, though I found reading hard at the time. Still got one of them."

Raine nodded toward the corner of her desk, at her battered, dog-eared, yellow-tagged copy of *The Conquest of Bread*.

She'd tried to get me to read it a couple of times, and I'd discovered I wasn't one for theory. But now I wanted to.

"They fed brain and body," Zheng purred.

"That they did, yeah." Raine nodded. "I was there for about three or

four weeks. Almost started to get better, you know? Felt a touch human again. These people, they weren't my people. They didn't *need* me, but ... well, it was nice. And then one night the Met turned up to break the doors down and arrest everybody and change the locks."

"Oh!" I couldn't help myself, frowning with second-hand outrage. "What absolute- I- well!"

Raine laughed softly. "Yeah. Fuckers. Just doing their job, wrecking anything built outside the system. I was there that night. They didn't get violent. Well, not much." Raine shrugged. "But it flipped a switch in my head. I was standing there in the kitchen doorway, watching two officers arresting the lady who'd been nice to me. This other officer, a young woman, she was approaching me with that condescending look. Knew she was going to ask how old I was, where my parents were, all that bullshit. I just turned around, went back to the room I'd been using, grabbed all my stuff, my backpack, tugged my hood up, and sprinted back into the kitchen with a piece of rebar in one hand."

"Yes!" Zheng growled. I flinched in surprise. She was leaning forward in her chair, eyes boring holes into Raine.

"Dunno what I hoped to do," Raine said. "But I tied up the cops for a few minutes of shouting, gave a few of the others time to grab stuff and get out the back. Knew I shouldn't hurt anybody, 'cos even if I got away, the bastards would pin it on the others. So I just ran around a lot and kicked a few shins, then jumped out a window."

Raine pulled a smile of such nostalgic sadness, an echo of her confidence filtered through old insecurity, fear, and homelessness.

"Back into London streets," she said. "The end."

"Oh, Raine," I murmured. "I'm not even going to judge that one, of course you're telling the truth."

Raine shrugged with exaggerated self-consciousness. "Glad you think so. Well, that's me done." She scooped up her dice again. "What you say, big girl? Ready to lose twice in a row?"

But Zheng was staring at Raine, wide-eyed with predatory focus, alert and switched on. If she'd turned that kind of gaze on me, I would have curled up in a ball in a corner in an effort to escape, but Raine merely paused with a raised eyebrow.

“No more dice,” Zheng rumbled.

My mouth went dry. Adrenaline throbbed through my veins. A corner of my mind started screaming. What had gone wrong? I glanced back and forth between Zheng and Raine, at the pair of frozen expressions gauging and judging the other.

“Um,” I managed.

“Hold up,” Raine murmured to me, without taking her eyes off Zheng. “No more dice, hey?”

“You will not win my past from me,” Zheng purred. “You will not take it as loot.”

Oh no, *no no no no*, I thought. I almost launched myself off the bed to put myself between the two of them. I could feel the fight coming. Abyssal instinct recognised this.

Abyssal instinct does not understand people.

“I give it freely,” Zheng said, and I couldn’t believe my ears. “As a gift.”

Raine tilted her head in a gracious nod. “Cool. I accept?”

“I was made by accident,” Zheng purred. “In grief and love.”

To my wide-eyed heart-fluttering surprise, Zheng told Raine the story of her ‘birth’, of her early life in northern Siberia, of her people, and her little bird. The same story she’d told me in the woods beyond Sharrowford, where she’d confessed what I meant to her and what she thought I was, where I’d convinced her to come home with us. The version she told in these comfortable surroundings was far less fragmented, without the tears or the tenderness. I’d never told Raine anything Zheng had revealed to me that day. That was Zheng’s history to share or keep private, and I felt light-headed as she told the story.

Raine listened politely and asked pointed questions, and to my equally fascinated ears she managed to draw out details I’d never heard from Zheng. The shape of her beloved’s face, the scent of the northern forests, the practises of the Mongols’ tame wizards.

Zheng reached the end, and told the part that made my heart skip a beat.

“Alright,” Raine said, respectful and serious. “So Heather’s the

reincarnation of your shaman. Cool.”

I winced, blushing terribly. “Raine, how can you just believe it like that?”

“It’s alright,” she said. “It’s Zheng’s deal, yeah?”

Zheng shrugged, expansive and unreadable. “Perhaps. Perhaps you monkeys are reborn again, like the Buddhists say. Perhaps not. Perhaps I’ve grown sentimental. It matters not. My shaman is here, and here is where I stay, until she dies again.”

“But that’s not for a loooong time.” Raine cracked a grin and pointed at me. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“Agreed,” Zheng purred.

“Raine,” I protested. “Aren’t you ... you know? I mean, this isn’t ... rational.” I huffed. “Oh, who am I kidding, nothing in my life is rational anymore. Maybe I am a reincarnated shaman from northern Siberia, fine.”

Raine laughed. “Hey, as long as Zheng isn’t making prior claim.”

“I claim nothing but a place at the shaman’s side,” Zheng purred.

“I got no problem with that,” Raine said, easy and calm, but with something unspoken beneath her words. “Here, you showed me yours, I’ll show you mine.”

“R-Raine!” I hissed.

But I’d misunderstood. Gutter-mind Heather, I shushed myself.

“I wasn’t an accident,” Raine was saying. “But my parents sure didn’t plan for whatever the hell I was.”

Raine returned the respect and trust, and told Zheng the basics of her upbringing, her long dissociative state, her selective mutism, and why she ran away from home. Far more condensed and coherent than the tearful tale she’d told me in the room at Sharrowford General Hospital, unblurred by painkillers or adrenaline or fear of rejection. She told it almost laughing, and capped the story off with a proper ending – a truncated version of when she met Eevee, the journey through the Saye estate to find her new reason for being a person.

“Mm. You love the wizard too,” Zheng purred.

"I do. Yeah. I love Eevee like a sister, won't lie. I killed a couple of things like you, just to get to her, and that was before I even knew her name."

"Raine," I scolded, very gently.

Raine spread her hands. "Not as old or experienced as Zheng though, fair point."

"Then they were not things like me," Zheng purred.

Raine laughed. To my surprise, Zheng laughed too, low and slow and dark, and I breathed a tight sigh of relief. Raine noticed my tension and shot a wink at me. I managed to nod back, one hand to my chest, rubbing my sternum through my ribbed sweater.

"*Yoshou*, mmmmmm," Zheng made a deep rumbling thinking sound, eyes narrowing to sleepy slits. "This does not do you justice."

"Come again?"

"*Tsoryn gants chono*," Zheng said. "You are no monkey. You are the hunter that dies without the pack. Born alone. You should have starved to death on the steppe. But you did not. You found your wizard, and you found the shaman."

I was afraid Raine might laugh again, but she nodded along, taking this seriously. I dared not make a sound lest I disrupt the strange alchemy that crackled in the air between them.

"You wanna join the pack?" she asked.

Zheng stared, heavy-lidded and dark, and blinked once.

"Cool," Raine said, as easy as agreeing on what to eat for lunch.

Zheng purred once, and grew quiet.

"... that's it?" I blurted out, wide-eyed, then blushed when they both looked at me, suddenly self-conscious under the scrutiny now that Raine and Zheng had joined forces in some indefinable, ineffable fashion. "U-uh, um, sorry, I didn't mean to ..."

"That's just the peace treaty, Heather," Raine laughed, and kicked her feet up onto the bed. "Zheng old girl, I think you and I need to have a real talk. About the reason we're up here in the first place."

"Mmmmmmm," Zheng purred.

“And what better time for it?” Raine went on, turning theatrical with a wave of her hand. She kissed the tips of two fingers, and then used them to shoot a double-barrelled finger-gun at me. “She’s right here.”

My heart juddered so hard I thought it was going to stop. My insides turned to a wall of butterflies. My face went red.

“Um ... ”

“The shaman is always here,” Zheng purred.

“Yes, philosophically speaking Heather would be with me even if I was in a lightless pit, she’s proved that,” Raine said. “But I mean she’s here, right now, in the room, and she asked for this, so she can’t very well run off without undermining her own aims.”

Raine had me dead to rights.

In the few seconds she’d been speaking, my limbs had acquired a mind of their own. On shaking feet and numb hands I’d clambered off the bed and slipped back into the fluffy slippers, my mind whirling with half-baked excuses to leave the room and – and what?

Raine’s gaze pinned me to the floor. Zheng’s eyes fixed me to the wall. I swallowed hard, and tried to locate my lungs.

“I won’t run,” I squeaked.

Raine smiled, bright and confident. Zheng showed all her teeth.

“Then let’s talk about you,” Raine said.

a very great mischief – 13.5

“But this isn’t about me!” I said.

Or rather, I attempted to say that. Vibrating like a caged butterfly, my heart pounding so hard I could feel it deep down in my belly, my head about to catch fire from my overheating brain, my hands quivering in front of me, and all I managed to do was squeak out an approximation of those words in a breathless rush.

Raine laughed, light and soft and oh so easy to fall in love with, and absolutely not what I needed right then.

“Heather, this is all about you,” she said. “Take it easy, yeah? We’re not gonna eat you.”

I gave her such a look, a grade-A frown through my incandescent blush. “Don’t.”

“I said we’re not!” She raised her hands in laughing surrender.

Zheng purred in agreement, long and low and loud, and that didn’t help either. Her purring was a siren’s lure, answered by a sympathetic response deep in my belly, a squirmy feeling that called me to step closer, stop worrying, curl up in her lap and purr back at her.

For a long moment I was stuck mute. Couldn’t finish my thought out loud, because my thoughts had been pounded into mush. Part of me wanted to kick off the slippers and shrug out of my pink-scaled hoodie and crawl back onto the bed and make unrepeatable noises. Abyssal instincts responded in kind, not with the aggression of flared tentacles and an urge to hiss, but with a soft-bodied, belly-showing vulnerability, a desire to puff my chest out and wiggle appendages I didn’t have. Perhaps luckily for the rest of me, that part didn’t possess veto powers in non-emergency situations.

Was this all it took to render my plans down into nothing? A little direct attention and light flirting?

I felt so seen in that moment, so exposed, with Raine and Zheng both looking at me, paying me attention, thinking about me. The

beautiful new clothes made it worse – or better, depending on how much I listened to my body’s screaming instincts – because here I was, on display, presenting myself. No baggy hoodie to act as a shell, no blanket to curl up inside like a shy mollusk, no Tenny or Lozzie or Praem to hide behind.

My plumage was fluffed, my colouration bright; it was mating season, and I was in bloom.

I managed to heave down a shuddering breath – shuddering so hard I saw Raine’s expression twitch with actual concern – and pressed a hand to my chest, as if to hold myself back.

No, I snapped at myself. This is not about sex. You told both of *them* this is not about sex. To go back on my word would be indescribably fun; an awful part of me that was forever fourteen years old and flush with hormones knew that with one word I could have both of them with me on the bed, and I would be a gibbering mess within half a minute, and I had the power to do that, and nothing would stop me.

But it would be a betrayal of all three of us. It would solve nothing except my libido.

“I think we’ve broken her,” Raine stage-whispered to Zheng.

“The shaman is unbreakable,” Zheng said. “Have faith.”

“No, no,” I forced out. “You’ve come pretty close to ... well. Yes. The less said the better. Better.”

“Heather,” Raine said my name with a sudden and unmistakable whip-crack of command. I flinched and stared at her, snared by the serious expression on her face.

“R-Raine?” I stammered.

“I can tell you’re turned on by this.”

A huge sigh escaped my lips. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, I-”

“Hey, nothing to be sorry for,” Raine went on, still hard and commanding, and I shut up instantly. “What you said earlier, in bed this morning, right there,” she pointed at our bed. “I took it seriously.”

This has to be about more than sex, my own words echoed in memory.

"I know, I know." I cringed with guilt. Stupid horny Heather, I scolded myself for being an animal. "I'm sorry, I-"

"No, Heather, listen," she almost snapped. "Don't mistake flirting for going back on my word. Even if you give up, I won't. I'll refuse."

I blinked at her.

"I'm saying no," Raine finished.

"Mmmm," Zheng rumbled in agreement. "Shaman, you threatened to leave rather than satisfy your own carnality. I too say no."

Like an alley cat after the proverbial bucket of cold water, I came up blinking and sober from the depths of my own arousal. A chorus of non-consent from Raine and Zheng shut everything down. Fourteen-year-old-Heather gave up. Abyssal instinct receded into background noise. I looked away, terribly embarrassed and feeling very silly, trying not to hide behind my hands.

"She seriously said that to you?" Raine was asking Zheng.

"Mmmhmm. The shaman threatened to spend her day with the mooncalf, doing handstands in the park."

"Well damn." Raine said. "Don't threaten yourself with a good time, Heather. Maybe you should do that anyway, have a day out with Lozzie sometime?"

"Yes, yes," I sighed at myself, still shaking in the comedown from my own biological high, but much more in control now. "Look, this is meant to be about you two. You two becoming ... well, if not friends, then at least ... understanding? Talking. Trying to ... " I waved a hand as I searched for the right word.

"And we have. Loads'a talking." Raine cracked a grin. "I think I get Zheng now. A bit. You get me, Zheng? Same for you?"

"The wolf had already won my respect," Zheng purred. "Now she has my understanding."

"That's me?" Raine pointed at herself. "I'm 'the wolf'? Come on, that's gonna get confusing, with Twil and all. You are allowed to use my name, you know?"

"I don't think Zheng goes much for names," I said. "Listen, please, it's not time to talk about me yet, it can't be, you're not ... ready."

“Heather,” Raine said my name with such indulgent affection. “What is the one thing Zheng and I have in common, more than anything else?” She pointed a finger-gun at me, then lowered her thumb in slow-motion, and mouthed ‘pow’, and I rolled my eyes and turned tomato-red again. “If we don’t talk about you, we ain’t ever gonna get anywhere.”

Robbed of the shield of my own sexuality, the embarrassment was worse. No escape into arousal, no fleeing out into the upstairs hallway either, though I was painfully aware of how many paces lay between me and the doorway. A couple of my phantom limbs even reached toward the door handle. My breath came in shallow little jerks as I fought down the most intense self-consciousness of my life.

“... I ... I don’t like being the centre of attention,” I said. My voice came out so very small, so pitiful and pathetic, that it broke the wave of my own embarrassment on a wall of pure exasperation. I huffed and screwed up my eyes and my fists. “Oh, for crying out loud, why am I like this?”

“Hey, Heather, you look amazing,” Raine said, confident and easy. “And it’ll be a hell of a lot harder to talk about you if you deprive of us the best eye candy in the city.”

“*Eye candy*?” I wrinkled my nose at Raine, about to snap a retort.

But then I slammed to a stop at the victory grin on her face. She’d known exactly the effect those words would have on me, exactly how to snap me out of the embarrassment.

Raine reached forward and patted the edge of the bed between her and Zheng. “Come on, you know you wanna. Everybody likes hearing people say nice things about them.”

“Oh, alright,” I said. “Fine! We can talk about me, and I’ll stay to listen. Don’t say I didn’t warn you if I have to plug my ears.”

“Good enough, shaman,” Zheng purred.

The six or seven paces back to the bed felt like a mile, but I drew strength from my new clothes and what I was. I passed Raine and sat down on the edge of the bed, roughly equidistant from her and Zheng. As I sat, I smoothed my skirt over my backside, then slipped my feet out of the fuzzy slippers and drew them up on the bed.

“So then,” Raine began. “Heather, you don’t mind-”

“Wait, please,” I managed to say, injecting my tone with just a touch of Evelyn-like superiority.

I took my time getting comfortable, settling the pink-scaled hoodie about my shoulders, and even reached over to where I’d been sitting before, to grab the pretty coloured dice I’d been playing with. I rolled them in my hands and lined them up on the bed, one by one, then raised my chin high.

“Very well,” I said, sounding much more confident and in control than I truly felt. “I’m ready as I’ll ever be.”

Eyes left, Raine. Eyes right, Zheng.

“ ... could you perhaps not watch me like a pair of foxes with a chicken?”

Zheng broke into a rumbling laugh. Raine turned her eyes away and suppressed a smile by biting the tip of her tongue.

“It’s not helping!” I huffed. “Oh, for pity’s sake, if I ever actually manage to have a threesome with you two, I’ll probably black out before we even begin. This is completely impossible, I’m clearly incapable of dealing with it.”

“Alright, alright!” Raine raised her hands in mock surrender. “I’m not even trying to tease you right now. You’re teasing yourself. Let’s make it easy on you, get to the point, yeah? What you say, Zheng?”

But Zheng was watching me with predatory interest. Her jaw hung open, teeth exposed, tongue roving over them. She clacked them shut and purred an agreement, turning her attention back to Raine. “We are here for the shaman. Yes.”

“That we are. That we are,” said Raine. “Want me to go first? Put my cards on the table?”

Zheng gestured expansively with one lazy hand, blinking as slow as a dozing tiger.

Raine nodded just as slowly, as if they were locked in a strange unspoken ritual dance. Body language, predator posturing, the natural communication of a pair of killers or monsters, those who had chosen their own path with no regard as to sensibility or survivability. As I sat there with the hem of my skirt pinched

between thumb and forefinger just to have something to hold onto, I was struck with an incredible sense of gratitude; I was allowed to witness this, these two incredible people in such an intimate moment. I was a soft mollusk curled in my shell, and these two sharp creatures were here to show me what they could do.

Raine extended one hand, to point at me.

"I love this woman," she said to Zheng. No humour. No joke. Heart naked. "And I've made a conscious decision, both eyes open, to follow her into hell."

"W-what? Raine?" I blurted out.

"Before Heather and I got official with each other," Raine went on. "Evee did a piece of magic to trace Heather's nightmares. And that piece of string led all the way back to Wonderland. We saw the Eye. Laoyeh. Gazer. The big beholder. Eyeball fuck nugget. Whatever you call it. And it saw us back."

"Mm," Zheng grunted.

I stared at Raine, wide-eyed with realisation as she explained.

"Only for a few seconds, 'course. Heather saved us." Raine shrugged. "But it was in my head, Evee's head too. Dunno if it touched Twil, maybe the dog smell drove it off." She cracked a smile at her own weakly attempted joke. "But from that moment, I knew what Heather was up against. Giant alien eyeball that can rewrite reality and peel our world open like a circular saw on a tin can. Can you guess what I decided?"

It was not a rhetorical question. Raine waited for an answer.

"Devotion," Zheng purred.

Raine nodded, and finally grinned again. "Yeah," she said, barely above a whisper. "I decided, right then as it was rummaging in my head, right in that moment when it could see my thoughts. Might have been a defense mechanism maybe, but that doesn't make it any less true. Twil's a werewolf, she's got special protection, and Evee's got experience. But me? I'm just a regular ol' ape. And when it was in here," she put a fingertip to her forehead. "Rooting around, I thought at it, 'you ever try to finish the job, you ever take Heather like you took her twin? Then I'm coming after your stupid giant eyeball with a broken bottle the size of the world, and there's

not a hospital big enough to stitch that for you.”

Zheng broke into a savage grin. “Your courage is greater than your muscles, little wolf, but muscle is half courage at first.”

“Raine,” I whined, channeling deep embarrassment into mild exasperation. “Don’t be absurd, you can’t *glass* the Eye. You’re not going to get into a bar fight with it.”

“Oh yeah?” She finally looked away from Zheng and turned to me. “Watch me.”

And she was so angry.

Not with me, of course. Raine’s anger was cold and focused, the iron-hard certainty of conviction. If it had been anybody other than her, I would have flinched.

“ ... why?” I asked.

Raine blew out a breath, expelling her anger and smiling for me. “Last I checked? ‘Cos I’m madly head over heels in love with you, duh.”

At any other time I might have blushed and rolled my eyes and muttered some brush-off comment. But after Raine’s speech, after her anger at my transcendent tormentor, such a joke would be in poor taste.

I held her gaze. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“Because I like making you feel good. I like making you warm, and happy, and I love those moments when you’re completely unselfconscious and you smile at something without thinking first. I love the way you get dressed. I love the way you roll your eyes, just like now, yeah, that too. I love the way you blush, I love teasing you. I love the way you look curled up with a book, and you can’t see yourself then, glued to the words. I love the way you-”

“R-Raine.” I wanted to curl up and hide behind my hands. “S-sto-”

To my surprise, Raine stopped. She cracked a grin that made my heart do back flips. She’d made her point.

“I want the shaman to thrive.” Zheng spoke up without preamble, her voice a low comfortable purr. “To be strong. To live as long as possible. To be what she is, unconstrained.”

“Yeah, me too.” Raine shrugged. “But that doesn’t tell me shit I don’t already know. How do you feel about her, zombie girl? Come on. Truth.”

Slowly, Zheng looked at me, and I felt like a mouse before an adder. It took every ounce of willpower not to squirm or squeak as her face split into the fierce joy of her shark-toothed grin.

“She is fire hidden in the heart of a stone. She is born to lead, but she sees it not. Those who invite devotion are never worthy of it, but those who know it not are worth every step.”

“That’s ... very, very kind of you, Zheng,” I said, blushing. “I-”

“Hey, no,” Raine spoke over me. “Drop the prophet-and-messiah talk for a sec. Look at me, and tell me how you feel about Heather.”

I blushed like a steam engine, but managed to hold my tongue; I didn’t understand what exactly Raine was getting at, but it seemed important to her.

Zheng just raised a curious eyebrow. “I have told you how I feel about the shaman. I am no poet.”

Raine tilted her head to the side in suffering scepticism. Not good enough, her expression said.

“Speak plain, wolf,” Zheng rumbled.

“Do you love her?” Raine asked.

Zheng blinked, once, very slowly. “Why is that a question?”

“Because it’s the basic prerequisite.” Raine cracked a grin, and for a second she seemed almost as toothy as Zheng, almost as sharp. “If you just wanna fuck Heather, if this is just carnal, then respect and admiration and dedication is all well and good, but I need something more than that. I need to know-”

“Idiot monkey,” Zheng growled. “Yes. Yes, I love the shaman. How is this not plain?”

Raine’s grin shifted tone. “Good! That’s all I needed.”

Zheng growled in her throat like a goaded animal.

“So, come on,” Raine went on. “You and her, pair ‘o women, what you wanna do?”

"R-Raine!" I squeaked, mortified. "You said no-"

"No sex, yeah," Raine agreed with gusto. "But we gotta talk about it, Heather. We gotta boil it down. If you can't do this, I will. If you're uncomfortable talking about it, say so, and I'll drop it here, but we gotta come back to it eventually."

"There is nothing wrong in the comfort of flesh," Zheng purred, vaguely amused. "You monkeys rut. Sometimes it is *funny*, but it is good for you."

"Well, um, I-" I stammered and blushed. "I mean, yes, in theory, b-but-"

"I would offer the shaman every comfort, every intimacy," Zheng purred, soft as a distant waterfall heard through miles of jungle. She sighed a slow and heavy sigh, and looked at her own hands and arms. "And I would enjoy bringing her happiness."

I couldn't say anything to that, and it was a minor miracle I didn't either run for the door or pass out from overheating.

"Straightforward," Raine said. "I like it. 'What is good in life?', eh? Real Conan the Barbarian here."

"Don't call her that!" I squeaked.

"Hey, it's a compliment," Raine told me. "Conan was a rebel slave. Slaver-killer. Big respect."

"I like this compliment," Zheng rumbled.

"Only in that one terrible film," I sighed.

"I know, I know, the books are different." Raine shot me an indulgent grin. "The books are always different."

"Still can't believe you got me to watch that," I muttered.

Raine clapped her hands together. "Right then. Peace treaty signed. Borders drawn. Common ground established."

"This is no war," Zheng rumbled.

"Exactly! It's peace!" Raine grinned. I tutted and rolled my eyes again. Raine gestured toward me. "How'd you feel about sharing her?"

I had to bite my lips and make fists with both hands to stop myself

from screaming.

"She is not mine to share," Zheng growled. "Nor yours. She is her own."

"Yes, thank you!" I blurted out, red in the face and whirling like a firework, feeling like a squid expelling itself from its hiding place and filling the water with shimmering rainbow ink of convulsive panic. Even my phantom limbs joined in, waving like overexcited hands. "This isn't my bloody harem! You're not sharing me, we're ... trying to ... oh, I don't even know any more!"

Raine laughed. "Evee's been showing you too much anime."

I boggled at her. "What does that have to do with anything!?"

"I care not if she takes a hundred lovers," Zheng continued. "I am not like you monkeys. I do not grasp."

"Okay," I sighed. "I think a hundred is a little out, but I do appreciate the principle, thank you. I think?"

Raine shot me a raised eyebrow. "Maybe you should talk about what you want here, Heather, how you feel about this situation?"

"I ... I don't ... I can't think-" Running on instinct, I glanced over my shoulder at the door to the upstairs hallway. *Escape, escape!* part of my brain screamed.

In one smooth motion, Raine turned in her chair and kicked her legs up onto the bed next to me, a harbour chain to block my scuttling retreat. I hadn't even been about to move, but I squeaked in surprise all the same, flinching backward as a small hiss escaped from between my lips – but then Raine winced, making no effort to hide her mistake as she drew in a sharp breath between her teeth. One of her hands flew to grasp her left thigh.

"Raine?!"

"Ahhh, it's okay, it's okay." She grinned through the pain, eyes watering. "Just pulled on the stitches. Easy to forget, you know? It's okay, nothing's popped, just-" She winced again. "... burns."

"Burns?" I echoed. "Oh no, Raine, you can't just assume that. You have to check the wound."

"It's fine, it's fine." She wheezed and tried to return to normal, but I wasn't having it. "And we're in the middle of-"

“Raine,” I snapped. “Now.”

“I’d rather-”

I huffed and swivelled toward her on the bed, all my embarrassment forgotten. “Then let me check. Roll up your trouser leg.”

Raine gave an awkward grin and eyed the end of her trousers. She was wearing a pair of comfortable old jeans, loose and baggy. “Uhh, these don’t exactly roll up that far.”

“Then take them off!” I lost my temper.

Raine blinked involuntary tears out of her eyes and shrugged at Zheng. “Wants me to take off my clothes in front of you. What can I do, hey?”

“Oh, don’t be so perfectly ridiculous,” I huffed at her. “Zheng can leave the room if you’re uncomfortable. I’m sorry, Zheng, I guess this is over, but health comes first.”

Zheng shrugged in easy acceptance.

“Nah, I’m cool with it,” Raine said, lowering her feet from the bed with extreme care and standing up slowly, putting her weight on her good leg. “I just joke through the pain. You know that, Heather.”

And so, Raine got half-naked in front of Zheng for the first time, for one of the most unsexy reasons I could possibly imagine. I wasn’t even thinking about that though. Images of popped stitches and torn scar tissue chased all thoughts of rogue sexuality from my mind. Concern for Raine’s health came first.

With a little difficulty and a little help from me, she wiggled her jeans down off her hips and let them pool around her ankles, then stood still as I gently peeled back the dressing around her left thigh. I’d done this enough times by now, changed her dressings when she was exhausted or deep in painkiller haze, or simply when I wanted to express my care and affection.

I breathed a sigh of relief when all the stitches were still exactly where they were meant to be, holding closed the sides of her ragged wound, the angry red in the middle still oozing a tiny trickle of clear blood plasma.

“See, s’all good,” she said. “Back to the hospital again on Wednesday, right?”

“Yes, indeed. Are you having trouble standing?” I asked, looking up at her face.

“Nah. Not for you.”

I took the opportunity to change the dressing, swapping in fresh gauze and bandage from the medicine box which now lived on Raine’s bedside table. My by-now practised hands made quick work with scissors and antibiotic ointment. In the back of my mind I knew I was doing this to introduce Zheng to the part of our relationship which mattered infinitely more than any amount of sex.

Raine took my ministrations without complaint, one hand on my shoulder for support, and as I worked I felt more and more like some kind of remora or deep-sea mollusk tending to a shark. Abyssal instinct blossomed into an understanding I could not have put into words, an understanding that surprised me, so different to the cold logic of survival; as I tended Raine in front of Zheng, abyssal instinct acknowledged the mutualistic behaviour.

By the time I was almost done, abyssal instinct was prodding at me to secrete antiseptic mucus from glands I didn’t have, and rub it into Raine’s wound.

“She is sweet, isn’t she?” Raine said.

“Oh hush,” I whispered.

“The shaman is love,” Zheng agreed.

For once, I didn’t blush. Abyssal instinct did not blush. It wanted to mate – but that didn’t mean the same thing as having sex.

I stuck down the last edge of Raine’s dressing and looked up at her, into those rich brown eyes.

“If I talk about what I want,” I said. “Are you going to interpret those wants and bend yourself around them again? You’ve already been working harder at this than I have.”

“I won’t. Promise,” she said.

“Then what do *you* want?” I asked.

Raine opened her mouth, but then paused. She took a moment to study her dressing, then slowly tugged her jeans back up and sat down very carefully.

"I want you to be happy," she said. "Don't want you to get hurt. Want you to-"

"Wolf," Zheng purred. "The shaman asked what you want. Not what you want for her."

Raine blinked at her, then burst out laughing. "Fair point, fair point! What do I want? There's barely enough of me to *want*, you understand that, yeah? But if I had to say something, I'd say I want to be Heather's special person. I don't want her to ever drift away from me. But she's promised me that she won't. So I already have what I want. I have true wealth."

"And you're not jealous anymore?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I was jealous because you needed me to be. You don't anymore, so I'm not." Raine spread her hands. "Honestly, I'm cool with this. Under these circumstances, anyway. With you specifically," she nodded to Zheng. "My greatest fear is Heather getting hurt or taken away, and I got no fear of that with you."

"Mm," Zheng grunted.

"If she was going out clubbing, getting picked up by randoms, eh-h-h-h." Raine squinted one eye to the side. "I wouldn't be so happy."

"Raine?" I blushed faintly, mortified by the notion. "That's not ... not me. That's not something I'd do. I wouldn't have the courage, let alone the interest."

"Exactly." She cracked a grin. "But Zheng? Yeah! Or if say, you decided to get with Eevee one night, and it wasn't just a one-night thing? You know what, I'd be fine with that."

I stared at her. "I-I- c-can we not complicate things, please? I'm not going to sleep with Eevee."

"Yeah but in principle!" Raine laughed. "And don't rule it out. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is I'm cool with this because it's serious. Wouldn't be the same if it was casual sex. That's my red line, Heather, the real one, from my heart. Zheng might be fine with you taking a hundred lovers, but I ain't. Anyone who gets with

you has to love you.”

“I ... ” I struggled to control my blush. “Thank you, for being honest. Okay. I think I can deal with that.”

“Well, that’s my position staked out,” Raine said. “And we have Zheng’s too. What about you?”

I glanced between the two of them, and my heart climbed into my throat.

“Speak, shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “We listen.”

“Yeah,” Raine agreed. “What do you want from this situation?”

I opened my mouth, closed it again, swallowed much too hard, looked down into my lap and squeezed my eyes shut in an effort to get a hold of myself.

“Besides Zheng and I sandwiched either side of you?” Raine asked, coming to the rescue.

I exploded in a huge huff and rolled my eyes, but Raine’s innuendo gave me my voice back. “What I *want* is for both of you to be part of my life. To get along, to be with me, to ... ” I turned to Zheng, swung round on the bed to face her fully, to stare into those slow, quiet eyes, razor-sharp and deceptively relaxed beneath her dark mop of hair. “Zheng, you’ve promised to stay by my side, until I die. You’ve found me and I-I-”

I had to wave down Raine’s concerned hand, as I dabbed sudden tears from my eyes with the loose sleeve of my scaled hoodie, but I kept talking.

“I seem to be your reason for going on,” I said, sniffing through the tears. “I can’t do justice to that oath. I acknowledge it. I value it. And I want to give something back to you. To respect your love. I’m not even a hundred percent sure I want a sexual relationship with you, it doesn’t have to be that way, I just don’t want you to have to sleep on the sofa. I want to be able to hug you in front of Raine without feeling guilty. I want to ... k-kiss you?” I shot a glance at Raine, burning with embarrassment and guilt, but she just nodded along. “M-maybe. I don’t know. I want to be close to you, and have it not feel wrong.”

Zheng let out a long, slow purr. Simple acknowledgement and affection, wordless and perfect.

I stared down into my lap, burning with shame; why couldn't I be normal, even if just in this?

"That is one of the most admirable things I've ever heard you say," Raine said softly.

"... doesn't feel that way," I sniffed, clearing my throat and wiping my eyes.

"Gonna apologise in advance for this one," Raine said. "But I gotta ask a real difficult question. Heather, how much of this is Seven-Shades' idea?"

"Oh, very little of it," I said, sighing and puffing out a tiny laugh with strange release. "She wanted me to jump straight into a threesome, I think. This is all me."

Zheng's chin rose, her eyes narrowed, and she shifted in her chair as if sighting a rival.

"I wish to meet this godling that follows you," she rumbled.

"Trust me, you don't," Raine said. "Kind of a bitch. Hope she heard that one, too." Raine eyed the ceiling and the window, as if Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was about to crash through one or the other.

"... Sevens?" I raised my voice to the room in general. "Would you like to comment from the peanut gallery?"

Nothing.

"Dirty little voyeur, eh?" Raine said.

"Quite, I hope she's not watching this," I sighed. "Look, at the very least I want you both to get along with each other. At the very least. If we can have that, maybe we can find some ... configuration."

"I have told you before, shaman," Zheng purred. "There are more loves than eros."

"Yeah, but eros is cool." Raine smirked.

I rolled my eyes. "... could we maybe start with a ... a cuddly relationship? It doesn't have to be sex. Maybe not ever. That's not important. What's important is ... " I sighed. "Is there even a word for this? I don't know what I'm trying to build here, us as a ... a-"

A whisper of sun-baked bronze and finespun gold brushed past my

ear.

Family, she whispered.

I flinched and turned, but the bed was empty. Nobody was in the room except us.

“Shaman?” Zheng rumbled. She was half out of her seat.

“Heather, what is it?” Raine asked, gone tense all over.

“... just a thought,” I murmured, trying to process the notion.

“Nothing, I’m sorry. Sit down, please. I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

Raine and Zheng shared a look – which was a good sign, in a way – and a silent agreement passed between them.

“You know,” Raine said at length while I was still gathering myself. “Any great project needs a pioneer.”

“I’m sorry?” I blinked at her.

“A practical experiment. Blueprints and ideas are all fine and good, but you gotta make a prototype. Prove the thing works. We’re not just dealing with emotions here, we’re dealing with a practical problem.”

“Mmmm,” Zheng purred. “You first, wolf.”

“As if I’m giving you a choice.” Raine shot a grin – a teasing one, which made my heart flip – at Zheng. “I call dibs.”

“Dibs on what?” I blinked at her in mounting confusion. “Raine, what are you talking about?”

Raine answered, but not with words. She stood up and I saw her answer in the uncoiling of her muscles, in the hand she ran through her hair, in the way she looked at me with a loving smirk.

“O-oh,” I squeaked as she took a step toward me, instinctively backing up as she drew closer, as she mounted the bed, straddling my thighs with a little grunt of effort. “B-but your leg, your-”

“Forget the leg for a sec,” she purred, leaning in close, cupping my cheek with one hand.

“You promised no sex,” I hissed, quivering at her touch, wide-eyed and barely holding myself up.

Raine grinned. "Kissing isn't always about sex. This is not about sex. It's about expression. And demonstration."

My eyes flicked to Zheng, and found her watching with slow, sleepy-eyed interest, and I swear I felt steam coming out of my ears. "B-but, in front-"

"Heather, if you can't endure a kiss in front of Zheng, I think that's a sign to back down. Which is it?"

Wide-eyed, overheated, my heart about to clang and crash and judder to a stop, I managed a tiny nod up at her, and put my arms around Raine's shoulders. She leaned in and kissed me.

She also kept her word. Long and lavish and loving, the sort of kiss that left me panting afterward, my eyelids heavy, my heart racing, but Raine kept her hands on my shoulders rather than roving anywhere else. She kissed me deep and hard and then pulled away with gentle slowness. She climbed off me and stood up, one hand taking mine to lead me off the bed. I followed, her and instinct both, numb and shaking and breathless, as she led me over to Zheng in the armchair.

Zheng was dark and warm, and the tiny part of my mind which was still able to catalogue experience noted that she seemed as breathless as I, in her own way. Almost bearing her teeth, the wet tentacle of her tongue playing about her lips, her breath rising and falling inside her heavy chest.

Raine raised my hand high and led me over as if presenting me. It felt almost like a ritual, a rite. Real magic, blood and bodies transforming via contact, alchemy in the joining of heat and touch.

And for a moment, in my wonderful new clothes, I felt almost beautiful.

Without a word, Raine allowed her fingertips to part from mine as I clambered into Zheng's lap. Instinct took over and I felt like a kitten, purring in her grasp as her huge hands closed about me, cupping the back of my skull and the base of my belly. My phantom limbs joined in, squirming and writhing and trying to link with every part of her. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd stuck out one of my actual, fleshy hands, waving it and making frustrated noises in my throat.

"She wants you too," Zheng purred. Raine laughed, and held my

hand. I squeezed. She squeezed back.

We stayed like that for a surprisingly long time. Maybe two or three minutes. Raine held my hand. Zheng stroked my hair. She was so warm, like cuddling up to a radiator through several blankets. I closed my eyes for more than a few seconds, and Zheng started to scratch my scalp.

“Mind flexing for me?” Raine murmured.

“Mm,” Zheng grunted.

A few moments of silence passed, broken only by the sound of cloth moving, then, “Nice,” Raine said, admiringly. “We should work out together sometime. Doubt you need it though?”

“We should.”

“Didn’t notice when I shook your hand back in the woods,” Raine went on softly, voice soft as if I was sleeping and not to be woken. “But you run hot, don’t you?”

“Mmmmmm,” Zheng purred.

“Love you both,” I murmured into the pillow of Zheng’s chest.

“You kissed Heather before, right?” Raine asked. “I could smell you on her. Plus, well, she told me all about it.”

“Don’t have to kiss right now,” I mumbled

“This is what the shaman wants,” Zheng said. I felt her words vibrate inside her chest. “Thank you.”

“Hey, you’re welcome,” Raine replied. “But we ain’t out of the woods yet.”

A spike in Raine’s tone forced me to sit up and disentangle myself from Zheng’s embrace, blinking and flushed. “Raine?”

They were staring at each other now, over the top of my head. Zheng must have picked up on the tone as well, because I felt her shift beneath me, muscles bunching and tensing.

“Might wanna stand aside for this bit, Heather,” said Raine.

“Mm,” Zheng grunted – and lifted me up like cat, under the armpits, placing me down next to the chair and holding on for a moment until I got my surprised feet back under myself.

“H-hey!” I protested.

“One little problem,” Raine was saying to Zheng. “I just ain’t attracted to you, Zheng. Sorry, Heather,” she glanced at me. “But I’m just not. I like my partners cuddly, smaller than me, sweet and clever and easy to tease. You just don’t do anything for me, Zheng. Don’t get me wrong, you’re cool, I respect you. But we ain’t a triangle right now, we’re two lines connected to a point in the middle.” She thumbed toward me. “I’m not down for some top-for-top thing with you.”

“Does it matter, little wolf?” Zheng purred, unsmiling and focused. “I feel no desire for you either.”

“It does!” I squeaked before either of them could answer. “I said before, this is not my harem!”

Raine smiled and shrugged. “There you have it.”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted, but turned to me. “Shaman, you can demand comradeship, but not desire.”

“I ... I’m not comfortable with the idea of being a ... a-”

“You know, the triangle is one of the strongest shapes, for building. Roofs, houses, stuff,” Raine said. “But two points of the triangle can just be resting on the ground, they don’t have to be connected to each other, just the point at the top.”

I looked between them. “I ... I’m being unfair, aren’t I? Oh, dear, oh no, I’m sorry, I-”

“There is one way,” Raine said, and flashed a sudden dangerous smile at Zheng. “We never had a proper fight, did we?”

Zheng growled low in her throat. “We made an oath, wolf. No fighting.”

“Then I’m gonna remain unattracted to you,” Raine said.

“Please do not fight!” I raised my voice. “Please, no, it’s not worth it. I accept it, I can’t have everything I want, it’s unfair, it’s-”

“I’d win though,” Raine said. She winked. “Easy.”

“Ha!” Zheng barked, and broke into the all-tooth grin of a hungry shark. “You are good, wolf, and I respect you too. But no.”

“Yeah, maybe not while my leg’s like this,” Raine tapped her left thigh. “But once I’m fit again, hoooo, you won’t know what’s hit you. I went a round with you before, remember? Got a few blows in back then. Might surprise you.”

“Wolves break as easily as monkeys.”

“Not this one,” Raine breathed, her face lighting up inside. “I can go toe to toe with you, Zheng. Maybe we’ll feel differently about each other then.”

“Raine!” I whined. “I asked you not to do this, I don’t want you two to fight.”

Raine shot me an unapologetic grin. “Heather, this isn’t about you.”

I blinked at her, surprised and taken aback.

“The wolf has a point, shaman. This is her and I now.”

“If Zheng and me are going to be anything to each other,” Raine went on, “anything except two points on your compass, we have to do it our own way.”

“You have a healing bullet wound!” I boggled at her. “No!”

Raine cleared her throat, finally brought down a notch.

Zheng chuckled in agreement. “I dare not hurt you, wolf. I will not hurt the shaman’s lover. It would be an unfair match, I would be shackled.”

“Oh, what’s that?” Raine cupped her ear, grinning. “Who said anything about hurting each other in a fight?”

“Combat presumes pain,” Zheng purred.

“Yes, exactly!” I huffed and folded my arms.

“Zhengy, Zhengy, Zhengy.” Raine sighed and shook her head with theatrical absurdity. “Can I call you that? We cool with that? Girl, we ain’t swinging maces and swords at each other, or even knives and bats. Even fists. It’s the twenty first century. We’ve got better ways to fight.”

a very great mischief – 13.6

Raine and Zheng fought with everything they had, right down to the last sliver of crimson, and I couldn't do a single thing to stop them.

They loved it. Body and soul, they both loved a good fight.

And to my complete lack of surprise, I loved watching them.

"You gotta learn to block air," Raine said, grinning like mad. "You gotta start blocking air, 'cos I'm gonna keep jumping in. Gonna keep jumping. In. On. You. Ha!"

"Rrrrrrr." Zheng bared her teeth in a low growl. "Little wolf, I am going to be the one jumping on you."

"Don't announce your intentions, blockhead," Raine shot back. "Then I can prep- oh! Yeah! Haha!" Raine got hit, hard. She rolled with the blows and came up laughing. "That's more like it!"

"I learnt to feint in combat before your first recognisable ancestors dribbled down your great-great-grandmother's thigh," Zheng growled as she pressed the attack.

"Not like this you didn't."

Raine went quiet and focused. She dodged all of Zheng's follow-up attacks, and used a technique I hadn't witnessed yet, a ridiculous spinning jump which misdirected the target away from the arc of her knife.

Zheng went down, snapped her teeth in frustration, and hopped back up – only to lose the round to a tiny toe-jab.

"Unnhnnn," she grunted, the closest she could get to graceful acknowledgement.

Raine raised both thumbs, and blew across them in the manner of an old west gunslinger blowing across the barrel of a six-shooter after a duel.

"Next time, little wolf," Zheng rumbled, "I will pin you in the corner and tear your guts out. And I will use a different fighter."

I sighed from below the action. “Is all the rudeness really necessary?”

Raine glanced down at me – spread across both their laps – with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. She was glowing with enjoyment, completely in her element, and my minor complaint felt like a reed before a hurricane, unworthy of being voiced. I was the luckiest girl in the entire world, to get to witness this up close and personal.

Then she reached down and goosed my side through my pink jumper.

“R-Raine!” I squeaked, trying to squirm away.

“Sorry, couldn’t help myself,” she laughed “And yes. Trash talk is an integral part of fighting game culture. Zheng and I, right now? We’re bonding. Ain’t we?”

Raine moved her elbow – her actual, physical elbow, in the real world of flesh and blood – about eight inches, to gently nudge Zheng in the side. Zheng allowed this liberty to pass without comment, which was true testimony to how far they’d come today.

“We are,” Zheng grunted, but sounded vaguely angry about it.

I sighed again and turned my eyes back to the television. With Raine’s victory, their temporary virtual battlefield was dissolving back into the character select screen, full of tiny cartoon portraits of various anime girls and boys and monsters and several combinations of all three.

“I suppose I wouldn’t know about that,” I said.

But then, that was the point; this was for them. Not me.

They’d been going at it now for half an hour, and unlike *akarakish*, this contest was not even remotely fair. Zheng had never so much as touched a video game before, let alone gone head-to-head against an experienced opponent. I’d breathed an actual audible sigh of relief when Raine had suggested video games, but Zheng had watched in cautious curiosity. Raine had turned on her laptop, hooked it up to the back of the television, and spooled out cables for a pair of controllers.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to use the console thingy?” I’d asked.

“Ah? Oh, this one isn’t on the console,” Raine answered.

“Can’t we play the alchemist game?” I’d blinked in confusion. This was a lot of material setup for a single video game. “The one with the ... substantial bosom?”

“That’s not even two-player. Plus, this is special. Zheng’ll like it.”

She’d placed one of the two black controllers in Zheng’s waiting hands – the ‘better one’, she’d called it. “Without the sticky triangle button, but I can compensate for that.”

“You are disadvantaging yourself?” Zheng had rumbled, her narrowed eyes flicking across the controller buttons with intense interest.

“S’only fair. Least at first.”

Raine booted the game up and output the visuals from her laptop to the television, an apparently elementary trick that had me wide-eyed with surprise. I hadn’t known that was possible. I suppose she’d done it before for other things, but I probably hadn’t been paying attention to the specifics. She explained the basic notion of a fighting game, the concepts, terminology, button presses and moves – and not just to Zheng, though I was much slower on the uptake than Zheng.

“Let’s not muck about in practice mode. You can learn by whaling on me for real,” Raine said.

Within about thirty seconds they’d left me far behind with “invincibility frames” and “quarter circle forward”, “she’s a grappler” and “press three face buttons at once when you have heat.” Zheng only needed to see something once, hear an explanation once, and she was away. She was surprisingly dexterous with the controller too, far better than I’d expected, and she stopped needing to glance down at her hands within about five seconds. Better than my record at least, and I’d been playing much easier games too.

Learning by doing only lasted a couple of rounds, until Zheng stopped responding to Raine’s suggestions, and went for her unprompted.

“Wanna go for real? Got a choice?” Raine nodded at the character select screen. “I main Shiki here, but you might like that one, or her. They’re both up close and personal. Like you.”

“Who is this big man?” Zheng rumbled, as her selection hovered over the ‘big man’ in question.

“Shoots animals out of his body.”

“Mmmmm. Good,” Zheng purred, and they began.

They fought the first round without settling in for the long haul. Raine stood by the bed and Zheng still sat in the armchair, but by the third round Raine had sat down on the edge of the bed, and by the forth she’d scooted over next to me, legs crossed, intent and focused on the screen even when I thoughtlessly leaned against her back.

When Zheng lost for the fifth time, she stood up all at once with a growl between her teeth, huge and threatening in the confined space of our bedroom.

“Hey, don’t be a sore loser,” Raine told her with a warning tone in her voice. “You’re learning, you landed that combo on me, you-”

“You have gained a morale advantage, little wolf.” Zheng jerked her chin at me.

“O-oh!” I pulled away from Raine, blushing and surprised. “I didn’t mean to favour one of you over the other. I was just- it was- I was-”

Raine just laughed and ruffled my hair. “You need some motivational Heather too, hey? Climb aboard then.” Raine glanced at me. “If you don’t mind, of course?”

“N-not at all!” I squeaked, self-conscious at the attention all over again.

But my self-consciousness melted away like spring frost in gentle sunlight. Zheng joined us on the bed, and I silently thanked the Saye family tastes in bed frame sizes, because while she did have to scoot back a bit further, she fit quite comfortably alongside Raine, both of them cross-legged and focused as they started another round. I leaned on both their backs and watched over their shoulders for a while, the recipient of unexpected casual skinship between rounds or after another victory – Raine ruffling my hair, Zheng reaching back to rub me like a cat – but I slowly found myself drawn to the obvious conclusion, the one place I was supposed to be. With the possibility of sex banished for now, with Raine and Zheng truly invested and focused on the game,

everything made so much more sense. I could do this, and it wasn't embarrassing.

Well, it was a little bit embarrassing.

Unspoken, almost unthinking, entirely natural, I shed my pink-scaled hoodie like a protective skin no longer needed, and crawled around the front and into both of their laps.

Head nestled on Zheng's thigh, legs draped over Raine's lap, I watched them fight.

My inviolate realm had finally welcomed two others.

I understood vanishingly little of what either of them was actually doing, what any of the button presses meant, but I could follow the action on the screen readily enough, and the action on screen was very pretty – little animated two-dimensional characters beating each other up, sprouting claws, throwing knives, punching fire, baring fangs – even if I had no idea how any of it was being achieved.

I felt a little like a background bystander during a climactic fight scene in an anime show.

Lots of flashy moves and very impressive anime ladies, and not an overinflated bust-line in sight, but it all seemed a bit over the top to me, nothing like a real fight. Everybody involved should have been dead a dozen times over; one did not hit a concrete pavement and get one's skull crushed by a pretty vampire lady and then bounce back to one's feet as if nothing had happened. I sighed inside at the implication: I knew what a real fight looked like. Little Heather, terminal mess, can't even dress herself without freaking out, knows intimately the reality of a life-or-death fight. What would my mother say?

Raine stuck with the one character she knew how to play at a high level of competence – a woman in a kimono, slashing a knife about, whose design I rather liked. She went easy as Zheng tried out different options, different play-styles, but she never gave Zheng the win for free. Raine always let her get a few hits in or try out all her moves, before making it clear who was still on top.

But somewhere between rounds ten and eleven, while I lay in both their laps and felt like a very lucky kitten with my skirt across Raine's legs and my head in the gap between Zheng's thigh and the

warm flexing hardness of her abdominal muscles, Zheng surprised Raine.

She'd tried a few different characters by then – the 'big man', a teenage Japanese girl vampire, a sort of tiny comedic cat, and a mischievous maid who couldn't possibly be *further* from Praem-like – but she settled on a madly grinning, evil-looking vampire lady, who was perhaps the entire reason Raine had selected the game in the first place. Her moves seemed very aggressive to me, big and wide and confident. Not unlike Zheng herself, perhaps.

Zheng used her to take a round off Raine, aggressive, unrelenting, and with a sliver of red left in her health bar.

"Woo!" But it was Raine who whooped at the end, and held up a hand.

"Victory, little wolf," Zheng growled. "At last."

Raine waggled her hand. "Don't leave me hanging!"

"Mmmmm?" Zheng purred, tilting her head.

"Come on, up top," Raine said.

Zheng blinked, once, slowly, like a lizard.

Raine narrowed her eyes and cracked a sharp grin. "Don't pretend you don't know what a high-five is. You've been hanging around wizards, not preserved in ice since the Mongols. You're not *Captain Caveman*."

Zheng maintained her quiet curiosity for a moment longer, pretending incomprehension. Had a win made her aggressive? Or was she toying with Raine as one cat might with another? Being so close to the minor confrontation but seeing it from below, down in her lap, made it almost comedic. My phantom limbs tried to poke her in the cheeks and forehead, more amused than concerned.

"No fighting," I said – and my words emerged almost Lizzie-like, a tiny sing-song that made me blush and wiggle and hide behind a hand.

"Yeah, what she said." Raine nodded down at me and squeezed one of my knees, stroking my leg through my white tights.

Zheng broke into an all-tooth grin at Raine, a dragon about to ask a difficult riddle of its lunch, and finally slapped her own massive

palm against Raine's hand.

"Ha!" She barked at Raine's answering grin. "Another!"

"Sure thing," Raine said. "You won't win again though. I got you dialled in now."

Zheng had been turning back to the screen, with one hand lowered toward my head to stroke my hair, but the confident bite in Raine's tone made her freeze. I felt the sudden flow of tension in her muscles, the tightening of instinct, the sharpening of senses. Heavy dark eyes shot back to Raine, and a shiver of animal fear went through me.

It wasn't a joke anymore.

"Little wolf," she purred.

"Z-Zheng-" I murmured, but she ignored me.

Raine went tense too, still grinning, a dangerous twinkle in her eyes. "Now you take offence? That's what it takes? A little bit of shit-talking?"

"Overconfidence does not suit you," Zheng purred. She placed her controller down on the bed and leaned towards Raine, slowly easing closer and closer. She pulled her lips back to show all her teeth, a maw filled with daggers that made my stomach turn over with both excitement and fear. I twisted and fidgeted in her lap, instinct telling me to clear out of the way, love demanding I stay where I was.

Raine, incredibly, stood her ground, and withstood Zheng's predatory attention with nought but a raised eyebrow.

"Dunno if you've checked recently," she said. "But I don't scare easy. Now, you wanna put some cash down, make this a money match, then I'll be shitting myself."

"N-no fighting, please ..." I squeaked.

"I don't think we're fighting," Raine murmured, eyes locked on Zheng's gaze. "Are we?"

Zheng leaned in even closer, until their faces were barely six inches apart. Her teeth parted and out rolled twelve inches of wet pink tongue, slicing into the air with lizard-like slowness, tasting Raine's breath in front of her face.

Raine's eyebrows almost achieved escape velocity. She let out a low whistle. "Okay, now I see why Heather wants to sleep with you. Dang."

"R-Raine!" I squealed in mortified embarrassment. She laughed, but Zheng didn't so much as flicker.

Slowly, inch by inch, Zheng reeled her tongue back into her mouth, and clicked her teeth together. She let out a sound halfway between a tiger's purr and the distant murmur of a lost jungle leviathan. Raine stared back with manic joy. I could barely draw breath, I was so overexcited, panged with a tiny spike of guilt over how much I was enjoying the moment of strange animal frisson between them. Zheng's behaviour was reminiscent of how she'd first approached me.

Was this her way of flirting? Was she trying to decide if she *liked* Raine? Or was it challenge, confrontation, jostling for dominance?

Abyssal instinct knew it was both.

Finally, Raine's eyes flickered down to me for a split-second. "Heather looks like she's about to blow a gasket, watching us do this."

"Can you blame me?!" I burst out, then slammed my mouth shut and hid behind both hands, blushing and vibrating and making a sound like a distressed seal.

Zheng's laugh was a low rumble chuckle. She pulled back from Raine and let out a long sigh, like a mountain trying to decide if it was going to become a volcano. I peeked out from between my hands just in time to see her raking her fingers back through the mess of her dark hair, regarding Raine from behind inscrutable eyes.

"A start, little wolf."

Raine narrowed one eye in a sceptical look. "But only a start."

"Then let us continue." Zheng plucked the controller off the bed, and stroked my overheated head with her other hand. I whined and hid and felt exceptionally silly.

"Yeah, continue kicking your arse more like," Raine laughed, and turned back to the character select screen.

Zheng took another two rounds off her before Raine could adapt. But then Raine came back with misdirection, finally pulled out her full range of experience, and that's when the trash talking started.

However much I might complain, it amused me to my core. The way Raine and Zheng sniped back and forth, skirting the fuzzy line between playful and insulting, the way Raine jeered and whooped, the way she stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth, the way Zheng focused, eyes widening with predatory intensity, baring her teeth at critical moments – all of it was delightful.

Raine never treated me like that, never insulted me like that, even as a joke. I wasn't a rival. I was not a challenger. I couldn't be that to her. This was something she couldn't get from me.

Cuddled up in both their laps at once, half-drowsing in Zheng's body heat and both their scents, I turned that idea over in my mind, staring up at Raine as she bit out another smiling jibe.

Was I jealous?

No, not in the slightest. I was enjoying this side of her.

Zheng was similar. To her I was The Shaman, a person of transcendent respect. She would never call me a 'dung-eater' like she did when Raine won a round without taking a single piece of damage. Her aggression shone through, but directed, almost friendly and warm.

And this was so much better than real fighting, than letting them hurt each other for real. This risked nothing except one's ego. With delight came relief, that we'd found a way.

I drifted on the edge of drowsiness, and asked myself the questions that mattered.

Was this what I needed?

Is this my anchor?

And as soon as that thought took conscious form in my mind, something changed about the video game which Raine and Zheng were playing.

The character Raine was controlling did a move I hadn't seen before, a sort of stab-stop pullback with her knife, and when she resumed her neutral pose it was subtly different. She was standing

differently, holding her knife differently, with an oddly familiar smirk animated in miniature.

Zheng's character, the crazed violent vampire, suffered a similar 'glitch'. She landed a few blows which Raine blocked, and then when the little animated figure jumped back, she rolled her neck and flexed muscles in a way she had not done before. A very familiar way, as a huge toothy grin ripped across the tiny cartoon face.

The two figures jumped at each other again, and their movements looked nothing like previously. Raine's character stabbed and span, sticking and moving, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Zheng's character grabbed and ripped, bearing mighty teeth, leaping like a hungry lion. Both of them on screen grinned like maniacs. They were loving this.

Very alert and very awake now, I stared at the screen in disbelief. Neither Raine nor Zheng appeared to notice anything was wrong.

And then I spied, in the background of the stage – a children's playground at night, beneath a crescent moon – that a figure had appeared. Part of the scenery. Pixelated yellow robes and a mask for a face, observing the fight.

I do hope Sevens saw my scowl from the far side of the television screen.

'And what, pray tell, is this little play supposed to teach me?' I thought at her in frustration, angry at her for intruding on our private bonding session. *'That Raine and Zheng look hot when they fight?'*

She gave me an answer, a practical one.

For the first time in all the rounds they'd fought, Raine and Zheng drew. In a moment which I understand is quite rare in fighting games, their 'hitboxes' – I word I later learnt from Raine – overlapped in such a fashion that Raine's knife-strike took out Zheng in the exact same moment that Zheng put her fist through Raine's chest.

They both fell down, thrown across the cartoon stage in slow-motion double-defeat.

"Awww, come on!" Raine called out.

"Disappointing," Zheng rumbled.

Maybe they couldn't see what happened next. Perhaps it was for my eyes only. Perhaps Seven-Shades-of-Software-Issues intended it that way.

The two little figures on the screen – one battered and bloody knife-woman and one limping superhuman vampire – got up and staggered toward each other in a shared animation, then slumped together, each standing only with the other's support. Arms linked, heads together, grinning wild.

"Yare sasenakereba naranai," said the yellow-robed figure in the background. *"Aitsura no seishitsu desu."*

Subtitles scrolled at the base of the screen, in blocky yellow.

'You have to let them. It's what they are.'

I sighed through my nose.

Let them what? Fight, for real?

"Heather?" Raine said my name with obvious concern, and I looked up from the screen, caught red-handed. "You've gone tense. You okay?"

"Something is wrong, shaman?" Zheng purred as well. Her hand found my head, cradling my skull like I was a small nervous animal.

"Nothing I could possibly explain," I said with another sigh, and forced myself to relax. "It's just really good to see you two having fun together. Fun. Yes."

When I looked back at the screen, the yellow figure was walking away, vanishing into the pixelated background.

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"Lemme lay this one out flat then, for my own benefit," said Nicole Webb. She wrapped her hands around the fresh mug of tea which Praem had placed on the kitchen table in front of her. "You want me to locate an extraordinarily dangerous man, who we know from experience can wear other people's faces, who lives outside the law, can throw fireballs or turn people into frogs or whatever, possibly commands a cult of dedicated acolytes, and has committed actual honest to God kidnapping, torture, and probably human experimentation?"

"W-well ... " I stammered, but Nicole held up a hand. She wasn't

done yet.

Evelyn tried to sit up straight, frowning at old pain in her twisted spine. One hand left the table to rub at the socket of her prosthetic leg, through her comfortable skirt. "That would be the long and short of it, yes," she said.

"And you can't find him with magic," Nicole went on. "Because he's too well hidden. With magic."

"Correct. We assume."

"And you think I'm the woman for this job?" Nicole's faux-serious front broke into a laugh as she leaned back in her chair. "Look, all of you, I appreciate the vote of confidence, but what the fuck?"

Evelyn sighed.

Over by the counter, standing in defiance of her very real need to sit down as much as possible to help her healing leg, Raine shot a finger-gun at Nicole.

"Nicky, come on," she said. "You're the expert."

Nicole laughed at her too. "You're more expert at killing wizards than I am, Haynes. No offense, but fuck off."

"You *are* the expert," Evelyn said, her voice thin with fraying patience. "Mages still have to eat and sleep, and occasionally take a shit. Somebody buys food for him. He's an old man, he must see a doctor on occasion. He lives somewhere, I'd guess no further out than Manchester. We're not asking you to kill him, we're asking you to find him. And none of us are experts at finding people who don't want to be found."

Nicole shrugged with feigned helplessness "Alright, what if he's gone off to one of your weird dimensions outside reality?" She gestured at me. "Ever think of that?"

"Constantly," I muttered.

"Yeah," Lozzie hissed, hovering at my shoulders. "Hope he has."

"If he's hiding Outside," Evelyn deadpanned, "then the problem solves itself. No human being lasts long out there. But Edward Lilburne is far too clever for that."

"You've got the skills, Nicky," Raine said. "And we've got the need.

Need a manhunt here. Tracking a fugitive. Come on.”

Nicole blew out a long breath, making a *pbbbbbt* sound as she did, and cast her eyes around the kitchen. “What about the great hunter, hey? Isn’t she supposed to be good at this?”

Evelyn stiffened. “If you are referring to Twil, she is both busy with school, and I don’t want her-”

“Nah, not miss teenage werewolf.” Nicole waved a hand. “The big lady with all the muscles. The-” She tutted. “*Demon.*”

“Zheng’s asleep,” I informed her – though I left out the detail of exactly who’s bed she was sleeping in. “She’s been hunting every night for the last week, trying to pick up any trace of him, and she’s having no luck either. Please, Nicky.” I pleaded. “Even if you’re not comfortable taking the job for us, could you ... suggest anything? Anything at all? Please.”

Nicole looked at me, and all her dismissive humour melted away.

After all, I was the one who’d pulled her into this world.

It was Saturday morning, almost a full week since Raine and Zheng and I had spent the afternoon playing video games together. We – myself, Evelyn, Raine, Praem, and Lozzie – were all gathered in the kitchen, to ask PI Nicole Webb to achieve the impossible.

The last four days had been quiet, uneventful, and saturated with deep unspoken emotional confusion which left me barely able to concentrate on anything more complicated than losing myself in a book, let alone the strategic necessity of enlisting Nicole Webb’s detective skills to find Edward Lilburne. Evelyn had informed me back on Tuesday – or was it Wednesday? – that Nicole was now an exceptionally busy woman, but she would make time for us first thing Saturday morning. I’d likely forgotten all about the agreed meeting five minutes later.

Bothering Nicole shouldn’t have been necessary; I should have been able to solve this days ago. I should have been able to do this with brainmath.

I should have forged my anchor by now.

Nicole didn’t seem to mind popping round to the house though, and in a way it was good to see her.

“You seem different, detective,” Raine had said when we’d greeted her at the front door, as Praem had closed and locked it again behind her. Nicole had wiped her boots on the doormat and glanced around the front room, nodding to each of us in polite, professional greeting even as Raine needled her. “Get a haircut? Buy a new car?” Raine cracked a grin. “Get laid at last?”

“Raine,” I tutted under my breath. Lozzie, draped over my shoulders like a plush toy, stifled a snort behind one hand.

“Ha ha,” Nicole had deadpanned back. “Nice crutch, Haynes. What’d you do, twist your ankle doing a spin-kick?”

Raine grinned back, brimming with smug satisfaction. “Took a bullet.”

Nicole hesitated on a laugh, then looked around at the rest of us. Evelyn sighed and nodded. I nodded too, feeling oddly sheepish, as I was the one Raine had taken the bullet for. Lozzie directed a tiny scowl at Nicole.

“Uh ... alright then,” Nicole said, suitably serious now but a bit floored. “From a gun?” She held up a hand. “Okay, no, stupid question. From a gun that I need to worry about?”

“Nah,” Raine said. “Got it upstairs, actually, s’mine now. And the shooter’s come over to our side.”

“Conditionally,” Evelyn grunted. “Miss Webb, welcome, and thank you for coming. Please do ignore Raine being an insufferable bore, and-”

“Got a scar too,” Raine spoke over Evelyn. “In an interesting place. Wanna see my proof, officer? Wanna interrogate me?”

“You and me alone in an interrogation room won’t go well for either of us, Haynes,” Nicole shot back – with a tight, nasty grin.

Evelyn boggled at them. I blinked in surprise too.

“Down,” Praem intoned.

That made Nicole jump. The doll-demon had stepped back from the door after locking it, to lurk at the edge of Nicole’s vision.

She held out one hand. “Coat.”

Nicole stared at her, taking in the hints of Night Praem showing

through in her choice of clothing. Her new maid uniform was yet to arrive, after being painstakingly selected one night as she had poured over options via Evelyn's laptop, so in the meantime Praem had taken to combining some of her new clothes – long skirt and tight sweater – with deep dark eyeshadow and a pair of black lace gloves she'd picked up during our shopping trip.

“... you going goth there?” Nicole asked.

“Coat,” Praem repeated.

“Coat,” Nicole echoed, empty and blinking. “Oh, right, yeah, cool. Coat.” She patted her coat down for mobile phone and a notebook, extracted them, then shucked off the coat and handed it to Praem. “Thank you.”

Evelyn finally recovered with a huff. “Stop *flirting*, you pair of wild dogs,” she said. “Raine, I expect it from you, but miss Webb, don't join in with her, for God's sake.”

“Yes, Raine,” I tutted softly. “Be nice.”

“Hey, I am being extra nice,” said Raine.

Nicole shot us all a sheepish grin, and reserved an apologetic nod for me. “Sorry, I don't mean to spar with your girlfriend, Heather. I'm just feeling a lot less constrained these days. You know?”

Raine wasn't wrong though. Nicole did seem different.

Between the casual grey jumper and the unremarkable jeans, the big boots on her feet and the many and varied bulges in the pockets of her long coat, the simple ponytail and the relaxed awareness on her face, there was very little left of Detective Sargent Webb. She looked more like an investigative reporter, unassuming, camouflaged by normality, and easy to talk to.

“And don't call me *officer*,” she added to Raine. “It's just Nicky now. Nicole to you.”

Raine laughed. “Whatever you say, copper.”

Nicole frowned. Evelyn looked like she wanted to twat Raine over the head with her walking stick.

“Ayy-see-ayy-bee?” Lozzie asked slowly, from right next to my head, still draped over my shoulders from behind like an affectionate boa constrictor. I caught the edge of her narrowed eyes,

her suspicious pout, her serious little frown.

“Lozzie,” I said gently. “Maybe it’s not the time for-”

“It’s always the time!” Lozzie chirped, squishing her cheek against mine.

“You know what?” Nicole said. “Sure, why not? ACAB. Shine on, you wonderful weird little person you.”

She held out a fist toward Lozzie and I, and for a moment I assumed this was some kind of passive-aggressive gesture, that I’d failed to forestall a confrontation. But then Lozzie reached out, slowly and distrustfully, like a wary cat, and bumped her own fist against Nicole’s.

Lozzie hadn’t stopped watching her like a small animal with an unfamiliar intruder, but she hadn’t raised any further objection to Nicole being allowed in the house. Praem had hung up Nicole’s coat, Nicole had taken her shoes off, and we’d decamped to the kitchen for tea and a briefing, which hadn’t gone well when Evelyn had gotten straight into what we needed, what we were asking for, and ended with Nicole staring at me, like a shipwrecked sailor regarding the remains of her ruined boat.

“You don’t have to be here,” I said to that face. “I’m sorry.”

Nicole blew out another long breath. “Look, this is for your long-lost sister, yeah? Not revenge. Not territorial pissing. Not self-defense. It’s for your twin. Tell me it is.”

“It is. We need the book he stole.”

Nicole nodded slowly, picked her pencil up off the table, and tapped her notebook with the point – currently open to a page she’d stopped scribbling on when Evelyn had gotten into the uncomfortable details. She wrote the word ‘leverage’, underlined it twice, then flipped the notebook shut and looked up at us again.

“Alright you lot, if I’m going to do this – and I don’t know that I will,” she held up a hand, “I’m gonna need every single scrap of information you have on Edward Lilburne and his possible associates. Everything, no matter how unimportant.” She glanced at Lozzie. “You’re his niece, right? You gotta spill some family beans. I’m sorry, but you gotta.”

Lozzie shrunk down against my shoulders, cheeks puffed out,

making a soft whining noise in her throat.

"We have Amy Stack looking for him already," Evelyn spoke up. "Inconclusively, so far."

"Oh hey, fuck, what?" Nicole boggled at her. "Woah, no. I don't know if I wanna deal with her again. I've seen some shit on the police force, but she was a real bona-fide psychopath. You could tell at a glance."

"No kidding," Raine murmured.

Did I detect a wistful hint in Raine's voice? I glanced at her, but she was focused on Nicole.

"Also, wait," Nicole carried on. "She's on your side now?"

"We saved her little boy," Evelyn said, curt and simple.

"She has a child?! That woman, that stone-cold killer, has a child?"

"Monsters have families too," Raine said.

"It's not important right now," Evelyn grumbled. "The important thing is that I can put you in contact with her, if you wish."

"Errrr, let me think about that one," Nicole said, in a tone which meant 'let me think of a reasonable excuse to turn it down.' "Is that all you've got on him then, one lone psycho out there trying to find him? A physical description, and ... well, his lawyer? That's it?"

Evelyn cleared her throat. Raine shrugged.

"That is it," Praem intoned from by the doorway.

Nicole sighed, and started to shake her head.

"What's it like being a private eye?" I blurted out. She looked up at me, surprised. "I mean, now that you've been doing it for a little while. A ... a month? Now that you're ... like you said, freer than you used to be."

I cleared my throat and felt intensely awkward. Nicole was an experienced interrogator, she knew how to read and manipulate people, and she must have known exactly what I was trying to do. But she smiled and played along anyway. Perhaps she really did want to help, and all she needed was the right excuse.

"Mostly what I expected," she said, leaning back in her chair.

She put her pencil down and finally took up her cup of tea. She took a long sip as she gathered her thoughts.

“All mysterious beautiful women wandering into your office on a dark and stormy evening?” Raine asked.

Nicole smirked back. “I wish. Nah. It’s slow stuff most of the time, which can be a bit of a drag, but I don’t have a boss to answer to anymore, and I don’t have to worry about departmental politics. There’s a lotta slow time, lots of talking people, which I’m good at, I guess. Lots of following cheating spouses, lots of industrial espionage.” She took another long sip of tea. “Loooots of industrial espionage.”

“What does that entail then?” Raine asked. I silently thanked her for helping this along.

“Well, for example,” Nicole said. “I spent two days this week waiting for a very specific dumpster to fill with some very specific unshredded documents. Then I bribed a dustman, and handed those documents to some people who are going to make a court case based on stuff in said documents, who then paid me money.” She winked at Raine. “Can’t get any more specific than that, or I’d have to kill you. I can do that now. Practically a secret agent, you know.”

Raine laughed. “You can try.”

Nicole waved her down. “I did end up joining that cooperate collective over in Manchester, bunch of other PIs from all over this part of the north. Some of them get into much more grey area shit. Dressing up as plumbers or electricians and blagging their way into places, or straight up sneaking into office blocks. I haven’t got the bottle for that. Yet.”

“Do crime,” Lozzie whispered.

“Grey areas!” Nicole protested, but with a grin.

“Be gay,” Lozzie whispered, even quieter.

“Sounds very ... fulfilling,” Evelyn tried, a little half-hearted.

Nicole shrugged. “It’s not like I’m achieving any great good in the world, but then again I didn’t do that on the police force either. At least this way I might help somebody for real someday. And I’ve even got an office now, over in Manchester. Sort of. Only stood in it once. Not even a desk in there. Could’a pitched up there for the day

and made you come to me.” She broke into a grin at Evelyn.

“I do hope the building in question has proper disabled access,” Evelyn deadpanned at her.

Nicole froze. “Uh ... I-I think there’s a lift.”

Evelyn puffed out a single laugh. “Relax, I’m winding you up.”

“Oh. Oh, right, uh. Ahem. Well. You are paying my advertised rates for this job, right?” Nicole recovered with a cheeky grin. “Nah, I’m joking, for you lot, this is a freebie.”

“Oh,” I spoke up. “We wouldn’t dream of expecting you to-”

“No, seriously.” Nicole waved me down. “For you-”

“I’ll pay your normal rates,” Evelyn said.

Nicole blinked at her. “ ... I mean ... no offense, but you are a just university student in the end ... oh.” Nicole brightened up. “Right. You’re rich, miss Saye, aren’t you?”

“For a given value of rich. And I’m not going to extract free labour from anybody. If you do the job, I’ll pay.”

Nicole cleared her throat. “Half normal rates.”

“Seventy five,” Evelyn said.

“Okay, done. Oh, but that reminds me. Meant to mention a little something to you next time I got the chance. Before I quit the force, somebody happened to misplace the relevant files about your father’s possible property tax issues. Some of those documents were pretty old. Thirty, forty years, and nobody made copies. Pity. Dunno what happened to them.”

“Heeeeeeeeeey, go Nicky,” Raine said with a grin.

“Nothing to do with me,” Nicole said. Picture of innocence, she withstood Evelyn’s level gaze with utter obliviousness.

“I don’t approve of police corruption,” Evelyn said eventually.

“Well, it’s a damn good thing I’m not a police officer anymore, then, isn’t it?” Nicole cracked a huge grin, and was answered with a chirp of agreement from Lozzie. “Let’s not get too far into the weeds right now, yeah? So, you lot have tried to locate mister Lilburne with magic already, right?”

Involuntary or not, Evelyn glanced at me.

“Yes,” she said. “My ways haven’t worked. Heather’s ...”

I hadn’t tried brainmath again, not yet.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had made it clear that the next time I attempted to sip from the dark waters of the abyss, she could not be the one to pull me back to my feet if I slipped any deeper than intended. My anchor had to be complete, but I hadn’t the faintest clue how to define a polyamorous relationship as an anchor of hyperdimensional mathematics.

I might have tried, but I wasn’t even sure if I had an anchor.

Since Raine and Zheng had bonded over fighting games, I’d only grown more confused. I hadn’t known what to expect in the hours and days that had followed, but surprisingly little had changed. There had been no great transformation of my romantic or sexual life. No revelation of how polyamory was meant to work. The biggest difference was nothing to even do with Zheng; I’d grown ever so slightly more comfortable in my new clothes. Even now, sitting at the kitchen table, I was wearing my pink ribbed sweater with my pajama bottoms.

Zheng and I had most certainly not entered any kind of sexual relationship. We hadn’t even kissed. She’d taken to affectionately touching my head whenever nearby, and I’d cuddled in her lap several times, which was one of the most enjoyable experiences I had discovered in life, and I’d even fallen asleep like that one night, after which she had deposited me back in bed with Raine.

It was cuddly. And I liked that. But it confused me.

There was an odd distance between her and Raine, an undercurrent of combative looks and friendly jibes that convinced me Seven-Shades was right. They did need to fight. Zheng had moved partway into our shared life, even joined us in our bedroom the last two nights – when she wasn’t hunting – sleeping in the chair like a huge silent sentinel, making me chew my lip in anxiety as I struggled to find the words to invite her into bed. Raine and her had opened up to each other, but the next step was impossible without their own methods.

And that meant no true polyamory. No anchor. No brainmath to find Edward Lilburne.

Or did it?

Not all love is eros, Zheng had told me, twice now.

Did I love Zheng? And if so, how?

"The lawyer is the way in," Nicole was saying, tapping her notebook as I resurfaced from confusing thoughts once more.

"The fat man with the rat face?" Raine asked.

Nicole laughed out loud. "Yeah. Harold Yuleson. Left an impression, didn't he? I knew him a little from my time on the force, if you recall?"

"Indeed," Evelyn said, tight and frowning.

"Not the other guy who was with him," Nicole went on. "Julian, was that his name? I'm not dealing with one of you wizards. No way. But lawyers, eh. I can wrangle lawyers. I might lack certain kinds of authority now, but that gives me other edges."

"Any approach to his lawyer will alert Lilburne to our intentions," Evelyn said. "Anything other than agreeing to terms."

Nicole spread her hands. "I'm not going to make an approach. I'm going to break into his office."

"Yeeeeeeeah girl," Raine said. "We'll make a cat burglar out of you yet."

"He's gotta have an address in his files somewhere," Nicole went on, leaning forward, getting more animated as she went. "Even if it's just for a contact. A single phone number can be the first loose stitch to unravel the whole thing. Anything."

"You done breaking and entering before?" Raine asked her.

"No, but I know how," Nicole admitted. "As long as he doesn't have magical locks or something."

Evelyn was frowning, obviously not happy with this plan, but her hands were tied. We had asked for expert opinion, and we'd gotten it.

"Look," Nicole said, obviously catching Evelyn's silent meaning. "We'll make a deal. If I see a floating ghost or hear a zombie's moan or come across a spooky old book, I'll turn around and walk away

and call you. How's that?"

Evelyn opened her mouth to reply.

"There's somebody else I'd like you to look for as well," I interrupted.

"Heather," Evelyn said in low warning. "We said we don't have the spare time or energy."

"I think we need to try. It's not like I'm useful for much else lately," I told Evelyn, then turned back to Nicole. "It's something we should inform you about too, since you were involved."

"Oh dear," Nicole said, all her enthusiasm draining away. "I think I know where this is going."

"Oh dear," Praem echoed, sing-song style. Lozzie made a sad whine and hid behind my shoulders.

"Not all of the Eye cultists are dead," Raine said, when I couldn't get the words out. Nicole blew out a long breath, and I saw her turn a touch pale in the face.

I nodded. "We saw one of them. A man. He recognised me somehow. And we got a picture of the number plate from his car. I'd like you to find him."

"What for?" Nicole asked, slowly.

"So I can help him," I said. "Or deal with him."

Or vivisect him, whispered the cold abyssal logic that forever lived inside me, and would do anything to rescue Maisie.

a very great mischief – 13.7

“Or deal with him,” Nicole echoed me.

It was not a question.

She did not need to add a single word. Her stare contained a precisely calibrated dose of scepticism, a micro-expression from a person who knew how to speak truth to power, without even speaking.

“... if I have to,” I managed, but I had to look away, down at the kitchen table, down at my hands splayed flat just so I wouldn’t drive my fingernails into my own palms.

I did not want to be *power*. Not for this.

Nicole let out a huge sigh and drew a hand over her face. “Oh, fuck me. For fuck’s sake, you lot.”

“Hey, Nicky, we were gonna tell you. Today, after this,” Raine said. “We weren’t gonna keep this a secret. If there’s any more survivors from the cult, it’s kinda important you know, you were involved and all. There might just be this guy, or there might be a few, we don’t-”

“I wish you hadn’t bloody well told me!” Nicole snapped. Behind me, Lizzie buried her face in the back of my shoulder and made a soft whine. “Look, if I find Edward Lilburne, it’s up to you what you do with him. You’re all wizards or whatever, he’s killed kids, I don’t give a fuck if you use his skin to make a book or something. I don’t wanna know. But those people, in that ...” Nicole had to pause, wet her lips, take a breath. “In that house, not all of them were ... I mean, fuck! It was a *cult*, plenty of them were exploited, conned into it, right? Fucking, Kimberly, where is she?” Nicole gestured around. “She was a member, she was bullied into it, she was a victim, right? Right?”

“Technically correct,” Evelyn deadpanned.

“That is true,” I murmured.

“So you’ve got some victims of that ... that *insane shit* we saw, who

avoided it,” a tremor almost took Nicole’s voice, but she sucked down a deep breath. “And you might need to ‘deal with them?’”

I couldn’t look her in the eye. Not because I’d suggested inflicting violence upon those who may not deserve it, but because I was keeping silent about the truth. Lozzie was shaking and shivering against my back, against the back of the chair. I needed to turn around and hug her, but right now I did not deserve that comfort.

“Not-” I stopped. Lies. Tried again, voice shaking. “Not necessarily. I might ... might be able to help. Nobody deserves the Eye.”

“But if you can’t help,” Nicole went on. “Then you deal with them?”

“I ... I don’t ... ”

I didn’t know. I couldn’t say. I genuinely had no idea what I would do what with a cult survivor, a human being with the Eye still lodged inside their head. Would I try to help, would I extend what aid I could, or would I pull them apart in the quest for an advantage? Heal and save, or vivisect for information?

“Sometimes you gotta do these things,” Raine said, quiet and serious. “To keep people safe.”

“Fuck you, Haynes,” Nicole spat. “Ahhh fuck. We can’t have another incident like at that house, not here, not in Sharrowford, not my hometown. Imagine if a random member of the public had gotten in there before we did. Or if somebody had called an ambulance. Imagine it! Yeah, sure, they might not remember it properly afterward or whatever, but I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t have come out of there in one piece.” She shook her head. “Not again. I am not doing that again. Can’t let it happen again.”

“Can’t,” Praem echoed. Nicole blinked at her.

“You feel responsible for this,” Evelyn said. “But you’re not.”

“I’m responsible because I know about it. What am I supposed to do, forget this all exists? That any of it happened?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Raine said, nodding slowly. “You get that too, huh? Sometimes you just gotta jump in. Can’t let it go. Like an itch. Same as me.”

Nicole gave Raine such a frown.

“I have said it before,” Evelyn deadpanned slowly, into the

awkward silence that followed. “And I will say it again, this time for your benefit too, miss Webb. It is highly unlikely that anything more than tiny handful of Eye-affected cultists – loyalists, if you will – left that house before the ritual. They likely have no resources, no books. The larger faction retained those, and then I recovered them. Do you remember?”

Nicole stared back at Evelyn, her mind taking a moment to catch up. “ ... I don’t want to remember, but yeah. So?”

“They have no books to learn from. And I very much doubt they count amongst their number any mages, not on the scale of Alexander or Edward, or even Sarika. Remember the ones who were working with Edward? The ones who contacted Sarika? The ones with ... ” Evelyn sighed. “Mister Joking?”

“Yeah?”

“If they counted any serious power amongst themselves,” Evelyn explained, “they would not have thrown themselves on Edward’s mercy. I believe that anyone with serious power stayed with Sarika’s group for the final ritual, in hubris and overconfidence. Those who fled were the ones with nothing. Cowards and the powerless. And they made the right choice.”

“What if that was a different group?” Nicole asked. “You ever think of that?”

“Extensively,” Evelyn grunted. “Yes, I have run over every possible combination of factors a dozen times. If there’s a second remnant of the Eye cult out there, then they’re nothing. The man we saw, I suspect he was as surprised as we were. The fact they haven’t contacted Sarika suggests they’re lying as low as possible.”

“Sarika, yeah, right.” Nicole rolled her eyes. “Bastion of honesty and truth, that one. When did you get so trusting?”

“She can’t lie to me,” I said, and I was not proud of it.

Nicole glanced at me. From the look on my face, she must have known what I meant, and she didn’t argue. She leaned back in the silence that followed, gathering her thoughts as I wallowed in self-disgust.

“You’ve changed your tune, miss Saye,” Nicole said eventually. “I didn’t exactly have a lot of time to get to know you, but I got the

impression you think of Sharrowford as your territory. You don't think these people are worth pursuing?"

"Make up your mind," Raine said with a smirk. "You want us to kill them or not?"

"Raine," I whined, shivering with my arms around myself. Lozzie had gone very still against my shoulder.

"I don't know! Alright?" Nicole said.

"My priorities have changed," said Evelyn, hard and uncompromising. "But do not think I have gone soft. If an ex-cultist turns up on our doorstep with anything but flowers and cake, then I will have them killed, no questions, no-"

To my utter desolation, Lozzie peeled herself off my shoulder and fled the kitchen, poncho flapping out behind her. I almost lurched out of my seat to follow her, but guilt kept me pinned. I'd started this, I had a responsibility to stay here. A moment later, we heard the soft patter of her feet ascending the stairs.

"Praem," Evelyn said, with a sideways nod of her head. "Make sure she's okay. Please."

Praem marched out of the kitchen. I knew she wouldn't be coming back anytime soon.

Evelyn sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Oops?" Nicole offered.

"Oops. Quite," Evelyn grunted. "My point stands. I will not put my friends and f- ... family at risk over nothing, over a group of people who are unlikely to be a threat any greater than ambient background noise. I will not march somebody I love into another trap. It is as simple as that." She rounded on me, scowling like a breaking thunderstorm, jabbing a finger at me. "That goes for you most of all. I know exactly what you're doing and exactly why you want to make contact with an Eye cultist."

I stared at her and flushed deep, embarrassed red, mortified and horrified and seen, in the worst possible way, still reeling and mortified at Lozzie's departure.

"I- n-no, Evee-"

"And I don't blame you," she snapped. "But no. You are not to

expose yourself to even more unnecessary danger than you do all the bloody time. We *have* a way of getting to Wonderland and standing safely before the Eye, if only we can get that book. We are not mucking about with a bunch of cultists so you can peel open their skulls and root around inside their brains.”

I cringed, inside and out, and prayed for the floor to swallow me up. My face burned. My friends knew what I was. Evelyn could predict the lengths I might go to. They knew me.

“Oh shit,” Nicole breathed. “I get it now. You’re not asking me to help with self-defence. You’re asking for help obtaining a test subject.”

“It’s for Maisie,” I squeezed out around the lump in my throat. “It is. It is.”

“Hey,” Raine spoke up, sharp and warning. She grabbed her crutch from where it leaned on the counter and limped over toward me. “Nicky, stop. Hey, Eevee, back off-”

“I will not let you do that to yourself, Heather,” Evelyn went on. “God knows you’ve stopped me doing worse to myself.”

“*Eevee*,” Raine said.

Flushed with the anger of care, breathing a little too hard, Evelyn stopped. “You know I’m right,” she muttered.

“Eevee, drop-” Raine said.

“She’s right,” I squeaked.

Awkward silence descended on the kitchen. Raine rubbed my shoulders through my jumper, but I wanted to curl up and vanish. Nicole blew out a long sigh and cleared her throat and offered an apology, but I barely heard it. Evelyn offered none, and I did not expect her to.

“Hooooooo,” Raine said eventually. “Eevee, Eevee, Eevee. Where’d that come from?”

“From too many years of getting it wrong,” Evelyn grunted. “I am living for more than myself now. That’s all.”

“Well, hey,” Raine said, quietly affectionate. “That’s a good thing.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Evelyn went on. “These people still represent

a threat, however small. If I could press a button to kill them all, I would, but I'm not sending Praem out there to walk into a trap, I'm not going to intentionally put us in another situation where we get split up and picked off. A few stragglers with no knowledge and no books and no magic are not worth the risk."

"I hope you're right," Nicole said. "I really do hope you're right."

From the depths of my pit, I spoke up.

"I still don't know how to deal with the Eye," I said.

"You will, Heather," Raine said, squeezing my shoulder. "You can do it, I believe in you. We all do."

"Fight?" I went on, struggled to sit up straight, forcing myself to raise my eyes, no matter how guilty I felt. "Or communicate? Or bargain with, or cajole, or educate, or ... anything? Even looking at the edge of it with hyperdimensional mathematics was almost too much, when I pulled Sarika free, and she was on the very edge. If I stick my mind in there, unprepared, to look for Maisie, I won't come back out. Not as I am now." I turned to Evelyn, made myself meet her storm-clouded eyes. "I can't just get to Wonderland and look up at it – even protected, yes, I know – and pull Maisie out of the sky. I need information, intelligence. I need to know it, more than I do right now. I need to understand how to talk to it. The clay thing in the workshop," I nodded at the closed door to Evelyn's magical workshop. "It's not enough. It's not a direct connection, it may not even have been sent by the Eye. It's taught me breadth, but not depth. Not specifics. Sarika, I already freed her, and from her all I had was the Eye's fingerprints." I swallowed hard. What I was suggesting, I had no idea if I was even capable of following through. "I need one of them, Eevee. I need to look inside one of their heads, yes, you're right. But I have to do it."

Evelyn held my gaze. Her jaw tightened. She hissed a wordless sound of frustration through her teeth.

"What if the Eye is feeding them brainmath? Or other things? Transforming them?" I asked, throwing out anything I could to convince myself, but none of it was enough. I screwed up my eyes. "What if I promise to go into this to help them?"

"I don't care about that," Evelyn hissed.

"I do," Nicole said.

Evelyn shook her head slowly, but it was not a gesture of refusal. “I know trying to stop you will just backfire.”

“Can’t stop our Heather,” Raine said.

“Very well. But promise you won’t do anything alone. Anything,” Evelyn said.

“I promise.” I nodded. And I intended to keep it.

“And promise no vivisection,” she went on. “To yourself.”

“Yeah,” Nicole grunted.

“I promise,” I repeated.

But I wasn’t so sure about that one.

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“I really do need to talk to her, if possible.”

Nicole eyed the top of the stairs, where they vanished into the upstairs hallway.

“You mean Lozzie?” I asked.

Nicole nodded. “Anything she has on her uncle could turn out to be useful.” She sighed and took a sip from her second mug of tea, then shot me a sidelong smile, which could not quite conceal the wary glint behind her eyes. “You’d be surprised how often some tiny half-remembered detail ends up being the loose thread. If she knows anything about him, I need it. An ex-wife, a house he used to live in, any children of his own, anywhere he used to work. Anything at all.”

I nodded slowly. “I see. I see, um, well ... yes.”

Nicole smiled in the awkward manner of somebody trying to ignore a previously uncomfortable exchange, and took another sip of tea to cover the fact that neither of us had anything to say. I’d made that cup of tea, a second one for everybody, just to have some excuse to get up from the table and move my hands, as she and Evelyn had wrapped up another twenty minutes of complex strategy talk.

They’d eventually agreed on a day for the plan to break into Harold Yuleson’s office, this coming Monday, along with procedures for contact, checking in, what to do if it all went terribly wrong, and

how Nicole should proceed with his copied files or raided snack drawer, or whatever exactly the process would entail. I'd barely been able to listen.

But when Evelyn had gotten up to use the toilet and Raine had decided that now was the perfect time to microwave some hot dogs for lunch, Nicky had picked up her tea and walked into the front room to stretch her legs. I'd gone after her, sheepish and mortified and not wanting her to see me as some inhuman monster.

Heather Morell, willing to perform human experimentation, in my old pajama bottoms and pink jumper.

I'd lingered by the doorway, with nothing to say, when she'd spoken up about Lozzie.

"Do you think she ran off because of me?" Nicole asked after the long sip of tea, finding her voice again.

"Oh, Lozzie? No, no, not at all," I said, stepping closer, trying to feel normal. "She doesn't like you much, I think, but she wouldn't run off because of you. She just doesn't like it when people talk about violence."

"Ahhhh," Nicole went, as if she understood perfectly. Perhaps she did. "I don't blame her, then. She is pretty young. She's very sweet, she doesn't deserve to have to deal with all ... this."

"I believe Lozzie is only a year or two younger than me."

Nicole blinked at me. "For serious?"

"As far we know. It's complicated."

Nicole blew out a puff. "Still."

"And it's not violence itself that bothers her, it's the talking about it part. I did watch her stab a man to death with a scalpel once."

Nicole boggled at me.

"Admittedly, we were in rather extreme circumstances," I added.

"Lozzie did that?" One corner of Nicole's mouth curled up in a worryingly approving smile. "Lozzie? The girl who makes weird noises and acts like she's a thirteen year old on a sugar high?"

I raised my chin, lightly offended on Lozzie's behalf. "She chooses

to act the way she does because it makes her feel right. I respect that.”

“Oh, sure, yeah, absolutely, more power to her. Cheers.” Nicole mimed a toast with her mug. “Just surprised is all. She doesn’t look like she has it in her.”

“There’s more to Lozzie than meets the eye.”

“You’re telling me. Is she ... ” Nicole struggled for a moment, silently chewing her words. Back in the kitchen, the microwave made a *ding* sound and Raine started bustling about with plates and the fridge door. “Does she have ... PTSD? Or ... ”

I sighed and shrugged. “Maybe she does. Maybe I do. But I doubt we’d get much from professional help, except a very confused and lightly traumatised psychotherapist.”

“Hey, don’t knock therapy,” Nicole said, suddenly serious. “I’ve been seeing somebody for the last couple of months. Helped with the decision to quit the force. Helped work through some complex guilt. Nasty shit.”

“But you can’t talk to them about us, can you?” I said, then added, with a little thorn of spite, “or about the house?”

Nicole shrugged. “Not exactly, but ... ”

“My sister was kidnapped by a giant Eyeball, and Lozzie was used as a metaphysical life-raft, by something not unlike that giant Eyeball. Although luckily for her, it was a lot less malign.”

“Point.” Nicole cleared her throat.

“It’s okay, Nicky. May I ... may I still call you Nicky?” My breath caught in my throat.

“Eh? Yeah, sure, ‘course you can.”

I nodded, and directed my gaze at a random point on the floor.

“You feel awkward because of earlier,” Nicole said. It wasn’t a question.

“I feel like I crossed a line,” I muttered. “Yes. I’m horrified at myself sometimes. At what I might do, for Maisie.”

She sighed. “Look, Heather, don’t worry about it. I’m not sure if I’m

gonna actually do it for you, let me think about it some more, but you lot live so far beyond the moral and ethical event horizon. I got no right to judge you.”

“Yes you do,” I said, quiet but firm. “I promised myself many months ago that Maisie would not come back only to find me turned into a monster. Growing tentacles, dragging around shards of the abyss, hissing at people, none of that makes me a monster. Vivisecting innocent people, that would make me a monster. Evelyn is correct about that.” I sighed too now, screwing up my eyes and cursing myself. “But I need to look inside one of these people’s heads. Maybe I can do it carefully. I don’t know. Maybe you shouldn’t take my request.”

I trailed off, still unable to meet her eyes. Nicole cleared her throat and sipped her tea and looked at the top of the stairs.

“So, Lozzie,” she said eventually.

“Lozzie, yes,” I sighed with guilty relief. “Do you want me to convince her to talk to you?”

“No, no,” Nicole said quickly. “No, it’s not my business. I don’t have the right to interrogate anybody. I’d just appreciate if you asked her.”

“Hey hey!” came Raine’s happy shout from the kitchen. “Food’s almost up! Gonna butter some rolls too, you two want in?”

“Maybe in a minute,” I called back – then took a deep breath and straightened my spine as much as I could, tried to feel normal again, just Heather, little old me. Lozzie would help with that.

“On the contrary, Nicky,” I said. “I’d appreciate if you came upstairs with me to talk to Lozzie yourself. She needs more contact beyond just this house. Plus, you might think of questions I wouldn’t. After all, you are the professional.”

“Fair enough,” Nicky said, and we went upstairs together.

I led the way, with the floorboards creaking softly beneath our feet. But when we reached the top of the stairs and I started ahead for the closed door of Lozzie’s bedroom, Nicole paused behind me. Her eyes roved over the upstairs hallway, showing a little white at the edges.

“Nicky?”

“Uh ... yeah, yeah. I haven’t actually been up here before.” Her eyes found me again, amused and frowning at the same time. “You do realise how creepy this place is, don’t you? Or is this normal for you?”

I blinked at her, then back the corridor, a space I passed through multiple times every single day, and after a moment I came to understand what Nicole meant. It wasn’t too gloomy up here this Saturday morning; some bright spark had opened all the curtains to flood the usually dim passageway with watery spring sunlight, but this served only to deepen the pools of darkness beneath the door frames and the shadows at the further reaches where the corridor slunk off to the left. The sunlight showed all the warping in the old floorboards, the discoloured patches of wall through the paint, the strange unexplained scuffs on the skirting boards which I never thought about too much.

Venerable, lived in, thick with history.

“Oh,” I tutted. “Oh, Nicky, it’s just a house. It’s a beautiful house, too. Much better than some awful suburban box made of particle board and plastic.”

“A house full of wizards and demons, right.” She cleared her throat, a little embarrassed and suitably chastised. “Excuse me if I see far too many doors up here. This place isn’t bigger on the inside than it is outside, right? I open the wrong door, I’m not gonna find a drop down a thousand feet of cliff?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I admit, it might not be a perfectly normal house, but it doesn’t do that.”

“As long as the walls don’t start bleeding.”

Nicole reached out and touched the nearest patch of wall with her fingertips, as if to assure herself it would neither bleed nor scream.

“They’re nice walls. It’s a nice house. It looks after us.” On a rather silly impulse, I reached out and patted the wall too. “Good house.”

“You talking to it like it’s alive does not help, by the way.”

“I’m anthropomorphising an inanimate object.” I huffed. “That’s normal. Natural. We’ve been doing it for tens of thousand of years.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay. Cool. There’s still way too many doors.” She nodded at the corridor, then lit up. She tried to hide the reaction,

but her eyebrows gave her away, as she stepped forward to join me in the patch of sunlight spilling from one of the small, square windows. She made a very studied show of looking out of that window, at the other houses and the street visible out there in Sharrowford. “Kimberly still lives here with you lot, right? She around today?”

I kept my expression carefully neutral. “Did you ever approach her at work?”

Nicole cleared her throat and avoided my eyes. “No, no I didn’t in the end. When I was a copper, well, I had, you know. Authority. Didn’t want her to see me like that, if I was trying it on. I’m like a useless teenager sometimes. Uh, no offense.”

“I’m twenty.”

“Wouldn’t mind scoring some weed off her. Maybe, you know, see how she reacts to me. She in?”

“She knows you’re here,” I said gently, “but she chose to hide from the scary police detective. I think that speaks volumes.”

Nicole gave a huge deflating sigh.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Nah, it’s not your fault that my type are also the type to not like police officers,” Nicole grumbled with a rueful smile. “Maybe give it a few months. Let the stink wash off.”

“Excuse me for asking,” I said. “But are you only focused on her because she’s ‘close to hand’?”

“No, I’m focused on her because she’s cute,” Nicole deadpanned at me. “And I’m not focused, either. I had a little fling a couple of weeks ago. It was alright, not very satisfying. Not really my type in the end.”

“And Kimberly’s your type.”

“Yeah. No joke.”

“Maybe I’ll talk to her sometime, and see how she reacts to the idea?” I offered. “But no promises. I don’t think she’s into you. I don’t think you’re even on her radar.”

Nicole studied me for a second, practical and solid in her sensible

clothes and tired eyes. "I'd appreciate that. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours?" She cracked a long-suffering grin. "Can hardly turn down your job if you do that for me."

"Oh!" My carefully constructed front crumbled into a blinking mess. "Oh, no, no, Nicky, I didn't mean it that way. I just mean I'll talk to her, I'm not trying to trade favours, a-and you don't have to do it, you don't have to, I-"

Nicole laughed softly, and reminded me I was in the presence of a very experienced manipulator, even if she was no longer using her powers for the state. I blushed and frowned at her, and almost puffed my cheeks out like Lozzie. She cleared her throat with apologetic shrug.

"I'll think about it," she said. "And hey, I shouldn't be leaning on you as a romance therapist. Let's go talk to Lozzie."

"Mmm, let's."

I led Nicole down the hallway, past sensibly closed doors and lurking pools of shadow. I paused at my own bedroom to crack the door and check on Zheng. Her massive sleeping bulk was stretched out beneath the bedsheets in the gloom, breathing softly.

"Shaman," she rumbled without opening her eyes.

"Just checking on you," I whispered.

"Need me?"

"Go back to sleep."

And she did. I closed the door again and found Nicole regarding me with a raised eyebrow.

"Zheng's sleeping, like I said."

"Is that your bedroom?" she asked.

"We have a thing going on. A complicated thing."

Nicole raised her hands. "Say no more. None of my business."

When we reached the door to Lozzie's bedroom, I knocked softly and called even softer. "Lozzie? It's me. Nicky is with me. Can we come in?"

A heavy mumble, a fluttery trill of surprise – which made Nicole

flinch and frown – and a sing-song silver-bell of “You may enter” all replied to my inquiry. I opened the door and peered inside.

There was never very much to see in Lozzie’s bedroom. She hadn’t put a lot of effort into making it her own, into expressing herself with posters or plush toys or treasured mementos, because she didn’t have any of those things. Apart from her pastel poncho and the other clothes she’d arrived in upon her return from Outside – and her pink beanie with the cat ears that she’d picked up on our shopping trip – everything in the room came from the house itself, or from us. Most of the clothes she wore were borrowed from me. The books that littered the floor and the low table in the middle of the room had come from my collection, or Evelyn’s study, or the library. Lozzie’s mobile phone was a hand-me-down from Evelyn too; we’d thought it important she have one of her own, that she feel connected, even if she didn’t go outdoors by herself.

Before Tenny had hatched and joined her in here, the room had seemed oddly empty. It was the same size as mine and Raine’s. The expanse of the double bed with its old iron frame and the vast empty space of the floor had always dwarfed Lozzie’s slender form. But now the low table was scattered with mess – dinosaur books and books full of illustrated animals, puzzle books and three Rubik’s cubes and two chess sets, and an incredibly complicated three-dimensional metal puzzle which Raine had ordered off the internet. It had come with special sealed instructions, and an invitation to some obscure organisation, addressed to anybody capable of solving the puzzle without recourse to the instructions.

Tenny had dismantled it in about fifteen minutes and promptly lost interest. Raine had spent an hour trying to figure out how to express Tenny’s critique in an email to the designers.

Since Tenny’s arrival, we’d added more to the room as well – a pair of comfy bean-bag chairs around the low table, one of the old televisions which was lying around the house, and most recently, Raine’s ‘gamecube’.

Tenny was currently sprawled on her belly across one of the beanbag chairs, video game controller in both hands in front of her. Two of her tentacles were busy playing a game of chess against each other – against herself?

“Heath!” she trilled at my appearance. “Ahhh! Ghost.”

“Ghosts, yes.” I smiled and politely glanced at the screen. She was playing more of the spooky game in the cartoon mansion.

“Spooky,” she fluttered, then blinked her huge all-black eyes past me.

Praem was perched on the edge of the bed, prim and proper and straight-backed, one lace-gloved hand stroking Lozzie’s blonde head. That scalp was the only part of Lozzie visible. She’d pulled up the sheets from the edges of the bed and wrapped herself in a messy cocoon of blankets. Another two of Tenny’s tentacles were stuck down the front of the blanket-cocoon, presumably for hugging purposes.

“Ah,” I said. “Lozzie?”

No reply came from inside the cocoon, only a caterpillar-like shuffle.

“Praem, is she okay?” I asked.

Praem looked up at me, empty milk-white eyes meeting my own, and said nothing.

“Ah, well.” I stepped over the threshold and considered sitting down on the bed. Perhaps this wasn’t the best time for Nicole to question Lozzie after all. Something about our conversation had really upset her, worse than her usual aversion to violent topics and raised voices. “Perhaps it would be best if you wait ...”

I turned back to Nicole, and trailed off.

Our friendly local Private Eye was staring at Tenny as if she had seen an alien. She glanced at me, then back at Tenny – at the unexplained moth-puppy-tentacle person with coal black skin and white fur and twitching antenna.

“Am I hallucinating?” Nicole asked, slowly and carefully.

“No!” I said. “No, uh- I’m sorry, I-”

“lo?” Tenny trilled at her. “Heeeellooo?”

“Heather,” Nicole said, tight and a little unimpressed, still staring at Tenny. “I would appreciate an explanation. Please.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” I blurted out, hands up. “This is Tenny, it’s fine, she’s fine.”

“lo?” Tenny tried again. Two tentacles snaked out from beneath her flesh-cloak and began moving toward Nicole. The detective took a step back, eyes going wide.

“Tenny!” I tried not to sound panicked, I didn’t want to upset her. “This- please- Tenny, this is Nicky. Please don’t touch her, okay? Please, please no touching without warning.”

Tenny blinked at me several times, deeply confused. I took the extra precaution of stepping forward and gently taking her pair of exploratory tentacles in my own hands, smiling at her as I did.

“Heather, what am I looking at here?” Nicole asked.

“Not what,” I said, firm but gentle. “Who. Her name is Tenny.”

“Okaaaaaay,” Nicole said, very much not okay.

“Tenny, this is Nicky,” I repeated. “Nicky, this is Tenny. She’s Lozzie’s ... creation. Child. Sort of.”

“Nick-eeee,” Tenny echoed, wiggling her legs and rolling on the beanbag. “Nick-eeeeeee.”

Nicole was still frozen in the doorway, her stare flicking back and forth between me and Tenny. I sighed at her. “She’s trying to say hello to you,” I said. “Come say hello back?”

“She can say hello from over there, thank you very much,” Nicole said. “And what is with the fucking tentacles?”

“Don’t swear!” I snapped, and felt Tenny’s tentacles flinch in my grip. “Tenny, I’m sorry, I’m not angry with you, it’s okay.”

“Brrrrrrrr,” she trilled.

I turned back to Nicole. “Please don’t swear in front of Tenny, she’s basically a child. And you’re acting as if you are afraid of her,” I put special, gentle emphasis on each word. “Please come say hello.”

Nicole got the message, but she tilted her head with a ‘I-cannot-believe-you-are-asking-me-to-do-this’ look.

“She is absolutely harmless,” I whispered.

Which was true enough.

With a sigh and a sucking of her teeth, Nicole stepped up to my shoulder and peered at Tenny.

“Nick-eeee,” Tenny said.

Nicole raised an awkward hand and pulled the best smile she could muster under the circumstances, the product of work with much more difficult people than Tenny. “Good afternoon, Tenny,” she said, strained and fake, but polite. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tenny replied in her fluttering, trilling voice. She wiggled her tentacles out of my hands, and hovered them in front of Nicole for a heart-stopping second, before looking sort of sad as she withdrew them.

Nicole cleared her throat and gave me a look. “May I ... ask ... ?” She opened a hand, at a complete loss.

I sighed. “We don’t really know what Tenny is. She was a spirit, pneuma-somatic life, and then Lozzie put her in a cocoon and she hatched into a real girl.”

“Real girl!” Tenny trilled, then laughed – a strange hissing, fluttering noise deep inside her chest. She glanced back at the screen and resumed pressing the buttons on her controller.

“The important part is that she’s family now,” I said.

Nicole shook her head in disbelief, then pointed quizzically at one of the chess boards on the low table. I couldn’t help but notice as well. The whole time we’d been talking and Tenny’s attention had been on us, she’d continued playing chess against herself with two of her tentacles, finished one match, reset the pieces, and started over.

“In some ways she’s a child,” I explained. “But in other ways she’s more intelligent than us. She’s developing very quickly. A few weeks ago she was more like a baby, mentally. Now she’s ... ”

“A twelve year-old playing xbox?” Nicole offered.

“Not xbox!” Tenny trilled. “Cuuuube.”

“Important distinction,” Praem intoned from the bed.

“Oh, for sure,” Nicole said, suppressing an absurd laugh. She nodded to Tenny. “Excuse my mistake, Tenny.”

“scused,” Tenny trilled, and turned back to her game. “Pbbbbbbbt.”

“Alright,” Nicole said, a little shaky around the edges, but doing her

best hard-boiled detective impression. She kept her voice very soft. "Alright, I can deal with this. I can deal. Please don't spring something like this on me again, Heather."

I grimaced in apology.

"It's alright," Nicole repeated, still soft and gentle. "I'm dealing with it."

"Tenny," I asked. "Is Lozzie feeling okay?"

Tenny rotated her head to glance at the bed, then imitated Lozzie's puffed-cheeks gesture and slowly blew the air out. "Lozzie grump."

"M'not grumpy," came a muffled voice from inside the covers.

Nicole and I shared a glance. She nodded to the door with a silent question in her eyes, but I shook my head. It was worth trying, at least. Nicole nodded once and stepped back to a polite distance, and tried not to stare at Tenny too much.

"Lozzie?" I ventured as I sat down next to Praem on the edge of the bed, next to Lozzie's cocoon. "Nicky had some questions for you, but we can do that another time if you're feeling bad. Do you want to come out, or do you want me to get in with you? I can ask Nicky to leave, if you like. She's not police anymore, so she has to do what I tell her. I'm scarier than she is."

The blanket-lump curled up tighter, but a small pale hand crept out of a gap to find me, flopping against my knee, like a huge deep-sea mollusk extending a tongue from inside a protective shell. I touched it and Lozzie held on. I glanced at Praem, but she was watching Lozzie too.

"Lozzie?" I tried again. "Are you okay?"

"Mmmhmmm," Lozzie murmured.

"What's wrong?"

"The world is full of horrible people," she said from inside the covers, her voice uncharacteristically slow and limp. "Horrible people doing horrible things to each other all the time. And family is great, you're great, I love you, but there's so many bad things and bad people and it's all so complicated and confusing and I don't want to think about it but I have to think about it and I don't want to."

“Oh, Lozzie.” I squeezed her hand.

“I tried to go Outside.”

My heart juddered. A flash of cold blossomed in my chest, a spike of panic.

Lozzie must have felt that.

“Only for a few minutes!” she chirped. Blanket-Lozzie wiggled and wriggled and out popped her head from inside the covers, flushed from enclosure and pouting faintly, eyes even heavier-lidded than usual. Tenny’s pair of tentacles emerged with her, cradling her back in a half-hug. She wasn’t crying, just incredibly down. “Just for a bit! I just want to step away sometimes and go Outside but I *can’t* and I can’t go and I’m stuck because the stupid hands keep hanging onto my ankles. And I want to show Tenny, she’s stuck here too and she can’t even go outdoors because she’ll be seen and people will hurt her but I know places she can fly for real and not worry but we can’t!”

“Bbbppppptt,” went Tenny.

“Lozzie, I’m sorry.” I reached forward to brush her hair away from her forehead, where flyaway strands of fine blonde had stuck to her skin. “We’ll find a way to get rid of the dead hands. We will. I might be able to brainmath them away, maybe, they’re only ... ”

Lozzie gave me a sad look from beneath heavy lids. She didn’t even need me to say it. We’d talked about it before.

The hands were probably her brother. Or what was left of him. We couldn’t even find Edward Lilburne, and he was very much alive and kicking. If we couldn’t find a live man, what chance did we have with a ghost?

But that wasn’t the source of the razor thorn of guilt pricking at my heart.

“A-and in the meantime,” I added, trying to cover for myself. “We can always go to the castle, whenever you’re feeling tired. I promise we’ll always do that, together.”

“It’s not enough,” she murmured. “I want to go Outside. To the real places.”

Deep down, in a locked vault of the heart I would never admit to

owning, part of me whispered the truth.

You haven't unmade the hands, because you don't want Lozzie to leave again.

"Heather?" Lozzie said my name, her sad tone completely gone as she sat up, the motion dragging her cocoon apart. "Heather?"

"It's ... I ... uh ... "

"Trust," Praem intoned, and I almost jumped out of my skin. How had she known?

She was right. Trust. I had no choice but to trust Lozzie. She'd gone Outside for an extended period before. Then, when I'd been helpless before the Eye, she'd responded to Maisie's call and come to my rescue. Trust was the only option, because the other path would keep her miserable and make me responsible, and that would make me into another kind of monster.

"Heatherrrrrrr?" Lozzie dipped her head to look at me from below, her elfin face curious and confused.

"I'll use brainmath to remove the dead hands," I said, looking her in the eye. "I'll try. Not now, not today, not ... not until I solve the anchor problem." I cleared my throat. "Not that you know what that means, but when I'm ready. I'll fight them. And you can go Outside again, I promise. I won't be afraid. Well, no, I might be afraid, but I'll deal with that."

A little smile crept onto Lozzie's face. She sniffed and wiped her eyes on a corner of her blanket cocoon, and then threw her arms around my shoulders, squeezing tight. I hugged her back, and dipped a hand to pat one of Tenny's tentacles too.

"We can go Outside together right now, you know?" she chirped. "Like we used to. We can go through the gateway and then anywhere! Anywhere at all! There's this place with the biggest trees ever, as big as mountains, and the leaves are all clever and thinky, but you have to think around them or they get grumpy and then they say a lot of confusing things but it's always nice things and we could go right now!"

I went stiff. "Um ... "

Lozzie pulled back, smile bouncing across her face. "I know. I knooooow. You don't wanna go unless it's dreams."

"I ... I think I find Outside scarier than you do, Lozzie. I'm ... I'm sorry."

The pout inched back. "I knooooow."

A light bulb went on in my head. "Lozzie, can you do a handstand?"

Lozzie blinked at me.

"Handstand," Praem echoed.

"Yes?" Lozzie said, tilting her head back and forth like a curious bird.

"Could you teach me how?" I asked.

The head-tilting became almost terminal. I was worried she'd rotate her head right off the top of her spine.

"Do you want to go to the park together?" I carried on quickly.

"The big one near the university campus, with the oak trees and the children's playground. We can go on a weekday, in the middle of the day, so there's not many kids around. We'll get ice creams, and play on the swings, and you can teach me how to do a handstand. It's spring, the weather's been getting warmer. And you're right, you could do with getting out of the house some more. Even if only for half an hour. Even if it's only here, not Outside. It'll be nice. We can take Raine too, for ... well, you understand."

Lozzie did a very comical eye-narrowing and puffed one cheek out. "I'm not actually a child."

"Neither am I," I said, "and I would very much like to go to the park."

Lozzie broke into giggles and snorting and puffed at my lap with her hands. "Okay then! Okay! Okay-okay-okaaaaaay. On Monday? As soon as we can?"

"On Monday."

"Caaaaaan we invite fuzzy too? I haven't seen her in a while and I wanna give her a hug."

I blinked at her. "Fuzzy?"

"Twil!"

"Oh. Certainly. If she's not busy."

"Twil will be available," Praem intoned. I blinked at her.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I know," Praem said.

Lozzie gave me another hug, and Praem finally got up from the edge of the bed, carefully brushing off her skirt and standing up ramrod-straight, hands clasped in front of her. She very pointedly stared at Nicole.

"Yeah?" Nicole said.

"Questions," Praem intoned.

"Questions, yeah, sure. For a start, where's your maid outfit? Not going in for that anymore?"

"On the way."

"Excuse me?" I looked up from the hug.

"On the way," Praem repeated.

"Getting a new one, eh?" Nicole asked. "Not every day you see somebody pull off a genuine full-on maid outfit. Suited you. Looking forward to version two-point-oh."

"Questions," Praem repeated.

"Yes, yes," I filled in for Nicole, disentangling myself from Lozzie and clearing my throat. "Lozzie, Nicky wanted to ask-

"I know, I know!" Lozzie puffed out both cheeks. She looked past me, up at Nicole. "I was thinking about it while I was wrapped up and I don't know anything *useful*-useful because my parents never saw much of Edward when I was small, because he was my dad's brother and they didn't like each other for reasons I never knew because my parents were gone before I was old enough and Alexander never told me things."

Nicole nodded, taking this all very seriously. If she struggled at all with Lozzie's super-rapid-fire mode, she didn't let on. "Any small details might-

"My dad was Richard Lilburne but that probably doesn't narrow it down or help with anything and my mum was Merle and if that helps then good but I don't want to think about them anymore."

"I'm sorry," Nicole said, and years of interrogation rooms helped her mean it. "I don't mean to-"

"But there was this house." Lozzie screwed up her eyes. "It was *his* house and I only ever went there twice and it was only when my parents were around, and Alexander never ever ever ever went there and when he had to send people there they didn't come back, and Edward pretended they never got there but you could tell they did and something happened but my brother pretended it was all okay."

Nicole and I shared a glance.

"Lozzie?" I pressed gently. "What house? You didn't mention this before."

"Because I can't remember where it is!" she burst out at me. "I was only small! It was made of brown and red bricks and had beams and it was pretty big but not really big, and there were woods but not too many woods and it had a gravel driveway and a stupid statue of a naked woman in the garden, and I can't remember!"

I nodded all the same. "Thank you, Lozzie, thank you for trying. I mean it, really."

"Mmm, I can't help." Lozzie pouted.

"Hey, no," Nicole said, with a voice like the cat that got the cream. "That is help. Oh, trust me, that's something. That sure is something alright."

"... you know the place?" I asked.

Nicole shook her head. "Not yet. But when I find it, then I'll know it."

a very great mischief – 13.8

On Monday morning I kept the easiest of the many promises I had made; I took Lozzie to the park.

And while we were there, I came within a hair's breadth of breaking a different promise – and almost broke myself in the process.

Strictly speaking, Raine and Twil took Lozzie and I to the park. We could hardly go wandering around Sharrowford unaccompanied. Though I was technically capable of supernatural self-defense up to and including cold-blooded murder without a trace, such feats of hyperdimensional mathematics always came at a cost. We couldn't discount the idea of Edward Lilburne sending a sacrificial pawn to draw my attention, before trying to kidnap Lozzie once I was busy regurgitating my breakfast. With Lozzie unable to slip Outside at will, her natural escape route was cut off. Like a bird with clipped wings.

Neither of us could risk going anywhere alone, but we weren't going to let that stop us living. We had Raine's handgun and Twil's claws for protection.

Raine was happy to get out of the house too. She relished the opportunity to stretch her muscles, to prove to herself she hadn't become a long-term invalid, despite still needing the crutch.

She hadn't been to the gym since the bullet wound, denied her usual routine of exercise – one I'd watched a couple of times, when she'd dragged me to the gym in the very early stages of our relationship. Back then she'd baited me with the implicit promise of her own body, the sight of her getting sweaty, a temptation I fully and proudly admit as one of my many weaknesses. These last couple of weeks, she'd attempted some limited routines at home, push ups and crunches and such, and somehow dragged me into participating again.

Not that I had any complaints.

"Gotta keep the core muscles conditioned. That goes fast if you're not careful," she'd told me, before discovering that each push up

sent a jagged spike of pain down her injured thigh.

She still beat my precisely three reps.

In the end she'd settled for lifting her small set of hand weights, sitting on the edge of the bed and working her upper body with methodical, meditative precision. I'd never had the opportunity to watch that up close before, and I found the motion of her back muscles quite hypnotic.

Twil proved a little more difficult. Lozzie had made the request, but I delegated the 'call Twil' part to myself. Then I discovered, on Sunday morning with phone in hand, that I had no idea what to say. I'd never invited a friend to 'hang out' before. I'd never had friends in that way. If I wanted to talk to Evelyn, she was in the same building most of the time, I could knock on her bedroom door. If I needed to see Lozzie, she was always right there. How was this supposed to work?

In the end I sent her a text message.

'Hello Twil. It's me, Heather. Lozzie and Raine and I are going to the park tomorrow. Would you like to come with us? Only if you are free, of course.'

I read the message over three times, changed the wording twice, and it still felt awfully stuffy when I hit send. Less than thirty seconds later I received a reply which consisted of a string of emotes and three acronyms.

"Um," I'd said out loud, blinking at my phone as it lay on the kitchen table.

Evelyn, halfway through the process of supervising Praem's construction of a sandwich large enough to use for a doorstop, frowned sharply over at the phone and let out a sigh. "I assume that's Twil?"

"... there's no actual words in this." I stared at the message like a magic-eye picture, but it still didn't make sense.

"Give it here." Evelyn marched over and all but snatched the phone out of my hands, tucking her walking stick into the crook of her arm as her fingers flew across the touchscreen. Behind her, Praem paused with a slab of cheese in one hand.

"Don't tell her off, Eevee, please," I said.

"I'm used to this. Sometimes she needs a kick in the backside. There." Evelyn slapped the phone back into my waiting hands.

She had sent a message.

'Heather doesn't speak your live-laugh-love-poisoned deep fried. Use real words.'

"I don't understand what that means either," I told Evelyn.

"Good," she said. "Best keep it that way."

"Do you want to come to the park too, Eevee?" I asked. "The last thing I'd want to do is leave you out, especially if you'd like to hang out with Twil."

"Ehhhh." Evelyn frowned and waved the suggestion away like a bad smell. "I'm not really the park-going type. Besides, I have a lecture at eleven tomorrow."

"Do you want Twil to hang out afterward? Back here? I'm sure she'd be happy to."

"She needs to get back to studying," Evelyn grunted.

I caught Praem's milk-white eyes over Evelyn's shoulder. The doll-demon was not going to say it, so I did.

"Is that the only reason?" I asked, making my voice as innocent as I could.

Evelyn sighed. "... no, but I'd rather not go into detail right now. Even with you. It's just, I don't know what to do with her. But thank you, Heather. You're too sweet and none of us deserve you."

"Sweet," Praem echoed.

I blushed and frowned down at the phone. "That's not ... well, I ... Eevee, you-

Twil saved me. The phone buzzed in my hands, and the first message was filled with herky-jerky panic, obvious even via text.

'Eevee is that you???? Sorry! Sorry, you know it's just how I am! What are you doing on Heather's phone? Something up?'

I concentrated on a measured reply-slash-apology, and eventually made myself clear.

'It's nothing special or important,' I messaged her. 'We're just going to hang out in the park together for an hour or so. It's okay if you don't want to come or if you don't have the time to spare. Evelyn wants me to remind you that you are very busy in the run-up to exam season and it's okay to say no. Lozzie specifically wanted to see you, but I'm sure she can wait.'

And all I got back was a *'Loz? Sure! What time?'*

= =

We left the house around nine thirty on Monday morning, just after Twil turned up, but not before she bounded upstairs to see Evelyn. Raine and I exchanged a knowing glance as Twil called Evelyn's name at the top of the stairs, and was answered by a distant grumble.

"Don't make out for too long!" Raine called.

I nudged her gently in the side. "Don't."

"What?" Raine shot me a grin and gestured at Lozzie. "Somebody's liable to pop if we wait much longer. Twil doesn't have time for a snuggle."

She wasn't wrong. We'd visited the castle yesterday to sit at the windows for half an hour and watch the strange alien life in the streets below, to recharge Lozzie's metaphysical batteries. It showed.

Lozzie was practically vibrating, hopping from foot to foot by the front door, her pastel poncho flapping out like the frilled skirts of a jellyfish. I half expected the cat-ears on her pink beanie to start twitching. She'd found a tennis ball somewhere, perfectly clean and brand new – which was a mystery in itself – and she was currently bouncing it off the floorboards, catching it again in one hand with surprisingly perfect dexterity.

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" she chirped at our attention. "Fuzzy and grumpy can kiss for hours, we can go alone!"

"We'll wait for Twil," I said gently.

Raine cupped her hands around her mouth and called up the stairs again. "Stop necking and get down here!"

"Raine!" I hissed. "They're probably not."

“Oh yeah? You underestimate our Evee.”

“I don’t even think they’re properly together,” I whispered. “It’s more complex than that.”

Raine hiked an eyebrow at me. “You were so sure about them. What changed?”

“Well, maybe I was wrong.”

But Twil bounded back down the stairs a minute later, with a cheeky grin for me and a friendly “Fuck off, hey?” for Raine.

Raine raised her hands in mock-surrender. “Don’t shoot the messenger for speaking truth.”

“S’none o’ your business, yeah?” Twil bit back, a touch less friendly. She clacked her teeth together, an unconscious gesture that showed the contours of the wolf beneath the woman, lurking just below the surface of her angelically pretty face and artfully messy long dark curls.

“Fuzzy fuzzy fuzzy!” Lozzie came out of nowhere and slammed into Twil, a head-butt-hug hard enough to knock the wind from even an invincible werewolf. She’d been too busy tripping into her shoes when Twil had knocked on the front door, so now she buried her face in Twil’s oversize white hoodie, and wormed her hands beneath Twil’s blue-and-lime coat.

“Oof- okay, alright,” Twil puffed to get her breath back. “Uh, hey Lozzie.”

Lozzie smiled up at her. “Go fuzzy?”

“Eh?”

“Fuzzy-fuzzy?” Lozzie bounced on the spot like a released spring.

“Uh. N-not right now?”

“Awwww. Okay then!” And Lozzie bounced away as quickly as she’d begun. She threw the locks on the front door and skipped out onto the garden path, and we three had no choice but to follow.

It was good to see her like this, even if she’d had to leave Tenny behind today. No amount of imitative camouflage would convince sober eyes under daylight that Tenny was a human being. Zheng had stayed behind too, half to babysit Tenny, half because she

would draw so much attention out there on the streets, even if she could just about pass for human.

I was already planning a repeat outing, at night, for them.

The walk to the park wasn't too long, just up to the university campus and then a little further along Bluebell Road, though we planned a small detour near the end for the sake of ice cream or chocolate or whatever took our fancy. The sky was ringed with clouds built up like ramparts, and the sun gave a thin trickle of warmth to the waking world, enough to keep the chill off one's face, but not enough to chase away coats and jackets. The threat of rain stood on the horizon, the ever-changeable weather of the North.

Raine and I had to be on campus later, but not until three in the afternoon, so for this morning we had all the time in the world, and we took it slow. Not just because of Raine's crutch.

Taking it easy was the point.

I hadn't yet worked up the courage for tri-layered skirts and rainbow tights in public, but I wore my new pink-scaled hoodie. An ankylosaurus, armoured and secure, emerged from the depths of abyssal time onto the streets of Sharrowford. Raine wore her leather jacket, and Twil always looked ready to call somebody questionable names and throw down for a fight, despite her porcelain beauty.

I'd half-entertained the notion of asking Lozzie to wear something less conspicuous than her pastel hoodie and the pink hat with the cat ears. She stood out. But I didn't have the heart. She loved herself, and I wasn't going to step on that.

Her uncle knew where she was already, knew where we lived. If he was going to move on us, he'd do it regardless. A few passers-by with strong impressions of the girl in the bright poncho wouldn't make a blind bit of difference.

If the Heather of four or five years ago had seen us walking down the street, she would have thought we were the coolest people ever. She would have assumed we were on our way to somewhere very mature and exciting – a literature class with a famous professor, a notorious lesbian club, a subversive political meeting – rather than what we were actually doing, which was going to the park to eat ice cream and play on the swings.

“Hey, I see that little smile,” Raine murmured, walking beside me with her crutch under the opposite armpit.

“Just feeling presentable. For once.”

“Looking gorgeous, more like,” she purred back.

My cool did not last long. We were barely five minutes out from the invisible protective bubble of the Saye house, when Lozzie began to gather an entourage.

The streets of Sharrowford always teemed with pneuma-somatic life in all its dizzying alien variety. I’d simply grown used to it, and grown used to the quiet refuge of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. More recently I’d grown used to the way the spirits kept a respectful distance from me, well clear of the scent of the abyss clinging to my soul.

I spotted a dozen different strange amalgamations and alien impossibilities before we even reached the end of the road. A creature like a polar bear but with tentacles in place of a head was snuffling along the opposite pavement, following the sticky slime trail left by a humanoid figure with a tail like a slug. A bat-like giant glided overhead with wings of jagged obsidian, slow as a blimp on unseen air currents. Ghouls – crosses between dogs and people and apes – lurked in alleyways and scattered in polite deference before my passing. A flower made of glowing flesh and shining steel had attached itself to a stop sign, brown roots running down the metal and penetrating the asphalt, but when I approached, it withdrew its anchors and shuffled off along a nearby wall.

Lozzie smiled and waved at eyestalks which rose above the nearby houses, and blew brief kisses at hulking, slumping creatures at the ends of the roads we passed. She trailed her fingertips across the tops of floating flesh-masses and made ‘fffttt fttt’ come-hither noises at skittish deer-creatures with claws instead of hooves and eyes of molten silver.

In the past I would have been mortified with embarrassment, but now it didn’t seem to matter. So what if random people thought she was mentally unwell? She wasn’t, and I knew that. If anybody had a problem with her then they could answer to me, and that was all that mattered.

Until the hound.

It was loitering in one of those thin alleyways between two sets of terraced houses, with overflowing bins and lichen-covered walls. Lozzie was skipping a few steps ahead of us when it padded out onto the pavement and nosed against her leg.

"Awww, hello there." She instantly stopped and squatted down to pet the scaly head. "Aren't you a friendly one? Yes you are, yes you are!"

Raine laughed softly and Twil pulled an uncertain grimace. They couldn't see the hound, only Lozzie talking to thin air.

It was a cross between canine and deep-sea predator, as if a dog had evolved around an oceanic geothermal vent. The size of a golden retriever, but plated with thick overlapping scales instead of fur, showing patches of wrinkled grey skin beneath. Huge black eyes stared up at Lozzie, surrounded by wiry black bristles. A mouth of needle-teeth hung open as a long thin grey tongue lolled out. Slender tentacles rose from the creature's back, waving like seaweed in an invisible current.

Deja vu and disquiet stopped me in my tracks.

"Heather?" Raine stopped too. "Is it not safe?"

"Good boy," Lozzie was whispering to it. Ears like armoured flaps twitched at her words. "Good boy good boy, wanna come with us, good boy?"

"Um, Lozzie," I managed, and my voice came out far too tight. "Lozzie, is that ... is that one of the ... *dogs*, that was following you around before you first left for Outside?"

"Mmm?" Lozzie looked up at me, puffed a cheek out as her eyes rolled up in thought, then shrugged. "Maybe! Dunno! Sometimes they don't let me know but that's okay because they're all good and one is just as good as the others, if they've gone somewhere else that's okay too, they don't have to come back to me. I took some of them Outside to help but some of them stayed here so maybe!" She stood up and slapped the side of her thigh several times as she took a step forward. "Good boy, come with us!"

"Heather, hey?" Raine got my attention, voice sharp and focused. "Is this not safe?"

“Yeah, yo,” Twil piped up, hands deep in her pockets, trying to look nonchalant. “I got no problem with friendly invisible monsters, I think, but I can’t see what we’re dealing with here? Clue me in?”

“It’s fiiiiine,” Lozzie said.

“It’s ... I ... it’s technically safe, yes.” I sighed, mostly at myself. “Lozzie used to have a whole ... group of spirits following her. I just don’t ... don’t like-”

I made eye contact with the hound, and found it looking back at me. The wrong sort of intelligence lived behind those oily eyes. Neither canine nor squid, but something truly alien to our order of being. Abyssal instinct and savanna ape answered with one voice – a shiver down my spine and a flex of phantom limbs and a hiss clawing up my throat.

The hound dipped its head, flattened armoured ears against its skull, and hid behind Lozzie’s legs.

“Oh no!” Lozzie chirped, squatting down again. “Heathy’s nothing to be scared of! It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay,” she chanted to the poor spirit, arms going around its scaly midsection.

The hiss died in my throat, replaced by a mortified flush.

“You scaring dogs now?” Twil laughed at me.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out. “I just- Lozzie, you know how I feel about pneuma-somatic life. I can’t just get over it. I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t feel the same way about you,” she told me, looking back over her shoulder. “See? See? He’s just scared. It’s okay, good boy, you’re a good boy, Heathy’s not scary, see? She’ll give you a pet too, okay? Yes! Yes!”

“Um.” I froze.

“You don’t *have to* have to,” Lozzie said. “But it’s not scary and it doesn’t feel slimy or cold and you can just do it once and then stop again.”

I swallowed and looked around for help. Twil was still mostly bewildered. Raine shrugged and said, “It’s up to you. No pressure, we can just walk on if you like.”

“No pressure!” Lozzie agreed.

“No, I’ll- I’ll do it,” I said.

And I did, though I got it over quickly so I didn’t have to think about it too much. I made a conscious, deliberate effort to fold back my phantom limbs, took three steps forward, and bent down to briefly pat the head of the nightmare aquatic dog. It was barely even there, a faint impression of pneuma-somatic scales and warm flesh. Lozzie held it still and whispered to it about how I wasn’t scary, and before I knew it I’d straightened up and stepped back again, shaking slightly.

The real hurdle was doing that out in public. An empty residential street, but still. Crazy Heather, petting things that didn’t exist.

“Hey, Heather, you okay?” Raine asked me softly, as Lozzie stood up and gave me a big beaming smile. Raine took my hand.

“I ... I think so,” I said.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know?” Raine murmured even softer. “You don’t have to let Lozzie pressure you into stuff.”

“She didn’t,” I said firmly. “They’re not scary. That’s all. It’s me, not them.”

“Hey, yo, invisible monsters are pretty scary,” Twil put in. “Like ghosts.”

Lozzie was already skipping ahead again. The oceanic hound trotted along at her heels, and other spirits were already taking an interest. A thing like a cluster of seedpods and tiny wings landed on her shoulder, and a lizard the size of my hand, made of spun glass, climbed up her poncho.

“They’re not monsters,” I said.

= =

By the time we reached the park, Lozzie had accumulated almost a dozen pneuma-somatic friends. Another hound had appeared along Bluebell Road, almost identical to the first, along with a sort of goat-like creature with horns of brass and human arms instead of legs. Weird little collections of flesh and teeth and lizard-skin sat on her shoulders or rode on her poncho, along with a faceless owl sitting in the hood and a lime-green jellyfish thing trailing in her wake.

They all kept a respectful distance from me, which I very much appreciated, but for the first time in a long time I didn't mind them so much. Their presence made Lozzie happy. That was enough.

We stopped at a newsagent's on Bluebell Road, before doubling back to the park. Lozzie and I got ice cream cones with flakes. Raine bought a grape popsicle. Twil made an unconventional choice.

"It's ice cream time," Raine laughed. "Not fried chicken time. You'll be sick if you run around too much after that."

"Shut up, no I won't," Twil whined back through a mouthful of meat. "I'm hungry, alright? I can eat chicken if I want."

"Don't food shame," I teased Raine.

"Yeah, listen to your better half," Twil shot back. "Sides, I'll be finished by the time we reach the swings. Iron stomach, that's me."

Lozzie led us the rest of the way, past the car-barriers and beneath the shadow of the university buildings and through the park gates.

Yare Broad park is not broader than it is long, and I have no idea what a 'yare' is meant to be, but it's very good at being a park.

Sprawling out from the far edge of the university campus, sloping down before collapsing into several miles of open wetland crisscrossed by raised wooden walkways and filled with wild ducks, Yare Broad is by far Sharrowford's largest park. Sequestered from the busiest parts of the city by the bulk of the university campus, the views are marred only slightly by one of the huge modern off-white student residential blocks. Quiet on weekdays, except for an occasional thin trickle of university students, which kept it always more than totally empty, it was the perfect public place to feel neither crowded in nor completely alone.

We wandered past little copses of trees, down snaking pathways, toward a children's playground area on the far left of the park, shaded by several very old oak trees. Almost nobody else was about this time of day, late Monday morning. We spotted a couple of joggers, a few people sitting on distant benches – probably university staff getting some fresh air and sunlight on a break – and one group of students having a picnic which seemed to consist of a lot of alcohol and not much food.

Lozzie was first on the swings. She scooped down the rest of her ice cream and leapt up onto one of the old metal-chain swings, planting her feet on the broad rubber seat and standing tall. Her spirit friends scattered across the area, doing the sort of inexplicable things that spirits do. The hounds started sniffing for something along the ground. Several of the smaller creatures still clung to Lozzie as she began to rock back and forth.

“Er,” said Twil, stopping at the edge of the playground asphalt, frowning at the ancient metal slide and slightly rusty swing frame. “How is this place still standing?”

“I’m sorry?” I asked, focused on the last few bites of my ice cream cone.

“Because it’s cool!” Lozzie said.

She produced her mystery tennis ball from inside her poncho again, and started bouncing it off the ground as she swung backward, catching it each time on the return, a feat of dexterity that even Raine would struggle with.

“It’s a fuckin’ death trap,” Twil started laughing. “This is the sort of shit they tear down, you know? Replace it all with modern plastic and a nice soft landing of wood chips.” She tapped the asphalt with a heel.

“We’re hardly going to be doing somersaults,” I said with a little sigh, and wandered over to join Lozzie. I brushed a few stray leaves off the seat of the swing next to her, and sat down. “We’re just here to hang out for a bit. For fresh air and sunlight.”

“Could’a done that in the back garden,” Twil muttered. She went over to a bin nearby and tossed the wrapper from her chicken, licking the remaining grease from her fingertips. “I know, I know why I’m along. Bodyguard duty, right? I don’t mind, it’s cool.”

“Noooo!” Went Lozzie. The old metal chains made a rhythmic creaking as she rocked back and forth, adjusting her body weight to swing further each time. “I wanted you to come, fuzzy! And we’re gonna do handstands.”

Twil blinked at her.

“Yes, Lozzie’s going to teach me how to do a handstand,” I said. “We are going to enjoy ourselves. We are. We’re just sitting in the

park. 'Hanging out.' That's all."

We were going to enjoy ourselves for half an hour, eat these ice creams, and relax, and most certainly not think about the fact that PI Nicole Webb would be breaking into the office of Edward Lilburne's lawyer that very night. In less than twelve hours we would all be gathered around the kitchen table with butterflies in our collective metaphorical stomach, waiting for the phone call.

The Heather of just six months ago would have felt awfully self-conscious sitting on a swing in a park, childish and silly.

That all mattered so little now.

"Yeah, lassie," Raine said with a grin, clacking forward with her crutch. She very gently pushed against my back, rocking the swing by a couple of inches. "Don't be a stick in the mud. Scared you're gonna skin your knees?"

Lozzie was really going for it now, rocking her whole body back and forth on the swing, the seat almost vertical on both ends of the arc, the chains creaking like a ship at sea.

"Pffft," went Twil. "Me? I'm alright. I'm invincible. Just hope you lot are up to date on your tetanus jabs."

With a sudden lump in my throat, I looked up at Lozzie, swinging back and forth further and further, her pastel poncho streaming out behind her as she bent her knees. My guess was she hadn't seen the inside of a GP's surgery since her parents had died, let alone been scheduled for booster jabs. She caught my look and giggled, face whizzing past at high speed now.

"I don't need it!" she yelled.

"But what if you fall and cut yourself?" I asked.

Lozzie answered by forcing her momentum to the absolute limit, arcing the swing as far forward as it could go under her body weight – and then she jumped.

My heart leapt into my mouth as she sailed through the air, poncho streaming out behind her, small spirits clinging to her shoulders or tumbling onto the grass as she cleared the edge of the asphalt. The stunt lasted less than two seconds, and she was probably less than four feet off the ground at the apex of her jump, but my phantom limbs whirled to life as I jerked out of my own seat in a futile effort

to catch her.

Lozzie landed on the balls of her feet with all the grace of a ballerina, bending knees and spinning on the spot to face us with arms thrown wide.

“Also I never fall!” she announced.

“Fuckin’ ‘ell,” Twil sighed.

I had a hand to my heart. “Lozzie.”

But Lozzie just stuck out a hand toward me, the other one already busy bunching up her poncho and tucking it into her trousers.

“Come over onto the grass! I’m gonna teach you to do handstands, like we said. You too, fuzzy-wuzzy.”

“I can do handstands, easy,” said Twil.

“Then show us how because Heather wants to learn. It’s easy, I promise-promise. It’s easy you just have to balance right upside-down and not let all the blood to go to your head too.”

I let out a huge sigh, but Raine took that moment to squeeze my shoulder, cutting off whatever complaint was brewing in my heart. She caught my eye.

“We won’t let her hurt herself,” she whispered.

“... it’s not that,” I managed.

I wasn’t afraid of Lozzie falling and scraping herself, not really. Bruises and grazes were part of life. On a level I didn’t understand, I knew she was safe from that. Whatever Lozzie was, she was above such concerns.

But at the apex of her leap, I’d been terrified she was going to vanish before she hit the ground.

“I know,” Raine whispered back. “All the better reason to spend time together now, yeah?”

I forced myself to eat the last bite of my ice cream cone, then got up and joined Lozzie and Twil as they wandered out onto the grass. Lozzie stuck her hand out again, and this time I took it in my own.

At first I was quite incapable of imitating Lozzie’s demonstration of a handstand. She bent forward, put her hands on the ground, and

just flipped her legs into the air, waving her shoes about as her poncho flapped down into her face despite her efforts to tuck it in. Twil made it look even easier, but she was cheating, with her werewolf strength and regenerating muscle.

I tried three times, couldn't get myself up, and then when I finally did I just wobbled and fell over sideways, to the sound of Raine's affectionate laughter. I felt faintly embarrassed, but I'd made this request, I'd suggested this little outing, and I was going to stick with it even if I looked like the biggest idiot in the world.

I had more success when Lozzie became my training wheels. She held my ankles as I huffed and puffed to keep strength in my arms.

But it was worth the effort. When I finally managed to balance by myself and Lozzie took her hands away, she clapped and laughed, and I laughed too when I finally fell over and rolled onto my back. Lozzie helped me up and hugged me and I hugged her too. Then Twil showed up both of us by doing a cartwheel.

"Show off," Raine laughed.

"Flaunt it if you got it," Twil shot back.

Lozzie produced her tennis ball again, out of nowhere. With a manic giggle on her lips and a flick of her wrist, she said, "Fetch!"

Twil almost fell for it. She jerked one way on sheer instinct, before catching herself and blushing incandescent red. Lozzie broke down in giggles.

"Lozzie!" I scolded, hand to my own mouth, but I was laughing too.

"You- you didn't even throw the ball! It's still in your hand!" Twil spluttered.

"That's your complaint?" Raine asked.

"It's cheating!" Twil snapped.

"It's- it-" I struggled to control myself. "Lozzie, that was quite rude."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Lozzie said through a bout of terrible giggles.

"I just had to! And it's cute and it's sweet and I didn't mean it in a bad way and I'm really sorry I didn't throw the ball for real and you're lovely fuzzy and I shouldn't joke about it and-"

"You know if you throw that ball I can catch it before it hits the

ground, right?” Twil said.

Lozzie stopped dead and bit her bottom lip at Twil, eyes shining beneath her heavy lids.

“Out here?” Raine asked. “At full speed, in public?”

“Nah, like, half speed,” Twil said. “Normal person speed. Just, you know, good.”

“Can I?” Lozzie whispered, face lit up like a star.

“Do it,” Twil said.

So Lozzie threw the ball.

She didn’t throw it far, more vertical than horizontal, but Twil’s confidence proved well founded. Our werewolf friend had more energy than any actual dog, and it was always impressive to watch her run, though she kept her promise and stuck well within human limits. We were in public, after all.

Handstands, playing catch, relaxing on the swings. This was all so normal, but it touched me in a way I was having trouble processing. Lozzie and Twil went on like that for a few minutes, but then we all retreated to the swings again, talking about everything and nothing while we swung back and forth. Even Raine put her crutch down and sat on the swing next to me, as Lozzie and Twil debated how fast they could both run. By the time I’d gathered my thoughts, they were up again, and this time Twil was trying to show Lozzie how to do a cartwheel. The spirits had followed her out there, the oceanic hounds circling like sharks, other creatures sitting in the grass, or following at Lozzie’s ankles.

I watched, and wasn’t even aware of my own smile.

“Hey,” Raine murmured, rocking back and forth gently on the swing next to me. “You needed this as much as Lozzie, didn’t you?”

“I suppose so,” I said, and caught my smile, guilty and confused.

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s good to see you happy.”

“I feel like I’m Outside,” I said.

Raine stopped swinging, eyebrows raised.

“Not in a bad way,” I hastened to add. “This is how it felt in the

dreams, the Outside dreams with Lozzie. I've told you about them before, but I can't explain how they felt. Her enthusiasm, her energy, it's infectious. As long as I didn't wake up too far, I was never scared, no matter the weird places she took me. She's so unconstrained, so free. I like it. I like that she shares it. It's how we became friends." I sighed. "There's just a touch of that here, right now. Just a touch."

Raine said nothing, but reached over and ruffled my hair. I let her, and closed my eyes, feeling like a cat being petted.

"Only a shame that Zheng couldn't come," I said.

"I dunno," Raine said. "Put her in a big coat, she'll be alright. Nobody's going to freak out about a tall lady, which, you know, if she doesn't show off her teeth, that's all she is."

"Maybe," I murmured.

We lapsed into companionable silence. I used the toe of one shoe against the asphalt to rock myself back and forth on the swing. Raine's gaze wandered past me, over my shoulder, along the pathway that led away from the little playground area.

"Also, I'm not sure if I should say this, considering my track record," I built up my courage with every word. "But it's good to see Lozzie and Twil getting on."

"Oh?" Raine snapped back to me, a smirk on her lips. She glanced at Lozzie trying to do a cartwheel on the grass, before Twil caught her again, Lozzie's slender form crashing into the werewolf's front with a tangle of limbs before Twil righted her. "You think Lozzie's ...?"

"No," I said, quick and sharp.

"She did ask for Twil to be here," Raine said. "You can't rule it out. I think this calls for a 'puppy love' joke."

I shot Raine a look. She cleared her throat in surprise.

"Don't," I said. "I mean it. Lozzie's not given any indication, and I would prefer to respect that. Plus, I'm not making any more assumptions about this sort of thing. I made assumptions about Evelyn and Twil, and I don't think that was good for Evee. I think I helped the pair of them into a mistake."

"Ahhhhh," went Raine. "Evee's not talked to me about it."

"She has to me. A little. And I think maybe I shouldn't have encouraged them into it. Even if it works out. I was ... pushing too hard." I sighed, and shut my mouth as Lizzie wandered back toward us. Spirits padded after her, and a particular creature – a sort of long-tailed lizard made of translucent greasy crystals – stuck so close to her it seemed almost protective.

Twil stood out there on the grass for a moment longer, hands on her hips, frowning at something off to our left. When she finally turned to follow Lizzie, she kept looking at – I followed her gaze – a lady on a bench?

A young lady, in coat and jeans with dark hair in a ponytail, sat on a bench about fifty feet away down one of the snaking pathways, eating a sandwich out of a plastic wrapper. The trees sheltered her from the rest of the park, but did not obstruct the view between us, like a natural cubby in the park's topography.

Twil's pose, the set of her musculature, everything about how she held herself, set me on sudden edge.

Like a hound with a scent.

"Twil?" I asked when she got close, my stomach suddenly churning. "What's wrong?"

"I saw her too," Raine said softly, rising from the swing and putting her weight on her crutch. "What do you think?"

"I don't think it's anything!" Lizzie stage-whispered, eyes wide as she could make them. "I don't recognise her, it's just a person. Just a person. Nothing-nothing."

Suddenly her hand was in mine, and I was on my feet, trying not to stare too openly at the woman on the nearby bench. Something tingled in the back of my skull.

"She keeps looking over at us, and she's crap at being subtle about it," Twil growled between clenched teeth, doing a far better job of not giving us away. She kept sneaking sideways glances. "Was watching Lizzie. I could feel it, yeah? You know my senses are good at things like this, she was, sure as sure."

Raine nodded. "I believe you. Thought so too. Getting the creeps, you know?"

“Maybe she just liked the look of my poncho,” Lozzie murmured. She pressed in close to me and I wound a protective arm around her.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I spoke up. “We’re being ...”

I glanced at the woman on the bench.

She can’t have been much older than me, perhaps in her mid-twenties. She’d glanced up briefly and met my eyes by pure chance. Twil was right, she was doing a terrible job of pretending not to watch us. She made a show of looking one way, then the other, eyes oh-so-innocently wandering over to check on us, then quickly darting away again.

Eye contact at fifty feet distance, for less than a second. I couldn’t even see her pupils, let alone read what lay behind them.

But abyssal instinct just knew.

She must have realised we’d seen her watching, because she started to get up.

“Want me to go get her?” Twil grunted. “Could question her, quiet like. There’s hardly anybody around.”

“Nah,” Raine said. “Too much risk. We should leave, and call Eevee, let her know, if she’s-

“Heather? Heathy-Heathy? Heathy?” Lozzie was tugging on my arm, going panicked and breathless. “Raine, Heather’s not here.”

Lozzie was right. I was not there, and I was not listening.

Abyssal instinct *knew*.

And this time, that side of me was not afraid. There was no conscious decision. One half of me simply acted, took control, and damn the consequences.

“It’s one of them,” I murmured through numb lips.

I took three paces forward before I even knew what was happening. I let go of Lozzie’s hand before the mental transformation completed, before the hiss rose up my throat and abyssal instinct overwhelmed my rational mind. Somebody said my name – probably Raine – and somebody else said “woah, what the fuck” as I picked up my feet and took off at a dead run, straight at the

woman getting up from the bench.

She looked up, saw me coming, and swallowed a scream.

I just went for her. Full on, no restraint, running across fifty feet of grass, pure instinct. One foot in front of the other, as fast as I could make them go.

Now, I will be the first to admit that I am not the most athletic person in the world. In fact, I hadn't sprinted in a very long time. If anybody in the park saw me in that moment, all they'd have seen was a rather scrawny young woman doing a very poor job at covering ground. I stumbled, I planted my feet wrong, it's a miracle I didn't twist an ankle or pull a muscle, and I was panting my lungs out before I'd covered even half the distance.

The cold survivalist logic of the abyss did not care. This prize was worth the damage.

She stank of the Eye.

Staring at me in blind terror, she fumbled with her bag, dropped it, had to pick it up again and managed to draw a pen-knife in one hand and a small metal cylinder in the other. Hands shaking, eyes wide, she backed up a few paces as if resisting the urge to run. She had only seconds to make the decision.

Instinct demanded the tools for the job, and hyperdimensional mathematics happily provided. I was maybe twenty paces from her when a tiny pop of pain burst inside in my head as I flicked the essential value from a zero to a one, and my phantom limbs exploded into writhing, strobing, perfect life from my sides, tugging and pulling on flesh deep inside my torso.

But this time they had some additions – barbed hooks of bone set in rotating sockets.

I hadn't needed to consciously build those. Too much time watching squid videos on youtube.

In the abyss I'd been prey. I'd hidden in the dark and lived off algae and slime. But for this task, I needed to be a predator, and my body knew how.

Instinct screamed at me to shove a tentacle into the woman's head. Pin her down and eat her thoughts, pluck apart the electro-chemistry of her brain, find the Eye's subtle control just like I had

with Edward's servitor. A human being was so much more complex than a servitor, and there was no chance I could go blundering about in there without doing incredible, irreversible damage. I'd leave this woman a gibbering wreck, or in a coma, at best.

Abyssal instinct did not care. It cared about my friends, my mate, my pack, and it cared about Maisie. But it did not care about random apes.

And it was *me*. I cannot pass responsibility off onto a part of me by externalising it. I made that decision, I gave in to the urge, I wanted to do it.

When I was almost upon her, the ex-cultist, the Eye-ridden woman, lifted the little metal cylinder, pointing it at me, hoping to catch me with the end before I could touch her. But she couldn't see the strobing pneuma-somatic tentacles. Her other hand held the little pen-knife in a white-knuckle grip. Up close, she was obviously a wreck. Eyes ringed with dark bags, a twitching tic in her face, her body bony beneath her clothes in the manner of somebody who had not eaten enough for weeks on end. She clamped down on a scream, teeth together, feet scuffing in panic as she forced herself to stand her ground.

I was almost on her, ready to grab her at wrists and ankles and hold her in place while I unpicked her brain.

And then Twil slammed into my back and brought me down.

a very great mischief – 13.9

Everybody should experience being tackled to the ground, at least once. Preferably with a soft landing.

Perhaps not ‘being tackled to the ground by your werewolf friend only seconds before you maim or kill a person who (probably) does not deserve to die’. That part was all on me.

It is quite the humbling experience. Twil hit me from behind, shoulder ramming into the base of my ribs, arms looping around my middle, head tucked against my side. The impact knocked the wind out of me and scrambled the inside of my head before we even hit the ground. All one’s plans and thoughts get shaken apart like a snow globe. A hundred pounds of meat and muscle has slammed into you, so the brain drops back to basic survival instinct. Doesn’t matter if it’s your friend hitting you, doesn’t matter if you have a rugby ball in your hands, or six additional limbs tipped with pads of rotating bone hooks, everything stops and restarts from cold. It’s like being switched off and on again.

Which was exactly what I needed.

I went down face first in a tangle of limbs. The ground wasn’t too hard this time of year, not yet baked solid by summer sun, so the worst I got was a bruise on my chin and grass stains down my hoodie. My pneuma-somatic limbs and human arms alike lay stunned. Felt like minutes but it was only a second or two, as I lay there panting for breath and blinking at the grass suddenly so close to my face.

Twil knew what she was doing, and didn’t take any chances. She quickly let go of my midsection, sat up, planted her weight firmly on my backside, and pinned my shoulders to the ground.

“Er ... Heather, right. Stay down, yeah?” she said.

My tentacles twitched and slapped at the ground. One of them followed a still-stuttering half-thought and reached forward for the boots of the ex-cultist woman in my peripheral vision.

“I can still-” I panted.

“Heather, fuck,” Twil grunted through her teeth. “Stay down.”

“ ... okay.”

Predatory instinct and abyssal euphoria guttered out to almost nothing. I was in shock, at myself. If Twil hadn't hit me that hard, would I have turned on her? Would I have tried to fight her too? Had I really been about to do the unthinkable?

Twil hadn't actually hit me that hard, which probably saved me an injury. She hadn't needed to run particularly fast to catch up, still well within normal human limits. No amount of abyssal instinct nor any number of additional limbs could overcome the fact that I was five foot nothing with a stride to match, and possessed the leg muscles of a medieval scribe. Raine could have caught me instead, if she hadn't been slowed by her crutch; Lozzie could easily have matched me too, though she might have struggled to keep me pinned to the ground as Twil so easily did. By any reasonable standard I had taken a relatively long time to cross those fifty feet which had separated me from my cowering, wide-eyed, ex-cultist prey.

Which raised the question – why hadn't she run?

I was too winded and too horrified at myself to realise the implication. Twil was too busy keeping me pinned to think of asking. Raine and Lozzie were two pairs of footsteps still hurrying across the grass to join us.

“Oh sh-shit,” I heard the ex-cultist stammer. She stumbled back, almost tripping over her own feet.

“You stay right fuckin' there,” Twil growled at her – really growled, deep and low and dangerous, reverberating in her chest. To hear that so close, while pinned to the ground, was not a fun experience. Ancient ape instincts screamed warnings about predators. My bowels clenched up and my heart threatened to burst from my chest.

The Eye Loyalist was panting almost as hard as me. Sideways in my peripheral vision, framed by towering clouds in the void of blue sky above, I saw her shake her head.

Then, suddenly, Lozzie filled my vision, all pastel colours and floating strands of wispy blonde hair. She was on her knees in an instant, face right up to mine. A few remaining diminutive spirits

clung to her poncho and shoulders, but they fled and scattered rather than stay close to me.

“Heathy, Heathy, it’s okay, no, no-no, it’s okay,” she whispered.

One of her hands went to my cheek, but the other went to one of my restless tentacles, quickly sliding up and along on a collision course with the pads of razor-sharp rotating hooks. Lozzie’s soft skin versus pneuma-somatic bone. There could be no contest; I retracted the hooks completely before she reached them. I folded them back below the pale luminescent flesh, put them away, and unmade them.

“Good girl,” Lozzie whispered for my ears alone. She was smiling, but it did not look easy.

“Oh God, oh fuck, oh fuck,” the ex-cultist was saying.

“Run and I’ll shoot you in the back,” Raine said.

I would have rolled my eyes at that, but I was too busy freaking out.

Raine spoke not a single decibel louder than normal, but somehow her voice cut through all indecision. I couldn’t see her from on the ground, but I knew she was a pace or two behind us.

Twil twisted round on top of me. “In public?! You fucking mad?!”

“Heather,” Raine said, “you okay? Lozzie said you have your tentacles out.”

“She’s an Eye cultist,” I panted, trying to twist my head to see Raine. “She is. I- I know it. She is!”

“Okay, I believe you. Are you okay?”

“I did it as gentle as I could,” Twil said.

“I’m ... I’m ... ” I managed, throat closing up, face burning. “I-I won’t ... I won’t- I won’t hurt ... I-”

“Let her up,” said Raine.

“You sure?” Twil asked.

“Yeah. And thanks, Twil. I mean it. Let her up.”

“Sorry Heather,” Twil mumbled as she let go and stood. She

reached down to help me up.

But the second her weight was off me, I was already lurching to my feet, pneuma-somatic tentacles pushing me up, one hand in Twil's, the rest of me wobbling into Lozzie's arms. I was still panting, half with panic, half from the sprint, my face burning. The Eye Loyalist gasped and flinched back, as if afraid I was going to touch her.

Sensible woman.

Horror and guilt mingled into a sickening cocktail, spiced with abyssal euphoria. With my tentacles still manifested, I still felt inherently, elementally *right*, despite what I'd almost just done. I could not reconcile myself. I felt like I was about to fly apart. I hiccuped and panted, with nowhere to turn.

But none of us had time to think, let alone wallow in guilt.

"Want me to take her now?" Twil growled between her teeth, locked onto the ex-cultist lady.

"Wouldn't risk it," Raine said, low and soft, nodding at the little metal cylinder the woman was still holding out toward us in one shaking hand. "What's that you got there, a pipe bomb?"

Now I was more than a guided missile of tooth and claw, I saw it clearly – a steel cylinder about the size of a commercial glow-stick, with a cap on either end. The middle was decorated with a trio of pronged symbols that made my eyes itch.

The ex-cultist, the Eye Loyalist, the lady who'd been watching us, the human being I'd been about to vivisect and devour, she was right on the edge of her own sanity, holding herself from the precipice by sheer willpower. She looked as if she'd been awake for a week straight and hadn't eaten in a month, eyes bloodshot and ringed with dark bags, gaze darting between the four of us at high speed. Her complexion was almost grey beneath her dark skin, face gaunt with short term malnutrition. Her hair was pulled back in a long, unwashed, greasy ponytail, though her clothes were clean. Her breathing shook with adrenaline. She had no idea how to hold the penknife in her other hand.

"Heathy," Lozzie whispered, and I blinked in surprise as a small hand squeezed the base of one of my pneuma-somatic tentacles. "Heathy you have to put them away put them away before you get tired and fall over, you have to put them away-away. Please please

please. For me.”

Lozzie was right. I was burning through my energy reserves. A minute or two left, at most, before I crashed out.

“This wasn’t meant to happen, wasn’t meant to happen,” the Eye Loyalist babbled.

“Fuckin’ ‘ey,” Twil grunted. “How about you drop your shit and I won’t break you in half?”

“A lot wasn’t meant to happen,” Raine said. “Lower whatever that is and we’ll have a nice little chat, okay? We just wanna know why you’re watching us. Maybe this is all a big misunderstanding. Maybe you were just here by chance. Come on, we’re all in public. Somebody’s gonna walk by any second, or somebody’s gonna spot us doing this. Lower the weapon. We ain’t gonna hurt you.”

“How does that jive with ‘run and I’ll shoot you in the back’?” Twil grunted.

“S’just how I roll,” Raine said.

The cultist swallowed hard and wet her lips, like she was about to say something. But then her eyes flickered past us, to the left and the right.

She made no attempt to hide the glance, no effort to be subtle. She wasn’t trained, or experienced, or the least bit capable of what she’d set out to do today, and it was that glance which convinced me. She’d held her ground before me not with courage, but with exhaustion and lack of options. Abyssal instinct dismissed her in that moment, read her as a liability to her own cause, a floundering pup. She was a normal person, who had once led a normal life, and no idea what she was doing.

Neither did the other two.

They closed on us from behind, at diagonal angles, forming a rough triangle with the young woman. That was the only competent thing they’d done, watching us from three equidistant spots.

Lozzie clamped herself to my side and clung onto my arm. She was shaking like a leaf. My tentacles hugged her close on pure instinct, while the others threw up a warning display. Of course, nobody but her and I could see that.

The second Eye Loyalist was already quite close. He drew to a stop about twenty paces away. He'd probably been waiting back among the trees that lined this side of the park. A black gentleman, perhaps in his fifties or even sixties, with greying hair but built solidly the way a lifetime of casual exercise does to a person – but he was drained inside, eyes exhausted and face sagging with incredible stress. He wore a dark green raincoat and had one hand in a pocket, pointing something at us without revealing it, but his expression did not communicate threat. Wide-eyed, cold sweat rolling down his forehead, his other hand raised in a placating gesture. He was absolutely terrified, even more than the young woman, and it did not take a rocket scientist to figure out why. They shared an obvious family resemblance, in the eyes and mouth and jawline.

A third ex-cultist jogged across the grass from the other side, and skidded to a halt.

He looked like a slightly aged-up version of a stereotypical teenage drug dealer, with little twists of dark hair escaping from under a beanie hat. Shaking inside a lumpy hoodie, a closed folding knife held in both hands in front of him, he clearly had no idea what to do – except lock eyes with me in exasperated mutual recognition.

Even with his face covered in scraggly self-neglect beard growth, the animal impression was as strong as it had been at the top of Glasswick Tower.

“Badger?” I blurted out.

Badger just sighed.

“Fuck!” Twil spat.

“Woah, woah,” Raine said, holding up her free hand, addressing everyone as she stood tall even with her crutch. “Let’s not get too close, yeah? Let’s all keep this nice and cool.”

The older gentleman began to nod.

“Screw cool, man,” Badger said to him, voice shaking, manic and almost spitting his words. “We gotta get this done, right now, man, we gotta get this done.”

“Hey, you, badger-face,” Raine said, sudden and sharp. “I remember you, from that house, with the rest of the cult. You made it out, right? Smart man. You wanna be smart here too, this isn’t worth

your life.”

“My life’s in the shitter,” he hissed back, then glanced to the older guy. “What do we do now, dude? Richie, come on, what do we do?”

“Nothing,” the older gentleman – Richie – said, voice strained to absolute breaking point. Cold sweat rolled down his face and he almost seemed to be struggling to breathe. “We do nothing. Okay?” His eyes flicked to the young woman – his daughter, his niece, granddaughter? “Why aren’t you running?”

She just shook her head, wide-eyed. “I-I ... ”

“If she runs, I’ll shoot her in the back,” Raine repeated, casual as talking about the weather. She slipped her free hand inside her jacket and pointed something at the woman – her fingers or her handgun, I couldn’t tell.

Richie gritted his teeth and glanced left and right – checking to see if other people were too close to us – and then showed the edge of what he was gripping inside his raincoat pocket. A revolver. The sliver of revealed metal almost looked rusty. He shoved it back in his pocket and pointed it at Raine again.

“You do that,” he told her, voice shaking. “And I’ll shoot you too. Swear to God, I will do it.”

“Any of you try anything, I’ll rip your fucking heads off!” Twil growled.

“Who the fuck is *she*?” Badger nodded at Twil.

“I have no idea,” Richie said between clenched teeth.

“You can’t shoot Raine,” I spoke up, then hiccuped once, “because I can stop bullets.”

Badger and Richie shared a glance. Badger nodded. Richie drew a hand across his face.

“That is true,” Richie said. “We- we know that’s true. She can. She’s done it before. Look,” he said to us. “Look, we’ve made a mistake-”

“Mistake?” I hissed, anger mounting, outrage barely kept in check, abyssal instinct beginning to scream at me to pull these people apart where they stood. “You’re still doing the Eye’s bidding, like Saturday morning cartoon villains. You came here to kidnap me and send me back to it and you don’t even know what you’re doing.”

Richie and Badger shared another glance. Something was wrong. Raine shifted her footing, and I could feel the violence approaching.

“There’s no need for anybody to die here today,” Richie said, making a placating gesture with one hand. “Let’s just-”

“Bugger this,” Badger spat. He fumbled to open his folding knife, but only managed to cut himself in the process, yelping and shaking his hand. He sucked on the tiny wound, grimacing.

“You gotta press the little release catch,” Raine pointed out. “Then the blade is free to move. And don’t pull it open toward your body.”

Badger scowled at her, then down at his knife, then shoved it in his pocket. “Richie, we can do this right now. Come on, man,” he said.

Richie shook his head.

“We could!” the young woman piped up. Too close. I rounded on her, a hiss in my throat.

“Don’t let her touch you!” Richie called out.

The ex-cultist lady tripped back and almost went sprawling in the grass, stumbling and righting herself like a woman before a rabid dog, biting down on a scream. She waved her tiny pen-knife in front of herself to ward me off.

“Hey, hey,” Raine raised her voice. “We’re in public, in the middle of Yare park, in broad daylight. The university’s right there,” she pointed, “and there’s plenty of people within shouting distance. One of us starts screaming, this is done. And if you still wanna rumble while there’s people watching, we can make bodies vanish with no fuss. Heather’ll just send you Outside.” She nodded at me. “Who’s going to believe a witness claiming three people just vanished into thin air?”

“Yes,” I hissed – and realised I was almost at the end of my reserves. A hollow space was forming inside my chest, a spiritual abscess, even as adrenaline pulsed through my arteries.

“She can’t get us all,” Badger said. “Right? Right? All we need is to grab her and reach the car.”

“You’ll never get there, dickwad,” Twil growled at him. He flinched.

Raine made eye contact with Richie, who had spoken the most sense so far. “I’m gonna let you leave. Back away, right now.”

“Dad,” the young woman whined. “We can’t. We can’t! I can’t do this anymore.”

“You promise you won’t come after us?” Richie’s throat bobbed. His eyes flicked to the young woman.

Raine took a beat to answer – a beat too long, because Twil got there first.

“Fat chance,” Twil growled.

“Come on then, dude, we do this, right now, right now,” Badger said, trying to work himself up.

“We’ve fucked up, mate,” Richie said. “Just run!”

Badger, sweating and shaking at the end of his rope, did just that. He broke and ran – straight at me.

Richie swore and drew the revolver from his pocket.

I got halfway into the dripping molten fragments of a physics-breaking hyperdimensional equation at the speed of thought, before I realised the gun was a bluff. The weapon was a rusted shell, didn’t even have a cylinder. Richie levelled it just long enough – the blink of an eye – to give cover for his daughter to pick up her feet and run. Raine was still in the process of half-drawing her own weapon when Richie broke and ran too, sprinting back toward the tree-line and the edge of the park.

Twil jerked one way – after her fleeing prey – and then the other, in the split-second that Badger bore down on us.

Reeling from aborted brainmath, with sudden nosebleed running down my face, energy almost spent, I whirled my tentacles to face him. I thrust Lozzie away too, clear of whatever he was going to attempt.

Madness, sheer madness that he’d even try to grab me. The moment he made contact I would send him Outside.

But then he veered, almost tripped, corrected his course. He wasn’t aiming for me at all.

He was going for Lozzie.

I think Lozzie tried to Slip, on instinct, like a bird trying to take flight and discovering the stubs of its own wings. Her eyes

unfocused and this horrible shiver passed through her, a spasm that started in her head and shot down her spine, as if she was about to suffer a epileptic fit. But of course, she couldn't go. Instead she screamed and scrambled back toward me and I felt like such an idiot for pushing her away. Abyssal instinct responded with new hooks of bone and a hiss to shatter glass and was I fully prepared to rip Badger's arms off and pop his head like a grape and-

And Twil's fist caught him in the jaw. Span him over like rag doll. He went down very undramatically, and somehow lost his beanie hat in the process.

Lozzie slammed into my side and stayed there, clinging on tight.

"That's what you get, shitface!" Twil swung at Badger again as he scrambled to his feet, knocking him in the ribs as he scrabbled for the knife in his pocket. He managed to draw it, but Twil knocked it from his hands and he staggered back, blinked at her twice, then turned and ran.

Twil let out a growl and sprinted after him – but she got less than three paces.

"Twil!" Raine snapped – hard and angry, not like her usual self. "Stop."

Twil obliged, skidding to a stop like a cartoon.

"But he's-"

"Raine, no!" I blurted out in panic, burbling through nosebleed and the urge to vomit. "We need one of them. Twil, get him!"

"We need to move, right now, people are going to start asking questions," Raine said quickly, nodding at distant figures in the park. Richie and his daughter were already gone, but a jogger on one of the pathways had stopped running, and was looking our way with his hands on his hips. The day-drinking student picnic were all looking in our direction as well.

"We have to go home, and we have to walk there," said Raine. She crossed the few paces to me as I wobbled and blinked and felt my tentacles beginning to collapse, my energy running out.

"Then go!" Twil said. "They're getting away!"

"They are!" I said. "They- ahhh, oh, aahhhh."

The pain started in my sides, tentacles collapsing into pneuma-somatic ash from the tips downward. Lozzie shivered and whimpered, clinging to me, and that was the only thing which kept me on my feet. Raine grabbed me under the arm, lent me her support.

“I’m on a crutch,” she said to Twil. “Heather’s about to collapse. That might not have been the last of them. I need you to help.”

Twil glanced after Badger, who was almost at the little turn where the pathway vanished around a copse of trees. Another twenty seconds and he’d be at the park gates, and then out into Sharrowford’s streets. Twil grit her teeth and made a huffing noise, a hound straining on her leash.

Lances of pain stabbed into my sides, muscles seizing up as the tentacles’ support structures pulled themselves free from my flesh and fell away into nothingness.

“No ... ” I whined through my teeth.

“What are you gonna do if you catch him?” Raine said quickly. “Beat answers out of him in broad daylight? Don’t run off, Twil.”

Twil finally sighed and nodded, the tension flowing out of her as she shook herself, standing down. “Shit, yeah, okay. Let’s get you all home first. Shit.”

With the last of my energy, with the ghost of a tentacle, merely phantom limb once more, with tenderised muscle and shredded cell walls and bruised ribs, I reached out toward the distant fleeing figure of Badger. He ducked around the trees and put himself beyond our power to catch.

Then the edges of my vision throbbed dark. I keened between my teeth at the pain in my torso, and almost passed out.

= =

Lozzie cried for hours.

She held it together until we got back to the house, sniffing and wiping at her red-rimmed eyes, doing her best to add her attention to Raine’s and Twil’s as we hurried home. I was no good, Twil practically had to carry me, and it was minor miracle that nobody paid us too much attention, what with my nosebleed and the fact I could barely work my legs and the one time I had to stop along

Bluebell Road to vomit into the gutter.

But as soon as we got home, as soon as the door was locked and Raine was calling Evelyn at campus to tell her what had happened, as soon as Zheng appeared at the merest hint of my pain on the air, as soon as Twil zipped about the house checking the locks, Lozzie broke down crying.

She retreated to her bedroom, with Tenny, and buried herself under the covers, crying into her pillow. Even exhausted and bruised and aching inside, I insisted on seeing her as soon as Raine had helped clean my face and forced me to drink a pint of water.

Perhaps Lozzie's distress kept me together. Perhaps it was easier to think about her than myself.

I stroked her hair as she sobbed into her pillow, at the end of my own energy too, tender and aching and with the ghost of bile in my throat, Raine half propping me up. Tenny sat on the end of the bed, po-faced and lost and not quite understanding. After an hour Lozzie finally calmed down and slipped off into an uneasy sleep, the only escape still open to her. I went down too, dragged under by exhaustion and a helping from Evelyn's stash of painkillers.

"You keep her company," Raine murmured, kissing me on the forehead as she tucked a blanket around my shoulders. "You need rest too. Don't worry about anything, we'll keep watch."

"But ... " I mumbled back through sleep and pain. "But Twil's ... if she finds ... "

"If Twil drags anything back with her, I'll wake you. Promise."

The next eight hours descended into a blur of animal instinct and shared body heat and stiffening bruises that denied me any true sleep. I'd kept my tentacles active far too long, drained myself right to empty, and painkillers could not fight every twinge and ache as the bruises set in. I curled around Lozzie as her big spoon, and tried not to move too much, drifting in and out of consciousness.

But some hours later Lozzie got up to go to the toilet, and I woke to find myself wrapped in Zheng's arms instead, soaking in her ambient body heat. Her hunt must have come up cold. Tenny was nowhere to be seen either. When Lozzie didn't return, I pulled my aching carcass from between Zheng's arms and out of bed, hissing pain between my teeth.

“Rest, shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “You are spread thin.”

“Lozzie’s been too long,” I slurred.

Zheng did not argue further. After a sleep-addled stumble through the unlit upstairs hallway while the house brooded in shadows, we found Lozzie huddled on the bathroom floor. The moment we saw her she did that little shake again, the unfocused eyes and the shiver in the head that told me she was trying to Slip.

But she couldn’t. Still restrained by the ghostly dead hands around her ankles, the grasping of a hyperdimensional phantom across the membrane between here and Outside. She started crying all over again, burying her head between her knees.

Zheng scooped her up like she weighed nothing, and carried her back to bed.

She cried for another hour, perhaps, until we lulled her back to sleep.

I didn’t blame her, and if anyone had I would have slapped them. Our trip to the park was meant for her, a brief sally of freedom to punctuate the long unspoken siege, and it had ended with a kidnapping attempt. A clumsy failure of an attempt, but it had reminded her of just how trapped she was, and what was waiting for her if we ever let down our guard.

And now she couldn’t rely on me either. I had *pushed her away* – that it was mistaken didn’t matter – and when she’d tried to escape, she’d found her wings clipped.

And she’d had to help control me.

I tried not to think about that part, but snatches of nightmare broke through the pain and exhaustion. Sleep came and went in fits and starts, and I dreamed of my own hands covered greasy grey brain matter as I rooted around inside a shattered skull.

Energy dripped back, filling the cold void in my chest with something except my own pulped flesh.

Hunger woke me eventually. Deep, gnawing, hollow-belly hunger that set my hands shaking before I’d even finished sitting up in Lozzie’s bed.

“Lozzie?” I croaked into the dark, but she slept on, breathing slow

and even.

Zheng was gone, but somebody had tucked me in snug and warm, and Tenny had appeared on the opposite side of the bed, silken black tentacles wrapped around Lozzie's hands and hips. She was asleep too. Past the foot of the bed, the television cast jagged blue light over the low table and Tenny's toys, with a video game paused on the screen.

The hunger was overwhelming. I simply had to eat. There was no way I was leaving Lozzie to wake up by herself, so I don't know what I would have done if we'd been alone – stuck my head out of the bedroom door and squawked for food like a baby bird? But with Tenny curled up by her side, I didn't feel too much guilt when I wriggled out of bed, leaving Lozzie to stir and murmur against my sudden absence. Though I did have to pause and stay very still for several long moments, as I swallowed a gasp of pain at the stiff bruises blossoming across my flanks, the slow rolling deep aches stabbing into my sides, while simultaneously trying not to quiver too hard with hunger shakes.

I felt like an ancient shrivelled vampire rising from a tomb, as I cracked the door open and shuffled out into the upstairs hallway, my sides creaking like old leather.

The hallway was dark, but cold clear moonlight spilled in through the open curtains, turning the wooden surfaces of Number 12 Barnslow Drive into ephemeral silver. I'd slept the day away. Missed class.

Such a bad girl, Heather. What would your mother say? Skipping classes, trying to commit murder, and torture, and worse. Bad girl.

Monster.

Abyssal instinct drew me to the window. I stared down at the street, silvered by moonlight between hazy orange puddles beneath the street lamps. I scanned for tell-tale shadows cast by waiting predators, or the stealthy lumps of hidden bottom-feeders, or anything out of place. The muscles around my eyes twitched oddly, and I had to screw them up when I realised I'd attempted to blink nictitating membranes I did not possess.

Food smells made my stomach rumble like a tar pit, and drew me downstairs. I had to take the steps carefully, one at a time,

descending into the cavernous space of the front room where spars of moonlight broke the inky darkness, and the far end was flooded with warmth spilling out from the kitchen doorway.

Deja vu struck me, for the second time today.

I'd done this before, months and months ago, when Raine had first brought me to this house. Crept downstairs in the dark, aching and bruised, drawn by the smell of food.

Was I still the same person? Had I become a monster yet?

Too hungry to think about that right then. The soft machine demanded fuel, ape and abyss and Heather all agreed on that.

I shuffled into the warmth and light of the kitchen, following my nose and the sounds of soft conversation. Five pairs of eyes rose to greet me.

"Heather! Hey, you're up!" Raine was up too and out of her seat, almost forgoing her crutch in her haste to reach me.

"Yo," Twil said, raising a hand. She was sat on the far side of the kitchen table and looking extremely awkward, like a teenager forced to endure a dinnertime argument between her parents.

"Shaman," Zheng rumbled, leaning against the wall like she was propping up the whole house. She reached over and placed one hand on the top of my head, and I felt my muscles relax in sympathetic pleasure.

Praem said nothing, just standing off to one side of Evelyn with her hands clasped before her. Evelyn raised an eyebrow at me, waiting while Raine pressed a hand to my forehead and gave me a hug and peered into my eyes to make sure I was truly awake and truly here.

"You with us, yeah?" Raine asked. "Heather?"

"Mmm," I grunted. "I'm ... here, I'm just ... sides hurt. Bruises."

Post-meal debris was scattered across the kitchen table – a crock pot still half-full of chicken stew, thick with gravy, alongside some leftover rice at the bottom of a pan, and four dirty plates. Four? Had Zheng joined the others for dinner? That or Praem, I don't know which seemed more unlikely.

"How are you feeling?" Evelyn asked eventually.

“Hungry,” I croaked.

Raine laughed. Twil laughed too, but it sounded forced. Evelyn huffed a snort, but that was enough for me.

I let Raine guide me to a chair while Praem reheated a very generous portion of rice and stew, and Twil found an excuse to hop up and hover about and get in Praem’s way. That first helping of rice and chicken and thick chunky vegetables barely registered on my palate, I ate so fast, and didn’t fill me up in the slightest. I sat there blinking and half-awake while Praem fetched another.

As hunger started to abate, my mind came back. That’s when I realised everyone was both quiet and tense. Twil was sneaking awkward glances at me. Evelyn was staring at her phone on the table. Zheng was brooding – which was normal, so that didn’t count. Raine was quiet too, which spooked me. She noticed my pause after the first bite of my second bowl of food.

“It’s okay to slow down a bit,” she said with a warm smile.

“ ... what’s happened?” I croaked.

That roused Evelyn. She took a deep breath, sighed, and gestured at her phone, her other hand rubbing at her aching hip in an unconscious gesture.

“We’re all on the edge of our seats,” she said, with faux-sarcasm. “Nicole Webb called fifteen minutes ago, to let us know she was about to begin. If everything is going to plan, she’s already elbow-deep in Harold Yuleson’s files. If not, well ... ” She gestured at the phone again.

“Then we’re ready to move,” Raine said, quiet and confident, with a wink for me. “But my bet is we won’t have to. Nicky knows what she’s about.”

“Oh,” I managed. “Oh, it’s really that late?”

“Mm, past ten.” Evelyn eyed me oddly, as if waiting for something else, a cold curiosity in her eyes.

A lump grew in my throat. I opened my mouth to say something – to beg forgiveness, to apologise, to sob, I don’t know. I never got there.

“Hey, uh,” Twil piped up, having obvious difficulty in the way of a

teenager trying to ask their crush on a date. "Heather, are you ... like ... are you alright?"

I blinked at her, my guilt briefly short-circuited. "... mostly. I think. Thank you for asking though."

Twil's throat bobbed. In the corner of my eye, I saw Zheng's face crack into a truly shit-eating grin, showing all her teeth. Twil shot her a scowl, but that only served to make the grin pull wider.

"Shut up, zombie," Twil growled.

"I did not speak a word," said Zheng.

"Oh for pity's sake, Twil," Evelyn huffed. "Just say it. You're not a coward."

"Everyone just shut the fuck up, okay?" Twil said, then cleared her throat. She wet her lips and grimaced at me. "I mean, like, I did have to tackle you. Are you ... are we ... I'm sorry. Sorry, yeah!" She lit up. "I'm trying to apologise, right. Sorry."

"Oh. Um ... that's the last thing I was thinking about," I admitted. "There's no hard feelings. We're okay."

"I did it textbook like," Twil went on, grimacing. "Best I could. Tried not to bounce your skull or anything or-"

"Twil, there's no need to apologise," I said.

She opened her mouth to carry on, but then stopped and nodded. "Just didn't wanna actually hurt you. You're kinda small and fragile, you know?"

I actually laughed a little, a tiny giggle. "Twil, you're barely taller than me."

"The shaman is not fragile," Zheng purred.

"Yeah yeah." Twil waved us off, blushing. "You know what I mean. Heather's like, petite. Felt weird hurting her."

"Besides," I sighed, looking down at my second bowl of stew, feeling as if I did not deserve food. "I did more damage to myself than you ever could."

Raine squeezed my shoulder.

"Quite," said Evelyn, very unimpressed.

Zheng made a low growling sound in her throat – at Evelyn.

“Down,” Praem intoned. I shook my head too, I would not have them fight over this principle. Zheng trailed off with a grudging snort. Awkward silence fell, and I wanted to curl up and go back to sleep.

“What happened this morning, Heather?” Evelyn asked eventually.

Raine opened her mouth with a soft click, but Evelyn’s hand chopped the air to cut her off.

“Shush,” Praem intoned for her.

“In your *own* words,” Evelyn added. “Raine and Twil have both told me what they saw already. What *happened*?”

I looked up into those big blue eyes with their stress lines. Evelyn was impossible to lie to. I respected her too much, liked her too much. And in that moment, that moment in which Raine and Zheng would make any excuse for me and Twil was too accepting to push back, I realised how much I needed Evelyn to like me too.

“I was going to take that woman apart,” I said. I expected my voice to shake, but it came out plain and even. “I was going to use a tentacle, stick it into her head and hollow out her thoughts, I suppose. Dig out the Eye’s secrets. Core her like an apple.”

‘Shit,’ Twil mouthed silently. Raine rubbed my back. Evelyn stared at me, unreadable.

“I don’t have an excuse,” I went on. “Instinct told me what to do, but ... I wanted to do it. I made a promise, and then I tried to break it. Because I’m turning into ... ”

“You are *not* becoming a monster,” Raine said, and I flinched slightly at the whip-crack in her voice.

“Yeah, I mean, shit,” Twil added with an awkward smile. “Humans do horrible things to each other all the same. Er, I mean, not that ... horrible, uh ... ”

“Why the tentacle in the head?” Evelyn asked, eyes hungry with curiosity.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It just came over me. The logic of it made sense.” I laughed once, a humourless sound which threatened to turn into a sob. “Maybe that’s what the Eye does. Maybe that was

another one of its lessons.”

Evelyn sighed heavily. “I would say that you and I need to have a talk, but I suspect you’re beating yourself up worse than I ever could.”

I nodded, hanging my head.

“Look,” Evelyn said. “None of us disapprove of trying to kill these people-”

“Hey, hey,” Raine piped up with a smirk. “Badger’s made it this far. Dude’s a survivor, big respect. If I catch him I’ll beat him black and blue, but I won’t kill the guy.” She cleared her throat, and added under her breath, “less I have to.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes.

“I don’t want to kill them either,” I said. “Not after what we saw. They were just regular people, Eevee. They were so scared of me. Of us.”

Evelyn wet her lips and huffed. “Well, good. Fine. I suppose. My point is, you-”

“Almost crossed a line, yes. I know.” I bit down on my lower lip.

“The predator does what it must,” Zheng purred. I tried to give her a scowl, but she met my eyes with such placid calm I couldn’t keep it up. “Do you blame the wolf or the bear, for eating, shaman? You are real, you cannot live forever on tinned meat without facing the truth.”

Evelyn thumped an elbow on the table and put her forehead in her hand. “Yes, thank you for keeping the message coherent, Zheng.”

Zheng shrugged, unconcerned. “The shaman will not bring herself harm by following her nature.”

“I almost did,” I hissed.

“But hey, Heather,” Raine said. “You didn’t. That’s what we’re all here for, right? Help each other keep promises.”

My anger boiled over in a sudden flash. “I wouldn’t even be in this position if Edward Lilburne didn’t have our *fucking* book!”

Everyone stared at me. I blinked several times, red in the face, not

knowing where to turn my eyes. Then I hiccuped twice in quick succession.

“Holy shit,” Twil whispered. “She swore.”

“Well, it’s true!” I snapped again. “He probably doesn’t even know why we need it, doesn’t understand that he’s delaying everything, that he’s holding up-” I huffed through my nose. “So I’m scratching for any advantage, anything at all, and I’m willing to hurt people and commit horrible acts, yes. Because we don’t have the book so we can’t safely face the Eye so I have to grow claws. And he must have sent those people. He must have! For Lozzie. I won’t have it! I won’t!”

I felt like punching the table, but that would only have earned me another bruise. Instead I sat there taking deep breaths while Raine rubbed my back. Zheng stepped over and put a huge hand on my head as well, and I slipped out of anger and into sheer exhaustion.

“That part I agree with,” Evelyn said softly.

“Snap,” said Twil.

“These two have both been hunting,” Raine said with a nod at Twil and Zheng. “But they didn’t turn anything up, not near the park, and not near the house. Those three clowns who came at us, I think we terrified ‘em. I doubt they’re gonna try again. Don’t worry about Lozzie, okay?”

“You don’t know that,” Twil said, then shut her mouth at Raine’s warning smirk.

“I appreciate the effort,” I said. “But it’s hard to feel reassured right now. I’m sorry.”

“There is a very serious question here, which none of us have asked yet,” Evelyn said, slowly and carefully.

“What’s that, general?” Raine asked. Evelyn rolled her eyes, but went on nonetheless.

“How could anybody know you were going to be at the park this morning?” she asked.

Evelyn’s mobile phone chose that exact moment to light up with an incoming call, vibrating against the table and playing an anime theme song as the ring tone. She jumped, I jumped, Twil jerked

round. Evelyn slapped the ‘answer call’ button.

“Speak,” she said.

“In, out, in, out, shake it all about,” Nicole’s voice came from the phone’s speaker, made tinny and electronic, but singing with pure exuberance. “You do the hokey-cokey and you turn around, and that’s what it’s all about! Wheeeey!”

We all looked at each other, except Evelyn who frowned at the phone as if it had turned into a live frog. Raine burst out laughing.

“Miss Saye? Hello?” Nicole tried again, a little breathless.

“What the fuck was that?” Evelyn spat. “Where are you? What’s happened?”

“I’m sitting in my car,” came Nicole’s voice again. She did not sound like herself. She sounded like Nicole Webb processed through a kilo of cocaine. “Safe and sound, with one cloned computer hard drive and a stack of photocopies of everything and anything I could grab, and a gut absolutely saturated with adrenaline. Yeah!”

A slap resounded down the phone, Nicole hitting her car’s steering wheel with the palm of her hand.

“Well done Nicky!” Raine cheered. “Hell yeah, girl.”

I sighed with relief too. At least we were getting somewhere.

“Thank you so much, Nicky,” I added.

“Thank you, thank you. I’ll be here all week. Actually no, I’ll be reading these documents, but first I need to go pick up a lot – and I do mean a *lot* – of weed, and get very fucking stoned, thank you very much, ladies.” She let out a long breath, suddenly slowing down. “Actually sod that, I’m gonna sit on the toilet for an hour. This is not glamorous. I am getting too old to start a new career as a burglar.”

“Have you made it look like a break in?” Evelyn asked.

“Yeah, like we said. Cleared out their petty cash, just a couple of hundred. I don’t think we’ll fool somebody like Yuleson, but whatever.”

“Send me another message when you’re home safe,” Evelyn said. “And Nicole, thank you. I appreciate a job well done.”

“Haha!” Nicole laughed. “And thank you for paying me, because fuck doing this for free. Signing off for now.”

Evelyn ended the phone call and we all breathed a collective sigh of relief. Zheng purred like a huge, satisfied cat.

“That’s more than enough excitement for one day,” Evelyn said, leaning back in her chair. She rotated her neck, which made her spine click three times. “Heather, do you think we could do anything for Lozzie? To make her feel any more safe-”

But Evelyn never got to finish that sentence. She cut off in surprise as three of us – me, Praem, and Zheng – all turned to look at the top of the open doorway to the magical workshop.

One of the spider-servitors, all black chitin and waving stingers and crystalline eyes flickering in the light, came scuttling out of the doorway upside down, shooting across the ceiling with surprising speed. I flinched and almost yelped, I’d forgotten how fast the things could move when they needed to. The armoured servitor crossed the ceiling as Zheng showed all her teeth, but it wasn’t going for her.

It vanished through the opposite doorway, into the little utility room.

“Heather? What was that?” Evelyn demanded.

“Woah, yeah, hey-” Twil was saying. Raine was already tense all over, ready to move. She knew.

“Spiders,” Praem intoned, and pointed very accurately so Evelyn would know where it went.

“On the move,” Zheng purred, as the second one shot from the workshop doorway as well, sideways along the wall and into the front room. Praem pointed again.

Evelyn stared for a moment, eyes wide at nothing. Our gazes met.

“Something’s here,” I said.

“Yes,” she agreed, gone quite pale in the face, swallowing hard.

“Something has crossed the boundary of the house, at the front wall or the back garden.”

Raine was already on her feet, grabbing something from inside her jacket on the back of her chair. Zheng was three paces away in an

instant, loping toward the back door. Twil bared her teeth in a growl. Praem stepped closer to Evelyn. My eyes went to the ceiling, up to where Lozzie was still sleeping.

I pushed the chair back and stood up, wobbly but mobile, intending to go her – and that's when I saw him.

In the back garden, visible through the small kitchen window, picked out by the moonlight like an idiot standing on a ridge in the middle of a battlefield; crouched in the grass, as if that would make any difference.

Badger saw me looking, and froze.

a very great mischief – 13.10

Abyssal instinct came roaring back.

I'd spotted Badger through the kitchen window, caught him in the act of sneaking through our back garden, unmistakable even beneath the ghostly moon and the distant backwash of orange light pollution, in his lumpy shapeless hoodie with curls of springy hair escaping from under the hood, frozen in shock about six feet from the gnarled old tree where Tenny's cocoon had once grown. A fleeting glimpse, a quarter of a second – and a tidal wave crashed through my endocrine system.

Human adrenaline and oceanic hunting drive, the affront of territorial intrusion, the implicit threat to my friends, my pack, to Lozzie sleeping upstairs unaware, the sudden vibration in my arms and legs, the dilation of blood vessels, tunnel vision, hunger; all of it hit me before the others had time to react to my gasp.

A single aching heartbeat of predatory urge wracked me, body and soul.

I wanted to sprout tentacles, to fling myself headfirst through the glass and metal of the kitchen window, like a squid ejecting herself from a crack in the rock in ambush. Instinct provided a plan, a trajectory straight to Badger's cranium, a crystal clear mental image.

Luckily, I was still me, and therefore still an exhausted wreck. If I'd been well-rested, less bruised, and perhaps if I hadn't already attempted to mutilate and murder a person that very morning, perhaps I would have discovered that smashing through windows with one's own body does not work like it does in the movies. I'd likely have bounced off and made a complete prat of myself. Even if I had managed to shatter the glass, I'd have covered myself in wounds and landed in the garden like a sack of wet meat. Abyssal instinct cannot make up for multiple lacerations from broken glass.

Guilt or willpower or weakness, all or one held me back for a crucial second, no matter how I drooled and shivered with desire.

And then my phantom limbs were whipping through the air, trying

to grasp the edge of the table to hold me steady, lunging for the doorway to the utility room to follow Zheng. Even as psychological constructs, mental ghosts, their motion demanded support and response in the tension and flex of real muscles in my flanks – real muscles which I had abused to breaking point that morning, and which were currently a mass of bruises.

Incredible pain flared through my sides as the muscles seized up.

“Ahhhhh!” I cried out and almost fell over, losing sight of Badger.

For a few moments everything was chaos. I was clutching myself, panting and sweating with pain. Somebody caught me and held me up. My own name shot right past my ears. A growl, scrambling feet, shouting, the back door slamming open followed by a tiger’s rumble through a throat of granite.

That got through. Zheng was outdoors, going for Badger.

“N-no!” I ripped myself back up, eyes watering, and nearly pulled myself right out of Raine’s arms. “She can’t, she-”

“Heather, woah-”

“She can’t!”

The kitchen was bedlam. Twil span away from the window and raced for the back door as well. Evelyn was white-faced and stuck in a silent stammer, half-retreated toward her magical workshop. Praem was opening one of the kitchen cupboards for God alone knows what reason. I’d tipped over two chairs somehow and managed to knock an empty plate onto the floor, which had shattered across the flagstones in a dangerous mess of sharp fragments. Raine had her pistol in one hand, me in the other, crutch abandoned. She was putting her weight on the wrong leg.

And through the kitchen window, out in the dimly lit garden amid the overgrown grass and untended flowerbeds choked with weeds, I glimpsed the shadowy figure of Badger again.

The idiot hadn’t run.

This time he’d managed to open his folding knife without injuring himself. In a whirl of confusion as I was already turning for the back door, I saw him holding the tiny blade out in front, with his other hand curled in a defensive posture.

He knew what Zheng could do. He must have known she'd go through that like wet paper. He had seconds.

Which meant so did I.

"Heath-" Raine started to say my name, to hold me back. To be fair, between the pain in my sides and general exhaustion, I could barely walk, and Badger might not be alone.

"Help me!" I screamed in her face.

To her infinite credit, Raine understood me before I even understood myself. She didn't argue. She jammed her shoulder beneath mine, which sent a ricochet of pain shooting down through my bruises and playing discordant notes across my nerve endings. I cried out through my teeth, but it was worth it, as she dragged me quickly along in Twil's wake, into the darkness of the utility room and through the now open back door, beneath the massive hanging bulk of the spider-servitor which could not or would not go beyond the boundaries of the house. We burst out into the sudden chill and silvery moonlight in the back garden.

Badger was about fifteen or twenty feet away, just in front of the gnarled old tree. The grass at his ankles, green and verdant in the warming spring weather, was a blanket of sliver threads beneath the moonlight.

Twil was only a pace or two ahead of us on the little patio, teeth bared, head swivelling left and right to track for other threats in the thick shadows of the overgrown garden.

Zheng was about to pounce.

A savage grin ripped across her face at the prospect of a fight, her massive frame lowered and rocked back on one leg, tensing and ready to spring.

"Zheng, no!" I choked out.

She juddered to a halt like a stalled train, a frustrated growl between her teeth. One eye flicked back over her shoulder at me.

Badger, wide eyed and panting with terror, clearly could not believe this reprieve. Beneath his hood I could make out the whites of his eyes, his shuddering mouth as he heaved for breath, the cold sweat rolling down his face. Both his hands shook, knife held out before him.

Hunting instinct stirred in my chest once again, told me to rush at him, bring him down, hold him in place. *Eat his brain.*

I said no.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled, deeply displeased.

“Yo, Heather, what?” Twil said.

“I have to do it right this time,” I wheezed, as Raine raised her pistol to cover Badger all the same. “I have to do it right, to-”

Badger’s eyes flickered from Zheng to me. He wet his lips, and found the shreds of his courage again.

“Sod it!” he spat.

He brought his knife and his free hand together, screwed up his eyes in a grimace – and slit open his own palm.

None of us had expected that. Not even Zheng knew how to react.

“What the shit?” Twil said.

“Uh oh,” Raine murmured.

Badger drew rapid shuddering breaths through his teeth, holding his wounded hand low and clenched into a tight fist. A thick trickle of blood dripped between his knuckles, the crimson made black by moonlight, staining the grass beneath.

“Ahhhhhh, ahhhhh,” he hissed in pain. “Alright, yeeeeeeeah, ah fuck. Fuck me. There we go, there we go.”

He raised the fist, toward us, and began to uncurl his fingers.

We were all familiar enough with magic and paranoid enough to predict what this might mean. Twil tensed to leap out of the way. Raine twisted her body to shield me. I gasped as I scrambled for some kind of hyperdimensional equation to protect us, though I had no idea exactly what Badger had just done to himself. Zheng bared her teeth and was about to leap in front of his aim, when a sudden snap wave of cold washed over us all, sucking the breath from my lungs and the heat from beneath my clothes.

Evelyn stepped out onto the patio beside us, walking stick clicking on the stones, her scrimshawed thighbone held tight in one fist, breathing hard as her own magic took effect. Praem followed beside

her, carrying a carving knife.

“Whatever you are trying to do, I have us all protected.” Evelyn snapped at Badger. “And you are doing it practically in public. There are neighbouring houses barely ... across ...”

Badger finished opening his hand. Evelyn trailed off in shock. Zheng retreated a couple of paces, which made the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and set abyssal instinct screaming warnings into my lizard brain. Zheng, retreating? Very bad sign.

“Siiiiiiick,” said Twil.

A mouth had opened in Badger’s palm, where he’d cut himself. Thick red lips framed a set of discoloured teeth filed down to needle-sharp points. A tongue rolled out, lapping at the air, making slick wet noises as it rolled. Behind that tongue the interior of the hand-mouth was dark as the void, and seemed to extend back further than Badger’s flesh could possibly accommodate.

The mouth began to whisper, on the edge of hearing.

Badger grimaced at us, in obvious pain. His eyes flickered around, a cornered animal still looking for escape as he warded us off with this strange grotesque magic. Quickly, reluctant to take his eyes off us, he glanced over his shoulder at the garden fence, about another twenty feet behind him.

Abyssal instinct did not care about the strange hand-mouth. Did not recognise it. Abyssal instinct screamed at me to pounce.

“Bet that comes in handy,” Raine said with a laugh.

“What the hell have you done to yourself?” Evelyn snapped. To my surprise she sounded both offended and outraged.

“*Ooran juh*,” Zheng growled with naked disgust.

“You know it too?” Evelyn shot at her.

“I heal any wound, any bite,” Zheng growled at Badger. “I am faster than you, idiot wizard, for that thing will devour you before it can touch my flesh.”

“Then why don’t you fuckin’ leap at me, hey?” Badger spat back at her, panting and glancing about, licking his lips. His eyes met mine. “Let me pass. Let me go. Come on, you tell them let me go, or I’ll-”

“No,” I told him. “You’re my chance to do this right. And you came here for Lozzie, I’m not letting you walk away.”

His grimace got worse, face screwing up in panic.

The whispering from the hand-mouth teased at my ears, the words impossible to make out, but somehow promising secrets if only I would listen closer.

“I don’t think we have an option, Heather,” Evelyn said. She lowered the thighbone and the cold snap collapsed like a bubble. Spring night wind whipped back in, ruffling my hair with invisible fingers. Evelyn sagged slightly and Praem supported her side. “Plus, he’ll be dead within hours anyway.”

“What?” I blinked at her.

“Yeah, thanks,” Badger said, dripping sarcasm. “Just let me go then.”

“How long have you been doing that, hm?” she asked him, almost pityingly. “Days, weeks? That thing will kill you. Never thought I’d see it in reality. What on earth kind of deals have you been making, you little fool?”

“Anything that might get the Eye out of my head,” Badger raged. “Screw you all!”

“No,” I muttered, trying to raise my voice. Raine understood, and helped me stagger forward a pace or two. “No, no, I can- I can help, I can-”

“And it doesn’t work anyway,” Badger went on. “Now let me past, at the door round to the front.” He nodded past the side of the house. “I’ll go, we can forget I was here. Just let me go.”

But Zheng was already moving, sliding sideways to cover his one obvious retreat. Twil bared her teeth and raised her hands as ghostly wolf-flesh began to wrap around her forearms, turning nails into claws.

“Stop that,” Evelyn snapped at Twil, and the werewolf transformation halted, Twil blinking at Evelyn in surprise. “Don’t you go anywhere near him! And what are you thinking, transforming out here in public?”

“But- I- Eevee, he-”

Badger took a step back.

“Don’t,” I whined at him. “I can help, I can, I know I can, I-”

Badger turned and fled. Stumbling, sprinting, he threw himself at the back fence, dropping his knife in the process. Feet kicking at the boards, hands hauling himself up, he scrambled for the top of fence as Zheng broke for him like a loosed hound. She covered the gap in the blink of an eye, moving fast as any cheetah, but he waved the hand-mouth in her general direction and she skidded to a halt, growling in frustration. He finally managed to get one leg over the fence, then fell with an undignified thump on the other side. A moment later we could all hear him running across the broken scrub ground, making for the nearest road on that side – Brickbridge Lane – or perhaps for one of the other nearby gardens.

Zheng crouched, tensed to spring, to leap the fence.

“Zheng, no!” I cried out.

I pulled myself free from Raine’s supporting embrace and almost fell over in the grass as I staggered forward, desperate in the grip of so many conflicting desires, clamping my arms around my middle as my bruises flared with pain. The damp grass soaked through my bare socks, chilling my toes. Zheng stalked back toward me with wild eyes and a growl in her teeth.

“He’s getting away!” Twil said. “What the hell?!”

“Yes, shaman,” Zheng rumbled, eyes boring holes through me.

“What use mercy in the face of death? He stands as nothing before me, not even with the mark of the defiler in his hand, he-”

“It has to be me!” I blurted out at her, panting for breath. “It has to be me. You don’t get it, it has to be me.”

Raine caught up, limping slightly, and put her arm around my shoulders. “Heather, hey, hey, slow down. Let Zheng go after him. Zheng, you ready?”

“The shaman desires me not to go, little wolf,” Zheng growled, staring at me for a real explanation.

“Yo, dumb-asses, he’s getting the fuck away.” Twil backpedaled past, going for the fence, looking at us like we were all mad. “He gets to the bridge or back onto Bluebell, we’ll never catch him.”

But Praem strode right up to Twil and grabbed her wrist, held her firm.

“H-hey!”

“Stay,” Praem intoned.

“You are not going anywhere near that man,” Evelyn snapped at her.

“Oi, off!” Twil shook Praem free. In retrospect I’m certain the doll-demon let her go to forestall a fight, which was the last thing we needed right now. Twil turned back to Evelyn. “We’ve gotta track him, Eevee, while these two figure what the hell they’re doing.” She thumbed at me and Zheng.

“If that mouth bites you, the wound will never heal,” Evelyn said. “Werewolf or not. In the worst case you will bleed to death. Understand?”

“Look, I won’t go near him, promise.” Twil held both hands up as she skipped backward toward the fence.

“And do not listen to the whispering!” Evelyn shouted. “Not a word of it!”

“I’ll track him only, keep my distance. I’ve got his scent, it’s easy. I’ve got my phone. Heather, yo?” She caught my eye and waggled her hand. “I’ve got my phone. Call me, I’ll be on his tail.”

And with that, Twil went up and over the fence in a flash, still dressed only in tshirt and jeans, vaulting like an Olympic athlete. She hit the other side at a dead sprint.

“Full moon’s gone to her idiot head,” Evelyn hissed.

Praem stepped back toward Evelyn, eyes up and alert for other cultists hiding in the corners, but the night around us was empty as Twil’s footsteps raced off into the city.

“I want you to catch him, yes, but you have to take me with you,” I was babbling to Zheng. “You have to take me too, it has to be me, I have to try, I have to.”

“Heather,” Raine said with a touch of steel in her voice. “You can hardly walk upright.”

“Then Zheng can carry me,” I said, colder than I intended as I

shrugged off Raine's arm. She staggered slightly without her crutch. "S-sorry, Raine, sorry! Oh, it has to be me."

"You need to atone, don't you?" Evelyn asked.

Raine's eyes lit up. "Ah."

I shook my head. I couldn't lie, not to myself here, not with this. "I need to *hunt*."

Evelyn frowned with exasperation. Raine laughed. Zheng grinned in sudden savage approval. I blushed hard and confused, the urge pulling at my chest and my tentacles, driving my legs into motion, a tingling at the back of my skull. Abyssal instinct was like a full-body itch I could not scratch. I needed to run, to propel myself through the night after fleeing prey, to sink barbed hooks into-

"Nature is red in tooth and claw," Praem sung.

Evelyn side-eyed at her. "Yes, thank you."

"I have to do it right this time," I said. "I can do it. I can hunt without the intent to kill him, t-to vivisect him. This is part of me. But the violence this morning was not. That was a choice, it doesn't have to be nature. I can offer him help, a way out. If he'll take it."

"Is this really the time for your personal redemption?" Evelyn deadpanned at me.

"It's an opportunity to study how the Eye interacts with a human mind," I stammered out quickly. "And if he's going to die, if he's so difficult to get near, Zheng can hardly disable him and bring him back to house. I have to go. It has to be me. It has to be. Nobody deserves the Eye."

A huge hand descended onto my shoulder. Zheng's grin split the night and my heart leapt like fire.

"Shaman, I will take you into any hell you care to conquer. The hunt is in you, we must move fast to catch this prey, but you cannot run. I will carry you."

She started to turn and crouch, to let me climb onto her back, but Raine put out a hand and gave us a doubtful twist of her head.

"I won't be able to keep up with this one." Raine gestured at her left leg, at the way she was struggling to keep her weight on her thigh. To my incredible surprise she made no effort to hide her doubt and

discomfort. There was no joke in her expression, no dawn of confidence. Only truth. "Heather, you're wiped out already. You go brainmath, you're liable to collapse, and I won't be there to catch you."

I had no answer to that. Not because Zheng could protect me, but because Raine wouldn't be there.

"I will be," Zheng purred. "I will keep the shaman safe." Soft as velvet. I'd never heard her speak like that before.

Raine locked eyes with her. "She's exhausted. Worn out. Hungry. You better not slip up, Zheng."

"I will never."

I grit my teeth in humiliated frustration, face burning as they spoke about me. Raine was right, but her words hurt me on a level she couldn't possibly have known.

My flanks, my oblique muscles, my abdominal wall, all of it was bruised black and blue from using my tentacles for too long this morning, and the tissue damage ran deep. I was already dreading a whole week of recovery, of those bruises stiffening and turning green and yellow as they healed. My head was still thick with sleep despite the adrenaline and the cold night air, and I was hardly dressed for a nighttime jaunt, still in the tshirt and pajama bottoms I'd dragged on to join Lozzie in bed, with nothing but thick socks on my feet. My teeth were already threatening to chatter.

But bruises and muscle damage were only the tip of the iceberg. I was drained. Running on fumes. Despite a belly full of food, my body felt like it had been burning fat reserves for hours, to fill the void inside.

Manifesting my tentacles required so much energy, let alone maintaining them. I needed to pick myself up and go, Zheng piggyback or not. I needed energy, right now, but all I had was biochemistry, lugged around in this sloshing chemical factory of a body. Instinct said be a predator, but I didn't have the physical form to achieve that.

I needed a power plant. A nuclear core in place of my heart, a fusion reaction in my gut.

And with that thought, I almost made one.

On my journey home through the deepest, darkest parts of the abyss, I'd clung to geothermal vents for heat and scraped pale slime off rocks for protein. I'd harvested every scrap of nutrition I could, and run it through metabolic pathways which weren't even possible in our reality. In the absolute black of crushing pressure at the bottom of the oceanic wasteland, I'd often had to turn those pathways in on themselves, twisting like a mobius strip. None of that was possible here.

But if tentacles and webbed fingers and a hiss in my throat could approximate the perfect form I'd possessed out there, then a pneuma-somatic reactor inside my torso could approximate abyssal biochemistry.

In the same way my phantom limbs had first appeared, I simply became aware of it, as if it had been there all along. A trilobe knot of gritty muscle and thick tissue nestled deep in the left side of my abdomen, filled with honeycomb structures for glucose production, riven by crypts for enzyme transport, laced with sacks for lipid synthesis – and other structures for unspeakable processes, ones that had no proper home in a human body.

Heat, glorious heat like a banked fire, flooded up my side. And just for a second, that heat almost filled the merest fraction of the hungry void.

I gasped and shuddered and placed both hands against my abdomen.

"Heather?" Raine's eyes went wide and she grabbed me by the arm. Zheng was up as well, ready to catch me as I stumbled back, blinking down at myself.

The trilobe organ wasn't real, of course. It wasn't even pneuma-somatic. Not yet. It was an image-ghost, a memory of abyssal perception imprinted on my human biology. A phantom limb. The heat wasn't real, it was all in my head; pressing my hands beneath my tshirt proved my skin was just as cold as before. But the tentacles had started as phantom limbs too, and they were very much real when I made them so.

I didn't actually make the organ real, bring it into pneuma-somatic life, let alone light the thing with the spark of metabolic fire. I had no idea how it would work. Making mistakes with additional external limbs was one thing; screwing up an internal power plant

was a very different kettle of fish. For all I knew, I'd explode on the spot like a bomb going off. I'd be a headline item in 'strange but true' news by the following morning. 'University student detonates in back garden, are drugs to blame?'

I stood there, staring down at myself and taking shuddering breaths as I realised the implications.

"The shaman is right, little wolf," Zheng purred. "But she is also in crisis. Perhaps I should go alone."

"No!" I blurted out. "No, no, I can do it. Raine, I can do it, I just ..."

Was it my imagination, or did I feel more energetic? It wasn't possible. The organ was not real.

"I-I just thought of a way to ... to solve the energy problem," I finished, shaking my head. "But not right now. Raine, please, it has to be me to confront Badger. I have to do this, for myself, for the knowledge I might gain, the edge it might give me. Please, trust me, trust Zheng to take care of me. She won't let me hurt myself." I whirled to Zheng, still unsteady on my feet. "Promise?"

"Always," Zheng purred.

Raine locked eyes with me for a heartbeat too long, and then laughed. She broke into one of those beaming grins, the ones she'd used on me when we'd first met, and leaned forward to kiss me on the forehead, both hands on my shoulders.

"Come back safe," she said. "Good hunting."

Her gaze flicked to Zheng, and some unspoken exchange passed between them as Zheng crouched down to offer me a piggyback.

"Wait," Praem intoned, surprising us all. She turned her milk-white eyes on me. "Coat. Shoes. Phone."

"O-oh," I stammered, having forgotten the basic essentials in my rush to solve abstract problems. "I-"

Praem turned and marched toward the open back door, vanishing inside with a swish of her skirt. Evelyn glanced left and right. She looked so small and vulnerable with her walking stick as she stood suddenly alone in the moonlight, but then Raine stepped back to stand by her side.

“We’ll watch the house, and Lozzie,” Raine went on, “and check to see if Badger had any friends nearby. Right Eevee?”

“Right,” Evelyn deadpanned. “Zheng. Zombie. Whatever the hell you you want to be called. Unlike Raine I do not place infinite trust in your handling of the most important-” She bit down. “You bring Heather back safe or I will empty your soul from your vessel like a carton of apple juice, I don’t care how ancient you are.”

“You will have no need to try, wizard,” Zheng purred.

“Keep away from the mouth in his hand. Do not get bitten. And don’t listen to the whispers.”

“I know, wizard.”

“That’s mostly for Heather,” Evelyn snapped. “Do. Not. Listen.”

I nodded vigorously. “I understand.”

Praem returned a moment later and I submitted to coat and shoes, suddenly aware of how I was beginning to shiver. No amount of phantom bio-reactor could actually keep my flesh warm. Praem also slapped my phone into my hand, the screen already unlocked and open on Twil’s number.

“Thank you, Praem, thank you,” I whispered, and made a mental note to hug her later.

“You are welcome,” she intoned.

As I climbed onto Zheng’s back and she looped her arms beneath my thighs, I looked over at Evelyn and asked the question which had almost slipped my mind.

“Eevee, what was that mouth in Badger’s hand anyway? What was he doing?”

“Old magic,” Zheng rumbled before Evelyn could answer. “Blood-rot and corruption.”

“It’s a technique mentioned in several old tomes,” Evelyn said, tight and unimpressed. “Well documented, widely known, especially if Zheng is familiar with it too. But very stupid. He’s made a deal with ... well, I shan’t pronounce the name out loud, it might hurt your ears.”

“You said it’ll kill him within a few hours?” I asked.

Evelyn shrugged. "Or days. Hours is more likely if he's been doing it for a while already. This might be his last hit."

Zheng straightened up and I suddenly felt very tall indeed, pressing myself tight to the heat pouring off her muscled back, looping my arms around her neck to hold myself in place. She turned toward the fence, and my stomach lurched with anticipation of the leap. But I twisted my head to catch Evelyn and Raine and Praem one last time. Raine shot me a broad wink and a cheesy grin.

"How will it kill him? Eevee?" I asked.

"The owner of the mouth will come to collect the debt," she deadpanned. "Let's hope you find him first."

= =

Catching Badger was not difficult in the end.

As soon as Zheng leapt the back fence – a rocket-ship journey for both my heart and the pit of my stomach – and once I'd recovered and located my lungs again, I raised my mobile phone to my ear and called Twil, clinging hard around Zheng's neck with my other arm.

Zheng set off at a loping pace, eating up the scrub ground and empty lots and darting past the few dark houses on this side of the road, heading for Brickbridge Lane. I struggled not to squeak; I was not used to moving so fast.

Twil answered the call in a rush. "Heather?"

"Yes, it's me. Where-"

"I'm right behind him!" She was panting, still on the move. "Down Brickbridge, then left onto uh ... the one with the big trees! We're coming up on the roundabout now. He slowed a bit but then he spotted me, maybe, and he picked up again. I'm gonna try to corner him-" Her voice cut out as a vehicle passed by on her end of the call, and my other ear pricked up, hoping maybe I could hear the distant car, but it was impossible to pick out one sound from Sharrowford at night. "- but not until the bus stop, yeah?" Twil finished, then quickly went on. "Shit, he's gone right, onto Sparrow Street, I'll never find a spot out of view here. Hurry up! You with Zheng?"

"In a manner of speaking," I said, then started relaying the

directions to Zheng. But she didn't need them. She'd heard every word.

"As the crow flies, shaman."

And fly she did. Like the wind.

She'd been pacing herself while I was on the phone call, to allow me a moment to communicate, but as soon as she knew where we were headed, Zheng moved so fast it scared me. She took a direct route too, straight across the quiet road and plunging through the patch of scraggly woods, then up and over a brick wall without so much as a 'hup' of effort, flitting through the pools of street-lighting like a dragonfly. Down the embankment, then darting along the rows of terraced houses on Windsor Road, ghosting through Sharrowford at night like ball lightning. Spirits scattered before us, running into alleyways or vanishing over the rooftops, retracting tentacles and scuttling into drains.

For the first few seconds I kept my mouth shut and my head pressed to her shoulder, seeking solace in Zheng's baking body heat down my front, with my guts lurching and my head spinning, scared that at any second I was going to slam face first into the pavement. What was I doing? How had I gotten myself to this point? Riding a demon through the night at speeds enough to break my neck.

But Zheng would never drop me. She'd sooner break every bone in her own body. She'd fallen much further with me, once.

As my mind was reassured I wasn't going to end as a smear on the ground, something else woke up inside me.

It may not have been my feet eating up the distance, or my lungs pumping with effort, or my senses tracking our prey – but I was hunting. Finally, for real. And it felt so very good.

An electric tingle buzzed through all my senses, my brain on controlled fast-forward, the cocktail of adrenaline in my veins taking on a subtly different flavour. As I raised my eyes from Zheng's shoulder, everything seemed sharper, the details stood out with greater clarity – the lichen on the walls, the marks on the pavement, the discarded food wrappers in the gutter. I felt the most bizarre urge to peel my lips back from my teeth, to hiss under my breath as if flushing out prey. I had to scrunch my aching eyelids up again when I tried to blink with membranes I didn't possess, and I

felt my phantom tentacles flex and ready themselves as if they they were tipped with bone hooks once more.

Zheng hurled herself around the corner into Sparrow Street, a huge shadow flitting along the rows of parked cars, and I hissed with glee.

I spotted the answering grin across her face, and mumbled ‘I love you’ into her shoulder.

It was impossible for our chase to go completely unnoticed, even on a Monday night in a residential area with nobody around. Perhaps Twil was an expert at silent stalking with her wolf senses and hunting instinct, but Zheng was seven feet of muscle moving at high speed. However she normally kept herself concealed was hampered by carrying me. No leaping on rooftops for her with me clinging to her back.

We didn’t confirm anything until two months later, when Raine found a post on one of the supernatural and paranormal internet forums she kept an eye on. Zheng’s run had been spotted that night, by a middle-aged man who’d been looking out of his kitchen window, at the exact moment we’d passed by. A huge blur in the dark, a glimpse of nightmare creature racing through the streets of sleepy Sharrowford, a monster here in England. Who’d believe it? Certainly not his wife, according to the forlorn forum post.

Who knows how many others spotted us but dismissed it, or never spoke about it, or couldn’t process what they glimpsed in the corner of their eye, out in the dark?

To be fair, it got harder to spot us once the fog rolled in.

Thick, soupy, grey fog, which sprung up out of nowhere once we hit the end of Sparrow Street. I assumed it had rolled in off the countryside, creeping through the gaps between the houses, just bad luck. The local pneuma-somatic life didn’t seem to like the fog either, and we saw fewer and fewer spirits, glimpsed vanishing into the haze. The mist turned Sharrowford into a ghostly vision around us as Zheng raced on.

Twil’s voice came from the phone in my hand. We’d kept the line open.

“Heather! I’ve got him boxed in!” she hissed rapidly when I pressed it to my ear. “By the old bus stop between Noreen and Hastings.

Hurry! If you're gonna do anything, this is the place, you can't see shit from here, there's loads of fog!"

We reached Twil seconds later.

She whirled toward us as Zheng loomed out of the fog at the corner of Hastings Road, half-werewolf with claws and fuzzy muscled legs and a snout, eyes wide and dilated in hunting mode. The sight made my heart hitch into my throat.

"It's us!" I hissed over Zheng's shoulder.

Twil blinked once at Zheng, and once at me. "Alright there, Master Blaster?"

"What?" I squinted at her, but Twil was already turning back the way she'd been looking, tense from tip to toe as she peeked around a corner of brick wall, at the junction between Hastings and Noreen. She was still panting for breath.

"Later," she hissed. "Can't take my eyes off him."

Zheng leaned out too, and even with my own abyssal hunting instincts activated like aching salivary glands, it took a moment to appreciate what Twil had achieved.

"He's stopped now that I've looped around twice to cut him off," she whispered. "But he might break for it again. If you're gonna nab him, do it now."

Badger didn't look boxed in at all, except by the tightly packed terraced houses in this more run-down area, some of them with boarded up lower windows. The three-way road was open in all directions, clogged only by the thickening greasy fog. But he'd stopped by a bus shelter, a shell of green metal with a few panes of glass left, the empty advertising panels caked with graffiti. Head up, eyes wide and swivelling all about, he didn't seem to know which way to turn, chest rising and falling as he heaved to get his breath back.

He thought Twil was everywhere.

"Good technique, *laangren*," Zheng purred with obvious appreciation.

"We gonna jump him together?" Twil hissed. "We can take him, both of us, beat him-" she glanced up at me. "I mean-"

“Put me down,” I said. “And we’re not going to jump him. I’m going to talk to him. Offer him help.”

“What?!” Twil boggled at me.

Zheng crouched until my feet touched the ground. I let go of her and almost fell over, my legs wobbly with adrenaline and twitchy anticipation. This was all so new, so fresh, a biological urge I’d never embraced before. My phantom limbs bunched and gathered, ready to spring forward, to pounce. I was almost panting too, but for a totally different reason.

“Heather, he was one of them!” Twil hissed. “Experimenting on kids and shit. And he just tried to kidnap Lozzie again, and you wanna help him?!”

“I’m not saying we let him go,” I whispered back. “I’m saying I’m not going to torture and dismantle him. Nobody deserves the Eye. We can both get something out of this.”

Twil blew out a breath, grimacing at me in painful doubt.

“But I’m going to try to help this time,” I hurried to add. “Not kill him. And I need you two to back me up. Flank me. Look scary.”

“Easy, shaman,” Zheng purred.

“Ahh fuck it,” Twil grunted. “Just don’t torture anybody in front of me, alright?”

“I promise,” I whispered.

We must have made quite a sight, stepping out around the corner into the middle of the road, wading through the fog. I went first, with Twil on my right and Zheng on my left, a pace behind me. Twil unwound her transformation, just in case, but I don’t think it made her any less intimidating under the circumstances.

Badger froze to the spot, eyes locked on me.

“It’s time to stop running,” I called out softly.

“Shit, Heather,” Twil whispered out of the corner of her mouth. “Maybe be less intimidating?”

I’d tried my best to make myself sound confident, to speak level and even and calm, as if to a skittish animal, but it was impossible. My voice shook. My entire body was gripped with an overwhelming

urge to pounce, to grasp with my tentacles, to inject paralytic toxins and spin constricting webs and begin a process I could not even name.

Badger's eyes darted left and right in panic – and he raised the hand-mouth toward us.

Needle-teeth clicked together twice but the fog soaked up the whispering. For a second I thought he was about to turn and run into the mist, and the urge to spring became almost overwhelming. I twitched, biting my bottom lip, on the verge of losing control. Twil started to growl.

But then Badger gave a huge sigh and dropped his arm. All the fight went out of him. My abyssal hunting urge guttered out, like a flame without oxygen.

Shoulders slumped, expression slack, Badger staggered the few paces to the bus shelter bench and sat down in a dejected heap.

“Uh,” said Twil. She and I shared a glance. Zheng shrugged.

Badger stared at the gruesome mouth he'd cut into his palm, with such defeat on his face, but then frowned up at us and waved his other hand at the rest of the bench like a grumpy teenager.

Without the guide of instinct, it took a few moments to organise my thoughts. Twil leaned close and whispered, “We're right next to you. If he tries anything like.”

I nodded, steeling myself for the task, and walked up to Badger.

The moment seemed somehow surreal, the air and angles and silence all wrong, as if we'd stepped Outside directly from the streets of Sharrowford. No spirits lingered here, not a single watching eyestalk or lurking ghoul in sight. Moonlight filtered through the fog and mixed with the overhead glow from the street lamps. One would assume that silver and orange would wreath the street in ethereal phantasm – but the fog felt heavy, pale, and greasy. The rows of terraced houses seemed too tall for this part of the city, and I had the sudden irrational impression of a wall of ancient houses closing up as the fog swallowed the roads.

Badger eyed the three of us, still panting to get his breath back.

He was a mess. Big, wet eyes more suited to a puppy than a cultist, and a hangdog face once built for smiling, but which didn't smile

much anymore. His curly dark hair and scraggly beard clearly hadn't been washed in days, he'd put on a little bit of weight. He looked like he hadn't managed a good night's sleep in many weeks. He held the disgusting mouth-hand away from his own body, pointed at the ground. It seemed to have stopped whispering.

"I don't care if you kill me," he said as I stopped a few feet clear of him. "Just make it quick, alright? And if you're gonna send me ... Out make sure I'm dead first. Snap my neck. Zheng? You can do that, right? Come on, I never treated you badly, I never did anything to you."

Zheng answered with a tilt of her head.

"Just don't ... don't send me to Him," Badger added, his eyes pleading with me.

"Him?" Twil asked.

Badger frowned and groaned. "*Magnus Viglator*. Him. It. The Eye. Just fucking kill me already."

"We're not here to kill you," I said. "Well, I'm not, at least."

Badger managed to slump even further, like a building collapse. He rolled his eyes. "Well fuckin' sit down then if you're not gonna kill me, so I don't have to keep looking up at you."

I nodded. "Very well then."

"Shaman," Zheng purred in warning.

"Uhhh you sure that's a good idea?" Twil asked.

But I stepped forward. I was not afraid of this broken man, or the teeth in his palm. I was a hundred times more frightening. I sat down on the cold plastic bench, smoothing my coat beneath my backside as I sat. Zheng and Twil hovered close, ready to leap in, but I shot them both a look to make my intentions clear.

Though I did keep a nice safe few feet between Badger and I. Beyond arm's reach.

Badger stared at his hand, the mouth still turned toward the ground. I couldn't see the lips moving anymore.

"Badger," I said. "Or ... " I rummaged through my memory. " ... Nate?"

“How the hell do you remember that?” He frowned sidelong at me. I shrugged. “Just call me Badger. Only my parents call me Nathan.”

“Badger then. Badger, I need information.”

“Edward Lilburne sent us,” he said without hesitation. I struggled to contain my surprise at his instant surrender. “That’s what you wanted, right? The old goat had a job for us, another task before ...” His eyes went wide. “Oh ... oh no.”

Badger straightened up, visible terror creeping through him like slow rot through dead flesh.

“What? What is it?!” Twil spat.

Zheng was suddenly turning every which way, staring out into the fog. “Shaman,” she rumbled. “We are too late.”

Badger had eyes only for his own hand. He turned it over slowly, shaking all over, his breath coming in short little gasps.

The grotesque mouth was gone, replaced by a shallow slash across his palm, still bleeding a thin trickle of crimson.

Badger squeezed his eyes shut in a grimace of such intense sorrow that I almost sympathised with him, with this man who had promised to cut Raine’s fingers off, twice tried to kidnap Lozzie, and was previously determined to send me back to the Eye. He hissed between his teeth in rising panic, tears running down his cheeks.

“Time to pay the piper?” I asked – though my own heart was pounding too.

“You want information?” he managed to squeeze out. “You best be bloody quick. Oh fuck, not like this, not like this!” He scrabbled for his knife – before recalling he’d dropped it back at the house. “Kill me!” he shouted at us. “Come on, fuck, don’t let me go like this, it’s not human, it’s not right. Please!”

“The hell is that smell?” Twil said, wrinkling her nose as she turned outward toward the fog. Bulges and eddies were forming in the swirling mist, around a dark spot which seemed to be getting bigger.

“*Shi zai chung wai de ren*,” Zheng growled in Chinese. “Get up, shaman. We run.”

“Run?” I blinked at her in shock. Zheng, run? “No, we can’t, not

now. Badger, Edward sent you, but where is he? Where did-”

But Badger was insensible, arms wrapped around himself, staring out at the fog, hyperventilating. His legs were vibrating against the plastic bench, as if he was desperate to move but fixed in place.

“Shaman!” Zheng reached back for me without taking her eyes off the fog. “This is beyond me. We are too late to the kill. Leave him.”

“Oh no,” Badger murmured.

A figure lumbered out of the fog.

Perhaps it had been human, once. Or perhaps it was simply failing to imitate a human.

Greasy pale flesh the colour and texture of rotten oats, hugely obese, with massive slab-like feet, hands as big as dinner plates, and shoulders wide as a car. Impossibly tall, nine or ten feet in height, a tower of pallid meat. Naked, completely naked and hairless, and there was something obscene about that, something intentional.

It had no head or neck. No facial features anywhere – except a drooling mouth in the palm it raised in silent greeting.

“Shaman, up!” Zheng roared, and pulled me to my feet.

The pale giant took a lumbering step toward us, and Badger screamed.

a very great mischief – 13.11

There are times in life when one acts without thinking. No matter how rational and cool headed we tell ourselves we are, we're all animals beneath the thin shelter of ego and prefrontal cortex. In moments of great stress we can commit mistakes of self destruction and casual cruelty, or shining examples of heroism and selflessness – or simply reveal the amoral truth.

When this pale obese giant bore down on us through the greasy fog, striding across the asphalt on feet like slabs of frozen meat, as it raised a hand the size of a dinner plate, rent by a mouth full of fangs and drool, as Zheng yanked me to my feet and braced to pull me away, as Badger screamed in white-faced terror, as Twil's growl stuttered out into a whine, I did not think.

Zheng was panicked. That should have gotten through to me.

We were not cornered, we were not at bay; we could run, off into the thick fog clogging Sharrowford's streets.

Badger's skull contained invaluable information, but he was also my enemy. He'd tried to kidnap Lozzie. Leaving him to his fate would ruin my plan, but it would also spare us a horrible decision.

None of those things mattered. I was not making a decision, I was obeying a biological imperative. I pulled myself free from Zheng's grip, barely aware of what I was doing, only succeeding because my reaction surprised her.

I rounded on the pale obscenity, and I *screached*.

No mere imitation hiss from a human throat, and nothing like a human scream, I screeched my lungs out. A warning display, on reflex, a complete surrender to gut impulse and bodily logic. I'd been high on hunting instinct the whole way here, this reaction was no great leap. A part of me had recognised the pale headless giant, not for what it was, but for the role it currently filled in our ecosystem. Zheng had even put it into words, perhaps seeded the concept in my mind: we were 'late to the kill'.

The headless giant was a competing predator.

My screech meant *mine*.

In truth I sounded awful, like a cross between a goat and a fox and a gibbon. I do hope the fog soaked up the worst of the racket I made, that I didn't accidentally terrify some small child tucked up in their bed or some poor old lady sitting up late at night. Another strange occurrence to add to the list of paranormal happenings in Sharrowford, the case of the mystery night-time screech.

My body wanted to back up the claim to my prey, flashing irrelevant nerve impulses and trying to dilate organs I didn't possess. My phantom tentacles lashed the air in a warning display, lined with bone hooks, tipped by venomous stingers, laced with paralytic mucus. My jaw ached, trying to fulfil the biological impossibility of sprouting a double-row of razor sharp teeth. My skin itched with the need to flush my exterior with toxic colouration. And deep inside my abdomen, tissues and muscles tried to adjust themselves, to cradle and support and supply a bio-reactor that was not yet real.

If I hadn't been acting on instinct, I might have gone over the edge and made it real. Fortunately for me, even the most simple operation of hyperdimensional mathematics required a great deal of brainpower, rather than screeching one's lungs out like an animal.

Halfway into the screech, the pain in my bruised flanks hit me like a wave of fire.

I didn't 'snap out of it', I was in too deep for that, and the circumstances were too dire, but I came back to conscious thought with a shuddering hiss of tight-clenched burning pain down my sides, playing across the bruises I'd given myself that morning. New kinds of pain blossomed across my body as well. My jaw ached like I'd been punched, my legs felt as if they were on backwards, my eyes itched, red and raw. My skin was flushed all over like I'd been dunked in a hot bath. Worst of all was the sharp stabbing inside my abdomen, making the muscles shudder and seize up, like particularly bad period pain.

But the pain was almost worth it. The most bizarre combination of agony and euphoria stirred in every cell, as if I was on the verge of orgasm.

Under any other conditions I would have curled up on the ground with a whine in my throat, but there was no time for that.

The headless giant had stopped about twelve paces away in the middle of the road, a wobbling tower of pale, wormy, grease-streaked meat. He had both hands stuck out in front of himself, past the huge mass of his gut, with the pair of slavering red-lipped mouths pointed at us.

“Holy fucking shit, big H,” Twil hissed through a snout which contained far too many teeth. She’d gone full wolf transformation. “It stopped! What do we do now?!”

“Shaman?” Zheng growled, her entire body curled around a hair-trigger motion, ready to sweep me off my feet and bundle me away from the bench and Badger.

“I know what I’m-” I tried to croak, but my throat didn’t work right. The words came out as a hissing gurgle, barely even human, and painful like a pulled muscle. Twil flinched from me in horrified amazement.

I swallowed, hard and dry and difficult, like I was unknitting my own trachea and vocal cords. I coughed, which turned into a convulsive choking sound, but then I drew clear breath once more.

“I know what I’m doing,” I wheezed, and sounded almost human this time.

Something whimpered.

It was only then that I realised I was using one hand to grip Badger by the side of his head, like a bird of prey with a rabbit’s skull caged in its claws – though my hand was much too small to complete the impression. He was paralysed with terror, eyes flicking back and forth between me and the pale giant, not sure which one of us was more threatening. When I met his eyes he whimpered again, slow tears tracking down his cheeks.

Mine, instinct hissed. *My prey*.

I elected not to let go of Badger’s head. Yet.

Perhaps I felt he deserved it.

The obese headless man was moving his mouth-hands back and forth like an obscene interpretive dance, slowly turning them to look at each of us, his flesh wobbling and sagging. A thick wet whispering began to fill the air as the lips of those mouths slapped together, slurping and rolling their tongues.

“Oh this is fucked up, this is so fucked up, this is fuuuuucked,” Twil babbled, her words mangled into a low growl by the shape of her wolf muzzle. She was shivering all over, fur bristling, panting hard, not her usual overconfident self.

“Stay still, *laangren*,” Zheng growled – but she was not faring much better, tense down to the last muscle. I’d never seen her afraid like this before.

Judged objectively, the headless giant was not half as weird or alien as most pneuma-somatic life. True, he was incredibly big, two or three feet taller than Zheng, and his flesh was unhealthy and pale in a way that made my stomach turn. But in the end this thing was just a very large man with no head or neck, and mouths in each hand. Hardly scary compared to some of what I’d seen on a regular basis since I was ten years old.

But there was something very wrong about this. About the rotten oats and old cheese texture of his grimy skin. About the nudity, which seemed intentional, an affront, a statement of power. About the sheer weight of cold flesh, as if he was a super-dense object, a black hole warping the space around him. About the meaning of those mouths. I felt as if I would understand everything if I only listened to that whispering, if I only leaned in close, if I only allowed him to bring his hand to my ear.

And he was absolutely not a spirit.

“This is mine,” I raised my voice over the whispers. “Mine. Understand?”

The headless giant turned both hand-mouths toward me. A tongue slopped forth, wagging up and down.

“I am quite sure that you are not supposed to be here,” I croaked. “And you are made of matter. Which means I can send you elsewhere. Whatever you are, I am certain I can find a place Outside that even you can’t endure. Leave, before I escort you out.”

The mouths in the pale hands curled into an answering pair of lascivious grins, drooling great thick loops of saliva onto the road. He raised one calloused leathery foot – and took a step backward. Step by lumbering step, he backed away into the wall of fog, his vast bulk turning hazy as the mist swallowed him up. The last we saw of him were the grinning red lips in his palms, until they too

vanished beyond the greasy fog.

Silence returned. Several heartbeats passed. The dark rows of terraced houses pressed close.

“You think its bugged off? For real?” Twil hissed eventually.

“It waits,” Zheng growled, watching the fog.

“It’s gone for now,” I managed to squeeze out. “It didn’t like me. That’s what matters.”

My skin was coated with cold sweat, clothes sticking to me. I was quivering with adrenaline, but mostly with pain, dozens of small aches and spikes and prickling all over, to join the chorus of screaming muscles in my flanks.

I let go of Badger’s head at last, and he let out a shuddering whine, squeezing his eyes up tight and cradling his wounded hand.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Twil said, still all wolf and not the easiest thing to look at, crouched tight in a defensive posture, ready to bite and snap. “I’d shit myself and run too, if a girl made a noise at me like that.”

“You’re one to talk,” I croaked. “You growl.”

I scrubbed at my itching eyes and cleared my throat, but couldn’t seem to shift whatever was in there. I turned and shielded my mouth with a hand as I spat a wad of thick, glue-like mucus onto the pavement. There was blood in it. Straightening up again proved almost too difficult, triggering another round of deep-tissue jabbing inside my abdomen, like a fist clenched so long that the muscles had started to seize up. I clutched at myself and staggered, tripping over my feet.

Zheng caught me with one arm.

“I-I can’t- can’t stand up-” I clung to her.

“I have you, shaman.”

She did, but she didn’t spare even a second to look down at me. Zheng watched the fog, quietly alert.

“No complaints here though. It worked, right? Yeah.” Twil was already babbling, breathing too hard, her words mangled into a series of throaty growls. “Fuck, no way I wanted to fight that thing,

like it was ... wrong. I dunno, shit. I'm not meant to be scared by this sorta crap, this is what I was made for, this is why I'm, you know, a werewolf. I'm meant to stand up to this stuff. What the hell? What the hell was that!?"

"*Ooran juh*," Zheng purred.

"It wasn't a spirit, not pneuma-somatic," I said.

"Yeah, no shit. I could smell him," Twil spat. "Like rotting cheese and stanky feet. How is it even in Sharrowford, just walking around?"

"I don't think we're technically in Sharrowford right now," I said, trying to stay calm as I stared into the fog.

Twil squinted at me like I was mad. She gestured at the road, the houses, and finally at the glass and metal of the bus shelter.

"It's just a feeling," I sighed.

A broken voice interrupted us.

"He hasn't gone away," Badger said.

Badger was still sitting on the bus stop bench, hunched forward and cradling his wounded hand, curly hair matted with sweat, hood thrown back. He looked like a man at the gallows, utterly defeated and spent as he stared at the ground between his boots. He'd also wet himself, and under the circumstances I was not surprised. None of us mentioned it, though Twil did wrinkle her nose.

"Zheng is right," he went on, thin and weak. "He's out there, waiting. Always waiting. It's started now, I can't escape."

"Then we'll take you back to the house," I said, firm as I could. I tried to draw myself up and ignore the dozen sources of pain stabbing at me. Twil shot me a frown. "Under guard," I added. "We'll tie him up."

"We're not leading Mister Blobby out there back to the house," Twil said. "Not for this shit head. Heather, what are you on?"

"It's the most magically defensible position in Sharrowford. I can hardly ... *question him*," I cleared my throat, "if that thing gets to him first."

"There's no point," Badger said, regaining a little self-control, no

longer mumbling with fear. He raised his head with what little pride he could muster. "I'm good as dead now. The Big Man can take me from inside a closed and locked room, you'll see. Look, Morell, I'll tell you anything you want to know, just promise to snap my neck after, pull my head off, shoot me, anything you want, just kill me, don't leave me for him."

"Yeah, sure," Twil said. "But what the hell is he?"

Badger shrugged. "The real name hurts to say, makes your mouth bleed and your ears hurt. We just called him the Big Man, for short like."

Twil huffed a snort, not really laughing, then nodded to me. "Ask him then. Let's get it over with and get the hell out."

"I can't," I hissed. "I need to ... you know what I need to do. And I can't do that here."

Twil pulled a grimace.

"The shaman is right," Zheng rumbled. "We cannot stay here. Look."

Zheng extended a finger and pointed at the fog off to our left. Twil growled. Badger bit his lips to strangle a whimper. I stared for a second before I saw it, and then my stomach lurched.

A red-lipped grin in a pale hand, barely visible at the extreme limit of the fog.

As we watched, it retreated and vanished.

The Big Man – 'Mister Blobby' – had retreated only to circle around us, perhaps to find a weakness, or stage a better ambush, or simply to wait for us to get cold and tired. I doubted our human logic applied to the thing anyway. But I wasn't leaving Badger here. Badger was my prey. I would have what I needed from him, but I couldn't risk doing it here with that creature still stalking us.

"Alright." Twil whirled back toward us. "I'll sling Badger over my shoulder, and we make a run for it, back to the house."

"Too late, *laangren*," Zheng purred – and pointed the other way.

Another hand-mouth greeted us with a drooling grin, way back in the fog, from the opposite end of the road.

Twil's eyes went wide. She mouthed 'what the fuck', as the Big Man's mouth receded back into the mist once again.

He had every escape covered. Either there was more than one of him, or running past him wasn't an option. Almost as if he'd heard us making plans.

"Badger," I said. "This thing that's after you, how does it work?"

Badger tore his eyes from the fog and stared at me, then swallowed in an effort to gather himself. He looked down at the wound in his hand where the mouth had been. The long shallow cut still oozed a thin trickle of blood, slowly pooling in the lines on his palm.

"You get three bites, and you have to land them all," he said, wincing as he tried to flex his hand. "Three times, and then you've fulfilled your end of the contract, the deal, the agreement. We got it from a book. Well, from photocopies that Sammy made when she wasn't meant to. You sign the contract in a dream, but it's real. If you miss a bite though, if you don't go through with it, then he owns you. That's the terms. He comes to take you instead. Gets his pound of flesh in the end."

"Okay," I said. "And?"

"None of this tells us anything," Twil hissed. Her werewolf form was rapidly unweaving itself, dropping away in shreds of translucent matter, leaving her mostly human once more. She kept the claws out though.

"But it might give Eevee something to go on," I murmured, and Twil shut up.

"First time, I bit myself." Badger shook his head, grimacing, as he pointed at his opposite shoulder. I couldn't tell through the shapeless lumpy hoodie, but he could have a dressing wrapped around his arm under there, bleeding into a pad of gauze and cotton wool. "That was the idea, see? Bite yourself, replace one God with another, then fill the contract anyway, and you're free. Smart idiots we were. Thought we had it all figured out. But it didn't work. He couldn't take us from the ... the ..." Badger's head twitched in suppressed disgust. "The Eye."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "There's more than one of you doing this?"

Badger's face contorted, holding back tears. "Not any more, no. There was three of us what signed the contract. Me and the guys, Stibby and Dingle. I'd known Stibby since school, he was my friend, we ... but no, it's just me now. I had to bite Dingle, that was my second bite. He wanted to go back on the plan, so ... he didn't live through it. I didn't mean to."

"You mean you murdered a man," I said.

Badger raised his eyes and gave me the worst glare he could muster, full of bitterness and anger. "I would murder this whole city to get the Eye out of my head."

"Why'd you come to the house, hey?" Twil asked. "What the hell were you trying after this morning?"

Badger shook his head. "Last ditch attempt. Never seen your place before, Morell. Thought maybe I could ... I dunno, shimmy up a drainpipe and sling Lauren over my shoulder? Stupid bloody idea. Even her brother could never control her. She'd have scratched my eyes out."

"Very stupid," I said, struggling not to give vent to cold fury. Nobody touches my friends.

"Then why pull the hand mouth thing if it'll kill you?" Twil squinted at him.

"Didn't wanna die," he said. "Just wanted to get away. Figured maybe I'd bite myself again."

"How do we get past the Big Man? How do we make him go away?" I asked.

Badger shrugged, utterly defeated.

"Shit, Heather," Twil said. "Maybe we do gotta leave him here." She held out a hand to stall my objections. "Hey, Badger. Edward sent you, right? Lilburne? How do we find him? Where's the hell's he hiding? Tell us that and maybe ... yeah. Yeah."

She glanced at me for approval I could not give. She couldn't say the words either. Twil was good at fighting and brawling, but she wasn't like Raine. She couldn't kill an unarmed person in cold blood.

"I don't know where he lives or anything," Badger said, cringing

with apology. "He says we're contaminated. Deals with us through a fence, a middleman, a fixer."

"Oh, come on!" Twil spat.

"We did get to see him in person once," Badger added quickly. "So we knew it was really him, back from when the cult was together for real. The fence he uses is this guy, Adam Gore, a small time drug dealer, guy's no big deal at all. We always met him in the *Ostler's Arms*, off Station Road. You know the one? Anyway, second time we met him, when we were figuring out terms for the job, Adam says Edward wants to see us himself, to judge if he can actually help us. That was the deal, he was offering to help with the ... " Badger broke off and tapped his own forehead. "If we could snatch his niece for him. That was the price."

"Interesting," I said, colder even than I intended.

Badger swallowed. "Edward was in a back room in the pub, and we had to go back there one by one. And I know it was really him, I'd recognise him anywhere. Look for Adam, you could maybe get something out of him, I guess. Or the pub landlord must've been on it, with the back room and all."

"That's hardly any use," Twil huffed.

"How many of you are left now?" I asked softly, trying to bargain with my darker impulses. We could kill Badger now, leave him here, if only I could snatch another opportunity, another one of these ex-cultists with the Eye's tendrils lodged in their head. Nicole hadn't rejected my request, yet.

But Badger looked at me with an ember of defiance. "I'm not telling you that. You'll kill everyone."

I blinked in shock, at the conviction in his eyes, at the vehemence in his voice.

"What?" Twil pulled a full-face squint at him.

"What- what- what do you mean?" I asked.

"Like you did the rest," he went on. "Look, I get it, I made a choice to live to like this, but most of the others don't deserve to be die. They've still got a chance. Maybe Edward really will help them, or maybe they'll find another way. But if I lead you to them, that'll be it. No, I won't."

“What ‘rest?’” I boggled at him. “What are you talking about?”

“He means the house,” Zheng purred. “The idiot wizards who thought they could bargain. The fire.”

“That was you people,” he said. “I’m not stupid.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Twil rolled her eyes and huffed like the teenager she was.

“That wasn’t us,” I said, slowly and clearly. “They defied the Eye, tried to negotiate with it, and it killed them all. They killed each other. Went mad. We walked into a slaughterhouse, and yes we burned it, as a precaution. I’m sorry they had such horrible deaths, but it wasn’t us.”

“Sure, sure,” Badger said. “‘It was like that when I got here.’ Heard that one before.”

“If you don’t believe us, you can ask the only survivor. You can ask Sarika yourself.”

Badger froze. The faintest spark of hope kindled a frown across his forehead. “Sarry’s alive?”

“You dumb-arse,” Twil said.

I looked at him like he was an idiot. “It was all over the newspapers. Some other survivors from the cult even contacted her. How can you possibly have missed that she lived?”

“I ... I thought ... I dunno.” A strange transformation came over him. He took several deep breaths, tried to sit up straighter, pushed his hair back. Like an alcoholic after coming clean, his eyes seemed clearer. “I assumed you’d faked it somehow. Or done something to her. Please, please don’t lie about this. Sarry’s alive? Really?”

“She’s crippled,” I said. “But yes, she’s alive.”

Badger let out a strangled breath and had to blink away tears. He looked down at his wounded hand, then out at the fog.

“What am I doing?” he asked, voice gone tiny.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “*Ooran juh* will not wait forever. The net tightens.”

The greasy cold fog was beginning to creep beneath my coat,

leeching away my body heat, and I could feel a shiver starting in my limbs. The hunt and the terrifying confrontation had gotten my blood up, but now we'd been standing still and talking for several minutes, and hunger still gnawed at the roots of my belly. The fog seemed to be thickening as well, obscuring even the nearest terraced houses. When I glanced past Zheng, we appeared to stand on a island of damp asphalt, surrounded by murky seas of infinity. The battered old bus stop was our only landmark.

"... this isn't natural," Twil said.

At least the moon still hung untouched in the sky.

"Shaman, we were late to the kill," Zheng purred. "You may have to accept that."

"He has to come with us," I said.

"Then we run for it," Twil said. "Come on, what else can we do? You'll get another chance, Heather, these idiots are out there still gunning for you, right? You and Lizzie?"

"I don't want to die," Badger said, softly, as if surprised. He wasn't talking to us at all. But then he snapped together, blinking at our faces with a new and mounting panic. "I don't want to die, but I can't live like this. The *Magnus Vigilator*, Alexander's fucking patron God, the Eye, it's in my head, all the time. In every gap in my thoughts, any time I lose focus, between every word, it's there. I can't sleep without drinking half a bottle of vodka every night to drown it out. Every chance, every stray thought, it's there, injecting the worst-" He paused and shivered all over. "The worst feelings ever. Always prodding me, prodding me, driving me forward like a slave, to find you."

He jabbed a finger at me.

"Oi, off," Twil snapped at him.

"I don't even know how to send her back to it!" He shouted, voice swallowed by the fog. "None of us know anything. Maybe the cult did, when it was still together, but we literally cannot give it what it wants now! I'm fucking harmless to you."

"Not to Lizzie you weren't," I said.

The flame of his anger guttered out in shame and guilt. He looked down, and winced again as he tried to curl up his wounded hand.

“Kill me then. Don’t leave me for the Big Man. Zheng’s right, you should get out of here.”

“No,” I said. “You and I are going to make a deal.”

“I’ve told you everything I know.”

“I can remove the Eye from your head.”

When he looked up, there was no hope in his eyes. Badger did not believe me.

“I’m not doing this out of the goodness of my heart,” I said, and tried not to shiver in the gathering cold, leaning close into Zheng’s side for heat and comfort. I did my best to ignore the pain in my abdomen, and put strength into my voice. “I have very little sympathy for you, Badger. You were part of the Sharrowford Cult, and I don’t know the depth of your personal involvement, but you were one of the leaders after I killed Alexander. I should let Zheng pull your head off, but I need to operate on you to understand the Eye, to understand how it affects human minds, how it works. That’s what I get out of this. The Eye has held my twin sister for ten years. Understand? I need every scrap of insight I can get, and I will vivisect you for that knowledge, one way or the other.”

A glint of fear flashed back into Badger’s eyes. I swallowed and tried to dial down, taking a deep breath of the cold air.

“But I can try to minimise the damage,” I said. “Try to put you back together afterward. I can’t guarantee it will work. I might be able to sever the Eye’s connection, but it might kill you. Or it might leave you brain dead, or crippled, or give you any number of debilitating neurological conditions. Think of it as volunteering for a clinical trial.”

Badger shook his head in disbelief.

“She totally can,” Twil said. “She did it for Sarika once already, and she was way more screwed up than you, mate. At least you’re not flickering all over the place and stabbing yourself in the head.”

“Sarika’s situation was very different,” I said with a sigh and a sideways look at Twil. I was starting to understand why Evelyn looked at her that way sometimes. “The Eye had her held more tightly.”

“How?” Badger stared at me. “How can you stand up to something

like that? I don't believe it, it's not possible. Look what happened to Alexander, and he was on his *ubermensch* power trip. He could shrug off bullets, and tell the Godlings what to do. Even he couldn't control it, not one bit. What makes you special?"

"She is the shaman," Zheng purred from above me.

I blinked at Badger's incomprehension, and then I realised.

"You people never understood why the Eye wants me, did you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Figured you pissed it off somehow. A ritual. Failed summoning. Or you belong to it, like us."

I sighed. "No. No, you silly little thing."

Goodness, I sounded like Evelyn.

"Wha-" His mouth hung open.

"Heather?" Twil went tense at my tone. Zheng let out a low chuckle.

"Did you never think to ask why I can send people Outside, why I can go there myself? Why I can stop bullets with my mind? How I killed Alexander? Or do any of the things I can do? Did you never ask yourself?"

"W-well you're like Lauren is, back when-"

I shook my head. "Lozzie's powers are not the same as mine. Do you know why?"

Badger looked at me now with the same dawning terror as when I'd screeched at the Big Man and held his head like a bird of prey.

"The *Magnus Viglator* took me and my twin sister ten years ago, to the place it lives, and taught us to be a little bit like itself," I told him. "I am its adopted daughter. If you could see me for what I really am, beneath this." I pinched my own cheek. "You would go mad from the revelation."

It was a miracle that I didn't cringe as I said all that. Big scary Heather, ready to peel your scalp back and crack your skull and root around in your grey matter, but you can trust me because I'm like the other terrifying thing that's in there already, and I haven't yet forgotten how to be human. Not entirely.

Also the last part was a lie. *Homo abyssus* was not terrifying, it was beautiful. I hoped Raine would one day call me cute like that, tentacles and membranes and webbed fingers and feathery feelers and all.

Badger stared, wide-eyed. He must have thought me off my rocker.

"I'm your best hope," I said. "And the best hope for all the others. Now, are you going to be my test subject, or do I have to put somebody else through it?"

Badger took a deep, shuddering breath, looked to Twil and Zheng for help – found none in Twil, and Zheng was watching the fog – and then nodded, slow at first, then very emphatically indeed. I had made him believe.

"Alright. Alright, but you have to promise me one thing," he said.

"You're not in a position to demand shit," Twil growled at him. Badger flinched.

"Wait," I said gently to Twil. "Promise what?"

"If it doesn't work, I don't wanna be a vegetable and still have this thing in my head. If you mess up and you put me in a coma or whatever, and you haven't pushed it out, you have to kill me. Don't leave me like that. Just make sure I'm dead. Cremate me. That's what I want, if it doesn't work. Okay? I don't wanna go on like this, I can't do it anymore. And I'm dead anyway, really."

He raised his eyes past us, to the wall of fog. To my relief, the mist had rolled back a little in the last minute or two, revealing the dark windows and low garden walls of the terraced houses once more, though the combination of moonlight and orange street lamps served to create a strange optical illusion. The houses seemed to bend toward us, as if the buildings themselves were eavesdropping.

"The Big Man'll get me," Badger said. "Finish me off before he takes me behind the wall. Okay?"

"Behind the wall?" Twil asked

But Badger blinked at her, as if his words had made perfect sense.

"If I can remove the Eye's umbilical, I'm certain I can tear up whatever contract you made with Mister Blobby out there," I sighed. "You don't get the easy way out. If I fix you, you're going to

make up for being part of the cult.”

Badger swallowed, nervous and still broken, but with a resigned hope in his face now.

Twil sighed. “Fuck me, Heather, you’ve got more mercy in your little finger than I have in my whole body.”

“It’s not mercy,” I said. “Killing him would be mercy. What I’m going to do could be much worse, and don’t remind me.” I pressed a hand to my abdomen, beneath my coat, trying to ease the spiking, prickling pain that suddenly worsened as I straightened up and looked out into the fog. “But I’m not going to perform complex brainmath out here, not with that thing waiting for us. Plus I’m freezing. I’m in bloody pajama bottoms because of this ... this ... ” I gestured at Badger. “Very stupid and rude person.”

Badger averted his eyes. Really, I thought? You came at us with intent to harm, to kidnap, and *that* makes you look down in shame? I felt like shouting at him.

“Let’s get you back to the house.” was all I said. “Under lock and key. Stand up.”

“Right, right you are,” Badger muttered as he awkwardly got to his feet, trying to wring out the wet patch from the front of his jeans.

“We’re really gonna do it?” Twil said, bouncing on the balls of her feet and limbering up.

“Maybe,” I said. “I think we should call Evee first, see if there’s anything she can do or recommend. She recognised the trick Badger pulled, she might know something useful, about how to avoid this creature.”

“Evee’s gonna go thermonuclear over this,” Twil muttered

“Then I’ll explain to her,” I said. “That bringing Badger back is ... my ... decision ... ”

Like the tide rolling out, the fog began to peel away.

No breath of wind stirred the wall of mist. The air was still and silent, even as the fog flowed away over brick and asphalt, leaving behind a faint shiny layer of cold greasy moisture on every surface. As the road junction opened up and the terraced houses emerged in a ring around us, I began to breathe a sigh of relief, despite the

unnatural weather phenomenon. Twil muttered a ‘thank God for that’.

But as the fog receded, the houses kept rising, and we discovered we had nothing to be thankful for.

Behind the first row of terraced houses was another row, higher up and arranged in a true circle, impossibly bent toward us like a scrum of listening giants leaning over the shoulders of their fellows below. And behind them, another row, further away and bending forward too. And another, and another, and another, climbing away from us as if we stood in the bottom of a giant amphitheatre the size of a city.

Twil’s mouth dropped open and she cowered like a terrified hound. Badger whimpered. Zheng growled in frustration.

The effect was dizzying, like an optical illusion to induce vertigo. The houses furthest away must have been impossibly large to be visible at that distance. If I tried to focus on any one detail I felt like a speck of dust, surrounded by millions of dark misshapen windows like empty eye sockets.

“What the fuck, what the fuck-”

“Oh no, no no no no-”

The fog raced away, sucking back through streets that ran at impossible curves up among the leering houses, the roads themselves twisted into a maze-like mess of switchbacks and loops upon the inside of a rising plane. As if the city had been transformed by a magic trick while we weren’t looking.

At the very limit of the city, miles and miles and miles away but visible as if looming over us down here at the bottom of this pit, the fog stopped, bunching and thickening against an unseen barrier – and then it flowed up and over and vanished at last, to reveal the wall.

Red bricks piled like dried scabs, drystone without mortar, hundreds of miles high in a ring that rose in every direction behind the houses.

Even Zheng had to lower her eyes with a pained grunt.

“I told you we weren’t in Sharrowford anymore,” I whispered.

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“But you’re not Outside,” Evelyn said thirty seconds later.

“Great, yeah,” Twil hissed at the phone in my hand, keeping her voice low as if something might overhear us. “That’s a real consolation here, thank you very much. You don’t have to see this place every time you look up!”

Evelyn cleared her throat, distorted by interference on the line. “Calm down, look at your feet if you have to.”

“Look at my goddamn feet, she says,” Twil muttered. “I’ll look at your bloody feet.”

“You’re not Outside,” Evelyn repeated – and I wondered if only I could detect the hint of a tremor in her voice, as she struggled to cover her emotions with deadpan analysis. “Or we wouldn’t be speaking. If your phones work, you’re still in range of a cell service tower, which means you’re technically still in Sharrowford.” She paused. “Or still on Earth, I suppose.”

“Thank God for small mercies?” I asked

“Exactly,” Evelyn said.

I sighed heavily, clinging to Evelyn’s measured words to stop myself from panicking, and to Zheng’s arm to stop myself from sitting down on the ground with physical exhaustion and hunger shakes.

“So how do we get the hell out of here, huh?” Twil demanded, shooting glances down every twisted road and sneaking her eyes up at the looming, bent houses above us.

“I’m working on it,” Evelyn grumbled.

She was thumping about on the other end of the phone, rapidly leafing through books, twice breaking off from our conversation to shout orders or requests to Praem for specific objects from her workshop. In the background, I could hear a hurrying pair of feet, and I feared I knew exactly who that was.

“Heather,” Evelyn added quickly. “Is Twil going to hold herself together?”

Twil pulled the most exasperated, irritated shrug I’d ever seen from her, and shook herself like a wet dog, baring her teeth. Her face and hands kept flowing back and forth between human and wolf,

betraying the level of terror she felt.

"We're all going to hold it together," I said, staring directly at Twil. "Isn't that right? *Twil*, isn't that right?"

"Sure," Twil said. She did not sound sure.

"The *laangren* will be fine, wizard," Zheng rumbled. "Concentrate."

"Mm," Evelyn grunted, whispering something under her breath, speed-reading in what sounded like Latin.

"Could this be some kind of illusion?" I asked.

"Doubtful," said Evelyn. "There's four of you, and you're all seeing the same thing, yes?"

"Yes, of course, as I said." We'd already compared impressions when describing the problem to Evelyn.

My eyes crept upward, to the rows upon rows of giant houses and the vast, heaven-scraping ring-wall in the distance. Each red brick must have been the size of a mountain. My head swam, dizzy at the scale and distances involved. The perspective was impossible, as if the whole world had been turned into a curved goldfish bowl, with us at the bottom.

This place did not look much like the real Sharrowford either. Except for the street corner where we stood, with the bus shelter and the old terraced houses, the vast buildings that marched away from us were too dark, too uniform in their grotesquery, greasy with soot and coal-dust that this city hadn't seen for forty years or more. When we looked along the streets nearby, they seemed familiar, but as one's eyes travelled upward, the perspective became impossible to endure without nausea.

It was also dead silent. No sounds of cars passing in the distance, no voices snatched on the night air. And no spirits. Not a single crumb of pneuma-somatic life. Utterly sterile.

At least there was still a familiar moon above us.

I'd seen worse Outside, in my nightmares and my Slips. This warped version of Sharrowford had nothing on the Library of Carcosa, and certainly not on Wonderland.

But the very fact it was somehow still Sharrowford was intolerable. We were lost in a place that should not be.

"Shaman," Zheng purred, and her free hand cupped the back of my head, suffusing me with heat. I managed to pull my gaze back down to street level, shaking slightly.

"The city looks normal to us too," Evelyn was saying. "Raine, look out the window again," she called over her shoulder.

"Already done!" Raine's voice floated back from deeper in the house. "Just good old Sharrowford out there!"

"Wait," Evelyn said, bringing her voice closer to the phone.

"Heather, you used the word 'amphitheatre' earlier, when you were describing the perspective."

"... so?"

"Are you absolutely certain this isn't the doing of your theatrical friend?"

"Sevens? No. No, this doesn't seem her style. And I only meant that as a metaphor. We're not on a stage. Besides, abducting Badger for brainmath medical experiments isn't an event she'd be interested in."

Badger was not taking this at all well, though surprisingly his panic was more controlled than Twil's. Maybe he was resigned to this as his punishment. He stood as close to us as he dared, keeping his eyes firmly on the ground and trying not to hyperventilate or shake too badly. He'd wrapped his wounded palm in the end of his own sleeve, wincing and hissing now and again whenever he tried to flex the fingers.

"Can you ask her for help?" Raine's voice suddenly came across the phone, as if she was leaning over Evelyn's shoulder.

"... I'm sorry?"

"Sevens!" Raine said, breathless. "Ask her for help! Drama queen has to be useful for something, maybe she can chase off Mister Blobby."

Evelyn hissed a wordless complaint.

I glanced about the road junction, careful not to raise my eyes to the wide carnivorous sky.

"Uh ... Sevens?" I called out softly. "Are you here? Feel like offering some help?"

The silent city told no secrets. No shred of teasing gold edged out from around a window frame, no welcoming sunlight glow, no yellow ribbons.

"Nothing," I said into the phone for Raine and Evelyn's benefit. "Either she's not here or she doesn't feel like helping."

"Where the flying fuck is *here* anyway?" Twil spat. "Can't we just walk back to the house? I can see Notte Street from here. It's right there! What if all the rest is just messing with our heads?"

"You stay exactly where you are," Evelyn said. "Not a step further, not until I figure this out. I have the relevant passages right here, let me bloody well read them."

"Twil," I said gently. "There's no spirits. We can't hear any cars. I don't think we can walk back to the house."

"We are watched," Zheng purred, blinking her eyes slowly at the end of each road like big cat. "That is where we are."

"You know how this works?" Evelyn's voice floated up from the phone.

"No, wizard." Zheng sounded quite regretful. "I do not."

"He wants me," Badger said. The first thing he'd said in minutes. He pulled a horribly pained smile. "That's how it works. This is all because I'm his, by right of contract. It'll stop when ..."

"Should let the bastard thing take you then," Twil growled.

"Do. Not," Evelyn snapped down the phone, exasperated beyond proper sentences. "Do not let the-" She sighed sharply. "'Mister Blobby' abduct or eat or throw a bloody surprise party for that fool. Do not introduce more variables. We have no idea what that will do."

"Hey, Heather, hey," Raine's voice shot back on the other side of the phone. "I'm coming to get you, I'm gonna walk-"

"Raine, no," I pleaded. "Stop. Please. I don't think you'll be able to find us."

"But hey, if I can-"

"Shut up, you oaf," Evelyn snapped at her. "What are you going to do, stomp out there and twat the thing with your crutch? Sit down."

I have the relevant passages right here now, let me translate.” Evelyn huffed a great sigh. “Heather, are you listening?”

“I am on the edge of my seat,” and said, struggling to stay calm. “Evee, please. We would all very much like to get out of here.”

“Right. First. Absolutely do not under any circumstances touch the wall. The big wall, that is. You said it was red?”

“I don’t think there’s much risk of us touching it, looks like it’s miles away.”

“Nevertheless.”

“No touchy wall, got it,” Twil said, nodding along. Clear instructions seemed to blow away the worst of her panic.

“Second,” Evelyn went on. “I suggest you all stay close together, but I hope that much goes without saying.”

“Duh,” Twil almost laughed.

“Of course,” I confirmed.

“Third,” Evelyn continued. “You’re going to have to cut each other’s eyeballs and tongues out.”

“... what.” Twil blinked at the phone.

I went cold all over. “Evee?”

“Preferably with a rusty spoon. Make sure to get the entire optic nerve, and don’t stem the bleeding. Fingers must go as well, and you need to devour those, you disgusting sacks of rotting meat, but that’ll make it difficult to hang the apostate upside down by his feet and drain his blood into a bucket, so best do that first.”

Evelyn’s voice rattled on. Twil and I stared at each other. She’d gone white. Zheng started to growl deep in her chest. Badger just stared.

“Organs will come out last, but start with the lower ones, the kidneys and liver, don’t go straight for the heart because that will end things early. You thought you could get out by calling a friend, but you can’t, because I’m here now. I’m here. I’m right here, and so are you. Hello.”

The line went dead. My phone screen popped up a cheery little

query about call quality.

“That ... that wasn’t really Eevee, right?” Twil asked.

“The wizard is irritating,” Zheng rumbled. “But those were not her words.”

I sighed, and tried to stop shaking. “I think that’s a safe assumption.”

a very great mischief – 13.12

Panic set in quicker than I had expected.

The warped goldfish bowl perspective, the rows of impossibly curved terraced houses leering down at us, this twisted version of Sharrowford; the lurking threat of the Big Man, ‘Mister Blobby’, Badger’s contract-holder, my rival predator, ten feet of pallid wormy meat that had spooked even Zheng; the layer of greasy moisture left on every inch of brick and asphalt by the retreating fog; the moon above, seen as if from the bottom of a well, with the great red brick wall forming a barrier vaster than the world; and the strange blood-soaked words in Evelyn’s voice before the call had cut out. All of it combined into a cocktail of total incomprehension.

The sheer still silence was intolerable. In a way it would have been easier if we’d been surrounded by grisly monsters.

Badger was quivering with adrenaline and fear, his breath shaking, arms wrapped around himself. Twil was whirling every which way, trying to look down all three roads at the same time. Zheng stood statue still with the deceptively relaxed readiness of a big cat. I clung to her for support, still staring at the phone in my hand. My mind raced to replay the bizarre things Evelyn had said, or been forced to say, trying desperately to divine if we’d just been taunted – or if something worse had happened, back at the house.

Twil turned to me, panting and wide-eyed. “D-do you think we can call Eevee back?”

I’d never heard her stammer like that before.

“No,” I said, swallowing down my own panic and lingering pain. My abdomen was sending deep stabbing pains up into my guts, hopefully just an aftereffect of stress. “No, I don’t think that would be a good idea. Not if that wasn’t really her and- Twil!” I snapped as Twil fumbled out her own mobile phone, already thumbing through the screens to Evelyn’s number. “Please don’t risk it. Twil, please, we don’t know if our phones have been compromised somehow.”

“The shaman is right,” Zheng purred. “*Ooran juh* will take any

opening, and force it wide.”

“Shit,” said Twil. “You don’t think it got to the house somehow, right? Right?”

“No, I believe that was some kind of illusion.” I sounded much more confident than I felt. I was guessing, at best, but we had to stay calm and collected. “Or it hijacked the call. Imitated Evelyn’s voice, to taunt us, to make us afraid.”

“So was that her or not?!” Twil asked.

I hesitated.

“Heather!” she growled.

“I don’t know!” I snapped, then had to pause and cough. My throat felt twisted inside, delicate muscles burning with unfamiliar effort, like walking on a dislocated hip. “I think that was the real Raine and Eevee, at first. She sounded completely like herself, right up until the subject became ... well. And Barnslow Drive is like a magical fortress. People can knock on the door, but that thing wasn’t a person, not at all. Even if it went for the house, it couldn’t just walk in. It couldn’t.”

“He can go anywhere,” Badger muttered, voice thin and reedy. “No door, no lock, no bolt may deny him entrance. No key is complex enough to escape his genius.” He swallowed and glanced up at us. “That was a quote from the pages we had. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t know if that’s true,” I said, and failed to sound either calm or collected.

“Sod it,” Twil spat, and pressed her phone to the side of her head. “What’s it gonna do, reach through the speaker and bite my ear off?” She turned to the empty, silent streets and stuck two fingers up at nothing. “Fuck you! You hear me, bitch?! Fuck you, I’m invincible!”

“Oh my goodness.” I had to suck down a deep breath, chest constricting inside. “Twil, don’t, please-”

“*Laangren*,” Zheng rumbled. “I will not save you from your own stupidity.”

“Shhhhhh-shh-shh, it’s- it’s-” Twil waved a hand at us, then frowned at whatever she was hearing on the phone. “What do you mean, out

of range or switched off? Evee's got voicemail, I know she has." Twil lowered the phone again, frowning at the screen. "I've got signal, but there's no connection. Like she's taken her sim card out. What the hell?"

"It's an illusion," I said again, trying to make myself believe. "The call was hijacked. Our phones have been cut off."

"Nothing like this ever happened before," Badger said, voice far away and hollow. He was staring up at the leering houses, face slowly going slack.

Zheng reached out, grabbed a fistful of his hair, wrenched his head down.

"Wha—" Badger flailed in panic.

"Zheng, don't hurt—"

"Eyes on the ground, worm," Zheng rumbled at Badger as he blinked rapidly, panting his lungs out in animal panic, his attention ripped from the impossible amphitheatre back down to street level. Zheng let go with a tiny shove. "The shaman needs your mind intact."

"R-right, right, right you are," he babbled. "Right, Z-Zheng, yes, yes, good idea. Focus. Focus."

"You asshole," Twil growled, suddenly stepping toward him, scraps of ghostly flesh flowing together into more wolf than human. Badger recoiled. "This is your fault, you stupid little shit."

"*Down*," I snapped, as hard as I could, as *Evelyn* as I could. The effort made the spiking pain in my abdomen worse, clenching and shuddering.

Twil stopped and bared her teeth at me instead.

"Evee is fine," I said. "She's behind the walls of a house strong enough to keep out any other magical influence. She has Praem and Raine and Lozzie all with her. Not to mention Tenny. I'm sure Tenny could beat up our disgusting stalker. It would be no contest."

The intentional absurdity of my statement drew a tiny humourless huff from Twil, but the accuracy of my reading her concerns doused the worst of her anger. She looked away, still steaming, but no longer about to tear Badger's face off.

“And we need to focus on getting ourselves out of here first,” I said. “We can help Eevee once we’re clear.”

“Yeah ... yeah, alright, fine. I get it.” Twil ran a hand through her dark curls, looking out at the deserted streets again, shooting a quick glance at the way they climbed the impossible sides of this curved plane. “What do we do then, walk back to the house? I know you said it won’t work, but we could at least try, yeah?”

I took a deep breath and steeled myself.

“Shaman?” Zheng must have felt my accelerating heartbeat.

“I want to try to use brainmath to slip us all Outside,” I said.

“Oh no,” Badger breathed.

“What?” Twil frowned.

“If this space, whatever this is, is located in our reality but cut off somehow, then maybe the dead hands phenomenon is cut off as well. If so, I may be able to relocate us Outside, and then back again, free of this ... this.” I gestured around without looking up. “And if we’re not in reality, then maybe I can take us back there manually.”

Twil grimaced. “You sure you wanna do that, Heather?”

“The shaman is always sure,” Zheng purred.

I tutted. “I am not.”

“Sure you’re up to it?” Twil asked. “You look like shit already.” Her eyes widened and she blushed before she even finished the sentence. “Uh- I mean, uh- I mean you’re exhausted! I mean, you don’t look like shit. Fuck, sorry.”

Her flustered clumsiness would have been heart-fluttering under any other circumstances.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I feel just as excremental as I look. I’m falling apart here, Zheng’s going to have to carry me regardless. I may as well try. I might pass out, but this an emergency.”

Twil nodded, then glanced up at Zheng. “You got her, yeah? Don’t drop her if she falls.”

Zheng grunted an affirmative.

“Everyone needs to touch. Hold hands or something,” I said. “Like we did with Lozzie on the way back from Carcosa. Don’t let go. And keep your eyes firmly closed. You too,” I added to Badger. “I don’t want you losing your mind in the transition.” He nodded, and squeezed his eyes shut, gone white in the face.

Twil grabbed Badger by the shoulder. Zheng held me tight in one arm, and after a moment’s hesitation, Twil offered her a hand. My stomach was churning with the anticipation of pain, but there was no sense in delaying.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” I said.

I plunged my mind into the black sump at the bottom of my soul, thrust into the boiling tar up to my elbows, burning away skin and lighting my brain on fire. I dredged up that familiar old equation, the one I’d used so many times now, the most fundamental of the Eye’s lessons, the mathematical formula to rotate matter from reality to Outside and back again. It rose like a dripping hulk from the depths, the machine parts awakening as I touched them one by one. Molten metal slammed into place across the surface of my brain, scraping away slivers of who and what I was, shooting splinters of impossible knowledge deep into my subconscious to burrow and fester. Each figure of the equation clicked down in sequence, the hyperdimensional mathematics completing itself in the span of a hummingbird’s wing beat.

And then a pair of cold vices closed around my ankles.

Dead hands, anchored in deep soil, and holding fast.

The equation fell apart in a cry of pain and a sudden welter of nosebleed. My vision blurred, throbbing black around the edges as I hung in Zheng’s grip like a rag doll with my strings cut. Zheng cradled my head and chest and let me lean forward as I clenched up every muscle in my body to stop from vomiting. I let out a gurgling cry as my stomach muscles tried to convulse, but I held on. I had bested this formula before. I would not surrender now.

Panting, wiping nosebleed on my coat sleeve, shaking all over with pain like the aftermath of an electric shock, I straightened up and let Zheng take my weight. Could barely work my legs.

“Shaman,” she purred.

“Didn’t work?” Twil grimaced. She let go of Zheng’s hand and let go

of Badger, who was looking at me somewhat awestruck.

“No hitchhiking for us,” I muttered, a little bit out of my head.

Twil squinted. “Eh?”

“We walk, *laangren*,” Zheng purred.

= =

For lack of any other option, we did indeed try to walk home.

“... oh that is too weird,” Twil said, staring back the way we’d come after about a hundred meters. “I really really really don’t like that. Really mega total do not like. Uh uh. No way. Screw this place.”

“Then do not look, *laangren*,” Zheng purred.

The goldfish bowl effect, the leering houses, and the great red brick wall all moved with us, as if the whole world rotated relative to the awful sights above us. We seemed unable to reach the point where the road curved impossibly upward into the space between those dark houses, walking through a silent Sharrowford as normal instead – or as close to normal as it could be, covered in a sheen of shiny grease and darkened by soot and grime. Behind us, once we walked far enough, the junction with the bus stop had risen up into the ring of houses and jumbled streets, all details rapidly lost to sight. Where we’d stood only minutes before was pulled up onto the side of the goldfish bowl plane.

The effect was dizzying to watch. We all tried to keep our gazes less than a hundred meters ahead, on the relatively normal road as it descended from the illusion above.

I did wonder what would happen if we split into two groups and walked in different directions, but decided not to risk any experiments.

I didn’t even speculate out loud; we may have had a hidden eavesdropper.

Twil went in front – ‘taking point’ as Raine liked to call it – and stayed in full-on werewolf mode. Why not, we reasoned, there was nobody here to see. We made our way down the middle of the road, slow and cautious, no leaping walls or sprinting at speed, all the better to spot an ambush if our corpulent stalker decided to have

another go.

Badger stayed in the middle, partly so Zheng could keep an eye on him, and Zheng herself brought up the rear, but never too far away.

I rode on Zheng's back again, exhausted beyond words, my eyelids like lead.

Attempted brainmath had drained me down to fumes. Combined with the stabbing pains in my abdomen and the aftermath of the screech and the lingering ravenous hunger, I felt barely present, a numb sack of meat clinging to my packmate's back. Even my phantom limbs were limp, wrapped around Zheng in an embrace she couldn't feel, like an injured squid with a friendly shark.

"I'm- sorry Zheng, there's still nosebleed, I can't-"

"Bleed on me, shaman," she'd purred.

I knew she'd never drop me. I could have slept like this, if only we were elsewhere.

Sharrowford degenerated as we walked. Hastings Road could have been mistaken for normal, on a rough night, in the dark, after a storm, but by the time we reached Sparrow Street, the city at ground level had transformed into a dark parody.

The houses were coated with grime, coal-dust and soot and pollution, their windowpanes darkened from the inside by layers of dirt, brickwork eaten away by lichen and pale moss. The garden walls were coated in disgusting grease that made my skin crawl, and the gardens themselves were thin with dead grass, littered with old kitchen appliances or piles of rubbish. Streetlights seemed dimmer as we passed, parked cars had faded paint-jobs, and the gutters were clogged with rotting organic matter like leaf mulch or mud, with tiny white worms writhing within.

"Come on, what the hell?" Twil growled through her snout from up ahead. She was flexing her claws, wolf ears swivelling to catch the slightest sound, jumping at shadows. "Sharrowford doesn't look half this bad, this is bullshit. Come out and fight us, fucko!"

Her challenge echoed away between the houses.

"Calm, *laangren*," Zheng purred.

"How am I meant to calm down if this motherfucker won't come

out and fight me? Shit-eating coward bitch-tits ... ” She trailed off into muttered insults. I noticed Badger trying not to flinch every time Twil opened her mouth.

“*Ooran juh* wants you tormented,” said Zheng.

“I’ll show it bloody torment.” Twil gestured at the dark and filthy houses. “What about all the people? Come on, there was people sleeping in these houses, right? It’s the middle of the night. They can’t all have vanished.”

Not a single light shone in any window. Not a whisper moved behind any curtain.

“We’re not in Sharrowford,” I croaked.

We crept on a few more steps in tense silence. Zheng turned her head very slightly, meeting my eyes sidelong across her own shoulder.

“What is your plan, shaman?” she whispered.

“ ... get home. Maybe ... maybe there ... ”

“I will fight anything for you,” she whispered on, “even *Ooran juh*, though I cannot win. But I do not know how to get you out of this gullet.”

Zheng’s warmth down my front made me feel so safe, but here it was a false hope. I tried to nod.

“I love you too, Zheng. I’ll get us out. Get us out,” I whispered back. “I’ll think of something.”

Up ahead, Twil stopped by a low garden wall, gritting her teeth at one of the worm-eaten wooden doors.

“I could go ring a doorbell,” she said. “See if anybody’s home.”

“*Laangren*,” Zheng rumbled a warning.

“Twil, no-” I croaked, but it was too late. Twil was already vaulting the low wall, onto the patch of scraggy grass that passed for a lawn. She trotted up onto the front step and pressed the doorbell twice, bouncing on her wolf-paw paws and rolling her furred shoulders, ready to spring away or throw a punch.

Zheng stopped with me on her back, a good safe distance away.

Badger scurried behind us.

“Bad plan, hey,” he was muttering to himself. “Bad plan, bad baaaaad plan. What is with this werewolf stuff, man?”

“Hey hey!” Twil called up at the house. “Anybody home?”

“Twil, leave it, please,” I said.

“Quiet, shaman,” Zheng purred. I shut my mouth.

Twil jabbed the doorbell twice more. Seconds ticked by, maybe a whole minute, but nothing happened. My phantom limbs tried to ready themselves, sluggish and tugging on my bruises. Eventually Twil let out a huge grumbling huff and shrugged her shoulders.

“Guess that answers that,” she sighed. Twil looked back at us over one shoulder and pulled a self-deprecating smirk with her wolf’s snout, a very strange sight. “Made myself look like a right arse, didn’t-”

“Twil!” I screamed.

At the moment she’d turned to look over her shoulder, the door had begun to open, a dark crack widening with silent glacial slowness.

When I screamed, a fat pale arm squirmed out through the gap like a great albino worm forcing itself through corpse-flesh.

Twil whirled just in time, leaping back with a yelp, stumbling on the house’s front step. The slavering mouth in the Big Man’s palm snapped razor teeth shut on empty air, an inch from Twil’s head. She scrambled back, panting and wild. The door and frame bulged outward, creaking and warping as a giant bulk pressed against them from behind.

“Back up, *laangren*,” Zheng rumbled.

The mouth in the palm opened wide, and curled red lips into a toothy smile, flickering out a wet red tongue as a whispering filled the air, soft and serpentine and full of secrets.

I tried to hiss again, but only croaked. I wanted to clamber off Zheng’s back and – what? I ached all over, my whirling phantom limbs were no help, all they did was send shooting pains up my bruised flanks. Zheng held tight around my thighs, ignoring my squirming to get down.

“Fuck you!” Twil roared at the arm and the hidden giant behind it. “I’ll bite your fucking hand off you coward!”

“You cannot fight it-” Zheng raised her voice, but Twil was already hurling herself at the arm.

And in a motion that made my eyes water, she failed to connect.

It was like watching an optical illusion in real time. Twil’s claws seemed to sail through the place where her target should be, her motion itself revealing that the Big Man’s arm was actually at a totally different angle. It was impossible, a trick of the light that made my eyes water and forced a pained groan from Badger.

Twil sailed past and hit the wall with a surprised thump, and the mouth-hand went for her again, opening wide to take a chunk out of her scalp.

But Twil was fast. And the Big Man was trapped behind a door.

She dropped to her belly, rolled beneath his reach, and came up level with his giant hinge of an elbow, ready to rip into greasy flesh, claws angled to disarticulate and debone his joint with the first strike – but then his arm slithered back as quick as it had thrust forward, folds of loose skin gathering and bunching against the door and frame for a split second, before the whole mass vanished back into the gap.

The door slammed shut.

“Coward!” Twil growled, and threw herself at the door. She kicked at the wood, sending splinters flying and awful cracking sounds echoing down the deserted street. “Get out here and fight, bitch!”

“*Laangren*, stop,” Zheng rumbled. I was still squirming, instinct desperate to get down and drag Twil back.

Twil’s forth kick knocked the front door clean off its hinges. The worm-eaten wood crashed into the darkness of an unlit corridor.

Empty. No Big Man. Nothing to sink her claws into.

Twil made an incoherent sound of animal rage through her gritted teeth. She kicked at the door frame and whirled, looking for something to fight, making fists with her claws.

“Twil!” I tried to snap – but the word came out as a cough. “Twil, for pity’s sake, stop,” I wheezed. “Please. It’s trying to trap us, to

lure us into getting bitten, to give us the creeps. Stop.”

“Well it’s working!” Twil snapped.

But she did rapidly simmer down, heaving for breath and hanging her head as she stepped back over the wall to rejoin us in the street. She shot dark looks up and down the road, and back over her shoulder at the empty toothless mouth of the broken doorway. She wouldn’t meet anybody’s eyes, flexing her claws and hunching her shoulders.

“I hate this,” she hissed.

“Twil,” I tried again, more gentle this time, looking down at her from over Zheng’s shoulder. “I know you do, but we need you to stay alert and not get distracted. If we do get attacked, you need to be on your toes.”

“Stay frosty,” she said, almost mockingly, but then grimaced and shrugged. “Sorry I’m like this. I know it’s no good.”

“There is no shame in courage, *laangren*,” Zheng said.

“Yeah but it’s supposed to bloody well work, innit?” Twil huffed, and then turned to lead the way again. “I’ll try to keep a lid on myself. Sorry, Heather.”

“Wait, Twil,” I croaked. “If this thing is trying to get to us, you need to speak your mind. Don’t let it needle you.”

She shrugged. Wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Already have.”

I struggled to marshal my thoughts. I ached all over, with pain and exhaustion, but Twil needed help or she wouldn’t get through this. I knew this landscape, this nature of landscape, this barren waste, far better than she did. On some level I felt like I understood the Big Man. A rival predator. I knew all the tricks, because I’d learned them in the abyss. Twil would be baited by a flickering among the rocks, a stray tendril in the shadows, a piece of odd-looking coral, diverted away from us and hunted down.

“Twil, what did you mean earlier, when you said this is what you were made for?” I tried.

Twil finally looked up and blinked at me. “... my granddad, right?”

“I’m sorry?”

“S’why he made me a werewolf,” she said, and her voice brimmed with sudden pride. “I mean screw whatever Eevee says, the old man is dead. He made me a werewolf so I could deal with stuff like this, when it gets sent against my family, against the Church. That’s why I’m like this, s’what I’m meant to be good at. Fighting monsters, yeah? But it’s not working, is it? Not this time.”

“I think this is beyond any of us,” I told her. “There’s no shame in that either.”

Twil shrugged and gave me an awkward wave. “I just don’t get what the hell’s going on. Look, I’ll be alright, let’s just keep moving, yeah?”

“Good idea,” Badger added from behind us. Twil shot him a nasty look.

“One foot in front of the other, *laangren*,” Zheng purred. “I have your back.”

Twil and Zheng shared a very different sort of look. After a moment, Twil swallowed and nodded.

We carried on, down dark streets clogged with filth and grease and oily sheens on every surface. A stench was rising on the night air, like old cabbage and rotten eggs and fish left in the sun. Twil began to breathe through her mouth to drown out the worst of the smell, wolf’s jaw hanging open. Once or twice I raised my eyes and risked a look at the vast ring-wall above us, and the the moon in the sky. At least the moon seemed unblemished.

“Zheng,” I mumbled from Zheng’s shoulder, trying to raise my croaking voice as much as I could so Twil could hear too. I had to keep us together, keep our spirits up, keep our thoughts focused on what we could understand.

“Shaman?”

“Why are you sc-” I caught myself. “Why are you so cautious of this big fat man? Mister Blobby, if that’s what we’re calling him? Not to put too finer point on this, but I have seen you gleefully fight a building once before.”

“*Ooran juh* cannot be fought.”

“And a tower block can?” Twil shot over her shoulder. “I’ve heard the story, you doing your Kool-Aid Man impression.”

"You are not listening," Zheng purred. "I fear no physical contest, no God of this world or the shaman's dark sea. But *Ooran juh* does not fight with muscle and fist. It is no Outsider. It is no God. It was a monkey once, a wizard. Much worse."

I blinked several times in surprise, trying to process this fact.

"A person?" I asked. "That was a human being?"

"Mm. Once."

"Makes sense, trying to scare us like this," Twil growled. "If it was some alien from beyond, it wouldn't be trying to freak us out on purpose. Bastard."

"That's not what it says in the book," Badger spoke up quietly, without raising his eyes. "In the photocopies from the book, I mean."

"It wrote the book," Zheng purred.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

Zheng said nothing for several paces, brooding in silence as we rounded the corner of another street. The road surface itself was caked with gunk, oil runoff and grime, and the drains were clogged with black rotting filth, forming puddles of stagnant water.

"A wizard had a theory, about a book," Zheng eventually rumbled as we crept down the middle of the street. The low, soft purr of her voice soothed my anxiety a little, even if she was talking about horrible subjects.

"A *Song* wizard," she said. "His name was Liu Bai. I knew him twenty nine years, with the Khans. Used me as a sounding board when he couldn't get his fellows to listen, and my bindings were such that I was not permitted to rip his tongue out and gut him, so I heard most of it. The book was an unnamed rotting thing he had picked up in Samarkand, but when he tried to lead the rest of us back to the bookseller, the place was gone. He swore blind that the bookseller had not been truly human, but something else wearing the skin of one of you monkeys, a man so obese he should not have been alive."

"Sounds like our friend," Twil grunted.

"Perhaps," Zheng continued. "Liu Bai swore the book contained

instructions for a contract of power, for the shaping of flesh. A contract with a much older wizard who had been beyond, to a place of endless cold water, where the reshaping of flesh was achievable at but a thought.”

I shivered with recognition, no longer soothed.

“The abyss?” I whispered. “That thing is a person who returned from the abyss? Like me?”

Zheng shrugged gently, not wanting to jostle me too hard on her shoulders. “That is what Liu Bai believed. None of the other wizards could see this in the rotting book. They saw only diseased ramblings.”

The road curved to the right, past houses fallen into deep disrepair, their windows blackened and their roofs threadbare. The garden walls were covered in a tiny black filigree of creeping fungus. We weren’t too far from home now.

“I do not know when he made the deal. In a dream, perhaps,” Zheng purred. “But over several weeks he grew fat. Weeping sores opened in both his palms, and the edges of the wounds seemed to twitch like lips. He drooled, soiled himself, stumbled about in a daze. The others shunned him. He was confined to his tent. He was going to be left behind when the army next moved. None had seen him for days when he finally emerged, but he was not Liu Bai anymore. *Ooran juh* had found a new host.”

Badger kept glancing back over his shoulder, eyes growing more horrified with every turn of Zheng’s account. He was squeezing his wounded hand tight inside the end of his bloodied sleeve.

“What, the fat guy like, possessed him?” Twil asked.

“Or used him as a gateway, or a lighthouse,” Zheng purred. “Or ate him for sport. I do not know. Half the camp burned that night. The warriors could not stop him, though none lacked courage. He was always where their weapons were not. He declined every fight, and bit every arm turned against him. I can move in the blink of an eye, but even I cannot be in two places at once. We lacked the means to bring *Ooran juh* to battle. He left when he grew bored, simply ceased to be. Not because we drove him off.”

I was having trouble concentrating on Zheng’s story. That greasy pale fat man, that obscene headless thing, that was something like

me? A human being who had journeyed into the abyss between spheres, like I had?

That grotesque mountain of pale meat, was that his *Homo abyssus*?

"The warriors who were bitten did not heal," Zheng was saying. "Their wounds turned infected, would not be cleaned with either fire or steel, or even amputation. The sickness was in the blood. They suffered dreams and waking visions of *Ooran juh* offering them a contract, to end the pain. Many slew themselves, many others turned up dead, many walked off into the steppe alone."

"Alright, don't get bit," Twil said. "Evee already told us that part."

"I met it once again, hundreds of years later," Zheng purred. "It took a wizard who owned me at the time. She had been dabbling in dubious books, but she could not possibly have had the very same tome as Liu Bai. That time *Ooran juh* simply strode out of a locked room. He took her to wherever he takes his prey, but I just stood and watched. I was below his notice."

"I-I think what we see of him is a projection," Badger spoke up, voice unsteady. He glanced back over his shoulder at Zheng and I, then hurried to face forward again, keeping his eyes carefully on the ground.

"Speak up, worm," Zheng rumbled.

"... it's like a, uh ..." He struggled for a moment, then wet his lips and took a deep breath. "Imagine if we were all two-dimensional shapes, right? Bear with me here a sec, okay? Like if people were all circles, squares, triangles, whatever. Then imagine a three-dimensional shape comes to visit us. We'd only see one projection of it where it intersects with our world on a two-dee plane, not the whole thing. Right?"

"Like *Flatland*," I croaked.

"Yeah, yeah," Badger nodded. He looked back, the brightest and most alert I'd seen him so far. "So like, the Big Man, and things like him, they're like a five or six or seven dimensional shape, visiting us shapes that only move and see in three dimensions. Four dimensions if you count time, I guess. Get it?"

"Wizard filth," Zheng rumbled. Badger flinched and stumbled, like he wanted to run from her.

"I get it," I spoke up. "Let him speak, Zheng. I think this might be valuable."

Or at least it would keep our minds focused on something other than the grease and filth and decay all around.

"S-so that's why the Big Man can be in multiple different places, and why we can't touch him, but he can touch us if he wants to," Badger stammered on. "He's just one projection of a larger entity, and he can rotate away from us whenever he wants."

"Like the messenger," Twil piped up from in front. "Remember that, Heather? Back in the Medieval Metaphysics room? I jumped straight at it, but it didn't even have to dodge."

"I do remember," I croaked softly.

"Where'd you get all this from anyway?" Twil growled at Badger.

"Learned it from Sarry, mostly," he said. "I'm not as stupid as I look. And I know I look really stupid, right."

"Could'a fooled me."

"I did go to uni, you know?"

"What?" Twil squinted back at him. "What'd you study there?"

"Maths," Badger said. "S'kinda how I got into the cult ... "

He sighed and fell silent, as we crept along the final stretch of filth-streaked road before the turning into Barnslow Drive. This corner, this street, had become so familiar to me over the last half a year. My Cape of Good Hope before warm sanctuary and real family. But this place was not really Sharrowford, not right now.

The nearby houses were coated with dirt and grime, the pavements smeared with unspeakable black slime, the drain gratings submerged beneath a scum of oily dark water. The overhanging trees on the opposite side of the road were leafless and dead, dotted with black fungal infection and patches of rot. Defamiliarisation crept over me, a sense of spiritual vertigo, and I had to resist the urge to bury my face in Zheng's shoulder and screw my eyes shut.

We reached the stretch of pavement opposite home.

"Great," Twil growled.

I don't know what I'd expected to find at Number 12 Barnslow Drive. A signpost to the exit? A secret door back into the real world? Evelyn and Raine, waiting to rescue us? An idea, inspiration, a clue at least.

The house was an even worse wreck than the other mockeries in this ruined place. All the lifetimes of effort which had gone into holding the building together in reality were absent here; missing tiles left the buckled roof open to the elements in several places, the walls were covered in dark creeping ivy thick as blankets, and the brickwork was loose and crumbling. The windows were streaked with black filth from the inside, and the front garden was overgrown with waist-high weeds, thick grasses and twisted thorns. As we stared in crushed hope, I saw small scuttling insects dart from under the eaves and vanish into cracks in the walls. Nobody lived here.

"What now, shaman?" Zheng rumbled.

I stared at the house, feeling violated. My home, even as an illusion, reduced to this? Was this meant to be a vision of the future, or a stab at my heart?

"Hey," Twil suddenly barked. "Hey, hey, is that Eevee? Guys, guys, there's a face in the window! Don't you see that?" Twil pointed, whirling to us and then back again. "That's Eevee! It must have got her, it must have!"

All I saw was a white smudge on the other side of a second-floor window. Fungus on the glass.

"Twil," I said, slowly and carefully. "That's not Eevee. That's nothing."

"I don't- I-" Twil frowned up at the window, squinting and blinking her eyes. "But ... but what if she's inside?"

"She isn't," I said, hard as I could. "Twil, don't look at it. Look at me instead. Twil, please. If a regular house was a trap, this is a definitely a trap. Don't be stupid. Stop looking at it."

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" Twil snapped – but she did look away from the house, down at the ground, then at me, gritting her teeth. "It's a stupid trap. I mean, come on, who would walk in there, right? It's obviously not your bloody house. Try harder, bitch-tits," she spat at the empty road.

"We need a way out, shaman," Zheng murmured.

"I know," I whispered back. "I just can't think of anything. I could try brainmath again, try to ... comprehend this place. It'll be difficult-"

"No, shaman. We need a way out, quickly."

"I know, I-"

"Uhhhhhh, guys," Twil said. She was looking directly up. "Is it just me, or does the big red wall look ... taller?"

I followed her gaze, craning my neck up past the rows of dark terraced houses, toward the very top of that impossibly giant ring-wall of scabby red.

Twil was right. As if reaching toward the moon in the centre, the wall seemed taller. Almost like we were sinking deeper. Or the opening was getting narrower.

"It ... does," I admitted.

"Oh no," Badger murmured. "The way out is closing up. It's closing up. It's over."

"We are in his mouth," Zheng rumbled. "Behind his teeth. We must climb out, before he finishes chewing, but I cannot grasp the walls to pull us up."

"What?" Twil stared at her, wide-eyed with panic. "Oh fuck that, come on, that was just a metaphor, right?"

Zheng blinked at her, once, slowly. "Shaman."

"I-I'm trying to think of something," I stammered. "Maybe if I try brainmath again, try something different, try-"

Buzz-buzz.

We all jumped out of our collective skin when my phone went off, buzzing in my coat pocket. Twil bristled all over and Badger gasped and I felt like I was going to have a heart attack, but Zheng held fast. With one shaking hand I fumbled my phone out as it kept ringing.

"It's Evee, right?" Twil asked.

I shook my head. "I don't recognise the number."

"It's him," Badger said. "Taunting us. It must be. Don't answer it, don't answer it!"

"Shut up, you prat," Twil growled at him. "It might be Evee, giving us a way out."

"Shaman," Zheng purred, and nodded out into the street. "Decide quickly."

I followed her gaze, and saw that the blocked drains along the kerb were overflowing more than before, flooding the entire road with a thin layer of backed-up sewer water, with disgusting oily patches and dark substances floating in the liquid. Bubbles of rank gas rose from the depths of the drain entrances, popping softly in the silence.

The phone kept buzzing in my hand.

"Okay," I said, phantom limbs rising to defend me from an unseen threat. "Everyone brace yourselves."

I pressed the answer call button, and held the phone out at arm's length, heart racing as I waited for the trap to spring shut, ready to counter it at the speed of thought.

"... Morell?" asked a voice from the phone's speaker.

Dead flat, utterly cold, the voice of a predatory lizard. I'd recognise that voice anywhere. I was so surprised I forgot to be afraid for a moment, and jammed the phone against my ear in shock.

"Stack?" I said. "Amy?"

"Morell," she repeated. Her voice was a little distorted by poor connection, but it was absolutely Amy Stack.

"W-what ... what are you- is this really you?" I asked.

A beat of silence. I swore I could feel the exasperated sigh.

"You asked me to call you," she said.

I boggled at that. Zheng narrowed her eyes, Twil shrugged wide, both of them able to overhear the conversation and just as confused as I was.

"I ... Stack, we're in the middle of a crisis right now," I said quickly. "Did you call by chance, or did Evelyn contact you, or-"

“You told me to call you, Morell,” Stack said, level and calm. “You’re standing in front of me right now, and I don’t know how you got in here. But I’m talking to you as well, on the phone. I don’t want to know. Here.”

The phone changed hands with a rustle.

“Heather? Can you hear me?”

It was my own voice.

“Sevens?!” I asked.

“Unless there’s another identical copy of you running around Sharrowford, yes, it’s me,” said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, in an irritatingly accurate copy of my own voice, complete with that touch of patronising intellectualism in her tone. “And at the moment it’s also my exact words reaching you. We have a few moments before that boorish gentleman interrupts us.”

“Are you coming to help?” I asked.

“Oh, fuck, please,” Twil said.

“Help?” Sevens echoed. “Oh dear, oh no, I absolutely cannot come in there. That philistine would run rings around me and bite both my hands off. We’re simply not evenly matched, I’m not capable of that.”

I suppressed an urge to slap her. “I know this doesn’t fit your delicate theatrical sensibility, but I can hardly conclude a sweeping lesbian romance for your enjoyment if we all get drowned in rising sewer water.”

I glanced at the road. The blackened, scum-filled water was an inch deep now, and still rising. Twil shuffled away from the kerb, baring her teeth at the water.

“Sewer water?” Sevens asked. “Ugh. Oh dear, that means he already knows. He’s panicking though, which is probably a good sign.”

“Knows what? Sevens, are you helping or not? What is this phone call even for?”

“To open another connection, of course,” Sevens said with that infuriating hint of smugness – me at my absolute worst, when I thought I was being clever. “I’ve sent a ... well, an acquaintance, to help guide you out. I can’t vouch for her quality or her intentions,

because I've known her for all of about fifteen minutes, but she was very insistent, and I don't know why anybody would willingly throw themselves down that particular gullet for anything less than deepest love."

"Why- why-" I tried to gather my thoughts. "Why not call from Raine or Evelyn's phone? What does Stack have to-"

Sevens-Shades-of-Heather sighed, losing her patience. "Because he's already found and closed those connections. You needed a fresh one, and if I showed myself to Lozzie, you'd all be dead by the time she finishes hugging me. Not that I mind her, of course."

"Oh shit, oh shit, look at that," Twil said.

I followed her wide-eyed gaze.

The great red wall was shuddering.

Vast ripples and pulses flowed up the scabby red bricks, more like a twitching biological sphincter than stone and rock under the influence of an earthquake, trying to inch closer to the clean light of the moon in the middle of the sky. A moment later, as if it had taken seconds to cross a vast distance, a sound like slapping meat reached us, distant and distorted, the first sound to break the silence of this mock-city.

"He's knows you've almost figured out how to escape," Sevens was saying down the phone, in my own voice. "So he's going to do his best to force you down his throat now."

"How!?" I croaked into the phone. "I haven't figured out anything!"

The water in the road was lapping at the kerb. Dark shapes were moving in it now, giant shadows beneath the surface, as if the water were miles deep rather than an inch or two of muck over dirty asphalt.

"Oh don't be stupid, of course you have. You're the only one who can perceive matter in the relevant way. The help I've sent will only be able to signpost you, it's up to you to do the rest," Sevens explained. "But it's dead help, a dead friend, a friend who has tasted worms once before. I've never tasted worms," Sevens' voice – my voice – carried on, and it took me a moment of shock to realise it wasn't really her anymore.

"My flesh is forever, held between here and there, between decay

and life. Are you forever, Heather Morell? You could be, but you are small and weak, you refuse to grow strong, to eat good meat, to grow fat with good food and good-”

Twil flinched at a sudden flicker of dark motion in the front garden of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. Zheng whirled and growled. Badger tripped back in surprise.

But I lowered the phone, and ignored the rattling voice of what was no longer Sevens imitating me.

A fox stood on the garden wall.

Toned and sleek from a good diet and plenty of exercise, russet fur fluffy and healthy, black-tipped ears swivelling. Bright orange eyes met mine, then the fox quickly looked behind herself, as if she'd recently escaped a hunter and could hear it following on her trail. Then she bounded forward along the wall, and turned back to look at me again.

The fox was not part of this place. She was too clean. Too familiar.

“What the hell?” Twil said.

“It's- it's okay,” I said, struggling to gather my thoughts as I ended the call and put my phone away. “I think I know this fox. Is it you? ... Saye?”

“You what?” Twil boggled at me.

The fox tilted her head, quickly looked forward along the road, then back at us again. Filthy water was beginning to overlap the kerb beside us, millimetre by millimetre.

“It's a long story,” I said, shaking my head. “I think this is Evelyn's ... well, it's part of her family. Maybe. Sort of. What are you doing here?” I asked the fox. “How did you get to- oh, well, I suppose we aren't actually in Sharrowford, are we?”

The fox replied by hurrying along to the next garden wall, hopping the gap with a spring of her back legs. She looked up at the sky and the great red wall closing in on the moon. We didn't have long, the gap was getting smaller and smaller, tightening around that one source of clean natural light.

“Foxes are good allies, if they will have you,” Zheng purred. “Both predators and eaters of the dead. They know the secret ways. Do we

follow her, shaman?"

"She'll do her best to lead us out. I think."

If only I could figure out what Sevens had meant.

"Oh bloody great," Badger said. "Now we're following an animal."

"Stay here with the shit water if you want, numb-nuts," Twil said.

"Looks like a chance to me."

She was already picking up her feet and trotting after the fox, trying to skirt the rapidly forming puddles on the pavement. Zheng settled me more comfortably on her back, and set off as well, at a rapid ground-eating lope. Badger let out a groan, but jogged after us, boots splashing through the muck.

The fox raced ahead along the low garden walls, hopping from brick to brick, staying clear of the rising water in the street. We tried to ignore the vast shadows moving below, and the way the great red wall shuddered and flexed above our heads.

Pinned in the mouth of a predator, we fled between its teeth.

a very great mischief – 13.13

The Saye Fox — if she was indeed the very same preternatural animal we had met skulking around the grounds of Evelyn's childhood home months ago — ran along the garden walls and fences down Barnslow Drive, hopping from corner-post to crumbling brick on silent paws, skirting patches of slimy black mold, her russet tail flicking as she stayed out of the rising water in the street below.

She led us back out into the city, this false and twisted Sharrowford, as it closed up around us and filled with filth at our feet. We followed as best we could.

The fox turned left at the end of Barnslow Drive, but not before stopping and glancing back again. Those lamplight orange eyes found mine as her paws danced in place with restless urgency, her ears swivelling to catch the distant meaty slapping sounds of the great red wall, and the closer slopping noises of the water in the roadway, as dark shapes disturbed the deeps below.

Vulpine eyes asked me a silent question, but I didn't speak fox.

"What?" I spluttered out loud over Zheng's shoulder, my voice still a croaking, weakened mess, dragged down by exhaustion, hunger, and pain. The spiking, prickling sensation in my abdomen was a constant presence now. "Don't stop! Go!"

"Save your strength, shaman," Zheng purred.

"B-but she's— she needs me to ... "

I had no idea what she needed.

But the fox was already away again, as if the hounds of hell had her scent. She had to hop down to the pavement, to round the corner to the next set of walls, darting between the slowly forming puddles of rank, stinking water, before leaping up again and leading us onward. My voice was lost in the splash of three pairs of feet, as Twil and Zheng and Badger all raced to keep up, plunging around the corner through the rising flood.

In the seven months since I'd met Raine and Evelyn and discovered I was not crazy after all, I had fled or been carried out of more than one nasty situation — looping stairwell traps, fake shopping centre fires, defeated cults with collapsing ambitions, actual for-real deadly house fires, the Library of Carcosa — but with the exception of Wonderland itself, this place took the award for most bowel-clenching terror, because it was very obviously trying to swallow and digest us before we could escape.

As we ran after the fox, the great red wall in the impossibly unreachable distance kept up a disgusting shuddering and shaking, undulating like a layer of flesh, or a mucus membrane inching slowly shut. I realised with detached recognition, as I kept my head tight to Zheng's shoulder and my arms firmly clinging to her neck with all the strength I could muster, that perhaps this explained the deep red colour of the wall: it was slow-twitch muscle, on a scale my mind refused to comprehend.

Whenever I risked a glance upward, I could see the circle of dark sky around the moon was shrinking, as the mouth of this well of flesh tightened around our only source of clean light.

I tried not to dwell on what might happen if it closed.

The mock-city around us was rapidly degenerating now, and filling with what I could only think of as digestive fluid.

We raced past houses straight out of an Edgar Allen Poe story, the rotting bones of buildings long abandoned, terraced houses collapsed in on themselves, Victorian redbricks devoured by waves of dark ivy and left open to the elements. The trees had reduced to skeletons too; not the hardy gnarled stereotype of a Gothic horror *uberwald*, but brittle grey things flaking apart like burnt logs, coated with parasitic fungi and greasy biofilm. The pavement itself turned crumbly, rent from beneath by cracks as if undermined by tree roots and weeds. Fewer and fewer streetlights shone with any warmth, many of them had shattered bulbs, and the ones that did still function were flickering or dim, leaving us to rely on the narrowing moonlight.

Everything was covered in grease, cook-fire grease, fatty grease, soft and yellow where it had built up in the corners of windows and walls, the sort of grease one might find in the gut of a drowned corpse.

The filthy water was worse. By the time the Saye Fox turned again — left a second time, a double-back? — the vile sewer water had crested the kerbs and spread beyond mere pavement puddles. Oily with grime, full of floating black rot and tiny white wiggling worms lifted from the drain entrances and gutters. It stank too, like sulphur, rotten cabbage, and bad eggs. Zheng and Twil and Badger were forced to splash through a thin layer of the rancid water, and the Saye Fox spent as little time down on the pavement as possible, darting through as quickly as she could and shaking her paws off once she leapt onto a garden wall again.

Twil was in trainers, her feet must have been soaked through when the water inched up above her soles, but at least Zheng and Badger were both wearing proper boots, and I was safe and dry on Zheng's back for now. I was most worried about Badger. He was the only true human here. Neither he nor Twil complained — not that they had time to, with the running and the huffing and the puffing — so at least the water wasn't actually corrosive acid. But there was no telling what it might do to unprotected flesh.

Vast dark shapes moved beneath the murky water in the middle of the road, as if we looked down into an actual oceanic gulf.

They weren't illusions. Their weight and displacement disturbed the water, forming swells and humps and slopping waves against the kerb. As we splashed along the pavement, limbs and feelers began to break the surface out in the road.

"Oh fuck off with that!" Twil shouted as she ran, shooting wide-eyed glances into the street.

Grey tentacles like a parody of a giant octopus rose slowly to wave in the air, accompanied by multi-hinged insectoid arms clad in dark exoskeleton, along with strange thin feelers like marine plants, and thick muscular tongues like a clam's pseudopod.

"Ignore it, *laangren*," Zheng rumbled.

Badger, huffing and puffing and splashing along behind us, was repeating 'oh shit oh shit oh shit' in every gap between his heaving breath.

"How am I meant to ignore this?!" Twil skidded to a halt, throwing up a shower of filthy water, and turned to face the road.

One of the insectoid arms had ventured close to the kerb, plated

like a knight and tipped with a hook to rival any butcher's gutting tool. Zheng slammed to a halt as well, and I clung to her back with muffled squeal, but the arm was already dipping for Twil, darting down to snare her and drag her below the surface of the water. Her ghostly werewolf form whirled together like a second skin. I swallowed a tiny scream as she dodged sideways — the thin stinger missed her — but to catch her balance she put one foot over the edge of the kerb, down into the road itself, into the deep water.

But Twil didn't go tumbling and splashing into the darkness. Her foot found the asphalt of the road surface, not a thousand fathoms of cold water.

She turned so fast I could barely follow the motion, ripping through the insectoid arm's exoskeleton with both sets of her claws.

Black blood erupted from the flailing stump. The severed portion flopped to the ground, falling into a nearby garden. The owner of the arm darted beneath the surface of the water and vanished back into the general murk.

"Yeah!" Twil roared. "How'd you like that?!"

Several other marine appendages which had been circling closer suddenly decided we presented too much difficulty to pick off, and drifted back out into the middle of the road, or slipped beneath the waves.

"Not so good at dodging me now, are you, you big bitch?" Twil went on, fired up and grinning with her wolf's snout.

"It's not him," I croaked. "Just parasites. Keep going. Keep moving."

The Saye Fox had stopped to wait for us almost twenty feet ahead, restless and fidgeting on a garden wall. Her eyes kept darting out into the road too, keeping watch on the circling scavengers below, but then she looked directly at me again. Abyssal instinct stirred at the question behind those fire-lit eyes, but I didn't understand. I looked past the fox, at the route she was taking through the darkening streets, and felt a tugging from the black pit at the bottom of my soul, from the hyperdimensional mathematics always lurking in my subconscious. The Eye's lessons presented some solution to this place, an answer to why it existed. A wave of nausea and vertigo passed through me and I clung to Zheng's back even harder.

“Eh? What?” Twil frowned.

“Parasites, *laangren*,” Zheng answered for me, already striding past Twil and hurrying after the fox. “*Ooran juh*’s tapeworms and lice, picking over the scraps of his meal. We are beyond them.”

“Speak for yourself,” Badger muttered, voice shaking with terror as he slipped past too, sticking close to Zheng and I.

“Watch your feet, Twil,” I croaked back, loud as I could.

“What? Oh, shit!” She only just realised she’d stepped into the road, soaking the cuff of her jeans and filling her trainer with water. She pulled her foot up and shook herself off, then frowned at the visible asphalt beneath the water. “How ... but— it’s deep, but— what?”

“Don’t think about it!” I called.

Impossible space, broken causality, not meant for the unprotected human mind. I could comprehend it, of course, if only I was willing to dredge up the Eye’s relevant lessons.

“Hurry up, *laangren*!” Zheng roared, taking off after the fox as it scampered away again, leading us deeper into this roiling, rotting Sharrowford. Twil did not need telling twice. She picked up her feet and passed us seconds later, hot on the fox’s tail.

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A minute later, the Saye Fox turned left a third time.

“The hell?!” Twil called out as we rounded the corner. “Is it confused or something? We’re heading back toward the house!”

The fox stopped on a low garden wall, waiting for us to catch up, but she offered no explanation. Orange eyes like clean fire burned into mine, pleading now, begging me to see. Twil slowed to a jog as we reached the fox, casting a wary look at the tentacles and pseudopods and tongues which were keeping level with us out in the water. Zheng and I were not far behind, but my mind was spinning, my stomach rebelling at the thoughts darting through my head.

“Keep going!” Twil shouted encouragement at the fox, even as it was leaping up and racing away down the garden walls and fences, lean vulpine body stretched out in that distinctive loping sprint. “Keep going, we can keep up, we can!”

“The worm is struggling,” Zheng rumbled.

She wasn’t wrong. Badger was having a hard time keeping up. A few paces behind us, his face was red with effort and coated in sweat. He was heaving for breath, legs pumping, the slowest by far when compared to Zheng and Twil, either of whom could easily have outpaced the fox in a foot race.

“I can— can— don’t leave me—” he panted, almost drooling from the strain.

“You will not be left behind, worm,” Zheng rumbled. “The shaman needs your brain, even if I must rip it out with your spinal column still attached.”

Badger swallowed hard, and redoubled his efforts.

“Shit, I’ll carry him!” Twil skidded to a halt and doubled back, ready to grab Badger and sling him over her shoulder. “And don’t complain, you arse, this is for Heather, not you.”

“She’s not waiting for Badger,” I croaked out with considerable effort. Up ahead, the fox halted again, staring back at me, proving my point.

“Eh?” went Twil.

“Shaman?” Zheng purred.

“It’s waiting for me,” I went on, my eyes aching and burning, my skin itching from the aftermath of the screech, my abdomen clenching and spasming inside. I had to *see*, had to pull aside the veil, figure out what hyperdimensional principle I was meant to apply. I was too exhausted and spent to risk getting it wrong. I would only have one shot. “Running doesn’t matter, running won’t get us out. It needs me to ... to ... ” My stomach roiled. Out in the road, the water roiled too, slopping as the parasite predators sensed weakness. “Twil, keep moving!” I snapped. “We have to keep going, I can’t— can’t think—”

Twil nodded and turned around, after the fox again. Badger did his best to keep up.

“Focus, shaman,” Zheng whispered.

“Trying,” I croaked.

Miss Fox turned left again. We followed, past rotten trees and

collapsed houses, and I realised we'd entered the far end of Barnslow Drive. The insulting parody of home rose into view once more, covered in soot and grease, ruined and empty. The rising water was flooding the front garden now, sluicing through the gate and soaking into the soil, turning the overgrown grass into a reeking, fecal swamp.

"It's taken us in a bloody circle!" Twil shouted. The fox didn't slow down, sprinting at top speed along the garden walls.

"Can't you—" Badger panted. "Talk to it? You're a— canine too?"

Twil answered with an insulted snap of her teeth.

The Saye Fox slammed to a halt at Number 12 Barnslow Drive, skipping and hopping across the brickwork of the wall and then doubling back, pacing as if in a cage, as she waited the few seconds for us to catch up. Twil looked like she wanted to pick up the animal and throttle her.

"What now?!" she asked the fox. "We're back where we bloody well started!"

"No we're not," I croaked, then had to pause and wince and gasp as a fresh spike of pain raked through my abdomen. I pressed myself tight to the warmth of Zheng's back. "It only looks that way."

The fox stopped pacing and locked eyes with me again. Then she looked at the house, the garden, and out at the road with the marine parasites and the slopping water, now up to our ankles on the pavement. I followed her gaze, over the disgusting details of this hostile parody. Then up, up at the great red wall, shuddering and flexing.

The moon was now separated from the mouth of the wall by only a thin margin of sky. Moonlight cast a clean silver circle on us, but only us. All else was plunged into the shadow beneath the ring-wall.

"Talk, shaman," Zheng whispered.

"Running didn't matter," I squeezed out, my mind beginning to detach. "Running was just ritual."

"Oh," Badger panted. "Great. Right. Yeah. Some ritual."

"This isn't the same spot," I went on. "Because this isn't space, not really. We have to reach the wall, but we can't because we're not

oriented correctly, because ... a ... a tongue keeps food pushed back?"

"Ahhhh, don't say it like that!" Twil whined.

"And she's trying to get me to ... rotate us?"

As I voiced the idea, the logic fell into place with a searing lance of familiar old headache pain. I drew a sharp wince between my teeth as the true meaning and structure of this place was outlined in hyperdimensional mathematics, too hot to touch, the abyssal truth beneath the human sense-data. We stood in the mouth of a whale, risen from the abyssal depths, hanging open in our reality. Crusted with barnacles and filled with parasites, all the life of a miniature ecosystem that grew in the centuries between gargantuan swallows. And now it was about to hinge shut and vanish back below the waves, with us inside.

It all seemed so unfair, so absurd, so without meaning or purpose. This ancient mage, *Ooran juh*, the Big Man, we hadn't even been aware of him three hours ago. For all we knew, he hadn't been aware of us either, totally uninterested in anything except collecting his due from Badger. But this was the inevitable result of being involved in this world of magecraft and secret monsters, of brushing up against Outside, wasn't it?

I'd never truly agreed with Evelyn's paranoia. I'd proved it wrong enough times, proved that the people we encountered were in the end just people, even some of those who weren't human, and that we could deal with them as people, not cognitive hazards or insane berserkers or unreachable mysteries to be killed and burned.

But here was the truth and justification. We'd simply bumped into this thing, going about its own grisly, incomprehensible business, absolutely lethal and totally beyond our ability to counter.

A mage, more dangerous than any God.

In the end it was just another threat to my pack, and another obstacle on the path back to my sister. There was only one thing for it.

I was running on fumes, but we had to get out. It didn't matter if I fell unconscious or vomited up my entire digestive system the second we were out, as long as we got out.

With a scream and a shudder and a stab of white-hot pain inside my head, I drew the relevant equation from the dark rooms in my subconscious, gripped the dripping levers of reality, and pulled.

Zheng leaned forward so I could vomit over her shoulder without getting it all down her front. Very considerate.

Long hard heartbeats passed as my vision throbbed dark and my nose bled all over Zheng's jumper. Muffled voices shouted in panic — Twil? Badger? — and then the world came trickling back to my senses, my ears clearing with conscious effort as I wiped my mouth on Zheng's shoulder and lifted my head.

"We're still here!" Twil shouted up at me. "What did you do? We're still here!" She was ankle deep in the filthy water. The ruined version of our home still haunted my peripheral vision. I was so weak I couldn't even nod past her.

"Look, *laangren*," Zheng breathed. Badger was already staring, breathless and wide-eyed. When Twil turned and saw, she ducked her head and cowered.

The great red wall now stood a mere twenty feet away. I had brought us here, we had travelled without moving.

The wall looked as if it had erupted from the ground in the manner of a giant tooth from dying gum tissue, displacing pavement and asphalt and overgrown grass, blocking off the road and bisecting one corner of the house. The vast length stretched off to the left and right either side of us. Up close the surface of the wall was gnarled and pitted, covered in bumps and ridges like the inside of a diseased throat. Each red block was so large that we could only spot one seam, sixty or seventy feet up in the air.

Water slapped against the base of the wall, but the parasites in the deep were retreating in haste. Their questing limbs slipped beneath the surface as they fled down the road and away from the edge of their world.

The Saye Fox opened her russet muzzle and let out a laughing chitter-chatter vulpine *yip-yap*.

"Yes, shaman!" Zheng roared in triumph. "You have brought us here, now we break through. No wall will keep me in."

"What happened to 'don't touch the wall'?" Twil boggled at the vast

edifice, then at Zheng. “Evee said don’t touch it, right? And that part was really her?”

“Wizards are often wrong,” Zheng purred. “Shaman, I must set you down if I am to rend this giant’s flesh.”

“No,” I whined as Zheng began to crouch. “Zheng, no. I have to do it.”

Zheng paused.

“Don’t touch it,” I said, sniffing back my nosebleed. “Can’t touch it. Evee was right, don’t touch. You’d get infected. Have to use brainmath. Punch a hole, with math. Not fists.”

Twil and Zheng shared a glance. Badger swallowed so loud I could hear it over the slopping water.

“She’s nearly spent,” Twil said through gritted teeth.

“The shaman knows well enough,” Zheng purred.

“She’ll pass out,” Twil went on. “She’ll pass out, she’s gone. Look at her!”

“I get one shot,” I croaked. “I know. One shot. I can do—”

But the end of my sentence was drowned out by an earth shattering *schloooooo-p-pop* as the great red wall shuddered again, a vast ripple of slow motion passing up through the muscle in a wave of contraction. We all followed the motion upward, to the opening far above our heads.

Like a puckered sphincter squeezing shut, the circular opening of the great red wall closed in on itself, and blotted out the moon.

We were plunged into rancid darkness, left with only the weak orange light from stuttering street lamps.

The Saye Fox went frantic, hopping and bouncing from paw to paw. Twil bristled all over and muttered curses under her breath. The water in the road started to slop and slosh, as if disturbed far below.

“It’s okay,” I croaked. “I can still do it.”

“Oh God, oh fuck, oh God.” Badger closed his eyes and put his hands together, wincing at the pain in his wounded palm. “Please God I’ve never asked you for anything these last few years and I’m

sorry I'm sorry, please please let this work, I won't resist, I'll let her v-vivisect me, please don't let this be—"

"Shut up, worm," Zheng growled. "Let the shaman concentrate."

Badger bit his own knuckles, tears running down his cheeks.

"*Ooran juh* is preparing to swallow," Zheng said. "Work fast, shaman."

I didn't waste breath on reassurances. I concentrated.

If we were in the mouth of a true whale, then no amount of bone and hide could have resisted the atomic fire I knew my mind could put out, no cartilage and tendon would stand up to pure force. But this was not mere flesh I was preparing to punch through — it was self-expression, a construct of abyssal truth and genius creativity and human cruelty, which had taken centuries to grow in the mind and body of a mage so far beyond me that they almost rivalled the Eye in sheer power. But I was an abyssal thing too, and I already understood what I was looking at.

With a hiss of pain I laid out the beginning equations of comprehension and definition, the framework that would allow me to define what lay in front of me. Once I had that ready, pulling the cell walls apart would not be too difficult in theory, though it would take everything I had. I would pass out in a welter of my own vomit and blood once I was done. But we would be out, and the others could take it from there. I trusted Zheng to carry me home through anything.

I moved my mind to slot the first figure of the equation into place.

But then the front door of the dark mockery of Number 12 Barnslow Drive flew open, sheering off rusted hinges and slapping down into the water in the overgrown garden. The door frame bulged and cracked, then exploded outward in chunks of brick and a shower of wood splinters. Ten feet of obese worm-eaten pale meat strode out of the house and straight toward us.

Ooran juh, the Big Man, 'Mister Blobby' — he'd figured out what I was doing.

He'd rotated himself down to our level to stop me.

Badger screamed. Twil turned and growled through too many teeth, hunched and ready to pounce. The Saye Fox froze in place, ears

back, tail bristling. Zheng backed up into the deeper water with me still clinging to her back, but I was insensible with sudden explosive pain in my head and a streaming nosebleed, as the equation fell apart in pure shock.

How could we be in his mouth, yet fight him like this at the same time? I sensed that the answer that question would drive me irrevocably insane.

“Yeah!” Twil was shouting. “Come at me, dickhead! You wanna fuckin’ fight?! I got you a fight right—”

“It is after the shaman!” Zheng roared over her.

But that was all she had time to say.

Ooran juh moved fast and sure for such an impossibly fat figure, slapping down those slab feet and kicking up huge sprays of filth, rather than troubling himself with water resistance by striding through the muck. Headless and towering, both hands held out in front like a cheap zombie, each palm split by a curled red grin filled with dripping saliva and sharp teeth. It bore down on us at full speed, like a man power-walking, taking the garden wall in one stride, coming straight for Zheng and I.

It was like being charged by a hippopotamus.

Even with no energy left, my body instinctively tried to recoil, to make myself small, curl up to protect my vital organs. My phantom limbs joined in, trying to make a ball like a threatened octopus, around both myself and Zheng.

Twil — oh Twil, so full of stupid bravery — launched herself at the Big Man’s side, all teeth and claw at an angle impossible for him to dodge without breaking his stride. But he simply stepped onward and she sailed through the open air behind to crash down into the water, spluttering and confused. She should have hit him, the angle was impossible for her to miss, but he’d simply not been there.

Zheng feinted one way, then darted the other. I hiccuped into her shoulder and clung on for dear life as she moved fast enough to wrench my guts out of place.

For a split-second, I saw *Ooran juh* in two places at once; the headless giant was bearing down on us from his former angle, but also at the same time intercepting Zheng from another direction.

Abyssal senses or pure luck, I had no idea how I saw that, but the trick made my head ache and my eyes sting.

Then he was very much in front of us. Zheng slammed to a halt as he reached out one plate-sized hand to rip me away from her.

“Hey, you,” came an angry, shaking voice.

It was Badger. He’d walked right up to the Big Man’s side, holding his head high, eyes raised, gripping his wounded hand tight in his other. Fresh blood dripped between his knuckles.

The Big Man stopped, as if bothered by a fly. If he had possessed a neck and head, it would have turned slowly to regard the tiny human form of Badger. Zheng took the opportunity to back up, splashing through the water as I wheezed and spat bile and tried to gather myself enough to try again.

“Shaman, we cannot run,” she hissed quickly. “There is nowhere to go. Get us out.”

“Try—” I gurgled. Had to restart the equation, but I had nothing left. Not even fumes. I would have to dip into the abyss. “Trying, to —”

In a display of some of the most idiotic courage I had ever seen in a human being, Badger quickly opened his wounded hand and raised it high, to strike the Big Man’s side or leg. In that frozen moment, I saw the disgusting mouth had re-opened in Badger’s palm – and the blood, his own blood, in his own teeth in his real mouth — and realised what he had done. Weaponless and helpless, Badger had bitten open his own wound and summoned the mouth-hand again, to turn *Ooran juh*’s teeth against itself.

Badger slapped his palm down onto the Big Mans’s tree-trunk thigh. The mouth bit deep into wormy, greasy flesh, and came away spitting out pale off-white fluid more akin to pus than blood.

The Big Man shook Badger off like a puppy clinging to his trouser leg, and used the back of one his massive hands to move Badger out of way, forcing him to stumble and trip through the water. It wasn’t even a violent gesture. It was the act of an uncaring adult toward a small and stupid child. And he could have simply avoided the whole thing, we were all familiar by now with how he could step past any physical attack. He had chosen to get bitten, to show how little our weapons mattered.

All Badger's courage drained away into nothing. He went white with horror as the Big Man turned back to Zheng and I.

Twil went for him again, but she just skidded into the empty water where he should have been standing, growling and snapping and shouting in frustration. Over on the wall, the Saye Fox was yipping and yowling, doing what little she could.

And then he was on me.

I saw it again — *Ooran juh* at every possible angle all around Zheng and I, a dozen mouth-hands all reaching to pluck me off her back, to bite my soul out. Every escape was accounted for.

Zheng chose the unseen option.

In a flash of motion she let go of my thighs, pulled my arms from around her neck, and turned fast enough to fling me off her back.

She shook me off and threw me clear. I screamed in surprise, phantom limbs frantically trying to anchor myself to her, like a squid shooting out feeding tentacles to hook prey — but my tentacles were not real, not right now. I landed with a splash in the filthy water six feet away, the impact knocking the wind out of me, soaked and freezing in an instant.

“Shaman, get out!” Zheng roared, and turned to face the momentarily confused Big Man.

She'd bought me a few seconds.

Zheng struck like lightning wrapped in molten honey. Her fists moved as pounding pistons, aiming a dozen punches in the blink of an eye at the vulnerable bones of the Big Man's sternum and upper ribs. A single one of those blows could shatter concrete and bend steel, I'd seen it before, and I had no doubt that even the Big Man's substantial physical form would be hard pressed to withstand that.

Zheng's fists passed through empty air, as if the headless giant was just to one side of her reach, trapped by an optical illusion of perspective.

Ooran juh reached out to bite her.

One drooling mouth in a fat-fingered hand moved toward Zheng's face, slow and easy, like he was going to pet a cat, with no need to exert himself. Zheng stood her ground, because if she dodged, the

Big Man would go for me instead. I was lurching to my feet, a horrified scream in my throat, my face smeared with nosebleed, barely able to stand on quivering knees and weighed down by my soaking clothes.

But to my incredible surprise, Zheng caught the flabby pale meat of the giant's wrist with both her hands, bracing her feet and digging her fingers into the greasy skin. A savage grin of blood-lust joy ripped across her face, showing all her teeth as she held the snapping mouth at bay inches from her own.

"Shaman!" she roared.

"Heather get us the fuck out!" Twil shouted too.

"I can't—" I panted in horror. I had nothing left. My vision was throbbing black at the edges.

Then *Ooran juh* slapped his other palm onto Zheng's side, and bit deep.

She didn't scream, barely grunted. Razor-sharp teeth pieced her flank just beneath her ribcage, ripping straight through her clothes and tearing off a huge chunk of quivering, bleeding flesh. The hand pulled back, swallowing and then darting out a thick red tongue to lick the blood from those smiling lips.

Zheng sagged all along one side as blood streamed down her hip and thigh, soaking into her trousers and streaming into the water. She stumbled as if the strength had gone out of her, and lost her grip on *Ooran juh*'s wrist as he pulled his hand away. He moved to bite her a second time. She got an arm in front of her face as she staggered backward, and he ripped a chunk of raw meat out of Zheng's forearm.

That time, she screamed. An angry roar of frustration and pain, open-mouthed like a lion.

I cannot adequately describe the horror of watching somebody you love being hurt in that way. Not just shot or stabbed. No wound could kill Zheng. She'd shrugged off far worse, and she'd revelled in the damage. She'd leapt from a building for me, back when we'd barely known each other. But *Ooran juh*'s bites were far more than mere wounds. They were an infection, a violation, a claim. Like watching a loved one step on a rusty nail, or drowning in sewage, or taking a poison arrow to the gut.

Zheng sagged backward, one leg going out from under her. She splashed down in the filthy water, barely managing to stay upright, balanced on one knee. Her blood flowed in twin rivers from the pair of massive bite wounds.

The headless giant reached down toward her with both hands.

A hiss rose in my throat, a counter-claim, because Zheng was mine and nobody hurts any of my pack mates and she was *mine, my claim, don't you touch her* — but I was spent. Empty. I didn't even have the energy to wheeze a challenge, let alone transmute my throat again and screech defiance. I could barely stay on my feet, my legs were quivering with the effort. In my blurring vision I saw Twil drop into a crouch behind the Big Man, ready to pounce, but that was a hopeless gesture. I could not get us out, my brain was too full of fog, I was ready to collapse, and *Ooran juh* would murder my friends and my lovers, eat my pack, and then turn to me regardless.

I lacked the energy.

But I did not lack the means to produce it.

By the split-second that idea shot through my exhausted mind, it was already too late to stop myself. I was already reaching down into the black tar pooled at the base of my soul, to flick a single mathematical value from a zero to a one. It was a minor miracle I didn't kill myself by accident. I had studied nothing, made no plans, had no idea how this even worked, but there was no time for experimenting. Everything was screaming at me to to help Zheng, to fight off her attacker, to get us out, to protect. And if I had been thinking clearly, if I had been wide awake? I would have made the exact same decision. Consequences did not matter.

With one change in the hyperdimensional equation that defined myself, I spun imagination and phantom pain and abyssal memory together, into pneuma-somatic reality; I forged new flesh and simulated muscle and artificial tendon, tied into a knot so complex that evolution itself could never have woven something so beautiful.

I built the trilobe reactor organ in my abdomen, with pneuma-somatic flesh, made it real — and lit it with a spark of metabolic fire.

Heat, real heat, body heat running hot, flushed up my side and through my gut and pumped strength into my legs like a shot of adrenaline. My heart rate climbed to maximum and stayed there, sustained and supported by processes that would have killed an unaltered human being. My head cleared with a single shake, senses so wide that they hurt, and I gasped as my lungs filled and every inch of my skin broke out with sweat. Glucose pounding through my veins, every muscle overproducing ATP, and the hungry void at my core filling up like an empty fuel tank for which I'd finally found the input nozzle. The trilobe organ inside me was not a mere physical reactor. Other processes were already running away, approximations of chemistry and biology that should only have been possible down in the abyss.

The rest came a split-second later, as naturally as taking a breath — my tentacles sprouted from my sides, six rainbow-strobing pneuma-somatic limbs lashing the air, ready for war, reinforced with ropes of muscle, tipped with razor-sharp claws, and lined with hundreds of tiny hooks.

But the pneuma-somatic changes did not stop there. I was too deep now.

I blinked nictitating membranes over my eyes; the surface of my skin flushed with tetrodotoxin and warning colouration; my shoulders sprouted defensive spines like a sea urchin; my teeth ached and elongated and sharpened; webbing formed between my fingers, thick and leathery; a tail tipped by a venom-packed stinger grew from the base of my spine; my throat twisted into an impossible configuration and my jaw hinged open in a screech of challenge. All pneuma-somatic modifications, none planned, all drawing power from my new reactor, a furnace wedged deep in the left side of my abdomen.

I suspected I would never be able to sleep on my left side again. Never sleep again, full stop. I had more energy than I could ever use, drawn from a source that would never run dry, and I had completed the first stage of true alchemical transition, the great work. I was perfect.

And I had no idea if I could ever go back.

Didn't matter right then.

The whole process had taken the blink of an eye, and *Ooran juh* was

still reaching down toward Zheng's face with his drooling mouth-hands — but he had paused. Despite the lack of a head or face, I had the distinct impression he was looking at me.

“Holy shit,” Twil breathed. “Heather?”

Badger was staring at me too, mouth open in awe. The Saye Fox had gone quiet and still, ready to flee.

“Shaman,” Zheng grunted, voice bubbling with blood and pain. “Do not—”

I was barely even there. Words registered, but I didn't care about the meaning of the hooting ape sounds. Those were for later. With a screech and a hiss and a warning display of tentacles to put a colossal squid to shame, I lashed out at the Big Man.

But of course he simply wasn't where my tentacles struck the air. He was to one side, as if I was mistaken and had missed.

Whatever I had just become, I was still physical and pneumasomatic, I couldn't just reach out with my tentacles and stop him.

But I'd thought of that. Or at least, abyssal instinct and ape brain and whatever Heather they had constructed between them, had thought of that. In the illusory split-second where the Big Man was not where he should be, I plunged my mind back into the Eye's lessons, screeching at the pain in my head, and threw a cage around him. A cage of mathematical redefinition, a cage of *here* and *now*. Through effort that would have knocked me unconscious without the reactor thrumming and throbbing in my belly, I defined this part of him, this projection, this slice of his true form, and forced it to stay on our level. Like a giant squid hooking a shark and dragging it down into the black ocean depths.

The equation was still not gentle or easy on my body and mind, no matter how changed or how much I'd added to myself. Lances of pain rammed through my skull like molten-hot railway spikes, and my stomach clenched into a ball as I spat up bile. My nosebleed restarted and I smeared the mess across my face, gagging and panting and whining with pain.

But I didn't pass out. I couldn't have passed out if I'd wanted to.

Ooran juh was suddenly in only one place. Straightening up, turning toward me. Even if the full, real entity could not be fought, this

slice of him could bleed and die.

“Six or seven or eight dimensions!” I screeched and spat, my voice a trilling abyssal mess of knotted muscle. “Fight in this one or let us go! Take it back! Take back the bites! She’s not yours!”

The headless giant raised both hands toward me, split by leering grins, licking their lips in mocking obscenity.

So I screeched, cast my tentacles wide, and threw myself at this rival predator.

a very great mischief – 13.14

Ankle-deep in filthy water, besieged by cloying greasy darkness, trapped in a rotting mockery of Sharrowford that was about to swallow us alive, with Zheng bleeding from bites the size of my hands and wounded in a way even she could not shrug off, I had taken the only option left.

I screeched and leapt at *Ooran juh*, with no idea what I was doing.

No amount of pneuma-somatic body modification or magical prostheses gave me the faintest notion of what to do in a fight, however perfect and beautiful my new form, however euphoric I would have felt under any other circumstances. The trilobe reactor organ in my abdomen supplied limitless biochemical energy, but the muscles in my arms and legs were still those of a twenty year old woman who generally did not exercise. Perfected abyssal instinct joined in chorus with savannah ape tribal loyalty, screaming at me to protect my pack, my mate, my partners, but I still had no idea how to actually win a physical fight.

I slammed into the headless giant as a flailing mass of barbed tentacles, toxic spines, and snapping teeth, no more coordinated than a little girl in a playground slap-fight. But this little girl was armed with all the fruits of the abyss.

Ooran juh stood his ground before my inexpert charge. Why not? He probably weighed ten times what I did. A plate-sized hand smacked away one of my tentacles with wrecking-ball force, bruising and tenderising the rainbow-strobing flesh.

But there was no bone inside the tentacle to break, only springy pneuma-somatic muscle. No shock, no transmitted impact, and no way to stop me.

He didn't have enough hands. My five other tentacles hit him all over like a squid fighting a whale, lashing at his soft, wormy, rotten-oat flesh, digging in with thousands of hooks and barbs. Tiny muscles in my tentacles all twisted in a wave, rotating each hook to tear every wound wider, before whipping back, ripping great tracks out of his hide. He bled slow sickly off-white pus from hundreds of

lacerations, the broken flesh covered in necrotizing mucus I'd left behind.

Ooran juh struck back, trying to catch the strobing rainbow beauty in the teeth of his hand-mouths as I lashed at him a second time.

He did, twice, biting chunks of quivering, bleeding pneuma-somatic flesh from my tentacles.

I screeched and yowled, but the trilobe reactor organ was already compensating, flooding my veins with new kinds of white blood cells — and things that were not really mammalian leukocytes at all, flushing the inflamed skin around the bites with eosinophils and lymphocytes that had no proper place in a human body, fighting off the Big Man's claim. My wounds closed with rapid-growth scabs of pastel florescence; each tentacle blossomed with chitin plates for armour.

The Big Man's hand-mouths retched out gobbets of my flesh, their lips swollen, gagging on mouthfuls of tetrodotoxin and conotoxin and approximations of compounds that should not have been possible in our reality.

He compensated too, ignored the third strike from my whipping tentacles, and reached for my head and mantle instead.

Head and *body* instead, insisted a still-ape part of my mind.

Even in a life-or-death fight, running on pure instinct, I knew that to let him bite my core of true flesh would be too much for me to combat. Pneuma-somatic matter was renewable, plastic, malleable, but a bite from one of those mouths could rip out my entire flank, snip off three of my tentacles in one chomp, and snap my spine with ease.

He bore down on me, taking giant crashing steps through the filthy water which was now up to my calves, spraying the rank sewage everywhere as he tried to grab me in a bear hug. Animal fear flashed sirens in the back of my head at his sheer size and weight, this towering mountain of pale meat about to crash into me. I hissed in warning and panic, trying to scramble back. Without the clean moonlight, our fight took place by the disorienting flicker and dying glow of the street lights, casting the Big Man's bulk in roiling shadows, confusing human eyesight. Pneuma-somatic additions rewired my eyeballs and optic nerve, racing for an advantage as my

sight flickered through infra-red and ultra-violet, and other colour spectra which we have no vocabulary to describe.

Abyssal memory provided theory, pneuma-somatic flesh executed praxis; new ligament strong as steel cables sprouted along my ankle tendons, articulated exoskeleton wrapped my knees in springy cages, and the surface of my skin rose in warning spines of red and yellow.

My new legs bounced and I dodged below his grasp, stepping sideways to circle him, hitting his arm and flank with my tentacles again, ripping off great strips of his flesh even as his mouth-hands caught the spines along my shoulders and snapped them off.

But I was too ungainly to make full use of what I was. Too new. Too unfamiliar.

I couldn't stay steady on my new legs, overcompensating for the muscle difference and the fluid resistance in the rising flood. As I tried to dodge I tripped, sprawled, and splashed down into the road. Water closed over my face.

Membranes slid across my eyes to protect them from the slopping, roiling filth. Valves slammed shut in my nose and throat to keep out infection as I surfaced and spluttered, spitting out the taste of sewage.

Ooran juh turned and stomped and reached toward me.

I attempted to right myself with organs I didn't yet possess, syphon-jets and internal gyroscopes and gas bladders, organs too complex to grow from idea-seeds in the time it took the headless giant to reach me.

I hissed and spat and screeched and sprouted new spines and armour plates, but he grabbed me and bit through them even as I wrapped tentacles tight around his wrists to hold him back. The rotten pudding flesh on his arms and torso was blackening around the thousands of tiny wounds I'd inflicted, but still his monstrous strength pressed me down. Even pumped full of paralytic toxin, he was a hundred times stronger than I.

The water around us was bucking and chopping, and the great red wall was convulsing, drawing tighter and tighter. *Ooran juh* — the greater entity of which this obese headless giant was only a projection — was still in the process of swallowing. He was only

fighting to keep us occupied.

My reactor was running hotter and hotter as I squirmed to my feet, locked in a death-grip with the Big Man, caked in sweat, heart pounding like a piston. The trilobe organ raced through and discarded entire new classes of reaction, as my body demanded more with each new pneuma-somatic germination, each addition wove at speed, each physical reinforcement and enhancement.

The Big Man forced one hand against my faltering strength, right toward my unprotected face.

“Stop fighting him, shaman!” Zheng roared from somewhere nearby. “Stop fighting and get rid of him!”

A ball of teeth and claw and grey-russet fur shot out of the gathering dark and slammed into *Ooran juh*’s legs from behind, scything for his hamstrings and the backs of his knees, snapping teeth closed on the classic canine crippling targets.

He let go of me and hit Twil with an almighty backhand, sending her flying. She crashed into the garden wall of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, but hopped to her feet again in a split second, spitting blood and grinning through a wolf’s snout.

“Can’t fucking dodge me now, you rancid cunt!” she screamed at him. “Come at me, bitch-tits!”

Behind her, Badger had picked up the Saye Fox, cradling the animal in his arms like a pet, to shield her from the rising water, even as he cringed at the re-opened wound in his hand, squeezing it tight to stop the blood flow. She was screaming at the Big Man too, those long open-mouthed fox screams of warning and panic, as the water rose and the whale’s mouth pressed in all around us.

Zheng couldn’t even get to her feet. She was sagging, still bleeding, her side coated in her own blood.

“Get rid of him, shaman!”

I’m trying, I thought, I’m trying but I’m not strong enough, even when I’m perfect and beautiful and—

And I could be such an idiot sometimes. That’s the downside of entering a fight without any training. You get tunnel vision.

As Twil picked up her paws and charged the Big Man again, I

lashed out at the exposed flesh of his back with all six tentacles, and connected in a great slapping rip of rending flesh.

Then I dredged up that familiar old equation.

This headless giant was only one part of the entity, a projection into our three dimensions of something so much greater and more alien, a human who had journeyed into the abyss and returned as something more, like me. Unlike me, he had pursued a transformation that had left his body and humanity behind, transcended the mere physical, become so other that he was truly untouchable to us.

Also unlike me, he couldn't do hyperdimensional mathematics.

Best I could achieve was to send this part of him Outside, but it would be like sending a person's arm or hand Outside, without the rest of him. The impact would rip him apart on the dimensional membrane itself, like throwing a person against an electric wood saw.

Bleeding and quivering with white-hot fire across the surface of my consciousness, I raced through the equation, and put into practice lessons from an adoptive parent far more dangerous than this predator.

Out.

But to my incredible surprise, *Ooran juh* fought back.

He was clumsy and blunt, the struggling of a crab turning the curve of its shell against a cephalopod's crushing beak. He did not know brainmath, but he had once visited those impossible depths of mathematical principle and starlight and dancing photons. He understood just enough to turn away my beak for a fraction of a second.

That fraction of a second was all he needed. As the equation snapped shut, he took one giant, striding step forward to leave my tentacles behind, ripping wormy flesh off his back. He batted Twil away again so she crashed into the roiling water. Then he turned and backed away from me, palms out and grinning wide with their wet, red mouths.

He only had to wait, stall a few more seconds, until his vast whale-mouth was ready to swallow.

Unconsciously, on the level of autonomic reaction, below true flesh and pneuma-somatic addition alike, down in my soul, I prepared to dive.

If he was going to drag us down into the abyss, I would be ready to swim.

I would eat him from the inside.

Perhaps he retained enough human intellect to read the change in my expression, or perhaps some other less physical sense allowed him to understand what I was about to do, the lengths to which I would go. Perhaps in that moment he realised that I was like him, I had been in the abyss too, and I would not die on the first swallow. My friends would die, but I would linger in his gut, chew through his intestines, sear his innards with acid, and worm my way to his heart like a killing parasite.

I made myself indigestible.

And he let go.

The greasy headless giant stopped moving, frozen on the spot. The life seemed to go out of it for a split second before the entire thing collapsed into jelly, melting down in a mass of yellow-white pus and liquefied flesh. *Ooran juh* could not rotate this part of himself out of the dimensions accessible to us, I had him pinned here with a cage of hyperdimensional mathematics, so he was forced to gnaw the limb off like an animal in a trap. He abandoned this part, this projection, the fight lost to the threat of real damage in the abyss if he dared swallow me.

Clean silver light crashed down into the dark.

Above our heads, the great red wall opened, puckered around the full moon and rapidly widening, pulling away and down toward us, sinking into the ground only twenty feet away where it bisected the road. The water began to drain as well, slopping and sloshing down hidden sluices as *Ooran juh*'s jaws receded back into the abyss, without us.

"Holy shit," Twil breathed, staring up at the wall, before she splashed through the draining water toward the huge mound of rotten white goo. "Where'd he go?! What— what's happening? Heather?"

“Spitting us out,” I croaked — a scratchy, twisted sound from an inhuman throat.

“You’re sure?” She stared at me, eyes roving nervously along my body, my tentacles, my spines, my toxic colouration. Here, she could see it all, and I looked barely human.

“Mmhmm,” I grunted.

Badger was staring up as well, still hugging the fox. “Never thought I’d be so glad to be regurgitated,” he said.

The fog rushed back in, flowing over the lip of the great red wall as it descended, plunging us into thick soupy mist as the last of the filthy water drained away from the road surface. For a moment the fog was so thick I couldn’t see any of the others, only the disgusting greasy mound of white mess that had been *Ooran juh*.

“Z-Zheng?” I called out.

“Here, shaman.”

She was right by my shoulder in the fog, bent over with pain, heaving ragged breaths between her teeth, blood caked all down her hip and one leg of her jeans and dripping from the bite wound in her forearm. She put her other hand on my shoulder, and I realised with stomach-lurching horror that she was using me to stay standing.

The fog thinned but didn’t clear — normal fog, not greasy and thick, the ordinary weather of spring fog in Sharrowford — and revealed everybody else still standing. Twil gaped around us, wide-eyed and panting and dripping wet, same as myself. Badger closed his eyes, shaking with relief. The Saye Fox wriggled out of his arms and trotted over to me.

We were next to the bus stop where we’d caught up with Badger. Right where we’d first plunged into the beast’s maw.

Relief was sweet, but I didn’t have the luxury of collapsing or passing out. My bioreactor was still burning hot, still fuelling pneuma-somatic flesh.

“Are we—” Twil panted. “Are we out? We won?”

I was too busy gaping at Zheng’s wounds to answer.

“Shaman,” Zheng said, her throat thick with blood and pain. Zheng

wasn't meant to be in pain, not real pain, she wasn't meant to feel this way, she was meant to shrug it off, to leap and howl and laugh. "Shaman, you must get home. *Ooran juh* is still waiting for us. Go."

She shoved me away and I stumbled a few steps as she crashed down to one knee again, heaving for breath, drooling blood.

"Zheng, no!" I said, and rushed back, falling to my knees by her side.

"Oh shit," said Twil, and hurried over to us. She jabbed a finger back at Badger. "Don't you fuckin' move."

He shook his head. "I'm not going anywhere without you lot."

"Shaman, go," Zheng grunted. Her eyes were heavy and unfocused. I ignored her plea and wormed underneath her arm, got close to her side, then pulled up the shredded fabric of her jumper to expose the wound in her flank. I gasped and had to blink back tears, a hand to my mouth.

Her wound looked very, very bad. The flesh was chewed and mashed, hanging in strips and dangling shreds. Grey and black patches were already blooming with necrotic infection on fast forward, leeching Zheng's strength with a claim beyond mere biological damage. I grabbed her forearm too. The second bite there was much the same, ruining her on a level deeper than the physical.

"We're not leaving you behind, you dumb-arse," Twil said, but her voice shook at the sight of those wounds. "Fuck knows how we're gonna get you back if you can't walk. I can maybe toss you over my shoulder, I dunno, you're too tall." Her eyes flickered to me.

"Heather's lost all her like ... extra limbs, or she could have carried you."

Had I? I could still see and feel my tentacles, my toxic colouration, my webbing and my spines, all the miracle of what I really was, *Homo abyssus* in the flesh.

But we were back in our reality now, and my additions were confined to pneuma-somatic invisibility once more.

"I cannot be saved, shaman," Zheng croaked. "*Ooran juh* has me. Go, before—"

I bared my teeth and hissed, to shut her up and establish who gave the orders here, enough to make Twil jump and Badger flinch and

the Saye Fox hop back. I hissed in defiance of anything and anyone that would attempt to take what was mine. I was willing to violate reality itself to rescue my sister from the Eye, and I was not about to allow some jumped-up mage who'd spent too long in the abyss to take away any other members of my family.

Abyssal instinct provided the methods.

I opened my mouth wide, shoved my face right into the wound in Zheng's side, and started biting.

"Unnnn!" she grunted in sudden, surprised pain. "Shaman—"

"Holy shit what is she—"

Somebody vomited. I think that was Badger.

I bit away the infected flesh around and inside Zheng's wound, sheering it off with the clean razor-sharp edges of pneuma-somatic teeth that only she and I could see. I nuzzled in deep, didn't care about her blood smeared all over my face, gripping Zheng with all my tentacles to keep her in place, barbs safely retracted. I drooled great looping ropes of pneuma-somatic antiseptic mucus into the wound as I worked, forming new glands in my throat for the task, sharing white blood cells with Zheng's immune system, even as scraps of her actual blood slid down my throat to be sampled and re-purposed by the trilobe reactor organ in my gut. I spat out chunks of grey and black infection to sizzle on the asphalt road surface, melted by bootstrapped enzymes in my saliva.

The physical act of biting away her infection was more than mere biology. Whatever I was doing, I did not understand it on a conscious level, but I knew in my gut that it had a spiritual mirror. I dug out the Big Man's claim on her, made her safe, made her mine, cleaned away any trace of him with my own abyssal biology.

By the time I finished on the first wound, Zheng didn't need to be held still anymore. She offered her arm for me to do the same to the second bite, breathing clearer and easier, staring at me with wonder.

"Alright," Twil was saying, her werewolf transformation dismissed to leave a wet and bedraggled teenage girl standing there. "Alright, this takes the award for weirdest shit I've ever seen."

"She *can* do it," Badger whispered. "She can."

Eventually I was done, and stood up, wobbling on my knees despite the sheer power of the bioreactor in my abdomen. Even backed up by near-infinite energy, cleansing the Big Man's infection was taking a toll. My immune system — or whatever abyssal processes were analogous to an immune system — were working overtime, producing white blood cells and flushing me out, detoxifying the infection.

"Shaman," Zheng breathed in awe, and got to her feet. She was shaking too, weak from the effort, but much stronger than before, no longer being actively drained. She caught me under one arm before I stumbled. I wrapped a tentacle around her in return. "You are a beautiful thing, shaman."

"Mm," I grunted.

My pneuma-somatic mucus had formed a sticky layer over her raw flesh, stopped the bleeding, and was encouraging and supporting her own rapid healing processes. I stared at it, unwilling to split my attention until I was certain the wounds were beginning to knit closed, however slowly.

"Shaman, we must go. This is not over."

"Bloody right," Twil agreed, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "You okay now, Zheng?"

"Not yet. I will be."

I nodded along. The Saye Fox rubbed herself against my ankles.

"Home," I muttered.

My pneuma-somatic additions were blurring against the fog and the backdrop of real terraced houses, in a trick of the light. They didn't start falling apart into ash and nothingness, I wasn't running out of energy. As the last of the Big Man's infection was cleansed away, the trilobe reactor did not ratchet down, did not cease production. If anything, I was getting hotter inside as my reserves filled to the brim.

"You better not run," Twil growled at Badger.

"Not a chance," Badger replied. He'd wrapped his bleeding hand in his sleeve again. His eyes wandered over to where the great greasy mound of liquid flesh still lay in the middle of the road, the remains of the Big Man's physical form.

Twil noticed it too. "Gross. It's dead, right? Looks like a fatberg. What do we do with it?"

"Leave it here," Zheng purred. "Let the monkeys hose it into the drains. Now move, the shaman is burning up."

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We staggered back through quiet midnight streets, comforted by the normality of good old English fog, and the sounds of the occasional car passing along distant roads. The Saye Fox trotted ahead of us as if she knew the way, nosing at the overflowing rubbish bins and sniffing the walls, just like an ordinary fox, but with far more self-assurance than any natural vulpine visitor.

Zheng supported me with one arm, but she couldn't have picked me up even if I'd needed it.

Unlike Badger and Twil, she could still see the truth of *Homo abyssus*, my six rainbow-strobing tentacles, the snapped spines on my shoulders, the chitin plates on my legs and sides, the strange shape of my pupils and the toxic colouration in my skin. Carrying me with all that might have presented some difficulty. She was careful to avoid my various spikes and sharp edges.

"Concentrate, shaman," she purred. "Do not leave me."

I blinked up at her, blinked four different sets of eyelids, and tried to deny that I knew what she meant. "Zheng? Of course I won't. I won't, I'm ... fine ..."

I tried to soften my pointy bits, to round them off, to retract my spines and re-metabolise the toxins, to fold away the slashing claws studding my tentacles — but as we crept toward home, my sense of my own body grew harder to hold onto, the plastic metamorphic process running away with abyssal memory and euphoric longing. My tentacles grew blurry, hazy and indistinct, with both hooked and non-hooked configurations laid on top of each other, occupying the same space. I blinked, and the tentacles appeared to be doubled, tripled, quadrupled. I was coated with sweat; my belly burned with fire like I'd swallowed the sun and become its master.

"*Laangren*, call ahead," Zheng rumbled to Twil up in front. "The shaman is collapsing."

"I'm not," I said. "I'm fine. I can ... I'm still here, I'm not ... going

... ”

“Eh?” Twil glanced back. “Uh, yeah, she looks fine? Better than ever. What are you—”

“Call ahead,” Zheng repeated. “Tell the wizard. Now.”

I didn’t argue.

Twil dug out her mobile phone, mercifully undamaged by her various trips into the water, and called ahead. By the time we reached the real Number 12 Barnslow Drive, a welcoming committee was waiting for us in the front garden, lit from behind by a little warm light spilling from the windows of the house.

Raine, Evelyn, and Lozzie all lit up with relief in their own separate ways as we came into view, but Praem merely stared at me in expressionless recognition. Raine called my name and Evelyn puffed out a huge sigh — and quickly blocked Raine with her walking stick, stopping her from scrambling out of the garden gate to meet me.

“Stay inside the property boundary!” Evelyn snapped. “How many times must I say it?!”

“Ohmygoshohmygosh—” Lozzie was breathless, mouth agape, hands flapping wildly. “Heathy Heathy Heathy oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!”

“Loz, what?” Raine’s relief faltered.

“She’s so beautiful!”

“The shaman is unstable,” Zheng called out. “Mooncalf, wizard, I do not know what she needs. And *Ooran juh* may still be after us.”

“Unstable?” Raine asked, deadly serious. “What does that mean? Hey, big girl, talk to me here.”

“Wait, wait,” Evelyn snapped. She took in our state, Badger walking in front of Twil, sweating with nerves, and the way I was hanging off Zheng’s arm, burning with fire-hot fever sweat. “Actually, no, don’t wait, get inside the wall, for fuck’s sake.” She pointed at Badger. “What about him?”

“He’s volunteered for Heather’s ... thing,” Twil said, then growled at Badger to encourage him into the garden.

Badger swallowed as he stepped over the threshold, sweating and afraid. “Right, yes. I ... yeah.”

“Then get him indoors,” Evelyn snapped. “Into the cellar, there’s a circle waiting, I want him inside it five minutes ago.”

Then the Saye Fox hopped up onto the garden wall, bushy and russet and proud. Evelyn froze and stared at her, dumb-stuck and going white in the face. Praem stepped closer, as if ready to shoo the animal into the road. The fox flashed firelight eyes at the doll-demon, perhaps in memory of how she’d been captured the first time we’d met.

“It’s okay. She’s okay,” I croaked. “She helped us escape. Sevens sent her.”

Evelyn blinked at the weird, scratchy sound of my voice, but then just stared at the fox as it watched her in return. Zheng led me over the garden threshold too, which Lozzie took as her cue to bounce over and wrap me in a sudden hug, somehow avoiding all of my spines and spikes. Raine was stuck between Evelyn’s distress and my unknown state. Twil set about prodding Badger into the house, but she was distracted too, fascinated by the connection between Evelyn and the fox.

“I don’t need your help,” Evelyn hissed at it.

The Saye Fox turned in a circle on the wall, lowered her head, and let out a chitter-chatter *yip-yap* unmistakably both friendly and amused. Quickly she hopped down into the street and scampered away into the Sharrowford night.

“No!” Evelyn reached out one hand. “Wait—”

But the Saye Fox was already gone.

“That’s some serious helicopter parenting,” said Raine.

“Oh, shut up!” Evelyn exploded at her, whirling on the rest of us.

“We’re still in a crisis. Now what is wrong with Heather?”

“She went full squid-girl,” Twil explained. “I could see it and all. Kinda cool, I guess, but she’s back to normal now. I don’t really get it.”

I’d fallen quiet as we’d entered the garden, growing less conscious, less connected, less here. Lozzie disentangled herself from the hug

and leaned back, said something sweet, something positive, something affirming about what I'd done to myself — but the words no longer made any sense. Human-shaped shadows moved in the orange street lighting which bathed the garden, but my new body parts were so much brighter, fluorescing and strobing and glowing with energy from the star in my belly.

Praem spoke, a bell-clear sound I would recognise anywhere, even on the other side of the abyss, and hurried voices followed. Lozzie's face fell as she grabbed and squeezed one of my tentacles, as if trying to hold it steady. Raine appeared by Lozzie's side, peering at me in concern, lips flapping sounds that might have been my name. In my blurring vision the tentacles seemed to multiply either side of them a dozen times, spinning out into an infinity of ruffles and tendrils and beautiful variations that I could iterate on forever.

I felt myself flowing between one form and the next. Endlessly mutable. But that was impossible here, there was only one place I could be so incandescent.

A snatch of Lozzie's voice filtered through, thick and muffled, like I was underwater. "Heathy, you have to turn it off you have to turn it off. You don't have to get rid of it because it's beautiful but you need to turn it—"

I knew what she meant. She wanted me to shut down the trilobe bioreactor.

"Everyone's home?" I said. Or, I thought I said. I had to repeat it twice before ape heads nodded in response. "Safe?"

"—safe, yeah," Raine's voice glugged above me as I sank deeper. "—did good, you did good, you can stop now. Rest—"

But I didn't want to rest. The threshold of the house was only a few paces away now, my body dragged there unresisting, but I didn't want to smother the reaction inside me. This euphoria of being was too delicious. My body told me I could run and leap, burrow into the earth and swim the skies, leap into the abyss and back again — though a tiny, screaming part of me knew that particular urge was neither sane nor sensible.

My new state of being did not have to end.

I'd just encountered an example of where that path led; if I didn't stop here, would I become something like the Big Man? Unanchored

in my physical body, without definition or concrete self-image? How long had it taken him to build his abyssal-crossing multi-dimensional self? Could I do that?

I sensed that I could, that I was already slipping down that slope, toward the same old destination.

The abyss was calling. I loved the way it felt.

And I had still not forged my anchor.

But on the sandy lip of that submarine shore, that drop into the infinite sunless depths, I found a new principle. I dug my heels in and raked my hands into the silt, turned fingernails to claws and hung on, rammed tentacles into every crack of stone that was not stone at all but maths and physics and starlight and thought. I anchored myself with the meaning of the very thing I had finally summoned into reality; I'd lit that reactor and built my new form to save Zheng, because I loved her.

Homo abyssus — me — had been made whole and complete by that act of purpose. I was both abyssal and human, and would not be taken by one or the other.

An act of love, practised as an abyssal thing, served as the most sturdy anchor in all reality.

I ripped myself up and out, back to full consciousness, gasping and spluttering through a waterfall of nosebleed in the front room of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. Voices were shouting my name, somebody was propping me up, a ring of faces surrounded my sight. I held my hands up — and half a dozen tentacles with them — to make some space.

“Stop, stop, I’m fine, I’m here, I’m not going anywhere, I’m—”

“Heathy you have to stop!” Lozzie said, tears making tracks down her cheeks.

“Ease down, shaman,” Zheng purred. “You must slow the fire.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Evelyn snapped. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but stop it.”

“Hey, Heather,” a familiar voice crooned my name, brimming with confidence. Raine took my hand. “Hey, you can relax now. I’m here.”

Raine cracked a beaming smile, just for me. Not a shred of doubt in her.

“You gotta chill out, though,” she added.

“Oh, right, yes, okay,” I croaked. “One second. I think I can—”

And with a flicker of thought, before I knew what I was doing, I slammed home an array of biochemical control rods inside the trilobe organ. They snuffed the reactions out to a decimal-point percentage of their previous runaway heat. It was like plunging every cell of my body into ice water. A gasp ripped from my throat, my pneuma-somatic additions folded up and shrivelled away, and the pain-debt I’d incurred hit me all at once in a wave of bruises and muscle spasms and torn tissues.

I was unconscious before I hit the floor.

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I slept for sixteen hours.

There was no fugue state, no dissociation, no out of body experience; I was very much inhabiting my own flesh — much to my discomfort. I was exhausted as if I’d run a dozen back-to-back marathons, and bruised all over in various new and interesting ways, several of which I hadn’t even realised were possible. After I passed out in the front room, I spluttered back to consciousness a few seconds later and found myself in Raine’s arms, but I had no recollection of who carried me upstairs.

I was present but mute with dragging exhaustion as caring, tender hands cleaned the blood off my face, and dunked me gently in the bath to wash off the rancid sewer water. A swirl of voices and busy commotion filled the house, and more than once I snapped to awareness, panicking that we needed to defend ourselves. But every time, Raine’s face or Lozzie’s words would enter my senses and I would sink back below the surface. I think Praem saw me naked, but I was beyond caring, head lolling with sleep on a warm shoulder as somebody else picked me up and took me to bed.

Sleep was deep and dreamless, the sleep of bodily healing, newborn sleep. I woke up three times and support was always there, to help me hobble to the bathroom on legs that lacked the necessary extra parts, to press a glass of water into my hands when I tried to reach for it with tentacles that made my sides ache, to briefly feed my

wordless moans for calories with a microwave pastry and a cheese sandwich.

True awakening came slowly, in a chorus of bruises, to the backdrop of the next day's sunset glow filtering through my bedroom curtain.

I lay on my back for a long, long time, wrapped in bedsheets like a mummy, staring at the ceiling with eyes that slowly learnt how to focus again. My body wanted to stay very still, but my brain had taken its fill of sleep. Five minutes passed, then perhaps ten, and I wasn't falling back asleep.

Then I tried to scratch my leg.

"... uhhhhhh," I groaned. "Oh, I am so sore."

"Heather?"

"Shaman?"

A pair of familiar voices greeted me. Brain said safe, safe and home. Body complained.

"Mm," I grunted.

"Think she's awake for real this time?" Raine asked.

"No," Zheng said. "Let her sleep."

"I wish I wasn't awake," I grumbled.

Furtive sounds moved beyond the limit of my vision, and a face appeared above me — Raine, peering down with mild concern. I met her eyes, made contact, and puffed out a tiny breath.

"Oh!" Raine lit up. "Hey, no, she is awake. Hey there, Heather. How you feeling?"

She put a gentle hand on my shoulder through the covers, but even that was too much. I winced and groaned. "No, no touch, no touch."

"Ah, sorry. Sorry." She withdrew her hand. "That bad, huh?"

I made a noise like a very grumpy pig. Even my throat felt bruised. My eyeballs ached. The tiny muscles between my fingers were strained and every inch of my skin felt vaguely red and raw. It was like waking up from a whole-body transplant.

"I cannot believe how sore I am," I murmured.

"You wanna sit up? Want some help? I can try to be as gentle as possible."

"I think I'll die if I try that."

"You will heal, shaman," Zheng purred. "Your body is strong. They are only bruises."

"Yeah, no joke," Raine said, grinning that confident grin down at me. "Lozzie's been over you inch by inch, there's nothing broken, no permanent damage, you're just super inflamed and very bruised. Hey, but you know what? You already look better than when you got home."

"Sit up. Mm. Okay," I croaked. If I didn't sit up now, I'd lie here for the next twenty years.

"You want help?" Raine asked.

"Please."

Sitting up in bed was not the most difficult physical adjustment I'd ever made — I'd been slower, weaker, hungrier, and more tired on occasion before — but it was by far the most painful. A million tiny bruises leave the human body with no comfortable position to adopt, no hiding place from the irritating aches and pains and undignified fleshiness of being mortal.

But as I winced and cringed at the pressure of Raine's hands on my oversensitive, raw skin, I didn't feel undignified. I felt whole. As she helped me sit up, my phantom limbs tried to help too, tentacles reaching out to brace against the bed and push the covers back. But those pneuma-somatic additions had already folded back into incorporeality when I'd switched off the bioreactor. Their efforts served only to pull on the already abused muscles in my flanks, drawing a hiss of deeper pain from my throat.

I liked that pain. I valued it. For the first time ever, it was not a reminder of what I yearned for, not a source of abyssal dysphoria. The pain was proof of what I was, no matter that most of *Homo abyssus* was currently tucked away for safety.

Only most.

As I finally reached a sitting position and Raine held me gently, I

placed both my hands over my own abdomen, and felt the residual heat banked inside.

The trilobe reactor organ was still in there. Not a ghost of abyssal body image and phantom pain, not a pneuma-somatic blueprint waiting to be re-summoned like my tentacles, not a hypothetical piece of impossible biology. When I'd slammed the biochemical control rods into their metabolic channels, the reactor had switched over into a self-sustaining mode. It was part of my body now, an internal organ, and I could not truly switch it off, any more than I could quieten the beating of my own heart.

"Hey, Heather?" Raine murmured very gently. I blinked — ow, even my eyelids ached, how was that possible? — and came around from my self-directed awe.

"It feels good to be ... to be," I croaked. "I'm ... I ... um ... "

Raine was standing next to the bed, ready to catch me if I collapsed, back-lit by the sunset on the other side of the window. Zheng was sat on the floor with her legs stretched out in front of her, leaning against the wall. She was half-naked from the waist up, one arm and her flank wrapped in bandages and gauze, over the wounds the Big Man had left on her. Clearly her own supernatural healing factor wasn't quite enough, and needed a tiny bit of helping along by modern medicine. But even the sight of her almost topless wasn't what stopped my words.

A dog was sitting on the foot of the bed.

Small and round, brown-furred, with stubby little legs. It had its tongue out, panting softly, looking at me with friendly curiosity.

"I am hallucinating a Corgi," I croaked.

"Oh, this is Whistle," Raine said. "He's Badger's dog. You would have missed him if you'd slept five minutes longer, he keeps doing circuits of the house and nosing in on everybody." Raine reached over and rubbed Whistle behind the ears. The dog certainly didn't seem to mind.

I blinked three times, very slowly. "Badger's dog."

"A last request," Zheng purred.

My heart juddered. "He's not dead, is he? Not after all that?"

Raine laughed. “Nah, Badger’s alive and well, so far. We stuck him in the cellar, but he’s on real good behaviour. Whatever you did, Heather, you really convinced him. He keeps asking if you’re awake, if you’re going to be okay. Made me mighty suspicious at first, but he means it.”

“That doesn’t explain the Corgi.”

The dog in question — rotund little Whistle — tilted his head as I spoke, ears flopping about.

“Badger’s two requests,” Raine said. “He didn’t want his dog to get left locked indoors if he never makes it home. So, if he ... well, you know.” Raine sketched me a smile. “We’ll take responsibility for Whistle. The second request is he’d like to see Sarika before you go to town on his head. We can do that. I think he’s sweet on her.”

I sighed — my throat hurt, but never mind. “Raine, what I’m going to do to Badger might kill him. Or leave him as a vegetable. Meeting his dog does not make that any easier.”

As if he understood my tone, Whistle let out a curious whine.

“Yeeeeeah,” said Raine, with an exaggerated grimace. “Sorry about that. Can’t leave the poor bugger to starve though.”

Raine was right, but I was too distracted by pain to focus on abstract ethical issues right then. I slowly gathered the sheets in my lap, closed my eyes, and started to drift off while sitting up.

Then memory crashed back in. I gasped, blinked back awake, groping for Raine’s hand. Whistle flinched. “Where’s— is everybody —”

“Everyone is just fine,” Raine purred, one hand gently on the back of my head. The slight pain was worth her touch. “Everybody’s safe.”

“He’s not come back? The Big Man, he’s gone?”

“No, shaman,” Zheng purred.

Raine sighed softly and rolled her eyes, but she told the truth.

“There was a knock on the door, round about dawn. There wasn’t anybody actually there, kinda spooky, and then Badger started screaming because he saw something outdoors. But it seems our big fat friend can’t actually get in here, can’t violate Evee’s boundary.

We're safe." She gave me a slightly strained smile. "Twil's gone home. She wanted to stay, but she and Eevee had a bit of a set-to, 'cos Twil's got classes this morning. But no worries, she's been texting Eevee all day to let us know she's safe. Lozzie's somewhere, doing ..."

"Cooking," Zheng purred.

"Ha. Yeah. Tenny wanted to snuggle with you, but we thought it maybe best to leave you untouched for a bit, so she's downstairs with Lozzie. Evelyn's been wondering about that fox all day, but she's doing fine. Kim's still at work, almost none the wiser, but we've had her checking in. Seems like Mister Blobby only cares about Badger."

"We made a phone call," I croaked. "Evelyn said ... things, I was worried."

"Yeah, we heard the whole story from Twil, it's cool. You said some strange stuff down the phone at us, too, but it can't have been you."

"Oh. Good. Good." I blinked, trailing off, then remembered. "Have you seen Sevens?"

"Nah, not yet," Raine admitted. "Heard all that from Twil too, how she helped. Almost enough to get Sevens back in my good books. Twil and Zheng both told me you went full-on squid-girl transformation too."

"The shaman was glorious," Zheng purred from the floor.

"Which is the coolest thing I've ever heard." Raine flashed me a grin. "Wish I could'a seen it. Lozzie couldn't stop singing your praises. Bet you looked a right stunner."

"Oh." I felt myself blushing faintly and pressed my hands to my abdomen again. "There's a ... I made a ... a reactor. In my gut. Pneuma-somatic."

Raine nodded slowly. "Lozzie explained it, yeah. Well, kind of. You know how Lozzie is. Evelyn took a look too, but I don't think she understood it."

"None will," Zheng purred. "None who have not dived in the dark."

I glanced down at myself. "I might have shaved years off my life with this. I don't even know how it works. But I had to. Had to."

“How do you feel though?” Raine asked.

“ ... healthy. Hungry.”

My mind crept back to the events of last night.

I’d fought that thing, for real, that towering mountain of greasy, pallid meat, amid the flooding darkness. A dribble of adrenaline leaked into my bloodstream, and I found my breath hitching, my gut clenching up, my senses opening.

“He’s still out there,” I croaked.

“He still has a claim on the worm,” Zheng rumbled, and raised her arm with the bloody bandage. “But not on me.”

“Good,” I croaked.

The memory of biting into Zheng’s wound was almost unreal. Had I really done that? A strange blush rose inside me. Little Heather Morell, acting like a cannibal horror from some shock movie.

I hadn’t really killed *Ooran juh*. To kill such a thing was a feat beyond me. But I had won, in a very real way. I had come out victorious, in a contest between two vastly inhuman entities, and protected my family and friends.

I was not insensible to the parallels, though I doubted the Eye could be defeated in a fistfight, no matter how many tentacles I grew.

“You did it once, shaman, you can do it again,” said Zheng, and for a moment I thought she was reading my mind, but then she continued. “With no contract, *Ooran juh* will leave.”

“Yes, yes. Though it might be a little more difficult with Badger,” I murmured, but Zheng’s faith helped. “There’s a lot of work to do. I need to ... get up. If I even can.” I sighed. On the foot of the bed, Whistle rose to his little doggy feet and hopped down to the floor, then slowly trotted out into the hallway.

“Heather,” Raine said, bringing her face to eye-level with mine. “I am so proud of you.”

I averted my eyes. “I did what anybody would do. I wasn’t going to let Zheng go.”

She straightened up, and didn’t press the point, but she and Zheng shared a private, knowing look.

“Are you here, shaman?” Zheng purred a moment later, soft and tender.

She levered herself up off the floor and stood over me, dark hair sticking up in every direction, clean from a bath earlier. She gazed down on me with tender awe and fascinated devotion, a look that still had the power to make me deeply uncomfortable. I did not deserve to be looked at like that. I was no messiah, no miracle worker, not somebody to be worshipped.

But that wasn’t what that expression meant, was it?

It was the same way Raine looked at me, just filtered through a different set of needs and desires. It was love.

“Of course she’s here,” Raine answered for me. But Zheng blinked slowly, waiting.

I pressed my sore hands to my aching abdomen again, felt the residual heat of the reactor organ. My tentacles, my spines, my toxic defenses, my webbing and fins, exoskeleton plates and springy joint reinforcement, it all lay just on the other side of perception, folded away for now as an echo, but undeniably real. *Homo abyssus* had completed her metamorphosis, anchored herself with one foot in the real and the other foot in the deep.

“I’m here,” I said, more to myself than my pack. “For good.”

any mortal thing – 14.1

It wasn't until five days later that I felt confident enough to perform the vivisection.

After our fight with *Ooran juh* — who Raine insisted on calling 'Orange Juice', much to Evelyn's eye-rolling exasperation — I took the rest of that week off university classes, to heal and recover. I even officially and formally 'called in' with flu symptoms, which wasn't far off the truth. Every muscle in my body ached, from the thick slabs of quadriceps and gluteus, through my underdeveloped abdominals and weak arms, right down to the tiny muscles that controlled my eyelids, the slow squeezing tube of my oesophagus, and the delicate muscles between my fingers and toes. Even my tongue and jaw ached, along with the narrow anchor muscles up the sides of my skull, which made eating difficult for the first day or two.

But I still felt terribly guilty for skipping class. My well trained, good girl upbringing did not relent for anything, not even abyssal euphoria.

"I could still go to class," I protested in a raw voice that next morning. "I'm not weak, I can stand and walk."

"Yeah, sure, while wincing and shaking with each step," Raine said.

"It just hurts. Alright, it hurts a lot. All over. But pain is just pain. I feel pretty good in every other way."

"Regular people get sick too, Heather. Plus, hey, imagine how we'd look. We'd make a right pair in one of your lectures, me on my crutch and you wobbling like you've just been screwed six ways to Sunday."

"The shaman can do what she wants," said Zheng.

"Any divinely appointed monarch needs good advisers," said Raine. "And I ain't advising, I'm making an executive decision. Heather needs to take it easy. You wanna fight me over that?"

"I'm not a monarch," I croaked, blushing. "Raine!"

Zheng rolled one shoulder and blinked a slow blink of silent acquiescence.

The muscle soreness did not fade quickly, but transmuted down the ladder from spiritual concern to material reality, from omnipresent full body ache into a more discrete series of very impressive bruises. My flanks blossomed black and blue where my tentacles had been anchored, and my skin broke out in dozens of tiny short-lived contusions wherever I'd sprouted spines. My knees and ankles grew stiff and creaky as the muscles recovered from my hasty pneumasomatic reinforcements and exoskeleton frames, and my skin was raw and red and oversensitive, an aftereffect of how I'd flushed myself with warning colouration and defensive toxins. At least that last effect faded within twelve hours. It would have been torture otherwise, even dragging on a fresh set of clothes was like rubbing myself down with a cheese grater.

Raine went to class as normal, because I made her go, but she hurried back as soon as possible; Zheng stayed slow, stayed indoors, stayed close to me, like an injured bear in her den. She was still wrapped in bandages that Praem insisted on changing for her. My emergency field surgery had been a success, but even Zheng's post-human body took over forty eight hours to close the supernatural bite wounds. She lingered at the windows, watching the streets at dusk and dawn, like a jungle cat waiting for a glimpse of her territorial rival.

Tuesday I vegetated all day, after a night of sleeping like the dead. I lay in bed until noon, eating whatever was put in front of me, visited by Lizzie and Tenny and little stubby-legged Whistle in rotation. Whistle didn't seem to mind Tenny. She even turned up once carrying the dog in her arms, with one of her silken black tentacles wrapped around his rotund belly.

That was a good sign, if we did end up adopting the dog. But I wasn't up to thinking about that yet. If we did have to adopt Whistle, that would mean I'd failed. It would mean responsibility for another death.

When Tenny offered Whistle to me on the bed, I had to turn her down.

"Pet," she trilled, trying to place the cuddly dog in my lap, lowering him in a clutch of her tentacles. His little legs waggled and he

seemed confused but not alarmed. "Stroke. Feels good. Good touch."

"Thank you, Tenny," I croaked. "But ... but no, thank you, it's too much. I can't."

"Can't pet?" Tenny blinked those huge black eyes at me.

"I mean I can't ... get too attached. Um ... "

I didn't mind the dog. I'd never been much of a dog person, always vaguely afraid of them as a child, but since Wonderland, they'd rather paled in comparison to what I saw every day, and Whistle was a very well-behaved, well-trained ambassador for dog-kind, never barking or slobbering or nipping with his teeth. But I was not up to explaining the moral and emotional intricacies of potentially growing attached to the pet dog of a man whose brain I was about to peel open, certainly not to Tenny. She was too young, still seemed like a child, no matter how fast she was learning and how quickly her speech patterns were maturing. Lozzie jumped in to save me.

"Auntie Heathy needs space!" Lozzie chirped, and plucked Whistle out of Tenny's arms, giving the dog a quick hug before placing him back down on the floor. "Lots of space, she's sore alllllll over, up and down and in and out and no touchy-touchy, okay? Not without special permissions."

Tenny blinked at Lozzie, blinked at me, and blinked at the dog as he trotted back out of the room. I don't think she entirely bought it. She was getting very perceptive lately.

Lozzie then undermined her own lesson by having me turn onto my front so she could rub my back. I grumbled and complained and couldn't get comfortable, especially with my once-again-phantom limbs trying to help steady me. Lozzie weighed so little as she clambered up to straddle my backside, but as soon as she started squeezing and kneading the large, bruised muscles down my back, I felt such relief I had to groan into the pillow. It was still painful. Her hands hurt. But that was the point.

Painkillers worked too, strangely enough.

"I can get you stronger stuff than the codeine, if you need it," Evelyn said to me in the kitchen that evening.

I'd been working my incredibly slow way through dinner — homemade chicken casserole with rice and lots of soft vegetables, spiced with paprika and cumin, one of Praem's increasingly complex forays into unsupervised cooking. Between the jaw pain and stiff bruising in my fingers, it had taken me an hour and a half to eat, even dosed with pills from Evelyn's secret stash.

"... I could put it in a blender and drink it," I said.

"No," Praem intoned from behind Evelyn's shoulder. Her new maid uniform had finally arrived in the post, and she'd been wearing it all day. Evelyn refused to divulge how much the outfit had cost, but there was no way it was a standard off-the-rack imitation ordered from Amazon. Even the packaging had looked expensive. Between the high collar and the understated bust framing, the crisp, sleek skirt and the smooth lace at cuffs and collar and hems, Praem managed to look extremely pleased with herself even without an expression on her face.

I sighed. "Maybe I'll be better by tomorrow. What other painkillers do you have?"

"I've got prescriptions for all sorts," said Evelyn. "Tramadol or vicodin at least. Or we could go ask Kimberly to share some of her special crop."

"Ooooooh yeah," Raine said, feet up up one of the chairs. "Getting high'll help out with that sort of pain."

"I think I've had enough of altered states of consciousness lately," I said.

"What you've done to yourself this time is undeniably biological," said Evelyn. "Inflammation, soreness, muscle strain. Which I for one find much preferable to you vanishing Outside or bleeding from your face holes. Take some painkillers, Heather. Take it from me, there's no dignity in suffering needlessly."

Evelyn was right. This wasn't spiritual, not another untouchable bruise or ghostly abscess inside my chest, not some mystery ache behind my sternum that medical science couldn't help. I wasn't exaggerating about the lack of weakness either — I felt strong, vital, and healthy, in a way I hadn't since the very first time I'd used hyperdimensional mathematics to force a Slip, so many months ago now. Every time I'd used brain-math since then, I'd come away with

an aching void inside my chest, which never truly closed. The trilobe bioreactor had operated on more than a purely physical level, and finally filled in that void. I felt it all the time now, a brimming cup in my core.

But this omnipresent pain was debilitating for the mind. I wanted to just sit or lie in a heap, not moving, and switch my brain off.

I accepted a vicodin.

“And we do need you capable, ASAP,” Evelyn added. She glanced past Raine, into the utility room where the door to the cellar stood ajar. “That idiot can’t live down there forever.”

“Hey, Evee,” said Raine. “Give her some time, she fought a giant monster, yeah? I wouldn’t throw Godzilla at you and then expect you to seduce Twil two days later.”

Evelyn glared at her, unimpressed. Raine pulled an innocent smirk.

“I could do it now,” I murmured, mostly to myself. Why did that prospect make my chest go tight? “The longer I wait, the less time Maisie has.”

“Heal,” Praem intoned.

“Yes, yes, heal up. That’s not my point,” Evelyn huffed. “Look, it doesn’t make any difference to our plans. Even if you extract the Eye’s embarrassing diary entries and incriminating phone logs from that fool’s mind, it doesn’t speed up our schedule any. Nicole needs to find Edward’s house, and we need to steal our book back.”

Raine raised a confused eyebrow at Evelyn. “Why the rush then?”

“Because there is a condemned man in our cellar. He is waiting to die.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I may not be happy with what you’re going to do, Heather,” she said. “But while I accept the necessity, it doesn’t matter how well he understands the risks, or how disgustingly enthusiastic he seems about it.”

“Yeah, no joke,” Raine muttered.

“It’s the only way,” I croaked. “It might help him, and it’s better than the Big Man. Better than the Eye.”

“Yes, and I agree,” Evelyn sighed. “I understand. I get it. But you wouldn’t let me be cruel, Heather. You taught me otherwise. I won’t let you, either. Don’t make him wait too long. Get it over with.”

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Wednesday morning I woke up with six tentacles wrapped around my lovers.

Zheng and I had fallen asleep while spooning, with my backside tucked tight against her lap and one of her arms cuddling my tiny frame against her front. It was like sleeping with a giant hot-water bottle which could also autonomously wrap around you, which was basically the best thing ever. We’d figured the heat might help soften my bruises, so Zheng had gotten the lion’s share of me that night, and Raine had cuddled up in front of me, beneath the covers, holding my hands.

I wasn’t aware of what I’d done until the early sunlight started to filter through the curtain, grey and heavy with the threat of dawn showers. I’d blinked barely conscious, bleary-eyed and heavy-lidded as Raine had stirred and attempted to turn over in bed.

Then she’d discovered far too many limbs holding her in a gentle embrace, and had shot wide awake, frozen and tense right in front of my eyes.

“R-Raine?” I croaked in shared panic, not understanding.

The tone in my voice must have woken Zheng as well, because suddenly my big cuddly water bottle was levering herself up, ready to fight off monsters or eat an intruder.

“Woah woah woah, slow down, big girl,” Raine said, one arm out. But she didn’t look up, eyes fixed down on her own body below the covers.

“Shaman? Little wolf?”

“It’s okay, I’m fine, it’s just us. I think.” Raine rummaged below the covers. I felt her hand on my arm, first hesitant then firm. She squeezed and rubbed. “Heather, that’s you, right? This is you?”

“I— I’m sorry?” I tried to clear my eyes, deeply confused as I wriggled my arm away from her. “What’s wrong? I don’t ... ”

Zheng was chuckling low in her throat. She was touching one of my

arms too. “The shaman has sprouted in the night.”

Raine was holding one of my hands, and my other was under the pillow — but Zheng had one of my arms as well, and raised it to her lips to kiss my skin; but Raine was holding yet another arm, and somehow I was hugging her with two more and had one around around her backside and this was far too many limbs to account for.

“Oh.” My eyes went wide. Realisation dawned like a bucket of cold water over my head. I was suddenly very awake. “Oh, oh *shit*.”

I yanked my free hand out from under the pillow and patted along my face and shoulders. Had I sprouted spines in my sleep and hurt Raine? Was I covered in armour plating and toxins?

I wasn’t. Apart from the tentacles, the rest was just a vague phantom feeling on the edge of my conscious mind.

“Hey, hey, it’s fine,” Raine said, right up close to my face. “Heather, it’s fine. It’s just you. It’s only you.”

“I’m not meant to ... in my sleep? I don’t— I didn’t— are you hurt?”

“You cannot see them, can you, little wolf?” Zheng purred.

“Sure can feel ‘em though.” Raine flashed a smirk. “Especially the one between my legs.”

I blushed beetroot red and withdrew that particular tentacle with a slither across the bedsheets, though Raine playfully clamped her thighs around it as I wiggled free. I hid behind my hand, blushing and cringing.

“They are beautiful,” Zheng purred. “They deserve to be seen, little wolf.”

“I’m sure they do. Guess this is a new perk of sleeping with Heather, huh?”

“Please don’t,” I whined.

When I concentrated, I could feel the trilobe organ in my abdomen humming away with a steady pump of energy, to keep these pneuma-somatic additions fresh and healthy. It was spreading a subtle yet deep heat through my belly. A single biochemical control rod from the shutdown array had slid upward in the metabolic channel it occupied within the reactor, allowing the reaction to

ramp up just enough to manifest my tentacles, but no further. I'd done it in my sleep, by instinct, because I'd wanted to hug Raine as well as Zheng.

I wriggled one tentacle free and poked it out of the covers. Rainbow fluorescence cast slowly shifting colours over my pillow and Raine's face and the walls, brightening the room in the grey dawn static, the colours sleepy and heavy beneath the pale flesh. What a strange paradox, that I was casting bioluminescence that Raine couldn't see. I ran a human hand over it to be absolutely certain.

"Oh. Oh, okay," I panted, heart thudding in my chest.

I could only thank God and Maisie that my tentacles were in their smooth configuration, not a barb or hook in sight, and no necrotizing or paralytic mucus smeared on Raine's vulnerable skin. Even fast asleep, my body knew to never to hurt my mates. When I'd been staggering home from the fight on Sunday night, unable to fold away my sharp edges and toxic spines, I'd still been flushed with adrenaline, ready to drive the Big Man off a second time if I had to.

In fact, I'd only ever manifested my tentacles before in panic and self-defense, or for euphoric combat problem solving. This was the first time I'd done it for a purpose other than fighting.

The roots, buried deep in my flanks and anchored in already bruised tissues, ached like pulled muscles whenever I moved them.

"Here, little wolf, here, feel." Zheng guided Raine's hand, to touch what she couldn't see.

I let out a little gasp and a not unpleasurable shudder of surprise, as Raine drew her fingertips down to where one of my tentacles thickened. "U-um, maybe not ... not right ..."

"Hey, it's only us three in here," Raine purred. "Are these erogenous, or what?"

"No! N-no they're not, not like that." I blushed so hard my throat turned red. I did my best to sit up in bed and push the covers down, airing out my pajamas, no matter the aches and sore muscles. My tentacles followed me up and out, spreading either side of me, drawing out the deep aches in my flanks. "I-I'm very, very, very sore. I really don't think I would survive a ... double."

My eyes flicked from Zheng to Raine and back again. They shared a knowing look. Raine laughed.

But I really was too sore. For now.

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Evelyn got me in a magic circle in the workshop two hours later, half-naked and shivering in my pajama bottoms and bra, though by then I'd shut down the bioreactor and folded the tentacles away.

"But why?!" Lozzie asked from the sofa, both hands planted between her spread knees as she rocked back and forth, wispy blonde hair floating everywhere. "They're so pretty, you don't have to hide them away, it's not like anybody's going to see if they wouldn't already be seeing them!"

"Well ... it does hurt," I said. "The bruises, I mean."

Evelyn huffed an unimpressed laugh down by my belly. "Not surprising. You do look rather like a bad Jackson Pollock painting right now."

"Oh, thank you," I muttered.

Lozzie pouted and puffed her cheeks out. "That's not fair, even the bruises are pretty. They're proof! Of good things!"

Evelyn straightened up, putting her weight on her walking stick and lowering the magically modified magnifying glass she'd been using to examine my flank, where the bruising was most coherent and regular, from the anchor-points of the tentacles themselves. The magnifying glass was a recent invention of her own, the lens itself painted with a magic circle of her own design and the lens frame covered in tiny eye-watering script. I caught a glimpse of the swirling, headache-inducing view through the lens, a vision of the floor behind her cast in psychedelic shifting neon, and had to look away. She winced and rubbed her hip, not used to bending over like that, but apparently unbothered by the effect of staring through the glass for several minutes.

She wasn't exaggerating about the bruises. My torso and hips and most of my legs were covered in a patchwork quilt of visible bruising, busy turning dark purple, stiff and painful, though a few areas were already going green and yellow with the healing process. I looked like I'd been beaten. Get me in front of a doctor

and Raine might get arrested on suspicion of domestic abuse. Which was no laughing matter.

“Yes, but they’re also causing Heather considerable pain,” Evelyn said to Lozzie, then added, for me, “but you do look better. I don’t think sleep-tentacling Raine has pulled anything loose.”

“And the bioreactor?” I asked.

Evelyn wet her lips, meeting my eyes with an expression I’d seen on her too many times before, hungry curiosity and cold fascination. But this time it was softened by frowning concern.

“I’ve never heard of anything like it before,” she said slowly. “But then again, you keep doing things I’ve never heard of before. It’s a true, actual, real biological organ, Heather. You grew it. And I’m neither a doctor nor a surgeon.” She waved the magnifying glass. “This isn’t an MRI machine, it’s not going to tell us anything medically significant. The best I can say is the organ isn’t doing anything magically dangerous to you. You can probably activate it if you want, just keep it gentle. Don’t go all the way. Don’t pull a muscle.”

I glanced over to the table, where the far more medically significant device still lay, a yellow box with a glass dial and an adjustable tube. Evelyn saw the direction of my gaze and sighed.

“You heard it as well as I did,” she said. “There was nothing but regular background radiation.”

“But that wouldn’t pick up alpha particles through my skin. I Googled it.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. She actually snapped at me. “Heather, if your new appendix mark two-point-oh was shedding alpha particles into your fucking bloodstream, we would know, because you would be dying of radiation poisoning by now. Stop it. Stop worrying yourself.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Sorry ... I ... just sorry. It’s like part of me doesn’t believe I deserve to feel good about any of this, I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something to go wrong.”

“Impostor syndrome for your own body?”

“That’s why I turned the reactor off and put the tentacles away, I’m

worried it's going to fall apart again."

"Mm."

"... why do you have a Geiger counter, anyway?" I asked.

Evelyn shrugged. "It was in the house. God alone knows what it was for."

"Get one out!" Lozzie urged. "Get a tentacle out! They're prettyyyyyy. I wanna touch one again!"

I sighed and awkwardly crossed my arms over my chest, feeling self-conscious. "You sound like you're asking me to get my boobs out or something."

Lozzie giggled, flapping a sleeve. "Heathy! No!"

"You do need to keep the bruises flexible," Evelyn said. "Work the muscles a little bit. It'll help. She's not wrong."

"Doctor's orders!" Lozzie chirped.

"They feel clumsy," I huffed, telling the full truth at last. "Clumsy and less dexterous. In bed, when I woke up, when I was moving them around, they didn't feel the same as before. At first I thought it was because I was half-asleep, but then I ... I kept knocking things over in the bathroom. Like suddenly I can't use them right."

"Not an emergency," Praem intoned from by the door. We all stared at her.

"... that's a good point," Evelyn muttered. "Thank you, Praem."

Praem nodded her head ever so slightly.

"Look, are we done?" I asked. "Can I put my shirt back on now? I'm cold."

"Of course," Evelyn said. She tossed the magnifying glass onto the table and eased herself into a chair, while Lozzie passed me my t-shirt and hoodie. I slowly and painfully tugged both on over my head and snuggled down inside the warmth, hiding my bruised body and my embarrassment.

"Whenever you've manifested your tentacles before," Evelyn spoke slowly, thinking with each word, "it's always been in a crisis. Correct? Unless you and Raine have been up to some truly

degenerate activities behind closed doors.”

I think she was trying to soften the seriousness of the subject, but I didn’t laugh. I blushed and hid behind a hand.

“Oh,” Evelyn said, voice gone hollow. “Okay, no, I don’t need to know that. That was a joke.”

“We haven’t!” I blurted out. “But you saying it as a joke is bad enough!”

Lozzie was giggling so hard she had to fling herself back onto the sofa and bury her face in the cushions. Evelyn cleared her throat and held up both hands, but embarrassment at her own joke had ruined her composure, and she couldn’t locate the start of her next thought.

“Only in a fight?” Praem said, coming to the rescue with her sing-song silver-bell voice.

“Yes, yes, exactly.” I nodded, fighting down the blush that had risen at the unspeakable yet intriguing suggestion. “Every time I’ve made my tentacles real, it’s always been in a fight, or a crisis, and I’ve used them right away. The most I’d gotten out of them in the past, before Sunday, was perhaps a few minutes. And on Sunday it was all fight and then aftermath. But this morning, I don’t know how long they were active. It could have been hours.”

“You may not be used to them,” Evelyn said, “when you’re not using them on instinct.”

I nodded. She had a point. When I’d woken up with my tentacles all manifested, it had felt very right to be that much closer to the shape my abyssal memories said I should be able to adopt. But a hand can feel right to possess, yet still be clumsy.

“Then you do need to get them out!” Lozzie bounced to her feet and wrapped her arms around my chest from behind, in a hug. Somehow she didn’t aggravate a single bruise.

“Are you going to use the tentacles on Badger?” Evelyn asked.

I blinked at her in white-faced incomprehension, mouth agape, almost offended. “ ... E-Evelyn, *excuse me?*”

Evelyn gritted her teeth. “I mean to perform the vivisection, not whatever you were thinking.”

“O-oh. Oh. That makes much more sense. I’m sorry.”

At the word ‘vivisection’, Lozzie had let go of me and flopped back into the sofa. She began humming loudly, and buried her head in the cushions again, swinging her legs back and forth.

She didn’t want to hear this. Didn’t want to think about it. Neither did I, but it was my responsibility.

I glanced over at the open door to the kitchen — we hadn’t sequestered ourselves away for this, Raine was at class and Zheng was napping and Tenny was playing video games upstairs — and then beyond that, to the utility room at the back of the house. I couldn’t see the cellar door from here, but I knew it was standing open too. Down there beneath the floors, Badger was asleep or reading a book, or perhaps watching the old television we’d dragged down there for him.

We weren’t keeping him tied up and handcuffed in the cellar; he was no Amy Stack. We’d only kept him confined for the first day, until Evelyn had a chance to make sure he wasn’t carrying the magical equivalent of a cranial bomb, and Raine had decided his earnest awe of me was not an act. He’d seen me fight *Ooran Juh* and watched me bite out Zheng’s infection, and in a way, I had rescued him. That had changed something about his priorities, but I didn’t yet understand what. Perhaps I would never know. Perhaps I would flay his mind before he got a chance to tell me.

But he’d requested to stay down in the cellar, sleeping on the camp bed Raine had dragged out of storage, petting Whistle and awaiting my inevitable attentions. Perhaps it was penance.

More likely it was fear. He’d seen *something* out in the streets beyond the house, twice — once as a vague impression and the second time as an actual fat man who’d been standing and watching the house, not headless, just a very obese human. It could have been a coincidence, but as soon as we’d opened the front door, the fat man had vanished.

Ooran Juh, waiting for him. The Big Man was not bothering with the rest of us, but he was waiting for Badger.

Though I had my suspicions. If I stepped outdoors, it might follow me or watch me — but not challenge me. This was my territory, I’d made that clear, but this rival predator would wait forever for his

target.

Zheng had taken to shadowing Badger whenever he emerged to use the bathroom, and Raine and Evelyn had both spoken to him multiple times. Kimberly made herself exceptionally scarce. She informed us she'd not had much contact with Badger while they were both in the cult. He'd been several levels above her, not a real mage but somehow important, but she still didn't want to see or meet or even hear anybody who had been involved in the Sharrowford Cult ever again, as long as she lived. I had a mind to grant her that safety, as much as we could.

I had not been downstairs to see Badger either.

I'd heard him, though. We'd all heard him. Badger suffered the most unimaginable night terrors, full-on screaming fits and somnambulant flailing and falling out of bed, though no actual sleepwalking. He needed constant mental occupation when awake, which is why Zheng had carried the old telly down there, and we'd given him a pile of books and let him keep his mobile phone. Any unguarded mental moment was another opening for the Eye to torture him, trying to get him to do something he couldn't. Last Raine had told me, he was watching the whole of *Dark Shadows* from beginning to end, some American soap opera I'd never heard of.

We'd ruled out drawing the Fractal on his skin, even as a compassionate measure. After what had happened to the Cult, when they'd used the Fractal to attempt negotiation with the Eye, we thought it too risky.

"Well?" Evelyn prompted when I didn't reply. "Are you going to use the tentacles on him or not?"

"Maybe." I gathered my wits, then hugged myself through my hoodie. Wished Raine was here. "Honestly, I don't know. I won't know until I begin."

"You don't know?" Evelyn asked, then sighed heavily. "Heather, how long is the man supposed to wait? He's on death row."

"I could do it right now, if I was hurting less," I said. "A few more days, at most. Plus, we still need to convince Sarika to come see him. Don't we?"

"Maybe we should respect her wishes," Evelyn said.

After two short phone calls, Sarika had made it abundantly yet laconically clear that she did not wish to see “that fucking idiot coward Nathan.” But I was using that as an excuse, no matter how sore my muscles. I didn’t need muscles to do brain-math. Not with the reactor organ in my belly.

“We keep using the word ‘vivisection’,” I said, in a naked attempt to avoid the actual problem. “But that’s only a metaphor. What I’m going to do to him is primarily hyperdimensional mathematics. Very similar to what I did with Sarika, in fact, but with the added complication that the Eye is technically still in him. Connected to him. Somehow. I’ll need to be ready, for contact, maybe. My tentacles are a secondary issue.”

Evelyn raised her eyebrows in sardonic disbelief. “Need I remind you this all started when you got your tentacles out in the middle of the park? What were you going to do with them, tickle a cultist into submission?”

As if roused by thinking about them, my six phantom limbs rose up from my sides, forcing a wince from me as the muscles inside my torso adjusted to support structures which were not there right now.

“Of course not, Evee.”

“I’m serious. You got the tentacles out. You were going to trepan one of them.”

“That was only instinct! I’m not going to crack open his skull and root around in his brain, not literally. The tentacles might just provide some ... I don’t know. Some kind of catalyst component. A stronger connection. I know they can pass through flesh if they have to, Tenny did that once, with a person’s head, but—”

“So maybe you will have to get physical,” Evelyn finished for me.

“Why are you so insistent on this?”

Evelyn gave me a deeply unimpressed look, hunched over the handle of her walking stick like a gargoyle, sour and squinting. “Because I’m a horrible bitch who can’t help but torture my closest friends and loved ones, by forcing them to think about horrible impending tasks they would rather avoid.”

“Liar,” Praem intoned.

“Yes,” I agreed. “That is very transparently a lie, Evee. And you’re not a bitch.”

“Yes I am.”

“Don’t use that language for yourself.”

Evelyn stamped with her walking stick. “I want you to be prepared for this, Heather. Doing everything last minute, running on instinct, that might work in a fight, but not for this. If you have to stick your fingers into his actual brain, whether you’re reaching through his skull or boring a hole in it, I don’t care which, I want you to be ready. I do not want you to be consumed by guilt if you kill this man and then blame yourself for being under-prepared. Stop avoiding the practicalities.”

I averted my eyes. Behind me, Lozzie had stopped humming, hiding beneath the cushions like a burrowing ferret. But I could tell she was listening now.

“I don’t know if I could do that part,” I muttered. “I can do the brain-math, but ... ”

“Then I suggest you get some practice in,” Evelyn said.

I puffed out a humourless laugh. “Practice brain surgery? On what? You? Whistle? Myself?”

“Not brain surgery. Basic dexterity. And we do have somebody you could learn from.”

= =

“Cheeeeeeeck,” Tenny trilled.

Raine drew a sharp breath through her teeth. “Ooooh, she’s got you dead to rights there, Heather.”

I frowned at the board, holding my hands clasped in my lap. On the other side of the kitchen table, Tenny started to bob and weave in her seat, rocking like Lozzie sometimes did. A playful smile spread across her mouth as she watched me think, those huge pelagic eyes fixed on my face rather than the board and the pieces between us.

“It’s check, not checkmate,” Evelyn supplied.

“Shhhhhh!” Lozzie scolded, a finger to her lips. “Let Heathy think!”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and hid her mistake behind a long sip of post-dinner tea. But she couldn't keep her mouth shut. "Watching Heather lose to a child over and over is like pulling teeth."

"You don't have to watch," I muttered. "And this was your suggestion in the first place."

"I didn't suggest playing a game you have no hope of winning."

"Hope-ahhhh," Tenny said in her fluttering voice, leaning toward Evelyn's chair. Two extra tentacles slid from their hidden sheaths in her shoulders, beneath the white fluffy layer of her flesh-cloak wings. Black and silky, they waved through the air toward Evelyn, who made a valiant effort to stay still and calm.

"Yes?" Evelyn said, somewhat strained.

But Tenny stopped short of patting Evelyn's shoulder with the tentacles, making a sort of blinking, tilting expression which meant she'd remembered or realised something.

"Auntie Eevee, not touching," she announced, and mimed patting the air instead, much to Evelyn's visible relief.

"Good girl, Tenny," Lozzie stage-whispered.

"Thank you, yes," Evelyn said. "But what was your point?"

"Heath can win," Tenny trilled.

"Exactly my point too." Evelyn cleared her throat. Then, in the way one would indulge a precocious child, she pulled a very awkward smile and raised her cup of tea to Tenny. "Great minds think alike."

"Great minds," Tenny echoed. One of her tentacles was still close to Evelyn after the air-pat, and it quickly dipped into the mug of tea to steal a sip. Evelyn blinked and pulled the mug back, leaving the tentacle dripping brown tea, but Tenny was already making a weird trilling feathery sound that was probably a giggle.

"Wonderful." Evelyn pulled a face at the remaining liquid in her mug.

"Tenny is clean!" Lozzie chirped. "It's fine!"

"Of course she's clean," Evelyn huffed. "That doesn't mean I want to share her mouth ... gut ... tentacle? Tentacle flora. Assuming she has any. Oh, sod it." Evelyn threw back the rest of the tea.

I'd been frowning at the board the whole time, trying to ignore the peanut gallery. As Evelyn downed the rest of her tea, the pieces on the board finally stopped conspiring against me and gave up their secrets.

"I can see the way out," I muttered — and promptly banged my hands on the underside of the table. "Ow."

Raine started laughing. "Are you okay? Heather?"

"I'm fine." I tutted, and manoeuvred my hands from beneath the table, my wrists bound together with the soft fabric belt from Evelyn's dressing gown. "Is this still really necessary?"

"Until you stop trying to move your hands before your tentacles," Evelyn said. "Try again."

I sighed and rolled my eyes, replaced my hands in my lap, and concentrated on moving a tentacle instead.

It was after dinner that same Wednesday. Night was struggling to fall out in the garden, over the streets and houses of Sharrowford in spring. Sunset gripped the horizon with tendrils of orange and rose larger than anything I could ever hope to summon. For the first night since I'd started living at Number 12 Barnslow Drive, we had the heating turned down to barely a trickle, the old iron radiators lying dormant and quiet. The first feelers of summer were still perhaps a month away, but this house had been built back in a time when people still cared about proper insulation. Despite the missing roof tiles and cracked brickwork and old windows and creaking floorboards, it was still strong in its bones, still determined to shelter its human charges. I was still wearing my pink-scaled hoodie, but I'd gone down to only one t-shirt beneath.

We'd pushed aside the dinner detritus of dirty plates, and set up the chessboard in the middle of the table. Then I'd sat there for twenty minutes, making everybody else simultaneously very bored and a little worried, as I'd closed my eyes and concentrated on easing a single biochemical control rod out of its metabolic channel inside my reactor organ.

I could have just slammed the whole thing onto full power. As instinctive as taking a deep breath; but half the purpose of this exercise was to consciously discover the breakpoints.

I'd edged the trilobe organ into throbbing, pulsing life — an

operation which felt like trying to pluck a single eyebrow hair freehand, with a pair of kitchen tongs, in the dark. But I'd stuck with it, until a faint blush of heat spread through my abdomen, enough to make me purr with pleasure. Summoning the two tentacles had been easy by comparison, a simple flicker of hyperdimensional mathematics, not even complicated enough to cause a nosebleed. Though I had experienced a brief stabbing headache behind my eyes.

The pain was worth the euphoria, as they had arced out either side of me, beautiful and strong and perfect.

Lozzie had ooh'd and ahh'd at them, wide-eyed and smiling like she was watching the sunset out in the garden. Zheng had nodded silent approval, then stalked off to watch the street from the windows. Praem had acknowledged nothing, and Tenny had watched my movements like a squid meeting another squid in the dancing ocean sunlight, trying to follow along with the motions of my tentacles.

I'd positioned one above the chess board, concentrating hard on the action of curling the smooth flesh and the muscle inside.

The other had gone into Lozzie's lap, so she could massage it. A little deal we'd made, to help alleviate the deep-bruise pain in my sides. She had to let off after a few minutes though, I couldn't concentrate on the chess board; having the tentacle kneaded was like getting a foot rub, it felt too good and made me want to go to sleep.

Tenny made the first move, inching a pawn forward. I watched very closely as her tentacle-tip curled around the chess piece, then attempted to mimic her.

We'd chosen chess specifically to distract my conscious mind between each move; it was one thing to prioritise my tentacles in a fight or a crisis or in a moment of fear, when abyssal instinct was concerned with pure survival, but it was another thing entirely to use them for delicate, complex motions when I was relaxed and safe, while considering a difficult problem. We couldn't do brain surgery, but this was the next best task.

After all, to last even a few moves against Tenny did require exceptional concentration. I was no strategist — that was Evelyn's department — and I had not exactly played much chess before, so I had to do a lot of concentrating.

It must have been a strange experience for Evelyn and Raine. Whenever I made a move, to them, the chess piece seemed to float.

“I recommend never doing this in public,” Evelyn muttered as I made my first move. “You look like you’re using telekinesis. You’ll freak out the whole country.”

I had since lost five times in a row, and bashed my hands and wrists into the table about quadruple that number.

And I kept knocking the pieces over.

“Tch.” I tutted as the curling tip of my tentacle fumbled the rook piece I’d been trying to move to block Tenny’s check. It fell on its side and rolled away. I tried to grab it — whacked my hands on the table again — and not only did I not catch the piece, but also managed to knock over two pawns with the flailing end of my tentacle. “Oh, bum!” I swore, losing my temper.

The rook rolled off the board and off the edge of the table. Raine caught it before it hit the floor.

“Hey, hey, Heather.” She held the fallen castle piece out to me, smiling a comforting smile. “Relax, take a deep breath. Here, try to take it out of my hand instead.”

“I can’t do this!” I whined, then felt terribly guilty, because Raine didn’t deserve my anger. I rubbed my face with both my hands, still trailing the belt from my wrists. “I keep trying to copy what Tenny does, but it’s not working, I don’t have any fine control. And I’m still sore all over, doing this hurts. My tentacles aren’t meant for this human scale stuff, they’re apparently only good for beating up monsters and hurting people.” I huffed. “Not that I mind. Still feels right to have them.”

Raine smirked. “I wouldn’t class that one between my legs this morning as ‘beating up monsters’.”

“Raine!” I squeaked.

Evelyn rapped the table with her knuckles and gestured at Tenny. “There is a literal child in the room, Raine. I will hit you with my walking stick. I will.”

Lozzie wasn’t exactly setting a good example either, giggling like mad behind the ends of both her sleeves.

Raine cleared her throat. “Sorry. I forgot. It’s alright, Tenny, Heather and I were just cuddling this morning. Tentacles are good for cuddles, you know that already.”

“Cuddle!” Tenny trilled. Four of her tentacles snaked over to Lozzie and gave her a hug, all while Tenny was looking the other way. I had to avert my eyes, fuming with unreasonable and irrational envy of her easy dexterity.

“Heather,” Evelyn said, in a much softer tone than the one she reserved for Raine. “Do you know how long it took me to learn to walk again?”

My envy faded with sputtering shame. “No? No, I don’t believe you’ve ever told me that, Evee. I’m sorry.”

“Two years,” Evelyn said quietly. “And I had to re-learn periodically as I grew up, whenever I needed a larger replacement.” Her free hand wandered down to where the socket of her prosthetic leg cradled her thigh, beneath her comfy skirt. I noticed Lozzie staring with innocent, blinking interest. “This will not come quickly, and it will not be easy.”

I took a deep breath. “I know that. But I only have a couple of days, yes? The point of this is to be ready for— ahh!”

A surprised squeak escaped my throat and a sudden embarrassed blush rose up my cheeks. Tenny had wrapped one of her tentacles around my own, curling around and around as if braiding them together. She was gentle, but it was still like linking arms without warning.

“T-Tenny, what—”

“Here. Here here. Here,” she trilled, and guided me toward Raine’s hand.

She acted as a living crutch for the direction and support of my own tentacle, the equivalent of a person reaching over from behind my back to correct my grip. Together, we plucked the rook from Raine’s waiting hand, and placed it back on the chessboard, blocking Tenny’s check attempt. She smiled at me and waggled her head side to side, her feathery antennae twitching.

“ ... thank you, Tenny. Thank you. I ... maybe you can show me how.”

Tenny nodded, and set about picking up the two toppled pawns as well.

Over on the kitchen counter, Evelyn's mobile phone rang suddenly and softly. She frowned at it, but Praem was already picking it up and handing it to her.

"Answer," Praem intoned.

"Hey, is it Nicky?" Raine asked. "She found anything?"

"No," Evelyn said at length, frowning at the phone screen. Tenny and I were concentrating together on moving another chess piece, but something in Evelyn's voice made me look over at her. She pressed the answer call button and held the phone to her ear. "What do you want?"

A long pause. Raine and I shared a look. Lozzie fussed about with two of Tenny's tentacles.

"Calm down," Evelyn said eventually, rolling her eyes, not sounding very placatory at all. "No, he's still alive." Another long pause. "Oh, that changed your tune, did it? Like you deserve to. Mmhmm. Saturday then. Alright, alright, no I don't care, I'll put her on."

Evelyn held the phone out to me, looking very unimpressed.

"Me?" I asked.

"It's Sarika. She's changed her mind, wants to see Badger. Preferably before you operate on him, I assume." She pursed her lips down at the phone. "Careful, she's doing crocodile tears."

any mortal thing – 14.2

The first thing Sarika did when she saw Badger was walk up to him and slap him in the face.

Well, no, that's not quite accurate. She didn't walk, and it was worse than a slap. She spent at least twenty seconds hobbling across the kitchen on her pair of crutches, pausing and panting to catch her breath every couple of dragging paces, shaking all over with effort — and from the lingering pain I knew she felt, but which she refused to admit out loud. She had made a very specific request on the way here in Raine's car, that we were not to help her in front of Badger, not unless she fell over and broke a bone, or literally passed out. She'd been quiet and docile in the car, but the moment she'd seen Badger through the kitchen doorway, she'd sunk deep into the murky river of her emotional waters, and dredged up that bitter scowl like the rusted hulk of a warship pulled from toxic silt.

Badger had risen to his feet as she'd approached, greeting her with a hesitant smile and an amazed look in his eyes. I think until that moment he may have suspected she really was dead after all, and we may have been lying to him. But Sarika hosed him down with contempt and spite, her determination reforged into strength with every step toward him. Her eyelids kept twitching out of sync, and she struggled to stay straight on her crutches.

"Sorry," he said with breathless tenderness, as she finally reached him.

Over by the door, Raine and I shared a covert grimace. Praem stood prim and proper on the other side of the room, betraying nothing. I hadn't consciously predicted what was coming, but I could feel it in my gut.

Evelyn had made a prediction, however, and was proven right when Sarika attempted to punch Badger in the face with the handle of her crutch.

"Sorry," he was saying, "I thought you were dead. I'm so glad you're— woah!"

I yelped too, hand to my mouth to stifle a shocked hiccup.

Sarika was much fitter and stronger than when she'd first visited us. She'd come a long way since I'd reached into the mathematics that defined who and what she was, since I'd re-knitted the worst of the lingering damage left by the Eye's unkind grip on her soul.

She still wouldn't have made it up and down the cellar steps though, which was why this little reunion was taking place in the kitchen.

I'd worked on Sarika twice in the weeks since then, as she'd sat in the magical workshop under Raine and Evelyn's careful supervision, and I'd held an emergency sick bucket between my knees. I'd hunted down a dozen mangled sub-values in the impossibly complex equation that was Sarika Masalkar, filled them as best I could, smoothed out the worst of her shakes, and tried to eliminate her newfound propensity for explosive migraines. It felt like repairing a cathedral with wood glue and play-doh.

She'd regained a little of her muscle tone, and had less trouble keeping down solid food, but she was still a mess, still looked like a bruise in human form, and never seemed free of suffering except when asleep, which apparently never lasted long without either nightmares or drugs to keep them away. Her eyes were still bloodshot and ringed with dark exhaustion, and her face was still slack and pale and waxen beneath her coffee-brown skin. Her twitching was better. She'd stopped biting her own hands. I doubted I was ever going to be able to eliminate her tremors or her chronic fatigue. She was not yet fit enough to perform her penance — burying the bodies of the Sharrowford Cult's victims, still lying desiccated and abandoned in the empty shell of their castle — but I was learning a lot from the process of mending her shattered soul. Transferable skills for Maisie, I hoped.

She also wasn't quite capable of swinging that punch, let alone with the added weight of the crutch or the awkward angle she had to adopt to stay on her feet.

It was a messy, clumsy, embarrassing moment for everybody present. She flailed at his head with the handle, letting out a great heaving grunt of effort. Badger flinched and stumbled back with a yelp, getting bashed in the side with the crutch, crashing into a chair, and almost tripping over his own feet. Poor Whistle went skidding across the floor to escape the sudden outbreak of hostilities, his little doggy paws scraping the kitchen flagstones as

he scurried for safety behind Evelyn's skirt.

Sarika whacked at Badger another couple of times with increasing difficulty, but he was safely out of range now, gaping at her as he clutched a chair.

"Can we please stop the violence!" I hiccuped again. "Please."

"Alright," Evelyn raised her voice. "That's enough."

Raine strode forward between them, hands out like a referee separating a pair of boxers; she'd left her crutch upstairs in a show of strength, now that her leg was healed to the point she could at least pretend she didn't feel any pain.

Praem didn't move, judging Badger entirely capable of recovering on his own. Or perhaps she was just unwilling to lend aid to the people who had once removed her from her body and tried to kill her mother. I sighed and stepped forward a little as well, arms out in case Sarika was about to topple over. She almost did, stamping down with her crutch again and swaying hard as she struggled to regain her balance.

"Back to your corners, back to your corners," Raine was saying in a passable imitation of a ringside announcer voice.

Sarika twitched an elbow in my direction in a subconscious refusal of help. I would have rolled my eyes if I wasn't busy dealing with my own sudden pain. My phantom limbs had reached out in an effort to steady her, all of them currently mere brain-ghosts, not pneuma-somatic glory; but my mind still said the limbs needed support, and the bruised muscles in my flanks duly obeyed, sending a shiver of stiff pain up my sides. I was much healed since the middle of the week, but still tender and sore.

The reactor organ responded too, control rods shivering for retraction, telling me to make those limbs real so I could hold Sarika steady. I resisted the urge, however oddly pleasurable.

Badger shook his head, wide-eyed at Sarika. "Sorry ... what was that? Why?"

She inclined her head, doing her best to stare down her nose though Badger was taller than her. Sarika handled her spite like a gutting knife. She cut him deep with nothing but a flicker of her eyes. But Badger held her gaze.

"You always were a coward, Nathan," she croaked at him, voice a scratchy mess.

Badger closed his gaping mouth, surprise replaced with resignation. "Yeah. Yeah I am, no lie. But not for the reasons you think."

"Is that it, then?" Evelyn asked, with a tone as if she'd been watching a particularly disappointing variety show. "Was this entire excursion an excuse to lightly abuse a condemned man? Well, I'm so glad we helped facilitate that. It's a good thing we actually have some important questions to ask the pair of you, or this would be a total waste of my time."

"No," Raine said slowly, looking first at Badger, then at Sarika, trying to catch her eye. "No, I don't think these two are done with each other yet."

Sarika snorted, then had to breathe deeply and cough to make up for the effort of snorting.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, and screwed up my courage instead. Unless I was using brain-math to rewire her nervous system, I still found her difficult to deal with.

"Sarika," I said.

"... what?" she croaked.

"Is that all you wanted? If you've said all you have to say, then we're not going to make you stay or anything. I don't like it, and I'm a little annoyed at you deceiving us, but I'll respect it. If hitting Badger is what you needed."

Sarika turned her bitterness on me, and I steeled myself to stand my ground, but she spared me the corrosive acid she had used on Badger. She was just exhausted and unimpressed. "You think I would waste my time if all I wanted to do was belt this idiot in the head? Well, you're right, Morell, as you're usually right about fucking well everything, aren't you?"

"Hey, Sarika, come on," Raine said, in a warning tone just the wrong side of gentle.

"It's alright," I said to Raine. "Let her vent."

"I would waste my time to do that, yes," Sarika croaked on, voice like a handful of burnt gravel, panting between her words. "It's

worth the satisfaction. But right now there's a design competition on, and I am taking valuable time out of something I actually give a shit about. So yes, I do have more to say." She glared at Badger again, in a way that suggested 'more to say' was going to be a string of creative insults like an artillery barrage aimed at his self-worth. Badger stared back, making no effort to defend himself.

"Design competition?" Evelyn muttered.

"Yeah," Raine piped up with an odd smile. "Forgot to mention in the car, but I saw your latest video, Sarika. Good stuff."

Sarika's contempt faltered and fell beneath the hooves of battered pride. Eyelids twitching, a full-body shake intensifying, she waved the dismissive hand of the terminally unable to accept praise. "Whatever, it's crap."

Raine shrugged. "Twenty thousand views says otherwise."

"What are you talking about?" Evelyn hissed. "What has she been up to? Sarika, what have you been doing?"

"Yes, um," I added. "Did I miss something here?"

Raine looked at us both with surprise. "Oh, yeah, she's been doing magic right under your nose and I didn't tell you, Evee."

"Sarcasm does not become you," Evelyn said.

Raine laughed. "Sarika's been making Minecraft videos on Youtube. She told us, remember? Last time she was over."

"They weren't listening," Sarika croaked. "Morell was being sick at the time. And who cares?"

"I care," Badger said.

"Shut up."

Evelyn did a very long, slow blink, accompanied by a worrying tightening of her jaw muscles. "Mass murderer turned Minecraft youtuber. Fine. Forget I asked."

"Stranger things have happened to us," I said.

"It's three videos," Sarika wheezed. "Stop making a big deal."

"Yeah," Raine said, "but what she's not telling you is one of those videos is about one of the coolest, largest castles I've ever seen. It's

got sky-trains and docks and luxury bedrooms. Must have taken her days.”

“Five hundred hours, give or take,” Sarika said. “Not like I can do much else.”

“You’d love it, Heather,” Raine said.

I held my hands up in polite surrender. “I’m not sure I can separate the ‘shared responsibility for mass murder’ part from the ‘cool Minecraft video’ part, I’m sorry.” Then I added, “I don’t even really know how Minecraft works, anyway.”

“That’s why I said forget it,” Sarika croaked.

Her arms were shaking as she gripped her crutches, the effort too much to sustain as we stood around, but she refused to ask for a chair, or even to just assert dominance by sitting down first. I had to leap in before she forced her dignity all the way to collapse.

“Why don’t you two sit down then?” I asked — then hiccuped, worried this wouldn’t work. “If you have more to talk about, that is. Praem, would you be so kind as to make us some tea? And where’s Whistle gone? Whistle, Whistle? It’s okay to come out now, all the scary fighting has stopped, here boy, here.”

My forced domesticity did the trick. Badger made the mistake of pulling out a chair for Sarika, and Raine had to stop her from whacking him with a crutch again, but they did eventually get sat down. Sarika sat as far as possible from Badger, refused to accept any help stowing her crutches, and took out her phone to show Raine some kind of video game full of strapping young men wearing implausible outfits. Raine nodded politely, more at the various large numbers attached to Sarika’s characters than the visual designs. Praem made tea, Evelyn thumped down in a chair like a professional adjudicator, and I retrieved Whistle from the floor, hugging him to my chest for some much needed comfort. So much for not growing attached to the dog. He was too sweet.

We had warned Badger about Sarika’s physical state, but even softened by whatever obscure feelings he harboured for her, he still struggled with the sight of her, now that he’d gotten past the whole getting beaten with a stick part.

She saw him staring too, at the way her once black hair had turned almost completely white, at her slack facial muscles and twitching

eyes, at the way she laboured to breathe, and how she struggled to control a constant quiver in all her misfiring muscles.

Praem set tea in front of both of them — Sarika's mug cooled preemptively, and supplied with a saucer, to help mitigate the danger of her spilling any during one of her shaking episodes. Praem supplied Evelyn and Raine with tea as well, and coffee for me, and then reappeared at Evelyn's elbow with a plate of biscuits, holding them there until Evelyn huffed and accepted two chocolate chip cookies. After she put the biscuits on the table, Praem fussed — if 'fussed' is the right word for several extremely precise motions — with the short blanket that Evelyn was using like a shawl, draped around her shoulders. Evelyn waved her away, but not before Praem made sure those kinked shoulders were properly warm.

"Well?" Sarika croaked at Badger. "Not so bloody pretty anymore, am I?"

"Does your voice hurt?" he asked.

"... yes. What, they didn't tell you I'm a mess?"

"They did." Badger sighed and took an awkward sip from his tea.

Sarika had come armoured to this meeting. The previous two times she'd visited the house for our brain-math sessions, she'd worn pajama bottoms and a comfortable old sweater beneath her long coat, with Croc shoes on her feet. But for Badger she kept the coat buttoned up, her legs inside a pair of loose jeans, and wore boots. Raine had helped her get those boots on, she couldn't have done it by herself.

She could not be further from the sobbing voice I'd heard over the phone three days ago.

The first thing Sarika had said to me when Evelyn had handed me the phone on Wednesday was, "Please don't kill him." Over the course of ten confused and guilt-inducing minutes, she'd dialled that down to, "Please don't kill him *yet*," and finally, "Please give me time to come see him, before you do this thing." She'd stopped crying by the end of the phone call, but she had asked me not to reveal any of this to Badger. Her pride could not take it.

Badger, on the other hand, looked far healthier than he had on the night I'd claimed him from *Ooran juh*. He wore clean clothes, which Raine had fetched from his tiny bedsit flat when she'd gone to

rescue Whistle, just plain jeans and a t-shirt with a band logo on the front. He was still oddly greasy, no matter how much he washed, an effect I hope would be solved when I tore up the Big Man's contract. His hair was forever a mop of messy brown curls falling about his eyes, the type which even a good barber's shop could only hope to hold back for a week or two. But he radiated a sort of inner peace. His pathetic hangdog vulnerability and bitter aggression had mellowed into calm acceptance.

No amount of inner peace could hide the wound on his left shoulder.

That was where he'd bitten himself the first time he'd summoned *Ooran juh's* mouth into his own palm. Praem had arranged and applied a fresh dressing to the weeks-old bite wound, and changed it every day this week, but the wound constantly weeped thin blood and yellow pus, soaking through the gauze and bandage within twelve hours. It refused to close or stop bleeding. Evelyn directed Praem in trying a few basic first-aid techniques, some magical, some of which had involved rather a lot of pain for Badger, disinfecting and cleaning and binding the bite. But the wound simply would not heal.

I doubted I could treat his wound the same way I'd treated Zheng's. He lacked her supernatural constitution, so if I did bite out the Big Man's infection, Badger would probably end up with a hole the size of a fist in his arm, and we'd have to rush him to hospital.

And besides, the wound wasn't the problem. He'd made a contract. I had to find it and rip it up, whatever that actually meant in the metaphors of hyperdimensional mathematics.

"Sorry, look," Badger started awkwardly, after Sarika had finished taking a very careful sip from her own mug of tea. "I know we never saw eye to eye, like, about a lot of things—"

"About Alexander," Sarika growled.

Badger dipped his head and cleared his throat in pained acknowledgement. "About a lot of things. But I'm really glad you made it out. I'm really happy you got out of that house, no matter what state you're in now. I thought you were gone."

"I was. I was dead. I came back from the fucking grave." Sarika indicated me with a roll of her eyes. "Thank her if you must."

"I have." Badger nodded awkwardly at me. I felt like hiding behind Whistle. They both fell silent.

Evelyn sighed. "However much I am just loving listening to this reunion, do we need to leave the room so you two can have your heart-to-heart?"

I had to try very hard not to cringe, not to give the game away. There was no way we were actually going to leave the room. This was all part of Evelyn's plan, to let the pair of them talk and see if in their emotional distress they slipped into details which might be useful to us. But that meant they had to keep talking. I, on the other hand, would have loved to flee upstairs.

Please, I thought, this is so awkward. Whistle was beginning to get restless in my arms, I'd have to put him down soon. I needed something else to hide behind.

"No," Sarika croaked quickly. "Don't leave me alone with him. He'll get weepy."

"It's alright, yeah," Badger agreed. "I don't mind."

"Hold up a sec," said Raine, voice sharpening. "Sarika, are you scared of being left alone with him? Is that what this is about? He's got a thing for you, hasn't he?"

Sarika managed to dial her odious contempt up to about an eight out of ten. She glared at Raine. "Don't you even insinuate that about him."

Raine put her hands up and laughed. "Right, got it. You get to call him things, but I don't."

"Sorry," Badger said. "All I wanted to say was I'm glad you're alive. And ..." He glanced around the room at the rest of us, then lowered his voice for Sarika. "You've still got shooters out there if you need 'em."

"Shooters?" Raine raised her eyebrows. "You pushing your luck there?"

"A metaphor, like," he said, hands up. "I mean not everybody's dead, yet. Sarika, you still have friends." He took a deep breath. "If you want to tell me I'm an idiot, go ahead. If that's all you wanted to say."

Sarika snorted. "I'm not going to offer you a pity-fuck."

"I don't want that!" Badger exploded, actually lost his temper, all his inner peace shattering back into a frustrated young man.

My eyes went wide and I felt like I was trapped inside a terrible soap opera. Raine paused in the middle of sipping her tea, and stayed stuck like that. Evelyn closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Praem appeared at Evelyn's shoulder again, with more biscuits, and a packet of paracetamol.

"I never was in love with you, Sarry," Badger went on. "I don't even know where you got the idea from. You're my friend, you were always my friend. We made a stupid decision together and—"

"You never liked Alexander," she croaked.

"You were in an abusive relationship!"

"You were jealous. And he was never abusive to me."

Badger did a mock-shock wide-eyed double-take, and gestured up and down at Sarika, at her ruined body.

"That was different," Sarika croaked.

"He sold us out. All of us, you included. He sold us out to the thing that whispers inside my head, all the time, every day. He didn't spare you from that. He sold us out to save his own skin. I don't care how good a boyfriend he was."

"Coward," Sarika croaked.

"Yeah!" Badger spread his arms. "Yeah, okay. Because I should have put my—" He cut off and thumped his hand on the table, then took a deep breath and let his anger flow away. "Should have put my foot down years ago."

Evelyn caught my eye across the table; she'd predicted this too — an attempt to claim they'd never liked Alexander in the first place — but not quite in this form. Sarika would not let it go.

"You ran," Sarika croaked at Badger. I realised fresh tears were shining in her eyes. "You ran when the rest of us tried to negotiate with ... to ... t-to—" She screwed up her face, gasping for breath. The memory of the Eye was too much, even if it didn't cause throat constriction and physical pain anymore.

“Sorry?!”

“Sarika,” I said her name out loud, and put Whistle down on the kitchen table, right in front of her.

“Feet off table,” Praem intoned, then, “Take a biscuit,” to Evelyn.

“What?” Evelyn frowned at Praem. “I’m fine, put that down.”

“In a moment, I’m sorry Praem,” I said. “Sarika, listen to the sound of my voice.”

“Don’t need ... help,” she panted. One quivering, shaking, pale hand reached out and awkwardly stroked Whistle’s flank. The Corgi made a soft whining noise and licked Sarika’s fingers. She grimaced, but it seemed to do the trick. “You ran,” she repeated. “We stayed. You left me when I needed you.”

“And I was right,” Badger said. “I survived, yeah? I shoulda’ dragged you out of there, fuck the consequences.”

Sarika said nothing. With a jerky, shaking arm, she wiped half-formed tears on her sleeve, gritting her teeth at the evidence she could still cry over this betrayal.

“Sorry,” he went on, and shot a glance at me, “if I’m still alive this time next week, I’m not letting you do anything like that ever again.”

Sarika snorted. The tears had dried up. “You’ve always been such an old woman. You don’t have the right to let or not let me do anything. And I can’t do magic any more, ever, I’m fucking broken, you idiot. What are you going to do, police my bedtime?”

“Then tell me I’m not your friend anymore,” he said. “And I’ll shut up.”

“Fuck you, Nate.”

Badger braced, waiting for the follow-up, the real rejection, but the words never came. I had to suppress a hiccup. Sarika lowered her eyes back to her mobile phone, dismissing some alert from her questionable game full of athletic men. The tension in the kitchen dialled down via the half-conscious shared chorus of body language. Raine finally finished that swallow of tea and lowered her mug, catching my eye with exaggerated second-hand embarrassment. Evelyn looked ready to shoot somebody.

“Now that we’ve finished playing at couples’ therapy,” Evelyn grumbled — then cut off as Praem bumped her elbow with the plate of food and painkillers. “I’m fine, put that down!”

“Eat,” Praem intoned.

“Did you not have breakfast?” I asked.

“I—” Evelyn huffed. “I had ... tea.”

“Eat,” Praem repeated.

Evelyn snatched up another biscuit and took a scowling bite, chewing and swallowing before asking Praem a silent question with an irritable look, a look that said ‘well then?’ Praem withdrew again.

“As I was saying,” Evelyn attempted a second time. “Now that we have you both in one place, and Sarika is feeling healthier, we have an important question to—”

“And it was never a stupid decision,” Sarika wheezed at Badger. “He was right.”

“Alexander?” Badger asked. “You’re still banging on about this?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and let out a sound like a malfunctioning steam engine. Raine hid a smirk behind her sleeve.

“He was right,” Sarika repeated. “Everything I ... I ... experienced,” she squeezed the word out, eyelids involuntarily squinting. “It proved that. We’re so small, we’re nothing. Being human is a dead end. You can’t fight it. The— the— *Eye*,” she spat. “Or anything else from out there. We are a dead end.”

Badger pointed at me. His voice dropped to a hush, an almost religious awe. “You haven’t seen what she can do.”

“Fixed me,” Sarika grunted. “Luck.”

I bit the inside of my lips. Please, please don’t talk about this, don’t talk about me in that way. My phantom limbs tried to curl up, to hide me away, like an octopus making itself into a ball.

“She can fight it,” Badger said. “She can! I can’t even explain what I saw her do, Sorry. She’s human, look at her, she’s a human being, whatever I saw her turn herself into, and she fought off something I can’t even put into words. Screw the stuff Alexander did to his

body, this was the real thing. It was like a manifestation. You remember those, in the early days before Alexander broke his sister's head? It was like watching an angel take form. She's the real thing, Sarry, she's everything we were always looking for—"

"Could you please not?" I hissed.

"Yeah, dial it back there, friend," Raine said. "Don't make me put you in time-out for five minutes. Don't be getting creepy about my girl."

Badger cleared his throat and nodded awkwardly, but shot me a look that turned my stomach. I was no messiah, I did not want that awe.

"She can't fight it," Sarika croaked. "All you can do is refuse to engage. The only way to win is to not make contact, because the moment you do, it's already won. You and everyone else who survived that house, you're a vector. Should take all of you, all of you, and ... " Sarika raised two shaking fingers to the side of her own head, thumb out to mime a gun, and pointed it at her own temple. "And burn the bodies."

"Sarika," I said gently. "We talked about this."

"You're not right," she said to me, panting with the effort of her conviction. "You're not right. You shouldn't be leaving any trace of it. The only reason I haven't slit my own wrists to remove myself as another vector, is because I know I'm free of it. You should be burning us all. Burn it all, and the books."

I couldn't take that look, that certainty, that iron-hard need to destroy what had hurt her, expressed as omnicidal rage. Poor little Whistle must have sensed my discomfort, because he whined softly from the table, beneath my lingering hand. I had to look away.

"... *the fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool,*" I quoted, quietly.

"*Winning will put any man into courage,*" Sarika quoted back at me. I blinked at her in surprise, and she sneered with thin satisfaction. "You're not the only one who knows your Shakespeare, Morell. Don't lord it over me."

I shook my head. "I'm not wise. I don't have much courage. And I haven't won, not yet."

She snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Then it worked on you," Badger said. "You admitted it, you're free of the Eye, it worked on you."

Sarika made a face like she'd been eating lemons. She tried to fix Badger with a withering look, but her face was slack and exhausted. She looked like she needed a nap. Badger glanced at Evelyn, who now had her arms crossed, staring at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry about this, Miss Saye," he ventured. "Sorry we're taking so long."

"No, no," Evelyn sighed. "You are about to give your life for the cause." She made that sound very cynical indeed. "The least we can do is let you go without any regrets. Say whatever you have to say. It's not as if I could do anything else with you two both in here."

But Sarika spoke first. "You're really going through with this, Nathan? You're going to let her rummage in your brain?"

"Yeah," he said instantly. "You did."

"She didn't give me a choice. And it wasn't my brain."

Badger shook his head. "It's not just about me. If this works, if I'm alive this time next week, I'm gonna go find the others. I'm gonna tell them there's a way out. It's not unbeatable, Sarry. You're living proof of that."

We'd briefly discussed his desire to help the other remnants of the cult, all of them desperate to escape the Eye, earlier this morning before Raine and I had gone to fetch Sarika. I'd alluded to it previously, when I'd convinced Badger to agree to the vivisection, but I'd been trying not to think about it. This wasn't just about him.

Sarika didn't say anything for a long time. Evelyn even looked like she was about to interrupt, but then Sarika looked down at the table. I saw her throat bob as she laboured for breath.

"How many of us are left?" she asked.

Badger glanced at Raine, then at me. He knew we wanted to know as well.

"... eleven," he said, voice gone hollow.

"Eleven?" Sarika managed a slack, squinting frown. "At least ... no,

no, at least twenty five of you left Alexander's old house that night. At least. More like thirty."

"And eleven are left. Including me."

Sarika didn't know where to look for a long moment. Eventually her eyes found her phone again.

Evelyn unfolded her arms and cracked her back by rotating her neck from one side to the other. "Eleven members of a murderous cult, who engaged in kidnapping, child murder, and attempting to kill all of us. You're lucky there's even two of you left, because if it wasn't for Heather, I would have eliminated every last one of you. You all deserve life in prison. Do I make myself clear?"

Sarika said nothing, but Badger nodded.

Then he hesitated, before saying, "You said 'us', Sorry."

"Eh?"

"You asked, how many of 'us' are left," he echoed her earlier words.

"We're not going to rebuild the cult, you idiot," she wheezed at him. "What are you getting at?"

"Maybe we build something else."

"Not in my city you don't," Evelyn snapped.

But Badger wasn't listening to her. He wasn't listening to Sarika's objections either. He was looking up at me, with the light of a terrible awe behind his eyes. I was beginning to understand how he'd ended up in a cult. Here was a man who'd been looking for meaning his whole life. And I didn't even possess any charisma.

"Devious," Praem intoned, bell-clear and sing-song.

Evelyn swivelled awkwardly in her chair to frown at Praem, and found the demon-doll staring right back at her with those blank, milk-white eyes, expressionless and unreadable. Next to Praem, Raine raised her mug of tea in a toast.

"Sneaky," Praem continued. "Underhanded. Ingenious."

"What are you on about?" Evelyn hissed.

"She's got a point, Eevee," Raine piped up.

“She’s teasing you,” I said.

Evelyn shrugged at Praem, but Praem declined to explain.

“Because, yeah,” Raine jumped in, “planning to resurrect their cult, talking about it right in front of you, that’s the last thing you’d expect, right? Clearly little miss chronic fatigue disorder here is gonna get back together with mister bites himself in the arm, and throw a coup for control of the city.”

Evelyn gave her a very unimpressed look.

Raine put her hands up. “Hey, I’m just interpreting.” She gestured at Praem.

Evelyn’s withering glare tripped and fell before her eyes reached Praem. She cleared her throat, looked away, and finally met Praem’s silent stare with a visibly embarrassed effort. “Yes, I’m paranoid,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean there aren’t people out to get me. This one tried to have me killed.” She pointed at Sarika. “She took you out of your body.”

“Incapable now,” Praem intoned. “Crippled. Neutered.”

Sarika huffed a single puff of non-laugh. Praem resumed her straight-backed perfect poise. Raine shrugged in agreement.

“I think she just wants you to worry less, Eevee,” I murmured.

“We’ll all worry less when we have fewer enemies,” Evelyn grumbled, turning back to the table, to Badger and Sarika. “And on that subject, now you two have quite finished, I want to know everything that you do about Edward Lilburne.”

“I’ve already told you everything I’ve got,” Badger said. “I never had much contact with the old bastard. Sorry, like.”

“I did,” Sarika croaked.

We all turned to regard her. She shrugged, slow and lopsided and painful.

“Well?” Evelyn snapped.

“Told you most of it already. Knew him through Alexander. I can’t find him for you.”

“Yes, we’re working on that ourselves,” Evelyn said. “I’m not

interested in repeating what little you know about how to locate him, I want to know what he's like, as a person. I would like to know my enemy."

"Ask Lauren," Sarika croaked.

"Lozzie doesn't know very much," I said softly. "Mostly just that he's cruel and efficient."

Sarika snorted, a painful sound that ended with her having to clear her throat. She hacked and coughed and struggled to get a tissue out of her pocket, and brought up a twisted glob of mucus into it. We all waited awkwardly for her to get her breath back.

"Sorry, you—" Badger started.

"No, Nate. I'm not okay. I hope you like what you're seeing, because this might be your future as well." She sneered at him, then continued once he shut his mouth. "Lauren is correct. Edward is cruel, and he is efficient. He's also a sadistic old freak. Alexander was ... he ... he did what he did because he believed in it, he believed in something. I never got the impression Edward believed in shit."

"Not even himself?" Raine asked. "Or money, or power?"

Sarika thought for a moment, running her tongue slowly over her teeth behind her closed lips. "He never bragged. Never used his position to abuse any of the cult. Never took liberties. But he never justified anything."

Badger nodded along. "Alexander always had justifications."

Sarika gave a puff of breath that was probably meant to be a snort. "For everything. Rolled off his tongue. Edward didn't. Like he was an alien, studying people, studying things from Outside, pulling them apart, to ..." Sarika trailed off and squeezed her eyes shut, visibly exhausted by the effort.

"Classic sociopath?" Raine offered.

"Perhaps," Evelyn muttered. "Maybe not. Doesn't sound like he has any problems with impulse control. This thing with the book, our book he stole, Sarika, do you think it's a trap? Or do you think he expects us to negotiate in good faith?"

"Both. Neither," Sarika went on, eyelids heavy in a half-squinting

scowl. "He'll have plans for both, and he won't care which option you take as long as he gets what he wants."

"Do you think there would be any options he would habitually not account for?" Evelyn asked. "Before you answer, I do want to let you know that I don't trust you, I don't trust your answers to these questions. So tell the truth anyway, because I will analyse it."

"She won't lie to me, Eevee," I murmured.

Sarika stared at the tabletop, hazy-eyed and heavy. For a long moment I thought she was nodding off, but eventually she answered.

"Losing."

"... losing," Evelyn echoed, deadpan.

"He would not account for losing."

"Well then!" Raine said with a great big smile. "That's easy enough, we'll be fine. We'll just stick to winning. That's my speciality, it is, winning."

I rolled my eyes and let out a big sigh, exhausted by the emotional tension of being in this kitchen with these people, having to listen to what should have remained private matters, getting to know a little about a man I did not want to know, because I was probably going to kill him. I resented being here, knowing these things, resented the ugly necessity of Evelyn's plan.

"Raine," I whined, folding my arms over my chest. "The performative absurdity isn't helping. And Eevee, you can't expect a serious answer if you tell her you don't believe her anyway, that's just ... silly ..."

I had expected Evelyn to be as equally exasperated as me. But she was staring at the look in Sarika's exhausted, dark-ringed eyes, with total comprehension.

"Yes," Evelyn murmured. "Yes, I see. He doesn't even care if he wins or loses, not in that sense, does he?"

Sarika half-shrugged. "My impression."

"He only cares about results."

"You mean he's not the sort of guy who gloats over a dying

enemy?" Raine asked. "Seemed like a right arsehole that time we met him. And in the letter he left for us."

"Exactly," Evelyn muttered, still frowning at Sarika. "Which means everything he's done might be in order to rile us up. Intentionally. And Sarika, you're not lying. Why?"

"Because he should be dead," Sarika wheezed. "You all should be. Maybe you'll kill him. Good."

Evelyn sighed. "Fair enough."

"I have a question as well," I spoke up, stepping back, leaving my arms folded protectively over my chest. Evelyn blinked at me in surprise. I hadn't discussed this with her earlier. Raine nodded, backing me up.

"Ask away," Badger said. Sarika just blinked, slow as a sleepwalker.

"After Alexander and I ... fought," I said, "I know he clung to life for a few hours, long enough to make the deal with the Eye. But you have no idea where the body ended up, after it went missing from Glasswick tower?"

Badger pulled an apologetic face, so pathetic it made me want to sigh at him. Sarika nodded, it was something I'd already asked her, weeks ago.

"Do you think he could still be alive?" I asked. "Or in some other state that isn't life, but isn't death, either?"

"Don't," Sarika croaked, an angry hiss in her voice.

"Fucking well hope not," Badger said, then swallowed. "Possible, technically, I guess. But he was gone. Totally gone."

"Okay, okay," I said quickly, vaguely mortified. "Part two of the same question. Badger, when Edward Lilburne sent you to kidnap Lozzie, did he make it clear we wouldn't be able to escape by going Outside?"

"Uhh ... yeah." Badger nodded. "Yeah, it's the only reason we took the job. Ed's man said neither you or her would be able to slip away, like. I dunno why. Dunno how he knew."

Evelyn's eyebrows climbed her forehead. "He knows."

"He knows," I echoed. "That's bad."

“What does this have to do with Alexander?” Sarika croaked.

I sighed heavily. “I don’t know. Hopefully nothing. God grant he stay dead.”

Evelyn nodded slowly at my use of a familiar phrase, with unwavering agreement. May all mages lie quiet in their graves. If only we could find his body.

“You seem different,” Sarika croaked at me. She blinked one eye, then the other, lids painfully heavy, then turned back to the game still lit up on her phone screen, swiping left to select between several shirtless men.

My stomach turned. Were my changes really that obvious? On one hand, it felt like a compliment, like an acknowledgement that others could see me for what I really was, even with my pneuma-somatic changes tucked away, my abyssal truth hidden from the world. I’d come to terms with not really being fully human anymore, because I was still a person; those are two different categories, not every person is a human. For a moment I felt warm and right, felt a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. My reactor organ ached to blossom with power, instinct tugging at me to manifest myself in full, just for the sheer pleasure of it.

On the other hand, that urge worried me. I was still bruised and sore. I swallowed it down, like stifling a purr.

“Different how?” I asked.

Sarika shrugged. “I don’t know. Don’t care. Are you doing this thing today?”

“... thing? I’m sorry?” I blinked at her, my hands wandering idly down to my sides where the bruises from my tentacles lay beneath my clothes. One hand pressed against my abdomen, feeling the residual heat of the reactor in my belly. This was me now, this is what I was, it’s what I wanted. I suspect it’s what I needed long before even my trip to the abyss. That had been a catalyst. The Eye had changed me first.

“The vivisection,” Sarika said. “You gonna cut Nate’s skull open today, or what?”

“This afternoon,” Evelyn answered for me. Her eyes found mine and left me no choice. I turned away, clamping my lips together.

"I'm ready," said Badger. "Whenever you are, Miss Morell." He reached across the table, and drew Whistle into his lap. I couldn't help but notice his hands were shaking as he stroked the Corgi's fur.

A lump grew in my throat.

"You staying?" Evelyn asked Sarika.

"Should I?" Sarika wheezed.

"It's up to you," Evelyn said. "I don't entirely know what will happen. Regardless of how Heather does it, or how well it goes, I want the fucking thing Badger made a contract with out of my city. If the big greasy fat freak doesn't leave after Badger's contract is annulled, then I'm going to break out the big guns, right there on the spot. If you can't handle that, I suggest you leave."

"Miss Morell isn't the big guns?" Badger asked.

Evelyn turned to regard him with glacial slowness and an icy cold stare to freeze the blood. "Look at me. Remember what I am. She is not what you should be afraid of, you vermin."

Deep in my private heart, I said a silent thank you to Evelyn, with a note to hug her later. Maybe cry into her shoulder a bit too. Thank you, Eevee, thank you for taking the heat off me, my big scary mage with her bitter mannerisms and venomous attitude. Maybe she understood or maybe she didn't. My best friend, my surrogate sister.

"Hooooo, Eevee," Raine said, wincing.

"I don't give a damn if she saves you from the Eye," Evelyn carried on. "I don't give a damn if she feeds you to—" a tut "—'Orange Juice'. All I care about is that she comes out of this unharmed and a little wiser. And gets your filth out of my city. And if you ever track any back in again, I will have you hunted down and skinned and left in a shallow grave in the woods. Do I make myself absolutely clear?"

Badger nodded, throat bobbing.

"Good," Evelyn snapped.

"If you survive," I managed to add, trying to play the good cop, the good girl, the merciful and gentle thing that I was not, "then I'm going to make you bury bodies alongside Sarika, the ones you left in the castle. Maybe you and all the other cult remnants, maybe you

can do something good. I haven't thought of what, not yet."

"I'm staying," Sarika announced.

"Sorry," Badger sighed with relief and met her eyes, but she snarled at him, an ugly sound like rubbing wet gravel down the inside of her throat.

"Somebody needs to give you a kick in the head when you wake up," she wheezed. "Well, what are we waiting for? Get on with it. Unscrew his dome."

any mortal thing – 14.3

“Evee, do I seem different?”

Evelyn furrowed her brow into one of those exasperated frowns she always adopted before delivering some witheringly sarcastic answer to a very stupid question. She even got as far as wetting her lips and opening her mouth, but then she must have seen past the surface of my words, or perhaps she recognised the earnest need in my eyes. She relaxed her weight onto her walking stick and considered me carefully for several silent moments.

“It’s a serious question,” I explained. “I’m not being silly, or rhetorical, or messing you around. Or trying to illustrate some obscure point. To you, do I seem different?”

Evelyn sighed. “Be precise. Different compared to when?”

I shrugged. “Compared to before Monday, I suppose. Or earlier. Or earlier this week.”

Evelyn turned her head to consider me from a different angle, half-closing one eye in a squint, studying my expression. She wasn’t an idiot, she must have known what I was really asking; so she was weighing up one of two things — either how different I had become, or how much to tell me, how much to soften the blow, how much I could take.

In the months since I’d become friends with Evelyn, I’d also become intimately familiar with her scrutiny, all the different ways she looked at and examined and judged people, even those closest to her. If her mind was already chewing over a problem, especially a strategic one, then she would frown straight through the person in question while really thinking about their potential, their position as a game piece, or how they fit in with what she wanted to do next. Or how to remove them from the equation entirely. On occasion she adopted that amoral hunger which I suspect she had learnt from her mother, though I would never say that out loud. But she could be tender as well, at least in private, though that implied no less frowning intensity from her big blue eyes, so deceptively soft and welcoming when at rest, so harsh when thinking. More

recently I'd noticed a new form of examination in her looks — at Praem, almost gentle, certainly appreciative, often vulnerable.

But this was new. Evelyn's gaze hovered halfway between analytic and gentle. That made me nervous.

"Or ... or since I met you?" I added, heart rate climbing, palms going clammy. "Or since ... Eevee, I know this isn't an easy balance for you. Just give it to me straight. That's why I'm not asking Raine, she never gives anything to me straight." I managed a weak laugh at my own stupid joke.

"Heather."

"If you know what I mean, but—"

"Heather, shut up."

I shut up. Evelyn frowned gently at me again, then frowned out of the back window, then frowned at her walking stick, then frowned over her shoulder at the half-open door back to the kitchen. Frowned at everything, in fact, a big three-sixty bubble of frowning, that's our Evelyn. An elemental frown in human form.

"No man ever steps in the same river twice," she said slowly. "For it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

"... good thing we're not men, then." I squeezed out a terrible fake laugh, barely more than a tremor on the final word. Evelyn gave me a look. "Sorry," I added.

"You know what I mean. You're not the only one who can quote literature at people. Of course you seem different, Heather. You're more confident. Especially compared to when I first met you."

"But I'm still me?"

Evelyn's full-on frown roared back, blasting me like a thunderclap. "Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "Of course you're still you."

That was more like it. Most of my anxiety melted away. I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding, and lit up with an involuntary smile. I almost leaned forward to give Evelyn a hug without asking permission, but caught myself at the last moment, eyes searching hers for acknowledgement and recognition. She was utterly perplexed, but huffed and nodded, opening one arm to accept the hug. I kept it soft, hands away from Evelyn's kinked

spine, but I did bury my face in her shoulder for a moment, in the blanket she was using as a shawl.

When we separated, she was frowning at me in a whole new way — utterly baffled. “That was all you needed?” she asked. “For me to shout at you a bit? That’s why you asked me back here? Don’t tell me you’re developing a masochistic streak.”

“You treating me the same is all the proof I need,” I said. “I hadn’t realised that. You’re very consistent, Evee.”

“Mmmm. Not sure how I feel about that.”

“You’re a rock, Evelyn. You really are.”

“Pffft, I’d hate to have to rely on me as a rock. You should find a better one.”

But Evelyn didn’t really mean that. She turned to look out into the garden with a self-conscious huff, terminating the line of conversation before I could embarrass her further. Beyond the windows, the early afternoon sunlight danced across the tree leaves, drawing tiny insects out to clamber along the overgrown grass and verdant weeds and thistle-heads and mossy patches. The bright day seemed so at odds with what we were preparing to do.

Evelyn and I were alone in the utility room behind the kitchen, as the others bustled about in the rest of the house, getting ready for what I was increasingly thinking of as ‘the operation’, though I would not be scrubbing up, and it would not be performed in a sterile environment.

Badger had eaten what might be his last meal — bangers and mash with Bisto gravy — and Sarika was half-asleep on the sofa in the workshop. Zheng had been staying out of the way at my request, so as not to complicate matters with Badger and Sarika, due to her justified hatred of mages, but now she was standing guard in the workshop, though had totally refused to exchange even a single word with Sarika. Raine and Praem were gathering together the last few odds and ends we would need. Lozzie was off being Lozzie somewhere upstairs, but she was to be involved as well, that was the plan. Evelyn had finished her own preparations days ago, the set-up was ready to be used. But I’d stepped away from the hustle and bustle, and asked her to join me back here for a few moments.

I followed Evelyn’s gaze out into the garden. British springtime was

in full flow for once, even here up North, drawing perennials out of their hidden winter bulbs. A yellow riot of wild daffodils had erupted along what had once been orderly flowerbeds, and joined by a surprising miniature cluster of bluebells beneath the shade of the tall right hand fence, punctuated by thistles and random wildflowers and rambling weeds. I spotted a trio of butterflies beneath the tree branches, though I squinted when I realised one of them was a very distinct shade of yellow.

"This is because Sarika said you seem different, isn't it?" Evelyn asked.

"Hm? Oh, well, I suppose so." When I looked back at the butterflies, there were only two. The yellow one had vanished into the sunlight. "Hmmm."

"You shouldn't listen to the opinion of somebody who hates you. She may have said it just to get under your skin. Or to knock Badger's admiration of you down a peg, which is frankly creepy in the first place. That man is raring to start a new cult, around you. Careful with that. If he lives."

"She had a point though," I said, slipping back into my anxieties. "My life has changed so much, so fast, over the last ... how long has it been? Eight months?"

"Give or take."

"Eight months. Maybe seven. It's been a whirlwind, Eevee. I can't believe how much I've changed, and now I have all these extra body parts, even if they're tucked away most of the time, and I feel like I'm beginning to fray. Emotionally, I mean. It would be so good to just stop for a month, even a couple of weeks, to take stock, to slow down, to adjust. But I can't. Maisie has a deadline. Four, five months at most."

"Why are you thinking about this now?" Evelyn asked. "Trying to justify what we're about to do?"

"No, I've already found my justification." I sighed. "I need to understand the Eye, as much as possible. No. If I'm going to do hyperdimensional surgery, I need to be completely comfortable with what I'm becoming. I don't need any of this on my mind."

"Heather, you are not a different person because you've got some extra limbs. In fact, you're more you than ever. You know how I can

tell? Because you're doing this." She gestured at the utility room and the pair of us. "This is what you do. It's extremely you."

"I suppose. That's not it, I—"

"Are you afraid of losing yourself? Jumping into the abyss again?"

I shook my head. "Not anymore. I'm anchored now. I found my anchor. Anchors, I should say. I won't sink down there by accident, I think I may even be able to sip from it. Metaphorically speaking. Oh, I'm sorry, Eevee, this is all metaphors."

"You afraid of change?" Evelyn asked. "I'm afraid of change, I'm fucking terrified of change." I blinked at her in surprise. She shrugged, adjusting herself around her walking stick. "It's true, believe it or not. Raine's right about me in that respect, at least. I know I'm weird like that. I like the same things to happen, I like routine, and I don't like it when people disrupt my routines and screw up my plans. I don't like my life changing, because for most of it, change was extremely bad. That's why I get so damned grumpy. Fear of change is normal, Heather. I resisted it for long enough, but I thought you were leaping headfirst into it. Turns out I was wrong. Sometimes I forget we're quite similar."

"What were you resisting?"

Evelyn frowned at me in mild disbelief. "Something that was already changing and which I couldn't stop. Do keep up, Heather."

"I'm sorry, I don't ... "

Praem chose that exact moment to knock on the half-open door of the utility room. She pushed it wide enough to step over the threshold, the skirt of her maid uniform rustling against the door frame, milk-white eyes locating us with a flick. Her hands returned to clasp together in front of her. Perhaps she'd been listening.

"Speak of the devil, and she shall appear," Evelyn said with a wry little smile, then cleared her throat and added more seriously, to Praem, "No offence, you are not a devil. Turn of phrase only, understand?"

Praem unclasped her hands, stuck out her index fingers, and held them either side of her forehead. Like horns. "Devil," she intoned.

Evelyn sighed. I put a hand over my mouth.

"I ... I see, yes," I said with a smile behind my hand. "Change that you were resisting. Hi, Praem."

"Good change," Evelyn said, adjusting her weight on her walking stick and rubbing her hip. "Change that has made my life immeasurably better, in ways I never could have imagined." She cleared her throat and looked away. "Don't have time for getting emotional right now. We all need clear heads for this. Is that why you're here?" she asked Praem.

"All is ready," Praem said, in the sing-song of snowflakes and ice winds.

"Then go wait with the others. We'll be right there. I need to finish talking with Heather."

Praem bustled back out without complaint, and pulled the door almost closed behind her. Evelyn turned back to me, but I was already babbling out my thoughts.

"I don't know what change I'm afraid of," I lied, trying to avoid it even though I was the one who'd wanted to get it off my chest. "I want this, this body, this pneuma-somatic truth, everything I've become, but ... but ... maybe I'll change too far," another lie. "Maybe ... "

Evelyn sighed. "You're not afraid of that."

"I'm not."

"You're afraid of how far your twin might have changed."

I blinked away the beginning of thin tears, wiped my eyes on my sleeve, and nodded. "You know me too well, Eevee."

"It's hardly rocket science," she grumbled. "You're thinking about Badger, about what you have to do, and this is all practice for Maisie, in the end. Isn't it?" I nodded, but Evelyn kept talking. "And you're thinking about the state Sarika was in when we found her, beyond humanity, beyond mortality, barely a person anymore, just a ... memory, smeared across the surface of reality like roadkill."

"Eevee," I said, throat thick. "I-I ... please don't—"

"And you're wondering what Maisie will be like. How much will be left of her. What will be left to save." Evelyn spoke without looking at me, staring out into the sunlight of a warm day that felt a million

miles away. Her eyes did not see what she looked at. "Because this has taken too long, and she has been in the Eye's grip for ten years already, far more closely than either of those idiot cultists waiting in my workshop. And none of us can even imagine what that has done to your twin. And more than being afraid we're going to be too late, or that we're going to fail, you simply do not know what you are going to discover, when we find her."

Tears rolled down my cheeks now, barely held back by my scrunched eyes and my sniffing. "E-Evee—"

"Maisie is very likely not a human being anymore," she said, plain and straightforward. "Perhaps not even a person."

"Evee ... "

Evelyn turned to me, eyes hungry and intense, with a power I'd not often seen her wield. She reached out with her free hand, her maimed hand, and grabbed one of mine, awkward and clumsy and clammy too, and held on hard.

"But she is still your sister. She reached out to you, Heather. You still have her message on the child's t-shirt, I know you look at it every day, don't you?"

I nodded, blinking as my tears fell.

"The fact you are afraid of what we might find," she said, "rather than the possibility we might fail ... ?" Evelyn shook her head, but a smile crept onto her face. "You are completely insane, Heather Morell, and not in the way that you once thought. And I adore you for it. We are going to do this thing, this insane, dangerous thing, this thing that no mage in history would have considered doing, and I will resurrect my mother just to laugh in her face and tell her it's possible. Understand? Whatever is left of your sister, we will bring back here. Fuck knows how we're going to do it, but you have made me believe it is worth doing. That it can be done. If you cannot have faith in yourself, then have faith in that."

I nodded, my tears of a very different flavor now. I took long, slow, steady breaths, and to my incredible surprise, Evelyn reached up and helped brush my hair out of my face. She wasn't very good at it, fingers clumsy, not used to touching other people, and quickly returned to her habitual position of leaning heavily on her walking stick, but I held onto her hand, until she cleared her throat.

“Here,” she said, digging a handkerchief out of a pocket. “Dry your eyes.” I accepted the handkerchief and did as she suggested, already feeling much relieved. “Better?”

“Much. Thank you, Eevee.”

“Sorry,” she said. “Had to ... push you.”

I laughed awkwardly. “Was all that just to make me cry, to get it out of my system?”

“Partly.” Evelyn frowned. “But not a word of it was a lie, understand?” I nodded. “You feel better now, catharsis, yes? No longer all bottled up? Good. We both need clear heads for this.”

“We do,” I admitted, glancing at the door behind Evelyn, to the kitchen.

“Ready to cut a man’s head open?” she asked.

I nodded and took a deep breath as I folded the handkerchief back up. “Metaphorically. Ready as I’ll ever be.”

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“Will I feel anything?” Badger asked. “When you begin?”

He was trying to conceal the shudder in his voice — bravado in front of Sarika, or resolve in front of me, or perhaps a forced acceptance that he deserved his fate — but he wasn’t doing a very good job of that. His voice shook, despite his best efforts to steady his breathing. Raine had just removed Whistle from his lap, at Evelyn’s instruction of “no dogs allowed in the circles”, and Badger had nothing else to do with his quivering hands. He’d hugged the Corgi one last time, handed him off to Raine, and Whistle now sat placid but alert in Sarika’s lap instead, on the sofa, another member of the audience for our operating theatre.

But Badger showed far more courage than he had a week ago. He didn’t try to back out at the last moment. He didn’t plead. Didn’t run. Perhaps paradoxically, that made this all harder for me. If he’d screamed and begged and had to be dragged back into the circle, then at least he would have been the same coward and idiot he’d been last week, a cheap monster who’d tried to kidnap Lozzie, unwilling to repent or pay for his sins.

It seemed unfair that he’d finally developed a moral compass and

located his spine, when I was about to do something that might end his life.

“You may feel a small prick,” Raine answered for me, with a huge, shit-eating grin. She flourished the latex gloves on her hands, snapping one rubbery wrist cuff like a parody of a mad scientist.

Evelyn didn’t even roll her eyes; Raine had made four different variations on that joke in the last twenty minutes, complete with the same glove-snapping gesture and cheesy grin. I knew she was trying to take the edge off, but it wasn’t helping, even if it did make Lozzie giggle.

“You may feel the same, soon,” Praem intoned at her. Raine put her hands up and shut her mouth, suppressing a smirk.

Badger ignored both of them. He waited for me.

“I don’t know,” I said, my mouth gone dry. “It’ll probably be over too quickly for you to feel anything. One way or the other.”

He nodded. From behind, I saw his throat bob as he opened his mouth, but he had nothing left to say.

At least I didn’t have to see his face.

We were gathered in the cave-like darkness of the ex-drawing room, the magical workshop, with the bright sunlight shut out behind thick curtains. Almost all of us were present, except for Tenny, who was upstairs, because nobody felt like making a literal child potentially watch a man die. Zheng was stalking up and down the rest of the house, in case *Ooran Juh* took offence to my meddling with Badger’s contract and decided to risk assaulting the house after all. Kimberly had not joined us. In fact, she had requested to be far, far away while we did this, and was currently visiting one of her friends from the Wiccan coven.

Badger and I were sat inside a pair of magic circles, though his was considerably more complex, with inward-facing collections of Latin and Sanskrit text surrounding esoteric symbols, pointed like spikes in the throat of a deep sea fish, to stop food escaping back up a slippery gullet. My circle at least didn’t make my eyes water, but it was a triple-layered affair, a multiple buffer of protection and warning and bastion.

He sat facing away from me. A small mercy. His circle was large

enough for him to collapse onto his back without breaking the boundary.

The two circles sat inside a larger circle, a full five layers of interlocking rings painted on a massive piece of white canvas, which now dominated the workshop floor. Evelyn had purchased it specifically for this working. She'd had Praem push back the table and clear up the other debris — even shunting our long-forgotten clay-squid friend into a corner under a tarpaulin, to roll and slop to itself in peace. She'd spent most of the week constructing these circles, element by painstaking element, in charcoal and bull's blood and crushed seashell.

It was, according to Evelyn, the most secure creation she'd ever made. A veritable star-fortress of magic circles. But it all faced inward.

"Blunt and brutal," she'd said to me earlier. "Absolutely nothing subtle about it. Ugly as hell, too, but it'll get the job done."

"The job?" I'd asked.

"Protecting us. Protecting you, if something goes wrong."

Because of course, this was nothing like fixing Sarika. Badger was still in the grip, no matter how remote, no matter if it was across the membrane between here and Outside, no matter that I'd be interfacing with him via hyperdimensional mathematics.

We had learnt, from our first brush with the Eye, that no contact was safe.

Evelyn herself was on standby, perched in a chair, ready with yet another magic circle, along with her scrimshawed thighbone and three large glass bottles full of rather grisly pieces of bull anatomy, ready for the 'big guns' in case *Ooran Juh* got shirty with us. Praem waited by her shoulder, ready for any task that might be tackled in a maid dress.

Raine was there too, of course she wouldn't leave me alone for this, though for once her speciality probably wasn't required. Instead of a knife or a gun, she'd carried in our first-aid kit. She'd said, "In case Badger bangs his head", and then like a magician producing an entire tractor from beneath a top hat, she'd dug out a large yellow clamshell box from the mess on the sofa, and added it to our supplies of painkillers and emergency bandages.

“Raine,” Evelyn had said slowly, “since when do we have a portable defibrillator?”

“A defibrillator?” My voice had risen about two octaves.

Badger gulped.

Raine shrugged. “Since we’re gonna do something that might stop some poor bugger’s heart?”

“It might do more than stop his heart,” I murmured, wringing my hands. “We don’t have the equipment for this. Raine, the best thing you can keep to hand is your phone, to call an ambulance.”

Raine wagged her mobile phone at me. “Way ahead of you.”

“No,” Evelyn sighed. “I mean where did you get it?”

“Stole it from a train station. Wall-mounted, aren’t they? You can just pick them up and go. Don’t worry, I did it without being caught on camera, and I was even a very, very good Robin Hood and called them afterward to let them know some downright anti-social scoundrel had stolen their portable defib.”

“Good idea,” I’d said, before Evelyn could argue.

Sarika had watched us with heavy-lidded, exhausted eyes, ringed with dark bags, saying nothing since she’d expended almost all her energy by arguing with Badger in the kitchen earlier. She was on the sofa, and she seemed like an old woman, weak and collapsed into herself. But when Whistle was deposited on her lap, she looped deceptively strong fingers through his dog collar.

“Good boy,” she’d murmured, stroking him with a finger.

Lozzie was here too, in the circle with me, her arms wrapped around my middle from behind, her head resting on my upper back. She was here as an emergency ripcord, to pull me out if something went wrong, to lend her powers to mine. She didn’t have the ability to go rooting around editing people’s mathematical definition, and she couldn’t rebuild pneuma-somatic flesh in anybody except me, but she’d insisted on joining all the same.

“Just in case,” she’d whispered into my ear. “I can pull you out, the other other way.”

I linked my fingers with hers, against my own front. Our breathing synched up. Her weight felt invisible.

There was no more reason for delay.

“What I mean is,” I said out loud, “this might take only a split-second. Hyperdimensional mathematics usually happens at the speed of thought. Though this is complex, it might take ... I don’t know. A second or two.”

“Because there are multiple things to do,” Evelyn said, soft but firm.

I nodded, trying to focus on the plan, but trying to not yet allow my eyes to wander down to the notebook of hyperdimensional mathematics that lay in my lap. “Yes. First, I’m going to rip up the Big Man’s contract. Flex my legs, as it were. If that hurts too much, then I might come back for a moment, to catch my breath. But if I don’t need to, if I’m in full flow—” What a joke, full flow? With brain-math? Full flow of pain, more like. “—then I’ll move straight on to ... finding the Eye’s grip, and examining how it ... yes.”

Everyone had fallen silent. In the corner of my eye, I saw Zheng had appeared in the workshop doorway, to watch or protect or just to be near me. Even Raine wasn’t trying to grin any more, but she shot me a confident nod when I met her eyes.

“I’m ready,” Badger said.

“Any last words?” Raine asked him.

“... thank you,” he said, but didn’t seem to know why he’d said it.

“Get on with it,” Sarika wheezed. “Before he says something he’ll regret when he wakes up.”

I got on with it.

With a sensation like relaxing a muscle that I’d held tense for too long, like uncurling a fist, or finally stretching out a bent knee, I eased one of the biochemical control rods out of its channel inside my trilobe reactor organ. A shudder of slow pleasure and sharp pain rolled through my core — the latter quick and gone again, the former lingering as heat in my belly, turning my muscles to butter, easing the remnants of my bruises. A shuddering gasp escaped my throat, and Lozzie hugged me tighter. I slid the control rod out far enough to power one tentacle, then summoned that limb into brilliant, rainbow-strobing life with a flicker of hyperdimensional mathematics, arcing out from my left flank in a smooth, pale tube of flexible muscle. No teeth or hooks or toxins. Not yet.

It felt wonderful. Even though I'd proven myself clumsy and inexperienced, the sheer physical euphoria of my extra limb would have made me purr, if I was summoning it for any other purpose but this.

"Ooooooh," Lozzie murmured, eyes wide over my shoulder. Zheng rumbled approval.

I slid the control rod out further, enough to run two or three tentacles, but I didn't summon any more, though it took an effort of will to hold myself back. The extra power was another safety buffer.

My chest felt tight, mouth dry, hands clammy as Lozzie held onto them. I swallowed and nodded, mostly to myself, as I lowered my single tentacle toward the back of Badger's head, toward his curly brown hair and the scalp and skull beneath. A large enough target, and I did not fumble.

He froze and stiffened as I wrapped the tentacle around his skull. His breath stopped in his throat. I didn't squeeze or grip very hard, the point was merely to make the connection. I'd done this thrice before — defined a human being via hyperdimensional mathematics — once with Raine, and twice with Sarika. Raine had been miles away and the effort had almost sent me tumbling out of my body and into the abyss. On the time she wasn't trapped in the Eye's grip, Sarika had been sitting across the kitchen table, and I'd damn well near passed out and bled from my eyes. Physical contact was going to make this easier.

For a given definition of easier; this time, the Eye was right there.

Physical contact also provided rapid access to the inside of Badger's skull, in case everything went terribly wrong. I prepared a sheathed, razor-sharp band of bone, just beneath the surface of my tentacle, ready to flick out and slice through scalp at the speed of thought.

"Ready?" I whispered.

For a moment, Badger just panted in fear. Then he whispered too, "Do it."

I looked down the notebook full of hyperdimensional mathematics, and plunged headfirst into the black sump at the bottom of my soul.

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Ripping up *Ooran Juh's* contract on Badger was surprisingly straightforward.

Badger — Nathan Sterling Hobbes, as I knew instantly, as I knew everything else about him, from the split second I carried out the trick of perception of defining him via hyperdimensional mathematics at close range — was no less complex than Sarika had been, no less complex than any human being. An equation like the nuclear furnace of a star's core, dense with roiling layers of overlapping meaning, jagged fractal possibilities, memories and events and physical structure like sedimentary layers, all penetrating and entering and co-mingling with each other, in a matrix of creation beyond any mortal mind.

I saw the old scar on his leg where he'd fallen off a bike at age nine and walked home alone to call an ambulance because his parents were out; I saw him in Sharrowford University Library as a student, poring over mathematics textbooks, hair short and clothes neat, clean of drugs for once, his eyes drawn inexorably to the very non-library book the stranger had left for him; I saw Alexander Lilburne, debating philosophy as Badger failed to counter his points, dragged deeper and deeper into negating his own beliefs; I saw Badger's girlfriend, the one the cult hadn't known about, the one Sarika still didn't know about, dying of a heroin overdose in a Manchester bedsit.

Too much information. Like before. If this hadn't all happened in the instant of frozen time afforded to me by the brain-math, I would have collapsed from the strain.

Ooran Juh's contract was wrapped around Badger like a greasy layer of filth, a thin membrane sac of cloying, infectious claim on everything inside. Like a reverse womb.

I ripped it apart, slicing through the tissue with barely a flicker of mathematics, a claw-touch, and out came the equation that was Badger, flopping and heaving and wet with foul fluids. I let him flounder by himself, weak and mewling, as I picked up the contract and ate it, shredded it with razor teeth, melted it with acid, broke it down with specialised enzymes, rendered it into proteins, and destroyed any trace of what *Ooran Juh* used for DNA or ink or a signature in blood.

Then I regurgitated it onto the ground, as bile and acid and nothing else. That had been the easy one.

One down, one to go.

= =

I slammed back to reality in a tidal wave of pain. Head flaring with bursts of supernovae explosion, face smeared wet with blood streaming from my nose, gut roiling and clenching in an effort to hold back a torrent of vomit. I keened through my teeth, gasping and kicking. Lozzie held on tight.

The bioreactor had helped. I was still conscious and had more than enough energy to keep going. But defining a human being was still almost beyond my pain threshold. I'd had to surface before I could dive deeper again.

And I surfaced to screaming chaos.

Everyone was shouting. Zheng and Raine were nowhere to be seen, but I could hear Zheng growling from the kitchen or the front room — how was that possible? I'd taken a second, two seconds at most. Praem had Evelyn by the shoulders, to stop her from rising, and Evelyn had gone white in the face. Sarika was wide-eyed with terror, clutching her crutches. Whistle was up on his paws, barking.

Badger was curled up in a ball, on his side, but still inside his magic circle. I'd tightened my tentacle's grip on his skull. He was mewling softly.

Lozzie's arms tightened around my middle. "Heathy, Heathy it's okay! It's okay, we can keep going, it's okay!"

"It is very much not fucking okay!" Evelyn shouted. "Raine, get that bastard out of—"

Zheng made a sound like an angry tiger, and I think the crash which followed was the front door getting knocked off its hinges.

"Don't stop now," Lozzie whispered. "We have to finish!"

Lozzie was right. The others would keep me safe, whatever we'd triggered. I blinked the blood out of my eyes as best I could, slammed the pieces of the equation back into place, and gripped the slick, black, dripping levers of reality once more. I spun hyperdimensional mathematics into a glove made of scalpels, reached into the equation that was Badger, and began to peel him apart, to find the Eye's hidden tendrils embedded in his soul.

= =

Imagine you have crept into a torture chamber.

You are there to rescue a prisoner, an abused wreck kept in a dark corner, weeping softly to himself. But upon raising your shaded lantern you discover the problem, you discover why he has not been able to free himself, despite the strength of his cries for help, and the current absence of the torturer. The torture machines are so complex that they demand hours of study just to comprehend their controls, and they have so pierced and invaded and ruined his body that he cannot be extracted from them without dying, not unless the rescue is performed with incredible care.

To draw back the black iron would be to let forth torrents of his blood, to unscrew the bolts and rivets and turn the little nozzles would break his bones all over again, to lessen the pressure of the vice would crack his skull.

You're here to understand those machines. And as a by-product of understanding, through knowledge, you can get him out, with the minimum of damage.

Except the machines don't make any sense. They rake his flesh from angles they could not possibly have reached, they have left him with wounds that should have killed him ten times over, they dose him with drugs that should have rendered him unconscious, but every time you make an adjustment, he has to swallow a scream.

And the torturer is returning.

Down the steps at the front of the dungeon, from the opposite route you took, a great darkness heralds the one thing that might reveal how the machines work — the attention of the one of whom they are a part.

But then the torturer will know you are here too.

= =

Imagine a dolphin caught in a net.

The net is steel cable, it cannot be cut with the few hand-tools you have. The dolphin is desperate, thrashing in the water, straining against the lines of the net, but the more the creature thrashes, the deeper the lines cut. They have cut so deep now, sawed through skin and flesh and into the organs, leeching bright red blood into the seawater.

And you're down there in your flimsy, vulnerable diving gear. No sturdy shark cage to hide inside. Dead fish clog the water, blood clouds your vision.

You keep rolling the dolphin over, but the net seems to have no end, no tears, no breaks, no weak spots or frayed cables, nothing to give you a way to begin freeing the dolphin. To get it out, you'll have to start digging into the poor creature's flesh. There is no other way. The netting is beyond your comprehension.

But down in the water far below you and the dolphin, something is rising. Something that is watching the dolphin struggle. Something that cast the net in the first place, from an organ you cannot even imagine.

If you wait for it to arrive, maybe you'll understand how the net works. You'll see the first principles behind the construction. You will understand.

But then you will be in the leviathan's maw too.

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Imagine you are hanging in space in the upper atmosphere of a gas giant, and the planet itself has somehow snared your fellow cosmonaut in tendrils of cloud and gravity, and is dragging him down into the crushing pressure.

And you can do nothing, because the gasses have invaded his suit and the gravity has broken his limbs. He is wrapped with invisible force and yet somehow not dead, cradled in the outer grip of something so utterly inimical to human life, which your senses cannot even process.

You reach out to touch him, to anchor him, but you cannot understand how he is being pulled down.

But the planet itself is turning below you, faster than any celestial body should rotate. A giant, two dozen times the size of Earth, banded in ochre and red-orange and a million shades of crimson, against a backdrop of cold interstellar space. It is turning toward you and your companion, attention shifting on a scale your mind cannot endure.

If you let it turn, it will see you. Both of you. But then you'll know.

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The relationship between Badger and the Eye wasn't like any of those things, of course. It was like all of them at once, and a million other tortured metaphors, the only way my fragile brain could process the information. And it was still a brain, no matter how abyssal I'd become. I was still so very small compared to the Eye, compared to even one tendril, one lash, one cell.

This was nothing like freeing Sarika. She'd been disembodied by then, turned into pure information, and I'd been trying to ignore the Eye as much as possible, only comprehend as much as I needed to rip her from its grip.

Badger still had flesh. Ripping him out would kill him.

Every part of the equation that was Nathan was wrapped in counter-equations, poised negations, additions and addendums and expansions, like tentacles that had penetrated him through every pore. A violation more complete than any rape, any invasive surgery, any infection. The Eye owned everything that defined him, was wrapped tight around every part of him. And those were only the outermost of the outermost layers of the Eye's attention, the bits that were possible to understand because they were interfacing with the equation that described a human being.

Lucky for me, that wasn't the point. I was here to understand.

But comprehension was nearly impossible.

I dared not look too closely at the Eye's tendrils themselves. Each one was infinitely more complex than a person, an ever-shifting riot of impossibly complicated fractal equation that I kept firmly at the limit of my awareness, even as I tried to work on them, to understand how they operated, how they had invaded Badger so totally. With a sinking feeling I came to realise that the only reason I was safe was because they were so remote from the Eye's real core, away across the membrane between here and Outside. Badger had been invaded by the equivalent of the Eye's subconscious attention.

And I was burning up just trying to look back.

Even the slightest movement of hyperdimensional mathematics was leaving Badger shredded and raw, pulling bits of him off, leaving them snagged in the Eye's trillion fractal hooks or spinning off into necrosis and death. I would have had more luck trying to unwind a

physical parasite from the wrinkles of his actual brain. Never mind comprehending this; even trying to reveal the junction between Eye and human would kill Badger by the time I was done.

And as I tried, so clumsy and bloody, to pare away the human from the Outsider, I felt the Eye become aware of me, in the way one becomes aware of furtive fumbling in a distant room.

Panic, blind panic, the animalistic panic of knowing the predator is coming. If I lingered too long, I would be seen.

But I sensed, on some level, that if the Eye turned its attention fully on Badger, the connections would finally make sense. Or at least, a kind of sense, if I could bear to watch.

But I could not stay here.

I dived deeper, to sip from the abyss, to anchor myself on that submarine shore of barren silt and dunk my head into the deeper waters to draw strength from the dark. Maybe I could hide until the Eye's attention passed over us both. Maybe I could drag Badger down here. Or maybe I could come back as something more suited for the task, and endure fleeting seconds of the Eye's attention as it played over the inside of Badger's mind, and by watching him disintegrate, I would finally comprehend, I would be granted insight.

The idea was seductive. Would it be murder?

Halfway down to the abyss, playful hands snagged my ankles, and pulled me sideways.

= =

Calm haze settled on my mind like a warm blanket. I blinked clear eyes up at a night sky, devoid of clouds and blanketed with stars, bright as diamonds in the void.

"Heather! Come on, up, up, up time, up time! We have to really seriously super-duper mega-hurry!"

"... Lozzie?"

I sat up slowly, and found myself on a vast plain of bare grey earth. Cool night air hung still and soft around my face and head, like dusk after a hot day. No light but starlight fell on me. I felt unhurried and safe, not menaced by nocturnal predators or

vulnerable and alone after dark. The grey plain stretched off forever in three directions, but right in front of me, perhaps miles away or perhaps only a few hundred meters — I sensed that distance was difficult to judge because the atmosphere was so thin — stood a rampart of mountains that scraped the heavens.

The mountains were dark too, though I thought I could see a hint of dawn at the line of sharp summits.

“Upppppp!” Lozzie repeated, and grabbed my arms to pull me to my feet.

“Lozzie, what— I was—”

“I would question what I’m doing here,” my own voice said, from off to one side, “but apparently I don’t have a choice. The little one didn’t ask my permission.”

I turned and blinked at myself, at a vision of me, standing a few feet away on the grey soil. She — the other Heather — was dressed in my pink-scaled hoodie and triple-layered skirt, with blonde highlights in her hair and LED light-up shoes on her feet.

Seven-Shades-of-absolutely-not-Heather sighed and gave a little shrug.

“I had to invite disco you too!” Lozzie chirped. “We have to find him quick! Super quick!” Lozzie was at her absolute worst, shaky and jittery, all but vibrating on the spot as she glanced left and right across the endless plain. She was in her pastel poncho, wispy blonde hair flying everywhere, and I realised I was in the same clothes I’d been wearing back in the house for the—

“Vivisection,” I murmured. “Lozzie, Lozzie, stop. I was in the middle of the vivisection. I was doing brain-math. I don’t—”

“You still are!” She whirled back to me. “Don’t think about it too hard!”

“... we’re in a dream? The dreams? Like we used to?”

“I don’t know why I’m here,” Sevens said. “This is not my area of expertise, not at all.”

“Pleaseeee don’t think about it too hard, Heathy,” Lozzie went on at high speed. “Yes and no. But don’t think about it or it’ll stop working and if it stops working Badger will die. Die-die. Dead-dead,

not getting him back dead. You can't do it alone so I'm helping but I can't help like you do so it's this or nothing!"

"But saving him isn't ... important?"

Lozzie bit her lower lip.

With my emotions blunted by what I quickly recognised as dream-logic, I glanced around the grey plain again. There was no sign of Badger, or anything that might stand in for him.

The mountaintops seemed a touch lighter.

"That's bad," Sevens said, my own shaking fear leaking into her version of my voice. She hiccuped softly.

"You ... made this? Lozzie?" I asked.

"I'm making it all right now, but it already exists, but it's not a place but it is a place but only while we're here. But it's okay, we can get him and get gone before the peeper comes up! We need to be reeeeeeal quick. Like five minutes quick."

"I would estimate," said Sevens-as-me, "that we have four minutes and twenty three seconds of subjective time. And I will be leaving before then, believe me."

That washed away some of the dream-logic calm. I had a sinking suspicion about what exactly was rising on the other side of those mountains.

any mortal thing – 14.4

Dawn was breaking, behind the mountains.

Except those weren't really mountains, and that wasn't the sun — or any other star — casting the first touch of deep red illumination against the far side of those towering peaks. Waves of dirty crimson light seemed to lift from the rock around the mountaintops, like thousands of translucent ribbons fluttering slowly under invisible pressure, in a medium too thick to be normal atmosphere. I realised, with growing horror, that I was looking at streamers of superheated air.

Whatever medium Lozzie had used to construct this place, this metaphor, this dream, whatever substrate or thought-matter, it was not strong enough to withstand the crushing attention of the Eye's observation.

Even beneath the blanket of artificial calm imposed by the dream-logic brain-haze, my mouth went bone dry, my stomach clenched up hard, and my heart began to race. That was the Eye, rising around the curvature of this globe, and there was no escape on this featureless grey plane of bare earth, not even a rock to hide behind. Every direction was blasted, baked, scoured clean of anything larger than a grain of rice, right to the horizon — which seemed oddly close and visibly curved, as if this planetoid was too small. Last time I had confronted the Eye, back when the fake-Lozzie thing had whisked me away to Wonderland, I vaguely recalled throwing a rock at it. A futile gesture, certainly, but here I couldn't even do that.

Dream-logic formed a dam, holding back the headwaters of actual terror, keeping me from falling to my knees and curling up in a ball.

But my hands shook uncontrollably, adrenaline flooded me like a tidal wave, and I almost started to hyperventilate. This wasn't Wonderland, this was a dream, but that was the Eye, for real, metaphorised through whatever Lozzie had built here, and I was no longer an expression of executed hyperdimensional mathematics, thinking in ways that would allow me to slip between definition and reality in a heartbeat of real time. I was fully conscious, I was

tiny, and the Eye was approaching like a slow-motion shock wave from a nuclear bomb.

Sevens had said four minutes and twenty three seconds.

“No ... no ... ” I murmured, throat closing. “We have to—”

My mind began the equation, spinning up the necessary mathematics to get us out of here, wherever or whatever *here* was. Dream or reality, Outside or Earth, I didn’t care. That was the Eye, and I was not staying to meet its gaze.

“Heather, no! No!”

Lozzie grabbed my hands and ripped my attention back down to her, disrupting my concentration with the urgency and panic on her elfin little face. The equation fell apart. I winced with headache pain and a sudden sharp nosebleed.

“Ah, ow. Lozzie.”

“If you go then we all go and it’ll all collapse and it won’t work,” Lozzie rattled off at high speed. “So you have to stay, okay? We can find him, we can, we can do it!”

“That’s all well and good, little one,” Sevens-Shades-of-Disco-Me said, visibly swallowing a pale echo of my own fear, “but I don’t see him anywhere.”

Lozzie bit her lip and turned left and right, wispy hair flicking out as her poncho twirled after her. “He should be right here, we should be right on top of him, he—”

“Why?!” I suddenly shouted in her face. “I had it under control!”

Lozzie flinched like a struck cat, a full-body shudder angled away from me; that was one of the worst things I’d ever seen, but I was too scared and in too much panic to care right then, goaded into anger by fear and confusion.

“H-Heathy it’ll be fine it’ll be fine, it’ll be quick, very quick—”

“Four minutes, two seconds,” said Sevens.

“I had it under control!” I repeated, raving at Lozzie, crying softly now with sheer overload. Lozzie shrank back. “I was diving, I was away from it, I had a plan — multiple plans! All sorts of different things I could have tried. And now we’re here, and that—” I

glanced skyward at the mountain peaks. The red sunlight had brightened, the streamers of superheated air thickening in the upper atmosphere, the darkness burned away under an attention that imposed its own conditions.

I couldn't think. Not with that approaching.

"I find myself in enthusiastic agreement," Sevens said quickly, struggling to control the quiver in her — my — voice. "We should not be here. The only reason I haven't already left is because you, little one," she addressed Lozzie, "have an absolutely fascinating play of your own, and I would very much regret letting you retire from the stage before you find your feet."

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight looked absolutely absurd against the backdrop of grey earth and interstellar darkness, with the blonde highlights in my hair, that beautiful pink hoodie, and the LEDs flashing on her shoes. She'd modified the raver-Heather outfit even further, added a pair of rainbow-striped tights, a white-and-pink belt loose around her waist, and three finger-strokes of bright yellow face paint across one cheek. She was like a bioluminescent squid in the depths of an ocean trench.

She was also terrified, or at least channelling my terror. That, combined with the absurdly pretty outfit, helped snap me out of the worst of my panic. Did I really look like that when terrified? Wide-eyed and shaking, gone pale all over, sweaty and twitchy like a spooked field mouse?

"He was gonna die ... " Lozzie said, eyes wet and quivering.

"He volunteered!" I snapped, anger not quite quenched. "The whole point was that he might die! This wasn't the plan!"

Lozzie's quivering shock suddenly screwed up into tiny, defiant, puff-cheeked outrage. "Yes it was! I'm helping! You asked me to help and I'm helping because you're gonna let it look but that's what it wants you to do because that's what it is and when it does ___"

"Yes! And when it looks, I'll understand, that's the point. It's a giant eyeball, that's what it does. It looks!"

"We're running out of time," Sevens said. "Here."

She clicked her fingers.

I was absolutely certain she didn't need to click her fingers, she was just being dramatic. At least the gesture let me know that she was responsible for this.

It was like switching the lights on in a dark room in the middle of the night, after you've woken up but your eyes haven't adjusted yet, and all the shapes of familiar furniture form strange terrain in the gloom, odd humps and hanging shapes which fill the imagination with ghosts. When you switch that light on, it turns out you've been navigating with a mixture of memory and shadow, a projection created more by the inside of your head than by external sense data. The room is real, in either light or darkness, but not the same.

The plain, the mountains, the Eye's rising attention chewing at the peaks like the shock wave of a supernova, it was all abstracted away into mathematics.

So was I. For a glorious, beautiful moment — almost pleasurable enough to wash away what was actually happening here — I was top-to-bottom *Homo Abyssus*, far more extensively than I'd ever managed in reality. I was *right*. Completely.

I wish I'd experienced that under different circumstances, preferably ones in which I could stop to enjoy the sensation.

Instead of Lozzie — little Lozzie as short as me, dressed in pastel poncho and comfy layers and with her great long mass of blonde hair — I was looking at a collection of shining starlight globes, like bubbles, curled into each other like conch shells. Their surfaces were oil on water but infinitely more beautiful, a riot of fractal colour which revealed more layers the deeper one looked, a work of evolutionary art from an order of being even the most psychedelically inclined naturalist could not have imagined. The starlight globes were a kind of flesh, organised into a shape a little like a nautilus. A cute little protective shell cupped the rest of her, with yet more patterns across it, swirling and changing and melding; dozens of tiny eyes and a collection of miniature feelers poked out of the front, like a kitten peering from inside a box. There was something playful and fey about that shape. Something self-selected. Something joyful, even in panic.

Seven-Shades-of-Heather had been replaced by a beauty I had glimpsed once before, through the truth of abyssal senses, a creature of infinite frills in butter-soft delicacy, a grace beyond the

sharpest lemon, flesh so smooth it was akin to sunlight on one's face.

Next to her, Lozzie and I seemed like twisted, malformed children; ugly ducklings.

Of course, I wasn't actually *seeing* any of this, not with my eyes, not with sight, not even with the metaphorical sight of Lozzie's dream-imposition. All of this was abyssal truth, filtered into the best metaphors that the human mind could manage under the massive strain.

"If you must have this argument now, do it like this, it's quicker," Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight said — or thought, or projected, or injected into our minds. Her communication was like the singing voice of a planet. It was not words, but impulse, pure meaning, uncluttered by language.

Lozzie and I were too overwhelmed. For long minutes — though time was irrelevant to this state of being — we just flailed and clung to each other. Lozzie let out a few half-notes of attempted communication, but they died under the sheer intimidation, like trying to sing into a hurricane.

Seven-Shades-of-Stupendous-Underestimation let out a sigh like a galaxy collapsing, and clicked her fingers again.

Grey plain, dark mountains, red-hot rising sun—all back again. Lozzie and I, comfortably human-shaped once more, hugging like scared children. Seven-Shades-of-Disco-Heather rolled her eyes.

"Argue later, then!" she snapped, imitating me at my huffing, outraged worst. "Perhaps don't waste precious seconds? Don't doom yourselves to the mother of all suntans?" She pointed at the line of mountains with a shaking hand.

Lozzie and I glanced at each other. Lozzie shrank back slightly at the look in my eyes, and I let go of her, but I held onto one hand.

"We still need to get out," I said quickly. "And I can go back to what I was doing, let it look at him and—"

"It wants you to let it look at him so it can do that while you're close!" Lozzie said.

"Not this again," Sevens sighed.

“It’s a trap! And he’ll die and you won’t get anything!”

“It is turning its attention, yes,” Sevens agreed. “And it will likely obliterate him, completely. Like Sarika. There won’t be anything biological, anything physical left to examine. I don’t care how good Evee thinks her circles are.”

Lozzie paused, sleepy-eyed yet panicked gaze flicking to Sevens. “... yeah!” she added.

I gave her the tiniest, most affectionate, yet disapproving frown. That was a retroactive justification. “Lozzie,” I sighed.

“And this way you can do it with your body,” she said. “With your hands and your tentacles and eyes and stuff, you can see how the Eye does it for yourself and then just go — go! And it’ll be safe to do it, I swear, I promise, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. He said sorry, Heather.”

“What?”

“Badger,” Lozzie said, voice quivering behind one sleeve, forcing herself not to look away. “He ... he came upstairs to talk to me. At night. He said sorry. For being in the cult. Nobody’s ever apologised before. Not even Flowsie.”

I sighed, exasperated but beyond solutions right now. “Lozzie, you should have said something.”

“I thought you’d be really good at this,” she said in a tiny voice. “I thought he wouldn’t die. I didn’t think.”

“It’s the Eye, Lozzie,” I said. “I’m not that good.”

“I’m sorry ... ”

“It’s okay, little one,” Seven-Shades-of-Superior-Me said in a soft voice. She gave Lozzie a quick hug, then glanced up at the mountain peaks. Lozzie clung to her, crying soft tears of confused shame. “Three minutes, five seconds. If we’re going to find Badger, we best do it right now.”

“Wait, wait,” I said. “I still need to understand how I’m supposed to watch the Eye ... interact with him. I don’t understand, what’s actually going to happen, when ... ?” I glanced up at the mountains too. “When it arrives?”

Sevens let go of Lozzie and stepped back. “Just meet its gaze,

Heather. You're the only one who can."

"He should be right here!" Lozzie said, panic in her heavy-lidded eyes. "I don't get where—"

Without warning, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight exploded into a riot of amber and gold, a fractal expansion of ruffled butter and lemon shavings, *Homo Abyssus* Heather with Sevens' mask slipping. With a motion like a jellyfish bobbing through the waves, she gathered skirts of satin-smooth pneuma-somatic flesh and launched herself into the air like a kite from a slingshot, scattering loose grey dirt, puffing Lozzie and I with a blast of air like from a helicopter take-off.

She flew in a sudden, shallow arc away from us, parallel with the mountains. It was like watching a woman in an elaborate ball gown complete a low-orbit manoeuvre on a moon. Which, I suppose, was exactly what she was doing.

At the apex of her flight, her ruffled yellow form seemed to bunch up toward one side, like a cephalopod preparing muscle groups for a burst of speed. I saw bits of me still in there in the core of the mass, LED light-up shoes trailing behind her on rainbow-clad legs. Sevens unleashed all that kinetic energy in a slam of air or force or ejected propellant, and her flight path took a ninety-degree turn away from the mountains.

"What is she doing?" I murmured, awestruck.

"Flooping!" Lozzie chirped.

Sevens completed two more rapid changes of direction, then let her final arc carry her further away. A single yellow ribbon-like structure flashed out behind her, like a finger beckoning to us, just before she vanished over the too-close horizon. A split-second later, a spray of dust and grey earth plumed up into the air.

"Come on!" Lozzie yipped, and grabbed my hand. "I'm so sorry, Heather, I'm sorry, but let's go!"

"Right." I nodded, squeezed her hand, and picked up my feet.

We ran hand-in-hand, feet kicking up little sprays of grey earth, Lozzie's poncho fluttering out behind her, my lungs heaving with effort. It was clumsy, stupid, and inexpert, because neither of us were very good runners, though at least Lozzie was fitter than I. To

our right, the great dark range of mountains reared toward the sky, but their tips had brightened further, the light beginning to stream far above our heads in horizontal shafts of burning air. The sky itself was turning red and orange, dark and heavy, and deepest blue in the far distance. Heat-haze wavered and flickered above us, and when I glanced over at the mountains themselves, the source of that noxious light was peeling flakes of ash and black sand from the rock, like a wave of physical pressure.

Somehow, in a feat of compacted space and mind-bending physics, we reached Sevens' landing site about twenty seconds later.

This ball of rock and dirt we were on was impossible. How could it take only twenty seconds to reach the horizon? Gravity felt like it did on Earth, but it was like standing on a tiny moon.

"Hey! Hey hey!" Lozzie was calling as we skidded to a halt. I had to bend forward and put my hands on my knees, heaving for breath as Lozzie danced from foot to foot.

Sevens was folding away the shade of her true form which she'd extruded to achieve flight, wearing my appearance like a mask again, but with ruffles and tendrils and membranes of yellow butterscotch sucking back into her flesh like parasitic mollusks. Here and there, parts of that yellow brilliance had turned black, the flesh cracked and steaming, bleeding pale fluid, burned by grazing the awful light during the apex of her flight.

"Ahhhh! Tch," she hissed through her teeth, like me after a paper cut or a stubbed toe, as she tenderly folded those damaged parts back inside herself.

I tried not to watch; seeing a mirror copy of yourself sucking in extra parts like a slug retracting its eye stalks was a little much, even for me.

"Sevens, are you ... okay ... ?"

My voice trailed off between gulps of air, as I realised why Sevens had landed. Lozzie was already dropping to her knees. She tossed her poncho over one shoulder and started to dig. Her slender, delicate fingers scrabbled at the grey, compacted earth.

It was Badger.

Or at least, I assumed it was him. The lump of flesh was barely

recognisable as a person, let alone a specific person.

A human head was sticking out of the barren plain which stretched in all directions. The owner of the head was buried up to their neck, and still alive, but probably not for much longer. Every inch of skin had been burned as if by direct exposure to the most powerful ultraviolet light possible, red and crisped, weeping and bleeding, covered in massive blisters, the hair and eyebrows and lashes seared away. His lips were open, sucking down thin, slow breaths like a whisper of distant wind. He was blind, eyes turned white, sight burned out by a previous pass of the impossible light.

Lozzie raked away the loose earth around Badger's buried neck, but the ground was too hard, unyielding, and all she did was bend her nails and bloody her fingertips.

"Heather, help!"

Of course, he wasn't really buried. This was real, but interpreted through dream metaphor. The ground was the Eye's unconscious grip, and we mere apes had not the strength to break it.

I stared in horror at Badger's burned face, then glanced back up at the mountain peaks. Dark red light blasted over them now, the rays creeping downward through the air above our heads. The source of that light would rise above the mountains soon, and I could not bear the thought of seeing even its utmost outer rim. I hiccuped and straightened up, panic making my hands shake. Lozzie scratched in the dirt, but she was getting nowhere.

"We can't do it ... " I murmured. I felt like I was nine years old again. "Don't make me, don't make me ... "

"We have barely a minute before that attention will start to touch the ground," Sevens said, then hiccuped in perfect imitation of my fear.

"Can't you ... ?" I gestured at Badger with my eyes, at Lozzie trying to dig.

"I don't know," Sevens said. "I don't—"

Lozzie whipped around. "Please! Please please please! Please we can't let him go, we can't let him die, Heather won't learn anything and— and— he did—"

Sevens held up a shaking hand — and I realised she'd painted her

nails too, my nails, in neon pink. “All right, all right, little one. I will try, once, and then we all have to get out of here.”

Lozzie nodded. Sevens didn’t wait for her to stand up or back away, but simply exploded into extra-human appendages again, like a squid jetting from a crevasse, so much more complex than anything I had achieved with *Homo Abyssus*, and somehow much more alien, a whirling mass of yellow tentacles and tendrils and feelers, and limbs which hurt to look at, things that Lozzie’s dream-space could barely process into metaphor. I actually yelped in surprise and almost stumbled back. Sevens slammed cutting claws and yellow tentacle-fists into the earth around Badger’s exposed head, engulfing him like an octopus preying on a crab. For one horrible moment I assumed she was going to decapitate him and save only his head, but her human face — my face — scrunched up with strain. She levered herself backward, pulling on her extra-human parts like a tug of war.

She reared up and slammed the ground again, and then a third time. The nuclear sunlight crept lower. I saw it touch the horizon far to our left, caressing the curvature of this globe with burning attention. The ground began to steam.

Sevens whipped her extra parts back into herself again, heaving for breath. The earth around Badger was marked with scrapes and shallow divots, but none more than an inch or two deep.

“I’m sorry ... ” Sevens shook her head, cringing.

“We can’t,” I said, starting to hyperventilate, my own eyes filling with tears. “We’ve lost. Lozzie, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Don’t make me stay here.”

“We can’t just leave!” Lozzie hopped to her feet, taking my hands in hers. “Heather can’t you brain-math all the ground away or take him back to reality or something, or burn the ground, or delete it or —”

I shook my head too. “Lozzie, this isn’t real ground. If it was, then yes, I could just teleport him out with brain-math, but this is the Eye’s grip, it’s not ... none of us are ... ”

Real.

None of us were really there. This was happening, but not how our minds were processing it.

Badger drew in a long, horrible wheeze down his burned throat. He exhaled a single word, barely more than a breath. I don't think Lozzie or Sevens heard. It was my name.

He was praying. To me.

Except I wasn't a god — but I was the adopted child of one.

I don't know if that convinced me to do as I did next, or if it was Lozzie's pleading, or a determination to preserve the usefulness of my volunteer test subject, or perhaps it was just simple bloody-minded defiance of the Eye, of this vast uncaring intelligence which had tormented me half my life.

"Heather?" Lozzie said, eyes as wide as they could go with her damaged extraocular muscles. She must have seen the look on my face. I let go of her hands and stepped back, turning toward Badger, planted in the earth like a seed of flesh.

"If this isn't real, I don't even need the bioreactor here," I murmured, mind working a million miles an hour. "It's all metaphor."

And so when I blossomed with tentacles — not six, but three dozen, from flanks and back and shoulders — when I cut into the earth with digging claws and melted it with injected enzyme slurry, when I pumped it out with specialised syphons as liquid mud, when I jammed support braces of rapid-growth bone and chitin against the outer wall of the hole I was digging, when I blasted Badger's shaking, emaciated frame with jets of antibiotic mucus, and wrapped him in spider-webbing strong as steel, it was all metaphor. There were no bruises to suffer here, no reactor to overheat, no biological complications to get in the way.

There was only the Eye's attention, edging closer, the light burning the air less than fifty meters above our heads.

But still, I shuddered with pleasure. The transformation was incredible, a work of art on the canvas of the mind, unconstrained by the limits of real flesh and the throbbing heat of the bioreactor in my abdomen. I could have gone further, melted into something not human at all, embraced abyssal reality — but I had to work fast. The mud turned caustic and toxic against Badger's exposed flesh, and I was trying not to damage him further.

Lozzie gasped in delight, hands to her mouth. Sevens frowned, but

didn't disapprove. Neither of them understood how I was doing this.

In a very real way, I was made from the same stuff as the Eye. It had adopted Maisie and me, and tried to make us more like itself by teaching us how to think. Malice? Probably not. I doubted it experienced anything as crude and ape-centric as malice, even in analogy. No, it had taught us how to think because it had tried, very briefly, to raise us, and had kept trying to raise me despite my departure. Distance learning. The ultimate helicopter parent.

So when I dug into that earth, I was speaking the same language. The Eye recognised my touch, my methods, my style. I suspect the same would have happened if I had dug with my actual hands — but speed was of the essence.

As I dug and wrenched and pulled Badger out of the wound I'd made in the ground, I had the spine-creeping sensation that I was being allowed to do this. Even unconsciously, at the very limit of its distributed attention, the Eye was not going to let some unfamiliar hand peel open its fingers and pry out something that belonged to it. Lozzie and Sevens were not allowed. But as I pumped the liquid mud out from around Badger, and pulled his legs from the sucking swamp I'd created, and hosed off his burning flesh before he lost all his skin, I felt like I was being allowed to win a playful tug of war. Playful, over a human soul.

I was a young predator, being taught how to hunt.

I finally pulled Badger free, got him swaddled in biological bandages to soak up his blood, and dumped him next to the hole, mewling and broken. I whipped all my extra, ad-hoc parts back inside myself before I stumbled, sweating and panting, light-headed from the effort, throbbing all over.

"He's out—" I panted. "Get him— up— get out before—"

Lozzie was already on it. She wedged a shoulder beneath Badger's arm, and heaved him into a sitting position. None of his muscles seemed to work, twitching and shaking, shivering inside the cocoon I'd woven for him.

"Here!" Lozzie held out her other hand toward me. "Let's goooooo! It's quicker when I do it so let's go!"

I stared at her outstretched offer, then looked away, up at the shafts

of noxious, nuclear sunlight slicing through the air overhead, rapidly descending toward our shadowed redoubt. A line of dark red sunlight steadily advanced toward us from the left, as if to drive us deeper into the shelter of the mountains' shadow. The ground steamed and popped where the light touched, burning away impurities under the pressure of pure observation.

"I can get out by myself," Sevens said quickly, with a tremble in her voice. "And I am just about to do so. But, Heather, what are you doing?"

"... Heather?" Lozzie squeaked.

"I'm staying," I said. "A few more moments."

"Oh no," Sevens sighed.

"You said it yourself — I'm the only one who can meet its gaze." My voice quivered and my throat was closing up. I felt a terrible weight on my chest. I'd rarely been so afraid before. But I had to do this.

Sevens gave me the exact same look I'd often given Raine in the past, a cocktail of wide-eyed incredulity, exasperated disbelief, and more than a little fear. Did I really look that gormless?

"That was rhetorical," she said. "Sarcastic, even! Heather, you can't stand up to that, not as you are. I know I couldn't."

"But you're not actually me," I said.

Sevens rolled her eyes — my eyes — and I decided yes, I did actually look that gormless. "You're rationalising."

She was right, I was trying to rationalise what I was about to do. The line of burning sunlight crept ever closer.

"You're not actually the Eye's adopted daughter," I said. "It will go differently for me, because I am. That's the point. And I only need to stay for a second or two. I need to understand how it does this," I nodded at Badger. "And he's out now, I might not have another chance. Maisie is on a time limit and I may never get another chance to do this, to understand. It does this via the act of observation itself. I need to see it observe, I need to see how it *sees*."

I hiccuped, loudly and painfully. I was shaking all over.

"Heather noooooo," Lozzie whined, eyes pleading.

I frowned at her, then tried to soften my expression. If I got this wrong, it might be the last time I ever saw Lozzie. "I'll only be a second behind you. I promise."

"But Badger—"

"Is free now," I spoke too hard, shaking all over, fear running into anger. "Which means this is my only chance to understand. Go, go! Don't distract me, Lozzie, please."

Lozzie's lower lip wobbled. Badger, wheezing for breath through blackened, blistered lips, managed to flop a hand in my direction. Blind eyes rolled in search of my voice. He struggled to fill his lungs, and hissed actual words, paper-thin and scratchy across burned vocal chords.

"—leave me with her—" he wheezed. "No— point other— wise. No point to— me."

That almost broke my resolve. Badger was free of the Eye, sort of. All Lozzie had to do was translate him back out of this place, and he was refusing. For me.

Volunteering for possible death in a dangerous experiment was one thing; but willingly laying down one's life in service of a leader's goals, when personal salvation and rescue was right there, right next to you, ready to whisk you away from danger, that was something else. I had reason to believe I could survive a moment or two of the Eye's direct attention, considering what I had become since my last brush with that penetrating, cosmic sight. But Badger would not live. He was offering himself with blind devotion, to yet another entity he had elevated to godhood in his mind.

I froze up with the knowledge that if I took that step, I could never take it back.

I screwed my eyes shut, and whispered, "I will not be a monster when I next see my sister."

"Heather?" Lozzie squeaked.

"Get him out of here!" I shouted at her — but I was really shouting at myself, at my own temptations. Lozzie flinched and swallowed a squeal. "Just go! I will be right behind you, Lozzie, I promise, okay? I love you, I do, and I won't leave you alone. I promise, just go, right now, before I change my mind, please, please!"

Lozzie vanished and took Badger with her. She was still shaking. Didn't even nod at me.

The burning sunlight was barely thirty meters up now, and falling every second as its source rose on the other side of the mountain range. The high peaks were almost impossible to look at, back-lit with searing fire that was somehow both white-hot and void-dark at the same time; the Eye was too much a paradox for any dream to contain. Light flooded the firmament above us with heat haze thick as steam, backed by violet and ochre and orange. The line of illumination on the ground was so close I could feel it like an open furnace.

I turned to Sevens, but she was already shaking her head, wide-eyed with mirrored fear.

"Yes, I know," she said. "We have seconds, at most. I can't stay, Heather. A life pulling strings and walking the boards does not prepare any director for a theatre fire, even me."

"I'm not asking you to stay." I paused to hiccup. "Go, so I can concentrate."

I was already sprouting fresh sets of tentacles from my flanks and back, straight through my clothes like true pneuma-somatic flesh, a clustered forest of new designs that out in reality would have taken hours of concentration and sweating pain, and would have earned me bruises deep enough to cause organ damage; flat spades of bone and chitin wrapped in leathery skin as shielding, thrown in front of me in overlapping layers like the petals of a flower; thick ablative fat beneath speed-grown armour plates, shock absorbers to cushion my core like biological suspension; supercooled fluids manufactured by impossible glands, pumped into the spaces between my cells and used like insulation between layers of alternating membrane; dark protective films flickering shut over my eyes, triple layers of new eyelid to hold back the worst of the light.

In reality, this would have felt glorious beyond imagination, but here in the dream, still wavering on the edge of lucidity, it wasn't real; it was metaphor for my limits. Deep in the part of my brain that still believed I would live through the next minute, I felt sort of sad about that. But it was very good practice. Though I struggled to imagine a situation out in reality where I would need any of this. I wasn't about to throw myself into a volcano any time soon.

“I’ll be right—”

“—behind me,” Sevens finished my sentence with a huff. “No, you won’t, stop lying.”

“I can’t ask anybody else to do this alongside me,” I said. “I don’t think anybody else can.”

“Don’t say things like that!” Sevens snapped at me, my own voice a screechy mess. “You spent enough time teaching Eevee she doesn’t have to do everything alone, don’t you start thinking like that too.”

“I’m not. I need you to help the others. Out in reality. Can you do that? I think something happened out there, it was chaos. I know time isn’t technically passing, but ... ”

“I can’t.” Sevens huffed, and cast an increasingly nervous glance at the creeping line of light. We had thirty seconds, maybe, unless we sprinted for the shadow of the mountains. “I’m already damaging myself just by being here, but ... ” Suddenly, Sevens took a deep, cleansing breath as she straightened up, and opened her eyes on me with an expression I never would have made, a look more Evelyn than me, confident and old and slightly bitter. Even under the present circumstances, it was enough to confuse me into a frown. Like looking in a mirror and finding something else looking back. “But sometimes the greatest director must learn when to save her leading lady from backstage accidents. Here.”

With a spinning flourish that would have sent the real me tumbling onto my backside, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight peeled away part of her self.

It came off like a membrane, a single translucent layer lifted from skin and hair and clothes alike, a yellow shimmer in the air as fine and light as spider silk, fluttering down into one hand as she completed the spin.

She held it out to me, flushed with pride that I recognised only partly as my own. The membrane in her hand became a yellow cloak.

“A final mask,” she said. “For when all others are removed.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was, for the first time I’d witnessed, failing to accurately imitate me. Alien intelligence looked out from inside my own eyes, and struggled to remain down here on the

ground floor of humanity. Micro-expression changes in her confident pride were nothing like myself, but drawn from a dozen different sources, all of them authentically human, except for those eyes. It was like looking at my own body inhabited by a preternaturally experienced version of myself, a thousand-year old immortal slipped back into her own younger skin.

I glanced at the cloak. It looked like silk. “ ... what is this, really?”

“Take it!” She tutted. “You think we have time to explain? Five seconds, Heather, and we are making like a banana, and *splitting*.”

“ ... I would never say that,” I huffed, but I took the cloak. I needed all the help I could get.

The fabric was warm as sun-kissed skin, light as buttercup petals, yet thick as alpaca wool, and strong as iron. Even with my body changed beyond human recognition, the cloak slipped about my shoulders without so much as a shrug, a mantle that felt like an embrace.

What was this a metaphor for?

Sevens hiccuped. The line of burning sunlight was less than ten meters away, the light itself pouring down in a straight line from the mountain peaks, lowering toward my head. Behind those great jagged dark teeth, a black rim was rising, so distant and yet so large it seemed to dwarf the world.

“Make sure you are right behind me,” Sevens said. I’d never heard myself so serious.

“Because the whole play will fall apart without me?” I laughed on the edge of hysteria, terrified out of my mind. Only the lingering dream-logic haze kept me on my feet as I turned my shielding, my ablative meat, my cooling vanes, my membranes and bone armour and bio-bunkering toward the mountain range, toward the Eye rising beyond them.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight laughed like me, an irritating laugh like a particularly clumsy bird. “No, of course not. That’s the great pity, Heather. You’re not the centre of the universe, no matter what that thing over there thinks.” She nodded at the mountains. “If you die here, life goes on. People will miss you, terribly and deeply. They will hurt. Some of them will never stop hurting. But life will go on.” She sniffed, crying real tears.

And then she was gone too, seconds before the searing light of the Eye's attention swept over the spot where she'd been standing.

I turned to stare into the nuclear dawn rising over the mountains of the mind.

A dark rim stood behind the peaks, infinitely distant yet close as one's own iris; it rose inch by inevitable inch, revealing bunched flesh, mountain ranges of its own, the edge of a lid larger than the universe.

The lid lifted higher, and I spotted a sliver of silver sea.

And then the wash of blinding red light, the shock wave that drove my braced heels into the grey soil, the burning heat already tearing through my outermost layers.

A void, pouring with light, with attention, with observation.

A thought hit me like a lash of cosmic energy — perception, awareness, *recognition*.

Yes, I thought, *and I see you too*.

any mortal thing – 14.5

Observation defines reality.

We — human beings and other people-creatures, in our small bodies, with our crude senses, and our physical constraints — we like to think that observation is a passive act. We imagine that absorption of information does not affect the observed. This is a lie, fed to us by the limits of our perception. It is also not important; ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine-recurring percent of people will never, ever have to think about any of this. It will make no difference to their lives. Those few people who experience the strange warping of synaesthesia have tasted the very edge of what this implies, but even they are still working within firmly grounded, human, mortal boundaries.

All those limits go out the window when you deal with gods and monsters, from the wilds of Outside or the deep dark cold of the abyss.

And what greater source of observation than an intelligence which is all eyeball?

The Eye's observation, its attention, its awareness, poured from that tiny visible slit of silvered sea beneath the dark ridge of eyelid, hanging just above the mountain range.

Observation blasted that barren grey plain in a wave of scorching heat to rival the corona of the sun, already burning through the outer layers of my new defences. The deep red light was both void-dark and yet blindingly bright, forcing me to speed-grow new layers of thick ultra-violet protection over my vulnerable senses.

Hurricane-force cosmic winds slammed into me like a million atomic bombs all detonated at once, grinding my heels into the grey soil, prompting me to lash myself to the ground with anchor cables of thick muscle, themselves plated with bio-ceramic heat armour in order to last more than a split second under the force of the Eye's gaze.

It saw me and it knew me. I think I was screaming.

Deep inside, a buried part of me was wailing with a child's panic.

I'd been forced to replay this trauma once before, months ago when the Lozzie-thing had dragged me to Wonderland, but back then I'd been confused and in shock, and the Eye had taken precious moments to focus a fraction of its attention on my physical body, sprawled in the black ash of Wonderland. But here, in Lozzie's dream metaphor, the Eye was fully aware, already hunting for the source of the unexplained tickle at the edge of its peripheral vision. It already knew what it was going to find, because it had recognised my touch when I'd freed Badger.

A voice hissed through clenched teeth, "No no no no no, not again not again not again, no please please no—"

Nobody else was left, so it must have been me.

I was a sobbing, shaking, hysterical child once again, transported back ten years to utter incomprehension in the face of a cosmic truth I couldn't possibly understand. There are things no child should ever see, things that evolution has not programmed us to endure, for which all our responses are inadequate, counter-productive, inappropriate. Part of me was nine years old again, and all she wanted was for this to stop.

But I was more than the sum of my evolutionary history now. I was *Homo Abyssus*. I cradled that nine-year-old Heather deep in a protective core of pneuma-somatic armour and padded chitin and shock-absorbing pressurised gel. I reinforced her bones with steel in the osteocytes, pumped her lungs full of oxygen-rich gill-fluid, armoured her grey matter with specialised membranes, and cleaned the vomit and blood and tears from her face. I wrapped her in Sevens' yellow cloak, a gift I still didn't understand.

I coaxed her into facing the Eye, and I showed her we could do it, we could stand here, and not be reduced to dust.

So when I stared into that light with tears rolling down my cheeks, and said, "It's okay, it's okay, look, look, *look*," I was only talking to myself.

I had five or perhaps six seconds of subjective time before my fortress would collapse. The Eye's burning attention tore through my armoured plate tentacles like a blowtorch through tinfoil, reducing them to blackened stumps, then to ash, the limbs snapping off and tumbling behind me in the whipping gale. I speed-grew replacements and slammed them into place in the petal-work

lattice, though I couldn't keep up, forced tighter and smaller with each plugged breach. The heat boiled the super-cooled fluids between my specialised protective membranes, and I ejected the ruined liquid in gouts of bubbling black, manufacturing more to pump into my cells before they cooked. My ablative fat crisped and burned, sloughing off in great slabs of ruined flesh. I sweated protective mucus, covered myself in a dense layer of light-reflecting white, and sprouted neural spines from my back, webbed with vascularised tissue to shed heat into my own meagre shadow. The Eye's observation chewed inexorably closer to my core, where I was still wrapped in Sevens' cloak.

My biology could not out pace the Eye. But I didn't flee — and I didn't look away.

I stared back into the Eye. I observed the great observer. That was the trick.

There is a famous thought experiment which almost everybody has heard of these days: *Schrödinger's cat*. I'm not a physicist, but I understand it is intended to illustrate the observer principle in quantum mechanics. Well, I only understand this because I read a book or two about it; I had to ask Twil for recommendations, she knows some of this better than I ever could. I do apologise to poor Mr Schrödinger, because I am about to torture his metaphor to fulfil a purpose he never intended.

You take a cat and put it in a box. In the box is a device which will kill the cat — poor cat. The cat-murder machine is linked to a Geiger counter, and in front of the Geiger counter is a very small piece of radioactive material. If the Geiger counter detects atomic decay, then the machine triggers, and the cat is killed. If no atom decays, the machine does not trigger, and the cat lives.

Until an observer opens the box to check, the cat is both alive and dead, at the same time. The position of the quantum particle is both *a* and *b*, until observed.

Of course, the cat is not actually a cat, and the box is not actually a box. This is all a metaphor. At the quantum level, right down at the building blocks of reality, things do not work the same as up in our rarefied, higher strata, with our heads in the clouds of electromagnetism and gravity, obsessed with causality.

But then again, everything on that grey plain was a metaphor.

Observation defines reality. It is not possible to observe an object without light hitting the object. It is not possible to record the behaviour of marine trench creatures without first illuminating them, and therefore changing their behaviour. It is not possible to stand distant from any system and observe it from outside, because there is no position truly outside of everything, not even *Outside*. And at the most basic level, right down there in the dripping black guts of reality, to observe is to affect.

This is a truth which the Eye had come to understand, down in the abyss where it had been born. It had used that truth to dredge itself from the dark waters and into being, and that is the truth which it had become.

As my defences smoked and burned and my extremities caught fire, another tiny part of me was laughing like a maniac.

That's why you're a giant eyeball? I thought. Because you learnt how to see so bloody well?

But that's what I had been doing all along, as well — to Raine, to Sarika, and now to Badger, every time I'd defined a human being in hyperdimensional mathematics. I'd been observing, and through observation, I gained the power to change. It was what I'd been doing with every hyperdimensional equation. Observing reality, and therefore changing it. All those lessons the Eye had ever had fed to me, all the buried knowledge it had spent ten years cramming into my subconscious, until a reeking, sucking, fetid swamp lay like a bottomless pool in the sump of my soul, all of it was about teaching me how to *observe*.

"I see you too!" I screamed out loud into the gale and the heat and the burning red light, with a mouth that was not remotely human anymore.

But I could only look into the Eye because I wasn't doing it with my actual, biological, human eyeballs back in reality. That would have blinded me and cooked my brain, not to mention given me terrible sunburn. This was only possible via metaphor, here in the dream, and I had Lozzie to thank for that.

Enduring the nuclear storm until the last moment was not enough; winning a staring contest with the Eye was not possible.

No, I had to observe, for as long as I could.

A rational part of me was still thinking in literal terms, and wanted to jump into the muddy, shadowed hole left behind where I'd pulled Badger out of the barren grey soil, but the rest of me knew that was pointless. I had to stare back, right into that curve of silvered sea beneath the Eye's lid. So I dug my feet in and redoubled the efforts to shore up my defences, with my plate-armour slats burning away and my fluid insulation boiling and my darkened layers crisping around me.

The Eye did not rise any further above that mountain range, but hung as if peering over them, as if up on tiptoes and able to stretch no further. I realised, with the sort of recognition that one has upon finally resolving an optical illusion, that it couldn't go any higher, because those mountains were the membrane between our reality and Outside, crossable only by the likes of me and Lozzie and other trans-dimensional travellers. Whatever else the Eye was, it could not brute force its way in, not yet. It could only peer over the lip.

I started to grin, to laugh, almost hysterical — and then I discovered I was wrong.

Like a coronal mass ejection made of darkness, a vast tentacle of awareness reared over the mountains and slammed down into my bulwark with the force of an asteroid impact. Not an actual tentacle, not something I could see with my eyes, even in this realm that was all metaphor, but a tendril of pure thought, a focusing of gaze, a squinting of eyes and a narrowing of attention.

A dozen of my tentacles were pulverised instantly, into pulped meat and skinned muscle. Membranes burst and spilled their fluids onto the grey soil, organs ruptured and stopped working, and the trilobe reactor in my abdomen ran red-hot to compensate. Chitin shattered into a million shards, exploding outward in reactive defence, then turned to ash and blasted into my face, clogging my already besieged senses. The last of my ablative fat bubbled away, leaving me with ragged stumps and seared flesh and hanging sheets of blackened tissue.

I was naked before the Eye. Except for Sevens' cloak.

As my skin steamed and began to crackle, I pulled the yellow fabric tight around myself, and discovered a hood deeper than space, sleeves enough for more than just my arms, and layers of yellow truth just as thick as the Eye's own nature.

I huddled inside the cloak, screaming myself hoarse and bleeding all over, but still staring back into the Eye for one more heartbeat.

As it focused on me, as it wrapped its grip about my soul, I finally understood — even through the relative gentleness of touch which it applied to its own progeny. Insight finally exploded into my mind like a supernova, and I understood the nature of the Eye's grasp.

Sevens' gift had bought me the extra second I needed.

Before the Eye's grip closed tight, I began and ended the only hyperdimensional equation I could have executed under such stress. The one that came naturally by now, the one I'd unconsciously been using for half my life, the one trick of perception it had successfully taught not to my conscious mind, but to my nature.

The cloak came with me, an unbreakable embrace.

Out.

= =

I crashed through the membrane and back to reality. It felt like diving into the sea ahead of a pyroclastic flow.

For half a second, all was noise and meat — ape hooting, warm flesh flapping, ugly jagged shapes of plant fibre and organic polymer at angles that made my head scream and my senses recoil. My mind was still working on that other, deeper level, closer to the truth of reality, and it rejected these shadows dancing on the cave wall, despite the sweet relief of the shade.

My own meat-flaps flickered over blood-slick orbs and I shuddered in disgust. I resolved to rip them out, but my hands got caught up in Sevens' cloak.

That gave my senses the moment they needed to catch up. I stopped trying to pull out my own eyeballs, and realised that there was a lot of shouting going on.

Some of the shouting was distinctly Evelyn, intoning Latin in a terrified, shaking voice. Lozzie's arms were still tight around my middle, her head on my shoulder, her weeping apologies flowing in one long chain of *sorry sorry I'm sorry Heather I'm so sorry*. Then my vision throbbed black and I passed out.

According to Praem — the only person present in the workshop that

afternoon who kept her head — I was only unconscious for about ten seconds, long enough for Lozzie to lay me on my side in the recovery position, and for me to regurgitate what little I'd eaten that morning. Consciousness dribbled back as a thousand hammers pounding on the inside of my skull, a headache accompanied by the acrid stench of my own vomit, and the taste of treacly nosebleed. Snatches of voice dug the cotton wool from my ears, and I believe I let out a sound like a beached dolphin.

"Heathy! Heathy! Heathy!" Lozzie was chirping my name through tears. Behind her, Evelyn's Latin chant trailed off into panting, followed by the sound of her thumping back down into a chair.

"Mmmmm ... here," I managed to grumble.

Everyone spoke at once. Total chaos.

"Lozzie, is she all right? Is she conscious, is—"

"Nathan? Nathan? He's not breathing, he's not—"

A soft bark, a gentle *whuff* of canine curiosity. Hello there, Whistle, that must be you. Glad you made it, at least.

"Heathy, here, here, sit up, upsie-doooo, upside-get, wheeeeeeee!"

Footsteps slammed back into the room, heavy boots not far from my head.

"Heather?" That was Raine, unable to hide her concern. I whined in my throat as Lozzie dragged me up into a sitting position. She did not find it easy, she wasn't quite strong enough, and had to wedge her shoulder under my armpit to apply all her weight.

"She's fine!" Evelyn snapped. "What about that bastard thing?"

"It's out," Raine said. "Zheng's after it, and we need a screwdriver for the front door."

"Sounded like it needed more than a screwdriver."

"What about—"

"She's fine," Evelyn repeated. "She even spoke. Heather, you with us?"

"Heathy is here!" Lozzie chirped.

"Did it work?" Evelyn asked, hard and cold. "Heather, did it work?"

“Mm’fine,” I grumbled. My eyes were gummed shut with blood, and I tried to wipe at them with clumsy, numb fingers. My single manifested pneuma-somatic tentacle joined in, but all I managed to do with that was slap myself across the forehead hard enough to hurt. Somebody gently took my face and dabbed at me with the corner of some fabric, and I held still as best I could, wheezing and ravenously hungry, suffering the worst headache short of a swollen brain.

Somebody else touched my shoulder and squeezed. “Heather? I’ll get you some chocolate in a sec, yeah?” Raine, but her voice sounded wrong, fatalistic and rushed. “Evee, what about—”

“Did it work?” Evelyn repeated, hard enough to make me wince.

“Found the Eye,” I croaked. “Got him ... out. Yes. Worked. It let me.”

“Let you?” Evelyn echoed, incredulous.

“Evee, look at him,” Raine said.

Lozzie managed to wipe my eyes enough that I could crack them open on the unfolding madness filling the workshop.

“Pay attention!” Sarika screeched from the sofa, heaving for breath. “Can none of you reprobates see that Nathan isn’t fucking breathing!?”

She wasn’t wrong.

Badger was sprawled on his back on his side of the complex magic circle, hands twitching in front of his chest, as if he was trying to raise them but couldn’t find the strength. For a split second I was intensely confused — my brain had expected the burned, malnourished wreck from inside the dream-metaphor, but Badger looked just as he had before we’d begun. His head was rolled back, eyes open just a crack, but he wasn’t really there. Whistle was down on the floor next to him, flagrantly disobeying the ‘no dogs in the magic circles’ rule, nosing at his side and whining.

“Evee, circle?” Raine asked, quick and all business.

“Yes, yes! The circle doesn’t matter, we’re done, scuff it all you like.”

Praem whirled into action and descended on Badger in a flutter of

maid dress and white lace, thumping to her knees by his side. Deft, strong hands took his head and tilted his chin back, one of her fingers against his throat for the space of a pulse or two — or not, as it turned out. Before anybody could ask if he was okay, Praem wound back a fist, paused for a fraction of a second to adjust her aim with far more accuracy than any of us could have achieved, and slammed it down into the centre of Badger's chest.

A solid, wince-inducing *crack* shot through the room as she broke his sternum.

It didn't work. Badger just kept twitching. Praem placed a finger against his throat again.

"No," she intoned.

"Then do like we practised!" Raine said, going for the defibrillator. "Come on, Praem, break some ribs!"

Praem didn't need the reminder. She linked both hands together, placed them against the centre of Badger's chest, and began pumping both arms in a steady, unceasing rhythm. If you wanted a person with limitless stamina to do something that absolutely needed to continue without being interrupted, Praem was your woman. It was only later that we discovered Raine wasn't being dramatic — she and Praem had discussed this possibility, along with about a dozen other potential medical emergencies that might have befallen Badger, if I did manage to rip him from the Eye's grip.

So I sat there on the floor with Lozzie propping me up, caked in my own sticky sweat, exhausted beyond words, still confused and feeling alien in my own body after the glory on the other side, and watched as Praem did indeed crack two of Badger's ribs, forcing air into his lungs. Raine rushed to crack open the portable defibrillator.

I clutched at my own chest, expecting to find Sevens' cloak, still feeling that yellow embrace around my shoulders. But my quivering fingers closed on thin air.

"Heathy?" Lozzie murmured.

"... it's nothing," I croaked.

The next few minutes did not unfold like I expected, with my vague, pop-culture notions of what it took to restart a person's heart function.

“Whistle, off, off, that’s it boy, off,” Raine said as she knelt next to Badger, opposite Praem. She tried to nudge the worried Corgi away from his best friend, as she opened the yellow clamshell of the portable defibrillator. “Somebody move the dog, please,” she said quick and clear, no nonsense. “He can’t be touching Badger when we do this.”

Lozzie scuttled forward, leaving me to heave for breath and lean on my shaking arms. Then she returned to support me again, with Whistle hugged in her lap. The dog was whining. He had no idea what was going on, but he still understood.

There were no big metal paddles, no rubbing them together, no Raine shouting *clear!*

The portable defibrillator started talking the moment Raine pulled out a bundle of rubberised wires, and for second I thought the voice was just in my head, another sense-confused artifact of my imperfect abyssal transition. But then I realised it was walking us through the process — *peel one pad from plastic liner, place pad on patient’s upper chest*, and so on. Raine pulled her knife from the back of her jeans and slit Badger’s t-shirt open, then slapped the pair of adhesive electrode pads on his pale, flabby chest and side before the machine could finish reciting the instructions.

“No, no, Nathan you fucking idiot—” Sarika was hissing through her teeth, one hand pressed tight to her eyes.

“*Do not touch patient*,” the machine said in its bland, polite, female voice recording. Badger was still barely twitching.

“That means you too,” Evelyn said, nudging Praem’s hip with her walking stick. “Even if you don’t have a pulse.”

Praem stopped doing chest compressions, raised her hands, and turned milk-white eyes on Evelyn.

Evelyn frowned. “... or, do you?”

“Yes,” Praem intoned.

“Fair enough. And, good job.”

“*Analysing heart rhythm*,” the machine was saying. “*Shock advised. Charging.*”

Raine raised both hands, as if we were all raring to get in the way.

“Everybody hold up. Hold up.”

“Stand clear. Press flashing button to—”

Raine pressed the big red button with the flashing heart symbol. Badger twitched.

That was it. No convulsive jerk, no failing limbs, no *thoomp* of electric shock. Like a flinch. The machine started rattling off fresh instructions about continuing chest compressions, but Praem was already on the task.

“Wake up, wake up you stupid fuck,” Sarika hissed down at Badger. She’d uncovered her eyes, raw and red and angry.

“Analysing heart rhythm.”

“Heather,” Evelyn grunted, gone quite pale in the face herself. “You don’t have to sit here through this. Lozzie, get her some water, at least, some—”

“No,” I croaked. “It’s mine.”

I didn’t possess enough eloquence right then to express myself clearly, but Evelyn got the point. She swallowed, nodded, and squeezed the head of her walking stick with both hands, flesh creaking against the wood.

“Shock advised. Charging.”

“What happened?” I croaked up at Evelyn, as Raine and Praem went through the process again.

Evelyn nodded at Badger. “A man climbed out of his throat.”

“ ... sorry?”

Evelyn huffed, and I could tell that her frustration lay with her own incomprehension. “A man. Climbed out. Of his throat.”

“Yeah it was weird shit,” Raine said with an odd grin. “Even for us. Dude was made of all skin, empty, like a rag doll.”

“He, it, whatever,” Evelyn said, “went straight for Sarika, oddly enough. Some remnant of mister Orange Juice, probably. Zheng caught him, of course, but he wriggled out, nothing to grasp, slippery bastard. The bloody Spider-Servitors barely reacted until he was halfway to the front door, too slow and senile to—”

“Stand clear. Press—”

Raine jammed her thumb down on the button. Badger twitched again. The machine demanded more chest compressions. A lump started to grow in my throat, and a sinking feeling took hold in the pit of my stomach. What if he didn't come back? What if he couldn't come back?

“W-what was the Latin for?” I croaked again, trying to distract myself and reboot my lagging mind. “The spell?”

“Analysing heart rhythm.”

“Shoring up the house's defences,” Evelyn said, then sighed heavily and rubbed her eyes. I noticed her hand was quivering. “Or not. As much as I can affect something on that scale.” She gestured with a flick of her wrist, at the house itself. “I doubt I did anything more than add a layer of paper mache to castle walls.”

“ ... why?”

“When you came back, something was trying to follow you. No prizes for guessing what, I assume?” Evelyn's eyes found me, shaken and a little wild. A shiver passed through my core. We both remembered what the Eye's distant attention had felt like, the first time we'd blundered into it like idiots, back in the Medieval Metaphysics Department.

“Oh. Oh, yes, well.”

Evelyn forced a shrug, awkward with her kinked spine. “I don't even know if the house did anything. I suspect the Eye was simply too big to follow, whatever ... appendage it may have tried to worm after you.”

“Yeah, got kinda dark in here for a sec,” Raine said. “Like something was peering in the windows. Creepy, hey?”

“It's gone now,” Lizzie murmured, stroking Whistle behind the ears. The dog was focused entirely on Badger, whining softly in his throat.

“Shock advised. Charging.”

“Come on come on come on—” Sarika was hissing under her breath, in a rasp like her throat was lined with sandpaper and acid.

“Stand clear. Press flashing button to—”

Raine pressed the button a third time. We all watched Badger twitch and fail to start, like a broken engine with a missing spark plug. Praem slammed both hands down on his chest again before the machine had time to even begin the bland instruction about *apply sixty more chest compressions*. Up until that third shock, we'd been forcing our voices into a semblance of normality, trying to pretend we were all sitting around and recovering in the aftermath. But the operation was not over yet. Badger was dying, and we couldn't seem to stop it happening.

None of us spoke into the silence that followed, filled only by the soft wheezing of air in and out of Badger's mouth, forced by Praem's hands manually pumping his diaphragm. The machine squawked out identical instructions again.

"Shock advised. Charging."

Praem let go, allowed the machine to do its thing.

"Hey," Raine said to nobody in particular. "Sometimes, you bump-start a motorbike, it takes a few goes for the engine to catch."

"You've never ridden a motorbike," Evelyn hissed. "Shut up."

Raine shrugged.

My throat felt like it was closing up. Couldn't get enough air. Sympathy with the man whose soul I had bruised and burnt? What if his stopped heart was not the root cause? What if Badger was like a man crushed between two train carriages, alive and breathing for the few minutes of false life, but dead the moment the rescuers pulled the crushing metal off his ruined body? What if I'd pulled a dead man out of that muddy grey hole?

"Stand clear—"

Red flashing button. Raine's thumb. My vision blurring with sticky crimson blood and clear guilt. Lozzie shaking next to me, starting to cry softly. Whistle's whimpers, lost and confused.

Badger twitched as the electric shock passed through his muscles. Nothing.

Time seemed to stretch out into a never-ending moment of horror. He'd volunteered, and he was dying free, with no more Eye in his brain, but I'd killed him. Hadn't I? Thirty more chest compressions, the machine said. Praem obeyed. Evelyn passed her hand in front of

her eyes; no love lost for an ex-cultist, but she couldn't bear this either. None of us were that cold-blooded.

"We keep trying," Raine said, loud and clear, raising her voice. "Just because we try it four or five times and it doesn't work, doesn't mean he's dead, not yet, not as long as we've got—"

"Get up!" Sarika screeched. She struggled to her feet, fumbling her crutches, and almost went flying before she managed to get the supports beneath her armpits. Tears were rolling down her face as she staggered the few steps toward Badger.

"Analysing heart rhythm."

"For pity's sake, keep her out of this," said Evelyn.

"Kinda got our hands full right now," Raine said. "Sarika, hey, don't touch him."

But to Sarika, there may as well have been nobody else in the room except Badger.

"Get up!" She shrieked at him again. In a feat of bitter frustration, she kicked Badger in the shoulder — no small matter when she could barely stay standing unsupported, wobbling on her crutches, half curled up around her stomach as if in pain. "Get up! You're not allowed to come back from the fucking dead and then leave again, you worthless bastard, you shit! You promised me! You promised we'd both make it! Wake up!"

Sarika broke down completely, sobbing and retching. I reached out a weak hand toward her, but she didn't even see, and I didn't know what I would have done anyway. What could I say? *Sorry for killing your only remaining friend?*

He'd done terrible things. And he'd volunteered. But my hands were shaking.

Raine pressed the button for a fifth shock. Badger — no, Badger's corpse — twitched, weaker than before, as if the machine was running out of battery.

"I think it's time to stop," Evelyn muttered from behind her hand, a choke in her voice.

"No," Raine said, "we keep going until there's no more charge." She glanced at me with a furtive look in her eyes. She knew exactly

what was happening inside my head. “We do our due diligence, if there’s any chance of keeping this man alive. We have to ...”

But Praem stopped pumping Badger’s chest. She sat back and just started down at him. His arms had stopped moving, stopped twitching, gone limp. His eyes were open slightly, but all the light had gone out of them. Glassy, empty, nobody home. Lozzie buried her face in Whistle’s fur, whimpering worse than the dog. Sarika couldn’t stifle her crying. She turned away from us, bitterness fallen into sorrow. A lump in my throat stopped my voice.

“Praem, come on,” Raine said. “Come on, we’ve got another couple of jolts in the shock box here.”

Praem just stared at the corpse.

“Screw it, I’ll do it myself.” Raine sat forward, linked her hands together, and pressed the heel of one palm against Badger’s sternum.

“He’s dead,” Evelyn snapped. “Not every story gets a happy ending. The man is dead.”

Sarika let out a terrible sound, a wounded-animal noise, trying to bury her face in her elbow.

“Come off it, Eevee,” Raine said as she started administering chest compressions, breathing deep with the steady effort. “If you know one thing about me, it’s that I never give up. Right?”

“We’re not giving up,” Evelyn spat. “We did what we set out to do, and he gets to die without the Eye in his head. He knew the risks.”

“He ain’t dead yet.”

Evelyn grit her teeth, real anger flashing behind her eyes. “Stop giving Heather false hope. Stop, Raine.”

When Raine glanced at me, her eyes asked a silent question, asked for permission, asked *which way now*? And for the first time ever I realised all the implications of the way she looked at me. Badger had looked at me with the growing worship of a cultist toward an object of sublime fascination, a thing to be put on a pedestal, an inhuman entity to be decoded and begged and sacrificed to.

Raine looked at me with actual faith.

“It’s not his heart,” I blurted out, my voice croaky and broken. I

spat to clear my mouth, and wiped my lips on the back of my hand, feeling disgusting and wretched, but none of that mattered right now.

Evelyn frowned. "Heather?"

"That's my girl," Raine said. "Come on, what are you thinking?"

"I mean, it might not be his heart. I don't know. The heart is shut down but the damage is in the soul, in the mathematics that makes him function, in his ... in his brain."

Sarika turned and stared at me, eyes red and raw. I stared back.

"Then what are you waiting for?" she hissed.

"I don't know if I can do this." But even as I spoke, my single tentacle arced through the air to cup the side of Badger's head. I'd prepared for this, I'd planned it, I'd gone through all sorts of different ways I might have to open him up for real. "And it could be very ... " I winced. "Very grisly."

"You can do—" Raine started to reassure me.

"I don't fucking care!" Sarika screamed. "Cut his head open!"

Sagging with exhaustion, still raw and bruised inside from a close brush with the Eye, I slammed one full biochemical control rod all the way out of my trilobe reactor organ, and felt my body flush with heat and energy to make up for the hunger and glucose crash. I summoned every scrap of concentration I could muster, and turned the tip of my single tentacle into a pneuma-somatic diamond drill bit.

I'd done my research. I hadn't wanted to read about lobotomies and intracranial pressure, but I'd forced myself to learn the basics, and to attempt a copy of a modern trepanation tool in pneuma-somatic bio-diamond. Perfect for cutting bone, but smooth to flesh, and totally sterile at the microscopic level. I'd not expected to need it, but I also hadn't expected Badger to break in this specific way, where we might just be able bring him back. The bone-saw I'd kept beneath the surface of my tentacle earlier, that had been for me, for our safety, in case of Eye-related emergency. But the drill was for Badger.

"Stop pumping his chest," I said, voice shaking with adrenaline. "I need him to stay still, I think—"

I manifested two more tentacles before I finished my own sentence, perfect pale strobing flesh reaching out to clamp around Badger's head and neck, strong as steel, to hold his skull perfectly still. The others saw him twitch. I just stared, starting to shake.

"Heather, talk to me," Raine said. "Talk us through it."

"Talk," Praem echoed.

"O-okay," I tried, swallowing too hard. "Keep up with the chest compressions, I've got him held still now. I'm going to ... drill ... a ... oh, please don't look. Don't watch this."

Praem took over from Raine, forcing air into Badger's lungs with both hands. She closed her eyes.

"Heather," Evelyn said, solid and steady — or at least, trying to sound solid and steady, though the cold sweat on her face gave the lie to her voice. "What exactly are you going to do?"

I rolled my eyes, shaking and shivering with adrenaline and anxiety, my teeth chattering as a hysterical hiccup forced its way from between my lips. "I'm going to drill a hole in his head, Evee. I'm going to drill a hole in a person's head, make a very small tentacle, then branch it down very very small, and see if I can define the problem. Please, just let me—"

"Are you certain?" Evelyn asked.

"Well, no! Obviously! I'm not a brain surgeon, and I'm going to do maths in his head. This is insane, but I have to try, I'm not ... I will not be responsible for giving up."

Lozzie hugged me tight around the middle — a featherweight anchor rooted deeper than I.

"Tell us what you need," Raine said. "Heather, anything. What do you need?"

Another hysterical hiccup-laugh escaped my throat. "Towels, probably!"

Raine was on her feet and out of the room faster than I could add *actually yes that was serious*, and back in less than twenty seconds, her arms full of old towels from the downstairs bathroom. She put one over Praem's side, presumably as splatter protection, and laid the rest around Badger's head. My core of true flesh was shivering

like a leaf, and the shiver passed up my tentacle and into the drill bit; I could not afford the same level of clumsiness that I'd displayed all week, I could not risk fumbling a chess piece here, not with a human brain. So I slammed two more control rods out of my trilobe reactor, the heat ramping up like atomic fire in my belly, and overcame the shiver in the tentacle with sheer muscle power, tensing and locking until it hurt.

"I'm going to start," I said, voice quivering. "Look away, please, please look away, don't— don't watch me do this. This might not work, I might slip up, I might—"

"It's not as if you can kill him any more dead," Sarika croaked, no longer crying.

"Hm," Evelyn grunted. "Point."

I wasn't sure who turned away and who watched the process, except for Sarika. She was glued to the whole thing from start to finish, eyes wide open.

The pneuma-somatic drill bit was steady as rock, held perfectly level by the dozens of layers of muscle inside my tentacle, powered by the churn of energy in my abdomen, as precise and delicate as any surgical robot — but the moment I relaxed even a fraction, it would quiver, and this would all be for nothing. I used the tip of one of the other tentacles to make a tiny incision, about an inch diagonally upward from Badger's right temple, slicing through scalp until I hit skull. Then I wiggled the drill bit in, until it scraped against bone. I gagged and wanted to vomit at the awful sensation, but I held on.

I resisted the urge to close my eyes as I clenched the muscles to spin the drill.

Visually it wasn't as bad as I'd feared. No spray of flesh and bone dust — the drill bit tentacle was too well designed to allow that. When I felt the point of the drill pop through the other side of Badger's cranium, I quickly pulled it back out. Bright red blood flowed from a wound no wider than a piece of pencil graphite, soaking into the towel below his head. But the tactile sensations made my stomach turn; bone shredded, flesh pushed aside, and the soft pressure of the meninges cradling his brain.

Evelyn made a retching sound. I hoped she wasn't watching.

The drill melted back into my tentacle, cells folding away their specialisations, and I pressed the pale tip against the bleeding wound — then pressed in.

The slimmest, tinniest, most narrow offshoot of my tentacle wormed through the hole in Badger's cranium and split itself a dozen times, then a dozen more, smaller and smaller with each division. Each one bifurcated even further, until my eyes fluttered shut with instinctive concentration as I wielded thousands of mono-cellular filaments. Each one found a separate path through the protective folds of his meninges, penetrating through the blood-brain barrier and stopping up the route behind them.

I could not consciously control them all, not even one of them, not with the precision required to avoid inflicting brain damage, not even with three control rods all the way out and my head overheating with the effort. So I let them slide, I let them find their own way deeper, slipping between the wrinkles of a human brain, then inside the grey matter itself, to entwine with the neurons, like blind fingers sliding over unknown topography.

Neurons were still firing, electrical activity still going; he was technically still alive. For now.

I let instinct guide me until I was connected with as much of Badger's grey matter as possible, and then I fired up the maths.

I did not need to see all of Badger, not the full equation, the burning star of infinite complexity like any human being; I only needed his brain, the physical structure. I needed to find whatever broken neuron had stopped his heart and was blocking the reboot. There was no way I could have done this by actual knowledge, by touch and guesswork, but I didn't have to rely on that; I will never be a brain surgeon, but I am very much the daughter of the Eye.

I defined what I was touching — a human brain, *this* human brain — in hyperdimensional mathematics.

Another control rod popped free, like a heat sink firing off in anticipation of greater need. Out in reality, I think I flinched, I may even have cried out, and I certainly bled from my eyes all over again.

In that frozen second of time I observed his brain laid out as a simple equation — well, relatively simple, speaking from my frame

of experience — and I found the damage, plain as day.

His lower brain functions formed a smear, like damp newsprint dragged out of a sweaty grip. All the higher stuff was intact, personality and memory and ego, but it was no wonder his heart had stopped. I suppose the Eye wasn't interested in Nathan as a person, just as meat, a puppet to be commanded. So that's where it had grasped.

I did the best I could, weaving new mathematics into the broken gaps, pinching off loose ends and tidying up ragged edges, re-stringing broken connections between clusters, the functions of which I could not guess. I did not know what I was fixing, which parts of the equation were heart-related, which were his digestion, what governed the ability to sweat, or feel pain, or stand straight. Would he be deaf for the rest of his life, or be unable to recognise faces? Would he lose control of his bowels, or spend his final years in an iron lung?

I didn't want that. I told myself it was because I wanted Badger to serve his punishment in a way that did some good in the world, not just languishing in pointless pain. Retribution is pointless if you've already permanently disarmed your foe.

He was no Alexander.

So I redoubled my efforts. I pushed the hyperdimensional mathematics to the screaming, bleeding, quivering edge of reality. I modelled replacement equations for his brain, patched him with semi-human processes, plugged the gaps with guesswork based on the only reference I had — myself, abyssal and all.

And then I was done.

I resurfaced with a coughing splutter of nosebleed, a desperate gasping for breath, and a sense of horrible claustrophobia; I had, after all, been inside a person's skull. Such a small space. My vision throbbed black as gentle hands held me steady, but I was so exhausted, so spent, that even Lozzie's grip couldn't keep me up, and I collapsed onto the floor, thumping down on my side.

Barely enough thought left to breathe. I felt my tentacle retracting from inside Badger's brain, recombining filaments as it sucked back out of his grey matter, and finally it popped free of the trepanation hole in his cranium. I let go with all three tentacles and let them

flop to the ground, like a beached squid.

“More blood!” Raine’s voice. “She’s out, that must mean she’s done.”

“Get some fucking bandages on that,” Evelyn spluttered.

“He’ll have to go to hospital, even if this works,” Raine said, rushed but trying to sound confident. “Heather? Heather, are you done? Heather?”

A gentle hand touched my face. I lay at the edge of oblivion, but I put everything I had into cracking open my eyes. Raine was right in front of me, blurry through the haze of blood and the darkness closing in.

“ ... shock him,” I wheezed.

“You got it!” Raine moved back, and I could see Badger lying on the floor, still a corpse. A corpse with a hole in its head, and Praem rapidly trying to apply gauze and bandage.

“Shock advised. Charging.”

Praem let go. I closed my eyes, completely exhausted, beyond thought.

“Magic number, magic number,” Raine said. “Lucky sevens, magic number.”

“It’s shock number six, you fool”, Evelyn grunted.

I heard Badger twitch against the floorboards.

Then nothing.

Sarika, trying to hold back a sob. Lozzie, biting her lip. Evelyn’s fingers tightening on her walking stick. Somehow, I heard it all.

And I heard a breath like a mummified ancient, drawing air into parched lungs.

Badger made a sound of pain, small and mewling.

“Pulse,” Praem intoned.

“Nathan?” Sarika said. There was a sudden clatter of crutches and the sound of Raine catching her as she fell to the floor too. “Nathan, you fuck, say something. Speak! Tell me you aren’t brain damaged,

not any more than usual. Say something!”

Badger took another hissing breath.

“ ... free,” he managed. I’d never heard a voice so weak.

I’d won.

Lozzie gave me a hug, and brought her lips close to my ear. “We did it! Heathy! We did it!”

“Get Heather some water, and chocolate, and probably painkillers,” Evelyn was snapping. “And call an ambulance. An actual ambulance, because we do not have the resources to deal with that head wound. Now, Raine!”

“Lozzie,” I murmured.

“Heathyyyyy!” she hissed back.

“We need to talk,” I muttered, and felt her go stiff, before I slipped off into triumphant oblivion.

any mortal thing – 14.6

Badger lived, but only just.

I was mercifully out cold during the mundane panic which followed the emergency brain surgery. While I was busy being unconscious and Raine was calling an ambulance, Badger slipped into a coma.

I didn't get the whole story until that evening, when I woke up in my own bed, groggy and cotton-mouthed, feeling like I'd been run over by a road roller. But then I had to distill the events from Lozzie and Praem, two widely divergent outputs from a game of telephone, which stretched all the way across the city to Sharrowford General Hospital.

Praem had been watching over me while I slept, and she was more interested in making sure I stayed hydrated, in trying to feed me dinner, and tracking my painkiller intake, than in explaining to me what had happened or where everyone else had gotten to.

"But he's alive?" I'd croaked.

"Alive."

"... and?"

"Alive is good." She raised another spoonful of rice and soft vegetables to my mouth. "Another bite."

"But—"

"Another bite."

I chewed and swallowed like a good girl. It was very awkward eating while those milk-white eyes watched me chew — let alone while resisting the urge to pluck the spoon from her hand with one of my tentacles.

I'd woken up with three of them still fully manifested in rainbow-strobing pneuma-somatic flesh, two on my left flank, one on my right hip. They were still drawing on the steady, unbroken thrum of power from the bioreactor in my abdomen, with one of the control rods all the way out. Invisible to normal eyes, beautiful and elegant

and slightly clumsy, they almost had a mind of their own, following my will before each impulse registered in my conscious mind. They pushed the sheets back before my arms could get there, fumbled my mobile phone off the bedside table, and awkwardly patted Praem on the lap in a gesture of twinned frustration and gratitude. Praem's milk-white eyes flickered as she followed them; she, after all, could see exactly where they were.

"But I have to get up," I croaked. "I have to—"

"Raine said to look after you," Praem told me in her sing-song, silver-bell voice. "So looking after you, I am."

Lozzie, on the other hand, zoomed at a million miles an hour. I gave her a tentacle to hug, but that didn't slow her down.

"—and then Raine called *again* because he woke up but he was trying to tell the doctors things that weren't true but she had to step in but they didn't believe him because it was all slurred and silly which was lucky—"

But then Lozzie made herself oddly scarce as soon as I came round to full consciousness and finished eating. She rattled around in the kitchen, trying to clean her blood-soaked poncho in the washing machine, and apparently teaching Tenny how to bake a cake, with Whistle trotting around at their heels, eager for scraps and very interested in random petting from Tenny's silky black tentacles. The result, which I didn't witness until the next morning, used no less than five different colours of food dye. Tenny informed me it was a "clown cake", and that clowns were bad, but cake was good.

Eventually, Praem let me get up, and I wandered out into the dark corridor, propelled more by the three tentacles than my shaky legs. They reached out to touch the floor and walls; I felt like an octopus wriggling along the inside of a tube, deliciously alien and correct, for once.

Despite everything, despite the exhaustion, a small smile crept onto my face.

Evelyn turned out to be the only other person left in the house. She was having a lie down in her bedroom, in the dark, but not truly asleep. Propped up on the pillows, prosthetic leg removed, she cracked open bloodshot eyes and looked me up and down as I gently pushed her door open. In the deep shadows of the house at

evening, she was just another indistinct lump on the bed.

“You’re looking less bruised than I expected,” she grumbled.

“Evee, I’m so sorry to wake you,” I said through the crack in the door. “I just ... everything’s really quiet, everyone’s gone, and I’m feeling a little shell shocked here. If you want, I can—”

“No, no,” Evelyn grumbled, shifting against the pillows. “You come here, you idiot, I want to see you’re okay. Besides, you didn’t wake me, I’m too tired to sleep.”

I stepped into her bedroom. “ ... that sounds like a paradox.”

“Not for me.” Evelyn sat up with a low wheeze of pain, a shadow detaching itself from the pillowy nest. “Be a dear, Heather, turn the lamp on, will you? Not the main lights, my eyes are feeling sensitive.”

I did as Evelyn asked. The bedside lamp threw soft, warm light over the hills and valleys of her piled bed covers, and revealed her tucked in the middle, squinting and blinking against the illumination. She looked so small and vulnerable amid the lilac and purple bedsheets, like a grub wrapped in protective layers of a cocoon that would never hatch. The matte black of her prosthetic leg stood next to the bed, a poor substitute for a real guard, and her mane of blonde hair was loose, badly in need of a brush. For a moment she seemed many decades older than her actual age, slow and creaky, but then she finished blinking and drew herself up as best she could, the fire of sharp intelligence returning to her eyes.

“Evee, are you okay?”

“Mmmm,” she grunted and shrugged. “That spell earlier took a lot out of me. I feel like I’m about eighty years old. Pass me that.” She gestured at a glass of water on the bedside table, and I pressed it into her hands. She didn’t take her eyes off me as she drank the whole glass and wiped her lips gently on the back of one hand.

“Evee?”

“Forget about me, Heather. The real question is are you okay? I wasn’t just being colourful, you really are less bruised than I expected, and you’re already up and moving.” She nodded at my flanks. “How are the tentacle anchor points?”

“Oh, um.” I looked down at myself. Somebody — Praem, obviously,

because I couldn't imagine Lozzie finding the requisite strength unless she was Outside — had cleaned the blood and vomit from my face, and changed me into some of my own pajamas, loose and comfortable. I pulled the top up to expose my belly, expecting to find those massive, circular, stiffening bruises like normal. But the more controlled summoning of my tentacles had left only a series of large red rings around the bases of the three I currently had manifested, raised and irritated, as if I'd been slapped, or stung by nettles. I marvelled at them for a moment.

Perhaps it wasn't the summoning that left the bruises at all; maybe it was the loss, when they went away again.

"That's new," Evelyn said.

"Well ... well, most of what I did was in my head. Or in Badger's head." I managed a terrible, weak, stupid laugh. Evelyn smiled a grim and rueful smile. "I am very tired though, I feel like I could go straight back to bed, but ... " I gestured at my own head. "Too much to think about. Badger is alive, yes?"

"Praem didn't tell you?"

"Well, yes, but between Praem and Lozzie ... " I wagged both hands either side of my head. One of my tentacles did a loop in the air too, but Evelyn couldn't see that.

"He's breathing. In the hospital, with Raine and Sarika. Raine's been calling every hour with an update, but mostly just to check if you're awake yet. And your big zombie friend is off chasing the skin-golem that climbed out of Badger. She returned about an hour ago, took one look at you and made some comment about bringing you a trophy, then took off again. You won, Heather," Evelyn sighed. "Excepting the fact we're going to need to repair the front door, which is currently braced shut with a piece of wood. All in all, I'd call that acceptable losses."

"Oh. Oh, okay, that's all ... all good. I mean, except the door." I let out a huge sigh and felt a head rush coming on.

"Mm. Your legs are quivering." Evelyn patted the bedsheets next to her. "Sit."

With relief I hadn't known I needed, I climbed up on the bed and leaned into the pillows next to Evelyn, taking deep breaths and watching my tentacles wave in the air. I had the most

unaccountable urge to give Evelyn a hug, or just to touch her shoulder, or pat her hair. All those long seconds of subjective time fighting the cosmic pressure of the Eye's gaze on some utterly inhuman barren rock had me touch-starved and desperate for normal, warm, human contact. If Raine had been there, I'd have demanded to be the little spoon, and if Lozzie hadn't made herself scarce, I'd have asked to snuggle. With Evelyn, such liberties were always more difficult, but I sighed with instinctive relaxation at the shared human scent of her body next to mine.

"How do you feel?" she asked, slowly and carefully, as if I were made of blown glass.

"... I don't know," I admitted to the ceiling. My tentacles waved like fronds of seaweed in an ocean current. "Saved a man's life. How is that supposed to feel?"

"Heroic?" Evelyn managed a single heartbeat before she let out a humourless puff.

I echoed the sound. We both knew it didn't feel that way.

"That's not what I'm asking about, though, and you know it," she went on, softly and slowly. "Lozzie came out of your ... trance state, about two seconds before you did. That's according to Praem's count, by the way, so it's accurate. Usually with you, it's instant, but you lingered. With the Eye. Are you okay, Heather?"

"I stared back at it."

Silence. Evelyn swallowed, far too hard. "Why?"

"Because I realised that's what it is, *how* it is, the essence of its being," I spoke to the ceiling, concealing a shudder in my voice, of awe and wonder. "And it's what I am, too, what it's been teaching me all along." I turned on the pillows, to meet Evelyn's gaze with my own. "I looked back into it, the way it looks at us, at ... everything. I *looked* at it, Eevee. You remember what that felt like, when it stared at us before, back in the Medieval Metaphysics room? I did that, back at it. On a much smaller scale, yes, but I did it. I looked back. I ... I don't know what that means."

Evelyn frowned. Without warning she raised one hand and cupped my chin, bringing her face far too close to mine as she stared into my eyes, first the left, then the right.

“E-Evee ... ?”

“Mm,” she grunted and let go of me. “You don’t look any different from where I’m sitting.”

“But—”

“You don’t look any different from where I’m sitting,” she repeated. “Understand?”

“ ... well ... good. I think.”

Evelyn nodded once, carefully, and then let out a big sigh. “I did tell Praem to get me as soon as you were awake. Where is she, anyway?”

“Taking dirty plates back downstairs. I slipped out while she was gone, actually. Pretty certain she wanted me to go straight back to sleep.”

“She’s being overzealous. Raine made her promise to look after you. Should have come gotten me.”

“Praem only let you rest because she cares about you,” I said.

Evelyn sighed. “That’s what I worry about. And where’s Lozzie?”

“Making a cake. Has she been acting funny?”

Evelyn raised an eyebrow at me. “Do bears shit in the woods? No more than usual. She left you alone? She was glued to you, that’s half the reason Raine even agreed to leave the house in the first place, she trusts Lozzie with you. Did something happen, while you were ... ” she raised her hands and did little air-quotes, grimacing as she said, “*calculating* together?”

“No,” I said, then, “yes. Maybe. Oh, I don’t know. She ... took the initiative.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“ ... I yelled at her. Badly. Screamed my head off, in fact.”

Evelyn’s narrowed eyes deepened into a full blown frown, a searching, inquisitive squint of puzzled concern. “You, shouting at Lozzie?”

I sighed and buried my face in Evelyn’s pillow nest. “I know.”

“Did she deserve it?”

“Evee!”

“It’s a fair question. She can be extremely ... *Lozzie*.”

I bit my lip. “Maybe. I haven’t exactly had time to process events yet.”

“Yes, no kidding,” Evelyn said, the nature of her frown changing. Her eyes alighted on mine once more, and I was no longer a complex problem to be unknotted. “Also, I’m sorry, ‘yelling’? How do you shout in hyperdimensional mathematics?”

“... you don’t,” I muttered, more to myself than Evelyn. “Nothing that happened ... happened. But it did, but it wasn’t this, or here, or like ... this.” I raised my hand and flexed my fingers. “It wasn’t flesh, not for real.”

“Okay, now you’re sounding like Lozzie. Please don’t.”

I managed a small smile. “It happened. That’s all I can communicate, without dragging you there too.”

“Don’t do that either,” Evelyn said.

I snuggled in closer to the pillows. Before I realised what I was doing, I made an involuntary motion with one hand, a sort of blind tugging, as if trying to pull a blanket tighter around myself — but I was only wearing pajamas. It took a moment of confused staring at my own hand, a moment of slow neural connections re-linking and firing up, to realise that I’d tried to snuggle up inside Sevens’ yellow cloak.

The yellow gift still lay about my shoulders, an invisible, ghostly sensation, light as spider silk. But there was nothing there, either visible or pneuma-somatic, nothing for my tentacles to pluck at either, as one of them flapped at my collar, trying to find the substance of the fabric. It was similar to the phantom sensation of glasses still on one’s face, when one is too used to wearing them, only to reach up and discover they are not present.

Except the sensation of the cloak did not fade.

“... Heather!” Evelyn hissed between her teeth.

“I’m sorry, what? What?” I looked up and found Evelyn had gone very still and very pale, wide eyes flicking between me and her own

lap.

“Tell me this is you!” she hissed, breaking out in cold sweat.

One of my tentacles lay across her thighs like a lazily flopped-out arm, slowly curling into a hug around her hips. The mystery of Sevens’ cloak had distracted me so much that I hadn’t been paying attention to what my other tentacles were doing, let alone the subconscious desire to cuddle with Evelyn. Practice as I might, and ram the muscles themselves full of extra-biological sources of energy, I still lacked the multi-tasking brain power of a true octopus or squid.

I whipped the tentacle off Evelyn so fast it sent a spike of pain into my side.

“Yes, yes!” I spluttered. “Oh, goodness, I’m so sorry, yes, it’s me! It’s just me! I’m so sorry, Evee, I’m so sorry.”

Evelyn drew in a shaking breath, frowning at me like I’d just goosed her side or tickled her under the armpit without warning. “I do appreciate the ... the ... skin-ship, I suppose, but bloody well warn me if you’re going to touch me at all, let alone with something invisible.”

“I didn’t mean to invade your personal space, it was an accident, I wasn’t paying attention to where I was putting my hands. Um. Not hands.”

“It wouldn’t be half so spooky if we could see the damn things.” Evelyn let out a huff, then paused with an odd frown on her face. A tip of pink tongue poked out from between the corner of her lips, a sure sign of her mind chewing a problem. “Wait here. Actually, no, I can’t be bothered to put my leg back on right now.” Her eyes searched me. “And you need rest. Where’s Praem when I need her, hmm?”

“Probably making sure Tenny doesn’t eat too much raw cake batter.”

“Coming,” a sing-song intonation like a struck bell rang out along the upstairs hallway, and a moment later we heard the sound of Praem’s gently clicking footfalls making their way up the stairs and across the floorboards. I turned to look over my shoulder as Praem appeared in the open doorway, prim and proper and perfect in her maid uniform, hands clasped before her.

Evelyn shot her a sharp frown. "I was speaking at normal volume. How good is your hearing?"

Milk-white eyes made it impossible to know where Praem was looking, but I was certain she stared at Evelyn.

"When you need, I am there," she intoned.

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. "You don't have to hang on my every beck and call, you know? You can tell me to shut up if I'm being a bitch. I'll get it myself, I should put my leg back on anyway." Evelyn started to heave herself up into a proper sitting position, shifting toward me on the bed. "Pardon me, Heather."

"Oh, no, Eevee, I can go," I said, starting to get up as well, my tentacles pushing up from the bed. "You're all comfy, just let me—"

"I am already standing up," Praem intoned.

"Let me just get my leg on," Evelyn snapped, scooting forward on the bed as I moved out of the way. I noticed she was staring at a point on the floor, or perhaps at the corner of my hip, unable to meet Praem's eyes.

"I am already standing up," Praem repeated.

I froze, feeling like piggy-in-the-middle during a family spat.

Evelyn hissed through her teeth. "I said, let me—"

"Not stopping you," Praem said.

"I am not an invalid, I am perfectly capable of getting out of bed and going downstairs."

"You do not want to."

"That is beside the point," Evelyn hissed at Praem. "Don't try to stop me from putting my damn leg back on. Anybody would think you were—"

Praem stepped forward, dropped to one knee next, and picked up Evelyn's prosthetic leg; for a horrible moment I thought she was going to abscond with the artificial limb in some grotesque forced-infirmary behaviour. But all my fears were unfounded. She held the limb up, angled just right for Evelyn to slot the rubber socket onto her truncated thigh.

Evelyn went still, blushing ever so slightly in both cheeks. She couldn't look at Praem. "You know I don't need that," she said.

"Put your leg on; I will get what you need."

Evelyn sighed, but her voice came out softer than before. "The magnifying glass. It's still on the table in the workshop. That, and the red pen, and the etching tool. And give me that." She gestured in irritation. Praem pressed the prosthetic leg into Evelyn's grip.

Praem stood, straightened, and marched back out of the room. I watched her go, then watched Evelyn in tense, self-conscious silence, as she pulled aside her dressing gown and wriggled the stump of her thigh into the rubber socket of her prosthetic leg, still blushing, concentrating especially hard — or pretending to concentrate — on the process she'd performed at least once a day for half her life.

She finished, stomped on the floor with her artificial foot, and shot me a frown. "Yes?"

"... she only does it because she cares about you, Eevee."

"Tch, I know."

"She loves you."

"And she's entitled to a life of her own. You make life, you accept that principle. If you don't, you shouldn't have the right. Makes you evil." She took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Oh, I'm so bloody transparent, aren't I?"

"A little." I smiled. "But if you believe what you said, then you also have to respect her choice, to spend her time taking care of you and being your family—"

"*Family*," Evelyn hissed, almost as if she couldn't believe the word. She shook her head.

"I thought you were getting used to the idea?"

"Yes, but sometimes it still hits me. Is that so surprising? It's going to take more than a few weeks to get used to the fact I have a daughter." Evelyn shook herself, like a raven ruffling her feathers. "I'm too young for this. Too much responsibility. I have to do right by her. I can't fuck this up, Heather."

"You won't. And you're not doing it alone."

Evelyn made a noncommittal grumble and looked away, but I was an experienced translator of all the little variations in pitch and tone and volume in Evelyn's various grumbles and grunts and throaty noises. This was a good one, a slightly embarrassed one, and had me smiling involuntarily at the back of her head.

Praem returned a minute or two later with the requested items — Evelyn's magically modified magnifying glass, along with a narrow-nibbed pen and a sharpened tool for scraping lines into the metal rim. Evelyn thanked her, then turned the magnifying glass on me, peering through it with one eye closed. I had to look away from the bizarre swirl of colours through the lens, and the warping effect on Evelyn's eye; the magical circle drawn onto the glass itself already made my stomach turn.

"Do you need me to do anything?" I asked.

"Just be yourself. Oh, but don't put the tentacles away, obviously."

Evelyn worked for a few minutes, peering at me and the air around my body, looking for my tentacles, then lowering the magnifying glass to make tiny adjustments to the spell she'd wrapped around the lens casing, adding more angles and a few words in a language I didn't recognise. I started to blush a little, feeling self conscious.

"There," she said eventually, frowning through the glass, her eyes made huge by the warping effect of light refraction, wobbling and wavering under the strange optics of the spell. "I can't see them clearly, not like we did in the castle that one time, but I can make out ... mm, a rainbow strobe effect." She puffed out a laugh. "Very you, of course. I'd forgotten."

"You can actually see pneuma-somatic material through that?" I asked.

"No. Well, sort of." Evelyn sighed and shrugged and tossed the magnifying glass onto the bedsheets. "At the moment it's more like looking at the readout on a radar display. I'm just seeing the fact the object is there, and some basic qualities, not the object itself, or rather the light reflected from it. But if I keep tuning the technique ... " She shrugged again, silently evasive.

"I thought you'd be more enthusiastic about this. Has any mage ever done it before?"

"Not that I know of. But then again, I'm sure there's plenty of mages

in Britain alone who I don't even know about. As long as they don't come into my territory, that's fine."

I bit my lower lip at her. Evelyn was evading the actual question, but I had no idea why. "Evee ... "

She saw the look on my face and rolled her eyes. "Oh, for pity's sake. It just feels stupid, all right?"

"Stupid?"

"Yes. Is there an echo in here?"

"Yes," Praem echoed. I almost giggled.

"What I mean," Evelyn said, "is that yes, in theory I could perfect the technique, given enough time and a lot more experimental material. I could, possibly, make a pair of glasses that would allow a person to see pneuma-somatic tissues. And you know what?" She answered her own question before I had a chance. "That sounds like an idea from a bad urban fantasy novel, that's what, and I hate it. Trust me, Heather, if a piece of magic sounds too good to be true, it usually is."

"Oh goodness, I'd love that though. I want Raine to see my tentacles."

"For what pur— no, don't answer that." Evelyn pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm not promising anything. And it's still dumb."

"It's not dumb!" My turn to huff. "One must take ideas for new inventions wherever one can. Perhaps we would never have invented flying machines without Leonardo da Vinci drawing all those things that didn't work."

Evelyn scoffed. "Nonsense."

"I'm serious. If you get the idea for pneuma-somatic glasses from a silly novel, so what?"

Evelyn shot me a very tired look. "So I should dedicate this invention to ... oh, I don't know, Nasu? Though those glasses did the opposite."

"I'm sorry?"

"Never mind," Evelyn said. "In any case, I'm not working on it right now. I'm bloody exhausted. That spell back in the workshop ... "

She trailed off and shook her head, looking five decades her senior for a long, dragging moment once again.

“Was it really that bad?” I asked.

Evelyn shrugged.

“Yes,” Praem intoned.

“The whole room ... darkened,” Evelyn muttered, “but it wasn’t actual darkness. It was like some vast object occluding a source of light which has always been there, some constant presence in life, in reality, that you just take for granted, the way a fish is not aware of the water. And then something blocked it.”

“ ... did you rehearse those words?” I asked.

Evelyn sighed. “Yes. I’ve been thinking about it constantly since it happened. The sensation only lasted for half a second perhaps, before I started the magic, but ... ” She trailed off and shrugged. “As I said earlier, I doubt I or the house did anything. The Eye was simply too big to follow through whatever pinprick hole you’d made.”

I shuddered as she spoke, her voice too far away, echoing and distant, as if the experience had taken something from her.

“Evee, I’m going to touch your shoulders. Is that okay?”

“ ... mm. I suppose so.”

I wrapped an arm and a tentacle around Evelyn’s kinked, twisted back. I didn’t press too hard, or touch her spine, but she leaned into my embrace with a long-suffering sigh, awkward and unused to being touched, but savouring the contact all the same.

“So,” I said eventually, as we detached again. “What’s going on with Badger? I do want to know.”

Evelyn nodded toward the bedside table, to where her mobile phone was lying beneath the lamp. “Raine’s been keeping us updated, and it’s time we called her before she calls us again. She’ll want to know you’re up and well, so let’s find out if they’ve plugged the hole in his skull yet.”

= =

Badger had slipped into a coma back there on the floor of the

magical workshop, but his body had kept struggling. According to Raine — and according to the paramedics from the ambulance — he'd come round once on the journey to the hospital, incoherent and weak but fighting hard to stay in the land of the living, and then three more times in intensive care, while he'd lain under an oxygen mask and the doctors had worked to stem the bleeding. He hadn't been slipping in and out of consciousness, but falling deeper down, right into a coma each time. He'd raved about things that nobody but I could have understood — burning sight in the land of everlasting night, and angels which were all tentacles and wings and eyes — and he cried tears of relief whenever he was fully coherent. Luckily for us, doctors and nurses saw weirder and worse all the time. Badger was just another patient suffering psychological side-effects of massive trauma.

Raine had followed the ambulance in her car, with Sarika in the passenger seat. They were at the hospital as Badger's *friends*. According to Sarika he had no family worth calling to his side, except Whistle.

"So, so ..." I struggled to phrase my question down the phone to Raine, as all the little sounds of a busy hospital leaked through from the other side. "What are they actually treating him for? I don't know what they'll find if they MRI his brain, we don't want to cause some kind of panic. What did you tell them?"

Raine laughed. "The truth!"

To my incredible surprise and deep concern — at least until she explained the rationale — Raine had indeed told the doctors and nurses the truth; or at least a fun-house mirror reflection of the truth.

She told them Badger had drilled a hole in his own head, with a home-made skull brace and a stolen medical drill bit.

How did she know this? Well, he was a friend of hers, and of Sarika here, and he'd been talking for weeks about drastic solutions to strange headaches. He'd been building some sort of head-clamp device; he even showed it to her once, and put his head inside the thing, very upsetting, though she was pretty sure he'd since relocated it somewhere other than his little bedsit flat, since she'd reacted with such concern. You know, concern, for a friend. So, if the police happened to take an interest, and they searched his flat,

they probably wouldn't find anything. Dunno where he did it in the end. Somewhere sterile, she hoped.

According to Raine's inventive but carefully contained tall tale, the first we'd known of this was Badger turning up on our doorstep, head wrapped in a bloody towel, teetering on the edge of consciousness. We certainly had enough blood soaked towels to prove that part, if anybody cared to investigate the particulars.

Raine had no idea where he'd stolen the drill bit from, of course. Sarika had put in the opinion that he'd bought it off the so-called "dark web".

How they'd come up with the lie so quickly, I had no idea. Sarika's back up surprised me too. Perhaps they'd spoken in the car.

"But the whole ruse relies on Badger knowing what to say when he wakes up," I hissed down the phone, as if I might be overheard.

"He's a crazy man who drilled a hole in his own head," said Raine. "He'll be talking all sorts of nonsense. Plenty of time to get his story straight. Plus," she lowered her voice to a whisper down the phone, "we've been here all afternoon and early evening, and the fuzz hasn't taken any notice at all. They still keep a little eye on Sarika from time to time, so if they gave a damn, they'd be here already. I think we're in the clear, Heather. For now. Praem got all the blood cleaned up back home?"

"Yes, but—"

"Relax. I got this under control. Cool?"

I sighed. "Cool," I echoed.

= =

Badger spent three days slipping in and out of consciousness. Raine spent three days taking Sarika to and from the hospital, though I never visited. I didn't want to see him, I didn't want him to see me, and I didn't want to risk being there if or when he died.

But he didn't. He pulled through, with a nasty hole in the side of his head, a psychiatric evaluation to put to shame any UFO conspiracy enthusiast, and a place on a hopefully short waiting list to have a small titanium fixation plate installed in his skull. Three days, no police, no cultists turning up to murder him in his hospital bed, no *Ooran Juh* reaching for him from a dark corner — and only minor

neurological damage. He had shakes and tremors, problems closing his fingers all the way, some issues with intermittent loss of taste and blurry peripheral vision, not to mention the headaches, which were to be expected. But he was apparently free of memory problems, spacial awareness issues, perception of time and so on. His personality was intact, and his higher brain functions preserved, though more by the Eye's lack of interest than any finesse in my rescue.

Raine conveyed messages from Badger, for me; reports of his garbled private gratitude that I did not want to hear. I told her so after the first time, and she didn't tell me anything else he'd said about me, except for the fact he was once again was master of the inside of his own head. The Eye's crushing presence, that outsider whispering in one's own skull, those alien drives, were gone.

I'd won the tug of war, but I didn't let it go to my head; I'd gotten lucky, and Badger had paid for my revelation.

Freeing a single ex-cultist from the Eye, that was one thing. Doing it with all the rest? The police would absolutely sit up and take notice if we sent ten more people to A&E with mystery drill wounds in their skulls, brain damage or not.

Maybe the Eye wouldn't grip so hard next time. Maybe now it knew what I wanted, it would let me take those people from its grasp. After all, it had been playing with me, in the manner of a mother predator playing with its young, letting me win the tug of war.

Or maybe it would force me to rip the next person in half.

And maybe I would do so, just for another few seconds of staring back into that silvery sea of awareness. For another layer of knowledge which would bring me closer to freeing my sister. For another lesson.

On the first day after the brain surgery and the confrontation with the Eye, I called my mother. My actual, real, biological mother, to remind myself that I was not only an abyssal thing, raised by an Outsider on a steady diet of impossible mathematics. I was an ape too, and my own ape mother felt far less intimidating for once, which was an interesting experience. We didn't talk about much. I had to lie extensively, of course, though I told her the truth — that Raine and I were doing very well and our relationship was stronger than ever, and yes of course we'll come visit in the summer, and no,

the house is perfectly fine, and yes I'm eating plenty, and I've made lots of friends now. A mad part of me wanted to tell her about Zheng, but even if I could make her understand the strange, developing, non-sexual-but-still-romantic nature of our particular polyamorous situation, I don't think even my solid and stoic mother could have looked at Zheng and come away with a rational explanation.

Zheng didn't return that first night, nor the next, or the one after that. She didn't so much as leave a dead squirrel on the back doorstep.

"For all her boasting of being such a great hunter," Evelyn commented on Tuesday evening that week, "she certainly is taking her sweet time."

"Maybe the weird skin-man's a good sprinter," Raine said.

"She wouldn't go far," I said, trying to convince myself not to worry. "Not far from me, not now, not after ..."

Raine shot me a grin over the kitchen table. "Missing your left-hand bed warmer?"

"Tch," I tutted at her. "I'm actually worried, Raine, not everything is about what I want. Zheng's done this before, vanished for days, weeks on end. I wish she'd just check in, let me know she's okay. She did still have that wound bandaged up."

"Mister—" Evelyn sighed, "*Orange Juice* is completely gone, uninterested in Badger. I doubt she's going to run into that problem again."

"Maybe ... maybe we could ask Twil to go find her?" I asked. "Follow her nose?"

Evelyn shot me a sharp frown. "It is exam season, Heather. Twil's got one tomorrow morning, in fact. She needs to sleep, and concentrate. I understand your fears, but don't screw this up for her. There's a good reason I've kept her away from this mess."

"Hey," Raine said, reaching over to squeeze my shoulder. "Zheng wouldn't get in deeper than she can get out. She's just being like a cat. I'm sure she'll be home soon enough, with or without a trophy, eh?"

"Home soon enough," I echoed. "Just wish I knew where she was."

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Physically, I did surprisingly well over those three days; Evelyn was right, I was nowhere near as bruised as I had been in the past. I recovered quickly, my energy returning in slow waves from the trilobe reactor in my abdomen, which I fed with cravings for meat and cheese. Raine picked up fast food on her way home from the hospital each time — thick-sauced curry, pizza enough to choke a bear, an entire package of sausage rolls — and I ate too much, all of it burned on the altar of my new body, fuel for a self-correcting, self-perfecting bio-mechanical experiment in feeling good for once.

Unlike every other aftermath of abyssal euphoria, this time I kept my tentacles.

I kept at least one tentacle manifested at almost all times, fuelled by varying the extraction depth of a single control rod in the bioreactor, like clenching or relaxing a rarely used muscle. Sometimes I treated myself to two or three, touching the ceiling and walls as I crept through the house, stifling a giggle of physical delight, though I folded them all away when we attempted to resume normality by attending classes on Wednesday. The risk of touching a unsuspecting person with an invisible appendage was too great. I gave into temptation only once, unrolling an invisible tentacle below the desk while I sat in a seminar. It felt like stretching out a cramped leg.

After experimentation, I discovered that the most comfortable single tentacle to keep permanently out was the lowest one on my left flank, down on my hip. I started to use it to touch things around the house, reaching for things in the kitchen, playing with Tenny, and trying not to spook poor Whistle. The corgi couldn't see the limb, but he could somehow sense the motion, though I never risked upsetting him by petting him with it. That would be cruel.

I felt more energetic than I had since childhood, since I'd last been hand-in-hand with Maisie.

I didn't tell anybody about Sevens' cloak. Not even Raine. It felt somehow private, something that I should wait for her to request I return, a secret, just between us. Intimate, but harmless.

I could almost have felt confident — not happy, and certainly not contented, not without Maisie returned to me. But confident, yes. Terrified of the revelation, but confident I could use it. Every

unoccupied moment returned me to the thought of staring back into the Eye, to the new understanding that seeing was defining, and that was how the Eye related to everything which wasn't itself.

And I was a little watcher. An Eye in miniature, blended with savanna ape and abyssal choice and parts of all the people I knew.

"So, you gotta practice your scowl?" Raine said when I explained all this to her. "Get a real mean look in your eyes, win a staring contest."

I laughed, but weakly, still terrified of how to implement what I'd learned. "To do what, intimidate it?"

"To make it blink first, duh."

"Oh, Raine, the rest of me would die before I got that far. I don't know how to survive the experience."

Raine shot me one of those absurd grins, the ones she knew were wrong, the ones meant to make me roll my eyes. "I'll stand in front, you can scowl at it over my shoulder."

I did roll my eyes at that, but only a little. Maybe she was onto something.

I could have felt confident, yes — but Lozzie was avoiding me. That hurt.

She didn't give the silent treatment or shut doors in my face or scurry out of the room whenever I appeared, but she was careful never to be left alone with me, always trotting off with Tenny whenever I turned toward her, always chattering at impenetrable high-speed so I couldn't get a word in edge ways, couldn't begin the subject, always sound asleep or strangely absent or currently naked and getting changed or watching Tenny do something and she'd be off again on a thousand-word ramble, both sweet and fascinating but so obviously a conflict avoidance strategy.

"You want me to talk to her instead?" Raine asked. "She doesn't avoid me."

I sighed. "That's sweet of you to offer, but it would be beside the point. She caused a practical problem. Sort of. But that's not really what bothers me, not really why I need to talk to her. I just need to ... talk to her."

Lozzie had stopped me from committing a murder, and my anger at her intervention had faded, but the issue was still there. She should have let me know. She had too much faith in me. She shouldn't have been there if she was that vulnerable. She was sweet and I loved her and I needed to understand, but she needed to understand too.

In the end it wasn't a matter of strategy, but of courage.

I finally cornered her on Wednesday afternoon, after Raine and I got home from university. All I had to do was peer in through the open door of her bedroom, easing it wider with a tentacle — they had more courage than my hands, clumsy fingers clasped together inside the front pocket of my hoodie — and Lozzie and Tenny looked up from the television, the latter innocently curious with her big black eyes, the former like a pixie caught stealing a baby.

Tenny had been playing a video game against herself, one controller in her human hands, another one in her tentacles, racing two go-karts against a host of computer-controlled opponents. Lozzie was perched on the foot of the bed, watching and giving commentary and praise. Tenny kept playing, not even looking at the screen, as I smiled at the pair of them and shuffled into the room.

Lozzie must have seen the look on my face. She froze with a hitching smile.

"Tenny, Lozzie, hey," I said.

"Heath!" Tenny greeted me. A single tentacle wriggled out from under her wings and came to touch mine in a sort of hand-hold-high-five combo.

"Tenny, can I borrow Lozzie for a bit?" I asked, focusing on Tenny though I knew I shouldn't. "I need to talk to her, about something important. Adult stuff."

"... 'dult," Tenny echoed.

"Lozzie," I said, my throat tightening as I finally made eye contact with her. "We do need to ta—"

I didn't even get to finish my sentence before Lozzie tried to run away.

Her eyes unfocused and her whole body flinched, a shiver passing through her like the start of a seizure. But then she caught herself

like a narcoleptic after a micro-sleep, snapping to and blinking rapidly, cringing away from me.

“Lozzie?!” I jerked toward her in panic that something was wrong, but then I realised. “Lozzie, did you just try to Slip?”

“Loz!” Tenny was up on her feet, game truly forgotten now.

“Did you just try to Slip to avoid talking with me?” I asked.

Lozzie drew her knees to her chest on the bed, and looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes filled with shame and fear.

“But I can’t, can I?” she said.

any mortal thing – 14.7

Lozzie — my little Lozzie, my surrogate sister, my hyperactive gremlin-elf with hair like a cloud of gold and always with more energy to share, who spoke beautiful nonsense half the time and shining truth the other half; my special friend from beyond the wall of sleep and the veil of dreams, who had dragged me Outside and managed to show me that not all trips beyond our placid island of ignorance were doomed to loss amid black seas of infinity; who had brought me to castles as large as cities, and infinite deserts with sand as fine as time, and deep quiet forests of alien trees with slow secret vegetable thoughts; the girl who I had put everything on the line in order to rescue, who I had committed murder for, my proof-of-concept that I had what it took to save Maisie — she stared up at me with fear and shame.

“I can’t,” she squeaked. She meant *I can’t Slip. I can’t run away from you.*

In all the dark constellations between the bright stars of human emotion, all the grim, lonely paths of grief and alienation, despair and self-loathing, trauma and anguish, one of the most inhospitable spheres on which to alight is the knowledge that somebody you love is afraid of you.

Lozzie hugged her knees to her chest, curled into a ball in the corner of her bed, huddled inside the protective embrace of her pastel-striped poncho. She seemed like a small child afraid of a beating, while I was the terrifying monster who’d stalked her back to what was supposed to be a safe place, and now she couldn’t run away.

But fear and shame were not the only emotions I inspired. Deep in the blue of Lozzie’s eyes lay a cold sheen of defiance.

I put my hands up — not in surrender, but in the manner one might show empty palms to a skittish animal, some tiny vulnerable rodent that thinks it’s about to be thoughtlessly crushed. My three tentacles had begun to drift toward Lozzie too, driven by the natural desire to comfort her with a hug, but I pulled them back as well, to show I wouldn’t even touch her unless she gave her consent.

That felt unnatural. We were always touching each other.

Anything I might have said died on the way to my lips, replaced with a wordless, “Uh ... a ... a ... ” sound.

“Loz! Loz!” Tenny fluttered, panicked by whatever was unfolding between her adults.

She broke the awful spell which had divided Lozzie and I by reaching out toward Lozzie with her silken black tentacles, wrapping them around her wrists and hands, looping round her waist, and holding the underside of her thighs and the back of her head. Tenny had finally abandoned her video game. The screen showed a pause prompt, and one controller hung limp in two thoughtlessly slack tentacles as she tossed the other from her humanoid hands on to the low table. Lozzie took several shaky breaths and hugged the tentacles in return, rubbing her cheek against Tenny’s coal-black skin.

“It’s okay, Tenns, it’s okay,” Lozzie said in a voice that was very much not okay, sniffing and snuffling on the verge of tears. “I’m okay, we’re okay, okay-okay, okaaaaaay. It’s just auntie Heather, just here and normal, everything is normal and okay.”

“Heath?” Tenny fluttered at me. She blinked those sea-black eyes, uncomprehending but worried. Her strips and whorls of white fur were bristling in alarm.

I swallowed, throat like sandpaper, and located my voice. “Of course it’s okay, Tenny. Everything is okay. Going to be okay.”

“Buuurrrrr,” Tenny trilled a doubtful noise. She even narrowed her eyes at me, which was new. One of her tentacles wrapped around one of mine in a cephalopod hug.

“Lozzie,” I said without looking at her — I worried that if I looked, I would gladly sacrifice my words on the altar of her fear. I would lie to avoid hurting her, or shut my mouth and abandon the conversation, and that really would change the nature of our relationship. “Lozzie, there’s nothing, nothing I would say to you that would hurt Tenny. Just things that are maybe not for young ears?”

Lozzie didn’t reply, so I risked a glance at the bed. She was still huddled up, now webbed in Tenny’s tentacles, still staring at me with fear in her eyes.

“Why?” I asked, and my voice broke.

“Frrrrrrppp!” went Tenny. One of her tentacles tightened on mine, and I made a conscious effort to pull myself together. One of us had to get there, to drag the other along, and it wasn’t going to be Lozzie.

“Lozzie, it’s me?” I tried again. “It’s just me. What are you afraid of? Why try to run?”

Lozzie’s lower lip started to wobble, and the fear gave way to the shame. Tears filled her eyes but she resisted the threat of sobbing, and instead scrubbed at her face with the back of her sleeve.

“I don’t know,” she murmured in such a small voice it hurt my heart. “I’m sorry, Heathy, I’m sorry, it’s just what I—”

“Loz!” Tenny trilled. “No!”

“It’s okay, Tenny,” I hushed, one hand out to stop Tenny getting in the way of Lozzie’s emergency unfolding. “It’s okay. It’s all going to be okay.”

“It’s just what I do, isn’t it?” Lozzie carried on, talking to her knees or the bedspread or Tenny’s tentacle in her arms, in a small, snuffly, reedy voice. “I run away and I go elsewhere and I’m sorry, I’m really sorry Heathy, you’re not like that but I can’t help it, and you’re not like that, you’re not him, you’re not him, you’re not *him*.” Lozzie buried her face in her knees as she repeated those three words, then kept going, muffled by flesh and bone and cloth. “She’s not him. Stop. Stop.”

She balled up her fists and hit herself on the head, until Tenny wrapped gently restraining tentacles around her wrists to hold her back.

I didn’t even have to ask. In Lozzie’s past, *We need to talk* could only have come from one person. Running was entirely rational. As far away as possible. Preferably Outside.

“... yes, Lozzie, oh my goodness,” I said, almost taken with a tiny hysterical laugh, but I managed to control that. “I’m not your brother. I’m not Alexander.”

“I know that!” Lozzie’s face rose from her hiding place, red and flushed with shame. “I know! It’s not fair on you I know that I know it but I can’t help— it’s like I still can’t get away from him, like he’s

still doing this to me and I don't know why— I just— I want to run, I want to go, I don't want to be— don't—”

“Brrrrrrffffrrrr!” Tenny made an agitated sound, one of the loudest I'd ever heard from her, a feathery trilling which made the floor resonate beneath my feet, like the house was in the grip of a very sudden, short, fluffy thunderstorm. I think I heard somebody downstairs drop something in surprise, but then Tenny was launching herself at the bed in a bundle of whipping tentacles and fuzzy wing fluff.

“Yes, yes, give her a hug,” I said, feeling a bit useless as Tenny squirmed against Lozzie's side. “That's ... that's for the best right now. Let's all ... calm down. Yes.”

I allowed myself a big sigh as Tenny wrapped Lozzie in a hug, using both her humanoid arms and all her tentacles too. She even tangled their legs together, and then started to purr that deep, resonant thrum of healing and relaxation, like a huge cat with an injured friend. Lozzie sniffed and managed to stop crying, allowed Tenny to cradle her head, and hung on to her soft fur like a baby marsupial clinging to a mother.

Part of me wanted to join in; the rest of me knew I needed to press on. We weren't out of the woods yet.

“Lozzie ... I ... look, the last thing I wanted to do was make you scared or intimidate you.”

Lozzie shook her head, still buried in Tenny. “No. Didn't.”

“We do still need to—” I slammed on the brakes and tried to recalibrate. “There's ... certain subjects we should maybe, probably —”

“We need to talk,” Lozzie said for me, small and reedy. She raised red-rimmed eyes and sniffed hard. “I get it, I get it, I do, I get it.”

“Lozzie, Lozzie, please don't say it like that, it's nothing to be afraid of. I don't want to scare you. Look, I can put my—”

I started to roll my trio of tentacles away, intending to tuck the pneuma-somatic additions back inside myself, back into their state as phantom limbs.

“No!” Lozzie wriggled a hand out of the cuddle-mass and waved it at me, with a delicate little frown on her face. “They're pretty!

Rainbows are pretty!”

“Noooo,” Tenny imitated in a fluttery trill.

“I-I thought I might be intimidating—”

“Nnnnnn!” Lozzie made a frustrated noise, more Tenny than human, and waggled her free hand at me, boneless and floppy. She puffed out her cheeks — and that was when I knew we were probably going to be okay.

“What?” I almost laughed. “Lozzie, you’re going to have to tell me what that gesture means. Use words, please.”

“Give! Give give!”

“That’s *a* word, I suppose,” I sighed.

I extended a tentacle out toward Lozzie and she took it in both hands, hugging my extra limb to her chest and nuzzling it like a plush toy. The sensation made me want to curl up and go to sleep. My eyelids grew heavy.

“Maybe we should just take a nap together ... ” I said.

Lozzie shook her head. “It’s my fault and I’m sorry, you’re not a scary person, you’re the opposite of scary. Anti-scary auntie Heather with no scary or spiky or dangerous parts.”

“I’d say I have a few spikes and dangerous parts,” I sighed.

“Sometimes literally.”

“But never pointed at me,” Lozzie said. I had the distinct impression she was talking to herself. Her words were an affirmation.

“But never pointed at you,” I repeated after her.

Lozzie nodded slowly. Her heavy-lidded eyes took a circuitous route of the bedroom she shared with Tenny, over the low table covered with toys and mathematics puzzles and books of increasing complexity, over the controllers Tenny had abandoned, and the few random clothes draped over the back and seat of a chair — almost all of those were borrowed from me or Raine or Evelyn. Lozzie herself owned so little, only the clothes she had arrived in from Outside, and my affection. Her eyes lingered briefly on the mobile phone we’d given her, on the little bedside table alongside an empty glass of water, a stick of lip salve, and a crumpled up wrapper from a cereal bar. I knew from experience the only

numbers in her phone were ours — mine, Raine's, Evelyn's. For emergencies.

Her hand tightened on Tenny's fur as her eyes found mine again.

"This is my fault too," I said. "It's taken me three days to find the courage to come talk to you, that shouldn't happen, I feel like a coward. I'm not even going to raise my voice at you. I'm sorry for doing that, out there, back when ... " My eyes drifted to Tenny, who was staring at me with all the innocent curiosity of a child, soaking up information like a sponge. "Is this really something for Tenny's ears?"

"Whyyyyy?" Tenny trilled, tilting her head back and forth. "Why not me?"

"Um, not that I'm going to do anything bad to Lozzie, I promise. Just that Lozzie and I are going to talk about scary things, but not scary to each other. It might give you nightmares."

"Heathy," Lozzie said softly, though she was watching Tenny's eyes. "She's not a human child and she's growing sooo fast. Can't keep everything from Tenny forever because she learns really quickly and she already knows half of what's going on just by listening to us and thinking. She does a lot of that, a lot of thinking in ways we haven't got and it's how she's so good at so many different things."

"Haaa!" Tenny made a happy noise, well aware that she was being praised.

"Yes, and that's always very impressive," I said, "but we're going to talk about ... well ... deaths that might have happened, but didn't. And the Eye."

"Eye," Tenny echoed. "Eye know. I know. Bbbbrrrrrttt."

"You do?" I asked.

"Tenny, Tenn-Tenns," Lozzie murmured pet names, stroking and ruffling the fur on Tenny's head. Tenny let out a deep purr and closed her eyes like a cat. "Tenns, are you listening to me very carefully?" Tenny's eyes snapped back open. "Heathy and I have to do a big serious time talk, because we did a big thing together, aaaaaand I made a mistake."

"Mistake?" Tenny's head tilted to the side. "Mistake?"

“Mmmhmm. I tried to help auntie Heathy but she thinks I shouldn’t have done it because it was a bad and dangerous thing to do and it was a mistake and everyone makes mistakes.”

“No,” I sighed gently. “It’s not as simple as that.”

Lozzie’s heavy-lidded eyes found me again, skittish with fresh nerves. “It’s not?”

“No, of course not.” I shook my head. “Lozzie, you ... you did do the right thing, but you did it for reasons you should have shared with me.” I glanced at Tenny, at her quiet, innocent listening. “You should have told me how you were feeling, after Badger came to apologise to you. If you had doubts, or disagreed with what we were doing, that’s fine. But you should have told me. You could have sat it out.”

“No I couldn’t! You would have been hurt!” Lozzie turned to Tenny. “She would have been hurt!”

“Huuurrr ... tuh?” Tenny echoed, big black eyes bouncing back and forth between Lozzie and me. Was she following this without context? How much did she know?

“Maybe Badger wouldn’t have made it,” I said slowly, “but that’s not the problem. That part was good, and thank you, and well done. But ... Lozzie, you put me right in front of the Eye, without warning, with no plan, and I ... ”

My voice began to quiver with a memory of terror and a rekindled spark of anger, so I swallowed it all down and trailed off into silence. Lozzie had put me in front of the Eye, that was no angry lie of self-justification. No warning, no plan, no protection except what I ended up summoning. In the end that decision had proved fruitful beyond my wildest hopes, but it hadn’t been her decision to make.

Lozzie’s eyes went wide — well, as wide as they could go with her sleepy lids.

“Oh,” was all she said.

I took a deep, steadying breath. “I would still like to talk to you, just the two of us. And it doesn’t matter how angry I am, I would never hurt you. You know that, don’t you? I love you.”

Lozzie’s lips shook, unable to form any words. Then her head snapped up, eyes in full focus, as if dragged taut by internal puppet

strings.

“Can we talk Outside?” she asked.

I boggled at her, quietly stunned. “ ... but the dead hands, I haven’t ___”

“Exactly!” Lozzie slapped the bedsheets. Tenny let out a surprised *maaaa!* “You won’t let me go.”

“W-what? Lozzie, no, I—”

“It’s been days and you still haven’t done it, you’ve got everything you need and you haven’t done it, you haven’t even tried. Please! And I won’t run off, I promise I won’t run off, I promise, I promise, I just want to be there and we can talk and I won’t feel like this. For real, I promise, I won’t go away and I won’t run. Just open the cage door, please, I won’t fly off. I won’t.”

Lozzie panted softly after her outburst, face fallen far from her usual elfin joy. Heavy eyes pleaded with me, exhausted by days of stress and tension, afraid that I would imprison her deeper, as punishment for her transgression.

She’d spent most of her life in a cult. Taken out of school, isolated, subjected to her parents’ bizarre choices, and then fed to the bare spark of a fallen godling. But even after her personal alliance with the star beneath the castle, she’d been dragged back to a cage of stone and mist, punished for escape with lack of friends, lack of contact, lack of a life. And now, finally living among friends who cared for her, she couldn’t go outdoors, couldn’t go anywhere alone, didn’t have anywhere else *to go*.

Everything I was doing was aggravating her trauma.

“Right now?” I asked.

Lozzie nodded, desperate, pleading. “And we can talk anywhere, anywhere you like, we’ll go somewhere cool, somewhere really cool, somewhere you’d like.”

“Anywhere is fine,” I said. “The dead hands, then. I suppose it’s time I gave them a shot.”

I forced a smile I didn’t really feel. Once Lozzie was Outside under her own power, who knew if she’d ever come back?

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I stared into the bottom of the blue plastic bucket in my lap, and felt like I was staring into the mouth of a tunnel. A bricked up tunnel that I was about to force open with a sledgehammer and a pneumatic drill before striding into the dripping darkness. My stomach was clenched up tight and cold sweat had broken out down my back, in anticipation of familiar old pain and unfamiliar obstacles.

“All right,” I said out loud, trying and failing to sound confident. “I think I’m ready.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. She was sitting in a chair next to the table in the workshop. “Once more, I would like to register my significant discomfort that you are doing this by yourself.”

“Gotta agree there,” Raine said from the other side of the ex-drawing room, lounging against the wall with her arms folded. “Can’t stop you though.”

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh. “I know what I’m doing. I’ve done this more times than I can count.”

“Not while fighting mystery ghost hands you haven’t,” Evelyn said, seriously unimpressed. “First rule of dealing with the unknown when it comes to magic: don’t. That includes mystery ghost hands. In fact, I’d say it explicitly refers to things like mystery ghost hands.”

“Well,” I sighed. “*Don’t try* is not an option.”

“You sound like Raine,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Ha! She does, doesn’t she?” Raine agreed with a grin. “Can’t help but admire that, you know? I’ve rubbed off on you, Heather. Makes you invincible, like me.”

“Don’t distract her with flirting,” Evelyn hissed. “That is the last thing we need. If she must do this, let her bloody well concentrate.”

“Indeed,” I said, allowing a sardonic edge to creep into my voice. That finally shut the pair of them up.

Quiet fell on the magical workshop, broken by Tenny’s soft purring and the thudding of my heart like a dove caged behind my ribs. The special magic circles from the weekend had been cleared away and disposed of, too stained with blood for preservation, and the floorboards beneath me were freshly scrubbed with detergent and

steel wool. Praem had done a wonderful job cleaning up, and I hoped the bucket would prevent the need for a repeat performance.

“Heather knows what she’s doing,” Lozzie said from over on the sofa. “She does!”

She was sitting cross-legged too, wiggling her knees and toes with nervous energy. When I looked up from the bucket, she nodded at me like a bobble-head in a hurricane, and Tenny purred from next to her with wordless encouragement, though I wasn’t sure if Tenny understood what she was encouraging. Half of Tenny’s silken black tentacles waved in the air and the other half were wrapped around Lozzie’s shoulders.

Evelyn cleared her throat. “At least take Praem with you. You’ve taken her before, you know it’s safe, and the journey barely affects her.”

Praem was standing in her customary position just behind and to the side of Evelyn’s chair, dressed not in her maid uniform, but wearing a blue ribbed polo neck sweater and a long skirt. None of us questioned why some days were maid dress days and others were not. I assumed it was just whatever Praem felt like. Praem turned her head as if to acknowledge Evelyn’s suggestion, then looked at me with silent, impassive intensity.

“I need to do this by myself,” I repeated for the sixth time in the last twenty minutes. “I don’t know what the dead hands could do, it might be dangerous for anybody alongside me.”

“It might be dangerous for *you*. What if you pass out on the other side?”

“I won’t. Not with this going.” I gestured downward with my eyes, at my own abdomen beneath the dark pink of my scaled hoodie. I had two control rods all the way out of the bioreactor; more than enough excess power to keep myself conscious and upright, and to fuel the return equation, even with three tentacles manifested. I would not get stranded or spend an hour face down beneath alien skies. My tentacles would help me deal with any unexpected company. All three were tucked in tight against my body, wrapped around an arm and my waist, waiting to stop me from collapsing onto my back in the worst case scenario. I was dressed for the trip, in hoodie and jeans and shoes, wrapped up warm and secure, taking this seriously. “And I’m going to go somewhere safe, anyway,” I

added.

“*Safe*,” Evelyn scoffed.

“Well, yes, fair enough,” I said. “Safe by Outside standards.”

“It is safe!” Lozzie insisted. “There’s nothing there that isn’t mine! It’s where I always used to go for looooots of peace and quiet and it’s definitely safe now with all the stuff I left there so Heather won’t even be alone, she’ll be fine, super fine, lots of protection, extra protection!”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn sighed, “I get it, fine.” She glared over my head. “I can’t believe you’re okay with this, Raine. Where’s all your protective habits gone when we actually need them? Aren’t you supposed to ... tch!” She tutted and waved a hand toward me.

Raine shrugged and cracked a grin. “I trust Heather. And hey, I trust Lozzie too. If she says there’s more of her shiny boys over there, I trust them to look out for Heather if anything goes wrong. Which it won’t.”

“Evelyn,” I said softly, “if I try to take Praem but I can’t beat the hands, there’s a risk she could end up Outside without me. Stranded. I know I can get out, Slip, transition, whatever, but Praem can’t. I won’t ask anybody to run that risk.”

Evelyn opened her mouth but came up short. She glanced at Praem, swallowed, and let out a huge huff. “I wish we were doing this with the bloody gate instead.”

Lozzie let out a soft whine.

“The gate isn’t the point,” I said. “Freedom is the point.” I took a deep breath. “I’m ready now, there’s no point delaying, so I’m going to do this. The sooner I try, the sooner we can find out if it works. If it doesn’t, then you’ll know, because I’ll still be right here and vomiting into this bucket. If it does work, then I’ll come straight back, as soon as I’ve recovered. That will take a few minutes, at most. Five at the maximum, I’d estimate. And then I’ll ... ”

My stomach filled with butterflies as I glanced over at Lozzie’s expectant excitement. Cold sweat stuck my t-shirt to my back, and my chest tightened in a way that had nothing to do with the embrace of my tentacles.

I wasn’t afraid of pain, and I wasn’t worried about this going wrong.

I was barely concerned about confronting the dead hands — either they yielded, or they didn't. No, I was afraid of keeping my promise to Lozzie.

The silver lining was that I didn't expect this to work — but I still had to make a good faith attempt, not just go through the motions. For Lozzie.

“Don't try to follow me,” I told her, out loud, but I hadn't planned to say any of this. “Please. Just in case something goes wrong, or I'm still dealing with the hands or something. Just wait for me to get back. We'll go together.”

Please don't leave without saying goodbye, I thought.

Lozzie nodded, smiling wide, all friendly and happy and insensible to my fears.

“Good luck,” Praem intoned from behind Evelyn. “Come home soon.”

“I ... I will, thank you Praem. Won't be a minute.”

As soon as I said those word, I wished I hadn't.

I looked down into the bucket again, ready to be violently ill, and plunged both my hands into the tarry black swamp down at the bottom of my soul. Out came the familiar old equation, dark and dripping and oily, the one I could self-implement without even thinking. I had done so over and over again, year after year as a scared, confused teenager, slipping in and out of reality with no understanding of what was happening to me. The most elemental, simple equation I had, the one which had become part of me.

Out.

Reality folded up into a kaleidoscope of swirling colours. I slammed my eyes shut — and felt those cold, boney hands close around my ankles. Unwelcome anchors, to keep my feet rooted on this side of the membrane.

Of course, they weren't really hands, and they weren't really boney. If they were, Raine could have broken their wrists with a good stomp and spared us all this difficulty. ‘Boney hands’ was merely the easiest way of translating the mathematical principles into human-readable sensation.

This time I was ready. Before I toppled forward like an unwary animal caught by a bear trap, I reached down with my own thoughts, with an equation unfolding like a flower of razor blades. A dozen tentacles split into tools to flense and pare and skin and debone, to crack joints and syphon marrow, to act like crushing vices and dilating jaws, to free my ankles by force and break a lot of fingers in the process. And if the hands fought back, I was ready to sip from the abyss, ready to test myself to the limit.

But before I could touch them, the hands let go.

They released my ankles and sank back into the membrane between realities. Unwilling to fight, or unwilling to risk injury — or unwilling to be analysed for what they really were?

Suddenly unobstructed, the equation completed.

Out I went.

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Warm wind caressed my face, carrying a scent not unlike cinnamon and camphor; soft purple light brushed the exterior of my closed eyelids; velvety grass cushioned my thighs and backside. I'd arrived sitting, for once, so I didn't fall over with nausea and weakness and the shock of the Slip.

The blue plastic bucket in my lap had made the transition with me. That was lucky, because it didn't matter how much power my bioreactor was creating — executing a hyperdimensional equation still felt like turning my brain inside out and dunking it in molten metal, and I very much needed to be sick. I shook and shivered as waves of headache slammed through my skull, and clenched my stomach muscles in an effort to stop myself from vomiting. I clung to the bucket as I spat stringy bile, heaving for breath, comforting myself with a hug from my tentacles. My vision throbbed black around the edges when I opened my eyes, but the bioreactor ensured that I was far from the mercy of unconsciousness. I had to ride this out.

As I sat there whining on that hillside of soft yellow grass, I realised I hadn't actually been prepared for the pain. I hadn't expected this to work.

I certainly hadn't expected the hands to give up.

“Ugh. Tricked me,” I croaked, sniffing back a nosebleed as I watched a few droplets of crimson splash into the bucket. “Why? Doesn’t make any sense ...”

I couldn’t stay mad though. Pain was fleeting compared to the sight of this place.

Dark yellow grass — natural yellow, not Sevens yellow, though I could not have quantified exactly how I recognised the distinction — coated the gentle hillsides which unrolled all the way to the horizon, creating a landscape like heaped blankets. The wind carried the spiced scent of the grass on the air. The sky was a dome of night, yet not dark, but lit with whorls and spirals of bruised purple, not close enough to be clouds but not far away enough to be the void dust of a nebula; I suspected this planet, this plane, whatever it was, was ringed with glowing belts of material which did not exist in our reality. A pair of moons hung further out, one the colour of old emerald, the other a pale cream, like raw chalk.

This was the first place Lozzie had ever taken me in the dreams. This was where I’d met her, where I’d learnt her name and seen her face, and where she’d begun to show me that Outside was not all bad all the time.

Lozzie had not exaggerated; this plane was peaceful and quiet — or at least this small part of it was — but when I’d visited before, my perceptions had been cushioned by dream logic.

As I picked myself up off the grass and unrolled my trio of tentacles, I realised how alien this place was.

Lozzie hadn’t mentioned that. Perhaps it wasn’t, to her.

Silence reigned in this place, except for the almost imperceptible whisper of warm wind through the grass. No birdsong, no animals, no distant sounds of civilisation. It was not the silence of Carcosa, which smothered sounds with unnatural force, but simple emptiness and quiet. The purple light from the whirls in the sky made no sense, creating a permanent twilight of strange colours — was this grass actually yellow? When I looked at the arm of my hoodie, it seemed darker than normal. I reached down to touch the grass and it didn’t feel like grass should. Too thick, too rubbery. Even breathing felt different, as if my lungs were stronger, easier to fill.

Compared to the immensity of the Library of Carcosa, or the blasted

post-apocalyptic landscape of Wonderland, the quiet plain was nothing. But it was absolutely not Earth, not our reality. I was over the rainbow and far away.

The horizon seemed very distant in all directions, featureless except for the undulating hills, though far off to my right I could see indistinct shapes which looked sort of like the outline of a city if I squinted, skyscrapers or towers or perhaps walls. There were no other landmarks.

Except for Lozzie's knights.

This was where she'd been keeping them.

"The most double-safe place where there's nothing and nobody and everything finished happening a loooong time ago, so they can just rest and think and not have to worry! They worry too, you know, if they have to think about stuff when I'm not there to tell them what to do but that's okay because I made them safe!"

That's what she'd said, and I believed her, but that didn't make the sight of them any less bizarre.

The knights were spread out over the nearby yellow grass hillsides in a rough circle, like an army in conference, voting on their next campaign.

"Round table?" I mused out loud. My voice carried, far away across the hills.

Every one of them was sealed inside head-to-toe chrome armour, huge plates of mirror-finish metal, though I knew better than to assume it was mere steel. The few visible seams and joints gave away the sheer thickness of that plate, six or seven inches of protection. And even that hadn't stood up to the Eye for more than few seconds.

Each knight was easily as tall as Zheng. None of their helmets showed eye holes or even a grille for breathing, faceless. But they were not all identical. Some were shorter or taller than others, some bulkier or thinner, some with armour that seemed more graceful and lithe. Many had unique suits of armour, with fluting or additional plates or differently shaped helmets. A few were even overweight, the armour bulging out to contain their paunches or wider hips, though it was difficult if not impossible to assign a gender to any of them. Many were armed the same as the two I'd

seen in action, with a huge tower shield and a lance bigger and heavier than any human knight had ever carried, but others held different weapons locked in their metal gauntlets — two-handed swords, maces as tall as a person, weird bill-hook polearms that looked as if they were for cracking armour. Several wielded what I think were meant to be crossbows, if crossbows were made of metal and designed by an alien with no understanding of human physical limits or number of hands.

Some stood to attention, gazing upward, others knelt as if in prayer; a few lay flat on their backs, hands over their chests; many sat cross-legged, as if deep in meditation.

None of them moved an inch. A field of statues.

I stopped counting somewhere between forty and fifty, and that was only a third of the circle. I knew my Arthurian literary tradition, so I could make an educated guess.

“A hundred and forty eight left, Lozzie?” I murmured a sigh for the two we’d lost. Died protecting us. The fact they weren’t all identical made that worse. Whatever Lozzie had done here — and I did intend to ask her about the details — these were living creatures inside those shells of imperishable metal.

I realised one of them was looking at me; facing me, in fact. I hadn’t seen it move, so it must have been facing me when I arrived. I stared back at it, though the helmet lacked even blank eye holes to gaze into. More impassive than even Praem.

“Thank you,” I said out loud, feeling awkward, though the words were important. “Thank you for the sacrifices of your comrades.”

I jumped when the knight responded, though it moved so very slowly. It dipped helmet, shield, and lance, and sank to one knee, head bowed in private prayer. None of the others moved, and the knight stopped once it assumed its new position, head bowed in my direction.

“Oh, don’t pray to me,” I whispered. “Not even the Eye is really a god.”

The knight did not stand up.

However, I didn’t have time to debate theology with creatures that probably couldn’t talk. I had promised my friends I would be gone

less than five minutes, and the last thing I wanted to do was send Raine into a panic. I sighed and began to sit down again, my tentacles reaching out to steady me. I tried not to contemplate the possibility that Lozzie might already be gone before I got back.

That's when I saw the skull.

Lozzie's goat skull mask lay about twelve feet behind me. I hadn't seen it until I'd glanced back. For a moment I didn't know what I was looking at, but then I remembered — she'd been wearing it the very first time we'd met, when Raine and Twil and I had run into her, alongside the core of the Sharrowford Cult in that underground car park. Then, here in the dream when she'd spoken to me properly, she'd taken it off to reveal her real face.

Curious, though stretching my self-imposed time limit, I went over to the mask, reached down with a tentacle, and picked it up.

It was a real skull, the bone old and yellowed, though the surface had been sanded and waxed, or rendered smooth through some other process. The inside was padded with leather straps and foam to create a comfortable fit for a human head. Two stubby horns swept backward, their points blunted for safety or aesthetics.

I frowned into the empty eye sockets. The skull felt far too light, the eyes were positioned incorrectly for a goat — too central, so as to make good eye holes for the person wearing it as a mask — and there was something wrong about the proportions.

“Goats don't grow this large,” I said to Lozzie, though she wasn't here. “And you took this off in a dream. How is this real?”

When you live in a world of magic and monsters, when you know the secret truths below the surface of reality, you come to learn there are some questions not worth answering. I sighed and shrugged, tucked the skull under my arm, and began to equation to return home.

Out.

= =

Lozzie was on me the moment I felt the solid wood of home beneath my feet, as a cloud of blonde hair and a pair of eyes like fire-lit sapphires.

“I couldn't follow!” she chirped. “I couldn't follow you, Heathy, it

didn't work! It didn't work!"

"I told you— not—" I croaked, smiling with relief even as I clutched my stomach and clenched hard to hold on to my lunch. "Nnnuuhh ..."

"Heath!" Tenny trilled from behind Lozzie, black tentacles reaching past her in confused panic.

Luckily enough, Raine was on me too. She caught me under the arms as I flailed for her support, clinging on hard as blood dripped from my nose.

"Still here," I panted through the taste of bile as my vision throbbed dark around the edges. "Still here, Loz. Good."

"It's okay, it's okay," Raine murmured. "I've got you, Heather, I've got you. Well done, well done, you did it. Knew you could."

"You left the bloody bucket behind!" Evelyn said. "And what is *that*?" She gestured at the skull hanging from one of my hands, her voice dripping with sarcasm. I would have felt hurt, but I knew her ire came from a place of worry after all those long minutes waiting for me to return from Outside. "Did you do a trade? Are we now on a fetch quest chain that somehow ends with the book we need? What do we trade with Edward, a bullet?"

"Fetch quest?" I echoed, utterly confused.

Raine, ever a good sport and able to adapt to almost anything, didn't even comment as I instinctively wrapped a tentacle around her shoulders, hanging off her like a squid lashed to a rock in a strong current. Her eyes widened slightly, but she smiled for me. "Fuckin' cool," she said with a wink, and I knew what she meant.

"It's my hat!" Lozzie shrieked with excitement, clapping her hands together in glee and bouncing from foot to foot, her frustration briefly forgotten.

I offered her the over-sized goat skull. Lozzie did a little twirling curtsy with her poncho before she accepted it from my hand. She grinned wide at the empty eye sockets like greeting an old friend, then quickly turned it around and slipped it on over her head. The gnarled old bone swallowed her face. She looked out at me from deep within the eye sockets, her beautiful blue eyes encased in shadow and bone.

“Oh,” I breathed.

“It’s so pretty, I know! Isn’t it pretty? I know it’s kind of weird and boney, but I love things like this it’s so prettyyyyy!”

Lozzie’s words came out warped by the bones of something that had probably not been a real goat, at least not an earthly one. The weight of the mask, the odd proportions with the rest of her body, the sweeping horns, and the way her wispy waterfall of blonde hair flowed down and out of the back; it all combined together to create a disquieting impression of some fey creature. Something distinctly non-human. Something you might meet in a ring of mushrooms, which would ask you a dangerous riddle with the voice of a songbird, then steal your name and face just for a lark.

All my fears about Lozzie vanishing came crashing back.

Sometimes I forgot. Lozzie was a person, a beautiful one, and important to me. But she was far from a human being. I knew that, I’d seen it up close.

“Lozzzzzz?” went Tenny, backing away, slightly unsure.

“It’s me, it’s just me!” Lozzie pulled the front of the mask up to show Tenny her face beneath. “Still me under here, Tenn-Tenns, helloooo.”

“Fttttpppp,” Tenny trilled, apparently satisfied, patting the skull with a tentacle. Lozzie let the mask fall down over her face again.

“I take it the mystery hands didn’t pose much of a problem in the end, then?” Evelyn asked, frowning sidelong as Lozzie capered from foot to foot. “And that you reached your intended destination? Didn’t look too different compared to when you did it under controlled conditions before.”

“Very elegant,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn frowned at her with a little sigh, but Praem ignored the look, raised her hands, and gave me a tiny round of delicate applause.

“Yes. It worked,” I croaked, nodding a thank you to Raine as I managed to stand straight on my own two feet. She handed me a tissue to wipe my nosebleed. The bioreactor thrummed with power inside my abdomen, pushing energy into my muscles, though I still felt terribly nauseated.

“No!” Lozzie chirped. “It didn’t!”

“ ... it ... it did, for me, anyway. The hands just gave up as soon as I threatened to fight. Oh,” I said, breaking off as Raine pressed a glass of cold water into my hands. “Thank you, thank—”

“Drink,” Raine said. I obeyed.

“It didn’t work for me!” Lozzie said, tugging the goat skull off her face and swinging it by one of the horns. “I tried to follow but they were still there and they held on and I hate them, I really really hate them, it was awful and ... ” Lozzie stopped and sniffed, taking a deep breath, and I realised she was genuinely shaken by the experience.

“Yes,” Evelyn said, voice suddenly tight, frowning at me in puzzled concern. “She screamed, in fact. Sit down, Lozzie, it’s going to be all right,” she tried to sound reassuring, but she wasn’t the best at that while also distracted by a worrying puzzle. “We’ll figure it out. Heather, what was that you just said?”

I finished draining my glass of water. “Lozzie, I did ask you not to follow me.”

“I was just so excited ... ” Her face fell into a sad smile, cheeks puffed out. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you and—”

“Heather,” Evelyn almost snapped, holding herself back by the skin of her teeth. “You said the hands just gave up?”

I blinked at her, then nodded. “Yes. I thought it was strange too.”

“Very,” Evelyn said, meaning *Uh oh*.

“That means it’s not just some kind of automatic process or a natural phenomenon,” I said. “Whatever mind lies behind them is intelligent enough to know I could overpower it.”

Evelyn stared at me, then looked at Lozzie, then cleared her throat. Lozzie bit her lower lip. “We still have no evidence,” Evelyn said. She left the second part of that sentence unspoken.

We still have no evidence it’s Alexander.

“But ... ” Lozzie paused, which was rare, then wet her lips with a dart of pink tongue, turning to me as she visibly brightened. “But we can get Outside now! You can take me, we can go together!”

“Lozzie, I’m not sure. I ... ”

“But we were supposed to go together anyway!” she chirped. “The whole point was to talk, right? I promise promise *promise* I’ll be better out there, please, pleeeeeease! And we can talk, I’ll listen. It’ll be okay, Heathy. You can take me.”

I put my hands up in awkward, embarrassed surrender, shamed by the depth and desperation of her need. “Okay, okay, Lozzie, okay.”

“Right now?” Raine asked, low and soft, raising an eyebrow at me. “Aren’t you a bit worn out?”

“Best to strike while the iron is hot,” I said, butterflies in my stomach, though I could not tell what made me more nervous — the prospect of a serious talk with Lozzie, her answers to my questions about her knights, or the prospect she might go skipping off Outside the moment I guided her through the membrane. “Plus, no, I can never be worn out again, remember?”

“No, you totally can,” Raine said. “You’re still you, nuclear power plant in your belly or not.”

“I need to talk to Lozzie now,” I whispered. “As soon as possible. We need to.”

Raine sighed, but smiled. “Don’t stay out there too long, okay?”

“I promise.”

“This is a bad idea,” Evelyn said. “A bad idea. You hear me?”

But Lozzie was having none of it. She dropped the goat skull mask over her face again and skipped right up to me, leaving Tenny behind in a confused cloud of tentacles. She grabbed my hands and swung them from side to side.

“Let’s gooooo!” she said from inside the mask, voice a ghostly echo beneath the bone.

“Have a safe trip,” Praem intoned. Evelyn shot her a frown. Raine laughed.

“Let’s go!” Lozzie chirped. “Heather, please! Please!”

“Brrrrt?” Tenny made a curious noise, reaching out with a cautious tentacle.

“W-what about Tenny?” I asked.

Lozzie tilted her goat skull mask to one side. It was like talking to an imp, horns and all. “Mmmm-mmm. Just me this time.” She turned the goat skull’s eye sockets on Tenny. “Be good, Tenny! I’ll show you fun places, I promise-promise double promise, but not right now, you have to stay here and be very good for auntie Raine and auntie Evee, okay?”

“ ... brrrrrrrr?” Tenny retracted her tentacles. She looked very uncertain, a mirror to how I felt.

Lozzie turned back to me. “Let’s go! Wheee!”

Why was I so afraid? Why hadn’t I been this scared when Lozzie had come with us to Carcosa? Because back then, she’d had a task to focus on, a reason to help us with a specific goal. But now she was desperate for the air beyond the bars.

I couldn’t deny her.

“Hold on tight,” I said. My voice shook.

Out.

any mortal thing – 14.8

Slipping never hurt Lozzie like it did me.

For me, any transition across the membrane between our reality and Outside — whether involuntary or intentional; whether as a terrified teenager thinking I was suffering a schizophrenic hallucination, or as a fully informed and involved abyssal hybrid; whether sitting comfortably and surrounded by friends, or in a moment of crisis and blood — it was always painful, always disorienting, always alienating.

Like stepping through an airlock into a different atmospheric pressure, or descending from a hot day down into a cold cellar, where all my body's autonomic expectations were thrown into disarray. Pushing through that membrane put pressure on some vital component of the self — not merely of living, but of existing at all. This was not merely the after effects of brain-math; those were bad enough, headache and nosebleed and nausea as my body rejected the impossible maths. I sagged in Lozzie's arms, clenched my stomach muscles to hold back a wave of vomit, and snorted nosebleed onto the yellow hillside. The others had suffered it too during our emergency return from Carcosa, a dislocation of the soul, an alienation from the sensation of *being*, a popping of the ears from an altitude change that had nothing to do with height. Even now, with three tentacles and an impossible bioreactor, I took it no better than I had any other time.

For Lozzie it was like slipping into a hot bath.

The moment we arrived back on the quiet plains of yellow grass, I heard Lozzie let out a sigh of true release. Soft, subtle, with a little shudder in her voice, audible even through the skull mask on her face. I was busy squeezing my eyes shut against the black pain of ice pick headache, snorting back my nosebleed, and trying not to be very sick all over the ground. My trio of tentacles unfurled and flailed to catch myself, but they were a part of my body too, and not immune to this sickness.

Lozzie wasn't so awestruck that she neglected to catch me before I crumpled to my knees. She held me up and I clung to her as

crimson droplets fell from my nose to stain the grass. We slowly gave way together, wrapped in my own tentacles, lower and lower until we sat down and slumped against each other. One of my tentacles had gone for her mask, testing the texture of strangely smooth bone surface, and gently tugging on one of the horns as if trying to remove it from Lozzie's face. She didn't notice. I was whining softly, but I could still hear the smile of relief in her breathing.

"Heathy, here!"

She pressed something smooth and cool into my lap. My vision slowly cleared, red darkness throbbing back into the periphery, replaced by blue plastic with a bit of cold bile splattered down in the bottom.

"Oh," I croaked. "Bucket."

"Bucket good!" Lozzie chirped from beneath her mask. "Heathy good?"

"... relatively," I managed. "Three slips in fifteen minutes. New record. Give me a moment." I squeezed my eyes shut again and hung over the bucket, trying to fight down a wave of nausea as the hyperdimensional mathematics threatened to bubble up from my subconscious, like a black swamp over-saturated with toxic gasses.

Lozzie rubbed my back and leaned against my side, sharing her squirrely warmth. She made happy little humming sounds from beneath her mask as she looked off toward the ring of armoured knights, at the distant undulating horizon, and up at the purple sweeps and swirls in the distant night sky. She wiggled her bottom back and forth in excitement and her other hand patted one of my tentacles. She was immune to the deleterious effects of a Slip, like a specialised rodent that had evolved to navigate the razor thorns and toxic needles of a jungle bramble that would shred any clumsy human.

This was where she was supposed to be, wasn't it? Not with us. Not in our reality. Outside was her natural environment.

After a minute or two of shaking and sweating, I could raise my head again. I straightened up and cast my gaze out across the quiet plain. Deep breaths of alien, Outside air filled my lungs with the taste of cinnamon, and the gentle wind eased the sweat from my

face.

“Mmm-mmm? Mmm? Mmm-mmmm?” Lozzie made wordless sounds and bumped her shoulder against my side, but I understood every nuance, even through the mask. The purplish light in this place made the bone seem paradoxically bright.

“Mmhmm.” I nodded an affirmative.

Lozzie gently disentangled herself from me and stood up, bouncing on the balls of her feet with barely contained excitement. When she stepped forward I unravelled my tentacle from her side, let her go, though I felt a sick twist in my stomach, a horrible tightening of my heart, and a plea dying on my lips.

“Lozzie ... ” I murmured, voice quivering as she took two steps away from me. My trio of tentacles twitched, aching to reach out and restrain her. She turned back to me and executed a fluttering, bouncing curtsy with the hem of her poncho, an overexcited, girlish gesture of gratitude, before she leapt and skipped away and my heart couldn’t take it. “Don’t ... don’t leave ... ” I whispered.

But all my fears were groundless. Lozzie skipped away a few paces across the quiet hillside of yellow grass, but she didn’t vanish into thin air or bid me a tearful goodbye.

“Woo!” She threw her arms in the air and let out a wild whoop of joy, then hopped and tucked and rolled into a spontaneous cartwheel — exactly as Twil had taught her — only wobbling a little before she lost her balance and collapsed onto the grass, laughing and kicking and rolling over, her goat skull mask falling off in an explosion of wispy blonde hair. She left the mask behind, to my silent and bizarre relief, and bounced back to her feet without missing a beat, skipping and hopping over to the nearest of her chrome-clad knights. She slammed into the poor creature with enough force to topple a redwood, but the knight merely looked down at her with its blank-faced helmet as she hugged it from behind and let out a high pitched “Mmm!” of appreciation.

Dozens of the nearby knights turned toward her too, not clanking or clunking at all but marked only by the soft brush of their armoured feet against the grass. Their motions seemed strangely fluid inside such cumbersome suits. They didn’t salute or kneel or bang their fists on their chest plates, but just pointed themselves at her, like sunflowers turning toward the sun. The effect was more than

slightly creepy.

“Everybody stay, stay!” she called out loud, hands up as if waving to a pack of excitable hounds. “Safe safe yes good safe, no problems! Stay and sleep!”

Then she was away from the knights as quickly as she’d scampered to them, skipping back across the yellow grass, flushed and smiling in a way I hadn’t seen her smile in months, genuinely happy. Despite everything, I found myself smiling back, overwhelmed by her energy.

Lozzie finally flopped down on the grass nearby, hair billowing out around her. She stretched out her arms and legs and swept them back and forth, like she was making a snow angel. She scrunched her face up tight and let out another “Mmmmm!” noise, then relaxed all at once, into a deep, satisfied sigh.

A shaking laugh took me, of relief and bewilderment at her sheer joy.

“Heathy?” Lozzie opened her eyes and found me. “Heathy, are you okay?”

“... no,” I managed, and realised I was on the verge of tears. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve — a mistake, as my nose left a bloody streak on my hoodie. “Are you going to leave?”

Lozzie blinked three times, blankly confused but suddenly alert. She sat up in a hurry, hands planted between her outstretched legs with the easy flexibility of a natural gymnast. “Leave? Leave what? Heathy, whaaaa?”

“I’m so afraid you’re going to leave,” I admitted with a quiver in my voice. “You’ve manipulated me into bringing you out here and now —”

Lozzie bit her lower lip. “Um ... ”

“Oh, damn it,” I snapped at myself, staring down into the bucket because I couldn’t face her as I let it all out. “Not that I wouldn’t have brought you here anyway. You do really need it, I can see that, I can see the need is real, but you did manipulate me, Lozzie. And when you left before, when you went Outside before, you didn’t come back for weeks. No, for months! You said you’d visit, but you didn’t. You only came back when I was in danger, and yes,

I can't thank you enough for that, you saved me from the Eye. But you left, Lozzie." I hugged the bucket, cold comfort. "I can't deal with this. I'm sorry, I'm sorry for treating you like my sister, but I can't help it. You can't just make friends with me and then leave."

Silence. My courage was brittle as pig iron, forged in desperate haste, and Lozzie's silence nearly broke it. But when I looked up I met that same sleepy-eyed confusion, that nervous lip-bite, not fear. Whether she intended it or not, that gave me heart.

"You dragged me Outside and made me your friend," I managed. "And I want that. I don't want you to leave again, but you belong out here, don't you?"

"... don't you?" Lozzie murmured.

I shook my head.

Lozzie sprang to her feet in a flurry of pastel poncho and strands of wispy blonde hair. For a horrible second I thought she was going to run from me, from this conversation, from the difficult parts of being a person. One of my tentacles reached out for her ankle, a pointless and shameful gesture, a last attempt to restrain her and drag her home.

But then she faced me and bowed from her waist, so deeply that her hair pooled in the yellow grass.

We stayed frozen like that for perhaps ten whole seconds, watched by the eyeless gaze from dozens of silent knights.

Eventually, I figured out how to work the human parts of my throat, and murmured her name. "... Lozzie?"

She whipped her head back up, hair flung out behind like some ancient Celtic warrior-woman.

"I'm sorry!" she said. She wasn't the slightest bit tearful or upset, but bright-eyed and coherent. All here. "I'm sorry, Heathy. I'm sorry for not visiting, and I'm double sorry for saying I would but then not doing it. I hadn't been Outside in so long and it feels so right to be here, I didn't want to go back again, I just didn't! And I was worried about leading my uncle to you as well but *bleeeh*. But that was selfish and I'm sorry for being so useless, I can't even think in the ways I'm supposed to a lot of the time. Out here, I can think clearer! More clearly?" Lozzie's eyes did this little spin up and

around. "With more clarity," she said slowly, as if experimenting with the words. "I can think. With more clarity. Clarityyyyyy." She giggled. "See? Clarity. See. That's kind of a rhyme!"

I blinked at her, surprised. "That ... that is becoming evident, certainly."

"And yes I manipulated you and I'm so sorry," she went on at usual Lozzie high-speed. Apparently being Outside did not change the fundamentals of her personality. "But it was the only way to defeat being afraid and now I'm not afraid anymore because you're not him and you're not trying to lock me up or keep me from Outside and I'm sorry my stupid subconscious thought that way. I wish Zheng had been there and then we could have talked through her, she gets it, but she's run off like a big stupid dog."

I sighed, shaking inside. I couldn't forgive her yet, that wouldn't do justice to these feelings. "You're not stupid and you're not useless, and those aren't what you should be apologising for."

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes!" Lozzie chattered, the opposite of what I'd expected and feared. Instead, she smiled. "I'm sorry for being selfish. It's all about survival! I can't unlearn that in a few months with you and everyone else being wonderful, and I feel bad for *not* learning it but the truth is my brother is always going to live in my head and I just have to live with that."

"... goodness, Lozzie, you weren't exaggerating about being different Outside."

Lozzie giggled and bit her lip again, then gathered her hair up behind her and tidied it into a messy knot of soft gold. She flounced across the gap between us and sat down opposite me, crossed her legs, and reached out with both hands.

"Done with bucket?" she asked. "No more sick?"

"... yes, thank you." I let her take the bucket from my lap. She placed it to one side and took both my hands instead, gently swinging them back and forth as she leaned toward my lap. I wrapped a tentacle around her wrist.

"Don't you remember from the dreams?" she asked. "I know I was alllllways more together in the dreams."

"Lozzie, I ... I loved those dreams. I love that you decided to be my

friend, to show me it's not all bad all the time out here, but ... I don't recall them properly. Not all of it. It's hazy a lot of the time. Sometimes it feels like it was something done *to me*."

Lozzie bit her lip and bobbed her head. "I'm sorry! I just needed a friend, and you always had fun in the dreams, and I wasn't trying to hide them from you, I wasn't! You just can't connect them up. Need to spend more time Outside!"

"... perhaps," I said, choosing to ignore that particular minefield for now. "Oh, Lozzie, I'm sorry too."

"You are forgiven!" Lozzie chirped, waving one hand over me like a magician trying to make all my guilt vanish beneath a white cloth. "Forgiven! Away!"

I managed a small laugh. "You didn't seriously think I wanted to keep you locked up like a princess in a tower, did you?"

"No no no." Lozzie shook her head with great emphasis, which unknotted her hair and sent it flying everywhere again. She gathered it up and pulled the knot tighter this time. "Not consciously, not with my front brain parts. But you don't want me to leave, that bit is true."

I cringed inside. "I'm sorry we had to keep you in the house all this time, what with the cult, and Edward, but I promise we'll make it better." A lump grew in my throat as I left the conditional unspoken: *If you stay*. "You should be getting ... some school? Or something. Oh goodness, you never even went to secondary school, did you? I don't know, we should be able to do something for you at least, you—"

"Heathy," Lozzie dropped her voice with a funny smile and a tinkling laugh. "Heathy, none of that is for me." She let go of my hands and spread her arms wide. "This is for me. This is where I'm supposed to be."

The lump in my throat threatened to choke me. I hugged myself with my tentacles. "Then you are going to leave."

Lozzie threw her head back and made a great big *pfffffft* noise. Evidently the Lozzie-to-Tenny mannerism pipeline was not a one-way connection. "No more than a person leaves their house every day to go outdoors, silly!" she said.

“Well, you didn’t keep that promise last time.” I felt terrible even as I said that, vindictive and angry, with a rusty edge of sarcasm in my voice. “You mean you’d come back, regularly, every night?”

Lozzie blinked at me, tilting her head one way, then the other, as if totally confused. My ugly tone didn’t appear to have upset her. “Of course? Sleeping Outside is fine and fun sometimes but also sometimes not very fun and it’s much better to have a real home with a red bed and stuff. Isn’t it? Heathy?”

My turn to blink in confusion. My rising hurt guttered out.

“... we’ve got our wires crossed,” I muttered, frowning at Lozzie’s sky-blue eyes, soft and sleepy, tinted with alien purple beneath the glowing night skies of the quiet plain. A self-conscious blush crept up my cheeks. “My own abandonment issues have clouded my judgement.”

“Of course I wouldn’t leave-leave!” Lozzie leapt to the rescue, taking my hands again and suddenly squirming into my lap like a cat, turning onto her back with her head on my thighs and her legs stretched out on the yellow grass. “You gave me somewhere to stay. People! Family! I never had that before. And besides, there’s Tenny.” Lozzie’s eyes widened with a serious nod. “I didn’t know she’d hatch into a real person. She’s my baby. I’m not going to leave her alone. I’m not like my brother, I’ll never be!”

I stared down at Lozzie’s face in my lap, dumbstuck for a moment before I let out a huge sigh. I finally allowed myself to let go.

Lozzie was not Maisie.

I took her face in both hands, upside down, and gently kissed her forehead. She giggled and kicked her legs, happy as a cat being fussed over.

“I forgive you, too,” I said. “For being selfish, I mean. I’m not sure I should forgive you for manipulating me, you could just have asked, but I can’t blame you for your brain not functioning properly in our reality, that would be unfair. That’s not your fault, so ... mmm. But I’m not going to stop feeling afraid of losing you, afraid that you would leave, but I trust you, and I forgive you.”

“Accepted!” Lozzie stuck a hand up in the air.

“We still need to talk about what happened with Badger. With the

Eye. Your objections, how you didn't ... ”

I trailed off as my gaze wandered upward, as I looked past Lozzie's discarded goat mask, past the ring of gathered knights and the gently rolling yellow hills, toward the horizon, thinking of that other horizon bordered by the mountains of the mind, where I had stared down the Eye and had learnt what it meant to observe the great observer.

On that distant horizon, an object was moving.

“Lozzie,” I said.

“Mm? Mm? Heathy?” She must have heard the tone in my voice, or perhaps felt the way I tensed up — but more likely it was the way my three tentacles suddenly unfurled into a protective ring. My other three, which lay in wait as mere phantom limbs, tried to join them too, their anchor points aching along my flanks. The trilobe reactor twitched with instinctive insistence that I needed to defend myself, make my extra limbs real, cover myself in spines, and flood my skin with warning colouration.

I pointed.

Lozzie was out of my lap and up on her feet before I could clutch her safe in my tentacles. She sprang forward and stretched up on the tips of her toes, one hand shading her eyes as if a harsh sun beat down on us instead of the strange dark purple light from the twinkling whorls the sky. I scrambled to my feet beside her and gave in to the urge to grow the rest of my tentacles. I eased another control rod out of the bioreactor and allowed the remaining three tentacles to burst into beautiful, rainbow-strobing life from my flanks. They instantly threw themselves out around Lozzie and I in a protective bubble, as if ready for attack from any side.

Privately I sighed at myself. This was a bit of an overreaction for a dot on the horizon.

A tiny white hump was moving across the horizon from left to right — east to west? Did those terms even mean anything on a plane with no sun to move across the sky? Dirty white, like bone or old plaster, shaped like a stubby cigar, rounded at one end and flat at the other and bulging in the middle. Whatever the white dot was, it was so far away as to be impossible to make out any details, except for the merest suggestion of vertical ribs or sections like an insect

carapace. It moved at a snail's pace, inching along the distant horizon, paying us zero attention.

But the sense of scale made my mind swim. To make out even that level of detail that far away, it must have been the size of a barn.

"What is it?" I whispered, bristling all over.

"Caterpillar!" Lozzie announced, and shot a gleeful smile at me. "They're fine and totally safe really, nothing to worry about! It's okay, Heathyyyyy."

My mouth hung open in disbelief as I stared at Lozzie. A pressure, a high-pitched note, whined inside my head. My heart rate was climbing and my breathing was hitching in my throat.

"Lozzie, this place was supposed to be empty," I said. "Safe. You said it was safe."

"Empty of dangerous things, yeah. The cattles are fine, they don't do anything, they just trundle about. Look, look, it's fine." She gestured at the ring of knights, her armoured creations, and she was right. They weren't reacting at all. Somehow that calmed my nerves better than Lozzie's own protestations of safety — but it did nothing to blunt my anger, my frustration, the same issue all over again.

"Lozzie." I swallowed, tried to count to five inside my own head. "Lozzie, you said to us, to me and Evelyn and Raine, not half an hour ago, that there's nothing here that isn't yours. You said that. I can't ... "

I can't trust your words, or your judgement.

Lozzie blinked big sleepy eyes at me. "Yeah!" she chirped. "I made the caterpillars too, duuuuh."

My strangled, choked anger spluttered out into a confused frown and a rising blush. I almost shrunk back from Lozzie, my tentacles bunching up; not only did I feel silly, I felt guilty all over again. I had assumed the worst of her.

"You ... I'm sorry, Lozzie, pardon me?"

"I made the caterpillars too," she repeated. "All of them! I don't remember how many I made because it was the first thing I did with the ones who didn't want to be knights, soooo maybe three or four dozen? And I know they're happy because they let me know,

they do all the exploring but out here they can do it slow and carefully because everything is already dust and gone and stuff, just ruins waaaay out. They're going to help with Maisie too! That's what they're for! We're gonna comb Wonderland!"

I boggled at her, then put my hands out and gave up. "Oh ... kay. Okay, Lizzie. I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions."

Lizzie giggled. "It's okay! There's sooooo much stuff Outside that isn't scary."

"And there's so much stuff that is," I sighed. "But yes, Lizzie, I know. You showed me plenty back in the dreams, and I believe you, I just can't always deal with it and I thought that ... um, caterpillar was—"

"What about if I show you more right now?" Lizzie's expression lit up like a human glow-stick. She bounced away from me on the balls of her feet, hopped and skipped the couple of paces to her goat skull mask, shaking the knot back out of her hair, and slipped the mask back on over her face. She turned those bone-ringed eyes toward me. "And you're awake this time! You won't forget any of it!"

My heart leapt into my throat. "Um ... Lizzie, I'm not sure, really."

"You've got all your tentacles out too, so you're super safe anyway, right? Right! Right-o, let's go, doot-doot doo dooty-oh!" Lizzie went all sing-song on me as she skipped back and grabbed both my hands, her voice strangely muffled from deep in shadow and bone.

"Lizzie, I-I'm really not sure about this!" My voice quivered with barely controlled panic.

"We'll be fine! One hundred percent!" she chirped. "And hey, let's be extra — hundred and ten, hundred and twenty!"

Lizzie waved a hand behind herself. Two of the frozen knights suddenly picked up their feet and marched over to us, soundless except for their metal footfalls on the grass. The way they moved made my skin crawl and sent a shock of instinctive warning up my spine; Lizzie's creations may have been unquestionably on our side, but they walked with inhuman fluidity, as if they possessed neither bone nor sinew beneath that shiny chrome.

Both knights carried shield and lance. They stopped either side of

Lozzie, towering over us. I caught my own warped reflection in one of the shields, a pink and brown blob surrounded by six arcs of pale rainbow.

“We’ll all go together, see?” Lozzie chirped, and I could feel her elfin smile burning through the bone mask. “Touch a shoulder, hang on tight, ‘cos—”

“No!”

The word was scarcely out of my mouth before I ripped my hands from Lozzie’s grip and stumbled back in panic. All my tentacles whipped forward as if to shield me from her. My face burned with embarrassment and shame, my back and armpits were drenched with cold sweat, and my heart was racing so fast I thought it might explode. I had to squeeze my hands into fists to stop them shaking.

“ ... Heather?” Lozzie’s voice came out so small and confused.

“I can’t, Lozzie, I can’t, don’t make me, I can’t.”

Lozzie pulled off the skull mask. Her hair flew everywhere. Distraught eyes met mine. “H-Heathy? It’s fine, it’s safe, I promise!”

I shook my head, jerky and impulsive, and couldn’t stop shaking it. “You can step into my nightmares without even a blink. I can’t. Look at me.” I held out my shaking hands. “Outside places were my childhood nightmares, my night terrors, for years. I can’t, Lozzie, not without the cushion of being in a dream. Or by shutting my eyes and curling up into a ball. This,” I tapped the ground subconsciously with one tentacle-tip, “this is as far as I can go, somewhere like this.”

“ ... but you went to the library! That was cool. It was fancy and fun. And you went to save Eevee that one time, and—”

“In emergencies.” I took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm myself, trying to fight down visions of rotting jungles and endless metal hallways, of worms the size of continents and the rocks I’d hidden beneath, of the vast sky-bound creatures and blind black tunnels beneath the earth, of fungus that walked as living decay, of five-pointed vegetable intelligences and seas of boiling mercury. All the nightmare places I’d been taken. “To help people,” I went on. “To save them. And to try to acquire what we need to save my sister. Not for *fun*.”

“But ... the abyss!”

“The abyss is not the same,” I sighed. “I spent subjective years down there. It became part of me. Maybe it always was, ever since the Eye began to change Maisie and I. But Lozzie, I am not built for ninety percent of the places I’ve seen Outside. Even like this.” My tentacles gestured inward at themselves. “Not psychologically.”

Lozzie’s lips wobbled. “Even the big cool castle?”

“I ... ” My mouth turned dry and my palms went clammy as I realised there was more to this than fear. I did want to see the sorts of places Lozzie used to take me, the wild vistas and impossible castles and quiet deserts.

But what if I liked them too much?

What if Lozzie and I were more similar than I suspected?

“I don’t know,” I forced myself to say. “I don’t know how it would feel without being in a dream. The library was bad enough. Please, don’t ... I can’t come with you.”

Lozzie’s face fell even further. I wanted to reach out and give her a hug but fear held me back — fear of her whisking me away, and fear that I might be seduced by what lay on the other side of another Slip.

But then she puffed her cheeks out and shrugged. “Okay. Oke. Okaaaaay.”

“ ... okay?”

“Don’t worry about it, Heathy! Maybe we’ll do dreams again sometime instead, but I get it. I dooooo.” She nodded slowly, trying to look sagely and understanding, but I saw the elemental sadness behind her eyes.

“Just because ... ” I struggled for the words. “Just because we can’t share everything in life, that doesn’t diminish us.”

She nodded along, but I could tell she was struggling. Outside was part of her, she was part of it, and I could only share in it through a safety filter, with my senses blurred and stopped up, like Odysseus lashed to the mast of his ship as the sirens sang.

I let out a sad sigh and stepped back toward Lozzie, cramming my trepidation back into a bottle. One of my tentacles inched out and

slid across her shoulder-blades, making her squirm and giggle at me. Involuntary, but better than nothing. She flapped her poncho and sighed too, and then glanced up at the pair of knights still waiting in silence either side of us, as if they understood.

“Tell me about them,” I blurted out.

“Ahhhhhhhhh?”

“The knights, I mean.” I nodded up at our silent chaperones. “You made them, yes?”

“Oh, yeah! I put them together and showed them the way and they’re all waiting to help!” Lozzie beamed at me with obvious pride.

I steeled myself for a question I’d been waiting to ask for months. I suspected I would not like the answer. “Back when you saved me from the Eye, when Maisie called you to Wonderland, you had one of these knights with you, and it ...”

Lozzie nodded and gave a sad little sniff. “Melted. Mmmmmm.”

“Yes, and I saw what was inside the armour. Though it was burned by then, and only for a moment. Lozzie, what are they, exactly?”

Lozzie’s face lit back up with glee. “Do you wanna see?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say no.”

Lozzie turned on the ball of one foot, poncho spinning outward, then knocked a jaunty little rhythm on the chest plate of one of her knights. “Ding-dong!” she announced, then grabbed my hand and hopped back, dragging me with her.

Before I could open my mouth in a yelp of surprise, the knight’s metal armour flew open in all directions, like a silent explosion.

And then it froze, each piece suspended in the air at the end of a thick twist of dark, undulating, leathery meat. The open armour revealed that no piece of metal had actually been attached or fastened or welded to any other — the whole suit had been held together by pressure from within, pulled taut by sheer muscular strength, like a child holding a costume close to their body with their hands. Except the occupant possessed much more than just two hands. Open, revealed, exposed to the air like a planet detonated from the inside and but held close by void-frozen magma,

each piece of armour from boot to helmet stuck out in a different direction.

I put both hands to my mouth in shock.

The occupant, the pilot, the thing hiding inside, the squirming meat — *no*, I corrected myself forcefully, *two of these things have died for you, one of them staring down the Eye. You do not get to be disgusted* — the knight stared back at us in blinking silence.

“Lozzie,” I said from inside my hands. “That’s a blob monster. I-I mean no offence,” I hastened to add, speaking to the knight itself and hoping it could understand.

The occupant of the armour was a roiling, bubbling, protoplasmic blob of dark flesh, the colour of raw beef and over-steeped tea. It — he? she? — possessed more than a dozen tentacles, using one each to grip the inside of every armour plate with a massive set of suckers and filaments. More tentacles filled the arms and legs of the suit, but made no attempt to mimic the structures of human limbs. The helmet’s lack of eye holes or visor finally made sense — there was nothing in there but a pair of tentacles to hold it on. Yet more tentacles simply drifted out of the armour cavity to wave in the air like seaweed. A multitude of eyes boiled up from the creature’s surface — human eyes, animal eyes, insect eyes, and other optical apparatus that had no earthly analogue, along with strange organs that were perhaps ears or mouths, though most of them vanished back below the surface of the flesh again, as fast as they had been formed. It did stare back at us though. It saw, and knew, and recognised.

“Kinda blobby!” Lozzie admitted, as if I had just critiqued a cake. “But they’re super duper extra efficient and it lets them do lots of thinking too. You know they can turn almost every cell into a sort of mini brain-cell if they need to? Though most of the ones who wanted that went out as caterpillars instead, so these ones think with each other instead of alone but they don’t need to touch for that like the ones in the caterpillars. Hi!” Lozzie waved at the blob-knight inside the armour, and to my horror and awe, it waved back with at least three tentacles.

“... but ... but you made this, Lozzie?”

“Yeah!”

“All of these?” I managed to rip my eyes away from the knight in front of us and briefly take in the whole field of them once again, all those happy little blobs safe and snug inside their armour. Lozzie’s round table. She’d made an army.

We really were more different than I thought. Goodness, was I glad she was on our side.

“Of course all of them!” she was saying. “I got the idea from one that already existed, I just had to take it Outside so it could be more fleshy, and then all the others got modified for parts and size and thinking and it worked!” She did a strange, breathy giggle. “I learned a lot, you know? From my friend at the bottom of the castle, I mean, about changing bodies, but I never tried it on this kind of scale before but nobody died or got hurt and I guess they have Tenny to thank for that too, since I made her first and all, from spare parts too, but much safer.”

“Lozzie, Lozzie, slow down, please.” I held out a hand. One of my tentacles echoed the gesture, and the knight reached out a tentacle too, as if to greet me, but I pulled back, staring at it with rising incomprehension. “I don’t understand, and you’re not explaining. What are they?”

“Spirits. *Kami!*”

“ ... wha-what?”

“Some of them are the friends who came with me when I first left,” she started saying, and my mind dredged up the memories of all the spirits who had clustered about her when she’d fled reality, back in that park back in Sharrowford, after we’d rescued her from the cult’s castle. “But others started turning up as soon as I put out the call, ones who’d known you and known all about how you kept getting dragged back by the big scary eye in the sky. Some of them even knew you from like ten years ago! And they all wanted to help and there’s a sort of trade-off, you know, they help but they get a body, but I didn’t make any of them do it if they didn’t want to, a few just left and went off to other places Outside but all these left here are in it to help and—”

Lozzie kept going, but her words went in one ear and out the other. A great rushing sound, like the sea, filled my head as I turned to look at the weird, twisted, mollusk-like blob-thing still holding the plates of its armour out from its body, like an exotic clam feeding on

marine snow.

Three stubby little tentacles were held out toward me. A hand, to shake.

The other half of my childhood nightmares, all the nameless ghosts and monsters, the hallucinations which had haunted and tormented me for a decade, which had driven me to false insanity and the dubious refuge of antipsychotics.

Now one of them was knight in Lozzie's service, on a quest for me.

I reached out not one, not two, but three of my tentacles, one for each the knight offered, and grasped all three in a cross-species handshake, a fleeting moment of contact with a devotion I did not understand.

But I'm not ashamed to admit that I started crying anyway.

"Heathy?" Lozzie chirped, hands suddenly on my side. "Are you okay? Okay-okay?"

"Very okay," I murmured, but really I was speaking to those bubbling eyes and that leathery flesh. "More okay than in a long time."

"Yay!" Lozzie chirped.

A lump grew in my throat, courage and recklessness and a little bit of insanity; what else was I wrong about?

What else was I capable of?

"Lozzie, how about we take that trip elsewhere after all?"

any mortal thing – 14.9

Lozzie took a heartbeat to absorb my foolish request. Perhaps she couldn't believe her ears; I could hardly blame her, not when I'd been so adamant in my rejection only minutes earlier, so horrified, so afraid.

It's not every day somebody offers to dive head first into their own trauma.

Eventually I looked away from the knight inside the open suit of armour, away from the fleshy, tea-stain coloured, living core of intent that had set itself the task of protecting us. We broke our tentacle handshake by silent mutual agreement and the knight slowly retracted its feelers too. Lozzie was staring at me, blinking sleepy eyes, mouth open but stalled. One of her hands was bunched in the pastel fabric of her poncho. Her goat-skull mask hung from the other by one horn.

"The trip elsewhere," I repeated. "Let's do it. Together." My voice quivered but rang unbroken, gentle echoes lost across this endless quiet plain of yellow grass, beneath the soft purple light of a whorled and spiralled sky.

"You really mean it?" Lozzie asked, her voice barely louder than her breath.

I nodded, then wiped the threat of tears on my sleeve and held out a hand toward her. "Yes." A hiccup got in the way and made me roll my eyes. "Don't make me repeat it again, please. I'll lose all my courage."

"Heathy ... " She accepted my outstretched hand. Lozzie's elfin little smile bounced back onto her face as she rocked on the balls of her feet, but the smile was extinguished again when she bit her bottom lip. "I don't want to force you! You said, you said you're not like me and you're right we're really not, not really, not in the way it really matters out—"

"We might not be exactly the same thing, yes," I said, trying to keep my voice free of quiver and shiver. "But since when does that matter? A-and if I ... oh, for pity's sake, if I don't do this now then

I'll never do it. I might never have the courage again. I might never find the guts to ask you a second time. And Lozzie, I need every edge I can find. You've given me one — given *us* one — a hundred and fifty ones." I gestured at the knights of Lozzie's imaginary round table, spread out across the yellow hillsides, and at our specific friend still standing there and holding its armour apart like a shelled mollusk. "But if I can find another by facing— f-facing—" My voice began to shake. "I'm not a scared little girl anymore. You've been out there and you've come back fine."

Lozzie pulled an awkward toothy smile and did a little bird-like bob of her head. "Fine is relative?"

"You are fine," I almost snapped. "No matter what anybody says about you."

Lozzie scrunched her eyes up like a cat. "Mmmmm!" she went.

"I need every edge I can acquire if I'm going to take Maisie back from the Eye. I need to find my limits. I thought this was one." I glanced at the knights again. "But it's not. Take me elsewhere, Lozzie, please. To interesting places. Show me. Because I might learn something, maybe about myself."

"Oh, Heathy!" Lozzie her arms around my neck in a sudden hug. I hugged her back, as much to still my racing heart as to acknowledge her joy, and briefly felt her heart beating inside her own chest against mine. I could not have asked for a better source of comfort. She pulled away as quickly as she had embraced me, squeezing my arms and then my hands, nodding enthusiastically. "Yes! We can do it! And it doesn't have to be long because you want to get back for dinner but it'll be real and I promise it's safe and yes!" She laughed and bounced back on her heels, but held on tight to one of my hands.

I smiled back as I let out a long, slow, shaking breath, marred only slightly by a loud hiccup at the end. Truth was, I was still terrified and I didn't try to hide it. What was the point? I knew what I was doing, and why I was doing it. I'd made my choice. It was time.

Lozzie dipped her head in a wave of wispy blonde hair and slipped the goat-skull mask back over her features, then straightened up, once more tucked away behind shadow and bone, topped with horns, fey and alien.

“You’ll have to get me one of those,” I said, purely to distract from the fluttering in my stomach.

“We could! I think! I don’t know! Maybe!”

I forced out a tiny laugh and pulled my hoodie tighter around myself, drawing my six tentacles inward toward my body; I wrapped two of them around my torso in a self-hug and allowed another to creep down my own arm to grasp Lozzie’s wrist. I would not lose my grip on her, no matter where we went.

“It’s okay, I won’t let go, I promise,” she chirped. I managed a nod. “Come come!” she called out, and the two knights she’d called over previously now got into position again, flanking her shoulders. The one which had opened its armour set about retracting the metal back into place, pulling muscles tight like a clam to seal itself away inside the shell of perfect chrome once more. A tendril flicked out through the final closing gap between cuirass and pauldron, angled up and pointing at me, then slipped inside before the armour closed completely. Once again, a knight in shining armour stood there, with no hint as to what roiling flesh lay hidden inside.

I burst out laughing in a release of tension. The absurdity was too much.

“Heathy?” Lozzie twitched her head side-to-side like a curious puppy, another gesture she shared with Tenny. The re-armoured knight stepped into position and placed a metal gauntlet on Lozzie’s shoulder to mirror the one on her other side.

“It gave me a thumbs up,” I said through the laughter. “Very sweet.”

Lozzie beamed up at the knight, but it did not react, sealed as it was in metal once more. Perhaps it did respond, inside the dark privacy of that armour. Perhaps that’s why they seemed so impassive, all talking mind-to-mind without the need for external expression. I hoped they were happy.

“Ready?” Lozzie asked with a teasing lilt. My heart hammered against the cage of my ribs and my mouth was suddenly very dry. I almost said no.

“Keep ... keep it moderate, please,” I said instead. “Nowhere too extreme. Places we’ve been before, perhaps.”

“Mhmm, mmhmm!” Lozzie nodded along, the goat-skull mask bouncing up and down.

“And whatever you do,” I blurted out and felt stupid, “don’t actually take me to Wonderland.”

“Heatherrrrrrr,” Lozzie purred.

“I know! I know, I didn’t need to say it, I’m sorry, it just scares me, it’s always in the back of my head. I know you wouldn’t.”

“I don’t want to go back there either,” Lozzie said. I could hear the wrinkled nose in her tone even through the weight of the bone mask. Quite right.

“Then I’m ready,” I said with butterflies in my stomach. My tentacle squeezed tighter on Lozzie’s wrist. I had to resist the urge to armour-plate myself.

Lozzie swung our joined hands up into the air with my tentacle along for the ride. Her goat-skull mask turned to meet my gaze. In the second before we departed I felt a brief flicker of dissociation, a sense of looking in the mirror and not seeing oneself — but in reverse; I felt as if I was looking at Lozzie’s real face, or the closest thing possible.

“I love you!” she said, then, “Wheee!”

Reality folded up.

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Mile-long god-worms digested endless lava flows of molten metal and defecated it out as living, green biomass that exploded into verdant plant-life, while Lozzie and I watched from an outcrop that had already ossified into bone; a sky filled with plate-creatures each the size of a continent, all of them with unique ecosystems riding on their backs, singing songs in the upper atmosphere loud enough to shatter rock, and we tiny little apes protected inside a bubble of air which Lozzie conjured from her knight’s shields as she sang in response; the castle where she’d taken me before, wrapped in a thick blanket of snow and tucked away in a mountain valley, beauty sublime enough to break to my heart, but quieter than before, as if the snow had never stopped falling and the inhabitants had grown fewer, under the watchful eye of the giant bird which perched on a distant peak and watched the fortress, as if laying

siege with the power of thought; a giggle and a huddle and a game of noughts and crosses in the dancing sand of a place far too hot for unprotected human flesh, but where Lozzie kicked her shoes off and trod without a care, and I coaxed my bioreactor to power a pair of heat-sink sails and pad my outer dermis with coolant.

I did not come away from that last one unscathed, back bruised in new places and skin tender, all aching and raw from growing fresh pneuma-somatic body parts. Lozzie massaged my muscles as we lay in a cradle of vines, high up in the canopy of a rotting jungle beneath a sun the colour of dead peach.

“We can go back if you want,” she chirped from beneath the bone-mask. She did not take it off in these depths. “It’s been hours and hours and hours.”

“Not yet,” I croaked, and forced my hand back into hers, past my better judgement.

She sang to beetle-backed crustaceans with heads of writhing fingers, that talked to each other in a language of colour and pheromone. She convinced them we were only there to watch the distant mushroom towers unfold like giant sunflowers, though the towers pointed not at a sun, but at a mass of sub-orbital glowing bone like a giant tumour of the sky. There was another castle, one I liked less, built for things shaped so much larger than we little monkeys, with no windows and no doors, only endless dark pressing in on the tiny bubble of light cast from the tips of the knights’ lances. We left there quickly when things began to move in the shadows, shapes that made me want to scream and bristle and cover myself with warning spines and toxic compounds, despite Lozzie’s protests that this was a friendly place. We stood on a frozen shore opposite moving mountains of black mold, Lozzie singing to them in alien language as they split and recombined, eating and disgorging each other in an endless chain as they flowed downriver — though that river was not water, and the sea which served as their ultimate destination was beyond my imagination.

And yet, no matter how beautiful or how awful, every one of these visitations was a kind of subtle, self-inflicted torture.

Lozzie could giggle and dance and sing out here — and she did, with relish and relief, even in places I could not comprehend, the ones where I had to close my eyes and press my palms over my ears

and wrap myself in my own tentacles, or the ones where I simply had to swallow a scream. Though, to Lozzie's credit, as soon as I did those things she whisked us away to the next whistle-stop location, and her knights guarded me like the loyal hounds they were.

But even the beautiful places — the ones that floated in the heart of glowing nebulae, or where the air itself was braided like woven silk, or where all was shimmering dust and bone-white leftovers — even those, I could not fully endure.

Every Outside dimension we visited felt wrong — was wrong. The light was an impossible hue, or the colours shifted along the spectrum just enough to make my vision swim. Or the gravity was incorrect, my own footsteps warped, the processes of my organs confused. My skin tingled, the air a foreign sensation in my lungs. Any surface I touched felt *wrong*, even through my shoes, and forced nausea down my throat as my body tried to reject the sensation; all Outside was formed by the alien rules and logic that ran riot beyond the ordered walls of the castle of Earth. My thoughts twisted this way and that under ineffable conditions, held fast only by the inviolable core of abyssal being I had become.

We had not evolved for these places. Apes were not meant to be here, Outside. Here was soul-death amid sublime beauty.

No. Lozzie was meant to be out here. I wasn't. Even with what I had become, these places were not meant for me. Enduring them was an act of sheer willpower and self-discipline that I could not keep up for long. Even an abyssal thing is only adjusted for one set of conditions, not all possible climates at once. Lozzie and I huddled inside pink hoodie and pastel poncho amid the black seas of infinity, but she loved it out there.

I peered through my fingers at iron-blue intensities and void-dark infinities; I groped for Lozzie's hand in the middle of whirl-storm winds that pulled not at flesh and bone but at thought and memory; I tucked my tentacles in close to avoid the attention of snuffling intelligences and blind immensities. And by the end of it I felt sick, sick, *sick*.

"Do you want to go home?"

"No," I lied.

I was an alloy of ape and abyss, testing the limits of my endurance.

And I found myself wanting.

But it was not merely a matter of physical confrontation. Here was the other half of my childhood and teenage trauma, and I was attacking myself with it, over and over, until I quivered, bleeding, on the edge of my own sanity. It was self-harm, but I did not admit that at the time.

“Heathy Heathy, Heathyyyy, come, come, time to come home, come —”

“We’re not done.”

“Yes we areeeee.”

Lozzie squeezed my hand one last time, skipping back to me in a place where even she did not look remotely human, an inside-out place of coal-black meat and fluttering tissues.

“No, I have to keep going, have to keep—”

Lozzie did not take no for an answer. She pulled me home by one hand.

= =

We touched back down on the quiet plain of yellow grass, like an antechamber between our reality and the true depths of Outside, the continental shelf before the deep dark of open ocean. The first thing I did was sit down very suddenly on the ground, my hand slipping from Lozzie’s as my knees gave out; the second thing I did was flinch about a foot in the air at the skull staring up at me from my own lap. I choked out a yelp and flung the twisted thing away in surprise.

“Oop!” Lozzie squeaked as she lunged for it. She caught the skull in both arms before it could hit the ground, tottering on both feet to regain her balance. “Heathy! It’s not unbreakable, you might crack it!” She giggled and shook her head, her voice and face still hidden inside the shadow of her own skull-mask.

“What— what— I-I don’t—” I panted for breath, blinking in utter confusion.

Lozzie cradled the twisted skull in her arms like a skittish cat. She hopped forward on tiptoes, tilting her upper body to peer down at me, her hair spilling out from her mask in a waterfall of blonde.

“Heathy?”

“I ... give me a moment,” I managed, trying to gather myself. “ ... confused. I don’t ... ”

The last hour — or twenty minutes, or three hours, or three days — formed a blur of pressurised memory. It was akin to the feeling of coming up for air after being glued to a book. Nothing seemed real, even myself. I grasped my own hands and squeezed to check that I could still feel pain.

“Tch, ow,” I tutted. That was a yes.

Lozzie squatted down so she was level with me, then pulled her goat-skull mask off and placed it on the ground. Freed from shadow and bone, her face was creased with care and she was biting her lip, big blue eyes like twin sapphires of happy exhaustion after our journey. Her two knights, the two we’d brought with us on the dizzying trip Outside, stepped back from their flanking positions, as if to rejoin the round table spread out across the yellow hillsides. But they did not fully retreat just yet, waiting to be dismissed.

“Heathy?” Lozzie murmured again.

“I’m ... I’m okay,” I lied. I was very far from okay. I was caked in cold sweat from head to toe, wrapped in my tentacles like an infant sucking her own thumb, and shaking all over. My stomach felt like a black hole and I had a headache — not a brain-math headache, for once, but simple dehydration and stress, a constant throb that pounded harder whenever I moved my head. “How ... Lozzie ... what?”

“We were out there too long for you maybe,” she murmured, biting her lip again. “Heathy?”

“No, no,” I said. “My fault, my request.” I managed to blink up at her, at her elfin little face framed by the deep purple night. “I think I’m having a panic attack. Or coming down from one.”

“I know!” Lozzie squeaked, then reached out her free hand and took mine. She squeezed hard, and I squeezed back, trying to get the weight off my chest. “You didn’t have to. You didn’t have to come if it was going to—”

“I didn’t have to,” I echoed. “I chose to. Bad choice.” I forced out an awkward laugh. “Aversion therapy, my hat.”

"You don't have a hat," Lozzie murmured and puffed her cheeks out. I almost managed to laugh.

"Exactly," I croaked.

We stayed like that, hand-in-hand on the yellow hillside, until the shaking and the panting and the worst of the fear passed. I hugged myself with my tentacles and held on tight, forcing out slow breaths, trying to feel normal again.

You made it, I told myself. You went Outside, for hours — or days? How much time had passed? You went Out by choice, to some of the most inhuman places you could ever imagine, you endured them, and you came back. You did it.

I did not feel proud; I felt damaged.

"You did it," Lozzie said with a teasing smile through her worry. My little mind-reader.

I nodded at the skull cradled in the crook of her other arm. "Lozzie, what is that?"

"You don't remember?" She blinked at me, then held out the alien skull. "Here, it's yours! We said we'd get you one as well, remember?"

"I ... I do remember that conversation, yes."

The skull in Lozzie's hands, the skull we'd brought back from the nighted depths, her sisterly offering to me, was a strange and twisted thing, a fluted, metallic grey, bell-shape, shaped not unlike how I imagine an octopus skull would look — if cephalopods possessed internal skeletons. Six eye holes stared with blind nothingness behind them, ringed with ridges of protective bone. If the creature had a jaw in life, it did not anymore, only a strange horizontal structure like a slash of mouth, which looked as if it had once been ringed with other appendages or bone supports. The implication made me shudder. I was glad it was dead, and that I was not meeting it face to face in the flesh. The bottom of the skull flared out into a skirt of bone, making it perfect for converting into a mask or helmet.

As Lozzie held it out, the skull caught the purplish light of the skies above the quiet plain. The surface shimmered like oil on water, with ripples and rings. The bone was neither clean white nor dirty

yellow, but a strangely smooth metallic grey, like a metal that should not have been a solid at normal pressures and temperatures.

“Where did we ... ?” I let my question trail off.

“We took it from the seabed, eight or nine jumps ago, among all the others in the graveyard jumble. You really really don’t remember? It’s suuuuper super old, from near the bottom where none of the scavengers go because all the flesh has been picked off the bones long ago. And it’s beautiful! You said so yourself! Here!”

She offered it to me again, but I flinched back, two tentacles rising as if to defend me from assault.

“I-I-I can’t, Lozzie, I— did I really say it’s beautiful?”

“You did! I can hold on to it for you if you don’t want to take it right now, after all it’s going to need some padding inside for your head and face and you might need to file down the bits around the eyes because they’re still kind of rough despite being in the sea for so long, which is odd and I think it means it used different kinds of metal to reinforce different parts of itself. Isn’t that cool?” She beamed at me, more in love with the thing in her hands than I could ever be.

But her passion convinced me to try. Gingerly, I reached out with both hands to accept the mortal leavings of a creature I could scarcely imagine.

Lozzie beamed even wider, and placed the skull in my hands with all the delicacy of trying to dress a cat. From the metallic appearance I expected the skull to be heavy, but it weighed barely anything at all. Lozzie giggled at my surprise.

“It’s like carbon fibre,” I murmured. “So light.”

“Probably really strong too!” Lozzie chirped. “Look look, up the top there in the back!” She pointed to the underside of the Outsider skull. I turned it over gently, as if it was made of spun glass which might break apart in my hands. Lozzie hadn’t been exaggerating; on the back of the skull there was a set of faint indentations — tooth marks, sharp and raking, from teeth that had once pierced whatever hide and flesh had clothed this creature. The teeth had been turned away by the diamond-hard surface of the skull.

I brushed hesitant fingers over the bite mark. No crack, no

weakness, no flaw radiated out from the wound. “I wonder if this is what killed it?”

“Don’t think so!” Lozzie chirped. “Too hard for that! Probably won and bit back!”

I turned the alien cephalopod skull over again, to stare into the eye holes and run my fingers over the contours — though it wasn’t strictly a cephalopod. I had learnt plenty about that particular biological niche, from months of pining while watching youtube videos of squid and octopuses. Whatever earthly analogue I imagined for this creature, it was not truly of that class. The same as Lozzie’s goat-skull mask, which had likely not come from a true goat at all.

The surface was smooth and cool and somehow soothing, and I felt the sweat finally drying on my skin and sticking my t-shirt to my back. The gentle wind of the quiet plain ruffled my hair. Six empty eye sockets stared up at me, unseeing and long dead. The metal felt so unfamiliar, but did not make me shudder with disgust; when I tilted the skull, the metal caught the light and showed me a ripple of colours for which I did not have names. Memory dribbled back, of Lozzie and I in a bubble of air on some nighted sea floor, picking through bones; that had happened, and I had called our find beautiful, if only because it seemed so real down there in the dark. On an impulse I did not understand, I put a finger into one of the eye sockets.

What manner of creature had you been? I asked it in the silence of my mind. Mortal, certainly. Mortal enough to die, to leave a body behind, for one like me to find. What kind of thoughts had filled this skull in life? Outside thoughts, alien to me? Or could we have communicated? You weren’t like the Eye, or the other giants of Outside, or the things in the abyss. Were you male or female? Or perhaps you did not have biological sex at all, perhaps you propagated by budding, or cloning, or some other, unthinkable process. What was your identity, did you have family? None of these questions would ever be answered. But you had flesh, once. *I have flesh now*, I thought. *And one day I will be like you.*

But not yet. And not Outside. I will die old, in bed, I told myself, and I have miles to go before then.

It was an oddly comforting idea. My lingering panic attack finally

faded away into mere echo. The skull was a connection, a bridge, proof.

“Heathy?” Lozzie’s voice crept into my rumination.

“Thank you for the present,” I said. “I was right the first time. I think.”

“The first time?”

“It is beautiful.”

“Yay!” Lozzie threw her hands in the air, which was not a sustainable pose while also squatting, at least not with her lack of muscle tone. She wobbled and laughed and had to accept falling back onto her bottom with a little “oof,” legs wiggling in the air.

“We still do need to talk,” I said, feeling oddly emboldened. I had conquered my oldest fear — well, with the exception of the Eye. What was a chat with Lozzie by comparison? Nothing to be afraid of. Lozzie and I loved each other.

“Oh.” Lozzie sat up from her sprawl, blinking at me. “We do? We doooo? I thought we did. We did!”

“We never finished. Not about the part that really matters, to me. The part that hurt me.”

“Oh. Oops.” Lozzie bit her lip.

“Not oops. It’s okay.” I sighed. “I mean, I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m not very good having big serious talks.”

“Pfffffft,” went Lozzie. “You so totally are! Duh.”

“Thank you, I think? In any case, I don’t feel like I am. But I’m not going to manipulate you into anything, or browbeat you, or attack you, I promise. I’m not even going to tell you off. Maybe I was going to do that at one point, but it feels silly now. We’re friends, and I’m hoping if I express this then you’ll understand.”

Lozzie nodded with enthusiastic urgency, head going up and down like a cartoon donkey, expression that blinking po-faced seriousness that was impossible not to find sweet, but which meant she really was listening. I found myself winding two of my tentacles around each other, a new nervous behaviour.

“You put me right in front of the Eye, without warning,” I said.

Despite everything, my voice cracked. The memory of burning pressure flared up inside me, of the unstoppable force of the Eye's gaze.

Lozzie lit up, as much as she could do with her damaged extraocular muscles, and her mouth flew open. But I held a hand out to stop her. I needed her to understand, not just apologise.

"And I prevailed," I added. "I won, I made it out, I learnt I could make it out. I learnt that the Eye is not impossible to escape even once it has me in its sight. Which is invaluable. Invaluable. But, Lozzie, you put me there without warning. You made me face my ... my ... " I sniffed hard and had to wipe my eyes on the back of my hand. "You made me face it. And I need you to understand what that means."

Lozzie nodded.

"Do you understand?" I asked.

Nod nod.

"You can speak now," I said. "I didn't mean to silence you, you can —"

"I'm sorry," Lozzie said, and she said it without biting her lip, without upturned eyes, without any cutesy affectation, except her hands gripping the fabric of her poncho.

"Okay. Okay. I forgive you," I said. "I can do that, I—"

"But it was still the right thing to do," Lozzie continued.

"... pardon?"

Now Lozzie bit her lip. She wasn't shaking with fear, but this sudden reversal took courage. "You needed me there and you needed me to do that because you just said yourself that it worked out in the end, you needed it!"

I started to shake my head. "Lozzie—"

"I made a decision and it was my decision because you don't have to do everything yourself all the time. You were missing! Missing something important and I had to step in because I'm your friend and I get to protect you too!" Lozzie raced ahead, voicing her runaway train of thought. "What would have happened if I hadn't? You would have killed Badger or the Eye would have had him and

you wouldn't have learnt anything at all and we wouldn't be here talking about this because you might have done something you couldn't take back. And it worked out." She slowed down all of a sudden. "And now we're here."

I gaped at her. "You're ... trying to justify intentionally exposing me to—"

"No!" Lozzie squawked. "No it wasn't justified! Of course it wasn't!"

"... well, we agree on that much." I sighed, shaking my head.

"Lozzie, it worked out, but it might not have done. There were so many possible things that could have gone wrong, things that could have failed. Because of you deciding something on your own, about me, without asking me."

"But it was the only thing I could do," she said.

"So you're saying it wasn't your fault?" I asked.

Lozzie shook her head, sending faint wisps of blonde hair out from her like a glowing halo. "Of course it was my fault because I did it but if we could rewind time and do it all over again I would still do the same thing but—"

Lozzie did something she so rarely could: she stopped.

She stopped totally dead, then looked up and away from me, at the spirals of purple light in the unnatural night sky. "But I would ask you first? Okay. Okay! Oki-doki-does. I would have to ask you first. I wish I could time travel, it's so much easier that way." She looked back at me with an expression like a goblin caught with her hand in a biscuit tin. "And I won't do it again. I won't. I'm sorry." She held a hand out toward me.

Hesitant at first, I accepted her hand, small and cool and soft in my own. I sighed and tried to share a smile with her too.

"Don't hate me," she added in a small voice.

"I don't," I sighed. "Apology accepted. Even if we don't agree, it matters that you understand."

"I'm smarter than I look!" She chirped, then let go of my hand with a giggle. "You really seriously for real thought I wouldn't?"

I shrugged, a touch of colour creeping into my cheeks. I cleared my throat, feeling horribly awkward. "My turn to apologise, I suppose."

Lozzie, with the way you act back in reality, sometimes it's difficult to keep in mind you're not actually a thirteen year old or something."

Lozzie mock-gaped at me, scandalised and outraged, but she wasn't a good enough actor to sell the drama. I still rolled my eyes and had to look away, half in embarrassment, half in guilt.

"We've talked about plenty of non-childish things!" she chirped. "All sorts! You'd never talk to Tenny about half of what we've talked about, and especially in the dreams but ahhhhh no no you don't remember that all properly, right, yes, okay-okay. Do you remember telling me about how Raine figured she can make you pop twice in a row if she—"

"Lozzie!" I squeaked, my outrage quite real. Lozzie burst into a peal of giggles. I glanced at the knights a few paces away, as if they gave a hoot about overhearing the details of my sex life.

"They don't think about those sorts of things!" Lozzie announced after following the direction of my flustered gaze.

"Yes, but it's still a bit weird to have it said out loud."

"You didn't care about that in the dreams. Just relax, Heathy! You know you can talk to me about anything at all, I don't judge, what have I got to judge on anyway? You know all the things about me and I know all the things about you."

I let out a little sigh, almost sad. "I don't, actually. Know all the things about you, I mean. Because the dreams are still hazy."

"Pbbbbbt," Lozzie made a sad sound and flopped sideways on the pale yellow grass. "That's true but it doesn't have to be true. New promise! We'll do a new promise."

"There was an old promise?" I asked, somewhat liking this notion.

"Many many manyyyyy," Lozzie chanted from the ground. "But new promise now. I promise not to make decisions that affect you without asking you first, including—" She stuck out a finger. "—including more dreams."

"I would love to dream with you again," I blurted out. "But I'd like to remember them this time."

"Mmhmm, mmhmm, and in return, you promise to ask me things if

you wanna know them.”

“Agreed,” I said, easily and softly. “Do we need to do a ritual to seal the promise?”

Lozzie wrinkled her nose, which looked extra silly with her face sideways. “Promises are promises, the words make them happen and not when you rub your blood together or something. If it’s a true promise then you know because it gets kept and if it was false then it doesn’t.”

I felt unaccountably playful when I asked, “And which is this?”

Lozzie grinned wide, impish and teasing. “A true one.”

“All right. All right.” I felt a mischievous flutter. “Lozzie, do you fancy Twil?”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!” Lozzie burst into laughter, kicking her legs and smacking the ground with both hands before flailing herself back up into a sitting position. I was blushing enough for both of us, mortified at my own question. “Fuzzy? No! No, no, no way. Not mine, not my ... type? Typing? Style? I don’t know if I will ever have a type but fuzzy is fuzzy and not like that.”

“A very comprehensive answer,” I hurried to say, trying to manually rub the blush off my own cheeks. “Yes. Thank you. Okay. Ahem.”

I actually said *ahem* out loud. I could be such a gossip, but I couldn’t take the heat.

Lozzie giggled at my self-inflicted discomfort and then shuffled to cross the gap between us. She settled in beside me and propped her chin on my shoulder, so we could both look down at the metallic skull in my lap. She reached down to stroke the strange Outsider’s skull.

“I think it’s really pretty,” she said.

“It is, in its own way.”

“It’ll make a good mask!”

“And why would I need a mask?” I asked. Lozzie shrugged and puffed her cheeks out.

“Maybe it’s not a mask then,” she said.

I sighed and leaned my head against hers, thought-to-thought.

“I wish you’d told me in the first place,” I said, “about Badger coming to apologise to you. We could have approached everything differently, at least.”

“But then you might not have been able to do it, which is fair because it was a hard thing to do and hard things are hard.”

“Still.” I pulled back so I could look her in the eyes. “I wish you’d just told me that you had a problem with his death. I always assumed ... well. I saw you stab a man to death with a scalpel once, you were wild, you were ... what’s ... oh ... ”

As I said those words — as I recalled what Lozzie had done back when I’d murdered her brother, recalled her palming a scalpel and slitting the throat of one of her brother’s cultist minions — Lozzie squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, jerky and cringing and blocking it out, shrinking down inside herself to hide from the memory.

“Oh,” I repeated, and realised what I’d been missing this entire time. “Oh, Lozzie, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay it’s okay it’s okay it’s okay—” she hissed to herself, then opened her eyes again, panting softly and trying to smile. “I’m okay I’m okay just don’t don’t don’t—”

“Okay, okay! I won’t, I won’t bring it up, not now, not now.”

Lozzie clung to me, squeezing my hoodie into tight handfuls in both her fists, shivering and shaking inside her own skin. I held her gently, stroking the back of her head, trying to tease her hair into a semblance of order. After a while she stopped shaking quite so badly, and slowly, ever so slowly, to give us something to focus on, I set about the intimate process of braiding her hair.

None of us — not me, not Evee, not Raine, not Zheng, to my knowledge — had ever addressed the fact that Lozzie had committed murder to escape her abusive brother. I’d blasted Alexander Lilburne into a broken mess of pulped meat and shattered bone, yes, and that had changed me forever. Over time I had discovered, to my twinned horror and fascination, that perhaps I was built for this after all. Not like Raine, but enough not to be destroyed by the act.

Lozzie was not built for murder. Lozzie didn't even like to hear talk of violence. And she'd stabbed a man in the throat because that was her only option. I'd gotten so used to thinking of her escape as a rescue, but she had participated along with us.

She'd been mentally unwell back then, unwell because of abuse, but that did not make her immune to what she'd had to do.

We sat huddled together on that quiet plain, allowing the minutes to stretch out beneath the soft purple light as I braided Lozzie's hair and one of my tentacles slipped around her waist in a hug; gentle wind teased stray strands of blonde out of my hands, which I dutifully gathered back in; the fairy tale knights of her round table kept their own council; she did not want to talk about this right now, so I kept my mouth shut, because I'd already done enough damage.

I finished braiding her hair and held up the unsecured end.

"Pretty," Lozzie chirped. The bounce was back in her voice, even if weak. I thanked whatever gods would listen.

"We don't have anything to tie it with, though," I said.

Lozzie rummaged beneath her poncho. I'd always suspected she had secret pockets sewn into the lining, and my suspicions were heightened when she lit up with an, "Aha!" and wriggled and arm out to present me with a little pink hair tie. I bound up the end of her braid, nice and neat.

"Thankeeeeee," she purred, and we shared a hug.

"Lozzie, if you ever want to—"

"I will!" she chirped before I could finish. "But not ... "

"Not now," I finished for her, nodding. "Not now. It's okay."

A herky-jerky smile twitched back onto Lozzie's lips. She twisted around, bounced to her feet, and offered me a hand. I accepted, hugging the Outsider cephalopod skull to my chest with the other hand as Lozzie helped me up. She retrieved her goat-skull mask from the ground too.

"Time to go home and have dinner?" I asked.

"I need to decompress," she said, smile teasing, eyelashes fluttering. "You said not to take you to extreme places Outside but there's

places I haven't seen in months and months and I want to go see them. I can go by myself!"

My heart dropped into my stomach, but I tried not to let it show on my face. I failed miserably. " ... all right," I said.

"Oh, Heathy, I'm not going anywhere!" She threw her arms around my neck and squeezed me quickly. "I'll be back soon enough, I promise!"

"How soon?" I croaked out, my throat closing up.

Lozzie danced back a couple of paces, closed one eye, then the other, then opened both. "I dunno! The morning? Like I'm going out for a night! You don't do that but it's a thing that people do a lot and I want to. Ple—"

"You don't have to ask for my permission," I blurted out. "I'm not keeping you from ... going out and partying? Oh my goodness." I rolled my eyes and felt absolutely absurd. "I'm like a droll, stick-in-the-mud older sister, aren't I?" I hiccuped, because otherwise I might cry again. "Keeping you from going out and having fun."

"Not droll!" Lozzie directed a serious little frown at me. "Indoor fun is fun too."

"But sometimes you need to see your other friends. Your Outside friends. Right."

Lozzie nodded up and down, her braid bouncing.

"I ... I need you with me, Lozzie," I said. "For Maisie, and for ... "

"I am with you!" she declared, pointing one finger at me. "And I'll be back for breakfast! Smoke me a kipper!"

I frowned and spluttered out a laugh. "A *what*?"

"A kipper! You know. Actually I don't know what a kipper is. I think it's a fish but I just heard it somewhere so cereal is fine."

"I'll find out what a kipper is and smoke you one," I laughed, trying to hold back everything else I felt. Lozzie was just going out for the evening. Outside. To all those nightmare vistas and impossible places, because that was her natural environment. "What shall I say to Tenny? Mummy's out for the evening?"

"Mmhmm! She'll understand! I've told her allllll about Outside, she

knows what it means.”

“Do you maybe want to take her along sometime?” What was I even saying? Trying to make this seem normal, make it less terrifying?

Lozzie’s good humour hit a speed bump. She sighed and flapped her poncho. “Tenny’s not a child of Outside.”

“ ... oh?”

“She was made on Earth! With all Earth parts and Earth thoughts and stuff. There’s places I really really wanna show her, but she’s not built for it like we are.”

Like you are, I thought, but did not say out loud.

“That’s, well, that’s fair enough,” I said. “She’s going to need room to fly, eventually.”

“And she will get it!” Lozzie spread her arms to indicate the quiet plain, goat-skull mask dangling from one hand.

“Ah. Yes.”

“Anyway. Heathyyyyyy, you can see yourself home, yeah? I’ll be back in the morning, for real, I promise!”

I managed a nod. My throat was dry, my palms clammy, but I did not reach out for Lozzie. I chose to trust her.

She slipped the goat-skull mask back over her head, transforming into a pixie from the underworld once more, then skipped across the few feet which separated us and hugged me once more, squeezed me hard until I choked out a laugh and squeezed her back. Then she let go, our hands touching at the fingertips as she stepped away.

“Later!” she chirped, so undeniably happy.

And then with a hop and a skip, she ran and leaped into the air.

And vanished.

I stood there for several long minutes of silence and peace on the quiet plain, trying to fight down a lump in my throat, twisting my hoodie in one hand and hugging myself with my tentacles. I did trust Lozzie. She wasn’t Maisie, she wasn’t being kidnapped or taken away, she was my friend and she was going out for the night,

to places that she'd been to many, many times before.

"A night on the town," I said out loud, and laughed a sad laugh at myself, then let out a big sigh. "Heather, you're so silly. She'll be fine."

I bid a goodbye — only for now — to the knights, though none of them responded in any visible fashion. I even patted one of them, the one who had opened its armour to me. I located Evelyn's blue bucket a few feet away, picked it up, and tucked the Outsider cephalopod skull under my arm. Then I took some deep breaths, closed my eyes, and executed the familiar old equation. Time to go back to where I belonged. Time to cry into Raine's shoulder and endure a sleepless night waiting for Lozzie to come home.

Out.

Space folded up around me.

And boney hands closed around my ankles in a vice-grip of iron and ice, to hold me fast before I could cross back to reality.

any mortal thing – 14.10

Cold as an empty grave and strong as granite, dead hands closed around the delicate bones of my ankles until talus and tibia creaked under pressure; I was held fast, neither in reality nor Outside, neither back home in Sharroford nor stranded on the quiet plain.

I wanted to scream, but could not. I wanted to thrash and kick and spit, but could not. I wanted to reach down with tentacle and claw and extrude specialised cutting tools and rip the hands off at their own wrists, but could not.

Could not do. Could not act. Could not even think.

I was stuck neither here nor there, but nowhere at all. Inside the membrane, in the transitional state, caught in the act of translocation.

It was both a single moment and also eternity, because time did not mean anything in the between-space. This was not the abyss — if the dead hands had dragged me down there, I could have turned on them like a cornered fox and torn them apart with beautiful truth. But this was merely the cell wall, the space between one state and the other, the phase transition; in itself it meant nothing, was nothing, could produce and harbour and be nothing.

I was stuck there, and yet I did not exist there.

It was like being suffocated.

And then I rubber-banded back out, because vacuum abhors presence.

= =

I crashed back Outside squealing and spluttering like a dying pig.

The soft yellow grass of the quiet plain rushed up to meet me as my knees gave out. I dropped the blue plastic bucket and the beautiful Outsider-cephalopod skull, gripped by full-body rejection of what I'd just experienced. Shivering as if in the claws of a fever, I managed to stay on my hands and knees, sagging and moaning, body drenched from head to toe in cold sweat. My vision throbbed

black and red, head pounding like a struck gong. My six tentacles braced against the ground as well, and I would have collapsed without their support, though I lost control of my stomach. I vomited in the kind of way I hadn't for months. Disgust and panic and physical revulsion brought up bile and acid — laced with a surprising amount of blood.

For a long time — several minutes, not the mere subjective time-torture of fear and pain — all I could do was stare at the puddle of my own sick and force wheezing breaths into my fluttering lungs, arms and legs quivering as if I'd run for miles. My head span, my vision was blurry. The crude chemical factory of my poor, abused ape body needed time to adjust to the shock.

Eventually I summoned the presence of mind to feed that chemical factory. I slid another control rod a quarter out of the bioreactor in my abdomen, flushing my body with energy. But no equilibrium came. Blood-tainted sweat dripped from my nose.

“ ... what ... what on earth—”

But I wasn't on Earth. The word stuck in my throat.

“Ignore it. Ignore it, Heather,” I hissed to myself, then choked, almost vomiting again. “You have to ignore it. Don't think, don't think, don't think. Can't stay like this. Can't. Come on, get up, get up. Raine's waiting for you, get up.”

That got me moving, though only enough to crawl clear of the vomit puddle and flop onto my back on the yellow grass.

Panting, dazed, trying to fight down the mounting horror, I stared up at the whorled purple sky of this Outside place.

The shaking intensified, spreading to my whole body. I wrung my hands together, trying to quite literally get a grip on myself. My tentacles tried to help, wrapping around my waist and chest in a self-administered emergency hug. Couldn't think about what this meant, couldn't allow that thought to grow; I'd lose control, I'd break down and curl into a ball and never move again.

Instead I sat up, clutching my own ankles to protect them.

“Coward,” I hissed, then hiccuped, then tried again.

The familiar old equation slid down like rose-tinted poison. I span it up at the speed of thought; this time I was ready, tentacles poised,

with the toxic knowledge of a dozen other equations waiting at my back, ready to skin and debone and melt and crack.

Out.

Dead hands closed a cold vice around my ankles, right on cue. I reached toward them with pneuma-somatic limb and hyperdimensional mathematics, with all the warning colouration of imminent conflict and the black flags of no mercy and the bleeding eyes of cornered animal savagery. Like before, they should retreat in fear. A coward's filthy trick is one thing, but fighting on this kind of level is another, and over the last few months I had received what Raine might call a "battlefield baptism" in supernatural struggle. Whatever the hands were, they were not up to a fight, they'd proved that before, they'd run, they'd vanished, they'd declined the duel.

This time, the hands did not flee.

I touched the dead hands, made contact with cold, dry, papery flesh, made ready to rip and tear and break and shred, readying all the tools at the bottom of my subconscious. If they would not yield, I would even drag them down into the abyss.

Hands, *hands*, I kept thinking of them as hands, but there was no visual information here in the stopped time of hyperdimensional mathematics, no sensory input that was not the desperate interpretation of electrically charged meat, no instinct that was not misapplied savannah ape evolution.

I made contact — and the hands exploded outward into a hundred iterations of themselves.

Fractal expansion of dead flesh and clawing fingers grasped at my own specialised tools, wrapped my blades in boney fingers, dug iron-hard digits into my tentacles; hands, hands, a hundred, then a thousand, flowing over each other like something from one of Raine's terrible zombie movies she'd tried to show me, a tidal wave of grasping, holding, grabbing and gripping, the very concept of possessing, boiled down to what one may hold tight in one's own clenched fist. For every finger I ripped off another three appeared from the torn stump; for every wrist I shattered, another two sprouted in its place; for every grip I broke by peeling muscle from bone, another dozen latched on.

If this had happened in reality I would have been screaming my head off; instead, my instinctive reaction screamed *dive*. Down into the abyss, where this thing would not survive. I would drown it.

But I couldn't go. I couldn't leap deeper. The dead hands held me back, like slamming myself against the bonds of a net.

To struggle was pointless, like fighting mold that grew faster than I could tear at it; somehow I knew that the hands could have flowed up and over my face and head if they so chose, that my act of keeping them at bay was futile.

I gave up and crashed back to my own body, groaning and crying and doubling up to vomit again, stomach muscles clenching on nothing but stringy bile. My vision swam and my nose ran freely with blood, dripping down my chin and onto the yellow grass. Wheezing for breath, headache pounding, I dug my fingers into the dry soil as if I could somehow dig my way back to reality.

"No, no no no," I began to whine through clenched teeth, and wished I hadn't.

All my worst fears were coming true. I tried to look up at the yellow horizon, but it was blurred through a veil of tears. I started to hyperventilate, a weight pressing on my chest. No amount of bioreactor energy or bodily euphoria could hold this back.

"Lozzie," I whispered. "Lozzie, come back ... Raine? Evee? Zheng? ... Maisie?"

The panic attack rolled over me like a breaking storm. Hands shaking, caked in sweat, my breath coming in short, ragged gasps; my heart raced and wouldn't stop, my chest felt like it was collapsing. I couldn't do anything but curl up where I sat in sheer unbridled terror. Hiccups interrupted wet, choking sobs. Everything had been so good only minutes before, everything had been okay, but now the walls had closed in.

Outside was never my worst nightmare; getting stuck there was.

I don't know how long I sat, crying and shaking, hugging myself with my tentacles. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes, shivering and growing cold. I was completely alone. Nobody was coming for me. Not Raine, not Zheng, not any of my friends and comrades and would-be saviours, because I was beyond anybody's reach out there. Anybody but Lozzie, and she had left with a hop and a skip and a

smile on her face.

I had come so far since I'd been a terrified half-alive thing, rotting in my own delusion and exhaustion in the days before Raine had found me. I was armed with hyperdimensional mathematics, a bioreactor in my guts, a living shadow of my abyssal self in summoned tentacles and limitless potential; I was observer and observed, I was the adopted daughter of the Eye, and my shoulders were still wrapped with the yellow cloak from Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

But in the end I was still without Maisie. I was incomplete. A half-person, a joke.

And I was alone, trapped Outside.

"I ... I can't ... " I whispered to myself, throat thick and clogged. "Can't ... "

A shining hand descended into my field of vision; I didn't have the energy to flinch. I looked up and found one of Lozzie's knights before me, blurred by tears, half-knelt to offer me a gauntleted hand. I hadn't even heard the knight approach.

I stared at it for a long moment as my brain caught up.

Not alone.

The panic attack had technically passed, leaving despair and childhood fear in its wake, but all of a sudden I felt like I was waking up from a nightmare. My clothes were stuck to my skin with cold sweat, and I felt terribly weak, but I took a deep, cleansing breath and then accepted the knight's hand. My own was very small in comparison to the gauntlet of Outsider star-steel, but the metal felt faintly warm as if heated by gentle sunlight. The knight straightened up and easily helped me to my feet.

"... thank you," I croaked, then cleared my throat. The knight didn't respond, just stood as if waiting for orders.

I scrubbed my eyes clear and wiped my bloody nose on my sleeve, but most of the blood had dried. Then I flapped my hoodie and t-shirt, trying to alleviate the physical discomfort of sticky sweat as best I could. I gave myself the time I needed to think. I was experiencing something I never had before — panic had actually burnt itself out. Without an immediate threat, and having passed

through the crucible of a panic attack, my mind was — well, not clear, not this deep in ancient trauma. But close enough.

I knew I had to get out of here, one way or another. I was lost, but not permanently. Not yet.

“I could hug you, you know that?” I told the knight, though I didn’t expect a response. I awkwardly patted its metal arm.

The knight who had helped me up was not one of the two that had guarded Lozzie and I during our Outside pub-crawl. This knight did not carry shield and lance like the majority of Lozzie’s knightly order, but held a gigantic single-bladed axe slung over one shoulder, the sort of axe one might use to fight dragons or ogres in a traditional fairy tale. Its armour was accented with little swirls and lines etched into the metal, not unlike floral patterns. When I squinted and peered closer the decoration revealed itself as abstract representation, an optical illusion which brought to mind the depths of a forest seen from the edge of the tree line, filled with secret green places and dripping branches. It didn’t seem like something Lozzie would make. Was this the knight’s own choice?

“So, which member of the round table are you meant to be?” I asked it.

The knight continued staring down at me with that blank-faced helmet, though I knew the hollow inside the helm contained only the end of an anchor-tentacle. I found myself addressing its midsection instead, where I knew the true creature must reside, tucked away in metal and darkness.

“... oh, oh I am sorry,” I breathed, forcing the absurd words as a ritual of calming, trying to think about anything except what was happening to me. “You are a true knight, you’re not *meant* to be anything. My apologies.”

The knight dipped its chin in thanks. That was all.

I took a deep breath to further fortify myself and then looked away, first out at the horizon. One of Lozzie’s gigantic caterpillar creatures was still inching along the grassy plains. Its course must have curved closer to us, because it seemed slightly bigger than before, the vertical ribs more easily defined against the off-white of the creature’s massive carapace. I could see little antennas — which must actually have been as tall as a person — sticking up from the

front of the caterpillar in a cluster of sensory organs or equipment. Then I looked up into the calming beauty of the whorled and spiralled sky, then finally down at the ground.

“Oh, oops,” I said to myself, and left the knight’s side to retrieve the cephalopod skull I’d dropped. I cradled it in my arms and hugged it to my belly; I would have preferred a pillow, or a friend, but this cold comfort would have to serve.

I looked at the ground again and frowned.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” I asked.

Then, feeling terribly awkward, I cleared my throat and glanced up at the forest-pattern knight.

“Not you, sorry,” I told it. “I was talking to ... well ... ” I gestured at the ground. Silly really, the physical ground was not actually where the dead hands had come from. But the knight didn’t respond. I think it understood my intent.

I turned back to the ground, talking to nothing.

“It’s you, correct? I can’t think of anybody else who would be stuck between our reality and Outside, disembodied, trying to trap me. You used Lozzie’s needs as bait, didn’t you? You let us come Outside, because she was never your real target. I’m your target. You hate me because I murdered you.”

The ground did not answer. Neither did the sky. I sighed and felt absurd, but I kept going.

“I killed you once, Alexander,” I said, then sighed, blushing even though I was the only one who cared. “And yes, I know it sounds like Raine, it’s like a one-liner she’d say trying to be cool. But it’s true: I will kill you again if I have to. Whatever you are now, you are not beyond my reach.”

Gentle wind, sweet smelling and faintly warm. The feel of my own heartbeat, exhausted by adrenaline. One of my own tentacles squeezing my waist.

No reply.

I let out a final sigh of surrender. “Oh well. Maybe it’s not even him at all. Maybe it’s something else, completely different. What do you think?” I glanced up at the knight, but it declined to offer an

opinion. "Yes, my thoughts exactly. Okay, next is step two, let's see if she's about."

I looked up and around and raised my voice. I didn't need to, but it felt right.

"Sevens?" I called out. My voice echoed away across the quiet plain and died off on the wind. "Sevens, if you're here, if you're paying attention, I could really use some help right now. Practical help, you understand? I'm stranded. I'm in very big trouble. Are you here?"

Silence and wind and the knights beneath purple light, but no flicker of sun-kissed gold. If Sevens was listening, she wasn't willing to step onto the stage. Perhaps subconsciously, I tried to tug at the feeling of her yellow cloak which still hung about my shoulders, invisible and intangible. I hadn't seen her since she'd gifted me this part of herself. Not even a glimpse. I didn't know what that meant and I couldn't help but worry about her.

"She's a god-like Outsider creature, Heather," I tutted to myself. "I'm sure she's fine. You need to concentrate."

I had to stay logical, had to take practical steps, practical problem-solving steps. I didn't want to do this, but there was only one logical thing to try next. I glanced up at the axe-carrying knight.

"Do you know how to locate Lozzie?" I asked. I looked back past its elbow, at all the other knights, sitting or standing, frozen in their poses of thought. "Do any of you know?"

None of them responded.

"All right. I'll take that as a no. Will you consent to come with me, elsewhere?" I asked the forest-etched knight. "I need to experiment, but I don't want to go alone. I can bring you right back, or at least back to the house, if this works. I promise I won't abandon you anywhere."

The knight did not need to nod, it simply raised a single gauntlet and laid it upon my shoulder.

"Ah." I forced myself to breathe out as butterflies started up in my stomach. I was really going to do this. "I see. You understand what I'm talking about then." Awkwardly, I laid my own hand over the warm metal gauntlet and added a tentacle just to be sure. "Hold on

tight, please. I'm not as good at this as Lozzie is."

It held on tight.

I span up the equation at the speed of thought and added a slice of the Saye map, the map of all realities, to select an Outside dimension as nonthreatening as possible.

Out.

The quiet plain collapsed in a spinning kaleidoscope.

= =

My experiment was not only a miserable failure, it also hurt, a lot. It left me exhausted, even with the limitless energy of my bioreactor thrumming away in the wet red darkness inside my abdomen.

Dead hands — Alexander Lilburne or not — did not try to stop me jumping from the quiet plain to another Outside dimension. Or perhaps they couldn't.

The knight and I materialised in the snowbound castle that Lozzie had taken me to twice before, in a sort of long gallery open to the elements along one side, affording me a breathtaking view of the deep valley in which the castle sat, filled with gnarled trees and thickly swirling snowflakes beyond the monolithic blocks of stone.

The axe-knight caught me around the belly before I could fall over and vomit my guts out, helping me to retain my feet as my tentacles flailed for purchase and my stomach clenched up hard. My teeth began to chatter within seconds of our arrival. The cold here was like a physical wall. The small signal fires burning at regular intervals along the open gallery did not provide much heat, so I clung to the knight's front to leach the warmth of its armour.

"Thank you," I croaked. "Onward and ... and out."

Out, again, to see if the hands could follow me here, if they still barred my way back home when my exit point was a different Outside dimension entirely.

They had.

I found the hands waiting for me at the membrane yet again, like a clever guard dog that had circled around inside a curtain wall.

Reeling, coughing, choking, the knight and I both got rubber-

banded back to the snowbound castle together, like a toy boat filled with air exploding from the surface of the bathwater. Simple physics, applied on the scale of universal principle. The knight wasn't shocked, but it did stagger, *clank-clank* with those imperishable metal boots against the cold stone of the castle floor. I hung limp in the poor thing's grip, vomiting and spluttering and heaving for breath with the strain of a third casting out. It was a small miracle I didn't drop the cephalopod skull again, hugged tight in my tentacles.

"Didn't— work," I panted against the metal of the knight's chest. "Okay, have to go back, go back, have to go back, think, think—"

Familiar old equation like a progressively blunted sword, but it could still tear the gossamer between worlds.

= =

Back in the relative warmth of the quiet plain once more, I slumped from the forest-knight's grip, still shivering from the lingering cold. Curling my freezing toes inside my trainers, I hugged myself and rubbed my arms, even as my head throbbed with pain and I fought off the after effects of another intentional Slip and another shove back by the dead hands.

"Well, here we are again," I said through chattering teeth.

I couldn't keep doing this.

The forest-knight resumed a pose of relaxed indifference, axe over one shoulder. I sat down heavily on the grass with the squid skull in my lap, allowing the bioreactor to flood me with slow waves of heat to fight back the cold, with my tentacles acting as insulation. Eventually I stopped shivering, but by then my thoughts were closing in again.

"I'm not alone, I'm not alone," I whispered, then cleared my throat and raised my voice, trying to make myself sound confident. Who was I kidding? I was talking to myself. "In the worst case scenario," I said out loud, "I just have to wait for Lizzie. Until tomorrow morning. She'll go home, back to the house, and then she'll know I got stuck. Unless the hands try to stop her too ... no, no, don't think that, you can't think that, you can't. She'll go home and ... and Evelyn will have to reactivate the gateway, point it here, and ... oh, oh God. Oh, Raine. She's going to be worried sick."

Understatement of the year. Raine was likely going out of her mind with worry; she couldn't help, didn't know where I was. All her daring and confidence did not apply to this problem. For all I knew, Evelyn was already trying to rework the gateway mandala. After all, I'd been gone quite a while. But without Lozzie's innate knowledge she wouldn't or couldn't deduce how to adjust the gateway to connect to this plane of Outside.

"If ... if Lozzie is stuck too ... or ..." I put the idea together slowly, a lump growing in my throat. "If nobody else can get to me, I'll have to fight the hands. I should be able to fight the hands. Dammit," I hissed, "I stared down the Eye, why couldn't I fight them off?"

Because they were infinitely expanding, a fractal explosion.

"And there's only one of me. Only six tentacles," I sighed, answering my own question. I glanced over the knights spread out across the hillsides: there was an idea. But no, however skilled they might be at physical combat, this was hyperdimensional mathematics, or perhaps just plain old magic.

"Lozzie, Lozzie," I murmured, "please just come back. Just come back. We can beat it together. Surely."

My breath caught on the lump in my throat. I was out of options, out of places to turn. Not alone, but without the kind of help I needed. If only Evelyn were here, she would know something we could try, some spell or old book to bridge the gap, or if only Sevens was listening, ready to step in — or even if Zheng was by my side. She might not be able to help but she'd put up a good fight all the same.

I needed a mage.

I lit up inside and actually gasped out loud, a true eureka moment. There was one mage I could reach, in theory.

"Oh please, please be where we last saw you, please," I said through shaking lips, climbing to my feet and grabbing the cephalopod skull again. I turned to the knight. "We've got to go somewhere really dangerous. Well, okay, no, *I* have to go somewhere really dangerous, even for me. Are you willing to—"

The axe-knight placed a metal hand on my shoulder and tilted its helmet.

“ ... thank you,” I whispered, then swallowed and found my mouth had gone very dry indeed. “This is going to be difficult, I have to get the exact location we left from. I might be bleeding on the other side, unconscious, dazed, worse, I don’t know. Please catch me. And ... right, yes.”

No time to waste.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and jammed both hands into the black swamp at the bottom of my soul.

This operation required not only the familiar old equation to force passage through the membrane between worlds, targeted via the indelible memory of the Saye map, but needed me to perform exact translocation with only meters of allowable error. I had to take us to the right spot, a place I’d known only at the height of stress and panic, a place with no real landmarks I could think of, no distinguishing features, just memory and mathematical data. The effort to attain that level of precision might fry my brain.

But I did have the emotions.

One of the most important moments of my life had happened there, the moment I pulled a beloved friend back from the brink. Could emotion be processed into mathematical input? How bleak, how cold. I hated the notion, but it was the truth. Just because we’re all mathematics and brain chemistry in the end does not make our experiences any less valuable.

I built an equation at the speed of thought, piece by exact piece, through the all-too-familiar construct of the intentional Slip and the sickening, impossible directions of the map, then onward into my own memories of cradling Evelyn’s bruised and battered self-worth. I rendered experience down into the raw materials of hyperdimensional mathematics, until I knew the exact spot where it had happened.

Out.

My head flared with blinding pain. I was out cold before reality folded up.

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The scent of books and dust and aged wood teased me back to consciousness. Those old friends let me know I’d gotten the

destination at least half correct.

I groaned and opened blood-gummed eyes and found myself curled into a ball on my side, cold drool pooling on the floorboards next to my slack lips. Bookcases towered in front of me, marching off into the distance, stuffed to overflowing with all manner of volumes in all shapes and sizes, scrolls and leather-bound tomes and things that didn't seem like books at all, with leaves of metal or ridged spheres with hexagonal openings. Down a row of bookcases I spied grey robes fluttering past, dragged by the shuffling stride of leathery grey feet, on the eternal task of cataloguing and sorting.

A pair of chrome boots stood off to one side of my peripheral vision — the knight, unmoving, facing outward, guarding my unconscious body. I looked up at the helmet and the axe. The knight seemed untouched. I breathed a tiny sigh of relief.

“... how long have I been lying here?” I croaked, coughing. My throat was dry, my head thick with sleep, my muscles stiff. The knight did not answer.

Neither did the jumbled deeps of the Library of Carcosa.

When I tried to sit up, I discovered that I'd wrapped myself in my tentacles, like a cat nuzzling into its own tail, or an armadillo or pangolin tucking itself tight within layers of armoured scales. Disentangling myself was like stretching sleep-addled limbs, coupled with the slow-to-wake feeling of the thrumming reactor warming up in my belly. I felt stupid and guilty and disoriented. Oversleeping Outside, how absurd.

I also found the cephalopod skull hugged tight to my stomach, safely brought with us during the transition. Didn't want to lose Lozzie's gift.

Eventually I got myself into a sitting position and then clambered to my feet, using the forest-knight's chrome elbow for support that I didn't really need. Rubbing the crusted blood out of my eyes and filling my lungs served to sharpen my senses, but looking around us granted no sense of recognition, no relief.

“Well,” I said to the knight, to myself, to nobody. “We made it, but I don't know if this is the right spot.”

The Library of Carcosa swallowed the sound of my voice, the quiet itself like a thick, cloying blanket around my head and face.

We had made it to the library, of that there could be no doubt. I'd managed to deposit the knight and myself on a broad concourse of open floorboards which ran parallel to the vast canyon between the two walls of library floors. The dizzying open space yawned wide to our left, separated from us by a mere waist-high banister. The gap was crisscrossed with spindly walkways and creaking bridges. A touch of vertigo made my head swim when I dared glance down at the canyon floor far below, with its drifts and mounds of discarded books. The far wall tempted me to look up at the infinite height, worryingly familiar now — how upsetting, how strange, that an Outside place could seem familiar.

To our right lay the depths of this library floor, rows of bookcases that appeared ordered from the edge, but revealed their bedlam and chaos if you dared peer around a corner. Little stacks of books like balanced rocks lay between the avalanches of dislodged texts. A few squid-faced librarians went about their business in ones and twos, but none of them close to us. Had the imposing presence of Lozzie's knight kept them away?

I swallowed and blinked and tried to remember — was this the place that Evelyn had almost been taken away by the library's catalogue system? I glanced up and down the open space between the library stacks and the canyon edge, but there was no sign of my quarry.

If we were in the right place, then all trace of that event had been cleared away. No bizarre macrophage creature down in the canyon below, no scrum of librarians.

And no grey sphere-machine. No Saldis.

"Every part of this library looks the same as all the other parts," I hissed, frustration and fear rising in my throat like acid reflux. "Oh, what was I thinking? Even if this is the same spot, she would have moved on by now. Why would she stay?"

My shot in the dark had gone wide, my slim hope turning to ash in my hands. My tentacles were restless, curling about the knight's arm and reaching out to poke at loose books on the nearest shelf, nervous actions to occupy my overtaxed mind. A lump was growing in my throat again, fear returning and clear-headed logic fading fast. Locating Saldis in all the unknown vastness of the Library of Carcosa was almost as daunting as trying to find Lozzie among the

infinite alien spheres of Outside.

“ ... but she is here,” I said. “We know she’s here. That means ... ”

I trailed off as my eyes wandered down the length of the library floor to the nearest squid-faced librarian, currently occupied in a strange re-shelving process with a fallen pile of books. It looked like the work of several days to come. The creature wasn’t going anywhere soon.

“That one.” I glanced up at the axe-knight’s helmet. “Will you follow me? I’ll do my best to protect you out here, but ... I can’t do this alone, if I get overwhelmed, I ... ”

The knight answered me with a disarmingly human response. It — he, I was starting to think of it as — rolled one shoulder as if limbering up, and adjusted his grip on the massive axe.

“Right. Thank you,” I said, nodding pointlessly. “I’ll have to lead the way. We don’t have Evelyn’s scouting tools, no nuts and bolts to throw ahead of us, so ... I’ve got the longest reach. We’re only going fifty feet or so. Step where I step.”

The journey to the squid-faced librarian only took a couple of minutes, but it felt like hours. I inched along, watching for distortions in the air, for discoloured patches of floorboard, or any other tell-tale sign of the anomalies we had previously encountered in the library. Last time we’d had Evelyn’s bag of cloth-wrapped nuts to throw ahead to test our path, but now I simply stretched out a tentacle, feeling the way ahead, trying to still my racing heart with the knowledge that I could regrow the pneuma-somatic flesh if I really had to. The knight followed behind me on surprisingly silent feet, sticking close.

I stopped about six feet from the squid-faced librarian creature. If we had left any ill-will or hard feelings behind when we had departed last time, it didn’t show any. It stayed focused on its task, bending at the waist to pick up books from the fallen pile, feeding each one into its own head like a library return-slot made of sharp spines and writhing grey tentacles. A few seconds passed after it ate each book, and then its raggedy grey robes would twitch with horrible sinuousness, prompting the creature to reach inside the robes and withdraw a book — sometimes the same one, sometimes totally different — before finally slotting the book into the proper place on the shelves.

“Hello,” I raised my voice into a stage-whisper, then rolled my eyes at myself. Now was not the time to stand on library etiquette. Nobody was going to tut and frown at me if I spoke up and made some noise.

Well, I certainly hoped they wouldn’t. I wouldn’t want to meet whoever was in charge here.

“Excuse me,” I tried again. “Hello. Hi. Hello? I need, um, assistance. I think that’s what you do. Sometimes.”

The librarian carried on working. I frowned and was about to huff and turn to the knight at my back, but then Lozzie’s own technique surfaced from my memory. I could have kissed her for that.

With one tentacle — after all, I didn’t want to risk brushing the creature with my bare skin — I picked up a single book from the low drift of fallen tomes and held it out to the squid-faced librarian. At first it ignored my offering, but when it finished processing the current book it was on, it didn’t bend down to retrieve another volume. It turned to me instead.

“Here. For you,” I said, feeling terribly awkward. Between the forest-knight and the librarians, I was practically a chatterbox by comparison. “Please take it, and please listen to my request.”

The squid-faced librarian accepted the book in its gnarled grey hands and promptly fed it into its own face, engulfing the book within a second or two.

Then it waited, facing me.

I felt the most sudden and unaccountable urge to take the Outsider cephalopod skull and place it over my head and face, to hide my true identity in front of this tiny, detached appendage of whatever intelligence truly managed the library. With fumbling hands I did exactly that, despite the lack of padding or cushioning for my head. I lowered the mask over my own face. The metallic skull was a little large for the task, and ridges inside dug into my scalp, but it weighed barely anything and the eye sockets lined up perfectly with my own eyes. The sound of my own breathing echoed in my ears, but I felt safe and secure. Shielded.

“Saldis,” I said out loud. The mask didn’t muffle my voice as much as I’d worried. “Saldis. The mage in the grey sphere. She’s not part of your catalogue, but I bet you know where she is. Saldis. Show me

where she is. Please.”

For a second, the squid-faced librarian did not respond. My heart pounded in my own chest with anticipation of failure. But then out whirled one of its arms, to point off down the clear concourse.

“Take me,” I said.

The squid turned, abandoned its task, and led the way.

“Well, here we go then,” I said to the knight behind me. “I hope you like walking.”

My stomach was clenched into a tight knot of anxiety, but I picked up my feet to follow the ragged grey robes. What choice did we have? Saldis could be very far away indeed; we might be about to walk for hours and hours through the mad labyrinth of the library. I needed food and water. Could my bioreactor compensate for those? Worry set in quickly, but I had to keep going. There was no way back.

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To my incredible relief, Saldis turned out to not have ventured that far since our last meeting. The squid-faced librarian led us along the wide concourse, then deep into the library stacks themselves, past towering bookcases and shattered wooden floorboards, over mounds of jumbled books and around patches of deep darkness where the glow-globes had failed in times long past. It didn’t once look back to check if we were following, and didn’t respond when I raised my voice to ask it how far away Saldis might be. I gave up after that, settled into a rhythm of walking.

Up a spiral of maddening stairs that seemed to turn back on themselves if one dared look down, across a section of floor populated by lecterns with books chained and bound and roped shut on top of them, past a trio of corpses that looked like dried and shaved gorillas with too many mouths, and then finally deep into the rear of this library floor, almost to the back wall of dark wood.

The journey took almost an hour, but just when I was beginning to despair, the librarian led us into a tiny clearing among the bookcases. The clearing contained a sort of tapestry strung between four poles, covered in tiny script in green ink in a language I didn’t recognise. The text itself was normal enough, but the way the tapestry was hung made my eyes hurt — it was between four poles,

but a casual glance made it seem as if it only had two sides, a front and a rear. But there were four poles in a square formation.

Even inside the shelter of the cephalopod skull, I had to blink my watering eyes and look away.

And there was the grey sphere-machine, sitting opposite the tapestry.

“Oh,” I breathed out as relief flooded me. My heart soared and my head felt light. “Oh, thank you. Thank you.”

I glanced around for the librarian, but the creature was already leaving, robes rustling off down a row of bookcases. Probably for the best — I had not forgotten what those things were capable of, in large enough numbers. Best avoid the attention of the library catalogue as long as possible. I looked over my shoulder instead, at the forest-knight.

“This is her,” I told him. “In the sphere. She’s ... well, maybe not a *friend*, but close enough.”

If the knight understood, it did not respond.

I turned back to the sphere. It was no less bizarre than the first time I’d seen the unearthly machine, six feet in diameter and made of thousands of hand-width rectangular prisms, all matte grey and blank and smooth. It was balanced on the floorboards as if given unnatural buoyancy by invisible physical forces, instead of crashing straight through the ground with all its massive weight.

It was also closed.

“ ... maybe she’s sleeping,” I murmured. I cleared my throat, straightened my hoodie — absurd habits, I knew — and then reached out with one hand to knock on the sphere, like I was dropping in for an unannounced visit at the flat of an acquaintance, rather than deep Outside and standing before some impossible machinery which I knew contained a person who hadn’t been entirely human in a very long time.

Knock knock knock, three times with my knuckles. Then I cleared my throat again and added, “It’s me, Saldis. Um, Heather Morell?”

I waited. Nothing happened.

“Oh, don’t make me wake you up by getting the knight to hit your

silly hamster ball with his axe,” I hissed in barely contained frustration. I was tired from the walk and more than a little hungry, without the patience for her games. “I need help, Saldis. Wake up.”

I gave the sphere an angry thump and skinned a knuckle, then hissed in pain and stuck the hand beneath my mask to suck at the spot I’d grazed.

Then, before I could so much as step back to think, the sphere emitted a ripping, tearing, pulping sound, like meat being pulverised and shredded. I jumped about half a foot in the air, tentacles whirling before memory caught up with me. I’d heard that sound before, back when we’d first met Saldis.

The sphere opened, rectangular prisms sliding back like the petals of a mechanical flower of extreme precision, folding up and back and away to reveal the well-lit interior of the sphere and the soft flowing curves of grey that formed the pilot seat.

“Saldis!” I said in relief.

And there she was, long and slender and neat like a dancer, dark-skinned and gentle-eyed, hair woven into thick masses of braid which fell about her shoulders. Lounging on her comfy seat, she wore an expression half surprised and half bored, blinking slightly with poised and practised interest, as if woken from a pleasant nap by an over-enthusiastic songbird.

Like the first time the sphere had opened, she was completely naked from tip to toe and covered in a steaming layer of crimson blood.

“Oh,” she sighed, rolling her eyes at the ceiling then down at herself. “I am hardly dressed for visitors, you really must give me a moment to ready myself if you’re—”

“I don’t care about that, it doesn’t matter!” I blurted out, though a tiny part of me was very impressed, not only with the sheer fact of Saldis’ nudity — she was remarkably beautiful, even if not my type — but also with how she was completely unselfconscious. She carried herself with the attitude of a queen. “Saldis, I need help!”

“Help, help, yes, of course.” She smiled as she spoke, a teasing crease in the corners of her eyes. She finally looked up at me and winked. “But when you ask for assistance, you usually let the ... one ... petitioned ... ”

She trailed off, eyes widening. She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, staring at me.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, it’s me!” I snapped, pulling the cephalopod skull off my head, making a mess of my hair. “It’s Heather. Don’t tell me you don’t remember, or something silly like that. You don’t lose all your memories every time you ...” I nodded at her gore-soaked nudity and whatever unthinkable process that implied.

“No, no no, of course not, don’t be absurd.” She tutted, but her awe did not abate. She wet her lips — tasting blood with a little smack of appreciation — and gestured at me with both hands. “Lady Morell, forgive me, but you have rather changed since I last laid my poor, plebeian eyes upon you.” She paused and pulled a face like she’d bitten into a rotten lemon. “Plebeian, really? Is that the best word you little Englishers have for it? Well, I suppose you’re more than a little Englisher, now. My poor, lowly— oh no, no that won’t do. My mere gaze?” She experimented with a flourish of one hand, then tutted and waved it away like a bad smell.

“I know,” I said, raising one tentacle. “But I can tell you all about the pneuma-somatic additions later. Right now, I need help. I’m stuck and—”

“What?” Saldis squinted at me like I was an idiot. “No, I don’t mean your arms, Lady Morell. I mean, well, should I be addressing you differently? I know I have a reputation to uphold as a deliciously cheeky and dangerously illegal woman, but I do owe you at least a modicum of proper respect.” She gestured at me, up and down. “Especially if your raiment came from where I suspect it did.”

I boggled at her. “I never asked you to call me *Lady* in the first place.”

She brightened with a hesitant smile — I suspected the hesitancy was an act, but the smile was real. “Ah, yes, we are on first name terms, are we not? Delightful! I suppose that means you might be willing to introduce me to your ... well, as I said, should I be addressing you differently?”

“Saldis, what are you talking about?”

She gestured at me again, pulling a perplexed expression, as if it was obvious. “You have donned the purple. Or the yellow.” She laughed, a bubbly, relaxed sound. “Same thing! I assume it was

from Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight? Oh what am I saying, of course it was, who else would you have met?"

I blinked at her, dumbfounded, and finally realised what she meant — she could see the yellow cloak Sevens had gifted to me. I tried to draw it tighter, to rub the fabric between my fingers, but it proved as intangible as always.

"You mean you can see the ... ?"

But Saldis wasn't listening. She rattled on. "You must tell me everything, I am all ears and a terrible gossip, though I promise my lips are sealed. Oh, this is delightful. Have you had some kind of ceremony yet, or is this only a betrothal?"

My eyes went wide. My mouth opened but no sound came out.

Saldis came up short too, then curled her lips in a wicked smile like a scandalised teenager. She put her fingers to her mouth. "Oh. Oh dear."

"It's ... it ... it—" I hiccuped hard enough to hurt. "She gave it to me to protect me!"

"I'll bet she did," Saldis laughed. "You may not have said any vows, little Englisher, but that mantle around your shoulders is an invite to the family. Her family. And I very much doubt that Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight is looking to merely adopt you. You are too much of a catch for that, my dear."

any mortal thing – 14.11

“A marriage proposal.”

I moved my mouth and pushed air over my vocal cords; sound came out, but the words couldn't possibly be correct. My voice felt far away, my head was hot and spinning, and my chest tightened with internal pressure as if about to implode around the vacuum of my heart.

But Saldis either didn't notice or didn't care.

“More of a marriage *promise*,” she rambled on, waving a hand in little circles of thought, lounging back against the comfortable grey curves of her machine's pilot seat. Her naked skin was still slathered with a thick layer of gently steaming blood, but somehow she left no stains upon the grey material. “You've already accepted it, after all. The proposal stage is over and done with, though, ooooooh, there's a thought.” She smiled wide to show perfect teeth and fluttered her lashes, her eyelids sticking together briefly with crimson mess. “I would have loved to witness the drama of that moment. Imagine! A pretender to the throne of Carcosa, finding herself a suitable match at long last. All the scheming and thought which must have gone into it. Tell me, please, Lady Morell, did she engineer this ‘danger’ she was protecting you from? What a little minx!”

That horrible suggestion bought me round. “No,” I said, frowning at Saldis in her absurd hamster ball. “No, no she did not ‘engineer’ anything. She got burned trying to help and I almost died. She didn't even want to be there in the first place. There's nothing *romantic* about confronting trauma. I will not hear you suggest such a thing of her!”

By the time I finished ordering my thoughts, my tentacles were up and ready, as if itching to peel Saldis out of her machine like ripping a mollusk from its shell.

The muffled quiet of the library caught the snap of my voice in a silent fist, strangling the sound before an echo could form. My anger was reduced to a trickle of wind whispering off between the

bookcases and the stacks of abandoned volumes. Saldis made a big show of raising her hands in surrender, but the gesture was undermined by the roll of her eyes and the smirk on her lips.

“I’m not the director or playwright here,” she said. “Don’t vent your fury on me, Lady Morell. Take it up with your fiancée.”

“*Fiancée*,” I spat.

But in private panic, I searched my memories. Could Sevens have worked backstage, to bring together the necessary elements and force the decisions that had led to Lozzie and I confronting the Eye to save Badger’s soul, but then inserted herself at the final moment, all just as an excuse to give me this silken yellow cloak?

My fingers unconsciously tried to touch the yellow comfort about my shoulders, the enclosing warmth, this portable hug. In Lozzie’s dream-world it had felt as warm as sun-kissed skin. Seven’s skin?

Had it all been a ruse? Had I been on stage the whole time?

No, I decided not. I recalled the way Sevens had acted when she’d given me the cloak — her strange reluctance to take the final step, the way her imitation of me had broken down before reasserting itself in nervous hiccups. She had been just as afraid of the Eye as anybody else. Out there in the dream she had burned and bled for me, for real, not an act. Though for something such as her, where did acting end and action begin? But whichever it was, gifting me the cloak had been an act of desperation, not the final move in Sevens’ perfectly executed plan.

The gift had meant something real to her, not merely to the imitative layers she wrapped around the core of her own abyssal truth.

Of course, that didn’t rule out marriage proposal.

I felt a strong urge to don my squid-mask once more and hide inside the grey-metal bone. My tentacles kept curling and uncurling in a nervous fidget. I even wrapped one around my belly as my stomach began to roil with growing anxiety.

“Ahhhh,” Saldis sighed with all the cloying oiliness of a used-car salesman, or at least the Old Norse equivalent of a used-car salesman. “And now you’re seeing how all the pieces have been arranged since the very beginning.” She sighed again, this time in

the dreamy manner of a preteen with a magazine spread of a favourite pop idol. She leaned forward and attempted to place her blood-soaked chin in one gore-smeared hand, balancing an elbow on her knee — but she was much too covered in wet blood to assume the pose properly. Her elbow slipped from her knee and she whacked herself in the face with the back of her own hand, overbalancing and nearly toppling forward out of her sphere-machine.

“Tch!” she tutted and huffed at the fumble.

“Serves you right.” I snorted out a bitter little laugh. “And you’re wrong. Sevens did not set up anything.”

Saldis recovered her bruised dignity by clearing her throat and gesturing down at her own nude glory, dark skin still steaming with fresh blood. “I really must get dressed. This news is the most exciting courtly development in over fifty years and I’ve completely lost any sense of decorum, but can you blame me?”

“You don’t have a sense of decorum. You are being an absolute ... *stirrer*.”

“Excuse me?” Saldis blinked at me with bewilderment.

“A *shit*-stirrer,” I enunciated with great care, doing my best Evelyn-impression scowl, then hiccuped loudly enough to pierce the silence of the library for a split second. Swearing made me feel like a very bad girl indeed, even though I’d learnt that particular word from Raine.

I even glanced back over my shoulder at the forest-knight, still standing behind me in a pose of relaxed readiness, his axe slung over one shoulder. I felt as if I should apologise for my foul language, but the knight did not appear to care. He just did his self-appointed duty, standing by on guard.

Saldis wiggled her bottom in her seat, lips pursed as if to hold back a laugh. “Guilty as charged, but I am also correct. And being right is worth any amount of stirring. Oooh, what a delightful phrase; *shit-stirrer*. I believe I shall add it to my list of titles.”

I shook my head, as much at myself as at Saldis, along with this ridiculous notion she was peddling. “Look, I don’t have time for this. Saldis, I’m here because I need your help, because I’m in the middle of a crisis, an emergency. A much more pressing emergency

than fictitious marriage proposals from Outsider godling daughters.”

Saldis raised her eyebrows in polite interest, so I went on.

“I’m stuck. Stuck Outside, because something is preventing me from returning home — an intelligence, a purpose. It manifests as hands that grab my ankles when I try to leave, but they’re not literally hands, that’s just ... interpretation. I think it might be the remains of a mage I killed once, but I don’t know. And I need to find Lozzie first — do you remember her?” Saldis nodded, though slightly detached, with forced politeness. “And I need to get her out too, because the same force is probably going to hold her back when she tries to return home. But I don’t know what Outside dimension she’s gone to. I need help to ... break the hands, defeat them, I don’t know.”

Saldis waited a beat, then dipped her head in po-faced acknowledgement. “You are trapped on this branch, this bough, here, in Carcosa?”

“No, not just here,” I sighed with exhaustion as I rounded on the problem again. “I can move from dimension to dimension, Outside, but not back to Earth. Whenever I try, it’s like hands gripping at my ankles. I can’t beat them because it happens in the space between, the membrane, the gap, I can’t do things there.”

Saldis pulled a real heavy pinch of a frown, squinted her eyes and wrinkled her nose, the complete works, as if I was talking distasteful nonsense. She wet her lips, taking a tiny taste of the blood all over her skin, then slowly raised one hand. I braced for magic, for her unique and bizarre flesh-splitting physical incantation.

“I really must get dressed,” she said — and without further warning, her grey sphere-machine began to fold shut, the exterior blocks sliding over each other and back into place. “A moment, please, Lady Morell,” she said as the machine closed around her like a Venus fly trap.

The grey surface slid shut without a sound. All of a sudden I was alone in the Library of Carcosa once more. Alone with Lozzie’s knight at my back. Alone with my thoughts.

I let out a huge sigh and rubbed the bridge of my nose, squeezing

my eyes shut to avert an onrushing stress headache. I was very, very hungry, despite the bioreactor purring away in my gut to supply me with raw energy. My legs were tired enough that two of my tentacles had wrapped around them to act as braces against the floorboards, like a pneuma-somatic powered exoskeleton. I might have been more adapted to survive Outside than ever before, but I still needed food and water, rest and warmth, and eventually a shower and some sleep. Human or not, my core was still flesh and my brain was still meat.

Before I could stop myself, my fingers twitched to pull Sevens' cloak tighter around my shoulders, to instinctively wrap myself in comfort's warm embrace.

"Oh, tch," I tutted when I realised, blushing bright red. I wrapped a tentacle around my shoulders instead. "A marriage proposal, really. Ridiculous. Absurd notion."

Clearly my subconscious did not agree. One hand tried to smooth my hair down, raking it into a semblance of order, while the other straightened my pink hoodie, then wavered when I realised I couldn't do anything about the nosebleed stains I'd wiped all over my right sleeve.

Face still burning red and with a guilty barb in my chest, I glanced around the little clearing of bookshelves, trying not to look at the impossible tapestry in the middle. But it wasn't Outside physics making my stomach churn and my palms sweat. I half-expected to see a white mask peeking around a corner to watch me with shy interest, like a timid character from one of Evelyn's more irritating anime shows. I even checked behind the forest-patterned knight, but there was no embarrassed mass of yellow on the other side of him either.

"Tell me if you see her, okay?" I asked him. His helmet went up and down in a neat, covert nod.

I filled my lungs, placed a hand over my fluttering heart, and — cursing myself for a romantic fool — called out to Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

"Sevens? Sevens, I don't care what you've done or not done, or what it means or doesn't mean. I just need help getting home. I don't know what's happening to Raine, or Eevee, or anybody else. I'm terrified and barely holding myself together, and you must

know that. You care about my drama, my story, don't you? Well if I can't get home, it ends here. Outside. Alone."

I kept my eyes peeled for a whisper of dawn-break gold, a hint of warm honey on the air, or a butterscotch flutter behind a bookcase. But none came.

A moment later, Saldis' sphere-machine slid open again like an otherworldly egg disgorging a live parrot with rampant plumage of red and gold. The grey blocks slid back to reveal Saldis cleaned of her gruesome layer of steaming blood and clad in a thick-spun red dress, from chin to toes, showing almost no skin except her face and hands.

It wasn't the same dress she'd worn the first time we'd met her — this was much flashier. A truly massive amount of gold thread was woven into the fabric, in an ostentatious design that showed a rearing snake-dragon against a field of stars, with a vanquished wolf beneath its coils. A golden raven was inlaid on either shoulder, as if whispering up into her ears. She wore a dozen heavy necklaces with gold pendants, some with triple-triangle interlocking designs, some with little inverted hammers, others with trees or boars, and one that had no pendant but instead a runic inscription in what I assumed was Old Norse. Her fingers glittered with rings and her wrists jangled with gold bangles as she leaned back in her seat and tossed one leg over the other.

In her lap lay a trio of massive black rats, half asleep with their little eyes heavily lidded, all curled up against each other and looking very comfortable indeed, as if they'd been napping there for hours. They were the healthiest rats I'd ever seen, glossy-furred and sleek and perfectly groomed, but each one must have weighed almost two pounds, more than enough to make the boldest cat think twice. Somehow I doubted they were earthly rats at all, not really. Saldis lowered a hand to pet one of them along its spine.

I blinked at her in surprise. She must have caught the look on my face.

"Flaunt it if you got it," she said with a satisfied smile, then frowned. "Oh dear. Oh, that is just crass. But I suppose I do 'got it'. Don't think your mantle is so impressive that I can't match up in my own way."

I didn't have to exert effort to scowl that time. "Saldis, this is not a

catwalk contest. I can't even *see* this." I tried to pluck at Sevens' cloak to make my point.

She smiled with infuriating indulgence and scratched one of her pet rats under the chin. It nuzzled her hand. "So you say, Lady Morell. Have no fear, though, I would never upstage either bride at the event itself. I will keep myself strictly within reasonable bounds." She suddenly lit up. "That is, assuming you are not going to elope? Oh, how exciting!"

I silently counted to ten, casting about for a conversational — and emotional — handhold. "Where did you get those rats from, anyway?"

She shrugged. "Same place I get everything. Meet Hugstari, Vegdrasill, and Mótsognir." She touched the three rats in turn, smiling with genuine pride and delight. "They do so love courtly drama, it would be terribly cruel of me to let them miss it unfolding. Now, where were we?"

"I need to get home," I repeated. "Back to Earth, past the hands. You're a mage. Can you help me, or not?"

"Mm, yes." She pulled that same pinched frown from before. "You want to go back to *Midgard*?" She pronounced the word with exaggerated care, as if it was a foreign object in her mouth, with sharp edges and pointy bits. She wet her lips and tried again. "Midgard. Midgard. Hmm. Your rather ... interesting language, shall we say, doesn't appear to have a suitable concept to hand, let alone an actual word. I'm defaulting." She pulled a mock-embarrassed grimace. "Midgard, then?"

I nodded. I knew enough basic Norse mythology to recognise the term. She meant Earth, whatever word she used for it, the place where humans lived. "Yes. Can you help?"

Her grimace widened, pained around the eyes. "Oh, certainly, but I have current conditions to consider."

"If it's a matter of reciprocation, I will do any—"

"No no no." She flapped a hand, genuinely flustered. "I would not dream of expecting such, Lady Morell." She must have understood my raised eyebrow of disbelief, because she waved her hand in a little circle of surrender. "I would not dream of expecting it from you as you are right now. You wear the yellow. Betrothed or not,

presumptive or consummated, one does not make demands of a member of the Yellow King's family."

My cheeks burned with unspoken denial. "... okay, so why not help me?"

"I would be stepping on toes. You should ask your fiancée for help first."

I looked away with growing discomfort and cleared my throat, trying to avoid the inevitable. "I've tried," I murmured.

"Lady Morell?"

I huffed and forced myself to speak up. "I've tried and she's not answering me. Or she's not even here. I haven't seen anything of Sevens since she gifted me the cloak. She hasn't shown her face, not once."

Saldis lit up like a child presented with a bucket of luxury ice cream. She emitted a small, strangled squeal of delight, contorting her lips to prevent a grin, but could not resist the urge to clap her hands together beneath her chin. I shot her quite a glare, the best I could muster under the circumstances, powered as much by growing headache and hunger as by embarrassment and exasperation.

"Don't," I said.

"But it's so obvious!" She threw her hands wide. "Oh, oh, she's shy, she's a fool in love, her heart cannot take it! She must be here, must be watching right now, too afraid to come out." Saldis put her fingertips to her mouth, eyes shining with a sheen of dramatic tears as she glanced out of the opening of her sphere-machine, at the bookcases all around, looking for the same evidence of a hidden watcher as I had done. "I did not know, I did not know! I have a front row seat, right here, to the greatest confession scene I am ever likely to witness. How did the beginning of it play out? I am dying to know."

"It's not a marriage proposal!" I exploded at her. "No, you must be misinterpreting this. Or you're messing with me."

Saldis put her hand over her heart. "By the fire at the centre of creation, I am not teasing you, Lady Morell."

I threw my hands — and tentacles — up in utter exasperation.

Words burst from me, unplanned and uncontrolled, the truth of my feelings. “I just can’t believe it, I can’t. It’s nonsense. I am hardly a *catch*. Look at me. I’m covered in my own blood and I stink of vomit. I am an absolute nightmare, my life is a mess, I’m half abyssal squid — and that’s when I’m feeling good about myself — and I’m on a collision course with an Outsider God that I still don’t know how to beat. I’m weird and ugly and I don’t fully expect to make it through the next year. I’m going to end up dead if I don’t get everything right. I’m not exactly a lot of fun, either.”

“Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight clearly disagrees with your self-assessment,” said Saldis.

A sense of *deja vu* crept over me. I’d been here before, in another secluded spot, running down the list of my faults and failures in front of another suitor who I’d judged worthy of so much more than scrawny little disaster Heather Morell. Blushing, flushed in the face, deeply self-conscious of my messy clothes and unwashed hair, I risked another glance at the corners of the bookcases and the dark nooks between rows; I’d just realised I wasn’t really arguing with Saldis at all.

She was right about one thing — Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight probably was observing. I was talking to her.

“And ... and Sevens is so ... ” I murmured.

Mad thoughts stampeded through my head. If I accepted, if I said yes — no, that, was absurd. I dialled back: if I acknowledged Sevens’ feelings — if not a bloody *marriage proposal* — what would that mean? My imagination summoned an image of Sevens-as-me, leaning in close for a kiss. I rejected that with instinctive revulsion, it would be too much like kissing the memory of Maisie. Could she appear as Raine instead? That would be even worse, a horrible falsehood, almost a betrayal. Unless Raine agreed — no, no; I physically shook my head, that was too weird.

Or would she appear as herself? Her true self, the beautiful marine-form of infinite buttermilk ruffles and trailing tendrils of young fire, the canary flesh and scent of fresh lemon.

That thought made my mouth go dry and my heart flutter against my ribs like a caged bird.

“Besides,” I tried to rally by denying it out loud. “I’m taken, twice

over. I have enough difficulty just with Raine, let alone Zheng too, and that's hardly resolved as it is. My love life is complex enough when I'm already living in a polyamorous triangle where the other two angles of said triangle still want to have a no-holds barred fistfight. And I don't even have sex with Zheng, yet. If ever. My life is complex enough as it is."

Saldis blinked at me quite hard, struggling to suppress a disbelieving smirk.

"What?" I snapped.

"Goodness, Lady Morell. And you wonder why Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight might possibly be interested in you?"

"Yes, fine! As a protagonist in one of her plays! Not as a ... partner." I struggled with the word, blushing heavily. I tried to cast my mind back to when Sevens had saved me from slipping into the abyss, when I'd been clawing my way back to the submarine shore of bare rock and she'd reached down and lifted me up. She'd told me about the principle of building an anchor for myself, and how she could not intervene a second time because that was not in her nature. It was not what she was.

"That's not how she works," I said out loud. "That's not what she is. She made that very clear to me, once. She doesn't get involved, it's counter to her nature, or something."

Saldis shrugged an eloquent, rolling shrug. "What can change the nature of a woman?"

I rolled my eyes in exasperated surrender, but then my heart went cold with realisation. I had changed Sevens. I'd made her involve herself, to save me, not just that once, but then a second time, in front of the Eye. She'd helped, been burned for her trouble, been wounded and grown tearful, and then gifted me a piece of herself. A piece of her heart?

"And think how rare it must be," Saldis prattled on while I was busy having an emotional crisis, "for one such as her to encounter anything remotely like a suitable match, one of the same sophistication and ability, let alone the same social station. Adopted or not, Lady Morell, you are a sort of princess too. Or had you forgotten that?"

I cleared my throat. "I am decidedly anti-monarchist, thank you

very much.”

“Oh dear. Well, I couldn’t agree more, personally. I’ve done a spot of regicide myself, though rather a long time ago now.” She lowered her voice to a silly stage-whisper. “But don’t let your father-in-law-to-be hear you saying that.” Saldis wiggled her eyebrows meaningfully, then seemed to rethink her words and tapped her chin with one long-nailed finger. “... or maybe you should, considering his reported exploits. He might approve of a little neck-cutting here and there. Hmmm.”

My glare was faltering, but Saldis humoured me by putting her hands up in teasing mock-surrender.

“This is all academic, anyway,” I said. “If she can’t or won’t help me, I still need to get out of here. I still need to find Lozzie. I don’t have time for this drama. Will you help or—”

Clank.

Lozzie’s forest-pattern knight made a sound of metal-on-metal by adjusting the axe it held over one shoulder. I instantly whipped around, tentacles whirling.

“Sevens?!”

The knight held one hand outstretched, gauntlet curled to point index finger straight at a bookcase.

Hardback spines in browns and blacks and worryingly pale shades of soft leather, punctuated by crumbling pages of ancient grimoires that had lost their bindings, and those few bound in more esoteric materials — girded with bone or wrapped in steel or plated with ancient wood. A jumble of tomes and texts and not a Sevens in sight, not peering around a corner or over the top of the bookcase, nor hiding in the implausibly narrow gaps between the tops of the books and the underside of each shelf.

Then, as I dragged my gaze away, she coalesced in the periphery of my vision, among the chaos of the books themselves.

The ragged spines and dog-eared corners and buckled covers conspired to form an outline of yellow, like an optical illusion or magic-eye picture rising from the chaos. A suggestion of shape burst into life — a petite female figure wrapped in wind-swept robes, peeking around the edge of a low wall, shy and coquettish, backed

by sun-baked dunes. The image existed only in the precise angle at which one looked at the rows of books.

I flinched in surprise, but that hid the optical illusion from my sight, returning the bookcases to just visual noise. Squinting, blinking, I caught only scraps, and saw that she was moving, that she had recoiled with the shock of being spotted, though the shift in image was generated purely by the new position I had adopted. The books themselves had not changed, neither had the light; nothing had moved, yet as my perspective shifted so did this furtive pretender.

Six months ago, such an impossible effect would have sent me into screaming confusion, but now I adapted.

Quickly, using all my powers of pneuma-somatic body-modification, I formed tiny screws of extra muscle behind my eyes and forced them to unfocus, grimacing through the sudden pain.

And there she was. Seven-Shades-of-Desert-Sprite, fleeing across the sands. She leapt to the next bookcase in the row like a painting come to life and jumping from frame to frame.

“Sevens!” I cried, outraged as much as I was surprised. “Don’t run away!”

I lashed out with a tentacle to catch her by an ankle, but of course I only knocked books off a shelf. Inside the magic-eye image, Sevens stumbled over a sudden pit in the sand dug by my fumble. She recovered with a little hop that made my heart skip.

“Where? Where? I don’t see a thing!” Saldis was squawking from behind me, utterly inconsolable that she was missing the action.

Seven’s run reached the end of the row of bookcases, where a chasm of eight or nine feet separated her from another camouflaging canvas of book spines. I thought she might slip around the corner or vanish — but she hit the edge of the books and exploded into real space, the illusion shattering in a whipping flurry of thick yellow silk that seemed to pour from nowhere.

For a fleeting moment, that yellow silk wrapped around a petite female figure, or took the shape of one, as if caught on an invisible human outline in a gale of wind. She was glancing back over her shoulder at me, caught in a frozen moment of flight, facial features nothing but folds of fabric.

Behind me, Saldis gasped in awe.

Then the silk whipped away in the grip of a hurricane, vanishing behind the bookcases, leaving nothing but empty space.

“Sevens!” I snapped, hurrying across the floorboards and skidding to a halt, grabbing a bookcase with my tentacles to spin myself around and after the fleeing yellow fabric.

But the row beyond was empty. Silence and shadows and marching volumes greeted me; a couple of squid-faced librarians shuffled about in the middle distance.

“Oh for crying out loud, Sevens,” I said. I couldn’t help myself, red in the face with both embarrassment and anger. “Now is not the time to play at being a shrinking violet. Come out. Right this instant.”

No butter-soft fingers curled around the corner of a bookcase.

“We can ... Sevens, if you come and talk to me, we can talk about what this means. We can talk, right now, and I will ... I will give you an answer. If you come out right now. I promise. Last chance.”

No sunburst eye lit up in the shadows.

“For pity’s sake, Sevens. My friends, my ... *family* might be in trouble, back in reality. The hands trapping me here might be part of a plan. If something happens to Raine, or Eevee, or anybody else, I won’t ever be able to forgive you for not helping me.”

No lock of flaxen hair floated among the shelves. Sevens was well and truly hiding.

“Oh, oh dear, oh dear me,” Saldis was cooing back in the clearing, rather uselessly. “Mótsognir, you’re up, little one. Off you go now. Be swift.”

Little ratty claws skittered across the floorboards and one of the three massive black rats slipped between my feet to skitter off down the row of bookcases, sniffing and snuffling like a bloodhound. He ran in a circle, pointed his nose in the air, then slipped off around a corner. The sound of tiny claws was soon swallowed up in the thickly cloying silence of the library.

I turned to Saldis, wide-eyed with surprise. She was petting the other two rats.

"How is he supposed to get far in this place?" I asked. "He's big, but not that big."

"*Dvergjar* have their own paths through the great trunk," she purred, pulling a smugly enigmatic smile. "More importantly, Lady Morell, I think it's safe to assume that your friends and companions back in Midgard are perfectly untouched by whatever mysterious malicious forces you're worried about."

I hardly heard her, glancing off down the row of bookcases again, pursing my lips in irritation at Sevens. I huffed and stomped back into the clearing, back to Saldis and the forest-knight.

"What makes you so confident about that?" I demanded, still scowling through my blush.

"If her fiancée's comrades were in dire danger, surely Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight would overcome her fear and help you ride to their rescue. Why, it's a perfect tale, a perfect performance. You think she would pass that up?"

"... I suppose you have a point." I wrapped a tentacle around my stomach again, trying to still the roiling anxiety in my guts. "Still. *Fiancee*." I shook my head.

"You still doubt—"

"Not after that." I tutted. "An Outsider godling, behaving like a fourteen-year-old with a crush. Really! She won't even confront me, this is absurd. I don't need this right now, I need help."

Saldis fluttered her eyelashes. "A maiden's heart is such a delicate thing."

"And yellow is also a synonym for coward."

I cast my blushing scowl over the bookcases and spines and the shadows between the rows, over the wooden floorboards and the underside of the next floor up, the glowglobes and the dust-thick library air. Sevens was still watching, I was certain of it, and a spiteful, wounded part of me hoped she'd heard me question her courage.

"Oh, oh," Saldis was in full dramatic flow. "You cast a spear at her heart, Lady Morell! I never knew you were such a cruel woman."

"Stop it, please," I sighed.

But Saldis wasn't entirely wrong; I was being cruel. Even in the height of crisis, I was forced to consider the possibility that Sevens really had gifted me the cloak purely as protection against the Eye — but that it was also a symbol of marriage proposal at the same time. Both things could be true, and she was deeply embarrassed at the unavoidable implication, or at the revealed truth. But none of that excused her reaction right then.

If any other woman in my life, in any other circumstances, had been forced into this conclusion with me, I would have been reduced to a flustered and flattered mess, whatever I thought of her and whether it ended in mutual agreement to never speak of it again, or in something more heartfelt. But Lozzie was in trouble, I was stuck Outside, and I did not know what was happening back home. Ruthlessness prevailed.

I was also forced to confront the opposite possibility; what if Sevens had planned all of this? What if I was dancing on her stage?

If she wouldn't face me, I couldn't answer any of those questions. I had to stay focused.

Saldis prattled on.

“—but if she declines the meeting, it can only mean she is waiting for the right moment. No! The perfect moment—”

“Saldis,” I said, pulling my hoodie tighter around my shoulders, raising my chin, and tucking in my tentacles. “Saldis, forget Sevens. Can you help me get home or not? Can you help me defeat the dead hands, with magic?”

Saldis stopped mid-word, rather unimpressed, then sighed and shrugged. She sat back, waved a bored hand, and concentrated on petting the pair of rats left in her lap. “Oh, I suppose so. It's a bit pedestrian, but I don't see why not, other than the risk of stepping on the toes of a Pretender's plan. But I suppose I must be part of the plan too? Perhaps! In any case, go ahead, show me.” She waved vaguely in my direction.

“Show you?”

“Yes. Of course. I need first-hand experience of the phenomenon that's troubling you.” She raised a rat up on one palm to make eye-level contact with him, then made a saccharine kissy-faces at the rodent. “Even I'm not skilled enough to fix a problem blind. Show

me, please.”

“It’s ... well, it’s not something that happens in real space, it’s ... oh,” I sighed. “I suppose you can see the cloak, so maybe you can see that too.”

Saldis caught my eye with a tiny smirk and patted the inside of her sphere-machine. “Do not forget that I am not my five senses, little Englisher. You’ve gained some fancy limbs and more than a touch of royal favour, but I’ve been around a lot longer than you.”

Somehow, her smile, her confidence, was the exact balm I needed in that moment; Saldis would get me home. She was awful and irritating, but she could do this for me. Even if this was Alexander holding me back, Saldis was older and wiser and stronger. She would know how to snap his wrists. I’d owe her — perhaps owe her a good word with Sevens, but all that could be dealt with later, after I was home or had found Lozzie or had burned the dead hands down into ash.

“All right,” I said, taking a deep breath and steeling myself for the pain. “I didn’t want to have to do this again, but all right. Watch closely.”

“Have no fear, Lady Morell. My eyes are peeled.”

I handed my Outsider-squid skull to the forest-knight, wrapped myself with my tentacles to brace for the inevitable return, and closed my eyes.

The equation was second nature by then, a click of my fingers, a flick of the wrist, like taking a hop across a barrier that was becoming progressively thinner with every transition.

Out.

Cold hands closed around my ankles.

= =

The membrane spat me back out in a welter of blood and pain and disorientation. This time I had expected that same result and readied myself, tentacles braced and hugging me tight to keep me on my feet. But even with the forest-knight placing one metal hand against the small of my back, I still staggered and sagged, bent double as I spat strings of bile onto the library floorboards.

My stomach felt like a void. I was so hungry.

“Uuuurghhhh ... ” I groaned, wiping nosebleed all over my pink sleeve and waiting for my vision to stop throbbing black at the edges. “Sevens, if you’re really in love with me, can’t you at least spare me from more of this?”

My whispered plea received no reply. I grumbled some more and spat on the floor and finally managed to pull myself upright, leaning against the knight.

Saldis was staring at me like she’d seen a ghost. She’d actually gone pale with fright, a condition I’d believed she was incapable of. She was cuddling the rats in her lap as if to shelter them.

“Saldis?” I croaked, wiping my mouth on the back of my hand, feeling like some kind of filthy vomit goblin.

“I don’t think I can help you, Lady Morell,” she said, voice oddly hushed.

“What?”

She shook her head, swallowed with awkward delicacy, and seemed to come round somewhat. “This is no mere *draugr* at your heels, my Lady. This is vengeance. What in all creation did you do to attract this sort of anger?”

“I murdered a mage and destroyed his life’s work,” I told her — not without a hint of pride, which instantly made me feel sick with guilt.

“Well,” Saldis sighed. “I cannot help you with this.”

“Can’t or won’t?” I grunted, trying to ignore the crushing pressure on my chest again, trying to keep my head clear. If she couldn’t help me, I was truly stuck.

“Can’t!” She lit up with a smile, though intensely awkward even on her laugh-lined face. “Those who keep going after they lose their bodies are nought but spite and regret, an old form of magic indeed, and not to be countered with mere skill. You cannot fight such a thing with anger and revulsion, either, because yours will never match their own. The only way out is, well ... ” She cleared her throat and grimaced. “One must lay the dead to rest. Apologise and forgive.”

“Forgive?” I hissed. “Absolutely—”

“And you have to mean it. Saying sorry in a contrite tone is not good enough.”

I shook my head, wracked with painful aftershock. The forest-knight handed me my squid-mask and I almost slipped it on without thinking, but then hugged it tight instead, like a protective talisman. “I think forgiveness rather out of the question. I don’t think I’m capable of that, not in this case.”

“Quite.” Saldis sighed. “The man in question is dead, you are not dealing with him, but forgiveness is not the easy path. If it was, more would take it and none would sing of revenge. Nevertheless, you cannot hate forever, little Englisher. It eats you inside.”

I sighed and felt my shoulders slump. Apologise and forgive? Give me a few months, less of a crisis, and a good therapist or two — for Lozzie as well — and perhaps I would be able to approach the concept of forgiving Alexander Lilburne, maybe, from a distance, after Zheng had defiled his grave and cracked his bones.

“He killed children,” I said, and surprised myself with the choke in my voice. “He hurt his own sister, my friend. I can’t.”

Saldis nodded and gave me a sad smile. “Yes, it is hard to forgive monsters. That is why this is so effective.”

“At least I know it must be him now,” I muttered, then took a deep breath and tried to put him from my mind. “You really can’t help me fight the hands off? Hurt them, make them stop?”

Saldis shook her head.

A lump formed in my throat once again. I was trapped and Lozzie was trapped. I groped for anything, any handhold I could find. There had to be another way back, another way across the membrane. I sagged back on my tentacles, using them like extra legs against the floorboards, badly wanting to sit down, lie down, close my eyes and curl up in a ball and slip off to sleep.

“Saldis, how did you get here? Originally, I mean? You came from Earth — from Midgard, didn’t you?”

Saldis blinked at me with polite surprise. “Why, I climbed down Yggdrasil, of course.”

I frowned at her through sandy eyes. “... the ... world tree of Norse mythology? What does that mean?”

Saldis shrugged and leaned back inside her machine. One of her rats rolled over in her lap. “I climbed down the trunk, across the roots, and then went wherever I wished. Of course, I couldn’t have done it like this,” she gestured at herself, at her flesh and bone body.

“Wait, you mean this literally? You climbed down a giant tree? The ‘world tree?’”

She frowned at me. “Yes? What else would I mean?”

“But you said you’ve never met a god? The gods, in general? How can the tree ... ”

Saldis laughed with genuine amusement. “Just because the gods do not exist does not mean Yggdrasil doesn’t. What a silly notion.”

I shook my head. “We have completely different cultural contexts. You mean there is a place, a real, physical place you can climb up some giant roots and return to ... Midgard?”

“Of course.” Saldis looked me up and down quickly and cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t attempt it as you are though. No amount of royal favour and no number of extra limbs would help you survive that climb. You’d be eaten before you got a hundred feet up the roots.”

“I have a feeling that you and I would see very different things if we both looked at Yggdrasil.”

Saldis pulled a mildly offended face. “Well, if you say so.”

“It might be my only choice though, I have to try. Even if it’s dangerous.” I curled up around my stomach, aching with hunger and a desire for sleep. “Saldis, do you have anything to eat? Any food?”

I hated to imagine what she might produce as ‘food’, but I was too hungry to care.

But then, Saldis clicked her fingers and lit up with a grin.

“Why not go to the palace?” she asked, bright and cheery, like this was the obvious solution we’d been missing all along. She scratched one of her rats behind the ears with delight.

“The ... the what? I’m sorry?”

“The palace, the palace! You’re already here in Carcosa, it’s hardly that much of a trip.” She gestured into the effective infinity of the library. “Certainly quicker than a journey up Yggdrasil. Out the front of the library, past the lake of Hali, and there you have it. You’ll certainly get an odd reception with that mantle about your shoulders, but it’ll be a safe one. The courtiers and servants would never dare risk affront by laying hands on the betrothed of one of the King’s own family, though they will tease and play games.” She drew in a breath between her teeth. “Though the same cannot be said of the family itself. You would be walking a gauntlet of attention from siblings and cousins and aunts, some of them quite spiteful. I could come with you, though I will have to button up if we encounter ... questions.” She smiled. “And they will have plenty of food.”

My hands and guts had both gone cold. “Saldis, what are you suggesting?”

“Go ask your future father-in-law for assistance. Go see the King in Yellow.”

any mortal thing – 14.12

Acceptance had come easy to me — acceptance that monsters and mages and magic really do exist, along with werewolves and spirits and demons, not to mention the black seas of infinity Outside our own placid island of ignorance.

Well, for a given value of *easy*, after the initial shock and denial and the crying and the dry-heaving and the survivor's guilt and ten years of medication and hospital visits and medical torture wasted. When Raine and Evelyn had first pulled back the veil and left me with no safety blanket, I had felt a terrible sense that reality itself had betrayed me, that the universe had played a grotesque trick on my mind and perception; it was like vertigo of the emotions. I'd had a choice: either reject it all and retreat into decay, or leap from the cliff and hope I learnt to fly before I hit the rocks.

But I had started from a unique position which imparted to me a certain weird strength. Before I'd met Raine on that fateful morning, I had believed in error that I was broken, that my memories meant nothing, that my senses were wrong. Then she'd turned my world upside down and I discovered myself the right way up for the first time in ten years. I was not broken, I was healthy — or at least I did not suffer from schizophrenia. The jury's still out on post-traumatic stress disorder.

And if I was not broken, if reality really was that silly, then Maisie really had existed and my life meant something.

So I'd leapt. I had not quite learnt to fly, but at least I was still falling.

Even months and months later, I still woke up occasionally in the small hours of the night and forgot myself. Groggy and sleepy with Raine wrapped around me from behind, cuddled in her arms, or with the massive bulk of Zheng's imposing physique in front of me, radiating heat. In that comfortable, animal gap between sleep and true consciousness I could pretend that none of it had really happened. I could cling to a dream that I was a very lucky university student with some unconventional romantic relationships.

Though since I'd made my tentacles permanent, those moments of ignorance had faded. Reality was now wrought in my own new flesh. I'd left the illusion behind and in truth I was not sad to see it go. I knew what was real and what was not.

But *The King in Yellow* was fiction.

Saldis' enthusiastic suggestion hung in the stale silence of the library clearing, excitement and delight playing across her face in a bright smile and a wiggle of her perfectly plucked eyebrows, but the idea of petitioning the King in Yellow for help did not bring me any relief. A worryingly nostalgic sense of unreality began to settle on my shoulders; a pressure built inside my head like a high-pitched whine on the edge of my hearing. My breath caught in my throat. My empty stomach did not help, either. Low blood sugar, short temper, irritable and rash.

"But," I said. "But the King in Yellow isn't—"

Isn't real?

I bit my tongue hard enough to draw flesh blood. The pain sharpened my mind, grounded my senses, and reminded me that at least I was real; I cut dissociation off at the root.

"Isn't going to listen to your petition?" Saldis got the wrong end of the stick and finished my sentence. She waved one manicured hand at me, then glanced down at the pair of massive black rats in her lap, as if sharing an amused and sceptical look with a close friend, at the expense of my naivety. "Lady Morell," she carried on with an indulgent sigh which made me want to grit my teeth, "you are wearing proof of invitation to join his family, no matter how far down the royal hierarchy you may sit. You may be an uninvited guest to the palace, certainly, but you will be of great and pressing interest. Of that I have no doubt. He will not only grace you with the time of day, he will be very eager to speak with you indeed."

She finished with a smug smile, like she'd snatched a puzzle box from my hands and completed it with a single twist.

I sighed and rolled my eyes, fighting derealisation with exasperation, hugging the Outsider squid-skull to my belly to stop my hands from shaking. "Yes, exactly what I need, an angry king shouting at me about corrupting his daughter. Let's just pile another crisis on top, see how high we can go before the whole lot collapses

and crushes me.”

Saldis pouted, either genuinely hurt or very good at putting on the look. “There’s no need to be sarcastic.”

I shot her a glare but her childish pouting did not relent. I huffed and cast about for a moment, wishing I could just order the forest-knight forward to slap her in the face or something, but then I reminded myself of my situation. I only had one ally right now.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Apology accepted!” Saldis brightened instantly. I very nearly threw the skull at her.

“Saldis, try to see your suggestion from my perspective. Assuming I can reach this ... palace, what am I even walking into?”

“Oh, Lady Morell, you’re not going to get hung, drawn, and quartered for having known Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight in the Biblical sense, you—” Saldis cut herself off with a face like she’d swallowed a fly. “*Known in the Biblical sense?*” she repeated slowly, with an expression of growing outrage I imagined she might wear if she found a perfectly framed dog turd lying right on the middle of a folded dress. “What an absolutely useless, foul, vague euphemism. How do you Englishers even communicate when you’re working with such utter dross? Wait, no.” She held up both hands and adopted a look of angelic tolerance. “I am getting off track. Lady Morell, you are not going to get thrown into a dungeon and have hot pokers applied to unmentionable places, not for the crime of having gone elbow-deep in the cunt of the King’s decidedly lesbian daughter.”

Saldis illustrated her colourful description by pushing a clenched fist through the ring of her opposite thumb and forefinger, all the way to her elbow. She held the demonstration aloft, completely serious.

I burst into embarrassed laughter, going red in the face, smothering my mouth behind both hands as I hiccuped loudly. One of my tentacles had to catch the squid-skull mask. The laughter was not all good — I was genuinely on the verge of losing control with shaking and hiccups and lurking fear, even if Saldis’ absurd display had taken the edge off the lingering sense of unreality.

She watched me with a perplexed frown. “Lady Morell?”

I waved her down, taking several deep breaths to get myself back under control. “Nothing like a bit of sexual obscenity to ground the mind,” I muttered.

“Oh, quite,” Saldis agreed, though she didn’t seem sure at all, still frowning at me like I was about to fall over or pass out. “Did I hit the nail on the head, just then? Have you and Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight been ... ?” She made an upward fist-pumping motion.

“No!” I snapped, and had to fan my face to fight down the enduring blush. “Saldis, I don’t know what you’re made of — literally, I can’t imagine — but we mere mortal humans—”

“Which you are most certainly not—”

“—are not made for inserting entire arms up inside!” I finished, squeaking with the absurdity of what I was saying.

“Speak for yourself,” Saldis said with the corner of her mouth.

“Sevens and I have not engaged in any coital or even flirtatious activities, none whatsoever. If we had, do you think I would be so surprised about this?” I made to pluck at the invisible fabric of Sevens’ cloak, but my fingers passed through the space my senses said the garment should occupy, just like every previous attempt. I tutted and fussed, one of my tentacles puffing at where the fabric should be.

Saldis sighed and pulled an infuriatingly indulgent shrug, more with her palms than her shoulders. “Well, if that’s what you say, you have even less to worry about.”

“How can it be both invisible and yellow?” I huffed at the feeling of the invisible cloak, the warmth snug about my shoulders. “It’s the invisible pink unicorn problem, illustrated in reality. Oh, I do hate this. Damn you, Sevens.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing,” I sighed. “Something Raine taught me. Philosophy, about the existence of God, or Gods. How horribly relevant.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight herself was one thing — she undoubtedly existed, no matter how many layers of mask she wore or whose face she imitated. I’d seen her with my own eyes, both in the flesh and in the abyss. I’d seen past her masks to the truth beneath, all her alien complexity and robust abyssal beauty like secret life at the

bottom of a marine trench. I could touch her and verify she was real.

But her father, the King? The King in Yellow was from a book, a set of unremarkable short horror stories written in the late nineteenth century.

Since meeting Sevens, I'd read that book from cover to cover three times, trying to glean the slightest clue from those confused snippets of fiction. The first time we'd encountered this strange crossover between fiction and reality, Evelyn had launched into an outraged rant, firm and unyielding in her belief that the Yellow King could not exist, that all those old stories were just nonsense pulp from a hundred years ago. At the time I'd mostly dismissed her anger — after all, it stood to reason that any fiction could contain kernels of truth. What if the person who wrote those stories had encountered the real Yellow King, long ago? Why not process that experience into fiction rather than writing down some squalid occult tome that nobody would take as real? *The King in Yellow* had endured and thrived as fiction, far better than it ever would have as one of those crumbling books from Evelyn's secret collection beneath Sharrowford University Library.

But I'd only been able to accept that because it was a purely academic question. Now it was rapidly becoming a practical problem. Perhaps paradoxically, that made it a philosophical issue.

"Why can't things just be simple?" I hissed to myself.

In that rather lame collection of short stories, the entity known as the King in Yellow was poorly defined — a haunting presence in a fictional play that drove its audience insane, a name whispered in rotting tenements while the fog roiled outside, a creeping suggestion of watching and observing, reinterpreted and rewritten dozens of times in the years since.

The King in Yellow was not merely a fictional entity, it was created by the process of fictional re-imagining, like the compacting of silt on a lake bed to eventually create rock.

So what would I be going to meet?

Something not unlike the Eye. A being which had dragged itself from the dark of the abyss under its own power, whatever it had been before. Sevens had told me that her father the King had begun

life as something not unlike a human being. Perhaps that's why he had a family, something comprehensible on a mortal level, rather than the Eye's dead globe of Wonderland.

I was going to meet Sevens' dad.

I was also covered in my own blood, stank of fear-sweat and vomit, and was so hungry I could have eaten my own fingers. A great first impression.

How would I have reacted to meeting Raine's father? Well, bad example. I probably would have tried to punch the man with a tentacle. *Don't do that to the King*, I told myself, *I doubt he'd be willing to help after a tentacle fight*.

"If I meet the King in Yellow," I said out loud to Saldis, anxiety clutching at my chest, "what exactly will I see?"

Saldis raised her eyebrows. To my surprise, the pair of rats in her lap paused as well, sitting up on their hind legs and looking right at me with their tiny black eyes.

"A very good question," Saldis said, voice low and husky, as if she was telling a horror story around a campfire. Just what I needed; I almost rolled my eyes. "I've never had the pleasure in person, though I have heard all the tales. Usually he is not somebody you would wish to meet, not if he is actively seeking you out, especially when wearing some of his other guises."

"Other guises?"

"Mmmhmm! You know how it goes, a king or a prince wants to go among the common people, so he dons a disguise. But for one of such majesty, nature is difficult to conceal. When the King walks abroad, those who meet him know they have been met. It is impossible to mistake him for a mere pretender to the throne, or even for one of his closest family. He will certainly show you a mask too, Lady Morell. I doubt very much that either of us wants to see the unfiltered truth. Neither would I want to deal with one of his displeased masks, but the Library has been quiet for a long time; Hastur hasn't passed through in decades, so I suspect the King's mood is still amiable."

"Hastur?" I echoed the strange name — and instantly regretted it.

From Saldis the word had sounded normal, not one of those twisted

un-words that made the mouth and throat bleed and seared human ears with supernatural pain. But in my mouth the word felt like a live slug. I stopped to retch, clutching at my chest, and would have vomited if I didn't have extensive experience in holding back nausea.

"Yes, Has-" Saldis cut off with a tut, blazing an angry frown all of a sudden. "You almost made us say it three times between us! Don't!"

I spat on the floorboards, trying to wash away a taste that was not a taste, a phantom sensation of something wet and wriggling and rancid. The bioreactor in my abdomen suddenly spiked its power output, thrumming hard in my gut, purging an invader that I'd accidentally invited inside, merely by speaking a word. For a few seconds my skin burned fever-hot and a flash sweat broke out beneath my clothes. But the bioreactor did its job, fuelling impossible processes, churning out pneuma-somatic approximations of macrophages and eosinophils to surge through my bloodstream and fight off the infection. The fever passed and I straightened up, panting and blinking, wiping sweat off my face.

Saldis was still frowning at me, like I'd done something wrong, hands on her hips inside her sphere-machine.

"You could have warned me," I spluttered.

She shrugged. "I did! Don't say Ha- ... that name three times. It's obvious, it should *feel* obvious. Besides, it's common knowledge. I thought you had a little mage or two among your comrades, didn't you? The blonde one with the terrible attitude and the dangerous eyes?"

Dangerous eyes? I filed that one away for later.

"Yes, okay. I get the picture." I spat on the floorboards again, though I had regained enough composure to once again feel the pressures of being a goody-two-shoes, so I turned and hid the gesture behind one hand.

"I wouldn't want to invoke that aspect of the King of Yellow even if I was completely inert at the time." Saldis was saying. She gestured up with both hands at the inside of her grey sphere-machine. "Best not speak of the devil, yes?"

"Oh, this bodes really well for meeting him," I muttered.

All I'd done was speak the name of one of the King's masks, but if I had still been mere ape, without my pneuma-somatic additions and changes, without my abdominal reactor and my adaptive biology, what would have happened to me just then? My hands were still shaking with adrenaline and my t-shirt was plastered to my back with sweat. Whatever assault I'd just come under, my body had awakened to a real fight, not just brushed off a lazy exploratory tentacle.

Sevens' father, once something like us, great playwright and director, patriarch and monarch — whatever the King in Yellow was, first and foremost he was an Outsider god. Like the Eye.

I forced myself to take a deep breath; I had no other choice, except to give up, lie down, and die. I'd faced the Eye, I could face this.

"It's all right for you inside your shell," I said to Saldis, transmuting my terror into flippant grumpiness; I finally understood why Evelyn did this all the time. "The rest of us can't simply retract our necks and hide from consequences."

Contrary to my expectations, Saldis got all smug when I said that. "As a lifestyle, I highly recommend it," she purred.

I frowned at her, distracting myself with a silly thought. "Saldis, are you a snail?"

"... excuse me?"

"You're sort of like a human snail, aren't you? I mean it seriously, I'm not trying to insult you. Since I last saw you, I have had some experience with how mages can eventually end up. You're a human core inside a some kind of mage snail-shell. Aren't you?"

Saldis' expression went through a fascinating slow-motion change, growing more and more disgusted with every second of contemplation. She looked away, out at the library, then at the pair of big black rats in her lap who were happily rolling on their backs. She cleared her throat, expression getting even worse as she twisted her lips together. "Well ... I ... that is to say ... I ... "

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"No. Maybe. No, no! Absolutely not. I will not accept that description. A snail?!"

"You do carry your home on your back."

“But still!”

“Look, Saldis,” I said, seizing the opportunity while she was off balance. “I’m not worried about the King in Yellow punishing me for seducing his daughter, that would be absurd. I’m worried about the vast gulf between what I am and what he is. Do you understand? How can I possibly communicate with something like that?”

Saldis tutted, still faintly offended. “You communicate with Seven-Shades, do you not? Well enough for her to fall for you. The trick is to speak clearly. And listen carefully when spoken to.”

I sighed and ran a hand over my face, followed by a tentacle. I really didn’t have a choice; if things took a turn for the worst, I could always Slip out, back to the quiet plain, assuming the King couldn’t stop me. I glanced over my shoulder at the forest-pattern knight still standing silent and unmoving.

“Are you willing to walk into this with me?” I asked him softly.

His helmet went up and down, just a single jerk of his chin. I nodded back and curled a tentacle-tip around his empty gauntlet. At least I had one normal companion out there. That thought made me puff out a breath of dark laughter — a pneuma-somatic spirit given real flesh and piloting a suit of Outsider steel now counted not only as a comrade, but *normal* compared to the surroundings. He was as far out of his element here as I was.

“Saldis, okay, so, the palace. How do I get to—”

But as I turned back to Saldis, I noticed we’d attracted an audience.

A single squid-faced librarian stood in one of the gaps between two bookcases, as if it had just walked around the corner, turned, and stopped. It was totally motionless, grey hands tucked into its sleeves, face-tentacles slack. Despite the lack of sensory organs in its eyeless grey face of tentacles and spines, I felt like I was being watched, intently, by something of great intelligence.

Saldis leaned forward out of her pilot seat to follow the direction of my shock. Her rats clung to her skirts with their little claws.

“Oh,” she went, raising her eyebrows. “That’s unexpected. I wonder what it wants.”

“Um,” I said. “That’s new behaviour. Saldis, the last time we saw

unorthodox behaviour from these things, it was very bad. And that's an understatement."

My tentacles drifted upward as if to defend myself from attack, but the librarian just stood there, perfectly still. In a sudden blur of metal, the forest-knight swung past me, unlimbering his axe from his shoulder in one smooth motion and dropping the haft down into a two-handed fighting stance. His footsteps hit the floorboards without a sound.

"No!" I squeaked, shooting out one tentacle to grab him by the elbow.

He stopped right away. If he'd pulled, I doubted I could have restrained him.

"Don't antagonise them," I said softly. "Don't make it worse."

The librarian hadn't even flinched.

"Mmm." Saldis pursed her lips. "I suspect the content of our deliberations has attracted attention, but not from the catalogue — it wouldn't care. Somebody's taken an interest, somebody with enough authority to personally hijack a librarian. Hello there!" She waved her fingers at the insensate squid-faced puppet, but it didn't react, so she sighed and shrugged and sat back, winking at me instead. "Best you not stick around in this spot much longer, yes? If you've drawn attention, the family's already onto you. Best get to somewhere nice and official with lots of witnesses." Then she nodded at the forest-patterned knight, her voice turning to a flirtatious purr. "Your big fellow there is quite the eager one, isn't he?"

I tore my eyes away from the grey librarian with some difficulty, heart pounding in my chest. What exactly was watching us? I told myself I was better off not knowing.

"Maybe we were talking too loud in the library," I muttered, then hiccuped out a strangled laugh.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing," I said, rallying my thoughts. "I can't stay here, yes. Saldis, how do I reach the palace? You mentioned the front of the library, but as far as I can tell the library is infinite in three directions. Where do I go?"

“Not infinite!” Saldis sighed like I was small child failing to add two and two. “Oh, little Englisher, nothing is infinite. Not even my appetites.” She cracked a terrible smile and let out a cackle, her eyes travelling up and down the forest-knight’s armour without guile. Even the rats appeared to cringe. “The library has a front entrance, of course. How else would anybody get in? Well, present company excepted.” She gestured at me.

“Yes, but how can I reach it?”

“ ... you walk there, with your little feets on the ends of your little leggies. How else? Perhaps your chap there can carry you.” She nodded at the knight. “Wouldn’t mind that myself.”

I tried very hard not to kill her with my eyes. “I need to get back today. Tonight. I don’t even know how many hours have passed since I left. I was asleep on the floor, for crying out loud!” I snapped, losing control of my anger and fear again, trying not to think about Raine and Evelyn and Lozzie, shooting an angry glance at the silent, watching librarian. “And I’m ravenously hungry. I don’t know about your bloody hamster ball, Saldis, but I cannot walk for three months or three years until we find the front door.”

Saldis raised an eyebrow, delicately offended. She even folded her arms, which messed up the perfect lines of her golden-embroidered red dress.

I sighed, closed my eyes, and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’m ... I’m sorry. None of this is your fault,” I forced myself to say. “I apologise for snapping.”

“Quite understandable, Lady Morell.”

“Saldis, how did you get here from the front—”

But when I opened my eyes I choked off my words and did a double take — our single watching squid-faced librarian had brought some friends. Now three of them stood in the gap between the bookshelves, shoulder to shoulder in perfect stillness. Several more ragged grey-robed figures were drifting in behind them.

Saldis leaned forward to follow my gaze again, then froze.

“Ah,” she said, voice suddenly tight. “Faster escalation than I expected.”

“There’s more,” I said with a quiver in my voice.

I pointed left, at the opposite exit from the little library clearing. Another pair of grey librarians stood there, as if blocking a potential retreat, slowly being joined by more shuffling down the bookcase rows. I looked over my shoulder at the direction from which I had entered the clearing and found a further four squid-faces staring back at me in silent regard, a small crowd beginning to gather behind.

One of the librarians took a shuffling, zombie-like step forward, bare grey feet edging into the clearing. Then another did the same. Then a third. The first trickle of an avalanche began to converge toward Saldis and me.

The forest-knight adjusted his footing, drawing closer to my back and levelling his axe to protect me. He crowded me toward the sphere-machine, the only retreat still available, though it led us nowhere. My stomach clenched up hard, my skin broke out in cold sweat, and — *damn the consequences*, I thought — I narrowly ignored the urge to slip the squid-skull back over my head.

Saldis and I looked at each other.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“It means you have attracted more attention than I thought,” Saldis said quickly, all her amusement gone, very focused all of a sudden. “The catalogue is gathering numbers. You have become an object of some interest, Lady Morell.”

“I thought you said it wasn’t the catalogue?”

She shrugged. “None of us are totally infallible, despite very good track records. I was wrong. Wrong! Ahaha, wrong!” She laughed, and I did not like the edge of hysteria in her voice. “The issue of leaving in a hurry is becoming rather pressing, no?” She sat back in her machine and ran her eyes over the unfolded entrance.

“Don’t you hide in your shell!” I snapped at her.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” All around us, more librarians were beginning to shuffle into the clearing. A ring was forming, centred on me and Saldis. “Besides, it’s not I who has to worry. Observe.”

Saldis’ sphere-machine suddenly backed up from me by about six feet, clicking across the floorboards in its strange rolling locomotion, the grey blocks flowing over the outer surface without

disturbing the interior. It looked as if Saldis and her pilot seat were suspended by a gyroscope. When she reached the desired safe distance, the machine stopped and Saldis peered out of the opening in the front, nodding at the slowly tightening ring of librarians.

“See?” she asked brightly.

Several of the shuffling grey figures adjusted course — toward her.

Her smile died and her eyes went wide. She sat back quickly in her pilot seat, staring at me, her pair of black rats nuzzling into her lap, trying to hide.

“I am supposed to be invisible to them, to a degree,” she said, but I sensed she wasn’t really talking to me. “But I’m not. Oh dear. Oh dear oh dear, no no no, we can’t have this. I’m afraid I may have to break my promise to you, Lady Morell, I may have to crawl back into my *snail shell* and see you when this is all over. I do wish you the—”

“Saldis!” I snapped at her, more irritated than afraid. “Don’t you dare! I’ll never—”

“—the best of luck with surviving. Perhaps you can translocate yourself out for a few hours until they lose interest, no? Well, best of—”

“Oh, fine!” I huffed. I suppose she had a point — she was willing to help, but not risk her life. I rolled my eyes and prepared to leave.

“*Hastuuuuuuurrrr.*”

The voice came from the crowding ring of squid-faced librarians, a low rumble of wet meat like an open wound used as a mouth.

Saldis froze and stopped talking, face gone white as ash. We stared at each other for a split second, then both turned together, she all but clambering out of her shell to get a better look. The rats swung from the front of her dress, scrambling up to perch on her shoulders.

The ring of squid-faced librarians was drawing closer — and their robes were bulging and twitching with awful life beneath. Hummocks and humps and writhings stirred the fabric. As we watched in horror, the motions began to part the ragged grey down the middle, first on one librarian, then another, then a third, like insects ripping free from spent cocoons.

“Has ... turr?”

The voice came from among the crowd, from twenty hidden mouths ripped in grey flesh.

“Hastur,” one of them gurgled.

Third time’s the charm.

The closest librarian suddenly twitched and convulsed as a yellow tentacle poured out from between the gap in its robes. Slow as rancid honey, the colour of old pus, about as thick as a baby’s arm, the tentacle twisted in the air like a newborn creature tasting reality for the first time, clumsy and awkward. Its surface flowed with protoplasmic change, as if trying to sprout suckers and claws and sensory organs. Another tentacle joined it, then another. The librarian fell over in a heap on the floorboards, writhing and jerking as its body was given over entirely to the parasite.

A second librarian fell too, yellow tentacles bursting forth like the petals of a flower rooted in a corpse. A third went down the same way, lashing at the floor, though at the back of the crowd I saw the spell weaken and break. The rearmost librarians were scattering and running now that the unseen presence had manifested in the sacrificial flesh of their comrades.

Had I brought this parasite here, when I spoke the name and purged the infection from my own body?

The tentacles did not reach for us right away, but found each other first, touching and groping like mating slugs, then binding together into one flesh, melting into each other and becoming one. The host bodies of the fallen librarians were rapidly consumed with yellow rot, their own flesh donated to the growing mass in front of us, ringing us, all around us.

The air tasted like fungus and sulphur, making me cough. My eyes stung. A whine beyond human hearing made the inside of my head hurt.

And the rest of the possessed librarians were still shuffling toward us.

Without hesitation, I slipped the squid-skull over my head, taking refuge inside the bone-metal. My eyes stopping stinging and my breath cleared instantly. The forest-knight pushed me back toward

Saldis, axe levelled, nowhere to go.

Saldis sat back, took a sharp breath, slapped herself twice on both cheeks, and snapped her attention to me, speaking very fast. "Let's stop beating around the bush, Lady Morell. Heather? Can I call you Heather?"

"Obviously!" I squeaked. "But this is hardly the time to—"

"Can you use your powers of travelling without moving to take us both straight to the library entrance?"

"Us? But—" I cast a glance at the tentacles and the librarians, the closing ring. Some of the limbs were taller than the bookcases now, their flesh flowing like candle wax. "You want to come with me?"

She clapped her hands together with a frozen smile. "I would be delighted to accompany you all the way to an audience with the King, as long as it is away from this spot. And quickly."

"Right, okay, but I can't just take us straight to the entrance, because I've never been there. I don't know what it looks like, where it is, anything about it."

"I have been there! Once, when I arrived," Saldis announced quickly, hands grasping the air in front of her. "Is that enough to work with? If not, anywhere else is acceptable too!"

"I ... I have no idea."

Saldis shrugged, a rather fatalistic smile on her lips. The rats clung to her shoulders. "Well, we can give it a shot, or I can close up and run like hell." She waved a hand at the tightening ring of librarians and their strange yellow parasites, the former still shuffling closer and the latter waving in the air like strange carnivorous plants. The bookcases of the clearing were barely visible between grey and yellow now, but our would-be captors were still just beyond range of the forest-knight's axe. I suspected he was more than capable of defending me against the librarians themselves, but not against whatever was riding them. The growing mass of yellow flesh could simply have engulfed him, axe and armour and all.

"I ... I think I can slingshot us back out of the library and to the entrance." I hiccuped. "If ... if I can sort of ... process the history of everywhere you've been. Maybe! Oh, actually, I have no idea if I can do that, I'm hungry and exhausted and we're running out of

time and we need to—”

“Well! Hurry up, then! Do it!” Saldis said. “I’m assuming I’m going to need to close up my front here anyway. I don’t want to be dragged unprotected through whatever medium you use. Yes?”

“Yes, yes. Keep your eyes closed, at least!” I nodded, stepping closer to her sphere-machine and touching it with hand and tentacle alike. Behind me, the forest-knight clapped a hand on my shoulder, anchoring himself, ready for the Slip. “Go ahead, seal up- no, wait!”

Saldis blinked at me as the blocks of matte grey began to move. They paused mid-flow.

“What about your rat?” I asked. “The one you sent after Sevens? We can’t leave him behind!”

“Mótsognir? Oh, he’ll be fine.” Saldis waved a both hands. “He’ll find his own way back to me, he always does!”

The rats on her shoulders bobbed their heads in agreement. The blocks started to flow closed again.

“Saldis, this isn’t going to work!” I squeaked. Several of my tentacles flew forward to hook the edges of the grey blocks, like grabbing a door before it closed. The blocks stopped again and Saldis gave me a deeply impatient, wide-eyed, almost panicked look. “In the best of times I could do this, but I need something to go on. Somewhere to go! I don’t know the location, and if I get this wrong I could pass out and we’ll both be stuck here, with this.”

Behind me, a great swish of parting air heralded the forest-knight swinging his axe one-handed. I cringed and braced for terrible violence, whirling to look, tentacles ready to defend myself against the press of grey bodies and explosion of parasitic yellow. But he had only brought the axe down horizontal, pointed at the chest of the nearest librarian. It didn’t react in the slightest, beginning to press itself against the head of the axe like a puppet being walked into a wall, blind and unfeeling. Then it twitched and a tentacle eased out from between splitting robes. The knight brought the axe back, ready to strike.

“I can gift you a memory,” Saldis said, in the exact tone of somebody offering to break all my bones.

I spun back to her. “You can? Is it dangerous?”

"No, it's just ... intimate." She huffed and leaned forward in her seat, toward me, though her eyes scanned past my shoulders in wide and unconcealed fear. "But circumstances leave us no choice. If your fiancée has a problem with this, well, she can only blame herself for leaving us to deal with her father's wrath." Saldis focused on me and brought a hand level with my cheek, as if to cup my face. "You have to consent, understand? And take that mask off, quickly now!"

"Oh. C-consent?" Even in the grip of a crisis I felt myself blush, but I fumbled the mask off and back into a cradle of my tentacles. My eyes watered in the open air and my bioreactor spun up, fighting off unseen pathogens.

Saldis leaned all the way out of her machine and brought her face to within twelve inches of my own; no matter how irritating and egotistical, she was a strikingly beautiful woman, with full red lips now gently parting before me, her hand about to brush my cheek. My heart skipped more than a beat and I found myself frozen to the spot. What did she mean by intimate? Was she going to kiss her memory into me?

"T-This is too silly, you can't be serious," I said. "Stop joking!"

"This is a an emergency, Lady Morell," she said quickly, husky and low. "Give me your consent and allow me to touch your face."

I steeled myself. We had to get out of here. I had to find Lozzie, I had to beat the hands, I had to get back home. I would have slept with Saldis if that's what it took; I didn't for a second believe she had engineered this to trick me. I swallowed on a very dry throat.

"Okay," I said. "Okay, do it. Yes, quick!"

"Best close your eyes, too," she whispered. "Works better that way."

I closed my eyes, heart slamming inside my ribs, fear crawling up my spine. Behind me, the forest-knight pressed against my back, retreating further from the ring of waving yellow tentacles. I heard another three thumps of limp bodies as librarians went down, followed by the slick wet curl of fresh-born tentacles throbbing into the air to join the rest.

Lips parted, blushing red as a tomato, I was braced for an emergency kiss.

Saldis slapped me across the cheek so hard she drew blood.

“Uuhhh.” I grunted and spluttered, blinking watering eyes and clutching my stinging face, the taste of fresh blood in my mouth again. I would have gone spinning to the floor if it wasn’t for my tentacles anchoring me to the sphere-machine, as well as Saldis’ own firm grip on my shoulder. “Ow!”

Saldis’ face filled my vision, eyes blazing wide. “Did it work?” she demanded.

“I- um- uh-” The slap had knocked my thoughts sideways, like a hard reboot of a computer by ripping the plug out of the wall and jamming it back in again.

“The library entrance!” Saldis raised her voice in the manner of speaking to an elderly person who had refused to use their hearing aid. She shook my shoulder, rattling me back and forth. “The entrance, Lady Morell! Can you picture the entrance?”

“You- you just slapped me, that didn’t do—”

An image burst into my mind, fully-formed and too detailed, more like a frame from a movie than a memory, the edges too sharp, the colours too saturated, the scents too real, the taste of the air in my mouth and nose. The library entrance, a dark wooden archway, inserted into my own mind.

“... yes!” I said, blinking in shock. “Yes, I do! I can!”

Behind me, the forest-knight’s axe suddenly broke the air, slamming through meat with a wet sound of shattering bone. I flinched in surprise, my stomach turning over at the worse sound that followed — tentacles slapping against metal.

“Then get us there!” Saldis shouted. The grey blocks of her machine rolled shut, sealing her inside like a mollusk in its shell. I only pulled my tentacles out of the way at the last second, heart hammering in my ribs as I dared a glance back over my shoulder.

The nearest of the fallen librarians had sprouted a clutch of yellow tentacles too, and these were tangled with the knight’s axe as if trying to pull it from his grip. One of the thick yellow tendrils whirled around as if to point at me, waving in the air like a cobra rearing to strike.

I hissed at it. Long and loud.

Spitting a little blood, I placed one hand on the rough grey surface of Saldis' machine, made sure the knight was still gripping my shoulder, and closed my eyes.

The familiar old equation spooled free like loose magnetic tape, burning through the flesh of my hands as I desperately wrapped it tight around the false, foreign, unfamiliar memory, as I looped and knotted and pulled it tight, anchored it hard, and let go.

In the last second of consciousness before reality folded up, I felt an extra, unexpected weight along with Saldis and the Knight.

Those yellow tentacles were anchored to me, through the knight, through the axe they were wrapped around, through the librarian flesh they were using as a vehicle for physical manifestation, all the way back to whatever *Hastur* was.

I had a feeling I was already meeting the King in Yellow; perhaps he was not best pleased with his daughter's choice of partner.

The Library collapsed.

Out I went, with an unwanted passenger.

any mortal thing – 14.13

I thought I'd grown accustomed to rough landings; seven months ago I'd forced myself through a baptism of fire with my first intentional return from Outside, only minutes after I'd accepted self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics — I'd rescued Evelyn from her ill-considered trip and I'd had to complete the equation with her clinging to me for dear life. Since then I had become intimately familiar with the pain and the nausea and the disorientation that came with each Slip, with each crash through the membrane, each shunt to Outside, each stomach-churning drop through the hidden trapdoor in reality's stage.

But our arrival on the book-strewn floor of the library canyon was so bad that I ought to have invented a new classification. A category six hurricane of mess, panic, confusion, and pain.

Technically we didn't cross the membrane. We didn't so much as brush against it. The equation I'd crafted was like a gravity-well slingshot, balling us up in a package of mathematics and swinging us around the fulcrum of the quiet plain, without ever touching down. I had aimed us back toward the Library of Carcosa, straight at the memory Saldis had slapped into my brain.

Under pressure, I'd taught myself how to teleport. As the saying goes, "necessity is the mother of invention", but I've come to believe that a good dash of fear can sometimes help things along.

Unfortunately, the source of that motivation had hitched a ride.

Hastur had come with us.

We crashed down like a starship breaking apart under atmospheric stress, onto the polished wooden floor, tumbling among the book-drifts at the bottom of the library canyon — myself, Saldis in her sphere-shell, Lozzie's forest-pattern knight, and our unwanted, uninvited, insistent stowaway.

For several vital seconds, all was blood and pain and noise. My head throbbed like a struck gong and my vision blurred with hypotension and stabs of white-hot agony, turning the heaps and hills of discarded books on the library floor into a shadow-puppet

play of whirling darkness and clawing gloom. My feet slipped on loose tomes, I let go of Saldis' sphere, and doubled up to spit stringy bile onto the floor. Without my tentacles braced against the ground, I would have crumpled and fallen on my face.

My heart slammed into my ribs like a dying bird and my body dumped another round of adrenaline into my bloodstream, because I knew we weren't out of the woods yet.

The knight had let go of me, he couldn't spare a hand to help me up; the most awful, wet, slick, sulfurous sounds were slapping against his armour. Then a heavy *swish* made me flinch — his axe parting the air — followed by a noise like rotten meat exploding under pressure.

I couldn't afford to pass out or lie down. I couldn't even afford five seconds bent double with my hands on my knees.

With effort I hadn't thought myself capable of, I reeled upright, arms clutched around my own chest as if to keep my organs inside, tentacles flailing to catch myself.

My blurred vision took in everything at once; the gloomy glow of distant witch-light over the head-height drifts of discarded and ruined books, more tomes slipping and sliding underfoot; Saldis' grey sphere-machine, still closed up tight and rolling to bump against a book-drift — not flowing on its strange mechanical blocks, but actually rolling, as if inert and abandoned, as if the Slip had knocked her unconscious and insensible; I think I screamed her name for help, but I may as well have screamed at a ball of concrete.

On my other side, the forest-knight was doing battle with Hastur — whatever Hastur was.

By either a miracle of luck or a limitation of the hyperdimensional equation, I had not dragged the entire ring of expanding yellow flesh along behind us. Only two of the parasitised librarian corpses had made the transition. They lay in a rapidly yellowing heap on the side of a book-drift about seven feet away from the Knight, their dead bodies at the core of a seed-bed, a thick layer of soupy flesh like rotting mustard, about the size of a small car, from which emerged a whirling mass of pus-coloured tentacles.

That bed of yellow flesh had been neatly severed by two curved

arcs, bisected by the edges of my hyperdimensional teleport. A steaming mess of fluids and tissues and vaguely organ-shaped wet masses were spilling out onto the library floor from those massive wounds, the colour of rotten lemons. It reminded me of a slice of lasagna, or one of those terrible microwave pastries that Raine sometimes ate, with the filling overflowing from the sides. The comparison turned my stomach. The internal goop was staining and ruining the books even as the substance rapidly hardened and began to sprout the stubs of fresh tentacles, like a self-cauterising sample of giant carrion mollusk.

Each live tentacle was smooth and thickly muscled, the colour of old bone and rancid butter. Trying to focus on them made my eyes ache — they seemed to exist in more than the physical dimension, leaving behind after-images and ghostly outlines as they lashed and whipped at the air, as if each tentacle was the sum of all the different positions it might occupy in space. They trailed visible spores of twinkling gold and little clouds of fungal gas; the air was beginning to stink of sulphur again.

The knight had severed two tentacles with his war-axe. Their shrivelling remains lay at his feet, twisting and shrinking and smoking.

But that was all he'd managed. Several tentacles clutched hard around the head and haft of his axe, trying to rip it from his grip.

As I gaped in wordless panic, another three tentacles shot out like attacks from a hunting squid. Two of them bounced off the knight's armour with the ring of star-steel plate, turned away by some Outsider property that Lozzie had woven into the metal.

But the third struck true, found purchase on the knight's helmet, and began to squeeze. Loops of tentacle dropped around his chest plate and abdomen too, exploiting the opening. I heard metal creak and groan under sudden pressure.

The knight tried to pull back, to free his axe — and to protect me from a pair of tentacles sneaking around his side — but Hastur's hands were much stronger than their slender appearance suggested. To my horror, hairline cracks began to open between the plates of the knight's armour, separating under the massive external pressure. The flesh-blob of ascended pneuma-somatic *kami* inside was losing the tug of war.

The King in Yellow would not be denied by strength, not here, not clothed in this mask.

Hastur may not have understood the lack of a skull to crush inside that helmet, the lack of ribcage to shatter and heart to shred, but once the armour was breached, my wonderful little protector would be exposed, not only to the King's wrath, but to the yellow spores in the air, the rotten-lemon virions, the fungus and sulphur stench. Saldis had her shell and I had my bioreactor, but the Knight — the true knight inside the armour, a scrap of flesh and faith that I personally owed — did not possess those advantages.

I hadn't realised, earlier that day, back in the quiet plain, just how vulnerable and soft the knights had chosen to be, by becoming flesh.

They had agreed in some Lozzie-dreamt ritual to risk themselves for a greater principle.

And the forest-knight, right then, was about to die for that principle. For me.

With an instinctive flick more thought than muscle, I slammed all the remaining biochemical control rods out of my trilobe reactor. A gasp ripped from my throat as pure energy flooded my veins, sluiced through my heart, and soaked my brain until I was quivering from head to toe. It felt like how I imagined taking a huge snort of cocaine might feel.

Sharp and aware and running red-hot, I moved. Two of my tentacles slipped my squid-skull helmet back over my face, though my nose was running freely with blood. On shaking legs I threw myself out from behind the knight, out into the open, arms and tentacles spread wide, teeth gritted and bared and eyes bulging with more than just adrenaline.

"Get off him!" I shouted.

Well, I tried to shout that. I actually just hissed at the top of my lungs, a long, warbling sound that should not have come from any human throat.

To my surprise — and horrified dismay — the writhing mass of yellow tentacles, the Outsider fungal parasite, Hastur, whatever it was, obeyed.

In a flash of motion the tentacles were off the knight and into the air, so fast that the poor forest-knight stumbled, metal boots clanking against the floorboard and slipping in the discarded books. The whipping, slopping, dripping fronds of yellow death turned to point at me instead.

I hissed again, intentionally this time, long and loud, though muffled by the library's enforced quiet. Arms wide, tentacles splayed, making myself look big. I shook from scalp to toes with adrenaline and fear and substances that had no place in a proper human bloodstream.

Hastur was most certainly not intimidated.

The writhing array of yellow tentacles bobbed to the left, then to the right, always pointing at me, as if each one were tipped by an eyeball. The seed bed at their conjoined roots continued to expand, like slime mold crossed with comedy foam, flowing over the books and dissolving their pages, soaking into the floorboards, sprouting little wriggling nubs of new tentacles. My face and hands itched as the air was flooded with fungal stink; my throat began to burn and sweat broke out all over my skin as my body fought off the unseen pathogen.

Lozzie's forest-knight hefted his axe and took two steps sideways, to stand at my shoulder. A right-hand man. But I was in charge now.

I hiccuped, loudly. The yellow tentacles flinched.

"Saldis?" I hissed through my teeth, unwilling to take my eyes off the tentacles. They were locked onto me, mesmerised and awaiting a signal, like a snake pit full of charmed cobras. "Saldis, wake up, please! What do I do?"

Saldis' sphere-machine lay inert.

A mad notion entered my mind, but it made sense. This was no tentacle beast, no animal, no cosmic child. This was a tiny piece of a being similar to the Eye. It was the King in Yellow, no matter how convincingly masked or how little I had severed from the greater mass. This was a monarch.

Slowly, shaking and caked in sweat, I lowered my tentacles and my arms. I pinched the hem of my pink hoodie between thumb and forefinger, bowed my head, bent my knees, and did the best approximation I could of a curtsy.

"I request an audience with the King in Yellow," I croaked out through blood-splattered lips. "By ... by the gift your daughter has given to me."

I tilted one shoulder forward, trying to show the skin-warm, sun-yellow cloak which I still couldn't touch.

"I claim no position or right by this," I babbled, making it up as I went along. Thank goodness for reading enough trashy fantasy in my teenage years to just spout this off the top of my head. "I only ask to be allowed to approach your majesty and speak a few words. If we gave offence or incited alarm, I apologise with all my heart and beg forgiveness, for the sake of your daughter, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight."

I swallowed another hiccup and raised my eyes. The tentacles were holding still in the air, pointed at me like a clutch of curious serpents trying to hypnotise a mouse, dripping thick yellow globs of venom and fungal matter that dissipated into wisps of toxic yellow gas before they hit the floor, filling the air with stinging fumes which made my eyes water.

"Please?" I added.

Hastur waited, but I had nothing more to say.

"Oh, fine!" I spat, another hiss rising in my throat. I braced for impact, whirled my tentacles in a protective wall, and began the difficult, painful work of flushing my skin with neurotoxin and poison and antimycotic agents, a hyperdimensional equation brewing in the back of my mind. "If that's not good enough for you, then you're a terrible father to Sevens. Stand aside or fight me. You might win but I'll burn going down and ruin your digestive tract on the way out."

And with that, the dripping yellow mass collapsed.

The pustulent tentacles shrivelled up in the blink of an eye, turning brown and wrinkled like dead fruit, slumping to the floor. The sudden rot carried back down their trunks and into the thick mat of muscular yellow meat, which shrank and dried and went grey in seconds. Its corners peeled up from the books like a salted slug. A faint wisp of clean white steam rose and vanished into the dark library air. The invasive fungal scent ebbed away to nothing; my face and hands and throat stopped itching and my fever broke. In

seconds, Hastur was gone, replaced with a grey mass of spent ash and desiccated flesh, with a pair of skeletal librarian corpses lying at its core.

Silence returned to the library, broken by the racing of my own heart.

“Oh ... kay?” I managed, croaking and coughing, my body still wired tight, ready for fight or flight. I hadn’t expected my little outburst to work, and I couldn’t believe my eyes as I stared at the dried grey mess on the floor. My hands were shaking with uncontrollable nervous energy, my tentacles were bunched like fists, and I couldn’t stop heaving for breath.

My vision began to blur and warp at the edges and a strange detachment crept up from the black pool of my subconscious. All dressed up with nowhere to go.

With the delicate care of a lover attending to one’s own body, I slid the biochemical control rods back into my trilobe reactor, narrowly avoiding the start of burnout. It was like clenching and relaxing muscles inside one’s own abdomen in a specific sequence; I felt the power inside me spike, which tore a gasp and a twitch and quiver from me, my knees buckling. But then I slammed all except three of the control rods home, letting out an involuntary keening noise through my teeth, a panting wail. For a long moment I just hunched up, sweating and shaking, guarded by the forest-knight, hugging myself through the strange afterglow.

Eventually I felt coherent enough to straighten up again, though I was still panting softly inside the squid mask. I took that off again so I could wipe the sweat and blood off my face with both hands, then wiped those on my sleeves, despairing for the state of my once-beautiful pink hoodie.

“You don’t suppose he liked my defiance?” I asked the knight in a dry croak, waving a tentacle at Hastur’s vacated manifestation. “Earned his respect?”

The knight did not answer. He just shouldered his axe.

I took a deep breath, stuck my tongue out at the taste of blood and bile in my throat, despairing at the lack of water to wash it away, then made sure my legs worked before I went to see if Saldis had finished her nap.

Her sphere-machine lay where it had rolled, leaning against a book-drift. Previously, each individual grey block which formed the exterior of the sphere had always been vertical, no matter how far or fast the machine had rolled, or what Saldis had been up to on the inside. But now the blocks were all at an angle, like a capsized ship.

“Saldis?” I said out loud. “Oh, come on, I’m too tired for this. Wake up.”

I slapped the machine with a tentacle. Nothing happened, so I hit it harder, like hammering on a door.

“The Slip better not have killed you,” I muttered. “And you better not be playing dead.”

Despite my flippant words, a seed of doubt germinated in my belly. What if I had killed Saldis by accident? I had no particular love for her, but she wasn’t my enemy. Such a senseless death would be a tragedy, my fault, a terrible thing to have done. And I would be without a guide again.

“Come on, little miss snail, get up.”

An idea struck me — what if she was less snail and more tortoise?

I readied three tentacles and tried to heave her machine off the book-drift, planting both feet and putting my back into the motion, but the thing weighed a ton. I lacked the strength to roll it upright. The forest-knight joined me a heartbeat later, free hand on the grey blocks. Between us we righted the machine. As soon as the blocks were vertical to the floor, the sphere suddenly stopped and became oddly weightless, lost all inertia but gained infinite stability; still heaving with all my strength, I blundered into the side and only narrowly avoided cracking my skull open on one of the edges, cushioned by a tentacle.

Before I had even taken a breath and stepped back, the front of the sphere snapped open in fast-forward, peeling back like the lips of a snarling animal.

Saldis emerged in a blur, her red and gold dress like a bleeding, jewelled tongue lashing out from the core of her machine. She planted one bare foot on the lip of the opening, the other back in her pilot seat, eyes blazing, braids swept back, and held both hands aloft with her soft sleeves fallen back to her elbows. Exactly the sort of pose I would imagine for a wizard in a silly fantasy novel, ready

to cast a fireball at her foes — if it wasn't for all the blood.

Her hands and forearms were split open in twin twisting spirals of exposed muscle and bone flowing like wax, her flesh itself forming a sigil ready to rend the surface of reality. The effect made my eyes hurt and sent a spike of pain directly into the centre of my head.

"Ahhhh, ow," I hissed, stumbling back.

"Fessi dottir nordursins mun ekki finnast vant!" She was howling like a banshee. *"Ekki af neinum gudi- oh,"* she suddenly cut off. "Oh my. Oh dear." She cleared her throat. "Have I missed it? I've missed the entire thing! No!"

"Could you put those away, please?" I said, still squinting and shielding my eyes from her blood-magic.

"What? What? Put what away? Oh!" Saldis gave an awkward little laugh. I heard a sound like a dozen zippers being fastened at once, if zippers were made of meat and bone.

When I looked up again, Saldis was still standing with one foot planted on the lip of her sphere-machine, staring down at the grey, shrivelled mass of Hastur's manifestation with a bewildered frown on her delicate features.

"And I was all ready for it, too," she murmured, shaking her head.

"Are you ... Saldis, are you all right?"

"Pardon, poppet?" She blinked at me with a look like a woken sleepwalker. "Oh, yes, quite all right. All together and in one piece, that's what really matters, in the end. In the end, there is no end. Ha ha for me." She nodded at the dead thing on the floor. "Looks like a very old, very dried out turd, doesn't it? How undignified. I suppose your travelling without moving trick didn't bring along enough of him to keep him viable, yes?"

"Oh, no. He was here, very much so. He left of his own volition, though."

Saldis coughed out a single laugh and then gave a deflating sigh, sagging against her sphere-machine. A surprise crested her delicate features and coffee-brown cheeks — a genuinely warm smile. I hadn't seen that kind of smile on her face before, resigned and happy at the same time, more human than I had expected from her.

“Well. Well!” she said. “We should count ourselves extremely lucky indeed. And here I was ready to go out in a blaze of glory. Die taking a chunk out of that fellow and I’d get a seat at the head table, alongside Odin himself.”

“In Valhalla? I thought you didn’t believe in any gods.”

“There are no atheists in foxholes, my poppet.” A frown marred her smile, but then she dismissed it with a shrug. “No, I will give that phrase a passing grade. It’s presumptuous but grammatically elegant, although *foxhole*? Hmmm, I would have words with the inventor of that one.” Saldis plucked one of the pendants from around her neck, an inverted golden hammer, then raised it to her lips and kissed it with savage relish. She nodded at the ashen grey remains again. “Lucky that your strange technique didn’t leave enough of him for a fight then, hmm?”

“Oh, he tried to fight.”

Saldis blinked at me several times. “Oh no, no no, you must be mistaken.”

“No. I’m not.”

“You’re not?” Saldis’ eyes widened.

I shrugged, too exhausted for her awe. “I curtsied and asked for mercy—”

“Oh!” Saldis brightened. “That makes so much more sense—”

“—but he didn’t respond, so I trash talked him.”

“Trash ... talked?”

“I told him to go away or fight me properly. And that I’d give him indigestion if he ate me. So he left.”

Saldis stared at me for another heartbeat, mouth open, then started laughing. She laughed long and low and so hard that she cried. She leaned her head against the exterior of her machine and shook all over. I rolled my eyes and clutched at myself, beyond done with this.

“Saldis.”

“I weep!” Saldis reared back up to her full height, one arm thrown wide. “Not only for your audacity, but also for the fact that I missed

it!” She wiped tears from her cheeks, then grabbed one of the golden pendants around her neck. With a quick tug she pulled the necklace free and then tossed it in my direction, a flash of bright gold arcing through the air.

I instinctively reached for it with my actual hands, not my tentacles, but fumbled the catch and almost dropped it onto the library floor, slipping on the footing of loose books. “Tch!” I hissed, frustrated and embarrassed. If it weren’t for my tentacles, I would have gone sprawling onto my backside.

“Oh, Lady Morell, you are such a fascinating creature,” Saldis said as I was recovering, huffing and puffing and red in the face. “Look at that, you can barely keep your own feet, yet you face down a destroyer of worlds with nothing but polite insults. Perhaps it’s your *English*, perhaps the language is simply that toxic.”

I gave her an exhausted look, then examined the pendant she’d tossed to me. It was a thick disk about half the size of my palm, showing an intricately detailed design of a stylised, androgynous face. One eye was an empty, blind socket; the other eye was wide open, blazing with inner light. The necklace portion was made of soft dark leather, but the pendant itself must have been worth a fortune. Real gold, yellow and bright and heavy.

“I ... I can’t—”

“You have earned the right, Lady Morell,” Saldis said, with a strange new tone I’d never heard in her voice before, softly reverent. “Keep it. For what little protection it may offer.”

“Saldis, where I come from, this would be worth a staggering amount of money. I can’t just take this.”

Saldis sneered — not at me, but at a formless notion. “Money cannot buy wisdom. Only sacrifice does that. Sell it, give it away, or lose it, and you will find it quickly returned to your hands.”

I frowned at the pendant, then sighed. “All right, thank you. Thank you for the gift. As long as this isn’t another hidden marriage proposal, or any other kind of hidden proposal. Yes?”

Saldis tutted. “Perish the thought! I would never get in the way of a pretender’s romance, I’m not suicidal. Besides, Lady Morell, you are cute as a fawn, but you are not my sort.”

“Well, that’s ... ” I cleared my throat, vaguely embarrassed. “Good to know.”

I tucked the pendant away inside the front pocket of my hoodie, out of sight and out of mind, and finally raised my eyes beyond this little clearing between the drifts of discarded books. We were quite close to one towering wall of the library canyon, perhaps only a hundred feet away. The sheer wooden wall rose for sixty feet or more, cloaked in thick shadows and cobwebbed with climbing staircases, before giving way to the first of the library floors. A few clutches of squid-faced librarians peered over the railings up above, but with only their own customary curiosity, not piloted by an Outsider god-parasite. Some of them clutched books, others held those wicked fork-weapons for controlling intruders, but none of them moved toward the staircases.

None of this matched the memory Saldis had slapped into me, but that memory was already fading into a dreamlike haze. All I could picture was a wooden archway.

“I don’t see anything that looks like a front entrance,” I said. “Are we in the right place?”

“Exactly the right place,” Saldis answered, airy and arrogant. She slapped the side of her machine and then slipped back down into her pilot seat, putting her feet up on the open lip. Her two rats appeared from somewhere behind the seat, scrabbling up into her lap and nuzzling at her hands. “And how is that memory I shared with you, Lady Morell?” She asked the question without looking up from her rats. “How is it faring?”

“Mostly faded by now, actually.”

“Good!” she announced. “Good, yes. As it should be. I shall lead the way, have no fear.”

Saldis’ grey sphere-machine turned on the spot and trundled out of the little cove of book-drifts, the blocks ticking against the exposed floorboards where they weren’t cushioned by fallen tomes and loose pages. I shared a wary look with the forest-knight — or at least imagined that he looked back at me with the same level of doubt and trepidation, despite his blank, unseeing helmet — then drew myself up as best I could, gathered my tentacles close to my core, and set off after Saldis.

We didn't travel far before the front entrance revealed itself. Saldis rounded the corner of the book-drifts and led us toward the library floors, out into a wide open space that was somewhat clearer compared to the hills of books toward the centre of the canyon. Perhaps the librarians stuck close to the walls whenever their cataloguing duties sent them down here.

"There, see?" Saldis said when we were perhaps two hundred meters out from the canyon wall. "Precisely the right place. Just as I remember it."

As we approached, the front entrance drifted out of the gloom. What had seemed a blank space, hidden deep in the shadows, resolved first into a stretch of wall strangely devoid of staircases for a hundred metres in either direction. But then the darkness deepened, stretched off into a third dimension of distance, and I realised I was staring right into the mouth of a wooden archway built for a giant.

Vertigo gripped me and my feet stumbled to a halt amid the books. That single archway was sixty feet tall and a hundred feet wide, but it was not the size that stopped me — the rest of the Library of Carcosa had already inoculated me against that. Size didn't matter, but darkness did.

Distant glow-globe light struggled a few feet down the unseen passageway, but beyond that lay a wall of night, a suffocating blanket of subterranean pressure, a nothingness. It was a hallway, a corridor, but I could only see it as a pit.

"Lady Morell?" Saldis drew to a halt and her machine turned to face me.

"We have to go through that?"

Saldis raised her eyebrows, not quite following, but then lit up with a silent, amused *oh* on her lips. "Fear of the dark is nothing to be ashamed of. Quite natural, quite rational. Very sensible, in fact."

"There's nothing natural about that darkness. Is it safe to pass through there? I'm serious, and don't leave anything out."

"Safe?" Saldis laughed. "No, absolutely not."

I blinked. "But you said—"

"I said fear of the dark is very sensible. Did I not?" she tutted. I

huffed a sigh and rolled my eyes, but Saldis waved a hand and carried on. "I've only passed that way once and I did so with all my hatches firmly battened down. The library does have a receptionist."

"A ... receptionist?"

Saldis huffed and threw her hands up in frustration. The pair of rats in her lap rolled on their backs, as if laughing. "Apparently that's the best your language can do for the concept. Yes, a receptionist, to screen visitors. But I subverted it. As far as the catalogue system is concerned, I never really arrived. An inert ball rolled in, beneath notice." She sighed. "Getting out is less trouble than getting in. You won't have to demonstrate your worthiness to handle the light of knowledge, but you and your bodyguard will require some actual light. Else you are likely to be eaten."

"Light," I echoed, staring into that darkness again. "Against that? And that will protect us?"

Saldis nodded.

"But I don't have a torch, or a ..." I trailed off and rolled my eyes at myself.

Power thrummed from my abdominal reactor as I turned up the rainbow-strobing bio-luminosity in all six of my tentacles. One around each of my legs as bio-mechanical braces, another wrapped around my midsection in a self-hug, another two held aloft like raised torches, and a final one trailing behind me, embracing the knight's free hand and forearm to keep him close. I slipped the squid-skull mask back on over my head, for whatever protection it might offer in the dark.

"Oh, bravo!" Saldis gave me a little round of applause. I don't think she was being sarcastic. "Very fetching."

"I feel like I'm at a rave," I sighed, blushing with the absurdity of how I must have looked, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "Not that I've ever been to a rave. Maybe I should ask Raine to take me to one, I'd be very popular like this."

"You don't sound very happy about it, Lady Morell."

"Never mind." I stomped past her, leading the knight. "The palace is on the other side of this, you're certain?"

“Quite certain. And past the lake. A short little jaunt, nothing really.”

“And you can’t just slap a memory into me again, have me teleport?”

Saldis drew in a breath between her teeth. “Oh, we’re not in enough danger for that. Not something I want to do more than once. Might have emotional repercussions for you.”

I sighed. “Right. Are we going, then?”

Saldis looked up at the wall of darkness. For a moment she didn’t say anything. I turned to her, expecting a sarcastic comment on her lips, but found instead a strangely contemplative and melancholic look in her eyes, distant and far-away as she stared into the dark. For just a moment, she seemed as old as she must have been.

“Well,” she sighed. “I don’t suppose I’ll be coming back this way soon. Perhaps it’s time I stopped being a pure scholar for a little while.”

“What were you, before?”

Saldis smiled, sharp and dangerous and full of pleasure. “A terror.”

An involuntary shiver went down my spine. I’d spent enough time around real killers and monsters to identify a genuine boast.

“Well, little ones,” Saldis said to the rats in her lap, stroking their heads with her thumbs. “It’s time for a bit of a longer sleep, yes? Nothing to worry about, we’ll be out the other side in no time, and I’m sure your brother will catch up with you soon.”

I glanced back at the forest-knight. “Is it alright for me to take the knight through this?”

“Him?” Saldis ran her eyes up and down the knight. “Oh, certainly. Just have him stay close. Would be such a terrible shame to leave him behind, after all.” She winked at the knight, then licked her lips and wiggled her eyebrows too. “I do so adore the strong and silent type.”

“Saldis, he’s not even humanoid,” I huffed. “The occupant of this armour is a tentacle blob. A dutiful, devoted, sweet tentacle blob,” I added quickly. “The armour is just a shell, he’s like a mollusk inside there.”

Saldis frowned at me like I was saying something mildly offensive. "So? I don't discriminate. Don't be a bigot, Lady Morell, it doesn't become you."

"That's not— I mean— oh, fine, never mind."

"Quite right," Saldis said, giving me an awkward side-eye.

"Forget I said anything. Let's just go."

"Of course," she said. The grey blocks of her sphere-machine began to close up again, sealing her and her pair of rats inside. "It's a straight shot to the way out, but it can be a long walk, so I'll lead. If we run into trouble, I won't be able to open up, so keep your rainbows flashing."

I nodded, trying to quiet the fluttering nerves in my belly. Saldis shot me a wink as the front of her machine flowed shut.

As soon as she was sealed inside, the machine resumed trundling toward the vast wooden archway and the thick, cloying darkness within. I swallowed past a growing lump in my throat and forced myself to pick up my feet and follow her, step by shaking step, guiding the knight along behind me.

The archway loomed tall as we approached. Darkness lurked inside, a wall of a stale air. I felt so very small. What a paradox; I had plunged into the abyss, a truly infinite space, and we were currently in the Library of Carcosa, a place so vast the human mind had trouble dealing with it, but here I was, afraid of the dark.

I glanced up as we passed below the wooden archway. Letters as long as I was tall were inscribed on the wood itself, in some long-forgotten or non-human language, an angular alphabet of spikes and spines. I couldn't read a word of it.

Beyond the letters, leaning down from the floor above, a small group of squid-faced librarians were watching us leave.

I raised a tentacle to wave to them, but none waved in return. The gesture made my rainbow-light waver in the darkness ahead, pushing the black depths back inch by inch. Saldis crossed the threshold first and the gloom swallowed her grey sphere. I followed, hand-in-tentacle with my knight, wrapped in my protective bubble of colour and light as the darkness closed in tight.

Darkness.

Complete and total. Not a mote, not a flicker, not a pinprick of light in the void. Darker than the most overcast night on Earth, darker than a mineshaft miles underground, darker than even the abyss. At least out in the abyss the membrane served as a surface, filtering the light of reality to the upper reaches, no matter how crushing the black depths down on the ocean floor; at least out there other creatures occasionally pulsed and sparkled with bioluminescence, or gathered around the heat-glow of geothermal vents, or flared in bright arcs of violence.

In the dark passageway, all suns had gone out.

There was only me, only the light of my six tentacles. The gentle rainbow illumination maintained a soap bubble of fragile light, just enough to see a metre or two of the polished oaken floorboards in every direction, just enough to keep the knight safe as he stuck close to my back, just enough to pick out the rear of Saldis' sphere as it crept along in front of me.

If this place had walls or a ceiling, they were too far away for sight. Once, I glanced back, past the knight, expecting to see the wooden archway and the distant glow of the library — but the archway had been swallowed by the dark.

No books littered the floor. No dust lay on the tessellated boards. Saldis' sphere rolled along, but made no sound. Neither did my own footsteps.

We made it perhaps twenty minutes before I started to have a panic attack.

I wasn't afraid of the dark. Even as a small child, it hadn't bothered me much — the world is very different when you have a twin whose hand you can always hold in dark places. Maisie and I would always wake the other up if we had to use the toilet in the middle of the night, we'd go together, because nothing and nobody could harm us together. I had one particularly delightful memory — which I'd managed to finally re-embrace, those last six months — of when our parents had taken us out for a walk in the woods a little too late in the day, and we'd both grown nervous and jumpy as the sun had begun to set, casting skeletal shadows through the trees. Of course, we'd been no more than five minutes walk from the car, in the middle of a well-maintained public park, shepherded by our

parents, but a little girl's mind sometimes doesn't take those factors into account. Maisie and I had each wriggled off a glove — her left, my right — and held hands, skin to skin, walking side by side with the sort of solemn seriousness that only children can. What is there to be afraid of in the dark when there's two of you?

After Wonderland, there was plenty. I had worse things to be afraid of.

But this was no mere darkness.

As we walked deeper into the passageway leading out of the library, the darkness seemed to thicken around the edges of my fragile bubble of rainbow light. In my peripheral vision I saw the shadows press inward, shaving off the edges of my rainbows, as if testing the resistance of my illumination — but the optical illusion always passed whenever I looked directly at it. I was certain there were silent things moving just beyond the range of my light, vast presences and awarenesses in the black depths, always parting and slithering away before the weak lamps of my tentacles so that I would never see them.

The silence was unbearable. All I could hear was the pounding of my own heart and the hissing of my own breath. As the minutes stretched longer and longer, I began to hear the pump of my own blood in my veins, the tiny gurgles in my stomach, the fluid inside my inner ear, the creak of my muscles and tendons.

My heart hammered faster and faster and cold sweat ran down my back and a weight began to settle on my chest; there was nowhere to turn, no light to be seen, no end to the dark.

We walked through a void. If I turned left or right and lost my way, I might walk forever.

“Sal— Saldis!” I hissed at the rear of her sphere-machine. “Saldis, I need to ...”

To what? All I could do was keep walking. The knight's hand in my tentacle was cold comfort, but at least he was here with me. I sucked air through a closing throat and hugged myself with a tentacle, drawing my hoodie tighter as if I could shelter from the dark. I eased a control rod out of my bioreactor and turned my tentacles brighter, but it didn't seem to make any difference to the darkness, did not expand my refuge of light.

The panic attack did not pass, but sapped my energy and my willpower, made me want to curl up and hide. My feet began to drag and my pace slowed as I worked harder and harder just to breathe.

Then, for just a heartbeat, a thin band of gloom separated me from the rear of Saldis' sphere.

The separation lasted less than a second as I picked up my pace, my blood curdling at the prospect of being left behind. The rear of the grey sphere floated back out of the darkness as I caught up — but suddenly the rainbow illumination at the front of my bubble was swallowed by shadows.

I slammed to a stop as if I'd been about to run off a cliff, the knight stopping with me.

My rainbow bubble was cut off by a straight line of darkness. I took a step back and the illumination returned, like an obstacle had been removed from the front of a torch. It was a wall of darkness, literally, a straight line blocking my way.

Somehow, I could still see the rear of Saldis' machine, trundling slowly away from me, vanishing into the void.

"Saldis!" I hissed, my voice a scratchy, panicked mess as my chest felt like it was collapsing. "Saldis, stop!"

I slammed a full control rod's length out of my bioreactor and flooded my tentacles with bioluminescence, but that didn't help, the wall of darkness did not permit illumination. Saldis' sphere-machine was finally swallowed by the gloom ahead, leaving me behind.

"Saldis?" I whispered.

She wasn't coming back.

All around me, the darkness seemed to press in, and this time the effect did not stop when I stared at the edge of my rainbow-light. My bubble of light shrank, rainbow strobing bioluminescence compacted, inch by inch. The knight drew in closer too, huddling inside the safe zone created by my tentacles.

"Oh that's a stupid trick," I hissed out at the dark, trying to turn terror into anger even as I was panting and shaking. "How could I possibly see the back of Saldis' machine if light doesn't cross this barrier? I'm not stupid. That's impossible."

But the darkness wasn't listening. Hastur may have been moved by defiance and courage, but darkness doesn't care.

My sphere of safety drew smaller and smaller, no matter how much energy I poured into my tentacles, no matter that I made them blaze until they itched and burned and ached with the effort. The darkness drew in so tight that I started to hunch, that any moment the knight would be swallowed first, and I would follow soon after.

"All right," I hissed, about to break, terrified out of my mind, clinging to the knight. "All right. You want light? You want to see how much light I can make? Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you."

I jammed my hands down into my own deep, unknowable darkness, into the Eye's lessons, dredging them from the toxic black tar which stained my soul.

And I found a dozen ways to make an awful lot of light.

any mortal thing – 14.14

Darkness closed its jaws around me as I scrambled to make light.

The Eye's lessons presented a dozen methods to bend physics to my will, or break it entirely, or apply it in ways that only worked Outside, far from the watchful constraints of Earth's reality. I might combust the air itself with an infinite gout of flame, or summon a gigantic arc of electrical discharge, or gather a handful of hydrogen atoms and squeeze them together until their protons began to fuse. Other methods had no Earthly analogue. The Eye's lessons whispered of ways to light my skin itself with the power of a star, to blaze hot without fire, to cut through darkness with laser and microwave to cook the shadows themselves until they might illuminate the whole planet with the pyre of their death.

But choice was almost my undoing.

Rummaging through the equations already ate up a precious second – I couldn't do this at the speed of thought, it was all so new and experimental. I keened through clenched teeth as I exposed myself to the toxic corrosion of the Eye's lessons, head filled with stabbing pain, stomach clenched in desperate desire to purge a sickness from my body. The process took a toll of both pain and time; the former I could endure, the latter I had little left to spend.

My bubble of rainbow bioluminescence was shrinking, my tentacles a flickering ember against the dark, my walls breached and overtopped by a siege of shadows. The forest-knight and I had less than a metre of refuge left. I pressed myself close to his side so that I wouldn't lose him. Blackness lapped closer and closer to my toes and began to touch the edge of the knight's other arm.

I threw away another half-second to examine and discard seven, then eight, then nine ways of making light. The hyperdimensional details of each one made me retch and choke.

"None of these will—" I babbled in panic, bloody spittle on my lips.

The hyperdimensional mathematics were undeniable: none of these methods could overcome the dark.

All of them would make light, yes, all of them functioned, but that wasn't the problem. The Eye's teaching was accurate and true, it had left me no traps, held nothing back. That very same fullness of instruction informed me that all these methods would fall short. None of them would pierce *this* darkness.

My six tentacles were already overheating, burning and itching as I poured energy into them in a vain effort to flood the air with bioluminescence. I was already pouring out a torrent of light, to no avail. Fire or electricity or slamming atoms together would prove just as futile — which was lucky, because in panic I began to execute that last one before I realised it wouldn't work. I began to weave the equation which would pluck hydrogen atoms from the atmosphere, ball them up, and squeeze them hard. But I let the equation collapse in horror as I realised that light was not the solution.

That attempt cost me another two seconds, two seconds of convulsive dry heave and throbbing headache. The pain was a vice widening inside my skull, threatening to burst my brain. My nose ran with blood and my eyes flared with pain and a sticky sensation seeped from the sockets behind my squid-skull mask. I would have crumpled if it wasn't for the knight's free hand holding me up by the scruff of my neck.

No source of light would piece this darkness; a deeper principle was at work here.

The Eye's lessons, long buried but comprehensive beyond human imagining, explained this in painstaking detail — and offered an obvious solution. Darkness was the absence of light, but this darkness was the presence of absence. Absence could not be detected with human senses, not without presence with which to compare. But here it had presence, because we were Outside. The trick was to observe the absence.

My body shied away from that solution so hard that I almost choked on my own tongue.

Then, we ran out of time.

Darkness finally engulfed the forest-knight's opposite side, swallowing his elbow and part of his forearm, despite his efforts to stay within the contracting bubble of safety. A sound broke the silence of the dark passageway — a rustle like petals of dead flesh

drawn over metal, a brushing and a scraping like steel wool on stone, repeated and overlapping itself like a broken audio program trying to play the same note a thousand times. It was so soft, so gentle, so subtle that if one was not sunk deep in the darkness, one might doubt it was a real sound at all.

The dark touched the toes of my left trainer, pressing in so tight that my tentacles themselves would soon fall into shadow. And then, as I was still trying to process the Eye's solution, darkness flowed over my left forearm.

A sensation like a thousand dry tongues slithered over my exposed hand.

My skin crawled with revulsion, my blood went cold, and I think I screamed. It was as if every inch of darkness contained infinite layers of feelers, running over my flesh and probing at the sleeve of my hoodie, stroking me with the blunt underside of a billion claws.

Implications be damned, I ran headfirst into the Eye's lesson rather than be swallowed by that.

Back in Lozzie's dream-dimension this principle had come easy, but accepting it in the flesh was a leap I'd been unwilling to take, even if only subconsciously. I'd spent weeks pushing myself closer and closer to this edge, but here it was at last, undeniable and inevitable. I had to do it quick and dirty, not the full transformation I'd achieved in the dream. This was not going to be beautiful or elegant or euphoric. Mostly it was going to hurt.

I opened my eyes as wide as I could, ignoring the blood which made my eyelids stick together, and then made tiny adjustments to my eyes with pneuma-somatic flesh. I added lenses and layers that existed in both the physical and the metaphysical; I flooded new mucus membranes with fluids that had no place in the human body; I catalysed processes inside my cone and rod cells, to make them do more than just capture light.

Agony screamed through my optic nerve and extraocular muscles, like a serrated icepick to my face. I span up an equation that made me gibber and shake and bleed from my hair follicles.

I stared out into the darkness, peeled back a set of eyelids I'd had closed all my life — and I observed.

For a split second I saw the presence of absence. I understood, in

both the molecular and metaphysical sense. And I knew how to make it go away.

With my sight — with hyperdimensional mathematics expressed through the power of seeing and knowing — I reached out and gathered together that handful of hydrogen atoms I'd been about to crush earlier. I made sure this would work, that this version of the equation would negate absence, piling on layers of metaphysics that only the Eye would have understood. I crushed that ball of atoms tight, overcoming the nuclear forces not with sheer strength but with the inevitability of editing reality. I picked a pair of atoms, aimed them at each other, and slammed them together. Protons fused.

A pinprick of light shattered the darkness.

Achingly bright, hot enough to burn out my human retina, and about to grow, to expand, to wash clean not only the darkness but everything it touched.

It was only then I realised I'd made a huge mistake. This was it, this was where I was going to die, consumed by nuclear fire that I'd summoned not in panic, but in pure superiority. In arrogance. In imitation of my teacher.

I'd made myself a little bit more like the Eye, and in the process I'd lost track of what I was doing. Observation is a heady drug.

My ocular adjustments began to collapse, my mouth hinged open to scream, and my regrets drowned me — Lizzie would be stuck Outside forever, Evelyn and Raine would never know what had become of me, and Maisie would wither away to nothing, never to see home again.

A small, pale, blood-stained hand emerged from the darkness and smothered the atomic spark.

Yellow light bloomed across the tessellated floorboards, the colour of a shaded desk lamp on a stormy night, a candle flicker in a ship's cabin among the gloaming waves, wan flowers beneath winter sun. Yellow chased away the darkness, giving me and the forest-knight eight feet of breathing room in every direction. Yellow cradled me as I sagged and crumpled and fell to my hands and knees. I yanked the squid-skull mask off my head and let it roll across the floor, retching and twitching and spitting bile from quivering lips. I barely

resisted a tidal wave of dysphoric urge to claw at the burning sensation behind my eyes as the pneuma-somatic additions turned to ash, as my optic nerve reacted like a torn muscle, as normal sight wavered in and out, familiar but horribly alien and wrong and not what I was meant to see.

For a few moments I thought my vision was forever ruined — a strange cocktail of fear and delight, that I might be stuck like this. But yellow illumination struggled to soothe my sight, to bring me back from the brink of endless blur. Normal vision throbbed back like an aching tooth. I stayed there on my hands and knees, panting and shaking with the aftershock of becoming too much like my adoptive Outsider parent.

A sigh of shaking relief floated through the air.

“Oh, Heather,” somebody said in my own voice, with a tremble of sickeningly earnest concern.

I looked up from the floor and found a blood-drenched nightmare staring back.

“Sevens,” I said.

She was the source of the sombre yellow light. It glowed from her like a shrouded beacon on a lonely hill. The darkness appeared skittish and reluctant to intrude.

She was clothed in my musculature and wearing my face again, dressed like me but modified to attend a rave I would never enjoy. Blonde highlights graced my plain hair, light-up shoes flashed on the end of my feet, rainbow tights wrapped my scrawny legs, a white and pink belt looped around my waist, and three finger-strokes of yellow paint marked my cheek — her cheek.

But she was also covered in blood. Her nose ran with crimson, eyes gummed with scarlet, mess all over her face, cut through with pink-froth tear-tracks from her eyes. Even her hairline showed a sticky residue. Her own blood — my blood — was smeared down the front of her pink hoodie and rubbed into the sleeves in great long streaks. Her hands were filthy with bloodstains too, even the fist she was holding out in front of herself to contain the nuclear reaction I’d unwittingly sparked. Her clothes were stuck to her with cold sweat, rumpled and dishevelled. She’d mirrored my six tentacles as well, six slender, graceful, rainbow-strobing limbs emerging from her

flanks, through the fabric of the hoodie. An abyssal creature soaked in blood, exhausted and harried at the end of her rope.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, voice trembling, brow creased with tearful worry. “I should have gotten over myself sooner. Are you hurt?”

My eyes in her face were dark and hollow, the sockets flowering with strange bruises; my face on her soul was grey with stress.

I stared at her for a groggy moment before I realised she was mirroring me exactly, blood and bruises and all, despite the different clothes.

“ ... do I really look that awful?” I croaked.

“I’m sorry?” Sevens boggled at me with my own gormless expression, then glanced down at herself, spluttering with embarrassment. “Oh, um, well, not ... it’s not that bad.”

“I look barely human,” I mumbled, then groaned at the ache in my eyes as I squeezed them shut. The bruises on Sevens’ face were not for show — my eye sockets and facial muscles hurt like I’d been beaten with a rolling pin by Praem in a very bad mood.

With help from my tentacles I slowly and painfully climbed back to my feet, legs shaking and unsteady, as if I’d just run a marathon. I scrubbed my face on my hoodie, trying to clear the worst of the blood out of my eyes. Then I checked my left hand, wiggling my fingers, but it seemed none the worse for the split second descent into darkness.

The knight hadn’t fared quite so well. The darkness had not actually breached his suit of armour, but his left vambrace was covered in a swirl of tiny scratches where it had been submerged in the black. He’d only been touched for a second or two longer than me. I shuddered to imagine my fate if I hadn’t reacted as fast as I did.

“You okay?” I croaked to him. He turned his helmet to look at his scratched forearm, though I knew there were no sensory organs up there, the motion was all for show. He gave an unreadable nod, then dropped his axe from over his shoulder to hold it ready in both hands, facing out into the dark, as if he could fight absence itself.

“Wouldn’t bother if I were you,” I muttered to him. “But thanks.”

As I peeled my sweat-soaked t-shirt from the skin of my back, I realised my tentacles were stuck beneath some of my clothes, a new

and confusing sensation. How had I gotten that badly tangled up? I rolled my shoulders and went to adjust my hoodie — but found myself with a handful of skin-warm yellow cloak.

Soft as silk, thick as hide, warm as an hour in the sun, the yellow of fresh butter and ripe lemon.

“... what? I can see it. I can touch it now,” I said. I manoeuvred my tentacles out from beneath the cloak, so it would stop getting in the way.

“Of course you can,” Sevens said, with a strange crack in her imitation of my voice. “You’re in my light.”

Normally I wouldn’t describe the experience of almost getting eaten by sentient, living darkness as *lucky*, but right then the aftershock of pure terror overrode any thoughts of romantic embarrassment. I was more than capable of looking Seven-Shades-of-Drug-Rave right in the eye.

“Thank you,” I croaked, nodding weakly at where her yellow blessing had pushed back the darkness.

“Heather, what were you doing?” She gestured with her closed fist, eyes filled with horror. Was that just mimicry of my subconscious, I wondered, or was Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight appalled at what I had been about to do?

I squeezed my eyes shut, winced at the pain, and took a moment to dig for energy reserves. Luckily, my bioreactor seemed none the worse for wear, still thrumming along in my belly.

“Nearly blowing myself up, apparently,” I said.

“You wouldn’t have taken the library with you,” Sevens said, my own tone of exasperation making me want to grit my teeth, “but you would have burned yourself to a crisp. You were unprepared! Heather, what were you thinking!?”

“There was not a lot of thinking involved. Mostly I was trying to not get eaten.”

Sevens shook her head, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, speechless, the very picture of how I might look at Raine in the aftermath of some madcap plan. She let out a humourless laugh, devoid of joy.

“You never cease to amaze me, Heather,” Sevens said in my own

voice, trembling with affection. She was crying softly, swallowing and blinking in a failing effort to hold back the waterworks. "I'm so sorry, I should have been here sooner, I shouldn't have let that idiotic crone drag you in here. I owe you more than that, I ... " She trailed off, furiously scrubbing her eyes on her sleeve. Goodness, did I really look that pathetic?

A faint fluttering threatened inside my chest. I had to glance back out at the darkness. Moving my eyes made them ache.

I thought about all the things I might say to Sevens, the question I ought to ask, and the fluttering got worse. Instead, I cleared my throat, awkward and thick.

"Sevens, can you get me home?"

Her expression was like an arrow through my chest — not the ugly twist of pain, but a hollow look of utter failure.

"... no," she said, struggling with tears again. "Of course not. Do you think I would have left you stranded if I could help? Do you really think so little of me?"

"I ... " I sighed heavily, beyond exasperated, unprepared for this. "I don't really know you, Sevens. Even now I'm talking to a mask, aren't I? All I know is your fascination with me. And that you like to watch."

She sobbed, once, exactly like me. I did not find it endearing — it hurt.

"Okay, okay," I hurried to add, stumbling over my words, gesturing a surrender with one hand and one tentacle. "That's not fair, that's not fair. You've helped me, multiple times. Very seriously. I'm sorry, I didn't really mean that, I just ... I thought you were avoiding me, earlier. Running away when I needed your help, when you might be able to get me out of here, or help me find Lozzie. I'm sorry."

Sevens controlled her sobbing and stared at me again. "Do you mean that?"

"... yes, I do." Not a lie, by only just. "You have helped me, a lot."

She nodded slowly and wiped her tears on her sleeve, but that only served to smear the blood around her face. She still sniffed a bit, but at least she'd stopped crying. Two of her tentacles, imitations of

my own rainbow-strobing beauties, reached out toward me, hesitant and halting, as if asking to hold my hand.

I tilted my head with an exasperated look, a silent *really?*

She pulled a shaking smile, tugging at my heartstrings. It was like looking in a mirror and it made me equal parts nauseous and heartsick.

“Sevens, is this you crying?” I asked. “Or is this just you imitating me? Are these crocodile tears?”

She hesitated for a long moment, hollow and defeated, then said, “... I don’t know anymore.”

I relented with a sigh and wrapped one of my own tentacle-tips around hers, squeezing gently. She squeezed back.

I couldn’t say no, could I? I needed her.

“Thank you for saving me,” I repeated, somewhat stiff and rote, more to soothe my own guilt at speaking so harshly to her than to make plain my gratitude. “Nothing I could do was going to work, nothing until ... well.” I nodded at her closed fist. “And you really can’t get me home? You can’t even try? Or find Lozzie for me?”

Sevens took a deep and steadying breath, coming back from the brink of weeping. “I’m sorry, Heather, but I can’t get you back to Earth.” She stepped a little closer and glanced at her closed fist, then opened it as casually as casting away a mote of dust. The nuclear reaction I’d started was nowhere to be seen. “I tried, I tried to find a way back for you, but that horrible old crone is right — those dead hands are true vengeance. I can pass by them, even clad in your mask, because it is not me they want, it is you. They are too real to take to the stage, they are beyond my jurisdiction. Even if they weren’t, they are not merely a mage’s tattered soul. They borrow the strength of another.”

“The Eye?”

Sevens-as-Distraught-Me nodded.

“Then it really must be Alexander,” I muttered, flaring inside with real anger. “Channelling the power of his final deal. Why can’t mages just stay dead? What did I commit murder for?”

“For your friends.” Sevens smiled with pained affection and it made

my stomach curdle and my heart flutter both at once. That look on my own face, directed at me, was too much. I was a horrible little gremlin, too capable of sugar-sweetness for my own good, but rotten inside.

“By ‘that horrible old crone’, I take it you were referring to Saldis?” I asked.

“Yes. I wish you weren’t following her around.”

“She’s helped so far,” I said, feeling oddly defensive. “Aren’t you much, much older than her, anyway?”

Sevens gave me a little frown. “By human standards, perhaps, yes. By mine? Well ...” She shrugged. “Saldis is ... I don’t like her. She’s a nuisance audience.”

“I’ll put up with quite a lot of nuisance right now if it’ll get me home. I assume you know we’re trying to reach your father. Could he get me back home?”

Sevens’ face collapsed into a theatrical parody of anxiety, me at my absolute worst and most dramatic. She frowned and bit her lip, cringing as if from an imagined blow. Her exhausted eyes lost what little shine remained in them, replaced by the manic energy of desperate panic.

“Oh, please don’t, Heather, please don’t,” she pleaded. “He won’t understand what I’ve done.” Her eyes flickered down to the yellow cloak about my shoulders. “This is not a confrontation I can let you walk into.”

“I already told him, as Ha—” I sighed. “As that yellow blob.”

“I know, I know—”

“I told him what for. I threatened him, Sevens. I think it even impressed him a little bit.”

Sevens blinked at me, shocked. “You ... you did what?”

“I told him to move aside or fight me. Didn’t you see?”

“I was ... I was busy, I was examining the hands. I did not see that.” Sevens stepped even closer to me, my eyes in her face wide and bloodshot with near-hysteria. “But it makes no difference. Heather, you do not know what you are speaking of. My father is the King in Yellow. He can be so silly sometimes, but he is not like me. You are

walking into a terror that has crushed generals and kings, emperors and popes. I cannot protect you from my own father.”

“Well it’s a good thing I’m none of those things,” I huffed. “I’m just a lowly university student. Can he get me home or not?”

“... probably.” Sevens glanced away, biting her lip so hard it must have drawn blood, though it was hard to tell amongst the smeared mess of half-dried gore on her face. “But he won’t understand why you’re wearing that.”

I didn’t have to ask what she meant. I tugged the yellow cloak tighter, instinctively taking refuge inside it despite the emotional ambiguity. It was so warm, like it had come straight from the dryer, inviting me to bury my face in the sun-kissed fabric. Even right then, exhausted and bloody and having one of the most paradoxical conversations of my life, I could quite happily have wrapped myself in the cloak, laid down, and slept like a baby.

“Won’t understand?” I echoed. “Or won’t accept?”

Sevens’ eyes flickered back to me, filled with fear. How had Raine ever seen anything attractive in me if this was what I looked like when afraid? I was ugly and pitiful, nothing to be proud of.

Before she could answer, I lost my nerve. I huffed and gestured at the darkness lurking beyond Sevens’ bastion of light. We still stood in a void of terror, beneath a crushing pressure that could rush back in at any moment and drown us both. “I cannot believe we’re doing this here. In the middle of this nightmare. This is not the place for a heart-to-heart, Sevens. Can’t we ... if we have to talk about this ... isn’t there somewhere—”

“We could go to my room, in the palace,” she said in a voice of spun-glass fragility.

I almost choked. “Your ... room?”

She flushed bright red, unable to meet my eyes. “T-that is an inappropriate suggestion, I apologise, I retract the invitation. T-though if you want to ... ”

“Uh, um ... not ... yet,” I managed. I glanced at the forest-knight too, embarrassed that he was being subjected to overhearing all of this, but he didn’t seem to care.

Sevens nodded with mortified relief. “You’re perfectly safe now,

regardless. This light cannot fail.”

“What is it, anyway?” I asked quickly, just to change the subject, to get away from her implication. “Normal light wouldn’t do the trick, I figured out that much.”

“It’s just me, being myself,” she said. “The library is intended for family only, and approved guests, though those rules have been flouted for longer than they were ever enforced. Most visitors don’t use the physical entrance.” She laughed softly, a forced sound, me trying to make light of a bad situation.

“Obviously,” I agreed.

“You merely lack the proper permissions. My fault, I am sorry. I never was one for stamping forms in triplicate and the like. Well, you *lacked* the permissions. Now I’ve made them ... official.” She swallowed with self-conscious embarrassment as she gestured at my yellow cloak, her cloak, the piece of herself she’d given to me. “I could leave you here in the dark, if you ... if you want, if you tell me you want me to leave. I’ll go, if you want. You would be properly marked as allowed, now that I’ve made it clear.” She shot a glance out at the darkness, a tiny, delicate frown, like me frowning at Raine saying something inappropriate, faintly irritated at the dark.

“No, no, you can ... you can come with us,” I said, slowly, trying not to think about what exactly she had made ‘official’. I glanced over my shoulder at where the wall of impenetrable darkness had barred my way. Sevens’ light had cut a hole through it, clearing our path. “We should catch up with Saldis, she’ll be wondering where I’ve—” I turned back “—gotten ... to ... ”

Sevens, wearing my face, looked so pitiful and abandoned. She looked how I might look in the wake of Raine breaking up with me. A thought so terrible I could not acknowledge the comparison. My heart wrenched itself inside my chest.

“I would go with you,” she murmured. “I would not let you face any corner of my home without me.”

Then she hiccuped. Like a frog with something stuck in its throat. Exactly like me.

To my everlasting embarrassment, I hiccuped too, then huffed and scowled.

“Sevens, I can’t do this talking to myself thing. Please, can’t you, I don’t know, chose somebody else?”

“Can’t you find any love for yourself?”

“It’s like talking to Maisie. It’s grotesque.”

Sevens nodded once, awkward and self-conscious — my awkwardness, my self-consciousness — and then as she raised her head, she ceased to be me.

The optical transition made me flinch in shock. Suddenly, Sevens was a whole head taller, built like an athlete, dressed in leather jacket and curb-stomping boots. Gone were the tentacles and the blood and the bruises, the lank hair and the hollow eyes, all replaced with a rakish grin.

“Hey,” said Seven-Shades-of-Raine. “Better?”

“Oh, no. Absolutely not.” I shook my head, hands up in surrender, scared at the speed of my private reaction — the sound of Raine’s voice had instantly put me at ease, unlocked whole groups of tensed muscles, made me sigh with relief just to see her. But it wasn’t her, not really. “You cannot be Raine. You cannot be her! That’s underhanded. That’s cheating.”

Seven-Raine shrugged, smiling with a perfect simulation of Raine’s blazing confidence. “My bad.” She pointed a pair of finger-guns at me. “Can’t fault me for trying though, yeah?”

“Yes. Yes I bloody well can. Stop it. Right now.”

“You’re the boss.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight ran Raine’s hand through Raine’s artfully messy hair; when she finished, she had gained another two feet of height, a hundred pounds of muscle, and teeth to shame a great white shark.

“Shaman,” Seven-Shades-of-Seven-Feet-Plus purred in Zheng’s voice.

That deep, throaty, stone-on-stone rumble made my bowels clench with a unique cocktail of thrill. Sevens had chosen Zheng at her most dangerous, dressed in jeans and boots and a long coat and nothing else, showing off her iron-hard abdominal muscles and the proud curve of her chest, her red-chocolate skin covered with a

dense mass of black tattoos, punctuated by the missing patches and circles I'd erased when I'd freed her.

She grinned and showed all her teeth. I flinched, my tentacles drawing back into a defensive ball.

"Sevens!" I hissed. "You can't just cycle through other people who are in love with me!"

"Can't I?" she rumbled, an exact replica of Zheng's understated, proud defiance. She even flexed her fingers and rolled her neck, limbering up for a fight.

"Stop it!"

Seven-Shades-of-Muscular-Demon shrugged. "Another, then."

And in the blink of an eye she lost her height, her muscle, and her confidence. Gripping a walking stick, blonde hair gathered into a messy ponytail, hunched shoulders wrapped in an oversized cream sweater, Evelyn stared back at me, most unimpressed.

The effect was uncanny, somehow more accurate than either Raine or Zheng. Perhaps it was the little details of mannerism, the clench of her fingers on the handle of her walking stick, the sour twist to her lips, the bags under her eyes.

"Oh, come on," I sighed. "Evelyn? That's just ridiculous, she doesn't —"

"Ridiculous?" spat Seven-Shades-of-Saye, Evelyn's voice dripping with scorn, oddly comforting in this Outside place. "You trample feelings without even realising you're doing it, Heather."

"Sevens, I'm not ignoring your feelings, I—"

"Did it from day one." Evelyn went on. "How can you get close to me, force me to open up, without expecting this to happen? This is your responsibility. I'd been wrapped up tight and secure for years, surviving. But oh no, no, right from the word go you were only into Raine. Healthy and hale, strong and fit, bench pressing you into the fucking bed. And look at me." She smacked her prosthetic leg through her skirt with her walking stick, a hollow sound echoing off into the darkness. "How could I ever compete with that? Evelyn Saye, twisted little cripple, pining after things she doesn't deserve. I should have put you from my mind, but you're always there, being so fucking right and sweet and brave," she spat those words, made

them foul. "And then to add insult to injury, you pushed me and Twil together when neither of us was ready."

Faint tears stained Evelyn's cheeks, angry and repressed.

I stared at Seven-Shades-of-Unrequited-Love, mouth open, stomach fallen through the floor, and had to remind myself very carefully that she was not actually Evelyn.

"No," I said slowly. "No, go back to being me."

Seven-Saye snorted with derision, turned her face away, and reverted to a mirror image of myself, short and scrawny and covered in blood. Sevens omitted the fanciful additions of blonde highlights, stripy tights, and face paint. She even didn't bother mimicking my tentacles, but stood as a simple mirror of me at my worst, hollow-eyed and dirty and pathetic. Me without my abyssal side.

"Sorry," she murmured.

I was still reeling, hands up in stunned surrender. "Was that ... you? Or was that Eevee? How much of that was Eevee?"

She shrugged. "Not sure."

"... okay. All right." I shook my head, trying to recover, slipping on my emotional footing. I glanced to the forest-knight for support, but he wasn't even paying attention. Lesbian relationship problems were a bit far out of his wheelhouse. "Okay, let's take everything that just implied about Evelyn and put it firmly to one side, because I cannot deal with that right now, thank you very much."

"Yes. Sorry. I was getting a little off track."

With an emotional effort only possible under such strained conditions, I did exactly as I suggested; I put that all away in a box, perhaps never to be opened.

"Why are you only crying when you're me?" I asked, grabbing onto any handhold to get me away from those thoughts. "Is that you, or me? Do you have any real interiority of your own, Sevens?"

Seven-Shades-of-Morell chewed her lip. "What's the difference? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

Quoting Shakespeare at me; I did that to other people. It was insufferable.

“Don’t you have a ... a you? A favourite avatar, a favourite face, somebody I can talk to and it’ll just be you?”

“No!” Sevens whined. “You’ve already forced me onto the stage, I cannot stand here as myself. There is no me to join you on the boards, Heather.” She sighed heavily, and I knew from the experience of my own face in the mirror that she was struggling to not start crying. She’d found my own battered pride and was hanging onto it for dear life. She hiccuped, loudly. “I’m so confused.”

A lump formed in my throat. I took a handful of the yellow cloak again, and did my best not to look away from Sevens as I asked, “Why am I wearing this?”

“You were going to die,” she told me. “I had no choice but to give you part of myself. You do this same thing all the time, Heather. You make decisions, split second decisions for the good of your friends, for their lives, their survival, during which you carve off pieces of your own heart. You do what has to be done. I did the same, because your mask has become affixed to my face.”

That sent a steel barb through my heart, but I kept going. “And it is a marriage proposal?”

Sevens sighed, flopping her arms against her copy of my hoodie, casting her eyes skyward into the dark. “Technically, yes. It’s traditional.”

“Did you mean it as such?”

She shrugged with her hands and pulled a very sad smile. “Do you know you can trick the brain by smiling, even when you don’t feel happy? Making the expression causes a sort of reverse feedback loop, causes your brain to release the relevant chemicals. It’s the same if you stand like a superhero. Ever heard of that?” Sevens puffed out my chest and put her balled fists on her hips, striking a pose that looked utterly wrong for me. “Like this. Hold it for a few minutes and it’ll make you feel more confident. It reverses cause and effect.”

“You’re not a human being, Sevens. You’re an Outsider god-thing, you don’t have brain chemicals to trick with feedback. And the power pose phenomenon isn’t true, anyway.”

Sevens’ superhero pose collapsed back into my usual slump.

"Sometimes, acting stops being acting, is that so difficult to believe? The cloak is not just a symbol, Heather. I gave you a piece of myself. It has metaphysical weight. I did it to save you, I did what you would do, but that's made it real."

"So, you really are in love with me?" I swallowed and found my throat dry, my hands clammy, my stomach fluttering.

"... I don't know," Sevens said, face twisting as she struggled not to start crying again, her voice quivering. "How could I be? I am only a question. You have the answers, how could I be part of them? This isn't what I'm supposed to be, it feels wrong. It's all wrong, Heather. You've made me all wrong and now I don't know what I am anymore."

"I ... I'm sorry, Sevens, I don't know how to process any of this."

"I don't seriously expect you to actually marry me," she said quickly, embarrassed and mortified; I couldn't help but think she didn't deserve to be embarrassed at such feelings, whatever she was. "We'll have to explain to my father, now that he's already seen you. But I still feel this, whatever happens, whatever he says, whatever you say to me. Whatever you decide."

I cast about for an emotional handhold. "Sevens, there's something I don't understand. Why haven't I seen you since you gave me the cloak? Why not just come talk to me?"

"I am ... not meant to be a player, strutting upon the stage. It changes everything. How can I direct when I am involved? It reduces me to a mere voyeur. To direct players is one thing, it is what I am made for, it is my essence. But to watch those who I have become a part of?" She shook head. "It makes me filthy. I am disgusted with myself."

She held her line against the tears, but only just.

I tried very hard in that moment to keep in mind what Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight actually was, behind her imitated flesh and the soft yellow light and the desolate emotion on my mirrored face. She was an Outsider thing, not a human being, a godlike shard of some alien principle; I'd seen behind her curtain, laid my abyssal senses on the beautiful truth of her real self, the butterscotch fronds and sunlight ripples of her true body, which existed in a way I ached to be.

That creature had fallen in love with me and could not process those emotions back down to a human scale. The thought made my head swim and my stomach flutter.

Or, she was acting.

Either way, I needed her on my side. I hated what I was about to do.

Slowly, hesitantly, worried that I was making a mistake, I opened my hands, then my arms, caught between a warding-off gesture and an invitation. Sevens stared, awestruck and terrified.

“This is not an answer,” I managed to say. “I don’t know how to deal with this, I don’t know if I can accept anything from you, and we can’t do this here and now. But you are not wrong, you’re not disgusting, you’re just feeling things. Do you want a hug?”

Sevens nodded, fighting to stop her face from collapsing into tears. She took a few shuffling steps, then all but blundered into me, pressing her face to my shoulder as she held back dry sobs. Awkwardly, but not without a certain level of affection, I put my arms around her shoulders and wrapped a tentacle around her waist. My shoulders, my waist, exactly the same height as myself. My scent, my warmth, all a copy. A falsehood. But was the real core, inside the mask?

Hugging myself was too cruel. It was like hugging Maisie. I tried not to think about that.

“You’re not ... you’re not wrong, Sevens,” I repeated. “You’re not broken. You’re just ... in love, I suppose. That can feel very much like being broken.”

“You would know,” she murmured into my shoulder, with my own voice.

The hug went on for a minute, then two minutes, with Sevens’ weight sagging onto me, our bodies pressed together in a perfect twinned fit. I started to quietly panic; was I leading her on? Giving her hope where there was none? Did she have hope? Did I *want* her to have hope? But she wasn’t even a person — *well, no*, I corrected myself forcefully, she was a person, just not a singular person in the normal way. Most of the people in my life were not strictly human, what was one more?

But Sevens was so much more alien and other compared to Zheng or Praem or Lozzie. Or even Tenny.

A dark thought began to creep into the back of my mind. Wasn't this all too convenient? I'd been trapped by the crushing weight of the darkness, alone except for my brave knight who was as powerless as I, about to be devoured; then, soft yellow light had burst forth to save me, to pull me back from the brink. And now Sevens was wearing the form of the one person whose presence I desired more than anything else in the world, the one person to whom I would deny nothing — for it was my face she wore, but I couldn't stop thinking of my lost twin.

I didn't feel like I was standing on a stage. But would I know, if I was?

Gently, carefully, so as not to make her think that I was rejecting her outright, I peeled Sevens off me and made a gap between us, just to arms length. She gave me a fragile little smile, my own shaking face at my most vulnerable. She dabbed at her eyes with a clean corner of one sleeve, which only made her eye sockets that much bloodier.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"You're welcome. I think. Look, even if nothing comes of this, you're still ..." I paused and cleared my throat, with some discomfort. "Actually, are you my friend? You have helped me, a lot."

"If you would have me, I would be," she said.

"Well, okay," I steeled myself to say it. "You're that at the very least. It's just a bit weird when the only faces you can wear are my own, or those of my friends. This is a very surreal moment for me. I hope you understand that."

Sevens nodded, glum and low, but not crying any more.

I took a deep breath. "We still need to go see your father. The King in Yellow. If he can help me."

"He might," Sevens said, nodding seriously.

"What about finding Lozzie? Can you help me do that?"

Sevens shook her head. "My father wouldn't be able to either. She

has gone elsewhere. He does not even rule every part of Carcosa, let alone all of Outside.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Then I really do need to defeat the hands, if she’s going to be able to get home.”

“I suppose so ... ” Sevens murmured.

“What about everyone back home?” I asked with a sudden hitch in my heart. “Have you seen them, checked up on them?”

Sevens let out a shuddering sigh, a note of alarm in her widening eyes. “I ... I cannot. Not now that I’m on the stage beside you. If I leave it now ... I do not know what will happen to the role I am improvising. I ... do not wish to lose it. There is no understudy to take my place. Not now.” She swallowed, an obvious lump in her throat.

Well done, Heather, I scolded myself. *You went one step too far.*

But outwardly I nodded. “That’s okay. I understand. Well, I think I understand.”

I broke away from her at last, gently and slowly, her fingers trailing after me, and I stooped to pick up my squid-skull helmet from where it had fallen. I didn’t slip it on just yet, but instead reached out to gently touch the forest-knight on the corner of his elbow. “Sorry you had to stand there through all that. I think we’re ready to move again.”

He lowered his axe and turned toward us, awaiting our departure from this nighted realm.

“I will walk you to my father’s audience chambers,” Sevens raised her voice ever so slightly. “With me at your side, well, we will have to deal with my siblings and cousins, but I am the equal of any of them.”

“That would be helpful. Thank you.”

I screwed up my doubts and worries, pulled the warm yellow cloak tight about my shoulders, and held my hand out to her — but to my surprise, Sevens shook her head.

“I do not want that awful woman to see me like this,” she said, and I was surprised by the suddenly revealed core of quiet defiance in her voice — my voice. Is that what I sounded like when I found

courage? When I was prepared, when I was facing down the dark? I don't think she noticed, but I was speechless for a moment.

Maybe that was what Raine saw in me.

I cleared my throat. "You can be Raine if you must," I said. "I understand. Though ... don't do anything, not even hold my hand, not as her. Please."

"No, that would be grossly unfair," she said. "I could ... " She cleared her throat delicately, exactly like me broaching a very awkward suggestion. "There is no unmasked self, you understand? This will not be me. It will merely be an old mask, one that will not cry in front of strangers. It will be strange for me too, to don the guise of an intruder in your story."

"Do what you need to do, Sevens."

So I can do what I need to do. I left that part unsaid.

Sevens nodded, then turned her head sideways by only a few inches, and suddenly she wasn't me anymore.

In place of my mirror image stood a completely different person, a young woman who had no presence in my memories, not even a passing familiarity. I could say with absolute confidence that I had never seen this mask before.

She also looked exactly like I imagined a minor princess should do.

Slender and slight, an inch or two taller and perhaps a year or two older than me, Sevens' new mask had blonde hair cut ruler-straight just below a sharp chin, brushed to perfection so not a single strand stood out of place, held back with a red hair-band. A blunt fringe framed unnaturally turquoise eyes, wide and staring, not with the austerity of command, but with an unstudied intensity that marked her out as eccentric. That was a stare to unnerve daddy's visitors. A neat little nose and a small, serious mouth completed the somewhat doll-like look.

She wore a crisp white blouse with short sleeves, tucked into an ankle-length yellow skirt, and neat, sensible black shoes on her feet.

Ramrod-straight posture, hands clasped behind her back, head tilting slightly to meet my surprised gaze with those wide, staring, unsmiling eyes; if she'd raised her chin she would have radiated aristocratic arrogance, but the lack of that single mannerism kept

her firmly on my own level.

But my goodness, she was intense. I balked a little at that strange stare.

“Ready to depart?” Sevens asked. Her voice was perfect, trained, sweet but sharp. For a moment I lost my tongue.

“Uh ... um ... ”

“Remember, this is not truly me,” Sevens said. “It is merely an old mask.”

“It ... seems like you. Sort of.” I took a deep breath to settle myself. This was still Sevens, not some aristo daughter. But Sevens was an aristocrat’s daughter, that was the point. Perhaps it was because she was finally wearing the face of a person I did not know, but I felt like I was actually seeing her at last. “I like it, at least.”

She blinked and tilted her head again. “Really?”

The tone of the question was impossible to read: an innocent platitude, a veiled threat, an unimpressed suggestion — and an appeal for more, all at once.

“ ... are you sure you’re not trying to appeal to me?” I asked.

Sevens blinked. “Not intentionally.”

“This mask, is this person still out there in the world somewhere? Or—”

“She died a long time ago,” Sevens said, level and cool. “She would have approved of me borrowing her looks, especially if it sent a young maiden into paroxysms of confused lust. She was like that. Can you believe it?”

Without even a hint of smile, I could not tell if Sevens was joking.

“Er ... ” I hiccuped. Sevens did not.

“She was also very good at self-control.” Seven-Shades-of-Suggestively-Sexual offered me a slender hand, nails cut very short indeed. “Shall we?”

I sighed, but I accepted her offer, slipping my hand into hers. She did not squeeze, but raised her eyebrows in acknowledgement.

“Come on,” I said to the knight. He shouldered his axe and set off

after us, as we walked into the pressing darkness, to catch up with Saldis, and to go see the King in Yellow about a present for the object of his daughter's affection.

any mortal thing – 14.15

Hand in hand, with the forest-knight at our heels and my heart in my mouth, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight led me out of the dark.

At first I was rendered speechless, but not merely because of Sevens' new and intense mask, her princess-mask of starch and stares and silent implications. Despite the perpetual motion machine of my abdominal bioreactor, I was beyond exhausted — between panic, fear, adrenaline, whirling anxieties, confrontations with multiple Outsider beings, a moment of Eye-like observation, and almost blowing myself up, all topped off with the cherry of a genuine emotional crisis, I was spent. My mind was running on fumes, my emotions were worn down to a stub, and I was probably suffering some kind of short term adrenal fatigue.

Not to mention the hunger. I would have eaten week-old chips right then. I would have risked Tenny's first attempt at cooking, or gladly scarfed down one of Zheng's offerings of raw squirrel.

After the first minute or two of walking deeper into the dark void, when it became apparent that the living darkness was not impudent enough to encroach on Sevens' eight-foot bubble of warm candlelight, my mind wandered into a waking doze. My footsteps grew heavy, my eyelids heavier, my brain slipping into automatic. A pair of my tentacles clutched the squid-skull mask to my belly like a comforting plush toy. I tugged Sevens' yellow cloak snug around my neck and throat, seeking refuge in warmth.

Safe now, my instincts whispered.

Sevens' neat black heels went *click-click-click* against the floorboards in an unwavering rhythm, her long yellow skirt swishing at her ankles, now and again revealing snatches of white tights on her slender legs. I kept sneaking sidelong glances at her new face in profile, her sharp cheekbones and unsmiling eyes, her clear skin and the straight line of her mouth.

On the fifth or sixth lingering glance, I met those wide turquoise eyes staring back at me.

“ ... s-sorry,” I blurted out.

Slender eyebrows climbed toward her ruler-straight fringe.

"I'm just very tired," I explained, under duress from that look. "Having trouble focusing. I can't get used to you like this."

"Does my countenance help keep you alert?" Sevens asked. Her new voice was like a slice of lemon dipped in chocolate, sharply sweet and precise, leaving one unsure as to which flavour was the truth.

"Um ... " I squinted, more with tiredness than confusion. "I'm not sure what you mean?"

"Does gazing upon me make your heart rate climb? Does it tighten your chest? Does the sight of me stop your breath in your throat?" She waited a beat while I was unable to reply, staring dumbfounded at her unreadable intensity. I would have stumbled as we walked along if it wasn't for her hand in mine. "Regardless, Heather, you may feast your eyes to your heart's content. Be assured, I am not self-conscious."

I had to look away, blushing like I'd been sunburned, no longer the least bit tired.

"... Sevens, you are doing this on purpose," I managed.

"Doing what on purpose?" she asked.

"You know very well what I mean," I hissed.

"Alas, I am but a young and sheltered princess," she said, still measured and cool and not sounding sheltered at all. "I am too far down the line of inheritance to merit training as a proper lady, and far too uncanny to bother with sending me to balls and galas in the hopes of marrying me off to some *nouveau riche* merchant. I am unschooled in the ways of the world. So you must tell me what you mean, kitten."

I had been ready to face her again and roll my eyes at her absurd act, but that last word made me stammer and splutter.

She still didn't smile. Not even a hint. She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said this mask was good at self-control.

"Ah, here we are at last." She turned her eyes ahead and nodded into the dark, leaving me unfinished and raw. "The way begins to open."

I let out a shuddering sigh, expecting another flirtatious trick, but

quickly discovered that Sevens was being serious.

All around us, the corridor itself had finally become visible, as if seen through a deep haze on the edge of sight, like the world lit by the first feelers of a grey and rainy dawn. Ceiling and walls loomed out of the gloom, much closer than I had expected, perhaps only twenty feet away and rapidly tightening as Sevens strode on with her unwavering *click-click* against the floorboards. I squinted in confusion, for the walls were not the same tessellated wood as the floor, but appeared to be made of bare, packed earth, wormed through with gnarled tree roots, some as thick as my entire body but some mere finger-width feelers.

Staring out into the grey haze, I realised that Sevens' soft light was going out.

Her halo of warmth was shrinking and contracting, fuzzy at the edges as the grey pressed inward, grown so dim that the rainbow glow of my tentacles had begun to overtake it once more.

"Sevens!" I hissed, heart leaping into my mouth, my free hand gripping the sleeve of her perfectly starched blouse, one of my tentacles looping hurriedly about her shoulders. "Sevens, the light!"

"Shhhhhh, shh-shh-shhh," she hushed me gently. Somehow her casual dismissal stilled my nerves better than any actual explanation. "The light is no longer relevant. This is ordinary gloom."

"Oh. Oh, um, okay, I—"

Blushing and embarrassed, I started to remove my hand from Sevens' shoulder, but she caught it with her own before I could retreat. Wide, staring eyes bored into mine.

"You are perfectly safe by my side, kitten," she said.

"... *don't*," I whined. She let me go.

That kept my mind firmly occupied for the rest of the journey out of the Library of Carcosa, a mercifully short three or four minutes through the steadily tightening corridor of bare earth and visible roots. Sevens' light faded, replaced by the faint glow of my tentacles and a milky, pale luminescence filtering in from somewhere up ahead, shrouded by a thickening bramble of roots. The corridor tightened to ten feet wide, then six feet, then barely wide enough

for the two of us to walk shoulder-to-shoulder. We were forced to press ourselves together if we didn't wish to snag our clothes on the hooked and gnarled roots. My legs tangled with Sevens' yellow skirt; her scent stole into my nose — starch and soap and simple shampoo. The poor forest-knight had to stoop, carrying his axe low in both hands.

Then, as if stepping from a deep wood onto a lonely moor, the roots opened like petals, disgorging us into light like watered milk.

Blinking, blinded, struggling to adjust to the weak daylight, I held my arm up to shield my eyes. I think I missed Sevens stumble, but I couldn't be sure.

"Oh there you are, poppet," Saldis' voice greeted us. "And you've found a new friend! How delightful. You certainly do know how to make them, don't you?"

"You could have stopped or come back for me," I muttered as I peeled my eyes open — still strangely raw and tender from my desperate experiment with the Eye's observational theory, despite the watery texture of the light. "Saldis, why didn't ... you ..."

But as I blinked away pink-tinged tears to clear my sight, my words trailed off, my mouth hanging open. My head spun with vertigo.

Our escape from the darkness had placed us on a vantage point, on a hillside at the head — or perhaps tail — of a wide road paved with rose-pink bricks. A moth-eaten blanket of pale moorland unrolled at my feet, covered in grasses the white of mature fungus, the purple of dying flowers, and the yellow of mustard gas. The landscape was punctured through not with one lake — the Lake of Hali, Saldis had called it — but dozens of lakes, shining pools of bright blue liquid that looked more like they'd been cut into the ground than formed naturally, each one ringed by steep banks of pale, bare, wet earth. Little copses of things that were meant to be trees dotted the high places of the moors, but they looked too fungal and moved too much to be anything like earthly plant life. Some of them were penned in with barbed wire, a rusty red at odds with the other colours of this place.

The ground was coated in a thin, ankle-deep mist, wispy and ethereal, not dense enough to obscure details unless one looked toward the horizon, where one was met instead by the tall, dark, craggy impression of ancient leering trees at the edge of the fog.

The rose-pink road meandered over the little hills and wound between the lakes, passing a massive signpost made of black stone, which was festooned with dozens of boards pointing in every direction, some of them straight up into the sky or down at the ground. Further on, the road was flanked by a collection of metal gibbet cages, containing inhuman skeletons long-since picked clean.

At the other end of that rose-brick road, all the way down at the foot of the mouldy, rotten blanket, stood the palace of the King in Yellow.

I sighed, trying to cover my sickening vertigo with exasperation.

“Oh, really?” I hissed. It did not help.

The structure could not have been mistaken for anything else, because it was everywhere and it was impossible.

Fairytale spires and rings of fanciful battlements reared hundreds of feet into the sky, far taller than anything possible under Earth gravity; many of them vanished into the omnipresent milky fog which hung in the sky in place of cloud cover. Great grey walls were punctured by decorative arrow-slits and indefensible balconies, covered with mile-wide carvings and gigantic stained-glass windows — though the scenes in the stonework and the glass were too far away to make out. Built from a dozen different types of stone — granite block, white marble, yellowed sandstone, red slate, and types I could not name — the castle was piled up on itself like a layered cake, but the layers appeared to recede forever, never reaching a crescendo, drawing the eye ever inward until one had to blink and look away.

Far weirder were the spires and walls that *emerged* from the foggy sky, upside down, as if the castle somehow wrapped around on itself in a gigantic sphere which cupped this landscape in its hollow core. Bits of crenellation and clusters of towers stuck out at wild angles from every possible place in the milky firmament. If one squinted and waited for the shifting mist to briefly thin, one could see the layers of the castle piled up in the very sky above our heads.

If there was a sun, it was obscured behind stone. Where the milk-pale light came from, I had no idea.

When I glanced back over my shoulder, I expected to see the Library of Carcosa rearing up behind me. But instead I found a dark

hedge of roots and brambles, thick as night and twice as impenetrable, covered with ebony thorns of all sizes from pinprick to spear. A twelve foot wall of half-dead plant-life, impossible to scale without tearing oneself to shreds.

And visible beyond that hedge, more palace.

It was all around us, as if we stood not on the moors but in a castle courtyard bounded in every direction by a world-ball of a building. The eye of the storm.

My brain was like a skipping record; it kept insisting that the Library of Carcosa was so tall, practically infinite, surely it should have been scraping the heavens? Where was it? Where had we been only minutes earlier? We could not be standing here and not be in the shadow of the library, that was impossible, my senses were playing a trick on me.

I crammed that thought into a pressure vessel. I was *Outside*. I had to start thinking Outside thoughts, or lose my mind.

It had been easy to forget, hidden away in the void of the dark passage, and even in the all-too-familiar alien infinity of the library, just how strange Outside could be.

“Learned behaviour,” I hissed through gritted teeth. “Just learned behaviour. Nothing to be afraid of.”

That was a lie. There was plenty to be scared of out here — we were not alone.

Carrion birds wheeled in the sky and perched on the towers, little smudges of dark against the pale air; I guessed that up close they were unlikely to look anything like real crows or ravens. On distant hillsides, pinkish creatures with too many legs and rubbery eyes on stalks paused to watch us, like crosses between cows and spiders, before thankfully going about their business once again. A few hundred feet down the rose-brick road a tall, spindly figure was tending to a clutch of the strange fungus-trees; dressed in a yellow smock, barefoot and bald and without any facial features, like a human being stretched out to twelve feet in height and scrubbed of detail. It wielded a huge pair of clippers, snipping off a branch here and a bud there with glacial slowness, occasionally slapping one of the fungal trees when it tried to wander off like a slug inching away.

The palace itself was visibly inhabited. I kept my focus on the portion in front of us, where the structure wore skirts of stone, flaring out into petticoats of overlapping walls and spindly walkways. Dim figures lurked behind the windows and on the battlements, little more than shadows or memories, accompanied by scraps of half-glimpsed yellow.

Two nightmares perched above the palace gatehouse, where a pair of massive wooden doors stood wide to receive any visitor brave enough to enter.

The first was too painful to look at for more than a second — a gigantic yellow trapezoid shape was balanced on one point, on the lowest of the palace towers, rotating slowly to reveal facets shining with inner light like a gemstone. But the geometry of the object was all wrong and my eyes burned with an afterimage even when I'd looked away.

The second gatehouse guardian was a sphinx.

It was yellow, and the size of a building, but in every other aspect it was just a sphinx. Body of a lion but with a human face, with a pair of massive white-feathered wings lying in repose. It would not have looked out of place in an illustration of ancient Greek or Egyptian mythology. Lounging directly above the gatehouse, massive tail slowly swishing through the air, it watched us at a great distance with deceptively sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes, set in an elegant, androgynous face. Yellow eyes, the colour of lightning.

I had the most powerful urge to put my squid-skull mask back on, that I might hide from that stare.

“And who are you, poppet?” Saldis was saying as I was busy trying not to have a panic attack about answering riddles. “Can’t say I’ve seen you before. Not in the library, anyway, and I wouldn’t forget that face in a hurry. Oh no, no indeed, I would remember those eyes. I would immortalise them.”

I tore my attention away from the soaring towers of the Yellow King’s palace and his worryingly large pet. Saldis’ sphere was parked just at the edge of the pale-pink road, open down the front. Milky fog lapped at its base, and at the feet of the forest-knight, who was standing at a polite and safe distance. Inside the sphere, Saldis herself looked none the worse for the experience of navigating the dark. Her pair of rats sniffed about her lap as she

leaned forward to peer at Sevens.

Sevens stared back at Saldis with the same wide-eyed intensity she'd used on me, eloquently unreadable, plainly elegant. She'd let go of my hand so she could clasp them behind her back, radiating mild contempt.

Rather than answering Saldis' question, she raised her eyebrows by a fraction of an inch. A question of her own.

"Neither would I forget such a bearing," Saldis went on. "Should I be addressing you in any particular way, my lady?"

I rolled my eyes. "I do not have the patience for you two playing games with each other. Not now. Stop it."

Saldis glanced at me, faintly irritated. "I am not playing a game, lady Morell, I am being serious. Who is ... this ... ?" She trailed off, mouth forming a little 'o' as she turned wide eyes back to Sevens. "Ah."

"Ah," Sevens echoed.

"Your royal highness," Saldis said as she lit up, voice turning oily, delight cresting across her face like a fangirl before her favourite teen pop idol. She put both hands to her own chest as if trying to contain her wild heart. To my surprise, the pair of rats in her lap flopped and rolled in something approaching exasperated boredom. I frowned at them and could have sworn that both of them turned those little black eyes on me in silent solidarity.

"None other," said Sevens.

"I do beg your forgiveness, ma'am, I should have realised," Saldis drooled out. "Should have realised! I can be such a dunce at times, I do apologise. Well! I am honoured that you have blessed us by deciding to join us formally and openly."

"No you're not."

"And may I congratulate you on your betrothal? I understand you have felt somewhat shy in the past, and— oh! And you emerged holding hands with lady Morell!" Saldis clapped her own hands together with girlish excitement. That wasn't an act, of that I was sure, she was actually losing control, for real. "You have reconciled then? No, no, wrong word!" Saldis hissed at herself and bit down on one of her own knuckles. "Damn this English, it is so clumsy at

times, is it not?" She gave a nervous laugh and pulled an oily, fake smile for Sevens. "I meant to ask if you and lady Morell have indeed agreed to marry?"

"No."

"... no?"

"No," Sevens repeated herself. "No, you may not congratulate me."

Saldis blinked three times, slowly. "Ma'am? Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, your royal—"

"Why don't you take your machine and roll it back into the library, you vile little slug?"

Sevens' voice, sweet and sharp, held not the slightest hint of disgust or disdain. Somehow that made it all the more intimidating. If she had turned that venom on me with those intense eyes and that aristocratic bearing, I would have transformed my own blood to acid and melted myself to escape the crippling embarrassment. Even at the periphery of her gaze, I felt the blow-back like an emotional heatwave. It made me want to curl up and hide my face behind my hands.

Saldis was dumbfounded. Her mouth moved but no sound came out. Her eyes bulged as if she was on the verge of terrible anger.

Sevens tilted her head to one side, turquoise eyes shining with esoteric promise. All of a sudden she was holding a closed umbrella in one hand, the tightly wrapped canopy a subtle lilac caress, the handle made of polished wood. She planted the metal tip against the road surface and tilted the umbrella at a jaunty angle.

A threat, but so absurd I couldn't process it; she was threatening to hit Saldis with a lilac umbrella.

"Stop," I raised my voice. "Stop, or I will ... get very upset and probably cry." My tentacles, all except the one still holding my squid-skull mask, rose in silent menace, as if I had any chance whatsoever of restraining these two inhuman beings if they decided to fight. "I need all the help I can get right now. That means both of you, I don't have anyone else to—"

But then Saldis, to my great surprise, broke into a manic grin, ear-to-ear, delighted beyond words, with eyes only for Seven-Shades-of-Wildly-Offensive.

“Again!” Saldis cried out. “Again, oh please, ma’am, again.” She tapped her chest with her fingertips. “Insult me again.”

Sevens obliged. “Overstuffed sow. Bitch in heat. Knot-bait.”

“Ahh!” Saldis spread the fingers of one hand, face deep in the rapture of true art.

“*Mesu buta.*”

“Oh! Oh, yes!” Saldis cheered, then stopped dead with a frown. “Wait, no, that wasn’t English. What was that?”

Sevens answered by tilting her head the other way and adjusting the angle of her umbrella.

“Japanese, I think,” I sighed, trying to straighten my back — the subconscious pressure of this Outside place was making me want to curl up and stoop, make myself small so I could hide. “I understood *some* of that. What are you two doing?”

“Rest assured, my dear,” Sevens turned and spoke to me. “I take no pleasure in the act. The insults are real.”

“And that is what makes them shine!” Saldis announced, rocking back in her seat and slapping an armrest. Her rats jumped. “Bravo, bravo! Oh, I am honoured to witness such a display, let alone to be the target of it! Sublime!” She laughed, free and genuine, no longer oily and repulsive, grinning like a madwoman fresh from the attic.

“It is no display,” Sevens told her. “I do not wish for you to accompany us, you pile of offal.”

Saldis controlled her laughter but not her smile. She rolled forward in her seat, sinuous as a snake, and winked at Seven-Shades. “I’m afraid you don’t have a choice, ma’am. You can’t seriously expect me to back off now, not when you’ve shown yourself and you’re heading for one of the greatest shows I’ll ever see. Besides, I don’t think you would be able to stop me.”

“I could,” I raised my voice, staring at Saldis. She raised her eyebrows at me in surprise. “I could. I could probably find a way to crack your shell, you know that? And I’m betting Sevens could too.” I shot a sidelong look at Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, expecting her to be death-glaring at Saldis, but she was already looking back at me, intense and unyielding. My words stuck in my throat at her scrutiny and I almost didn’t get them out. “But I’m asking her not to.

Please.”

Seven-Shades-of-Superfluous-Superiority stared back at me for a heartbeat, then closed her eyelids in a glacial blink. An affirmative.

The chill of that gesture made my heart climb into my mouth. She made her disapproval clear even as she acquiesced.

“Thank you, lady Morell,” Saldis said with a cloying tone and an irritating wink. “While I am not certain in your ability to best me, I respect your confidence.”

“That is not license to antagonise Sevens either,” I said to Saldis, keeping my voice firm. “Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight is my fiancée.” My face burned, but I held her gaze. “You keep your fascination with her at arm’s length. No touching.”

Saldis held her hands up in surrender. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” Then she nodded at Sevens, a twinkle in her eye. “Besides, I see you’ve already left your mark on the young princess.”

“What? What are you talking about? I ... ”

I followed Saldis’ pointed nod back to Sevens, then to the creased sleeve of Sevens’ otherwise immaculate white blouse. That was where I’d grabbed her in my panic earlier, when I’d thought the dark was closing in again.

Sevens followed the look too, turning her head to stare down at her rumpled sleeve.

It wasn’t the only flaw in her austere aesthetics — a few wisps of her blonde hair had been plucked astray by our passage through the roots, part of the hem of her yellow skirt was upturned from her brisk stride, and the low mist was forming condensation on her black shoes. Sevens’ mask was not artificial perfection. I had a sudden and confusing impression that she would be just as collected and elegant if she was covered in blood and sick, like I still was.

“Oh,” I said, suddenly uncomfortable for some reason I didn’t understand. “Oh, yes, that was ... that was me.”

“Made time for a spot of sneaky necking before you caught back up with me, yes?” Saldis asked, voice full of tease.

I shot her a look. “No—”

“Yes,” Sevens said. I boggled at her, speechless and blushing. Saldis

cackled like the old crone she was.

“Sevens!” I whined.

Seven-Shades-of-Unsubtle-Insinuation watched me with those wide, staring eyes. “You made the mark. Correcting it is your responsibility. Or your choice.”

I huffed, muttering under my breath as I stomped across the three paces that separated Sevens and me. “Can’t believe this, we’re in the middle of Outside, I’m exhausted beyond words and starving hungry, and you’re trying to mark your territory.” I grabbed her crumpled sleeve, straightened it out, and smoothed it down. But I couldn’t make it quite perfect again. Sevens just watched me, her face far too close, until I looked up and scowled at her. “And I am not your territory, as you are well aware. You’re already sharing.”

Sevens glanced down at her sleeve, then back up at me.

“That’ll do, kitten,” she whispered.

I spluttered and turned away, blushing beetroot red. Saldis was beside herself, both hands to her mouth to smother a squeal, practically rolling around in her seat.

“And you can stop that!” I snapped at her. “We did not make out in the dark! Or do anything else!”

“Yes we did,” Sevens countered me, sharp and cool. “For several minutes. Heather is an expert. I had to sit down afterward.”

Saldis squealed so hard I thought she was going to burst from the top of her sphere-machine. Her pair of rats almost fell off her lap. She kicked her legs and laughed and went red in the face, fanning herself with a hand — though not as red as me. I turned away and folded my arms. My tentacles followed suit.

“For somebody you said you dislike, you certainly seem to have no problem amusing her,” I muttered.

“I do it for you,” Sevens said.

We stood there for a minute while Saldis got her breath back and I stopped glowing like a space heater.

“Oh dear, oh my dear, oh goodness,” Saldis was saying. “You two are a riot. Riot? *Riot*, mmm, crunchy. I like that word, oh yes. I think I threw a riot once, but we didn’t call it that.”

“Cease your prattling,” Sevens told her.

“Yes, yes, of course ma’am,” Saldis answered off-hand, letting out a big sigh. “Oh, it has been a while since I was last out here. Doesn’t look quite the same without all the pennants and pavilions, not to mention the destriers and cattle and the great big whale carcass. Whale? No, that’s not right. Oh well, I suppose English lacks the word, never mind. The King’s servants have done a grand job cleaning up all the gore, though!”

I finally got over my lingering embarrassment and turned to frown at Saldis. She was gazing out across the unearthly landscape with genuine nostalgia.

“How long were you waiting for me out here?” I asked.

“Ten or fifteen minutes. Don’t you worry yourself about fifteen minutes, poppet, that’s a blink of an eye for me.”

“Yes, Saldis, I was very worried about wasting your time,” I said, surprising even myself with the sarcasm in my voice. “Why didn’t you come back for me? I almost got eaten. Sevens had to come rescue me.”

“I never doubted you for a moment, Lady Morell!” Saldis protested, looking taken aback. “Besides, you had your fiancée watching out for you the whole time. You just said, she rode to your salvation.”

I glanced from Saldis to Sevens, both of them watching me, and narrowed my eyes as a cold feeling crept into my chest. “... you two didn’t plan this together, did you?”

Saldis laughed. “I wish I had!”

“Never,” Sevens said.

“Never?” Saldis asked, a little sadly.

“N e v e r,” Sevens said, slow as ice-cold venom.

“Oh well,” Saldis sighed. “I suppose there’s your proof.”

“All right then,” I said. “Sorry, Sevens, I just ... this is too much. Can we concentrate on reaching your father?”

“As you wish,” Sevens said.

“And I’m very glad your gentleman friend made it out in one piece

too,” Saldis went on, nodding at the forest-knight still standing a few paces away, his axe held casually over one shoulder. She even shot him a wink and coquettish little smile. “Such a waste when men like that fall to things they shouldn’t have to face. I truly think men should not be involved in war at all, they’re far too pretty to waste on death in combat and besides, they’re not—”

Sevens and I made eye contact with each other and silently agreed to completely ignore Saldis.

Sevens held her hand out to me again, the umbrella in her other hand held at an angle with the tip against the ground. She didn’t need words, but just raised her eyebrows a fraction of an inch. I sighed and slipped my hand into hers, wrapping my tentacles closer about my own body. Then I tugged her yellow cloak tighter around my shoulders too, the best protection I could hope for in this Outside place. But I left the mask off for now.

Sevens tilted her head at me in silent question.

“Yes,” I said. “Let’s be off.”

We set off down the rose-brick road, hand in hand with the knight following after us. His metal boots made a gentle ringing sound with each step. It took Saldis a moment to break off from her musing about the nature of men — which had descended into a treatise about nudity — and realise we were walking off without her. Her grey sphere caught up a few paces later, Saldis herself peering out the front with a grin.

“Ma’am, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight,” she said, resuming a fraction of her oily tone from earlier. “How may I address you in this most ... graceful of forms?”

“As your royal highness,” Sevens answered without missing a beat.

“No name?” Saldis struggled not to laugh; she was enjoying this far too much.

“Don’t start again,” I hissed. “This might be normal for you two, but I am constantly on the verge of freaking out in this place.” I gestured upward with my eyes, at the world-palace in the sky beyond the mist, all around us.

“Have no fear,” Sevens announced, swinging her umbrella with each step. “This is my home, after all.”

The journey along the rose-brick road was tortuously uneventful; my nerves, frayed thin by exhaustion and hunger, told me that I was Outside, exposed, in the open, screaming in the back of my mind that I should be hiding behind a rock or digging a hole in the ground and waiting for the Slip back to reality. Abyssal instinct whined and twitched at the slow ramble across this open moorland, over the crests of mushroom—coloured hills and along banks of pale yellow grass; I wanted to slink into a dark hole and hide from the immensity — not to mention the slow, steady stare of the giant sphinx lounging on the distant palace wall. It watched our every step.

But nothing else jumped out at us. Nothing descended from the clouds. No Outsider nightmare came roaring over the hills. Paradoxically, that made my nerves worse. Half of me would have preferred to fight something with my tentacles.

We passed the strange gardener creature I'd seen from the hillside. He — I thought of it as masculine, though in truth it could have been anything — paused in his achingly slow work of pruning the pale, fungal trees as we passed by. He turned to us, raising a spindly hand in greeting, twelve feet up in the air. Saldis rattled on, ignoring him; I tensed up and tried not to look at the blank expanse of flesh where his face should have been, or the slug-like motions of his fungal charges trying to creep away while his back was turned; but Sevens nodded politely and touched the handle of her umbrella to her forehead in a makeshift salute.

"What was that?" I whispered once we were safely past.

"A grounds keeper," Sevens said, unconcerned. "What else would it be?"

We walked on past the huge black signpost with its dozens of suggested directions. Sevens did not pause to consult it, which was a relief, because trying to read the signs themselves made my eyes water and my head throb, though I was surprised to see at least two signposts which were very definitely written in French. We followed the rose-brick road onward, to where it wound closer to the steep-sided banks of several of the unnatural-looking lakes. The road itself never dared violate the halos of oddly bare and packed wet earth around each small lake, but it ventured tantalisingly close. I couldn't resist the urge to stare down into the waters, if only to distract myself from my nerves and Saldis' constant stream of one-

woman conversation.

“—and the last time I was here there were all sorts throwing themselves into the lake of Hali,” she was saying, “in hopes of rebirth. Despite the fact it’s never worked! Can you imagine? Most of them died before they got a chance to begin drowning and—”

The steep sides of each lake were vertically ridged, as if beaten flat by giant rolling pins, or worn smooth by animals sliding into the water. It made me think of seals or penguins slipping down the banks.

As I stared into the sapphire-blue waters of each lake we passed, I began to see that Saldis had not lied to me earlier — the depths of each lake seemed to extend beneath the margin of the banks themselves, vanishing into shadow under the curve of the earth before joining with the brighter spots of other lakes further off.

They were not lakes at all. Each hole was a puncture in the land. The true lake was subterranean, beneath our feet.

Each opening allowed a narrow shaft of light to penetrate the gloom-filled waters. I squinted into those depths, able to see so much further than I would through earthly liquid, hampered only by the shadow of the land itself.

And far, far below, hundreds of feet down, I caught a faint hint of sinuous folds shifting over themselves. A bed of snakes at the root of the world.

“ ... Sevens, what are we walking on?” I asked in a voice much smaller than I’d intended.

She turned to me, eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch, then followed the direction of my gaze.

“Solid ground,” she said.

“Then what is that?” I whispered. “Down there?”

“A distant relative.” She surprised me with a sigh. “Best not stare.”

“ ... right. Right you are. Of course. Very rude to stare.”

I decided to keep my eyes firmly ahead until we were clear of the lake and its hidden inhabitant, but that was not much better. As we left behind the dark punctures in the skin of this world and emerged onto the relatively open final half-mile of flat ground before the

great doors of the palace, the sphinx which had been lounging above the gatehouse climbed to its feet.

Even at this distance the creature was truly gigantic. It was easily as large as the Great Sphinx of Giza, the statue back on Earth, sixty or seventy feet tall and well over two hundred feet from nose to tail. Unlike the statue, however, it possessed a rough muscularity that made me think more of an actual animal than anything I'd previously seen Outside. Yellow light from the slowly rotating trapezoid nearby caught the sphinx's glossy yellow fur and fluffy mane, the roll of powerful legs and the swish of the tail. That light glinted in massive all-yellow eyes, set in a human face as big as a car.

It stood up and spread feathered wings, flexing massive pinions in the milky mist, staring at us.

"Oh dear," Saldis said, in the exact same tone one might use to comment on a slightly fatter than usual cat.

"Yes, oh dear indeed," I hissed, stumbling to a halt though the creature was still almost a half a mile away. The knight stopped at my shoulder, but Sevens kept going for a couple of paces, still holding my hand until I dug in my heels and made her pause with me. "Sevens, what is that? We can't— it's huge— I'm not big enough to deal with that."

"You will not have to," she said, cool and unruffled. "My siblings are my responsibility, not yours. I will shield you from their questions and their disapproval."

I stared at Sevens for a moment, then up at the sphinx again, then back at Sevens. "... siblings?"

She gave a single, tilted nod, elegant and concise, coupled with a gentle closing of her eyes as she tucked a stray lock of blonde behind one ear. An embarrassing admission.

"Oh, lovely. I get to meet the family." My head felt light and my heart skipped a beat.

"News of our coupling has already spread. Doubtless, some wish to offer their opinions. Those I will disregard. Some I may mock."

"The sphinx of the hundred gates," Saldis murmured from inside her sphere. "I thought it was an illusion until it moved. I ... I wish

to meet this beast, very much. But also not to meet it, if you take my meaning.”

“My protection does not extend to you,” said Sevens.

Saldis laughed. “Of course it does, your majesty. But just in case, that’s why I take my home with me wherever I go. Snail I may be, but snail I am proud.” She wrinkled her nose. “That sounded better in my head. Ugh.”

“There is nothing to fear. Come.” Sevens gently tugged on my hand. With fear and reluctance in my heart, I picked my feet up and walked onward, trying to resist the urge to throw my tentacles wide to make myself look as big as possible. I locked eyes with the sphinx, but it did not look away.

We passed the metal gibbet cages full of inhuman skeletons, and two spots where the rose-pink road branched off to head left and right around the castle walls, and still the sphinx stared us down.

“Nothing will befall you,” Sevens said. She must have felt how my palm had turned clammy.

I managed a puff of breath, not even a real laugh. “Yes, all safe here. All like a fairy tale.” I slipped into a snatch of song, “We’re off to see the wizard.”

“My father has been a wizard, at times.”

“It was just a joke,” I said, heart hammering in my ribs. That sphinx was massive, it could swat me dead with one paw, pneuma-somatic tentacles or not. “Wrong colour of road, anyway. And this place is much worse than Oz.”

“Not every place Outside is savage, Heather,” Sevens said. I detected the tiniest hint of pride in her voice, so little as to not break plausible deniability. “Some are much more refined than Earth. Such as here.”

“Glad to hear it. Sevens, is there any food to eat in the palace? Human edible food?”

“... only from my hand, kitten,” she answered after a beat.

“Excuse me?” I blinked at her, blushing again. On her other side, Saldis lit up with glee at getting a front-row seat to this flirting.

“Accept food from no other,” Sevens said. “Even my father. Only I

may feed you.”

“Oh, I really have been kidnapped by fairies, haven’t I?” I sighed. “This is absurd, Sevens. I’m so hungry that I can’t think straight, I don’t want to keep walking, I want to stop right here and—”

I got my wish.

One of Sevens’ siblings chose that moment to make clear their displeasure — but it wasn’t the sphinx.

We’d all been watching the gargantuan feline as it had begun to pace slowly back and forth on the palace wall, huge paws padding with impossible silence for something so large, waiting for those wings to split the air and for the creature to glide over to meet us.

The shining yellow trapezoid shape ceased rotating, detached from the tip of the tower where it had been waiting, and boomed through the air toward us like a jet breaking the sound barrier.

It was like being bull-rushed by a piece of architecture.

The trapezoid was far larger than the sphinx and my body simply had no idea what to do, no more than it would if an asteroid was about to hit me. The thing bellowed as it raced through the air, a deep ringing sound like a gemstone screaming, blotting out thought and blurring the senses. I had only a second or two in which to react, but that moment was consumed by slamming my hands over my ears and wrapping my head with my tentacles to block out the awful noise. I stumbled and tried to duck, as if I could do anything to avoid the force of a meteor about to smash us all into paste.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight took two precise steps forward, opened her lilac umbrella, and levelled it at the onrushing trapezoid.

It halted an inch from the tip of her umbrella, decelerating to a stop instantly, still howling.

I actually fell over onto my backside, cowering in unspeakable terrified awe, trying to hide myself inside the yellow cloak. The yellow gem-creature was the size of a skyscraper. Something that big should not have moved, nor stopped so suddenly, nor make those awful sounds.

Saldis had closed her sphere up tight. The ancient mage was playing it safe. Perhaps she was just concerned about her rats.

The forest-knight had fallen to one knee. He was struggling to raise his axe.

The trapezoid unfurled a dozen wings of glowing light, each one easily a hundred feet long; it sprouted a halo of golden yellow, made of esoteric magical symbols which I couldn't even look at without feeling a nosebleed drip down my face. It howled and bellowed like a jet engine had learned how to perform death metal vocals, wordless sounds that couldn't possibly be communication. I crawled on the ground, trying to keep it out of my head. But it did not advance past Sevens' umbrella.

Sevens just sighed. Somehow I heard that over the din.

"Yes, brother," she said, cold and sharp. "But it is none of your business."

More bellowing, more noise like being shouted at by a mountain.

"If you would cease being so rude, I would introduce you to her," Sevens answered. "But you are being a boor. I shall slap you if you continue."

A crescendo of planetary rage. I thought my eardrums would explode.

"Father took a human lover once," Sevens said. "Without that, none of us would exist."

A *ding* like a bell the size of the milky way.

"Why yes, I am comparing myself to father. Lord knows, you can't."
Silence.

I looked up, shaking and shivering, tears running down my face with loss of control. The trapezoid had departed even quicker than it had arrived — reduced to a yellow spot in the sky as it fled upward into the castle.

Sevens sighed with the tone of one who had dispatched an unwanted caller. She carefully rolled up her umbrella, dusted off her skirt with one hand, and adjusted the angle of her headband. Then she turned and offered me a hand. I took it without hesitation and all but clung to her when she helped me to my feet, wrapping three tentacles around her arm with instinctive need. She was so slender and slight beneath her clothes, but she was like iron where I

was shivering.

“Shhhh, kitten, shhhh,” she murmured, gently drying my eyes with a handkerchief she had produced from somewhere. “I told you not to be afraid.”

“That is a bit difficult when getting yelled at by a piece of a moon!” I squeaked, and finally managed to peel myself off her, embarrassed and self-conscious. Next to me, the forest-knight slowly levered himself up to his feet, none the worse for wear.

“The King in Yellow took a human lover?” Saldis asked as her grey sphere bloomed open again. “Was that a bluff, ma’am?”

“It is none of your business,” Sevens told her. “Besides, you had better get back in your ball, you rancid pustule.”

“What?” I asked, my stomach dropping. “Why?”

But Saldis was already closing up. I caught the whites of her eyes, gone wide in terror.

“Because that was the easy one,” Sevens said. She nodded toward the palace. “Here comes trouble.”

During the commotion with the trapezoid, the sphinx had hopped down to the ground. It trotted up the road toward us with dainty feline strides, each footstep the length of a house, tail swishing, eyes blazing with feline curiosity.

any mortal thing – 14.16

My family didn't keep any pets when Maisie and I were little; after Wonderland — or, from our parents' perspective, after my schizophrenia manifested at nine years old — they had enough on their hands dealing with me, without adding further complications to our household. My father had owned a dog in the years before we were born, a noble-looking German Shepherd by the name of Alfred, though I only knew him from a handful of low-resolution photographs. He'd died at a rather advanced age when Maisie and I were only six months old, which invited a nameless melancholy whenever I thought about it too much. During my teenage years, three different child psychologists had suggested animal-assisted therapy, or that my parents should consider getting a small dog. That experiment lasted less than a week and ended in a massive relapse; thirteen year-old me got her hopes up at the fantasy of a big friendly dog who would bark at her hallucinations and scare off the monsters nobody else could see. Which didn't happen. Dogs couldn't see spirits either.

So, I wasn't good with animals. I was not used to them.

But I had once been fascinated by a cat.

When Maisie and I were perhaps six or seven years old, our neighbourhood in Reading had played brief host to a bold stray. A marmalade-and-white tabby cat had taken up residence in the streets. She was sleek and muscular and graceful. Our parents called her Ginger, which Maisie and I mangled into *Gins*, in the private language that young twins sometimes develop.

Gins the orange cat developed a habit of begging for scraps outside peoples' doors by rolling on her back and looking cute. She sunned herself on garden walls and promenaded up and down the pavements without a care, but she was also the terror of all the local domesticated cats. At night she would poach pet food from unattended bowls by sneaking in through unlocked cat flaps. More than once somebody else on our street woke up to the sound of their own pet hissing and yowling in a secret nocturnal confrontation. To a pair of small children this was the height of

excitement and scandal.

She didn't visit our back garden much, probably because we lacked any pet food to give her. On the rare occasions she did appear, Maisie and I were beside ourselves with delight. Gins was a very proud cat, all strutting and preening, somehow both fluffy and elegant at the same time, dignified and commanding, queen of her adopted domain. Our parents forbid us from trying to stroke her, which caused a little disappointment at first, but we accepted it as the natural order of things — no feline that noble would be interested in the attentions of a pair of over-curious six year old girls.

But once, she'd stolen into our back garden in pursuit of a big fat black rat. She'd caught it right in front of Maisie and I as we'd pressed ourselves against the glass of the back door in horrified awe. She'd cornered it on our little patio, toyed with the poor thing, then snapped its neck and taken her sweet time with her meal. She'd eaten it head first, crunching the delicate bones, smearing blood and gore all over her oh-so-fluffy orange face and paws.

I always remembered the shared realisation that Maisie and I had whispered to each other as we'd watched sweet little Gins dismember and devour her prey, as she'd watched us back with those shining feline eyes: if we'd been as small as that rat, she would have gladly eaten us.

It wasn't until many years later that I realised poor Ginger had probably been slowly starving, covered in fleas, and riddled with parasites. Strays rarely have a good life.

Her beauty and dignity had been an illusion.

But as the yellow sphinx padded up the rose-brick road on silent paws, making for Sevens and Saldis and the knight and myself, that memory of predatory beauty came flooding back.

The sphinx must have weighed thousands of pounds, but it trod like a dancer with muscles that flowed like butter, slinking and strutting with the grace of a poem as it strode through the pale mist which covered the ground. Its mane was a halo of dark gold, its velvety fur the colour of fresh wheat, the swishing tail a lightning bolt ready to strike; its great wings were folded down against its back, the rival of any roc. The skin of its human face was a rich, dusky brown, with plush lips in a natural pout, wide soft cheeks, and a pair of slender,

arched eyebrows in stark black.

Yellow eyes showed a hint of bronze slit-pupil on the background of dying sunlight sclerae. The sphinx's gaze passed briefly over Sevens and the sealed ball of Saldis' machine, then settled on me. Those pupils widened, as if fixed on prey about to scurry away.

"Stand your ground," Sevens murmured. Her hand, cool and dry, found mine again. She laced her fingers between mine.

I hiccuped, loud and painful. "In front of that!?"

"She will not attack us." Sevens tilted her head, watching the sphinx approach. "Not if she knows what's good for her."

"Oh, great," I hissed. "I think I preferred the giant screaming gemstone."

I did my best to stare down the sphinx as she finished her approach — more difficult than I'd expected, considering I'd stared down the biggest stare of all, but I suppose that had been in Lozzie's dream, whereas my physical body was literally here, Outside, trying to lock eyes with a seventy-foot lion. A trickle of adrenaline turned into a steady pump of animalistic fear. The control rods in my bioreactor instinctively inched out of their channels, trying to supply me with raw energy to compensate for the gnawing hunger in my belly. I itched to slip the squid-skull helmet over my face, but it would make no difference against something this size; if the sphinx was indeed going to pose us a riddle, the last thing I wanted to do was risk muffling my voice. My fingers clutched at Sevens' yellow cloak about my shoulders.

My six tentacles crept outward to make myself look big, flushing their surface layers with toxins to make myself poisonous to eat. A hiss rose in my throat as the giant sphinx finally drew to a stop in front of us. She settled on her haunches and regarded us with heavy-lidded eyes, from seventy feet up.

I tried to remind myself that this was also a form of illusion; the sphinx was a mask, the same as Sevens. But that thought died under a torrent of fight-or-flight. All I could do was stand transfixed. If I moved, I would break.

"Sister," Sevens spoke first, cold and polite. "What are you doing?"

The sphinx blinked with feline lethargy, then lowered her head and

shoulders into a crouch so we did not have to crane our necks quite so high to meet her gaze. Her face alone was gigantic enough, and too close despite still being a good thirty feet away.

Claws the size of battleship-engine propeller blades slid out from between her paw-pads.

Threat! Threat! abyssal instinct and savannah ape screamed in unison — and I broke into a hiss. Long and loud and shaking, my tentacles rearing like stingers. It was that or curl up inside Sevens' cloak and choke on my own hiccups.

The sphinx turned lazy eyes toward me. I hissed again, so hard it burned my throat, until my lungs were empty and my head was spinning.

Her gaze lingered for a moment, but then she looked away. If it wasn't for Sevens' hand in mine, the relief would have buckled my knees.

"You are eating from the refuse heap, sister," the Sphinx said to Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, in a voice like silk drawn over razor blades. That sound made me shiver and swallow, my throat all twisted inside from the hissing. The sphinx's voice was far too high for something so large, and far too human, far too knowing and mocking and teasing. She indicated me with a tiny sideways tilt of her gigantic head, dark mane ruffling in the air as she moved. "Then again, I already am eating from the refuse heap all the time."

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight raised her chin. The adjustment was tiny but it conferred upon her an instant air of icy arrogance, a full-on aristocratic transformation.

"You may insult me at your leisure," said Sevens. "But—"

"—too true I may," the sphinx interrupted.

Sevens spoke right over her, "But you will show better manners toward my betrothed."

The sphinx inched her head forward, shuffling her paws toward us; the motion made me flinch. The giant human lips curled with amusement, showing a mouth of giant, blunt teeth, human teeth. The effect made me feel vaguely sick.

"Or what?" she asked.

“Or I shall take a spray bottle to you.” Sevens raised the handle of her umbrella and extended one finger around an imaginary trigger. “*Ssppt ssppt.*”

The sphinx’s smile widened, acid and steaming. Sevens planted the tip of her umbrella back on the ground, chin high, eyes cold as a winter storm. I prepared to let go of her hand and leap away, my heart racing with terror, half my tentacles wrapped around me in a protective cushion. There was no way we were going to get lucky twice, was there? She’d driven off the flying trapezoid, but that had just screamed and bellowed with impotent anger, easily dismissed between Outside beings of this order. The sphinx wanted to play, as cats played with their prey.

But rather than pounce on us or sideswipe me into paste with a flick of her claws, Sevens’ sister settled her gigantic maned head onto her outstretched front paws in an unmistakable pose of feline relaxation. Her huge tail stood straight up behind her, the tip curling with playful amusement.

“I always enjoy your jokes, Seven-Shades,” the sphinx purred.

“It is not a joke. I will chastise you,” said Sevens, then turned to me. She indicated the sphinx with a tilt of her umbrella. “This is Tenebrous Melancholy of the Umbral Sands. Her name is a mouthful, so you may shorten it any way you wish, even to something insulting. Preferably to something insulting. Moggy, mouser, fleabag, as you wish.”

The sphinx blinked with all the speed of an advancing glacier as our eyes met again. My heart slammed in my chest and I fought off both a hiccup and a hiss as I gave her a polite nod, my lips sealed against saying anything silly. But both of them waited. Sevens did not give me any help when I glanced at her. Neither did the forest-knight when I risked a tiny look over my shoulder. He was standing very still, axe poised like a pike, as if to ward off a cavalry charge. Brave, but even he couldn’t stop the sphinx if she decided to crush us.

Her tail swished, once.

“Um, Melancholy ... Mel?” I croaked, my throat still raw.

‘Mel’, all several thousand pounds of her, rumbled a purr in grudging approval, a purr that made the ground shake. I’d passed whatever test the yellow sisters had set, but I just flinched again as

she flexed her claws a second time. I couldn't stop myself from scowling at her.

"Why are you being so large, sister?" Sevens asked her. "Cease this pointless intimidation. You know it does not make any difference to me. Only to Heather here."

As Sevens spoke, Mel reached out with her opposite paw toward Saldis' closed sphere. She nudged it like a cat with an unfamiliar new toy, then planted her gigantic paw on top of the ball and tried to drag it toward herself, totally undeterred by the spiky exterior formed by the grey blocks. When the ball refused to move, Mel bared her human-like teeth in a silent grimace. Only at the sound of my name did she turn her attention back to us.

"She is named after a bush?" Mel asked. "And I like being large. I should ask you to justify your current smallness. I've seen you much larger before and I think it suited you better."

"This mask is human," Sevens said. "They do tend toward smaller sizes."

"Then swap to a larger one. These instincts are difficult to suppress, they keep prodding me to pin you and bite your legs off."

Sevens sighed softly. "Don't make me come up there, Melancholy. You do not want me to do that. I am wearing a human mask because I am with a human. I will not leave her out of a conversation. To do so would be exceedingly rude."

Mel nodded toward me — and gestured at me with one gigantic yellow paw as well, though her claws remained sheathed. I flinched so hard that I stumbled back. My hand almost slipped out of Sevens' grip, but she clamped her fingers around mine tight as iron, hard enough to grind flesh against bone. My stumble and her strength almost dislocated my wrist and shoulder before I caught myself, but my hiss of surprise and pain was lost in the razor-sharp song of Mel's voice.

"This is not a human," Mel was saying as I recovered my composure. "I should know, I've spent more time among them than you have. I was being worshipped in adoring terror when you were just a half-formed notion lost in rat-infested brothels in the cradle of Rome."

As soon as my hand was secure in Sevens' once more, her grip went

back to normal, but she didn't acknowledge what she'd done. She didn't even look at me.

I was not to let go of her hand in front of this creature, sister or no.

"Melancholy," said Sevens, cool and calm, "you are not actually the Sphinx of Thebes. Shut up and shrink yourself."

Tenebrous Melancholy of the Umbral Sands let out a *snuff* noise, the feline equivalent of an exasperated huff. She reared back up to her full height, sitting on her haunches and looking down at us with a most sour-lipped expression, her thick, dark mane framed from behind by the drifting sky-mists and the dimly visible upside-down castle piled in the sky.

Then, in less than the blink of an eye, she was suddenly a sixth of her size. The sphinx went from a seventy-foot colossus — which my brain said should not even be moving — to a mere ten-foot giant blocking our way down the rose-brick road.

"Thank you, dear sister," said Sevens. "Now I will ask you again: what are you doing here? Are you escort, or obstacle?"

Mel yawned, slow and lazy, raising a front paw to her mouth in a very un-cat like gesture. "Goodness me, you can be such a bore. I think I preferred you during your *Grand Guignol* phase. Don't you remember how much fun that was? Recall that party of jesters we had skinned, what a great show!" She stood up and padded silently over to Saldis's closed sphere, now only about four feet taller than the grey machine, like a cat with a beach ball. She sniffed the top of the sphere and batted at it with one paw, but it still refused to budge. "Why can't you put your favourite human though some good old blood and guts, some proper ultra-violence?"

"She does enough of that to herself," said Seven-Shades-of-Quietly-Boastful.

Mel's attention flicked back to us for a second, a cat distracted by a dancing string. "Does she now?"

"Look at her, sister," said Sevens. "I am not responsible for any of that claret."

Mel ran her bronze-on-yellow eyes up and down my body, taking in the blood all over my sleeves and down the front of my hoodie and crusted around my nostrils. Her wide, dusky-chocolate face was so

expressive, eyes scrunched in curiosity, nose twitching with interest, lips pouted in consideration. I stared back, feeling disgusting but defiant, straightening my spine as best I could to show off my trophies, though they were all my own blood. *Look all you want*, I thought. *I survive this and more, regularly.*

“Mmmm, hmmmmmmm-mmmmm, a bloody mess, yes!” Mel grinned. “Has she been feasting upon her enemies? I approve!”

I sighed under my breath. “Something like that.”

“That only means she would be even better suited to your former style, sister,” Mel purred. “Why not make a grand return? We can dress the stage with her glistening entrails, paint the boards with her pretty brains. What say you, sister? How about a collaboration?”

“Try me,” I hissed. Mel glanced at me, unconcerned but curious.

“One does not do violence upon the object of one’s heart,” said Sevens, measured and calm.

“Oh, tosh and nonsense!” Mel huffed. “I did plenty of that to plenty of strapping young things, though mine were admittedly more carnal. They usually ended up in my belly.” She returned her attention to Saldis’ closed sphere, suddenly raising a paw and batting quickly several times against the unyielding grey surface. “And what is *this*? Why won’t it move?! This is intolerable!”

“Our methods of expressing love are very different,” said Seven-Shades-of-Unerringly-Polite. “If you presume to critique mine, then I shall return the favour.”

Melancholy paused in her futile attack on Saldis’ sphere, shooting a suspicious look at Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. “Love? Stage-infatuation is not love. As soon as the play is over, she becomes immortalised in the moments of the performance, but not beyond that. You are wasting her potential. You wish to repeat a story forever, sterile and incomplete. Let us use her properly. You want the milk, not the cow, and have mistaken the latter for the former.”

“Cow?!” I blurted out, outrage overcoming intimidation. “Excuse me!”

“What if the performance itself continues forever?” Sevens asked.

Melancholy snorted. “These creatures are short-lived, they do not

last, not even uplifted like this scrap of muscle and bone.” She nodded at me again. “But pain? Pain lingers forever. I should know. You want to critique my love, with your head full of rainbows? I am a vision of how you will end up.”

Sevens shrugged delicately, slender shoulders rising along with her crisp white blouse. “You never understood love. I do.”

Melancholy rolled her razor-sharp, yellow eyes and then returned her attention to Saldis’ sphere, peering around the sides for a hidden opening. She reared up on her hind legs and tackled the machine with her whole body, all ten muscular feet of herself, trying to roll it along. The machine did not oblige, but stayed firmly fixed to the ground. She took a moment to bite at it, then grunted in frustration.

“Besides, I do not think she loves you, sister,” she purred.

“I know,” Sevens answered, without a second’s hesitation.

“Not yet,” I spoke up, tired of being a bystander. Melancholy spared me a glance as she let the sphere go and fell back to her feet, the interest of a cat toward prey making a mistake during a clumsy escape. “I’m thinking about it. But I can hardly think it over properly when I’m in the middle of an emergency. Which you are adding to. Are you barring our way?”

Melancholy stared me down for several heartbeats, but I refused to squirm or shrink. She gave up on the sphere and padded back to Sevens and me, tail swishing slowly, bronze pupils dilating, making no effort to hide her predatory body language as she crept closer. The forest-knight’s axe inched past my shoulder in a futile effort to ward her off. My tentacles drifted back and forth, ready to strike or curl into a protective ball. Inside, I was shuddering and swallowing down a hiccup, but I did my best not to show my fear. I was a predator too — or at least I could be, at my most abyssal and ruthless. I tried to channel that into my stare, into my body language. Melancholy stopped six or seven feet away and tossed her head.

“The strange hybrid’s heart belongs to another,” she said.

“Several others, yes,” Sevens sighed. “And that is acceptable. Encouraged, even. Sister, this is getting tiresome. May we pass?”

“That is not what I mean. Her heart belongs to another.

Completely.”

“May. We. Pass?”

“You may not.”

Sevens had no quick retort to the refusal, which made my heart pound against my ribs with sudden worry. I shot a sidelong look at her, but her face gave nothing away. Instead I cleared my throat and asked, “Is that why you’ve chosen a sphinx as your mask? To bar my way?”

“It is not for your sake, hybrid. I wore this for so long it began to feel more real than my own face,” she purred, slinking closer on silent paws. “I am the Sphinx of Thebes, for she is no more, her bones worn away to dust and joined with the sands. There is only me left to keep the memory alive.”

Tail swishing, eyes flashing, she peeled back her lips and ran her tongue along her exposed teeth. I think it was meant to be a threat, but it was somehow mis-calibrated.

“I thought you’d have sharper teeth,” I said, but wasn’t sure why I wanted to irritate her.

“And I thought you’d have a sharper mind,” she shot back.

“Let us pass,” said Sevens. “Or you and I will come to blows.”

“Not without a riddle,” purred the sphinx. “One to open your rainbow-clouded eyes, sister.”

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” I hissed. “Really? Really, this is what we’re doing? I’m so hungry I could eat *you*, so get it over with.”

“You are the one who chose to be here, Melancholy,” said Sevens, her calm voice dripping with understated reproach. “This is not your usual haunt. You can’t declare this is a toll road based on your whims alone. This road is the property of the king.”

“Who do you think sent me?” Mel growled. “Our geometry obsessed brother was the one here of his own accord.” She tossed her head to indicate the glowing trapezoid which had vanished up into the jumble of the castle. Her lips curled into a dark smile. “Though I would not say I am here under duress. I am rather enjoying this.”

“Then you are to be my object lesson?” Sevens asked, airy and unconcerned. “Consider the object presented, the lesson

acknowledged. You have performed your function. Now stand aside.”

Melancholy’s smile did not diminish. “Still, I must ask the riddle. It is the nature of the mask.”

“I am afraid that Heather is a student of literature,” said Sevens. “She knows all your riddles.”

“Do I?” I snapped, losing control at last. Then I hiccuped, loud and awkward. “Do I really? And you!” I blazed at the sphinx. “What are you going to do if I answer incorrectly? I’ve escaped the jaws of much larger creatures than you. I can melt your digestive system if you even try.”

“Then so be it. I will melt.”

“We do not have time for this silliness,” Sevens said, with a tone that would have sent me into stuttering apologies if she’d turned it my way. “Heather is exhausted and hungry and has already secured an audience with father. Stand aside, sister.”

“No exceptions,” Mel growled. “And you cannot help her. No hints, or I will change the riddle to a harder one.”

“Try me,” I huffed.

Sevens turned to me, an ice-cold severity in her eyes. “Do not answer. Whatever she asks, it is not your responsibility.”

I flinched — but also scowled. Sevens’ mask was so severe, so impossible to resist. Under any other circumstances I would have been a very good girl and done exactly as I was told, yes please, thank you ma’am. But I was beyond exhausted and beginning to get quite angry.

“Are you ready, hybrid?” Mel purred, padding another few steps forward, closing the gap to arm’s reach. My heart tried to escape through the front of my ribs. Try as I might to restrain them, my tentacles whirled back up into a defensive posture, a ring of muscled threat ready to whip and punch and lash. Mel eyed them carefully and stopped her advance. “Greater warriors than you have fallen beneath my claws.”

I snorted out a laugh, almost hysterical, at my wit’s end. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m not a warrior. I’m a university student.”

“... students today are truly impressive,” Mel purred, raising an eyebrow at my tentacles. “Ready or not, here I come.”

“Do not answer,” Sevens repeated, cold and hard. It took an effort of will not to meet her eyes.

“She must,” Mel purred.

“A wrong answer will bind you. Do not.”

“Nothing can bind me that I do not choose,” I murmured. “Ask your riddle, sphinx. If I get it wrong, I will be the one eating you.”

My words came out calm only because I was beyond tired, beyond caring, but also a little curious.

Melancholy settled back on her leonine haunches, watching me with deceptively sleepy eyes. In that moment of stillness she looked like a statue carved from yellow sandstone. When she spoke, it was with lyrical rhythm, soft and slow, an assassin’s dagger of oiled silver drawn from a scabbard of human leather. Each syllable lingered in the milky, pale air.

“Begun together, but forever parted. The same in form, but not inside. Mistaken for one alone, sometimes for mischief, but never for another. What am I?”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“... why would you ask me that?”

Melancholy just stared, heavy-lidded and inscrutable.

“Do not answer,” said Sevens. “You do not have—”

“I know the answer,” I snapped, unsure if I should feel humiliated or furious.

“You have heard this one before?” Melancholy purred, making no effort to feign surprise.

I sighed. “Of course not, I suspect you made it up on the spot. But it’s obvious. Why ask me that?”

“What is your answer?”

I glanced at Sevens; she was watching me. Her intense, unreadable expression showed a tiny flaw, a faint tightness around her wide and staring eyes. This riddle was written for me, but we both knew

it was aimed at her.

“What if I refuse to answer?” I asked.

“Mmmm,” Mel rumbled. “Then you may not proceed.”

“What if I say I’m willing to fight you instead of answering?”

Mel tilted her head, the exact gesture of a cat considering a particularly stupid dog. “Then perhaps you do love Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, but in the wrong way. And for that I will eat you, bones and brain and all, correct answer or not.”

Guilt stirred in my chest. Tenebrous Melancholy of the Umbral Sands was correct. Love without respect was not love at all.

But I didn’t want to hurt Sevens. And I didn’t know what that desire implied.

“Your answer?” Mel prompted.

“Twins,” I surrendered. “The answer to your riddle is *twins*.”

Sevens tightened her grip on my hand. Melancholy did not react, staring down at me from ten feet up with all the languid illusion of a predator at rest. But I didn’t raise my tentacles, I didn’t tense up, I didn’t even hiccup.

“Correct,” Melancholy purred.

“Of course it’s correct!” I snapped. “Of course I would know that answer. As if I’m not consumed by it every day. In everything I do for the last ten years there has been a gaping hole, an absence, a missing presence by my side. And maybe that makes me not an ordinary twin at all, maybe I’m unhealthy and obsessed with her, but I don’t care about that. It doesn’t matter how happy I can feel in the moment or how many friends I make or how many people sleep in my bed with me. She is not here. Of course I know what you’re talking about, and it is a cruel trick to use that fact in this way. You are a horrid thing.”

“See, sister?” Melancholy asked. “She loves another.”

True guilt spread through my chest and belly like a web of rot. I’d forgotten how the Yellow King’s progeny made everything into a performance, made every emotional point with endless theatrics, and knew everything they required about the subjects of their plays. Melancholy had made a good point: I was using Sevens. Not just

right now to help me deal with this emergency, to help me reach her father and get home, but ultimately to help me rescue Maisie.

The same way I was using everyone else in my life.

It was true. I loved another, and I would do anything to get her back. Even exploit the love of an Outsider godling daughter.

I turned my eyes away, staring down at the rose-pink bricks and the pale grass beyond the road. Dry words stuck in my throat. I wanted to hide inside my squid-skull mask again. My tentacles bunched around my torso in a protective ball and I moved to slip my hand out of Sevens' grip. I didn't deserve what she was offering, I didn't deserve any of this, I was using her, lying to her, manipulating her. But she tightened her grip again.

"... no," I murmured. "Sevens, no, I—"

"I am enlightened, sister," Sevens said, cool and calm, her words cutting through my guilt like a red-hot scalpel, cauterising healthy flesh to burn out infection.

"Mm?" Melancholy purred.

"I have been enlightened as to why you remain in that form after so many years. If you donned a mask which required clothing, you would struggle to dress yourself in the morning, for you are so very stupid."

"Sevens!" I squeaked. "She isn't wrong, she—"

"All relationships contain a transactional element," Sevens continued smoothly. "The existence of the transaction itself is not a negative, or a corruption of pure intent, or a flaw in a perfect diamond. It is a prerequisite. Only the content of the transaction can be negative. Observe." She turned to me. "Heather, may I kiss you?"

"What?" My mouth fell open. I glanced at her lips, soft and pink and stern. "Now? Here?"

"Here and now."

I started to blush. "Um ... Sevens, I—I—"

"It is not necessary, but we both desire it." She turned back to Melancholy. "I wish to claim her lips and feel them against mine. She wishes the same toward me. We make a transaction of pleasure,

and further enjoy the pleasure inflicted upon each other.”

“*Inflicted?*” I whined.

“This principle is fractally nested and can be applied at any level. But it is not equal, it can never be equal. I would enjoy the kiss more than her,” Sevens explained to Melancholy. “Love is not rainbows and fairy-tale endings, sister. It is messy and hard work, constant and unrelenting. The rescue of her sister will bring her joy, which will bring me joy. And she will benefit more than I, and that I accept. That is love, sister.”

Melancholy’s human face twisted with slow disgust, tail swishing, claws flexing. She even began to show her teeth in a silent snarl.

Sevens drove home the knife, “Only a romantic fool convinces themselves’ otherwise. A dreamer who ends up pining for something which they imagined as pure, but was only pure because it was stillborn, never tested, never admitted. It was not real.”

“It was real!” Melancholy bellowed. I flinched. Sevens did not.

“Then why do you wear her face?” Sevens asked. “When you could wear the one with which you loved her?”

Melancholy huffed through her nose and rose from her haunches, sliding her massive claws out from between the furry toes of her paws. For a second I was terrified we had provoked a fight, but she tossed her head and slid the claws away again, then padded over toward Saldis’ sphere machine. “The riddle is answered, your way is clear. When you see father, tell him he is a whore’s pox-ridden slit.”

Sevens and I shared a glance. I let out a shuddering breath as the tension left me. She shrugged minutely.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Anything for you,” Sevens murmured, for my ears alone.

“But this one may not proceed,” Melancholy growled, sniffing the blocks of the grey sphere machine, a dark frown on her face.

“Hiding in a shell, pretending to be a ball of stone. My nose is not so easily led astray. I was not sent for you, but you have irritated me. You must answer a riddle too, whatever manner of soft meat lies within.” She sat back on her haunches, adopting a haughty and unimpressed expression. “Open up, coward.”

To absolutely nobody's surprise, Saldis did not open up — but I gasped in shock when her sphere-machine began to roll forward, the grey blocks click-click-clicking against the surface of the rose-brick road, heading straight for the sphinx as if to brush her aside.

Tenebrous Melancholy of the Umbral Sands let out a lion's roar.

She launched herself at the grey sphere, battering it with hammer-blows from her paws, raking at it with claws as long as knives. The sphere stopped, but nothing could penetrate the imperishable material; Saldis' shell was far too well-made to be breached by a cat, no matter how big. The sphinx landed a dozen more blows, then rocked back on her paws to catch her breath; the sphere moved forward again but Mel threw herself at it with renewed frenzy, stopping it in its tracks.

"I may not be able to rend you limb from limb," Melancholy growled, "but you may not pass without a correct answer, snail-thing!"

Sevens bent down to my ear, her ruler-straight blonde hair brushing my cheek, and whispered, "Let's carry on. Leave them to their fun."

"But, Saldis ... "

Saldis tried to inch forward again. Mel threw herself at the sphere, slashing and slamming. She couldn't actually stop it from moving, but Saldis seemed unwilling to run her down or ram into her. Like this, it would take days for Saldis to inch to the open invitation of the palace doors, still a half-mile's walk further down the rose-brick road.

"Better she doesn't come with us," Sevens whispered. "After all, don't you want to visit my room? Just the two of us."

I went wide-eyed at Seven-Shades-of-Seriously-Seductive, my cheeks flushing bright red, my palm suddenly clammy in her hand. Her wide, staring, intense eyes were unreadable as she looked down at me, just that tiny bit taller than myself.

"W-why—"

"You can sit down and rest before your audience with my father. Have something to eat. Nap. I'll keep you company, kitten."

I very nearly left Saldis behind. Can you blame me? I wouldn't have blamed me. I'd have given myself a pat on the back.

Suddenly, a little black dot came scurrying over the pale grass beyond the rose-brick road; it seemed to have come from nowhere, burst from some hole hidden by an invisible fold in the flat landscape. Before anybody could react, it shot across the ground and onto the surface of the road, right beneath Melancholy's whirling paws.

"Kyaaa!" the sphinx let out a shriek, a cartoon scream completely unsuited for her predatory elegance and power.

Yellow eyes gone wide, she backpedaled away from the grey sphere, paws flailing in the air with the ungainly comedy of a cat with all grace discarded. She fell onto her side and scrambled back to her feet, wings flapping uselessly, hissing and spitting at—

A rat.

A sleek, fat, black rat, up on his hind legs in the middle of the road, staring down a sphinx hundreds of times his own size.

"Coward!" Melancholy bellowed again. "You—"

The rat scurried at her a second time, looping around her feet and past her rump, unafraid of the weight of her paws as she danced on the spot as if suddenly standing on hot coals. She yowled and screamed and backed away again, fleeing from the rat in cringing disgust. But he followed, forcing her back with nothing except paradoxical fear.

"Oh my goodness, oh!" I blurted out, struggling not to laugh as I raised a hand to cover my mouth. It was horrifying — Melancholy could have crushed the poor rat to paste if she'd tried, but seeing such a massive, dignified feline act like a spooked kitten was too much.

Saldis' grey sphere machine suddenly blossomed open down the front. She came out laughing too, leaning through the opening with one foot up on the lip of the machine, her other two rats perched on her shoulders.

"That's right, Mótsognir!" she cheered through her laughter. "Give her the ol' one-two knockout!"

For a split second, Melancholy's yellow eyes blazed past her tiny opponent to fix Saldis with a look of impotent rage. Her whole body tensed, wings cracking the air, ready to pounce with her powerful

back legs — but then Mótsognir the rat leapt at her face and she yowled, scrambling back on skidding paws.

A strong hand caught the rat mid-leap.

No more sphinx. No more ten-foot monster born from Earthly myth. In her place stood a woman, undoubtedly human, with dark skin and darker hair in long messy curls, dressed in sandals and sun-bleached, loose-fitting robes over mismatched pieces of bronze armour, which left her muscled arms exposed. She wore a sword on a belt around her waist, in a scuffed, unadorned scabbard. Past middle-age, her face was lined by care and weather, but her eyes were sharp and intelligent — and very yellow. She scowled at Mótsognir as she held the rat at arm's length.

Mótsognir twisted and turned, but Melancholy's new mask had him firmly by the scuff of his neck.

"I wouldn't suggest irritating him," Saldis called out, gently mocking as she struggled not to smile too hard. "He can be most vicious when roused."

Lips pursed, with a scowl of such thunder it could have given Evelyn a run for her money, Melancholy marched up to Saldis and held out the rat.

"Your property, I believe," she said, in an accent I'd never heard before, an accent that probably didn't exist anymore, of lilting vowels and sharp consonants.

"Why thank you, lady of the sands," Saldis said, grinning wide. She accepted Mótsognir back and cradled him against her chest. The rat looked particularly pleased with himself. Melancholy did not; she put her hands on her hips as Saldis said, "And with this demonstration, I take it there's no need for further riddles?"

"I always hated the damn things," Melancholy answered, tight and hard, with an expression like she wanted to punch Saldis square in the face.

"I—" I blurted out. "I'm sorry for laughing! I couldn't help it!"

Melancholy waved me away with an irritated flick of one calloused hand, not even bothering to meet my eyes. "I laughed at her enough in life."

"It is good to see you being honest again, sister," Sevens spoke up.

“Tch!” Melancholy snorted. Apparently this new mask was not one for banter. She turned away, showing us a cold shoulder as she stalked past Saldis’ machine and the forest-knight, his weapon now slung over his shoulder again. She headed up the rose-brick road, away from the palace, leaving us behind. She threw words back over her shoulder, “I hope you find what you’re looking for, Seven-Shades, but I’m afraid you’re staring into an empty grave.”

“Where will I find father?” Sevens called after her, soft yet sharp.

“At the centre of the party,” she shot over her shoulder without turning back, sandals slapping on the rose-brick road. “Where else?”

We watched her leave, rolling her shoulders to pull her robes tighter, until she dwindled to a figure trudging across the pale landscape, half-lost in the milky mist.

“What a delightful woman,” Saldis sighed with genuine admiration. “I would like to meet her again, though not when she’s barring my way.”

“Is she going to the library?” I asked Sevens.

Sevens shrugged delicately. “Unlikely.” She looked at me, a lingering and meaningful look with those intense eyes. “Shall we?”

“Quite!” Saldis said, settling back into her seat.

“Not you,” Sevens said to her. “Be quiet.”

Nothing now stood between us and the palace gatehouse except half a mile of rose-brick road across the pale plain. A pair of huge wooden doors waited, wide open, large enough to admit the sphinx herself with double the room to spare. I nodded, gathering myself as best I could and matching Sevens’ step as we walked on.

The palace loomed over us as we drew closer, but I tried not to look up. The way it was piled up on itself in endless layers drew the eye inward in a dizzying spiral, as if looking down into a pit without a bottom. The forest-knight marched behind us without a care. Saldis trundled along at our rear, chattering nonsense about the sphinx and other half-animals, but I wasn’t listening, I was trying to focus on what I was going to say to the Yellow King — if indeed he decided to adopt a form that would listen to me at all. My guts churned and my head swam with growing nerves.

Without the fearful distractions of giant lions or screaming

geometry, I stared ahead, past the palace doors. A massive corridor was visible beyond, but it seemed to shrink tight after only a little way, perhaps a hundred meters — then it stretched and kinked and turned at angles which made my eyes itch, even at this distance.

As we drew close, I caught snatches of laughter and little snippets of piano music on the air, barely on the edge of hearing.

“Sevens? Why can I hear ... a ... party?” I asked.

“There’s always a party,” Sevens said, with an unmistakable hint of disapproval in her already cold tone. “Some best not attended.”

“I adore a good party!” Saldis announced. She even sniffed the air, though I could smell nothing beyond the grass and the mist. “Good ale and roast meat, my favourite. As long as there’s plenty to go around.”

As we approached the threshold of the palace doors, the corridor inside twisted as if seen through a fun-house mirror. With shaking hands I jammed my squid-skull mask on over my head, taking refuge behind the eye-holes.

And then, beneath the snatches of music and laughter, a distant, stone-muffled scream drifted through the air.

“Yes,” Sevens added on the last step as the palace loomed over us, “we would do well to avoid this party.”

any mortal thing – 14.17

Whatever I had become over the previous seven months, however deep I delved into occult secrets, whoever I befriended beyond the boundaries of imagination, I was still a human being. I had mixed my flesh with the invisible glory I'd brought back from the abyss; I'd grafted tentacles to my flanks and re-purposed neurons to run them; I'd grown a reactor in my belly, an organ which could ruin the career of any biologist; I'd spoken with creatures not unlike gods, stared down things worse than the devil, and apparently made impossible creatures fall in love with me.

Some people might call me a monster, what with all these tentacles waving about and a hiss in my throat and my skin flushed with tetrodotoxin, but they'd be using the word incorrectly. All these additions were still me, still Heather, still part of the human being at my core — not a corruption or an invasion. I carried a brain inside my skull. I got hungry and tired and cried sometimes. I had to sit down to use the toilet. I was fleshy and soft and scrawny, I bruised easily, and I got terribly sore whenever I sat hunched up in a chair for too long without stretching.

None of that was anything to be ashamed of, despite the moments of terrible dissociation when I looked down at myself and saw rotting meat wrapped around a glugging chemical factory. I felt sunlight on my skin, I filled my lungs with air, I ate chocolate and strawberries — those not earmarked for Praem, anyway. I snuggled up in bed alongside Raine and laughed with my friends and melted under the stream of a hot shower; all of those things were worth experiencing. Worth holding onto. Worth existing for. Praem and Zheng agreed, it was better than the abyss. If I didn't believe that, then why try to rescue Maisie at all? Why try to give all of this back to her? Whatever I looked like and wherever I'd been, I was still human.

And the royal palace of the King in Yellow was not designed for human minds.

When Sevens and I stepped over the threshold, hand in hand beneath the stone arch and past the massive wooden doors, my

senses came under assault.

“Are we going directly to the King?” I asked from behind the false safety of my squid-skull mask. I stared out through the eye-holes at the twisted stone corridor, hoping it was just an optical illusion. Perhaps it would resolve as we drew closer. Then again, perhaps Raine would appear with a chocolate ice cream for me. Both were equally likely.

“You need food.” Sevens answered, soft and calm as she guided me the first few steps into her father’s palace. Her voice drowned out the sounds of the distant party — the muffled music and the hubbub of a crowd. “Water too. Perhaps a short rest.”

At the mention of water, I swallowed on reflex. I hadn’t hydrated in hours and my throat felt dry as a desert. We’d had a long walk and several frightening confrontations, and I hadn’t stopped in all that time. Sevens was right — if it wasn’t for the bioreactor pumping away in my belly, I’d have already collapsed from hunger and exhaustion. Even entertaining that thought made my eyelids droop and my feet drag like lead weights.

But the King in Yellow was close. Once I reached him, either he would help me or he wouldn’t. And if he did, home beckoned.

“No,” I croaked. “Straight to your father. Rest when I’m home.”

“Heather—”

“Rest when I’m home,” I repeated.

“If you do not schedule time for rest, your body will schedule it for you,” said Sevens.

“I don’t need rest,” I lied. My free hand crept into my hoodie’s front pocket, bumping the golden pendent Saldis had given to me. I pressed my fingers against my belly through my hoodie and t-shirt, against the inner warmth of the bioreactor. I concentrated on drawing out another control rod, edging toward the red zone of overload, but not quite there yet. “Don’t need ... rest ... ”

I made it six steps before the assault on my senses grew too heavy to ignore.

The stone corridor ahead of us was all wrong, twisting and kinking like a novelty hallway in a haunted house. The floor ended up on the ceiling and the ceiling became the floor; the walls jinked one

way and then the other, but somehow did not occlude the view further on, a spacial paradox; the width of the corridor shrank down to a single hand-span, impossible to squeeze through, before expanding out into unclear lines, the walls themselves wavering like melting wax. For a split second I started to sigh an unimpressed laugh and shake my head — was this really the best the King in Yellow had to offer? Funhouse mirrors? But this was no comedy illusion.

Trying to follow any straight line made my eyes itch, then burn, then ignited a deep ache behind my eyeballs, a throbbing pain in my optic nerve.

Blinking away stinging tears behind the eye-holes of my squid-skull mask, I tried to focus on the transition points of the hallway — the place where stonework gave way to elegant plaster inlaid with golden-yellow scroll-work, the beginning of the rich red carpets and intricate rugs, the first of the side-doors made of heavy polished oak. But that went no better. Stone was replaced by plaster, yes, that was undeniable, but the transition between materials eluded my sight. The point where one ended and the other began seemed to slide away from my attention like a cluster of exposed cockroaches, accompanied by a giggling on the edge of my hearing. It was the same with the doors: in my peripheral vision I could see one door, sensibly shut, singular — but when I looked at it there were suddenly a dozen doors lining the corridor, some of them massive, some tiny, some ten feet off the floor. Coals glowed in braziers and glow globes shone from the walls, but some of them were upside down, clinging to the ceiling, or cast negative-light which struggled against the illumination of their fellows, multiplying or vanishing when I looked their way.

My eyes throbbed like bruises and I started to feel sick before I realised. The issue was not with the architecture, it was with the capacity of my senses. I could not process the reality of this place. Funhouse mirrors and haunted-house hallways were the best metaphors my mind could summon.

And those metaphors were too fragile to protect me.

“Everything is going to be all right,” whispered Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. She must have picked up on my tension through my clammy palm, but I doubted she saw as I did.

Another couple of steps and my inner ear went haywire at the twist of the corridor beneath my feet; my head span and my balance routed, tentacles whirling in panic to catch myself on empty air. Not a single angle was correct, not even those of my own body; this space was not designed for anything even remotely like me. When I gasped, the corridor captured the sound of my own voice and hurled it along the trajectory of a dozen different echoes, returning to my ears as jagged whispers reflected from surfaces complex beyond my comprehension. My head whirled with alien pressure, the unreachable canals of my ears itched like fire, and my stomach clenched up to purge the toxin of illusion.

Sevens caught me, hand in mine.

Her other arm looped around my waist, tight and strong. All my tentacles wrapped around her, clinging to her like driftwood in a storm. I whimpered in pain and disorientation.

“I’ve got you, kitten,” she whispered, cool and dry.

But the palace architecture had infected my hearing.

Sevens’ voice reached my ears as a jumbled mess of overlapping sound, three or four sets of the same words mangled and shredded and recombined. Even stranger was a doubling effect — below the calm, collected tones of Seven-Shades-of-Sober-Soothing, other voices writhed: a twitchy, breathy rush of hyperactive nervous energy; the crack and cackle of an ancient crone mocking my discomfort; a dozen others less easily identifiable; and a noise that was not a voice at all but an abyssal howling, not real sound but something else, something other, processed through human sensory apparatus.

The Heather of seven months prior would have recoiled in screaming horror; the be-tentacled Heather of then, wearing a helmet made from an Outsider squid and seriously contemplating romance with a dangerous shade of yellow, sighed through her teeth with mounting frustration.

“Dangerous architecture, really?” I said.

“Take a moment, find your feet. I am here,” Sevens said with that awful screech that lay behind her words. “Literally, look at your feet. I will guide you.”

“Don’t know if that’ll help,” I croaked. “Also you sound awful.”

“ ... excuse me?”

I was already staring down at my feet, my scuffed dirty trainers next to Sevens' neatly polished black shoes, but the angles on those were all wrong as well. Enclosure by the walls of the palace did not exempt anything from the corruption of my senses. My trainers were jagged one second, then elongated in another, then gone in a blink and back in the next, along with my feet.

The vision of my own ankles twisting and jinking made my stomach do a back flip. I retched, but held on, perhaps because my stomach was empty.

Afraid of what I might see if I looked at Sevens, instead I sagged against her and craned back over my shoulder, at Saldis and the forest-knight. Both of them had entered the palace a few steps behind us.

Saldis was peering out of the opening of her sphere, gawking around at the corridor like a country bumpkin in the big city. Her rats scurried about her shoulders, over-stimulated and unafraid. I'd half expected to see her buttoned up tight inside her sphere, but it was easy to forget how little of the human remained in Saldis. The knight had never been human, but he had been Earthly. He was no more meant to be out here than me. But Lozzie's modifications had gifted him the metaphysical tools to survive. Imperishable armour or Outsider biology, he stood tall, axe over his shoulder, unperturbed.

“Just me then,” I squeezed out, stomach turning over and ready to hurl. Why was I the only one experiencing this effect?

As soon as I dared ask the question in the privacy of my own mind, the truth presented itself, a dark leviathan wallowing in the black swamp at the bottom of my soul. The Eye's lessons readied the answer for me, began to supply the hyperdimensional mathematics behind this architecture, burning white-hot inside my skull.

I slammed my eyes shut with a gasp, sealing myself into the dark.

Sevens was saying, “I will get you to my father, but first you need —”

“I am five hundred percent too hungry and too tired and too small for this,” I groaned. “I want out of here, Sevens. The King, your father, first. Now.”

"It's incredible," Saldis breathed in genuine awe, voice quivering at me from fifty different directions as it bounced and reflected and reconverged. "And this is just the foyer! I feel like I'm standing at the gates of *Miklagard* all over again."

"Shut. Up," I hissed, eyes still clamped tight. "Please shut up. Every sound is wrong."

"Lady Morell? You—"

"Shh!" Sevens hushed her. The sound was like a blowtorch in my ears. I heard a flump, presumably Saldis flopping back into her seat with theatrical obedience, but no more words.

I hoped for merciful silence, but the walls of the palace whispered with the sounds of the distant party — tinkling laughter and hearty guffaws, a skipping record player hastily reset, snatches of classical music and jazz played atop each other, all muffled behind miles of wall, all distorted into jagged nightmares.

And the screams, even more distant. Screams and gurgles and strangled cries.

I shivered and tried to draw Sevens' cloak tighter around my shoulders, but it wasn't big enough.

Sevens squeezed my hand. She had to do it three times before I finally caught on and squeezed back. She pulled me gently, with my tentacles still clinging to her for support, and led on.

For the next twenty minutes, Seven-Shades-of-Seeing became my eyes. Without the sensory assault of the architecture and our own mangled voices, I regained most of my sense of balance, but my inner ear sometimes glimpsed snatches of truth. Sometimes I could feel we were walking at an impossible angle, mounting a slope where the wall should be, or that the ceiling should be touching my head, or that we'd turned in a spiral despite walking in a straight line. We passed into vast open spaces where our footsteps echoed among stars, down corridors my stomach told me were suspended over bottomless pits, and over walkways which I knew in my gut were exposed to the open air, upside down over the misty landscape below. I felt rugs beneath my shoes of such luxuriant texture they must have cost a king's ransom, but I was spared exposure to any other decoration.

Thrice on our short journey, we encountered the dangling tendrils

of the party, like the snares of a jellyfish waiting for unwary prey.

The first time, I heard a door open ahead of us, a loud click followed by a sudden swelling of the distant laughter and music. Sevens hissed, “Stop.” I obeyed, frozen in sudden terror.

Thankfully the sound was quickly sealed away again, the door closing once more with a gentle *tock* of wood-on-wood. Sevens waited several heartbeats. I felt like a rodent crouched beneath a log, uncertain if the predators had moved on, but then Sevens squeezed my hand twice and her confidence flowed into me. Even with my eyes closed I could feel her chin held high, her shoulders set back, her eyes intense and wide.

The second time was much worse.

We were in some kind of junction, perhaps a crossroads, caught right in the middle when it happened — I have no idea how I knew that, perhaps gut instinct, perhaps the echoes of our footsteps, or perhaps I didn’t need eyes to see in that place. From our left, far away down a corridor, a cacophony began on the edge of my hearing. Voices all a-jumble like a hundred people talking over each other in excitement, the slap and squeak of hurrying feet and stumbles and little hops, laughter too, high and rich and low and manic with pain. And screaming. Lots of screaming. Pain-screaming and fear-screaming and the screaming of lost minds.

It was like an approaching wave, at first a gentle trickle on the edge of perception, easily mistaken for one’s imagination, then building to an onrushing torrent in the very moment of listening, faster than one could react.

I had the horrible sense of crossing a ford at the exact moment of a tidal swell. I almost opened my eyes and looked, but I am endlessly thankful that I did not.

Sevens didn’t bother to say stop. She grabbed me in a hug and clung on tight.

“Don’t move a muscle,” she whispered in my ear.

The tidal wave of people — and I suppose they were people, by my definition, though not human — hit us a split second later in a torrent of voices, a few perhaps speaking human languages, but none of them English and most of them painful. A mass of stampeding feet stomped and clattered and rattled past us, many of

them audibly not feet at all, but hooves or suckers or other things I couldn't identify by sound. Several shadows passed over us, blocking what little light filtered through my closed eyelids. Other shapes slithered and bumped and rolled across the floor inches from my feet. The screaming came from several distinct points amid the wall of sound, held aloft or muffled behind bars or stretched out by unthinkable mechanisms.

Scent got inside my squid-skull helmet — cigar smoke and sickly perfume and unnameable spices; sweat and blood and excrement. A whiff of roast pork teased my nose. That was too much for my empty stomach, roiling so hard I felt sick, a trickle of drool running down my chin. But I was no idiot. I knew what that smell really was.

When the crowd passed and the screaming departed and we were left alone again, I did not ask Sevens if I could have some bacon.

She let go of me very slowly. I was shivering and shaking all over, feeling drained despite the power of the bioreactor still thrumming away in my belly; the sheer density of sensory processing issues as the crowd had passed by had left me exhausted on a deeper level than the mere physical. I felt like I was turning grey. I clung to Sevens with all my tentacles, desperate to curl up in a ball and go to sleep, dreading the effort of taking another step.

“Can't ... ” I croaked.

She squeezed my hand. *You can*, it said.

“Oh, oh goodness me, goodness me,” Saldis breathed in awe, her voice like a broken radio broadcast. “Now that is a party I truly wish to join in with. Well, assuming I wouldn't end up on the menu.”

“Shhh,” Sevens hissed.

The third and final brush with the party was barely contact at all. A minute or two after the encounter in the crossroads, when I was walking with a dragging step, breathing too hard, and covered in a sheet of sweat beneath my squid-skull mask, a fourth set of footsteps joined us.

Behind mine and Sevens' and the almost imperceptible scuff of the forest-knight's march, beneath the occasional clicking of Saldis' sphere-machine whenever we passed over stone or wood —

footsteps, tapping. *Tap-tap-tap*. At first the footsteps followed far behind us, easily lost amid the distant sounds of the party, but they quickly caught up. Smart dress shoes rapping along wooden floors, each step precise and measured. My heart juddered in sudden fear as I realised what I was hearing.

“Sevens!” I hissed.

“Keep walking,” she whispered back. “We are safe.”

I winced at the mangled sound of her voice, but I did as I was told.

The footsteps caught up with Sevens and me, then matched our pace and walked with us. I expected Saldis to say some inane greeting out loud, but when she didn’t speak my shoulder blades began to itch, cold sweat on my back. What exactly was walking alongside us? I felt no imposing presence, no displacement of air, no furnace-hot blast of attention, murderous intent, or predatory instinct. One of my tentacles began to inch outward, driven by the need to locate and identify a potential threat, but I reeled it back in with a force of will.

Seconds lengthened to minutes and nothing happened. Exhaustion dragged me back down into the false relaxation of hazy consciousness and micro-sleeps. The human body might go on forever when supplied with limitless energy, but the human mind needs rest, recuperation, and reorganisation. *Defragmenting*, Raine had once called it, like a computer. It didn’t matter how much raw energy my bioreactor dumped into my bloodstream, I was truly fatigued. A headache cocktail of sleep deprivation and stress lulled me into a stumbling walk, breathing too hard, hanging off Sevens’ arm to keep myself upright, half-asleep behind my own eyes.

I jerked awake when the owner of the footsteps increased their pace and pulled ahead of us. I almost opened my eyes on reflex, but by a miracle of luck, I kept them shut. I was about to breathe a silent sigh of relief, when a single irregular note disrupted the departing metronome of our unseen escort, a footstep out of place as they turned.

A noise split the air, a sound like a rusty saw dragged back and forth through frozen meat.

“*Good speaking to you, sister,*” it said.

I barely resisted screaming at the assault from that awful sound. My

tentacles whipped away from Sevens to wrap around my torso in a protective ball; I felt the sudden emptiness as my body tried and failed to dump more adrenaline into my system. Like a knee collapsing under one's weight.

The footsteps trotted off but the damage was done: the creeping corruption of the palace reached my sense of touch.

Perhaps it was the fault of that unspeakable voice, or perhaps it was the end result of keeping my eyes shut, heightening the focus of my other senses, my awareness of sound and scent and the sensations on my skin. More likely it was a speedball of exhaustion and hunger that left me vulnerable. Too long propped up by abyssal approximation of human biology.

Suddenly, Sevens' hand in mine was both right here, fingers laced together, and miles away across a void of cold vacuum. My weight against her side was both a close snuggle between two vaguely human-sized creatures, but at the same time it felt like the grinding of a pair of tectonic plates. My shoes were open mouths wrapped around my feet and my own skin was too constricting, a strait jacket suddenly crushing my lungs with my own flesh. My hair follicles ached and my eyeballs were too large and my fingernails needed to come out, had to come out, had to go, right now, *right now*.

I think I choked on thin air. I think I opened my eyes. I think a strong pair of arms scooped me up around the back and behind the knees and hoisted me in a princess-carry as I whimpered and spluttered. I don't recall precisely, because that's when my consciousness flickered and went out.

The last thing I heard was Sevens, sighing. "I did ask him not to speak."

= =

Silk pillowcase.

That was my first coherent thought when my mind ebbed back. I was no stranger to this process, this drip-feed of pain and awareness, sensation leaking in until the pilot-sapience was awake enough to piece it together.

Cheek cradled by luxurious softness, hands wedged beneath the pillow in an instinctive hug, shoulders and waist and hips and legs

cocooned by soft layers. Silken and gentle and cool. Silk pillowcase; the height of luxury.

I don't think I'd ever touched silk before, but somehow I still knew.

Consciousness breached the waves of oblivion, registered these impressions, then began to sink again, like an orca who had tasted air and decided the deep ocean was better. My limbic system whispered *sleep, recover, nothing to worry about*. I snuggled closer into the pillow and the embrace of my own tentacles, thick ropes of muscle wrapped around my torso and belly to keep me warm and snug. Distant worries and blurred impressions demanded executive function, but the executive was asleep at her fancy desk, drooling on her suit.

Silky smooth, soft and warm, cool and dry.

Where am I again? my mind asked before I went under.

Then cold and wet and wriggling and stinking of rot, grinding bone-grit into my face.

Sleep ripped apart with a gasp. I choked down a shriek, pushed myself up, heart racing like a hare, and scrambled back, away from —

A silk pillowcase.

Panting, covered in a sheen of cold flash-sweat, I sat blinking and confused for a long moment as my mind caught up, as I took in my surroundings, as my heart rate eased back down.

I was on a bed — a very fancy bed, quite possibly the fanciest bed I'd ever seen, let alone been deposited upon and allowed to burrow into like a drowsy rodent. It was large enough to sleep six or seven people — or perhaps four of Zheng — with about half a dozen crisp white sheets beneath a thick butter-yellow duvet. A small hill worth of pillows was piled against the reddish oak headboard, all of them different colours, though the one I'd been snuggled up with was a very deep, soothing, sunset yellow.

“... Sevens?” I croaked at the pillow through cracked lips, then felt very silly when it didn't answer.

Only a small corner of the bedsheets were peeled back, right where I'd been asleep, just enough space for me to snuggle my face into the pillow. A little patch of my drool had dried on the yellow

pillowcase. The rest of the bed was immaculately smooth and plush, untouched but for the divot left by my body weight. I felt like I'd violated the bed, as if I'd wandered onto a set that was never meant to be truly used, a show-piece or an artwork now forever damaged by my bodily needs.

Four wooden posters stood at the corners of the bed, with dark, heavy drapes gathered back by little ropes. Beyond those drapes was a room equally absurd, like something meant for a fairy-tale princess, all soft white walls with fancy wainscoting and little flourishes of yellow-gold leaf, the kind of interior decorating that didn't exist outside of stately homes or people with more money than taste. Imitation candle-shaped light bulbs draped soft illumination over every surface. Overlapping rugs covered a floor as large as a sitting room, though there was little other furniture — I instantly spotted my squid-skull mask and my blood-stained pink hoodie neatly placed in the middle of a small white-and-gold table, along with three matching chairs far too fancy to ever sit on. Beyond that was only a single door leading out, the same white-and-gold design with a little golden door handle. A trio of huge wardrobes flanked a makeup table, and an absolutely gigantic full-length mirror stood next to that, easily eleven or twelve feet tall.

I caught sight of myself in that mirror, so very tiny.

"I look terrible." I coughed, raising a sleep-clumsy hand to poke at my face.

Somebody had cleaned the worst of the blood, removed my hoodie, and taken away my shoes. *No prizes for guessing who*, I told myself, far too groggy to feel embarrassed. Sevens had seen worse; for all I knew, she watched me on the toilet.

I was wrapped up warm and snug in Sevens' yellow cloak, which seemed to have grown about three sizes and gained a hood large enough to lose myself inside, more like robes. My tentacles were wound about my body in a tight self-hug beneath the cloak, my very own portable sleeping bag, but I regretted that as soon as I started to unwind them — they ached like arms after sleeping at the wrong angle, knees kept bent for too long, muscles sore and stiff. I arced them outward slowly, wincing and hissing as I worked the life back into my extra limbs.

My mouth was bone dry and my eyes were gummy and thick. My

fingers were stiff and my head was full of cotton wool. I could still taste blood and I ached all over, but I'd slept for several hours. I'd come back from the brink.

But I stared at that yellow silk pillowcase. Where had that sensation of wet rot come from? A nightmare? It had felt too real for that. But this place was solid now, solid enough to run my hand over the duvet.

"Sevens?" I raised my croaking voice, casting about the room, shuffling on my knees. "Seven- ahh!"

I jumped, hand to my racing heart, at the sight of Lozzie's forest-pattern knight standing at attention on the other side of the bed. Shining chrome and star-metal axe, tall and silent. He was a welcome sight.

"Oh, I wish you'd said something before I saw you," I wheezed, my heart dialling back down again as I took several deep breaths. My head swam with the adrenaline spike. The knight didn't respond. "How long have I been asleep?"

The forest-knight raised his metallic gauntlet. Four fingers.

"Four hours?" I gaped. "Oh, blast and fiddlesticks and ... that ... that is hours, yes? Not four days. Please not four days."

The knight lowered his hand.

Couldn't be four days.

"Well, okay, well ... thank you for standing guard," I managed, then coughed several times in a futile effort to clear my throat. I felt like I'd swallowed a bottle of glue. "Sevens can't be here herself? I suppose that's something she has in common with Raine, at least, not being there when I wake up from a fugue state. She could at least ... "

I trailed off as my eyes found the bedside table next to the knight's knee.

An angel had left food for me.

A cut-crystal pitcher full of water stood next to an empty glass and a plate of sandwiches wrapped in clingfilm. My stomach rumbled so hard it hurt, nauseated with hunger. My hands shook as I pulled the plate onto my lap and ripped off the clingfilm — *clingfilm?*

Outside? My mind filed that away for later, too focused on the ravenous need to eat. Shaking and panting, my salivary glands tingled and ached at the scent of ham and cheese, butter and mustard, tomato and pickles and fresh-baked bread.

My tentacles were ready to shove the entire first sandwich down my throat; I actually had to swallow my own drool as I picked it up; but then I paused, mouth open, desperate.

Holding back took more will I'd expected. The soft machine of my body demanded fuel. Now. It didn't care about the bioreactor. Now. Now!

I looked at the knight. "... Sevens?" I had to slurp back drool. "Sevens left these for me? Not somebody else? I know you're not big on talking but I have to know, she said nobody but her but I'm —"

The knight dipped the chin of his helmet. Good enough.

I inhaled one sandwich and got three bites into the next before I regained enough self control to pour myself some water. I drank so fast I spilled some down my t-shirt, panting and swallowing and almost getting food stuck in my throat. These sandwiches were fit for royalty, wasted on me scarfing them down like a starved pig. I licked crumbs off my fingers and picked every fallen scrap of cheese and meat off the plate. I drained the pitcher and ate until it was all gone. My jaw hurt and my stomach felt fuller than it had in years.

After the food, I sat there for a good few minutes, dazed and sleepy. I upended the pitcher and swallowed the last few drops of water, then placed it and the plate back on the bedside table. For some reason I felt it would be a crime to leave them on the bed.

Stretching my legs and wiggling my toes proved that everything still worked. The rugs on the floor were even softer and thicker than they looked. Sevens' yellow robe was so long it dragged behind me as I trudged over to the makeup table and the mirror, which showed me just how much of a mess I was, eye bags and all. The wardrobes were full of clothes. The floor was horizontal. The walls were sensibly upright. When I padded over to the table, I picked up my squid-skull mask, but didn't put it on. That was solid too, actually here, not a trick. The gold pendant from Saldis was still inside the front pocket of my hoodie. I tapped it on the table. It didn't vanish.

I walked back to the bedside table and scooped up the clingfilm. It crinkled, just like clingfilm should.

“This can’t be real,” I murmured, then glanced at the knight. “Well, no,” I explained, mostly for myself. “Of course it’s real, but it’s also ... I don’t get it. This is clingfilm. We’re Outside.” I squeezed my eyes shut and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’m too tired for this. Where is Sevens, anyway? Don’t tell me I have to go find her?”

The knight turned his head to look toward the only door out of the bedroom.

“Great,” I sighed. “All right, but if I open that door and there’s a bottomless pit on the other side, or a brick wall, or ... I don’t know, Melancholy’s mouth wide open for me to walk into, like I’m a mouse in a cartoon, then I will be very upset. I might cry.”

Carrying my squid-skull mask in one tentacle and tugging Sevens’ robes snug around my shoulders, I padded across the rugs and over toward the door, pausing to retrieve my hoodie from the table. The garment was badly stained with blood, but it had been a present from Raine; I’d rather eat my own toenails than abandon it Outside.

I crept up to the door and was about to touch the golden-yellow handle. But then I heard voices from the next room.

One first, laughing and jovial. I recognised it instantly — Saldis. The walls of the Yellow King’s palace were too well-made to make out what she was saying, but her tone rang true, amused and fascinated, in full flow.

The second voice took a moment to answer, but then slammed along like the chatter of a typewriter, a nervous run-on sentence that ended clipped and juddering.

Female, young, scratchy and blunt, grumpy as sin and twice as jumpy.

I didn’t recognise it. Whoever it was, at least it wasn’t like any of Sevens’ relatives from earlier. Consumed by curiosity but too groggy and full of food to realise what I was hearing, I pressed the door handle down as slowly as I could and inched the door open, peering through the widening gap.

“—and there’s only so much give, so much slack before they break, especially with a trio, with poly. It’s so much more complex to

balance, so you have to give them as much slack as possible—”

The room beyond was sister to the bedroom, a parlour decorated in the same style, all in white with gold highlights. Light fell from a pair of massive floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall, illuminating a trio of low sofas around a wooden coffee table, on which sat a full tea set in beautiful butter-yellow. Some half-eaten cake lay on matching plates. A reading desk and an armchair, complete with a lamp, stood off to one side of the room, next to a row of neatly organised bookcases filled with the cheap cardboard of early twentieth-century consumer hardbacks, some little soapstone Buddha statues, and a glass case which contained a massive preserved butterfly. My shoes lay next to a door on the other side of the room, laces neatly untied.

“—reel it out, shove it into their hands, force it down their fucking throats for all I care—”

Saldis’ grey sphere-machine — complete with Saldis sitting comfortably in her pilot seat — was next to one of the sofas, as out of place as a giant snail at a tea party. She was facing the door as I peered inside, her eyes widening, eyebrows shooting up as we looked at each other.

“—the important thing is that they don’t break. I mean fuck, who cares about me? If they stay strong, I’m strong, and—”

Her trio of massive black rats were on the coffee table, among the cups and saucers, nibbling at cake on three little plates.

“—strength leads to strength. That’s how it works with three or four or fifteen partners; screw it up and you screw everything up. But keep it strong and you’re invincible. You’re immortal.”

The speaker was facing away from me, squatting barefoot on one of the rugs. She looked exactly as young as she sounded, perhaps my age or even a little younger. She was so bony and scrawny she must have been malnourished, so pale her skin was almost translucent, so thin I could see the tracery of blue veins beneath the surface. She wore only a black tank-top and a pair of matching black shorts on her pale legs. Her hair was the brown of an unwashed dog, hanging limp past her grubby neck.

A set of dolls and action figures — all thankfully human — were strewn across the rug in front of her, in various stages of child-

friendly undress. All of them were female, but there was a great variety between them, the hand-downs and knock-offs of a dozen different families. No Barbies though, nothing so recognisable.

As she spoke, she held a doll in each hand and mashed them together as if trying to make them kiss, so she didn't notice when Saldis spotted me.

When she finished talking, I realised what I was seeing.

"... Sevens?" I croaked.

Seven-Shades-of-Sad-and-Scrawny jerked around like I'd hit her with a cattle prod, feet going out from under her, hands dropping the dolls.

Beetroot blush blossomed across mushroom-pale skin. Wide eyes bulged, twice human size; red irises, black sclerae. A mouth full of tiny sharp needle-teeth hinged open in wordless embarrassment.

She scrambled to her feet, rubbery and twitchy like a ferret — but by the time she got there, Seven-Shades-of-Secret-Shame had vanished, replaced once again with the quiet confidence and cold exterior of her princess-mask. Dirty rumpled tank-top was replaced by crisp white blouse, lank hair by ruler-straight blonde fringe, inhuman features by enigmatic turquoise eyes and perfect skin. She clasped her hands behind her back and fixed me with a piercing gaze.

"Heather," said Seven-Shades-of-Surprisingly-Unsubtle, calm and collected. "I did not hear you wake."

"... obviously," I croaked. "Sevens, what was—"

"An old mask. That is all. It is good to see you awake. How did you sleep? How do you feel? Did you find the food?"

"I— yes, thank you, Sevens. I ... slept, I guess. Still feel pretty terrible though. I'd love a bath, but ... not Outside." I spoke slowly, well aware she was trying to distract me with questions. "That ... that other mask, that was ... you?"

"Old and unimportant. Did you like the sandwiches? I made them myself. I hope I predicted your tastes; I expect I did. I know them all, of course."

"Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight does herself a disservice!" Saldis barked

a laugh from inside her sphere. She raised a teacup in casual salute, accompanied by a very smug grin. "Old and unimportant, indeed! We were having the most fascinating conversation. A real strategy meet—"

Sevens turned with icy slowness and fixed Saldis with the silence of a descending guillotine blade. Saldis covered her mistake with an ostentatious display of sipping her tea and rolling her eyes.

"Sevens," I croaked, "if that was some kind of real you—"

"There is no real me. Only masks."

"You wear masks like moods!" I huffed, too groggy to be polite. "That means every one of them is the real you. Right? So don't be embarrassed." I tugged on a corner of the thick yellow robes which held me like an embrace. "You were happy to show it to Saldis. You gave me a piece of yourself and you want me to accept you? Then show me all of you. Don't hide important bits of yourself."

Sevens' expression was unreadable behind those wide, intense eyes. She tilted her head, neither a nod nor a shake. Behind her, Saldis looked like she was going to asphyxiate if she got any more smug.

I huffed out a sigh and closed my exhausted eyes. This was not the time for this battle.

"Thank you for bringing me here," I said. "I passed out, I was overwhelmed. Too tired. What's going on? Where is this?"

"These are my chambers," said Sevens. "You have slept in my bed. Though, perhaps not in the way we would both prefer, kitten."

She was trying to make me flustered, but her tried-and-tested tactic did not work. All I could see in my mind's eye was that bony little blood-goblin she'd been moments ago, with the weird black eyes and the tiny sharp teeth, so mortified and ashamed to be caught playing with dolls, to be caught existing at all. I wanted to take the hand of that mask and tell her not to be embarrassed, not by any part of herself. I would not mock her for playing with dolls. I would not deny that she was real.

But maybe I had Sevens all wrong. Maybe that's not what she needed from me.

"This is still inside the palace?" I asked, glancing around the room. My vision was all fine here, no funhouse mirror distortions. When I

looked out the window I felt a wave of vertigo — the view showed a tangle of jumbled towers and battlements, upside down and right way up and sideways and backwards, all wreathed in sky-mist. Impossible to estimate how far up. But no distortion, no sickness, no screaming wrongness in my head. “Why is this all so ... human?”

“Human?” Saldis asked, laughing. She gestured around the room with her teacup. “A poor joke, lady Morell. Especially from you.”

“This looks pretty human to me.” I waved the piece of clingfilm I was still holding. “This is clingfilm. But we’re Outside. Forgive me for assuming, but I don’t think Tesco delivers out here.”

To my surprise, Sevens and Saldis shared a glance. Saldis shrugged. Sevens gave nothing away as she turned back to me.

“This room is merely a comfortable space for myself and those I invite,” she said, “and I have very much invited you. What you perceive here, that is your responsibility. Your perceptions are adjusting. This means that speed is of the essence. We must get you home.”

I stared at Sevens, then down at the clingfilm in my hand. “... so, not clingfilm?”

“Not exactly.”

I swallowed and felt vaguely sick. “What were the sandwiches, then?”

“Sandwiches.”

I frowned at Sevens. “But—”

“Lady Morell,” Saldis spoke up, “I have been beyond Midgard for much, much longer than you have. Allow me to offer you some advice: when you encounter a paradox out here, accept it. Questioning these things leads to madness.”

“So, I ate sandwiches,” I said. “All right. Sevens, getting home, yes. Is the King still waiting for me?”

“I have spoken with my father on your behalf,” she said.

My heart leapt. “Oh. Oh, great, did he—”

“And I have secured for you an audience chamber which will present as little challenge to your senses as possible.”

“ ... you couldn’t talk to him for me? Get him to help us?”

Sevens shook her head, expression gravely serious, eyes boring right through me. “He wishes to meet you himself. He is in a suspiciously good mood.”

“You don’t sound very happy about that,” I said. The King wanted to meet me, personally. Those sandwiches suddenly lay like lead in my belly. What did ‘good mood’ mean for a being that had worn *Hastur* as a mask?

“No,” Sevens said. “I am not happy about it.”

“You think he’s planning something?” I asked. “Is that what he’s like?”

“I think,” Saldis announced, voice quivering with barely concealed excitement, “that he’s going to put on a show for us. I simply cannot wait. Chance of a lifetime!”

“He is like everything,” said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

“Great. Great, okay,” I said, trying to remain calm. I snuggled down inside Sevens’ yellow robes. “Well, it’s too late to turn back now. I’ll just have to hope he likes me, I suppose.”

“I will protect you,” Sevens said. “Even against my own father.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” I forced a laugh I didn’t feel. “I don’t have a great track record meeting with important people in castles.”

Sevens didn’t acknowledge my weak joke. She reached into the pocket of her long yellow skirt and drew out a piece of yellow fabric. For a moment I thought she’d detached a fragment of herself, similar to the cloak, but then she held it out to me and I saw it was quite mundane.

“A blindfold?” I asked.

“Not for play, sadly,” she said, cool and dry, and almost got me with that one. “The walk to the audience chamber is not long from here, but this time I will shield you properly. I will remove the blindfold when we arrive. Are you ready?”

“No. But the sooner we get this over with, the better.”

“Good. Hold still.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight raised the blindfold to my face and gently wrapped the soft yellow cloth around my eyes, plunging me into darkness. Her hands moved over the back of my head to tie it in place. For a moment there was nothing. I was in a void. Then her hand found mine.

She led on.

= =

The walk to the audience chamber was mercifully short, only two or three minutes from leaving Sevens' parlour. Her blindfold did the job; I couldn't see anything, not even a crack of light. Somehow the blindfold protected my hearing as well, but I wasn't deafened, I could still hear Sevens' footsteps, the gentle metallic ring of the forest-knight's boots, and the slow ticking of Saldis' sphere, but those sounds were normal, undistorted, not an assault on my senses.

The din of the distant party had fallen silent. Perhaps I'd slept through the end of the festivities.

When we passed into the audience chamber, I felt it in my gut and in my bones. I did not need eyes to see that we had stepped into a void; I did not need Sevens to stop to know we had reached our destination; I did not need to hear the subtle *click* of a door behind us to know there was no going back.

Sevens' hand tightened on mine. I realised with a sudden sinking feeling that her palm had gone clammy.

"Oh," Saldis breathed, not even a whisper, in wonder. "Oh my."

"Sevens?" I murmured. "Sevens, what's wrong?"

A gentle hand reached up and undid the blindfold, fumbling slightly with shaking fingertips. The yellow darkness fell away as Sevens returned my sight. White flooded in, making me blink and squint. Then I saw what was wrong.

The audience chamber was a large round room — merely large, not some giant Outsider-scale space, perhaps big enough to count as a ballroom — all in white and completely featureless. There weren't even any lamps or light bulbs or fireplaces; the illumination seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, leaving scant few shadows.

In the centre of the room was a little brown table on a single leg, with a wide base at the bottom, the sort of cheap table you might

find in any coffee shop back on Earth. A steaming cup of coffee waited at one edge. Two chairs sat either side of the table.

A man was sitting in the chair opposite, facing us. At least, I assumed it was a man. He was bandaged from head to toe, every inch of him concealed behind rough yellow fabric. Like a mummified Egyptian Pharaoh.

Rail-thin, unmoving. Bandaged hands propped on the table.

He was, however, not the most worrying thing about the room. We had an audience.

A crowd was arranged in a circle around the edge of the room, three or four people deep. Humans — or at least currently imitating humans. All of them were dressed as if they'd stepped straight out of a 1920s period-piece, all elegant flapper dresses and black-tie dinner suits, cigars and cigarette holders, flutes of champagne and glasses of red wine. Some were dressed like stereotypical gangsters, others like precocious children. All ages were represented. Men, women, and those in between too, overt non-binary people, butch women, feminine men.

None of them made a sound, but all of them were amused, grinning or winking at us. Many raised silent toasts with their drinks. Some licked their lips in anticipation or mimed silent clapping. More than a few were practically vibrating with excitement.

My tentacles inched out from beneath the thick folds of my yellow robe. Abyssal instinct screamed *fight!* My bioreactor thrummed in my abdomen.

"Sevens," I asked, my voice tight and high. I nodded at the bandaged man in the centre of the room. "Is that your father?"

"Yes," was all she said. She was staring at him, intense with blank fury.

"Oh, oh dear, oh my poppets," Saldis was saying, panting softly. "Are we to be ... the subject of a play?"

"Father," Sevens raised her voice. She took a step forward, hand still in mine. "Father, I do not understand. Why are you unmasked?"

Our unwelcome audience exploded into roaring cheers, sudden enough to make me flinch and hiss.

“No mask? No mask!” they shouted and jeered and laughed, sharing sudden toasts and elbowing each other in the ribs, falling over themselves with glee. The words turned into a chant. “No mask! No mask! No mask!”

Sevens stared from face to face, wide-eyed.

The bandaged man at the coffee table raised the fingers of one hand.

The chant died instantly. But we were not to be spared. A section of the crowd to our left surged outward from the ring of onlookers, like a piece of amoeba undergoing binary fission. They pulled forward until they were clear of the audience, then adopted different poses, expressions of rapt listening, eyes full of admiration and flattery — all turned toward Saldis.

Inside her sphere, Saldis suddenly lit up with delight. Her machine moved toward the detached display and she leaned out of the front, a hand extended in greeting, her rats on her shoulders.

“Saldis Solveig Nyland!” she introduced herself brightly. One of the little crowd, a fat older man, shook her hand with friendly glee on his ruddy red face. “Delighted, yes, delighted. I see you’ve heard of me.” Another hand was pointed at her, a young woman in a silken dress. “And who is this delightful creature? And oh, I think we’ve met before. Here, why don’t we—”

The crowd around Saldis all started talking at once, drowning her in a sea of chatter. She laughed along, talking utter nonsense. Her rats flowed off her shoulders and into waiting hands, to be petted and cooed over, passed from admirer to admirer. Saldis started to tell some long, winding story about a sea journey.

“Father!” Sevens raised her voice, furious, losing control. “Father, you cannot be serious. Stop this, right now.”

The bandaged man waved his fingers again.

A second blob of people detached themselves from the crowd. I expected a slight variation on what we’d just witnessed, that they would adjust their roles to the needs of the moment, wear new expressions and wield new temptations.

They exploded into a mass of yellow tentacles, rushing at us. I screamed and hissed.

The forest-knight stepped past Sevens and me, levelled his axe, and waded in.

Weapon whirling and flashing against the walls of the white chamber, moving with grace despite the incredible weight of the armour and the unwieldy way he held it together inside, the forest-knight chopped and sliced through yellow tentacles. They bounced off his armour and fainted through his guard, but never did any real damage, never hit hard enough to leave a dent. But no matter how many he cut down, more always rose in their place. The still-human crowd craned to watch, grinning and shaking their fists with silent pugilistic suggestions, making wagers between themselves.

“Sevens,” I said, voice quivering. “What is going on?”

“Enough, Father,” she called out. “You have made your point. Heather and I shall speak with you alone, but not until you dismiss —”

A third group of 1920s imitations stepped forward from the ring of the crowd. Targeting me, I assumed. I was the Outsider here, I was the human interloper, I was the problem.

But then I realised the third and final group were all women.

They all suddenly froze in place, in various over-dramatic poses — some glaring at each other, some gazing upon another with unrequited desire, others turned away in the act of crying. One had a knife ready to plunge into another woman’s back. Yet another still was pushing down a smaller woman with an expression of glee on both their faces, but watched by a third who looked aghast.

Sevens’ hand slipped out of mine.

Before I could grab for her or say her name, she was no longer the Princess in Yellow, Seven-Shades-of-Supreme-Confidence, elegant and cold. In one step toward the group of frozen dolls, she transformed into the unwashed, jittery, black-eyed girl I’d glimpsed in her chambers.

She skittered over toward the group of women and began to chatter to herself, pointing at them and adjusting their poses, swapping them from partner to partner, recombining and reordering, rewriting the playtime romances. The women — her siblings? Her family? — obeyed like living dolls, moving at her orders.

“No no, you here, her there. You won’t go at all,” she snatched out between those needle-teeth. “You’re useless but useless people need love too so wait a moment and I’ll get to you. Shit. Fuck, this one won’t do, you need a third. A third!”

“ ... Sevens?” I said. “Sevens!”

She didn’t even glance back at me.

The crowd of imitation humans was completely absorbed in the three separate shows. None of them had attention left for me, or for the bandaged man in the middle of the room.

He raised his head and looked at me from behind his yellow bandages.

“Just me then,” I whispered to myself.

My heart was racing and my mouth was dry, my body was ready for fight-or-flight, my tentacles kept trying to drift wide. I itched to jam the squid-skull mask over my head, or turn and run, or hiss at the top of my lungs.

But this audience was for me. All others had been given amusing distractions. I steeled myself, and approached the King in Yellow.

He didn’t acknowledge me when I stopped a few paces away from the battered old coffee table, just staring from behind his yellow bandages. I couldn’t make out anything beneath the fabric, no scrap of skin or glow of strange light, just the contours of a vaguely male face, deep in medical dressing.

I bowed my head and pinched the corners of my yellow robe, doing the best curtsy I could under the circumstances.

“Your majesty,” I said.

My eyes lingered on the steaming cup of coffee and the empty chair. *Deja vu* crept over me; I knew these objects, I knew this place. But I never went to coffee shops. Raine took me to pubs or cafes, greasy spoon places, and the occasional curry house, but I always drank coffee at home. Where did I know this from?

I risked raising my head and looked at the King again. He said nothing, so I forced words past my dry lips. “Your majesty, thank you for this audience. I believe you already know why I’m here and what I have come to request, but I will gladly do you the respect of

repeating myself if you so wish.”

The King in Yellow said nothing.

“I have been stranded Outside,” I went on, “by ... well, by a force I don’t fully understand. Your daughter, Seven—”

The King in Yellow reached up behind his own head with his bandaged hands and began to unveil his face. My breath stuck in my throat, my body tried to prepare for anything, but how does one prepare to be face to face with something not unlike the Eye?

Inch by inch, strip by strip of yellow fabric, the King in Yellow showed me something far worse.

A human face. Shiny, young, male, white. Chin perfectly shaved, angular but not blunt, a little puppy fat still in his cheeks. Tousled blond hair, thick and expertly styled, not cheap. An all-knowing smile on his thin lips, self-satisfied and sickly-warm. Eyes full of amusement at the expense of anything he cared to look at. Assured in his own power.

The King in Yellow finished revealing his mask. Strips of yellow bandage hung loose. He leaned back in his chair and smiled at me, enjoying the moment.

“You’re not him,” I managed, shaking with something akin to rage.

The Yellow King tutted and laughed, a single puff of unimpressed air. “Oh, Lavinia—”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped.

He raised both bandaged hands in a mock-placating gesture. “You would do well to learn a lesson which most of my children never seem to understand.” He gestured out at the audience, his yellow children.

Then he waited, watching me with a smug, oily smile that made me sick.

“You’re even doing his irritating pauses,” I hissed, swallowing disgust. “What lesson?”

“We are what we pretend to be,” said the King in Yellow. He smiled wider, showing perfect pearly-white teeth. “Right now, in a very real way, I *am* Alexander Lilburne.”

any mortal thing – 14.18

“No, you’re not really him.” I couldn’t keep the shiver out of my voice. “Not really.”

The King in Yellow sighed through a dead man’s lips. He tilted his chin down, as if to look at me over the rim of an imaginary pair of glasses. Alexander Lilburne’s visage wore a note of ostentatious boredom.

“Well, no,” he drawled. “Not literally. Not by your categorically inadequate definition of ‘the real’. But the events which happen on stage, when in role, really do happen. The motions of muscle and sinew are not fake, the sound of spoken words are not hallucination; the dagger in the night may indeed be made of rubber, but the fist which grips it is real flesh. But that’s not the branch of philosophy we’re here to discuss, is it?” He gestured at the empty chair with one yellow-banded hand. “You have had an exceptionally long journey to reach this point. No need to tire your feet further. Please, Lavinia, do sit down.”

“I told you not to call me that,” I hissed through clenched teeth.

Wrong response. Alexander’s sick amusement returned like a sunburst from behind the clouds. He showed his teeth and raised his eyebrows, relishing my irritation and discomfort.

I matched his stare. My tentacles itched to reach across the coffee table, yank him out of his chair, and throttle the life from him, or pluck his limbs off, or punch through the thin bone of his skull to scramble his brains with hook and claw. Abyssal instinct screamed incoherent urges to sink my teeth into his throat or jam my thumbs into his eyes. My bioreactor quivered, trying to shed control rods in preparation for a fight. I slipped my hands deeper into the warm yellow darkness of Sevens’ robes so he wouldn’t see them shaking. My body recalled killing this foe once before and it was ready to do so again.

Except this wasn’t Alexander Lilburne; this was the King in Yellow, and he was more than capable of defending himself against something like me.

Keeping that fact in mind was difficult, to say the least.

“... wait,” I managed, trying to stay focused on why I was here in the first place. “Are you responsible for all this? For Alexander’s revenge? For the dead hands? For ...”

The King in Yellow managed to make his Alexander-mask look so unimpressed that the real man himself would have admitted defeat. He looked at me like I was a particularly dim child who’d just eaten a pound of glue and chased it with a pair of scissors.

“No,” I murmured. “No, the hands started long before I met Sevens, right after Lozzie saved me from Wonderland. Unless you’ve been watching me this whole time, it couldn’t possibly be you.”

Alexander-in-Yellow raised his bandaged hands and gave me a derisively delicate round of applause, fingertips against palm. His smug smile made me want to spit at him, but the clapping itself was stiff and artificial, as if the bandaged body had not quite caught up with the transformation of the face. Was he like Sevens when I’d first met her? An imitation head on an Outsider body?

“Well done, Lavinia,” he said. “You see? You can get there when you try. The phenomenon which interrupts your clever trick of stepping between worlds has nothing to do with me. I am merely wearing the visage of the cause. And such a visage it is, too. Why, just look at him.” The King spread both hands either side of Alexander’s face, striking a self-consciously noble, upward-angled pose, like a bust of a Roman senator. He ran a hand through his thick blonde hair. “This chin, this nose, these lips. This man should have been a real leader, not a con artist and a cannibal, feeding on his fellows. If I’d had my hands on him, I would have molded him into a man worth the tyrant’s death you gave him.”

“Why wear his face?” I asked. In the secret back rooms of my mind, I already knew.

The King tutted. “Lavinia, come now. That question is beneath your intelligence. Playing dumb will not get you far with me.”

I shook my head, so disgusted I could feel acid reflux at the base of my throat. “This is too accurate, this ... this method acting, is that what it is? It’s vile. It’s obscene. I killed this man, you ... *your majesty*.” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice. “And you’re making me talk to him again? I mean, yes, I can guess why, I’m not

completely stupid, but ... ” Saldis’ words rang in my mind, her explanation of what the dead hands really were. “I can’t forgive him. I can’t do that.”

His-Smugness-of-Yellow nodded along, smile cutting deeper than I’d known possible.

“Indeed,” he purred.

I let out a sigh that shuddered with both anger and anxiety, trying to keep a tight grip on my temper, my instincts, and the sandwiches in my stomach, which now sat like cold lead in my guts. I forced my gaze away from the King, away from Alexander’s memory, and looked out at the crowd of 1920s-era cosplayers in their ring around the edge of the circular white room.

A few of them were watching us, but only with an occasional disinterested glance over their drinks. We didn’t present much spectacle compared with the three attractions the King had put on for them — Saldis telling a roaring tale of going a-viking, her three rats the darlings of her listeners; the forest-knight locked in an endless dance of combat with yellow tentacles, showing off his skills with his axe; Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight scuttling about and chattering through her needle-teeth as she repositioned and recombined the actresses in her web of imaginary sapphic romance.

Sevens’ voice seemed so far away, like I was standing backstage.

“This is not a good first impression of my ... ” I swallowed and steeled myself. “Of my future father-in-law.”

The King in Yellow shrugged with every ounce of Alexander’s self-importance. He gestured at the chair again. “Sit, please. We have so much to discuss.”

Fighting my disgust, I yanked the chair out with one tentacle and sat down, gathering the mass of Sevens’ yellow robes and smoothing them over my backside as I lowered myself into the chair. I managed to keep my eyes locked with the King, but unfortunately he did not care; his imitation of Alexander’s superiority complex was far too complete. Once I was settled, I fought against the urge to slip my squid-skull mask on over my head — somewhere deep down, I knew this was an unfair contest. If I wore my mask, I would forfeit my opportunity.

“I’ve taken the liberty of making you some coffee,” he said, his

smile giving away the game, the set, the match, the whole damn sport. He nodded at the steaming cup on my side of the little plastic table. "I didn't know if you prefer it black, or heavily sugared, or with milk, so I went with the safe option. Mediocre." He rolled his eyes. "Boring, but safe."

"I thought you knew everything about me," I said, trying to sneer.

Alexander's eyebrows shot up in carefully controlled surprise.

"Why, no. That's my daughter's prerogative. I have no interest in stories such as yours, not beyond the proficiency of their technical execution. You and I do not know each other yet, that is the point of this friendly chat. However, I do know that you were bold enough to stand up to me when I wore my armour and carried a sword. Which is why I've done my homework, and ... voila!" He gestured at his face again.

Hope fluttered behind my ribs. He said it with Alexander's cloying, oily tones, which invited suspicion and derision, but that was actual praise. How much could I trust?

"You mean Hast—" I cut myself off, biting my lips before I could say the full name.

Alexander laughed at my expense, a stomach-churning sound. He tapped the coffee table with his fingertips. "Hastur, yes. I was impressed, oh, quite, very impressed. Very few beings attempt to defy that. Humans, lesser still. Most would run, screaming, fouling themselves, mere bit-parts to be quickly discarded or used to illustrate some point. A few might get down on their hands and knees and profess their allegiance. But you? You threatened to give me indigestion. That's front-of-stage material."

"I've been swallowed by worse."

He smiled and it was all Alexander. All smug self-importance, the look of a man sizing up a prospect to be flattered just enough to ensnare and exploit.

I couldn't stop myself. I opened my mouth wide and hissed at him.

He just took it, raising his eyebrows and smiling all the wider. When I finished, panting and glowering, he gestured at the coffee again.

"Please, don't hold back on my account," he said.

I didn't even bother looking down at the steaming coffee. "When the real Alexander offered me a drink, it was probably drugged. And I didn't fall for it then either."

"Very smart. Very sensible."

"I am not the same creature I was when I sat at the real version of this table," I said slowly, letting my tentacles drift outward from inside Sevens' yellow robes, allowing the hint of a hiss into my words from my twisted, knotted throat. In truth, I did not feel one hundredth as intimidating as I was trying to look. I was a fragile insect trying to flare the imitation snake-eyes on my wings; but this predator was too canny, too intelligent. He saw through everything.

"Hello, not the same creature," said Bastard-in-Yellow, "I'm dad."

All my fronting slammed to a halt, mouth hanging open. "... did ... you just ... *what?*"

"Indeed, you are not the same creature you were back then," the King continued seamlessly after his awful joke. He reached across the table with one bandaged hand and picked up the steaming cup of coffee. As he sat back, Alexander's mannerisms flowed through his bandaged body, shoulders flexing, one leg crossed over the other, relaxing into a pose of unassailable confidence. He took a long sip of the coffee and smacked his lips. "You have become so much more, Lavinia. After all, when you spoke to the real Alexander at this table, you were not yet a murderer."

Murderer. He drew the word out, savouring the three syllables like caviar, watching me for the slightest reaction.

I didn't give him any satisfaction — I looked away, toward Sevens in her weird little blood-goblin mask, scuttling about between her lesbian volunteers. She didn't return my gaze, too lost in her father's trick, but I caught a flash of those huge red-black eyes like shadowed rubies, that strangely wide mouth full of tiny sharp teeth, those delicate cheekbones and petite nose. Her bare arms and legs vibrated with energy, like she was mainlining caffeine, cocaine, and cortisol all at once.

I'm not sure why I looked away from the King. What was the point? I knew what he was up to, and what he was trying to get me to do. I knew what this was about. I knew and acknowledged and accepted that I had committed murder. Furthermore, he was wrong

in one important detail. He didn't have me complete. Did he not know?

"This is cruel," I said. "You know that?"

"Oh, Lavinia," he sighed with Alexander's voice, losing patience. "Cruelty is hardly my intention. If I was being cruel, would I have invited you to a friendly sit down? You cannot even imagine what cruelty from me looks like, you—"

"Not *this*." I turned back to him and tapped the table with the tip of one tentacle. "That."

I pointed out at the crowd, our uninvited and unexpected audience. I pointed at Saldis and the forest-knight, at the silently laughing onlookers, the ones making bets, the ones whispering to each other, the ones clapping with delight. But mostly I pointed at Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

Lilburne-in-Yellow raised his eyebrows at me. He knew exactly what I meant, the worm, but he was going to make me say it anyway. He wanted to make me say it out loud.

"Ah? Cruel?"

"Yes," I hissed. "It's cruel. To put people on display against their will. Saldis, well, probably not her. I'll bet she's having the time of life right now. The knight, you're probably stressing him out, though I don't know him well enough to be sure. But Sevens?" I shook my head, anger building inside my gut, a head of steam making ready to burst. "You're mocking her. If that's how you treat your own daughter, how you treat her passions, the meaning of her life, then perhaps you really are just like Alexander. Perhaps I should pulverise you like I did to him. I've stared down the Eye, *your majesty*. I know how to observe truth. What will I see if I turn that look on you?"

Alexander's smug amusement drained away, leaving behind a cold landscape of wordless arrogance. I had offended him with that, with a threat that I suddenly realised was not a bluff.

"Are you prepared for what you might see?" he asked, unsmiling. "There is no little man behind the curtain."

"Stop treating her like that," I hissed. "Or I'll claw your face off."

Kingly Alexander held my gaze for three heartbeats — perhaps

waiting to see if I would really do it. I let my tentacles twitch outward, I pulled a control rod out of my bioreactor, and I tensed up to spring out of my chair and across the table, ready to give it everything I had yet again, to defend a friend — or more? — from this abusive monster, even if he was only a mask. A hyperdimensional equation suggested itself in the back of my mind, whispered to me: *see*.

But before I could pull the trigger, Alexander sighed and looked away. He raised one hand in the air, moving it from side to side to cover the whole room as he clicked his fingers three times. How he clicked his fingers wrapped in bandages, I had no idea.

His clicking got the attention of his yellow children, the entire audience. Hundreds of faces paused and looked toward him.

“Leave,” he said, voice filling the white room. He waggled a pair of fingers at the far side, where we had entered earlier. “Go on, out. Off you go.”

I was expecting them to vanish like dawn mist, like the illusory projections they were. But a chorus of disappointment rippled through the crowd, faces falling, frowns blossoming, big sighs and over-dramatic shrugs and performative stomps. Some gestured toward the display of their choice — most of those were watching the forest-knight’s gladiatorial showdown, though to my eyes the fight was locked in a never-ending stalemate. A few even opened their mouths and began to voice complaints, the first they’d spoken out loud since their chants of “No mask!”

“But father—”

“You can’t be serious!”

“We’ve only just begun—”

“Dear Seven is going to solve this one, I know it, I—”

The King in Yellow clicked his fingers again and jabbed toward the door which had appeared in the white surface of the curving wall. “Now. *You will leave.*”

In his words I caught the faintest hint of the magical compulsion that the real Alexander had used in life, when we’d faced him on the battlements of his grey jade castle, and later when he’d tried to bring Lozzie back to his side. It hadn’t worked well for him then,

but the King in Yellow held an authority that Alexander could only have dreamed of. As one his yellow family gave up on the triple show. Drinks were drained, currency changed hands, arms were linked and kisses given and off they went in one great departing wave, sulking and striding and strutting out of the white doors, into the corridor barely visible beyond. Some of them tossed me winks or meaningful nods or just shook their heads. A few of the women blew me kisses. One particularly ancient old man — who was not an old man at all, I had to remind myself — saluted me with a mahogany walking stick, in utter sombre respect.

The King in Yellow clicked his fingers a couple of times more, still holding his hand high over his own head.

“Orbit, Melancholy, Steel,” he said, “you three stay. I may have need of you.”

Three figures detached themselves from the departing crowd, though I saw that all three had not been making the best effort to leave in the first place, perhaps expecting this retroactive summons. The three resumed their places around the edge of the circular white room, roughly equidistant. I recognised Melancholy — she still wore the same face as earlier, brown and weathered and more than a little grumpy, though I hadn’t spotted her in the crowd, dressed in a simple, unflattering black dress from throat to ankle. Perhaps my nap in Sevens’ bed had given her time to return from her trip to the library.

I had no idea who ‘Orbit’ and ‘Steel’ were. One appeared to be a small boy with an ugly smirk on his face, the kind of smirk that told you he’d just tortured a puppy to death. He was dressed in a tiny dinner suit, blonde hair slicked back, slightly overweight. The other was an older lady who looked more like she should be commanding troops on a battlefield than dressed for a party, with close-cropped grey hair and a severe, strict expression, hands clasped behind a very straight back, eyes forward, feet planted.

The rest of the audience finished filing out. A young man with messy hair was the last through the doors. He turned on his heel and pulled them shut behind him with a wistful sigh.

The doors vanished, sealing us inside the white ballroom. Then Melancholy, Orbit, and Steel all changed.

Melancholy didn’t surprise me. In the blink of an eye she was the

grand sphinx once more, ten or eleven feet of feline muscle settling down on her haunches to watch the unfolding drama. She caught my eye with her electric yellow gaze, rumbling a deep purr and blinking once in recognition, but offering no encouragement.

The horrible little boy was replaced by a creature which I swear was just a five-foot rectangle of yellow sponge, but then he seemed to change his mind, becoming something not unlike a centaur — if a centaur was one third praying mantis, one third slug, and one third chimpanzee. Slime-coated yellow muscle flowed into bristly arms and green plates, topped by a head with twitching antennae and massive compound eyes. Whatever it was, it was barely Outsider, could have easily been a spirit back on Earth.

The severe older woman, however, donned a true nightmare.

Humanoid, wrapped in a black carapace, shiny like a beetle; tall as Zheng, but all angular and sharp, as if skin was pulled taut around ribcage and hips and every bone of the limbs. All tooth and claw, a living bundle of black razor blades. Elongated head, smooth and black, no eyes. Strangler's hands. Tail like an anchor-chain tipped with a blade as big as a spade. It curled up on its haunches, squatting like an ape, but moving with the grace and fluidity of a serpent.

As pure visual data it was no more disturbing than half the pneumasomatic life I saw on a regular basis, but something about this creature was different. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck, my bowels clenched in terror, and my tentacles drew into a protective ball around my core. The thing clearly showed it was relaxed, squatting and watching, but a hiss rose in my throat all the same, prompted by a desperate need to signal that I was not prey and I would fight back.

But it was right next to Sevens. She was still chattering on to herself, adjusting her actresses, currently deciding the exact angle at which two of them would kiss. She didn't even notice the grim reaper crouched next to her.

Abyssal instinct started to scream: that thing had to die, right now, as quickly as possible. I couldn't even take my eyes off it, because it might move, and somehow I knew that when it did, it would move so very fast. I would lose track of it and it might scoop up Sevens and Sevens was so very small, smaller than me, and could not

defend herself. That thing was an infection, a plague; it had to die.

I started to jerk forward out of my chair, skin blossoming with toxins, tentacles plating themselves with molecule-thick iridium and silicon.

“No,” drawled the King in Yellow, most unimpressed. I flinched round to hiss at him, but discovered he was not talking to me. “Steel, no,” he repeated.

The horrible man-beetle-death-thing gave a low hiss to rival one of my own. I bristled and hissed back, but then Steel obeyed her father. In a flicker, the unacceptable aberration was gone, replaced by an actual human — the same grey-haired, strict-looking woman who had stood there before, but dressed in lumpy, shapeless, brown military fatigues. She raised an eyebrow at the King.

“You are here to provide a counterpoint,” he told her, “not antagonise our guest into a life-or-death fight. Have I made myself clear?”

“That is my counterpoint,” she said, voice hard and clipped, not quite human.

Yellow-Alexander pursed his lips, most displeased.

Steel rolled her eyes, but she nodded.

The King in Yellow turned back to me at last. I eased back into my chair, swallowing down the dregs of the killing instinct. With Steel back to her human mask, the desperate need to defend Sevens drained away, surprising me with its intensity. But the dregs of adrenaline still sluiced through my bloodstream.

“Better?” Alexander asked, spreading both bandaged hands to indicate the whole room.

I managed a nod. “Yes. Thank you.”

“I do apologise, Lavinia. It’s this mask.” He let out a haughty sigh, taking another sip from the coffee on the table. The cup hadn’t stopped steaming. “I’ve been wearing it for hours, you see, ever since you stood up to Hastur.” The King gestured at his own face — at Alexander’s face. “He was an exceptionally cruel man, wasn’t he? Classical sociopathic sadist, even if he told himself otherwise.”

“He was,” I answered tightly, still trying to bring my tentacles back

in and slow my racing heart.

“Do you think he really believed his own justifications? Was he working to protect humankind, by leaving it behind?”

“I ... I don’t know,” I admitted. It was the truth. “I don’t think it mattered, in the end.”

He nodded, slow and smug. “You’ve had your fun, Lavinia—”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Then stop avoiding the subject,” he snapped, suddenly angry, no longer amused — Alexander’s loss of control at loss of face. “You killed me, Lavinia. Little Lavinny. You became a murderer, because of me. Was it worth it?”

“I was a murderer before I killed you,” I said before I could stop myself. “*Him*. Before I killed him, I mean. You’re not Alexander, not really.”

“Ahhhhhhh yes,” Alexander purred, steepling his bandaged hands together. A new kind of smile crested his face: the smile of a successful flanking. He’d expected me to say that, damn him, he did know everything. “The young initiate I sent with Amy Stack, to deliver your invitation to the real version of this friendly little chat. As I seem to recall, you killed him in one of the most horrible ways possible, a fate not even a dog should suffer.”

“I sent him Outside,” I admitted — and my voice cracked as I said it.

For a moment my mind returned to that dirty back alleyway, and to my ill-considered trip to the bookshop in the centre of Sharrowford, unprotected, unaccompanied, without Raine, before my tentacles, before the abyss. I’d run into Twil, but Stack had lured her away and I’d been left alone to be found by one of the cultists, by Alexander’s man. For a split second my body recalled the feeling of being pinned down by somebody bigger and stronger than me, the horror of being helpless, the writhing, twisting, kicking animal sensation as I’d tried to get free. I’d had to get rid of him, get him off me. Tenny had helped, distracted him for a moment, just long enough for me to free my hand. And then I’d sent him Outside. Gone. Long before I’d gained the knowledge to pinpoint location. Even if I had known how to retrieve him, back then one forced translocation left me shaking and spent, empty and exhausted,

ready to pass out. I could not have performed another.

“Tell me, Lavinia, do you even remember his name?”

“Jake,” I said without hesitation. “You said it— *he* said it,” I hissed my correction. “In the coffee shop, the real one. I’ve never forgotten.”

“But that wasn’t murder, was it? You don’t think of it as murder. My blood is on your hands, but only metaphorically, not literally. You killed me without even pulling a trigger, Lavinia, but still I haunt you. You dream about me sometimes, don’t you? I turn up in your nightmares, though you often forget them by dawn. But poor Jake? You don’t dream about him, and you had to touch him with your actual hand, you had to press it into his face to kill him. But it wasn’t murder.”

I tried to wet my lips, but my mouth had gone dry. “It was a murder, technically it—”

“Technically? No, manslaughter at best. Any jury in the land — well, not this land, I mean England — would take one look at you and one look at him and rule in your favour. Reasonable force, belief in imminent attack, all that. No. It wasn’t murder.”

“It was self-defence,” I squeaked.

“Exactly,” Alexander pressed, smiling wide with victory. “And I wasn’t?”

“I mean it was a reflex!” I snapped, losing my temper, losing my cool, everything flooding out. “I wanted him off me, so I sent him elsewhere, but I didn’t mean to kill—”

I slammed to a stop. Alexander leaned back, smiling like a cat with a mouse trapped between his paws.

“But you did mean to kill me,” he said.

“Yes. Obviously, yes!” I turned away, angry and humiliated, having to admit this to the face of the man I’d murdered. I sought refuge in Sevens instead, her diminutive form scuttling about between her living dolls. She was totally absorbed, enjoying every second — not as fun, but as the creative flow of somebody doing what they really loved. That grounded me for a second, brought me back, gave me something to hold onto. I huddled down inside her yellow robes, warm as sunlight on my shoulders. I was shivering.

“Do you regret it?” Alexander asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, then closed it again. I focused on Sevens as hard as I could.

“Would you kill again, to protect your friends?” he went on. “Your family? Your lovers? Your sister?”

“Of course I would,” I said, still staring at Sevens to keep my head clear. “I had to. You were a monster, Alexander. If there had been another way, if I could have put you in prison for life, have you make some kind of restitution, then maybe I would have done that instead. But I’ll never know. Because you didn’t give me a chance.”

“Oh?” he asked, his mocking tone a twisted knife in my gut. “So I am responsible for my own murder? I am both victim and perpetrator? You said it yourself, Lavinia, there were other ways. You chose to kill me, to murder me, when you had other choices. You chose.”

“You were going to kill me and my friends.” I turned back to him at last, the heat in my chest like a runaway nuclear reaction, burning bright and hot and destructive in ways I couldn’t track anymore. “You were giving Zheng a command. We wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“You don’t know that,” he said, calm and cool. “Perhaps I was freeing her, like a final wish for a genie.” He laughed, well aware of the absurdity of his own words.

I swallowed hard, surprised to find a lump in my throat. My hands were shaking and my head was throbbing. Was this what it felt like to confront a person you’d murdered? Even a monster like Alexander Lilburne? There were no psychological guidelines for this, no tried and tested coping mechanisms. No coping mechanisms at all. Nobody in all history had done this before, not outside of dreams and nightmares and waking hallucinations.

This isn’t really him, I told myself.

“Is this ... ” I croaked, had to clear my throat. “Is this all to get me to forgive him, so I can overcome the dead hands? Because I can’t forgive him. I can’t—”

“No, not particularly,” drawled the King in Yellow, suddenly Alexander but bored with all this. He leaned back with a sigh, all

amusement gone. The tonal whiplash was too much, too unrealistic; I'd barely known Alexander, not for real, but in that moment I glimpsed the Yellow Ocean behind the mask, the player beneath the role, the man in charge.

I blinked at him. " ... what? But I—"

"We can conclude this right here. End this whole charade, this farce, this poorly written slapstick comedy. The nature of your tale does not interest me, Lavinia. My personal expertise, my art, my brilliance — is all in tragedies." He allowed a thin smile to creep back onto his face. "And a particular kind of tragedy too, not the futile grubbing of worms in the poisonous dirt, but the tragedy of greatness brought low by its own flaws, blinded by lust for power, by ambition. I deal in great men devouring their own intestines, not ... whatever you are."

I puffed out a humourless laugh. "So what, you prefer *King Lear*? Would you be more interested if I gouged out my own eyeballs?"

A note of interest sparked in Alexander's eyes, quiet and sudden and very still. "Will you?"

"No."

He laughed too, a derisive snort. "I thought not. Well then, Lavinia. I have a deal to offer you."

"A deal?"

"A deal, a contract, a royal writ. I can solve your problem, these so-called 'dead hands' which grasp at your ankles and block your path." As he spoke, the King in Yellow began to unwrap the bandages from his right hand, starting with his index finger. I expected to see the soft palm and manicured fingernails of Alexander Lilburne, but the yellow bandages fell away to reveal flesh the colour of dying sunlight. No wrinkles, no fingernails, no little hairs on the knuckles — just smooth gold, glowing softly from within like the banked heart of a star.

"And I do not merely mean to brush them aside," he continued as he revealed the hand. "I will brush them aside for all time, for you and Lauren Lilburne alike, and any other miscreants you care to pick up. I will remove the issue. You need not raise a finger but to shake my hand." He finished the unwrapping process and held out the hand of the King, halfway across the coffee table.

My breath stopped in my throat. One of my tentacles twitched, but I controlled the impulse. “Alexander tried to make a deal with me too.”

The King in Yellow split Alexander’s face in a grin so smug it made me nauseated. “That he did, didn’t he?”

Then he waited. I rolled my eyes. “What’s the catch?”

“Shake my hand, take my deal — and Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight cannot go with you.”

A sheet of ice settled in my stomach. “Ah.”

At the edge of the white room, Melancholy tossed her great sphinx’s head, mane ruffling in the air, and snorted through her nose. Steel, still closest to Sevens, sighed with a long-suffering exasperation. Orbit, the boy who had turned into the slug-centaur, made a sound like wet gravel poured into sewage — a laugh.

“You will remove that cloak.” The King nodded at my warm yellow robes, Sevens’ portable embrace, her symbol of affection. “And hand it over to me. It was, after all, never hers to give, not really.”

Something hard and spiky bristled inside me. “Sevens is an adult, as far as I understand, she—”

“She is, but this is a *royal* family, after all. Inheritance and all that. She is making a youthful mistake and it is my duty as her father to correct her. Don’t worry yourself, she won’t come to any harm.” He smiled, still speaking with a reasonable and mild tone, Alexander with the knowledge that he’d already won. The lie dripped from the gaps between his words. “I’m not going to lock her in her room or take away her possessions or force her into some partnership she doesn’t want. I’m not going to backhand her across her face as soon as you’re out of the picture.”

“Says you,” I snapped. “I can’t believe this. She’s free to make her own decisions.”

“She is making a mistake.” He nodded at the yellow hand, extended halfway between us. “All this deal will do is ensure the pain is minimal. That it happens at home, where she is surrounded by her family. That it is early on in the process, not late, not deep, not scarring. After all, you’ve already done enough damage, haven’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You have forced her against her own nature. Twice now.”

I stared for a moment, with nothing to say to that. I was caked in cold sweat, shivering despite the comfort of the yellow robes. I glanced down at the golden hand waiting for my assent. Tried to slow my thoughts, tried to step back from the situation and think it through. The King in Yellow loved tragedies. Would he sacrifice his own daughter for the sake of a play? Or was it all a lie, was I on the stage right now? I looked over at Sevens, playing with her dolls, but she was insensible to all this.

“This is obviously a test,” I murmured, nothing obvious about it.

Alexander sighed, so unimpressed he was getting bored. “No, the deal is quite real,” he drawled, flexing the fingers of the golden-yellow hand. “This is not Alexander’s, this is the hand of the king. Open your true eye and check if you must, little watcher. You of all beings should be able to verify that.”

I whirled back to him. “Little watcher?”

He shrugged.

“What does that mean?” I pressed. “Is that a term you made up just now, or have you seen something like me before?”

The King in Yellow shook his head. “I told you already, Lavinia, I am not interested in your tale. For you, there is only this deal, this way out. In fact, this is a step too far in the first place, I shouldn’t even really be offering it. I am indirectly helping you in your struggle. But if it will get you to go away, then that is a fair price, and I must pay it like all others.” He sighed, as if affronted at this ‘fair price.’ “Besides, you cannot seriously think that a human being, even one as changed as you, is a suitable romantic partner for one of us?”

“You took a human woman as your wife.”

I blurted it out before I could stop myself, the words tripping off my tongue.

Alexander’s smug, oily smile drained away, replaced by the truth beneath — the cold anger of narcissism challenged. The King was not impressed by my bleating. Despite how far I’d come, despite every change I’d gone through, despite my tentacles and my

bioreactor and my yellow cloak and the fact I'd killed this man once before, suddenly I was back there, not in the coffee shop, but in the moment I'd confronted Alexander in his castle, right at the second before I'd killed him. Except this time there was no Lozzie at my side, no hyperdimensional equation burning and ready, no friends coming to rescue me.

"Do as I say, not as I do," he said.

"So you're not just a sadist, you're also a hypocrite," I managed to squeeze out.

"Lavinia, you do not love my daughter. Not really."

I had no clever answer to that.

Guilt twisted inside my chest like a parasite made of knives and acid. He — Alexander, the King in Yellow, whatever was speaking — was correct. I did not love Sevens. Did I even respect her? Did I have a single shred of respect for the value and fragility and tenderness of what she felt for me? I barely even understood it; how could I possibly return those feelings?

The King in Yellow was offering me a significant advantage, the removal of an obstacle which stood between me and Maisie, even if I found some other way of getting home in the meantime. The deal would bring me that much closer to my goals: it would get me home, it would ensure Lozzie's safety. It would take me back to Raine and Evelyn and Zheng, everything I loved. And all I had to give up was the love of a being I didn't even really understand, the affection of a woman so complex and contradictory that her feelings for me had already damaged her fundamental nature.

All I had to do was shake the King's hand. That was the sensible thing. The rational choice. The safe decision.

My right arm twitched.

"What is it to be, Lavinia?"

"Shut up," I hissed.

Abyssal ruthlessness was silent. This was a higher-order function. But I barely functioned at the best of times.

Everything the King had said in Alexander's voice was disgusting — not just because Sevens was my friend, but on principle as well: that

she didn't have the right to decide for herself, that her love was not her own to give, that father knew best. I turned to stare at Sevens. She scuttled about between her dolls, a weird little twisted thing all mushroom-pale skin and hot obsession.

I wanted to protect that creature. An ugly duckling full of passion and delight. There was something supremely beautiful about her like that.

But even that was not the real her. Even that was a mask. The real her was abyssal. The King's domination and abuse would not be remotely human, not even physical, material, not here — so not valid?

All of this, even the deal, even his words, were play and pretend. That was what these yellow beings were. Play and pretend.

And suddenly I knew what to do. He'd said it himself.

We are what we pretend to be.

I whipped out one tentacle and slapped away the King's golden hand.

"Don't insult me," I hissed.

Heart in my throat, lead in my belly, adrenaline surging through my veins, I managed to sound an awful lot more confident than I felt. Bioreactor thrumming, legs ready to throw myself out of the chair, I was prepared to fight over this — over Sevens. Abyssal instinct zeroed the path between me and Sevens as I hatched a plan to sprint to her, scoop her up, and take us elsewhere, anywhere, any other Outside dimension — before Steel could turn back into that death-beetle-thing and reach her first at the King's snapped command.

But to my incredible relief, the King started laughing.

Sadly, it was Alexander's laugh, an oily, self-satisfied chuckle, with narrowed eyes of mocking disbelief. He withdrew his offered hand and picked up the coffee instead, taking a long sip to douse his laughter.

"It's not funny," I snapped.

"It's not, of course it's not! Oh, Lavinia, courage is never comedic," he said in a tone dripping with sarcasm. He placed the coffee back

down with exaggerated care. I was fired up now; I wanted to slap him across the face as well. One of my tentacles twitched in that direction, and he mockingly raised a hand ready to bat it away, as if playing with a feisty kitten. "Oh, Morell. Would you have taken a deal if the real Alexander had offered you one?"

I hissed through my teeth, aching to hit him. "What? What sort of deal? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I don't know." He gestured airily with his unwrapped golden hand. "Say, free passage home for you and your friends? Plus, of course, an iron-hard certainty that he would cease all his experiments, never raise a finger again, never touch a single hair on some poor runaway's head." Alexander's voice hardened as he spoke, springing the trap. "Would you have let him live?"

"... I ... no. No, he had to die. He had to. Everything he'd done, and with Lozzie, he—"

"So it was revenge?" His words were hard now, flying at me like spears as he leaned forward over the table, eyes boring into me. "You are judge, jury, and executioner?"

"Not revenge, no. Everything he was doing in that castle, his cult, the dead children, all of it was wrong, he had to—"

"Did you have that right?"

I blinked, frowning hard, feeling like I was sinking in quicksand. "Right? Right doesn't come into it. Look at what he was the head of."

"You are so close to understanding. These things are institutional," Alexander all but growled. "Killing one man, even a leader, does not stop the exploitation, the evil, the suffering. Is that your justification? You are not that naive, Lavinia. You grew up sheltered, but you have learned since then, from your comrades if not from books. Killing me stopped nothing, the act merely dispersed it. My uncle, Edward, he is out there right now, continuing the horror and the abuse, and you know that. And you will not kill him as easily as you ended me."

"But, everything you were doing—"

"How many proteges have I made, even in death?" Alexander ran on, face a mask of righteous obsession. "Can you be certain Sarika

will not turn, in due time? Better kill her too, yes? And all the others I taught, all the rest, they have to go as well. And what about you, what about the cult that is gathering around you? Will you be like me one day?"

"No. Never. Never, I—"

"Killing one man has not stopped the process," he hissed.

"He had to die," I murmured, voice shaking.

"Did you have the right?"

"Right isn't—"

Alexander Lilburne slammed his hand down on the coffee table so hard it made the cup fall over. Brown liquid sloshed out and over the edge and onto the floor. Eyes blazing with the fury of arrogance, he shouted over me.

"Did you have the right, Lavinia!?"

I knew that goading anger too well. It was the exact same way he'd looked the moment before I'd killed him, screaming at me that I wouldn't do it. An anger that would never admit defeat, never admit wrong doing, never admit what it really was.

"Killing isn't what mattered!" I screamed in his face. "Keeping my friends alive is what mattered! That's building something real! Something better. Not just for sentimental emotion, but for community, for mutual support, for each other. Greater than me alone. A whole." I felt myself dial down with every word, anger leaving me like spent steam. "And to save that, you had to die."

Alexander's eyes bored into me.

"... yes," I whispered. "For that, I had the right."

And with that, a mote of guilt left me. I'd been holding onto it all this time. A weight so tiny, so insignificant. The true meaning of the murder I'd committed.

A few stray tears rolled down my cheeks. I sniffed hard. Alexander sat back, suddenly impassive. I stared at him and did not see the King.

"I'm sorry I had to kill you," I said. "But I don't regret it. You can't hurt anyone anymore. You're dead. Just rest."

I felt no forgiveness. Only responsibility.

The King in Yellow nodded. “Goodbye, Lavinia.”

And then there was no Alexander Lilburne. Gone quicker than I could draw breath.

Sitting in his place on the other side of the coffee table was a man I’d never seen before. Tall and gangly in an awkward and apologetic way, as if a tree had uprooted itself to relocate, but had been invited to a tea party halfway through, too polite to refuse. The yellow bandages were gone, replaced by a set of comfortable white robes and a pair of sandals on his feet.

His skin was the colour of coffee with too much milk, warm brown but rarely exposed to the sun. Perhaps middle-aged, his curly black hair showed some grey at the temples, cut short around a pair of comically large ears. A matching salt-and-pepper beard and heavy moustache were both neatly trimmed and lightly oiled, which framed a gentle mouth and an overly large nose. High, noble cheekbones highlighted thick dark eyelashes and carefully plucked brows.

The only yellow was in his soft, puppy-like eyes, with irises the colour of burning brass.

I’d never been attracted to a man — and I wasn’t then either — but even my decidedly lesbian self could tell this mask was the King in Yellow at his most handsome and approachable.

“Really?” I sighed, unimpressed.

He lit up with a warm smile which crinkled the corners of his eyes, like a friendly uncle who’d just seen me enter through a rarely used door.

“I am sorry, but it is one’s nature,” he began, in an accent which flattened all tonal stress, vaguely Middle Eastern but which I couldn’t place. “Your— ah!” He noticed the fallen coffee cup and the brown puddle still spreading across the table and the floor, quickly righting it with one long-fingered hand and fussing over the mess, though not actually bothering to wipe it up. “Ahh, I can be so clumsy, so clumsy, what a terrible display. Oh, no, no no.” He threw up his hands, laughing at himself, looking around the room to his three yellow children — Melancholy snorted, Steel pointedly ignored his silent request, and Orbit stuck out a three-foot long

barbed and steaming tongue.

“But I have sent all my help away,” the king laughed. “It seems I am alone with the mess I have made.”

“That’s not a very subtle metaphor,” I blurted out, still reeling.

“Not a metaphor, not at all. Well, perhaps a little.” He shot me a wink, scooted his chair back from the puddle, and rummaged around in his robes until he produced a battered paper bag. He dug out some kind of sugar-dusted dough ball and popped it into his mouth, then held the bag out toward me, speaking as he chewed. “Would you like one?”

I stared at him, then into the bag full of baked sweets. I could barely summon the coherence to shake my head, the whiplash was too great. I tried to huddle inside Sevens’ yellow robes, folding my tentacles around me for support, clinging to the real.

“Really?” He seemed surprised. “They are delightful. Very light, very fluffy, not heavy on the stomach.”

“No. Thank you,” I grunted. He shrugged and retracted the offer, plucking out another treat for himself and chewing with relish.

All I could do was stare, my catharsis turning to rot in my belly. He’d brought me to a genuine conclusion, lifted the weight of murder from my shoulders, opened my eyes — and this was how he reacted?

“I can’t ... I ... how can you do this?” I asked. “Right after you were being *him*? What if I hadn’t done what you were waiting for? What if I hadn’t reached your desired conclusion?”

“Desired?” He blinked at me. “It was a collaboration. We were writing it together. You and I.”

“My life is not a story.”

“Every life is a story.” He smiled like an indulgent uncle, the genuine affection undeniable, battering against my outrage. “It is how we are made, how we are structured. Structure is everything, you know? It is born up here.” He tapped his forehead with his fingertips. “And we impose it on the world. Otherwise, we are animals, without narrative.”

“... what if—” I cast about and found Sevens again, still flitting

between her playthings, now in the process of making three separate couples kiss. "What if I'd decided differently? What if I'd decided to kill you? Or kidnap Sevens to save her? Because I would have done. I was inches from doing that. Would you have stopped me from writing the wrong story?"

"Oh, no. No, far from it. Then we would inhabit a very different story to the one we find ourselves in."

I boggled at him. "Are we still in a play? Is this still your bloody stage?"

He shrugged and smiled all the wider, eyes glistening with admiration. "Not mine. Yours."

That smile was worse than any mockery from Alexander Lilburne. The King in Yellow wore his kindly guise, but I suspected he would wear it just the same if I had been reduced to a mental breakdown, never able to overcome the reality of murder. The smile was a mask. Power lay behind it. I had narrowly avoided disaster, at nothing more than his whim.

"Then how much of what you said was true?" I demanded. "How much was an act?"

The Gentle King spread his hands and almost dropped the paper bag of sweets, making a comical recovery at the last second. I snorted a non-laugh and shook my head, disgusted at the display of slapstick harmlessness.

"What about the dead hands?" I asked. "I feel ... I mean, what I felt just now, that was real, but they—"

"I think you will find no trouble from them now, miss Morell. I think Mister Lilburne's ghost will understand."

I tried not to thank him for that. He had not done all this for my sake, merely for his own amusement.

"Everything is a play to you people," I hissed.

"Guilty, always guilty, yes. The play's the thing, haha!" He spoke the laugh out loud, grinning like he'd offered me a present.

"*Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king?*" I spat the rest of the *Hamlet* line back at him. "I doubt you have one. Now what about Sevens?" I demanded, pointing with one tentacle at where she

continued her one-woman play. “How much of that was real? If you’re still going to confine her and stop her from—”

The Kindly Monarch in Yellow flourished one floppy white sleeve and tried to click his fingers, but the dramatic gesture was thwarted by the sugar dust all over his hand. I doubted his power relied on the sound itself, but he still fussed and tutted, licking his fingertips clean before trying again.

Click.

All at once, the three private plays across the stage of the white room came to a halt.

The forest-knight reacted with the least surprise; his duel with the endless yellow tentacles ceased as his opponent suddenly drew away in a quivering ring, then transformed back into the 1920s caricatures. Laughing and slapping each others’ shoulders, the imitation-humans linked hands and took a bow toward the knight, who was paused in the act of bringing down his axe. He held the pose for a moment, then straightened up and returned the bow. I didn’t think he was in on the play, just being polite.

The murmur of Saldis’ nautical tale stuttered out in confusion as her audience suddenly stopped paying attention. All of them turned toward the King with the look of actors interrupted by their director, eyebrows raised and hands spread in silent question, though the ones currently holding the rats kept petting and fussing over them.

Saldis looked so very crestfallen. “I ... was just getting to ... excuse me? Ladies and gents?”

“We’ll carry on,” one of the young women called to the King, “if that’s all the same to you, sire?”

He waved permission. Saldis got her attentive audience back, but she seemed more than a little shocked, blinking at them, at me, and at the King, as if she’d just realised she’d been hoodwinked all along.

But I didn’t have attention to spare. Sevens was tugging my heartstrings.

The moment the King clicked his fingers, Sevens’ tableau sprang out of their carefully selected poses, ruining her work in one fell swoop.

They all stepped back from her with giggles on their lips, smiles hidden behind fluttering hands, making teasing eyes at each other. Sevens let out a noise like a cross between a surprised toad and a steam kettle, sprawling onto her skinny bum in shock before scrambling back to her feet, shoulders hunched and hands drawn in close to her chest.

Flushed bright red with embarrassment, showing all her needle-teeth in a grimace, black eyes bulging, she twitched and spun about with all the nervous energy of a frightened rodent. Lank and greasy hair trailed behind her. She snapped her teeth at Steel and boggled at Melancholy, then finally noticed the King in Yellow, her father.

Gurgling between her teeth, pattering on the balls of bare feet, she rushed over to him with those spindly pale legs, face burning.

“Daaaaad!” she yowled with all the force of a betrayed teenage girl, between teeth like pins. “Fuck!”

“My jungle rose,” he said, smiling that ingratiating smile. “You were wonderful, well—”

She slapped him across the head, a clumsy open-palm mash. He took it in his stride, laughing and putting up his hands in surrender.

“Fuck you! You shit!” she screeched, not amused.

Perhaps she’d forgotten I was present. Her red-black eyes flickered around, searching for more targets on which to vent her embarrassment — but then she juddered to a halt at the sight of me, mouth hinging open, eyes wide as night.

There was no time to think. If I’d thought, I would have failed. I acted on instinct.

I reached out quickly with a tentacle and grabbed one of her small, translucent-pale hands, almost curled like a claw. It was clammy and bony, but very solid.

“No!” I blurted out. “Don’t change!”

She grimaced at me, cringing so hard she almost curled up in a ball. From the back of her throat she made a hissing gurgle like some kind of sunless cave-lizard. “Nooooo—”

“Yes! Sevens, this is you as well. Look!” I squeezed with my tentacle, adding one of my actual hands too, wrapped on top of

hers, clinging on hard. “Look, I’m holding your hand. Nobody is forcing me to.”

“Nnnnnnnnnnn ... ” She grumbled, still blushing bright red, but she didn’t run away. She didn’t change, didn’t switch to a different mask. She shuffled away from her father and got close to my side on little tip-toe footsteps, then grabbed a nervous handful of my yellow robes. She hung on tight, staring at the floor, too mortified to speak.

The King in Yellow uttered a long sigh. “I see it is too late to break this bond. As it was with myself.”

“So you really did have a human wife?” I asked.

“Did!” Sevens rasped at him. “Don’t lie!”

The King nodded. “I bound myself with that decision. I loved her, and love limited my scope, my range, my creative vision. But!” He raised a finger. “Limitation is the mother of invention. Boundaries give us shape.” He gestured at himself, then at Sevens. “You see?”

“And you don’t wish the same for your daughter?”

He sighed with undeniable sadness. “I love all my children, but few of them are mature enough to move beyond imitation, beyond plays, to change their nature in truth. The three you see here?” He gestured outward with arms wide, at Melancholy and Steel and Orbit. Melancholy yawned a cat’s yawn. Steel inclined her head, eyes narrowed, disapproving. Orbit, still a slug-centaur, clasped his ape hands together and raised them over his insectoid head in celebration. “They,” the King continued. “They are the only ones who have gone beyond plays. And two of them—” He glanced at Steel, then at Orbit, with a strange pride in his eyes, half admiration and half terrible sorrow. “Their forms of love would be alien to you. Horrifying, most likely.”

“There is no horror in bearing new life,” Steel raised her voice, cold and certain. “However it is achieved.”

The King winced slowly, with a sad smile.

“Melancholy,” he said, “she knew human beings, like I did, and she knew what she was doing. And it hurt her. But you, miss Morell, or may I call you by your first name?”

“ ... if you want. Just not Lavinia.”

“Heather, then. You may live forever, if you play your pieces well. Perhaps you will be good for my daughter.”

“I don’t care about living forever. I’ll settle for saving my twin. You know that already, and I won’t lie.”

“That is what I am afraid of,” he sighed.

“I want to help her!” Sevens said in that chittering gurgle-voice. Her fingers tightened on my yellow robes. “Dad, I want to help!”

He raised his hands in surrender once more, but had nothing left to say from behind his kindly smile.

“That’s it then?” I asked. “We’re just ... free to go?”

“If you wish,” he said.

Making sure I had a firm grip on Sevens’ sweaty little hand, I stood up from my seat. My tentacles flexed outward and several of my vertebrae popped as I straightened my spine. Every muscle was sore with tension and my t-shirt was stuck to my skin. This entire encounter had probably shaved a few years off my life.

Sevens hopped from foot to foot, as if unsure if she should break away or toward me, run or snuggle. She was a few inches shorter than me and wouldn’t look at my face. For the first time ever, I think I understood how Raine felt about me.

I turned to her and caught her with eye contact, as if pinning her to a wall. She went stiff and still, black eyes staring back into mine, red pupils dilating wide. Her face was so sallow and pale. It was like looking into a pair of shadowed rubies set in cloudy ivory. There was a dangerous beauty to this mask; my ape instincts told me to stay away from this opportunistic predator, but there was something in her scent, her nature, the urgency of her movements. It drew me in. I wanted to run my fingers along the razor blade. I’d never felt anything like it before.

She cringed away from me, as if expecting a blow.

“Sevens, will you come home with me?” I murmured.

“Like this?!” she rasped. “After you saw ... nnnuurrngggg ... ”

“Yes, like this,” I laughed with relief. “Like however you want. However you are. Please?” I took a handful of the yellow robes in my other fist. “I accept. I do. I mean, maybe we can’t get actually

married, that's a technical question for later. A big, complex, messy one. But I accept you. Come home with me?"

"Rrrrrrrrr," she made a noise like an uncomfortable dog, but she nodded.

I blew out a slow sigh of relief, then turned to the King once more, still sitting comfortably.

"And you," I said. "Can't you help me against the Eye, if I'm with your daughter?"

The King raised his eyebrows in surprise, then laughed softly. He gestured around again. Steel was shaking her iron head. Melancholy had raised her eyebrows. Orbit curled up on himself, slug-safe.

"Look around at my court," said the King, suddenly growing grim and serious. "Look at me, examine me, daughter-in-law to-be. To you I might seem as a god, but in truth I am only a single step removed from you and yours. For all the beauty and pageantry of Carcosa, for all the latent cruelty in my children, for all that I have shown men the hells of their own creation, though I was once the ruination of cities and the coming of the red death ... I could no more stand unprotected before *Casma* than you. There is no help I could render unto you that my daughter has not already gifted."

"Daaaaaad," Sevens hissed between her teeth, cringing with embarrassment.

"But if you ever find yourself trapped Outside again, little watcher," he said. "My house has many rooms."

"... thank you." I nodded as politely as I could manage, still completely overwhelmed. "Little watcher?"

He shrugged. "Poetic license. The *Casma* watches. You are its heir, but you are not as it. Only little. In the good way. I make my peace now, with the little watcher, that I may be observed favourably in the future."

"If you say so." I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

I squeezed tight on Sevens' hand, to make sure she wasn't about to run away, then turned to gesture to Lozzie's forest-knight, but he was already approaching my side, towering over us in his chrome armour. He lowered a hand onto my shoulder, properly anchored. The King nodded politely to him, but he didn't nod back. When I

checked over my shoulder for Saldis, I received only a wave in return, over the heads of her adoring audience.

"I think I'll stay and get to know these wonderful people!" she called.

One of her big black rats was perched on the shoulder of a man facing away from us. The rat caught my eye and I swear it laughed as only a rat can. Saldis would be fine on her own, I guessed.

"I will come visit, sister," Melancholy purred, head lazing on her paws. "Keep a bed fresh."

Sevens couldn't even look at her, still flushed with embarrassment, eyes downcast.

"Are you ready?" I whispered to Sevens.

"... no," she croaked.

"Time to go home, regardless. I'm exhausted."

The familiar old equation spun up in the back of my mind, burning hot and toxic. The King rose to his feet and gave me one last smile, too sweet and too warm to be real. I knew that if things had worked out differently here, he would have smiled just as warmly at my steaming corpse.

I executed the equation, and took Sevens home.

Out.

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.1

In the space between one world and the next, dead hands closed around my ankles.

But now they were weak.

Skin and bone do not provide much strength. The hands had been dead for so long that all their muscle and sinew had withered away to dust, their nails had turned yellow and brittle, and their grip was no tighter than a chance brush with a leafless branch, barren and winter-bare. How had I never noticed before? How had such an emaciated grasp ever held me back? They tried to scramble and scabble and scuttle up my trouser legs, but they didn't possess strength enough to climb.

I could have shaken my ankles loose, kicked the hands away, and carried on without a backward glance.

Instead, in that forever moment of non-time inside the membrane between reality and Outside, I reached down — not with my tentacles, not with toxic defences and venomous stingers, not with rending teeth and ripping claws, but with my plain old human hands, or at least with their analogue in that place where nothing truly existed.

Gently but firmly, I removed what was left of Alexander Lilburne's ambition from around my ankles; I held the hands for a heartbeat, bony and dead and without true will.

Then I pushed them off into the static, and let go.

= =

We — that was, myself, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, and Lozzie's dutiful forest-knight — landed back in Number 12 Barnslow Drive with all the grace and elegance of a mistimed leap off a deflating bouncy castle.

My feet touched solid floorboards for about half a second. I caught

a whirling glimpse of the ex-drawing room, Evelyn's magical workshop, all dark wood caressed by the fuzzy grey shadows of early morning, with a soft pool of warm light floating in the middle, a beacon calling me back across a dark ocean. Home flooded my senses, the familiar scent of the house, of old furniture and peeling paint and fresh laundry and steamed rice and chicken casserole and cumin and paprika and black pepper and Raine's shampoo and Evelyn's hand cream and feminine sweat and rumpled sheets and pencil lead and printed pages and traces of my own bodily oils on a hundred surfaces. I was part of this place and it was part of me. Even with my eyes watering, my head pounding, and my stomach in open rebellion, relief blossomed inside me like a bomb going off.

Then I fell over onto my backside.

No simple pratfall for me; I went down hard. I don't know if it was the relief, the stress of the Slip, or the aftermath of Carcosa, but I went over like a horse, feet skidding out from under me as gravity's enthusiastic welcome took a sledgehammer to my centre of balance. My tentacles flailed in a futile effort to break my fall, knocking things over, sending a chair clattering onto its side, slapping against the floorboards, dropping my squid-skull mask with a dull thump. I twisted as I fell, arms and legs tangled in my voluminous yellow robes.

I bumped my tailbone when I landed on my bum, not hard enough to injure, but still hard enough to send that unique spike of pain rocketing up through my body.

But the sudden pain was exquisite. So sharp, so bright, the clearest thing I'd ever felt — and it didn't really hurt. It sang through my nerve endings and said *here I am*, undeniable and irrefutable.

Sevens was busy falling over too, even messier and more uncoordinated than me; her sweaty little hand slipped out of mine as she went down in a dry-heaving, twitching heap, letting out little throaty gurgles of animal complaint. Either this mask did not confer immunity to the effects of the Slip, or she was still employing her acting skills. The knight didn't collapse, which was lucky, since his armour weighed far more than any human being. He probably would have gone straight through the floorboards and into the cellar. But he did stagger, a *clank-clank-clonk* like a coughing train. A chrome giant much too big for the room swayed and wavered in my tear-blurred peripheral vision. He only stopped when he

bumped into the table hard enough to leave a dent in the wood, hanging onto the edge with his free hand, bent over like he was going to be sick.

I was in pain, stomach roiling, squeezing my eyes shut as I lay on my back in a heap of limbs and yellow fabric, tentacles and arms alike both limp with exhaustion. I should have groaned, or turned over to vomit, or cried out for Raine, or just whimpered and prayed for help.

Instead, laughter pushed its way up my throat and out through my lips.

“Ahaha ... home! Hello hooooooooome,” I wailed in victory.

The laughter came in waves, subtle but irresistible, in between spikes of nausea. Honey-sweet relief drenched my thoughts in amber antiseptic.

Eventually I managed to roll onto my side, dragging my yellow robes with me, at least to avoid choking on my own sick if the nausea overpowered the relief. My tentacles could barely help — they were quivering as if I’d just followed along with one of Raine’s weight lifting routines. My entire body felt like a fresh bruise, that slow subtle ache of phantom weakness that heralded being very sore in the morning, but it was coupled with every inch of my skin feeling like I’d just stepped out of a steaming hot bath, oversensitive and tingling. From my eyelids to my toes, every nerve ending was open like a flower, leaving me on the blurred boundary between strange pleasure and writhing discomfort.

For a moment longer than I intended, I just lay there on my side, staring at the bony corner of Sevens’ hip as I ran my fingertips across a patch of floorboard, fascinated by the clarity of the woodgrain.

“Made it,” I was muttering. “Made it, made it, made it. I did it. I got out. Got back. Maisie can get back too.”

“Nnnnnn ... ” Sevens gurgled with pain. “Owwwww?”

I didn’t care how badly I ached or how tired I felt. I could have been bleeding out or concussed or missing a hand; none of those would have spoilt my relief. I was home, I’d made it back. I’d overcome the childhood fear that had haunted me since Wonderland. I was not lost.

As I pulled myself into a sitting position, I welcomed each and every flex of deep-muscle ache, like the embrace of old friends. Every twinge and stab was so clear, so real, so instantly and evidently present.

But when I turned my bleary, bloodshot eyes on the magical workshop around us, I discovered that clarity was not restricted to the inside of my own body.

The first feelers of grey dawn were creeping around the edges of the heavy curtains, encroaching on a sloppy puddle of warm orange cast by a small lamp on the table — and for perhaps fifteen uninterrupted seconds, I was mesmerised by the floating dust caught within the light. It was beautiful and complex and completely impossible to look away, even if I'd wanted to. When I finally did, my fascination shifted to the woodgrain in the table and the chairs, the fabric fibres in the lumpy surface of the old sofa, the imperfections in the wall paint. All of it bored into my senses like an overload of reality, leaving my head heavy and fuzzy.

The surface of my skin, the scent of books and food and hair, the hard feeling of the ground beneath my backside and legs; the air entering my lungs as I inhaled; the glint of light off the knight's shin armour and the nervous shiver of Sevens' bare legs — all of it was just incredible. These things had been here all this time, and I hadn't noticed how beautiful they were? Even my own hands were mesmerising. I held one up and flexed it in front of my face, hypnotised for a moment by the motion of my own fingers, my mouth hanging open.

I'd expected to suffer some sensory processing issues on my return to reality, similar to when I'd delved too deep into the abyss, that horrifying splashdown back to a world of rotting meat and deafening ape noises and unspeakable stench. But I hadn't been to the abyss, I'd been Outside.

I had not exactly attended the cinema many times over the course of my life; the constant presence of pneuma-somatic creatures made it very difficult to concentrate on enjoying a show. But I recognised this feeling all the same, from those scant few Christmas pantomimes my parents had taken Maisie and me to see when we were very little. This feeling was very much like when one stood up from a long stretch in a dark theatre, when the curtain closes and the lights go up and you are no longer audience, but simply a being

once again, reduced back down to your own body.

Reality felt hyper-real, because I'd been gone for too long.

Which is why it took me a moment to look up from the creases in my own right hand and realise that somebody was staring at me.

Big blue eyes, exhausted and ringed with dark bags, set in a round, sallown-skinned face which had never quite shed all its teenage puppy fat, so naturally inclined to kindness yet so artificially adapted to defensive scowls. A mane of golden-blonde hair was gathered back into a functional, messy pony-tail. Hunched shoulders wrapped in blanket and shawl and cream-coloured jumper against the predatory cold, long skirt not quite managing to hide the black carbon-fibre of a prosthetic ankle and blade-shaped foot. Small and cuddly, badly in need of a hug.

Evelyn Saye was sitting at the old dining table, staring at me wide-eyed, her mouth hanging open in shock.

She looked like hell, like she hadn't slept for a week, running on nothing but fumes and spite — which, to be fair, was not entirely out of the ordinary for my dear friend Evelyn. Whatever else had happened in my absence, at least she was a constant. But she'd either been crying or stressed out of her mind, or both, or worse, and I knew in my gut it was probably because of me. A huge mess of notes and papers lay on the table before her, looking like a whirlwind had been through them, accompanied by two ancient tomes wrapped in cracked leather, both of them propped open with other books. She was holding a pen, but it clattered to the table from her hand.

"Evee!" I croaked, fully aware that I was grinning like a lunatic but unable to control myself. I made an abortive attempt to stand up and hurl myself at her for a hug, but ended up sprawling forward instead, all tangled in my yellow robes. I barely managed to catch myself with my tentacles to avoid going flat on my face. "Oop! Ahh, um, haha."

Evelyn just shook her head, numb with amazement. She tore her eyes away from me to take in Sevens and the Knight as well.

Even as I laughed at my own clumsiness, I could tell something was wrong with me. The act of almost falling over was *so funny*, the rubbery sensation in my muscles was so fascinating I wanted to

stretch them every which way. But I couldn't deny the force of relief, wiping unexpected tears from the corners of my eyes.

"Evee, oh Evelyn, Evelyn, I'm back, I'm back. Oh, it feels like it's been such a ... long ... time?"

The alarm and confusion in Evelyn's eyes grabbed me by the throat. Cold panic lanced into my bowels, even through the enclosing warmth of Sevens' yellow robes. My unsteady vision lurched around the magical workshop, but nothing seemed different, nothing out of place. The bucket with the clay-squid still sat in one corner. The pair of spider-servitors still clung to the walls, watching me in mute silence with their banks of crystalline eyes. I waved numbly at them.

"Why does it feel like it's been such a long time?" My voice came out tiny and weak, mouth going dry, lips quivering. "Evee? Evee, say something. Don't tell me it's been weeks, or ... or months, or ... no, no."

Evelyn threw up her hands, grimacing with frustration. "It's been seventeen hours, Heather," she said, tight and controlled. "No, make that nineteen. You have been gone all night long."

I heaved with relief, one hand to my chest. "Oh thank god. Thank you. Oh Evee, oh—"

"And what time do you call this?" she hissed. In any other circumstances, the quiet fury in her voice would have sent me into stammered apologies, but I just started laughing again. I let out a silly giggle that should have had me scowling at myself, but instead I half-covered my mouth, laughing and kicking and going red in the face.

"Home time!" I said.

Evelyn boggled at me, then turned her head to the kitchen door, took a deep breath, and shouted at the top of her lungs. "She's here! Heather's down here and she's all fucked up!"

"Ow," I murmured as I winced my eyes shut. Evelyn's shout was an affectionate assault on my tender senses. "Actually I'm significantly less screwed up than usual. I don't feel as sick, really. It's really cool! Less painful, mmhmm."

Evelyn frowned at me like I'd just grown an extra head. "No. No,

you are definitely riding high on something.”

A small, clammy hand suddenly wormed into mine; Sevens had found me again. Wide black-and-red eyes peered at me over the top of her own knees, drawn up to her chest in a protective huddle, rocking back and forth. She let out a throaty gurgle, a low, “Guuuurrhhh.”

“It’s okaaaaaaay,” I replied to her.

A sudden slam made us both flinch; Evelyn slapping the table with an open palm. She was staring at Sevens, going a little green around the gills. “Fuck me, I thought that was Lozzie. I thought she’d dyed her hair or something, or ...” She grabbed her walking stick from where it had been leaning against the back of her chair, clutching it with white knuckles.

“Oh noooo, no no.” I tried to gather my thoughts. Evelyn had nothing to worry about. “Lozzie’s not here.”

“Not here? Oh I don’t fucking believe this shit,” Evelyn spat, eyes blazing at me, tendons in her neck standing out as she went red in the face. “Heather! What happened?” She grabbed a fistful of the notes spread out across the table and brandished them like proof of a criminal conspiracy. “I’ve been trying to reach you all fucking night! I don’t even know how to describe your trajectory, let alone the Outside dimension you went to! I told you this was a terrible idea, I said, I said it and you didn’t listen!”

“I know and I’m sorry, I’m sorry. But you can stop now, Eevee.” The words tumbled out of me. “We’re safe, we’re safe, and I love you, and thank you for looking and—”

“So where the hell is Lozzie? I can’t stop until you’re both safe, can I?” she snapped, then pointed her papers at Sevens. “Because that is not Lozzie. I know what that knight is, that’s one of Lozzie’s, and fine, whatever, but what the hell is *she*?” She turned her head to shout into the kitchen again. “Praem! Praem, in here, now!”

“It’s Sevens!” I said, laughing again. “Sevens! Sevens!”

“Seven?” Evelyn gaped at me.

“Eevee, this is just Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight,” I said, concentrating past the haze. “It’s okay. This is a mask.”

“Rrrrrrr,” gurgled Seven-Shades-of-Toothy-Goblin, peering up at

Evelyn with red-on-black.

“ ... your yellow Outsider?”

“Yes! Yes!” I nodded. She finally got it! I could have cheered, though I knew the confusion was my fault.

Sevens clacked her needle-teeth twice. Evelyn frowned at the pair of us.

“She’s safe,” I said.

“Safe?!” Evelyn snapped. “She’s an Outsider and she’s already screwed with us more than enough—”

“People are sleeping,” came a sing-song intonation, clear as a bell.

Praem stepped through the kitchen door. The sight of her was almost as much of a comfort as Evelyn. Straight-backed and holding herself with perfect poise, dressed from head to toe in the crisp black and white of her maid uniform, with her blonde hair pinned up in a bun, she was a very familiar sight, and for that I could have kissed her. Plush and smooth and smart and sensible, Praem was still here.

However, her warning came too late; as she joined us, I heard footsteps through the ceiling, a confused, half-awake stumble.

“Yes, I know, I—” Evelyn stopped dead at the sight of Praem’s blank, milk-white eyes, her expressionless reproach. Praem stepped forward and placed a steaming mug of tea on the table in from of Evelyn, then turned to me.

“Welcome home,” she intoned.

“Thank you,” I croaked, trying to get my feet under me again.

“Praem, you’re so cute. I-I mean, um, er— yes.” I cleared my throat. “I can’t quite stand up ... could I trouble you for—”

Praem clicked over to me and Sevens, precise and exact with every movement. In the past, back when we’d first met, her perfectly stiff mannerisms could sometimes seem slightly uncanny, but now they were familiar and family and home. She stopped by the Knight and turned toward him first. He had just finished straightening up, his axe back on his shoulder where it belonged. A still-functioning sub-Heather in the back of my mind noted that it had taken him an awfully long time to stand up straight again.

“Welcome,” she intoned. The Knight’s helmet chin went up and down, almost as stiff as her.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” Evelyn hissed. “This isn’t a bloody tea party. Help her up and—”

Praem interrupted her creator with nothing but a look. Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes and banged the tip of her walking stick on the floor twice. I laughed, unable to stop myself, but mortified at my own behaviour, hand covering my mouth in embarrassment.

“Welcome,” Praem repeated — for Sevens this time, bell-clear and expressionless, milk-white eyes looking down at red-on-black.

“Rrrrrrrrrrr ... ” Sevens gurgled, withdrawing her hand from mine and curling up in a tighter ball.

“Sevens?” I murmured. “It’s okay, Praem is lovely.”

“Welcome,” Praem repeated.

“Buuuuurrrrr—”

“Welcome.”

Sevens hissed between her teeth.

“Welcome.”

“ ... thank you,” Sevens finally gurgled. She clambered into an awkward squat-crouch, bare feet on the floorboards, joints like loose rubber.

Praem turned back to Evelyn. “Safe.”

“Oh fine,” Evelyn huffed. “If you say so.”

Praem helped me up with strong hands under my armpits. She didn’t mind when I leaned into her for a hug, heavy and slow and almost sleepy, nor when I added my tentacles around her shoulders and waist and hung on tight. Nor did she mind when I started absent-mindedly rubbing my face on her shoulder as I tested my quivering legs, just for the sensation of starchy cloth on my cheeks — though I certainly minded very much when I realised what I was doing.

“Oh!” I jerked back, blushing and stammering. “I’m so sorry, I, uh, I don’t what came over me, I was just— just—”

“Stim good,” Praem said.

“I-I’m sorry?”

“You are in an altered state of consciousness,” Praem replied, sing-song and soft.

“You can bloody well say that again,” Evelyn huffed. “She’s high as a kite.”

“I’m not high? What are you talking about.” I paused and blinked several times; my intonation was all wrong there. “Oh ... oh, I ... I am? Oh, bum.”

“Did you do this to her?” Evelyn snapped at Seven-Shades-of-Shy.

“Nooooo,” Sevens rasped, grimacing away from Evelyn’s withering attention. “She was out there too long. Adjusted. She’ll be fine. Coming down.”

“ ... like decompression sickness,” Evelyn murmured, then jabbed toward Sevens with her walking stick. “You tell me now, Outsider, and you tell me the truth, or I will find a way to hurt you—”

“Be kind!” I almost yelled. Evelyn blinked at me in surprise.

“Heather—”

“Be kind.”

“Alright, alright! You, Seven whatever-you-are, is this putting Heather in any danger?”

Sevens shook her head and hooked her fingers between her toes.

“Are you lying, you—”

“She cares about me too much to hurt me,” I blurted out. “I’m sure it’s fine. I’m fiiiiine, I’m just ... woozy.”

Evelyn spat out a single bark of non-laughter.

“Heather, what on earth have you been doing? Or not on Earth, rather! And you still haven’t answered my question. Where the hell is Lozzie?” She waved the handful of notes in the air again. “Do I need to keep going? Because I will. I need you to concentrate for five seconds, Heather. Stop looking elsewhere, focus on me.”

“I am focusing.”

“You are not. Lozzie? Where is she? Because if she’s lost too I’m not stopping. I am not leaving a single—”

“She’ll be along as soon as she realises the way is clear,” I said, still smiling and half-laughing with relief. “The way is clear now. I cleared the way. I killed him, I killed him! Lozzie can get home herself. It’s okay, I did it! I did it!”

Evelyn fixed me with such a look, lips pursed, eyes bulging, dark with exhaustion, red-ringed and bloodshot, and I realised with a flash of insight that she’d been sitting at that table all night long, trying to get me home. She’d been up since I’d left, or at least since my friends realised something was wrong. The mess of notes on the table were a new set of changes to the gateway spell, the same kind of changes that had left Kimberly a sobbing, shaking mess, which only Lozzie had managed to understand in the end. And Evelyn had been up all night, trying to make new ones. I noticed she was shaking, shivering inside and trying to control it, like she had a fever.

That was like a bucket of cold water poured over my head.

“... Lozzie’s okay. I think,” I managed to say. It was difficult to focus, but I tried as hard as I could. “She should be along in her own time.”

Evelyn watched me carefully for a moment longer, then nodded and blew out a slow breath. She put the papers down and flexed her stiff fingers. “Right. Thank you, Heather. Praem, get her some ... oh, I don’t bloody well know, chocolate won’t help, she clearly doesn’t need a serotonin hit.”

“Praem,” I said to the doll-demon still holding me steady. “Is Eevee okay?”

Evelyn huffed. “I’m fi—”

“Yes,” Praem intoned. “Kept her fed and watered. Needs to sleep. Will be okay.”

“You can sleep now,” I told Evelyn, nodding in what I thought looked like a very serious and sober way. “You should, we’re safe, we—”

I didn’t have a chance to insist further before the sound of footsteps crashed down the stairs and across the front room.

Raine came literally skidding across the kitchen and sliding into the workshop on her socks.

She was, in that moment, the best thing I'd ever seen, a firm reminder why being physically embodied in the real world was absolutely fantastic.

Her chestnut-brown hair stuck up like she'd been running her hands through it all day; warm eyes looked at me like I was made of gold; the soft angles of her face were more familiar than the shape of my own body. She was wearing a tank top and shorts in an unexpected mirror-image of Sevens, showing off butter-smooth muscles and healthy pink skin, toned arms and powerful legs and the unsubtle curve of her hips. I could tell she'd run downstairs too fast on her still-healing leg, putting weight in the uninjured one; she didn't need the dressing around her thigh anymore, but the wound was still there, still healing, still hidden beneath her shorts. But apparently the pain didn't matter.

For some reason which my mind took too long to catch up with, she was also wearing a pair of cardboard anaglyph spectacles perched on her nose, the kind which came with 3D posters or novelty animations. One plastic lens in red, the other in blue, they made her look like she'd been reading a racy comic in bed. Or they would have, but the white cardboard which surrounded the lenses was covered in the tiny black scrawl of a pair of miniature magic circles.

She lit up with a grin of utter delight and aimed a pair of finger guns at me.

"Heather!" she roared — then paused, mouth open wide, eyes going up and down and around me. "Holy shit, look at you! All six!"

"Raine!" I screeched back. "Oh, you can see my tentacles?"

"Sure can." She tipped the glasses down as she stepped closer, looking at me with naked eyes, then blew out a low whistle as she checked through them again. I couldn't help but notice how her attention briefly flickered to both Sevens and the forest-knight, then dismissed both of them as safe and unimportant compared to the joy of me being back.

Praem deposited me into Raine's arms and I snuggled against her like she was pillow, sheets, mattress, the whole bed, burying my face in her chest and wrapping all my tentacles around her. She

returned the hug, hard and urgent, squeezing me tight inside my yellow robes.

“Raineeeee,” I sighed into her chest, into her warmth and her beating heart, her familiar scent, the feeling of her muscles flexing and relaxing.

“Hoooo, okay, hello there,” Raine laughed. I felt her fingertips brush the surface of one of my tentacles.

“Ahhh!” I gasped in surprise.

“Heeeeeeey, it actually works,” Raine said.

“Hugs feel soooo good,” I murmured. “Touch me, please, please touch. Feels like I’ve been gone a lot longer than I have.”

“Heather, you are so beautiful. You know that?”

“Of course she is,” Sevens gurgled from beside me on the floor.

Raine blinked and peered over my shoulder, down at Seven-Shades-of-Invasive-Gremlin. She tugged the glasses off, tilted her head at Sevens, and received a low, throaty hiss in return, before Sevens buried her head beneath her own arms again, hiding.

“Of course the glasses bloody well work,” Evelyn grumbled. “I made sure they would work. I spent enough blood on the process, didn’t I? You can see her additions? Is it just the tentacles or has she done worse to herself this time? Let me guess, as soon as she relaxes, we’re going to need to call the hospital?”

“She’s fine, as far as I can see. Just the tentacles, very cool!” Raine shot me a wink, but then nodded down at Sevens. “Who’s this delightful little bundle of tooth and claw?”

“Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, apparently,” Evelyn grumbled.

“It’s Sevens,” I murmured. “She helped. Helped a lot. Gave me this.” I flapped one sleeve of the yellow robes. “And I wouldn’t have gotten out if it wasn’t for her and the knight. Both of them. Stars, yes.”

“You got her out? You helped?” Raine asked over my shoulder, down at Sevens.

“Rrrrrrr ... yes,” went Sevens.

“Then hey, thanks. I know we’ve had our differences, but you rescue my girl, you’re in my good books.” She craned up at the knight too. “Hey there, tin man. You one of Lozzie’s, right? Never did get to have a good look at one of you things. Nice axe, you an ess-tee-arr build?”

She received a nod in return. To my surprise, the knight’s armour made a low creaking noise as he moved.

“Thanks for saving my girl. Owe you one.” She cracked a grin. “If there’s anything I can possibly owe you?”

“Could do with a drink,” Sevens gurgled from next to my shins. At that, Praem turned on her heel and clicked off into the kitchen.

Raine gently eased me back. “Hey, Heather, look at me, please? Oh, Heather,” she breathed my name, shaking her head, an uncontrollable grin on her lips. “It’s so good to see you. Are you alright, are you hurt anywhere? You don’t look bruised, but you are pale.” She was squeezing my shoulders, my arms, my wrists, and I realised she was speaking too fast, trying her best to conceal the way she was shaking between each breath. “What happened, hey? And where’s Lozzie? Heather, you look like you need a sit down and a cup of tea and a bath and a—”

“Raine, stop, stooooooooop,” I managed. “Stop speaking.”

She couldn’t. She tried to catch herself, blowing out a breath and nodding, but she carried on anyway. “You’re home. That’s what matters, right, yeah. But if there’s something after you or you need help or— I mean, where the hell is Lozzie, right?” She laughed. “Heather, you look like hell. Is that dried blood on your face? And it’s all down your hoodie and hey, hey, this yellow robe, yeah?” She rolled the fabric between her fingers. “This is really something. You gave this to her, yellow?” She peered down at Sevens, who looked away, hiding behind her own hands.

“Shhhhhhhhhhh,” I hushed, one clumsy finger mashed against Raine’s lips.

Praem returned at that exact moment, clicking back into the workshop with a glass of water in each hand. She offered one to Sevens — who downed it as if she didn’t even have to swallow, tossing the glass back in one throw — and the other to the Knight. To all our confused surprise, the Knight accepted the glass in his

free hand and somehow managed to not crush it to powder. We all watched, my finger still against Raine's lips, as he clinked the glass against his blank metal faceplate and tipped the water down himself. Praem produced a tea towel, as if she had expected this, and dropped it on the floor to absorb the puddle.

"Um," said Raine.

"I think he's just being polite?" I squinted at the Knight.

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "I don't know if you've noticed," she drawled. "But Heather's high as a kite. Absolutely off her head. Some kind of decompression sickness, but apparently she's not in any danger."

"I am not high!" I whined.

"... you kind of are," Raine said, peering at me with a grin. "Wow, you weren't kidding, Evee, it's like she's stoned."

"And you were freaking out," I shot back.

"Yeah," Raine admitted, much to my surprise. "Little bit. Haven't slept, haven't eaten. What do you expect, hey? You were gone, girl. I thought maybe, you know, that was it. Maybe you and Lozzie had finally moved on."

She smiled, but there was real pain behind her eyes.

Guilt and warmth and love surged through my chest. I reluctantly pulled myself out of Raine's embrace, gathering my yellow robes up. She and Praem both moved to catch me, as if I might topple over at any moment, but I planted tentacles on the ground to keep myself on my own two feet, gently easing their hands away.

"Heather," Raine said, trying to catch my hand. "Come on, hey, let me—"

"Shut up," I said, with the most affection one could ever squeeze into such disrespectful words. Before Raine could react, I reached up with both hands and clumsily cupped her cheeks. Yellow sleeves fell back from my thin arms.

"I love you," I said. "You do know that, don't you? I love you."

Raine blinked. I savoured the rare feeling of rendering her speechless.

"I love you, Raine," I repeated. "And I'm not going anywhere."

"I love you too," she said, and I could hear the choke in her voice.

I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate past the feeling of hyper-reality, the altered consciousness, the exhaustion and the lingering pain. "In the last ... what was it, Eevee, nineteen hours?"

"Nineteen hours," Evelyn supplied with a grunt.

"In the last nineteen hours I have almost died ... three times? I think that's a conservative estimate." I let out a huge sigh. "Infected by Hast— no, *no*," I took care to admonish myself. If I summoned that here then there would be no containing it, whether I had the blessing of the King in Yellow or not. "Almost infected, almost eaten by living darkness, then almost eaten by a giant cat with an abandonment complex. Almost joined a party where I'm pretty sure they were eating human flesh — oh, that's four times, oh, silly me. And then I almost got trapped in an emotional loop which could have ended me, I assume."

"Father wouldn't do that to you," Sevens gurgled from down at my feet. One small hand curled around my shin. "You're not his type."

"*Father*," Evelyn scoffed, in the exact same tone as *bullshit*.

"And now I am home," I said with a sigh. "And I want you to know that I love you, Raine, and I don't tell you that enough, and maybe I would never have been able to tell you again. But I made it back because I am not leaving."

"I love you too," Raine repeated, dead serious.

I nodded, then surprised everyone by stumbling away from Raine and crossing the two steps to Evelyn. I opened my arms, yellow robes flapping wide as well.

"Hug okay?" I asked.

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes, but she nodded and accepted my awkward, half-leaning embrace as I ended up mostly hugging her head. Her hair was so fine and soft and I wanted to keep touching it, but I accidentally made her flinch when I forgot what one of my tentacles was doing and started to wrap it around her waist. She brushed off my stuttering apologies with a "Don't worry about it."

Raine laughed. "I like this high and huggy Heather. Hugelather."

“Yes,” Praem intoned.

Sevens let out a rasp like some kind of cave rodent.

As Evelyn and I parted again, her fingers lingered on the fabric of the yellow cloak for a moment too long, entranced by the warmth and softness. As she was still frowning at it, perhaps about to ask something, I opened my stupid mouth on an impulse I should have ignored.

“I love you too, Evee.”

Her eyes met mine from beneath a suddenly skittish frown, response stuck in her throat. For a moment, my mind’s eye recalled the image of Evelyn that Seven-Shades-of-Unrequited-Love had shown me back in Carcosa, Evelyn spitting bitterness and jealousy. But how much of that had been true? How much of that had been Sevens? I’d stumbled over to Evelyn on impulse, to tell my best friend how much she meant to me, but I’d snagged myself on a hidden bear trap.

I could have backed out. The necessary words floated up my throat: I love you, yes, but in a slightly different way to Raine, haha, so funny, laugh it all off.

But I didn’t say it. I had no right to shut her down.

After a moment, Evelyn took it how I knew she would, averting her eyes and looking extremely awkward as she cleared her throat. “Thank you, I suppose. That’s very sweet of you. You are very, very sweet, Heather.” The way she said it sounded anything but sweet.

“Sweet to you,” I said on impulse, and cursed myself for it.

“But we still need to know what is going on,” she ran right over me, revving up her frustration again. “Where exactly is Lozzie? I know you said she can get home by herself, but if she can’t then I’m not abandoning the attempt. I’ve sunk enough into this already.” She slapped the notes on the table with an angry, dismissive backhand.

“It’s fine, really.” I had to squint my eyes, forcing myself to stay steady and coherent. “It’s all good. I think. Lozzie should be home whenever she realises the way is clear. It’s safe now, nothing should be stopping her. I killed him, I really killed him, and it’s okay!”

“Killed who?” Raine asked, gentle but serious.

“Oh, Alexander Lilburne.”

Raine looked at me very, very carefully. Evelyn went quite still.

“Heather,” Raine said, “that was months ago.”

“Yes, yes, it was, it was but I only just realised that I killed him. No, wait, no that’s not right.” I shook my head and huffed.

“I told you she was high,” Evelyn said.

“I only just accepted that I killed him. Look, it’s a long story, but basically the dead hands are gone. Lozzie can get through whenever she likes.” I let out a weak laugh. “If she’s finished her night out, that is. Maybe she never even knew all of this happened.”

“Knew all of *what* happened?” Evelyn demanded. “Unnnnnhh,” she groaned in frustration and tapped her walking stick on the floorboards, undoubtedly restraining the urge to whack me in the shins — I didn’t blame her. “God, I can hardly think straight, I need to sleep for a week.”

“Me also,” I said, gathering myself as best I could, then completely undermined my determination when I lurched backward and caught myself on the edge of the table with my tentacles. Raine took my shoulder, helping to steady me. Sevens closed her fingers around my leg again and I absent-mindedly placed one hand on her hair. Then I spotted my squid-skull mask where it fallen on the floor and picked it up with one tentacle. Evelyn’s eyes went wide — I suppose all she saw was a floating metallic-grey skull — and Raine whipped the magically modified 3D glasses back on to her face, then let out a low whistle.

“Got some dexterity in you, yeeeeeeah!” Raine cheered as I placed the skull on the table.

“And what exactly is that?” Evelyn hissed at the skull, frowning dark and curious.

“Cute,” Praem intoned.

“Oh, this was just a present from Lozzie, before everything went wrong. It is kind of cute. It’s mine now.” I stroked the skull mask and began to lift it onto my head, then stopped halfway, laughing at myself, vaguely embarrassed. “Um, something about it makes me want to wear it.”

“*Heather*,” Evelyn hissed.

“No, no, it’s safe! It protected me several times! I think it’s something in the ... bone? Steel?” I shrugged. “Anyway, look, I got stuck,” I said, speaking to the room. “You were right, Eevee. You’re often right. You really know ... things. Stuff. You know what I mean.” I tried to ignore Evelyn rolling her eyes at my rambling speech. “The dead hands, they were a trap. Lizzie and I had a good talk, she went off for a fun night out, I guess? But then when I tried to come home, snap!” I closed the fingers of my free hand like a Venus flytrap. “Stuck. Stuck Outside. It was one of the worst things that’s ever ... I was stuck.”

Raine squeezed my shoulder. I sniffed.

“So what, it took you nineteen hours to break some fingers?” Evelyn asked.

I shook my head again. “Had to get help.” I patted Sevens’ head and nodded toward the knight. “Saldis too.”

“Saldis?” Evelyn hissed. “What does that mage have to do with all this?”

“I went to the library. Only place I could think of. It’s kind of a long story. Oh, uh.” I rummaged in my hoodie and dumped Saldis’ golden pendant on the table. “She gave me that, after I, um, chased off the King in Yellow, one of his bad masks.”

Evelyn and Raine both went wide-eyed — Evelyn at me, Raine at the pendant.

“Solid gold,” Praem intoned.

Raine started laughing. “No shit, Sherlock.”

“You ... ran off ... what? Hastur?” Evelyn asked, aghast.

“Shhhh!” I hissed, waving her down. “Don’t say the name!”

“That actually works? Heather, I tried that as a teenager. It’s nonsense. It’s *fiction*.”

“He’s real,” Sevens rasped.

“Oh for the love of—” Evelyn slapped the table again. “Hastur Hastur Hastur. Hastur! Hastur! Come on, come and get me!”

I tensed up and Raine followed my lead, going stiff and ready all of a sudden, but nothing happened. I hiccuped once and Evelyn frowned at me.

“It worked in the library, okay?” I said. “Just don’t ever do it Outside. Maybe it doesn’t work on Earth. Look, nothing’s happened here at home, right? While I was in trouble?”

Raine and Evelyn shared a glance.

“Nothing has happened,” Praem intoned, suddenly at my shoulder with a glass of water. I hadn’t even seen her leave the room. She pressed it into my hands.

I asked Praem instead. “There’s no crisis? Nothing happened when I was gone? No attack on the house? No plot to get you?”

“Nothing has happened,” Evelyn snapped. “Except a lot of panic. Should something have happened?”

“I ... well ... no. Though I think this confirms the dead hands were not under the control of Edward Lilburne, anyway. Which is good! Good, yes. Good.” I laughed softly at the absurdity of it all. It really was a vengeful spirit, all along. “I guess I really was being haunted. Like a ghost. Out for revenge. Ha!”

Evelyn huffed a sigh to knock down an oak tree. Raine just laughed.

“Where’s Zheng?” I asked. “And Tenny? Is she worried about Lozzie?”

“Yeah, real bad,” Raine said softly. “We couldn’t hide what was up, not after a few hours. She’s too smart for that. So I just told her, straight up, no white lies. Finally got her to go to sleep about two hours ago, but I’m pretty sure it was just pure exhaustion. She needs to know her mother is okay, soon as we can. ‘Cos that’s what Lozzie is to her, right?”

I nodded, tears suddenly threatening in my eyes. “Lozzie will come home. She will. What about Zheng?”

“Your stupid zombie is still not back from her hunt,” said Evelyn.

“Drink,” Praem intoned, pressing the glass of water toward my face.

“Oh, I’m fiiiiine,” I said, blinking rapidly and smiling at Praem, though I still accepted the water and took a long sip. “I actually ate not too long ago.”

"You *ate*?" Evelyn said. She shared a glance with Raine, but got a shrug in return. "You ate food, Outside? You ingested matter? With your mouth?"

"Ham and cheese sandwiches," I said.

"Cool," said Raine. "They have mustard?"

"No, not *cool*, Raine." Evelyn boggled at me. "Heather, you put things in your mouth, Outside things, and swallowed them?"

"My fault," said Sevens in her raspy little voice.

All eyes turned to Seven-Shades-of-Supremely-Self-Conscious as she finally unfolded herself from her awkward squat-crouch. At less than five feet tall, scrawny and bony and dressed only in tank-top and shorts, with bare feet and stringy, rat-tail hair, she looked like she wanted to climb into a dark hole and be forgotten, not join this room of athletic lesbians and scowling mages and perfect maids. She clung to my side with both hands, fists gripping my yellow robes as if afraid she'd be ripped away from me. Shoulders hunched, eyes darting about, she couldn't even meet the gazes directed at her.

"I still don't fully understand what exactly I'm looking at here," Evelyn said, cold and sharp, frowning at Sevens. She jabbed a finger at her too. "Because you — yes, you, I'm talking to you — do not look anything like how Heather described Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight."

Sevens hunched up even tighter, trying to make herself small. "Sorry," she rasped.

Evelyn paused as if very confused. "I ... I wasn't looking for an apology, I just ... I— oh, sod it," she huffed. "If you are something else, piggybacking on Heather's return, how would I even know?"

"It is Sevens," I said, placing a gentle hand on one of Sevens' pale arms and wrapping a protective tentacle around her shoulders. "One of her masks, anyway."

"And she's being awfully clingy with you," Evelyn added.

"She is, ain't she?" Raine said with a smirk. She shot me a finger gun. "Heather, you dog, you been having a night out and making moves without me?"

Raine meant it as a joke, but it was more sobering than an emergency hypodermic full of pure caffeine. The flash of guilt in my eyes caught her attention like a siren. She tilted her head with guileless curiosity. Words stuck in my throat, words I could not say yet.

“Yo, yellow,” Raine carried on instead, doing an upward-tilting nod at the quivering goblin clamped to my side. Sevens just hid her face in my shoulder. “You been taking good care of my girl? Thanks for bringing her back, I mean it. I appreciate it, for real, despite you being a bitch before. We’re cool, you and me. Yeah?” She reached out for Sevens’ shoulder, but Sevens shrank away like a cat who didn’t want to be petted. Raine paused as soon as she saw this and glanced at me instead. “She alright? No touchy?”

“Uh ... no,” I said. “I think she’s going through some things right now.”

Raine shrugged. “Think I prefer her like this. At least she’s not being me.”

“What is the purpose of this mask?” Evelyn asked, and I recognised that clinical coldness, that mage’s hunger for meaning and knowledge. “Are we in the middle of one of her plays? Heather, you’re basically high, and you’ve got a reality-altering Outsider trying to hide behind you. We need clarity, right now, because I’m too exhausted to give a shit; are we in the middle of a play?”

Sevens shook her head against my side.

“No,” I said. “This is just Sevens. For real. No play.”

“Wait wait wait,” Raine said, half-grinning, pointing a pair of finger-guns at Sevens. “This is the real Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight? This is her real self? This?”

“Don’t you dare laugh at her!” I exploded at Raine, surprised at my own anger. Raine actually blinked, the second time I’d surprised her in the minutes since I’d gotten home. “If it wasn’t for her help, I’d be dead. And she’s allowing herself to be vulnerable right now, in ways I don’t think we even understand. She’s sort of ... left the stage, I think?”

I glanced at Sevens for confirmation, wary of speaking for her. She managed to make fleeting eye contact with the others, long enough to nod.

“Redefining self-hood,” she gurgled, then let out a long hiss like the start of a panic attack.

“There you have it,” I said. “And she’s done it all to help me. I’m serious, Raine, if you laugh at her now I will be very unimpressed by you. You’re meant to be a knight errant, aren’t you? Chosen freely, not just because I needed it? Well, here is a damsel who needs help.”

“Is she your friend now?” Raine asked without missing a beat, completely serious, and I fell in love with her all over again.

“Ye—”

I paused so hard I almost choked. Raine’s eyebrows climbed. My heart rate spiked and I hiccuped loud enough to make Sevens flinch.

“No,” Sevens rasped.

“No,” I corrected myself, voice shaking, lips numb. “She’s actually a bit more than that, now. I think. Maybe.”

Raine’s eyebrows left orbit.

“You have got to be fucking joking,” Evelyn muttered. She looked ready to eat her own fist.

I let out a shaking sigh. “A lot has happened. God, it feels like it’s been days, not a single night. I-I didn’t mean to— I haven’t *done* anything— we haven’t, I mean—”

Raine burst out laughing, which made me flinch. I watched her eyes, trying to read which way she was jumping. Jealousy, forced acceptance, something else? The last time I’d done this, with Zheng, it had not ended well; but we’d learned things about each other since then, surely it wouldn’t be the same.

“Our Heather moves fast!” Raine said with a grin. “Doesn’t seem like your type though?”

“Well done,” Praem intoned. I couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic or not.

“It’s not like that!” I protested, desperate to explain everything that had happened in one breath and trying to convince myself that I could. Reality is a hell of a drug, as Raine would say, and I was still struggling for coherence. “It’s so much more complicated, I have so

much to explain and I'm so tired, oh goodness, I have to sit down."

"I don't believe this," Evelyn growled. "You go missing all night, Outside, and I've been putting my mind through a goddamn wood chipper to find you and bring you back, and you're having a grand old time, oh yes, making out with yet another thing you've dragged —"

Sevens detached herself from my side. For a moment I thought the worst was happening — either she was scurrying away in mortified embarrassment, or she was going to hiss at Evelyn in challenge over the insult, or she was simply going to rotate herself back through the membrane, back to the castle, back to her father. But what she did was so much worse.

In less than a heartbeat, a second Evelyn was standing next to me.

The illusion was perfect: the hunched spine, the permanent disapproving scowl, the layers of comfy clothes wrapped around a brittle core. She even had Evelyn's walking stick and the currently visible slice of prosthetic leg. The real Evelyn's angry words died with a splutter.

"Be honest," grunted Seven-Shades-of-Saye. "You can't bullshit a bullshitter."

Evelyn went pale. I wasn't sure if she got what Sevens meant. Maybe she did.

"Sevens!" I squeaked and almost slapped her. I hadn't expected this, I thought she was done with other masks, finished with plays.

"Two Eves?" Raine laughed. "Oh damn, I got my work cut out for me. I have enough trouble body-guarding for one, but I'll give it my best shot."

Seven-Shades-of-Grumpy-Mage turned to Raine, scowling at her too, but then the illusion broke and reformed yet again.

Starched white blouse and perfectly level blonde hair, long yellow skirt and impassively cool expression on a delicate-featured face. The Princess-Mask was back and my mind reeled with confusion and embarrassment in equal measure. She extended one dry, neat hand toward Raine.

"Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight," she said, unreadably plain. "We have met before, but proper introductions are in order."

Raine laughed and shrugged, but she shook Sevens' hand while I looked on, speechless.

"A handshake after you steal my girl?" Raine asked, shaking her head as if impressed. "You got guts, I'll give you that."

"Not stolen. I have nothing but respect for you."

Raine blew out a theatrically uncertain breath, but Sevens was already turning away, toward Praem. She offered her hand to the doll-demon and Praem took it without complaint, apparently utterly unruffled by the spiritual wardrobe switching.

"Sevens, stop," I managed, but she was already turning to Evelyn.

"Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, madam mage," she introduced herself all over again, hand out.

Evelyn just scowled at her, eyes flicking between the rest of us. "I cannot believe you lot are stupid enough to listen to this."

"No trick," said Sevens. "No trap. No trust?"

"Trust an Outsider," Evelyn hissed sarcasm.

"You are angry and bitter because you were afraid for Heather," said Seven-Shades-of-Far-Too-Perceptive. "And jealous because she is your best friend, yet I got to see her and support her through an ordeal. You are made no lesser by this; she does love you. But you already trust Outsiders, and worse."

Evelyn managed to keep most of the blush off her cheeks by staring Sevens down. When she took the hand of the Yellow Princess, she visibly squeezed too hard, or at least tried to, but Sevens gave no sign of pain.

"Thank you for having me," said Sevens.

"Stop, stop! Sevens, stop!" I finally blurted out as she stepped back from Evelyn. "Sevens, I told you, you don't have to put on masks like this if you don't want to."

"And what if I want to?" she asked me, cool and collected.

"... then ... I ... nobody here is going to reject you if you wear your emotions on your sleeve." I spread my arms and my tentacles, though Raine and Evelyn couldn't see the latter. "If they do, they'll have me to answer to."

A tiny sigh from the Yellow Beauty. “You prefer me this way. This is your preference, kitten.”

“*Kitten?*” Raine echoed, deliciously amused.

Perhaps Sevens had expected that to bowl me over, render me speechless, shut down the argument and allow her to retreat into her mirror-house of false selves once again. But she had me wrong. She’d been having me wrong all this time.

“My preferences do not — and should not — determine who you are!” I yelled at her, though the princess did not so much as blink. “I don’t need you to be this ... this ... ”

“Dommy mommy princess vibe,” Raine supplied. “Niiiiiice.”

“I— what?” I boggled at Raine. “But yes, yes, that, I suppose. I don’t need you to be that, Sevens. I already went through this with Raine. And I already have her.”

“Heeeey, thanks,” Raine said with a grin. Evelyn looked like she wanted to pull out her own teeth.

“You do,” said Sevens.

“If you’re going to do this,” I carried on before I could unpack what that might mean, “then you may as well just wear a copy of Raine instead — and don’t. Don’t do that. I want to know you, Sevens, not whatever front you feel you have to put up. Raine and Evelyn, and yes, Praem too, they’re basically my family. If you meant this,” I grabbed a fistful of the yellow robes, “then they’re—”

I bit off the words. *Then they’re yours too.*

“Drop the act,” I finished. “Please.”

“Yeah, hey,” Raine said, “don’t wear my face, if it’s all the same to you? One of a kind, can’t touch this.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes.

“Heather,” said the Yellow Daughter, slow and calm. “I know what you are about to say to your family here. I am not certain I can endure it in any other form. My comfortable mask — for it is too a mask — will surely wish for the ground to swallow her. It will hurt.”

“What do you mean, what I’m about to say?”

Seven-Shades-of-Superlative-Subtlety took a pinch of my yellow robes between thumb and forefinger. My mind caught up with hers. I hiccuped, loud and painful.

“Oh ... well ... I ... I have to tell them. I do.”

“Look after me, please,” said Sevens.

And then she was the blood-goblin again, quicker than I could blink. She hid against my side, burying her face, trying hard not to hyperventilate.

Everyone was looking at me, Evelyn vaguely unimpressed, Raine deeply amused, Praem unreadable. The only one who didn't care was the forest-knight; in fact, he hadn't moved or reacted at all in minutes. He'd seen it all before.

I took a pinch of the yellow robes between thumb and forefinger. “This was a ... a ... gift. From Sevens. It ... um.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “I suppose I better start at the beginning.”

“You better,” Evelyn hissed.

“Hey,” Raine said, still jovial, but bubbling beneath with a dangerous undercurrent. I was shaking when I opened my eyes, expecting to see her gaze boring back into me, real jealousy revealed, hard and ugly and undeniable — and justified.

But she was pointing at Evelyn.

“I'm the one who sleeps with her,” Raine said to Evelyn, “and I say it's fine. I trust Heather. Alright?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and threw up her hands in surrender.

“But hey, Yellow.” Raine turned back to Sevens and me. “You and I need to get to know each other.”

“We can talk about this,” I said quickly, desperately avoiding the actual subject.

“Yeah,” Raine said, so very reasonable. “We sure can. Hey, relax. I trust you. You haven't shagged her yet, right?”

“Nooo! As if we had time for that!”

“And you don't have to spill it all right now. I get the jist, it's cool.” Raine smiled, so confident and sweet, so unbreakable. But I knew

the truth, I knew who this was for, and I had a duty to Raine too.
“You’ve been on your feet for, what, nineteen hours?”

“Minus a nap,” I said.

“Minus a nap, pfffft, yeah, you need to sit down and have something to eat, and maybe a bath?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I have things to tell you, things you have a right to know.”

“But you didn’t bonk her?”

“There’s things more important than sex!” I squeaked. I grabbed a handful of the robes. “Sevens gave me this when Lozzie and I confronted the Eye inside Badger’s head. It was the only reason I survived. She had to give it to me. It was the only way. It was non-physical before, but when she saved me Outside, it ... turned real.”

Sevens herself shivered and shook against my side. Raine caught the meaning in my voice, something below my words themselves; she didn’t try to interrupt. Evelyn seemed to get it before I said it, her eyes going wide in shock for a split second before she put her face in her palm.

“It’s a marriage proposal,” I managed through a closing throat.
“And now I’ve met her father. The King in Yellow. He approved.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.2

“ ... the King in Yellow?”

“The King in Yellow.”

“Is *fiction*.”

“Apparently not. I don’t think I was hallucinating, or being tricked. All the tricks were out in the open, that’s how they worked so well. I know what I saw, what I spoke with. And it wasn’t as if it was just him on his own, there was plenty of corroborating evidence. Like I said, there was a whole family of them. A castle. His kingdom.”

“You can’t know— this thing must have been— it’s not possible that ___”

“*There are more things in heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy*,” I said gently, to help Evelyn as she struggled to complete her sentences.

Evelyn did not thank me for that. She gave up her protests and glared across the kitchen table, unimpressed and heavy-lidded, looking like a dark cloud incapable of bursting into rain.

“Heather,” she said. “That is the third time you’ve quoted that exact same line of *Hamlet* at me since we first met, and it makes no more sense now than the previous two times.”

Delighted surprise stole over me. “You ... you remember when I quote things? Evee?”

Evelyn waved me away with a huff, squeezing her eyes shut and pinching the bridge of her nose. “This is giving me a gaping arsehole of a headache. You are giving me a headache. The King in sodding Yellow is giving me a headache.”

“Drink,” Praem intoned from next to Evelyn’s shoulder.

Evelyn hissed through her teeth and continued to ignore the stone-cold mug of tea at her elbow — along with the merely lukewarm

second mug, the barely hot third one, and the plate of now soggy toast that Praem had attempted to get her to eat during the hour I'd taken to tell the story, to no avail. Evelyn had been too focused on me, watching and listening and taking notes, with all the rapt attention of seeker after knowledge trying to piece together a shredded text from some ancient library. Except, from her reaction, one had to assume the venerable tome had turned out to be full of childish insults and drawings of genitalia.

"Praem's got a point there, Eevee," Raine said. She was looking far more at ease, feet up on the corner of the table — ankles only, soles dangling over the edge after being told off by Praem — with her chair rocked back to balance on two legs, hands behind her head like she was sunbathing at the beach. Unlike Evelyn, Raine had not only downed a cup of tea, she'd asked for a mug of my coffee too, and eaten some vague approximation of breakfast — though I disagreed in the strongest terms that microwaved pastries from the freezer counted as breakfast food. She wiggled her be-socked toes in the air, cracking small joints with satisfying audible *pop* sounds. "You're dehydrated."

"I don't need water," Evelyn grumbled. "I need half a bottle of whiskey. Sod that, I need a shot of morphine." She glared at me again, her elbows on the table, hunched with the exhaustion of an unresolved all-nighter. "You're serious? You met and talked with the King in Yellow, or at least something calling itself that? Like you're talking to me? Not in hyperdimensional mathematics? Everything you've just said, it didn't happen in some abstract mind-space?"

I shrugged. "It was very physical. I don't know what more to tell you, Eevee, I can't seem to make you believe—"

"I would never suggest that you would lie to me," Evelyn said quickly, almost embarrassed. "Heather, the King in Yellow is not real. It's fiction. It's far more likely that you met a being which decided to base itself on the fiction, not the other way around. Life imitating art, something like that, I don't fucking know!"

"Why does it matter?"

"Because!" Evelyn snapped and threw her hands up. "It's fiction!"

"Guuuuuuurgh."

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight let out a low, throaty rasp, showing a quick snatch of her sharp little needle-teeth. She was perched in a chair pulled so close that it was touching mine, staring across the table-top at Evelyn's denial.

Evelyn almost managed to control her flinch this time; she'd improved over this last hour, every time Seven-Shades had something to add, but she hadn't quite mastered herself yet. She huffed and shot a redoubled glare at Sevens. "Yes? You have something to add?"

"He'd like that," Sevens gurgled. She only managed to hold Evelyn's gaze for a moment, then looked down and away, rocking slightly in her weird squatting pose.

"Like what?" Evelyn snapped.

"Mages convincing themselves he isn't real. Gurr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r," Sevens laughed like a malfunctioning radiator, but without much of a smile.

"Greatest trick the devil ever pulled," Praem intoned.

"Hey, that's what I was about to say," Raine said. "Great minds think alike, Praem."

"Great minds," said Praem.

Evelyn didn't look away from Sevens, daring her to resume eye contact, but the hunched gremlin at my side declined the challenge. Instead, Sevens stared at her own pale little hand, moving it slowly back and forth over the table, in and out of the watery, early-morning sunlight pouring in through the kitchen window. She'd been doing that on and off since the dawn had broken through the clouds. True sunlight revealed the fine tracery of blue veins beneath the mushroom-pale skin of Seven-Shades-of-Shivering-Sprite. I ran a tentacle up her arm, gentle and supporting, following her back and forth motions.

"Evee," I said, gently as I could — and that proved more difficult than I'd expected. I had to consciously restrain myself from reaching across the table with a spare tentacle to wrap around her forearm. I already had another tentacle coiled in Raine's lap like a cat, but Evelyn didn't like being touched without warning normally, let alone by invisible feelers that she could only see through a pair of glasses that made her eyes hurt. But I didn't want her to dislike

Sevens.

“Mm?” she grunted, still staring at Sevens.

“Evee,” I tried again, “why does it bother you so much?”

Evelyn let out a huge sigh and sat back in her chair, one hand massaging her thigh where flesh met prosthetic socket, the other finally giving in and picking up the stone cold cup of tea. She took a sip and pulled a face.

“Still hot.” Praem indicated the most recent cup of tea with a brush of her fingertips.

“Yes, thank you Praem, you’re a dear,” Evelyn muttered, swapping mugs and sighing after a sip of tea how tea should always be.

“She’s salty because she’s been proved wrong,” Raine said with a wink. “And she hasn’t got a theory to replace it yet. Give her five minutes, she’ll make one, and it’ll be better than the last. Theory for everything, our Evee.”

“This bothers me,” Evelyn used her words like a whip, eyes shooting daggers at Raine and receiving a mock duck-and-cover gesture in surrender, “because I once spent a significant amount of time reading them all — Chambers, Blackwood, Lovecraft, Ashton Smith, Dunsany, even Robert Howard — ha! What a different world we’d be living in if he was right. I even tried some of the modern ones — Derleth, Campbell, all that nonsense. Because I needed to know what was real and what was fiction. Because my ... ” She shot a look at Sevens, then shrugged when the yellow daughter didn’t even look up. “Because my mother insisted it was important. Because she made me read them.”

“Oh,” I said.

“You’ve never told me that,” Raine added, eyebrows raised in surprise.

“There’s plenty of things I don’t tell you,” Evelyn grumbled.

“But,” I said, “wouldn’t this mean your mother was wrong? She was wrong about plenty of other things, isn’t this another chance to ‘stick it to her?’” I did little air quotes with one hand.

Evelyn shook her head. “She would be delighted.”

“O-oh.”

"She always insisted there were grains of truth in some of all that pulp fiction guff." Evelyn tapped her fingernails on the table in an irritated rhythm. "Didn't know what though, or where, or who. She would love this. The discovery, the confirmation, being proved correct. Same as me, same as—"

"She is dead," Praem said, voice like a musical bell made of ice.

Raine's eyebrows shot up her forehead and she looked to me for emergency help. I shrugged minutely, fully prepared to get up and walk around the table to give Evelyn a hug.

Evelyn grit her teeth at the interruption and started to bite back, to hurt, to lash out. "She's—"

"Dead-dead-diddly-dead-deado," Praem said, utterly expressionless.

Evelyn stopped like she'd walked into a lamppost. I wrapped an invisible tentacle around my own face to stifle a laugh. Raine stayed perfectly still, like a cat spotting a dog. Seven-Shades-of-One-Of-Us watched the exchange with her black eyes flicking back and forth, like the audience at a tennis match.

Then Evelyn sighed. Something slipped inside her, some gear that she wasn't capable of shifting on her own, some long-tensed muscle she'd been desperately trying to unlearn how to flex. She glanced at Praem, then raised her eyes to the ceiling. "That she is."

"Deadydoodle," Praem added.

"Okay, yes, you can stop now," Evelyn sighed. A nasty smile slowly crossed her face. "And she never got to find out. Eh, good enough for me." She shrugged and took another long sip from her cup of tea before banging it down on the table, then spoke with only a thin veneer of sarcasm. "Fine, Heather. The King in Yellow is real, and strong, and he's your friend. Now, I need some bloody breakfast before I start digesting my own bones." She pulled a face at the soggy, cold toast on the plate at her elbow.

"Bacon and eggs," Praem intoned.

"Please."

= =

I'd spent the last hour or so telling my friends everything, from the

top, while the sun rose on a chill and grey Sharrowford morning.

After I'd dropped the bomb about Sevens' half-intentional marriage proposal, Raine had suggested we decamp to the kitchen. Just like that. I'd been shaking with nerves at the reveal, ready for anything — shouting, anger, another round of Raine's unfairly suppressed jealousy, perhaps even another judder-stop as she failed to integrate what I'd done — but Evelyn was far worse than Raine, looking at me just so utterly exhausted by all this, as if she should have expected nothing less.

Raine barely reacted to the actual news, which spooked me badly. Working out everything with Zheng had been painful enough, so I was prepared for this to send an emotional wrecking ball at the reinforced concrete of our relationship. Perhaps the walls would hold, or perhaps they would buckle and we would have to dig through the wreckage for bits of rebar to build a temporary shelter. Perhaps doing this a second time would be the last straw on the camel's back. Never mind that I had agreed to nothing with Sevens, committed to nothing, said yes to nothing.

I had blurted out as much. "It— it's only out of respect for her! I haven't said I will, we haven't started a ... anything! I haven't kissed her, I don't even know if I want to!"

But Raine just laughed. She shrugged, aimed a pair of finger-guns at Sevens, and said something about being a 'spawn camper'. That went completely over my head, but it provoked Evelyn to hiss with disgust and throw a balled-up piece of paper at Raine's head.

"Raine, don't you want to— shouldn't we— I mean, this—" I'd stammered and stuttered.

"Shhhhhh. Come on, you need a sit down."

Raine had taken my hands and coaxed me along, smiled at me without guile, and helped me make the walk into the kitchen — though Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight stayed glued to my side, hiding her face and unable to glance up at Raine. I felt like I was held between a pair of animals which might snap at each other any moment. I'd half-dragged myself to a chair with my tentacles, legs still wobbly from the strange Outside-high. Sevens had huddled next to me, quivering like a leaf, breath hissing between her teeth in little gaspy spurts.

Raine crouched so she was eye-level with me in the chair, held my hands, and didn't even comment on the tentacle I instinctively wrapped around her shoulders, though I saw the moment of surprise in her eyes.

"You've just been through a traumatic experience," she said, beaming softly with that bottomless confidence which still made me melt in her hands. "And hey, I get it, you wanna unload it all at once. And I wanna hear all about it too. But right now the important thing is that you're home. Chill, right? You wanna get out of that hoodie? It's covered in blood. Better get it in the wash if we've got any hope of saving it. That's all your blood, or ... ?"

"Oh, um, all mine, yes. Raine, I—"

"Take it you wanna keep the yellow robes on for now though, yeah? You gotta get some food in you, at least. And I can run a bath if you like."

The others trailed into the kitchen after us — Evelyn all but stomping, Praem gliding over to the counter with Evelyn's cooling cup of tea. The knight had to duck to pass through the kitchen doorway. Praem shot him a silent look and he unshouldered his axe — one second later he would have put an impressive hole in the wall. This building was not made for beings of his size, at least not without Zheng's muscular grace to compensate. Was it my imagination, or were his movements growing less coordinated?

"I— Raine, I—" I'd struggled to pull my thoughts together, still deep in the sensory high from my return, but trying to stay prepared for Raine's true reaction. I'd never had to pretend to be sober before. "Don't we need to talk about all this?"

Raine had shrugged — though she'd glanced at Sevens. "What's to talk about?"

"Don't give me that!" I'd hissed. "You can't just glide over this, you —"

"I can and I will," she shot back suddenly, sharp enough to make me flinch. She squeezed my hands tighter, as if afraid I might pull away from her. "Heather, my priority, my number one, my reason for being awake all night long, my reason for breathing, is you. And right now you're kinda loopy—"

"So are you," I'd murmured.

“—obviously exhausted, and crusted with blood. You want me to be me? Well, here you go, this is me. My number one priority is you being safe and healthy, and until I’m satisfied about that I couldn’t give a flying shit for your need to explain.”

I blinked at her, half-surprised, half cheering that she was finally denying me something. “O-okay?”

Then she cracked a grin and everything was okay again. “Or has the King planted a bomb on you that goes off if you don’t start necking with Sevens ASAP? What are we at, T-minus twenty seconds until you gotta shove your tongue down her throat?”

“Guuurrrrrhhh,” Sevens gurgled against my side, trying to curl up small enough so the floor could swallow her.

“W-w-well no. But I—”

“Oh for pity’s sake,” Evelyn hissed from the other side of the table.

“Heather,” Raine said, warm and patient, but utterly immovable. She would not take no for an answer, not about this. “You wanted me to be real and raw, so you’ve got me raw. Now do as I say.”

A deep blush rose up my neck and cheeks. “ ... yes.”

“Yes what?” Raine asked. I blinked at her, totally lost. “Yes, *ma’am*,” she filled in for me.

“Raine!” I hissed, shooting a deeply embarrassed glance at Evelyn and Praem. Evelyn looked like every word of this was killing more of her brain cells. “Raine you—” *Stop competing, you don’t need to win anything*, I thought, but I couldn’t say that out loud. “I appreciate the thought, but you’re avoiding the subject, just like before, and—”

“Yes, *ma’am*,” Raine repeated. “Say it.”

“Urgh,” Evelyn grunted.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes *ma’am*.”

“Good girl,” Raine purred.

“But I need to know how you feel,” I blurted out. Now that was the truth, maybe too raw.

Raine winced in slow motion. “Yeah, so do I. Might take a while.”

My heart climbed into my throat. I couldn't believe my luck — an honest admission of hesitancy and irresolution, from Raine. The sky was falling.

"Raine? Raine, what does that mean?"

"I dunno yet." She shrugged and glanced at Sevens again, still huddled against my side. "I'll tell you what it doesn't mean though. Doesn't mean I disapprove of yellow here. But it doesn't mean I like *this*." She took a handful of the yellow robes, the symbolic commitment, the warmth of Sevens' embrace still wrapped deep and soft around my shoulders. "Gotta think about that one. After all, I've got dibs on you."

Before I could react to any of that, Raine let go of my hands and straightened up. She reached past me, going for Sevens. For a second my heart slammed against the cage of my ribs, expecting the worst — but Raine brushed the top of Sevens' head and gave that lank, greasy hair the ruffling of a lifetime.

Sevens yelped into my shoulder with surprise, a strangled, gnashing sound. Raine managed a full second of ruffle before Sevens exploded upward from my shoulder and bared all her teeth, hissing and gurgling like a cross between a surprised possum and a rabid squirrel. *Snap snap* went her teeth, clacking shut on empty air as Raine whipped her hand away just in time.

"You're a good girl, too," Raine said, laughing.

Sevens' ire vanished, replaced with an incandescent blush.

"I think I like you now, yellow," said Raine. "Any friend of Heather's is a friend of mine. We cool? 'Yellow'? Or you want me to call you something else?"

Sevens stared at her like a deer in headlights, black eyes gone wide, then rammed her face back into my side so hard it knocked the wind out of me with a little "Oof!" I wrapped an arm around her head, driven by a bizarre need to comfort her. Raine laughed and ruffled my hair too, then grabbed another chair and slid it up behind Sevens until it gently touched the backs of her legs.

Sevens jerked and flinched and let out a, "Guurrrg!"

"Raine, be gentle with her, please," I said. "Don't— please don't do what you did with Zheng, this is different."

Raine actually blinked at me in surprise. “I’m giving her a chair. For real. Hey, Yellow, come on, you gotta sit too, if you’re gonna be here for real and not float off. Those legs aren’t powered by magic, far as I can see.”

Sevens accepted the chair by climbing into it, gurgling and rasping like a stray cat warily accepting a bowl of food. She still refused to let go of my side, clinging on with both hands. Her sitting position looked horribly uncomfortable — she squatted on the chair, feet planted firmly, knees up, shoulders rounded. A natural position for one blessed with double-joints and hyper-mobility, perhaps. She was like rubber.

Evelyn finally sat down opposite us, eyebags heavier than her gaze. “Stop flirting.”

“Why?” Raine asked. “I’m enjoying myself here.”

“Because I am not getting up to relocate again.” She made sure to catch my eye. “Heather, either go take a bath or start talking. Or eating.”

“I-I really don’t think I could begin to relax,” I said. “I’m sorry, Raine, I can’t, I need to ... unburden.”

Raine shrugged with her hands. “How about a compromise? You eat some food, drink some fluids, take it easy, and I’ll listen. Cool?”

“ ... ‘cool’,” I echoed.

“You’re also covered in your own blood, so you are coming out of that hoodie,” she added. “You wearing anything under there?”

“The usual, two t-shirts.” I lifted a corner of the yellow robes. “But, um—”

“Allow me,” said Raine.

I didn’t have much of a choice, I couldn’t have resisted even if I’d wanted to. Raine rolled the yellow robes down my shoulders until I could wriggle my arms out of the sleeves, then peeled me out of my terribly bloodstained hoodie. She passed it off to Praem, who stepped into the utility room, presumably to shove the garment into a bucket full of cold water.

Before I could do it myself, Raine helped pull the yellow robes back up to cover my shoulders again.

“... are you sure?” I asked. Raine nodded.

“Sevens,” rasped Sevens.

“Oh, wonderful, now she’s like a Pokemon,” Evelyn sighed.

“Sevens, then. Got it,” Raine said without missing a beat, and I realised Sevens had been peeking at her over my shoulder, showing twin slivers of red pupil. “You want a bath too? Not to critique your personal hygiene, but you look like you need it. You could even share it with Heather. I’m cool with that.”

“Raine!” I squeaked at her.

“... laterrrrrr,” Sevens rasped.

So I told them everything, in as much detail as I could recall. I told them about getting stuck on the quiet plain, rubber-banded back by the immovable object of the dead hands, waiting for me in the membrane between worlds like a tripwire snaring my ankles. The dregs of my strange high finally dribbled away as I recalled the fear and panic, the blossoming of childhood terror into awful reality. That nine-year-old Heather was still huddled up warm and safe in my core, still tender and afraid, as if the rest of me was a protective shell I’d woven around her. She stirred at the memories and I felt tears threaten behind my eyes, but I wrapped metaphorical arms around my previous self and reminded her that we were strong enough to survive anything.

I told Evelyn and Raine about how I’d gotten the bright idea to find Saldis, and how I’d taken the Knight with me, how he’d volunteered to help me in my hour of need. Raine saluted him for that, with a clenched fist held pointed at the side of her own head. To our surprise, the Knight returned the gesture of respect, though somewhat slower. His elbow creaked ever so slightly.

I recounted the dimensional slingshot technique and passing out on the floor when I landed in the library of Carcosa. I told them about finding Saldis, about the confrontation with Hastur — “Hastur!” Evelyn scoffed again.

But she also asked me to pause and repeat that part. A spark kindled behind her eyes. She asked Praem — “If you would be a dear, please” — to fetch her notebook and the “pale tome, the one on the left,” from the magical workshop.

She had me repeat every detail of Hastur's appearance, everything I could remember. Her questions grew more esoteric, more difficult to answer — "What kind of taste in the air? Were the tentacles repeating any patterns in their movements? Did it whisper, any sounds, any words at all?" — until I could answer no more.

As I spoke, Raine began to ply me with food. Praem had moved to start cooking first, brewing another cup of tea for Evelyn and putting coffee on for me, but Raine had silently taken over the responsibility of making sure I ate. She put food in front of me without a word, then levelled meaningful looks at me until I paused to take a bite.

She led with two slabs of thickly buttered toast, then moved to jam, then a bowl of oats and honey, then on to pop tarts. It rather extended the process of telling the story, but after the first few uncertain bites of toast and jam I felt my body start to wake up, demanding fuel for the fires of mortal life as my physiology switched from Outsider processes to human metabolism. My abdominal bioreactor had been running so hot and high for so long that I didn't have to exert any conscious effort to begin sliding the biochemical control rods back into their channels. As glucose hit my bloodstream, the inexhaustible thrum of extra-biological power ebbed away, slowing to a trickle, just enough to maintain my six tentacles.

A new kind of exhaustion settled on me as the miracle in my abdomen powered down to a resting state — eyelids like lead, a dull headache, limbs heavy with the wrought-iron of over-exertion. Even my tentacles felt sluggish; I wrapped two around my own body and one around Sevens' shoulders. I'd bought time and endurance with the bioreactor, but all debts came due in time.

Raine noticed my struggle when she made me a plate of scrambled eggs. The smell was intoxicating — it brought me back to my body, to my needs, to being alive and fleshy and incredibly hungry — but I didn't reject it this time. I had my tentacles now and they gave me something to cling to, proof of what I really was.

I could have eaten three times what Raine made, but when I fumbled my fork and dropped it on the tabletop, she insisted on wiping my face with cold water. I felt like a small child with grubby cheeks as she washed away the lingering traces of my own blood.

When it came time to recount what had happened in the corridor of living darkness, I left out the details — not only Sevens' private matters, but Evelyn's too. I glossed over what nobody needed to hear.

Sevens herself relaxed as I told the story, as I contextualised her Princess-mask. She finally stopped gripping my robes and peeled her face away from my side, hooking her small, pale hands around her ankles as she squatted, peering at the others across the tabletop. She gazed at Praem with interest, sometimes made furtive eye contact with Evelyn, and snuck little sideways looks at Raine. Apparently she didn't need to flex her knees to relieve joint-pressure in that pose. I was almost jealous.

"But now she choses to appear like this?" Evelyn gestured at her with a pencil, but spoke to me. "Why? She's not even yellow anymore."

"Authenticity," Sevens gurgled in the back of her throat.

"Well, I'm getting to that," I said. "It's complicated. And um, I might not even get to it. It is Sevens' business, really."

"You said it yourself, Heather," Evelyn reminded me. "She's all masks. How can she have 'business' that isn't imitation?"

"I am right here, you know," Sevens rasped — but she looked down at the tabletop when Evelyn paid attention to her.

"Yes," Evelyn sighed. "That much is undeniable. Is she going to be living here? Heather, even this house only has so many bedrooms."

"I, um, er, I think so? I don't know. I assume so."

"You need to eat, too, Sevens?" Raine asked, swanning past the table with a second cup of coffee for me. She placed it down with a tiny flourish of presentation.

"Not hungry," Sevens gurgled.

"Nah, I mean, do you need to eat, for real?" Raine asked. "Judging by those teeth, you need a carnivore diet, yeah? Hey, you wouldn't be the first in this household. We've got a packet of bacon in the fridge."

Evelyn rolled her eyes and tapped her pencil against her notebook, impatient for me to continue. "Of course she doesn't need to eat our

food, Raine. She's not even really physical. She's not technically real."

"Hey, we can afford an extra mouth."

Evelyn turned an expression on Raine which would not have been out of place on a stone carving of Satan glowering down from a doomed mountaintop. If she'd looked at me like that I would have hidden under the table, tentacles or no. If the King in Yellow had really wanted to make me leave without taking Sevens, he should have imitated Evelyn at her most deeply insulted.

"You mean *I* can afford an extra mouth," Evelyn said, voice dripping toxic waste. "And don't ever suggest I would not be willing to do so."

"Whoa," Raine put her hands up, laughing. "Okay, okay, we're cool. Don't bite my head off."

"No money jokes," Praem intoned. Raine turned the surrender to her too.

"Not a carnivore," Sevens rasped between her pointy sharp needle-teeth. She managed to glance up at Raine long enough to make a flicker of eye contact. "Eat, yeah. Should eat. Anything else would be cheating."

"Sure then. Eggs?"

"Egg," said Sevens.

Raine shot her a wink and a finger-gun; Sevens' red-on-black eyes followed Raine around the kitchen as she cracked three more eggs into the pan and scrambled them up. When the food was ready, Sevens ate with rapid nibbles, taking tiny bites and chewing them with the speed of a rodent.

Evelyn continued to take notes on everything I said about what lay beyond the library of Carcosa: the King's hollow sphere-world of castle, the landscape of pale mist, the creatures and strange beings within. She asked me endless questions about Melancholy and the big angry trapezoid — and when I couldn't answer, she turned to Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

"What are any of you actually constructed of?" Evelyn demanded. "You're not normal matter."

But Sevens merely shrugged. “I’unno,” she said with the sulky disinterest of a teenage girl at a parent-teacher meeting. “What are you made of?”

“Mostly carbon and water,” Evelyn shot back. “Don’t you even know that?”

Sevens blinked those huge black eyes — she managed to stay fixed on Evelyn for a second — and then twitched her head to look at me. “Need to go down to understand. Down in the dark. Like Heather. She knows.”

Evelyn huffed and gestured with her pencil. “Alright, fine, whatever. Heather, carry on, please.”

In the end I couldn’t hold back the waterworks when I spoke about Alexander Lilburne. I told Raine and Evelyn and Praem about the King in Yellow, about his family, about the meeting he had lured me into, the meeting that imitated the same fateful time I’d met the real Alexander in a shuttered and closed Sharrowford coffee shop.

“What a bastard,” Raine muttered.

“No. No, he knew what I needed,” I said. “But, also yes, absolute bastard.”

Raine whistled.

Evelyn frowned through the whole thing with professional interest, rapt with attention, sharing a confused look with Raine when I explained the respective transformations of the King’s favourites — Steel and Orbit. Raine sat forward in her chair and held tight to one of my hand when she began to realise what had really happened out there. What I’d really seen.

“And it was all right,” I repeated, wiping slow tears on the sleeve of my yellow robes. “It was all right. That’s what he showed me. When I killed Alexander, when I murdered him, it was the right thing to do. Not because of some set of ethics that justifies it, but because it needed to happen. And the hands ... they didn’t have any power over me anymore. And then I went home. Came home. And here I am.”

A moment of silence settled over the kitchen, broken only by my sniffing as I brought my tears under control — for there was nothing to cry about any more. Sevens gurgled softly. Raine

squeezed my hand.

Then Evelyn sighed. "Heather."

"Mm?" I looked up at her, surprised by the ease in her eyes.

"You're not the only one who's had to deal with this. Killing a mage, when it had to happen, but never feeling right afterward." She cleared her throat, but it didn't help, her words still came out stilted and halting. "If you need to talk about ... well. You know. You could have done, with me. You still can, whenever. I know what it feels like."

To my surprise, one of Praem's perfectly neat hands crept onto Evelyn's shoulder and stayed there, even when Evelyn awkwardly tried to shrug her off. After a moment, Evelyn cleared her throat and patted Praem's hand in return, awkward and tentative.

I nodded. "Thank you, Eeve. I just ... I thought I was okay with it. With what I did. I guess I wasn't, but I didn't even know."

"You know it but you don't know you know it," Raine murmured softly, then to my surprise she sighed too. She leaned over from her chair and helped dry my eyes with a gentle thumb brushed across my cheeks. "Because it needed to happen, yeah?"

"Yes. Raine?" I blinked at her, at the new way she was looking at me, serious and a touch sad, but then she broke into a smile.

"I guess I hoped you'd never have to learn that."

I laughed, once, more bitter than I'd expected. "Learn that murder is sometimes okay?"

She shrugged. "But hey, you were never going to stay innocent, and that's okay too."

"Innocent, really?" I almost bristled. "Raine, I was never *innocent*."

Raine laughed and put her hands up in surrender. She was doing that a lot this morning. "Poor choice of words, right. Hey, I just hoped I could shoulder some of that for you."

"You can't shoulder murder for other people," I said.

"Bloody right," said Evelyn. "She tried to do the same thing for me too, you know? She ever told you that? Although she was much more clumsy about it back then. Screamed it in my face with my

mother's corpse not even cold. Literally."

Raine stared at Evelyn in blank-faced surprise. "Holy shit, Evee."

"What?" Evelyn hissed. "What, I'm not allowed to finally deal with that via a bit of humour?"

Raine laughed, shaking her head, but I could see the delight in her smile even as she verbally brushed it off. "Come on, Evee. I hit your mum at least six different ways that would have killed a regular person. I did that murder too."

"Mmmhmm." Evelyn pursed her lips. "You keep telling yourself that."

"Tally, minus one," Praem intoned. Raine gaped at her in mock-offense. I actually laughed.

Sevens' eyes ping-ponged back and forth between my friends as they bantered about matricide. I squeezed her arm with a tentacle and she let out a low, raspy, "Guuuuurg."

"Heather," Evelyn said, her tone sliding down into the chill waters of something I did not like, her pencil resting against her notebook. "You need to explain that last part to me over again. In detail, please. Because I still don't understand — the King in Yellow? The real thing?"

The sun finished rising as I repeated details for Evelyn. Sevens kept sticking her pale hand into the patch of light on the table. And I did too, letting the warmth of our own star soak into the dry and dirty skin on the back of my hand. As Raine stood up and rubbed my shoulders through the yellow robes to work the tight knots out of my muscles, I stared through the small kitchen window at the scraps of blue beyond the clouds. Sevens watched and listened and learned, not as an observer who had convinced herself she was objective, but as a participant, in the room, here with us. Praem and the Knight had nothing to say, but I liked that both of them were here with us.

Part of me wanted to step outdoors to bask in the sun, despite my aching muscles and heavy limbs. Here was where I was meant to be.

A sensation grew inside my chest, a dull realisation that I would have felt that way even if I'd Slipped back to the wrong location —

say, if I'd landed in the Gobi desert or the Australian outback or the middle of the Pacific ocean. Well, yes, I would have been in a panic — I'm still me — but this specific relief, this return of the real, that would have remained even with all else gone.

But I didn't like that thought. I didn't need the world, I just needed what was in this kitchen. And upstairs. And sleeping off a rough night Outside. And over in Brinkwood. And wherever Zheng had got to.

Earth for Earth's sake mattered nothing. I'd killed Alexander for the safety and lives of specific people.

= =

After we'd decompressed, when Evelyn finally accepted the existence of the King in Yellow, and when Praem had speed-cooked bacon and eggs — and firmly rejected Raine's help with a silent stare — Evelyn still regarded me with that cold clinical look, a mage's look, those narrowed eyes and that probing intelligence, staring at me over a half-cleaned plate in our very normal kitchen of slate floor and old counter-tops and cast-iron stove.

"... Eevee?" I ventured, sending my own probe back to discover her intent.

"Do you even begin to understand what it is you've done, Heather?" she asked.

"Eevee?"

"I'm serious."

"You're also being creepy as hell," Raine said.

"What I've done? Made a new friend?" I glanced at Sevens, who was peering right back at Evelyn across the table, eyes shaded by the tilt of her own brow. "Outwitted a monarch? Okay, I didn't do that part. I'm pretty sure he could have stopped me if he'd tried. Eevee, what are you talking about?"

Evelyn sucked on her teeth, turning her head as if to examine me from different angles. Her eyes roved my sides and my shoulders, even though she couldn't see my tentacles, not without the aid of her hastily-wrought trick glasses, which currently sat on the table in front of Raine. Her gaze made me want to slip the squid-skull mask back on over my head, but I'd left it in the magical workshop. This

was home, this was safe, I didn't need the mask.

Did I?

"Evee, hey." Raine clicked her fingers twice. "I know what you're doing."

Evelyn ignored her, eyes cold with hunger. "Heather, the experience you had this night, nineteen hours Outside, alone and far from human contact, that is the sort of thing which forms the basis for an entire tome like this." She tapped the book on the kitchen table, the one Praem had fetched, bound in worryingly pale leather, old and cracked but still supple. "Any mage achieving such a feat — and surviving it! — would be ambitious beyond telling."

"But you've been Outside too. We all have. To the library of Carcosa, together."

"Oh, tosh," Evelyn huffed. "That was a short expedition under controlled circumstances — during which, I might add, a lot of things went wrong. We almost died half a dozen times. Especially me. And look what happened to the group Edward sent in too, they got it even worse. That's nothing by comparison. You were alone, or almost alone." She nodded to the Knight. "Making deals with Outsiders on your own terms. And look what you've won."

She gestured at Sevens, but didn't look away from me — and then I saw the hint of wonder in the back of her eyes, the spark of awe touching kindling I dare not examine too closely.

Instead, I stamped on it.

"Evee? Evee, I know that look from you. Don't."

"Oh don't—" she started.

"Don't look at me like I'm a mage. I'm Heather. That's all I'll ever be. Don't."

"... yes." Evelyn cleared her throat. "Yes. Sorry. Still!" She brushed it off, barked with laughter and let herself grow sardonic. "My mother would have given her firstborn for such an experience. That's me, in case you don't get the joke."

"No," Praem intoned. Evelyn cleared her throat again and looked away.

"Evee, where is this coming from?" I demanded.

Evelyn shrugged. "Old habit. Survival strategy. I said sorry, didn't I? You were gone all night, Heather. Forgive me for thinking the worst."

I didn't like the tone in her voice, but she had a point. "It does feel like I was gone a lot longer than that," I said, haltingly. "Could that have actually happened?"

Raine perked up. "You don't look older or anything. Tired as shit, sure, but not older. I'd know."

I couldn't help but smile despite myself. "Thank you, but that's not what I mean."

"Time dilation?" Evelyn asked. "That's why you were panicked when you returned?"

I shrugged. "I slept twice. The second time, I know how long that one was, because Sevens and Saldis were both right there. But the first, I was just unconscious on the library floor, wrapped up in a cocoon of my own tentacles." I looked over my shoulder at the forest-knight, standing tall by the door to the workshop, axe held point-down on the kitchen tiles. "The Knight was there, but I'm not certain he experiences time like we do. I could have been lying there for a subjective week."

"Weren't," rasped Sevens. We all glanced at her and she moved to hide behind my shoulder, but managed to refrain from the full withdrawal. "Just hours. Hours."

"Okay," I sighed. "Okay, good. Thank you."

"You went on a true journey Outside," Evelyn said. "You returned with artifacts, with gifts torn from the utmost rim of the universe." She gestured at my yellow robes and through the door behind me, at my squid-skull mask sitting on the table in the workshop, staring at us with six dark eye holes. Saldis' golden pendant lay there too, dull in the shadows. "You met a god, but you didn't even think to ask the relevant questions. Any mage would give both eyes to hear the merest whispers from an Outsider of that scale, but you—"

"Evee, don't, please."

"Yeah, hey," Raine added. "Evelyn, down."

Evelyn shook her head, sighed — and smiled, hard and savage, right at me, a choke in her voice. "Heather, your every action

proves me wrong. Proves my mother wrong, I suppose. I love you too, you godly fool.”

I was too stunned to thank her. Evelyn held her resolution for about half a second before she blushed, looking down and tapping her notebook with her pencil. We all knew better than to comment on the sheen of tears in her eyes.

“Love is good,” Praem intoned.

“Uh, yeah!” Raine joined in. “Hear hear! Bit generic, but big truth from our resident maid enthusiast.”

Praem gave her a look. Raine shrugged with a very ‘I-did-my-best’ kind of expression. I don’t think she understood what was going on with Evelyn. In truth, neither did I, not fully.

Evelyn rolled her eyes at all this, a nice opening for an elegant recovery as she scrubbed her face on the back of her sleeve. We all pretended not to see. She pointed her pencil at Sevens. “And I don’t suppose I’m going to get anything out of you, am I?”

This time, Sevens met her look, staring sullen from behind black jewels. “What’s to get?”

“Exactly. You’re a theatre kid, not a monarch. You have nothing to teach me.” Evelyn paused with a strange look on her face, a wary intensity, a paradoxical need. “Do you?”

Sevens tilted her head to the side, so slowly that my imagination supplied the creaking of a door from some half-remembered black and white horror film, something about ancient castles and forgotten caskets. Her head rotated on a neck far too rubbery and flexible to be truly human, though I heard the popping of several vertebrae as they stood out on the back of her neck. Her black-and-red eyes never left Evelyn, glittering like rubies in the night. She stopped blinking. Stopped breathing. Stopped moving at all.

That was no act. The motion was distressingly predatory, like something Zheng might do, but purer, more real; Zheng’s body had, after all, begun life as a human being. Sevens’ motion reached down into my brainstem and tugged at ancient instincts evolved for avoiding big cats on the African savannah. This scrawny, pale, weird little creature squatting next to me was a predator. My genes knew so.

Evelyn flinched back, following her instincts too. Raine sat up straight all of a sudden, eyes fixed on Sevens. Praem didn't move — she knew better, she saw through the mask — but her milk-white eyes swivelled to fix on Sevens.

But to me, in that moment, this mask of Sevens-Shades-of-Sunlight was heart-achingly cute.

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached out with one hand and touched the back of Sevens' neck, entangling my fingers with her long, dirty hair, cupping the base of her head where spine met skull. Vulnerable, slender, full of fragile little bones and important blood vessels and vital nerve trunks. Her ever-so-slightly-too-warm skin tingled beneath my fingers as a shiver shot through her.

I was entranced by this mask, by the predator, by the paradoxical seduction. And unlike Zheng, she wasn't even trying.

"Rrrrrr?!" She flinched, breaking eye contact with Evelyn and jerking round to face me — but a pair of my tentacles had instinctively lashed hard around her slender wrists, holding her tight as our eyes met.

A soft *hiss* rose up my throat; the first time I'd felt the urge to hiss at anything other than a threat. It came out low and slow. It felt right.

We stayed like that for three heartbeats, heat climbing up my face. But I couldn't let go.

"Be ... be nice to ... to Evee, okay?" I squeezed out eventually.

Sevens nodded. Jerky, up and down, once.

I let her go as suddenly as I'd grabbed her. Seven-Shades-of-Suitably-Submissive rocked back, but didn't flee. She ducked her head and watched me as I withdrew hand and tentacle alike. I felt a laugh creep up my throat with strange and hysterical delight, buzzing inside with something I'd never felt before. When I glanced around the table, I found that Raine was watching us with deep interest and curiosity, which only made me choke on my laughter.

"What I meant," Evelyn raised her voice to stop us descending into complete animalistic nonsense, "is that you have no magic to teach me, Sevens. Nothing about Outside. No secrets. Yes?"

"Guuuuurrrrrgggg," went Sevens, like a white noise machine set on a note too deep. She eyed me warily once more — then bumped me

with her head, exactly like a cat accepting a petting. But she quickly returned her attention to Evelyn. “Nah.”

Oh, I realised with numb fascination, *I was establishing dominance.*

Evelyn blew out a long breath, still a little jumpy, watching Sevens like the stray she was. “I don’t know how you find her so palatable like this, Heather. I preferred the prissy princess.”

“Uh ... right, yes. Uh, I mean, she’s fine.” I was still recovering from what I’d done.

“Rrrrr-fuck,” Sevens rasped. Evelyn barked a laugh.

“I don’t,” I murmured, almost out of breath with strange excitement. “I don’t prefer the princess. Oh wow.”

“Yeah, me neither,” said Raine, loud and proud and swinging her feet down to the floor. She stood up, twisting her head left and right and flexing her back to work the sleep-deprivation kinks out of her muscles. Then she went quite still and locked eyes with Sevens.

“But I sure would love to have a chat with her. Don’t know if I can say the things I need to say to that sweet little face.”

Sevens held her gaze — but also dug a hand into my robes, holding on tight.

Flushed with the aftereffects of how I’d just *renegotiated* the nature of my relationship with Seven-Shades-of-Gnashing-Goblin, my mouth ran away before I could control myself.

“Raine, Raine, we— I— I mean you—” I hissed through my teeth, trying to get a grip. “Raine, you can be as jealous as you need to. We’ll deal with that. You can accept it or reject it and I am one hundred percent by your side and we will work this out.”

Raine shot me a grin, her confidence dialled down just a notch less than usual. “Ehhh. I already said, I don’t really know. I mean, I don’t even know who or what I’m actually dealing with here. This isn’t her, not really, is it? This is just a mood. You and I,” she said to Sevens, pointing two fingers at her own eyes and then back at Sevens, “we need to get to know each other. For real.”

“You can do that,” I blurted out, then looked at Sevens. “You can do that?”

“Rrrrr-gguuurg.” Sevens ducked her head, avoiding the attention.

“The Princess, well,” Raine said with a shrug, half-acting, putting on a show. “I don’t like the idea of her bending you over and making you squeal.”

I went tomato-red, mouth wide open in a splutter.

Sevens did her weird gurgle-laugh in the back of her throat. Raine shot a pair of finger-guns at her. “See what I mean? Gobbo gets it.”

“I’m not a ‘gobbo’. That’s disrespectful,” Sevens rasped.

“Sure,” said Raine. “So, is there a real you I can speak to?”

“Abyssal,” Sevens said. “Wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Ah. Right. Beyond even me, hey? But you ain’t beyond me, not like that.”

I knew exactly what she was doing — she was trying to communicate. But I couldn’t help myself.

“I do not *squeal!*” I said.

“Sometimes you do,” Evelyn drawled, looking like she wanted to pass out. “I can hear it through the walls.”

Everybody looked at her. Even Praem.

“ ... I was joking,” Evelyn added.

Raine was laughing, I was blushing, and Sevens seemed to be relaxing into this somehow.

“So yeah, the princess, maybe yes, maybe not,” Raine went on. “But hey, goblin girl here is the same thing, the same person. I accept that. So I don’t know how to feel.” She shrugged. “You’ve really not even made out with her?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, trying to control my blush. “Not everything is about physical lust, Raine. Emotions are real too. Why does it matter if we haven’t? I’d never intentionally break your trust like that.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, but what if you want to snog her?”

“Then I’ll ... I’ll have to ... to ... ”

To not do it, my mind supplied. I glanced at Sevens. Could I reject her for Raine’s sake? She stared back at me, red-on-black like fire

inside obsidian, sulky but apparently not worried. Maybe she couldn't understand what was being negotiated here. Or maybe I was the one not seeing the truth.

"Call it my simian territoriality or whatever," Raine said. "My alpha prerogative or something."

"Oh please," Evelyn drawled. "Heather's the only alpha here."

Raine cleared her throat. "Well, yeah, but you get the point. Anyway. Heather, there's a bit of me that doesn't want you to do it unless I give you permission first."

"... permission?" I asked, feeling a much slower yet much hotter blush creeping up my cheeks.

"Yeah," Raine said. She waited a beat, watching me with a growing smirk — a nasty one, showing a few teeth. "Ask permission to kiss Sevens."

Sevens and I glanced at each other at the exact same moment. The scrawny little gremlin had points of bright colour growing in her cheeks too.

"You ... you want me to?" I asked Raine.

Raine took three steps closer to my chair. I suddenly felt like she was towering over me. "Ask permission. Go on." She placed a hand on my shoulder and bent down, so her face was inches from mine. I could not have stopped her with two dozen tentacles. I was like a rat in front of a snake. "Let's find out what I say."

I opened my mouth, but my tongue was dry as sand. My heart felt like a dying dove. My hands were shaking. Next to me, Sevens was making a gurgle in her throat, but my hind-brain registered it as *submission*.

Raine was indeed much more powerful than the Yellow Princess.

"Oh I'm not fucking watching this," Evelyn grumbled, and started banging her walking stick against a table leg to punctuate her word. "Do this upstairs. With a closed door. And soundproofing."

Raine laughed and let go of me and took a step back. She shot me a wink and ran a hand through her hair and tilted her chin up, beaming with confidence. And it was all real.

I let out a sound like a confused seal.

“Right,” Evelyn hissed. “Before you lot inevitably make a gigantic mess in the bathroom that I don’t want to know about, I have to ask. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight — what are you right now?”

Sevens turned with a little flick of her head, desperate for relief from the pressure of Raine’s attention. “Excuse me? What?”

“I’m not a fool,” Evelyn explained. “What are you? Clearly not a human being. This mask, I mean. What was it before you borrowed it?”

“Vampire,” said Sevens.

Evelyn frowned and sighed like a small child had just said something very stupid. “There’s no such thing as vampires.”

And to my surprise — to everyone’s surprise, judging by the flinches and the stares — Sevens pulled a huge, toothy grin. It had none of Zheng’s slow predatory menace. It was like looking at some faerie creature that had just stolen a cooling pie off a windowsill and been caught with crumbs on her fingers.

Evelyn cleared her throat and looked away. Raine nodded in appreciation. Sevens let out a “rrr-rrr-rrr” laugh, like a small electric motor with a loose blade.

I stared at Sevens, and realised.

Oh no, oh dear. I sort of did want to kiss her.

“Well,” Raine said, raising her voice over my kindling desire, “maybe it’s time for that bath.”

I sighed and nodded yes, shaking a little at all this, but feeling the exhaustion drag at my limbs. “I suppose so. Oh, I do wish Lozzie would come home already. I am still worried about her.”

“Sleeping off a night out,” Praem intoned.

“You’re probably right,” I admitted, “but I wish she’d do that at home. I wish she would—”

Creeeeaaaaak.

A noise like a submarine at sea rang through the kitchen, of creaking plates and straining rivets, metal tortured by the pressure of the deep. For a split second I thought it was the house itself, that something had come loose in some distant room, a beam was

buckling or a bed breaking upstairs. The sound was so clearly structural, on a greater-than-human scale, something going very wrong.

Creeeeek-clonk.

Behind me, the Knight dropped his axe to the floor with an almighty *clang*.

I wrenched round in my chair, tentacles grabbing the table for leverage. Raine and Evelyn were both staring, as surprised as I was. Sevens all but fell out of her chair in shock, half-sprawling on the floor in a tangle of pale limbs and long dark hair. Praem picked up a tea towel and stepped forward.

The forest-knight was bleeding.

Thin watery red liquid was seeping from the almost imperceptible seams in his shining metal armour. Every plate and piece of his suit was quivering, as if he was struggling to keep his hold on the inside, like a man in the grip of a hemorrhagic fever.

Lozzie's words from weeks and weeks ago slammed into the forefront of mind, from back when I'd first asked her about her knights.

"They don't work up here, they fall apart. Like a deep-sea fish brought up to the surface, they'll just – ploop."

I was out of my chair so fast it skidded across the kitchen. Bioreactor waking back up, nerves screaming, yellow robes tangled around my legs; I used my tentacles to launch myself at the Knight like an octopus shooting from a gap in the rocks, chasing shelled prey with a sharp beak – except I was trying to do the opposite, trying to keep his shell intact, and plunge him back into the deep waters.

I slammed into him at the same moment I executed the equation.

I didn't even care about the risk of getting stuck again.

Out.

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.3

Popular media is rife with apocryphal tales of so-called ‘hysterical strength’ — young mothers lifting burning cars off trapped infants, fathers discovering hidden reserves of speed to snatch a child from the jaws of death, even old men sucker punching bears to save their tiny pet dogs from being mauled and eaten. Raine says there’s a grain of truth in such stories, but that it’s mostly justification for nonsense, and I’m inclined to agree with her. Adrenaline and love make a potent cocktail. Pain, fatigue, even permanent damage can all be rendered into mere illusion, but bodies — even inhuman bodies — still have limits. One’s instincts make demands, but eventually bones break, tendons snap, and muscle fibres tear. But sometimes the damage is worth taking, just for a chance of saving another.

When I slammed into the Knight and sent us crashing through the membrane back to Outside, I barely felt the transition. The molten toxic corrosion of hyperdimensional mathematics sloshed inside my skull, searing through my eyeballs like hot poker, but I simply didn’t care. I executed the equation with a flicker of thought, pure reaction, no concern for how little energy I had left.

Reality dissolved into kaleidoscopic chaos. For a moment which was also eternity, we were nowhere at all.

Then the Quiet Plain exploded around us with colour and motion and time.

The kinetic force of five-foot-nothing me, with my clutch of tentacles and my trailing fan of yellow robe, finished the arc I’d begun back in reality, smashing into the front of the Knight’s shiny chrome armour, tentacles lashing like a panicked octopus. I was a tiny wrecking ball of fragile flesh and frantic fear, but he should have withstood that like a tank versus a particularly excitable hedgehog.

To my endless horror, he fell over.

He toppled like a felled tree, crashing onto his back on the soft yellow grass of the quiet plain. I went down with him, clinging on hard. My head banged off his breastplate, I bruised both elbows and one knee, crunched a hip into his armour, pinned one hand beneath his weight for a moment long enough to grind my bones, and somehow managed to punch myself in the stomach with one of my tentacles.

It wasn't the worst post-Slip landing I'd ever had, but it was up there. Not to mention I was already drained, exhausted, and emotionally spent after one of the longest nights of my life.

Head whirling, body throbbing with new pain, truly empty, I felt myself just *let go*.

But I didn't black out — I *couldn't* black out. My body wouldn't let me, it had decided otherwise. In the one second it had taken me and the Knight to fall down in a tangle of limbs and shaking metal, the miracle bioreactor in my abdomen had performed the opposite of an emergency SCRAM operation. Every control rod shot out of its chemical channel, slamming the reactor to maximum output; I was running hot before I even finished injuring myself, screaming past safe limits and risking ego-death.

I sat up and fell *off* the Knight in a second tangle of limbs, turned to my head to vomit, and didn't even take the time to groan before I wiped my mouth on my sleeve. No time for self-pity.

I turned back to the Knight because I had to do something, anything, whatever I could.

"No no no no no—" I hissed, going up on my knees and leaning over the Knight's supine form. I had no idea what to do with my shaking hands or quivering tentacles. I didn't even know where to start.

The Knight was literally falling apart — peeling himself out of his protective shell of imperishable metal, pushing away the chrome plates and shining pauldrons and letting go of the helmet and the greaves and the gauntlets, leaving them to lie limp and empty on the yellow grass as he revealed the gnarled truth inside, the real Knight contained within the amour, the self of dark flesh. Watery red fluid sluiced out and soaked into the ground, stinking of blood and bile. But his tentacles — glorious things lined with powerful suckers and filaments like Velcro — had grown too weak for the

task; he couldn't lift the heavy breastplate off himself, like a man trapped beneath a fallen beam with broken arms.

I grabbed the metal with both hands and two tentacles and heaved it off his core. The heavy plate fell onto the grass with a dull thump.

"Oh ... oh God," I breathed. "Oh no. Please, please—"

When one of the other knights had shown me the truth of what lay inside their armour — the protoplasmic bubbling, the masses of tentacles like ropes of muscle, the leathery dark raw-beef texture of their skin — the experience had not only gifted me with empathy and understanding, it had given me a baseline for what they were supposed to look like.

Which is why I understood the forest-knight was so badly injured.

His core — about the size of a beach-ball — flopped as if partially deflated, like a balloon filled with cold, lumpy, congealed fat, spasming and flexing. The thickest and strongest of his dozens of tentacles lay limp and twitching where he'd managed to extract himself from the arms and legs of the armour; the smaller ones tried to rise, to drift like seaweed, but they merely quivered, falling back as if beached in the cold air. The surface of his tea-coloured skin was puffy and bloated, like a bar of soap left in the water for too long. Every inch of him was weeping that thin, watery, stinking blood. The vigorous protoplasmic bubbling was absent; half-formed mouths and eyes and other alien organs were frozen in the surface of his skin, as if he'd kept trying to generate the correct sensory apparatus right up until his energy had given out.

Three eyes seemed to still function: one like a goat's eye, the second an insect compound eye, and the third distressingly human. They all turned to meet my panicked gaze.

"You're ... you're okay now." My tongue was numb and a weight lay on my chest. "You're Outside. You're Outside now, it's okay, it's going to be okay ..."

My hands and tentacles hovered, useless. I had no idea where to start, how to help, what he needed. I dared not touch anything, lest I cause more damage, more pain. I'd practised and practised and practised in order to do brain surgery on Badger, but the Knight wasn't even remotely human.

"What ... what do I ... ?" I managed, throat closing up, tears

running down my cheeks. “Why didn’t you say something? Why—no, no, this is all my fault, it’s all my fault. I should have paid attention. You weren’t even supposed to be there.”

He shouldn’t have been in our reality. Lozzie had told me in plain language. But I’d been so distracted, so focused on myself and Sevens and on getting home. I’d pulled him up behind us without even thinking. Like dredging a deep-sea fish to the surface on the back of my safe little submersible, like Lozzie but a thousand times quicker, a thousand times worse.

His suit of armour, wrought from Outsider star-steel, had probably afforded him some limited protection. A bubble of metaphysical safety against what for him must have been a howling void. But even that armour had seams. He’d had to hold it together himself, from the inside. Imagine trying to clutch a space suit to your own naked body, when every movement might allow in more of the deathly cold nothingness beyond.

“I’ve hurt you,” I tried to say, but it came out as a whine between gritted teeth. “What do I do? What do you need?”

A mouth near his top end flapped open and shut with liquid noises, but held no expression and made no cry for help. I stared at it, feeling myself sinking.

“Not vocal,” I said, voice dying. “Not vocal. Of course I know you’re not vocal. It’s not your responsibility to be vocal. I should have ... asked ... should have known.”

One of his three active eyes — the goat-pupil one — blinked slowly in an unmistakable gesture. A thickly muscled tentacle bumped against my knee.

I believe he was trying to say ‘*It’s okay.*’

When I turned to vomit again I could barely see through a veil of tears. It wasn’t an aftershock of hyperdimensional mathematics that brought up the remains of my breakfast, it was guilt and horror.

I’d done this. By accident. That didn’t make it any better.

I scrubbed my tears away and wiped my mouth again, desperate to help rather than be consumed by selfish guilt, but I couldn’t do anything except be ready. There was no move to make here, no first aid, no medical help. Not without his maker.

“Lozzie?” I said her name like a prayer, hoping beyond hope that she would materialise in front of me, just like she had that time in Wonderland. “Lozzie?! Lozzie please!” I looked up and around, pleading with her to appear. “You made them, you know how to—

When I raised my eyes, I discovered a ring of steel.

Other knights had gathered to watch, to pay their respects to their dying comrade, or perhaps just to look on in horror at what I’d done. About two dozen of them had wandered away from their habitual positions in Lozzie’s imaginary round table, spread out across the soft yellow hillsides. They stood at a safe distance, silent grey-chrome sentinels of thick metal, carrying their shields and their swords and their lances, slung over their shoulders or held at rest. Their armour shone darkly, lit from far above by the strange purple whorls in the sky, framed by the distant horizon and brushed by the touch of the sweetly-spiced wind.

“Help!” I said. “How do I help him? What do I do?”

None of them answered. They couldn’t, that wasn’t how they communicated. But that didn’t stop me from twisting on the spot, looking at each blank-visored helmet in turn, pleading and babbling. “Help, please, can’t you do something for him?! Tell me what to do! I can do magic, I can fix things, I can fix people, and—and— I don’t know what to do! I need Lozzie but she’s not here!”

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I saw sorrow and resignation in the set of their shoulders, the angle of their chins, the slump of their arms. One of them was even pointing his featureless faceplate up at the sky, as if weeping to the absent stars.

Two of them had died protecting Lozzie and I, first from the Eye, then from the black lighting creature in Carcosa. But had they ever witnessed the death of one of their own, up close and slow, with time enough to say goodbye?

Regret almost overwhelmed me, filling my eyes and gritting my teeth; all that bioreactor energy rushed through my veins and saturated my cells, with nothing to do.

This was why I cared.

If Raine or Evelyn had been in mortal danger, that so-called ‘hysterical strength’ would have made perfect sense. I loved my friends. I would do anything for them. But I’d known this Knight,

this weird blob of flesh, for about twenty hours. I'd never exchanged a single word with him; we could barely communicate. But he'd been alongside me every step of the way. He'd volunteered to protect me, duelled Hastur, walked through the darkness, faced a sphinx, and helped me defy the King in Yellow. He was a hero, no matter how minor the part he played.

All of them had volunteered for this, made some kind of vow with Lozzie, an unimaginable pact to protect me and help rescue Maisie. Though I had not asked for them, I had followers, disciples, pawns.

Perhaps they were all prepared to throw themselves at the Eye, when the time came. I did not particularly like that they had pledged themselves to die for me, but I knew I would use them in the end, if they were willing and able and could help me rescue my sister. So the only way to deal with that was to accept I had a responsibility to them in return. I had a duty of care. A covenant to never spend them carelessly — or spend them not at all, if it could ever be avoided.

To die defending us was one thing. But to die because I made a stupid mistake?

A keening noise tried to force itself up my throat. I hadn't cried like this in months. I was filthy.

The dying forest-knight bumped my knee with a tentacle again. Powerful suckers tried to grasp my jeans, but slipped off like broken fingers. A sob choked me as I reached down to make contact, as I touched tentacle to tentacle and the forest-knight hung on as hard as he could.

"It's going to be okay," I lied.

Before I could think about what I was doing, I leaned forward and took the poor thing in my arms. I hugged the Knight and gently pulled him off the ground and into my lap, stroking the puffy, leathery, weeping flesh like comforting a dying animal that didn't understand what was happening. But the Knight understood all too well. He coiled several tentacles around me in return, but could barely hold on, all his strength gone.

I made sure to wrap as much of him as I could in Sevens' robes. Perhaps the warmth would soothe him, take away the pain.

"It's going to be ... okay," I lied again.

Television and movies always make these sorts of moments seem so clean and neat; white bedsheets and murmured goodbyes, eyes closing without the need for intervention, picturesque bullet wounds that never disfigure, sorrow-stricken heroes carrying their dead friends. But reality is so much flesh. They never show the voiding bowels, the ugly coughing, the bitterness and failure.

The Knight was heavy enough that my thighs were already aching, a beach-ball made of muscle, leathery flesh rough and sticky with the bloody weeping, which soaked into the front of my clothes and got all over my arms and hands. He stank of strange fluids, bloody excrement and bile, vaguely cloacal, and he was an awkward shape to hug without getting his watery blood on my neck and face. But I didn't care. I hugged him gently so as not to make the pain worse, pressing him against the radiating warmth of the bioreactor in my abdomen, now running almost out of control. My head felt light, spinning away into the clouds, senses beginning to blur.

He was just like us. Lozzie had made him flesh, true flesh, and I was an idiot who hadn't paid attention to that simple fact. I swore I would never let this happen again.

"It's going to be—"

True flesh.

Pressed against my abdomen.

"—okay," I finished as my tears suddenly stopped.

I looked down at the be-tentacled beach-ball of swollen, aching flesh nestled in my lap. Two of his three eyes were half-closed in exhaustion, but the one with the goat-pupil swivelled to look up at me.

"... I know flesh," I murmured. "I'm flesh too."

He blinked. A question.

"I've already let two of you die and I should have been smarter, should have been faster, should have done something differently. Well this time I can." My voice rose in confidence as I spoke, quivering but backed by resolution. "I have an idea."

I brought one of my own tentacles in front of my face so I could watch the concept blossom into life. My beautiful pneuma-somatic limb responded to my half-formed notion with a shudder of sub-

dermal transformation, new organs and structures speed-growing beneath the pale, rainbow-strobing skin, seeded by thought and fuelled by the pounding energy of my bioreactor. The Knight's single remaining eye swivelled up to watch as the tip of the tentacle peeled open like a flower, revealing a needle.

Six inches long and wrought from bio-steel — a substance I hadn't even known I could make until the idea had struck me. The needle was thick enough to pierce elephant hide. Purple light glinted off the metal. Tiny tendrils lapped it in a layer of antiseptic and then wicked away the moisture until it shone like a dagger.

A trio of sacks nestled at the needle's base, each the size of a golf ball, semi-translucent, and rapidly filling with their respective payloads.

One was golden-yellow, bright and burning. The second was clear-white, milky and thin. The third was black as the deep, oily and potent.

My flank started to go cold, right where that tentacle was rooted and anchored in human flesh; I shoved the folds of Sevens' cloak tighter against my side. Those three fluids were being distilled from my own blood, taken from my plasma and lymph, leached out of my cells. The bioreactor in my abdomen screamed with heat as it compensated, pumping out glucose and enzymes and other things best left unformed in the light of reality, substances which had no place in the human body — and I was seeing them with my own eyes for the first time.

Somehow, deep in my gut, I knew I had only a second or two; the unnameable substances I was extracting from my own body would not stay stable when isolated and purified like this. I had to mix them again, join them with flesh, give them purpose.

I raised the needle over the Knight in my arms and reared the tentacle back, ready to strike.

His single eye found me, weeping a few slow tears. I didn't need to read minds to know the question he was asking.

"You're going to be—" I started to say.

The needle ached like an open wound. Any longer and I must close it, void the contents, seal myself back up. But I couldn't do it, I couldn't give him hope, I couldn't lie.

His strange goat-pupil dilated with fear.

Will this work? he asked.

“I have no idea,” I admitted — and plunged the needle home.

The metal spike struck true, stabbing right through his leathery hide and sinking into his core, among alien organs and exotic chemicals, the base slamming home against his skin. A set of tiny muscles contracted inside my tentacle-tip, valves opening and sphincters pushing and tubes dilating, draining the trio of sacks and mixing their contents into a single stream of alchemical miracle that shot through the needle and into the Knight.

It was one of the most disgusting physical sensations I’d ever experienced, like a cross between shoving one’s leg into a vat of sun-baked cow viscera, and a highly-localised chill of frostbite just under my ribs. A shock wave ran up through the tentacle I’d used and hit me in the flank like a bucket of ice-cubes dumped into my torso cavity. I hissed through my teeth — then just *hissed* at the sky like an animal, in pain and shock. It stung and ached and made me want to tear out a fistful of my own flesh. In my abdomen, the trilobe bioreactor screamed and overheated, a burning star in my belly spinning new matter and dumping it into my bloodstream, to replace what I was giving away.

He twitched and shivered in my arms, his single remaining eye going glassy and cloudy. I hugged him tighter, as if that would make any difference.

Either this was going to work, or I’d just delivered a merciful deathblow.

I didn’t even fully understand what I’d just done; abyssal instinct and bodily drive were screaming at me to *stop*, like I was losing blood. The fluids I was ejecting were never supposed to leave my body, never meant to be chemically isolated in the first place, and absolutely not intended for transfusion into another living creature.

But I squeezed with muscles I hadn’t possessed sixty seconds earlier. Tiny membranes in my tentacle-tip tore themselves apart. Miniature tendons snapped and curled. Muscles ripped under their own force, pushing out every last droplet of burning ichor.

And suddenly, like touching a live electrical cable, I achieved connection.

For a split second the Knight and I were part of the same pneumatic circuit. As the trio of chemicals recombined and pulsed through his circulatory system, as they bonded with his cell walls and located whatever he used instead of adenosine triphosphate, as they sank into the whorls of his thinking-meat and rode the nerve impulses, his biology and mine were linked through the thin tunnel of bio-steel, back up through my tentacle and into my body through my flank, all the way back to my heart and lungs and brain.

I felt what he felt — all-encompassing pain and exhaustion, desperate hope, and a kind of love that no word exists for in any human language. I finally understood why Lozzie had made them *knights*. Real historical knights may have been a thin justification over the brutality of feudalism, but here was chivalric devotion worthy of the name.

But there was not only one knight.

There was this flesh and this mind, cradled in my arms on the cusp of death or salvation, but for one glorious explosive moment I was aware of all those other minds too, arranged in a ring for comradeship, company, and consensus-making. When one of them fell, the ring could close, so as to never truly be broken. I caught a snatched moment of their constant flow of thought-exchange, not as words or any other recognisable communication, too alien for even me to understand, a whirling impressions of sorrow, hissed arguments about intervention, debates on proper rites and procedures and mourning, wild shouts of trust and belief, while beneath it all they still carried on a million conversations about subjects so alien I never did manage to understand what I'd witnessed. It was as if I was a foreigner who had walked up to their round table, respected and beloved, but bereft of their tongue.

Yet more distant than these alien yet human-scale minds, I sensed other groupings of thoughts further out, still connected but totally incomprehensible to me, awash with sense-impressions of vast barren plains beneath the purple-whorled sky, or the ruins of impossibly cyclopean cities built from sandy megaliths, or deep mountain caves full of strange fossils and ancient machinery. These were the minds of the barn-sized creatures Lozzie had called 'caterpillars', out there exploring the world of the Quiet Plain. If I stood at the Round Table, then those were akin to esoteric board games being played out in adjacent rooms, with terminology and move call-outs I couldn't begin to decipher.

Lozzie had made life and imbued it with love and purpose — but now it was out there, beyond the boundaries of human imagination, exploring and learning in a place truly alien, making definition for itself.

In that frozen moment, I realised I could never spend these beings against the Eye. It would be a kind of genocide.

Then my alchemical gift finished gushing from the needle. The connection broke and I was alone once again, shivering and hissing with pain, with a great big lump of bleeding flesh cradled in my lap.

All three of the forest-knight's eyes were closed. He was twitching, tentacles spasming, flesh roiling with sudden protoplasmic activity. Like a seizure.

I withdrew the needle — wincing and retching at the awful sucking noise it made as it pulled back out of him, slick with blood. The tentacle I'd used felt tender and abused. I couldn't seem to close the petal-structure again, so the needle hung there in the air, throbbing and aching.

"Please, please," I hissed through my teeth.

There was no great moment of relief, no rush of gratitude, no hysterical laughter, only a numb trickle of realisation when I noticed the Knight wasn't dying in my lap anymore. His leathery skin began to very slowly exude and consume strange organs again. Five new eyes — none of them human or even animal — bubbled up from the surface half-formed and cloudy, but they all looked at me, blinking with recognition.

I eased him off my lap and onto the backplate of his armour, which still lay where he'd fallen. He tried to help, but his tentacles were still weak, slapping against pieces of discarded metal in a fruitless effort.

"It's okay," I murmured, patting one of his tentacles. My head was whirling and pounding, my face flushed as if in the grip of a fever. "Rest. You don't have to rush to ... um ... pull yourself together."

Three of five eyes swivelled back to me. Two of them blinked. The third rolled back in its socket.

I hiccuped, holding back a spike of hysterical laughter that had

nothing to do with amusement. “Sorry. Couldn’t resist the pun. Don’t know what to say. Just rest, okay? I ... don’t know what I’ve done to you, but we still need Lozzie to look at you. She understands how you work, your biology and stuff. I don’t, I don’t know what I’ve done, you might still be in danger. We need to wait for Lozzie, or find her. Lozzie, right, she’ll know, she—”

With a soft pop of displaced air, a scuff of trainers on grass, and a flutter of pink-white-and-blue poncho, Lozzie materialised eight feet to my left.

“Heathy!” She lit up , with her big smile and sleepy eyes.

Lozzie looked no worse for wear than when she’d left me behind on this same spot the previous day. A little puffy around the eyes from lack of sleep perhaps, but practically glowing with bouncy energy. Her braid had come loose and fallen apart, wispy blonde hair loose about her elfin little face and mischievous eyes. A crudely constructed paper crown sat at a jaunty angle on her head, decorated with orange scribbles, and a face-paint hand print of the same colour was smeared across one of her cheeks and part of her neck — though the hand which had applied it had clearly not been human. Not enough fingers, too many claws.

She’d also brought a passenger. Evelyn was holding on to Lozzie’s forearm.

Eyes going wide as saucers at our surroundings, mouth dropping open as her face drained of all colour, other hand turning white-knuckle tight on her walking stick, Evelyn started screaming.

“W-what?” Lozzie flinched away in confusion.

“Why did you bring me!?” Evelyn shouted in her face, trying to transition from terror to anger. She flung Lozzie’s arm away from herself, gritting her teeth, unsteady as she took a stumbling step backward. But then she glanced over her shoulder and discovered nothing but more quiet hillsides of yellow grass and more silent knights around us.

“ ... because you said it was an emergency?” Lozzie tilted her head and pointed at me and the forest-knight. “And it is! You were right!”

“I didn’t mean for you to bring me along you fucking loon!” Evelyn screamed.

Lozzie recoiled like a kicked dog. “You took my hand!” she chirped. “To impress on you the importance of—”

“Evee!” I yelped, staggering to my feet and reaching out for her with my tentacles. I was unsteady too, weak and covered in cold sweat like I’d just donated a pint of blood. “Evee, it’s okay, I’m here. This is a safe place.”

But Evelyn flinched away from my tentacles. She started to half-raise her walking stick, shaking all over, going green around the gills, her breath coming in struggling spurts. She couldn’t stay focused on me, eyes whirling for possible threats, her weakened leg buckling with effort. If I struggled to exist Outside it must have been so much worse for Evelyn, unprepared for the trip, let alone the arrival.

“Safe?!” she managed to spit. “You—”

I didn’t wait for her to finish; I threw my tentacles wide, into a shark—cage for Evelyn to shelter inside. She didn’t like to be touched, so I doubted trying to calm her with a hug would help defeat the panic attack she was so clearly trying to stave off, but at least I could show her she was protected.

“Lozzie,” I spoke over Evelyn’s sudden splutter. “Yes, it’s an emergency.” I pointed at the forest-knight on the ground, still writhing gently amid the ruins of his armour. “He came back to reality with me and I forgot, I forgot what you told me, after an hour he started to ...”

“Oh.” Lozzie’s eyes went wide. She started at the knight. “But he’s okay?”

I brought my needle-tipped tentacle up between us. “I injected him with the distilled ... stuff, from my bioreactor.”

“Heather, what the hell?” Evelyn hissed. That seemed to have done the trick. She was still white as a sheet and looked like she wanted to vomit, but she wasn’t rapidly falling apart anymore.

Lozzie did a double-take at the huge needle and back at me, then over at the knight. For a second she was paralysed. My heart sank.

“I-I think it stabilised him,” I said, “but I don’t know how to—”

“It’ll be alright!” Lozzie launched herself toward the Knight, poncho

flapping as she went down on her knees by his side.

“Eeeeeverything is going to be alright! Alright, on the night! Just wait wait wait wait!”

She wagged a hand at Evelyn and me as if to tell us to be quiet — then she started singing.

Slow and soft at first, aimed down at the Knight, like murmuring a lullaby to a small child; for a moment I was afraid that she had lied, that she was administering some kind of last rites, or saying a tearful goodbye. But then her voice rose in volume, mouth open in a long, haunting, beautiful note. She raised her eyes too, fixed on the horizon and then the skies, her face bathed in the purple light spilling from the starry deep above. Her eyes fluttered shut as she hit her stride.

Lozzie’s singing was beautiful but strange, one long note varying in pitch, broken only by the need to inhale, a sound that seemed too much for her throat, bobbing as she undulated up and down the scales. Below the pure sound of her voice itself lay another voice, a second tone on the very limit of human hearing, perhaps ultrasound, camouflaged and embraced by and hidden inside Lozzie’s own singing.

My eyes were watering, my ears itched, and a sympathetic resonance rung deep in my chest, as if the sound was reaching inside me.

Evelyn had to wipe her watering eyes too, though neither of us was actually crying. It was like standing before a pressure differential, tugging on one’s front with the deceptively gentle insistence of an undertow current. The Knight at Lozzie’s knees responded well though. He wrapped several tentacles around her thighs and waist. His protoplasmic shifting seemed to slow into a steady rhythm.

Evelyn nudged me in the side with the handle of her walking stick and nodded sideways. I nodded back.

We stepped away from Lozzie until we were clear of the invisible pressure from her singing. We had to pass among the gathered ring of knights who had come to watch, though several of them gladly moved to make room for us, stepping aside without a sound as their metal boots moved across the soft yellow grass. Evelyn flinched at that, despite my protective cage of tentacles around her. Even when we finally stopped and took a shared deep breath, her eyes followed

the knights with all the wariness of a spooked cat.

"It is safe here, I'm serious," I said, lowering my tentacles at last. "I don't even really need to do this."

Evelyn shot me such a look, mustering her ire despite how she was still pale and waxy. "Heather."

"Really, I mean it. This dimension, it's empty apart from us and the knights, and they would literally die for me. You're safe right now, Eevee. I promise."

Evelyn wet her lips and leaned heavily on her walking stick, fixing me with a very unimpressed and grumpy look. That was more like it, that was more her. I'd given her an opening to do her usual thing, a familiar emotional handhold.

"Heather, perhaps you've forgotten," she said. "But I happen to be a human being. I don't know exactly what you are anymore — and I don't mean that in a bad way," she added with a huff. "But you and Lozzie are far better equipped to be out here. I am not."

"And I'm right next to you," I said, waggling a tentacle. "See? Protecting."

Evelyn eyed my tentacles again, wary and uncertain. "... mm. Quite."

A horrible slimy feeling slid into my chest and squeezed my heart. "Do my tentacles scare you? Do I scare you?"

"What?" Evelyn scowled at me. "No, don't be absurd. Heather, I don't doubt your intentions. I doubt your *capacity*. We are *Outside* and I don't care how supposedly empty and safe this particular patch of ground might be." She tapped the grass with the tip of her walking stick, then gestured around at the yellow hillsides, the dozens of knights, the sky full of purple whorls like diamonds scattered across velvet. "This is all a little overwhelming, to put it lightly. I don't even know what this place is. We could be breathing in anything — what is that smell?" She sniffed the cinnamon scent in the air.

"Eevee, if the Eye itself opened above us, then my first priority would be to get you home safe."

Evelyn shot me a sidelong look, still scowling and gritting her teeth, but she stopped ranting.

“Do you want to hold my hand?” I asked, offering one. “In case of emergency, in case we have to leave quickly. I won’t ask you to touch a tentacle.”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes — but she slipped her hand into mine anyway, her maimed hand with the missing fingers, the same one I’d once felt slip out of my grip when she’d gotten stranded Outside all by herself. It was clammy with cold sweat, muscles tight with tension. This time I held on tight. She looked away to watch Lozzie instead. I followed suit and we shared a moment of silence.

“You’re too kind for your own good, you know that?” she said.

“I think it’s for everybody’s good.”

“Mm, well. Lozzie is performing a miracle, isn’t she?”

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men,” I quoted, watching with awe as the forest-knight seemed to gain in strength with every minute Lozzie sang. Thick tentacles waved in the air.

“Not an apt quote, Heather,” Evelyn sighed. “Because it looks like Lozzie will indeed be able to put Humpty together again. Have you noticed she’s got a hickey on her neck?”

I sighed. From this angle, with Lozzie’s face pointing up at the sky as she sang, it was impossible to miss. “Yes. How did she get that, Outside?”

Evelyn shrugged. She eyed my tentacles again. “I think your tentacles are very nice, Heather. They suit you. But please keep that one away from me.”

“What? Oh!”

I realised she was staring at the bio-steel needle still hanging exposed in the air — it had been creeping closer to her without conscious intent on my part. I reeled it in, oddly embarrassed, and finally managed to fold up the tip of the tentacle once again, like a flower of flesh closing its petals. I felt the needle begin to dissolve back into the pneuma-somatic cells.

My bioreactor was still running hot, pumping out energy into my veins and animating my tentacles; had the excess of power led me to seek an outlet? I forced the control rods back into their channels one by one, shaking and shuddering as I did so, feeling the exhaustion wash over me. My eyelids were like lead. Didn’t help

that I'd vomited up half my breakfast.

"Sorry, sorry, I lost track of it," I said. "Though I'm pretty sure jabbing you with it would just make you hyperactive or something."

"Or give me cancer. Heather, you have no idea what that could do to a human body, one that lacks the self-regulating systems yours probably possesses by now."

"That's true, you do have a point. Again, sorry, really sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Do not use it on a person. Do not. Even in an emergency. Do anything else, brainmath, experimental surgery, jamming your fingers into the wound."

"I understand." I was struggling not to blush.

"Do not—"

"I get it," I grunted, then squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed the bridge of my nose. "I'm sorry, Eevee. I'm ... I panicked and ... no, don't worry, I won't jab you with my magical life juice. I promise."

"Well. See that you don't."

Awkward silence descended, broken only by Lozzie's singing. The forest-knight looked like he was going to pull through; his skin wasn't weeping anymore and he had more than a dozen eyes, pointed in every direction. His tentacles were beginning to poke at the discarded pieces of his armour.

"This is fascinating," Evelyn murmured eventually. "But Praem will be going spare."

"She trusts Lozzie. And she trusts me too, I hope. She knows we'll keep you safe. And we'll have you back in a minute or two, I just ... I need to know the Knight is okay. I really messed up, Eevee. I really did, I almost killed him."

Evelyn looked at me — no longer probing and wary, but just meeting my eyes. "I don't know if I've ever seen you move that fast before."

"I'm sorry?"

"When you realised something was wrong with him." Evelyn nodded at the Knight, who was now attempting to slowly

reassemble his armour around himself, worming bundles of tentacles through greaves and vambraces. He was still clumsy though, and couldn't quite get himself together.

"I have a responsibility," I muttered, only half talking to Evelyn. "To everyone who helps me, to not be like ... not be ... "

I waved a tentacle in front of my own face. Not be like what? Not turn into the thing that Evelyn had seen back in the kitchen, the awe-inspiring transhuman Outsider that I feared I might become? Like *Ooran Juh*?

Evelyn squeezed my hand, a little too hard, almost panicked. When I looked up at her, she was frowning back at me, sober and serious.

"Don't drift away on me," she said.

I laughed softly, not really amused. "That's exactly what I'm trying not to do."

"You really feel that responsibility, don't you?"

"Of course I do. He helped me, he volunteered when I was alone and lost. I know it was only one night, but I was terrified. I would have had to go to Carcosa, totally alone." I watched as the Knight struggled to flex a metal boot at the end of a branch of ropy tentacles.

"Mm," Evelyn grunted. She opened her mouth, closed it again, then looked away before finally speaking. "You feel that way about everyone in your life?"

"Well, um, to some degree, of course."

"You don't have to give of yourself to everyone who asks. Or even everyone who *doesn't* ask. You have a right to say no."

"Evee?"

She didn't answer, staring at Lozzie singing away into the deep purple sky, squinting slightly as if puzzling over a complex problem. Her profile was framed by the distant hillsides, her small neat nose and her compact jawline, the bags under her eyes and her surprisingly squishy cheeks. Fingers of wind plucked at her hair, tugging loose strands across her shoulders.

I could have left it there, pretended I didn't understand, feigned ignorance. But I was flush with the dregs of draining energy, with

the emotional aftermath of narrowly avoiding the accidental death of a being in my care, and with the relief of conquering my life-long fear of getting stuck Outside. I was alive, so no more holding back.

“What are we talking about, Eevee?” I asked, and my voice only quivered a little.

Her throat bobbed. Her maimed hand grew clammy in mine. Slowly, like the turning of an iceberg in deep waters, she looked back to me. Our eyes met but neither of us spoke. We both knew. That was all we needed.

Then she huffed out a great sigh. “Oh, not this. I don’t mean this.” She waved her walking stick at Lozzie and the Knight. “This was right, you were right, you have a responsibility toward those who help you. We all do, it’s basic solidarity. I admire you for it. It’s the right thing.”

“... but?”

“But everyone wants to bloody well sleep with you or worship you!” she snapped, scowling at the knights gathered around us. “That goes for you lot as well.”

“Eevee,” I said gently.

“What? I’m right. You go off Outside for a night and you come back with another girlfriend! I know there’s reasons, good reasons, but —”

“You’re jealous.” I swallowed, hard.

“Fucking right I’m jealous.” She stared right at me, cheeks burning but unembarrassed. “I’m ashamed too. You had me read cold, Heather, I was looking at you like a mage with a creature to study. Thank you for reminding me otherwise. I mean it. Thank you for reminding me you’re just you.”

“I’ll always be just me.”

“For better or worse,” she huffed, rolling her shoulders to work out the kinks, watching Lozzie again so she didn’t have to see my reaction to what she said next. “I never had any normal friends.”

“... obviously,” I said, wary but wanting her to continue. Maybe she just needed to get it off her chest.

“I had — and still have, yes — Raine. Don’t tell her I said that,

she'll be insufferable about it. But she's hardly a normal friend." Evelyn sucked on her teeth in thought. When she spoke again, her voice came out soft and low. "Don't repeat this to anybody, but ... sometimes when I'm alone in bed, I like to dream that I might give up on magic one day." She glanced at me, faintly guilty. "After we rescue your sister. And we will, we'll succeed. But I can't give it up, not even then. Not if I kill every mage within a hundred miles of Sharrowford and we blind the Eye with the universe's largest broken bottle."

I gave a weak laugh, a polite laugh, but Evelyn wasn't joking.

"I know I can't," she carried on, looking out at the Quiet Plain again. "Once you're in you can never get back out, but that's not why. It's not because of the knowledge that lives in my skull or the hunger for it — the only worthwhile thing I inherited from my mother. No. It's because of you, Heather."

She went silent for a second. My heart climbed up my throat and knocked on the back of my teeth.

Then she added, "And Praem."

"Oh," I breathed.

"And yes, Raine too, obviously. But mostly you and Praem. You'll never get out, it's part of you now. And Praem is my daughter. Not *sort of* my daughter. She is. That's final."

"You're saying you have a responsibility too."

"No. No, it's not responsibility for me. If I didn't have this—" Evelyn hissed through her teeth and corrected, "I mean if I didn't have all of you, then I don't think I would have a reason to carry on."

"Evee?" I squeezed her hand. She glanced at me and pulled a self-directed scowl.

"Oh don't fret," she said. "I'm not talking suicidal ideation. Heather, I was terrified when you didn't come home."

"I know, and I'm sorry, and I—"

"I'm not looking for an apology." She looked away and cleared her throat. "You can't force your way into my life and not take some responsibility."

I managed a small laugh. "You sound like me with Raine."

I regretted those words before they left my mouth. Evelyn winced. I bit my tongue. I swear I heard a waver in Lozzie's singing. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I could have sworn one of the knights on a distant hillside put his faceplate in his palm.

"Sorry," I said, blushing.

"It's not quite the same, is it?"

"It's not," I hurried to add. "No. Not at all."

Evelyn took a moment to compose herself. "Heather, would you like to watch some cartoons with me?"

"Um ... sure? Of course, I'd be delighted to. You mean anime?"

Evelyn shrugged. "Let's not get into that distinction right now. I'd like to show you some more favourites sometime. We don't do enough of that, we're always caught up in not dying or being eaten. So let's you and me watch some cartoons together. Just you and me."

"I'd like that." I squeezed her hand and she smiled, a real smile, which melted the tension from her face and for just a second made me see what Evelyn might have looked like if she'd never discovered magic at all. Puppy-fat and kindness.

I would have slipped a tentacle across her shoulders for a proper hug, but I thought it best to ask first, and I didn't quite have the courage for that.

We waited through another minute of singing.

"Evee, I've been wondering, why didn't Sevens come after me just now?"

"Mm? Oh, yes, that was a bit of a panic. She said you'd know what to do, but Raine was grabbing her and demanding she take us after you." Evelyn grumbled as she spoke, clearly unimpressed with the whole thing. "Then Lozzie appeared about sixty seconds later. It was like an episode of Scooby Doo, you out one door and her in the other. I half-expected Praem to start humming Yakety Sax."

"Yakety what? I'm sorry?"

"Never mind."

“But she didn’t follow.”

“She said it would be cheating,” Evelyn explained. “Then she ran off, vanished upstairs.”

My heart sank. That was a bad sign. “Vanished as in ... *vanished* vanished?”

“No, physically ran off, with her feet. Though I think she took the stairs on all fours. We could hear her banging around up there. As soon as Lozzie appeared, Raine shouted at her to go help you, then she took off, to coax Sevens out from a cupboard with a box of dog treats for all I know.”

“Oh dear,” I sighed. But that did sound better than the alternative. “More mess to solve.”

“Before you go solving any messes, you need a sleep. A long one. And a bath.” Evelyn performatively sniffed at me. “You stink, you know.”

“Well, pardon me for bleeding on myself,” I said, mock-apologetic.

Evelyn snorted a laugh, shaking her head. Then she looked around at the knights, the yellow hillsides, and up at the purple-whorled sky again. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe this particular place is safe. It feels like it right now, but I don’t trust that feeling.”

“Only a few more minutes, I think we’re wrapping up,” I said. The Knight was finally wriggling tendrils back into his helmet, dozens of tentacles grasping pieces of armour and pulling them into place over his dark, leathery core, bracing them and fitting them together. “I think he’s going to be okay.”

“At the rate he’s going, it’s going to be another fifteen minutes before he gets himself sealed in.”

I glanced around too, at this strange and desolate place, now filled with Lozzie’s progeny. “I guess we can just come and go now, what with the dead hands gone.”

Evelyn hissed through her teeth. “You mean *you* can come and go. Do not tempt me.”

“Ah. Oh. Very fair point.”

“Screw it,” Evelyn grunted, nodding at the ground. “Is it safe to sit on this grass? It’s not going to poison me or something?”

“I’ve lain down on it for hours before.”

“Fair enough then. Give me a hand, will you?”

And so Evelyn and I settled down to wait for a few minutes, Outside but not alone, never alone, as Lizzie put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.4

“I feel like something has changed. As if things are different now.”

I spoke the words to the ghostly reflection of my face in the bath water, warped by ripples in the surface.

Silent heartbeats counted time against the peeling paint of the bathroom walls and the faded varnish on the door. The water’s heat soaked into my tender skin and aching muscles like the penetrating embrace of an amniotic sac, reaching through my abdomen to cradle the embers in my bioreactor. My eyelids drooped shut for the hundredth time.

“Yeah, plus one girlfriend,” Raine said, bright and clear. I snapped back to full consciousness with a small hypnic jerk. “Coming back from a night out with a bird on your arm, seems like a pretty big difference to me.”

“Raine,” I whined softly. “That’s not what I meant.”

Raine laughed, good natured and teasing. She leaned out of her chair and over the side of the bathtub to ruffle my hair — a little difficult when it was hanging in wet rat-tails down my neck and shoulders, so she ended up awkwardly patting me instead. She carefully avoided the nasty purple bruise on my forehead from where I’d head-butted the knight’s armour.

Whistle shifted on her lap, his little doggy paws preparing for a rough landing as he expected her to stand up, but Raine relaxed back into her chair and scratched Whistle behind the ears, in case he felt left out.

I sank down into the bathwater, up to my cheekbones to hide a blush, then blew grumpy bubbles.

“What do you think, Whistle?” Raine addressed the corgi curled comfortably in her lap. “Should I go easy on Heather while she’s naked in the bath? While she’s so slow and loopy — sloopy,” she laughed at her own terrible joke. “Or should I press my advantage?”

What is your canine wisdom, ‘o small doggo?’”

Whistle replied with neither bark nor whine, but his ears pricked up and he looked from Raine to me.

I surfaced just enough to free my mouth from the bondage of the deep. “Don’t answer that, Whistle. She’s not allowed to entrap you.”

Whistle wiggled his backside and rested his head on his paws, leaving us humans to work this out ourselves.

“Good answer,” Raine said appreciatively, scratching the top of his head. “Smart boy.”

I narrowed my eyes at Raine. “He’s wise to your tricks.”

“I have tricks?”

Raine’s smile was a touch too sharp at the edges. It didn’t reach her eyes.

“You know you have tricks,” I sighed. “But also, no. I’m just being silly because I’m so exhausted. And I’m in the bath. It’s kind of hard to have a serious conversation when you’re naked and tired.”

“Should I get in too, then?”

I rolled my eyes but a faint spark kindled in the base of my abdomen at the prospect of bath time with Raine, even when exhausted past the limits of my transhuman biology. I measured my words with care. “Normally I’d never refuse, but we’re not going to have any fun right now. If you hug me, I’ll fall asleep, and I think that’s the exact opposite of your stated purpose here, yes?”

Raine pulled a cheeky grin; that one did reach her eyes. Something in my chest unknotted.

“I’m not being serious, anyway,” she said. “Not that I don’t want to, you do need a good seeing to—”

“Raine!” I tutted.

“—but you need food and sleep more than you need sex.” Her grin hardened with a tone of command, which stirred a very different kind of squirming in my belly. “You’re still following my orders, got it? You do what I tell you, until I’m satisfied you’re out of the danger zone.”

“Yes ma’am ... ” I said, not entirely serious.

Being naked in the bath while Raine sat next to me fully clothed was a strange experience. She’d swapped her shorts for a pair of loose pajama bottoms, but she was still wearing a tank top, showing off her toned arms and well-shaped shoulders — not to mention the lack of a bra. Warm brown eyes watched me in return whenever I found myself lost in her looks, which was difficult to restrain when I was so exhausted, when it felt like I’d been gone for so long, despite the passing of only a single night. She was tired too, with dark rings around her eyes, but no flaw could conceal how painfully pretty she was, between her expressive mouth and full, fluffy, chestnut-brown hair, which she kept running a hand through.

“This feels like the first time I’ve been alone with you in a while,” I said on impulse.

“Ahhh, but we’re not alone.” Raine picked up one of Whistle’s paws and waved it at me. He snuffed through his nose but otherwise tolerated the intrusion.

“Whistle doesn’t count.”

“Poor Whistle!” Raine laughed. “Do you want us to be alone, Heather?”

“No,” I sighed. “It’s okay, it just feels strange right now. Was there no more news overnight?” I nodded at Whistle. “Badger didn’t die in hospital or something?”

“Nah, no news. And you don’t need to be thinking about news, you need to be resting. You were meant to be in class today, but I’ve already called in sick for you. So shut down that big smart brain of yours for a bit, okay? Let me take over for the rest of the day.”

“I suppose so. I can’t just sit here though.”

“Time to get out then?” Raine asked. “You’re looking pretty prune.”

“Raine, that wasn’t some throwaway platitude earlier,” I said, frowning up at her over the lip of the bathtub. I shifted below the water, crossed my legs, and hugged my single remaining tentacle around my middle, as if to protect myself against a cold that had nothing to do with physical temperature. The pale, rainbow-strobing flesh blossomed with colour against my sallow skin.

“Something is different now.”

Raine opened her mouth to tell me off, to tell me to do as I was told, but she must have caught the stone in my eyes.

“Wanna talk about it while I towel you off?” she asked instead.

“It’s not about you and it’s not about Sevens,” I said.

“Oh! Well then. That’s good, because I’m still—”

“Still thinking,” I finished for her. “I know. It’s not about that. It’s about Outside. *Outside* is different now.”

At least home was still the same. Mostly.

= =

Myself, Evelyn, and Lozzie had returned from the Quiet Plain about an hour ago.

Or perhaps two hours. I wasn’t sure how long I’d spent in the bath. By the time I was coherent my fingers and toes had gone wrinkly from the water. It was exceptionally difficult to keep track of time when I felt so groggy. I kept slipping away to flirt with the enticing dark mistress of sleep, seduced down into that other abyss, from which even I returned with only half-remembered glimpses.

Which is an overwrought way of saying I kept nodding off in the tub. Raine had to sit in the bathroom and keep talking to help me stay awake.

We’d left the forest-knight firmly behind in the Quiet Plain this time, at home alongside the rest of his society and species and hive mind. He’d taken about twenty minutes to fully reassemble his armour around himself, pulling each plate into position with several tentacles and settling it flush against the others. It took him several goes to get each piece just right — the seams of the armour were so finely wrought and locked together with such precision, as if cut by laser and expert hand. He would hold one piece against the next for thirty full seconds, moving it so slightly that we humans could see only the bunching and relaxing of his tentacles as he adjusted the metal by millimetres. But once a plate was locked to the others, he could hold it firm with nothing but the tensile strength of a suckered tentacle attached to the inside.

I hadn’t realised before how complex and advanced the knights’

Outsider-plate really was. When the volunteer from among them had opened up yesterday, in order to show me what they really were inside, I'd been so focused on the occupant that I hadn't paid attention to the container. The suits were a miracle of both metal smithing and engineering, and a further miracle how smoothly each plate moved once it was in place. They formed a perfect seal, with no oil, no cloth under layer, no rubber to soften the plates against each other.

And Lozzie had made them? She was many things, many of them delightful and lovely and creative, but she made *life* — Tenny, the knights, who knew what else? She didn't know the first thing about metalworking.

I made a mental note to ask Lozzie about the armour sometime. Perhaps she'd had help. Armour like that doesn't grow on trees.

Or maybe it does, I had to remind myself. *Things are different Outside.*

Still, I wanted to know what kind of help was out there, Outside, now that Alexander's ghost no longer blocked our way. After all, if things like the King in Yellow existed, that opened up all kinds of potential.

Didn't it?

And how much should I tell Lozzie about the dead hands, about Alexander's final torment? I pondered that question as we watched the Knight stand up. He'd gotten his boots and greaves together, along with most of the hip armour. For a long and comical moment he stood there as a tentacle filled bottom half, while he picked up the first piece of the torso armour and lowered it into place.

"Wrong trousers," Evelyn murmured, forcing a snort.

Would Lozzie want to know that her brother had returned to life, if only as a short-lived imitation, a mask worn on an Outsider's face? Would she want to know what had happened to the hands, his ghost, the last trace of his will? She hid her trauma so well behind her own mask, which made it difficult to know what would hurt her more. Regardless, I had a duty to tell her. She'd want to know all about Sevens anyway.

The Knight looked so much better as he sealed himself into his armour and settled the helmet on top, like a tank's hatch clanging shut. His dark and leathery skin was still puffy and bruised, but the

beautiful alien magic of Lozzie's song had returned his strength and halted the blood weeping through his weakened skin. His protoplasmic shifting seemed to have settled as well. Eyes and mouths — and a dozen other organs for which I did not have names — sprouted across the surface of his skin, many of them rolling toward me. A long thin tentacle waved a thank you. I waved back.

As he slotted the last pieces of his suit back into place, Lozzie reached inside the armour to give him a hug. Whatever flaws she had, none could accuse her of not loving her creations.

Before we left, I hugged him too, through the armour.

"This isn't goodbye or anything," I said. "We can— *I* can come and go freely now. So can Lozzie."

"Yeah!" Lozzie said, slapping his abdominal armour with the flat of her hand. "I'm going to come back and hear alllll about what they've been up to as well and I need to talk to the cattys and check up on this one to make sure he's recovering okay, so we'll be back sooooooon! Be good now!"

"And thank you," I said to his midsection as I stepped back, speaking to where the true Knight was, in the core of the armour. "For everything you did."

Lozzie tilted her head at me. "Everything he did?"

"It's a long story, Loz. Later, please."

"Oh!" Lozzie lit up. "Big emergency, not just knight emergency. Eevee already said some, yes yes!"

"Quite," Evelyn grumbled, eyeing the re-armoured knight. "I'm not going to hug you, but thank you for protecting Heather. Now, can we—"

Evelyn paused in surprise when the Knight nodded, a simple up-and-down tilt of his helmet. After a moment, she nodded back.

"Now," she tried again with a sigh. "Can we please go home?"

Lozzie returned from the Quiet Plain under her own power, but Evelyn had to piggyback on my Slip. She squeezed my hand so tight it hurt, but I refrained from comment. Lozzie had offered, profusely and with much enthusiasm, to employ her particular brand of dimension-transfer to get us home, but Evelyn recalled the after-

effects of that all too well, from when we'd had to make our emergency exit from the library of Carcosa. Going Out, Lozzie's way was smooth enough, but going back placed a terrible strain on the human mind and soul. So Evelyn had taken my hand, I'd covertly touched a tentacle to her shoulder just in case the worst should happen, and she'd screwed up her eyes for the trip.

We made a far more gentle landing than my earlier membrane-ripping splashdown all the way from the Carcosa audience chamber, which was good because I hated the idea of Evelyn falling over and hurting herself. However, the very first thing I did was let go of Evelyn and sit down in a heap, head spinning, black oblivion filling the periphery of my vision. Even my tentacles were so exhausted they could barely hold me up. Evelyn was shouting for Praem, I was busy lying down for some quality floorboard time, but Lozzie took one step into the kitchen and spotted the Knight's fallen weapon.

"Oh, he dropped his axe!" she chirped. "He'll need that!"

Praem appeared in response to Evelyn's call, clicking across the kitchen flagstones and stopping in the doorway to the workshop, though I could only see the corner of her skirt and her shiny black shoes. I could barely find the strength to raise my head.

"Praem." Evelyn sighed to conceal a quiver of emotion. "That's better."

"Loz Loz Loz!" came a familiar trilling. A bundle of whirling black shot across the sliver of kitchen visible behind Praem's feet, punctuated by a canine 'wuff' of mild alarm, which was in turn followed by scrabbling claws as Tenny gently placed Whistle on the floor so she could use every single tentacle to hug Lozzie.

"Tenny-Tenns!" Lozzie cheered.

Whistle nosed around Praem's skirt and trotted over to me.

"Hello floor friend," I mumbled through numb lips. "You are down low as well. World's funny from down here. Woof."

Absent-minded, exhausted, and fading fast, I tried to use one of my tentacles to pat him, before realising he couldn't see them. Poor thing flinched in surprise at the invisible touch. He gave me quite a look.

“Oopsie,” I slurred.

Evelyn frowned down at me. “I believe Heather is going to need a hand. Praem, please? And where is Raine?”

Praem said nothing for several seconds. Tenny and Lozzie were squeal-hugging somewhere behind her. I think my eyes drifted shut, but then they were open again when she spoke.

“Evelyn,” Praem said. Her sing-song voice broke Evelyn’s name down into three distinct syllables, *Ev-eh-lyn*, with the exact cadence of *I-love-you*.

I thought I’d imagined it in my growing delirium.

“Yes? Yes, I’m back, thank you, hello, I love you too,” Evelyn rattled off, then cleared her throat.

“Oh I was right,” I mumbled.

Lozzie’s head appeared around the kitchen door, encircled by black tentacles, wispy blonde hair floating all over the place. “Be right back!” she chirped — then ducked back again, quickly followed by the sound of her straining to pick up the axe and failing gloriously. Lozzie may have been an ex-human with a godling riding in her head, but she still had noodle arms.

Praem turned on her heel and stepped back into the kitchen. I couldn’t see what happened, but I heard a very distinct clang and an *oof* from Lozzie.

“Thank you, Praem!” she said. “Deary-dear Praem!”

“Oh, don’t tell me she’s going back out there again?” Evelyn hissed. “Can we not? Can we stop for five minutes, before Heather passes out? Before I start shouting?”

“Should learn to *axe* first,” Praem intoned from the kitchen.

It was one of the few times I’d ever heard Praem put intentional stress on a word — and she was not amused.

Evelyn just stopped dead cold. Lozzie made a tiny sound of inquiry, but Praem kept going.

“Axe before you take Evelyn. Anywhere,” she intoned.

“Praem, really,” Evelyn huffed.

“Yes miss Praem yes sorry yes,” Lozzie chattered.

“Axe first,” Praem repeated.

“Yes yes yes yes.”

I started laughing and couldn't stop, slow at first, bubbling up my throat and crinkling the corners of my eyes, until I was crying a little with the remains of the return-high, the relief that I hadn't killed the Knight, the fact I was home. All of it overwhelmed me.

I didn't recall much after that, not until I was in the bath. Reality blurred into an undifferentiated mess of bodily need and hands helping me along and my own tentacles grasping at any handhold they could find. I think I asked where Sevens was, but I couldn't be sure. At one point I was instinctively aware Lozzie was gone again, that she might not return. I wanted to stay right where I was and wait for her; Tenny waited with me, black tentacles entwined with mine in a cephalopod's hug.

But then Lozzie was back again, a mote of light in the corner of my confused sensory input. I consented to be carried upstairs.

I did recall passing Kimberly in the front room, wide-eyed and amazed we were all so busy so early in the morning.

“Are we having a crisis? Miss— I mean, Evelyn?”

“No,” Evelyn grunted. “Carry on.”

“Morning, Kim!” I slurred.

“Uh, morning. I have to get to work, but ... did something happen?”

“Could say that.” Raine shot her a wink. “Tell you about it some other time.”

“I'd rather you not,” Kimberly mumbled as she passed us on the way to make toast or cereal and do normal people morning things.

Raine shooed everyone else out of the bathroom — except for Whistle, and Tenny for the time it took her to give me a hug — then cradled me on the floor and allowed me to nap in her arms while the bath filled with hot water. She peeled me out of my stained and dirty clothes, but when it came time to remove Sevens' yellow robes, I felt guilty and confused; the robes had started life as a metaphysical presence before they gained heft and weight and solidity, but what did it mean to take them off? Would I be

symbolically rejecting Sevens?

I was half-worried that the garment would melt away like dew before the morning sun, which is why I clung to them, whining a wordless complaint.

“Heather, hey,” Raine had purred. “Even married people take their rings off to shower. It’ll be right here, on the side next to the sink. I promise.”

I acquiesced with a heavy heart and weak hands. Raine folded the robes. Sevens’ affection did not turn to mist, but stayed put, solid and real.

Paradoxically, the bath revived me, even as it bolstered the caresses of sleep trying to drag me below the surface. My bioreactor eased down to a slow ebb and I folded away all but one tentacle — maintaining all six felt right, but they were terribly unwieldy in the bathtub. Putting them away felt bad both physically and emotionally, but the hot water blunted the pain, and the abyssal dysphoria was soothed by the knowledge I could remake them whenever I wanted. Losing them temporarily no longer felt like such a terrible violation, because I knew they were a true part of me. My body was mine to command.

I would need a lot more water in which to manoeuvre with all six tentacles — an idea I filed away for later in a mental folder labelled ‘maybe too good to be true’. The tentacle I did keep out was the one I’d used as the bio-steel injection needle for the Knight. The tip still ached, as if dull and spent, so I soaked it in the hot water.

The sounds of the house comforted my exhausted emotions, the familiar noises of Evelyn and Praem moving around downstairs, the woody, clean scents of the old bathroom, the murmur of Raine’s voice as she kept me awake. A conspicuous gap lingered on the edge of my perception, like a missing back tooth that I couldn’t locate with my tongue, not until Raine dumped water over my head to rinse away the shampoo. Zheng still wasn’t here. Somehow my abyssal instincts knew the shape of her absence, a black hole seen only by the lack of stars.

Of Sevens, I could sense nothing.

“Oh, she’s around here, don’t you worry,” Raine reassured me. “She’s just gone all shy on me.”

Once I was coherent enough, I told Raine all about the Knight and what had happened. I unfolded my guilt and my fears, but then I kept going.

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“Different how?” Raine asked.

The gentle teasing had vanished from her tone, replaced by quiet attention. Whistle’s ears perked up too.

I sighed and resisted the urge to sink back down into the bathwater. Perhaps I was more cephalopod than I thought, trying to take refuge in the watery deep. But oceanic darkness and water pressure could not keep uncomfortable thoughts at bay. Raine waited more than a few heartbeats as I tried to find the words to express myself. She didn’t even crack a joke.

“It’s like ... exposure therapy?” I said, then huffed and shook my head. “No, that’s not right. Forget I said anything.”

“Heather, I will do almost anything for you,” said Raine. “I’ll even kill people for you. Hell, I already have. But if you tell me something in that tone of voice, I ain’t gonna forget it.”

I nodded, feeling guilty at taking her for granted, then I rested my forehead against the side of the bathtub so I didn’t have to look at anything except blank white.

“Outside was always frightening,” I said slowly, trying to warm to my subject. “That’s a stupid statement, it’s so obvious, but I have to say it. You’ve only been to the library of Carcosa, Raine. It’s dangerous, but at least it’s ... comprehensible. Humans make libraries too. But most of the places I’ve seen out there aren’t remotely human, nothing we would recognise, and when they are recognisable they’re worse. I still scream at them even now, even places Lizzie can go make me ... ” I had to take a deep breath. “Once, when I was a teenager, I Slipped and ended up in this endless warren of metal corridors. It just went on and on and on. There was no purpose to it, like it had been built by a malfunctioning machine. Loops and circles which led nowhere, had no purpose, or no purpose I could ever comprehend without going mad. When I believed I had schizophrenia, I could write off those experiences as meaningless. Brain-ghosts. Dreams. That was how I comforted and protected myself. All those endless vistas, those

watching giants in impossible landscapes, those ... ”

I stopped to gather my thoughts, lost in horrible memories of places I didn't wish to revisit even when armed and armoured in the glory of abyssal reflection, with all my tentacles and a layer of steel wrapped about my body.

Naked in the bath, I turned my left forearm so I could look at the Fractal. The first and best gift, the bulwark that hid me from the Eye's sight and kept me beyond its reach. The shield that stopped it from dragging me back through the membrane over and over again.

“Thank you, Raine,” I murmured.

“You're welcome?” she said. “Hey, I haven't done anything right now except sit here and look pretty. But you're welcome, that comes naturally.”

I managed a small laugh. “Yes, keep doing that, please.”

“Don't let me interrupt though.”

“Yes. Right. Where was I? It ... it's alien out there, yes, but at the court of the King in Yellow, they were thinking beings. People, sort of. They were only pretending to be human, but they were people. We could communicate. There are people out there. Sort of. I never thought of it that way before.”

“You gonna go visit for a cup of tea?”

“Absolutely not.” I paused. “Well. Maybe.”

“Hey, I was only joking,” Raine laughed. “But if that's what you need to do ... ”

She trailed off, which was not normal with her. I finally looked up from the bathtub and found her eyes, unsmiling but gentle as she gazed back at me. That was uncommon as well.

“I mean, think about it,” I said, almost pleading but not certain why. “Think about the Eye, about Wonderland, about the world the Eye is floating over. Wonderland has buildings. They're shells, yes, burnt out by some unimaginable world-consuming flame, but somebody or something built those things. People. I'd never really thought about any of this before. Praem and Zheng are one thing, they came from the abyss and humans gave them bodies, that makes sense, I remember what it's like down there; anything living

there would much rather be here, with warmth and sunlight and strawberries. But Outside? It doesn't make any sense; some of those places are so alien, so weird, I can't even imagine how they think. There's, what? Whole civilisations out there?" I shrugged, lost. "Lozzie came home with a hickey! From where?!"

"Whoa, Heather, easy," Raine murmured, leaning over to squeeze my naked shoulder. "Slow down, hey."

"I don't have time to slow down," I grunted, strange tears prickling in my eyes. "Maisie can't wait."

Raine's eyebrows shot up. "You think this can help Maisie?"

"I was thinking about it while Evelyn and I were watching the Knight," I said, trying to unpack thoughts which had gathered while in the grip of exhaustion, half-dreams that held gleaming diamond specks of insight buried deep in the sucking mud. "About Outside, about thinking beings, species, races, civilisations, I don't know. That's what the Knights are, a species. Raine, why did the Eye manifest where it did? Over Wonderland? What did they do to let it in, whoever they were?"

Raine tilted her head. "Does it matter to us?"

She asked the question plain, not a challenge but a serious inquiry. I loved it when she did that.

I nodded. "I don't know how to beat the Eye or how to take Maisie back. I don't even know where to start. Sevens told me that lesbian romance has something to do with it, but I think she's a little biased about problem solving. I don't see how my relationships help me fight or communicate with the Eye. If we get the book from Edward and Eevee makes her invisibility thingy, okay, then we can get to Wonderland, but then what?"

"You're suggesting we root around in the ashes out there?"

"Exactly," I whispered.

Raine nodded slowly and kissed me on the forehead. I let my eyes flutter shut for a second before she sat back again.

"Experimental archaeology," Raine said. "You sure have been thinking a lot."

"Oh, I don't know," I sighed. "I don't even know what I expect to

find. There's a whole world beneath the Eye. I'm ... trying to avoid a frightening thing, Raine."

"Ah?"

"If I can go Outside casually, easily, am I just doing what the Eye wants me to do? Am I becoming more like it?" I shook my head. "But I have to try. I have to. Lozzie made miracles out there. Maybe I can too."

"Hey, you make miracles just fine here," Raine said. Her smile beamed through me.

"... thank you. It's hard to remember it's only been a single night. And now I can just ... come and go? From here and Outside? That's so strange, so different. I can't put it into words, Raine. I can't grasp that concept. The realm of my nightmares is somewhere else I can step into, just like that."

A shiver passed up my body, the physical memory of post-traumatic stress. Outside was still horrible, even if only a thought away.

Raine must have seen, because she reached over to turn the bath tap. She dumped another couple of pints of hot water in with me. I felt the wave of diluted heat against my side, easing away the imaginary chill.

"I was afraid you might not come back."

Raine spoke low and soft. Her voice cracked.

"Raine?!" I was so shocked I started to stand up in the bath. My single tentacle uncoiled from around myself and reached out toward her. Whistle looked up from her lap, making an inquisitive murmur in his throat.

"Hey, I'm fine now," Raine said, waving me down. "I'm just ... " She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, then blinked in surprise at the moisture she found there. "Oh, hey, tears. Wow."

"Raine, it is okay to cry," I blurted out. "It's okay, it's fine."

"Sure is," she agreed, cracking an awkward smile, words thick in her throat, red eyes blinking at me. "You wanted me real and raw, you got it. I don't want to lose you out there. And that's not miss knight errant talking, that's me, Raine. Just me."

I reached out with my actual hand, so Raine could see. She gave it a squeeze and I squeezed back.

"I won't leave you," I said. "Even if I wanted to go Outside — which I don't — I'll always come home."

"I know," Raine sighed. "Just feels like you had to go through an ordeal without me. Ha, some bodyguard I am."

"It's not your fault. I should have brought you along, even!"

I laughed — but inside I cringed with private horror.

I would not have survived the trials of last night without pneumatic mimicry of the abyssal body I'd once possessed, without my tentacles and my bioreactor, my armour and my immune system, my hyperdimensional mathematics and my status as the Eye's adopted daughter. Raine was strong, smart, and charismatic; I love her, but she is only human. What if she'd inhaled a lungful of Hastur's yellow spores? Or had her elbow caught in the million jaws of the gnawing darkness? Or been swatted aside by Melancholy's paw, or caught up in the party of flesh and madness that raced through the corridors in the palace of the Yellow King? What if she'd been in the audience chamber and required distracting like the others? What if she'd been under threat when the King's favourites had donned their lover-masks? How would I have reacted to Raine being threatened? Raine Outside and unprotected.

However much tender regard I felt for Sevens, I did not love her. Not yet. But I had defied the Yellow King for her sake.

What would I have done if Raine had been there, if he had threatened her?

"Regicidal revolution," I whispered, so softly that Raine didn't catch it above her own gentle laugh.

"I never did get to punch Alexander's stupid face in," she was saying. "Maybe the King in Yellow would have obliged a request. What do you think, would he be a good sport about that?"

"Maybe," I said, but I didn't really mean it. My mind was elsewhere.

I wasn't sure I could ever take Raine Outside.

She noticed my internal struggle. "Hey, Heather, it's gonna be alright," she purred. "We'll be alright. You and me, whatever else

happens. I'm just getting used to the idea. Processing, you know? I'm not sure if I should say this, but in a way those freaky dead hands had a silver lining. I didn't have to worry that you might step out and never come back. And I'm sorry for thinking that. I really mean it. I apologise."

A lump formed in my throat — sympathetic guilt. "You still don't have to worry about that."

"I know. I trust you."

Her words radiated that beaming confidence that had first won me over, battered down my walls, and saved me from a future of anti-psychotic medications in a padded cell. But I saw the cracks beneath, the weather-worried flaws. In the past I would never have possessed the courage to press.

"... but?" I asked.

The Raine of a month ago would have laughed off the question and pretended nothing was wrong. But my Raine sighed through a smile.

"But you had a hell of an adventure out there," she said. "You already made miracles, by the sound of it. I would have loved to have been there, just to see you being cool. My squid-girl from beyond." She broke into a grin at that, genuine and undiluted. "But I wasn't there. And maybe I won't be next time, either."

"I will always come home," I repeated.

"And I'll always be here."

"I love you," I said, trying not to tear up. Raine nodded and reached over to ruffle my hair again and kiss me on the cheek. I hugged her over the side of the bath, leaving damp patches around her shoulders.

When we separated again, her eyes went up and to my left. I followed her gaze and realised she was looking at my tentacle.

"You can see it?" I asked. "But you're not wearing the glasses? How?"

"It's wet," Raine said.

"... oh."

"I can't really see it, not the flesh or the cool arr-gee-bee lighting—"

"Sorry?" I blinked.

"—but I can see the sheen of water hovering in the air. That's some real invisible man stuff you got going on there, Heather. Better be careful in the rain and such, right? Don't wanna freak out random people."

"Of course, I ... never thought of that before. How odd."

I chewed my lip as we both settled back again, moving my tentacle through the air and dipping it back into the bath. Whistle snuffed in Raine's lap. His eyes followed the dripping wet ghost of my single tentacle.

"You wanna get out yet, or—" Raine started.

"It's the same for me," I said before I could lose all my courage.

"With Lizzie."

Raine raised her eyebrows.

"About going Outside, the fear of letting somebody go and that they might not come back." I explained in a rush, desperate to get it out of me, reject it, expel it. But I couldn't deny it. "Now the hands are gone, I've given up control."

"You had control?"

I shook my head. "I wasn't the one stopping her from going outside, but I ... I wanted it." I swallowed, the words like venom in my mouth as I spat them out, but I had to speak them. "I'm always afraid she'll leave, go Outside and not come back, because that's where she belongs, that's where she's most comfortable. Part of me saw the hands as an excuse, or ... used them as an excuse. To keep her here." I blinked hard, frowning at myself. "And that's a terrible thing. The potential is in me, to be terrible. To want to control."

"Admitting it is good. Saying it out loud, that's good."

I shrugged. "I don't feel any cleaner for saying it."

"Are you still going to try to stop her from going Outside?"

"No! No, I don't have any right to do that. Of course I don't. Is this a me thing, Raine? Or is it a mage thing? Or because of what I'm becoming, because of ... "

I trailed off as I arced my one tentacle through the air again, coiling it closed into a fist of pale meat. Raine couldn't see the flesh itself, but she could still see the faint sheen of dripping water. Her eyes followed it too.

"I don't know what I'm turning into," I murmured. "It feels good, but—"

"That has nothing to do with it," Raine said, firm and certain. I blinked at her.

"How can you be so sure?"

Raine sighed through a slow grin and spread her arms in a shrug — then returned one hand to scratch behind Whistle's ears when he whined. "Sometimes you forget I'm a student of politics, don't you? And I don't just mean 'cos I'm studying it."

I shook my head, confused. "What does that have to do with all this? And I never forget. I never forget anything about you, Raine."

"It's not a you thing," she said. "I know you too well. It's not a mage thing, not specifically, and I don't think it's an abyss thing either. It's a power thing."

"Power? Oh."

Raine leaned back in her chair, rolling her neck and getting comfortable. "There's this idea, you've probably heard it before; power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"Right, yes. Of course, you think I'm—"

"But that's bullshit. Power itself doesn't corrupt, that's just an excuse used by monsters. If you have a consistent and coherent ideological standpoint, and you apply it to the world around you, then hey, power doesn't corrupt. Not by itself. The standpoint has to be wrong in the first place."

I frowned in thought. "I'm not sure I agree with that."

"Then do some dialectics."

"Excuse me?" I boggled at her, feeling like a Yorkshire Terrier presented with advanced algebra.

Raine laughed. "Look, Heather, you wanted to keep Lozzie here, you wanted to control her — but you didn't. You struggled with the

feelings and you worked them out, and then you did the right thing. Nobody gets difficult questions right first time, nobody knows what to do on pure instinct. I sure never have. The guidance of conscience is a load of bullshit. You have to actually analyse. And by your own reckoning, that's what you did."

"I suppose so ... " I frowned at Raine, at her certainty, at how she seemed to have all the answers. I wasn't sure I agreed with her, but I didn't have the brainpower to argue philosophy right then. "Where is Lizzie, anyway? I was a bit woozy back there, I didn't see where she went. Oh!" I sat up straight in the bath. "She's not trying to find Sevens, is she? I-I'm not sure what would happen if they met in uncontrolled circumstances, I—"

Raine laughed, serious debate time over. "Far as I know, she went off for a nap while I was running your bath. But don't worry, I don't think even she is gonna pry Sevens out of hiding."

I managed a tiny laugh as well, using it to cover for the question that floated up into my mind.

The bathwater was getting cold again and my fingers had gone very wrinkly. I wiggled them in the air. A lump was hardening in my throat. To not ask the obvious question would be very conspicuous. But I just said, "I suppose it's time I got out. I could use a nap as well."

"You sure could. Come here then."

Raine put Whistle down on the floor, then got up, grabbed a towel from the rail, and held it out for me. I clambered over the side of the tub on shaky legs, muscles soft and sleepy from the heat and relaxation. She wrapped me in the towel and set about drying my hair while Whistle nosed along the skirting boards for interesting smells.

I closed my eyes as Raine rubbed my hair with the towel. "Did you ... "

"Hmm?" Raine made an innocent sound, as if she didn't know. I sighed heavily and screwed up my courage. I'd faced down an Outsider god only a few hours ago. Why was this so hard?

"Did you have any luck finding Sevens?" I forced out.

"A little bit," Raine answered — casual, or fake-casual, I couldn't

tell. My heart rate spiked as her hands stopped, leaving me beneath the dark of the towel over my head. "She hid under our bed, then in the cupboard. Like I said, hiding good. Scurries about right fast. Good at slipping through gaps and out of hands, too, like a ferret or a weasel. Made of rubber and grease."

"You weren't rough with her, were you?"

"Nah, 'course not. Just want her to come out and talk." Raine clucked her tongue. "Besides, she should have been in this bath with you, her hair's filthy and she does smell a bit, though not of sweat. Got an iron tang to her. Vampire smell, I guess."

"Raine," I whined softly. "I'm not going to share a bath with her. I don't need to do things like—"

Raine whipped the towel down off my head without warning. A soft yelp escaped my throat — chased by a hiccup that made poor Whistle jump. Raine shoved her lips against mine, hard and fierce, gripping my body through the towel wrapped about me. The deep kiss left me flushed and panting when she pulled back, eyes burning through mine. I hiccuped again, ruining the moment. Were we about to do it on the bathroom floor?

"Oh ..." I swallowed, discovering that I'd lashed my tentacle around one of her arms. I let go, gently, but Raine pinned the arm against her body, trapping my tentacle.

"Nuh uh," she said. "No running."

"Are you marking your territory?" I managed to ask.

"Yes," she said. "Straight up, not gonna lie about it. Now, if Seven-Shades-of-Sucking-Shit wants to join us, she's more than welcome. We can talk. I'm not even fronting or anything, I am being honest about my feelings, wide open. Her shit makes me uncomfortable and she needs to come talk to me about it."

"I-I don't think she's listening in anymore, not like she used to. She's a participant now."

"Then she needs to bloody well participate," Raine said, harder than I'd expected. "Not hide under the bed and hiss at me. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm real thankful she saved you out there, stepped in when she was needed. Big respect." Raine looked up from me and glanced around the bathroom. "You hear that, Sevens? Big respect."

Now get out here and talk to me.” Raine grit her teeth with a savage grin. “I’ll even talk to the prissy bitch princess if I have to.”

“She’s not a *bitch*,” I said. “Raine, don’t call people that.”

Raine’s eyes found mine again, burning bright with passion, and I half-wished I hadn’t gotten her attention. I quivered and wanted to take a step back, as if she was about to slam me into the wall and take me right there.

“But saving you doesn’t mean she gets to sleep with you, in any form,” Raine said. “And she sure as hell isn’t marrying you first. I have a claim on you, Heather. You’re mine.”

I swallowed, flushing bright red. “That’s ... very ... ”

A grin broke across Raine’s face like the sun from behind storm clouds. She leaned back and straightened up, gave me space to breathe, her engine clocking all the way back down to mild and easy. She ran a hand through her hair and sighed. “Unhealthy? Yeah, probably, but hey, you wanted the real me.”

“I was going to say *romantic*, but maybe it’s unhealthy of me to think that way.” I took a very deep breath and tried to force my heart rate down.

“Do you wanna get married?”

Heart rate back up. Way up. I stared, wide-eyed, a balloon expanding inside my chest. Raine leaned one hand against the wall next to my head, slow and gentle.

“Not yet?” she added.

“ ... Raine ... Raine I ... ” My mouth had gone completely dry. My tentacle was still around her arm. I couldn’t let go. “I don’t know if either of us will even be alive in six months. Four months!”

She cracked a cheesy smile. “All the more reason.”

“No, I’m serious! Raine! You can’t say that and not treat it seriously. I don’t like to think about it, but we, all of us, we might not survive trying to rescue my sister. Even with everything I’ve learnt, all the ways I’ve changed, I might die. And I can just about deal with that.” I swallowed hard, to hold back the sudden threatening tears. “But you ... you might ... God, I hope you don’t. Even if I don’t make it, I want ... I want you to live, Raine, I—”

“Heather,” Raine said my name and suddenly she was all serious, even through the smile. She didn’t lean in close, but it felt like she did. “If the worst happens, if that happens, if the rest of us all make it back but you don’t, then I’ll never be able to marry you.”

I felt like my heart was going to explode. My head span.

“We’ve only known each other ... what, seven, eight months?” My words emerged in an absurd squeak, followed by a hiccup. “What do I tell my— my parents—”

Raine shrugged. “So? Doesn’t have to be a big deal. No ceremony, just registry office. Eevee and Praem can witness for us. Dunno what they’ll think of Praem though. Does she even have a signature to sign?”

Oh, Eevee, I thought.

“You’re serious,” I said out loud.

“I love you.”

“A-and I love you too, Raine, but I might not come back from Wonderland. I might lose.”

“And I swept you off your feet knowing that.”

I fidgeted in place, as if pinned to the wall like a captured moth. I glanced at Whistle for help, but he didn’t even understand, trying to go up on his hind legs so he could peer into the toilet bowl.

“Oh, screw it,” I hissed. “I was never going to make it to thirty anyway.” I shot a dark look at Raine. “This is very unfair, I’m exhausted. And I thought you didn’t believe in marriage? Why bring the state into this?”

She shrugged again. “We could do it our way instead, if you like?”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t even have to go to the registry office. We can do it right here, right now. Cut our palms and press them together, the way Zheng and I never did to seal our deal. Mix our blood, you and me, forever. You can even jab me with your *magical life juice* that Eevee was telling you never to use. I wanna see what you feel like inside me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to concentrate past the blush

supernova in my face. "Raine, yes, in principle, but—"

Raine finally straightened up again, laughing. "It's cool, Heather, no pressure. Couldn't let myself get upstaged by Mellow Yellow. She beat me to the proposal, but she won't beat me to anything else."

I boggled at her, coming down from a high I hadn't wanted. " ... you mean that was all ... ?"

"Oh, no." Raine shook her head. "I'm deadly serious. Just, you know, you can wait. If you want."

I scowled at her, unimpressed but also secretly delighted, unwrapping my tentacle from her arm and clutching my towel to my front. "Did you just propose to me while I'm naked in a towel?"

She cracked a grin and shot me a wink. "Sure did."

I huffed and straightened up, but half of it was performance.

"Hey, for serious though," Raine said. "I am jealous. For real. Sevens wants to join us, be my friend, be your more-than-a-friend? Fine. But she's not going to scuttle around and avoid me and then slink into bed beside you at night. No way. We do this up front."

I frowned at her, then at my tentacle tip. "And you're not bothered by the fact she's an Outsider? Not even remotely human?"

Raine shrugged. "I've got no problems with *what* Sevens is, as long as she's not a side-piece. She's in or out, not halfway."

"Fair enough," I sighed, struggling to get my breath back. Raine took me gently by the arm, supporting me.

"Got a bit carried away there," she said.

"No, no, it's very understandable, I just ... I don't understand why she's hiding." I sighed. "And thank you for being honest, thank you for everything. Oh, Raine, what's Zheng going to think of all this?"

"Dunno. Wish she'd hurry up and come home though, she's missed all the fun." Raine took me gently by the shoulders and carried on drying me off. "Hey, she might be back after you sleep. We can talk more then, too. You just focus on that. Want me to carry you to bed?"

I shot her a look. "I'd rather you get me some clothes, please. However much I would love you to princess carry me to bed, I think

I'd expire if Evelyn saw that in the corridor."

Raine laughed and nodded. She let me go, stepping back toward the door.

"What are you going to do while I nap?" I asked her, with a sudden fishhook in the back of my throat.

Raine paused, as if considering lying by omission, then she shrugged. "Gonna try again with Sevens. Think she's in the laundry cupboard. I took this off your bedside table, here."

She pulled a piece of yellow fabric out of her pocket, a jagged torn edge from some larger garment.

"Remember this?" she said. "This was all me, all my knife. I wanna give it back to her. Symbolic gesture, to—"

Raine never got to finish her sentence. All at once the bathroom door crashed open, as if a large and overexcited dog had run headfirst into the wood. A familiar bunch of black tentacles shot inside and grabbed the door frame. Only that familiarity kept my yelp of surprise from turning into a scream. Whistle yipped and turned in a circle.

"Heath Heath!"

Tenny stood in the doorway looking extraordinarily proud of herself, fluffy antenna wiggling, tentacles going all over the place, hands flapping.

One group of tentacles had Sevens by the scruff of her neck.

The scrawny, bony, awkward girl looked like she'd been crouched on the other side of the door when Tenny had grabbed her. She hadn't even had time to start hissing and gurgling, let alone kicking and biting. Needle teeth exposed, red eyes dilated wide, she hung there in shock, hands up as if they'd been pressed against the door, head turned slightly. The very picture of a scuttling goblin.

"Evee's dropping! Drop! Drop!" Tenny exclaimed in flustered delight, shoving Sevens into the room.

"Eavesdropping," I corrected her gently, catching on instantly. "Thank you, Tenny. Thank you, but please be gentle. Please!"

"Am gentle," Tenny said with a smile. She gently encouraged Sevens further into the room. "Pounce gentle. Catch gentle. No

bruises!”

Sevens let out a “rrrrrrrr-rrrrr” noise in the back of her throat, looking very grumpy and scowling up at us, then round at Tenny, and even baring her teeth at Whistle, who backed up and let out a little “huff.”

“Ah,” Raine said, a teasing smile on her face. “Listening in, eh? Still trying to play like you’re off stage?”

“Eavesdropping,” I sighed.

“I only wanted to know!” Sevens rasped. “I’m sorry!”

“Well, you’re here now,” Raine said to her. “No time like the present. What do you think, Heather, what’s the punishment for eavesdropping around here?”

“Bath time?” I ventured.

Sevens’ eyes went wider. “No.”

“Vampires allergic to running water?” Raine asked. “Sensory processing issues with liquids? Don’t like being submerged? Anything else?”

“No, not that, but—”

“Then you are having a bath. Or a shower. Or roll in some sand, just get this mask clean,” Raine said. “Then you can cuddle with Heather, when you’re clean. Not before.”

Sevens bared her teeth and gurgled. Behind her, Tenny let out a trilling sound. Sevens flinched and stared at her.

“Or,” Raine said, “you can stay greasy and unwashed, and you and I can have a chat about relationships — without Heather, because she’ll be napping.”

“Bleeerggggh,” went Sevens, sticking her tongue out and dipping her head. “Bath tiiiiime ... ”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.5

In the end, we compromised; or perhaps Raine just sweet-talked us. Sevens bathed while I napped, and Raine promised not to corner her until I was awake.

Neither Raine nor I waited in the bathroom, though. We had no desire to invade Sevens' privacy. That scrawny, pale body was only a mask over the abyssal truth of Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, but to treat her as anything other than a full person would be a slippery slope indeed. So we drained the lukewarm bathwater, collected my yellow robe from the counter, and left Sevens to her own business. I led Tenny out by a tentacle, though Raine lingered a moment to ask if Sevens wanted us to leave Whistle behind.

"Not good with dogs," she said in her raspy voice. She made hesitant eye-contact with little Whistle. He snuffed. "They don't like me."

So Raine scooped Whistle up in her arms. But she turned back at the door. "My deepest apologies if this is a stupid question, oh princessy one—"

Sevens clacked her teeth with irritation. "Just ask."

"It's okay, Sevens," I spoke around the door frame. "Raine means well."

"Guurrrghhh ... "

"If you're all masks and costumes and onion layers," Raine said, "can't you just step into a cupboard and step out clean? Superman style? If you don't want a bath, why not skip the experience? For serious, I'm not taking the piss. Not trying to mock you or anything."

Sevens gazed back at Raine with eyes like chips of molten-cored obsidian, face tilted down to throw her eye sockets into shadow. Her lips parted and she blew a bubble with her own saliva. Then she huffed like a grumpy teenager.

“Would be cheating,” she said. “I’m here now.”

“Gotcha, say no more. Want me to run a fresh bath for you or—”

“I know how taps work,” Sevens snapped. She punctuated her complaint with a cut-off *gerrrrk* noise in the back of her throat, then turned and slapped at the taps. Water splashed into the tub. I was left with a lingering view of Sevens’ slender back through her dark tank-top, the individual vertebrae of her spine standing out as she hunched over the bath. As we retreated and Raine closed the bathroom door behind us, Sevens glanced back and met my exhausted gaze with black-on-red, for just a second, petulant and grumpy — but also pleading.

Raine waited at a polite distance from the bathroom door, until she was certain the splashing sounds indicated Sevens was properly in the tub, then she finally turned away to put me to bed.

Tenny was gently asked to go entertain herself or find Lozzie — “Because auntie Heather needs to sleep.” Whistle curled up like a giant French pastry at the foot of our bed. Raine got me out of my damp towel and into some clean pajamas, then used Evelyn’s blow dryer on my hair. It didn’t take much to coax me under the bed sheets, especially when Raine draped the yellow robes over the top of the covers. But when she sat down and brushed my hair away from my forehead, I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep.

“Of course you will,” Raine said. “It’s what your body needs. Just relax. You were nodding off in the bath easy enough.”

“I’m too buzzed,” I said with a fatalistic sigh. I reached out of the covers with my tentacle and curled it around a corner of Sevens’ yellow robes, feeling the strange metaphysical warmth flow into the pale flesh of my extra limb. “Despite how tired I am. There’s too much to think about, too much to do. There’s Sevens, and I need to know why Zheng isn’t home yet, and we need to speak to Badger but we can’t all visit him in the hospital, and ... Nicole? With the papers? ... and Evee’s ... mmm ... ”

Good Lady Hypnos claimed me without my knowledge, enfolding me in dreamless oblivion.

= =

My plan of *just a nap, just an hour or two* did not survive contact with that first sip of sleep; Raine was correct, my body knew what it

needed, and that was apparently eleven hours of lying very still. My powers of unstoppable napping consumed the rest of the morning, smothered the whole afternoon, and bit off a good chunk of the evening. Hazy periods of drifting consciousness came and went, submersed in cocooned comfort. I dimly recalled waking up to the rasping sound of Sevens' voice and Raine's whispered reply, "You woke her, shhhhh."

I must have sat up, because I felt like I'd been dragged from the rubble of a collapsed star. I recalled grumbling "More sleep," and flopping back down in bed. I recalled Raine's gentle hands tucking me back in.

I remembered stumbling to the toilet sometime later, my eyes closed against the afternoon sunlight pouring in through the windows. I recalled a firm grip helping me there and back. Raine's face filled my memory, her hands holding a glass of water.

"So you don't wake up with cotton-mouth," she'd said. I must have complained terribly, because a tiny whip-crack of command tinted her next words. "Come on Heather. Drink, then I'll let you sleep more."

"Sleep more," I remembered saying, but nothing after that.

= =

Sunset heralded true awareness.

An early summer sunset paying a premature visit to the last days of spring, turning the horizon the colour of old blood, drenching the underside of the clouds with a deep orange which dripped onto the city of Sharrowford beneath. Even the warm, womb-like darkness of my bedroom was not immune to the deluge. The mouth of the sunset furnace glowed through the curtain, teasing my eyes open. Half-awake, I gazed up at the sliver of orange sky visible in the gap between fabric and window frame.

I lay immobile for what felt like a very long time, though it was likely only a minute or two. I struggled to keep my eyes open, drawn to that sky, surrounded by the barely-visible shapes of familiar furniture and discarded clothes in the gloom all around.

My subconscious registered somebody else's breathing nearby. Not in the armchair, not by the desk, not out in the dark. Raine, right where she should be, next to me in bed.

Instinctively I burrowed back down into the bed sheets and rolled onto my side to snuggle against her. Hands reaching, tentacle questing, nose nuzzling for her neck.

A scent like iron, like blood on skin.

Unfamiliar body odour was not fully masked by soap — thin and hot, like strong black coffee. One of my hands bumped a bony shoulder.

I was suddenly very awake and very aware that I shared a bed with neither Raine or Zheng, nor anything else I recognised.

I was half-upright and pulling the covers after me, heart clenching like a fist, a hiss caught in my throat. But then the petite form in bed next to me, draped in thick shadows, brought last night rushing back.

“Oh,” I breathed at my own stupid panic. “Sevens.”

Tension drained away, though it left a slight adrenaline tremor in my hands and a heavy pulse in my tired skull. I leaned to the side so the hazy sunset glow would afford me a better view of Seven-Shades-of-Fast-Asleep.

Sevens was asleep on her back beneath the sheets, all sprawled out. One leg stuck out of the covers, one arm was thrown over her head, her hips and belly were twisted sideways, and her neck was kinked at a very uncomfortable looking angle. She once again demonstrated that the vampire mask had joints made of rubber and ball bearings. Her dark hair was no longer greasy and unkempt, but had emerged from the enforced bath time as a silken blanket, now spread out across the pillow and partially twisted beneath her strangely fragile body. She wore a loose white t-shirt several sizes too large for her, probably borrowed from Raine.

Her mouth hung open in sleep, a dark cave full of glittering needles.

I'd expected her to sleep curled up in a ball, perhaps even wrapped entirely in a duvet like some kind of burrowing animal who felt safest in tight spaces. Another assumption of mine which proved wrong. Her face with its small and delicate features, her sharp cheekbones and pinched nose, looked utterly relaxed. In sleep, she inhaled through her nose and snored ever so gently as she exhaled through her mouth.

The dying sunlight picked out the tracery of blue veins beneath her mushroom-pale skin. Was this safe for a vampire? She'd stuck her hand in direct sunlight earlier and hadn't burst into flame. She didn't start to smoke and hiss as I watched her sleep, so I put the notion from my mind.

Then I noticed the position of her other hand, close to me. Her fingers were long and grasping, and wrapped tight in the fabric of the yellow robes she'd gifted to me.

"Oh ... " I breathed, my smile turning painful. The robes seemed to catch and store the sunset which fell upon the fabric, turning the colour of molten honey.

I looked from the robe to Sevens. She was about my size, though scrawnier and smaller, but not by much. When awake, her eyes were like saucers, all black and red, absolutely not human. But if we were both plunged into darkness — and if she refrained from making noises like a cave lizard — then at a casual glance we might appear quite similar.

"... am I treating you as a surrogate too?" I whispered, then shook my head. "No. No, I'm ... attracted to you. That's not a Maisie thing. That's a you thing."

Sevens snorted in her sleep and I feared I'd woken her with something deeply embarrassing to both of us, but then she stirred and settled back into the soft breathing of deeper slumber.

I sighed and finished sitting up, careful not to drag the sheets off her.

Nobody else was in the room, neither Raine nor Whistle. A seed of worry tried to germinate in the back of my mind, but I reminded myself that it was evening, I'd been sleeping all day. I could hardly expect Raine to be there right away. No emergency seemed apparent — the house was quiet but not silent. A gentle murmur of voices floated up from the ground floor, barely audible through the solid construction of Number 12 Barnslo Drive. I could hear somebody moving around a few rooms away, perhaps in Evelyn's study, and the muffled sounds of a television talking to itself through the walls.

When I turned to the bedside table for the time — 09:15, my clock announced — I found a note.

Folded so it stood up like a pyramid, the note was placed with one corner tucked beneath my mobile phone, so I couldn't possibly miss it or knock it to the floor.

A spike of worry needled at my heart. My tentacle snatched up the note and conveyed it to my quivering hands. I almost hissed in frustration at the delay of unfolding the thing.

"Why is this practically origami? What's so important that—"

Pencil writing blossomed as I wrestled the note open.

If you wake up and need me, I'm downstairs! But keep sleeping if you need to. We saved you some dinner too, if you're hungry.

"Oh," I breathed. "Raine, don't scare me like that ... "

There was more.

Remember you haven't asked permission yet, so no shagging the vampire! But you can cuddle and kiss if you want, you get that for free.

Love you, xxx Raine~

I folded the note into quarters and briefly considered eating it to destroy the evidence — surely I could exert pneuma-somatic biology to fully digest paper without the risk of stomach problems? But then I shoved it away under the detritus on my bedside table. Deep orange sunset glow hid my blush.

"You can't be serious, Raine," I whispered into the gloom. "I never said I wanted to ... want to ... " I pulled my knees up beneath the covers and buried my face in them. "I do want to kiss her," I said in a shuddering breath. "I do. Oh, Heather, stop."

I didn't love Sevens, not yet. It would be unfair to toy with her emotions by expressing physical affection when I still didn't know where this was going. But we'd already come so close. My single tentacle was already drifting through the air toward one of her wrists, driven by a strange and unfamiliar desire to hold her there, hold her wrist down. I stopped the unconscious reaction and turned my head to gaze upon Sevens again, just as an experiment.

She was looking back up at me.

I froze — but Sevens' eyes were open only a crack, two slits of deeper black with sparks of red at their cores, like gemstones from the heart of a volcano. She didn't seem to have heard, held on the

razor's edge between sleep and consciousness.

But of course she'd heard, hadn't she? She wasn't actually *this* in front of me, was she? Her awareness extended beyond that, into the abyssal.

Didn't it?

Why take a bath? Because to skip it would be cheating.

I swallowed on a suddenly dry throat and raised my voice to just above a whisper. It came out hoarse and dry. "Sevens?"

"... mmmmmm," she grumbled, a tired and raspy noise.

Then, to the sound of my heart playing a trumpet blare, she stuck one awkward gangly arm out toward me.

I bit my lip, heart juddering, mouth gone totally dry. Raine had said it was okay and now Sevens was asking for it too. The instinctive ape in me wanted to cuddle up and go back to sleep with this packmate-friend-partner, but I retained enough higher functions to hold off for a few moments longer.

"Sevens, I ... I can't promise you anything, I don't—"

"Guurrrrr," she rasped, going pouty and petulant in the sunset glow. "Shut up and give me a hug. Please?" She finished by clicking her teeth together, *clack-clack*.

That cannonball went right through my curtain wall, hit my powder magazine, and blew me to pieces.

Before I could stop myself, I was giving Sevens exactly what she'd asked for. My tentacle snaked out and grabbed one of her wrists, pinning it to the pillow and drawing a confused "Maaah?" of sleepy complaint from her. A second tentacle sprouted from my flank beneath the blankets to join the first, powered by the most gentle flicker of my bioreactor. I ran that up behind her, along the stringy muscles of her slender back, to press her in close and cradle her against my front. I was snuggling back down in bed, hands gently touching her shoulders through her t-shirt. *Keep it chaste for now, Heather, come on*, I willed myself — but then I leaned in close and planted a soft kiss on her cheek.

She tasted of soap with a hint of iron.

"Heatherrrrr," she half-complained, half-exalted me, snuggling into

my hug in return. I gasped in something akin to awe.

My goodness, she was so slight and bony, there was so little of her. It was like cradling a bird whose bones were at risk of shattering if you pressed too tight. I was gentle, so very gentle, but I wanted to squeeze her and make her squeak — though I also struggled with a strange desire to march her downstairs and make her a lot of food. I was blushing from the unexpected kiss, asking myself why I'd done that, wondering what the hell I was doing as I held Sevens close. She nuzzled in deeper, pressing against my shoulder, giving herself to me. I took a shuddering breath, reminded myself that Raine had given me permission for this, and began to lean in to kiss her cheek again. Just her cheek, I told myself.

And that's when I felt her jaw hinge wide.

Dozens of very sharp teeth pressed their needle-prick pressure against my exposed throat.

Oh right, I thought to myself, oddly calm. *Vampire.*

Seven-Shades-of-Exsanguination did not bite down right away. She clung to me, strong fingers gripping the back of my pajama top, her legs entangled with mine, holding us locked together in the moment before the bloody joining of mouth to artery. I felt the hot tickle of her breath against my skin and the faint tremor in her limbs.

I should have sprouted all six of my tentacles and peeled her off me like a leech. I should have speed-grown armour plating over my throat to turn away her fangs. I should have said *down, bad girl!*

But I'd already established who was in charge here; this changed nothing.

I sighed with deep release I hadn't known I'd needed. Almost without thought, one of my hands ran up Sevens' back, slow and gentle, then cupped the back of her head where skull met spine, pressing her against me. The tentacle I'd been using to hug her crept upward too, wrapping around her neck, like holding the muzzle of a feeding calf. I tilted my head back to expose more throat, eyes fluttering shut as a tiny part of my mind screamed *why are you enjoying this?!*

"Go ahead," I murmured. "If you need it."

And I meant it. God help me, I meant it for real. I would have let

her bite down.

Well, it's not as if I couldn't have patched the hole with pneumasomatic tissue. I wonder if Sevens would have classed that as 'cheating'?

Sevens froze for a long moment — even her excited, nervous vibration stopped, going cold in my arms. Then I felt the pinpricks of her needle-teeth leave my throat. She let out a weird little “Guuurrrgh,” noise and scooted back from me, pulling as far away as she could without actually leaving the hug. Her eyes avoided mine, staring down at the covers. The dim sunset glow almost hid her awkward blush.

“Sevens?”

“... I was j-joking,” she rasped through those sharp little clenched teeth, then managed to meet my eyes with a blushing frown. “Why'd you have to make it weird?”

I laughed, couldn't help myself. “You were quite welcome to go ahead, if you needed to. I wouldn't have minded.” I put a hand to my throat where her teeth had touched, but it came away clean. She hadn't even broken the skin.

“Mmmmm-rrrrrr ...” she rasped with obvious embarrassment, scooting further back in the bed.

She didn't reject the hug entirely. One of her hands lingered for the touch of my own, but I sensed she did need the physical space, so I let her go. She sat up, coiled in the blankets like a ferret in a burrow. I followed suit so we were eye to eye. Two small animals sitting opposite each other in the dying sun, both of us mere physical fronts for unspeakable and unknowable invisible truths. Sevens sniffed and rubbed at her nose, watching me with a cautious look. The t-shirt was so large on her it looked silly, like a tent. I let my two tentacles coil about myself for comfort, rubbing my bruised sides — all that hard work last night had left a mark, even if I was mostly used to it by now. Flinging myself across the kitchen to save the Knight with a Slip had strained more than a few muscles.

“Do you need blood?” I asked. “Are you really a vampire? I mean, in this mask, right now?”

Sevens slowly blinked one eye closed, then the other, then opened both. “It's what this mask believed. She drank blood. Sometimes.”

“Who was she?”

Seven-Shades-of-Suddenly-Shy averted her eyes and fidgeted in her coiled blanket nest, hunching her shoulders and ducking her head, a prelude to hiding away. She hissed through bared teeth.

I reached out with a tentacle and took firm but gentle hold of her chin and cheek, arresting her retreat. I was only half-aware of what I was doing, still groggy and running mostly on instinct, but this made my heart pound against the inside of my ribs.

“Gu-uhh!” Sevens gurgled. Her eyes shot up, blinking rapidly.

“... sorry,” I said, throat gone tight. “I just ... why her? Why this mask? I know there’s no real you, no real mask. I accept that, totally. But I would love to know more about you. Why this mask? Why is this one comfortable for you?”

Sevens made a grumble in her throat and leaned into my tentacle for a second, then gently moved away. Dominance reinforced. She looked down at her own slender, bony arms and flexed her wiry fingers before she spoke.

“She was the first one I ever guided to happiness with another woman,” Sevens said slowly, voice a gentle creak of raspy vocal chords.

Her words held a strange melancholy I couldn’t quite place. Memory, I supposed.

“Oh,” I sighed. “Oh, Sevens.”

She shrugged. “So she’s kind of like the last time I redefined myself? We’re all just stories in the end, right? So here’s one that made me.” She made a claw of her fingers in front of her face, mock-menacing at me, but the toothy grin she pulled was one hundred percent fake. She couldn’t even convince herself.

“Sevens, are you all right?”

She let the hand fall to the sheets again. “I’m ... I don’t know. It’s been a long time since I did this.”

“Redefined yourself?”

She nodded, chewing her bottom lip and looking out at the sunset. “And it’s scary. Self-critique hurts. You realise all the things you’ve been getting wrong.”

"You've been doing pretty well so far, I think."

Her eyes wandered back to me, slow and sad and not really convinced. "This mask," she said. "Do you want to hear the story?"

"Yes!" I almost yelped. "Yes, please, Sevens, I want to know about you. Please."

"Mmmmm," she grumbled. "Well, her name was Julija. Don't call me that though, I'm not her." Sevens frowned. I nodded seriously and she carried on. "She was born to a very, very rich family. The sort of family who lived in a castle. But she was also very, very sick. Born wrong. Something eating her inside, maybe, something in her heart or her brain. They didn't have the kind of medical technology you have these days, so they couldn't fix her, no matter the herbs they stuffed in her mouth or the leeches they put on her skin. But her family were rich and they lived in a part of the world where money could buy anything. So they bought a way out for their daughter, before her body finished running down."

"They made her into a vampire?"

Sevens shrugged, bony shoulders lopsided beneath her nest of blankets. "They didn't know what they were buying. They didn't know the full price. They hired a mysterious gentleman of great renown, who came with a big glass vial of stolen blood from something of which he would not speak. He encased their daughter in magic circles and a coffin of lead. Then he killed her, then brought her back, then killed her again with a stake through the heart, then left the corpse in a bath filled with the blood of a freshly slaughtered bull. When he left, her parents waited the two full days as they were instructed. They didn't disturb the corpse. They did love their daughter, but they couldn't deal with what she was when she woke up."

As Sevens spoke and warmed to her tale, she visibly relaxed, no longer avoiding my eyes but locking to them with an almost hypnotic intensity. Her voice became a barbed lure, dragging one's thoughts onward through the past.

"She was like an animal. Hated sunlight, water, loud noises, rough clothes against her skin, wrong tastes. All sorts of things. Attacked the servants, the walls, the floor. Went around naked, barking and growling. But her parents loved her, so they did everything they could, tried to make her comfortable, made a secluded haven for

her to rave and scream as much as she needed. But as the years went by, her parents aged. She didn't. She got these weird eyes. She grew strong but not older. And she grew these." Sevens flashed her needle-pointed teeth and clacked them together.

"Poor thing," I murmured.

"Mmm. It was a hundred years later when I turned up."

I blinked. "A century?"

"Mmhmm. The parents were long dead. Julija was a family myth, a thing living in the castle cellars and inside the walls. She ate rats and mice, mostly, drained them and left the corpses lying around. Sometimes they'd be found, add to the myth. But it wasn't enough, you know?" Sevens placed an index fingertip against the side of her skull and twisted it back and forth.

"Not enough blood?"

"Not enough to make her brain work again."

"Oh. Oh, I see!"

Sevens sighed, a wet rasp. "I was there for the father, actually. The current head of the household, I mean, not Julija's father, he'd been a good man. I was ... not quite following in my own father's footsteps, but I did ... things." Sevens dipped her head, suddenly awkward again.

"Grand Guignol?" I echoed the words Melancholy had spoken back on the road to the King's palace in Carcosa. "A bit of the old ultraviolence?"

Sevens' red-chipped eyes darted back to me. The corners of her mouth spiked up with an evil little smile, a kind I had never seen before on her face, this mask or any other. Her voice emerged with a quivering tremor of nervous excitement.

"Family tragedy was in the making. They were all going to die, him last. A play for hubris and pride. There was going to be this big ending where his son was going to eat his father's own ... " Sevens trailed off, baring her teeth in a weird little hiss, curling her head left and right and avoiding my eyes.

"It's okay," I said, not quite sure if it was okay at all. I had to remind myself briefly what Sevens really was.

"I don't do that anymore," she rasped low, head hanging. "I'm not my father."

I coiled a tentacle around one of her small hands. "I know. I accept that."

"I do worse now though," she said in a tiny hiss. "Don't I?"

"I'm sorry?"

Suddenly she shook her head, like a dog shaking off water. She sat up again, gazing at me. "I was there for mister patriarch, but then I discovered Julija. And she'd discovered the family's daughter."

"Ahhhhhhhhh."

"Ah indeed," Sevens rasped — and smiled again. A real smile this time, a little hitching flicker that showed her teeth and made her eyes bright with joy. "And that changed everything. The daughter, her name was Hana. She was nineteen that year, and they were going to marry her off to her own cousin. Twenty years older than her! At first I wanted to work that into the play, but then ... then ... Julija kept sneaking into her bedroom to watch her sleep. Hana knew it was happening, but she wasn't afraid, she was fascinated. In rapture of the dark. And I saw it happen, and I saw that they could be more. More! And I wanted ... wanted ..."

Sevens swallowed on a thickening throat. She sniffed hard and wiped her eyes on the back of one hand. Even for an Outsider, the power of memory was a sight to behold.

"It's okay, take your time," I murmured, cradling her hand in the end of my tentacle. I wanted to lean over and hug her, but I didn't dare risk interruption.

"I wanted to write them a happy ending," Sevens said. "Or at least a glorious one, if they couldn't have happy. Out with a bloody bang. Not just a side-note in somebody else's story. Not just the daughter in a play. A protagonist."

I nodded, feeling her passion. "Absolutely."

"So I changed the play. I rewrote the script as I went. I ... nudged them in the right direction."

Sevens said that as if it was a terrible thing to do, a mistake, a violation. She gritted her teeth and looked off into the gathering

dark as the sunset deepened.

“... the right direction?” I prompted, afraid of where this was going. Her first failure? But she’d said she’d guided the vampire to happiness.

But happiness for how long? At what cost?

And what definition of happiness?

“I ... I shouldn’t be ...” she murmured under her breath, then swallowed hard and visibly pulled herself together. “I nudged them together until Hana offered Julija her wrist one night. It was ... I’d never ... I’d never cried before. I’d never been interested in that side of human emotions. But I watched Julija drink human blood for the first time, and her mind came back, and they were so in love. And I wanted to make more of that.”

I nodded along. “That’s very admirable.”

“Three months later I had them out of the castle, out from under the family, free. Free forever.”

Sevens smiled at this, but shaking and uncertain. I sighed with relief. “That’s a good thing, you did a good thing! Sevens, you helped people.”

“Then I put on another play, once they were free. A totally different genre. I had redefined everything I was, everything I could do, where all my limits were, but I had one last bloody pantomime left in me.” She broke into a grin — a predator’s grin, the beautiful rapture of razor-sharp edges and blood-stained claws. Her voice shook with murderous joy as she raced on. “I stayed there for another two months, picking off the rest of the family one by one, for all they’d done to their daughter. I wore this mask and I ate them alive. The betrothed, the cousin, he I left for last. So none of them would ever go after the girls I’d helped.”

“Well, Sevens, I can’t say for sure I would have done any differently, I think. I probably wouldn’t have eaten them though.”

“Guuurrrh-urk. Well, yes. But that was a previous me. The last dregs. And now I’m changing again because I was still wrong but I don’t know where it leads.”

I leaned forward on the bed and drew Seven-Shades-of-Unstable-Self into another hug. Gently, slowly, I wound my arms around her

back and a tentacle around her waist. She clung to me in return, burying her face in my shoulder. This time she did bite — but gently, chewing on my collarbone without breaking skin or fabric.

“Let’s make sure it leads somewhere together,” I said.

“Mmmmm,” Sevens grumbled. We disentangled again and sat back on the bed. Her free hand found a corner of the yellow robes, which were spread out over the top of the covers. “What if I’m not worthy of it?”

I tilted my head. “Why wouldn’t you be worthy?”

She shrugged, but I sensed a lie in the gesture. “Marriage?”

“Um ... I don’t know about that,” I said, trying to stay honest. “You heard what Raine said, too.”

“Mmmm,” she rasped, but this time it was faintly amused, coupled with a grumpy twist of her lips. “She has first dibs on you. Figures.”

I laughed softly. “That’s Raine for you.”

Sevens hissed through her teeth. “I didn’t mean to *propose* in the first place. Do I have to go over it all again? It’s okay if we don’t, I won’t be hurt, I just want ... you know.”

The laugh bubbled past my lips. “You’re so ... deliciously grumpy in this mask, Sevens.”

“Guuuurgh,” she croaked, averting her eyes.

“So what happened to Hana and Julija in the end?” I asked.

“Hana became a vampire too,” said Sevens. “Touch and go, almost died, but she made it. As far as I know, they might still be out there. Maybe. I lost track.”

“Hmmmm. You should talk to Zheng about vampires sometime.”

Sevens’ eyes went wide, glistening black orbs in the dusken glow. “Zheng? Oh no.”

“She’s not going to threaten you,” I said. “Or, she better not.”

“She might not like any of this ... ”

“She loves me, but it’s not like that, she won’t be possessive. I think. That’s just something we need to all sit down and discuss like

adults. Isn't it?"

"Mmmmmm. Suppose. You haven't fucked though."

I blinked in mute shock, a wordless sound croaking from my throat. "I ... um ... well, no? Sevens, we don't need to. I don't think we ever needed to. Maybe I'll kiss her on the cheek sometimes, or get in her lap, but ... I don't need her to *fuck* me." I echoed Sevens' exact choice of word with delicate and precise pronunciation, but still had to clear my throat afterward, feeling like I wasn't supposed to say that. "That's what I do with Raine. You must know that. I don't need it. And she doesn't seem to need it either?"

"And what if that changes? Hmm? What then? Does your polyamory explode in your face?"

"... no. We just ... talk about it. Like adults."

"Pfffffft," Sevens snorted. "Passion is better than rationality." Then she seemed to deflate, curling in on herself, finally completing the retreat I'd halted earlier. She ducked her head under the covers and assumed the aspect of a fully-wrapped blanket-blob. Only her eyes remained visible, peering out through a slit in the covers. "Or so I thought," she gurgled, muffled and indistinct. "Wrong about everything. Wrong wrong wrong."

"Sevens?" I almost laughed, but the tone of her voice held real self-recrimination. She spoke from the bottom of a deep, dark pit. I reached toward her. "What's wrong?"

"Nnnnnnnnn." She shrank from my questing touch. "Sorry. This mask wants to hide from difficult things. I can ... change? If you want?"

"No, no, it's okay. What I want shouldn't determine your self." I sighed and sat back, frowning as I tried to figure out what I was dealing with here. "Sevens, why do you love me?"

She answered without hesitation. "Because you're breaking all the rules."

"The rules?"

"You're facing down an alien god-thing to get back somebody you love. And you'll probably die trying. But you're gonna do it anyway."

“Die?” My chest tightened. Hadn’t Sevens told me that I had all the tools to achieve victory against the Eye? She’d been cryptic and obtuse, certainly, but not fatalistic, not like this. I hadn’t fully believed her advice that somehow lesbian romance was the key to victory — or believed she knew what she was talking about — but she’d seemed so certain, unwavering, concrete in her judgement. From that to this left me shocked. “I— I mean, I know my chances aren’t great, but—”

Sevens exploded from her blanket-ball in a flurry of whirling limbs and gnashing teeth, casting off the sheets and bouncing up to her feet on the bed. She stepped back and fell off the side of the mattress, crashing to the floor in a heap of limbs, then scrambled upright back into the sunset glow like a true vampire bursting from a coffin of shadows.

And then Seven-Shades-of-Shaky-Bloodsucker was gone. In her place stood the Princess Mask.

Chin high, eyes calm and cold and bright in the orange dusk, hands clasped behind her back. Her straight-cut blonde hair was a dishevelled mess from sleep, sticking up in the rear and tangled at one side, but her dignity somehow transformed this into a badge of honour.

Except, she was still wearing Raine’s oversized white t-shirt. And nothing else.

My eyes felt like they were going to pop out of my skull. I put a hand to my gaping mouth. The Princess Mask had looked so smart and sharp in her yellow skirt and crisp blouse with her subtle curves standing out, but this was on another level entirely. The t-shirt hung down, a size too large, terminating around the flare of her hips. Somehow being reduced to only a t-shirt made her seem sharper, more disciplined, hard and unyielding.

Her next words were a bucket of ice cubes poured over my head.

“I do not wish to discuss or consider the prospect of your death,” she said, soft and precise. “I love you, and I will work to avoid this outcome, but I am emotionally exhausted and flagellating myself for my litany of mistakes.”

“S-Sevens you didn’t have to—” I stammered, but she rode right on over me.

“So, right now, Heather,” her voice grew husky, “stop.”

She took two precise steps toward the bed, then mounted the mattress on all fours, crawling toward me, t-shirt hanging down, eyes locked with me. I felt myself backing away, stammering, trying to squeeze out a word or two.

“Sevens— I— *hic*.”

She reached me, expressionless ice-cold face filling my vision. “I do not wish to expound upon your many qualities, your death-defying willpower, your leadership and your fortitude, your overflowing love for those you consider yours — I only wish to share in it.”

“Sevens, you’re— you’re very close, you—”

The Yellow Princess transfixed me with a look, then leaned in to plant two quick kisses on me — on my cheek and my brow. Like how Raine so often did. Brief and warm.

I was frozen to the spot.

“Stop,” she purred. “I am exhausted, though I do not show it as you do.”

“O-of course, but—”

She finally leaned back from me, kneeling on the bed sheets. “We can discuss death — little or otherwise — some other time.”

I scowled at her through my incandescent blush, struggling to catch my breath. “Don’t you start going all Raine on me, Sevens! She uses ... she *used* sex to distract from emotional issues all the time. Don’t do that. I don’t want to go through the same thing all over again.”

“I’m not distracting from the issue,” said the Daughter of the Yellow Court. “I am being honest. I am emotionally exhausted and processing the faults of my most recent self-redefinition. Allow me space, even if I am wearing the face of a teeny-tiny babby goblin who makes noises like a drainpipe.”

Sevens managed to say those words with a completely straight face.

“All right,” I replied, clearing my throat. “I understand, I think. Or if I don’t, then at least I can give you what you need. I hope.”

The Yellow Princess nodded once with cold yet attentive grace, a bow of her head and a closing of her eyes — and then she was

replaced with Seven-Shades-of-Shivering-Goblin once again.

“Brrrrrrr,” she rasped, blinking those black-red eyes. “Can we go get some food? I’m hungry.”

“Me too.” I smiled for her, took her clammy little hand in mine, and we climbed off the bed together.

For a moment we just stood in the cool darkness of my bedroom, side-lit by the dying sun, looking into each other’s eyes as we held hands. *I don’t love her*, I reminded myself.

But I think I could do, if I wanted to.

I looked Sevens up and down with a sigh, trying to clear my mind. “Maybe you should wear more than just a t-shirt. Aren’t you cold?”

She shook her head. “Got pants on.”

“You have? Raine’s too, I suppose.” I blinked, then held up a hand. “Wait, no. No need to show me.”

Sevens pulled a toothy grin, hissing a little *huh-huh* laugh through her teeth.

“What about the robes?” I looked back to where the thick yellow robes lay on the bed, still spread out across the covers. I reached over and dragged them toward us, lifting the fabric to my nose on a whim, to take a deep sniff. Sunlight and gold, honey and butter — all faint suggestions in the vault of memory.

“It’s done its job,” Sevens rasped. “Just a symbol now.”

“Symbols are important. Isn’t this a part of you? Do you need me to wear it? I will. It did protect me. You protected me.”

“Mmmmmmmmm ... needs to be more convenient. I can do that. But let me think.”

“Do you need me to wear it now, though?” I repeated.

Sevens pouted and shook her head. “No. Need you to keep it safe.” To my surprise, she reached out and pressed three fingertips to my chest, just over my heart. “Get it?”

I nodded, speechless at the gesture. Then I dragged the robes off the bed and draped the garment over Sevens’ own shoulders.

The yellow waves engulfed her like a waterfall, massive on her tiny

frame. She let out a little gurgle-squeak of surprise and for a second I thought she was going to wriggle right back out of the robes, but then she grabbed the sides and drew them closed, huddling down inside the enclosing warmth. She peered at me with scepticism in the quirk of her eyebrows.

“But this is yours,” she said. “I gave it to you.”

“What’s mine is safe with you,” I said. “I can’t peel off part of myself, so the symbol will have to do.”

Sevens made a little gurgle and looked down, points of colour blossoming in her cheeks. She wormed a hand out of the robes and stuck it out toward me, awkward and blunt, fingers grasping. I slipped mine into hers and squeezed gently.

“Let’s go find some food,” I said.

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We slipped out into the welcoming darkness of the upstairs hallway, hand-in-hand. The house was deep in the clutches of dusk. Heavy shadows filled the open spaces of corridor and door frame, and turned the head of the stairs into a phantom of shades. Sunset poured in through the window and painted a smear of slanted orange against one wall. A line of faint artificial light showed beneath the door to Evelyn’s study, and I could hear television or perhaps video game noises from Lozzie’s room, but the unmistakable murmur of voices in the kitchen drew me toward the stairs — as did the liquid grumble of my empty stomach.

Sevens walked on her tiptoes, stalking like a predator on high-alert, muffled only slightly by the gentle dragging of the yellow robes across the floorboards. I almost giggled at the sight — she was so small inside the robes, totally swamped, a tiny thing wrapped in layers of safety. Like me in this house.

On a whim I paused at the window to look out at the sunset again.

It was more beautiful than anything Outside. At least, I hoped it was. The deep orange light turned the underside of the sky into a banked fire, framed by the backdrop of the distant horizon like a wall of slow-burning flame. Long shadows stretched from every house, wall, fence, and lamppost, etching canyons of darkness across the visible sliver of road and pavement and gardens.

Pneuma-somatic life cavorted in the sunset. Two houses down, a sort of praying mantis stood on the roof, studded with shiny patches like metal plates, sunning itself in the orange glow. In the next garden across, a trio of giant mushrooms swayed gently to a song none could hear. As I watched they stood up on dozens of tiny legs and relocated to stay out of the lengthening shadows. In the street, a thing like a cross between an anteater and crocodile was rolling on its back, huge jaws opening and closing on empty air. Strange birds made of crystal and smoke clustered around it, pecking at its hide to remove unseen parasites. At the end of the road stood a twelve-foot figure like a polar bear half-melted and steaming with toxic green gasses.

I sighed with delight, then blinked in surprise. I never would have imagined feeling safe and normal at the sight of my *hallucinations*. But they were Earthly as much as I was, not Outsiders. They were meant to be here.

I tore myself away from the world and led Sevens downstairs. She took the steps one by one with little hopping footsteps, with the robes dragging behind her.

The lights were off in the front room, but the kitchen glowed against the oncoming night. As we approached, I recognised the sound of Raine's voice, low and firm.

"—this part you've got down just fine," she was saying. "Look, you've done it with your eyes closed. Let's move on."

My heart climbed up my throat. Her tone was unmistakable: desperate reassurance.

"Raine?!" I spoke her name out loud, almost in a sudden panic as Sevens and I pattered around the corner.

Two faces looked up from the kitchen table. Raine, suddenly brightening into a grin at the sight of me — and, to my surprise, sitting close by her side, was Twil.

Our friendly neighbourhood werewolf was not doing well. Her unmatched, almost porcelain beauty was marred by a deep frown on her delicate features. She had the faintest bags under her eyes, face lined with the signs of short-term chronic stress. Her long curly dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, which I'd never seen her do before, and she'd shed her habitual blue-and-lime coat, reduced

down to a black long sleeved t-shirt with ragged holes in the ends of the sleeves, one of which she was in the process of worrying wider with her front teeth. She sat hunched in the chair, one leg wiggling back and forth with nervous energy.

“Hey, Heather, you’re up!” Raine said. “Sevens,” she added with a nod.

“Oh, uh, hey,” Twil said, spitting out the end of her own sleeve and trying on a forced smile.

“Oh goodness,” I blurted out, eyes wide. “What’s- what’s happened? I don’t ... oh.”

A pair of textbooks lay open on the table, showing complicated biological diagrams surrounded by dizzying notes and information boxes. The books were flanked by well-organised sheaves of notes, complete with colour-coded tabs inserted for easy browsing. A large format notebook sat in front of Twil and a chewed pencil bounced between two of her fingers with nervous impatience.

“Oh,” I repeated. “Exams. Right.”

“Revision crisis,” Raine said with a wink and a cluck of her tongue.

“It’s not a bloody crisis, okay?” Twil said with a sidelong glance at Raine. “I just need somebody to bounce off. Hey Heather.” She did a little upward-tilting nod for me. “Sorry for like, monopolising your girlfriend. S’just she’s good at this, you know?”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head, heart rate still dialling down. “It’s fine. Best of luck, really. You deserve it. When’s the, um—”

“Final exam’s two days from now,” Twil said too quickly, then swallowed and tired to smile again. “Thanks.”

Raine raised her eyebrows at me. “Twil’s gonna be juuuuust fine. She’s freaking out over nothing, she doesn’t even need me, she knows this stuff inside out and backwards. I’m just doing moral support, really. You sleep well, Heather? Hungry?”

“Um ... fine. I’m fine. Twil?”

Twil was staring past me with all the intensity of a pointer dog, at the shivering, yellow-clad blob who was peering over my shoulder with eyes the colour of a bonfire in the dark. Sevens let out a low “Gurgh,” at the attention. Her hand had gone extra clammy in

mine.

“Uh, yeah.” Twil cleared her throat and managed to look at me instead. “Heard you had kind of an adventure.”

“That is putting it lightly,” I sighed.

“Is that ... ?” Twil asked Raine as she thumbed at me and Sevens. Raine nodded.

“*She* is Sevens-Shades-of-Sunlight,” I said a little too hard. “And yes, I had an adventure and brought back a girl who is actually an Outsider godling. Which sounds absurd, I know.” I sighed. “But then my life is just one long litany of absurd happenings, I’ve sort of gotten used to it.”

Twil cleared her throat awkwardly. “Soz. Didn’t mean like anything by that.”

“Sevens, Twil. Twil, Sevens,” I said. “But you’ve already met, technically.”

“Yeah, cool,” Twil said, and did not sound cool at all.

Sevens just gurgled.

“Heather, how you holding up?” Raine asked, rising from her seat and rolling her shoulders to work out the kinks. She nodded at the fridge. “You want some food? We made vegetable curry, saved some for you.”

“*We*?” Twil asked.

“Okay, Praem made vegetable curry.”

“I helped!” Twil said, voice rising by two octaves.

“You chopped some carrots.”

“That classifies as helping. Fuck you.”

Raine laughed and spread her hands in mock defeat.

“I would, uh, love some food actually,” I said, but then nodded at the table. “Am I going to be interrupting? I don’t want to distract.”

Twil grinned and leaned back in her chair, finally relaxing by an inch. “S’not a problem. S’your house, after all.”

“Yeah, come on,” Raine said, going for the fridge. “Sit down and

have some food. You too, Sevens.”

“Guuurrrr.”

“But hey,” Twil went on, as if she’d just remembered something. “Evee did say that Heather and Sevensy here should go talk to ... her ... about ... um?”

Twil trailed off as Raine slowly turned back to her. A look of resigned disappointment peeked through Raine’s smile.

“Raine?” I perked up.

“Was I like, not supposed to say that?” Twil asked, eyes flicking from Raine to me. “Oh shit.”

“It’s fine,” Raine sighed. “Just thought you might have more sense.”

“Well sorry.” Twil huffed, rounding her shoulders. “Should probably spell it out for me in future.”

“Raine, what is this?” I asked. “Were you trying to keep something from me?”

Raine shook her head. “Just until you’d eaten. Would’a been nice to sit with you, that’s all. Here, I’ll get you some curry and warm it up. But yeah, Evee wanted to talk to you as soon as you’re out of bed and mentally coherent.”

“About what?”

“Rrrrrrrrrrr,” went Sevens over my shoulder.

Raine shot her a wink. “About our little yellow friend here.”

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We found Evelyn exactly where Raine said she would be — upstairs in the study, ensconced in her ancient wooden desk chair before a pile of books, scribbling away at something on the desk.

“Come in, I won’t bite,” she called through the door when I knocked.

I had to perform a complex balancing act in the dark, with a lukewarm bowl of curry in one hand and the door handle in the other; Sevens was attached to my pajamas by both hands like a limpet, as she had been the entire time Raine had been heating up the food, and then all the way back up the stairs too, forcing us to

shuffle along lest we trip over each other's feet.

"It's only Eevee," I'd whispered.

"Gurrrr. She wants me gone."

"I doubt it. Sevens, relax, please, I can't get up the stairs like this."

But Sevens wouldn't let go, as if afraid of being pulled away from me.

It was only when I huffed with frustration that I realised my pair of tentacles was already nudging the study door for me, opening it on the soft, warm glow of Evelyn's desk lamp. The study yawned wide, a nook of light nestled deeper in the enclosing darkness of the house, welcoming me with the scent of old books.

Evelyn looked up as we entered, turning in her wooden desk chair, eyes greeting me with soft recognition.

"Heather. Evening. You slept?" she asked.

"Uh, yes, not badly either, thank you. More to the point, Eevee, did you sleep?"

Evelyn looked both better and worse than when I'd seen her that morning. She'd changed her clothes and was now wearing a comfy looking purple sweater and a long floral-pattern skirt, quite bright and frivolous by her standards. Her hair was pinned up in a loose bun, the sort of thing she did while working on a difficult problem. Her eyes were still tired but not as dark as earlier, and her expression held far less stress in the lines of her face.

She had an oddly contemplative look about her in the moment she considered my question, akin to the inquisitive, cold curiosity that she had so obviously inherited from her mother, but softened by self-conscious reflection.

What really surprised me was her prosthetic leg. She'd removed it.

The short tower of matte black carbon fibre stood by the corner of the desk, easily within her reach, the knee locked in place. The outline of her stump was clearly visible beneath her skirt.

A couple of large spiral-bound notebooks sat on the desk behind her, along with an old book open down the middle. Not a magical tome, just regular print on paper old enough to start turning brown.

Her bone wand lay across her lap, the densely scrimshawed symbols enough to make my eyes water if I looked too closely.

The smell of old books filled the air, a familiar and enticing comfort, but I didn't get to spend much time up here in the study, at least not with other people. I came in here often enough to browse Evelyn's collection of regular, normal, ordinary books, stacked to the ceiling in their cases which lined the walls, but there was only one decent chair and step-stool. It wasn't really set up for relaxation. The room faced the wrong direction to catch the sunset this late, so the gloaming of Sharrowford was visible through the small window only as a blank darkness.

"Evee?" I prompted when that contemplative look didn't leave her face.

She drew in a deep breath and let out a sigh. "Yes. Thank you. Yes, I slept, some. I think Praem would have tied me to the bed if I hadn't at least tried."

"Mmm-huh," Sevens laughed at my shoulder, snorting with nerves.

"Are you ... all right?" I asked. "You look ... um ... thoughtful."

"I'm not even working, really," Evelyn went on with a sigh, waving at the notebooks on the desk. "Just reading for university. Classics does require some work, occasionally, even for somebody fully fluent. Have to do a spot of history here and there. Though all I've learnt in two years is that the entire Roman senate should have been shot. Huh." She gave a humourless laugh, then frowned at us. "Do you want to sit down? Don't stand there with that food."

"Evee," I sighed too. "What is this about?"

Her frown deepened. "What is what about?"

"Um."

"Oh for— Raine and Twil told you to come up here?"

"Yes?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, it wasn't something I needed right away. What did Twil even say? For fuck's sake, they could have let you sit down and eat!" She spat the words out, quite outraged on my behalf. "It's hardly important. It's not as if we could do anything about it anyway."

And at that, she looked very pointedly at Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

“Well,” I said, spooning a mouthful of vegetable curry toward my mouth with slow resign. “I’m here now. We’re here now.”

Evelyn huffed and drew her hand over her face. “All right. All right, I’ll get this over with, I suppose. I’ve been thinking. All afternoon. About you.” She nodded at Sevens.

“Mmmmmm. Me,” Sevens rasped.

Evelyn tilted her head up and turned her chair so she was facing us straight-on. She put both hands on her bone-wand.

“Evee-” I started, heart climbing into my mouth as I swallowed in a hurry. Lukewarm vegetable mush squeezed down my throat. Both of my tentacles instinctively moved to shield Sevens.

“S’okay,” Sevens grunted.

“I have a question,” Evelyn said, strangely formal. “Make that two questions. More, depending.”

“Get on with it,” Sevens rasped.

“How much are you going to direct us?” Evelyn asked, without hint of bitterness or guile. “How much of a hand do you have over anything we do or experience? And what’s to stop you deciding that our ‘story’ would be better served by a successful attack on my house? Or by removing one of us like a side character with a tragic death? What’s to stop you fucking with me?” Evelyn paused, then added in a rush, as if embarrassed: “With us, I mean.”

Sevens seemed to shrink, gaze falling to the floor, shoulders hunching inside the yellow robes. I grabbed her hand with one of my tentacles but she wriggled free.

“Evee,” I protested. “She’s not like that. I told you, she left the stage, or ... joined us on it?” I glanced at Sevens, but she looked wretched all of a sudden, grimacing in sorrow down at her own feet.

“It’s an honest question,” Evelyn said. “If she says no, that she won’t do any of that, then fine.”

“Fine?” I boggled at Evelyn. “That’s not ... like you?”

Evelyn shrugged. “As I said, I wouldn’t be able to do anything about

it anyway.” Evelyn picked up the bone wand and pointed it at Sevens. “She is an outside context problem — ha!” She barked at her little joke. “An *outside* context problem — pun very much intended — for my skills, what magic I know. If she wants to ruin us for the sake of drama, I doubt there’s much I could do.” Evelyn frowned. “Though you could probably intervene, Heather. Or maybe Lozzie could. Or Twil’s dubious ‘god’, or—”

“I caaaaaan’t,” Sevens rasped through clenched teeth. She enunciated the end of the word so hard it warped into a spat *tuh*.

We both paused at that. At the frustration in her voice.

“Can’t, or won’t?” Evelyn asked.

“Sevens?” I tried to duck my head to peer at her face. “Are you okay?”

“I didn’t want to talk about this!” she whined. “I can’t direct anything!” Her voice cracked and broke as she spoke, as she curled up inside the yellow robes. “I was wrong. Completely wrong. Don’t you get it?” She glanced at me for a second, black-red eyes brimming with tears, then flicked her head away to scrub her face on the yellow robes.

Without warning, she suddenly collapsed. For a heartbeat I thought she’d transitioned into another mask, something unexpected — but with a thump-a-thump of bony backside and knees against wood, she sat down in a heap on the floor, robes billowing out around her. She drew her knees up and stuck her face into them.

“Sevens?!” I crouched down next to her, totally off-balance. “Are you crying?”

“I shouldn’t be prodding people to do things,” she sobbed into her knees. “That’s not love.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.6

Seven-Shades-of-Sad-and-Sorry sobbed into her knees for perhaps five or six minutes, which felt like a subjective eternity. Time becomes stretched whenever a close companion crosses the emotional event horizon from beyond which no communication can return. Each second suggests you should speak a pointless platitude, ask a question unanswered, or at least make gentle mouth-sounds, all of it seemingly useless to the wanderer in inner darkness.

It's very awkward to comfort somebody who can't tell you why they're crying. But try you must. Even I could do that much.

Sevens wouldn't respond to her name or to my hand rubbing her shaking back through the yellow robes, but I kept going anyway. Her sobbing was broken by throaty gurgles and little hiccups, ugly and difficult. Her dark hair hung in a lank sheet over her knees. I crouched on the floor of Evelyn's study, placed my rapidly cooling bowl of vegetable curry to one side, and wrapped a tentacle around her shoulders to let her know I was with her.

"It's okay, Sevens. It's okay," I said as she shook and sobbed. "Just ... let it all out. That's it. There you go."

I tried to sound like Raine, confident and reassuring, bright and certain. I don't think I pulled that off; despite building some practical experience, I would never learn the knack. Sevens' tears brought a sympathetic twinge to my own eyes.

Evelyn opened her mouth several times but never got past her own hesitation. Eventually she cleared her throat and averted her eyes. She rubbed at the stump of her thigh through her skirt, staring at the night beyond the window, the rows of books in the shelves, or down at her own truncated leg — anywhere but at Sevens. She glanced at me only once, then looked away again with a frown of mingled irritation and guilt.

Five or six minutes finally dribbled away and took Sevens' tears with them, her sobs trailing off into sniffing and wheezy breathing,

face still buried in her own knees.

“It’s okay, you just rest there, just relax,” I said, trying to conceal my relief as I stroked the back of Sevens’ head.

I didn’t do a very good job of that; couldn’t keep the tremor out of my voice. My mind was whirling with the import of Sevens’ distraught words. She’d deflected me when we’d been alone together in my bedroom, but Evelyn’s direct question had rammed a lance straight through her heart.

I shouldn’t be prodding people to do things, she’d said. That’s not love.

And I couldn’t say I disagreed.

I had not forgotten her brutally didactic performance, staged for my sole benefit with the bodies of my fellow literature students, even if that sadistic play had been revealed as an illusion and nobody had been hurt for real. I remembered her mockery of Raine in the Medieval Metaphysics room, and her smugly knowing attitude toward my goals and my fears. I recalled with faint distaste the way she’d been watching, listening, *observing* in Raine’s hospital room, and in my bedroom too, trying to show me the way to bring Raine and Zheng together without losing everything. She had been a voyeur, excusing violation as art.

Perhaps this lesson was a good one for her, however painful.

But then again—

I can’t direct anything!

She couldn’t direct anymore? She’d been wrong, yes, about the nature of love, about treating people as actors on the stage for her grand romantic dramas. But by her own account, she’d done good things in the past. What about Julija and Hana? Would they have found each other or escaped without Sevens’ meddling?

Would I have stabilised the strange relationship I now had with Raine and Zheng?

But more importantly, what did this change mean for a being like Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight? A barb of guilt twisted and snagged in my chest as I reminded myself that I’d done this thing to her. True, I hadn’t forced her to save me from the lip of the abyss that one time, nor had I dragged her into Lozzie’s dream where we’d confronted the Eye, but both times she had stepped onto the stage

in order to save my life. She had begun the process of redefinition, for me.

Had I broken her?

As Sevens sniffed and snuffled and I wrestled with guilt, a soft knock came a-knocking at the study door. Evelyn's head snapped up at the prospect of salvation but she caught herself and glanced at me.

I shrugged and pulled a resigned smile. Not as if things could get worse.

"Come in," I called softly.

The door opened and the darkness of the upstairs hallway disgorged a sweeping figure of black-and-white perfection — Praem, still dressed in her near-immaculate maid outfit, though interestingly without any shoes on. Her feet were bare except for the thick white tights she wore, padding across the floorboards with only a whisper of cloth against wood. Her hair was pinned up in a loose bun, exactly the same way Evelyn's currently was. A sympathetic gesture, perhaps.

Whistle trotted in at her heels, rotund and curious, claws clicking against the floor.

Praem marched three paces into the room then stopped, black skirt and soft underskirt swaying, with her hands clasped before her. Blank white eyes stared at Evelyn, then Praem turned her whole head to stare at me, then at Sevens, then back at Evelyn.

"I heard weeping," she intoned, voice like a silver bell in a snowstorm.

"Yes," Evelyn sighed, gesturing at the air. "Yes, you did. I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine."

Praem turned her head again to stare at Evelyn's detached prosthetic leg, then back at Evelyn.

Evelyn cleared her throat, embarrassed. "Not now. I'm fine sitting here, please. I'm not the one struggling right now."

"Quite," I said, still rubbing Sevens' back, smiling awkwardly as Praem returned her attention to us.

"Cold," Praem intoned.

“I’m sorry?”

“Food. Going cold.”

“Oh, ah, yes, um.” I eyed my abandoned bowl of vegetable curry.
“Hunger is a bit of a distant concern right now. Sorry.”

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Not even Praem was equipped to help in this circumstance, though she did turn and silently shut the study door behind her, enclosing us in the soft warm of the desk lamp once again.

Whistle, however, showed no such indecision. The corgi trotted over to us on his stubby little legs and sniffed at the edge of Sevens’ yellow robes where they were pooled on the floor. Then stepped on to the robes, turned in a circle, and sat down.

Sevens tilted her head to the side without lifting it from her knees, just enough to show Whistle a sliver of those eyes of molten darkness from beneath her hair.

As imperious as a young prince, Whistle went *snuff*, and closed his eyes like he was sitting in a patch of warm sunlight. Which, I suppose, he kind of was.

Sevens wormed one pale, bony arm out from beneath the robes and reached toward Whistle’s head — but this dog was not for petting, at least not by vampires. His eyes squinted open and his lips peeled back to show his teeth. A growl rose from his throat. Sevens paused, fingers curling back.

“Guurrrrg,” Sevens rasped.

“No,” Praem intoned – sharp and sudden.

Whistle stopped growling and looked around at Praem in wide-eyed alarm. To be fair, I would have done the same if Praem had taken that tone with me. In fact, it took me a moment to realise my hand had paused on Sevens’ back — I’d subconsciously obeyed Praem as well.

“No growling,” Praem informed him.

Whistle’s little doggy eyes moved from Praem to Sevens’ hand, then back to Praem, then back to the hand. He settled forward again, pretending nothing was wrong.

“You may pet him,” Praem said.

Sevens reached forward again until her long-fingered hand made contact with Whistle's flank. She stroked him several times, carefully and gently, then stroked his head too. His eyes drifted almost shut, kept open only a crack to watch for signs of vampire treachery.

"You can't be serious," Evelyn muttered.

"Corgi communication," Praem said.

I smiled as Evelyn rolled her eyes. When Sevens lifted her head from her knees her eyes were red-rimmed to match their cores. Tears had stained her cheeks and soaked into the robe where her face had lain, but at least she was no longer crying.

"Good dog. Nice dog," she rasped to Whistle as she stroked his head with two fingertips. "I bet you'd like me better with another mask on, mmm?"

"Poor Whistle," I sighed. "He's the most normal thing in this room."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Evelyn snapped, clearly irritated. I blinked at her in surprise.

"Well, there's you, Eeve. You're a mage. Praem is a demon from the abyss." I quickly added, "Demon as a technical term, not demon as a judgement. Sorry. You're an angel, Praem, really."

"Angel," Praem echoed.

I cleared my throat before I could continue, faintly embarrassed.

"Then there's Sevens, an Outsider, currently a vampire. And then there's me. God alone knows what I am anymore. We're in a mage's study and none of us are normal, except the dog."

"Normal dog," Sevens croaked. She clacked her teeth together twice and Whistle's ears swivelled.

"Look," Evelyn said with a huff, presumably at my nonsense. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask this." She gestured at Sevens, though thankfully she left her bone wand in her own lap this time. "How much of this is real?"

A steel band tightened inside my chest. "Excuse me, Eeve?"

Sevens looked up at her as well, dry-eyed and dull.

Evelyn raised her hands with a shamed grimace. "Yes, I know, Saye

is being a difficult bitch again. Woe is me. But I have to understand. If what we're looking at is a *mask*, then ... ” She cleared her throat and addressed Sevens instead. “Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. Princess, Lady, whatever you are, are your tears real?”

I tutted. I'd expected better of Evelyn.

“Define real,” said Sevens.

Evelyn shrugged with her hands. “Authentic emotional response?”

“Define authenticity. Go on. Try. I'll wait.”

Evelyn huffed and cast about. “An emotional response that isn't an act? One that comes from inside? You know what I'm asking, don't play word games with me. Do you really feel, or are you all an act, or mostly an act, or what?”

“Evelyn, this is really unfair,” I snapped. My other tentacle drifted up in front of Sevens, as if to shield her.

“What's unfair about it?” Evelyn snapped back, her irritation blossoming out at me like a blast of heat.

“You're not treating her like a person.”

Evelyn winced her eyes closed with a sigh. “Heather, your faith in me is touching.”

“ ... I'm sorry?”

“I treat people like this all the time,” Evelyn said. “Perhaps you haven't noticed. If I didn't consider her a person, I wouldn't have spent the day sitting around reading for university classes. I would have engineered a method of killing her, containing her, or sending her back where she bloody well came from. And I would have put it into action before you woke up, to avoid the chance of you objecting and undermining your own protection.”

I blinked in shock. “Evee, I—”

“So yes, I am treating her like a person. Ha!” Evelyn barked a single laugh. “A damn sight better than I treat most powerful people whose motives I don't understand. If she was a human being, I'd have her tied to a chair in a circle, with Raine ready to shoot her in the head, until I'm certain she's not going to kill you in your sleep.”

I stared, lost for words.

"It's fair," Sevens growled slowly, holding Evelyn's gaze. She was all cried out, languishing in that post-weep exhaustion, quiet and small. She lowered her knees, stretching her legs out beneath the yellow robes across the floor. "It's a good question. Good questions from the good magician. Need to know what you've invited into your little castle. Heather matters, you want to make sure she's not cradling a scorpion. But you of all people should already know the answers."

Evelyn shrugged with fingertips alone. "It is a responsibility."

Sevens twisted her head sideways without moving her eyes, keeping those ember-bright points locked on Evelyn. The gesture was disturbingly predatory and vaguely birdlike, sending a thrill of affectionate excitement bouncing around inside my chest. It reminded me of a vulture, featherless and filthy and ferreting through corpses, but it made me want to grab Sevens by the side of the head and nuzzle her. My little predator, something I should be running from, and all I wanted to do was get closer. My tentacle subconsciously tightened around her bony shoulders, instinctively afraid she had taken offence for real and was about to settle the score.

The predatory air was not lost on Evelyn; she went very still and started to turn pale. Praem didn't react and Whistle didn't even bother to open his eyes, so I suppose we were never in any real danger.

A second passed, then two, then three, pushing us right to the edge of instinctive panic, the cliff-face off which one of us would tumble first.

But then Sevens turned her eyes along with her head, leaving Evelyn free to breathe once more. Her gaze shifted flicker-quick to Evelyn's detached prosthetic leg, standing immobile by the corner of the desk.

"Is that your leg?" Sevens rasped.

Evelyn was panting to catch her breath, one hand to her chest. "What?"

"Sevens," I murmured. "That was unkind."

"Is that your leg?" Sevens repeated.

“Oh. Yes, yes that’s mine,” Evelyn said. “I walk with a prosthetic. I assumed you already knew, you seem to know ... ” Evelyn trailed off and raised her eyebrows. “Ah.”

Sevens clacked her teeth together and let out a little gurgled *kaaoo* noise.

Evelyn glanced down at the stump of her thigh. “Well. Fair enough,” she sighed, then drew herself up. Her voice took on a formal tone. “In that case I ... I apologise. I’m sorry that my inquiry acted as a trigger for you. I needed an answer and I suppose I have it now. You needn’t elaborate further if you don’t want to, and I suspect I couldn’t compel you anyway.”

“*Pbbbbbbbt*,” Sevens blew out a long raspberry of a sigh. “No. It’s fine. Can’t keep avoiding it, anyway. Here now, can’t run backstage again. Doors are locked, script is lost, audience gone. Just me and you.” She spoke to the floorboards and the indistinct lumps of her own feet beneath the yellow robes.

“Sevens, you don’t have to think about this now,” I said, shifting to a more comfortable sitting position on the floor next to her, which totally undermined my words.

Seven-Shades-of-Quietly-Subdued glanced sideways up at Praem, but the doll-demon was staring at a point on the opposite wall, completely composed with her hands folded demurely in front of her.

“Maids hear everything,” said Sevens. “Can you keep secrets?”

“Secrets kept,” Praem intoned.

“Mm.”

Sevens opened her mouth as if to continue, but stopped and sighed — a sound like a leaky, rusty, broken radiator on a cold winter morning. She drew her knees up again, wrapping her slender arms around them. She curled up smaller and tighter before the words finally crept out of her mouth, crackling and broken.

“You saw me playing with my dolls, Heather,” she croaked. “That was you and your friends. Metaphorically speaking.”

I cast my mind back to when I’d surprised her in Carcosa, playing with her toy dolls in front of Saldis. “Yes, I did figure that part out.”

“Dolls?” Evelyn murmured.

“That’s how I think of you. Thought of you! Not anymore. How I thought of everyone.”

“I know.” I nodded.

“Then why didn’t you try to make me fuck off?” Sevens turned accusing eyes on me, grimacing to show her needle-teeth. “I treated you as a part to be written, a piece to move around, and you just took it!”

I blinked at her. “Well, actually no, I was kind of offended sometimes. More than sometimes.”

“And then I fell in love for real. Involved!” She grabbed at her own chest, sinking fingertips into flesh. “And everything I’d done before was *wrong* all of a sudden. Love on the stage is nothing compared to reality. And if I’m in it personally, I’m here, I’m *here*, then how can I move people like pieces? I can’t direct myself. I can’t disrespect you like that.” She blinked away faint tears again, but she had nothing left in the tank, so that was all. “And you let me do it to you. You let me prod and poke and rewrite your lines and you—”

“It’s okay, Sevens,” I blurted out. “You helped! You did, it wasn’t all wrong. I mean, without you, maybe Zheng and I wouldn’t have—”

“It was wrong!” she rasped in my face. “If you don’t get it then maybe I shouldn’t be here at all! Maybe I don’t deserve—”

“Bad girl,” Praem said.

We both stopped dead, flinching back from each other like a pair of cats who’d been caught about to start a fight. Sevens twisted around with all the rubber-jointed flexibility of a surprised ferret, staring up at Praem with wide black eyes. Whistle looked around too, uncertain if he was being addressed. Evelyn frowned like she was watching a live recording of a terrible soap opera, but couldn’t look away.

Praem stared back. “You have been a bad girl.”

Sevens ducked her head and whined deep in her throat, hair hiding her face. I grabbed her around the shoulders in a hug, scowling up at Praem, my free tentacle drifting around to protect.

“Praem!” I said. “Don’t! She’s already—”

“You will not run away,” Praem carried on.

Sevens peered up at her through a curtain of hair, panting, eyes wide.

“Praem,” I warned.

“You will not run away,” Praem repeated.

“I ... I ... ” Sevens croaked.

“You will not run away. You silly goose.”

“ ... I won’t run away,” Sevens echoed, voice a raspy trickle.

“You will accept punishment,” Praem continued. “Then you will be a good girl.”

Sevens swallowed. “Good girl? No more directing?”

“No more.”

“I ... I don’t know how. I’m really scared. I w-want to keep helping people find love, but ... not like this. I can’t do this to ... to ... ” Sevens quivered and shook, so I squeezed her tighter, but she stayed focused on Praem. “I can’t become like them, not really, not fully. I’m always going to be me.”

“I am always me as well,” Praem said. “It is easy.”

Slowly, Sevens began to nod. “Easy.”

“Punishment,” Praem reminded her.

Sevens winced. “Mmmmmnnnn-rrrrr.”

“What punishment?” I asked.

“Babysitting.”

“Babysitting?” Sevens repeated.

“Tenny.”

“I don’t think Tenny is technically a baby anymore,” I said — but Praem turned her head to direct a look at me. “Technically,” I muttered, then I shut up.

Sevens nodded slowly, gently peeling herself out of my grip and pushing her hair out of her face. “Babysitting. I can do that. I can do that.” But she shook her head, grabbing at her own chest again

with fingers curled like claws. “Is this what love is supposed to feel like?”

“Yes,” Praem answered.

“It’s scary, when people aren’t pieces.”

“Not as scary as Night Praem,” said Praem.

Sevens shot her a grimace, then hissed through her teeth and finally seemed to relax, coming out the other side of something no human being could have guided her through, not even a human who had gone as far as Evelyn or I had. She needed somebody who had come from elsewhere.

Evelyn emerged from behind one hand, her cheeks more red than I’d seen in a while, frowning up a storm. “*Night Praem?*”

“Night Praem,” said Praem.

“That’s the second time I’ve heard this,” Evelyn said. “And I’m still none the wiser.”

“When she puts on the lace glove and the eyeliner and stuff,” I explained.

“And the skirt,” Praem said.

“There’s a skirt?” I asked.

“What *skirt?*” Evelyn huffed.

Sevens’ black-and-red eyes bounced between us. She looked both confused and surprised, but was clearly enjoying the little show. I couldn’t know for sure if Praem was doing this on purpose, but I silently thanked her all the same; if Sevens was one of us now, she deserved to be treated the same, whatever the truth which floated just out of sight, pressed up against the membrane that separated us from the abyss.

“How do you have clothes which I don’t know about?” Evelyn was demanding. “I mean, yes, fine, you’re entitled to them, but where the hell did you get a mysterious bloody skirt?”

“Not bloody,” Praem replied. “Black. With flair.”

“Then show me it.”

“Night Praem only.”

“Sevens,” I murmured, below the volume of the unfolding farce.
“Sevens, I just want you to know that ... ”

I was about to forgive her — or at least explain that if she chose to apologise, forgiveness would be hers, for all the transgressions of voyeurism and assumption that she had made. But then she turned to me and her face crumpled again. She managed to catch herself halfway as she choked out the words.

“I’m really afraid you’re going to die,” she told me.

It interrupted Evelyn’s semi-serious demand to meet Night Praem. Even Whistle tilted his head to watch, catching her tone if not her meaning.

“Die?” I tried to laugh but found a sudden lump in my throat. I couldn’t get the denial out. “I ... I know.”

“I didn’t want to think about this.” Sevens made a low gurgle sound of pure anxiety. She gazed at me with such mounting sorrow it tore at my heart. “To find you, only to lose you so soon. I don’t want to be the one left to keep your memory alive, like Melancholy does.”

“You’re not going to lose me. I mean ... I ... ”

How could I lie when I’d said the same thing to Raine? I might not make it through the next few months. I might fail to save Maisie. I might never return from Wonderland.

“But I know you have to try,” Sevens said in a tiny voice, as if she’d read my mind. “Or you wouldn’t be you.”

“Wait wait wait,” I said, holding up a hand. “Sevens, you were so confident before. When you spoke to me in the Medieval Metaphysics room, when we first met. Don’t you remember that? Well, no, third time we met, I suppose, but still. You told me I had all the tools, I just had to figure out how to use them.”

Sevens gently clacked her needle-sharp teeth together, then started to chew on her lower lip. She wouldn’t look directly at me.

“You told me to accept the abyssal side of myself.” A nervous laugh slipped from between my lips. “And I have! It’s not even a side, it’s just me. *Homo Abyssus* is me! It was probably always me, since the Eye!”

“Yes. Yes, that’s true ... ”

"A-and I remember your exact words — *Grace, friendship, solidarity. These are potential building blocks. Things the Eye can never draw on.*" I recited her words like a mantra, surprised myself with my recall. "You told me that, Sevens! You were so certain!"

"Heather," Evelyn said my name through her teeth, a blunt warning. I couldn't even look round at her.

A tiny voice in the back of my mind, still rational, asked why I was getting so worked up. I'd rejected Sevens' words at the time, hadn't I? Her smug arrogance feeding me riddles. I'd hated it. I'd resented her. So why was my voice growing shrill?

"I was making it up as I went along," said Sevens, speaking to the floorboards.

"... but it's what Maisie said too." I hiccuped and felt a hole open inside my chest, a void in my heart. "Gather my friends. You implied you knew what that meant."

"I didn't. I don't. Okay?"

"You said ... you *implied* that lesbian romance was somehow the key to beating the Eye. Which I always thought was absurd, because you are rather biased!" Another laugh burbled out of me, maddening in the soft study air. "But you told me that. You meant it, you weren't lying. You said—"

"I knoooooow!" Sevens whined. "Love conquers all? Maybe I was wrong. I don't know anymore. I don't know."

"Well," Evelyn muttered under her breath, "that explains a lot."

My throat closed up. I realised with growing horror that I wanted to take Sevens by the shoulders and shake her until she recanted. She'd told me that I had a chance, however absurd it had seemed; deep down some desperate part of me had been clinging to that fragile piece of driftwood. Now it disintegrated under my hands, leaving me alone and helpless once more, treading water in the open ocean.

"Heather?" Evelyn was saying my name, but I was a million miles away. "Heather? Oh for pity's sake. Praem, poke her in the shoulder or something, please."

Sevens was downcast and filled with regret, leaning forward on her hands with her sheet of stringy hair hiding her profile. How could

such a powerful Outsider feel regret and remorse? Because she was in love with me. It didn't matter if love was foreign to her being — she'd learnt it along the way, as we all had to learn to love. And now she was afraid I was going to die in a matter of months.

I was afraid too. I was terrified.

As Praem said something to Evelyn and Evelyn hissed back in frustration, I realised I couldn't do this to Sevens. I could not demand external validation. I could not expect certainty of Sevens while she was going through her own personal crisis. Faith in myself had to come from elsewhere.

I dredged deep, cradling Maisie's name in my heart.

"Well, Sevens," I said, voice stronger than I felt, "I think you were right."

Evelyn and Praem both stopped talking. Sevens looked up at me and pushed her hair back, a dark mess cast over one shoulder. Red-rimmed eyes with sparks in the centre. She stared in awe at whatever was going on with my face — which was a mystery to me, because I felt awful.

Faith in oneself. Fake it until you make it.

I took Sevens' hand again. "You were right."

"No," she rasped.

"And Maisie was right. I still don't know what it means, *gather your friends*, but that is the source of my strength: everybody else. I couldn't do anything without them." I glanced over at Evelyn, up at Praem, and down at the floor to where Raine and Twil sat in the kitchen. Lozzie and Tenny were upstairs somewhere. I spared a lost thought for Zheng, wherever she'd gotten to. "So I still think you're right, and I don't care what you say now. You won't move me from that position."

Her face fell. Even empty of tears, she still sobbed. I held out my arms.

Seven-Shades-of-Seeking-Solidarity crawled into my lap and clung to me for a long, long time. Long enough to stop shaking, for me to find my balance again, for Evelyn to look away and clear her throat. I stroked Sevens' hair and murmured nonsense for her. I had to be the rock here, at least for now.

Eventually she let go and slithered back out of my lap, taking the folds of yellow robe with her.

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked softly.

“Mmmm,” she grumbled and nodded, rubbing her eyes with her knuckles.

Evelyn cleared her throat again and sat up straight. “I have a question.”

“Evee, I think perhaps the time for questions is done for the moment?” I said with an awkward smile. “We’re all a little emotionally worn out by this.”

“It’s not an emotional question,” Evelyn said, voice oddly tight. “It’s a practical question.”

Sevens blinked bleary eyes over at Evelyn. “Guurrr?”

“You’re invested in Heather’s fate,” Evelyn said. “You’re also incredibly powerful.”

To my surprise, Sevens shook her head and let out a huff like an asthmatic raven. “Not in the way you want.”

“Perhaps not. But you understand the purpose of my question. Can you help us?”

Sevens hung her head as if in shame — but when she raised her face again, she wasn’t the little blood-goblin anymore.

I flinched before I could catch myself. Whistle twisted his muzzle back and forth in confusion; perhaps the mask-change affected scent too. Evelyn jerked in surprise, then held herself in check with visible discomfort. Only Praem seemed unconcerned.

“You really must stop doing that without warning,” I muttered.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had donned her Princess mask once more, appearing exactly as she had in the bedroom earlier, her blonde hair matted at the back and sticking up at one side. She’d carried over the red-rimmed eyes and emotionally exhausted look from the vampire mask as well, still huddled on the floor in the same pose, beneath the yellow robes. Yet somehow she still radiated dignity and control. She didn’t reply to me, but only tilted her chin upward, cold eyes locked with Evelyn.

"It seems you and I must talk strategy," she said, calm and cool.

Evelyn huffed, suddenly unimpressed. She hunched a little in her chair. "Strategy. Right."

The Yellow Princess reached over to Whistle with both hands and deftly but gently lifted him from his spot on the corner of the robes. He looked most put out, legs paddling in thin air, about to snap and growl, but Sevens fixed him with an unreadable gaze and his little doggy muzzle clamped shut with an aborted whine. He allowed himself to be put aside, trotting over to Praem for shelter.

Sevens rose to her feet, legs unfolding and spine straightening, graceful as a willow tree. She held her head high and chin raised, one arm across her chest to secure the yellow robes. She bent to retrieve me, one cool, soft hand taking mine and guiding me upward without pausing to ask. I went along, finding it impossible to resist. Once I was safely on my feet, she set about adjusting the yellow robes around her own body, tightening here, loosening there, tugging part of the fabric over one shoulder, wrapping another part around her waist. The garment seemed to flow with her hands, changing position and thickness, until she stood barefoot and elegant in a very fetching semblance of a Roman toga.

"Yes, strategy," she replied to Evelyn's withering look. "Because I am merely an amateur. I cannot talk logistics."

Evelyn perked up, frowning but not quite so unimpressed any more. "Go on."

"I cannot. You are the professional, Evelyn Saye. I have stood on the sidelines of war, but I have never been a general."

Evelyn snorted. "Isn't that what royalty is meant to do? Take all the glory while others do the dying?"

"I have departed my father's court, by choice," said the Yellow Princess. If she felt offended, she didn't show it, not beyond her cold and precise tone. "But I can hardly don the mantle of revolution. Not yet."

"Yet?" I boggled at her.

"For another time, my kitten."

Evelyn laughed without humour. "Fair enough, princess. All right then, let's talk strategy." She rolled her neck until her spine clicked,

then settled back, fingers running idly along the bone-wand in her lap. "You want to sit down?"

Sevens shook her head.

"I do, actually," I sighed, bending to pick up my bowl of stone-cold vegetable curry.

"Of course, Heather, take the stool." Evelyn waved her hand vaguely, still staring at Sevens.

I didn't want to leave Sevens' side, but something about the way she held herself told me she was beyond contact at the moment, ritually distant, formalised. One arm over her chest, back straight and hard, chin high.

"Fiddlesticks to that," I whispered, then went up on tiptoes to kiss her on the cheek. She blinked and turned only her eyes to me, which made me almost giggle. She watched me the whole way as I bumbled over to sit down on the step-stool with my disgustingly cold bowl of vegetable curry balanced on my knees.

"Do you know where to find Edward Lilburne?" Evelyn asked.

"No," said Sevens.

"Can you find him for us?"

Sevens considered this for a moment. Praem took the opportunity to crouch down, gathering up her uniform's skirts, and place a hand on Whistle's head.

"My currently preferred mask is technically agoraphobic," Sevens answered. "It might prove extremely challenging. This mask would be more suitable, but I suspect you have better hunters at your disposal already."

"No. I mean can you find him with your ... ah." Evelyn sighed with disappointed realisation. "You mean you can't."

"Masks only," Sevens confirmed with an almost apologetic tilt of her head. "Though I do have a few masks from Outside, ones which would certainly cause a stir in the city, possibly draw him out. Though I suspect you would rather I not. My sphere of action is still *lesbian romance*, and may be shrinking further. Though limitation does bring focus."

Evelyn and I glanced at each other.

“You mean,” I ventured, “you might become more free to act as you re-define yourself?”

“I do not know, kitten,” said Sevens, a touch of actual sadness in her usually cold voice.

“*Kitten!*” Evelyn spluttered. “Again with that.”

“What if I was threatened?” I asked, growing curious about where her limits truly lay. “Could you act then?”

“Obviously. If you or yours were threatened, well, I have fists, do I not?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “You’re an Outsider, the rules of our reality don’t apply to you, not fully. You’re telling me you have the same range of action as a human being?”

“Not quite. Your reality has very flexible rules.”

Sevens held out her right hand. Suddenly, like Lozzie appearing from Outside, her lilac umbrella was right there in her grasp, the handle of polished wood glinting in the soft light. At this, even Praem was surprised, standing up suddenly. Sevens twirled the umbrella and tapped the metal tip against the floorboards.

“My rules, however,” Sevens added, “are less flexible. My range is limited. As is yours.”

“All right, all right.” Evelyn sucked on her teeth. “Allow me to posit an absurd example. What if Edward, say, kidnapped Raine because he was in love with her and wanted to steal her from Heather?”

“Evee!” I whined. “Ew.”

“I said it’s an intentionally absurd example. Calm down.”

“Then yes,” said Sevens. Her brown tightened by a fraction, the tiniest frown. “The lover of my beloved, kidnapped, mm. I would not restrain myself to mere directorial duties. I never again wish to do so.”

“You mean you’d go after him, as yourself?” Evelyn asked. “Could you, I don’t know, appear behind him and take his heart out for us? Or—”

Sevens shook her head with a heavy sigh. “To you I might seem as a god, but in truth I am only a single step removed from you and

yours.”

“That’s what your father said to me!” I blurted out in shock.
“Exactly, word for word.”

Sevens bowed her head. “He speaks well. When he is not being difficult.” She raised her eyes to Evelyn again. “You think of me as an Outsider reality-warper, but that could not be further from the truth. I am bound by rules, just as you are. The primary difference is that I have some leeway to define my own set of rules, but in turn they define me. If broken, I would lose definition.”

“You’re trying not to cheat,” I muttered.

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted.

“How do you think I and my father and my many siblings remain so lucid?” Sevens went on. “I am currently redefining myself, yes, but I am still bound, as a human is still bound by gravity and thermodynamics. Ignore those rules, and you are no longer human, but something else. Usually dead.”

“Or like me,” I murmured.

Sevens nodded toward me with deep respect in the tilt of her head.
“The other outcome.”

“Huh. Convenient,” Evelyn grunted. “So what you’re saying is you’re useless?”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “What about when you stopped my nuclear explosion?”

Evelyn looked at me, wide-eyed, mouth hanging open. “You made a nuclear explosion?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you that part. Yes, in the dark corridor, in the library.” Evelyn stared at me. I cleared my throat, faintly embarrassed. “It wasn’t a good idea. I would have blown myself up.”

“When I met you in the library,” said Sevens, “I was falling apart. My edges had become ... fuzzy. Poorly defined. I was in danger of what my father once termed the *primordial urge*, the return to formlessness, the lure of the deep waters.”

“The abyss?” I asked.

“Just so.”

“Oh, Sevens.”

She'd been in danger of what I struggled against. Less so than when I first returned from my journey through the deepest black, but the temptation was always there, the whispered promise of ultimate freedom in lack of solid definition. *Homo Abyssus* I may have been, but part of me still yearned for infinity.

“Your acceptance was my salvation, Heather,” Sevens continued. “I stopped the ‘explosion’ with such ease because I was losing my boundaries. I could do it again, certainly to save your life, but the act would be one of self redefinition. As every act is, no matter how small. Even these words I am speaking right now are further defining my limits, my boundaries, my self-hood.”

“What if somebody broke into this house?” Evelyn asked quickly, perhaps unwilling to be drawn into further debate about Outsider philosophy.

“Then I would do my best to stop them, though Raine’s pistol or your servitors would be better suited to that task.”

“What if I asked you to protect Evelyn?” I said out loud. Sevens turned to look at me and raised an eyebrow. “It’s a serious question,” I added.

“That I would do so,” she said. “Though I would need a suitable mask.”

“This one seems pretty suitable already,” Evelyn muttered. “You don’t fool me with the lack of serious muscle mass. You are dangerous, whatever face you wear.”

“Suitable for my father’s realm, perhaps. Not for the dangers one may face elsewhere.” Sevens tilted her head sideways, a performative gesture of consideration. Then she tilted her head the other way, slowly looking toward me. “Yes, there is only one who is fully suited to protecting you, Evelyn.”

I stared back, mouth open, a slight blush rising in my cheeks. “I-I’m not—”

Sevens looked away from me. She turned her head toward Praem.

“May I?” she asked.

“You may,” Praem intoned.

Sevens grabbed a fistful of her makeshift yellow toga, just over her heart. She bowed deeply, sweeping her other hand until it almost touched the floor, one leg stretched back with toes pointed in a pose like a ballerina. She moved with languid slowness, an illusion as if she were underwater.

Then she was all speed. She straightened up, spinning on one foot and ripping the toga off in a combined motion of perfect elegance. The yellow robes billowed into the air, concealing her for a split second behind a rippling sea of butter-yellow infinity and sunlight depths.

The robes fell toward me, pooling in my lap and across my legs as Sevens stood revealed.

The Princess Mask was gone, replaced by Seven-Shades-of-Surely-Not-a-Servant.

I sighed. “You are a terrible show-off. Almost as bad as Raine.”

An exact replica of Praem stood before us, separated from the genuine article by only a few feet. Milk-white eyes, cold-blond hair, curvy and compact, with her hands folded demurely in front of her. Expressionless and blank, she’d captured Praem’s natural mannerisms with perfection. She’d even copied the maid outfit, right down to the starch and lace.

She had permitted herself only one allowance, perhaps to assist us poor apes who couldn’t tell reality from fiction. Seven-Shades-of-Not-Praem wore a skintight yellow undershirt beneath the maid outfit, visible only as a butter-smooth layer of cloth at her wrists and throat. Yellow highlights in the black-and-white.

Poor Whistle was very confused, nose twitching between the real Praem and Sevens’ imitation, trotting back and forth between their ankles.

Sevens sketched a tiny curtsy, just a flick of one hand next to her skirt.

“Oh yes,” Evelyn drawled — though her studied contempt did not entirely conceal the touch of disquiet in her voice. “Very original. I have seen two of her before, you know? And I did that myself, no Outsider tricks necessary.”

“Yes,” Sevens intoned with Praem’s voice, clear as a bell heard across a glacier.

“Indeed,” added the real Praem.

I sighed again but couldn’t keep the smile off my face. “Well, it’s very fetching, I suppose. But no. Absolutely not. Never.”

“This is the best mask for the hypothetical task,” said Sevens.

“Task?” I asked.

“Protecting Evelyn,” both Praems said together.

They looked at each other. It was like mirror images.

“This doesn’t bother you, Praem?” I asked.

“She asked,” Praem said.

“Permission,” Sevens ended the sentence.

“And I said—”

“—yes.”

“Oh no, absolutely not,” Evelyn said. “I’m not having this. Heather is correct, stop it.”

“This is—”

“—only illustration.”

“Not a—”

“—real mask.”

“Fun,” ended the real Praem.

Evelyn huffed through her teeth. Praem and Mirror-Praem ignored her.

The real Praem suddenly adjusted her own uniform with quick, precise movements of her hands, smoothing out her already wrinkle-free skirt, tugging lace tight at her elbow and settling shoulder straps beneath her top. She stopped, about to resume her habitual folded-hands pose, but then put one hand on her hips and raised the other to her face instead. She framed one eye with a sideways peace-symbol, index and middle finger. Sevens copied the pose.

“Oh for—” Evelyn hissed.

“Fabulous,” Praem intoned.

“You are,” replied Sevens, in Praem’s own voice.

Evelyn put her face in her hands, moaning softly. I frowned, feeling just as confused as Whistle looked. He snuffed once and sat down, deciding to wait this one out.

“Um,” I said.

“Babysitting duties,” said the real Praem, dropping her hands back into her usual pose. “Then you will be a good girl.”

“I will,” said Sevens.

“But not me,” Praem added.

“Regrettable.”

“Necessary. Do not confuse Tenny. Follow me.”

Before Evelyn or I could protest or interject, Praem turned on her heel with a spin of her skirt, opened the door back into the dark corridor, and padded out of the room. Whistle scrambled to his feet and clattered after her. Sevens lingered for a moment, turning to look back at Evelyn and I. She did another curtsy-in-name-only with a flick of her hand.

“Praem would never do that,” Evelyn snapped. “Not like that.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sussed-Out stopped dead, then stopped being.

The vampire mask was back in her place, standing before us in a t-shirt several times too large for her tiny frame, dark hair spilling down her back. She shook herself with a sudden convulsive motion, gritting her needle-teeth and gurgling deep in her throat.

“Not a real mask anyway,” she croaked, glaring at Evelyn like a sulky teenager.

“It’s not my fault it was imperfect,” Evelyn shot back. “Don’t imitate my daughter then.”

“Rrrrrr.”

“Good girl,” Praem intoned softly from the corridor. It was a call to arms.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sevens groaned.

I started to rise from my seat. “Are you going to be all right? Do you want me to ... ?”

Sevens shook her head and waved me back down, hunching her shoulders with a grimace. “Gotta do some things myself. You need to eat. I’ll go ... meet *tentacles*,” she hissed, and slunk after Praem like a lizard venturing into a cave.

“I’ll catch up with you in a bit!” I called.

A small pale hand closed the door behind her, leaving me alone with Evelyn and a bowl of soggy vegetable curry.

My stomach grumbled in the moment of silence that followed. Evelyn and I met each others’ eyes, but I was too stunned to speak. Evelyn shrugged, also at a loss for words. I took up a spoonful of vegetable mush from my bowl, then thought better of it, letting the food slide back in with a wet *plop*.

“Well,” I tried. “At least she’s getting on with Praem? I think? Actually, I’m not sure what just happened. Even by our standards, that was ... difficult.”

“That was extraordinarily weird,” Evelyn said, leaning back in her old wooden desk chair with a big sigh. “And probably a ploy to get me to stop asking so many questions.”

“Oh. Oh dear, you really think so? You think Sevens was concealing something?”

Evelyn blinked at me, beyond exhausted. “Heather, she is an Outsider and probably hundreds of years old. She’s concealing a lot of things, I have no doubt. But she’s also going through a crisis that isn’t any of my business. But, I have to ask these things, because nobody else will. Certainly not you.”

“I understand, Eevee. And I forgive you for sounding rude, I know you mean well.”

“Do I?” Evelyn asked, then cleared her throat before I could answer, before I could think about what that might really mean. “So, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, your Outsider friend, she can’t help us find Edward Lilburne. Pity.”

“I’m not sure that’s one hundred percent true,” I offered, feeling

sceptical. I put my bowl down on the floor and drew the discarded yellow robes over my shoulders, burrowing down in the warmth.

“Nevertheless, it means we’re still waiting for the good detective to get back to us. Let’s hope the documents she stole from the lawyer turn up something useful.” Evelyn mused, sucking on her teeth. She looked at me sidelong. “What about you, Heather?”

“What about me?”

“You’ve come very far recently. I don’t suppose you could try that trick with the map of Sharrowford again, try to pinpoint Mr Lilburne’s location?”

Evelyn’s voice didn’t hold a lot of hope, just a faintly amused note, but I still felt guilty.

“Probably not,” I said. “I think Sevens made a good point about limitations. They keep us defined. To encompass a whole city with my mind ... I don’t think it’s safe for me to cross that boundary.” A shiver went up my spine — what would happen if I surpassed my limits? The abyss again? No, I’d learnt to accept that part of myself, I wouldn’t dive again without intention. What lay beyond my limits was abandonment of where I’d started, of where I still stood. But I swallowed, a cold lump in my throat. “But I will, if we have to,” I said. “For Maisie. But maybe Nicole can find him first, yes.”

Evelyn nodded. “Or maybe Stack will come through. Ha!” She barked a humourless laugh, but I appreciated the effort.

“An address would help.” I shrugged. “Not as if thinking about it helps us right now.”

Evelyn suddenly glared daggers at me. I actually flinched, one tentacle twitching upward.

“Evee?”

“Thinking ahead is exactly what is going to keep us alive, Heather,” she snapped, eyes blazing. “Especially if we have to go up against Edward on his home turf.”

“I— I wasn’t—”

“Plans and back up plans and *back-up* back up plans may be the only thing standing between us and disaster.” As she spoke, Evelyn gripped the stump of her thigh through her skirt, tighter and

tighter. She didn't seem to be aware of it. "Do you understand?"

"I do, but—"

"What happened last night, that never happens again. Never."

"It won't!" I blurted out, desperate to comfort her. I pointed at her leg. "Evee, you're hurting yourself."

"What? Oh." She let go of her thigh, suppressing a wince.

"Evee, what happened last night will never happen again. The dead hands are gone. Alexander's ghost, whatever it was, it's gone now."

"Not good enough," Evelyn said, still scowling but not quite as angry. "We should have had contingencies in place. I should have predicted everything that might possibly happen to you out there. Or Lozzie! It's not just you. We should have had the gate formula ready and adjusted for that weird grassland where she's storing her tin men, just in case you needed an escape route. Everything that happened to you could have been avoided with one tiny precaution, but we didn't take it!" She snapped. "We've been lax because we barely know what we're doing half the time. Well, not again."

"Evee, it's not all your responsibility." I reached over to take her hand. At first she tried to shake me off, but then I asked silent permission with my eyes. She allowed me to slip my fingers into hers. She sighed and shook her head, but she did squeeze back.

"It is my responsibility," she grumbled, "because you might be a natural leader, but you're a shitty strategist. No offence."

"None taken." I laughed.

"What I am trying to say is that I should have insisted that you and Lozzie waited for me to set up the gate properly. You were so wrapped up in her, in what you were doing, in your crisis. I couldn't get through to you. I've told you before, I'm not good at doing any of this unrehearsed. I couldn't find the right words to make you stop and think for five seconds so I could—"

Evelyn broke off and huffed, tapping her fingernails on her bone wand.

"You were right. It was a bad idea, no matter how it turned out in the end."

"Mm."

“Evee,” I pitched my voice low and gentle. “I trust your judgement.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

“But I do. Evee, in future, if ever you need to insist that I stop a course of action, just say so.”

“I can never find the right thing to say in the heat of the moment.” She hissed frustration. “You know that.”

“Then say *I insist*. It can be our code. If you say that, then I promise I’ll stop.”

Evelyn looked at me with a dark frown. “Don’t do that. What if I’m wrong? What if I get something wrong and get one of us killed?”

I laughed with the absurdity of it, then covered my mouth with one hand, mortified for laughing at her. “Sorry! Sorry, I didn’t mean in a moment of genuine emergency. If I need to pull Raine out of the jaws of a shark, I won’t stop because you tell me to. Though I do hope we aren’t going to meet any sharks.”

“Me too.” Evelyn tutted.

“I mean when making plans. When we have that chance to pause. If you say *I insist*, then we stop and rethink. I promise.”

Evelyn swallowed, unable to meet my eyes. She nodded slowly. “All right. All right, Heather. How are you so bloody good at this?”

“At what?”

“Expressing yourself.”

I shrugged. “I fake it, mostly. I copy Raine. I copy you, as well, believe it or not.” I had to add that qualifier when Evelyn’s eyebrows tried to meet in the middle. “I copy things I’ve read in books, too. There’s no trick to it.”

Evelyn snorted, shaking her head. She let go of my hand, lifted the bone wand off her thighs, and placed it carefully back on the desk. She tilted her head upward and rubbed her face with her fingertips, working the tension and stress out of her muscles.

“Then *I insist*,” she said. “Right now.”

“Ah?”

“You and I need to talk strategy too. Alone, without the others.” She stopped rubbing her face and met my eyes, not glowering, not cold and clinical Evelyn Saye, but not grumpy Evee either. This was the Evelyn who I’d come to a silent agreement with, out on the Quiet Plain. “So I can say things without Raine trying to argue with me through you.”

“Do ... do we have to do this now, Evee? “I’m exhausted, can’t it wait until ... ” I glanced at the window, but it was already evening. The sunset had finished. Only darkness lurked outdoors.

“I insist,” she hissed. “Or did you not mean that?”

“I did! I did, Evee, I’m sorry, it’s just we’re not even making plans right now.”

“We are. Heather, we need to talk about this ASAP, because you keep surviving things you shouldn’t, however happy that makes me.” She swallowed down a knot of emotion at those words.

“You’ve just come fresh off besting the King in fucking Yellow, and I don’t even know what that means. You’ve slept, you’re awake enough to deal with this. I am worried you will walk into this while bursting with overconfidence, even if you don’t show it externally. So we need to talk.”

I boggled at her. Me, overconfident? “About what?”

“About what happens when we find Edward Lilburne’s lair.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.7

Since the first moment I'd met her, Evelyn had been wrong about so many things.

She'd been wrong about me, for a start. Not once, not twice, but three times — first that I was dangerous, then that I was crazy, and third that she was unworthy of my friendship. With time and effort I'd proved all of those assumptions false. She'd been wrong about Raine's attitude toward me, wrong about Twil's intentions, wrong about Tenny's nature. She'd been wrong about her childhood home and what it could mean to her, given the hard work of exorcising her mother's memory. She'd been wrong about her spider-servitors and how well they could protect the house. She'd even been wrong about the house itself; Number 12 Barnslow Drive may indeed have been the most supernaturally defensible position in Sharrowford, but it was far from impregnable.

Was she wrong about the Eye? Only time would tell.

This thing cannot be fought, she'd told me, rapping her walking stick on the table in the drawing room, back before she'd converted it into a magical workshop.

She was correct about that part, I had no doubt. Even as far as I'd come, I had no hope of wrestling the thing into submission. We had to find another way.

She was right about Maisie, too. Even now, months later, her warning still sometimes echoed in my darkest moments, utterly alone without my missing half, lying awake in bed in the small hours of the morning, too guilty to wake Raine or rouse Zheng.

Nothing human can survive out there for long.

I'd proved her words right upon the canvas of my own flesh. One journey through the abyss had returned me here with an utterly changed sense of who and what I was, so Maisie's only hope was my continued endurance and flowering, my defiance of abyssal

dysphoria, my refusal to give up and dive back into the deep waters. Every day I lived like this was further proof that it could be done, that it was possible, that whatever I tore from Eye's grasp two or three months hence would have a life worth living.

But above all else, Evelyn had been wrong about Praem.

She'd been taught fear and paranoia, but her own basic decency had saved her. She may have refused to treat Praem as a person — she'd not even given her a name until I'd forced the issue — but she had not bound her in a corpse, not tainted the act of creation with murder and violation. She'd reacted with alarm and disgust when Praem had begun to show individuality, wearing her maid outfit and speaking out of turn — but with a little guidance and help, she'd refrained from stamping out the anomalous behaviour. She'd allowed Praem to grow, which had in turn allowed her to grow. And she had discovered that the foundational aspects of her mother's philosophy were even more wrong than she'd ever imagined. To her credit, she hadn't rejected that revelation; it may have seemed obvious to us, but that did not do justice to the emotional and intellectual leap of faith she'd had to make. And now she called Praem her *daughter*.

I was proud of her.

Which is why I took it so seriously when I saw that old, hard-edged paranoia, in the set of her eyes and the line of her mouth, when she spoke of what might happen when we found Edward Lilburne.

Evelyn was right about that as well — I hadn't given the subject a lot of thought. Locating the man was difficult enough.

"How could I be overconfident about that?" I repeated her own words back at her. "I've barely thought about it."

Evelyn didn't reply. She stared down at me, trying to cultivate an air of professional detachment, the mature professor who'd heard a fresh student say something seemingly obvious but revealingly incorrect, waiting for me to catch up and stumble toward a retraction. She had the advantages of height and dignity, sitting comfortably in her circa-1950s wooden desk chair, while I perched on the step-stool with voluminous yellow robes spilling over my knees, a bowl of cold vegetable curry on the floor next to me. Evelyn's face — soft rounded cheeks that had never quite lost all their puppy fat, eyes lined by stress and trauma but such a gentle

sea-breeze blue, nose small and neat — was lit from the side by the shaded lamp on the desk, casting her profile into crags and peaks of shadow, a reflection of the night beyond the small, high window in the back wall of the study.

I realised with disappointed surprise that she was attempting to summon the banished spirit of the first time she'd lectured me, alone together in the basement of Sharrowford University Library. Consciously or not, the muscles of her face and the pinch of her mouth tried to adopt that preemptive rejection and haughty distance.

But she failed. We knew each other too well now, and I knew that wasn't really her. She couldn't conceal how much she cared. Beneath the act, the reality peeked through, concern and worry and fear. Her throat bobbed.

"Evee?" I prompted. "It's okay, you don't have to glare at me."

"I'm *thinking*," she said with a little huff. "I'm no good at this off the top of my head, you know that."

"Ah, yes. Sorry." I rejoiced that she'd dropped the attempted act. I sat up straight and attentive and averted my eyes so as to not make her too self-conscious.

After a few moments of awkward throat-clearing and drumming her fingers on the arms of her chair, she found the right words.

"Then what do you think?" she asked. "What will happen if — God willing, when — we find Edward Lilburne?"

"I suppose ... we try to corner him? Back him into a situation he can't escape from?" I swallowed and shrugged, facing a prospect I didn't want to deal with. "I don't necessarily want to kill him. Not after everything that's happened since Alexander. But from what Lozzie's told us, and from everything we've seen, maybe that has to happen." I sighed. "I don't think we have the right to make that judgement, but we do have a right to defend each other."

Evelyn nodded along. As soon as I was finished, she snapped, "Too abstract."

I blinked at her. "Pardon?"

"Far too abstract. You're thinking in ethical and abstract terms. What *happens*? Practically, what do we do?"

I shook my head, feeling lost. “How can we know until we know where he is? Plans depend on actual circumstances.”

“Not good enough.”

“Evee?”

“It’s not good enough,” she repeated, unrelenting. “Say he’s in a house, and the house is in Sharrowford — the most simple and unlikely prospect, yes, but let’s go with the simple one to illustrate my point. What do we do?”

“ ... well, we ... we have to go to the house?” I asked slowly, seeking approval as I spoke.

“How many of us, in what order? Do we send a scout first? Who is willing to do that? What happens if we can’t get in? What happens if he has mundane protection, bodyguards and such? What happens, Heather?”

I spread my hands. “I don’t know. Evee, what’s your point? You can just come out and say it, I’m not going to ignore you without listening. This is me, not Raine.” I gave a nervous little laugh, trying to defuse the situation, but Evelyn wasn’t smiling. “Are you trying to say we need this kind of detailed plan right now?”

“No,” she said, visibly uncomfortable as she shifted in the chair to relieve pressure on her truncated thigh. “Look, I admit, I’m using an amateur approximation of the Socratic method, to try to get you to see my point. What happens when we go after Edward Lilburne?”

“I don’t know, not yet. We handled Alexander quite well in the end, didn’t we?” As soon as those words were out of my mouth, I winced and put a hand to my face, followed by a tentacle. “Okay, no, bad example and badly put. We didn’t. I almost didn’t make it out of that castle. But we’re more experienced now, much more experienced. I’m better at brain-math, we have Zheng on our side, we have Sevens, whatever help she can offer. And if we do make a proper plan then I think we probably have a good chance of at least staying safe. Don’t we?”

Evelyn shook her head slowly, a grimace pulling at the corners of her mouth. “This is exactly what I meant, Heather.”

I almost rolled my eyes. “I know mages are dangerous. I’m not being naive. I know we could be walking into anything. I killed

Alexander, I fought off *Ooran Juh*; I have some experience here, don't I?"

"What you have is so many trump cards you're practically a trick deck," Evelyn said. "That's my point."

I opened my mouth to argue, but the words died in my throat. "Oh. Ah."

Evelyn let out a great sigh and leaned back in her chair, as if she'd overcome a great hurdle. "Sorry. That was too harsh. Sometimes I don't know how to get through to you."

"Am I really that difficult?" I asked. My chest felt tight.

Evelyn regarded me for a moment with eyes like a lizard peering out from under a rock. "No, I'm just being a difficult bitch. And over-protective. Turns out Raine isn't the only one with a monopoly on that."

I nodded but had to look away from those staring eyes, flooded with the memory of the moment we'd shared out on the Quiet Plain. This was the second time one of us had compared our relationship to Raine and me. "Evee, I-I understand, but—"

"Heather, you just made the exact comparison that I was worried about — do not mistake Edward for Alexander."

"Ah?"

Evelyn sucked on her teeth, looking away from me and up at the window, out at the night sky above the city. "I didn't want to say this before. Didn't want to diminish what you did when you ... defeated Alexander Lilburne."

"I killed him, Evee. Call it what it is, please."

"When you killed him." She nodded quickly. "It's a difficult thing, murder. Raine doesn't understand that, but I do. I know what it's like to kill a mage, when you have to, and when maybe you don't want to." She swallowed with some difficulty, struggling to put old pains aside.

"Evee," I said her name gently and reached forward with my toes, to touch the be-socked toes of her single foot. She whirled back around to stare at me. "Dealing with Edward isn't going to be like dealing with your mother."

"Exactly. Heather, now you've ... processed the act, I think I can say this. We got lucky with Alexander."

I nodded along, a sad smile on my lips. "We did, yes."

"No!" she snapped all of a sudden. She slapped her hand on the desk, but the old piece of furniture was too solidly built, too sturdy for her anger to shake. She winced and pulled her hand back, clenching and flexing her fingers around her stinging palm.

"E-Evee?"

"You don't get it," she hissed. "My mother was forty five years old when I murdered her. She'd been studying magic since she was thirteen. My grandmother, bless and curse her foresight, inducted my mother into magic with proper training, trying to build something beyond the scattered bullshit that passes for mage-craft. And she succeeded, a little. And my mother was damn nigh fucking unkillable."

Evelyn stopped, breathing hard, eyes blazing. She swallowed as if she was forcing down a mouthful of gravel.

"Y-you're saying—"

"I'm not even certain she's really dead," Evelyn continued in a razor-edged rasp. "If it was in my power, I would have that coffin dug up and thrown into a fucking blast furnace until even the ash is gone. It will forever worry me that we have not found Alexander Lilburne's corpse, whatever happened to his soul or his spirit or willpower or whatever the hell it was you encountered."

"He's dead, Evee. He's dead, I felt him go, I let go of his hands."

She took a great shuddering breath and passed a hand over her face, trying to calm down, sagging back in the chair. "Yes ... yes, okay, yes, whatever. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's okay. Evee, you have nothing to apologise for."

"Has Raine ever told you the whole story of how we killed my mother? How impossible it was to put her down?"

"No, actually," I said, but I restrained myself from adding *but I would love to hear it*. Morbid fascination gripped me; what did it take to kill a mage?

Evelyn spoke as if she'd read my mind. Her eyes bored into me,

deep in the shadowed pools of her sockets, as if from the bottom of a coal pit. “It took everything I had, and more. Raine could not have done it alone, no matter how much she tries to shoulder my burden for me. All her violence was useless. The only reason I prevailed was because of the passenger in my head.” Evelyn tapped her temple. “The demon my mother put there, the one she was trying to bargain with, the one she was using me as a vessel for. I’ve told you before, it hated her as much as I did. It fed me ways to undermine her for months in advance. It shielded me from things I had no way to predict. It held my mind together with sheer force of will when I would have cracked otherwise. And you know what?”

Her voice was the raw scratch of broken metal. I shook my head, afraid to speak.

“When it came time to do the deed, to raise the proverbial knife—” Evelyn raised her maimed hand, miming a dagger “—the things my mother summoned to defend herself, the layers of protection she had in place, just as a precaution — some of them were unspeakable. Things even I can’t put into words. She wasn’t remotely human by the end of it, the way she ... changed herself to survive. And she kept fucking fighting, kept trying to subdue me even when I had her down a spinal column and a—”

Evelyn cut off with a clack of her teeth, slamming her mouth shut on memories that tasted of rot. Shaking with each breath, she stared right through me, at something only she could see.

Hesitating only a heartbeat, I stood up from the step-stool and went to her, trailing my yellow robes across the floorboards.

Traumatic memories and difficult words did not make Evelyn any less awkward at hugging, but she didn’t try to wave me off or shove me away. She fumed in embarrassed silence, but she did manage to take several deep, calming breaths. With an effort of supreme will, I kept my two tentacles off her. I didn’t want to freak her out with invisible ropes of muscle touching her shoulders.

She patted my hip and cleared her throat when she’d had enough. I stepped back, trying to smile for her.

“I’m sorry,” she croaked, then put her face in her hand, leaning heavily on the desk. “I’m sorry, Heather. Didn’t think it would be that bad. I don’t talk about this very often. I never, ever talk about the details. I can’t.”

“Evee, it’s okay. You don’t have to.”

She shook her head. “It’s nearly summer, for pity’s sake. Five months since we all visited Sussex. I thought I’d ... gotten better, gotten ... ”

“Oh, Evee.” I reached out and touched her shoulder again, but very gently, watching for a flinch that never came. “Nobody just ‘gets over’ things like that, even when they don’t involve terrible old mages who should have gone to prison.”

Evelyn tried to laugh at that one — just a snort of breath from her nose.

“It’s part of you,” I went on. “For better or worse, and I do hope for better. You can’t deny that, and nobody should expect you to. I certainly don’t expect you to just ‘get over it’ or pretend it didn’t happen. But if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s good too. I think.”

Evelyn shrugged, but her hand found mine — her maimed left hand, only the thumb and index finger intact. On the rare occasions that Evelyn touched other people, she never used that hand. The stump of her ring finger and her truncated middle finger lay across the back of my palm, holding on gently.

“If you’re going to stick with me,” she grumbled, “this is what you’ve got to get used to.”

“I’m already used to you, Evee. It’s just you.”

“That’s what bothers me,” she murmured, so quietly that we could pretend I hadn’t heard. For just a second, her head tilted toward my arm, as if she was going to nuzzle me. I was frozen with shock. But then she stopped, or caught herself in the act, or thought better of it. She cleared her throat and nodded slowly, then gently waved me off herself. I took that as the signal to stop pressing, stepped back, and hesitated at the step-stool.

“Oh, sit down,” she grumbled, blinking at me with exhausted eyes. “I’m not made of spun glass any more than you are.”

“But you can always say something to me if you’re suffering.”

She swallowed, just staring. She had to look away before she could nod. I finally sat down again.

"Where was I?" she muttered.

"We got lucky with Alexander?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath. "We got very lucky, Heather, but I don't think you understand why. Alexander was a young man. In, what, his twenties? He can't have been older than twenty six, twenty seven, at the most?" I nodded, thinking that was about right. "Not enough time to build true power. But Edward Lilburne? How old do you suppose he is?"

"Sixties, at least," I said softly, realisation coming over me in a slow wave of ice crawling up from my gut. I pulled Sevens' yellow robes tighter around myself. "Ah."

"An old man, yes. He may have been studying magic his entire life." Evelyn fixed me with that serious gaze again, the armour of a mage sliding down over her features. "From what you told me, that first time you saw him, he had a physical object, a goddamn device, to locate or bait the *Noctis macer*. You remember that?"

"Of course I do," I said. Bitterness rose in my throat at the memory of how we'd rejected Maisie's full message, by accident and misunderstanding.

"That should have been impossible," Evelyn continued. "Then at that pub, he wore another man's face, remotely piloted. He laid a trap for us with Stack's little boy, he rode his own suborned, hollowed out, pneuma-somatic pseudo-servitor. I can't even get the control language correct for the servitors my grandmother built. We have no idea what we could be facing when we set about trying to corner him, but I'm not confident."

"Do you think he could be a more powerful mage than you?"

Evelyn snorted with a burst of derisive laughter. "I am standing on my mother's shoulders, regardless of how I feel about that. And she stood on my grandmother's shoulders. I'm loath to admit it, but most of the time I have no idea what I'm doing. So yes, if he's been practising magic as long as I suspect he has, he is far more dangerous than me." She cleared her throat. "Though I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"Always."

Evelyn wet her lips and glanced at the scrimshawed thigh bone on

the desk, her wand, her dark inheritance. “What my family has done is vanishingly rare. The process that produced me — handing knowledge and experience down from one generation to the next — almost never happens. My mother tried to break that chain regardless, for the sake of personal power. You understand? That’s one of the problems with being a mage, it’s part of the reason there’s so few of us, part of the reason there’s no ... ” Evelyn waved a hand, looking for the right word.

“Organic community?” I suggested.

“Mm. Something like that. Transfer of knowledge is almost impossible when an apprentice or a student might kill you just to surpass you. It’s why any attempt turns into a cult; it’s the only way to ensure power, control, secrecy. And handing things down to one’s own children becomes difficult, to say the least, when flesh and blood relations are so very *useful*.” Evelyn snorted that word. “Or when one leaves humanity behind entirely. It’s why we’re so reliant on these.” She reached past the thigh bone and tapped the book at the rear of her desk.

I hadn’t noticed the heavy old tome sitting there before, a hornet among butterflies and moths. I recognised the pale, cracked leather of the cover, the edges of the heavy parchment pages, yellowed with age, and the pieces of tape holding the horrid thing together like some lich that should have crumbled to dust long ago.

Unbekannte Orte, the book which contained the true name of the Eye.

“Take Lizzie, for example. What happened to her family?” Evelyn was saying as I stared at the book as if I’d discovered a slug in my salad. “It’s shredded, her parents are dead. The fact she made it out intact is a miracle. People like her — or me — are incredibly rare.” Evelyn said that without a hint of pride, voice dripping with bitter resignation. “To be as young as I am yet wield actual power, even if I’m a mess most of the time, I do recognise how strange this is in comparison with other mages.”

I tore my eyes away from the book. “You really think Edward will be that powerful?”

Evelyn shrugged, eyelids growing heavy with exhaustion. “Power is relative to preparation, intelligence, paranoia, investment. A tank is powerful, but not if it doesn’t have any fuel and the crew are all

high on mushrooms. Think about it.”

“I’m trying,” I huffed. “We don’t know anything about him for certain. Everything we’ve seen from him has been bluff or misdirection, it’s like he’s ... not even there.”

Evelyn snorted. “Exactly. That’s what scares me, Heather. We got lucky with Alexander because he was an arrogant fool. But Edward is more like me.”

“Ah?”

“Paranoid.”

“Oh. I ... I see, yes. I see what you mean.”

“We have to try to predict his moves, what he might do once we find him and make contact, what tools he might use to move against us in return. Fighting a mage in the open, if we can catch him, that’s one thing. But I suspect he’s like me in more ways than one — if he moves around, he’ll be guarded. He’ll stay on home turf as much as possible, and we do *not* want to fight a mage on his home turf. Would you want to fight *me* in my home? Think about that for a moment, think about the protection I am surrounded by, the people I am surrounded by, night and day.”

I shook my head, furrowing my brow as the meaning of her words finally hit home. “I certainly wouldn’t want to try.”

“Mm. You see my point now?”

“Sort of. You think I could be overconfident because of my successes.”

“In a nutshell, yes. You’ve never fought something like this. I have.”

I nodded slowly. “Then, do you have a plan?”

“No.”

“ ... no?”

“No. Nada. Nyet. Nein.” She snorted a humourless laugh. “Best I can come up with is a surprise attack on his house, but that’s obvious, he must be expecting that. If it’s his final bolt-hole, I don’t want to walk in there, even wearing an NBC suit. And I’m not sending Praem in like some kind of sacrificial canary, never again.”

Ruthlessness stirred in my chest, the memory of the cold abyss. “I could ask Zheng to go in first. She’d do it, for me.”

“Mm. She is practically invincible, I know. But he will have considered that, he may have considered every possibility. I do need to speak with Zheng though. She had long contact with Edward, at least peripherally, and she does tend to divulge slightly more useful information than Lizzie. Slightly.”

“I wish she’d come home,” I sighed.

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “We have to take a calculated risk. Decide what is worth risking for this, Heather.”

A prickle of guilt needled at my heart. Maisie’s soul, my sister’s life — or what remained of it — was worth any risk to myself. I’d already made that decision, months and months ago. But I could not ask everyone else I knew to risk everything they had for the sake of a girl they’d never met. Asking them to help me go up against the Eye was one thing, because we were trying to find a way around that fight. But Edward? He was human. More dangerous, in some ways.

“I have to do it alone, don’t I?” I whispered.

“What?” Evelyn spat, squinting at me. “Heather, shut the fuck up, right now.”

“I—I— okay?”

“Don’t be absurd. Don’t you dare say things like that. If not for your own sake then at least for mine. You taught me to stop thinking that way, so don’t you dare even think it, not in here, not in the privacy of your own head, nowhere.” She said that all in a rush, frowning at me like I needed a good slap.

“Point taken. Okay. Thank you. I’ll ... I’ll try.”

“You better,” she hissed, then drifted off into silence, sighing to herself.

I took a deep breath and tried to marshal my tired intellect, still running close to empty even after all those long hours of sleep. Reluctantly I retrieved my bowl of soggy, cold curry from the floor and mechanically fed myself a mouthful, just to have something in my belly. Evelyn watched without comment, perhaps thinking along with me. Or perhaps she was feeling queasy about the cold

curry.

“Evee,” I said eventually, pausing to chew a particularly crunchy bit of broccoli — which was a relief, in fact. “What would you do in his situation?”

Evelyn raised her eyebrows in genuine surprise. “Walls and bunkers, I suppose. What I already do, wrap myself in a fortress and never come out. A real Hoxhaist, I am. Ha.” She spoke the laugh out loud with not a touch of humour.

“Pardon?” I blinked at her, totally lost.

“Sorry. I’ve absorbed too much nonsense from Raine over the years. My point is, I’d probably be even more cautious than him.”

“So, how would you pry yourself out?”

“Good question,” Evelyn said, low and quiet, then just stared at me, miles away inside her own head. I let her think as I forced down another spoonful of vile vegetable slop. She cleared her throat and wet her lips with a flicker of pink tongue, then continued, slow and hesitant. “I would summon a ... ‘willing participant’.” She paused to tut. “Of course, I can’t do that anymore. I can’t make something like Praem without taking responsibility for creating life. But for the sake of the thought experiment, lets assume I could bring myself to do that.”

“Just as a thought experiment.” I nodded. “I’d never ask you otherwise.”

“Mm.”

“Okay. So then what?”

Evelyn allowed a small, savage smile to grace her thin lips. “I’d strap a bomb to it and have it walk up to his front door.”

I blinked several times, a spoonful of cold curry frozen halfway to my mouth. “A ... bomb?”

“Pity I don’t know anything about bomb making.” Evelyn sucked on her teeth. “Perhaps Stack does. Getting the materials would be hard enough, but maybe she could help with that too.”

“W-wait, Evee, you mean an actual bomb? Not magic? A *bomb* bomb?”

Evelyn snorted, leaned back in her chair, and ran her fingers along her scrimshawed wand lying on the desk, staring at the symbols carved into the human thigh bone. “Yes, Heather. A *bomb* bomb. A *bomb bomb* bomb. I am talking about blowing a mage to pieces with an improvised explosive device.”

“Um.”

“Don’t worry.” She sighed and deflated again. “Even if I was willing to drag some poor soul from the abyss just to make it commit a suicide bombing — which I’m not, not anymore — there’s two problems with that plan. One, it’ll attract attention from the secular authorities.”

“Bloody right it would!” I squeaked, then put a hand delicately over my mouth. “Pardon my language. But, yes, the police would be all over us.”

“Quite. Let off a bomb in rural England, big enough to take out an entire house, or warehouse, or wherever Edward is hiding, and make it look like what, terrorism? Being a mage does allow a certain leeway to sidestep legal issues, but I’m quite sure the state could destroy me for mundane crimes if it wanted to.”

“Yes, please,” I said, nodding with relief. “Let’s not make bombs. Please. I don’t think I could deal with that.”

Evelyn stopped running her fingers along the thigh bone, picked the wand up, and lay it back across her own thighs. The naked bone shone yellowed and old in the lamplight, inches from the end of her stump beneath her skirt. I wondered, and not for the first time, where that thigh bone had come from. It couldn’t be Evelyn’s own leg — she still had half her femur.

“But more importantly,” she said, “we’re not trying to kill Edward Lilburne.”

“We’re not?”

“We need that book.”

My eyebrows climbed as a void opened inside my chest. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, not from Evelyn. “Are you suggesting what I think you are?”

“The book,” she repeated. “*The Testament of Heliopolis*. If I’m to complete the *Invisus Oculus*, I need the magical formulae that book

reputedly contains. In all these long months of trying, I cannot figure out any other way to make us invisible to the Eye's attention. Even this may not work, but it's the best shot I can take. We need that book."

"Of course. Of course, Eeve, I agree, that's the whole point, but you're not suggesting we make a deal?"

"Heather, we might be dealing with a man we cannot kill, understand? We couldn't kill *Ooran Juh* in the end either, we just drove him off."

"He was closer to me than to Edward!" My voice rose to a squeak. "He was like me, he'd returned from the abyss!"

"You're proving me right again, Heather." Evelyn spoke slowly and carefully, struggling to contain herself. "You are underestimating a mage because you've overcome worse. And I am telling you again: he could be much, much worse than something like the big fat orange juice monster."

I sighed and shrugged, at a loss.

"Killing him is not our aim," Evelyn continued. "It's a means to an end. Which means it doesn't have to happen."

I must have been giving her such a look, wide-eyed and pale and staring, because Evelyn's carefully constructed facade of deathly sincerity broke into a huge huff and a roll of her eyes.

"E-Eeve?"

"Don't look at me like I've been replaced with a pod person," she snapped.

I laughed without humour. "Can you blame me? You're the last person I expected this from. You're suggesting we do what, exactly? We already tried talking with him, don't you remember what happened in that pub garden? He was vile."

"Of course I bloody well remember," Evelyn grumbled. "Don't get me wrong, Heather. Don't think I've gone soft in my old age or something. I want him dead. Him and every other mage even aware of me and my ... well, you and Raine and Praem and the others. Us. Aware of us. But priorities change. He's not worth risking a single hair on Praem's head, if that can be avoided."

I couldn't keep the stunned incredulity out of my voice. "You're suggesting we make a deal with him. In return for the book."

Evelyn let out a slow breath and squeezed her eyes shut. She was just as disgusted by this notion as I was.

"If I could cut off his hands and take out his tongue to render him harmless, I would," she said — as I privately shuddered at the memory of Zheng ripping out a mage's tongue, and the time she'd almost done the same to Kimberly. "No magic without *logos*. But I think that may be a little optimistic."

"If you say so."

"Edward Lilburne is dangerous. But so am I. So are we. He probably does not want to fight us any more than we want to fight him. We may be able to take advantage of that. That's all."

I shook my head in disbelief, cold vegetables turning to poison in my stomach. "But he wants Lizzie."

"He can't have her," Evelyn hissed. "That's not the kind of compromise I'm willing to make."

"Well, good!" I said. "Evee, do you really believe all this? You think we can end this without having to ... kill him?"

Evelyn stared at me for a long, long moment. She looked over at *Unbekannte Orte* on her desk, down at her bone wand, then over at her prosthetic leg, still standing squat and silent like a black sentinel watching over her vulnerable flesh.

"No," she said, voice flat. "Not really. But I have to suggest it anyway. The alternative could be worse."

I didn't have a reply for that. Evelyn was correct — we'd gotten lucky with Alexander, with his relative youth and his addiction to his own arrogance. She was, in the end, the only one of us who had fought a mage at the peak of their powers, and won.

I shoved another spoonful of cold curry into my mouth. "We're going to need all our strength," I muttered.

"Mm."

"Speaking of which, my left hand is still missing."

"Your left hand?"

“Zheng.”

= =

The following four days were slow and awkward in the extreme. So many loose ends, with no way to tie them together and no scissors with which to snip them off, neat and contained.

But at least I was home, though I’d brought the Outside back with me.

My squid-skull mask, so impossible and beautiful in its metallic glory, sat on the table in the magical workshop, as if waiting for my return, watching us from dark eye sockets. Every day I went and ran a hand over that smooth grey surface. I even settled it over my head a couple of times, staring out through the eye holes on an alien world. But I always took it off again and left it where it lay. I didn’t need it on Earth. Not yet.

“Later,” I whispered to it. Or to myself.

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Zheng did not return that night after Evelyn and I had our strategy talk, though I lay awake in bed listening for the telltale sound of the back door. Nor did she show up the following day, or the night I finally slept like normal, or the three days after that. Several times I stepped out into the back garden, hoping to find a pile of decapitated squirrel corpses on the patio. At least then I’d know she was out there. But I was always disappointed.

My eyes kept scanning the top of the garden fence in hope that she’d suddenly vault the boundary and come striding back into my life.

“Hey, Heather, I’m sure she’s alright,” Raine said to me one time, when I was standing and gazing through the window in the utility room. She knew what I was pining for, what I was worried about. She put her arm around my shoulders. “She’s just kinda irresponsible, you know?”

“I hope you’re right,” I murmured.

“Heeeeeeey, Zheng can handle anything.” Raine cracked a grin for me. “You told me she technically fought a building when you first met.”

"She did. But *Ooran Juh* is worse than a building. And that thing she was chasing, that weird skin-ghost that climbed out of Badger." I shook my head. "We don't even know what that was."

"Maybe it's just really good at running."

I sighed, worry curdling into anger. "I'm going to buy her a mobile phone and force her to carry it everywhere. No excuses. No cuddle privileges until she makes sure it's possible to contact her. I'm not having this happen again."

"You sound like Eevee," Raine said, not without a hint of admiration in her voice.

"Good."

= =

Evelyn sent Praem out into the city, twice, just to walk the streets and watch the shadows, well-protected with warding signs beneath her casual clothes, and armed with a compact tire iron under her skirt. Not that she needed the weapon. I was surprised; I hadn't pleaded or even prompted for this.

"Zheng is important to you," Evelyn explained when Praem returned the first time, as we pottered about in the kitchen warming ourselves with tea and biscuits. "However much I dislike her ... attitudes. And it's not as if I'm asking Praem to step into a magical pocket dimension or fistfight a monster. It's broad daylight out, she's got her phone, she knows what she's doing. And she's got strict instructions to come straight home if anything happens."

"I cannot be stopped," Praem intoned, turning her head to stare at her creator. Evelyn cleared her throat like a burst of machine gun fire, turning a little red around the ears.

"Eevee?" I asked.

Evelyn gestured at Praem. "I may have taken too much credit for this venture."

I blinked at Praem in surprise. "Oh. This was your idea?"

"Zheng. Cute gorilla," said Praem.

The threat calculation was not so simple the second time she came home, straight home, when something had happened.

“What do you mean you were *followed*?” Evelyn hissed at Praem in the front room, while Raine slipped out the door to check down the street, handgun tucked away in her leather jacket. “By who? Where? I want descriptions.”

But descriptions were useless, no matter how precise and accurate Praem always was. She’d been walking up the length of Sharrowford’s main high street, past the department stores and the entrance to Swanbrook mall, threading her way among the afternoon crowds, when two people had begun following her — a young woman with long black hair, and a diminutive teenage girl. The descriptions didn’t sound like anybody we’d seen before.

“Family resemblance,” Praem said.

“Tch, that doesn’t tell us anything,” Evelyn hissed, so agitated she’d started stomping back and forth, hitting the skirting board with the tip of her walking stick.

“More remnants of the cult, do you think?” I asked.

“Gotta be.” Raine clucked her tongue. She’d found nothing outdoors, nobody down the street. No trace. We all silently hoped Praem had lost them. “Hey, Praem, did those two jokers look strung out?”

“No,” Praem intoned. “Healthy. Alert. Confident.”

“Huh,” Raine grunted.

“Edward?” I whispered.

“Maybe,” Evelyn grunted. “Shit. I don’t know! I don’t know anything! We need to interrogate Badger about every single surviving member of the cult. We need them ... I don’t know. Rounded up. Dealt with. Made safe.”

“We hardly need to ‘interrogate’ him,” I said with a sigh. “I’m pretty sure he’ll happily tell us. Tell me, at least.”

I felt sick in my stomach at that prospect. I still hadn’t seen him again since the magical brain surgery. I didn’t want his thanks or his blossoming hero-worship.

“When does he get out of the hospital again?” Evelyn asked.

Raine wobbled a hand back and forth. “Operation to put a plate in his skull’s not until next week. Gotta plug that hole we made before

they can let him out, you know? Seemed pretty lucid when I took Sarika to see him yesterday. I could ask him, if you want? Get a list, names, descriptions, all that?"

"Lie to him," Evelyn said with a decisive nod. "Tell him Heather wants the names."

I resisted an urge to groan and sit on the floor. "I said it before and I'll say it again, we can't send all those people — ten more of them —"

"If they're still alive," Evelyn said.

"If they're still alive," I echoed, trying not to sound irritated. "We can't send them all to the hospital with trepanation wounds. That's going to draw attention. Even if I can do what I did, all over again, ten more times ... " My stomach clenched up at that idea. "Ten more staring contests? No, I can't."

"We don't have to help them all," Evelyn said. "We just want to stop them hunting us. I'm not sending Praem out again."

"You send me nowhere," Praem intoned, standing by the kitchen door.

Evelyn shot her a look, eyes hard, jaw clenched. "I am putting my foot down. You don't go out. Not alone. None of us do. The same rules I've always lived by."

"You send—"

"If you go out, I go with you," Evelyn spoke right over her. "I will follow you, I will bloody well hobble along. The whole way." She held the doll-demon's blank, milk-white gaze, level and serious and burning in both cheeks.

Praem did not go looking for Zheng a third time.

Evelyn was right though, however painful and awkward it was to admit the conditions we lived under. The remains of the Sharrowford Cult were still out there, Eye-haunted and desperate to deliver what it demanded of them — me. I had a way to help them, in theory, but no way to contact them until Badger was out of the hospital, until he could form a bridge back to the horror of their hounded and tortured existence, and let them know there was a way out. And Edward's men were out there too. God alone knew what he was up to.

So we began to settle back into an uncomfortable routine, with Raine escorting me to and from university, Praem going everywhere with Evelyn, and Lozzie unable to leave the house.

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Nicole Webb, our very own supernatural private eye, called Evelyn twice every day, to check in — to “radio base camp” as Raine put it. The documents she’d stolen from the offices of Edward’s lawyer hadn’t amounted to much yet, but there was so much more to sort through. Evelyn told her to keep digging, assured her she was on retainer for as long as it took, and reminded her to call twice every single day.

“Yeah yeah,” I heard Nicole affirm the instruction over the phone, as it lay on the table so we could all hear. “Just in case there’s a picture of a skeleton in here. Or a haunted photocopy, ooooooh.” She made a ghostly noise. “Miss Saye, this is a mother-lode of lawyer’s paperwork. There’s nothing spooky about it except how boring it is. Is that a symptom? Wanting to dig my eyes out with a spoon? Need to come exorcise me?”

“If you ask real nicely, Nicky girl,” Raine purred over Evelyn’s shoulder.

“You just try it, Haynes,” Nicole shot back. “I’ll give you a paper cut where the sun don’t shine.”

“Just call to check in,” Evelyn grunted. “Just in case. Every day. Understand?”

“As long as you’re paying, I’ll call in as often as you want,” Nicole said. “You’re the boss.”

“Twice a day is fine. Before and after you start, as agreed.”

“Please, Nicky,” I added over Evelyn’s shoulder too, on the opposite side to Raine. “I don’t want anything to happen to you. Just be safe, okay?”

Nicole sighed, heavily. A thump sounded down the phone. I suspected it was her head on her desk, confirmed by the muffled quality of her next words. “In case you lot can’t tell, I’m trying to stave off the creeps here. Don’t make it worse, hey? Trust me, if I see a single piece of paper somewhere I didn’t put it myself, I’ll be over at your place like my arse is on fire.”

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One person I didn't have to worry about was Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

She settled in surprisingly quickly, perhaps thanks to Praem's adoption of her cause, or maybe it was down to her nature as a narrative chameleon.

On that first night, the one I lay awake listening for Zheng, Sevens slunk back into my bedroom just past midnight, visibly exhausted from running about the house with Tenny, like a cat who had spent all day being chased by a good-natured puppy. But she didn't make a beeline for my side. She avoided me and made for the big armchair instead, perhaps because Raine was fast asleep with her arms around me. I whispered to Sevens in the dark, little secret entreaties to join me. But she only gurgled back and curled up in a blanket nest until the morning.

The next night I coaxed her into bed, beckoning with hands and tentacles alike. "Just for a cuddle?"

"Gurrrr?" she made a raspy gurgle in her throat, shoulders hunched as she was frozen at the foot of the bed like some silent movie apparition. Her eyes searched for permission — not from me, but past me, from Raine.

"Heather can cuddle who she likes," Raine said. Then she winked at Sevens.

"Rrrrrr-okay. Okay!"

Sevens slipped into bed with us, small and wriggly and cuddled up against my front, making soft raspy gurgles that were almost purring sounds. In the morning, she was still there.

I didn't ask Raine's permission for anything else; I wasn't certain I was going to do so. I didn't love Sevens. I had to keep reminding myself of that whenever I idly wrapped a tentacle around the back of her neck, or subconsciously stepped closer to her to compare our heights, or realised that if I really, really tried, with all six tentacles, I might just be able to pick her up.

"Kaaaaooo? Heather?" She shied away from me one time, when I'd been watching for twenty seconds without realising, gripped by an urge to grab her and — and what?

“Nothing,” I’d sighed, forcing myself to stop quivering. “Nothing at all.” I tried to ruffle her hair, keep it casual, like Raine does. But I was clumsy and inexperienced, and my hand lingered for a moment too long. She gurgled at me and bumped her head on my shoulder, just like a cat.

I didn’t love her. But I wanted to *play* with her. And that would have been deeply unfair to somebody who was so very in love with me.

Around the house, she wasn’t always by my side, which was a relief in more ways than one. She joined me for reading, for quiet moments together just relaxing, and made a point to request I read out loud to her — she wanted to learn my favourites. But she also spent a lot of time just lurking. We found her half-asleep in strange places, curled up in corners, on the kitchen counter tops, in the downstairs cupboard, not quite unconscious but not fully lucid either. She’d always be in the kitchen whenever one of us was cooking, or at least hanging around close by, red-and-black eyes peeking around a door frame. She watched people make their beds or do the laundry, she watched people eat, she watched Evelyn work through the doorway of the magical workshop.

“Vampire instincts,” Raine said with a laugh. “Ambush predator. Like a trap-door spider.”

“I think she’s just trying to learn more about us,” I said. “She doesn’t know how, not without her ... old techniques.”

She even watched Praem watch her in return.

“That is ... um, very ... very spooky,” Kimberly said. It was the first time she’d seen Sevens. Her introduction to the newest member of our household was Sevens and Praem, staring at each other across the kitchen while Evelyn tried to eat breakfast. Both of them were equally unblinking, for fifteen minutes.

“Maximum spooky,” Praem intoned.

Sevens flinched like a cat and scurried behind me. Kimberly flinched and probably decided the rest of us were as mad as ever.

To all our surprise, Sevens also spent a lot of time with Lozzie and Tenny.

Perhaps it was the crash course in tentacle babysitting, maybe it

was the video games, or perhaps it was the way she and Lozzie seemed to be able to hold actual conversations, which appeared to make full sense to both of them. More than once I heard them going on for hours, just a pair of blurred voices upstairs, one giggly and the other raspy.

Or maybe it was because she was the first person who could almost beat Tenny at chess. Almost.

Raine and I witnessed them play, on the fourth day after my return from Carcosa. Tenny actually had to pay attention; her usual distracted style could not prevail against Seven-Shades-of-Strategist's lightning-quick decision making. With great, staring concentration, Tenny eventually won every game, but only with all her tentacles whirling about as if the motion helped her to think.

"Silly vampire good," she trilled.

Sevens, to her credit, didn't seem to care about losing.

"Vampire stuff," she croaked, showing all her teeth. "Good at counting."

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Evelyn wasn't laughing when she found Sevens under her bed.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Ahhhhhh!" Sevens screech-rasped, arms over her head as Evelyn chased her out of the room and into the upstairs corridor. "It was comfy, I didn't mean anything by it! It was comfyyyy!"

Evelyn's shriek had already brought everyone else running to witness the moment — Sevens sprawled against the far wall, Evelyn looking like she wanted to run the blood-goblin through with her walking stick — but I'd already been in Evelyn's bedroom, and I just sighed at the whole thing.

We'd been about to keep our promise to each other, five days after our strategy meeting; we'd been all set up to watch some cartoons together, just the two of us, with Evelyn's laptop perched on the bed. Evelyn had been explaining in a very roundabout and obviously embarrassed way that what we were about to watch was technically for children, but I didn't mind — and then we'd heard the snuffling, sniffing snore from beneath the mattress.

And now it was all thrown to the wind in a near-melee in the

upstairs hallway. Tenny appeared and threw herself into the middle, though to protect Sevens or protect Evelyn, none of us were quite sure which. The air turned into a whirling mass of black tentacles. Raine tried to pick Sevens up. Sevens made a sound like a drainpipe and I later learnt that she bit Raine's shoulder — though not aggressively, just gently, for comfort; she didn't break skin. Kimberly took one look out of her bedroom door and closed it again.

"She's only protecting her new friend!" Lozzie protested.

"And I was only protecting the sanctity of my fucking bedroom!" Evelyn snapped.

"It was comfy!" Sevens rasped into Raine's shoulder, clinging on like a koala.

"She is being a very good girl!" Lozzie said. "Tenny, good girl!"

"Good girl!" Tenny fluttered.

"She is being a fucking nuisance—" Evelyn snapped. "No, not you, Tenny, not you—"

I only hung back for as long as I did because I was so disappointed; I'd really been looking forward to watching cartoons with her, and now Evelyn would be in a foul mood, even when this misunderstanding was dealt with. I hung back by her bedroom window, bathed in the orange of early evening, and I was about to step forward and help resolve the altercation, when I glanced out of the window, down at the garden.

A fox was sitting in the grass. Looking right up at me. A big, sleek, healthy fox.

"Oh," I said out loud. "It's you."

And then I felt that recognition, that sixth-sense familiarity, that knowing in my gut that she was close.

I was out of the room and past my shocked friends and would have tumbled headfirst down the stairs if it wasn't for my tentacles catching me on the banister. The argument slammed to a halt; Raine called after me; I didn't stop. I hit the front room and scuttled across the floorboards and burst into the kitchen just as Zheng got home.

“Shaman!” she roared by way of greeting. I scrambled to a halt, as if blasted by a foghorn. Even I sometimes forget how big she is.

She stood just inside the doorway from the utility room, dressed in coat and jeans and shapeless jumper, seven feet of gloriously filthy demon host side-lit by the sunset. Her hair was a rat’s nest and she badly needed a shower — I could smell her from across the room, like she’d been sleeping alternate nights in a landfill and a slaughterhouse slop-bucket. But she was intact and alive and grinning like mad.

“Zheng!” I couldn’t help myself, not at those sharp-edged eyes and red-chocolate skin, so familiar by now — but I recoiled from the stench. Behind me, the others were piling down the stairs, but for a moment it was just me and Zheng. “You ... you ... stink! Really badly, oh my goodness.”

“Hahaha!” she roared again. “I do!”

“Where have you been?! I’ve been ... well. Worried. Yes! Worried.”

Zheng’s grin dialled down as she heaved out a rumbling purr, satisfied and oddly pleasurable.

“Losing a tail, shaman,” she rumbled. “I am hunted, by a hunter every bit as skilled as I.”

“ ... *Ooran Juh*? Or ... something to do with Edward?”

Zheng shook her head, slow and smug. “No, shaman. One like me.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.8

Rarely had so few words sent a hand of ice running up my spine and birthed a writhing scorpion in my belly.

Zheng stood haloed by the early evening light flooding in through the kitchen and utility room windows, bathing her long coat and heavy boots in orange firelight, making her red-chocolate skin and dark thatch of hair glow with inner heat. And glow she did, through the undeniable savage glee on her face, the deep satisfaction in her purring exhalation, and the physical joy in the flex of her aching muscles.

She was in afterglow.

For a long moment I couldn't speak — and not solely because of the vile cloacal stench clinging to Zheng from whatever mad places she'd been sleeping all week. I was overwhelmed by rotten worms crawling through my veins and a band of steel expanding inside my chest, rusty hooks buried deep in the muscle of my heart. My throat was stopped up with black acid tar and my brain was full of angry wasps.

Zheng's joy flickered and faltered with a twitch of her eyebrows. I was too obvious.

"Shaman?" she rumbled.

"Like ... you?"

I cleared my throat but barely felt myself echo Zheng's words. Had to pull myself together. The others were clattering down the stairs behind me, they'd be in the kitchen in moments; Raine could read me like an open book even when I was trying to be subtle, she'd see this a mile away, like a forest fire.

"Like you?" I repeated. Zheng had met somebody like her? "Zheng, what ... what does that mean? Like you in what way?"

Savage enjoyment ripped back onto Zheng's face, revealing her

razor-sharp shark teeth clenched in a skull's grin.

Normally I loved that look on her. It stole my breath and set a squirming in the pit of my belly. But now I felt like a viper was biting my guts from the inside, filling me with venom.

Zheng's pleasure, respect, and joy — aimed at somebody else.

The others entered the kitchen behind me at last but I couldn't get a hold of myself. Evelyn clacked along with her walking stick while Raine squeezed my shoulder and nodded to Zheng. Praem waited by the door as Lozzie and Tenny skipped in, half-wrapped in each other. But then Tenny let out a loud trilling noise of olfactory offence, waving her tentacles up and down in a wave-like fan as if to waft away a bad smell. She pulled Lozzie with her as she retreated through the door again, dragging pastel poncho back with a clutch of black tentacles like a scene from a bad horror movie, made farcical by Lozzie going "Ooowoop!"

All other complaints were stilled by the religious intensity in Zheng's voice.

"A hunter like me, shaman," she was purring with the throat of a tiger. "A demon dredged from the darkest seas and crammed into human flesh. We tracked each other for days across brick and concrete, the equal of any deep forest. There are so many hidden places in any city, places to fight, places to hide. It has taken me the last two days just to lose the tail so I may return home." Her voice dropped to a hiss of awe and wonder. "Ahhhh, such skills. I almost could not escape. Shaman, you cannot know!"

"I suppose I can't," I murmured.

I did my best to hide my physical reaction, clutching my heart tightly and trying not to let the discomfort show on my face. I even forced myself to uncross my arms — though a moment later I found I'd crossed them again, subconsciously. Couldn't help it, closing myself off with a gesture. But pneuma-somatic flesh told my secrets to all those capable of seeing. I just prayed that Raine didn't get the bright idea to slip on those special 3D glasses Evelyn had made. The trilobe reactor in my abdomen had shed a control rod to ramp up energy production, and I didn't care enough to stop it; my tentacles had increased from two to four, first reaching toward Zheng but then clenching up tight around my own torso, the armour of self-embrace. My gums itched with a desire to sprout rows of sharp

teeth and I wanted to twist my throat into a screech.

Zheng didn't seem to notice. That made it worse.

I was *jealous*.

"There's a demon host out there?" Evelyn snapped as soon as the opening presented itself. "In Sharrowford, in the city? Right here in —" She broke off and coughed, grimacing as she waved a hand in front of her nose. "Ugh, bloody hell. That's coming from you? What the hell is that?"

Raine blinked several times; the stench was so bad it made her eyes water. "*Eau de* rotten cow carcasses left out in the sun, by the smell of her."

"Stink! Stinky!" Tenny yelled through the door from the front room, a noise like somebody shouting through an electric fan. A small canine whine joined her. Whistle did not approve of the odour either.

"It's really bad!" Lozzie added, giggling like the little maniac she was. For once, her laughter didn't help me.

"Yes, little wizard," Zheng purred with a toothy grin. She strode into the kitchen proper, rolling her neck and reaching for a chair.

"No," Praem intoned, sharp and sudden.

Zheng flicked her head to meet Praem's gaze.

"Filthy," Praem expanded. "Wash hands or touch nothing."

The staring contest lasted less than a second. Zheng broke first, looking away with resigned defeat.

She gave up on the chair and rotated her shoulders, working out the kinds of kinks that can only come from sleeping on hard, cold ground. "Yes, wizard. A demon host. Like me."

"And what's so special about this one?" Evelyn went on quickly, holding her nose. "You killed all the cult's zombies in that house where they did their ritual, what's different about this? Why have you been gone so long? And what happened to Orange Juice's skin-freak?"

Zheng let out a sound like the heart of a forge furnace, narrowing sharp eyes at Evelyn. As she did, Raine tilted her head in obvious

warning. I felt a pair of small, grasping hands worm their way into the fabric of my hoodie from behind — Sevens, almost as if on cue. She squeezed against me like I was a curtain wall between her and Zheng. Her hot little head pressed against my shoulder as she peered around me.

“Wizards,” Zheng growled contempt at Evelyn. “Always with the details. The what, the when, the where. Always making new boxes. Always—”

Zheng broke off and glanced at Praem again. Praem hadn’t said a thing. She hadn’t even moved. But Zheng rolled her eyes and curled her upper lip in distaste.

“Answer her,” I said, my voice about three shades too harsh. I cleared my throat and mentally slapped myself. “Please, Zheng. This is important.”

Zheng tilted her head at me with a curious twitch in her eyebrows. “Shaman?”

“It’s important!” I repeated, a bit shrill. “You can’t tell us there’s somebody like you out there and refuse to explain!”

“Yes, you killed plenty of zombies before,” Evelyn repeated herself too, shuffling over to the table. She nudged a chair out with her walking stick. Perhaps demonstrating her mutual contempt for Zheng, she sat down heavily, when Zheng was still not allowed to, stilled by our maid’s strict instructions. “What’s different about one more?”

Zheng stared at Evelyn, then broke into another giant, toothy grin, her irritation forgotten in the rapture of recent memory. “Those things were not like me, wizard. They were saplings. Single-digits old at best. Mad. Decaying.”

“They were enslaved,” I said, a cold lump in my throat.

“Yes, shaman!” Zheng roared for me. “But what I’ve duelled in this city was no zombie, no discarded shell filled with unwilling spark. One like me, a hunter in free flesh! No slave!”

“Fucking hell,” Evelyn hissed. “Unbound?”

Raine let out a low whistle.

“Uh oh!” Lozzie went, clearly not taking this at all seriously. Tenny

echoed her, a fluttery “Uuuuh oooooh!” coming from the front room, followed by a much quieter, “Stinky.”

“We can hardly talk,” I said with a tut. “Zheng is free and so is Praem.”

“Praem is Praem,” Evelyn said without missing a beat. “We raised her with love.” She paused and started to blush, then threw her arms wide so hard she almost brained Raine with her walking stick. “What?! We did! I defy anybody to define it differently. Even you!” She waved her walking stick past me. I glanced back to see Lozzie peeking around the door frame, a giggle hidden behind the end of one sleeve. “Praem may be almost unique among demon hosts. So there. And Zheng, well ... Heather vouches for Zheng.”

“You think we should all be bound, wizard?” Zheng rumbled, low and dangerous. Evelyn blanched but managed to meet her eyes.

“You should never have been enslaved in the first place.”

“Zheng was treated as human when she was brought to our reality. Treated with respect,” I said gently. I’d never explained Zheng’s exact past to Evelyn. That was Zheng’s business. “Maybe it’s not as rare as you think, Evee.”

Evelyn huffed and waved us to shut up. “Zheng. This is something made by Edward? An unbound demon host, in a human corpse, walking the streets of Sharrowford?” She shook her head. “He can’t be that desperate, he can’t be, that’s insane.”

“Ha!” Zheng barked a derisive laugh, like a fresh log thrown into a fire. “That worm would never free a slave. It’s not in him. Besides, he could never control something like that, not unshackled and free. You should have seen her, wizard! She is glorious!”

“*She?*” I hissed under my breath.

“And look what she left on my flesh!”

Without warning for sensitive constitutions, Zheng grabbed the hem of her own baggy, shapeless, grey jumper, and yanked it upward. My eyes almost popped out of their sockets as she revealed inch after inch of rippling abdominal muscle. Her bare chocolate-red skin was still marked by the winding, matted, indecipherable mass of her black binding tattoos, the layers of spell that had kept her bound and re-bound for centuries, now punctuated by gaps like

crop circles where I'd removed enough of it to free her. She pulled her jumper upward, exposing her iron-hard belly, the base of her rib-cage, and more, more than any of us was prepared to see, certainly not in the kitchen.

Evelyn coughed so hard it was like a steam explosion. Raine was laughing. Lozzie squealed with both hands over her mouth. Sevens made a weird little "gaa-urrrk" noise into my shoulder.

Of course, they were all just reacting to her breasts. Impressive, yes, but I'd seen those before.

I was staring at the bruises.

Six bruises were visible on Zheng's abdomen and chest, with the shadows of several more lurking up on her shoulders and collarbone, too far beneath the jumper for even her wild display to show off to us. They blossomed like dark flowers beneath her skin, some of them days old, turning yellow and green with the healing process, but others were fresh, shining purple and black. One bruise — at the base of her ribs — still showed the outline of a row of knuckles, small and neat.

Knuckle marks. On her flesh.

"I could not have stopped any of these blows!" She was raving on, showing all her teeth in a grin of pride. I tasted bile. "I gave as good as I got, but I could not stop her! I could not!"

Raine started a slow clap, shaking her head and grinning too. Evelyn cleared her throat again and muttered, "Put those away, bloody hell."

"I thought you were supposed to heal super fast?" Raine said. "Didn't you break both your legs saving Heather that one time?"

"Ahhhhh, little wolf, you remember well," Zheng purred, still flashing all of us. "But these wounds were earned! I deserve to feel their length and breadth. They heal at your rate, your monkey rate. There are good things about you monkeys, things worth being here for. Like these."

"Put your fucking tits away, for fuck's sake!" Evelyn huffed, tapping the table like she was mashing a 'close window' button.

Zheng just laughed. She turned to me with a grin like a teenage admirer showing off bruises and scrapes from some madcap attempt

to impress the object of her affections. She kept the jumper pulled up, presenting her trophies.

But I had nothing to say.

“... shaman?” Zheng rumbled after a heartbeat, grin flickering off.

“Hey, hold up a sec,” Raine said, vaguely sceptical, “I seem to recall the first time we met, I hit you with a baseball bat like, oh, maybe four or five times?”

“Six,” Zheng answered instantly. “You did well, little wolf.”

“You let those ones slow-heal too?”

Zheng nodded, dipping her head to Raine in a gesture of respect. Raine nodded back with momentary surprise.

“Yes, I’m sure your duelling scars are all very impressive,” Evelyn drawled. “But what you’re saying is there’s an unbound demon host who is your equal. Just wandering around Sharrowford.”

“Hunting,” Zheng purred. “She was hunting.”

Zheng finally dropped her jumper again, which was a relief for the rest of us, in various different ways — except for Lizzie, who let out a disappointed “Awww!” My beautiful demon host flexed her shoulders again, which I now understood was her trying to work out the stiff pain of the bruises she was refusing to heal.

“Hunting you?” Evelyn snapped.

Zheng shook her head. “*Ooran Juh’s* skin man was her prey. We hunted the same game. She beat me there but we met over the kill. I surprised her in the act of devouring the remains. From then, she hunted me, and I hunted her. We clashed twice.”

“And— and you didn’t kill her?”

Acid and spite.

It took me a moment to realise why everyone was suddenly looking at me — Evelyn with a frown, Raine with surprise, Praem’s head rotating on her neck to stare at me with milk-white eyes. I even felt Sevens looking up at me from down by my own shoulder. Only then did I realise I’d spoken.

The words had slipped out beneath my notice, barbed and hooked

with sarcasm. I sounded like Evelyn. One of my hands moved to cover my mouth in mortified shock, but I forced it back down. I was committed now. A twisted, bitter serpent in my chest bid me to stare right back at Zheng.

Zheng watched me with dark eyes. She didn't answer, but went very still, all except for the way she tilted her head slightly, like a big cat sizing up something that was neither prey nor pack-mate. I felt my throat bob as I swallowed, fighting off the need to cower like a mouse before a rattlesnake. Unfamiliar bitterness kept me standing straight even as I cursed myself for a complete fool. What was I doing?

She fought another zombie! I screamed at myself. *So what?!*

I was acting like an emotionally constipated thirteen year old with an unrequited crush — something I'd never done back when I was actually thirteen years old. Why couldn't I just say it out loud, tell her I was jealous? This was Zheng. She loved me to a disturbing and dangerous degree, so what was I afraid of? This was nothing, somebody she'd fought, a *zombie*.

A zombie she clearly admired.

I felt Sevens gently bite my shoulder blade through my hoodie, just a touch with her teeth, like a dog who didn't intend to break skin. Did she know? Could she tell?

"No, shaman," Zheng said eventually, unsmiling. "I could not defeat her."

I swallowed because I knew I was in deep. I'd given the game away, drawn my heart out to sit bloody and beating on my sleeve.

"Heather?" Raine murmured, reaching for my elbow. Seven-Shades-of-Shoulder-Goblin did a raspy purring noise directly into my side, into the back of my ribs, tiny hands curling around my hips. Under any other circumstances that would have drawn a squirming yelp from me and made me wriggle out of her grip, giggling. But right then all I did was frown and cough.

Zheng stared me down, hard and sharp, like a flint knife.

I'd been jealous before, of course, and just as equally without proper cause. Driven by social maladjustment and lack of experience and pure projection, back before Raine and I had

officially become a couple, I'd briefly thought Twil was a serious contender for her affections. I'd compared myself with the werewolf's effortless porcelain beauty and implied supernatural exoticism. I'd felt just as immature and stupid back then.

My reaction this time was different. It implied things about myself that I didn't like.

I didn't have time to unpack the tangled mess in my head, distill the cocktail that had gone into this moment — the time Zheng had been gone, my own guilt at picking up Sevens Outside, my worry for Zheng out in the city, and the sheer joy she was showing.

I'd never met this zombie she'd fought, but she had clearly *loved* the experience.

My four currently manifested tentacles were twitching and flexing, aching to reach over to Zheng and do — what? I was restrained only by the terrible stench of her right then, and the fact she was probably a walking biohazard. I wanted to hug her, roughly, too hard for her wounds, squeeze her tight and make her ache. I wanted to peel back her clothes and jab at those bruises to see how she would react, to inflict a little pain. If I'd been alone I would have put a hand over my mouth at that thought.

What am I thinking?! That's horrible. Heather, no!

I didn't have the right to think that way. I had *three girlfriends*. Well, two. Two and a half? Whatever it was, it wasn't simply monogamy. I didn't have a right to tell Zheng what she could and couldn't do. Did I?

Instead I forced down a deep breath and nodded to Zheng, pretending I was just shocked.

"You didn't win? Yes, you didn't win," I squeezed out. Didn't convince anybody, let alone Zheng. "It's just ... she must have been quite incredible to do that much damage to you."

I failed utterly at purging the scorn from my voice.

"Perhaps next time I will, shaman," Zheng answered, turning her head one way and then the other, examining me carefully. "And I will bring you her head."

I cringed. At least that was real enough. "No, no, please, you don't have to bring me anybody's head, Zheng. Please, that's not what I

want.”

“Mmm,” Zheng grunted. All her joyous good humour was gone. I’d ruined it.

“I was just so worried about you!” I blurted out. “And now you come back ... raving about having fun! For all we knew, *Ooran Juh* came back to finish you off and I wasn’t there to clean you up this time, or Edward captured you and hollowed you out, or you decided to go back to Siberia or something!”

That was a low blow. Zheng blinked, slowly.

“I was worried. Okay?” I finished, putting too much emphasis into my voice.

“Now you know how we all felt,” Evelyn muttered. I grimaced. Sevens did a little raspy purr into my back.

I was a coward, covering the truth with another truth. A different truth. I said nothing of the jealousy.

Zheng stared at me another second, then broke into a reborn grin. My heart creaked with rotten relief.

“I am here, shaman. I would not leave you.”

“Well!” I blurted out. “I’m going to buy you a bloody mobile phone! And you’re to carry it. Everywhere.”

Zheng blinked once like a big cat rolling in the sun, eyes drifting past me to Sevens, who was still peering around my side. Zheng tilted her head. “You’ve been Out, shaman.”

“Yes, well,” I huffed. “While you were hunting, we had kind of an experience. I spent a night Outside. It’s a long story, I’ll tell you later.”

My eyes were drawn with sudden magnetic pull to the open door of the magical workshop. My squid-skull mask sat on the table, pointed right into the kitchen as if watching us with blank eye sockets. I felt a deep need to walk over to it and drop it over my own head, to hide from difficult feelings, to wear the face of what I felt inside. Abyssal things and Outsiders didn’t have to deal with simple romantic jealousy. Or did they?

“Mmmmmmm,” Zheng purred. She tilted her head to follow Sevens as the little blood-goblin slid further behind my back, until only one

black-and-red eye showed around my flank. She poked her tongue out at Zheng, just a quick flicker, but enough to make Zheng tilt her head the other way in response.

“Can we please not keep getting so far off topic that we get lost in the woods?” Evelyn grumbled, tapping the side of the kitchen table with her walking stick. She waved her other hand in front of her nose again. “This is important information and I need it all. But you smell like an open cesspit and you need hosing down with bleach. Please?”

“Sorry, Eevee,” I sighed, trying to pull myself back together.

“Wizard, I have told you all that matters,” said Zheng.

“You told me you found a demon host eating the remains of something spawned by the fat orange juice man. That is a *nightmare*. What does that even mean? Was she physically eating it?”

“Mm. The whole thing,” Zheng grunted. “I let her finish.”

Raine laughed and slapped her knee. Evelyn put her face in one hand and looked like she wanted to scream.

“That may not have been optimal,” I said gently.

“Fucking great,” Evelyn hissed. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“Means she was one hungry, hungry hippo,” Raine said. Evelyn gave her a look that could have made concrete crumble.

“She made the kill,” Zheng said. “She earned the right.”

Evelyn’s look got worse. “And you didn’t think that maybe, perhaps, letting somebody you apparently respect eat something that originated with the big fat fucking orange juice bastard, you didn’t think that was a bad idea? That maybe you should, you know, stop her? Warn her?” Evelyn shrugged with her hands and then slapped the table. “I swear, I am surrounded by morons.”

Zheng bared her teeth and growled low in her throat. “She ate *it*. Not the other way around.”

“And you have a lot to learn about germ theory, apparently,” Evelyn said.

“Did you speak with her?” I asked, my throat tightening at the thought of Zheng swapping words with this unknown demon out there in the city. *Yes, I sighed at myself privately, I’m sure they whispered sweet nothings in between punches.*

Then again, maybe they had done. Zheng was like that.

She shook her head. “We sized each other up, shaman. We communicated, but we did not speak. We needed only fists and feet, and the poetry of the hunt across many days. There is a deeper communication in the hunt, but usually it is only one way. This time — this time it was both ways.” She drew in a great breath and let it out slowly, grinning that slow, satisfied grin again. I swallowed a mouthful of bile.

“How’d you lose her?” Raine asked. “You said you spent the last two days losing a tail. You didn’t lead her back here, right?”

Zheng shot a very sharp-eyed look at Raine, her grin momentarily frozen. “Would I put the shaman at risk, little wolf?”

“Nah.” Raine shook her head. “I trust you.”

“I hid in places beyond self-respect,” Zheng said.

“So that’s why you reek,” Evelyn muttered.

“Smelly smells smell smelly!” Tenny called — from even further back in the front room than before. Zheng’s pigsty stench was spreading.

“And I had help to draw her off,” Zheng continued. “An unexpected companion. A—”

“Oh!” I said. “The fox!”

I felt myself light up with a genuine smile, toxic jealousy briefly forgotten. Everyone else was going through some variation of frowning at either me or Zheng and repeating “the fox?” like I’d spoken a foreign language. Even Tenny trilled “foooooox?” from the front room. But Zheng nodded slowly at me in a moment of shared understanding.

“That was how I knew Zheng was home,” I explained, crossing the kitchen in a hurry so I could peer out of the window and into the back garden.

Sevens’ little hands managed to stay clinging to me, forcing us both

into an awkward waddle, but I was so excited that I shook her off without thinking. I leaned over the sink, craning my neck to see if the fox was still sitting on the sun-soaked grass beneath the skies of dying orange. But the animal was gone, nowhere to be seen as I scanned the garden.

"The fox," I was explaining, "Evee's fox."

"It's not *my* fox," Evelyn grunted. "And what's it still doing in the city? Shouldn't the damn thing have gone back to Sussex? However it got here in the first place."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Evee," I tutted, craning my neck to look along the fence. But there was no sign of the fox. "She wants to help, she—"

"Gaawwaaaaoooo!"

Sevens let out a noise half malfunctioning toilet flush and half velociraptor with blocked sinuses, loud enough to make me jump and spin.

"Hey hey hey hey—" Raine was shouting.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Evelyn hissed.

"Bad Zheng!" Lizzie shouted past Tenny, who was emitting a noise like a lawn mower made of feathers and turning the kitchen doorway into a wall of whirling black tentacles.

Zheng had Sevens by the head.

One massive hand was tangled in Sevens' lank, dark locks, Zheng's long fingers holding her skull with a grip like an iron vise. Zheng peered at her with all the curious interest of a panther with a small animal pinned beneath her paws. Sevens responded with rasping and keening through her teeth, baring those sharp little needle-points at Zheng. She hunched her shoulders, twisting her body to present the smallest possible target, but she didn't try to pull away. She knew she was trapped.

"Zheng!" I snapped. "Zheng, stop!"

But Zheng ignored me. Had I irritated her, crossed some barrier earlier? She turned Sevens' head one way, then the other, looking at her from both sides. Then she leaned in closer and closer, until she was inches away from Sevens' face. Sevens raised both hands with

her fingers hooked like claws, a *hiiiiiiirrrrrkkk* sound rising in her throat, a rattlesnake warning through a drainpipe.

Zheng sniffed her, shifted position, sniffed her again, then straightened up.

“Leech,” Zheng grunted. “Hnnnh.”

“It’s Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight,” I explained. “That’s just a mask. A form. She’s only a vampire right now. And not really.”

Zheng stared at Sevens and Sevens gurgled back, one long noise like a very angry lizard.

“Not really a bloody vampire at all,” Evelyn hissed.

“Yellow leech, then,” Zheng purred.

“You fucking reek!” Sevens rasped at her. “Let go!”

“Poor girl’s gonna need her hair washed after this,” Raine said. “Your hands have gotta be filthy, Zheng.”

“She’s also mine,” I said, with unexpected steel in my voice.

Slowly, Zheng’s gaze slid sideways, to meet my eyes. Sevens pulled in her grip, but Zheng’s fingers were too strong to escape.

“Property?” Zheng purred.

“Well,” I huffed. “I don’t own her, if that’s what you mean, but she’s mine. We’re close. She’s a bit like you, now, Zheng.”

I hadn’t intended to imply so much confrontation or channel so much unexplained bitterness, but Zheng seemed to accept my explanation. She turned back to Sevens, gave her one big, toothy flash, then finally let her go.

But Sevens was not content to retreat and lick her wounded pride. As soon as Zheng loosened her grip, Sevens twisted like a ferret, gathering herself in a crouch and bouncing up with ankles like springs. The balls of her feet left the floor for one glorious airborne moment as she sank her teeth into Zheng’s hand.

“Uunnh!” Zheng grunted, actually surprised by how fast and rubbery Sevens had moved.

Seven-Shades-of-Sneaky-Snap didn’t hang on like a dog with a stick, but let go quickly, hitting the floor and scrambling back. She

squeaked and rasped and knocked over a chair with a great clatter on the flagstones, which made Evelyn wince and Tenny go *pppbbbt!* Sevens slid behind me and clung to my back like a cowering dog, then ruined the effect by peering over my shoulder at Zheng and sticking her tongue out.

Zheng raised her injured hand and stared at the wound with mild interest. The bite had gone deep, sliced flesh to ribbons. Blood dripped down her hand and wrist and onto the floor.

“Oh, great, thank you,” Evelyn said. “Thank you for adding literal blood on the floor to the stench you already brought in.”

“The leech bit me, wizard, not the other way around.”

“Oh come off it, big girl,” Raine said. “That was your fault. You gonna be keeping that wound?” she nodded at Zheng’s hand, but it was already rapidly healing, the blood slowing to a trickle. Not quite as fast as Twil, but fast enough to look entirely unnatural.

I twisted my head to check Seven’s face around my shoulder. Her little pink tongue was busy licking Zheng’s blood off her lips. It smelled of iron and cinnamon.

“Um, do we have to deal with ... vampire implications, here?” I asked. “Is Zheng ... in danger?”

“Nah,” Sevens rasped, staring at Zheng with a sullen expression. “Got you good. Why don’t you keep it? Don’t I count?”

“You cheat, leech,” Zheng purred.

“Not anymore,” Sevens replied.

“Okay, new rule,” I said very loud and very clear, putting my hands on my hips — that dislodged Sevens briefly, so I could make my point. “Anybody who wants to spend the night in my bed is not allowed to bite each other, grab each other by the hair, or otherwise physically assault and harass each other. Do I make myself clear?” I tried to stare equally at both Zheng and Sevens.

“She started it,” Sevens rasped.

“Mm. I did,” said Zheng.

“I mean if biting or hair grabbing are both out ... ” Raine pulled a very theatrical shrug. I blushed beetroot red and stared her down, but she just pointed a finger gun at me. “You’re out too.”

Praem was staring at the fallen chair. Sevens slid entirely behind me, but Praem did not goad her out with a silent look. She transferred her attention to Zheng instead.

Zheng stared back. Praem did not relent.

“She knocked the chair over,” Zheng rumbled.

Praem continued to stare.

“Hnnnnnggghhh,” Zheng sighed, then bent to pick the chair up.

“No,” Evelyn snapped. “No, stop touching things. You’re practically carrying cholera.”

“Dirty,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn jabbed a finger at Zheng. “You need a bath. No, scratch that, you need to go in an autoclave.”

“Filthy,” said Praem.

“You don’t order me, wizard.”

“No, but I do,” I said with a sigh. “You are filthy right now, Zheng, that much is true.”

“Disgusting,” Praem carried on. Zheng shot her a sour look.

“You need to be cleaned,” Evelyn said. “Scrubbed. Sanitised. And then you and I are going to talk about your zombie friend out there in the city and figure out what to do.”

“Vile,” Praem added.

“We, wizard?” Zheng rumbled. “This is my duel. I am home for the sake of the shaman’s heart, not for you, not for—”

“Long black hair,” Praem intoned. “Ponytail. Green eyes. Six foot five. Mid-to-late twenties. Jogging bottoms, red with white stripe. Grey hoodie. Favours left leg.”

We’d all heard the details before, of course, but it was such a non-sequitur that we all paused to look at her; all except Zheng, who stared with eyes gone wide and mouth open in shock. I’d never seen her so shaken.

Praem stared back, milk-white and unreadable, hands folded neatly in front of her long skirt.

“ ... how do you know that?” Zheng hissed eventually.

“Instrument case on her back,” Praem carried on. “Hard-shell. Guitar. Likely does not contain guitar.”

Zheng’s lips peeled back from her teeth in wordless rage.

“Ah,” Evelyn said as realisation dawned.

“Praem knows your friend too, right?” Raine asked.

“The other,” Praem continued. “Black hair. Short bob. Green eyes. Four foot ten. Teenager, perhaps fifteen or—”

“What *other*!?” Zheng roared.

“You did not see the other,” Praem intoned. “I did.”

“Praem’s mysterious stalkers the other day,” Evelyn said with a tone of resigned finality. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, exhausted by the confluence of our troubles. “Shit. An unbound demon and ... what? Her mage handler? Her charge? Her younger bloody sister?”

“There was—” Zheng sputtered. “There was only one! I saw only one! And she was free! She was!”

Evelyn shook her head. “We don’t know what you saw.”

“*Vultures will be here soon*,” I murmured. A chill went up my back, raising the little hairs on my neck, and my bioreactor could do nothing to combat this cold. Everyone looked at me, all pinched frowns and polite curiosity and concerned eyes. I cleared my throat, feeling as if I’d been possessed for a moment. “Edward Lilburne said that to us. Remember? He said it with a false mouth over his own, but that was him speaking those words. Maybe he was right.”

Raine nodded. “Back at the meeting in the pub garden.” She puffed out a long sigh.

“There’s no power vacuum,” Evelyn said, but her voice did not carry true conviction, ruined by a hard swallow. “There isn’t. I’m here.”

“I think the vultures are here regardless, Evee,” I said. “Sharroford’s cracks are filling up with monsters.”

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The argument only got worse after Zheng emerged from the bath.

With nothing but silent stares, Praem made it crystal clear that Zheng was not stepping one foot further into the house while smelling like she'd been rolling in pig urine. Zheng began to angrily strip her clothes off and dump them in a heap on the floor. We all scurried out of the kitchen and upstairs — or in Evelyn's case, into her magical workshop, along with Tenny, much to her and everyone else's confusion, but Tenny seemed to like it. Praem stayed to supervise the biohazard safety protocols. I would have stayed to watch too; with Zheng in any other state, I would have quite enjoyed the sight of her ripping off her clothes in frustration, but even I have limits. She smelled so bad it made me gag.

While a very large and very naked Zheng stomped upstairs to sit and fume in the bathtub, Praem stuffed the fouled clothes into the washing machine and placed Zheng's boots in a bowl of warm soapy water for special attention. She did something esoteric with the washing machine, too. Not only did it display three red lights like she was about to overload an engine, but when the wash cycle finished the panel lit up with a flashing orange warning LED.

"Um, Praem," I called when I noticed the flashing. "Is this safe?"

"She canne' take it, captain," Raine said, laughing.

"Please leave the room," Praem told us as she bustled in.

We did, and Praem closed the door to the utility room. Eight full minutes passed before she emerged again, but the dryer was thumping around with Zheng's wet clothes inside and nothing was amiss, no scorch marks on the ceiling or burns on Praem's hands or puddle of acid eating through the floor tiles.

"Praem, what?" I asked, boggling at her.

Praem just stared back.

"I suspect we're better off not knowing," Evelyn grumbled from the doorway to the magical workshop. "Just don't break the washing machine, please. That's an extra headache we don't need."

"You live in merciful ignorance," Praem intoned. Then she turned with a spin of her maid dress and marched off to continue dumping hot water over Zheng's head.

In the interest of hygiene and health, I gave Sevens' hair and scalp a

wash as well, where Zheng had touched her. She complained like a cat forced under the cold tap, gurgling and rasping and whining the whole time, though all I did was have her bend over the tiny tub in the downstairs bathroom so I could direct the cheap rubber-hose shower-head replacement at her skull. And I used nice hot water too.

“Mouthwash,” I said afterwards, handing her the bottle.

“Nurrrrgh?” She pouted at me from beneath the towel over her wet hair.

“You bit her, Sevens. She was filthy. You have no idea what was on her skin, and frankly I don’t want to find out. That mouth isn’t coming anywhere near me until it’s cleaned out. Now swish with the mouthwash or I’ll brush your teeth for you.”

“Nnnnnnn, should be cheating this,” Sevens whined. But she used the mouthwash, though she did pull a face after spitting it out.

By the time Zheng climbed out of the bath and stalked downstairs like a panther who’d been caught in a thunderstorm, we had all reconvened in the magical workshop — except Lozzie and Tenny, because Lozzie didn’t like to think about these things too much, and Tenny sensed her mild distress so went to play video games with her. Zheng had borrowed a pair of Raine’s jogging bottoms, almost too small for her hips and backside, and made do with a pair of towels draped over her shoulders, which made it a little difficult to take her seriously despite the topic of conversation. With a sulk on her face, Praem drying her hair, and her skin smelling of soap and spice, she reminded me of a large dog after a forced bath.

“This is mine, wizard,” she was rumbling at Evelyn over the map of Sharrowford spread out on the workshop table.

Evelyn had cleared away notes and books and magical detritus to make room for the full-size ordnance survey map. It was the same one she’d once used to mark the locations of the Sharrowford Cult’s miniature pocket dimensions, spacial loops, and dead-end traps. Streets and buildings were outlined in looping red, whole swathes of the city were dominated by Evelyn’s neat handwritten notes, and area after area was marked off with big black X symbols — loops closed by Praem, many months ago now.

She’d not known what to do with my squid-skull mask, so I was

cradling it in my arms and resisting the urge to put it on.

Evelyn banged the map with the head of her walking stick, trying to lose her temper, but even her lips twitched at the sight of Zheng sitting in a chair with Praem drying her hair.

“*Wizard*,” Zheng rumbled a warning.

“This is deadly serious,” Evelyn said with a cough. “If this was just one random zombie out there in the wilderness, well ... I still wouldn’t like it. But I cannot police everything that goes on in Sharrowford, that’s obviously beyond me. Beyond us. And what’s the point, anyway?” She let out a strangely sad sigh.

“What happened to ‘your city’?” Raine asked with a smirk.

“Shut up before I shove my walking stick down your throat,” Evelyn said, but for once her tone of voice didn’t match her words, though I tutted and rolled my eyes all the same. “If this was just a zombie, fine, Zheng can throw herself at it all she likes.”

“No she can’t,” I corrected gently but firmly.

Zheng glanced over her shoulder at the tone in my voice, eyes sharp as knives around the edge of the towel as Praem dried her hair. Her look went right through me. I held her gaze but almost faltered, wrapped in my tentacles as a bulwark against scrutiny. Did she pick up on the possessive taint in my words, or had I successfully concealed the truth behind my concern for her safety?

“What if you don’t win?” I forced myself to say.

Zheng shrugged. “That is part of hunting.”

Praem finally finished drying Zheng’s hair and stepped back, revealing Zheng’s dark mop sticking up in all different directions. I sighed with affection and jealousy and a deep pang I didn’t understand and didn’t want to acknowledge. Why did I feel this way? I didn’t want her to go out and meet this demon host again, not unless it was with me at her side.

Was I worried for her safety, or that she might leave me?

The only person capable of unravelling that question for me was currently sitting with her legs curled up beneath her on a chair, wrapped in my yellow robes like a blanket, staring at the map on the table and moving her head side-to-side like a cat trying to figure

out an optical illusion. If Sevens had any supernatural insight into my internal struggle, she wasn't letting on.

No more cheating applied to me too, I guess.

Did it apply to Zheng? I almost laughed at the terrible double-meaning.

But externally I extended a peace offering. As Praem stepped back and folded the towel over her arm, I went to Zheng. I followed pure instinct and sort of hugged her from behind, awkward with the skull-mask in one hand. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders with my head against the furnace-heat of her neck, nuzzling her and sighing with the shared contentment of skinship. One of her hands came up and spread fingertips through my hair. Only when I was fully committed did I realise I was quite literally draping myself over her, like a bad noir-movie temptress. I went a bit red in the face, gave her an extra squeeze, and straightened up, clearing my throat. Only Raine caught my embarrassment, eyebrows raised in private jest.

Zheng watched me rise, eyes vaguely sullen as she let me go.

"I don't want you to get hurt," I told her. "You know that. We've been over this, Zheng. You matter to me."

"... nnnnnn," she rumbled. "Shaman, you cannot stop me hunting."

"Can't you stick to squirrels? I'll even eat one, if you cook it."

She snorted. Neither denial nor acknowledgement. She turned from me, and I knew that was the last word on the subject.

"As I keep trying to say," Evelyn repeated herself with a note of irritation, "if this was one stray zombie from God alone knows where, that would be one thing. But the companion who shares a family resemblance with her, that implies something else, but I don't understand what." Her voice tightened. "Besides, they followed Praem."

"There was no other," Zheng rumbled.

"Says you," Praem intoned.

"We don't have time for this, Eevee," I protested. "You said it yourself, you can hardly be expected to follow up everything that happens in the city. Perhaps they don't even concern us, perhaps

they've already moved on now Zheng gave them the slip. Perhaps they have nothing to do with Edward Lilburne at all."

"Heather's got a point," Raine added from her chair. She was leaning back with her feet against one of the table legs. She risked Praem's wrath if she put them on the table itself. "We don't want to open more fronts."

"Fronts," Sevens rasped to herself, thinking as she stared at the map.

Evelyn tapped the map as well. "Just tell me all the places you met the zombie. I won't ask you to track her for me if—"

"This is *mine* wizard," Zheng rumbled, voice turning angry, dangerous enough to make Evelyn flinch and go pale. "How many times?"

"None," Praem intoned, stepping into Zheng's line of sight.

"Why is this our responsibility—" I started to say.

"Whoa, down girl," Raine interrupted.

"This is my hunt, there was no other—"

"Was too," Praem countered.

"Rrrrr-rrrr—rrrrr," Sevens started to growl at all the noise.

I tried to raise my voice. "I don't see why we should—"

Slam.

Evelyn lifted her walking stick and slammed it down across the table with an almighty crack against the wooden surface. I jumped, Raine did a performative flinch, Zheng and Praem didn't react except to shut up, but Sevens squawked like a parrot with a sore throat and fell out of her chair. I quickly went over to help her up.

"They. Followed. Praem," Evelyn said, loud and slow, as if we were all stupid and hard of hearing.

Her eyes blazed, daring defiance as she looked at each of us — even Zheng was not spared. But nobody spoke up, so Evelyn took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"We are still waiting for Miss Webb to get back to us about the documents she stole on our behalf," Evelyn continued, more calm

but not less angry. “There is nothing else we can do in the meantime. We are waiting. And they followed Praem.”

“We understand, Eevee,” I said, and she nodded at me, distracted.

“At the very least, I want these people found and ruled out as a threat,” she carried on. “And you.” She jabbed her walking stick at Zheng. “You can go out and get yourself killed if you want. I’d rather you don’t, because bless her mad heart, Heather loves you. And I care about her wellbeing. If you get yourself killed and she has to grieve for you, so help me God, I will move heaven and Earth to put you back in that body so I can hang you upside down and have Praem beat you.” Evelyn paused, shaking slightly with emotional effort. Zheng opened her mouth on a rumbled reply, but Evelyn tapped the table and pointed at the door to the kitchen. “Out.”

Zheng twisted her head, raising her chin. A big cat denying that any had the ability to command it.

“You want to hunt, then fucking go and do it,” Evelyn snapped. “This is a war room, we’re planning. Get out. Unless you’re staying to help.”

Slowly, with all the airs and graces of a neolithic monarch on her throne of stone, Zheng crossed her arms and lapsed into sullen silence.

I breathed a private sigh of relief — and felt such terrible guilt. I’d not had to step in to put my foot down. Evelyn’s words had spared me having to inflict the horrible indignity on Zheng of forcing her to forgo her passions. But that was just cheating. I still got what I wanted. Zheng, all mine. The victory did not taste sweet.

“So,” Raine broached into the awkward silence, swinging her feet to the floor with a double tap of rubber on floorboards. “How exactly are we proposing to find these two mystery ladies?”

Evelyn nodded, eyes going to Zheng again.

“Mmmmm,” Zheng rumbled, head wobbling from side to side. “I could not track the demon without being tracked in return. She is too good.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?” Evelyn asked.

“Couldn’t,” Zheng replied, just the wrong side of angry.

I cleared my throat, hoping to forestall another blow-up. “You said yourself, Eevee, they followed Praem. They might do so again, or follow any of us, perhaps.”

“Praem? No.” Evelyn shook her head. “I’m not using her as bait.”

Praem turned to stare at Evelyn.

“*Nobody* gets used as bait,” Evelyn clarified.

I sighed. “That’s all well and good, Eevee, I agree, but—”

“Sevens?” Evelyn asked.

“Blrugh?” Sevens made a sound that involved sticking her tongue out halfway. “I don’t even know these people.”

“Fine,” Evelyn huffed, staring at the map again. “We can’t use anybody as bait, anyway. I don’t like the idea of approaching this pair in the street, not if they’re operating out in the open. They’ll be protected in some fashion. We need a way to surprise them when they’re vulnerable, but to do that we need a way of tracking that doesn’t involve Zheng, apparently. How about—”

Knock knock!

The knock on the front door was somehow both jaunty and full of energy. The whole room paused to stare into the kitchen, where the single window showed that night had fallen while we’d been speaking. Raine stood up and reached inside her jacket, drawing her handgun.

Knock-knock, knock-knock-knock.

Zheng rose too, still draped in towels. I found my mouth had gone very dry. Praem began to move and stepped into the kitchen, going for the front door.

“I hope you’re right about losing that tail, big girl,” Raine shot back as she hurried on Praem’s heels.

Zheng rumbled with wordless irritation.

In moments we were all in the front room, all except Evelyn who stayed in the kitchen doorway, going white in the face. Sevens peered around her. All around us the house itself seemed to hold its breath. Praem waited by the door, watching in silence as Raine hopped up the stairs to check who was waiting on the doorstep.

Zheng sniffed at the door frame, frowning — then breaking into an amused grin just as Raine came barrelling back down.

“It’s fine, it’s fine!” Raine called out, putting her gun away and going for the door.

“Don’t open it!” Evelyn hissed. “What if—”

But Raine was already there, sliding back the bolts and unlocking the latch. She threw the door wide on the warm night air, letting in a streetlight glow, the scent of dry grass, and a very confused looking werewolf.

“Uh?” went Twil.

Her big grin froze at the sight of all of us standing there to greet her. She probably hadn’t expected almost the entire household at once.

“Oh,” I breathed a sigh of relief, my tentacles relaxing. “Twil, it’s you. Hello!”

“Hey,” Raine said, “you came at a weird moment.”

“Disappointing,” Zheng rumbled and turned away.

“Be nice,” Praem intoned.

“Uhhhhhh,” Twil said again, eyes searching past the rest of us for Evelyn. “We said I was gonna come over? When like, the last exams were out? Which was ... today? So here I am?”

Evelyn let out a huge sigh, shaking slightly with adrenaline as she passed a hand over her face. “Yes, yes. I forgot. I ... yes.”

Twil crept over the threshold, looking sheepish. “Something going down?”

“Speak of the devil and she shall appear,” Evelyn muttered.

“Oh,” I said. My eyebrows climbed as I met Evelyn’s look.

“Devil? Eh?” Twil frowned at us.

“Twil,” Evelyn said with a formal clearing of her throat. “It seems we have need of your nose.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.9

Twil's nose was fast, her feet were faster, and her mind was sharp as a knife — however emotionally dense she could seem at times.

She was back thirty-six hours later, at the crack of dawn.

“Mages and witches, deadites and ditches! Motherfuckers, screwballs, and two types of squid-girl! My favourite little lady—”

Lozzie squealed in surprise and delight as Twil literally swept her off her feet, spun her through the air, and placed her back down with a flourish, unsteady and blushing hard. Lozzie flapped about in her borrowed pajamas, chest heaving like she was on the cover of a bad romance novel. Tenny trilled a mildly offended “Not squiiid,” but Twil was too hyped up to pay attention to the correction. She was already turning back to the kitchen table, where Evelyn, Raine, and myself all sat blinking at her in the watery morning light.

“Psychos and wizards and maids and all the rest!” she went on — then hesitated when she gestured at Sevens lurking behind my chair, eating a piece of overcooked bacon with her bare hands. “And ... whatever the hell you are, shine on you weird little goblin!”

“Oh my god,” Evelyn grumbled like a dying engine, a spoonful of cereal halfway to her mouth. “Who let her in here at this ungodly hour of the morning?”

“You did,” Praem said in a sing-song voice.

“You did, dumba, you gave me a key! Ba-dum-bum-bum!” Twil drummed on the kitchen table, shaking the breakfast things. Raine was beside herself with laughter. I could only stare; we hadn't seen Twil this animated in ages, certainly not when she'd turned up on our doorstep the evening before last, and found herself press-ganged into helping us hunt mysterious zombies. “And guess what, buckaroos?”

“You're running away to join the circus?” Evelyn said, still groggy

from waking up not twenty minutes ago. “Twil, you’re meant to be out looking for those—”

“I have found your bitches!” Twil announced.

She spread her arms, took a bow, and slapped her backside right down into a waiting chair. Then she whipped off her blue-and-lime coat, tossed it onto another chair, and put her feet up on the table, trainers in the air. She showed us all her pearly white teeth in a smug grin. Twil was entirely human right then, no trace of the ghostly wolf-form laid over her flesh, but there was more than a touch of wolfish pride on her face.

“Now where’s my goddamn rotisserie chicken?” she said.

“Feet,” Praem intoned. “Off table.”

“Oop!” Twil grimaced so hard it made me splutter with laughter and cover my mouth. She whipped her feet off the table, nodding apologies to Praem.

“Sorry! Sorry, sorry, got carried away. Carried away. Can you blame me though?”

Praem did not answer, too busy spraying that part of the table with dettol and wiping it down, lest an invisible crumb of dirt had fallen from Twil’s all-too-clean white trainers. Twil settled back instead, smoothing her white hoodie over her belly with animalistic satisfaction.

“You’ve found them?” Evelyn asked, squinting and frowning through bleary eyes. Morning was not kind to her.

“You gone deaf while I was busy?” Twil shot back, grinning a shit-eating grin. “Yeah, damn right I found them! Who’s the best tracker in the whole world? Who? Ooooh, is it this lass? Is it me?” She pointed her index fingers at her own face, pumping her hands up and down.

“Oh, Twil, well done!” I said with a sigh of relief. I’d been uncomfortable with this entire endeavour, guilty about what we’d forced her into, worried it would go wrong, but her sheer exuberance was rubbing off on me. Twil was not my type, but it was difficult not to respond to a beautiful person being so full of energy.

Without thinking what I was doing, I started to give her a little

round of applause. Lozzie joined in. Tenny slapped her tentacles about.

“Twil, don’t take this the wrong way,” Raine said, trying to keep a straight face, “but you didn’t do a line of coke for breakfast this morning, right?”

“No! Fuck you!” Twil said, but in good humour. “Aren’t I allowed to be proud?” She tapped her own chest through her white hoodie, then clicked her fingers and pointed at Zheng, who was watching with badly concealed interest from the doorway to the magical workshop. “You’re shit at this, miss walking dead. They were easy. You had my number back in the woods, but you ain’t got nothing on me when I’m on my own. Lean and mean, unfettered!” She slapped the table again. “Now where’s my chicken?”

“She didn’t see you, *laangren*?” Zheng rumbled, unamused. “She did not track you back here?”

“Not a chance,” Twil said, almost purring. “They didn’t see me even once, not even—”

“*They*,” Zheng hissed through her teeth, like wind through a wall of knives.

“Yeah, neither of them!” Twil carried on, though I was wincing. “Not even when I got literally like eight feet away from the tall one. They’re not actually any good at tracking or losing a tail. You’ve just lost your touch.”

“Mmmm,” Zheng growled, lips twisting.

Evelyn cleared her throat. “All that means is the unidentified demon host was able to track Zheng because of her nature. One demon host recognising another, not a skilled hunter.”

Zheng’s eyebrows drew together, uncertain if she should be relieved or offended.

“It just means you recognised each other, Zheng,” I said out loud. “Not that there was anything special happening. Nothing like that.”

Zheng stared at me for a second, then shrugged. I felt a twist of guilt in my chest, but there was no time to examine that now.

“Hey, where’s the dog?” Twil asked, peering about under the table.

“Whistle sleeps late,” Tenny informed her. “He sleepy. Sleeeeeeep.”

“You really did find them?” Evelyn asked Twil, taking a delayed bite of cereal and then speaking around it. “You’re not just having a laugh?”

“Course I really found them!” Twil tutted at her. “What do you take me for, a con woman?”

Evelyn waved her off, waking up as her curiosity warmed. “And, what did you find? Did you see what they’re up to? Where they live?”

“The little one and the big one,” Twil said with a wink. “Where they live — or where they’re staying at least — and everything they got up to yesterday. Hell, I can even tell you when the younger one was taking a dump.”

“Ew,” I said, wrinkling my nose. Sevens made a equally disgusted gurgle behind me.

“Joking!” Twil laughed.

“Where did you find them, then?” Evelyn asked.

Twil waggled a finger. “Ah-ah-ah. What about my chicken?”

Evelyn huffed. “Later. Come on, details now. Where were they?”

Twil gave her a look, then rolled her shoulders and nodded with resignation. Even I could tell she was trying to tone it down, to keep a huge grin off her face as she carried on speaking. “Oh, nowhere special,” she said. “They’re living with the local Sugondese community.”

Evelyn stopped chewing and gave Twil a look so hard that she may as well have been carved from granite. An unimpressed and vengeful goddess, laser-etched into the moon. Twil was trying very hard not to grin, on the verge of losing control. Raine bit her lips from the inside and put her face in one hand.

“Sugondese,” Praem echoed. Twil turned red in the face with effort, gripping the table. Lizzie exploded with squealing giggles, face in her arms.

“... *Sugondese*?” I echoed, confused by the word and doubly confused by everyone else’s behaviour; I thought my geographical knowledge was pretty good, but I was coming up short. “I don’t ... um ... recognise that?”

Twil turned to me and broke into the craziest grin I'd ever seen on her face, like a mad wolf about to open wide enough to swallow the world. She started to speak, but Evelyn got there first.

"I will have you garotted and your body burnt," Evelyn hissed.

"Nuts," said Praem.

"I am sorry, but what is going on?" I asked, losing my temper. Raine was quietly breaking down in laughter next to me. "Am I being left out of something important again? Are we regressing, here?"

"Regressing to being twelve fucking years old, maybe," Evelyn spat. "This is serious!"

"Nuts!" Lozzie yelled.

"I'm going to lose my shit here," Raine managed to say between her fingers.

Twil spread her arms. "You haven't got my rotisserie chicken, so I haven't got the location of your spooky bitches."

"Twil, hey," Raine said, clearing her throat. "You're here before the supermarkets are open. What is it right now, six? We didn't expect you to be this fast."

"Supermarkets? Oh no, hey, no way are you fobbing me off with that. I want the good stuff, one of those ones with the honey glaze from that place on Sister's Corner, that they like, take the legs off and grill them for you. I have out- over- and super-performed on this; I want my payment!" She slapped the table again, grinning in her maniac victory. "Give me the meat!"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "That means somebody has to actually go and get the bloody chicken, before you'll even talk? It's six in the morning! You're not going to eat it now."

"Bloody right I'm gonna eat it now!" Twil said, her tone offended but still laughing. She was deriving far more pleasure out of this act than she ever would out of the actual chicken. "I've had the exam season from hell, and then I perform a miracle for you. I want my chicken! Give me my chicken! You promised me a chicken!"

"Excuse me," I said out loud, then blushed slightly when everyone looked at me, but sat up in growing defiance. "I still don't

understand. I feel intentionally left out of something here. Who are the Sugondese? Was that some kind of joke?"

Lozzie emitted a high-pitched wheeze and almost fell over. Sevens let out a sound like "*Buuurggg*," from behind me, burying her face in my shoulder.

"Nuts," Praem repeated. I frowned at her.

Raine leaned closer, a twisted smile on her lips. "Sook on 'deez titties."

"Raine!" I squeaked — then I froze, mouth hanging open as the words sank in. I rolled my eyes so hard it hurt a little. "Oh, I don't believe it. I don't believe you lot. Oh my goodness. Really?"

"I told you it was immature," Evelyn grumbled, pushing her half-empty cereal bowl away. "Do we really have to go get the chicken now, Twil? Are you serious?"

Twil leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "If I don't get my chicken, that's violation of contract. Dunno how you do it down in Sussex with the rest of the southern fairies—"

"Excuse me!" I squeaked.

Twil did a double-take, suddenly chastised. "Uh, present company excepted."

"That's beside the point! Twil! I don't want to hear you say that again." I blushed from the effort of confrontation but gave her my best stare.

"Alright, alright! Sorry, uh ... I don't know how it is down there in Sussex with the rest of the southern ... posh ... wankers?" She shrugged, grimacing through her teeth. I'd ruined her flow but I didn't regret it one bit. "But up here in the North we do things by miners' rules. One out, all out. Give me my chicken or I'm on strike."

Evelyn sighed, closed her eyes, and pinched the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. "Fine. Sister's Corner it is. Praem, be a dear and help me up, please? I need to get dressed if we're going to do this."

"Actually, I'll go," I said. Everyone glanced at me. "I could do with the walk. And Raine can come with me."

“Right you are, boss,” Raine said with a wink and a teasing salute.

“Ahhhh, no, come on,” Twil suddenly protested. “It was Evee’s promise, you don’t have to do it for her, big H.”

“I would like to stretch my legs,” I told Twil, matching action to words as I stood up from breakfast and took a deep breath. Sevens rose with me, clinging to my back. “And to take a walk with Raine.”

“Then I’ll come with!” Twil said, bouncing up from her chair.

I glanced at Evelyn, just a quick flicker of my eyes, but she looked away. Neither acknowledgement nor denial. Maybe she wasn’t even aware.

She needed to either apologise to Twil, or work things out with her, or maybe say something I couldn’t even imagine. She was the one who’d started this, the one who’d roped Twil into our plans, got her to help us yet again. I still wasn’t entirely clear if they were a couple, despite the intimacy they’d shared — and I got the impression they didn’t know either. But that hadn’t stopped Evelyn from using her.

I weighed the options: tell Twil to stay here and hope that in our brief absence Evelyn would find the courage to actually talk with her, or have Twil come with us to give Evelyn the emotional breathing space she needed.

Neither was any good. And it hardly mattered, the damage was already done. The least I could do was show Twil that some of us did really appreciate her help.

I smiled at Twil. “That would be nice. We can go for a walk together.”

At least we had a result.

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I didn’t blame Twil for her absurd performance and chicken-based ultimatum — though I also didn’t doubt that she really, really wanted that chicken. She deserved payment for her professional services. We had quite nakedly used her; or Evelyn had, at least.

I couldn’t help but think about that on the short jaunt down to Sister’s Corner and the speciality store Twil had been talking about, a pastry and meat pie shop called *Krikor*.

“Basically just an upmarket Greggs,” Raine explained to me on the way there. “The food, I mean, not the look. Place looks like shit.”

“Yeah but they make *the shit*,” Twil said, turning to walk backward a few paces so she could grin directly at us. She bounced on the balls of her feet and flapped the corners of her coat with her hands in her pockets, full of energy in a way I hadn’t seen in a long time. If she was sore about being exploited, she wasn’t showing it directly. That wasn’t like Twil, she wasn’t any good at hiding her emotions. Maybe she enjoyed being of use to Evelyn.

Whistle trotted along the pavement in front of us, the handle of his leash safely in Raine’s right hand. Twil did a little hop-skip-turn and ruffled him behind the ears, replying to his surprised “Rrrruurp?” with a low, throaty growl of her own. He yipped a little, but not aggressively, and Twil laughed as she straightened up.

“Dog communication, hey?” Raine asked. “You gonna sniff his bum next?”

“Shut the fuck up, you stupid asshole,” Twil shot back, with a tone so friendly that I half expected her to sniff *Raine’s* bottom.

“Twil,” I piped up, feeling a little sheepish — after all, I hadn’t possessed the coherency to call off any of this in the first place. “How have you got so much energy? You spent all day yesterday tracking those two women for us, aren’t you tired?”

“Yeah!” Twil shot me a grin and a wink. “But you know what?”

Oh dear, was this it? Was this a glimpse of the anger beneath her sunny disposition? “Um, what?”

“I also happened to spend all yesterday tracking,” she said, then pumped her arms and ran on the spot, finishing with a little yell like she was psyching herself up before a race. “Aaaaaahhh! Feels good, it really does. I needed that shake-out after all those bloody exams. Eevee knows me too well now, haha! Shit, my parents would freak if they heard me say that.”

“I wonder if she really does ... ” I cleared my throat gently.

When Twil had turned up on our doorstep two days earlier, Evelyn had treated her as if there was no way she’d refuse our request. I had assumed she was exploiting the tattered remnants of their romantic relationship, but now I wasn’t so sure.

I'd messed them up so badly with my meddling in the past; I didn't want to push, at all, in case I did so again.

I needed to talk to Evelyn about this, but very gently.

The rest of the journey there and back was thankfully uneventful, no mystery ladies or giant zombies popping out from between garden walls to follow us, and the spirit life seemed docile and sluggish. I wondered if they moved in seasons too, as I watched a huge leech-like creature slop along the road, ridden by a gaggle of gangly insects. The late spring weather didn't extend this early into the morning, so the thin fog nipped at my exposed hands whenever I removed them from the front pocket of my hoodie. Raine gave me Whistle's leash a few times as we walked past the houses and across the quiet main road, almost devoid of traffic, plunging deeper into the student quarter. "He's a good dog, he doesn't pull," she said.

"Plus he's only got them short little legs," Twil added. "Little pawsies, ickle bitty leggies."

Whistle sniffed at the drains, nosed among every patch of grass, and investigated every curious stain on the pavement. A couple of spirits flitted over to him once, huge glassy eyes and twig-like fingers marvelling over him, and I paused to let them enjoy the aura of dog before they moved on, with Whistle himself none the wiser. His short legs forced us into a more sedate pace than Twil would have set otherwise. It was only once we reached Sister's Corner that I realised that's probably why Raine suggested we bring him along.

Krikor turned out to be just as awful-looking as Raine had implied, like a Greggs where nothing had been replaced for twenty years, all peeling paint and chipped counter tops, stainless-steel chairs and sticky floors.

But the smell was so good that poor little Whistle's eyes dilated like he'd gotten into Evelyn's painkiller stash. My stomach started rumbling, and I'd not long ago had breakfast.

From the quality of the food, I concluded that the owner of the place — a short, balding, Turkish man who wore grease-stained kitchen overalls, but had an expression like he was running a five-star Hollywood restaurant rather than a weird rip-off Greggs in Sharrowford — spent all the revenue on a mixture of ingredients, equipment, and skilled labour, customer-facing aesthetics be damned.

Or maybe it had something to do with the spirit clinging upside-down to the ceiling, a mass of globes and tiny cog-wheels and hourglasses, each part of it spinning and turning and twisting like a clockwork engine.

To my horror, while we were waiting for our order, Raine expressed the question to the owner's face. I stood there, mortified for a second, afraid we were about to get thrown out. But he grinned at us, knowingly.

"Ahhhhhhh, you want to know my secret?" he asked, winking at Raine over the counter.

"You gotta be putting something in the food," Twil said, "'cos I'm addicted to this place and I don't even live in the city."

"Never!" he tutted. "All these other places, the ones that fail, they put crap out because they put crap in. They hire teenagers to put things in microwaves because they don't want to pay more than minimum wage. Me? Tch-tch-tch." He shook his head and winked, and left it at that.

We ended up buying more than just Twil's promised chicken. An interrupted breakfast had left us more hungry than we'd expected, and any good strategy meeting was going to require a bit of gastronomic fortification. We picked up some fancy breakfast bake rolls stuffed with bacon and scrambled egg, along with a leg of lamb for Zheng and even a bag of dog treats for Whistle. Couldn't leave him out, not with the way his nose was twitching.

Once we were back in the open air, me carrying the bag full of food and Twil with the plastic chicken container in both arms, she asked the obvious question.

"So what's the plan now then?" she said. "We gotta go knock over those two you had me find, or what?"

I cleared my throat before Raine could answer. "The plan is second breakfast, I think."

= =

Second breakfast was more peaceful than the first, but I found it hard to enjoy the food. Neither Evelyn nor Twil was a big believer in separating business from pleasure.

Twil dug into her chicken, accompanied by some coleslaw

scavenged from our fridge and a big dollop of mustard. Zheng appreciated the roast lamb with a deep purr that made me squirm. Sevens ate her food with little nibbles, perched up on the kitchen counter. Lozzie and Tenny reappeared too, lured downstairs by the scent of warm pastry and cooked meat. Twil made a point of sharing some of the chicken with both of them, giving Tenny a particularly juicy bit of wing meat on a plate; but when it came to Lozzie's turn, Twil fed her a bite from her own fork, grinning as Lozzie went "Mmmm!" and clapped her hands together, rewarded with a brief, fluttery hug from our pastel-rainbow pixie. I raised an eyebrow at that, but nobody else seemed to pick up on how close they were being. Had they always been that way, or was I just noticing now?

Or maybe it was just me, maybe I was projecting my lingering jealousy onto people who didn't think that way.

But it made no difference when Evelyn cleared her throat and started asking questions about mages and monsters; Lozzie cleared out and Tenny went with her. Twil didn't seem particularly disappointed, so maybe that was all in my head.

"Yeah, it was the tall one I spotted first," Twil was saying after scarfing down an entire drumstick, licking the glaze off her fingers. "She was kind of hard to miss when I finally found her. Women that tall are pretty striking, you know?" She nodded to Zheng, totally serious. "She was waiting for the other one just off Bruster's Road, outside some kind of little business, down one of them side-streets with the cobblestones, you know?"

"What business?" Evelyn asked, her own pastry growing cold on a plate before her. She'd barely nibbled at it.

Twil shook her head. "Didn't get a chance to check. The younger one came out of the place and they were off, I had to stick with them."

"Bruster's, right?" Raine murmured, tapping at her phone screen. She licked her lips in concentration and showed Twil the phone. "This the place?"

Twil peered at the little screen, which Raine had open to a Google Maps streetview image of Bruster's Road, a small lane down near the city centre, all anonymous red brick walls and stout doors set back from the street, some with little plaques or signposts.

“Nah, the one next to it.” Twil pointed at the screen. “The one with the black door, that’s the one the girl came out of. What is that place?”

Raine zoomed in on image and we all frowned at the little white board next to the door.

“Safe Hands Dentistry,” Raine read out loud. “Huh. Maybe she was getting her teeth cleaned.”

Twil went *pfffft* and sat back. I shrugged, a little lost. Evelyn only frowned deeper.

“Dental hygiene is essential,” said Praem.

“Big words from somebody who eats nothing but strawberries,” Twil said. She speared a piece of crispy, glazed chicken with her fork and waved it at Praem. “You sure you don’t want a bite?”

“I am vegan,” Praem answered.

Evelyn shot her a curious look, as if trying to figure out if she was being serious.

“Well,” I piped up in her defence, “technically she is, she’s not joking. I think.”

“No shit?” said Twil. “Damn, okay, sorry. I’ll remember that.”

“Thank you,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn huffed and shook her head. “What did they do after that, Twil? You followed them all day?”

“Yeah, bloody right I did,” Twil said. “Soon as I got downwind, I could smell it clear as you like. Biggie doesn’t exactly smell like Zheng but—”

“Biggie?” I echoed with a delicate grimace.

“Yeah, Biggie and Smalls.” Twil shot me a wink. Sevens let out a raspy giggle from over on the counter. “It was weird thinking of them as like, just ‘target A and target B’ or whatever, so I gave ‘em names.”

“Biggie,” Zheng rumbled, deeply unimpressed. She was standing by the door to the front room, as if too restless to sit down.

“Oh yeah, you gonna do better?” Twil spread her arms. Zheng just

stared down at her.

"If we can please stay on the subject," Evelyn sighed. "Please."

"A dentist's," Raine said, low and shrewd, thumbing through her phone, "with no web page and no public phone number." She looked up at our stares and grinned. "Just doing a little background research. *Safe Hands Dentistry* either isn't real, or it's been out of business so long there's no trace of it left online."

"Oh, shit," Twil said.

"Oh shit is right," Evelyn hissed. "I want to know what's in that building."

"I should'a gone in," Twil sighed.

"No," Evelyn snapped. "No, you complete idiot, you should not have gone in. Nobody goes in anywhere blind!" She jabbed the table with a fingertip. Twil put her hands up in performative surrender. "Understand? Answer me, Twil. Say it with words, not avoidance."

"You can talk," Twil muttered.

"What was that?" Evelyn hissed.

"Evee," I said gently, starting to panic. "Maybe don't—"

"Nothing," Twil grunted. "Alright, I promise. No wandering into dark corners." She puffed out a breath like a grumpy teenager, which is exactly what she was, I suppose. "Not that I need to worry about that usually."

Evelyn sat back, visibly struggling to get herself under control. She flexed her maimed hand, as if the fingers had gone stiff from clenching too hard. Then she glanced at me, her gaze lingering far too long, an unspoken plea on her lips. But just when I was about to break the awkward silent tension, she turned back to Twil and gestured with the head of her walking stick.

"Continue," she said. "If you like. I suppose."

"Well," Twil started, pulling her good humour back together. "Like I was saying, the tall one stinks. Not quite like Zheng smells most of the time, but there's this ... tang, you know? In common. Like something that body odour can't hide. I could tell there was something not human in her."

"Big ol' zombie," Raine said. Zheng just grunted, we knew this already.

"Yeah and she moves like one too," Twil said, not without a hint of appreciation. "I could tell she was jacked, under her clothes, either that or wiry, but muscles either way. Moved really graceful like. I wouldn't want to get in a fight with her. Kudos to you, Zheng."

"She was glorious," Zheng purred.

"Yeah I'll take your word for it," Twil sighed. "No thanks."

"Was she still carrying the instrument case?" Evelyn asked.

"Yup. A guitar case. Never saw what was in it though, sorry."

"And the little one?" I asked.

"Naaaah." Twil shook her head, pulling a squinty frown that had me suddenly worried. "Not so little once I got a good look. Her face says sixteen, seventeen maybe. Maybe my age even, but she's just real small. Smalls, right? Get it? And weedy too, like Heather is." Twil gestured at me without thinking, then caught herself and went-wide eyed. "Uh ... um ... no offence, big H."

I puffed out a little laugh. "None taken. I am weedy."

"The shaman is not weak," Zheng rumbled.

"Zheng, I love you," I said, "but I have noodle arms and get winded if I run up the stairs."

Zheng stared at me with heavy-lidded eyes. "You stood burning before *Laoyeh*. You've killed mages. You freed me. You survived."

"Different kind of strength," I muttered, then raised my voice in an effort to avoid the topic. "But Twil, that's not quite what I meant."

"Yeah, I know," Twil said, grimacing. "And uh ... well, that's the weird part."

"Weird part?" Evelyn said, as one might say the words *what do you mean, nuclear device?*

"I followed 'em all day, right? And I could be wrong, I could have messed up, but the kid didn't smell of anything."

"Not a zombie, then," Evelyn said. "So?"

Twil shook her head. "Nah, Evee, you don't get it. She didn't smell of anything."

"No scent?" Zheng rumbled.

"Yeah. Right," Twil said. "Nothing. Nothing at all. That doesn't happen, not with people. Everyone has a smell, a personal scent, it's really obvious to me, sometimes I can even tell who's been in a room. Even Praem's got a smell, and she's like, made of wood inside, right?"

"Woody," Praem said.

"But that kid? Nothing. Blank." She chopped the air with one hand. She was deeply uncomfortable all of a sudden as she frowned at her plate of chicken and coleslaw. We all fell silent for a second as she bent down and reached over to pet Whistle, who was still face-deep in his bowl of dog treats. She ruffled him behind the ears as she spoke. "I mean maybe if she was really, really clean, and all her clothes were new, I dunno? She was in a school uniform though, blazer and tie and stuff. Looked smart but not like brand new. I didn't recognise if the school was around here or if it was just an act. I dunno. Shit."

I shared a look with Evelyn, but she was lost in thought, frowning to herself, chewing on her tongue inside her mouth.

"Dressed like a school student, during school hours?" Raine asked. "They get stopped at all?"

"Oh, yeah!" Twil straightened back up and pointed at Raine, lighting up again, thankful for something she understood. "I forgot about that. A bobby stopped them at one point."

"Police?" Evelyn asked with a frown.

"Oh dear," I said.

"Yeah, bloody right," Twil laughed. "I thought they were done for. I dropped back so he didn't see me too. It was all casual, but I figured he was asking some boilerplate check about why the young lady wasn't in school right then or some shit. But the tall one did the talking and he walked off again, totally happy with it."

"... the zombie did the talking?" Evelyn asked, then let out a sharp sigh. "Great."

“Which one of them was in charge?” Raine asked.

“Oh, the tall one, totally,” Twil answered. “The kid really didn’t wanna be there, that was obvious. She was humming with nerves, all jitters and stuff. Head down, dragging her feet a bit. The big zombie was in charge, hundred percent. I think the kid was there under duress, like. Wish I could have done something, but ... you know. Zombie out in broad daylight.” Twil pulled a face. “Nobody else could tell, I bet. Looks totally human.”

“They stop to talk?” said Raine. “To each other, I mean.”

“A little bit, yeah,” Twil said. “I couldn’t get close enough to hear anything, but sometimes Biggie would stop them and they’d talk a bit. She’d always lean down so Smalls could whisper right into her ear, mouth cupped with a hand and all. I dunno what that was about.”

“Hmmm,” Evelyn grumbled. I could tell she was none the wiser than the rest of us. “What did they do all day?”

“I think they were visiting people,” Twil said, nodding. “I never followed them into any buildings, obviously, so I can’t be sure; I’m good but I’m not like ‘tactical espionage action’ level stealthy.” She did little air quotes around those words.

“I dunno,” Raine said, cracking a grin. “I think you’d look good in a sneaking suit.”

“Fuck off.” Twil shot at her, carrying right on. “Anyway, that’s the impression I got, it was like a doctor doing a round of house visits or something. They went to nine different places, all across town, some of them apartment blocks and some of them actual houses, mostly out in the suburbs eastward, but a couple were close to the uni.” Twil shook her head. “That had me shitting myself, I thought they were coming right here. I had my phone out, ready to call you lot, but they just went into these places and then came right back out like fifteen or twenty minutes later.”

Evelyn lit up at that, eyes burning with purpose. “Tell me you got the addresses of those houses.”

“Nope,” Twil said, grinning. “Did one better. Marked the spot on my phone and took a picture of each house. Couldn’t get the apartments they went into, didn’t want to follow them into the stairwells, but I got the buildings.”

“Good!” Evelyn nodded. “How many houses?”

“Of the nine places, only three. Rest was apartments.”

“Send me them, on your phone. Now, I need to see.”

Twil fiddled about with her phone while she kept talking, eyes darting up and down from the screen. “You know what was weird though? They never took a bus anywhere. Like they were walking this long circuit of downtown on purpose, like they were looking for something. Took them all day but neither of them seemed to get tired.”

“Are they staying in the city?” Raine asked as Evelyn thumbed through Twil’s pictures on her own phone, frowning hard.

“Yeah!” Twil said. “Or at least they did last night, far as I can tell. About half five, they headed back to the city centre and went into this little block of flats along the back of Storerry Lane. Real run down place, over a couple of shops or something in the front. I thought they were just doing another visit or something, so I parked myself up behind some bins and— Heather?” She broke off.

“Sorry!” I blurted out, trying to wipe the silly smile off my face. “It’s just ... the thought of you hiding behind some bins like we’re all in a spy film. It’s very silly. I am sorry.”

“It felt silly! I was there an hour. Got all cold.”

“Ah,” Evelyn said, clearing her throat. “My apologies for that, too.”

“Eh, whatever.” Twil waved it off, though I was so surprised my eyebrows shot up. Evelyn frowned at me. “Anyway, Biggie emerged again about seven o’clock, but on her own this time. I was gonna follow her, but I thought hey, what if they know I’m watching and this is a set-up?” Twil did a big shrug in her chair. “So she walked off and I stuck around. I didn’t see Smalls come out, but Biggie came back about twenty minutes later carrying a bag of Chinese takeaway. And uh ... I followed her up.”

“You went in after her?” Evelyn asked, voice suddenly sharp. “I was very clear, you were not to risk yourself. Do I need to rap your knuckles with a ruler, you idiot?”

“It was one of those communal shared entrances!” Twil put up both hands. “I let her go up ahead of me and then just followed the smell. Seriously, I was never closer than a whole floor behind her.”

Evelyn gave her a piercing look. I cleared my throat softly. "I'm glad you stayed safe, Twil," I said. "Please don't take any risks on our account."

A bolus of guilt lodged in my throat; yes, please don't take any risks for us, except coming to Wonderland to help me face down the Eye.

"Place was in a right state," Twil was explaining, "a real tip, dried piss and used syringes in the entranceway, that sort of thing. But I followed the zombie's smell all the way to their front door — number fifteen. Must be really small in there by how close together all the doors are, just a bedsit or something." She shrugged. "And that was it. I watched the place from the street for another couple of hours, but they didn't come out. I guess that's where they're staying."

Twil fell quiet with an awkward puff of breath from the corner of her mouth. Silence descended on the kitchen, except for the chewing noises of Sevens still slowly working her way through her pastry.

We all shared cautious looks. We'd been doing this for long enough now that we knew what came next.

Zheng turned away from the table and strode toward the utility room.

I was up and out of my seat in a flash, running on pure instinct, tentacles arcing out to block her path. "Zheng, no!" I snapped, then clamped a hand to my mouth, mortified.

She stopped and stared at me, unsmiling and heavy-lidded. "Shaman."

It was not a question.

"Heeeey what?" Twil said. Raine went tense, but stayed quiet.

"I thought we already went over this," Evelyn grumbled under her breath.

Zheng tilted her head to stare at me all the harder. Slowly, shaking with effort, I withdrew my tentacles from her intended path. I opened her way. Blinking back tears that I didn't want to feel, I let her go.

"Go on then," I hissed, unwilling to look at her, being unfair

because she didn't understand what this meant to me; I could not communicate the depth of my jealousy. "If you must."

But Zheng didn't go. She stared at me for another couple of seconds, then rolled her neck so hard that her vertebrae went *pop-pop-pop*. Instead of leaving, she leant against the wall and folded her muscled arms across her chest. I stared at her, uncertain what was happening.

"I will hear your monkey plans first," she purred.

"Zheng ... " I sighed.

"Shaman."

"That's all well and good," Evelyn said, "but we don't have a plan. We don't have any good options here. Nothing."

"We don't?" Raine asked, in a tone that said she already agreed.

Evelyn shook her head. "Option one — we break into their flat while they're present, and force a confrontation." She snorted. "Not good. The teenager is a wild card, she could be anything, and any competent mage or ... other thing will certainly have protection set up."

"So no smash and grab," Twil sighed, almost disappointed.

"Option two is we break in while they aren't there," Evelyn said. "Also bad, same reasons."

"Yeah what would be the point of that?" Twil asked.

"Gather information, determine who they are, set up an ambush." Evelyn sighed again. "Plus, by the sounds of it, this flat is very exposed. Does the building have thin walls?"

"Uh, yeah. I could overhear people having an argument right through 'em."

"So it's practically a public place. We can't do anything flashy. Neither can they." She waved the head of her walking stick at Zheng. "Which means you breaking their door down and challenging your friend to an honourable duel would draw a lot of attention. Community attention, police attention. I don't know which would be worse. I assume your fights happened in secluded spots, yes?"

“Mm,” Zheng grunted.

“I rest my case, then. Option three is we confront them in public. Same problems again.” Evelyn huffed, sharp and frustrated. “If they know who we are, they may be waiting for an opportunity. Or ... hell, I don’t know!” She spat, losing her temper as her carefully enumerated options added up to precisely nothing. “Time was I would have sent something to murder them, but I can’t do that anymore. I must know who they are, I must know why they were following Praem. We can’t just let this drop. We have to confront them.”

“I could walk up to them in public,” Twil offered with a shrug. “Like, in the middle of a crowd so nothing would happen. Tell them who I am, ask what they’re up to.”

“No,” Evelyn said. “No, not alone, not like that. Not in such uncontrolled circumstances.”

“Sounds like their flat is basically in public anyway,” Raine mused, leaning back on her hands.

“Why don’t we just knock on their door and say hello?” I asked.

Evelyn turned to me, looking like she wanted to roll her eyeballs out of their sockets. “Heather, I have more respect for your intelligence than to assume ... you’re being ... ” She trailed off, frowning harder until it looked like she was having difficulties with her digestion.

“Public place,” Raine repeated, nodding. “We come in peace, take us to your leader?”

“Aw shit.” Twil pulled a face. “Really?”

“If we need to find out what their business is,” I explained, “and we don’t want to risk violence, why don’t we just ask?”

Evelyn put her face in one hand and started groaning. Behind me, Zheng began to chuckle, slow and low and soft, like a tiger rolling stones in her throat. Sevens gurgled in agreement; perhaps her sense of drama was tickled by the absurdity.

“We better go real heavily armed,” Raine said, keeping a bright smile in her voice. “Just in case.”

“Speak softly,” Praem intoned in her sing-song voice.

“And carry a great big fuckin’ stick!” Sevens rasped, finishing Praem’s sentence with a cackle. Praem nodded to her.

“I hate this so much,” Evelyn said into her hands.

“You can’t be serious?” Twil asked, eyes wide.

Evelyn sighed and straightened up, hollow-eyed and exhausted. “Heather is right. It’s the least bad of a series of bad options. Knock on the door, as if we’re just regular people, introduce ourselves, and ask what they’re doing. While pointing a cannon at their faces.”

“I don’t really like the cannon part ... ” I said.

“Tough,” Evelyn grunted. “Gunboat diplomacy it is.”

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Gunboat diplomacy was a little difficult to organise in broad daylight, especially for a bunch of monsters and mages and our assorted menagerie. We couldn’t just walk up to their door carrying guns and swinging baseball bats — not that we had need of such things. Even if we did, Raine was the only one qualified to use them. And we only had one gun.

So the plan, the set up, and the execution were all as simple as possible.

“Fewer moving parts means less things that can go wrong,” Evelyn explained on the afternoon we put the plan into action, as we were getting dressed for the journey downtown, slipping weapons and wands into pockets and beneath coats, two days after Twil’s ‘debriefing.’ This was the fourth time in two days that Evelyn had repeated those words. “Wishful thinking, perhaps,” she added.

“We’ll be fine,” Raine reassured her. “We’re taking every precaution, right? Unless you don’t trust your own work?”

“I trust my own work fine!” Evelyn snapped, shoving her arms into the coat Praem was holding out for her. “Do you trust your reaction times?”

“Because if you don’t, say so now,” Raine went on, totally serious in a way I’d rarely seen her. “We’ll call the whole thing off. No joke, serious. I’ll call Twil back right now and tell her to stop.”

Evelyn glanced at me, standing there in my hoodie, stomach churning. Raine had hugged me hard, two minutes earlier, but I was

cold again.

“... do you ... do you *insist* we do anything differently, Eevee?” I squeezed out through a tightening throat. I didn’t want to do this either.

She sucked on her teeth for a moment and part of me prayed she’d say the words I’d promised to heed. In the end, this was my suggestion. If this all went wrong, it would be my fault.

But Evelyn shook her head. She let out a long sigh and closed her eyes, silently counting to ten as Praem settled her coat on her shoulders. “Just keep the seals on you. If you feel one start to peel off, then stop, alert the rest of us, and we’ll fix it or retreat. And for pity’s sake don’t scratch at them. And do what I say; remember, walk as if you’re in a minefield.”

I nodded, and that was that. We were committed.

The seals were Evelyn’s answer to the problem of walking into an unseen threat — Raine had flippantly called them “magical body armour”, but that had prompted a twenty-minute rant from Evelyn, mostly about how if one could make magical body armour, all our lives would be considerably easier. I gathered they were more akin to ablative heat shielding.

“Which means they are single-use, understand?” Evelyn had made sure we all knew. “And probably only good for a second, maybe two, depending on what hits you. And they won’t stop anything physical, just ... unseen tampering. Anything happens, you run. The seals give you the moment to pick yourself up and go. Maybe! Keep in mind these are untested, I’m basically making this up as I go along.”

“What about you?” I’d asked.

“Praem can pick me up,” she’d answered without embarrassment. Behind her, Praem had flexed one arm beneath her uniform.

Evelyn had spent the entire previous day making the things, adapting them from other work she’d done in the past, a pair for each of us who were going — herself, Raine, me, Twil, and Praem. Zheng was the only exception.

“You put no magic on my body, wizard,” Zheng had rumbled.

“She gets an exemption,” I’d said.

“Suit yourself,” Evelyn answered.

As we left the house and began the nerve-wracking walk to the bus downtown, I considered that Zheng was getting off lightly. She’d already gone ahead, to lurk in an alleyway near the block of flats on Storerry Lane. The rest of us had the seals affixed beneath our clothes — two sheets of thin grease paper, each covered in dozens of tiny magic circles and their attendant esoteric symbols, affixed to belly and back with skin-safe cosplay glue. Safe, but not comfortable. The paper crinkled against my stomach as I moved and the corners were starting to itch.

We took the bus downtown and spent an awkward, tense hour in a cafe just off the main high street, waiting for the call from Twil, watching the spring sun creep toward the horizon. I barely remembered a thing about that hour, couldn’t taste my cup of tea, didn’t know half of what I said to Raine. My tentacles wrapped me in a ball of safety and my bioreactor was going like a furnace in my belly.

The *gunboat* part of our set-up comprised Raine, Praem, and Twil. Raine was armed, heavily, everything hidden beneath her jacket or in the waistband of her jeans. If in some cosmic accident we were stopped by the police, Raine was probably going to prison for a very long time. Praem had no need of weapons, but she wasn’t wearing her maid outfit, dressed instead like the elegant young lady she was, in a long skirt and a comfortable sweater.

Twil was Twil, and currently following our quarry.

The *diplomacy* part was Evelyn and myself, though Evelyn had her bone wand inside her coat — most uncomfortable, I assumed. I had a head full of hyperdimensional mathematics, six invisible tentacles on my flanks, and a small can of pepper spray in my pocket.

What was Zheng in this increasingly tortured metaphor? A battleship, perhaps, waiting off-shore. She was under strict instructions not to follow us in. Emergency only. I’d bought her a phone, at last; or rather, Evelyn had. Now Zheng kept sending me text messages to check in, every fifteen minutes since she’d left the house.

Shaman.

Yes?

I am still waiting.

By the time the call came, I could barely feel my hands for the nervous tension. Raine answered her phone, listened to Twil for a second, then nodded to the rest of us.

“Time for a house call,” she said.

= =

Storerry Lane was a dump. It was a back street behind a row of dingy-looking shop fronts, the glowering visages of pawnbrokers and small-time bookies and unidentifiable businesses which advertised themselves with entry buzzers and barred windows, the bottom-feeders at the outer edge of the foot traffic ecosystem of Sharrowford’s city centre. The rear was even worse, half-choked with overflowing rubbish bins and stagnant puddles that never truly dried. A few cars were parked on the curb, other little streets led off to less blighted places, but the lane itself was the sort of un-position that served no purpose except to move people in and out of the stubby flats that climbed over the shop fronts with their blank-brick walls, only rarely punctuated by dirty windows.

Every surface was drenched in late-afternoon shadows, the sun hidden behind the opposite row of filthy red bricks.

It wasn’t too bad during daylight. Not totally deserted; I saw a young mother pushing a buggy down the opposite pavement, and an old man shuffling along, fussing with his flat cap. But I wouldn’t want to still be here when night fell.

“Fun spot, can see why you pitched up here,” Raine said with a broad grin as we met Twil at the end of the road. She was waiting on the pavement corner for us.

“Shut up, stay focused,” Evelyn hissed. Her shoulders were as tense as I felt. She glanced down the horrible little street “Which one is it?”

“The door with the green front and the glass side-windows,” Twil said quickly and quietly, hands in her coat pockets as she nodded sideways. “We go in, it’s up on the third floor, fourth door on the right. Neither of them have left, they’re both home. Unless they climbed out a window.”

“Do not tempt fate,” Praem intoned.

My hands were slick and I was having trouble catching my breath. My tentacles felt like a strait jacket of my own making. I had to remind myself that everyone was by my side. We were all together. And Zheng was less than a hundred feet away; if the worst came to the worst, all I had to do was scream my head off.

“Right,” Evelyn said. “Stick to the plan. Praem, Twil, you take—“

“Which window is it?” Raine said softly.

Something in her tone made everyone freeze.

Twil followed her gaze, up at the building. “Uhhhh ... that ... that one, yeah. Shit.”

Evelyn grunted in frustration, one arm twitching with a desire to belt Raine with her walking stick. “Raine, what are you—”

“Because it looks like we’ve been rumbled,” Raine said.

I followed Raine’s gaze too.

From the other side of a small, dirty window up on the third floor, a pale oval was pointed down at us, crowned by a messy helmet of black hair and staring with a pair of eyes like sapphires. Neat little hands gripped the windowsill, half-hidden inside the sleeves of a black blazer, as if she was straining up on tiptoes to spy.

She did not withdraw in shock or hide with the embarrassment of being seen, but stared back in total silence, the unreadable poker-face of a master dissembler or a traumatised child.

“Yeah,” Raine sighed. “We’ve been rumbled alright.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.10

Across the dirty, dank, shadow-filled street, deep in one of Sharrowford's most worm-riddled holes, from behind a pane of filthy glass, I met a pair of eyes like polished sapphires.

Blue as a fire-drenched sea.

That was the singular detail which struck me, even three stories up, obscured by the window and the angle of the lowering sun. The mystery girl — Smalls, in Twil's inventive vernacular — was a pale oval sunk into the black background of her own hair and the indistinct room beyond. The late afternoon spring sun brushed her face like a timid wild-flower in a peat bog. But those eyes were oceanic, deeper than their surface, and watching us in return.

Perhaps it was merely a trick of the light, but between her unnaturally blue eyes and her perfect stillness, she seemed like a doll, propped in the window to provide shock or amusement to any passer-by who happened to look up.

But she was no doll. Despite her frozen expression, I felt her attention crawling over me.

An impression akin to *deja vu* passed through me in a cold shudder. I did not recognise this girl and I had never stood on this spot before, but I knew this sensation all too well: the recognition that sparked between two thinking beings across an inhospitable gulf.

I had forgotten, between my trial in Carcosa and the warm, welcoming, familiar cocoon of home, just how strange and alienating our own reality could be.

Dark infinities lurked in so many corners of the Earth. This girl was peering out from inside one of them.

Then Raine lifted her hand and waved to the girl in the window.

Smalls blinked those impossible eyes, slipped down from the window, and vanished beyond our sight.

“Shit,” said Twil.

The spell broke and I could breathe again; I felt like I’d been locked inside those eyes. Reality reasserted itself in the sound of traffic passing nearby, the noise of distant voices, the hum and drum of Sharrowford on an ordinary afternoon.

“Would’a been nice if she’d waved back,” Raine said with a little sigh, as if we were discussing a flirting prospect rather than somebody we were about to threaten with our metaphorical naval guns.

“Shit is right!” Evelyn hissed. Her knuckles had gone white on the handle of her walking stick and her eyes darted from window to window, like she expected the girl to walk through the walls of the tiny bedsit flat and appear behind one of the equally filthy adjacent portals. “We have to leave, right now. We’ve fucked up, we’ve totally fucked this all up.” She spat the words, glancing up and down the street in terrible agitation. I hadn’t seen her this frightened in ages, her complexion going pale and waxy. She hunched her shoulders worse than usual and I could tell she was agitated by the corners of the seal stuck to her belly beneath her clothes. “We can’t walk up there now, we can’t, we can’t walk into that.”

Without thinking, I grabbed her free hand and held it tight. “Evee, it’s okay,” I whispered. “I think we’re okay. We’re okay. We’re okay.”

My own calm surprised me. The implications of our position were beginning to filter into my mind at last, tightening my throat and dumping a pint of adrenaline into my bloodstream, but my reaction had been delayed by that strange moment of bridging contact with the eyes of the girl in the window, a moment shared between me and the dark corners of the Earth. My tentacles — all six, ready and eager to flex and stretch — were uncoiling from my sides and creeping around Evelyn to form a protective barrier. She couldn’t see them, of course, and I couldn’t risk using them in public; some poor passer-by might have nightmares about poltergeists.

“Yeah, hey, keep your voice down,” Twil said, craning her head to glance up and down the street as well. “Somebody’s gonna look at us freaking out. Just keep it cool, keep it real cool, yeah?”

Evelyn glared at our joined hands, then over at me, her lips pressed

into a tight, bloodless line. Her palm was sweating against mine. I squeezed. She swallowed but didn't squeeze back.

"We're okay," I repeated, feeling a lump growing in my own throat. The adrenaline was hitting now: we'd been seen.

"Nah, this is fine," Raine said, confident and serious, nodding to herself as she stared up at the window and put her hands on her hips. "Perfect, actually."

"*Perfect!?*" Evelyn hissed.

"Yeah, perfect. We're not trying to ambush them to rough them up or anything, we're just gonna say hello. This way they know we're coming, less likely to surprise them."

"They could be setting up to get the drop on us," Evelyn snapped at her. "Right now!"

"In public? Naaah." Raine shot her a wink. "Sure, yeah, they've got a moment to set up facing the door with a shotgun, metaphorically speaking. So us standing here and waving back is like shouting 'Don't shoot, we come in peace!' If we just blunder there and surprise them, that actually makes it more likely they'll pull the trigger. Again, metaphorically speaking." Raine nodded to herself, talking as casually as about the weather. My head throbbed with nervous anxiety, but I held on to my jitters for Evelyn's sake.

"I guess so ..." Twil mused, chewing on her tongue, one hand scratching absent-mindedly at her stomach — she wasn't immune to the itchy glue on seals either. "We're all still standing here and the street hasn't exploded, soooooo yeah. I'm still in. And hey, if we back out now, I'm still gonna have to tell my family."

"I can't countenance this," Evelyn said through a strangled throat.

"They know we're coming," Raine said to Evelyn and myself with an easy smile and a twinkle in her eyes. "And we know that they know, and they know that we know that they know. So we all know that everyone else knows. You know?"

Evelyn gave her such a look. I did too, though I knew she was trying to help by transmuting Evelyn's fear into irritation.

"Shut up," Praem told her.

Raine shot Praem a wink and a hip-fired finger-gun.

"I think ... " I started, then wet my lips and pulled my threadbare courage together with a squeeze of Evelyn's hand. I swallowed a hiccup. "I don't think that girl was normal. But if we retreat now, they might assume we were trying to ambush them. It would be very suspicious behaviour."

Raine nodded, trying to look sagely and wise. She squeezed my shoulder. Twil puffed out a breath and said, "In for a penny, in for a pound."

Evelyn couldn't get a hold of herself. She'd gone from unable to squeeze my hand in return to holding on so tight it hurt my fingers. Her eyes, wide and a little bloodshot, darted between the window where Smalls had watched, the plain door that served as the entrance to the low rise block of flats, and the end of the street, the promise of retreat and safety.

"Evee," I said, trying to get her attention. "Evee, look at me, please? Evee? If you insist, then we'll leave. No arguments. Do you insist?"

"Eh?" Twil squinted at me. "Big H, come on, you were right first time. It's mad to leave now. They'll think we were trying to ... you know!" She lowered her voice to a stage-whisper, like we were mafia footsoldiers, her classically pretty face twisted with a grimace. "Whack them!"

"Maybe we should," Evelyn said, voice tight with effort.

"Leave?" I asked. My heart began to soar with relief. I knew it wasn't the right choice, but I wanted to run too. Evelyn had fought hard against her own paranoia to reach this spot, this moment, this dirty pavement corner on a filthy, run-down Sharrowford street, but what if she was right? What if her paranoia was right?

Abyssal instinct crawled up my spine like a mass of sucking salty seaweed, screaming at me to run and hide from unknown potential predators.

But instinct also demanded that I protect the pack, protect family. Keep those tentacles around Evelyn.

And a tiny but insistent voice whispered *What if that girl needs help?*

"No," Evelyn hissed. "Whack them."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Twil groaned.

“Yeaaaah,” Raine said, clearing her throat. “We’re not set up for that. Unless you want to shout for Zheng.”

“I’m not being serious, you pair of morons,” Evelyn said. “I’m venting. No, we are not going to do that.”

“Phew,” Praem said out loud.

Evelyn shot her a filthy look, but then relented and drew herself up to her full height, struggling with her crooked spine. She met my eyes and finally managed to loosen her grip on my hand, but she didn’t let go.

“Heather is correct. Retreating now would give the impression we wanted to ambush them. We’re committed. We go in. We stick to the plan.”

She spoke to me — to me alone, it felt, her soft blue eyes so familiar, a contrast to the pair I’d seen up in the window. I swallowed, nodded, and kept my tentacles around her like a shark-cage as we headed for the front door.

Praem and Twil took the lead, as the most physically robust of our landing party, followed by Raine just behind them. Evelyn and myself stayed in the rear — “Tanks up front, healers in back,” as Raine had put it earlier. We had no need to discuss the plan from this point, we’d gone over it again and again, including the need to keep Evelyn at the rear. I’d never seen her stumble or fall because of her disability, but we all knew she couldn’t run on her prosthetic and her withered leg, not really.

The entrance to the block of flats was a pair of steel double-doors, inset with and flanked by smoked glass which was filled with anti-shatter wire mesh. Weeds grew in the gaps between the paving slabs, fertilized by discarded cigarette ends and fossilized chewing gum. A rather optimistic tarnished brass plaque next to the door informed the doomed reader that the building was called *Summerway Apartments*.

As we made our final approach, I kept glancing up at that third-story window to see if Smalls would reappear.

“Heather, Praem,” Evelyn said quietly but softly, just before we reached the door. “Any pneuma-somatics?”

A shape like a cross between a gorilla and a giant rat was snuffling

along the edge of the building's rooftop, as if searching for scraps, followed by some kind of living moss that oozed halfway down the building. In the street, keeping their distance from us, was a gaggle of creatures that could have passed for geese, if it wasn't for all the tendrils and snapping teeth. A twelve foot tall humanoid figure stood stock still in one of the alleyway mouths, wrapped in white like a corpse in a shroud, a trio of eyeballs in its stomach rolling as if in a seizure. Back the way we'd came, a pair of ghoulish deer-things were creeping along the road, locked in some slow-motion game with each other.

"Well, yes," I said, "plenty. But nothing out of the ordinary."

"Nothing that could be a servitor?"

"I can't be sure, but none of them look out of place. I mean, for spirits. They all look out of place." I cleared my throat. "You know what I mean."

"Only good boys and girls," Praem intoned, sing-song, as she paused by the front door to the flats. Evelyn peered forward to ensure the door wasn't booby-trapped.

Unlikely, she'd explained during our earlier planning, not with something so public, but we had to check. Working quickly, she drew the modified 3D-vision glasses out and squinted through them at the door frame, scanning quickly up and down. We all held our breath, praying that nobody who lived there would choose that exact moment to depart the building. It wasn't as if we could be forced to explain what we were up to, but a group of university-age women all acting weird would stick in a person's memory; that's the last place we would want to stay, if the worst happened and we left any mess for the mundane authorities.

"I don't see anything wrong," Evelyn muttered, swallowing on a dry throat as she tucked the glasses away.

Praem nodded, grabbed the steel handle, and swung the door wide. She went in first, followed by Twil.

"Tanks up front," Raine said, winking at me. "Hang back, yeah? Look after Evee."

"I don't need looking after," Evelyn said.

"I will," I replied, hiccuped softly, and held on tight.

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We reached the door to number fifteen without stepping on any landmines or snagging any tripwires. Evelyn was so tense, squeezing my hand harder than she realised, thumping her walking stick down on every step. We may as well have been creeping through No Man's Land, between rows of barbed wire.

The inside of the *Summerway Apartments* — a name I absolutely could not append to this building — was just as bad as Twil had claimed. It was old, perhaps 1950s or even earlier, the sort of construction thrown up in a hurry to capitalise on spare space, cramming lodgers and renters into every nook and cranny the city offered. I did love old buildings, but nobody should be forced to live in a place like that. The entranceway reeked of urine and the unmistakable musk of cannabis; the dark corners were indeed littered with used syringes and fresh stains, along with a few discarded condoms.

Bare wooden floorboards creaked beneath our feet as we climbed the narrow stairwell, flanked by equally bare wooden walls that some poor soul had once tried to wallpaper, but now only yellowed scraps remained. The bannister was wrought iron, probably weighed a ton, and was scarred and marked with ancient burns and scorches. Must have been scavenged from a house fire in a mansion. Naked bulbs on bare wires hung from the ceiling of each small landing, each of which led off in a corridor with a double-row of numbered front doors. The middle of each flight of constricted stairs and the dead end of each corridor was clotted with shadows. A few spirits lurked about, but not many wished to brave the tight confines.

It was very difficult to keep in mind this was an inhabited building, that normal people lived here, that this wasn't some Outsider warren deep in the earth or a castle full of horrors. We were approaching a zombie who had gone toe-to-toe with Zheng, at the very least, and god alone knew what else. Walking into the lion's den, yet again. One would have thought we'd learnt our lesson.

Despite the sounds we could hear through the building's walls — a child laughing somewhere, a man calling out a muffled question, the low drone of a television, the whistle of an old-style kettle — and despite the presence of Raine and Twil and Praem close to hand, I wanted to armour up.

My body ached with the need to cover myself in plates and spines, to sprout toxic vanes and sharpen my teeth. I wished I'd brought my squid-skull mask, though I could hardly carry that around in public, let alone wear the thing on my head. My tentacles flexed and twitched as we climbed the stairs, occasionally reaching for the bannister with an urge to pull myself straight up the middle of the shaft and short-cut all this risky walking. In the face of danger, abyssal instinct burned bright with helpful suggestions — run fast, be sharp, strike first.

But Evelyn's hand held me back, though she knew it not. Keeping my tentacles around her in a protective cage was more important than rocketing up the stairs and punching a tentacle through the skull of our quarry, like coring an apple.

Not that I could have done that anyway; I'd probably just have bounced off the bannister and winded myself.

Nobody said anything until we reached the third floor landing. Twil nodded down into the shadows of the corridor.

"Number fifteen, third on the right," she whispered. Her voice seemed to carry too far in these bare confines, the wood a listening echo-chamber.

"Stick to the plan," Evelyn hissed through her teeth, throat bobbing with a dry swallow. I nodded, my heart like a fluttering dove and my breath tight in my chest.

We crept up to the door. I felt equal parts absurd and terrified, like we were play-acting a cartoon break in, but there was no pretend about any of this. Raine's hand crept to her pistol beneath her jacket; Twil's arms were free and ready for transformation; Praem stayed straight-backed and prim as always. Barely able to breathe, I kept my tentacles close as Evelyn pulled out the glasses again and looked the door up and down. She was as pale and shaky as I felt, twitchy and full of adrenaline.

"Praem?" she said eventually, barely a whisper.

Praem dipped her head in a simple nod. She couldn't see anything wrong either. Evelyn put the glasses away and glanced at me.

"Just a door," I mouthed.

Twil was sniffing, nose in the air, brows knotted. Evelyn was so

impatient and nervous that she actually tapped Twil's leg with her walking stick. Twil frowned back, but then nodded. "They're here," she whispered, showing her teeth in an instinctive canine display.

We all shared a glance. This was it. Moment of truth.

Evelyn worked her scrimshawed thigh-bone wand out from beneath her coat, one hand wrapped around the designs on the surface. She nodded to Praem.

Praem raised a hand and knocked on the door, three medium-soft raps with her neat, pale knuckles. The sound was like a broken drum in this tight warren of old wood.

We all waited, holding our collective breath. Raine edged her pistol out of her jacket, glancing up and down the corridor to check that nobody else was emerging from the other flats.

Time stretched out. My back was sweating. The sticky seal paper itched terribly on my skin.

"Try again," Evelyn hissed.

"They heard!" Twil protested. "They're fucking with us."

Praem knocked again, exactly the same.

A second passed, two seconds, three — and then a tiny mewl of sound reached us through the door; for a moment my brain couldn't parse it as words, it was so timid and pitiful.

"It's ... it's unlocked," a small feminine voice called through the wood, quivering and hesitant.

"Fuck," Evelyn hissed through her teeth.

"A trap?" Raine murmured, drawing her gun into the open. She held it pointed downward. Twil flexed her hands, aching to make claws.

"I don't know!" Evelyn whispered back. "Nobody touch the door handle. Praem, do not touch the handle."

"Tentacles," I whispered to Evee, my heart hammering on the inside of my ribs. I hiccuped, but I wasn't backing down now. "Evee, I can touch the handle. I can shed layers, I can shed and regrow a whole limb if I have to! Let me do it."

"I can grow hands back too," Twil muttered, a bit put out.

Evelyn's eyes searched mine.

"I can do it!" I said. "Like a lizard losing a tail. I'll be completely safe. And if there's more, if there's magic, you know I can ... do my thing."

"If Heather says she can do it, she can do it," Raine whispered.

Evelyn swallowed hard, then nodded once. She let go of my hand and motioned nobody else to touch me. "When Heather opens the door, stick to the plan. No sudden movements. If anything unexpected happens, follow my directions. If I say run, we run."

"We know, we know, damn," Twil said, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

With my heart in my throat and my hands clenched into tight little fists, I uncoiled one tentacle and reached for the antiquated brass door handle. My pneuma-somatic flesh, pale and gently strobing in the gloom, thickened around the tip as I reached out, adding layers of callus-like skin and reinforcing itself with spurs of stiff cartilage. I felt my bioreactor spike with power flooding my bloodstream with things that had no place in a proper human body, anticipating the worst — an electric shock, a magical trap, an ambush.

My tentacle grabbed the door handle. Nothing happened.

I blew out a shaking breath.

"You've got it?" Twil hissed.

"Yes, I'm touching it," I replied. "It's safe so far."

There was no need for words as I eased the door handle down. The others watched the ghostly spectacle with baited breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Only Praem could actually see my tentacle doing the work, until Evelyn quickly fumbled the modified 3D glasses back onto her face. If a passer-by had chanced on us in that moment, we'd have ended up on a paranormal website for certain; five college girls watching a poltergeist open a door.

Nothing happened when the door handle reached the nadir of its arc; nothing leapt out to claw off our faces when I cracked the door away from the frame; nothing detonated or screamed or pointed a gun at us as I swung the door wide to slowly reveal the cramped

room beyond.

Everyone peered over my shoulders. Twil was visibly twitching to rush inside, but she managed to stick to the plan.

I did my best to ignore what I saw: the bare wooden floor and dirty walls, the pair of sparse metal bunk beds either side of the room, the backpack and sports bag and the low table, the fast-food detritus on a battered kitchen counter. Most of all, I tried for just a moment to ignore the girl sitting on the right-hand bed, her huge sapphire doll-eyes peering at us from over the rampart of her own knees drawn up to her chest, clutching a pillow. I had to try very hard to ignore the way she was shaking and shivering.

“Hey there,” Raine said to her, easy and light, radiating all that beaming confidence which she so often used on me. That was part of the plan too. “We’ll step inside in a sec, but we’ve just gotta check it’s safe first, yeah? And if it’s safe for us, it’s safe for you too. Promise.”

The girl on the bed just stared, eyes flicking between us. Next to me, Praem put a finger to her own lips, gesturing for quiet.

While all this was happening, I reached just over the threshold with a pair of tentacles. Nothing happened, so I ran then along the inside of the door frame, feeling for ridges or bumps, sigils carved into the wood, or even something as crude as a piece of misplaced tape. I felt nothing out of place, no trap, no mechanism.

“Doorway’s normal,” I said, surprised to find my voice squeaky with adrenaline.

“In,” Evelyn barked.

We piled through the doorway, in order, exactly as planned — well, almost exactly. Evelyn’s jitters were so bad she almost tripped over the threshold, whacking her walking stick against her own leg and swearing with surprisingly colourful creativity. I had to catch her with my hands and my tentacles, making her jump in alarm and draw breath to yelp, but she understood what was happening and managed to swallow the scream. She nodded her thanks as I helped her into the room.

My own legs were shaky, knees weak, but the plan went off without a hitch.

Praem and Twil were into the room first, with strict instructions to check the corners, ceiling included — and be ready to intercept and shove back the big zombie lady, in case she was waiting to jump us. The object was not to provoke a fight, but to buy a second or two to make ourselves clear. Keep the gunboat's guns pointed without firing them, so to speak. Raine was through next, raising her pistol to exert some visible control of the situation. Then, when nobody exploded into a fountain of blood, Evelyn and I joined in the rear.

“Shut the door,” Evelyn hissed once we were inside. I obliged, pushing with one tentacle until I heard a click.

No traps, no tricks, no treachery.

We had only one problem: the zombie wasn't there.

The bedsit room was one of the most horrible living spaces I'd ever seen with my own eyes. A floor of bare wooden boards showed a plethora of mysterious stains, matched in decrepitude by walls of crumbling plaster, scarred with the tell-tale flaking of internal water damage. The only furniture was a pair of metal bunk bed frames which looked like they belonged in a military barracks, a low table toward the rear of the room, and a single rickety, worm-eaten chair. A compact kitchen comprised the whole of one rear corner of the already cramped space, with a single chipped and battered counter top, once white but long turned brownish with age. The tiny oven probably didn't work and the microwave looked like it was about forty years old. Empty plastic bags and polystyrene fast-food containers littered the counter top.

The room's single window, filthy from years of grime, let in little light. The one bare bulb in the ceiling didn't help much either.

A trio of bags lay on the floor between the bed frames — a compact and somewhat cutesy tote bag in dark pink, a modern rucksack suited for hiking, and a heavy-duty sports bag. The sports bag was open on a mess of rumpled clothes, assorted toiletries, a few charging cables, and a couple of paperback books. A school uniform — black blazer, white shirt, grey tie, with matching skirt and tights — hung on a clothes hanger hooked over the end of one of the bed frames.

Only one of the beds boasted an actual mattress on the bare metal crossbars, roughly made up with some very clean and soft-looking lilac sheets, totally out of place in this dank hole. The girl — Smalls,

as Twil had called her — was sitting on that bed, frozen and terrified as we all glanced about the room like a pack of wolves.

A black hardshell guitar case lay on the bare metal frame of the opposite bottom bunk.

“ ... where’s the other one?” Evelyn said.

The only other egress was the window, but it didn’t look like it had been opened in decades. A tiny bathroom jutted off in the right-hand corner, containing a very old toilet and an unhygienic looking shower. Raine took all of half a second to stick her gun and head in there.

“It’s clear,” she said. “She’s not in here.”

We all held our collective breath, eyes searching the room, as if Zheng’s special friend was about to leap out of thin air. But there was simply nowhere in the room to hide, not even a cupboard. Rather absurdly, Raine ducked down to glance under the bed frames; no zombies there either.

Praem was the only one of us not on the verge of panic. She was staring at the girl huddled on the bed.

“Twil,” Evelyn said, voice tight, “you said neither of them had left. They were both meant to be here.”

“I didn’t see anyone leave!” Twil protested, turning on the spot with her nose in the air, sniffing deeply. “I can still smell her.”

“Could still be in the building,” Raine said, soft and controlled. “On another floor. To avoid us. Could have moved as soon as we were spotted.”

Her eyes flickered to the girl on the bed, the scrunched up scrap of humanity staring back at us.

With a sickening cold in the base of my stomach, I realised Raine was covering the girl with her handgun — not pointing the barrel directly at her, but close enough to make her intent obvious. Evelyn had revealed the full length of her bone wand, tucked it into the crook of her elbow, and was watching the girl as well, hand poised over the scrimshawed designs. Praem was just staring.

I had to remind myself with an effort of will that we didn’t know what we were looking at.

"She's right here, I can fucking smell her!" Twil said. She stepped deeper into the room and waved her arms around as if swiping at cobwebs, trying to catch invisible prey. "I bet you any money you like, she's right here. Come on! You stink, I know you're there!"

"Twil," Evelyn said, hard and tight, then snapped when she didn't get a response. "Twil. Twil!"

"What?" Twil rounded on her, shrugging with hands that were already halfway to claws.

"If she is standing there," Evelyn said, slowly and carefully, barely containing her temper, "and currently invisible, then kindly do not start an incident by smacking her over the fucking head."

"... oh. Right. Sure." Twil cleared her throat and shot a wary look at the empty air either side of herself. "Sorry."

"We don't even know if she's there," Raine said. "Evee, we need a decision."

"Heather?" Evelyn looked at me. "Praem?"

"Um ... there's nothing in here but us," I said. "Nothing pneumatic."

"Hello," Praem said, sing-song soft, speaking to the girl huddled on the bed. "My name is Praem. What is yours?"

The girl stared back at Praem's milk-white look, her own eyes like sapphires in moonlight. From the window I'd thought her expressionless, but up close nothing could be further from the truth. She was terrified of us, eyes wide and mouth a frozen line, heart-shaped face peering over the top of the pillow she had clutched to her chest. Her expression was that unique look of one who knows they must try very hard not to show fear in the face of dangerous predators.

She was also absolutely tiny and incredibly pretty, almost doll-like. Twil had been right about her estimated age — by her face she was clearly at least as old as Twil, but petite in the extreme, perhaps even a whole inch or two shorter than me, though her frame was legitimately compact, not scrawny like mine. She had small, neat facial features, with a pale little nose and thick, dark eyelashes, all set in perfect porcelain skin. A messy helmet of black hair, thick and luxurious, full of random cow-licks and bouncy twists, fell level

with her chin. She was dressed in a black knitted jumper over a white blouse, with matching black leggings and a pair of thick socks on her feet.

Pale skin, black hair — and those impossible eyes.

Something wasn't right here. I recalled Mister 'Joe King' and his perfect disguises, selves layered inside each other like skins to be ripped off.

The girl took a moment to gather herself before she could answer Praem's question, swallowing with some difficulty, chest rising and falling with breaths that came too fast.

"Jan," she said. Her voice was weak and uncertain.

"Short for Janice?" Raine asked her with a warm smile, despite the lingering threat of the gun. The girl shook her head, which made her hair bounce. "Hey," Raine followed up. "Hey there, no worries, take it easy, okay? We ain't here to hurt you, even if you aren't what you appear to be. Even if you're really *really* not what you appear to be. Right, Evee?"

"What?" Evelyn snapped, so Raine gave her a meaningful look. "Oh, yes. Yes! I'm a little thrown off here, Raine. This isn't ... isn't what I expected. Where the hell is the other one?"

Raine winked at Evelyn, then turned back to the girl, improvising in real time as the plan disintegrated around us. "Short for January, then?" she asked.

"Just Jan," said Jan.

"What'cha doing here, Jan?" Raine pressed, beaming with enough confidence to peel the most wretched heart out of the darkest hole.

Jan's throat bobbed with another visible swallow, her eyes darting between us. I tried to imagine what she saw. She shook her head as if confused. "I ... I ... wasn't ... I've been here for ... two weeks? Three? I don't know you, I think. Are you here to take me back to my parents?"

Her voice was delicate and light, her accent posh and refined. Whoever she was, she probably didn't belong in Sharrowford.

Raine raised her eyebrows and shared a look with the rest of us. I bit my lip.

"Maybe," Raine said. "Depends if you want to go back or not?"

"We're not here to hurt you," Evelyn finally began, her wheels locking back onto the plan once more, into the practised lines I'd listened to her recite last night. "We're here to talk. The excess of caution is for our safety, but you haven't threatened us or laid any traps, and we are not going to hurt you. Understand? You followed my daughter a few days ago." She indicated Praem with a little nod. "I want to know who you are and what you're doing in my city."

Evelyn took a deep breath, diplomacy successfully delivered.

Jan's wide blue eyes stared back at her, framed by those messy dark locks. She blinked, swallowed, lips parted in frozen confusion. "I don't understand," she said.

Twil sighed and gestured at her. "Evee, she's a fucking kid. What are you expecting? We need to talk to the zombie."

"She's not a kid," I murmured, confused as to why I felt that way. "She's our age ... isn't she?"

"Good afternoon, Jan," Praem intoned, leaning down slightly so she was eye-level with the girl on the bed. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Nice to ... meet you?" Jan swallowed hard again, throat audibly dry.

Praem did not attempt to smile. Probably for the best.

"Jan. Right," Evelyn went on, struggling to find the right words. We were off-track again. "Right. Where's your friend? We know there's two of you. Or she was, what, your captor?"

"I don't ... I'm sorry ... I don't—" Jan started shaking her head, looking like she wanted to bury her face in the pillow clutched to her front. Her voice was shaking and quivering, tears gathering in those impossible eyes. "You mean the lady I was with? I don't know who she is, I don't even have her name. The others, the ones with the old man, they put me in her care. You're not from him, are you?"

Evelyn frowned like she was turning to stone. "We're not with any 'old man'. Where's the zombie?"

"She left the room before I saw you from the window." Jan

swallowed to suppress a growing stammer. “It was like she knew you were coming. I’m sorry.”

“Shit,” Raine hissed, glancing at the door.

“Who are you?” Evelyn demanded. “Who’s the lady you were with? What are you doing in my city? I need you to answer.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Raine started to murmur, soft and reassuring, but we were losing ground. This was all going wrong.

“Maybe we should just get her out of here?” Twil suggested.

Why was nobody commenting on her eyes?

Those eyes were like nothing I’d ever seen before, a shifting blue like the underside of the sea, or gemstones in flame. People didn’t possess eyes like that. Set in Jan’s neat, pale, terrified face were the most beautiful eyes I’d ever seen, and I didn’t think that in some romantic or erotic sense. Her eyes were aesthetic marvels, a storm-tossed sky lit by the blink of a supernova. What was I looking at?

As Evelyn raised her voice and Jan squeaked — actually *squeaked* in fear — I forced myself to look away from those eyes. Something was wrong here. My mind automatically searched for clues among the contents of the room, the clothes in the bags, the two books visible poking from the mess. I turned my head to catch the titles on the pair of paperbacks, but one of them was in Chinese and the other in Russian. Without thinking, one of my tentacles uncurled towards the books, to pick one up and take a look.

Jan’s impossibly beautiful eyes flickered in my peripheral vision.

I looked back at her and caught the moment. Just a split second. Then she was looking elsewhere again.

“—we’re not here to hurt you or kidnap you or do anything to you, in fact,” Evelyn was saying, her voice rising with frustration. “We are trying to make contact without violence, for once. So call your friend or tell us where she is or—”

“Twil,” I said, loud and clear, the tone of my voice cutting across Evelyn losing control. “Twil, step away from her.”

“Eh?” Twil frowned at me, but she did as I said.

“Praem, you too,” I said. “Away from the bed. Please.”

“Heather?” Evelyn grunted at me, but Praem was already obeying my request. Raine went very still and ready.

Jan stared at me, seemingly uncomprehending, white as a sheet. Her lower lip trembled.

“You could see my tentacle just now,” I said. “Couldn’t you?”

“Oh daaaaaamn,” Twil hissed.

Jan blinked at me, then glanced at the others, doing a very good impression of a confused and scared young woman who had no idea what this crazy person was talking about. Her throat bobbed and her mouth hung open. A trapped little mouse, surrounded by big scary predators in a dirty and dark place. I had to steel myself for unkindness, because everything about her made me want to scoop her up and whisk her off to safety.

“I saw your eyes follow the tip,” I said. “You need to be honest and tell us what you are, because there’s only certain types of things that can see my tentacles. And we still won’t hurt you, not if you’re not trying to hurt us. What are you, Jan?”

But little Jan shook her head, bewildered and wide-eyed. “I ... I-I don’t understand,” she squeezed out. “T-tentacles?”

Evelyn sighed.

“She’s lying?” Raine asked me. But I didn’t answer, I just stared at Jan, watching her eyes. Had I been mistaken?

“Uncertain,” Praem intoned. She hadn’t caught the look either.

“Only one thing for it,” I said.

Heart in my mouth, I uncoiled one of my tentacles again and reached across the empty gap between us. I inched the tentacle slowly towards Jan’s face, coming at her from the side, waiting for the flicker of her eyes. She watched us instead, seemingly oblivious to the tentacle extending towards her, seeking an explanation for what was going on, her chest rising and falling with rapid and increasing panic as the silence stretched out.

“I-I’m sorry,” she blurted out. “I don’t know what you’re—”

Four inches from the soft skin of her cheek.

“—talking about. I—”

An inch. No response.

“—was taken from my parents’ two— no, three weeks ago. They keep moving me, I don’t even know where I am. I—”

I touched her cheek with the tip of my tentacle. Cool and soft. I pressed gently, just hard enough to dimple the skin.

She froze — not in shock and horror at an unexpected touch, but with the mild surprise of a gambler who had wagered on the wrong horse.

Jan moved her face away from my tentacle with a sigh.

The transformation was not instant or unnatural — nothing magical about it — but it was no less shocking, seeing a master actor shed all the tricks of the trade like sweat-soaked vestments. Her pitiful pleading cut out with a clearing of her throat. The terror slid from her face, replaced with the faint amusement of resigned defeat, but not without retaining the pallor of residual fear. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve as I whipped my tentacle back in shock, blinking them clear of crocodile tears. Her neat little lips creased with a subtle sardonic smile, but now the faint tremor was true.

“Awwww shit,” said Twil, making wolf-claws of both hands with a flicker-wisp of spirit-matter. Raine raised her gun and pointed it directly at Jan’s head. Evelyn grit her teeth and went pale, unable to spare a hand to cling to me, but pressing against my side all the same. Praem didn’t move.

Jan sighed again and stretched out her legs so they hung over the side of the bed, flexing her feet. She let the pillow flop down into her lap.

“You do have to admit,” she said, voice a delicate curl, no less girlish but without the lost-lamb bleat, “I almost had you with that stupid act.”

“Almost,” Raine said, with a grudging smirk of respect. “Not bad.”

“Who and what are you?” Evelyn demanded through her teeth.

“That’s fucking unfair, that’s what it is!” Twil snapped. “Shit, she had me!”

“You can see my tentacles,” I repeated. “Which mean’s you’re ... what?”

Jan nodded politely to me in defeat, blinking thick dark eyelashes. "I assumed they were an illusion, so I stayed still when I should have flinched. That's some very serious work you've had done there, miss."

"Thank you," I said. "I've tried very hard."

Jan raised her eyebrows. "You did it to yourself? Interesting."

"You need to answer our questions," Evelyn said, tight and angry, "and call your friend out from hiding. Right now."

"I don't really like being threatened?" Jan said, pulling a face. "Are you in charge? Because I would really appreciate it if that one there—" she gestured at Raine "—would stop pointing a gun at me. Please? Like, bullets are a major weakness of mine."

"Not a chance," Raine murmured. "Sorry."

We had to think quickly here, but I couldn't figure out what to make of Jan, whatever she was. This was nothing like the previous times we'd seen mages disguise themselves as other people; there was an obvious contrast between Jan's physical size, her apparent youth, and her attitude of cool confidence in the face of actual fear — because she was afraid, quite a bit. She did not read as some ancient thing curled up like a cancer in the body of a young girl, and possessed none of the animalistic strangeness or mechanical precision that I'd seen in demon hosts. What she seemed like was a very confident teenage girl with a serious talent for acting.

Abyssal instincts agreed. I felt no desire at all to launch myself across the room and pull her brain out before she could hurt my friends.

But what about those eyes?

"Oh well," Jan sighed, pulling a pained smile. "I hope for my sake your trigger discipline is better than your ability to read liars."

"Absolutely," Raine replied, stock-still, finger most certainly not inside the trigger guard.

Jan reached up toward her own face to tuck a stray lock of hair behind one ear. Raine snapped out something about keeping her hands where we could see them, but it was already too late, her act had disarmed us so competently and we were yet to complete the gear-shift. In the split second Jan's fingers were next to her own

ear, they seemed to slip over each other, each finger vanishing and reappearing from sight in rapid succession, so quickly that one couldn't be sure if the effect was a trick of the light.

Her fingers reappeared from nowhere — holding a tiny, compact handgun, pulled from thin air.

I hadn't known guns came in such small sizes. It was also pink.

"Drop that right now," Raine was saying all of a sudden, low and serious. Twil was already growling and stepping in front of the rest of us, ready to rip the gun straight from the girl's hand. Praem had stepped neatly in front of Evelyn before we'd even registered the weapon.

"Ah-ah-ah-ahhhhh," Jan went, smiling that subtle little smile even as sweat rolled down her forehead. She waved the gun, but not at us, wagging it like a finger. "You're pointing your guns at me. I don't get to do the same?"

"You've already concealed plenty," Raine said.

"I can take that right off you, you little shit," Twil growled. "Put it down."

Jan sighed, nodding politely. Slowly and carefully she placed the gun down on the bed next to her.

"Don't touch it," Evelyn snapped before anybody could move to scoop up the firearm.

"What?" Jan asked. "You think I would booby-trap my own last resort? Is that the sort of people I'm dealing with here?"

"It's hardly your last resort," I piped up, mouth gone quite dry. "If you can pull a gun from the air, you can produce other things too."

"Smart," Jan said. She nodded with a sweet smile, though she had to steady herself with a deep breath, bluffing just as hard as us. "You have no idea what else I have up my sleeves. Literally." She did a little flourish with her hands, like a magician about to produce a card — which was exactly what jumped into the gap between the first and middle fingers of her right hand. She turned the playing card over to show us.

"Huh," Raine laughed. "Ace of spades. Nice trick."

"Stop doing that," Evelyn snapped.

“Trust me, all of you, you with the gun, and the werewolf, and whatever you are, squid girl, and *that*.” She nodded at Evelyn’s bone wand, eyes widening a fraction. “I am amply defended. We’re in a stand-off here, you haven’t got the upper hand. We can do a lot of damage to each other in a very short space of time, I’m certain of that, so let’s all take a deep breath?”

“We weren’t after an upper hand,” Evelyn said. “We want to talk. You followed my— Praem here. You followed one of us. I want to know what you’re doing. I want to know who and what you are.”

“And then we can all go our separate ways,” Raine added in a purr, though she still held her pistol levelled with both hands. “We just want to make sure you’re not a threat.”

Jan laughed, a real laugh, a teenage girl’s giggle. “You know what? This is so absurd that I actually believe you. Certainly, why not?” She leaned back on her hands and shrugged. A little pink tongue flickered out to wet her lips. “When I saw you in the street I assumed you were going to put something straight through the window, so I was prepared for worse. But here you are. Talking. My goodness.”

“Jan,” Evelyn said, gently motioning Praem aside a pace or two. “Jan what?”

“Dutch name, right?” Raine asked.

Jan shrugged. “Jan Martense.”

Evelyn frowned like she’d found excrement smeared all over the doormat. “I’m not an idiot, nor was I born yesterday.”

Jan cringed. “Worth a try, wasn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?” I asked.

“It’s a name from a story,” Evelyn grunted. “An obvious one. She’s lying to us.”

“Oh don’t be absurd,” Jan said. “I’m hardly going to give you my real name, certainly not under these circumstances.”

“My name is Evelyn Saye,” Evee said, loud and clear, straightening her spine as much as she could. “I am a mage, and these are my friends and companions. You and your zombie followed one of my household through the city centre. I want to know what you’re

doing in my city and that you are not a threat to me and mine. I am trying, very hard, to create some fucking civility between mages for once, rather than tearing your head off before we even make contact. Which, trust me, we are more than capable of doing, no matter how many stupid tricks you pull from pocket dimensions. Now where's your zombie friend?"

Jan gave a very good show of looking like an outraged teenage girl. Which, maybe she actually was.

"Your city?" she asked. "Excuse me, but I don't see a crown on your head."

Twil snorted, involuntarily.

"You know what I mean," Evelyn hissed.

"And last I checked, the mayor of Sharrowford was a gentleman in his sixties. So, not you. What is this, are we working on right of conquest here? Do I have to formally challenge you to be allowed within city limits? Is this why that giant slab of meat has been harassing us for like two weeks?"

"Zheng," I sighed. "She means Zheng. I'm sorry, Zheng does her own thing. She enjoyed fighting your ... friend?"

Jan rolled her eyes. "Fair enough. I assume you sent this clown to follow us though?" she nodded at Twil.

"... m-me?" Twil stammered.

"Yes. Had to find where you were living," Evelyn said.

"You mean you knew I was there?" Twil asked in a small, offended voice. "*Clown?*"

"Any unknown mage or associates in Sharrowford present an unacceptable risk to my friends and family," Evelyn rattled off. "We're already in a conflict with one mage and I need to be absolutely sure you aren't working for him, whatever you are. Frankly, an unbound demon host turns up on the streets of Sharrowford, and I have to assume the worst. And you followed my daughter." She stamped with her walking stick, snarling those last few words.

"She's made of wood," Jan said. "It's not every day you spot a person made of wood. I was interested." She nodded to Praem.

“Cool, by the way. Well done.”

“I am fabulous,” Praem intoned. Jan smiled, apparently delighted at this.

“Jan,” I said. “Listen to me very carefully, please.”

“And you, what are you?” She gestured at me with her eyes. “I thought you were something very different for a moment, but—”

“I need you to listen,” I repeated, bringing the metaphorical cannon to bear. Jan blinked once. “This isn’t a stand-off. I can reach out with one tentacle and touch you again — unless you’re very acrobatic indeed?”

Jan shrugged. “What you see is mostly what you get.”

I nodded. “Well then. If I can touch you, I can get rid of you, instantly. I can shunt you *Outside* with a single thought. Do you know that term? Maybe you know it by a different name, but I think you know what I mean. And yes, in the confusion, you might get a shot off, you hurt one or two of us. Your zombie, whoever she is, might pop out of the wall and take one of us down. But you will be placed beyond recovery, the instant I touch you.”

Jan went quite still as I spoke. Her eyes searched the faces of my friends. She found no bluff. “Okay. Where is this going?”

“However,” I went on, “I am not a murderer by habit. We just want to make sure you’re not a danger to us.”

“Heather,” Evelyn hissed, “remember what I said about mages and overconfidence.”

“Mhmm,” I grunted.

Jan stared back at me for a second, those huge beautiful eyes blinking in thought. “Alright,” she sighed. “I don’t want to fight either, I’m not generally in the habit of murder. I’m a mage too. I’m in Sharrowford to do a job, for which I am being paid, by people who have nothing to do with this city and hopefully nothing to do with you.”

“Tentacles,” Praem intoned, pointing out the lie. Jan wasn’t just a mage — she could see pneuma-somatic flesh. But Jan blinked, not following. She didn’t understand.

Raine blew out a *pfffft* sound. “All a mistake, hey?”

“A job?” Evelyn said, sceptical to the point of disgust. “What do you mean, a job?”

“What’s the job?” Twil asked.

“Well, that’s where you lot come in.” Jan pulled an anxious smile. “I came to Sharrowford to do a job, then discovered the job was unnecessary. But in the process of discovering, I found another group of people who would pay me to do a different job. Involving you, all of you. Which I was very much inclined to take, because you were already following me around — or, ‘Zheng’ was, my mistake. And if I could get you all in one place, that would make it possible to finish the first job too. And everybody likes to get paid twice.”

Tension tightened our little group, all but Praem. Evelyn’s frown turned stormy. Twil shook her head and growled.

“What job?” Evelyn hissed. “Who are you working for?”

“S’gotta be Eddy boy,” Raine said.

“Yeah, who else would give a shit?” Twil said. “Now he’s got this mercenary working for him.”

“Contractor!” Jan said, huffing with squinting disbelief, very much the put out little madam. “Mercenaries generally fight wars. Do I look like I’m remotely suitable to fight a war?”

“Looks can be deceiving,” I said softly, still struggling against a sudden urge to wrap a tentacle around her throat. Those eyes met mine with a private understanding.

“I have less than zero interest in your turf war,” Jan said. “And I’m not even that interested in any of you, not really. Except you, squiddy, perhaps. Wouldn’t mind swapping notes on ... yourself. And — Praem, was it?”

“Praem,” said Praem.

“You’re quite a marvel.” Jan smiled at her with lip-biting, girlish approval. “And I think you know that, too.”

“I am all my mother’s love,” Praem said.

“Mother?” Jan hitched an eyebrow, then glanced at Evelyn. “Oh. Oh! When you said ‘daughter’, I thought that was cover. You really treat her as—”

“Shut up and answer the fucking question,” Evelyn snapped at her.

Jan considered for a moment, then nodded, something different about her attitude in the way she met Evelyn’s eyes. “I’m working for a group whose name I am not at liberty to divulge,” she said with all the delicacy of a lady turning down a dance at a ball.

“Oh for—” Evelyn hissed.

“You’re gonna have to do better than that,” Raine said.

“But!” Jan went on, huffing at our impatience, raising a finger. “I can tell you what I was sent to do. I’m to track down everyone and anyone who has been involved with one Nathan Sterling Hobbes—”

“Badger,” I blurted out. “That’s Badger’s real name.”

“—including whoever put him in the hospital,” she carried on with an extra smile in her voice, “and verify that they are free of certain ... contaminants.”

“Contaminants,” Evelyn dead-panned.

“Don’t worry,” Jan said. “You lot are far too coherent and sane to be what I’m looking for. But I’m still going to have to check you.”

“Like hell you are,” Twil grunted.

“Yeah, what she said,” Raine agreed.

Jan shook her head. “You don’t understand. A person turns up in a hospital, anywhere in Britain, with a mysterious self-inflicted trepanation wound—”

“It wasn’t self-inflicted,” I said.

“Heather,” Evelyn hissed through her teeth.

“Yeah maybe don’t?” Twil suggested.

“It’s all right,” I said, staring at Jan. She was staring back with sudden and polite interest, eyes like jewels dropped into a fire. “Something isn’t right here. Wires have gotten crossed, somehow. We need to clear it up. I put that hole in Nathan’s head.”

“Oh dear,” Jan sighed. She wet her lips and swallowed, fear inching back. “And why did you do that?”

“To save his life from something that was in his head.”

“Those are not the words I need to hear,” Jan said. “Look, I was trying to say: a person turns up in any hospital, anywhere in Britain, with a mysterious self-inflicted trepanation wound — and a certain group of people sit up and take notice. They want to make sure they don’t have to break out the tinfoil hats and the car bombs.”

“The *car bombs*?” Twil spluttered.

“How do you know what happened to him?” I asked.

“It was in the newspapers,” Jan said. “The local ones. And I didn’t find out about it, my current employers did. But they’re mostly a bunch of cowards. So that’s why I’m here, to rule out a certain problem. And if I don’t get back to them eventually, they’ll come after you themselves. And not with magic.” Her eyes alighted on Raine’s handgun. “Though from the looks of it, you might be prepared for that, too.”

“We’d rather avoid that kinda thing, thanks all the same,” Raine said.

Jan pulled another one of those awkward teenage smiles, one that said she knew she was in a lot of trouble, and was not going to get out of it. “Well, that means I need to take a little peek inside all of your heads.”

for the sake of a few sheep – 15.11

Jan's awkward grimace was a work of subtle art.

She kept it plastered across her delicate features as we took a moment to absorb her preposterous request. The slowly dying sunlight lowered through the single filthy window of her cramped bedsit room, brushed the corner of her soft cheekbone, and made twinkling highlights in the lustrous black of her fluffy hair. Her impossibly beautiful eyes pinched in a squint as if preparing to receive a punch on the arm. It was technically a smile — her bow-shaped, pale-pink lips were curved upward, after all — showing pearly-white clenched teeth. The sort of smile that told us she knew her request could not possibly be granted, but hoping against hope that we were either very stupid or very kind.

It was a very teenager smile, the smile one pulls when mum and dad are not impressed, and one cannot charm them like some pretty little pixie, but one is old enough that mutual respect is not completely impossible, if only they would listen.

If Jan was some kind of fake, then she was a perfect actress at playing her apparent age. But how could such a young woman be an accomplished mage?

The answer was standing right next to me, of course, with her bent spine and her maimed hand and her missing leg, gripping her scrimshawed bone wand — Evelyn.

But Jan didn't look traumatised or damaged; she didn't even act strange, not by our standards. She was eloquent and petite and displayed a proper fear response to a bunch of dangerous people pointing weapons at her.

Heather, you don't look damaged on the surface, I reminded myself. Don't be so quick to judge. Maybe she's just a girl.

Her eyes, like sapphires burning with internal fire, suggested otherwise.

Just a girl, very interested in the contents of our heads. My head. And there was only one thing in my head besides myself.

Evelyn finally processed Jan's request. She snorted. "You want to look inside our heads. Right. Nice try."

Jan's grimace deepened into a wince. "I'm not taking the mickey."

"Hey, yo," Twil said with a derisive laugh, "I dunno about like, me, or Raine, but you do not wanna look inside Heather's head, yo." She jerked a thumb in my direction. "The last bunch o' jokers who tried that didn't feel so good about what they found there. It's bad, yeah? Like, big crazy death-fuck time bad. Don't try."

Jan's grimace froze and her gemstone eyes flickered to me. She looked like a hunter who'd been caught by the tiger, on the latrine with her gun far away.

"Twil," Raine said with resigned amusement, still pointing her handgun at Jan's head, "not the best moment for that."

"*Big crazy death-fuck time?*" Evelyn echoed, most unimpressed. Twil just shrugged. "Need I remind you that you are not meant to be doing the talking here?"

Twil put her hands up. "Alright, alright. I was just being poetic. S'not like I wanna think about that stuff either."

"The Sharrowford Cult never looked inside my head, Twil," I said out loud — but I said it to Jan, speaking directly to the wary, waxen look coming over her expression. "All I did was give them the Fractal."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I know," Twil whined. "I was being ... I was tryin' ... you know. Intimidate. S'what I'm here for, right?"

"You're here to tank," Raine said. Twil rolled her eyes.

"Heather, is it?" Jan asked, having gone very still indeed. Her pale throat bobbed with a dry swallow. The ace of spades playing card in her hand — the one she'd pulled from some private pocket dimension — was quivering slightly between her fingers. She carefully placed it down on the bed, on the opposite side of her lap from her pink handgun.

Her fear was back, worse than before, and hard to conceal; she wasn't that good an actress, she could only harness what she

already had. I tried to watch her right hand in the corner of my eye, watch the gap between her fingers and her willingly discarded pistol, that scrap of polymer and plastic in girlish pink, such an absurd colour for a weapon.

If my worst suspicions were right, she might be willing to grab the gun and shoot me, even at the cost of her own life. My bioreactor was already spooling up more power inside my abdomen, shunting biochemical control rods out of their channels and flooding me with energy, making me want to bounce on the balls of my feet and plate my front with extruded steel. Three of my tentacles moved to cover me, to catch a literal bullet if need be — though Jan could see that, couldn't she?

I opened my mouth and almost said something like *grab her gun, please*, or *I think this young lady is about to try shooting me*, but I knew she might dive for the weapon if I cried a warning. Or worse, she might produce more than a playing card from up her sleeves. I wet my lips, heart juddering, bowels going tight.

Raine must have noticed my tension, because she shifted her footing, as if ready to move. Praem stepped forward one pace, back within range of the girl on the bed.

In the back of my mind, I began to ready the first burning figures and aching principles of an equation I'd only used once before. Once, to save Raine's life, I'd deflected a bullet.

Could I do so again, pre-emptively?

"That's my name," I said. I even smiled.

"And what lives in your head, Heather?" Jan asked. Those deep blue eyes seemed to draw me inward. I couldn't look away, as if they were windows to an ocean.

"If I answer that, are you going to pick up your gun and try to shoot me?" My voice barely shook at all.

Jan blew out a long breath. "I don't know, really. I guess I'm supposed to, but there's not a lot of point now. As I said, this is just a job. If you're ... infested, well." She shrugged. "Maybe we can come to an agreement. Maybe you can pay me to go away."

"Pay you?" Twil snorted.

"I like the sound of that," Evelyn said, though her tone did not

agree.

“A token amount.” Jan lit up, eyes flicking away from me at last and roving across the others. I let out a breath I hadn’t known I was holding. “Buy out my contract. No, really, I’m serious. I’m not a hero, I’m just looking to get paid, and I can hardly spend money if you decide to encase me in concrete and throw me in a river. A hundred pounds?” She grimaced again, knowing she had no chance. “Fifty? Twenty? Seriously, one of you, just stuff a fiver in my bag there.”

“Remember,” Evelyn raised her voice, “we still don’t know where her demon host has gotten to. We are still before the jaws of a trap.”

“It’s not a trap,” Jan protested. “It’s a sensible precaution.”

“Then where is she?” Evelyn hissed.

“The thing in my mind is bigger than both of us,” I said slowly. “Bigger than all of us here. Bigger than this entire world. You do not want to meet it, you do not want to look inside my mind, because it will drive you mad. I barely keep it at bay, with magic I don’t even understand, and frankly I doubt you have much chance either. And it has taught me the most horrible things, the keys to reality, like toxic waste in my mind. You do not want that in your —”

“*Head!*” Jan interrupted me, eyes wide with hope.

“ ... I’m sorry?”

“Head. Head! You said mind. Did you mean mind, or did you mean head?” She looked between all of us, suddenly more animated, a smile peeking back onto her delicate lips. She brushed her fluffy black hair behind her ears. I saw Raine twitch, almost go for the kill shot, and Jan flinched so hard she threw her hands up in surrender. But she rattled on quickly. “Because I don’t care about what’s in your mind. I don’t care about your thoughts. You could be like her —” she nodded at Praem “—for all I care, you could have a whole legion of demons in your mind and I really would not be bothered one slightest bit. It would be terribly hypocritical of me, anyway.”

I blinked at her in confusion. Raine shrugged but kept her pistol trained. Twil puffed out a breath. Praem didn’t move.

"In your head, or in your mind?" Jan repeated, trying to maintain her smile. "Let's clear this up."

"The Eye," I said out loud, tentacles twitching, fully expecting her to pull some impossible death-magic from thin air. "It's in my mind, yes. Not my head, physically. Are you after the Eye? Don't make us speak its true name, because the true name hurts to even hear, it ... really sucks, it—"

"She's not after the Eye," Evelyn said softly, but with such conviction that we all looked at her.

"Uh, indeed!" Jan said. "That's a bit of a coincidence, but I don't know what the 'Eye', singular, is, but that doesn't sound like what I'm here to find."

"My mother had notes on you people," Evelyn said. She took a deep breath, finally removed her hand from the designs on her bone wand, and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Her painfully grey expression was gone, colour coming back into her cheeks. She rolled her neck left and right, which produced a clicking and grinding of vertebrae. "Took me a moment to recall."

"Ah," Jan grimaced, more embarrassed than afraid. "I'm only working for them, I'm not one of them myself."

"The Army of the Third Eye," Evelyn sighed. She tapped her own forehead with a sigh. "Trepanation hole? Third eye? Get it?"

"Oh, come on," Twil sighed. "You're kidding?"

"You mean ... this isn't about the Eye?" I asked. "Our Eye, I mean? 'Army of the Third Eye'? Goodness, that's an awfully confusing name. Why does everything to do with magic have such stupid names?"

I found myself almost panting to get my breath back, talking just to feel normal. My tentacles slowly lowered as I realised Jan was no longer tense with the need to grab her gun and shoot me. I concentrated to force control rods back into my bioreactor, like struggling with occulted internal muscles. Jan pulled a very awkward smile indeed, quite embarrassed.

"They're a cult," Evelyn went on, frowning at Jan. "Quite an old one, too. Thirty years or so now, if they really are still around. My mother's notes said they fizzled out about twenty five years back,

too many of them dead, too much attention from the mundane authorities.” She glanced at the rest of us. “They let off a couple of car bombs in London in the early nineties and tried to assassinate an MP. According to my mother’s notes they ... ” She redirected her attention back to Jan, still hard and uncompromising even if not ready to kill her anymore. “You need to prove you’re not lying. I know of the people you claim to work for. Explain what you’re here for. If your words don’t match my expectations, I will have Raine here shoot you.”

“Evee,” I hissed.

“She’ll do it, she totally will,” Raine said, pulling a resigned smile with her lips pressed together.

“She will not,” Praem intoned.

“I am trying to present a credible threat here,” Evelyn said, rolling her eyes.

“I already did that,” I said. “I think.” Then I undermined myself with a truly gargantuan hiccup, so bad it actually hurt my diaphragm. Jan flinched and I blushed slightly. “Sorry,” I said, trying to take a breath. “Too much ... too much of all this.”

“Is she okay?” Jan asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, rubbing my sternum.

“Answer the question,” Evelyn grumbled, though her tone seemed utterly resigned to the growing absurdity of a true misunderstanding.

Jan puffed out a sigh and pulled that uniquely teenage grimace again, half embarrassment, half like a worm exposed under an overturned rock. “The Army of the Third Eye is hardly a ‘cult,’” she said in that delicate voice. “That’s a bit much. They don’t understand anything about magic, they’re basically a bunch of normies who got overexposed and couldn’t deal with it.”

“And what do they want,” Evelyn said — it wasn’t even a question, she was just utterly exhausted by this moment.

“They um ... ” Jan cleared her throat and blushed. “They believe the British government and general establishment types are being mind-controlled by giant alien insects. From space.”

“What,” went Twil.

Raine raised her eyebrows.

“Um,” I said. “Giant?”

“Yes, yes, go on,” Evelyn sighed, making a get-on-with-it hand gesture.

“Well, giant in relative terms,” Jan said. She held her hands about a foot apart. “About the size of a pigeon. Sort of mottled grey-green. They look a bit like a giant fly but they’ve got many more limbs and lots of eyes, and they’re supposed to curl up and hide inside human skulls, entwined with the brain matter itself. Supposedly they can read memories and then pilot the host with suggestion and mental torture and ... look,” she hurried to add, though Evelyn was already nodding along, “I don’t believe a word of this. The *Army* have a lot of sketches of these things but only one blurry photograph. You and I, if you are all what you claim to be, we both know that it could be a photograph of anything. Some demon, something from the Beyond, something a stupid and irresponsible mage cooked up once.”

“This all matches up,” Evelyn sighed, possibly the most exasperated I’d ever seen her.

“Giant alien space bugs?” Twil asked, in the tone one might say *magical polka-dot clowns*.

“My theory,” Jan said, quite apologetic, “is that these poor fellows encountered something, years and years ago, something magical that they couldn’t deal with, that they couldn’t process. So, cultural expectations took over, maybe one of them was into UFO stuff, so ... giant mind-control space bugs.”

“Maladaptive coping strategy,” Evelyn said. “That happens, rarely, when somebody can’t process exposure to magic.” She finally let go of her bone wand and casually passed it to Praem, then flexed and massaged her stiff fingers.

Raine raised her eyebrows at that. “Evee, you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I don’t fucking care any more. Just keep the gun pointed at her,” Evelyn grumbled. “Finish, what else?” she spat at Jan.

“I’ve only ever met five members of the *Army*,” Jan said, “and I

think that's all that's left. They're all in their sixties now and they're all absolutely deep in awful paranoia, it's really quite sad. They've all performed trepanation on themselves in the past — they believe sunlight kills the bugs. So, when your ... um ... friend," she cleared her throat, "turned up in Sharrowford General Hospital with a hole in his head, one of them read about it in his regular Google search for news with the word 'trepanation'." She pulled another grimace-smile. "They paid me a lot of money to soothe their paranoia, that's really all there is to it. I'm supposed to check out this Nathan fellow and make sure it's not relevant to them. But they are paranoid, and if it doesn't involve trying to kill government ministers, I think they really will break out the improvised explosive devices."

"Uh, 'scuse me?" Twil said. "I'm not following a word of this?"

"Why am I not surprised?" Evelyn shot her a very tired look. "Normal people got exposed to magic and couldn't deal with it. Maybe one of them got a demon in his head or something. That was my mother's conjecture, anyway."

"Right, right, okay," Twil said, trying really hard. "So there's not actually any giant alien space bugs?"

"No," Evelyn said, very slowly and very carefully.

"But they explained it to themselves with giant alien space bugs?" I asked Jan directly.

"Mhmm." Jan nodded, smiling.

"They really believe this?"

"They really believe it, yes. They're paying me a lot of money to confirm a giant alien space bug did not come out of Nathan's head."

"... I've heard and seen a lot of absurd things since I stumbled into all this," I said, "but that has to be some kind of record."

Jan winced. "I do apologise."

"No, wait, you were about to shoot me!" I said, pointing with both one hand and a tentacle at the pink gun on the bed. "You were about to reach for that thing. I'm not very experienced at reading people, but even I could see that."

"Ohhhh yeah," Raine said, soft and low. "Another couple of seconds there and I would'a made you a third eye of your own."

Jan's beautiful, impossible, gem-like eyes twitched — for a moment I thought she was about to finally reveal her true weapons and turn us all to stone with a charmed look. My tentacles jerked up to defend myself, defend my friends, block her gaze; but then I realised with an embarrassed flush that she'd barely resisted an urge to roll her eyes. She was, in fact, staying extra polite.

"The gun, really?" she muttered, faintly amused. "Of course I was about to defend myself, I thought I'd finally run into the real thing!"

"So you do believe in the alien space bugs?" I asked.

Jan's resistance crumbled; she rolled her eyes. "No, of course not. What do you take me for? I've done this same job three times and I've never seen anything to suggest the *Army* aren't just a bunch of well-armed lunatics, but ... well, your man Nathan is clearly disturbed, and not only by the hole in his head." She shrugged, just as delicately as she did everything else. "That fit the pattern described by my clients, but it's the first time I'd seen it. I did hunt down *something* that had come out of him, but that seemed unrelated, so I was ready to dismiss it and get back to business."

"The skin man that came out of Badger," Raine said, nodding. "Your zombie ate it."

"Of course she did," Jan said. "It reeked of him, we needed to get rid of it. Also, excuse me — *zombie*?"

"Whatever she is," Raine said.

"Did you make that thing? It was horribly unhygienic."

"Nah." Raine shook her head. "We were trying to get rid of it too."

"And what is your business, exactly?" Evelyn grumbled. "Beyond this job."

"Making money." Jan raised one hand and rubbed her fingers together. "But then you hunt me down, I bring it up, and you get defensive. You start telling me there's something in your head, so yes, of course I was getting ready for action! Goodness me." She sighed, pursing her lips and shaking her head at me. "I thought I was about to be face to face with giant alien space bugs."

"That's what you signed up for, ain't it?" Twil said.

Jan sighed and gave Twil a pinched look. She was about to open

her mouth and carry on — she seemed to like the sound of her own voice. Either that or she was practised at long-form distraction. But I pushed in before we could get further off track.

“This doesn’t actually explain anything,” I said, my tentacles still up. “How did you track Praem? How did you know we were out in the street just now? How can you see my tentacles? What was the ‘second job’ you mentioned, from what group of people? And what about your ... ”

Eyes, I was about to say, but those eyes flickered to me and seemed to hold me still by virtue of their sheer beauty.

“Yeah,” Raine added. She hadn’t moved, but suddenly her gun seemed to loom larger. “You’re good at the run around, I’ll give you that, but you’ve missed a detail.”

Jan blinked at Raine. “Yes?”

“Badger would have contacted us if you’d seen him in the hospital,” Raine said with an awful smirk, the smirk of a hound cornering prey. “You’re still lying. Checkmate.”

“Of course he wouldn’t have!” Jan tutted. “I threatened him. You’ve got him in there with no protection at all. He thinks I’ll come back and kill him if he breathes a word to you.”

“Ah,” said Raine.

“Shit,” went Twil. “She’s got us there. We’re kind of bad at this.”

“Oversight,” said Praem.

“Still doesn’t explain the second job, hey?” Raine pressed.

Evelyn suddenly snapped, “Of course it explains that. Am I the only one of us capable of extrapolating from available information?” She frowned around at all of us, an exacting schoolmarm with a clutch of particularly slow students. She stared at me. “I expected better of you, Heather.”

“I’m ... sorry?”

“Never mind, it’s not your area. I suppose this is why I’m your strategist,” she grumbled, then ignored me in favour of Jan. “You were talking to the rest of the survivors from the Sharrowford Cult, weren’t you? Badger’s remaining friends and contacts. That’s all the places you were visiting two days ago. And they wanted you to do

something about us.”

Jan sat up straight, settling her petite frame into a semi-formal pose, hands cradled in her tiny lap. “Guilty as charged — though it’s not a crime.”

“Do something about us?” Raine echoed, a dark smile in her voice.

Jan cleared her throat. “They offered to pay me, well, not very much money, to confirm if Nathan is alive and well or not, if his mind is intact, and so on. They gave me a promise of further pay if I could — and I quote — ‘pry him out of their clutches’. That being you, of course.”

“Dangerous job, you know?” Raine purred. “We’re dangerous people.”

“We are not,” I muttered, vastly uncomfortable.

“Absolutely,” Jan said with a swallow and an awkward smile.

“Really, you have to understand, I only took the job because I was pretty sure that ‘Badger’ — goodness, he does look like a badger, doesn’t he? How apt. I only took the job because it was pretty obvious that he’s fine, except a tiny bit of brain damage, but that’s to be expected. He’s hardly under duress and seems to absolutely adore you.” She nodded at me and my stomach turned over. “My plan was to wait for him to get discharged, meet you through him, and then get paid twice; once for confirming the obvious absence of alien space bugs, the other for ‘freeing’ Badger.” She sighed and flopped her hands against her lap. “Didn’t expect you people to act like territorial cats. Considering what you did for Nathan, I assumed you were ...” She paused for a tiny laugh. “‘The good guys’, to some extent.”

“There are no good mages,” Evelyn hissed.

“We are the good guys,” Twil said, a bit shrill with offence, frowning. She glanced at the rest of us. “Good girls, whatever.”

“Good girls,” Praem intoned.

“Yeah,” Twil echoed, then caught our mixed expressions. “What?”

“Maybe we better leave those definitions to posterity,” I said.

Raine was shaking her head at Jan. “This might be convincing Eevee, but I think you’re being a touch too talkative.”

"You're pointing a gun at me!" Jan said, outraged in the exact way a teenage girl would be at something so obvious. "Look, I'm not here to be a hero, I'm here to get paid. I can't exactly enjoy the bit that comes after getting paid if my brains are splattered all over the back wall of this total dump. What a place to die." She gestured with her eyes at the horrible, cramped bedsit room all around us. "Want me to tell you anything else about the job? I will, because you're pointing a gun at me, duh."

"And you have one of your own," Raine said, still level and cold.

"Oh for—" Jan huffed, started to reach for the pink handgun, then stopped with her fingers splayed. "Can I pick this up and hand it to you without being ventilated? It'll prove a point."

Raine glanced at Evelyn, who shrugged. She pulled the 3D-glasses from her pocket and peered through them at the gun. "She's not trying to hoodwink us."

"Rare for you, Evee," Raine said.

"This is too stupid not to believe. Get on with it."

"I don't think there's anything magical about it," I said. "But that's just me."

"Don't smell no silver," Twil added.

Frowning but cautious, Raine nodded, took one hand off her own pistol, and held it out to accept Jan's gun. Jan picked the weapon up by the barrel and held the grip out toward Raine. Frowning surprise flickered across Raine's face the moment she took the absurdly pink firearm in her own hand.

"Raine?" I asked, suddenly alarmed.

"Oh, you're kidding me," Raine laughed, hefting the weight of the gun. Taking extra care where she pointed the barrel of her own pistol, she pressed a catch on the side of the pink gun, slid out the bit that held the bullets, glanced inside and snorted, then clicked it back into place. She pulled back the slide and looked into the chamber, shaking her head. She gave Jan a look I'd never seen before — actual exasperation, but tinged by professional interest, almost admiration. "You absolutely had me going."

"It wouldn't be any good otherwise," Jan said with a musical, girlish giggle.

Then Raine aimed the pink gun at Jan's stomach and pulled the trigger.

I almost screamed. Subconsciously I'd understood exactly what I'd seen, but my fore-brain had taken just long enough to catch up that for a split second I thought Raine was summarily shooting this girl in the belly. A gasp escaped me, panicked hands and tentacles whirling, half to catch the bullet, half to yank the gun out of Raine's hands, one tentacle lingering to forestall Jan's inevitable and probably deadly response.

But instead of a deafening bang and the awful sound of metal going through meat, the pink gun produced a dull *pock*.

A little white pellet bounced off Jan's thick black sweater.

"Heeeey, ow!" Jan flinched. "That still hurts a bit!"

Twil started laughing. Evelyn sighed.

"Oh come on," Raine sneered. "It's sub-airsoft. This wouldn't even hurt a mouse. Looks the part though." She turned the pink gun over appreciatively. "Pink ain't my style, but what is this supposed to be, some kinda sub-compact?"

"I have no idea," Jan said. "I'm not into guns, personally."

"It's a fucking airsoft gun!" Twil was howling. She put both hands on her head and turned in a circle.

"Twil," Evelyn grunted. "Stay on task. She's still a mage."

"It's an airsoft gun! Fuck me!"

"Excuse me, Raine," I managed to say, keeping my voice steady.

"Can you maybe warn me next time you shoot somebody?"

"Heather?" Raine blinked at me, then lit up with concern. "Oh, shit, you thought it was real?"

"I thought you were shooting her! Yes!"

"I would never," Raine said, dead serious. "I mean, I would, if she was a threat. But not in cold blood. Unless we had to."

"Good to know," Jan said in a stage-whisper.

"Just warn me next time, instead of pulling the theatrics, please?" I asked, trying to force my heart rate back down.

“You bet. Promise,” Raine said, all humour forgotten in the way she nodded to me. “Gotta admit it had style though. Bang bang.” She pointed the fake, girly-pink gun at Jan again, miming firing off rounds. Her own pistol was aimed carefully at the floor.

I gave her such a look.

“I think they really do make pink guns, you know?” Twil said. “Like, real ones.”

“If we are all quite finished playing with toy guns,” Evelyn said as Raine handed the utterly harmless airsoft pistol back to Jan. “I think this establishes where we all stand.”

“This really does have nothing to do with us,” I said. “Well, except the bit with the leftovers of the cult.”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure she’s telling the truth,” Evelyn grumbled. She was hunching up harder than before, leaning heavily on her walking stick, and unsuccessfully suppressing a grimace. Her free hand wandered down to rub at her thigh, then scratch at where the seal paper was irritating her stomach. My own seal was an itchy mass by now, I desperately wanted to peel it off. “And I need a sit down.”

“This means we did the right thing then, hey?” Twil said, gesturing around the room. “We came to talk it out, ‘stead of shooting first. Success!”

It didn’t feel like a success; our moment of unintended silence spoke volumes. We had barged into Jan’s rented hovel, pointing weapons and making threats, very much being ‘the bad guys’, until she’d explained herself. From one perspective we were blameless — we had no idea what she was, she could have been anything. Still could be anything.

But she was very small and looked so very vulnerable sitting on that bed, engulfed in her knitted jumper, with her slender legs stretched out over the side, pillow in her lap. Between her fluffy black hair and her delicate facial features, she looked like the sort of girl who should have been on the edge of a friend group in school right now, comfortably eating a pop tart or a cookie or some other nondescript sweet thing, not in this filthy room surrounded by a group of dangerous creatures.

Except for her eyes. And the way she’d pulled a fake gun and a

playing card from pockets of nowhere.

It was very difficult to keep in mind that this girl was a mage.

"Sorry, there really is nowhere to sit," Jan said with a sigh. "The chairs are terrible, they came with the room."

"Mm," Evelyn grunted, the tone of a woman who knew there would be no sitting for a while yet, but she still glanced behind her at the opposite bed frame, bare of sheets or even a mattress, just that guitar case sitting there. "I'm not sure it would be a good idea anyway. You're not totally unarmed, we are still dealing with a real mage here. As you proved earlier. What else are you hiding up your sleeves?"

Jan smiled. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I would, actually."

"Oh, nothing special," Jan said. She touched a spot diagonally upward from her own forehead and her fingertips appeared to vanish for the blink of an eye, as if passing behind an invisible curtain. Raine twitched her gun up and Twil was about to surge forward, which surprised me so hard that I flinched, but Jan's hand was back in a blink, holding a Chupa Chups lollipop. She unwrapped it and popped it in the corner of her mouth, then spoke around the stick. "Defences, of course, yes, I won't deny that. But I don't need defences if you're genuinely not going to point a gun at me anymore."

Evelyn sighed and shook her head.

"Mages," I hissed. "Bloody show-offs."

"One more question," Raine said. She tilted her head at the guitar case behind us. "What's in the case?"

"Magic sword," Jan said around her lollipop. "Long story."

"... magic sword?" Raine asked.

"Magic sword," Evelyn sighed.

"Magic sword," Praem echoed.

"Magic sword, yes, don't sound so surprised. Go on, open it if you like, I can't lift the thing. We never use it, anyway."

Evelyn nodded to Praem, frowning hard. Praem stepped over to the opposite bed frame, undid the clasps on the hardshell case, and lifted the lid.

A sword, plain as day, lay nestled in a bed of old t-shirts and plastic carrier bags. It looked totally unremarkable, even a bit tarnished.

“Whoa,” Twil muttered.

“Alright, close it up,” said Evelyn. “That’s enough of that nonsense.”

Praem closed the lid while Jan swung her legs back and forth over the side of the bed, enjoying her lollipop. We all shared a confused glance. Evelyn was about to speak, but Twil got there first.

“Wait a fuckin’ minute,” Twil said slowly, squinting at Jan. “You’ve got a sword, but also a fake gun, right?”

“ ... right?” Jan echoed.

“And you took a job, which you knew wasn’t a real job, because, you know, giant alien space bugs. And then you took another job, but you only took it because you knew it would mean almost no work. Like, you weren’t actually planning to fight Heather and Evee for Badger, you just knew it was already cool. You were gonna get paid for doing nothing. Twice.”

“Mmm ... hmmm?” went Jan, increasingly like a deer in headlights.

“Dodgy dealer,” Praem intoned.

“You’re a con artist,” Twil said, mouth hanging open. “You’re like a mage con artist or some shit.”

Jan winced, drawing a sharp breath through clenched teeth. She waggled a slow finger at Twil. “That— that is— that’s— that’s a very harsh piece of terminology there. That’s very accusatory.”

Raine laughed. “Twil’s got your number. Hasn’t she?”

“I’m a magical problem solver!”

“Yeah, fake magical problems,” Twil said.

Jan sighed and surprised us all by flopping backward on the bed, arms outstretched. She lay still for a moment, staring at the ceiling through the slats of the top bunk. It was so very teenager that none of us knew how to react.

“Fake magical problems usually end with very grateful people paying me large sums of money,” she said to the dirty ceiling “You know how *real* magical problems tend to end?”

“Blood and terror,” Evelyn muttered.

“Yes!” Jan suddenly sat back up, looking at us like we were all idiots, despite the smile on her lips. “Real magical problems — the kind that you fine people seem to be suffering — end up with getting dead. And I don’t want to be dead! I should know, tried it once already. No thank you. I like getting paid, and I *love* getting paid twice for the same job. Money buys all sorts of lovely things like better living conditions than this, good food, a nice dress or two, the occasional book. Making sense, am I? So pack away the sanctimonious judgement of how I make a living. It’s not as if I have many other choices. And trust me, I’ve tried most of them.”

“You’re still a con artist,” Twil said.

“And you’re a terrible tracker. We knew you were there behind us the whole day!”

“Tch,” Twil tutted.

Jan’s little outburst was like watching the lenses realign in some piece of esoteric clockwork: it brought this whole situation into clear focus at last. She was no innocent child and we were not the nasty monsters leering over her — she was like a rat, a furtive thing beneath the floorboards, and here we were with torches and crowbars, prying our way into her particular underworld. And now she was frozen in fear, ready to bite perhaps, but mostly hoping she could convince us that she wasn’t getting into our grain.

“This still doesn’t explain how you can see my tentacles,” I said, a little more harsh than I had intended. “Or how you could tell what Praem is, or how you knew we were out in the street.”

Jan blinked at me in surprise, those incredible eyes trapped behind thick dark lashes. “I’m quite sure it doesn’t explain everything.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Look, I’m willing to tell you people whatever you want to know about me being here, because you’ve decided you’re all joint queens of Sharrowford or something. But I’m not spilling all my secrets to you. Some things are just not your business.”

"She is still a mage," Evelyn grumbled. "Whatever else she is."

"Quite right I am," Jan agreed.

"Why the bloody hell were you wearing a school uniform?" Twil gestured at the neat, smart blazer and skirt hanging from the opposite bed frame.

Jan shrugged. "It's wonderful camouflage. I'm the right size for it."

"It's your eyes, isn't it?" I finally blurted it out, forcing the words up my throat like I was overcoming some terrible taboo. "Nobody else has mentioned them. Am I the only one seeing this?"

I glanced around at Evelyn, Raine, Twil, and Praem, and met blank, uncomprehending stares.

"No," Praem intoned. "I see."

"Oh," I breathed.

"What about her eyes?" Evelyn went tense, then pulled out her modified 3D-glasses again, fumbling them onto her face as I spoke.

"They're abnormal. It must be how she saw my—"

But the words died in my throat when I looked back at Jan. Those burning gemstone eyes had gone wide in shock, framed by a deep red blush blossoming in her cheeks. One pale, delicate, small-nailed hand was raised to cover her mouth.

"You can see ... oh my goodness," she gasped, then turned half away from me and shaded her eyes with one hand.

"W-what?"

"That's quite embarrassing!" she squeaked. "That's ... very private!"

"It's only your eyes," I said, dumbfounded.

"It's me! It's me! How can you see that?" she protested, glancing at me around the side of her hand. Then she realised Praem could see as well and unsuccessfully attempted to hide from both of us for a second, before giving up with a very haughty little huff. She crossed her arms and sat there, fuming and blushing like we'd walked in on her naked.

"Um ... I'm sorry, but I don't follow," I said.

Evelyn gestured hurriedly at Praem, waving one hand for the return of her bone wand. She gripped the weapon tightly again, tucking one end of it under her armpit as she stared at Jan through the glasses.

“Evee?” Raine murmured, raising her pistol again.

“Hey, what?” Twil added. “We fighting now?”

“What are you?” Evelyn hissed at Jan, her jaw set with sudden tension, eyes hard, mouth a tight line.

“Excuse me?” Jan asked.

“I said, what are you?” Evelyn repeated, then whipped the glasses back off and looked Jan’s petite form up and down. Her knuckles were turning white on her walking stick. “What am I actually looking at here?”

Jan blinked. “I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

“You said you’ve worked for the Army of the Third Eye multiple times, but you can’t be any older than nineteen, at most. Heather is seeing fucking *spiritus expositae* in your eyes, isn’t she? Which means you’re not fully settled in there, whatever you are.” Evelyn’s voice shook as she spoke and I saw her throat bob. “How old are you really?”

Jan’s jaw dropped and her brow creased with outrage. She took the lollipop out of her mouth. “Excuse me! You can’t just ask that.”

“Where did you get that body?” Evelyn said, throat thick with emotion, losing control.

“My body?” Jan gaped at her. “My body is none of your business!”

“It is if you fucking stole it,” Evelyn spat.

Two and two crashed together in my mind and added up to a gut-wrenching, blood-chilling five; Evelyn’s sudden blinding rage made perfect sense. Here was a mage who was very unlikely to be the age she appeared, claiming and demonstrating experience beyond her years, in the body of a young girl unblemished by the kind of exposure damage that Evelyn had endured. Eyes were a window on the soul, and Jan’s told of something very different inhabiting her body, but not a demon. Older, cleverer, perhaps not the original owner.

“Oh shit,” Raine hissed, levelling her gun at Jan’s head again. Praem took a half-step so she was almost in front of Eeve, shielding her. Twil seemed confused, but her hands swirled into claws all the same. We were back on for a fight.

“Excuse me, but no it isn’t,” Jan snapped, outrage overcoming fear as she raged back at Evelyn. “Look, I’m willing to be open with you people but not—”

“Then I will have it out of you one way or another,” Evelyn hissed, her fingers shifting across the scrimshawed designs on her bone wand.

Then Evelyn yelped in surprise — at the feeling of one of my tentacles wrapped around her wrist. An invisible grip held Evelyn back from committing torture. She turned on me, eyes blazing. It was a miracle the room did not erupt into violence, as only Praem could see what had happened. Raine was staring Jan down while Twil didn’t know which way to turn.

“Heather,” Evelyn hissed in my face. “You let go—”

“Eeve, she has an unbound demon host,” I said quickly, my own pulse like a drumbeat in my throat. “Like Praem. That she is not keeping a slave has to mean something.”

Evelyn actually bared her teeth at me. “She might be like—”

“But she might be nothing like your mother,” I rattled off as quickly as I could. “And I’m not going to let you get blood on your hands over a mistake. Please. Eeve, please. She’s not even threatened us. Please. You did the same for me.”

Evelyn’s eyes blazed, her jaw set tight. She pulled at the grip of my tentacle around her wrist, but then relented, staring back at Jan, who was still sitting there with her arms folded, outraged almost beyond words.

“I still have to know,” Evelyn hissed.

“Yeeeeeeeah,” Raine said, clicking her tongue. “That’s a red flag alright.”

“I’m not following a bloody word of this,” Twil muttered. “Are we doing a fight or what?”

“Jan,” I said, struggling to keep my voice level. “I’m sorry, but we

do need an answer to that mystery. For personal reasons. Either we need a satisfactory answer to what you are, or Evelyn will very likely torture it out of you. And if she's right, then I'd be inclined to let her. I don't think she is right. Please."

Jan stared at me, outraged and afraid in a way I'd never seen on a person before. Those beautiful eyes like the sky over a perfect sea were holding back a threat of tears. But she held her head high. "What are you going to ask next?" she said, cold and angry. "What I've got in my underwear?"

I winced. "No. Never. We just ... Evelyn here ... she's very sensitive about the subject of ... stolen bodies."

"Joint," Praem intoned, then added, "They will understand."

Jan stared at Praem, then let out a shaking sigh. "Fine. At least one of you shows a modicum of respect."

Praem bowed her head. It did not take an expert in body language to read that apology.

Jan reached out with both hands and began to roll up the right sleeve of her comfortable black jumper, revealing the crisp white fabric of her blouse underneath. She undid the tiny button at the cuff of the blouse, fingers fumbling a little with nerves, then rolled that up too. Smooth, pale, perfect skin slid out, a very slender and dainty forearm. Blushing hard with fury struggling not to show her tears, she pushed the fabric back up past her elbow, then held up her arm and flexed the joint so we could all see.

My jaw dropped. Evelyn stared for a second, then swallowed, letting go of her bone wand and averting her eyes. Raine let out a low whistle.

"Guess that explains why she doesn't smell of anything," Twil muttered.

Jan's right elbow was a ball-and-socket doll-joint. Coloured like flesh, but not truly alive. She flexed the joint back and forth, then wiggled her fingers and rotated her wrist, and the trick became clear. Once one had seen the obvious fake of her elbow joint, the seams along her wrist and fingers were much harder to hide, as was the line where her neck joined to her skull. The illusion fell away as if it had never been there; she was using a technique very similar to Praem, clothing a doll's skeleton in pneuma-somatic flesh — yet

somehow visible and tangible.

“Whole body?” Raine asked, injecting her voice with that utterly judgement-free question she’d once used on me, to disarm all my fears.

“Whole body,” Jan hissed, barely able to speak from sheer humiliation. “Is that enough for you?”

“I think that explains everything,” I blurted out, then hiccuped in horror at what we’d done. “I’m so sorry we forced you to do that.”

“Yeah, hey,” Raine cleared her throat. “I think we kinda crossed a line there.”

“Yes,” Evelyn snapped. “Yes, of course ... I ... ”

“The answer to your question is no, by the way,” Jan said, shoving her sleeve back down to hide her arm again. As soon as the most egregiously obvious of her joints was hidden, the other seams became harder to detect. She blinked back tears of rage. “I didn’t steal my own body. I made it. It’s mine. It’s me. Also, fuck you.”

“No wonder you were so interested in Praem,” I said.

“It is beautiful,” Praem intoned.

Jan scrubbed her eyes on her sleeve, trying not to show her tears, but Praem’s words drew a tiny jerk from her. I wasn’t sure if it was a sob or a hiccup, but she got a grip on herself quickly and raised a sarcastic smile to me and Evelyn.

“I do hope you’re satisfied now,” she said.

“I’m— I— I apologise,” Evelyn stammered out. “I had to know, I—”

“We made a mistake, but we had to do it,” I said, then regretted that instantly “I mean we ... we hurt ... oh, dear.”

Jan gave me a look that said she didn’t care.

“Oof,” Twil said out loud.

Evelyn stopped trying to talk her way out of this. She straightened her spine as best she could, planted her walking stick firmly, and grabbed a fistful of her own skirt, then pulled upward until she revealed the matte black carbon fibre of her prosthetic shin and knee, showing off the artificial leg like a war-wound.

Jan shook her head, lips pressed together, not impressed. "It's hardly the same, is it?"

"My mother attempted to cheat death by taking my body," Evelyn said.

Jan stopped, actually listening. Evelyn's chest rose and fell with emotional effort. Over her shoulder, I saw Twil's eyes go wide with shock.

Oh Evee, I silently whined. *You never told Twil?*

"I was to be left in her rotting carcass," Evelyn continued, though her words were forced, clipped, pushed out with great effort. "She did this damage to me, and more, prior to that attempt at possession. I have never considered the proper course of action to take if I encountered a mage who has successfully carried out her failed method of life-extension. I had to confirm ... " She trailed off. I covertly slid my arm through hers and placed my hand atop her fingers. She flinched, eyes flickering to me, but then steadied.

The worst of Jan's outrage had subsided in the face of this confession. She half-nodded, a sideways tilt of her head, an acceptance, at least. She finally put her lollipop back in her mouth, though didn't seem to be enjoying it very much.

"I would like to know who I am dealing with here," Evelyn said, voice still tight. "Are you ... human, or a demon in a doll, or—"

"I was born *homo sapiens*, yes," Jan said, softly but still a little peeved.

"And how old are you?"

"Eighteen." Jan shot Evelyn a look again, daring us to call her bluff.

"I am trying," Evelyn said, "to afford you the respect we have violated."

"Eighteen," Jan repeated. "I have been eighteen for a very long time. Trust me, the body determines more about the mind than one expects. As you probably well know. Just treat me as what you perceive, please."

"We can do that," Raine said, stepping in so easy and confident before Evelyn could put her foot in her own mouth again.

"May I ask a question?" I said.

“You may as well,” Jan sighed.

“What am I seeing when I look at your eyes? They’re ... I’ve never seen eyes like that before. They’re beautiful, just ... ” I trailed off, lost for words.

“You are seeing me,” she said. “In here.”

A moment of silence passed. I think I understood.

“If you made your own body, why are you so small?” said Twil.

It was a genuine question. There was too much innocence in Twil’s tone for it to be otherwise, but I winced all the same. Evelyn put her face in her hand. Raine raised her eyes to the ceiling.

Jan pursed her lips and gave Twil a look. “Have you perhaps considered that I was also this same size previously?”

“Oh,” Twil said. “Right. Okay, cool.”

“... is she simple?” Jan pointed at Twil and asked the rest of us.

“Sometimes,” Evelyn grunted.

“Oi!” said Twil.

“I am so sorry about all this,” I said, feeling both mortified and relieved. At least this was better than anything else that could have happened. Just.

Jan nodded awkwardly, but then crossed her arms, looked out of the window, and shoved the pillow off her lap — then pulled it back again and cuddled it to her chest.

“I think I’m ready to leave you people and your stupid, stupid city,” she said. “But right now I am feeling quite vulnerable, so I do apologise, but you’re going to have to deal with this.”

She reached out with the fingers of her right hand and stroked the air next to the bed. Those fingers had shown seamed joints along every knuckle only a minute or two ago, but now the illusion had firmly re-established itself. Fleshy digits briefly vanished from view, but for much longer and far deeper than her card-trick or hidden sweet pocket. She swiped her hand through the air like whisking back a curtain.

And Zheng’s mysterious zombie friend stepped out of thin air.

On the scale of a human being, the effect was dizzying, like watching a person appear around an invisible doorway. It stung my eyes and forced me to blink — though the particular qualities of the person joining us made my heart skip a beat and my tentacles fly up in a protective barrier. Twil growled in her throat and went halfway to wolf. Raine's hands twitched to raise her gun, though she resisted the urge. Evelyn gasped and bumped against me. Praem just stared.

We'd all gotten used to living with Zheng, to some extent, to her big-cat rumbles and her tiger-like quickness, but not all demon hosts were alike, in frame or aspect.

The woman who stepped out of thin air could have walked down any Sharrowford street and been accepted as perfectly human; she was tall, perhaps six and a half feet, with long black hair the same as Jan's, tied into a neat braid which reached all the way to the small of her back. She wore simple jeans and a practical grey coat full of pockets, over some kind of hooded athletic top, with trainers on her feet. The family resemblance Praem had mentioned was obvious — she and Jan were sisters, at the very least. They possessed the same delicate facial features, neat little nose, and compact mouth, all set in a heart-shaped face. The demon host lacked the impossibly beautiful eyes, stormy grey instead of electric-arc blue, but her stare was wide and emotionless, eyelids pulled so open that one saw a thick band of white around her irises.

Her stare reminded me of an owl, made me feel like a rodent, waiting for the claws.

But it was the way she moved which set the little hairs standing up on the back of one's neck. She moved like she stared — focused grace in every muscle, twitchy and bird-like, ready to lash out at a moment's notice. The tension in her frame reminded me more of Raine than Zheng, that strength and mobility like a set of steel cables beneath cloth and skin.

Was this what Zheng admired? An ember of jealousy smouldered in my chest. I thought about my mobile phone, currently muted for safety, and Zheng waiting on the other end. Should I call her, get her in here? Force the confrontation?

"These people are horrible. I need a hu—" Jan started to say, then yelped and put a hand to her mouth. She saw it the same moment we all did.

Her demon host friend was carrying a surprise visitor — a large, well-fed, sleek-furred fox, curled up in her arms like a cat.

“You again!” Evelyn snapped, entirely at the fox.

“Oh hey,” Twil lit up. “It’s back!”

Jan went quite shrill. “Where— what— I ... I didn’t put that in there with you!”

The demon host turned to look at Jan; it must have been a spectacularly unpleasant feeling to have that attention spin around to you, like an owl hearing a rabbit a mile downwind.

“She was already present,” the woman said. To my surprise, her voice was perfectly ordinary, with the same delicate tones and precise pronunciation as Jan. She stroked the fox’s head and neck. “She is quite safe. Quite friendly. Very clean.”

“Very clean,” Praem intoned. I could have sworn the fox gave her a look.

The demon host turned to Praem. At this, the fox decided it was time to get put down again, and wriggled in the demon’s arms until she stooped and placed it on the floor. Claws clicked across the wooden boards, bushy tail swishing behind her. Evelyn shuffled back nervously as the fox padded past us and over to the door, as if asking to be let out. She looked up at me, then at Evelyn, amber eyes muted in the grim surroundings of this horrible little room.

“What are you?” Evelyn hissed.

The fox let out a warbling yip.

“What was it even doing here?” Jan asked, as perplexed as we were. “I don’t understand how it could possibly get in.”

“I think she was attempting to broker a peace,” I said haltingly, watching the fox for a reaction. The animal just stared up at Evelyn. “She led Zheng back to us, which broke up the fight. In theory. anyway.”

“You know this animal?” Jan asked. “This is yours?”

“She’s not ours,” Evelyn said. “But we know her.”

The fox nosed at the crack between door and frame, then glanced back up again.

“Can you stay a moment?” I asked her, unsure if she understood. “We’re not done here, not yet.”

Jan sighed and decided we were all mad and this was really none of her business. She turned back to her very tall demon host and stuck her arms out. “I need a hug. These people have violated me.”

“Again, sorry,” I said with a wince.

“Yeah, really,” Raine added. “Apologies.”

“She’s still a bloody mage,” Evelyn said. “And that is a demon.”

“I heard everything,” the demon host said. The way she spoke, the cadence and rhythm, had just a touch of Praem’s manner about her. The intonation, the precision. “We’re not using real names. Who am I right now?”

“Oh, that,” Jan sighed. “It hardly matters now. This is July.” She nodded to the demon.

“July and Jan,” Evelyn deadpanned. “Why do I not believe that?”

“Believe whatever you want,” Jan said. She waggled her arms up at the taller lady. “July, hug. Or I suppose you think I deserved all that?”

“You do not deserve cruelty,” July said. She bent down and wrapped her arms around Jan’s shoulders, giving her a reassuring yet politely brief hug. “But you should have expected this.”

“You smell like fox,” Jan said into her shoulder.

“You just let her take it, huh?” Raine asked the big demon.

July let go of Jan, straightened up, and turned her owl-like stare on Raine, a cold searchlight of predatory attention. Raine didn’t flinch, but she did stiffen, muscles subconsciously readying for action. She stared back, two predators sizing each other up.

“You wanna go?” Raine murmured.

“No. If you had pulled the trigger,” July said, unblinking, “I would have caught the bullet and spat it back at you.” Then she transferred her attention to the fox. “But I was assured that would not be necessary.”

“Yes,” Praem intoned.

July met Praem's gaze. For a moment, the two demons stared at each other as well, almost equally blank.

"I'm sure you understand," July said.

"Fucking hell," Twil muttered, tilting her head from side to side while looking July up and down. "Why are they always so bloody tall? Is Praem gonna get really tall when she gets a bit older, or what?"

"I am the perfect height," Praem said.

"Why is she unbound?" Evelyn asked, gesturing toward July with the head of her walking stick.

Jan gave Evelyn a look like she couldn't believe her ears. "That is none of your business. Do you people just make a habit of barging into everyone's life and demanding to know all their private business? Is this how you keep other mages out of your city, by being incredibly rude all the time?"

"You have an unbound demon."

"And so do you!" Jan pointed at Praem. "You called her your daughter!"

"Exactly. So you know my reasons. What are yours?"

"It's none of your business," Jan said.

"Mages," I huffed. "It's like herding cats."

"It is," July agreed, staring at me; I struggled not to flinch from that look. Her eyes followed my tentacles bobbing up to defend me.

"You are an octopus."

"I ... sort of, yes."

"I'm not having you walking around my city with an unbound demon," Evelyn said. "But I do need to understand your reasons."

"Well, fine!" Jan huffed back. "Because I am leaving. I'm obviously not going to get paid for any of this—"

"Jan," I spoke over the argument. "I would like to pay you for a job."

Everyone stared at me. Even Praem didn't know where I was going with this.

“Oh?” Jan said.

I cleared my throat and overcame two obstacles at once. Part of me was screaming to just hustle these two out of Sharrowford, out of our lives, to get July away from Zheng. But another part of me whispered with the true knowledge of what I had to do. I crammed that jealousy down deep; if I gave into it now I would never forgive myself, because others would pay the price.

The other obstacle was solved with great embarrassment.

I turned to Evelyn and said, “I need to borrow some money. I’m so sorry.”

She blinked at me, so surprised she was speechless for a second. “Anything,” she said.

“Thank you. Right, yes. Well. Jan. I want you to get all of the cultists together, all the survivors, everyone Badger knew. I want you to be a bridge for them, to us.”

“Oh dear,” Jan said, swallowing delicately. “Real magical problems. I really don’t think I can accept this one, I’m sorry, but we’re—”

“Not going anywhere,” said July.

“... excuse me?” Jan squeaked up at her.

July locked eyes with me, wide and staring. Deep down inside, abyssal instinct screamed; she knew. She was taunting me.

“I would like to meet ‘Zheng’ again,” she said. “That is our price for the job.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.12

July did not share Jan's impossibly beautiful eyes, neither their subtle light like gemstones dropped in embers, nor their blue like the shimmer of a baking summer sky. She did possess Jan's delicate facial features and her thick black hair, though braided instead of short and fluffy, but July's eyes were grey, mundane, human — the irony was not lost on me, considering she was a demon, a thing of the abyss wrenched from the limitless dark sea and placed in a new home of human flesh, just like Zheng. And just like Zheng, her stare was predatory and dangerous, though in a very different way; her eyelids were permanently held wide, so one could see the white of her sclerae. Her stare was like an owl listening for the scurry of a rodent, wide and still and silent, where Zheng would have narrowed her gaze, razor-sharp. July held herself so still that she didn't appear to breathe; Zheng would have rumbled and purred.

This demon host waited like a bird of prey or a trapdoor spider, unmoving until I tried to break one way or the other, promising pursuit in the outline of her muscles. She stared at me with eyes the colour of a looming storm, awaiting my answer to her price.

But I was not the prey for which she lay in wait.

She wanted Zheng so very badly, and she knew I was the one to negotiate with, perhaps intimidate, or simply needle and provoke. Abyssal instinct simmered with territorial warnings, marked her as a rival, and whispered inappropriate urges up the trunk of my hind-brain. My tentacles crept outward to make myself look bigger, to display a warning, to prepare for a fight.

July's predatory intensity and my wordless response had stilled the others too. Though they couldn't see my tentacles, they must have felt the change in the air, because Evelyn was turning pale and Raine looked ready to start slitting throats. Twil flexed her hands into wolf-claws. Jan's eyes went wide at the sight of my tentacles reaching outward. Even the Saye Fox was uncomfortable, head ducked low to the floorboards, trying to go unnoticed. Only Praem

didn't react.

Fight? a very sensible part of my mind butted in, almost screaming. You're going to fight a demon host over Zheng? In this cramped and dirty room, surrounded by people who might get hurt? You don't even have sex with Zheng! You don't own her!

Stupid, stupid Heather, I cursed, getting hold of myself and forcing a deep breath into my lungs. If I truly wanted July gone, I could just send her Outside. She'd be as good as dead.

But I couldn't do that, could I?

I found my mouth had gone very dry indeed, my pulse a hydraulic piston in my throat, head going light, hands cold and shaking. I may have dragged a portion of my abyssal truth into the air and light of reality, and grafted it to my flesh; I may have taken three steps towards the unalloyed glory of *Homo abyssus*; I may be supported by brain-math and pneuma-somatic organs and a family of capable monsters and true companions; but I was still entirely capable of making poor decisions over a pretty girl.

"A meeting with Zheng is not mine to grant," I managed to say, and wasn't sure if I was lying or not.

"Ooooooh." Raine pulled a big, silly, theatrical wince, gurning like a clown. "Good answer, Heather. Outplayed, outplayed. Come on, bug-eyes," she addressed July, "you're barking up the wrong tree. You think we can tell Zheng to do shit?"

Raine's absurd reaction popped the tension like a knife in a gas-bladder. I could have flung my arms around her neck and kissed her for that. Maybe I'd save that for later.

I reeled my tentacles back in with an effort of will. Evelyn drew a shaky breath, Twil shook herself, and the fox padded in a little circle by the door, claws clicking on the wood. She even let out a tiny *yip*.

But July was still staring at me. Grey eyes like cold stone.

"You can," she said.

"You don't set terms!" Jan squeaked up at her from the bottom bunk of the bed frame.

July turned to Jan in the most unnerving fashion. She moved her

head while keeping her eyes locked on me, then flicked those cold grey orbs round to Jan at the last second. Jan tutted and rolled her eyes to the heavens, as if she was dealing with a sulky child, rather than six and a half feet of demon host powerful enough to leave bruises on Zheng.

“I mean you never do set terms, not that you’re not allowed to or something,” Jan said. “And don’t you pull that face at me. You’re haggling with your new octopus friend, you can leave me out of it. That way, if we both end up dead, it’s your fault.”

“Trouble in paradise, hey?” Raine asked.

“Yeah, great,” Twil added. “Just what we need, more clowns.”

“Clowns are funny,” Praem said. Twil gave her a sceptical look.

July stared Jan down for a moment longer, but the mage didn’t so much as shiver. I had no idea how Jan could talk to a demon like that, but then I reflected on how I sometimes spoke to Zheng. Eventually you get numb to any level of intimidation. And I couldn’t help but wonder about the nature of their relationship.

They’re just people, in the end, I reminded myself. Even if they’re not human.

Finally the demon host returned her gaze back to me, but this time I clamped down on the instinct which kept urging me to unscrew her head. Instead I took a deep breath and spent a moment to study her.

July — if that was her real name — possessed both Jan’s delicate beauty and an obvious inhuman nature, which was really nothing like Zheng upon closer examination. Her wide, staring, owl-like look was deeply artificial, as if she’d broken something in her facial muscles long ago, not akin to Zheng’s expressive joy. Between her neatly braided black hair and her unremarkable clothes, there was something austere about her. She lacked Zheng’s flair for grand gestures, the poetry of muscle in motion, delight in being physical and embodied. In her practical grey coat and athletic top and jeans, she almost reminded me of Amy Stack.

I sighed. “How on earth do you walk around in public without scaring people? Zheng can’t do that.”

“Normies see what they expect to see,” Jan said.

“You have internet poisoning,” said Evelyn. “‘Normies’, really?”

"It's a useful word! Actually," Jan rattled on, "I take back what I said before. If we're going to do a job, can somebody pay me anyway? July's predilection for your extremely large friend won't put food on my table."

Evelyn sighed. "Do we really need this?" she asked me. "You want to finish dealing with the cult's dregs?"

"I ... well ... "

Words stuck in my throat, stilled by July's stare.

And I couldn't lie to Evelyn.

"Sounds like you should be the ones paying us," Raine said with a laugh.

She rolled her neck and her shoulders to work out the tension, which also functioned as a non-verbal signal that the threat of violent confrontation was well and truly over. Flicking the safety on her handgun and tucking it away inside her jacket was an afterthought. She chuckled to herself again, shaking her head; I think I was the only one who picked up the false note, the performance, the way she forced herself. For a moment I thought it was some kind of ruse, that she was about to draw her knife instead and peel July's face off for insinuating things about Zheng. A tiny, twisted, ugly part of me cheered for exactly that outcome. But then I realised: Raine knew violence, inside and out, far better than any of the rest of us did. She was the only one of us who could truly de-escalate this moment, because she appreciated the nature of our position.

Forget the *gunboat*, Raine should have been the *diplomacy*.

"Pay you?" Jan wrinkled her nose in disgust, as if a dog had just taken a huge dump in front of her. "For what? Are you going to demand a fine for trespassing?"

Twil lit up with a laugh too, following Raine's lead, unconsciously or not. "Yeah, that's right! You gotta pay the Sharrowford Troll Toll!"

"For Zheng's time, duh," Raine said. She cast about with a dirty smirk. "What do we think her rates should be, hundred pounds an hour?"

"Ha!" Twil barked. "Nah, she's rare, she's high class, she's picky, so

more like two, no, three hundred an hour?"

"Three hundred pounds?!" Jan squeaked. "No! No way, absolutely not, stop this. July, don't say a word."

"Done," July said, hard and harsh and heavy, like we were concluding a deal to sell a black market nuclear warhead.

"No sale," Praem intoned.

"We are not *pimping out* Zheng!" I said, going quite shrill. A terrible, angry blush shot up my neck and cheeks. My tentacles clenched and shook with an urge to run wild, but I kept them in check. The Saye Fox went *yuuuurrrp*.

Raine shot me a wink. "I'm only joking, you know that."

I huffed and folded my arms across my chest. "You're very lucky she's not in here with us. She wouldn't stand for it."

"All I want is to meet her again," July said, staring at me with those owl-eyes. "I am not demanding sexual favours."

"I-I know that," I stammered, "I just ... you fought each other."

"Maybe we will do so again," July said — with a touch of rough, raw relish in her voice. "That is up to Zheng."

"What is it with demons and fighting?" Twil asked. "Praem doesn't do this. Why can't you be more like her, hey?"

"You can talk," Raine laughed.

"None dare," Praem intoned.

"I suspect," Jan supplied from the bed with an exasperated tone, "that Praem here was made under more ... sedate circumstances?"

"You could say that," Evelyn answered slowly. She was frowning at July with what was rapidly looking like professional interest. "But that's not what matters. What matters is upbringing. Is she ... *yours*?"

"Mine?" Jan said. "In a manner of speaking. I suppose."

"Deny all you want," July said.

"I don't deny a thing!" Jan tutted.

I was shaking my head through all of this nonsense. "I can't agree to

this. You and Zheng ... you hurt her, I saw the bruises!"

"Were they permanent?" July asked.

"Well, no, but—"

"Is Zheng yours to command?"

"Oh, here we go," Jan sighed. She crossed her arms, wiggled her feet over the side of the bed, and stared up at the ceiling, as if she'd heard this a million times before. She rolled her lollipop back and forth in her mouth, loudly clacking it against her teeth.

"I'm sorry?" I asked.

"Is Zheng yours?" said July. "Do you own her? Do you direct her?"

"... she does what I ask, but only *because* I ask," I said, and I knew that was a lie too. When Zheng had returned home with the trophies of her fight still fresh on her skin, she had been glowing with savage glee. I had not forgotten her tale about the vampire she had once met in the past of Eastern Europe, the strange love that had blossomed from the alchemy of combat, something I could never share, which no human could ever reach.

I couldn't hold Zheng back from this. I wasn't sure if I had the right to try.

"But she's no slave," I added, my throat closing up. "I don't own her. She's her own person."

Raine raised both hands. She didn't actually step between us, but she may as well have done so. "How about we get the lady herself in question up here, and ask her what she wants, if she'll be willing to do this deal?"

"No," I blurted out, then regretted it, because Raine hitched an eyebrow at me in surprise. She didn't get it, not completely. Not in the way I did. I hurried to cover my embarrassment. "I mean ... July, please, why do you want her? What do you expect to happen?"

July did not smile, but I swear the corners of her mouth twitched.

"I would like to resume our contest," she said.

"Contest," I echoed. My worst fears, coming true.

But then my mobile phone buzzed in my pocket to alert me to a text message. I dug it out, horribly self-conscious because I knew exactly who it was going to be.

Shaman. Answer, was all it said.

I fumbled at the keys, sending a reply to let Zheng know that I was okay and safe and everything was fine and no she didn't need to come crashing in through the window to save us.

"It's her," July said. "Isn't it?"

I glanced up as I composed the message, but chose not to reply.

Evelyn tapped her walking stick on the floor to get everyone's attention. "I think we need to discuss exactly what this job is going to entail. And what exact payment is being demanded here ... and ... um ... "

She trailed off, her carefully constructed thoughts interrupted by the Saye Fox. The animal had been waiting close to the door, but finally decided to pad back into the room, drawing closer to Evelyn. It looked up at her hip, then toward her face, as if trying to communicate. She shuffled away from it, bumping against my side as I tried to send the text message to Zheng.

"Wait wait wait," Jan spoke into the opening, as if remembering something. She patted July's hip. "Ah-ah, wait, July. We're not agreeing to anything until I know why exactly you want me to be your 'bridge' back to all those sad people with the head problems. I do have professional standards to keep."

"What do you care?" Twil grunted. "You were conning their money out of them."

"I may be a con artist," Jan almost snapped at her, in the way a Chihuahua might snap at a Doberman. "But I will not aid in committing mass murder. And forgive me for presuming but you do seem like a bunch of very dangerous people. And I know for fact you're rude and invasive."

"I'm not going to hurt them," I sighed, feeling a headache coming on. "I want to help them."

Zheng's reply buzzed into my hand. *Long time. Is she there?*

July craned her neck to see, so I tilted my phone screen away from

her. I chewed my bottom lip so hard I was about to draw blood.

“Tie up the loose ends,” Evelyn grunted. “Mm. I approve of that part. They do need to be dealt with, one way or another.”

“That could be just as bad!” Jan squeaked. “You’re going to trepan all ten of them? That’s going to get you on the radar of local authorities, and I mean mundane authorities — police, probably important police. I imagine a spate of mystery holes-in-heads is going to make a big splash in the newspapers. And if there’s one thing that sorts like us need to avoid, it’s big splashes in newspapers.” She caught Evelyn’s eye as she spoke and Evelyn nodded along, making a grumbly thinking sound in her throat.

“She has a point there, Heather,” Evelyn added. “It’s an incredibly risky move.”

“Be quieter to kill ‘em all,” Twil said with a grimace. “Not that I’m saying we should, ‘course. I wouldn’t. Nah.”

“That’s ... ” I stammered and stumbled. “Yes, I know, but ... we can’t leave them like ... I was hoping maybe Jan here ... ”

I was trying to do too many things at once. Controlling six tentacles was child’s play compared to lying to Jan to get her to stay in Sharrowford, while also manoeuvring July so she wouldn’t meet Zheng again, and wrestling with my internal guilt and jealousy, as well as thinking up the right response to get Zheng to stay safely tucked away without outright lying to her. Because I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t just lie to Zheng.

This was giving me a headache.

“Hey, Heather,” Raine said, trying to help, sounding so confident, but missing the mark by a mile. “If this isn’t gonna work, we can always just wait for Badger to get out of hospital. He’s living proof we’re not gonna feed them all to the Eye or whatever. We can do it that way. We can make it work.”

“I know that,” I hissed, sounding like an irritated donkey.

Raine’s eyebrows went up. I saw the silent ‘ah’ of realisation behind her eyes, and busied myself trying to compose another reply to Zheng.

“Yeah,” Twil said. “What do we need these two clowns for?”

“Rude,” Praem intoned.

“Rude,” July agreed, somewhat harder. Twil bared her teeth at July, but it was more playful than aggressive. The demon didn’t rise to the challenge.

Evelyn frowned at me. She may not have worked out the truth, but she could see the discrepancy. “Heather?” she hissed my name.

I was rapidly losing control of the situation and I hadn’t even tried to reel in the bait yet.

“Excuse me,” Jan’s voice suddenly cut through everyone else, delicate and light, with a promise of hidden playfulness. My head was drawn up to her as if by strings. She caught my eyes with her burning blue, a girlish smile on her lips. “I can see you need something, Heather. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“H-how ... ”

“Oh fuck right off with that!” Twil snorted.

Jan’s sweet act collapsed into a slouching shrug and a deadpan glare at Twil. The magic broke — and it wasn’t real magic, just sheer charisma. I felt a terrible blush rising up my cheeks.

“I am only trying to help,” Jan said.

“You’re trying your shit on with her!”

“It was kind of obvious,” Raine sighed.

“It’s just me, being me,” Jan protested. “I’m not on the job all the time. Besides, Heather has already agreed to pay me. Sort of. Maybe.”

“Zheng,” July said to me. “Message her. Tell her I am here. Tell her to come.”

“Ah-ah, July, one moment, please,” Jan said. “I’m very serious, Heather. If there’s something you need from me, from a mage, that you perhaps can’t express in front of your friends, then we can always ask the others to step out and—”

“Doll,” Praem intoned.

Jan blinked at her quite suddenly, as if slapped, as if offended. I think it was real.

I sighed, all my carefully laid plans collapsing into a pile of rubble. “She’s not talking about you,” I said to Jan. “She’s figured out what I’m after.”

“O-oh?” Jan glanced between me and Praem, suddenly alarmed.

I drew myself up as best I could. “Jan. We could use assistance with the cult, that much is true. There is something in their heads, and they need help, whatever they did in the past. They don’t deserve this. Nobody does. There’s ten of them, apart from Badger. That’s a lot of people, and you’re correct, I can’t put them all in hospital with suspiciously similar wounds, that would be a nightmare. The police already looked into Badger when we put him there, they think Raine is his ‘friend’. We don’t want more attention than we’ve already drawn, I don’t know what would happen. So we need ideas, experience, help, anything you can do, really.”

“Well ... ” Jan swallowed and pulled a car-salesman smile. “As I’ve already said, that’s a real magical problem, and I’m not exactly inclined to get involved in real magical problems.”

“But—”

“But!” Jan echoed me quickly. “But if all I’m doing is making introductions and acting in an advisory capacity ... I could be convinced. For the right price.”

“The price is a meeting with Zheng,” July said, utterly unwavering.

Jan sighed and rolled her eyes, a very ‘see-what-I-have-to-deal-with’ gesture. “I bet yours doesn’t act like this,” she said to Evelyn.

“Quite,” Evelyn said, watching me sidelong. She could tell more was coming.

“But there’s something else I want,” I said, a lump in my throat. “And I need you to take this request very seriously. Please.”

Jan raised her chin, beautiful eyes blinking several times, girlish and poised once again. Her sales face. Raine, Evelyn, and Twil weren’t quite following yet — I was so far off the plan that I was leading us in the jungle. Even I didn’t really know my true destination, but if I couldn’t guarantee Jan and July staying in Sharrowford, if I couldn’t engineer another meeting under less strained circumstances, then I had to ask right away.

“Go ahead,” Jan said, soft and pleasant.

"If it is possible, I would like to commission from you another body like your own. An artificial body, for a different inhabitant."

Jan's sales face froze as if dashed with wet concrete.

"Ah," Evelyn sighed.

"Oh," went Twil. "Oh, shit!"

Raine winced — I wasn't sure what that meant, but I wrote it off for now, kept it in the back of my mind.

Jan unfroze her expression via application of some emergency emotional hair dryer, her smile stretching to maximum artificial sweetness. "If you want to put a demon inside some wood or plastic, well, you already have a far better example than I could achieve." She gestured at Praem, who nodded her head in acknowledgement. "I don't know what you could possibly want me for."

"It's not for a demon," I said. "It's for a human. *Homo sapiens*. You said you built your own body. Could you do that for somebody else? I assume it's not just ... off the shelf?" I winced. "Terrible phrasing, I'm sorry."

"It's not off the shelf, no," Jan said, her smile so hard it was cracking.

"Will you do it?" I asked.

Jan's eyes, the colour of blue flame inside spun glass, maintained their careful sales-pitch temperature for about another half-second, then her expression melted into cold ash. She wasn't smiling anymore, face pinched with cautious pity. She bit her lower lip — which somehow made her look older, not younger — and looked me up and down. Her eyes travelled along my tentacles with confused pity; I curled them close to my body, suddenly self-conscious.

"You don't want this," she said. "Unless you've got inoperable cancer, or something worse? You're a marvel, look at yourself, you're beautiful, you don't need this."

"It's not for me," I blurted out, blushing.

"Whoever it's for, the point stands. You don't want this. There are better ways to attain one's own ideal body. Hell, there are much

better mundane ways to transition from one form to another than when I was your age.” Jan stopped cold, then blinked several times and cleared her throat. “Forget I said that, please. Look, you don’t want this.”

“It’s better than no body at all,” I said. “Please.”

“Heather,” Evelyn said through her teeth, “we don’t need her for this. What was the point of fixing Sarika? I thought that was your plan.”

“It won’t hurt to have a back up option,” I replied. “Ripping Sarika from the Eye, remaking her, I still don’t really understand what I did. And Maisie ... you’ve said it yourself. We don’t know what might be left of her. She needs a body, in case I can’t perform a second miracle. I hadn’t even thought of it before now.”

Jan was frowning at us, trying to follow along. “Somebody without a body? Somebody ... dead? Look, I’m good, but I’m no necromancer. I don’t think I can help you.”

“Wait, hold on,” Twil said. “Are necromancers real? Walking skeletons and stuff?”

“No,” July answered for Jan, voice hard and sudden, like a bird’s cry over lonely mountain peaks.

“She’s not dead,” I said to Jan. “She’s *Outside*. She may not have a body anymore, or she may not be human anymore. We don’t know. If we ... *when* we rescue her, I may need somewhere to put her.”

Jan started shaking her head, and not in the way of a master haggler trying to appear reluctant, to drive the bargain higher. She crossed her arms, frowning delicately but sternly.

“How much to make it work?” I pressed.

“However much it takes, I suspect,” Evelyn grumbled.

I turned to Evee, face burning, and struggled to look her in the eye. “I couldn’t do this without your money. I’m sorry, I’m sorry I have to ask for—”

“Don’t be,” Evelyn said, almost as hard as July’s voice. To my incredible surprise she reached over and awkwardly patted my side, as if she wanted to touch me but didn’t know how, though her hand quickly retreated again, like a nervous rodent testing a new friend.

Then she turned to Jan. “And don’t tell us it can’t be done.”

Jan did a very teenager gesture, a combination sigh, slouch, and roll of her eyes. It was most impressive. Twil even snorted. The fox, still lingering by the edge of Evelyn’s skirt, let out a little yip and did a hop, which made Evelyn flinch and frown down at the dubious creature.

“Demons have no internal logic to impose on a body,” Jan said, then gestured at Praem. “She’s your *daughter*, yes? I assume you made her, and she’s not grown horns and spikes, so you know what I’m talking about. It’s a myth, it’s nonsense.”

Evelyn grumbled, gesturing at Jan to get on with it. The fox circled around the back of her skirt, then nosed between her and I.

“You can put them in wood, plastic, bits of rubbish, whatever you want,” Jan went on. “And they adapt the vessel, given enough time, but the expectations of that adaptation are imposed externally. But a human being?” Jan shook her head. “In something that started as flesh, as one of us, there is a hunger, for flesh, to be flesh, to be the right kind of flesh your mind says you should be.” Her eyes found my tentacles again. “Humans can’t just inhabit anything you force them into — or which nature forces them into, for that matter. They need a specific environment, it’s individual, personal, not *off the shelf*, no. I expect you understand that, Heather.”

“I do,” I said. “I really do.”

“But something ... Outside, you said? The Beyond? You take somebody who has been ... changed, and you put them in the wrong body, it might be like torture. I don’t care how much you pay me, I have some limits.”

“She’s my twin sister,” I said. “The body would need to be based on mine, she would be familiar with that much. I can make additions from there, once she’s in it. Does that assuage your worries?”

Jan went wide-eyed and stared at me like I’d grown a second head. “Oh my goodness, you people really are in deep. Your twin?”

“But does it mean you’d do it?”

“Well ... I guess!” She threw up her hands. “Holy shit. Oh, I don’t want to be any part of whatever madness you people are into. And this is a backup option? What’s plan A?”

“Straight back to the meat,” Twil said with a grimace.

“I’ve done plan A before,” I said. “It worked, I rebuilt a human from her thoughts alone. But it cost me ... too much. Next time there won’t be anyone to send me back, if my anchors fail. I need a foundation to put her in.”

Jan raised one eyebrow. “Your metaphors are getting a little deep for me, dear.”

I sighed. “How much to make a body like yours?”

“Money cannot buy that.” She shook her head. “No deal.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Evelyn. “You’re just scared. Some mage you are, you pissy little coward.”

“Excuse me!” Jan squeaked. “I’m bloody right to be scared, by the sounds of it. You people are dealing with things far beyond what I get paid for. No, absolutely not. We’re out.”

“You don’t have to be involved,” I said, glancing at Evelyn. She nodded very slightly, letting me take the lead after her surprise attack on Jan’s pride. “You just need to make the vessel. Name a price.”

“Vessel,” Jan echoed, ostentatiously unimpressed. “It’s not as simple as that. Every part of my body had to be hand crafted. By myself.” She raised a hand and wiggled her fingers; the doll-joints were currently invisible, but one could almost see them if one squinted. “The process of creation was the process of inhabitation. Making a life-size model of somebody else ... ” She looked me up and down and I saw in those eyes a hidden spark of professional curiosity, like the blossoming of a chemical fire.

“Is it possible, though?” I asked. “Can you do it?”

Jan caught herself, looked away, and cast around the room as if for help. She plucked her lollipop from her mouth and stared at it, then put it back again, then removed it a second time before reaching up with it and making it vanish back into whatever pocket dimension she’d pulled it from in the first place. The optical effect made my eyes twitch, as an object just ceased to occupy space.

July just kept staring at me with a silent promise of a poison pill in any deal, but I had to try.

“All right,” Jan said eventually. “Two million pounds.”

I blinked. My stomach felt like a block of ice. Raine chuckled softly. Twil went, “tch.”

But Evelyn stared in a way I’d never seen her stare before. Her jaw tightened to match the tension in her eyes. Slowly, like the pull of a powerful magnet, her irritated gaze drew Jan’s eyes away from me, until the mages were locked in a silent moment together. Evelyn was so unimpressed she could have been made of stone. Jan raised her eyebrows and cleared her throat, unwilling to let silence linger with whatever Evelyn was filling it with — but Evelyn did not break. She tilted her head forward, until her eyes were deep in the shadow of her brow, shadows cast by the single ceiling light bulb. Jan swallowed, shifting uncomfortably on the bed.

“The price still includes a meeting with Zheng,” July said.

“No!” Jan decided suddenly. “No, we are not getting involved. That’s that.”

“You are losing,” July informed her. “The other mage has your weakness.”

Jan swallowed and risked a glance at Evelyn again. Evelyn looked ready to eat a mouthful of bees.

“Ten thousand pounds,” said Evelyn.

I gasped. Two million was just an absurd number, a meaningless figure. Jan may as well have demanded ten quintillion pounds and it would have meant the same thing: *this is out of your reach*. But ten thousand pounds? That was a number I could conceptualise, and it was very high indeed. Part of me reeled that Evelyn would make such an offer on my behalf. On Maisie’s behalf.

Jan puffed out a long breath. “I still don’t want to do this.”

“The price is Zheng,” July addressed me again. “A meeting with Zheng. She can decide from there.”

“Round and round we go,” Raine said out loud. She pulled a slow wince at me. “Should have kept quiet about the doll part, Heather.”

“... I’m sorry?”

“Leverage,” Raine said. “You’ve given them leverage.”

I sighed. "I know. But there wasn't any other way. I think."

Evelyn snorted. "There probably was."

"We're still not doing it," Jan said. "And that's final."

To everybody's surprise, July responded to this by leaning down and getting in Jan's face. It was like watching a bird of prey intimidate a rabbit. The demon host hung from the bunk bed frame by one hand, the other pressing into the mattress on Jan's opposite side so as to box her in, their faces mere inches apart. The rest of us shared nervous glances; even Raine took a deep breath. The sheer physical intimidation rolling off July stirred instinctive ape fear in one's gut, no matter the direction it was aimed. Twil bared her teeth and growled softly. The fox yipped from between Evelyn and me, which made Evelyn jump and grab my arm.

But Jan didn't give a damn.

Jan, all five foot nothing of her — for she was probably an inch or two shorter than me — climbed to her feet on the bed.

Or at least she attempted to, before remembering she was sitting on a bunk bed; even her petite stature was too tall to straighten up all the way. Nevertheless, the motion achieved its aim. July was forced to half-straighten as well, in order to maintain the face-to-face stare-down, which left her hanging halfway.

Jan was stooped with head against the underside of the top bunk. She put her hands on her hips and pouted. July maintained a very awkward pose, all her menace dissipated by looking like she was crouched in desperate need of the toilet.

"Well," Jan said, "this is a fine position you've gotten us into."

"Take the job," July replied.

"You're meant to be on my side! This isn't going to end well! This nonsense didn't happen with the last demon you ran into, what's so special about 'Zheng'? God, nobody is even pronouncing that name right!" Jan raged, going red in the cheeks. She threw her hands up and stepped straight off the side of the bed, totally ignoring the knife-like demon host right in front of her.

She landed like she was made of cotton, the soles of her thick black socks whispering against the battered old floorboards. She put her hands on her hips scowled at the rest of us. She was indeed shorter

than me, which was rare enough.

“I’m not doing it, I’m sorry—” she started.

“You are an absolute coward,” Evelyn said quickly.

Jan made a face of amazed offence.

July straightened up and took a step toward Jan — or toward me, it wasn’t clear, because Raine stepped in front of her and tilted her head in a very specific way which meant *don’t start or I’ll start on you*.

Twil looked like a deer in headlights, ghostly wolf-flesh swirling into coherency, preparing for a fight. The fox between Evelyn and I let out a sound like *yiiiroowwww*. Praem turned her head to look right at me, as if she knew I could resolve all this in an instant.

And worst of all, my phone started ringing. Zheng was calling me. I stared at the phone screen amid the sudden chaos, paralysed.

Before I could drop the phone or hit the reject call button or perhaps just scream at the top of my lungs, a maimed hand with two fingers missing plucked the phone out of my grip and answered the call.

“Be quiet,” Praem said.

She didn’t shout, didn’t raise her voice, but her tone had all the inexorable force of a glacier grinding away the roots of a mountain range.

Everyone went quiet. Evelyn cleared her throat and raised my phone to her ear.

“Hello, Zheng,” she said, unimpressed, frowning at me as she spoke. “Yes, it’s me, Heather’s standing right in front of me like a fart in a trance.” A pause. “Yes, she’s here too, what did you expect? No, no don’t do that. I will have Praem beat you unconscious with a rolling pin if you do that.” Another pause. Evelyn sighed. “No, she will keep going until we achieve unconsciousness, trust me on that. I think you best come up here in any case. Use the stairs. Don’t be seen.”

“Evee,” I hissed. “No!”

“And Heather has something to add.”

Evelyn held the phone out toward my mouth. She whispered two words. I shrugged, did it even matter now?

“Shaman?” came Zheng’s voice, a tinny noise with the speaker so far from my ears.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms and forced down a mouthful of bile. My tentacles bunched up like a wounded squid. “No fighting,” I said.

“Shaman—”

“No fighting!” I snapped. Evelyn nodded along. “No fighting. If we’re going to organise this, we have to do it right. So no fighting. Not here, not now. And no tongue removing or finger breaking, either. We’re all friends up here. For now.”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted. The line went dead.

Evelyn gently placed the phone back in my shaking hands, frowning at me. I swallowed too hard, then managed to raise my eyes to meet her gaze.

She didn’t say a word, but I read the confusion on her face, the concern for me — and the fragility as well. That act had cost her; stepping into the role of Evelyn Saye, Mage and Monster, always cost her. My Evee stared back from behind eyes made hard with effort. She did not understand why I’d crumbled. Or she did, but she didn’t like what that meant.

I cast about for help — and found Raine.

For once, Raine wasn’t smiling, grinning, smirking, or anything like that. She had one hand raised to ward off July — brave but stupid — but she wasn’t looking at the tall and imposing demon host. She was looking at me. Our eyes met across the frozen chaos of the tiny bedsit room, with sudden sober understanding, hers pinched with something I so rarely saw on Raine’s face. Jealous disapproval too strong for her to hide.

But it wasn’t aimed at me; it was mine.

Raine nodded, almost imperceptibly. She got it. She understood. Raine and I were finally on the same page about Zheng.

I took a deep breath and turned back to Evelyn. “Thank you, Evee. I’m sorry.”

She nodded too, awkwardly, and looked away. Back to normal.

“Great,” Jan said. “Your gigantic friend is on the way? To do what, eat my spleen?”

Evelyn sighed and gestured at me, emotionally spent. I wet my lips and did my best.

“I think ... I think we’re going to organize a play date for our respective giant murderous zombie ladies,” I said.

“And I,” Evelyn said, “am going to offer you ten thousand pounds to build a body for Heather’s twin sister.”

Jan looked away. “I still haven’t said I’ll do it.”

“You will do it,” July said. “Because I will stay here anyway.”

She showed no relish, nothing but her bug-eyed stare as she turned to watch the door for Zheng’s arrival.

Jan gritted her teeth, hands on her hips, most annoyed.

“They can be impossible creatures sometimes,” I said, feeling a little apologetic, like we were dog owners whose pets had become entangled in the park. “I know how you feel. Zheng is a handful at times.”

“I am a handful,” said Praem.

Waiting for Zheng to join us was almost as nail-biting as our own approach to the horrible little bedsit flat. I half-expected her to come crashing through the window all these floors up and cause a public incident, or at least to stomp her way up the stairs like a herd of elephants. Twil seemed to expect that too, flexing her claws and craning her neck to get a better look through the window, without getting too close. The low afternoon light hovered over Sharrowford outdoors, high above the window and the buildings beyond, as if we were in a deep, dark canyon.

Raine cleared her throat in obvious performance, while Jan stared at a point on the opposite wall, tongue running over her teeth as she considered ways to escape this unwanted offer of a job. July just stared at the door. Evelyn leaned on me, though I wasn’t sure if it was subconscious or not.

The Saye Fox broke the tension, and had us all watching her, when she padded out from between Evelyn and me, her claws clicking on

the floorboards. She slinked off around the corner into the flat's tiny little bathroom. A scraping sound reached us a second later — claws on old porcelain, followed by a wet *slurp-slurp* of canine tongue lapping up water.

“She’s not?” Twil said.

I wrinkled my nose. “Ew.”

“Well, she is a fox,” Raine laughed. “What’d you expect?”

“She’s not a fox,” Evelyn said, a touch too tense.

Praem took one for the team, walking over to the bathroom and peering around the door frame.

“Drinking from the toilet,” Praem announced. “Confirmed.”

The fox re-emerged a moment later, licking her chops, then looked up at the flat’s front door.

Knock-knock, came the announcement of Zheng’s arrival, two precise yet heavy clacks of knuckle on wood.

Praem looked to Evelyn. Evelyn looked to me. I took a deep breath and nodded. “No fighting,” I repeated, glancing at July. But she had eyes only for her new dancing partner, or at least the door behind which she waited.

Praem opened the door and Zheng swept inside like we’d admitted the spectre of death itself into the room, filling the doorway. She had to duck, straightening up once over the threshold, towering over everybody else. All her seven feet of height, her rippling layers of muscle, and her molten intensity were so much more imposing in the small, cramped space, especially with seven people already in here, plus the fox. She was wrapped from head to toe in a less restrictive version of the way the Sharrowford Cult used to keep her hidden, with a knitted hat on her head and a scarf wrapped around her lower face to hide her teeth, the rest of her concealed by her loose and baggy grey jumper, her jeans, and long coat.

Her sharp-edged, intelligent eyes found July instantly, like a pair of tigers sighting each other across a jungle clearing. She breathed out like a furnace, a rumble that shook my guts.

“I said no fighting,” I tried to say, but what emerged was a sound like a ball of mice rolling down a hill.

Jan had evidently not seen Zheng this close before, because her eyes had gone wide, her face had gone pale, and her fingers had curled shut around a handful of July's jacket.

Before Praem even had time to shut the door, Zheng ripped the hat off her head and yanked down her scarf. A grin tore across her face, savage glee framing her rows of shark teeth, all of it directed at July, her counterpart, her mirror-image from another angle, her dancing partner I could never hope to match.

A lump stuck in my throat.

"Zheng," July said. "That is your name."

"Ahhhhhhh," Zheng breathed out between her teeth. It was like dragon's breath. "Bird of prey, now I see you clear!"

"Hey—" Raine started to say, but Zheng was already taking a step forward.

With a *yip-yap* and a blur of russet fur, the fox bounced about three feet into the air on her hind legs, a tiny bundle of muscle and claw slamming against Zheng's front. Zheng stopped dead, not because of kinetic force but because of her own care for the strange animal; she didn't wish to knock it aside. Her arms whipped out and caught the fox, then cradled it to her chest.

Fox stared up at demon host; Zheng stared back. The Saye Fox whined. Zheng tilted her head.

"Mm," she grunted, then looked up at the rest of us. Her eyes alighted on me. "Shaman. I am here."

"No fighting," I managed to squeeze out.

Zheng blinked, slowly. She did not nod.

"My goodness," Jan whispered, panting. "Did you ... you made her? July, you didn't tell me she was so large!"

"I did."

"Well you didn't put enough emphasis on it!"

"We didn't make Zheng," I said, finally swallowing the lump in my throat. "She's a lot older than us."

"Bird of prey," Zheng rumbled — and I could hear the playful tease

in her voice, the voice of a tiger playing with its food. “Here I am, bird of prey. Not distracted now.”

“Excuses,” July replied.

“Ha!” Zheng barked, eyes burning like hot coals. “You are a fine thing, you are unfettered, and ... ” Her eyes slid down to Jan at last. The savage glee dropped from her face. “Mmmmmm ... wizard, but small. Wizardling. Does she know her place?”

“Hi,” Jan squeaked. “Yes, hi, hello. Please don’t eat me.”

“You have no quarrel with my maker,” July said.

Zheng’s eyes lingered on Jan for a moment longer. Her gaze did not soften, but when she looked away it was with total dismissal and disinterest. The little mage was unimportant, then, except as a mage who knew not to practice slavery.

“Bird of prey—”

“My name is July.”

“You are my bird of prey for now.”

“All right,” Evelyn raised her voice. “Stop flirting. You got what you want. Here she is. Can we get on with the part of this where we wrap this up and get out of this tiny room, please? Are you going to do this job for us, or not?”

Jan let out a huge sigh of mixed defeat and exasperation. “July, we can’t stay—”

“I am staying,” July said, staring at Zheng. “I want a duel.”

Zheng bared all her teeth. “A duel!” she roared. The fox in her arms went *yeeerrrr!* in her face.

Thump-thump-thump came the dull sound of somebody banging on a nearby apartment wall. We all froze, even Zheng.

“I think we’re making too much goddamn noise!” Twil hissed.

“Yes,” I said. “Clearly the duel is not going to happen here. Or now. Or at all, actually.”

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled — but she didn’t even look at me.

“Fine,” I hissed.

“Should we really be letting them do this?” Jan asked.

I shrugged. “I can’t control Zheng. I suppose it’s going to happen anyway, now, so we may as well make it safe for them, at least. Oh, goodness, what am I saying? Every step of this is absurd. Is July at least robust enough to be ... damaged?”

“I am robust beyond her,” July said, meaning Zheng.

“She is,” Jan sighed. “Technically.”

“Then you’ll think about the job, at least?” I asked. “In exchange for ...”

I felt the most horrible twist of guilt, low in my stomach. I couldn’t stand the way July and Zheng were looking at each other. It was like the anticipation of meeting a new lover, mixed with the territorial urination of a pair of apex predators. The less charitable part of me, the twisted little gremlin who could put Sevens to shame, couldn’t help thinking of them like a pair of hounds in heat. I felt sick.

“Badger isn’t getting out of the hospital until next week,” Evelyn said, low and serious, her mind running through the implications on our plans. “And Nicole is still searching for the house. We have time for this, if we must, though not long. Your choice, Heather.”

“It’s not my choice any more,” I said, struggling not to stare at Zheng. She wouldn’t even look at me again. She had eyes only for her special new friend.

She’s going to fight her, not fuck her! I scolded myself silently, but it didn’t work. I felt tears prickle in the corners of my eyes.

For Zheng, fighting was transcendent. Fighting was love. I could not share this.

“Hey, left hand,” Raine’s voice cut through the mutual attraction, a pair of scissors through a live wire, unexpectedly hard and cold.

Zheng’s attention swivelled from July to Raine. Her brow creased in surprise. “Little wolf?”

“Why her?” Raine asked. “Why not me?”

My jaw fell open, I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Oh my fucking god, you’re both doing it,” Evelyn hissed, putting

her face in her hand. "I don't believe this."

"Bad girls," Praem intoned.

Zheng tilted her head at Raine in surprise, a tiger considering a rival. If she'd had ears to match, they would have perked up. "You are fragile, little wolf. You cannot match me."

"What if I can?"

Zheng blinked. "You cannot. I respect your attempts. You know this. And we swore an oath."

"Still hurts," Raine said. "Some other bint should not be getting first dibs on you."

"Little wolf—"

"You better not lose," Raine said. "Because that's mine. You don't give that to anybody else."

Zheng couldn't tear her eyes away from this. To be fair, neither could anybody else. Nobody had expected this reaction. My mind was racing: was this real, or was Raine putting it on for my benefit? A few months ago, I knew it would have been the latter, but now I wasn't so sure.

"... do I even wanna know?" Twil pulled a face. "Shit, you guys are too complex for me."

"Quite," Evelyn said through her teeth. She glanced at me with vague accusation in her eyes, but I just shrugged. This was new to me too. Evelyn squinted with obvious scepticism.

Raine laughed and turned from Zheng, as if the whole thing had been a sick joke. But she turned to July, face to face.

"Hey there you," she said. When July refused to look away from Zheng, Raine raised her hand and clicked her fingers, once, twice, three times. "Pay attention, bug-eyes. You're dealing with me for a sec. Either you look at me or I'm gonna make you look at me, and you don't want that."

July did the same for Raine as she'd done for Jan, moving her head without her eyes, then finally flicking her gaze at the very last second. Something about it made me flinch, as if the motion dredged up some instinctive response. Evelyn flinched too, then huffed a swear word between her teeth. The fox went *yerp* in

Zheng's arms, bushy tail bristling.

But Raine didn't flinch, not at all. July stared at her with those propped-wide eyes, but Raine just grinned right back.

"Hey there, freaky," Raine said, soft and low and infinitely dangerous. A shiver went up my spine. How did she do it, how was she more intimidating than Zheng? If she'd spoken to me with that tone, I would have melted into a puddle of goo.

July raised an eyebrow. That was all.

"I'm gonna give you a warning," Raine carried right on, still grinning.

"You do not need to warn me, dog—"

"Yeah I do," Raine purred. "See, I'm cool with you and Zheng having your little play-fight. That's your business, her business, whatever. I'll deal. But if this is a ruse, a trick, a plan? If this is all just to get to her under false pretences? If you actually harm her, for real, with some below-the-belt shit that has nothing to do with your 'honourable duel'? Then I will step in and gut you like a fish."

The corners of July's mouth twitched.

Raine raised one hand, horizontal, flat and level. "Look at that, hey? Look at my hand. Look into my eyes. Yeah? You see that?"

"Raine, what are you doing?" Evelyn cursed. "What kind of nonsense is this?"

"Shh," I hissed. I'd seen Raine do this before. She knew what she was doing, even if it was a bit mad.

"Do I believe I can beat you?" Raine asked July, her voice barely above a whisper. "Not 'can I', but do I believe I can?"

July looked for a long, long time. Just when I thought she was making a point of not answering, she opened her mouth.

"Yes," she said.

Raine winked, clicked her tongue, and stepped away from the demon. She dusted her hands off. "Think I've made my point."

"Fuckin' 'ell, Raine," Twil let out a breath we hadn't known she was holding. She shook herself like a wet dog.

“What are you?” Jan asked, boggling at Raine.

Raine shot her a wink and a flash of teeth. “Homo motherfucking sapiens, baby, the best goddamn predator to ever walk the earth. And you best believe I can put your zombie down if push comes to shove. I don’t think you’re working for Eddy-boy, not really. But just in case.”

“Not with an unbound zombie,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Yeah,” Raine went on. “But I’m making our insurance policy clear. That’s me, by the way. Living insurance.” She pointed at herself with both thumbs.

Twil snorted. Evelyn shook her head. Zheng let out an unimpressed rumble. I sighed, but actually I could have leapt at Raine and kissed her for that. She’d made our shared position very clear. I still wasn’t comfortable, but I wasn’t the only one consumed by jealousy. At least Raine could attempt to exert some control.

Raine caught my eye and shot me a wink too. I felt myself blush. She was irrepressible.

“Location, location, location,” Praem intoned, prompting the rest of us.

“Yes, quite.” Jan cleared her throat. “Where is this going to happen? If it must.”

“Good question,” Evelyn grumbled, frowning at Jan. “I’d offer our back garden, but we do have neighbours. And it’s not happening indoors.”

“Yes, absolutely. I’m not paying for those sorts of damages.”

“There’s always the woods,” Twil said. “Way out, where nobody really goes?”

“Always the risk of a stray hiker,” Evelyn said. “No.”

A light bulb went on in my head. I did have a way to exert control. To make this legitimate. To make it — somewhat — mine. My tentacles wrapped around my torso like armour. I felt small and wretched and guilty, but I said the words regardless.

“I think I know somewhere private,” I said. “With a lot of space. Where we won’t do any damage, or be interrupted.”

Something in my tone made everyone look at me. Even Zheng finally looked. I stared back at her, my throat like acid.

“If we’re going to organise a duel,” I said. “We may as well have a proper audience. An audience of experts.”

“Shaman?”

“If you’re going to do this, do it right. Do it Outside, in front of the round table. Out on the quiet plain.”

Outside, in my domain.

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.13

It was one thing to wallow chin-deep in the dank and toxic swamps of my own poorly examined jealousy, to declare that I would force Zheng and July to stage their sexually charged ritual combat out on the Quiet Plain, where I could play the role of elevated voyeur and exert some kind of control over my rapidly crumbling relationship. But it was another matter entirely to actually organise a group trip Outside.

As Raine would put it, my mouth had written a cheque that my posterior was incapable of backing with hard currency.

Self-indulgence was easy; logistics took the better part of three days.

But in the precise moment I'd spoken those words, a twisted, ugly, grasping part of myself had entertained the madcap notion of just grabbing Zheng and July right there, in that cramped and filthy bedsit room. I wanted to slam the relevant equation through my mind like an unlubricated engine piston, to rip the three of us through the membrane without warning, consequences be damned. A poisonous cocktail of spiteful revenge, sadistic control, and a need to get this over with, to cut my humiliation and guilt short, to take this sordid mess somewhere private where only I could go.

And I almost did it.

A second of stunned silence and sceptical stares followed my corrosive demand; in that second, I felt all my muscles tense with a desire to spring across the room, before a more sensible soul could argue me down or present a less dangerous option. My six tentacles bunched and curled, two of them swinging around to brace against the floorboards behind me like a pair of springs, the others coiling with the constrictive promise of jellyfish stingers, ready to entangle July and slap into Zheng, uncaring of who else got caught in the crossfire. Instinctively, I knew I was probably about to bruise myself by bouncing off the wall like the bag of bones I was, but the drive

was too strong to ignore. I had no idea about July's strength, but there was no way I could keep myself wrapped around Zheng for more than a few seconds. Tentacles or no, Zheng was fully capable of peeling me off herself like an overeager octopus. She could dump me on the floor, squealing and lashing, helpless.

But Zheng loved me. She was very reluctant to hurt me. In that moment, driven by the twisted-up knot of abyssal territorialism and confused guilt, I was ready to exploit that love. All I needed was her split-second of hesitation in which to work the familiar old brain-math, and send us all spiralling Outside.

I was being an idiot, but a very specific kind of idiot.

"Outside?" somebody hissed, incredulous. I think that was Evelyn.

I must have been vibrating with anticipation, visibly about to spring like a coiled squid, because two things happened at the same time — an iron vice closed around my upper arm, and a voice cut through my jealous haze.

"*Heather*," Evelyn was suddenly snapping in my face. "*Heather!*"

"... y-yes?" I croaked, more animal than person.

I took a moment to blink, to draw a deep breath down my constricted throat, to remember where and who and what I was — I was not a squid about to pounce on hard-shelled prey and crack it open with my beak. I had to swallow quite hard, forcing my throat back into the right shape, fighting down the urge to hiss. My tentacles relaxed, though rather grudgingly, their support-structure muscles tense and tight inside my torso. I winced with referred pain running up and down my flanks.

"Is she alright?" somebody asked, their voice still hazy and distant. I think that was Jan. "What's wrong with her?"

"Evee?" I tried again, then realised who was holding my arm. "Um ... hi ... Praem?"

"Hello," said Praem, still holding my upper left arm in one hand, as if I was about to run away. She must have crossed the small room in two or three strides to grab me. Her blank, milk-white eyes bored into mine.

Evelyn was frowning up a thunderstorm, equal parts concern, alarm, and disapproval. The rest of the room wasn't much better:

Jan's eyes had gone terribly wide at my tentacles; Raine was watching Zheng with her hands on her hips; Zheng herself was peering at me in curious quasi-arousal, lips parted, eyes alert, as if she liked what she'd just seen — me about to tackle her. At least Twil was oblivious to the whole thing, looking like she'd stepped into a soap opera episode halfway through the plot, without her lines memorised.

"Evee? I'm ... I'm fine," I said.

"Your idea makes sense," Evelyn said to me, slow and careful with each syllable, watching me as if the wrong word might make me explode into tentacles and gibbering. "It makes sense. Yes? Outside is the best place for them to fight, if we have to go along with this nonsense at all. But I *insist* we do this properly. Heather?"

"Properly ... " I echoed. Had to swallow again. My whole body felt like a knot of muscle. "Yes. Right. Properly."

"I insist, do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, of course, I'm ... yes."

My face was burning with mortified embarrassment. I could barely look Evelyn in the eye, let alone round on Zheng or check on Raine. Part of me still toyed with the equation to send myself *Out*, just to escape this moment.

"Any trip Outside requires we take contingencies and precautions," Evelyn went on, staring at me like I'd just sleepwalked onto a motorway, voice sharp as a barbed whip. I wanted to cringe and shrink. "And this is my responsibility, I'm not letting you swan off again without a gateway prepared and ready to use, even if it is just over to Lozzie's tin-man storage. And even if you have Zheng there to look after you." She huffed like a steam engine and fussed at Praem's hand on my arm. "Go on, let go of her, she's fine. Here, let me."

Praem allowed herself to be disengaged from my arm like a well-oiled wheel clamp. Evelyn took her place, very awkwardly patting my hand and then taking it in hers, still frowning at me like she'd eaten an entire lemon, skin and all.

"Yes ... yes," I forced myself to say out loud. "Yes, safety first. Safety first. A gateway, you did say that, didn't you? I suppose I can hardly go alone ... "

"Alone?" Zheng purred, then chuckled, a dark rumble from a dark place. "Shaman, you want a private show, these gladiators all your own?"

The Saye Fox, still in her arms, joined in the chuckle with a *yiiiirp* sound.

"Not exactly," I whispered, my throat too thick for more words. I couldn't look up, couldn't meet Zheng's eyes. Evelyn squeezed my hand so hard it ground my finger bones together. "Ah," I winced, but she didn't let up until I looked at her. She frowned at me, hard and searching, not liking what she found. "Evee?" I whispered to her alone, but she didn't respond.

"I am content with any audience," July said. Zheng nodded to her and I hated that.

"Excuse me," Jan piped up from next to July. Her head of fluffy black hair peered around July's hip as if she'd been hiding behind the demon host. "I need a tiny, tiny bit of clarification here, just a teensy-weensy word of unpacking the issue. You're talking about taking this duel ... 'Outside'?" She pronounced the word like it was from an unfamiliar language, raising her thumb and forefinger pinched together, squinting in an effort to control her reaction. "That's your word for the spheres beyond, isn't it? The beyond, the spirit realms, the cradle of gods?"

Evelyn sighed. "*Outside* is an infinitely less *chuunibyou* term."

Twil pulled a baffled squint. "A less *what* term?"

"Nothing," Evelyn grunted. "Even you aren't internet poisoned enough for that one. An edgy term, let's put it that way."

"That's hardly the issue here," Jan said, in the tone of somebody who had just discovered their car had been compacted into a neat metal cube. "The spheres beyond—"

"*Outside* is the shaman's preference," Zheng rumbled, "so *Outside* it is."

Jan sighed, wet her lips, and cleared her throat with the effort of somebody being conned out of a lot of money. "Outside then. That's somewhere that you people can just ... go? Just like that? To have a fight? Like wandering down to an empty park or something?"

"The shaman knows the way," Zheng said.

“Bloody right she does,” Twil sighed. “S’not easy though.”

Jan slowly went pale. “You’re joking. This is a sick joke. This isn’t funny.”

“It is deadly serious,” Evelyn said, frowning a pinched frown right back at Jan. “We have ways and means of getting there. They will not be revealed to you. Do not try to steal them.”

“Oh, oh, oh.” Jan put her hands up. “Excuse me, I thought I was dealing with rational people here, not lunatics who assume that I’m interested in stealing the secrets of how to step into the fucking Chernobyl exclusion zone in nothing but my underwear! No, I’m mostly interested in not having my soul plucked out through my arse hole by some god-thing that happens to pass by! We are not going *beyond* so our demon hosts can get all hot and heavy in private! We can hire a fucking tennis court for the day or something!”

“It won’t be in private,” July said, back to staring at Zheng.

“Ha!” Zheng barked right back at her. “The glory for all to see.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” I said, finding my conversational feet once again. At least this was a topic I understood well. “We have access to a couple of different Outside dimensions which we know are safe. One of them has a lot of open space. That’s the place I was talking about.”

“How can you possibly know it’s safe!?” Jan spread her arms at me in a very frustrated little shrug.

“We’ve partly colonised it,” I said. “I mean, one of us has. She’s not here right now. And it’s not really colonising, she’s built a metaphorical round table there. You know, King Arthur’s round table, I mean. But out of thoughts. Kind of. There’s knights.”

Jan looked at me like I was completely off my rocker.

“Sorry,” I said.

“I’ve been there,” Evelyn grumbled. “Heather is doing a particularly terrible job of communicating right now, please do forgive her. It’s perfectly safe. Trust me, I didn’t want to go either. If we’re going to do this nonsense, we might as well do it right, where there’s no chance of us being seen. This is already an utter waste of time and energy, the last thing I want is for it to spiral off into an unrelated

crisis. Understand?"

"Plus there's plenty of security," I said, trying to convince myself. "The knights."

Jan looked at each of our faces, eyes wide with horrified awe. Raine gave her a thumbs up. Zheng rumbled with satisfaction. Twil muttered something about "hoping there's a horizon this time."

"There is," I reassured her. "It's kind of normal. Except the sky."

"Oh, except the sky!" Jan burst out. "That's alright then, perfectly fine. We are not doing this."

"Yes we are," July said without missing a beat.

Jan threw her hands up, stomped over to the open sports bag on the floor, and awkwardly went down on her knees to rummage around in the clothes. "Right, then I want danger pay. And not from you lot." She looked up at myself and the others, to make her point clear, then pointed at July. "From you! This is your fault. If we get eaten by a mountain of flesh, or turned into seedbeds for some extra-dimensional worms, or zombified by brain-eating plants, you are to blame!"

"I am always to blame for your pains," said July.

"And your half of these Sharrowford jobs is going towards the new dresses," Jan added with a huff.

"I will starve for your fashion."

Jan finally found what she was looking for in the bag, struggling to pull out a huge white coat that looked about three sizes too large for her, complete with massive hood, fur-trimmed rim, and lots of very thick padding. It unravelled other clothes as it came, apparently heavier than it looked. She straightened up and shook it out with some effort.

"And I am bloody well going armoured," she said, then turned to Evelyn. "Let's get this over with. This is madness!"

"Yes," I whispered, mostly to myself. "It is."

"Actually," Evelyn said, clearing her throat and frowning at the coat, "this is going to take a day or two to prepare. We have to build the gate from scratch, I'm not having us do this the quick and dirty way. That's unsafe."

“Oh!” Jan’s expression brightened with saccharine sweet fake relief. “Oh, I see, that would be unsafe. Yes, silly me. The unsafe way to expose oneself to the fucking vacuum of space.”

Evelyn sighed. “You can put your suit of armour away for now.”

“A day or two?” Zheng rumbled. “Wizard?”

“I’m not exaggerating.” Evelyn shot Zheng a very unimpressed look. “Why, is that too long for you? Going to elope with your new friend when you have to wait a bit? Deal with it.”

Zheng rumbled deep in her throat.

“You will ... ” I forced myself to say. “You will come home with us, right, Zheng?”

“For you, shaman,” she replied.

Raine laughed, a good natured belly chuckle, trying to throw the tension off like a heavy blanket. “I think it’s time we exchanged numbers, instead of threats, hey?”

Jan made a noise of pure, wordless frustration, stamping her foot and throwing the coat down. Something inside it audibly clanked against the floorboards.

“Just what I need,” she tutted. “Delays!”

= =

“So, hey,” Raine said. “What was that all about, Heather? Fancy talking?”

She had her hands propped behind her head as she leaned on the backboard of our bed, bare legs stretched out in front of her over the rumpled sheets, crossed at the ankles, caressed by the milky-grey light filtering in through the window. A cartoonish exaggeration of her own unstudied relaxation.

I stared at the open book on my crossed legs, not really seeing the words. Could barely make out the print anyway, not in the dying light of a rainy evening. That would require me to get up, cross the room, switch on the lamp, then cross back to the bed and sit down again, all of which seemed like far too much to bother with. I opened my mouth, about to say something utterly inane, something like *What was what all about, Raine? I haven’t the faintest clue what you’re talking about. I’m just hunky-dory with the third point of our*

barely stable triangle deciding to have a de-facto romantic fling with somebody she's only just met.

But I didn't say that, because it was the opposite of true. I frowned at the book.

"Heather?"

"I may as well ask you the same thing," I said, sounding out every inch of my grumpy pout. "What was *that* all about?"

"You really have to ask?" Raine chuckled.

I sighed and surrendered. "This book is upside down." I tutted and turned the book right way up. "What even is this?" I flapped the cover over. "Oh, this is yours. Who is *Ocalan*? What am I even reading here?"

"Philosophy," Raine said.

I tutted again, closed the book, and reached over to deposit it on Raine's thighs, which managed to capture my eyes for longer than I would have wanted under the circumstances, even in this grey haze. I still looked though, my eyes travelling up to the dark stain of the bullet scar on her upper left thigh, sunk deep in the shadows of her body. Raine ostentatiously stretched her legs and cracked her toes. I blushed and rolled my eyes.

"You can't ask me a serious emotional question when you're not wearing anything," I said.

"I'm wearing a t-shirt, and underwear. And hey, socks!" Raine wiggled her toes. I turned away, though I didn't actually want to. "And hey, right back at you."

"I'm fully clothed!"

"You can't return from a serious emotional crucible and instantly pick up a book and start reading it," Raine shot back, though with a smile in her voice. "Literally, you can't. Not only was it one of my philosophy books, it was upside down. You have been defeated. Soundly!"

"It wasn't instant," I said, my voice a touch too high. I crossed my arms and frowned at the bedroom door, which was currently closed to keep the rest of the house firmly out for a while. "I checked on Sevens. We made sure Evee had her stuff. We saw Twil off."

Silence descended, to match the rainy dusk.

It was almost evening, on the same day as our rash yet ultimately superfluous attempt at gunboat diplomacy with Jan and July. Sunset was cloistered behind thick, dark rain clouds. The day dribbled away beneath a leaden sky as drizzle blanketed Sharrowford with cold and damp. Spring was no respite from this kind of weather, especially in the North. Light like static turned every surface and angle into an indistinct mockery. Number 12 Barnslow Drive felt as subdued as we were after the stress and tension of the day, quiet and recovering, though I could hear the muffled sounds of Praem in the kitchen and the occasional deep rumble of Zheng's voice somewhere far below — talking to Evelyn, I supposed.

We'd been home for just over an hour, and now Raine and I were alone in our bedroom together; not an uncommon situation, but one I was uniquely unprepared for right then. I hadn't unpacked any of my knotted-up feelings.

It felt strange to simply return home after all that impending violence, but what else was there to do? Sometimes a thing happens and then you just go home afterwards. That's life.

Jan and Evelyn had swapped mobile phone numbers and promised to begin coordinating the 'play date' as soon as practicable, though Evelyn had heavily implied that any attempted magical trickery over the phone would earn Jan a sharp rebuke. We'd bid our new and reluctant acquaintances an awkward goodbye, and then headed home. Zheng had donned her hat and pulled up her scarf and vanished into an alleyway, with the fox still in her arms; she would stand out rather badly if she took the bus with the rest of us.

By the time we got home, she was already there, and she'd lost the fox.

"The eaters of the dead have their own paths, shaman," she'd explained. "A fox will not be caged and remain a fox. She wanted to go. She went."

Evelyn had sighed heavily at that. "Blasted thing. Can't even communicate properly."

The following hour had been awkward in the extreme. We'd all needed to peel off the sigil paper stuck to our bellies and backs, the

glue residue itching like nettle-stings until properly washed off. Twil had opted to head home herself, giving us all funny looks before she'd slipped out of the front door. But I couldn't think straight, I could barely look Zheng in the eye, I walked around like I was a zombie myself, pulled on automatic strings to change my clothes and wash the glue off and check if Evelyn needed any help setting up the gateway to the Quiet Plain.

She'd stared at me in the magical workshop, still frowning with a shade of how she had back in Jan's bedsit, sucking on her teeth.

"I'm serious," I'd said. "Evee? I want to help, if there's anything I can do."

"You want to help," she echoed in a grumble, then sighed. "Yes and no."

She'd stomped over to the table in the workshop and picked up a tiny plastic food bag, which had been lying near my squid-skull mask. I stared at the mask with instinctive longing to wedge it on over my head, to hide from the world, from Zheng especially. My beautiful giant demon was lurking in the utility room, like she'd been banished there.

"I had Lozzie bring me these, a couple of days ago," Evelyn was saying, waving the plastic bag between thumb and forefinger. I pulled my attention away from my guarded retreat. The bag contained a few blades of rubbery yellow grass. "I did suspect we might end up needing to do this at some point. Though not for such a stupid and wasteful reason."

"Is that grass from the Quiet Plain?"

"Quite," Evelyn said with a sigh. "The dimension needs a better name than that. You're not much for creative names."

"Sorry ... "

Evelyn blinked, then frowned harder. "That was a gentle joke. You don't need to apologise for it. Not to me."

I shrugged. "Sorry, Evee, I'm just a bit ... frazzled. By the day."

"Evidently," she said, tight and low.

"So, how does the grass work? What's it for?"

"It's a focus," Evelyn went on, though her easy words did not match

the way she looked at me, her brow knitted with dark concern. That frown made me feel like I should apologise again, shrink away, curl up and never return, but I stood my ground. “The same way we were eventually able to rebuild the gateway equations to connect with Carcosa, using that book you brought back from the library. Same principle, different Outside plane. It’s probably a good idea regardless, to set up a permanent gateway there. A staging ground, perhaps, for going deeper. I’ll probably still need Lozzie’s help though, like before.” She huffed and slapped the bag back down on the table, shaking her head. “Listen to me, permanent gateways to Outside, a good idea! I would have dunked my own head in the sink for suggesting such a thing a few months ago. Look what you’ve done to me, Heather, hm? Look what you’ve done to me.”

Her stare cut right through my flesh. I managed a weak smile. One of my tentacles tried to reach for her, but then stopped halfway.

“We’ll be safe,” I said, though part of me knew that wasn’t what we were really discussing. “I know we will.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted, and turned away.

I found no refuge in the advice of my resident expert on lesbian relationship drama; we’d left Sevens at home during the expedition to confront Jan, partly because she wasn’t so much *gunboat* as potential *atomic bomb*, and partly because forcing her to use that bomb would risk the stability of her new and tender self-hood. So she’d stayed with Lozzie and Tenny. I found them all in Lozzie’s room, taking a nap together, tucked under the covers and lined up like matryoshka dolls — Tenny spooning Lozzie who was in turn spooning Sevens, limbs everywhere, sheets tangled, lots of snoring going on.

And Zheng wouldn’t come upstairs, wouldn’t come to our bedroom. She was lurking in the utility room and kitchen, watching Praem cook alongside Whistle. She had more fellow-feeling with the Corgi than with me right then.

So now it was just me, Raine with her trousers off, and the rainstorm drumming on the roof.

Silence dragged on for long enough to become suspicious. I felt an itch between my shoulder blades, a premonition that Raine had silently gone up on her knees and crawled toward me on the bed. Perhaps she was about to apply a very physical solution to my

emotional constipation. I wouldn't have said no, only I knew I was incapable of enjoying sex right then.

"Raine, please don't."

I looked back over my shoulder, but Raine was still leaning against the headboard. She hadn't moved an inch. The silence had not heralded an attempt to solve my problems with aggressive, overwhelming, toe-curling sex, but had instead concealed an increasingly wide and shit-eating grin on Raine's face.

"Don't what?" she asked.

"Oh, fine!" I exploded at last, uncrossing my arms and flinging them wide. My one currently manifested tentacle did the same, flying out and coiling like a fist in wordless frustration. "I'm jealous, okay?"

Saying the word felt like dislodging a bolus of rotten meat from inside my throat, foul juices running down my gullet even as the pressure finally released. I hiccuped, loud and angry, like the warning cry of some marine bottom-feeder.

"I admit it," I went on, at the edge of shouting. "I'm really, really jealous of all this, of Zheng, of what she's doing with this ... July ... *person!*"

To my everlasting relief, Raine did not laugh; she didn't even keep grinning. The grin folded up and vanished before I'd even gotten the first word out, replaced with a subtle and reassuring smile. She nodded along until I finished.

"You can say 'bitch', you know?" she said. "I'm not gonna ding you for that."

"That wasn't what I meant," I huffed, turning sulky as my anger flared out. "Besides, it's hardly fair. It's not July's fault. It's Zheng's."

"Hey, Heather," Raine cooed softly, radiating all the warmth I'd ever needed. "It's okay to admit you feel jealous, yeah? Better than letting it eat you up inside. You should go tell Zheng about it too, clear the air. She'll understand. Well, she probably will, in her own way. Probably say something about wolves and trees. Right?"

I shrugged, shaking my head, feeling like I had a lump of burning coal in the centre of my chest. Then I looked up at Raine with a raised eyebrow. She laughed and shrugged too, but far more casual

and relaxed.

“Hey,” she said, “you don’t even have to say it. I know, I know, that’s kinda rich coming from me, preaching to you about jealousy.”

“I-I was not thinking that!” I blurted out.

“Yeah you were. Even if it was only subconscious. But hey, it’s cool.” Raine spread her hands. “You told me, yourself, you said it — it’s okay to be jealous.”

“But that was you, this is me, this is—”

“Heather.” Raine’s voice held just a touch of a whipcrack, enough to make me sit up and pay attention, to stop me wallowing in useless guilt. “You showed me that jealousy is just something you have to work through sometimes. I believed in you then, and I believe in you now. Stop beating yourself up. You don’t get to do that, not on my watch.”

I forced myself to hold Raine’s gaze for a few more seconds, then sniffed loudly and scrubbed at my eyes. She scooted over on the bed and her hand found my side, stroking and patting until I could look up again. I stared out of the window for a moment, into the haze of clouds, then back down at Raine’s soft brown eyes, so much the opposite to her body, muscles like bunched cable beneath her skin.

“I love you, Raine,” I said. “But I don’t deserve your faith in this. I feel like I shouldn’t be jealous of Zheng. Like it’s not justified, somehow.”

“Why not?” Raine asked — a genuine question, like always, no pre-judgement in her words. Her casual tone unlocked my heart.

“Because it’s a fight!” I sighed. “It’s not as if she slept with July or something. They spent several days doing their level best to murder each other. And I get the feeling this ... this ‘play fight’ is going to be extremely bloody. It’s hardly something I should feel jealous of. I certainly wouldn’t want to participate in it.”

Wouldn’t I? A tiny whisper of abyssal instinct crawled up my spine. My single tentacle bunched and coiled.

Raine waited a beat. “But?”

“But for Zheng, fighting is like a three-course meal at a fancy restaurant,” I said, turning bitter with sarcasm. “Wining and dining

before sweeping her partner home for a night of athletic sex.”

“Because of her vampire, right? The one from the story she told?”

I nodded. “Because of her vampire friend. I can’t be that for her, I can’t ... ”

Can’t? a tiny voice whispered. *You have six strong tentacles. You can plate yourself in armour. You could bring Zheng down.*

I huffed at myself — no, I couldn’t, not in a straight fight, no matter what nonsense my brain was feeding me.

“Hey, there’s stuff you can’t be to me,” Raine said, “that doesn’t mean you gotta be jealous.”

“That’s different.” I frowned. “I think.”

“Are you seriously afraid you’re going to lose Zheng?” Raine asked.

“Oh, no,” I said, suddenly coming up short and feeling very silly indeed. “Not lose her. Not like that. I’m just uncomfortable with all this. With her ... doing this with somebody ... somebody else. Somebody I don’t know. It’s not fair.”

“Yeah,” Raine said slowly, letting out a deep sigh. “Me too.”

I looked down at Raine on the bed; she’d rolled over almost onto her front, one bare leg waving half-raised in the air, her hand still lingering at my side, her hips cupped between the mattress and the milky light filtering through the window. My Raine, deceptively cuddly when she wanted to be, but she couldn’t hide the buttery-smooth flexibility of her muscles, the alert listening of her face, the way she saw right through me.

“You’re not just mirroring my jealousy, are you?” I asked.

The wrong question — or the right question, if one happens to be a fan of watching one’s very athletic girlfriend curl off the bed like a wolf rising from repose. Which, obviously, I was. Raine stopped waving one leg in the air, paused for a moment as she watched me with sudden curiosity, then rolled the other way, hit the edge of the bed, and sprang to her feet all in one fluid motion. Muscles uncoiled like springs. Her arms fanned through the haze of dim grey light, as if in slow motion, dappled by the haze of drizzling rain outdoors. As she turned, the static gloom picked out the uneven rut of the scar on her upper left thigh.

The bullet wound was mostly healed now, at least to the point that she didn't need a dressing and gauze anymore. No more weeping plasma and thin blood into a pad of cotton wool. But when backlit by the grey halo of the rainstorm outside, the fresh scar looked like a jagged fingertip of razor blades had been drawn across her flesh, punctuated around the edges by the marks where the stitches had pierced her skin.

A mass of angry red scar tissue puckered around the shallow wound of Stack's bullet. It took an expert in Raine's personal musculature to see the way it upset her balance ever so slightly, the way she still favoured the opposite leg. I happen to be such an expert.

Raine reached her arms above her head, rolled her neck from side to side, and started stretching her leg muscles in a practised sequence.

With the grey light behind her, she was like a shade, a shadow in the gloom. From my angle on the bed I could barely make out her expression.

"No," she said after a moment, a contemplative purr, weak light playing over her goose-pimpled thighs. "No. I'm not mirroring you, Heather. I don't like the idea of Zheng fighting somebody for pleasure."

"Me neither," I said.

"Unless it's me," Raine added.

I swallowed a hiccup. "Ah. Oh. Right."

Raine paused, her hands on her hips, head sideways as if listening for something beyond my range of hearing, a fellow ghost lurking out in the drizzle. The light framed her profile, unsmiling, knife-edge sharp. "Didn't expect to feel that," she said. "Hadn't thought about it before. Hell, Zheng just ain't my type. But if it was a fight ... yeah. Yeah, that's mine. I want that from her. She owes me that."

"Oh no," I breathed, an excited yet terrified tremor in my chest. They were both beyond me. "Raine, no. You can't!"

Raine turned back to me, plunging her expression into backlit gloom. The light glowed through the individual strands of her hair, turning chestnut to grey.

"You think I was joking, earlier?" she asked.

“No, no, not exactly. Raine, we’ve been over this, you and she promised not to fight. I thought you got this out of your systems with the fighting games. And she’s a demon, Raine. You’ve seen her fight.”

“You don’t think I would win?”

Her question was barely above a whisper, a predatory purr that froze me to the spot. I could not answer. I was not supposed to answer.

Raine took a deep breath, a cleansing breath, filling her lungs and closing her eyes. Then, to my aesthetic delight but emotional dismay, she grabbed the hem of her t-shirt and pulled it off over her head, unwrapping herself like a sword from a sheath, letting the t-shirt fall to the floor. Abdominal muscles flexed, hipbones jutted, shoulders rolled. But there was no moment of gloating grin, no pause in which she savoured the way her nearly nude form overpowered me like a choke hold, no subtle flicker of her tongue across her lips as she watched my reaction. She didn’t even look at me. For once, there was nothing sexual in her sudden disrobing.

Instead of reaching for me, she reached for her knife.

Raine picked up her matte black combat knife from where it lay on her bedside table, safely tucked away in its own sheath. But she drew the blade in the same way she had drawn herself, dropping the sheath like an afterthought. Naked metal soaked up the milky light from the window behind her.

My breath stuck in my throat, a thrill of dangerous excitement pounding through my head. Two more of my tentacles had manifested as well, curling close to my body like armour. I knew that Raine would never hurt me; she would never even joke with the knife, she was always so careful, so responsible, but I’d never seen her like this before. There was something unfamiliar about the way she moved now, something new, something not meant for me.

She stood very still, haloed by the gloom, knife held in one hand, her other hand with fingers splayed by her side, head raised and eyes closed, breathing slightly too hard. Slowly she raised the knife and touched the flat of the blade to her own chest, over her heart.

“I would win,” she murmured. “I could do it. I can see how to do it.”

“Raine,” I said, and found my voice quivering. “You’re talking about killing somebody I love.”

Her lips curled into a familiar smile. That was more like my Raine. But she still didn’t open her eyes. The knife lowered, slicing through rain-dappled air. She spun the blade in her hand, a flourish that I couldn’t quite follow, ending with the knife held reversed, ready for a strike from an unexpected angle.

“Not killing. Beating. In a duel. First blood, first pin to the mat, something like that. Not to the death.”

“You don’t have to fight her because I’m hurt,” I said, barely able to squeeze the words out.

“I love you, Heather,” Raine said, still low and soft. “But it’s not for you.”

I drew in a shuddering breath. “This is all very ... very *edgy*, Raine. Could you at least put the knife away? Please?”

Raine chuckled and the spell broke. She opened her eyes, retrieved the sheath from the floor, and slid the knife safely away. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Don’t sound so worried, hey?” she said, tossing the knife back onto the bedside table. “I think this is just how Zheng and I work. So yeah, I’m jealous too. I’ve half a mind to go slap her one right now.”

“Don’t! Oh, Raine, don’t, please, that isn’t going to make anything better!”

“Might provoke a fight,” Raine said. “Then I get to claim it.”

“Don’t. Oh, I don’t think I can deal with that on top of everything else. What if ... what if it was Twil, or Praem fighting her? Would you feel the same then? Do you have to follow this line of thought?”

Raine cocked her head at me. “Right back at you.”

“I’m sorry?”

She cracked a grin. She was still beautiful, framed from behind by the storm-light through the window, half-naked and curved like a dream, a fallen angel risen from the damp concrete and abandoned corners of Sharrowford, to bless me with a vision I still did not deserve. My beautiful, wounded, guardian angel, who had taken a

bullet for me, unfolded herself, and kept unfolding at the merest touch.

Now who's being edgy? I scolded myself.

"I'm not comfortable with what Zheng is doing either, but I get it," Raine said. "I get my own reactions to all this, and you know why? Because you've made me own up to them before. You made me take them head on, like watching a film of an oncoming train without flinching. But you, Heather? Damn, girl, you are lost." She shook her head and sat down, her darkly angelic halo melting away into the air, just Raine again as she planted her backside on the bed and shot me a smirk. "Here, let's do a thought experiment. I love thought experiments."

"Okay?" I said, bewildered but smiling, taken along by Raine's confidence and bluster — and her semi-nudity, of course. I struggled not to stare at her body instead of her face. "Maybe ... maybe put your t-shirt back on though? I'm going to have trouble concentrating otherwise. Sorry."

Raine paused, blinked at me, then broke into a grin. "Feeling a little hot under the collar?"

"Yes!" I scolded. "Of course! You're practically naked! What do you think?"

"It's not like you don't see this every day."

"That doesn't make any difference!"

Raine cracked a grin, so different to just a few moments earlier, radiating cheeky confidence. She flexed one arm. "I think you're sweating at the sight of these lethal weapons."

"Raine!" I batted at her. She laughed, sprang up from the bed, and scooped her t-shirt off the floor. I watched her wriggle back into it, a tiny bit sad to see her covered up again, though painfully aware we had more important matters to discuss.

Though I did wonder, in the back of my mind, if that little show had been intentional, to help guide me through the sucking swamps and stinging thorns of my own jealousy.

"Right, thought experiment," Raine repeated. She held up a finger. "Imagine me." She tapped her chest. "Imagine me, making out with another girl."

I blinked. My smile tugged wider. “ ... okay?”

“No, I’m serious. Really try to picture it, as realistically as you can. Me, all hot and bothered, with my tongue down some other girl’s throat, really into it.”

I cleared my own throat, starting to blush. “Um ... I ... I can’t? I can’t really imagine that. Who? Who are you kissing in this imaginary scenario?”

“Anybody!” She threw her hands up, grinning. “Pick the prettiest girl from one of your uni classes and imagine I’ve got my hand down her knickers.”

I frowned with effort, but felt nothing in particular. “This is silly.”

“Why?” Raine asked, as if this was the point.

“Because you wouldn’t do it. You just wouldn’t. Or if you did, I’d be watching. I think.”

Outside nightmare dimensions and alien god-kings and unspeakable geometries were all well and good, but I couldn’t imagine Raine cheating on me. That was far more unthinkable.

“Okay, how about ... ” Raine cast around, then scooped up one of the video game boxes from by the telly. She flopped back down on the bed and turned the box to me. “How about her?”

It was the game she’d been playing on and off for the last couple of months, the one with the anime girls doing alchemy, with lots of timers and silly battles against cartoonish slime monsters and goblins and such. The front cover of the box was graced with art of the game’s protagonist, an overly bubbly and implausibly endowed young woman wearing a white waistcoat, a jacket falling off her bare shoulders, and a pair of miniature shorts which barely contained her hips.

“Her?” I echoed, frowning and laughing at the same time. “The one you’ve been making ... jiggle every time she jumps?”

“Yeah!” Raine nodded. “Imagine I’m making out with her. Because, hey, I would! Look at her.” She tapped the box art. “Wouldn’t say no to getting suffocated by either end of her, if you know what I mean.”

“Raine,” I tutted. “This is just silly, she’s not real.”

Raine put the box down and narrowed her eyes. "Okay, time for live ammo."

I blinked. "Pardon?"

"What if I said I wanted to make out with Kimberly?"

My eyes went wide. "Do you?"

"Thought experiment, remember?"

"... I ... um ... I mean, but you don't."

"I dunno." Raine shrugged, pulling a thoughtful face. "She's mousy and kinda skittish, I can get down with that. Hasn't got your spine, but she's real cute all the same. I could see myself pinning her against a wall and making her squirm. Do you think she squeaks when she—"

"Raine," I snapped, no longer amused. "Raine, this is Kimberly you're talking about. Have a little respect."

Raine laughed. "Thought experiment!"

"Still!"

"Thought experiment," Raine repeated like a mantra, trying to sound sober and serious, though I could tell she was having far too much fun with this. "Imagine, right now, that I get up, go into Kimberly's room, and offer her a hundred quid to spend an hour in bed with me."

"Raine!" I squeaked, outraged. "That is completely—"

"Thought experiment."

"—unacceptable. Kim doesn't have a lot of money, she was practically in poverty before moving—"

"Heather, I'm trying to make a—"

"—in with us, it's not even funny as a joke, I don't want to hear—"

"*Heather*," Raine spoke my name with a touch of command. I flinched and stopped, but kept frowning at her. "Hey, Heather, you're running away from the point I'm trying to make. You're doing real good at it, too, sprinting away from me here."

I blushed and crossed my arms. "Well, it's just absurd. I know you

wouldn't do something like that, so it's hard to picture."

"From live ammo to hollow-point," Raine murmured.

"I'm sorry?"

"I'd really love to fuck Jan," she said, straight-faced.

My jaw dropped. I stared at her, trying to figure out how much of this was more hypothetical act than reality. "You're teasing me. Aren't you?"

"Nuh uh." Raine shook her head, wiggling her eyebrows and allowing herself a dirty smirk. "Come on, did you see her? Absolutely my type."

"You ... I mean ... *what?*"

"Real short, kinda like you, very easy to pick her up and princess carry her. Sweet and fluffy and cute as a button," Raine explained, her grin growing. "Didn't you notice? She's about your height, though even through that cardigan I could tell she's got quite a bit more titty—"

"Raine!" I practically shrieked.

"But what's really important is that hidden layer of thorns. A con artist with a mousy streak! Oh, come on, Heather, can't you see it? Can you imagine how she would react if I came onto her, strong? Like I do with you? She'd be quivering and blushing, but she'd be trying to put on a brave face too." Raine bit her lip. "Mmm. And did you see how she hid behind July at one point? Oh my goodness." Raine laughed, patting her ribs over her own heart. "I could eat her up."

I stared, speechless, taking a moment to process and recover. "You're ... you're saying all this to get me to react."

Raine laughed. "Yeah, but it's also a little bit true."

"But you wouldn't."

"Course I wouldn't! It would be a bloody nightmare. For all I know, she's got a thing with July, and I ain't butting in on that. And even if she was into it, she might require a bit more emotional commitment than I'd be willing to give. But, I do kinda want to. And that's the point. How does it make you *feel*, Heather? Jealous?"

“Oh,” I breathed, catching up at last as the shock receded. Thought experiment, indeed. “Well ... well, no, actually. You’re telling me about it right now. It’s a bit ... a bit much. But how can I be jealous if you’re telling me about it?”

“Exactly,” Raine said. I boggled at her, so she went on. “Think about it for a sec, Heather.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, looking at Raine, then staring out of the window at the drizzle against the glass. I truly did not feel jealous at this idea she found Jan attractive. I tried to imagine her sweeping the diminutive mage off her feet and making out with her, but the mental image just made me grimace with how silly it all seemed. She wouldn’t — not without permission.

“I don’t feel jealous,” I said. “Because I know that you aren’t going anywhere. And you’re asking first. Even if it is hypothetical.”

“And Zheng is going somewhere?” Raine prompted.

“No. But ... ” I sighed. “She’s not *mine*. I don’t have a right to exert control.”

Abyssal instinct screamed the lie in every cell of my body.

I may not have had sex with Zheng, but I had claimed her body and soul in a very real sense, back when I had healed her wounds after our fight with the greasy, fleshy giant, *Ooran Juh*. I had sliced the necrotic flesh from around her bite wounds with my own pneuma-somatic teeth, and drooled antiseptic mucus into her bloodstream, gifting her flesh with the extra-normal white blood cells manufactured in my trilobe reactor organ, my biological approximations of abyssal principles, wrought from impossible energies in our reality. I had entered her, saturated her; part of me was in her.

Zheng was mine, instinct said.

Sex did not give one any claim on another person. Even I knew that, with my extremely limited, all-Raine experience.

A dull ache was throbbing inside the tip of one of my tentacles, the beginning of the alchemical process of pneuma-somatic transformation, separating and multiplying the stem-cell analogues that would become a bio-steel needle and turgid fluid sacs. I winced and squinted, concentrating for a moment to halt and reverse the

process. A horrible, sick guilt grew like a toxic bubble in my gut as I realised what was happening.

My body wanted to inject Zheng with the same regenerative ichor that I had used to heal the Forest Knight.

My body wanted to *claim her*, again.

“Heather?” Raine asked, suddenly sharp, following my gaze to the tentacle, where she couldn’t see anything. Evelyn still had the modified 3D-glasses downstairs. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I blurted out, feeling like I was trying to dunk myself under a cold shower. I reeled the tentacle in, forced it down, and had half a mind to fold them all away until the feeling passed, wracked with shame. “Uh ... I felt guilty for being jealous. For not wanting Zheng to do this. I feel like I’m trying to claim her.”

Raine nodded. “Then you need to talk to her about it.”

“I’m not sure I can!” I said, despairing at what I might do if Zheng figured out what I really wanted, what I needed. She would probably say yes. “I wish she’d just ... ”

“You wish she’d called you in the first place?”

“When she’d run into July, yes! If she liked her so much, she should have just let me know!”

“Yeah,” Raine sighed. “Exactly. When it comes to this poly thing, begging for forgiveness is definitely not easier than asking permission. You think you’d feel different if she’d come home and checked first?”

“Maybe.” I shook my head, even deeper in guilt than when we’d started this conversation. I wanted to *violate* Zheng. I was a horrible little toxic thing, I needed to be flung back into the ocean abyss with the rest of the predators. “It’s too late for that now.”

“Hey, hey, Heather,” Raine purred. She leaned in close and pulled me into a hug. She must have recognised how distraught and torn up I felt. But for a moment I couldn’t hug her in return, consumed by guilt. Would I treat her like this, if she strayed? But she wouldn’t. But what if she did? The aching tip of my tentacle twitched. I felt like squeezing it until it went numb.

Then I gripped Raine back so hard it must have hurt.

She held on until I finally relaxed, until the sound of the rain and the hazy grey light lulled me down, drowsy and heavy-lidded.

“Hey,” Raine murmured as we parted, my hands lingering on her body. “Maybe we can make things better by watching her fight. Maybe you can be part of it that way. She wanted to show off, after all. Maybe she wants to show off to you. Maybe it’s for you. You should ask her about that.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“And hey, even if it’s not for you, she wants to share. She wants you to see her having fun, at least. That matters. She does love you, don’t forget that.”

“And I’ve chosen to love her in return,” I murmured. “Sometimes I feel like I don’t understand where Zheng and I stand.”

“But she’s broken your trust?”

“It’s only a fight, not sex.” I sighed, running my hands over each other. “I ... I should try to ... enjoy watching it, I suppose.” I huffed. “Oh, what am I saying? Enjoy watching a bloody fight between a pair of demons? Raine, it’s going to be a nightmare.”

Raine laughed. “Actually I’m kind of looking forward to it. And to seeing this ‘quiet plain’ and all the other knights. The Round Table dimension. Camelot! Can we call it that?”

“We are not calling it Camelot.”

“Is there like a Lancelot and a Percival and so on?” Raine asked, grinning with the absurd nature of the question. “Who’s Arthur, is that Lozzie?”

“I think there’s a Gawain,” I said. “Maybe. You met him.”

Raine blinked. “No shit?”

I shrugged, not quite certain about that. “I don’t think Lozzie knows Arthurian legend very well. I doubt it’s exact.” I frowned at Raine, distracting myself from my own guilt. “I’m not sure anybody else should be there in the first place though.”

“What, at Camelot, to watch the fight? I’m not missing this, Heather!”

“Last time I took you Outside ... ” I trailed off, my eyes moving

down her body to the scar on her upper left thigh.

Raine laughed. "Unless Stack is there with a gun and new grudge, I don't think we have to worry about that. Eeve's gonna have a gate up, and there's over a hundred knights out there, right? We're gonna be totally safe. This is Lozzie's special secret base, right? You said yourself, it's safe."

"... mm. I suppose."

"Hey, look on the bright side, it might not even go ahead," Raine said, leaning back on the bed again.

"Sorry?"

"I'd put fifty quid on Jan skipping town. Tonight. When's Eeve supposed to call her?"

"Soon, maybe. I think she might already have done so?" I looked around for my phone, to check the time, but the deepening storm and the gathering dusk had slowly plunged the room into heavier shadows. I hadn't even noticed the cocoon of darkness gathering around us. It invited me to close my eyes and curl up, go to sleep, forget about all this. The house itself was trying to soothe me.

"What an absolutely stupid day this has been," I sighed. "I don't think you're right, though. I don't think Jan can overrule July. The fight will go ahead."

Raine pulled a smirk. "Ahhhhh, but that was in front of us. Maybe in private, Jan's the one in charge, no questions, no nonsense. Maybe she cracks the whip behind closed doors."

I tutted softly, but my heart wasn't in it. I could not summon any hope.

"You should really talk to Zheng, you know?" Raine went on, soft and serious again. "She'll understand."

"Maybe," I muttered. But I couldn't.

Jealousy was a horrible thing, the way it twisted me inside and out. I was disgusted with myself and gripped by the fear that Zheng would see my true need on my face. I wanted to claim her, own her, make her mine. She, who had spent most of her life enslaved. I couldn't do that.

Plain as day, right on my face.

Right on my face.

“Raine,” I said hesitantly, speaking into the static. “Did ... did Eevee seem okay to you?”

“What do you mean? She seemed like Eevee, that much is sure.”

“Well ... ” I pictured Evelyn’s face against the shadows, the way she’d been frowning at me since I’d almost gone full abyssal hellion to drag Zheng Outside. My mouth went dry. “She’s got a lot of work ahead of her, to make this gate. And she didn’t seem very impressed with all this. I think.”

“Yeah, our Eevee is gonna be a touch grumpy, alright.”

“A touch grumpy,” I echoed. My blood was going cold with realisation.

I wasn’t the only one feeling jealous, was I?

“We should probably do something for her,” Raine was saying while my mind was racing ahead, about to slam into a mountainside guardrail and go off a cliff. “She was really looking forward to watching cartoons with you, you know? She didn’t say anything to me, but I could tell. She gets real intense and a little defensive when she’s excited about something. It’s kinda sweet, really, you get used to it and how to recognise—”

“Do you think Twil has gotten home yet?” I asked, trying to keep the quiver from my voice. Raine stopped and raised her eyebrows at me. “It’s just that I should maybe have a word with her. Perhaps. I’m not sure.”

Raine laughed. “Got enough qualifiers there?”

“Tch,” I tutted. “I’m serious. I need to have a word with her.”

“With Twil?”

“Yes.” I nodded, holding fast to a fragile reed of courage. “Before we let this fight go ahead. About Eevee.”

for the sake of a few sheep – 15.14

Crafting the gateway to ‘Camelot’ — as Evelyn also started calling it, after surrendering to Raine’s incessant use of the term — did not take one or two days. It took ten.

Evelyn’s original estimate was wildly optimistic, which was rare for her. But adjusting the gateway mandala turned out to be a lot more difficult than expected. We couldn’t just rip down the parts which referred to Carcosa and replace them with new symbols, to politely inform the membrane between worlds that we would like to visit this place named after Arthurian Legend. Reality cared nothing for our definitions, Quiet Plain or Camelot or Round Table or “This fucking bastard shit hole that I can’t fucking well find,” as Evelyn described it after four days of trying.

“It’s not a shit hole,” Lozzie protested with a pout. “It’s pretty. Real pretty! You’ve been there too, Eveey-weevey, you saw the skies!”

Evelyn sighed at that, dragging a hand over her face as they’d sat at the table in the magical workshop. The table was littered with sheets of paper covered in fragments of new gateway mandala, dozens upon dozens of fresh attempts at adjusting the output destination.

That pile of paper grew all week long, like a snow bank in a storm. Evelyn huddled in the centre as if she was extruding an igloo about herself. Lozzie flitted in and out whenever Evelyn hit a snag, rotating or transposing or correcting some piece of magic that looked wrong to her quasi-Outsider instincts.

“Hey, Eevee,” Raine said on day four, when Evelyn had thumped into the kitchen looking ready to bite the head off a live chicken. “We knew it was never gonna be as simple as punching in a bunch of hieroglyphs and watching a big wibbly-wobbly ring open a wormhole for us, right? Take a break, go soak in the bath. Watch some cartoons with Heather or something. Take tomorrow off. Or take a nap?”

“A nap,” Evelyn echoed. She made the word ‘nap’ sound like an insult. “If it ever becomes that easy to open a gate, I will open one to the far side of the moon and have Praem throw you through.”

“A ... a nap would be ... be good for you,” I ventured as well, from the other side of the kitchen, swallowing a hiccup. “Please, Evee. I could even, um ... I could ... ”

I could nap with you, I hadn’t the courage to say.

Evelyn stared at me, blank and exhausted, only reacting when Praem pressed a mug of hot chocolate into her hands.

“Drink,” Praem said.

“Oh, I don’t want this,” Evelyn grumbled, gesturing as if to hand the mug back to Praem. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Drink.”

“I didn’t ask—”

“You will drink,” Praem repeated herself for a third time.

Evelyn drank her hot chocolate like a good girl. And she took that nap, thank the gods.

Raine was more right than she knew. The nature of Outside was nothing so simple as parallel dimensions, lined up side by side or stacked atop each other, so one could neatly step through from one dimension to the next. It was hardly the proverbial turtles all the way down. The sea of dark infinity that lay beyond our earthly sphere was so difficult to capture in human terms that even the simplest possible mapping — the map hidden away in the dank cellars of the Saye Estate down in Sussex — was a hazard to human senses and sanity all by itself. We were not simply entering a new address into a cosmic GPS tracker, we were charting a course through a maze not meant for human minds; I may have been able to achieve the former with raw hyperdimensional mathematics, but the gateway was plain old magic, the stable and safe kind.

“Safe magic is an oxymoron,” Evelyn spat at her own explanation. “But it’s safer than the alternative.”

As two days dragged into three and five dragged into six, Evelyn blamed herself. She didn’t work herself into a frenzy or fall into dark rages, but she got quiet and intense and deeply tired. That

prompted me to begin sharing Praem's duties of making sure she actually got to bed each night, even tucking her in and turning out her light. I hadn't seen her like this since last year, since the early days of her shadow war against the Sharrowford Cult, back when she'd locked herself in her magical workshop to direct Praem's hunting trips.

She was pushing herself too hard. But this was no matter of life and death, no malicious intruder in her city, no siege upon our house. It was a play date for zombies.

I wasn't an idiot, I knew why she was driving herself. Because of me. By day four I wished I'd never suggested we take the duel Outside.

At least she didn't lock herself away this time, physically or metaphorically. The door to the workshop stood open all day, every day. I doubt I would have been able to take the guilt otherwise; I would have swallowed my jealousy, my pride, my whole self. I would have staged an intervention. I would have had Zheng and July fight in a public swimming pool for all I cared, wearing swimsuits and rubber armbands. Nothing was worth that kind of damage to Evelyn.

But she never fell quite that far. No matter how monosyllabic and grumpy she could be at times, she was making progress.

Though she hadn't stopped frowning at me with that dark and unspeakable jealousy.

= =

"Half the reason this is taking so long is the *anchoring*," she told me on day seven.

I'd stepped into the workshop with a plate of peeled and sliced apple for her — peeled and sliced myself, not by Praem, in some wordless act of physical penance. I possessed none of Praem's accuracy and speed with peeler or knife, these were not pretty apple slices, and I had almost cut myself once or twice. But Praem had not stepped in, oddly enough. Evelyn grunted a thank you, then launched into an explanation.

"*Anchoring*?" I asked, half polite, half genuinely interested, all happy she was talking.

“Mm, technical term,” Evelyn said. She took up the fork and crunched through a piece of apple, watching me with those big blue eyes, dispassionate and thoughtful.

It was the first of June, still a few weeks out from true summer. Half the bulbs were dead in the drawing room’s light fixture and weak sunlight filtered through the heavy curtains over the bay windows; Evelyn had rarely looked so close to my first impression of her, almost nine months ago then, back in the Medieval Metaphysics room. The hazy illumination caught stray dust motes around her golden-blond hair and the thick, enclosing warmth of her cream-coloured ribbed jumper. Despite the improving weather, she still wore a long skirt over her comfortable pajama bottoms. Cuddly, warm, tucked away with her books. Sometimes, if only for a moment here and there, she seemed like a fairytale witch one might find in a hidden woodland cottage.

Except, I knew the truth; I knew the prosthetic leg lurked beneath her skirt, I was familiar with the sharp tongue and sharper mind beneath the plush exterior, and I knew that she was crafting real magic. But Evelyn Saye was part of my family, warts and all. I preferred that to any cottage fantasy.

So why couldn’t I talk to her about that?

“Technical term?” I said instead.

“Is there an echo in here?” she grunted, then smiled with thin, sardonic amusement as I tutted and rolled my eyes. “Yes, a technical term, though I just made it up a couple of days ago.” She crunched through another slice of apple and gestured at the gateway mandala. It lay spread out across the back wall of the former drawing room. A few stray shafts of late sunlight played over the bare plaster and the pieces of stiff cardboard that she and Lozzie had been propping up there all week, the components of the new formula. I could only glance at it for a few moments — the thing still turned my stomach, like I was looking at a dozen dismembered animals in the process of being sewn back together into some new and impossible configuration. “It’s basically solved, we could probably open the gateway to Camelot—”

I couldn’t quite suppress a sigh. Evelyn frowned at me. “Sorry,” I said. “I just think that name is a bit silly.”

“It is silly,” Evelyn snapped. There was that jealous pinch in her

eyebrows again, that dark frown shot sidelong at me for a fleeting second. "Everything about this is silly. No, scratch that, it's all downright fucking stupid, the whole lot of it. Zheng, you, Jan and July, Raine, that blasted fox. All of it."

"Sorry," I repeated, in a whisper so quiet she couldn't possibly have heard.

"Like I said, the new gateway is basically solved already, but this one is going to be anchored." She frowned at the doorway of bare plaster scored into the wall. "Almost all of us are going to be over there watching these two zombies slap each other stupid. Even if that takes only thirty seconds, I want this end secure."

"Isn't the house already secure?"

Evelyn sighed, but her voice took on a tiny touch of pride. "Paranoia has its upsides, Heather. This version of the gateway formula is going to be semi-permanent, for safety. For example, if some lunatic was to break in here while we're all watching Camelot's greatest pay-per-view match, it would be extremely bad if said lunatic was to get past my spider-servitors and rub off even a small portion of the mandala. Very bad. And the spiders are not exactly reliable."

I glanced up into the far corner of the workshop, where one spider-servitor clung upside down on the ceiling, resting or thinking or just vegetating. It was hard to tell what they thought about all day. The head of crystalline eyes showed no reaction, just watching the room as always. I pulled an apologetic expression anyway, hoping it understood. I'd always felt quite fond of the senile creatures, ever since one of them had scurried after me to squat over my unconscious form, back when the cult had tried their kidnapping trick with our first gateway.

"That's a bit harsh," I sighed.

"Eh," Evelyn grunted, waving one hand in dismissal. "They're not reliable. They're helpful, but they're not reliable."

"Besides, Lozzie and I could always bring us back home."

Evelyn rounded on me again in her chair, wielding a piece of apple on the end of her fork. I flinched slightly in the face of her genuine anger. "And what if you were both incapacitated? Or absent? Or worse? Hm? Because that's what happened before. You were gone."

Both of you. I want something that works without your input, in case we ever have to come and bloody well fetch you.”

“That’s a ... that’s a good point, Eevee. Fair enough. And thank you, I know you’re only looking out for me.”

Evelyn turned away with a wordless grumble. I reached out to awkwardly pat her on the shoulder. To my delight and surprise she absent-mindedly held my fingertips in return, though she must have barely felt my touch through her thick jumper. Then, she seemed to lean her head as if she was about to touch her face to my hand, but caught herself, apparently just as subconsciously, because she let go of my hand and went on talking as if nothing had happened. Three of my tentacles inched out toward her, but withdrew without contact, because I was only indulging my own guilt. My heart felt like a rotting worm inside my chest.

“So this version stays open. No matter what happens to the physical spell written all over the goddamn walls.” She sighed. “Or at least that’s the theory. I still have to test it.”

“I assume it’s not fully permanent?” I asked.

Evelyn snorted, though her sarcasm was at least amused rather than bitter and sharp. “Oh yes, that would be a great idea, just fill this room with physical doorways to elsewhere. The crossroads of the universe, right here in Sharrowford. I’ll put up a signpost, we’ll turn it into somebody’s hub level.”

“Hub what? Pardon?”

“Never mind.”

“So, how do we close it again?”

“We don’t. I do. Kimberly should be able to do it as well, I’m going to share the details with her, in case I’m ... ” She trailed off and waved a hand with an uncomfortable murmur. “It requires a specific counter-rotational gesture and the correct incantation sequence. Or, it will do, in theory, if the damn thing works like it’s meant to. I’m still not certain it will, this entire thing might be a wash. You might have to put a leash on Zheng after all.” Evelyn let true scorn leech into those last few words.

I cringed inside, feeling doubly awful. Guilt over Zheng and guilt over Evelyn. She hated this.

"I'm sure it will work," I said. "Evee, you're really good at this, when you let yourself be."

She sighed heavily. "Heather, I know you're not trying to lie on purpose, but you're too sweet for your own good."

I blinked, mortified, as Evelyn turned heavily lidded eyes up toward me. "I'm ... sorry?"

"I am terrible at magic," she said. "But even if I wasn't, this would still be highly experimental, far beyond the boundaries of what any of my contemporaries or peers have attempted to do." She gestured at the blank doorway and the unfinished mandala again. "I'm taking principles I barely comprehend and tying them together with duct tape and hope. You don't understand, Raine doesn't understand, Lozzie certainly doesn't understand, at least not in the way I need. Praem, I don't even want her to understand. Kimberly might, but she doesn't deserve any more of this shit. She's half out and I bloody well intend to allow her to stay that way. Your weird little yellow friend, maybe, but she's not telling."

"What about Jan?" I asked.

Evelyn's expression darkened like a flash storm moving across her face. "Perhaps," she hissed through clenched teeth.

"Oh, Evee, I didn't mean to say we should show her any of it. Of course not. Of course."

"This shouldn't even exist," Evelyn said, watching me carefully, intent and alert for the first time in several days. The jealousy had gone away, replaced with my strategist once again. "This gateway. What we've done. You do understand that, yes?"

"But you did it anyway," I said. "It's an achievement."

Evelyn hissed and waved both hands. "I didn't do this, Heather. I copied the work the cult did, however they tunnelled through to their wounded Outsider thing. Their doorways couldn't have taken them truly Outside, just over to their pocket dimension. And then Lozzie had to finish the formula for us, you remember?"

"How could I forget," I murmured.

"Without her, I'm not sure we could have done it at all. You understand that? You understand that none of what we're doing here should even exist? Jan, the way she was reacting last week —

she was *right*. We've built a physical doorway to Outside. I'm not entirely certain that anybody else is currently capable of this." She snorted. "With the exception of one mister Edward Lilburne. We are playing with fire."

"To rescue my sister."

Evelyn's expression did not change, no shock of realisation, no backing down, no sudden retreat. She just nodded. "Yes, exactly."

It was all worth it, she agreed. Even if we got burned.

"You really think this has never been done before?" I asked.

"There's nothing in any of your dusty tomes or creepy books?"

Evelyn frowned at me, a touch less serious. She pulled a face.

"They're not 'creepy'. That's like calling fresh lava 'a bit spicy'. And, well, maybe. Here and there. There's plenty of accounts of journeys Outside, but scant little on technique. Everybody's always so evasive about specifics. Nobody wants to share."

"Mages, quite," I sighed.

"Quite."

"You're doing the same thing, though," I said. Evelyn frowned at me. "I mean, perhaps with good justification," I hurried to add.

"Edward Lilburne has already stolen this technique," she said.

"Though I'm pretty certain he can only go to the Library of Carcosa. He can only use what that bloody joker memorised when he saw our gateway. He hasn't got Lozzie to do the corrections for him to make it all actually work. We wouldn't even be able to place this gateway on an upright surface out there, in Camelot, without Lozzie directing her creations around to give us one." She sighed. "But Edward does keep exceeding my estimations. Which is why this gate will be anchored. Just in case."

"Just in case," I echoed. All my fault.

"I can't emphasize this enough, Heather, I would not be able to do this without Lozzie. You're sure she's on board with all this? She doesn't seem to be reacting like there's going to be ... well, violence."

I swallowed, another hooked barb slicing through my heart. "I think she's kind of excited about everyone going to visit her knights. And

I did explain it's all going to be conducted in the spirit of good sportsmanship ... " I trailed off, struggling to convince even myself.

Evelyn snorted. "Right. Good sportsmanship. Not to the death."

"I think that makes it okay for her, if it's Zheng. And ... and I think she wants Tenny to try flying again, out there, where it's safe."

Evelyn didn't respond to that, growing quiet and intense as she stared at me.

"Evelyn?"

"Tenny. A child. Right. I do hope that place is safe, Heather. I really do."

"Evee, are *you* on board with all this?"

Evelyn stared at me for another few heartbeats. I felt like looking away, shrinking back, retreating into the kitchen, but I held my ground, I gave her the respect I owed. The jealousy crept back into the creases of her frown, dark and brooding.

"You all need to get this out of your collective systems," she said eventually. "You and Zheng, mostly. Get it over with."

I broke. "Evee, I'm really sorry," I blurted out.

But she was already turning away, back to the apple slices. She waved a hand and snorted a laugh. "You have nothing to apologise for, Heather. Don't worry about it. Don't even think about it."

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I was surprised that Jan didn't simply flee Sharrowford and block Evelyn's phone number; that's what I would have done in her situation. She had every reason to place herself as far away from us as possible. Except for July. The demon host's need kept them both in the city, kept them waiting for Evelyn to finish the gate, kept Jan answering the daily phone calls.

"What's she even doing this whole week?" Raine asked. "She's a con artist, so she's gotta keep moving forward, finding new marks, generating new work. Right?"

"She's not a *shark*," Evelyn huffed.

"Does she look like a shark?" Lozzie asked. "I hope she looks like a

shark! Girl shark!”

“Shark! Shark!” Tenny joined in, briefly deafening us with very excited trilling. She’d recently discovered my youtube playlist of marine animal videos.

“Jan is small and sweet and cute,” Praem informed Lozzie. “Not a shark.”

“No shark?” Tenny sounded sad. I reached over to stroke her head, ruffling her tuft of white fur. She went *pbbbbbt* into my hand.

Lozzie puffed her cheeks out. “Sharks are cute.”

“My mistake,” Praem intoned. “Sharks are cute.”

“If you must know,” Evelyn drawled, “I get the impression she is mostly shopping for clothes and eating copious amounts of fast food. I don’t think she’s hurting for money.”

“She needs to eat?” I asked.

Evelyn shrugged. “Needs, wants, who cares.”

“I care,” Praem told us.

Jan wasn’t the only one making best use of the lull between unexpected crises. Twil’s exam season may have come slightly earlier, but at Sharrowford University it was ‘assessment period’, a brutally sanitised way of saying it was time to turn in essays and sit end-of-term exams, for the next three weeks. The whiplash between the two halves of my life felt unreal sometimes — supernatural impossibilities on one hand, the intellectual familiarity of literature on the other.

But amid the chaos of abyssal biology, murderous magicians, and my fumbling attempts to love those who loved me, I’d managed to attend enough lectures and participate in enough seminars so that I was not left with a pile of disconnected notions from which to conjure three last-minute essays. In fact, I’d been taking diligent notes all term, in between horrors and trips Outside and emotional snake pits. I had most of the scaffolding in place for the three coursework essays I had to submit — one on a close reading of *Gulliver’s Travels*, which unfortunately turned my stomach with unintended comparisons to real life, but the other two were safer, long-form meditations on interpretive strategies for *Jane Eyre* and a very personally interesting exploration of travelling upriver in *Heart*

of *Darkness*. I kept thinking about those essays at night, lying in bed, trying to distract myself from the other half of my life — and from Zheng's absence.

Raine and Evelyn were both second year students, which meant they suffered rather a bit more pressure. Evelyn's work was always done far in advance, one of the benefits of being a fluent speaker in the matters she was supposedly 'studying'. Raine, however, had none of the all-coursework mercies of the literature department to spare her, nor Evelyn's hidden reserve of diligent hard work behind the scenes. For Raine, it was a season of all-nighter scrambles to write up philosophy papers, and get her mind around a trio of exams. Though she never showed the slightest bit of concern.

Being normal felt so fake; how could I care about my future career when we had so little time left in which to reach Maisie? How could I concentrate on correct footnote formatting when the Eye waited just beyond a membrane thinner than my soul, holding my lost twin?

But life turned, and so did my pen. Or at least, my fingers pressed keys on the laptop keyboard.

And it kept my mind away from what I wanted to say to Twil.

I'd tried calling her once, that very same evening on which I'd expressed the notion out loud. That turned out to be a mistake — both the call and sharing the half-formed notion with Raine. As soon as Twil had answered her mobile phone, I'd realised that I needed to say these things to her face, things about her and Evelyn, and about myself. Courage may have come easier at the distance between Sharrowford and Brinkwood, but this subject required respect and care. I had to be gentle. I had to see her face. I had to offer her a hug. So I'd ended the call with a bad excuse about wanting to check that she was home safe.

All week my head swirled with possibilities, with horrible images of how Twil might react — anger, bitterness, spite, even hatred. I couldn't bear to consider the other end of the range, that she might be hurt, might cry. But I had to do it. To her face.

Which meant waiting for Evelyn to call her back to the house, to help us with Jan and July during the visit to Camelot. There was no way I could call her over to the house myself, not without driving Raine's curiosity past its already wild peak, not without everyone

wondering what I was doing, talking to our friendly werewolf in private.

Raine had accepted my lame explanation that this was something about Evelyn and Twil, about their relationship — which was technically true. I hated the idea of lying to Raine, of concealing things from her; but I had to keep these cards close to my heart, because they weren't just about me. If I let her in on the truth, she wouldn't be able to keep it to herself. She would catalyse the whole situation, set hearts in motion, and I didn't have the emotional bandwidth for even a fraction of this, not with Zheng too, not with the burning jealousy.

We had to get to the other side of this duel, and whatever lay in wait for me and Zheng. Then, maybe, I could start to deal with it.

Zheng herself stayed out of my way, mostly out of my sight, and barely spoke to me. She vanished from the house to hunt each evening. Every night I wondered if this was the night she wouldn't come back.

"Meat, shaman," she purred to me one night, when we'd found each other in the darkness of the kitchen, illuminated only by the distant street lamp glow.

Her natural environment, the freedom of the night. I'd ached to ask her to take me out with her, to ride on her back again like when we'd pursued Badger together. I wanted to feel the wind on our faces together, our hearts beating side-by-side. But I couldn't say the words, because I wanted to claim her.

"Meat?" I'd echoed.

"I hunt for meat. Sheep, squirrel, other secrets in the woods. Not for my opponent. Not until the hour you appointed, shaman."

"That ... that's good to know," I'd managed, then focused on drinking from my glass of water, for far too long, drawing out the seconds. By the time I'd finished, she was out the back door, gone again.

I missed her like a missing arm.

I couldn't talk to anybody about this, not my lovers, not Lozzie, not even Sevens. She of all people may have been able to untangle it, but something about her felt embryonic now, the way she cuddled

up to me in bed and purred into my chest, the way she spent more and more time with Lozzie and Tenny, the way she reacted with big blinking eyes the one time I tried to share it with her, when we were alone in bed one morning, while Raine was downstairs making breakfast.

She got the part about Zheng, of course. She knew that all too well. She hugged me around the middle and purred into my chest over that. She understood. But when it came to the subject of Twil, she shied away, hands peeling off my sides and boney body sinking into the sheets like a manta ray hiding beneath shallow sand.

“I can’t help,” Seven-Shades-of-Squeamish-Subordinate had rasped.

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

She raised a hand and wobbled it back and forth, showing all her sharp little needle-teeth in a pained grimace. “Bit of both? Can’t intervene. Can’t move you around on the stage. You’re in deeeeeeeep. You gotta dig up.”

“Oh, Sevens.” I reached out and wormed a tentacle around her shoulders beneath the sheets. “I’m not asking you to direct. I’m asking you to help as you are now. As you. Or just ... just listen? Just listen.”

Sevens had let out an uncomfortable *guuurrrrrruk*. But she’d reached over and cuddled my middle again. “Here for you. If you need it. Want a wing-woman with the werewolf?”

I’d actually laughed at that, stroking Sevens’ lank hair back from her forehead. “Maybe. You are so lovely, Sevens. I won’t force you, but maybe ... when I do it, stay near? Okay?”

“Will lurk,” she gurgled. “In ceiling.”

“Um, maybe not that. Praem will be quite put out if you get into the wall cavity. It would make a terrible mess.”

Sevens had laughed at that, a lovely rasping noise that made me want to pick her up and nuzzle her. Nobody else could treat this with the respect it needed, nobody but the reforming meddler herself.

As the days ground on, my tension grew, like a great worm coiled in my gut, feeding on my bio-reactor. I began to keep multiple tentacles manifested all day long, sometimes even through the

night. More than once I woke up with them wrapped around my torso in a constricting ball, after dreams of crushing and choking.

Everyone must have thought I was consumed by jealousy. They were right, but that was only half of it. Evelyn sunk deeper into her work. Zheng avoided us all, hunting and eating. Lozzie tiptoed around, giving me stealthy hugs when she thought nobody else was looking. And Raine had sex with me twice a day, helping me burn off the tension.

That didn't quite work, because it wasn't about my jealousy anymore.

It was about the sense of an impending change in the air. Several of them, all bearing down like thunderclouds.

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Private Eye Nicole Webb, super-spy according to Raine — detective for hire according to everybody else — checked in with Evelyn twice every day, still chewing through a mountain of stolen paperwork between other jobs, hunting for any clues about the location of a most cautious and private client.

On day nine, when the gateway really was ready and all we had left was the test, Evelyn called Raine and me into the kitchen, and put Nicole on speaker phone.

"Repeat what you just said, please, detective," Evelyn requested of the phone on the table. "I don't want to repeat it myself, I might get it wrong. From the top, please."

Nicole cleared her throat on the other end of the phone. "Alright then, for the peanut gallery out there," her smooth, relaxed tones purred in between the shuffling of papers. "There's basically two ways of concealing information when you have to keep these kinds of records. Either you keep everything squeaky-clean, you keep all the grisly details off the books completely, never write down any phone numbers of people you aren't supposed to know, that sort of thing. Or, you make everything so dense and complex that it's impossible to unravel. Make it too difficult to piece together the kind of clear picture you need to build a case against a crooked lawyer, and that's actually quite easy to do. Follow me so far?"

"Absence versus concealed, sure," Raine said. "Go on, Nicky."

"That's detective Webb to you, Haynes," Nicole shot back, then continued without missing a beat. "So, the lawyer, Yuleson, he deals with a lot of dodgy people, right? Not just your Edward guy. People who have actually been committing major crimes. I mean, there's some shit in here I would have loved to get my hands on while I was police. Not that any of it is actionable, mind you."

"Especially 'cos it's stolen, little miss criminal," Raine said.

"Raine, shut the fuck up," Evelyn growled. "Not now. Listen."

Raine blinked in surprise. Evelyn was not joking around.

"Yes, shush," I added gently. Raine grinned and goosed my flank, which made me wriggle.

"Thanks, Heather," Nicole said with a laugh. At least she was enjoying this a little. "Look, my point is, Yuleson's done legal counsel and defence for people linked with major drug dealing operations. And when you're dealing with that, you want to keep everything — and I do mean *everything* — cleaner than a brothel toilet seat before a royal visit, you get me?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Ew."

"Money from clean sources, nothing shady that's gonna bring external attention, that kind of thing. Yuleson's records are technically clean. Very clean. He uses the first strategy. But ... " Nicole paused. I could hear her wetting her lips, hear the creep of discomfort in her voice.

"Detective," Evelyn prompted. "Continue, please. The same way you told me."

"So I'm looking for this house, right?" Nicole's voice came back strong. "For a stray invoice that lists an address, a copy of a purchase order, something legal to do with the house, property, taxes. Anything at all. And yeah, there's lots of stuff in here, fake names or fall guys on half of it, any one of these could be connected with Edward Lilburne. I keep following them up, looking up people, confirming who they are, checking if addresses are real, but ... uh ... fuck me, miss Saye, do I need to—"

"Say it again," Evelyn repeated. She shared a glance with us. I could see the tension around her eyes.

"It's nothing supernatural," Nicole said, laughing it off. "It's just ...

well. I feel like I'm being led around in a circle."

Raine raised her eyebrows. Evelyn nodded. I bit my lip.

"Led around?" Raine prompted. "By a pile of documents?"

"Ahhhhh, that's why it sounds so silly," Nicole sighed. "Look, it's a sense you get. Not a real sixth sense or anything, I'm not talking about any of your supernatural guff, I'm talking about detective work. You do this for long enough, police or private or whatever, and when you're working one of those cases where some element has been concealed, hidden for real, on purpose, then sometimes you get this sense like you're going around in a circle, right? Covering the same ground over and over, looking for that crack, that break in the armour, that way in. But it's nothing literal, you get me? It's not like you can point to something, it's just a feeling."

"But you said 'led'," Raine repeated.

"Yeah ... yeah." Nicole puffed out a big sigh. I could hear her scratching her head. "'Cos this shouldn't be happening. This isn't like a murder investigation or something, it's just trying to find an address. A hint of an address, even. A forwarded tax document. Anything. But it feels like I'm chasing a person. A person who's covering their tracks."

Nicole stopped. Silence fell over the kitchen. I hugged myself with hands and tentacles alike, feeling like a cold hand was creeping up my spine. Somebody flicked the kitchen lights on, banishing the gloom — Praem, listening in alongside us. She met my eyes and stared, blank white, as unreadable as the phone on the table.

"I think she should stop," I said out loud.

"I've already instructed her to do so," Evelyn said.

"I mean it's probably nothing," Nicole's voice floated up from the lonely phone on the table, suddenly seeming very far away, on the other side of a wall. I wish we'd had this meeting face-to-face. "But I realised it this afternoon, so here I am. Checking in, getting the all stop."

"I'm not exaggerating, by the way," Evelyn said, leaning toward the phone. "You will be paid for today, but nothing else past this point, you understand? You are to stop this investigation."

"Yeah, yeah," Nicole laughed. "I'm not gonna work for free or

anything.”

“You box up and seal everything you took from those offices,” Evelyn went on. “You don’t touch it, you don’t look at it, you stop thinking about it. Completely.”

“It’s cool, hey. I’ve got another job to be on this afternoon, just bread-and-butter stuff. I won’t touch your job again until you give me the go-ahead.” She sighed, a big puff down the phone. “You really think this is some supernatural effect? Something messing with my head? It doesn’t feel like that, it feels normal. There’s no ghosts floating through my flat, I’m not losing time or blacking out. It all makes sense, you know?”

“It can’t be ruled out,” Evelyn said, tight and frowning.

“Yes, quite,” I added. “Nicky, just stop, don’t touch it again. We’ll ... we will ...”

I trailed off, wetting my lips. We would what? The gateway to Camelot was almost ready; tomorrow was the day, Evelyn was all prepared for the test. But none of that mattered at all compared to finding Edward Lilburne, taking that book from him, and completing the *Invisus Oculus*, our way to go unseen even in sight of the Eye. Nothing mattered next to rescuing Maisie. Part of me wanted to call everything off, give Zheng an ultimatum, forget any notion of talking to Twil.

But who would be left to rescue my sister, if I abandoned everything I believed in? If I left my friends behind? Certainly not me.

“We’ll be over there at your apartment the day after tomorrow,” Evelyn spoke up, making me jump. “Do not touch any of it in the meantime, detective. Understand? Don’t touch a thing. We’re dealing with something at current. Then we’ll come take a look at the effect for ourselves.”

“Oh, believe me, I ain’t gonna touch it until you’re paying me again,” Nicole said with a laugh.

“Nicky,” I spoke up one last time. “Nicky, if anything strange happens, call us, okay? Any hour of the day or night. Call us.”

“You bet, little ghost-busters. Have no fear, I’m about to spend the next forty-eight hours tailing a client’s cheating wife. All very

boring, all very routine. No spooky bullshit for me. Fingers crossed, swear on me mum, so on and all that.”

After Evelyn ended the call, I couldn’t help but chew on my lower lip.

“What if we can’t find the house at all?” I asked. “What if we can’t catch Edward? What if we can’t get hold of the book?”

Raine pulled me into a gentle hug. “Hey, Heather, if that happens, then we’ll find some other way.”

“We will,” Evelyn grunted. She shot me a frown from down in her chair. “After we get this nonsense over with.”

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‘This nonsense’ — the final preparation for Zheng and July’s duel — began the following morning, the tenth and hopefully last day of the process. Evelyn’s magical workshop was all set up for the outing to Camelot, ready to go ahead once her test proved successful.

Everything was in place, from Raine’s emergency kit of makeshift riot shield and protective helmet, through Zheng’s lurking presence in the utility room and kitchen, to Lozzie’s repeated assurances that it would be perfectly safe over there.

“And the ... ‘caterpillar?’” Evelyn asked yet again, as Lozzie scarfed down a bowl of sugary cereal at sunrise. “You’re sure it’s staying in place? We’re not going to open this gate and find ourselves a hundred miles away from your knights? And it needs to stay there the whole day, it can’t go shuffling off after we call Jan over.”

“I’ll go check again!” Lozzie chirped, hopped up from the table with her spoon still in hand, and vanished into thin air.

She came back twenty minutes later, of course, all smiles and nods.

Everyone was present and correct, waiting for Evelyn’s total satisfaction with the gateway mandala, twiddling our thumbs and eating junk food and fretting over jealousy. Lozzie and Praem were thick as thieves for some mysterious reason; more than once I saw Lozzie go up on tiptoes and whisper into Praem’s ear, to be answered by Praem nodding along. Tenny flitted about, mostly petting Whistle, pretending she didn’t feel our tension. As it was a Saturday, Kimberly was home too, but she stayed firmly shut away in her bedroom, watching My Little Pony and doing something that

Raine called ‘hot boxing.’

“Good taste,” Evelyn grunted. “As long as she’s on hand, in case the worst happens.”

Zheng mostly just lurked, arms folded over her chest, stripped down to t-shirt and jeans, standing like a statue with infinite patience. I should have spoken to her, should have addressed what I felt. But I still had no right to stop the duel. I was going to let this go ahead and deal with whatever I felt, no matter how badly it burnt my throat going down.

And Twil was here too, called over as muscle, just in case; she played around with Tenny and Whistle, laughed at Lozzie flapping her sleeves, and made dubious grumbles about going Outside.

“S’not that I mind helping,” she said. “Not like I’m busy, hey, summer holiday. Just ... it got kinda fucky last time we were out there.”

“This is much safer, no fucky-wucky,” Lozzie told her. “Even Eevee-weevey came out there before!”

“Ehhh, if Eevee thinks it’s safe ... ” Twil shrugged.

I bided my time, trying to screw up my courage and pick my moment. But all I managed to do was give myself awful gut pain and a blinding headache, fuelled by anxiety. I wanted to don Sevens’ yellow robe and hide my face inside my squid-skull mask, but I knew I couldn’t. Not only would that serve as a red flag a mile high, on fire and screaming, it would place a barrier between myself and Twil. I had to say this as me, little Heather, not through the suit of abyssal armour I was constructing about myself.

Eventually I cornered Twil away from the others, after Lozzie had skipped off to fetch something, Evelyn was bustling around in the magical workshop, and Raine was brewing another cup of tea. Tenny might have overheard. So might have Zheng. But they kept quiet.

I’d rehearsed the opener in my head: “Twil, do you have a moment for a word in private? It won’t take long, but I’d prefer to say it alone. Perhaps upstairs in Eevee’s study?”

What I actually did was grab Twil and squeak like a dolphin having a fit.

Against all odds I must have made myself understood, because a few moments later I was leading her up the stairs, feeling like my head was full of wasps. I had to use half my tentacles to hug myself, the other half to hold onto the walls and the banister to keep from collapsing in a nervous heap. By the time I reached the study and ushered Twil inside, I was ready to scream. Sevens must have been lurking somewhere nearby, I did trust her to keep her promise, but I was such a ball of compacted anxiety that I didn't even think to look.

The study door muffled the sound of voices from below — Lozzie's giggle and Evelyn's grumble, Raine's questions and the clipped tones of Praem trying to keep everyone fed and watered. I shut Twil and myself away together in the cloistered gloom, among the bookcases and the dusty tomes.

When I turned to her, Twil looked like a deer in headlights, frozen and wide-eyed beneath the single high window on the back wall.

She looked like how I felt.

"Twil ... " I managed. Then I hiccuped so hard it hurt, forced to put a hand over my racing heart. "I'm sorry to call you up here like this."

"Uh, wha— what— I mean, um, big H— no," Twil stammered worse than I ever could. "Heather— uh, what's this ... what's happened, what's going on? What's the— what— I mean—"

Twil was beautiful, even when I'd accidentally inflicted my own jitters on her. Long curly black hair framed her porcelain-perfect face, falling on the shoulders of her soft white hoodie. She'd kicked her shoes off at the front door earlier, leaving her in a pair of surprisingly cutesy pink socks beneath her jeans. Between the plush of the hoodie, her paradoxically non-threatening expression, and the way she was framed by the towering bookcases of Evelyn's study, I had the most bizarre urge to seek comfort in a hug, which was wildly unfair because I was about to hurt her.

"Nothing is going on, Twil," I forced myself to say. I swallowed another hiccup. "I'm sorry for spooking you. Everything downstairs is exactly as it seems. This is about a personal matter."

Twil's wide amber eyes went even wider, bug-eyed with alarm. "H-Heather? Oh, oh shit, no, I'm ... I can't ... I—"

Her genuine fear cut right through my anxiety. “Twil?”

“Look, Heather, big H.” She forced a terribly awkward, toothy smile as she raised her hands, as if to ward me off. “I respect you, alright? I think you’re cool, I think you’re good for like everyone you know, and I’m on board with you and Saye and Raine and everyone else. But I’m ... not ... into you like that?”

Her smile turned into a skull’s grimace. Twil looked like she wanted to either bolt for the window or hide under the desk. Wisps of spirit matter began to float around her in a half-glimpsed halo. She was so uncomfortable she was summoning her wolf-form in sheer panic.

I burst out laughing.

All the knotted-up, twisted, condensed tension of the last ten days came undone, like a black hole entering some new and impossible process of reverse gravitational expulsion, unloading more than a week’s worth of stress at once, pouring it out into the void. I laughed and laughed and kept laughing until I felt tears running down my cheeks. I clutched my belly and waved my tentacles in the air and sat down suddenly on the floor, rocking and moaning as the laughter finally drained away. It was a wonder nobody came upstairs to check on what was making a noise like a dying squid.

Twil watched me in confused fear. “Heather? You ... alright?”

I wiped my cheeks and raised my face, looking up at Twil from my new spot on the floor. But her expression of slack-jawed horror was so funny that I snorted and lost control again, going into a second laughing fit that went on and on until my diaphragm hurt and my cheeks ached. I had to wave her down, make her wait until I was truly and finally done.

“Twil,” I said eventually. “I did not call you up here to deliver a secret confession of illicit love.”

“... oh. Oh. Um. Okay.” Twil started to blush. “Er ... sorry? Sorry.”

“I can’t believe this, this is so silly.” I sighed, feeling like I’d finally come up for air after a week underwater.

Twil spread her arms. “You do have a tendency to like, collect people! What was I meant to think!? And like, we never talk in private! I thought something real bad was up, and then you said it wasn’t so I thought it was about, you know! Shit!”

I leaned back with my hands against the floorboards, too spent to stand even with the aid of my tentacles. “Twil, you are a very beautiful woman. I mean that, I’ve thought it since the first time we met, when I slapped you in the face — for which I am still very sorry, by the way. But you can rest easy. I’m not into you in that way. We have zero chemistry. You are a good friend. Plus, my love life is already enough of a headache without adding an additional werewolf.” I looked around at the floorboards. “Goodness, Eevee needs to put down some rugs in here, this floor is quite uncomfortable.”

Twil puffed out a very long sigh, making an almost horse-like noise with her lips. “Same. Uh, same to you, I mean. You’re real pretty, like. Promise. Just not, you know.” She cleared her throat. “Not like that. Not for me.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to flatter me.”

“I’m not! I’m just not down for any horizontal shuffling, you know?”

“Shuffling?” I wrinkled my nose. “Twil.”

She blushed harder and scratched the back of her neck. “You know what I mean. The old one-two punch. Throat-boxing. Carpet cleaning.”

“Stop, please, please.”

“Alright, alright! Just burning off some tension here, yeah? You can hardly blame me, after that.” Twil pulled another grimace, still looking deeply uncomfortable, just in a different way to before. “So er, what is this about, then? What’s up? Like I said, we almost never talk alone, you and me. You need like, somebody to talk to?” Her expression darkened into a particularly difficult frown. “Wait a sec, Raine’s treating you right, isn’t she?”

“Oh of course she is,” I tutted as I picked myself up, dusting my backside off and taking a deep breath. The flutter in my stomach returned, but nowhere near as bad as before. Twil’s density had quite dispelled the worst of my nerves. I folded my hands in front of myself, trying to adopt a little Praem-like poise. “It’s not about me. Well, it is. But mostly not. Not at first. Sort of.”

Twil boggled at me. “Uh, okay?”

"I'll start from the top. Twil, I want to apologise to you."

"... to me?" She blinked in confusion.

"Yes, to you. I'm sorry for the way I pushed you and Evelyn together. I'm not arrogant enough to believe I was solely responsible, but I share some fault, for encouraging both of you into a relationship that I'm pretty sure she wasn't ready for. I don't know about you, though. From how little time you two have spent together over the last month or so, I'm guessing it hasn't gone well. I'm sorry."

Once I was speaking, the words flowed. Twil might be hurt, might start crying, might need help and support, and I had to be that for her right now, because I'd done this to them. I had to deliver my speech, that was my purpose right then.

To my surprise and no little measure of relief, Twil did another big floppy sigh, followed by a shrug and a rueful smile.

"Ha," she said. "Er, yeah. Thanks, I guess."

"I take it I'm correct, then? About the state of the relationship?"

"Relationship, huh? Yeah, I don't think we have one anymore." Twil pulled another awkward smile; I couldn't tell if she was putting on a brave face for my sake or not.

"You can talk about it if you need to," I said. "She hasn't mentioned much either, and I don't know what's happened. And you don't have to talk about it either, if you don't want to. But I would like to take responsibility. And I do care about you, Twil, I want to help make this right for you, and ... yes."

Twil spread her arms in a big shrug. "Hey, easy come, easy go. We tried it, but it didn't really work out."

I shook my head, at a loss, almost stunned. This was the last thing I'd expected. I'd been prepared for tears. "You mean you're okay with this?"

"Well, nah, 'course not. But hey, I'm just glad it didn't, like, drive us apart? Wow, what a fucking thing to be saying. A year ago I thought Evee was a right bitch. Not only that, I thought she was a mad wizard type for real. Though, I guess she kind of is." Twil looked diagonally upward, visibly thinking for a moment.

"I'm ... I just ... I'm surprised you're so casual about it."

Twil shrugged again. "Not everyone treats hooking up like you do. I'm cool with it."

"But she's been practically ignoring you for weeks, using the excuse of your exams to keep you at arm's length. She never told you all sorts of things — I know that, for a fact. I've been thinking about it all week, how she didn't tell you about ... her mother. And other stuff."

Twil laughed softly and waved a hand at me. "Ahhhhh, that's just how things are. And like, it's nice, you know? She really did want me to do well in the exams, I don't think it was just an excuse. She does care, just, like ... not like *that*."

"Ah?"

Twil did another big sigh then cast around the room, suddenly restless. She reminded me very much of a hound in that moment, as she bounced over to the desk chair and plonked herself down there. She gave it a spin, one way, then the other, then stopped it with her toes as I went over to join her.

"See, like," Twil started, groping toward the idea even as she put it into words, "I always got the impression that Evee was forcing herself a bit, with me. You know what I mean?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure? I don't need you to share intimate details, of course I'm not asking that."

Twil shrugged. "She likes me, I get that, that's real and all. But it's not enough to do ... you know?" Twil pulled a smirk. "Like she's confusing friendship with romance. Or like she's got a crush but thinks it all has to fall out a certain way. We did some stuff together, but I kinda backed off after a while. Got the sense she wasn't really liking it, not really."

"Ah," I said, nodding. "Yes. I think that's part of what I'm apologising for."

"Too much time around all us fucking dykes. Like uh, what do they call it? Compulsory whatever. Like she thought she had to. Not that I forced her or anything!" Twil hastened to add. "She always took initiative. She just didn't really seem to enjoy, like, making out and stuff. A bit, yeah, but not like ... you know."

I sighed. "I think I know. And that's why I wanted to apologise."

"It's cool," Twil said, cracking a grin. "It wasn't your fault. Takes two to tango. Or ... three? Haha, yeah, in your case."

"Or four or five," I muttered.

"Haha!" Twil laughed, her tension finally melting away. She hiked one leg up over an arm of the chair. "For you, yeah. Serious, no hard feelings, big H. It didn't drive shit between me and Evee as friends. Which is weird as fuck, you know? Like, you can't usually sleep with somebody and then break up without even really talking about it and then still stay friends! But we kinda are. I respect her, you know?"

"Even after she kept important things from you?"

Twil shrugged. "It's her life. Her business. I mean like, I care, you know? I wanna help. But I ain't got a right to it or some shit. I knew her dead mum was bad news, but I didn't know it was that bad." Twil's amusement drained away. "Poor fuckin' Evee."

"She's very ... fragile, in some ways," I said.

"Fuck that," Twil countered. "She's strong! Just in different ways, like. Don't tell her I said that though, ha!"

"And you're really okay, just ... carrying on afterward, like this?"

"Sure. Why not?" Twil sighed and gave me a bit of a look. "Big H, you're smart and good with people, but sometimes you don't get it."

My turn to boggle at her. "I'm sorry, Twil?"

"I like you lot. I like this house. I like being one of you." She smiled, and this time there was no hangdog self-deprecation or wolfish fear. I could practically see her wagging tail. "I get to hang out with a bunch of cool older girls, you're all gay as shit, and I don't have to hide what I am."

"... a lesbian?"

Twil laughed. "No, a fucking werewolf!"

"Oh, right. Of course. Tch." I huffed. "Yes, yes, the werewolf thing."

"Plus, hey, seriously," Twil went on. "You're a refuge from my family." Something caught in her face as soon as those words were

out of her mouth. I'd accidentally peeled away all her defences. Her amusement zeroed to nothing. She swallowed, suddenly pale and awkward. "Don't, uh ... if you ever meet my mum again, don't tell her I said that. Please. For real."

I stepped closer and took Twil's hand, surprising myself. "I won't. I promise. Are you okay at home? Have things been bad?"

She shook her head. "Nah. I mean, no more than usual. They're still my family, even if they're ... touched." She tapped her head. "I'm the only one that doesn't talk to god," she snorted. "You lot gave me a new perspective, you know? Made me see what was going on. I mean, they're fine. They really are. They seriously don't do like, sacrifices in the woods or whatever. But ever since that thing with my mum ... I dunno. I can't look at them the same way." Twil trailed off to nothing, not really looking at me. "I miss my granddad."

"He's the one who made you into a werewolf, is that right?"

"Yeah," Twil muttered. "He was different."

I squeezed Twil's hand again. "Twil, you really do always have a place here. If you get into Sharrowford university, do you want to come stay with us?"

Twil grinned, suddenly cheeky. "Ehhhhh, maybe. Maybe I'll take a room on campus."

"It's free if you stay here. No rent."

She laughed. "Okay then! You drive a hard bargain, big H."

"I'm sure I do." I pulled myself up straight, playing the part for a moment. I gave her hand a final squeeze and then let go. "When is A-level results day? When will you know?"

"Not till August." She pulled a face. "The waiting is killing me already. Think I might try to get a summer job or something, kill time, save some cash. But uh, kinda hard to do manual labour and not give away that I can throw breeze blocks around one-handed."

"Ah, yes. That would be a concern."

We trailed off into silence for a moment. Anxiety built inside me again like steam pressure.

"Well," Twil said. "I'm cool with all this. You should say sorry to

Evee too, I mean if you haven't already. Are you alright, though? I mean, all this shit with Zheng is whack, and I don't just mean this bonkers trip Outside. I can tell you're kinda eaten up by it, you—"

"There's something else."

"Yeah?" Twil looked totally innocent, blinking up at me.

"I can't talk to anybody else about this. I wasn't sure I could even talk to you about it, not until I knew how you felt about Evelyn and yourself." I took a step back, to a distance that felt more formal, trying to keep the words flowing. My hands were shaking. "But I need somebody to listen, somebody other than Sevens, because she was part of it. When I was in Carcosa, something happened. She showed me something. I've been trying to ignore it, pretend I didn't see it. Pretend maybe it wasn't real."

"Some Outsider shit?" Twil murmured.

"Sort of. No, not really. That's part of the problem. It was all jumbled up with other stuff, with Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, with how she felt. She was using other people's faces to explain how she feels about me. First Raine, then Zheng, then ... then Evee."

My throat almost closed up. Twil just shook her head, not quite following. "Okay?"

"Oh, for pity's sake, Twil," I huffed, flushed in the face and losing control. "Don't make me say it. Don't make me say ... I ... I think that Evee ..."

"You think Evee has feelings for you?" Twil asked, first frowning in confusion, then with a growing smile of amused disbelief.

"I know it sounds absurd!" I blurted out. "It's not—"

"Do bears shit in the woods?" Twil asked, still amused, yet now deeply unimpressed at the same time. "Is the sky blue? Is the pope a Catholic?"

I stared at her, stunned and numb. "I ... I'm sorry?"

"Evee has feelings for you? No shit, Sherlock." Twil knocked her knuckles against her own skull. "Duh! And here I thought I was bad."

for the sake of a few sheep – 15.15

Twil — our clueless werewolf girl who always looked so confused, dog-brained and headstrong and easily pleased, always getting the wrong end of the stick, always up for a fight but barking up the wrong tree, always on the edge of every situation, one step behind every conversation — was looking at me like I was the idiot.

Because she was right. I was the idiot. I was the big stupid idiot.

She wasn't merely three steps ahead of me. Twil was running an entirely different race, on a track I hadn't even been aware of until five seconds ago. She'd lapped me so many times I didn't know whether I was coming or going. She'd sprinted past me and spun me around like a roadrunner past a certain unfortunate coyote, leaving me to stagger in a cartoonish daze.

“Cos, you know,” Twil was still talking, somewhere far away, “I was real bad, I didn't figure out me and Evee could even try for it ‘till you said so. Er, Heather?”

She raised a hand from where she sprawled, comfortable and loose in the old swivel chair, with a leg hooked over one of the arms. She was utterly relaxed and natural, even in the unfamiliar surroundings of Evelyn's study, flanked and hemmed in by bookcases and shadows and the heavy desk. She waved her fingers back and forth in front of my eyes.

“Heather? You okay?”

“You ... you mean it's obvious?” I heard myself ask.

“That Evee's got feelings for you?” Twil laughed, then trailed off.
“Uh, yeah?”

A terrifying vista of reality and truth opened up before me, a vast gulf of how little I really knew; I felt like a Polar explorer, testing the snow before each step with a hiking pole, only to dislodge a fall of ice and discover the toes of my boots were already hanging over the edge of a bottomless chasm. Forget the alien spheres of Outside

and the infinite dark sea of the Abyss; relationships were so much more difficult to navigate.

“Er, Heather? Yo? Um ... do you need ... like ... Raine? Should I get Raine?”

“No, no I’m ... no.”

For the second time in this conversation, I sat down on the floor. I slid down a bookcase, the shelves bumping painfully against my spine until I landed on my backside. My tentacles were coiled around me too tightly to cushion the landing, in a futile attempt at self-comfort. I sat in a heap for a long moment, staring at nothing in particular.

Twil cleared her throat with a very intentional ‘ahem’ sound. “Need a permit to open a hole like that in Sharrowford.”

I finally blinked up at her, coming back to my senses, discovering that I was still in the semi-gloom of the study, surrounded by books and bare floorboards and one vastly uncomfortable werewolf. I half expected reality to fold up and deposit me Outside.

“I’m sorry?” I asked.

“Your ... your mouth, is like, hanging open. It was a joke, like.”

“Oh.” I shook my head as a humourless laugh forced its way up my throat. I leaned my head back against the hard, cool surface of a wooden shelf, then forward to bump my forehead against my raised knees, then back again so my skull went *clonk* against the shelf.

Twil scrambled into a proper sitting position in the chair, about to leap to her feet. “Heather? Yo, big H, hey, don’t start hurting yourself, ‘cos then I really will have to go get Raine because I don’t know what to do about that. Yeah? Okay? Are you alright?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Twil. I’m not going to hurt myself.” I groped for a book from the shelves, any book, filling my hands with a random hardback. I put the book against my knees and laid my forehead against the cover, the world’s most uncomfortable pillow. “It’s just me. It’s all me.”

“It ... it’s you.” Twil sounded increasingly worried. “Right. Yeah. It is.”

“It’s me,” I repeated, face squished against the hardback. “I’m the

useless lesbian.” I let out a huge sigh and raised my head from the cool, firm sanctuary of a book cover. “What even is this?” I murmured, turning the book over. “Oh, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, huh.”

“Heather, seriously,” Twil said, sounding like she was about to call the fire brigade. “You alright? Because this is giving me the spooks.”

“I’m fine, Twil. I’m sorry. I’m just reeling a bit.”

Twil pulled a toothy grimace, very much like a dog unsure of an unfamiliar scent. She was jiggling one leg up and down with nervous energy. “Wow. Shit. I thought this was like, obvious. Eevee, I mean.”

“*Wow shit* indeed,” I echoed.

“I thought that was kind of why you were apologising and all.”

“No!” I tutted. That forced me to pull myself back together. I couldn’t have Twil misunderstanding this, it was too important for her own well being, for the future of our friendship, for her emotional peace of mind. I drew in a deep breath and slapped my cheek with the book, which made her blink in alarm. “No, Twil, no. I apologised because what I did was wrong. What I did with you and Eevee, pushing you together when you weren’t ready, it was like a smaller version of what Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight tried to do with me. Moving people around like cute little playing pieces on some board, satisfied in pairing you off, not treating you as fully autonomous people. It was wrong of me. It’s a genuine apology. I would apologise to you even if Evelyn had gotten together with ... I don’t know. Somebody else entirely.”

Twil’s grimace collapsed into a relieved sigh. “Hey, look, it’s cool. You don’t have to keep saying sorry.”

“But I am—”

“Apology accepted!” Twil laughed, one hand out to ward me off. “Apology accepted, yeah? You and me, we’re cool, we’re cool now.”

“... okay,” I said, slumping back against the bookcase. I narrowly resisted an urge to apologise *for* apologising.

Twil puffed out a big sigh of relief and leaned back in the chair as well. She rolled her shoulders inside her white hoodie, working out

the tension, then pulled both her feet up onto the seat, getting extra comfy. She brushed her dark curls away from her face. “So er, why did you wanna talk to me about this? I get why not Sevens, but hey, anyone would listen.”

I shrugged, still at a bit of a loss. “Who else am I going to talk to? Zheng, right now? Praem, Eeve’s daughter? Lozzie is sweet and lovely, but she’s not exactly a fountain of good advice.”

“What about Raine? She is your girlfriend.” Twil laughed.

“A while back, Eeve wanted to borrow me for a cuddle,” I said, talking to the ceiling. “It was the night before we went to Carcosa. It was a ruse by Eeve, to give me some time away from Raine being difficult, but Raine thought it was genuine. She referenced a ‘deal’ they made in the past and then offered to lend me to Eeve. As a partner.” I slid my eyes back down to Twil. She was pulling quite the grimace.

“Oh. Oh dang. What the fuck?”

“Mmhmm. If I told Raine about all this, or if she figured it out on her own, she might lock me and Eeve in a room until we kiss. Which I’m not willing to risk.”

Twil puffed out the opposite of a laugh. “Right. Shit.”

“So I’m talking to you. And it turns out you actually understand much better than I do. I’m sorry for underestimating you, Twil.”

To my surprise, Twil flashed a cheeky smile. “That’s just how I roll. Under the radar. Lone wolf in the forest, yeeeeeah.” She struck a pose with both hands, like she was on the cover of a trendy musical album.

I snorted a tiny laugh. “I don’t understand anything do I? Eeve has feelings for me?”

“Yeah?” Twil boggled at me. “She obviously fucking adores you, big H. I mean, I knew that before she and I had our thing together, it’s just right out there in the open. She’s always different with you, treats you different to everyone else. Well, ‘cept maybe Praem, but Praem’s her kid. She’s gentle with you. Likes it when you’re close. Didn’t expect you to be all surprised and shit.”

I shook my head and sighed, feeling like I’d been up all night. “But why?”

“You rescued her.”

“I know, several times, but so has Raine, and she doesn’t—”

“No, no no no,” Twil spoke over me, waving both hands. “No, like ... you *rescued* her. Think about it for a sec. ‘Cos like, this is something she and I did talk about. Like, a lot. And I think she’s not said diddly squat to you.”

“Diddly squat?” I echoed. “Twil, your dialect is slipping.”

Twil refused my bait.

“She’d made Raine move out. She was in this house all by herself, long before Praem. Just the spiders for company, and it’s not like they’re up for a chat. Not like she’s got any friends at the uni, either. She was pushing everyone away.” Twil’s voice grew heavy with melancholy. “Think about it. This house was just empty. Then you drop in on her and here she is now, nine months later, she’s got a family. You were the start of it.”

An image of Evelyn floated up from my subconscious, of the first time I’d met her, wrapped in her protective layers of clothing, tucked away in the Medieval Metaphysics room. Evelyn Saye, a ghost of the real person who’d revealed herself seconds later, all hissing spite and bitter anger. She’d lashed out at me with verbal barbs, dripping toxicity she would never level at me these days, saying the most hurtful and rude things. She’d turned even worse on Raine, naked contempt, almost hatred. She’d denied me and driven me off. But then she’d thrown herself Outside, alone, on a wild experiment.

I’d rarely thought about that dangerous experiment she’d done, in the months since I’d rescued her from the consequences. I’d reached out and dragged her back from Outside, with my first intentional Slip; I had broken with ten years of self-abuse and lies, for Eevee.

That experiment, that trip Outside, that flawed spell she’d used, the one with no way back — she’d never, ever think of doing such a thing now.

I put my hand to my mouth and felt tears prickle in my eyes.

“She ... she was ... experiencing suicidal ideation,” I murmured. The cold, clinical words were not enough. Eevee, my Eevee, she’d almost done it. In loneliness and pain. “Maybe only subconsciously,

maybe she didn't intend to, but ... ”

“Yeah,” Twil added. She leaned down out of the chair, grabbed my shoulder, and squeezed me far too hard. The contact brought me back from a dark place. “But she didn't. That's the important bit, right? She didn't. And she didn't that other time in the library, either. ‘Cos you were there.”

I nodded, a bit numb. I glanced at the study door, vaguely tempted to run all the way downstairs and hug Evelyn. “Best decision I ever made,” I murmured.

“Couldn't agree more.” Twil let out a huge sigh and leaned back again. “So, hey, you see why she might, like, feel things about you?”

“Well, yes! But she's never given any indication that she—”

“Oh, come on!” Twil laughed, a mad sound, banishing the heavy atmosphere with a bark. “She does it all the time!”

“But ... but ... like *that*?”

Twil paused, raised an eyebrow, and got this tortured faux-shrewd look on her face; I could practically see the gears turning between her ears. She nodded slowly, cracking her knuckles one by one “Ahhhhh, yeah, right. I can see where you're getting some crossed wires here, maybe. Like, yeah, Evee obviously has feelings for you, right. But that doesn't necessarily mean she wants to do the sideways shuffle with you.”

I blinked like she'd slapped me. “Twil!”

“No, I'm serious,” Twil went on, totally unfazed by my offended tut. “Evee's got feelings for me too, legit, she hasn't fallen out of those or something, but that doesn't mean she wanted to shag me either. I think all that confused her so much that she pushed me away.” Twil shrugged. “I think she might be ace or something. Ace but not realise it herself. And that's a bloody hard subject to bring up, I dunno if I can do it.”

I shook my head, confused. “Yes, Evee is pretty ‘ace’. At least, I think she is.”

Twil blinked at me, deadpan unimpressed. “‘Ace’ as in ‘asexual’, Heather.”

“Oh!” I blushed like a rotten tomato, flapping my hands and thumping the book down on my knees.

“You do know what that means, right?”

“Yes! Oh my goodness. How are you so far ahead of me all the time?!” I huffed at myself, mortified. “Evee might be asexual, yes, fine. Oh, goodness, how can we be talking about her like this without her present?”

“Because I’m tryin’ give you advice, you big dumbos.”

I sighed and sagged against the shelves. “Yes. Yes, hit me again. I am the big dumbos.”

“And hey, it’s not like we’re bad-mouthing her. We both care about her.”

“That is true,” I murmured, nodding along. “You think Evee is asexual, but she doesn’t understand it herself?”

Twil shrugged. “I dunno, I’m not saying for certain. All I’m saying is that she likes you, but maybe she doesn’t want your fingers all up inside her.” I wrinkled my nose at the crude expression, but Twil kept going. “Maybe she doesn’t even want to make out with you or anything. You get what I mean? I mean, hell, you’re doing this whole poly thing, you probably get this, right?”

“Sort of. Well, actually no, maybe not.”

Twil did a very Evelyn thing all of a sudden — she sucked on her teeth, considering me through narrowed eyes. I’d never seen her make that expression before. On Twil, it was akin to walking through a silent forest at night, then spotting a wolf lurking between the trees, holding itself perfectly still as it watched you in return, uncertain if it was afraid of your unexpected meeting, or about to dismantle you as prey.

“... T-Twil?” I stammered.

“Wow. You actually don’t get this, do you?” she asked.

“Ummmm. Maybe?”

She suddenly sprang into action. I actually flinched. She didn’t see, but two of my tentacles uncoiled like springs, as if to catch her and throw her back. But all she did was sit forward in the chair, suddenly all animated hand gestures as she tried to make her point.

“Alright,” she said. “Think about it like this. When people get together, especially when they’re really inexperienced, sometimes they kinda try to be the person they *think* their partner wants them to be, or maybe they try to do stuff that fits in with the role of girlfriend or boyfriend, like, uh ... ” Twil wet her lips and looked around, eyes darting about in animated thought. “Like say a guy gets his first girlfriend, right? And she’s not putting any expectations on him, but he’s absorbed all this crazy shit about how you’re meant to be manly, but that’s not him, it’s not how he is.”

“Internalised gender roles. Yes, Twil, I’m well aware of the concept. Where is this going? How is this relevant to Eevee?”

Twil spread her hands. “This is just an example, right? So maybe this guy starts acting different — not better, not worse, just different — ‘cos he thinks that’s how he’s supposed to. And he’s not enjoying it, she’s not enjoying it, and they don’t understand why, ‘cos they’re doing all the ‘right things’ that they’re ‘meant’ to do. It’s kinda like the opposite version of putting somebody else on a pedestal. People put themselves in boxes, you know?” Twil pulled a face. “I think, er, to be real polite, you kinda missed out on this sort of mistake, ‘cos you’re with Raine.”

I blinked. “What does Raine have to do with this?”

“Ahhh, come on,” Twil said. “Raine’s so sweet on you and she doesn’t demand shit, right? If you try to put yourself in a box like that, she’ll like, dismantle the box. Ha!” Twil forced a laugh, trying to keep things light.

Putting myself in a box? I turned the idea over, with a sensation like *deja vu*. “I ... suppose so ... ” I said out loud.

I trailed off, half in thought and half because Twil’s awkward laugh heralded a sneaky visitor.

From behind the side of Evelyn’s slab-like desk and behind Twil’s back, a crescent of butter-soft yellow rose with the stately silence of a hot air balloon. A tuft of black hair and a pale, narrow little face followed, wearing familiar yellow robes like a headscarf. Seven-Shades-of-Skulking-and-Skulduggery had apparently been hiding behind the desk this entire time. She peered at me with those gems of red firelight set in black voids, over Twil’s shoulder.

Sevens gave me a pained, awkward, self-conscious smile, all needle

teeth and cringing. I frowned at her for interrupting — but Twil was already talking again.

“So like, the point,” Twil was saying, oblivious to the blood-gremlin leering over her shoulder, “is that Eevee tried to be the good lesbian girlfriend. And her model for that is just you and Raine, I think. So that meant she had to want sex, right? Even if she really doesn’t.”

I blinked away from Sevens and replayed Twil’s words in my mind.

“Right,” I said. “I think I see. She thought certain things had to happen. For it to count. To be real.”

Twil nodded — Sevens nodded along behind her. I frowned again and Sevens cringed even harder, ducking her head.

“And yeah, Eevee’s got feelings for you, sure,” Twil continued. “But this is the real important bit. Maybe she expresses it *because* you’re with Raine. So you’re claimed already. Your sex stuff happens elsewhere. So you’re ... you’re like, safe.”

My eyes went wide. A light bulb flickered on, somewhere down in the archives that I rarely visited.

“Oh.”

“Yeah! You get it now? I’m not saying don’t. I ain’t saying never ever do it. But I am saying that if you try to kiss her or shove a hand down her knickers, maybe she’d get the same way with you as she did with me, ‘cos then she thinks it’s all official and has to happen a certain way.”

“All official ... has to happen a certain way ... ” I echoed. My mind whirled.

“Maybe she just wants to cuddle with you.” Twil shrugged. “Hell, maybe she actually just wants to cuddle with me. She might not want to ever have sex at all. Or maybe she’d be comfy as like a service top, I dunno. She does all the work but doesn’t like it in return? Hell, that’s valid too. You get this now?”

I nodded slowly. I felt like a kettle that had just come to the boil and was now cooling down, my thoughts cleared, my substance clarified, my medium cleansed.

“I think you may be right,” I murmured.

Seven-Shades-of-Shrinking-Sincerity sank downward, dropping

below Twil's shoulder and vanishing behind the corner of the desk again. That time, Twil must have seen the direction of my disapproving frown, because she turned to glance behind herself. I winced, ready for a yelp and a scream and Sevens scrambling out in a flurry of limbs and misunderstandings, just when I felt like Twil and I had finally struck the gold I'd been mining toward for so long. But Twil turned back to me as if nothing was there, though I did notice her sniff the air and frown slightly.

"Thank you, Twil," I said, trying to bring her back.

"Ahhh it's nothing." She pulled a slow wince. "Evelyn Saye is a complicated woman. And I gotta be honest, maybe too complicated for me."

"Ah? You mean that you would have ended up breaking up anyway?"

"Weeeeeell. If she wanted me to be her cuddle slut, sure, you know? She's cute, I respect her, it would be nice and all. But that's not what I really want. And it does take two to tango."

I laughed gently and stretched against the already uncomfortable bookshelves. "And what do you want, Twil?"

"Er. It'll gross you out again."

"Say it anyway. I do owe you that much."

"Um, alright then." Twil cleared her throat. "I want a girlfriend I can pin to the bed with one hand while I make her squeal with the other. The good kind of squealing."

"Oh, goodness." I cleared my throat and tried not to blush, but I put a hand to my mouth. "I see. Yes. Right."

"You did ask."

"Yes! Sorry. Indeed, yes. I did ask, I did, yes. And thank you for sharing. I think."

"So, maybe not Evee," Twil said. "However much I do like her."

"Of course." I shook my head with a big sigh, feeling a little like I'd surfaced from the deep ocean, from the abyss, or as if I'd just returned from Outside. "Twil, how are you so knowledgeable about this? How are you so ... wise?"

Twil laughed with genuine amusement. "I'm not fuckin' wise, big H. I'm just good at, like, love stuff. I kinda assumed you were too, like you're in this whole crazy poly thing, I sort of guessed you knew what you were doing."

"Evidently not." I watched Twil for a moment, compact and graceful Twil with her big-dog energy and the subtle, hidden mind of a creature that instinctively understood pack dynamics. She rocked a little in the chair, apparently very comfortable with all this. "How do you know all this stuff?"

She shrugged. "Not my first time around the block."

"You mean you've had other girlfriends? Before Evee?"

She nodded. "Yeah, couple of times. Don't look so surprised. I mean, like, you lot aren't my entire world or anything. I've got mates at school back in Brinkwood, though uh, only one person knows what I am. I went with this one girl for about eight months and she's *still* into the werewolf thing, but she doesn't know about anything else."

I blinked in surprise. "You ... you mean ... other people know? You showed people your ... wolf?" I cringed at my own terrible phrasing. "You know what I mean."

Twil grimaced. "Like I said, just one person. And she's kind of a problem 'cos of it. Not that she can tell anybody, it's not like anybody would believe it."

"What's her name?"

Twil slumped in the chair. "You really wanna talk about my exes?"

My turn to laugh, blushing but not so mortified any more. I waved a hand in apology. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry, I'm just surprised. Don't go all grumpy teenager on me."

"Pffft," Twil snorted, but she was smiling. "I'm not grumpy."

"May I ask you a personal question?" I said.

"You've already asked me plenty."

"Do you like Lozzie?"

A knowing smile crept across Twil's face. "Ahhhhh, I've thought about it. You've spotted that, hey? How can you spot that, but not

Evee?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, because I’m blind. Are you serious, you like her?”

Twil shrugged, still smiling. “Maybe, I dunno. She’s cute. But like, hey, I’m in rebound here. You don’t get with somebody you respect while you’re in rebound, and I do respect Lozzers. Plus she’s ... you know. I mean, she’s lovely and all. But she lives Outside half the time. I dunno if I’ve got the chops for that. So it’s just a crush. Don’t say anything to her, yeah?”

I nodded, very serious. “I won’t breathe a word. And I’ll assume it’s not going anywhere. As I said, Twil, I’m sorry, and I’ve learnt my lesson. I shan’t meddle unless asked to.”

“Cheers, big H. But hey, let’s stick to the subject, yeah?” She nodded at the closed door to the study. “Cos we’re gonna get missed sooner or later. You gonna do anything about your little revelation over Evee? Gonna move, or stay put, or what?”

I sighed, coming back down to earth. I finally uncoiled on the floor, stretching my legs out and curling my toes. Every muscle felt tight with unexpressed tension, though my tentacles did relax at least. They gripped the bookcase and ran along the spines of the books, obsessed with my own sources of distraction and comfort.

“The thing is,” I said, “I think Evelyn and I both already knew all this. I just wasn’t looking at it. And she knows that I know. And I know that she knows I ... ” I cleared my throat. “You understand. Sorry, Raine’s rubbing off on me. What I mean is that we practically spoke about it already, we just ... didn’t actually say the words.”

Twil gave me a disbelieving look, the ultimate teenage expression of exasperation, slack jawed and heavy lidded. “Then you didn’t talk about it. Holy shit, big H, you’re meant to be smart.”

“Oh, I know!” I huffed. “I know! Maybe you’re right, maybe all she wants is cuddles with commitment. But I’m worried that things might change between us. Might go wrong.”

Twil bobbed her head from side-to-side, pulling a dubious thinking face. “Can I make a suggestion? Like, offer you a piece of maybe kinda sorta rude advice?”

“Rude?” I blinked at her. “Twil, you’ve already proven I’m a bit of

an idiot, be as rude as you like.”

Twil cleared her throat, visibly uncomfortable. “Far be it from me to tell you how to live your life and all, but haven’t you got enough on your plate without adding Eevee too?”

I sighed a very big sigh and squeezed my eyes shut, then pinched the bridge of my nose, hung my head, and let out a groan. “I know.”

“I mean, you’ve got three girlfriends!”

“Three girlfriends,” I groaned into my own hand.

“Maybe focus on Zheng and stuff, until all this shit is over? Dunno ‘bout everyone else, but I could see you were real jealous back there last week with Zheng and July and everything. And I thought you had it under control. But it turns out you don’t.”

“Bloody right I don’t!” I snapped, more at myself than Twil, raising my head again. I couldn’t hide from this any longer. “And yes, I am terribly, horribly jealous.”

“You have every right to be!” Twil nodded along with me. “Damn right, girl! You’re doing this poly shit and she didn’t even ask, right?”

“Right!” I slapped the floor with an open palm. My tentacles bristled.

“Doesn’t matter if it’s three or four or five people,” Twil said, holding up her fingers in sequence, then making a fist. “Unless you talk about it first, then it’s cheating. Plain and simple.”

“Yes! Yes, I ... ” I slammed to a halt. “No, no it’s not sex, it’s ... it’s fighting. She has a right to fight whoever she wants. I can’t stop that.”

Twil pulled a deeply sceptical look again, a teeth-gritting un-smile, recoiling from my naivety. She raised her hands in a don’t-shoot-the-messenger gesture. “Whatever you gotta tell yourself.”

“It’s not sex!”

“Sure, sure. Whateeeeeever you say.”

“It’s not.”

"Then why are you acting like it is? You're acting like she's gone and slept around. Like your girlfriend is being the town bike. She's meant to be your girl, right? Or like, one of your girls. You can say no. But you gotta say it!"

"I ... I shouldn't ... I ... "

"Why not fight her yourself?"

"*What?* I mean, pardon me?"

A wicked grin flickered across Twil's face, accompanied by a ghostly suggestion of a wolf's muzzle in the air, a half-glimpsed phantom of a violent promise. She raised a hand and flexed fingers that were suddenly wrapped in fur and claw, showing off her weapons. "Either before or after she does the smack-down with July. Stake your claim. Show her she's yours."

For a second I stared at Twil, at the hovering promise of joyous violence in her face and her fist, offering a temptation I dared not name. My mouth went dry. My stomach clenched up. My trilobe bioreactor tried to shunt power production up a notch. My tentacles flexed and flared. I felt a tingle in my skin, abyssal instinct making suggestions about chitin armour, toxin production, and jagged spikes. My head felt suddenly hot.

Then a flicker passed over my senses, like a distant discharge of static electricity, or the lifting of air pressure after a thunderstorm. I blinked, reeled my wild instincts back in, and glanced over at the floor. Fight or flight hovered at the edge of my consciousness, a body-memory that surprised me at a deeper level than any desire to wrestle Zheng.

"... Heather?" Twil said my name.

"I think Evee just opened the gateway to Camelot," I said slowly. A ball of snakes writhed in the pit of my stomach. The hour was at hand — or at least only a phone call away.

Twil boggled at me. "You can tell?"

"Yes, didn't you feel that?"

"Nah, nothing. Not surprised though." She shrugged. "You've got a lot going on already, makes sense you can feel the wibbly-wobbles or whatever. Guess they don't need us after all." She tilted her head to peer at me when I kept staring at the floor. "Sooooo, you gonna

fight Zheng or what?”

I sighed. “I can’t.”

“Sure you can. What’s stopping you?”

“You can’t be serious. You’ve seen Zheng fight. She could pin me down and *tickle* me into submission, with one hand. Blindfolded. With her feet tied together. And food poisoning.”

“No, come on!” Twil complained at me like a football fan shouting at a bad penalty shot, leaning forward in her chair, face lit up with equal measures of excitement and exasperation. “You totally could! Heather, yo, I saw you fight that big ugly bastard, Orangey-whatever. The guy, with the mouths! I was there, remember?”

“*Ooran Juh*, yes.”

“And you kicked his arse! You went big-time squid-girl mode and went toe-to-toe with him!”

“Twil, don’t exaggerate. I hardly ‘kicked’ anything. In fact, I seem to remember falling over into the water after a few moments. And going ‘squid-girl’ mode almost burnt out my brain, not to mention the bruises. That was an emergency. I didn’t even know what I was doing.”

“Yeah but you didn’t see yourself. You were fucking ‘rad! And you won!”

“Yes, by threatening him with brain-math. I couldn’t have won otherwise, I’m not built for that kind of thing.” I shivered inside for a moment; my tentacles flexed and quivered with the physical memory of being bitten and torn, chunks of them ripped out by ravenous teeth. “I’m hardly going to use the threat of mutually assured destruction in a ‘play-fight’ with Zheng.”

Twil shook her head. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

I frowned and crossed my arms. “And we have to be downstairs, soon.”

“You don’t have to go all-out all the time, duh. I don’t even think you’d win! But you’d show her you’re willing to put a few bruises on the line. That’s speaking her language. Try for real, get on her level, slap her with a tentacle.” Twil mimed a melodramatic slap, like something from a soap opera.

I shook my head, guilt bubbling back up my throat like acid reflux. "Claiming her would be wrong. Putting a mark on her like that. No."

Twil rolled her eyes. "Then make her reject you!"

"I ... I'm sorry, what?"

"You've got a right to do this. Do it out there, while we're all watching. Mark your territory, girl. It's what I'd do."

Twil flashed a wolfish grin; for a split second she had too many teeth, too sharp, too canine, set in a grinning muzzle of grey-russet fur. I'd never thought about it before, but Twil probably understood animalistic dominance play better than any of us, save perhaps for Zheng. She was giving me useful suggestions, whether she understood so or not. And not just about Zheng and Evelyn.

I swallowed, about to formulate an answer — perhaps another denial, though I felt a dam straining inside me, undermined and about to break. But then a neat, sharp knock sounded on the study door, a quick and gentle *ratta-tat-tat*. I jumped. Twil laughed and her face was suddenly back to normal.

"Yes?" I called out, feeling like I'd been caught doing something naughty. "We're in here! Hello!"

The study door cracked open and Praem stepped inside. Milk-white eyes found the pair of us. In the moment before she spoke, I saw a flutter of yellow vanish behind her skirt, as if somebody invisible had fled the room, but fumbled the last moment of an unseen escape.

"The door is open," Praem intoned. "Your presence is requested."

"Sure thing, little Saye!" Twil jumped up from her seat and rolled her shoulders. "Time to uh, *not* punch a knight, I guess."

"Little Saye'?" I echoed as I picked myself up off the floor and dusted off my backside. I returned *The Fellowship of the Ring* to its proper place on the bookshelf.

"I am the younger of the two extant Saye women within this household," said Praem. She directed a stare at Twil. "Not little."

Twil shot her a cheeky smile and a wink.

"So it's all going ahead, downstairs?" I asked.

Praem turned to me. "I hope you had a good talk. Your presence is requested."

"Sure did!" Twil said, heading over to the door and miming punches at an imaginary foe.

I frowned at Praem. Did she somehow know what Twil and I had been discussing? Lozzie had whispered in her ear several times earlier, while we'd all been twiddling our thumbs and waiting for Evelyn to finish the final touches on the gate. Neither of them had thrown knowing glances in my direction — not that Praem ever would — but it wasn't impossible. I felt a lead weight in the pit of my stomach, a mortified flush trying to bloom in my cheeks. But Praem just stood there in the gloom of the study, barely lit from one side by the late morning illumination which struggled in through the single high window. She gave nothing away.

I cleared my throat. "Praem, um, where's Lozzie right now?"

"Outside," said Praem.

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It would not be accurate to say that Lozzie had 'jumped the starting gun' on our bizarre trip to Camelot, because Lozzie recognised no starting signal, let alone the starting line or even the track. She was off and away, playing to her own tune.

By the time Twil and I followed Praem back downstairs and into the magical workshop, the gateway was finished, open, and waiting.

A door to Outside stood in the far wall of the old drawing room, a gap in the plaster and paint which opened out on some other place, exactly as it had for Carcosa before, and the Castle before that, and the Sharrowford Cult's hideous jumbled un-space too, back when it had opened for the first time. All of those were terrifying and alien places, even the Cult's Castle, despite the fact we had it secured and locked down now, ours for the foreseeable future. On each of those occasions, the gateway had seemed like a yawning mouth, leading down into dark and unknown dungeons.

But with the Quiet Plain, Camelot, whatever we wanted to call it, the gate seemed more like a doorway onto the world's largest back garden. At least we knew this destination was safe. If one hundred and forty eight of Lozzie's knights were not enough to protect our little beachhead, then nothing was.

I could see the knights as I stepped into the workshop, their stately armoured forms dotted across the slice of gently rolling yellow hillsides visible through the doorway. Lozzie was already over there, fluttering between them, her pentacolour pastel poncho fluttering and flouncing as she darted from one knight to the next, sharing a hug here, a few unheard words there, her wispy blonde hair trailing behind her. The knights were unmoving, but I knew they cared, inside.

Lozzie turned and waved at us. She must have seen the motion of Twil and I re-entering the workshop. She flapped the sides of her poncho and moved her mouth, calling to us, though no sound transmitted through the gateway.

Deep purple spilled into our reality, flooding one end of the room with a slowly shifting illumination which seemed to absorb and swallow all other light.

And there was Zheng, already standing on the yellow grass of Camelot. She had her back to us, her hands on her hips, stripped down to jeans and short-sleeved white t-shirt, head raised to take in the whorled purple of the alien sky. That strange light played across the dark tangle of her hair, the ramparts of her shoulders, and the muscles of her back.

I let out a deep and involuntary sigh, the first to break a silence I had not recognised.

“It’s not so bad once you get over there,” Evelyn spoke out loud, staring at the doorway, struggling to put strength and confidence into her voice. “Not like Carcosa, at least.” She glanced at Twil and me. “Good of you to join us at last.”

“Holy shit,” said Twil, craning her neck and then ducking as she peered through the gateway from a safe distance. “Look at that sky, what the fuck is that?”

“*Language*,” Evelyn hissed, nodding sideways at Tenny.

“Skyyyyyy? Sky pretty? Sky?” Tenny trilled, making deep fluttering sounds inside her chest, her antenna twitching atop her head. She was far too entranced with the view through the gateway to get curious about Twil’s colourful language. She was also very brave, standing right next to the open doorway to Outside and peering through as Lozzie waved back to her. But her fleshy wing-cloak was

wrapped tightly around her torso and her mass of silken black tentacles was reeled all the way in, close to her body. A puppy, unsure of its surroundings but encouraged by the fact that mother was safely over on the other side and clearly unharmed.

Everyone else was standing far back, at a nice safe distance. Evelyn frowned at the gateway like it was a rival in a staring contest, even when Praem moved to her side and made herself known by touching Evelyn's elbow. Sevens was curled up on the sofa, making little *burrrrrrrr* sounds, wrapped in the yellow robes she'd been wearing upstairs. I spared her a look and she pulled a toothy grimace.

We'll talk later, I mouthed silently. Sevens cringed and averted her red-black eyes.

One of Evelyn's spider-servitors was in attendance, as always, clinging to the ceiling in the corner. To an unfamiliar observer it would not have appeared to care about the gateway at all, but I had come to recognise the tiny changes and tells in servitor body language — if these things could be said to have body language in the first place. The head of crystalline eyes was fixed on the gateway, staring, waiting, listening for a signal to move.

The only one of us even remotely relaxed was Raine. She was wearing the heavy padded motorcycle jacket she'd worn to Carcosa. Her home-made riot shield — a piece of sheet metal duct-taped to a rubber backing board — lay forgotten against the table, as did her handgun and her knife on the tabletop. Her arms were full of very alarmed and very curious Corgi.

"Just trying to stop him from running out there," she said to me with a wink. Whistle kept turning his head from side to side, staring at the doorway like something alien had appeared in the heart of his kingdom.

The gateway mandala — the spiralling mass of overlapping magic circles, esoteric symbols, fragments of obscure and alien languages, all sewn together like a cryptid made from spare parts — was blissfully concealed, for the first time since I had completed it under Lozzie's coerced guidance. White bin bags had been taped together like makeshift tarpaulin, then taped to the walls to cover the mandala. A few fragments still peeked around the edges of the horseshoe-shaped trash-portal, but they were not enough to hurt my

eyes by themselves.

“Does it work?” I asked. “Evee, does the anchoring work? Did you remove part of the spell?”

Evelyn let out a deep sigh, almost as if she was disappointed. She gestured toward the table, where a large piece of stiff card lay, detached from the new version of the mandala that she and Lozzie had been building all week. “It’s still open, yes. And short of knocking the wall down, it will stay open. Actually, I’m not certain what would happen if we knocked down the wall, so probably avoid doing that, please and thank you.”

“Evee,” Twil said suddenly, an amused and gentle lilt in her voice as she shook her head. “Evee, Evee, Evee.”

Evelyn adopted an alarmed frown. “Yes, that is my name, last time I checked. Why do you sound like you’re high?”

Twil opened her arms. “Can I give you a hug?”

I narrowly resisted an urge to roll my eyes and put my face in my hands. Raine went “Eyyyyyy.” Sevens hissed like a disturbed rattlesnake. But instead of reacting, I stepped past Evelyn and Twil, briefly allowing the fingers of one hand to brush Evelyn’s shoulder. I caught her eye and smiled a thank you at her, mixed with apology and adoration and a dozen other emotions that I didn’t have names for, not yet. At least a fraction of my feelings must have reached her, because Evelyn did a double take at my expression, as if I’d just blown her a kiss. Then I let go and turned to the gateway.

“Can I? Seriously?” Twil repeated.

Behind me, Evelyn spluttered. “Have you gone mad? Did you hit your head on the way down the stairs? This is hardly the bloody time, what are you playing at?”

“Cos I like and respect you,” Twil said, with a grin in her voice. “And I wanna show you I care. And hey, it’s just a hug. I’ll be gentle.”

Evelyn spluttered again. I glanced back and Twil winked at me. I didn’t know exactly what she was playing at either, but after our conversation upstairs, I suppose she had some lingering issues of her own to work through.

“Oh, fine!” Evelyn huffed. “For fuck’s sake, come here you

blithering idiot. And don't squeeze!"

As Twil and Evelyn finally made up — or at least gestured toward a new steady-state for something not quite friendship — I stepped toward the gateway. One of my tentacles subconsciously snagged my squid-skull mask from the workshop table as I passed by, depositing it into my suddenly clammy hands. I stared into the dark eye-holes in surprise, then looked up into the deep purple light spilling from the gate and flooding across the floor. Tenny watched as I approached, trilling a soft and gentle "Heath!" which I acknowledged with a smile and a nod, but I could summon nothing else past the lump in my throat and the tremor in my belly.

Some clever soul had brought our shoes into the workshop, as if this was a new back door. I stepped into my trainers, barely feeling the motions.

Zheng's back loomed before me, coffee-brown skin and the mass of her dark tattoos visible through her thin white t-shirt. She stood only a dozen or so paces beyond the gateway, bathed in a waterfall of strange purple light.

Nobody called out to me; perhaps they all understood what I was doing.

I took a deep breath as if I was plunging into the ocean, then stepped through the gateway and over to Camelot.

Cinnamon wind, warm and gentle, teased my sense of smell and filled my lungs with clean air. Yellow grass like rubbery velvet cushioned the soles of my trainers. Purple light reached through the backs of my eyes, slid down my optic nerve, and adjusted my visual cortex. All the tiny noises of Number 12 Barnslow Drive vanished, replaced with the soft wind and faint rustle of the Quiet Plain.

Ahead of me, Lozzie flitted and bounced between the knights. The shining chrome giants were still arranged in their rough circle across the hillsides, communing in their silent, invisible shared mind-space. The Forest-Knight was nearby too; I recognised him by the axe over his shoulder. He neither turned his head nor nodded, but I reminded myself to go greet him later.

And a dozen paces away, looking up at the sky, was Zheng.

I opened my mouth to say Zheng's name, but she must have heard the scuff of my feet against the grass, or caught the scent of my

nervous sweat on the wind, because she turned to look back over her shoulder. Dark, brooding eyes like razorblades dipped in oil; the rolling of her shoulder muscles like knotted ropes; her hands flexed with the promise of strength.

“Shaman,” she purred approval — but approval of what?

“Zheng.” I swallowed, resisting with an effort of will the desire to slip my squid-skull mask down over my head. “Zheng, I need to apologise. I want you to know that I don’t like any of this, but I won’t try to ... stop ... you?”

But Zheng’s eyes narrowed and her smile grew. She looked up and over my shoulder, nodding once.

I turned and almost jumped out of my skin. My tentacles whirled into a defensive cage, ready for a fight — before I relaxed as I realised what I was looking at.

It was one of Lozzie’s caterpillars, up close.

The caterpillar was a curving wall of off-white, the size of a barn and the colour of fresh bone or old Bakelite, pitted and gnarled like ceramic armour that had been subjected to a decade of wear and tear. The main body was separated into sections by vertical ribs of the same material, each section bulging outward as if shaped to deflect armour-piercing blows. The bottom of the carapace curled inward, exactly like a real caterpillar’s body, to ensure ground clearance — except Lozzie’s Outsider colony-organism sat directly on the ground itself. This one wasn’t moving, so Lozzie alone knew how the things achieved locomotion. The bottom two feet or so of the caterpillar’s carapace was smeared with dry, dark red mud, a totally different colour to the soft soil beneath the yellow grass around us. It had clearly voyaged far, out here in Camelot.

“My goodness,” I breathed, a little stunned at the sheer size of the thing. It was bigger than an elephant, like a whale had re-evolved back onto land. Something primitive and instinctive in my mind told me to steer well clear of the creature’s path, even as personal experience and my brief glimpse into the Knights’ collective mind told me the caterpillar was very much on our side — no, on my side, personally.

One end of the caterpillar’s body tapered off into a rounded dome, but the other end was clearly the head, raised off the ground so it

could look out across the yellow grasslands, recessed into the body slightly, almost like a mollusc ready to pull sensitive and vulnerable parts back inside the protective shell.

It possessed nothing so obvious as eyes or a mouth, nothing so animal or earthly as a nose or a jaw; the caterpillar's face was a mass of machine-like antennae, black and shiny, some of them longer than a person was tall, pointing in every direction. Between the antennae I could see shining disks of metal inset into a darker core, like sensors or camera lenses. Several flexible, flat-tipped tentacles also extended from that core of black material, though ridged and lined as if they were more machine than biology. They ran up and down the antenna in an unceasing cycle, stroking or tending or oiling them, it wasn't clear from this distance. The behaviour reminded me of some marine creature, perhaps a crab, cleaning its mouth-parts.

One tentacle turned to point at me, more than twenty feet up in the air. Inside the flat tip, something moved, something that was not quite an eyeball.

"Um ... hi," I said, feeling exceedingly small. I raised a hand and tried to wave, though I could barely move my arm. My tentacles had bunched up in a protective ball around my torso.

From somewhere deep inside the caterpillar came a rumble, a purr that was not quite biology but not quite machine either. It lasted only one second, deep and powerful, then cut off instantly. The tentacle which had been pointed at me then returned to the strange cleaning or preening process.

I just stared, lost for words next to this vast creature. Was this only the exterior, the equivalent of the Knights' suits of chrome metal?

And Lozzie had made this — just to explore an Outside dimension?

I had a feeling I was looking at so much more than a simple exploration machine.

The other side of the gateway was located on the caterpillar's hide, using one of the bulging sections of off-white armour as a piece of wall. Everyone else was staring at me through that gateway opening, vaguely alarmed or confused, so I smiled and waved to them as well. I said "It's okay," out loud, before sighing as I remembered sound did not transmit through the door.

Lozzie came bounding past me in a ball of pastel and blonde. She waved to everyone with both hands — which may have done more to reassure them than I could — and then slammed right into the side of the caterpillar, which made me jump. She spread both arms wide, pressed herself against the off-white surface, and emitted a high-pitched “Mmmmm!”

It took me a very confused moment to realise she was giving it a hug.

“Glorious, is it not, shaman?” Zheng purred.

I finally turned back to Zheng. She was gazing up at the caterpillar with open admiration, hands on her hips, clearly impressed.

“That’s rare for you,” I said, trying to get my tentacles to stand down.

“Ha!” Zheng rumbled. She spread her arms to indicate the caterpillar. “It is so big! I would fight it just to give the mooncalf proof of her prowess.” She nodded to Lozzie. “But I would lose.”

“Catty’s big!” Lozzie agreed, finally giving up on her attempt to hug a wall. “But no fighting them! Too much danger. It’s not what they’re for, okay Zhengy?”

“You would lose?” I echoed. Lozzie wormed her way past my tentacles somehow and hugged me from behind, putting her chin on my shoulder and her hands around my belly. I patted her wrists.

“Mm.” Zheng grunted. Her gaze returned to me. “It is the price of combat. Sometimes you lose.”

“Are you going to lose today?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Zheng tilted her head at me, slow and dark, with eyes like coal pits. Over my shoulder, Lozzie stuck her tongue out. Zheng heaved a great breath like a tiger’s purr. She rolled her shoulders and her neck.

“Do you wish to see me win?” she asked.

“I’m not sure I want to see it at all,” I said, feeling myself sinking into toxic mud once again. But I struggled to stay above the surface, to speak truth to my lover. I groped for an emotional handhold and found something unfamiliar as I spoke. “But if you must fight, then I would much prefer you win.”

Where did that come from? I asked myself. *What do you care if she wins or loses a play fight?*

Lozzie wiggled with pure excitement, making a little *eeeeee!* sound in her throat.

Zheng levelled her dark gaze at me. “Then I will win for you, shaman.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that, but okay.”

Zheng broke into a grin, wide and sharp and full of joy. My stomach did a flip. “Then call the little wizard. Have her bring my opponent. We are ready.”

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.16

Zheng's opponent arrived precisely on time, thirty-seven minutes after Evelyn called Jan to let her know we were ready to terrify her.

I still wanted Zheng to win; that wasn't a lie. But part of me did wish that Jan hadn't picked up the phone.

We didn't take the same paranoid security precautions as the last time we'd invited an informed visitor to the house. We'd already done the uncomfortable hostility dance with these two, making us look like a bunch of hair-trigger murderous loons at best. There were no hidden traps this time, no spider-servitor waiting above the front door to scan whoever and whatever stepped through. Besides, between one demon host and Jan's enchanting eyes, they would see quite clearly if we had strung a net of magical tripwires to snare their ankles. If it did turn out they intended to annihilate us in return for payment from Edward Lilburne, or the ineffable whim of some Outsider wibbly-wobbly, or just for the sheer fun of violence, then they were placing themselves in the worst position from which to do harm, on our home territory, within my arms' reach.

However, we did go through the laborious process of having Jan call Evelyn once they were standing at the garden gate. Praem then opened the front door so we could see Jan and July standing there. Raine waved them over. We were on.

"Just to avoid any misunderstandings," Evelyn muttered, frowning at the pair as they walked up the garden path. "What on earth is she wearing?"

"That coat, I think," I whispered back.

Twil smothered a laugh. "Are we gonna need to like, lift her up the steps?"

"Play nice," said Raine.

"Be polite to guests," Praem reminded us all. Twil cleared her throat and pretended to look sensible.

July was dressed ready to step straight into the ring. Despite the chill in the late spring air and the thin sunlight pouring down from the iron-hard firmament, she wore only a grey tank top and a pair of black jogging bottoms, leaving her long arms and elegantly muscled shoulders exposed and covered with goosebumps. Her long black braid was tidied away into a bun on the back of her head, to deny her opponent the extra handhold during combat. Though I was not well predisposed to this particular demon host, I could at least appreciate her sense of practicality — though not her imposing presence. She stalked up the garden path like a raptor, her intense stare boring into each of us. When she stepped over the threshold she stopped on the spot with an instant economy of motion, more akin to a bird or a lizard than anything mammalian. It made my skin crawl and my tentacles bunch up, ready to counter an attack. Next to me, Twil struggled not to respond by sprouting claws. I saw her flexing her hands.

July also carried that hardshell guitar case over her shoulder, the one which contained a magic sword.

“I do not see Zheng,” she said by way of greeting. Such a normal voice should not have come from such an imposing presence.

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” I whispered, so quietly that only I could hear.

“Hold your horses, yeah?” Twil said. “She’s waiting out where you’re gonna fight.”

July stared at Twil. The werewolf visibly bristled.

“I sure hope you’re not gonna be swinging that thing around in here, yeah?” Raine asked with a nod at the guitar case, softening her inquiry with a laugh.

“It will not be used today,” July informed us. “It is for killing. We’re not here for killing.”

Raine shot her a wink. “As long as we’re both on the same page.”

“Yes, yes,” Jan’s voice huffed and puffed from behind July. “We have to carry the bloody thing around everywhere, in case it gets stolen, because nobody wants that. Big drama, big mess, maybe we both die again! Yes, hello, hi, we’re here for this nonsense, let’s get it over with.”

Jan, on the other hand, was dressed for a visit to the South Pole, or perhaps to be tipped on her side and rolled down a hill, or maybe to repel boarders. She was swamped from throat to ankles by that gigantic white puffer coat she'd unravelled back in her bedsit. Her delicate features and fluffy black hair poked up from the fur-lined collar, deep blue eyes flashing with barely contained irritation, like a lightning bolt striking the sea. She looked like a cross between an ambulatory marshmallow and a penguin as she waddled up the garden path, puffing a huge sigh as she stepped inside — the coat was evidently quite heavy.

The effect was lessened only slightly when she unzipped the front of the coat, perhaps in an effort to show us she wasn't concealing a shotgun under there; rather superfluous, considering her magical pockets, but the gesture was nice. Her hands were so buried in the white, worm-like sleeves that she struggled to pop one out to reach the zipper, which had Twil struggling not to snort and me politely covering my mouth.

Beneath the coat, Jan was absolutely tiny. She was wearing a well fitted pink-and-white athletic tracksuit, as if ready to shed the coat and run for her life.

She reminded me of a slender yet colourful insect, frozen in the moment of exploding from her massive white cocoon. It was a lot showier than her casual clothes.

"Yes, I know, I'm not exactly dressed for a social call," she said. She clucked her tongue at Evelyn, mistaking a curious frown for disapproval. "I really do struggle to care right now. Don't, please."

"No criticism intended," Evelyn said. "You look fine."

"Oh, fine. Fine, she says."

"I think the tracksuit looks great," Raine said, nodding appreciatively. I shot her a glance and she winked at me. I struggled not to roll my eyes. Not the time, Raine — though I knew she was doing it to soothe my nerves.

"As if I care how you think I look," Jan huffed. "Let's get this over with. So where's this door to hell?"

= =

Upon finally being ushered into the presence of the open gateway

like a princess presented with a fancy thoroughbred horse — albeit a horse with scales and bulging eyes and a stinger-tipped tail — Jan ceased being huffy and fussy in the manner of a pampered cat denied her favourite food; instead she turned quiet and standoffish like a cat introduced to a grizzly bear.

She went wide-eyed with terror, froze to the spot, and turned grey in the face.

We all waited by the table in an awkward little line — myself, Raine, Evelyn, Twil, and Praem — as Jan stood there one step inside the magical workshop, with her towering demon host at her side. She stayed very silent and very still, staring at the gateway with an expression like it might reach out and eat her if she dared so much as squeak. Not even her eyes moved, those beautiful deep-blue eyes like firelit sapphires, ignoring the ugly rubbish-bag tarpaulin concealing the mandala, fixed on Camelot itself. The rolling yellow hillsides, the impossible purple light spilling forth, the knights dotted across the landscape, and Lizzie still fluttering around out there like a pastel butterfly amid her creations.

It was a strange feeling to have visitors set foot in the magical workshop, inside the old drawing room, among the secrets of Evelyn's magical development, and the few results of our furtive explorations of Outside. If we had been a true cult, rather than a bunch of university girls who barely knew what we were doing, that room would have been our inner sanctum. We would have had the gateway framed like an altar, my squid-skull and Saldis' golden medallion up on pedestals, and the demon-haunted clay-squid displayed inside a cage, being fed live mice or something equally as gruesome.

Instead, we'd cleaned the room. Well, Praem and Raine had cleaned, while Evelyn had made useful suggestions and I'd gotten in the way. The table was cleared of magical notes and mouldy tomes, leaving behind only Japanese comic books and perfectly ordinary novels, bathed in the backwash of impossible purple light from the open gateway. The clay squid-demon thing was covered with an actual tarpaulin pinned to the wall, because none of us felt like explaining that little secret. Evelyn had coaxed a second spider-servitor down from the attic with lots of rambling in Latin, so now two of the huge black pneuma-somatic guardians crouched upside-down in the corner over the sofa.

Every last scrap of useful knowledge was hidden upstairs or packed away — all except Evelyn's scrimshawed thigh-bone, which she held tucked under one arm. I had retained my squid-skull mask, which I cradled against my belly, through the comforting, enclosing warmth of my hoodie.

We were all dressed as if ready to step out into the back garden, hoodies and coats at the ready, shoes on our feet. Raine was wearing her padded motorcycle jacket, but I didn't think we'd be needing that. I'd half expected Praem to put on some of her casual clothes, but she was prim and starched in her full maid uniform. Perhaps a trip Outside required that certain formalities be properly observed.

Eventually, Evelyn cleared her throat. "It's quite safe," she said.

"It's not *safe* that bloody well concerns me," Jan hissed in her delicate little voice, strangled with fear and wonder. She finally found the courage to move her eyes and tilt her head, so she could confirm the gateway was more than just an illusion on the wall. "What ... what am I looking at?"

"We call it Camelot," I said, feeling terribly lame. "Or the quiet plain."

"That. Explains. Nothing."

July, all six and a half feet of her, seemed relatively unconcerned by comparison with her diminutive wizard. She stared at the gate with the same owlish intensity and predatory intent that turned on every other object of her regard. Chin high, arms crossed, eyes wide like a pair of searchlights which shone through flesh itself.

Though I was certain she wasn't really staring at the gate at all.

She only cared about the figure sitting on the yellow hillsides beyond. Zheng, with her eyes closed and her legs crossed, small at this distance but facing the gateway in blind greeting. After our little talk, Zheng had sat down Outside, out there among the Knights, to wait in silent and solitary meditation.

After nearly a full minute of Jan staring at the gateway like it was a live dragon, July went to take a step forward. Jan's hand shot out and practically punched July in the ribs in desperation to grab a fistful of tank top, clutching even through the puffy fabric of her own sleeve. Jan pulled an incoherent grimace and made a wordless

hissing sound. July turned to look at her with all the malice of a bird of prey interrupted in the middle of a meal, but Jan had eyes only for the gateway.

“We don’t have all day,” Evelyn sighed. “Oh, who am I kidding, we do have all day. But I would like to sit down some time this century, please?”

“This is real,” Jan muttered, then swallowed with visible difficulty.

“Welcome to the real world, hey?” Raine said.

“Welcome,” Praem echoed.

“Either this is real,” Jan continued, her voice quivering, “or you’re the greatest illusionist who ever lived, and I’m about to walk into a wall like we’re in a cartoon. Which, you know, would actually be preferable to this being real. Is this an illusion?” She managed to sneak a glance at Evelyn. “Tell me it’s an illusion. Please. I’ll walk right into it for you. I’ll even bounce off the wall. I’ll make a cartoon sound effect and do a pratfall, just tell me this isn’t real.”

“It’s all real,” I sighed. “Every last bit of it.”

Jan fell silent again, staring at the gate. I could see her struggling to catch her breath; did dolls need to breathe? Praem didn’t. Maybe it was different, if one started out as a human. Or maybe it just felt right for her. Would it feel right for Maisie, if I put her in a doll?

“Surely you’ve seen ... comparable phenomena?” Evelyn muttered.

Jan shook her head slowly. “I’d half expected you were all lying. That we were going to have them fight in your basement or something. But it’s real.”

“Hey, yo, Evee needs to sit down,” Twil said. “Get over it, yeah?”

“*Get over it?*” Jan echoed, scrunching up her eyes with utter disgust, though still not looking away from the open gate. “Get over it? Get over it. Just like that. Excuse me, miss fursuit exhibitionist, but I am having a bit of a moment here.”

“I agree,” July said, speaking at Jan like her voice was a cattle goad. “Get over it.”

“You can bloody well wait another five minutes!” Jan hissed.

“It is pretty shocking, the first time,” I said, clearing my throat.

“We’re all too used to this, I think.”

“Did they ask the people at the Trinity test to ‘get over it?’” Jan continued, infusing the words ‘get over it’ with all the teenage scorn she could summon. But then she huffed and wet her lips with a little dart of pink tongue, still frowning at the gateway like it was a mad suggestion in a badly planned war. “Well, yes, that’s the point, they probably did. And here I am, with a group of mad people who might set the atmosphere on fire.”

“Please don’t make that comparison,” Evelyn groaned.

Jan laughed, a hollow little sound in her throat, followed by a falling *auugh* of dismay. “What, Oppenheimer, ‘destroyer of worlds’, all that? With this, you bloody well could be the destroyer of worlds, if you use it wrong. Or if it falls into the wrong hands.”

Evelyn smothered a cough. Raine and I shared a glance. Twil grimaced.

That finally got Jan to look away from the gate, in order to turn a more deeply horrified look on our reactions.

“What did that mean? Hey, hey, excuse me.” She let go of July’s tank-top and clicked her fingers as if we were naughty children pretending we hadn’t broken mother’s favourite vase. July took the opportunity to turn away and continue watching Zheng once more, like a falcon released from the glove. “Miss Saye, big scary mage queen of Sharrowford, what was that? What was that look? All of you, what was that?”

Twil winced in slow motion. “S’uh, it’s maybe been ... uh ... you’re kinda ... right.”

Jan boggled at her. “Right? About what? Use sentences, please!”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “The technique has already been stolen from us once,” she said. “Which is why the gateway spell is covered up with tape and rubbish bags. I don’t want this to propagate any further than it already has.”

Jan did a slow double take away from Evelyn, looked at the gate, then back to Evelyn again. I felt an oily, awkward smile creeping onto my own face. Raine shrugged with her arms wide. Evelyn tried to keep her chin up.

“Oh,” Jan said in a shell-shocked voice. “Oh, right. I assumed you

were going for some sort of *Stig of the Dump* aesthetic, seeing as this gateway to hell is embedded in the wall of your house, just ... right there.” Then she snapped, letting out a sigh like a gun going off. “Oh. Oh I can’t believe this. It’s finally happened. I knew it would come to this eventually.”

“Nothing has not come to anything,” July said. Despite her carefully clipped tones, I could hear the exasperation in her voice.

Evelyn stiffened. I saw her eyes flick to Raine and Praem, a signal to be ready. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve finally stepped right into a giant pile of dung, haven’t I?” Jan went on, seemingly off inside her own head. “Steaming doo-doo all over my boots. I’ve run into a bunch of arr-pee-gee protagonists who’ve started the quest chain that ends the world. We really should have fled when we could, Jule. At least then we’d outrun the blast wave for a few more months. Maybe I could die in Paris, wouldn’t that have been poetic?”

“The world is not going to end,” July said. This time she actually sighed, though she was still fixed on Zheng. “Stop bellyaching.”

“They have a gateway to the beyond and it’s been stolen by some bloody psychopath!” Jan snapped, then pointedly stared at Evelyn, flapping one tube-like sleeve in an attempt to point at her. “Am I right? I’m making an educated guess here, more than half of the people like us are complete monsters. Yes?”

Evelyn sighed and gestured with her bone wand. “Edward Lilburne is his name. We’re in a sort of cold war with him. He’s ... ”

“Slaver, murderer, child kidnapper,” I said, nodding. “So, yes. A monster.”

“Great. Great! Wonderful!” Jan threw her arms in the air. Her exasperation was somewhat undercut by the giant puffy sleeves of her coat swallowing both her hands. I couldn’t help myself — I snorted out a laugh at the absurdity. She whirled on me. “And you can stop laughing, octopus girl! It’s alright for you, you’re already halfway equipped to thrive in whatever mad revelation crashes across the Earth after some idiot with a god complex invites the wrong giant floating brain over here!”

“I don’t think that part is possible,” Evelyn said slowly. “And I am an extremely paranoid person.”

“Not paranoid enough to refrain from tearing a hole in reality!”

“It’s quite a safe place,” I said. “Camelot, I mean.”

“Uuuunnnnnngggghhh.” Jan put her face in her hands and groaned — at least I assume it was her hands, because she actually just buried her face in the ends of her sleeves. “I can’t deal with this. I just can’t. I am done. Totally done. We’ll be dead by this time next year. Or worse.”

“You’re catastrophising again,” said July.

“Of course I’m catastrophising!” Jan snapped. “I think this warrants a bit of catastrophising! Am I allowed a pinch of freaking out? No?”

“It’s not that bad,” Twil interjected with a laugh. “I mean come on, there’s plenty of nasty stuff over here on Earth already, right? Didn’t mages already used to make gates like this, way back? World’s not over as far as I can see.”

“It is entirely possible for the world to end more than once,” Jan huffed.

“I’m not capable of triggering the apocalypse,” Evelyn said with a grumpy twist to her mouth, “but thank you for the implicit compliment. What you are looking at is not a true two-way door. Nothing on that side can cross over to here, not unless it originated here in the first place. And that’s not a property of the gateway; as far as I can tell, it is a property of reality itself. There are other ways of circumventing that law, but they’re not achievable with magecraft.” She glanced at me, perhaps subconsciously — my hyperdimensional mathematics could bring anything back from Outside, but we chose not to mention that. It was kinder on Jan’s mental health.

“See?” July said. “The world is not ending.”

Jan let out a long-suffering sigh. A strangely familiar tiredness settled like coal dust around her beautiful, blue-crystal eyes. “Fine. Fine. So be it. Don’t blame me if it does end right on top of us.”

“If it is ending,” July said, “I still insist on this duel.”

“Ugh, such a one track mind.” Jan sounded very much like the petulant teenager she appeared to be. She nodded at Praem. “Why can’t you be more like Praem — it was Praem, yes? Lovely name, by the way.” Praem nodded once. “Why can’t you be more like

Praem there? I don't see her challenging me to a thumb war just because we're both made of the same stuff."

"A thumb war can be arranged," Praem intoned. Jan let out a high-pitched laugh, a little too close to the edge for my liking.

"Maybe that's the distraction we need?" I suggested, then wished I hadn't spoken. I felt like an idiot.

"We'll save that for some other time, shall we?" Jan said, shaking her head. She waved at the gateway with one huge puffy white sleeve, presumably pointing with a finger inside. "So, if I step through that, can one of you personally guarantee it's not going to flay all my skin off, or replace my organs with blocks of dirt, or, I don't know, auto-catheterise my arse hole or something? There's no nasty side-effects I need to know about?" She squinted at the gateway. "Are those actual knights? Like, blokes in metal suits? I thought you lot were exaggerating. What have you people been doing out there?"

"There are no side-effects," Evelyn sighed. "Other than how bizarre it feels to stand Outside."

"Several of us are over there already," I added. "It really is about as safe as somewhere can get, out there. Um, we don't want you to panic when you step over there or anything. Zheng you've already met, but there's Lizzie too, you can see her from here. And Sevens is there, and there's also Tenny, and our dog — well, Badger's dog, Whistle—"

"You took a *dog* out there?" Jan almost shouted at me. I flinched, tentacles jerking in surprise. "Oh, you people are even more wildly irresponsible than I thought. You get that poor animal back in here, right now! I'm not going anywhere until—"

Before Jan could finish having at us for presumed animal cruelty, July strode forward, straight for the gateway. This time she was fast enough — and Jan was distracted enough — that Jan's desperate attempt to grab her resulted only in Jan's sleeve baffing against her back.

"There's also a giant caterpillar!" I said quickly, as July reached the gate, ducking so the guitar case wouldn't catch on the rim. "Don't be scared, it's perfectly safe!"

Jan gave me an extremely alarmed look.

July stepped through the gate and straightened up slowly, beneath the purple glow. She stared at Zheng for a long moment, then turned on the spot, gazing about at the knights and the yellow hillsides, showing all the reverence of a pilgrim in a great temple. She did pause briefly when she looked over her shoulder at the caterpillar, but her eyes were already so wide and penetrating that I couldn't tell if she was shocked or afraid or just accepting what she saw. Lozzie waved to her and called something, but we couldn't hear the words. July ignored the greeting anyway. She did stare off to her left for a long moment, as if curious or confused by something beyond our line of sight.

"July? July?" Jan was saying, in the sort of tone that usually accompanies the stamping of a petulant foot. "You haven't burst into flame, so I assume you can hear me?"

"She can't, actually," Evelyn explained. "Sound cannot cross the barrier."

July stepped back through the gate, back to our side, back to Earth.

"It's safe enough," she said.

"For a demon host!" Jan huffed. "That's one thing, but a human being is much more—"

"You are not human fragile anymore." July strode toward her.

"I am, I break all too easily," Jan said, frowning as July marched right up to her and bent as if to pick her up. "No, stop! Stop that, not here!" Jan slapped at her with the floppy ends of her padded sleeves, like a pair of clumsy elephant trunks. "I can walk just fine, thank you!"

"But you are complaining so very much," July told her. Unlike Praem's expressionless tones, this demon host did not conceal her mockery.

Raine snorted a laugh behind one hand. Evelyn rolled her eyes. My smile grew very fixed. Twil actually said "ha!" out loud.

"And I will keep complaining," Jan said. She tried to put her hands on her hips but it didn't really work in the massive coat.

July stared at her for a moment longer. I was about to open my mouth and hurry this along, it was bordering on absurd now, but then for a split second I didn't see them as siblings, one older and

one younger — if that was what the Martense pair really were. Instead I saw a mother and child — an old lady, petulant and tired, but having a lot more fun with this exchange than she was letting on, opposite a daughter who just wanted to go outside and play, but would indulge any of her dear mother's whims.

Projection, I told myself. I was projecting Praem and Evelyn onto these two. But I still reached out covertly and gave Evelyn's elbow a squeeze. She flinched slightly and frowned at me, but more in confusion than anger.

"Fine," July said. "Stay here."

The demon turned on her heel, marched back up to the gateway, and stepped across. Her long black braid swished through after her.

This time she didn't pause once over the threshold, but carried on walking toward Zheng. A flutter of pastel poncho detached from a cluster of knights and flounced over toward her, to greet or question or tease. Amid all the confusion and confrontation and even after the emotional turmoil of the last few hours — not to mention the way I kept glancing at Evelyn's profile, wanting to speak to her in private — I still felt a flicker of an urge to launch myself Outside just to protect Lozzie. My tentacles twitched as one, aching to reach out and make sure July did not touch so much as one hair on Lozzie's head. But Outside was her domain. She was surrounded by her knights and more. Lozzie was safer out there than she was here.

"Jule ... ? Ju-July?" Jan reached after her in confusion and dismay, then seemed to catch herself and remembered we were all watching. She cleared her throat and lowered her arm, then tugged her coat tight around herself and shook her head. She suddenly seemed very small and vulnerable. "I, er, um ... suppose we better follow, or we'll miss the show."

"It's okay," I piped up in a misguided effort to reassure her. "Zheng has strict instructions not to start until we've discussed the rules."

"Oh," Jan said. She didn't meet my eyes, too self-conscious. "Rules. Right. There's going to be rules. Very sensible, yes."

"We really don't have to step through," I said, trying not to cringe with second-hand embarrassment. "You could watch from here, if you want. If you don't want to go. That's okay, I totally

understand.”

“Scared?” Twil snorted. “Huh. Some mage, right.”

“Of course I’m scared!” Jan said. “You should all be terrified, this is terrifying. The fact you’re not scared in the slightest is even worse!” She gestured at the gate. “Anything could be out there!”

“We know exactly what’s out there,” I said, cringing with apology. “For that dimension, at least. Mostly. Well, I’m trusting Lozzie on this, she’s the expert.”

Raine winced at my phrasing. I blushed, feeling like an idiot. My head was not in the right place for this conversation.

Half of me wanted to be alone with Evelyn, right now; the other half was relieved I couldn’t be.

“Oh, right,” Jan said, lashing on the sarcasm with her delicate tones. “An expert in the beyond. That’s great. And what does she do, exactly? No doubt something nightmarish that I would be happier not knowing.”

Unfortunately, our efforts to convince Jan to step outside the boundaries of reality were undermined at that exact moment by a bundle of black tentacles emerging through the gateway.

Tenny appeared around the side of the gate and stepped backward across the threshold, back to Earth, creeping like a child retreating from a dark room, unwilling to turn away and look where she was going, lest the ghosts snagged her ankles. Her shoulders were hunched, her head ducked, her wing-cloak wrapped tightly around herself in a protective layer of black silken flesh and fuzzy white fur. Her antennae lay very still, flush against her head. Her tentacles were retracted close to her body, reaching behind herself like she was groping for a handhold or a familiar support. Her humanoid arms held Whistle, equally quiet and pensive, little doggy ears standing straight up.

Of course, all Jan saw was a monster, crossing to our side. She went pale, mouth wide open, recoiling like she was ready to bolt.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” I blurted out, hands up. “It’s just Tenny!”

“Awww shit,” went Twil. Evelyn sighed and put her face in one hand.

“Buuuuuurrrrrrrrrt?” went Tenny, turning on the spot.

Jan boggled at me and Evelyn. “So much for nothing crossing from that side! What is that?!”

"It's Tenny!" I repeated, even as I knew she needed more explanation than that. "She's from here! She's supposed to be here."

“Hey, Tenns, you okay?” Raine was saying, quickly crossing the room and accepting Tenny’s oddly desperate clutching tentacles on her shoulders. She scratched Whistle’s head. “Not so good out there, yeah?”

“Not good,” Tenny trilled. Her big black pelagic eyes roved across us as she copied a very Lozzie gesture, puffing her cheeks out. She wrapped a secure tentacle around Raine’s arm, holding on tight. Then she spotted Jan. “Lo?”

“Tenny, this is Jan,” I said, trying to repair the mess. “Jan, this is Tenny. We did verbally warn you we had a non-human here. Remember? Eevee, you did do that on the phone, didn’t you?”

"I did," Evelyn sighed. "Apparently it didn't take."

Jan just stared, jaw slack.

“Lo?” Tenny repeated. She puffed out a *buuuuurrrrrr*. “Not a shark?”

I cleared my throat. “Tenny is technically a child, so please don’t scare her. And yes, Tenny. Jan here is not a shark.”

"Blllllrrrrrtttt, no shark." Tenny pouted.

“She’s ... she’s from here?” Jan murmured. “How?”

“Lozzie made her,” I said. “Sort of. She’s Lozzie’s daughter, technically. She started as a spirit.”

“As pneuma-somatic life,” Evelyn supplied with a sigh.

“Yes, then Lozzie made her a cocoon and she came out ... well, real, for want of a better word.”

“Tenny is a real girl,” Praem intoned.

"I ... I'm sorry ... I didn't ... process that," Jan said slowly, her horror turning not to confusion, but to awe, as her deep blue eyes travelled up and down Tenny's body. "My goodness," she breathed, barely more than a whisper. "Hello. Hello there. Oh, oh you are a

wonder. Tenny, was it? I'm so sorry, I called you a what ... " Her voice trailed off as she looked at the rest of us, awestruck. "You people ... you ... you *made* her? Did I hear that right?" Jan flicked back to Tenny suddenly, who was watching Jan as if the small woman was quite crazy. "I am so sorry for talking about you in third person, by the way. Hello dear."

"Lozzie did," I repeated. "Yes."

Jan just stared at Tenny in awe. She even stepped forward, fingers out to receive the greeting touch of one of Tenny's silken black tentacles. Tenny touched tentacle to trembling finger tips, then pulled a very dubious expression at Jan.

"Not a shaaaark," Tenny trilled. "Lo Jan?"

"Yes, yes, hello. My goodness, you are a wonder. You are one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen." Jan started laughing, looking over at the rest of us. She spread her arms. "What do you need me for? You want me to make a doll for your twin sister, out of dead matter, when this ... this ... Lozzie?" She gestured through the gate. "I assume that's the one with the fetching poncho talking to Jule. When she can craft true flesh?" Jan shook her head. "You're wasting your time with me."

"It's more complex than that," Evelyn said, in an unimpressed tone that brooked no argument.

"Yes," I agreed. "I'm not sure Lozzie can just grow an empty person or something. In fact, I doubt that very much."

"Oh, I must speak with her," Jan said. "May I speak with her? This Lozzie, that's her, right? Correct? I can speak with her? Is she— does she have— is there anything I should—"

"You're quite welcome to speak with Lozzie," I said gently. "But she can be difficult to communicate with, sometimes."

"Yeah," Twil added. "Bit of an understatement, that, but she's real sweet. Be nice, okay?"

"I would never be anything but nice," Jan said, her confidence apparently all returned. She even straightened up.

"You cool to go back through the gate, Tenny?" Raine asked Tenny.

"Mmmmmuuurrrrrrr," Tenny trilled. "Pretty. But also scary. No

flying today.”

Raine patted her on the shoulder. My heart went out to how sweet she was with Tenny. “Ahhhh, you don’t have to,” she said. “We can just sit and watch with Whistle. Isn’t that right, Whistle?”

Whistle went *huff*. Perhaps he recognised his own name.

“Ah,” Jan said, bright blue eyes flicking through the gate again. Her throat bobbed. “I don’t suppose you could ask Lozzie to come over here for a chat?”

I was about to open my mouth and say certainly, why not, I’ll ask her. I wasn’t about to force an innocent to step Outside, though I did wonder if Jan counted as innocent.

But Evelyn spoke up quickly, before I could get a word out. “No, not right now,” she said. “Lozzie is needed out there. You’ll have to come with us.”

“Ah. Well.” Jan took a deep breath. I got the sudden impression she wanted to cross herself. “Well. Well, well, perhaps another time then, I do really want to speak with—”

Jan did not get to finish her sentence, because Praem stepped up. With three short clicks of her sensible heels, Praem approached Jan, stopped at a distance calculated precisely between professional courtesy and personal intimacy, and held out one pale hand.

“Be not afraid,” Praem said.

Jan blinked at Praem, down at her hand, and then at us, raising her eyebrows in mild alarm and mute question.

“Don’t look at me,” Evelyn said. “I have no idea what she’s doing. Praem, what are you doing?”

“Escorting,” Praem intoned. “If desired.”

“She’s being very sweet,” I said out loud. “She’s not mocking you or anything, she’s being serious.”

Evelyn nodded along with a sort of grudging sigh.

“Oh, why not?” Jan said, her tone suddenly much more like that of the old woman I’d glimpsed for a moment as she’d argued with July. She wriggled one hand out of the end of her voluminous sleeve and placed it graciously in Praem’s palm. “Thank you, you’ve

very kind. Maybe leave out the ‘be not afraid’ line next time though. You are angelic, but it’s a bit much.”

“I am angelic,” Praem agreed.

“Hey, if it makes you feel safer,” Raine added. She spread her hands and patted her heavily padded motorcycle jacket. “I know how it feels.”

“All safe!” Tenny trilled, apparently much happier now she was back with the rest of us, rather than watching her mother tend to the knights.

“Quite,” Evelyn said, frowning at Praem and Jan as if not sure what to make of this development.

“Can somebody hold my hand too?” Twil asked, laughing.

“No teasing,” Praem intoned. She gave us all a blank-faced, white-eyed look — Twil especially, who at least had the good sense to look sheepish.

Praem lingered on me for a moment longer than the others, which I could only tell because of the way she moved her head.

It was impossible to be certain, but a moment of communication passed between us, though I couldn’t figure out how I understood her intention. Perhaps I was merely projecting, perhaps it was nothing, or perhaps it was the emotional backwash of my rather intense conversation with Twil, and my newly exposed thoughts about the woman standing next to me.

Praem would escort Jan — and therefore I was to look after Evelyn.

I nodded back, just a tiny tilt of my head. Praem’s pointed gaze moved on.

“Oh, wait a moment,” said Jan. “I actually have something for you. I’d forgotten in all this flappery and failure to warn.”

“Failure to warn?” Evelyn echoed under her breath. “I did tell you, it’s not my fault you didn’t listen.”

Jan moved as if to rummage inside her coat. Her free hand popped out of her sleeve, like a furtive, hairless rodent bursting from a hole in the sand. She touched the air about six inches in front of her chest and her hand completely vanished from view again. We may have seen this trick before but the visual impact was no less

dizzying, no less impossible, no less inherently threatening — she could have anything hidden inside that invisible gap.

Jan's hand reappeared a split second later, holding a compact box of fresh strawberries.

"For you." She held them out to Praem. "A thank you for being so sweet the first time we met. Just don't share them with anybody else."

"Staaaawberry!" Tenny trilled, suddenly lighting up.

"Except Tenny," Jan added. "She can have some. I gather this is the correct gesture, from what your mother told me? Though I should most certainly not feed them to you myself, that's some dangerous symbolism, I think?" She raised an eyebrow at Evelyn.

"Praem's not bound," Evelyn said, but she was frowning. "She can accept strawberries from anybody she wishes."

Praem accepted the box and bowed her head to Jan. "Thank you."

Twil was still bamboozled by the whole exchange, frowning like she didn't quite get it. "Why not just put the strawberries in your pockets? Like, your normal pockets? Why do you need to magically hide strawberries?"

"Force of habit," Jan said, turning smug and batting thick dark lashes over her twinkling eyes. "Once you've gotten used to wearing dresses with pockets, you can never truly go back."

Twil's confusion got worse. "But you're wearing a tracksuit."

Jan sighed and rolled her eyes, point entirely missed. Without warning, she repeated her magical-pockets trick as if reaching out and plucking an insect from the air, about a foot to the left of her head. Her fingers returned holding a pair of pink-framed sunglasses.

"No accounting for poor taste," she said.

"Don't tell me you're gonna wear those indoors?" Twil asked.

"That is a bit edgy," Raine said. "Even for us."

"Nice colour though," I added.

"Does that look like indoors to you?" Jan gestured at the gateway. "I'm not taking any chances with that weird purple light, no matter

what you lot say. I am not getting sunburnt or snow-blinded out there.” She snapped the shades open with a flick of her wrist and lowered them over her shining blue eyes. “Consider this well and truly dealt with.”

Evelyn snorted without humour. “You really are internet poisoned, you little—”

“Evee!” I almost slapped her arm, but I could never truly strike Evelyn, not even in jest. “I think they look really good! Cool, even.”

“They are, heeeey,” Raine added with a wink for Jan. “Looking smooth.”

“Heather,” Evelyn tutted. “She’s memeing at us.”

I blinked. “She’s what?”

Jan pointed a finger at Evelyn, a smug little smile on her suddenly cheeky face, below the dark pools of her sunglasses. Blue fire burned behind the tinted lenses; no glasses could truly hide that kind of otherworldly beauty. “You may be an absolutely terrifying mage, and I may have been led into the lion’s den by July being horny for getting her head kicked in, but girl, my power level exceeds yours by a significant margin.”

Evelyn let out a huff like she’d just been subjected to a truly awful pun. She put her face in one hand. Twil started laughing. Only Tenny looked as baffled as I felt, twitching her fluffy white antennae and blinking her huge black eyes.

“I’m sorry, I’m completely lost,” I said. “‘Power level’? Is this a mage thing?”

“Heather, just ... just don’t,” Evelyn said into her hand.

“I love you,” said Raine. “Don’t worry about it, trust me.”

“Well, okay,” I said, feeling a little put out.

Jan very gently gestured with the hand that Praem was holding. “Are we quite ready? Your big slab of muscle must be getting impatient by now.”

“Alright, alright,” Evelyn grumbled. “Let’s get this over with. Hopefully at least in time for dinner.”

Raine led the way with Tenny in tow, coaxing our nervous moth-

child back over to Camelot with Whistle still snuggled in her arms; I was confident that if things got too much for Tenny, Raine would bring her back home. Yet as Raine's shoulders and Tenny's silken black tentacles passed through the membrane into Camelot's purple light, I suppressed an urge to dart across the room and drag them both back. It was only the Quiet Plain, full of Lozzie's knights. I had to repeat that to myself, just to let them go.

Twil paused with an after-you gesture for the rest of us. Jan glanced back over her shoulder as we moved toward the gateway.

"Are they not coming with us?" she asked, peering over the top of her sunglasses.

"Ah? What?" Twil glanced back too, at what for her was just the empty corners of the room. Evelyn pulled a frown, but then she realised.

"She means the spider-servitors," I explained for Twil's benefit. "You can see them too, Jan?"

"Of course I can." Jan raised an eyebrow at me and then ran her eyes along my tentacles, her sudden attention enough to make me feel a little shy. I pulled my extra limbs in toward myself. "I can see your additions, after all. Don't be shy now, they're very impressive."

"The spiders stay here," Evelyn said, her voice too tight for the subject. "Come on, let's get on with this."

"What? Why?" Jan peered around Praem's flank, blinking with surprise over the rim of her sunglasses, absolutely flummoxed.

"They're perfect. I mean, jolly good job on them, they're fantastic, well done. I've rarely seen a servitor as cleanly built, let alone that complex. We really should have them along, real combat machines, just in case, no? You say this is safe, but you never know."

I pulled a pained smile. "They don't really like to move far. Not unless it's an emergency."

"They ... don't ... like to?" Jan's delicate brow furrowed in confusion. "They're servitors. Aren't they?"

Evelyn sighed. "They stay here," she repeated, then turned her head so Jan couldn't see her mouth the words 'operational security' at me.

Jan didn't know that Evelyn could barely command the servitors. It

was probably best we kept it that way.

“Ah, yes,” I joined in, somewhat late to the game. “They stay here. There’s important reasons to do with the house. Security. All that.”

“Still ... ” Jan sighed at the spiders. “They’re beautiful specimens. I’d feel much safer with some real muscle along, you know? Muscle that doesn’t wander off to fight other muscle, that is.”

“I will not wander off,” Praem said, sing-song and lilting. She lifted Jan’s hand slightly. “Shall we go?”

“Certainly. Thank you, miss Praem.”

“Miss Saye,” Praem corrected.

“Ah! My mistake. Of course. Please do lead on, miss Saye.”

In an awkward shuffle more befitting a group of young teenagers edging onto a dance floor, the rest of us stepped through the gate to Camelot.

Jan and Praem went first, greeting Raine and Tenny on the other side. I hovered close to Evelyn before she took the plunge; she tried to conceal the way she drew in a deep breath, steadying herself and leaning heavily on her walking stick, but I caught and cradled every moment of her trepidation, wishing I could shoulder it in her place. I had to stop myself from wrapping a tentacle around her shoulders. That would probably just make her jump.

“It’s not dangerous,” I murmured. “Well. Not really.”

“Yeah,” Twil piped up from behind us. “We’re both right here with you, Eeve. You know?”

Evelyn gave me the sort of sour, sidelong look that would have made me shiver with anxiety six months ago. Then she rolled her eyes, forcefully linked her arm with mine, and used me as a guide-rail to step through to Outside, dragging me along. Twil laughed behind us, cut off suddenly by the dimensional transition, then resuming as she stepped through in our wake.

Camelot opened around us like a flower of purple and yellow, blooming through the sky with whorls like the inside of a human brain, showering us with a shifting aurora more beautiful than any earthly light. Cinnamon wind brushed our faces and tugged at loose strands of hair, a distant sea-breeze bringing us the scent of far-off

petrified forests and dead cities, the merest hint of the caterpillars' wanderings. Hillsides unrolled around us, covered with the silent sentinels of chrome, Lozzie's round table.

Sometimes these places were wasted on me. But together with my friends, my family, it was almost worth coming here.

We all stood in a little cluster around the gateway exit for a moment, just soaking in the strangeness of being.

Jan was blinking rapidly, head turning left and right with jerky intensity, not frozen in fear but doing a poor job of concealing her breathless awe. The rest of us had all been here before — Evelyn had insisted that Raine and Twil and Praem all duck through for at least a minute or two before Jan and July arrived, just to acclimatise themselves, in case the worst should happen. But the sense of strangeness still hit everyone like a wave of vertigo and nausea, necessitating a pause to catch breath that had never been stolen. Even Tenny, with her inhuman senses and totally different physiological set-up, was affected enough that she focused on petting Whistle with a trio of tentacles. I considered asking Raine to just take her back through. Only Praem was totally unaffected.

Well, Praem and myself.

Praem took the liberty of tapping Jan on the shoulder and saying, "Do not be afraid. Look behind us."

"Oh, oh my." Jan still jumped when she followed the instruction, coming face-to-hide with the vast bulk of the caterpillar. She put a hand to her heart — did dolls have hearts? Did Praem have a heart inside her wooden chest? Metaphorically, very much so. "Oh that is ... that is very big indeed. Too big."

"That's what she said," Twil muttered from the corner of her mouth. Evelyn almost whacked her in the shins with her walking stick, but Twil managed to skip away, forcing a laugh.

"Thank you, Twil," I said — and I meant it. Anything for a bit of normality when Outside.

"You people have built *seating* out here?" Jan asked, eyebrows scrunching above her shades. "What's next, are you going to put up a gazebo? Plant some roses?"

"Strawberry bushes," Praem intoned.

“Oh, lovely,” Jan said. I got the impression her sarcasm was blunted for Praem’s benefit.

“We didn’t build this,” Evelyn said, vaguely uncomfortable as she gestured at the caterpillar — and the ‘seating’. “This is all Lozzie’s work. Look again, it’s part of the ... creature. Or, was.”

Jan paused, staring up at the caterpillar again. “She made this too?”

“Oh yes,” Evelyn said, sounding none too happy about it.

“I really must speak with her,” Jan murmured.

Lozzie’s whale-sized caterpillar of off-white carapace and shaped armour had extruded seating for us. Earlier, after the gate was open but before Jan had arrived, when we’d all stepped over here for a moment, we’d discovered the caterpillar had performed some kind of rapid self-modification. It seemed to have shed one of the bulging armour sections between the thinner vertical ribs, to reveal a fresh, clean white section only a few inches beneath, like a turtle or tortoise shedding sections of old shell, replacing them with new protection grown beneath the old.

The discarded piece of off-white armour now lay on the yellow grass alongside the caterpillar, where it had fallen, a slab of curved armour several feet high. It formed a very sizeable if rather rough and uncomfortable bench. There was more than enough room for all of us, twice over.

“Front row seats,” Twil chuckled.

Halfway along the bench, huddled like a sad blob of melting butter, was Sevens, wrapped in yellow robes like a small child amid stolen blankets. Upon our arrival she slipped to her feet and slunk over, peering at Jan with red-on-black eyes.

“*Guuurrrkk*,” she went at Jan, slinking straight past the bewildered stare and right up to Tenny and Raine. “Tenns, you okay?”

“*Mmmmmrrrrrr*,” Tenny replied with an uncertain flutter.

“I think she might need to go back home, actually,” I said. “She’s not doing well out here. Could you ... ?”

“Mm-mmmmm.” Sevens nodded, wordlessly accepting the affections of Tenny’s tentacles wrapping around her shoulders and arms, like a nervous octopus. Tenny let go of Raine and clung to

Sevens instead. “Tenns, wanna go?”

“M’okay,” Tenny said, raising her chin. “For now.”

“... do I even want to know who this is?” Jan asked, gesturing at Sevens.

“You do not want to know,” Praem intoned.

“Apparently I don’t want to know,” Jan said to Sevens. “My apologies.”

Raine was standing with her hands on her hips, looking outward across the plains. I was struck by the uncanny similarity to how Zheng had stood on that same spot, only an hour earlier.

“You think they’re about to start without us?” she asked, loud enough to project her voice.

About sixty feet directly ahead of us, July and Zheng were facing off, staring each other down like a pair of apex predators who had stumbled across one another in a jungle clearing. Zheng had risen from her cross-legged repose and July had walked to almost within arms’ reach. I couldn’t see July’s expression with her back to us, but I could read the fascination and hunger on Zheng’s face, the silent desire, the undeniable lust.

My stomach turned over with lingering jealousy, sick and tight. Suddenly nothing mattered, certainly not my wish for Zheng to win. I had to bite my lower lip and turn away.

Tentacles bunched and coiled with instinctive urgency. My skin tingled, aching to flush with warning colouration and deadly toxins. Part of me wanted to spring across the sixty feet as quick as I could and plant myself in front of July.

A hiss crawled up my throat.

“Wouldn’t put it past them,” Jan said with total dismissal. She wasn’t even paying attention. “Are we going to sit down, then? I’m not keen on standing here while these two beat each other to a pulp.”

“They absolutely will not be starting without us,” Evelyn snapped, right next to me. “There are going to be rules to this. And for once we have a judge capable of enforcing rules.”

Evelyn’s tone contained a note I rarely heard from her, shocking me

out of my jealous simmer — secret smug victory. I blinked at her, followed her gaze back to Zheng, then I realised what I'd missed.

“Oh,” Jan said. “Oh, I see. Very clever.”

Lozzie was standing between July and Zheng, bobbing her head and chattering up at July.

It was too far away to make out the words, but the meaning was undeniable. My tentacles relaxed and the abyssal itch ebbed away. I felt Evelyn's arm looped through mine again.

“Security and concealment weren't the only reasons for doing this out here,” Evelyn croaked softly. “You made a good call for more reasons than you thought, Heather. Completely mad. But good.”

I boggled at her, my mind whirling to catch up. My throat still felt thick with the need to hiss at July. “Evee ... you ... you mean Lozzie agreed to this because ... ?”

To my wordless delight — and more than a little bit of unexpected blush — Evelyn smiled for real, in a way I'd never seen her smile before, narrow-eyed and devious, but not at all dark. The strategist's smile, for me. “Over a hundred penuma-somatically engineered knights and one caterpillar-machine the size of an airliner. That's more than enough show of strength to keep this as a duel, to keep it under control.”

“Oh goodness,” Jan said. “How smart. I only wish it wasn't happening here.”

I couldn't believe my ears. Evelyn could barely contain her smile, though she kept her lips together. Mischief danced in her eyes.

“Evee, you ... you didn't tell me,” I said.

She snorted. “You would have told Zheng. And it wasn't like I was concealing anything from you, this was obvious.”

“I ... I suppose so ... ”

“I still don't approve of any of this. We should not even be here,” Evelyn said.

“Much agreed,” Jan added.

“*Burrrrrrrrt!*” went Tenny.

“But if it has to be done,” Evelyn continued, holding her head higher, “then it’s going to be done without putting either of these incredible idiots at real risk.”

Twil let out a low whistle. “You’re bloody devious, you know that? Good thing you’re on our side.”

“We’d get nowhere without you, Evee,” Raine shot back over her shoulder.

Evelyn straightened her spine as best she could. “I’m not on your side, Twil. You’re on mine.”

Twil snorted and rolled her eyes, but she didn’t deny it.

“You lot are all completely mad,” Jan said, shaking her head. “If it wasn’t for Lozzie — that’s her name, right, I’m getting that correct? If it wasn’t for her, I’d have hit the ejector seat already. Are we going to sit down or not? I would like to get my snacks out.”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn grumbled, tugging on my arm. “Let’s get moving, I suppose. Come on, Heather, the sooner we sit down the sooner we ... Heather?”

“Something’s going wrong,” I murmured, heart in my throat.

While the others bantered about seating arrangements, I had been watching Zheng and July.

I saw the warning signs in their shared body language before it happened — or at least my abyssal instincts did, picking up on the secret meanings of pose and musculature and the invisible tension in the air between two dangerous predators. I couldn’t have put it into words, or said exactly why my own body suddenly dumped a bucket of adrenaline into my veins. I just knew.

Up until that moment, Zheng had been smiling a predator’s smile, darkly delighted that the fight was about to begin, that her opponent was finally here, glowing with all the anticipation of new consummation. Neither of them were even looking at Lozzie, as she flapped her pastel poncho and chattered back and forth between them, her voice high and light, lost on the cinnamon air.

But then July must have said something, though the words were too far away to hear, even as a murmur on the wind.

Whatever she said, it killed Zheng’s smile.

Lozzie had enough time to visibly laugh at July's words, lifting the hem of her poncho to cover her mouth — but then Zheng clenched her teeth and growled, deep down in her throat and chest. That sound carried all too well, a deep bass rumble like the disapproval of a mountain.

“Oh shit,” Twil hissed from next to me.

“Lozzie!” Raine called. “Lozzie, what are they doing?”

“She’s losing control,” I said. “Zheng!”

“What is she saying?” Evelyn demanded of Jan.

“Don’t look at me!” Jan squeaked. “I have no idea! I’m not in charge of her or anything!”

July tilted her chin up. Spoke again. Zheng’s eyes blazed with anger.

Lozzie said something to the demons, flapping her poncho. But then she stepped back out of the firing line as Zheng inched forward. Lozzie cast a terrified look at us. Raine started forward, as did Twil, but there was no time to cover the distance. Around the trio, several of Lozzie’s knights turned as one, weapons lifted in readiness, shields raised by chrome hands.

July spoke a third and final time. Lozzie turned and ran toward us.

Zheng rocked back on her heels, spat at July’s feet, and threw herself behind a punch like a lightning bolt.

for the sake of a few sheep – 15.17

Framed by rolling hills of soft yellow velvet and the meandering line of the distant horizon, beneath a sky of blooming purple whorls like royal ink in dark oil, brushed by warm cinnamon wind, watched by an audience of Outside things, a round table of armoured knights — and a handful of mortals — Zheng swung for July.

She was so fast it took my breath away.

Even sixty feet distant, just witnessing the motion was enough to make me flinch. Zheng's punch was a flicker-blur against the background of purple and yellow, her clenched fist a scorpion-sting lashing out with all her weight behind the blow.

Evelyn flinched as well, her arm still wrapped around mine to anchor herself firmly to the ground in this Outside place, tightening as if Zheng's pre-emptive strike would upend the world. Jan drew a gasp between clenched teeth. Tenny let out a sound like a hundred panicked moths. In her arms, Whistle whined and flattened his ears against his head.

Only a few paces ahead of us, Raine paused, not shocked but suddenly still. Twil kept going, picking up her feet into a sprint as Lizzie ran to meet her.

I'd rarely seen Zheng fight. Months and months ago, she'd fought Raine inside the stairwell trap set up by the Sharrowford Cult; Raine had hit her a few times with a stolen baseball bat, but Zheng had replied with a blurring barrage of fists and sent Raine reeling. Since then, I'd grown to suspect that Zheng had held back on purpose, out of disgust for the people who had held her in slavery. I'd witnessed how fast she could move, a handful of times since then, with the kind of speed born of marriage between animalistic purpose and demonic body-modification, a blur of motion to rip out a mage's tongue.

And now she'd lost her temper, discarded the rules, and started

early. This was not within the bounds of the duel and there was no way any of us could stop her.

But she missed.

Before Jan had time to complete her gasp, before my flinch had finished, before Twil had sprinted another two steps, Zheng's punch sailed through open air.

July had ducked.

Zheng's face contorted with rage, showing her shark-toothed maw in an open-mouthed roar. She aimed four more blows at July in quick succession, jack-hammer punches which blurred through the air, trying to catch jawbone, sternum, or rib cage with alternating fists. Zheng was like a Greek Goddess, her muscles flowing beneath red-chocolate skin, her loose and baggy white t-shirt doing little to conceal her raw strength. Shock and adrenaline mixed with something headier inside me, a potent cocktail of awe, admiration, and abyssal desire. My reactor organ twitched inside my abdomen.

July bobbed and weaved, avoiding Zheng's fists by mere inches. The feat was all the more impressive with that unwieldy guitar case strapped to her back, but we barely had time to appreciate the spectacle, it went so quick, pure reaction, no time for either combatant to think about each move.

But July didn't raise her own fists. She made no effort to counter-attack. She moved like a snake, sinuous and rubbery.

The half-dozen knights nearest to the fight were stomping toward the demon hosts, shields raised, weapons levelled. I had no doubt that Zheng would respect the lives of Lozzie's creations, but they simply wouldn't be fast enough to make any difference. None of us were fast enough, none of us could even reach them before this spiralled out of control; what would happen when Zheng finally landed a blow, or July struck back?

Abyssal instinct prodded me forward all the same, but not for noble reasons, not for the sake of de-escalation. My legs itched like I'd dunked them in salt, aching to move, to run toward the fight, following some mad notion that I should join in. My tentacles bunched behind me like springs, ready to fling me forward, strengthening themselves inside with ropes of muscle to — to what? To pull the combatants apart? To bludgeon them both into

submission? To just let loose with the joy of what Twil would call a ‘good scrap’?

My more rational side knew that covering sixty feet at a sprint would just wind me, trilobe bioreactor or no.

I started to shake with internal pressure, like a kettle with no steam spout.

“Go! Go on!” Evelyn suddenly yelled, shoving me forward.

Half my tentacles flailed in confusion, reaching back for Evelyn, my spring-start aborted by shock. To my incredible surprise Evelyn reacted as if she could see my extra limbs — she batted them away with the head of her walking stick, then wildly gestured me forward. But of course she could see my pneuma-somatic additions. We were Outside.

“Go on, Heather, you fool!” she snapped at me, wild-eyed. “Tell her to stop, she’ll listen to you!”

“I-I can’t, I—”

Sixty feet away, Zheng wound up for a lunge. July ducked back, spun on one heel, and Zheng skidded past her. Twil was just catching up with Lozzie, grabbing her to halt her panicked flight. Raine was frozen to the spot, staring at the fight with such intensity as I’d never seen on her face before. Tenny was practically screaming, a long trilling noise of alarm.

Zheng reared up, drew in a great breath, and roared at the top of her lungs. “Fight me, cowa—”

Booooooooooooooowoooooooooop.

A foghorn noise exploded around us, a tidal wave so deep and so loud that it rattled my teeth and vibrated the jelly inside my eyeballs. It was not actually sound — such a spike of decibels would have blown out the eardrums of every human being present in Camelot, but when it faded we were not rendered deaf. Sound was simply the only way our senses could process this information, this Outside effect, meant for Outside places and Outsider beings.

Everyone — without exception — jumped, flinched, jerked, reacted by hunching shoulders and going quiet, wide-eyed in animal recognition.

There could be no mistake what that noise meant: *I am here, I am bigger than you, and I am telling you to stop what you are doing.*

Even Praem blinked three times, hard and slow, as if her eyes were watering. Ahead of us, Zheng halted her assault, turning to gaze back toward us, upon the source of the noise. The pause gave the knights enough time to catch up and interpose themselves between the two combatants. July turned and bowed her head.

“Thank you!” Lizzie called to the caterpillar.

Twil, clinging to Lizzie like she was the one in need of a big strong rescuer, was staring back our way like a puppy confronted by a lobster.

Behind us, the giant machine-creature of bone-carapace was humming from inside, the volume level falling through successive layers, as if some great engine was spooling down behind the armour plating. Nobody else spoke or moved until the sound finally drained away to nothing. Warning delivered, the caterpillar fell silent once more.

“Mmmmmrrrrrr,” went Tenny, uncertain and soft. In her arms, poor Whistle looked absolutely terrified, silent and wide-eyed, very much wanting to get out of here. Sevens had her hands clamped over her ears, still wincing. Praem had not let go of Jan’s hand, but Jan stuck one of her fingers in her own ear, blinking as if to clear watering eyes. Evelyn had gone pale with shock.

I was not exempt from the caterpillar’s message; all my abyssal desire for animal union with Zheng had vanished as if dashed beneath a bucket of cold water. I’d wrapped my tentacles tight around myself, the last refuge of a scared cephalopod.

“That was some ref’s whistle, alright,” Raine said. She started laughing. How she could laugh after that, I had no idea.

“Well,” Evelyn said, clearing her throat. “Well. Quite.”

One of Tenny’s tentacles reached out and gently touched her elbow. She flinched, but then awkwardly patted the silken smooth black appendage.

“Ow,” said Jan, blinking too hard. “Perhaps warn us, next time?”

For a moment I thought she was talking to us. Then I realised Jan was addressing the caterpillar.

“Thank you for your help,” Praem added, looking up at the wall of off-white bone.

“*Burrrrrrr*,” Tenny did not sound like she agreed with that one.

“Are they quite finished?” Jan asked, turning back to peer at Zheng and July. The huge white coat made her look like a rotating marshmallow, which went a long way to helping me unclench all my muscles.

“I ... I think so?” I found my voice again. The knights were firmly between the pair of demon hosts now, a wall of shining chrome ready to block any further attempts at breaking the rules. Zheng turned a smouldering look of pure murder on July, but July just gazed at the caterpillar in mute acknowledgement. “Should we ... ?” I ventured, lost for words. “Jan, do you want to ... ?”

“Excuse me?” Jan squinted sidelong. “Absolutely not. I’m not getting anywhere near that. Jule!” she yelled. “Jule, what are you doing, you huge dingbat? Come back here, I’m going to dock you a hundred quid for wasting our time!”

July did not reply, outlined against the rolling hillsides.

“What are you waiting for?” Evelyn hissed at me, gesturing with her walking stick, shooing me onward. “Zheng will listen to you. Go on. Take Raine with you.”

“What?” I stammered, still trying to recover from my own whirling desires. “I— but you’re—”

“I’m not going to fall over without you, Heather. I’m fine. Tenny’s right here.” Evelyn cleared her throat, somewhat awkwardly. “Isn’t that right, Tenny?”

“*Brrrrrt!*” went Tenny. She wrapped a single, polite, gentle tentacle around Evelyn’s elbow. “Auntie Eevee safe.”

“... right, right.” I nodded, trying to gather myself, feeling like I’d been spread out in a gooey puddle across the ground.

I took a couple of wobbly steps away from the group which still lingered by the open gateway, but my head was spinning. My heart pounded in my chest and cold sweat had broken out all across my torso, just from witnessing two transcendent predators locked in a moment of combat. My mouth was dry, my hands had gone cold and numb with tension, hugging my squid-skull mask to my belly

like a hard, metallic pillow. I could barely unclench my tentacles. More importantly, I didn't know if I wanted to risk doing so.

The prospect of walking right up to Zheng sent a dangerous thrill through my guts, another deep injection of adrenaline, another pulse of energy from my bioreactor.

Grab her, part of me screamed.

It helped that Raine was waiting for me only a dozen paces ahead. She held out a hand as I approached. I forced myself to let go of the squid-skull mask and tuck it under one arm, so I could take Raine's hand.

"Hey, hey it's okay," she murmured, but she was grinning. Fascination danced behind her eyes. "You could have put one of your tentacles in my hand instead, if you preferred."

"Oh, right. You can see them," I managed to say, robotic and inarticulate. "We're Outside. Yes."

I tried to take a step, to carry on toward Twil and Lozzie, who were waiting for us. But Raine held on tight and bobbed her head so I couldn't avoid her eyes.

"It's alright, Heather. It's gonna be fine," she said. "The catty boy stopped them. I'm sure it's nothing life or death, right?"

"Right," I breathed, tense as a wound spring.

That grin got worse. She glanced over at Zheng and July was with naked appreciation. "But did you see that?"

I pulled on her hand, dragging us onward. "A little hard to miss, yes," I whispered.

Lozzie and Twil were only marginally better. They were holding hands too, though for rather different reasons. Lozzie had her poncho tugged tight around her torso, like a protective membrane. Twil was still watching the caterpillar, as if it might start booming again.

"Fuckin' 'ell," Twil said as we joined them. "Big lad goes boop, hey?"

"Big boops," Lozzie said.

"Lozzie," I asked. "What happened over there? What was July

saying?”

Lozzie met my eyes, awkward and upturned, biting her bottom lip. Her free hand clutched the inside of her poncho, not quite afraid — she had nothing to be afraid of, out here among her creations — but embarrassed and self-conscious.

“Um ... you should ask Zheng,” she said.

“Ah,” Raine said. “I’m guessing that means it was about you, Heather.”

“Me?”

“Mmmhmmmm!” Lozzie confirmed, lips pressed together, averting her eyes.

“Come on, let’s go sort this out,” Raine said, gently pulling me onward, our roles swapped yet again. “Maybe we can salvage a proper duel out of this yet. I wanna see them finish what they started.”

“Don’t really think that matters anymore,” Twil muttered.

“Sure it does!” Lozzie chirped.

As we approached July and Zheng — impassive and sulky, respectively — and their loose scrum of knightly chaperones, my week-old jealousy finally began to curdle and boil away under the release of pressure, revealing it had been rotten all along, hiding a layer of plain ugliness beneath. Zheng was staring at the side of July’s head like she wanted to drive her fist through the other demon’s skull. Her clean and clear lust for joyous combat was nowhere to be found, not even a scrap of it deep inside the glowering dark pools of her eye sockets, no aura of pleasure in the set of her shoulders or the poise of her muscles, exposed by her t-shirt. July couldn’t care less, watching the caterpillar instead, then watching us approach without a single care written upon her staring, owlsh expression.

Part of me *liked* that Zheng’s attitude had changed. What was there to be jealous of now?

But another part of me felt such terrible guilt for being happy about that. All she’d wanted was a friendly contest with a physical equal. She’d even wanted me to watch. And now some rude remark — about me — had robbed her of that. She’d been happy, now she was

sad. And I was almost satisfied by that.

My moment of clarity of abyssal need to grapple with Zheng had washed my mind clean. I didn't like what I found there.

You disgusting thing, I hissed at myself inside the privacy of my own mind. *You're happy that somebody you love is disappointed? You're foul.*

I wanted to slip the squid-skull mask on over my head, hide my face, become something else, some other being that didn't have to feel guilt over irrational and ugly jealousy. With the mask on, I could launch myself at Zheng and have her catch me mid air, pin me to the ground, and hold me there in victory, pinned and squealing and batting at her with my tentacles. Clean and simple and swimming in cold water, my heart ached for that clarity of purpose.

But I was still Heather, whatever else I was.

Raine, Twil, Lozzie, and I all drew to a halt, just short of the little clutch of various very tall beings. I felt even shorter than usual, compared with demons and knights. At least I knew the knights were friendly. That helped as they towered there, silent and still, their chrome armour reflecting the yellow hillsides and purple sky.

"Alright, you two," Raine spoke up first, bright and jovial, one big joke. She thumbed back over her shoulder. "The chonk lord back there — or is it chonk lady? Lozzie?"

"Chonk lord!" Lozzie cheered.

"Chonk lord back there says no fighting without the rules, okay?" Raine waited a beat, but neither demon said anything. "Hey, Zheng, left hand. What's up? Talk to me, dumb arse, I'm right here and I'm on your side, in case you've forgotten."

Zheng drew in a deep breath and let out a slow rumble, a tiger held at bay with a wall of spears.

"The wager still stands," July said, smooth and calm. She finally looked away from us and focused on Zheng again.

Zheng growled. "There. Is. No. Wager."

"Then there will be no duel."

"Excuse me?" I tried to say. What I actually did was squeak, an

embarrassing warble that ended in a hiccup and a huff. Raine squeezed my hand and I tried again. “There was no discussion of a wager. What is this about? July, excuse me, I’m sorry, but what did you say to Zheng? I don’t mind you two ... ” I trailed off with a lump in my throat. “Well, this was supposed to be a friendly duel. Safe. A bit of fun. What did you say?”

“That is between her and I,” July said, without turning to me.

“Ha!” Zheng barked. She thumped one fist against her own chest. “There is nothing beyond the shaman’s sight, you pigeon. You do not comprehend what you see, because you are not even looking. Look at her.”

“You are fond of your octopus,” July replied, cool and level, delicate yet sharp. “That much you have established. At length. The wager remains the same.”

“O-octopus?” I ventured. “ ... me?”

“Duh,” Twil said.

Zheng opened her mouth wide and roared at July, past the jagged barrier of knights between them.

“I will rip your head from your shoulders and stop your throat with dung! There will be no wager because I will eat your marrow and cast your guts out for the vultures!”

I had never seen Zheng so angry, at least not without following it up by ripping somebody apart. It was like standing next to a bottled hurricane — she was holding back, her anger kept in check, pressurised by the lack of outlet. Just like me.

I flinched very hard and barely resisted an urge to scramble behind Raine, my tentacles bunching and tightening to protect my core. Twil was suddenly half-werewolf, spirit scraps floating around her body. Lozzie sort of vibrated on the spot, hands up by her chin, pattering from foot to foot. At least she wasn’t afraid.

Just when I thought the caterpillar would have to boom for peace again, Raine raised her voice.

“Whoa, whoa! Hey!” Raine yelled. Zheng snapped her teeth shut. I could practically see the steam coming off her hide.

“Zheng pleeeeeease,” Lozzie whined. Zheng dipped her head, almost

ashamed, but still glowered at July

“What wager?” I managed to squeeze the words out.

Zheng’s attention finally left her opponent — and found me instead. Darkly smouldering eyes like pits of fire fixed on mine. The sudden attention sent a pulse of adrenaline and hormones and worse slamming through my veins, confusing my instincts with overlapping desires I couldn’t handle. I wanted to leap at her and run away at the same time, scream in her face and fall to my knees in apology.

She held out one hand toward me, a pose of both request and offering in the same gesture, the double intent and the care on display in the slow motion of her muscles, the curl of her fingers, and the way her expression finally softened into quasi-religious reverence.

Zheng hadn’t looked at me that way in weeks.

“Shaman,” she purred.

“Zheng,” I breathed. “I’m here.”

Raine gently pushed me toward Zheng’s outstretched hand. I took it, subconsciously coiling tentacles around her wrist and forearm. She pulled me in close and turned me around by the shoulders, to face July. With my back pressed against Zheng, the heat pouring off her soaked into my tense muscles, unknotted week-old tension and turned me pliant as butter.

Then, without warning, Zheng scooped me up like a handbag puppy.

“Wah!” I let out a yelp of surprise, spluttering and flailing. “Zheng!”

She hoisted me into the air, one arm cradling my buttocks for support, the other around my belly, lifting me until my head was level with hers, displaying me to July like a trophy. Instinctively I lashed myself to her with my tentacles, holding on like a squid to a rock in a strong current. Raine struggled not to laugh and Twil openly snorted. Lozzie went red in the face, covering her mouth with her poncho, flapping around with her other hand like she was watching a romance scene in a soap opera.

“Look at the shaman,” Zheng rumbled at July, “if you would have me think you a bird of prey and not some brain-addled pigeon.”

"I see an octopus," said July. "Big deal. You're in the wrong place and doing the wrong thing. You know it too."

"Zheng, oh my goodness," I spluttered, blushing bright red in the face, feeling like a tiny dog wagging my legs in the air. Whatever pride she had in me was rather overwhelmed by sheer embarrassment. "Put me down!"

"Maybe you should listen to her," July suggested.

"Ah come on," Twil said. "This is getting silly."

"Heathy go up!" Lozzie cheered.

But Zheng's next words emerged with none of the humour the rest of us were trying to inject into this tense situation. She purred deep and low, rich with the promise of bloody violence, right next to my head. I froze at her tone, the anger and the love.

"If the shaman so wished it," Zheng told July, "she could dismantle you piece by piece and send each piece to a different void. There would be no defence against her. No counter move. Nothing."

July opened her mouth to reply, but Zheng carried on.

"As barely a tadpole of what she is now, she lashed out at me, unskilled and clumsy — and she took off my left arm, at the shoulder."

July paused. Finally, her eyes flickered to me. She stared, fixed and wide-eyed. It was indeed like being stared down by a giant owl.

"She did," said July. "I see."

"You are fun, bird of prey," Zheng purred. "You are a good opponent. You are a skilled hunter. You are good enough to land blows on me and avoid my reply in kind. But you could never take a limb from me."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." July's attention returned to Zheng — but then flicked back over to me. It was the first time I'd seen her hesitate.

"The shaman broke my chains," Zheng rumbled. "Compared to her, you are nothing."

My heart strained in my chest like it was going to burst. I almost couldn't bear to hear these words, not after I'd been stewing in my

rancid jealousy all week long, struggling to communicate with Zheng, silently accusing her of emotional infidelity without giving her a chance to defend herself. Her love for me was strange and fierce, not fully sexual, tinged with religious awe and reverence, built on a foundation of worship and animal recognition — but how could I ever have doubted it, for even a moment?

“Zheng,” I managed to say, blushing tomato-red up in the air, my feet dangling, “I appreciate your feelings on the matter, but I would also appreciate if you could put me down, please.”

Zheng relented, finally plonking me back down on my wobbly feet. She kept her hands on my hips, holding me steady until I unwrapped my tentacles from around her arms and shoulders. My extra limbs had gone stiff from gripping her so hard, from fear of falling; I wondered if I’d left marks on her skin, beneath her clothes. A strange, animal part of me wondered if she would enjoy that. Another part of me started to lean back against her, luxuriating in the heat her skin gave off, hoping she would wrap her arms around me and I could push back with my tentacles and—

I snapped to, standing up straight. Not now, maybe not ever. We were still right in the middle of a very tense situation.

“Chains are of the mind,” July said to Zheng.

“You were born free, fledgling,” Zheng said. “You do not understand.”

“I, um, I feel like I’m still missing something here?” I cleared my throat and felt extremely awkward, surrounded by the towering chrome knights and the muscular prowess of both Zheng and July. “What wager are you demanding, July? What is going on here?”

“I think I’m following,” Raine said quietly. Something unpleasant and sharp edged into her voice.

“The duel is off,” Zheng said to July.

“Awwww, come on!” Twil huffed. “After all this mucking about?”

Raine sighed and smiled a disappointed smile. Lozzie puffed her cheeks out and whined in her throat.

“Then you are a coward,” July replied. “You do not believe in your own prowess.”

"I have nothing to prove to you, pigeon," Zheng spat back. "I would not reforge my own chains or depart from the shaman's side for the chance to urinate on your twitching corpse."

"Whoa," Twil muttered. Lozzie bit her lip and edged behind the werewolf. Raine just laughed.

I stepped to the side so I was able to look at Zheng's face without craning back over my shoulder, then put my hands on my hips and did my best to channel a fraction of Evelyn's habitual irritation, that grumpy look that I admired so much. But when I spoke I sounded more like a huffy schoolmarm. "This is getting silly. Twil is right, we've gone to all this trouble to set up this duel. July, you won't fight without this wager? What is it? And Zheng, what did she say about me? Why are you both being so cagey?"

July just stared at Zheng. Zheng bared her teeth.

"Ummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm," Lozzie drew the sound out — and out, and out, and out, until finally everyone was looking at her. Even July had to relent. Lozzie peeked over Twil's shoulder, sleepy-eyed and impish, like she knew exactly the impact her words would have. "July wants to wager ownership of Zheng, like a contract or a prize or winning her heart, that sort of thing, so if July wins Zheng has to follow her from now on. Sorry, sorry!" Lozzie ducked her head beneath her arms, expecting retribution.

"Yuuuup," Raine murmured. "Thought as much."

"Well that's fucked up," Twil said. "This isn't a fucking meat market."

A cold feeling settled in my stomach. My brain couldn't quite catch up with that information. "And ... what if Zheng wins?"

"I named no wager," Zheng rumbled. "Because I will not fight under that condition. The duel is off."

"Coward," July repeated.

Her voice was casual and relaxed, like an older girl in a playground fight goading a shorter and weaker opponent, but with no expectation of real retribution.

I stared at July, at this strange demon host — her intense, wide eyes, her birdlike precision in every movement, her presence like a living razor blade. Her facial features were a grand echo of Jan's

more delicate looks, as if they were sisters born from different fathers but the same mother. She looked so much more human, almost at baseline normal, compared to Zheng's muscular power and huge stature, or Praem's controlled poise and blank eyes, but I realised in that silent moment, trapped between an unreasonable wager and over a week of anticipation, that I had no idea what I was looking at. July was a far greater unknown. I did not know July, did not know how she had been raised, had no idea of her value system.

And in a way, she wished to re-enslave Zheng.

July must have felt me staring, because she finally turned, unprompted, to look at me, to fix me with that wide-eyed, burning gaze. There were none of Lozzie's knights between us at this angle, nothing blocking us from each other.

The Heather of six months ago would have shrank and fled. The Heather of yesterday would have cast her eyes down, ashamed of her thoughts, guilty and twisted up inside. But that Heather was wrong.

I slipped my squid-skull mask on over my head, sliding into the comfort of darkness and metallic bone, staring out through the eye-holes. I felt my spine straighten and my tentacles quieten, spreading out from my body with instinctive threat display. Somebody hissed my name, possibly Raine, but then Zheng purred with approval. A dozen processes stirred inside me — toxin production in my skin, the itch of desire to plate myself with chitin and bio-steel, the ache of sprouting spines.

All too easy to perform those modifications, Outside. All too easy to slip over.

I resisted the urges, for now.

"Zheng is mine," I told July, speaking against the inside of the mask, but somehow my voice still carried. "But only because she chooses to be. If you make such a suggestion again, if you try to make her a slave, then you will fight me, not her. And not in a duel."

The words were meant to be cold and calm, but my heart fluttered with anger.

"Holy shit, big H," Twil hissed.

A gentle hand closed on my upper arm. I allowed it to stay. I wasn't actually going to fight July, I only wanted to make this clear.

July stared me down for a long moment. I felt my tentacles begin to tingle, ceasing their rainbow strobing and turning darker as the skin flushed with neurotoxin, preparing to pucker into stingers and barbs.

Then July bowed her head to me. "I apologise. I have misunderstood the situation."

I almost panted inside the mask. "That's all you have to say?"

"That's all I have to say. You have an apology."

"Apology accepted," I said. Then I let out a huge sigh, pulled the helmet off my head again, and almost fell over with my hair going everywhere. But Raine was there at my side, to steady me.

"Thank fuck for that," Twil hissed.

"Mm," Zheng grunted in disapproval. "You should grovel, bird of prey."

"One grovels for offence, not mistakes," July replied, raising her head again.

"I should put you on a spit and cook you, slowly."

"I have been forgiven. You heard the words of your octopus."

"Ha!" Zheng barked. "You have not been listening. I am not hers to command. She has forgiven you. I will not."

"A pity. I would still like to fight."

"Huh," Zheng sneered.

"Excuse me," I piped up, taking deep breaths to work the adrenaline out of my bloodstream, trying to clamp down on the eager beginnings of too many processes of abyssal biology. "But I need to know, July. Did Jan have any idea you were going to do something like this? I have a rather poor opinion of you now and I would prefer it not extend to Jan, if possible. She's been very sweet so far."

I couldn't tell if July held me in contempt or not, her searchlight stare was so difficult to read, like looking back at an owl caught in

the twilight.

“Jan cannot reliably tell her arse from her elbow,” July said. “Zheng terrifies her. If she knew of my wager, she would have fled Sharrowford.”

“Smart girl,” Twil said.

“Awww!” went Lozzie. “But she’s so tiny!”

Zheng snorted a dark laugh. “The wizardling has more sense than her creation. A low bar to clear.”

“I am sorry you think that.”

Raine let out a big sigh, shaking her head. “I guess this means the duel is off, hey? Real shame. And we went to all this work, too.”

“I would still have our contest,” July said. “No wager.”

Zheng rumbled deep in her chest like a goaded tiger, curling both her hands into fists before flexing her fingers. She repeated the motion several times, visibly restless.

“Zheng,” I spoke up, reaching toward her with one tentacle and gently touching her flank. “I would like you to enjoy yourself. It is important to me.” I swallowed and forced myself to keep going. “If you want to fight July, for fun, then please do so.”

“What is the point?” Zheng asked, speaking to July. “I expected so much more.”

“I may not be able to pin you to the mat,” July said, “but I will knock you down time and again. You are strong, but you are slow.”

“And you will pay for the insult,” Zheng rumbled.

“Zheng,” I repeated her name, my voice a reedy tremor. Zheng’s dark, flashing eyes turned sidelong to catch mine.

“Shaman.”

“Do it if you wish. It’s up to you. But you aren’t ever going anywhere, not if you don’t wish to.”

Zheng took a deep breath. A savage grin ripped across her face. “Very well, shaman. For you.”

= =

“The rules are simple enough,” Evelyn explained. “Now both of you listen, or I’ll have Praem twist your ears off.”

She stood with her back as straight as she could, walking stick planted at an angle, her scrimshawed thigh-bone tucked under one elbow. Between her pose and her disciplinary glower, she looked more like she was delivering battle plans than adjudicating the demonic equivalent of a boxing match.

And I stood right next to her, trying not to openly admire her poise. I had other things to think about right then.

Zheng and July stood a few paces away, having trudged back over to the gateway, the caterpillar, and the dubious carapace-bench. A small cluster of knights had trailed us as well, just in case Zheng and July decided to break their ceasefire early. But the demons had shown every sign of listening patiently, so Lozzie had gestured by flapping her poncho, and the knights had fanned out to take up positions around the edge of the imaginary boxing ring.

Lozzie and I flanked Evelyn, the metaphorical power behind the throne. That was a strange feeling, as I stood there and listened — realising that I, little old me, with my scrawny muscles and lank hair, I was the big stick. Well, Lozzie was too, but that was even stranger.

The others were all by the bench — all except Sevens and Tenny, who had stepped back through the gateway, back to Sharrowford and home, carrying Whistle. We had wordlessly agreed that the coming level of violence was not for children or dogs, even if it was going to be strictly non-lethal.

Raine stood at the end of the bench, hands on her hips, watching July and Zheng with a curious look on her face, faintly amused. Jan and Praem sat side by side, a stark contrast in height even when sat down, made worse by Jan’s massive white coat that swamped her like castle walls around her slender body. She wiggled pink-clad legs over the side of the bench. Praem had the tub of strawberries open in her lap, chewing slowly. Jan had performed her magical pocket trick again, producing a polystyrene fast-food box of fried chicken from thin air. The smell had drawn Twil over like a pet dog hearing the food cupboard open in a distant kitchen, but Jan had frowned over her dark sunglasses, making a show of refusing to share. July had divested herself of the guitar case with the magic

sword inside, laying it at Jan's feet with a strangely ceremonial gesture, though Jan had pointedly paid no attention. As far as I could tell, she'd refused to touch the thing at all.

But Jan couldn't hide the true direction of her interest — she kept casting sidelong, covert glances over at Lozzie. But she had to lean forward around the collar of her own coat every time, which ruined her attempt at subtlety.

"One round," Evelyn continued. I turned my attention back to her, away from Lozzie giving Jan a little wave with the corner of her poncho. "No time limit. Though if it goes on for hours, we will call a draw. Some of us have better things to do than watch a glorified mud wrestling match."

"Wizard," Zheng rumbled a warning.

"And you can shut your mouth for once, you giant lug," Evelyn snapped back. Zheng blinked slowly, like a big cat refusing to admit it was cowed, but accepting that further complaints would only cause more delays. "Now, after some basic consultation with Jan and with Lozzie, we have decided on some limits. These apply to both of you, understand?" Evelyn didn't wait for an answer. "No ripping and tearing, no removing each other's body parts, no biting, gouging, stabbing, etcetera. Blows and grapples only."

"Understood," July said.

"Mm," Zheng grunted. "Acceptable."

Evelyn gave Zheng a look like she wanted to spray her with a garden hose. "If you break the rules, the caterpillar will sound off again. Don't, because none of us want that. If either of you are knocked down and can't rise after ten seconds, you lose. Same for being pinned, if you can't break the hold and rise after ten seconds. This is very simple and straightforward. Have I made myself clear?"

"Who counts?" July asked.

"The knights!" Lozzie chirped. "They're more accurate and impartial and they can see a lot lot lot more anyway!"

"Done," Zheng grunted. She rolled her neck and shoulders, a show of limbering up, slabs of thick muscle shifting and bunching beneath her plain white t-shirt. "Ready, bird of prey?"

July did something I'd not seen from her yet — she bounced twice

on the balls of her feet, arms loose, as if flexing the whole length of her body. Her wide and staring eyes closed for a full second, then snapped back open again. "I am now."

"You will wait for the signal," Evelyn grunted. "Walk out about ten meters, in the middle of the knights there. Keep your distance from each other until the signal. And you better bloody well stay clear of this bench, because so help me God I will spank both of you if we have to get up and scramble out of your way for this nonsense."

"Word," Raine called. "No crashing into the stands, you hear?"

"Do not worry, little wolf," Zheng raised her voice in reply.

"Good luck," I said. Zheng's gaze lingered on me for a moment. She grinned wide, showing all her shark's teeth, then she turned and stalked away, keeping more than one arm's length between her and July.

Evelyn let out a shaking sigh. I carefully took her free hand. "Are you okay, Evee?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," she grunted, turning a sharp frown on me as the demons departed for the field. "Are you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you, Heather. You look like you're ready to have some kind of breakdown."

"... I'm just twitchy," I said, only half a lie. I had no idea how Evelyn would react if I confessed that I sort of wanted to wrestle with Zheng myself. "I want to ... my tentacles feel ... *I feel restless.*"

"Mm," Evelyn grunted, already swinging her walking stick around and heading for the bench, dragging me along. "I'm sorry for poking you with my stick earlier, you looked like you needed it. But I am going to sit the hell down and not move for a while, my hip is killing me and I've had enough of this bloody place already. Fuck Outside. Fuck zombies. Fuck all this ... this ... playground nonsense. Less time spent out here the better, for you as well."

"It's okay, Evee-weevey," Lozzie piped up too, skipping ahead on Evelyn's other side, flapping her poncho like a flying squirrel catching the air. "I don't think it's gonna take long!"

"Ehhhhh," Evelyn grunted. "It better not."

I helped Evelyn get settled on the bench, then took my place next to her while Zheng and July stalked off into the middle of their imaginary ring, framed by the yellow hillsides and the towering knights. Raine watched them go as well, a subtle frown on her brow. Twil puffed out a sigh, staring wistfully at the box of fried chicken in Jan's lap.

Jan cleared her throat delicately, one hand to her mouth. "I really feel like I should apologise," she ventured, putting on a show of hesitancy. "I didn't know Jule was going to do any of that. Perhaps this place is getting to her. It does feel odd out here, like I'm half in a dream, or as if I've just come round from being groggy or ... " She trailed off, shaking her head slowly.

"It's not your fault," I said. "And yes, being Outside does that to people."

"I've almost lost my appetite," she said.

"Wish you would," Twil whispered.

"Still, it's a pretty raw impression," Jan said directly to me, across Evelyn's lap. She had to lean forward to make her face seen around the bulk of her huge puffy white coat, sitting on the bench like a splayed marshmallow. "For the record, there's no way I would have somehow taken on your Zheng friend. Absolutely not."

"Zheng is not scary," Praem said. She selected another strawberry and held it up to the sky, as if the purple light of Camelot was shining through the red flesh of the fruit.

"Perhaps not to you," Jan sighed. "But I beg to differ."

"Well," I said, a little embarrassed. "Friend, yes, but more ... um ... er ... "

Lozzie chose that exact moment to flounce past, flapping the hem of her pastel poncho like a jellyfish membrane. She stopped in front of Jan, bit her lip, and looked down sidelong at the tiny, delicate mage in her pink and white tracksuit.

I'd never seen Lozzie act shy before. She played it off by putting on a little show, but it was plain to see.

Jan, on the other hand, had no hope of hiding her emotions. She looked up at Lozzie, eager and interested, but then wet her lips and had nothing to say, stuck with her mouth open.

“Hi!” Lozzie chirped eventually, doing a little jump-turn toward Jan, poncho and hair going everywhere.

“Hello! Yes! You and I, we must talk!” Jan said. “You’re Lozzie, yes? May I call you that? I’m Jan, we should ... um ... well. You know.”

Lozzie tilted her head one way, then the other. “Later? Are you staying to hang out or have you gotta go go go after back home real quick? Fight time is now and fight time is kind of stressful so I have to pay attention and watch in case of bad things, but bad things probably won’t happen but you know how it is. Or maybe you don’t? Which is fine too!”

Jan just stared, slightly stunned, hanging off every word. “Uh ... I can ... may I?”

“You’re quite welcome to ‘hang out,’” I said. “But maybe not July. She has to, I don’t know, wait in the cellar or something.”

Jan winced and sighed. “We do come as a set. Again, I’m very sorry.”

“I’m only being sore,” I said.

“Don’t apologise for other people!” Lozzie chirped. She giggled and pulled the hem of her poncho up to cover her mouth.

“That is a very fetching outfit, by the way,” Jan said. “Very nice. I do like it.”

“Wanna borrow?” Lozzie waved a corner of pastel fabric at her, a cephalopod communication gesture.

Jan laughed softly. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m quite comfortable here like this. Thank you.”

“Flirt later,” Evelyn grunted. “Are they ready yet?”

“I think sooooo!” Lozzie said, bouncing forward a few steps and peering out at the combatants.

Jan cleared her throat and busied herself chewing on a piece of chicken. “It’s not flirting, really. Absolutely not.” She tutted, frowning at Evelyn.

“You know what I think?” Raine spoke up, full-throated and confident. She was peering out at Zheng and July with a shrewd frown. “I think July was just trying to psyche Zheng out.”

"I'm sorry?" I asked.

"Oh," Jan said. "Oh, well, maybe. That's not her style though."

"You're kidding, right?" Twil said. "She's all about unsettling. Have you ever looked at her? Shit!"

"Unsettle her before the fight," Raine explained for my benefit. "Put her off balance with an emotional attack. Make her lose her temper, think more was on the line than really was. Smart move. Not what I would do with Zheng, but smart move all the same."

"You mean ... you think it was all a lie?" I asked.

"It's not impossible." Raine shot me a wink. "You're not so good at subterfuge, Heather."

Twil suddenly laughed. "You can say that again."

"Oh shush," I struggled not to blush. "I just never thought of that."

"It is a good point," Jan added, chewing on a mouthful of fried chicken, then licking her fingertips. "It's not as if she or I could magically compel Zheng, anyway. How was she going to enforce the result?"

"Violence?" suggested Raine.

"Hardly," Jan said, pulling a distasteful grimace. "Don't, you'll put me off my lunch."

I was shaking my head. "I can't believe this."

"You're all stupid," Evelyn grumbled. "Lozzie, are we ready?"

"Maybe!" Lozzie chirped, bouncing from foot to foot. In the middle of the loose ring of knights, Zheng and July faced each other; Zheng rolled her shoulders like a prizefighter limbering up her weapons, but July just stared, relaxed and placid. Lozzie raised and waved both hands. "Woooo! Ready?" she called.

"Jan," I said with a sigh, "before this kicks off, finally, I really must put this in perspective. What is July, to you? Are you sisters, or ... more? Or less, that's a thing too." I cleared my throat, feeling awkward. "If you don't mind answering, of course."

Jan peered around the edge of her massive coat again, one eyebrow raised in a slightly peevish look. "You're asking if she and I fuck."

"I-I'm not asking for that level of detail!" I squeaked out. Next to me, Evelyn sighed and put her face in her hand. Twil snorted a laugh.

"No," Jan said, polite but unimpressed. "She's a sister, at best. A difficult one, too. We're not like you and your Zheng, we're not screwing each other."

I blushed again, hard. "Zheng and I don't— I mean, that isn't what we we— we don't have sex. It's not like that. It's just ... I'm trying to figure her out. As a demon. I thought you might have something to share. I'm sorry. I got the wrong impression. Sorry."

Jan opened her mouth to answer, but Evelyn got there first, turning a deep, piercing frown on me.

"You don't?" she demanded. "You and Zheng? You don't ... *do it*?"

"... Eevee?" My blush deepened. I could almost feel the steam coming off my face.

"Just answer the question!" she hissed.

"Well, no. We don't."

Evelyn blinked once. "Huh."

Jan let out a long-suffering sigh and leaned back into the sanctuary of her coat again. "Your polycule is a nightmare."

"You can tell we're a polycule?" I asked. "I mean, we're not!"

"We're not a polycule," Evelyn grumbled.

"You are very obviously a polycule," Jan said, unimpressed in the extreme. Her brilliant blue eyes peered around her coat again, over the rims of her dark glasses. "You're telling me you two aren't dating? Queen bitch and miss octopus?"

Evelyn and I glanced at each other. I froze and swallowed, tentacles squirming in horrible discomfort either side of me. Evelyn cleared her throat and looked away. Twil was struggling to contain her laughter so badly that I thought she might fall off the bench.

"Oh," Jan said, sinking back behind the wall of her coat. "My apologies, indeed."

"Hey, hey," Raine said, waving a hand behind herself to catch our

attention, while hers stayed locked on the pair of demons. “They’re gonna start.”

Lozzie had the hem of her poncho raised in one hand, held high like a flag ready to descend. We fell quiet, all eyes on the combatants. My heart climbed into my mouth. Evelyn’s hand squirmed into mine.

“Ready!” Lozzie cheered. “Set! Ding ding ding!”

She sliced through the air with a handful of fluttering pastel and finished with a celebratory twirl.

For the first second, neither fighter moved. Zheng waited, tall and poised like jungle cat, her fists raised, one low, one high in a rough fighting stance, every muscle straining with a deceptive economy of tension. July held herself perfectly still, in the way of a waiting dagger.

Then, almost faster than the human eye could follow, July struck first.

Now she had approval, now it was official, there was no holding back.

Zheng had named her well; it was like watching a bird of prey scream through the air to descend on a mountain goat. A Roc, falling from the heavens, a thunderbolt of speed and power from the roiling clouds. Zheng dug her heels into the soft earth at the last split second, trying to pivot like a bullfighter before the charge — but she got it wrong. Weight and impact were not July’s intent.

Instead of sailing past Zheng, she checked her rush by counterbalancing her body, giving up on throwing her weight behind a punch. She ducked directly inside Zheng’s guard, her arms flashing out — one, two, three, knuckles landing hits on Zheng’s unprotected stomach.

I don’t know why I was shocked when Zheng reeled from the blows. I’d seen the bruises on her flesh. I knew this might happen.

But I still winced and flinched. Evelyn squeezed my hand.

Zheng grunted like a winded horse and swiped downward to slam July’s skull into the ground, but July was already past her, dancing away on the balls of her feet, her bare arms loose like rubber as she slipped away. Zheng swung wide and July bobbed out of the arc of

the strike. She back-pedalled, putting space between herself and Zheng's fists.

"You can't catch me," July said, loud enough for us all to hear. "You're not fast enough."

"Ooooh," Jan winced. "I am sorry. July hasn't been this bitchy in years. I don't know what's gotten into her."

"Infatuation," Raine murmured — so fixated on the fight that she was distracted in a way I'd never seen before.

But Zheng did not answer July's goad. She put her fists up again and twisted her body into a different stance, arms held wider to block July's next attempt.

July rose to the challenge a second time. She fell like a raptor and repeated the feat again, coming in like a whip-snap on the air, ducking inside Zheng's guard and landing hammer-blow strikes on her belly, her hips, the sides of her ribcage. I heard a pair of cracking noises, loud and awful, the unmistakable sound of Zheng's ribs breaking under the punches. She heaved a grunt of pain.

July slipped away again, weaving and ducking and twisting like a winged snake. Zheng roared with her final missed counter-attack, fists finding empty air instead of flesh. She turned and spat a mouthful of blood onto the grass — but then she grinned.

"Come at me, pigeon! I almost have you!"

Twil grimaced. "Why's she letting July set the pace? What the fuck is she doing?"

This time there was no pause. July came in a third time, then a fourth, her body whipping around like a length of steel cable. She stuck Zheng in the face, a slamming impact that made Zheng's head snap to the side. Then, finally, Zheng managed to block a blow with her forearm — but July saw it coming and followed up with a strike from another angle. I heard another awful crack, the sound of a breaking bone in Zheng's arm.

"Go down," July said, hopping back. "Or I'll keep hitting you until a concussion."

"Soon, pigeon," Zheng grunted. She was bleeding from her lips, face blossoming with dark bruises, shoulders hunched in pain.

“What’s she doing?!” Twil was up on her feet, arms out, eyes wide. “This is bullshit! Zheng, for fuck’s sake!”

“Oh my goodness,” Jan murmured. “Raine, I do believe you’re right.”

“And Zheng’s rejecting her,” Raine said. “Her whole way of fighting. Shitting on the technique. But I don’t get this, what’s her plan?”

“She’s already won,” I muttered. A feeling filled me like nothing I’d ever felt before, a recognition, an instinctive knowing, though I couldn’t put it into words. I’d never so much as watched a boxing match before, I had no idea how any of this worked, how could I be remotely certain? My tentacles ached to imitate Zheng’s fists, every inch of my skin itched all over with a wordless urge to sprout and bloom; if Evelyn hadn’t been holding my hand, I would have leapt to my feet with the sheer energy of the moment. I was sweating like crazy, almost panting, my head flushed like my brain was bathed in honeyed fire.

“Heather?” Somebody said my name. I wasn’t sure who.

“Zheng’s already won. She’s already won!” I repeated.

July lunged for Zheng a sixth time. I was so sure of Zheng, so certain deep down in my abyssal guts, that I was not prepared at all.

Zheng twisted as if to catch July, to snatch her fists from the air and pin her — but July saw it coming. Zheng went left, because July had always gone left up until now. I only realised that when I saw the mistake.

But this time July went right, ducking around Zheng, taking it wide as if she’d been warned off. But then she stepped in close and actually stopped, full stop, for just a split second.

Just long enough to wind up a hammer-blow to the back of Zheng’s neck.

Crunch, crack. Zheng’s head snapped forward.

I saw the strength go out of her limbs. Connections cut. Nerves interrupted. She was a demon host, she’d heal in minutes — I had no real fear for her safety or health — but she’d lost. A band tightened inside my chest, around my heart.

Her rejection had failed.

But as Zheng started to crumple forward, July allowed herself a split second of relaxation, a single moment of appreciation for a job well done. Muscles stilled, pose slackened, breath left her parted lips.

Zheng's right leg shot out and caught the ground like a spring; she twisted around, turning the crumple into a pounce, a tiger coming out of a feint and into a rugby tackle. It would take more than one sucker-punch to break Zheng's spine.

I was up on my feet and yelling my lungs out when Zheng slammed into July's midsection and rode her to the ground.

for the sake of a few sheep –

15.18

Zheng's tackle hit July in the stomach and hips. She used her whole body as a spring, from her ankles on upward, turning herself into a battering ram of muscle and bone, putting all her strength and weight behind the shoulder that rammed into July's guts. Even over the sound of my own wild shout, Twil's premature victory cheer, Evelyn's hiss, and Jan's sharp wince, I heard a wet crack-crunch of bone — July's pelvis fracturing in two.

Her head snapped forward with whiplash pressure as Zheng's momentum knocked her clean off her feet and bore her to the ground.

For a split second the pair of demons were suspended in the air, a freeze-frame of perfect technique, captured forever against the yellow horizon and void-purple skies of Camelot. July's perpetual wide-eyed look was supplemented by her jaw hanging open in shock. Zheng grinned with sheer savage glee, showing her maw of shark's teeth.

Then they slammed into the yellow velvet grass, so hard I thought I could feel the vibration in the soles of my trainers.

July's skull bounced off the ground and Zheng drove her into the earth. Another uncontrolled shout tore from my throat, like I couldn't help myself. I'd never felt this way before, in the grip of a physical need to celebrate and leap and yell and wave my arms — or my tentacles — at somebody else's success. In that moment I finally understood those cheering crowds of football fans, roaring like one gestalt animal whenever their team scored a goal. I would never again look down on such exultation.

"She's got her!" Twil yelled, pumping both fists in the air, much more used to this sort of thing.

"Looks that way," Jan said through clenched teeth.

Evelyn surged to her feet next to me, craning her neck as if to get a

better view of the fight, though she had a perfectly clear view just sitting on the makeshift carapace-bench. Even she wasn't immune to this rush of shared sensation. But her body couldn't quite keep up, she almost stumbled in an effort to steady her weight on her walking stick. She flinched when I caught her with one hand and one tentacle, but then she clung to my side as she found her feet.

Praem had paused in lifting a strawberry to her own mouth, blank white eyes staring ahead. Lozzie hopped from foot to foot like an overexcited rabbit, poncho fluttering. Behind us I heard a *gurrrrrrr-ruuuk* gurgle of shock from the direction of the gateway. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the fight to check the source, but that was unmistakably Sevens, snuck back over here to watch.

Only one of us didn't react. Raine neither cheered nor winced. Hands on her hips, her expression a mask of focus and concentration, she watched the demons hit the dirt with a squint in her eyes and a frown on her brow.

“That’s gotta be it!” Twil said. “She’s fucked!”

“Don’t be so sure,” Raine murmured.

Everything I knew about fighting I had learnt from listening to Raine, though I had internalised scant little. I did possess a touch of abyssal cunning, that much was true, but instinctive gut-feeling about how to fling oneself across a room with a set of a tentacles, or how to flush one's skin with tetrodotoxin and hiss one's throat raw at a bigger predator, none of that helped with the technical knowledge of a one-on-one fistfight, let alone a competition with formal rules. I'd never so much as watched a boxing match or a martial arts video, at least not before I'd met Raine. But when she'd gushed to me about the intricacies of knife fighting and self-defence, she had made one thing abundantly clear: most real fights went to the ground, went there quickly, and did not come back up again until one combatant had lost.

My gut said surely this was over — July was fast, but Zheng had her now.

Doubt crept into my heart, because my heart trusted Raine. What did she see that the rest of us missed?

For half a second after the impact, the demons just lay there in a heap of bruises and broken bones, entwined together with Zheng's

arms around the small of July's back and her head buried in the side of July's chest, bare skin against bare skin, sweat mixing, both of them winded so hard they had to pause.

Later I would look back on that half-second and realise my earlier jealousy was deeply misplaced. Zheng, my Zheng, my beautiful rumbling giant of muscle and red-chocolate skin and body heat like a furnace, was snuggled up tight against another woman, a woman she had been physically pursuing for weeks, who she had lusted after, and was about to claim. This was not sex, but it was what Zheng wanted, a moment of meaning written with the joining of their own bodies — and all I cared about was that grin of joyous triumph on her face, her satisfaction and violent pleasure.

She was having fun and I was loving it.

A lifeless seed-stone finally germinated into a clean and healthy green sprout, deep inside my chest and gut, soaking up toxic swamp-filth and beginning to purify the waters. But only beginning. Right then was hardly the moment for fully processing that feeling. Now was the time for more violence.

Both combatants whirled back to life before the rest of us had time to take another breath. July bucked beneath Zheng, twisting to get away like a rattlesnake caught by a fox, all sinew and steel-cable muscle. But her legs were pinned beneath Zheng's weight and her pelvis was still broken. Demon hosts could ignore pain — I knew that from the terrifying experience of riding along with Zheng's leap from Glasswick tower, when she'd broken both her legs in multiple places to protect me from any damage — but a snapped pelvis was a structural failure. There was only so much the body could do with miss-anchored muscles and mulched nerve bundles, at least until demon host healing speed kicked in. But that could take minutes. July had only ten seconds to get off the floor before she lost the fight.

On cue, Lozzie raised one arm straight up into the air, a single finger extended to point at the heavens. All around the edge of the unmarked ring of combat, her knights raised swords and lances and axes and shields, then clashed them together in a great metallic stamp, ringing out over the hillsides.

"One!" Lozzie shouted.

"Why's she not moving?!" Twil was yelling. "Zheng, push it!"

Zheng was clinging to July like a limpet, as if she thought she'd already won. July made a fist and swung a roundhouse at the back of Zheng's head. The punch was clumsy and slow compared with her earlier grace and speed, but still with incredible strength behind the blow.

But then Zheng reared up, exploding from the ground like a sprinter from a standing start, using her leg muscles as springs again. July was caught mid-punch, unable to take the opening to wriggle away.

Zheng's right arm flew up, then crashed down to pin July's head against the ground. Zheng roared a laugh like a jungle cat, laughing at the hubris of her prey as July's fist glanced off Zheng's ribs. Her other hand slammed against July's own ribcage, pinning her like an exotic butterfly.

"Oh come on, Jule, stay down," Jan sighed.

"Okay that's gotta be it!" Twil yelled.

The knights clashed weapons against shields a second time. "Two!" Lozzie called out, flicking up a second finger.

July writhed and bucked on the ground, staring up at Zheng with wide owlsh eyes between Zheng's own fingers, as if her gaze alone could throw her opponent clear. Zheng laughed right in her face, roaring a taunt that echoed out over the quiet plains of Camelot.

"Three!" Lozzie counted with the knights.

"Watch the feet," Raine said a split second before it happened.

Zheng wasn't the only one who could feint.

July's struggling and bucking was not enough to overcome Zheng's raw strength, backed up by all the power of her abyssal origins, whatever alien fibres and supernatural enhancements laced her muscles and bones. But then, quick as a lizard in the sun, one of July's helpless attempts to throw Zheng off turned into something else. She jerked her legs up into the gap that Zheng had left between their bodies. A wince — an actual wince — passed over her staring, intense face, a wince of pain at what she was forcing her broken pelvis to support. Perhaps not all demon hosts could suppress their human nerves as expertly as Zheng.

July jackknifed her body, got her feet below Zheng, and kicked her double-barrel in the stomach.

“No!” I cried out, carried along that same stream of wild passion as before, but falling into a ravine of dismay.

Zheng took the kick with a great *ooof* of breath — but she stayed put, to everyone’s shock, especially July’s. The smaller demon host tried to take the opening to whip her body out from beneath Zheng. She managed to jerk her head to slip out from under Zheng’s crushing grip. But she’d expected Zheng to be thrown off her, so her moves were made with that in mind, muscles already locked into the correct response for the wrong result.

Zheng caught July’s head again like a mongoose pinning a snake, sideways this time, with July’s cheek crushed into the grass, facing us.

“Four!” Lozzie called as the knights counted.

July tried to kick Zheng again, legs jackknifing up into a firing position a second time — but Zheng sat on her knees, grinding her broken pelvis into the grass.

“Five!”

Zheng lowered her face toward July’s, pinned helpless against the earth. A slow, wicked grin parted Zheng’s lips, which peeled back upon row after row of razor sharp teeth.

Lozzie’s other arm shot into the air. “Six!”

July’s breath heaved in hard little spurts; I hadn’t known a demon host could visibly panic. Her eyes rolled sideways at Zheng, unable to look her in the face from the angle at which she was trapped, like an animal in a neck-snare. If July had not been a demon, I would have sworn she was terrified, but it was impossible to tell with her wide-eyed, staring look.

Zheng brought her clenched teeth to within inches of July’s cheek.

“Seven!”

Out rolled Zheng’s tongue, inch after inch of thick, wet, red meat, almost a foot of flickering tentacle that lapped the air just shy of July’s quivering eyeballs.

“Serves you right, Jule,” Jan muttered. “See what happens when you bite off more than you can chew?”

“Er,” Twil said, suddenly alarmed. “She’s not gonna ... like ... she’s

not gonna eat her, right?”

“She’s won!” I cheered. “Zheng!”

“Ummmm,” went Twil, increasingly worried.

“Eight!” Lozzie counted in time with the knights clashing their shields.

“If she tries any cannibalism,” Evelyn drawled — though even she could not hide the racing of her heart at this spectacle of violent intimidation, her voice quivering slightly, “then she’ll get knocked off by what is basically a sonic weapon. Relax.”

“She’s making herself clear,” Raine said. Her voice rang with open admiration. “But also, you know, softening the rejection.”

“She is!” I said, surprised to find a smile on my own face. Where had my jealousy gone? Zheng had her opponent pinned and was practically licking her face, a sign that even if she rejected her style, she approved of something. She accepted the connection, on her terms alone. But all I felt was an internal heat to match Zheng’s own, a restless urge to jump and shout and grab something — somebody, anybody — with my tentacles, and spin them around.

I took extra care not to squeeze Evelyn too hard with hand or tentacle alike, though I couldn’t help the way I cradled her shoulders. I wanted to pick her up and hug her.

Lozzie’s final finger flicked up, leaving only one thumb curled into her palm. “Nine!”

Zheng’s writhing tongue whipped back into her mouth. She clicked her teeth shut, millimetres away from July’s ear. Then I saw her lips moving as she purred some secret to her dancing partner.

The loose ring of knights raised their weapons to clash against their shields a final time. Beneath Zheng’s grip, July finally relaxed. The fight went out of her, eyes wide and staring ahead as if she’d already resumed her habitual owlish poise, despite being pinned to the ground.

Zheng — to my shock and horror — relaxed with her.

“Zheng—!” The cry tore up my throat.

July moved so fast she was almost a blur; she pulled her arms upward so her palms were flat on the ground either side of her

chest, then twisted her hips and legs like a rubber band wound tight around a pencil, putting every ounce of muscular strength and surprise into throwing Zheng off her body.

Zheng was hurled into the air like a pebble from a sling, a tangle of flailing limbs going up and over July's head. My chest constricted — victory, stolen!

“Holy shit,” Raine breathed, awe in her trapped words. She saw the result a moment before the rest of us realised.

Zheng's arc was not uncontrolled at all.

Though thrown off July's legs and into the air, Zheng's right hand never left July's skull. For one gravity-defying moment of acrobatic brilliance, she was balanced upside-down on her own joint-locked arm, planted on July's head, her legs in the air, other hand whirling to catch herself. She was grinning wide, eyes blazing with joy, deep in her element.

July twisted again, taking advantage of the split second in which Zheng's weight was in motion. She jackknifed her body, screamed in pain at her shattered pelvis, and attempted to leap to her feet.

But Zheng landed in a folded squat, one hand still cradling July's skull like an eagle with an egg.

“Down!” Zheng roared.

She slammed July's skull back into the ground. July's whole body cracked like the length of a whip, the impact running through her and drumming her heels on the grass.

The knights clashed their weapons upon their shields. “Ten!” Lozzie shouted. She did a little up-down sweep with the fluttery hem of her pastel poncho, like she was waving the finish flag at a race. “Ding ding ding!”

Behind us, the gigantic bulk of her caterpillar emitted a low-pitched *boop* — tiny compared to the warning siren from earlier, a single touch of engine-plates that echoed out across Camelot, rolling away over the hills and off into the sky.

Final bell. Fight was done. Competitors, lay down your arms.

Just as with the opening of the fight, nobody moved for a long moment. Was it really over? After all, what set of rules could

possibly constrain the beings we'd just witnessed? In reality it was only the space of two heartbeats, but it felt like minutes.

Zheng stayed hunched in a squat like an overgrown gargoyle, looming over July's head, one massive hand still pinning her to the ground. The dark pools of her eyes bored down into July. Heaving for breath in victory, running hot with visibly gleaming flash-sweat beneath the shifting purple light of Camelot, she was a thing of rough and muscular beauty. July lay supine below her, staring back up, her own chest rising and falling in a slow, steady pant. Her right hand lifted toward Zheng's face, stopped and wavered, then fluttered back down when Zheng did not react. A final rejected gesture.

Then Raine started clapping.

"Bloody well done!" she called out. "Well done, Zheng! Tough luck, July!"

"Yeah!" Twil joined in, clapping her hands over her head. "Woo!"

"Wheeeee!" went Lozzie.

Zheng finally lifted her claw-grip off July's skull. She paused in mid-air for a moment. The position brought to mind a bird of prey toying with a rabbit, though July was no longer the soaring raptor in the skies. Zheng flexed her fingers, rolled her neck to work out the kinks after the failed killing blow earlier, and rocked back on her heels to give July room to rise. But July just lay there, sighed heavily, and closed her eyes.

Zheng let out a low rumble. A slow, sardonic grin crept across her face,

"You almost had me, bird of prey," she said, loud enough for us all to hear.

"That's going to sting," Jan said with a little sigh. "Her neck or her pride, I'm not sure which will hurt more. She'll sulk for weeks over this one. She did ask for it, though."

"She will be cared for," said Praem.

"Oh, of course." Jan nodded. "Absolutely. I wouldn't dream of otherwise. No hard feelings, not from me."

I barely heard them talking — I had eyes for only Zheng.

She looked up from July, from her vanquished opponent, her friendly playmate, with her dominance firmly established, and turned to me. Our eyes met across the battlefield as she rose to her feet, skin steaming with sweat, her grin growing with pure satisfaction and showmanship. She beamed with pride, rolling her neck and flexing the aching muscles of her back, watching me with a glow in her face and a smoulder in the pits of her eyes.

And I finally realised that though the fight was for July, the show had been for me.

I let out a trapped breath I hadn't known I'd been holding, shaking and flushed with adrenaline, but for once I was not afraid. A stupid grin kept pulling at the corners of my mouth and I had to blink tears out of my eyes. I felt hot all over, like my skin was flushed and my belly was warm, my tentacles itching to flex and uncoil and pull me across the grass toward her. My hands were cold and quivering and I had to tuck them into my armpits — well, the one that Evelyn wasn't clinging to.

"You were beautiful!" I called out, a choking shout through a dry throat. Zheng ran her tongue along her razor-sharp teeth and bobbed her head. But that couldn't possibly be a bow. Zheng bowed to nobody, not even me.

"Heather?" Evelyn asked, none too steady herself. "Are you alright?"

"Just ... just excited!" My voice came out in a squeak. I puffed out a long breath, trying to gather myself. "That was ... that was ..."

I couldn't find the words, I just shook my head, still staring as Zheng curled her back and arms in a huge stretch, healing after the fight. She stuck one hand under her shirt, prodding at the purple bruises blossoming across her skin. For a moment I thought she was about to strip her t-shirt off over her head, but at least she refrained from that excess.

"Quicker than I thought," Evelyn said.

I blinked at her. "Ah?"

"That was quicker than I thought it would be," she explained, letting out a sigh to rival July, though hers was a sign of relief. She rolled one shoulder in a half-hearted attempt to dislodge my tentacle, then seemed to think better of it and aborted the motion

halfway through. “I assumed we’d be stuck here all afternoon while they beat each other black and blue.”

“Evee, Evee, Evee,” Raine said. She turned to us with a big cheeky grin on her face, back to normal after the passing of her fixated awe. I noticed that she still thrummed with hidden excitement, something that perhaps only I was picking up on. Or maybe it was just this intoxicating shared joy. “I know you need zero further evidence that you ain’t your mother, but you really do know bugger all about demon hosts, don’t you?”

Evelyn glowered at her. “I will leave you out here.”

Raine laughed and spread her hands. “Hey, I’m the only one here who’s kicked a demon’s arse before.”

Jan paused halfway through the process of standing up, balancing her fast-food box of chicken in one hand as she clambered to her feet. Her massive, puffy white coat apparently weighed her down slightly, so she had to use Praem’s arm as a handhold. But then she stopped dead and stared at Raine over the top of her sunglasses.

“E-excuse me?” she stammered. “What— demon— you’ve had?” Jan squeezed her eyes shut, huffed, and finished getting to her feet. “I’m sorry, excuse me, you appear to have short-circuited my language centre by talking utter bull. Did I hear that correctly?”

Raine shot a finger gun and a wink at Jan. Evelyn sighed and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Oh, nonsense,” Jan hissed.

“Errrr,” Twil said, “technically not nonsense?”

“It is true,” Praem said, standing up and smoothing her skirt over her hips. Jan boggled at her.

“No shit,” Raine said. “And that was back when I was only a teenager, too. This isn’t my first waltz, I know more than I look—”

“We are not divulging our entire bloody life stories right now,” Evelyn grumbled. “Or I really will leave you here. Yes, Jan, technically Raine has beaten a few demon hosts before, though under very different circumstances. But don’t let her ego fool you. The things my mother once made were nothing like Zheng or July, and certainly nothing like Praem. I’m not even sure they should be classified the same.” She glanced at Praem. “Raine certainly

wouldn't beat any of ours in a fight."

"Oh, oh!" Raine raised her hands in a big performative gesture of modesty. "Praem could wipe the floor with me. No question. Praem, I wouldn't even insult you by asking."

Praem nodded, once.

"Praem, strong!" Lozzie chirped.

"Good," Evelyn sighed. "Now you've stopped waving your dick around, we can—"

"But Zheng?" Raine carried on, allowing herself a sharp and dangerous smirk. "Hey, you never know 'till you try."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. I swallowed down a secret lump in my throat. I think I knew very well why Raine had been so fascinated by every blow and counter-blow of the duel.

"Aw come on," Twil said, "did you see any of that shit?" She gestured at Zheng and July with both hands. "You're good, Raine, I'll give you that, but you'd get your arse handed to you. Raw. Uncooked. Come off it. Heather? Tell her she's not gonna fight Zheng."

I couldn't speak, not without hypocrisy. Deep down in my guts and in the hot, dark, lizard-brain place in the back of my own skull, the grotto of ancient instincts that my abyssal side had identified with, I lusted after the very same experience. My skin itched all over, I had to keep my tentacles close to stop them twitching with wild energy, and my mouth was dry with adrenaline and tension.

I just shook my head.

"*Guuurrrk*," Sevens went from over by the gateway. "Don't know the winner. Maybe, maybe ... " She trailed off into an uncomfortable grumble.

"Don't you start as well!" Evelyn craned round so she could tell Sevens off. "Don't encourage her!"

"Hey, don't worry," Raine said, radiating a worrying level of pure confidence. "I'm not gonna fight Zheng next."

"Bloody right," Evelyn huffed.

Jan watched this entire exchange with blank-faced alarm, obvious

even through her dark glasses. When a moment of silence finally fell, she pulled a pained smile.

“Right,” she said, bright and sarcastic. “Right then. Good to know. Great.”

“It really was quicker than I expected,” Evelyn said. “Which is a blessing because now we can get out of here before we all start going funny. No offence, Lizzie.”

“Mm-mm!” Lizzie did a wiggly shrug. I think she understood we all couldn’t take this as easily as her.

Evelyn caught my eye and nodded toward Zheng and July.

“Heather, do you want to ... ?”

“Oh, yes!” I nodded.

“Quite, quite,” Jan said. “Less time spent out here the better.” She gestured awkwardly with her little tray of chicken skewers. “Didn’t even have time to finish my snack.”

“You don’t want the rest?” Twil perked up, eyes like saucers. “I’ll finish it for you. Don’t waste it.”

“Are you actually a dog?” Jan asked her, peering around the side of her coat and Praem’s hip. “I mean, I know you’ve got this whole werewolf thing going on, and the less I know about that, the better. But this is just what you do? You smell food, or hear about food, and you go oooh, food! I’ve got to be really annoying about food! Is this you?”

“Fuzzy likes her chicken,” Lizzie said.

“Hey,” Twil said, “if you give me some of that chicken, you can call me a mangy bitch, for all I care. What is that sauce on it?”

“Garlic.” Jan sighed. “You’re not a vampire, too, are you?”

“Not that I know. Might wanna be careful about her though.” Twil pointed at Sevens, still lurking just this side of the gateway. At least there was no sign of Tenny and Whistle, safely back in the house.

Jan stared at Sevens for a moment too long, then looked back to Twil. I could almost physically see her decision not to confront this fact.

“You can have one piece of chicken, and that’s all,” she said.

Lozzie did a little twirl on the spot and skipped past us. “Can I have some toooooo?” she asked.

Jan suddenly went quite tongue-tied, um-ing and ahh-ing as Lozzie bobbed in front of her.

“Farcical,” Evelyn hissed under her breath. “I need a cup of tea, sod all this.”

Evelyn and I left the chicken negotiations behind as we walked arm in arm to go see the victor and the vanquished. Raine joined us too, on my opposite side.

The three of us walked up to Zheng and July, one standing tall and the other lying defeated on the ground. July still had her eyes closed, breathing softly, almost as if asleep. Her tank-top and jeans were scuffed with the dry earth, twisted and askew. A few strands of her silky black hair had escaped from the tight bun on the back of her head. Zheng watched me approach, face split with that beaming grin of pride, rumbling with each breath like a tiger in repose. She was covered in a sheen of sweat, steaming gently in the soft wind. I could smell her on the air, rich and spiced, sweat and heat and furnace-fires, iron and blood.

“What is this?” Evelyn grumbled, leaving heavily on her walking stick when we stopped. She nodded to encompass both demons. “A bloody renaissance painting?”

“Well done, lefty, well done, hey?” Raine gave Zheng a little personal round of applause. “And well done to the loser, too,” she added for July, voice absolutely free of even a hint of mockery. She really meant what she said. “You put up one hell of a fight, July. You’re fast as greased lightning, girl. I’m impressed.”

“Gotta go fast,” July said from down on the ground. She sounded deeply, thoroughly defeated, almost depressed.

I didn’t understand why Raine laughed, or why Evelyn put her face in her hand and groaned. “Don’t tell me you’re as bad as your sister back there,” Evelyn hissed.

“We must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey,” said July. “And I am in pain.”

Zheng ignored all of it.

“Did you see me, shaman?” she purred.

I nodded, found my throat was dry, and had to exert extra effort to keep my tentacles close to my body, tightly wound like compressed springs. The one tentacle holding my squid-skull mask felt paralysed with indecision. My ankles tensed, twitching to spring toward Zheng. Only Evelyn's arm around mine kept me anchored.

"You were ... very impressive. Very. I was very ... impressed." I huffed out a sigh at my own inarticulate nonsense. "Oh, for pity's sake. Yes, Zheng, that was incredible. I've never seen anything like it before. And I feel better too, now."

"Mmmm?" Zheng tilted her head at me, blinking slowly.

"Uh ... " I came up short.

"Yeah, no kidding," Twil added from behind us, though a mouthful of chicken. "I've watched some MMA before, but that was off the hook."

She sauntered up, chewing on her own prize, one garlic-glazed drumstick. Lozzie, Jan, and Praem wandered over as well, though Sevens stayed by the gateway, perhaps kept tethered by the proximity to Tenny. Jan was delicately holding up another garlic slathered chicken drumstick for Lozzie to nibble on, her sunglasses pushed up on her forehead, a faint blush in her soft and delicate cheeks.

Zheng ignored all of that, too.

"Better, shaman?" Zheng purred, showing a thin sliver of her many teeth through parted lips.

"She means," July added from the floor, "that she has resolved her internal contradictions. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis." July finally cracked open her eyes, from shut to owl-wide in one flicker of dark lashes. She looked at me, slightly pathetic at that angle, like a bird with bound wings. "Or not quite synthesis, not yet."

She sounded deeply sad.

"Heeeeeeey," Raine said. "I like how you think."

Zheng blinked slowly at me one more time, then turned away and held out a huge, meaty hand toward July, to help her up. July just stared at the hand.

Jan sighed. "Oh, don't be a sore loser, Jule."

"I'm not sore," July said. "I am ... " She paused, frowning. Her expression reminded me of a confused child. "Pained."

"Get up, bird of prey," Zheng rumbled.

"My hips—"

"Are healed. Good enough to stand. So stand."

July accepted Zheng's hand at last, but surprised me by averting her eyes as Zheng helped pull her to her feet. She quickly let go again, standing there with her arms awkward and limp, her feet close together, her eyes fixed on the floor. Dejected, humiliated, she would rather have stayed lying down. In that moment, I finally realised what I was looking at. July, demon host, speed machine, tall and elegant and pretty, athletic and strong, far closer to being Zheng's equal than I ever could, with the mannerisms of a hungry predator and the talons to match, had the heart of a teenage girl.

Raine must have picked up on that impression too, because her instincts kicked in. "Hey," she said, warm and soft, "sometimes you just lose. It's not so bad, yeah? If it's not life or death, then you learn from it. And hey, maybe you learn from it even when it is life or death."

"Bird of prey, you are not rendered flightless," Zheng rumbled.

"I ... " July spoke to the ground, frowning. "Had hoped to ... impress you?"

"You did, bird of prey," Zheng purred through a low smile. "You are fast and you are skilled. And I enjoyed you. But I have been doing this for a long time. I have traded blows with mage-creations, Outsiders, true warriors, real vampires. I have eaten the flesh of man-killer bear, crowned monkey, and *ghul* alike. I have stood on more battlefields than I remember. And now my blood itself runs with the shaman's own blessing, her holy flesh inside me." Zheng's hands went to her arm and her flank — the locations of the wounds that *Ooran Juh* had left on her, which I had healed with my own bootstrapped abyssal white blood cells and pneuma-somatic shearing teeth.

Holy? I almost whined in my throat at that. I wanted to bundle Zheng to the ground and bite her or something. The urge was nonsense, but it was making my eyes water and my guts clench.

“Bird of prey, how old are you?” Zheng continued.

“I wanted to ... I wanted you to ... ”

“She’s twenty five,” Jan spoke up with a sigh. “But the first fifteen years of that were not exactly fruitful. So maybe she’s ten. Or, well.” She eyed Praem, whose arm she was still holding. “Perhaps regular ages don’t apply to demons.”

“Twenty five years!” Zheng laughed, a good-natured belly laugh. “You are a sapling. And you were good.”

“It isn’t enough,” July said, frowning down at the grass. “I wanted you to come with me. And then I wanted to show you that I could be enough.”

“Thank you,” I blurted out before I could stop myself. “July, thank you for playing with Zheng. I’m sorry I was such a bitch. Thank you. She enjoyed it. That’s what matters. Didn’t you enjoy it too?”

July finally looked up, but not at Zheng. She stared at me, still wide-eyed but somehow lost.

“I don’t understand why I feel like this,” she said to me, accusing, hurt, confused.

“Girl,” Raine said with a sigh and grin, putting her hands on her hips. “You’ve got a crush.”

July turned to stare at Raine instead, head flicking around like an owl hearing the rustle of a vole beneath a pile of leaves. Behind us, Twil spluttered, almost choking on a mouthful of chicken. Lozzie let out a muffled squeal.

“Yes,” I sighed. “I was trying to avoid saying that. Trying to be polite, Raine.”

Evelyn frowned sidelong at me. “I thought you disliked this demon now?”

“Well, that’s before I realised that she’s struggling with ... *feelings*.”

“I have not got a crush,” July said.

“You so have,” Jan added, waving her final chicken drumstick in the air. “This isn’t her first, but it’s certainly the most messy. Come on, Jule, you’ve been turned down but it’s been very complimentary. Take the L’ on this one.”

“Wait, wait!” Twil said. “You’re telling me we’ve done all this because of a teenager with a crush?”

“That seems to be the case,” I said, clearing my throat as delicately as I could.

Twil started laughing. “Come on! Really?!”

July stared into mid-air, uncomfortable in a way none of us could help with. Her frown concentrated around her eyes, pinched and narrowing, turned inward on herself.

Just when I thought we were going to witness a demon host bursting into tears and ugly crying in front of a bunch of people she probably felt humiliated by, Praem whirled into action. She gently removed Jan’s hand from her arm, lifted her little plastic box of strawberries, and walked right up to July with a neat and strict economy of motion.

“You,” July said to her by way of greeting, staring with more confusion than accusation.

“Me,” Praem agreed.

“Um,” I murmured, alarmed by the sudden confrontation. But Evelyn held tight to my arm and leaned close to my ear.

“Trust her,” she hissed.

“You are not like me,” July said to Praem. “I respect you but I am not interested in fighting—”

“Would you like a strawberry?” Praem asked.

July stared at the box of fruit; July stared back into Praem’s blank, milk-white eyes; July stared at Praem’s hand as it found July’s elbow and gently guided her away from Zheng, away from us, and drew her off far enough that we couldn’t hear what they might say to each other. Praem opened the box of strawberries and held one up. July shook her head. Praem ate the strawberry, but July did not storm off or lose interest.

“Oh, I didn’t expect that,” Jan said after a moment, looking a bit abandoned in her puffy coat and flashy tracksuit. “Gosh, your Praem is quite the polymath, isn’t she? Diplomacy and hostage-negotiation too.”

“Hostage negotiation?” I blinked at Jan. “I didn’t think it was

getting that tense.”

Jan shrugged, her empty fast food tray in one hand. “Figure of speech. Sounds cooler than ‘social worker’ or ‘therapist for troubled teens’.”

“I dunno,” Raine said. “I think social workers are pretty cool.”

Evelyn let out an almighty huff. “Why are we having this conversation Outside?”

Jan actually perked up at that. “Human beings can get used to almost anything, you know? In fact, I feel better than I did when we stepped in here. It’s still, well, weird, but not so bad.”

“Trust me,” Twil said, “there’s worse places than this.”

“Indeed,” I sighed.

“Are we done here?” Evelyn asked, growing peevish. “Anybody would think we’re in a public park, not standing around beyond the boundaries of reality and wondering if we’re being irradiated by the sky.” Evelyn glanced up, frowning at the whorls of shifting purple in the black firmament above, like the spiral arms of disrupted galaxies spreading as ink in oil.

“It’s ... it’s not, right?” Jan stammered all of a sudden. She glanced up at the sky too, then pushed her sunglasses back over her eyes. “We’re not all being cooked, are we?”

“Noooooo!” said Lozzie, but she made it sound more like *Noouuuuuh!*

Laughing, she tried to envelop Jan’s shoulders with her poncho. The coat rather got in the way. If Jan hadn’t been armoured deep inside her puffy bulwark, I’m certain the Lozzie jellyfish attack would have engulfed her totally. Instead, Lozzie rather ineffectually draped herself over Jan, which caused Jan to blush and blink and make a one-woman massive fuss.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Evelyn explained. “Lozzie is trustworthy. Besides, Heather spent a lot of time out here before and she’s fine. Now, are we going home? Please?”

“We are not done yet, wizard,” Zheng purred, bottled excitement deep in her gravelly tone. “Are we, shaman?”

A shiver went through me, hard and unexpected, a hot flush from

inside my core which was more than just emotional reaction. The bioreactor inside my abdomen responded to Zheng's purr by ramping up power production, making me suddenly run hot, breaking out in a layer of cold sweat. Her voice was like a lash and a leash, yanking my attention back up to her hypnotic eyes. Zheng's lips peeled back from her teeth in a dangerous smile, all razor-sharp edges, face glowing like a furnace.

Suddenly I felt the same way as when we'd first met, back in that ugly concrete room in Glasswick tower, when I'd thought she was going to eat me alive. I was a field-mouse frozen by a serpent's gaze.

For a moment I could barely breathe. Then I hiccuped. " ... we're not," I managed to murmur.

"We're not?" Zheng purred, grinning with deep satisfaction.

"Don't get— get rhetorical with me," I said, my mouth bone dry and my hands shaking. "Stop teasing."

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," went Twil, the universal sound of muted alarm. "Uh, Heather, you want me to take Evee off you, there?"

"Oh for—" Evelyn huffed. She was still clamped to my arm, using me as support and anchor. "You're joking? Heather, you're joking."

"The shaman needs what the shaman needs," Zheng purred, eyes boring into me like hot coals through shivering ice. But I stood my ground.

"Eveey-weevy puddin' and pie," Lizzie sing-songed, wrapping herself around Evelyn's opposite arm with gentle care, then peeling her off me. "Back away, away away."

"Yeah yeah clear some space!" Twil said, much more relaxed with Evelyn out of the way. "Zheng, you be gentle now!"

"No worries on that front," Raine said.

"Are you people serious?" Jan asked. "Do you all do this? Just beat each other up on a whim?"

"Nah," Raine hissed in a stage-whisper. "This is a Zheng thing. And a Heather thing, maybe."

But I barely heard their words. The chatter of night insects at the

edge of the blazing bonfire that was Zheng. Freed from the responsibility of cradling Evelyn's shoulders, my tentacles subconsciously drifted outward, like a squid suspended in still waters at the ocean floor; half threat display, half subconscious mating ritual, I didn't even know what I was doing. My throat ached as if a bone was out of place and needed to be popped back in. My skin itched to flush itself with strobing colouration. My eyes stung and my gums ached and the tendons in my ankles creaked as if ready to turn to bio-steel and launch me forward like coiled springs.

"Say it, shaman. I've seen it on your face all week."

"... fight me too!" I tried to say — but I just hissed at her, then blushed bright red.

"But you will lose," she purred. "Unless you fight for real."

"It—" I gurgled, then swallowed hard and forced real words up my twisting throat. "It doesn't matter! I don't care! Fight me and win then, quickly!"

"As you will it, little bird," Zheng purred, grinning like a great white shark.

I was not actually conscious or aware of the moment I threw myself at Zheng. Memory struggles to encode itself on moments of such high stress, such relief and release, such physical overload. Raine later testified that I bounced off the ground with my tentacles, like an octopus pouncing on a crab, though Twil added I did land and stumble as if I'd fallen off a pogo-stick, not exactly the picture of abyssal grace and beauty. Lizzie assured me that I was very cool and "very wriggly!" Evelyn just sighed and shrugged when I asked her, not one for all this performative violence and play-fighting.

The next thing I knew, I slammed into Zheng. I recall her face, her roaring grin, her sheer pleasure that I'd finally joined in. I hit her as a ball of lashing tentacles, my extra limbs flailing to catch her wrists or her elbows, trying to constrict and bind and pin. But there was no toxin in my flesh, no barbed hooks to rip at her skin, no stingers or spikes or spines. Just strobing rainbow glow-light, latching onto her body and wrapping round tight.

She caught me in mid-air, of course. I offered absolutely no challenge to her speed or her strength, not without brain-math or

delving deep into the pits of abyssal biology.

Zheng caught me by the shoulder and chest. She made a good effort to cushion my wild leap, but it still knocked the wind out of me. My attempts to wrestle her arms with my tentacles were equally fruitless.

She caught me like a rugby ball, swung me through the air so hard my head spun, and slammed me to the ground.

Well, for a given value of slammed. It *felt* like a slam, at my size and general fragility. For Zheng, I'm sure it was very gentle. She even cradled my head.

I hissed in her face with manic, animalistic joy, with fighting joy, something I'd never felt before. I flailed my feet against her hips as she pinned me to the grass. I wrapped my tentacles around her arms and shoulders, half constricting attack, half romantic embrace. But even with two tentacles wound about her right arm like a pair of boa constrictors, she held me pinned with ease. I could not pry her off me.

At some point during the leap, I must have rammed the squid-skull mask on over my head, because Zheng gently slipped it free, exposing me to the open air and the spiced scent of her skin.

"Haha!" she roared with laughter, sweat gleaming on her skin. "Shaman, I have you beaten!"

"Not— yet!" I heaved against her, panting and laughing, flushed all over.

Subconsciously at first, then with increasing intention, one of my tentacles drifted upward to hover next to Zheng's flank. The tip narrowed, sharpened, and I felt the alchemical process beginning inside the pneuma-somatic flesh. A bio-steel needle coalesced inside tentacle-tip. The desire I'd been so ashamed of blossomed into reality, inches from Zheng's rib cage.

She noticed, turning the dark razors of her eyes upon my sin.

I stopped laughing, suddenly self-conscious and mortified. I ached like I was on the edge of sexual climax — but this wasn't sex. It was something else. Something just as carnal, but not sexual. I had no frame of reference for this.

"I'm ... " I tried to speak, to explain myself. "I don't ... "

“Little bird,” Zheng purred, turning back to me and lowering her head toward my face. Her teeth parted, the length of her tongue flickering behind sharp points. “Did you really think I would leave you for another?”

“You didn’t come home!” I blurted out, my voice a scratchy mess through a throat barely human right then. “For days! You were out fighting and having fun and I thought you might have been hurt again where I couldn’t get to you! And I wanted to see you having fun! I want to be included!”

Zheng purred deep in her throat, lowering her parted teeth toward me. Her tongue — inch after inch of dripping, steaming tentacle — slid out between her lips and hovered in front of my face, sliding past my eyes to rasp across my left cheek. She licked me, rough as a cat’s tongue, leaving a sticky wet slick across my face.

Then her tongue retreated again, teeth snapping shut. I was quivering all over.

“You need only ask, shaman,” she purred. “I apologise for making you worry. But for nothing else.”

“And I ... I’m sorry for being jealous.”

The grin ripped back across Zheng’s face. “Haha! Foolish monkey!”

And with that, she picked me up and whirled me into the air again. I shrieked and hiccuped and grabbed on tight with my tentacles, half-convinced she was about to toss me like a caber. But she spun me round and placed me back down on my feet. Head spinning, heart hammering, I clung to her and her familiar heat, panting and spent.

“You may wrestle me at your leisure, shaman,” Zheng purred, placing a hand on my head, cupping my skull like an egg. “Whenever you wish.”

The one tentacle which had started the transformation into alchemical delivery device now retreated, joining my others and ceasing the process. I hugged Zheng around the middle, carelessly mashing my face into the bruises beneath her t-shirt.

“It’s more than that,” I murmured. “I won’t be able to do this without you. All of it. The Eye, Maisie ...”

Zheng’s hand stroked the back of my head. “If my fists could break

Laoyeh, shaman, I would shatter every bone.”

I rubbed my face back and forth, shaking my head. “I don’t need you to do that. I just need you by me. Like this. We don’t even have to ever have sex, not if that’s not what we are. Or ... we could?”

Zheng answered with a purr. We didn’t need more words.

“Ah-hem,” came an uncomfortable throat-clearing from behind me. “I understand you two are having a ... moment,” Evelyn said. “But we really should go home.”

“Oh!” I jerked like I’d touched an electric fence, suddenly realising that everyone was watching.

I stepped away from Zheng, though half my tentacles stayed attached to her. I scooped my squid-skull mask off the ground and fluttered about trying not to look anybody else in the eyes, mortified by the way I’d been acting, but also oddly proud. Lozzie was silently squealing into her hands next to Evelyn. Jan watched me with a wary frown. Twil shot me a wink when she caught my eyes, congratulations for a job well done. Praem and July had wandered back almost to the gateway, where Sevens was saying something to them.

“Ha!” Zheng barked. “Shaman, be proud!”

“I am, I am!”

“Yes,” Evelyn sighed. “And we can all be more proud somewhere that is not Outside.”

But Raine was staring at Zheng, so intense and focused that Zheng’s attention was drawn to her like steel to a magnet. The look on Raine’s face sent my heart fluttering, and not in the good way. Evelyn froze and went pale when she noticed.

“Raine!” Evelyn snapped. “Raine!”

“Nah,” Raine murmured, shaking her head.

“Oh shit, what now?” Twil said. “Not you too, for fuck’s sake.”

“I was right!” Jan threw her hands in the air, or at least wiggled the overstuffed sleeves of her coat. “You lot are all just gagging to beat each other up! I was wrong, you’re not a polycule or a cult, you’re a masochist club! Count me out, thank you very much indeed.”

“Little wolf?” Zheng purred.

Raine smiled, sharp and confident. Slowly, she peeled her leather jacket off her shoulders and slipped her arms out of the sleeves, revealing the tight black t-shirt beneath; I don’t know if it was the adrenaline in my blood or the aftershock of what I’d just done with Zheng, but the sight of Raine unwrapping her body like that sent a shiver of alarm and excitement through me.

“Raine,” I squeaked. “Raine, you know you can’t.”

“You just did,” she answered. She was so focused on Zheng that she couldn’t even look at me.

“B-but ... I’m ... ”

“Different?” Raine asked. She stuck her hand inside her jacket before she dropped it, letting the leather fall to reveal the single black talon of her combat knife. The blade seemed to drink up the purple light of Camelot, reflecting nothing. She spun it into a backhand grip. “I’m different too.”

“Oh my goodness,” Jan said, taking several steps back.

“Different in the fucking head!” Twil said. “That’s a fucking knife, you loon!”

“Yeah, a knife,” Raine said, smirking at Zheng.

“For what purpose, little wolf?” Zheng asked, low and unimpressed, not smiling anymore. “We swore a vow.”

“Because you and I don’t understand each other yet,” said Raine. “Not really. So I’m next up.”

for the sake of a few sheep – 15.19

Raine laid her challenge at Zheng's feet like a bloodied rabbit, awaiting an answer.

She held her matte black combat knife in a backhand grip, like a venomous fang so rarely slid from its fleshy sheathe. I sensed her intent on the edge of my conscious mind, in the placement of her feet, the tilt of her hips, the slow unfolding of tension in her shoulders and upper arms. Raine, standing beneath the slowly shifting purple of Camelot's void-sky, stripped down to a skin-tight black t-shirt and blue jeans, all subtle toned muscle and wound-tight tendon. Her body language spoke straight to my instincts, the promise of violence flowing up her musculature and out through the kinetic energy of her raw physicality. This aspect of her personality, her ability and propensity for violence, had aroused me since the very first time I'd witnessed her fight. I was familiar with this, I accepted this part of her, and I thought I knew everything about it.

But out in Camelot, throwing down the metaphorical gauntlet, the sight of her stole a beat from my heart.

Raine never ceased to surprise me.

I had made a choice to love Raine, consciously or otherwise, to build something concrete with each comforting embrace, each casual touch and wordless back-rub, every time we woke up tangled together in the morning, each time I asked her how she was feeling, each kiss and cuddle and tiny act of care.

So I am not proud to admit this, but on occasion — whenever I was wrapped up in my own issues, pursuing my own white whales of emotional tangle-knots down hidden rabbit holes to a very different type of Wonderland — sometimes, I took this side of Raine for granted.

She was always there, always my Raine, always beaming with confidence or ready to spring to my defence, always with a hidden

trick up her sleeve, or a concealed weapon in her clothes. Even after the bullet wound in Carcosa and the emotional crisis in the hospital, after she'd unfolded to me the secret valves and byways of her heart, she had not wavered for even a second. She had never strayed and never lost faith, though I was teased and courted and cared for by ancient zombies, Outsider princesses, and her own oldest and best friend. She had told me she would never lose interest and never move on, even if I became some star-spawn squid-thing. She meant that; from any other it might be only hollow reassurance, but I had faith in Raine. Perhaps taking her for granted was a form of self-harm, an incoherent complaint from the part of me that still didn't believe I deserved her. Why did she stay, when she had no reason except me?

She was only human, compared with all those others — compared with me. So sometimes I forgot what she was.

As she raised her knife in that backhand grip, an animal shiver shot up my spine, raced down into my belly, and grabbed me by the crotch. And I wasn't even the target of Raine's violent delight, she was staring at Zheng. If she'd turned that look on me, I would have fainted, trilobe reactor or not.

Raine never ceased to surprise me, yes; Evelyn had said the same thing once, back when we'd first met, but she had meant it negatively. In retrospect, neither of us really understood Raine, neither of us got what she was, no matter how much she put into words. There was something about her in that moment, for me at least, that outstripped all Zheng's aggression and brooding dark intensity. The sight of her plunged a fist into my belly, grabbed my guts, and held me firm.

The promise of Raine's violence, the tension in her musculature, was laced with desire.

Which was probably why I went completely tongue-tied, long enough for Zheng to reply first.

"Little wolf?" Zheng asked. "Or nothing more than a hyena?"

Raine beamed with cheeky confidence. "Hey, don't knock hyenas. They steal kills off lions, you know? And I don't mean once or twice. They do it all the time. Great big cat-dog things, they're kinda sweet. You wanna call me a hyena, go ahead, I'd be honoured. But it's my turn with you now."

“Hyenas are cute ... ” Lozzie murmured, then bit her lip.

Twil rediscovered her voice too. “Your turn?” she said. “She’s not a fucking water slide! Plus she’s just gotten beaten up once, you really are stealing a kill. Well okay, not *kill*, but yeah. Hyena is right!”

“How you feeling, left hand?” Raine asked Zheng. “All healed up?”

Zheng was not amused. She rolled her head without taking her eyes off Raine, drawing in a deep breath as if testing her ribcage for lingering fractures. She flexed both fists, searching for pain.

“Don’t answer that,” I blurted out when I realised what Raine was doing. I tightened the grip of the three tentacles I had wrapped around Zheng’s arms and shoulders. “Zheng, don’t—”

“I am healed, hyena. It makes no difference.”

“Quite,” Evelyn snapped. She tried to stamp with her walking stick, but the velvety yellow grass absorbed the impact, turning it into a dull thump. “Raine, don’t you dare. I know that look, I’ve seen it on your face a dozen times. Control yourself! Heather, say something to her.”

“I ... um ... ”

I also knew that look on Raine’s face, but I doubted that Eevee understood what she was witnessing.

Raine never ceased to surprise me, but I should have seen this one coming. I had known this might happen, ever since that rain-drenched night in our bedroom, when Raine had stripped down half-naked in the grey light, holding her knife like a holy relic, her body taut with hidden potential and unspeakable excitement. I had assumed she wanted to beat Zheng for the glory of proving herself, to take her place equal to my ‘left hand’.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. The truth was written in her eyes and her musculature, plain to me, because I’d seen both elements of this alloy so many times before, but never combined into one.

She *wanted* Zheng.

“Heather understands,” Raine said, though she spoke to Zheng. “Your shaman understands this, big girl. She knows we need to do it. So how about it? You and me. Right now.”

“I refuse,” Zheng purred, still deeply unimpressed.

“Playing hard to get?” Raine laughed softly and shook her head. “Look, lefty, I’m not gonna insult you by taunting you as a coward or something, ‘cos we both know that isn’t true. Look at me. Look at me real careful.”

Zheng rumbled a wordless sound as she breathed out. Her eyes narrowed at Raine.

“You don’t have to do this,” I whispered.

“You want this too,” Raine said, voice low and husky, honey over rock.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Twil hissed. “God-damn shit, every time I think I have a handle on you lot, you do something like this!”

“You’re telling me,” Jan murmured. While Raine and Zheng had been facing off, Jan had slowly slid behind Lozzie and Evelyn. Apparently her massive puffy coat was not protection enough from the coming storm.

“We made a vow,” Zheng rumbled. “Not to fight. For the shaman it would be as if her left hand and right hand went to war.”

Raine relaxed by a tiny fraction. For a moment I thought we had gotten through to her, but then she sighed and spun her knife over her palm, like a spider cleaning her fangs.

“We made a vow not to fight for real,” she said. “This is different, it’s a contest. Isn’t it? I’m not gonna try to kill you or anything. And I sure do hope you’ll extend the same courtesy to me.” Raine smirked. “After all, hey, I’m a lot more fragile than you, big girl.”

“Raine!” I tried to sound stern, to channel Evelyn, but my voice came out as a squeak — because part of me didn’t really want her to stop, part of me did understand why she was doing this. “Raine, listen to yourself! How can you expect to win? I love you and believe in you, but this is Zheng!”

“Yeah,” said Twil. “She’s gonna wipe the floor with you. Maybe literally. Mop Raine.”

Raine finally looked away from Zheng and met my eyes. She was glowing, almost vibrating, but not with her usual boundless confidence. She was tight and flushed with a cocktail of sexuality and violence, hard-edged and razor-sharp. My three unoccupied

tentacles coiled in tight to my body, wrapping around my torso, the cephalopod version of putting my fists beneath my chin and clutching my arms to my chest. I hugged my squid-skull helmet like a plushie, like it might protect me.

Raine had a demon's look in her eyes.

"Why, little wolf?" Zheng purred.

Raine's gaze left me and I sighed with relief.

"Because we ain't a proper triangle yet," Raine answered, shaking her head. "You, me, and Heather. We're flawed, we're missing a beam, we gotta bridge that gap. And I've tried, you know? I've really tried to be attracted to you, lefty."

Jan huffed from behind her bulwark. "*Not a polycule*," she hissed under her breath. "What absolute bullshit."

Lozzie, face buried in her poncho, let out a muffled squeal. Evelyn shot a glare at her like she wanted to thwap Lozzie over the head, but thankfully she didn't. Even poised on the cusp of a psychopathic death-match, I would have shouted at Evelyn if she'd given in to that particular urge.

"But I just ain't into you," Raine carried on. "You ain't my type, no matter how I think about you, not on that kind of level, not in the kinda way that Heather is. I've tried to understand, but I just don't. I don't get you, and I don't think you get me either." She spun her knife in her hand again, rotating the grip in her palm, letting the black blade drink the strange purple light. "And you know why? Because we haven't tried talking in the one language we share."

I actually whined, deep down in my throat. Evelyn rolled her eyes and threw her hands up, exasperated beyond words. Over by the gate, I noticed Sevens staring with all the interest of a rubbernecking motorist passing the site of a gruesome pile-up. Praem and July had stopped next to her, perhaps not expecting us to linger long.

Zheng let out a slow, rumble purr, tilting her head with cautious interest. "We are a right hand and a left hand. We need not join."

Raine laughed without humour. "Need ain't the same as want."

"Why now?"

“Why not now?” Raine spread her arms, knife flashing out at the end of one hand. “We might never get another chance, you and I. Once we get that book, once we go where we’re going, maybe there won’t be an *after*. Maybe this time nobody comes back from Wonderland.”

Zheng bared her teeth in a silent snarl. “The shaman will—”

“I asked Heather to marry me. Did she tell you that?”

“Raineeeee!” I squealed.

“What?!” Lozzie exploded about two feet off the ground, flapping her hands.

“Holy shit,” said Twil. “Figures.”

Jan just started laughing. Evelyn shook her head.

Zheng grunted. “Monkey fictions do not interest me. You and the shaman are already joined, as are she and I.”

Raine shrugged. “I happen to agree, but hey, the point stands. We might not come back, we might not make it. We might not ever have another chance.” She let out a long, deep breath, shuddering with anticipation. “I don’t know why I feel this. I’ve never felt like this before, not even with Heather. It’s different, somehow. There was a shade of it with Amy Stack, but only a shade, and hey, she’s married and has a kid, and she’s straight, too. Pity. Plus she wasn’t on my side.” Raine pointed at Zheng with the end of her knife, a black claw extended. “You’re on my side, Zheng. And I want you. This ain’t a crush.”

Slowly, horribly, matching the sinking feeling in my stomach, a curious smile spread across Zheng’s face. “You cannot keep up with me.”

“Oh, I think I can.”

“Yo, yo,” Twil said, clicking her fingers as if to break them out of a trance, boggling at Raine like she’d gone mad — which, in a way, she had. “What do you think you’re gonna do, hey? She’s gonna take that knife — like, literally, just pull it out of your hand — and then pin you to the floor, dumb arse!”

“Oh?” Raine tilted a smirk at Twil. “Maybe Zheng should worry more about touching this knife.”

“Raine,” Evelyn grunted. “Raine, what have you done?”

A chill settled into my belly, a hand of ice inside my guts. “Um, yes, Raine, what do you mean by that?”

“Uh ooooooh,” went Lozzie.

All around us, the loose ring of Lozzie’s knights suddenly shifted, a glinting of chrome surfaces as weapons were adjusted and shields raised by an inch or two.

“Whoa, whoa,” Raine said, defusing worry with an easy laugh. She raised the knife and held it level so I could see. “Nothing supernatural! It’s a knife, that’s all. I swear. Hey, I said it’s a contest. If I win by trickery that doesn’t prove a thing, right? This isn’t a gutter fight, it’s a real duel.”

“You promise?” I asked.

“Promise.” Raine winked at me.

“Hooooooo,” Lozzie let out a high-pitched sigh. Her knights relaxed again. “Raine, no scary words!”

“Sorry, Loz,” said Raine.

Zheng tilted her head. “Stop riddling, hyena. Make your proposal.”

Raine laughed. “How can you tell I’ve got one? Nah, don’t answer that, rhetorical question. You can tell because we’re finally talking in a language we both speak. Do I even need to say it out loud?

“Mmmmm,” Zheng rumbled. She glanced down at me and around at everyone else. “For the rest.”

Raine nodded. She spun her knife in her hand again, flipping it over the back of her palm like she was doing a trick. It required her to completely let go of the handle, so for a moment I thought she’d flubbed the technique and was about to drop the blade — but she snatched it out of the air, firm and confident. She angled it down toward the ground like a fencer with a sword. Chin up. Back straight. Eyes forward.

“First blood,” she said.

“Ha!” Zheng barked. “Yours or mine?”

“Yours, naturally.”

“Ugh,” went Twil, rolling her eyes like a grumpy teenager. “Cut the drama, will you? Raine, she’s gonna break your nose with one punch.”

“I must admit,” Jan piped up again from behind Lozzie and Evelyn, “that sounds quite likely. I’d pay to see it though. You should sell tickets for this.”

Evelyn caught my eyes and interrogated me with a silent frown, pinched and urgent. But I couldn’t do a single thing here. I couldn’t even step between Raine and Zheng — I’d never seen Raine so attractive, so glowing with violent magnetism. If I stepped between them I would faint, or turn to jelly, or have an orgasm on the spot just from being looked at like that.

Part of me wanted to see this fight, wanted to see the two most attractive women I’d ever known locked in a grapple with each other. I tried to force that part of me down, but I was still clinging to Zheng with three tentacles, practically right in the firing line. I was useless at stopping this. Besides, I wasn’t sure that I had any right to do so.

“No, I’m serious,” Raine carried on, low and gentle. “Unless you’re really that confident. Unless you think my knife is just for show.”

“You’ve hit me before,” Zheng said, “but I was not trying to avoid you.”

“See, I watched how you fought July. You stood there and you took it. That’s all well and good, but what if she’d had a knife and you hadn’t? What if she’d cut your tendons and left you on the ground?” Raine raised an eyebrow, letting the question stand against the gentle wind for just a moment. “So that’s my challenge. First blood — your first blood. If I cut you even once, I win. If you can disarm and immobilize me, you win.”

Zheng stared for a second, then bared her teeth in a slow grin, razor-sharp and ready to bite down. “A challenge.”

“Exactly,” Raine purred back.

“Zheng,” I whined. “Please.”

“Oh, come on,” Jan said, up on tip-toes to peer over Lozzie’s shoulder. “That’s hardly fair. Even I can see that.”

“Sounds pretty fair to me, actually,” Twil said. “As long as like,

Zheng isn't allowed to break both of Raine's legs or something."

Zheng rumbled deep in her throat. "That would bring the shaman no pleasure and no gain." Her eyes crept down to me again. I swallowed and felt like tripping backward away from her. "No permanent damage. My hands are tied."

"It's the only way we can fight without sending one of us to the hospital," Raine said.

"Unfair," a hard and unimpressed voice suddenly cut across our little group. "Unfair. You do Zheng a disrespect."

July stood a few paces behind Jan, staring at Raine. She and Praem had wandered back over, trailed distantly by the diminutive yellow-wrapped figure of Sevens. July had three strawberries balanced awkwardly in one hand, but Praem still held the box.

I shot a frown at July, surprised at the heat of my own irritation. "July, I have partially forgiven you because you're a ... teenager with a crush, but what you did was brimming with disrespect. You can hardly talk about that."

"Bird of prey—" Zheng rumbled.

July spoke over her. "It is not fitting—"

"Fair representation of atrocity," Praem intoned. Everyone looked at her in confusion, all except Zheng and Raine.

"Yeah," Raine sighed with implicit apology in her voice, nodding to Praem. "You know what I'm talking about. Sorry, Praem. I was trying to leave it unsaid, not put it into words."

"This is only a game," Praem said. Raine nodded to her again in acceptance and apology.

"I'm sorry too," Jan said, brimming with sarcasm, "because you've all completely lost me here. What are you talking about?"

"Oh," I breathed, finally putting two and two together. My eyes went wide. "Raine's knife. A one-hit fight. She means it to stand in for one of the cult's demon-sealing tubes."

Raine bowed her head, pained by this explanation. Zheng cupped the back of my skull like the proud owner of a clever puppy. Evelyn frowned with distaste. Lozzie's eyes went all scrunchy and she covered her mouth with the lifted hem of her poncho — I think she

was genuinely disgusted by this notion. Praem didn't react, but I swore I could see a faint tightness around her milk-white eyes.

Jan waited a beat, then cleared her throat. "That explains nothing, thank you very much."

Evelyn sighed. "The Sharrowford Cult, The Brotherhood of the New Sun, the people you were going to do your secondary job for, the murderous kidnapping vermin we shattered last year—"

"Oh, don't be too modest," Jan murmured.

"They had a technique," Evelyn spoke over her. "We never got to see it in action, but we know it worked because they used it on Praem, once. They pulled her out of her body and trapped her soul — for want of a better word — in a glass jar."

Jan's sharp mockery drained away, along with the colour in her face. She took off her dark shades and stared at Evelyn with her naked, gem-blue eyes.

"No, I'm not exaggerating," Evelyn went on. "They achieved it by means of a small cylinder device, quite a bit smaller than Raine's knife, actually. But the principle is sound, if vile. Apparently Zheng was threatened with it, once, according to Heather."

"Yes," I said, trying to talk past the lump in my throat. "When ... well, yes, Alexander did. Before, well, you know."

"Vile is right," Jan breathed. "None of the, um, 'survivors' mentioned this to me."

Evelyn waved a dismissive hand. "The ringleaders are all dead, gone, or ... well, not relevant anymore. I doubt any of the remnants even know about it."

"Cept Eddy boy," Twil said.

Lozzie puffed out her cheeks and let her shoulders slump, looking momentarily sad and cowed.

"Yes," Evelyn said, "Edward Lilburne, the mage we are in conflict with, may retain the technique. Maybe. We don't know."

Jan took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. "July, be good and remember that, will you? Kind of important."

"Quite," Evelyn said, staring right back at Jan. "And I assure you,

we have no idea how it worked. I can't do it. And I wouldn't, either."

Jan nodded, but her hands fiddled with her shades and she bit her lower lip.

"So you see," Raine said, finally raising her knife once more and pointing it at Zheng, "in a way, this is fair, because it's something that could really happen to you. One scratch and you're out, lefty. Or bottled, rather."

"Ugh," Evelyn grimaced.

"That is—" Jan cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, that is downright offensive."

"It's real though," I said, still entranced by the electrified air between Raine and Zheng. "And ... and this is just a game."

"Better a game between us," Raine said, "rather than the real thing with an enemy."

"Huuuuuuuh," Zheng rumbled at Raine, watching her through heavily lidded eyes, a tiger pretending repose. "It would not have worked on me. I am too well embedded in my flesh. I have been here a long time."

"For the sake of a duel," Raine said, "can't we assume it might work?" Then she grinned and lowered her blade. "Unless you're afraid of losing."

Zheng curled her back and tilted her head at the same time, hunched her shoulders like a big cat about to pounce, and showed all her teeth in a rictus grin of animalistic challenge. Then she rumbled like a sleeping volcano, a deep and resonant sound that reached into my bones and drew the breath from my lungs — not least because I was still holding on to her.

Jan squeaked and grabbed Lozzie's poncho, though Lozzie just giggled. Evelyn went quite green around the gills, but Praem appeared by her side. Twil instinctively growled as well, but even she could not match that sound. I hiccuped, embarrassingly enough.

Raine didn't even flinch. She just rolled her neck and dropped into a fighting stance, knife held backhand, loose and ready and close to her body.

"If you two do this with Heather standing between you," Evelyn snapped suddenly, "so help me God, I will have both of you drowned!"

I squeaked like a vole dug out of a hidey-hole as Zheng gently peeled my tentacles off her arms. She took me by one shoulder and steered me away from herself.

"Clear the way, shaman."

"B-but—"

To my surprise, a small and clammy hand wormed into my own. A sudden shivery heat pressed against my side. Sevens bumped her head off my ribs like a cat, still draped in her yellow robes.

"Mm-mm," she gurgled, shaking her head. "Can't stop now. Come come, come. Come."

She pulled at my hand. I wrapped a tentacle around her shoulders and dug my feet in — little blood-goblin Sevens did not tell me what to do, instinct was very clear on that despite how I felt a little guilty.

"Raine," I said, voice all a-quiver, one last confused attempt to explain to myself why they shouldn't do this. "Raine, you said you wouldn't, you made a vow, and ... and she's going to beat you! And you don't need to do this, you don't have anything to prove. You don't have to prove anything to me."

To my surprise and shock, Raine looked at me with a frown. It was the first time I'd ever seen her unimpressed with me.

"Heather," she breathed my name with open affection, the affection of 'I love you, but shut up'. "Heather, this isn't about you."

I blinked at her. " ... oh. I ... um ... "

"It's about me and Zheng. And if you really don't want me to do it, if you really don't want us to fight ... "

Raine trailed off. Zheng rumbled low in her chest. Sevens gurgled like a malfunctioning radiator, tugging on my hand. Subconsciously, I wrapped a tentacle around her arm, then felt her gently bite the pale, pneuma-somatic flesh, though without breaking the skin. I nodded along with Raine, half of me praying for this final hope of de-escalation, the other half vibrating with

anticipation.

"Then I'm sorry," Raine carried on, drawing herself up and staring me down. "Because I'm doing it anyway."

"What?"

"My responsibility, my choice. I won't let you shoulder the guilt of stopping me. It's all mine. And hey." She grinned, beaming wide and confident, just like usual, all for me. "It's not like I'm gonna get hurt."

"Ha!" Zheng barked.

"Well," Raine added, "not too badly."

"Don't you dare!" I pleaded with Zheng. "Don't you—"

Evelyn cleared her throat and tapped her walking stick against her own prosthetic leg, making a ratta-tat-tat sound. "If we have to make a hospital trip because you two are horny for each other and can't talk about it like adults, then I will personally see to it that you eat nothing but oats for three weeks. Do I make myself clear?"

"No punctures," Zheng purred. "No bleeding. No broken bones."

"And no concussions!" I added. "Raine is fragile, she's not like you. Zheng, you be gentle, please. Please."

Zheng looked down at me, dark and brooding, but deeply amused. "I cradled you, shaman. I will do the same with our hyena." Then she reared back up to her full height and bared all her teeth to Raine. "But even with these fetters on my limbs, I will still have you."

"Says you," Raine purred back.

"Are we actually letting this crazy shit go ahead?" Twil asked, arms wide. She gestured at Lozzie. "Hey, hey Loz, make the booper go boop again. Make them stop. Raine's gonna get hurt, seriously."

Lozzie bit her bottom lip and did a full-body wiggle, like a worm, from feet to head, ending by turning her eyes to me. "Heathy?"

My breath caught in my throat. "I ... I mean ... if there's rules, it's more like a wrestling match. I think."

"Look at you lot," Jan said with a tut. She bustled out from behind

Lozzie like an ambulatory marshmallow and tried to put her hands on her hips, which was a little difficult still wrapped in the confines of her giant coat. Lozzie mirrored her pose for effect, hands on hips, which threw off Jan's poise for a moment as she flustered. "Ahem. I mean, I don't even know you people very well, but I can tell these two have been chomping at the bit for this. Let them get it out of their systems, yes? Is there any rational reason why not? Do you not trust Zheng to withhold her full strength?"

"I trust her," Raine said, speaking directly to Zheng. "I trust her completely."

"Hyena." Zheng nodded to Raine.

"They already fought!" Twil yelled. "I thought *that* was getting it out of their systems!"

"Yeah, while I was recovering from a bullet wound," Raine said. "Video games were all well and good. But now?"

Raine planted her right foot, twisted her hips, and lifted her left knee into the air. Slowly, like a ballerina on the stage, showing off to everybody present, she extended her leg out sideways, rotating at the waist.

"Yes, very impressive," Jan sighed. Evelyn nodded in exasperated agreement. "Bullet wound? You know what, don't bother explaining that. Look, I'm with grumpy here," she gestured at Evelyn. "This has been a mite bit stressful coming out here, so either fight and get it over with, or come back indoors — *tch*, indoors, what am I saying? — come back indoors where you can flex at each other in peace."

Evelyn balanced her walking stick with her elbow, so she could slow clap, though only twice. "Well said."

"I'm glad you and I agree on some matters," said Jan.

"Ah shit," Twil said. "Alright. Okay. We're all down with watching Raine get her arse beat."

"If you don't want to watch, then don't," Evelyn grumbled.

"You're kidding!" Twil said. "I wouldn't miss this one! Shit, my money's on the zombie. No offence, Raine."

"None taken."

"We are not making wagers," I squeaked. "Absolutely not."

"Tenner on Zheng," Jan announced. "Count me in."

"Who's banker?" Twil asked.

Evelyn sighed. "Me, I suppose."

"We are not betting on them!" I repeated, outraged, curling my tentacles around my torso like I was crossing my arms. I only realised I was making the gesture after I'd completed it and added a frown. Sevens pulled me by the arm, dragging me clear of the imaginary ring of combat as the others backed away too. "That's perverse!"

"Hey, it's all a game, right?" Twil asked.

"*Gaoououk*," Sevens rasped. "Ten on Zheng too."

"You don't even have any money!" I squeaked at her. She ducked her head, shying away from me, so I wrapped a tentacle tighter around her shoulders in exasperated apology. "I'm sorry, I just ... I can't believe this. Tenny and Whistle are back indoors, at least, yes?"

Sevens nodded. "Inside, yeah. Mmm, money ... "

"I'll spot her the ten," Jan said. "Why not? This day can't possibly get any more stupid."

"Don't jinx us, please," Evelyn huffed. "And you do all realise this doesn't work if nobody bets on Raine, yes? And matches all your wagers. I'm certainly not paying out, only keeping track. Somebody has to believe in Raine, yes?" Her eyes found me as we drew to a halt in a little cluster, much closer to Zheng and Raine than we had been to the previous fight. "Heather?"

"... I ... I ... um ... I can't."

Twil grinned. "No confidence in her, hey?"

"Twenty on Zhengy!" Lozzie chirped, arms in the air. "Am I doing the countdown again?"

"We shouldn't need a count," Raine called back. "First blood from Zheng, and that's her loss. If I lose my knife and I'm pinned, my loss."

“Oki-doki-doo!”

“I have confidence in both of them!” I snapped at Twil. “I love both of them. I can’t pick a favourite, that’s the point.”

“Fifty pence, on Zheng,” Praem intoned.

I boggled at her. “You too?”

Praem met my eyes and bowed her head. An apology.

“Are we ready?” Lozzie called out, flapping the sides of her poncho up and down like the wings of a flying squirrel. “Ready ready?”

A satisfied, animal grin ripped across Zheng’s face as she stared back at Raine. She rolled her head from side to side, flexed her back and her toned, powerful arms. She was so much taller than Raine, an Olympian goddess carved from brown marble. Raine bounced on the balls of her feet suddenly, swapping from left foot forward to right, then back again. She tossed her knife in the air and caught it, then shook herself all over, almost like a hound. Muscles like rubber and springs.

“Twenty paces, hyena?” Zheng purred.

Raine shook her head. “Nah, I think we’re good like this.”

Zheng seemed amused. “Not much space to charge. No room to build speed. Is that not your only hope?”

Back here in the spectators’ box, Twil imitated Raine’s bouncing footwork, consciously or otherwise. But where Raine held her knife still and steady, Twil swung a couple of shadow-boxing punches. “Evee, you gonna wager?” she asked. “Thought you loved that kinda thing?”

Evelyn snorted. “I’d out-wager all of you. On Raine.”

Twil stopped and stared at her. Jan cocked an eyebrow. Lozzie made a curious little o-shape with her mouth. Sevens let out a low sound like a confused rat. I opened my mouth to say thank you, though I could barely take my eyes off Raine and Zheng.

“Two hundred pounds on Raine,” said July.

I looked over my shoulder toward the back of our little group, and found July staring her owl-like stare, directed at Raine. I wouldn’t have recognised that look an hour ago, not past whatever demon

host mannerisms made her so deeply and unsettlingly intense. It was like standing near a komodo dragon. But by now I saw it plain. Admiration, adoration, ardour.

Everyone else glanced at her too, with varying degrees of surprise. Even Raine shot her a finger-gun and a wink.

“What happened to the crush on Zheng, hey?” Twil asked with a laugh.

“July’s being bitter,” Jan stage-whispered.

“Aww, no!” Lozzie said. “Don’t let it turn sour!”

Sevens was practically vibrating against my side, barely able to contain her fan-girl energy at all this talk of crushes and bitter rejection.

“Don’t you develop a crush on Raine as well,” I said to July.

She finally turned her gaze away from Raine and met my eyes, hard enough to make me flinch. “I admire her purity of self-belief. It is beautiful.”

“It ... it is, yes,” I admitted with a sigh. “Sometimes I worry about her getting hurt, though.”

July nodded. “I understand. I feel the same way about Jan.”

“H-hey!” Jan spluttered. “Purity of self-belief?! Me? Tch.” She settled her coat around her shoulders, which was a bit like a ferret burrowing into a bucket full of cotton wool. “Don’t you go all soppy on me, Jule.”

July returned her attention to the impending fight, but for one moment I noticed her linger on Jan’s back with undeniable affection.

Perhaps I had misjudged her. Maybe I’d been too harsh, even after her defeat.

“Quiet in the stands, quiet in the stands, please!” Raine called, laughing. “You’re all supposed to be holding your collective breath over there.”

Twil cupped her mouth with both hands. “Get on with it!”

“Yes,” I tutted under my breath. “Get on with it.”

“Right you are, boss!” Raine called back with a mock salute — then turned to Zheng with a finality that left no doubt.

She twisted her feet against the velvet yellow grass, finding her footing. I watched all the jolly teasing drain from her frame, replaced with a wave of muscle tension as her pose flowed with the frozen promise of violence. She raised her knife, held loose and close.

“I am ready for you, hyena,” Zheng rumbled, yet she made no effort to look ready. She pulled herself up to her full height and raised her chin, waiting.

Lozzie raised the corner of her poncho, just as she had done for July and Zheng before.

But in the moment before Lozzie lowered the makeshift pastel flag, Sevens purred and nuzzled into the side of my ribs, at the base of my tentacles, to get my attention.

“Mm?” I could barely blink down at her.

“S’not a real fight,” she rasped under her breath, so only I could hear. “Not like I saw might happen.”

“Not real?” I hissed.

“Ready, set!” Lozzie yelled.

Sevens rubbed her head back and forth, like a prophetic cat in my armpit. She slurped excess saliva back through her needle-teeth as she spoke. “Won’t be enough. Joined, but not consummated. No knock-out, no end to them. Have to hurt, join in pain. Not enough.”

“Go!” Lozzie shouted, her poncho fluttering as she sliced the air with her makeshift flag.

Sevens’ words whirled inside my head, but I couldn’t spare the attention to think about them. The Eye itself could have opened in Camelot’s purple whorled skies and I would not have paid it the slightest mind right then. Evelyn could have grabbed my face and tried to kiss me and I wouldn’t even have made eye contact with her.

At the word ‘go’, Raine bounced up on the balls of her feet, swaying from side to side like a boxer looking for an opening. She held her black combat knife close to her body, an arachnid fang tucked in

tight. I could practically see the adrenaline pumping through her veins and the beat of her pulse in her throat. She was breathing hard but steady, focused on Zheng with every cell of her being, staring and listening for the slightest twitch, ready for the bull's charge.

But Zheng declined the attack. Instead she stood there, tall and still, a statue of silent muscle.

"Aw come on," Twil hissed. "Sandbagging again?"

"It is not the same," July said, voice shaking with awe. "It is different."

"It's a bloody waste of time, that's what it is," Evelyn grumbled.

Zheng lifted her arms to her sides, outstretched and open palmed, as if crucified. A mocking smile crept across her face. "Go ahead, hyena. Take your shot."

Raine tilted her head and replied with a grin of her own — then she charged.

Raine is only human, in the end. She was not as fast as July, as strong as Praem, and possessed none of Twil's rapid healing. She had no fangs, no claws, no clutch of tentacles on her back. The rules of this duel were intended to give her a chance and provide Zheng with an interesting challenge. In a fair fight with no holds barred, she would lose to Zheng — or something like Zheng — very quickly indeed. She was my Raine and she was beautiful; her violence was beautiful to me, a tendency of mine that still worried me more than a little. But there was no way she was good enough to beat Zheng without trickery or clever plays. I was half expecting her to pull out a second knife, or throw sand in Zheng's eyes, or cheat in some equally creative fashion.

Raine never ceases to surprise me, especially when I think I've spotted the surprise.

She charged straight at Zheng, like a living lance with a spring-loaded barb in one hand. For a second I thought Zheng was going to take the knife in her chest, just to make a point even if she would technically lose — but at the very last possible second, Zheng dropped into a fighting crouch, a wrestler's crouch, a tackle-crouch with one hand out to catch Raine's knife-arm.

I winced, as did Evelyn. Lozzie clapped and yipped, swept away in the energy of the moment as Jan scurried behind her. Sevens went ‘*guuuurrrrk*’. July kept the faith.

And Raine switched hands.

The motion was so quick I almost missed it; when I realised what she’d done, while running flat-out in a headlong charge, I cringed with worry that she might slip or stumble and stab herself by accident. But Raine was nothing if not both skilled and graceful. With her knife in a backhand grip in her right fist, between the space of one sprinting step and the next, just about to slam head-first into Zheng’s catch, Raine slid her hands together.

Black talon flashing backward through the air, rearing up like a scorpion stinger. A simple downward strike that Zheng should have been able to dodge with her eyes closed — but in Raine’s *left* hand, not her right.

Zheng jinked to the side. She avoided the descending blade with ease, dodging with demonic reaction speed, but the change of footing ruined her attempt to grab what had been Raine’s knife-hand. Raine didn’t even have to adjust as Zheng’s grip closed on empty air.

But Raine had overextended. Even I could see that, with my total beginner’s understanding of knife fighting. She was within Zheng’s guard, but that meant she was in grabbing range, grappling range, immobilizing range. Even as the thought crawled across my neurons, I saw Zheng’s other hand swiping outward, to catch Raine’s left wrist at the termination of the feint-strike Zheng had just avoided.

Raine had her one chance. She’d tried a good trick, but Zheng was just too fast, and that settled the question. I started to wince in anticipation of her loss.

But Raine never completed that downward stab, that move Zheng was angling to catch.

Instead she opened her fingers, dropped her knife through two feet of air, and caught it in her right hand.

The blade shot upward as Raine ducked, her single wicked-sharp talon already inside Zheng’s guard, aimed at the vulnerable flesh of her forearm.

Zheng could have easily caught Raine by her now empty left hand, or by the head, or throat, but she was angled all wrong to stop Raine's blade itself. One scratch would be her loss. Zheng whipped her arm away and hopped back three paces, out of Raine's range, hands raised to catch any trickery in retreat. Breathing hard and grinning wide. A fire burned in Zheng's eyes, gone wide with sheer joy.

"Hyena!" she roared. "As cunning as a real bone-eater!"

Raine paused as well, breathing deep and steady, sweat already beading on her forehead from the sheer concentration and effort. She flexed both her hands and shook herself from head to toe like a wet dog. Totally in her element in a way I hadn't seen in months and months.

She was glowing. She was made for this. Self-made, perhaps.

I fell in love with her all over again.

The whole exchange had lasted only a couple of seconds, so quick and skilled that we could only unravel the details in retrospect, still reeling in the moment, unable to believe our eyes.

Twil grabbed her own head in amazement. "Holy shit."

"That's our Raine," Evelyn said.

"Scary scary," said Lozzie.

Raine raised her knife and pointed it at Zheng. "You're not trying," she said, and I realised I'd never heard that tone from her before — frustrated anger, even through her grin. "Make me work. It's real, or it doesn't happen at all, Zheng. Make me work for it, or there is no triangle, there can't be any you and I otherwise."

Zheng's joyous grin froze. She opened her mouth to reply, showing a maw of shark's teeth. But Raine didn't need her answer in words. She picked up her feet and darted at Zheng like a hurled javelin.

I cried out in dismay when Raine tried the same trick a second time.

Her hands slipped across each other, knife going from right to left, black talon switching sides in the second before she hit Zheng.

Zheng saw the same trick too. We all did. She threw her weight toward Raine's left hand, ready to catch her wrist and end this farce.

But the knife came up in Raine's *right*. Backhand. A rising strike with all her body weight twisted behind it.

She had only mimed the switch.

Zheng had to rock backward and throw herself out of the path of Raine's hidden surprise, roaring with sheer delight at the misdirection. Raine bounced upward like a spider from a trapdoor, her single black fang almost making contact with Zheng's chin, less than an inch of Camelot's sky visible between knife-point and red-chocolate skin.

I caught a glimpse of Raine's eyes, brimming with pleasure and purpose.

This time Raine and Zheng stayed locked at point-blank range for maybe twenty to thirty seconds, trading missed blow and counter-dodge. Raine's knife was always one step ahead of where Zheng expected it to be, never using the same trick twice, never backing down or yielding the initiative, never allowing Zheng a single opening to exploit — because any opening was a trap, baited with an overbalance or overextension, the blade-point always ready to punish.

Raine could not match Zheng's speed. That's why we'd all assumed this would be over so quickly, or that she'd had something up her sleeve. But instead of trying to match or overcome that which she could not, Raine had devised the perfect counter: prediction. I'd never seen anything like it before. I hadn't even known Raine was capable of something like this. She must have been practising in secret, for weeks. She'd been watching Zheng for so long, measuring her, learning about her. This kind of estimation could only come from a place of deep fascination.

Against an opponent willing to catch the knife or sustain a small wound, Raine would have lost. If Zheng had been a fraction less quick, if she had lacked her demonic speed, she would have lost instead, because she kept taking Raine's traps, kept testing to see if one of them was real, an exploitable opening to finally grab her wrist and slam her to the ground.

Raine had predicted that too, I realised. She knew Zheng would not be able to resist the bait.

Then, just when I started to wonder if Raine would run out of

different techniques, Zheng went on the offensive.

She stopped trying to catch Raine's wrists, stopped trying to immobilize her knife-arm or grab her head or throat, and simply aimed a punch at Raine's gut. In between one knife-feint and the next. Brutal and quick, a piston-blow through the air.

I yelped and put a hand to my mouth when Raine took the punch below her ribs. She doubled-up and jerked back, her knife hand looping a wild slash through the air to put some distance between her and Zheng.

"Hey! Hey!" Evelyn shouted with sudden anger. "No broken bones and no damaged organs!"

"Raine!" I called out. "Are you okay?"

But Raine straightened up, grinning and panting, her free hand on her stomach.

Zheng raised a fist. "I know my own strength, wizard," she rumbled. "No real damage. No hospital. No injuries."

"Pulled punches," July said. "Sad."

"But necessary!" I blurted out.

"That's more like it, big girl," Raine said to Zheng, voice quivering with excitement. "Show me how much you care."

Raine flew at Zheng again — but Zheng replied in kind.

I yelped in sympathetic terror. Anybody would break, having Zheng charge at them. It was like a wall of muscle smashing into the air itself. But Raine met her in the middle.

Raine's knife flashed, met with fist and claw. Zheng jinked and ducked, howling like a prehistoric wolf. Raine went to circle, bobbing on the balls of her feet, laughing back at Zheng in a way I'd never heard before — but Zheng was already there, smashing Raine's knife-arm aside with a blunt backhand. Raine took a glancing blow to the ribs and used her reaction to hide a switch of her knife from right to left. Zheng ignored the incoming blow, went for Raine's head and shoulder, to grapple and pin her arm. Raine was forced to duck, twist at the hips, put all her weight on her left leg.

And she crumpled.

I saw the exact moment her thigh muscle failed. She expected it to support her full body weight *just so*, at the precise angle to take her bouncing up and around Zheng's right flank, beneath the hand ready to grab her by the head. But that thigh muscle was where Raine had taken a bullet for me, where Stack's last round had gouged a chunk out of Raine's flesh. And when she relied on her body to do precisely what she needed, right at the edge of the possible, it failed her.

Raine fell to one knee, stumbling as her thigh muscle gave out. Zheng was on her in the blink of an eye, grabbing her upturned wrist, Raine's last attempt to drive the knife into Zheng's gut and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. But it wasn't to be.

Zheng squeezed hard and slammed Raine's arm into the ground — her knife dropped from her fingers. Disarmed. Zheng's knee found Raine's stomach, her other hand scrabbling for a hold on Raine's shoulder to pin her properly. Raine tried to twist out of the way, as if she had any hope at all of dislodging Zheng's superior strength.

Zheng slammed her hand into Raine's shoulder. Her legs pressed on Raine's thighs. Pinned. Their faces inches apart, both of them flushed and caked in sweat.

"Stay, hyena!" Zheng roared laughter in Raine's face — and then cut off instantly.

Raine was grinning up at her, panting with victory.

She hadn't been trying to twist away at all — she'd been catching her knife in her opposite hand. The point pressed against Zheng's stomach through her loose t-shirt, like an umbilical joining their bodies together, belly to belly.

Red, dark red, crimson and rich, began to trickle down the blade. It spread out from a narrow line across Zheng's stomach, soaking into the fabric of her t-shirt.

The rest of us were all frozen in awe. Lozzie had her mouth hanging open, poncho raised as if to declare a winner, but even she couldn't speak.

"I win," Raine croaked.

"You are pinned, hyena," Zheng purred back.

"And you're bottled. One touch is all it takes."

I'd never seen Raine so proud, so flushed, so excited. Zheng's blood trickled over the short guard of her knife and between her knuckles.

Zheng rumbled. For a moment I thought she was going to lose her temper — but then she grinned back down at Raine, bringing their faces even closer together. "What are you, little thing?"

Raine laughed through clenched teeth, answering with a wiggle of her eyebrows. "You're bloody good, and you know it, too. Had to fake you out. Almost ran me down. You're so good."

"Did I?" Zheng purred into her face, barely a whisper on the cinnamon wind.

"Maybe," Raine panted.

"Maybe ... mmmmmm." Zheng let go of Raine's shoulder but kept her opposite wrist pinned, then reached down between them to touch her own belly, where she'd been cut.

Raine let go of the knife and let it fall — and her hand brushed against Zheng's, both of them bloodied. Their hands moved against each other for a moment across the surface of Zheng's stomach. No doubt the wound was already closing with demon host healing speed, but their hands, Raine's right and Zheng's left, not quite joined, turned slick and coated with Zheng's crimson blood.

They stared into each others' eyes as it happened, Raine certain in victory, Zheng a little confused.

"Oh my goodness," Jan whispered under her breath, hand to her mouth. "Should we really be watching this?"

"Uh," Twil cleared her throat gently. "Maybe not?"

"Yessssss," Sevens rasped, sounding like she'd just snorted a line of cocaine.

Raine raised her hand, covered in Zheng's blood, and lifted it toward Zheng's mouth. Zheng stared in a state of frozen shock I'd rarely seen on her before, confused, cautious, wary — but interested.

In an act I never would have imagined possible, Zheng parted her teeth, long tongue flickering behind the razor-points, and allowed two of Raine's fingers past her lips.

Tongue-touch, lips brushing bloodied flesh, teeth gentle as a mate.

Raine fed Zheng a taste of her own blood.

Zheng copied the gesture. Her own blood-soaked hand found Raine's face, smeared crimson across Raine's jaw and cheeks, and allowed Raine to suck on the side of her palm, for just a heartbeat.

"Ghastly," Evelyn grunted.

"... I don't know," I murmured, mesmerised. My tongue flickered out to wet my lips. "It's ... different."

Zheng lifted her bloody hand from Raine's face. Raine slipped her fingers out of Zheng's mouth and wiped them on her own t-shirt. Zheng finally let her go, sitting up on her haunches and taking her weight off Raine. The spell between them did not quite break, though the intensity thinned as Zheng stood up and offered Raine a hand. The zombie pulled the psychopath to her feet.

"Fuck me," Twil said. "Raine, what the hell? Where did you learn to do any of that shit?"

Raine cracked a grin and shrugged. "Youtube. Practice. Probably wouldn't work the same on anybody 'cept Zheng."

Praem began a polite round of applause. Jan blew out a long breath, shaking her head and turning away. Sevens gurgled against my side, eyes wide as saucers, practically vibrating.

"That was," Evelyn said, "without a doubt, one of the weirdest things I've ever seen you do, Raine. And I've seen you do a lot."

Raine shot her a wink, bending over to pick up her knife from the floor, wandering to where her fallen jacket lay so she could put the knife safely away. Then she caught my eye, beaming with pride through her bloody half-mask. I could see crimson on her lips. "Hey Heather, I think we're finally poly for real, yeah?"

"Was that ... " I tried to form words. "Was that sex?"

"No," Zheng rumbled. "It was more."

"Kinda." Raine shrugged. "You mind?"

I shook my head, feeling more than a little numb. Their fight kept replaying in my head. Part of me wanted to run over to both of them and jump into their combined arms, but they were both smeared with blood; my good-girl habits and upbringing told me that would make such a terrible mess.

"I do hope that's safe ... " I trailed off. "All the ... fluids."

"Ha!" Twil snorted.

"No blood borne plague can live in me, shaman," Zheng rumbled.

"The hyena is safe. I would not have ... shared, otherwise."

Raine licked her lips with a thoughtful look.

"But who won?" July asked. She sounded a little put out.

"Everybody wins!" Lozzie finally cheered, throwing her hands into the air. "Zhengy, you did it! You did the thing! The thing with the blood pact!"

Zheng stared at her own blood-soaked hand, then at Raine's face.

"A pact. I was not thinking of that."

"Yes, yes," Jan sighed. "Your incredibly weird polycule of literal blood-drinking sex-fights, that's one thing, but the wager was the other." She wormed a free hand out from inside her coat, wearing it like a cloak now, and rubbed her thumb and forefinger together.

"Who wins?"

"Does it matter?" Raine asked, laughing.

"Sort of," Jan tutted. "Thought I was going to get a payout."

"Stop bellyaching," Evelyn sighed. "Can we go home now, please? Are we done here? Unless you two need to stay out here to rut in the grass or something."

I blushed like crazy at that. Raine laughed. Zheng lifted her shirt to examine her stomach, the wound already closed, a four-inch slash low on her belly, across old tattoos and red-chocolate skin.

"Shower time," Praem announced.

"Yeah, shower time," Raine agreed. "No arguments there."

"You as well," Praem said to Zheng.

"Mm," Zheng grunted. She looked Raine up and down. Raine winked back at her. It was like a spark passing between them.

Slowly, as if picking up the pieces after the world's most violent lunchtime picnic, we made our way back over to the gate, toward the waiting warmth and light and normality of Sharrowford and home. Lozzie bounced between her knights, hugging several of

them goodbye for now; I gave a somewhat shell-shocked wave to the Forest Knight, who was standing distant from us with a clutch of his fellows. He nodded back and I promised myself I would come see him properly sometime soon.

But as we wandered home, with Raine and Zheng walking beside each other, with Sevens hanging off my arm, and Evelyn casting a curious frown at the way I looked so numb, I wondered if anything could ever be normal again.

“That was bonkers,” Twil was saying. “Look, I do some crazy shit, but you two were off the hook.”

“You want to go as well, *laangren*?” Zheng purred.

Twil put her hands up. “No thank you. No thanks. I’m good. Just fine, thanks.”

“I can’t believe we spent so long on all this nonsense,” Evelyn grumbled. Lozzie skipped past her, toward the gate, poncho fluttering as she hugged the caterpillar again, like trying to embrace a barn.

“Well,” Jan sighed. “Sometimes you have to spend energy and effort on maintaining and strengthening relationships. You can’t get anywhere alone, after all.” She glanced at July, but July was watching Raine and Zheng with fascination, barely able to concentrate as she stopped by the carapace bench to pick up the guitar case which contained the magic sword. “Oh well,” Jan said. “What about lunch? I’d kill for some lunch. This has left me all shaky.”

“You ate all that chicken!” Twil said.

“You ate some of it, which means I’m hungry,” Jan tutted, holding her head high as she waddled along in her massive coat.

Despite my reeling mind, I decided that Jan was correct. We still had so many things to do; Edward still had our book, the cult was still at large; I hadn’t even begun to talk with Jan about making a body for Maisie, and I had little hope of finding the courage to confront Evelyn about her feelings any time soon.

But Zheng and Raine had finally bridged the other angle of our triangle, without my help.

I felt stronger than ever.

As we approached the gateway, Twil suddenly jumped in surprise. She rummaged in her hoodie and pulled out her mobile phone, then laughed and shook her head, blinking at the screen. The phone was vibrating in her hand.

“Signals actually get through the gate?” Raine said. “Weird, huh?”

“It’s my mum.” Twil tutted. “Told her we were gonna be, like, you know, beyond contact? Weird is right.”

“Oh that is very bizarre,” Jan said. “I do not like that one bit. No no no.”

“I wouldn’t answer it here,” Evelyn said. “But not for any magical reasons. Might get weird interference out here.”

“Right ‘ho,” Twil sighed. She stepped through the gate first, pausing to pat the caterpillar on the flank as she did. “Good lad, cheers for your help.”

The rest of us shuffled through after her, leaving Camelot and knights and purple whorls behind. Raine caught my hand before I went, then leaned in to kiss my cheek, leaving a smear of Zheng’s blood on me.

“R-Raine!?” I squeaked, moving to wipe my face. But then I caught the look in Zheng’s eyes.

“The shaman is in the pact too,” she purred.

I blushed hard, alongside my lovers, and then went home.

But on the other side of the gate, back in the oddly narrow confines of Evelyn’s magical workshop, everyone had drawn to an awkward halt. Twil was holding her phone to her ear, frowning like she’d been confronted with a dead rat on her bed.

“What do you mean, delirious?!” she said into the phone. The rest of us all shared a glance at the edge in her voice as she stepped away from the gate. “Delirious, what does that mean? Mum, slow down, what—”

Twil paused, listening to her mother’s voice on the other end of the phone. Evelyn had gone very still and silent, listening carefully. Raine shrugged. Praem marched past us all, heading for the kitchen.

“What’s happening?” Jan whispered.

“No idea,” I muttered. “Sorry.”

“No, no,” Twil suddenly exploded at the phone again. “Mum, she doesn’t know where we live. You’ve just dragged this woman out of the woods. Why are you lying to me?”

“Twil?” I asked.

“Never a dull moment,” Raine said.

Evelyn stepped forward, walking stick clacking on the floorboards, and took Twil by one shoulder. Twil stared at her, still listening to her mother over the phone.

“Twil, it’s me,” Evelyn said. “Share.”

Twil rolled her eyes and said “Just a sec,” into the phone, then covered the speaker with one hand.

“Twil,” Evelyn repeated, voice hard and firm. “Whatever is going on, I am on your side. What has your family—”

“Nah, it’s not them,” Twil sighed. “My mum’s talking nonsense. She says detective Webb— one sec.” Twil put the phone back to her ear. “By the way, mum, she’s not a police detective anymore, she’s a private eye.” A pause. “Yeah, that fucking changes everything! No, I’ll fucking swear if I want, you’ve gone out looking for somebody to kidnap, you’ve snatched this woman and now you’re—” Twil paused, growing even more confused. “What do you mean, she found you?”

“*Police?*” Jan hissed, making the word sound like *nuclear weapons*.

“Twil!” Evelyn snapped.

“Nicole?” I asked. “You’re talking about Nicole. Twil, what’s going on?”

Twil came up from the phone again, sighed, and pulled a painful smile. “Yeah, according to my mum, anyway. Nicky Webb, our friendly private eye, has just wandered out of the trees on the edge of Brinkwood, out of her fucking mind and babbling, and made a beeline straight for my family home. How the fuck, hey? She doesn’t even know where I live, right?”

Raine, Evelyn, and I all shared a glance. A sinking feeling dragged at the base of my stomach.

“The documents she stole,” Evelyn said, going pale. “The search for the house.”

“Oh no,” I hissed.

Raine puffed out a breath. “No spooky bullshit for little miss detective. No spooky bullshit my arse.”

and walked a crooked mile – 16.1

Brinkwood was not Sharrowford.

One might be forgiven for assuming a thin distinction between city and village, if one judged by a map of Sharrowford and its surroundings. The village of Brinkwood — a ‘historic’ village according to some labels, because it had once been the site of a Roman villa complex — lay only two train stops north of Sharrowford Central station. For the price of a thirteen pound return ticket, the curious traveller could be standing in Brinkwood’s own little train station twenty minutes later, beneath the shadow of the heathland hills, a stone’s throw from three pubs, one primary school, a secondary school and sixth form, a small Tesco, a regional pork-pie manufacturer — and the thickly wooded vale beyond the houses.

Brinkwood’s position on the map suggested a dormitory town for Sharrowford, just a short ride to the edge of the city and a scenic jaunt across open countryside of damp fields full of sad-looking cows. A little outpost of the English rural idyll.

But maps and numbers are only descriptions, they are never the territory. It was a minor miracle that Brinkwood station had survived mothballing at all, let alone still saw regular service. If one did wish to actually alight there, one had to catch exactly the right kind of train. Most of the higher-speed trains were diverted around the older tracks entirely. Three in four simply went straight past the tiny village platform at full speed, leaving the inattentive would-be rural explorer stranded high and dry in Manchester several stops later. And Brinkwood’s train platform was so short it could only serve the front two carriages; if you weren’t standing in the right part of the train when it drew to a halt, you would find yourself once again whisked off to parts unknown as the rotting ex-mill town vanished into the distance, hiding away in its wooded valley.

Despite everything that I had experienced in Sharrowford, I’d gotten used to the strange atmosphere of the city. I’d lived there for less

than a year, but I felt as if I'd lived all my long stolen decade in a mere nine months.

I had come to know the winding streets with their untended potholes and filthy gutters; the university like a warren of different styles, always with some new cubbyhole or forgotten room to discover; the hidden gems of takeaway restaurants and exotic eateries where Raine would take me; the spirit creatures around every corner, vital and ever-present in their dozens, once nightmarish but now an odd kind of nostalgic old friend; red bricks, solid roofs, rows of terraced houses; weird little shops in the city centre, weirder people, back alleys and back routes and bridges and Churches and pubs. Sharrowford didn't need dormitory towns, it had its own trailing edges of ragged suburbs and concrete edifices from the 1960s.

Essentially I was a city girl at heart — though Reading, where I'd been born and grown up, had not been my city. The years I should have gotten to know Reading, I spent in and out of psychiatric care instead, screaming into my pillow, or sobbing in the dark, pleading for my sister to come home.

But Sharrowford? I was coming to love Sharrowford, perhaps in the way one comes to love an oak tree undermining the foundations of a castle. Old and gnarled, beautiful in its ugliness, abused since the industrial revolution and never really allowed to heal.

I thought I knew Sharrowford's surroundings, too. We'd been out there and walked the woods together, when Zheng had fled into the countryside.

Brinkwood was just more countryside, how bad could it possibly be?

We didn't take the train. We had to keep our retreat open, not bound by train timetables. So Raine drove.

"I hate this place already," Evelyn hissed between her teeth as we entered the village, peering out through the passenger-side window. "Just look at it."

"Evee," I sighed — not at her, but at the growing cloud of butterflies in my stomach as I huddled in the back seat, hugging my squid-skull mask like a plushie in my lap. "It's just a village. There's nothing sinister about it. Please."

“Call Zheng again,” she snapped. “Try again.”

“Alright, alright,” I groaned.

“Technically Brinky’s a town,” said Twil. She was sitting in the back with me, with Praem’s wide hips squeezed into the middle seat between us, prim and proper, eyes straight ahead. “Not a village, really.”

“*Brinky?*” Evelyn spat.

“Brinky,” Praem echoed.

Evelyn had held her temper in stormy silence for the entire journey, since we’d wormed our way out of Sharrowford’s urban heart and left the arteries of the main roads, to descend into the open countryside north of the city, crisscrossed by single-lane tarmac paths and the unpaved punctuation of farmland access routes. Wide hummocked fields dotted with distant sheep, wild hedgerows overgrown with bramble and nettle, stone walls lined by tall craggy trees; the English rural dream, marred only slightly by the sheer amount of mud either side of the tarmac, the occasional squashed squirrel or hedgehog in the roadway, and the rutted potholes which threatened the integrity of the tires.

For me, the local spirit life revealed the lie beneath the surface. The city was almost always packed with pneuma-somatic fauna in a constant state of motion and action, perhaps reflecting the lives or vitality of the people. Out here in the countryside it thinned yet intensified, but without the wild sense of freedom I had gotten from the tentacle-trees and canopy-dwellers in the woods during our previous outing, back when we’d gone to find Zheng.

We passed a creature the size of a dinosaur, half-lizard half-plant, bleeding from a hundred wounds as it limped across a distant field; a tall, silent being like a dark pylon stood next to a lonely crossroads, as if waiting for a direction, forever abandoned by its fellows; down an unpaved side-road I spied things like trees but lashed about with pale tentacles, migrating in a herd of a dozen or more, seemingly wandering into the sun-beaten, empty deeps of the countryside.

Once, this had all been forests, or at least open common land. Now it was an open-air factory, concealed behind the romance of the rural.

How long did spirits live? Did they remember what it was like out here, before enclosure? Were they lost?

Spring was in full bloom, carpeting everything with thick, deep green, but the sun couldn't quite chase away the chill in the air. Long shadows fell across the landscape as we plunged into the village of Brinkwood itself.

Brinkwood was situated at the mouth of a long, narrow valley, which had once been part of a winding, difficult path through the Pennines, first made obsolete by the iron certainty of the rail-roads, then later by the ubiquitous brutality of the motorcar. Mill trade and textiles had kept the town alive through the nineteenth century, but now it was on the dubious life support of small trades, bookies, and local tourism. Tall hills rose either side of the town, humped pale sentinels that had watched the valley since long before human beings had made an outpost of civilisation here; always visible over the slate rooftops and rickety chimneys, their flanks were dotted with trees that thickened lower down. Their angle would make for late sunrises, but thankfully only the trees themselves would deepen the dusk.

But the valley which cut between the hills was thick with woods, almost a true forest, a deeper and more tangled offshoot of the lowland woods Zheng had fled to earlier in the year.

I watched Evelyn's eyes flickering back and forth over Saturday afternoon pedestrians in the single shopping street, frowning at the sign for an optician's practice, the pizza place optimistically named 'Galactic Taste', and the pair of grey-faced bank branches duelling over a zebra crossing. We passed one of the village pubs — *The King's Elbow* — with its picturesque back garden of wooden benches and lunchtime drinkers. But to Evelyn's glare it may as well have been barbed wire fences and minefields. Her scrimshawed thigh-bone lay in her lap, as if ready to raise it to the window and blast a would-be attacker, as if we were journeying into the dark heart of some occupied territory in our armoured vehicle — rather than bunch of university girls out in the countryside for a Saturday afternoon drive.

At least she couldn't see the spirit life, the monkey-things of tar and rock swinging over the rooftops, the silent slug-like sentinels at the crossroads, the bulk of the faceless thing that squatted in the town's churchyard.

“Stupid name,” she hissed. “Stupid place. Shouldn’t be out here.”

“Oi,” Twil tutted. “It’s not that bad. I do go to school here, you know?”

“It’s horrible,” Evelyn said. “No wonder you’re so ... ”

“So what?” Twil bristled. “Look, Evee, yeah, we’re all in this together, and I fuckin’ love you, you dolt, but don’t keep insulting my home.”

Raine chuckled in the driver’s seat. She drove nice and slow, taking each village corner gently and carefully as we wound deeper into the town, sticking to the speed limit as we passed through thin residential streets that looked like they hadn’t been updated in decades, all full of little houses and even some low terraced flats. We could have asked for no better driver under the circumstances, which was all the more impressive seeing as Raine had been locked in adrenaline-pumping, sexually-charged combat about an hour earlier. None of us were in the right mind for this, but we didn’t have a choice. We were not about to ignore Nicole in trouble.

We couldn’t afford the slightest suspicion right then, not with half the stuff we were carrying.

I watched the trees gather as we crept through Brinkwood, as the houses thinned away to a trickle, as the thickened, ancient bark was joined by carpets of fallen leaves along the hedgerows.

“Settle down, girls,” Raine said with a smile in her voice. “Or I’ll turn this car around and take us home.”

Evelyn grunted. “Even as a joke, that is in poor taste, Raine. We leave nobody behind.”

Twil sighed, not for the first time. “It’s not a rescue operation, alright? We agreed on that, yeah? We’re not gonna leap out of the car and bean my mum over the head, okay?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Evelyn said through her teeth.

“Expert consulting,” Praem intoned.

Praem had her hands folded in her lap, atop her long shell-blue skirt. Evelyn had made her change out of her maid uniform before we’d left the house. Just in case.

“Yeah!” Twil said, nodding and pointing at Praem in the middle

seat. “Yeah, listen to Praem, she’s got it right. We’re not going in guns blazing. It’s not like Nicky’s been kidnapped. I had it all wrong earlier, right? You have been listening to me, yeah?”

“Every bloody word,” Evelyn hissed.

“Eh?”

“Hey, Twil,” Raine said, turning her head toward Twil without taking her eyes off the road — she was slowing the car at a junction, a village crossroads where the houses truly and finally ran out, replaced by heavy old oaks and beaches climbing the slopes. “Right turn here, yeah? Your place is just beyond?”

“Yeah, halfway down toward the bridge,” Twil said. “Along here, left at the fork, then it’s third on the right. First two are just fields, so you can’t miss it. The house is pretty obvious.”

Raine took the turning, car wheels soft on the pitted and water-eaten asphalt. Evelyn started chewing on her thumbnail.

Perhaps she was hungry; we hadn’t even had time to eat lunch before we’d left, nothing except cramming a few cereal bars into our faces.

I pulled my eyes away from the passing trees, the woods punctuated by distant fields that climbed the valley’s sides, and the deeper patches where the trees ran back beneath miles of deep canopy.

“Evee,” I said, and found my throat a little scratchy. My nerves were getting to me, despite the squid-skull in my lap and my one manifested tentacle wrapped around my shoulders in a self-hug. I’d tucked the other five away for now, folded them back into imagination and phantasm, as a concession to squeezing three people into the back seat. “Evee, it reminds you of Sussex, doesn’t it?”

Evelyn twisted to frown at me over her shoulder, over the back of the passenger seat. “For fu—” she started, then cut off with a sharp sigh at the look in my eyes. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“It’s nothing like where you grew up,” I said, reaching forward to pat her awkwardly on the shoulder.

“Yeah,” Twil added with a forced laugh. “You lived in a big posh house. This ain’t that.”

Evelyn huffed and turned back to staring out of the windscreen, as if we might suddenly come under attack as we plunged beneath the tall canopy of ancient woodland.

“Keep your eyes open, Heather,” she grumbled. “Especially for anything that doesn’t look like natural pneuma-somatic fauna.”

“I know, I know,” I sighed. “There’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

“So far.”

“All eyes on the road,” Praem announced. “The way is clear.”

“Yes, you as well, thank you Praem.” Evelyn sighed, rapping her fingernails on the passenger seat armrest. “And Heather, try calling Zheng again, before we get there. She bloody well better be in position. I don’t want to be sitting in this car waiting for her to turn up.”

“In position?” Twil asked. “In position for what? We’re not going to storm my own house.”

Raine laughed and shook her head. “Never thought I’d see you trusting Zheng to keep us safe, Eevee. What, I’m not enough?”

“Just in case,” Evelyn grunted. “Heather, call her.”

“I’m ... I’m already doing it,” I said, clearing my throat, holding my phone to my ear.

“Please,” Evelyn added, then, “Sorry. Sorry, I’m ... I don’t like this.”

“None of us do,” Raine said with a grin.

“Speak for yourselves,” said Twil. “It’s only Brinkwood. It’s home.”

My phone rang quietly in my hand. The trees crawled by alongside the narrowing road. I willed Zheng to pick up. Evelyn wasn’t wrong, we needed as much protection as we could get, even if this was all above-board and absolutely not a trap, by either the Brinkwood cult — which I seriously doubted — or a distant and unknowable move by Edward Lilburne — which I doubted significantly less.

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To our collective credit, we hadn’t instantly descended into a tailspin of paranoia and panic after Twil’s mysterious phone call

from her mother.

Quite a feat, seeing as it had come hot on the heels of both planned and improvised duels Outside, one of the most magically and emotionally complex things any of us had done in a while. Raine and Zheng had both been covered in blood, I'd been all a-whirl inside my own head with emotional overload and quasi-sexual awe, and we'd had a stable gateway to Camelot to deal with, whatever we decided to do about Nicole's situation.

After a bit more second-hand confused back-and-forth between Twil and her mother on the other end of the phone, we'd established a few basic facts: Nicole Webb was at Twil's house, not being held hostage, and free to leave whenever she wanted.

But she was neither willing nor able to leave under her own power. According to Twil's mother, Nicole Webb, private eye, had stumbled out of the woods in a semi-coherent daze, a fugue state, talking nonsense — actual nonsense, even by the standards of people in the know, who worshipped an Outsider and had a werewolf for a daughter. So, no exaggeration there. She'd collapsed on their doorstep and they'd taken her indoors.

For anybody else, they would have called an ambulance and maybe the police. After all, this wasn't any of their business.

Except that Twil's mother recognised Nicole, from the meeting between us and Edward's people. Nicole was in the know, exposed to the supernatural, and as far as Twil's mother knew, still very much a police detective.

"I think she just wants this off the family's hands, you know?" Twil explained to us after she'd hung up. "This isn't anything to do with them. This is the shit we've had super-spy Nicky doing, right? Looking for Edward's place?"

"Maybe," Evelyn hissed. "But maybe not. I don't know. We don't know anything."

"It's not a fucking trap!" Twil said. "My mum is freaked out, okay?"

"We go in as if it is a trap," Evelyn said. "No complaints, no arguing. Or you stay here and we'll do it without you."

"It's my home! It's my parents!"

"I don't think it's going to be a trap," I had piped up, my mouth

gone dry, my hands shaking.

I couldn't stop thinking about what Nicole had said, about the documents she'd stolen from Edward, the sense she'd gotten that the information itself had been avoiding her curiosity, trying to hide from her insight. Had she lied to us, had she carried on with the investigation regardless?

"Nah," Raine had said to that. "For my money, Nicky's way too sensible to stick her nose back in, not when she said she'd stop."

"We are going to retrieve her regardless," Evelyn said. "Nobody gets left behind."

"Left behind where!?" Twil shouted. "She's at my bloody house, it's not like she's behind enemy lines or some shit."

Jan had cleared her throat, still flanked by the towering presence of July. "Excuse me," she'd interjected as we'd all started melting down at each other, flapping one hand of her overstuffed coat to get our attention. "I do hope I'm not included in this 'we' statement of yours. I don't know what you lot are up to, exactly, but I would rather not be involved in anything that includes a *police detective*, ex or otherwise."

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. "Yes. Obviously. And this is none of your business anyway."

"She can hang out with me!" Lozzie chirped, bumping into Jan's side like an amorous cat rubbing itself on a nearby leg.

"Oh!" Jan sort of caught her but without touching her, suddenly all delicate hover-hands and blushing cheeks. "Um, well, that's very ... kind of you, but we, uh. Um."

"Actually," Evelyn snapped, "I've changed my mind. You can help."

July had perked up at that. Jan had looked up too, head surfacing from her coat like a seal from an ice-hole. "Absolutely no—"

"You can house-sit."

Evelyn had not liked Lozzie's request, as she made clear once we were in the car, but it was the only thing that made sense under the circumstances; we had already trusted Jan and July enough to let them in our home and through the gateway to Camelot. They already knew where we lived. If they were still planning a move

against us, now was the time to do it regardless, and none of us actually thought they were. Jan's aversion to complications and danger was difficult to fake.

So Evelyn had taken charge of planning. She'd shooed us out of the room while she and Lozzie deactivated the gateway. Zheng and Raine had done their best to clean the blood off their respective faces — and in Zheng's case, her belly and hips, swapping out her t-shirt for something clean. I'd flittered around, still shell-shocked after the duels, more than a little sweaty, badly in need of a sit-down, but found myself making a cup of tea for Jan and July. But that wasn't to last. Evelyn reappeared like a whirlwind of command.

Zheng was dispatched — with Evelyn's instructions but by my request — to reach Twil's house before the rest of us did, with her mobile phone firmly in her pocket and strict instructions not to pull any doors off any hinges or any heads off any necks.

"You fucking lay a hand on my mum and I'll take you apart," Twil had growled at her, not happy about any step of this. "I'm not kidding. I heal faster than you, don't you forget that."

Zheng had strode past Twil in the kitchen as if ignoring her — but then briefly grabbed her head in one massive hand, let out a chuckle, and vanished out the back door before Twil could retaliate with a bite.

"And you're certain," Evelyn had pressed Lozzie, "there's no way you can just ... jump there, yes?"

"There's no singing calling me there," Lozzie had said, sighing at the kitchen table. "I can go Out! But not like, back anywhere I choose, not unless I can *hear*. And I don't know the voices out there or the reflections. Sooooo no. Okay?"

Evelyn huffed, but she nodded. "I suppose so."

I'd caught Sevens briefly, in the front room, during the only moment we'd had alone before we'd left the house. "Please do keep an eye on things," I'd murmured as the others got ready. "You're one of us, you're part of the house. I ... I think I trust Jan and July, but this is all so sudden, I need somebody here who I can trust for sure, who is powerful enough to ... well, just in case."

"I wanna come too," Sevens had rasped, clinging to my front with

her hands curled into claws. "I wanna watch you."

"Nothing is going to happen," I said to her. "I ... I hope. We'll see what's up with Nicky, and ... and ..."

"You're kidding yourself," Sevens bumped her head against my shoulder, gurgling the words into my flesh, chewing gently on my hoodie. I hugged her awkwardly.

"Watching the house is important too," I said.

"*Mmmuuurrrrr*. Okaaaaay. But I'll be there if you need it."

"Don't jeopardise your progress, Sevens."

"Mmmmmm. For you."

Raine, Evelyn, Twil, Praem, and I had all piled into Raine's reliable but somewhat cramped car. We left Jan and July with Lozzie, Tenny and Sevens, and with Whistle trotting around in the kitchen, what we hoped were capable hands.

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Geerswin Farm — Twil's family home — was tucked away just past Brinkwood itself, an open secret not quite fully subsumed by the creeping mud and green rot of the deep woods, but not truly part of the village either. It stood on the borderland between one world and the next, though I had the distinct impression that not all of us could feel the lingering transition as we passed between the jumbled mass of thickening trees.

The road narrowed, the mud encroached on crumbling asphalt, and the canopy above blocked out most of the sunlight.

"You actually walk this, every day, to get to school or the train station?" Evelyn asked, her voice dropping to a subconscious whisper as if something might hear us from beyond the ever-closer tree-line.

Twil shrugged. "Yeah? It's not that bad, it's not like a dirt path or something. It's only like fifteen minutes walk to school."

"Fifteen minutes," Evelyn laughed without humour, shaking her head.

"We're hardly like, in the Outer Hebrides. You don't have to get on a boat to get here. We've driven here from Sharrowford! In like

twenty minutes!”

I still had my phone pressed to my ear, still ringing, still going unanswered. Zheng wasn't picking up.

“It is absolutely the back of beyond,” Evelyn hissed. Her attention suddenly snapped up from the road as the trees parted ahead of us, as the house and grounds loomed out of the woods, a sudden fairy-ring among the boughs. “Is that it?” she asked.

Raine was laughing. “Didn't know you lived in a mansion, Twil.”

“It's not a mansion!” Twil was getting shrill, which wasn't helping my nerves. “It's not even as big as your house!”

“Oh my goodness,” I said, putting my free hand over my mouth at the sight of the place.

Raine must have caught the panic in my voice. “Heather?”

“Um ... it's ... um ... ”

“Busy,” Praem intoned, bell-clear, cutting through our confusion.

To call Twil's family home a ‘farm’ was not really accurate — that was a sentimental anachronism, no matter what status claimed by the little rusted sign at the end of the driveway. At some distant point in the past, an optimistic pioneer had carved out a few fields here in the shadows of the tall trees, cleared the woods back to a higher ridge in the earth, erected a row of stables, added a set of fences, and then crowned their achievement with a rambling farmhouse in red brick, dark slate, and thick wooden beams.

Nature had since digested all those ambitions. The fields were overgrown with long grass, thistles, and hardy little saplings, slowly re-colonising the clearing and returning it to the forest. The fences were rotten and full of holes. Only one field still boasted intact fences, painstakingly repaired with modern lumber and treated with creosote paint, but still pockmarked with green mosses and damp lichens. I spotted a pair of alpacas far off in the corner of that field, with a small group of sheep clustered around them as they looked up at our approach.

The block of stables had collapsed long ago. Only one at the far end was kept in any state of repair, wrapped in tarpaulin as a form of weatherproofing. The stub of a black-beamed barn poked from the scrub ground beyond, looking like it had once burnt almost to the

ground. At least the driveway was fresh gravel, no older than a few years since it was last replaced, not too riven with mud-holes and wheel-ruts.

The farmhouse itself was the only part of the property that obviously received regular attention and maintenance. A low structure of only two floors, it was nothing like the grandiose size of the manor house down in Sussex on the Saye estate. Twil was correct about that, it was neither fancy nor posh — but it was still much larger and more dignified than any modern new build one might find in Sharrowford. In form it was less neat and regular than Number 12 Barnslow Drive; the building looked like it had started life as a much smaller structure, then been progressively added to on one side, lending it an outline like a series of smaller boxes being pulled out of each other. But it was far better tended than our home — no ivy climbed the clean red brickwork, no tiles were missing from the slate roof, the small square windows were clean and a little back patio was festooned with healthy green potted plants.

I could tell that whoever was responsible for the building loved it dearly. And so did I. Love at first sight and more than a little bit of envy directed at Twil, for getting to grow up in a place like this.

It was real and cared for in a way I so rarely saw: on closer inspection some of the roof tiles were the wrong colour, sourced from anywhere to fill the gaps. The window panes were clean but the cross-beams had not been repainted in years. What I had thought was metal trim on the patio doors was actually masses of duct tape, holding the hinges on. Whoever cared for this place did not have deep resources to draw on, but they were mounting a desperate rearguard action against time and decay.

Whoever would willingly care for an old and venerable building in such a way was my instant friend and ally.

But that wasn't what I was reacting to; I only processed that later.

"What do you mean, busy?" Evelyn hissed. "Praem, what do you mean?"

"Busy," Praem repeated. "But the way is clear."

"Heather?" Raine slowed as we approached the gravel driveway. "What do you see? Should we stop?"

"It's just my home," Twil huffed.

“The way is clear,” Praem repeated.

“Uh. If Praem thinks ... ” I struggled to find my voice — but I didn’t have time to do more than that.

The car rounded the farm’s hedgerow border, giving us a view down the driveway, all the way to the front door of the farmhouse.

I lowered my phone from my ear and killed the unanswered call. No wonder Zheng hadn’t picked up.

The wide space between the front of the house and the abandoned stables was paved with a broad patch of cracked and crumbly tarmac, laid down as room for parking, an ugly practicality amid this grand ruin. It was currently occupied by a beefy green land rover that I recognised from our first meeting with the Church of Hringewindla, alongside a pair of more sensible looking cars, one of which was parked at a jaunty angle which screamed ‘I was in a hurry when I pulled up.’

Twil’s mother, Christine Hopton, was standing on the raised brick step before the front door, almost exactly as I recalled her from our previous meetings, like Twil but thirty years older, with long unbound grey hair and a face lined by a lifetime of genuine smiles. But right then she was frowning, her arms folded beneath a tie-dye shawl, her body language like a schoolteacher threatened with a knife.

Benjamin — Twil’s cousin, who’d we’d also met before, months ago — was standing next to her on the tarmac. For all his heavily muscled bulk and close-cropped hair and imposing looks, he was currently white-faced and open-mouthed in naked terror.

Opposite them, twelve feet away, wrapped in her long coat and fresh, unbloodied clothes, stood Zheng.

She was baring her teeth, moving her head back and forth with all the predatory intent of a big cat sizing up a rival.

“Oh shit!” Twil shouted, fumbling with the door handle. “Shit shit shit!”

“No, Twil!” I said, trying to grab for her over Praem’s lap and managing only to get a face full of Praem’s chest. “It’s fine, she’s not glaring at your mum!”

“Heather!” Evelyn snapped, fumbling inside her coat. “Praem! What

are we looking at? One of you bloody well *explain*.”

“Zheng’s in a staring contest,” I said, panic clawing up my throat. Praem helped me sit back up. “I-I think, anyway. I think it’s okay!”

“Staring contest with what?!” Twil yelled, popping the car door even though the wheels were still rolling. The smell of the woods rushed inside the car, loamy soil and rotting leaves.

“The bubble-things,” I said. “The cult’s— I mean, your family’s servitors.”

“Doggies,” Praem intoned.

I had failed to remind myself that the people who owned this house had the strings of an Outsider god wrapped around their brains, but the bubble-servitors were impossible to ignore.

They were crawling all over the exterior of the house. A dozen or more.

I’d witnessed a single example of the Brinkwood Cult’s ‘angels’ once before, back when Twil’s mother, Christine Hopton, high priestess of the Church of Hringewindla, had visited us in order to offer the resources and help of the Church with cracking the Sharrowford Cult’s interdimensional gateways. Though that had turned out to maybe, possibly, be a trap. That seemed like so long ago now — before we’d stormed the castle, before Alexander’s demise, before I’d rediscovered what I really was. And before Zheng.

The bubble-servitors were only semi-visible, glinting in the sunlight like blobs of oversized soap suds, individual bubbles sliding over each other in a constant process of liquid rearrangement. Back in Sharrowford, I’d found it hard to gauge the size of the one that Christine Hopton had brought with her, but outlined now against the roof of the house, the background of thick woods, and the tarmac and grass of the grounds, the cult’s real muscle was much clearer.

Each one was about six or seven feet in diameter, though they took a constantly shifting, irregular shape, making it hard to standardize. Four or five of the things were perched on the roof, and it was difficult to tell them apart as they circled and bobbed. Another two floated through the little garden like silent air-bound jellyfish. One hovered over the front door, within inches of Christine and Benjamin’s heads. Several clustered around the dilapidated stables

and more of them were hanging over the distant, overgrown fields. We passed one on guard duty by the driveway, component bubbles slipping and sliding as if it was somehow reacting to the car's movement.

The motion of the things made my stomach turn over. It made me think of naked muscle with the skin stripped away.

I couldn't help but notice there was no other spirit life here. This was a monoculture. Hringewindla's angel-buds only.

And one of the bubble-servitors was right in front of Zheng, hanging in the air, as if locked in a staring contest.

Unfortunately, nobody but Praem and I could see that. Even when Evelyn pulled out her modified 3D glasses, I don't think she understood what she was looking at. Everybody else saw Zheng making a face like she wanted to eat Twil's mum, and not in the fun way.

Twil boggled at me — then leapt from the car as Raine was still pulling to a stop. She hit the tarmac running and sprinted over to put herself between Zheng and her mother.

"Oh yes, make everything worse, well done!" Evelyn shouted, whipping the glasses off her face. "Somebody help me up before this all explodes!"

Then Raine was setting the handbrake and killing the engine and the rest of us piled out of the car too, out into the loamy scent and rustling leaves of the middle of the woods, straight into a whirlwind.

"Don't you fucking dare you—" Twil, putting her fists up for Zheng.

"Twil! Language!" Scolded by her own mother.

"Hey hey hey, what the hell is that," Benjamin was freaking out. "What the hell is she? I am not dealing with that, I am not dealing with that—"

"Everybody. Calm. Down." Evelyn couldn't snap loud enough, voice lost in the creaking of the trees overhead. Praem and I got her to her feet before I realised how badly she was shaking, how much she didn't want to be here, how risky she felt this was.

"Woof. Good dog." Praem, talking to something almost nobody else

could see.

"Rrrrrrrr-rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr." Zheng kept growling, louder and louder.

“Whoa, whoa, hey, no need for violence, okay?” Raine, always brave, stepping forward with her hands out. “We’re all here to—”

“Mum, mum get indoors and—”

“I will absolutely not, this is a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding my arse!” Benjamin shouted. “That’s a full-on fucking revenant. Fuck this, I’m getting the shotgun.”

A swish and a click and a low tone from Raine, her stubby black pistol suddenly in her hand. “Wouldn’t do that if I were you, mate.”

“Raine!” Twil shouted. “Fuck, put that away!”

"Then tell your cousin to—"

“You get her to back off then!” Benjamin pointed at Zheng. His hand was shaking.

Zheng rumbled between her teeth, twisting her head left and right at the revolting mass of bubbles in front of her eyes. Little sub-clusters of iridescent spheres followed her motion, as if mimicking or mocking. The colours on the bubble-servitor's surface ran together, oil on water, forcing me to blink hard to clear my itching, stinging eyes. Evelyn's grip tightened on my arm as the situation spiralled out of control.

I tried to speak. “She’s not—”

But Twil yelled over me. “This isn’t what we—”

“Twil, dear—”

Evelyn raised her voice again. “Everybody shut the fu—”

“I’m getting the gun!”

“Don’t you move a muscle, fella, you stay right there.”

“Raine, put it down!”

Hiiiiisssssrrrrrk!

I hissed long and loud and hard, so hard that my throat ached and burned when I finally let the sound trail off, but the stunt did the

trick — everybody stopped shouting and waving their arms about. I only realised after I'd done it that I'd also reached out and wrapped my single manifested tentacle around Raine's wrists, forcing her pistol to stay pointed at the ground. We all stood there for a moment in stunned silence, broken only by the rustle of leaves overhead as I panted and swallowed and forced my throat back into the proper human configuration. In the distant field, the little clutch of sheep with their pair of alpaca guardians were all staring at us — at me, and my predator-sound.

Evelyn was shaking gently against my arm. Twil was staring at me, thankful but shocked. Benjamin looked like he'd soiled himself. Zheng didn't care, still locked in silent confrontation with the bubble-bath creature.

Christine Hopton cleared her throat. "Thank you," she managed to say, a little shocked but quickly recovering her poise and dignity. "Heather, if I am recalling correctly? Thank you."

"Mmm," I grunted, my throat now too raw for words, filled with the scent of mud and bark.

"Thank you, indeed. Now, if everybody could stay calm, please? Ben, don't go anywhere, do not introduce more firearms to this situation. And Twil," she added quickly, "if you could not start shouting."

"Raine pointed her gun at us," Twil huffed.

"She didn't, actually," Christine said. "She was always pointing it at the ground."

"Safety first," Raine said with a polite nod. "And the safety's on, too." Her eyes flicked to Benjamin, who was standing there like a pillar of salt, staring at me in shock, his hands half-raised like he wasn't sure if he should surrender or not. "Just don't go fetching any shotguns, okay?"

"... sure," he said. "Whatever. Alright." He nodded at Zheng. "You've got a bloody revenant standing right there, though. Can somebody call it off, please?"

"Zheng does what she pleases," Evelyn said. She caught my eye and nodded too, mouthing a silent thank you.

"Shaman," Zheng finally rumbled, without taking her eyes off the

bubble-servitor inches from her nose. Benjamin jumped. Christine blinked in surprise. I think they'd assumed Zheng couldn't talk. "The god-spawn blocks the way. I am not to pass."

"Wait, what?" Twil said, frowning in confusion.

"Ah." Christine winced with implicit apology. "The angels. I thought that was happening, I do apologise. Neither I nor Ben here can see them." She waved an impatient hand at Benjamin. "Go tell Amanda they need calming. Our guests need to come inside and see to their friend. And do not return with the shotgun."

"What?" Ben pulled a grimace. "Leave you out here with them?"

"Oi, I'm standing right here!" Twil said.

"Yeah," Ben snapped at her. "And you weren't here when you were fuckin' needed. I had to race here from my flat and—"

"Ben," Christine said, firmer than expected. "Inside. Tell Amanda. Now."

He sighed and shrugged, shaking his meaty head. "Fine." He pointed at Twil. "You look after your mum."

"Hey, fuck you too!" Twil spat.

"Twil!" her mother scolded.

I tried not to watch that exchange, mortified for Twil, for her family, for everyone involved. I felt like we'd walked in on something we shouldn't be witnessing.

Evelyn cleared her throat loudly, shoulders hunched against the wind through the trees. Her grip on my arm was particularly tight and I didn't blame her, not with the way the tall trunks creaked and swayed far above us.

"Where is Nicole Webb?" she asked.

Christine bowed her head as if embarrassed. "Indoors, in our sitting room. She's safe, we haven't done anything. Ben, please, if you could get moving?"

"Wait," Evelyn snapped. "Before we all go exploding off in our separate directions, I would like to establish exactly what is going on here. Nobody move, please."

From anybody else, in any other tone but long-suffering exasperation, the words ‘nobody move, please’ would probably have sent several of the people present in that tumbledown forest clearing all moving at once, at high-speed, with dangerous intent. But Evelyn was so fed up she managed to make it into a phrase of de-escalation, even as she rummaged inside her coat.

Her hand emerged with the magically modified 3D-glasses once again, their rims covered in tiny magical symbols. She slipped them on and looked around with a frown — first curious, then increasingly disgusted. “Ugh,” she muttered. “Worse than I imagined. Why are there so many of them? Praem, step away from that one, please. Don’t touch it.”

Praem withdrew her hovering hand; she’d been reaching out to one of the bubble-servitors at the edge of the tarmac, as if the invisible pneuma-somatic god-bud was just an unfamiliar dog.

“They are quite safe,” Christine said. “And I do apologise.”

“Says you,” Evelyn hissed.

I half-expected Twil to bristle with offence, but she just grimaced and looked away, out at the dank woods beyond. Christine sighed and briefly closed her eyes. Benjamin looked like he wanted to punch something.

“I count fourteen of them,” Evelyn said, then gestured with the head of her walking stick at the one Zheng was facing off against. “One right there. Heather, Praem? Is this correct? Anything I’m missing?”

“No, no.” I shook my head. “Actually there’s no other spirits around at all. Nothing, anywhere.”

“Ominous,” Raine said with a smirk.

Christine sighed and shrugged beneath her shawl, arms still folded across her chest. “I can’t see them either, but I know they’re present. We don’t usually have so many of them at the house, they stay at the Church, but under the circumstances, we thought it best to ... take precautions.”

“Because of us?” I asked, my chest tightening with strange guilt.

Christine blinked at me. I was too far away to glimpse the depths of her eyes, but for a moment I remembered what I’d seen there when

she'd visited us in Sharrowford — her god moving through her like a behemoth in the deep.

"Why, no, dear," she said. "Because we don't know what your friend was running from."

"And we're not a threat?" Evelyn asked — though it only sounded half like a question. I could almost hear the gears turning inside Evelyn's mind.

Christine shook her head. She sighed heavily, hesitated, and then stepped off the little raised brick platform before the solid front door of the house, down onto the tarmac. She strode forward, short and compact, but confident with her chin held high, eyes compassionate yet guarded, arms folded but not afraid. Benjamin reached out awkwardly to stop her, but Twil batted his hand out of the way, snarling at him. Christine walked halfway toward Zheng and Evelyn and myself, until she was only a few feet away.

"You are my daughter's friends and companions," she said. "I like to think we can have cordial relations, even strained like this. Even if only personally, if not between our Church and your ... well, coven?"

"Family," I said before anybody could stop me. Christine blinked in surprise, then nodded politely.

"Coven is good enough," Evelyn grunted.

"Yo, hey," Twil spoke up. "Protection's a good idea right now though. Mum, you keep these bubble thingys around, right? Tell Amanda to keep 'em here. We still don't know if this is Ed—"

"Twil," Evelyn said, loud and clear, cutting her off.

"... what?" Twil looked outraged. "What, I'm not supposed to tell my family? This is my home, Eevee!"

Evelyn stared back at Twil, frowning hard and conflicted, sucking on her teeth.

"It would assist us," Christine said, "if we were to know what is going on. Please, miss Saye?"

"Eevee," I ventured. "May I?"

Evelyn frowned at Twil, then at Christine, then around at the bubble-servitors again. She slowly pulled the 3D glasses off her face,

then sighed and nodded.

“Thank you,” I whispered, then raised my voice. “I’m sorry we’re all so on edge, we’ve come straight from ... a mess.” Raine snorted, but I carried on. “Um, Nicole Webb, the lady you have in there, she’s a private eye. She was working on a job for us, trying to locate a property that belongs to Edward Lilburne.”

“Ah,” said Christine.

“We told her to stop,” Evelyn said. “There were unexplained irregularities in the location she was attempting to find. That was yesterday. So either she didn’t stop, or something else happened to her.”

“Edward Lilburne,” Christine echoed. “Indeed.”

“Fuckin’ ‘ell,” Benjamin hissed.

“We would rather not have any further dealings with him at all,” Christine said.

Zheng *rumbled* like a volcano caged in stone. She finally turned her dark and brooding eyes away from the bubble-servitor silently blocking her way, and stared down at Christine instead. The bubble-servitor moved like oil on glass through the air, sliding to cover the gap between them.

“Sound judgement, appendage,” Zheng said.

“Hey!” Twil snapped, running up to join her mother.

Twil’s mother managed to look back at Zheng for all of about three seconds, then averted her eyes. “I see you’ve expanded your coven, since we last spoke.”

“Zheng,” I said, pitching my voice as firmly as I could — though it came out in a squeak. “Zheng, please do not hurt these people. They’re not our enemies.”

“Mmmm,” Zheng sighed a great sigh and turned her gaze back to the bubble-servitor itself. “This thing, this gauze, this membrane of light, I could tear it in two with my little finger.”

“Please don’t,” I repeated.

“Huh,” she snorted.

Christine took a deep breath and gestured at Benjamin again. "Amanda, now. Tell her to soothe them."

Benjamin put his hands up, sighed like we were all making a terrible mistake, and slipped back inside through the open front door, devoured by the heavy shadows just beyond the threshold.

A moment of awkward silence passed as we stood around on that patch of rotten tarmac. The trees creaked all around us, ships in a storm. I had the distinct impression that we stood in a brief pause of light and space — literally, as sunlight poured down into this temporary woodland clearing — whilst all around us a deep darkness lurked beyond the tree line.

Superstitious illusion, the paranoia of a lifelong city girl. I'd been out to the woods before, it was only plants and animals. Even the spirits were nice.

Twil let out a big sigh, suddenly very ordinary teenager again. Raine shrugged and put her pistol away. Praem stopped staring at the nearest bubble-servitor and took up her place next to Evelyn again.

"Where's dad at?" Twil asked.

Christine was trying to smile at Evelyn and myself. "Work, dear. He's at work."

"Who else is about? Is it just you and Ben or ... ?"

Twil trailed off, catching the knowing look that passed directly between her mother and Evelyn. Mage and High Priestess understood why no answer was forthcoming, though it took the rest of us a moment to catch up.

Raine laughed first. I sighed. Twil went "Aw, come on."

"Truce," Praem intoned.

"We already have a truce," Evelyn said, low and serious, speaking to Christine. "You don't have to tell us how many people you have inside. You're already quite well defended. No offence meant or taken."

"We're also not here to attack anybody," I spoke up, trying to sound strict.

"Yeah, damn right," Twil said.

Christine looked away, wet her lips, then sighed awkwardly. "William and Jowdy are upstairs," she said.

"Ah," Twil cringed. "Uhhhhhh."

"With instructions to stay there until this is all over." She looked back to Evelyn again, chin high and defiant. "They're Twil's little cousins, they were here to visit their mother. This is a Saturday, after all."

"Children?" Evelyn asked. Christine nodded. "If there's no violence from you, there won't be any from us. I promise that."

Zheng rumbled at the bubble-servitor. "Wizard, you make no promises for my—"

Praem reached out one delicate hand and poked Zheng in the side, beneath her ribs with one outstretched finger. "No."

Christine stayed frozen for a second, watching Zheng carefully. But my beautiful demon host only glowered in silence.

"Aunt Amanda's here too, right?" Twil prompted.

"... yes," Christine found her voice again. "Yes. Quite. She's looking at the policewoman right now. Private eye, I mean, I'm sorry. I believe the rest of you met Amanda during the meeting at that pub in Sharrowford. She is our foremost practitioner of the divine arts, but she can't find anything wrong with Miss Webb."

"Vaguely remember her," Evelyn said.

"Mm," I agreed. I barely recalled her at all, to be honest. A dumpy woman, run to fat from stress, with bags beneath her eyes and that haunted look which came from too much intimacy with the supernatural.

Christine glanced at Twil. "Gareth is here with her."

"Awww what?" Twil pulled a face. "He can't tell his arse from his elbow. He's looking at Nicky too?"

"Actually I think he's just admiring Amanda," Christine said in a stage whisper. Twil snorted. "Miss Saye, Evelyn, Heather, uh ... Praem, was it? Praem, yes. Raine too. And ..."

"Zheng," I supplied.

“Zheng,” Christine finished, trying very hard to look directly at the seven feet of rippling muscle standing in her front driveway.

“Pleased to meet you, yes. If you’d all like to come inside and take a look at your friend, I would much appreciate it, because we don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

“Actually,” Evelyn said. “I’d prefer if you bring her out here.”

“Yeeeeeeah,” Raine agreed slowly. “We’ll take her off your hands, okay?”

Christine sighed sharply. “I’m afraid that might be quite difficult. She can barely stand, let alone walk in a straight line. Between us we won’t be able to manhandle her out here. Though ... Twil, dear?”

“Yeah, I could sling her over my shoulder,” Twil said, then sighed too, at Evelyn. “This isn’t a trap, hey? What proof do you need?”

Evelyn met her gaze with a clenched jaw. “I don’t believe it is, but ...” She looked upward, at the house, then lifted the modified 3D glasses to her eyes again. “Hmm.”

“There are no guardian angels inside my house,” Christine said.

“This is not a trap. Your friend walked out of the woods and she can barely stand. She’s also not speaking coherent sentences.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Evelyn asked. “What’s she been saying?”

Christine shrugged. “Neither myself nor Amanda has ever seen anything like it before, and, well, we’ve both seen rather a lot. She is speaking, but it’s just nonsense.”

“She didn’t run into your god out in the woods, did she?” Raine asked, polite but serious.

Christine shook her head. “I doubt that very much.”

“How can you be sure?”

Christine shot Raine a pinched look, irritated but trying to stay polite. “I have seen my own husband embraced by the thoughts of our divine patron. I know what such a state looks like. This is not it.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “We don’t seriously think you’ve done this to her, but we need to rule it out. Twil?”

“Eh?” Twil blinked at Evelyn, then caught on, nodding along. “Yeah, right. You can trust my mum on this.”

“She didn’t visit your ... Church?” Evelyn did her best to suppress a sigh before that last word.

Christine opened her mouth to answer, then glanced suddenly and sharply at me. I blinked back at her, feeling naked, like she was looking right through me.

Evelyn cleared her throat. “I do know where it’s located,” she said. “I have my grandmother’s maps. If we wanted to attack you, it would be simple.”

“I’m not going to go there,” I said to Christine — but I knew I was talking to the thing watching me through her eyes, the thing that had been mortally terrified of a visit from me, back when the Church had tried to draw us in previously. “You’ve nothing to fear from me. I’m sorry.”

Behind her, Twil pulled a face that threatened to break my heart, biting her lower lip and averting her eyes. She hated being reminded of this.

“Of course, dear,” Christine suddenly sighed, smiling again. “Nothing to apologise for. And no, Miss Webb certainly did not visit our Church. She wandered out of the woods right over there.” Christine finally uncrossed her arms and pointed out of the driveway, across the road, to where the sucking mud and mulched leaves formed a shallow ditch on the far side. “Which means she probably came off the main road somehow, perhaps the A523 or a smaller road. We have no idea where her car is, though she does have her keys on her.”

“Tracks,” Zheng rumbled, still facing down the bubble-servitor, which was shifting and adjusting in front of her.

“Oh, yes!” Christine confirmed, a little too hard when pressed by Zheng’s rumble. “We didn’t touch her footprints. The mud is very pliable this time of year. If you want to check, they’re right there, leading back into the woods. You may check for yourselves if you don’t believe me.”

Evelyn sucked on her teeth. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

Raine raised an eyebrow at her. “Evee?”

Evelyn nodded slowly. “I believe you and I need to—”

Suddenly and without warning, the bubble-servitor that had been blocking Zheng retreated from us, rolling over itself like a modular slug. Zheng growled, a goaded tiger. I flinched, disgusted by the motion and wincing at the effect on my eyes. Praem raised a hand and waved politely. The other servitors — on the roof and dotted about the old farm — also adjusted their positions, as if adopting some modified guard pattern now we’d been confirmed as not a threat.

Christine waited a beat, holding her breath. “Have the angels relaxed?”

“Stood down,” Praem intoned.

Christine let out a sigh of relief. “Good. Good. I was half worried Ben was going to come back out swinging, he can be so difficult sometimes. You may all come inside now, if you want. You don’t all have to, I understand if you’d rather not. I do hope you can figure out what’s wrong with your friend.”

Evelyn and I shared a glance. Raine shrugged. Twil rolled her eyes, the very picture of a sulky teenager.

“We’ll all come in, I think,” Evelyn said, nodding slowly. Through my arm and my one tentacle, I could feel the beating of her heart, her pulse in her wrist, going a little too fast. “I think you and we need to trust each other.”

“Well, good!” Twil said.

“Indeed.” Christine nodded. “I agree, if only for—”

“And I’m not just talking to you, Christine,” Evelyn interrupted. “I’m talking to the thing in your head. We need not be on opposite sides. Mister Edward Lilburne could be a problem for both of us, especially because we can’t find the bastard, and he has a track record for exploiting things like you and—”

A scream suddenly cut across our little peace conference, muffled from inside the walls of the house, loud enough to make us all jump and send the sheep and alpacas in the distant field scrambling for the fence.

A woman’s scream, high-pitched with fright — but it was not the voice of private detective Nicole Webb.

and walked a crooked mile –

16.2

A scream, deep in the woods beneath the leaf-dappled sunlight, from inside the rambling old farmhouse, muffled by red brick and dark slate and heavy beams. No neighbours within earshot, no busy road of passing cars, no Good Samaritan on the path. Only trees and weeds and a handful of sheep to hear the chilling cry.

And us, of course.

“Oh you’re joking,” I hissed before the scream could finish.

This was too obvious, too cliché, too much like one of those cheesy black and white horror movies that Raine sometimes got me to watch with her. Those were only enjoyable because I got to snuggle up in her lap, though I did appreciate the sheer enthusiasm she showed for the rather obvious progression of overwrought spooky nonsense.

And now here we were, deep in the closest thing to a real forest in the North of England, potentially less than a mile or two from a real Outsider buried beneath an ancient Church, off-balance and tired after supernatural sports day, facing down a tense-but-not-dangerous situation with some very suspicious ‘angels’ which looked more like frothed bleach than ladies with wings, when what should interrupt our relaxation of terms but a blood-curdling scream?

Was a giant bat about to burst from the chimney and go flapping off into the woods? Would bony hands erupt from the soil, clutching for brains? Were we about to hear the clank of chains and the moaning of a ghost?

Perhaps Edward Lilburne was a fan of Hammer Horror classics too.

The scream cut off as suddenly as it had started, but thankfully not with a gurgle of ruptured windpipe or bloody vomit. A beat of stunned silence descended on the woodland clearing, the old farmhouse, and our patch of crumbly tarmac, broken only by the

rustle of leaves, the creak of trees, and some distantly confused bleating from the handful of sheep.

“You can bloody well say that again, Heather,” Evelyn whispered between her teeth, still holding tight to my arm, her forearm linked through mine. She must have heard my exasperated hiss.

Then we lost control.

“Amanda?!” Christine shouted. She started hurrying back toward the open front door of the house, which seemed to yawn on an infinite black depth, an illusion caused by the bright day outdoors. “Amanda!”

“That’s my aunt, shit!” Twil said.

Twil picked up her feet like a sprinter and raced past her mother before anybody could stop her. She took the front steps in one leap, already half-werewolf by the time her feet touched the bricks. Wisps of ghostly canine form whirled about her arms and upper back.

“Wait!” Evelyn snapped. “Twil, you wait!”

But Twil was already slipping inside the house, vanishing out of sight in the cool darkness. Her mother trotted up the steps and followed her indoors.

“In for a penny, in for a pound, hey?” Raine said, wheeling backward to face us as she moved to catch up with Twil. She nodded to Zheng as well. “Come on, lefty, tanks up front. Praem, you watch the rear, yeah?”

“This is obviously a trap!” Evelyn snapped.

“Well, it’s a stupid one, then,” I huffed, covering anxiety with exasperation. “More than a bit premature, I think.”

“The shaman is right,” Zheng rumbled, baring her teeth in a distasteful grimace. She didn’t like the look of this either. “Our help is not needed.”

“Good doggies,” Praem intoned.

“What?” Evelyn squinted at us all, bewildered.

“Uh, Heather?” Raine asked.

“They’re going inside,” I said, as if it was obvious. “Not much of a trap if you get ... I don’t know, dissolved.”

I pointed at the house before I remembered that neither Evelyn nor Raine could see what was plain to myself, Zheng, and Praem. Evelyn fumbled the modified 3D glasses back onto her face as I huffed with embarrassment. She cringed and went pale before passing the glasses to Raine.

“We really need more than one pair of those,” Evelyn muttered.

“Siiiiick,” said Raine.

Most of the bubble-servitors were rapidly oozing their way inside the farmhouse, passing directly through the glass of closed windows, each one like a wet sponge squeezing itself through the neck of a bottle. They made no sound, but the motion of bubbles sliding over each other and compressing as they squished themselves indoors filled my imagination with the noise of raw meat sliding through mud. It reminded me of a video I’d seen of a *whale fall* — the miniature ecosystem of scavengers which formed on the sea floor around the carcass of a dead whale, the soft-bodied cephalopods and pale molluscs of the ocean trenches worming their way through decaying flesh.

A few bubble-servitors stayed on the roof as lookouts, but all the rest slucked and slipped and slid indoors. We stood watching as they vanished behind the walls of the house.

Amanda Hopton, Twil’s aunt, the woman who’d apparently just screamed her head off, had once been described to us as the one member of the Church of Hringewindla who had spent the most time learning from their god. And now all Hringewindla’s angels were rushing to her defence.

If this was indeed a trap, then her attacker was in for a very nasty surprise.

“Zheng is right, we’re probably surplus to requirements here,” Evelyn said with a sigh. But she put her walking stick forward and tried to straighten her shoulders, pulling her chin up and setting her jaw. She almost managed to cover for the pale, blood-drained look in her face. I squeezed her arm, proud of her efforts, but not wanting her to push herself. “But we should show we’re willing to help, regardless. And Twil did just run in there, bloody fool.”

"I don't hear any shouting or crashing about," Raine said. She turned back to the house with a smirk. "Guess we're in the clear."

"Eyes up, little wolf," Zheng purred. "We know nothing."

"Probably just saw a spider under the sink."

"Spiders are lovely," Praem intoned.

Nothing leapt out at us as we approached the house, neither from the distant tree-line nor the lingering shadows beyond the front door. No red eyes peered from the upper windows, even when I watched for slightly longer than necessary. No maddened screams echoed from inside the house, no gibbering and meeping, no rattle of bones or cackling laughter.

"Why does so much of my life after meeting you two involve entering haunted houses where spooky things are happening?" I said. I meant Raine and Evelyn, of course.

"Better than doing magic in a bedsit, isn't it?" Evelyn shot me a sidelong look, heavy with meaning.

"Besides, it's not haunted," Raine laughed.

"Of course it's fucking haunted," Evelyn said. "Are those glasses broken or are you blind? It just happens that the ghosts are neutral. For now."

"Into yet another haunted house," I sighed.

"Another?" Evelyn asked.

"Ours."

"Oh."

My full complement of tentacles unfolded from my sides as we crept up to the front door, blossoming from phantom limbs into rainbow-pulsing pneuma-somatic flesh. My bioreactor edged out part of a control rod, preparing me for what might lurk indoors, beyond the dark threshold.

A little cephalopod, inching toward the whale fall. I resisted the urge to put on my squid-skull mask. I didn't want to frighten any of Twil's family.

Raine still had the 3D glasses pushed up the bridge of her nose. She

must have caught me in her peripheral vision, because she turned and let out a low wolf-whistle.

“Raine,” I huffed. “This is hardly the time.”

“It is always time for tentacles, shaman. Keep your claws sharp,” Zheng said, on the opposite side of me — and then bounded ahead, taking the brick front step in one hop and ducking her upper half inside the house, checking for predators or trap-door spiders or worse.

Raine was up beside her in an instant, gun pointed at the floor, black knife concealed back-hand in her opposite palm. She covered Zheng’s back as the demon host peered into the house.

They were in sync, working together as one organism. The beauty of their momentary coordination made me feel so much safer.

Had they always been like this? Not two hours ago they’d been locked in combat, but not a trace of that remained in them now, as if the tension between them had been heated and hammered into a more flexible alloy. The blood which Zheng had smeared on Raine’s face was washed off, and the shallow cut across Zheng’s belly had closed to nothing more than a thin red line of scar tissue. But something remained, something wordless and unspoken. The previous me would have wanted to step between them, to act as that link, but now they were doing it on their own.

Their linkage was far from perfect, however. Raine had to duck Zheng’s elbow; Zheng bumped Raine’s knife hand. But they shared a look, then carried on.

“Hey!” Twil’s voice came from deeper in the house, half-muffled by too many canine teeth, calling back to us. “It’s fine! It’s fine, come on in!”

“Then why the bloody scream?” Evelyn called back as we mounted the steps.

“Saw something!” Twil shouted. “It’s fine, there’s nothing here!”

“Nothing here, she says,” Evelyn hissed. She shook her head and shared a look with Raine and me.

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled,” Raine said, tapping the 3D glasses.

“Peeled and sliced,” Praem added, sing-song like she was reciting a

line from a child's nursery rhyme.

Zheng ducked through the front door of *Geerswin Farm*. The rest of us followed, traipsing up the bare brick steps and over the painted wooden threshold. Raine kept her handgun pointed at the floor. Evelyn held her scrimshawed thigh-bone under her armpit. I tried to still the racing of my heart, squeezing harder on Evelyn's arm.

Twil's home surprised me a second time. I had expected to step inside a renovated farmhouse, like one of those optimistic 1990s converted barns, all structurally pointless dust-trap beams set between patches of bare plaster, complete with awful lino floors and an expensive kitchen that clashed with the rest of the building. I'd seen one or two examples of the type before, lovely old houses out on the rural fringes bought up by people with more money than sense, then gutted and hollowed out, their innards replaced like they'd been parasitised, so they were merely a shell over cold and sterile interior design.

But instead, the inside of Geerswin Farm's main house looked like it hadn't been remodelled in a very long time. Bare wooden floors had once been waxed and polished, but were now mostly stripped by time and the passing of feet, hidden beneath heavy rugs that at least kept the heat in and cushioned one's tread. Pale orange wallpaper was peeling at the corners and edges, cut back where it could not be saved or repaired, like a ragged sunset. The skirting boards were scuffed, the iron radiators spotted with rust, the door handles tarnished and scratched — but the hinges were well-oiled, the screws-plates tightened, and the floors clean and tidy. The building smelled of old wood, cooking scents, and fresh linen.

Rustic, nothing fake about it.

We found ourselves in a long corridor which ran the length of the house, well-lit and homey, with a few mountain-peak landscape paintings on the walls — nothing fancy, just cheap watercolours, but very nice, very tasteful. Doors led off to the left and right and the corridor terminated in what looked like a sitting room. Some carpeted stairs led upward on the left.

"Oh, it's not spooky at all." I tutted. "I mean, not that I'm disappointed. Far from it."

"Do we take our shoes off at the door?" Raine called down the long hallway.

Twil's head — thankfully human now — appeared around a door frame, halfway down on the right, long curls hanging down. "Nah. Shut the front door though, yeah? And get in here, this is weird."

She vanished into the room again. Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. Praem was already shutting the door behind us. Zheng rumbled deep in her throat and craned her head to peer up the stairs, putting one hand on the banister.

Evelyn tapped Zheng on the leg with her walking stick. "No."

Zheng rounded on her slowly, a tiger poked in the backside. "Wizard."

I steeled myself to jump in, but to my surprise, Evelyn held her ground and held Zheng's gaze. Perhaps that had something to do with how we were literally arm in arm, though she didn't strictly need the support.

"There are children up there," she said to Zheng, flat and uninterested, as if the matter was already decided. "Don't go scaring them."

"Besides," I added, trying to be diplomatic, "you're the strongest here, Zheng. If you run off now, we'll have to carry Nicole ourselves."

"Strongest," Praem echoed, peering around to catch my eyes with her accusing, milk-white stare. I blushed and spluttered and managed to get a 'sorry' in there somewhere.

Zheng chuckled. "The wizard's daughter knows better, shaman. And I am not giving in to wanderlust. Instead, I wonder."

Raine went visibly tense at the tone in Zheng's voice. "Wonder?" she asked.

"Quit with the poetry," Evelyn hissed. "What are you talking about?"

Zheng spread her arms as she stepped past the stairs. "Where have the angels gone?"

"Ah," said Raine, peering through the 3D glasses again. "Good point. House should be full of them. Where'd they go?"

"Busy doggos," Praem said.

Twil's voice echoed down the hallway again. "What are you lot doing? Get in here!"

"Let's go talk to their handler then," Evelyn grunted, tightening her arm on mine. "Everyone stay alert."

"If something does jump out at me, I shall scream," I said. I took a deep breath and tried to look scary. It probably didn't work.

We found the current nexus of Hringewindlaist shenanigans halfway down the house's spinal corridor, in a smallish room that Twil insisted on calling the 'den', a sort of supernumerary miniature sitting room with a large television, some wooden bookcases, and a bank of soft armchairs. Children's toys were scattered across one corner and a large glass-filled door looked out onto the back patio, filling the room with reflected green light from the rustling leaves outdoors.

Twil and her mother were clustered around a third woman who I vaguely recognised as Amanda Hopton, Twil's aunt. She'd been at the pub meeting with Edward Lilburne, though she hadn't left much of an impression. Thin-faced and sallow from stress, yet also overweight around the middle, she still shared the family resemblance to her sister and niece, with dark curls and a compact frame, but tainted with shaking mania in her eyes.

She was also terrified, recoiling as we entered the room, panting in near-panic.

"Mandy, Mandy there is nothing here," Christine was saying, trying to catch her sister's panicked arms. "There is nothing here. There is nothing inside the house, nothing got past the angels. Mandy, you're safe. Look at me, please."

Past the Hopton trio, propped up in an armchair with a blanket over her knees, was Nicole Webb.

She looked up at us, making what seemed like perfectly lucid eye contact, though frowning with deep and worried concern. The armchair was much too large for her, robbing the former detective of her usual imposing posture and striking confidence, though her blonde hair was neatly pulled back in its usual professional bun. Her eyes flashed with quick observation, counting us with a flicker, lingering on Zheng. She was dressed for walking, though not for the woods, in a long coat and dark trousers. Her white shirt was dirty

and rumpled from her journey through the countryside.

Raine cracked a smile as soon as we saw her. “Eyyyyy, Nicky. They ain’t got you trussed up?”

Nicole sighed, as if very tired indeed.

Evelyn raised her voice, speaking to Twil and Christine, gesturing at Amanda. “What did she see? Excuse me, what did she see?”

Twil shrugged, grimacing through her teeth, clearly embarrassed. “I dunno, uh, it’s weird.”

“Usually important to voice these things,” I said, “in case there’s something unexpected about.”

Putting theory into practice, I quick scanned the corners of the room for dark spots or hanging spider-webs or other tell-tale signs of pneuma-somatic trickery, but there was nothing here except old wallpaper and a few stains, though the bookcases were respectably interesting, mostly full of paperback novels and some large-format photography books about nature. Zheng peeled off to stalk around the edge of the room, doing the same thing but with greater accuracy than I could achieve. Nicole turned her head to watch Zheng go, a little perturbed when the demon host passed behind her.

“It was only a flicker!” Amanda said to all of us, batting Christine’s hands away. “It was only a flicker, but I know what ... I ... saw ... ”

She trailed off, staring directly at me, all her fear draining away.

I suddenly felt awfully self-conscious.

“Um ... hello?” I said.

Amanda’s cloudy, dazed eyes travelled up and down my body, over my tentacles, her mouth hanging open. “Godspit and heavens-light,” she murmured. “You’ve gone far..”

I went red in the face, horrified by the way she was looking at me, eyes full of religious awe. “They’re only tentacles.”

“Mandy,” Christine said, gentle but firm. “Now is not the time. Can you concentrate for me, please?”

“Nobody told me you’d transcended ... ” Amanda took a step toward me, as if in a trance, one hand reaching out, fingers

trembling.

Instantly Raine was between me and her. Behind the enraptured woman, Zheng's hand suddenly came down on her shoulder.

"Be still, worm," Zheng rumbled.

Amanda jumped about a foot in the air, whirling around and staring up at Zheng with almost equal awe. Zheng stared back down at her, baring her teeth.

"Hey now," Twil warned, edging closer to Zheng.

"Do not interfere with the shaman, worm-thing," Zheng purred in Amanda's face. "Do not presume to touch."

Rather than collapsing into a puddle of melted butter, Amanda nodded slowly, wetting her lips and taking a moment to breathe. "I apologise," she said to Zheng. "Are you her messenger? She is beautiful."

Zheng rumbled between her teeth with naked disgust, but then let Amanda go with a — for her — gentle shove. Christine caught Amanda's stumble and shot a frown at Zheng, but Zheng ignored the look and continued her circuit of the room.

"No, it's my fault," Amanda said, staring at the floor and gathering herself. "I was overcome. Overcome. I apologise."

She didn't seem that afraid. Perhaps when one spent a significant portion of one's life in direct contact with an Outsider god, one did not spook easily, even by seven-foot tall demon hosts with mouths full of knives.

"Who was that speaking just then?" Evelyn asked slowly. "You, Amanda Hopton? Or the thing in your head?"

Amanda raised her eyes to meet Evelyn, then glanced at me, guilty and ashamed.

"I think we should leave that question unanswered, for now, please?" Christine said, gently, with an awkward smile. "This isn't what we're here for. Amanda, are you alright now?"

Amanda straightened up and sighed, smoothing her dark curls over her head. She had such awful bags under her eyes, too much like I had once been, a wreck on the edge of the abyss. "I did see something," she said. "Out in the corridor. Just a flicker, but it was

right here and it wasn't one of ours."

Twil jerked her thumb at the ceiling. "The boys, upstairs? Playing pranks?"

"Gareth already ran up there to check on them," Christine said.

"Puh," Twil snorted. "Making himself useful for once."

"Bernard's up there anyway," Amanda said, sounding very certain. I recalled Bernard from our meeting at the pub — Amanda's large and friendly golden retriever. She seemed to have more confidence in the dog than she did this 'Gareth' fellow.

A funny thought crossed my mind, one I'd had so often as a young teenager, trapped and alone in a world inhabited by inexplicable nightmares.

"Can dogs see spirits?" I asked out loud.

"Bernard can," Amanda answered with a sudden proud smile.

"Where's Ben, anyway?" Twil muttered, sticking her head out into the corridor.

"I thought he went back out to his car?" Amanda replied.

"Oh dear," Christine sighed.

"Hey, Nicky," Raine said, heading over to Nicole at last. She put away her pistol and her knife inside her leather jacket. "They said you were delirious, but you're being real quiet now."

"She's improved a little bit," Amanda said. "I have no idea what's wrong with her though. I'm sorry."

Nicole pulled a pained, embarrassed face, and opened her mouth.

"Three score and eighteen, but not without reversals. You know the grass on the pitch is not always fed by worms? Truth, lies, pies in the sky. I was never told which way to walk but always how to step. Don't you think this looks strongly broken open already, why go further?"

She spoke so confidently that it stunned us all to silence.

"Am I having a fucking stroke?" Evelyn asked.

"No," Praem intoned.

Nicole sighed and shook her head, making an exasperated shrugging motion with both hands. Raine laughed, then covered her mouth and said sorry for laughing. Zheng watched Nicole carefully from across the room. Twil blinked as if she'd been slapped with a glove made of pepper spray.

"Her language processing is all ... 'messed up'," Christine said, and I could hear the conditional quotations around her words. "And she can't walk in a straight line. She stumbles into the walls when she tries."

"I've heard of non-supernatural conditions that can cause this," Evelyn said thoughtfully. "But I doubt this is anything normal. Too neat for a physical cause."

Evelyn finally disentangled her arm from mine, patting my hand in silent thank you. She rolled her shoulders beneath her coat and cream-soft jumper, and stomped across to peer down at Nicole. The detective frowned up at her with the exact expression of a patient with an obscure disease, hoping *this* doctor would be the one to find a cure.

A spiral-bound notebook lay on the arm of the chair. Evelyn frowned down at it. "You tried writing instead of speaking?" she asked.

"Accidental inversionary principle," Nicole sighed, but her tone made her meaning clear.

"Pretty much the same result," Amanda said. "There is something in her. In her voice and her tongue. Broken her."

"Alright," Evelyn said to Nicole. She pulled her scrimshawed thigh-bone out from beneath her own armpit, slipping the gruesome magic wand into her hands, settling her walking stick against the chair. "Just nod or shake your head. Can you do that?"

Nicole nodded. She sighed again, sharp and harsh, irritated at her own inability to communicate.

I opened my mouth to reassure her, though I didn't know what to say, but Evelyn got there first.

"It isn't your fault," Evelyn snapped. "Well, it might be your fault that you got into this situation in the first place, I don't know yet—"

"Jam and butter and dead snails—" Nicole argued back.

“But,” Evelyn said, making a motion like she wanted to bop Nicole on the nose with her bone-wand, “the verbal diarrhoea is not your fault. You can’t control your body, whatever this is. Now stop with the self-pity and answer my questions.”

Nicole nodded, rolling her eyes.

“Did you stop the investigation into Edward Lilburne’s property?”

Nicole nodded.

“Did you pack away the stolen documents like we asked?”

Nicole nodded again.

“Did you look at them at all after that phone conversation we had?”

Nicole shook her head.

Evelyn and Nicole, the mage and the private eye, went on this way for about two or three minutes, a one-sided conversation punctuated by short pauses for Evelyn to frown and suck on her teeth and formulate the next question. Through careful phrasing, she rapidly drew out most of the relevant details, at least the ones that Nicole could communicate without further explanation. According to her increasingly encouraged nodding, she had done exactly as we’d asked — she’d packed the stolen documents away, put them from her mind, and turned her energies toward other paying work. She had expected a phone call and visit from us tomorrow, perhaps to pick up the documents and ritually burn them to exorcise whatever influence they were exerting.

“And you don’t remember how you ended up in the woods?” Evelyn asked.

Nicole sighed and shrugged, but would neither shake nor nod to that one.

“Where were you, Sharrowford?”

Shake.

“Nearby? The countryside?”

Shake again, lips pursed.

“ ... Manchester?”

Nicole nodded.

Raine let out a whistle. "You went pretty far in a fugue state, huh?"

Nicole huffed a non-laugh. She was not amused by any of this.

"Your car is still up Manchester way, you think?" Raine asked.

Nicole nodded, pulling a very exasperated face.

"Hmmmm," Evelyn grumbled. She began moving her hands slowly over the scrimshawed designs in her bone wand. My stomach tightened at the sight of that. Whenever she'd used that thing before, the effects had caused terrible backwash. But then she paused and gestured with vague irritation back at Raine. "Give me the glasses, I need to look at her properly."

"Oh, there's nothing strange about her," I supplied, as Raine handed Evelyn the glasses. "I can't see anything abnormal."

"Still," Evelyn said. "Let's see what we can see. Right, detective?"

Nicole pulled a dubious face, but held still as Evelyn leaned in close, examining her through the absurd red-and-blue lenses of the modified 3D glasses. We all stood awkwardly watching for a moment before Evelyn sighed again.

"Don't all watch me, please," she grumbled.

Christine cleared her throat, shuffling her feet. "Right, of course. Twil, would you be a dear and go check on Gareth, please?"

Twil shrugged. "Sure, I guess."

"I'll come up too," Amanda said. "I'd like to reassure the boys. This has frightened them."

"Bring Bernard back down, hey?" Raine said with a wink and a laugh. "I wanna meet the dog again."

I wasn't really paying attention as Twil and her aunt left the room. I was so focused on Evelyn and Nicole, on the way Evelyn kept adjusting her position around the detective's chair, as if she hoped to reveal a secret door in the poor woman's head which she might reach out and open and so discover what had happened to her. I squinted at Nicole, but my natural pneuma-somatic sight revealed nothing — no runes scrawled on her skin, no ghostly apparition clinging to her back with boney fingers inserted in her language centre. But Evelyn kept adjusting her grip across the symbols and circles on her bone-wand. The sight made my skin crawl. I was

uncomfortably reminded that I had no idea of the true intricacies of what I was looking at.

The house creaked gently in the wind, soft and slow, at one with the trees beyond.

"The hounds are still missing," Zheng rumbled at the back of the room.

"... hounds?" Christine asked. "You mean ... Hringewindla's angels?"

"Uh huh, that's right," Raine grunted. "They were all cramming themselves into the house after you and Twil."

A pause. I was still watching Evelyn.

"That is ... strange," Christine said. "You're certain? And they're not in here with us now? One moment, I'm sorry, I must check."

I heard the sound of her stepping out into the corridor, footsteps swallowed by the angles of the house. Then another pair of footsteps followed her, quick and tripping, as if hopping out not to follow, but just to check which way she was going.

"Shaman," Zheng rumbled.

I snapped up and around from watching Evelyn and Nicole — the tone in Zheng's voice was full of warning.

She was frozen stiff at the back of the room, watching the doorway to the corridor with the fixed expression of a tiger staring down an armed hunter. Praem stood a little way from her, hands clasped, back straight, also staring right at the open door.

Nobody else was there. Christine had left the room, of course. Had Raine ducked out into the corridor after her?

"Zheng?" I said, my belly going cold and my blood suddenly full of adrenaline, though I didn't know why. "R-Raine? Raine!" I raised my voice slightly.

"Something is wrong here, shaman," Zheng rumbled.

"Where's Raine?" I demanded, stepping forward. But Zheng held out a hand to block me.

"All is calm," Praem intoned. "All is quiet. This is bad."

“What are you lot going on about?” Evelyn straightened up, huffing and cursing under her breath. “Will you shut up and let me concentrate for—”

“Raine?!” I called past Zheng’s arm.

“The hyena cannot hear us. None can,” Zheng purred. She turned to look at Praem for a moment. “Watch them,” she said.

Then Zheng stalked forward, out through the door and into the wooden hallway with its heavy rugs and tasteful paintings. She slunk like a stalking cat, ready to spring left or right at the slightest movement, at the first sign of danger or challenge or unexplained presence. I had no idea what was going on, but even if Raine hadn’t suddenly vanished into thin air, the set and pose of Zheng’s shoulders, the ripple of her muscles beneath her clothes, the silent creep of her feet, it all sent a shiver of adrenaline and fear up my spine. In her long coat, she was some avenging devil from the pit, and I was very glad she was on our side. My bioreactor shunted an entire control rod free and my tentacles arched out, making myself look big, following an instinct to back Zheng up against some unseen predator.

But nothing happened. Zheng stepped into the corridor, looked left and right, then grunted, eyes flashing like pools of dark oil.

“Zheng?” I hissed, heart racing.

“There is nothing here, shaman. There is nobody else breathing in this house.”

“You cannot know,” Praem said.

“There is nobody else in this house,” Zheng repeated.

“... what?” I boggled at her. Behind me, Evelyn swallowed on such a dry mouth that I heard her throat bob. “Zheng, what is going on, this is just a doorway. There’s nothing—”

Zheng made to move left, to take a step down the corridor.

“No!” Evelyn snapped in panic. “Stay together! Stay in the room!”

The fear and terror in Evelyn’s voice shocked me into unthinking action. I darted forward to grab Zheng with my tentacles, to anchor her here, to keep her close, but I was too late; Zheng stepped to the left, around the door frame.

She was out of line of sight for less than a second, obscured by the angle of the architecture for less time than it took me to stumble forward, barrelling after her, out through the doorway.

I felt Praem's hand, firm and strong, try to grab one of my tentacles. But I slipped away, too intent on Zheng.

To say I am not steady on my feet is rather an understatement. I bounced and staggered out into the spinal hallway, expecting to round the door frame and hook my hands into the back of Zheng's coat.

She wasn't there.

Nothing was there, just empty hallway and open doors, terminating in the large sitting room. Sunlight arced in through the windows. The trees rustled beyond the house.

I almost crashed right into the opposite wall in shock, catching myself with my tentacles like an octopus floating against a rock.

"Zheng?" I said out loud. But she simply wasn't there. "Zheng ... where ... ? Oh no."

A dark pit opened in my stomach as I hurled myself back at the door to the 'den', all but skidding inside, eyes darting left and right.

Praem was nowhere to be seen. Evelyn was gone too. Nicole's chair was empty.

Sunlight poured in through the window set into the back door. The woods waited beyond the little patio and the potted plants and the mud. Everything else was exactly as it should be, from the discarded toys on the floor to the silent television at the opposite end of the room. All around me, the old farmhouse creaked gently in the distant wind, in time with the treetops outdoors.

For just a moment, my breath stuck in my throat. Fear stood on a knife-edge of heart muscle and tentacle-tip, as my extra limbs coiled and curled around me, their semi-independent instinct just as confused as I was.

Then, with shaking hands, I pulled my squid-skull mask out of my tentacles and lowered it over my own head.

Metallic refuge, armour of the soul, my true face on the exterior. I stared out at the peeling wallpaper and old floorboards through the

many eye sockets, and forced a deep, shaking breath into my lungs. I turned in a slow circle, taking in the whole room, just in case some lurking shadow was about to pounce on me from behind. I wet my lips, then found I was chewing my tongue, and forced myself to stop.

“Be rational,” I whispered to myself. “Stay calm. You’ve seen this kind of thing before. Heather, you know what this is.”

I stepped back out into the corridor, just to check it hadn’t extended off to infinite length — it hadn’t, thankfully. Then I went back into the den to see if anything might change, but nothing did. None of my friends and family reappeared. So much for that easy way out.

“This is like the loop trap from Willow House,” I said out loud, speaking to the air, to myself, or to the house itself. “Like the trap the Sharrowford Cult used on us. We’ve all been peeled off from each other. Into different versions of the building. Am I right?”

Nothing and nobody answered. The trees beyond the walls filled my silence with the rustle of leaves in the wind.

“Because there’s no other way Zheng could have vanished so fast,” I said. “Unless you ate her.”

A pause. I huffed, feeling absurd.

“By ‘you’, I mean the house. Are you listening to me?”

The house did not answer. I stepped back out into the corridor. My tentacles were tense and coiled hard enough to make all my back muscles ache and my stomach hurt.

“I have been lost and alone and beyond help in much scarier places than this,” I said, raising my voice so it carried up and down the spine of the building. “And I can just Slip away. I can Slip out, go back home, and return here with an Outsider godling, my fiancée, who loves me and will do anything for me. Do you want to face that? Do you want that?”

I tried to sound confident and defiant, but my heart was fluttering and my stomach was roiling.

“Who am I talking to?” I went on. “If this is your doing, Hring— Hringy—” I was so anxious that I stumbled over the stupid name. “*Cringe-face*,” I spat instead. “If this is your doing, then I don’t understand what you’re trying to communicate or achieve by

threatening me and my friends, because you are making me very angry.”

Nothing replied. No bubble-servitor came hurtling down the hallway. No knife-shadow rose from the narrow gaps between the floorboards.

“It’s not you though, is it? You’re too cautious for this.” I sighed. The fight went out of me. “Oh, I’m talking to the walls. Always knew I’d end up like this, crazy Heather, talking to thin air.”

Speaking self-mockery out loud helped to ground me, keep my feet rooted in the normal and the real as I headed back up the length of the corridor, making for the front door.

“What is it with mages and these absurd spatial distortions? You all just love doing this, warping space. The cult did it, Alexander did it. Orange Juice did it. Wake up in the morning and warp yourself down to breakfast without moving. Perverse. You don’t see Evelyn doing this, do you? And that’s part of why I love her, no warping our house into a tangled knot of corridors. No walking through a bedroom to reach the bathroom. No absurd, tacky columns.”

I worked myself up into a rant, like a child whistling in the dark, trying to resist the urge to scream or run. I kept glancing back over my shoulder, tentacles bracing to cover every doorway I passed.

There was an answer to this place, of course. Hyperdimensional mathematics could define a dozen houses, all identical, superimposed over each other. But why? For what purpose? If this was a maze in which we’d been lured apart from each other, what lay at the centre of the maze? Maybe nothing. If I allowed myself to dwell on that question, the right equations would present themselves, oil-slick and dripping blackness, from the sump at the bottom of my soul. But I was alone. If I passed out now, with a nosebleed and a pounding headache, I had no idea what might scoop me up.

I reached the front door, slapped the latch down so I wouldn’t have to acknowledge my own shaking hands, and then grabbed the door handle.

“I swear, whoever or whatever is doing this, if I open this door and there’s another identical corridor instead of the actual outdoors, I’m going to start punching holes in the scenery.”

Snapping my words to summon courage I didn't feel, I yanked on the door handle, tentacles poised to catch whatever gibbering monster was about to fall upon me.

Brick doorstep, crumbly tarmac, three cars — including Raine's, sitting right where we'd left it. Tumbledown stables with the ragged fields beyond. All ringed by the dark promise of the tree-line and the deeper woods.

A sigh of exasperated relief escaped my lips.

"What's the point of confusing us like this if you leave the outdoors the same?" I hissed, stepping down onto the tarmac with my arms folded, as if to keep my fluttering heart inside my ribs. Part of me wanted to run to Raine's car and huddle in the back seat like a scared child, but I swallowed and forced myself to look up at the house.

All Hringewindla's bubble-servitors were gone, missing from their guard posts on the roof. Or rather, they were probably still out there in actual, unmodified reality, just not reflected here in whatever set of tangled pocket dimensions we'd been dragged into.

"Unless I'm the only one standing in actual reality," I murmured, biting my bottom lip and frowning up at the dark windows and quiet, red brick of the Hopton family home. "And everyone else has been snatched away. All except me."

If this was a trap for my friends, I needed to reconnect with them, fast.

Just as I was about to step back indoors, an indistinct shadow passed behind one of the upstairs windows. I froze, staring up at the dark squares of glass, half-hoping it would pass again, half praying it did not return.

Then I found my courage by spreading my tentacles wide. Let the monsters try me.

"Hello!" I shouted. "Hello! Whoever's at the window, I'm down here! It's me!"

The shadow lurched back into view, smeared across the glass like a misshapen parody of flesh and cloth. A fumble with a catch and the window sprang open on well-oiled hinges. I braced for a nightmare to pour out.

“Heather!”

Raine leaned out of the window, beaming and laughing from the second floor.

“Oh, oh my goodness, Raine,” I heaved her name, going weak and shaky all of a sudden, pressing one hand over my racing heart. “Is that really you or is this some trick?”

“Really real. Real as real can be.” Raine shot me a wink. I couldn’t help but notice she had her pistol in one hand. She had to raise her voice slightly to cover the distance between us. “I would ask ‘hey, where’d the party go?’ but I’m guessing there’s some major mojo going down right now.”

“You can say that again,” I huffed, then pulled my squid-skull mask off so she could see my face clearly. “Everyone vanished one by one, as soon as we were out of sight for more than a second or two. Did you experience the same thing?”

“Yeeeah,” Raine sighed. “Remind you of anything?”

“Exactly. This is just like with Willow House.” I nodded, finding relief in sharing the assessment. “Stupid spooky nonsense, really!”

“Cept this time, Zheng’s on our side.” Raine beaming with confidence. “Anything actually happened, you seen anything gribbly lurking about?”

I shook my head. “Not a single thing. It’s just empty. It’s like we’re all in the same space but can’t see each other. Or in different versions of the same building, side-by-side but separate.”

“Same here. Though uh ... ” Raine cleared her throat and glanced over her shoulder, back into the house. “The corridors are getting kinda tangled, for me. Like Willow House, but worse.”

“Worse?”

“Kinda. Also our phones aren’t working.” She tapped her jacket. “I tried calling you, but there’s no signal.”

I rummaged in my hoodie for my phone and found that Raine was correct. My phone had no signal. Did this mean we were Outside, or just very deep in the woods? I sighed and felt a very strong desire to rub the bridge of my nose.

“This is absurd,” I said. “What is the point of this?”

"Maybe there isn't a point," Raine said, leaning further out of the window and frowning at the ground. "Maybe this is like a natural phenomenon."

"What on earth is natural about this?" I shrugged with all my tentacles.

"Nicole can't walk straight or speak straight, right? Then we get in a room with her, trying to find out what she knows, and suddenly we can't navigate straight either."

"Oh. Hmm." I frowned. "I suppose that's plausible. It is a bit of a leap, though."

"Sometimes you gotta leap." Raine blew out a puff and shrugged at the ground. "But I think if I leap from here to join you, I might break my ankles. This is a long drop, even if I hang from the windowsill."

"Please be careful!" I squeaked.

Raine shot me a wink. "Sure will, don't you worry. But we gotta reassemble somehow. You think Eevee is by herself right now?"

"Actually she and Praem were together, hopefully they stayed that way."

"You still got your tentacles out?"

"Oh, um, of course."

Raine nodded. "I can't see 'em, left the glasses with Eevee. You think you could climb up here?"

I chewed on my bottom lip again, eyeing the unornamented brickwork and the various narrow windowsills. "I don't know. I've never even climbed a tree. Even with all my tentacles, that's a lot."

"You certain?" Raine asked, no pressure in her voice, no value-judgement, just an honest request.

I swallowed. We did need to avoid being separated again. "I could leap, maybe. Like a spring. But you'd have to catch me, I'm not sure I can grab the window with any accuracy. Raine, why not just come downstairs and step out of the front door? Maybe if I close it first?"

"Maybe. If the house always opens to the same outdoors, that's probably the best way to link up, but we can't be ... certain ... "

Raine trailed off, her eyes going past me. I turned but saw nothing there, no sudden monster melting out of the tree-line, no dark figure on the tarmac. Just the parked cars and the fields and the swaying trees, leaves rustling in the ever-present wind.

“Heather, get back indoors. Now,” she called down to me.

“Raine?” She’d gone stony-faced, ready to do violence. “What’s wrong?”

“Get back indoors,” she repeated. “I’ll head down to the front door and maybe we’ll be able to link up. If not ... ” She paused, biting her lip too. “If not ... ”

I shook my head. “Raine, it’s normal out here. What are you seeing? Your car is right there, even.”

Raine laughed without humour, indulgent but pained as she smiled at me. “Heather, you always were bad with cars. That’s not mine. None of that out there is ours.”

A cold knife slid into my belly as I turned back to re-examine our surroundings.

Raine was right — that was not her car standing on the tarmac. The shape of the body was subtly wrong, unlike any real car, as if the angles had all been flipped in such a way that was not obvious, unless one stared for a few seconds and really thought about what a car should look like. The other two cars parked out there were much the same, especially the land rover, which was the right colour — green — but the wrong shade, as if it had sat in the sun for fifty years, slowly bleaching.

The fields were worse. How often do you really *look* at grass?

Because none of that was grass. It was wriggling. In waves.

The thistles and little saplings and tall weeds were none of those things, they were flesh in imitation of plant, writhing and flexing and twitching in what I had thought was the wind. The little cluster of sheep with their pair of alpacas were neither sheep nor alpaca either. They had horns, black and curved and visible even at this distance, and they were all facing the house, facing us, with faces that looked all too human.

“Raine,” I murmured.

“Get indoors. Now.”

I backed up a step toward the open door, tentacles fumbling my squid-skull mask back over my head, trying to hide. “Are we ... Outside?”

“I don’t think so,” Raine called down to me. “It doesn’t feel like Outside. Heather, get indoors, I’ll be right down.”

“But you won’t be here!” I squeaked. “We’re not inhabiting the same space! Where even is this? Where ... ”

My mouth went dry as I realised the worst thing of all: the driveway and the road were gone, swallowed up by the forest. And it was a forest now, not merely a patchwork quilt of woodland, scattered across the English countryside, where it was possible to walk in a straight line for less than an hour and always reach a road. The forest had marched forward onto the farm grounds, with thick gnarled roots that plunged into the earth like digging fingers, or worms. I couldn’t see a scrap of light through the trees, not a single sliver of distant sky or open ground. They stood in ranks hundreds of miles deep.

“Heather. Heather, get indoors!”

“But then we’ll be cut off again!”

“Screw it, executive decision time.” I heard the sound of Raine’s feet finding the windowsill. “Stay right there!”

“Raine, don’t hurt yourself, don’t ... ”

Darkness thickened beyond the tree-line, as if night was falling, out in the woods. Shadows seemed to press inward, crawling across the narrow dome of sky visible through the break in the canopy. Wind howled through the trunks and thrashed the leaves. An oncoming storm, out of nowhere.

My attention was off Raine for perhaps two seconds.

The window banged shut. I looked up, but Raine was gone. She hadn’t climbed out or dropped to the ground, she’d just vanished. Again.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” I hissed at the absurdity of it all.

I tried to stand tall as premature night rolled over the farm, swallowing up the fields and the monstrous sheep within. It

blanketed the cars and pooled around their wheels, ate up the mud and the crumbly tarmac and nipped at my heels as I hopped up onto the brick steps. It pressed against the walls of the house, suddenly held back only by the semi-circle of light spilling from the front door.

“It is *not* night time,” I said, sounding a lot more defiant than I felt, hugging myself with both arms. “This is *nonsense*. This isn’t even happening.”

The darkness thickened further, as if forming hands or tentacles out beyond the house.

I scrambled inside, slammed the front door, and threw the latch. Then I backed away, praying nothing was about to thump against the thin wood.

Nothing did.

I turned back to the long spinal corridor of the house, panting to catch my breath and slow my racing heart. My tentacles were all a-whirl with frustration and panic. The lights indoors kept out the bizarre, creeping darkness, but there was no longer any warm sunlight pouring in through distant windows.

Raine did not appear, no matter how long I waited. Neither did anybody else. The corridor, mute and bland, invited me to explore.

I was in a haunted house, in the middle of the night, by myself.

“If this your doing, Edward,” I whispered, “then when we catch you, I’m going to have Raine put your head in a toilet and flush it.”

and walked a crooked mile – 16.3

Alone in a haunted house, surrounded by the wailing wind of an oncoming storm, the tree-trunks of a forest that had marched from nowhere, and the dark claws of a premature, unnatural, cloying night. Separated from my comrades and lovers, taunted by space that made no sense, left with only my wits and my meagre strength to see me through. The lamp-lit corridor beckoned, lined with watercolour mountain vistas and doors that could lead to anywhere.

My whispered threat to have Raine put Edward Lilburne's head down a toilet did not summon the owlish old man from around one of the door frames, like a puppet-master stepping out from behind the curtain.

I would have preferred if he had appeared; at least then I'd have something to slap.

"Oh, I'm as bad as Raine sometimes," I hissed to myself, inside the safety of my cephalopod mask. "Can't solve a problem unless you can punch it, really?"

The me of nine months ago would have found a cupboard or perhaps the space under a bed, curled up in a ball, and sobbed myself to sleep, in the hope that I would be safe and home once I woke up. Like a cut-price Dorothy who couldn't even be bothered to tap her magic slippers together. Even the me of six weeks back, prior to my unplanned outing to Carcosa, would have been paralysed with fear at being cut off from Raine and Evelyn, scattered to the far corners of this bizarre trap.

But that Heather was not in charge anymore. She was not forced to make decisions in the grip of terror, buffeted by ineffable forces beyond her understanding. My squid-skull mask, my abdominal reactor organ, and my six beautiful, rainbow-strobing tentacles were only the outward heralds of a much more meaningful alchemy, deep in my heart, where the old me was wrapped tight and cradled safe.

Which is a fancy way of trying to explain why I huffed, stamped my foot, and shouted at the top of my lungs.

“Helloooooo!”

I drew out the word right to the edge of a scream. My voice echoed away down the long spinal corridor of Twil’s house, unanswered by bare wood and old wallpaper, soaked up by lino and carpet, but more than loud enough to penetrate every corner.

Nobody answered. I stood there panting, getting my breath back.

“All right, so there’s nobody here but me,” I said out loud. “As if I believe that for a single second. This is absurd.”

Thump went a heavy knock against the wood of the front door, right behind me.

I strangled a yelp, spinning on the spot, then had to grit my teeth and swallow hard to stop myself from hissing like a goaded lizard at the inside of the closed door. All my tentacles were out wide, making me look big and intimidating to whatever shadow-spawned nightmare was about to burst the latch and splinter the wood.

But nothing did. Not even a second thump. Wind howled, tree-tops rustled, beams creaked — so I couldn’t be certain, when I thought I heard something padding away from the door on bare feet.

I stood there panting like a fool, scared out of my wits for a long minute as my tentacles retracted and my heart rate lowered.

“I am not putting up with this!” I snapped. “I am not! You stop this right now!”

I dosed myself up with my own irritation like a hit of diazepam to chase away the fear. It partially worked, though it was mostly for show, in case hidden eyes were watching from dark corners. Abyssal instinct whispered imperatives to stay defiant, show no weakness, do not hesitate, as if I was deep in a warren of predators, among the rocks with the flesh-eaters, puffing myself up to convince them that attacking me was too much of a risk.

Maybe that instinct was right. Perhaps we were among hidden predators.

Raine was right too, about our mobile phones not working. That didn’t stop me from trying. The phone dutifully told me that I had

no signal, that I was out beyond the borders of civilisation, but I called Raine's number all the same, just to see if the line would connect. It didn't, giving me the usual 'out of service range' tone.

"This farm isn't that isolated," I said with an irritated sigh, tucking the phone away and talking to the walls again. "It's fifteen minutes on foot to a small town. There's probably a mast within jogging distance. This isn't exactly convincing, do you understand that?"

I faced the mute corridor, chewing my tongue behind my mask, weighing my options.

Slip, or stay?

If I Slipped out — preferably to Camelot as a slingshot to take me back to Sharrowford and home and help — then I might not be able to return, even if I fetched Sevens and Lizzie and came back to this house all over again. I might be stuck on the exterior surface of this trap, whatever it really was. That is, if this was just a trap, rather than the conscious working of some Outsider mind, poised to fight me if I tried to leave. If I did decide to flee to get help, I might only have one shot, one chance to Slip away before the jaws closed around my leg.

And I wouldn't leave my friends and comrades to that fate. If this was anything like that night with *Ooran Juh*, if we were in something's gullet, then the threat of my toxic abyssal poison might be the only thing stopping the trap from swallowing us whole.

No, I had to stay, in case the others would die without me here to poison the dish.

"This doesn't feel anything like mister orange juice, though," I muttered behind my mask, gathering my courage to creep down the corridor. "Come on, Heather. Bottom floor first. Let's find a spooky door and ... and ... slap some ghosts."

Slap some ghosts? I winced at myself. Raine would be proud.

Twil's home, *Geerswin Farm*, would have been a lovely old house to explore by the light of day, preferably with Raine or Evelyn or anybody else at my side, but it was significantly less lovely during this artificially imposed fake night, complete with winds making the beams creak and the roof tiles rattle, like I was inside a ship at sea. Still, at least this wasn't a modern house, that would have been even worse: a true nightmare of anonymous walls and inhuman

angles, work surfaces never used or touched by human hands or care, every architectural turn suggesting habitation but never quite invoking the reality of living presence. At least tip-toeing down this spinal corridor felt like I was surrounded by a house that somebody loved.

And then I stopped tip-toeing, because why bother?

“I’m here, I’m here, and you are going to have to deal with me!”

I checked the doors on the left and right as I made for the sitting room at the end of the hallway, hoping against hope that I would come across one of the others, passed out or something — which would explain why nobody had answered my shout. Or perhaps I would run into one of the bubble-servitors. At least then I could remotely interrogate Hringewindla. Failing those, I might find some clue as to what was going on, or at least provoke a reaction.

My tentacles stayed poised and ready, hovering like scorpion stingers, edging around each door frame. I kept my mask on, my hands free.

The ‘den’ — as Twil had called it — was still empty, just armchairs and the television and some books, and the limitless, thick night pressing in on the back door to the patio. The other doors revealed equally empty domestic absences: a cloak room full of waxed coats and wellington boots, exactly suited to a walk in the woods; a boiler room with one of those ancient standing water-heaters, a washing machine, tumble dryer, and a big chest freezer — I checked inside that, in case a meat-monster was about to leap out, but it was all just frozen vegetables and chicken nuggets. A spare downstairs bedroom looked like it hadn’t been used in a long time, boxes and packaging piled up at one end. I found a tiny study with neatly stacked papers atop a broad wooden desk, along with a truly ancient computer which even I could tell was about twenty years out of date. The final door led into the kitchen, which seemed to wrap around to join the large sitting room.

Their kitchen was beautiful, straight out of one of my teenage fantasies of living in a combination castle-cottage in the Cotswolds. Slate and tile surfaces, pots and utensils hanging on the walls, sideboards of pale stone rather than modern Formica — a true holdover from another age. The room’s centrepiece was one of those huge multi-purpose combination oven-boiler-things, made of

cream-painted metal. Pipes ran from the massive oven into the ceiling, pipes that had once provided central heating for the whole house, feeding the iron radiators I'd spotted in some of the other rooms. It even had a little door where you could choose to fuel it with wood rather than gas or oil. I reminded myself to ask Twil's mother about that oven, if we came out the other side of this bizarre incident in one piece. I wanted to know how old it was. It was like a visitor from the distant past.

"You're beautiful," I told it.

But my pleasure drained away as my footsteps tapped across the pale terracotta tiles of the kitchen floor, heading for the connecting door into the sitting room.

What I'd thought was a sitting room was more of a dining room. A large wooden table dominated the space, probably quite fancy once upon a time, with little ribbed carvings down the legs and a smooth expanse of varnished cream-orange wood for the top, though now it was chipped and pitted and scratched from decades of use, but still given pride of place, along with the matching chairs. The rest of the room boasted a pair of sofas, a traditional sideboard cabinet full of crockery, a huge fireplace that seemed to have been used recently, a wonderful pair of enlarged photographs on the walls which looked like pictures of the very woods that lay beyond the house — and a bank of windows, split down the middle by a pair of glass patio doors.

Night loomed beyond the windows, as impenetrable as the abyss.

I glanced around the room to make sure nothing was going to ambush me. I even looked under the table and poked my head into the little closed cubbyhole style cupboard, which was full of random junk, a vacuum cleaner, and some wrapping paper. Only then did I creep over to the windows.

They were supposed to be looking out over the back patio, but I could see only a scrap of ground.

The artificial darkness outdoors pressed in like a wall of fog. Barely three or four inches of the back patio was visible in the overspill of light from indoors. I could hear the tortured creak and moan of trees and the storm-tossed sound of the leaves in the high winds, but none of it was visible beyond the wall of night.

"It's mid-afternoon in May," I sighed. "You're not fooling anybody. In Carcosa I almost got eaten by sentient darkness and I responded by trying to cause a nuclear explosion. Do you want me to do that here? Yes? You want me to blow you up?"

Nobody and nothing replied.

"You're not listening to this, are you, Sevens? If you're here, if you followed us, please show yourself? I need some help. I won't be angry that you followed us, just ... please."

Sevens was not here.

I tried to set my shoulders and look irritated, tried to channel Evelyn at her worst — or best, depending on what one thought of her — but it didn't quite work. I was very thankful for my pink hoodie, the armour of my soul. I even rolled my left sleeve up a little so I could run my fingers over the Fractal on my forearm, my original safety blanket.

"Fine," I hissed. "I'll check upstairs. If I don't find anybody, I shall unravel this place with my mind. You think you're strong enough to fight that? I am the daughter of an Outsider god, this ... *nonsense* is beyond me."

Barely believed the words I was saying, but I had to keep up appearances.

Then, thunder split the night.

I was just about to turn away from the window when the crash of the storm hit — one of those split second crack-boom thunderclaps that comes from roiling silence and makes you jump like a startled rabbit. Or maybe that's just me.

Lightning flashed in the same instant, as if the storm was right above the house, throwing everything into stark illumination. The lashing trees, thick as a primordial forest; the writhing, wriggling un-grass, out there between the tree-line and the house; the potted plants, meat pretending to be vegetable matter; the mud, thick and cloying, like soil mixed with blood.

And one of the alpacas, from the back field.

It was standing barely ten meters from the house, out in the open, staring directly through the patio doors, right at me. Black horns curved from the sides of its head, coal-dust dark. A human face with

blank, fish-like eyes caught the flash of lightning. Bared teeth held a lipless grimace.

Then the darkness slammed back down, concealing all.

Adrenaline pounded through my head.

“Oh, very original,” I spat, though to my surprise I wasn’t actually afraid, more annoyed. “What, am I supposed to be scared of an alpaca with a human face? I’ve spent half my life seeing worse monsters around every corner. You’re going to have to do better than that. A spooky alpaca, really?”

As the adrenaline drained away, my anger grew. I genuinely had been lost and alone in scarier places than this. There was something parodic about this situation — the darkness, the being cut off from each other, the unexplained storm, and now a lightning flash at the exact moment I was looking outdoors. Like we were trapped by the logic of a Scooby-Doo episode. I was a little afraid, of course I was; I didn’t want to have to fight off a weird alpaca with my tentacles. But deep down, I’d seen far worse. I’d been Outside. I’d been to the court of the Yellow King.

“It’s like this is all a bad ... joke ... um?”

After the lightning flash, the shadows had regathered around the patio doors, but they had also disgorged a curiously coherent shape. Or maybe it had been there all along, and the lightning had ruined its concealment.

Diaphanous skirts of ruffled rippling flesh — translucent camouflage to blend in with the shadows — surrounded a creature the size of a small pony, currently clinging to the outside edge of the patio doors with a set of eight thick, hooked climbing-limbs. Part funnel-web spider, part deep-sea giant squid, part lizard, the thing was armour-plated in pus-white, covered in scales and bristles, looking like an abandoned war machine. A big bulbous abdomen was tucked in close to the body, like a hound tucking its tail between its legs.

A dozen cone-shaped metallic eyes, situated like a spider’s, stared back at me, half-retracted for protection against the whipping winds.

A sharp beak was buried in there somewhere, working up and down with nervous energy, surrounded by a set of seven segmented

tentacles — and the stub of an eighth.

“What the ... what are you doing here?”

I recognised this creature.

It was Edward Lilburne’s amalgam-servitor, the very same one I’d fought off at the home of Amy Stack’s son and his father, Shuja Yousafzai.

Back then, Edward Lilburne had piloted the creature directly, like an animal with some kind of cartoon-logic control-collar. I’d had to make contact with it and then use hyperdimensional mathematics to chase Edward out of its mind and break his control over the poor thing. In the aftermath, we’d surmised that it had probably started life as an actual pneuma-somatic creature, just another spirit, but it had been experimented on and modified, its own willpower hollowed out and supplanted by the old mage himself. Evelyn believed he probably didn’t have the techniques to construct a true servitor, so this was the next best solution to the lack of spirit-muscle.

The last I’d seen of the thing, it had been fleeing across the rooftops of Sharrowford, running on pure instinct, free of the evil wizard making it do his bidding.

“Are you trying to ambush me?” I said out loud — but I didn’t think this was a repeat attempt.

The first time the amalgam-servitor had ambushed us had been perfect, like a spider from an invisible trap. Now it looked more like a spider stuck in a bathtub, out of its context, exposed and threatened by the unnatural darkness, same as me. The seven jointed, segmented tentacles were not extended in a search for prey, but wrapped around its own body in a protective ball.

The thing was terrified.

In response to the sound of my voice, it shuffled closer to the patio door, which was a little disconcerting because I was looking at the thing’s underside, and it was very large indeed.

Metal cone eyes swivelled to look out at the darkness, then back to me. The creature’s tentacles pulled tighter, re-armouring itself against the whipping winds and the lurking alpaca with a human face.

“Yes, you and me both,” I said in sympathy, shaking my head. “Are you asking to be let indoors?”

It click-clacked further to the side, clear of the door handle. The big sharp beak opened and closed several times.

I bit my bottom lip, caught between natural sympathy for something so much like myself — those tentacles were impressive and beautiful, in their own way — and wariness of the amalgam-servitor, not to mention what might lie in the darkness beyond.

“You’re definitely not with Edward anymore, right?” I sighed heavily. “I’ve no way of being sure.”

Cone eyes blinked. The thing looked so pitiful.

Under Edward’s control and direction, it had been a thing of meticulous planning. The moment I had set it free, it had reverted to instinct. What I saw now was not a perfectly poised trap, but a frightened arachnid.

“I don’t know ... ” I murmured, squinting out at the darkness. “If I open the door, is something going to rush in here? Are you ... no, no, you’re terrified, you’re still free.”

The amalgam-servitor pressed itself tighter against the glass. The wind pulled and dragged at its delicate black membranes. That looked painful.

“Oh, fine,” I hissed. “Praem would never let me live it down if I left a spider to die. But if this is a trick then you’re going Outside. Understand?”

The brass latch turned without resistance. The wind reached inside like a fist, slamming me in the front and face so hard that I had to anchor myself with my tentacles. I huddled behind the door, safe inside my mask, as the amalgam-servitor scurried inside, a mass of clawed limb and segmented tentacle wrapped in black membranes and shivering all over. Try as I might to suppress the gut reaction, I still flinched as the thing shot past me. Anybody would, so close to a squid-lizard thing the size of a pony.

I had to use half my tentacles to slam the door shut again. My noodle-arms weren’t enough to defy the force of the unnatural storm-winds. As I slapped the latch back into place, another rolling crack-boom of thunder made me jump and hiss.

The lightning in the clouds lit the landscape — and revealed the alpaca with horns and a human face, now only six feet from the patio doors.

Before the night rushed back in, I saw crimson smears and scraps of flesh between its grimace-grinning teeth.

Then all was darkness and wind once more.

“Oh ... oh, bugger off!” I snapped at the window. Then I turned, rather absurdly, to the amalgam-servitor, and added, “Sorry. Sorry, I didn’t mean you. Sorry for swearing.”

I wasn’t even sure if the pneuma-somatic creature could understand me, but I didn’t need to be an expert in supernatural body language to see that it was still terrified. The spider-squid thing had crammed itself against the back wall of the sitting room, trying to jam itself into a secluded corner and wrap itself about with those black, floating membranes of false shadow. All its metal cone-eyes were turned on the patio doors and the darkness beyond. It wasn’t interested in ambushing me, not in the slightest. It wanted to hide.

Stepping toward it and away from the window, I extended my hand, palm-up, shaking only a tiny bit.

It recoiled, trying to make itself smaller. Metal cone-eyes whirred and clicked at me, like camera lenses.

“Okay,” I sighed. “Fair enough. I was responsible for you pulling off one of your own legs, after all. You haven’t fallen back under Edward’s control or anything, have you? If you had, you would be the lethal secret in the trap, not scared out of your wits. Correct?”

Cone-eyes withdrew into mottled flesh, then poked back out. Was that a yes, or a no, or a please-stop-talking-ape-thing-and-let-me-hide?

“Your presence here doesn’t actually answer anything, you know that?” I snapped, huffing with irritation. “In fact, it only raises more questions! Were you the thing that Amanda Hopton saw in the hallway? How did you get past the bubble-servitors? Or have you been here — I mean here, inside this ... cartoon haunted house, all along? This doesn’t make any sense!”

The spider-squid crawled slowly up the wall, trying to wedge itself into the corner between wall and ceiling, watching me like I was its

natural predator.

“Unless ... unless you went back to Edward,” I mused. “For revenge. Or because it was the only place you knew. And then ... Nicole comes along, and you follow her back out, you follow her here, from Edward’s house. Maybe?”

Mister double-spider — or Miss double-spider, I couldn’t actually tell — provided an answer by curling up even tighter, segmented tentacles wrapped around itself like a ball of armour.

“Fair enough,” I sighed. “Well, stay here if you want, but I am going to check upstairs, before a spooky alpaca crashes through that door.”

Crack-boom went the thunder. Lightning split the darkness a third time.

The alpaca was right up against the glass. A human face with fish-like eyes and a bloody mouth, smearing crimson on the window.

The lightning flash passed. The alpaca stayed, staring at me.

I crossed my arms, lifted my chin, and tried to ignore the pounding of my heart.

“Shoo!” I said, waving my tentacles. “Go on, off with you! Or break the glass and try me. Go on. What’s the point of this, otherwise? What are you *doing*?”

The alpaca backed away, slowly vanishing into the darkness.

“Mhmm.” I tutted. “Thought so.”

When I crept back out into the corridor, the squid-spider decided to follow me.

He kept at a polite distance in the rear, hook-claws feeling his way along the wall, hanging sideways. My own relief surprised me. The thing was incredibly weird and had once been piloted by a horrible mage, but right now it was the only other living thing I’d found in this cursed house.

“I can’t just keep thinking of you as ‘that squid-spider’,” I murmured as we crept back toward the front of the house, past the open doorways. “You need a name. I suppose that’ll have to wait until you’ve communicated in some fashion.” I glanced back at the thing, clinging to the edges of a door frame. “For now ... I don’t know,

you're more cat than dog. What do people call their cats? Marmalade? You're not marmalade coloured though, you're more like marmite and curdled cream. Marmite the spider, how does that sound?"

Marmite did not reply. He — I decided it was a he, for now, though prepared to correct myself later — scissored his beak up and down, all eyes on me, hunched and close to the wall. I was reminded of a timid animal following its owner into a scary place.

When we passed the open door to the den, a strange thing happened.

First I glanced inside, just to check that Nicole hadn't reappeared in her armchair, but the room was still empty. Then, as I turned away, a door appeared in my peripheral vision, in the back wall of the room. Plain wood with a neat handle, like all the other doors in the house.

"Oh, that's ... ah?"

But when I looked directly at it, the door wasn't there. I sighed and slipped one hand inside my squid-skull mask, so I could pinch the bridge of my nose with exasperation.

Marmite and I then commenced several fruitless minutes of trying to find the door again. Well, I did. Marmite just watched. Perhaps he wondered what on earth the little ape-squid was up to, running her hands and tentacles all over the wall, hissing in frustration and taking her helmet off, putting it back on, taking it off again, and putting on all over again. Try as I might, the door was not there, not even invisible. There and gone again.

"Fine. I give up," I said, stepping out of the room — and then the door appeared again in my peripheral vision.

This time, I didn't move my head or my eyes, though I hissed with the stupidity of the moment. If I could edge all the way up to the door without looking directly at it, perhaps I could grab the handle and exit this absurd fake space.

Then a shape moved across the door. Blonde hair, rounded shoulders, stomping with her walking stick, scowling and chewing her lips as she stared at a notepad in one hand.

"Evee!" My heart leapt.

And the door was gone. Evelyn wasn't there either.

"Oh for—" I forced myself to take a deep breath. "If there is a mind behind this, I am going to give you such a ... a ... telling-off! I am really not in the mood for this. I've spent all morning watching demons fight and I am tired. I don't want to be doing this right now, I want to be at home, taking a nap or reading a book!"

I didn't waste any more time on the door-that-wasn't. Back to the corridor. Marmite scuttled along behind me.

We almost reached the stairs before I noticed an extra door. And this one was not running away.

It was opposite the stairs themselves, flush up against the door to the little cloak room, identical to all the other doors in the house, plain wood painted an off-white cream colour.

"That wasn't there before," I sighed, more irritated than spooked by now. "Is this meant to be scary? The first one was a bait-and-switch, but this one opens on a bottomless pit, right? This is dumb. What do you think, Marmite? Pretend we haven't seen it? Oh, I suppose it's a way deeper into this ... whatever this is all meant to—"

The door opened and disgorged a woman being eaten by a blob monster.

At least, that's what it looked like for the first split second. I recoiled like a cat faced with a snake, hissing at the top of my lungs and whipping all my tentacles forward in self-defence as I scrambled backward. I think I bumped into Marmite on the wall, because somebody or something helped catch and right me on my own two feet again so I could keep hissing.

"Miss— Morell? H-Heather?"

My hiss died down to a pant of adrenaline and confusion as my eyes made sense of what I was looking at.

Amanda Hopton waved at me awkwardly with her free hand, the one that was not engulfed in bubble-servitor.

"Uh ... hello," I croaked, forcing my throat back into a human configuration with an effort of willpower. It felt like swallowing a pine cone. "Sorry ... I thought ... um ... " I gestured with one tentacle at the collection of massive soap bubbles attached to Amanda's arm and head.

One of Hringewindla's angels was perched on her like the world's largest parrot. Iridescent bubbles piled up around her head and neck, spilling over her shoulder, and clinging to her left arm — which was entirely buried within the shifting mass of the bubble-creature, visible through the translucent layers, warped by multiple angles of refraction.

"Oh," Amanda reacted quite slowly, glancing over at her bulbous passenger. "It's quite safe. I'm fine. I needed help, in all this ... confusion."

"Help ... right." I cleared my throat again.

"Is that yours?" She nodded past me, at Marmite, who was still clinging to the wall.

"Um, in a manner of speaking," I sighed. "Long story. I think he might be what you saw in the corridor earlier, but he's not responsible for all this. He's safe too. I think."

"Mmmmmm," Amanda made a low humming, nodding along, heavy lidded eyes blinking slowly — then snapping open to fix on Marmite. "Yes. He is allowed to be here."

I let out a big sigh, trying to straighten up and shake off the adrenaline. "That door you came from, that wasn't there a moment ago." I peered over her shoulder. "Oh."

It was just another cloak room, identical to the one I'd been in earlier. Same coats, same shoes, same boxes.

"Ahh?" Amanda turned, confused, the bubble-servitor turning with her. She half closed the door with one hand, which revealed that the *other* door, the one to the cloak room I'd been inside, was now nowhere to be seen. Blank wall.

I sighed a great big sigh and wanted to put my face in my hands. Only my squid mask stopped me. "There was another door," I said. "It's gone now."

"Oh, yes, I've been experiencing that too," Amanda said, nodding along. "New doors. Corridors all tangled, going in circles. It's awful. I'm so glad to see somebody else."

Her voice held a mesmerised, floating quality; back in normal reality that was just how she sounded, but surrounded as we were now by cloying night and howling winds beyond the walls, the way

she spoke almost gave me the creeps.

I'd never been alone with Amanda before. I'd only met her twice. She possessed the same neat features and dark curls as her sister, but with significantly more grey in her hair and much heavier bags under her eyes. Oddly, I couldn't quite tell her age. She could have been in her fifties or her thirties, run-down in some ways but preserved in others, as if she rarely saw the sun. She had more fat on her frame and more lines in her face, backed by a slack exhaustion that came from a lifetime of terrible stress or an acute period of no sleep. I suspected the former. I knew it well.

But her eyes danced with alert intelligence.

"You've been experiencing all this as well, then?" I asked. "You left the den, went upstairs with Twil? What happened?"

Amanda nodded. The bubble-servitor adjusted as she moved her head, a disgusting flowing motion of hundreds of tiny bubbles. "To see my boys, yes. We went upstairs, but then I turned a corner and Twil was gone. I thought she was just doing something Twil-like, you know? Run off somewhere." She tried a smile, nervous and soft, like a puffball mushroom.

"Yes. It would be very Twil, doing that amid all this."

"But then my boys were missing too. And Gareth — he's my gentleman friend. He wouldn't leave the boys after I told him to stay with them, he simply wouldn't do that. And Bernard was gone, too. That's my dog."

"We'll find your children, I'm sure they're safe. I don't think this place is ... serious. Sort of."

Amanda sighed. "I'm afraid you and I both have better protection than most, miss Morell. Heather?"

"Heather is fine," I said.

"... what is it? What's wrong?"

I felt myself blush, suddenly deeply awkward. She must have seen the way I was watching her face. "Excuse me for saying this, it's not an accusation, but under the circumstances ... well, Amanda, you're not very afraid, for somebody trapped in a haunted house."

She really wasn't. The sleepy-eyed look, the strung-out exhaustion,

the strange floating of her words. Her children were missing, wasn't she supposed to be in panic?

Amanda nodded. "I am fortified and protected in my hour of need. Fear would not help. The hand of my god is on me."

"Ah," I cleared my throat. "Literally, yes. I apologise. I'm ... "

"We didn't do this," she said, though she didn't sound offended. "I speak with the voice of my god, and this is not our doing."

"Well, it's not ours either."

She nodded. "I believe that."

I shuffled my feet and tried to smile back. Not easy in this place. Behind me, Marmite was twitching and adjusting on the wall, as if listening to the sounds of the wind or the creaking of the beams.

"So ... we're all cut off," I said. "But how have you and I bumped into each other? If we can replicate that, we can probably find everybody else. Maybe get out of here."

Amanda smiled. "I am receiving direct help." She wiggled her fingers inside the bubble-servitor. "But I don't think that's actually helping. You're the first I've found. All I've done is wander around this labyrinth."

"Labyrinth? All I've seen is the house, like normal. Save a phantom door or two."

Amanda shook her head. "It is a jumble."

"Well, not for me. Have you seen outdoors?"

"Oh. Yeah." She cringed a little — that helped remind me she was still a person too, not just a mouthpiece for an Outsider. "I'm sorry, Heather. It's very strange talking to you through your mask, though it is very beautiful. I might not show it but I am quite perfectly terrified right now, for my safety, for my boys' safety, for everyone else. I don't understand what's going on."

It was only once I took off my squid-skull mask that I realised how much security and comfort I'd been drawing from being cradled in metallic armour. Naked, exposed directly to the walls of the house and the wind beyond, uncovered and unprotected. I silently thanked the strange Outside creature that had donated its remains, which had become my mask.

“Is that better?” I asked Amanda.

“Thank you. Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said automatically, frowning at her though I didn’t mean to.

“If we work together, we may be able to find the others,” she said slowly, slack lipped and squinting. “Or ... I am not unaware of your many blessings from the Beyond. Can you go for help?” When I didn’t answer right away, Amanda swallowed. “Heather?”

“Amanda, am I speaking with you right now or ... well, *him*?”

“Both,” she said without hesitation. “My god is in my head, all the time. I make no secret of this. He is present, he is listening, he speaks to me. But not through me, not directly.”

I chewed my lip, watching her carefully, trying to see into the backs of her eyes, brown pools like thick mud set in flesh the colour of sunless fungus. Abyssal instinct whispered dark suggestions, ruthless suggestions — maybe this woman was lying, maybe she was the bioluminescent lure before the jaws of the creature that held us in its jaw. Maybe this was all Hringewindla’s trap, but he had none of the strength of *Ooran Juh*.

“And he doesn’t know what’s going on?” I asked. But my words came out like ice.

Amanda must have read the look on my face. She swallowed hard.

“I am no puppet, I am ... loved. Especially so. Please don’t repeat this in front of the others, especially Christine, she doesn’t like to be reminded of it, but I am Hringewindla’s special one, in this generation, this life. I am his closest. I have been with him since before I could speak. He is always with me, and he does not understand what is happening here. Please. I’m terrified too.”

“I ... I do want to believe you.”

“He would not leave me in this as bait, miss Morell.”

I reached out with a tentacle and brushed her arm, a subconscious gesture of connection and acceptance. Strangely enough, Marmite copied the gesture — bony, segmented tentacles reached past me, hovering in the air.

“I don’t have any choice but to trust you regardless,” I said. “The

only other option would be to ... hurt you, I suppose. Which I won't do. But if this turns out to be a trick ... ”

I stared into her eyes, to make clear who was the intended recipient of my implied threat. My voice shook more than I wanted.

Amanda nodded, a little jerky and shaken. I blew out a slow breath and retracted my tentacle. Marmite did the same, mimicking my action.

“However, I can't just leave,” I said. “It's too much of a risk.”

I quickly filled Amanda in on my assumptions so far — that my toxic presence might be the only thing stopping this trap from swallowing us, that Raine had suggested this is not intentional but instead some kind of natural phenomenon, and about where I'd found Marmite.

“Marmite?” she echoed, blinking at me.

“Marmite. Provisionally. For now. I just needed something to call him.”

But when I explained where he'd come from originally, Amanda bit her lip, staring at his black-shadowed form clinging to the wall.

“As far as I'm aware, he's clean now,” I said. “I don't even know what he's doing here, he's basically just pneuma-somatic life.”

“A *kami*, yes ... ” Amanda moved her head left and right, as if examining the squid-spider from different angles. The bubble-servitor attached to her head and arm did the same, much to my suppressed disgust.

“*Hring—*,” I stopped, cleared my throat, and decided not to try that pronunciation again. “Your god really has no idea what is happening here? How we might get out?”

Amanda sighed, glancing down the spinal corridor of the house. “Sometimes his thoughts are difficult to interpret correctly, even for me. But he is concerned about ... contamination. Infestation. Hidden germination. These words do not capture the concept he is worried about, but they are close enough. I do not have the right language for it, none of us do.”

“Ah,” I sighed. “Well. Good try, regardless.”

“He does think we should find the private eye again, Nicole Webb.”

Amanda hesitated, wetting her thin, cracked lips. “He suggests that I allow one of his buds—” she gestured with her left arm inside the bubble-servitor “—to clean her.”

Cold seeped into my belly.

“ ... *clean* her?”

“Spiritually.” Amanda held my gaze, guilty and pained. She knew exactly how that sounded.

“I think ... you should hold off on that, if we run into her. Please.”

Amanda didn’t nod. She just looked away from me. “Do you want to stick together, to try to find her? I would appreciate not doing this alone.”

“Of course,” I said, swallowing and forcing a polite nod. “We best stick together now.”

I couldn’t be certain, of course, but I think Amanda had just asked me to help her defy her god, without saying the words. If she found Nicole first, and alone, then her god was very interested in rooting around inside Nicole’s head.

“Whatever it means to ‘stick together’ in all this,” Amanda said with an awkward smile. “I suspect the maze will separate us again, the moment we’re out of sight of each other.”

“How is your god helping you, exactly? We might be able to work with that, somehow.”

“Directions, of a sort. But even he is confused by the tangle now, by the extra doors, the corridors duplicated, the rooms that shouldn’t be there. This is not within his understanding, as vast as his mind may be.”

I bit my bottom lip. “I haven’t seen any of that, just the house. All except the door you emerged from.”

“Curious.” Amanda tilted her head at me. The bubble-servitor on her shoulders flowed with the motion, like a bag full of silt. “You could find the detective in an instant though, could you not?”

“I ... maybe. With the right maths.”

Cold fingers crept into my belly again. Behind me, Marmite eased backward along the wall, retreating with painful slowness.

"I've heard about what you can do," Amanda said. When she blinked, her eyelids were out of sync. "From Twil. I think your friend, Raine, yes? She was right, and Hringewindla agrees. The detective was the start of this. She carried the infection in. If we can find her, we can ... diagnose. Identify. Trace."

I took a step back as well. Abyssal instinct flared warning signs inside my head. "You sound more certain than a moment ago. Amanda."

"This could all be over quite soon, if you would please—"

"Stop," I snapped.

Amanda flinched. She blinked several times, eyelids in sync once again. "I'm sorry. S-sorry, I—"

"Just, stop." I swallowed hard. Abyssal instinct was screaming about lures and marine canyons and the giant things that lurked down there, waiting for prey to stray near to the edge. "You're not very subtle, are you?"

Amanda gaped at me, gormless and lost. " ... I'm sorry?"

"I'm not talking to you, Amanda."

"Oh ... "

I forced myself to let out a slow breath. "Look. Look, I understand you think Nicole is the cause of all this, but she's also our friend, and we're responsible for what happened. I'm not going to lead you to her if you're just going to scoop out her mind. If we find her and you try to overpower me ... well," I paused, swallowing awkwardly. "You know what I can do to your followers. And your angels."

Amanda shook her head, shocked and frightened. "Please, please, I-I won't— I don't mean to—"

"I'm sorry," I sighed, running one hand over my face, trying not to shake so badly. "Besides, I don't think I can just picture Nicole in my head and rotate the house like one of those puzzles full of ball bearings, it's never as simple as ... that?"

Don't think of a black cat, one tells oneself, and instantly one pictures a black cat, no matter how hard one tries. The negation of the object contains within itself the definition of the negated. The black hole defines itself against the background of stars.

Observation does not fail when faced with an absence — absence itself becomes definition.

So for a moment, I pictured exactly what I described — Nicole like a ball-bearing in a puzzle, and how I might use hyperdimensional mathematics to rotate the dimensions around her, to bring her to us.

And then, from behind Amanda and Marmite and I, came a scuff-stumble of unsteady feet.

Marmite whirled on the wall, backing away in fear, almost bumping into me. My tentacles fanned out with instinctive shock. Amanda gasped and her bubble-servitor flowed upward, as if it was trying to make her look bigger too.

Nicole Webb, private eye, stumbled out of the den and slumped against the wall.

“Salute and advance and by all that is unkept,” she said with weary relief, struggling to stay standing. “But there’s no window for delay, no time for entrenchment, no whistle of shell.”

“You found her!” Amanda sighed with relief. “Detective, hello.”

“ ... Nicole, right,” I murmured. “We ... found you.”

There was just one problem — I hadn’t actually executed any equations. I hadn’t performed any hyperdimensional mathematics. I had not done this.

But there was no time to stop and think. Amanda was already stepping forward, maybe to take Nicole by the arm and help her stand up, or maybe to inject bubble-servitor into her skull through her ear canal. The bubble-servitor started to crane forward on Amanda’s shoulder like a cresting wave, flowing over itself with naked interest.

I shouldered past Amanda, half-turning with a display of my tentacles thrust out to block her way, my left arm showing the Fractal. The bubble-servitor recoiled and Amanda stumbled. I groped for Nicole with my other three tentacles. Nicole, of course, could not see the wordless confrontation. The detective yelped in surprise as I dragged her to her feet with unseen limbs, grabbing for my physical, human hand when I reached her.

Amanda stood there with a cowed, blinking expression. But the

bubble-servitor on her shoulder roiled and rocked, like a giant unshelled mollusc working itself into a frenzy.

“Nicky, hi, Nicky,” I said all in a rush. “It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s just my invisible tentacles picking you up. It’s just me.”

Nicole gave me such a look when I said that. I sighed and rolled my eyes. At least she didn’t let go of me though, hooking her arm around my shoulders so she could stand up almost straight.

“What now, miss Morell?” Amanda asked. “What do we do now?”

We were at an impasse, an unspoken stand-off, facing each other across this wooden corridor, myself and Hringewindla, surrounded by the whipping, whistling winds and the pressing night beyond the walls. Amanda had gone glassy-eyed, barely even here. To my side, poor Marmite was cramming himself into the junction between wall and ceiling, unwilling to run but trying to stay clear of the confrontation between the avatar of a crippled god and the daughter of the Eye.

“We can’t just stand here all night,” Amanda continued when I didn’t answer.

“It isn’t really night,” I said. Keep up the facade. Play along that we’re not in conflict.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m not handing Nicole over to you.”

“Parley and sally,” Nicole blurted out. “A hilltop world of whippoorwills and stone circles. Which way to Canterbury?”

“I’m not going to harm her, I promise.” Amanda sighed, frowning in a long-suffering kind of way, the way I would have frowned this time last year. “We need to get rid of this, clean away the cobwebs, and she was the start.”

On her shoulder, the bubble servitor suddenly split itself into six distinct strands, feelers formed by roiling soap bubbles. They fanned out to touch the walls, the floor, and the ceiling, creeping toward us in a web that extended from its main body.

“I should Slip,” I said.

Amanda stopped and tilted her head at me. The bubble-servitor kept inching toward us. Nicole frowned harder, panting with the

effort of pointing her feet in the right direction.

“I thought you said you didn’t want to try, in case ... ?”

I wet my lips carefully, trying to consider my options. I could not let Hringewindla get his bubbles on Nicole. The way she clung to me proved that much — she did not consent. If he had wanted to harm her for some other reason, then he’d had hours to do that before we’d arrived. I didn’t know how to read the mind of an Outsider, let alone through a human avatar, but I didn’t think I was being lied to.

“If Nicole is the origin of this, then removing her from the house may unravel the effect,” I said. “I can take her Outside.”

The bubble-servitor paused.

“ ... that may work,” said Amanda.

“I am afraid of not being able to get back,” I explained. “If this is some ... separate, unconnected space, I might not be able to return, not cleanly. But it’s worth trying. And if this is a trap, if I am the only thing stopping it from closing, then I leave the responsibility to you.”

Amanda nodded slowly. Her eyes were full of fog.

“Do I have your word that you will help my friends, if anything happens when I leave?” I asked. “And I’m not talking to you.”

Amanda blinked twice. Behind the glassy, cloudy orbs of her eyes, a vast shape adjusted itself, a leviathan bulk seen through a crack in the earth’s crust.

“You have my word,” something else said with her mouth.

“Exit stage left?” Nicole asked. She might be talking nonsense, but her tone was terrified.

“It’s safe,” I said to her, our faces uncomfortably close. “I mean, it feels bad, yes. And being Outside at all feels ... weird. But Raine’s been through it, she’s a totally unaltered human being like you, and she’s fine.”

Nicole gave me a very dubious frown.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “That’s just Raine being Raine.”

“Imbriglicated,” Nicole muttered.

“I will stay here with my angels,” Amanda said. “I will attempt to find your friends.”

“I think that’s best. If you did come Outside, well, I don’t know what that might do to your connection with your god.”

Amanda shrugged. “Hringewindla is with me always.”

I did my best to ignore her fanaticism, glancing up at Marmite instead. He was now firmly wedged into the ceiling, wrapped in his shadow-soft membranes like an upside-down blanket fort.

“Do you want to come with me? Get out of this?” I asked.

Marmite pulled his segmented tentacles even tighter, but then his cone-eyes swivelled to look at the extended tendrils from the bubble-servitor.

“That’s a no, I presume?” Amanda asked. “I don’t speak any *kami* language.”

“Neither do I,” I sighed. Amanda looked briefly confused, blinking at me. “But uh ... oh.”

Marmite slowly crept down the wall, took up a position behind me, and tapped the back of my thigh with a segmented bone-tentacle.

“A yes?”

“A yes,” I said. “Well then. If this works, I’ll be back in a matter of minutes. Be safe, I suppose.”

Amanda nodded politely and stepped back, as if hyperdimensional mathematics had a minimum blast radius. The bubble-servitor flowed after her, deciding to let us go.

Nothing else for it, no time for second thoughts, no other preparation needed. This was the only way to defuse the situation.

“Hold on tight and close your eyes,” I said to Nicole. “This can be stressful. Also I may vomit on the other side, so ... watch out. You too, Marmite.”

The squid-spider wrapped his grip around my leg.

The familiar old equation spun up inside my head, rising from the inky depths like a machine preserved in sticky, corrosive black oil.

Each piece slammed into place, red-hot with speed and precision, burning a path through my brain.

Out.

The house folded up, shrank to a point, and stepped sideways.

and walked a crooked mile –

16.4

Nicole, Marmite, and I arrived in Camelot on our feet, but we didn't stay standing for long.

It had been a while since I'd used hyperdimensional mathematics for anything more complex than subconscious speculation, let alone a manual Slip, not since my return from Carcosa. The aftermath of the inhuman equation crackled and hissed across the surface of my mind, like water droplets flung on a red-hot metal plate. A stabbing headache blossomed behind my eyes and my stomach clenched like a fist. My body tried to reject the logic and lessons of the Eye. I doubled up so hard that Nicole's arm slid off my shoulders and I lost my tentacle-grip around her waist. Marmite scurried to give us space, pulling his own bony tentacle free from around my thigh, moving with such haste that it bounced off my opposite shin.

Nicole staggered and slumped to her knees on the grass, bundled in her long coat. I hugged myself with all my tentacles, drooling ropes of saliva, heaving with the effort of holding back a wave of vomit.

But I refused to give up the contents of my stomach. A Slip is just a Slip, and I'd Slipped so many times before.

I croaked and gurgled and spluttered, but I wasn't sick.

By the time I straightened up and wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my hoodie, Nicole was staring about us in slack-jawed wonder.

"Welcome to Camelot," I croaked, then had to clear my throat again. "We are currently Outside."

Nicole wore an expression like a palaeolithic woman dumped on a London pavement, open-mouthed and wide eyed at sights for which she had no context. I watched her take in the whorled purple sky and the soft yellow hillsides, the rough circle of Lozzie's shining knights spread out nearby, and the vast, humped bulk of the caterpillar, still standing where we'd left it only hours earlier. The off-white carapace-bench lay where it had fallen beside the massive

machine-creature — and if my eyes did not deceive me, Jan's little polystyrene box of chicken lay on the bench.

"Tch, littering," I said under my breath.

A dried patch of crimson marked the nearby grass, where a little of Zheng's blood had soaked into the soil.

Nicole looked up and found me with numb eyes, blinking up and down my body with growing confusion. She was not taking this well.

"Um, Outside reality, that is," I added. "Not 'outside' as in outdoors. Obviously. You can see that." I cleared my throat again. Nicole blinked very hard, as if trying to wake up from a bad dream. "It's perfectly safe, I promise."

Bwop.

Nicole and I both jumped at the sudden booming noise — a miniature version of the caterpillar's *booop-wooop* alarm, like the tiniest touch of engine plates on some vast machine, followed by the long, muffled dial-down whine from inside the pitted bulk of the giant.

"It's just the catty saying hi," I explained quickly, more than a little shaken myself. I turned and called out to all our extra-dimensional friends. "Hello, everyone! Sorry for the confusion. We're back again. Only for a moment though." Then I glanced at the caterpillar again, raising my voice across the yellow-grass plains. "I don't suppose you can get a message to Lozzie? No?"

The caterpillar did not reply. I took a deep breath, my stomach beginning to churn with anxiety.

"We really must keep moving," I muttered to myself. "Get back to the house, get, um ... Sevens. Right, yes."

"Camelot." Nicole finally spoke, then huffed a humourless laugh, her voice stretched thin.

"That's just what we call it. It's a silly name, I know."

"You have got to be joking," she said, still huddled on her knees beneath her long coat. She looked much more vulnerable than I'd ever seen her before, which was quite a feat, considering I'd seen her tied up and begging for her life. There was something pitiful

and broken about her, out here. Strands of her blonde hair had escaped her bun, and she looked like she was in pain. That, or constipated. “Knights in shining armour. Where’s the castle, huh? What next, we gonna recruit a gender swapped king Arthur? Totally expect you lot to have something like that up your sleeves. At least that would make sense.”

“We have a castle in a different dimension. Sort of,” I said with off-handed embarrassment — then I did a double take down at Nicole. “Nicky! You’re talking normally!”

“That I am.” She puffed out a big sigh and a wince, rubbing her sternum with one hand. “Feel like total shit though, like I’m gonna hurl. Is it alright if I hurl out here, or is that gonna unravel my soul, or something equally stupid?”

“Um, yes, be sick if you need to. I’ve done it plenty of times.” I awkwardly reached for her with my tentacles. “That’s just what Slipping feels like, I’m sorry.”

“Better than a teleporter accident, I guess,” she grumbled, but then she shied away from me, eyes going wide at my approaching tentacles. “Um. Hey.”

“Sorry, sorry!” I recoiled, mortified. “I keep forgetting people can’t see them normally, back in reality. Sorry. You’ve never seen this before. I’m sorry. It’s just me.”

“Ah, don’t worry.” She waved a hand. “I gather you saved me from getting some experimental brain surgery back there, so, hey, thanks. Don’t worry about it.” She nodded behind me. “What’s that though? That meant to be here too?”

Nicole was talking about Marmite, of course.

The poor squid-spider thing was taking to Camelot far worse than we apes. He was pressed low to the ground, his shadowy black membranes standing out like spilt ink on clean parchment, the purple light of Camelot reflecting from them like iridescent beetle-wings. His legs were tucked in below his body and his segmented bone-tentacles were wrapped in a ball around his core. Cone-eyes swivelled and twitched in every direction.

Marmite was a creature of dark corners and shadowy recesses, not wide open spaces and grassy steppe. Poor thing was cowering and exposed.

“Oh, Marmite! I’m sorry!” I reached out and touched him with a tentacle. He reached up to meet me, locking the end of one bony appendage with mine. “Nicky, I’m sorry, this is Marmite, he came with us just now but you couldn’t see him.”

“Right. Invisible monsters. I’ll try not to think about that, thanks.”

“I’m sorry, this is always so confusing.” I sighed. “Evee’s right, we really need more than one pair of those magic glasses.”

“Last thing my senses need right now is more bloody magic.”

“Nicky, it’ll be okay,” I said — but I was really talking to myself, my own worry clawing up my throat, making my voice quiver. “But we have to get back, as soon as possible. I-I’ve left everyone else’s safety in the hands of Hingle- Hingey—” I huffed. “The Brinkwood Church. Evee would kill me if she knew. Oh, wait! You were with Evee and Praem! What happened, were you in the room with them, what—”

“Yeah,” Nicole said with an exasperated sigh, giving me quite a look. “Evelyn Saye was doing ... I don’t know. Some magic. Some bullshit with a notebook and sticking paper on the walls. Then I closed my eyes and she and the ... Praem, right? They were gone. You were out in the corridor. You know the rest, you were there for it.”

“ ... okay. Okay, that explains absolutely nothing.” I swallowed too hard, which made my throat hurt. “Okay, Nicky, we’ve got to get back. Uh, I need— I need us to Slip again—”

Nicole raised both hands in surrender, wincing hard like she had a hangover headache. “Heather Morell. Slow down. Please.”

“I can’t! Everyone is in danger!”

“And you’ve got tentacles!” Nicole laughed, right up on the edge of hysteria. “Give me a moment here, okay? I’ve been babbling all day. I don’t know how I got where I was, and now I don’t know where I am. And that is an understatement.”

“We should just go, I can do it—”

“Yeah,” Nicole’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “And when I go back, am I gonna be talking in riddles again? Gimme a sec to gather my thoughts. Your friends are scary enough, they can look after themselves for a couple of minutes, okay?”

Abyssal instinct pulled both ways at once. *Get back to your pack, they need you*, it screamed — while at the same time it demanded whatever information I might glean from Nicole. One of my tentacles twitched with the urge to just peel her head open and extract what I needed directly, but that urge was so absurd it flickered out as soon as it crossed my mind.

“Okay,” I forced myself to say, blowing out a deep breath. “But we should get moving as soon as possible. Everyone else might need help.”

Nicole nodded, still wincing and rubbing her ribs, looking like she was suffering the onset of food poisoning. “Help me up, yeah? My legs are ... well, I would say they’re fucked, but I think they’re getting better. A hand, please, not a tentacle.”

I did as she asked, though it was easier said than done; Nicole didn’t weigh that much more than me but my noodle-arms were not up to the task, so I instinctively braced myself against the ground with half my tentacles, using them as leverage. The detective stumbled to her feet, then stared at my tentacles as they adjusted with my balance.

I wasn’t sure if it was a subconscious reaction, but I made them strobe slightly brighter when she stared.

“Of course they’re rainbows,” she muttered, not quite laughing.

“Lozzie once called them my ‘lesbian limbs’.” I pulled an awkward smile. The detective arched an eyebrow, hunched in her coat, still using me as a handrail.

“So, you’ve got tentacles, all the time? Just invisible normally?”

“Yes. Well, sometimes I have to put them away, it does take effort to keep them out.” Except, not anymore, not with the bioreactor in my abdomen, but I decided not to complicate Nicole’s mind further by telling her about the pneuma-somatic reactor inside my body. “They’re just a ... reflection of what I’m meant to be. I’m sorry, I’ve scared you a bit. I should have said something first.”

“Nah, nah.” Nicole straightened up and pulled a smile, tired and confused, but draping herself with the aura of professionalism once more. “They’re very impressive. I won’t lie and pretend I understand, but you do you, Heather. But uh, why not anchor them in your back instead of your sides, though? It looks awkward.”

I sighed. "Are you an expert on tentacles?"

"No! Sorry. I just ... hell, I'm just trying to hold onto something concrete right now. We're out here standing on the bloody ethereal plane getting booped at by giant slugs, and you've got a set of rainbow tentacles. Cut me some slack, yeah? I'm sorry. Didn't mean to say something offensive. I think."

"Apology accepted, please don't worry about it." I felt just as awkward as Nicole looked. "I suppose there's no accepted etiquette for this, is there?"

"Young women growing tentacles? Eh, not really."

"Well, um, they're in my sides because this is what I went with first, on reflex. Over time I've gotten used to it. I know it's not optimal, but it's what I've made. It's mine. That matters more."

Nicole nodded along. "Yeah, sometimes you've just gotta roll with what works. I'm, uh, happy for you? Is that appropriate?"

I nodded back. "Thank you."

As if putting weight on a tender injury, Nicole stepped back with exaggerated care, letting go of my hand at last. She moved slowly, until she was standing on her own two feet. She didn't look very steady. Her breathing was deep and slow, but shaking with pain and discomfort. She pressed a hand to the middle of her chest again. "Why are we talking about your tentacles anyway, huh?" She tried to laugh but couldn't quite get there. "Oh shit, this really hurts."

I tried not to show any alarm. "That might have something to do with being Outside. Did it hurt like this back in reality?"

"Nah. A bit. Not like this though." She cast around again, up at the whorled sky and around at the knights. "This ain't what I was expecting. So what are these guys, the knights of the round table?"

"Lozzie made them. It's a long story. What were you expecting?"

"I dunno. A lot more wibbly-wobbles. Not blokes in armour and giant insects that go boop." She huffed a laugh, but she sounded like a heavy smoker all of a sudden. "I've tried reading a bunch of Lovecraft since we met. Trying to get my head around the real world. He was probably onto something, but too far up his own arse."

“Lovecraft?”

Nicole straightened up by force of will, wincing through her teeth. She blinked at me. “You’re telling me you’ve not read any Lovecraft? You’re a squid person, your sister was kidnapped by an alien god, and you’ve not read any Lovecraft?”

“... oh, him.” I tutted. “No, it’s all just stories. Well, Eevee says so, anyway.”

“Still. Might have been onto something, right? Fragments of truth in fiction, yeah? S’what I think, anyway. Or maybe that’s just how my mind works. Looking for details.”

I shrugged. “I am dating a daughter of the King in Yellow, so I can hardly speak.”

Nicole went very still.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, wincing with embarrassment. “I didn’t tell you about that. We’re going to ask her for help now, with whatever on earth was going on back there. That’s my plan, anyway.”

“You know what? Forget I said anything.”

“Sorry.”

“Actually wait, unforget.” Nicole frowned, tilting her head, discomfort briefly forgotten. “Aren’t you already with Raine? And Zheng, at the same time?”

“Um, yes.”

“So now you have three girlfriends?” Nicole managed to make this question sound like *So now you’ve won the lottery three times?*

“One is technically a fiancée. Maybe two.” I cleared my throat.

“Fucking hell.” Nicole laughed. “What have I gotta do to get pussy like that? Is it the tentacles?”

“Nicky,” I hissed, embarrassed and blushing. I even glanced down at Marmite behind me, as if a giant pneuma-somatic spider-squid was going to have his delicate sensibilities scandalised by talk about *pussy*. He didn’t care, he was mostly just afraid of the sky, and holding onto my tentacle very tightly.

“Ahhh, sorry,” Nicole said. “You didn’t deserve that. Look, I’m a

crude old bitch in private sometimes, and right now I'm kinda fucked up."

"Evidently," I said. "We need to get back and get help, and figure out what happened to you. Are you ready now?"

Nicole held up a hand. "Whoa, whoa, can't we ... like ... regroup? At least tell me what the hell was going on back there?"

"With the darkness? And the spooky stuff? I have no idea, I'm sorry. Something similar to this happened to us a little while back, but it wasn't quite the same. This big guy was trying to eat us." Nicole's eyebrows shot up her forehead. "Well, he wasn't a guy, he was a mage. Or had been a mage, once. But he'd been in the abyss, like me." Nicole's eyes kept getting wider. "Actually, never mind. I'm sorry."

"Yeah that's a bit above my pay grade."

I tried to laugh. "You get paid for this?"

"If Miss Saye will give me danger money, I'm not gonna turn it down. Though I'd prefer knowing what the hell was happening."

"I just don't know. It's like we were in one of those Hammer Horror movies or something, it was all so silly. Hardly scary."

"Well I'm glad you fucking thought so!" Nicole snapped at me. I flinched, blinking, confused. She eyed my tentacles, the way they curled back in, protecting my vulnerable core of true flesh. "Look, Heather, the last time I had to deal with supernatural stuff because of you lot, it kind of changed my life. Okay?"

"Oh."

Nicole was concealing it well, with all the professionalism of a lifelong public servant — a real one, no matter the realities of what she'd actually done while with the Sharrowford Police. But tucked away beneath her physical discomfort, her flippant comments, and her shock at being Outside, Nicole Webb was terrified of going back.

"Sorry," she said, trying to pull herself together. "Sorry. Sometimes I forget you're just a uni student."

"Nicky, this is nothing like that house we went to, where the cult had—"

“Yeah, okay, yeah,” she spoke over me, and quickly. “I don’t want to think about that. I get it.”

“It’s not the same, this is not the same at all. I won’t let it be the same.”

Nicole stared back at me. I finally noticed how she was sweating, gone pale and waxen beneath her otherwise healthy complexion. “Alright, chosen one. So, what do we do?”

“We go back to the farm. Not straight back inside the house, but next to Raine’s car — I think I can pinpoint that. Then we see what we can see. Maybe without you it’ll all have collapsed, be back to normal.”

“And if not?”

“Then I’ll call Lozzie. I’ll talk to Sevens. She might be able to help.”

But she’ll have to break the rules she’s set herself, won’t she? I bit my bottom lip at that thought. She had offered.

“Muddle through it from there, hey?” Nicole pulled a rueful smile. “I get the picture this is how you lot always operate.”

“Not always, sometimes there’s planning. But this is an emergency.”

“Yeah, right. Okay, so, hold up a sec, because if we go back and I can’t talk, then I can’t tell you what happened to me, right?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Please, explain. Please.”

Nicole blew out a long breath. A change came over her, a calming and quietening of her mind, visible in the tension of her facial muscles and the angle of her chin. She even closed her eyes briefly, then glanced around Camelot once more, perhaps anchoring herself in the undeniable reality of what she could see.

“It was yesterday afternoon,” she said, with a flicker of her tongue over her lips, squinting a little with the effort of recall. She stared at the caterpillar as she spoke. “I was in Manchester for a job, like I told you lot. Well, okay, actually I was in Stockport, but same thing. Don’t let anybody from Manchester know I said that, though.” She added a forced chuckle. “Just didn’t want to confuse Miss Saye with more shaking my head. I was in the suburbs, supposed to be looking for this guy cheating on his wife — his lady-friend’s place is round there. But the husband is also paying me to counter-spy on the wife,

because he's certain she's stealing money from his business. Whatever, probably doesn't matter. I parked just off the A6, next to this old Church with a great big graveyard. For all I know my car's still there. Hope it is ... ”

She trailed off, eyes lost on the horizon.

“Nicky?”

“Mm?” She blinked hard. “Sorry, yes. I was thinking. It's ... a little hard to think, right now.”

“Outside is difficult to endure, I understand. We can go back as soon as you're ready.”

“So, I parked up,” she went on. Her voice faded as she spoke. Her attention couldn't seem to find me, eyelids blinking too much as she focused out at Camelot, or up at the whorled purple sky, or down at Marmite, cowering behind me. “Then I walked into the graveyard for a little bit, to think.”

She fell silent again, sharp blue eyes staring out at nothing, gentle wind plucking at the hem of her long coat and the few strands of blonde hair that had escaped her bun. My gut clenched with worry. Nicole was not meant to be out here. Even the comparatively gentle effect of Camelot was too much for her mind.

“To think about the house we asked you to find?”

“Well, no, that's the weird part. I was thinking about the job, making a plan. Not about you lot at all. Then I looked at the graves and the trees, and there was this one grave with a little statue of an angel, kinda tacky, it was naked, and ... and ... ”

Nicole blinked very slowly and put her hand to her chest again, rubbing as if pained.

“And I did think about the stolen documents,” she said. “But only for a second. Maybe my subconscious was chewing on the puzzle, I dunno. I remember turning away and leaving the graveyard, and crossing the A6, but ... nothing after that. Not until I was on the edge of that farm. Exhausted, must have been walking all night. Doubt I slept.” She snorted. “They did feed me, you know? Nice people, the Hoptons. As long as their god doesn't take an interest in you, I guess.”

“They're ... all right.”

“So, Heather. Miss Morell. Any idea what happened to me?”

I bit my lip and shook my head. “I’m sorry. If I use brain-math, I might be able to unravel what’s happened, or where you’ve been, or something, maybe. But first I have to use that to get us home.”

Nicole puffed out a long sigh, ending in a cough. She nodded and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “I just gotta hold on to you, right?”

“Tighter than that, please. You too, Marmite,” I added over my shoulder.

Nicole and I linked arms, firm and close. Marmite wrapped one segmented bony tentacle around my thigh again, a solid anchor.

“You’re gonna call the rest of your friends, right?” Nicole asked.

“For help, yes.”

“Don’t suppose you could swing somebody to my flat to go check on my dog? He’s been alone overnight. He’s got water, of course, but, you know. Dogs.” She pulled a pained wince. “Preferably before we get sucked back into a Scooby-Doo episode.”

“Um, I’ll see if somebody is free? I’m surprised you can think about that, out here.”

“Eh.” Nicole shrugged, but her shaking breath gave away her fear. “I got used to it, being a copper. Always gotta take your mind off how the sausage is made, you know?”

“It’ll be okay, Nicky, we’re going to solve this.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re not about to be reduced to verbal diarrhoea again.”

“Once we’re back, I’ll fix it. We’ll find a way.”

Nicole shared a sidelong look with me. Our faces were far too close. She sighed and rolled her eyes, though I got the impression it was unintentional. “Hey, thanks, wonder tentacles. I appreciate it.”

“Ready?”

“Nah. What we really need is a cunning plan and a talking dog for a mascot. Or a firearms team loaded for ghosts. Or a priest.”

“Marmite can be the mascot,” I said. “Ready?”

“All right. Take us away, teleporter girl.”

Out.

= =

Geerswin Farm was back to normal.

Shafts of mid-afternoon sunlight fell through the tangled canopy, dappling Raine’s car and the other two vehicles. Brown tree-trunks marched away in every direction, but stopped at the edge of the road back to Brinkwood. Green grass reflected the warm, bright, welcoming day. Out in the fields, two very normal alpacas stood amid their cluster of sheep, watching as Nicole and I heaved and panted, as I doubled over and tried not to vomit. The old farmhouse stood silent and still, the front door sensibly shut.

Three bubble-servitors were perched in their guard positions on the roof, but nothing else lurked in wait. Quiet, rural, picturesque.

“Oh, oh no,” was the first thing out of my mouth once I pulled myself together and straightened up. My stomach roiled with anxiety.

“Isn’t this— a good— thing?” Nicole panted next to me. She’d stumbled a few paces away, blinking and shaking her head, wincing slowly with the shock of being shoved through the membrane from Outside, but she was keeping it together. “It’s back to normal, that’s good, right?”

“Not if there’s nobody here.” I watched the front door, praying it would open and Raine would step out. “I don’t even know if we should go inside or not.”

Part of me wanted to sprint at the door and knock it down, calling for my friends. Another part of me wanted to curl up in the back seat of Raine’s car and hide from the implications of all this. My tentacles certainly agreed. They were gripping Raine’s car like a rock in a storm, like I was a delicate deep-sea mollusc amid strong currents and threatening tides.

“Your nose is bleeding, by the way,” Nicole said.

“What? Oh.” I sniffed hard and realised I could taste blood. Two Slips in quick succession had indeed given me a terrible nosebleed — a droplet rolled off my chin when I tilted my head forward. I scrubbed the mess on my sleeve and rummaged inside my hoodie

for my mobile phone.

“Your tentacles are gone too.”

“Don’t remind me,” I said, oddly pained by the fact Nicole couldn’t see them. I held up my phone. My heart leapt — I had a signal.

“So’s the little spider guy.” Nicole put her hands on her hips and glanced behind me.

“You just can’t see him. He’s right there,” I mumbled up a throat full of my own nosebleed. “It’s okay, Marmite. It’s okay, boy.”

Marmite was still right behind me, taking shelter in the gap between the tarmac and the underside of Raine’s car, trying to keep well clear of the high-visibility patches of sunlight. He couldn’t quite fit under the car though, he was too large. His black shadowy membranes weren’t doing too well out here either, making him look like a big splotch of dirty laundry to any passing pneuma-somatic sight. But the bubble-servitors on the roof paid him no mind.

“Look, I dunno about you, but I’m much happier out of whatever that trap was,” Nicole said, hands on her hips, frowning at the house. “Maybe it didn’t even have anything to do with me.” She raised her hands and cupped her mouth. “Hello! Hey! I’m out here with Heather! Hello!”

We waited for a long moment, but the only reply was the rustle of leaves and the creak of tree-trunks in the gentle wind.

I jabbed at my phone, found Lozzie’s number, and hit the call button.

“Look on the bright side,” Nicole went on. “My chest doesn’t hurt anymore, and I’m still speaking like tiger refracted but without seals upon the lips of the Buddha.”

She paused, shared a look with me, then let out a gigantic sigh.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Screen thought to fractal process,” she huffed, exasperated beyond words — literally. She threw her hands in the air and took a couple of experimental steps forward, then wobbled as her balance seemed to give out. Nicole tilted her head to look at her own feet like they were very naughty children about to get arrested and given an official caution. “Noodle!” she spat.

“Noodle, indeed,” I whispered, phone to my ear. “Please pick up, Lozzie, please please—”

With a click and a squeal, my prayers were answered.

“Lozzie?! Lozzie?”

All I heard from the other end was distant giggling and somebody going ‘shhh, shhh,’ barely audible over the sudden rustle of leaves in a gust of wind. My heart sank — were we still in the trap? Was the phone call corrupted, the same as it had been when I’d called Evelyn from inside Orange Juice’s mouth?

Then Lozzie’s voice slapped against the phone.

“Heathyyyyyyyyyyyyyy.”

“Lozzie!”

“Hey hey hey heeeeeeeey,” she said, floaty yet heavy, as if half-asleep. “Everything good? Goody-good-goodies? Heathy-Heaths?”

“Oh, she sounds worse than me!” a voice slurred somewhere behind Lozzie, more distant from the phone. Was that Jan? She sounded impaired somehow, speaking too slowly. “Get her off that.”

“I will not enforce anything here,” said a third voice, stern and cold. That was July, no doubt about it.

“Lozzie? What’s going on?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I winced, bracing for a torrent of nonsense, for this voice on the phone to not actually be Lozzie, but an imitation about to pour vile insults or horrifying suggestions into my ears.

But Lozzie just giggled, as if she couldn’t help it. “Nothiiiiing!”

In the background, somebody gurgled, sleepy and irritated.

Nicole was staring at me with mounting disbelief. She tried to say something, stopped, and mimed a drinking action. I just shook my head, there was no way.

“Lozzie, I’m sorry,” yet another voice said, much closer to the phone, quivering with nervous tension. “May I talk to Heather? Please, yes, thank you, mm.”

The phone changed hands with a soft rustle.

“Hello! Hello?” I snapped, starting to lose patience. “We are in

actual trouble here, I need help!”

“Heather, hello, I’m so sorry about this.” It took me a moment to recognise the anxious quiver and habitual fear.

“Kimberly? Is that you?”

“Yes, yes, it’s me. I’m sorry.” Her voice was trembling with worry, as if she was afraid of getting slapped. “I’m so sorry, I tried to enforce some responsibility on this situation but—”

“My fault!” Jan called from somewhere behind the phone, ending her words with a slap of flesh on flesh. “My fault, blame me, I put down the cash!”

“ ... Kim, what is happening there?”

A swallow, dry and hard. “I couldn’t say no. This ... January—”

“Jan! Just Jan for you, sweet pea,” said Jan.

“Jan,” Kimberly corrected herself with a pained sigh. “She offered me five hundred pounds. I couldn’t say no!”

“For what?” I boggled at Nicole over on this end of the conversation. Nicole just rolled her eyes.

“Some ... you know. Some green.” Kimberly’s voice dropped to a murmur. “Some cannabis.”

“ ... you mean ... you’re all ... high?”

I couldn’t quite process this information. My brain lacked the slot for this shape. Kimberly gushed with apologies and stammered to explain herself. But then she went, “Oof,” and Lozzie’s voice returned, close to the phone again — I assumed Lozzie had jumped on her back.

“Not Tenny!” Lozzie informed me, proudly. “Tenn-Tenns and Whistle are upstairs playing video games! No mind-altering substances for Tenns until she’s bigger! And not for dogs!”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Kimberly agreed all in a rush. “Not for dogs or Tenny, that was very important, I wouldn’t have said yes if it wasn’t for that and I’m so sorry, Heather. I’m sorry, I—”

“Kim,” I said, snapping harder than I’d intended. “Kim, is Sevens there? We need help, something has gone badly wrong, and I don’t

have anybody else to turn to. Please don't tell me she's high as well."

"Ummm. A little bit."

"Guuuuuobluuuuuurrrrr," came a long and irritated gurgle. Somebody yelped, at least two voices giggled, and something clacked loudly against the phone. "Heatherrrrr?" came Sevens' raspy voice a moment later, thick and fuzzy with relaxation. "What happened?"

"Sevens!" I snapped her name too. "I ... I left you there to be the responsible one! We're in trouble, I need your help. But you're ... impaired! How can you be ... look, I'm going to come and get you, with a Slip, we need help—"

Three things happened at once.

On the other end of the call, the phone clattered to the ground, hard enough to make me wince.

Jan raised her voice in sudden alarm. "Whoa, whoa, okay, what!?" Lozzie was babbling something about "doing a big whoopsie."

And a split second later, appearing like a glint of dawn on brass, The Yellow Princess stepped from nowhere and stood just in front of Raine's car.

A splash of gold amid the green and brown, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight wore her aristocratic mask like a well-fitting glove, a second skin over flesh that none but I had ever seen. Impassive blue eyes framed by knife-sharp features, hair cut level and straight at her neck. She wore a crisp white blouse and long yellow skirt, expertly curved and starched and without a single crease. The metal tip of her umbrella clacked against the tarmac, as if she was just stopping by in the middle of a casual stroll. She greeted me with a tiny widening of her eyes.

"Sevens!" I sighed with relief, letting my phone drop from my ear. On the other end, Jan did not sound too happy. I killed the call without bothering to inform them that Sevens had joined us. Lozzie could figure that out, I was sure.

"You call and I come, kitten," said Seven-Shades-of-Suddenly-by-my-Side, calm and cool. "In more ways than one."

"Tch!" I tutted, but I couldn't keep the smile off my face. "It's

hardly the time for that! We're in a lot of trouble and I think you might be able to help."

"Am I your last resort? Is that my role in your life?"

I juddered to a halt, suddenly horrified. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight gazed at me with that ice-cold expression, unreadable and unknowable. Had I hurt her? Was she joking, or was this serious? Had I ruined all the progress she'd made in her long process of self-redefinition? I studied her face, but I was suddenly reminded that what stood before me was a *mask*.

"... no," I managed to say. "I mean, you ... you offered to—"

"And I always will," she said, ice-cold precision in every word. "I should have come with you." Her eyes flickered first to Nicole, then down to Marmite, then back to me. "The detective and a spider. Interesting companions. Where is everybody else?"

Nicole gave me a dubious look, pointed at Sevens, and shrugged a silent question.

"This is Sevens," I explained, "the lady I mentioned before, the daughter of the—"

Nicole waved that down and shook her head. She didn't want to know.

"I know of you, detective," said Sevens. "I respect your craft and your experience. That is all we require for now. We have a problem to solve. Issues of identity can be addressed later. Even yours, if you wish it so."

That set an additional alarm bell ringing in my head, but I muffled it for the moment.

"Sevens, thank you. Thank you for coming so quickly. I had no idea you even could. I hope this hasn't ... hurt you. I meant what I said about retaining your progress, I don't want this to ... " I sighed, rubbing my chest, trying to still my nauseating worry. My tentacles tightened their grip on Raine's car. "I didn't know you could teleport from place to place," I added, awkwardly. "I suppose you've done that before, though."

"I cannot," Sevens said. "But I can come to you, my beloved. Wherever you may be."

Nicole laughed at that, a slim relief amid this growing confusion. I blushed and resisted an urge to roll my eyes.

Quickly, with the minimum of confusion that I could achieve, I informed Sevens about what had happened — she wasn't a literal mind-reader, after all. She listened closely, without nodding, eyes boring into me, the sunlight shifting and fluttering across her face as it filtered through the leaves above. When I described the absurd and spooky alpaca, she turned briefly to consider the animals in the field. They were slowly trotting across the grass and mud to come look at what we were doing. They looked perfectly normal now.

As I spoke, I realised that the alpaca and the sheep weren't the only parties interested in Sevens. Hringwindla's bubble-servitors, the three of them which hadn't entered the trap, had all gathered at the front of the roof, craning forward like rearing slugs made of soap suds. They had neither faces nor eyes, but somehow I could tell they were focused on Sevens. Yet they were unwilling to risk warding her off, like guard dogs staring through a fence at a stray komodo dragon.

"And then we came back from Outside," I finished. "Nicky's speech is all jumbled again."

"Typists and secretaries writing with invisible ink," Nicole said. She threw up her hands.

Sevens stared at her for a moment, then back at me, then over at the house, as if considering nothing more important than what blend of tea to select for her afternoon repast. She said nothing, but blinked once, slowly. Sunlight moved across the clearing. The sheep in the field nosed at the fence. It was so peaceful here, but my chest hurt and my stomach roiled.

"I'm really worried about everybody else," I said. "I don't understand where they physically are. And there's children in there, too, Amanda's children. Bystanders."

"You took something Outside," said Sevens. "When you removed the detective from the situation. Outside, that thing became different. Pain in the detective's chest."

"Oh," I said. Nicole shared a worried glance with me.

"Outside, it ceased to work as it does here, above the surface. Upon return, it resumed. The detective's pain stopped. Her language fails

once more.”

“That makes ... sense,” I said, swallowing hard. Nicole was starting to look very worried indeed.

Seven-Shades-of-Serious-Suspicion turned to watch Nicole, tilting her head to one side. The detective spread her arms and did a little sarcastic bow with her head, asking if Sevens wanted her to do a twirl.

“No, detective, that is quite all right,” said Sevens. “I suspect this is not a matter of combat, it is a matter of—”

Sevens slammed to a halt mid-word, lips quivering on an unformed thought. She blinked several times, eyes looking right through Nicole, face gone pale and waxen, as if a wave of sudden nausea had gripped her stomach. She even leaned forward slightly, as if preparing to vomit. I knew that pose and that feeling all too well.

But I’d never seen the Princess Mask like that.

“Sevens?!” Instinctively I grabbed for her with my tentacles, letting go of Raine’s car and wrapping one around her waist instead, then another around her shoulders, creasing her perfectly pressed outfit.

Seven-Shades-of-Deep-Distress turned to me, breathing hard and unsteady.

“I have been infected,” she said.

“ ... what? I’m sorry?”

“We may as well be standing waist-deep in tidewater mud. My nature has not afforded me any immunity.” Sevens took a deep breath with considerable effort, then nodded at Nicole. “She is carrying a parasite. Everyone in contact with her has been infected. I am no exception.”

Nicole stared back at Sevens, wide-eyed with horror. Her hand went to her own chest.

“A-a parasite? Sevens, what do you mean?”

“Not a physical creature. A parasite of information, designed to infect the mind that was looking for the hiding place of Edward Lilburne.” She paused, still sweating and pale, turning almost grey with effort or fear. “It has cornered me. I have no options. Let go of me, kitten, please.”

“Don’t call me kitten at a moment like this! Sevens, what do you mean, what are you going to do?”

“I must go Outside, where the parasite becomes a physical thing, and assume a form it cannot inhabit.”

Nicole gripped her own chest, where she’d been feeling the pain while Outside. A physical thing? A parasite inside her chest?

Sevens wouldn’t look at me, but I knew her too well to be fooled. Seven-Shades-of-Subterfuge was hiding something, or leaving something unsaid.

“Sevens? Wouldn’t going Outside and changing be cheat—”

“I must remove this thing before it takes root,” she said, precise and cold. “It has found fears in a language it understands, albeit childish ones. The darkness, the altered animals, these are coming from a human interface, but implemented via something greater. Amanda Hopton’s fears, with Hringewindla’s powers as the implementation. I would wager that Amanda Hopton does not like horror fiction.”

“Wait, wait, you mean all of that stuff is coming from her mind?”

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

“There is no time to be certain. I must be quick.” Sevens placed her free hand on the tentacle around her waist, gently trying to peel me off her. But her hand was weak and shaking, her skin clammy and cold. “Let go of me.”

“Sevens, if you go Outside and change—”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight finally looked at me. “I am both human and not human. If this thing takes root inside me, it will have access to far worse fears from which to weave its false world. And greater stages on which to play them out. I am cornered.” She tried to explain carefully. “I must turn and fight.”

“Great ones, but not the apes alone?” Nicole asked, frowning hard. She was trying to keep up.

Sevens nodded at her, curt but respectful.

“That ... kind of made sense?” I said.

“Yes,” Sevens explained. “This parasite is information, not intent. It was designed to obfuscate for human minds, not Outsider ones. It has spilled over into something it was not meant to touch and is rapidly metastasising. With you, detective, confusion was the aim, and would likely have worn off once you had moved on. But then you met Amanda Hopton, and the parasite now grows in fertile flesh it should never have had access to, that of a God. It is our good fortune this God understands human fears as the sum of black and white horror movies, because his current mortal paramour hid behind the sofa as a child. But now it has me.”

“Oh. Oh no,” I said, mouth going dry as I finally understood.

“I must assume another form. Let go.”

“Sevens, no!” I snapped, holding her even tighter. “What about me!? I’m not really human any more, either, what’s it doing inside me?”

Sevens opened her mouth with a wet click. Her spine straightened, ready to shut me down, to deploy just a sliver of that aristocratic bearing to overrule me. I wondered if this was why she’d appeared as the Princess, not the Blood-Goblin.

But then she paused. She looked me up and down with admiration and appreciation, and said, “Ah.”

“Ah? Ah what? Sevens!”

“You are not infected. You are immune. You have been subject to the projection only, via Hringewindla’s own infection, not the jumbling of direction and meaning.”

“Oh. I couldn’t see the jumbled doors and stuff! You’re right!”

Nicole raised a fist in mute, provisional triumph.

“This is not all a good thing, kitten,” Sevens purred. “It means you are subject to the effect, leaking from others, without ever being able to identify the cause inside yourself. Immunity denies you access. Without cause, how can one observe?”

“Okay, fine!” I huffed. “But what do we do, practically? I’m not letting you go Outside and changing yourself, Sevens, I’m not letting you undo all the progress you’ve made with finding yourself, even for an emergency, even for this! How do I ... ” My throat went dry and my words trailed off as I realised what I was about to

suggest.

“Yes.” Sevens nodded, very matter-of-fact. “The other method of removal would be for you to share your immune system.”

“I’ve done that with Zheng before! I know that’s a thing I can do, I think?”

“And Zheng shared hers with Raine, earlier today. They may both be immune, too. Lucky ladies, little kitten. Will you include me among their number?”

I huffed and rolled my eyes. “You don’t have to make it so sexual.”

“Because if you don’t do so, and quickly, then things are about to get a lot spookier. The spore is germinating. Look around, my beloved.”

Seven-Shades-of-Seriously-Scared was correct — Geerswin Farm was beginning to change once again, but not like before.

The golden-yellow sunlight filtering through the leaves was turning a wintry grey, thick and heavy with the threat of snow. As the four of us looked up — including Marmite peering out from beneath Raine’s car — the wind went still and a few flakes began to fall, drifting through the quiet air. Not just out of season, but the wrong temperature. It was not growing cold. Several flakes dusted my hair and my shoulders. I reached out and caught one in my hand.

It wasn’t snow at all. It was ash.

A smell of burning meat tickled my nose — not the dreaded pork-like scent of human flesh, but something utterly wrong, the stench made by an alien funeral pyre. My stomach clenched in disgust and I shivered as I brushed the ash from my hair and flipped my hood up.

The farm house itself seemed to leer at us, as if the tight, latticed windows had become empty eye sockets. A giant skull on an ash-strewn plain. The grass, the weeds, the plants, all turned slowly pale, withered by drought and cracked soil, the ash piling up to obscure everything. Off in the field, the pair of alpacas and the little cluster of sheep slowly sat down, lowering their heads and going very still. Ash began to cover their bodies.

Nicole looked horrified. She was seeing this too, clear as the suddenly fading day. Marmite tried to cram himself deeper beneath

Raine's car, but he couldn't quite fit. His clawed climbing-limbs scrabbled and scratched at the tarmac.

"... Sevens?" my voice came out in a squeak. "T-this isn't real, this is an illusion, correct? You said it was a parasite, making us see things, warping reality with Hringy-cringe-whatever's power, yes? So this isn't—"

"What happens on the stage is always real. The hand holds the knife and makes the stroke, even if the intent is pure invention. Your immune system, your white blood cells. Now, little kitten, or the struggle will be worse."

"Okay, okay! But how?"

I felt a twitch in the tip of one of my tentacles, the merest suggestion of bio-steel delivery system, needle and fluid. But that wasn't my immune system, that was something else, something I barely understood yet.

"Blood," said Sevens. "For myself, a droplet or two should suffice."

"Oh!" I lit up with relief. Blood would be easy enough. "Do you want to bite me, as your vampire mask—"

"No," she said, gentle but quick. "Never mix business and pleasure. Speed is of the essence."

I nodded and got to work. With a flicker of one of my free tentacles, I turned the tip into a millimetre worth of razor-blade, then braced, winced, and forced the sharp edge against the pad of my own left thumb. I had to close my eyes and not look at the moment I sliced into my flesh. Nicole watched in mounting horror, though all she could see was a tiny cut suddenly open on my thumb. I raised the miniature wound toward Sevens.

"Here, here, take whatever you need."

Before I could consider the necessary logistics of feeding my abyssal white blood cells to an Outsider Princess of the Yellow Court, Sevens grabbed my hand in hers, cool and quick, cradling my wrist like I was made of sugar glass. Ashen flakes fell upon her yellow-blond hair as she raised my hand to her mouth in the gathering darkness. I blushed and made to look away as her lips pressed to the blood dripping from the pad of my thumb — but she had other ideas.

Sevens lapped a droplet of blood from my skin, then yanked my wrist so I fell against her. I yelped. Then she pressed her lips to mine, kissing my own blood back into my mouth.

She tasted of iron under sunlight, wheat soaked with rain, and blood-thickened butter.

I broke away from her in shock, though I didn't let go with my tentacles, I did not reject her. "Sevens!" I squeaked.

"One would think you were used to the flavour of your own veins," she answered, cool and collected, as if we hadn't just snogged in the middle of a serious emergency, rapidly getting covered in meat-ash.

Her lips were red with my taste, the impression of her still on my mouth. Ash fell behind her and around her, piling on the ground. The house had gone grey and old, forgotten and barren.

"Yes, but that's rather beside the point now! I thought you said don't mix business and pleasure?"

Nicole was watching us with confused shock, with the kind of expression that said 'Why are these dykes making out when the air smells of burning flesh and the world is turning dark?'

"With you, kitten, it is all pleasure," Sevens said. She licked me off her lips.

Even amid all this, I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "Fine! More importantly, is it working?"

"I believe so. Give your blessing a moment to ... to ... "

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight stopped again, the same as she had before, as if wracked by a sudden wave of carefully concealed nausea. This time I was already holding her in my tentacles, ready to assist.

But this time, the base of her throat bulged outward.

Something was inside her.

For a split-second, the Yellow Princess lost all her calm, all her composure, all her perfect poise. She grabbed at my arm, eyes bulging with panic — and then she was gone, replaced, mask stripped away.

Sevens the Blood Goblin lay wrapped in my tentacles, panicking

and choking, something writhing inside her throat.

The Princess Mask had encountered an emotional state it could not support.

Nicole actually stumbled back in surprise. Of course, she had no explanation for this, she'd only just met Sevens, let alone witnessed her transition from one mask to another. Sevens couldn't even speak, eyes bulging, choking past the suddenly very physical parasite.

I did the only thing that made any sense.

I whipped a tentacle through the air and slid it smoothly down her throat.

I didn't stop to consider the implications; if a bystander — say, Raine — had suggested the slightest innuendo about this moment, I would have slapped her, well-meaning or not. This was pure instinct, the need to get this thing out of my friend, my partner, my beloved, the need to protect her body. Whether she was real or abyssal illusion or anything else, it was her and it had been invaded. Abyssal instinct demanded I remove the source of the infection.

Having a tentacle down Sevens' throat was a unique and bizarre experience. She gagged and shook. I felt myself slide past thin lips, needle-sharp teeth, raspy little tongue, then bumped down into her trachea. Then I felt something else, lodged in her flesh, coated with cold slime and hooked barbs.

Sevens gagged and tried to retch, thrashing against my tentacles. I gripped her harder, trying to get this over with as quickly as possible, the tip of my tentacle wrapping around the parasite in her throat. But it wriggled lower, slipping downward into her body. Sevens grabbed for my arm and dug her fingernails into my skin.

I squeezed another six or seven inches of tentacle past her lips. This time I didn't apply half measures. Inside the wet darkness of her throat, I made suckers and adhesive enzymes and slapped my tentacle against the wriggling parasite, melting its spikes and trapping a dozen tiny limbs with my own precise muscles.

With a horrible wet *slooorp* noise, I dragged the parasite up Sevens' throat, out of her mouth, and into the open air.

“Sevens?! Sevens are you okay?!”

Seven-Shades-of-Shock-and-Spluttering whined and sagged in my grip, leaning against me and drooling from slack lips, exhausted and spent. “Mmmnnnuuhhhhh,” she rasped. “Didn’t expect ... that would make it ... physical.”

“Are you okay, though?”

“Mm. Will be. Kill it, please.”

“What? Oh. Ew.” I finally looked up at the thing I was holding in my tentacle, and wrinkled my nose in disgust.

It was like a big grey limbless shrimp crossed with a slug, about the size of a hot-dog, dotted with half-melted spines and hooks, curling and flexing in a futile attempt to escape my grasp. I was vaguely aware that it was, on some level, not real — it had been forced into physicality by my abyssal immune system, borrowed by Sevens.

My head hurt when I thought about that too closely; I’m sure the Eye’s lessons contained the exact mathematics to explain how that all worked, but it was hardly the time to go dredging.

Instead, I slapped the parasite on the tarmac, hard enough to kill it. The thing stopped wriggling and went still.

Ash slowly ceased to fall. The sky began to brighten. Out in the field, one of the alpacas stumbled to its feet.

“Uuuurrrrrrrgggg,” Sevens gurgled. I helped her stand up. Red-on-black eyes blinked heavily, first at Marmite, then at Nicole.

“What now?” I asked, looking up at Nicole, at the centre of her chest and her throat.

The detective shook her head, eyes wide with terror, clutching her own chest.

“No,” Sevens rasped. “Same procedure would kill a human. Don’t try with her.” She tilted her head to peer at Marmite, still half-crammed under Raine’s car. “He’s safe though. Come out, come on. You ain’t got nothing in you, little one.”

Marmite stayed firmly under the car, not convinced by a gurgling, drooling, sagging vampire girl upon whom I’d just performed emergency surgery.

“Sevens, what do we do now?” I asked. “How do we get everyone else out of the ... spooky-house?”

“Find Hringewindla.”

“ ... pardon?”

Sevens looked up at me, pulling quite the pained grimace, lips covered in blood-speckled drool.

“Find Hringewindla. Immunize him. Pull out the parasite. His might be a bit bigger, though.”

and walked a crooked mile – 16.5

“Find Hringewindla?” I echoed the suggestion. A sinking feeling settled into the pit of my stomach. “The parasite might be bigger?” Sevens, what does that mean?”

I tried not to look at the smashed remains of the grey shrimp-slug parasite, lying on the tarmac in the dappled sunlight next to Raine’s car.

“Bigger,” said Sevens in her habitual goblin rasp. She licked flecks of her own blood off her lips, from where I’d dragged the parasite out of her throat.

“ ... bigger?”

“Bigger. You know. Large. More size.”

I struggled very hard not to give Sevens a nasty look as she coiled there in the embrace of my tentacles.

“Yes,” I said, “I do know the literal definition of ‘bigger’, but what does that mean in the context of an Outsider god? Pardon me for being rather concerned here. How much bigger? The size of a cat, or a horse, or are we about to have some kind of Godzilla incident? Do I need to show you one of those giant robot shows so you can wear an appropriate mask for this? Should we be calling your sister, Melancholy, so she can turn into a giant cat and eat it for us? Help me here, Sevens. How much bigger?”

“*Buuurrrrrlll*,” Sevens gurgled, clearing her throat very loudly — I couldn’t blame her for that, considering what had been lodged in there only minutes earlier. She ducked her head, avoiding my frown. “I dunno? Bigger.”

Nicole gave me the kind of look that I like to imagine she would have given other police officers over an unexplained dead body. She looked about ready to call in the army, jumbled words and wobbly legs or not.

“It’s all right, Nicky,” I said. “It’s probably not a Godzilla situation. I don’t think that can happen.”

Nicole gave me another look that said, *You think!?*

“I’m ... I don’t know what I’m doing, okay? We need to ... to think. Does ... does Hringewindla even have a throat?”

Sevens shrugged again. “Tunno.”

On the plus side, I was finally able to pronounce *Hringewindla* correctly, by copying Sevens. I learn something new every day, even if it’s something I’d rather not know.

At least the sky wasn’t turning to ash and darkness anymore. The optimistic sunlight of mid-afternoon was flooding back through the ring of trees that surrounded Geerswin Farm. The only patch of darkness left was Marmite and his imitation shadow-membranes, still half-crammed beneath Raine’s car, trying to hide from the open spaces and the sunlight, and probably from me too, after he’d just seen me ram a tentacle down Sevens’ throat. The grass was green and healthy, laced with low moss and tall thistles and thick clumps of weed. The wind had died down to a mere whisper through the woods, and no longer carried the scent of burning alien meat. The ash had vanished, as if absorbed into the ground.

One of the alpacas had wandered all the way up to the edge of the nearest fence, probably to investigate what we were up to. Alpaca snout, fuzzy and cute, with normal, wide-set, black eyes beneath a big tuft of brown fur, exactly as an alpaca should be. No human face, no bloody teeth.

Geerswin Farmhouse was dead silent.

“Are we certain that we’re back in reality now?” I asked.

Bleeeeeee, went the alpaca.

“Yaaaah,” said Sevens. She cracked her neck and bared her mouth of sharp little needle-teeth — at which Nicole managed to go even wider-eyed with concern. “Amanda doesn’t know where we are, so Cringe-winge-face doesn’t either, so we’re not all jumbled up. ‘Cept ... mm ... hmmm ... ”

She raised one pale, long-fingered hand and pointed up at the trio of bubble-servitors on the roof of the farmhouse. They were still poised at the edge, craning toward us like giant marine molluscs

from a lip of rock, spooked by the presence of Seven-Shades-of-Unexpectedly-Powerful.

“Might be bad,” Sevens explained.

“Oh. Oh dear. You think they have direct communication with him?”

“Can’t do.” Sevens had to clear her throat again. “Else we’d already be back in his nightmare.”

“His *nightmare*?”

Sevens nodded. She wavered for a moment, visibly thinking, then bumped her head against my tentacles, like a cat nuzzling a person’s hand. “He’s having a nightmare. Parasite symptom. That’s what all that was, kind of. I think.”

I sighed. “At least your metaphors are easier to understand than Lozzie’s. So we find Hringewindla, wake him up — whatever that means for an Outsider in this context — and remove his parasite? With the three of us? And Marmite, of course.”

“Ship of fools,” Nicole spat.

I winced. “Yes, I couldn’t agree more. We’re alone, in the middle of the woods. Nicole can hardly walk without stumbling. Sevens, you’re very powerful, but you’re ... self-limited, and with good reason. I don’t want to do any more damage to you than I already have done.”

“*Murrrrrrr*, no damage. And no choice. We gotta.”

“And we’re going to introduce ourselves to an actual Outsider, a real one, something that self-describes as a god, and ... what, de-worm him?”

“Mmmm, yeah.” Sevens cringed into one of my tentacles, using me like a pillow.

Nicole laughed. Apparently she could still do that without getting scrambled.

“Besides, do we even know where he is?” I ran my eyes along the edge of the tree-line, where the shadows gathered between the trunks. “I think Eevee mentioned something about an old church out here in the woods, once. But that was months ago, I can hardly recall it now.”

“Schismatic prismatic,” Nicole said. She sucked on her teeth, a serious frown on her brow.

“Nicky? You ... you might know where the church is?”

Nicole huffed and shook her head. “Quakers and quackers and diggers and levellers. World turned upside down. The King’s head on a spike of obsidian, but forgotten amid the ruckus.”

I stared at her, blinking in shock. Her words had shaken a memory loose inside my head. “That almost made sense. Eevee said something about Quakers, once.”

With a great deal of effort, I cast my mind back all the way to last year, to when I’d first met Twil and we’d discussed the Brinkwood Cult. That was more challenging than it sounds, because the last nine months of my life had been a whirlwind of change.

“My grandmother had them well-documented,” Evelyn had said, back then. “From a safe distance. They probably started as a group of Quakers, tried to rebuild the abandoned church out in the woods, where Lowdon village used to be. That’s about three miles north of Brinkwood.”

“Lowdon village?” I said out loud.

Nicole pulled a thinking face, but she seemed doubtful.

“I think Eevee said it was three miles north of Brinkwood itself,” I said. “But finding an old church in these woods? We could walk right past it and never know. And that’s not even accounting for what’s actually inside. Or guarding it. Eevee knew things about the Brinkwood Cult, but she’s ... not here right now. We need her. Or Twil, I suppose.”

“Leeches and poultices,” Nicole said. “Bone-setting into the sunset beyond the furthest waves.”

“Nicky? Oh.”

Nicole wasn’t deep in thought anymore. She was staring at Sevens with a different kind of worried frown. Marmite had gone very still as well, all his cone eyes fixed on my sweet little faux-vampire.

Sevens was pulled tight in my tentacle-embrace like a bat in the roof of a cave, her limbs pulled inward and her shoulders hunched, a pair of tiny red points deep in the coal-black of her eyes. She had

retreated behind the curtain of her own dark, stringy hair, but that could not conceal the animalistic fixation on her face as she stared at me. Her jaw hung open, her breathing a steady hiss between rows of needle-sharp teeth.

“Sevens? O-oh, right, right, um ... ”

She wasn’t making eye contact with me — she was staring at the blood, my blood, smeared across my face from my earlier nosebleed, and from the bloody kiss we’d shared.

I put a hand over my lower face to spare her the awkward temptation. Also to hide my blush.

Sevens blinked hard, like a sleepwalker coming around from deep dreams. She swallowed with a little upward tilt of her head, rasping deep in her throat and forcing her shoulders straight. “Sorry ... um ... leggo?”

“Lego?”

“Let go, pleaseeeee.”

“Oh, of course, of course.”

The moment I unwound my tentacles from around Seven-Shades-of-Sanguine-Solicitation, she quickly stumbled back with a little hopping motion, bare feet scrunched against the sun-speckled tarmac. On the third hop-step-skip the Blood Goblin vanished, replaced instantly with the Yellow Princess once again.

Seven-Shades-of-Regained-Composure let out the tiniest sigh, smoothed her yellow skirt over her hips, and clicked her fingers. Her umbrella appeared in her hand. She did a little flourish and clicked the tip against the ground.

Nicole actually flinched, then looked at me for some kind of explanation. “Circus tents filled to the brim with rotting fish?” she asked.

“Sorry,” I said. “Sevens is not what you see here. But she also is. It’s complicated and you probably don’t want to know. Also this is absolutely not the time to explain.”

“I am exactly what I appear to be and I arrive precisely when I mean to,” said the Princess Mask, cool and confident, addressing Nicole. “Though perhaps I ought not to claim kinship with that

particular expression. I am no wizard, after all.”

Nicole gave her such a look, deadpan and unimpressed in the extreme.

“Ah,” said Sevens. Did I detect a hint of sarcasm beneath her tone? “Are you not one for the ‘mommy dommy’ vibes, detective?”

Nicole clenched her jaw and made a fist.

“Sevens,” I said a little too firmly, trying to regain control of the situation before my only support decided to either fight or flirt with each other. “I’m so sorry about the blood.” I gestured at my face. “I should have accounted for it being tempting. I apologise.”

“Worry not,” said Sevens. She sounded perfectly fine, but it was always hard to tell with the Princess.

I took a moment to gather myself and scrub the rest of the blood from around my nose and mouth. I couldn’t tell how much had come from my Slip-induced nosebleed and how much from the strange blood-kiss with the princess. A trace of my blood still graced her lips, glinting in the sunlight like obscene lipstick. I finally pulled in the tentacle I’d used to fish the parasite out of her throat, and carefully cleaned off the tip with some wet-wipes from inside Raine’s car, not wanting to leave any trace of the disgusting creature on my flesh, pneuma-somatic or not. But Seven’s saliva I just wiped on my hoodie. Why not? I was already stained with blood, yet again.

“We can’t confront an Outsider god by ourselves,” I said as I cleaned up.

“We have two options,” Seven-Shades explained into the momentary quiet. “We can attempt to find Hringewindla himself, as I said, or we can plunge back into his living nightmare and attempt to retrieve the others.” She gestured at the house with one perfect hand.

“I thought you said we’d have to bump into Amanda for that?”

“In theory. I suspect we could simply wander around the house and be drawn in. It is the current location of his nightmare. However, it would get us nowhere. As the parasite grows, so will the nightmare.”

I bit my lip. North, three miles. But we could walk right past the

church. I didn't even know what it looked like, what to expect, what to prepare for. We knew nothing.

"Nicole can barely walk in a straight line," I repeated, mostly to myself. But then I looked at the detective, wearing her long coat and worried frown. "What do you want to do, Nicky? Should we leave you here while we try to deal with this?"

Nicole puffed out a sigh, shrugged, and took an experimental step forward.

She managed three paces before almost losing her balance, wobbling on the spot and wind-milling her arms. I stuck out a tentacle to help keep her on her feet, which made her flinch and almost fall over the other way. She caught herself, hissed with frustration, and shot me a frown.

"Sorry, sorry!" I blurted out when she was finally safe, mortified and blushing. "Sorry, that was me, I just ... I ... oh, goodness." My voice cracked. "We're not the team for this. This is farcical. I've got to get Nicole back on her feet, at least. Sevens, are you sure that I can't somehow remove the parasite from her?"

Nicole pulled a grimace. Sevens fixed me with a cool, level stare.

"Attempting the same procedure on a human being — a real human being — would cause a lot of damage to their throat, oesophagus, mouth, tongue, possibly teeth. Remember what I am. My flesh is ... " Sevens paused with the merest hint of melancholy. "My flesh is not true, though I treat it as if it is." She pointed at the dead parasite on the tarmac with the tip of her umbrella. "Pull the same thing out of the detective's throat and her own blood will begin to pool in her lungs. Not to mention the pain. Considerable pain."

I shared a horrified look with Nicole.

"Then ... then how are we ever going to get it out?"

"There may be magical methods," said Sevens. "To remove it without making it physical. Not every situation is an emergency, kitten. The detective is alive and well, and will remain so."

I ignored that *kitten* for now. "Does this mean everyone else in the house has one of these parasites in them now? I can't just leave everyone here, not Raine and Evelyn, they're both only human. Twil, Zheng, Praem, maybe they'll fare better, but ... "

“Kitten—”

“Stop kittening me!”

“Listen to me, kitten.” Sevens clacked the tip of her umbrella on the tarmac and took two smart steps forward, until she was inches from me. My tentacles whirled up in surprise, as if she was an unknown attacker, but she didn’t blink or flinch. “The detective’s parasite has already re-activated, although the primary effect is wearing off. Her balance is returning. Zheng and Raine will be immune due to the presence of your blessing in Zheng’s blood—”

“Then why aren’t they here?! Where is everybody?”

“Inside the nightmare of a god.”

“But what does that mean?”

The Yellow Princess blinked once, slowly. “You know this. True Outsiders are not meant to be here, on Earth. Those who have swum the abyss have a strange and unstable relationship with notions of reality. You and I. Precious little Lozzie. Ooran Juh. Hringewindla. It is the same. The others are stuck in his nightmare, a nightmare built by the memories and life of his human companionship. That is all.”

I chewed on my lip. Nicole sighed, making a spinning motion with one fingertip over her temple.

“Raine and Zheng will be immune to personal infection,” Sevens continued, fixated on me like a searchlight. “But they are still stuck in the nightmare. Praem, I do not know. Her soul may not possess the right pneuma-somatic architecture to be infected. Twil and Evelyn, very likely. But none of them know the location of Edward’s house, none of them have been exposed to the parasite’s trigger, like the detective here.”

Nicole’s eyebrows climbed her forehead. She finally understood. Yesterday, standing in an unrelated graveyard, many miles away, her subconscious had put together the clues from the documents she’d stolen, and the parasite had whirled to life to stop her consciously realising the location of Edward’s house. Pure chance.

“Evee ... ” I murmured. “She’ll be terrified by this, even if she is with Praem. I can’t go, I can’t leave her here, not in all that. There has to be a way to get her out.”

“I know how you feel, beloved. Believe me, I know.”

I turned back to the house, so placid and normal now, a lovely old farmhouse deep in the woods, covered in shifting bars of sunlight through the dense canopy of leaves. But inside was a raging nightmare of jumbled corridors and phantom hallways, unnatural darkness and spooky alpacas with human faces, the sum of all the absurd fears of Amanda Hopton, projected by the powers of a god.

“Oh gosh, I do hope her children are okay in there, too ... ”

“We could wander the nightmare for months without finding each other,” said Sevens. “Without finding anybody. But it will collapse without Hringwindla’s parasite.”

“Evee would be able to help us,” I said, trying to convince myself. “She is a mage, remember? And when I glimpsed her, she was trying to get out, she was trying to figure something out. Maybe she’s already trying.”

I bit my lip and focused on the house, clenching and unclenching my hands, subconsciously preparing myself for pain.

“Kitten?”

“Shhh. I’m trying to think.”

I wished I could pull everyone out of that house, but the others weren’t mages. If Evelyn was already working on escaping, perhaps I could light a beacon for her to follow.

Evelyn was a better mage than she gave herself credit for. Though I had few comparisons and terrible experiences with other mages, I had faith in her. Faith in her drive to survive and escape. The Evelyn of today was not the defeated and broken woman who had tried to throw herself away in the Library of Carcosa. She would not curl up in a ball and sob to herself in a dark corner, certainly not with Praem at her side. And not with me to light her way.

I stuck one of my tentacles straight up in the air; strictly speaking the gesture was not necessary, I was not going to create a physical beacon by flashing my rainbow-strobing flesh at maximum brightness, though Lizzie would probably be delighted at that idea. It was a sympathetic gesture, like taking a step forward when Slipping, like ancient Latin intoned for a spell, like bowing one’s head in supplication to an Outsider god.

Except, I was only trying to remember a lesson.

Beacon, I thought — and I plunged down into the oily black darkness of my own repressed nightmares, the memories of the Eye's nightly instruction, the toxic machinery held in suspended animation in my subconscious. The equation was mercifully simple, far easier and more straightforward than Slipping, a mere blip-blink across the surface of my mind, a piece of loose driftwood bobbing to the surface of the abyssal ocean.

But my raised tentacle did indeed pulse like a beacon, a triple-flash of rainbow, an alien light beneath the terrestrial sun.

I think Marmite tried to hide from that, poor thing. I winced through a spike of headache and felt a single bead of blood leak from my right nostril.

I'm getting better at this, I thought. Sevens grabbed my arm to steady me and stop me from crumpling to my knees.

“Heather, beloved,” she said, cool and crisp and clear. “You are a guide post of flesh, and that is beautiful, but even you cannot reach into the dreams of a—”

The front door of Geerswin farmhouse banged open so hard I was afraid it was going to fly off the hinges.

Praem lowered her boot, marched down the brick steps, and joined us on the tarmac.

She was carrying Evelyn, piggy-back style.

“Evee! Praem!” I tore myself out of Sevens' grip, stumbling as I relocated my kneecaps, then rushed forward to greet the latest escapees from the nightmare.

“Oh thank fuck,” Evelyn said out loud.

She looked and sounded ready to collapse, even though she was already being carried. Evelyn had her arms over Praem's shoulders, but her bone-wand was clasped tight in both hands, fingers twisted into a precise configuration across the scrimshawed magic designs. She was deathly pale as if heaving with effort, sweat beading on her forehead, blinking hard in the direct sunlight. The modified 3D glasses perched on her nose did nothing to protect her eyes. Praem carried her effortlessly, hands beneath Evelyn's knees, Evelyn's walking stick wedged beneath her armpit.

“We’re out?” Evelyn called to me over Praem’s shoulder, her voice a breaking croak. “Are we actually out?”

“You’re out, you’re out!” I confirmed as I ran up to them. Evelyn nodded, then slumped against Praem’s back, letting her bone wand hang from one hand. I felt a crackle of static across my clothes and a rush of warm air, the after-effect of Evelyn’s spell. “Evee?!”

“M’fine,” she grumbled, head on Praem’s shoulder. “Not going to pass out. Fuck this.”

I wanted to hug both of them, explain everything, and get Evelyn back on her feet, all at once. Instead what I did was flap back and forth and whirl my tentacles like an octopus with too many enrichment activities, babbling at high speed about beacons and brain-math, as Evelyn muttered a thank you and flopped one hand toward me.

“Heather,” said Praem, interrupting my flow.

“Y-yes?”

Praem locked eyes with me, milk-white and not quite as unreadable as always. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the doll-demon was almost on edge.

“Safe?” she asked, one bell-clear word ringing out.

“Of course it’s bloody safe!” Evelyn grumbled from her back, though she didn’t let go of Praem’s shoulders. “The sun is out, Heather’s here, so is ... alright, Seven-Shades of whatever is here too, that bodes well. Put me down, come on. I can stand.”

“We are beyond the localised effect,” said Sevens. “I believe we are quite safe here, as long as nobody steps back into the house.”

“Wishes and fishes, birds and bitches,” Nicole said with a grim smile — saying hello, I assumed.

Praem waited, staring at me.

“It’s safe,” I said, then added, “I think.”

Praem waited.

“I’ll make it safe,” I said.

Praem crouched, going down on one knee so Evelyn’s feet could

touch the ground. I fussed around trying to help, getting the walking stick into Eeve's hand and steadying her with a tentacle as she found her balance, which seemed more difficult than usual. She was still pale and caked in cold sweat, hair plastered to her forehead. She struggled to get the bone-wand away, poking out of her coat pocket.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, I'm fine," Evelyn hissed, half waving me off, half clinging to my hand for support. She held on hard, unwilling to let go.

"It hasn't got you too, has it?" I asked. "You're not having trouble walking?"

Evelyn shot me a dark frown. "What hasn't got me too? Heather, a prosthetic leg can do a lot of things without support, but dismounting from a piggy-back is not one of them. No matter how strong Praem is."

"Strong," Praem echoed, straightening up. She turned to stare upward at the trio of bubble-servitors on the roof, which were craning down to examine us. "Strong."

"But why a piggyback in the first place, then?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

Evelyn pursed her lips and gave me a dark look. "I was doing magic, in case you didn't notice. Besides, you try wandering around a labyrinth for half an hour after the morning we've had. My hips are killing me."

"Oh. Oh, of course. Eeve, I'm sorry. Sorry."

"It's alright, Heather," she grumbled, bumping against my side as if we were a pair of cats sharing our scent.

"Good doggos," Praem said, apparently talking to the bubble-servitors up on the roof.

"No," Evelyn snapped. "Bad dogs. All of them. All of this nonsense! Heather, what the hell is going on? Do you know?" She nodded at Sevens. "Does she know? What is all this?"

"The nightmare of a god," said Sevens.

"Oh yes, that explains everything," Evelyn spat. "Thank you."

"We do know what's going on," I said. "Sort of, it's kind of ...

disgusting, though. And complicated.”

“Well you better explain it then, because I assume everyone else is still stuck.” Evelyn peered past me, taking in Nicole — who gave her a polite nod. But then she flinched and dipped her modified 3D-glasses, to confirm that Marmite was indeed pneuma-somatic life, invisible in the normal human spectrum. Her throat bobbed and her hand went clammy in mine. “Heather? That’s a servitor. It’s lifting the car. There’s actual matter interaction, that is a servitor. Not a spirit.”

“Oh, that’s Marmite, it’s fine, he’s fine, he’s not involved. I think. Well, of course he’s involved, but not responsible. He’s the thing we freed from Edward, back at Stack’s house, remember? Um, Stack’s boy’s father’s house ... yes.” I cleared my throat.

Evelyn gave me a look like I’d gone completely off my rocker. “Marmite. The giant spider thing under Raine’s car? You’ve named it Marmite?”

“For now.” Evelyn kept staring at me, so I started to blush. “I needed a name, okay? I couldn’t just keep calling him ‘you’.”

Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut and lifted the 3D glasses so she could pinch the bridge of her nose. She hissed a wordless sound between her teeth. “If somebody doesn’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going to start belting people with my stick until words fall out.”

“Marmite is a fine name, for a fine creature,” said the Yellow Princess.

Praem turned to look at Marmite too. Marmite looked back at her with his metal cone-eyes.

“Good boy,” said Praem, patting one thigh through her skirt. “Come here.”

Evelyn was in desperate need of a sit down, but going back inside the house to fetch a chair would rather defeat the point of escaping in the first place. Praem coaxed Marmite out from under Raine’s car, crouching and speaking in soft musical tones, like he was a nervous dog. With Marmite out of the way, Evelyn sat sideways on the back seat, feet firmly on the tarmac, hands leaning on her walking stick while we filled her in on what had happened. At first she was very concerned with Marmite and had me explain, in detail, that he wasn’t under Edward’s control anymore. He was

wild, that was for certain. Praem petting him seemed to go a long way to soothing Evelyn's worries.

She listened patiently, recovering from her magical efforts, asking only a few questions.

"They're all *high*? Did I hear that right? They've gotten high? Lozzie, Jan, July, Kimberly? On weed?"

"Most enjoyable," said Sevens. "My apologies."

"Tenny and Whistle were excluded," I said. "Lozzie was very clear about that."

"Bloody right," Evelyn grumbled. "Alright, fine, go on. This can't possibly get more absurd, not after the alpaca."

She was wrong, of course.

By the time I finished explaining the parasite and how I'd fished one out of Sevens' throat, Evelyn had gone from a baseline level of frowning to looking like a woodcut of a priest at a witch-burning. She stared at the smashed lump of grey meat on the ground, the dead parasite, one hand pressed to her own breastbone.

"There's one of these things in Praem, too?" she asked. "And in me?"

I swallowed hard, about to explain how we couldn't remove it right now — how I couldn't remove it right now. Sticking a tentacle down Sevens' throat was one thing, she could regenerate her flesh with little more than a flicker of magic. But I couldn't risk serious harm to Evelyn. Even pushing a tentacle into her mouth would be too much of a risk. I knew deep down that I couldn't do it.

"No," said Seven-Shades-of-Certainty, before I could speak.

Evelyn and I looked around at her. Nicole did too, leaning on the car next to us to save her legs. Sevens was watching Praem petting Marmite, an extremely bizarre sight even by our standards; the doll-demon was squatting, skirt neatly tucked up over her knees, using one hand to stroke and scratch what passed for Marmite's 'head', just past his bank of swivelling, twitching, metallic cone-eyes, which were currently scrunched up exactly like a dog getting some very satisfying pets.

To Nicole, it must have looked like Praem was petting thin air.

“No?” I echoed.

Sevens looked up. “Praem is clean. I do not know why.”

“Personal hygiene,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn snorted. “She doesn’t process information like a human being does, not exactly. That may give her natural immunity. But then again, neither does Sevens here, or Hringewindla, obviously.”

“I am strong,” said Praem.

“Indeed,” Evelyn sighed. “What about me?”

“You are clean too,” said Sevens. “I do not know why.”

“Oh,” I sighed in relief. “Oh, that’s good news. One less thing to deal with.”

“Hmm,” Evelyn grumbled. “Too broken to be infested.”

“Evee!” I tutted. “Don’t say that about yourself.”

Evelyn waved me off, vaguely embarrassed. “I mean it literally. I’ve been possessed twice in the course of my life, remember? I might be ... shaped wrong. Inside. That’s not a value judgement.”

“You’re shaped just right, Evee,” I said. “And I don’t care if it’s a metaphor.”

Evelyn actually blushed slightly, huffing and grumbling, waving me away with an irritated flap of one hand. “We don’t have time for all this. I’m exhausted already, after this morning. What a day for this to happen.”

“How are we going to get everyone else out?” I asked. “My beacon-thing only worked because you were already on the right path, so to speak. Nobody else has responded or turned up.”

Evelyn considered me for a moment, then looked to Sevens. “Do you think the others are in physical danger?”

“Hard to say,” Sevens replied. “I would wager not, considering Heather’s experiences.”

Evelyn sighed. “Sevens is right. We need to deal with Hringewindla, shut this down at the source. Though I’d rather not.”

Sevens gave her a little nod of acknowledgement.

“Are you sure?” I tried to keep the quiver out of my voice. “What about Raine, Twil, Zheng? What if this is intentional, what if Edward is behind all this? What if we’re being watched right now? What if Raine is in trouble, or if Edward’s going for Lozzie back at home? There’s children in there too and I—”

“Heather,” Evelyn snapped — then grimaced and nodded an apology. “Sorry. Heather, I know. I’m trying to stay calm too. One thing at a time. We need to cut the phenomenon off at the source. Between myself, you, and Sevens, we stand a pretty good chance, I’d say.”

I blinked in surprise. “I’m not discounting us here, but ... Eevee, this is an Outsider, a ... god.”

“It’s not a god,” Evelyn said, with surprising patience.

“Still!”

“It’s an Outsider, exactly. And we’re not going to fight him, we’re going to talk.” She grimaced at that word. “As Raine might say, we don’t need the tanks for this.”

Nicole snorted a laugh.

“Tanks?” I echoed.

“Never mind. My point is, Heather, all we have to do is get you in front of him.”

“Eevee, you’re putting too much faith in me. I don’t even know what I’m doing. De-worming somebody with a tentacle is one thing, but this is an Outsider we’re talking about. I don’t even know what he is, not really.”

Evelyn nodded, taking me seriously. “Do you remember why Hringewindla was afraid of you, back when the cult—” She paused, smiled awkwardly, and corrected herself. “Back when the ‘Brinkwood Church’ tried to convince us to come here?

“ ... because of ... hyperdimensional mathematics?”

“Exactly. You need to reach inside him and de-worm this dog for us. I’m pretty sure this will work.”

“Good boy,” said Praem.

I boggled at Eevee. “How? On what basis? What if he doesn’t want

us to? What if he's confused? What if he's terrified of me?"

"Heather, we don't have any other choice."

I tilted my head at her when I realised. "We don't know what we're doing, do we?"

Evelyn winced. "I'm hoping it'll make sense when we get there."

Nicole laughed again, throwing up her hands.

"It's the best shot we have," Evelyn raised her voice. "And we need to stop this before it grows." She gestured at Sevens. "Unless you have any other ideas?"

Seven-Shades-of-Superficial-Modesty raised her chin. "I could sacrifice everything I am becoming and wear a mask on the same scale as this ancient god-thing. It may work."

"No, absolutely not," I said, then sighed heavily. "I'll do it. I'm on his level already. I've had coffee with the King in Yellow, I can do this. Well, okay, I rejected coffee from the King in Yellow. Same principle."

Nicole boggled at me like I'd grown a second head. I shrugged an apology.

"Should we call Lozzie?" I asked. "She might know how to talk to it."

"I would not take that risk with the little one," said Sevens. "She may not be immune."

I nodded, trying to fight down my nerves. De-worm a god?

"We won't need muscle for this," Evelyn said, with a tone of final planning. "I know where the Church is, as well." She pointed with her walking stick, off into the trees parallel to the road. "There should be a path, sign-posted by the cult itself, if my grandmother's notes still hold up."

"If you say so ... "

"Heather, I don't like this either. Think of it as practice for the Eye." To my massive surprise Evelyn reached out and groped for my hand, finding it and squeezing hard. "And you might have to do it alone, because I don't think I can hump it through three miles of woods."

I squeezed her hand back. "Magic is difficult, yes ... "

"I will carry you anywhere," Praem intoned. She stopped petting Marmite and stood up, still holding one of his segmented bone-tentacles.

Evelyn opened her mouth to argue, then sighed and nodded. "Fine."

"Any taste of indignity would be worth the presence of a mage of your calibre," said Sevens. She didn't seem to be joking.

But Evelyn shot her a frown all the same. "Being carried by Praem is never undignified."

Nicole cleared her throat and gestured at her legs. "Sole pretender to the throne of bones, left without jester or attendant or court."

"Marmite is also strong," said Praem. "And a good boy."

The rest of us shared a worried look. Even Sevens didn't seem to understand that one.

"Praem?" I said.

"Marmite is strong."

Evelyn barked with sudden rueful laughter and put her face in one hand. "She's telling you to ride the invisible spider, detective. That, or we leave you here, alone." Evelyn slipped the 3D glasses off her face and held them out to Nicole. "Here, you'll need these, at least to ... how do they say it?"

"Mount up," said Praem.

Nicole looked absolutely horrified, though only for about five seconds. She gritted her teeth, shook herself, and accepted the glasses, slipping them over her eyes with a dubious grimace at Marmite.

"Time to get going, then," said Evelyn. "Giddy-up, Webb."

Evelyn clambered out of the car with my help, while Nicole gingerly approached Marmite, still unsteady and weak.

Sevens was watching the bubble-servitors on the rooftop.

"Do you think they'll come with us?" I asked as Evelyn settled her coat and got her bone-wand tucked firmly under one arm.

"They can't reach their god right now," said Sevens, watching the pneuma-somatic froth-creatures as they all stared back at her. "He is lost in his nightmare."

"Well grab an air horn," Evelyn said. "Because we're going to wake him up."

As we gathered ourselves to leave, I nodded at the smashed remains of the parasite on the ground, a smear of grey meat and thin, cracked carapace. "Evee, do you think we should do anything with that?"

"Burn it. When we come back."

= =

The Church of Hringewindla — the physical building which enshrined the presence of a living god — was not actually three miles walk away through dark and forbidding woods, trudging through rotting leaves and muddy wallows and scrambling over fallen tree trunks. In the end it was perhaps one mile north of Geerswin Farm, along a well-trodden and properly cleared path, lit with leaf-dappled sunlight, past some delightful bluebell patches. There was even a wooden signpost at a tiny crossroads, pointing to Geerswin, Lowdon, Brinkwood, and somewhere called Bedham, though the wood of the sign was old and slimy and covered in green lichen.

Nothing ambushed us on the way there, not even a kink in the path, which surprised me more than I expected. After all, this was the secret core of an inhuman Outsider cult, the last refuge and retreat of a crippled god from beyond our dimension. Shouldn't the path through these woods be warped and twisted beneath our feet, as if we approached the metaphysical weight of a black hole? Shouldn't it lead us into a confrontation with some nightmarish guardian? Shouldn't the woods behind us be vanishing in thick fog?

I voiced as much to Evelyn, as Praem carried her along in a piggy-back.

"That sort of thing is for cults that don't last," she said.

"Hringewindla's been around long enough to have some idea of human normality. I assume."

The only sign we were approaching somewhere of supernatural significance was the total lack of spirit life, except for Marmite. I

spotted a few furtive spirits further off in the woods, things that scuttled or scurried away before I could get a good look at them, but that was all. It was like an oceanic dead zone, deprived of oxygen or nutrients, a pneuma-somatic barren plain.

Whatever was wrong with the place, it didn't affect Hringewindla's angels. A smattering of bubble-servitors hung in the treetops, bobbing and rolling across the underside of the canopy.

"It's like they're security cameras," I said.

"Good doggos," said Praem.

"Keep a bloody close eye on them," Evelyn said.

We must have made quite the spectacle, traipsing through the woods. Evelyn was too exhausted and shaky for a mile's walk, so Praem carried her the whole way. At least she wasn't wearing her maid outfit right now. I still had blood smeared on my hoodie and an alien squid-skull cradled in my tentacles. Seven-Shades-of-Aristocratic-Poise looked totally out of place, more suited to a tea-room than the mud and leaves, though she strode with unwavering confidence, using her umbrella as a walking stick. Nicole rode on Marmite's back with her eyes closed, gritting her teeth, her hands in a white knuckle grip on fur she couldn't see. I kept one of Marmite's tentacles wrapped with my own, in case he tried to wander off, but he was content to follow at my heels.

I was very concerned about running into other people, walkers out for a stroll, that sort of thing, because untrained eyes would see Nicole floating, cross-legged in the air, about two feet off the ground. We'd already had enough absurdity for one day, between spooky alpacas and artificial night, not to mention the duel this morning. I could do without a screaming, panicking bystander. My tentacles kept twitching in anticipation, though I dared not acknowledge what I might do to keep us from being interrupted.

But we didn't run into anybody. Not a soul. Even the birds were quiet, in this part of the woods.

Trees thickened, canopy darkened, bubble-servitors multiplied above us — and the path led us right to the ruins of Lowdon.

"Well, this is more like it," I said as we drew to a halt at the edge of what had once been a clearing.

The ancient and forgotten village of Lowdon was nothing but a few stubs of stone and brick poking out of the leaf-mulch. The tallest remnant of wall was no higher than my waist, covered in wet lichen and ivy, the mortar eaten away by time and weather. The vague outlines of half a dozen houses were spread out across a wide area that had probably been a true clearing four hundred years ago. Now it was just more forest floor, with slightly smaller trees rooted where hearths and walls had once stood.

One building was intact, in the centre of the ruins; the Church of Hringewindla looked exactly as I had imagined it might do, a long one-story structure made of that distinctive Northern red brick, raised perhaps a couple of hundred years ago and fallen to ruin not long after. The roof was missing, leaving a half-complete steeple naked to the elements, without a bell or a fire or whatever was supposed to be up there. Tall, narrow windows contained neither glass nor shutters, long since shattered or rotted away. Weeds and moss grew in the cracks between the bricks. The front entrance was under the steeple, a low arch of brick, plain and unadorned.

“What do you mean, ‘this is more like it’?” Evelyn asked, giving me a look. “And put me down now, thank you Praem. I should be on my feet from here.”

“I mean it looks like the centre of an Outsider cult,” I replied, helping Evelyn down again. She found her feet and got her weight firmly on her walking stick. “It’s all ruined and spooky.”

“Spooky,” Praem agreed.

“And well guarded,” said Sevens, very softly, looking up at the trees.

“None of this should be here,” Evelyn said. “Think about what this is, this is local history, somebody would have excavated it by now. Hringewindla has been keeping people away for centuries.” Evelyn adjusted the 3D glasses on her eyes and followed Sevens’ gaze upward. “Ah. Hm.”

The woodland canopy above the ruined village was packed with bubble-servitors, roiling and twisting and flowing over each other, like a mass of slugs suspended upside down.

“That’s ... a lot,” I said.

“There must be thousands of them,” Evelyn murmured. She

swallowed and found my hand, holding on tight. “Ten thousand?”

“Walk with care,” said Sevens.

“We must be allowed to be here,” I said. “They would make us leave otherwise, wouldn’t they?”

“Hringewindla is having a nightmare,” Sevens repeated. “They are cut off.”

“Walk with care,” Praem agreed.

“Sevens,” Evelyn said through gritted teeth. I could feel her quivering. “If they break and descend on us ... ”

“I will do what I can,” said Sevens.

Evelyn swallowed hard. “Then come on. And tread carefully.” She gestured us ahead with her walking stick.

“Can I please get off this giant spider now?” Nicole hissed — then opened her eyes and lit up with a grin. “Hey, words! I’m speaking words!” Then she looked down and turned a little green. “Oh, I’m floating. Oh, I hate that, I really hate it.”

“Nicky!” I sighed with relief.

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted.

With a hand from Praem and a tentacle from me, we got Nicole off Marmite’s back and onto her own feet once more. She wobbled a bit, but kept her balance well, straightening her coat and smoothing her hair back.

“That was an experience I don’t care to repeat,” she said. Behind her, Marmite waggled two of his bony tentacles.

“I think you’ve offended Marmite,” I said.

“Eh?” Nicole boggled at me. “Um ... er ... sorry, Marmite?” She tried to look at him, but being unable to see him meant she just talked to a patch of ground. “Very smooth ride, very strong back. Just a bit weird, ‘cos I can’t see you and all. No offence meant?”

Marmite lowered his offended tentacles and crept over to my side. His eyes kept swivelling and twitching, trying to take in every corner of the ruined village and the church and the bubble-servitors at the same time. He did not like it here, no more than we did.

"This isn't necessarily a good sign, detective," Evelyn said, sucking on her teeth. "I'm glad you're back with us, but this could mean we've stepped inside some kind of effect that renders the parasite useless, or has killed it." She looked to Sevens. "Any ideas?"

Sevens shook her head. "You are the mage here."

"And you're the daughter of the King in Yellow," Evelyn grumbled. "You can't tell us anything?"

"Please don't get into this now," I hissed.

"I am barely a fingernail's width above you," Sevens replied. "Because I have chosen to be."

"Mm," Evelyn grunted. She looked at the church again. We all did. "Nothing else for it."

"I'll take the lead," I said, mouth going dry. "I can feel ahead with my tentacles."

"Praem, with her," said Evelyn. "And both of you be careful, for pity's sake."

Bubble-servitors roiled and rolled far above our heads as we picked our way through the corpse of the village. Marmite clung to one of my tentacles with two of his own. Sevens gave Evelyn her arm for support. Nicole drew a highly illegal hand-held pepper-spray device from inside her pocket; she kept glancing at Sevens, but managed to keep her curiosity under control, for now.

There was no invisible force-field or magical trap blocking the front entrance to the church — Evelyn went over the whole thing with the 3D glasses and I stuck a tentacle beneath the arch to test. Nothing happened.

"How is a god inside this thing?" Nicole hissed between her teeth. "It's just a shell."

"Shells contain worlds," said Sevens.

"Both of you shut up and stop thinking," Evelyn said. "Okay, maybe not you, godling. Webb, you stop thinking about it."

"Right you are, boss," said Nicole.

We crept beneath the arch to join the weeds and mud and fallen bricks inside.

The interior of the old church was in an even worse state of repair than the exterior — if indeed there was any distinction between in and out, without a roof and nothing in the windows. The woodland canopy filled the sky, bubbling with Hringewindla's angels. No wonder he didn't need human protection. An army waited to descend on anything that dared threaten his resting place.

Nothing remained inside the church, not even the floor, just hard-packed mud. A few weeds straggled at the edges of the walls and some ancient bricks and roof tiles lay scattered about where pews and altar must have stood, once upon a time. Moss clung to the walls, along with some spots of healthy white fungal growth. No bird nests sat atop the old bricks, nor any remains of bee hives or wasp nests. Not a single fly or mosquito buzzed past.

The only sign that people had been here at all in the past two centuries were a pair of wooden beams braced against the ground, their top ends bolted into the bricks on opposite sides of the church, apparently helping to hold the walls up.

"I was bloody right," Nicole said. "There's nothing in here. It's empty."

The rest of us didn't reply. Marmite shuffled behind me, cone-eyes peering around my legs. Wordlessly, Evelyn removed her modified 3D glasses and held them out to Nicole.

"Uh ... " Nicole went very still. "Am I going to see a god if I put those on?"

"Just look," Evelyn hissed.

Nicole fumbled the glasses onto her face. Her jaw fell open when she saw what the rest of us were looking at.

Where the altar had once stood, a white mound emerged from the mud, like a hill of chalk, about ten or twelve feet in height and perhaps seven or eight feet across, flaring out like a natural hummock to meet the ground and disappear below the soil. But this structure could never be mistaken for a natural occurrence — it was ridged with a spiral pattern of impossible complexity, carved into the material itself, like shell or bone that had been worked over and over and over by an obsessive artist, carving the spirals within spirals, recurring downward and downward so one's eye seemed to be drawn into an infinite depth on a flat white surface.

A dark opening yawned on one side of the white mound, curving down and away, large enough to admit a person.

A single bubble-servitor sat over the opening, leaning toward us like a mollusc performing a threat display.

“... what am I looking at?” Nicole whispered, as if the bubble-angel might pounce if she spoke too loudly.

“I have no idea,” Evelyn said. I could tell it took her considerable effort to say those words.

“This is pneuma-somatic, isn’t it?” I murmured. “Otherwise Nicky would have seen it. Right.”

“Sevens,” Evelyn said, “what are we looking at?”

“I have no idea either,” said Sevens. “I am not familiar with Hringewindla, or where he came from, or his nature.”

“Are we looking at a piece of him?” Evelyn asked through her teeth.

“It’s a shell,” I said. A sinking feeling settled into the base of my stomach. “It’s the mouth of a shell.” I looked down at the earth beneath my feet. “The rest of it must be below ground, this is just the tip.”

Nicole laughed — or tried to, a nervous flutter in her throat. “Just the tip, she says. Ha.”

“Shut up, detective,” Evelyn snapped.

“You don’t think we’re meant to step in there, right?”

“We’re not *meant* to do anything here,” Evelyn said. “There isn’t a guidebook for this.”

“You think he’s gonna come out of that opening?” Nicole’s voice was starting to quiver, her breath shaking. “What’s even gonna come out? What- what—”

“Give me those.” Evelyn snatched the 3D glasses off Nicole’s face and put them back on herself.

“Hringewindla?” I called out loud, to the shell-tip.

I don’t know what I expected.

Evelyn grabbed my arm. Nicole flinched. Sevens raised her

umbrella like a handgun. The bubble-servitor on the shell-tip craned toward us.

“Bad dog,” said Praem.

Nothing else happened.

“He will not give us an audience,” said Sevens. “He is dreaming, deep in his nightmares. The detective is correct. We may have to enter if we wish to wake him.”

“Enter? The shell?” Evelyn gritted her teeth. “We don’t even know what we’re looking at.”

I shook my head, wetting my lips and trying to think. “He is crippled, remember? What does that mean for an Outsider, for a god?”

“I wish we had Twil with us,” Evelyn hissed.

I patted her arm. My fingers were shaking a little too. “She wouldn’t be able to tell us much, I think. Didn’t you say they always kept her away from all this? Because she frightened him too. A little like me.”

“I don’t care,” Evelyn said. “I still wish she was with us.”

Sevens lowered her umbrella again and took a step forward. “I will see what I can see.”

“Be careful!” I said. “Oh Sevens, please be careful.”

Evelyn gripped my arm with near-panic as Sevens strode toward the spiral shell-tip. Praem walked forward a little way too, to provide unspoken back up. Above us, the bubble-servitors in the treetops rolled over each other like masses of giant slugs. The one atop the shell leaned forward, flaring and narrowing its front like the flat of a spade. It leaned directly toward Sevens.

She stopped about eight paces away, locking eyes with the angel.

“Bad dog,” Praem repeated.

“Praem, what does that mean?” I asked, trying to keep the anxiety out of my voice.

“Bad dog.”

Sevens peered into the mouth of the shell-structure, craning her

neck to see further inside without getting within range of the bubble-servitor.

“It goes down,” she said. “Down and around. A spiral.”

“I am not going in there,” Nicole said. She swallowed loudly. “I am not going in there. You can pay me any money you like, I am not going down there. No way. Just not.”

“Then you can stay here, detective,” Evelyn hissed, nodding upward at the trees and the thousands of bubble-servitors above us. “With them.”

“Our small friend here may have something to say about that,” said Sevens, watching the way the bubble-servitor was leaning toward her.

“You think it doesn’t want us to enter?” I asked.

Sevens didn’t respond for a long moment, locked in silent communion with the creature. Then she sighed a tiny sigh. “I may have to wear a different mask.”

“Maybe I can communicate with it? Let it know we’re not here to do any harm? I don’t know how, though.”

Sevens turned to look back over her shoulder at me. “Beloved, it is not a matter of communication, these little ones are not for speaking to. They are cut off and confused.”

Hringewindla’s angel rocked back suddenly, bunching and coiling like a dozen springs all bound together. Bubbles frothed and boiled — then shot out like a rubber band.

Sevens was caught in the act of turning her head, too slow when reduced to a mere human being.

Praem darted forward to knock her out of the way, but the bubbles were faster, unhindered by the messy business of joints and limbs. Evelyn fumbled with her bone-wand, far too late to respond in time. Marmite flared his tentacles and stood up on his legs, a threat display that went almost unnoticed. Nicole couldn’t even see what was happening.

Rationally, I knew that Sevens was not in any real danger. She was a god-thing from Outside. Even if the bubbles melted her face off, she could just switch masks. Couldn’t she? Or would this count,

would this be real? I had no way of knowing.

What I did know is that ten thousand bubble-servitors hung over our heads, and that an act of aggression against one might bring the whole mass down on us.

Instinct did not care. A monster was going to smash into Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. No time to think, so I didn't.

I hissed at the top of my lungs, braced all my tentacles against the ground, and flung myself like an angry squid.

and walked a crooked mile – 16.6

In retrospect, I probably should have used hyperdimensional mathematics.

Instead of relying on the Outsider-granted mind-powers that I could literally weave at the speed of thought, I threw myself at a pneumatic angel-bud creature — which looked like a collection of angry soap bubbles imitating the shape of a mutant slug, while we were inside the ruins of an ancient church which housed the entrance to the angel-bud's god-hive-father-nest, with thousands of the bubble-creature's friends hanging in a mass above our heads, like a inverted glob of giant frog-spawn, clinging to the underside of the forest canopy, ready to fall on us like the world's most disgusting waterfall.

This was not the smartest move I'd ever made. It wasn't the worst, but it was, in Evelyn's words, 'far from optimal'.

Brain-math probably would have worked better, too. I was maybe ten meters from the bubble-servitor when it shot toward Sevens, well within range to smash it away with a jumbled physics-breaking flail of maths. And brain-math worked at the speed of thought; there was no risk of the bubble-servitor slamming into Sevens before I had time to lash out with the first tool I dragged out of the oily deep. It would be like braining an assailant with a spanner — not a perfect self-defence weapon, but it would have gotten the job done all the same.

But hyperdimensional mathematics was higher-order thinking. Brain-math required intention and planning, even if that planning happened in a split second of thought etched upon the frozen membrane between reality and the abyss.

Planning? When a monster was about to engulf Sevens' head and digest her like some giant pitcher plant of skinned muscle and toxic slime?

Ape and abyss were in agreement, hands joined, heads together. No

plans. Defend the pack.

Which is a long-winded way of justifying why I lost control. I hissed and screeched and sprang off the ground like a coiled spring — forgetting, of course, that Evelyn and I had our arms linked. I think I made her stumble, but luckily Nicole was there to catch her while I was busy playing Humboldt Squid. At least I didn't have to deal with the guilt of knocking poor Evee to the ground. I think I would have grovelled at her feet for that.

I spent less than half a second airborne, passing Praem and Sevens in a blur of whipping tentacles.

Half a second was more than enough time to realise that I had made a mistake.

Instinct had failed to take into account that I was not a four-hundred pound abyssal creature of fanged maw and razor-sharp spines, that I was not in fact what half my mind said I should be. I was neither armour-plated nor smeared with my own toxic mucus. If I had been, my friends might have had some choice words for me. I wasn't even ready for a fight, not as I had been against Ooran Juh, with rapid alterations and additions to my core of true flesh. I was still five foot nothing and weighed all of a hundred and five pounds, pneuma-somatic tentacles or not. When I leapt, my mind said I should be sharp and graceful, like a steel spring, but I probably looked more like a chewed dog-toy thrown onto a soggy trampoline. This was not the first time I had followed my abyssal instincts, these grafted-on drives and urges which felt so much more vibrant and real than the muted colours of swallowing my desires. But it was the first time they had led me to do something I was not even remotely prepared for.

My body did the best it could. In that half-second, the bioreactor in my abdomen spun up like a turbine, pumping heat out into my belly, energy surging into limb and core, every muscle suddenly running hot. Five of my six tentacles whipped forward to concentrate the impact on my target. The pale, smooth, rainbow-lit pneuma-somatic flesh erupted with hooks and barbs, toothed suckers, sharp scales, and bio-steel blades.

One tentacle curled tight into my side, holding onto my squid-skull mask. No time to slip it on.

The bubble-servitor never touched Sevens, so at least I was a

successful protector. I slammed into the thing in mid-air and brought it down, like a cricket ball hitting a water balloon. We hit the ground together in a rolling mass of tentacles and limbs and trailing bubbles, me hissing at the top of my lungs, the bubble-servitor like a wet sack of rotten potatoes.

Evelyn later described it as like watching a threshing machine dumped into a bowl of pudding.

Pity it didn't feel that way. I would have preferred pudding.

Touching the bubble-servitor made my skin crawl; the thing felt exactly as I had imagined. Each translucent, iridescent bubble had the texture of raw meat, but wriggling and flexing, oily and warm. I didn't fight with any intent, just lashing out with feral response, pushing the thing away, ripping at it with hooked and barbed tentacles, slicing bubbles apart with my appendages, getting it away from us, away from me. Hissing and screeching warning noises, animalistic challenges to make this thing *leave*, I was completely beyond control.

Pieces of the bubble-servitor came away like ropes of rotten meat lashed off a carcass, clumps of bubbles tearing away from the central mass and trying to re-join like water droplets under surface tension.

The bubble-servitor fought back, stabbing at me with makeshift pseudopods and clubbed masses of bubbles, but it was hard to tell how much was intentional response and how much was wild flailing. Perhaps the thing was simply flaring outward like a blob of slime beaten with a whisk. The creature was clumsy, inaccurate, without proper force or killing intention behind each blow. So, we were evenly matched, pretty much. It even whacked me a couple of times, ineffectual slaps that made me screech all the louder.

The fight — really a slap-fight between two creatures that hadn't expected this — probably lasted only four or five seconds, tentacles whipping the air, bubble-monster whirling in confusion. Other voices shouted around us as I rolled on the hard-packed mud floor of the ancient church.

Then something else stepped in and pulled the bubble-servitor off me.

For a split second, lying on my back in the depths of abyssal instinct

and adrenaline-haze, I thought it was Praem, resplendent in her maid uniform with ruffled skirts and frilled shoulders, black and white and perfectly starched, exerting demonic strength as only she knew how.

But Praem wasn't wearing her maid uniform.

It wasn't Praem.

The bubble-servitor splashed against the wall of the church, flung there by an engine of war.

Eight feet of black, sharp-edged, armoured plates, flaring outward in a cone, ridged with yellow membranes like toxic frills. A creature of curving carapace and many-jointed limbs, with hands like bill-hooks. A razor-sharp tail whipped past my face; a sensory bulb like a wobbling head turned back to check I was okay; poison stingers and fighting claws poised to repel Hringewindla's angel a second time.

And yellow, yellow everywhere, in tiny tendrils rising between the plates of the figure's carapace, in the spore-dust that shed from its back in a golden wave, in the soft downy fuzz down its front.

"... Sevens?" I said — or tried to, unknotting my throat, raw from screeching like a wild cat.

The bubble-servitor decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Or perhaps it realised it shouldn't have messed with Seven-Shades-of-What-The-Hell-Is-That in the first place. As soon as it had reformed into a more coherent shape after splattering against the wall, it scooted upward, retreating from us like a spooked sea-slug.

Somebody whimpered in a desperate attempt not to scream. I think that was Nicole.

But before I could say "Sevens, is that you?", Hastur's Daughter vanished quicker than the blink of an eye, replaced once again by the prim and proper Princess Mask. Her starched white blouse and yellow skirt were all rumpled and askew, exactly as if she'd just plunged into a bar fight and dragged me clear.

She offered me her hand. I blinked at it, insensible and half-mute, still raging with adrenaline and waist-deep in abyssal instinct. And also still lying on my back like a confused tortoise.

"We must move," said the Princess. "Up, now."

I took her hand. She pulled me to my feet as I found my voice. “S-Sevens,” I croaked, throat still raw. “What was—”

“An old mask, from elsewhere,” she said, quick and collected. “We must move, now.”

“That was beautiful,” I mumbled. The crustacean-machine was stark and clear in my mind, like I’d seen a real angel out here in the ruined church deep in the woods. “Thank you, thank you, that was beau—”

“Kitten.”

Sevens span her umbrella in one hand, pointing upward with the metal tip. I followed, then felt like a bucket of cold water had been dumped over my head. Suddenly I was very sober.

The mass of bubble-servitors up in the trees had not taken kindly to our act of self-defence.

They had concentrated themselves in one central blob, directly over the shell of the old church, then begun to droop downward like a giant raindrop dangling from a leaf. The individual angels roiled and bubbled over each other, reminding me of a nature documentary about army ants. Strength in numbers, stick together, shoulder-to-shoulder to repel this strange and alien threat in their midst.

“Oh. Um, whoops.”

“Whoops is right,” Evelyn hissed through gritted teeth, unsteady on her feet as she peered upward through her modified 3D glasses. She had her bone-wand out in one hand, but didn’t seem to know what to do. “God dammit, Heather.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“It’s not your fault,” she added in a rush, grabbing at Praem’s arm for support. “Sevens is right, we need to move, right now. In or out, what are we doing?”

“What the fuuuuck was that?” Nicole finally spoke. Her voice quivered on the edge of hysteria. She was wide-eyed with pale terror, staring at Sevens like she’d seen a ghost. Or more accurately, a giant Outsider monster. “Your fucking ... what was ... please just —”

“Very pretty,” Praem intoned. “But not the time to discuss outfits.”

“Nicky, she’s on our side!” I blurted out. “We have to move, right now. She’s right.”

“—just tell me you’re not—”

Evelyn whipped the 3D glasses off her own face, stuck them over Nicole’s eyes, and forcefully jerked her chin upward.

Nicole stopped talking. Her jaw hung open.

“Right,” Evelyn said through clenched teeth. She’d gone green around the gills. Her other arm was wrapped around Praem’s elbow like a limpet. “In or out, what do we do? Run, or go deeper? Quickly now.”

“In?” Nicole looked at her like she was mad. “Into that ... that shell? No, no, no way.”

“It might be the only way to make contact with Hringewindla,” I said, glancing up at the descending droplet of bubbles again. They were halfway to the church now, the dangling blob thickening like a droplet of honey about to fall. The sight made me hunch my shoulders and duck my head, skin aching to sprout armour plates and spikes, instinct telling me to flee as if before a predator I couldn’t possibly understand. “W-we need to move, we—”

Three things happened at the same time.

Sevens pulled my hand, urging me toward the entrance of the chalk-white shell-tip poking from the soil, where the church altar used to be.

Nicole raised her voice in protest. Praem spoke too, a sudden sing-song of warning — “Bad doggos,” — interrupted by a yelp from Evelyn as Praem scooped her off her feet.

And Marmite, plucky little Marmite who apparently didn’t care one whit about the Mask of Hastur’s Spawn, scurried past us all in a blur of terrified scuttling limbs and threw himself into the open mouth of the shell.

“Run!” shouted Sevens.

We had deliberated for too long.

Sevens all but lifted me off my feet as she dragged me into the

opening of the spiral shell, shoving me deeper into the cave-like darkness, our feet ringing against the cold, smooth surface, so solid after the mud of the church. Sevens turned back to make sure the others were hurrying too, then she leaned out of the shell-mouth and flicked her umbrella open, raising the lilac canopy as if to shelter them from a sudden downpour of rain.

Praem bustled inside with Evelyn in her arms, half-dragging her. Evelyn's eyes were screwed shut in terror, knuckles white on her walking stick.

"Detective!" Sevens called, her composure cold with alarm.

Nicole Webb was slow to find her feet — or perhaps her courage. For one critical moment she fumbled with the 3D glasses on her face, unsure if she should join us or turn and run. But then she found her resolve, pushed the modified glasses against her eyes, and sprinted for the entrance, long coat flapping out behind her.

Too late.

The bubble-servitors began to fall like hailstones the size of dogs. These were not natural spirit-life, but hard pneuma-somatic flesh, more akin to the Saye family spiders than wild spirits. They hit the ground with real physical impact, slamming into the mud, sliding down the walls, filling the air with alien muscle and meat.

Nicole screamed when one fell directly in front of her path, but she didn't stop. She tried to vault over the thing but tripped and went sprawling in the mud, her legs still not entirely recovered from the effects of the parasite. She scrambled beneath Sevens' umbrella. One of the bubble-servitors actually bounced off the lilac fabric, which would have amazed me under less dazed and confused circumstances. Nicole took the offer of Sevens' hand.

Panting, wild-eyed behind the glasses, Nicole lurched to her feet and stumbled into the shell with the rest of us. "Oh my fu—"

"Deeper, now!" Sevens commanded, snapping her umbrella shut and drawing it inside.

No sooner had she voiced the warning than the entire mass of bubble-servitors finally fell onto the church.

It was like being buried by an avalanche. The creatures pummelled against the outside of the shell, the walls of the church, and the

ground itself. They blotted out what little sunlight crept around the curve of the shell's interior structure. They started to flow into the mouth of the shell like loose rockfall at Sevens' heels. Sevens grabbed me again, but she needn't have bothered, I was already pulling myself deeper with my tentacles, running on pure animal instinct to avoid being engulfed by that wave of vile bubble-flesh. Praem dragged Evelyn. Nicole followed close. Marmite scuttled sideways along the wall.

We only stopped when the sound of giant hail ceased drumming all around us.

Three sets of shuddering breath filled the close darkness — myself, Evelyn, and Nicole. So little light penetrated this deep, past the mound of bubble-servitors, that I could make out only the faintest outlines of everyone else. The walls of the shell were cool and smooth beneath my tentacles. My chest hurt with adrenaline and panic.

Somebody swallowed on a dry throat. Evelyn. "Is everybody ... intact?" she asked.

"I-I think so," said Nicole.

"Present and correct," said Sevens from my other side. "For now."

"Here," said Praem.

A hand bumped against me, then held fast. "Heather?" Evelyn hissed my name.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I said between panting breaths. "I'm here, Eevee, are you okay?"

"For a given value of 'okay'", she said. "Fucking hell."

"You can say that again," Nicole agreed.

"Praem, here." Evelyn clacked her walking stick against the floor, against the material of the shell, then rummaged in her coat in the dark. "Here, hold this, please. Yes, there you go. Just flick it."

"Let there be light," Praem said as she activated the flash-light function on Evelyn's mobile phone.

Harsh light burst from her hand, held up high, casting ghostly illumination across the off-white walls of the shell's interior. Deep fingers of shadow danced across the curved floor, cast by our

bodies.

Nicole and I copied the idea. I found my mobile phone and switched the flash-light on as well, trying not to dazzle anybody. Nicole produced a tiny hand-held torch from inside her coat, the exact sort of thing a competent private eye might carry. The torch shook in her grip and her face was coated in cold sweat. She pulled the modified 3D glasses off her face and knuckled at her eyes as we looked around.

"I can still see ... still see it, without the glasses ..." she said. Her voice was quivering. Bad sign.

"Because we're inside it," Evelyn muttered, taking the glasses from her with surprising gentleness. "Stop trying to think, detective."

"But—"

"Stop thinking. I will do the thinking for you."

Nicole took a deep breath, but it stuck in her throat. She'd gone almost grey in the last few seconds, her face washed out by the light reflected from the walls of the shell. She made a fist, clenching too hard, about to break.

"Nicky?" I said her name, but she was staring back up the way we'd came, at the pile of bubble-servitors blocking the way back.

"Nicky?"

But then she noticed that Sevens had somehow caused the raised tip of her umbrella to glow with soft blue light.

"Like a magic wand?" Nicole said, voice raw and shaking, but trying to sound plain old unimpressed. "You're kidding right? Screw that."

"It is functional, under the circumstances," Sevens replied. "You have a problem, detective?"

Nicole snorted, forced and artificial, but she unclenched her fist and let go of her breath. "Alright. Alright, I'm holding it together." I caught her eye. She gave me a jerky nod and an ironic smile. "Nice tentacles, Morell. On display now, eh?"

I smiled back, trying not to show how terrified I felt. Evelyn and I shared a glance, silently agreeing not to voice the obvious conclusion.

Being able to see the inside of the shell was one thing, we were standing in it, after all. But if my tentacles were visible, then wherever we were standing was more akin to Outside than to our reality.

Between two mobile phone flash-lights, one hand-held torch, and the twee fantasy-glow of Sevens' umbrella, we took stock of the inside of the shell. We were crammed together in a sort of narrow tunnel, perhaps seven or eight feet wide and ten or eleven feet in height, with a gentle curve to every surface, making it more like an oblong tube, although the floor was relatively flat. The exterior of the shell had looked chalky, sun-bleached, and aged, but the inside was pearlescent white, the surface full of tiny veins like crystal that soaked up the light and reflected it back in shimmers and iridescent flutters. Spiral patterns curled across every inch of surface, white-on-white, looping back into themselves and leading downward, down the shallow incline into the dark, down the helix toward the heart of the shell.

A pile of bubble-servitors blocked the way back up, heaped on top of each other like the aftermath of a rock slide, blotting out the light. They weren't coming after us, but there was no way back through them.

Evelyn stared at the mass of revolting creatures for a few moments, leaning on Praem's arm, then sighed and ran her hand over her face.

"It'll be okay, Eevee," I said. "We're not stuck. We're not."

"Er." Nicole swallowed hard. "How do we get back out? I would really like to know if there's a plan."

"God," Evelyn hissed. "We can all be so fucking stupid sometimes."

"That was as much my fault as any other," said Sevens. "I did not practice self-restraint."

"No, this is what we get for messing about!" Evelyn snapped.

"It was my fault," I said. "Eevee, it was my fault, I threw myself at the bubble-servitor."

Evelyn gave me a sidelong look. I tried to look contrite, which wasn't hard because I was absolutely mortified. I'd brought the gathering of Hringewindla's angels down on our heads and all I had

to show for it was muddy clothes, dirt smeared all over my hoodie, and the ragged remains of an adrenaline high.

"I lost control," I blurted out. "Back in the house earlier, when I found Raine, I didn't jump up to the window to join her. I feel so stupid I didn't, like I could have used my tentacles better, I should have followed the urge, so this time I just ... I gave in, I'm so—"

"Don't you dare," she said. "Don't you dare apologise. Shut the fuck up."

I opened my mouth and shut it again, unable to overcome Evelyn's glare.

"Uh, the way out?" Nicole prompted. "Please?"

Evelyn gestured at the pile of bubbles. "Remind you of anything, Heather? How do we end up in the same situation twice, hmm?"

"I'm sorry?"

"This is just like with Alexander's bloody castle. We're inside, no way back."

"Oh," I sighed. "No, Eevee, this is nothing like that time. It's not like we're trying to rescue anybody."

"Aren't we?"

"First as tragedy, then as farce," said Sevens, a few paces further down the spiralling slope. Marmite clung to the wall next to her, his tentacles trailing out across the surface of the shell, exploring this strange cave. "I am glad to be present for the farce. And you are all glad I was not here for the tragedy."

"Not a tragedy," said Praem.

"Hey," Nicole said, sharper than before. "Are you all ignoring me?"

"I can literally Slip us all back out if I have to, Nicky," I said.

"That's how we can escape. And rescuing Lozzie from the castle was not a tragedy, Sevens!"

Sevens nodded minutely, acknowledging my point.

Nicole held her hand out to me. "Alright, let's go then. I'm ready, let's go."

Evelyn snorted. Sevens raised her eyebrows. I swallowed and stared

at Nicole's hand.

"Going down," said Praem.

Her bell-clear voice echoed in the confines of the shell, vanishing downward into the spiralling dark.

Nicole studied our faces one by one. The light in her hand shook slightly. "You're kidding."

I winced. "Well ... this is what we wanted."

"Wait here if you like," Evelyn grumbled. She turned to peer down the spiral. "Praem, I need a hand, I can hardly balance on this floor as it is."

"Courage, detective," said Sevens. "You have more than you believe. You are no coward."

Nicole grit her teeth and lowered her hand. She looked ready to either curl up in a ball and start sobbing, or shoot somebody dead.

"Sorry," I murmured.

"Cowards generally live longer," she said. "Just don't put me in the vanguard, alright?"

= =

'Down' went on forever, plunging into the dark beneath the world.

Sevens led the way down the long spiral, umbrella held against her shoulder, sensible heels click-clacking against the calcium carbonate of Hringewindla's shell. If indeed it was calcium carbonate at all. What did Outsiders use to make shells? Was this part of his natural form, or had he grown this shell after arriving on Earth, for protection and safety? If the shell was pneuma-somatic, how had it come to be embedded so deeply in the ground? Clearly we had crossed some invisible threshold and stepped into a bubble of Outside, like a bulb of pressurised water from the ocean depths preserved in a reverse-Bathysphere.

I took Evelyn's advice and tried not to think too much about how this all worked. As Sevens had told me, Outsiders have an odd relationship with notions of reality.

Marmite scurried along the wall next to Sevens, happily keeping pace with her and probing the darkness with his long, bony,

segmented tentacles. It was the first time I'd seen him uncoil them from around his body, using them like he had when he'd been Edward's remote-controlled puppet. The darkness and the close confines suited him well. Perhaps he felt safe here, at home in the dark. At least one of us did.

I followed in Sevens' wake, my own tentacles wide and waiting, in case something was about to rush out of the darkness. I kept my squid-skull mask hugged against my belly, unwilling to hinder communication by seeking refuge inside the bone-metal, for now. Evelyn and Praem followed behind. Evelyn struggled a little with the smooth, shallow ramp of the shell innards, her walking stick betraying her on the polished surface. Praem acted as her support, the mobile phone raised in her other hand like a lantern in the dark.

Nicole brought up the rear, courage bolstered by purpose.

For the first five or ten minutes, we crept slowly downward without saying much, holding our collective breath. I didn't know about the others, but my mind was filled with images of Hringewindla, of what he might be like — some kind of giant mollusc at the core of this spiralling shell? At least he and I might have something in common.

But after ten minutes, the change became undeniable.

"It's getting wider," Evelyn said, looking at the opposite wall.

"Yeah," said Nicole. "I noticed that too. Weird, hey?" She toyed with her little can of pepper spray in one hand.

"Well," I said, trying to sound bright. All I did was make myself flinch at the volume of my own voice echoing down the tunnel. "It is a shell, after all. I think they tend to get wider, on the inside. I think."

"Stick to the right hand wall," Evelyn said. "That's the exterior."

The shell got wider and wider as we descended further down the helix. The slope of the floor got steeper too, tilting us downward. The left hand wall drew further and further away, until it was barely visible even when we pointed the light directly outward. By the twenty minute mark, we walked at the edge of a black and echoing void.

"It's okay, it's going to be all right," I said now and then. "I've been in worse places, much worse places. This is going to be okay."

"Is this real?" Nicole hissed from the rear. Her voice echoed off into the dark beside us. "Is this another nightmare? This can't be real. We've been walking downward for twenty minutes. Twenty. Minutes. How deep are we?"

"Don't think about it," Evelyn said between her teeth.

But Nicole couldn't stop. Her teeth were chattering. "There was a video game with something like this. Horror game, I think. Played it back when I was a teenager. These stairs kept going down and down and down. Impossible."

"What was at the bottom?" I asked. "In the game?"

"Hell. Sort of."

"Well, there's no such thing as hell," I said, trying to sound confident. Also a lie. There were many hells, Outside. "And at least there's no branches here, we can't get lost."

Evelyn hissed. "And don't you jinx us, Heather. So help me God, don't you jinx us with that."

I shut my mouth and kept it that way.

Just when the gradually steepening incline of the shell was becoming a problem for those of us without tentacles, Sevens found the stairs.

"Oh, how unexpected," I said as I joined her. We briefly paused on the narrow, rough, rectangular stairs cut directly into the material of the shell. They followed the right hand wall. Whoever had been here before had the same idea as us: don't wander off into the dark.

"Stairs," Praem announced.

"Oh, thank fuck for that," Evelyn grunted, covering her discomfort with complaints as she rubbed her hip.

"Hringewindla's home needs disabled access," said Praem. Nicole started laughing, a little too much, too loud, too shrill. Praem turned to look at her. "I am not joking," she added.

Nicole ended her laugh with a cough. "Right. Yeah. Sorry."

After almost half an hour of walking, half an hour of worrying about the others, about Raine and Zheng and Twil, half an hour of my gut clenched up like a fist, half an hour of being ready with adrenaline and barbed tentacles and brain-math, half an hour of descent in the dark — we stepped into the heart of Hringewindla's shell.

Light filtered around the curve from up ahead as the helix levelled off and the stairs gave up. Diffuse, dark purple light washed over everything and made my eyes ache, as if a toxic sun hung veiled behind thick clouds. The light slowly revealed that we were walking huddled along one wall of a massive smooth tunnel; the left hand wall was easily three hundred feet away, and the ceiling climbed up and up and up.

The tunnel ended like an estuary opening into the sea.

We all stopped there, on the edge of the possible. Marmite came down from the wall and huddled behind my legs, his recent courage sputtering out. Sevens put out her light and touched the shell-floor with her umbrella. Evelyn wet her lips and tried to speak, twice, but failed to find the words. Nicole's jaw hung open. I struggled not to coil my tentacles inward and cradle myself like a frightened child.

A plain of bone curved away from us, so wide it seemed flat. The distant walls must have been several miles away, indistinct boundaries of mottled chalk-and-grey, curving back upward toward an unseen ceiling. The cavity in the heart of the shell was so large that it possessed weather; thick dark clouds hung far up in the false sky, still as a dead ocean, lit from below by that strange dark purple glow.

Towers of curving, curled, spiked shell rose from the surface of the plain at regular intervals, in a spiral pattern, as if to provide anchors to something that had once filled the entire space. Some of them were cracked and broken, pieces of them missing, snapped off and lost.

The ground — the surface of the shell itself — was marked and scored here and there with meter after meter of jagged, black scorch mark, clearly ancient now, worn smooth and begun to blend in with the grey-chalk of the shell. Some of the marks had depressions down their middle, as if dozens of giant claws had once scraped across this surface.

The scorch marks and claw-wounds all radiated from a hole, clearly visible far, far to our right, halfway up the distant wall. The hole opened on darkness. It must have been gigantic, tall as a skyscraper.

But the crippling wound in Hringewindla's shell was dwarfed by what remained of the Outsider god himself.

Directly ahead of us, perhaps half a mile away, a dome bulged upward from the surface of the shell; a soap bubble the size of a football stadium. The shifting, semi-translucent veil poured out that strange purple light, like oil on water reflecting the sun. Inside the membrane of swirling purple I could just make out a slow shifting motion, like a mass of gigantic pale snakes coiling over each other, a never-ending slither of scale against scale, soundless and vast, as celestial mechanics in the void of space.

Angels — Hringewindla's bubble-servitors — floated above the oily purple soap bubble in a distant halo. Thousands of them, docile and still, a court attending their crippled god.

A few feet away from us, a short metal rod had been driven into the ground. A blue nylon rope was tied to the top of the rod, with the other end tied to another rod about twenty feet further on, and then another, and another, leading toward Hringewindla.

Guideposts, left here by human hands.

Somebody whimpered.

"How ... " Nicole barely breathed the word. "How does all this exist ... down here?"

"We can ... we can ... we can ... " Evelyn kept trying to start a sentence.

A single tear was running down Sevens' cheek. I doubted that she was overcome by the alien strangeness of this place. Hers was some unknowable sympathetic melancholy.

"I've seen worse," I said with a sigh.

Nicole boggled at me. Evelyn frowned in my direction. Sevens wiped her cheek and turned her attention to me instead. Praem kept staring at the big ball of giant snakes, but I don't think she was that bothered. Marmite gave no sign he'd understood, but he touched one of my tentacles to demand a hand-hold.

“You what?” Nicole said.

I shrugged. “I have. I mean, it’s weird, yes. Very weird. But I’ve genuinely seen much worse, Outside. At random. As a little girl.”

Evelyn forced herself to take a deep breath, steadying herself by leaning heavily on Praem’s support. “Heather is right. She’s seen much worse than this. This isn’t actually that bad. We must keep this in perspective.”

“Worse than that?!” Nicole gestured at the Hringewindla-dome and the wound in the shell. “Fuck me, Heather. You’re made of sterner stuff than I am.”

“I’m just used to it. It’s not a big deal.” I took a deep breath, oddly embarrassed by the way Nicole was looking at me, then I shouldered ahead, taking the lead as I made for the first of the guideposts driven into the shell-surface. “Come on, it’s not that bad.”

Somehow, I managed to sound like I was telling the truth.

This was very bad, in ways I wasn’t sure I wanted to comprehend. We didn’t even understand what we were looking at; I cursed my own lack of foresight, we should have had one of the Hoptons here with us to explain. I hadn’t been aware of my expectations until they’d been dashed. I had imagined Hringewindla as some tentacle-monster in a stone-walled church cellar, with a bloody altar at his feet, and a taste for riding along in human minds, something that could exist on Earth without breaking too many natural laws.

I’d met Gods face-to-face twice now, and I had to admit that Hringewindla was more akin to the Eye than to the King in Yellow.

But I wasn’t about to admit any of that in front of Nicole or Evelyn. Nicky was barely holding on. Evelyn was an unaltered human, however grumpy and brilliant she could be. Sevens and Praem and I may have been equipped for this encounter, but we had to protect those who were not.

Then again, I wasn’t sure if I was ready for this either.

I grabbed the blue nylon rope with a tentacle, just for something to anchor myself, and then forced one foot in front of the other. The alternative was to give up. We’d come too far for that.

To my deep and lasting relief, the others hurried to join me. My

gamble had worked. Phone flash-lights were switched off, Nicky's torch went out, and Marmite scurried up beside me, holding tight to one tentacle.

"And you said you hadn't read any Lovecraft," Nicole hissed.

"Old Howard was full of shit," Evelyn muttered. "Mostly."

"I think I preferred the spooky house," said Nicole. "Alpacas and all."

Crossing the half-mile of open ground took about ten minutes, flanked by those massive twisted pillars of shell, over the remains of scorch marks as wide as a bus. Our feet clacked and echoed across the smooth plain. The rubber tip of Evelyn's walking stick went squeak-squeak. Making our way toward the semi-transparent purple dome full of giant writhing tubes was not the most intimidating thing I'd ever done, but it was probably up there in the top ten.

The landscape was not simply alien — it wasn't a landscape at all. The curvature of every surface, the blunt tapering barbs on the towers, the looming hole far off to our right, all of it was undeniably biological. Even the thick grey clouds were not true clouds, but some kind of clinging internal moisture. I tried not to think about the implications of that.

"Why the safety rope?" Nicole asked after a minute or two. "I don't like that, not one bit. Why do you think they need a safety rope?"

Evelyn answered before I could think of how to soothe Nicole's worries. "Confusion, disorientation, brain fog," she said. "That sort of thing. Hringewindla gets into people's minds, detective. I would wager whatever acts of worship take place down here, sometimes they leave a worshipper ... unwell."

Nicole let out a big sigh. "Fuck me, I hope we aren't gonna need it."

"We won't," I said.

"... excuse me?" Nicole sounded even more worried than before. I sighed at my own poor choice of words.

"I mean, I'll Slip us back out, once we're done here. We're not climbing back up the shell. Evelyn would struggle, for a start."

"Bloody right," Evelyn grunted.

Nicole snorted and shook her head. "For a second there I thought

you meant we weren't going back at all."

"It won't be like that," I said. "We're here to help him. Then we'll leave. That's all."

"*Help him* is doing a lot of heavy lifting there," Nicole said. She nodded ahead, at the low purple dome like oil on water. "You gonna reach into that with a tentacle and pull out a parasite?"

"She might," Evelyn answered for me. "Stop thinking about it, detective. Let Heather and I do the thinking."

Nicole puffed out another sigh, but she stopped complaining.

The Hringewindla-dome revealed its true size as we drew closer. The shape wasn't really a dome at all, but actually a sphere, lying in a sort of socket in the landscape, slightly loose like a shrunken and withered eyeball, as if this core organ of his being had once been healthy and flush against the supporting tissues. About one hundred meters from the lip of the socket was some identifiably human detritus, where the guideposts terminated. The shapes came into focus as we got nearer. A trio of modern tents were pitched next to a low stone building.

"Is that ... a church?" Nicole asked.

"The real church," Evelyn said between gritted teeth. "Inside his body. Thing must be ancient."

But one of us was not watching Hringewindla at all. As we walked closer to the little human encampment, Sevens-Shades-of-Sunlight was gazing outward across the plain of dead calcium carbonate, her cool and collected features undeniably tainted with distant melancholy.

"Sevens?" I asked, as much to distract myself as to reassure her. "Are you all right?"

For a long moment the Yellow Princess did not respond. I thought she hadn't heard me. Then she turned to gaze past me, the other way out across the inside of Hringewindla's shell.

"He must have been such a grand thing," she said.

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. Nicole went "eh?" But I nodded, because I knew what Sevens was talking about. I hadn't tried to put it into words, but it didn't take a marine biologist to understand.

“A fortress,” Sevens continued, voice soft and far away. “Secure within his shell, bringing his home with him wherever he went. How many worlds did he visit? What sights has he seen? But now he cannot move. He cannot risk leaving, not with his protection ruined, or he might be devoured. He is stuck in the heart of his own shell, alive but immobile, marooned.”

“The hell are you talking about?” Nicole said.

“Big hole,” said Praem.

“Eh?”

“The hole in the wall, Nicky,” I said. “It’s a drill-hole.”

Nicole boggled at me, too. I saw her throat bob. She was very focused on this conversation, so as not to look up at the dome looming over us as we crept closer, like ants before a whale.

“Hringewindla has a shell, yes?” I said. “Like a marine mollusc. That hole in the wall over there, it’s like the kind of hole made by a predator, the kind with a drill-tongue, a rasping tongue. Like a starfish or a sea snail or something similar. That kind of predator pins the shell down, so they can drill a hole through, to get at the mollusc inside.”

Nicole stared at me, wide-eyed with dawning comprehension. Slowly, like a woman forcing herself to acknowledge a bleeding spectre in the corner of her bedroom, she turned to gaze at the vast hole in the wall of the shell, the leviathan scorch-and-claw marks across the shell’s surface, and the barbed towers that looked like they were meant for anchoring flesh.

Evelyn put her face in her hand. Her voice dripped with sarcasm. “Thank you for that explanation, Heather. Detective, don’t think about it.”

“Looks like he won the fight, though,” I said quickly, trying to cover for my mistake. Nicole had not wanted to know any of that. “But he’s been reduced. That’s what they meant by ‘crippled’, I suppose. Sorry, I only know all this because I’ve watched so many marine life videos on youtube ... ” I trailed off and cleared my throat.

“This entire space was once filled with his flesh,” said Sevens. I winced. Evelyn rolled her eyes to the false sky.

But Nicole just laughed, shaking her head. “Giant sea-creature gods,

wounded and napping. And you said Lovecraft was full of shit.”

“Reduced so far from his peak,” said Sevens. “Stuck here, trapped in his own body. It is no wonder he rides along in the minds of his mortal friends.”

Evelyn snorted. “Friends. An Outsider with—”

She didn’t quite manage to course-correct before the Yellow Princess gave her a sudden, sharp look.

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Present company excepted. You’re different.”

Seven-Shades-of-not-so-Smooth stopped walking, which was a problem because she was right next to me, with Evelyn and Praem behind us. Evelyn was forced to stop as well, arm-in-arm with Praem. Nicole halted too. Marmite paused at my side, confused by the sudden palpable tension.

“Am I?” Sevens asked Evelyn, ice-cold, umbrella resting point-down. “What about Praem?”

“Sevens, please,” I whined, and felt like banging my head on the ground. “Not now?”

“Praem is a demon from the abyss, in a human form, that’s different altogether,” Evelyn said. Then she huffed. “Look, I’m sorry, I apologise, I didn’t mean to offend you. But you’re a ... you wear a human form. That makes it easier.”

“I’m different because I am small, is that it? Because I’m not large? Because I choose to present in this form, rather than one like this?” She gestured around us with a flicker of her fingers. “Because I am not crippled?”

Evelyn’s turn to sigh and give her a look. “I’m crippled.”

“Disabled,” I said — but gently. I wasn’t actually correcting Evelyn’s choice. But the word was there if she wanted it.

“I know what it’s like,” she said to Sevens. “And I apologise. It’s hard for a human being to have sympathy for something the size of a dozen whales.”

“Yeah, cut us some slack, hey?” Nicole said, wide-eyed and confused by the whole situation. She wasn’t just left behind, she was practically on another planet. I was amazed she could keep up

with this at all. “And can we maybe not have this conversation while we’re in the middle of a giant underground shell? Maybe? Please?”

“We are about to speak with him,” Sevens replied without looking away from Evelyn. “Now is the perfect time to make sure we all understand what we are speaking to.”

“I’m trying,” Evelyn said through gritted teeth.

“She is trying,” said Praem.

Sevens waited another beat, then nodded, ever so slightly. “I know you are, madam magician. I apologise for my fiery temper.”

Evelyn frowned at her, incredulous. “Fiery temper? No apology necessary. I was in the wrong.”

Did I detect a hint of sarcasm in Sevens’ tone? This wasn’t the time to investigate what was going on with her, so I filed that away for now, worried that all was not well with my Yellow Lover.

We covered the final stretch of guide-posts and blue rope, which led us to the little human encampment, about a hundred meters away from the edge of the oily purple sphere. This close, the tube-like shapes below the surface were almost clear enough to see in full, a tantalizing suggestion of snake-like motion, ropes of clean white flesh sliding over each other in an endless dance, without head nor tail to demarcate end or beginning. The surface of the sphere itself was dizzying to watch, oily motion swirling in millions of tiny spirals, across a soap bubble larger than any object any of us had ever seen.

Well, except for me. It wasn’t larger than the Eye.

Purple light spilled from the surface of the great oily bubble. It made my skin feel oily too. My eyes and scalp both itched, as if I hadn’t washed for weeks. As if by unspoken agreement, we all sheltered in the thin shadow cast by the strange old church.

“Who the hell do you think built this?” Nicole asked. “How? I don’t even ... ”

“Down here in the corpse of a god,” said Sevens.

“People,” Praem said.

The Church of Hringewindla, the Brinkwood Cult — and the mad

fools who had come before them — had established a semi-permanent camp down here. The church building was truly ancient, made of grey stone blocks, roughly cut but expertly mortared. It contained nothing except a few low stone benches and a badly stained altar, the exact thing I had expected, though the stains looked ancient by now. The foundation stones were affixed directly to the shell's surface, though the building was short and squat, without a roof, and with one open end facing toward Hringewindla himself. What need of a roof when you were sheltered by your god?

"Anglo-Saxon, maybe?" Evelyn said. Her jaw was clenched tight. She shot a look at me. "Does our resident castle expert have an opinion?"

I shook my head, stunned by the age of the structure. It was untouched. No weather down here. "I don't know. It's not a castle."

The modern additions to the permanent encampment were far more practical. Three sturdy tents were fixed to the ground with steel spikes, looking ready to endure an Arctic storm. A large camping stove was set up nearby, ringed by some cheap lawn chairs. Some kind of stout plastic cabin stood a little way from the tents; Nicole laughed when we realised it was a portaloo, complete with the smell and everything.

We kept low as we explored the tents, trying to keep out of the purple light as much as possible.

The cult had food supplies here too, in a big chest next to the tents. Dried food, cereal bars, bottled water, and even a few MREs. Nicole peered at some of the bars, declared they were well within their best-by date, and then started eating while we poked around. The tents contained bedrolls, emergency changes of clothes, a first aid kit, all the things you might want while spending a season contemplating the divinity of a giant sea-snail.

The modern cult had even set up a small petrol-powered generator, currently switched off. Several full jerry-cans sat next to it. Lines ran from the generator to a little heater, some flood-lamps, and — hidden away inside one of the tents — the bulkiest and blockiest laptop I'd ever seen.

Nicole grabbed the computer, shaking her head with amusement. "Rugged conditions laptop," she explained as she propped it up on the food chest and pressed the power button. It awoke instantly, but

only to a password screen for a user labelled as ‘Amanda’.

“No prizes for guessing who spends all their time down here,” Evelyn muttered.

We exhausted the encampment quickly, there really wasn’t much to see, unless we planned on spending the night here. I wasn’t about to suggest that even as a joke.

About twenty feet out from the back of the tents and the open end of the church, the cult had painted a line on the ground, in red. It stretched about a hundred feet to the left and right. A second, closer line, was marked by rocks placed at regular intervals. Perhaps that line had been here for a much longer time.

“Do not cross?” Nicole suggested.

We were sheltering between the tents and the church, like a clutch of tiny fishes afraid to venture out into the open water with the sleeping leviathan. Purple light swirled and flickered over our hands and faces. I was starting to itch all over. Marmite wouldn’t follow us, crouched by the tents.

“Smart money would say that indicates the minimum safe distance, yes,” Evelyn said. “But why the second line? Why the rocks?”

“Maybe he’s gotten weaker, over the years,” I said.

“Sad,” said Praem. Sevens nodded in agreement.

“Why’s he not reacting to anything?” Nicole asked. “Can it ... see us?”

“He is having a nightmare,” said Sevens. “Not dead, but dreaming.”

Nicole gave her such a dark look I was afraid the detective was going to draw her pepper spray and unload it on Sevens’ face. “I don’t care what the fuck you are, lady,” she said, “but you make another Lovecraft joke and I will lay you the fuck out.”

“Fair,” said Sevens.

“What now?” Evelyn asked between clenched teeth, staring up at Hringewindla. “If he’s gone full *hikikomori* here, how do we wake him up?”

I frowned at her. “Full what, I’m sorry?”

“Never mind.” Evelyn shot me a look. “Any ideas?”

There was nothing else for it. I didn’t feel in any kind of fit state for a conversation with a god, let alone a wake up call; my clothes were covered in dirt from rolling around on the floor of the church, I was hungry and tired and mentally exhausted, my skin itched all over and my eyes ached from the oily purple un-light. But I took a deep breath, slipped my squid-skull mask on over my face, and stepped out from beside the church.

Hringewindla loomed like a cliff-face rising from the land.

Don’t worry, I told myself. If the worst happens you can always Slip him Outside. Though that would probably kill him, wouldn’t it?

Evelyn hissed my name, then a plea to be careful. Praem said, “Heather knows what she is doing.” Nicole stayed silent. Sevens followed at a distance, I could hear her shoes clicking behind me.

I spread my tentacles wide and opened both my hands. Unarmed, without guile. We come in peace.

Hringewindla’s halo of bubble-servitors turned above me like moons around a gas giant. Behind the oily veil, giant white tubes shifted and slithered.

I reached the red line, toes stopping inches from the stripe of paint. Behind my mask, my mouth was dry as a bone. My heart was hammering inside my chest. My legs shook. I was the adopted daughter of the Eye, but I was also very, very small.

“... please wake up?” I said out loud, then sighed when nothing happened, feeling like an idiot. “Wake up!” I yelled, but shouting was not enough to rouse a god. “What do you need here, an alarm clock made of hyperdimensional mathematics?”

“Possibly, kitten.”

I almost jumped out of my skin; Sevens had walked up right beside me. She was gazing up at Hringewindla’s surface, both hands on her umbrella, tip planted on the ground before her, lit all down her front by that purple light.

“Oh my goodness, Sevens, don’t do that!” I hissed, one hand over my pounding heart.

“Alarm clock,” she echoed. “Is that within your limits?”

"I ... I don't know. Alarm clocks are a human concept. I don't think the Eye had anything to say about them, somehow."

"Do you have anything to say about them?" She turned to look at me, cool and collected, even amid all this.

"... maybe?"

"Then try."

"Alarm clock ... alarm clock ... alarm clock," I muttered behind my mask, staring up at Hringwindla's core. "Alarm clock."

Sevens was asking me to forge something with mathematics that I had not been taught by the Eye.

She was asking me to create.

and walked a crooked mile – 16.7

“Alarm clock.”

My lips moved in the private darkness behind the metallic bone rampart of my squid-skull mask, forming the words once again. Accurate pronunciation, clear meaning, without adornment. I gazed upward at the gigantic soap-bubble membrane as I spoke, watching the surface swirl with spirals inside spirals, liquid and smooth like oil gliding across water. Toxic purple light poured from the oily sphere, like a blazing fire of biological heat. My eyes and hands and scalp all itched like crazy, as if I was covered in sea-lice.

Vast white snake-forms slithered over each other inside the bubble. That knot of otherworldly flesh was all that remained of Hringewindla, a living god who had once filled this barren cavity at the heart of his shell.

“Alarm clock ... ” I whispered once more, then bit my lower lip.

“Alarm clock,” Sevens echoed from beside me, her own voice so much more precise and formal.

But no amount of precision or detail would help me with this task. Sevens could have spelled the words forward and backward, recited the etymology of the term and the entire history of alarm clocks. Or she could have called Evelyn and Nicole up here so we could play a trio of mobile phone alarm noises. None of it would help.

Alarm clock was just words, not the thing itself. The words had no relation to the thing except for those of us who used language, and a specific language, too.

Did Hringewindla speak English, except through Amanda?

Did he even *speak*?

I shook my head, my confidence draining as I waded through miles of swamp. “Sevens, I don’t think I can do this,” I said. “What am I supposed to do here, summon a giant alarm clock?” I forced an

awkward laugh behind my mask.

"If you like," said Sevens.

"I suppose I could always spin my tentacles together and bob through the air, like one of those novelty alarm clocks you have to catch to turn it off?"

"Exceptionally cute, kitten. But no."

I sighed. "You could rise to my bait on occasion, you know that? Raine would."

"Raine would tell you that signifier and signified cannot be—"

"Yes, yes, I know what Raine would say. She would start talking a lot of philosophy that goes over my head. Besides, neither *signifier* nor *signified* is relevant here. Somehow I doubt that making a loud enough racket is actually going to wake him up, or drag him out of the nightmare, or whatever it is we're trying to do."

In the corner of my eye, Seven-Shades-of-Stressful-Pedagogy nodded her head in graceful surrender.

"Alarm clock," I huffed, trying to steel myself. I kept scratching at my hands. My cuticles itched.

"Heather!" Evelyn called in a very silly stage-whisper from behind us, from the relative shelter next to the ancient church, along with Nicole. "Heather, what are you two doing?"

"Is it not obvious?" Sevens replied.

"No! You're just staring at it! Keep us in the loop, for pity's sake!"

"We're building an alarm clock," I called back to her, then cast a look upward at the slowly orbiting halo of bubble-servitors. Would too much noise bring them crashing down on our heads? "Let me concentrate, please, Evee."

The Eye's lessons lurked in the deepest parts of my subconscious, the parts I preferred not to examine too closely. I used to think of that as a series of back rooms, cobwebbed and lightless, full of stalking monsters eager to jump out at me and drag me off into the dark. But over the last nine months of my increasingly confusing and dangerous life, that metaphor had become useless. It wasn't applicable anymore, not when I reached down there so often to drag those lessons forth, to put them to my own uses. Nowadays the

Eye's teachings were more like infernal machinery, stored in a lake of toxic black oil to stop their reactive nature from running out of control when exposed to light and air. And when I was willing to burn my hands and forearms with caustic chemicals, I could use that machinery to perform miracles.

But the Eye had taught me only the principles, the mathematics which described the angles of an alien yet universal physics. Light, heat, kinetic force, these were all simple things. Gravity, nuclear attraction, magnetism. Even the act of sliding matter through the membrane between here and Outside was just another kind of force, in the end.

If I was willing to endure pain and risk permanent damage, I could put a lance of energy right through Hringewindla's body, no matter how big he was. That would certainly wake him up, as would a thousand slightly-less-violent solutions.

But none of those were an *alarm clock*.

I'd made a beacon for Evelyn earlier, to guide her out of the house-maze, and I hadn't even thought about that. But a beacon was just light, turned to the purpose of guidance. My body had an analogue for the concept, in the rainbow strobing of my tentacles.

And an alarm clock was just sound, turned to the purpose of waking somebody up.

Something clicked into place in my thoughts; I didn't need an alarm clock, I only needed Hringewindla to wake up.

"Sevens," I murmured, trying not to break my concentration even as I asked the essential question, still staring up at the god-bubble before us. "What happens to the others back at the house, if we wake him up?"

"Nothing, I think."

"... you think?" I resisted the urge to turn and look at her. I had to hold on to this concept.

"The nightmare will not end until we extract the parasite and kill it. The parasite is the one projecting the confusion. I think."

"Again, you think?"

"I am not an expert on Outsiders." She paused. "That would be you,

my dearest.”

I sighed and tried to ignore the clenched fist in my belly. “I’m hardly an expert.”

“My father would probably disagree. As would I.”

“Well, thank you for the vote of confidence.” I tried not to sound too sarcastic. “I’m ... I think I’m ready. Ready as I’ll ever be.” My mouth was so dry I could barely swallow. “I’m going to try something. It might not work, I have no idea what the result will be. Do you need to step back?”

“Do you wish me to do so?”

Unable to summon the words, I stuck out my hand, clammy with the fear of pain and failure. Sevens took my hand in hers.

We stepped back together, away from the line of red paint. Nice and safe.

I didn’t do anything so cheesy or obvious as give us a countdown, but Sevens could probably tell I was about to dive by the way I took three short, sharp, nervous breaths.

And then I plunged in, face-first, full-body, and falling, down into the vat of black oil where I kept the things I did not want to know.

It would not be enough to simply locate the correct lessons from the Eye and put them together in the right order to achieve a desired effect. Even dragging Sarika from the Eye’s grasp had been a matter of motion and force, even if I’d had to leave my body to attain enough leverage to perform the equation. But this equation was not brute strength, not a giant gulp of cold waters, no deluge of information overwhelming my tiny ape brain; this was delicacy and dexterity. I had to swim through the waters of the sump, like cave diving in pitch darkness, surrounded by sharp rocks and jagged steel, with the toxic gunk and the burning acids, to forge a human concept from the mathematics of the gods. I had to use the abyssal logic of star-shine and electron mass to build an alarm clock.

My last coherent thought before the pain was that perhaps the Eye had intended this all along. Perhaps this was the point. The pupil must learn to apply herself.

My brain was on fire from the first figure of the equation, white-hot and melting through my neurons, but I couldn’t just slam the pieces

into place like with every other hyperdimensional equation. I had to stop and examine each one, select the next piece from the depths and fit it together, then turn the shape over in my mind to see if it looked right. Like building a real clock, with springs and winder and hands.

For some absurd, subconscious reason, I clung to the memory of an egg-timer that my mother had possessed when I was little, shaped like a rooster about to crow. Once, feeling mischievous, Maisie and I had set it to sixty seconds, then peered over the kitchen counter with nervous anticipation, waiting for it to ring out and irritate our parents.

I rebuilt that little egg-timer, piece by piece, from repurposed infernal machinery.

Extrapolating from first principles took *seconds*. That doesn't sound like long, but at the speed of thought that may as well have been hours.

I think I screamed. I know I squeezed Sevens' hand hard enough to hurt her, grinding her fingers together. Lucky it wasn't Evelyn who'd offered to hold my hand through this messy and imperfect delivery, because I could have hurt her badly, broken a finger or dislocated her wrist. But Sevens was made of sterner stuff. My six tentacles flailed, slapping the ground. The equation-building process went on so long that I felt blood start to drip down my face.

A final piece burned and hissed in my hands, melting my flesh and turning it black. A tiny hammer to ring the bell, to *waken*. I screamed myself raw with a sound like a beached dolphin as I slid it into place.

An angel was born.

In the open space halfway between me and Hringewindla's dome, a twelve foot high golden rooster burst into reality, like a sudden flare of molten gold dust. The centre of its body was a giant clock.

The abyssal cockerel filled his lungs, scale-feathers puffing up, glinting black-gold in the purple light. He raised a snapping squid-beak, spread diaphanous wings of glinting crystal, and gripped the shell-surface with rending claws, like an artillery piece anchoring itself to the ground.

He crowed so loud that he exploded.

Later, the others told me that nothing visible had happened, other than me flailing about like a wounded octopus and crumpling to my knees, hissing and spitting blood as I tried not to pass out. Not even Sevens actually saw the giant golden rooster-squid or heard the ear-splitting *cock-a-doodle-doo*.

The only evidence that I hadn't hallucinated the entire thing was a small 'news of the weird' article a few days later, in one of the local Sharrowford newspapers. Every domestic and farm rooster between Manchester and the Pennines had all screamed their tiny little lungs raw in unison, at about four fifteen in the afternoon that day, for no discernible reason. Some of them had gone on for almost an hour, wearing themselves to exhaustion in an effort to see off some invisible challenger. Farmers irritated, locals baffled. Enthusiasts of the paranormal pointed to a Civil War battle that had taken place on this very same day, in the year 1643, in a field not too far from the south end of Sharrowford. Roundhead ghosts are a better explanation than squid-girls summoning giant imaginary egg-timers, so I've never made an attempt to correct them.

My abdominal bioreactor flared to life as the squid-rooster exploded into nothingness. I crumpled and banged my knees on the ground, struggling to stay standing even as the reactor worked overtime to hold me up and keep me conscious. The delicacy of that brain-math had taken every ounce of concentration and intellectual power I could muster. My head was stuffed with cotton wool. I wanted to stop thinking and stare at a wall for twelve hours. Sevens' held my entire forearm, just to keep me from landing on my own face.

"I'm alright—" I tried to say, but my lips slurred the words and my mouth tasted like blood. My eyes were thick and gummy, tears running down my cheeks. My head hurt like a band of iron was expanding inside my skull.

My stomach tried to punch its way up my throat and out of my mouth — but something stopped it, held it back, kept it in place. I was physically incapable of vomiting into the squid mask.

I reminded myself to thank the donor, somehow, one day.

Sevens was saying something, a low purr of congratulation, calling me a good girl. Stomping footsteps hurried to join us. Another voice floated from behind, perhaps saying my name, maybe scolding me, I couldn't be sure. My ears still rang with that rooster's crow.

And then a wet *slooooooruummph* filled the air.

It was like the sound of an entire sewer system being unblocked with clean sea water all at once, or perhaps a power-generating dam being switched on for the first time and sluicing its internal machinery with muddy silt. I raised my eyes from the surface of the shell.

Hringewindla was awake.

A trio of those vast snake-like shapes breached the inside of the oil-on-water membrane, punching through from inside like sensory tendrils reaching out from the confines of a shell. Blunt-ended, covered in glistening, glinting, glittering scales, millions of tiny points of light reflecting the purple illumination. Each one must have been as thick as a skyscraper.

And all three lashed toward me, crumpled and cowering on the ground.

In that exact same moment, the halo of bubble-servitors gathered and swirled downward, like a tornado forming in a stormy sky.

I raised a hand, pure instinct and panic, my bruised mind spinning together the familiar old equation. *Out! Out, all of you Out!*

But then something made of black armour plate and white flesh grabbed my hand in a gentle claw. Hastur's Daughter towered over me, shrieking and wailing up at the awakened god. Yellow spores covered her back in a cloak of deadly promise. Hands tipped with black razor-blades made right-angle signs with each other, rotating back and forth in some unknowable symbolism. Seven-Shades-of-War-and-Ruin stood over me like a bodyguard.

And on my other side, a familiar drag-thump of foot and walking stick heralded a crackle in the air.

A discharge of static electricity rippled out across the shell-surface and terminated in a visible bubble of blue-on-blue that seared my eyes like living fire, surrounding myself and Sevens with a ten-foot bubble of our own. Evelyn stood next to me, hands contorted into painful angles on the surface of her scrimshawed bone-wand, sweating buckets and gasping out a torrent of jumbled Latin. Praem had both arms around her waist, holding her up.

In the corner of my eye, I spotted Nicole too, still sheltering in the

cover provided by the ancient church. She'd gone white as chalk. Marmite had joined her, cowering behind her legs.

Nicole had her pepper spray out, held aloft in one shaking hand.

Sevens was hissing and screeching up at the giant descending tentacles. Evelyn was almost panting her Latin chant, but she couldn't resist darting a terrified look at Seven-Shades-of-Spikes-and-Blades.

I lurched to my feet, spread my tentacles wide, and hissed.

Hringewindla hesitated.

The trio of vast snake-tentacles halted in their descent, whipping outward with sheer muscular momentum. A wave of displaced air buffeted down on us like storm winds, pulling at my hair and plastering my hoodie against my body. The whirling threat of bubble-servitors slowed, circling and bobbing, but not yet returning to their halo formation. We were mad to think that a line of red paint on the ground could ever hold back something that large.

"You mad bastard!" Evelyn shouted up at Hringewindla, sounding like she'd just smoked an entire packet of cigarettes. Blood flecked her lips. Her eyes were wide with barely suppressed terror, her pupils dilated with pain and effort, the side-effect of real magic. "We're trying to fucking help— you— shit—"

"Do not try to speak," Praem said, clear as ever.

Sevens made a sound up toward Hringewindla too, a bit like the sound a crab might make if it was losing a game of chess and decided to flip the board. She clacked several claws and did a skirts-to-tip muscular strain, as if threatening to release something from within herself. I didn't understand a word of it, but the intention was clear enough.

"No, no," I croaked, groping to brace myself against the floor with my tentacles so I didn't fall over again. "He's just trying to smash his alarm clock. Woke up cranky."

Seven-Shades-of-Chitin-and-Iron turned her bulb-tip head toward me — at least I assumed it was a head, what with the various void-black eyes and razor-sharp mouth-parts surrounded by armour plates.

"He's terrified of you," she said in a voice like the god of all wasps.

“Fucking hell!” Evelyn shouted. I couldn’t tell what spooked her more, Sevens or Hringewindla.

“We need to talk to him,” I croaked. I had to clear my throat, tasting mucus and iron, eyes itching and sticky with my own blood beneath the squid-skull mask. Hringewindla’s vast white tentacles floated hundreds of meters above our heads; my abyssal instinct bridged the gap of species and nature and time, reading his body language in those giant feelers — fear and shock, held back for only a brief moment by our barely credible threat display. “He doesn’t know why we’re here, he’s confused.”

“We’re talking to him—” Evelyn tried to say, but then coughed and wheezed like she was having an asthma attack. Her hands held the bone wand in a death-grip, refusing to halt the spell. “Talking to him—” she wheezed out, “right now!”

“We’re not here to hurt you!” I yelled up at the giant purple soap bubble, waving my hands in the air. “You’ve been infected by a parasite!”

The three vast snake-tentacles pulled upward — retreating to gain momentum, to smash us to paste.

Sevens screeched like a banshee crossed with a hornet. Evelyn whimpered in pain. Even between their doubled threat, I doubted they could hold back the fist of a god.

“He doesn’t communicate with language,” I murmured inside my mask. “He doesn’t even have ears. Oh, damn it all, Lozzie would know how to talk to a god. What would she do?”

Lozzie wouldn’t be afraid. Lozzie would make contact, with open arms and a joyous heart.

I raised my voice so the others could hear. “I have to let him into my head!”

“What!?” Evelyn choked on the word.

“Kitten,” Sevens warned me, a sound I did not care to hear again from this particular mask. Her voice made my bowels shiver.

“He doesn’t even understand what we are,” I said. I took the first step toward the line of red paint and the edge of Evelyn’s protective bubble. “He doesn’t get it, he has no eyes to see, no ears to hear. We have to make contact.”

“Wait, wait!” Evelyn snapped. She somehow found the reserves of energy to strain forward in Praem’s grip. “Heather, no! I can do that better than you can. I’ve had demons in my head before, remember? Let me.”

“Denied,” said Praem.

Above us, Hringewindla’s tentacles twitched, as if eager for our defences to fail. We were some horrible irritant or infection, not meant to be here inside his shell. To be repulsed, like others before. He didn’t recognise us.

I turned back to look Evelyn in the eyes. My tentacles worked like extra feet, pulling me toward the boundary, to where I would be exposed to the Outsider god. “Evee, I can’t. What if he doesn’t leave your head afterwards? I can’t risk that.”

“What if he doesn’t leave *your* head, Heather?!”

“I can force him out,” I said, almost laughing with the absurdity of the statement. “That would be easy. I’m the Eye’s adopted daughter, remember? I can do anything to my own body. Anything.”

“*Heather*,” Evelyn said my name like it was a desperate curse.

“But forcing him out of you?” I hiccuped, loudly, but I wasn’t sure why. “I can’t do brain surgery on you like I did with Badger. Evee, I can’t risk hurting you. I can’t, I can’t. I can do this but I can’t do that.”

Evelyn started at me, eyes bulging, panting with the effort of maintaining her spell, relying entirely on Praem to stop her collapsing. She looked more openly distraught than I’d ever seen her before. Evelyn was a woman of surly, self-directed disdain, even in her darkest moments, not naked horror as I saw now.

“P-Praem, stop her. Stop her!”

“I cannot drop you,” said Praem.

Evelyn glanced at Sevens, all eight feet of towering war machine, and found half her courage again. “Say something, you useless B-movie rubber monster!”

Seven-Shades-of-Scary-Silicone turned her array of glistening black eyes on Evelyn, then on me, then ceased to be.

She vanished without a flicker, like dropping the rubber monster

suit and stepping out of the remains. The Yellow Princess stood there instead, umbrella tip against the floor, face calm and unreadable.

“Heather is correct,” she said. “Hringewindla lacks the means for communication. This is not coffee with my father.”

Far up in the air, Hringewindla’s tentacles jerked, a hundred thousand tons of smooth mollusc muscle trying to decide if now was the time to crush us flat. Evelyn flinched and gritted her teeth, knuckles going white on her bone-wand.

“Heather!” she croaked. “Heather, for fuck’s sake. You might not be the same person after this!”

I staggered sideways toward the crackling blue surface of Evelyn’s protective spell, supported more by my tentacles than my shaking knees, unwilling to turn away from Eeve’s vulnerable, naked fear.

“Eeve, it’s going to work, it’s going to be fi—”

“Take that fucking mask off!” she cried, her eyes filling with unspent tears. “Let me see you!”

The request made little sense, but I didn’t hesitate. With my tentacles occupied in keeping me standing, I pulled the squid-skull mask off my face with shaking hands, then sniffed back the blood dripping from my nose. I must have looked an awful mess after the brain-math, with my own blood smeared around my eyes and dripping off my chin, mucus and snot all down my face.

Evelyn stared at me, eyes scrunched with more than physical pain. Hringewindla’s oil-bubble cast purple light on her horrified face. Vast tentacles bunched and coiled. Bubble-servitors descended in a slow, spiralling wave.

Eeve opened her mouth but she couldn’t find the words, even with Praem holding her tight.

She thought I was about to leave.

“Heather ... I ... ”

“I know,” I said, croaking through the blood and mucus in my throat, smiling for her. “Eeve, I know. I know. And I’m not going to stop being me. I promise. This will be nothing.”

We were out of time. Above us, Hringewindla’s skyscraper-thick

tendrils reared up like a nest of cobras about to strike. I lurched toward the edge of the electric blue bubble, finally turning my attention away from Evelyn.

Static electricity crackled across my clothes and tingled on my skin. I shouldered my way through Evelyn's spell. The bubble offered no resistance, then collapsed behind me as Evelyn screamed with frustration and gave up, hands finally slipping from the bone-wand.

She said something to my back, something she couldn't say to my face, something that made Sevens turn and stare at her with surprise, right at the limit of the Princess Mask's emotional range.

But a boom of displaced air drowned out Evelyn's words; Hringewindla's tentacles cracked like thunder and raced toward me like meteoric buckshot.

I was exhausted beyond thought, despite the bioreactor working overtime in my abdomen, like a sweat-shedding infection in my gut. Between the revelations and duels this morning, the emergency of Nicole's mysterious appearance, the absurd and spooky house, and the descent into Hringewindla's shell, I was about ready to crawl into bed and cuddle in Raine's arms and stop thinking for the rest of the month.

So I lurched over the painted red line and stopped with my arms wide open.

Hringewindla stopped too.

His tentacles drifted to a halt. The bubble-servitors floated, aimless and uneasy. I held my tentacles wide too, as many of them as I could spare without falling over. Inside, I was shaking with adrenaline as my gamble paid off.

I was right; the red line wasn't the danger line at all. Hringewindla could likely reach into every nook and cranny of his shell-core with those vast appendages.

The red line indicated how to commune with him. How to get close enough to whisper hello.

One of the three giant tentacles split off from the other two and descended toward me, but gently and slowly this time, pushing displaced air down against me like a slow rolling storm. I held my ground, but had to grit my teeth to keep from screaming or hissing

or scrambling back. Instinctive fear made me want to cower and hide at the approach of the largest limb I'd ever seen.

Hringewindla dipped his tentacle, down and down and down, until a wall of white, scaled flesh drew level with me, only a few feet away.

"Right," I whispered, hoarse and frozen. "Hello. Okay, so, how do we do this? How do we do this ... "

I already knew, even as I asked the question. I stretched out one of my own tentacles — a final concession to caution and reluctance, not to use my own right hand — and touched the very tip of rainbow-strobing pneuma-somatic flesh against Hringewindla's scaly hide.

An intrusion, probing, slick and wet and wriggling, like an injection of living fluid flowing back up my tentacle and into my core of true flesh.

My abyssal immune system gathered itself to repel the invader, assembling macrophage and tetrodotoxin, flooding my veins with white blood cells and raging up my spinal column in a red-hot flash-sweat of internal fire. But I clamped down on the reaction, forcing control rods back into the reactor.

I pulled my tentacle away from Hringewindla's touch, like I'd grasped bare metal in a snowstorm, but the intrusion was not severed. It was inside me now, wriggling upward, seeking contact.

Shaking, shivering, gasping in the throes of a fever, with a black liquid slug inching up my brain-stem, mouth-parts feeling along the surface of my hind-brain for a way inside. A wave of terrible disgust and sickness rocked me. I wanted to vomit, purge my body, get this thing out of me.

But this was what I wanted, wasn't it?

There was no choice. If I couldn't talk with Hringewindla, then what hope did I have of communicating with the Eye?

I opened the gate of my mind and let him inside.

The moment of transition was like dunking my head in a bucket of cold coffee. I felt something ooze across my cranial membrane and settle into the wrinkles of my brain, filling the creases like oil. Suddenly I was wide awake and panting, my heart racing, my skin

tingling all over. I smelled alien pheromones — but then my nose filled with the scent of fresh-cut grass and dandelions, a forest glade in spring. I tasted strong tea and lemon cake, felt an enclosing warmth around my shoulders and on the small of my back, and imagined a whispered welcome on the edge of my hearing.

“Oh, oh, that’s ... weird,” I panted. “Is that you? Hello, yes, nice to meet you. I think?”

A question suggested itself, as if I was listening in on somebody else’s subconscious. It wasn’t words, just a jumble of sense impression and deep curiosity.

“Heather Morell,” I said out loud, though I doubted it was necessary to speak my answer. “You know me, we’ve met enough times.”

The slug-oil in my brain slid deeper, soaking into the tissues and staining the grey matter. I retched and almost lost the contents of my stomach, but then suddenly the disgust vanished like a lifting fog. A feeling like a warm blanket settled on my shoulders, tucked itself in around my neck, and took my hands, patting them with papery, dry reassurance. My eyelids drifted shut. I felt completely and utterly safe, like I’d wandered out of the woods on a dark night and found a little old cottage, with a crackling fire and a single occupant, welcoming me to this oasis in the endless dark. All in return for whatever tales I could spare of the lands beyond the woods. Warmth, safety — and acceptance, a glowing wave of rightness, of knowing that something more powerful and much older than me was offering me protection and purpose, unlike any I’d ever known before.

No human being could have resisted that opiate.

I wasn’t really a human being anymore.

Abyssal instinct screeched and hissed and thrashed. I forced my eyes open and wide, like I was trying to avoid nodding off.

“Excuse me!” I snapped, shrugging and waving my hands to force the imaginary blanket off my shoulders. “No, I’m not here for that. I’m not one of yours. Stop it.”

Gentle now, rest your feet, sit down by the fire. I want to hear all about you, please, dear. I know you little people out there love to talk about yourselves.

“Those aren’t my thoughts!” I shouted.

They are now, and that’s okay, isn’t it? I’m a lot bigger than you but I won’t blot you out. I wouldn’t learn anything new if I blotted you out and sat on you and ate you up, so that’s not what I do anymore, I promise. Just stay and talk, please stay and talk. Here, I’ve got coffee with spices, and more cake, and we can put on reruns of *Home and Away*. Or do you prefer cartoons? *Spongebob* is a favourite of mine.

“Stop it!” I snapped, hissing the words. “I’m going to assume those are Amanda’s tastes, and I’m not Amanda, I am Heather Morell. I am the adopted daughter of the Eye and soon to be daughter-in-law to the King in Yellow. You are in my head on *sufferance*.”

The strange thoughts went quiet. Quiet and sad, like a little withered old man standing there with a full teapot, confused about why I didn’t want to have a drink with him.

That image sharpened, as my mind took over again and interpreted what it could from the jumble of information spewing forth from the connection with Hringewindla. A little old man, hobbling about his cabin in the woods with his crutches, wearing leg braces to keep himself mobile. But vital and full of energy.

“I can etch the surface of reality with my mind,” I went on, softer now. “I am a master of hyperdimensional mathematics. I can send your physical body Outside with ease. So, don’t make me do that, please.”

The old man went quite still.

The brain-slug was still nestled in my cranium.

I turned away from the massive scaled tendril and back toward the others. Sevens looked calm and unruffled. Evelyn was slumped against Praem’s side, staring at me in mute horror. Praem didn’t seem too worried. Further behind them, Nicole was watching me with a deep frown, still pale and covered in cold sweat, utterly uncomprehending. Marmite crouched at her feet.

“Evee, I’m fine! It’s me! I’m fine!” I said, stumbling back toward my friends, almost tripping with my tentacles.

Evelyn lurched out of Praem’s arms before I could reach her. She let her walking stick clatter to the ground and grabbed my face with

both hands, staring into my eyes with a piercing scowl. I had to catch her with my tentacles to stop her from falling over.

“E-Evee—”

“It’s you,” she hissed, hoarse and raw. “It’s you alright. Alright.”

“Of course it’s me, Evee. I’m fine. I’ve had worse in my head for my whole life.”

Evelyn sniffed deeply and wiped her face on her sleeve. Suddenly she couldn’t meet my eyes, watching the floor and then gesturing at Praem to help her once again.

“Greetings,” said Sevens. “Good afternoon.”

She was speaking in my direction, but it took me a moment to realise she was not talking to me.

“Uh ... he says hello,” I replied. “I think. It’s not words, it’s just a jumbled impression of ... stuff.”

“We are not here on a social call,” Sevens went on. “We are solving a crisis.”

I did my best to stand up straight, even if she wasn’t talking to me exactly. We had to be formal now, sensible, business-like; at least that’s what I told myself, the wrapper I used to process this increasingly absurd situation. Praem took Evelyn’s weight from me as Evelyn fussed about with her walking stick. Nicole slowly approached us as well.

“He ... doesn’t understand?” I said slowly, trying to sort through vague impressions. “I ... think. He just wants to ... sit around with us, hear about us.” I shook my head and sighed. “He doesn’t understand any of this.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Nicole asked, still at a safe distance from us. She eyed Hringewindla’s great drifting tentacles, and the one white tendril down at ground level, like a skyscraper on its side. “Did you tame it?”

“No, he’s in my head. For now.”

Nicole boggled at me. “Like with Amanda?”

“Not quite the same. More like I’ve broken into his house to interrogate him.”

The little old man in my mind hobbled to a chair and eased himself down, hands shaking in his lap, confused and afraid; at least, that's what it felt like, the closest my human sense-impressions could approximate.

I sighed again and glanced over at the gigantic purple bubble with the roiling snake-monster inside, partly to remind myself of what we were actually dealing with here. "Stop trying to be so pitiful. You were about to crush us to death."

"Why is it always tentacles?" Nicole sighed.

"Outside has carcinization too," Evelyn grunted.

"You good, Morell?" Nicole asked. "What's it feel like?"

"Like being invited for tea," I answered without thinking, then shook my head. "Never mind."

"You have a medical condition," Praem said, clear like a silver bell.

Hringewindla sat up and paid attention to that. He stirred inside my mind, a sudden innocent attention behind rheumy old eyes.

"We are here to deworm you," Praem explained.

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. The vast white tendril of scaled flesh that had descended for me to make contact with now began to lift from the ground, as if unsure.

"Wait!" Evelyn snapped, stamping once with her walking stick.

All her horror and dismay was gone, or at least crammed inside where she didn't have to examine it for a while. She still leaned on Praem's arm for support, but she straightened her spine as much as she could, and raised her chin. She did not address me, but spoke to the soap-bubble-and-snakes of Hringewindla's physical form.

"Now you listen to me," she hissed, simmering with anger. "And listen good. Because if you're going to use Heather's ears to hear, then you better bloody well be paying attention."

"Evee," I whispered. "There's no need for aggression."

"I have no love lost for you, you ... thing," she carried on, ignoring me. "So believe me, I would not be here if this was not a very serious emergency. And when we're done, if you don't leave Heather's mind again, I will have your entire cult slaughtered, then

come back down here with fire and acid until you're gone. Do you understand me?" Evelyn took a shuddering breath and turned to me, swallowing down a burning anger that she could not hide. "Heather, does he understand?"

"Actually, I don't think he does," I murmured. "He's already terrified of me in the first place."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "He'll still have me to answer to."

"Yes, yes, I think he understands that part, a little."

Evelyn turned back to the soap-bubble. "You have a parasite, Outsider. You caught it from Amanda Hopton, who caught it from Nicole here, who caught it from ... well, we don't know where from. Not yet. But I have my suspicions."

Calmly but sharply, Evelyn explained what we knew about the parasite, the information-scrambler. She recounted what had happened back in the house, from our human-level perspective. She related what had happened to the physical parasite inside Sevens, and the fact that Amanda and others were very likely still infected. As she spoke, I felt the brain-slug-ooze-thing shifting inside my skull, a kind of pneuma-somatic parasite itself, a link back to the vast creature that sat in front of us.

"The nightmare exists because of the parasite inside you," Evelyn said. "It has jumped the species gap, hijacked whatever higher-dimensional nonsense you're capable of, and is now running wild. We have to get it out of you."

"Yes," I echoed softly. I couldn't tell what Hringewindla was thinking, he had gone very quiet inside my mind, like a placid pool of black water. "We need to get it out, somehow."

But my mouth had gone dry and my hands were shaking inside the front pocket of my hoodie. Hringewindla was not anything like what I had expected when we'd decided to venture down here. Reaching into Sevens' throat to remove a physical parasite was one thing, but this? Hringewindla was simply too large, unless I was prepared to step inside his soap-bubble membrane, like some kind of miniature medical robot inside a giant body. Brain-math was an option, but the last time I had attempted to comprehend an Outsider god via direct brain-math, I'd plunged into the abyss with the sheer effort. I did have anchors now, but if Hringewindla was

even a fraction as complex as the Eye, it might be too much of a risk.

And how big was his parasite, anyway?

Evelyn finished explaining and looked over at me. “Does he comprehend?”

“I ... I don’t know. He’s gone rather quiet.”

Evelyn frowned harder, clenching her jaw.

“Pretty shocking,” Nicole said with a forced casual tone. “I mean, being told you’ve got a parasite. I’d be pretty freaked out if a doctor told me I had a tapeworm, you know?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes.

“Hringewindla,” I said out loud, voicing my thoughts. “I’m not sure how I’m going to get this thing out of you. I-I do want to help. I don’t know what trying to share my blood— m-my immune system, I mean. I don’t know what trying to share that with you would actually do. It might not be good for you. If there’s some other way, we can try to—”

Hringewindla’s trio of exposed tendrils suddenly whirled into motion once more, including the one he had extended to the ground in order to make contact. It was like standing too close to an ambulatory crane; the white scaled flesh shot upwards, the sheer size and strength buffeting us with a gale of wind. Praem had to hang onto Evelyn. Nicole’s coat flapped out with an audible crack. I stumbled and clung to the shell with all my tentacles, swallowing an instinctive hiss. Sevens stood unmoved, hair ruffled by the breeze.

The three tendrils of pale flesh arced high above the dome of purple liquid, then curled inward like fish-hooks. The spiralling mass of bubble-servitors shot upward to join them, moving as if caught in high winds, then pulling into a tight circle.

“Heather, what the hell is he doing?” Evelyn spat.

“I don’t know!”

“Self-surgery,” said Praem.

Evee looked at her in slowly dawning realisation.

“Mm,” went Sevens. “I strongly suggest that none of us move. He knows where we’re standing. He will take care. If I am correct.”

“What?” Nicole turned wide-eyed terror on Sevens. “You don’t mean ... oh you massive cu—”

Nicole’s colourful insult was drowned out by the noise of three giant snakes plunging through the world’s largest and messiest soap bubble, a vast, ground-shaking *sploooooort* that sounded more scatological than I had expected. The sound probably would have made Lozzie giggle, if the sight wasn’t so overwhelming. Above us, Hringewindla jammed his three tendrils right back through his outer membrane and into the writhing-snake core of his own body.

The purple membrane split open at the top, where he’d inserted the three tendrils, peeling open like a flower made of flesh, but instantly trying to wrap itself closed again. Great ripping and tearing sounds rolled from within Hringewindla’s depths, like a distant earthquake grinding below our feet. The snake-knot inside him suddenly stopped moving, then seized hard as if with a great muscular spasm.

I couldn’t help but cower at this vast spectacle, hiccuping and cringing and trying not to hiss. Evelyn was the same, huddling in Praem’s arms and gritting her teeth, hands clamped over her ears. Sevens was unaffected, but Nicole had curled up, arms over her head. Marmite was clinging to the ground like a spider in a hurricane. We weren’t built to experience something on this scale. It was like standing too close to the fury of a volcanic eruption.

But deep down inside, I recognised this moment; an abyssal leviathan, exerting all its strength.

I yearned to join in.

Hringewindla’s muscular clench ended with a meaty ripping sound worse than the innards of a thousand slaughterhouses. His bubble membrane seemed to flex and bend, as if something inside him was moving in the wrong way, bulging outward. The three vast tentacles went taut with strain.

“Reel it in,” said Praem, her voice clear as a bell amid the chaos and cacophony. “Almost there.”

Inside me, I felt Hringewindla nod a thank you for the encouragement. Perhaps we should have had Praem doing the

talking all along.

With one giant muscular pull, Hringewindla's three tendrils hauled their catch up from inside his own body, wrenching it past the membrane and up into the open air.

A parasite, a grey slug-shrimp thing plated with thin beetle-like carapace, covered with little barbs and hooks and wriggling legs.

Except Hringewindla's parasite was the size of a cargo ship.

Sheets of rank mucus fell from the parasite like rain. Hringewindla's tentacles gripped it so hard that flakes of carapace cracked off and fell through the air, large enough to flatten us all; we were only saved by the sheer sizes and distances involved, and perhaps by Hringewindla's care toward the weird little apes who had ventured inside his own body.

"Fuck me blind," Nicole whimpered.

"No thank you, detective," said Sevens. "You must find a special friend for that."

"What?"

Sevens' moment of absurdity helped short circuit Nicole's instinctive panic, which was lucky because I couldn't help. I was lost deep in the rapture of shared victory, a feedback loop from Hringewindla's own sense of violation and rage. He was very, very angry, with this thing that had the gall to invade his body. He'd seen off much worse in the distant past, nightmares this little gnat couldn't even dream of. In my mind's eye, the old crippled man with the crutches and the bent back was clutching a gutting knife.

Hringewindla slammed the parasite against the ground with two tentacles, like a man killing a fish by smashing it against the side of a boat. It was like a bomb going off. The ground shook. Grey meat splattered like an earth-slide of blood and guts. Fragments of grey carapace cracked off and spun away in all directions — except toward us, carefully blocked by the third tentacle.

Far off to our right, the parasite was like a new mountain range of ruined shell and pulped meat. It writhed and shook, pinned by two vast tentacles, making a pitiful effort to drag itself away.

But then the bubble-servitors descended upon it, like a cloud of bees, or perhaps a shoal of piranhas. They swarmed every exposed

scrap of flesh, pressing in close, covering the parasite with semi-transparent bubbles.

A horrible hissing, popping, fizzing sound filled the air, louder and louder. Moments later, the parasite stopped struggling, and lay still.

A smell like cooked meat filled the air, rancid and rotten.

Silence slowly returned, like the world filtering back after an avalanche. The crackle and pop of carbonising meat went on like a distant bonfire, joined briefly by a long, slow slurping sound, the sound of Hringewindla's membrane repairing itself, sealing his snake-knot core inside once again. Our own panting, shocked breathing finally filled my ears. Nicole looked like she wanted to curl up in a ball and stop thinking. I was thrumming with sympathetic rightness and shared disgust, nodding at Hringewindla even though he probably had no idea what the gesture meant.

Praem raised a fist.

"Kaiju fight-o," she said.

Nicole burst out laughing, a bit too hard, grimacing through her teeth. Evelyn sighed and groaned into her hand.

"I ... " I croaked more like a lizard than a human being, then cleared my throat and tried again. "Well done, um, well done Hringewindla. Thank you. I ... uh, I don't know what I was expecting."

"What need does a god have of mortal help?" Sevens asked. She shot me a sideways look and I read it instantly. *Except me*, she seemed to say.

"Exactly," Evelyn managed to squeeze out, wrinkling her nose at the terrible meaty stench. "Hringewindla is much larger than us, for a start. Though, Heather, he hasn't hurt himself doing that, has he?"

I blinked several times as the idea descended through my subconscious.

An image returned like a bubble of swamp gas floating up from the murky depths: the crippled old man, cleaning his knife, licking fresh blood from his yellowed teeth. He winked at me.

"I think he's just fine," I said.

We all took a moment to gather our wits and share exhausted looks.

Marmite slowly crept out from beside the ancient church and got close enough to wrap a bony tentacle around my leg.

“Good boy,” I murmured, absently patting him with a tentacle of my own.

“So ... is that it?” Nicole asked, putting her hands on her hips and staring out at the massive dead parasite, like a beached whale. Beneath the semi-transparent layer of bubble-servitors, the grey carapace and burst flesh were slowly turning black. “That lifts the whole nightmare, that’s it?” She snorted and shook her head.

“Listen to me, wow, ‘is that it?’ like we didn’t just watch a kaiju fight.” She shot me a look. “And you were so certain this wouldn’t be a Godzilla situation.”

“Kaiju fight,” said Praem. She almost seemed excited, though no less impassive than always.

“I have been known to be wrong,” I said, still a little dazed.

“Why is everything so bloody big?” Nicole asked. She gazed up at the huge soap bubble with its three tendrils, still towering over us and pumping out that purple light. “Your great big caterpillar thing, in Camelot, that was big too. Why is everything so massive?”

“Gods are big,” said Praem.

“Not always,” said Sevens. Then she added, almost like an afterthought, “The nightmare is lifted.”

“What about all the others?” I asked. “Oh, Raine!” I fumbled my mobile phone from my pocket, hands still shaking with adrenaline. Inside my head, Hringewindla leaned over my shoulder to have a look. But there was no signal, not down here in the bowels of the earth and half outside of reality. “Oh, oh no. If she’s been freed, she’ll be looking for me.”

“I suspect we’ll be hearing from them soon enough,” said Sevens.

“Wait wait wait,” Nicole said. “What about all the other parasites? Or is this like a Dracula’s castle thing?” She thumbed at the giant dead parasite.

“Dracula’s castle?” I asked, blinking in confusion. “And, no, um ... Hringewindla is dealing with the ones inside his family. His cult, I mean. Right now. I think. It’s hard to process what any of this means, I’m sorry.”

“What about the one inside me?” Nicole tapped her chest.

“It’s dead,” said Sevens. “Parasitic proximity.” She gestured at the mountain of blackening meat with her umbrella. “The larger one took precedence. No doubt it would have tried to re-jump the species gap, back to us, if we had continued to communicate.”

“So ... so I’ve got a dead thing wedged in my chest?” Nicole swallowed, going pale, one hand pressed to her breastbone.

“No. It has reverted to information.” Sevens nodded once to her, a slightly amused look in the arch of her eyebrows — or was that just my imagination. “If it had died while you were Outside, that would have been different.”

“Then where are we now?” Nicole gestured around us.

“Inside Hringewindla,” I answered on reflex.

Nicole gestured angrily at the dead parasite again. “Then why was that one not information?!”

Evelyn sighed. “I keep telling you, detective. Don’t think about it.”

Nicole threw up her hands, but she laughed with undeniable relief.

Inside my mind, down in a subconscious place I’d never known about before, Hringewindla and I were having a kind of conversation.

It wasn’t conducted via words or speech, but images and ideas. I didn’t have to vocalise, and he didn’t have to explain himself. The withered old man with the leg braces and the gutting knife was busy dicing up the grey-fleshed parasites that had invaded the minds of his friends.

I asked him if he wanted help. Real help. He was terribly disabled, after all, and even if I couldn’t stretch brain-math that far, I felt compelled to offer. He was alien and gigantic, had almost killed us by mistake, and infested human minds with an irresistible need for information, but he was hardly comparable with the worst that Outside had to offer.

He turned me down with a twinkle in his eye and a creased smile on his papery face. Even if I patched the hole in his shell, there was so little of him left now. So much flesh to re-create, so much of him lost. And would it really be him? He wanted safety and security

now, not more risk. He was so very old and very tired, but very comfortable here.

Was there any other way I could help?

Yes, oh yes, little ape. Little squid, I am sorry, I apologise. These old eyes are not what they once were. Little squid, you can help, by not cutting off Hringewindla from his friends. His interface with the world. His eyes and ears and life beyond this shell. Don't be so cruel to them. Please.

In an imaginary space that was not a space at all, I patted the hand of an old and slightly confused man. He went on slicing up dead meat, angry with the person who dared to meddle with his people.

Mages. Dealt with plenty of them before, haven't we? Edward Lilburne? Mm. No idea where you might find him. Good luck though.

Back out in reality, Evelyn was frowning at me. Her face was lit by that oily purple light.

"Heather?"

"Mm, I'm here. Just ... communicating." I blinked at her, pulling myself back from the crackling fireside.

"Time to go, I think," she said.

She wasn't talking to me.

The oily slug-ooze in my brain did not move. I swallowed, suddenly worried. The old man went on chopping and chopping and chopping.

"I ... I don't think he knows how to leave," I said. "I'm going to have to use brain-math, like I said, to remove the connection. I ... "

Why would you want to leave, little squid? Don't you want to be my friend too?

The old man turned towards me, inside my imagination, with the gutting knife in his hand.

and walked a crooked mile – 16.8

Alone in a cabin deep in the woods, far from the paved roads and familiar signposts of civilisation, in the dead of night beside a crackling fireplace, a pair of comfortable armchairs, and a butcher's toolbox of knives displayed on a bare wooden wall. Some of the knives are chipped and scratched from years of use, from biting into bone or sawing through cartilage. Others are worn down to nubs of their former glory from decades of re-sharpening. But every blade is free of rust, clean and cared for, trophies of the hand that made the stroke and sliced the meat and severed the tendons.

Alone with a disabled old man, bent-backed and shrunken, skin dry and papery and yellowed like parchment, his hair and beard a scraggly mess, his legs braced by steel and plastic to support his crumbling bones, with crutches under his armpits to help him hobble about his reduced and narrow world, the inside of this single cabin.

Alone with an old man, clutching a well-used knife in his hand, asking why I didn't want to be his friend.

It was like a scene from one of the horror movies that I refused to watch with Raine, not the silly, comfortable, over-the-top Hammer Horror style at all.

Except I wasn't actually there. I wasn't experiencing any of that with my real senses. These images were merely my human imagination doing the best it could to frame and process the wordless conversation I was holding with Hringwindla. This was how my mind interpreted direct contact between me and an Outsider god.

My physical body, the 'real' me — whatever that meant anymore — was still standing inside the heart of his vast and ravaged shell, next to the shrivelled remains of his fleshy core, the gigantic snake-knot inside the purple membrane, and the three tentacles he had extended beyond that final barrier.

The kindly old man gripping the knife was actually a blob of Outsider flesh the size of a football stadium.

He was inside my head in a very literal sense — Hringewindla's contact medium, a slug of black ooze, had slipped along the inside of one tentacle and crawled up my spine until I'd let it past my own final barrier. Now it lay across the physical fabric of my brain, soaked into my grey matter like a film of oily slime, sluicing between my neurons. It should have felt disgusting enough to make me retch and scream; on the edge of my awareness, abyssal instinct twitched and flexed with a desire to scratch at my scalp, bore a hole in my own skull, and remove this infestation. But Hringewindla had quieted that disgust, wrapped me in warm comfort and reassurance, and made having a brain-slug seem almost normal.

Alone with an Outsider, in my head.

Except I wasn't alone, not really. I was never alone anymore, not unless I chose to be.

Evelyn must have seen the flare of panic behind my eyes, the sudden alarm when Hringewindla turned to me with that metaphorical knife in one hand. He wasn't the only one holding a weapon. Eevee brought her bone-wand up in both hands again, contorting her fingers across the surface of scrimshawed magical symbols. She stumbled, mishandling her own walking stick, but Praem was there to catch her and hold her tight.

"Heather?" Evelyn hissed between gritted teeth, eyes blazing. "He doesn't know how to leave? Then I will make it very clear to him. You hear me in there? Do you?"

I knew very well she wasn't talking to me.

"Ah," said Sevens, with a wet click of her lips.

Marmite tightened his grip around my left thigh, like a hound trying to stay close to his master.

"Hey, what?" Nicole said, suddenly alarmed again. She turned away from the sight of Hringewindla's removed and dead parasite, lying far off to one side like a slowly blackening mountain range of grey flesh and cracked carapace. It lay beneath deep drifts of bubble-servitors still cooking the thing to make sure it was inert. The sound of sizzling meat still filled the air. "What's the panic? What's going on now?"

“Our new friend has overstayed his welcome,” said Sevens. “Which is a pity, because he deserves the company.”

“Heather?” Evelyn hissed my name again. I swear she moved like she was going to bonk me on the head with her bone-wand.

“Wait, wait, please, wait!” I snapped at everybody, putting my hands and several of my tentacles up to get them to stop talking at me for a second. “I can’t concentrate on two things at once. Let me talk with him, please.”

Evelyn looked at me like I didn’t know my own mind, like I was suggesting I should go walking alone in an abandoned and semi-flooded mineshaft. She looked ready to knock me out and solve this herself, probably with far more violence.

“Evee, I’m going to be fine,” I blurted out. “If the worst comes to the worst, I can always—”

“Everybody grab a tentacle,” Evelyn spoke over me, then glanced at Nicole. “Mostly you, detective.”

“W-what?” I blinked in confusion.

“In case of emergency,” Evelyn said through clenched teeth. She nodded sideways at the trio of giant white tentacles far up in the air above our heads, still dripping with vile fluids from Hringewindla’s dead parasite.

It took me a moment to catch on.

What Evelyn meant is that I might have to Slip us out, and quickly.

The old man inside my mind tilted his head to one side. He didn’t understand that at all. He didn’t understand how I could leave.

“O-oh!” I said out loud, for the others. “Um, go ahead, yes, uh, feel free, tentacles for everyone, I suppose ... ”

We then commenced what had to be one of the most awkward group hugs in all history, still plagued by that toxic purple light making every exposed inch of skin itch. I wrapped a single tentacle around Evelyn and Praem combined. Evee helped by pinning it under one armpit, like I was securing her into the seat of a roller coaster. Nicole grimaced and politely allowed me to coil a tentacle around her arm, a firm handshake to anchor her if I had to leave in a hurry. Sevens shrugged minutely and said something about being

fine on her own, but she graciously accepted the tip of one tentacle in her free hand, like a dancing partner. Marmite already had a very firm grip around my thigh.

“Well?” Evelyn said. “Speak to him, then.”

“I think he’s just confused, just doesn’t understand. He’s never left somebody’s head before, he doesn’t have the concept ... ”

What need for confusion? We’re friends now, we’re getting to know each other, and I can tell you’ve got so many interesting and fascinating stories to share. You’ve been to all sorts of places and met all sorts of strange people, people I could never even imagine. The others, my other friends, they’re all very interesting and sweet and Amanda is very affectionate, but I would also like to hear your stories. Stay by the fire? Why do you need to go back out into the dark?

The old man still held the knife, staring at me with eyes sunken in great masses of wrinkled flesh and liver-spotted skin. He smiled and showed the stubs of his teeth.

“Those aren’t my thoughts,” I sighed out loud, staring up at the vast bulk of the real, physical Hringwindla, to keep myself grounded.

But they could be my thoughts, couldn’t they? They could be our thoughts. Like Amanda’s thoughts are my thoughts and your thoughts and—

“Stop, please,” I said out loud. “I’m not one of yours.”

Alone with an Outsider in my head? Even Evelyn didn’t really understand what that meant.

I’d been here before.

Inside the image that was both metaphor and reality, the dialogue of electrical impulse and pneuma-somatic mind-link, the cabin in the woods that was not real but also more real than my physical body, I unfurled my self-image.

Unlike physical reality, there were no boundaries, no limits, no pesky bone structure or blood vessels or nerve endings to worry about, no risk of massive haemorrhage or organ damage or strangling myself on my own umbilical cord. In here, I was unbounded.

I uncoiled six, then twelve, then two dozen tentacles, creating for myself a halo of barbed and venomous threat display. I blinked three sets of eyelids, layering species of vision than no human eyeball could receive, no human brain process. I plated my soft and vulnerable skin with bio-steel and chitinous carapace, flushed the gaps with toxins, and coloured myself with warning pigments in pink and red and yellow. I rammed my muscles full of excess fibres and anchored them beneath a growing exoskeleton. I sharpened my teeth to razor points and hollowed my tongue for a darting stinger and felt a tail sprout from the base of my spine as the vertebrae extended into spikes. Spines sprouted from my skin, the gaps between my fingers filled in with webbing, and my voice became an abyssal hiss from the darkest pit of my own childhood terrors.

Hringewindla's little gutting knife shook like a leaf; I reached out with one tentacle and took it from him.

"I already told you," I said in a voice not remotely human, "you're inside my head on sufferance."

The little old man ducked and cringed, fumbling his crutches as his knees quivered. He wiped grey parasite blood on his jumper with shaking hands. He hobbled away from me and all but collapsed into a chair, burying his face in his arms.

In reality, I breathed out a shuddering breath; I wasn't sure if any of that was going to work until I'd taken the risk. After all, the real Hringewindla was very large, no matter how much scary-squid I could channel. He could have called my bluff.

But he really was a terrified old man.

Evelyn was looking at me with terrible alarm, eyes wide, lips tight. Nicole seemed a little worried too.

"Ah?" I croaked.

"I know you make strange noises sometimes," Evelyn said, "but that was a little disconcerting, even for you."

"Ah?" I blinked several times and cleared my throat — which felt like untying a knot. "Oh, um, did I say that part out loud?"

Nicole forced a very awkward laugh. "Less 'say' and more 'gargle with acid'."

Sevens nodded with gentle agreement, though I got the sense she

somehow approved.

“Pretty voice,” said Praem.

I cleared my throat again, blushing and fussing with my hands at my neck, like I wanted to reach in and straighten out my vocal chords.

“Well?” Evelyn snapped.

“Uh ... I’m pretty sure he’s absolutely terrified of me,” I said. “He genuinely doesn’t understand how to leave my head. I think I can do it myself though, but as soon as I do, we’ll lose the connection. No more communication. And he’s so ... old.”

Nicole pointed at Hringewindla, the real Hringewindla, the giant tentacle monster cone-snail from Outside. “That, that is scared of you?”

“Sort of. Yes.”

She sighed and pulled a very odd smile. “Remind me to bring you along on my next dodgy job, I guess.”

“Absolutely not,” Evelyn said.

“Hey, hey.” Nicole put her hands up. The gesture pulled one of my tentacles with her. “It was a joke, yeah? A joke. I’m not gonna take a uni student on a stakeout. Even one of you lot.”

“... right. Yes. Of course.” Evelyn cleared her throat and looked back to me. “Well, Heather? Get on with it so we can leave.”

“Um ... ”

I’d made it sound too simple.

Back in the deep dark forest of the mind, I was staring down at that withered old man, huddled in an armchair that dwarfed his twisted body. I couldn’t hate him, or even be afraid of him, not really. He was barely even still here, just a scrap of memories and leathery old flesh, hanging on in this hole in the ground for a few more centuries. He was desperate for experience, for a life beyond this. He’d found it in the companionship of creatures so much smaller than himself. Who were we to tell him that was wrong? Nobody was being coerced here. Were they? I didn’t think they were.

In a distant and difficult way, he reminded me of Maisie.

So I told him about her.

Not with words, of course, but in a slew of emotions and images, human principles and human thoughts. I told this Outsider god about my twin sister. I told him all about how we'd grown up together, so very similar and alike, physically identical twins wearing each others' faces. He looked up as I began to explain, the fear on his face replaced with a hungry look, ravenous for information and experience. But when I told him what had happened to us, his curiosity turned grey. His lower lip quivered. His hands clutched at the arms of his chair. I told him a little about Wonderland. He ducked his head and shivered, whimpering. I told him about the Eye and he mewled, please no.

I told him about the bad years of madness and pain, but then I also told him about Raine, and Evelyn, and the others, and how far I'd come, and what I was planning to do. He listened, nodding slowly, staring up at me with those glassy eyes filmed with cataracts.

And that's why you don't want to come with me. You don't want to go to Wonderland, even inside my head.

You know what I am.

I wasn't quite sure if that was my thought, or his, but his liver-spotted head bobbed up and down in his chair.

He was really trying — and not just because he was terrified of my razor-tipped tentacles and my maw full of sharp teeth. He was trying to absorb, to comprehend, to relate. But as he nodded his head and blinked those shrunken and rheumy eyes and smiled a papery little smile, I got the impression he didn't really understand at all.

Hringewindla did not understand what a 'twin' was, or why I cared; I had a vague sense that to him we were as difficult to tell apart as a pair of ants. Can a human tell if two gnats are identical twins?

But he listened anyway, fascinated and deeply interested, trying to imagine what life was like for me. Even if he failed, the attempt was real.

When I finished, Hringewindla the old man opened his dry and thin-lipped mouth with a sound like dusty parchment, behind the tangle of thick grey beard.

And he told me a story too. A story of jumbled sense impressions and powerful, raw, unfiltered emotion.

Outsiders — true Outsiders, beings dredged from the deeps of the abyss to impose their self-hood upon the myriad worlds beyond Earth — do not experience memory or sensory processing in the same way as a human being. They don't even experience those things in a consistent way to each other. But I had stretched my own sense of self so far beyond human baseline. Hringewindla's stuttering, halting, rambling tale built his own perspective for me, from elements he did not understand. Any other human mind may have frayed under the strain, found it impossible to separate the sensory inputs into ones that we could actually process.

But I did. So he told me a story.

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Half a mile up, through senses that had no human analogue, Hringewindla looked down on a gathering of his friends.

The inside of his shell was identical to how we had found it, but the human was different. There was no portaloo back then, no little petrol-driven generator, no modern camping supplies. The tents were a much older design as well, archaic two-peg style shelters from the blasting light of his presence.

One small scrap of thinking flesh stood forward from the gathering, past the line of red paint. They'd used red paint back then, too.

Amanda Hopton, nine years old, dressed in a scarlet robe, hands bound and eyes blindfolded, the kind of bloody-altar-and-ritual-chanting business that Evelyn had been so certain the cult must still practice. And they had, only a few decades earlier.

Hringewindla did not understand terms like 'human sacrifice'.

Amanda Hopton, a tiny shivering figure, no older than I had been when the Eye had taken me and Maisie away from reality. Hringewindla had already soaked deep into the whorls and wrinkles of her brain; he knew her, he'd known her since she was six months old, he'd cradled her and rocked her to sleep and not understood any of it, except this weird mewling puppy needed to be held and encouraged to exist. But now her head was full of enforced devotion, the religious fervour of other friends that he didn't understand either, a feedback loop of the darkest corner of human

culture dumping toxic waste back into this Outsider god. Our toxicity. Our madness. Not his.

Hringewindla's memories didn't identify the other members of the cult there that day, not as individuals. But I could.

I spotted Christine Hopton, another little girl only a few years older than her doomed sister, hiding her eyes in a woman's skirts, a woman holding a third baby in her arms and trying not to weep.

Two figures led a rising chant by the stone altar in the ancient church, a man and a woman, both of them old and sinewy, stripped half-naked, painted with symbols in black tar on their flesh. Others joined them in praise for their god, urging him to accept their offering of new flesh for his ravaged form.

The family resemblance was unmistakable, but I didn't need to rely on human facial recognition. I could dip in to Hringewindla's memories with senses I did not possess, I could read their pheromones, their bodily history, their DNA.

The man and the woman, screaming and chanting, were Twil's great-grandparents.

But then everything had changed, very quickly. Several of Hringewindla's friends had gone away. The noise had spiked, then stopped. The urging to *eat eat eat* had faded.

The images he fed me made no sense to him. He held them out to me like photographs of a strange dance from a foreign culture he'd only ever seen in badly explained television documentaries.

A man with a very old rifle in his hands, who looked like he knew how to use it.

A striking family resemblance to Twil, in the face and the compact frame, but mostly the sheer physical confidence.

An argument — the man with the gun on one side, the half-naked great-grandparents on the other, going red in the face with rage at his interruption. Everyone gesticulating at the tiny, shivering child, Amanda Hopton, past the red line and waiting for the final communion with their god.

I watched Hringewindla's memories as he showed me Twil's grandfather shoot his own parents.

There were six corpses that day. The old heads of the cult.
Patricide, matricide. Nobody else had guns. The cult, cowed.

There would be no more human sacrifices.

The man with the rifle stepped over the red line too and scooped up little Amanda in one arm. A new prayer blossomed in Hringewindla's mind.

Hringewindla lowered the photographs and stared at them again, lost in memories he didn't understand. He didn't know why several friends had gone away, or what 'murder' was, or why a parent might slaughter the most repulsive elements of their own community to save their child's life. All he knew is that Amanda touched his outstretched tentacle with a little hand and he wouldn't be fed any more thinking flesh.

He knew this was important. That's why he told me. But he had no idea why.

= =

"Heather?" Evelyn hissed.

Out in reality, only a moment or two had passed.

"Ah ... "

"Heather, you're crying. What is happening in there?"

"Crying, yes, I know," I said, sniffing back tears and scrubbing my eyes on the back of my already bloody sleeve, smearing the earlier blood-tears around even worse than before. I was already a mess, more didn't matter right now. "I'm learning just how much Hringewindla doesn't understand, that's all. It's ... well, he's telling me a story."

"Stories can be lies," Evelyn said gently.

"Not from one so old, I think," said Sevens. She was gazing up at the real Hringewindla, her face lit by that purple light, shifting like oil on water. Evelyn kept scratching her own scalp and hands, but Sevens seemed largely immune to the irritating quality of the light.

"He doesn't understand anything," I said. "About us, I mean. He's ... oh, um."

Hringewindla's confusion was not over.

Inside my imagination, the extended and slightly tortured metaphor of the old disabled man did the equivalent of reaching beneath his chair and pulling out a photo album. He opened the cover and held the album up to me with shaking hands, asking a question that my mind could not even process into human terms, a question so wordless and ultimate that I felt a pang of sympathy deep in my chest.

Twil, it was all Twil.

Being born, growing up, seen from the eyes of every single person in her family, a scrap of thinking flesh that he didn't know, that he couldn't know. He knew her because he knew all her family. He knew all these people who loved her, everyone in her life. She was wrapped at the core of so much care. But he didn't know her.

Why? I managed to form the question, as best I could.

He'd tried to, once, a long time ago. But the man with the gun — Twil's grandfather, I realised, old and grey in this memory, leathery and sinewy with age and determination — had done something to her, made her poisonous to him. He recoiled from a memory of snapping canine jaws and sharp, raking claws, hiding within her like a secret second self ready to tear his connection to shreds.

But who is she? He asked me the question and my answer was not enough.

"That's Twil," I said out loud. "It's just Twil."

"Heather, what?" Evelyn said.

"Sorry, I ... he ... he doesn't know who Twil is."

Evelyn gave me a scrunched frown. "What? Don't talk nonsense, she's ... oh. Oh." Evelyn cleared her throat. "Then I was right."

"About her grandfather's motivations, yes." I sniffed hard, but tears were running down my cheeks.

Twil did not become a werewolf as a teenager. The seeds were planted when she was barely an infant, against her parents' consent, to keep the god out of her head. She wasn't a footsoldier at all. She was an experiment in freedom.

I did the one thing I'd been resisting this whole time, assured at last that it was not a trap. I walked over to the crackling fireplace and

sat down in the other armchair, opposite the metaphor of Hringewindla.

That wasn't even his real name, just a description of him in Old English, the best that some intrepid fool had managed to choke out upon first discovering him down here. His real name wasn't a word, obviously. Trying to speak it with a human mouth would have caused terrible pain, and probably hurt the ears to hear it said aloud. But it meant something like 'spiralled explorer'. He'd chosen it himself, a long time ago.

He showed me other relics that lay about his isolated cabin in the woods, not just the knives. He had a piece of shell wrapped in a handkerchief — not a piece of his shell, but that of his best friend, or mate, or double, I couldn't quite understand. He had a coin, a little five-pointed star made of greenish soapstone, taken from somewhere that had used currency, somewhere he'd once visited where the locals had liked him very much. He had a dead rat preserved in a jar, an old pet from somewhere else, never buried because she had asked not to be left for the worms. He had a collection of dice carved from the bones of a mentor, a cracked and chipped cup that had held the blood of a saint, and a wooden puzzle box that he still didn't know how to open, gifted to him by a sinister figure in his youth.

Were these physical objects, held somewhere within his snake-knot core? Or were they just metaphors for memories?

I asked the question but it made no sense to him. I decided not to think too hard.

Eventually I made the mistake of asking how he had gotten here, to Earth.

The story was a blast of incomprehensible memory, of a fight on a scale I could not comprehend, not without totally abandoning my person-hood and plunging into the abyss. I listened politely, nodding along to an old man's war story that meant nothing to me, full of sound and fury but no sense.

Out in reality, a hand squeezed mine, and pulled me back.

"Heather," Evelyn said, peering into my face, far too close for comfort. "Heather, that is all well and good, but he needs to leave your mind, now. Are you listening to me in there, Hringewindla?"

You need to leave Heather's mind."

I pulled back from Evelyn, suddenly self-conscious at our faces being only inches apart.

But Hringewindla didn't understand. It was like asking one of us to cease all communication — not just to stop talking, but to stop body language, all sound, even the reflection of light on our skin and clothes.

"He's not going to resist or try to hurt me," I said. "But I am going to have to remove him by force. If at all."

"If at all?" Evelyn echoed back at me.

"He's just lonely ... "

"He's not a dog that's followed you home," she snapped right in my face. "Heather, he's messing with the inside of your head. He's not meant to be in there. Sevens, for pity's sake, help me here."

But Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight merely blinked slowly and sighed a sigh full of melancholy. "I cannot deny others the balm of her attention. You should understand that better than myself, Eevee."

Evelyn slammed to a stop, mouth working but no sound coming out. It was the first time Sevens had called her 'Eevee'.

"You best be bloody sure he's not going to resist," Nicole said, leaping in before I could start blushing at the deeper meaning of Sevens' words. Nicole pointed up at the three giant tentacles standing tall as skyscrapers above us.

"He's not ... what we thought," I managed to say. "He's not."

But that didn't mean he wouldn't crush us in confused pain.

Could I remove the oily sludge from between the neurons of my own brain? Absolutely. All I had to do was allow my own abyssal immune system inside my grey matter. Modifying the selective permeability of my own blood-brain barrier was not beyond the limits of abyssal biological modification. I had purged Ooran Juh's influence with relative ease, and that had been a fast-growing rot in flesh and soul. Hringewindla's contact surface was nothing by comparison, a gentle hand on my shoulder. I could melt and re-metabolise it in seconds, I had no doubt.

But he was old and sweet and very confused, very tired, very

curious. It would burn him, scorch his flesh, make him retract his hand. I wasn't even sure I wanted to do it, but I had to. My mind was my own, no matter how much I had enjoyed this little chat.

I tried to tell him I had to go, tried to explain this might hurt. I asked him please not to lash out.

He stared at me with gummy, sunken eyes, and did not comprehend. He wanted to show me more of his special treasures, hobbling around his cabin, animated and happy now.

"You know, you should really visit my father," said Sevens.

"A-ah?" I turned to her, my eyes brimming with tears. She nodded to herself.

Inside my mind, the old man paused, as if hearing a voice from nowhere.

"My father does not get many chances to spend time with those of his own calibre," Sevens went on. "And a good show can always invigorate a degraded mind. What do you say, Hringewindla? Would you like to visit the palace?"

Inside my imagination, an image floated forth, a gracious refusal, an embarrassed old man being modest about his social circles — that being, none at all.

"Sevens," I hissed, "I-I need to concentrate, I need to make him understand this might hurt, it might be a kind of severing, a—"

"Heather," Evelyn snapped. "Just take us all Outside."

"But then we'd be abandoning him!" I blurted out. "And I need to make him see, before I do it."

"A visit to the stage," Sevens purred. "To the backstage, to back rooms of—"

"Whoa, hey," Nicole said. "Outside again?"

Evelyn snapped. "You owe this thing nothing, Heather. Get us out of here."

I almost sobbed. "If I can't communicate properly with him, then what hope do I have for communicating with the Eye? I can't just leave and—"

With a gentle puff-pop of displaced air and a tap-tap of pink converse shoes on the surface of Hringewindla's shell, a floaty jellyfish flutter of blue, pink, and white appeared in front of us.

"Lozzie!" I cried.

"Heathy!" she cheered, throwing her hands in the air. "There you are! Found you found you!"

Lozzie was a splash of vibrant colour against the bone-white dead surfaces of Hringewindla's shell, wrapped in her pastel poncho, her hair all fluffed up, blonde strands all over the place like she'd been dancing outdoors in a storm. She had the goofiest grin on her face, eyes so bloodshot she looked ready to sleep, hands bunched in her poncho to flap it about. Hringewindla's toxic purple light did not seem to touch her, as if she was lit by some other, invisible source, her hues and shades inviolate from exterior interference.

She was also wearing nothing on her lower half except her shoes. Luckily her poncho was long enough to cover her hips. Bare legs poked out below the hem, unselfconsciously nude.

"Oh shit," Evelyn snapped, eyes whipping over to Nicole and then the giant, dead parasite that Hringewindla had ripped out of himself.

"Calm yourself, magician," said Sevens. "The little one is untouched. The parasites are all dead."

Lozzie didn't give a hoot about parasites, dead or otherwise. She was too busy throwing herself at me in the most wriggly, fidgety hug I'd ever experienced. She somehow got in between everyone else, avoided all my tentacles, and wrapped her arms around me, but then wouldn't stop moving and making purring noises and jiggling one leg. It was like being hugged by a cat which wasn't sure if it wanted to be picked up or not.

"Loz- ah- Lozzie!" I hugged her back, laughing but concerned. "What- how did you—"

"Raine called me!" Lozzie chirped, then hopped back a step like a bird considering a curious worm, tilting her head to one side, giggling all the while. "She didn't know where you'd gotten to! Then she called me and Jan but Jan didn't want to come so I went beeeeeeeep and went on my own to Raine, because I know Raine so well it's easy to find her. And it's chaos! Everyone is there. Twil's

family too. So then I came to find you! And ... ooooh, hello-hello!”

Lozzie ducked her head and waved to Marmite. The huge squid-spider pressed himself lower to the ground and more firmly behind me, as if suddenly shy.

“This is Marmite, yes, um, Lozzie—”

“Hi Marmite!” Lozzie waved with both hands. Marmite bobbed one bony tentacle back at her.

“Lozzie,” Praem intoned. That got her attention, head up, eyes sleepy and bloodshot, but listening clearly. Praem gestured at me and Lozzie’s eyes followed the gesture to the end of Praem’s fingers, again like a cat.

“Lozzie,” I said, trying not to explode with worry, “are the others okay? Raine and Zheng and Twil? And Twil’s family? There were kids there, too, little children trapped in the nightmare.”

“Mmmm-mmmmm!” Lozzie closed both eyes and nodded like she was a bobble-head figurine, far more than necessary. “Nobody was bleeding and nobody was crying. Bubbles everywhere though! Zooming about!”

“The bubble-servitors,” Evelyn said, jaw clenched tight. “Lozzie, you’re certain there wasn’t anything untoward happening?” She didn’t even wait for an answer before turning to me. “We have to get back right now, before something else goes wrong.”

“Y-yes,” I said, trying to feel confidence that I didn’t believe.

“It’s fiiiiiiiiine,” Lozzie said, eyes still closed, as if she could see without sight.

“Lozzie,” Evelyn said sharply. “We are in the middle of a crisis. Are you still high?”

Nicole sighed, sounding sort of wistful. “Looks like it to me.”

“Yes!” Lozzie shot one hand into the air like an overeager student ready to answer an easy question. I started laughing, all the tension of the last few hours peeling off me under the force of the Lozzie pressure-washer.

“Wish I wasn’t sober right now,” Nicole added. “Don’t suppose I could get some of that good stuff later, hey?”

Turning to Evelyn had finally forced Lozzie's eyes out across the rest of the plain of bone-shell and twisted pillars, out toward the vast mountainside of dead parasite, still sizzling gently as the bubble-servitors cooked every inch of grey meat to make sure it was dead. Lozzie's mouth opened, slack with sleepy-eyed fascination as she took in the surroundings, as she stared at the distant hole in Hringewindla's shell, and the vast scorch and claw marks that had ruined his once great flesh, so long ago.

"Ooooooooooh," she went, as if we were standing in a theme park.

"How are you not freaked out by this?" Nicole asked. "Is it the weed?"

"Be gay, do crimes," Lozzie whispered as she looked up at Hringewindla himself, the vast purple dome and the snake-knot inside.

"Oh yeah, sure," Nicole scoffed. "That explains everything."

"Be gay," said Praem. "Be polite."

"Usually better than my solutions, sure," Evelyn muttered.

"Hey hey!" Lozzie suddenly flapped her poncho high in both hands, shouting up at the real, physical Hringewindla. Luckily we all discovered she was not nude beneath the poncho, but was wearing a pair of pink shorts I'd never seen before. I had the sudden and unshakable knowledge that those shorts belonged to Jan. "Hey you! Woaaaaa, you're big! Yeah!"

Inside my mind, Hringewindla-the-old-man stood up out of his chair suddenly. He smiled like he was seeing an old friend he hadn't clapped eyes on in decades.

"Um, Lozzie?" I said, clearing my throat. "Do you and Hringewindla know each other?"

"Mm?" Lozzie turned back over her shoulder to look at me, chin popping up over the corner of her poncho, sleepy-lidded eyes blinking like an owl in the light. "No? I've never seen him before, not until riiiiight now."

Second-hand pride welled up inside me. The old hunter, his knives worn down, his bones like dead wood, his flesh failing, drew a breath deeper than he had in centuries. Something about this meeting was revitalising him.

“Wait, wait a second, please,” I said, struggling to keep up. “Lozzie, are you communicating with him?”

Lozzie answered with a song.

She turned back to Hringewindla, opened her mouth, and tilted her head back so she was facing directly upward. Her eyes fluttered shut as she let out three long, high-pitched, ethereal notes of warbling beauty. For one strange moment she was frozen on the spot, neck stretched upward like a swan, body held poised like a statue as the notes trailed off. Her angelic voice made me blink back tears. Nicole gasped in surprise. Evelyn cleared her throat.

Then Lozzie adjusted her posture like a dancer switching to a different freeze frame, or a puppet yanked into a different configuration. She swayed to one side, stopped, and sang again, a ghostly and almost inhuman sound, but still girlish and sweet.

Inside my mind, Hringewindla was nodding and crying.

“The little one has that effect,” Sevens murmured. “There is a reason she is so beloved by the *kami*.”

Lozzie’s singing went on for several minutes, stop-start as she paused to sway and lurch, as if she was searching for the right acoustic angle. The old man inside my head stood up straight and put more strength into his arms to pull himself up on his crutches. The clouds in his eyes seemed to clear away.

Eventually, Lozzie trailed off and sighed a little sigh. She gazed out at the distant hole in the shell for a moment, her giddy high transmuted into slow and soft melancholy.

“It’s okay,” she murmured to nobody in particular. “It’s not that big.”

“Lozzie,” Evelyn said, clearing her throat and wiping a stray tear from her eyes. “We do need to leave. Sooner rather than later. And Heather has to get Hringewindla out of her head. Can you make sense to him for us? Communicate this?”

“I’m really afraid of hurting him,” I said. “Were you speaking with him just now? Is there anything we can do to make him understand?”

Lozzie bobbed her head from side to side, flapping her poncho like a stingray’s wings, building up steam again after her bout of

melancholy. Then she pivoted on one foot, spun toward me, and reached out to press my nose with her thumb.

“Boop!”

I laughed, tutted, and rolled my eyes. “Lozzie, that’s very cute, but it’s hardly the time for ... uh ... ”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight took my arm quickly. I suddenly gripped everything I could with my tentacles — Eevee, Lozzie, Praem, the ground, my own legs. My eyes bulged and my stomach clenched up like a fist. I gasped and heaved, flailing in panic.

The oily slug inside my brain was on the move.

Hringewindla’s contact medium gathered itself, leeching its own slick and slimy matter from between my neurons, sliding across the inside of my skull. I have felt a great many disgusting sensations in my life, from the sensory violence of Outside, to mage nonsense here in reality, from things I don’t understand growing inside my own body, to biting infected flesh away from the wounds of a lover. But the brain-slug won an award, a round of applause, and almost overpowered my no-vomiting techniques. How many people can say they’ve felt an alien god physically crawling across their brain?

Inside my imagination, the withered old man waved me a friendly goodbye. He turned toward somebody more his own size, somebody wrapped in a pentacolour pastel poncho.

But as the contact medium peeled away from my grey matter, the metaphor in my imagination collapsed like reality itself unravelling.

I was not talking to an old man at all, I was communicating with something so vast and so alien that the human mind could barely process the information. The warm blanket was pulled off my shoulders, the crackling fire went out, the walls of the cabin fell away, and I was in a void of churning self-hood that threatened to swamp me and drown me.

It was a good thing Sevens was holding me, and that Evelyn was wrapped in one of my tentacles. If I’d been alone, I think I would have ripped my own head open to get Hringewindla out.

Instead, Sevens held me like a steel vice. Somebody was shouting my name — Evelyn, probably — before being soothed by Lozzie’s giggling reassurances. I heaved and flailed and wanted to vomit up

my entire digestive tract to purge this sensation. A pair of very strong arms found my waist and helped to hold me up as I retched.

With a noise like unsticking a melted shoe from hot tarmac, Hringewindla's oil-slick brain-slug contact-medium detached from the inside of my skull and found its way through cells and tissue, down into my esophagus.

I hacked and coughed and choked, until Praem bent me over and slammed her hand against my back.

A glob of purple and white mucus shot from my mouth and splattered on the ground.

I hung there, wheezing for breath, watching the little blob of Hringewindla twitch and flex, like a deep-sea mollusc dragged up to the surface to die. Inside my mind, he was gone. The cabin in the woods, the surrounding night, the crackling fire, all of it was gone. Just me again, alone inside my own head. The relief was like a pulled tooth.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I wheezed as Praem and Evelyn both tried to handle me in different directions.

"Yay!" went Lozzie. She threw her arms up.

Before anybody could make a sensible suggestion, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight let go of me, took a half-step away, and ceased being human.

Hastur's Daughter reared up all of a sudden, beetle-black armour plates and yellow frills covering her body, her front a downy mat of soft fur, pincers and needle-legs braced against the shell-surface ground.

It had been bad enough when she'd been standing at a safe distance, but this mask change was up close and personal. Evelyn recoiled so hard she nearly sent us all sprawling with her. Nicole flinched and yelped and covered her mouth. Marmite yanked back and almost took my leg with him. Luckily Praem didn't care, she kept us anchored. Lozzie stared in open-mouthed awe and appreciation — I'd seen that look on her before, but it took me a moment to remember when. It was the exact same way she'd looked at Zheng's boobs.

Seven-Shades-of-Slick-and-Spiky reached down with one bone-like

hand, plucked the dying purple slug-thing from the ground, and popped it past her facial mandibles.

Small chitin plates moved in her throat. Her mouth-parts closed. She swallowed.

Then, just as suddenly, she was back to the Princess Mask, unruffled and starched. She shot us all a cool and collected look.

“My apologies,” she said. “I have sent that to my father.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then,” Evelyn said, dripping with sarcasm. “Perhaps next time you transform into an eight-foot alien monster, you can warn us all first?”

“Very pretty,” said Praem.

Lozzie was looking at Sevens like she was a pin-up model, biting her lower lip and twisting on one foot. I didn’t blame her. If we’d been anywhere else, I would have been having a very difficult and embarrassing conversation with Sevens right then.

But Sevens turned to Lozzie with a strict and unimpressed look. “Little one, you must warn us about this sort of thing in future. Not everyone has multiple breathing holes. Heather was in very mundane and boring danger.”

“Fucking right!” Evelyn snapped. “You could have choked her!”

“I didn’t know it would happen like that!” Lozzie protested, gone shrill, hands suddenly fluttering everywhere. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Heathy, I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay, Loz,” I croaked. Praem helped me to straighten up. Evelyn caught my eye, still brimming with misplaced anger. “Evee, she was just doing her best to help. She got Hringewindla out of my head. It worked.”

“Yes, and, well, good, okay!” Evelyn huffed, gritting her teeth and looking like she wanted to belt something with her walking stick — probably Sevens. Lozzie did a nervous, slow flinch away from her, hands curled into the fabric of her poncho.

I opened my mouth quickly. “You’re not actually angry at—”

“I’m not actually angry at—” Evelyn said at the exact same time.

We looked at each other. Evelyn sighed and averted her eyes.

from my cranium, it hadn't hurt Hringewindla — or at least she'd somehow communicated enough to stop him from lashing out in alienated pain. The three vast scaled tentacles hung placid in the air like a trio of seaweed fronds waving in slow current. The snake-knot inside his core slithered over itself in an endless dance of leviathan flesh. The bubble-membrane poured out toxic light, but had fully sealed itself once more, healing the self-inflicted parasite-removal wound.

"I don't think we need to do anything?" I said. "I ... think?"

Lozzie turned to look up at Hringewindla, still hugging one of my tentacles like it was a plushie. "I'll come see you. Yeah." She glanced back at me. "Can I come see him?"

"Do you want to?"

Lozzie nodded enthusiastically. "He's smart! He's got a looooooot of smarts, and he's feeling a lot better now! I think I can help him walk, maybe!"

"Walk?" Nicole echoed. "Uhhhh."

"It's a metaphor," I said.

"Nope!" Lozzie chirped.

"Like I said," Evelyn grumbled. "Don't think about it, detective. You'll be happier that way."

"Look, I'm trying my best not to think about much here," Nicole replied. "But that thing is still a giant squid-monster, alright? Can I think about that?"

"If you want," Evelyn grunted.

Lozzie was skipping around my side, trying to get close enough to pet Marmite. The squid-spider wasn't quite sure about her yet, but he didn't flee. But then Lozzie caught a hint of something in the air. She sniffed loudly.

"Why does it smell like chickens here?" she asked.

"I'll explain that part later," I sighed. "I think it's high time we left."

"Indeed," Evelyn agreed. "What are we doing, a round-trip through Camelot, or—"

“Ooh, ooh!” Lozzie bounced up on her heels, which made Marmite flinch. “I can take us straight back to Twil’s farmy-farm farm-place!”

Evelyn wanted to give her a look. I could see it in the tightness of her jaw. But she resisted, and I adored her for that.

“All right,” Evelyn said, sounding covertly unhappy about this. “We’ll take Lozzie’s way, it’s quicker and more direct. Nicole, be warned, this does tend to be a little more rough than Heather’s technique, so brace—”

Hringewindla wasn’t done yet.

With a deep thump of displaced air, one of his three vast tentacles descended toward us once again. Everyone froze in shock and horror; for a moment Evelyn scrambled for her bone-wand and Sevens went very still, about to switch masks. But then Lozzie cried out “It’s okay!” and she turned out to be right. Hringewindla’s tentacle slowed as it dipped, buffeting us with wind from above, but far gentler than before.

Down and down and down it came, until the skyscraper of white flesh hung level with us once again, facing us with a blunt tip of thick scales.

Lozzie let go of my tentacle and skipped forward. For one horrible moment it seemed as if that wall of flesh would swallow her, like she was vanishing into the distance. But then she stopped and bowed, as if with great respect. She held out both hands and touched the end of the tentacle, bowed again, and skipped back over to us, her poncho flapping as she came.

“For you!” she announced, and pressed an object into my hands.

It was the coin.

A little five-pointed star, made of greenish soapstone, about the size of a fifty pence piece. Hringewindla had shown me this, inside my imagination, a relic of somewhere he’d once visited. But that was all a metaphor. Wasn’t it?

I stared at the coin, then up at the snake-knot, and ached to ask him a dozen more questions.

“He says you might need it more than him, one day!” Lozzie chirped. “Because you might meet the people who gave it to him!”

“People ... ” I murmured. “Outsider people?”

Lozzie shrugged, giggling and flapping her hands, still stoned out of her mind.

“Sevens,” I said. “Do you know ... ?”

But the Yellow Princess shook her head. “To you I may seem well-travelled, but compared to the old man here, I have never ventured beyond the village where I was born.”

“Is he done?” Evelyn asked. Lozzie nodded, then turned to wave at the white scales of Hringewindla’s tentacle. He did not wave back, which was lucky because the pressure wave would probably have knocked us all over. “Good,” Evelyn said. “Then let’s get out of here before he changes his mind. Everyone grab onto Lozzie.”

“I’m popular!” Lozzie giggled, turning on the spot and swaying from side to side. Sevens gently took her shoulder to stop her wriggling about.

“Hey, one more thing,” Nicole said. “Just before we go.”

“You want to delay this even further?” Evelyn asked with a huff.

“Nah. Just ... can somebody please, please go check on my dog after this?”

“We’ll make sure your dog is safe, yes,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Doggy!” said Lozzie.

“Good doggo,” said Praem.

Marmite shuffled behind me, unsure if he was the subject of this unexpected praise. Nicole sighed with a great weariness and joined the Lozzie-circle. Evelyn made sure to be holding one of Lozzie’s hands. Praem helped me stand up straight as we all braced for the journey.

I cast one last glance up at Hringewindla, at his shrunken and shrivelled glory, then closed my hand around his soapstone gift.

and walked a crooked mile – 16.9

“Geerswin farm! Twil’s farm! Okay maybe not actually Twil’s farm — but Twil’s farm, yaaay! Fluffy llamas yes I love them yes I doooooo! Hihihhi, hi, hi!”

The moment we arrived back on the surface, Lozzie wriggled out of our collectively collapsing grip and sprang away, bouncing on the balls of her feet, fluttering her pentacolour poncho in the leaf-dappled sunlight, giggling and rambling as she skipped over to the curious and friendly alpaca sticking its head over the nearby fence.

Alpaca, not llama, I thought to myself, but there was no way I was getting those words out.

The rest of us were mere passengers on the Lozzie-train, alighting at this terminal station — myself, Evelyn, Praem, Nicole, Sevens, and poor little Marmite. We all but collapsed onto the crumbly, weathered tarmac next to Raine’s car.

Nicole was the only one who actually lost her footing and went down. She staggered as if sea-sick, then doubled up, slammed to her knees, and vomited noisily onto the ground. She groaned, clutching her stomach, spitting stringy bile. I would have winced with sympathy — I’d been there so many times before, hurling my guts up as my body rejected the brutal exposure to supernatural truth. But right then I was busy wrapping my arms and tentacles around my swirling, pounding, spinning head. I almost crumpled as well, knees buckling and giving out, wracked by the stress of Lozzie’s translocation-Slip. But Sevens stood tall and confident, holding me up with one strong arm around my waist, silently enduring the way I lashed myself to her with my tentacles. The Princess Mask was apparently unaffected by the pressure of skipping across the membrane between here and Outside.

I held my squid-skull mask to my stomach, a poor substitute for a pillow, but it sufficed.

Evelyn hung limp and moaning in Praem’s grip, eyes squeezed shut,

face gone pale and grey, coated with cold sweat. Her pain was more than physical. Praem stared into blank space, her demon mind still rebooting. Too human to avoid the aftershocks.

Marmite curled into a ball and covered himself with shadowy membranes, terrified and sick.

Riding along with one of Lozzie's intentional Slips was always an ordeal.

Whenever I Slipped on purpose, the bulk of the damage to mind and body was not actually from the transition itself, but from direct interface with the necessary brain-math to etch the equation upon the surface of reality. The damage was from touching the levers, not the outcome of pulling them. Slipping was disorienting and disgusting, yes, of course. Popping through the membrane between here and Outside was like having one's soul slid partway out of one's body, then jammed back in at the wrong angle. One was forced to wait for the parts to shift and adjust until container and self lined up again, like the tight and uncomfortable feeling of shrugging your coat on too quickly, but a hundred times worse. For a few seconds, a Slip always made you feel misaligned with your own body.

But Lozzie's Slip hadn't taken us Outside at all; if I'd been the one to pull us out of Hringewindla's core, I would have taken us to Camelot first, then back to Twil's house, a long-distance slingshot. Lozzie took us straight there, a no-stopping service, express route. Choo choo.

It was like being dragged across the membrane at high speed, skipping and bouncing like a flat stone upon the surface of a lake, one's soul jarred and juddered and shaken out of place. No human being could experience that and stand up straight afterward. Even Praem was shaken. I suspected Sevens hadn't actually gone along with it at all, but had used her own, personal, Outsider methods of locomotion, and then just pretended she'd piggybacked Lozzie along with the rest of us.

But we were out of Hringewindla's shell. We were back on the surface. Firmly back in reality, whatever that meant.

Late afternoon sunlight, the colour of fire on bronze, filtered through the gently swaying ring of trees that surrounded Geerswin Farm. The tarmac was solid and earthy and crumbling at the edges.

The air smelled of pollen and grass and rotting leaves. Shafts of light glinted off Raine's car, the faded red paint dappled by long, leafy shadows. The overgrown fields were matted with weeds and dotted with the tall, proud spikes of thistles, but the landscape was green and healthy and very, very normal. The old farmhouse squatted right where we'd left it, peering back at us with dark windows. The front door showed only a gaping shadow, as if the building itself was surprised by our return.

No more living nightmares, no more absurd spooky alpacas with human faces, no more reality warping around our senses.

Hringewindla was back in control. And so were we.

The only physical evidence that anything untoward had happened here was a lump of pulped grey meat and broken carapace, still lying on the tarmac a few feet away, a miniature copy of the leviathan monster Hringewindla had pulled from his snake-knot core, complete with little barbs and hooks and grasping legs. The parasite I'd ripped out of Sevens' throat had not resurrected itself and wandered off, or melted through the ground to contaminate the local water supply, or turned into a ghost or a vampire or something equally silly. I'd half-expected it to do that. Can you really blame me?

Of course, I couldn't enjoy the relief. My head was spinning, my senses were filled with a high-pitched whine, and my skin felt thin as rice-paper, ready to burst and let me float away into the woods, dispersed and forgotten. Only Sevens' grip kept me on my feet. I had an overwhelming urge to jam my squid-skull mask back on over my head and curl up in a tight ball of tentacles, like an octopus protecting herself against the dragging currents.

And it wasn't only the Slip; the whiplash was too sudden. Had I really been a mile underground only minutes earlier, talking to an ancient Outsider god via my own neuroelectrical signals?

Reality felt unreal.

But then hurrying feet and voices and chaos filled the air, the undeniable weight of other people.

"Heather! Hey! Hey, they're all out here! Twil, get out here!"

My heart soared at the familiar chord of Raine's voice. I heard the sound of her feet leaping down the brick steps of the house in one

bound, racing to join us.

“Raine ... ” I croaked, groping for her even with my eyes screwed shut. “Raine?”

“It’s alright, kitten,” Sevens purred from right beside me. “She is here. Everyone is here.”

“Oh shit, fuck me!” said Twil a second later, another voice hurtling from the open front door.

“Twil!” her mother scolded, not far behind, little shoes hurrying down the steps. “Oh, but thank heavens, thank goodness, they’re all here. They are all here, aren’t they? I am so sorry, Miss Saye, Heather, d-detective, and ... and ... um.”

“Good evening, high priestess,” said the Yellow Princess. “Do not worry yourself about me.”

“I told you they would show up!” Amanda said from the doorway, her voice filled with equal parts pride and relief. “He told me they were okay! I told you! You never listen!”

“Amanda,” Christine said, voice a bristle of smothered irritation. “Do not get into this right now, please.”

I reached blindly for Raine with one tentacle, found her, and hung on tight. She laughed, wrapped me in a hug, and kissed my forehead.

“She is safe, but there has been much brain-math,” Sevens informed her.

“You got us out of that, hey?” Raine asked me.

“Got you out,” I croaked, face cushioned in her chest. “Everyone out.”

“Everyone out,” Praem echoed.

We spent the next few minutes going precisely nowhere; Evelyn, Nicole, and I were in no state to be standing up and walking in straight lines, let alone climbing the steps to the house or explaining everything that had happened, down there in the dark beneath the earth. Praem wasn’t doing too well either, though she wasn’t about to fall over any time soon. Raine opened the back door of her car again, so Evelyn could have somewhere to sit. Twil helped Nicole stagger to her feet, though the detective looked punch-drunk, and

grumpier than a cat after a cold bath. Twil didn't look too great either, more than a little pale and haggard. I felt my own mind piecing itself back together, but it was painfully slow, eased along by the pressure of Raine's hands on my arms when she started rubbing me like I'd just come in from a snowstorm.

"Is every— everyone—" I slurred and mumbled, held between her and Sevens.

"Everyone is fine, Heather," Raine said, staring into my eyes. She held up one hand. "Here, open your eyes up proper, okay? How many fingers?"

"Three," I groaned, trying to laugh, delighted by the simple, familiar sight of Raine's chestnut-brown hair raked back from her forehead. "I'm not concussed, Raine, I'm post-Slip. Blame Lozzie."

I batted at Raine's hand with a tentacle. She jumped, then laughed. No glasses, not Outside. She couldn't see all of me.

From inside the back of Raine's car, Evelyn made a sound like she was ordering Praem to execute a war criminal. Her eyes were still scrunched up against the lingering after-effects, head bowed with pressure, both hands on her walking stick like an old woman who couldn't find the strength to rise from her chair. For once, even Praem couldn't make sense of her request. The doll-demon stared at her own mother with blank-faced incomprehension, more empty-eyed than usual.

"Kids," Sevens echoed. "She was asking about the children."

"Oh!" Amanda said. "My boys are fine, yes, thank you. They're right here, Miss Saye. Well ... right ... ah, up there."

Zheng chose that moment to join us, ducking low through the front door of the house. Her eyes found me with a dark twinkle.

"Shaman," she rumbled. I managed a nod, though she deserved more for what she'd so obviously done.

Zheng looked like she'd been having the time of her life.

Her lower half was splattered with blood, as if she had kicked a spooky alpaca to death. She had three bubble-servitors following her like hounds trailing after their master, and an additional, actual, flesh-and-blood hound in the form of Bernard, Amanda's golden retriever. He was currently doing his good-boy best to look

fearsome and protective.

Zheng was also carrying two small boys, one on each shoulder. They clung to her head and neck with both arms like marsupials to a mother. Amanda's boys — Richard and Oliver, as I later learned — looked about five or six years old, both of them po-faced and serious and utterly unafraid of the giant zombie whose shoulders they were riding on.

“Whee,” said Praem.

A man I'd never seen before was doing his best to emulate that lack of fear, following as close to Zheng as he could without cringing in animal terror. Gareth — Amanda's ‘gentleman friend’ that she'd told us about earlier — had obviously been through quite an ordeal. He was rail-thin in the way of a professional runner, with salt-and-pepper grey hair and a concerned, intelligent look on his face, framed by a neat little goatee. He was splattered with blood too, though it looked like back splash from Zheng's violence. A rolling pin shook in one of his hands, held like a club. To the man's credit, he didn't look like he was about to break and run.

Everybody was accounted for, quickly enough to still my worried heart and soothe Evelyn's guilty conscience. Raine was practically untouched — she hadn't even needed to use a weapon while trapped inside the spooky nonsense house. Christine Hopton, Twil's mother, was faring similarly, though obviously shaken and upset. She kept her arms tightly crossed, shoulders squared, chin drawn inward. Amanda was none the worse for wear at all, still sporting a bubble-servitor on her shoulder like the world's largest and gooiest parrot; she was also beaming at me.

Benjamin, Twil's cousin, the ill-fated and rather useless ‘muscle’ of the Church, had apparently found the shotgun he'd gone searching for earlier, an old-fashioned double-barrelled thing with a wooden stock. The gun hung loose in his hands as he guarded his aunts. For all his imposing bulk and carefully shaven head, he looked utterly out of his depth, like he'd seen a ghost. Maybe he had.

The bubble-servitors slowly oozed out of the house as well, squeezing themselves through the windows and gathering once more on the roof, floating through the air to take up their guard-post positions out in the fields and down the driveway. Bernard the dog watched them go. Amanda hadn't been exaggerating, I realised.

He could see pneuma-somatic life quite clearly.

Lozzie was away with the alpacas, arms entwined with the fence, petting their fluff with both hands.

“Who’s a good fluffy-fluff lad?” she cooed. “Yes, it’s you, you big llama, yes! You’re like a pillow!”

“They’re alpacas, actually,” Twil called to her, but Lozzie didn’t seem too worried by the distinction.

“Twil, are you okay?” I tried to ask, still hanging on to Sevens and Raine. What I actually said was a slurred mess. It was a miracle Twil understood me.

“Eh?” Twil blinked several times, then wiped her mouth on her coat sleeve. “Eh. I guess. Was hurling real bad when things all ... snapped back, like.”

“Her body,” said Sevens. “Purging the parasite. Her unique physiology would be capable of that.”

“Parasite?” Twil frowned at Sevens. “Also when the fuck did you get here, did I miss something?”

“When you weren’t looking.”

“The parasite is a long story,” I said. “Sevens is helping.”

Twil shrugged. “What is all this shit about, anyway? What the fuck just happened? Did we just get stuck in a Scooby-Doo episode?”

“Probably need to compare notes,” I sighed.

“Hringewindla is very thankful and very pleased,” Amanda said in a floaty and formal voice. She turned to gaze at Lozzie. “And very impressed.”

“Yes, that’s wonderful for him,” Christine said, looking somewhat small and reduced, shoulders more hunched and face more pinched than I’d ever seen her before. I didn’t blame her. That was her house this little invasion had violated and twisted. “I, on the other hand, would prefer a clear explanation for what has just happened. I gather you have all visited our god, somehow. But I don’t ... I don’t understand.”

“He is explaining as clearly as he needs to,” Amanda replied. Did I detect the tiniest bristle in her words? Christine certainly did,

frowning sidelong at her sister.

“Err,” Ben said, clearing his throat and gesturing with the shotgun. “Sorry, I’m with aunt Christine on this one. I’d love to know what the hell that was all about, right? Also maybe get us out of the open and back indoors, in case something else happens.”

“Word,” said Raine. “Smart man.”

“You wanna get back into that?” Twil scoffed.

He shrugged. “It’s over, right? I mean, like, that part of it. House is back to normal. Hringewindla seems ... alright. But he doesn’t know what else might be lurking, does he? He’s not omniscient. We need to get indoors, ‘case something else turns up. And call Mike, call your dad.”

Twil grimaced, but she nodded along.

“Ben,” Christine tutted his name, one hand forcing the shotgun barrels to point at the ground. “I told you to put that back. Stop waving it about.”

“It’s not even loaded,” Ben grumbled. “And I wasn’t *waving* it.”

“Yeah, fair’s fair,” Raine added. “He was keeping it pointed at the ground. Good trigger discipline too, mate.”

“Cheers. I think.” Benjamin frowned at her, looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here. He eyed the road and the tree line, clearly on edge, but not for show. I had a gut feeling that the man knew exactly what he was doing when it came to precautions for violence.

“Everybody shut up and stop talking nonsense,” Evelyn rasped in a voice like sandpaper. With superhuman effort she rose to her feet, squinting as if the fading sunlight was too strong for her eyes. Praem offered her arm, Evelyn took it, balanced between doll-demon and walking stick. She stomped forward a few paces, so she could address Amanda and Christine directly.

“Miss Saye,” Christine said, getting there first, suddenly straightening with the effort of polite regard. “I’m very glad to see you are okay as well. This has been ... this was all so ... ”

Christine trailed off, lost for words, shaking her head.

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “You owe me a cup of tea.”

Christine blinked several times. “ ... I’m sorry?”

Benjamin nodded along. “Girl’s got the right idea. Indoors, cup of tea, wait for the counter attack or—”

Christine tutted. “Ben, stop, please.”

Raine pointed at Ben, eyebrows raised in agreement. Muscle nodded to muscle.

“You owe me a cup of tea,” Evelyn repeated. “And some biscuits.”

“O-of course,” Christine said. “I’d be happy to, I just—”

“We just met your god and helped de-worm him. In the process, I have had to perform some deeply inadvisable magic, to discourage the giant moron from crushing us all to death.”

Benjamin’s face flickered with a scowl when Evelyn said ‘moron’, but he kept his peace when Evelyn jabbed at him with her walking stick and squinted like she would poke his eye out.

“Hey, Eevee,” said Raine, voice suddenly tight. “What do you mean, ‘inadvisable magic’?”

“Yes,” I added, suddenly worried on a level I hadn’t acknowledged until that moment. “What does that mean? Eevee, are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Evelyn grunted without looking at either of us. That didn’t help, but the conversation was already moving on.

“It’s true,” Amanda said. “Hringewindla is very pleased now. And clean. So clean again. This is good. This is a good thing, we should not be hostile or vindictive.”

“Speak for yourself,” Nicole grunted, eyeing Amanda with lingering suspicion.

“Mm,” Evelyn said. “Which means you owe us all some tea and biscuits, and ... ” She trailed off, frowning at Zheng. “Whatever she wants, I suppose.”

“Meat,” Praem suggested.

Zheng grinned the grin of a deeply satisfied carnivore. “The worm has been very thankful.”

The boys on Zheng’s shoulders shared a glance. One of them spoke up, high-pitched with childlike offense. “Don’t call mummy a

worm.”

“Your mother is a worm, your father is a worm, you are both worms.”

The boys shared another glance, rather nonplussed.

Gareth finally cleared his throat and spoke. He had the voice of a gentle and bookish librarian, not the sort of man who should be tangling with gods and monsters and getting splattered with blood. But then again, I suppose plenty of people would make the same assumption about me.

“I don’t think that’s a good thing to be saying to small children, to ... um ... ”

The poor man withered under Zheng’s smouldering gaze.

“Worm,” she added.

“Zheng, don’t insult children, please,” I croaked. “Especially not right now.”

“Can I be a snail instead?” asked the younger boy. “Like Hingey?”

“Hringewindla,” his mother gently corrected him.

Evelyn cleared her throat as loudly as she could manage, which unfortunately involved coughing spots of blood onto her own sleeve. “Tea, food. Yes?”

Christine Hopton nodded slowly, still shell-shocked and gathering her wits.

I spoke up. “What Eevee is trying to say, is that we would like to come inside and have a sit down, and a rest. We’ve all been through rather a lot. Maybe we can share experiences. Figure out what happened. Clear this up. All that ... diplomacy stuff?”

Benjamin nodded at me in silent approval.

“ ... yes,” Christine said after a moment. “Yes, of course. You’re all very welcome. We should sit down and ... and, well, I assume the danger is past? Hringewindla seems certain.”

I nodded. “It’s over. For now. I think.”

“Assuming none of this was intentional,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Yeah,” Ben grumbled. “Fucking right.”

“Intentional by whom?” Christine asked. Her eyes flickered left and right suddenly, as if she would catch the culprit lurking behind a nearby tree. Benjamin sighed out loud, drawing a hand over his face.

“That’s something we should probably discuss,” I said.

“Edward Lilburne,” Evelyn said. “This is all his doing, his trap, his creation run out of control.”

“Assumption,” said Praem.

Evelyn snorted. “I think it’s a bloody safe assumption,” she grumbled, then caught herself and shot a guilty grimace at the two little boys perched on Zheng’s shoulders. “It’s a safe assumption.”

Christine drew herself up and clapped her hands together, putting real effort into re-assuming the role of sweet and welcoming older lady, her schoolteacher visage slipping on as certainly as my squid-skull mask. “Yes, you’re all welcome to come inside and have some food. We could all do with a proper explanation. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need. My husband will be home soon too, I’ll call him right away, yes. We can get this all cleared up. I hope.”

Lozzie looked back over her shoulder while still petting the alpaca. “Jan’s gonna be wondering where I am!”

Nicole sighed heavily. “Can somebody please, please go check on my dog?”

Evelyn raised her walking stick and pointed at the smashed lump of grey meat, the dead parasite on the ground. “Before we go anywhere, that needs to be burned. Right now.”

“Ben, if you please?” Christine said.

Benjamin Hopton sighed and shrugged. “On it.”

For a moment he seemed to share a look with Evelyn, one of understanding that went deeper than muscle and mage. Apparently we weren’t the only ones used to disposing of evidence.

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Almost two full hours after our return from the inside of Hringewindla’s shell, I couldn’t stand the way his cultists looked at

me.

They tried not to be obvious about it, but they couldn't conceal it completely.

We were all sitting in the Hoptons' dining room, in the rear of Geerswin Farmhouse, gathered around the large wooden table covered in decades of chips and scratches. The fireplace lay cold and unlit, but the heating from the kitchen kept the room comfortable in the early summer evening. Mugs of now-cold tea sat atop the table, along with plates of biscuit crumbs and the remains of two sandwiches, the evidence that we'd been breaking bread with the Church, well into the growing dusk. It was all very domestic, very normal, very human. Except for the topics of conversation.

"These glasses are a miracle," said Twil's father.

Michael Hopton held Evelyn's modified 3D glasses up to the back doors looking out onto the patio, handling them like an exposed circuit board. He peered through them again, at the bubble-servitor perched on the nearest fence, bathed in dying sunlight.

"Just magic," said Evelyn.

"We've never been able to make anything like this. Even the old man—"

Christine Hopton cleared her throat, loudly but politely. Michael caught himself and grimaced under his wife's sidelong look. So much like Twil, I thought. She really did take after her father.

"Even my late father-in-law," he corrected himself, "Clive, he—"

"*Clive?*" Raine interrupted from 'our' side of the table, unable to keep the smirk off her face. "Scuse me, sorry," she added with a wink when everyone looked at her. "Just, you know, big-shot intimidating cult-wizard guy, but he was called Clive? Kinda undercuts him a bit, you know? No offense meant, though. Very normal name."

Christine looked none too pleased at the mockery — the 'old man' had been her father, after all. She pursed her lips, but she was too polite to complain. Amanda shrugged, still fuzzy-eyed, bubble-servitor still perched on her shoulder as she sat in her chair. Michael worried at his lower lip.

Twil growled. "He wasn't intim—"

But I got there first. "He wasn't intimidating," I blurted out. "He was more like you than you realise, Raine."

Raine turned a smirk on me without missing a beat. "You're saying I'm not intimidating?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean."

Raine laughed and nodded a silent apology to the Hoptons, raising her hands in surrender before taking a long sip from her tea. Twil huffed, putting up with the implied insult for now.

But Amanda and Christine were both staring at me in muted awe.

I looked away, seeking Raine's hand under the table. I tightened my clutch of tentacles around the chair I was sitting in, gripping tighter and tighter. Maybe if I gripped hard enough, I might splinter the wood.

"As I was saying," Michael Hopton resumed, making a show of peering through the glasses again. "Even old Clive, rest his soul, couldn't have made something like these glasses, Miss Saye. Even with all the contacts he had, all the things he did achieve, the second sight was beyond him. Beyond any of us." He lowered the glasses and nodded respectfully across the dining room table, at Evelyn — though he couldn't resist a little flicker at me too, like a tiny petition to some aloof idol in the corner of the room. "I am very glad that we are not in conflict with each other any longer."

Evelyn stared back, half-squinting, curled in her chair as if her back hurt more than usual. At any other time, I would have read her attitude as hostility, but we all knew how exhausted she felt. She let the implied question hang in the air.

"Mm," she grunted eventually, then looked at Amanda. "I know you have pneuma-somatic sight. How is that beyond you?"

"So does the hound," Zheng rumbled from behind us, from her more comfortable seat on the sofa, sprawled out like a tiger at rest. She was still chewing her way through the dried rabbit meat that Gareth had found in the fridge. She raised one hand and pointed at Amanda's dog.

Bernard looked up at the sound of Zheng's voice, panting at her with approval. I'd never known an animal to approve of her before.

He was sitting very calm and comfortable on the little rug by the back door — right next to Marmite, who he'd apparently decided was a member of his pack now. Of the dog and the huge squid-spider thing, Marmite was the one who looked slightly unsure, still half-wrapped in his shadowy membranes. Bernard was perfectly happy, panting softly with his tongue out, watching us humans — and other-than-humans — talk ourselves out.

At least the dog wasn't looking at me like I'd descended from the heavens.

"Huh, yes," Evelyn added. "Thank you for that information, Zheng. A dog seeing spirits. I can only imagine how that works out."

"Very well, actually," Amanda answered, voice floating away as she spoke. "He's kept my boys safe."

"Good boy," Praem said to Bernard, from where she stood at Evelyn's elbow. Bernard looked up at her and tilted his head sideways, ears flopping about.

"Yes, but how?" Evelyn grunted, wincing harder as if fighting off a sudden spike of headache. "Rather contradicts all this praise for my magic eye glasses if you can just ..." She waved a hand vaguely, gesturing at her own head.

Michael shared an awkward look with Amanda, turning the glasses over in his hands. "Being god-touched is not enough to grant the sight," he said.

"Yes," Christine spoke up. She was sitting very straight-backed and formal in her own chair, trying to appear calm and in control. She'd spoken very little compared with her sister and her husband, more shaken by these events than I'd suspected at first. And constantly distracted by me, of course. "My sister's position is special, it ... she ... went through a very different experience, in her communion with our god. Please understand, this is not a normal thing for us. We do not all see beyond the veil. We are not gifted, not as ..."

Christine met my eyes. She tried a smile, a warm, welcoming smile, but the sweetness was soured by worship.

"It's not a gift," I said. I tried to sound normal, but I couldn't keep the disgust out of my tone.

"Of course," she hurried to add. "Of course, my dear, I apologise."

“There’s no need to say sorry,” I added, feeling horribly awkward. Evelyn just stared at that exchange, exhausted down to her bones. “Still doesn’t explain the dog,” she grumbled.

“I asked for a dog,” Amanda said. “I prayed and pleaded. A dog, to see with me. When I was little. Hringewindla has always honoured the request. Bernard is the most recent of my friends to have the sight. There were others before him, all passed away in their own time.”

“Awww,” Nicole said from her place on the other sofa. “You know, that’s almost enough to make me forgive you for threatening to hollow my skull out.”

Amanda nodded to the detective, as if this was a perfectly normal thing to say.

A dull pang of jealousy gnawed at the roots of my heart. If only I’d had a dog as a companion all these years, a spirit-seeing canine friend who could understand.

“Hringewindla has never extended that favour,” Michael explained. He reached across the table to return the glasses. Raine accepted them in Evelyn’s stead. “Those glasses are a miracle, I mean it, really. Having something like that, even one or two pairs of them, it would seriously improve our safety and security.” He swallowed. “The security of the church, I mean. The safety of my family.”

Christine sighed and closed her eyes briefly. “Mike, you can be so indirect sometimes.”

“Yeah dad,” Twil tutted. “These are my friends, not like, a fuckin’ weirdo mage or something.”

Christine sighed again, sharper. “Twil, please. Stop with the foul language. Not in this house.”

“Thank you for the inclusion,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Weirdoes,” said Praem.

Michael Hopton huffed and looked away, exactly like Twil would do when challenged like this. It was a bit different coming from a man built like a compact lumberjack, with a face like a granite outcrop, radiating physical readiness. But he and his daughter shared the same total inability to conceal their emotions. He was

terribly embarrassed by all this.

"I'm trying to be polite here," he said to the mug at his elbow. "These people have just saved us."

"*Heather* saved you," Evelyn hissed. "As I have already explained."

"Yeah, and Big H is the big ace, yo," Twil said with a grin. I ducked my head and looked away, struggling to deal with Twil's effusive gratitude, on top of the way her family looked at me. "And Evelyn is a big softie, and Raine's ... fuckin' ... Raine, you know?"

"Fuckin' Heather, actually," Raine corrected, totally unembarrassed. Evelyn sighed, I blushed and hissed under my breath, Raine cracked a shit-eating grin.

"Language, dear, please," said Twil's mother, tone turned hopeless.

"My point is," Twil went on, "if we want copies of the glasses, we can just ask. Eevee, hey, can you make more of those glasses?"

"In theory."

"Caaaaaan we have some?"

Evelyn turned a look on Twil, more plain tired than grumpy. Twil pulled a 'obviously-I-am-asking-a-rhetorical-question' face. Evelyn sighed and turned back to Michael, Christine, and Amanda, the current ruling triumvirate of the Church of Hringewindla.

For just a moment, instead of keeping their attention on the grumpy mage in their midst, all three glanced at me. As if I was the power behind the throne.

I couldn't stand it. I wanted to put my squid-skull mask on and hiss at them to leave me alone.

The awestruck behaviour had started earlier, when we'd sat down and explained everything that had just happened, matching our experiences and putting all the pieces together.

We'd had 'official' meetings with the Church twice before — once when Christine Hopton had visited Evelyn's house in Sharrowford, to offer Hringewindla's 'help' with the gateway spell, then a second time when they'd joined the fraught and dangerous *détente* between us and Edward Lilburne, though that second time had not included either tea or biscuits. But this time was different, we'd just been through an ordeal together — for a certain value of 'together'

— and had come out the other side with a very different perception of who these people were and what exactly they worshipped.

And they'd come out of it with a completely different perception of me as well.

Geerswin Farmhouse was entirely back to normal. On the inside, the walls stood sensibly upright, the doors led to where one expected them to go, and the view through the back patio windows was of dying sunlight, overgrown fields, and the shadow-haunted forest. Wind dragged through the trees outdoors, sounding the leaves in a slow, all-pervasive rustle. The long shadows crept across the farm, past the sheep and the pair of alpacas huddled outside, and over the roof of the house, covering the dozens of bubble-servitors keeping watch up there, in case Edward Lilburne should decide to make a move. But it was a natural darkness, long welcome after the cartoonish fears of Hringewindla's nightmare.

It was hard to believe that giant shell lay buried underground, only a short walk away. As we all talked, I kept staring out of the window, thinking about that pressurised bubble of Outside, here on Earth.

Some things that sleep in English soil should never be disturbed.

At first, Christine and Amanda had done their best to show real hospitality, helped by Gareth and 'helped' by the boys once Zheng had put them down. We had cups of tea all round, plenty of snacks, and an offer of painkillers for Evelyn.

"Thank you, but I have my own," Evelyn had grumbled. She had accepted a glass of water to wash down the pills she'd produced from inside a coat pocket.

"Mind if I have one?" Nicole had asked from the sofa.

"Mm. Sure. Praem?"

Praem had to take a pill to the detective, because Evelyn didn't want to stand up again. I wasn't sure if she could stand up right then.

Evee really was faring the worst of any of us. At first I wasn't sure how much of it was the after-effect of the Slip, and how much was the price of her magic. The crackling, electric blue shield she'd created earlier, down there in Hringewindla's guts, was by far the

most pyrotechnically impressive piece of magecraft I'd ever seen from her. Real, physical, tangible magic, with a twist of her hands. And she'd done it to protect us — to protect me. I told her so, as we'd gotten settled in waiting for the kettle to boil.

"I thought you said magic was never fireballs and broomsticks. Eevee, that was incredible," I'd murmured to her, squeezing her hand beneath the table.

"It was stupid and costly," she'd grunted back, then coughed more crimson into a borrowed handkerchief. Praem picked up her glass of water and put it down six inches closer. Evelyn obeyed, taking a sip to wash away the taste of her own blood.

But where Nicole and I slowly recovered from Lozzie's overenthusiastic slip, Evelyn did not. As we and the Hoptons talked, she hunched in her chair like a gargoyle, dark-eyed and clutching her walking stick. I stayed close. At one point I even wrapped a tentacle around her wrist, which unfortunately made her flinch. She couldn't see that part of me without the glasses.

But after the flinch, she hung on tight.

Her bone-wand lay on the table before her throughout the entire conversation, like a loaded rifle. I wasn't sure what that meant; I even toyed with the idea of asking her to put it away, as a show of good faith. But then the Hoptons started looking at me like I was an Outsider god, and I was thankful for the shelter of an implicit threat.

The rest of us weren't doing too badly. Nicole sat on the other sofa, first nursing a mug of tea, then a glass of beer. It wasn't as if she was going to operate a vehicle any time soon. Somebody would have to go with her to recover her car, but not today, not after all this. She was still lucid and speaking clearly, her parasite very much dead, but she looked shell-shocked and exhausted and said very little. She looked how I felt.

Zheng had put the boys down, much to their pouting disappointment. She had also consented to have several towels spread out on the sofa so she didn't smear the cushions with blood.

"Llama," she said when I asked, grinning with satisfaction.

"They're alpacas," I sighed. "And I don't think you actually killed one. It was a nightmare-thing, a piece of living fiction, a ghost, sort

of.”

She chuckled, placed one huge hand on my head, and purred so deep it made my entrails vibrate. “Ghosts don’t bleed.”

The Hoptons looked far more shaken, but none of them were actually hurt. Twil’s father turned up about half an hour after we’d returned, racing home after his wife had called him. Their home had been invaded, their god violated, their physical safety threatened, and they were powerless to do anything about it themselves, except wave useless shotguns around and hope the bubble-servitors would help.

Benjamin was relieved of said shotgun by Twil’s father, gently but firmly. Once it was clear the threat was past, Ben sulked off home himself. I gathered he had a life of his own, things to do, places to be, despite his dutiful bodyguard work. Gareth, Amanda’s gentleman friend, seemed eager to get out from under our feet, or perhaps just happy to get away from Zheng. He excused himself by saying he needed to go upstairs and change his blood-stained trousers, then spent most of his time shepherding the boys out of the dining room and pottering about in the kitchen. I got the impression he was on the periphery of the cult, not privy to the inner workings of the leadership, even if he was sleeping with one of them.

In fact, Michael, Christine, and Amanda all seemed to engage in a wordless agreement not to begin discussing any serious details until the two boys were upstairs, Benjamin was off in his car, and Gareth was firmly out of the room. But then came some awkward deliberation over Twil’s presence.

“She’s an adult now, Chris,” her father had said. “She’s our daughter, and she’s involved. She’s got a right to be involved.”

“She is not part of the decision making process.” Christine had huffed. “Michael, you know this, you know the rules.”

“We make the rules!”

“Yes, and they exclude her.”

“Mum!” Twil had whined. “For fuck’s sake!”

“Language!”

“Hringewindla doesn’t have an opinion on this,” Amanda added

from one side. The other two ignored her.

“She’s my daughter, and she’s staying,” Michael crossed his arms, trying to look stern, but the man almost flinched under the grey wrath of his wife’s piercing stare.

“Either we stick to the rules, or we—”

But Evelyn had cleared her throat and banged her tea mug on the table. The Hoptons all looked at her instead, though Amanda had spared a glance for my twitching tentacles. She could still see them.

“Twil is with me,” Evelyn grumbled. “If she has to leave the room, then I go too, and everyone else comes with me.” Her exhausted stare dared any to argue.

Twil stayed, but didn’t say much, looking intensely awkward.

Lozzie and Sevens did not stay, however. As soon as it was clear we weren’t going to light up or play video games, Lozzie vanished — literally, just vanished when nobody was looking. I was worried for about ten minutes, until she reappeared on the sofa and started gushing to Nicole about how cute her dog was.

“Husky! Husky husky! Hucky! Hucksie!”

“Not a husky, actually,” Nicole had said, still squinting over a mug of tea. “He’s some kind of cross. Husky, German Shepherd, something. He was a stray.”

“Husky!”

“And he’s—”

“Watered and fed and given many pets please please Nicky please can I go see him again? I won’t even call you a pig, please?!”

“Sure. Fine. Knock yourself out, you little goblin.”

But Lozzie did not zoom through time and space to go spend the rest of the evening with Nicole’s dog, partly because I requested she stay close after that. None of us wanted to risk Edward Lilburne making a move amid all this. We were exhausted as it was. But Lozzie wasn’t sticking around to listen to all this serious talk. She declared she hadn’t been here for any of this, had little to add, and went to find Amanda’s boys to see if they wanted anything. The Hoptons watched her go, somewhat awkward and unreadable. I didn’t understand why they looked at her as if she was on another

plane of existence. To them, she was just some random teenage girl, wasn't she? Just another friend of Evelyn and Twil.

We called home before we got down to business. Raine called Kimberly, to check that the house had not burned down and nobody had started doing anything more dangerous than cannabis. I had half a mind to speak with Kimberly myself, to request a word with Jan, and to put Tenny on so I could hear the comfort of her familiar, trilling voice. But I was so exhausted by this long day that I just sat there with Evelyn, and let Raine handle the details.

Seven-Shades-of-Proper-and-Prim followed Lozzie upstairs as well, but she stayed in the dining room long enough to confirm her earlier assessment — the parasites were all dead.

"That's why you were vomiting so badly, little puppy," she said to Twil.

"Puppy?" Twil spat. "Hey! And you still haven't explained this 'parasite' thing."

"I still don't understand where they all went," Nicole said.

I cleared my throat. "I think I can explain that, but only because I've watched too many marine life videos on youtube. Certain parasites secrete anti-competition chemicals or hormones, to kill smaller members of their own species that might compete for hosts or resources. I think the big one inside Hringewindla killed off all the others, when it got too big. Just a natural consequence."

"I'm sorry," Michael said. "Big one, inside Hringewindla? I am going to need a serious explanation, please."

"I already told you," Amanda said. "I told you all."

Michael and Christine both suppressed pained wincings. Clearly, Amanda was not very good at relating direct communication from their god.

We all shared what had happened to us, right back to the moment Hringewindla's nightmare had begun to isolate us from one another, leaving us to wander inside the suddenly expanding labyrinth of the farmhouse. We even drew up a basic timeline of events so we were all on the same page. Michael Hopton handled that, playing secretary for the rest of us with a pad and pencil, as the only one who hadn't been here in person.

Everyone except me had experienced a true maze, doors opening on hallways and rooms that shouldn't exist, blood-grinning mutant sheep peering in through the windows.

"When I dropped down out of the window," Raine explained, "you were just gone, Heather. I took my eyes off you for a second. Scared the hell out of me."

"Me too," I admitted.

"Eyes, yes," Evelyn muttered, thinking out loud. "Heather saw what others didn't. She was the only one it didn't work on. She saw through it."

"But why would that be?" Christine asked. "You've mentioned that Heather here has ... unique powers, yes. But Hringewindla, he is a god. How could any mortal have avoided his thoughts?"

"It's complicated," I said.

What nobody understood was how Zheng had broken the rules of the maze; other than people bumping into me — Raine, Amanda, and Nicole — she was the only one who had apparently been able to gather others to her. Bernard the dog, then the boys, then Gareth, like she was a magnet for protection in the false darkness.

"Maybe it's because she kicked one of the fake alpacas to pieces?" Raine suggested.

"You didn't burst through a wall, did you?" Evelyn asked.

"Oh yeah," Praem deadpanned. Evelyn frowned up at her.

Zheng rumbled from the sofa. "No gods and no masters can keep me bound," she said. "The shaman's blessing frees me forever. Even from your worm-filth." She directed those last few words at the Hoptons.

Christine bristled, but Amanda reached out and placed a hand on her sister's arm.

"Zheng," Amanda said. "Thank you. Again, thank you, for looking after my boys. I think they have become fond of you."

"Shut up, worm," Zheng rumbled. Amanda quivered. "It was not for you."

Things became more complicated when we tried to explain how I

had escaped, let alone the nature of the parasites, how we had removed them, and why I was immune. At first the Hoptons asked a lot of questions about every assumption we made, but all three of them grew quieter and quieter as Evelyn and I explained what details we thought were safe to share.

I made a silent and private executive decision not to explain Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. As far as the human members of the Church were concerned, she was just another magically inclined friend of Evelyn Saye, the local mage of note.

I was too emotionally exhausted to realise the impact of my own actions. There were too many things to address, too many things to think about — the fallout of the duel between Raine and Zheng, the nature of Sevens' terrifying and beautiful new form, the words Evelyn had spoken down inside Hringewindla's shell, not to even mention the possible involvement of Edward Lilburne in all this. But I was wiped out, everyone was wiped out. All I wanted to do was stop thinking for a week.

So we just told them. We told them that we went to talk to their god and journeyed into his shell. We told them that I woke him up by force, spoke to him inside my own mind, and cast him out when I was done.

The nightmare had indeed broken as soon as we'd woken up Hringewindla. According to everyone we'd left behind in the house, the transition had been a sensory kaleidoscope of collapsing walls and melting doors, the nightmare sloughing off like shed snakeskin, depositing them back into the heady and raw textures of the real. They hadn't known what to make of it at the time, though Raine and Twil had deduced it quickly enough when they'd realised who was missing.

That was when the awe started.

Christine, Michael, and even Amanda, they all started to look at me with shell shocked reverence, with the kind of eyes that Badger had turned on me after he'd seen me defeat Ooran Juh.

I was worried they would look upon me as a profane interruption, as an outsider who had insulted and bullied their god. Though the very idea that I could 'bully' a god was rather worrying in the first place.

But what happened was far worse. They stopped asking questions. Michael and Christine kept looking at Amanda, as if for confirmation of what I was telling them. She nodded, floaty and numb, as Hringewindla's distant communication matched up with my own.

"All I did was speak with him," I said, struggling to look them in the eyes as they watched me. "It wasn't difficult. Well, okay, no, that's a lie, it was difficult, but it wasn't ... a ... " I sighed and looked away. "He's just an Outsider."

"He spoke to you, directly?" Christine asked me. Her voice quivered. "And then ... you made him leave?"

"Yes. Sort of. Lozzie encouraged him to leave."

None of them knew what to say.

"The little one is a marvel of creation," Amanda said after a moment, voice a heavy mumble. Christine and Michael both turned to look at her, half-alarmed. Evelyn perked up too, frowning hard.

But Hringewindla had nothing more to say.

Little one? That was the same way Sevens always referred to Lozzie. Was Hringewindla talking about her, or about me?

From then onward, they did not look at me as a human being again. I couldn't stand it.

"You did ... de-worm him," Christine said, clearing her throat delicately. "And without that, we would all have been trapped. You have rendered an invaluable service to us, and to Hringewindla. You took his blessing and then ... left it. For this, I thank you."

She bowed her head. Her husband did the same. I shrugged, feeling deeply awkward, hands around my mug of tea.

"The shaman dispenses her own blessings," Zheng rumbled.

"Heeeeeeey," Raine added. "That's that. Heather does that by herself. No need for a higher power."

Michael snorted. Christine frowned at him sidelong. Amanda nodded, the only one who understood how Hringewindla himself really felt — or so I assumed. The bubble-servitor on her shoulder seemed to agree, bobbing up and down.

In a misguided effort to re-normalise myself in their eyes, I told them about Hringewindla's gift. The soapstone coin was still in my pocket, weighing as heavy as a fragment of neutron star. But I was completely wrong, this was not the right move. I passed it across the table and Michael accepted it with both hands, like it was the relic of a saint. He bowed his head and couldn't look me in the eyes.

There was much ooh-ing and ahh-ing over the coin as they passed it from hand to hand.

"Tch," Evelyn tutted. "You do understand that object might be dangerous, yes?"

"How could it be of danger?" Michael said in a hushed voice, holding the coin up to the light so he could inspect the strange five-dot design on the top — or was it the underside? "Hringewindla gave it to ... human ... hands ... "

He trailed off, flicking a worried glance in my direction.

Zheng snorted. "The shaman is no monkey. What burns your hands may not burn hers."

"Ah," he said, blinking in frozen alarm, like he was holding a piece of radioactive meteorite. "Yes, um."

"Yeah, Heather is protected against a lotta crap," Raine said. She nodded at the soapstone coin. "Let us know if your skin peels off in a couple of days, yeah?"

Michael shared a sudden and worried glance with his wife.

"Oh, I'm sure it's fine," she said.

"I'm joking!" Raine laughed.

"It is only stone," Amanda said. That seemed to settle the worries.

"But still, from his hand directly ... "

When Michael passed it back to me, he averted his eyes from my gaze. He handed me the stone like he was making an offering to a dangerous god at some dark and forgotten shrine.

I decided to ignore it as best I could. I didn't want to start a fresh argument with the Church, with Twil's family, not when we'd finally reached some kind of understanding at last. Even Evelyn was being diplomatic.

But after Evelyn shared the modified 3D glasses, Michael and Christine both stared at my tentacles like I was a hidden revelation. And then after they handed the glasses back and made their request, they looked at *me* for the answer, not at Evelyn.

I snapped.

“Stop it!” I blurted out. I think Evelyn had been about to answer them seriously, because she half flinched and frowned at me as I scraped my chair back and stood up. My cheeks were burning and my tentacles flared out, I couldn’t stop it happening, couldn’t stop the hiss clawing up my throat.

“Heather?” Raine said my name.

“Whoa, whoa, what, what?” Twil was up on her feet too, panicking at my sudden anger. Bernard let out a soft ‘wuff’, which made Marmite flinch. Praem tried to place a hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged her off.

“Stop looking at me like that!” I snapped at Hringewindla’s cultists. All three of them stared at me, suddenly ashamed and shocked, but more awed than put off. “I am not like your god. It was just an old man in my head! He’s in all of yours, isn’t he? Isn’t he?!”

Shocked silence. A gentle hand took my wrist. This time I allowed it. Raine, holding me softly.

The Hoptons all looked at each other. Amanda just bit her lip and shook her head. Michael and Christine looked exactly like shepherds being shouted at by a biblically accurate angel, afraid to express their fear. Twil groaned and put her face in both hands. I think she swore under her breath.

“It was just an old man in my head ... ”

“It’s not like that for us,” Michael said, averting his eyes from mine. “You spoke with him. As an equal. You’re a ... ”

“I am a twenty year old university student with tentacles,” I said, trying very hard to keep my voice steady. My cheeks burned and a hiccup forced itself up my throat. “I am not an Outsider god. Stop looking at me like that.”

“You rejected him,” Christine said, shaking her head, as if this explained anything. “You ... you’re ... how can we ... you’re on his scale, his ... ”

“Heeeeeeey,” Raine said, trying to lighten the moment with her tone. She pointed a jokey finger gun at the Hoptons. “Stop looking at my girl like that, yeah? She says stop, so stop. I’m the only one allowed to ogle her, alright?”

Zheng purred from the sofa. “How can they help themselves, little wolf? They are right. The shaman is more than flesh.”

“Great,” Twil grunted through clenched teeth. “Just what I fuckin’ need.”

“Reformation,” said Praem.

“She’s just a kid ... ” Nicole added, but her tone gave away that she didn’t really believe. She’d already been awed by what I was and what I could do.

I started to turn away from the table, peeling my tentacles off the chair, itching to go upstairs and find Lozzie. I did not want to be looked at like this. I was a thing of the abyss, a creature of the oceanic darkness between the spheres, but I was not a god, not a thing to be worshipped. I sniffed and hid my face, pulling Raine with me.

“Wait,” Evelyn grunted. “Wait a second.”

“We’re so sorry,” Christine hurried to say. “Try— try to see this from our perspective. I’m so sorry we’ve caused offense, but nothing like this has ever happened before. We don’t—”

“Shut up,” Evelyn said. “Listen. Seeing as we have met your god, I would like to propose a formal cessation to any hostility between us. Any suspicions. We’re allied against the same man, the same one responsible for all of this. I would like to make this explicit, before you lot go off and have a religious crisis — *without* Heather here, thank you very much.”

Evee, oh Evee. My heart hurt.

“Of course,” Michael said, pulling himself up. “But this Lilburne man, we still don’t know where he is. Was this a move against us?”

Evelyn shrugged. “I don’t think so. I think it was an accident. But I also think we now know where he is.”

I turned back, as surprised as everybody else. “Evee?”

A thin, deeply satisfied smile creased Evelyn’s exhausted face. She

gestured at Nicole. "Why did the parasite scramble Nicole's short-term memory? Any takers?"

Nicole sighed. "Because I must have subconsciously figured out where Edward Lilburne's house is, right. We've been over this. I don't remember anything. It's like I had the worst drunken night possible, but without the fun part."

"You may not remember, but your feet do."

"Eh?"

Twil lit up first, getting it before anybody else. "Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit."

"Twil," her mother tutted.

"Why did Nicole end up here?" Evelyn asked. I heard that familiar old tone in her voice, the aloof professor, waiting for a slow class to catch up. "Why did she walk all the way here while under the influence of the parasite?"

"What are you saying, I figured out where the house is, and went to it, on foot?"

"Exactly, detective." Evelyn nodded to herself. "It's just a theory, but I think the parasite didn't walk you here. You walked here. You figured out where Edward Lilburne's house is and set off to find it, which triggered the parasite to begin gestating. By the time you reached it on foot, the parasite was fully grown, to knock you off course and make you forget."

"Then why'd I end up here?" she asked.

"You're a professional detective. You're also a very special kind of paranoid idiot. I should know, because I'm one too. You're telling us that you never looked into any of us, after our difficult first meeting, months ago?"

"Ah." Nicole cringed. "I mean, yeah, I did. Just to ... you know, confirm you weren't all using fake names or something."

"And you looked up Twil's address."

Nicole cleared her throat and scratched the back of her head. "So what, it was lodged in my subconscious?"

"Yes. With the parasite scrambling your mind and your ability to walk, you made for the nearest place you knew you could somehow

get into contact with us. So, sometime between the moment you stepped out of that graveyard in Manchester, and when you stepped out of the woods and onto this farm, you found Edward Lilburne's safe house, somewhere between there and here. Or close enough. Which means we know where it is, we know where he's hiding, because it has to be somewhere you could have reached, on foot, within the window of time you went missing."

"That's our Evee," Raine said into the stunned silence. "Got a theory for everything."

"Theory of everything," said Praem.

Evelyn's smile got thinner and darker. She was so very pleased with her hypothesis.

"I hope you're right," Nicole said, sounding very sceptical. "What do we need to figure this out then, a map?"

"Of course it's right," Evelyn grunted.

But she didn't look at Nicole for approval. She allowed her eyes to creep and flitter upward, searching for my face. She was so tired, so drained, lips still stained with a little of her own blood.

Evelyn looked at me with more love and worship than a legion of cultists. And nobody else could see that.

"Good idea," I managed to say, staring back at her in surprise.

"Good idea, Evee. I ... I think you might be right."

She nodded and looked away again. "Of course I'm right. Now, let's figure out how to hunt a mage."

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.1

“To Miss Evelyn Saye,

For the transparent courtesy of your recent correspondence, I extend my gratitude to you and your associates. I was greatly disappointed by the lack of a timely reply to the letter I left for you in the great outsider library. I had considered the slim possibility that you did not seek the The Testament of Heliopolis, and had therefore not received my letter. I am glad to discover that my original deduction was correct. One so rarely gets the opportunity to correspond with another real magician, let alone a woman of your calibre, as an equal. Many obstacles stand in the way of open communication, such as mutual suspicion, the inherent danger of our vocation, and basic paranoia. I am delighted you have decided to re-open this dialogue.

However, the content of your letter leaves much to be desired. I had hoped for better relations between us.

The parasitic crisis you describe is highly alarming and completely unacceptable. I am gladdened by the news that the Brinkwood Church is unharmed by these events. I have no quarrel with those people or their way of life. However, these events have nothing to do with me or my work. Such recklessness would be more in keeping with my worries for your development, not the fruit of my own researches. Forgive me for being blunt, but there is no other way to say this: this is akin to something your mother would have done. I cannot but interpret this wild accusation as anything except a sad attempt to warn me about the fallout of your own excesses, while shielding yourself from blame by pinning it on me. I am certain you have convinced your associates, but I am made of sharper materials. For the warning, you have my thanks. For the accusation, my disappointment.

Your inquiry as to the whereabouts of Miss Stack is equally puzzling. Furthermore, it inclines me to believe that you have inherited not only your late mother’s reckless pursuit of power, but also her sadism. We both know what has happened to Amy Stack. I will not dignify the question with an answer.

As to your blunt demand for access to The Testament of Heliopolis, this book is not your property. It is mine. My conditions remain the same as outlined in my previous letter. I am willing to share limited portions of the text, in as safe a manner as possible, in return for custody of my niece.

You write that Lauren is an adult and that this is impossible, but this is pure sentimentality and deflection. You and I both understand that she is not fully in command of her faculties, that she has special requirements and needs, which cannot be fully met here, not by those who do not understand her. You do not understand her, or what she represents, or what she is capable of. Mishandled, she would be very dangerous, and requires special attentions. I urge you to contact my lawyer again, Harold Yuleson, with further correspondence so that we may organize the beginning of negotiations. Do not send—”

“Skip the rest of that paragraph, it dissolves into legalese.”

Evelyn interrupted Praem’s reading of the letter. Praem paused, milk-white eyes flicking further down the neatly folded sheet of paper in her hands.

“I will warn you now, so as to save you the time,” Praem resumed. Her lilting, sing-song voice was almost enough to bury the meaning of the words. “This letter, the physical object that has been delivered to you by my lawyer, was printed out by him, at his offices. This paper and ink has not touched my hands. Any attempt to use it as a sympathetic focus for magic will result in failure. I urge you not to attempt underhanded attacks on my person, but come to the figurative table where we may discuss how to move forward.

I have greater respect for you than you might assume, Miss Saye. Let us deal as equals, and dispense with any further unpleasantness.

*Yours sincerely,
Edward.”*

Praem finished without fanfare. She stood there for a moment, holding the letter, framed by the soft June sunlight creeping around the edges of the heavy curtains. Dust motes hung in a shaft of light, not far from the hateful thing in her hands. She placed the letter back on the workshop table, next to our copy of the one Evelyn had handed to Nicole, to hand to Edward’s lawyer. She smoothed the cuffs and skirt of her maid uniform, then resumed her habitual poise, straight-backed and staring at nothing with blank, milk-white

eyes.

We all stared at the letter like it was a live scorpion. Evelyn let out a grumbly sigh.

Twil bared her teeth and said, "Fucking cunt."

Evelyn actually laughed, a tiny snort. "Would have put it a bit more delicately myself, but yes. Well said."

"Should fuckin' send him a pipe bomb next time. Or an envelope full of anthrax. Is that still a thing?"

Evelyn shrugged. "I doubt that would get past the lawyer."

Twil gestured at the letter with both hands, rocking back in her chair. "What was the fuckin' point of this? Like he was gonna say 'yeah, sorry mate, my bad with the whole mind-eating prawn-worm thing, here's the book by way of apology'. Fuck. Fuck all of this."

Raine clucked her tongue and hissed through her teeth. She leaned back too, put her hands behind her head, and got halfway into the process of putting her feet up on the table before Praem stopped her with a sharp glance. She cleared her throat and winked an apology up at Praem. "Gotta agree with Twil here," she said. "We shouldn't have made a peep about all this, Eeve. Lost the element of surprise here. He's gonna know we're coming."

"There would be no element of surprise either way," Evelyn said with a sigh. "How many times do you need to hear this? His home is going to be festooned with early-warning systems, some of them probably very much alive. You're not going to climb a drainpipe and shove a pillow over his face, Raine. Stop thinking about this like jumping a thug in a back alley. Think bigger, both of you."

Raine blew out a long breath and nodded at the letter. "You think it's safe to keep that in here?"

"Safe," said Praem.

"Yes," Evelyn said. "I'm not a total idiot. Praem checked it when we got it off Nicole. It's just paper."

Raine shrugged. "So that part wasn't a lie, at least. How much of the rest of it you think is true?"

"It's all lies!" Twil spat. She huffed and stood up, knocking her chair back in frustration. "It's just bullshit! Can't believe my parents

agreed to this shit too. This was stupid. What the hell has this guy got to say that's worth hearing, huh?"

Evelyn gave Twil a dark look. "Do I instruct you on how to bite off a rabbit's head?"

Twil blinked at her. "What?"

Raine laughed, spreading her hands in a shrug.

Evelyn said, "Then don't instruct me on strategy, unless you have useful suggestions. Sending the letter to Edward Lilburne was the right move." She reached out with one hand, her maimed hand, missing fingers on full display instead of hidden in the end of her sleeve. She tapped the letter. "This is exactly the kind of response I had hoped for."

Twil spread her arms. "It's full of lies!"

I cleared my throat, loudly, then regretted it because everybody looked at me. Rather a paradoxical action, but I felt responsible for this. I hadn't done anything to stop Evelyn's plan. None of us had, all week. I toyed with the half-empty mug of cold tea on the table as I spoke. "That's kind of the point. I think. We can tell what he's thinking by the kind of lies he tells."

Evelyn nodded. "Thank you, Heather. At least somebody around here actually pays attention."

Twil huffed and flopped her arms.

"Also," I added, "please don't yell so much. You're upsetting Marmite."

I nodded toward the corner of the magical workshop. Twil opened her mouth, about to continue getting pointlessly upset that we weren't committing terrorism by posting improvised explosive devices to a house we still couldn't find, but then the meaning of my words filtered through her brain. She fumbled inside her hoodie for her pair of magically modified glasses. Her ones weren't 3D, just cheap black frames with flat, clear plastic instead of lenses, part of keeping the expenses as low as possible. The magical working was etched in miniature across the frames and down the arms. From a distance of a few feet, they could pass for normal glasses, as long as nobody looked too closely or for too long. The fruit of Evelyn's recent work.

Twil slipped them on so she could see what I saw. She frowned at the corner of the magical workshop, where the two sofas were wedged together, then tilted her head to one side. "How can you tell?" she asked.

"He sort of hides himself more when he's feeling threatened or unsafe. It's okay, Marmite," I said to the huge spider-squid. "Nobody is angry with you. You're a good boy."

Marmite was in one of his now-habitual spots, curled up on the arm of one of the sofas with all his legs tucked under him, a pose that Lozzie had taken to calling the "spider-loaf". He'd been half-asleep minutes earlier, his metallic cone-eyes drifting open and shut like a dozing cat, his bony tentacles anchoring him to the sofa, the wall, and the pair of spider-servitors in the corner above him. The spider-servitors were his new best friends. They'd taken to following him around the house whenever he moved, though one of them always stayed in here, watching the inactive gateway to Camelot.

We hadn't established if Marmite and the servitors could actually communicate with each other, but they kept touching, Marmite wrapping them in tentacles, them laying their stingers across him without harm, so we assumed they were talking somehow.

Since Twil had started shouting, Marmite's eyes were wide open, darting about the room. His shadowy black membranes had fluttered outward, wrapping his pale-furred body in the illusionary shadows.

"Yeah, Twil." Raine laughed, peeping through her own modified glasses before putting them down on the table again. "Stop scaring the puppy, hey? You're meant to be the big sister dog."

Twil sighed. "He's not mine."

Praem walked over to Marmite. She didn't need a pair of novelty glasses to see pneuma-somatic flesh. She reached down and gave Marmite scratches behind where his ears might have been if he was a canine.

"Good boy," said Praem. "Good boy. Good boy. Good boy."

Slowly but surely, Marmite relaxed. He reeled in his membranes. His eyes grew heavy. Was that a purring I heard on the air? No, just my imagination.

“Alright,” Twil said, removing the glasses from her face again. She gestured at the letter from Edward Lilburne. “I still don’t get this though, seriously. Like Raine said, he’s warned now, right? You don’t warn somebody you’re after, not until the last possible second. We gotta fuckin’ smack the guy as soon as we figure out which house is his, yeah?”

She pointed at the dozens of photographs and Google Map printouts stuck to the wall behind Evelyn. Every single one was of a different house. Some of them were small and suburban, from the very edge of Stockport. Others were large, rural, rambling things on the edges of villages or deep in the forest around Brinkwood. Some of them were crossed out with big red Xs through them, others lay in a pile on the table, next to a brand new Ordnance Survey map already covered in Evelyn’s notes.

Evelyn cleared her throat and looked away, drumming her fingers on the table.

Twil stared at her for a second, then glanced at me and Raine. “We are gonna figure out which house is his, right? It can’t be that hard now. Isn’t Nicky supposed to be on this?” Twil forced an awkward laugh. “Can’t be that many houses between Stockport and Brinkwood.”

“Hidden house,” Praem intoned. “House, hidden. Housey. Hiddeny.”

Twil stared at her. “Oh fuck off. Seriously?”

I winced.

Evelyn cleared her throat again and relocated her dignity. “The decision to send the letter to Edward Lilburne was taken before we ran into difficulty pinpointing the house. The purpose stands, and it’s a good one.”

“I’m sorry, Eevee, but I’m lost as well,” I said. “We have given up the element of surprise by letting him know about the whole thing with the parasites. I understand the need to get inside his head, to ‘know your enemy’, but ... you’re acting like this is a win of some kind. I don’t see it.”

Evelyn turned a narrow-eyed look on me. But she smiled one of those thin and satisfied smiles, Evelyn at her devious best. It sent a shiver up my spine.

“I want him afraid,” she said.

The shiver turned hot.

Twil huffed, rolled her eyes, and slouched like the grumpy teenager she was, as if Evelyn had explained in great detail why Twil was not allowed to go out clubbing tonight. She took a step toward the kitchen door and said, “Screw it, I need another sausage roll.”

We were gathered in the magical workshop, safe and sound in Sharrowford, a week and two days after the incident with Nicole wandering through the woods, the magical infovore parasites, and the journey into Hringewindla’s shell.

We’d spent that week hunting a mage. Well, Evelyn had. But we still didn’t have our prey in sight.

= =

It had been a relatively quiet week by the standards of my life those days. That was a blessing, because after the emotional overload and physical exhaustion of that weekend, between the duel and meeting Hringewindla, I was ready to curl up into a ball and go to sleep for a month. Sadly, my powers of abyssal biology did not extend to a bear-like hibernation period, let alone packing on the necessary layer of fat, and even if they had, we had a mage to hunt and university essays to turn in, so I settled for a nice long twelve hours of merciful unconsciousness. I was so worn out that I barely recalled the journey home. I remembered the greenish soapstone coin clutched in one fist, Marmite crammed into the boot of Raine’s car, us leaving the Hoptons with promises of spirit-seeing 3D glasses and more regular coordination.

Jan and July had stayed over that night, the former on a sleeping bag in Lozzie’s room and the latter sleeping sat upright in the workshop, with Praem. None of us had the energy to care. Jan was in absolutely no fit state to be going anywhere with all that cannabis in her system, and Lozzie was delighted by the notion.

Poor Kimberly was so embarrassed and apologetic that I actually had to sit down with her the next day, in her bedroom, to stop her from offering to move out.

“It was irresponsible and stupid and I’m- I- I don’t deserve—”

“Kim, stop apologising,” I told her. I’d even squeezed her hand.

"You didn't even fully understand what we were doing. And you can't be expected to act as our backup if we don't explain to you in the first place. And even then, that would be terribly unfair. I'm ... well, not *angry* with Lozzie, she did turn up to help, but ... "

Kimberly pulled an awkward smile. "She was high."

I sighed and nodded. "She was high, as a kite. I don't think it made that much difference in the end, but ... " I shook my head at the absurdity. "I'm not pleased with her for that, or with Jan for starting and encouraging it. What if Edward had made a move against the house? But, again," I hurried to add, "that's not your responsibility. Just ... refuse to share, if this happens again. Please."

"July was sober," Kimberly offered, her eyes a haunted shadow. "I wasn't about to say no to her."

I sighed and nodded and patted her hand. This was about Lozzie and Jan, not the mousy and timid supplier who could be so easily pressured into anything.

"I screwed up," she repeated for the tenth time that morning, trying and failing to look me in the eyes. "It was my fault. I'm the adult here. I should have ... I should ... "

"Don't move out, Kim," I said. "Nobody wants you to do that."

But we had so many other things to think about and prepare for — and Lozzie had *helped*, even if she was irresponsible. I let that difficult conversation fall by the wayside. I let it slide, refused to find the courage and strength to confront her over this, not least because I wasn't sure what I was confronting her about. She hadn't exposed Tenny or Whistle to the smoke, she hadn't hurt herself or started an incident of some kind. There was nothing wrong with what she'd done — just when she'd done it.

Could I ask Lozzie to practice constant vigilance? Was that fair?

But I sure could have a proper go at Jan. She was much, much older than us, if my suspicions were correct. She had, in a way, been the responsible adult in charge.

Perhaps that's why she and July made themselves so scarce after that. Jan and Lozzie were very giggly with each other in the early hours of the following morning, though Tenny was in the room with them so I was safe to assume nothing was going on that I shouldn't

have overheard. But then as soon as the house was waking up and we were all finding our collective feet again, Jan thanked us all profusely, gave us seven entirely different contact numbers for her, one of which was a French phone number, and assured us that she wasn't leaving Sharrowford any time soon, lots of work to do — for us, mostly — but she needed to get out of our hair and change her clothes and whatnot, they do smell of weed smoke now, and so on and so on, don't worry about her, she and July can take care of themselves — until she was backing out of the door and almost tripping over her massive white coat.

“Can I come with!?” Lozzie had asked.

Lozzie had come bouncing past me in the front room as we'd been awkwardly seeing off Jan and July. She was still in her pajama bottoms beneath her poncho, tugging on her shoes with a little hippity-hop motion, not waiting for an answer. She almost crashed right into Jan with sheer exuberance. The terrified look on Jan's face was almost worth the trouble. July caught Lozzie in one arm and Jan by the scruff of her neck, and then settled both girls safely back on their feet again before they could go tumbling down in a tangle of limbs.

Lozzie was all giggles and a quick thank you hug for July. The demon host didn't care.

Jan made a show of dusting herself off, though she hadn't actually touched the floor at any point. “Well, um, I wouldn't be ... opposed, but uh ... well. You know.” She cleared her throat and looked at me.

I resisted the twin urge to sigh and put my hands on my hips. I didn't want to be some kind of disciplinary ogre.

Lozzie turned to me, giggling and wiping hair back out of her face. “Please please please! Only 'till after lunchtime! And then if I know where Janny is staying I can just poppity-pop over there without walking and stuff!”

“Janny?” I murmured, at the exact same moment Jan turned to her and said, “Janny?”

Evelyn's voice came from the kitchen doorway, thick with the kind of exhaustion that sleep hadn't touched. “I think that's a grand idea.”

I turned to see Evelyn leaning heavily on her walking stick, a mug of strong black coffee in her other hand. She never drank coffee, not like me. Evelyn was much more of a tea woman. But that morning, the morning following the journey into Hringewindla's shell, she looked like she needed a good cup of coffee. Black bags under her eyes, skin sallow and pale, almost grey with stress, hair limp and dry, back more hunched than usual. Never mind caffeine, she looked like she needed a shot of adrenaline and a dose of codeine. I half-suspected she'd already dipped into her secret stash of hard painkillers.

I cleared my throat. "Evee? But, I mean, Lozzie, going out alone, it's ..."

Evelyn ran her tongue over her teeth beneath her lips, then took her time sipping from her cup of coffee. "What? Too dangerous?"

I bit my lip, feeling terribly awkward. "Maybe. What if something happens?"

Evelyn just raised her eyes past me.

"Oh," said Jan. "Oh, of course, Lozzie would be safe with us. Isn't that right, July?"

"Mm," July grunted. She sounded so long-suffering, so done with this, but I had no doubt as to her sincerity.

"Evee," I whispered. "We've only just met these two."

"And Lozzie has befriended January."

"Just Jan, please," said Jan. Evelyn cleared her throat and gestured a casual apology with her mug.

Praem clicked out of the kitchen, carrying Lozzie's mobile phone in one hand and a twenty pound note in the other. "Good catch," she said to July as she passed, and then pressed the phone and the money into Lozzie's hands.

July frowned down at Praem. "Perhaps."

Praem held Lozzie's hands for a moment, until Lozzie was paying full attention to her.

"After lunchtime," she said.

Lozzie nodded hard enough to send her hair flying everywhere

again. She hugged Praem, totted over to hug me, and then did this playful air-hug thing with Eeve, which made Evelyn frown and blush and nod along. Then she raced upstairs to hug Tenny and pet Whistle.

Two minutes later she was out of the front door in July's wake, chattering to Jan about turtles. I watched them go. Lozzie turned back and waved to me when they reached the garden gate, just before Praem closed the front door.

"She'll be just fine," I said, mostly to myself.

Praem looked directly at me. White eyes bored into mine. "Jan is good."

I sighed and couldn't help myself. "Jan is a con artist and, well, sort of a coward. But so am I, I suppose. Though July isn't. Oh, damn it all, Eeve," I said as I turned back to her. "Your paranoia has rubbed off on me."

But when I turned back to Evelyn, she was staring at the closed front door like a lizard peeking out from beneath a rock. Her eyes held a cold blade, buried deep, briefly exposed. She blinked and the moment passed.

"Lozzie will be fine, I'm certain of that," she said. "If the worst was to happen, she can always just ... poof." Evelyn smiled awkwardly.

"Eeve. Eeve, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that Lozzie just made a real friend. Maybe more. Maybe a friend with benefits, who knows. That's none of my business though." Evelyn took another long sip from her coffee, avoiding my eyes.

I let her words hang in the air for a moment, unanswered, then said, "And?"

Evelyn sighed heavily and gave me a guilty glare. "And it's to our advantage if their friendship continues. Alright? Jan and July are trustworthy. Listen to me say that, Heather. I never thought I'd say words like that. Bloody hell, we left those two alone in this house with only Kimberly to stand between them and the entire contents of my workshop. And you know what?"

"I-I'm sorry, Eeve, I think I got the wrong end of the stick, I thought maybe you were—"

"They didn't touch a single thing. I checked. Not a page out of place." Evelyn swigged her coffee this time, then pulled a face as she got a mouthful of dregs. "Heather, we took them Outside, we let them sleep in this house. Either they're playing a very long and very clever game, far beyond our level, or we've just met a trustworthy mage. I want that woman on our side. I could probably buy her loyalty with money, certainly, but this is different. If that means encouraging Lozzie to ... " Evelyn cleared her throat and gestured with her empty mug. Praem caught the mug before Evelyn could slop the dregs out of the bottom and onto the floor, then stepped through into the kitchen to go wash it up.

I cleared my throat, blushing before I even said the words. "I don't think they're actually having a, you know. Sexual relationship."

"And it would be none of our fucking business if they are," Evelyn snapped.

"Yes, I-I couldn't agree more. Absolutely. None of our business."

"Except Jan is much older. I think." Evelyn sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "God damn it."

"You know that Lozzie came back from Outside with a hickey once, yes? I think she's capable of being responsible for herself."

Evelyn gave me a look.

"I'll talk to her," I added with a little sigh. "Just to be sure. That she's being safe."

Evelyn sighed again, shook her head, and said, "You wanted me to be a strategist, Heather. This is a good strategic move. I want Jan on our side."

"You're really good at this, Evee." I meant it, too. "I'll talk to Lozzie, make sure she isn't getting in too deep. Even if that's kind of absurd, considering where she goes half the time. More importantly, how are you feeling, after yesterday?"

"Eh," Evelyn grunted. "I'll live."

Lozzie kept her word. She returned shortly after lunchtime, by appearing around the doorway of the magical workshop while Evelyn was making plans, much to my unspoken relief. I should have known better than to worry. This was Lozzie's home now, whatever friends she made elsewhere.

Jan and July didn't drop entirely off the radar, which was also a relief, though a mixed one. I'd half expected them to up and vanish now that July's duel with Zheng was over and done with, friendship with Lozzie or not. But they didn't leave Sharrowford or ignore our calls. Lozzie went to visit them again a few days later, though I gathered they'd moved out of the tiny little bedsit flat and into somewhere less filthy and depressing. They didn't need the camouflage anymore, not from the ragged remains of the Eye cult, and not from us either.

"Where are they staying now?" Evelyn asked Lozzie. She made zero attempt to sound casual.

Lozzie tapped the side of her nose and winked, so broadly that she should have been on stage in a Christmas pantomime. "I'm not supposed to tell!" she chirped.

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine. I suppose I would do the same."

But Jan returned Evelyn's calls — and mine. In fits and starts, around the more pressing emergency of pinpointing Edward Lilburne's house — and the mundane pressures of wrapping up Sharrowford University's exam and coursework season — we began to coordinate the difficult process of figuring out how to contact the remnants of the Eye Cult and call them in from the cold. Jan said it might take a while, a couple of weeks to talk to them all, to explain what we might be able to offer. She and Evelyn talked money.

They also talked about Badger, and included me.

"We can't move forward until Nathan is out of the hospital," Jan said over the phone. She'd opted for a video call, perhaps to show good faith. All we could see behind her neat little face and fluffy black hair was bland beige walls and heavy curtains. Raine was certain that it was some kind of long-stay hotel.

Raine peered over Evelyn's shoulder, butting in. "Metal plate goes in his head on Friday. They reckon he'll be out next week, if it goes well. Which it better."

"Yes, I'm well aware." Jan pulled a too-sweet smile. "I've been to visit him again, to make sure he's not about to run off or something. We get him on his feet after he's discharged, then he's our living proof that you can help them, that you're not going to spirit them

away to meet their doom in the spheres beyond. All that.”

What we didn’t discuss was my request for a doll-body, for Maisie. Not yet. I had important things to ask, and I didn’t want to ask them over the phone, with everyone listening.

Regardless of the secret, hidden realities of the supernatural world, full of mages and monsters and giant snail-creatures buried beneath the woods, it was still assessment period at Sharrowford University. Raine had another exam to sit that week. I had an essay to finish, edit, footnote, and proofread. Evelyn trundled back and forth to campus several times, to turn in work she’d already completed to absolute perfection. She really was brilliant, at anything she turned her mind towards, even if she couldn’t see it.

I was putting off a very difficult conversation with my mother. On Wednesday of that week, she left a message on my phone; I think I was snuggled in Raine’s lap at the time, talking about nothing in particular. My mother wanted to know when I was planning to come home for the summer, after term ended on the 14th of June. I called her back two days later, at a time of day when I knew she’d be at work. I left a message saying I wasn’t sure yet.

Of course I was sure. I wasn’t going anywhere that summer.

My childhood home wasn’t really home anymore. My home was with everyone else, here.

That was far from the only difficult conversation left unspoken during that slow and strange week of psychological recovery. We didn’t really talk much about what had happened with Hringewindla. Evelyn tried to gather us together for a basic run-down a couple of days later, but everyone was so scatterbrained and distracted, and Evelyn was eager to focus on her new work, on the hunt. Sevens re-assumed her blood-goblin mask and her clingy, scratchy, almost bitey physical affection for me, and I didn’t have the strength of mind to ask her about her beautiful and alien war-form, Hastur’s Daughter, or about the moments of silver-tongued anger she’d displayed. I let sleeping dogs lie. Not a smart move. But then again, I’ve never claimed to be smart.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive was filled with a secret tension that I couldn’t quite identify. It was like walking across shifting sands, feeling the grains adjust around each footstep, yet knowing that deep beneath the earth, whole landslides and hidden earthquakes of

sand gathered, ready to upend the landscape.

Or maybe it was just me. Maybe I was shell shocked after Hringewindla, the Church, all of it, not to mention Raine duelling with Zheng.

That was one source of solid, unshakeable comfort — Raine and Zheng.

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On that very first night after the journey down into Hringewindla's shell, when I slept for twelve hours wrapped in my tentacles like an octopus ball, I woke up in the small hours of the morning to find Sevens nestled against my front beneath the sheets, like a sleepy marsupial. Half-asleep and feeling comfy, I cuddled her in the dark. But then I saw that Zheng was flat on her back at the edge of the bed, which was how she usually slept — but there was Raine, between us, one hand casually flung across Zheng's iron-hard abdominal muscles.

It was the first time I'd seen such casual touch from them.

Some ineffable barrier between them had finally broken down, and I don't think either of them understood exactly how it worked. Over the next few days they began to share strange, private glances, more open than before, Raine grinning with her usual rakish cockiness, Zheng sharp and dark and brooding. An unfamiliar observer would have seen nothing different from the way they used to look at each other, all challenge and passive aggression. But to me it was plain as day, a non-verbal conversation they'd been stopped from having all this time, until they'd shared blade and blood together.

On Saturday morning, almost a week later, I happened to wake up very early, plagued by the physical necessity of a full bladder and the June sunlight peeling back the curtain with white-yellow fingers. I would have stumbled to the bathroom and back, perhaps dragging Sevens with me, wrapped in my tentacles, or perhaps leaving her there after some gentle untangling — except, Raine and Zheng were missing. Ape instinct and abyssal drive agreed that this was very strange, so I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, left Seven-Shades-of-Sleepy-Leech to cuddle a pillow full-body style, and ventured out in the early-morning glow to go find the other two angles of my mutual triangle.

I discovered them by following the growled comments and occasional flesh-on-flesh impacts floating up into the kitchen from the open door of the cellar.

For a moment after I entered the kitchen, I stood frozen, hoodie dragged on skew-whiff, draped in shadow as the morning sunlight burned outdoors, like a tiny mouse on the threshold of leaving her desert cave. I put a hand over my mouth, eyes going wide.

Slam-thump, slap. Zheng, growling in deep appreciation. Raine laughing, then heaving for breath.

Another three impacts, quick and hard. Zheng grunting. Happy. Very happy.

“Oh my goodness,” I whispered behind my hand, heart hammering against the underside of my rib cage. I didn’t know if I should feel betrayed or aroused or start laughing. “Oh my goodness, what are you two doing down there? Why in the cellar!?”

“Sparring.”

Praem’s voice rang out from the shadows at the other end of the kitchen. I was already primed to go off like a tripwire, so I jumped about a foot in the air, toes dancing across the kitchen flagstones, yelping behind my hand. My tentacles fanned out, grabbing a chair, the edge of the table, the worktop, anything they could reach.

Praem was sitting at the far end of the kitchen table, reading a book, fully dressed in her maid uniform, with her hair pinned up. Between the deep shadows of the early morning and the rather distracting sounds from below, I hadn’t noticed her sitting there. A pair of milk-white eyes stared back at me.

“Praem!” I hissed. “Don’t make me jump like that! I-I didn’t see you there, I was ... distracted by ... ”

Slap-slap, smack. They were still at it.

“Sparring,” Praem repeated.

“ ... oh!” My eyes went wide. I blushed all over. “Oh, sparring. Like fighting. Fighting, yes. I thought they were ... well ... maybe ... you know.”

Praem stared at me, impassive and unreadable. I pulled a face like I’d bitten into a lemon.

Raine's voice floated up from the open cellar door. "Heather? Heather, that you up there?"

I stared at Praem, feet glued to the floor. The doll-demon stared back at me.

"What do I do?" I hissed.

"Go watch," Praem said, and then looked down, back at her book.

"Heather?" Raine called again.

"Oh, fine," I whispered. I unstuck my feet, crossed my arms, and stalked across the kitchen, tentacles trailing after me. "But you better not be naked together down there. Not that I have any right to stop you. Just ... should have ... invited me ... "

My words trailed off to less than a whisper. There was no way I could say that out loud, not with Praem sitting right there.

I ventured down into the stale, cool air and bare red brick of the cellar. The cold flagstone steps leached the heat through my socks, making me curl my toes up tight. Daylight faded as I descended, unwilling to join me in the depths. I hadn't been down here in weeks and weeks, not since before Badger had slept down here, having night terrors about the Eye and awaiting pneuma-somatic brain surgery.

The remains of his brief stay were still there — an uncomfortable looking camp-bed piled with a few sheets and a lumpy pillow, a neat tower of books on the floor next to it, and one of the televisions dragged down from upstairs. He had needed every distraction he could get.

I didn't like the reminder of what we'd done, even if I had saved him in the end.

As I reached the bottom of the steps, Raine's head appeared around the bannister. She was flushed and sweating, breathing hard, glowing with physical exertion. She beamed at me and said, "Hey, you!"

"Hello and good morning yourself," I murmured. I kept my arms folded, though I wasn't sure why. Raine leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. I tutted and half-heartedly ducked away. "Raine, you're so sweaty. What on earth are you ... two ... ah."

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled.

My words trailed off as I reached the cellar floor and finally understood what my lovers were doing with each other.

Between the thick support beams for the house, they’d unrolled a number of exercise mats across the ancient flagstone floor, covering up the remains of dozens of magic circles. Zheng was wearing nothing except a pair of shorts and a thin t-shirt, her rippling muscles coated with sweat, red-brown skin glistening in the light of the two bare bulbs hanging overhead. I noticed that beneath the t-shirt, her chest was tightly bound with a long strip of cloth, to keep things in place, so to speak. Her hair was swept back with grease and sweat, little droplets running down her neck. A lazy, toothy smile greeted me as I involuntarily ran my eyes up and down her body. I swallowed and blushed and looked away.

Raine wasn’t any easier on my sleepy libido. She was in her exercise gear, the outfit she normally only wore to the gym, tight black spats and a sports bra beneath an equally tight top. She bounced on the balls of her bare feet, as if she didn’t want to stop moving.

“We’re sparring,” she said, shooting me a wink and a grin. “Hey, sorry for not waking you. We were both just already up. You looked nice and comfy with Sevens, so.” Raine shrugged. “You hear the good news yet?”

“I ... sorry, what?”

“Got a call from the hospital, in the night. Badger got the plate in his skull, no complications.”

“Oh,” I said, totally overwhelmed in more ways than one. “That’s ... good. Yes.”

Raine’s grin got wider. “Wanna watch us?”

I blinked at her, wide-eyed. Raine struggled not to laugh. Zheng chuckled.

“I-I mean, I’m not going to say *no*,” I stammered. I took a few tentative steps deeper into the cellar, toward their makeshift sparring ring. The air smelled of dust, but also the hot spice of feminine sweat and the heady scent of Zheng’s furnace-like skin. “That would be an obvious lie. Yes, of course I’d love to watch my two girlfriends getting sweaty and punching each other. Of course.”

I huffed as Raine laughed again. "I thought you were ... you know." I murmured those last two words, blushing and half-hiding behind the end of my sleeve as I looked at the floor.

Raine and Zheng shared a glance.

"Uhhhh," said Raine. "Thought we were doing what now?"

Zheng purred. "Shaman?"

"I ... I thought ... " I hiccuped. "Oh, for pity's sake, I thought you were *doing it*."

Raine snorted. Zheng tilted her head, then chuckled low in her throat. I waved both of them off, hunching my shoulders, and said, "I mean, not that it's any of my business if you are."

"Course it's your business," Raine said, nudging me in the side with her elbow. She caught my eye when I tried to look away, then caught my chin in one hand. Suddenly serious, she said, "Hey, Heather. Of course it's your business."

"I ... I suppose." I couldn't keep the blush off my cheeks.

"Not that you get a veto or something. But you got a right to know. Maybe watch, if you wanna."

I stared at Raine, wide-eyed and dry mouthed, then hiccuped again. "Oh, damn it. I can't think about this right now. I'm sorry. I got it wrong."

"Yeah, just sparring." Raine cracked a grin and ruffled my hair. I didn't make any effort to fix it, I already had wild bed-head.

Zheng rumbled low in her throat again, rolling her half-naked shoulders, and asked, "Are we going to fuck, little wolf?"

I felt like my head was about to catch fire. I think I whined.

Raine laughed and stepped back onto the exercise mats. She stretched both arms above her head, working out the tension locked within her muscles. I struggled not to stare. "Dunno. Who'd be on top? No, wait, don't answer that. Gotta be me."

"Mmmmmmmmm," Zheng purred. She stared Raine down, as if daring her to lunge.

Raine shot me a wink. "Seriously though, Heather, I dunno if Zheng

and I are like that. But this?” She raised her fists and rolled them back and forth, like an early 20th century cartoon boxer. “This is better than sex with Zheng. Wanna see?” She raised one knee, like she was about to deliver a kung-fu kick to Zheng’s midsection. Zheng flowed aside, an easy dodge, even though Raine didn’t actually lash out with the implied attack.

“I ... I mean, y-yes, but ... ” I was shaking my head, still lost. “Why are you doing this down here?”

“We make a lot of noise, shaman,” said Zheng.

Raine jerked a thumb at Zheng. “Can hardly take her to the gym. Snapback effect only goes so far.”

I blinked at her. “Snap what now?”

“Snapback effect. What does Eevee call it? The thing that happens in people’s minds to explain magic, when they see it.”

“Oh, yes, I know what you mean. What does that have to do with going to the gym?” I eyed Zheng up and down briefly, then swallowed without meaning to. “Oh.”

Raine laughed. “Yeah. See her in a dark alleyway or racing through the night, a bystander will fill her in as something else. But if I took her down the uni gym to go lifting together, right out in the open? She’d be all over instagram in about twenty minutes, for all the wrong reasons.”

“Huh,” Zheng grunted, a snort through her nose.

Raine cocked an eyebrow at her, hands on her hips. “That bother you, big girl? You wanna show off those muscles to the world?”

“Only to the shaman,” Zheng said. “And you.”

Raine did a little theatrical bow. I blushed so hard I had to turn away and take a deep breath to steady myself and slow my heartbeat.

“Yes ... but ... why ... ” I struggled for a quick subject change. “Why in sight of all of this?”

I gestured around the cellar with one hand and two tentacles, at some of the most gruesome and inexplicable magical artefacts that Evelyn kept in the house — the wire-mesh cage which contained the unrotting corpse of the demon-possessed rabbit which had

saved us in the library of Carcosa, the mysterious pair of empty coffins along the back wall, the ugly piece of twisted metal sculpture sitting on a workbench and covered in ancient bloodstains. And the most recent addition to the room: the chair to which we had tied Stack when we'd debated her fate. Raine and Zheng had chosen to spar amid all this magical detritus, not to mention the sagging, empty wine racks and the boiler gurgling softly to itself in the corner.

Raine glanced about, hands on her hips. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Wizard spoor," Zheng said. "You live surrounded by this, shaman. No need to look away."

"It's just old junk," Raine said. She winked at me. "Hey, seriously, pull up a chair, watch a while. You might learn a thing."

Zheng bared her teeth at Raine. "You want more, little wolf?"

Raine ran a hand through her own hair and cocked her head up at the towering, half-naked demon host. "Always," she purred right back.

"I-I think if I stay and watch, the only thing I'm liable to learn is how embarrassed I have to feel to pass out ... "

I trailed off as both women turned to look at me, both of them amused in their own ways, Raine teasing and suppressing a smirk, Zheng dark and intense as her eyes cut through me. I swallowed a hiccup, groped for a chair with a tentacle, and fell into it like a mouse paralysed before a snake.

Raine shot me a wink. "Good girl."

"Raine!" I whined. I crossed my arms and coiled my tentacles around my tummy, but that didn't help.

She laughed and bounced on the balls of her feet, throwing lazy punches toward Zheng, shadow-boxing. "How about we give Heather a little demo, yeah? Let me hit you again?"

Zheng answered by spreading her arms and grinning wide, showing her shark-toothed grin.

So I curled up in the old wooden chair, hand over my mouth, watching my lovers showing off their bodies to each other. Raine

and Zheng's sparring didn't look anything like the duel they'd had out in Camelot; for a start, Zheng wasn't moving at full speed, and Raine didn't have her knife. It was all very stop-start, showing off strikes and lunges and the beginnings — but not the follow-throughs — of throws and mat-pins. Zheng allowed herself to get punched, a lot, but never landed anything fully on Raine in return, no closed-fist strike that would have sent Raine's head spinning or shattered her ribs.

I got the distinct impression that this was not really a practical exercise at all. It was pure pleasure, expressed in fragments of formal structure, in the flow and knowledge of fighting. And not for my benefit. This was for them, not for my sake, even if I was watching. I couldn't have joined in even if I'd wanted to. Oh, certainly, if I'd used my tentacles I probably could have done something creative and violent, but that wasn't the point. The point was play.

Though, I won't lie. I enjoyed it very much as well, and not only because they were having so much fun.

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Evelyn didn't waste a single day that week before she began the hunt for Edward Lilburne's house.

I hadn't really agreed with the plan to send him a letter, but by the time Evelyn explained to the rest of us what she was already doing, the process was well under way. While we were wrapped up in our own recovery, or in each other, or in university work, Evelyn was working on the problem. Exhausted, sallow-eyed, shaky as if she was malnourished, the price of her true magic down there in Hringewindla's shell weighed heavily on her, but she moved quicker than anybody else.

On the morning following our encounter with Hringewindla — while I'd been sleeping off the effects of stitching together a giant pneuma-somatic rooster and conversing with an Outsider cone-snail the size of a football stadium — Raine had taken Nicole to find her car, on the edge of Stockport. Praem and Evelyn had tagged along. They'd located the car, mercifully untouched and right where Nicole had left it in a Church graveyard. Then they'd followed Nicole back to her apartment in Sharrowford. Evelyn had retrieved the bundle of stolen documents and computer files that Nicole had

taken from Yuleson's offices.

Evelyn hadn't even risked bringing those inside the house; on the way home, they'd driven out to a little isolated stretch of woodland, and had themselves a brief bonfire in an old metal rubbish bin.

"Incineration is always the best way," she had explained to me once they'd all gotten home.

"Kill it with fire," said Praem.

Evelyn had cleared her throat at that suggestion. "I wouldn't go that far, but yes. When a mage screws up — really screws up — just burn everything. It's safer that way. Safer than allowing the contagion to spread. That's one thing my mother had correct."

"I'm just sad I didn't get to meet Nicky's dog," I said.

"Good doggo," said Praem. "Very fluff."

Evelyn purchased two fresh Ordnance Survey maps, to replace the one of Sharrowford that was covered in red ink and her own scrawled notations. But these two showed the countryside between Stockport and Brinkwood, every last little copse of trees and swell of hillside. Praem helped her clear off the table in the magical workshop for this new and challenging project. The maps took pride of place.

By halfway through Tuesday, after consulting with Nicole over the phone, she had marked out a snaking area between Stockport and Brinkwood, in red — the maximum range that Nicole could have reached on foot, while under the influence of the parasite, between the time she'd left her car and the time she had arrived at Geerswin Farm.

By the end of Wednesday, Evelyn had a list of houses. Every residence, suburban or rural, farm or isolated house, inside her hypothetical Nicole-rambling range. She printed out street view images from Google Maps and started pinning each house up on a board behind the table in the magical workshop. The ones she couldn't identify online, she sent Nicole to take pictures of.

"Evee, are you certain she's okay being involved in all this again?" I'd asked.

Evelyn snorted. "She's a detective. This is a mystery. She's in her element."

Raine peered over the table, leafing through the houses. “How we gonna narrow this down? Have Zheng go knock on every door?”

“The old fashioned way. Nicole wants to help with that. Verifying owners, that sort of thing. The moment we get one that doesn’t add up, we’ll ... figure out the next step.”

I picked up one printout, of a lovely little cottage somewhere in the countryside near Brinkwood. “What about Lozzie’s description of the place? It should have a gravel driveway, and a statue of a naked woman in the garden. Apparently.”

Evelyn sighed and took the printout from me, placing it back with the others, as if I had disturbed some specific ritual order. “None of these have anything like that. But it could be camouflaged in some other way. Or he could have had the place redesigned since Lozzie saw it.” She tapped the red area of her map. “If it’s in here, we’ll find it.”

“Then what?” Raine asked with a smirk. “We gonna send him a pipe bomb?”

Evelyn and I shared a look at that. We both smiled, in slightly different ways.

Raine’s eyebrows climbed and she said, “Hey, whoa there, you two. I’m all up for improvised explosive devices, but I wasn’t being serious. Unless you think that’ll actually work?”

Evelyn snorted. “Heather and I spoke about this. No. I don’t think we’re going to send him a bomb. We’re going to try the opposite.”

Raine and I both frowned. “What’s the opposite of a bomb?” Raine asked. “Hey, that sounds like a riddle!”

“The opposite of a bomb,” said Evelyn, “is a diplomatic missive.”

“Evee?” I said.

Raine nodded sagely, as if this made perfect sense. “Right. Bore him to death. I’ll get printing out the whole of one of those old-school websites where everything is one long paragraph about lizard people and the royal family. Heather, you go to the library and find the worst piece of literary theory you can. We’ll combine both.”

“I am being serious,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Oh?” Raine spread her arms. “I assumed you were having a laugh,

because what the fuck, Eevee? You're gonna find this guy's house just so you can send him a letter?"

"No," Evelyn huffed. "I've already sent the letter."

Raine and I both stared at her.

"Eevee, what?"

"Yes, um, how?" I asked.

"Via his lawyer. Look, I've sent him the letter, *then* I'm going to find his house. Then we're going to ... corner him. In that order."

I couldn't help but notice the pause before Evelyn had said 'corner him'.

We'd made Evelyn show us her own copy of the letter she'd sent, and I had to admit, it was a masterpiece of double-speak and careful wording. She'd raised each topic without actually giving anything away, radiating aggression in every line, browbeating and insulting without ever being direct. She could be terribly underhanded when she needed to be. It was quite impressive.

"Eevee, Eevee, Eevee," Raine sighed. "I'm glad you're on our side, you know?"

"It's just a letter," she snapped.

And Evelyn was so animated, so in her element, that I didn't have the heart to argue with the plan. As the week went on and she crossed off houses, talking to Nicole over the phone and tightening her net, she slowly recovered from the effects of too much magic. She got her strength and energy back, pouring it into the hunt. She stopped coughing up blood and wincing whenever she sat down, stopped having to lean on Praem just to get up the stairs. I wasn't about to interrupt her progress.

Besides, I wanted to find Edward Lilburne too. I wanted that book — needed that book. My sister was on a time limit, so almost any risk was worth taking. When the days stretched out into a week and almost every house was crossed off with angry red on Evelyn's board, I privately began staring at that Ordnance Survey map. I hadn't been able to define an entire city with hyperdimensional mathematics, but this patch of countryside, it was so much smaller.

But when I brought it up with Evelyn, she told me to wait for

Edward's inevitable response, his unwise move, his tipped hand.

And she turned out to be right. She'd met the man once, while he'd worn another person's face, but her read on him was perfect. The letter came on Tuesday morning, hand-delivered by special courier, from the offices of Harold Yuleson.

She called Twil over right away. We needed to discuss strategy.

So all that week, I didn't ask Eeve about what she'd said, down in Hringewindla's shell. I didn't want to distract her. Or at least, that's what I told myself.

I was right about one thing; I am a terrible coward.

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.2

Twil stomped back into the magical workshop armed for a food fight, clutching a sausage roll in each fist. A third dangled from between her teeth for a second before she scarfed it down, licking flakes of pastry off her lips. I'd never before seen somebody look so grumpy while eating; she was like a hound who'd been denied her treats. If we'd been discussing any other topic, I would have laughed.

But nobody was laughing that afternoon. Outdoors, the June sunlight burned high and bright in a clear sky of hammered blue iron, while we huddled in the shadows indoors, behind the heavy curtains of Evelyn's magical workshop, talking about subjects that had no place in the light of day.

As Twil chewed, she stared at the piece of paper on the table, flawlessly printed and neatly creased — the letter from Edward Lilburne.

"Two?" Evelyn sighed from the far side of the table. She'd drawn herself upright, as far as her kinked spine and back problems would allow. She radiated grim confidence. "You said *another* sausage roll, not two. That is my fridge, you know."

"Our fridge," said Praem, at Evelyn's shoulder.

Twil scoffed. She gestured at the letter with a sausage roll. "It's a reward, right? For dealing with all this bollocks."

Raine cracked a grin and rocked back in her own chair. "Dual-wielding to take down Eddy boy, huh? I can see it."

"Pffft," Twil snorted. She bit one of the sausage rolls in half, chewing thoughtfully. "Alright, I'll bite—"

"You're already doing that," Evelyn grumbled.

"Yeah yeah, ha ha." Twil jabbed the air with the intact sausage roll, like brandishing a dagger. "Why do we—"

“Crumbs,” Praem intoned, sudden and clear and sharp. She turned to stare at Twil, prim and straight-backed in her maid uniform.

“Eh?”

“Crumbs.”

I cleared my throat. “You’re getting crumbs everywhere, Twil. Praem does not approve of crumbs.”

Twil looked at the end of the sausage roll, then down at the table, where a few flakes of pastry had fallen. “Oh, er, shoot. Sorry, shit. Sorry, sorry!”

Praem took charge of the crumbs situation. She marched into the kitchen and returned with a plate, put it down on the table, then gently but insistently encouraged Twil to put her food on the plate like a sensible person. Twil blushed a bit, but she obeyed. Praem then handed her a piece of kitchen roll. A moment of embarrassed and amused silence passed as Twil wiped her hands, looking sheepish. Raine struggled not to laugh. Evelyn just sighed. I managed to smile, despite the black-hole weight of the letter on the table, sitting in the centre of the shadows and sucking up all my attention.

Twil huffed. “Sorry, sorry. Shit.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I said. “I think we all needed that, actually.”

“The floor does not require crumbs,” said Praem.

“Yeah, yeah, glad to be the fuckin’ clown around here,” Twil grumbled, she was smiling now too. She’d taken the edge off, bless her. She tossed the piece of kitchen roll onto the plate, then thought better of that and used it to pick up the other sausage roll and take a bite. She chewed thoughtfully again. “Alright, so. Eevee. Eevee-weavey puddin’ and pie.”

“Don’t you start talking like Lozzie as well,” said Evelyn.

Twil snorted a perfunctory laugh. “You said you want Ed afraid, right? Why do we want him afraid, instead of, you know, unsuspecting and surprised when we turn up to dome him with a crowbar? Actually, nah, forget that for a sec, reverse up even further. How is this making him afraid? Nothing in that sounded afraid to me. You know what it sounds like? Like a stuck-up asshole who thinks he’s in charge. Why’d we even let him know

any of that shit with the parasites happened? This bastard wasn't scared of us before, when we met him at that pub. He fuckin' should be though."

Twil scowled at the letter as if she could see through the black print, to the face of the man who had composed the words.

That impression was so strong that a shiver went down my spine all of a sudden, a cold weight settling in my belly. I stared at the letter as well, worried that the thought might be literal. Bushy grey eyebrows and liver-spotted pate and thin, bloodless lips, framing a wide-eyed owlish stare, peering at us from behind the page.

Was that possible? Could the letter be a trap, a trojan horse? Praem had checked it and found it safe, Evelyn had kept the thing in a magic circle for an hour earlier, testing it, and she'd even held it up to the spider-servitors to see if they reacted.

They hadn't, of course, or we would have burned the letter. I told myself I was getting paranoid and upset. Everything felt wrong. Even the womb-like embrace of the house all around us felt wrong for once, more like a smoky, dark room where horrible people discussed horrible things in secret. I wrapped myself slowly with my tentacles in a self-hug.

Evelyn raised her chin, nodded to Twil, and said, "I'm glad you asked."

She reached out and shifted Edward's letter, turning it so she could tap the first paragraph with a fingertip. Before she even opened her mouth, I recognised the shift in her posture, the taut composure in her face, the squaring of her twisted shoulders. Evee adopted the mantle of strategist-teacher, the magician Evelyn Saye; she had rehearsed these words, I was certain of that much.

"This letter reeks of fear," she said. "Perhaps you can't see it, but I can. Believe that. Informing Edward of the crisis with the parasite lets him know two things. One, we are actively hunting him. He would have assumed that already, but letting him know acts as a threat and a challenge, with no ambiguity, no beating around the bush."

Twil raised her eyebrows and nodded along. She liked the sound of that part. So did Raine.

I felt a twitch of self-disgust.

“Two,” Evelyn continued, “it lets him know we’ve already overcome a major layer of his security. It lets him know we’re looking for his house, and we’ve figured out how to find it. As far as he’s concerned, we may already know where he is.”

“Yeah,” Twil sighed. “That’s the bit I don’t get.”

“There is a third reason.” Evelyn allowed herself one of those narrow, dangerous smiles. She was enjoying this. I shivered inside when I saw that, Evelyn in her element, hunting another mage. “Now he knows I’m not afraid of telling him this. I’ve informed him that he is being hunted. Do you understand the implication? The letter I sent to Edward Lilburne was a death threat.”

Evelyn smiled even wider. She almost laughed, shoulders slumping again beneath her cream sweater.

Twil frowned, pulling a face. She popped the last piece of sausage roll in her mouth and chewed slowly. “Okay, so, yeah, we all know you can be kind of intimidating when you wanna be. But this guy already knew we were gonna try to take him out, right? I still don’t get how his reply means he’s afraid of us.”

Raine clacked her chair back down onto all four legs. “I can kinda see it. Think I get it. The way he totally deflects instead of having a gloat. And he tries to insult Eevee, too.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “Trying to rattle me in return.”

“That’s how you can tell,” I said with a sigh. My words felt bland and empty, not really what I wanted to say. “I agree with Eevee about that part. I think the news about the parasite really shook him. He really wants to turn it around and accuse Eevee. Make her angry. Reverse offender and victim, all that sort of stuff.”

“Exactly,” Raine said. She shot me a wink, then reached over to squeeze my shoulder. “Old bastards like him are always the same.”

Twil puffed out a dismissive breath. “We don’t even know this fuckin’ guy. We don’t know how he’s reacting, what he’s thinking. Maybe that’s the kind of thing he says when he feels in control?”

Raine shook her head. I shrugged, though I disagreed. I could practically feel the man himself leeching through the paper, like oil or fat leaving stains on the fingertips. I didn’t even want to touch it.

Evelyn was staring down at the letter, dark and intense. I wanted to

reach out and grab her shoulders, but she was on the other side of the table. A tentacle crept outward from my side, but I couldn't cross the gap. I'd put her in this position in the first place, hadn't I?

"I may not know Edward Lilburne the man," she said. "But I know exactly *what* he is. I know that kind of response, I recognise it. Maybe 'afraid' is not the right word, fine, whatever. But he's upset. Angry, afraid, the specifics don't matter. As long as he knows we're close."

Twil visibly swallowed, staring down at Evee. Then she cleared her throat. "So what, all this is bluster, he's trying to fuck with us?"

"Trying to fuck with *me*," Evelyn said.

She raised her eyes from the letter and the dark spell over her countenance broke like a summer storm, into clear skies and clear eyes. She took a deep breath and glanced around at the rest of us. Her gaze stopped on me for a split second. Maybe she saw the guilt, I wasn't sure.

"He doesn't seriously expect me to believe a word of this," she added. "It's an attempt to irritate. A show of power and contempt. But it is aimed squarely at me, and that's important."

Twil laughed and thumped down in a chair, kicking her legs up and stretching. "Bloody hell, Evee. You're good, sure, but you're so full of yourself sometimes. You know that, right?"

Raine leaned forward in her chair, frowning at Evee, then turning her head to re-read the letter Evelyn had sent to Edward. She was fascinated by something all of a sudden. "No, hold up a sec. Evee's on to something here."

Evelyn nodded. "Mirror imaging," she said. Raine whistled low, genuinely impressed.

"Errrrr," went Twil.

I made eyes at Evee, both politely interested and seeking to prompt her from slipping too deeply into rehearsed responses.

"Mirror imaging," she repeated with a nod at me, awkwardly clearing her throat. "It's a kind of cognitive bias. It means you assume that the thing or person you're trying to analyse must think in the same ways that you do. How much do you know about the Vietnam War?"

Twil and I looked at each other, both equally out of our depth. Raine laughed and shook her head, leaning back and blowing out a long breath, as if Evelyn had just performed some impressive trick shot.

“Er,” Twil said. “Not ... a lot?”

“Evee,” I sighed. “I appreciate the illustration, but this is a bit esoteric.”

“Esoteric,” Praem said. I think she was agreeing with me.

“Sometimes esoteric is useful,” Evelyn huffed. “During the Vietnam War, the Americans kept searching for a hypothetical ‘bamboo Pentagon’ in the jungle, mostly in Cambodia, because they assumed the Vietnamese had the same kinds of power structures as they did. So there had to be some kind of secret command centre that they could blow up, kill all the commanders, the planners, the strategists, and the rest of it would just fall apart without the head of the system.” Evelyn made a ‘pffft’ sound. “Mirror imaging. Assuming your opponent thinks like you.”

“Projection?” Twil suggested.

“Kind of.”

“You could have just said projection.”

Evee gave her a pinched look. She tapped the letter she’d sent to Edward then pointed at us with her maimed hand. “In my message to him, I mentioned you, I mentioned Raine, and Heather. Zheng as well. I phrased it as being from all of us. In his reply, it’s all me.” Twil turned her head to re-read the letter as Evee went on. “Edward Lilburne is an old and powerful mage. There’s probably a grain of truth in his claim of respect for me, though I don’t think it would stop him from killing me, or worse. But I’m the only one he bothered to address directly. Mage-to-mage, appealing to my pride and vanity, all that guff. He may consider me to be like him, and all the rest of us as just ... followers. Mirror imaging. I wanted to see if he would do it, and he did. Well, either that or he’s done a fantastic job of faking.”

“Could be trying to throw us off,” Raine suggested.

“Mm. Could be, yes. But it also may indicate a very serious blind spot for him.”

We all stared at the letter for a long moment.

“So, uh.” Twil cleared her throat. “You never explained why we want him to be afraid.”

Evelyn took a deep breath and raised her chin again. Proud, in control, focused and obsessed. “Because I want him to start expending his energy. I want him calling up extra security right now, demons or muscle or whatever he’s got. I want him expending resources, the sooner the better. That house will already be fortified as much as possible, more warning won’t make any difference to that. But I want him on edge. I want him thinking that we’re almost on him. I want him struggling to sleep and jumping at every shadow. I want him to get sloppy.”

My stomach turned over.

“Seems pretty fuckin’ optimistic,” said Twil.

I sighed. My mouth was dry. “It’s all we’ve got right now,” I said. “Good ... good plan, Eevee. I think it’s good.”

Evee smiled at me. Oh, she liked that. She liked it when I told her she was doing good.

Coward, a little voice whispered inside my head.

I was a coward for not breaking her out of this cycle all week. Down in Hringewindla’s shell, she’d shouted something to me, and all week I’d been pretending I didn’t know exactly what it meant. Because that would be Eevee, my best friend, maybe more. But right now I needed her to be the strategist. I needed Evelyn Saye, mage, territorial and devious, so I’d been allowing her to sink deeper all week long. And now she was planning terror and murder, for my benefit.

I had to change the subject, anything, anywhere other than this. “Eevee, um, may I ask, why did you ask him about Amy Stack?”

Evelyn nodded, a twinkle in her eye. “To confirm that he has no idea where she is.”

I frowned, then turned my head to read Edward’s reply again.

Your inquiry as to the whereabouts of Miss Stack is equally puzzling. Furthermore, it inclines me to believe that you have inherited not only your late mother’s reckless pursuit of power, but also her sadism. We

both know what has happened to Amy Stack. I will not dignify the question with an answer.

“Does he think we killed her?” I asked.

Evelyn shook her head. “He’s hedging his bets.”

“Lettin’ us fill in the blanks,” Twil said. A grin spread across her face. She nodded along with Evelyn.

“He has no idea where Stack is,” Evelyn said. “I hope that scares him too.”

“Bloody well should do,” said Twil. “Fuckin’ skinhead whack-job runnin’ around out there.” She paused and frowned. “Wait, do we know where she is?”

“Not exactly,” Raine supplied. “But I called her last week, regular check-in, make sure she’s still breathing. I let her know all about the parasite stuff, what happened with Nicky. Gave her the same range where Evee’s looking for the house.” Raine nodded at the Ordnance Survey map with the potential range of Nicole’s fugue-state wander marked out in red. “She’s out there doing the same thing as us, in her own way. Kind of.”

“If they kill each other,” said Evelyn, “it’ll be less work for us in the long run.”

Twil shook herself, a bit like a wet dog. She looked horribly uncomfortable at the mention of Amy Stack. “Fuck. I hate that she’s out there.”

“She’s been warned off killing any of the Eye Cult,” I said. “We’re ... still going to, well, try to help them. I think.”

“She’s our tool,” Evelyn said. “For now.”

Twil puffed out a big sigh. All her sausage rolls were gone. “You’re gonna share all this stuff with my parents, right?”

Evelyn waved a hand over Edward’s letter. “There’s nothing in here of use to them.”

Twil suddenly growled Evelyn’s name — a real growl, a canine rumble deep in her chest. The sound reached down into my brain-stem and poked the part of me that was descended from savannah apes, who’d spent their lives running from large predators with sharp teeth. I flinched hard, almost scrambling out of my chair,

tentacles whirling to knock Twil away from me, hiccuping twice. It was a minor miracle I didn't slap her right across the face. Instead I just sort of punched her in the ribs.

"Ow!" Twil yelped, grabbing her side.

Marmite flinched too. He'd been perfectly content to slip back into a semi-doze earlier, after Praem had soothed him, but Twil's growl woke him like a fire alarm. He scuttled back and halfway up the wall, taking shelter between the two spider-servitors, tentacles bristling and black membranes wrapping him in shadowy camouflage.

Raine had too much practice and self-control to lose herself to a flinch, but she still jerked, hand halfway to where her knife lay on the table, safely sheathed.

Evelyn flinched almost as bad as me, accompanied by a sharp gasp through her teeth, going white in the face.

"Twil!" she snapped.

"Bad dog," said Praem.

"Ow, Heather!" Twil looked at me like I'd slapped her with a fish. She didn't need to guess who had delivered the invisible punch to her ribs.

"I-I'm sorry!" I blurted out, mortified. I hiccuped again, then hissed in frustration with my own body. "Twil, you were growling! Really growling!"

"Bad dog," Praem repeated.

"Hey, I'm not actually a dog!" Twil spread her arms at Praem, as if ready to throw down for a fight.

"Bad wolf," Praem corrected. "But not big."

Twil tutted. "Oi. And hey, I can't help being angry! I thought we were supposed to be on the same side now, us and my parents, right? They need to know this shit too, if you're winding Edward up on purpose! He even mentioned them, you think that part is a lie? You think he's going to go after them, huh?!"

I tried saying her name. "Twil—"

"They have the protection of their god," Evelyn replied. "And the

glasses I've made for them. Twil, I am not worried about your family."

"Then fucking share information with them!" Twil snapped.

"Alright!" Evelyn shouted back, throwing her hands up. "Fine!"

"Hey, heeeeeeey," Raine said, standing up and raising her hands up to lower the sudden spike in temperature. "Ease down, girls, ease down. What have you been putting in the water, Evee?"

"Indoor voices," said Praem.

"Yes," I said, one hand to my heart, feeling it flutter and race beneath my ribs. "Oh my goodness, you two. Where is this coming from all of a sudden? Evee, Twil is technically right, we did agree to share information. But Twil, you growled. That was frightening. Please, don't."

Twil gritted her teeth and ducked her head, embarrassed and ashamed. She put a hand to her own forehead, hiding behind it. "I'm sorry, alright? I didn't mean to get angry."

Evelyn and I shared a confused look. She shrugged. I pulled my battered nerves together and sat back down in the chair next to Twil, trying to peer at her face. "Twil?" Gently, I touched her shoulder. "Twil, what's wrong?"

Twil peered out at me from behind her hand. She glanced away, then back again, then gestured at Edward Lilburne's letter.

"I'm angry about this, okay?" she grumbled under her breath. "All the stuff in it about ... about Lozzie. It's setting me off." She sniffed, though I didn't spy any tears gathering in her eyes. She nodded awkwardly to Evelyn. "Sorry Evee. Not really mad at you. Just this shit's setting me off. I don't like the way he talks about Lozzie."

Twil hunched in her chair. I patted her shoulder.

"Me neither," I said.

"Perfectly understandable," Evelyn said, clear and formal. "No need for an apology."

"Mm," Twil grunted.

Praem stepped away from her habitual position at Evelyn's shoulder. She walked around the table, bustled over to the

doorway, skirts rustling, and then flicked the light switch. We all sat there blinking for a second, casting weirdly guilty looks at each other, shadows banished to the corners. Marmite stood out on the wall like a splotch of ink.

“Not a big fan of that shit either,” Raine said after a moment, putting her hands on her hips. She leaned over to examine the letter again, as if she had to reread to remember. “Nope, not in the slightest. Doesn’t change anything from the other letter though, the one in the library. Not a nice reminder though, hey.”

I didn’t need to remind myself of what it said about Lozzie. Praem had read the words out loud. Even the sing-song beauty of her voice hadn’t robbed Edward’s words of their toxic poison.

He really, really wanted Lozzie. His niece. His property. The thought made my skin crawl.

“Why?” I whispered. I hadn’t meant to whisper, but the word came out as a choke.

Evelyn shrugged. “Her unique powers, I assume. Her nature. Edward and Alexander spent years, maybe decades, trying to tap into that dying star beneath the castle. Lozzie upended all that, learned more from it than they ever could. But she wasn’t easy to exploit.”

Twil was scowling at the letter like she wanted to sink her teeth into it. “Then why didn’t he, you know, brain-rip her or whatever, back when they had her in captivity?”

“... maybe,” I started to say. The words stuck in my throat. I didn’t want to even suggest this. But everyone glanced at me. “Maybe her brother protected her from their uncle.”

Twil squinted at me like I was mad. “That fuck? Protect her?”

I shrugged, feeling intensely awkward. “He was ... evil and abusive, yes. But it’s not impossible. It doesn’t make him good or anything. It doesn’t redeem him. It’s just a theory, anyway. It’s not like we can ever ask the man himself.”

Twil snorted. “Fingers crossed.”

“Hey, hey,” Evelyn said, tapping the table to get our attention. “Do not tempt fate when it comes to the mortality of mages.”

I couldn't help but notice that her hand was shaking. She quickly made a fist to hide the tremor.

"Evee, he's never coming back," I said. "He's gone."

"And I pray you are correct," she said, without any hint of mockery.

Silence fell on that dour note. Evelyn sighed and rubbed her eyes. I had to take several deep breaths — I may have put the mage to rest at long last, but the memory of Alexander Lilburne and the weight of his murder still lay across my shoulders, even if the King in Yellow had helped settle that burden more comfortably. Raine must have seen it written on my face, because she stepped over to give me a hug, rub my shoulders, and squeeze the back of my neck, working out the tension. I almost purred. I also wrapped a tentacle around her leg without thinking, which made her jump slightly, but only slightly — she was getting used to my invisible touches.

Twil pulled an awkward grimace and looked up at the ceiling. "Could always ask Loz' herself, I guess."

"She doesn't really like to talk about her brother," I said softly.

"Can hardly blame her for that," said Raine.

Twil just kept staring at the ceiling, as if she could see right through the wood and plaster, into Lozzie's bedroom upstairs. She gritted her teeth and swallowed. She was terrible at hiding her emotions.

"Twil?" I murmured her name. Evelyn grunted as well, curious or concerned.

"There's no question about it, right?" Twil said through her teeth.

"There's no way we would trade Lozzie for that book. Right?

There's no way we'd give her up, for ... "

Twil looked away from the ceiling as she spoke. She tried to conceal what she was really thinking, but she was never any good at that. Her eyes flickered across Evelyn and Praem, and met Raine's serious look, but her question wasn't addressed to them, not really. As she trailed off, she left the truth unsaid, staring at me.

"No," said Praem.

"How is that even a question?" Evelyn spat. "Under no circumstances."

"Yeah, Twil," Raine said with a little chuckle. "Hell, I'm almost

offended.”

But Twil waited for me.

A cold ball of rotten meat settled in my belly. Abyssal ruthlessness reared out of the dark of my mind, a thing of blade-sharp claw and absolute survival. I'd already been ruthless this week, I'd channelled cowardice into getting what I needed from Evelyn, telling myself it was respect. What was one more betrayal? A larger betrayal, certainly, but it was far from impossible. Instinct whispered.

I took that idea and turned it over in my mind, consciously, with both eyes open.

“... Heather?” Twil was frowning at me.

I took a deep breath, looking right back at her, and said, “Twil, I will never trade Lizzie for Maisie.”

Twil's teeth-gritting tension morphed into a mortified grimace. “Hey, I wasn't saying that! I wasn't saying that!”

“It's what you were thinking,” I said, forcing the words up a closing throat. “And it's a fair question.”

Twil put her hands up to ward me off. “I didn't mean—” She slammed to a halt. “Wait, what?”

“And the answer will always be no.” I blinked a distant threat of tears out of my eyes. “I'm not going to pretend the concept has not occurred to me. I ... would be the only one capable of it, I think. Of ... trapping her.” I shook my head and blew out a shaking breath, then hiccuped. “But I reject it. I reject the decision. There would be no point in getting my twin sister back if I have to become a monster to do it. She wouldn't want that.”

“I-I really didn't mean—”

“So it was a fair question,” I said, my voice dying.

We all slipped into embarrassed silence. Raine squeezed my shoulders, but I nearly pushed her off me. Twil nodded and hung her head. “Sorry Heather,” she murmured under her breath. I felt disgusting. Abyssal ruthlessness withered inside me.

Evelyn opened her mouth with a soft, wet click of her tongue. “True integrity doesn't come from never having the evil thought in the first place. It comes from having the evil thought and rejecting it.” I

stared at her. She shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. “You can’t resist temptation if you’re never tempted in the first place, all that. You know what I mean.”

I nodded, wiping my eyes. “Thank you, I ... thank you, Eevee.”

Her words washed away the filth. But why had I gone there in the first place? Why would I even acknowledge the temptation? Something was eating me inside.

“Of course,” Evelyn said, “it’s possible he doesn’t really want Lozzie at all.”

Twil squinted at her. “Eh?”

Raine laughed softly. “Seriously, Eevee? You second-guessing yourself now?”

“It’s not a second guess. It’s merely possible.”

“Why?” I asked, shaking my head. “Why would he lie about that, why would he pretend?”

“To make us angry,” Evelyn said. “To rile us up. Potentially, to divide us against each other.” She gestured at Twil and me. Twil grimaced. I bit my lip. “If I’m correct and he is committing the error of mirror-imaging, then his repeated demand for Lozzie makes perfect sense. I’m the mage, he’s negotiating with me for control of a resource, so on and so on. But if I’m wrong — and I have been wrong in the past—”

Twil snorted. “Yeah, right.”

Evelyn shot her a poisonous look. “If I’m wrong, and he’s only pretending to be mirror-imaging, then he must know the demand for Lozzie would make us very angry. He’s an arrogant and powerful old bastard, yes, and he probably does want Lozzie. But is he smarter than he is arrogant?” Evelyn shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“No way to know that, yeah,” Raine said with a sigh.

Twil swore softly. “I mean, damn, it kinda worked, right?” She glanced at me. “Sorry again, Heather.”

“Apology accepted. Please don’t worry about it.”

“Do we ... ” Twil bit her lip and glanced around. “Do we like, know

anybody who would give Lozzie up, for some kind of reward? Not that book we need, but like, something else? Money?"

"The five of us in here, absolutely not," Evelyn said. "I trust all of you completely." Evelyn's composure held for a couple of seconds, but then she cleared her throat and turned away. A faint blush crept up her cheeks. Praem crossed the room again and put one hand on Evelyn's shoulder.

"Zheng as well," I said, covering for Evee's embarrassment. "Zheng loves Lozzie like family. And she really hates mages."

"Can Sevens be bought?" Raine asked.

I shook my head. "Not unless Edward kidnaps *me* or something. And she'd probably suggest something else, first."

Twil laughed awkwardly. "Obviously Tenny is cool."

"Oh, of course." I nodded along, feeling increasingly uncomfortable. If Edward intended to turn us against each other, isn't this exactly what he would want us to discuss?

"I think my family's good, too," said Twil. She huffed. "Though I would say that, yeah."

"No, I agree, you're right," I said. "Their god ... likes her, a lot. He wouldn't demand otherwise of them. I think."

"... Kim?" Twil ventured, grimacing.

Evelyn shrugged. "At gunpoint, perhaps. But otherwise, no."

"Badger and Sarika are risks," Raine said softly. "We should keep them away from her."

"I really don't think either of them are a risk anymore," I said.

Raine redoubled her efforts to rub my shoulders. "Hey, just in case. That's all I mean."

"Nicky's not gonna flip, right?" Twil asked.

Raine laughed. "What, the one good cop from the Sharrowford Police? The one cop good enough to get the fuck out of the force? Nah. Nicky's incorruptible."

"Stack?" I asked.

“Not while her boy is under my protection,” Evelyn said.

We all shared an increasingly awkward look. We were avoiding the obvious.

“But ... hey,” Twil said, clearing her throat. “Lozzie can Slip now, right? Free and everything? We don’t even know if she’s upstairs right now. She might be off somewhere Outside, making out with a giant lizard or something. Right?”

Evelyn shook her head. “They confined her once before, in that castle. Edward could find a way to do so again. Perhaps he already has a way.”

“Aw come on, Eeve,” Twil huffed. “Just a second ago you were saying he might be faking it.”

Evelyn sighed heavily, the weight of the world on her chest. “Both. Both are possible. We must account for both. My point is that confining Lozzie, stopping her ability to step sideways, it would require time, research, a mage of considerable power and creativity ...”

She trailed off. Swallowed hard. Twil looked away and scratched her head. Raine pulled a performatively awkward expression.

“Jan,” I said.

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Well ...”

“Nah, nah,” Twil said. “Jan was, like, cool, yeah?”

“She really likes Lozzie,” said Raine. “To put it lightly.”

“We’re all thinking it,” I said, then I sighed. “Refusing to voice it isn’t going to make us feel any better.”

Evelyn opened a hand toward me. “Lozzie’s been to see her twice this last week, correct?”

“Yes,” I said. “Twice. And we don’t know where she’s staying now.”

“What?” Twil asked. “Like, does Lozzie teleport over there?”

“She does.”

“Shit.” Twil snorted. “Wish I could do that. Would save me some time.”

Evelyn clucked her tongue. “Jan has had plenty of opportunity to entrap Lozzie.”

“Yeah, sure.” Twil sounded suddenly doubtful. She sprawled back in her chair, grumpy teenager style. “But what if Ed-fuck decides to offer her a new opportunity, like? We don’t really know her, do we? She’s a con-artist who does mercenary work for the highest bidder. No standards, no morals, right? What if he offers her like a million quid to trap Lozzie for him?”

Evelyn took a deep breath and closed her eyes briefly. “I’ve decided we can trust Jan.”

“Yeah well maybe I don’t.”

“Lozzie clearly does. Twil, I want to trust her.”

Twil pulled a face at Evelyn. “Since when do you trust anybody?”

“Since it became expedient to do so.”

“Hey now,” Raine said. “I think we left an impression on Jan, but Twil’s got a point. We can’t totally trust her. Cute as a button, but maybe a snake, right?”

Evelyn swept her hand across the bare table, as if sweeping away a mess. “We can’t just tell Lozzie to stop visiting her.”

“We could try!” said Twil.

I cleared my throat. “I’ll speak with Lozzie.” Evee and Twil both looked at me. I couldn’t meet their eyes, so I looked at where my squid-skull mask sat on the workshop table, idly stroking it with one tentacle and then picking it up, as if I was planning on going somewhere I might need to wear it. “For the record, I trust Jan as well. And I can’t promise anything. But I’ll speak with Lozzie.”

That seemed to do the trick and lower the temperature in the room again. Evelyn nodded to me with exaggerated polite intention. Twil huffed and puffed and shrugged and muttered, “Fair enough.” I tried very hard not to sigh with exasperation.

They were more on edge about this than I was. I suppose I couldn’t blame them; Edward’s letter was a vile thing. The way he spoke about Lozzie made my skin crawl. There was no question, of course we would protect her. But Evelyn, my genius Evee, she didn’t know what to think — was Edward Lilburne an arrogant monster, or was

he an arrogant monster smart enough to hoodwink us? And Twil was fond of Lozzie, she'd said as much to me. Back last year when we'd rescued Lozzie from Alexander, Twil had thrown herself into the raid on the castle almost without question. For a friend, a companion, a member of her pack, Twil would always stand up and fight. But we had nothing to fight, not yet. So I would talk to Lozzie.

Though I hadn't said what I would talk to her about. I kept that part to myself.

Gosh, I thought, Evelyn's deviousness is rubbing off on me.

Raine stepped back from my chair and pointed a finger-gun at an imaginary target on the wall. "None of this matters if we take him out first." She lowered her thumb like the hammer on a revolver. "Bang."

Low, confident, utterly serious. Her pose was playground make-believe, but her tone could make me believe anything.

Evelyn didn't quite agree. She sighed sharply and drew a hand over her face. "What have I told you about mages and bullets? How many times?"

Raine raised her finger-gun to her lips and blew away an imaginary plume of gun smoke. "Maybe this time it'll be different. He is pretty old, after all."

"Alexander shrugged off a bullet to the chest," she snapped, then gestured at me. "You remember what Heather told us. He was prying the thing out of his own flesh, didn't give a damn."

"Yeah," Twil agreed. "That shit was spooky."

Evelyn gave her a pinched look.

Twil shrugged at her. "What?"

"You're also immune to bullets, in case you've forgotten."

Twil tutted and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I mean, I probably can. I've never been shot or nothing. Don't really wanna confirm it, thanks."

"Evee, Evee, Evee," Raine said as she 'cocked' her imaginary revolver again, drawing her thumb back like a hammer. "You're the one who told me to shoot him."

“It was a desperate gamble, yes,” Evelyn said.

“Maybe, next time, we go bigger.” Raine lifted her own pair of modified glasses from the table and snapped them open with a flourish. “Maybe, next time, we should use ...” She lowered the glasses over her face and cracked a grin. “More bullets.”

Twil spluttered with laughter. “You fuckin’ goof.”

I blushed faintly. “Stop being so silly, Raine.” She was being absurd. The pose might have worked with sunglasses, but the modified pneuma-somatic seeing glasses were just plain black with non-prescription lenses.

“More bullets,” said Praem.

“Yeeeeeeeah.” Raine pointed at her. “Praem knows what she’s about.”

Evelyn was not impressed. She put her face in one hand and sighed.

But I was very impressed. Not by Raine’s absurd show-boating, but by the way she’d dragged the tension down and strangled it to death. Between Twil’s laughter and Evelyn’s exasperation, the built-up horror and anxiety of Edward’s letter had finally been banished. Raine’s real talents ran deeper than violence and intimidation. I loved her for that too.

“More bullets,” Praem echoed.

“Woo!” went Raine

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn sighed. “I’ll take the suggestion into consider ...”

Raine lowered her imaginary guns and raised an eyebrow instead. Twil perked up. Evelyn glanced up at Praem and met deadly serious milk-white eyes.

“Eyyyyy,” went Raine, grinning. “Did I just stumble on gold?”

“More bullets,” Evelyn echoed. She shrugged, sucking on her teeth and frowning to herself. “Even a very old mage is still a human being, if he’s here, on Earth. He’s still flesh. So yes, Raine. Enough bullets, enough physical damage would ... disable him, at least. In theory.” She shook her head. “But we don’t have access to that kind of fire-power, not even illegally. Not on the scale I mean. Not on the kind of scale that would have stopped my mother.”

Twil's eyebrows climbed at those words, but she managed to keep her head and clear her throat. "Haven't we still got Stack's gun?"

"The Sten, yeah," Raine said with a melancholy sigh. She took the glasses back off. "She's a beauty of weapon, but she's not aged well. It's a miracle Stack kept that thing from jamming up in her hands. Plus it takes nine millimetre rounds, which I think is a bit smaller than what Evee is talking about?"

"Mm," Evelyn grunted. "Unless somebody is willing to sneak into a police armoury and spirit away an automatic shotgun, I don't think firearms are going to be much of a solution to a mage problem."

"... what about Lozzie?" Twil asked.

We all shared a very awkward look.

"I'll talk to her?" I suggested, wincing. "I don't think she'd like that though."

"Frankly, magic will serve us better," Evelyn said. "Less likely to get us arrested, too."

"I hear you on that one," Raine said. "Still. A riot shotgun? Wouldn't say no."

"Don't get your hopes up," I said, feeling horribly awkward. I was already planning to ask Lozzie some uncomfortable questions; requesting she filch a gun for us might be a step too far. "I'm half afraid she'd hop Outside for a month and not come back, if I asked her that. She really doesn't like to think about violence."

I tried to laugh, but I couldn't hide the nerves. Raine nodded, serious again, and squeezed my shoulder.

Twil gestured at the Ordnance Survey map and the photos of houses pinned on the board behind Evelyn. "None of that'll matter if we catch him first, right? What's the hold up with finding the house?"

Evelyn cleared her throat and glanced over her shoulder at the photographs. "We — that is Nicole and myself — have almost finished confirming the owners or occupiers of every house she could possibly have reached during her fugue state." Evelyn cleared her throat again and sucked on her teeth, staring at the photos.

"But ... you said you were like, having trouble or something? You're almost done, so it's gotta be one of them that's left, yeah?"

Twil laughed. “Shit, I’ll go run around the woods myself if it’ll help.”

“We’ve already had Zheng do a bit of that,” I said. I couldn’t make it sound confident, not at all. Twil looked at me, increasingly worried. “It didn’t help,” I added. “I think she’s out there now, actually.”

Evelyn examined the heavy curtains which still hid the creeping sunlight, as if she could find answers in the glow. “None of the remaining residences seem likely. I’ve begun to suspect that Edward Lilburne’s house may be ... concealed.”

“Concealed?” Twil echoed, eyebrows up. She looked at me and Raine. I smiled even more awkwardly. Raine shrugged.

“Concealed, yes,” Evelyn repeated.

“Hiddeny,” said Praem.

Twil just blinked at her. “Like ... what ... what do you mean? Eevee? What does that mean, hey?”

Evelyn rubbed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, then swept a hand across the red-marked Ordnance Survey map. “It means that either I am completely wrong and all this has been a waste of time — unlikely, mind you,” she added with a snap. “Or, Edward Lilburne is so paranoid and obsessed with security that not only did he hide the location of his house from attempts to find it via official documents and records, but also from trying to find it on foot.”

Twil stared at her, a bit blank.

“What Eevee is trying to say,” I explained. “Is that it might be tucked away in some kind of pocket space.”

Evelyn raised a finger and pulled a tight-jawed face. “I don’t think it’s the cult’s pocket dimensions and loop spaces. Those were collapsed when we broke their hold over the castle. The entire system folded in on itself. It’s gone. His house is not in a pocket dimension.”

“Then where the hell is it?” Twil asked. “Is it fuckin’ invisible?”

Evelyn sat up straight again, then rubbed at her nose, adjusted the position of her empty mug of tea, and half-turned to Praem. Then

she thought better of it and turned back, looked at me, looked at Raine, and rubbed her hip.

Apparently, Twil wasn't the only one incapable of hiding her emotions.

"Evee?" I asked, surprised.

She was wracked with anxiety.

She looked up and met my eyes. But then Twil leaned into her field of vision. "Yoooo, earth to Evee?"

Evelyn clenched a fist, she looked like she wanted to thump the table. "I have ... only a very basic understanding of the kind of magical principles and practices that would allow one to conceal a building like this. Twist perception and space so you can't walk up to it or stumble across it. I ... can't figure this out."

"Evee?" I repeated. "Evee, there's nothing wrong with not understanding something. We can find a way. I might be able to find the house via brain-math. If it's hidden, that might even make it easier somehow."

The guilt flowed out of me, finally relieved. It was my time to step up now. Evelyn could drop the mask, ease back off the throttle. Maybe I could even talk to her about other things so far left unsaid.

But Evelyn didn't answer. She stared at the curtain.

Raine cleared her throat with exaggerated delicacy. "We do know somebody else who's real good at keeping their house hidden. Don't we, Evee?"

Evelyn gritted her teeth so hard I heard them squeak.

Raine continued. "She might be able to tell us how this works. Share some insight, all that. Or even find it for us, if she's feeling so inclined. And hey, Evee, I'm pretty sure if you make the request, she'll do anything you—"

Evelyn snapped around and fixed Raine with a glare like a barrage of railway spikes. "The last thing we need to introduce to this situation is more fucking mages. No, Raine. No."

"Scuse me," Twil said with exaggerated offense. "Who the hell are you two talking about?"

“Yes, quite,” I added. “Please, you two, I’m having trouble following this.”

Evelyn and Raine stared each other down, Evelyn visibly disgusted and bristling on the far side of the table, Raine with her hands on her hips, wearing that sort of ironic told-you-so smile. Eventually Raine broke eye contact and looked away, but it wasn’t because she’d lost.

“Remember Felicity?” she asked.

“Oh.” My heart sank. I glanced at Evelyn. She did not look very happy.

Twil frowned. “The mage who fixed Eevee that one time? She was kinda whack. We never heard back from her, right?”

“Good,” Evelyn spat.

I recalled Felicity all too well. Felicity Amber Hackett, the eccentric, twitchy, damaged mage who had known Evelyn’s late and unlamented mother; the not-quite-a-doctor who had long ago performed the amputation of Evelyn’s leg; the mumbling, broken, haunted woman who had pointed a shotgun at us and then done magic so bizarre it seemed entirely out of our wheelhouse. Evelyn had described her as a demonophile psychopath, and worse. I’d briefly met — though not seen in the flesh — her bizarre semi-spiritual parasite, ‘Aym’, who had sounded like a cross between a young girl and a serial killer’s soul, a creature not quite like any other demon I’d encountered.

But Felicity had dropped everything and came running when I’d called, when I’d told her Evelyn needed help. After the Eye Cult had raided our home and left us scattered, Felicity had helped purge the demonic infestation from Evelyn’s body. The last I’d seen of her had been outside that awful house where the Eye Cult had come to ruin. She’d had her demon friend-slash-parasite in the back seat, injured on some level by exposure to the Eye’s attention. I’d told her to leave. Didn’t have time to deal with her right then.

I wasn’t sure if Evelyn was correct about Felicity, not completely. But I was absolutely certain that Evelyn still hated her.

Raine smiled and spread her arms in a placating shrug. “She’s got experience with this, Eevee. You know she has. Her house is like a needle in a haystack, right? She might know how this shit works.

And she'll do anything you ask."

Evelyn looked ready to bite the head off a small animal. Praem had her gently by the shoulders, but that didn't seem to be helping. She opened her mouth to spit a justified rejection — and I agreed with her. Even if she was wrong about Felicity, it would be the height of insensitivity and unkindness for us to expect her to have polite and reasonable relations with the woman her mother had used to cut off her leg.

But then a cold feeling bubbled up my throat.

"Exploit her if you must."

It took a second to realise I'd spoken. Everyone was looking at me. Cold-blooded thoughts coiled in the back of my head.

Ruthlessness.

Evelyn had turned her bitter frown on me instead, demanding an explanation. I cleared my throat and tried to justify that cold-blooded impulse, to work it back into my sense of self.

"I know you hate her," I said, throat turning thick. Evelyn nodded, once. "And I didn't think much of her either, even if she did ... help us. But Raine is right, she came running when you needed help. Why not exploit that?"

"Heather." Evelyn sounded very unimpressed with me. "Because—"

"You don't have to do it yourself," I said, holding her gaze. I had to pause to hiccup. My courage may have been cold-blooded, but I was still myself. "I'll do it. I'll call her. I'll tell her it's for you. And I'll tell her the truth, that you don't want to speak to her. All of it goes through me. You never have to speak with her. Let me do it, Eevee. Let me do it for you. Otherwise ... " I trailed off and stared down at the map, hugging my squid-skull to my stomach like a favourite plush toy. "We could lose him again. Lose the book. Lose the opportunity. And then what? We spend another three or four weeks doing this? How much is left of my sister?"

My words came out clipped and sharp. I hadn't intended that, but I was breaking.

"Hey," Raine murmured gently, reaching for my shoulder. "Hey, Heather. It's gonna be okay."

But I caught her wrist with one of my tentacles, hard and harsh. She almost flinched, held fast. I felt terrible, but there was no turning back now. My cold-blooded impulse had curdled into frustration.

“I’m serious,” I hissed, rising up out of my chair, half with my legs, half with tentacles against the floor. I stared at Evelyn across the table. She didn’t deserve this, but the words poured out of me. “If we have to wait much longer, I may as well go by myself. Throw myself at the Eye and hope for the best. I don’t even know how to fight the thing. Fight?” I scoffed. “Fight, talk, dazzle it with a glitter-bomb, I don’t know what I’m supposed to be planning for, Eevee! I still don’t know! I spoke to an Outsider god last weekend and I still don’t know!”

Raine had slipped on her pneuma-somatic glasses back on, so she could see my tentacles twitching and writhing like a furious squid. Furious at myself. My cowardice.

“Heather,” she murmured. “We’re going to figure it out.”

“Are we?” I hissed through a closing throat.

Evelyn stared back at me, frowning hard as if deep in thought. Did she even care? She’d spent all week only thinking about how to outmanoeuvre Edward Lilburne, her new rival, her territorial target, her tangled problem of professional dominance and paranoia.

A lump grew in my throat. Shame, mostly. Of course Evelyn cared, I didn’t even need to ask that. I’d turned self-doubt and Outsider fears into outward-facing spikes. I looked down, let go of Raine’s wrist, and felt all the determination flow out of me.

“I’m sorr—”

“Fine,” Evelyn said.

“A-ah?” I looked back up to find her nodding at me.

“Fine. We’ll use Felicity. We should try your brain-math, too. Anything we can use. You’re right, I think we have him cornered here. If he’s not running already, then this house must be his final refuge, the one place he doesn’t want to abandon. So yes, we might take a long time to find him. Let’s cut that short.” Evelyn gestured at Praem with her fingers. “My mobile phone, it’s on the kitchen table. Please.”

Praem turned and marched into the kitchen.

“You sure about this?” Raine asked.

Evelyn shrugged. “I’m never sure about anything, despite appearances. Don’t ask the impossible. Unless it’s ... eh.” Her eyes flickered to me as she waved the notion away.

“E-Evee,” I tried to say, stammering over half my words. “T-this isn’t fair of me, I’m just so afraid, you don’t deserve to have to put up with my—”

“I can’t help you with the Eye directly,” she said. “I don’t know how. You’re going to have to talk with the gods to figure that out. Literally.” She sighed, ironically, and Twil snorted a little too. “But I can help you with this part. I will get that book and finish the *Invisus Oculus*, and you will stand in Wonderland unseen by the Eye. I will get you to the finish line, Heather. I can’t tell you how to cross it, but I will get you there.”

I almost couldn’t meet the fire in her eyes, burning cold and hungry.

Praem stepped back into the workshop with Evelyn’s phone, but Evelyn held up a hand and gestured to me.

“Give it to her,” she said.

“Ah?” I blinked as Praem pressed Evee’s phone into my palm. “I don’t follow.”

Raine shot me a wink. “You did say you’d do the talking.”

Evelyn gestured at the phone. “Her number is in the list of blocked contacts. Should be obvious. The name I’ve given her is rude enough.”

Twil stood up and peered over my shoulder as I opened the block list. My eyes went wide. Twil snorted with laughter. Raine chuckled and said, “Evee, didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Praem helped with that one.”

We all stared at Praem. She stared back at us with milk-white eyes, hiding unknowable thoughts.

Twil laughed. “Hard to imagine you coming up with something so ... er ... scatological.”

“Poop,” said Praem.

“Now?” I asked. “Should I call her now?”

“No time like the present,” said Evelyn. “You’re up, Heather. Besides, you’re far better at dealing with mages than I am.”

Twil laughed again. “Maybe that’s why she’s so good with ... you ... er. Ahem.” Twil trailed off, clearing her throat awkwardly when I shot her a frown. “Yeah. Right.”

Evelyn looked away, blushing faintly.

“Here goes nothing, I suppose,” I said. I unblocked the contact, briefly considered renaming it to just ‘Felicity’, then sighed and decided that would probably count as defacing art. So I pressed the call button, held the phone up to my ear, and said, “More mages, takeaway delivery style, coming right up.”

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.3

Felicity was not an easy person to contact. Like most mages, I suppose. Hiding in their shells of matter and magic.

We called three times, with nearly six solid minutes of ringing in total. No answering machine, no voice mail. This was a land-line number, a direct route into the lair of a mage much more reclusive and questionable than our dear Evelyn. Raine encouraged me to stay on the line and keep trying. Twil suggested maybe she wasn't at home right then; Evelyn assured us that was vanishingly unlikely — if, that was, Felicity had indeed arrived home safely after her visit to Sharrowford, months ago now.

The phone rang and rang and rang. My determination soured into sore feet. Praem nudged my chair toward me, so I sat down and tried again, hanging up and redialling.

A minute later I was on the verge of giving up. The ringing of the phone felt like a soporific, insect-like mantra in my ear, a cricket's drone from the edge of the forest, lulling me half to sleep. Twil was muttering something about how we should get some drinks if we were going to be waiting much longer. Evelyn opened her mouth and sighed, about to admit defeat.

Then, with a soft mechanical click, the call connected.

I held up one hand for silence.

And silence was what I got. Dead air.

I had prepared myself for the ash-and-oil voice of Felicity's demonic parasite, the laughing nightmare thing that pretended to sound like a little girl, the nails-down-a-blackboard scratching at one's ears.

Instead, a black silence, like a standing wave just beyond the range of human hearing. The phone line had connected to a lightless void. A winking light in the deep dark of an unexplored cavern, illuminating nothing. I tried to open my mouth to speak a greeting, but instinct screamed at me to be quiet and still, as if I might attract

the attention of some vast unmoving watcher out in that frozen darkness. I stared sideways at the phone against my head, fighting the urge to fling it to the floor and crush it with a tentacle.

It was like I'd called the abyss.

Then somebody inhaled, as if stirring from sleep.

"Tannerbaum house," said a voice I recognised, female and heavy, a blurred half-mumble from one side of her mouth. Wary, distant, exhausted. "Who is this?"

I let out a sigh of relief. I felt like a mouse hiding inside a rotten log, passed over by a snake who had missed my scent. The others were all staring at me from around the table. Evelyn was frowning hard, deeply concerned in her own sort of way. It took me a moment to realise that I'd wrapped my tentacles around myself in a tight ball, a self-hug of pneuma-somatic flesh to make myself small and armoured and toxic to any would-be predator. My friends couldn't see that, of course, but one didn't need pneuma-somatic sight to see that I'd turned pale, broken out in cold sweat, and was shaking with a sudden adrenaline high.

Abyssal instinct had not liked that feeling from the other end of the phone.

"Heather?" Evelyn mouthed my name silently. I shook my head and uncoiled my tentacles, struggling for self-control.

I mouthed back to Evelyn. "Just creepy. I'm fine."

"Hello? ... hello?" On the other end of the phone call, the mumbled voice was growing suspicious. The speaker on Evelyn's mobile phone was high quality enough that we could all hear her words. Evelyn gestured at me: there you go, now talk.

"Felicity," I said out loud, trying to still my racing heart and put on my good-girl phone voice. "It's Heather. Hello, good afternoon. I'm sorry for calling so insistently. Heather Morell. Do you remember me?"

A long, silent pause. Normal silence, not the creeping black silence of the unknown void. Felicity was simply speechless for a moment. Evelyn crossed her arms and hunched in her seat, all but scowling at the phone. Raine listened carefully, chin in her hand. Twil seemed a bit lost. Praem stood to attention.

“Heather Morell,” Felicity said eventually. She swallowed audibly and took a deep breath. Her voice came through a bit clearer, less of a mumble. “Evee’s friend. Yes, of course I remember you.”

Felicity’s face drifted up from the fog of memory. She was not exactly a difficult person to recall. Narrow, soft features gave her face the illusion of being unguarded and inattentive. A long messy mop of reddish-brown hair crowned a stiff and willowy frame, awkward and furtive, like a cornered rabbit ready to kick out a predator’s intestines. And the burn scar, how could I forget that? The entire left side of Felicity’s face was consumed by an old burn scar, the skin discoloured and shiny. Her left eye was blind, blank and glassy. The left corner of her lips was mangled, fused together. Despite everything about her, the scars still stirred my sympathy, even in memory.

“That’s good, I’m glad you remember,” I said. “Again, I’m sorry for calling so—”

“Why have you called me?”

Urgent, afraid, a little bit hostile. I blinked in confusion before the pieces fell into place, then I sighed and made sure I was making eye contact with Evelyn as I spoke.

“Evee is fine,” I said. “She’s perfectly safe and doing very well. There’s no emergency. This phone call isn’t about that.”

“Oh.” I heard a sigh go out of Felicity. I could almost see her slump in my mind’s eye, one hand to her forehead with relief. It ended with a throaty sound, like she was suffering a chest infection. The creak of an old chair, a faint rattle of window panes, the distant whistle of wind, lonely and desolate. And right at the edge of my hearing, small bare feet pattering on naked stone, moving away from the phone. “Oh. Th-that— that’s good. That’s good.” Felicity swallowed audibly again, as if trying to clear her throat. “You are telling the truth, aren’t you?”

In front of me, Evelyn didn’t even roll her eyes. She stared as if she could transmit the evil eye across a phone call.

“Of course,” I said. “Evee’s right in front of me. She’s right here. We see each other every single day. She’s fine.”

Felicity was breathing a little too sharply, like a woman on the leading edge of a panic attack. “I-I know I don’t have any right to

demand this, but ... may I ... just one word ... I need to know if—”

“I am alive and well,” Evelyn spoke up, loud and clear. Her tone of voice could have turned an angel to stone. “That is all you’ll get.” She made eye contact with me again, eyebrows raised in question. Praem gently placed both hands on her shoulders, as if keeping her from rising, but Evelyn didn’t complain. I winced, feeling guilty again; the whole point of this was that I would be Evelyn’s conduit. I wanted to take this burden from her. She could even leave the room if she wished.

Felicity was silent.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yes. Oh, yes, yes I heard.” Felicity’s mumble blurred into near-incomprehensible gratitude. “Thank you. Thank her for me, Heather. I— no, no, don’t say anything. I-I shouldn’t— I don’t deserve—”

“Felicity, please, slow down. I can’t make out your words. I’m sorry.”

Truth be told, I could understand her words perfectly, I just wanted her to stop. Her tone made my skin crawl and left a sour taste in my mouth. I could imagine her cringing from her own guilt. I spoke mechanically, precise, with as much emotional distance as I could muster. Keep this strictly to business. The others evidently agreed. Evelyn had turned away in disgust. Raine puffed out a long breath, full of pity. Twil cringed with second-hand embarrassment.

“Sorry,” Felicity said, slow and steady now. “Sorry. I apologise. Heather, if it’s not about Evelyn, then why have you called me?”

“We do need your help with something.” I tried to stay crisp, measured, business-like. It came surprisingly easy. I reminded myself with every word, who I was doing this for. “Perhaps just your knowledge and advice, or perhaps practical help. It’s a magical problem, a magical question. Something we’re trying to figure out. All of us, Evelyn included.”

Another long silence, followed by a sigh. Felicity’s chair — or perhaps the floorboards beneath her desk — creaked again as she adjusted her weight.

“Okay.”

Guarded. Careful. Closed off.

Neither acceptance nor rejection. I contained a sigh of my own and reminded myself we were dealing with a mage here, no matter the personal connection or shared history. She may have come running to Evelyn's rescue when needed, but without the guilt of her past to keep her caged, Felicity Hackett was just another potential monster, draped in supernatural unknowns.

I hardened my heart and considered my options for a second. We did have a couple of ways into this, a couple of different types of leverage I could apply. I summoned every scrap of abyssal ruthlessness, repeated Maisie's name in my mind, and opened my mouth to speak.

Raine got there first. "Hey, Fliss," she said with a smile in her voice, leaning toward the phone. "What's up? How you doing? Hey, hey, Heather, put it on speaker phone so I can hear her proper."

An animated but silent argument then erupted between Evelyn and Raine, all gestures and mouthed obscenities, while I sat there vibrating like a squid who'd been about to pounce before my prey had been whisked away on the end of an invisible fishing line.

Evelyn swiped the air — no speaker phone. Raine made it clear this was a plan, a ploy, a clever plot. Evelyn should get up and leave if she wanted, Raine indicated, none of us would judge her. Evelyn did not want to leave, even when Praem offered her a hand up. Evelyn would stay and stew in her disgust.

"Heather? Heather?" Felicity was saying.

"Sorry, I was just trying to find the speaker function," I lied, lowered the phone from my ear, and switched the speaker mode. "There, now Raine can hear you as well."

"Is ... is Evelyn still in the room?"

Evee looked right at me and shook her head once. Absolutely not.

"No," I said. "She went upstairs."

"Heeeeeeey," Raine repeated herself. "So, Flissy, how's things?"

"Raine, hello." Felicity did not sound particularly enthused by Raine, but not frightened or put off either. "Things are ... things."

"Ha! Yeah, I know what you mean, know how that feels. Things are

thingy.” Raine sighed, fake-long-suffering. She grinned as she spoke, all acting, all fronting. “Sounds like something our Lizzie might say. You met Lizzie, right? When you were down here before?”

“The girl with the trans flag poncho, yes. Left somewhat of an impression.”

“Things are thingy,” Raine repeated. “Sounds like something she might say, that’s all. Anyway, Fliss, I missed you when you came down Sharrowford way to help us, on account of getting kidnapped and everything. Heard you had to skedaddle before they got me out. Big mess, I had to kill a guy and everything. Hoooo, you’re glad you didn’t stick around, believe that. But I heard it all from Heather later on, ‘course. Never got a chance to thank you for helping out. Helping Evee. Helping Heather. Heather’s my girl, you know, so, I owe you one.”

Evelyn pulled a face at Raine like Raine had just made a deal with a terrorist. Raine mouthed back, ‘Just go with it.’

But Felicity seemed to be having trouble absorbing Raine’s gratitude. “I ... uh ... yes. You’re welcome. I’m glad you didn’t ... die. Was there a risk of you dying?”

“Eh.” Raine shrugged. “Maybe. Don’t worry about it, hey. Just wanted to thank you.”

“Well, you’re ... you’re welcome. Yes.”

I had rarely heard another human being sound so fundamentally uncomfortable. Well, except for myself. Raine’s bluster and confidence was doing an incredible job of pinning Felicity to the wall. She did not want to be thanked. Not by anybody but Evee, perhaps.

Evelyn seemed to pick up on this as well. She was still frowning at Raine, but more with curiosity than anger now. Raine caught my eye and winked. Her plan was working.

Gently, I placed the phone on the table and drew myself upright. Raine had prepared the ground, now it was my turn.

“Felicity,” I said. “Briefly, before I explain our problem, I wanted to ask you, how is Aym? I ... can’t help but remember what I saw in the back seat of your car, before you left.”

That was true, at least. What I recalled was a twisted lump of oil-

slick darkness, huddled on the back seat of Felicity's range rover, covered with a blanket, mewling and panting like an injured animal after exposure to the pressure of the Eye's attention. Beady black eyes, shape-shifting claws, nothing at all like the 'little girl in a black dress' Felicity had warned us about. Aym, the demon-thing that followed her around. Whatever she was, she'd gotten hurt trying to help us. I did genuinely owe something in return for that. I wasn't sure what. Perhaps just a thank you.

Evelyn looked like she wanted to vomit.

"Aym." Felicity sighed that name with a blend of pain and love so heady that I felt bad for asking. For a terrible moment I thought she was about to say the demon-thing had died after her encounter with the Eye, but then Felicity added, "She survived the experience. Thank you for your concern."

"May I thank her?"

A moment of blank silence. "Thank her?"

"For going into that house for us. She helped. Or, she tried to. Didn't she?"

"She— she is none of your concern." Felicity's voice hardened. "I will pass on your thanks, if you really want that. But please don't. She—"

The patter of small feet on bare stone interrupted Felicity's voice. Such a gentle sound, but somehow it drowned out the words. Like a flash-storm of freezing rain smothering a weak fire.

A rough, raspy, high-pitched breathing joined us on the phone. Excited and rapid, like the bearer had been running around for quite some time. There was something aberrant about that breathing, as if it came from a throat twisted all wrong to be human.

My skin crawled and my spine itched, but I managed to swallow the inevitable hiccup.

"Is that you?" I asked. "Aym?"

The reply I received was not words, but a vibrating, hissing *hack-hack-hack*. Maybe a laugh, maybe something else, more animal than human. Then, just as it trailed off, a theatrical "Mwah!" A kissy-noise.

Raine winced. Twil bared her teeth in frozen growl, bristling all over. Evelyn shuddered with naked disgust.

Praem leaned down toward the phone on the table.

“Bad girl,” she said, bell-clear and sing-song beautiful.

On the other end of the phone, Aym — or what I assumed was Aym — yelped like a puppy bapped in the nose with a newspaper. The high-pitched breathing sound slithered away, feet trotting off into the black silence beyond the phone call. Felicity let out a shuddering sigh, as if she’d narrowly avoided danger.

Evelyn stared at the phone with unparalleled disgust.

“Please, don’t,” Felicity said. “Don’t attract her attention.”

I cleared my throat. “Sorry. I only wanted to thank her.”

“She knows. Trust me, please, she knows. What ... what help did you want? What is this about?”

The plan had worked. We’d broken down Felicity’s barriers, though I hadn’t expected the weird assist from Aym; I wondered, for a moment, if her interruption had been intentional, timed for just that moment. But how could she have known? Demons can be even more strange than mages.

I shared a glance with Evelyn. She looked hollow-eyed and wracked with disgust, but she shrugged and gestured. ‘Tell her everything,’ she mouthed.

“We’re trying to find a hidden house,” I said. “Much like your own. Or so I’m told.”

I explained the situation to Felicity, as efficiently as I could, without either leaving too much out or providing too much information about things she didn’t need to know — such as the Brinkwood Church, or their hidden god, or our exact level of involvement. But I had to explain Evelyn’s method to find the house, the steps we’d taken so far, and our looming failure. Evelyn nodded along, silently interrupting me at several points to indicate something I should or shouldn’t say.

Felicity went quiet at first, then began to ask technical questions: did we have a description of the house; had any of us ever visited it; did we think it was located near a specific species of tree; were

there any large hills in the specified area? She went on like that for a while, as I checked Evee's map and her photos. Felicity's voice grew in confidence, settling into familiar things and away from the sucking quicksand of her own emotions.

But of course, I also had to explain why we were looking for the place.

"Edward Lilburne?" Felicity echoed. I could almost hear her shaking her head. "The name doesn't ring a bell."

"Hey, Fliss," Raine interrupted. "You're not exactly the most gregarious type, right? No reason you'd know about the guy."

"And he knew Loretta Saye, you're certain of that?"

I cast a glance at Evelyn, but she seemed unperturbed by the mention of her mother. In fact, she even shrugged.

"We don't know if that part is true," I interpreted for her. "Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. Felicity, is this possible? Could his house be magically hidden in this kind of way?"

"Mmm." Felicity made an audible thinking sound. Uncomfortable. Uncertain. "It's not impossible. My own home cannot be found unless you already know the way. It's ... secluded, in special ways. That's why I use this land-line. I had to lay the final portion of it myself. Mobile phone signal doesn't come here. Neither does anything else. Well, nothing normal."

Raine and Evelyn shared a look. Twil pulled a face like she didn't want to know more.

"Then you know how this would work?" I asked.

"No."

"... no?"

Felicity sighed, almost apologetic. "I wasn't responsible for the working. I didn't do it myself. As far as I'm aware, my home, my house, has been this way since long before I ... inherited it."

The way Felicity said the word 'inherited' made my spine want to curl up and slink out of my body.

"This isn't the kind of magic you do in a single day," she was carrying on like she hadn't just spoken a rotting slug, "or even in a

year or three. It's serious working. It was performed by one who came before me. I wouldn't even know where to ... ”

Across hundreds of miles, spanned by the narrow bridge of electromagnetic radio waves and buried cables, I could almost feel Felicity curl up in her chair as she trailed off. That black silence pressed in around her, at the edge of my hearing.

“Felicity?”

“You're going to fight this mage regardless, aren't you?” she asked, voice a shaking murmur, pressed to a cold stone floor, somewhere in the dark.

Around the table, safe and sound in the bright surroundings of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, we all shared a mystified look. Even Evelyn didn't know what to make of the feeling radiating from the phone. Praem tightened a hand into a fist. Up on the wall, Marmite hid himself inside his black membranes, totally obscured. I wasn't the only one who could feel this. It wasn't the product of an over-active imagination or the twitchy caution of abyssal instinct.

“Yes,” I said at length. “Yes. We have to get that book from him, there's no other way to do this. Maybe we fight, or maybe there's another way, but we do have to locate him first.”

“You're going to do this anyway,” Felicity murmured. I got the impression she wasn't really responding to me. “Just like ... mm. Should have stayed. Stayed to help. Should have been there. Should never have left when she—”

“Shut up,” Evelyn said.

Felicity stopped, instantly. We could all hear her swallowing hard, sniffing, pulling herself back from some private precipice. Raine looked away, as if trying to spare Felicity the embarrassment, even though she couldn't see us. Twil winced and put her face in her hand, overwhelmed by second-hand embarrassment. Praem tilted her chin upward.

“Yes,” Evelyn carried on, voice hissing with contempt. “We are going to hunt and possibly kill this mage, regardless of your help or the quality of it.”

“I ... I ... yes,” Felicity said. “Aym would know. I mean, Aym might know, about the house. This house, I mean, not the one you're

trying to find. She was here when it was done, when the house was hidden. I might be able to ... to convince her to ... ”

I cleared my throat. “We would be very grateful.”

“I would need to come to Sharrowford. Eventually, I think. If I can feel out the contours by which this place has been hidden, if it’s the same techniques, or similar techniques, Aym may be able to ... peel them back.”

“Hey,” Raine said, spreading her hands. “If it gets us Edward, you can peel back the whole countryside. Crack open the hills and burn down the woods.”

Felicity laughed, more of a jerky hiccup, forced and difficult. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“You’re not coming to this house again,” said Evelyn.

Felicity did not answer.

“Will you call us back?” I asked. “Maybe when you’ve spoken to Aym?”

“It might take a day or two. It’s not as simple as it sounds. Should I ... this number, or—?”

I gave Felicity my number and Raine’s number. We didn’t want her calling Evelyn’s phone.

“I’ll try my best,” she said before we ended the call. “I promise that. I promise.”

Evelyn pulled a disgusted face. She met my eyes and drew her thumb across her throat.

When I disconnected the call, it was like shutting off a pitch dark room behind an armoured door. Suddenly the magical workshop seemed brighter. Only then did I realise how tense I had grown; my head was pounding, my chest was tight, my hands were quivering with strange effort. All the hard-edged ruthlessness went out of me in a rush. I hiccuped loudly.

A collective sigh went through the others, all except Praem, who stood there as crisp and straight-backed as always, though she did raise her hands and give me a polite, gentle round of applause. Raine rubbed the back of her own neck, then reached over to rub mine, as a reward for a difficult job well done. Twil slumped in her

chair, didn't seem to know what to say. Evelyn scowled at the phone like it was evidence in a murder case.

As abyssal logic receded, guilt trickled back in.

With one numb and shaky hand, I picked up Evelyn's phone and re-blocked Felicity's number, so she wouldn't have to think about that. Inside my chest, a spike of jagged iron worried at my heart. I was hurting two people here: Evelyn, by re-exposing her to the trauma of her own past, and Felicity, by emotionally manipulating her into working for us.

Justifications formed like a pearl around a speck of grit inside my soul. Evelyn had agreed to this. She'd said go ahead. And I owed nothing to Felicity.

But I owed so much to Evee. I stared down at the phone in my hand. This was my responsibility now, not hers. Anything to lift the burden of strategy from her shoulders. This is how it was meant to be. She could make the plans, but I would be her conduit, her hands.

"Well," Twil said eventually, blowing out a big sigh. "That was real fuckin' weird."

"Uh huh," said Raine. "Fliss is kind of a weird person."

Evelyn snorted. "Yes, grass is green, water is wet, bears defecate in the woods."

"Nah," Twil went on. She sounded horribly uncomfortable. "I mean like, she seemed kinda fucked up, you know? Does she need help?"

"She's a mage," Evelyn drawled. "We're beyond help."

"Evee!" I couldn't help myself, her name flew from my mouth as I looked up from the phone. "Don't talk about yourself like that."

But Evelyn didn't look fatalistic at all. The disgust had dropped away, replaced with a cool, level focus. She nodded to me, once, an admission that she shouldn't be putting herself down. That was the last thing I'd expected. Then she smiled at me. I didn't know what to say. Guilt flared, and then receded, dying away without a target.

I awkwardly reached over the table to return her mobile phone. "Are you certain you're okay with this?"

Praem took Evelyn's phone for her. Evelyn reached across the table

toward me with her maimed hand, palm up. I didn't know what she wanted, then I almost blushed as I realised. I returned the gesture, though I had to stand up a little to take her hand in mine. Without meaning to, I added a tentacle, wrapping it around her wrist without thinking. She didn't even flinch.

"We can do this," she said. "But Felicity is sure as hell not staying in this house. Not even a little bit."

"Agreed, yes, absolutely."

"No problem with that," Raine agreed. Twil shrugged, several steps behind.

"Evee, I ... thank you," I added.

Evelyn squeezed my hand, the stumps of her missing fingers cradled in my palm. Her eyes burned with purpose, and I knew her purpose was me.

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The impromptu strategy meeting broke up without being officially declared over — though Praem's insistence that it was time for a cup of tea seemed to do the trick to dispel any lingering tension. Twil wanted to show Evelyn an amusing video on her phone, something to do with too many cats in a single box. Raine followed me out into the kitchen, concerned for my state of mind, so I recharged with a nice long hug, snuggling into her front. Then I told her I was going upstairs, by myself.

Time to talk to Lizzie.

Evelyn's look had given me courage, a hot glowing ember in my chest. Besides, if I put it off again, I might never get to this conversation. If I told myself 'I'll do it tomorrow', well, Badger was getting out of hospital tomorrow. We had things to do. Easy excuses to put it off. No time like the present.

I half expected Marmite to follow at my heels as I made for the front room and the stairs. He was no stranger to following me around the house on occasion, often trailed by a spider-servitor. I'd assumed he might want to get out of the magical workshop after the raised voices and unexplained tension earlier, but when I peeked back around the door frame, he was hanging upside down from the ceiling. His metallic eyes were fixed on Twil's mobile phone. Maybe

he liked cats, too.

In the upstairs hallway, June sunlight burned hot and bright through the window, etching a patch of aching light on the old paint and older plaster of the wall, divided into four by the window lattice. I paused to soak my face and throat in that heat, squinting my eyes shut like a cat. Even my tentacles spread out for a moment, relaxed and soothed. Beyond the window, Sharrowford wavered with distant heat haze rising from the black tarmac of the roads. Summer inside Number 12 Barnsloew Drive was strange, the sun beating down on the exterior of the house but never spreading out beyond the cracks and slivers where it could enter. Out in the garden, the grass grew wild, and sometimes I could hear crickets or the whine of horse flies. But we never saw more than the occasional spider indoors.

Cool air washed over me again like fresh bedsheets when I stepped away from the patch of direct sunlight. The bedrooms and Evelyn's study were dim and shady, like rock pools beneath the tide.

The door to Lozzie's room was ajar by just a crack. Soft voices came from within. I knocked gently. My reward was one of those delightful fluttery trilling noises from Tenny, from deep in her chest.

"I'm coming in, okay?" I said.

The cosy grotto of Lozzie's bedroom — and Tenny's too, technically — was a much more comfortable sight than it had been months earlier. It was no longer the barren and empty space where Lozzie laid her head, bereft of possessions except borrowed clothes and the mobile phone we'd purchased for her. From the bean-bag chairs around the low table, to Raine's old 'gamecube' hooked up to the television, to the piles of books and puzzle toys, Tenny's presence had changed everything.

There was even a laptop in here now, usually sitting on the desk at the back of the room. A hand-me-down from Raine, specifically for Tenny. Raine had handled parental controls for the internet connection, though we'd had a bit of a debate about that. Evelyn hadn't liked the idea of restricting information, not for a being who was already stuck indoors almost all the time. Lozzie hadn't seen what all the fuss was about, but then Raine had taken her to one side and explained something in private, and Lozzie had quite

happily gone along with making sure Tenny was always supervised.

“Tenn-Tenns needs to grow up a bit more first, mmhmm, mmmhmm.” Lozzie had nodded along at the time.

“She’s growing up quickly,” Evelyn had said, “regardless of what we do. She’s what, effectively acting like a teenager now? We don’t want to shelter her unduly. Not that we have a choice.” Evelyn had sighed heavily, apparently more pained by this than Lozzie was. “Maybe if we take her down to Sussex, to my family home. Maybe somewhere without too many prying eyes. Oh, I don’t know.”

“She can almost do the illusion cloak thing now!” Lozzie had chirped. “Alllllmost perfect. Then we can go for a walk!”

I pushed the door open to discover pretty much the exact kind of comfy scene I had expected. Lozzie herself was curled up on her bed, amid a big nest of rumpled blankets and sheets, with a book propped on her knees. Her pastel poncho lay draped over the end of the bed, leaving her in just pajama bottoms and t-shirt for once. The only thing out of the ordinary was her phone on the pillow, kept close at hand. She’d started paying a lot more attention to it this last week.

Tenny and Sevens were sitting together at the low table, before the open screen of the laptop. Tenny was sprawled in a beanbag chair with Whistle in her lap. The dog was happily wrapped in a black tentacle and half asleep. He opened one eye in curiosity as I entered, then returned to napping. Sevens was in full goblin mode, squatting on the floor next to Tenny, chewing on the end of a pencil with her needle teeth. I don’t think the pencil stood much chance.

Tenny was multi-tasking to the extreme. One hand clutched a pencil, the other braced against a notebook on the table. A tentacle was busy twisting a Rubik’s cube, solving and scrambling and resolving it every few seconds. Another two tentacles were casually wrapped around Sevens, as if the blood goblin might try to run off at any moment. Another tentacle was wiping the inside of a very empty, very well-licked jar of peanut butter.

One additional tentacle was reading. Or at least it was pointed downward, at a book lying on the table, past the laptop and the notes. Two other tentacles held the book open. The silken black skin on the ‘reading’ tentacle had peeled back from the tip, as if to reveal an eye, but all I saw was shiny blackness.

Tenny's normal eyes, big and dark and pelagic, looked up at me as I stepped inside the room. Her fluffy white antennae were twitching like reeds in a breeze.

"Heath! Heath!" she trilled.

We had long ago established that Tenny was perfectly capable of pronouncing my full name correctly, but the nickname had stuck. I didn't mind it.

"Hello Tenny." I gave her a wave. Another tentacle snaked out from under her wings, making for me and joining with one of my own in an unspoken touch-greeting. "Are you ... having fun?" I peered at Sevens, who greeted me with a low, throaty, raspy noise. "What are you up to?"

"Histy'," she said, voice an excited flutter.

"History lessons," said Sevens in a raspy gurgle. She pointed at the screen. "Romans, Vikings, middle ages. Mmmmmm, keeping it kinda low on the bloody parts."

I blinked, wrong-footed all of a sudden. "Oh, I ... sort of expected you to be playing video games, I suppose."

Tenny giggled, a fluttery sound like a thousand moths inside her chest. "Can't play all the time, auntie Heath."

"Um, yes, that's very true." I cleared my throat. "Can't play all the time. That's very sensible of you, Tenny. That's good. Um, Sevens, you ... "

I trailed off as Sevens stared back at me, red-on-black eyes daring me to question this course of action. I couldn't tell if she was exhausted and exasperated by acting as Tenny's private home-school tutor, or if she was oddly smug about this arrangement.

Instead, I asked, "Wouldn't there be a better mask for teaching?"

"Mmmmmmmrrrrrrr," Sevens rasped. "Tenny likes this one. Too much."

Tenny confirmed this with a fluttery giggle and by hugging Sevens with her tentacles. Another spare tentacle reached over and ruffled Seven's long, lank hair, messing it up and sending it flying all over the place. Sevens rasped a complaint, but Tenny was being too affectionate to truly restrain her. I suppressed a giggle and shared

an amused look with Lozzie, who was keeping her peace, though with some difficulty. Her lips were twisted against each other to stop from laughing.

I cleared my throat. "You do know you can do this in the kitchen, if you'd like more space? Or in Eevee's study, maybe?"

I nodded at the low table. It did seem a bit cramped, between the laptop, Tenny's notes, the open book, an unfinished chess game, and the usual assortment of Tenny's toys and puzzles scattered about. There was even a miniature plush shark sitting on the edge by the laptop, facing the screen as if reading along. Tenny's favourite. We'd tried to purchase one of the larger plush sharks for her, but everywhere that stocked them had them on back order. Raine had suggested we go on an actual trip to the nearest Ikea, but that would mean a whole day out to Manchester. We didn't have time for that during exam season, at the very least.

"Tenny likes her things," Lozzie chirped. "It's comfy-comfy!"

One of Tenny's silken black tentacles snaked out and stroked the miniature plush shark. Her wide black eyes stared down at the plush toy, suddenly unreadable. Perhaps it was my imagination, but for just a second, she seemed almost melancholy.

I'd come up here with a clear intent to talk to Lozzie, but I couldn't help myself, not when faced by sad Tenny.

"Tenny," I blurted out before I could think about what to say.

"Would you like your own bedroom? Your own space? Your own bed?"

"Mmmmmuuuuur?" Tenny fluttered, looking up at me.

"You still sleep in Lozzie's bed, with her, don't you?" I asked.

"Mmmhmm," Tenny confirmed with a nod. She peered at me, head tilting from side to side, fluffy white antenna twitching rapidly.

I glanced at Lozzie, afraid that she was not going to like the sound of this in the slightest. But she was lighting up.

"Tenny is the most cuddly!" Lozzie chirped, scooting forward on the bed, pulling her blanket-nest apart as she moved. "Buuuuut maybe it's time for Tenny room? You could have a table for chess!"

Tenny blinked at the pair of us, big black eyes beneath a delicate

frown. Her tentacles pulled Sevens in tighter, perhaps a subconscious gesture. Sevens didn't complain, but she did gently bite at Tenny's shoulder to get her to relent. Whistle woke up too, perhaps sensing the tension. He half-wriggled half-fell out of Tenny's lap. If Tenny had been human, I swear she would have been chewing on her bottom lip or fiddling with the hem of her clothing. Her wing-cloak flexed, momentarily flushing with a rush of colours like oil on running water. Her camouflage, sparking in a moment of anxiety.

"You don't have to," I said gently, crossing the room and crouching down next to where Tenny was sitting, so we were eye-to-eye. She stared back at me, wide-eyed. I held her tentacle tight in my own, wrapping around it like a woven rope. "It was just a suggestion. And we'll all be right here, still under the same roof. Evee's bedroom is on the other side, so you won't be next door to Lozzie, but I'm certain we can clear out one of the spare rooms."

"One of," Sevens said with an amused rasp.

"We could get Praem to help," I carried on. "You could choose things to put on the walls, posters or pictures. You could have a whole pile of plush sharks on the bed, if you wanted. And you don't have to sleep in there if you don't want to." I lowered my voice to a stage whisper, leaning in close to Tenny. "You could always sneak back in here and sleep with Lozzie." I nodded very seriously, as if this was a secret revelation from the depths of the abyss. I glanced back at Lozzie, who was pretending not to be amused by all this.

I thought that was rather clever, but Tenny didn't quite agree. She stared at me, then up at Lozzie on the bed again, then back at me.

"I don't want to go anywhere," she said in her trilling voice.

"Awwww, Tenns!" Lozzie said, then emitted a sound like a concerned seal.

"Tenny, it would only be another room in the house," I said, struggling not to melt completely. "But you don't have to. It's just a thing you can do, if you decide you want to. It's your decision. Not mine, not Lozzie's, not anybody else's, okay?"

Tenny puffed her cheeks out — a Lozzie-gesture, which at least let me know she was back on track — then blew out all the air and said, "Will think about it."

I nodded, then reached forward to give Tenny a proper hug, with both my human arms and all my tentacles. She returned the hug, suddenly giggly again. It was like hugging a bag of snakes covered in cooking oil and engine grease, slippery and muscular and with patches of fluffy white fuzz in between. Tenny purred and vibrated like a giant cat.

“We all love you, Tenny,” I murmured. “I love you, Lozzie loves you. Nobody is going anywhere. Even auntie Evee loves you, even when she’s grumpy. Even Zheng cares about you.”

“Urrump?” Tenny made a doubtful noise at that last one.

“It’s true,” I whispered.

We slowly disentangled our hug, though Tenny stayed attached by a couple of tentacles even as I stood up and stepped back. The momentary melancholy had lifted from her features. I shared an amused glance with Lozzie. Somehow, the solidity and simplicity of reassuring Tenny had banished the worst of the guilt and frustration, smothered the razor-sharp core of abyssal ruthlessness, and soothed most of my worries.

But all that buckled and threatened to collapse again, as I watched Lozzie wiggle her legs over the side of her messy bed.

I’d told Tenny a lie, hadn’t I?

I did love her, little Tenny, and so did Lozzie, her mother. But I’d told her very clearly that nobody was going anywhere. And that just wasn’t true.

Like an insensitive fool, I opened my mouth and almost spoke the dreaded words: *Lozzie, we need to talk*. But I caught myself at the last moment and transitioned into a hiccup. Last time I’d used that phrase, I’d terrified Lozzie out of her wits. There was no need for that now.

“Heath?” Tenny trilled. She’d picked up on the sudden change in tension. Or maybe just the hiccup. Whistle had too, trotting past me with a wide berth, like I was a whirlpool and might suck him in.

“Tenny, Praem is making tea downstairs,” I said, plastering a fake smile across my face. Lozzie caught that, peering up at me from the bed, all curious. “If you go and ask very politely, and say please, she might make you some hot chocolate. I think there’s another jar of

peanut butter earmarked for you, as well.”

I was not very skilled at this kind of conversational subterfuge. Sevens came to my rescue though, standing up and encouraging Tenny to follow her. She must have understood my intention. But even if she hadn't, the promise of peanut butter monopolised all of Tenny's attention and made her tentacles very excited. She dropped half of what she was doing, scooped up her plush shark, and hopped to her feet, waving the empty jar of peanut butter on the end of one tentacle.

“Peanub bubber!”

“Gaaaaoorrrr,” went Sevens, dragged along in Tenny's wake like a small girl with a large dog. “Yes yes, peanut butter.”

“Hot choco and peanub bubber!”

Seconds later we heard Tenny fluttering down the stairs, followed by Sevens doing her best not to get swept off her feet. Whistle nosed out of the door after them, but not before he cast a doubtful look back at me.

I sighed heavily. Even dogs could tell. I was an open book.

Lozzie looked up at me from the bed. No imitation human gestures for her, she was very openly biting her lower lip. She knew I'd wanted to get her alone for a second. “Heathy?”

“It's okay, Lozzie, it's fine. It's fine.”

Gently, I pushed the bedroom door almost shut. The sunlight from the corridor dwindled to just a crack, closing us together in the fuzzy shadows inside the house.

“Heathy? What is it?” Lozzie asked.

Her eyes had gone wide as they could, with her permanent sleepy-lidded look. Her hands twisted at the bedsheets in her lap. She seemed so much smaller without her poncho on — she was wearing a pair of pajama bottoms borrowed from me, pink with little strawberries up the legs, and an old t-shirt I think she'd gotten off Evelyn, with a cartoonish pink-haired pony on the front, from one of those cartoons Evelyn liked.

“Lozzie, it's fine,” I said in a rush, sitting down on the bed next to her. “I just ... I never thanked you. For last weekend. With

Hringewindla.” I let out a big sigh of relief and nervous tension as Lozzie made a little oh-shape of realisation with her mouth. “You showed up just when I needed you, and I ... I didn’t thank you.”

I looked down at my hands in my lap. That was only half the truth.

Lozzie didn’t answer. Instead she slowly wrapped an arm around one of my tentacles, entwining with me without speaking, letting my automatic responses guide one of my pale, rubbery limbs to creep up and around her own arm, until I reached her shoulder. I sighed. She was only playing with me.

“Lozzie, I—”

But when I looked up, I found her staring back, head tilted so her hair hung loose, down on to her lap. “Aaaaaaaand?” she prompted.

I sighed, self-conscious and shaky. “Oh, you see right through me sometimes.”

Lozzie giggled. “I just see you, Heathy!”

“Yes, well.” I rubbed my face with one hand, trying to gather myself. “I’m just ... I’m very grateful that I didn’t have to do everything alone. I feel like I’ve really learned that now. I don’t have to do anything alone, not even talking to something like Hringewindla. If I couldn’t get him out of my head, I would have been stuck, or I would have needed to get ... violent.”

Lozzie averted her eyes briefly, but she nodded.

“But I didn’t have to do that,” I said. “Because you were there. The others were there too, and they helped. But mostly it was you. Butting in at the last moment. When I was communicating with him.”

My lower lip shook. I had to bite it, too hard.

“Ooooooooooh,” went Lozzie. “Ahhhhhhhhhhh. Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Hrm.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I just ... I wish I’d had more ... time? I don’t even know.” I shook with each breath. Lozzie reached out and put her other arm around my shoulders. “I’m not ungrateful, but Lozzie, speaking with Hringewindla was the closest I’ve ever gotten to speaking with something like the Eye. And the only thing I could do was make a metaphor out of it. I was talking to my own mind,

processing him into something I could understand. And the Eye won't be helpful, not like Hringewindla was."

Lozzie nodded against my shoulder. "He's reaaaaaally sweet. Mmhmm!"

I looked up and met her eyes, half-sleepy and heavy-lidded. For a moment, my heart blazed with hope. "Did you see the old man, in the cabin?"

Lozzie blinked several times and shook her head. "No?"

The lump returned to my throat. I took a deep breath and nodded. "All in my head. Even if I can communicate with the Eye, it's not going to be so helpful."

Lozzie squeezed me tighter.

"I'm sorry, Lozzie. But I sort of wish you'd left me there for a few more minutes. Alone with Hringewindla. So I could learn how to ..."

How to hurt him. I left that part unsaid.

I didn't even know if it was right. I had no idea what I would have to do to the Eye. I still didn't know. The experience with Hringewindla suggested methods. Painful ones.

"Never alone," Lozzie said. "Never alone, never by yourself, that's the point, Heathy! You're not going to be alone."

I looked up at her again, so hard she almost flinched at the look in my eyes. I felt like grabbing her and shaking her. "Are you going to be there for the Eye, in Wonderland? Could you do that to the Eye?"

"Heath—"

"Because I don't want you to, Lozzie. I don't—" I cut myself off and glanced at the open crack of door. I could hear Tenny burbling and trilling happily downstairs. "I don't want you to leave Tenny behind."

Lozzie bit her lip.

"You're her mother," I continued. "I can't even ask you to come to Wonderland, to take that risk. I can't ask you to come with us and maybe ... maybe not come back. I can't ask you to do that."

Lozzie blinked at me several times. Then she wiped the tears from my cheek with the back of her sleeve, and looked at me like I was an idiot.

“Um,” I said, suddenly blushing.

That was a very unique look from Lozzie. She’d never done it before. It seemed almost alien on her face, lips twisted together and one eyebrow raised. I think she copied it from a mixture of Raine and Evelyn, via pure observation.

It was very effective at getting me to shut up.

“Heathy,” Lozzie said, booping me on the nose with her free hand. “Why do you think I’ve made all the cattys? And the knights too! Everyone wants to help you! I promised I was going to help you, remember? You saved me, so I help you! Don’t you remember? Mmhmm, mmhmm?”

Lozzie bobbed her head insistently, catching my eyes and stopping me from looking away.

I did remember. I remembered all too well, because it was one of the defining events of my life. Lozzie, barefoot and bloodied, filthy and greasy and twitchy with trauma, surrounded by pneumasomatic creatures, on that morning last year after we’d pulled her out of her brother’s castle. I remembered Lozzie, promising that she’d return to help rescue my sister, that she would find a new kind of help. And she had. The Knights and the Caterpillars. Lozzie’s secret supernatural army, just on the other side of the membrane, waiting Outside.

I shook my head. “Of course I remember. But I can’t exploit them, either. You made life. I can’t send them all to their doom. It would be like genocide.”

“It won’t be doom!” Lozzie all but yelled in my face. I blinked in surprise as she surged with outrage.

“Lozz—”

“No doom! No doom! No doom-brained bad thoughts!” I’d never seen Lozzie like this before, with such a serious little frown etched on her forehead, eyes pinched with determination. “We’re gonna make the opening. You’re gonna reach in! The cattys are made for this, they’re so good at it! I didn’t even know they’d be so good, but

they are! We can't go wandering around Wonderland — ahaha," she giggled at the double meaning, "but they can! They're built for it. And the Knights are determined too, they can deal with all the other stuff, the mess and ruins and looking after us. We're going to need that, yes? Yes? Yes! Even with Zhengy and Eevee and everything, we can't do it alone. And they want to help! And ... " Lozzie trailed off. For a moment I thought she was going to crumple and look away. Her whole posture wavered, about to go. But then she screwed her eyes shut and carried on. "And maybe they don't all come back. Okay. Okay okay okay. Maybe some of them don't. Maybe some don't. But everyone wants to help. Everyone knows you! Everyone wants to know Maisie. Me too, Heathy. Me too."

I struggled to find an answer to that. Lozzie's sudden confidence was like warm butter inside my chest. I couldn't look her in the eyes. I almost curled up into my own lap, wishing I could vanish.

"I know. I know, you've told me that, I just ... there's so many other things I'm supposed to do. Things I have to do. I need to talk to Jan about making a back-up body for Maisie. We need to get the book. But I don't ... I don't know what to do. When we get there. To Wonderland." My voice trailed off to barely more than a whisper. "I haven't said this next part to Raine, or Eevee, or anybody. I can't. It's ... really hard to keep going. To keep doing these things, to stay focused on these things. It's really hard to be preparing for ... for after, when I don't know if we're even going to survive it." I took a deep breath and felt the guilt purge itself from me as I finally admitted it. "And it's all on me. You're going to help, and thank you. But the last piece of it, it's all on me. And I'm so scared. And sometimes I just want to climb into bed and forget everything, stop trying, stop thinking."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Lozzie hugged me tight. We stayed like that as I lost track of time, one minute drifting into another. I found myself listening to her heartbeat, wiping my tears on her shoulder.

"I haven't told anybody that part," I said eventually.

"It's okay."

"I don't know what to do."

"It's okaaaaaay."

"But I don't."

“That’s what the knights and the cattys are for,” she whispered. “And Evee-weavy’s magic circle. And everything else. You don’t have to know everything right away. Wonderland has secrets, we’ll find them, then you can use them!”

I sniffed loudly. “I hope you’re right.”

“Lozzies are always right,” said Lozzie.

Eventually I managed a small laugh. Lozzie and I stayed wrapped together for a long time, long enough for somebody — Raine, I think — to call up the stairs. Lozzie called back, but nobody came to look for us.

We separated, but stayed holding hands, side by side on the jumble of bedsheets. Lozzie rummaged in her poncho on the end of the bed, produced a hair brush, and set about brushing my hair while humming happily.

“Oh, Lozzie.” I almost started crying again, but I held it back. Something had released inside me, some muscle that had been twisted up for weeks now. The guilt had faded to mere echoes. “You’re too sweet.”

“Sweety-sweets as sweets does.”

I managed to laugh. “What does that even mean?”

“It means, don’t eat me.” She tapped my head with the hairbrush, very lightly.

“I do need to ask Jan about a lot of stuff.” I sighed, staring down at my lap. “That wasn’t me being hyperbolic. And, well, I do need to ask you about her, too.”

“Janny is cuuuuuute,” Lozzie chirped, still brushing my hair, slowly and methodically. She guided my hand up to feel how smooth she’d made it, smooth and silky against my head.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “But are you and her ... um ... ?”

Lozzie ducked around my side, back into my field of vision, blinking innocently. “Mm-mmm?”

I sighed and gave her an indulgent smile. “Oh, I suppose I should talk to her really. Or both of you, together? We do have a lot to discuss. Maybe Evee and I should call her again, I’m not sure.”

Lozzie tilted her head at me. “Wanna go visit right now?”

“ ... now?”

She broke into a mischievous, elfin little smile. “She won’t expect me to bring you along! You can surprise her, catch her off guard!”

“Ah?”

Lozzie dropped the hairbrush, patted me on the head, and hopped to her feet. “All done!” She pulled her poncho off the bed and wriggled into it, making a little ‘pwah!’ sound as her head popped free of the collar, hair going everywhere. Then she grabbed her mobile phone from the bed, jabbed at the screen, and held it up to her ear.

“Lozzie?”

“Shh-shh-shhhhh!” She shushed me, then bobbed from one foot to the other as she waited for her call to connect, then suddenly said, “It’s meeeee! Are you wearing all your clothes right now? Or at least half your clothes?” A pause. “Because I’m gonna be there in about ten seconds! Hide all your secrets, now!”

Lozzie ended the call before giving Jan time to respond — at least, I assumed it was Jan. I hadn’t been able to hear the other end of the phone. She was giggling like crazy, biting her lip, swiping hair out of her face, like this was the funniest jape in the world. Then she stuck her hand out to me.

“Ready?” Lozzie asked.

“You ... you mean we’re going to Slip?”

“Mhmm!” Lozzie nodded. “Quicker than walking! Smoother than cars. Not as cool as trains, because trains are cooler than most things, but still cool.”

I cleared my throat, struggling not to grin. “Lozzie, I’m sorry, I feel like I’m the one being caught off-guard here. I’m ... okay, I suppose I am dressed for this.” I glanced down at my hoodie and jeans, though I wasn’t wearing outdoor shoes, only socks. At least I had my phone in my pocket.

“We’re only going to her room. Not Outside!”

“What about everybody else?” I gestured at the door. “They’re going to wonder where we’ve gone.”

Lozzie lit up, nodded very enthusiastically — which sent her hair flying about again — and hopped over to the door. She flung it wide, stuck her head out into the corridor, and called out, “Heathy and me are heading out for a bit! Be right baaaaack!”

A smattering of confused voices replied to her, calling back up the stairs.

Lozzie bounded over to me and stuck her hand out again.

“Lozzie,” I sighed. “We can’t just ... go. Can we?”

“We can! We can call when we get there!” Lozzie puffed out her cheeks at my stick-in-the-mud exasperation. “And we can both hippity-hop a hundred percent fine now, Heathy! You can just come straight back if you don’t like it.”

“I suppose that’s true ... ” I stood up and straightened my hoodie. At least my hair was brushed. I looked presentable, mostly. “I do need to let ... oh.”

Praem appeared in the bedroom doorway, staring at us, hands folded in front of her perfectly starched maid uniform. Milk-white eyes bored into mine.

She didn’t even need to ask.

“We’re going to see Jan,” I said with a sigh. “Let Raine and Eevee know, please. Sorry, Praem.”

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie nodded and stuck out her other hand toward Praem. “We gotta be quick or she’ll be ready for us! Wanna come too?”

“No, thank you,” said Praem. “Have fun.”

“We will!” Lozzie giggled. She grabbed my hand, and before I could raise any further complaint, reality collapsed like a badly balanced house of cards.

= =

Rough landing, rougher than usual, even for a Lozzie-Slip. Like slamming on the brakes too late. Soul jarred loose, rattling around inside too much flesh. Senses jumbled, overlapping, taking too long to reboot.

I managed to keep my feet, digging my toes into thick green carpet

through my socks. Stumbled into a wall, tentacles thumping against plaster, bracing my weight, keeping me upright. Doubled over, panting and heaving, but I didn't vomit. Carpet was too nice to ruin with vomit.

My trilobe bioreactor pulsed hot for two or three seconds, burning like a fragment of star in my gut. Hotter than it needed to, just to keep me standing and conscious. My skin broke out in cold flash-sweat. A full-body shiver gripped me.

Fighting off an attack. But from what?

"Lozzie?" I croaked.

No answer.

I reeled upright in panic, blinking hard to clear my eyes. Something had gone badly wrong during the Slip.

Fancy corridor. Thick green carpet with a darker green pattern down the middle. Cream-coloured wallpaper, muted and tasteful. Soft lighting at sensible intervals. Air conditioning humming away. Voices, distant and muffled. The sound of a television playing somewhere behind a wall.

Doors ran down either side of the corridor. Soft cream-yellow. Numbered in brass, with card slots for locks. One-oh-five, one-oh-six, marching down to shiny steel lift doors and the right-hand turning of the stairs.

Hotel corridor. Empty, except me.

"Lozzie?" I said.

No Lozzie.

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.4

This was not the first time Lozzie and I had been separated by a Slip gone wrong.

When Lozzie had rescued me from Wonderland, months earlier, she'd snatched me from right beneath the Eye's gaze, albeit briefly blocked by the daring and dutiful sacrifice of one of her shining Knights. I had never forgotten the courage that must have required — courage, or madness, or a bit of both. But as we'd punched back through the membrane to our own reality, the pressure of that singular, vast attention from the Eye had ripped Lozzie and I away from each other. Perhaps her late brother's lingering shade had helped knock us off course.

Whatever the true cause or catalyst on that fateful day, Lozzie had successfully transported herself to Number 12 Barnslow Drive, while I'd been left adrift, unconscious, spat out somewhere not of our intention or design, dredged from Outside by barbed hooks and caught by bold poachers. I'd woken up in the clutches of the nascent Eye cult; or the shattered, ragged remains of the Sharrowford cult, depending on how one saw their situation.

And here I was again. A Slip had gone wrong. No Lozzie. Alone, by myself, in a strange and unknown place.

Well, alone in a nice-looking hotel corridor. Rich green carpet and tasteful cream-coloured wallpaper, all modern and clean and tidy, welcoming and non-threatening. It was really quite nice. Even managed to overpower my usual distaste for modern interiors.

I wasn't handcuffed to a radiator in a bare concrete room, crusted with my own blood and vomit. I wasn't under the watchful, dead eyes of seven feet of enslaved zombie muscle. I wasn't dazed and confused and shaking with horror at one of the worst experiences of my life, re-exposure to the Eye. I wasn't sobbing for my lost twin.

Trauma didn't care about any of that.

I tried to whisper, but I could barely get air through my throat.
“Lozzie ...”

For a heartbeat I was back there in Glasswick tower, helpless and confined and lost. I thought I’d processed that experience. I’d won, I’d escaped and saved my friends and all that was in the past. But the echo of fresh terror clawed up my throat and roiled in the pit of my stomach. My teeth chattered. My knees threatened to give out. I started to cringe, to curl up, to listen to that urge to cram myself into a corner and strangle my sobbing, lest something out there might hear, and come looking for the prey I was always destined to be.

But only for a heartbeat.

Fight-or-flight settled firmly on an answer.

I was not the terrified, quivering girl I’d been this time last year, or even a few months back. That Heather, the older me, she rested deep in my heart, safe and sound, swaddled in cotton wool and care. She didn’t have to be afraid anymore, not of this. I had swum through the abyss, I had duelled with post-human magicians, and I had taken tea in Carcosa with the King in Yellow. I was sharp and quick and I was loved.

Abyssal instinct reared up inside me, a many-headed hydra making ready for instant violence. Adrenaline poured into my veins. Cold sweat broke out across my skin, sticking my t-shirt to my back. My bioreactor hummed hot in my belly. All six pneuma-somatic tentacles fanned out to fill the corridor from wall to wall, reaching wide and strobing bright, ready to grab the first figure to emerge from one of the hotel room doors, ready to pop limbs out and rip heads off.

This time there would be no hostage situation, no cold threats in a concrete box, no negotiation.

A hiss tore up my throat, low and threatening.

Fuck off and die! Come get me! Here I am!

I’m not usually a violent person, believe it or not, considering some of the things I’ve done. But in that moment I fully believe that I was ready to kill the next person I saw, human being or demon-host or anything else. They — whoever *they* were in this context, my irrational displaced fear-rage wasn’t quite sure — they had taken

Lozzie, or tried to take me, they were going to burst through the very nice cream-coloured wallpaper or step out from the lift at the end of the corridor with a gun, or maybe appear behind me and call me *Lavinia*. My skin itched with the threat of warning colouration and bio-toxin, bubbling with pneuma-somatic potential. Another few seconds and I would have sprouted spines, plated myself with chitin armour, and probably howled like a deep-sea leviathan.

One of the cream-yellow doors halfway down the corridor swung open. Twenty feet away, perhaps. I readied myself to spring and scratch and sting.

Lucky the door wasn't closer, in retrospect.

A young man stepped out of the hotel room. Mid-twenties perhaps, only a few years older than me, slim and tallish in an awkward sort of way. He had a scraggly little goatee on his chin, and long dark hair pulled into an absolutely awful looking 'man-bun' on the back of his head, as Raine later informed me was the proper name for such a hairstyle. He was in a clean shirt and pressed trousers, nothing out of the ordinary, carrying a tote bag over one shoulder. He started fussing with his key card, to lock the hotel room door behind him.

He glanced down the corridor and did a double-take in my direction. We made eye contact. Just a second, a fleeting moment.

The young man averted his eyes, swallowed with no small difficulty, and concentrated very hard on checking his door was locked.

I didn't pounce, or hiss, or even call out to him. Instead, I felt very embarrassed indeed. Realisation was a bucket of cold water dumped on my anger and adrenaline.

He'd looked away like that because he was worried he'd just made eye contact with a crazy person.

Regular human beings couldn't see my tentacles all flared-out and ready to fight, but you didn't need to be a supernatural creature to see that I was caked in cold sweat, shaking with adrenaline, and bug-eyed with murderous intent. I'd just terrified some random hotel patron leaving his room. We were both very lucky his door wasn't any closer to me, or I would have picked him up with my tentacles and slammed him against the wall the moment he'd

emerged.

Mister Man-bun, bless his terrible hairstyle, patted his tote bag and hurried down the corridor toward the lift. He was very careful not to look back at the gorgon behind him. He pressed the lift call button, stood there awkwardly for about two seconds, then pressed it twice more. I saw his head twitch as he barely resisted the urge to check I wasn't creeping toward him. Then he thought better of waiting, and hurried down the stairs instead.

I let out a long, shuddering breath as reason dripped back, pressing a hand to my chest. I even pulled my tentacles in, though only halfway.

This was a hotel corridor. Almost a public place. I was surrounded by entirely ordinary daily noises of human habitation, soft voices and the hum of a television and even the distant rumble of traffic outdoors. Anybody might step out of one of these rooms, and none of them had anything to do with me. That random man I'd just scared might be about to tell the front desk there was some crazy girl upstairs, having a panic attack in the corridor, wearing no shoes.

The Slip had gone wrong, but I wasn't the one who'd been snatched.

With shaking hands, I fumbled my mobile phone out of my pocket, praying as I jabbed at the contact list.

I called Lozzie and held the phone to my ear. "Please please—" *hic* — "please—"

Click.

"Lozzie?!" I fought to keep my voice down. "Lozzie, are you—"

"Heathy!"

Lozzie. Bright and bouncy, not terrified. The relief was too much. I almost sat down on the floor right there.

"Lozzie, what just happened? Where are you? Are you safe? Right now, where are you?"

"I'm in Jan's room!" Lozzie chirped, like nothing was wrong.

"Heathy, where are *you*?"

I blinked up and down the corridor, at the rows of cream-yellow

doors. My head felt numb. “In a ... a hotel hallway. Um.”

With a familiar squeak, a delicate thump, and a loud clack, one of the doors at the rear end of the corridor flew open, bouncing off its doorstep with a rubbery *boink*. I flinched and turned, tentacles flaring out wide, a hiss in my throat. I was still on edge and ready to fight, if I was wrong.

Lozzie bounced out into the corridor, sideways on one foot, carried by her own momentum, pastel poncho flapping along with her.

She lowered the phone from her ear and spread her arms. The poncho flapped upward. “There you are!”

Numb all over and shaking with an adrenaline crash, I tripped down the corridor toward her, shaking my head in confusion. She gave me a quick little hug when we met, squeezing me hard. She took one of my tentacles in hand, to gently but firmly lower it from the lingering threat-display position. She didn’t need to bother; I lashed two tentacles around her, as if she might vanish without an anchor.

“Lozzie.” I squeezed her arms as she peeled back from me. “Lozzie, what ... what happened, I ... I don’t ... ”

“Come come!” Lozzie pulled me by the hands. “Come in, come in, Heathy. Inside Heathy, inside time, talk inside — inside!”

I allowed Lozzie to half-steer half-drag me into the hotel room, my fears and adrenaline soothed by the fact she was not lost to the tides and time of Outside, or to the devious plans of her uncle, or random chance imposed by a cold and uncaring universe. She stayed hand-in-hand with me as she scurried inside as well, past the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign hanging on the room’s door handle. She got the door properly locked and closed behind us, throwing the latch and hooking the safety chain in place.

Jan was sitting on the nearest of a pair of twin beds, staring at me with wide-eyed alarm. Of course, she could see my tentacles perfectly well.

“ ... hi,” I croaked.

“Heather. Hello,” she said, her delicate voice formal and tight. “My goodness, you look like you’ve just seen an entire chorus of ghosts.”

I didn’t know much about hotel rooms — all my home-away-from-

home experiences were with children's mental hospitals, and no matter how welcoming those tried to appear, they could never be home. But even I could tell that this hotel room was on the nicer side. To be fair, even the worst dump of a hotel would have been a step up from the rotten, ancient bedsit that Jan and July had been using as a temporary safe-house when we'd found them.

All cream and soft yellows on the walls and curtains, accented with cheap ply-board wood dressed up in dark colours to make it look like oak. A pair of single twin beds occupied pride of place, complete with a headboard built into the wall. The sheets on the furthest bed were smooth and tight with military precision, every wrinkle removed, the pillows gone as well. The nearest bed, where Jan currently sat cross-legged, looked like it hadn't been made in over a week, and seemed to boast all the pillows from the other bed as well, piled up as if to seat a very fussy princess.

The room boasted a desk with a mirror, a tiny little table with a pair of functional but comfortable chairs, a miniature fridge that worried me for a moment — was it full of alcohol? — and a tiny kitchenette with two burner rings, a built-in microwave, and a toaster bolted to the worktop. Jan and July had evidently made themselves at home there, because the little bin was overflowing with food wrappers, takeaway cartons, and empty coffee cups.

The entrance had a little rectangular area of polished wooden floorboard, so you could remove your shoes without dirtying the carpet. It was currently occupied by a pair of massive boots — July's, I assumed — and Jan's neat little pink trainers. Very civilized, I thought. Pity Lozzie and I weren't wearing any shoes.

An open door led off to the left, showing clean white bathroom tiles beyond. I could see the corner of one fluffy towel. A single window dominated the far wall, currently covered by heavy curtains. Bright, blazing sunlight crept around the edges. Air conditioning hummed from two overhead vents, keeping the room soft and cool while the world baked outdoors. I wasn't used to that, not at all.

How very mage-appropriate, shutting out the sun.

Our mage friend and her athletic demon had made themselves at home in other ways too. I spotted the sword-carrying guitar case propped up by the window. Jan's massive white coat was draped over a chair, swallowing it whole, though I could see various other

practical garments on the seat of that chair, with straps and holsters and what I later realised was the corner of a military-style flak jacket. Jan's pink tote bag lay on the desk, spilling out books and odds and ends of clothing and a small make-up pouch. A large rucksack and a massive sports bag sat on the floor near the end of the beds, doing the luggage impression of a dead animal in the process of being gutted; clothes lay about as if dragged from the bags by smaller scavengers. A laptop stood open on the little table, showing a youtube video of a cartoon horse. Other detritus lay all over the place: a phone charger cable, a couple of notebooks, an abandoned bra. They'd hooked some kind of game console up to the hotel television; I think I recognised it as one of the kind Evelyn kept saying we should get for Tenny.

On the inside of the front door was a magic circle.

Plain black, drawn in pen, on a piece of white A3 paper, held up with sticky tape. Three circles of descending size, like ripple-rings, connected by jagged lines and surrounded by snippets of a language that I recognised after a moment, though I couldn't read a word of it — Vietnamese. The magic didn't stir any nausea in my gut, but the triple-circle design made me feel like I was staring into a tunnel, a tube that reached into a white void of infinite space. A whine started on the edge of my hearing.

Jan cleared her throat. The whine cut out. "Wouldn't stare at that for too long, if I were you." I could hear the wince in her voice. "Not that it's dangerous. Not exactly. Just uncomfortable. You know." She cleared her throat again. "I'm just being polite, of course, you can do whatever you want."

Lozzie pulled me away from the door and pulled my attention away from the magic circle. I allowed her to guide me out onto the thick sea-green carpet, our socks sinking into the fabric. I held on to her hand, unwilling to let go, and kept two of my tentacles wrapped around her like a squid in a strong current, lashed to a rock. One wrapped around her shoulders, the other about her waist.

She cooed to me. "Heathy, Heathy it's okay, it's okaaaay."

I shook my head, still trying to gather myself. "Lozzie, stop. Stop, please. What just happened? What was that? How did we get ... separated?"

From the nearest of the two beds, Jan cleared her throat delicately,

a third time. “I feel as if I should be the one asking that, seeing as this is currently my temporary home. Well, sort of. In a way. A bit.”

Jan cast her eyes up and around, at the meagre surroundings of her hotel room. She hooked her hands under her folded legs and rocked backward. She still looked extremely worried. Her eyes quickly returned to me and the threat-posture halo of my tentacles, strobing bright and screaming with warning colouration in a rainbow of toxic potential.

She was dressed as if she’d been lounging around in bed all day, or perhaps transferring herself between bed and desk, between working and napping, or watching youtube videos and napping. She had little black socks on her feet and pink shorts on her hips, leaving her slender legs bare to the conditioned air, and bare to the gaze of anybody who cared to pay attention to the just-visible tell-tale lines of doll-joints on her knees. She wore a loose lilac t-shirt beneath the most fancy dressing gown I’d ever seen — gauze-thin, probably not silk but something approximate, tie-dyed in spirals of pastel blue and pink on a background of white. It floated out whenever she moved, giving the impression of a particularly delicate butterfly thinking about taking to the air. I doubted very much that it had come from the hotel bathroom.

I could just about see the doll-joints of her wrists and elbows through the thin fabric, fully on display. Warm, soft, human-looking flesh terminated in sudden artificial joints. So much like Praem. I did my best not to stare.

Jan looked so very petite and compact, wrapped in that big dressing gown. Her messy bob of thick black hair was even messier than usual. And her pneuma-somatic eyes of storm-blue crystal were ringed with anxiety as she stared at me. She was pale all through.

I cleared my throat and did what I could to reel my tentacles in. Terrifying somebody my own size made me feel bad. I wasn’t a monster.

“Thank you,” she added quickly. “So, what was that all about? What’s going on? Do I need to prepare for men with guns to burst through the door? Because I can do that, in a pinch, but I’d rather not ruin my new clothes, and also it’ll piss off the hotel management.”

I let out a big sigh. “No, it’s not that kind of problem. Lozzie, what

just happened?”

“Nothing!” Lozzie chirped, dancing forward a few steps on the carpet and patting my tentacles around her waist. She shook her head, confused but not distressed, biting her bottom lip. “Nothing happened! I got here and you were already out!”

Jan snorted delicately behind one hand. “I think we’re all out, here.”

Lozzie giggled. I shot Jan a look. “This is no time for gay jokes.”

“If there’s no emergency, then it’s always time for gay jokes. Is this seriously not an emergency? Lozzie seemed very distressed and now you seem very distressed. When powerful people get distressed, I get distressed. Please, what is happening?”

“We got ... separated. During the Slip. The teleport thing we can do. That shouldn’t happen. Lozzie, what was that? Did you feel anything? Something pull us apart? Anything at all?”

Lozzie didn’t answer right away. She bit her lip and furrowed her brow, small and intense. At least she was taking this seriously rather than brushing it off. I took some basic relief from that.

“Normal,” she said eventually. “Regular. No push, no pull, no evil spooky hands. I promise, nothing touched us! It felt normal.”

I glanced around the hotel room, then back at the magic circle on the inside of the door.

Could this be Jan’s doing?

Perhaps the Slip hiccup was the result of a trap she’d laid for Lozzie and me. Maybe she’d intended to peel me off, then entrap Lozzie while she was alone and beyond my help. But her plan had failed, so Jan was acting scared to cover for her mistake. The failure would already have her terrified. I knew she was frightened of me, of us, so acting alarmed and worried wouldn’t be too much of a leap. She could draw on her real emotions to make it believable.

“Um,” Jan said when I stared at her. She raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Heathyyyyyy,” Lozzie whined.

“Where’s July?” I asked.

Jan didn't answer for a second. I didn't blame her; I was standing there with my tentacles ready to whip her off the bed and slam her to the floor, though I didn't know it myself at the time. I was bristling like a cornered animal. I'd just asked her *Where's your back-up?* while looming over her, ready to inflict terrible violence.

She glanced at Lozzie. "A little help, please?"

Lozzie did a side-to-side flap with her head and her poncho, like a jolly little jellyfish adjusting her position in a column of seawater. Then she flounced across the last few steps separating her from Jan. She crawled onto the bed beside Jan and leaned into her, so that her pastel poncho and Jan's matching dressing gown were momentarily one and the same.

I kept a tentacle wrapped firmly around Lozzie's waist, like a life-line. Jan eyed it with open anxiety.

"It's okay, it's okay!" Lozzie purred to her. "Mmhmm, mmhmm!"

"If you say so." Jan swallowed hard. "If you must know, July is currently in the hotel pool. Downstairs. She likes to swim. Doesn't get much opportunity, so she's been doing it every day we're here." She wet her lips with a delicate flicker of pink tongue. "Excuse me, Heather, but you are scaring the shit out of me. Please stop."

I turned my head to look back at the little wooden entrance area. I stared at July's boots for a couple of seconds, then back to Jan again.

Then I hiccuped, loudly and painfully, because I could barely keep this up. I wasn't good at intimidation.

Jan disagreed. She hurried to explain. "July owns more than one pair of shoes. You've seen her in different shoes, I'm almost certain of that. Don't beat me up over misplaced shoes."

"Heathy," Lozzie added in a whine. "It's okay! It's Jan!"

But I couldn't let it go, not yet. "What about your pockets?"

Jan tilted her head very slightly, giving me a you-can't-be-serious sort of look. "I can't prove a negative. July is downstairs. She's not in one of my pockets."

As if to demonstrate her point, Jan reached out with her left hand and dragged her fingertips through the air. They vanished for a split

second, swallowed by the invisible curtain of exotic matter, and returned holding a pink ball, just smaller than Jan's fist. I almost flinched, because I assumed she was going to throw it at me. But then she squeezed the ball, compressing it in one hand as she blew out a long breath.

"A stress ball?" I asked.

Jan smiled, sweet and curdled. I got the impression she very much wanted to throw the ball at me.

Adrenaline and anxiety and abyssal instinct were making me paranoid. Jan was terrified of us, terrified of me. She wouldn't have tried something like this. I blew out a deep breath as well, finally letting go of Lozzie and forcing my tentacles in. I flexed both my hands, trying to fight down the adrenaline.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm sorry, Jan. I ... I don't know what just happened, that's all. It's upsetting me." I gestured back at the magic circle on the inside of the door. "What is that magic circle? Or, no, don't answer that, I'm sorry. I'm not a mage, I wouldn't understand. What does it do, in simple terms?"

Jan put her hands up. "It's a basic ward to keep out servitors and the like. Look, I had nothing to do with this."

"Jan can't stop me!" Lozzie chirped from her side, nodding so hard she bounced on the bed. Jan looked mildly jarred by this. "Or you!"

"Too right," Jan added. "And I wouldn't seek to, either. You lot can come and go as you please, that's your business. I certainly couldn't stand in your way." She gave a nervous little laugh. "I don't even really understand how Lozzie comes and goes."

I put one hand on my abdomen, through the fabric of my pink hoodie, feeling the fading heat of my bioreactor.

"Lozzie, when I arrived out there in the corridor, my reactor was going crazy. Like I was fighting off an infection, or an attack, or something. I don't know what, but something happened that wasn't done by us."

"Reactor?" Jan echoed, frowning like I'd said *loose tarantula*.

"Um, never mind. I have extra organs, it's a long story."

"Okaaaay then. Okay."

Lozzie was biting her lower lip again. She looked sort of sheepish, like she wanted to duck behind Jan. “I think I did a whoopsie,” she said in a small voice. “Heathy Heathy, it must have been all me! I went too fast and I was too happy to get here so I didn’t pay attention and it must have been me. I’m sorry. Okay? Okay.”

Jan shrugged, adjusting her tie-dye pastel dressing gown around her shoulders. “Makes sense to me. People sometimes trip when walking, don’t they?”

I shook my head. “Lozzie, let’s not Slip home. We don’t know what that was.” I fumbled with my mobile phone, trying to navigate to Raine’s number with clammy fingers. “I’ll call Raine, she can drive over in the car, pick us up instead. Jan, where are we, where is this?”

“Heather!” Lozzie puffed her cheeks out.

“Jan?” I repeated.

Jan glanced uncomfortably between me and Lozzie. She kneaded the stress ball in both hands. “Please don’t put me in the middle.”

“Heathy, it’s fine!” Lozzie chirped, rocking on the bed. “We’re fine! All I did was make a mistake! Look, watch, I’ll do it right now and it’ll all be fiiiine!”

Before I could gather my wits and my muscles to launch myself at her, Lozzie bounced to her feet on the bed, hopped back from Jan, and leaped into the air.

She vanished.

“Lozzie!” I almost screamed. Jan had to duck and cover to avoid my whirling tentacles, whipping through the air where Lozzie had vanished, as if I could pluck her from the membrane. “... Lozzie? Lozzie, for pity’s sake.”

But of course, Lozzie wasn’t there to answer. Just me and Jan, alone in a hotel room.

Jan cleared her throat and pulled an incredibly awkward smile. I squeezed my own ribcage with both arms, terrified that Lozzie wasn’t going to come back.

After a long, uncomfortable moment, Jan said, “She is irrepressible, isn’t she?”

I heard the affection in her tone, but couldn't process the meaning. I just stared at her, head going numb, then hiccuped loudly. "Sorry?"

"Lozzie, I mean. It's quite endearing, but living with her must be a handful."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "If she's gotten lost or kidnapped again ...

"Again?"

"That's another long story. She hasn't told you?"

Jan shook her head, trying to look casual, but I could tell she was burning up inside with curiosity. "She's told me some things about herself, her life. Her brother and all that, I assume? She never used the word kidnapping, though."

"It's not my place to say." I squeezed the words out through a closing throat. Lozzie had been gone for thirty seconds, longer than I expected, longer than I could stand. I looked down at my phone again, fumbling for Raine's number. "Lozzie, Lozzie you idiot, you irresponsible—"

"Boo!" went Lozzie.

She jumped out from behind the bathroom door, flapping her poncho out wide like a bird doing a mating display.

"Ah!" Jan lit up. She did a little round of applause. "Well done!"

Lozzie took a bow, then did a curtsy, then performed a sort of wiggly tumble over toward the bed. I was so overpowered by relief that I had to sit down. I barely recalled Lozzie flapping over and pulling out one of the plastic chairs for me, or the feeling of thumping down into it, or her brief but heartfelt hug. She danced back again, smiling with pride, a little bit smug.

"See?! Slippery-slips all lickey-split, not a problem within sight! All I did was make a mistake, Heathy! Please don't make a big deal about it! Even Lozzies mess up sometimes."

She trailed off and bit her lip. I nodded along and muttered an apology. Lozzie had Slipped, gone there and back, and everything was fine. If somebody — Edward — was trying to kidnap her, then they would have taken her while she was alone, ricocheting off the membrane like a pink-and-blue pinball. Nobody was trying to

snatch Lozzie during a Slip; nobody could except me, anyway. As far as I knew, there was nobody else like us. I took deep breaths and massaged my forehead, feeling the tension flow out of my muscles.

Edward wanted Lozzie, but he hadn't tried to snatch her just now. My mistake. My paranoia.

But one hand strayed to my abdomen. I gnawed on the memory of that burning sensation, of my bioreactor running hot. What had caused that? It was quiet again now, back to normal. But I'd felt that. The reality of my body could not be denied.

Lozzie perched on the edge of the bed and flopped backward, lying down next to Jan, amid the jumble of covers. Jan gave me an awkward smile. "Well, this certainly wasn't the afternoon I had planned. This makes the second time you've burst into my room and threatened me, you know that?"

"I'm sorry," I sighed. "I'm ... protective, of Lozzie. We all are."

"Mm. No hard feelings, not for that. Um ... yes." Jan cleared her throat, awkward in a very different way.

When I looked up, I found that Lozzie had draped one lazy arm and part of her poncho over Jan's hip and thigh. Her slender, pale hand rested on Jan's bare knee, directly on the doll-joint. Jan met my eyes, blushing faintly, trying not to acknowledge her position. I studied Jan for a moment, her petite form beneath her gauzy dressing gown, the faintly visible doll-joints on her arms and legs, her fluffy hair and delicate facial features. Quite a form to choose, if one had the opportunity to engineer and design one's own body. I watched the colour growing in her cheeks, and the shift of her eyes with their infinite blue depth, like watching a shining sea from orbit.

Jan wet her lips with a dart of pink tongue. "Oh dear," she said. "Am I about to get scolded?"

I took a moment to gather my thoughts, but found I had misplaced several of them. " ... uh, scolded?"

Jan pulled that self-consciously oily smile she'd used a few times before, the look of the con-woman who'd been rumbled, and knew that her mark was onto her. "You never got to tell me off for pressuring your house-mate to share her weed with us. Kimberly, wasn't it? I did pay, above market rate. And it was very good stuff."

“Oh, that.” I shook my head. “Well, it didn’t do any harm in the end, but you were sort of the responsible adult.”

“We had fun!” Lozzie chirped from the far side of Jan’s hip. She looked like she was about to bite Jan’s flank. “It was giggly!”

Jan’s smile got more awkward and a lot more toothy. “Sorry.”

I sighed and waved the idea away. “We were in the middle of an emergency, but it wasn’t your fault. Check with us next time though, please?”

Jan bobbed her head. “I really didn’t know. And um ... ”

She glanced down at Lozzie, just a flicker. I suppressed another sigh. She’d had a chance to get high and emotionally involved with somebody she was very interested in, and she’d taken the opening. I could hardly fault her for that part.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Besides, I don’t know if I can really scold somebody so much older than me. You seem so much more ... adult, compared to when we first met you.”

Jan’s smile relaxed. She spread her hands in a self-deprecating shrug. “Well, I’ve shed most of my camouflage. It’s why I’ve moved, too. Why stay in that awful dump when I’m on good terms with all the local players? You and Evelyn, the rest of the silly cultist people, the local whack-jobs out in the woods — there’s always a few of those in every place, you know?” Jan’s smile creaked. She was leaving somebody out, and we both knew it. She gestured at the room with a flick of her wrist, still holding the stress ball in one hand. “To answer your earlier question, we’re in the Sharrowford Metro. Metropolitan hotel, that is. Better than a travelodge, but not so much better that it breaks the bank. Also the staff are paid terribly, so they’re easy to bribe.”

Lozzie snorted a giggle. She scooted over further so she was curled around Jan’s hips and backside, like a living, pastel-coloured pillow for Jan’s lower back, head on one side of Jan, legs on the other. Jan stiffened, eyes widening slightly, trying to hide her reaction, like a cat who wasn’t certain about being petted. With a visible deep breath, she forced herself to relax.

“I need to ask you a question,” I said. Then I hiccuped and sighed.

“Ah,” said Jan.

“Ah?” went Lozzie, half sitting-up.

I didn’t want to do this, and I really didn’t want to do this in front of Lozzie, but there was no better opportunity.

“Jan,” I said, trying to play the words forward in my head before I spoke them. “I apologise in advance, but I have to ask this question. I realise the answer is probably no, and we ... well, Evelyn, mostly, has already decided to trust you. But I have to ask you, if only as a warning.”

“Yeeeeeee?” Jan looked very alarmed again. Lozzie had gone quiet.

“Edward Lilburne, the mage we’re in conflict with, he’s Lozzie’s uncle,” I said.

At the sound of his name, Lozzie buried her face in the covers.

Jan’s alarm faded, replaced with quiet caution. I half expected her to place a hand on Lozzie’s shoulder, but she didn’t touch her. She just said, “I am aware of that.”

“Has he approached you?”

“No.”

Instant. No hesitation. Was that a good sign?

“We suspect that he might make an approach, if he’s aware of you. He may offer you money, in exchange for helping him to kidnap Lozzie.”

Lozzie whined into the covers. I wrapped my arms around my own belly, feeling awful, but I had to say this. She had to hear this too. I had to make her aware of the possibility.

Jan watched my face, searching me with those eyes like blue fire trapped behind glass. I stared back into those eyes, right into her pneuma-somatic core, trying to read her thoughts from the surface of her soul. A failure, unfortunately. Mind-reading is not within the scope of hyperdimensional mathematics, not without reducing a human being to their mathematical description, and even then I’d never tried to read surface thoughts or deep intent, only history, components, what made up a person.

Jan stared at me. I stared at Jan. Like a pair of small, fluffy, domestic cats, trying to judge if it was time for the claws to come out.

I struck first.

"If Edward Lilburne approaches you," I said, "would you take the money? Yes or no?"

Lozzie reared up from the bed like a snake hidden behind a log, red in the face, wiping her wispy blonde hair away from her forehead, eyes blazing. She far outmatched us oversized house cats; Jan and I both flinched before Lozzie even opened her mouth.

"Heathy!" she yelled at me. "Why— why— why would you ask that it's not fair it's not fair to her or to me either why would you ask that she wouldn't she won't don't make it sour and—"

I shrank from her, trying to get a word in edgeways. "L-Lozzie, I'm sorry, I have to—"

Lozzie actually stood up on the bed as she went on, flapping her poncho up and down. I thought she was about to leap at me.

Jan cleared her throat. "It's a perfectly fair question," she said.

Lozzie stopped mid-word, looking down at Jan, who was simply staring at me again.

"It's not ... " Lozzie said.

Jan shrugged, watching me. "And the answer is most definitely no."

I nodded, slowly. "I'm sorry. I did have to ask."

Jan returned my nod. Lozzie glanced between the two of us, frowning like she was having trouble following the exchange. Jan reached up and patted her awkwardly on the hip, and then said to me, "Now, yes, I would say the exact same thing either way, wouldn't I? If I was planning to help a terrible old man carry out a kidnapping, I would hardly let you know my intention ahead of time."

"Um ... I was trying to avoid that implication."

Jan rolled her eyes. "Well, you've implied it regardless, well done. I am very mercenary, indeed I am. I make no secret of it, but even I have some limits. You think I'm just a con woman, that I have no values or beliefs, but I do. I've only been in Lozzie's life for a couple of weeks—"

"Week and a half," Lozzie corrected with a pout. "Almost."

“Has it really been less than two weeks?” Jan smiled up at Lozzie. “Feels like longer.”

“Mm-mmmmm.” Lozzie bobbed from side to side on the bed, which momentarily made Jan look like she was on a ship in a storm, and slightly queasy. Lozzie eventually steadied herself by putting two hands on Jan’s head, buried in that fluffy black hair. Jan blushed faintly and blinked rapidly.

“Be gentle, Lozzie,” I said.

“I am!”

“As I was saying,” Jan continued. “I’ve known Lozzie for less than two weeks, but there are certain kinds of people you can betray, and certain others you can’t betray without betraying yourself.”

“Well said,” I muttered, feeling suitably ashamed of myself.

“You could pay me a small fortune to betray a favourable client, certainly. Another mage? Absolutely, no question. No honour amongst thieves and all that. And I understand perfectly well that basic solidarity can count for very little between beings like us.” A hint of deep melancholy passed behind those storm-tossed blue eyes. She leaned forward on the bed. “I know what you see when you look at me. You don’t have to pretend otherwise.”

“Janny ... ” Lozzie murmured, slowly running her fingers through Jan’s hair.

I frowned, blinking, feeling like I’d wandered onto the court of an unfamiliar game. “What am I supposed to see when I look at you?”

Jan laughed, once, not really amused. “Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?” She gestured at her own body, one wave of her wrist from fluffy crown to her toes tucked away in her little black socks. “This is what I want you to see. But you already know better.”

“Jan, no no. Jan no,” Lozzie chirped. She tutted, then placed her hands on either side of Jan’s head, as if trying to squeeze the bad vibes out of her brain.

Jan had left me behind about three sentences ago. “I’m sorry,” I said, “but this is getting a bit esoteric for me. What do you think I see when I look at you?”

Jan frowned, delicate and sceptical, and said, “A mage.”

“Oh.”

“My exterior often says ‘teenage girl’, and that’s intentional. Just a teenager, passing through, don’t pay me any attention — except a respectful glance because I’m so cute.” Jan allowed herself a little smile, but it didn’t last, not even with Lozzie making sad little whining noises above her. “And in a way that’s not a lie; in a very real way I’m stuck in a forever puberty. I don’t think I would survive the leap to another body, and I’ve come to terms with that, I’ve accepted it. I *like* this body, it’s me. But you and I both know that I am not a harmless teenager. I am an old and powerful thing. And you have enough experience to know that things like me are dangerous. So I don’t blame you for your caution. I would do the same, in your position.”

“Not a thing!” Lozzie chirped. Jan reached up and patted Lozzie’s hand, but she stayed staring at me.

“Lozzie’s right, you shouldn’t call yourself a thing,” I agreed.

Jan smiled. “You know what I mean.”

“Words have power,” I said. “We are what we pretend to be.”

We are what we pretend to be. The advice given to me by The King in Yellow. I said the words before I realised who I was echoing.

And Jan did the last thing I expected — she started crying.

She resisted it well, holding my gaze for several long, awkward seconds as her crystal-blue eyes scrunched up and filled with tears, as her mouth curled and she had to bite her lips, as she turned red in the cheeks, but then finally failed. She was a very delicate crier, sniffing and wiping her eyes on the thin sleeve of her dressing gown, swallowing through a thick and heavy throat. It wasn’t a full-on weeping session, just the threat of vulnerability nibbling at her emotions.

“Janny,” Lozzie whispered. She went down on her knees and hugged Jan around the shoulders.

“Oh, damn you, Heather,” Jan said, though not unkindly. “It’s been a long time since somebody made me cry my own tears.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I said, feeling terribly awkward. “I hadn’t intended that to be so cutting. Do you, um, want a tissue?”

“Please,” Jan croaked softly. I pulled two tissues from a box on the desk, then thought better of it and simply handed Jan the whole box. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose, flapping tissues about, her dressing gown sleeves billowing. “Oh, damn you. Here I was trying to be all appropriately spooky and you just ... tch.”

Lozzie giggled. “Heathy’s good at that.”

“We are what we pretend to be,” Jan echoed me again. “So, what do you think I am pretending to be, Heather?”

“You’re a mage, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be Lozzie’s friend. Um. Or whatever you are to each other.”

She nodded, still dabbing at her eyes, and laughed softly. “What I was trying to get at in the first place is that you’re right to be suspicious of me. If you were any less protective of Lozzie then I’d be the one growing suspicious, with good reason. You know what I am, you have some idea of what I’m capable of.” She tugged at the pastel fabric of her dressing gown with one hand. “This could be so much protective colouration, for all you know, but it’s real. Solidarity is ... ”

Jan trailed off as she recognised the confusion on my face.

“I don’t think I follow,” I said. “Protective colouration?”

Jan frowned at me, then frowned at her own shoulder — at Lozzie, still wrapped around her in a hug. “Am I getting the wrong end of the stick here? Heather is aware, yes?”

“Excuse me?” I said. “Aware of what?”

Lozzie tilted her head side-to-side, suddenly rather puppy-like. She didn’t follow either. Jan cleared her throat and glanced back and forth between Lozzie and me, suddenly deeply uncomfortable again, no longer crying but caught in the middle of something which wasn’t her business. I could almost see the cogs turning in her head, as she tried to think of a way to back out from what she’d been in the middle of saying.

“Oh!” I caught on all of a sudden, second-hand embarrassed for Jan’s sake. My mind had been on mages and magic and monsters, not something so mundane. “You mean Lozzie’s trans flag poncho, and you’re wearing ... um ... ” I gestured at Jan’s matching tie-dye dressing gown, in swirls of blue, pink, and white. “Of course I know

about Lozzie. I thought that was just a given.”

Jan nodded, clearing her throat, silently thankful that I’d taken the leap in her place. “Well, what I meant to say is that as far as you’re concerned, this—” she straightened the dressing gown, “—could be just so much deception.”

“But it’s not. It actually quite suits you, though it does look a bit on the thin side.”

Jan brightened, almost preening as she sat up a bit straighter. “Then it’s perfect for the summer weather, isn’t it?”

Lozzie let out a giggle-snort. Jan blinked at her.

I sighed. “I can tell you’re not from the North. Don’t expect the heat to last. Or at least, that’s what I’ve been told. I’m not a local either.”

Jan nodded graciously. “I take great pride in never being a local.”

“Where are you from, anyway?”

Jan winked and tapped the side of her nose.

Lozzie giggled again. “I know! But I’m not telling!”

Jan looked momentarily discomfited, then cleared her throat and adopted an intentionally serious expression again. “We are what we pretend to be. I like that idea. As I said, there is precious little basic solidarity in our world. So I pretend, and I make it real.” She patted the corner of Lozzie’s poncho. “And furthermore, Heather, you’ve given this girl a family. A home. You, Tenny, Evelyn and Raine by the sounds of it too. Twil. Praem. All of you. You’ve given this girl a real family. I’ve heard about her biological relations—”

Lozzie made a soft, uncomfortable whine.

“—and they all ceased being real family to her, a long time ago. I’m not going to betray that. If I’d had something like that, maybe I would have had a better time of it. Besides,” she sighed, “you’re all absolutely terrifying, to be frank. Betraying something like you would be suicidal nonsense.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I think.”

“So, now,” Jan carried on, back in full flow, her half-mask of attitude firmly back in place. “If this mister Edward Lilburne approached me with a big sack of money—”

“I understand, I’m sorry, you don’t have to—”

“I would accept the money—”

A shock of sudden cold, deep in my belly. Only Lozzie’s giggle kept me in my chair. “What.”

Jan carried right on. “—and then inform you wonderful and trustworthy people exactly where he is, so you can throw him into the wild beyond, or have him shot in the back of the head, or whatever it is you have planned for him. Don’t tell me, by the way. Plausible deniability is so much more comfortable.”

I blew out a breath in unamused relief. Lozzie had disengaged her hug and briefly put her hands over her ears. I think Jan was a tiny bit relieved by that.

“I think I mentioned it earlier,” I said. “But Evelyn has chosen to trust you. Which means a lot, coming from her.”

“I’m sure it does,” Jan said. “We mages are a paranoid bunch. Usually.”

“I’ll choose to do the same.”

Jan bowed her head, formal and stiff, almost a little sarcastic, though I wasn’t sure that undertone was intentional. “I’ll do my best to be worthy of such regard.”

Lozzie giggled at that and hugged Jan from behind again, snaking her arms out of her pastel poncho. Jan cleared her throat and looked a bit embarrassed. I decided she wasn’t used to Lozzie’s normal level of platonic physical affection.

I needed to ask the obvious question, but my mind hit several speed-bumps of embarrassment too.

“So,” I said, glancing around the hotel room. “I take it you and July have decided to stay in Sharrowford for a bit? At least until the stuff with the cult is resolved?”

Jan shrugged eloquently. “It’s a delightful little city.”

I couldn’t help it, I frowned in disbelief. Lozzie wrinkled her nose.

“It’s ... functional,” I said.

“Okay, alright,” Jan admitted with a laugh. “It’s rotting from the

inside out, yes, and that's just for the normals. It's also absolutely lethal. The walls between reality and other places are very thin here, even I can feel that, and I'm not the most powerful mage going. No wonder so many different people are so eager to hang onto this place. I've got reasons to stay for now, though I usually make it a policy not to stop for long in places where mage-on-mage conflict is about to break out."

I felt a tug of curiosity, though it was distracting me further from my real intent. "Mage-on-mage conflict," I echoed. "Have you seen quite a bit of that?"

"From a distance. I'd rather not be involved when you deal with Edward. Or whatever happens afterward. Though I would happily give sanctuary to some." She bit her lower lip and glanced at Lozzie. "Wait, what am I saying? You can teleport wherever you want, can't you?"

"Mhmm!" Lozzie chirped. "Aaaaanywhere!"

"Well. Why am I staying in Sharrowford?" Jan laughed softly. "July and I could head to more familiar climes. You could come visit down Tru—" Jan caught herself, cleared her throat, and glanced at me. "Is there a reason I need to stay in the city, if Lozzie can bring people along?"

"Lozzie's Slips are very rough for passengers," I said.

Something in my tone must have communicated the awful, jarring truth behind such a bland statement. Jan swallowed and nodded. She understood the look in my eyes. "Well then. I'm here for a little longer, at least. I suppose."

"Reasons to stay," I echoed, glancing between Lozzie and Jan.

Lozzie seemed so very comfortable, hugging Jan from behind. She and Jan could not possibly have been any more different, one so neat and delicate and devious, one so free and floaty and uninhibited. Lozzie met my eyes and winked.

"Jan, there is something else I want to ask you," I said, and managed to sound casual enough not to cause a second panic.

"Mm?"

"Here we goooooo," went Lozzie. She giggled.

“Are you and Lozzie in a ... romantic ... situation?” I sighed, sudden and sharp. “Oh wow, I really made that sound precise, didn’t I?”

Jan blinked three times and blushed like a tomato. I hadn’t expected that.

Lozzie giggled like crazy. “Heathy!” she squeaked.

“I ... um ... we—” Jan struggled. “We haven’t ... kissed. Or anything like that! I don’t—”

“We’ve snuggled!” Lozzie told me. “Jan’s a good snuggler!”

Jan was mortified.

I put my hands up, blushing too. This situation was obviously far, far from what I had worried about. “I’m sorry,” I said. “You don’t have to tell me everything. Or even anything. I just needed to check. For Lozzie. I mean, not that it’s any of my business!”

“Oh for ... ” Jan huffed, fighting through her embarrassment. “Well maybe it’s a tiny bit romantic. Quasi-romantic? Is that a thing?”

“Mmhmm-mmhmm!” Lozzie nodded sagely. She was enjoying this far too much.

“But just because we’re both trans girls doesn’t mean we’re in a relationship,” Jan tutted at me.

Lozzie peered around her side and made eye contact. “Doesn’t it?”

Jan was rendered speechless. I had to turn away, deeply regretting that I’d ever asked. Whatever Jan and Lozzie were up to, I think I knew who was in charge. Apparently there wasn’t anything sexual about it either. And even if there was, it was none of my business. Lozzie was an adult. In some ways, Lozzie was a *mother*. She was her own person, and I didn’t need to wrap her in cotton wool.

And I decided to trust Jan.

I examined myself carefully, for jealous feelings. I found none. Lozzie was my friend, practically family, and if she was happy, then I was happy. That was a relief.

“Jan, um,” I said, trying to bring some normality back to the situation. I cleared my throat. “We do have a lot to talk about. Technical matters, magical matters, that sort of thing. Now seems

like as good a time as any.”

Lozzie took the hint. She let go of Jan and bounced to her feet, skipping across the room to fiddle with the video game console plugged into the television. It was like she’d had her setting switched from ‘cuddle’ to ‘distracted’. Sometimes I forgot how astute Lozzie could be, beneath her playful exterior.

Jan looked like a steam boiler on a cooling cycle. She nodded along, trying to compose herself. “Yes. Um. Indeed.”

“And I should probably call home,” I said, gesturing with my mobile phone. “We did say where we were going, but we left in kind of a rush. Raine and the others might be worrying about me.”

“Look,” Jan said with a sigh. “Before we move on, thank you for understanding. I will admit, I wasn’t expecting this. Whatever ... um ... develops between myself and Lozzie, I don’t intend it to be romantic.”

“Awww!” went Lozzie, but she was giggling behind a sleeve. Teasing Jan like crazy.

Jan cleared her throat again. I caught her eye. We both understood how Lozzie tended to be. “Though,” she added, “if things go that way ... well. Ahem. Yes.” Jan blew out a huff. “I did not expect tolerance as a mage. Though I suppose you can hardly talk, Heather. You’re far from normal yourself — and I mean that as a compliment, by the way.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Your tentacles are extremely impressive. I must ask you more about them, some time.” Jan laughed. “Besides, you’re romantically entangled with a mage too.”

I blinked. “What.”

“What?” Jan echoed me.

Lozzie giggle-snorted, flapping out her poncho. “Oopsie! Heathy doesn’t like to acknowledge that she and Eevee-weeveey love each other very much.”

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.5

“Does literally everybody know?! First Twil, then you! Sevens is probably aware of it too, even if she really has stopped reading our minds, or whatever it is she does. Not to mention Raine trying to lend me out that one time, like I’m a plush toy or something. Who else knows? Praem? Zheng? Has Tenny noticed? Oh, that would be a disaster, she’s too young to understand the complications involved, she’d say it out loud. At least tell me you don’t all sit around discussing it behind our backs? Tell me Evelyn and I aren’t the only ones who haven’t discussed our own bloody relationship.”

Lozzie couldn’t stop giggling.

The more I ranted, the worse she got. She’d started with a delicate little giggle-snort, but my impotent outrage drove her into a flapping frenzy of pastel poncho and laughing fit. One hand clamped over her mouth in a futile gesture at tact, heaving for breath through her nose, eyes watering with laughter. She capered from foot to foot in a little circle next to Jan’s hotel bed, overflowing with vicarious energy.

I could hardly blame her. I was being absurd. Ranting and raving meant I didn’t have to stop and think.

But I couldn’t go forever. Lozzie laughed and giggled and guffawed, so eventually I shut my mouth.

“Heathyyyyyy,” Lozzie squeaked like a steam train. She hadn’t expected such a bounty.

For a split second I almost went Outside. It’s what Lozzie would have done, cornered inside her own emotional thicket of thorns and barbs. She would have escaped via Outside. Why not? I didn’t have to sit here and have this conversation. I didn’t have to face these things. I could not be forced.

Lozzie would follow me though. There was no escape, not even Outside.

I shut up and sat there in that increasingly uncomfortable hotel room chair, arms crossed, tentacles folded, fuming silently, blushing like a beetroot, and scowling at the sea-green carpet. Maybe the floor would open up and swallow me if I gave it a rude enough look.

Jan cleared her throat with a delicate little *ahem-ahem*, still sitting on the foot of her incredibly messy bed. She was trying to sound diplomatic and detached, but she couldn't keep the amusement out of her voice. Lozzie's giggle fit was infectious.

"I am so very sorry," Jan said, trying for formal but sounding like a schoolgirl gossip caught in the act. "Once again, I appear to have misinterpreted the relationship between mage and octopus-girl. I have embarrassed you. My apologies for misspeaking."

I scowled at her too. "You said that on purpose. I do possess a working memory, thank you."

"Ah?" Jan's eyebrows rose. Innocent, or mock-innocent, it was hard to tell. She was too good at this. Lozzie bobbed from side to side, fanning her face with both hands, trying to hold her laughter.

"In Camelot," I snapped. "When we were waiting for Zheng and July to start their duel. You asked Eevee and I if we were dating. You already knew we're not."

"Oh, that." Jan's expression scrunched up with mingled distaste and embarrassment. "You can't seriously expect me to remember that? You took me into the wild beyond outside the spheres, and you expect me to remember every last little bit of conversation? Excuse me, squid-britches, I was struggling just to keep from having a dozen different kinds of panic attack. I barely remember half that afternoon. I touched a nerve, and I'm sorry, but this wasn't intentional. Tch." She tutted. "It's not as if I've caused some great problem, or outed you, or messed up your plans. Have I? You and Miss Saye, you're not star-crossed lovers of some kind, are you? Fated to certain doom if you brush hands over the last muffin in the box? Is she allergic to seafood?"

Jan struggled not to smirk at her own terrible joke, biting her lips together to stop from bursting out laughing. Lozzie howled with the giggles again and threw herself at the messy bed covers to contain the laughter, rolling around in the sheets. Pastel poncho flapped and flopped behind Jan.

I stared at Jan, unamused. “No.”

“Well.” Jan shrugged. She squeezed her pink stress ball. “Oops.”

I scowled at Jan, at her pastel-butterfly dressing gown and her exposed doll-joints. I scowled at Lozzie, still rolling on the bed. I scowled at the video game console over on the floor. I scowled at the curtains, the bags, the magic circle on the inside of the door — oh, to escape down the lift shaft, if only — and I scowled at Jan again.

She had known that Evelyn and I were not together, romantically speaking. That I was certain.

Had Lozzie put her up to this? Lozzie knew that Eevee and I were stuck at an unspoken impasse. Despite my indignant ranting, I knew it was obvious. Lozzie wasn't one for casual subterfuge, but she was also unusually close with Jan. If they'd planned this in advance, Jan could simply have been waiting for the right moment to ambush me with that line, or some variation of it.

Jan sighed. “You can hardly blame me for assuming you and the mage are romantically entangled. It seemed obvious enough.”

I sighed too. I was still shaken by the Slip spitting me out alone in the corridor, without Lozzie. I was still worried over Lozzie's safety and Jan's reliability. Paranoia can be a useful tool; I'd learnt that much from Evelyn. But paranoia shaped the mind that dared to wield it. Paranoia became a habit, then a way of life. My paranoia had shifted from serious matters to nonsense.

What did it matter if Lozzie had put Jan up to this? What difference did it make to me and Evelyn?

“Eevee and I, we're not romantically entangled,” I said, stiff and careful — and I wondered if that was true. “We are very close, yes. A pair of lesbians can be close friends without being romantic with each other. Obviously.”

Lozzie sat up behind Jan, trailing bits of sheet like a pastel-rainbow orca bursting from the ocean surface. “Yeah!” she chirped. “But you and Eevee aren't! She loves you!”

“I ... I ... I know.”

“And you love her!”

“ ... yes, but as a ... a fr—”

“Pffffffffffffffffffffffffff,” went Lozzie. “You keep avoiding it!”

And you didn't even hear what Evee shouted to me, I thought, down in Hringewindla's shell, when she thought I was walking into ego-death.

“We're complicated, all right?” I huffed and hunched in my chair, tentacles drawn in tight like I was battling a tummy ache. I even laid one across my own front so I could hug it for comfort. I wanted to run away. “Lozzie, Jan and I have really serious, important matters to discuss. Matters that don't involve my romantic problems. Okay?”

“Hmm-hmmm-hmmmmmm-hmmmmmm?” Lozzie tapped her chin with a finger, all mock-innocent.

Jan shrugged with her hands, looking oh so very reasonable. “We could have a proper girls' talk first, if you like. After all, I'm not part of your bizarre extended polycule, all crammed into that one house together. I'm outside your system, and sometimes what you need is an outside perspective.”

I glared at her, aware that my face was burning up. She rotated her hands so she was surrendering instead of shrugging, then squeezed the stress ball.

“No, thank you,” I said.

“Won't even charge. Agony aunt Jan. A free session.”

“Heathyyyyy,” Lozzie cooed. “Why not just talk to Evee-weeveey?”

I hiccuped, loud enough to make Jan jump, hard enough to hurt my throat and chest. I was shaking, gripping myself with all my tentacles, as if to armour my flesh against the teeth and claws of some unseen predator. I was right on the verge of fight-or-flight, stuck to the inside of my own clothes with sweat, overheated and constricted.

I had to stand up. I got to my feet and sucked down a deep breath, then flapped the hem of my hoodie to get some fresh air against my skin. The air-conditioning made the room taste dry and sterile.

Lozzie leaned close to Jan, to whisper something in her ear. I felt anxiety transmute to irritation, and decided I needed a distraction.

Perhaps it was the way I'd been conversationally ambushed, or

perhaps it was the result of coming down from the adrenaline high and paranoid-defensive mental posture, but I was liking this hotel room less and less by the minute. It was clean and airy, simple and modern, without decoration or ostentation, but the longer I spent here the more it reminded me of the kind of anonymous box I'd left behind when I'd moved in with Raine and Evelyn. Human beings were not meant to live alone inside air-conditioned cages, no matter how convenient.

I was well aware that was horribly unfair. Jan wasn't living alone, she had July. For all I knew she spent most of her time on that laptop, talking with hundreds of online friends. Or maybe she went out clubbing every night. I really knew very little about Jan. One woman's alienation is another's paradise.

Trying to clear my thoughts, I walked over to the heavy curtains which covered the hotel room's large window.

Thin strips of sunlight like white fire showed around the edges, the burning day held at bay behind thick fabric. With my tentacles, I peeled back the edge to look outdoors. What I got was a full face of direct sunlight, enough to make me blink and squint.

Sharrowford, sun-cracked by the strange June. For a moment I wasn't sure where we were located, other than several stories up. Heat-haze rose from a tangle of black tarmac roads, the kind of meaningless intersection that you might find in any city, hemmed in by glass and brick and metal all around, punctuated by traffic islands as isolated as undiscovered Pacific atolls. Plants wilted and turned brown. A few hardy trees along the pavements sucked sustenance from unseen sewer lines or buried stream-beds — or from piles of corpses, for all I knew. Few pedestrians braved the heat. Even the pneuma-somatic life seemed sluggish, sticking to the shadows of tall buildings or congregating beneath trees — though I did notice more plant-like ones up on the tall rooftops, petals of ice or metal or flesh wide open to drink in the heat. Plenty of cars navigated the tangle of back roads. As I watched, a couple of city buses passed by. A pneuma-somatic dog-thing the size of a horse was riding on the roof of one bus. It looked at me as it went past, then threw its head back in a silent howl.

I raised my eyes and recognised the spires of Sharrowford Cathedral on a distant hill. An ape-like thing was wrapped around one of the spires, fast asleep. It must have been huge.

I spoke without looking back at Jan and Lozzie. “We’re near the station, aren’t we?”

“Mm, a five minute walk,” Jan replied. I heard Lozzie whispering again. Plotting how to get me and Evee to kiss, I guessed. Was this how it felt? I still ached with guilt for banging Evee and Twil together like they were toy dolls, pairing them up for my amusement. I sighed inside and told myself I would need to explain to Lozzie why this was a bad idea.

“Kimberly must be close, then,” I said, just for distraction. “She works at a florist near the station. Not sure exactly where, though.”

“A florist?” Jan laughed softly as Lozzie’s whispering broke off. “The girl I bought weed from, she works at a florist?”

“I gather that’s some kind of stereotype?” I asked, still squinting out of the window, into the sunlight.

My phone buzzed in my hoodie’s front pocket before Jan could answer. I tutted at myself, highly conscious that I still hadn’t called home. I fished out the phone and found a text message from Raine.

Having fun with Lozzie?

I hurried to compose a reply, just to reassure her that I was safe — talking to Jan, Lozzie’s fine, going to discuss some sensitive subjects, please don’t worry about us, and so on.

Don’t worry about us? What about Slipping home? But Lozzie had tested it. We were safe.

“Heathyyyy,” Lozzie said, bouncing on her knees on the bed. “You didn’t answer the question!”

“Hmm?” I blinked up at her as I sent the text message to Raine. Lozzie looked like a melted jellyfish in blue and pink.

“Why don’t you just talk to Evee?” she chirped.

Jan cleared her throat and nodded very intently, catching my eye with a silent, pre-emptive apology. I wasn’t sure about earlier, but this time? Yes, Lozzie had absolutely put her up to whatever was about to happen next, that’s what all the whispering had been about, and she was very sorry to do this to me.

“Yes, quite,” Jan said. “Now, I don’t have the widest range of romantic experience, to put it lightly, but I have discovered that

generally these things go better if you communicate. Why not speak with her?”

Under duress or not, that question grated on me. I gave her a bit of a look. “Yes, I’m well aware.”

Lozzie giggled. “Heathy! You even sound like her sometimes! Like Evee!”

I sighed and rubbed my face with one hand. “She’s rubbed off on me. Her way of speaking is very ... courageous.”

Jan pulled a grimace and muttered, “I was thinking ‘bitchy’.” Lozzie poked her gently in the shoulder, a very obvious signal. Jan raised her voice. “But the question stands, Heather. Why not speak with her? Are you afraid of rejection? That’s very normal, very rational, everybody faces it, everybody has to deal with those feelings, but there’s no sense in letting those fears dictate your actions.”

I answered without hesitation. “No, I’m afraid of the opposite.”

Jan snorted a very inelegant laugh, then flapped her hands and pulled a grimace. She finally lost her grip on the stress ball, which fell and vanished among the bed covers. “Sorry. I was a bit overcome with your sheer confidence.”

I tucked the curtain back into place, shutting out the sun once more. I turned and leaned against the wall, head against the plaster, tentacles stretching out wide. I closed my eyes in emotional exhaustion.

“My love life is already complicated beyond reason,” I said. “You think going Outside is bad? Try juggling my three — yes, count them — three girlfriends.”

I heard nothing for a moment, saw nothing but the inside of my own eyelids, the play of coloured darkness across the underside of my own flesh.

Then Lozzie said, “Mmhmm! It’s true.”

“Heather, please,” Jan sighed, a bit tighter than before. She was running out of patience, but I wasn’t sure who with. “Enumerate for me? You’ve already proven that your polycule is beyond my comprehension.”

“Raine is my girlfriend. We’re a couple. We fuck.”

“Ooooooh,” went Lozzie. “Heathy!”

I opened my eyes and pulled an apologetic smile. Lozzie had both hands on her cheeks in a mock-scandalised look.

Jan seemed puzzled. “Ah?”

“Heathy never swears,” said Lozzie.

“I can swear if I wish to,” I said. “It’s not like I’ll burst into flames. I just don’t, not very much. Sorry, Lozzie, it’s just this is a difficult topic.”

“And I’m not part of your polycule,” said Jan. “Go on, if you’re comfortable.”

More than a hint of teenage girl crept into Jan’s tone when she said that. The mask of the con-woman, non-threatening and safe to speak with, just a young girl without a care. Was that intentional, or was it her way of trying to reassure? She wasn’t that dissimilar to Sevens, in some ways. The mask was a mask, but also real.

“Zheng,” I went on. “She’s ... well, I think we have an asexual partnership. She worships me, in a quasi-religious sense, partly because I freed her from slavery, partly because I remind her of somebody from her past. I think I love her too.” I shook my head. “I thought it was going to turn sexual between her and I, but ... it just didn’t. And I don’t mind that.” I sighed heavily. “And you saw how things have turned out between her and Raine.”

Jan nodded. “Most interesting, yes.”

“And then there’s Sevens.”

Jan winced. “The ... I really hesitate to say the word, but ... the vampire?”

I laughed. “You wish she was just a vampire.”

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind. She’s not a vampire. Apparently there’s no such thing, not really. She’s ... from elsewhere, let’s put it like that. Sevens proposed marriage to me.”

Jan whistled low. “And you said ... ?”

The laugh went away. “It’s complicated.”

Jan winced. “Poor girl.”

“She’s got a lot to make up for. And she’s changing, a lot. I don’t know if we’re meant to be together, but I’m happy to have her by my side, whatever she wants to be.”

Lozzie poked Jan in the shoulder again, in some kind of pre-arranged code. Jan gave her a doubtful look, so Lozzie leaned down and whispered in her ear for a moment, before bouncing back up and grinning at me. Jan shot me another apologetic look.

What was the point of this? I knew these were Lozzie’s words, via Jan. Was this supposed to convince me of something?

“Well,” Jan said, without much conviction. “Why not add Evee to all this?”

I stared at her and Lozzie for a moment. Lozzie shot me a broad, obvious wink — which Jan couldn’t see.

“Evelyn Saye’s sexuality is none of your business,” I told Jan.

“Of course, of course—”

“The short version is I’m not sure she’d be comfortable. The slightly longer version is I’m not even sure she knows what kind of relationship she would want. I think we’re fine where we are now. She and I are very, very close. And maybe that’s how we’re meant to be. And that’s okay. We hug, we touch, we care for each other, we talk a lot, we’re always around each other, every day. We don’t make out or have sex, but I don’t really think we need to.”

I spoke the words, but I only half-believed them myself.

For a moment, in the silence and peace of my mind’s eye, I tried to picture Evee snuggled up to me under her bed covers. That wasn’t too hard, it came naturally; we’d done that before, or at least something close enough. Then I tried to imagine her without any clothes on. If I did the same thing with Raine, I felt that familiar hitch of lust in my chest, the feeling like I was going to buckle at the knees.

But with Evee, that was absent. Naked Evelyn was just naked Evelyn. Not that I’d ever seen.

Lozzie was right though, I did love her. But how?

Why was I finally comfortable facing up to this? Perhaps because I

was away from home, in the naturally liminal space of a hotel, held in a brief artificial bubble. Or perhaps because I was away from Evelyn, beyond her contact, for a moment.

Lozzie dipped her head to whisper in Jan's ear again, but I spoke up first.

"Don't raise this with her," I said, a little harder than I intended. Protective instinct growled in my chest. My tentacles twitched, they wanted to wrap Evee up tight, look after her. Lozzie looked up in surprise. "That goes for you too, Lozzie. I'm serious. Evelyn is safe, and ... and somewhat happy. Happier than I've seen her before. She and I might not be perfect, our situation might not be perfect, but she's safe and happy. She has purpose. Don't bring this up with her, please. It could hurt her."

Because hurting Evelyn is my job, part of my mind whispered. Hurting her by refusing to acknowledge what she feels.

"Oh my goodness," Jan sighed. "We're past useless lesbian and into oppositional defiant disorder lesbian."

"I'm serious," I snapped.

Lozzie bit her bottom lip and nodded. "Okaaaaaay," she whined, pouting like a fussy child.

"Look, Lozzie, I do love Evee, but it's not like that. Not every relationship has to be—"

My phone buzzed in my hand.

Raine had sent me one of those creative text messages she sometimes composed, a picture made out of text symbols. She'd crafted an image of two figures sitting on a magic carpet, flying through the air, complete with little wisps of cloud and passing birds. The girl in front had long hair and a striped poncho, though the text couldn't manage colours. The girl in the rear had a hoodie and tentacles. My heart felt like it was growing too large for the inside of my chest.

"I ... I'm sorry, Lozzie," I said to the phone screen, unable to make eye contact. "I know you just want us to be happy." I sniffed, felt tears. "But I can't ... Evee doesn't ... she doesn't even know what she wants either. And it would be asking her to share, I can't. I can't."

“Do you two want some food?” Jan asked. Her changing of the subject was so obvious that even Twil would have picked up the hint. “I’m starving, I could go for a mid-afternoon snack. Goodness, actually, it’s almost dinner time. This place doesn’t really have room service, but they have a bar.”

“Ooooooh!” went Lizzie.

“I hardly think it’s the time for alcohol,” I said, scrubbing my face, sniffing back tears that had not quite started.

“Maybe not for you,” Jan said with a little wink. “But if we’re going to sit down and talk shop, I want some fortification. If we want something more substantial, I could call July, send her out to get us a proper meal from one of the places around here. What do you say, Heather?”

“Um ... ”

She scooted off the bed and hopped to her feet, little black socks sinking into the carpet, then crossed to the desk. Her pentacolour dressing gown billowed out behind her like an exotic species of jellyfish. She found her phone in her pink tote bag, neat and pink like so many other things she owned, but it was old — a flip-phone. She flipped it open.

“We’re going to talk magic and bodies, aren’t we? I think we both need some calories in us for that. I’m going to call July.” She cracked a subtle, cheeky smile. “It’s so good having a personal delivery service. What else are demons good for, hm?”

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We got Chinese food in the end, after very little debate. Real Chinese food, from a place which was apparently called *The Chonky Little Dragon*, a name so atrocious that I never would have imagined it was anything except a terrible gimmick. But Jan’s experience proved her right. I never saw the place, because she sent July to fetch the food with a phone call, straight from her dip in the pool, without us. Jan paid.

I called Raine while we waited for July to return, just to reassure her that everything was fine and there was no emergency unfolding.

“Hey, Heather, relax,” Raine laughed down the phone. I couldn’t tell if she was genuinely comfortable with this, or if she’d grown

more skilled at hiding her worries. “You’ve gone out with Lozzie for the afternoon, that’s all. It’s cool, I get it. Hell, there’s no better safety line than Lozzie, right? Can’t promise Zheng won’t come to join you though, I can’t do anything about that.”

“Oh, please do try to stop her,” I said. “I don’t think I could deal with that right now.”

Raine laughed again. “No promises. Say hi to Jan for me. And Heather.” Her voice dropped, suddenly serious. “Good luck. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Raine probably had a pretty good idea what we were going to discuss.

But not before food.

July took long enough that I had ample time to recover from thinking about kissing Evee, but not so long that things grew awkward in the hotel room. She let herself in, unlocking the door and looming inside like a knife-thrust from a blind angle.

She was carrying a pair of thin plastic bags full of food, and made a stalking bee-line to dump them on the little table as Jan hurried to scoop the fancy laptop out of the way. The bags clinked.

I had to struggle to suppress a flinch, away from July. The demon host was much as I remembered her, tall and built like a runner, with the wide-eyed look of a predatory bird. Her every motion was a knife-slash, so sharp I swear she didn’t displace the air as she moved. July was dressed for the heat outdoors, in a grey tank top which showed off the toned muscles of her arms and shoulders, and a pair of loose dark shorts below, with converse shoes and no socks. Her long black hair was loose, stretching almost to her backside, thick and dark and still damp from the pool. She carried a faint chemical smell of chlorine.

“Juls-Juls-Juls!” Lozzie greeted her, darting forward to look at the food around her side, like July was a piece of wall blocking her way.

Jan rummaged through the bags and started distributing polystyrene boxes, then reached into one of her invisible magic pockets and produced a pair of chopsticks.

July didn't greet Lozzie or Jan, but she stared at me for several long seconds, until Jan bumped her in the ribs with a box of food. "Yours. Take it. You want a fork, or chopsticks? You too, Heather, you want a fork?"

The demon host must have decided I wasn't there to pull Jan to pieces like a squid with a shellfish. She nodded at me with muted respect, then accepted her food.

"Fork."

"Uh, please," I said. "Fork for me too."

It was a strange time of day to be eating a heavy meal, far past lunchtime but not yet late enough for a proper dinner. I'd opted for rice and vegetables in some kind of plum sauce, and ended up pleasantly surprised. Lozzie had a big plate of sweet and sour chicken, while Jan had a gingery version of something similar. The two of them swapped choice bits the whole time, though Jan seemed a little embarrassed by the process. July had a box full of what looked like charred twists of leftover meat, but she seemed to enjoy it well enough.

Lozzie, July, and I all had tap water, but Jan had two bottles of beer.

"Both for me, don't worry," she said, with a wink.

We sat around eating. Lozzie occupied the desk chair, while Jan and I took the two chairs around the little table. July sat straight as a rod at the head of her perfectly made bed, watching everything with wide eyes. Lozzie got up and went over to her several times, offering her random bits of meat, which she accepted mechanically, like a very large and patient bird of prey. I tried not to watch her eat.

As we ate, Jan wanted to 'nerd out' over my tentacles, as Raine might put it.

"May I touch?" she asked, hand paused politely in the air over the table.

She'd had me lay one of the gently strobing pale limbs across the plywood between us, so she could peer at the colours. The others I kept tightly tucked in toward my body, feeling a little self-conscious in a room with three other people who needed no magical aids to

see what I really was. I didn't mind Jan's professional attention, but it did feel a little strange, like I was being examined by a very polite mad scientist.

When I didn't answer for a moment, Jan cleared her throat and pulled a delicate grimace. She placed her chopsticks down for a moment. "Pardon me, they're not erogenous or anything, are they? I'm not asking to touch a sex organ here, am I?"

Lozzie giggled, but Jan shot her a tiny frown. She was being genuinely respectful, or trying to.

"No," I said with a sigh, poking at my own food, all self-conscious now. "Well, I mean, I could probably modify them to be, but no, I've never tried that. You can touch if you like. It should be safe at the moment."

Jan paused again. "Safe?"

"I can put contact toxins in the skin," I explained across our pair of half-empty fast-food boxes. "Paralytics, neurotoxins, the kinds of things you might find in a puffer-fish or a poison dart frog." Jan's eyes widened. I blushed and felt horribly awkward. "It's something I can do when I'm in trouble, the toxins aren't always there, they're re-metabolised into other compounds. I think. It's perfectly safe at the moment."

"And how did you learn to do that?" she asked.

I'd misread Jan's expression. She wasn't afraid. She was fascinated.

She was watching me with naked fascination, though it was nothing like the hunger for knowledge that used to creep onto Evelyn's face, back in the early days of my brain-math experiments. It wasn't religious awe either, which was such a relief that I could have hugged her. It was admiration.

"Instinct, mostly," I said. "I did some reading up on biology, only a little, just textbooks from the university library. That may have helped, but it's mostly just innate gut feeling."

Jan couldn't help but laugh softly, amazed. She fortified herself with a swig of beer, then finally touched my tentacle. She blinked in surprise as she ran her hand down the length that lay across the table. Her doll-like joints showed faintly at her knuckles and wrist, as almost invisible artificial lines in her own crafted flesh. Neither

of us was fully human. Part of me liked that. Part of me liked sharing this with her, specifically.

“It’s smooth,” she said with a soft little laugh. “I didn’t expect that either. Like you’d be akin to a shark, or something, all rough and rasping.”

“I can make it non-smooth. Barbs, spikes, even those little rotating hooks that colossal squids have. Though I don’t know if I got those right, I was mostly working off knowledge from youtube videos and wikipedia.”

Jan stared at my face again. She blinked once, hard, then drained more of her beer.

“Heather, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’ve never seen anything quite like you before. You’re clearly human, there’s just ... more of you.”

The unspoken question was a thorn in my throat.

But Jan didn’t inhabit her original body, either. Maybe she would understand.

“It’s very hard to explain exactly what happened to me,” I said. “I went somewhere else. Not Outside, but the ... oh, I can’t explain it, even now. Human language can’t do it. I went to the place that all the bubbles of reality are floating in. Somewhere more real than reality. My physical body stayed here. And out there I was different. I was a different kind of being altogether. I was more perfect, faster, elegant. Unburdened. I was more ... just more.”

I closed my eyes. Had to swallow hard.

The abyss always lurked at the edge of my consciousness, a constant flavour to my thoughts and memories, a lost perfection and beauty that haunted me every waking hour, every day, forever. Sometimes I would wake in the night from a dream of slipping through ice-cold waters in the endless dark, sharp and quick and clever. Baths were risky, always a temptation to float beneath the surface, submerged in water and memory alike. Sometimes I would cry, afterward.

I was anchored now, by Raine and Zheng and all my other worldly attachments. In an emergency I did not doubt that I could swim to the edge of the abyss, the lip of that metaphorical marine trench where I could perform hyperdimensional mathematics on the

substrate of reality itself, rather than my own brain. Such a feat would be doable now, without the risk of sinking.

But the abyss in my blood and marrow called to the space between the spheres. Always, I would want to return.

On the canvas of my own eyelids, I tried to feel that perfection, but I couldn't.

The others seemed to sense I was having a moment. Jan awkwardly patted my tentacle. A foot snuck up out of nowhere — Lozzie's — and rubbed against my own.

I opened my eyes, blinking as if thrust into the light, back into the world of solid objects and warm flesh and strong smells. For just a second I felt horrible, rotten inside, a sloshing bag of meat and fluid. I shivered, but I forced myself to take a big mouthful of rice and vegetables, chewing and swallowing. Taste anchored me back in my body, firmly here again.

Jan cleared her throat. "If you need to stop ... "

I shook my head. "When I came back, my own body seemed completely wrong. Disgusting. Like I was never meant to be a bipedal ape at all, and certainly not ... here." I blew out a shuddering breath. "So I started to modify myself. That helped a lot, over time. I still feel it, this lingering wrongness in the back of my head, in the shape of my own body, but only sometimes, and nowhere near as bad as it used to be. The tentacles, they're not an alien affectation or a solution to a physical problem or a cool experiment, or anything like that. They're part of my body, they feel right to have. And I risked a lot to make them, too. I bruised myself very badly when I first started making them. I did internal damage to myself, tore muscles, risked internal bleeding. And all of it was worth doing. I would risk it again."

My voice had grown thick with emotion. Jan nodded, genuinely fascinated.

"Thank you," she said. "For sharing."

Lozzie leaned over so she could pat my head. Jan took a thoughtful drag from her beer. I sniffed hard, then laughed without much humour.

"If you think the tentacles are impressive," I said, "then you should

see me when I'm ready for a fight, though I have no idea what to do. I can modify practically my whole body, though it's very risky to do so in normal reality, I think."

Jan blinked at me several times. Lozzie nodded enthusiastically and said, "Mmmhmm! It's true! I've seen it! Spiky spooky armoured Heather!"

"Well," Jan said. "Well well well." She gently squeezed my tentacle, just enough to gauge the weight of muscle. "How did you solve the energy problem?"

"The energy problem? I'm sorry?"

"Mm. Not to mention the processing power to control it all." Jan smiled, took a bite of her food, and chewed thoughtfully. I could tell she was trying to find solid ground, to make a personal connection to what I'd just told her. Perhaps it was genuine, or perhaps it was the instincts of the con artist in her. She lifted her right hand and showed me the back of her palm. "Back when I first designed this body, I tried to do something analogous. Well, a little bit. I didn't try for tentacles, but I wanted to do something with more arms. Two hearts. Thicker skin. A beak. I had a plan for larger joints, to give my own muscles more leverage. But as you can see." She gestured wider with both hands, spreading out her fancy dressing gown too, showing off her petite form beneath lilac t-shirt and pink shorts. "I went for something more compact. Comfy and easy to wear. Something more me, which is really the most important consideration in the end."

"And cute!" Lozzie chirped.

"And that." Jan laughed, a little awkward, and blushed faintly before she caught herself again. "The notion that I would have been remotely comfortable in some improved-model human body was just absurd. Youthful idiocy. Too much science fiction as a kid. But, even discounting issues of physical dysphoria, it's surprisingly difficult to add extra limbs or such, as a human being. You need the neurological set-up." She gestured at July, who was sitting on the bed, watching us intently as she chewed her toasted meat. "Demons solve it via other methods. Their soul is closer to the surface, if that makes sense?"

"It doesn't," I admitted. "But never mind."

Jan waved in apology. “Whereas you, you must have returned with the right set-up, from ... wherever you went.”

“The abyss,” I said. “That’s what I call it.”

Jan winced in slow motion. “Lovely.”

I mirrored her wince. “Truth be told, there’s a strong possibility that the abyss was just a catalyst. I may have been this way from much earlier, though it’s very hard to explain why. My time in the abyss may have simply woken me up to my own nature, so to speak.”

I pulled an awkward smile. I didn’t feel like going into detail about my theory right then — my theory that the Eye had changed me, a decade before I’d plunged into the abyss. Jan didn’t need to know that part, it would scare her even worse, and it only raised further questions.

“Oh, absolutely,” she said. “I understand that, totally. Still, my question stands. You must be ravenous all the time, unless you’ve got a ... power plant ... ” She trailed off, staring at me. “Ah. Reactor, yes. You said it earlier.”

I forced an awkward little laugh and patted my lower abdomen. “Bioreactor. I don’t really understand how I made it. It runs on abyssal logic, abyssal physics and biology, but translated into human flesh. You’re right though, I had appetite problems before I made the reactor, to put it lightly.”

Jan blew out a long breath, then tried another smile, then took another hearty bite of rice and meat from her takeaway meal. I could practically see the slow transition from fascination and terror to ‘oh-well-none-of-my-business’. Where Evelyn would have stared and probed with professional awe, compiling a catalogue of supernatural facts, Jan wadded up the information about my miracle body and crammed it into the mental equivalent of an overflowing backpack.

“I think Heathy’s really really really really pretty,” Lozzie said. She tilted her head up and let her sleepy-lidded eyes fall even heavier than usual. “And she glows in the dark!”

Jan swallowed her food and blinked in polite interest. “I’m sure she does. And yes, Heather, your body is magnificently impressive. I hope you don’t take my questions as anything except admiration.”

“Um, thank you, yes, I ... I suppose it probably is. Though it doesn't feel that way.”

“It's also bloody scary,” Jan's smile turned stiff and forced, on purpose. “I hope you understand why I'm being so forward about this. About needing to understand your body?”

“Because of my twin sister,” I said.

Jan nodded, slow and serious. “Because of your twin sister.”

I took a deep breath and steadied myself. Jan watched me across the table and the two half-eaten boxes of food. In that moment she seemed both old and young at the same time, delicate in two different directions. She was serious in the way only a serious young girl can be, but overflowing with the experience of age. She watched, and waited, for me to make the first move. Was she being polite, or shrewd? Lizzie and July both declined the opportunity to interrupt. I could feel July's gaze on me from over on the bed.

This was what I wanted, wasn't it? I swallowed a hiccup.

“Will you do it?” I asked. “Will you make a body for her?”

Jan's composure broke down instantly, without even a token attempt to hold out. Her entire self-image just slumped and sloughed off. She puffed out a huge sigh and almost rolled her eyes, sagging a little in her chair. “Payment has been agreed on, so I suppose I'm duty-bound to attempt it, at least. But I really, really do not like the idea.”

“Why?” I asked. “Not that I'm trying to make things better — I mean, I will, if I can. But mostly I need to understand. I need to understand the challenge here. Please. I need to know.”

Jan held my gaze for a moment with a sort of tilted non-smile on her face, then sighed and nodded. She took another big bite of greasy chicken and leaned back, adjusting the folds of her pink-and-blue dressing gown and crossing one delicate leg over the other. The doll-joint of her knee was fully exposed, as if she was intentionally showing it off.

“On one hand there is a technical problem,” she said, slipping into the practised tones of a used car salesman. I refrained from frowning. She was probably trying her best to take this seriously. “Or rather, several intertwined technical problems. On the other

hand there is a philosophical problem.”

“Let’s start with the technical problem?”

Jan snorted a tiny laugh — that wasn’t part of the sales pitch. “I should charge a consultation fee.”

“I’ll pay it. I’m serious.”

Jan winced and raised a hand. “No, no, please. Don’t. That was a joke.” She took a moment, then slowly looked me up and down. “Your twin’s body would be based on you, correct? Identical twins? I think I asked you that before, but remind me.”

“We were identical, yes. Are identical.”

“Were?” Jan asked, sharper than I expected. “When?”

“Ten ... eleven years ago, almost.” A lump grew in my throat. “That’s when she was kidnapped.”

“So she didn’t go through puberty?”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Um. I ... uh, I suppose not. Unless she kept her body, out in—”

“Would she have squid tentacles by now as well?” Jan asked. “Or something else?”

“Um, probably not. It’s not the same situation. Well ... it might be, but that’s complicated.”

“Complicated?” Jan prompted. When I looked at her blankly, she sighed and smiled, dropping the sharp edges and the sharp tongue. “Making a body like mine is not simply a matter of buying a life-sized doll from Amazon and then hopping over to it. I’m aware that’s how Evelyn made Praem — which is a fascinating subject, by the way, genuine achievement — but demons and humans don’t work the same. Demons can anchor themselves in almost anything, because they’re coming into this world without any pre-existing structures of the soul. For a human being, the process of crafting a body is also the process of inhabitation.”

I pulled a sceptical pout. “I don’t think it was too different for Praem.”

Jan waved a hand. “The end result is a person, yes, I’m not disputing that. But the route is different. Look, Heather, I can’t just

craft a copy of you in the same way I made myself, and then expect your long-lost sister to just happily inhabit it. If she still has a physical body, what if she's modified it, like you have, adapted her physical body to her internal circumstances? You can't just rip her out of it and put her in a humanoid doll, that would be torture. I know, I know, I said this before, but the more I think about it, the less I like it."

"Where she is now, that's torture," I said. I stared into Jan's crystal-blue eyes. She was deadly serious, but so was I. "I've spoken to her, down in the abyss. I found a ... a crack in the wall. That's a metaphor, but it's the only words I have for it. And she's suffering. She wants out. If she stays there much longer, if I don't rescue her, and soon, then she'll cease to exist. There will be nothing left of her."

Jan frowned harder and harder, uncomfortable with all of this.

"She begged me," I said. "And I will bring her back here, with or without a body ready for her. So if you don't help me, then I'll do it myself."

Jan held my gaze for a moment, then puffed out a big sigh and nodded. "All right. Fair enough."

Lozzie set her food down on the desk and bounced out of her seat, so she could skip over and give me a hug. I was shaking, and Lozzie stayed there until I stopped. Then she let go and fluttered away to hug Jan as well. Jan cleared her throat with incredible awkwardness and returned the hug with one arm.

"If you do make a body for her," I said, "it would be a back up option, or perhaps a kind of foundation for what I'm going to try to do."

Jan had to poke her head around Lozzie's poncho. "Explain?"

I bit my lip, wondering how much I should tell her. Too much about the Eye might send poor Jan screaming for the hills. "My sister, Maisie, she's trapped by a ... an entity. We call it the Eye."

"Wonderful," Jan muttered.

"Several months ago, I freed somebody else from the Eye."

Jan's eyebrows shot up. "Oh. Oh, well, that's good. And here I was sort of taking you as a heroic type. No scouting, no prototypes. So

you've actually done this once before, you've made it work?"

"Sort of. The person I saved, she'd only been in the Eye's grip for a few hours. I brought her back and re-wove her body, but I think I could only do that because she still existed, sort of. I was just following the lines already imprinted on reality. Like a colouring book, but a human being."

Jan looked more and more concerned as I explained. Lozzie patted her head, slowly floofing up her already messy black hair.

"And she didn't come back healthy," I said. "She was a mage, before. She'll never do magic again. She suffers from terrible post-traumatic stress disorder and a laundry list of physical issues, some of which I've been trying to fix. But Maisie's been gone much, much longer. I don't think there's going to be a body to re-create. But if I have a vessel to put her in, maybe that will give me something to work with. If we can make it her. Somehow."

Jan nodded, lips pursed, brow furrowed. "That might actually work. That might actually solve the technical problem."

"Oh?"

Jan waved a hand. Lozzie leaned over her chair from behind, draped over Jan's shoulders.

"I got rather off-track earlier," Jan said. "The process of creation is the process of inhabitation, that's the important part. That's why it's so difficult to create a body for another person." She hunched in her chair, looking mightily uncomfortable for a moment, and looked over her shoulder at Lozzie, self-conscious but steeling herself for some vital task. Lozzie booped her on the nose with a fingertip, which made Jan blush and clear her throat and look back to me. She finally carried on. "When I made this body for myself, I didn't craft it and get it all nice and finished, and then leap into it once it was ready — well, actually I did, but I wasn't supposed to." She huffed. "The process of creating it was supposed to be the process of transference. There was meant to be a long, slow period where I would have slid from my old form and into this new one, achieved via the act of creating this." She poked herself in the chest. "Creation is inhabitation. You understand?"

"Ah," I said. "I think I'm beginning to see the problem."

"Only beginning to, trust me." Jan pulled a sardonic look. Lozzie

rested her head on Jan's shoulder. "As things happened, my old body, um, died. Unexpectedly."

"You were murdered," said July.

Jan winced and rolled her eyes. "And whose fault was that?"

"You were careless. I was a child."

Jan's wince turned to a grimace. "Yes, well. I was murdered. Before this body was ready. Do you know what it was like?"

I felt vastly out of my depth. "Being murdered?"

"No, being in an unfinished body." Jan tapped the table with an impatient fingertip, glanced at Lozzie on her shoulder again, as if for reassurance, then sighed and rolled her neck back. "Alright, you shared your physical secrets with me. It's only fair turnabout that I do the same for you."

"Oh," I said. "No, please, you don't have to."

"Jannyyyyyyy," Lozzie cooed, stroking Jan's hair again. "You don't have to if you don't want to! Even to me!"

But Jan focused entirely on me, trying to look very serious, which was challenging with Lozzie's fingers buried in her thick, dark, fluffy hair, slowly massaging her scalp, and Lozzie's sleepy head resting on her shoulder.

Jan spread her own hands, as if presenting herself for my inspection.

"My body is mostly made of CFRP," she said. "That's carbon-fibre-reinforced polymers. Hand crafted by yours truly. Very expensive, but it keeps me light and durable and will last a long time. I've got some metal parts too, mostly platinum and gold. Inside me, in my core, there's a bulletproof box, welded shut, which contains a sort of soul-trap, attuned to me personally. That's how I got in here." She frowned. "Though that makes it sound a lot more straightforward than it turned out to be."

I frowned as well. My mind snagged on a detail.

"Ahhhh," said Jan. "Questions, already?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, excuse me for being rude, but Jan, you're a very ... um, cautious person."

“I am a self-confessed coward. You can say it. I don’t mind.”

Lozzie giggled. I winced. July said, “Correct.”

“But why?” I asked. “If your soul is contained in a bulletproof box, then ... ?”

“I bleed,” Jan answered. “I bleed, I bruise, my bones will break. I breathe, I eat, I sleep, I shit. And if you shoot me in the head, the bullet will pulp my brains, and I will die.”

Lozzie made a pouty noise.

I frowned harder. “ ... but you’re made of carbon fibre.”

“No, this body *started* as carbon fibre. Big difference. I’ve quite settled in by now. You’ve literally worked with spirit-flesh, you’ve got six limbs of it attached to your sides. You don’t understand this principle?”

A light bulb went on inside my head. “Like Praem ... ”

The core of Praem’s body was made of wood, while her exterior was formed from a kind of pneuma-somatic flesh, similar to my tentacles and other abyssal additions, except hers was both solid and visible to normal sight, kind of like Twil’s werewolf transformation. But once, months ago now, I’d seen Praem’s wooden core itself, stripped naked of her flesh. Back when the Eye cult had kidnapped Raine, they’d managed to pull Praem out of her body. They had trapped her soul inside a jar. I didn’t have the best memories of that day; I’d been rather preoccupied with saving lives. But I did recall the sight of Praem’s wooden-doll core, covered in anchor-spikes and the web-like structures of a nervous system, her wooden joints augmented with sheaths of strange sinew-like material. The head of the doll — Praem’s skull — was covered in warped wood-grain, the underlying structure of her face. Or her brain.

“Excuse me?” Jan asked.

“Just something I saw once,” I said. “But I think I understand. Being present in a body, even if that body isn’t flesh, modifies it over time, yes?”

Jan nodded. “Exactly. The soul knows its own shape.”

I nodded with growing enthusiasm. I almost laughed. “That’s how it

feels!”

“Old-school mind-body duality is nonsense. We’re taught that the mind — or soul — is the self, and the body is merely a vessel. But this is not true. People like you and I are proof of that.” Jan pointed at my tentacles. I felt a rush of warm fuzzy feeling in my chest, and hugged one of my extra limbs to myself. Jan carried on. “The soul remembers its own shape. And it will go to great lengths to reshape the body.” Jan raised her fingers and wiggled them in the air. I wasn’t sure if she was showing off her semi-visible doll-joints, or the sheer fact that she *was*. “My core is carbon fibre and metal, but I’m wrapped in pneuma-somatic flesh, manifested by sheer force of will and self-image and the engine of my soul. For somebody like me, the soul shapes the body. That’s how this works.”

“So you have a functioning digestive system, circulation, a heart, and so on?”

“Mostly.” Jan sighed. “It’s not a one-for-one for a ‘normal’ human body, but it does all the things I need it to do — the things my mind says it should do. I can’t go to the doctor, obviously. I’d look like a nightmare under an x-ray machine and an MRI would pull me to pieces. And I probably can’t get pregnant, though I’ve never tested that.”

Lozzie lit up, wide-eyed, biting her lips to stop a giggle. Jan cleared her throat.

“Then, Maisie could have a real body.”

I don’t recall the taste of food very well, but I think I want to eat.

Maisie’s words echoed in my memory. I had to blink hard, several times, so as to stop the tears before they had a chance to begin.

I didn’t need to cry anymore. This was what I needed. I was taking a concrete step to prepare for our success, to be ready for the moment we won my sister back from the Eye. It was going to work. Doing this, planning with Jan, this was far more convincing than any amount of reassurance.

“Eventually,” Jan said — hard and sharp, unexpected.

“Ah?”

“When I was ... cut down,” Jan said, shooting a sideways glance at July, “I had to enter this new body prematurely. The soul works,

yes, but my goodness does it work slowly. I spent two weeks on my back before I could move. A month with no senses, blind and deaf and mute. Even touch didn't work properly. Have you ever been in a sensory deprivation tank? No? Well, after a while you start to go a little bit crazy. I didn't have a *face* for six months."

I put a hand to my mouth, mortified. "Oh. Oh, I've been so flippant. I'm so sorry, Jan."

"Jannyyyy," Lozzie buzzed, resting her cheek in Jan's hair. Jan went a little stiff, but smiled all the same.

"Do you see why I'm reluctant to design a body for somebody else?"

"I do, yes. But—"

"But it's going to be a foundation, a base, a platform for you to wrap in flesh, yes." Jan nodded. "That's why I think this might actually work. Depending on what's become of your sister. She may have changed, out there, changed to survive."

"Evee always says that nothing human can survive out there, not for long."

Lozzie stood up straight and wiggled her eyebrows. "Hello!"

"Except Lozzie," I said with a small laugh.

Jan pulled a comedy grimace and shrugged. "Humans can get used to anything, you know? Given enough time. I wonder if there's people, I mean human people, living out there somewhere. Not in that dimension where you kept all your giant caterpillars and knights of the round table."

"Camelot!" Lozzie announced.

July agreed. "Camelot," she said. "Good name."

Jan cringed at that. She didn't approve. "Camelot, yes. Not in that dimension, but elsewhere, further out. There must be human beings out there, if people have been visiting it before you lot."

I half-shrugged. "I met one human, Outside."

Jan's eye's lit up. "Oh?"

"Well, a mage. I think that still counts. She lives in a giant ball, I'm not sure she can leave it, kind of like a snail. Actually, I'm pretty

sure the giant ball prints her body every time she opens the shell to interact with people.”

“Oh,” Jan said, a mask of sudden frozen politeness. “Well then.”

I smiled awkwardly. She probably would have been happier not knowing about Saldis.

“She had magical pet rats, though. But I don’t think they were really rats. Long story. Sorry.”

Jan’s mask of polite rejection got more and more stony with every word I said. “Indeed,” was all she added.

“That’s the technical problem answered, then,” I said, feeling extra awkward. “You mentioned a philosophical problem, too?”

Jan blinked at me several times, lost. Lozzie giggled and kissed the top of Jan’s head, which made the petite mage jump slightly and struggle with a sudden blush.

“You did!” Lozzie chirped.

“I did? I ... oh, that.” Jan relaxed in her chair, a visible unclasp of fasteners and slackening of mental springs. She sighed and let her professional exterior drop away. She reached for her beer bottle, shook it, and drained the last few mouthfuls in one deep swig. Big sigh, small belch. Lozzie giggled. Jan spoke. “I’ll be blunt, Heather: I shouldn’t really be associating with you people at all. I’m breaking all my own rules. If it wasn’t for Lozzie, and Tenny — who is just the most miraculous being I’ve ever seen — and maybe Praem, too, then I’d have left you all in the dust, with no forwarding address. Screw the money. I’d probably have left some choice booby-traps in my wake, as well, just to dissuade you from trying to find me.”

I tried to see the humour in all that. “We’re not that scary,” I said.

Jan frowned, delicate and sceptical. “I make it a policy never to associate with anybody who is suffering from an abundance of destiny and-slash-or fate.”

I actually laughed. “I’m not a chosen one. This isn’t destiny. I’m nobody remarkable, or at least I wasn’t, once upon a time. I was kidnapped by a giant alien god! It’s not my fault.”

“Kidnapped. Chosen.” Jan shrugged apologetically, then searched for another mouthful of beer, but came up short.

"I'm not a chosen one, that's ridiculous." My voice turned sharp. "You can't say that to somebody like me."

I didn't explain why. Jan didn't need to know about the long, painful decade of illusory schizophrenia diagnosis.

"Really?" Jan shot me a look like a bitchy schoolgirl about to land a conversational *coup de grace*. "You're looking to save a twin sister who might not have a body of her own, and you happen to run into the one mage in England — hell, maybe the one mage in the entire world — who just so happens to possess the right experience and skills to make a body for her?" Jan lifted a hand again and showed off the joints of her fingers. "And you tell me you're no chosen one. Excuse me if I have trouble believing your own self-assessment."

"That ... that's just ... coincidence. Luck. There's not many mages, after all."

"Yes, yes," Jan sighed. "We're drawn to each other, inevitably. Regardless, it doesn't matter if this is the work of divine providence or the action of random atoms, you are still a very dangerous person to know, Heather Morell."

I opened my mouth to argue, but found that I couldn't. "Um ..."

"You're planning to raid a god's dungeon for the life of your twin sister. That is the stuff legends are made of, and I have had enough of that, thank you very much."

I almost missed it, but Jan glanced sidelong at the guitar case leaning against the wall, the one that contained the magic sword which she and July had declined to explain further. July, on the other hand, looked almost unimpressed by this statement.

"Legends are cool!" Lozzie chirped.

Jan raised her empty beer bottle in a lonely toast. "To witness titanic events is always dangerous, usually painful, and often fatal." The words had an air of recitation about them.

"That sounded like a quote," I said. "Who was that from?"

"A very cautious being indeed," Jan answered. "I should be running for the hills. I should be getting as far away from Sharrowford as possible. I should be on a flight to Tibet, days ago. But I'm here, agreeing to help you."

Behind Jan, Lozzie stuck her tongue out between her teeth, mischievous and elfin. Over on the bed, July folded her arms, closed her eyes, and nodded. It seemed as if everybody in Jan's life was glad she wasn't running away.

"And I can't thank you enough," I said. "Thank you, for agreeing to try, to make a body for Maisie. I mean it, Jan, thank you."

Jan fixed me with a sceptical look. "Yes, well. I'll have to negotiate an actual price for making the body. Materials, work hours. Like I said, I'm top-of-the-line expensive. Carbon fibre is not cheap. I'll need tools, and my workshop, my real one, at home. Which means I can't start until we've wrapped up this nonsense with your cult friends in Sharrowford."

"We'll get that fixed. I'm sure they'll listen to me."

"And I'm not going with you on this heist nonsense, to this big eye, or whatever it is. You couldn't pay me enough to even watch from a distance."

"I'm going!" Lozzie said, grabbing Jan's shoulders and leaning forward, so they could make eye contact. "I'm going to help! With all my cattles!"

Jan pulled the most awkward of smiles, but she couldn't break eye contact with Lozzie, held in place like a rodent before a snake.

"Before we do any of that, we're going to fight a mage," I said, coming to Jan's rescue. "Or at least outsmart him and steal his property."

"Yes!" Jan turned to me, with both horror and relief. Lozzie bounced back up and giggled again. "Yes you are. I don't like the sound of that, either."

"You've seen this kind of conflict before, correct?" I pulled a pained and apologetic face. "I don't suppose you happen to have any advice?"

"I certainly do," Jan said. "You want my advice for conflict between mages? Don't. That's my advice."

"We don't have a choice," I said. "It's that, or hand Lozzie over to him. So, not a choice at all."

"We're going to kill him," said a small voice — barely a whisper.

“Kill him.”

It took both of us a moment to absorb the shock; Lozzie had said that.

For a moment she stood there, still half-attached to Jan, but staring at me with sleepy-lidded eyes, deadly serious, only half-there, as if half her mind lay across the membrane. Dream-Lozzie stood in the room with us, whispering of murder.

July nodded. “A sensible course of action, with any enemy. We should approve.”

Jan stood up without hesitation and grabbed Lozzie in a hug, awkward but insistent. Her pastel dressing gown flowed after her. “Lozzie, I’m sorry we’re talking about this. Sorry, we shouldn’t do this in front of you.”

Lozzie blinked several times, like a sleep walker waking up. She let out a giggle and cuddled Jan in return.

“It’s okay,” she purred, nuzzling Jan’s shoulder. “It’s okaaaaaaay.”

Things rather trailed off after that. Jan and I silently agreed it was best not to discuss Edward around Lozzie; if Jan had any further suggestions for dealing with mages, she could always call us. I hoped she would, we needed all the help we could get. We’d already discussed the most important subjects, the reasons I came to see her in the first place, so I was content to allow us to relax a bit. She and I could figure out details later, over the phone. I promised to relate the relevant bits to Evelyn.

July seemed like she wanted to make some pointed suggestions to Lozzie, about Edward and murder, but Jan headed her off with some sharp looks.

We finished up our food. Jan and Lozzie ended up on the video game console, playing some kind of racing game against each other. Lozzie wasn’t very good, but Jan was teaching her. I settled in to watch for a while, half-interested. On the other side of the heavy curtains, the sun burned late. True evening was still a while off.

I felt better than I had in several weeks. We were going to build a body for Maisie. I could do this.

Eventually, it was time to go home. Lozzie and Jan conducted some half-whispered, semi-embarrassed negotiations about Lozzie

possibly staying the night, but Jan eventually convinced her that would have to wait. I pretended not to overhear any of it. July watched openly, staring at the pair of them.

As Lozzie hugged Jan goodbye for now — and skipped over to July to do the same, despite the demon host being stiff and awkward as a board — I sent Raine a quick text message. I let her know we were on our way home. Just in case.

“Janny Janny, come see you again tomorrow, yah-yah?” Lozzie chirped. She bounced over to me and hit me with a hug too, as I was slipping my phone back into my pocket.

Jan laughed softly, then cleared her throat. “Certainly. Any time. You don’t always have to bring Heather, though. Um, no offense, Heather.”

“None taken,” I said. And I meant it.

Lozzie and I stepped back from the table together, to ensure a safe slipping distance. She linked her arm through mine, warm and wiggly all up my side. I wrapped my tentacles around her in return. She snuggled in close.

“One more piece of advice though, Heather,” Jan said, pulling her dressing gown closed around herself. “Go talk to your Eevee. You clearly need to.”

I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it again, then sighed through my nose. “No comment.”

Lozzie giggled. “I’ll pester Heathy reeeeeeal hard!”

“Lozzie!” I squeaked.

“Bye-bye for now, Janny!”

Jan waved with one hand. July nodded politely. Lozzie did a funny little hop in place, and reality folded shut.

= =

Crash landing.

Like being clipped by a lorry at ninety miles an hour as we came out of the Slip. My feet found carpet but I couldn’t stay standing, not this time. Pneuma-somatic whiplash jarred my soul inside my flesh, slamming me up against the interior of my own body,

compressing me into a winded, wheezing animal.

Fell over, crumpled onto my side. Tentacles whipping out to fight off an imaginary foe, knocking over chairs, pulling at sofa cushions, toppling an end-table, then clenching in tight when they found nobody to rip apart. I heaved and squeezed and held in the contents of my stomach with force of will alone. Jan's words gave me strength; I was the absolute master of my own body.

Bioreactor running hot — even hotter than the first time. Skin coated with cold sweat, shivering with a flash-fever, fighting off infection, invasion, violation.

“Lozzie?” I croaked from the floor. “Again?”

No reply. No Lozzie. Again.

It was the smell that clued me in, before I opened my eyes. The room smelled of dust, old fabric, and unfamiliar cleaning agents.

This was not home.

I opened my eyes and scrubbed away the pain-tears on my sleeve. This was no time for curling up in agony. I pushed with my tentacles, forced myself to my feet, legs shaking.

Lozzie's Slip had deposited me in a place I'd never seen before.

A cramped sitting room, with a low ceiling, and white plaster walls. Faint cobwebs in the corners. Two sofas, one chair, all upholstered in ghastly floral patterns. A massive television in one corner, old and unplugged from the wall. Wooden mantelpiece covered in horrible little porcelain figures of cherub-faced children. Unused brick fireplace. Glass coffee table.

On the table was a folded sheet of paper, a note. Three words.

To Heather Morell.

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.6

A folded note, lying on a glass coffee table, in a cramped, ugly, dusty little sitting room. I'd never seen this place before. Another Slip gone wrong had spat me out, another sideways shunt from the intended path, another rebound off the membrane between reality and Outside.

My name was on the note. Not handwritten. Printed.

To Heather Morell.

Paranoia was correct all along. Lozzie hadn't made a mistake with the Slip to the hotel, she hadn't tripped up and let go of me before reaching Jan's room, she hadn't done a single thing incorrect. My name on the note proved that. Somebody had interfered with the Slip. Somebody had plucked us apart from each other, with misdirection or brute force or unknowable magic. And that somebody didn't just want Lozzie.

I'd been so concerned about the possibility of Edward kidnapping Lozzie, that I hadn't considered I might be the target.

I stared at the letter on the little glass coffee table, my mind racing like an overheating engine.

What was the purpose of that first interruption, when Lozzie and I had translocated to the hotel, and I'd appeared in the corridor? A test run? A proof-of-concept before the real thing? A mistake, an accidental tipping of my assailant's hand? A warning shot? Or had it been a misfire, a dud, a failure?

Oh yes indeed, this was a failure, very much so.

Whoever or whatever had done this to me — plucked me away from my route home and deposited me in some unknown place, far from my friends, alone and off-balance — they'd blown their chance. I'd already withstood the fear and the anxiety once today. I hadn't acknowledged it at the time, the lingering toxic beast of post-traumatic stress disorder, the flashback I'd suffered in that

unassuming and tasteful hotel corridor. I'd re-lived a moment of that horrible experience of handcuffs and bare concrete and credible threats, exhausted and caked in blood and afraid for my friends.

I don't know a lot about neurochemistry and trauma. Maybe it was like a refractory period. Maybe I was just angry. Maybe the note on the table gave me clarity.

This time, the trauma rolled off my back like a shower of lead weights, heavy but loose, crashing to the ground. I spread my tentacles out wide, vibrating with muscle tension, ready to grab and constrict and flush my flesh with toxins lethal to anything I might touch. I let my reactor run hot, dumping energy into my core, ready to power me through brain-math at a flicker of thought. I even yanked my left sleeve up, to expose the Fractal.

I took a deep breath, and allowed abyssal instinct to fill my throat with a long, loud, furious hiss.

That hiss must have carried through brick and plaster. If anybody was waiting to ambush me, I hoped that sound made them wet themselves.

Truth be told, there weren't actually any good hiding places in the weird dusty little sitting room where I'd landed, but that's where abyssal instinct went first — checking corners for lurking predators, looking behind the ugly floral sofas for crouching people, and peering beneath the coffee table, just in case. My tentacles flickered out, searching for hidden packages, wires, magic circles, anything and everything that might be used as a trap.

Nothing. Nobody there. Abyssal instinct retreated, gave me space to think.

My bioreactor was still running hot, but easing down. If I had needed antibodies to fight off some kind of infection, then they'd done their work and denatured back into other compounds. If I'd been under attack, it was over. I was safe, for now, for a given value of 'safe'.

I ignored the letter for a moment. Where was I, really?

The sitting room was cramped and oddly-shaped, like it had been converted from something else. A long, low step ran across the middle of the floor, splitting the room into two levels. Beams in the

ceiling, like a converted farm building. Was I at Twil's house? No, the air didn't smell right, not like Twil's home at all. I sniffed deep. Cleaning fluids and dust, like a holiday home that had never truly been lived in. Fake, unreal, a hollow shell of a house.

The brick fireplace was conspicuously clean as well, scrubbed of any actual soot a long time ago, then left to gather dust. Every surface was covered in that dust, all except the note on the table.

No pneuma-somatic life. That could mean something, but I wasn't sure what. Was the building warded?

A door stood in one corner of the room, thick naked wood with an absurd and ornate black iron handle, like it was cosplaying as a castle door. The light fixture in the ceiling lacked a bulb, leaving the room drenched in cave-like shadows. Two windows high up on one side provided almost no light, as small and cramped as everything else. My legs felt like jelly as I crept over to the windows. I had to go up on tiptoes to peer outdoors, with my tentacles pushing the ground to give me another two inches of height.

Chicken wire.

Beyond the window glass, maybe three or four feet away, was a bare metal chicken-wire fence. To the left and right I could see scaffolding poles, supporting the fence. The metal reached upward further than I could see, though I spotted a hint of thatched roof. The building was wrapped in a cage. How odd.

An overgrown garden rambled in summer glory on the other side of the wire, too deep and too thick to see a wall or a fence. I spotted a rusty old swing seat, a few cracked lines of moss-eaten grey which might have been pathways, and a hint of another building past the bushes and long grass. A couple of very tall trees stood silent and unmoving under the baking sun, old and gnarled and wreathed in all their green finery. I couldn't see the sun itself from inside, but the light was hot and burning, and the shadows were long. Late afternoon.

Was I still in England? Why was the building wrapped in chicken-wire? Was I caged?

I wanted to hiss again, but I swallowed the impulse and managed to stay quiet. Maybe they — *they* being Edward's cultists, I wasn't

kidding myself — didn't know where I was.

The note suggested otherwise. I crept back toward the glass table and carefully picked up the piece of paper with one of my tentacles, braced for trickery. The paper did not explode or try to suck my soul out through my eyeballs or turn into a giant frog that sang curses to make me die of melancholy. I lifted it closer, unfolded the note, and found more printed text.

"Please proceed to the kitchen. It is located on the first floor, at the rear of the house. If you arrive downstairs, simply follow the corridor. If you arrive upstairs, locate the stairs and proceed down. Watch your head on the beam at the foot of the stairs, I am told it is a bit low.

My apologies for the imprecision of this method. I do not know in which room you might arrive. I have placed an identical note in every room of this house.

You will not be stopped or challenged. I have laid no traps. You are free to leave if you so wish, nothing bars your way, but I beg a moment of your attention. Feel free to take your time.

Please proceed to the kitchen."

The note wasn't signed.

I read it three times, but I only grew more puzzled. If this was an attempt to kidnap and capture me, why not dump me straight into a magic circle designed to contain me, or into an actual cage? Instead I was unbound and prepared, forewarned and ready for a fight.

Lozzie. Of course.

With shaking hands, I pulled out my mobile phone. If Lozzie had also been taken, then this was all just a distraction to slow me down.

My phone showed no signal. Out of range. No service.

A sudden horrible suspicion gnawed inside my gut, like a trapped rat in my entrails. Was I Outside? Or was this the home of Felicity, beyond mobile phone signal, as she'd explained to me only a few hours earlier? I hissed between my teeth, consciously channelling fear into irritation — the moment I stopped being angry, I would start shaking. Well, shaking worse than I already was. I swallowed a hiccup, jabbing at my phone screen, sliding through menus.

Wifi signal.

“Yes!” I panted with relief.

Two wifi networks were within range. The signals were weak, but there they were, proof. Both were the kind you needed passwords for — one was a BT wifi hotspot, and the other was a private network named ‘MisterMuscle6942080085’, which I seriously doubted belonged to Edward. The signal was too weak to be coming from inside the building, anyway. It must have been a nearby neighbour.

So, I was in reality, still in Britain somewhere, and not inside some kind of magical dead zone for hiding houses.

Was this Edward’s house?

I crumpled the note in a tentacle, trying to think.

Nobody knew where I was — including myself. Lozzie had proven several times over that she was capable of tracking me almost anywhere. She’d Slipped me out of Wonderland, though she’d had help from Maisie to find me there, but I was in our reality right now. So something was blocking her from finding me, or she was restrained or unconscious or worse. Good thing I’d messaged Raine before we’d left Jan’s hotel room; she and Evelyn would at least know something was wrong.

I swallowed hard, feeling a quiver inside my chest. My breath came out in a horrible shudder.

Abyssal instinct was pulling me in two directions at the same time; part of me was screaming to run away, get out of here, go. Don’t follow the instructions, don’t try to find the kitchen, like the letter oh-so-politely requested of me. If I couldn’t Slip, then pull out one of the window frames, climb through the hole, rip the chicken-wire. Run.

Maybe if I tried to Slip out, something would stop me. But I didn’t try, because I didn’t know if I could return again. The previous interrupted Slip had not placed Lozzie and I very far apart from each other. Maybe she was here, close by.

I could not abandon Lozzie. I’d sooner cut off my hands.

“Keep yourself together,” I hissed. “She might need you.”

I strained my ears. Distant birdsong, somewhere beyond the walls. No screaming or thumping coming from other rooms or through the ceiling. Dead quiet. I couldn't even hear any cars. Not surprising if this place was totally beyond the range of any mobile towers.

"Move," I whispered. "Come on, Heather. You've been in much worse places. Move, move. Move!"

I made for the big wooden door, padding softly across the carpet. The pretentious wrought-iron handle turned easily. The hinges creaked, but only a little.

Beyond the door was a short corridor, turning left and right at the end. Salmon-coloured wallpaper, white tiles for the floor. Several unimaginative still-life pictures hung on the walls. Recessed lights in the ceiling, currently switched off. The sunlight didn't quite penetrate this far, leaving the corridor wreathed in gloom.

I crept out of the sitting room. My socks met cold tiles. I winced and curled up my toes.

Should have worn some shoes. Nothing to make one feel vulnerable like exposed soles in a strange place, with only a thin layer of sock between oneself and the cold.

I wished I'd brought my squid-skull helmet. I had no idea what to do with my hands, except to keep the Fractal exposed. I held it outward as I crept along.

"This house better not be absolute nonsense," I whispered. "I am not dealing with another stupid maze."

Either the house was suitably cowed by my simmering anger, or I'd gotten lucky. It was no maze, supernatural or otherwise. At the end of the corridor I found a front door to my left, and more corridor to my right. It snaked off into the house, but it didn't loop back on itself or vanish into the ground or turn upside down.

Lozzie was not in the first room I passed — a laundry room of some kind, short and squat, smelling of sea and sand — nor in the second, a long formal dining room with a faux-fancy table and a bunch of ornate chairs which probably cost a lot more than they were worth. The mysterious note-writer was true to their word: identical notes lay waiting in each of the rooms, placed so as to catch the eye of even the most casual observer. I even found another note folded at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Carpeted stairs, leading up and

around in a little spiral, cramped and awkward.

Somebody really wanted me in that kitchen.

Still no pneuma-somatic life anywhere, not even any diminutive spirits scuttling out of my way or nesting in the corners. I passed a few windows, but saw nothing except overgrown garden and a hint of a gravel driveway. That chicken-wire cage seemed to encase the whole house, three or four feet out from the walls. I spotted a couple of doors in the fence, also made of wire, leading outward. They weren't padlocked or bolted, just closed.

This was far more spooky than the Scooby-Doo house which Hringewindla had summoned by accident. This was the real thing, empty and baffling. A possessed alpaca with bloody teeth would have been a relief. A lightning crash, a howling storm, anything. But there was only silence and that slow-burning, late-afternoon sunlight.

I couldn't stand it.

At the bottom of those stairs, I filled my lungs and flared my tentacles wide.

"Lozzie!" I yelled at the top of my voice. "Lozzie!"

My shout didn't even echo. The house was too small and twisty to catch my words and howl them back. I stayed very still for several seconds, waiting for a distant thump or muffled scream, or the slap of running feet, or the growl of an unseen watcher. But all I heard was distant birdsong under the pitiless sun.

"All right then," I said out loud. I sounded so much more confident than I felt. My heart was fluttering, in the bad way. "Kitchen it is."

I found the kitchen at the very end of the snaking corridor, next to a back door that led out into the garden, which was all peeling paint and half-glass, so I could see the overgrown lawn and wild flowerbeds as I approached. A pair of double doors stood wide open in the side of the corridor, inviting me into the kitchen of this strange and empty house.

Not so empty after all, as I quickly discovered.

The kitchen in this cramped old house was massive, by far the largest single room I'd discovered. Sunlight fell through a bank of high windows, flooding across a wide floor of slate-coloured tiles,

sending questing fingers of afternoon glow up the stone counter tops and over the old-school wooden cabinets. Warm, bright, airy, with a high ceiling far above my head. No table, no chairs, no rubbish bin, no food, no cutlery, no evidence of people living here. Perhaps it had once been an entire dwelling; perhaps the rest of the building was added later, modern grafts to some core of ancient cottage.

Three things were waiting for me.

A machine: beneath the bank of windows, in the shadow of the wall, about as tall as a desk chair. It was like a cross between a cat-scratching post and a traffic light, made of stainless steel, a little tree of angled mirrors and coloured glass. Each mirror or circle of glass was mounted on an articulated arm, each one pointed in a different direction. The core of the machine was no thicker than my arm, but wires ran from a base of stainless steel to a set of compact LCD screens laid out on the floor, along with an open laptop. The screens were full of jumbled nonsense. The laptop had crashed; the screen was just a picture of frozen static. A faint smell of burnt circuitry hung in the air.

A monster: on the other side of the room, a nightmare creature squatted inside a magic circle. The circle was drawn with black pen, precise and without ornamentation, on a patch of whitewashed floor, to ensure no mistakes. The creature was like something dredged from the bottom of an alien sea. Built like a gorilla, muscled and heavy, it must have weighed easily five hundred pounds. Skin like grey meat, smooth and papery, dotted with curving spines like sensory hairs. Bare skull, bulging at the rear. A massive jaw jutted forward, showing a double-row of razor-sharp teeth, like an angler fish. Three blunt fingers on each paw, each ending in a long ragged grey claw. Eyes as big as saucers — and no, that's not hyperbole, the thing had eyes about six inches across, and pure black, built for the ocean depths. It watched me as I stepped inside, expressionless and vacant as only something from a deep place can be.

And a man.

Edward Lilburne.

I'd never gotten a chance to see Edward Lilburne up close the previous two times I'd encountered him face-to-face. The first was

in that deserted underground car park where we'd chased Maisie's messenger demon — Edward had been little more than a lumpy figure half-glimpsed by torchlight, amid the dripping concrete and mad panic of our first meeting with the Sharrowford Cult. The second time had been during the 'peace conference' at the pub, where he'd sent his lawyer to negotiate with us, while he'd hidden inside some kind of artificial re-creation of one of his own magical underlings, remote-piloting an artificial shell. I'd seen his face only briefly as the mask had melted away, a moment of recognition, but the man himself had not been present for us to kill or capture.

But it was him. I had no doubt.

Old, in his seventies or eighties, and not at all well-preserved. His face was pale and bloodless, craggy and liver-spotted like a landscape worked over by too many frosts. He had thick, bushy grey eyebrows like dead caterpillars, a nose pocked like a moonscape, and very thin lips. Stringy grey hair hung down either side of a pair of wire-frame glasses, showing a huge bald area on top of his head. He wore a shapeless coat, a practical thing, a hiker's coat, dark brown and full of pockets.

He was sitting in a rickety old wooden armchair on the far side of the wide kitchen floor. A plastic and metal walking stick hung from one of the arms. The huge owlish eyes behind his glasses were closed, peaceful and relaxed.

Edward Lilburne was fast asleep.

He was also protected inside a much larger magic circle than the one which contained the nightmare marine ape, easily twenty feet across, and much more complex. I saw three layers of circle, entire reams of Latin, Arabic, and Greek, and some snippets from a language I didn't recognise.

I didn't care about the magic circle; no barrier could stop me from crossing the room and pulling his head from his shoulders.

But I didn't do that, because it was too obvious.

I stood there for what must have only been a few seconds, but it felt like minutes, poised just over the threshold of the kitchen door. My tentacles strained, my heart hammered against my ribs, my head pounded with adrenaline. The ape-thing watched me, but it didn't move. The machine by the wall was dead or malfunctioned, quiet

and empty. Edward dozed on, thin chest rising and falling beneath coat and shirt.

I spoke up. “What is this?”

“Mmm?”

Edward’s eyes blinked open, slowly and with some difficulty, fighting against the late afternoon sunlight pouring in through the windows. He raised a papery, liver-spotted hand to shade his face. Smacking his lips, taking a deep breath, he drew himself up in the chair. The rickety old wood creaked beneath him, as if he weighed much more than suggested by his lean and sinewy body.

Owlsh eyes blinked. Boney hands adjusted wire glasses. He stared at me, unsurprised and unconcerned.

“ ... were you ... taking a nap?”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say, or do, except cross the circle and disembowel him. But I wasn’t an idiot. This was a trap.

“This body is not the real me,” he said, curt and quick but without great haste. “It’s a remote controlled vessel, similar to the one you saw previously.”

He had the voice of a ten-pack-a-day lifelong smoker, rough and reedy and raspy, all from his throat and nose. A Sharrowford accent, from back when England still had proper regional accents. A rich Northern roll, but fussy, indistinctly upper-class, with a cold certainty behind his words.

“Of course you wouldn’t risk yourself,” I muttered, not really speaking to him.

Edward — or the Edward-shaped vessel — unhooked his walking stick from the arm of the chair and pointed at the magic circle which surrounded him.

“If this circle is broken or crossed in any way, the vessel will disconnect,” he said. “And this conversation will come to an end. Physical disturbance, magical interference, even too much air pressure will trigger it. Do you understand?”

He waited for an answer, watching me. I waited too, trying to swallow my racing heart.

He didn’t speak, didn’t continue, didn’t repeat himself.

I nodded, slowly, and drew my tentacles back toward me. “You’re not really here. And you have a fail-safe.”

“Correct. I repeat, this is not the real me. If you try to harm me through the remote connection, I will be gone before you can reach the vessel. Yes, even you. I know you require touch to use your particular skills, as you did with my construct.”

“Construct?”

“In the home of Amy Stack’s husband and son,” he said. “You required touch to reach me through the remote connection. Hence this.” He pointed at the circle again.

I bristled inside at the reminder. He was talking about Marmite.

I had dug Edward’s control out of Marmite’s pneuma-somatic brain, chasing Edward’s spirit-scent through flesh and metal, battering down his barricades and smashing his security measures, right at the cutting edge of my hyperdimensional mathematics. In the end he had disconnected and fled, leaving Marmite free to flee across the rooftops of Sharrowford, with Edward’s control broken.

He was right; if this wasn’t the real Edward, if he was remote controlling it, then in theory I could use brain-math to trace the connection back to the genuine article, wherever he was hiding.

But I’d have to touch him first.

He saw the recognition in my face, nodded his head of stringy grey hair, and continued. “Furthermore, you won’t be able to track me through any object in this house, nor the house itself. I’ve never visited this place. I purchased it through an agent. The equipment was installed by hired workmen, days ago. Nobody has been to this house since then. Nobody else is in this house, or in the garden, or anywhere nearby. Do you understand?”

Very carefully, I turned my head to look at the ape-monster in the other magic circle. It was staring at Edward with those massive all-black eyes, jaw hanging slack, no trace of human expression in the oddly flat face. I wasn’t certain how, but I could tell the thing wasn’t pneuma-somatic. It was true flesh, solid and meaty, very much on the same plane as us.

An Outsider.

I said, “Hired workmen summoned that?”

Edward did not answer. He stared at me. I swallowed, my mind racing.

Why leave that one chink in his armour? Why go to such lengths to ensure there was almost no chance of me being able to trace or hurt him, but then leave a creature he may have summoned right there, for me to see, and then refuse to answer my question? He wanted my mind to fill in the blank. He wanted me to assume he had summoned it himself, and that it may provide a method by which to trace him. But that was too obvious. Why try that ploy in the first place? Did mages leave a magical fingerprint on creatures they summoned from Outside? I had no idea. Evelyn might have known, but it was just me here, alone with a mage.

Edward Lilburne was more clever than we'd given him credit for.

I stared back at him, craggy-faced and pale, old and weathered. He didn't look like a wealthy, powerful man. He looked like the total opposite of his arrogant nephew, Alexander Lilburne, a mage I'd put in the ground twice over. His shoes were battered and scuffed, his hair hadn't been cut in a long time, and his glasses were hardly the height of fashion. He wore that shapeless lumpy coat like it was his life. Then again, this was just a vessel.

He hadn't even introduced himself, or said my name, or threatened me. I don't think he cared about any of those things.

"You're telling me you want to talk," I said. "Not fight."

Edward nodded, then sighed and cracked his own neck, wincing.

"Why not just use a video call? Or send me a letter, like you did with Evelyn?"

He considered me for a second, unblinking and unmoving. I was reminded uncomfortably of a lizard, a big one, a komodo dragon held in motionless repose. The slanted sunlight added to the momentary illusion.

"A letter is not truly private," he said eventually. A papery tongue darted out to wet his lips. "One cannot have a proper conversation via letters. It takes too much time to receive a reply. A video call is too dangerous, you could trace me. This was the best way I could think of to talk in private." He leaned forward in his chair, gaze never once leaving me. The chair creaked. "You know who I am. I know who you are. I assume introductions are not necessary."

It was not a question.

I was furious, far more than I'd expected. My tentacles quivered with barely suppressed violence, struggling with the urge to spring across the room and dash him out of his stupid chair. Intellectually I accepted that I was talking to a mere vessel, some kind of pneumatic mask like he'd used for our previous meeting, but instinct didn't care. Abyssal instinct and ape solidarity were in total agreement: this man threatened my pack, he had to die. He'd plucked me away from Lozzie. He might have Lozzie somewhere right now. Why talk? Kill him, reach in through his remote connection and shred him like mince. Pull him apart. Core his brain. Drain his blood. Eat him alive.

Unlike all those months ago with Alexander, nothing held me back here. I had no ethical conflict. I simply didn't care.

But he might be right. He might be too quick for me.

I'd called Raine before Lozzie and I had left Jan's hotel room. I was fifteen or twenty minutes overdue. Evelyn and Raine would call Jan. They'd know I was missing. Evelyn would be looking for me, somehow.

Instead of launching myself across the room in a whipping cloud of barbed tentacles, I clamped down with sheer force of will and lashed myself to the door frame, moving slowly. If Edward wanted to talk, perhaps I could stall him, while my friends tried to find me.

Not for rescue. Oh no, I didn't need rescuing. This was nothing like when I'd spoken with Alexander. I wasn't holding out for a saviour.

If Evelyn could find us, perhaps she could do more than just talk.

Meanwhile, I bent my entire mind to the task at hand. I tried to still my racing heart and unclench the nervous fist in my gut. Listen. Observe. Look for a gap in his protections.

Know your enemy. Evelyn would approve.

"Say my name out loud," I hissed.

The smallest possible test. Edward passed with flying colours. He didn't even frown.

"Heather Morell," he said.

No *Lavinia*. He hadn't used my middle name on the letter either,

though he must know of it. Did he know that Alexander had used my middle name like a weapon against my temper? Was he omitting that intentionally, to be polite? Or to lull me into a false sense of security?

Well, not security. Never security, alone in a room with a mage. Except Evelyn.

“You’ve tried to kidnap me,” I said, barely keeping the anger from my voice. “And I felt something else, too. Some magical effect my body fought off. Why should I believe anything you say?”

“I am not a fool,” he continued after a moment, in that raspy, reedy voice, calm and focused. “I am not going to expose myself to danger without good cause. You are highly contaminated, a vector for a dangerous infection. You know of what I speak — the Eye inside your mind. It has already corrupted and ruined countless lives, though that was not your fault, but the work of my feckless nephew. Nevertheless, you are dangerous to confront and dangerous to contain. If my method had an adverse effect on you, that was unintentional. For that, I apologise. I would not do this if I did not believe you are worth talking with. Alone, in private.” He blinked, once, heavily and slowly, then stared at me again again, owlish and wide. “Though I will admit, I did want a good look at what you have become.”

His eyes went left and right, up and down, by the smallest fraction. He could see my tentacles.

A hiss crawled up my throat, soft and low and threatening. I didn’t try to stop it. Helped with the nerves, the thudding heart, the shaking hands which I shoved inside the front pocket of my hoodie.

Edward raised his eyebrows, faintly interested in that sound. But he didn’t even flinch.

“Where’s Lozzie?” I demanded.

“I have no idea,” he answered too quickly. My mind raced with my heart. He’d expected that question and prepared for it. “Presumably she reached whatever destination you and she were heading toward when I rerouted you. She will not find you here, I have taken steps to ensure that.”

“You expect me to believe you?” I spat. “Why wouldn’t you try to intercept her?”

"I cannot. She doesn't work like you do. I had the better part of a decade to study Lauren—"

"Lozzie," I hissed, long and loud. I reared up on my tentacles, straining toward him from the door frame, tentacles and teeth aching to rip him apart.

The feeling was like a slug of hot alcohol down my throat. The killing urge was a heady rush pounding up through my body and into my head.

I think he saw that. Edward stayed very, very still for several long seconds, until I eased down, panting and shaking. We stared at each other across the sun-draped kitchen flagstones.

Scraaaaaape-scraper, scraaaaaape-scraper, went the claws of the huge marine-ape Outsider-thing trapped inside her own circle.

She was staring at me now instead of Edward. My hiss had attracted her attention. Her claws tapped and scraped at the flagstones, like a caged parrot.

Her? Why did I know that? Abyssal instinct supplied the answer: *scent, pheromones*. This one was a female, though it hardly mattered.

"Lozzie, then," Edward said. I flicked my attention back to him, feeling like a snake in the grass. "I had the better part of a decade to study her. If I could pluck her from the transference stream, I would have no need to negotiate with you." He lifted his walking stick and pointed at the machine by the wall, the short tower of glass and mirrors hooked up to screens and a laptop, all broken now. "My methods cannot be attuned to her, she avoids them by instinct. You interact with the interstitial space differently. You can be detected, like any other Outside being moving from one side to the other. You can be rerouted. No doubt if you were doing it yourself, you would have sensed me and fought back. I had to wait until she was the one moving you, then select you alone."

"You missed the first time," I said, almost growling with challenge.

"Indeed." Edward finally glanced away, looking at his strange machine by the wall. "It is single use. Undoubtedly you have learned from this encounter. This method will not work again. We may talk like this only once, so do not end our conversation lightly."

He was supplying so much information, giving so much away, letting me ask all the questions. How much of it was lies? Was Lozzie really back home? Or was she somewhere else, trapped and bound, and this was all a ploy to stall me? I couldn't read his expression, his dead eyes and papery skin, his disinterest and detachment. I decided not to believe a word of it. But I had to figure out as much as I could.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Where is this?"

"Devon," he answered instantly.

"Devon?" I couldn't help my splutter of disbelief. Devon? I'd never been that far south. We must have been nearly three hundred miles from Sharrowford, on the other side of the country.

"Inland. Near a seaside town by the name of Salcombe. It's not far, a few miles' walk down the road. If you step outdoors and leave the Faraday cage that I have had constructed around this cottage, you may verify your location with your mobile phone."

I stared at him in shock. Faraday cage? For blocking electricity, and signals. He'd thought of everything.

Perhaps he read the surprise on my face, because he hurried to add, "But not yet. I do not want you to call your companions. If you leave the room, I will assume this conversation is over, and I will cut the connection to this vessel."

"What if I Slip away, hm?" I raised my chin, burning inside with anger and defiance. I wanted to knock him out of his chair and scream in his face. "Can you stop that? I'd like to see you try, because I don't think you have any idea what you're dealing with."

Edward nodded once. "You are free to leave, whenever you wish. I will assume the conversation has been terminated, and I will leave too."

He stared me down, daring me to go.

Was I being tested by this ancient, blood-soaked mage? He was being so very reasonable, probably on purpose. He wasn't even attempting to argue with me. According to him, he hadn't trapped me, he wasn't keeping me here, he hadn't touched Lozzie at all. Staying to talk was a decision made of my own free will. He didn't even really sound like the letter he'd sent to Evelyn — where was

the preening arrogance and linguistic meandering? Perhaps Edward Lilburne was simply not very eloquent in person. Or perhaps he was trying to lead me toward something else, something specific.

There was another layer here, one I was not aware of with human senses.

"I shouldn't be talking with you," I said slowly, unable to keep the scowl off my face.

I leaned into it instead. Why should I be polite with this man, this slaver and kidnapper? If Lozzie had told the truth, Edward Lilburne was the fixer and manipulator behind the homeless people that the cult had used as vessels for zombies. He was the man behind the dead children beneath the castle. Alexander had been the leader, but Edward was the engine.

I flared my tentacles out and allowed a hiss to fill my voice as I spoke, my throat twisting into an inhuman configuration. Didn't matter that he seemed impossible to intimidate, it made me feel better.

"I should be reaching through that circle and pulling your 'vessel' apart, looking for the strings. Is your magic really faster than thought? You want to play out that bet? You said it yourself, I'm contaminated by the Eye, but you don't understand the half of it — I'm its adopted daughter. It taught me everything it knows. I could put a tentacle through your chest and chase you all the way back to where the real you is waiting, and I don't think you can move fast enough. You're a threat to my friends, my family — mine!" I snapped like a beast dredged from the deep. "Should be trying to kill you."

Shaking, quivering with rage, I forced myself to stay still. Very still. Draw him out, keep him talking. Come on, Evelyn, Lozzie, anybody. Find me.

Edward stared. Wrinkled lizard-lids blinked slowly. Papery tongue flickered out to wet lips thin as straw.

I had to swallow hard to return my throat to a mostly-human shape.

"I'll stay and talk," I hissed. "But I would rather not."

"I will be frank. I will keep it short."

Scraaaape-clink-clink-clink, went the claws of the marine-ape-

Outsider, trapped inside her magic circle. I turned my whole head to look, making the gesture as obvious as possible.

Vacant eyes stared back into mine, black as the bottom of an ocean trench. Grey-fleshed muscles bunched and flexed, pulling the skin so taut it looked painful. Jutting jaw hung open, as if for filter feeding. But no plankton-eater would have teeth so sharp.

She looked from me to Edward, then back again.

“Is this thing supposed to threaten me?” I asked. Back to Edward. “I’ve fought far worse things from Outside. A fancy gorilla isn’t even frightening, I’ll just send it back where it came from.”

Edward shook his head. Lank grey hair barely moved. “It was necessary to bring you here. It is part of the machine.”

I frowned. “Explain. What is it?”

Edward took a deep breath. His thin chest rose. “We are wasting time.”

“I don’t care. Explain.”

Come on, Evelyn. Find me.

Edward gestured at the creature with a papery hand. “A fool who knew more than he wanted to once Christened the species as ‘dimensional shamblers’. They are incredibly rare, difficult to tempt from their hunting grounds. They almost never breach our reality without significant encouragement.”

“Breach our reality?”

“Yes. They possess a very limited and distant cousin of Lau— of my niece’s powers, naturally evolved, wherever they originated. They use it for hunting prey. The natural resonance of the thing’s flesh is necessary to set up the divine harmonics, which allowed my machine to function and bring you here. The creature is a kind of catalyst, nothing more.”

I stared at the ‘Dimensional Shambler’. It stared back at me.

“It is only an animal,” said Edward. “It is not here to harm you. Furthermore, it couldn’t. Its method of predation is to snatch things away, to elsewhere. That wouldn’t work on you. I lured it here and confined it for the machine, that is all.”

Abyssal instinct whispered up my spine and into my hind-brain, reading impulse from sources my human senses and human judgement could not, as I stared at the weird Outsider-ape-shark-thing. Outsider, yes. Animal, yes. But non-sapient?

Absolutely not.

Instinct whispered to me. This creature, this Shambler, this dimension-hopping predatory shark, it wanted out. It knew it was in a cage, yoked for some purpose it couldn't comprehend. Anger, confusion, fear — such simple things did not cross the species boundary, but it felt analogues to those emotions. Cold marine-life predation, threat calculation, the simple equation of muscle and meat. She and I understood each other.

I let my tentacles drift wider, running on instinct. The Shambler watched them strobe in dull rainbow. Or at least, her eyes moved.

This thing walked the spheres, Outside. Edward had summoned her. She might know where the real Edward was hiding, right now.

"It cannot understand you," he spoke without being asked. "If you wish to dismiss it right now, then break the circle. It will likely leave of its own accord."

Bingo, I thought. He didn't like me showing interest in the creature. Now, if only I could communicate with her.

I left one tentacle extended, strobing softly, as I turned back to Edward.

"I'm not stupid enough to fall for that kind of trap," I said. "Don't insult me, please."

"I do not intend insult. I wish to talk."

I shrugged, trying to look offended and unimpressed, buying more time. The tentacle I had extended toward the Shambler brightened slightly as I tried to figure out how to communicate.

"About what?" I said. "Why talk to me anyway? You already sent a letter to Evelyn, she got it this morning. Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of her too. And everyone else. Zheng, try speaking to Zheng, how about that?"

"You and Evelyn Saye have different aims. I know why you want the books, *The Testament of Heliopolis*."

He waited, expecting me to counter. Maybe he wasn't so different from Alexander after all. I waited as well. I was so much better at this than I used to be, even with cold sweat all down my back and my hands shaking and twisting inside my front pocket. I stared him down, daring him to comment on the tentacle I had extended toward the Shambler. I slowed the rainbow pulsing, trying to see if she would react in any way.

The Shambler raised one paw and held it vertical, level with the tip of my tentacle.

Edward cleared his throat softly. It was like the sound of a steel brush. "I want to offer you a deal. The book, in full. In return, you hand my niece over to me. Use your skill set to bind her so she won't escape."

I actually laughed. Well, I snorted a puff of air through my nose and shook my head. "You can't be serious."

"I am."

"You must know I'd never accept that, I'd never betray Lozzie. I'd never betray any of my friends. Not for anybody, but certainly not for you. Why even ask?"

Edward watched me from beneath his bushy grey eyebrows for a moment, then said, "Because I am attempting to avoid a conflict."

"Avoid? You're starting the conflict!"

"No, I am not." His voice offered the first hint of real emotion — he was irritated, growing rougher and more reedy. "A war between mages is a terrible thing. I do not expect you to understand, but Evelyn Saye should know better. It is not worth the risk."

I shrugged, shaking my head. "You're starting this. I'm sorry, but are you an idiot?" I almost hiccuped, doing my best to channel Evelyn at her best. "There wouldn't be any conflict in the first place if you left Lozzie alone and gave us the book. What happened to all your high-minded stuff about how dangerous Lozzie is, about how she needs special care or whatever?" I grimaced, even saying the words left a bad taste in my mouth. "I read the letter you sent to Evelyn. These don't sound like the same justifications at all. You were lying then, or you're lying now, which is it?" I huffed. "Actually, don't bother answering. I'm pretty sure this is nonsense. You're wasting my time."

I turned to the Dimensional Shambler and pulled my tentacle back, then let go of the door frame and took a step toward the creature.

“Wait!” said Edward.

I stopped, rolled my eyes, and looked at him again. He was almost out of his rickety old chair, agitated and frowning.

Oh my gosh, I thought, trying to keep my emotions off my face. I can't believe that worked.

I worked very hard to keep frowning back at him, smouldering with Evelyn-like irritation, while inside I was shaking and shivering with nerves. I had to swallow another hiccup. I'd been bluffing, and he'd taken the bait. Or was I playing into his hands? He was about to reveal the true reasons he wanted Lozzie, or something similar, wasn't he? But this would be a lie too. I reminded myself in no uncertain terms, he was lying.

He wet his lips and settled back, breathing a bit too hard. “I wish to avoid conflict. That is true. I wish to avoid a war with another mage, while also achieving my own aims.”

I tried to look extra unimpressed. Edward carried on talking.

“The content of the letter, that was for Saye. It was not a lie, but it was economical with the truth.”

I shook my head. “Word games.”

“The reason I am speaking with you, more frankly, is because you and I may understand each other better, far better than Evelyn Saye and I would understand each other.”

“You and I have nothing in common. Nothing. You can't seriously believe I would fall for that?”

Edward paused, wet his lips, and considered me as if from a different angle. “I want the secrets to travelling in the spheres Outside. That is why I want my niece.”

“Yes, I figured that part out. You already have our gateway magic.”

Edward sighed and rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. “The gateway magic I stole from you—”

“How?” I snapped.

He ignored that. “—it leads only to the great Outside library. I lack the neurological structures to adjust the spell. I require my niece.”

An evil little impulse took me by the tongue. “Too difficult for you, yes? What if I teach you how to Slip?”

“No.” He answered instantly. “I have considered that possibility and what I would trade for the lessons. One, you are contaminated by the Eye. Teaching me how to ‘Slip’, as you say, would open me up to similar infection with Outsider thought-patterns. Two, even if you could teach me the necessary mental sigilisation, my brain is human. Yours is not. You are only able to execute the necessary magic because you have undergone certain changes. I am too old and too human to survive such a thing. No. Physical gateways are the only viable method. For those, I require my niece. I require her mind.”

“I wouldn’t teach you anyway,” I said. “You’re the worst kind of monster. And I have no reason to give you Lozzie for this, either. Why would I ever help you? We’re close to finding your hiding place, and then we win.”

I thought I was bluffing; finding him was only half the battle, we had no idea how well he was protected.

But then Edward said, “I have no doubt you will. You are skilled and determined.”

“Then ... what?” I came up short. “You expect us to find you, and win?”

“Quite.”

I frowned harder. Was he mocking me? Was this his idea of sarcasm? He didn’t sound sarcastic, but I had no idea where he was going with this.

“We’re bringing in other help as well,” I said. “Other mages.”

His left eye twitched. “Unwise.”

“You want to avoid conflict between mages? Give me the book. That’s my deal, my offer.” I spat the words, feeling sharp and quick. I wasn’t a scared little girl any more, cowering before authority, medical or otherwise. I could pull his head off seven different ways if I found him. “You give me the book, I let you live. Lozzie is not involved.” I laughed, a sad sound, hollow and unimpressed. I think I

pulled that off, better than I expected. “What was the point of this conversation? Did you seriously think I would agree to any of that? Why do this? I can tell you’re trying to hoodwink me somehow, that this conversation isn’t what it seems to be. It’s too obvious. What are you doing?”

Edward stared at me through his thick, wire-rimmed spectacles. He sat up straighter and smoothed his coat over his chest.

“Do you know why?” he asked. “Do you know why I want the freedom of access to the spheres beyond, Outside?”

I opened my mouth to say ‘Lust for power’, but that was too obvious. I stopped and shook my head. Something in his tone was different — a baited hook. I backed up one pace, toward the kitchen door and the corridor beyond. The Shambler watched me, unblinking.

“You have been there,” Edward said. “You have travelled Outside, extensively, just like my niece has. You have seen the wonders beyond our cradle. You have witnessed first hand the depths which lie just beyond this veil.” He waved his hand slowly, back and forth, through the air. “You have seen a fraction of what I wish to see. And you’ve gone partway through the process.”

“... process?”

“Do you know there are only three ways a mage ends up?” His voice focused again, sharp as gravel under the tongue. “Evelyn Saye is one such way. My late nephew, the arrogant fool, he is another. Dead end in the former case. Simply dead in the latter. Do you know why Alexander died?”

“Because I murdered him. I put down a threat,” I said, suddenly bristling. My tentacles flared with involuntary anger. “And I’ll do it again.”

Edward ignored that. “Alexander died because he believed in something. He had a cause. A stupid and pointless cause, true, but it was cause, beyond himself. The cause blinded him to the consequences of his actions—”

“And you’re not? Kidnapping, child murder. Children in cages!” I spat. “I haven’t forgotten that! As if I would ever hand Lozzie over to you, you—”

"I accept the consequences of my actions and work to block or mitigate them. I do not convince myself they will not happen. And I have but one interest."

Edward's voice hitched on those last few words. I stopped shouting at him. I sensed we were past posturing, nearing the truth.

He was right about one thing. He was a lot more clever than Alexander had been. If I was going to find him and put him down, then I needed to understand him.

"What interest?" I asked.

"And I have kept myself human," he carried on, ignoring my question again, but staring right through me. "Very human, in order to see that interest through, as a human being. I will step beyond this cradle, this flesh, this matter. I will take the third option open to any mage who is not a fool. But I will do it as a full human being, untainted." He spat that final word, hissing with disgust, overflowing with all the emotion he'd kept bottled up. "Now, give me my niece."

"No," I spat back. "Give me the book."

A twinkle in his eyes, the faintest smile on his thin and papery lips, totally at odds with his anger and disgust a moment before; a perfect poker player, revealing his hand at last, revelling in his bluff.

"Show me how," he said.

Edward Lilburne pursed his lips and burst into a flurry of whistles, high and low, piping and wheezing.

It sounded barely human. I braced, hissing, tentacles balling up to protect myself.

The Dimensional Shambler stood up in her magic circle, all five hundred pounds of grey meat-muscle rolling and shifting. Her giant deep-sea eyes locked on me.

And she vanished.

"A demonstration, then," said Edward Lilburne.

The Shambler reappeared, a grey giant inches from my face, arms closing around me in a bear hug.

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.7

Despite my reluctant yet pivotal participation in more than a few episodes of physical combat, I did not possess the makings of a skilled fighter.

It wasn't that I didn't believe in violence as a tool; I was no pacifist, at least not any more. My experiences with Alexander had forever changed my mind about that, even if it had taken me some time, not to mention a bit of Outsider help, to reach my eventual conclusion. But there is a big difference between killing — which I could make myself do, when needed — and fighting. I simply didn't have it in me to 'throw down', as Raine might so succinctly put it. I was never up for a scrap, a knocking of heads, a pub brawl. I doubted I could ever learn the proper way to throw a punch, let alone the subtle art of not getting punched as badly as one is punching one's opponent. Not like Raine, or Zheng, with skill won by years of dedicated practice wedded to a natural propensity for easy violence, even if employed for good causes.

I was never going to win a boxing match or knock somebody out with an uppercut, not with my scrawny muscles and clumsy enthusiasm. I suspected that if Raine handed me her gun, I'd be absolutely terrified at pointing it all over the place and accidentally blowing a hole in the wall. A little hypocritical perhaps, considering what I could do with brain-math.

No matter how much abyssal biology I reverse-engineered from my memories of the sharp, quick, graceful thing who had swum in the abyss, no matter how much of that truth I manifested into reality with self-modification and bio-hacking, I was never going to learn how to handle myself in a punch up.

What I did have was instinct.

The Dimensional Shambler filled my vision, taut grey skin inches from my face, rolling over muscles bunched like steel cables, blocking my view of the cottage kitchen and Edward Lilburne

beyond. Her vacant, angler-fish face gaped down at me, pelagic eyes wide and unblinking, toothy jutting jaw hanging open as if mouth-breathing in atmosphere too thin for her lungs. Arms longer than her body ratcheted out like the limbs of a praying mantis, then swept shut to slam me in a bear hug.

One did not need training to know it was a bad idea to get caught by that.

A normal human being could not have escaped, not from a standing start, but my body remembered this feeling. Abyssal instinct recalled the pattern, deep in muscle memory. This wasn't the first time I'd had a slab of muscle appear out of thin air and try to grab me — and no matter how impressive and weird and alien, no matter how strong and predatory and threatening, the Shambler had nothing on Zheng.

I also had a set of built-in springs, which does help.

The Shambler swept her arms shut, but I was already grabbing the door frame with half my tentacles and slamming against the floor with the other half. Adrenaline pounded through my veins as I let the tentacles themselves do most of the thinking.

I flew backward like a squid on a plume of jet-propelled water.

The Shambler's arms scythed through empty air, slamming into her own sides like she was trying to hug herself. She lost her balance and stumbled forward.

In the split second before I hit the wall, during the moment the Shambler overbalanced, I lashed out with one tentacle. My instincts were running faster than my conscious mind. Truth was, I had no idea what the creature was doing. Edward's bizarre whistle had clearly acted as some kind of trigger, a magical signal to force the Shambler to attack me, or to slip the thing's leash, like a hungry Rottweiler. Or had my communication worked? Was it hugging me, as a thank you? The idea seemed absurd. But I didn't have time to think. Instinct had made me dodge, and instinct said *touch*.

Touch the Shambler on my own terms, make physical contact. Define her in hyperdimensional mathematics, locate Edward's control. Then trace the control or the summoning back to Edward, back to the mage.

What I didn't consider, in that moment of pure instinct, was why

Edward would make such an obvious mistake.

Should have let the Shambler grab me. Would have saved us both a lot of time.

The tip of one of my tentacles lashed out toward the Shambler's exposed flank. Inside my mind, at the speed of thought, I slid my ego down into that lightless filth where the Eye's lessons lurked. Preparing for brain-math, at the moment of contact.

My tentacle tip was millimetres from the taut grey skin when the Shambler vanished.

Just gone. Empty air. She hadn't even looked up, hadn't finished overbalancing, hadn't recovered.

I completed my arc through the air and crashed into the wall opposite the kitchen door. I was a tangle of lashing tentacles and sprawling limbs, clattering to the floor tiles with the wind knocked out of my lungs.

"W-what— how—"

Edward spoke from the kitchen. "They compete with each other, like most large predatory organisms do."

I scrambled to my feet as quickly as I could, confused and panting and a little bit bruised from the impact. Adrenaline pounding through my veins made me shake and quiver, made me feel like my feet were going to slide out from under me, like my head was going to explode from pressure. I was panting through my nose. Tentacles helped, they steadied me against the wall and then fanned out into a ring of protection.

Not a moment too soon.

The Shambler reappeared on my left, filling the corridor from floor to ceiling with a wall of grey meat. She stood at her full height, stretched out like a gorilla on hind legs, but so much taller. Her head and shoulders bumped the ceiling. A three-fingered paw descended, straight-armed, in an attempt to slap the top of my head.

I scrambled sideways, hissing loudly, two tentacles whipping up to try to catch the creature's wrist.

One tentacle almost made skin-to-skin contact. I braced again for

brain-math, to plunge into the impression the Shambler left on the mathematical substrate of reality.

Again, with only millimetres to spare, the Shambler vanished.

I struck empty air, hissing in frustration, my tentacles whip-cracking against nothing. I whirled on the spot, anticipating the marine-ape thing was going to appear behind me again. I must have looked like an octopus in a whirlpool.

“They likely evolved somewhere analogous to Earth,” Edward carried on, his voice a smoky rasp. “Close enough that they were shaped by similar kinds of intra-specific competition.”

Edward was still sitting on his rickety wooden chair, safe inside his own magic circle. He still wore that subtle smile on his lips, that knowing look that said only he understood what was truly happening here, while I was merely subject to the process he had set in motion. Behind his wire-frame glasses, his wide, owlish eyes twinkled with the kind of glee that one only ever sees in terrible old men.

I tried to ignore him for a moment. I whipped my head left and right, up and down the corridor, braced for the Shambler to reappear. To my right was the door to the garden. Beyond that was a door through the chicken-wire Faraday cage, and then the overgrown garden itself, drenched in the slowly bronzing sunlight of late afternoon. To my left, the empty corridor, white floor tiles, and still-life paintings on the walls.

A faint organic stench hung in the air — brackish water and estuary mud.

“It thinks you are competition,” Edward was saying. “Or perhaps a mate, though I have no notion of how the things breed, and frankly I do not wish to discover the answer. You probably don’t smell right for a mate, but you’re putting out all the correct signals for a threat. Its flesh will be resonating with that.”

I whirled on him, struggling not to hiss like an angry snake. “What are you trying to do?”

“How did it avoid you so quickly?” he spoke as if in answer to a question I had not asked. “There is your answer. You are a competing predator of the same type. It thinks you are one of its own kind, and it is reacting appropriately, with the same measures

it would take against another of its species, or perhaps a competitor of similar stature. I have encouraged it to do this.”

That subtle smile again. Paper-thin, mushroom-pale, perplexing.

I stared at Edward, trying to process his words, trying to bring the rational part of my mind to the fore. What was he trying to do here?

Did the Shambler understand I could Slip? Yes, that was the implication. She knew I could send her Outside, and she had evolved to compete in doing exactly this — combat via first touch, with the winner as whoever grabbed the other and dragged them elsewhere.

And Edward was going to do what? Watch us fight? I wasn't a fighter. If the Shambler grabbed me and spirited me away, Outside, I'd just come right back. He must have known that. Besides, the moment one of us made contact with the other, I could use brain-math to locate the strings wrapped around the Shambler's mind. I could follow them back to the puppeteer, the summoner, Edward himself. Even if he'd used an apprentice or underling, that would still be an opening, a chink in his armour, a lead on his real location. He must know that.

He wanted to watch me Slip. Back and forth? But why? He'd already refused instruction in the Eye's lessons.

A puzzle piece was missing. I was lacking some vital insight. Edward was closing a trap around my thoughts and actions, but I couldn't even see the jaws.

Abyssal instinct presented an elegant solution: scream and leap.

My tentacles whipped out and grabbed the frame of the kitchen door, a battery of muscular springs winding tight in an instant. For a split second I was suspended like the payload of a slingshot, pointed across the kitchen, aimed at Edward. I opened my mouth in an angry hiss, a warning hiss, a fighting noise. Edward must have realised what I was doing, because he flinched hard, like a man before a charging bull — but a man who knew he was safe behind bulletproof glass.

Time to pit our reflexes against each other. Could Edward vacate his vessel fast enough to avoid me reaching down the connection and into his brain?

My tentacles hurled me forward. I shot through the kitchen door in a scrambling, hissing, incoherent leap at the old man in the rickety chair.

He had less than half a second to react. Slow, too slow.

Then the Shambler stepped out of a sunbeam on my right, spread her arms wide, and caught my flying leap like a cat bringing down a crow.

Her grab knocked the wind out of me. My tentacles whiplashed, spiking my sides with a deep, dragging pain inside my torso. My feet kicked, held off the ground by sheer muscle power and the height of the Outsider marine-ape thing.

“There—” Edward had time to say. But he didn’t have time to finish the sentence.

Checkmate.

At the speed of thought, I dredged the infernal machinery of the Eye from the deep places of my mind. My trilobe reactor slammed biochemical control rods all the way out, giving me the energy and stability I needed. This would be easier than every other time I’d had to perform this piece of hyperdimensional mathematics. Physical contact, limitless energy, and a clear, straightforward purpose. The equation burned and hissed across the surface of my mind, searing my thoughts and sealing the pain for the moment the split second passed.

The Shambler — all five hundred pounds of grey meat and Outsider muscle, of curving tooth and three-toed paw and jutting jaw and saucer-sized eyeballs — unrolled before me in the language of the gods. Her definition was instantly laid out figure by figure in hyperdimensional mathematics, her impression on the substrate of the universe revealed before me in all the infinite complex glory of any living, thinking being.

This was going to hurt so much when I was done.

But I didn’t have to unravel her, or pick apart the bits of her that had gone wrong, or even understand a single thing about her. I only had to find the strings, identify the parts of her equation that didn’t fit — Edward’s control.

I was deluged with an impression of her, regardless of my aims. The

Shambler was a creature of slow muscle and thick mud. Her memories were of quiet waiting, long observation, silent stalking. I passed over faint impressions of lurking eye-deep in sluggish muck, gripped by starvation-hunger, punctuated by short bursts of hot, red violence, the crunching of bones, and the hurried filling of a multi-chambered stomach.

I didn't linger. I looked for the alien touch, the foreign object, the external control.

And I found nothing.

The Shambler was the Shambler, unaltered and untouched. She was totally in control of herself, free from hidden magical strings or mental control or the force of summoning contract. There was nothing in here that wasn't her own will.

Edward wasn't controlling her at all.

Time resumed in a rush of panic and pain.

I crashed out of the brain-math in a splutter of nosebleed. Ice-pick headache lanced behind my eyes and stomach muscles slammed together like my body was trying to purge a sickness. The afternoon sunlight flooded the cottage kitchen all around us, blotted out by the wall of grey meat that had caught me in a pair of arms longer than I was tall.

The Shambler was pulling me into a bear hug, crushing me against her front. I was spluttering and heaving, reeling from failed brain-math, confused and unable to gather myself. My tentacles whipped out, arcing for her face, running on instinct as they flushed with paralytic toxins and contact poisons. A hiss tried to climb up my bloody throat. My skin tingled with the need to sprout defensive spines. I was trapped, caught, too close, get away get away *get away!*

Edward whistled again, a haunting unnatural piping.

My payload of deadly toxin and sprouting spines was inches from the Shambler's vacant face, about to hit her, force her off me, drive her back.

Then the world shimmered as if seen through a veil of water, turned into dark grey fog, and blew away in the wind.

The Shambler's method of cross-membrane translation felt nothing like a Slip, neither my own brute-force way of hyperdimensional mathematics, nor via Lozzie's less well understood technique. One moment the world was there, in light and colour as the Shambler crushed me against her chest and my tentacles were about to slam into her face to inject a pint of neurotoxin — and then everything turned to fog, like reality was a dream, fading to nothing in the harsh dark sunrise of a dying star.

I didn't even shut my eyes, because there was nothing to shut them against. The world, the Shambler, myself, all was mist inside the membrane.

We could have been held in that state for a second, or an hour, or a year. In the membrane there was no such thing as time. The abyss was close, just the other side of a thought, but in this non-place there was no such thing as thought.

Then, chaos.

Reality smashed back into my senses, like I was a swimmer surfacing from the ocean into the middle of a naval battle.

Grey sky tumbling overhead, seen through mottled grey tree trunks and hanging sheets of rotten vegetation. My own voice hissing, screeching, the taste of iron in my mouth and nose, wet sticky crimson all down my face. The Shambler dropping me and lurching away from me, like I was a red-hot fire poker searing her flesh. My tentacles whipping out at her, shedding poison and toxin into the air — then missing as she vanished.

I landed with a wet splash, still hissing and screeching, in about three feet of muddy water.

If I hadn't been trying to hit the Shambler with my tentacles, I probably could have caught myself. Instead I splashed down straight onto my backside, feet slipping in the ooze. I yelped in shock as the water closed over my head, swallowing a disgusting mouthful of the stagnant gunk. I burst from the water again, lurching to my feet, spitting and retching and panting. I tried to scrub the muddy water out of my eyes on the sleeve of my hoodie, but my clothes were soaked through. All I managed to do was smear the nosebleed around. I staggered and almost slipped over again, socks and toes sinking into the mud. I had to anchor myself with my tentacles, then wiped at my eyes with both hands until my

vision was clear.

The Dimensional Shambler was gone.

And I was standing in a swamp, soaked to the bone, Outside.

Grey. Grey everywhere. Grey muddy water stretched off in every direction, thick as pudding in some places, thinner in others, like the spot where I'd landed. The mud was broken occasionally by low banks of higher ground, barely dry, covered in wet grey moss and glistening grey slime. Grey trees were rooted in the mud, massive things with trunks as wide as a car — or at least, they looked like trees at first glance. Once I stared for a moment I began to doubt my judgement. Their 'branches' were arranged in a swirl pattern, almost akin to a bony hand, like some kind of morbid Halloween decoration reaching toward the sky. Grey vegetation hung from those branches, like sheets of ivy or kudzu, but in tiny repeating swirl patterns that drew one's attention inward, as if down into a pattern deeper than mere surface. Here and there they touched the grey, muddy water, and had turned to wet rot.

The air stank of salt, sulphur, and soil, rich and dark and organic. I winced and wrinkled my nose.

Grey skies sat low overhead, a blanket of slow-moving lead, so thick it left this world plunged into a permanent grey dusk.

Grey horizon showed in snatched slivers between the trees. Far to my left, it looked like the trees dribbled out, giving way to an endless blank mud-flat. To my right, the trees got bigger and bigger, until the ones in the distance rivalled a Redwood back on Earth. Far, far away, far past the trees, I could see a hint of something like a tower, made of regular grey blocks.

Distant sounds floated through the swamp — a throaty hoot not unlike a chimpanzee, answered from far away by a similar voice, then silenced by a wet, lumbering *slurch* somewhere deeper off in the swamp.

I straightened up and sighed. "Oh well."

This experience would have been very disorienting for somebody who didn't know what was going on. An unsuspecting person, even a mage, would probably panic when whisked off to some unknown place, grey and dying, with no way home. But I'd been to far worse places than a muddy swamp. This was nothing. It wasn't even that

threatening.

Besides, I wasn't trapped.

My bioreactor was dialling down a few notches, easing the control rods back into their channels, though I was starting to flash-sweat with a fever induced by my abyssal immune system. I'd swallowed at least one mouthful of this swamp mud. No telling what I'd ingested. But my reactor would purge that from my body given a minute or two. I was shivering, hot and cold at the same time as the reactor pumped me full of heat.

The worst part was my mobile phone. I fished it out of my pocket and found it was already dead. The screen was blank, the insides were full of water.

"Wonderful," I hissed through chattering teeth, shivering with a fever. "You owe me a new phone, Edward. I'm not having Evelyn pay for it. We'll take the money for it after we kill you, I suppose." I ended with a tut.

Still no sign of the Shambler.

I turned in a slow circle to check my rear. The soupy swamp-mud dragged at my knees, slurping and sucking at my feet. I stared at the trunks of the dubious-looking trees, to see if she was observing me from cover.

"Pull prey Outside, then leave it alone," I muttered. "Wait for it to weaken, from fear and exhaustion." I looked up at the leaden sky. The air was still but quite cold. Without my bioreactor I would have been losing body heat fast. "Or from exposure," I added.

I took a deep breath and braced myself for brain-math. Back to reality. Could I aim well enough to land right on top of Edward's chair? That would circumvent his tripwire magic circle. Or should I go home, shouting for Lozzie? Should I grab Raine and Zheng and make a plan?

No, land right on Edward's vessel. End this, fast.

I didn't even get to start the equation when the Dimensional Shambler appeared right in front of me.

A wall of grey muscle displaced the muddy water in a wave against my front. Her arms ratcheted wide for another bear-hug. Vacant saucer-like eyes fixed on me, jaw hinging open.

I hissed and screeched and whipped out at her with neurotoxin in my tentacles.

She vanished.

“What the ... ?” I stood there for a moment, panting and shaking with the sudden burst of adrenaline. Had she known I was about to Slip? Hands on my chest, I tried to still my racing heart. “No, no, don’t do this. No.”

I reached for the Eye’s lessons and tried again.

That time she appeared on my left, close enough to make me flinch and stumble and almost go sprawling in the mud a second time. I screeched in her face and tried to strike her with enough toxin to kill an elephant, but she was gone before I had time to blink.

The third time I was ready, expecting her to appear — but she waited the single split second it took for me to hesitate, then came in with her shoulder low, darting forward through the water, throwing me off balance with a slop of muddy ooze and stinking filth.

And then she vanished again, and the swamp returned to grey quiet.

Panting, wheezing, I turned in a circle in the swamp mud, eyes trying to see in every direction at once, tentacles fanned out and ready.

She was trying to exhaust me. This was how they worked, how they hunted, or perhaps how they fought amongst their own kind. She would disrupt every attempt at leaving. I had a sneaking suspicion that if I managed to Slip out, she would follow me. The Shambler didn’t seem to have taken any damage from the Slip, but I would have to expend energy and pay the price of pain with every time I went back to reality. She could follow me and grab me and bring me here, over and over again, until I was exhausted and spent and made into easy prey.

Of course, she didn’t know about my bioreactor. If pressed, I could do this longer than her.

If pressed, I could use other hyperdimensional mathematics.

I could simply kill her, pulverise her with pure energy, set her on fire, tear all her limbs off.

I raised my voice so it would carry through the grey jungle, but it quivered more than I'd wanted. "If you don't let me go, I will kill you. Do you understand? I will kill you, and there's nothing you can do to stop me. Nothing you can—"

And there she was.

I hiccuped in surprise.

Off to my left, perhaps thirty or forty feet away through the tangle of ashen branches and rotting swirl-leaves, the Shambler crouched in a muddy wallow. I was certain she hadn't been there a second ago. She was barely visible, her taut grey hide blending in with the trees and the mud. A perfect ambush predator for this environment. I only saw her because of her huge black eyes, a pair of oily disks floating in the mottled grey.

We watched each other for a second or two. She made no effort to move.

"Is Edward commanding you somehow?" I called out. "Help me understand what you want! Are you treating me like prey? What are you doing?" I flared my tentacles wider. "I can kill you, if you keep trying to stop me! I don't want to, but I will!"

The Shambler blinked. The twin pools of oily black vanished into the grey background, and did not return. She'd gone again.

"Clever trick," I sighed. "From camouflage to ... gone ..."

Then I saw the island.

The Shambler had been crouched right in front of it. 'Island' was perhaps too grandiose a word; it was little more than an outcropping of jagged grey rock which rose a few feet above the floor of the swamp, perhaps fifteen feet in diameter. I'd missed it earlier, hidden as it was among the trees and the muck, crumbling at the edges, with a few patches of weird bristly grey moss around the base.

Sticking out of a crack in the rocks was a strip of muddy, dirty, torn blue fabric.

"... okaaaaay," I whispered. "What am I looking at? Did you want me to see that?"

The Shambler declined the invitation to appear and answer my

question, so I sighed heavily, rolled my eyes, and set about trudging toward the island.

Mud sucked at my feet and ankles. My wading motion stirred up an awful stench of organic rot from the depths of the water. I took each footstep with cringing care, feeling before myself with a pair of tentacles, using the others to ward off any unseen ambushers from behind the trees I passed. I was afraid of cutting my feet open on a sharp rock or a pointy stick beneath the water. My abyssal immune system would incinerate anything that got into a cut, but the pain could still debilitate me. The last thing I needed was a hole in my foot. And I was still feverish, my body fighting off the contents of the gunk I'd swallowed earlier.

I made an awful lot of noise wading through that muddy swamp. I exerted conscious effort to dull the rainbow-strobing of my tentacles. Didn't want some curious predator seeing me through the trees, though there was nothing I could do about my pink hoodie, still standing out even if I was drenched with muddy water.

Something must have sensed me though — when I was halfway to the island I heard a distant whistle-piping sound, not unlike the weird whistles that Edward Lilburne had used to signal the Shambler. The ethereal sound carried through the still air between the trees, a phantom piping. A second whistle replied on my opposite side, far away, weird and haunting and not remotely human.

When I stopped to listen, a third whistle joined in and cut off the previous pair, as if they'd figured out I was listening to them. They fell silent again.

Perhaps that was their language. That would explain a lot. Had Edward learned to speak it?

I reached the edge of the island and slopped up onto the fringe of exposed mud, water streaming from my clothes. The rock was cracked and weathered into ridges and furrows, rising up out of the swamp like a tiny piece of seaside cliff. I stopped and stared at the scrap of blue.

It was a collar.

A dog's collar, with a paw-print pattern and a little brass tag. Torn and chewed.

My hands were clenched hard inside my hoodie's pocket, nails digging into my skin, so I reached down with a tentacle and wiped the grey mud off the metal disk. There was a name — I must have read it, but I couldn't take it in, I couldn't process what this meant. The name was followed by an address. A Manchester address.

I dropped the collar, then peered into the cracks among the rocks, and found exactly what I was looking for.

Bones.

I'm not a biologist — well, technically I'm not, at least when it comes to anything except my own slow self-modification, and maybe a bit of pop-biology absorbed from too many youtube videos about marine life. But even I could tell the bones had probably come from Earth, not out here. Small, thin, yellow-white bones, scattered in the low places of the rock formation. Some of them retained traces of red, but all were stripped of every last scrap of meat, sucked clean. Some of the larger ones had been cracked for marrow. I spotted half a skull and couldn't be sure what it was, but it looked vaguely canine. Another collar caught my eye — brown this time, with a length of leash still attached. It was gnawed and chewed as if something had tried to eat the leather.

"He's been feeding it," I murmured, just to hear the sound of my own voice amid this strange horror. "Feeding it stolen pets? Training it with rewards and food and ... "

A sharp scent caught in my nose, just a hint in the still and stagnant swamp air, beneath the salt and the mud. Stronger than vegetable rot, meaty and vile, that smell tickled some instinctive horror in the base of my brain-stem.

I managed to unclench my hands so I could pull myself up onto the rocks. My heart was thudding in my ribs, fearing the worst. Jagged bits of stone stabbed at my feet through my wet socks, my tentacles gripped and pulled, my soaked clothes weighed me down, but I pulled myself up to where the rocks flattened out, beyond the reach of the swamp.

"No," I said, my voice breaking. "No, no."

A human corpse was lying on the rocks.

A young man or teenage boy, though it was hard to tell, exactly. He must have been dead for days, perhaps several weeks. He was still

fully dressed in baggy jeans and a black t-shirt, with a pair of trainers on his feet. His flesh had mummified, turned dry and taut and greyish on his exposed face and forearms, which made no sense at all; this was a swamp, the air was full of moisture, he should have rotted. No telling how anything worked out here, Outside. Perhaps that was why the smell of a rotting corpse wasn't too overpowering — just enough to stir revulsion and horror, but not enough to make my stomach rebel.

His lips were peeled back from his teeth by the drying process. His eyelids stood open, shrunken eyes staring up at the grey sky overhead. His tuft of brown hair was turning grey as well, as if consumed by the colourless swamp. He was laid out flat on his back, as if placed there post-mortem. Two bite wounds showed in the mummified flesh of his left arm, neat and precise. Otherwise, he was untouched.

I shook my head in mounting horror. Had to wrap a tentacle around myself to steady my nerves.

Then I noticed the Shambler again. She was standing off to the right of the rocky outcrop, twenty or thirty feet away, stretched up to her full height and watching me openly. One of her paws was clinging to an overhead branch. I stared back, slowly spreading my tentacles, not sure if I should hiss and spit in threat-display, or turn and walk away.

Instead, I called out to her. "Edward tried to make you into a man-eater? Why show me this?" I gestured down at the dead man, cringing and feeling vile, wishing I could roll him into the swamp. This was no fit place for a burial. "Are you trying to apologise? Threaten me? Why did you want me to see this?" I raised my voice further, losing control. "What is this!? What are you—"

A blur of orange leapt up in my peripheral vision. I flinched, whirling around, a hiss rising up my throat.

A cat.

A live cat, absolutely unmistakable. A marmalade orange tomcat was crouched on the rocks on the opposite side of the corpse.

He was quite old indeed, his muscle gone to soft fat, his fur still thick but no longer uniform. A pair of raggedy stumps was all that was left of his ears. Rheumy eyes peered out from a permanently

exhausted, sad-looking expression, the kind that some older cats grow into, like a tiny little orange old man scowling up at me.

He had a green kerchief around his neck instead of a collar, and mud in his fur and on his face, but he wasn't soaking wet or coated in the grey muck. He stared up at me with all the defiant feline alarm such an old gentleman could muster, then let out a little hiss.

"What," I croaked out loud. That was the last thing I'd expected.

I glanced back at the Shambler, but she was gone again.

A tiny, terrified, trembling voice cried out from down among the rocks, from where the cat had been hiding — a human voice, speaking English.

"Turmy, no!"

Flapping yellow plastic shot from a gap in the rocks, engulfed the cat, and scooped him up. He hissed at me again, unwilling to back down even as he was hoisted into the air. The sight was so strange that for a moment I didn't know what I was looking at, like a magic eye picture that refused to resolve, because something like this should not be seen Outside.

A little girl, maybe nine or ten years old, had darted from her hiding place amid the rocks and swept the cat up into her arms. She was wearing a yellow plastic raincoat over a thin jumper, and jogging bottoms tucked into a pair of purple wellington boots.

She was filthy and terrified. Long dark hair was plastered against her skull with sweat and mud. She looked pale, exhausted, very hungry and very thirsty and very afraid. Dark rings had formed around desperate eyes. The look in her face was more animal than human, running on instinct and terror.

Children were never, ever meant to look like that. My heart almost folded up.

She hugged the cat tight to her chest and stared up at me in naked terror, eyes wide and filling with tears, trying to swallow a whimper.

It took me a second to realise. We were Outside, she could see my tentacles.

Between my six extra appendages held outward in a threat display,

the blood smeared on my face, and my sopping wet clothes drenched with muddy water, I probably looked like some kind of swamp monster.

“It’s okay!” I croaked. I put both my hands out, palms open, and lowered my tentacles, angling them behind me to make myself less threatening. “It’s okay! I’m a person, I’m human!” Technically a lie, but that hardly mattered. “It’s okay! I’m not going to hurt you.”

I was terrible with children, but I don’t think I needed a degree in professional childcare techniques to know the right thing to say to a terrified little girl, lost Outside.

A terrified little girl, nine or ten years old, lost and alone beyond the walls of reality.

She’s me, the thought came clear as the sun amid all this grey. *She’s like I was.*

The girl stared up at me like I was a space alien, about to abduct her from her bed, or pull her head off her shoulders and eat her brains. She was doing a very admirable job of not crying, brave little thing, but it was a losing battle. The cat couldn’t decide if he should get comfortable in her arms, or stare me down to keep me away.

I stepped sideways so the corpse wasn’t between us, then crouched down so we were eye level with each other.

“It’s okay, it’s all right,” I said, trying to purge the shake from my voice. This girl needed an adult, confident and decisive, not me hiccuping and shying away from danger. *Raine*, I told myself, *be like Raine, right now.*

I tried to smile, but I suspect it was more of a blood-soaked rictus.

“My name’s Heather,” I said all in a rush, tripping over my words. “The tentacles on my sides, they’re part of me and they’re very strong, and sometimes I use them to fight bad people, but I’m not going to hurt you. Not with them, or any other way, I mean. I think I can get you out of here. Okay? I can! I can get you out! What’s your name?”

The girl lost her battle against her own tears. Her face crumpled with the pressure of long-resisted fear, eyes filling with water, lips wobbling as she tried to choke down a web sob. The cat in her arms

nuzzled into her chest, doing his best.

“Nat,” she said through the crying. It took me a moment to realise it was a word.

“Nat!” I echoed. “Short for Natalie?”

She nodded, tears running down her face, making tracks in the dirt. I nodded too, smiling brightly, pretending we were anywhere except in the middle of an Outsider swamp, surrounded by alien life and sucking mud and a giant gorilla monster that was trying to keep us here.

“I had a friend in primary school named Natalie,” I lied. Didn’t matter. “It’s a really pretty name. It’s a good name. Natalie, I can get you out of here, I’m kind of like a sort of wizard, I can—”

Natalie had decided that I was worth trusting, or perhaps merely that I was preferable to the Shambler and the other denizens of the swamp. She crossed the rocky surface between us in four quick strides, loose wellington boots slapping against her legs, and slammed into me with all the desperation only a terrified child could muster. One arm flew around my neck and she buried her sobbing face in my shoulder, clinging on tight enough to choke. She didn’t drop the cat, to my amazement, but cradled him with her other arm, almost but not quite squishing him between us.

“It’s okay, it’s going to be okay, it’s okay,” I said, patting her back and feeling very awkward indeed.

The hug was smearing swamp water all down her front, getting her clothes wet. She was already filthy, but I wanted to avoid any further risk of this girl getting an infection. I was able to fight off whatever pathogens lurked in this swamp water, but she was a baseline human, and a child. And starving.

Same for the cat. While Natalie clung around my neck and cried herself hoarse, I quickly brought a tentacle close to the cat, so he could sniff me. Old-man eyes squinted and cat nose twitched. He didn’t seem quite convinced by my scent, but he refrained from hissing or clawing at me.

“Natalie, Natalie I have to stand up, okay?” I murmured to the girl. “I have to stand up and look out for the ... the ... ”

“The gorilla,” she sobbed into my shoulder. She sniffed hard, trying

her best to stop crying. “I know.”

After some murmured reassurances, I managed to get Natalie disengaged from my front. I didn’t know what I was saying, just nonsense platitudes, but she was assured I wasn’t about to either eat her or abandon her here. For a moment she hung onto the sleeve of my hoodie with a white-knuckle grip, so I put my hand in hers and held on tight, then craned my neck to look around. I couldn’t see the Shambler anywhere nearby. She wasn’t watching us from the swamp floor or lurking behind us on the rocks or peering between the trees.

I turned back to Natalie, trying to figure out what to do, what this all meant.

Natalie was staring at me, wide-eyed and still terrified, dark hair plastered to her skull. I saw myself standing there, ten years ago. I wasn’t insensible to the comparison, it was too obvious. Protective need burned inside my chest like a slug of molten steel. Abyssal instinct agreed too, which surprised me; I’d never met this girl before, but I would fight the Shambler right down to tooth and claw before I let it keep her here.

But it wasn’t that simple. I glanced at the corpse lying on the rocks, uneaten and barely touched. The Shambler had not eaten that human being. And little Natalie would be no match for the Shambler’s muscle, if it wanted fresh meat.

I frowned in confusion. This was making less and less sense. I needed to get this girl home, but I couldn’t just Slip back to Edward with her in tow — if the Shambler would even let us go without me killing it first. The smart move would be to drop Natalie in front of a police station and then Slip back out, but the Shambler might follow her instead and then snatch her again, and then she might never be found.

Natalie whimpered, eyes flicking to my tentacles. The cat looked like he wanted to hiss at me again.

“Sorry!” I blurted out, trying to reel them back in. They’d been creeping outward, circling around Natalie from behind, building a protective cage without me even thinking about doing so. “They just ... they do that, when I’m angry or thinking or ... or trying to protect somebody. I’m trying to protect you right now. I’m trying to figure out how to ... where to ... ” I sighed hard and made an effort

to pull myself together. “My tentacles are very strong. Let me put one around your shoulders. That way the big gorilla thing can’t pull us apart if it attacks. Okay?”

“Mm, mm!” Natalie made a desperate sound, worming her hand out of mine and gesturing for a tentacle. She wanted protection, she just didn’t want it lurking behind her.

I put a tentacle in her hand so she could understand what it felt like, that it was just flesh, just a normal appendage. Then I wound it up her arm and over her shoulders in a hug through the yellow raincoat — a Slip-proof safety harness. She looked uncomfortable for a moment, then wrapped both of her arms around the cat again, trying to bite back a whimper. The cat nuzzled her chin.

“Okay, I’ve got you safe,” I said.

Natalie nodded, trying to be brave. Her lips quivered. “Octopus lady?”

“Yes!” I smiled, trying to look bright and wholesome, like we were in a children’s after-school television show. “That’s right, octopus lady. Heather, that’s my name, but you can call me octopus lady if you want.”

Natalie nodded again, more enthusiastic. I hoped she liked octopuses.

I nodded at the cat in her arms. I needed time to think, to plan. “Your cat, he—”

“Turmy,” she told me.

“Turmy, yes,” I echoed. Turmy seemed to recognise his name, looking up at us and then out at the swamp beyond the outcropping of rocks. “Turmy’s a very brave cat, isn’t he? Has he been protecting you too, before I got here?”

Natalie nodded. I sensed she was just old enough to understand that an aged house cat was not capable of protecting her from the Shambler. I was coming off as patronising. I cleared my throat and went for what I needed.

“How long have you been here, Natalie? A few hours, or longer?”

“Don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. Her hair was stiff with dried mud.

“Has the sun gone up and down?” I asked. She shrugged. Maybe there wasn’t a sun here, beyond the clouds. Stupid question. “Have you slept?” A nod. “Are you hurt anywhere?” Shake shake. “Was ... don’t look at the dead body, but was he here when you arrived?”

A nod, then she said, “There’s another, too. Down in the rocks. All ... rotten and bones and ... mm.”

I gave her another hug, gently. She seemed like she was holding on okay.

“Natalie, what’s your family name? Can you tell me that?”

With a few more moments of gentle questioning, I got the details we might need — Natalie Skeates, a Manchester phone number, and an address to match. Daddy was a teacher, Mummy worked in an office.

“One more thing, Natalie,” I said. “I need to know about the big gorilla monster. Did it bring you here?”

She nodded, sniffing hard to clear her nose and throat. “Grabbed me,” she said in a raw little voice.

“Where from? Was there anybody else there? Was there an old man?”

She blinked twice — then nodded. She panted between her words as she spoke. “Turmy got out. Bad Turmy. He was hissing and hissing at something. And I wasn’t supposed to go out into the back alley. But Turmy was there and he was scared. So I picked him up and I wasn’t supposed to and there was a monster.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I murmured. “I’ll take you back home, I promise. But there was an old man, before the gorilla grabbed you?”

Natalie nodded. I opened my mouth again, but then bit off my words. Was she just telling me what I wanted to hear?

“The old man had a whistle,” she said. “He whistled. I didn’t like it.”

My heart leapt. This girl had seen the real Edward Lilburne, in the flesh, whistling to the Shambler, feeding it or training it.

I had to steel myself for something I didn’t want to do.

“Okay, Natalie, okay. I’m gonna get you home, but ... I’m going to have to deal with the big gorilla monster first, and that might be ugly. I might have to kill it. So I want you to—”

Natalie’s eyes leapt up and over my head. She screamed the kind of horrible high-pitched scream that only little girls in terror could muster.

In the same moment, Turmy sprang out of her arms, hissing and spitting, his fur bristling, looking like he wanted to claw at the air.

I lurched to my feet and whirled around, the rest of my tentacles arching wide, flushing deep red and warning yellow, filling with paralytic toxins and preparing to sprout spikes and claws. I screeched at the top of my lungs, drowning out Natalie’s scream and Turmy’s hiss with a noise from the deepest places of the abyss.

The Shambler was looming over us, standing on the rocks.

She flinched. Perhaps she hadn’t expected my screech and display, or perhaps she sensed that I was now willing to murder her. Twin pools of oil blinked — and then she was gone again, vanished into thin air before my lashing whip of tentacles could slam into her side. They passed through empty air and I hissed with frustration.

Panting, heaving for breath, trying to get a hold of myself, I turned on the spot, looking for where the Shambler might appear next. Natalie was cowering and whimpering, with the cat cradled in her arms again. The marmalade moggy seemed to have decided that my hiss far outmatched his own volume. His stubby ears were rotated backward, as if trying to flatten them down against his skull.

The Shambler had reappeared about twenty feet away from the outcropping of rock, crouched in the mud up to her chest, dead ahead of us so Natalie couldn’t see. Was that intentional? Did she understand that she’d frightened the child? I stared the creature down.

Seconds ticked by, then half a minute, but the Shambler stayed put.

Natalie was staring around us too, big wide eyes showing absolute terror as she peered out across the rocks. She looked ready to curl into a ball and start sobbing. This child was not getting out of this experience without post-traumatic stress, no matter what I did now.

I crouched down again, swallowing hard to reset the internal shape

of my throat. Thankfully my pneuma-somatic reflexes were sharp enough that the tentacle I had wound about Natalie's shoulders had not flushed with toxins. My body recognised and acknowledged the need to protect, so I wasn't about to hurt her by accident.

I kept the Shambler in the corner of my vision as I considered the terrified girl.

If I had understood what had happened to me when I was child, when I'd been snatched away to Wonderland and exposed to a supernatural truth my mind couldn't handle, when the Eye had stolen my sister, then I never would have suffered the decade of misdiagnosis and madness. I would still have been traumatised, yes. What child wouldn't? But at least I'd have known I wasn't crazy.

"Natalie, Natalie, listen to me," I said. "Look at me. Look at me." She did, with quivering eyes in a pale face. "That creature isn't going to touch you, I promise. I'm bigger and scarier than it is, understand? But I need you to listen to me. Are you listening?"

My tone, urgent and hard, must have reached her through the terror. She nodded.

"We're in another dimension right now," I said. "That's where this is. An evil wizard kidnapped you and brought you here, because he was trying to get the monster to eat you. The gorilla monster, it's not evil, I think. It's kind of like a ... like a dog that's been trained by an evil person. I'm sort of like a wizard too, but not very much. And I'm also not evil. Okay?"

Natalie nodded along, jerky and serious, serious as only a small child could be.

There was so much more I needed to say: this is real but nobody will ever believe you, magic and monsters are real but not all of them are scary and dangerous, and you are not alone. *You are not alone*. But I didn't have time to comfort my own ten-year-old self across the gulf of years. I almost reached out to wipe the girl's cheek. But we had more important things to do.

"Natalie, this is very very important: were you the only child the gorilla brought here? You don't have any brothers or sisters or cousins or friends with you?"

Natalie shook her head. "Just Turmy." She buried her face in the cat's fur.

“Turmy’s a brave boy,” I said. The cat blinked at me, as if to say *Boy? I’m an old man*. For an absurd moment I felt like I should apologise; this place was getting to me. “And you’re a very brave girl, Natalie.”

She didn’t look like she believed me.

I straightened up and held my hand out toward her, herding her inward with the tentacle around her shoulders, so I could hold her tight. She didn’t need much encouragement to stand closer to me, but then she started to unwind one arm from around Turmy so she could cling onto my hoodie.

“No, Natalie, you hold on to Turmy, okay?” I caught her eyes as she looked up at me in confusion. “I’m going to take us home now, I ...”

I had to look up to check on the Shambler. There was no way to avoid drawing Natalie’s attention. She twisted around in my grip and yelped like a small animal when she saw the creature squatting out there in the swamp.

The Dimensional Shambler hadn’t moved since I’d screeched at her.

Had she led me here on purpose, to this outcropping of rock, and the lost human girl hiding within the cracks? She hadn’t eaten the corpse of the dead young man, and she hadn’t killed Natalie either. Edward had trained this creature with live food, and then tried to make her into a man-eater, but maybe she wasn’t following his plan. She’d eaten the animals, yes, the dogs and cats and whatever else he’d fed her — but could I blame her for that?

When I’d briefly had the Shambler defined with hyperdimensional mathematics, one of the strongest impressions I’d gotten was starvation.

These creatures didn’t all prosper. So yes, she’d eaten the animals. But a human? A fellow sapient?

Maybe she hadn’t known how to return the little girl. Maybe Edward wouldn’t let her. Maybe she was confused or frightened, maybe even guilty.

The Shambler and I stared at each other across the rock and the water and the mud. Her huge oily black eyes did not blink. I couldn’t read her, not even a little bit.

Are you going to let us go? I thought, unwilling to shout across the swamp and scare Natalie further. *Please don't make me kill you.*

"Octopus lady ..." Natalie said. She was still pressed close to my side.

I took a deep breath and wanted to hiccup, very badly, but I swallowed it. Had to pretend I knew what I was doing.

"Okay, Nat," I said. "I'm going to try to take you home now. Actually, I'm going to take you to my home. I know a lot of other, um, wizards. If the Shambler—the gorilla monster, if it tries to come after us, then they'll be able to protect you, okay? I want you to trust them for me. They'll seem really scary, um, maybe, but they're all good people."

Natalie's eyes widened with a child's fear. "You're not coming?"

"No, I'll come with you, but then I'll have to go again, really quickly, because I think the gorilla monster will chase me instead of you. And I have to go deal with the evil wizard who did this, because he won't be expecting me."

A weird smile flickered across my face, an evil little smile at the thought of surprising Edward and ripping his head off. A real smile, not the fake children's television-program smile I'd been trying to maintain all this time.

Natalie tried a little smile back. Just a flicker, but there it was. Maybe she was going to be okay.

I tightened my tentacle around her shoulders. "Okay, Nat, I need you to hold onto Turmy really, really tight, okay? That's your job, make sure he doesn't escape. Hug him close."

She nodded and squeezed the old cat to her chest. He seemed content to snuggle.

"And close your eyes," I said. "Keep them closed. Whatever you do, keep them closed." I put both hands on her shoulders. Natalie squeezed her eyes closed, shutting out the nightmares. "This will only take a second, but when we arrive, it'll be like being carsick. We might fall over. It's okay though, when we arrive, you can cry if you need to."

Natalie nodded. She kept her eyes shut. The poor girl was shaking.

The Shambler watched us from the swamp. I stared back at the creature and let out a small hiccup at last.

Let us go. Don't make me kill you.

I had saved a life, but if I was going to catch Edward as well, I had to move fast.

The familiar old equation spun into life like a perpetual motion machine, as I yanked it from the black oil in the secret room of my soul, pieces slotting into place and burning red-hot across the surface of my mind.

Out.

And as reality folded up, the Dimensional Shambler vanished.

In that last split second before we popped through the membrane, I felt her at my heels, coming after us.

I was going to have to be very fast indeed.

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.8

Reality snapped back like a rubber band stretched too far, slamming against the inside of my skull, the backs of my eyeballs, and the rear of my stomach. I dared not imagine what might happen if I ever stretched that rubber band far enough to break.

Number 12 Barnslow drive blossomed around my senses — home, safety, sanctuary.

I could think of no better shelter for a little girl who was being hunted by supernatural horror from beyond our sphere. Not because of Evelyn's vaunted security, the wards and the spells woven into the walls and sunk into the very foundations of the building; nor because of the solid brick to keep out physical intruders, the stout doors and small windows and sturdy locks; not even because of the unspoken spirit of the house herself, brooding on her own mute protective intent, keeping her own counsel from us little apes and ape-imitators who nested between her four strong walls. Not because it was familiar, or well-mapped, or home. No matter how safe the house itself, I wasn't counting on any of that to protect little Natalie.

Besides, the wards couldn't keep me or Lozzie from Slipping back into the house. I wasn't counting on them to stop the Shambler.

No, I was counting on what had saved me too, all those months ago when I'd been ready to give up on life.

We — Natalie holding Turmy tight in her arms, while I held her close in turn, with a tentacle wrapped about her shoulders — appeared almost exactly where I'd intended, right in the kitchen of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, standing on the cool flagstones in the orange light of the growing dusk outdoors, with my back as close to the table as possible. My aim was so good that I surprised even myself. We landed about two feet away from the table. Not perfect, but close enough for my plan to work without breaking my spine.

Well, 'plan' is perhaps putting it a bit too strongly. 'Vague idea of

how not to screw everything up', that sounds closer.

We exited the Slip with an audible *squelch* of swamp water as my socks slopped on the kitchen floor. I hissed and winced through the sudden stabbing headache behind my eyes, the price of the three-being Slip. I clenched every muscle from abdomen to diaphragm, willing myself to retain control and hang onto the contents of my stomach. Couldn't afford to crumple to the floor on my hands and knees, not now. We didn't have time for pain. We might only have seconds to spare.

So I blundered backward with Natalie in my arms, crashed into the table hard enough to leave a bruise on the small of my back, and lashed myself to the wooden surface with my tentacles.

Heather Morell, the safety-harness squid. Better a bruise on my back than a bloodied split across Natalie's forehead.

The poor girl didn't take the Slip very well. I could cushion the physical impact, but there was little I could do about the spiritual decompression sickness. As I caught us against the kitchen table and hung on to keep myself on my feet, Natalie was already sagging in my grip like a sick animal. She went limp and weak, struggling to keep her wellington boots against the floor, letting out one of those awful child-whimpers, the kind that reaches into the back of the human brain stem and lights up a switchboard of protective instinct, no matter one's age, no matter if one has children of one's own or not. Children in pain have fewer expressive inhibitions than adults. Natalie made a sound I never wanted to hear again, panted out between wet, liquid sobbing.

She dropped Turmy — not entirely on purpose, I believe, she just lost her muscle tension and coordination. The grand old gentleman slid down her front and landed on the floor like a drunken horse, all knees and rolling eyes. The poor cat was almost as badly affected as his owner. He wobbled a few paces across the kitchen floor like he was full to the brim with anaesthetic or muscle relaxants, then flopped over in a most undignified and uncomfortable angle, eyes rolling, mouth hanging open.

Natalie sagged forward in my grip, bent over with only one tentacle to hold her up like a child harness, and vomited noisily onto the flagstones.

I couldn't comfort her. I couldn't even spare a tentacle to keep her

hair out of her face. Not that she needed it, her hair was stiff with dried swamp mud.

With a conscious effort, like unclenching a muscle inside my guts, I slammed all the biochemical control rods out of my trilobe reactor. Full power, as Raine might say, chocks away, all caution to the wind. I pushed myself right up to the red line, the danger zone, the point at which self-hood and energy risked confusion and conflation if I held myself there for too long.

It was like a pint of caffeine, a syringe full of adrenaline, and a bucket of freezing cold water.

I reared up with a single deep breath that felt like it was ripping my lungs apart. Eyes wide, heart slamming, skin coated in hot-cold flash sweat. My tentacles detached from the table and shot outward into a fan-shape, a sunburst, a protective cage, all except the one still holding the limp, sobbing, vomiting girl. I must have looked like a demon from the pit.

We'd only been manifested for about two seconds. I jerked my head left and right, running on pure instinct, trying to take in the whole kitchen with one glance. Nothing on the table but a few cold, empty mugs, and the plate which Twil had used for her sausage rolls. A few crumbs remained. The lights were off, but evening sunlight poured in through the window, bathing everything in that peaceful orange glow. The door to the workshop stood open.

A frozen moment, the eye of the storm; instinct screamed through my heart and my veins, keeping me on the edge of readiness.

How long did we have until the Shambler appeared? I'd felt her on my heels, an unmistakable presence as we'd crossed the membrane. Did she have the power to delay her own arrival?

Or had she appeared somewhere else in the house? I hadn't considered that. An oversight, a mistake, stupid, stupid Heather. Was this Edward's plan all along? Get a Dimensional Shambler into our house and wreak havoc? It might grab Raine, or Tenny, or anybody. Eevee! Panic rocketed up my spine, a dose of something headier and harder than adrenaline. What a perfect assassination method for a rival mage. The Shambler might take Evelyn Outside and I might not be able to track her and—

A scrape of chairs and scrambling feet interrupted my wide-eyed

panic.

Twil shot out of the magical workshop and into the kitchen, skidding to a halt like a cartoon hound who'd smelled a side of roasting beef. She stared at me wide-eyed and open mouthed. I could hardly blame her, considering that I was soaking wet, covered in grey mud, and carrying a very sick little girl.

Raine was two paces behind, with a quick and decisive look on her face, like she was ready for anything. But she lit up at the sight of me, no matter how filthy I was or what I was carrying.

"Heather!" Twil said. Then she quickly wrinkled her nose and pulled a face, as if something stank like an open sewer. "Holy fucking shit what the—"

"Heather!" Raine roared my name in triumph. She crossed the kitchen quickly, hurrying to my side. She took in my filthy, dripping wet state, the girl hanging in one of my tentacles, and the cat on the floor, all with only a slightly bemused glance — and total acceptance. She didn't even break her stride. That's what Raine does; she deals with anything.

"Don't—" I panted, waving one hand at her. "Don't touch, I'm filthy, dangerous, it's—"

"You're back!" Raine got as close as she dared, but she respected my request, and didn't try to touch me, not yet. "I knew you would be!"

"Where's— Eevee, she—"

Evelyn's voice was a stinging whip, cracking through the air even before she stomped out of the magical workshop. "Heather, what the fuck do you think you're ... do ... "

She trailed off the moment she clapped eyes on me. She was leaning heavily on Praem's arm in lieu of her walking stick, with her bone-wand tucked under one armpit, and a piece of paper covered in magical symbols crumpled up in one fist, knuckles white with tension. She was drawn and pale and sweating with naked worry. But my heart unlatched. The Shambler was not after her.

"Welcome home," said Praem. "And guests."

"Heather, hey," Raine was saying, hands up and ready to help, hovering around me and Natalie, not sure what to do first. "I get it,

emergency, right? Tell us what to do. You don't have to explain, just go!"

Raine was right, there was no time to explain. I could always count on her to understand.

So I filled my lungs and howled at the top of my voice.

"Lozzie! Lozzie! Here, now! Lozzie!"

I came down panting, heaving, waving Raine away with one flopping hand. "Don't touch me, dangerous!" I heaved the words out, then added in mounting panic, "Lozzie, is she here? She got home, right? She's here, she's—"

"Lozzie is in residence," Praem answered over the shock of my other friends — though she needn't have bothered.

The sound of Lozzie hurling herself down the stairs was music to my ears, the light tap-tap of her feet on the creaky steps the best relief I could have asked for.

She didn't make it in time.

I heard her leap the last few steps to the floor of the front room, landing with a patter of feet, followed by some curiously alarmed trilling noises that could only have been Tenny peering down the stairs after her. But she didn't reach the kitchen before the Shambler got to us first.

A wall of grey muscle wrapped in taut grey skin suddenly filled the space in front of the kitchen doorway, stretching from floor to ceiling, dripping with rank swamp water and thick grey mud. The Dimensional Shambler, head and shoulders towering above us like the craggy ramparts of a rotten castle. Twin pools of oil locked on with all the predatory instinct of a bottom-dwelling hunter. Jutting jaw hung open, row of hook-teeth ready to rend flesh and scrape bone. A pair of grey arms swept wide, threatening to fill the room from wall to wall, ready to slam shut around Natalie and myself.

Somebody screamed — Evelyn, I think, in retrospect. Twil gaped in surprise for half a second, then growled low in her throat, lips peeling back from her teeth as her werewolf transformation whirled into place around her true flesh. Raine moved quick, no hesitation. She turned so as to put herself between the Shambler and me. She reached into her jacket, drawing and pointing her handgun in one

quick motion.

None of them would have been fast enough.

With one tentacle I grabbed Raine's gun and forced it to point at the floor. With a second I slapped against Twil's front to stop her rushing the Shambler. A third was still wrapped tight and secure around poor little Natalie, still sagging as if unconscious, stringy bile hanging from her lips, with no idea what was happening.

Three tentacles were left free, to pump full of paralytic toxin and lash out at the Shambler.

I filled my lungs with air and *screeched*.

The Shambler actually flinched. I like to think it was the volume and power of my screech, but I probably just sounded like an angry dolphin. In retrospect it was more likely the combined threat of me, a werewolf, a firearm, and Evelyn fumbling her bone-wand out from under her armpit.

The Outsider marine-ape vanished, leaving behind a puddle of swamp mud.

We all stood in shocked silence for a single heartbeat.

Twil wheezed as if punched in the chest — which, to be fair, was exactly what I'd just done to her. "Fuck!" she grunted.

Raine gently eased her handgun free from my tentacle. I let it go. She didn't look at me or stop to ask what had happened, she just turned on the spot, keeping the gun pointed at the floor for safety, trying to stand guard in every direction at once. She understood, instantly, what we needed, even if she had no idea of the specifics. If I hadn't been covered in mud and in the middle of a crisis, I could have kissed her for that.

Evelyn didn't take this in her stride quite as easily. "What the fuck just invaded my house?!"

"She! It's a she!" I panted, scratchy and raw through my twisted throat. "And she's sapient, and don't shoot her! But don't touch her either, absolutely do not touch her!"

Before I could explain properly, Lozzie poked her head around the kitchen doorway, where the Shambler had stood moments before.

All Lozzie's usual bounce and energy was missing. Her face was

pale and twitchy, eyes skittish and moving too fast, hair stuck to her forehead with sweat. I hadn't seen her look that way since I'd rescued her from her late brother, like a terrified animal ready to bite or flee. Her pastel pink-and-blue poncho was drawn in tight, like a jellyfish floating downward in the water, doing her best to remain unseen and unremarkable.

"Heathy!" She exploded into the room the moment our eyes met, splashing through the puddle of swamp water left by the Shambler, apparently uncaring about her socks getting soaked and filthy. "I didn't know where you went and I thought you were back with Jan but you weren't there either and I couldn't feel you anywhere I couldn't find you I'm sorry I—"

I shoved Natalie toward Lozzie, a package of shivering flesh wrapped in yellow plastic. Her wellington boots skidded across the flagstones. Lozzie flinched, not quite following, her poncho curled tight as if she wanted to dive into the waters and be away from here.

"Take her!" I yelled.

The girl was beginning to come round from the shock of the Slip at last, just enough to raise her head and stare with bleary, bloodshot, aching eyes, at all the strange people in the room with her. As she blinked and recovered, I could see the panic mounting on her pale, drawn, exhausted face once again.

"Where—" she panted in a tiny voice. "Turmy— where— I'm not—I—"

I squeezed her shoulders with the tentacle. "It's okay, Natalie, it's okay. These are the people I told you about, they're all friends, they're going to keep you safe." I pushed her toward Lozzie again. "Take her, now!"

Twil put a hand over her own mouth. "Oh my god, you kidnapped a little girl."

Raine snorted.

"Rescued, not kidnapped!" I snapped at Twil. "From Outside, and from Edward Lilburne!"

Evelyn hissed through clenched teeth. "Edward?"

"And we don't have time to discuss it! Lozzie! You're the only one

here besides me who can protect her, take—”

I didn't need to finish the sentence. I don't know if it was my bare-bones explanation, or the mention of her uncle's name, or the mounting terror in little Natalie's eyes, but I saw something visibly shift in Lozzie's posture. The twitchy, skittish anxiety flowed out of her, replaced in an instant as if she'd thrown a switch. Suddenly, Lozzie no longer looked ready to run. She flapped out her poncho, lit up with a big smile, and crouched down so she was level with Natalie.

“Hi! I'm Lozzie! I'm like Heather there but different! And fluffy!” She flapped the edges of her poncho, beckoning.

“Like ... the octopus-lady?” Natalie croaked. Her throat sounded terribly raw. She glanced back at me for reassurance.

“Octopus lady!” Lozzie giggled. “Yup-yup, that's Heathy alright!”

“Lozzie is a friend,” I said. “She'll keep you safe, Nat, I promise. She does the same kinds of things I do, she can stop the gorilla monster from taking you away again.”

I urged Natalie toward Lozzie, but the girl didn't need any further encouragement. She staggered the last few steps and then threw her arms around Lozzie's neck, clinging on tight and whining into her shoulder with a cocktail of fear and sobbing relief. Lozzie wrapped the poncho around Natalie's shivering body in return, uncaring of the mud and the residual swamp water on the girl's clothes, enclosing her in the thick folds of pastel blue and pink.

I wondered, not for the first time, if there was more to that poncho than merely a piece of comfortable fabric in the colours of a trans flag.

“Lozzie,” I said quickly, trying to get her attention — and realised I didn't even have to catch her eye. Lozzie was already listening, ready for my instructions, attentive and alert.

Well, as alert as she could look with her permanently heavy-lidded eyes.

“Lozzie, you hold onto her and you don't let go,” I said all in a rush, trying not to stumble over my words. The adrenaline and the urgency made my lips feel like rubber. “The Shambler — the thing that was just here — I think she'll follow me but she might come for

Natalie instead. She takes people away, Slips them Outside, understand? You're the only one except me who can stop that, or at least get back here if it happens. You don't let go of Nat, understand? Don't let go."

Lozzie nodded.

"*She?*" Twil muttered, still half werewolf, flexing her claws. "That thing was a she?"

Quickly as I could without hurting Natalie, I unwrapped my tentacle from around her shoulders, undoing the Slip-proof safety harness and sliding it out from inside Lozzie's poncho. Lozzie held the girl tight in her arms, safe and secure. She was in good hands. I'd never seen Lozzie so serious and determined.

Natalie squirmed in Lozzie's arms, twisting her head around, suddenly alarmed again. "Turmy? Where's Turmy? I didn't drop him, I promise I held on! Turmy!"

Twil pulled a grimace which contained far too many teeth. "What the hell is a Turmy?"

Raine nodded down at Turmy, still on the floor. "The cat, I assume?"

"Yah," I panted. "He's a good cat."

The exhausted old marmalade gentleman was still recovering from the effects of the Slip. Turmy got to his paws like his joints were made of rusted steel, then made a beeline for Natalie as if the rest of us weren't even present. He sniffed a corner of Lozzie's poncho and apparently decided in a single instant that she was a friend to all cats.

Then he turned and hissed at Twil. One couldn't blame him, she currently had more fur than he did. And bigger claws.

"Heather," Evelyn said my name, tight and tense. Praem was helping her over to the table, pulling out a chair for her while she leaned on Praem's other arm. She looked wild, frowning like she was about to have a migraine. "Heather, what was that creature? What was that? And what does Edward Lilburne have to do with it? And where were you?"

"Yeah, yo," Twil piped up. "The fuck was that? More importantly, is it coming back?"

Evelyn hissed with irritation. She waved away the chair Praem was trying to get her to sit down in. “Twil, language. There is a child right there, you reprobate.”

“Dimensional Shambler,” I said. “That’s what Edward called it. They snatch people to Outside, they can Slip, kind of, a bit like me.” I tried to get steady on my own feet again and gather my thoughts. I had to go, go go go, don’t linger, move now, before she returned and snatched anybody. “And it’s a she, a female, and sapient! Don’t shoot her, please. I think Edward was training her with food, it’s not her fault, but I can’t stay here, she’ll follow me instead of taking Natalie again. I think!”

I pulled my broken mobile phone out of my pocket and tossed it on the table, then started to tug at my hoodie, struggling to roll the water-logged garment up and over my head. It was still soaked through with swamp water and mud, and now my skin was covered in sweat, so the fabric stuck to me and threatened to suffocate me if I got it only halfway up and over my head. I rammed two tentacles up inside and rolled my shoulders awkwardly, hissing with frustration, and trying not to think about the paradox of using my tentacles to remove a piece of clothing that they regularly passed through. Pneuma-somatic flesh is weird, to say the least.

Raine said my name. “Heather, whoa, slow down a sec.” She shot me only the briefest of glances, though she was right by my side. She was still holding her gun low and keeping her eyes up, waiting for the Shambler to re-appear. “Talk to us, fill us in, yeah?”

“There’s no time for that!” I growled with frustration as I got one arm stuck inside my soaking hoodie.

“Heather.”

The whipcrack in Raine’s voice shot through me like an electric shock applied to my backside, a hot grasp reaching up inside my belly, a leash around my brain stem. I froze, all except my tentacles still struggling with my hoodie. Panting, staring at Raine, blinking several times. Brain rebooting.

Bless her, that was exactly what I needed.

“ ... yes?” I said in barely a breath.

Raine’s eyes flickered to me, one second of full concentration.

“Tell us what you need,” she said.

I nodded with feeling, as if to placate the messenger of an angry goddess — and in a way, that was exactly who Raine served. I took a deep breath, trying to dial down the unfocused haste. I wouldn’t be any good to anybody if I couldn’t communicate.

Evelyn grumbled through her teeth, “Actually, I would prefer a bit more planning than that. What the hell is going—”

The Shambler appeared in the corner of the kitchen, as if she had stepped out from behind the wedged-open door, diagonally behind Lozzie.

Head ducked low, shoulders jutting high, arms held out in a semi-circle as if she was about to land a rugby tackle and slam Lozzie and Natalie to the floor.

I screeched like a banshee and whipped out with all my tentacles, flushing them with warning colouration in red and yellow, pumping the skin full of paralytic toxins. But the Shambler was already too close to her targets, the powerful muscles of her hind legs contracted and ready to spring. And I was at the wrong angle, constricted by the wet confines of my hoodie. I stumbled and lost my balance, clattering into a chair.

Raine’s handgun came up and around, but she hesitated, stalled by my heartfelt plea to spare the Shambler’s life. Evelyn stammered out a snatch of Latin, her hands hurrying across her bone-wand, but she couldn’t think fast enough. Twil roared like a prehistoric dire-wolf and leapt past us in a bundle of fur and claw, but too slow, and she knew she couldn’t risk touching the Shambler. Natalie screamed into Lozzie’s shoulder, grabbing at her as if trying to burrow deeper into the protection of her pastel poncho. Turmy, bless his gentleman’s heart, turned and hissed at the Shambler, arching his back and fluffing his tail to make himself as big as possible.

Lozzie looked up at the Shambler, from behind a thin veil of wispy blonde hair. Unsurprised, unconcerned, and unsmiling.

“No,” she said — or rather, she sang, as a single note that seemed to blanket the air.

To my amazement, the Shambler hesitated.

It was like watching a cat or a puppy encounter a lobster for the

first time. Total confusion, faced with something beyond experience. The Shambler paused, her musculature lost all the springy momentum of an impending pounce, uncertain what exactly Lozzie was. The creature's face was unreadable, of course. I doubted very much that slack hanging jaw and nose-less flat expanse and pair of wide eyes like pools of oil could show anything even vaguely approximate to a human expression. She hadn't evolved here, after all. But the physical response smashed through all boundaries to communication: Lozzie made the thing pause in shock and wonder.

But not for long. The heartbeat passed and the Shambler was already re-gathering herself, arms ratcheting outward for a bear hug, powerful thigh and calf muscles bunching like watermelons to throw her at her target.

Luckily, one heartbeat was all we needed.

Praem appeared, almost within arms' reach of the Shambler. She'd marched around the table from the other side. Prim and proper and very straight-backed, Praem leaned in close as she dared.

"Bad girl," Praem said — and the Shambler flinched.

She flinched again when Twil snapped in her face. Whirling canine jaws and two paws full of claws warded her off, though Twil was careful not to touch. While I was hissing and struggling against my wet hoodie, Evelyn must have gotten her spell in order, because a rising trio of shouted Latin words heralded a sudden drop in air temperature, as if somebody had opened a door to a winter morning and ushered in the freezing air.

But all that wasn't quite enough. As I got my tentacles straight and prepared to join in, I could see the Shambler's huge black eyes fixate on Natalie in Lozzie's arms, see the muscles bunch and tendons tighten. She was going to push right past Twil and go for it, spell and claw and angry maid be damned.

But why? Why did she lead me to the lost girl Outside, in that grey and endless swamp, and then try to take her back again? Perhaps it was just instinct, or maybe Edward's conditioning was just that strong. Or perhaps I was missing something vital.

I bunched my tentacles, ready to hurl myself across the gap and land on the Shambler like a stinging jellyfish. I would kill her, if she

made me do it.

But then a mass of whirling black tentacles burst in through the kitchen door — Tenny.

Trilling like a lepidopteran version of a rattlesnake, her tentacles spread in a corona of snapping mouths, her wings fluttering and flickering with dizzying patterns of oil-on-water light, and patterned with swirling colours like the inside of a fairy mound on hallucinogens, Tenny reared up between the Shambler and Lozzie.

The display was enough to make even Twil flinch and recoil. Evelyn's spell spluttered out and the cold snap shut off as Evelyn grunted with pain. Raine had to look away, wincing through her teeth. I even retracted my tentacles with an instinctive flinch.

I think it was the flickering light on Tenny's wings, the swirling colours in oil-shimmer and purple-blossom and bile-green; the effect was both hypnotic and headache-inducing, painful to the eyes and ensnaring to the senses. To stare would be transfixed, but to look away would render oneself vulnerable before this rattling, trilling threat. I'd never seen her do anything like that before. Her camouflage-cloak was one thing, but this was the same biological principle turned toward ends I'd never imagined.

Tenny's flashing display was a very eloquent way of saying *go away* or *I will dismantle you*.

The Shambler took one look at her, then vanished again.

"Baaaah!" Tenny trilled at the space where the Shambler had stood.
"Bah!"

Luckily for the rest of us, Tenny dialled down the display on her wings, returning them to their usual muted darkness, except for a lingering swirl of colour just beneath the surface. But her tentacles still stood outward, snapping with angry little slaps.

"Tenns!" Lozzie cheered.

"Good assist," Praem intoned.

"Baah!" Tenny repeated, frowning a very serious little frown, turning on the spot as if she understood the Shambler might reappear at any moment. "Baaaaah!"

"Holy fucking shit, Tenny," Twil heaved, one hand on her own

chest.

“Language,” Evelyn hissed — probably because she had nothing else more useful to say.

“Baahhhh.”

Little Natalie was still screaming, almost inconsolable with panic, staring up at the black-and-white apparition which had chased away the Shambler.

“No no, it’s okay!” Lozzie said to her, trying to hold her still. “That’s Tenny, she’s my little girl! Kinda like you! It’s okay-okay!”

“Bwwwweeeeeeeh?” went Tenny, tilting her head at Natalie.
“Hiiiiii?”

Lozzie’s reassurances fell on deaf ears — but Turmy did the trick. While Tenny was staring back at Natalie, one of Tenny’s tentacles dipped toward the floor and found Turmy. The grand old marmalade gentleman did not seem very cordial toward this strange interloper, and looked like he was about to hiss and scratch at Tenny’s subconscious peace offering. But then the tentacle bobbed forward and flopped down in the exact position for Turmy to give it a cautious sniff.

One sniff convinced the cat. The tentacle popped back up and Turmy rubbed his face on it, claiming Tenny for his cat territory. Natalie must have seen this, because her panicked scream trailed off, huge eyes watching as Turmy rubbed himself on the tentacle and Tenny petted him in return.

“Tenny’s a little girl too, just like you!” Lozzie repeated, trying to catch Natalie’s eyes. But the girl had eyes only for her cat.

Tenny puffed her cheeks out and trilled, “Not little. Bigger than her.”

Human child and pneuma-somatic moth-puppy looked at each other for a moment. Turmy padded back to Natalie, bringing the tentacle with him. Natalie awkwardly patted the tentacle. Tenny made a “buuurrrr” noise.

“Tenny, thank you,” I said. I finally got myself upright again, through with my hoodie still half-off. “Tenny, Tenny I need you to do something for me.”

“Heath?”

“That little girl, her name is Natalie. I need you to protect her, please. If that thing comes back again, can you chase it away?”

“Yah!” Tenny trilled. She puffed herself up, tentacles wiggling, pulling back her coal-black lips in a big smile.

“But whatever you do, don’t touch it, okay? You mustn’t touch it. In fact, keep one tentacle wrapped around Lozzie’s arm. Can you do that for me?”

Tenny nodded and did exactly as I requested. In a moment, Natalie, Lozzie, and Tenny were all bound loosely together. Turmy seemed a bit nonplussed and reluctant to join in, but I doubted very much that the Shambler would try to spirit away the cat all by himself. He was peering at something in the front room. I craned my neck and spotted Whistle by the foot of the stairs.

Ah yes, that was exactly what we needed amid all this, a feline-to-canine standoff.

“Heather,” Raine reminded me, gently but firmly. “What do you need?”

I sighed and tugged at my incredibly wet hoodie, still hanging off me like a dead fish. “First I need to get out of this, so I can move. Help me, please, before the Shambler comes back.”

With some deft handiwork — though not before giving her pistol to Praem to hold — Raine managed to get my hoodie up and over my head. I felt several pounds lighter, and I probably was. She dumped it on the floor with an apologetic wince to Praem.

“Floor is better than table,” Praem said.

Twil clicked her tongue. “Washing machine is gonna struggle with that mess.”

“No,” said Praem.

“What next?” Raine asked me. “Talk to us, Heather.”

“I can lead the Shambler away!” I said, hopping and bouncing as I yanked my wet socks off my feet as well. “And I’ve got to go after Edward! I can catch him!”

“Wait!” Evelyn snapped. She was still gripping her bone-wand,

though it didn't quite conceal her shaking. "You know where he is? Heather, you found the bast—" Evelyn flickered a glance at Natalie, still shivering in Lozzie's hug. "You found him?"

I shook my head. "Not the real him! A fake, like he was using before, but if I can touch it then I might be able to trace the control back to him, if he's still there! But he might be gone, I don't know, but I have to try." I spoke too fast as I half-considered stripping out of my trousers too, but I decided against it. Didn't want to get arrested for public indecency, if we ended up elsewhere. "I need shoes! Shoes!"

Twil darted into the front room. "On it!"

"Heather," Evelyn said, visibly losing her temper with me, "in the name of God, please, explain!"

I took a deep breath and steadied myself, then locked eyes with Evelyn. She blinked, as if surprised by something she saw deep inside me.

"Edward interrupted our Slip home," I said. "He did it with some kind of machine, I don't understand. Lozzie, it wasn't your fault that first time, you didn't do anything wrong."

Lozzie let out a tiny sigh and went, "puuuuuh."

I hurried on. "He wanted to talk to me, but I think it was some kind of ploy, a cover for something else, but I can't figure out what. He was in a magic circle as a protective tripwire and he claimed that it wasn't really him, just a 'vessel'."

Raine nodded. "Like that time at the pub."

"Yes! Exactly!"

"We couldn't contact you," Evelyn snapped. "And Lozzie couldn't locate you either."

I shook my head. "He had some kind of Faraday cage, around a cottage. That's where the Slip took me. A cottage in Devon, or at least that's what he was claiming. I never got out into the garden to check where we were."

"Devon?" Evelyn pulled a disgusted face. "Bourgie fu—" She covered the rude word with a cough.

"And he had the Dimensional Shambler too," I said. "And set her on

me with some kind of command. She took me Outside, where he's been feeding her stay animals, pets, stuff like that. And Natalie!" I pointed at the girl. "But the Shambler hadn't eaten her. She led me to the girl, to rescue her! I'm certain the Shambler didn't really want to kill and eat her at all! She's from here — well, from Manchester. But I rescued her!"

Raine bit her lower lip in thought. Evelyn frowned hard. "Then what the hell is it doing now?"

"I don't know! But if I drop in on Edward — right on his head — I might be able to catch him!"

Raine frowned at me in concern. "Heather, you're steaming."

At first I thought she was being poetic. But then Raine pressed a hand to my forehead and I felt such cool relief. She wasn't exaggerating, I was burning up as if in the grip of a fever, my skin hot enough to begin drying my t-shirt and soaked trousers.

"I-It's the reactor," I said. "I need to dial down, ease down, I-I'll be okay."

Twil jumped back into the kitchen with her arms full of shoes, not just my trainers. She dumped them on the floor, kicked mine toward me, and slammed her feet into her own trainers with a one-two stomp.

"Let's go then!" she cheered. "Come on, let's kick his arse so hard he can taste his own—"

"Twil," Evelyn grumbled. Twil cut herself off, but not without a huge grin plastered across her face. She shot me a big thumbs up.

"Well done, big H, well done! We've got him, right?!"

"Wait, no," I stammered. "Like I said, it's only a remote-controlled vessel, and ... and it's just ... "

I hadn't expected this. Everything was moving too fast, spinning out of my already tenuous control. Raine scooped up her own shoes from the pile and tugged them onto her feet, then ducked into the magical workshop for a second. She returned tucking her big black combat knife into her waistband, shrugging on her armoured motorcycle jacket, and hauling her home-made riot shield. Praem was helping Evelyn on with her trainers, but the doll-demon was already wearing her smart black shoes.

“We all ready?” Raine said, catching Evelyn’s eye. “You need anything else?”

Evelyn sighed heavily, doing a poor job of covering her anxiety. She gestured vaguely with her bone-wand. “How about a commando unit of Royal Marines?”

Raine clicked her tongue and hissed through her teeth. “Can’t stretch that on short notice. We’ll have to do.”

Praem straightened up and gave Evelyn her arm for support. “Better than any marine.”

“Yeah!” Twil whooped.

Evelyn screwed her eyes up and grimaced. I could see the swear word trapped in her throat, but she didn’t say it out loud.

I took a single, hesitant step back from everybody, from my friends. “Raine, no,” I said, shaking my head. “I didn’t mean for this, I didn’t mean for everybody to come with me. There was nobody there except him.”

“We don’t know that,” Evelyn snapped. “Not for sure. Don’t be absurd.”

“No, no, I can’t—”

Raine shot me an indulgent smile, that beaming grin that she knew I couldn’t resist. “Heather, hey, as if we’d not come with.”

“No!” I hiccuped loudly, then had to clamp down on the rising panic in my voice. Natalie was safe now, but I’d been her anchor, the one telling her she was going to be okay. The last thing that little girl needed to hear was her saviour shaken and afraid and uncertain. I took a sharp breath and tried to rephrase my sudden irrational panic. “I mean, Raine, I need you to all stay here and keep Natalie safe. I-I can do this myself, all I have to do is drop on top of Edward, right where he’s waiting — or, was waiting, if he’s still there. It’s really simple, I can do it!”

I expected a look from Raine — an indulgent sigh or affectionate scepticism, a don’t-be-silly-Heather, a rejection of what I was feeling. But she just glanced at Lozzie instead, and said, “Loz, you and Tenna, you’ve got Natalie safe, right? The big ol’ Shamble-ramble isn’t gonna take her anywhere?”

Lozzie nodded once, hard and determined, such a serious look on her little face. “Got her!”

“Yaaaah!” Tenny trilled.

Natalie made a little whine, burrowing deeper into the protective folds of Lozzie’s poncho.

Raine turned back to me. “We’re coming with. Heather, hey, the girl is safe. You got her out, you did good. We’re coming with you.”

“What about the house?!” I blurted out. “What if Edward is sending something here right now? Somebody needs to stay and watch!”

Evelyn sighed. “Edward is not going to hit this house with mundane asset. If he was going to do that, he would have done so already, when you were gone and out of contact. Besides, look at the front door.”

I blinked in confusion, then craned my neck to see all the way into the front room.

Three spider servitors were clustered around the front door, one on either side and one hanging from the ceiling, all of them watching the door like ambush predators ready for the first sign of movement. Stingers like railway spikes quivered in the air, aching to plunge into vulnerable flesh. Marmite was clutching the wall too, further off to the left, by the stairs. His segmented bone-tentacles were spread out across the room like tripwires.

“Three ... ?” I murmured.

“From the attic. Took me enough shouting and Latin to get them into position,” Evelyn grumbled. “They’ll do their job this time.”

“What about the back door?” I gestured wide, scrambling for an excuse — but an excuse for what? “What about the windows? Where’s Zheng?”

“On her way home,” Raine said. “I called her the moment you went missing, she’s already on her way back. Ten minutes, tops. Can we wait ten minutes?”

Evelyn scoffed. “She’ll want to come too.”

“Then we go, now.” Raine said. “Heather, you ready for this?”

“Yes, but— but I can do this myself, I—”

Evelyn snorted. “Oh yes, I’m absolutely going to let you drop yourself straight into the field effect area of an unknown magic circle. Don’t be totally absurd, Heather. This is a real mage you’re dealing with. You require my presence for this. I can counter anything that he’s set up for us.”

I stumbled back another step. Wordless panic gripped my guts. I hiccuped, loudly and painfully. “I ... I ... I need you to ... I need Natalie to be safe. I *need* her to be safe. Raine, Evee, please, I need —”

I need you to protect me, ten years ago.

Natalie was not me. Her circumstances were not even close to mine. She had not been to Wonderland, or been subjected to the Eye, or had half her soul ripped out. But none of that mattered. As far as abyssal instinct and ancient trauma were concerned, she may as well have been me in miniature. That younger self I held swaddled and safe inside my core, wrapped in so many layers of protection, her long watch finally ended when I’d met Raine and Evelyn and realised I’d been right all along — Natalie was like her, extracted from my mind and made manifest in the flesh. I could not allow this girl to come to harm.

It was completely irrational, but it mattered more than I would ever be able to put into words. I didn’t just want Raine and Evelyn and Twil and Praem to stay here and make sure Natalie was safe, I wanted them to go back in time to save me and Maisie from Wonderland. I wanted to meet my friends ten years earlier than I had done, because then there would be so much less pain.

A seed of doubt germinated in the back of my mind: Edward Lilburne could not have chosen a more perfect victim to arouse my sympathy, my identification, my trauma — and my rage.

Had he engineered this on purpose? Had he chosen Natalie to find this crack in my armour? But why? To paralyse me with indecision and the memory of torment?

All it made me want to do was annihilate him.

I didn’t have time to phrase that suspicion, or chew and digest it properly. Help came in a new form and decided for me.

Click went the metal tip of an umbrella against the floor of the front room. We all looked round.

Sevens-Shades-of-Sunlight, the Yellow Princess in all her soft and sharp glory, starched and prim and icy-cold in her pressed blouse and smart skirt, had appeared behind Lozzie, in a similar manner to the Shambler herself. But Natalie didn't scream. Perhaps Sevens had the presence of mind to step out from behind the corner first, so as not to scare the girl.

The Yellow Princess locked eyes with me. "I will stay. The house will be safe, Heather. The girl will be safe."

"Sevens," I sighed, then hiccuped again, then grunted in pain. "I ... thank you."

"Right on, yellow," said Raine.

"It seems I am turning into a babysitter," said the Yellow Princess. "But I make no argument with this." She looked down at Natalie. "Hello, little one."

Natalie didn't say anything, just stared upward at this apparition of fallen royalty. I wondered if she understood what she was looking at.

"She's also dehydrated and possibly starving," I said quickly, before my resolve broke again. "She was stuck Outside, in that swamp, for god knows how long. And she needs cleaning, and soon. I don't know what pathogens might be in the water, the mud, so be careful. Get her washed and hydrated and ... and ... be safe, okay? Please."

Lozzie nodded. Tenny emitted a soft "burr". Sevens stared down at Natalie in an act of unspoken communication. Turmy padded over to Sevens on silent paws and sniffed at the hem of her skirt. A sharp flicker from her eyes informed Turmy that this lady was not for rubbing himself against, so Turmy compromised by rubbing himself on her umbrella. Sevens looked very unimpressed for a heartbeat — and Natalie, held in Lozzie's arms, let out a small, hesitant, but very real laugh.

She was going to be okay. Not like me.

"And she knows," I spoke up again. "This little girl, she's *in the know*, you understand? Lozzie, Sevens, don't lie to her, don't pretend it didn't happen. She was lost Outside. That happened. It was real."

Sevens lifted her eyes to mine and nodded, gently, softly. She got it.

All the chances I never had.

Evelyn hissed between her teeth, low enough that the girl couldn't hear. "Making her parents understand is going to be a hell of a job, Heather."

I shot a look at Evelyn. "We can do that. I can do that. I won't let the opposite happen!"

"Didn't say we can't," Evelyn grunted. "Just not looking forward to it."

Raine raised her voice. "Alright, ladies! Make a chain! Hands and feet inside the ride, brace for impact, we're goin' in hot!"

I bit my bottom lip, thinking hard. "I'm going to have to slingshot us around Camelot. I-I think I can do this in one go ... I think."

Twil thumbed over her shoulder, back into the magical workshop. "What about the big spooky doorway?"

Evelyn shook her head sharply. "Gateway is too slow, too many other risks. No. We go with Heather. I trust her more than my own fail-safes."

We got in position with the minimum amount of fuss, despite never having done this before. On one side, Raine linked her arm with mine, handgun and knife tucked safely away inside her clothes, her other arm holding onto her home-made riot shield, ready to cover me from the front. I wrapped two tentacles around her, for safety. On the other side, Praem linked her arm around my other elbow, then held Evelyn around the middle. A bit undignified, but very safe. Eevee scowled and gritted her teeth and readied her bone-wand in both hands, walking stick tucked under her armpit, concentration etched on her brow. She relaxed a fraction when I put a tentacle around her shoulders and held on tight. Twil stepped in on Praem's other side and hooked an arm around the doll-demon. I wrapped another tentacle around her waist, which made Twil go "oop!" in surprise.

"Hey, do we need a countdown?" Raine asked. "Countdown to launch?"

The grin on her face was not just for show. With her arm linked through mine, I could practically feel her vibrating with adrenaline, with the thrill of an upcoming fight. Her muscles sang a silent song

of tension and violence. It was a heady cocktail, pressed up right next to me.

"If anybody is counting down, it'll be me," I said. "Just brace, this will only take a second once I do it."

"Every combat drop needs a countdown. On my mark!"

Evelyn hissed. "Don't call it that, Raine, for pity's sake."

"Combat drop," Praem echoed.

"Not you too," Evelyn grunted. "Don't you dare jinx us."

"On my mark," said Praem.

Raine laughed. "Praem gets it!"

"Three," Praem intoned, turning her head to look at me. I nodded, tightened my tentacles, and took a deep breath. Evelyn gripped her bone wand. Twil flexed claws of semi-sold pneuma-somatic flesh and bared all her teeth.

"Hey hey," Raine said. "I'm supposed to be doing the countdown!"

"Stay safe!" Lozzie called out.

"Two."

"We're gonna be fine!" Twil called in return. "Be right back!"

"Everyone close your eyes," I said.

"One."

From over by Sevens, Turmy let out a little "*Murrr*."

"Mark."

I reached down into the black heart of the Eye's lessons and pulled out an equation that was fast becoming an old friend, a tool that fit into my hand with the ease of long use, no matter how much it hurt. To slingshot us around Camelot was easy enough, I just had to re-adapt the trick I'd used in the Library of Carcosa. Double the equation on top of itself, leave half of it unsaid, unthought, unused until we were riding the membrane. Teleportation could be achieved, at a high price in blood and pain.

The pieces slid into place, slamming across the surface of my mind in bloody-hot runnels through my neurons, leaving burned flesh

and seared thoughts behind.

And in that last split second as reality folded up like a collapsing paper bag, as Twil whooped and Raine braced and Evelyn screwed her eyes up tight against a horror she knew all too well, as Lozzie hugged Natalie tight and Sevens raised her chin to watch us go — the Dimensional Shambler stepped out of the air right in front of my closing eyes.

Like a minnow in the wake of a shark, she stepped toward me, into the transition across the membrane, riding my Slip all the way down, alongside us.

Out.

= =

A membrane-skipping slingshot was not an easy feat.

Human beings are not meant to pierce the membrane between reality and Outside. We're not evolved for it, physically or spiritually. The experience is like whiplash for the soul, being slammed back and forth inside one's own flesh, jarred out of place in relation to one's physical self-hood.

A slingshot was more than twice as bad. I used Camelot as a reference point to swing us around before the Slip completed, skimming the surface of the membrane, just like Lozzie's technique.

Like a skipping stone, bouncing across the water, refusing to sink, held aloft for that crucial moment by a trick of physics as the water itself generated lift. A paradox of motion, written in the mathematics of creation.

That was all a metaphor, of course. But it was the best one I had, and it got the job done.

My aim was improving, too. We crashed back into reality amid the bronze evening light of a Westcountry sunset, flooding through the high windows of a rural Devon cottage, in the middle of that wide open kitchen, right on top of Edward Lilburne's rickety wooden chair.

It was to Raine's great credit that she managed to keep her feet and ready her makeshift riot shield, despite letting out a sound like she wanted to be terribly sick all over the floor. Twil didn't fare quite so well, reeling and stumbling and trying to catch herself on empty air

with wind-milling arms, howling with disorientation and pain, dropping to all fours. Praem held fast, Evelyn's harness and rock, as Evelyn herself slurred out Latin while wincing and hissing, her hands moving across her bone-wand to dispel whatever traps Edward Lilburne might have left for us.

The Dimensional Shambler landed too, right in front of us, a wall of grey muscle. But then she lurched backward as if finally afraid of me, a hopping motion more frog than ape, and knocked over Edward's chair.

He wasn't sitting in it.

A moment of chaos and confusion gripped us all. The Shambler did not vanish, but fled to the far wall. Twil turned on the spot, reeling and growling. Raine did the same, trying to stay on her feet but almost failing. Evelyn shouted Latin and then trailed off as silence fell.

I gritted my teeth against the headache pain and lashed at the empty chair with one tentacle, blood running freely from my nose. "He's not here! No!"

"Gone," Raine said.

"Maybe he's still around!" Twil howled, grunting and gripping her own face with the pain and disorientation of the Slip. "And what the hell is that thing doing?!" She waved a hand at the Shambler.

A rough, reedy, raspy voice floated from the corridor beyond the kitchen, or perhaps from deeper in the house, or perhaps upstairs.

"She awaits her master's voice," said Edward Lilburne.

His words seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, then from outdoors, as if floating through the high windows on one side of the kitchen. We all turned every which way, as if expecting attack from anywhere.

"Do you know what magic is good for?" Edward continued.

One of the windows was open just a crack — the voice narrowed, came from there, undoubtedly. He was out in the garden.

"Very little, in fact," said Edward, as we picked up our feet and began to move. In all the confusion, the adrenaline, the need to hunt him down, I almost missed the sardonic melancholy, the

resignation in his tone. “Very little indeed. But you are going to help me make use of it, whether I like it or not. Aren’t you?”

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.9

I would love to say that my friends and I rushed out of that cottage kitchen, tumbled through the corridor toward the back door, and shot out into an overgrown garden in some forgotten corner of rural Devon, bathed in the bronze sunlight of early evening. Like the righteous avenging heroes in a puerile fantasy story, arriving at the moment of maximum atmospheric drama, to confront an evil wizard for all his cruel misdeeds inflicted on the innocent and the helpless.

We didn't do that, of course. If we were the sort of people who went gallivanting around like that, we would have all died long ago, and Edward wouldn't have had anything to worry about.

Alas, if one's response to the hidden supernatural truth of the world is to dress in Lycra, strap on a utility belt, and charge into every situation crying 'yield, villain!', then one doesn't tend to last very long. Those who survive their baptism of the otherworldly tend to learn a habit of paranoia, or at least a dose of healthy caution. However much we might gently jibe Nicole for her aversion to involvement in the supernatural, or pity Kimberly for her crippling fear of magic, or even look down on Jan for her self-admitted avoidance and cowardice, theirs was by far the more rational response. The sensible thing to do when one discovered that magic was real and the world was filled with hidden monsters was to run far away and never look back, or somehow acquire a small arsenal of illegal weaponry and live in a bunker. Even Raine, with her leap-first philosophy and boundless confidence, was far more cautious and careful than I sometimes gave her credit for. She might easily "start blastin'" as she so delicately put it once, but she would always check her corners first, either literally or metaphorically.

So, when Edward's voice floated through the high windows on one side of that rustic cottage kitchen, we all knew it was probably bait.

Well, all except Twil. After all, she was invincible.

We were still standing inside the magic circle from within which Edward had addressed me earlier, next to the rickety wooden chair I'd knocked over in my frustration at discovering that he'd escaped our ambush.

I was disentangling my tentacles from the others, to free them up for independent action, getting ready to move to the doorway or repel an attack, still trying to fight off the after-effects of the sling-shot Slip. Raine was caught in the moment of turning, looking away from the Dimensional Shambler and up at the window, the source of Edward's voice. Her home-made riot shield was heavy in one arm as she drew her pistol with her free hand. The Shambler had stepped over the edge of the circle and was pressing herself against the back wall, a slab of grey muscle suddenly wary of us, like an animal not quite yet cornered. Praem held Evelyn steady, while Evelyn rapidly adjusted her grip on her bone-wand, frowning like a gathering storm, ready to deal with whatever Edward was about to throw at us.

But silly old Twil dropped to all fours, more wolf than human, and shot for the kitchen doorway in a clatter of claws on tile.

Luckily for us, Evelyn knew how to use her voice as a whip.

"Stay!"

Twil jarred to a halt like a certain cartoon coyote slamming head first into a cliff-face painted to look like a road tunnel. Her whole body juddered and slammed backward, lurching up onto her hind legs, a pillar of bristling fur, sharp claws, and far too many teeth. It would have been the height of comedy under any other circumstances, but in that mystery cottage in the seconds before a confrontation between mages, it terrified me enough to provoke a loud hiccup.

Twil found her voice, holding her hands up as if poised before an electric fence. "What?! What?! Shit, what is it?! What?!"

"Shut up!" Evelyn yelled. "Nobody move unless I say, not an inch!"

"Don't have to tell us twice," Raine murmured.

We braced for the inevitable.

A moment of silence fell on the cottage kitchen, broken only by the low drone of summer insects out in the garden, the panting of our

own laboured breathing, and the pounding of my blood in my ears. Evening sunlight licked across the floor in tongues of invisible fire. I felt sticky sweat down my back and under my arms, mingling with the damp remnants of Outsider swamp water. I held my tentacles poised, fanned out, trying to resist the urge to hiss and screech, or just follow Twil's example and launch myself at the doorway into the corridor. A deep itch entered my muscles, a tingling at the base of my skull, the need to move.

Raine was like a spring aching to uncoil. Twil looked ready to bite through a steel plate. But the greatest burden fell on Evelyn, even as she leaned on Praem for support. Her knuckles were white on the bone-wand, her eyes locked on the single open window where Edward's voice had come from. Visible sweat beaded on her forehead. We all knew that if some kind of magical attack came, she would be our only real protection.

But nothing happened. Silence turned to seconds. Edward did not speak again. The walls didn't start bleeding or extruding tentacles or closing in to crush us. Nothing leapt out of thin air to rend us to shreds. The Shambler stayed where she cowered.

My shoulder blades ached. I realised I was gritting my teeth.

"Alright," Evelyn hissed. She sounded doubtful. "Alright. Alright, okay. Nobody move until I say so."

"Gotcha, boss," Raine replied. No hint of sarcasm. Twil nodded too. But I couldn't answer, not with my muscles singing for action.

Evelyn flicked a glance at the Shambler, still pressed against the back wall, watching us with those plate-sized oil-black eyes. "Heather, does that thing understand us? Heather? Heather!"

I had to swallow hard before I looked back as well, blinking sweat out of my eyes. I realised I'd wrapped two tentacles around Edward's wooden chair, and was in the process of pulling it apart.

"I ... yes, sort of," I hissed. "I think she does. A little."

"The hell are we doing!?" Twil hissed over her shoulder too, through a mouth made mostly of teeth. "He's right out there! Come on!"

Evelyn shot her a look sharp enough to cut glass. "Did you lose a chunk of your brain while I wasn't looking? Take a head wound?"

Get an elective lobotomy?” Evelyn looked like she wanted to beat Twil to death with her walking stick, then strangle the rest of us, then lie down and sleep for a year. I couldn’t tell how much of that was exasperation and how much was the after effects of the sling-shot Slip. “Do not go running head-first into a trap set by an expert mage. Not even you, Twil. Not even you.”

“But I’m invincible! And he’s right there, right out there! He’s gonna do for us any sec, we’ve gotta hit him first!”

“Yes, I am well aware!” Evelyn spat. “And he’s ... he’s not doing anything. Which means he’s extremely unlikely to be right there, or anywhere here. We have missed him. That was bait, at best.”

“Then what the hell did we just hear?”

Evelyn clenched her jaw. “I don’t know. We should be under attack by now. Our ambush failed. We need to leave, right now.”

“He might still be here ... ” said a hissing, shaking, dripping voice.

That voice was mine.

It took me a moment to realise I had spoken. My voice was quivering with a terrible, unspeakable need, my mouth full of so much saliva I was almost drooling down my chin. My muscles itched and ached, my head was pounding with adrenaline and aggression. Two of my tentacles were pulling and tearing at the wooden chair, ripping off splinters and shards of wood. Raine had produced her modified pneuma-somatic seeing-glasses and was watching me through them with open concern. Praem was staring at the chair.

Abyssal instinct was screaming with the need to hunt. Edward Lilburne had escaped me once. He was prey, slippery and clever, but he was so close. Pull off his head, rip out his guts, crack his bones, find his soul. It was like electric current up my spine.

Evelyn shook her head, sharp and grim, too preoccupied to notice that I was losing my mind. “His presence makes no difference either way. This is a trap, and we are not walking into it. He would be an idiot not to attack us now, an idiot! Wait a moment, wait a moment, everybody just wait, for pity’s sake, while I figure this out.”

Twil gritted her teeth, but she did as she was told. Raine covered

the door with her handgun. I watched the Shambler, trying to get a hold on myself.

Evelyn adjusted her grip on the bone-wand, as if preparing a different counter-spell. Praem let go of her waist and supported her by the arm instead, also openly watching the Shambler, in case the Outsider creature was about to betray us or respond to some hidden command from Edward.

Evelyn's eyes dropped to the triple-layered magic circle that surrounded us. The design was scuffed where the Shambler had crossed, ruined by swamp water. Twil's claws had also scratched flaws into the reams of Latin and Greek and Arabic notation.

"This is inert now," Evelyn said after a moment, "whatever it was doing before."

Twil hissed under her breath, "Yeah I coulda' told you that part myself, seeing as I'm not on fire or nothing."

Evelyn shot Twil a murderous look, then focused on the smaller magic circle, the one which had contained the Shambler earlier. "That one is textbook invocation, an invitation. That's where the swamp monster was?"

"Yes ... " I croaked. It felt like my brain was creaking with the pressure of holding back.

Evelyn stared for several long seconds at the strange mirrors-and-glass contraption beneath the windows, standing there like a cat tower made of steel. The little LCD screens and the crashed laptop were lying exactly where I'd seen them previously. Twil flexed her claws with shuddering physical impatience, grinding her teeth. Even Raine looked twitchy, as if she expected the Shambler to charge us at any moment. Only Praem was placid and calm, and we all knew that was an illusion. Her unwavering gaze had the Shambler pinned to the back wall.

"Heather?" Evelyn hissed.

"Y-yes. Yes, that's the machine he used to interrupt the Slip. Or so he claimed."

Evelyn shook her head. "Just leaving it here like this, it's nonsense. This is bullshit. No mage would leave their secrets on display. What the hell is he doing? What's he waiting for?"

Raine cleared her throat softly. "Something don't add up, right?"

"Yeah!" Twil hissed. "And why's he stopped talking?" She raised her voice, shouting up at the windows. "Hey, arse hole! Come back in here and fight me, you rancid cunt!"

Evelyn's attention snapped to me. "Heather, when you were here before, what did you see?" She jabbed with her bone-wand, out at the double-doorway which led into the corridor. "Anything around that door frame? Anything in the corridor? Anything at all?"

I shook my head, trying to focus. "Nothing. No circles, no traps, not that I saw. The door to the garden is on the left." I pointed upward, at the bank of small, high windows in the wall. "And there's the Faraday cage beyond that."

Raine hissed between her teeth. "Doubting very much that's just a Faraday cage."

"Quite," Evelyn huffed a humourless laugh. "This is making less and less sense. He should be attacking us right now, he should be trying to murder us. He should have wired this room with explosives or chlorine gas, even though I can defend against those things, maybe." Her hands tightened further on her bone-wand. "That's what I would have done. This doesn't add up."

"Retreat or advance?" Raine prompted. "Come on, Evee, don't get snagged up. Don't force me into executive decision mode."

"I'm not getting bloody well snagged up," she snapped back. "I don't understand this!"

Twil growled. "Retreat? Fuck that! Maybe he wants like, an honourable duel?"

"Ha," Evelyn barked. "As if." She spoke like she was chewing bricks. "He's not attacking us, but he knows that would make us paranoid, knows that I would read that as a *false* sense of security. Does he expect us to step out there? Or ... or to Slip into the garden, to avoid it? Or ... tch!" She tutted, staring at the open doorway, then the window. She looked like she was going to burst a blood vessel. I'd never seen her so paralysed by indecision before. She bit her bottom lip so hard I fear she might draw blood.

Raine repeated herself. "Retreat or advance? Now, Evee."

"Retreat," Evelyn snapped, suddenly no hesitation. "We had an

opportunity to get the drop on him. We failed. We retreat, right now. We do not go deeper into a thicket of traps laid by an expert mage specifically to fuck with us.” She turned to me and nodded. “Heather, you need Slip us back out. We’ve failed here.”

“Awwww shit!” Twil hissed. “Seriously?”

Raine exhaled with obvious relief. “Discretion is the better part of valour and all that.”

“Come again another day,” said Praem.

Abyssal hunting instinct screeched and writhed inside my chest, like a monster struggling to be born.

“But ... ” I croaked. “What if he is out there? What if ... Twil is ... right?”

My mind was chewing on this idea, turning it over and over and trying to worry through meat and crack bone to reach the core, the marrow, the truth of the matter. I felt like the idea was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t think straight, the need to hunt was blotting out everything else. The ends of my tentacles were coiling and uncoiling, as if trying to lend independent processing power to my brain. I barely noticed when I finally wrenched that wooden chair apart.

Evelyn snapped my name. “Heather, for fuck’s sake. An ancient mage does not seek a fucking honourable duel. What is wrong with you?”

“Down, girl,” said Praem. But it didn’t work.

“Hey, hey, Heather,” Raine purred. “Hey, look at me. Look at me.”

But I didn’t. I couldn’t. I was staring up at the single open window. Before I could stop myself, I raised my voice and called out.

“Are you still there? Edward, I’m talking to you. Are you still there?”

My voice came out as a hissing rasp, more animal trill than human words. I swallowed so hard it unknotted something deep inside my throat.

A moment of silence, then:

“Yes.”

Edward's voice did not come from beyond the window, but from the air itself, or from inside the walls, or perhaps from out in the corridor, or from the room above the kitchen. For a moment he was everywhere and nowhere, a ghost on the wind.

Evelyn bared her teeth and looked ready to summon hell itself with her wand. Twil twisted on the spot, back and forth, a dog responding to a sound beyond the human range of hearing. Raine froze. I almost lost control, thrumming with killing need, barely holding onto the urge to attack the walls and floor and ceiling like a flailing squid. I'm sure that wouldn't have gone well. I'd probably have just hurt myself.

Then Edward whistled.

A haunting high-low-high piping, the unearthly language of the Dimensional Shambler, not quite structured like words, but not quite animal call either. That sound came from out in the garden, no doubt about it. Something was standing out there and waiting for us, Edward or otherwise.

In the corner of my vision, the Shambler twitched, as if she was fighting her own response to that piping whistle. A wall of grey muscle rose up, ready to move.

Running on pure instinct, I whirled toward her and fanned out my tentacles.

"No!" I screeched, barely aware of what I was saying. "No! Mine! I feed you now! I feed you! Me, not him!"

The Shambler stared at me, frozen in animal intimidation. Edward whistled again, high-low-high — but I screeched at the sound and slapped the wall with my tentacles. The Shambler flinched, but she didn't vanish, didn't step Outside. Panting, dripping with sweat, I forced my words to make more sense.

"Go home," I said to her. "I'll bring you food. But you don't listen to him any more, you don't—"

Edward whistled a third time. Was that my imagination, or did I sense irritation in his tone, in the subtle stumble over the notes? The Shambler cringed, but she did not obey.

"You don't listen to him anymore," I said. "You listen to me. I'll bring you fresh meat. But no more people. Now go home."

The Shambler stared at me, blinked her twin pools of oily black, and then vanished.

“Holy shit, Heather,” Twil hissed.

Raine let out a low whistle. “Well done, well done!”

“Great, yes, great,” Evelyn grunted. I’d never seen her so wide-eyed and focused, but also so conflicted. “That’s one problem out of the way, certainly. Now it’s our turn to leave, right now. Heather?”

“Evee ... ” I whined — and felt the hunting instinct rising up through my body like a flush of hot alcohol in my gut.

I couldn’t deny the need any longer. More than mere psychological notion, it was a physical ache, burning in every muscle. My legs itched with the desire to move. My tentacles felt like fists kept clenched for too long, and my human hands were curled into real fists. Abyssal hunting instinct knew that if I could touch Edward, I would win. I could reach down through his vessel and along the connection back to his real self. Whatever it was made of would not resist analysis and deconstruction performed by brain-math. With one tentacle I could reach all the way back to the real Edward Lilburne and turn his brain into cooked meat. With one touch, there would be no need to find his stronghold, no further threats to my pack. One touch was all I needed.

Twil must have recognised the look on my face or the meaning of the tension in my musculature, because she stared at me and froze. Perhaps she knew it all too well, in herself. “Uh, Heather, chill out, yeah? You’re getting kinda freaky there.”

Raine’s hands were full of firearm and shield, so she bumped me with her elbow. “Yeah, whoa, ease down, okay? Heather? Heather?”

A physical need twitched up my back muscles and out through my tentacles and down to their tips. A mad part of me briefly considered climbing the wall and squeezing out through the window. Abyssal instinct screamed incoherent demands about hunting, about moving fast, about ambushes and surprises and the rending of vulnerable flesh.

“Heather,” Evelyn said, hard and unyielding, “we need to leave, now.”

"I ... I don't think he's lying," I said. I was panting, quivering all over, about to break. I was going to sprint for the door any moment, damn Edward's traps, they didn't matter. I would push through it all and bring him down and rip his head from his shoulders. Only Eevee's voice held me back, and only by a thread. "I think he's out there. We have to ... Eevee, we have to try ... to ... "

Evelyn gave me one of the worst looks she had ever directed toward me — fearful disdain, disbelief in my stupidity, and deep concern.

"I do love you, Heather, but—"

Hunting instinct screeched to a halt, not unlike Twil slamming into Evelyn's whipcrack voice earlier. Apparently Twil wasn't the only one who Evelyn had on a leash. I blinked several times, turning toward Evelyn and gaping like a fish.

But Evelyn didn't seem to realise what she'd just said out loud. She was too afraid and too exasperated to care.

"—but you can be such a fucking moron sometimes. That isn't even the real him out there, you understand? He wouldn't expose himself to risk, especially not to you. This is a trap. We are leaving. Read my lips, Heather, we're leaving. Right now."

Hunting instinct had run aground, mostly on the force of Evelyn's emotional outburst and her unintentional admission of love, rather than the appeal to my intellect. I blinked hard, hesitating, feeling like I'd slammed head first into a brick wall.

"This is not a boss fight, Heather," she raged on when I didn't answer right away. "You don't kill mages by running at them and screaming a war cry, not one as old as Edward. Not unless you're Zheng, and probably not even then."

Raine cleared her throat softly. "S'kinda what we did, once."

Evelyn didn't even have the spare capacity to shoot a deadly glance at Raine. Her attention bored through me, angry and outraged that I would risk us like this — that I would risk myself. "We are in a trap. We are leaving, right now. How many more times must I say it?" Her voice did not rise into a shout, but grew sharp and dark. "Am I your strategist, or not?"

"Yes, okay! Right!" I put my hands up in surrender. Tentacles too. I felt like such an idiot, as if I'd been in the grip of lust and Evelyn

had dumped a bucket of freezing water over my head to bring me round. “Okay, okay, but ... but we can’t just leave this house here, and that.” I gestured at the steel-and-glass cat-tower thing beneath the windows, hooked up to the fried laptop. “And whatever else he’s doing here. Eevee, there might be other victims like Natalie! We can’t just run away!”

Evelyn’s inner steel refused to bend. “We can too — but we’re not running away.”

“ ... what?”

Twil sounded just as confused as I felt. “Yeah, hey, what?”

“Tactical retreat?” Raine asked.

“Come again another day,” Praem intoned.

“Tactical retreat and regroup, yes,” Evelyn said, still speaking to me and me alone. “We’ve lost the man himself, he’s already gone, but we can pick over whatever’s left. Heather, you said this house is in Devon, near Salcombe. That’s what Edward said, right?”

“I— yes, that’s right, but—”

“If he didn’t lie — ha, doubtful — and if we can identify the cottage from a map, can you drop us in on a nearby hill, a road, something like that? Near to the house but not in the garden itself, because I’m certain that’s where he’s laid his trap. Can you do that?”

I boggled at Evelyn with muted awe. She had a twinkle in her eyes, that gleam of genius that made her shine like no other. My strategist.

“ ... I ... I don’t know, but I can try. If I can’t, Lozzie might be able to. I think.”

Evelyn nodded once, curt and hard. “Good enough. Heather, do you trust me? Do you trust this plan?”

“Of course.”

“Then take us home. Get us out of here before something else goes wrong.”

“Hear hear,” said Raine.

Evelyn didn’t wait for acknowledgement. She crammed herself

against my side, practically dragging Praem along with her, though I had no doubt that the doll-demon was still supporting her weight. I wasted no time on spluttering or planning, I just wrapped a tentacle around the pair of them, securely anchored. Raine stepped back toward me as well, though she kept her shield raised and her handgun pointed at the open door, just in case. I reached out and took her by the arm, adding a tentacle around her waist too. Twil rolled her eyes and huffed and made a great deal of fuss, but she hopped back across the boundary of the magic circle and submitted to the new plan of retreat and regroup, no matter how much it offended her hunter's sensibilities. I looped two tentacles around her fuzzy shoulders, a double-harness, in case she decided to dart off at the last moment. That made her yelp in surprise, then she swallowed a growl. Keeping a werewolf restrained was a new experience indeed.

"Ready?" I asked out loud. My heart was hammering in my ears.

"Ready," said Praem.

Raine nodded. "Whenever you are."

"Yes! Go!" Evelyn snapped.

"Remember to close your eyes," I said. I did the same, closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, trying to shut out the cottage kitchen and the glowing evening light and the high-pitched whine on the edge of my hearing and—

And Edward's voice, a sudden reedy rasp crawling up a throat clogged with tar, as if just on the other side of the kitchen wall, out in the overgrown garden.

"There is no way out—"

But I was already plunging my mind downward, sinking into the depths of black oil and toxic waters, dredging out the infernal machinery of the Eye's lessons. The equation to Slip, to send us Out, was as familiar as an old tool by now. My hand slid into the grip, the weight of it was a known quantity at the end of my arm, and I understood the function better than I had ever wanted to. The equation seared and hissed across the surface of my brain, white-hot fire shooting lances of pain down my neck and into my lungs and belly.

And nothing happened.

The frozen split second of hyperdimensional mathematics, the speed-of-thought moment where I performed the equation, collapsed back into regular time. A sledgehammer of pain crashed into my head, like a band of red-hot steel expanding inside my skull. My stomach clenched and spasmed, trying to reject the logic of the Eye. I cried out, a pitiful sound, as my friends caught me before I collapsed to my knees.

We were still standing in the cottage kitchen, my friends were still tight and secure in my grip, and sunlight like fire on bronze was still pouring through the kitchen windows.

And Edward was still talking.

“—through the Faraday cage. And it is so much more than that now. And it is almost complete. Thank you, Heather Morell.”

“Heather?!” Raine, in near-panic. “Hey, hey—”

Twil, shouting. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit—”

“He’s trapped us,” Evelyn, ice-cold. “The bastard has trapped us. Fuck.”

Everyone was talking at once. Strong hands held me up beneath my armpits and around my waist as I sagged and whined. I tightened my tentacle-anchors around my friends, and not a moment too soon; Twil tried to dart forward, panicking and heading for the door again, but my grip on her shoulders was too secure. She yanked all of us forward, hard enough to jar my suddenly tender head and stomach and make me cry out. But she came up short, like a dog on a choke-chain, yelping as she sprawled on the tiles.

“Wait!” Evelyn shouted. “For fuck’s sake, wait!”

“Evee,” Raine was saying. “Evee, we’re gonna have to shoot our way out. Get ready, okay? Time for some old fashioned violence. Praem, with me. Evee, stay behind us and—”

“No,” I wheezed. “Just a ... just a second ... I can ... ”

This wasn’t the first time an attempted Slip had fizzled out into nothing. It wasn’t anything like Alexander’s Dead Hands, reaching up from beyond the grave. Every time the lingering soul of Alexander Lilburne had stopped me crossing the membrane, I had felt the Slip begin and then felt the hands on my ankles, the dragging weight of metaphysical fetters on my flesh. But this

nothingness, as if the equation hadn't functioned at all, this had happened only once before.

Back when the Sharrowford Cult had sent Zheng to kidnap me, when they'd bullied and abused and threatened Lozzie into opening our experimental gateway, and they'd dragged me through into their pocket dimension that linked to the castle, I'd tried to escape by going Outside. And it hadn't worked. I had solved that situation with the bright idea of knocking Zheng's arm off. But I had never forgotten that feeling of null action, of the equation being correct but simply doing nothing, as if it referred to a quality of reality that was missing in that space, that dimension, that pocket of re-defined unearthly substrate.

Edward Lilburne had replicated the trick with a magically modified Faraday cage.

He'd figured out how to imprison Lozzie.

I like to imagine that thought gave me the burst of determination and energy; more realistically it was my bioreactor spinning up, pumping my veins full of exotic abyssal compounds that shouldn't exist inside the human body.

"Shoot our way out," Evelyn was saying to one side of me. Her hands creaked as she tightened them around her bone-wand. "I hate this. I hate it. We can't step out there. Everything about this is a trap."

"We can race for the other door!" That was Twil.

Raine raised her voice. "Everyone stay behind me and—"

With a deep, lung-ripping gasp, I reared up in my friends' grip, made a sound like an asthmatic chimpanzee, and slammed my mind back into the dripping black relics of the Eye's lessons.

This cage should not exist — metaphysically or morally. It was an affront, an offense, an obscenity. A cage for Lozzie could not be allowed to exist. However the Dimensional Shambler stepped between worlds, it clearly wasn't reliant on the same method as me, but I didn't have time to reverse-engineer an entirely different way of moving. Instead, I ran the equation again, the brain-math to take us Outside, but this time I didn't treat it like a familiar old tool or an automatic reflex. I ran it like a machine with a missing component. Part of the equation simply did nothing, couldn't find

purchase inside this bubble of artificial constricted reality.

I had to take it slowly, which was a special kind of torture. A second, perhaps two seconds, where I hung in my friends' arms and screamed and bled from the eyes and nose. Piece by burning, hissing, toxic piece, I reconstructed our way out.

And there it was, one element of the equation, one set of figures in the language of creation itself which did not apply here, in this space, this affront, this heresy to reality itself that Edward Lilburne had constructed.

I constructed a tool of my own. A response, an answer — an enzyme, shaped using the knowledge of the piece of equation that didn't work.

An enzyme-bomb, a compacted ball of potential compressed so tight it was ready to explode in a screeching wave of nullification and reversal. Metaphor breaks down at the bleeding edge of hyperdimensional mathematics, human language begins to fail. Enzyme was the best descriptor I had. At the speed of thought, I crafted the opposite of whatever Edward's magical Faraday cage was doing to the surface of reality.

Then I detonated it.

The others later told me that there was an audible sound — quite a loud sound, in fact, and not from me. As I cried out in pain with the technical difficulty of the brain-math, a great *creeeeeeeak-ping* screeched all around us, just beyond the walls of the cottage. Metal stress, we later discovered, as the entire chicken-wire Faraday cage was subjected to pressures it was never designed to endure.

But I didn't hear the sound. I was too busy grasping the levers of reality once again, burning the flesh from my hands, right down to dripping fat and blackened bone.

"Close your eyes!" I croaked.

Out we went, with no cage or prison to stop us.

= =

Our return to Number 12 Barnslow Drive was more than a little anticlimactic. It felt a bit like going out on a specific errand, but returning without getting anything accomplished, because one had forgotten one's purse on the top of the washing machine.

Well, that, and we were planning to head right back out as soon as we were ready.

We may have failed in ambushing Edward Lilburne himself — or perhaps we had put one foot into his trap before wrenching at the jaws to free ourselves — but that didn't mean we couldn't come at the situation from another angle. It didn't mean there was nothing to be salvaged here and no further responsibility to fulfil.

We landed in the usual big mess of headaches and nausea, of course, right in the middle of the magical workshop. I was bleeding from my nose and eyes, getting it all down my face, and so I missed the first few minutes of safety checking and recovery, as I sat in a heap on the floor and clutched at my head and stomach, trying not to vomit. That was some extreme brain-math and I was still reeling inside, throbbing and aching, trying to feel human again.

Edward Lilburne had not sent men with guns to capture Lozzie; or if he had, they must have taken one look at the spiders guarding the front door and skedaddled sharpish. Everyone was exactly where they were supposed to be. Lozzie and Tenny were still guarding Natalie in the kitchen. They'd wiped her face clean, gotten her sat in a chair, and were busy helping her drink a very large glass of apple juice. They hadn't gotten much further, but we'd only been gone for about five minutes. I felt a strange embarrassment at our jumbled explanation of what was going on.

In a way, I had failed to slay the evil wizard. I didn't want to explain that to Natalie. She was too young to understand.

Sevens was there too, sitting in the opposite chair, with a very comfortable-looking Turmy in her lap. The marmalade gentleman was getting marmalade hairs all over Sevens' skirt, but she somehow pretended it wasn't happening, even while luxuriously stroking his fur with one hand.

"We're in no rush," Evelyn explained to everyone, as Raine helped me wash my face and Twil looked ready to claw at every errant shadow. Eevee planted her walking stick firmly as she spoke, which was undermined only slightly by Praem forcing a glass of water into her free hand. "Yes— Praem— thank you— thank you, right, yes. As I was saying, we're not aiming to catch him anymore. He's likely long gone. We're aiming to get to that house safely, from a direction that won't trigger whatever he had waiting for us."

“Safety first,” said Praem.

“Safety first,” I croaked — and then spat blood into the kitchen sink as Raine rubbed my back. “Good idea. Mmmhmm.”

Sevens cleared her throat with expert delicacy. “And what about mademoiselle Shambles?”

“Heather made friends with it,” Evelyn grunted. “With her. I think we can be sure she’s not listening to Edward’s commands anymore. She obeyed Heather, instead.” Evelyn sighed and glanced at Natalie. The little girl was watching the proceedings with shell-shocked eyes, wide and staring, like she wasn’t all there. No child should look like that. “Still, Lozzie? And Tenny, you ... keep an eye on things, until we’ve confirmed. Yes?”

“Yaaaaaah,” Tenny trilled. Lozzie did a little mock-salute, making sure Natalie could see the comedy gesture. But the girl just stared at her glass of apple juice. The poor thing was exhausted, physically and mentally.

I was starting to feel the same. As the remnants of hunting instinct dribbled away, a great weariness came over me, not all physical. Failure dragged hard. I let my bioreactor spool down, slowly and carefully.

Locating likely candidates for the Faraday-caged cottage took about half an hour in the end. Evelyn had Praem fetch her laptop from upstairs, complete with the mouse so she didn’t have to fiddle with the track-pad. She set it up on the table in the magical workshop, with the rest of us peering over her shoulder now and again.

Evelyn opened Google Maps and got started. “Assuming Edward was telling the truth—”

Twil scoffed. “Big ask. Still think we’ve lost the place.”

“Assuming. Edward. Was. Telling. The. Truth.”

Twil put her hands up. “Alright, alright.”

“Then that cottage was near — where was it, Heather?”

“Salcombe,” I croaked, leaning heavily on Raine. She was practically carrying me. “Never heard of it before.”

“Seaside place,” Raine supplied. “Kinda famous?”

“A little,” Evelyn grunted. “I’ve heard of it, I think.” She panned the map down over the Westcountry, then Devon, then searched for Salcombe. The map zoomed in on an area that was all little seaside towns and picturesque villages clustered amid a patchwork of fields, all bracketed from below by the endless deep blue of the sea and a thick, sluggish estuary on the eastern side. “Assuming he wasn’t lying, it should be a few miles away from this town. Now, I think we can rule out anywhere within a village, and anywhere close enough that neighbours would see a giant chicken-wire cage around the house. Must be somewhere isolated.”

“Won’t we see the cage?” I croaked. “If we zoom in?”

Evelyn cleared her throat delicately and didn’t seem to know what to say. Twil snorted. Raine rubbed the back of my neck and said, “Heather, love, it’s not real-time images.”

“Oh. Well. That’s a bit disappointing. I just assumed it was.”

“Yes,” Evelyn confirmed, sounding a little uncomfortable. “At best these pictures will be a few months old. We won’t see the cage itself. As I was saying, it has to be an isolated house. You mentioned a thatched roof, Heather?”

“I only saw a tiny corner, but it was thatched, yes. There were two trees out in the garden as well, really big trees. They must have been really old.”

“So,” Evelyn said, already panning the map back along the main road which led out of Salcombe. “Isolated, thatched roof, large garden, at least two large trees. Let’s get looking.”

While Evelyn played geography detective, Raine helped me strip out of my damp clothes and get under a hot shower, to wash off the remnants of stinking swamp mud. More accurately, she forced me under the shower; I wanted to stay right there, ready for anything, raring to go right away. But Raine was correct — staying on the edge all the time was terrible for me. I’d be visiting the Shambler again soon enough, but I was confident that I could land on the rocky outcropping itself and avoid the mud. And when we returned to the cottage, I didn’t need the distraction of wet clothes and filthy hair.

Praem bustled about, cleaning up the mud I’d brought into the kitchen earlier. Lozzie and Tenny took little Natalie upstairs, to help

her get clean as well. I sat in a heap on the sofa with Raine. Evelyn worked, with Twil peering over her shoulder.

After a while — I wasn't sure how long, because exhaustion was fast laying a claim to me — Zheng stalked in through the back door like an avenging angel, roaring for attention, for her 'little wolf', for my approximate location. She calmed down as soon as she saw me.

"Shaman. You are returned."

"Zheng ... pick me up?"

I stuck my arms out, running mostly on instinct. Raine helped me up, Zheng accepted the burden, and I spent the next ten minutes clinging to her side like an octopus attached to a rock, using my tentacles to anchor myself on her. Raine filled her in on the details.

Zheng listened in silence, then rumbled down at Evelyn. "Wizard, what is your plan?"

Evelyn just frowned at the screen in concentration. "I've narrowed it down to three places. I think it's this one here." She jabbed a finger at the screen, at a smudge of green and brown satellite image. "The others are too visible from the roads. But this cottage, this is very isolated. Cleverly hidden by the hills. The only way to see it would be to hike over fields, ones without public footpaths. Not illegal, of course, but that still leaves it very well-hidden."

"Plan, wizard?" Zheng repeated.

Twil answered for her, doing a sideways swoosh-motion with both hands. "We're outflanking the bastard. Eyyyyy."

Evelyn tutted. "The 'bastard' is gone. I will guarantee you that. He didn't expect us to escape."

Zheng purred in approval. "None can hold the shaman against her will." One of her hands cupped the back of my head as I clung to her. "Nor her disciples."

I frowned at that word — disciples — but I was too drained to complain. Evelyn either didn't get the meaning, or she ignored it. "But his works will remain."

Zheng grunted her disappointment. "We raid his abandoned camp? Huh."

"Think like a detective, not like a boxer," Evelyn said. "He may

have left something useful behind. Heather,” she said my name and finally turned away from the screen, twisting around in her chair, rubbing her hip and looking up at me clinging to Zheng’s side. She pointed back at the screen with one finger. “Can you drop us in on this hill, right here? Can you do that, from just a map?”

I frowned and squinted and tried to visualise the landscape in my head. I was exhausted, and though this feat of hyperdimensional logistics didn’t seem beyond my powers, it felt tangential to how I understood the subtle art of stepping back and forth through the membrane. Part of me wanted to curl up on the floor and sleep. Or better, snuggle down in Zheng’s arms, drifting off into the mercy of temporary oblivion. So many other responsibilities loomed — checking on the Shambler, possibly sending her some food; helping little Natalie understand what had happened to her, not to mention returning her to her parents; preparing for Felicity’s help, or maybe her arrival here; and perhaps, once I was brave enough, dealing with how I’d been blinded by my own lust for the hunt.

But Edward Lilburne had tried to trap us, in a cage built for Lozzie. A hard, cold stone settled in my stomach, gripped by muscle tension and etched with acid.

“I’ll try my best,” I said.

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Twenty minutes later, standing on a lonely hilltop somewhere in rural Devon, side-lit by the dying firelight rays of the setting sun, Raine lowered a pair of binoculars from her eyes, and said, “Yup, that’s gotta be the place.”

Twil snorted with sarcasm. “Yeah, how can you tell?” She gestured at the binoculars. “Don’t even need those to see it.”

“Mm, no kidding.” Raine laughed softly. “How many other cottages round here do you reckon look like that? Well done Eevee, good call, first try. And well done Heather, for getting us here.” Raine reached over with her free hand and squeezed my shoulder. I replied with a tired grumble, using most of my energy to cling to Zheng for support.

A few paces ahead on the hillside, Evelyn pulled her modified 3D glasses off her face. Fingers of gentle wind teased at loose strands of blonde hair, playing them out across the vista of rolling hills and

hedgerows and little clumps of trees. For a moment she stood frozen, staring down at the cottage near the foot of the hill, lit from the west by the rays of the fainting sun, casting her in deep orange from boots to crown. Though she was leaning on Praem for support and her shoulders were visibly tense with concentration, I'd rarely seen her looking so strong.

She turned back over her shoulder and met my eyes.

"Heather, you see anything? Anything pneuma-somatic? Anything out of the ordinary?" She gestured with the glasses. "I've checked, but I trust your eyes better than I trust my work."

Zheng purred in my stead. "Nothing lurks here, wizard. It is dead."

"Very quiet," Praem agreed.

I sighed and nodded, gathering the shreds of my ragged concentration. "Zheng and Praem are right. It's like a dead zone in the ocean. There's no spirit life here. I can see things further off, but nothing ventures close to the cottage."

The lack of spirit life was the only thing marring an otherwise breathtaking view; I never thought I'd see the day when I would consider the absence of weird and spooky creatures to be a mark against a locale, but that was how it felt, like something was deeply unnatural about this spot, driving off the omnipresent pneuma-somatic wildlife, not unlike the approach to Hringewindla's shell near Brinkwood.

We were standing on the rough peak of the hill which Evelyn had indicated on Google Maps. I'd managed to sling-shot Slip us here without too much confusion or difficulty, though we'd spent a few moments staggering about like drunkards upon arrival, whining and doubling up with the pain and disorientation. I'd even sat down on the grass for several minutes while the others had looked about, until Zheng had hauled me to my feet and acted as a scaffolding for my increasingly exhausted mind.

The view was beautiful — and I wasn't just thinking about Evelyn looking determined and confident in the glowing sunset. All around us, patchwork fields rolled off into a tangle of strange countryside, little lanes winding between thick hedgerows, dark copses of trees on distant hills, and tiny cottages and houses visible far away, all lit by the darkening rays of a long summer sunset. The air buzzed with

the drone of small insects, the purr of distant cars on unseen roads, and the skitter of small animals inside the hedges and the long grass. Far to the south, the horizon turned into a dark haze that seemed to fill half the world, becoming one with the sky as it darkened. The sea, I assumed.

At the foot of the hill was Edward's cottage.

Raine was right, there was no doubt we'd found the correct place. A picturesque two-story cottage, with whitewashed walls and an archaic thatched roof, set very far back from the nearest road, accessed by its own long, unpaved driveway. There were no cars on the little patch of paved ground at the end of that drive, nor any sign of life in the massive, overgrown garden — though the trees and the hedges and the little brick walls could be hiding quite an ambush for the unwary.

The cottage was wrapped in a structure of scaffolding and chicken wire — scaffolding which had collapsed in places, and chicken wire that had exploded outward, bent and ruined and ripped by some unimaginable force. Hyperdimensional mathematics.

Spirit life wouldn't come anywhere near the cottage. The closest spirits I could see were at least a mile away across the hills, dark little tree-like things rambling across the landscape in jolly little hops. Others lurked further out — a giant of crumbled rock stood stock-still over a faraway farm, and a sleeping bird made of fire inside glass was curled up on a distant hilltop.

Raine was shaking her head, staring down at the cottage as she tucked the binoculars away. "It's the perfect hiding place, isn't it?"

Twil frowned at her. "Eh? It's right out in the open."

Evelyn cleared her throat. "It's not visible from any of the roads. Even if you go all the way up that drive, you'd have to step into the garden to actually see the cottage. I'd bet fifty pounds it doesn't get any post. Nobody has any reason to come here, except to break in to a holiday home."

"Yeah exactly," Twil said. "It's a holiday spot. Bad place to hide magic, right?"

Raine cracked a grin. "Naaah, think about it. Salcombe's that way, yeah?" She pointed off to our right, turning so that the sunset fire caught her face in profile. "Kingsbridge is north east." She pointed

another direction. “Thurlstone’s the opposite way. And hey, I’ve never been to any of these towns, but they’re all beach holiday places, right? Sun, sea, sand, all that shit.”

Twil huffed. “I wouldn’t mind some of ‘that shit’ right now, sounds good after today.”

“Speak for yourself,” Evelyn grunted, still frowning down at the cottage. I struggled to imagine Evelyn at the beach. It wouldn’t suit her. Would her prosthetic be in danger from loose sand?

Praem said, “I do like to be beside the seaside,” which earned her a sidelong frown from Evelyn and an amused snort from Twil.

“Point is,” Raine went on, “this time of year, in the summer hols, every beach is gonna be full of middle aged couples turning into lobsters, and gaggles of screaming kids. But here, inland? No way. Only locals would use a little road like that. A few hikers, maybe. And there’s no natural path up here, no reason to come here. If you wanna build a weird magical cage around a house and have nobody see, yeah, I’d say this spot is a pretty good bet.”

Twil shrugged. “Yeah, sure, whatever, but why all the way down here in Devon?”

Evelyn made a low grumbling sound. “Whatever it is, he wanted it far away from where he lives.” She took firm hold of her walking stick and planted it on the earth, clinging tightly to Praem’s arm for support as she took the first step down. “So tread carefully. We still don’t know what we’ll find.”

“Or if he’s gone,” Raine said.

Evelyn sighed. “Yes, well, we’re prepared for that, this time.”

Zheng rumbled like a tiger, eager for fresh meat. She was very happy to be included in this second expedition. None of us had any illusions what would happen if we found Edward.

The short walk down to the cottage felt quite surreal. As Raine had explained, it was extremely unlikely that we risked being seen by anybody out here, not even a passing car, especially at this particular time of day. But we still had to conceal our true purpose. Raine had swapped motorcycle jacket for leather jacket, dumped her makeshift riot shield, and hidden her weapons away somewhere inside her clothes. Twil was under strict instructions not to ‘go wolf’

out in the open. Evelyn's scrimshawed thigh-bone was tucked inside her coat. Praem still wore her habitual maid uniform, but we were relying on the tendency for observers' eyes to slide off her, the effect of not being in the know, if we came across any lone evening hikers. From a distance we could pass for a group of young women on their way back to their holiday cottage, perhaps slightly drunk and out for an unwise ramble before dinner. But up close it would be difficult to ignore the seven feet of rippling muscle that was Zheng. Or how I was clinging to her side without using my hands.

We approached the cottage from the rear, from the garden, where we located a tall wooden door in the rough brickwork of the garden wall. A sign next to the door informed us of the name of the property: *Grushans*.

"What's that, Welsh?" Twil asked.

"Cornish," Evelyn said. "I think. It's not important."

Twil and Zheng wanted to smash the bolt and shatter the wood, and probably rush into the garden and punch anything that moved. Raine offered to leap the wall and unlock the door from inside, but that would leave her exposed for a moment. Evelyn demanded extreme caution, and my grumpy grumbling kept Zheng in line, for now. Evelyn checked everything — door, frame, handle, the grass — before we were allowed to even touch the wood. The door wasn't even locked, and opened with creaking, rusty hinges.

The garden itself was overgrown, near-wild, neglected for at least many months, probably closer to several years. The grass was long and unkempt, the flower beds along the edge of the house and the inside of the garden walls had been overrun by weeds of all sorts, and the two massive trees I'd spotted from indoors were covered in creeping ivy and dry lichen. Stone pathways were marred by thick moss. Matching stone benches had cracked with the stresses of winter cold. A child's play-set swing had turned mostly to rust.

We proceeded into the garden as if creeping through a minefield.

That strategy paid off moments later, when we discovered the outer rim of Edward's magic circle by almost tripping over it.

The magic circle was cut into the earth, made from a series of shallow trenches perhaps two inches deep and three to four inches across, hidden by the overgrown grass. It was impossible to spot

when looking at it from an angle, or from inside the house, and was difficult to see from more than a few feet away, even when we knew it was there. One would have to be directly above the cottage in order to glimpse more than a tiny fraction of the strange, winding magic symbols which covered most of the lawn.

At the bottom of each trench of fresh-cut earth lay a cable of copper wire, lining the entire design with conductive metal.

We quickly discovered that the circle extended around the entire cottage, filling the garden with looping swirls and esoteric symbols, snatches of strange non-human language, and a series of concentric rings that tightened around the building itself as one approached closer. It was the largest man-made magic circle I'd ever seen, and by far the most strange.

"I can't believe he's done this," Evelyn said in a hushed voice as we cut our way through the circle. "Out in the open, I can't believe it. What is all this for? What was he doing?"

Zheng disarmed the thing as we went, ripping clods of earth out of the overgrown garden to ruin any magical effect. She pulled up the wires and cast them aside, taking a savage glee in the destructive work. Evelyn documented the circle with her mobile phone, but her hands were shaking. Eventually I reached out and wrapped a tentacle around her wrists, which helped.

"You don't know what this does?" Twil sounded more than a little uncomfortable that we didn't know what all this was for.

"Not a fucking clue," Evelyn spat.

And we weren't about to find out any time soon, because Edward Lilburne was no longer in residence.

The scaffolding and chicken wire Faraday cage was in ruins. Some parts of it had simply collapsed against the walls of the house, but in places the wire had twisted and exploded outward, as if pushed from inside by sudden force. A few of the metal scaffolding poles were sheared and broken as well, looking like they'd been through a car crushing machine.

"Holy shit, Heather," Twil murmured as we approached and negotiated our way around the wreckage. "You really did a number on this place."

“Sorry,” I murmured, as Zheng lifted me over the mess.

“No!” Twil laughed. “It’s good! It’s cool!”

“No cage can hold the shaman,” Zheng agreed.

Once we got inside the cottage itself we quickly discovered that Edward was gone. We proceeded with almost military caution, with Zheng and Twil in front, Raine with her gun out, and Evelyn clutching her bone-wand. But there was nothing here to fight, nothing here to surprise us or jump out at us from around a spooky, shadowed corner.

We found the kitchen exactly as we’d left it, complete with the magic circles and Edward’s steel cat-tree machine hooked up to a broken laptop, the machine which had apparently interrupted Lozzie’s Slip and brought me here in the first place.

“We’ll want that,” Evelyn said. “I want to take it apart and understand how it works. It’s the best clue we have on Edward’s techniques.”

Zheng didn’t agree. “A poor trophy.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Evelyn said with a sigh.

We found the rest of the introductory letters Edward had left for me in every room. We found the light switches to flood the house with proper illumination, pushing back the encroaching evening, including a few outdoor floodlights attached to the corners of the cottage, which did their best to make the garden more hospitable at night time.

We didn’t find any children in the basement. Indeed, the house had no basement at all. We found no secret summoning circles, no hidden library, no bloody altar or ritual knife, and no handy address book with Edward’s location waiting for us to discover it. We didn’t even find the remnants of the ‘vessel’ that Edward Lilburne had been remote-piloting, not even when Zheng and Twil combed the garden in the fading light, with demon eyes and werewolf sense of smell. I half expected us to find a cartoonish puddle of goo on one of the floors, like the thing would have melted once he’d withdrawn his control.

“You don’t think it was the real him, right?” Twil asked with a frown that made her look like she was constipated. Hands on her

hips, standing on the overgrown garden path, the too-harsh outdoor floodlights ruining the majesty of the summer night around her. "Like, he was bluffing or some shit?"

"Then where's he gone?" Raine asked.

"... walked off?" I suggested. The others looked at me. I shrugged. "As soon as we left, he could just have ... started walking."

"Fuck," Evelyn spat, without looking up from documenting the magic circle which surrounded the cottage.

Raine started laughing.

In fact, we found nothing new that one wouldn't find in any holiday cottage in rural Devon. Except for the contents of the kitchen, which were now ours, and the letters in every room, which had undoubtedly never touched Edward Lilburne's hands, there was nothing here for us to puzzle over except his absence.

And the magic circle, of course.

Evelyn insisted on documenting the entire magic circle — and on systematically destroying it afterward. None of us argued with that, even if Twil sighed a bit. I think she was missing something on the telly that evening.

Raine snorted at that. "What's wrong, Twil? You don't fancy staying the night here, going down the beach in the morning?"

"Screw that. S'too bloody spooky."

Praem found a long-handled garden spade just inside the front door of the cottage, with dry dirt on the blade, just the right size for digging those little trenches. Evelyn set about taking photographs of every part of the design cut into the garden soil, sketching certain areas in her little notebook, and writing down the strange language of the added incantations. Praem followed, digging up lumps of earth, destroying the circle piece by piece, severing the copper wire as she went.

As they worked, the sun slowly dropped below the horizon, plunging the cottage and the garden into the shadows of a summer night. I sat on one of the little stone benches by the back door, the door which Edward had been trying to lure us into charging through. Watching them work lulled my mind into a strange semi-trance state of emotional and mental exhaustion. Zheng stayed

close, stalking up and down, accepting the lazy touch of my tentacles whenever she passed. Raine and Twil were back inside the cottage, going through the upstairs bedrooms one more time.

Eventually, Evelyn's circuit brought her back toward the door, toward me.

She looked up from her note book, staring at me across a few feet of humid night air. She watched me for a long, long moment, long enough that Zheng came near and loomed at my back, as if Evelyn was somehow dangerous. My mind surfaced from the exhaustion as I blinked at the look on Evee's face — concern and worry, but also anger, poorly hidden beneath the cold, hard-edged analysis of Evelyn Saye the master strategist.

"Wizard?" Zheng rumbled.

"It's all right, Zheng," I said. My voice came out raspy and tired. "Evee, what's wrong?"

Evelyn stared at me for a moment longer, then sighed and shrugged, gesturing around us with her notebook, at the magic circle hiding in the grass — or its remnants now, as Praem was kicking up one last clod of mud with her boot against the back of the spade.

"What else? This. This ... extravagance. It's obscene."

"What does it do? Do you have a theory?" Evee loved her theories, maybe that would help.

Evelyn walked over and sat down on the bench next to me, lowering herself carefully with her walking stick. She winced when she sat, then sighed heavily and screwed her eyes up, sagging a little and kneading her thigh where flesh met prosthetic socket. All her earlier determination and confidence had turned to a kind of weary drag from within. Maybe she was reacting to the lack of danger as well. We'd combed the place inside and out, Edward was gone, there was nobody to fight. I gently nudged her arm with a tentacle, but she didn't take me up on the offer of casual skin-ship.

"Evee?" I prompted, suddenly growing nervous.

"No, Heather," she grunted. She straightened up and rolled her neck slowly, producing several loud pops, followed by a grunt. "No, I have no idea what any of it does. Whatever magical tradition this

draws on, I am almost completely unfamiliar with it. I recognise only a few basic elements, and from that I can perhaps draw some educated guesses. Perhaps. And I don't like the results."

"That all sounds very, um, measured and cautious. And also not what you really think."

Evelyn turned and glared at me. "This was a trap."

"Well, yes, that much was obvious. He was trying to kill us, of course, he—"

"You are much smarter than that, Heather," Evelyn snapped — angry, with me. I blinked in surprise. Zheng stirred behind us. "Or at least I would like to believe you are smarter than that. Think about it for five seconds. Please. Think."

"E-Evee, I don't follow, I don't—"

"If Edward Lilburne wanted to kill you, you know what he would have done? You want to know how I would have done it?" Evelyn stamped with her walking stick. "I would have planted a bomb under that chair, that old wooden chair he was using to bait you, the one you couldn't resist pulling to pieces. Remote detonation. We were right on top of it, because it was bait for you. A man like him could certainly lay his hands on the necessary resources for making a bomb. You'd probably have survived with hyperdimensional mathematics, but he wouldn't know that you'd be capable of that."

"... Evee, what are you saying?"

"He wasn't trying to kill us. He wasn't trying to kill you. If he was, there were very simple ways to achieve that end, multiple things we blundered into like fools. No." She gestured at the garden, at the ruined magic circle. Praem was highlighted against the tall garden wall by the glow of the exterior lights from the cottage. "He was trying to get you to step into this circle."

A cold feeling settled in my guts. "Me, personally?"

Evelyn turned back to me, eyes blazing with cold anger. "This was a trap for you, specifically. Yes, that is my theory. And you almost walked right into it. Fucking hell, Heather, you were ready to throw yourself into it, you imbecilic, bloody-minded moron! You're as bad as Raine, I swear to God. I should slap you, maybe that would knock your brains back into place."

“E-Evee, I don’t— I’m—”

Zheng shifted again, a shadow against the light, but Evelyn raised a finger to stall her, before the demon host had a chance to get indignant and defensive on my behalf. The sheer force of Evelyn’s anger overrode any intimidation she felt.

“And don’t you get pissy with me either, Zheng, you weren’t here. Heather nearly fucking died — or probably worse — so don’t you complain, because it’s a miracle she’s even sitting here with us.”

“Mm.” Zheng grunted, like a cautious tiger.

Evelyn looked away from Zheng and back at me again. Her anger was something new, something cold and sustained. “This was a trap for you, Heather. So you better start acting like it.”

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.10

A balmy summer evening in an isolated rural garden, so deep in the countryside that one could no longer hear any trace of distant traffic, nor see any tell-tale scar of light pollution on the horizon. Poised on the cusp of true night as if frozen in time; the setting sun reduced to a faint suggestion on the far side of the darkening hills; the silence of the shadows broken only by the chirping of hidden insects. Sitting on a weathered stone bench outside a lovely little thatched cottage, lit from behind by soft electric glow, beside a woman whom I loved very deeply — even if I wasn't exactly certain as to the exact and proper form of that love.

A year ago I would have given my left hand to be blessed by such a dreamlike scene.

Romantic fantasy had failed, however, to account for the more earthy realities — such as the piles of half-collapsed scaffolding and burst chicken wire which surrounded the otherwise picturesque cottage. And Praem the demon maid, methodically digging up most of the garden to ruin the magical design scored into the lawn. And of course not to forget Zheng, eight feet of rippling muscle looming behind us in the darkness, our implicit bodyguard, an ever-present reminder of our need to command and wield terrible violence at a moment's notice.

So, all in all, it was not actually a very romantic situation whatsoever.

The sheer weight of Evelyn's cold anger also didn't help.

I'd grown used to Evee's anger by then. I thought I understood it, that I understood her, at least better than I had back when we'd first met. Before we'd become real friends — and then perhaps more — I'd found Evelyn's anger intimidating at best, actively frightening at worst. Short-tempered, bitter, acerbic, often directly insulting, sometimes accompanied by threats of physical violence, omnidirectional, not even sparing herself from her own ire, it was easy

to see Evelyn Saye as the ‘nasty bitch’ she so often tried to project. But I’d come to understand that Evee wore her temper like a suit of armour.

She used anger to fortify herself against the reality of the supernatural truth, but also against her own fears and vulnerability and worry for her friends, and against the humiliations of constant pain; Evelyn’s body was a litany of long-term problems with no good solutions, not only her prosthetic leg and the chronic pain it caused in her hips and her stump, but also the less obvious disabilities of her missing fingers and her kinked spine, not to mention the hidden damage she so rarely spoke about, or the painkiller addiction we so delicately avoided acknowledging most of the time.

Those of us close to her, we understood that when Evelyn went off on one, she didn’t really mean it. Not really. Not like that.

It meant that she cared too much, or hurt too much, or was too scared, and couldn’t express herself in any other way.

Sitting on that stone bench in that garden in Devon, Evelyn’s cold fury bored into my flesh, hollowed me out, and wrapped a shaking, terrified grip around my soul. I’d been an idiot and nearly walked into a trap; Evelyn was so afraid that she was ready to hurt me — at least emotionally — in order to stop me from ever doing that again.

I didn’t know what was worse: Evelyn’s anger itself, or her theory that Edward’s trap had been aimed at me personally.

At least with Edward, I could just kill him when I found him.

“Heather?” Evelyn prompted when I didn’t respond. Her voice was still tight, sharp, acidic. “Heather, for fuck’s sake, don’t sit there staring at me like a fart in a trance. I need you to acknowledge what I’m saying. Edward Lilburne set this trap for you, do you understand? Or is that going in one ear and out the other? You can’t play at being a hero anymore, you can’t be that irresponsible, you hear me? This changes everything, we have to adjust our entire strategy. But strategy is useless if you ... you ... ” She trailed off, acid draining away, replaced with confused discomfort. “Heather? Are you ... ?”

I blinked the gathering tears out of my eyes, sniffing loudly and trying to hold myself together in front of Evee. My pink hoodie, my

favourite, my beloved gift from Raine, was currently hundreds of miles away back in Sharrowford, and also still sopping wet with Outsider swamp water. So, in rather poetic fashion, I was currently wearing the hoodie that Evelyn had bought me — dark pink, with diamond-shaped scale patterns on the shoulders and upper arms, hood and zipper trimmed in white. I always tried to avoid getting this one dirty, but I had nowhere else to scrub my eyes, so I wiped my face on my sleeve.

“Crying?” I croaked, sniffing back more tears. “A little bit.”

“Ah,” Evelyn said. I’d rarely heard her sound so awkward.

“I’m sorry, Eevee. I’m so sorry.” I spoke to the night, to the distant hills, to the shadowy outline of Praem still digging in the garden. My tentacles reeled in tight and wrapped around my core, like pneuma-somatic armour, trying to quash the shaking in my chest. Not as if Evelyn had accepted my touch earlier, anyway. “You’re right, I got overwhelmed by the situation. I— when I found Natalie Outside— everything— Edward has to die, has to, but— I’m sorry. I should have waited. I should have been sensible.” A small hiccup climbed up my throat. “I’m supposed to be sensible. Sensible good girl Heather.” Another small hiccup. “So much for that. Lost control of myself.”

Evelyn sighed a deep sigh. For a moment I heard her grinding her teeth. “No, I’m ... I should be ... I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Heather. I lost my temper with you.”

“You’ve a right to.”

Another sigh, sharp this time. Evelyn tapped the ground with the tip of her walking stick. “I’m taking my frustration out on you and you don’t deserve it. Edward got away. Our quarry escaped. Which pisses me off. He tried to, well, not murder you, but do something else, I don’t know what, not yet. If I had him here right now, I do believe I would be torturing him.”

Zheng purred with grim approval from behind us.

I turned and blinked at Evelyn, a cold feeling creeping through my veins and up my throat. I caught her in profile against the night, outlined in shadow by the harsh lights from the exterior of the cottage, strands of loose blonde hair against the star-strewn sky above. Her puppy-fat cheeks, her little nose, the hard stare in her

eyes. Evelyn Saye the mage, ready to commit atrocity in my name.

“E-Evee? No, I didn’t mean ... ”

She tutted and rolled her eyes. “Oh, not for the sheer sadism of it, don’t worry about that. I’m not quite that far gone, not yet.” She gestured with her walking stick at the magic circle cut into the lawn, the piles of ripped-up copper wire, the now-ruined design that Praem was still destroying. “I’d be torturing him to learn the purpose and function of this.” She shook her head with equal parts disgust and confusion. “He wanted to lure you specifically into this, but I don’t know why. He got away, so I’m taking it out on you, because I’m a terrible bitch who doesn’t know when to stop.”

“That’s not true, Evee.” I took a deep breath and started to unravel my tentacles. Evelyn wasn’t so scary any more.

She sighed and shrugged, still staring at the garden. “Sometimes it is. Sometimes I’m a right bitch, and I know it. Don’t deny that, Heather.”

I smiled an awkward smile, then reached over with one hand and gently placed it atop her own, both of which were curled tight around the handle of her walking stick. Her hands were cold, with focus or adrenaline or anger. She almost flinched, but then swallowed and accepted my touch.

“All right, I won’t deny it,” I said, trying to sound gentle and soft and accepting. “But if you’re a bitch, Evee, then you can be my bitch.”

It took me a good few seconds to realise what I’d said. Evelyn gave me a look of alarmed scepticism. Praem paused in her digging work, straightened up, and stared at us across the garden. Zheng hissed a long sound between her teeth, like the noise a tiger might make if it could laugh.

Eventually Evelyn found her voice again. “Heather, that doesn’t mean what you think it does.”

But I was already blushing, raising both hands in apologetic surrender, spluttering like a broken steam engine. “I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like that! I don’t— I don’t usually use language like that, so I didn’t think. I didn’t think!”

“Evidently not.”

Evelyn was blushing too, and frowning at Praem. The doll demon was finally lifting her spade with both hands and crossing the broken lawn to join us. Probably to tease me mercilessly for my Freudian slip.

I hurried to explain. “What I meant is that no matter how grumpy you get, or combative you are, or— or—”

“Yes, Heather, it— I— I get it. I get it.” Evelyn spoke to the ground, staring very hard at the grass, as if it might reveal my secrets to her.

“No matter what, I always accept you, Eevee. Always. Even when you’re being, um, ‘bitchy’.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Yes, Heather. I get it. I understand what you intended to say, even if you used questionable terminology with which to say it.”

I pulled a very awkward smile. “Again, um, sorry.”

“No, it’s all right. And ... thank you.” Evelyn sighed heavily and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “But we are very lucky Raine didn’t hear you say that, we’d never live it down.”

Praem finally joined us. She drew to a halt a few paces from Evelyn’s other side and clinked the blade of the shovel against the stones of the overgrown pathway. Her black-and-white maid outfit was still perfectly starched, the lace clean and smooth, hem unblemished by the work of turning over all that dirt. How she did it, I have no idea.

“Bitches,” she said, in a perfect lilting sing-song tone.

Evelyn glared a very cold glare at her. “Praem, you know that I love you unconditionally, but if you repeat this incident to Raine I will ... I’ll ... ”

Praem stared back. We all knew there was nothing Evelyn could credibly threaten her with.

Evee settled on something. “I shall invite you to a marathon watch party of the worst anime I can think of. Something truly diabolical. And not one of those ‘so bad it’s funny’ ones, either. Something painful. It’ll hurt me more than it hurts you.”

“Very scary,” said Praem. Evelyn huffed, but the matter was settled.

Silence descended for a moment. I was so exhausted by the events

of the day that I just wanted to lean on Eeve's shoulder and close my eyes, beneath this quiet sky between the shadowed hills. I was still frazzled from the Shambler, from Edward, from saving little Natalie. But delayed-action fear gnawed in the pit of my guts, not to mention guilt.

I reached over with a tentacle and gently wrapped it around Evelyn's forearm. She flinched from the invisible touch, but then realised it was me and tutted.

"Sorry," I murmured. "Just wanted to hug ... "

"It's alright, go on," she grumbled.

Slowly and gently, I slid a second tentacle across her shoulders and a third around her waist. That was a riskier gamble; Evelyn always had problems with people touching her back. Her spine was so sensitive, it was so easy to squeeze her in the wrong way, so difficult to get it right. But she sighed and leaned into my touch, allowing me to take her weight on the bench.

Zheng finally left her post behind us, stalking off to examine the ruins of the magic circle on the lawn. Perhaps she considered Praem an effective enough bodyguard by herself. Eight feet of zombie muscle ghosted through the deepening dark.

"Besides," I said with a little sigh, "I think you were justified in getting angry with me, Eeve. I totally lost control of myself back inside that kitchen. I'm sorry, really. And don't tell me to not be sorry."

Evelyn gave me an odd look, then nodded. "Please, just practice better self-preservation."

"I would say 'I don't know what came over me', but that would be a lie. I was just so angry with Edward. Building a cage for Lizzie, tricking us, kidnapping a little girl like that, leaving her to die Outside ... "

Anger flared up inside my chest, like embers revealed in the heart of a burned-out bonfire, but lacking the hot urgency of action. Edward wasn't nearby, my prey had escaped, so the anger was all intellectual and emotional now, unmixed with the instinctive hunting drive I'd brought back from the abyss.

"Yes," Evelyn said slowly. "I suspect that was intentional."

“I’m sorry?”

Evelyn gestured at the ruined circle, the overturned dirt, the severed copper wire. “Making you angry, to lure you into this.”

“Why would he need to make me angry? You don’t think he chose Natalie on purpose, to get to me somehow? That idea did occur to me, but it seems absurd, too specific.” Evelyn shook her head, but I kept going, because her suggestion didn’t make sense. “He plucked me right out of a Slip, why not just have me step directly into this? He could have dumped me right on top of it.”

“I don’t have all the answers,” Evelyn said. “However much it pains me to admit that.”

“Well, do you have a theory?”

Evelyn glanced at me sidelong, a twinkle in her eyes, a subtle smile on her lips, smug and knowing. There was my beautiful strategist.

Praem answered for her, “A theory is had.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Before we get to that, how is the girl? Lozzie is messaging you, right? Somebody’s staying in contact with her?”

“My phone’s broken,” I sighed. “But Raine gave me hers for the moment. Here.”

I hadn’t mentioned it earlier in all the commotion, certainly not in the face of Evee’s anger, but Lozzie had sent a text message and a photograph, while I’d been sitting on the bench and zoned out of my own mind. I fumbled Raine’s mobile phone out of my pocket and pulled up the message to reassure Evelyn.

The picture showed Natalie fast asleep on Lozzie’s bed, clean of Outsider swamp mud, dressed in oversized clothes borrowed from Lozzie — and curled up with an equally sleeping Tenny. The girl was wrapped in about half a dozen of Tenny’s black tentacles. That boded very well for her state of mind; I could think of no better way to disarm supernatural terror than to be introduced to Tenny. With a bit of luck she would remember the strange tentacle-friend who made happy trilling noises, and remember less about the hours lost and alone, Outside.

Lozzie’s face was visible in the corner of the picture, peering into the frame, horribly out of focus. She was making a v-sign with her

fingers.

“Wish I’d had a Tenny,” I said with a sad little smile.

But Evelyn went almost white in the face. “Heather, delete that picture. Right now.”

“Ah???”

Evelyn almost grabbed the phone from me. “And tell Lozzie to do the same! Fucking hell! Praem?”

Praem obeyed as if she’d read Evelyn’s mind. She deftly plucked the phone from my hands, her own fingers already flying across the screen to delete the picture and send a message to Lozzie.

“E-Evee? I don’t—”

“Heather, that is a photograph of a currently missing and kidnapped child. Do I have to spell this out to you? No pictures! Fuck! Praem?”

“Done,” Praem intoned. “Lozzie: informed. Images: deleted.”

I blinked several times. “But we’re gonna return her to her parents ...”

“Yes,” Evelyn sighed. “And I’m sure that excuse will hold up in court. No pictures of the kidnapped girl, at all. Can’t believe I have to explain this. Until she’s off our hands, she is radioactive. Tch.”

I felt very silly for several moments. Evelyn sighed and patted my arm awkwardly. Praem hung on to the phone, briefly tapping out a follow-up message to Lozzie.

“So, um,” I ventured. “Evee, your theory? About the circle?”

Evelyn settled herself more comfortably on the stone bench, though she did wince, even with the support of my tentacles. A cold stone slab was no proper place for her delicate backside, and I reminded myself not to let us linger here longer than needed. When she spoke again, it was Evelyn the teacher, comfortable and practised. I could tell she had briefly rehearsed some of these thoughts, probably while sketching and photographing Edward’s mysterious magic circle.

“Of course I have a theory, though it is only a theory,” she said. “I am making an educated guess based on the structure of the circle and the rough position of the contents.” She glanced over our

shoulders at the cottage, wrapped in layers of ruined chicken wire, all bent and burst. "And also from Edward Lilburne's behaviour."

I nodded along, my mouth going dry, but my mind waking up. This was Evelyn at her best, her sharpest, her most impressive. "Go on."

Evee wet her lips with a flicker of pink tongue. "I suspect that your emotional state may have formed an important part of this spell, whatever it was." She nodded at the churned dirt of the lawn.

"Possibly it required you to charge into the circle without noticing it first. The circle back in the kitchen, the one where he was sitting, that may also have been a component. It was bait, you were meant to appear on top of it. All of us being present, that may have interrupted whatever process the smaller component was meant to catalyse."

"But what was it catalysing?"

Evelyn frowned at me for a moment, darkly concerned. "The circle itself is a kind of cage, an enclosure." She gestured left and right along the wall of the cottage and the edge of the ruined Faraday cage. The corners were barely visible beyond the arc of the outdoor lights. "There's no way to leave the building without entering the circle. The back door, the front door, either would lead you into the area of effect. And the circle is very carefully hidden in the grass, as we found. You'd be several feet into it before you noticed, charging out of either door."

"What about if I had—"

"Climbed through a window, or smashed a hole in the wall?"

Evelyn finished for me, then shook her head. "You'd still step right into it." She sighed and glanced up at the thatched roof behind us. "I think going straight up might have worked as an escape route, going high enough to avoid the circle's area of effect, but you wouldn't have known that."

"I also can't fly," I said with a little laugh. "I'm not a superhero."

Evelyn gave me the briefest of doubtful glances. My heart skipped a beat, but she carried on before I could say anything. "Slipping wouldn't have worked either, of course. Not inside that Faraday cage. That was part of the trap."

"Right, of course. Oh!" I frowned in deeper confusion. "Wait, no, the Shambler Slipped me out the first time. My Slip didn't work, but

hers did.”

“Exactly,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Ah?”

Evelyn closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Slow down, Heather, let me explain the theory. Edward summons you here, correct? Then he makes impossible demands, obstinate demands, ones that will obviously make you angry. He demands Lozzie, and he gives you no proper explanation. Doesn’t it seem like his intent was to make you angry, on purpose?”

“I ... I suppose so. Do you mean he doesn’t really want Lozzie, after everything he’s said and done?”

“His intentions for Lozzie are beside the point. You spoke to him, I’m just working from what you’ve told me. Think back, and think carefully. Does it seem possible he was trying to make you angry?”

I stared out at the hills around the cottage, now blanketed with soft night, beneath a sky thick with stars. The suggestion of sunset was gone, swallowed by the darkness. Zheng had vanished too, somewhere behind the trees or the overgrown weed-choked flowerbeds. I cast my mind back to the conversation with Edward, an old man perched in a little wooden chair. He hadn’t acted smug or domineering or as if he had something to prove or convince me of, just bluntly confident in his superiority. He had made me angry, unspeakably so — but not as angry as I’d been after discovering Natalie, lost and alone in that Outsider swamp.

“ ... maybe,” I said eventually. “I don’t know.”

“Then”, Evelyn continued, “he has the Shambler take you away to her muddy wallow, where you find human corpses.”

“And Natalie.”

“And Natalie, yes, I’m getting to that. Listen, Heather, he may have even known that the Shambler wouldn’t actually eat either of them. You said she hadn’t, correct?”

I nodded. “Yes. The body of the young man, he was almost completely intact.” I blinked and swallowed. “Sorry, Evee, thinking about it is kind of ... vile. He needs a proper burial, whoever he was. His family, they’ll be missing him. Nobody knows. I ... ”

“Just bear with me,” Evelyn said. To my surprise, she patted the tentacle that I had currently wrapped around her arm, even though she couldn’t see it. Locating me by touch alone. “So, either you were going to find a dead young man and a dead little girl — or a live little girl, terrified and alone, Outside. From Edward’s perspective the details didn’t matter. You get enraged, angry, you lose control. He’s pressing your buttons. Then you come back here, full of very justified anger, and try to ambush him in that kitchen.”

“But he’d moved.” I nodded along. “He figured out we’d do that.”

“No,” Evelyn said, in the exact tone of a very patient professor with a student who was missing an obvious point. “No. Heather, think about it. He wanted you run out into the garden, to complete the next step of the spell. I would wager he left that chair the moment the Shambler took you away. He knew you would think of the ambush, he set himself up — or his vessel — as bait, for you.”

“Ah, yes.” I cleared my throat awkwardly. “Right, I see.”

“So, you Slip back, right into his magic circle in the kitchen. Now, whatever that was meant to do, it didn’t work. It was inert the moment we arrived, and I think I know why.”

“Why?”

Evelyn allowed herself a thin smile. “You brought all of us with you.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose I did, didn’t I?”

“I think he expected you to find two corpses in that swamp, then get angry, maybe kill the Shambler, and then Slip back right on top of his chair, to kill him. I don’t think he expected the little girl to survive. If he had, he would have accounted for the possibility you would have dropped her off at home first, and then returned with reinforcements. That circle, whatever it was, it was attuned to you, personally. But you brought us along, and our presence broke it.”

I squeezed her arm. “Good.”

“In theory, anyway. I think his plan was to get you angry, get you into that smaller circle, and then have you run out into the garden into the larger circle, this ... monstrosity here, whatever exit you took, since you wouldn’t be able to Slip.” Evelyn frowned. “Though he got that wrong too. He underestimated you.”

“Well, he underestimated hyperdimensional mathematics.” I sighed. “I tend to do that too, I don’t know my own limits.”

“Quite.”

I took a deep breath and did my best to stop thinking for a moment, to absorb what this all meant. I turned my eyes from Evelyn and stared into the thickening darkness of this summer night. A shadow moved by the rear garden wall, too tall to be a human being, avoiding the lights from the house — Zheng, carrying out one final check for any clues we might have missed. I didn’t have much hope for that.

“Evee,” I asked, “what do you think he was trying to do to me? What was this huge magic circle actually for?”

Evelyn shifted uncomfortably, rubbing at her thigh where socket met flesh. She spoke slowly, as if her own thoughts left a sour taste in her mouth. “I don’t know for certain. I don’t think he was trying to kill you, or the rest of us either. Like I said, a simple bomb would have done the trick for that. No, no I don’t think he was trying to kill you.”

Evelyn was frowning at the ruined circle upon the lawn, her eyes ringed with dark stress lines, her jaw clenched hard, her brow furrowed deep. On the far side of her, a few paces from the bench, Praem stared down at both of us.

“But that’s not the end of the theory,” I said. It wasn’t a question.

For a moment Evelyn didn’t answer, couldn’t answer. She looked like a stone carving of vengeance itself.

“I don’t know,” she said. “This circle, it’s ... the traditions he’s used for it, I’m not familiar with them. Some parts of it are very complex, yes, very much beyond my knowledge, that part is obvious. But the overall structure is like ... like a ... ”

A familiar purr interrupted us from the darkness.

“A blood funnel.”

Zheng stalked out of the shadows behind Praem, which was quite a feat considering the wide coverage of the outdoor lights. She seemed to step out of nowhere, unfolding like a panther dropping from a hidden branch and landing on the jungle floor with silent paws. The heat of the summer night and the drone of insects did

nothing to dispel the gut impression of being ambushed by some massive predatory feline. I flinched, all my tentacles flexing outward, except the three wrapped around Evelyn. Evee jerked as well, but then huffed in exasperation, glaring at Zheng. Praem merely turned and stared.

“For fuck’s sake,” Evelyn grunted. “You do that again, somebody’s liable to shoot you by accident, you giant idiot.”

“Zheng.” I forced a deep breath down my throat, trying to slow my racing heart. “Blood funnel? What do you mean?”

Zheng blinked slowly, exactly like a giant cat in some steaming jungle. “A funnel, with grooves cut to channel blood.”

Evelyn’s frown turned sharp as Zheng’s teeth. “How do you know that?”

Zheng gestured with one slow hand at the remains of the circle across the lawn, the piles of ruined copper wire cut into pieces by Praem’s spade, the strange design that Edward Lilburne had tried to get me to step inside.

“Rope and steel, gutting knives, channels for blood, a bucket for collection. The shape is clear.”

“How do you know the first thing about magic?” Evelyn demanded.

Zheng rolled her neck. “I know how to kill and drain a pig, wizard.”

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted.

“Wait, pardon?” I squinted in confusion. “You’re saying he was going to drain my blood?”

Evelyn sighed. “Not literally, no. But ... metaphorically. Spiritually? I don’t know. All I know is that, yes, Zheng is right, at least that’s what it looks like to my knowledge. A magical version of a funnel for collecting blood from a victim, pooling it at a central point.” She shot Zheng a dubious look, openly suspicious.

Zheng rumbled in return, showing all her teeth but without any hint of a smile. “Wizard, if I knew the littlest thing about this insult to the shaman, I would not keep it to myself.”

But to my incredible surprise, Evelyn neither flinched nor shied away. She stared back into Zheng’s sharp-edged eyes, right at that naked maw of shark-teeth. Praem stood between them, but for once

she seemed to form no barrier at all. I wet my lips and found I was quivering slightly. I tried to speak Zheng's name, to tell her to back down, but my throat was closing up.

Edward had wanted to drain my blood? What did that mean, even as a metaphor?

"All right," Evelyn said softly. Her voice snapped me back to myself. "All right, Zheng. Sometimes I forget we're on the same side. My apologies."

"Mm," Zheng grunted. Didn't sound like she was going to reciprocate the apology.

I swallowed hard and tried to gather my thoughts. "I don't get it ... drain my blood? I ... I know he wanted to learn how to Slip, I told you. At least I think that's what he meant. But ... he was going to do what? Take it from me?"

"You have a theory," Praem said — but she was talking to Zheng.

Zheng blinked slowly again, as if considering whether she should speak at all. But she broke when I looked up at her.

"Old magic," Zheng purred.

"Excuse me?" said Evelyn.

"Old magic. Older than your scribbling and whining, your wizard tricks and word traps and over-thinking the world. Old magic. Drink the blood, steal the soul."

I just shook my head, feeling horribly numb as I stared out at the ruined magic circle beneath the lawn of the cottage. This was the sort of dark madness I'd imagined when I'd first learned of magic, the only thing missing was a bloody stone altar. I almost laughed, but hiccuped instead.

"I don't understand," I said. "What does he want? Hyperdimensional mathematics? It would kill him. My abyssal ... self? He was obsessed with purity, that wasn't a lie, so why would he want that?"

Evelyn opened her mouth to speak, to suggest some theory, some rationalisation.

But Zheng crossed the few paces which separated us, resuming her place at my back, and placed one warm hand on the top of my

head.

“Do not waste energy on understanding wizards, shaman,” she purred. “Better to tear out their tongues before they speak.”

I sighed and tried to find the comfort in those words, reaching up with a tentacle and wrapping it around Zheng’s arm. But the sentiment left me cold. I already understood this wizard. There was only one possible conclusion. Edward Lilburne had attempted to steal something from me, either my abyssal nature, or dubious bond with the lessons with the Eye, or something more fundamental, something I’d failed to understand all these years since the Eye had kidnapped Maisie and myself. He wanted to render me down for my blood.

He didn’t want *me*, he wanted what I *was*. To drain me, like a pig in a slaughterhouse. Meat.

“Can’t have it,” I whispered.

Something horrible and dark turned inside my stomach. For the first time in my life, I considered going vegetarian.

But nobody had heard my whisper. Evelyn was scoffing with exaggerated offense.

“Oh, thank you very much,” she said to Zheng.

“No tongues,” Praem added.

Zheng looked down at them, dark eyes against the star-strewn sky. “Mm,” she grunted.

“Present company excepted,” I said for her. “I’m sure.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes, but then turned her attention to me. “Heather, whatever Edward was doing, we won’t let him do it. Not to you or to Lozzie. This circle is ruined, we’ve destroyed it, and we have his machine. I’ll study it and find out how it works. We’re not going to let him do this. I will not let him do this. That’s what I meant about changing our strategy.”

I nodded, squeezed her arm, and tried to look at the overturned dirt of the lawn without feeling like a lamb before a bombed-out slaughterhouse.

We fell silent for a long moment. Zheng kept her hand on top of my head for a few seconds, then withdrew it and stalked away a little

distance, peering around the side of the house, looking for any hidden watchers. Praem stepped over to the house and laid the spade against the wall of the cottage. Evelyn sighed and glanced up at the dark windows. Lights shone deeper inside, probably in one of the front bedrooms. As we watched, one light went out and another went on. Somebody crossed one of the windows — Twil, in the middle of saying something, as she and Raine finished their double-check inside the cottage.

“Wish those two would hurry up and be done with this,” Evelyn hissed. “We need to be away from here.”

Words bubbled up before I could stop myself. Zheng and Praem were both well within earshot, but somehow that didn’t matter. I rode a wave of exhaustion, fear, and salvation too, knowing that this strange moment would end very soon. If I didn’t stand up and shout now, I never would.

“Evee,” I said, looking right at her, “I love you too.”

Evelyn frowned at me. “Eh? Heather, what?”

“I ... I-I mean, back in the cottage, when I was losing control, you said ‘I love you, but—’ and then you got mad at me. Which is what I needed, I needed somebody to get me under control. But, Evee, I love you too. I love you.”

Why were those words so easy to say? Why had I been agonising all this time? Was I really so exhausted and out of my mind that I could simply admit it out loud? My heart wasn’t racing, my hands weren’t shaking; no pounding of nervous adrenaline wracked my head and chest. I was perfectly calm.

Evelyn Saye, my best friend, the woman I’d saved from Outside before I’d even understood what Outside was, a woman I perhaps knew better than I knew my own lover, stared back at me with those soft blue eyes set in that puppy-fat face, arched an eyebrow, and said, “Yeeees?”

I blinked three times. “ ... y-yes?”

“As in, yes, Heather, I love you too.” Evelyn sighed, rolled her eyes, and patted the tentacle I had wrapped around her forearm. Like I was drunk and running my mouth, stating the obvious, a self-evident truth we both already knew.

Then she looked back up at the cottage and sighed with impatience.

I stared at Evee, dumbfounded. I must have looked totally gormless.

My mouth half-worked, trying to form extra words, to add a clarification, perhaps something like ‘I mean I *love* you’, or ‘no you don’t get it’, or ‘Evee, I’m confessing that I have confused quasi-romantic feelings for you and they’re coming out in the wake of a near-death experience and reliving my own childhood trauma by projecting it onto a small child whom I saved from certain death by exposure and-slash-or starvation, please acknowledge the depth of my affection and regard for you.’

I had absolutely zero idea what was going on. Heather Morell, captain of an emotional ghost ship, lost at sea, amid miles of fog bank, with no crew and a worrying gnawing sound echoing up from the hold.

Was Evelyn hiding her real emotions, concealing them with a banal acknowledgement of our deep friendship? No, I couldn’t believe that. Evelyn was nothing if not calculating; despite her failures in the past, despite the way she insulted herself, she was a master of over-thinking — but not when it came to me. I was the only one allowed all the way inside, past her defences, to the secret room where she drew up her plots. Wasn’t I?

Or maybe she hadn’t understood what I’d said, maybe she had the wrong end of the stick — maybe by saying those words, I was forcing her into an uncomfortable situation, and she was simply taking the easiest way out. But no, that made even less sense. Evelyn had trouble admitting her affection for her friends at the best of times. To simply say, so casually, the words ‘I love you’ meant a lot to her.

She’d screamed those words to me, once before.

We hadn’t discussed it, half because I’d pretended I hadn’t heard them, and half because we’d had an entire crisis to deal with at the time.

Down in the depths of Hringewindla’s shell, when I’d been about to cross over the line of safety to accept his invasive parasite into my brain, into my soul, when Evelyn had briefly thought that ‘Heather Morell’ would cease to exist, replaced by some Outsider-ridden parasite-thing, she’d screamed those words to my back.

"I love you too much, Heather!"

She'd only been able to say that because she'd thought I was about to die. To my back. Almost drowned out by the booming air-displacement of Hringewindla's tentacles. How could I not have heard those words? I'd just been trying not to acknowledge them this whole time.

And she had just repeated it as the most casual thing in the world.

Had Evee found the emotional time and space to think about those words? Had her screamed confession forced her into confronting what she felt — or didn't feel? Had she already processed and accepted what we were to each other? She seemed so comfortable.

Well, good for her.

I, on the other hand, had a significantly less comprehensive understanding of the situation, to put it lightly.

What I did have was three tentacles wrapped around Evelyn's body, one clutching her arm, one over her shoulders, and a third tentacle looped around her waist. She was practically in my embrace, comfortable and casual in a way she was with nobody else, except maybe Praem. She was in my arms and had declared she loved me, and somehow this had made everything even less clear than before.

For one mad, desperate moment, as she looked up at the lights in the cottage windows, I was gripped by a desire to kiss her on the cheek.

But then I felt Praem's stare.

A few paces from us, standing at an angle where Evelyn couldn't quite see, Praem was giving me the most intense stare I'd ever seen from the doll-demon.

She wasn't frowning, of course. Praem never did anything so overt as frown, except for that one time I'd asked her to smile, shortly after Evelyn had first created her. But her milk-white eyes were locked right on me; I could somehow tell, despite the lack of pupils and sclera and the heavy shadows of the summer night. Praem was staring at me with something akin to a warning.

I stared back, trying to ask a silent question with my eyebrows.

What am I doing wrong? Praem, help!

To my incredible surprise, Praem nodded, then put a finger to her lips.

For one dizzying moment I thought I'd developed telepathic powers. I don't blame myself for that, not after werewolves and spirits and parallel dimensions and moth-girls and growing my own set of tentacles. But then Praem failed to respond to any of my follow-up thoughts, including the increasingly wild and outlandish ones which were intended solely to test if she could see what I was thinking. Some of those were so far beyond acceptability that even Praem would have needed to react, maybe even blush. I certainly did.

But she didn't. She had been reacting to the look in my eyes, and perhaps to the way I was gazing at Evelyn.

The moment passed. Evee sighed again and turned away from the cottage, then did a frowning double-take at me and shot a dubious glance at Praem over her shoulder.

"What are the pair of you doing behind my back?" She tutted. "This isn't the time for playing stupid games."

"Win stupid prizes," said Praem.

"Sorry!" I blurted out. "Sorry, I was just ... thinking about some ... stuff. And things. Nothing important."

Evelyn gave me a doubtful look, then gestured at Praem with the head of her walking stick. "Be a dear and fetch those two idiots inside, would you please? I doubt they're going to find anything by slitting open all the mattresses and pulling up the carpets. And we should get back to the house. There's no telling if Edward is trying to regroup right now, maybe to hit us here, or to follow up on some other plan. We need to be secure, and soon, and there's more work to do."

Praem turned and marched into the cottage. A couple of minutes later all the lights inside went out. Raine and Twil emerged through the back door, with Praem right behind them. Zheng appeared from the dark corners of the garden once again.

"Gang's all here, huh?" said Raine, a grin in her voice. She walked up behind us and squeezed my shoulder. "Nothing doing in there, sadly. Not a trace. Might be a secret door somewhere, like an episode of Scooby-Doo, but I doubt it. You holding up okay, Heather?"

No! In various ways!

“Um, mostly,” I lied.

“Shit’s heavy, yo,” said Twil. “We goin’?”

Twil had Edward’s Slip-trap contraption in her arms. Werewolf strength rendered the weirdly shaped mass of steel and glass easy to carry. Praem had the LCD screens in a carrier bag and the broken laptop under one arm.

“Yes,” Evelyn grunted. “One moment.”

With some difficulty — and some help from my tentacles — Evelyn climbed to her feet and dusted off her backside. For a moment I felt terribly embarrassed at having her wrapped in my tentacles while everyone else was right here, but I told myself it was no different to give her some support after a long day. After all, Raine and Twil couldn’t even see. This was just what friends did. Tentacle hugs. Friendly ones. Right.

Twil peered out at the ruined garden. “What we gonna’ do with the rest of the place? We’re just leaving it like this? What was all this shit about, anyway?”

Evelyn sighed, planted her walking stick firmly on the cracked pathway, and narrowed her eyes at the cottage. “We should really burn it down.”

“Eyyyyyy,” went Raine. The big grin suited her. “Sometimes, Eevee, you and I are working from the same page.”

“W-what?” Twil gaped. “We can’t do that!”

“We can and we should,” Evelyn grunted. “Won’t be the first time we’ve burned down a building.”

I cleared my throat softly. “Yes, but that was a haunted house, haunted by the Eye,” I said. “This is a beautiful old cottage. Eevee, this might be some kind of listed building. It doesn’t deserve that.”

“Petrol,” Praem intoned. “Matches.”

“Should be enough to get the job done.” Evelyn regarded the cottage with heavy-lidded eyes and a painful, haunted hunch to her shoulders. “When it comes to eradicating the work of mages, Heather, you never, ever leave anything to chance. Understand?” She glanced at me, then back at the garden behind us, at the

remains of the ruined magic circle. "The garden too, it needs to be destroyed, completely."

"Heeeey," said Raine, a bright smile on her face. "Can't help but notice that you're being totally serious here, Evee."

"Of course I'm serious. Have you changed your mind suddenly?"

Raine shook her head, laughed softly, and raised a hand, a gentle brake on Evelyn's pyromania. "When we torched the cult's house in Sharrowford, that was in the middle of a city, right? Plenty of neighbours around to raise the alarm when they saw smoke. Fire brigade right there, close at hand. Plus it was winter, in the North."

Evelyn frowned at her. "So?"

"Sooooooo, we're in rural Devon. Middle o' nowhere. Height o' summer. Ground's dry, grass is dry, hedgerows are dry. Think they've got a hosepipe ban on right now, yeah?" Raine smiled all the wider, faux-awkward as she made her case, but utterly confident beneath the act. "If we set fire to this cottage, it could spread, fast, and there's not a lotta people to spot it. A fire like that could eat whole hillsides, other cottages, maybe threaten a village. A small fire, probably not, but we're talking about dumping enough petrol on this place to turn it to ash. Nuh-uh. Sorry, Evee. Not doing it."

Evelyn frowned at Raine, frowned at the cottage, then frowned back at Raine again. Then she frowned at Twil, then at me, then even at Zheng looming at the edge of the darkness, then finally at Praem.

"Praem?" she said.

"No fires," said Praem.

"Tch." Evelyn tutted. "Great."

"Raine's got a bloody good point, right?" Twil said. "Burning up cult shit, that's one thing, but we've scoped the house, there's bugger all in there. It's just a holiday home. It's not as if anybody's gonna know we were here, but yeah, I don't wanna like, cause a wildfire. You know?"

"The garden has to be destroyed," Evelyn said, loud and clear, glancing at me. "I *insist*." She planted her stick firmly again, leaning forward like a general over a map table. "This was a trap, for Heather."

Quickly and with more than a touch of anger, Evelyn re-outlined her theory about the purpose of Edward's trap, for the benefit of Raine and Twil.

They listened without interruption. Raine came to my side and put an arm around my shoulders. Twil grimaced deeper and deeper, as if listening to a story that got worse with every detail. Raine asked a couple of questions, but nothing I hadn't already asked before

"The garden must be destroyed," Evelyn repeated.

Raine blew out a long sigh and glanced over the upturned earth. She was holding onto me pretty tightly. "Maybe if we dig a fire-break. Maybe. I dunno."

Twil looked increasingly worried. "I mean that's all pretty fucking bad, yo. That's some sick shit. You okay, Heather?"

"Mm," I went.

"But you know, garden's wrecked already?" Twil gestured at the ruined lawn.

"Job's a good'un," said Praem.

Evelyn gritted her teeth. "I don't want to leave a single trace, not one—"

"Evee," Raine said softly. "You don't seriously believe Eddy boy didn't keep notes on this? That this was his only attempt, a prototype with no backups? We're not talking about experimental giant robots here. He's a mage. He'll have design documents. Destroy this all you like, but it won't help."

Evelyn ground her teeth again. She met my eyes, searching, questioning.

"We've destroyed the garden, Evee," I said. "Let's not risk a fire." Then, in a smaller voice, I added, "He won't get to me again."

Evelyn sucked on her teeth, let her shoulders slump, and let out a big sigh. "Fine. You're right. He'll have design notes. There's nothing stopping him from making another one of these. Besides, we already have enough left to get done tonight."

"We do?" Twil puffed out a sigh. "Serious?"

"We have a kidnapped little girl in our house," Evelyn said,

glancing around at the rest of us. "Edward may not be aware she survived, but if he's smart, he'll be setting up a plan to call the police on us."

"Ah," went Raine. "Smart man would do that, yeah."

Twil blinked like she was trying to wake up from a dream. "What."

"Um, yes, Evee," I said. "What do you mean?"

"I already said it loud and clear. We have a kidnapped little girl in our house. We need to get that girl back to her parents. Not tomorrow, not in the morning. Tonight. Now. ASAP. We need to make a plan to drop her off at a police station and—"

"No!"

It took me a second to realise that I'd snapped. Evelyn blinked at me in shock, taken aback.

Raine rubbed my shoulder. "Hey, Heather, it's alright, we're gonna help her, yeah?"

Evelyn gathered herself and sighed. "... Heather, you rescued that girl, yes, but our responsibility is to—"

"No, I didn't rescue her, not yet," I said. "I haven't finished the rescue yet. It's not over until her family believes her."

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.11

“Police are launching an urgent appeal to help locate a little girl who went missing this weekend. Natalie Skeates, 10, of Prestwich, Greater Manchester, vanished only meters from the back door of her parents’ house, at around 8.15pm on Sunday night. Natalie is white, about 4 foot 2 inches tall, with long dark brown hair. She was last seen wearing grey jogging bottoms and a lilac pajama top, but may also be wearing a yellow plastic raincoat and a pair of purple wellington boots. Police currently believe she followed a family pet out into the back street behind her house.”

Raine paused to pull a theatrically painful wince. She didn’t look up from the newspaper she had spread out across the table in the magical workshop. She was leaning over it, hands braced on the edge of the tabletop. She hadn’t bothered to sit down since she’d returned with the paper and cast it onto the table like evidence in a dramatic criminal trial.

“Sounds like our girl,” Evelyn said between clenched teeth. “Is there more?”

“Oh, you bet there’s more.” Raine cleared her throat and put on her best serious-young-woman newsreader voice. “Police believe this may be a rare case of ‘stranger kidnapping’, as Natalie has no history of wandering off and no members of her extended family are being treated as suspects. The family cat is also missing, a ginger tomcat of advanced age who answers to ‘Turmy’. Members of the public are asked to report any sightings of deceased or stray ginger cats.” Raine winced again. “Daaaaamn, they’re desperate. Dead cats? Seriously?”

“It makes a certain kind of logical sense,” Evelyn said. She sounded dead inside; maybe that was just the exhaustion. She didn’t look happy either, especially when she turned and glared at me. “Listening closely, Heather?”

I did my best not to hiccup or flinch when Evelyn drawled venom.

The pint of caffeine in my veins was making me twitchy already, and the painkillers had put me on edge. The strong stuff, from Evee's private, secret, semi-legal stash. At least Evee and Raine couldn't see that I was hugging myself with all my tentacles, desperate to keep a firm grip on my nerves. I tried to sit up straight in my chair. Tried to look like I knew what I was doing.

This was going to work. I had to believe it was going to work.

"Of course," I said to Evee. I didn't quite manage to keep my voice level. My smile must have been a grimace. "Evee, of course I'm listen—"

"Where is that bloody cat right now, anyway?" Evelyn spoke over me. She glanced at Raine, then at Zheng looming by the doorway, then over her own shoulder at Praem, who was still waiting placid and calm for orders or requests. "If we lose track of that cat and Lozzie has to pull off this stupid fail-safe, we're fucked. We'll have police all over the house and a piece of living direct evidence wandering around between their legs. Where is it?"

Praem answered before I had a chance to lose my temper, which I would have regretted dearly.

"Turmy is upstairs," Praem intoned. "Safe cat. With Lozzie."

Evelyn gritted her teeth and made an irritated grumble.

"Still," Raine said. "Police are hoping to find a dead cat? They really have got bugger all, huh?"

"Well," I said, "Natalie did literally vanish. We can't blame them for being stumped."

Evelyn snorted. "Can blame the police for a lot of shit. Is that all, Raine?"

Raine resumed reading from the article. "Extensive enquiries are underway, but attempts to find Natalie are as yet unsuccessful. Greater Manchester Police are urging anybody with information on Natalie or her whereabouts to contact them on 101, blah blah blah." Raine pulled an ironic grin. "Just the usual boilerplate for any missing kid. Plus there's a picture of her here."

Raine half-turned the newspaper so we could see, but there was no need. The grainy picture showed a gap-toothed little girl in a school uniform polo-shirt, smiling a big toothy smile. It was unmistakably

the same girl who was currently curled up fast asleep on Lozzie's bed. A little insert picture in the corner showed what was probably meant to be Turmy, but the marmalade gentleman was barely recognisable from the grainy cat-shaped smudge.

"At least this confirms she isn't some homunculus made by Edward or something," Raine said. "Right?"

"Right," Evelyn agreed. She didn't sound happy about that either.

"Small mercies," I said, trying not to sigh.

It was almost one o'clock in the morning. We were all shattered and exhausted, full of coffee and painkillers, and we still had a kidnapped little girl in the house.

And we couldn't agree what to do about her.

We had returned from the cottage in rural Devon about an hour and a half earlier, carrying the remains of Edward's bizarre machine, a faint regret at not starting a huge wildfire, and the seeds of a blazing row. Practical realities had doused the heat of the potential argument, however; if we got too carried away debating the finer points of what to do next, we might not hear the police pulling up outside the house.

Provisionally, I did actually agree with Eevee. She was correct, we needed to resolve this quickly, both for our own safety and for little Natalie's mental and emotional health. If it was up to me, I would have let the girl sleep through the night, fed her a large breakfast in the morning, and only then set about the delicate process of returning her to her parents without getting us all arrested. Everything would be much easier after a good night's sleep, we'd be less irritable, far less tired, and far more able to think clearly. Less likely to bite each other's heads off, too.

But we might not have that long. Eevee was right about that, too. If Edward figured out — or simply guessed, or took a gamble — that Natalie was alive, then he might call the police with an anonymous tip.

Just imagine the newspaper the following morning: *Kidnapped girl found in occult student squat! Local neo-pagans outraged! University scandalised! Several young women arrested on suspicion of a myriad of bizarre crimes!*

Of course it wouldn't come to that, whatever happened, but I would rather avoid having to send a dozen police officers on a one-way trip Outside.

So while Natalie was still blissfully asleep and unaware, Lozzie and Tenny were most certainly not. Our first move upon returning home had been to make sure they were both awake and ready. Lozzie had strict instructions. At the first sign we were getting raided by a Tactical Firearms Unit, she was to Slip to Camelot, taking Natalie, Tenny, and Turmy with her. If she heard a knock on the front door, or the screech of tires in the road, or even a friendly "Ello 'ello 'ello, what's all this then?", she was to go, no questions, don't wait for the rest of us.

Raine had quite liked this plan. "The plod won't find anything except a bunch of students into the occult. Wiccan lesbian squat. It's perfect, elegant, can't go wrong. If Ed-boy goes through with it, the plan gets turned around on him, see? Making false reports, wasting police time, suddenly he's a suspect."

Evelyn had given her a death-glare. "It's a far bloody cry from perfect."

"What if they see Zheng?" I asked.

Raine answered without missing a beat. "Woman's rugby captain, Sharrowford uni team."

Twil had rolled her eyes and snorted at that one. "Rebecca Sappington is like five foot two, and blonde. Zheng ain't gonna pass muster."

We'd all looked at Twil, utterly bamboozled for a moment. Even Evelyn's anger had shut off in confusion.

"Scuse me, Twil," Raine said, "but who the hell are you talking about?"

Twil looked around at the three of us like we were idiots. "Sappington? Sharrowford uni women's rugby team captain?"

Evelyn blinked hard, as if trying to wake up from a dream. "Since when do you follow women's rugby?"

"Since always?" Twil said. "You three are the students at Sharrowford, don't you know this stuff?"

Evelyn sighed. “Not particularly.”

“I wouldn’t mind, I suppose ... ” I said.

Raine laughed. “Figures. Alright, not the captain then.”

But Lozzie’s emergency hiding place, while admittedly the best possible hiding place one could ever imagine, was only a stop-gap. We had to return Natalie to her parents, preferably before we were placed under any kind of suspicion, without getting ourselves in serious legal or criminal trouble, and – as I insisted, over and over — in a way that would make her parents understand, acknowledge, and believe what she had experienced.

I surprised myself with the rapid coherence of my own plan. I wasn’t quite certain where it had come from; I was exhausted, both physically and mentally, the caffeine and painkillers hadn’t fully kicked in as the plan had taken shape, and I wasn’t exactly good at thinking these kinds of thoughts. The power output from my trilobe reactor could keep me up and moving for days if need be, albeit at great cost to be paid by future Heather — but no amount of raw energy could bootstrap the cognition required for detailed, sensible, careful planning. Perhaps I’d been subconsciously working over the ideas for hours already. Perhaps the plan had taken shape when I’d been sitting on that cold stone bench, watching Evelyn work, in the garden of that little cottage.

But Evelyn did not approve of my plan. Oh no, not at all. I didn’t blame her though.

That had been a bad moment. Evelyn and I had ended up alone in the magical workshop together, with her anger reignited in a new and unstable form, like a product of controlled nuclear decay that I was trying to guide into place for a useful purpose. She was exhausted too, but unwilling to back down. Zheng was still upstairs with Lozzie. Twil had conked out on the kitchen table. Praem was content to watch us argue, but then she bustled around in the kitchen, making even more coffee. Raine had left only moments earlier, on a hurried trip to the nearest all-night corner shop, to pick up a copy of the *Manchester Evening News*.

“Heather, how many times?” Evelyn had almost been slapping the table, banging the floor with her walking stick. “The only sensible option — no, fuck it, the only remotely workable option — is to drop the girl off outside a police station, somewhere without CCTV,

and then vanish. Keep us out of the equation. Look, I understand how you feel—”

“No, Eevee, I don’t think you do. I’m sorry, but I don’t think you do.”

I’d said it quietly, but I’d meant it.

Evelyn had looked ready to surrender to a migraine. She’d curled up so hard that I almost broke cover and went over to hug her. But then she sat up again, raging. “I could maybe, *maybe* understand if you were talking about something like dropping her off in her own bed, and leaving a letter for the parents. Maybe! That would still be too much risk!”

“And it wouldn’t be enough. Eevee, please. It wouldn’t be enough. They won’t believe her. She’ll grow up being told it didn’t happen, that none of it was real, that it was all just a bad dream.”

Evelyn bit her tongue, literally. I could see her teeth chewing on the inside of her mouth as she stared at me. We were both sitting at the table in the magical workshop, on the same side. I’d chosen that very purposefully, when we’d sat down, rather than sitting across from her.

I didn’t need Evelyn Saye the magician for this, and I could make do without Evelyn the strategist, though I would always welcome her input. I had the plan all worked out. I knew what to do.

What I needed was Eevee, my friend, because I was terrified of failure.

Praem re-joined us and re-filled my coffee, which I drained as quickly as the drink cooled off. Zheng drifted down from upstairs to linger on the edge of the doorway, like an animal uncertain of interrupting a pair of smaller predators, lest they turn on her and join forces. In the kitchen, Twil was snoring.

“Then maybe it was a dream,” Evelyn said eventually.

Something cold bristled inside my chest. “... excuse me?”

“Heather, this girl, Natalie, she is not like you.” Evelyn’s voice came cold and cruel. For just a second, I hated her — but I grabbed that feeling before it could wriggle down into my gut. I dissected it and ate the parts. This wasn’t Eevee’s fault. She was trying to look after all of us.

"She is like me," I said. "Evee, please."

"She was not taken by the Eye, or anything even remotely like it. She's not going to grow up with hyperdimensional mathematics in her head, or nightmares from Outside, or even seeing spirits everywhere. She hasn't come back with pneuma-somatic sight. She's had a terrible, traumatic experience, yes, I acknowledge that, for fuck's sake. But she's not like you."

I drained the rest of my coffee to conceal the wound. I had to make Evelyn understand. I needed her approval.

"Evee," I said, far softer than her. "She's one of us now."

"How?! Heather, she's ten, she barely even understands what she's been through, she—"

"She's been exposed to magic. She's been Outside. That will have changed her. Isn't that how it works?"

Evelyn opened her mouth to snap at me again, but then stopped dead, almost panting. She drew a hand over her face and grimaced. She hated everything about this situation.

"We don't know what she might see as she grows up," I went on, trying to stay calm. "What she might stumble onto, five years, ten years, twenty years from now. She needs to be prepared. Her parents need to understand. She's in the know. She's one of us. I won't treat her otherwise."

"God fucking dammit, Heather," Evelyn hissed between her teeth. "Fuck you for being so right all the time."

Raine saved us the embarrassment of tears — which we were both on the verge of bursting into, for slightly different reasons — by returning at that exact moment. She announced herself by throwing the front door wide open and shouting, "Only me, not the police!", which made Twil emit a sleeping snort from the kitchen.

Then she'd slapped the newspaper down on the table to show us the article about Natalie's disappearance.

"Small mercies," I repeated again, trying to smile.

One o'clock in the morning, and we still couldn't agree.

Finally done, Raine flapped the newspaper shut to the front page. She straightened up and rolled her neck from side to side, then

flexed her shoulders and stretched her arms. She was just as tired as the rest of us, but taking pains not to show it too much. Evelyn stared at the newspaper, then directly at me, a silent accusation in her dark-rimmed eyes, waiting for my response to the fact that Natalie was already in the news. Praem waited at her shoulder. Zheng brooded, tall and dark and silent, arms folded as she leaned against the wall next to the door. She was watching me too, waiting for my decision. Twil was still asleep face-down on the kitchen table, head buried in her arms. I envied her.

Everybody was waiting for me. I was the one with the plan, after all.

Raine blew out a big sigh and gestured at the paper. "They were on it quick, yeah? It's only the *Manchester Evening News*, but what's that, less than twenty four hours between her going missing and this going to print?"

"Good parents," said Praem.

Raine pointed a finger gun at Praem, but the gesture wasn't backed with a smile. Just a blank, for once. "Smart parents, yeah. They didn't wait to report her missing. On it right quick."

Evelyn snorted. "Newspapers wouldn't give a toss if it was a kid from some sink estate. Or ten years older."

Raine pulled a slow wince. "True. Still, if it was me, I wouldn't hesitate to exploit missing white girl syndrome. Every tiny advantage means more chance of her being found, right?"

Evelyn frowned at Raine. "So?"

"Um, yes, Raine," I added. "Where are you going with this?"

Raine gave us a wry smile. "One article in the *Manchester Evening News* now, that's gonna be a BBC television item by the morning, tomorrow evening at latest. Most missing kids are found pretty quick, because they've just wandered off or been snatched by a family member or something. But this? This is a genuine vanishing. Girl just went like *that*." Raine clicked her fingers. "The parents are middle class, they've got resources, they'll be playing the media as much as they can, and I can't blame them for trying. And the media is gonna love it."

Evelyn nodded slowly, then stared at me.

“Yes, I know, it has to be tonight,” I said. “I understand that.”

Raine shrugged. “Right now, if she turns up in her own family home, they can probably bullshit something to the police. I doubt they’re watching the place that carefully, not yet. But if this gets any bigger before she turns back up, they might be suspected of having hidden her, for publicity or money or whatever. And that’s not gonna make your plan go smooth, Heather. I’d guess we’ve got until the morning, that’s when it’ll hit national news. If you’re gonna do this, you gotta do it now. Can’t let Nat sleep.”

“I know!” I snapped. “I know, okay? I’m ready to do it, I’m ready to go. The plan will work. Or at least I’m pretty sure it will. I have to try.”

Evelyn snorted with derision and disbelief, shaking her head.

Raine winced and averted her eyes with theatrical display. Zheng stared at Eevee, darkly unreadable; I couldn’t tell if she had faith or not. This may be a step too far, even for her shaman. Praem stared not at Evelyn, but at me.

I swallowed my irritation and summoned all the love I held for Eevee.

“Eevee, do you really think there’s no chance of her parents adapting quickly enough?”

Evelyn sighed, closed her eyes, and rubbed the bridge of her nose. When she answered, it was through gritted teeth, in a tone of fake politeness dripping with sarcasm. “I doubt very much that they will respond well, no. Most people don’t handle the occult truth without either going mad, becoming obsessed, or spending the rest of their life denying it. What do you think will happen, hm? What do you think is likely?”

“But Natalie herself—”

“Yes, children are pliable. Adults are not. Basic neuroplasticity. Nothing supernatural about it.”

“What about with the father of Amy Stack’s boy? Shuja. He believed. He adapted.”

“Because he’d already been broken down!” Evelyn spat, rounding on me, losing her temper. “If I understood the man’s personal history correctly, then Shuja Yousafzai spent a significant portion of

his life in a war zone, seeing his culture and society bombed and shot and bathed in blood. And then he had a child with an ex-mercenary and professional assassin. The man knows how to compartmentalise, how to keep his mouth shut. But you know what's most important?" Evelyn didn't wait for an answer, eyes blazing at me. "He knows a *tiny* bit about the fragility of consensus reality. So when he was exposed to the supernatural truth, he could just about deal with it. Just about." Evelyn huffed out a great irritated sigh. "Though I bet he spends an awful lot of time trying not to think about it very much."

I gathered all my courage. I already knew where this was going. "So I have to break them."

Evelyn made a fist and looked like she wanted to punch herself in the forehead. "A random middle-class couple from suburban Manchester? What did the girl say, her father is a teacher?"

"Mm," Raine confirmed.

"A teacher, great, yes. The salt of English soil will not break cleanly, Heather. They'll shatter into a million pieces. You have no idea who her parents are! They could be fundamentalist Christians, or hardcore ideological atheists, and neither of those positions is going to take well to having their entire world-view torn apart when you shove a tentacle into their faces."

"There's not going to be any tentacle shoving ... "

"These are settled people! People who believe 'it can't happen here', who have probably lived their entire lives inside a comfortable box of thought and perception. And you're not talking about slowly breaking them down over months or years, which might work, maybe, if you were very, very lucky indeed. You're talking about breaking them in minutes."

"Evee, their daughter vanished without a trace. I think they might be open to alternate explanations right about now."

Evelyn hissed frustration between her teeth. "And what if one of them is mentally ill, huh? What if one of them suffers from schizophrenia, for real? You introduce the real truth, you have no idea what kind of damage you could do."

"I have to believe that they would be willing to risk that for their child," I said. "Evee, we're talking about a little girl who doesn't

have her parents right now. They're not on her side. But they could be. It's worth the risk, to them and to myself."

The room fell silent for a moment, but the gravity of my words was rather undercut by Twil snoring softly from the kitchen. Which was lucky, because I hadn't intended to say anything of such great import. I was merely explaining why this mattered. I hadn't put it in words before. I looked down into my lap, sinking into myself. Evelyn sighed and turned away, rubbing her forehead. Praem clicked out of the room, bustled around in the kitchen for a few moments, and returned with a freshly re-filled pot of coffee. She topped up my mug. I sipped from it right away. She topped up Evee's mug too, but Evelyn left it untouched.

Raine said my name softly. "Hey, Heather?"

"Mm?" I looked up.

Raine was smiling, soft and warm, radiating that absolutely unconditional acceptance, the bedrock of her boundless confidence. "You're trying to do the right thing. I admire you for that. I really do, truly."

"... but?"

Raine considered for a moment, sighed, then shook her head. "There's no but. If you gotta try it, then you gotta try it. I'd be a hypocrite to tell you otherwise."

Evelyn snorted through her nose, shaking her head.

A great yawn echoed from the kitchen, followed by a smacking of lips and a clattering of chair legs on flagstones. Twil appeared in the magical workshop doorway a moment later, squinting bleary eyes and scratching her scalp through her thick dark hair.

"Uhhhh, we still on this?" she asked. "I don't see any coppers about, so I guess we haven't been swatted yet. What's the plan, yo?"

Praem addressed her. "Go back to sleep."

"Nah, I'm good. Ready to ... yeah. One-two, woo." Twil sketched a couple of limp punches into the air.

"Coffee," said Praem.

"Nah thanks."

But it was not a question. Moments later, Twil had a steaming mug of coffee in her hands, whether she liked it or not. Praem watched her from almost point blank range. Twil grimaced back, then sipped her coffee. Praem continued watching. I had no idea what was going on there and neither did Raine, by the equally confused amusement on her face, but I was too exhausted and spread too thinly to ask Praem what on earth she was doing.

Eventually, Evelyn sighed. "Heather, you don't have an obligation to save everybody. You can't. You said it yourself, you're not a superhero. You don't have to right every single wrong in the world, it's not your responsibility. You already rescued this girl. We can keep an eye on her from a distance if we have to."

Zheng purred like a half-awake tiger, which made Twil jump and almost spill her coffee. Praem refilled it.

"The shaman cannot deny her nature," Zheng said.

"I have a responsibility here, Evee," I said.

"Tch," Evelyn tutted. "Your responsibility is to us. All of us. And ... and to ..." Evee gritted her teeth, like the words stuck in her throat, like she didn't want to use this, didn't want to stoop to this level. "And to Maisie. How does this bring you any closer to your goal? How does this get us closer to your sister?"

"I've already said, Natalie is one of us now."

"That doesn't answer my question!" she snapped. "You're not atoning for anything here, Heather. You were not responsible for leaving your sister behind. You were a child, you couldn't have known!" Evelyn jabbed the tabletop with a finger. "You. Were. Not. Responsible."

That rendered me speechless. All my carefully constructed armour of level temper and rational planning fell away. I just gaped at Evee.

"Awwww shit," Twil said. "Evee, fuckin' hell, you—"

"Coffee. Drink," said Praem, right next to Twil's face.

Raine and Zheng were both sensible enough not to interrupt. They understood.

Evelyn braced, a subtle shifting of muscles and posture, as if I was

about to strike her.

I think Evelyn expected me to snap back at her. I think she was trying one last tactic, the one that might make me hate her, to stop me from accepting yet another dangerous task. She hadn't said those words as a cynical and hurtful blow against my ego. She truly meant it. She didn't want me to torture myself with guilt and responsibility.

Instead I clambered out of my chair, crossed the few paces between us, and gave her a hug.

It was an awkward hug, like every embrace between Evelyn and I, snagged and complicated by the difficulties of avoiding too much pressure on her back and spine, but also more awkward than usual, not just because I had to bend down, but because she flinched. She expected me to be angry. At first she just sat there, half-frozen, but then finally reached up and awkwardly patted me on the shoulder, clearing her throat and blushing.

After a good long while I let go and straightened up again, stepping back and smiling down at Eevee.

She sighed up at me, exasperated, anger all burnt out. "Heather, why are you like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like ... oh, never mind."

"Eevee, I'm not trying to atone for anything. Natalie isn't like Maisie, I'm not treating her as a surrogate for my sister. She's like me. I'm saving myself, in miniature. The me I could never save. And I'm not ashamed to say so. I wish I could reach back through time, with everything I know now, and save myself. I wish I could introduce my younger self to you, to Raine, to everybody I know now. I wish you'd been there, when I was little. When I'd returned from Wonderland. I wish I'd had any of you as a friend. But I can't do that, so all I'm trying to do is make sure that little girl doesn't suffer even a hundredth of what I did."

Evelyn made a grumbling sound, blushing quietly and staring at her coffee mug. Then she scooped it up and took a deep drag on the beverage.

"If you must, Heather. Who am I to resist, after all?"

"You're my best friend," I said, then glanced around at everybody else. "Well, one of them."

Twil raised a toast with her coffee. "It's cool, hey."

I dragged my chair closer to Eevee before sitting down again. "Eevee, I'll ask you once more. Do you think my plan has any chance of working?"

Evelyn studied me for a moment, then glanced over at Zheng, then back at me. She sucked on her teeth.

Out in the road, a car passed by the house. We all froze for a long, long moment as the sound of the engine receded into the city. Everybody held their breath, but no follow-up came. The road fell silent again.

"Clear," Raine said. I nodded. Evelyn sighed. Twil pulled a nasty face.

"Your plan isn't completely impossible," Evelyn conceded, returning to the subject. "But that's about the limit of my optimism." Her gaze turned hard and sharp and cold, Evelyn the strategist "You do understand that you're going to have to be violent for this to work, yes?"

I nodded. I did understand, all too well. "Yes, I know. I'm not going to enjoy it or anything, but I know."

"You're going to have to terrify those people out of their minds, and I mean that literally. You can't risk half-measures with this. You need to aim for that clean break, even if I don't think it's achievable. You need to prove me wrong."

"Camelot won't be enough. I know."

Evelyn froze for a second. Her eyes widened by a fraction, caught on sudden fear. "You're not going to take them to Wonderland?"

"Gods, Eevee, no!" I actually laughed, the idea was so absurd. I needed that release of tension. Evelyn huffed and went red in the face. Raine blew out a theatrical sigh of relief, as if she would possibly have believed that too. Twil pulled an uncomfortable face and tried to share a glance with Praem, but the doll-demon was staring at the coffee in her hands again. "Absolutely not," I repeated. "If I ever start planning that, feel free to tie me up."

Evelyn shot me an odd frown. Raine snorted. “Right. Well. I’ll remember that. At least you seem to understand. Though I’m not sure I agree with your choice of squad for this, either.”

Zheng rumbled from the other side of the room, a danger sound from the depths of the rainforest. “Huuuuh?”

“Not you, you bloody great oaf.” Evelyn huffed. “You’re the one I actually approve of. Stop taking offense at everything.”

Twil guffawed. “Yeah, you heard the lady. Grow some thicker skin.”

Zheng blinked slowly, apparently not offended.

“My ‘squad’?” I echoed, cringing. “Evee, you’re all my ‘squad’. We’re all each other’s ‘squad’. Goodness, that’s a very imprecise word.”

“Are you certain Tenny is up to this?” Evelyn asked.

“Oh.” I nodded, putting Evelyn’s questionable choice of words out of my mind for now. “Tenny is a lot more mature than she seems. And I think she understands this, she understands what’s going on. Lozzie will be there too, and, well, not to put too fine a point on it, Lozzie needs the support as well. Tenny’s presence will keep her grounded.”

Raine cleared her throat. “Tenns does also happen to be the most obviously supernatural looking person we’ve got.”

I sighed. “That too. If we have to rely on that ... ”

“Plus,” Raine added, bright and confident. I thanked her silently for that. “Nat was literally cuddled up with her. If we’re gonna have any chance of convincing the parents, that’s a pretty good shot. I’d take it.”

“Heather will be taking the shot,” Evelyn said, staring right at me. “Alone.”

I gave Evelyn the most irritated look I could muster, which probably just made me seem constipated and on the verge of crying. But it must have worked, because she blinked.

“Evee, please,” I said — then hiccuped, finally losing control. “I’m already struggling to stay calm, thinking about doing this. Please don’t make it worse.”

My hands were knotted tight in my lap. I had to make a conscious effort to relax my fingers, raise one hand, and straighten it out.

I was shaking, quite badly.

Evelyn sighed, shook her head, then reached out and took my hand, squeezing gently. Raine crossed around the table and joined us too. Her hands found my shoulders and started kneading my muscles.

Evee said, "You really shouldn't be drinking enough coffee to fell an elephant."

I laughed, weakly. "It's not the coffee. And I'm not going to be alone."

"Mmhmm," Raine agreed with sudden gusto. "Damn right."

Zheng purred like a sleeping tiger. "The shaman will be protected."

She knew how important she was to this. I couldn't pull it off truly by myself.

Evelyn narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. She started to say something, then stopped and looked away. "Yes, but ... neither I or Raine ... you're not ..."

"The fewer of us involved, the safer it will be," I said, trying to sound confident.

Evelyn clenched her teeth, but she nodded in grudging acceptance. "None of you can take your mobile phones along, understand? Nothing identifying. So don't screw up, don't get separated, and for God's sake make sure Lozzie knows her part."

"She'll do as I ask," I said. "I trust Lozzie. She understands the stakes."

"Yeah," Raine agreed. "We all saw how she reacted to Nat."

Evee seemed doubtful, but she didn't voice it. "You don't even show yourselves until it's worked. I mean it. Total anonymity."

I nodded. "I've planned for that."

"And what about the logistics?" she demanded. Her frown was different now, thoughtful and probing. She might not approve, but she was involved now. My strategist was on board, asking questions that mattered. "How are you going to make such a pinpoint Slip?"

“Lozzie can do the recon stage,” I said, then sighed and almost rolled my eyes. “‘Recon stage’, listen to me, I sound like Raine.”

Raine cleared her throat, mock-bashful. “Well, that was what I called it. It’s the right technical term.”

I carried on. “We already have the address, we’ve—”

Evelyn snorted. “Assuming the girl remembered her address correctly. She’s only ten.” Raine laughed at that for some reason. Evelyn frowned up at her. “What? What is it?”

“Evee, think about yourself at ten.” Raine shook her head. “And hey, the house is gonna be pretty obvious, it’ll be the one with a copper or two standing outside.”

“Quite,” Evelyn said through her teeth.

I tried again. “We have the address. And we’ve located the house on Google Maps. I’ve already proved I can sling-shot from that information alone.”

“Yes, outdoors, on a clear hilltop that was visible in the satellite picture. You’re talking about inside a house.”

“Hence Lozzie. She’s pretty confident that she can set up the rest. All I need is a picture of the inside, I think I can make it work from there.”

Evelyn sighed heavily. “You’ve really thought this through, haven’t you? You’ve covered everything.”

I shrugged. “I barely needed to think. It was already there.”

Zheng spoke up again. “The shaman knows more than she thinks she knows, always.”

“Pffft,” went Twil. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“There’s no need to mystify it, Zheng,” I said. “It’s just old trauma. How many hours do you think I’ve spent fantasizing about how different my life would have been, if only my parents had understood and believed?”

Zheng stared back at me for several heartbeats, then dipped her head in acknowledgement.

“Well,” said Evelyn, finally letting go of my hand and placing it

back in my lap. “The sooner, the better. What do you need, Heather?”

I shook my head. “Not much. Sevens is ready for her role, she’ll be in place before everything else. Lozzie can start as soon as I take over on emergency Slip duty, just in case the police do turn up after all.”

“Turmy,” said Praem.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I won’t forget Turmy. That’s another reason we need Tenny, somebody will have to carry him. Somebody not Natalie.”

“And don’t forget you made a deal with the Shambler,” Evelyn said, watching me closely, as if she suspected I might go back on that unspoken agreement. “She can wait until after this is done, but not much longer. You made that creature a promise, sort of.”

That was my cue to smile. I thought it was bright and happy, but it must have looked as sharp and devious as Evee herself, because she blinked at me in surprise.

“Two birds with one stone,” I said. “Or at least one and a half.”

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Isabella and Stephen Skeates — Natalie’s mother and father — were not sleeping soundly in their bed that night, not even by two o’clock in the morning, the dead hour when we put my plan into action.

One could hardly blame them for insomnia. Their daughter, their little girl, their only child, Natalie, was missing, presumed kidnapped. They probably blamed themselves for the momentary lapse of attention during which she had chased Turmy out the back door. They blamed themselves for not watching her carefully enough, for not impressing upon her the danger of the world beyond her home, for not arming her against the threat of unknown strangers in dark alleyways.

They were wrong, of course.

But their guilt and horror played into our hands. If they’d been sleeping in their bedroom on the second floor of their modest detached house in suburban Manchester, with its red brick exterior, its tiny garden, and its solid walls, we would have been unable to

pinpoint their location, unable to ensure the element of surprise.

But they were downstairs, in their poky little sitting room with its floral curtains and brown carpet, bathed in the electric blue glow of a muted television.

They were also alone. Raine's warnings turned out to be an exaggeration; there was no police constable standing outside their front door, only a single patrol car waiting several houses away, containing a single officer, who was mercifully fast asleep. By tomorrow night, with the toxic hydra of national news bearing down on them, that might change quite quickly. In the morning undoubtedly they would be joined by visiting family, to offer help and support. But not yet. For now, our window was clear.

Zheng and I landed almost exactly on target — right in the middle of the Skeates' sitting room.

Accuracy surprised me. I was getting better at this. Despite my assurances to Evelyn, all I had to calibrate the slingshot-Slip was a blurry phone camera photo taken by Lozzie, about three minutes earlier, through a crack in the sitting room curtains. She'd Slipped into the Skeates' back garden before us, crept up to the police car to confirm she wasn't about to be caught, and then crept around the exterior of the house to see what she could see. In another life, Lozzie could have been a super-spy. She could get in and out of anywhere, unseen, untraced. I'd never really thought about that before.

We'd gotten lucky with the crack in the curtains; that meant we didn't have to break into the place. Less evidence, less noise, less chance of something going wrong — and more impact for our arrival.

Once it was all over and done with, I spent a lot of time thinking about what Natalie's parents must have seen in that moment.

Two shadowy figures stepped out of thin air right before their eyes, as if disgorged by a hidden fold in reality that they'd been unable to see their entire lives. Backlit by the mute, dead light of their television set, a sudden intrusion into what remained of their domestic security. The last tatters of the veil ripped away in an instant. One figure was a towering giant on the very border of the humanly possible, seven feet of rippling meat, predatory animal intent, drooling and hissing through a maw of razor-sharp teeth.

The other figure was somehow no less inhuman, but subtly so, head and face hidden inside a mask of bone that couldn't possibly be real, the curves a haunting hint of otherworldly meaning.

What they didn't see was the difficulty that went into not falling over.

Zheng and I had to control the situation instantly, which was a very polite way of saying we needed to stay coherent enough to do sudden and terrible violence. That was part of why I'd selected Zheng alone for this. I had plenty of experience Slipping, keeping myself conscious and coherent — well, mostly — and I was confident that by redlining my reactor I could keep myself on my feet for the crucial few seconds, though I would pay for it later on, perhaps steeply. Zheng had once fallen from a building and shrugged off broken legs, shortly after *fighting* the building from the inside. She knew what was at stake here. She could find the reserves for this.

We had made a plan before we'd left home. Zheng would go for the father, Stephen. I would go for the mother, Isabella. There would be no need to communicate upon arrival.

The plan was simple. It almost worked.

The split-second we arrived — nauseated, swallowing a tidal wave of vomit, my reactor going full blast inside my belly, trying to orient myself in an unfamiliar space while a deep lance of pain rammed itself through my eye sockets and into my brain, in the half-shadowed, flickering cave of this cramped sitting room — I had the briefest impression of Natalie's parents.

Stephen, her father, was sitting in an armchair to the right. He had been on the verge of dozing off in the moment we had appeared, caught on the edge of fitful nightmares, his eyelids not quite open. Short and stocky, fit and neat and well-groomed, built like a football player who had aged out of the sport, with close-cropped dark hair on his head and a day's worth of dark stubble on his chin. One did not have to look very closely to see the sudden and terrible strain in a face that had been quite used to laughter, or the fact he hadn't changed his shirt and trousers in two days, or that he was barely there inside his own head.

His eyes snapped wide, his head snapped up, bewildered and drawing breath to scream.

Zheng was on him instantly, of course, even though her muscles were jellied and her senses were slowed by the aftermath of the Slip.

She crossed the room in one bound, ripped him out of his chair, and slammed him against the wall hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs. He wheezed with the impact before Zheng clamped a hand over his mouth. She shoved her face close to his, showing all her teeth and the whites of her eyes, a universal symbol for shut-up-and-don't-make-a-sound.

Zheng growled, low and loud. Stephen whimpered, staring right back into the depths of Zheng's eyes, crying in terror. He kicked weakly, but then gave up before he even connected with Zheng.

Isabella, Natalie's mother, did not react so quickly.

And neither did I.

It wasn't the aftermath of the Slip that held me back, or the way my head was pounding, or the roiling rebellion in my gut. I had three tentacles braced against the floor, three more coiled and ready to whip out at the woman, to hold her still and smother any screaming. I had rehearsed this step by step, I knew exactly what to do, and I'd put myself into the pose before making the Slip. But I couldn't follow through.

Isabella was sitting on a little brown sofa, quite distant from her husband. She wasn't dozing off. She was sitting quite upright, alert and aware, staring directly at me. A tall and willowy woman in a green cardigan, a shawl, and a long skirt, with very long, very dark hair, just like her daughter. She had been crying, an awful lot, her eyes ringed by raw, red skin. Many tissues were balled up on the sofa cushion next to her, with no attempt made to clear them away. Perhaps in normal times she was beautiful, in an ethereal sort of way, elfin and impish, with playful crows' feet in the corners of her eyes.

But right then she was haunted and harrowed, and horribly aware.

I knew that look.

That emptiness which comes when a missing piece of oneself has been ripped away by the unknown, that wracking guilt of failure and loss and not even knowing what had truly happened. No oblivion of nightmares for Isabella, no soporific tears to carry her

off into a fantasy where she hadn't lost her daughter. She was wide awake and wide eyed and dying inside.

She looked like me, before I'd had any hope. She looked like me in the mirror.

And for a split second, I couldn't do it. This woman didn't deserve to be pinned to the wall by some horrifying abyssal monster that had invaded her home. She didn't deserve to get shouted at and browbeaten and broken. She didn't deserve violence and horror, no matter how much it might help her daughter in the long run. I saw myself sitting there, grieving for Maisie, and I was about to do to her the opposite of everything I had needed when I'd been in her place, everything I had needed and gotten and cherished.

The plan crumbled to nothing.

Behind my squid-skull mask, I opened my mouth to offer salvation, to give the game away before it had even started.

Natalie's alive, it's okay, we're here to return her! I've saved your daughter! It's okay, don't be afraid!

The words were on my lips and they would ruin everything. Evee's "clean break" would be rendered truly impossible. They would never believe their daughter without exposure to the truth.

Then, Isabella went for her mobile phone.

The phone was sitting on an end-table next to the sofa, just beyond her reach, so she twisted and dived for it, as if she could somehow dial 999 and shout about monsters invading her home before I got to her. That was an act of true courage, because it was both pointless and mattered more than she could possibly understand. If she thought we were connected with her daughter's kidnapping, then to dive for her phone was an act of rebellion against loss. And it worked. With that futile, clumsy leap for the phone, she killed the words in my throat and saved her daughter's future.

I used three tentacles like a spring, launched myself across the space that divided us, hissing like a rattlesnake, and slammed into the poor woman with my other three tentacles.

Several seconds of messy, awkward struggle ensued, neither photogenic nor dramatic, just banal and violent. Isabella was not a physically strong woman, but she was driven by a burning need. My

tentacles were stronger than my human arms would ever be, but I was off-balance, confused, blind-sided by my own momentary inaction and the woman's courage. Isabella's strength only gave out when she realised she was struggling against invisible forces. In a few seconds I had her pinned against the sofa by wrists and throat, with one tentacle over her mouth.

Panting, shaking, covered in cold sweat, I straightened up in front of Isabella Skeates and stared down into a pair of eyes full of terror and hate. What did she see when she looked at me? A monster wearing the skull of a squid, something impossible and profane.

"I'm sorry," I croaked.

"Shaman?" Zheng purred over her shoulder.

"Got her," I panted back. "I got her."

"Mm." Zheng grunted. "Ready?"

"Yes. Bring him over here."

Zheng hauled Natalie's father round by his throat and the front of his shirt, then slammed him down on the sofa next to his wife.

"Stay," she rumbled between razor-sharp teeth, but she kept her grip on him tight, one hand clamped over his mouth, just in case. Isabella stared at Zheng too, intimidated by the sheer size of her, the thrumming animal presence, the threat of rapid violence. Zheng also wasn't wearing a mask, but she managed to look even more inhuman than I, a grinning demon in the flickering light from the television set.

Behind my squid-skull mask, I swallowed hard and cleared my throat.

I could not afford to hiccup during this. That would ruin everything. It would make me seem more human in their eyes.

"Look at me," I said, loud and clear. The Skeates hesitated for a moment, their attention stuck on Zheng, on her threatening promise. A small miscalculation. "Ignore her," I snapped. "Look at me. Look at me!"

The snap in my voice worked; I was imitating Raine, after all. Stephen and Isabella both flinched, though with slightly different timings. Stephen was slower, confused, terrified. Isabella was

slightly more present. They both stared in terror at my mask, at the twisted voice coming from inside. I made no effort to straighten out my throat after the hiss earlier. On the contrary, I allowed it to worsen, to pull tighter, turning my voice into a scratching, croaking nightmare. The squid-skull mask helped too, warping my voice in a way it never had before, as if some hidden quality inside the metallic bone had risen to the occasion, responding to the need to intimidate and terrify.

“We just materialised in the middle of your sitting room,” I said. I reached out with another tentacle and wrapped it around Zheng’s arm — then another, around Stephen’s head. His eyes went wide, rolling in a futile effort to see what was touching him, panting through his nose with panic. “I am holding you bound with invisible power. You can feel it, but you can’t see it. This is real.”

They both stared at me, eyes bloodshot with terror and grief. I didn’t expect this part to get through to them, but we had to use everything, step by step. No mercy, sadly enough. I could always apologise later.

“What you are experiencing is real,” I carried on, trying desperately to keep the steel in my voice. Inside I was shaking. I pictured myself as Evelyn, as Raine, as all the qualities in both of them which I admired so much. Courage, steadfast, unwavering. I had to be unwavering now. I had to inflict pain. But I was no torturer, and I was torturing these two. We hadn’t even started yet.

I went for the low blow, the set up, just to get it over with.

“You have to concentrate on what you are experiencing. If you want to save your daughter, Natalie, then you have to concentrate.”

Stephen blinked rapidly, sweat and tears in his eyes, but he was paying attention now. Oh yes, he was here now, he was on board. Isabella stared right at me, her gaze going through my mask and meeting the flesh inside. She knew I was in charge here. She knew what I was offering, if only on an instinctive level, and she would do anything, listen to anything, believe anything.

I didn’t like that feeling, the feeling of being in absolute command, of holding their lives in my hand. But I could use it for good, here and now.

“I am a monster from a place beyond your worst nightmares,” I

said. Technically true, sort of. Adopted daughter of the Eye and all that. “And I do understand that your nightmares must be pretty bad at the moment.”

Stephen whined. Isabella tried to nod.

“I am trying to return your daughter to you. I am trying to save her. But for her sake, there is something you must do. You must see where she went, for yourselves, with your own senses. Do you understand?”

I didn’t give them time to answer. They couldn’t possibly understand, not until they saw. I wasn’t giving them a choice.

I began the equation, whether they wanted it or not.

“I suggest you close your eyes,” I said. “Or you might break faster than you can bear. Now, hold on tight.”

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.12

On a low island of jagged grey rock, amid an endless swamp of soupy, sucking, stinking grey mud, ringed by tall grey trees with swirls of grey branches reaching up toward a leaden grey sky, I broke the minds of two innocent human beings.

I wasn't going to enjoy this. I didn't relish the banal mechanics of what I was about to inflict. Initiation into the eldritch truth was a kind of torture. I knew that better than anybody.

At least that's what I kept telling myself.

But from the moment the four of us arrived Outside, on that outcrop of dry rock in the middle of a vast, otherworldly, inhuman wilderness, something deep down inside me began to purr with bitter satisfaction. Something made nasty and vindictive by a very different kind of long torture, warped by old scar tissue and kept suspended in pain by unhealed wounds. It had been kept in peaceful sleep for a long time recently, soothed by the love and care of friends and more, compensated by the shining abyssal truth of bodily euphoria, comforted by a place to call home that was neither hospital nor filled with hidden minefields and tripwires. But in sleep it had grown in both size and sharpness — and Natalie's plight had stirred it from dreamless slumber.

I had not expected it. I had denied it for so long, I'd never thought myself capable.

So when we arrived Outside, and I kept my feet while Stephen and Isabella Skeates went sprawling on the rock, skinning their hands and knees, heaving for breath, eyes rolling, limbs malfunctioning in the post-Slip after-effects, unable to process where they were or how they had gotten here, that long-buried part of me purred a darkly satisfied laugh.

Believe me now?! Need to see more? No? Too bad, because there's an infinity more to see, but you are sadly finite.

Those thoughts didn't reach my face, let alone creep into my words; I was horrified at myself. The sudden impulse to gloat, to mock their pain and confusion, was one of the ugliest and most nonsensical urges I'd ever felt. And it wasn't abyssal instinct trying to lord it over these clumsy apes; abyssal instinct didn't care about this at all. I had no idea where this feeling had bubbled up from, hot and acid in my throat. To mock Edward Lilburne or another mage, somebody in the know, somebody who had chosen to do evil, that was one thing, even if it was inelegant and self-serving. But to mock these lost wretches as their souls and minds struggled with initial exposure to Outside? What was wrong with me?

I crammed that impulse into a bottle, rammed a cork into the neck, and sealed it away for later; if I was going to make Natalie's parents useful to her, then I could not afford the luxury of satisfying displaced personal grudges.

I could not afford to project my own parents onto these two.

Focus, I told myself. *You must stick to the script!*

At least my aim was good. I managed to land us on the same outcrop of low rock that Natalie and Turmy had used to hide themselves, where the Shambler had laid out the corpse of the poor young man, in what I assumed was her territory. Much better than dumping all four of us into the waist-high muddy water. I didn't want to risk the parents falling over in the muck, swallowing mouthfuls of Outsider swamp-mud, and contracting some bizarre infection or exotic disease. I didn't want them sick — or worse, dead — I wanted them to believe, to adapt, to accept.

Stephen and Isabella did not react well upon arrival Outside, amid the grey mud and grey vegetation and grey skies of the Shambler's home dimension. But who would blame them, except somebody without empathy?

When the Slip spat us back out, I managed to brace myself, lock my knees, and cling to Zheng, to stop myself from falling over or vomiting, which would risk ruining the fragile dignity and intimidating act that was such an important part of this whole performance. Zheng grunted and groaned like a gut-punched mountain with the impact of the Slip, but other than a brief sagging in her muscles and an audible roiling of her stomach, she managed to stay upright and together. My rock in the storm.

Natalie's parents both went sprawling, gasping for air, struggling to even stay on their hands and knees rather than collapse face-first onto the filthy ground. They both vomited, unfortunately enough, all stringy bile from stomachs kept empty by stress, though Stephen seemed to resist the urge for a few seconds longer than his wife.

Shaking and quivering, covered in cold flash-sweat, wracked with the inexplicable pain of the Slip, they both tried to gather themselves and get to their feet, or at least to their knees.

Neither of them got very far.

Zheng and I stayed silent at first, watching and waiting to see what might happen. That was also part of the plan. When Evelyn had voiced her many doubts about the safety and practicality of this entire process, she'd made a good point: we didn't know these people. We didn't know how they might react, or what kind of psychological mechanisms they might employ to justify or excuse what they were seeing. There was no reason for us to talk over the evidence of their own senses. I allowed Outside to do the talking for us.

Stephen, Natalie's father, exerted raw stubborn muscle power and managed to struggle halfway to his feet, scuffing the knees of his trousers on the rough surface of the rock. But halfway there he must have located his wits, because he froze, staring out at the endless mud flats beyond the thinning trees to our left. He stayed like that for several long seconds, unblinking and gaping, as if trapped in a vision. Then he turned, slowly, taking in the things that weren't quite trees, the leaden sky like a ceiling of grey weight, and the vast towering vegetation far away to the right, where the trees grew taller than earthly redwoods. His eyes fixed on the faint hint past even the trees themselves, the vague outline of a tower made from grey blocks. The thing must have been taller than a skyscraper. I could just about make out a dark opening near the tip of the structure.

As if struck in the middle of his chest, Stephen sat down heavily on his backside, mouth agape, staring, lost.

One hand groped for his wife's side, seeking support. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Should I have isolated them from each other?

Isabella got marginally further than her husband. She spat the taste of vomit from her mouth, wiped her face on the back of her sleeve,

and hauled herself to her feet as if pulled on a set of puppeteer's strings. Only when she gained her feet did she peer about at the impossible swamp, the grey mud, and the imitations of trees, draped with their swirls of vegetation that seemed to suck one's attention inward. Shivering, hunching, wringing her hands together so hard that it must have hurt her finger bones, Natalie's mother visibly struggled against onrushing hyperventilation.

Stephen tried to speak, but it came out as little more than half-formed un-thoughts, animal reaction to confusion. "Where ... wha — wha—"

Isabella placed one hand on her husband's shoulder, She squeezed, hard enough to hurt him. He winced and stopped trying to talk.

"I don't ... don't know," Isabella said. Her voice had gone high and reedy, on the edge of a personal abyss.

The contact seemed to help them both, grounded them in each other. Isabella swallowed so hard I thought she was going to do herself an injury in her own throat, baring her teeth and shaking with the muscular difficulty of the motion. Stephen groped for her arm again, found it, and she helped him to his feet.

Neither of them moved for a long moment, just staring out at the swamp, clinging together, listening to the distant sounds floating through the trees. The strange hooting I'd heard before — the language of the Dimensional Shamblers, I assumed — was audible from far away, a back-and-forth chorus of calls and responses, soaked up by the trees and the mud, muffled by miles of swamp. They were more active than when I'd first visited, as if they were having some kind of debate out there among the muddy wallows and brackish flows.

That was a very good sign. If I was right, then Sevens was already out there, wearing my face, buying good will with meat and bone.

Stephen and Isabella didn't appreciate the music of the swamp, however. They flinched at the loudest of the hooting, clutching each other in terror. A pair of hairless apes, stranded beyond their wildest nightmares.

That bitter part of me whispered a question: *What would happen to them if I just left them here? That would be quite a lesson, wouldn't it?*

That part of me, the part of myself I was trying desperately not to

acknowledge, the tinny voice whispering from inside the corked bottle, it judged Stephen and Isabella. It judged these stupid monkeys and found them wanting. It judged them as pathetic.

My conscious mind had to admit that bitter-Heather had a point there, even if it was too harsh and unyielding. The Shambler's swamp was hardly the worst place Outside had to offer. It had nothing on some of the inhuman nightmare realms that I could have exposed them to, let alone the kinds of places that Lizzie would happily spend time for fun. In the end it was just a grey, weird swamp, filled with ambush predators — dangerous, perhaps, not a nice place to spend a sunny afternoon or attempt to read a book, but hardly a vista to threaten one's sanity. Part of me wanted to say something like "Yes, you teleported here, get over it."

But intellectually I knew that was not the whole truth.

It wasn't the grey mud or the alien horizon plaguing their minds, or the effluvial stench of sulphur and brine that was getting to them. It wasn't the weird trees or the distant redwood-sized versions far away, or the massive impossible tower at the limit of vision, or the hooting in the swamp, or even the fact they'd arrived here via an inexplicable teleport. It was none of those things, and it wasn't the sum of those parts either.

Right then, as they gaped out at the grey swamp, Natalie's parents were feeling the true effect of standing Outside — the soul-wracking sense of wrongness, of displacement, of every cell in one's body screaming *you are not supposed to be here*. Human beings were not bred for this, not evolved to deal with that sensation. I'd spent so much time Outside, between my nightmares and the Slips and the journey through Carcosa, that it was all too easy for me to forget what that felt like. To even stand here was a kind of torture, for those who did not belong.

On a level I did not wish to fully acknowledge, I was meant to be out there. They were not. They were feeling that now.

Zheng had never been here either, but she didn't care. Despite her magnificent clothing of skin and muscle, she was a thing of the abyss burrowed down deep inside that flesh. Different rules applied to her. She stood tall beside me, wrapped in her trench coat like an extra from a noir movie, waiting for the next move.

Through the eye sockets of my squid-skull mask, I scanned the

nearby trees for any sign of the Shambler — our Shambler. But she didn't seem to be watching or lurking, unless she was hiding too well for me to discover. I didn't know if that meant Sevens' part of the plan had succeeded, or failed. I wouldn't know until I called out to her, but it was still too early to play that card.

Finally, Stephen found his voice.

"This can't be ... " he started, then trailed off, shaking his head. A stocky, well-built man, he was starting to bristle, muscles flexing beneath his clothes, choosing fight instead of flight. His sweat-stained, rumpled shirt was sticking to his back with sudden sweat. "It can't ... can't ... "

"Then where are we, dear?" Isabella said in a tiny voice, still clinging to her husband's hand.

"Can't be real," Stephen managed to say.

"It's real," I said.

My squid-skull mask warped and amplified my voice into an almost inhuman warble. The mask was playing along, giving me the extra edge of intimidation I might need, that last little piece of implied inhumanity. But I needed them to hear and believe, not scream in terror. Not yet, anyway. So I cleared my throat and dragged my voice back upward into a human register.

"It's real," I repeated, somewhat more normal.

To his great credit, Stephen found an ounce of courage. He turned toward Zheng and me, shaking his hands free from his wife's grip so he could ball up his fists. He half-raised them like a boxer getting ready for a fight, ready to lash out in fear and confusion. Grief and horror were boiling away to leave behind powdered rage. His eyes bulged in his face, fists getting ready to swing — and then he sputtered out as he saw me. Isabella turned as well.

They came face to face with the daughter of an alien god.

Well, an adopted one.

I was doing my best to look as intimidating as I possibly could, short of actually going full *homo abyssus*, sprouting toxic spines and armour plating all over my body. If I'd done that, we would have been on a strict — and short — time limit, before I burnt out.

I was holding all six of my tentacles fanned out wide, a sunburst of slow-strobing rainbow bioluminescence, a marine star in this realm of grey mud. Standing tall — well, as tall as I could at five foot nothing — with my squid-skull helmet hiding my sweating, worried face, my arms folded over my chest, and my tentacles spread, I must have looked like quite the weird little mutant monster.

Stephen was not about to rush me, not when he saw that. But Zheng growled low in her throat regardless, a warning not to approach the Outsider goddess.

“Know your place, monkey,” she rumbled at Stephen.

He flinched, badly, barely resisting the urge to fling himself away from this towering threat. But he kept his fists raised, which was sort of impressive. Courage or madness, which was it? I had no idea, not yet.

“Zheng,” I said softly. “There’s no need for that.”

All an act. We’d agreed on that, too. Though I suspected Zheng’s offence was quite real. She didn’t like even the suggestion of violence directed toward me.

“We’re very sorry,” Isabella said, dipping her head, voice robotic and tight. “We’re very sorry, very. I apologise for my husband.”

“What’s to apologise ... ” Stephen tried to say — but he was staring at Zheng, finally taking in the seven feet of demon-host muscle that had pinned him to his own sitting room wall only minutes earlier. I could almost see the awe struggling against the need to ask the relevant questions.

Then he saw the corpse, lying a few feet away on the rocks. His eyes went even wider, his teeth bared in horror.

“Yes, that is a dead man,” I said, as gently as I could. “He’s no concern of yours. I’m going to give him a proper burial shortly.”

Isabella saw the corpse too, but looked away from it quickly. Her eyes stared at Zheng for a second, but then settled on me, on the dark, unknowable eye holes of my squid-skull mask, and whatever lay behind them. She knew I was in charge. She was also a lot more coherent than her husband. Her eyes were wide with desperation, her shoulders were hunched as if beneath the eye of some great beast, and her skin had gone grey with stress and fear, but as she

stared at me she seemed to pull herself together inside, draw upright just a couple of inches, and focus her mind. She blinked hard, staring at me through the pressure of madness.

That was a very bad sign.

“Oh no,” I whispered to myself inside my mask.

I knew what was keeping her together — love for her daughter, the desperate need to get her back. That’s how she was clinging to sanity, to normality, how she was avoiding truly looking at her surroundings. If only she could endure this nightmare, her daughter lay at the end of it. She was telling herself that, using it like cement or like armour, hiding inside love to avoid the truth.

But I had to break her. I didn’t want to have to drag these two further out, to worse places. I had to break them here, to avoid worse torture.

Why avoid it? whispered that bitter voice, bottled up but not yet back asleep. *They will never believe, not without pain. Would you, if you had not endured it? She’s not even looking! None of them ever will!*

Isabella opened her mouth.

“Where’s my daughter?” she asked. “Where’s Natalie?”

Her voice was high and light, a singer’s voice, used to laughter and bedtime fairy tales and soft words in well-lit rooms. She stared at me with such burning intensity, such need, such desperation. If this situation devolved into violence, she would be the one to watch out for, not Natalie’s father. She would do anything to get her child back. I knew the look all too well.

Stick to the plan, I told myself. Stick to the plan, keep going.

“In order to save your daughter,” I said, “first you must absorb where we are standing. Stop looking away. Both of you.”

“How can this be real?” Stephen demanded — pleaded, voice shaking. That’s it, he was going quickly now. Maybe he’d drag his wife with him. Eyes watering, lower lip quivering, shoulders hunched and shaking. “How did we even get here? This is some kind of trick!”

“Dear, please,” Isabella said, on the edge of a very different kind of panic. “The lady— the— she’s trying to help. To help. Please—”

Stephen pointed a stubby finger at me. “You’re doing something to us. Drugged us, or ... or a projection or—”

“Then step into the swamp waters,” I said. “Wade as far as you like. I can protect you from the local wildlife, I think, if you need that proof.”

Inside the privacy of my squid-skull mask, I silently prayed that he wasn’t going to take me up on that offer, because wading through the swamp could quickly devolve into a farce. He might fall over. Or something might take an interest in us.

Instead, Stephen tore his eyes away from me and stared out at the swamp again, then down at the corpse. He poked the dead man with one toe, felt the yielding of soft, rotting flesh, and cringed as if sick inside. Then he cast about the surface of the rocky outcrop, as if looking for something. For a moment I didn’t understand what he was doing, but then he picked up a few loose pieces of stone, weighing them in his hands, before nodding in satisfaction.

“Dear,” Isabella said, “now is not the time for—”

“It is!” he hissed, staring at the stones in his hands. “It is. You can’t make this up. Can’t make it up. Can’t fool me with this. Cheap crap can’t fake it. Nonsense! Nonsense.”

Stephen selected a stone and threw it into the swamp. It landed out in the mud with a wet plop. He threw a second little stone, further this time, to splash down in a patch of thinner water.

Then he took the third stone, relatively flat and smooth, and flicked out his hand in a practised motion.

The flat stone hit the surface of the swamp and skipped back up into the air, spinning as it went, once, twice, three — four times total, before it hit a tree with a loud *thwock* sound and fell into the swamp at last, to be swallowed by the mud.

Stephen stood there, breathing hard, staring at the path of his skipping stone. His hands were shaking uncontrollably.

Isabella sobbed once, into her hand.

“Where are we?” Stephen said eventually. “Where is this?”

Something was wrong with his voice. Struggling, tight, starting to collapse. He sounded more like a little boy than a grown man.

“We are currently in a parallel dimension,” I said. “It’s one of many. Collectively we call them ‘Outside’, because they are outside our own reality. Not very creative, I know, but that’s what we call them. I haven’t given this particular place a name, not yet. I brought you here with magic.”

Stephen, to my great surprise, hiccuped. Almost exactly like I tended to in moments of great stress. He hiccuped, then made a sort of gasping, laughing noise, like he was struggling not to giggle. It was not a reassuring sound.

“Who gets to name it?” he asked.

Isabella turned away, as if resigning herself to doing this alone, without her husband’s madness.

“Where’s my daughter?” she repeated to me. “Please, how is this going to save her?”

“Your daughter was kidnapped by an evil wizard,” I said — then I sighed. The sound must have carried through my squid-skull mask as some barely human hiss, because Isabella flinched, one hand flying to her throat as if to protect herself from a monster. I felt a strong urge to reach up inside my mask and rub the bridge of my nose. “Yes,” I said, struggling not to sound utterly exasperated. “Yes, I know how that sounds, which is why I am trying to show you some proof. She was kidnapped by an evil wizard.”

“But ... ” Stephen said, still staring out at the swamp. “But Nat’s just a ... we’re just ... ”

I froze, then went off-script. That sounded important to dig. “You’re just what?” I asked.

“Nobodies. Nobody,” he said, half-mumbled.

Falling fast. Good. Keep pushing.

“Natalie is just a normal little girl, yes,” I said. “She was taken purely by chance, just bad luck, in the wrong place at the wrong time. She’s not a chosen one. This isn’t a young adult novel. She doesn’t have special powers or a unique fate or destiny to fulfil. An evil wizard kidnapped her to feed her to a monster. That’s all.”

Stephen finally turned away from the swamp and looked at the metallic visage of my squid-skull mask.

He was all the way out.

All the colour had drained from his face. Waxen, pale, as grey as the swamp around us. Covered in cold sweat, eyes wide, pupils dilated, lips quivering with the frozen effort of trying to form words but finding none adequate to the task. The armpits of his shirt were soaked with sweat. His hands were shaking as if in the grip of some palsy. He looked like he was on the verge of a heart attack.

“Evil wizard?” he echoed with a hysterical laugh in his voice. When he grinned, it was one of the worst expressions I’d ever seen on a human face, lips pulled back by pure mechanical action, spittle and drool leaking from between his teeth, a man pleading from behind a clown’s mask, tears carving tracks into his cheeks. “Evil wizard. My daughter was kidnapped by an evil wizard? What am I supposed to do with that information?”

Zheng took a half-step forward, to shield me. Stephen Skeates looked about ready to fight God.

“Steve,” Isabella said, without even looking at her husband, “sit down. You’re losing your temper.”

He was doing a darn-sight more than losing his temper. And Isabella was too calm, way too calm, as if petrifying inside. Their reactions could not have been more divergent.

“What good—” Stephen managed to say. “What possible good—what—no, no no no no—” He started shaking his head back and forth, gritting his teeth, squinting his eyes shut. A final line of resistance, thrown up in haste, trying to deny the truth.

Isabella wasn’t breaking anywhere near as fast as her husband. Or maybe she was already broken. She was still staring at me.

“And what are you?” she asked, her voice full of rapture and awe.

Was that good? Or bad? I stuck to the script, played the next card.

“I’m the adopted daughter of an alien god,” I said. “I happened to be passing by, that was all.”

Stephen bunched his fists and pressed them against his own forehead, as if suffering a terrible migraine. “No—no—this can’t—unnh!” He hit himself in the head, once, then twice, hard enough to hurt, grunting and panting. “This isn’t real! All of this, it’s a nightmare, it’s a nightmare! It’s not real!”

Zheng rumbled under her breath, speaking out of the corner of her mouth, so only I could hear. “Shaman.”

“It’s working,” I whispered back.

“This monkey will shake his own brain apart. Saye warned us of this.”

I almost broke character in front of Natalie’s parents in order to stare up at Zheng in surprise — I couldn’t recall her using Evelyn’s name ever before. To Zheng, Eevee was always just ‘wizard’ or ‘mage’. But there was no time to consider the implications of Zheng’s sudden softening of the heart.

Isabella was already speaking again, with quivering desperation in her voice. One hand reached out toward me, imploring, fingers shaking. Zheng raised a hand to ward her off before she could grab the front of my hoodie.

“And what did you do with Natalie?” Isabella was saying. “Where is she?”

Behind her, Stephen screamed.

An open-mouthed howl of incoherent rage, down at the ground as if imploring it to open up and swallow him alive. Every muscle in his arms and neck and face was pulled tight with tension that had nowhere to go, clenched so hard he was shaking all over. He punched himself in the skull again, heaving for breath through clenched teeth, his eyes bulging out of their sockets, his face turning red.

Zheng was right, Eevee had warned us that one possible response to the eldrich truth was self-harm. The ultimate rejection of reality, a retreat to the one place the sufferer still had agency, control over causing damage to one’s own body. Even if it wasn’t conscious or intentional, there was always the risk of harm during some kind of breakdown. And Stephen Skeates was breaking fast.

His rage had nowhere to go, directed inward, shoring up the crumbling walls of his reality.

This was hardly ideal, but it wasn’t a worst-case scenario, not yet. One parent was losing his mind in the anger of rejection. The other was clinging so hard to the promise of her daughter that she’d rendered herself capable of ignoring what lay in front of her own

eyes.

But I couldn't afford mercy. These two had to *break* before I could help reconstruct them.

I filled my lungs and raised my voice. "Your daughter is ... is ... "

But I trailed off in fresh horror.

Isabella, stately and fey, perhaps tall and proud in better times, with the willowy body of a dancer and her long dark hair flowing down her back, lowered herself to her knees before me. She put her hands together and bowed her head in prayer.

"Please," she sobbed. Tears ran down her cheeks, dripping onto the rock. "Please. I'll do anything. Anything. Please. What— what do you ask of me? Please, please, please."

I stared down at her in horror, then had to swallow a hiccup.

My act had been too good, too convincing, perhaps too real. She was begging me, imploring me, treating me as the Outsider godling daughter that I had been unwittingly presenting myself as. We hadn't planned for this, Evee hadn't predicted this, I had no contingency in place for being worshipped.

Stephen fell to his knees too, but not in supplication. He screamed at the ground, strings of drool leaking from between clenched teeth, so red in the face that he must have been close to bursting a blood vessel. His screaming must have carried for miles through the grey swamp around us.

"No ... " I whispered. "I didn't mean ... I'm not ... "

That bitter slice of my heart laughed with spiteful hate.

*How does it feel, casting yourself on the mercy of something inhuman?
How does it feel to be lost?*

This was a worst-case scenario beyond anything I had prepared for.

What had I expected? That this was going to unfold like Nicole's initiation into the occult truth? Nicky had already been primed, though none of us had known it at the time, back when we'd ended up with her bound and gagged in our old sitting room. A police detective who had already begun the long, slow, torturous process of turning against the illusions of her own profession, disgraced and discarded by a bureaucracy that cared nothing for her very real

ideals of justice, she was already part-way there, a seeker after the truth behind the veil, even if that truth was worse than she'd ever imagined. And Shuja, the father of Amy Stack's little boy, Evelyn had been right about him too; he'd seen his society pulled apart by unimaginable violence and destruction, he'd seen all comfortable realities fall away in the face of another kind of truth. He'd been primed for this, too.

To accept the truth without going mad, one had to already be a little bit broken.

But Natalie's parents were 'ordinary' people. Maybe they'd never questioned their beliefs before. Never doubted. Never wondered. Never looked up.

And I had just unmoored them from reality.

"Shaman," Zheng purred.

"I— I know—" I hissed back. "I don't know what to do, I—"

"Call for your yellow godling, shaman. Pull the ripcord. Now."

I turned to look up at Zheng, turned away from Isabella. Who cared about the illusion of power anymore? But the poor woman went on babbling out her prayer to me, clutching her hands together so hard that she was tearing her own flesh with her nails. "Please, please, whatever you are, whatever you want me to call you, please, return my daughter, I'll do anything, I'll give anything! I believe, I never did before but I do now, please, please, anything, anything—"

Stephen rocked back and forth on the ground, screaming, spittle drooling from his chin, heaving for each breath between his incoherent animal noises. He started speaking too, but it was nothing but wordless rage at the world collapsing around him.

"I can't!" I said to Zheng. "Sevens was meant to wait until ... until it was right, until it was time to show them the Shambler, but— but —"

Zheng grunted, taking a step forward. "It is too late, shaman. We have failed."

"Wait! Wait!" I reached for Zheng's arm, to hold her back from drastic action. I had no idea what she was about to do — shake the parents apart, throw them into the swamp, kill them as a failed experiment?

And then a voice whispered in my ear.

Like sunlight through golden honey, like the trickle of warm wind through ears of wheat beneath the baking summer sky, like butter melted by body heat.

“Embrace it,” said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

I froze. Luckily for Natalie’s parents, so did Zheng, rather than continuing forward to throw Stephen into the swamp, or whatever other violence she’d been about to inflict.

“W-what?” I whispered back. I half-turned to look over my shoulder.

Sevens wasn’t actually there, not as a physical presence, a human mask like usual. Nothing stood on the rock behind me. But I felt a warmth press against my back, like the gentle pressure of sunlight on cloth and skin. A breath tickled my ear, as if inside the private confines of my squid-skull mask. Gentle hands, immaterial and soft and firm, took my wrists and held me up.

“Embrace what they think you are,” whispered Seven-Shades-of-Not-Really-There.

“But I’m not!”

“You *are* the daughter of a god,” she whispered like gold over hidden thunder. “You are betrothed to a god. You walk the long path to apotheosis, and we are your disciples. Embrace it. These people need it, or they will not return from the pit.”

Inside my mask, I gritted my teeth. “I’m not a god! Sevens, stop!”

“No, but to them, right now, you need to be one.”

“I-I can’t! I don’t want to be worshipped! Sevens, I’m not a god, or a messiah, or a—”

“Not to me, not to us,” she whispered. “Not to those close to your heart. But to those beyond, you could be. This is your role, my beloved. These people need a god, a merciful one, to deliver them from evil. Little Natalie needs a god to save her parents from themselves, to mend the break in reality. Embrace it, and they will pull through.”

I almost sobbed. “I can’t. I’m just me.”

“Here,” whispered golden truth. “I will guide you.”

A familiar soft embrace flowed up and over my shoulders, wrapping me in liquid sunlight and silk — Sevens’ cloak, the mantle of her love, the piece of herself that she’d given to me as protection from the Eye, and which I’d asked her to hold for me since we’d returned together from her father’s house. The yellow robe, the marriage promise, proof of divinity.

Ah yes, just what I needed to prove I wasn’t an Outsider god, a full-body halo of glowing light that Natalie’s parents had no explanation for.

Isabella must have seen the glowing cloak, because she raised her head at last. She looked up at me in awestruck rapture. Stephen stopped screaming, his wild eyes rolling until they found me. Zheng stepped back, gave me room. And Sevens raised my arms, spreading them wide, her invisible touch gifting me the poise and pose of something I was not.

She whispered to me again, “Embrace it. Tell them the truth.”

“What truth?” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“That you have already saved their daughter. Pull them from the pit, they will never climb out by themselves.”

Behind my squid-skull mask, I opened my mouth.

I was not an Outsider godling, no matter how certain people kept looking at me. I was not a daughter in waiting, held in reserve for the mantle of the Eye to fall across my shoulders. I was not a saviour or a messiah or something to be worshipped, no matter how Badger or Zheng looked at me. I was just me, Heather Morell, born in Reading, a weird scrawny English girl who read too many books and wanted to kiss ladies.

But here I was, standing on the lip of an alien swamp, with two people desperately in need of salvation. And I’d put them there, I had brought them to this. They were now my responsibility.

I realised, in that brief pause, that we had attracted quite an audience.

The Shambler had returned, perhaps drawn by Stephen’s screaming, or by the departure of Sevens from her original task. She was standing about forty feet away from the little rock outcrop, waist-

deep in the swamp waters, beneath one of the strange, twisted trees. In both massive knobbly hands she held half a cow carcass, dragging it through the waters behind her like a child with an oversize pillow. She was gnawing on one end of the thing, chewing through meat and cracking bones with her angler-fish teeth. Lozzie's gift, lifted from the back of a Sharrowford butcher's shop via the untraceable magic of the Slip, and then delivered via Sevens wearing my face, the highest-class delivery girl in all Outside.

But she wasn't alone.

Dimensional Shamblers were everywhere. They lurked behind the thick boughs of the twisted trees, or eye-deep in the muck, or crouched on low rises of drier ground further out. Most were partially submerged, showing only the black discs of their massive eyes and the tops of their leathery heads, or crouched so one could see their shoulders humped like grey mud amid the grey waters, well camouflaged in the depths of the swamp. A few larger specimens stood tall and unmoving, impossible to see if you didn't know what you were looking for.

Dozens of them. I hadn't sensed them arriving, either appearing out of nowhere or wading through the waters. Some were clustered within arms' length of each other, family groups or rough alliances. Some were small, shorter than myself — children? Many of them were scarred in minor ways, with old claw-rakes down their hides or on their forearms. A few were missing digits or even a limb here and there.

Two particularly massive Shamblers stood very close to each other, actually touching, and they were terribly scarred with old battle wounds. One of them was even missing an eye. The other carried something in a fist — a length of steel pipe. Stainless steel, not rusted by the swamp waters. Now where had he gotten that from?

Almost every Shambler had a hunk of raw beef off the dead cow Sevens had brought here. They had shared.

Despite that, each group kept their distance from the others, like rival predators gathering at a watering hole, in witness to a brief truce.

Or to witness a revelation.

What might one do with an army of these creatures?

And they weren't the only things watching. Further off through the tangle of grey trees, I could just about make out the vast outline of some grey leviathan, some wallowing swamp-dweller with a neck that could stretch higher than the trees, currently surfaced from a life of mud-burrowing, paused to listen to this godling seed who had appeared in its swamp.

Further out, past the tall trees to the right, I could feel the attention of something up in that stone tower.

I had such an audience.

Temptation seized my guts and my throat, trying to squeeze words out of me. I wouldn't even have to think very carefully about what exactly to say, because my audiences were primed and ready. Out in the swamp, I had brought a bounty of fresh meat, and asked nothing in return. I had fed a multitude so used to long starvation and stringy meat. Closer at hand, Isabella and Stephen were begging for the deliverance of their child, and I was about to answer their prayers. At my side, Zheng already had faith, even if she didn't call it that out loud. At my back, Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight lifted me up with true Outsider divinity.

My tentacles strained and strobed. My trilobe reactor ran hot in my gut. So much potential. All I had to do was speak.

Standing on a fulcrum that I might move with the lightest touch. For a moment, I almost believed it myself. After all, the Eye had taught me the language of the gods, the keys to shape reality, hyperdimensional mathematics. I had dived into the abyss and returned as more than human. I had faced down the worst that Outside had to offer. I was clad in royal Yellow, on the cusp of something greater.

Here was the beginning of a real cult, trans-dimensional, ready to worship what they did not understand.

And I would be a gentle deity, a kind godling. I would never push my flock to self-destruction. I knew I could never do that, it wasn't in me. How much better could I protect my friends, if I had a real cult at my back? How many willing souls to throw themselves into the task of recovering my sister? How much security could I buy, for the price of this one lie?

That spiteful, bitter part of me reared up in triumph, smashing the

bottle inside my chest, a serpent in my heart.

I will make them see! I will make them believe! They lied to me and locked me in a mental hospital and told me she wasn't real, for years! I'm right! I know I'm right!

And who would object? Raine? Raine's words echoed in my memory, total acceptance of whatever I might become, back when we'd first gotten together.

"So maybe you learn to cut through solid steel with your mind, or command demons, or fight a god, but at the end of the day you're still gonna need a hug. You're still going to be shorter than me, and I'm still going to be able to pick you up and princess carry you, and you can't do a thing about it."

Lozzie? Lozzie was already halfway to godlike herself, barely human, and I accepted her fully, totally, anything she decided to become. Surely she would do the same for me?

Homo abyssus was the truth. I was the truth.

Nobody could complain if I just pretended, and then over time pretend might become real; no, it was already real, I was—

I was inviting Evelyn's disappointment.

That was like a bucket of cold water over my head. All the quivering potential collapsed into ugly ashes, and suddenly I was just Heather Morell again, sweaty and sticky inside a mask of bone, terrified of failure.

What was I thinking? Set myself up as a god? That was the path taken by so many mages before, the path that led to people like Alexander Lilburne, or to entities like Ooran Juh. I was not a thing to be worshipped, I was not an object, I was just Heather Morell, no matter how good I could be for my friends. Evelyn would take one look at me acting like that, and slap me across the face. And I would deserve it.

These two were not my parents. This wasn't my fight. It wasn't for me.

That shut the bitter voice up, for now.

But I still had to speak.

If I wasn't very, very careful, I was about to found a religion out

here. No matter how much these two needed it, I had to tread carefully, or I was going to hand an entire race of Outsider sapients a god powered by exhaustion, caffeine, and painkillers.

“No!” I snapped, and shook my arms free of Sevens’ embrace.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight stumbled on the rock surface behind me, an audible clack-clack of smart shoes on stone. A quick glance back showed the Yellow Princess, now physical and fully embodied. She sighed gently and gave me a slightly ruffled look, like a tropical parrot who’d been picked up unexpectedly.

“Kitten,” she warned me softly.

“Stop!” I hissed back. “Stop, right now.”

“The shaman says stop,” Zheng purred. Sevens shot her a sharp look. For a moment the two otherworldly ladies locked eyes with each other, but then Sevens looked away first, with a tiny huff. Zheng cracked her neck from side to side, thrumming with hidden tension.

I turned back to Natalie’s parents. They were looking rather confused at this exchange, not to mention Sevens suddenly appearing out of nowhere. She probably looked like she’d just stepped out of thin air behind me. More proof of strange miracles, the last thing I needed right now.

I faced Isabella and Stephen, lowered my tentacles from their sunburst spread, and killed the yellow glow of the Princesses’ mantle, smoothing it over my shoulders, just yellow fabric now.

“I have already rescued your daughter,” I said, clearing my throat to make my voice more normal. “Natalie is in a safe place. I can take you there in a moment. And Turmy, he’s okay too. Yes, I saved the cat as well. Or, well, he sort of saved himself.”

Isabella lit up with the internal glow of true rapture, crying openly now, babbling. “Thank you! Thank you, yes, thank you!”

Stephen shook his head in shock, consciousness rising from the depths of animal rage. But he turned toward me too, lowering his head in mute submission.

“No!” I snapped again, hard and angry.

Isabella fell silent, stumbling over a bitten-off word, waiting for my

instructions. Stephen flinched and half-raised his head.

"I need you to believe," I said. "But not in me. Stop that! I need you to believe in where you're standing, in the evidence of your own eyes. I need you to stop looking at me. Look around."

Isabella swallowed, hard and difficult, suddenly struggling to breathe. There it was, the buried horror which her spontaneous faith had been concealing. Stephen sighed like all the strength went out of him, sagging with denial, hanging his head.

Back to square one. I swore quietly, inside the privacy of my squid-skull mask.

"Keep going," said Sevens, quiet and soft, a voice at my back.

"This is real," I said. "And I need you to accept that. Your little girl needs you to accept that. Try."

Isabella drew in a sobbing breath. "No, I—"

"Why?" said Stephen.

"Good question," Zheng purred. "Shaman?"

I only had one tactic left.

With both hands and one tentacle, I reached up and hooked my squid-skull mask off my head, exposing my face. Dank swamp air stuck to my skin, the stench of sulphur and salt filled my nostrils, and my exhausted eyes suddenly stung with the sheer weight of this long, long day. I wiped my hair back out of my face and clung to Zheng's side with two tentacles, just for the extra support.

Then I hiccuped, loudly and painfully. "Ow," I sighed.

Natalie's parents stared at me like they were seeing a space alien stepping down the ramp of a starship. Their brief vision of god had a human face.

"Why?" I echoed. I tried to address them directly, but I couldn't stick to it. My eyes wandered off, looking at the loose ring of Shamblers, at the distant horizon of the swamp, at the vast trees off to our right, and up at the tower. Something was watching from up there, no doubt, and it had not turned away when I'd revealed my humanity, or what was left of it.

"You're ... " Stephen gathered himself. "You're just a girl. A young

woman, I mean.”

Sevens clicked her tongue. “Smart, this one, isn’t he?”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted. “The shaman is the shaman.”

“Why?” I echoed again. “Because once upon a time, something similar happened to me, when I was nine years old. A little younger than Natalie right now, yes?” They nodded. I continued. “I was kidnapped, taken Outside, by ... well, something from out here. Not this dimension, but another one, a much worse place. My parents didn’t believe me, and why should they? You two can barely believe, and you’re seeing it with your own eyes.”

“I ... I’m trying,” Isabella whispered. Her husband nodded, but he was still frowning, still needed more.

“Try harder, monkey,” said Zheng.

I carried on. “I spent years in and out of mental hospitals. The doctors diagnosed me with schizophrenia, but they were wrong. All because of something that really did happen. Do these look like a hallucination to you?” I pointed at my own tentacles.

“I felt them ... ” Isabella said. “I felt them, when you touched ... ”

“So, when I saved your daughter from death by exposure or starvation out here, I saw myself reflected in her. You want her to grow up healthy, don’t you? You want her to have a chance at a peaceful, fulfilling life? You don’t want her to doubt her every thought, her every experience?” They were nodding along now, I had them, somehow, even though this wasn’t what I’d expected or wanted — I needed them to acknowledge the swamp, Outside, not me. I wasn’t important here. But I spoke on. “Then you need to see and believe. Don’t look at me. Certainly don’t bloody well worship me. Look at where you are. Look, and stop denying the evidence of your own eyes. Stop trying to rationalise it away or mythologise it into something palatable.”

Stephen screwed up his eyes and gritted his teeth. For a moment I thought I’d failed, I’d lost him to that final denial.

“Look up,” I said. “For Natalie.”

In the end, Isabella went first. Hesitating, confused by her own internal reactions, she finally stopped pressing her hands together in prayer, and looked away from me. After a moment, Stephen did

the same, raising his eyes from the rock to the sky.

It took them a long time to get to their feet, but they got there in the end. They held hands and sobbed quietly for a while, but they did their best to look, even if they struggled, even if it hurt. Sevens and Zheng and I watched them adjust, staying out of the way of something which, in the end, was none of our business. As long as they accepted it, that was all that mattered.

Eventually, Isabella pointed at one of the Shamblers. She could probably only see the eyes, floating in the swamp muck. "What is ... I can see something, what is that?"

"Just some friends," I said. "I think they came to watch the show."

"Is it over now?" Stephen asked.

"It's never over," I sighed, staring up at that distant tower, wondering who was also watching. "Once you're in, you're in for good. And your daughter is in, whether anybody likes it or not. She adjusted, she survived out here alone for nearly twenty-four hours, and she kept her mind together, and kept her little cat from getting hurt, too. Though, maybe Turmy kept her from getting hurt, I don't know for sure."

"That does sound like Turmy," Isabella said. "He's a good boy."

They still won't fight for her, said that bitter voice in my chest. The moment you leave their world, they'll revert.

I looked back down at the pair of them, these two cowering apes who I had exposed to the inhuman truth with such cruelty. They were barely holding together, their sense of reality in tatters. I had them in the palm of my hand. I could shape them any way I wanted. That bitter voice demanded revenge.

But none of this was about me.

"So, are you in?" I asked. "Are you on your daughter's side, or not?"

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.13

Camelot served for the stage of reunion, between parents freshly baptised in the eldritch truth, with their lost and miraculous child — plus one venerable marmalade tomcat, of course, playing the fool around everybody's ankles to keep us sober and sensible.

But the whole process turned out more awkward than tearful. It was nothing like in the movies, where everybody would cry out each other's names and fly into each other's arms, weeping buckets of tears and declaring they'll never let go again and so on and so forth. The reality of such defining moments is always less cinematic than in our imaginations, always more messy, less clean-cut, never really final, lacking any of that sweeping conclusion that real stories so often possess. In reality — or in this case Outside — the dramatic moment passes, life goes on, and one simply has to live with the consequences.

Don't get me wrong, Stephen and Isabella were obviously and openly overwhelmed with emotion. They did love their daughter. Her return and safety was a blessing. They were thankful in a way they couldn't fully express. But watching them go through the relief and vulnerability made me feel like a voyeur on a private moment, a predator on their emotions, an intruder on their most tender and unstable feelings. Like I shouldn't be witnessing it. Even if I had saved Natalie and opened her parents' eyes, I was truly an outsider to this trio.

And a hissing, bitter voice in my chest insisted that they didn't deserve this relief.

Luckily — for a given value of 'luck' — I was also rather distracted by the important yet unrelated discovery that Lozzie's Knights had embarked on a construction project.

Our arrival in Camelot was considerably less graceful and controlled than my Slip to the Shamble-swamp. With no further need to maintain the illusion that I was some kind of terrifying

Outsider godling-avatar, here to strike the fear of hell into Natalie's parents, I didn't have to maintain my footing when we touched down. Which was nice, because I was absolutely exhausted by then. Back in England it must have been past three o'clock in the morning, or close to that, and I'd had one of the busiest days of my life, not to mention that I'd performed half a dozen Slips since mid-afternoon. Or was it more? Had I done seven Slips that day? I couldn't recall exactly, which was testimony to how tired I felt. In theory my abdominal bioreactor could keep me on my feet indefinitely, such was the fruit of abyssal bio-hacking, but it couldn't keep me from feeling like a zombie. My brain was mush, my muscles were cracked leather, and my eyes were dry sockets filled with salt.

So, when Camelot blossomed around us in soft yellow grass on rolling hillsides, the omnipresent purple glow of the whorled skies, and the glint of light on the star-steel armour of Lozzie's Knights, I let go of my charges with arm and tentacle, and sat down very heavily on my backside.

Zheng kept her feet of course, only swaying a little, grunting deep down in her chest like a tiger with an upset tummy. Sevens was totally unaffected by the Slip, cheating as usual. I suspected Sevens never actually went along with the Slip process, neither with me or with Lozzie, but only pretended to while she used her own far less traumatic way of sliding through the membrane between worlds.

Stephen and Isabella were afforded no such mercies, however. While I groaned and hunched up and held on tight to the contents of my stomach, fighting off a stabbing headache like a hot poker through both my eyeballs, Natalie's parents went sprawling again.

At least Camelot's grassy hillsides made a better cushion than a rocky outcrop in the Shamble-swamp. No skinned hands this time.

My fifth and final passenger didn't care about headaches or vomiting, or the soul-violence of the Slip, or the subtle, creeping wrongness of Outside, even here in safe, familiar Camelot. But neither could he enjoy the warm, cinnamon-scented wind which trickled through the air from parts unknown, or the transcendent spectacle of the sky filled with those purple whorls like shreds of quartz galaxy lying in low orbit, or the fairytale figures of Lozzie's Knights in their impossibly perfect armour.

The corpse of the young man who the Shambler had refused to eat, he couldn't care about anything anymore.

Camelot was going to be his resting place. Another concession to Evelyn's paranoia, but even I had to admit this was a sensible precaution. We couldn't risk bringing the unidentified corpse back to our reality and burying him in secret, no matter how much he deserved the basic dignity and respect of repatriation. He might be found, wherever we buried him. Police might launch an investigation, might trace the body back to us.

So he would be buried here, in a beautiful and peaceful place he had never and would never see.

As I recovered from the pain of brain-math, curled up and groaning like I had indigestion, I gratefully let go of the withered, dried-out corpse with the one tentacle I'd had wrapped around the dead man's shoulders. But I cradled the skull with care, making sure he was lying flat on the grassy hilltop, not dropped like a sack of potatoes.

Stephen and Isabella took a long time to pull themselves together. Two Slips in close succession was a lot to ask from uninitiated human beings. Stephen spat bile into the grass, then collapsed, then managed to roll onto his back, gazing up in awe at the purple whorled sky.

"Is this ... Outside ... too?" he asked in a croaking voice.

"Mm, yes," I grunted into my own knees, still fighting off the stabbing headache. "Different dimension. Safe place. We call it Camelot."

Stephen spluttered a very weak laugh. "Camelot?"

"Don't ask."

"Fair enough."

Isabella tried very hard not to sob at the pain and disorientation as she shivered on her hands and knees. She almost found victory, but then Stephen gently took her wrist, and she lost herself to a wave of nausea and tears.

The bitter whisperer deep in my chest didn't approve of that; it wanted me to growl and hiss at this pair of entitled apes, tell them they were lucky they hadn't ended up like the dead man we were

going to bury here. It wanted to remind them that without me and my powers and experience, their daughter would be rotting in the swamp as well.

Why does your little girl get to live while this man died of exposure and thirst? Your relief comes at the price of an innocent life. We don't even know his name!

That twisted, bitter part of me, coiled in my chest like a rotten grub, it had so little sympathy or trust for Natalie's parents — but infinite empathy and care for this nameless dead man. As they lay there, panting and quivering on the grass of Camelot, I felt a vindictive urge to ask them a hypothetical question.

Would one of you swap places with this man? Would you give yourself up for the sake of your daughter?

In a way, I'd already asked them that, just before we'd left the swamp. And they'd both answered in the positive.

Yes, they were in. They were on their daughter's side.

They'll drift away as soon as you leave.

But I had to believe they would keep faith — even if I was going to have to keep an eye on them for a while.

"Shaman," Zheng purred. She reached down to cup the back of my head with one hand. Her voice contained an oddly worried note.

"M'fine," I grunted, my eyes still squeezed shut against the pain. Sevens' yellow cloak was doing a good job of providing warmth and comfort, even through my hoodie. I tugged it tighter around myself. "S'just brain-math stuff. You've seen this a million times. Sevens, are you here too? Sevens?"

Sevens took a moment to answer. "... yes?"

"S'Lozzie here?" I finally raised my head and rubbed at my eyes with a tentacle, feeling bleary and bloodshot. "We need to make sure Nat doesn't see the corpse again. Or see her parents hurting, or ... or ..."

I trailed off in shock, eyes going wide, overwhelmed by a kind of awe I had not felt myself in many months.

Stephen was sitting up, staring as well, though he wasn't shocked in the same kind of way. After all, this was the first time he and

Isabella had seen Camelot. All of this was out of the ordinary to them, from the purple sky to the Knights and the gargantuan semi-machine presence of Lozzie's Caterpillars, and—

“Do you call it Camelot because of the castle?” he asked.

I answered with a hiccup.

In our absence, The Knights of the Perhaps-Not-So-Metaphorical-Anymore Round Table had apparently been very busy indeed.

We had materialised in the middle of a construction site, albeit a very quiet one, which enclosed the nearby rolling hillsides. My usual arrival spot in Camelot happened to be situated on a slightly higher hillside; by chance or luck — or more likely, by the unspoken, hidden, theatrical flare of the Knights themselves — that hilltop just so happened to form the perfect vantage point to look out across their handiwork. I shook my head in awe, eyes wide, twisting where I sat to take it all in.

To be fair to poor Stephen, he was exaggerating, but only because the structure was clearly unfinished. If this was to be a castle, then it had a long way to go yet — and I should know, because I know castles. At least, from books.

The Knights, along with their larger group-mind allies in the Caterpillars, had begun building two distinct structures.

The outline of a future curtain wall ran along the nearby hillsides, claiming the highest points and joining them together with what I assumed would eventually be tall stretches of stonework. For now, the curtain wall was only a dream, carved into the landscape with a ditch ready for the foundation blocks — but some of those blocks were in place, monolithic slabs of sandstone-coloured rock laid level and flat in the ground, waiting for mortar and stone to be placed atop them. Along that ring of future wall, I spied three low areas without any ditch cut into the soil, obviously intended to become gatehouses. They were wide enough for two Caterpillars abreast.

“Completely indefensible,” I murmured to myself, but I was just talking nonsense, too numb to think. This wasn't medieval Europe, they weren't going to be defending their fortress against cannons and scaling ladders.

What were they planning to defend against?

Off to our left lay the area of relatively flat ground where the friendly Caterpillar had once stood to provide us with a stable, upright surface for the gateway exit point, along with the piece of shed carapace that he had so graciously gifted us as a bench, on which to sit and watch Zheng and Raine having a duel out on the grassy steppe. The Caterpillar had since moved on, leaving behind a large area of dead grass, gone brown without the sustenance of the strange purple light from the sunless sky. But the bench remained, as did the gateway exit. The Caterpillar had obviously shed another plate of organic carapace armour, the plate on which the gateway had stood.

The Knights had mounted that plate upright, braced either side with more of that strange, dusky stone, and created a square of stone tiles around the gateway. A welcome mat, for visitors from Earth.

All of that area was well within the intended protection of the curtain walls — inside the bailey, I should say. In the middle of the area circumscribed by the ditch, the Knights and the Caterpillars had begun construction of a keep.

It was only in the very early stages of the process, with foundation stones laid down in a massive rectangular shape, made of that same odd, dusky sandstone-like rock. But where the curtain wall was only a suggestion waiting to be filled in, the keep was well under way, with low walls taking shape and sweeping arches for the entrances and a wide area of paved ground marking out the surroundings. The massive blocks of stone had been cut into more manageable bricks, held together with a faintly pinkish mortar. Almost one entire floor looked ready, and a second was creeping upward. I even spied what looked like narrow windows, arrow-slit style.

Not all of it was made from that odd stone. Some parts — the arches, the windows, anything that required complex shapes — were formed from pieces of Caterpillar carapace, cut or bent or moulded into the right forms. A castle taking form, in stone and bone.

They even had a crane and pulley system, also built from pieces of Caterpillar carapace, though I had no idea what they were using for rope.

“No wood, of course,” I murmured. “What are the internal floors made from?”

The whole structure was swarming with Knights, all of them working in silence except for the occasional clack of stone on stone. Many of them were carrying small sandstone blocks in carriers made from pieces of Caterpillar carapace; others were mixing what looked like some kind of mortar in a great white cauldron, drooling long strands of organic material from within intentional openings in their armour into the mixture; many Knights were working on cutting massive stone blocks into smaller bricks, using tools that looked re-purposed from their weapons; further Knights were sitting and standing around as if observing or overseeing the building work. Some of them still carried their weapons in their gauntlets, but most of them had their hands free for spades or poles or mixing tools.

Several Caterpillars were lined up inside the walls as well — three of them, massive whale-sized things that dwarfed the Knights. One of them was dotted with little growing structures, strange twists and turns of carapace, growing the pieces needed for the castle. The other two were carrying massive blocks of that dusky sandstone on their backs, roped to them with thick strands of sticky-looking black tar that were probably as wide around as a human being. The Knights scurried about them, helping to lower the stone next to the masonry workshop area.

In the distance to our right, I could see several more Caterpillars on the horizon, tiny white lozenge shapes either moving toward the castle or away from it. Some of them also had stone secured to their backs, visible even at such great distance if one squinted a bit.

“Hmm,” went Sevens.

“Or is it because of the blokes in armour?” Stephen asked when I didn’t answer.

I tried to gather my thoughts. “It’s ... um ... because of the Knights, yes.”

Stephen and Isabella must have heard the worry and confusion in my voice, because they shared a sudden, twitchy, nervous glance. Isabella had managed to get to her feet, but her husband was still sitting on the grass like me. Even if I was no longer a prospective god in their minds, I was still the person in charge, I was the one who knew what was going on, so hearing me awestruck was probably not a good sign for their own survival — or for the safety

of their daughter.

“Huh,” Zheng grunted. Performatively unimpressed, but she wasn’t fooling me.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” I said, then couldn’t resist a deep sigh. I could feel a headache coming on. My squid-skull mask called to me, promising to soothe the pain if I slipped it on over my head. But I needed a human face right then. We were still treading delicate ground. “I’m just surprised, they ... um ... this is new, it’s ... ”

Sevens cleared her throat delicately. “The knightly order of Camelot did not obtain planning permission for this new build.”

Stephen blinked hard, once, then nodded seriously. “Oh, right. Right then.”

Sevens had successfully summed up the problem in terms he could understand all too well.

Isabella looked less convinced, frowning to herself as she stared at the castle. Her long-fingered hands wrung together in barely contained anxiety. She looked like a stripped willow tree, lost Outside on some forgotten hill. “Who do you ask for planning permission, out here? Is there a ... county council?” She winced. “No, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, that’s absurd, obviously, sorry.”

“Me,” I grunted, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Or Lizzie? I don’t know.”

Sevens stepped forward, using her umbrella as a casual walking stick. “There is nothing to fear. This castle belongs to Heather, undoubtedly.”

“I don’t want another castle,” I grumbled. “What are they *doing*?”

“Another?” Isabella blinked at me, eyes wide.

Stephen was frowning up at Sevens now. “If you don’t mind me asking, miss, who are you? You kind of appeared out of ... nowhere ... um.” He eyed Zheng as well, realising that he had no idea who or what she was either. He was still very lost, desperate to get his little girl back, navigating mysterious waters.

“I’m an actual god,” said Sevens, cold and completely straight-faced. “But not the kind you worship. Don’t think about it too hard.”

I gave Sevens such a look. She politely tilted her head at me, the picture of innocence.

“You and I are going to have a talk later,” I said.

“Are we?”

I sighed and stuck out one hand to Zheng. “Help me up, please. I’m too tired to expend effort. Please.”

Zheng hauled me to my feet, though she probably didn’t need to. I could have climbed her side with my tentacles all by myself, though I still clung to her arm for support once I was standing, huddling inside the skin-warmth of the yellow cloak. For a moment I just gazed out across the castle-works, at the knights all busy building, at the Caterpillars serving as heavy lifting gear and extruding pieces of castle-structure, wondering what on earth was going on.

“How have they done this in a single week?” I asked nobody in particular. “I was last here a week ago. Okay, well, maybe a bit more than a week, but still. How large is this going to be?”

Sevens ventured a suggestion. “Arundel sized? The bailey is easily large enough. No Norman motte in the middle, of course. The keep will be very different, square and more modern.”

I scoffed with humourless laughter. “I’ve been to Arundel Castle, it’s huge, it’s ... wait.” I frowned at her, though Seven-Shades-of-Suspiciously-Specific-Experience was gazing out at the castle too, seemingly very interested. “Sevens, how do you know Arundel Castle?”

“I visited for a siege. Only for one day, though. The rest of it wasn’t relevant to me.”

By then, Stephen had gotten to his feet as well, with his wife’s assistance. Even in my increasingly exasperated state, I couldn’t help but notice they remained holding hands with each other, unwilling to let go as they stared out in awe at the seed of a castle framed against the whorled purple sky of Camelot. For a moment they didn’t seem like older adults at all, but more like a pair of teenagers who’d been playing at maturity, suddenly confronted by the vast and inhuman depths of the cosmos.

Not so different to me, see? I told that bitter snake coiled in my chest, but the voice responded with only a derisive snort.

Zheng rumbled, like a cat's trill but on a tiger's scale. "Shaman, I do not see the mooncalf."

"Well, yes," I huffed. "She's probably behind the bloody great castle, or capering about on the far side of one of the Caterpillars, or I don't know ... supervising engravings of cat-girls on the inside of a great hall while it's still under construction."

"Very suitable," said Sevens.

My final burst of irritation was half a hasty performance. I swallowed hard but tried to conceal the sudden draining of blood from my head and limbs, the plummeting feeling in my gut, and the cold sweat breaking out down my back. If Lozzie wasn't here, something must have gone badly wrong. Her part of the plan had involved at least one more Slip, with Natalie and Turmy and Tenny in tow. But she should have been here over an hour ago. She should have been waiting for us.

A terrible possibility blossomed in my imagination — what if Edward had a second machine all along? What if we were still standing waist deep in his trap?

"Shaman?" Zheng rumbled. Hiding my sudden anxiety from her was impossible. She could probably smell my fear.

"It's ... um ... we should look for Lozzie. She's ... probably in the castle?"

Seven-Shades-of-Sauntering-to-the-Rescue raised her umbrella and pointed with the metal tip. "I spy Turmy right there. Lozzie must be close."

"Turmy?!"

I must have squeaked like a surprised fox, because Stephen and Isabella both flinched and stared at me, before they also looked toward their lost cat.

Sevens was right. There was Turmy, a marmalade blob-smudge visible against the velvety yellow grass. He was about halfway across the enclosure of the prospective curtain walls, just by the edge of the keep, nosing and sniffing at the metal gauntlet a Knight had extended toward him. Three Knights in total had assumed a crouched position around the cat, each with one hand out, waiting for Turmy to sniff, or perhaps submit to petting. I hadn't noticed

him there between the trio of crouching Knights, because I'd assumed they were working on something at the base of the wall. Turmy didn't seem to have noticed us either, especially once he started rubbing himself on one of the Knights' hands.

The relief was overwhelming, and not just for Natalie's parents. Isabella put a hand to her chest. Stephen let out a shuddering sigh. But I felt all my fears crawl back up into my brain stem and leave only irritation in their wake. If Turmy was here, then Lozzie was here too, and she really was messing around in a half-finished castle, a construction site, with a small child. Two children, if one counted Tenny.

"Such a popular fellow, isn't he?" Sevens was saying. I heard a tiny sigh in her voice. Her free hand unconsciously brushed at her skirt, trying to brush away the memory of Turmy's shed fur.

"Oh," I hissed. "I can't believe how irresponsible Lozzie can be! Really!" I huffed harder, gathering myself. "I don't have the energy to worry right now, about this ... this ... unlicensed crenellation! I simply do not!"

My angry snap finally drew the attention of some of the nearby Knights. Visor-less sealed faceplates turned toward us. Working Knights stopped in their ceaseless motion and looked up from carrying bricks or mixing mortar or cutting stone. The Knights working the crane paused their limbs like automatons and turned only their heads. The attention went through them like a wave, until every single Knight was stock still and staring in our direction.

"Uh," went Stephen. Isabella's lips were shaking, too, eyes gone wide.

Sometimes it was all too easy for me to forget how eerie the Knights could be. I'd grown too used to them.

"Yes, hello!" I called out. "Yes, it's me, hi! Don't blame me for being a bit surprised, now, you're all—"

Bwop.

Bwiip.

Buup.

We all flinched together — well, Sevens didn't, though even Zheng stiffened briefly, head snapping around — at the trio of sudden

booming noises that echoed out across the quiet plain. None of the Knights reacted, of course, but over by the keep I saw Turmy jump and hiss, arching his back and fluffing up his tail at this unseen sonic assault.

“It’s fine!” I called out, heart racing, one hand pressed to my chest, tentacles instinctively flared outward. “It’s just the Caterpillars, the giant white things over there. They were just saying hello.”

The Caterpillars’ giant engine-booms were of course only miniature versions of the deafening alarm-roar any of them could make if they so chose to. Even now, as we recovered our breath and nursed racing pulses, I could hear a trio of great engines dialling down, a chorus of bass machinery inside the Caterpillars’ pitted white carapaces, returning to standby.

However, I did raise one tentacle to wave a greeting. The last thing I wanted was the great machine-creatures to think we hadn’t heard, and express themselves again but louder. Zheng followed suit, oddly enough, raising a single closed fist in salute.

Isabella and Stephen looked more than a bit shell-shocked at all this. Their baptism of fire in the Shamble-swamp had been up-close and personal, something I hadn’t let them look away from, but at least it had all been mostly on the human scale. The Caterpillars speaking, things on that scale communicating, was still a bit too much for them.

But I didn’t tell them to look away. The more they saw, the more they were forced to integrate into their world-view.

That’s why Camelot had come second. Safe, secure, peaceful Camelot. I just hadn’t expected the castle.

As we waved to our gigantic machine-grub friends, a tiny blonde head popped up over the lip of the incomplete walls of the castle keep. A puff of blonde hair, a flap of pentacolour pastel poncho, and Lizzie vanished again into the bowels of the construction site. All over the rest of the castle grounds, the Knights turned their heads away from us, resumed working on their various tasks, and got back on with the business of building.

I shook my head and put my hands on my hips, tutting softly.

A moment later, three small figures appeared around the far side of the castle, flanked by a pair of Knights on guard duty. Lizzie

diligently took the lead as Tenny herded little Natalie along, holding both of Natalie's hands with her silken black tentacles.

"Nat!" Isabella almost sobbed. Stephen looked about ready to cry too.

"Come along," I said, stepping forward and dragging Zheng after me. "Let's go meet them. I'd rather Natalie not have to see the corpse all over again."

We set off across the yellow grass, across what would one day be a castle courtyard. I glanced back only once, at the sad and lonely body of the nameless young man.

Natalie was reunited with her parents beneath the shelter of the walls of Camelot's keep. We met her and Lizzie and Tenny just shy of the border of paved ground the Knights had laid out. The pair of Knights accompanying them stopped a little way behind.

When little Natalie realised that the 'octopus lady' had brought her back to her parents at last, she pulled free of Tenny's embrace and ran across the gap which separated them, babbling for mummy and daddy.

Her parents did something not too dissimilar. I did my best to look away.

The actual moment of reunion between parents and child was deeply embarrassing to witness, but also a potential minefield. We couldn't simply turn away and allow it to play out until the moment of emotional exhaustion. We couldn't give this family their privacy, not yet — because Tenny was right there and Nat had taken a liking to her. She'd made friends with a humanoid moth-puppy. Mum and Dad were going to have questions. Which was, of course, at least partly intentional.

It didn't take too long for the tears to subside, though Natalie didn't cry at all. She had that far-past-exhaustion look that very tired small children sometimes get, wired with manic energy from hidden reserves, dressed in borrowed pajamas and a pair of crocs from Eevee which were far too large for her small feet. She kicked them off as her mother lifted her up for a hug, and didn't bother to slip them back on after she was placed back down again. She scrunched bare feet against the grass of Camelot, uncaring of how it felt, as her parents fussed over her.

That was the first sign which worried me.

“—and then the Octopus lady made it go away but it’s not bad it’s just like a big confused dog, a bad dog, but not because it’s a bad dog but—”

Natalie babbled on with a small child’s explanation of what had happened, even as her mother would barely let go of her, and her father cried quiet tears of relief.

“—but Tenny is really nice and Tenny made it go away again by getting really big and—”

Eventually, once they’d reassured their brain-stems that their daughter was safe and sound — and interrupted her several times to ask if she was hurt anywhere — Isabella and Stephen managed to spare a sliver of attention to realise what exactly their daughter was gesturing toward so happily.

Isabella kept a firm grip on one of Natalie’s hands. Stephen straightened up and stared.

“Burrrrrrt?” went Tenny, tilting her head at the parents. Two of her black tentacles were idly reaching toward her new friend. Another two were edging toward each of the parents, as if curious about them but not quite sure. “Naaaaat?”

Isabella and Stephen were freshly terrified all over again.

What did they see when they looked at Tenny? Fluffy white fur on coal-black skin, a pair of twitching antennae on her head, and eyes like something dredged from the deep. Tenny’s musculature was almost human, but not quite, like her muscles and joints were linked incorrectly to be a truly human frame. Wings hanging down like a cloak, part of her body, and a great mass of tentacles writhing out from the hidden space between wings and shoulders.

To me and to Lizzie, Tenny was beautiful. But to people who had not encountered her before?

This thing had just said their child’s name. Their body language was defensive, ready to flee or fight. Tenny must have seen it too, because all her tentacles paused, a worried look on her face, a touch of caution in those wide black eyes.

“Tenny!” Natalie reached out a hand, inviting the tentacle to hold again. “Mmm!”

Lozzie waved the corner of her poncho at the parents. “Hi!”

I cleared my throat and stepped forward. The time for polite distance was over. “Allow me, please.” I gestured at Lozzie first, trying to ease them into yet more supernatural truths. “This is Lozzie, my ... sister.” I settled on that word without really thinking about it, but it somehow felt right. Lozzie flashed a cheeky, delighted look at me. “Without her, your daughter would have been taken away again.” Then I gestured at Tenny. “This is Tenny, Lozzie’s daughter. Subjectively, she’s about the same age as Natalie —”

An irritated trill interrupted me. “Older!” said Tenny. “I’m older, Heath.”

To my great and lasting relief, Natalie let out a giggle.

That probably did more work than anything I could say. With the doubtful caution of a pair of apes letting a serpent into their den, Natalie’s parents watched as one of Tenny’s tentacles returned to hold Natalie’s hand.

I sighed and forced a smile. “Yes, well, Tenny is also a child, just a bit older, subjectively speaking. She’s been helping to look after Natalie since we found her in the swamp.”

“Tenny’s a friend!” Natalie said, full of sudden bursting enthusiasm, looking up at her mother and father. “And she’s really really clever! She does clever things with all her octopus parts, lots of different things at once!”

Stephen and Isabella did not look quite convinced just yet. The undeniable physical reality of Tenny had pushed both of them back up to the border of their own sanity. Isabella had gone white in the face, in shock or horror, while Stephen looked like he wanted to spit with disgust. I hoped he wouldn’t, for Tenny’s sake.

The idea that their child had been kidnapped by an evil wizard and spirited away beyond the walls of reality, that was one thing, they could maybe deal with that concept — because she was now being saved, returned to normality by the powers of things beyond their comprehension.

But the prospect of Natalie making friends with something visibly alien and other? That was a different hurdle. But they had to leap it. I wouldn’t let them refuse the change.

How could they not reject this? whispered the doubtful voice. *Belief doesn't equal acceptance. You're all monsters to them, these so-called 'normal' people.*

To my horror, I agreed with the doubts, even if they did sound a little edgy when put into words.

Lozzie and I both waited with bated breath, to see what was going to happen.

Despite appearances, we weren't actually putting Tenny on the spot without any support. Tenny, bless her speed of comprehension, had been given a set of very clear and explicit instructions, plus reassurances, by both myself and Lozzie, before we'd put the beginning of the plan into action. The situation was not about to spiral out of control. Even if something unexpected happened, Tenny was still anchored, both physically and emotionally; nobody had remarked on the single black tentacle that had crept out from beneath her wings and slid up inside Lozzie's poncho. Tenny was holding her mother's hand. She knew we were here.

"Helloooooo? Hello?" Tenny trilled, like some kind of exotic jungle parrot repeating the first word she'd heard.

But it didn't earn her a reply from Natalie's parents.

I cleared my throat and stuck to the script. "Tenny, Stephen and Isabella are Natalie's parents. What do you say to a friend's parents?"

"Ohhhh!" Tenny trilled at me, big black eyes going wide. She didn't actually need reminding, the 'surprise' was part of the act. She turned back to Natalie's parents and nodded her head in a little bow. "Thank you," she trilled in her fluttering voice, from a vocal system that we couldn't even picture. "Thank you for ... letting me play with Nat, Mister and Misses ... *brrrrt* ..." Tenny trailed off and glanced to me for help. She was, after all, a nervous young teenager talking to a pair of unfamiliar adults.

"Mister and Misses Skeates," I supplied in a stage whisper.

"Skeates!" Tenny announced like she'd flipped over a rock and found a fascinating bug. Half a dozen black, silken tentacles wiggled in a halo around her body, bobbing and weaving with the release of nervous energy. Tenny beamed.

Stephen Skeates swallowed hard — and glanced at me for guidance or reassurance.

The moment you're gone, they'll revert to disgust, whispered the horrible hissing in my chest.

"Tenny is not a human being," I said out loud, struggling not to hiccup. I'd practised these lines, but they still came hard. "But she is a person, sapient like us. She's from Earth, not Outside, whatever she looks like. And she's also a little girl."

Brrrrrrt! went Tenny, fluttering with irritation. She flapped her arms. Several tentacles waggled and wobbled at me. "Not little! Heath!"

Natalie giggled in delight. Tenny wasn't frightening to her, not at all.

Lozzie spread her arms beneath her poncho, catching everyone's attention for a moment with the display of pentacolour pastel, like a songbird flaring her crest.

"She's my precious babby!" said Lozzie. "So be kind, please?"

For just a second, Lozzie held Isabella's wary gaze, those little elfin eyes sparkling with mischief and knowledge. Then she did this sort of bend from the waist, flopping forward and letting her poncho flap with her, all relaxed and loose, before whirling back up and fixing Stephen with the same look.

I had no idea if Lozzie was performing covert magic based on interpretive dance, or if she was just being her usual silly self, but whatever it was, it worked. Isabella and Stephen both visibly relaxed, if only by a very small fraction, and the eyes they turned toward Tenny were now consciously restrained and polite. Parenthood bridged the gap; I still struggled to think of Lozzie as Tenny's mum, but she was, in a very real way.

"Tenny, was it?" Isabella managed to say. "You're very welcome."

"Mmmmmmmrrrrr."

"And thank you too, for keeping Nat company." Isabella looked to me again for confirmation. I nodded, while Tenny happily wiggled her tentacles.

"Mum! Mum!" Natalie was saying, tugging on her mother's hand. "Tenny can tie knots with her tentacles, it's really funny! And we

found a really huge round table inside the castle! And one of the Caterpillars said hello to me! And—”

Natalie was not acting much like a child who had just returned from a traumatic experience; she was rattling on at her parents like she'd just gotten home from a school trip. On one hand, that was a good sign. She wasn't clinging to mummy and daddy in wild-eyed terror, which would present well for the story that the Skeates would have to tell the police. But she was almost too normal, too excited, too stable.

I didn't mention that out loud, of course. I stepped back, politely giving the little family the space they needed. Stephen made eye contact with me as I withdrew a few paces, so I said, “We'll take you straight back home in a few minutes, when you're ready. We'll need to talk about practical matters, but it might be better to do that around a kitchen table, rather than out here. Let Nat stretch her legs for a few minutes?”

Stephen nodded. Natalie bobbed on her bare feet and said, “Thank you, octopus lady!”

Isabella looked at me too. “Thank you,” she said, deadly serious.

The awkward moment collapsed in two mutually acceptable directions. Natalie, chattering with childlike excitement, started to lead her parents off around the side of the castle, to show them “the part of the wall where it gets really tall!”, the “knight with the funny helmet”, and presumably to find Turmy before we left. Tenny trailed along with them, still holding Natalie's other hand in one curled end of a tentacle. Sevens stepped past me to provide a safe chaperone, flourishing her umbrella like a fancy walking stick, just in case of a blow-up or something unexpected happening. We hadn't planned this part, but she sauntered on without asking for guidance. Which was a relief.

Perhaps she was trying to make up for earlier.

“I will watch the puppy, too,” Zheng rumbled, but she only detached herself from my side after I acknowledged with a nod. I had regained enough strength to stand on my own two feet without wavering — well, two feet and two tentacles as extra bracing against the ground.

I had also mustered enough strength of mind to reach out with one

tentacle and snag the hem of Lozzie's poncho, just as she was about to skip off to join the rear of the impromptu tour group.

"Hey," I croaked.

Lozzie did a little flutter-flounce turn, dipping her head to one side. "Heathy?"

"Let them walk around for a few minutes," I said. Lozzie bit her bottom lip, openly doubtful and casting a look at the backs of the others as they neared the corner of the unfinished castle keep. I added, "Tenny has a princess of Carcosa and Zheng to look after her, she'll be fine."

Lozzie leaned toward me, wiggled her eyebrows, and put one hand next to her mouth in a comedic stage-whisper pose. "I was thinking more about mister and misses gloomy-face!"

"I think they need a breather too. And they've got Sevens, if things go off the rails. Please, Lozzie. Come with me instead? I need to take a look at the ... at the body, and I'd rather not do it alone. And I want your opinion on something."

Lozzie blinked several times as if surprised, went through a very brief show of resistance, pursing her lips and putting her hands on her hips, then broke into a sunburst of a smile, flapped the sides of her poncho, and skipped over to my side to take me by the hand.

While Natalie and her parents wandered the grounds of Camelot-under-construction, Lozzie and I retraced our earlier steps, heading up the gentle slope to where I'd left the corpse of the unknown traveller.

He wasn't alone anymore; three Knights had appeared around the corpse.

One stood at his head and another by his feet, both holding halberd-like weapons, facing outward toward the castle keep. A third stood opposite us, on the far side of the corpse, with a familiar long-hafted axe held in both hands, as if at parade attention. I would recognise my friend anywhere. It was the Forest Knight. Taken together, framed against the purple whorls in Camelot's sky, the three of them looked like the protagonists of an Arthurian legend, gazing off into their destiny. Or a very cheap fantasy novel cover by an artist who disliked drawing faces.

Lozzie and I took it slow as we climbed the hill, to give us time to talk.

“Lozzie,” I murmured, peering ahead at the Knights around the corpse. “What are they doing?”

“Standing vigil,” she replied instantly, her voice a sad trickle of its usual self.

“Lozzie? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. I know you don’t like this kind of thing, I just needed a friend with me, I need to drop the act.”

Lozzie sniffed and wiped her eyes on a corner of her poncho, then turned a bright smile on me again. “It’s okay! They’re just so sweet is all, they’re such good sweeties and boys and girls and all other sorts, did you know that too? They’ve invented all these ones that they have terms for but no words yet. They don’t do words often. We should teach them that too. More words.”

I sighed, but with a smile on my face. “I think we’ve taught them plenty, already. Lozzie, what are they doing here?” I glanced over my shoulder at the medieval construction site sprawled out behind us. “I mean, not just up on this hill. The whole thing. Why are they building a castle? More importantly, who are they hoping to defend against? I thought you said this world was empty, nothing here, all long extinct.”

Lozzie shrugged, tilting her head at me, rather po-faced. “I think they just think it’s cool.”

“It’s ... I’m sorry, it’s cool?”

“You love castles too, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, I do, but—”

Lozzie giggle-snorted and waved me down as if I was being silly. “Where do you think they got the idea?” She extended one arm out and pointed at the Forest Knight. “You gave him all sorts of stuff from inside you, didn’t you?”

I blinked in realisation. Of course, when the Forest Knight had almost died from spiritual decompression, and I’d had to inject him with the product of my own distilled and purified abyssal energies; I’d shared something with him that was never meant to be a physical substance, let alone leave my own flesh, and I had briefly

joined the very edge of the Round Table, though the communication had all happened in a medium I hadn't the faintest notion of how to understand.

And now the Knights were building a castle, because it was cool.

"I hope they're not going to adopt any other tastes and interests from my subconscious," I said, pulling a little grimace. Lozzie giggled and flapped her poncho. "Well, I'm glad you find it amusing, but we can't have them all developing a crush on Zheng."

Lozzie snorted again. "Heathy!"

"What? You're telling me that's not possible? They picked up a love of castles, so why not that?"

"Because they're Knights! It makes sense for them to build a castle!"

I tutted and shook my head, blushing faintly and frowning in utter perplexity. All this activity, this building, this industry, this was my fault all along. I couldn't adjust to that idea.

"Where are they even getting those huge stone blocks?" I asked. "Are the Cattys okay, hauling them all that distance?"

"Mhmm! They're fine!"

"And where are they getting it from?"

Lozzie pointed toward the distant horizon, where several tiny white specks were visible, the Caterpillars on their long trek to whatever makeshift quarry they'd carved out of some rocky ground, untouched and unseen by mortal eyes for thousands of years. There was a vague shape on the horizon when one squinted in that direction, the faintest suggestion of naked stone, dun and dusty.

"There's an abandoned city that way! They're taking from there."

I stopped dead and turned my head to stare at Lozzie. She tilted her own head back and forth, like a confused puppy.

"Um."

"Heathy?"

"Lozzie."

"Heathyyyyy?"

“You’re telling me that this castle is being built with pieces of monolithic stone stolen from a dead, ancient city, on a dead world?”

“Yah.”

I blinked several times, rubbed the bridge of my nose, and decided it didn’t matter. “I suppose the knights didn’t adopt a healthy fear of curses, then.”

Lozzie mock-gasped and flapped one hand beneath her poncho. “Heathy, you believe in curses?!”

I gave her a scathing look. “Can you blame me, really?”

Lozzie found that irresistibly funny. She giggled all the way up the rest of the hill, all the way to the feet of the Knights, wind-milling one arm and tugging on my hand, calling me the ‘cutest silly-button’. She only trailed off when we came face-to-face with the corpse and the Knights standing over him in their honour guard, for a dead man they didn’t even know.

“Hello you,” I said to the Forest Knight. His helmet dipped by a fraction of an inch. “No, no, I understand, you can’t move right now. You’re standing vigil. Thank you for doing this. You really didn’t have to, any of you three.” I looked at the other two knights, but they stayed stock still.

The Forest Knight resumed his position, helmet up, gazing out across the landscape.

Lozzie was biting her lower lip, staring down at the corpse, at the mummified, greyish skin on the man’s face and forearms.

“Hey,” I said softly, squeezing her hand and tugging gently so she would turn away. “Don’t look just yet. Let’s think about something else.”

So we did. For a long, quiet, peaceful moment, Lozzie and I stood hand in hand on the hilltop, gazing out across the castle construction site. Lozzie wriggled inside her poncho. I watched the little figures trailing around the edge of the keep — Natalie leading her parents and Tenny, followed by Zheng and Sevens. A familiar orange blob was now trying to rub itself on Sevens’ ankles.

“I’m worried that Natalie has adapted to Outside,” I said eventually.

Lozzie peered sideways at me. “Ahhhh? Ah? Ah-ah?”

“She’s not acting like this place feels wrong to her. She doesn’t seem affected by Camelot. I’m worried that could be a bad sign, in the long run.”

Lozzie pursed her lips and pulled a very serious thinky face.

“Mmmmm. I think that happens to everyone?”

“Maybe.” Lozzie was somewhat biased, but I didn’t say that out loud.

“She’s gonna be fine, Heathy! You did the right thing. We’re doing the right thing! Fine-fine all fine. And if she needs help, we’re gonna be there, right?”

Lozzie’s turn to squeeze my hand. I nodded, lost in thought and worry.

Warm cinnamon wind tickled my face and ran gentle fingers over my scalp. This place, this Outside realm, Camelot, it was almost like a part of home. A castle on the far side of Evelyn’s gate, garrisoned by Lozzie’s knights, that would be one impressive stronghold. Perhaps Evee could even ward it, make it a fortress in a magical sense too.

But what was a castle except an outpost of control?

But control by what?

By me and mine. The Knights, the Shamblers, the dregs of the Sharrowford cult back home; even Zheng and Sevens; Evelyn, my strategist; Raine, my bodyguard. Where was all this going? What was I becoming?

I had promised myself that I would not become a monster, that when Maisie saw me again, she would see the sister she remembered, her own face reflected. She would not find a monster wearing my skin. I would not shed everything that makes me who or what I am, just to get her back. I would rescue her and I would stay true to myself. And so far I was doing pretty well at that, I thought.

But I was becoming something else. The embryo of a god? No, that had been a delusion in a moment of weakness, encouraged by Sevens for some reason I didn’t yet understand.

I sighed and turned away from the castle. We had practical matters to solve before I could spend time on the philosophy of power.

The corpse of the unknown man stared at the purple sky with blank, dead eyes.

“Mmmm,” Lozzie made a sad little sound again. I held her hand tightly.

I had never met this man. I had no idea who he was. In life he may have been a horrible person, he may have committed acts or crimes that would make me hate him, he may have held beliefs that I would have found reprehensible. Or maybe not, maybe he had been a saint. More likely he'd been like the rest of us, somewhere between extremes.

Whatever he'd been in life, I wished he could have gone home.

“I wish we could figure out who he was,” I said.

“Mmhmm.”

Lozzie finally let go of my hand. She spent a few minutes circling the corpse, looking at him from different angles, peering at his dried out eyeballs and the skin on his hands. I'd half hoped she might be able to work out something that I'd missed, but we had no such luck. I was considering the possibility of using brain-math to define him, maybe to trace his history somehow. Even if we couldn't take him home, perhaps we could let his family know what had happened to him.

But he was a corpse. What would I find, if I peered into a dead thing?

I felt such guilt at not wanting to try. And I didn't understand why.

To my surprise, we were joined a couple of minutes later by an unexpected addition to our little group — Stephen Skeates.

Down below us, the tour had completed a circuit of the castle. Natalie was busy chattering something to her mother. I think I heard Sevens replying too, and then they vanished inside the keep, perhaps to see the 'big table'. But Stephen detached from the group, nodding some reassurances, and trudged up the hill to join us instead. As he approached he nodded to me with one of those awkward non-smiles and head-lifts that older men sometimes use to acknowledge each other. He didn't say anything, but just stood

there a few paces away from us, frowning down at the corpse.

Stephen Skeates was a very solidly built man, perhaps only half a foot taller than me. In rumpled clothes and sweat-stained shirt, he could have passed for an ageing football player after a rough night on the town, if it wasn't for the genuine haunted look in his eyes.

Eventually he cleared his throat and wet his lips, but didn't look up from the corpse. "I um, I wanted to ask ... "

Here it comes, whispered the bitter voice in my belly.

Stephen nodded at the corpse. "What happens to him now?"

The bitter hiss was silent. Hadn't expected that.

I drew in a big sigh before replying. "We're going to bury him here, I think. I was planning on just a coffin and a hole in the ground. But maybe we can have the Knights rustle up a stone sarcophagus or something."

Stephen glanced at the Knights, then looked away quickly. Still couldn't quite figure them out, could he? He stared at Lozzie for a second, then nodded to her too, then back to the corpse. "Who was he?" he asked.

"Not a clue," I said, sounding more prickly than I intended.

"Somebody else kidnapped by Edward Lilburne. Sorry, you don't know who that is. That's the name of the wizard who kidnapped your daughter."

"My uncle," said Lozzie, colder and sadder than usual. She pulled a frowny face when Stephen blinked at her in surprise. "We're gonna kill him, no worries!" she chirped.

He nodded along to that too, smiling awkwardly at Lozzie before glancing at me.

"Can't you ... take him home? Back to his parents? He looks like he must have been pretty young."

I pulled a sad smile. "Too risky. The police might find the body, trace it back to us. We can't return him, not safely. Though I would like to find his family, let them know, somehow. We have ways, but ... "

I trailed off in vague guilt. What would it mean, to touch death with brain-math?

The bitter voice in my chest curled in resentment, like a parasite in my heart. Stephen was just trying to soothe his own guilt, after all. He didn't really care about this man he'd never met. This was simply something he understood, something he could hold onto, make sense of.

Using the dead man for his own ends, whispered a part of me I hated to acknowledge. *Using the dead for absolution*, for—

"Some corner of a forgotten field that is forever England," Stephen said. His voice threatened to break. His eyes were full of tears. He sniffed hard and wiped them on his arm. "Is that how it goes? I was never good with poetry in school."

"*Foreign* field," I corrected him gently. "But otherwise, yes."

"He might not be English," Lozzie said. "Could be from aaaaaanywhere. Anywhere at all."

Stephen shook his head. "This could have been Nat. This could have been my daughter. This poor bloke, he didn't deserve it, he didn't. Out there, in that swamp. That's no place to die."

"I'm glad you agree," I said out loud.

The bitter, hissing voice in my chest had finally run out of things to say.

Stephen looked up at the trio of Knights. "Can I stand with you for a few minutes?"

They didn't answer, of course.

I cleared my throat gently. "They don't communicate like us, but I think you're welcome to join them. We won't be staying much longer, though. We can't risk dawn rising back in England while we're all here. People might wonder where you've gone, and we need to get your story straight, for the police."

Stephen nodded, taking it all very seriously. "Of course, of course." He went to step around the body, to join the Forest Knight in vigil, but then he paused, staring down at the dead man. "I'm not sure I should say this, but have you checked his pockets? For an ID or a wallet or anything?"

Lozzie and I shared a look. Lozzie snorted and covered her mouth with a corner of poncho. I sighed and rubbed my face with one

hand.

“No,” I admitted, somewhat embarrassed. “No, we haven’t. I’m a little bit squeamish about corpses. I was going to ask Zheng, but reuniting you with Natalie was more important. Here, let me, um ...”

I used a tentacle, not my hands, but even then it made me cringe with disgust. I should have left this task for Zheng, but I was embarrassed by having missed the obvious solution to the problem. With one tentacle-tip I patted down the young man’s pockets, found nothing obvious, then steeled myself to poke the tentacle inside, to make sure he wasn’t carrying his driving license loose in his baggy jeans.

In the left, nothing but lint.

But in the right, I found a piece of smooth stone.

In shock, I pulled it out of the dead man’s pocket, almost fumbling as I transferred it into my hands. Lozzie put a hand over her mouth when she saw. The little greenish stone meant nothing to Stephen, but he froze as well, the shock on my face was too obvious.

A piece of flat, greenish soapstone, carved into a five-pointed star. A stone coin.

Exactly like the one Hringewindla had gifted to me.

“What does that mean?” Stephen asked. “What is it?”

I took a long moment to gather myself, thoughts whirling inside my head. This wasn’t my coin, it was slightly different, cut from a different piece of stone. But it was an example of the same currency, from a place Outside that used things like currency.

“Heathy?” Lozzie prompted.

I wet my lips and closed my fist around the soapstone coin, staring down at the corpse. “It means our dead man here might not be as uninvolved as I first thought.”

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.14

With electric lights blazing against a sluggish northern dawn beyond the thin floral curtains, the Skeates' family home felt welcoming and cosy — much better than when Zheng and I had stepped from thin air only a couple of hours earlier, to intrude on the ghostly flicker-glow of terrified grief. Now the television was firmly switched off, hands were sensibly washed, faces splashed with cold water, shoes politely placed on the mat by the front door, and cups of strong tea suggested and administered all round.

The physical rituals of mutual trust were important, of course, but it was the house itself which unexpectedly grabbed my attention.

The house in Prestwich concealed its own age beneath several layers of interior renovation. Isabella and Stephen had filled their home with clean, modern furniture: self-assembled Ikea bookshelves; a tastefully plain dining table with matching chairs of unadorned wood; gauzy curtains with subtle rose designs on the fabric; a sturdy wooden-framed bunk-bed for Natalie, despite the fact she was an only child; sensible, solid, soft armchairs and a long sofa, all pointed at the television in the sitting room. None of it was untouched or unused, this was no display home of normality enforced over human need. The table was scuffed from hundreds of dinners, the chair-legs showed evidence of Turmy's claw marks, and the sofa was worn-in, cushions collapsed, probably in need of replacing soon. Natalie's wooden bed frame was covered in stickers of dinosaurs, cute-faced cartoon characters, girl superheroes, and at least one little figure I recognised from a video game which Tenny had been playing recently.

Natalie's bedroom was full of pastel chaos, occupied by a large collection of plush toys, with a very well-used set of art supplies scattered about on a small desk. One wall was covered with her own taped-up drawings, mostly cartoon characters. Apparently Natalie was currently going through a phase of drawing superheroes who were also pieces of cheese, or perhaps dinosaurs, or maybe birds. I didn't have time to stop and figure them out, though I did

spot one image that was almost certainly meant to be a dinosaur in a trench coat and a pirate hat, but with a lemon in place of the more traditional skull-and-crossbones symbol. Maybe Natalie could tell me all about detective-pirate-lemon-rex another day.

A good place for a little girl to grow up. A real place, warm and lived-in. After a good look at their home, I decided I liked Natalie's parents.

But the house itself was older than the family. Not as venerable as Number 12 Barnslow Drive, and it had surrendered to the advances of the modern world more readily, but I could feel it in the bones of the place. Between the oddly large kitchen, the rather cramped dining room, and the kinking snake of the stairs, I spied more than a few hints of history beneath the surface — the dark skirting boards from an earlier time, the open space in the kitchen where a large gas oven had probably once stood, the side of the stairs where a railing should have been, and the odd step-down from the kitchen to the dining room. I would place the red brick exterior no later than the 1930s. Maybe it was the layout, or the height of the ceilings, or maybe my imagination was running away with me, under the stress and exhaustion of this wearying day.

Or maybe I was trying to distract myself from the cool, smooth weight of the soapstone coin in my sweaty palm.

Better a mystery I understood than one I couldn't fathom.

I had plenty of opportunity to ponder the specifics of the house once we arrived. The very first thing we did, before we'd even finished recovering from the return Slip, was to comb the place from top to bottom. While Isabella cradled a nauseated and shivering Natalie, and Stephen was getting his breath back, and Tenny hugged poor confused Turmy, and Sevens kept an eye on them all, Zheng and Lozzie and I checked every single room, cupboard, and dark corner we could find. We even looked under the beds, stared into the plug holes in the bathroom, and opened the fridge. We weren't taking any chances with Edward's propensity for clever traps. It was overwhelmingly likely that Natalie had been selected by random chance, simply a little girl in the wrong place at the wrong time, so there was no reason for Edward to booby-trap her family home, like he'd done with Amy Stack's son. But it didn't hurt to check. I made sure to peer into the shadows this time, lest another creature like Marmite use my own assumptions against me.

We found nothing except the usual background level of pneumasomatic life. A dwarf-thing made of crumbly coal was nested in the back of a kitchen cupboard, a pair of spirits like praying mantises were visible cavorting in the small garden, and a flat, sad, limp mushroom creature was plastered over one of the windows. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing intentional. Nothing watching us back.

Once we pronounced the house was safe, we had much to discuss with Isabella and Stephen. We weren't out of the woods just yet. But they were understandably reluctant to part from their daughter for more than a few moments. Not all of the things I had to say were going to be suitable for her ears.

Eventually we reached an acceptable compromise. Natalie was to show Tenny her bedroom and her toys, chaperoned by Seven-Shades-of-Reluctant-Babysitter, while myself and Lozzie would speak to the parents, with Zheng hovering close at hand in case of an emergency on either end. I would have preferred Sevens with me and Lozzie upstairs, just so I could fall back on the eloquence of the Yellow Princess, but we all understood that Natalie needed a proper bodyguard right now, at least until I made it clear that she was in no further danger.

So Lozzie and I settled ourselves on the rather spartan wooden chairs in the cramped sitting room, opposite a strained and exhausted looking couple of parents. The mugs of steaming tea helped everybody's mood. The seven feet of looming demon-host by the doorway was probably less reassuring. In other circumstances I would have made Zheng sit down with us, but part of me clung to the authority, the threat of violence, the intimidation.

Amid all of this, Turmy had decided that the best place for a cat was in Lozzie's lap. As soon as we were sat down, he burrowed into her pastel poncho, curled up, and closed his eyes.

"Well," Isabella said in a tone of awkward politeness. "If Turmy has taken a liking to you, young Miss, then I'm certain we can trust you too."

"Cat good," Lozzie said with a mischievous little smile. She scratched Turmy behind the ears, which earned her a sonorous purr from the old marmalade gentleman. "Good cat. Gooooooood cat, yes good boy good cat, best boy, yes it's you. It's you. It's you!"

"He's always been good with Nat, even when she was a newborn. I

think that's rare, for cats?"

"Rare drop cat," Lozzie whispered to Turmy. "S-rank cat."

Behind the thin curtains dawn was threatening the horizon with a line of dull fire; but this morning was going to be grey and dreary. English summer had forgotten itself, as it so regularly did, leaving us with imitation-autumn in the middle of June. It was as if the grey world of the Shamble-swamp had followed us back. Electric lights and hot tea held it at bay for now, but soon there would be rain drumming on the roof. I could taste it in the air.

Small footsteps bumped and pattered above our heads, joined by the occasional fluttery trill of Tenny's voice. We'd barely been sat down long enough to take a single sip of tea, but Stephen couldn't keep his eyes from flicking to the ceiling again and again. He looked desperate to stand up and dart to the door, unwilling to leave his daughter alone. Isabella was equally antsy, but she hid it better, behind a polite, calm smile and the tension in her shoulders and neck.

Stephen finally muttered a complaint. "Don't you think we should at least be nearby?"

I drew in a deep breath, sat up straight, and tried to stop fiddling with the stone coin in my hoodie's front pocket. My thoughts were consumed by the small stone disc, but my role was not over yet. I had to stick to the script.

"Natalie is untouchable right now," I said. I tried to sound like Evelyn, like the confident, grizzled, terrifying mage, but without her barbed tongue. "Sevens — that's the woman in the yellow skirt — she wasn't lying when she called herself a 'god'. Technically, anyway. She is very powerful, in her own way. She is the best bodyguard your daughter could have under these circumstances."

Stephen finally unstuck his eyes from the ceiling, but he looked doubtful.

Isabella's smile tightened. "And what about when you leave?" she asked. "Will Natalie be safe, then? Will we be safe? Or are you leaving us to our own devices?"

"Natty's not important," Lozzie chirped with a smile.

Stephen visibly bristled. "Excuse me?"

I winced. The conversation was already getting away from the script in my head, slipping through my fingers. There was supposed to be an order to all this. I'd worked it out, planned what to say, but we were already spiralling off.

"What Lozzie means," I said, "is that none of you actually matter to the man who did this — Edward Lilburne, the wizard who kidnapped Natalie. There's no reason for him to come after Natalie again. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's all. There was nothing particularly special about her, she's not connected to anybody who matters, not responsible for anything. There's no reason for him to kidnap her or attack her, or anything like that, not least because it would draw an awful lot of attention from the police. He doesn't want that, any more than I would."

Stephen wrapped one hand around his mug of tea and leaned forward over the table, shoulders squared, frowning, unsatisfied.

Since we'd gotten back, he'd changed out of his sweat-stained shirt, washed the caked sweat off his face, eaten some kind of energy bar, and downed about two whole pints of water and a bottle of some kind of fancy cold brew coffee. The transformation was striking, from a shivering, screaming ape on the edge of the impossible, to a concerned middle-class father at a school parent's evening. I'd broken him Outside, forced him to accept reality, but he was putting himself back together with the new information included.

I was no longer a terrifying and inexplicable monster to him, I was merely the closest thing he had to an authority. And he wished to file a complaint.

"What about that coin you found on the dead man?" he demanded. "You said that meant he was involved. How do you know Natalie isn't involved? How can you be sure there's not some other reason for all this?"

I must have given him an exasperated look worthy of Evelyn, because Stephen frowned harder. Lozzie giggle-snorted. Isabella sighed softly and murmured her husband's name with gentle irritation.

"It's a reasonable bloody question," Stephen said, glancing at his wife.

"She's ten," I deadpanned.

“So?”

I resisted the urge to throttle him with a tentacle. “... so, unless she’s been sneaking out at night to join a cult — and I think we can rule that out — then I don’t think it’s possible for her to be involved.”

Stephen shook his head. “Look, with all due respect, I still don’t entirely follow. How can you be sure that—”

I pulled the coin of greenish soapstone out of my hoodie’s front and slapped it down on the table with a loud clack of stone on wood.

Then I hiccuped — the noise was half-inhuman, twisted by irritation and the shape of my throat. I hadn’t expected that.

Stephen flinched. Isabella blinked. Lizzie made a little murring sound of discomfort. Zheng stayed silent, because she probably approved.

I’d lost my temper. It was stupid, unnecessary, and unbecoming of the figure I was supposed to be to these people — authority and knowledge, reassurance in the face of the supernatural truth, a source of safety in the new reality I’d forced them to accept. I would have winced in apology if I wasn’t so exhausted, if they hadn’t already dragged me off-script, and if my mind wasn’t whirling with dark possibilities regarding this inexplicable coin.

“This coin,” I said, then cleared my throat and started over, softer, gentler, though a tickle in my throat made me sound raw. “This coin means that man was probably involved with the supernatural in some fashion. The only way he would find such a thing is by either being a mage, or being involved with a mage, or maybe journeying Outside. Maybe he picked it up there, right where he died. I don’t know. I do not know. Natalie is ten. The only way she could possibly have been involved prior to being kidnapped is through a family member. If, for example, Edward Lilburne was trying to punish or put pressure on her parents.”

My tone turned icy cold. I’d wanted to leave this part unsaid, but I couldn’t stop myself. They didn’t need to know what I’d been preparing to do, if I’d confirmed my worst fears about them, but now they’d asked.

Stephen’s frown darkened, from polite confusion to a hostile scowl. “Hey. Hey, we don’t—”

Zheng growled, low in her chest, a sound that filled the room and vibrated in one's guts. "Watch your tone, monkey."

Stephen balked, going pale and breaking out in cold sweat, staring at Zheng and raising both hands.

"Zheng," I said, "don't, please."

Stephen raised a weak protest. "There's— we're not— there's no—"

Isabella spoke clearly, though she was suddenly sweating as well. "We're not involved with anything. We're not. We never knew about any of this until you. Please, miss ... " She struggled for a moment, then wet her lips and took a deep breath. "Your—"

"It's alright," I said quickly, horrified by the prospect of her calling me *Your Majesty* or *Your Highness*. After all, I owned a castle full of knights, who could blame her? "I don't suspect you of anything, but it's important you understand. Do you know why we checked all the rooms in your house just now?"

Stephen swallowed hard. "In case we were lying to you this whole time."

I nodded. "The only way Natalie could have prior involvement with the supernatural is via a member of her family. When I found that coin, suddenly I had to decide if one or both of you had been acting for the last couple of hours."

The Skeates looked like they were being marched to the gallows. I sighed heavily. I hadn't wanted to scare them all over again.

"Well," Stephen said, with a level tone that took more courage than it sounded. "We weren't lying."

"I know you weren't acting," I said. "It's probably impossible to fake what I just put you through. And we found no sign of anything in your house, no hidden sigils or wards or magic circles. You're in the clear, I believe you. But I had to be sure."

The way they both looked at me made me feel like the worst kind of filth. Like peasants who'd been gifted a reprieve by their lord, sinners absolved by the grace of a god, like a shadow had passed over their souls and left them untouched, but might return again if they said the wrong words. I suddenly wanted to curl up in a ball and put my head in Lizzie's lap.

“What would you have done?” Isabella asked quietly. “If you’d found anything?”

I stared back at her for a moment. My eyes ached. “Do you really want to know?”

Zheng rumbled the answer for me. “The shaman would have killed you both.”

I winced and closed my eyes. Lozzie made a soft whining noise and concentrated hard on petting Turmy. Purring filled the air.

“I would have had to figure out if the ‘kidnapping’ was actually you offering her up willingly,” I said. “And if it was, then I would have killed you both, yes.” I smiled one of the most awkward smiles of my entire life. Those were not words you followed with a smile. “But ... but that’s not the case. We’re okay. You’re okay. Everything is fine. Natalie was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That’s all. It’s important you understand that.”

“Right,” Stephen said. Poor man was sweating bullets. All he’d done was ask a reasonable question and here I was admitting I’d been planning to kill him. Lozzie had curled up tighter in her chair too; she didn’t like talk about killing and violence, unless it was about her own family.

Isabella smiled back as best she could, maintaining eye contact with me. I didn’t like what that meant.

“More specifically,” I went on, trying to reassure them, “Edward Lilburne was feeding stray pets to a sort of monster. I think he happened to be passing by when Turmy got out of your back door. Natalie followed the cat and scooped him up, but Edward was already in the process of sending the cat Outside. Wrong place, wrong time, like I keep saying.”

“Turmy got lucky,” Lozzie said, nodding seriously. “Nat saved him.” She looked down at the cat and went all baby-voice. “Lucky-lucky cat, do you know that, Turmster? Do you know? You dooooo?”

“*Murrrt*,” went Turmy.

Stephen was still frowning at me, but now with a kind of distant, echoed horror behind his eyes. When he reached for his mug of tea, his hand shook slightly. Not for the first time, I worried about the long-term effects of what I’d done to these two. I needed to be

reassuring them, not threatening them. Why was this coming so easily to me?

Because you're still treating them like your own parents, said that bitter voice in my chest. Because you want to punish them.

I took a deep breath and rejected that entire concept. I had to be better.

"I'm sorry about all this," I said, going even further off-script myself. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this. You seem like decent people, you shouldn't have to, it's not fair, it's never fair when this happens, when mages and magic and bull— *bullshit* gets—"

"Why did you have to do that to us?" Stephen asked softly, his voice breaking. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I mean taking us Outside. Showing us like that."

He may not have known it, but Stephen had just thrown me a life-line; I was determined to loop it around him and his wife and haul them to shore.

"Because you had to be broken," I said. "And I'm sorry I had to do that, but it was the only way. You had to be exposed directly if you were ever going to believe a word of this."

"Gotta see for yourself!" Lozzie chimed in. "You don't believe, otherwise!"

"Couldn't you have just ... told us?"

I shook my head. "That's not how reality works. At least to the best of our knowledge." I drew myself up and tried to think of myself as Evelyn again, tried to adopt the tone she'd used back when she'd first explained this all to me. "The human mind naturally rejects the supernatural, the products of Outside introduced to our reality. Our minds filter things out and come up with alternative explanations, unless we're pushed past the point where exposure breaks us, so we can put ourselves back together with the new information properly reincorporated."

I sighed inside. My improvisation was terrible compared with Evelyn's metaphor of the castle, but it was close enough for now.

"But," Stephen insisted. "You could have shown us something, tried something first, anything."

“When you felt the invisible force of my tentacles, did you believe right away? Or were you trying to explain it somehow, inside your own head?”

Stephen frowned harder, thinking carefully. But Isabella blinked in surprise.

“I was thinking of magnets,” she said.

Lozzie hid a giggle behind one hand.

“Magnets?” I echoed.

“My goodness,” Isabella went on, almost awestruck. “My Lady, you’re correct. When you grabbed me — I’m sorry, when you restrained me, on the sofa, I thought you were somehow using magnets. Steve, she’s right. My mind did exactly what she just described.”

“Yeah ... ” Stephen said, staring at me with fresh horror. “Yeah, Izzy, yeah, you’re right. And out in the swamp, I was sure it was all a projection. Like in a white room or something. Shit.”

I cleared my throat and failed to contain my irritated tone.

“Isabella, why did you just call me ‘my Lady’?”

Isabella blinked those big brown eyes at me, innocently wary.

“Sevens,” she said. “When we were waiting, I asked her how to address you. She said that would be proper. Should I be more ... ?” She glanced at Zheng, but got no reply. She was trying to be respectful. A difficult needle to thread.

I failed to contain an exasperated sigh. At least Sevens had the good sense not to give them my family name, but that was scant comfort.

Lozzie snorted a laugh. “Heathy is Heathy!”

“It’s not funny,” I snapped at her.

“The shaman is the shaman,” Zheng said.

Isabella looked uncomfortable. “But—”

“Heather,” I snapped my own name. “That’s what you call me. Heather.”

Isabella bobbed her head in deference, with more than a touch of fear. Made me feel sick at myself. “Heather,” she repeated. “I’m

sorry.”

I took a moment to gather myself before speaking again. Had I always been this cruel?

“The reason I had to break you,” I said. “Natalie’s mind was already reconditioned by spending a night alone in that swamp. We call it being ‘in the know’. She didn’t have a choice in the matter. And that means in the future she might see supernatural things for what they are. It’s not likely she’ll run into anything, it’s actually quite rare, but it’s possible. Without her parents similarly reconditioned, she would have nobody to turn to.”

Stephen gestured at me. Isabella cleared her throat as if to tell him off for the gesture.

“What about you?” he asked. “Can she turn to you?”

“Always,” I said on reflex. “But wouldn’t you want to know why your daughter is friends with a woman twice her age? And now you do.”

“Ah. Well.” Stephen cleared his throat. “When you put it like that.”

I nodded. “We’ll leave it a few weeks, maybe a month or two, just because of the police and the news media, but I would like to maintain some kind of contact with Natalie, yes. Even if just to let her know that we’re here for her if she needs it.” I smiled and tried to look warm again. “Plus, she has taken a liking to Tenny. Tenny doesn’t have any friends her own age. This might be good for her, too. Well. I understand if you’re wary about that.”

“Tenny is a good girl,” said Lizzie, in a sort of sad voice. “Good baby.”

I pulled my smile tighter. I was leaving out one essential detail, of course: in a few months’ time, I might be dead. We might all be dead, just a collection of bones covered in black ash in Wonderland. I tried not to think about that. But Natalie and her parents had to be prepared, even without anybody left to guide them.

“I’m sorry, but you still haven’t really answered my question,” said Isabella. “What happens when you leave?”

Perhaps she saw right through me. Or perhaps she was just asking a sensible question. It wouldn’t be a good use of time to cry on these shoulders, though.

“When Edward sees the news that Natalie turned up home safe and sound, he’ll know it was us who got her back. She’s under our protection — my protection. We’ll make this explicit when we next communicate with him. We’ve sent letters and stuff through a lawyer, we have a line of communication. Natalie is off limits.”

“Or else what?” Stephen asked. Then he did a little sigh and a grumble. “You already said you’re planning to kill this man. What leverage have you got?”

I stared back at him for a heartbeat, then dropped the act, the serious act, the I-know-what-I’m-doing act.

“Letting him live,” I said.

Lozzie hissed through her teeth. She didn’t like that idea at all. Zheng rumbled in disgust.

“All right,” I sighed. “*Pretending* that we’ll let him live. More importantly, we can set up your house — and Natalie herself — with magical protection, the kind of tripwire that he won’t dare risk coming into contact with. We’ve done it once before, for somebody else.”

Stephen and Isabella shared a look. This didn’t seem to be reassuring them.

“I’m sorry,” I said, then hiccuped. “I’m not very good at doing this. I know I’m not very reassuring, but it’s the best I can think of. The best I can muster. I’m sorry I can’t do more. Once he’s dead, you’ll have no more worries about this.”

Stephen cleared his throat gently. “Why does she matter to you? Why do you care?”

“I already told you that. I went through something similar. I won’t let it happen to another child.” Beneath the table, Lozzie’s small, warm hand wormed into mine. She squeezed hard. I kept talking. “I don’t want your girl to turn out like me, misdiagnosed with schizophrenia, gaslit by the entire world. My parents denied what happened to me; it’s not their fault, but the damage it did was ... is ... ”

I stared across that bare wooden table and tried very hard not to see my own parents sitting on the other side.

How absurd. Isabella was practically my mother’s polar opposite,

willowy and elfin and graceful, soft spoken and poised and careful. Stephen had all the underlying assertive nature my own father lacked, not to mention he didn't have a beard. Also they were a lot younger, closer to my age than to my parents.

Yet for a moment my words stuck in my throat. In my head I was back in Cygnet children's hospital, protesting to mummy that I was seeing monsters, crying out because nobody would stop lying to me, nobody would stop saying that Maisie wasn't real.

People needed to stop treating me like a leader, or a messiah, or a god, because no matter how much I denied it, no matter how many layers of safety I wrapped around my core, how many understanding friends I made, how much I wrought my truth with the flesh of my own body, part of me would always be that scared little girl for whom reality had stopped making sense. Natalie's plight had thrust it all to the forefront of my mind. All my casual aggression and calculated cruelty, was it all just to avoid this frank conversation with avatars from my own past? Surrogate parents were asking me why I cared about my surrogate self, and the answers I had were no different to when I was nine years old: because the world had stopped making sense.

I grabbed the stone coin off the table with a sweating, shaking hand. A terrifying mystery, but better than talking to mum and dad about the truth. I stared at it, opened my mouth to say something stupid, like "It's time we left, then, we're done here, goodbye."

Zheng came to my rescue with a dark purr from the deeper shadows.

"The shaman sees further than you monkeys. She sees truth. Your pup will not."

Both Skeates stared at Zheng in the manner one looks toward a bear appearing around a copse of trees.

She was right though. Natalie would not suffer like me. That brought me back, too. I blinked and took a deep breath and hit the ground running, speaking too fast, uncaring that it probably made minimal sense to Isabella and Stephen.

"Yes, Natalie won't have to deal with even a fraction of what I do. She can't see spirits, she won't have the nightmares. But she's still been exposed to the supernatural, and I don't want another child to

go through what I did, that's why I care, that's what matters. So I'll do my best to protect her. That's why I care. You understand? Is that enough? Can we move onto practical matters now? The sun is rising, and you two need to have your story ready for the police."

Stephen raised one hand. "Wait, wait. All this talk about protection. What about the police?"

Lozzie perked up. Turmy did too, he must have felt it through her lap. Lozzie tilted her head to one side and waited.

A cold hand reached into my gut as I realised: the Skeates believed, but they didn't understand.

I hadn't prepared for this. It wasn't in my script.

"What about them?" I echoed, buying time.

"They'll never help you," Lozzie whispered.

"Well ... " Stephen looked between the pair of us. "Isn't there ... any kind of ... "

"Can they really do nothing?" Isabella asked.

I almost wanted to put my squid-skull mask back on. Hide behind the inhuman face that was closer to the real me. Instead, inside my mind, I spoke with Eeve's voice. My words came out with surprising clarity.

"There is no ministry for magic," I said. "No men in black, no secret Q-division in a government office somewhere. There's no council of mages, or local werewolf clan, or a nightclub full of vampires. There's nothing. There's no supernatural government or institutions or laws. There's just madmen, monsters, and mages — and very, very rarely, there's people like me and my friends. And we're monsters too, yes, but we're not *monstrous*. Don't investigate the supernatural, don't start buying occult books, don't go to the newspapers or paranormal websites or anything like that, because all you'll do is risk unwanted attention. Do you understand?"

Stephen stared at me in wordless shock, mouth hanging open. "I ... I assumed ... well, I don't know what I assumed, but ... that's ... "

"We're on our own," Isabella said.

"Not completely," I corrected her gently. "It's basically warlordism, yes. But we're the local power bloc, and we don't let mages kill

children.”

Stephen started laughing, dark and a little overwhelmed. “So, which is it? Adopted daughter of an alien god — don’t think I forgot that one — or queen of Camelot, or warlord — warlady? — of Manchester?”

“We’re not actually based in Manchester,” I said with a sigh, taking extra care with my words — I was pretty certain the Skeates were not going to approach the police, but I still didn’t want to tell them we were from Sharrowford. “But for these purposes, our jurisdiction extends here, yes.”

Zheng chuckled from the shadows in the corner, a low rumble between sharp teeth. “Warlord, shaman?”

I froze, blushing, realising I’d basically just agreed to that without a second thought. “I mean, I ... I’m ... we ... ” I let out a sharp huff at Stephen, then grabbed my mug of tea in a tentacle and took a deep drink of the lukewarm brew, before clacking it down in open irritation. Turmy peered over the lip of the table at that. A hiccup further undermined my unasked-for authority. “Fine. Yes, I’m all of those things and more. Is that what you want? You want a local ruler to worship? All right, you’ve got it. But not just me alone — I’m not a warlord. *Warlady*, really.” I tutted and shook my head, knowing that Raine would have loved that word. I was glad she wasn’t present to hear it. “Though you’re not going to meet the rest of us, for safety.”

Zheng purred curiously. “It would be a good title, shaman. Warlady. Mm.”

I could tell she was teasing me. Something about the amused hitch in her voice. I steadfastly ignored Zheng’s suggestion and focused on Natalie’s parents. “Now, if you are quite done, we need to discuss practical matters, preferably before any of your family contacts you, or a police officer knocks on your door. Now.”

But both Stephen and Isabella were having a very hard time looking away from the mug I’d just drunk from. I rolled my eyes, out of patience.

“No, I don’t possess powers of telekinesis,” I said. “I was lifting it with a tentacle. You saw them already!”

Isabella smiled and nodded, polite but on the edge of losing

something important. Stephen cleared his throat with obvious concern, then said, carefully, “May I ask why we could see them when we were ... ‘Outside’, but not here?”

“My tentacles are made from a special type of matter. Generally you have to be non-human, or extra-human, in order to see them, or anything else made from that matter. All three of us here—” I indicated myself, Lozzie, and Zheng with a sideways nod “—can see them clearly. You can’t. We have some special glasses which can allow for a human to see, but giving you a pair might be a bad idea for your mental health. Try not to think about that, please.”

Stephen shared an unreadable look with his wife, then a covert, polite glance at Lozzie. But nobody could sneak around the master sneaker; Lozzie flashed back a big smile and a broad wink, giggling in her seat as she petted Turmy. Isabella and Stephen may have finally managed to make sense of me, and Zheng was visibly not a human being, but Lozzie looked like an ordinary girl, at least on the surface. They didn’t seem to know how to process that.

I watched them both very carefully; these two were only freshly broken in, their minds still adapting to this new reality. Lozzie looked ordinary, yet she was not. I needed them to accept this, for their daughter’s sake, but I suspected it was possible to push them too far.

“Natalie will not turn out like us,” I said out loud. “She’s a human being, and will remain so. She can’t see my tentacles either.”

Stephen sighed with unconcealed relief, then had the good grace to wince with apology. Isabella managed to remain neutral, trying not to anger the god-queen-warlord-squid across the table from her.

We are what we pretend to be, I thought. *So what am I being right now?*

“Practical matters,” I said, somewhat sharper than I intended.

“Practically problems!” Lozzie chirped.

“Listen to the shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “Closely.”

Stephen nodded and pulled himself up in his chair, nodding seriously. “Right, of course. What do you want us to tell the police?”

Isabella spoke up before I could stick to the script. “We tell them

she came home, of course. She wandered off. She had an adventure.”

I nodded along. “As far as the rest of the world is concerned, your daughter spent the last twenty-four hours on the adventure of a lifetime for a ten year old, wandering around Manchester with her cat. Lozzie’s already coached her, and we’ll do some more before we leave, because the police will undoubtedly want to hear it from Natalie herself. She knocked on the back door in the middle of the night and woke you up, and you found her there. That’s all.”

“With the cat,” Lozzie added. In her lap, Turmy opened sleepy, bleary eyes again and added a soft-throated ‘mmmmrrrr’ to the proceedings.

“With Turmy,” I added. “That’s the important part. The newspapers will love that. A feel-good story about a girl and her cat, a silly puff-piece that people won’t really read. They’ll move on within a day or two. With any luck it won’t even hit the BBC as anything other than a ten-second piece.”

I was echoing Raine’s words, but I only half-believed them myself. It would take some serious effort for the police to accept this without question, at least privately. In public they would express relief and close the case. But one or two canny detectives might start to ask questions behind closed doors. We’d have to wait that out.

Stephen nodded, but I could see that Isabella was harbouring some similar doubts to myself. I caught her eyes and nodded gently, letting her know that I understood. We were taking a gamble here.

“Secondly,” I went on, “is the issue of Natalie’s health.”

That certainly took their attention away from the issue of what to tell the police. Stephen froze, but Isabella didn’t waste a beat.

“The mud,” she said, mouth hanging open. “Oh my God. In that swamp, the mud. It was filthy.”

“The mud, yes,” I said.

“It’s safe!” Lozzie chirped. “She’s cleeeeeean, there’s no infections or nasties or anything like that. I triple-checked! Turmy too!” She petted Turmy on the head when the cat looked up at the sound of his own name.

“Lozzie knows what she’s doing when it comes to bodies and medical issues,” I said. “And I trust her judgement about this. But ...”

“She’s clean!” Lozzie chirped at me with mounting irritation. “Heathy!”

“We can’t be one hundred percent certain.”

“Mmmm!” Lozzie grumbled. She curled up and gave Turmy a hug.

“The same goes for Turmy.” I addressed Natalie’s parents again. They did not look reassured by this exchange. “We can’t be one hundred percent certain that neither of them ingested anything from the swamp, or that they’re completely free of infection. You need to watch both of them very, very carefully over the next few days and weeks.”

“But ... ” Stephen swallowed. “But a doctor isn’t going to ... ?”

“Exactly. If Natalie gets some Outsider illness or infection, don’t take her to a doctor or the hospital. Contact us. We have other ways of solving that kind of problem, if it happens. It probably won’t. But if it does.”

Isabella frowned delicately and spoke with exacting precision. “You seem uncomfortable, Heather.” She said my name with obvious reluctance. Probably wanted to call me, ‘your grace’.

My turn to freeze with self-conscious fear. I stared at my mug. “Um. Well. It’s complicated.”

“I understand that we can’t possibly comprehend everything about your world. I accept that, on your word. But you need to share everything about my daughter’s health. Everything.”

When I glanced back up, that burning dedication had returned to Isabella’s eyes, the same look I’d seen on her when I’d arrived in her sitting room and pinned her to the sofa, the look which said she would do anything for her child. She would reach across this table and slap a god if she had to. And she did think I was some kind of god.

Zheng purred from the dark, “The shaman speaks of sharing flesh with flesh.”

I sighed and allowed my shoulders to slump. “Zheng, please don’t.”

"I am touched by the shaman's blessing. It kept my blood free of vermin, twice. She would do the same for your pup, if only asked."

I wanted to get out of my chair and throttle Zheng. One of my tentacles pointed toward her in silent threat, but she stared it down. The Skeates looked even more confused than before. Lozzie grabbed another one of my tentacles, wound it about her arm, then hugged it to her chest, as if to comfort me — or restrain me.

"All right, fine," I said. "My body produces certain unique ... well, anti-bodies, I suppose. I've shared them with people before and it's helped fight off supernatural or extra-dimensional infections. If Natalie was to develop some kind of problem, then it might be worth the risk."

"What risk?" Isabella demanded.

"I have no idea," I deadpanned, out of patience. "This isn't a tested medical procedure. I'm not talking about something clean and modern here, I'm talking about probably feeding her a spoon-full of my blood."

Isabella's mouth made a little O-shape of unspoken shock. Stephen put one hand to his own mouth.

"I have no idea what it's done to other people in the long run," I went on, thinking of Raine, who had shared my blood by proxy, from Zheng. "But it would be better than the alternative, but only if Natalie gets sick."

"Like communion," Stephen murmured in awe.

The look in his eyes made my stomach turn over and my blood curdle.

"It's not communion!" I snapped suddenly, surprising even myself. Stephen flinched hard. But Isabella stared at me with that look I hated more than all others — growing religious adoration. Her husband's feeling had been sharp and quick, but hers had deeper roots that I could not seem to dislodge. Perhaps she'd been waiting all her life for a god to step into it. "It's not communion," I repeated. "I'm not literally a god. My blood doesn't have magical properties. Well, okay, I suppose it does. But I'm not a god, stop looking at me like that."

Stephen shook his head. "You said you're the daughter of an alien

god. What does that mean?"

"Adopted daughter."

"And that's why you have tentacles? And ... and all the rest of it? The teleporting thing?"

I glared at him, but that had the opposite of my intended effect. The poor man began to bow his head. "Stop that!" I snapped. "No. Well, yes. Sort of. I'm not ... I'm not a god, that's all. Or a messiah. I'm just a young woman in a very difficult situation. I realise that you're thankful I saved your daughter, but stop thinking of me like that."

This was so much worse than with the Brinkwood Cult, the Hoptons, Twil's family. At least they were already worshipping an Outsider; sliding me into their rather thin pantheon had felt offensive and horrifying, but at least it made some kind of sense. But this? This was all my fault, this was because I'd presented myself as the Eye's daughter in order to overawe them, to break their minds. And then I'd revealed myself as human, or at least looking like a human, and I thought that had settled the matter.

But here they were, clinging to driftwood pieces of their new cosmology whenever I gave them an opening.

Was this why cults happened? Was this why Outsiders could seem like gods? Because people needed an explanation to cling to, once they were in the know. And Natalie's parents were using me as the new guidepost to their world. I had saved their child, delivered them from evil, and now they couldn't help themselves.

Stephen nodded along politely, looking suitably ashamed. But the look in his wife's eyes told me she would not accept my own denial. She'd believed it on the shores of the great swamp, in her moment of need, and she believed it now, with her child returned, salvation delivered, and the offer of a blood-bond with the messenger from beyond. She was ready to argue with the divine about the status of its own divinity.

But then she lowered her eyes to her own folded hands. "I have half a mind to ask you to do it right now. For Nat's sake."

"Bloody hell, Izzy," said Stephen. "No, not unless we need to. Come on now."

"This is what magic is like, this is what the supernatural is like," I

said. "There's no waving wands and chanting some magic words to make something go back to the way it was before. If Natalie sickens as a result of her exposure, then sharing my anti-bodies with her may be a sensible choice. But that choice isn't mine to make, so I didn't."

A very awkward few moments of silence fell over the cramped dining room. Isabella sat staring down at her own clasped hands. I hoped she wasn't praying, at least not to me. Stephen drained the rest of his tea and nodded a thanks across the table, not just to me, either, but to Lizzie and Zheng too. That was a better sign. Lizzie picked Turmy up out of her lap and placed him on the table, which prompted him to go over to Isabella and nuzzle her hands, which finally snapped her out of her own thoughts. She idly petted the cat, smiling with distant relief.

"Zheng," I said, "do you have the piece of paper?"

Zheng grunted an affirmative. She detached herself from the shadows like a great pillar in motion, strode to the table, and produced a piece of folded paper from inside her trench coat. She slid it across the tabletop, toward Natalie's parents.

"There's an email address written there," I said as Isabella picked up the piece of paper and unfolded it. "We'll be in contact with you soon enough, as I said, but if anything happens to Natalie, if she gets unwell with seemingly no cause, send an email to that address and we'll know."

"And you'll appear in the middle of our living room?" Stephen asked. He was only half-joking.

I shrugged and sighed. "Probably." I pushed my chair back. "It's almost dawn, time for us to get moving. I'd like to say bye to Nat though."

Isabella nodded. "Of course. You've a right to."

What right? I thought, but I kept that doubt to myself. I didn't want to get into a theological debate about myself.

At least the final problem of the morning was a relatively sweet one; Natalie and Tenny did not wish to be parted so soon. On Natalie's end, Tenny was a fascinating new friend with lots of hands, so she could hold eight or ten of Natalie's plush toys and plastic robots all at once, facilitating a very elaborate game of

make-believe. That's what we discovered them doing, upstairs in Natalie's bedroom, with Sevens looking on and quietly providing dramatic prompts.

On Tenny's end, Natalie was the only friend she'd ever made who was close to her own age. This was the first time she'd played with another child. She didn't even look sheepish or embarrassed about playing make-believe with toys. Still a little girl, then, even if she was growing up fast.

"Can Nat visit? Visit for playtime?" Tenny trilled, asking me and Lozzie alternately. She looked quite sad. "Pleaseeeee?"

"In the future," I told her, not wanting to actually lie. "But it'll have to be a while until then. Remember? Things have to be secret."

"Secret thiiiiiiiings," Tenny trilled in irritation, then puffed her cheeks out. So much like her mother.

"Octopus lady knows best!" Natalie assured Tenny, patting her on the head, both hands in the fine white fur that covered Tenny's skull. Tenny had three tentacles attached to Natalie in return, the Tenny version of holding hands and refusing to let go.

Apparently I did know best. Tenny was sad and grumpy, Isabella stood by in great discomfort, and Stephen awkwardly shook Tenny's 'hand' — the end of one of her tentacles — but amongst all this, Natalie was serious and beaming, as if she knew better than her parents. She hugged Tenny goodbye, accepted the returned Turmy, then went back to hug Lozzie. She even hugged Sevens, which Sevens returned with all the grace of a real princess.

I hugged Natalie goodbye too, which almost made me tear up, though I didn't understand why until I pulled back and started talking.

"Don't be afraid of anything, Nat," I told her, doing my best to control my own emotions, for her sake. "You might see things, but you're safe. You're safe because I brought you back, okay?"

"Mmm! Tenny told me too!"

"You remember all the things you need to tell the police?"

Natalie nodded. "I went for a long long walk about Manchester. All the ghosty stuff didn't happen. Secret. But Turmy was there!"

“Secret,” trilled Tenny. She was petting Turmy goodbye for now. The cat rubbed himself against her tentacles in return.

“Smart girl,” said Sevens.

“You’re going to be safe,” I told her. “Nothing’s going to take you away, okay? Your parents both love you very much, and they understand. And so do I, and you can see Tenny again sometime soon. Nothing is going to take you away from home. I promise.”

Little Natalie nodded up at me as I stood back up, with one gentle hand on her head. She trusted me, because I’d saved her, from Outside and from the disbelief of return.

It took an effort of will to remove my hand and let go, because in a very real way I was letting go of my past self.

But Natalie wasn’t me. She was going to fare much better than I ever had. She had her parents on her side, and a guardian to watch over her for now — even if I rejected any notion that I was a guardian ‘angel’. She understood what had happened, she would not grow up confused and lost, and she would never have nightmares of the Eye.

The me who had returned from Wonderland, the scared little girl, the Heather who had sobbed herself to sleep for years because nothing made sense, she would always carry those scars. But I could find better ways to cradle her in my heart. I could acknowledge those wounds and tend them better, and she would have no reason to feel such bitterness.

Natalie would never have to deal with that.

Here, at least, I’d done some good. Even if I died in Wonderland in a couple of months time, this child would not grow up in pain.

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Two soapstone coins sat side by side on the table in Evelyn’s magical workshop. Greenish like copper oxide, smooth as if passed through thousands of hands, their five points now rounded and soft, if they had ever been sharp in the first place. Like a slightly more jagged version of a fifty-pence piece. Veins and layers in the stone seemed to catch the light, as if always on the edge of sparking into something greater, as if about to reveal crystalline depths to their material structure.

They weren't really soapstone, of course. They were from Outside.

I'd been staring at the coins for almost ten minutes while towelling off my wet hair after a morning shower, wondering if I should bother doing anything but going straight back to bed that day, when I was interrupted.

"Have they divulged any secrets, kitten?"

"Ah?" I jumped, but only a little. After all, I knew the voice of the Yellow Princess all too well. Sevens had ghosted into the room while I'd been staring at the coins. Her umbrella was absent, her hands folded in front of her yellow skirt, almost like Praem.

"Sevens," I tutted. "Don't surprise me like that, I might belt you with my tentacles."

She shrugged delicate shoulders beneath a crisp white blouse. "So be it. Belt me if you must."

I scowled at her, suddenly quite serious. "Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, we are engaged. If I ever hit you, turn me over to your father, please." I tutted. "Don't even joke about that."

Sevens tilted her head upward, sharp cold eyes somehow bright even in the artificial glow. With the gloomy day outdoors, the light streaming through the kitchen window and reflecting into the magical workshop was providing only a slow, grey trickle, so I had all the lights on. It did rather demystify the space.

"As you will, kitten," she said.

I tutted and flushed, then pulled the towel off my head and nodded at the coins on the table. "To answer your question, no. I still haven't the foggiest. Eevee has theories, of course, but nothing new. Unless she's found the answers in a dream. Is she awake yet?"

"Haven't the foggiest."

It was two days since we'd returned Natalie to her parents, safe and sound. We'd all spent most of yesterday recovering, sleeping off an exhausting night and waiting to see if our gambles had worked. Yesterday evening we had been rewarded with almost exactly what Raine had predicted.

The evening news had run a very absurd puff-piece about the missing girl who had wandered the back roads of Manchester with her orange tomcat as her only companion. The BBC had a much

more flattering picture of Turmy than the grainy photograph from the newspaper. He was looking almost regal, if a bit battered by age. Natalie herself was kept firmly out of the view of any cameras. Her father, poor old Stephen, was interviewed by somebody outside his own front door, for all of one single-line sound-bite about his brave and adventurous daughter. The brave part was genuine, I could tell by his voice. An official police statement followed, wrapping everything up. Then, last and most certainly least, some talking head from Manchester bemoaned how no member of the public had alerted the police to a small girl wandering around the city unaccompanied.

But Turmy had been with her, so that was okay. A girl and her cat, alone against the world.

The police sirens we half-expected never materialised. We weren't raided on suspicion of kidnapping or worse. And Edward, if he was planning a move, was lying low for now.

However, there was no rest for the wicked. I had a dozen things on my exhausted mind, making me feel numb and stretched thin.

Raine was currently out, picking up Sarika and then driving her to the hospital, where Badger was getting discharged that afternoon. On the far side of the magical workshop, Edward's bizarre contraption of metal and glass sat safely contained inside a precautionary magic circle, waiting for Evelyn's attention. The thing was probably inert — the spider-servitors didn't care about it, and even Marmite hadn't given it a second glance. We were expecting a phone call from Felicity later that day. She'd sent a text message last night asking if we were willing to discuss a plan. We were, provisionally, but I didn't like the idea. Tenny was sulky and grumpy and I was consumed with worry about her long-term well-being; she couldn't go on being cooped up in this house forever, but what options did we have?

And Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had spent every minute since our return in her Yellow Princess form. I hadn't seen a peep out of the blood-goblin mask. As far as I knew, she hadn't even slept.

And now she was here, alone with me. Well, alone except for Marmite, but spiders tell no tales. At least, pneuma-somatic ones don't.

I pretended to focus on drying my hair again as I watched Sevens

watching me back. She watched me watching her. I watched her, watching.

“Sevens?” I said with a sigh. “You know we need to talk, don’t you?”

“I know a great many things.” She sounded both cold and amused at once. “Are you going to visit your new holding today?”

I blinked several times. “My ... my what? I’m sorry?”

“The castle, at Camelot.”

“Oh. Um. No, not right now. There’s too many things to do. Too many things to think about. We need to ask Hringewindla about these coins, for a start, somehow. Probably through Amanda. But you and I do need to talk.”

“That’s a pity. Camelot is a very pretty place, even if it is a bit silly. If we’re going to talk, perhaps we should talk in a place where your rule is without question, no?”

“My ... rule?” I squinted at her. “Oh, Sevens, no. Really?”

“Oh yes.” Sevens’ voice lost most of its amusement. “Isn’t it time to lay down the law on me, for my misbehaviour? I’ve been a very bad girl, my queen.”

pale student of unhallowed arts – 17.15

I've been a very bad girl, my queen.

To any other young woman of my particular orientation, set of predilections, tastes, desires, and curiosities, hearing that specific set of words, spoken in a tone of ice-cold sobriety by one's questionably dominant fiancée, secluded together in a room full of occult mysteries, beneath the brooding skies of a cloud-drenched day, would probably result in a state of pole-axed paralysis, feral trance, or just plain animalistic heat. I might even have enjoyed it too, if such words had been delivered under any other circumstances, by anybody except the same person who had attempted to goad me into false godhood and-slash-or messianic cult leader status.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, masked with the face of the Yellow Princess, the rightful daughter of the King in Yellow, stared back at me across the otherwise deserted magical workshop.

I was struck speechless for a long moment, half in disbelief, half with distaste.

Between her ramrod-straight posture, her wide unsmiling turquoise eyes, her perfectly straight-cut blonde hair, her crisp white blouse, and ankle-length yellow skirt, the Princess Mask was often too much for me to handle, even when she wasn't trying to overawe me. She held herself forever poised on the knife edge of aristocratic arrogance. It would take only one errant twist in the direction of her gaze, one haughty tilt of her chin, one dismissive flick of her fingertips, for her to radiate a sunburst of disdain and superiority. But she chose not to, and instead remained positioned in the liminal space of effortless potential. It was somehow more unnerving. And certainly more attractive.

But not right now, not with those specific words.

I tried to laugh it off, but I managed only a single, hollow chuckle. "Sevens, if you're trying to flirt, then that's in very poor taste.

Maybe if you said that while wearing your vampire mask ... ”

I trailed off, finding no handhold on her unreadable and icy regard.

Seven-Shades-of-Seditious-Supplicant tilted her head to the side by a few degrees. “Do you really believe I’m flirting, Your Grace?”

“Tch!” I tutted reflexively, scowling at her. “Sevens, don’t call me that.”

“My apologies. What style would my Ladyship prefer?”

“Style?” I was so flustered and taken aback as she galloped ahead of me, I walked right into the trap. “Ladyship?”

“Of address. It’s only proper, isn’t it? I am foreign royalty still, until we are properly wed, and then I may take all the liberties of personal intimacy. Will you copy the forebears of your homeland? Will you adopt ‘Your Majesty’ and ‘Your Royal Highness’?”

I still had the damp towel in my hands from drying my hair; I almost threw it at her in embarrassed outrage. “Sevens, stop! It’s not funny!”

“Of course not, no. You are not queen of England, that would be immensely confusing. We should create a proper title for you. *Regina Externus*?” She rolled the words around her mouth like a draught of exotic wine, eyes going up and to the side, followed by a dainty shake of her head. As if I wasn’t standing there going red in the face, watching this nonsense. “No, that sounds like an obscure disease of the lower parts. How about *Domina Polypus*? That would include all your other, non-queenly roles in one title, for all your realms and responsibilities. Simplicity is a sound advantage in rulership.”

I spat a laugh of offended disbelief; it was that or stare in speechless shock. “You’re being serious, aren’t you? Sometimes I forget you’re technically an aristocrat. What is this? Where is this coming from all of a sudden?”

“Why, from me, Your Grace.”

A hint of mockery in her tone set me off, like frozen acid. I couldn’t tell how much of this was a joke, or at who’s expense. I was already mortified by how close I’d come to giving in, back in the Shamble-swamp, to that unspeakable impulse to present myself as a false god.

“Stop calling me that!” I snapped. I didn’t know what to do with the damp towel in my hands, standing there with my hair all messy and my skin flushed from the shower, so I twisted the towel in my fists, feeling impotent. “I’m not a queen, or a messiah. I am not going to set myself up as the leader of a cult, and certainly not play some kind of god gambit on a pair of terrified people and a race of Outsider swamp creatures!”

Sevens didn’t even blink. As if she’d expected my every word. “I sense my Lady of the Squidly Crown is somewhat vexed.”

I rolled my eyes at that one. Who wouldn’t? “Now you’re just taking the mickey. Thanks for that. And yes, for your information, I am quite angry about what you tried to do. What you tried to encourage me to do, back in that swamp. Is this about that? This is your second attempt? Trying to bully me into doing something I shouldn’t?”

To my great surprise, Sevens raised a single eyebrow in a sceptical arch. “Angry?”

“Yes! Of course I’m angry! I—”

My impending rant was interrupted by the patter of footsteps through the ceiling overhead.

Somebody was up on their feet and moving around upstairs, probably Tenny or Evelyn. The tread was too heavy for Lozzie and too imprecise for Praem. But I was suddenly hyper-aware of being overheard, deeply uncomfortable with the notion of anybody else stumbling across this growing argument, especially Evelyn or Lozzie. Even Zheng would be barely tolerable, though I didn’t know where she was right that moment. Probably either sleeping or out hunting. More importantly, I didn’t understand exactly why I was so uncomfortable. What did I have to hide? But still, I cut off my snapping anger and swallowed hard, eyes glued to the ceiling, tentacles curling tight as if to protect my core from an unseen attack.

Seven-Shades-of-Sarcastic-Vassalage cleared her throat in a perfect little ahem-ahem sound. “Perhaps we should retire to a location where Your Grace can vent her mind without fear of interruption? The new castle, perhaps?”

I rolled my eyes and hissed. “Please stop talking about me in the

third person, Sevens. You've made your point."

"I don't believe I have, actually."

Her tone was still ice-cold. I felt myself shiver, my tentacles curling tighter, sweat breaking out down my back. And I'd just showered, too. Sevens loved me dearly, she had put her very nature on the line for me, had thrown herself into my defence during the incident with Hringewindla, and had literally gifted me with a piece of her self-hood. But here she was, staring me down, not flirting at all, but expressing a combination of distaste and concern.

I sighed. "Sevens, if you're trying to make a point, then just make it. There's no need for this ... this game-playing."

"Do you not wish to express your irritation, my Lady?"

I couldn't help but give her a very unimpressed look. "Just say what you mean. Please."

"Then I rest my case," said Seven-Shades-of-Smug-Little-Brat. "Shall we retire to Camelot for a few moments, so we may speak frankly?"

I slapped the damp towel over my shoulder and raked my fingertips through my wet hair, trying to look casual but probably just coming off as deeply artificial. "No, thank you. I've had quite enough of Slipping for a bit. Two days ago I slipped eight times. Nine times? I can't even count. I still feel slightly abstracted, loose inside my own body, like I'm going to wander off in an astral journey if I'm not careful. So, no, thank you."

That was a lie. It was true that all those Slips had left me feeling drained and weird, like I'd run a marathon on the phantom limbs of my own soul, muscles sore and strained in places that I didn't have muscles. But the feeling had faded by the end of yesterday, my bioreactor doing its job in keeping me topped up. I still had limits, undoubtedly, and I was afraid to approach them lest something go horribly wrong, but I was currently more than capable of Slipping with relative ease. I just didn't want to, though I didn't know why. Because Sevens was being irritating? Because I was afraid of what she might say, Outside and unfettered? Because I was afraid of what I might say? Like a coward, I shrank from the true confrontation which was brewing here.

Sevens waited a beat, for me to say more, as if she knew I was making it all up.

I turned away and started using a corner of the towel to dry the back of my neck, unable to meet Sevens' eyes. "Besides," I said, trying to sound casual; I was fooling nobody, I sounded like a twelve year old attempting to hide a tantrum. "Don't you have your own method of Slipping? Couldn't you offer to make it easier on me, for once?"

"When you take a step, it does not force others to walk with you. They must take a step themselves. You forget what I am, kitten."

I looked round at Sevens, half shocked, half relieved to be called something that wasn't a royal title. She was deadly serious, or at least unreadable enough that I couldn't see through the mask. But she'd dropped the nonsense, at last.

"I ... I'm sorry, Sevens." I sighed, mostly at myself. "Do you really want to go talk in Camelot? Right now? I'm willing to try, if it's that important. Especially if it's about what you said in the swamp. We do need to talk about that. Do you want to go?"

Seven-Shades-of-Plots-and-Plans tilted her head the other way. "Do you?"

I huffed softly, then stomped over to the door of the workshop and leaned out into the kitchen. I angled my voice toward the front room and the stairs beyond, then called out, "Sevens and I are going to Camelot for a few minutes!"

A reply floated down the stairs a few moments later, in Praem's bell-like voice.

"Take shoes," she intoned.

I blushed in embarrassment. Yes, of course, it wouldn't do to forget shoes a second time in three days, even if I was planning firmly against getting whisked off into another Outside escapade for hours on end, shoeless and stranded and carrying nothing but a damp bath towel. I stomped into the front room, muttering things like, "This is going to be a quick trip, it is," and, "Sevens, you best not be planning any nonsense, or I am going to be very upset indeed."

After stamping into my shoes, I spotted Praem at the top of the stairs. She was looking down at me, hands folded before her.

"We won't be long," I said, and made it sound like an apology. I took the damp towel off my shoulder and moved to drape it over

the bannister. "And I'll put that away when we're back, sorry. Let Lozzie know, please?"

"Keep the towel," said Praem.

"Um. Why?"

"Great practical value," she said, then turned on her heel and clicked back into the upstairs corridor on some unknown errand.

I huffed and grumbled. Why was everybody being so cryptic today? Was Raine going to come home and make me guess how Badger was doing? If Evee woke up now, would she ask me to solve a riddle? Perhaps Zheng might encourage me to divine her mood from the splayed guts of a half-eaten pigeon.

When I rejoined Sevens in the magical workshop, she had summoned her own shoes directly onto her feet, a pair of sensible black flats. Her umbrella was in her hand too, poised at a jaunty angle, like a young princess prepared for her mid-afternoon stroll in the gardens of her father's estate. Suddenly I had a terrible, paranoid thought that she was actually about to whisk me off to meet her father again, for some reason I didn't quite comprehend. But the impression faded as quickly as it had struck me. This was still Sevens. I still trusted her.

She extended her free hand toward me. "Ready, Your Grace?"

"I thought you'd dropped that," I snapped. I tutted and scowled at her, while scooping my squid-skull mask off the table; I wasn't going Outside again without the mask, ever.

"Dropped what, Your Grace?"

I didn't deign to reply. I took Sevens' hand in mine, then wrapped the tip of a tentacle around her wrist for good measure, glaring at her the whole time.

"I suppose I don't have to tell you to hold on tight?" I said. "Are you actually coming with me, or going your own way?"

"I walk beside you, my queen."

I rolled my eyes hard enough to hurt a little, clenched my stomach muscles, and plunged my mind into the black depths of my own soul.

To think that such a thing would ever become simple routine.

Out we went, the princess and I.

= =

Camelot was still as beautiful as the very first time I'd seen it, in that first ever dream I'd shared with Lozzie.

Sometimes I wondered if Lozzie had chosen Camelot on purpose, or if it really was just a coincidence. A non-threatening, safe, quiet place, where things had happened once but were now long past. At the time, she'd just intercepted the message from Maisie, intended for me, but even with that she couldn't possibly have known my primordial terror of Outside, of these unknown and alien places which had haunted me in dreams, across the membrane between worlds, dragging me back again and again for lost hours in dripping black jungles and windowless metal hallways and vast places that made teenage Heather curl up in a ball and sob herself into unconsciousness. In contrast, Lozzie had picked somewhere lovely. It was the right choice, the first taste I'd ever had of Outside as somewhere not to fear.

Even now, with a castle building site all around us, it was beautiful. The Knights worked without any of the modern blights of such processes — jackhammers, drills, the clank of machinery, the stink of hydrocarbons, all were absent. The loudest noise was the click-clack cutting of bricks from the huge blocks of stone. There was no pollution here, not unless the slow-crawling Caterpillars on the horizon put out some hidden, invisible, odourless waste product. I doubted that, somehow. Lozzie would not have made them that way.

The castle didn't look very different compared with two days earlier. The keep walls were a little higher — perhaps there was a second internal floor in place now — but the exterior curtain wall was still all but a mere outline. On the far side of the keep I spotted a section where the Knights had started putting those massive stone blocks on top of each other, beginning the real wall. Three Caterpillars were gathered around that spot, perhaps just having delivered the dun, sandy blocks to the seed of a wall, but they were currently just hanging out there, not doing anything. Two of them had long tendrils of strange sticky black tar extending from their 'faces', wrapped around the stone blocks as if helping to settle them in place, or perhaps glue them together in lieu of mortar.

Sevens waited politely while I recovered from the aftermath of the Slip, panting and squeezing my eyes shut as I forced myself not to vomit. She even kept her arm out for me, a support for my tentacles to cling to, like a squid attached to a piece of elegant, shapely driftwood. Eventually I straightened up and gazed out across the castle building site. Knights moved about their tasks, setting bricks in place, mixing mortar, cutting blocks. Some were currently carving out a pathway between the castle and one of the future gatehouses, pulling up the turf so others could start laying brickwork directly into the ground.

I'd landed us on that same hillside where we always arrived, the taller hill that would eventually be encircled and protected inside the future line of the curtain walls. In a real medieval castle, it would have been the perfect place to site some kind of watchtower, or perhaps a siege engine.

For now it was still home to the desiccated corpse of the unnamed young man who had died out in the swamp. Two Knights still stood vigil, by his head and his feet, but the Forest Knight was nowhere to be seen. I'd landed us at a respectful distance from the hilltop itself, just beyond human earshot.

All was bathed in the purple light of Camelot's alien sky. I felt it on my skin, a soothing darkness from the glittering firmament.

"Well, here we are," I said, sniffing back a nosebleed from the brain-math.

I fumbled with the damp towel, about to ruin it by wiping my bloody nose all over the fabric. Praem was right, towels were very useful things. But then Sevens produced a linen handkerchief seemingly out of nowhere and offered it to me. It was white, not yellow.

"Use this, Your Grace," she said.

I tutted at her calling me that yet again, but I accepted the handkerchief all the same, and used it to wipe the blood off my face. The nosebleed didn't last very long, just long enough for me to sniff and splutter a bit before it stopped. I folded the handkerchief and gestured awkwardly.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll ... wash this and return it? Is this a real object or ... ? You know what, don't answer that. The less I

understand about how Outside works, the better.”

But Sevens held out her hand for the handkerchief. “Please, Your Grace. You wouldn’t deprive your wife-to-be of a holy relic, would you?”

My guts froze. “Holy relic?”

“Stained with Her blood,” said Sevens. I could hear the capital H in ‘Her’. She meant me.

I sighed with enough force to light a fire, then stepped back in mingled disgust and embarrassed irritation. “Sevens, really?” I held the handkerchief awkwardly in one hand for a moment, then stuffed it in the pocket of my pajama bottoms and crossed my arms. “Well, now I’m absolutely not giving it back to you. This isn’t funny any more. Stop it.”

“Do you find something funny about this?”

Turquoise eyes bored back into mine. Ice-cold, unreadable, and not happy with me. A lump grew in my throat, but I had no idea what was going on. More importantly, I was the one who should have been irritated. I was irritated. I was angry and still upset and I didn’t understand why she was trying so hard to derail this conversation.

“What game are you playing now, Sevens? Hm? What’s next? Are you going to turn into three of my friends in sequence and use their voices to convince me to do something I shouldn’t?”

Sevens blinked. “A low blow, kitten.”

I flushed with sudden shame, mortified, mouth hanging open. Then I hiccuped, hard and painful in my throat. “I ... I, no, Sevens, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. You didn’t deserve that. That was deeply uncalled for. I apologise.”

“Apology accepted.”

I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. I could feel a stress headache threatening at the sides of my skull. “Sevens, whatever you’re doing, it’s hurting me. I don’t understand what this is about, if it’s a joke or something else, calling me a queen, or a messiah, or worse. It’s like you’re slipping back into old habits, trying to make me understand something through demonstration rather than bloody well talking to me!” I hiccuped again. “I’m sorry,

pardon my bad language.”

Sevens just stared. For the first time ever, I felt a distinct sense that the Yellow Princess was being forced to think something over before replying.

Then, eventually, she said, “You are not the only one who is angry right now.”

I blinked in surprise. My damp hair suddenly felt very cold. “You’re ... angry with me? Sevens?”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight produced another object in her free hand, apparently from nowhere — a Japanese-style folding fan, dyed in the thick, treacly yellow of melting butter on fresh bread. She flicked it open and hid the bottom half of her face, leaving only her eyes visible.

“Yes,” was all she said. Then she left me waiting.

“I ... Sevens ... I ... is this about how we’ve been using you? No, how *I*’ve been using you?” I felt an awful churn in my stomach. “I’m so sorry. I mean ... when you tagged along to Hringewindla, I just treated you like a helper, despite what you’re going through yourself. I know, I know you’re trying to find a new way to define yourself, and I ... I thought I was giving you time, and space. And ... and when you helped with Natalie, I ... thank you, for that, thank you, but I don’t mean to take you for granted. And about our engagement, I’m not going to leave you hanging forever and ... and ...”

Seven-Shades-of-Silent-Study did exactly that. She spooled out rope for me to hang myself. I trailed off.

“I am searching for purpose,” she said eventually, mouth muffled behind the fan. “For a new shape in which to fit. Your family — and family they are — is giving me spaces in which to fit myself. You give me purposes alongside you. The process is ongoing. Do not apologise for the greatest gift you have given me.”

“Oh, um.”

“You do not understand why I am angry.”

I shook my head. “No. Because you keep putting it in riddles.”

“And you keep rejecting the role you filled with such relish. Queen,

messiah, avatar, goddess.”

I sighed a great sigh and barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Is this because I turned you down in the swamp? Is that what you’re mad about? Sevens, you were trying to make me act like an actual god in front of two terrified people, not to even mention a whole bunch of very impressionable Shamblers. I wasn’t about to deceive them in that kind of way, I’m not going to act like a cult leader or a monarch and take advantage of people or—”

The folding fan snapped shut. Sevens was revealed once again. “You were not acting. You were being. And then you lied to yourself.”

“E-excuse me?”

“You are continuing to lie to yourself.” Sevens blinked, slowly and almost difficult. “I am not made for this. Understand that much, please. I am still not made for intervention, this very conversation is an act of self-redefinition, but if I do not have this conversation, then I will turn into something I will not like, which will end poorly for both of us.”

“Sevens? It’s ... it’s okay, you don’t have to force yourself.”

“You reject the role of leader, of queen, of monarch, of idol, of goddess — yet two days ago you used the prerogative of that role all the same. You took the power and applied it, yet rejected the responsibilities. I didn’t whisper temptation in your ear to make you cruel mistress of the fate of others. I did it to make you see what act you were committing.”

I squinted at Sevens, having trouble keeping up. “I’m really sorry, but I don’t follow. What act?”

“Torture.”

My mouth opened on a reflex I had never examined, let alone anticipated. Even as the words fell from my lips, they tasted like rot. “I had to. Sevens, I had to. I had no choice.”

“Did you now?”

“Of course I had to! We had no time, Natalie’s parents had to be made to understand, to be broken, quickly. You know that.”

Something horrible and barbed and sick stirred in my chest.

“There were always other options.”

“Bad ones!” I said. Panic shook my limbs. The thing in my chest sprouted spikes, burrowed into my heart and lungs, but I was feeding it, flash-growing the thing with every word I spoke. “Bad for Natalie. Sevens, you didn’t complain at the time. You didn’t protest! Nobody did! Well, I suppose Evelyn did, a little bit, but everybody saw the necessity. We had to do it. We had to. Are you trying to tell me I was wrong?”

With a flicker like the iris of an antique camera shutter, the Yellow Princess vanished.

Evelyn Saye stood before me. Shoulders wrapped in a shawl over pajamas, leaning on her walking stick, scowling with deep yellow eyes the colour of boiled butter. I flinched in surprise, though I knew it was just Sevens, wearing Evee’s face.

“S-Sevens! Don’t do that, don’t wear my friends, it’s—”

“Torture,” said Seven-Shades-of-Saye, through gritted teeth, a grim expression on her face. Evelyn’s voice, a voice I would know anywhere. “Sometimes necessary, especially in our world, yes. I would do it for you, Heather. I told you as such. I would put Edward Lilburne on an actual fucking rack, and break his bones with my own hands, to make him tell me what he was trying to do to you, so I can find every note he’s ever made on the process, and burn every last scrap.”

“... Sevens, I know Evee would do that, yes.” My stomach was turning over. The black mass in my chest was trying to crawl up my throat, like a physical thing I’d gestated inside my flesh. “You don’t have to remind me.”

“But I would choose to do it,” said the Yellow Mage. “Make no mistake about that. My hands are never forced.”

But my hands quivered. In an effort to stop shaking, I hugged two of my tentacles to my chest, holding on tight. “Sevens, stop speaking with her voice, stop it! Stop it!”

Sevens obeyed my snapped order without complaint. Seven-Shades-of-Saye vanished with a blink — only to be replaced by Raine.

A cocky grin splitting her lips, her head rolled back, dressed in leather jacket and comfy jeans. She even raked a hand through her gloriously thick chestnut hair, then sighed. The only element out of place was her eyes, yellow-on-yellow instead of soft brown, like I

was talking to a mass of beaten gold wearing my lover as a skin.

“Sevens!” I squealed.

“I’m better than I used to be, you know?” Sevens said with Raine’s voice, easy and relaxed, almost laughing. “At saying no to you, at being me, for myself. I got you to thank for that, Heather. No question about it.”

I swallowed and tried to control myself, feeling like I was going to be sick. “Sevens, where is this going?” I demanded. “Is this supposed to be you, speaking with Raine’s voice, or Raine herself? Or your idea of Raine? You can’t know what everybody was thinking!”

Yellow-Eyed Raine grinned wider and rolled a shrug with her toned shoulders. “I don’t even know. But you know what I do know? I’d never argue with you about your own trauma, Heather. I love you too much for that. You put that little girl in front of me, Natalie, and you tell me that she’s you, in your own mind? Fuck it, I’d do anything you ask. You know I’d do anything you ask. Hey, but if I stopped and thought about it? Holy shit. We didn’t need to torture those two. But hey.” The grin flickered back on. “I’m just not gonna think on that.”

All I could do was stare, open mouthed. I felt like a slug was trying to crawl up my throat.

Raine shot a finger-gun and a wink at me. “Love you.”

“... no,” I murmured, my voice breaking. “No, Raine would have said something, Raine would have spoken up, Raine would have stopped me, if she thought it was wrong.”

“Would she, really?”

I shook my head. “Stop. Stop, please.”

But it wasn’t over yet. Sevens wasn’t finished with me.

Raine flickered out like a snuffed candle. In her place stood Lozzie, with the usual pink and blue and white of her flag-poncho replaced by three different shades of yellow. Perhaps Sevens was trying to soften the blow by making it clear that these were masks, not people.

Seven-Shades-of-Silly-Pixie giggled, exactly like Lozzie.

“Outside isn’t scary!” she chirped, flapping her poncho like an excited squirrel. “I didn’t even see it that way. And they understood in the end, right? You were nice to them in the end, right? So it’s alllllll okay!”

“Lozzie, no ... no, Lozzie wouldn’t do something so cruel. She wouldn’t.”

“Aaaaaand I don’t wanna think about it.” Lozzie’s bouncy energy trailed off into an awkward, somber-faced little smile. “People should stop being afraid of it out here. I don’t care what they think.”

“Oh, Lozzie.” I bit my lip and felt the threat of tears fill my eyes. I almost reached out to her, though I knew it was just Sevens.

But then she was gone, a wisp on the wind, blowing away like golden wheat chaff across the hillsides. My hand closed on somebody else.

Zheng, a mountain of muscle towering over me, my hand holding her wrist. Yellow eyes filled what should have been a sharp and predatory gaze. A maw of shark teeth opened wide in a razor-sharp grin of savage joy. A tiger in the jungle deeps, leering at her prey. Seven-Shades-of-Far-Too-Large-And-Far-Too-Close leaned over me, leaned in close, rumbling like a furnace.

“S-Sevens, I know it’s just you, it’s not ... ”

The Yellow Demon leaned in so close that I could feel the heat of her skin beating against my face.

“Torture, shaman?” she purred. “If you had asked me to, I would have eaten those monkeys alive for you. In front of their pup.”

I felt tears rolling down my cheeks. “Zheng, no, if I asked that, you — you would have to tell me I was wrong.”

“You are right, shaman. You see further. You see everything. You freed me, you gave me new life. So I believe, in you.”

And then she was gone.

I was left standing there in shock, on a Camelot hillside beneath the purple whorled skies, with Seven-Shades-of-Seven-Faces standing at a polite distance from me, her umbrella tip-down against the ground, held at a jaunty angle.

“No,” I murmured.

“You made a choice to inflict pain, to get your way. Nobody forced you to do that. None really tried to argue with you.”

I shook my head. My throat was closing up, trying to keep the vile thing trapped in my chest. My words came out in a quiver. I hugged myself with three more tentacles, wrapping them around myself.

“But I had to.”

Sevens tilted her head, cold and unreadable as ever. She offered me no solace. “Stop lying to yourself.”

“What other choice did I have?!”

“Plenty of choices. There were other ways, Your Grace. Other methods you could have attempted, before torture. You could have exposed Natalie’s parents to Tenny, first. You could have shown them Twil, in full wolfish mantle. You could have taken them to Camelot first, reunited them with their daughter first, rather than putting them through the unknown ordeal. You could have done those things, but you chose not to.”

“It might not have worked. Sevens, you know that, you know it might not have worked. They might have rejected it, not believed, their minds might not have broken properly.”

“Might.”

I shook my head, harder and harder, like a nervous tic I couldn’t control. My breath came out in little pants and hiccups. “What—what are you saying, Sevens? What is this?”

“Natalie is not you. She does not share the curses and blessings of your situation. She will never see spirits. She did not lose a sister or a twin. She will not be haunted by the Eye. You could have left her with a story for her parents. She would still have grown up safe.”

My temper suddenly snapped, hot and red.

“She might not have!” I yelled in Sevens’ face. The rotten, twisted thing inside my chest finally exploded onto the surface, a thing that had festered in a wound for a long, long decade. I let it out, I gave it free reign, I listened to that impulse, wallowing in my own self-pity. My voice rose into a barely-human hiss-scratch of self-disgust and justified rage, echoing out across the quiet plain of Camelot. Down in the building site at the foot of the shallow incline, the

Knights paused in their work, tools going still and bricks suspended mid-placement, to gaze up at their queen's anger. "Insult me, fine. Call me a monster, whatever. I don't care! But don't insinuate I should have left that girl behind!"

Seven-Shades-of-Stoic-and-Stolid didn't even blink. My tantrum did not impress.

"You could have left her with a story for her parents," she repeated. "What part of that implies leaving her behind?"

"Leaving her to face the gas-lighting and uncertainty, alone! Against the whole world, alone! I won't do that, Sevens. Fu— fuck that! Nobody gets that, ever again. She's a child. No. Never again."

Sevens nodded, as if conceding a point. But I didn't feel like I was winning; I felt filthy.

"And you judged that was worth the torture of two human beings."

"You don't agree? Then you should have said something, shouldn't you?"

"My agreement doesn't matter. Maybe I also believe it was the right thing. But you are avoiding the point, Your Grace. You made a choice, and then you denied those people the relief they needed, by refusing to accept your role."

"I'm not going to pretend to be a god." I huffed, shaking my head, but I was barely convincing myself. Exposed to the purple light of Camelot, the dripping black rotten thing from inside my chest was cracking and withering.

"Then accept you made a choice. You made a choice to inflict pain. It's that, or the royal prerogative. The will of the queen, inscribed on flesh and nerve and in the blood of the subject, as would be your right, if you reach out and grasp it."

"I don't want that! Stop calling me that!"

"Then accept you made a choice to torture."

I opened my mouth to protest again, but I realised we'd gone in a circle. Tears filled my eyes. I felt a sob tugging at my throat. I bit my lip, tried to force that down. I was right, I knew I'd done the right thing.

"But ... but if it wasn't necessary, then I ... I ... "

Sevens waited politely, offering not the merest shred of comfort. I blinked furiously, trying not to cry. She was right. It had been so hard to see during the heat of the moment, the burning need to avoid another child going through what I did.

"I was ... trying to be aware," I said, struggling over each word. My voice was so much more human again, but I couldn't meet Sevens' eyes. I stared at the grass, panting softly, trying to hold onto that justification. "I know, I know I was projecting my own parents onto them, Stephen and Isabella. I knew I had to resist vindictive pleasure, a-and I did! I did!" I looked up at Sevens, embarrassed by my own desperate need for forgiveness and validation, but she just stared back at me. "I didn't enjoy hurting them. I didn't make it about me. Or at least I tried not to."

"Ah," said Sevens. "I see. So, you didn't enjoy it. That makes it all better then. Perhaps it even hurt you more than it hurt them?"

"No!" I cried out. "No, no that's not what I mean! I don't mean—I — I didn't mean to—"

The final collapse of my excuses came quick and cold, stealing over me like morning frost over dead grass. The rotten thing from within me froze and died. All my anger and embarrassment turned to slurry in my hands.

"Oh," I murmured. "I ... oh, no. No, I didn't think about ... I made a choice. There were other options, they wouldn't have been as certain, but ... oh no." I sniffed back the threat of tears, then put my face in one hand and tried not to sit down in a heap. Hugging myself with my tentacles, shaking with each breath, struggling to resist the urge to hide inside my squid-skull mask. "I chose to hurt them. I chose to do that. You're right, there were other ways. There were."

Sevens didn't speak. I screwed my eyes shut and gritted my teeth.

"I'm becoming a monster, aren't I?" I whined through my teeth. "I am. This isn't even the first time I've tortured a person. Just the first innocent ones. You're right. I chose this, I chose to do it, I ... "

"My father understands the uses of cruelty," said the Yellow Princess. "He is intimately familiar with the application and purposes of pain."

As I cried quiet, bitter tears into my own hand, scrubbing them

away with my sleeve, Sevens' voice held less of its former ice. She spoke as what she was — a storyteller, making a didactic point, but without the barbs of ironic satire.

"In my father's case," Sevens continued, beyond the wall of my self-indulgent tears, "he applies pain and cruelty with the right of a king. He never asks himself if it is right or wrong to do so — it is merely his nature, the nature of a king, expressed upon the flesh of his subjects. In the case of a human being, cruelty is the product of domination, exploitation, or hate. But you straddle the line between human and divine. If you were to grasp that side of your nature, I could not argue with your intent. Your methods would be cruel, but they would be in accordance with what you are. But you refused that, so you are hurting yourself with lies."

I nodded to myself, crying quietly. What was I becoming?

Sevens let out a small sigh, a very controlled sound. "But I am glad you did not choose that. I do not know if I could continue to love an engine of divine intent. Too much like my father. Too much like what I was trying to imitate, born into the application of cruelty as my prerogative. I am glad you chose otherwise, Heather."

"But I still did it," I whined. "I still chose."

Sevens crossed the gap between us with three neat steps, and drew me into a sudden embrace. She hugged me tight and wrapped something warm and soft about my shoulders, tucking it close around my neck and lifting a corner to help dry my eyes. It was her yellow mantle, the engagement gift, the piece of her which was now mine.

I let out a hopeless little laugh-sob and gently pushed her away, though without any real strength in my arm. "No," I murmured. "No, I don't deserve to be comforted over this." I sniffed hard and wiped my eyes, forcing myself upright. "I don't deserve to be feeling sorry for myself. Not me. I wasn't the victim, I was the torturer. Even if it was worth it. Was it worth it?"

Sevens shrugged minutely. "I cannot say. That is up to you to decide."

"Thought so," I grunted.

To my great surprise, Sevens suddenly smiled. Her smile was a sharp and shrewd thing, unlike any expression I'd ever seen before.

The Yellow Princess smiled like a cross between a weasel and a fox, subtle and cunning.

"I do love you, kitten. I'm glad to have you back."

"We're not done yet," I said.

Sevens cocked an eyebrow, no longer smiling. "Ah? You have accepted responsibility for the decision. There is no going back, no undoing the pain. You could apologise to Natalie's parents, but that would not change the past."

I shook my head, hard and curt. "No, that's not what I mean. How do I stop this happening again?"

Sevens blinked.

I went on. "Obviously I have a propensity for this. The potential is in me. I don't like it, but pretending it's not there, that would run the risk of something like this happening again. Maybe I wouldn't do anything differently, maybe with Natalie it really was the right choice, but it was a choice. What do I do?"

"Acknowledge it?" suggested Sevens, tilting her head slightly to one side. She actually sounded uncertain. I'd never heard this mask talk this way before. She obviously hadn't gotten this far, hadn't made that final leap. Her script ran out here. "Talk about it. Figure out why you did it. Commit to not doing it again."

"I know exactly why I did it." My voice shook with hot shame, but I drew myself up and pulled Sevens' yellow gift close around my shivering body. I wasn't cold, in fact I was sweating, but I was still shivering. I drew my tentacles inside it too, but kept my squid-skull mask in both hands now, staring into the black and empty eye sockets. "I did it because I was projecting my own parents onto them. I ... I've been ignoring that."

"No longer, though."

"There was a voice, in my head." I pulled a face and sighed. "Not a literal voice, I'm not having auditory hallucinations. Maybe it was in my chest, not my head." I rubbed at my sternum with one of my own tentacles. "A bitter voice, a vindictive version of me. I wanted to hurt them. I wanted to really, really hurt them."

"Ah."

"I didn't, though. I didn't do the things it wanted me to do. But, maybe I was being cruel anyway. Maybe I was hurting my own mum and dad, by proxy."

"Must I ask why?"

I let out a tiny, sad laugh, and raised my eyes from the unseeing sockets of my real face, to look up at the purple, crystalline whorls which filled the sky, like tattered royal cloaks brushing the atmosphere with strands of transcendent fabric. "Going to university here in Sharrowford, the entire decision to go in the first place, I think it was about getting away from my parents. I could have gotten into the University of Reading, it's got a perfectly fine literature department. But I ... I've never told anybody this. I lied to my parents. I told them I applied to Reading, that I was thinking of going to university close to home, so I could stay at home while studying. But I never applied, not really. I lied to them. To get away."

"You don't hate them."

A statement, not a question. I shook my head.

"I don't, no." My voice broke, went quiet and soft. "I can't hate them or blame them, it wasn't their fault, not really. It was the Eye. My parents didn't know any of this was real. They didn't know Maisie was real. They didn't know or understand what they did to me. When I left home for university in Sharrowford, I didn't think it was real either, but I had to get away from them. I had to get away from that house. From them, from ... from the threat of hospital again."

I swallowed hard, thick with mucus and tears, but I didn't start crying.

"Quite," Sevens said, as if I might stop there.

"Not that they would actually have ever sent me back," I said. "But the memories were there, wrapped up in that house. And now I know, all of it was real, they forced me to try to forget her, to forget Maisie, pretend she wasn't real. None of it ever happened, Heather. You're imagining things again, Heather. Focus on the physical things in front of you, *Heather*." I found I was gritting my teeth, doing a terrible imitation of my mother's voice. I had to force myself to relax, taking several deep breaths. "Maybe I do hate them."

It's not their fault. But I still do. I admit it. And so maybe I wanted to hurt them."

I took a great shuddering breath and lowered my eyes from the sky, ripping myself out of my memories and back down to Camelot. I felt like I'd just stepped out of a cold shower, shivering and freezing, naked and vulnerable, but scoured clean, wounds opened and sluiced with fresh water, dead flesh cut away, pathogens killed, bleeding freely from an old, old injury, but bleeding clean, fresh, red blood at long last.

"It's why I never really miss them," I murmured. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve again. "The rescue operation for Maisie, that's not why I don't talk to my parents. I never really miss that house. I don't call much, I don't like to talk to them. It's not their fault, no, but I do hate them a bit."

Sevens nodded gently, a golden smudge in my peripheral vision, glowing like sunset on seawater.

"I've been off balance since the moment I saw Natalie," I said. "I saw myself in her, and that was that. And I made a choice to torture two people. Maybe it was right, maybe it was wrong. But you're correct, Sevens, it was a choice. I made it." I sighed and looked back down at the squid-skull mask. "I need to be so very careful."

"This is one of the reasons I love you."

I looked up at Sevens and her ice-cold face, unreadable expression, and turquoise eyes. "Ah?"

"Your capacity for stepping off the path."

I gave a sad little laugh. "If you say so. I wouldn't have realised a thing without you prodding me. How are you so good at this, Sevens?"

Seven-Shades-of-Modest-Triumph shrugged. "I've helped a lot of young women. But never one I was in love with myself. This was messy, dirty, quick, and risky. And I was angry with you."

"Still," I said. "Thank you for confronting me."

Sevens tilted her head slightly, neither a shake nor a nod. "May I have my handkerchief back now?"

"Oh, um." I pulled the blood-soiled handkerchief out of my pocket

and pulled a face. "I suppose so. As long as you aren't going to treat it as an actual holy relic. Even if my blood does have unique properties."

"It would only be fair turnabout for you collecting pieces of me."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't think I've forgotten the scrap of yellow you kept, from our first meeting. The scrap of fabric."

I blushed and grimaced. "Oh, uh, I mean, that was a mistake. It wasn't meant to be weird. I think."

Sevens held out one hand. "Then return the favour."

I rolled my eyes, but at least she wasn't trying to call me by a royal title anymore. I handed her the scrap of fabric and blood. Sevens made it vanish somehow, into a pocket on her pocket-free skirt.

"Thank you, kitten."

I shook my head, exasperated but relieved. I looked away from Sevens, out across Camelot, across the castle still taking shape. "Is that why you wanted to talk to me out here? To show me physical proof of what I was pretending to be? Or not pretending to be, rather."

"Guuuuur-ruuuck," went Sevens the Blood Goblin.

I turned back to her in surprise. The Yellow Princess was gone, replaced with the scrawny, pale, lank-haired figure of the vampire, Seven-Shades-of-Sanguine-Pretender, dressed in black tank top, matching shorts, and a pair of black trainers on the end of spindly legs. She rolled a bony shrug and gurgled at me. "Guess so?"

"Sevens!" I said with delight. "Are you better? I mean, does this mean you're not angry now?"

"Mmmmmmm-yeah?" Sevens closed the gap between us and bumped her head against my side, like a huge cat. She smelled faintly of grass cuttings, for some odd reason. I wrapped a tentacle around her shoulders and she leaned on me, hot and wriggly against my side.

"Well, thank you," I said.

"Wanna go look at your castle?" she asked, blinking those huge black-and-red eyes down at the building site.

“Not yet. It would be unfair of me to interrupt their first draft, as it were. I should show them some respect, wait until they’re done, not go waltzing about like I own the place. Even if I do own the place, it’s not polite.”

“Good queen Morell,” Sevens croaked, then cackled like a broken engine.

“Don’t start that up again.” I tutted, then gently grabbed the back of her head with another tentacle. Sevens let out a little squeak of surprise. “It really does make me uncomfortable.”

“Sorryyyyy,” went Sevens, with a face that was anything but sorry. “But how can I resist? You have a castle, in a place called Camelot. It’s perrrrrrfect!”

“It’s absurd,” I sighed. “That’s what it is.”

“Heather Pendragon Morell.”

“Tch! Really, you—”

“Don’t like ‘Lavinia’ much, right?”

“... well, only because people have misused the name. I don’t mind it on its own.”

“Pendragon.”

“No!”

“Arthuria.”

“Also no! Sevens!” I ruffled her hair with one hand, messing it up and making her squeak and whine, but I quickly relented.

She writhed and grumbled and settled against my side again, black hair all messed up, then eventually looked over her shoulder, back up the hill.

“*Guuulurk*. What about him?” she asked. “Gonna take a looky-look inside?”

I twisted to look over my own shoulder, following Sevens’ gaze, though I didn’t really need to. I knew exactly who and what she was looking at.

“Inside?” I asked.

“Not literally.”

“Oh, come on then.”

With Sevens wrapped around a tentacle, and a tentacle wrapped around Sevens, we plodded up to the top of the hill, to have another gander at the mystery corpse who had carried an Outsider coin in his pockets.

The Knights were still standing their vigil, out of respect or tradition or some other meaning that I’d accidentally gifted to them via my own mind. I nodded to them in greeting, or as a gesture of mutual respect, but both of them just stared straight ahead at the horizon. Sevens stared down at the corpse, making soft thinky noises as she turned her head to the left and right. I joined her, but there was nothing new to see.

“Sooooooo, gonna look inside him?” she asked eventually.

“You mean with brain-math.”

“Well yeah.”

“... I don’t want to,” I said. Then I sighed and rubbed a hand over my face. I felt like I needed another shower already. I wiped my face on the still-damp towel instead. “That’s another thing I’ve been ignoring on purpose. I don’t really want to use brain-math to define somebody who’s already dead. I don’t want to look at a corpse through the lens of hyperdimensional mathematics.”

Sevens twisted her head at me. “Why? It’s a corpse. You might find out how he got the coin, riiiiight?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I had to push past a very specific reluctance, in the back of my mind. “Back when I defined Sarika, to pull her from the Eye, I learned all these weird little details about her, about her past, all the things she’d ever done or thought or felt. Those details didn’t stay clear in my mind, once it was over. Like I saw all of her at once, but then I forgot most of it again. Sort of like a dream.”

“Mmmm,” Sevens croaked.

“But ... this dead man, he’s just meat.”

“Dry meat.”

“If I define the corpse, what if it’s no different to a living person?”

“Ehhhh? Eh?”

“What if it’s just meat? What if I can see a whole personal history, in meat? What if I can see the value, or set of values, or piece of mathematics which defines dead or alive? What if I could bring him back, just by switching a few numbers?”

Sevens bit her lip, and didn’t answer.

I said it for the both of us. “Because that really would be a godlike act. So, I would rather not look. Not yet.”

“Mm-mm,” Sevens grunted. I could hear her chewing on her lip, but she didn’t say anything more.

I took a deep breath and let out a long sigh, then looked up from the corpse. “Besides, there’s got to be other ways to find out why he had that coin. I could look at the coin itself, or I could try—”

With a flutter-puff of poncho-flounce, Lozzie materialised about five feet to our left, standing with arms wide and one foot raised, as if in the middle of a ballet move.

“Heathy!”

“Lozzie?” My heart climbed into my mouth. “What’s going on? Nothing’s ... okay, no, you’re smiling. Sorry, I just ... right. Is everything okay?”

“And Sevvv!” Lozzie chirped.

“*Mmmmruck?*” went Sevens, peering around my side.

“Lozzie, nothing is going on, yes?”

“Raine called!” Lozzie said. She lowered her arms and one leg, then pointed with a poncho-flourish, at the dead man lying on the ground. “Remember I took a picture, on my cell-you-lar phone? Guess who recognised him? Go on, guess guess!”

A sinking feeling dragged at the pit of my stomach.

“Badger,” I said. “Badger recognised the dead man.”

“Badger! Cor-rect!”

“*Rrruurk,*” Sevens gurgled. “Badger. Hrrmm.”

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.1

“That’s Rally, yeah,” said Badger. “Like I told Raine earlier. I knew the guy. Well, a bit.”

“You’re sure you recognise him?” Raine asked. “Take your time, look all you want.”

Badger nodded again, at the picture of our mystery corpse on the screen of Raine’s phone as she held it out in front of him, currently zoomed in on the face of the dead man. “Absolutely, no doubt about it. Recognise him anywhere. Even dead like that, all dried out and stuff. He’s got that face like ... a ... um ... ”

Badger trailed off. He squinted hard, then blinked twice, perhaps struggling against another headache. His right hand fluttered up from his lap, as if to rub at his eyes, but a sudden tremor was already claiming the right side of his body once more, a quiver of shuddering muscles and misfiring nerves in hand, arm, and shoulder. He stared at nothing, hand shaking uselessly, locked in a silent contest with his own damaged brain.

Sarika was sitting closest to him, on the end of the sofa next to the large, comfortable armchair which looked like it could easily swallow two of Badger. Whistle was in her lap, ears perked up at the sight of Badger suffering, even if the Corgi couldn’t quite understand why his best friend was in pain. Sarika sighed, rolled her eyes, and reached over to rub Badger’s back in slow circles.

“Stop pushing yourself,” she snapped at him.

Everybody averted their eyes as politely as they could, affording Badger what little dignity we could give, clustered around in the living space of his rather sad and cramped bedsit flat.

Except for me.

I couldn’t stop staring at the man, even when it got weird.

This was the first time I’d seen Badger — real name Nathan Hobbes,

as we all knew by now — since the multi-staged brain-math I had performed on him, to break his contract with Ooran Juh, then free him from the grip of the Eye, and then fix his lower brain function so we could restart his failed heart. Easily the most complex and delicate sequence of brain-math I'd ever performed, in service of saving a man who had once been our mortal enemy. The last time I'd seen him he'd been lying on the floor of the magical workshop, bleeding from a head wound and recovering from having his heart jolted back to life. I'd rooted around inside his skull with a tentacle, and re-written a significant portion of the vast hyperdimensional equation that defined him as a person.

So I wasn't quite sure what I was looking at — a man I'd saved, or a man I'd changed?

Nathan did look like hell, there was no avoiding that brutal reality, but it was a totally different kind of hell than before.

His thick curly dark hair was gone, shaved off for the operation on his skull; a few days of stubble had sprouted from his scalp and chin, scraggly and rough; he'd lost quite a bit of weight during his hospital stay. The way he moved seemed wrong, especially his hands and arms, as if the muscles couldn't contract all the way without great focus and concentration. He blinked out of sync and squinted at everybody and did weird things with his eyes — Raine had explained that his sight was permanently damaged, blurry at the edges. He seemed wounded, weak, drained, like he'd crept right up to death's threshold, peered inside, and then only backed away at the last moment. I felt a bizarre urge to make sure he was eating properly. I certainly hoped he was taking the vast quantities of pills he was prescribed — antibiotics, opiate painkillers, and anticonvulsants, among other esoteric drugs.

The stubble on his head couldn't hide the massive surgical wound.

To insert the titanium fixation plate to cover the hole that I had drilled in Badger's skull, the surgeons at Sharrowford General Hospital had cut open a semi-circular flap of scalp, about the size of my hand, peeled it back, done their mechanical work to bond metal with bone, and then re-secured the flap with a curving arc of surgical staples.

An angry red line across the side of Nathan's head, not even scar tissue yet. Impossible to ignore, always there, no matter which way

he turned.

It almost didn't look real, like make-up, like he was an extra on the set of some low-budget horror movie. Looking at the wound stirred memories I'd rather not think about — of what felt like to root around inside human brains.

But, when one took a moment to really watch Badger, closely, to pay attention, he seemed almost like a different person.

Despite the dark rings of heavy exhaustion around his big, wet, puppy-dog eyes, Badger's gaze was free and clear and bright, in a way it hadn't been before. It reminded me of a before-and-after picture of a recovering alcoholic. He was all there, all present, in the moment. The wound on his left shoulder — the bite-mark where Ooran Juh's mouth in Badger's own palm had taken a chunk out of his flesh — had finally healed into a jagged, awful-looking scar, raw and tender, but no longer bleeding, no longer a forever open wound. His hangdog face no longer drooped, loose and tired around the ghost of a forgotten joy, but instead lit up all over whenever he smiled, as if the muscles had been rewired.

And he did smile, an awful lot.

He was like a mountain sage who'd just rejoined civilisation, after some soul-scouring meditation up in the wilds of the Lake District.

He also wasn't greasy anymore. That had always struck me about Nathan, he was always slightly greasy, unwashed, even when it wasn't his fault.

Nathan Hobbes, Badger, whatever he wanted to be now, was clean.

"S-s-sorry," he croaked, still shaking.

Barely was the word squeezed from his lips when Sarika tutted at him. "Stop apologising, you fucking moron."

Sarika and Badger made quite the pair. If anybody could match him for looking rough, Sarika still came close. A bitter bruise in human form, with bloodshot eyes, a half-slack face, pale and drawn beneath her light brown skin. She still twitched and shook constantly, her nerves shot through by the unkind grip of the Eye. But she'd gotten back a lot of the muscle tone in her legs and arms, she was slightly less unsteady on her crutches than when we'd last seen her, and she'd started taking better care of her hair again, no

longer looking so dry and straw-like. Though she hadn't dyed it to remove the streaks of premature grey. I didn't question that choice.

Two ex-cultists, both of them saved from the Eye, by me. Both of them trial runs for Maisie. Was this the best I could do? How much damage had I done? Did they deserve this? I couldn't answer any of those questions, roiling in my gut as I watched Badger struggle. Both of them had done unspeakable things. I didn't know what they deserved, only that I'd pulled them both from the pit.

"Hey, don't sweat it," Raine said, beaming her limitless confidence for the benefit of a man who had once threatened to have her fingers cut off. "It's alright. You take your time, dude. No pressure."

"Mm," Evelyn grunted from over on her own seat, an old wooden table chair. "No pressure. Right." She looked about as uncomfortable as I felt, but at least she had Praem standing at her shoulder.

"Indeed," agreed Jan, in a light, easy tone. "This isn't an interrogation or a questioning or anything. We're here as friends. Take it easy."

Jan, cross-legged on a beanbag chair, had the innocent, clueless, beatific smile of a saintly young woman plastered across her face, to match the black leggings and plaid skirt and smart white blouse she'd turned up in. I didn't know why she was bothering — everyone in this room knew what she was. Maybe it was her way of trying to be reassuring. I couldn't tell if she was faking the sweetness-and-light thing to cover for the natural horror at the unfortunate state of Badger, but then again she'd seen him in hospital, more than once.

The effect was somewhat undercut by July looming at the edge of the flat's little kitchen space, still and sharp like a giant owl, watching everybody with wide, staring eyes.

Sarika shot Jan the hundredth dirty look since the con-woman had walked through the door, but she kept her mouth shut. Jan just smiled back at her, pretending not to understand. In Sarika's lap, Whistle folded his ears back and whined.

Slowly, painstakingly, Badger's tremor passed. Sarika was careful to stop rubbing his back as he came around. He blinked several times, like a sleepwalker awakening to find himself in a strange place.

Then his eyes landed on me and he smiled the smile of the truly happy.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I blurted out before anybody else could answer. “Sarika is correct, you shouldn’t apologise. Don’t apologise to me.”

Badger blinked several times, but he didn’t stop smiling. “Sure thing, okay. No problem. It’s what you get with a metal plate in your head, I guess.”

“Hard head,” said Praem. “Head, hard.”

Raine chuckled. “Iron noggin, the hardest head in Sharrowford. There you go, that could be your wrestling name.”

Badger laughed too. He mimed knocking his knuckles against his own head, though without actually touching.

He’d been in the middle of suffering an attack of headaches and shaking when we’d arrived at his tiny flat about half an hour earlier. We had found him barely vocal, sitting with the lights off, hunched up in the lumpy armchair, sweating and shaking. He hadn’t been coherent enough to stand up and walk the few feet to his kitchen counter, to take the painkillers which lay right there. He hadn’t even been able to acknowledge us beyond a weird sideways twitch of his head.

Technically, according to the hospital, the sagely advice from the doctors, and the glossy NHS pamphlet — laconically titled ‘Cranioplasty following traumatic brain injury: patient and carer information’ — Badger was perfectly fine to be discharged all by himself. That didn’t take into account the damage done by the self-inflicted brain injury, of course. Or rather, the damage done by the Eye. And by me.

Sarika had stomped about the tiny flat on her crutches, berating Badger about keeping his painkillers closer to hand, elbowing out anybody else’s attempts to help with pills and water. She claimed that responsibility for herself, and she was more than capable of it now. She still shook and twitched, but bloody-minded bitterness had fuelled her practice with her crutches, helped by my long-term brain-math sessions, and undoubtedly motivated in unspoken ways by Badger’s survival. Though none of us pointed that out.

“We were only gone for thirty fucking minutes, Nathan!” she’d snapped, even as she’d counted out his pills and doubled-checked the dosage. “Your own crutch is right there!”

The rest of us had awkwardly milled around, waiting for Jan and July to show up. Praem made tea and coffee, which we’d brought with us. Raine deposited the spoils of a food run into Badger’s fridge. Whistle snuffled about, making certain no other dogs had invaded during his long absence. Lozzie had not come with us, because she didn’t want to see either Badger or Sarika. We had no worries about the police, they weren’t interested in Badger at all anymore. But I stayed curled up tight on myself, tentacles wound inward.

Badger’s flat was a deeply sad place.

It was off Woldbroke Street, one of those low rise terraces that backed onto a row of shops, not a dirty or dingy or dangerous part of Sharrowford, but simply somewhere that had been hollowed out by poverty. The terrace had once been whole houses, each one probably quite spacious inside, but it had since been broken up into cramped individual flats and had concrete stairways installed inside. Badger’s flat itself was only three rooms: a bathroom too small to turn around in without opening the door; a bedroom barely large enough for a double bed; and a combined sitting room and kitchen, the latter of which was tucked behind a little corner of wall. All scratchy carpet and pockmarked lino. There was only one window in the whole place, in the sitting room; outdoors was a dreary grey drizzle right then, summer seemed to have forgotten itself, but I had a feeling the flat would remain dim and dingy even under the full grace of the sun.

It wasn’t anywhere near as dire as the safe house that Jan and July had been living in as camouflage, but this was Badger’s actual home.

The contents were more important than the building, of course. And that’s what hurt me as I wandered around, waiting for the man in question to recover.

I personally knew three ex-cultists by then. Sarika lived with her parents and was making some attempt at rebuilding a life, even if it was mostly making Minecraft videos on youtube. At least she’d found something that she valued and that brought joy to others.

Kimberly was doing much better those days, living with us; her bedroom was a dense, miniature version of how she'd decorated her own flat back in Gleaston Tower, all posters of dragons looking noble, wolves howling at the moon, rainbow unicorns and healing crystals and little Buddha statues. I might find it a bit silly, but it was hers, she liked it, and I respected that.

But here, even in his own living space, there was very little of Badger — of Nathan Hobbes, the person.

He had no posters on the walls, no shelves stuffed with books and bric-a-brac, no favourite decorations or plush toys or framed photographs. His furniture was an eclectic mix of mismatched items, probably just things that other people had thrown out; not that there's anything wrong with scavenging, but it seemed lopsided. He had a lot of spare chairs which looked like they'd come from dining tables — but no table to place them around, except the low one in the middle of the room. That looked like it had suffered water damage at some point. He owned a small television, at least, along with a video game console hooked up below it, though only two games. His laptop lay on the table, a beaten-up old thing. No headphones, no external mouse, nothing else. His kitchen was even worse. One saucepan, two bowls, and just enough cutlery for one person to use before washing it up again.

There was more of Whistle in the flat than Badger. Of the many flaws Nathan might have been accused of, none could deny the man loved his dog. He kept two massive bags of dry dog food under the sink — which Praem promptly found — along with a large supply of tinned wet food and a massive haul of dog treats. Everything was carefully labelled for nutritional value, in Badger's own hand. Three leashes hung by the door, along with a Corgi-sized mini raincoat, a dog-fleece for cold days, and even a weird little set of tiny boots.

"For hot days," Raine had explained when I frowned at the little booties. "You know, when tarmac gets hot. Protects his little paws."

"Oh. Oh, well, that's very clever."

Whistle apparently agreed. Our investigation of the dog stuff had brought him over to watch. His dog stuff, I supposed.

"Sorry, Whistle lad," Raine said to him, crouching down to scratch his head. "Not time for that right now. Later on, hey?"

He'd whined, then snuffled off again, wiggling his little tail.

I hadn't meant to see any of this, but it was hard not to, with everybody bustling about while we waited for Badger's initial headache to subside. Praem apparently made enough mugs appear for everybody to drink tea or coffee, which I'm still not quite sure how she managed. But we were the ones who'd brought the tea and coffee with us. Maybe she'd secretly purchased mugs. I wasn't really paying attention.

I was too busy invading Badger's privacy.

I hadn't meant to. Sarika was rubbing his back, Praem was making tea, Raine and Evelyn were rattling on about what to do with Whistle, and I just wandered off, telling myself that I was seeking private solace. Actually, I was consumed with curiosity about Nathan.

There was so little of him here. Who was he, this man I'd saved?

So I stepped into his bedroom, without thinking.

On the squat double bed was one of those long-style pillows, for hugging while one sleeps. But it lacked a cover. I knew from certain conversations with Raine that those sorts of pillows were usually meant to have a cover with an anime girl printed on both sides, of varying levels of risqué illustration, for obvious purposes. Something about the bare pillow struck me as terribly sad; I'd almost have felt better if I'd ended up face-to-face with some improbably busty cartoon girl with her breasts out. At least that would have been something.

A little pile of books lay next to the bed, which drew my attention like a moth to a flame. This was better. Books! Everybody loves books, that's how I could understand Badger.

They were all about mathematics. No novels, no fiction, nothing like that. At the bottom of the pile were four textbooks, well-thumbed, full of little yellow tags as bookmarks. On top of that lay a history of maths, a book about the number zero, three biographies of famous mathematicians, two books that looked like they were about the junction between maths and philosophy, and a couple of pop-science books to round it all off.

Leaning against the wall was a framed degree certificate.

I hadn't touched the books, only leaned down so I could read the titles, but something about the diploma called to me. I picked it up with the end of one tentacle.

To my incredible surprise, it was hiding two more framed diplomas behind it, along with a pair of spiral-bound pamphlets. All three frames were cheap plastic, probably picked up from Tesco. They were dusty and didn't look like they'd been touched in months. I scooped them all up with my tentacles, then stood there in stunned amazement as I read the words on the certificates.

"Sharrowford University, school of mathematics," I muttered out loud as my eyes flicked from one to the other. "Nathan Hobbes, Bachelor of Mathematics, first class honours. Nathan Hobbes, Master of Mathematics. Nathan Hobbes, Doctorate of Mathematics."

Nathan Hobbes had a PhD. Badger, greasy, weird Badger, a Doctor of Mathematics.

The spiral-bound pamphlets revealed more. Sure enough, Badger's real name was on both of them, right there on the front page, protected by a cover of transparent green plastic. His own hard copies of his Masters and Doctoral theses. The Doctoral thesis had two letters tucked inside the cover, though they were both a decade old by now. One was from an academic publication I'd never heard of, a mathematics journal, asking him for further submissions. The second was an offer of a junior teaching post — at Oxford.

For some reason I didn't fully understand, I took a moment to carefully wipe the dust from the cheap frames, before placing them back where I'd found them. That was another mistake — as I wiped the PhD diploma, I dislodged another slip of paper inside the frame, something hidden behind the diploma itself. A photograph poked out. I had already intruded enough, but I couldn't help but identify the two figures in the photograph: Badger himself, looking healthy and whole and about ten years younger, alongside a young woman with her arms around his shoulders, absolutely beaming at the camera.

I had a vague memory of her face, as if I'd seen her in a dream. After all, I'd briefly known everything about Badger's past, back when I'd defined him in hyperdimensional mathematics, in order to break Ooran Juh's contact over his soul.

But I decided not to attempt to recall that memory. My hands were

already shaking, I already felt horribly sick, I'd already intruded far enough on a man who didn't deserve this, even if he deserved a lot. I pushed the photo back inside the frame and put the fruits of academia back where Badger had placed them, next to his bed, gathering dust.

The dregs of a life.

The Brotherhood of the New Sun, the Sharrowford Cult. They had pressed Kimberly into service raising zombies and doing magic, but they hadn't cared much about her private life. Alexander Lilburne had warped Sarika's morals, her ethics, her beliefs about the world, and made her complicit in terrible acts, but she was very much her own person, even now. But Badger? Badger lived alone in a tiny flat, sleeping next to a memory of what he could have been if Alexander Lilburne had never engaged him in philosophical debate.

Eventually, the painkillers had done their trick, aided by at least three other pills from intimidating-looking bottles with terrifying words on the labels. Badger had come around and accepted a cup of tea. Jan and July had shown up at last. And we'd shown Badger the picture again.

"Don't apologise to me," I repeated.

Badger nodded, still smiling for me.

"So," Raine jumped back in before things could get even more awkward. She pointed at her mobile phone again, with the picture of the dead man on the screen. "Rally? That's his name? Is that like, *Raleigh*?" She spelled the name quickly.

Badger seemed reluctant to look away from me, like he had something important to say, but then he swallowed and answered Raine. "Nah. Rally. Arr-ay-ell-ell-why." He shrugged. "Dunno if it was a real name or a nickname, or something else even, but that was definitely what he called himself. A lot of the guys from that period of the cult went around with fake names."

"How can you tell that's him?" Evelyn grunted, leaning heavily on her walking stick as she hunched in her own chair. "That corpse is practically mummified. His own parents probably couldn't identify him."

Badger smiled again, that easy smile of the free and happy.

"Seriously, it looks like him. It's the hair. And the jawbone. And

around the eyes, like? Yeah. He always had a face like a horse. It's Rally. For sure."

Jan let out a little laugh. "Very rich, coming from a man with the nickname 'Badger'."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "Sarika, you knew this man as well?"

Sarika stared at the zoomed-in image on the mobile phone. Raine held it up for her, but she shook her head with twitching distaste. "Yes, fine. I knew Rally, briefly," she said in her scratchy, croaky, half-broken voice. "But that's just a corpse. I can't identify it as anybody."

"You think Badger is incorrect?" Raine asked.

"Huh!" Sarika snorted derision and turned her eyes away. "No, I'm sure Nathan is right. Bloody freak, staring at corpses. Don't know how you can see anything there."

"Huuuruf," went Whistle, down in her lap, as if telling her off for being grumpy.

Badger laughed softly at that, as if the old blade of Sarika's tongue was gone dull with affection.

"Sooooo," Jan said, drawing the word out. "This unfortunate gentleman was indeed a member of the Brotherhood? You're certain about that part?"

Badger nodded. "Yeah, def'. Um, but, uh ... um ... "

He trailed off for a moment again, blinking hard but without any tremors, as if he had something in his eyes. Sarika huffed a long-suffering sigh and bapped him on the arm with one hand. "Nate, put your fucking glasses on."

"I don't need—"

"You can't see, you obstinate prick. Put your glasses on."

Badger cleared his throat with embarrassment, then accepted his glasses from the table, passed to him by Raine. He awkwardly settled them onto his face. I didn't blame him for disliking them, they were large and cumbersome, some kind of medical frames, probably whatever the hospital had in stock for these rare circumstances. He squinted and blinked through the thick lenses.

The glasses made it worse; he barely looked like the man we'd known before.

"They don't help," he complained, though he was still smiling. "They just magnify. They're not gonna fix my eyes." He waved his hands at either side of his own head, as if trying to brush away cobwebs.

Sarika hissed through her teeth. "Wear. Them."

"Better listen to your lady there," Raine said with a smirk.

Sarika snapped around at her like an angry crocodile. "I am not his fu— fu—" She twitched and stammered in frustration.

I didn't have the patience for this farce. "Nathan," I said, loud and clear, cutting across the nonsense. Badger blinked at me, like a huge-eyed bird on the other side of his thick magnifying glasses. I suddenly worried that July might decide to eat him. "Nathan, did the doctors tell you to wear those?"

"Yes. Yes, they did. At least, when my vision goes blurry. Which is, you know, most of the time." He laughed, then sighed. "They said it might stop my eyes trying to adjust when they can't actually do anything."

"Is your vision blurry right now?"

"Yeah."

"Then wear them."

I didn't say please. I didn't say 'you should wear them'. I just told him what to do. And he did it.

Jan cleared her throat again, pulling an even more strained smile than before. She sat up straighter in the absurd beanbag chair, hands folded in her lap, fake-demure. "Rally. Let's talk about this fellow. Please?"

"Right, yeah," Badger said, visibly pulling himself together and sitting up. "Rally was in the cult, that's right."

"Was he one of the survivors?" Raine asked. "One of the ones who left, before you lot did that ritual to talk to ... you know?" She gestured upward with a single finger, omitting the name of the Eye, out of respect for Sarika's pain.

“Oh! No, no, not at all!” Badger, strangely, broke out in a big smile again, genuinely happy, though after a beat he seemed to realise it was a little bit odd, and dialled it down. “Uh, I mean, no. Thing is, Rally got out years ago.”

“Mm,” Sarika added a grunt. “That’s what Alex thought, too.”

“Explain,” Evelyn said.

Badger went on. “Rally was one of the guys from the old days, or like, what counted as the old days, for us.” He gestured between himself and Sarika. “Before we joined. I only knew him a tiny bit. He was really, really smart, ambitious, driven, serious kinda guy. One of the few guys Alex was grooming as an actual wizard. Well, maybe. That was what everyone thought. Maybe that or he wanted to fatten them all up like pigs for slaughter. Who knows, hey?”

There was that smile again, unstoppable relief even when talking about terrible subjects.

Sarika stared at nothing, at the junction between wall and floor. “Ambition was a problem. Always a bloody problem.”

“Yeeeeeeah,” said Badger, nodding along with that. “He was super ambitious. Rumour was that’s why Alexander handed his training off to Edward, to get him forced out of the cult.”

“So he was one of Edward’s men?” Evelyn asked. “That’s what you mean? Get to the point here.”

Badger shrugged. “I dunno, sorry. He vanished. Left the cult. At least that’s what everybody said at the time.”

“Alex thought so too,” Sarika added, croaking through the words. The broken gravel of her voice couldn’t hide the hollow pain. “Unless he was lying to me about that as well.”

Badger looked toward his old friend with warm concern in his eyes. For a moment I thought we were going to see another replay of his incredibly awkward attitude toward Sarika, the painful, fractured dedication he’d shown when she’d visited our house, to see him one last time before he went under the dubious knife of my tentacles. I don’t know what he felt for her, if anything other than protective friendship and the shame of failing to keep her away from Alexander Lilburne. For one horrible second I thought he was going to lift his hand and reach out to her. I prepared to avert my eyes

along with everybody else.

But he didn't lift his hands. He just said, "Alex lied to all of us, about a lot of things. It's alright, Sarriy. None of that was your fault."

Sarika went from a morose sulk to frowning a bouquet of knives in an instant. She snorted a single, derisive huff. "Nate, shut the fuck up."

Evelyn murmured an agreement. "Mmhmm, I'm not quite sure about the 'none of your fault' part, either."

"We were all at fault," Sarika spat at Badger. "Don't you fucking lie to yourself. Fuck this lot." She gestured at us. "But don't lie to me."

"Oh, cheers," said Jan.

But Badger just smiled, untouched by rejection or admonishment. His smile back at Sarika wasn't a wide-mouthed grin or a showy smirk, but there was something undeniably pure about it. She must have thought so too, because she folded her arms over her chest and looked away with a huff.

"Well well well," said Raine, finally flicking the photo of the dead man off her phone screen and tucking the phone back in her pocket. "That does kinda scupper our theory. I assumed that guy, Rally, was from the survivors. Working with Edward, you know? Back to square one. Oh well."

Over toward the back of the room, beneath the dreary sky of thick clouds visible through the single window, Jan clambered to her feet with a little 'hup!' She smoothed down the back of her skirt, smiling ironically. "Indeed. Told you so. I'd never seen him before, either. None of the others mentioned him."

Evelyn tutted. "Who says you've found all of them?"

"She has found all of them," Badger said. "Everyone else who made it out of that house. Ten left, other than me."

Jan did a little head-bob-curtsey-bow toward Badger. He beamed back at her. Evelyn rolled her eyes. Sarika looked like she wanted to kick Jan in the stomach.

"Well then!" Jan said with a tone of finality. "I don't know why I'm still here. That corpse you found has absolutely nothing to do with

me. Nada, zilch, zip. Nothing! I'll be off then. Come on, July, we're going to get something nice for dinner."

July stared back at Jan. The demon of rope-like muscles and wide eyes just stood there, still as a statue.

I cleared my throat. "Now Badger is out of the hospital," I said, "we can finally contact those ten survivors. Jan, that's your job here. Today or tomorrow. Preferably today."

Jan sighed and sagged with all the theatrical sulk of the teenager she often appeared to be. "Can you maybe not involve me until you've gotten rid of that corpse? Please? Give me this one little job stipulation. No extra corpses."

Raine chuckled. "Afraid you're gonna get pulled in by the police for questioning?"

"Yes!" Jan huffed. "Obviously. Corpses attract attention! I can't believe you people just have a picture of that on your phones."

Sarika snorted. "Coward."

Jan gave her a rather sharp look, totally at odds with her prior performance. "Cowardice is survival. If you last as long as me, then you can lecture me about courage."

Sarika frowned in confusion, derision stalled only by one of her usual tics of flinching and shuddering. Jan, after all, did look much younger than Sarika.

Badger spoke up instead. "Where did you find him? Rally, I mean."

He was talking past everybody else, straight to me. Probably because I'd been staring at him, watching his every move, trying to read his mannerisms and his gestures, the turn of his head and the set of his muscles, looking for something I might recognise, something too familiar. To my surprise, I wasn't embarrassed in the slightest that he'd caught me staring.

"Outside," I said. "Which is where the corpse will stay. Unless you know about his parents, his family? Anything?"

Badger pulled an apologetic expression and shook his head. "Sorry. Poor bloke."

Jan spread her hands in an exasperated shrug. "He's Outside? Why didn't you tell me that at first? That makes it just fine, then. What a

place to hide a body, my goodness.”

“Didn’t Lozzie tell you that?” Raine asked.

“Well, sort of, yes. But, Lozzie.”

“Lozzie, indeed,” I sighed. Badger beamed back at me.

“Guess we’re back to square one, hey?” said Raine. She shot me a look.

“Almost,” I sighed, gathering myself. “One last thing.”

I pulled the pair of soapstone coins out of my hoodie and clacked them down on the low table.

The greenish, alien rock caught the dull light of the rainy day outside, as if both amplifying it and drinking it up. As I slid the coins toward Badger and Sarika I did my best to watch their faces. Sarika just frowned. Badger leaned forward.

“Do these mean anything to either of you?” I asked. “Anything at all?”

Badger took the question seriously, studying the coins with care, but then he shook his head. “Never seen them before. Wish I had. Is this something connected with Edward? I could ask the others, if you want, I could ask around, once we’ve reconnected.” He wet his lips and nodded at me with mounting eagerness. “Maybe somebody saw one of these, with Edward or Alexander. What do they do? Are they—”

“I’ve seen one of those before,” Sarika rasped.

We all looked up at her. She was frowning down at the coins, morose and long-faced again. Her head twitched, like a hypnic jerk, followed by a hard, tired blink.

“Where?” I asked.

“Edward,” she said without looking up. Her voice dropped to a murmur. “Years and years ago now. Bastard.”

“Sorry?” Badger said her name. Sarika blinked hard and looked up. One hand moved awkwardly toward Badger, but then she seemed to catch herself and frown at her own traitorous fingers.

“Back before the split really settled in,” she hurried on in her

ruined, raspy voice. "The split inside the cult, I mean, with Edward on one side and Alex on the other. It was ... mmm ... twenty ten, I think? Twenty eleven? The last time Lauren tried to run away from home."

"Lozzie," I corrected, firmly but gently.

Sarika waved me off in frowning irritation. "Lozzie. Lozzie, alright. The split was over her, over what to do about her. None of us, none of the cult were actually privy to the details, but a bunch of us did witness Alex and Edward having a huge argument."

"Who?" Badger asked, blinking with curiosity. "When was this? Where?"

Sarika shot him a grumpy frown. "You never saw it, you weren't there. It was at Alex's house."

"Continue, please," Evelyn said, with a tone that meant please pay attention and stop arguing.

Sarika sighed and grimaced, closing her eyes for a moment, struggling with a mote of her own private pain, whether physical or emotional. "Edward was angry. Quiet angry. That's sort of what he was like. I didn't really know the man, I'd only seen him a few times, despite how close I was with Alex. They argued about a lot of philosophical points, I don't remember most of it. But I do remember one of those coins." Sarika nodded at the stone coins on the little table. "Edward pulled it out of his pocket and said something like ... 'how can you ignore the potential of this?'"

"Exact words?" Evelyn asked.

Sarika gave her a withering look. Evelyn was immune, however. "No, of course not, it was ten years ago. Fucking joke."

"Ha ha," said Praem. Sarika glowered at her, but that was like frowning at a brick wall.

"Point taken," said Evelyn.

Jan put both hands up, as if she was interrupting a loud argument. She'd gone suddenly quite pale in the face. "Um, excuse me. Heather, Evelyn, what are those coins? I was not told about any magical coins or other such things we were bringing to this little meeting. This was to be a magic free zone. Demilitarized."

Raine snorted. "As if you're not carrying heat."

"Self-protection is different!" Jan said.

"I am right here," said July.

Evelyn sighed. "The coins aren't magical."

"They're from Outside," I corrected.

Jan started at me like I'd admitted to keeping a live velociraptor as a pet. Her smile was very fixed and waxen.

"They're inert." Evelyn tutted. "I've tested them. They're stone. That's all. Calm down."

Jan's smile went sour. She screwed her eyes up and pinched the bridge of her nose, then muttered to herself in that specific way that was meant to be overheard by everybody within earshot. "Great, now they're getting into Macguffins. Wonderful, yes. Perfect. This is not dispelling my fears that you lot are in fact a bunch of jay-arr-pee-gee protagonists."

Raine started laughing.

"What protagonists?" I asked. "Excuse me?"

"I cast magic missile," said Praem.

"Not in here, you don't," Sarika croaked, frowning darkly. I couldn't tell if she was in on the joke or not. Badger was laughing and smiling at everyone like he was on uppers.

"Wrong type of game," Raine snorted.

Evelyn cracked her voice like a whip. "If we could return to the topic at hand, thank you. Sarika, the coin. You saw it once, that was it?"

Sarika nodded. "S'all I got."

"Maybe we can ask Eddy," Raine said, still smirking. "Maybe it's like a token from an Outsider arcade. Trade in ten of them for a fancy mug."

The joke fell a bit flat. The laughter was already trailing off. I muttered a thank you to Sarika for the information, then scooped up the coins and slid them back into my pocket. They sat heavy as a pair of petrified hearts.

“Alright, okay, for serious,” Raine was saying. “What if this Rally guy stole the coin off Edward, and that’s why he ended up dead?”

Jan sighed. “One would assume that Edward would have then recovered the coin, no?”

Raine clicked her fingers and shot Jan a finger gun, topped by a beaming grin. “Smart lady, right on the money. Why indeed? That’s the question.”

For just a split-second, Jan was rendered speechless in the spotlight of Raine’s molten confidence, mouth hanging open, cheeks starting to colour with blush. I almost rolled my eyes; I hadn’t forgotten Raine’s confession that she found Jan extremely attractive. Of course I trusted her completely, she’d never do anything there without my permission, but I suppose she couldn’t resist a tiny bit of flirting when the opportunity presented itself. It took me a moment to realise that I had wrapped a tentacle around Raine’s leg, as if to restrain her; Raine’s grin slid to me and I earned a wink as well, then blushed in shame and embarrassment.

But then Jan put her walls back up. She huffed and set her jaw and folded her arms, the very picture of the stuffy student. “Actually no,” she said. “Why am I even suggesting anything? You should be paying me a consultation fee. I agreed to facilitate a meeting with the surviving cultists, via Nathan here, not to consult on some magic coin Macguffin from the dimensions beyond time and space. Nope, not doing it. In fact, I’m going into the kitchen for more tea.”

And she did. Jan ducked under July’s arm and started rattling about in the little kitchen space of the bedsit flat, muttering about ‘dying for a packet of crisps.’

Raine chuckled and bit her lower lip. Evelyn rolled her eyes again. Badger just smiled at the whole thing. Sarika did not look impressed, but she seemed a tiny bit more relaxed now that Jan was out of her line of sight. I had no idea why she hated the little mage so much.

“All right then,” said Evelyn with a note of finality in her voice. She levered herself up and out of her own chair, half her weight on her walking stick. Praem helped her with a gentle hand on Evee’s hip. “If that’s all we’ve got, then that’s all we’ve got. It’s high time for the second reason we came here.”

Badger gulped hard, his smile finally waning. I could see the flutter in his hands, the tension in his face. He knew we needed to do this, but his nerves were getting the better of him. I couldn't blame him, considering what had happened last time.

"It's going to be perfectly safe," Evelyn huffed. "All you have to do is stand there. Or sit there. Hell, if you scoot that chair out from the wall a bit, you might not even have to move."

Badger's eyes, of course, flickered back down to me, and stayed there.

A moment of odd, unspoken understanding passed between us. Somehow he saw the answer in my eyes before I even spoke. He started nodding before I said anything.

That spooked me, badly. A jolt of private terror shot through my bowels. I hurried to say the words out loud, just in case.

"Evee is telling the truth," I said. "It's perfectly safe. We need to get you a clean bill of health, Nathan. That's all. She's done this to me before, as well. It's not like doing anything. You just stand there."

"Okay. Okay, well, I'm ready then," said Badger. "Thank you, Heather. Thank you, really."

Badger said it like he was marching to his death all over again, but Evelyn wasn't exaggerating; the process was harmless, painless, and more boring than dramatic. Raine and July helped move the table and chairs out of the way, and then Praem unrolled the piece of canvas we'd brought with us, which contained a portable magic circle, pre-drawn back at home. Badger did actually find the strength and coherence to stand up, waiting there in the circle for the twenty minutes or so that it took Evelyn to examine him.

The doctors, nurses, and surgeons at Sharrowford General Hospital had done their best to fix Badger's body, but until Evelyn got him under the metaphorical microscope of her expertise, we couldn't be one hundred percent sure that my procedures had worked. So Badger stood in the middle of a magic circle, sweating slowly and looking very nervous indeed, balancing on one NHS-issue metal crutch, while Evelyn peered at him with the modified pneumasomatic seeing glasses. She made small adjustments to the magic circle via instructions to Praem, who stood ready with a water-soluble marker pen. After every adjustment, she would circle

Badger again, thump-thumping with her walking stick, waiting for a reaction that never came.

The rest of us did our best to spare Badger any further embarrassment — except for Sarika, who sat hunched up and glowering on the sofa like an abandoned gargoyle, with Whistle sitting comfortably in her lap.

Raine and Jan and July retired to the kitchen area, behind its little corner of wall, for all the illusion it gave of a separate space. I tried to follow, but I kept shooting sidelong glances at Badger, watching the way he moved his neck muscles, the blink of his eyes, the sway and tilt of his musculature. I kept staring at the red, angry surgical wound on his scalp.

How much had I changed him? When I'd rebuilt his lower brain function, I'd used part of myself, abyssal nature and all.

"Biscuit?"

"Ah?" I blinked away from poor Nathan in the circle, and found Raine offering me a Jammy Dodger from one of the packets we'd brought with us. "Oh, um. Yes, thank you." I accepted the biscuit and chewed slowly, watching Badger out of the corner of my eye, around the corner of slender wall that half-enclosed the kitchen space.

"Heather, dear," said Jan, giving me a little grimace. "Do you really want me to set up this meeting with the other survivors today? Nathan isn't really ... well ... you know."

"Entirely compos mentis?" Raine offered with an almost sad smile.

"He does seem a little loopy." Jan pulled an even worse smile-grimace. "It does rather hinge on him proving that you never hurt him. That you helped him, even!" Jan went up on tiptoes and made a show of peering into the sitting room area, at Badger and Evelyn. She lowered her voice and added, from the corner of her mouth, "I don't think I can properly emphasize how utterly terrified and strung-out those people are. All ten of them. Well, some seem to be faring better than others, but if I wasn't a magician, I would assume serious drug addiction, or some kind of paranoid condition. Sharrowford's local meth cooks, sampling their own wares too much."

"Jan," I tutted.

"I'm serious!" she hissed, making another show of looking to see if we'd been overheard. "They're terrified of you. The only reason I got close to them in the first place was by lying. They want to meet Badger, under very controlled circumstances. Not with you present, at least not at first. Do you really want to go ahead and pull the trigger on this? I thought you lot had plenty on your plate right now as it is."

Raine clucked her tongue. "We are waiting for that phone call from Fliss, that's true."

"Who's Fliss?" Jan asked, but then she shook her head suddenly and held up a hand. "Actually, no, don't tell me. I don't wish to know. Forget I asked."

"Another mage," said July, looming behind her.

"I don't want to know, Jule. Please, stop."

Raine's hand found my shoulder and squeezed gently. "Hey, Heather?"

"I'm thinking," I said.

"I know you are. Let me take some of the load, yeah? Jan has a point, we could be really busy again, soon. On the other hand, if we deal with the cult, that's one less way for Eddy-boy to screw with us."

For once, Raine's words slid off my mind like water off a duck's back.

"None of that matters," I murmured.

"Heather?"

All I could think of was Sevens, out in Camelot, forcing me to recognise that I always had a choice. Practical concerns were all well and good, but I had power, and another choice to make.

"I have a responsibility to those people," I said quietly. "I didn't cause what's happened to them, but I have a responsibility all the same. I'm the only one who might be able to give them relief from the Eye. Jan, please, if you really, genuinely believe that we should wait a few days for Badger to feel more coherent, because it would give us a better shot at being trusted, then please do that. But don't stall more than necessary."

Jan blew out a long breath. "Alright. You're paying the bill, after all. Well, if you were paying for this." She tutted.

To my surprise, July tilted her head up and caught my eye. The demon-host shifted her footing like a bird of prey, swaying in the tiny kitchen. Almost enough to make me flinch. "Once you catch them, what will you do with them?"

Jan winced. "I was trying not to think about that part."

I almost said *Me neither*, which would have been a small disaster. Instead I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut. "I don't quite know yet. I can't trepan them all, I can't send them all to hospital one after the other. But I can show them that it's possible. Maybe give them solace. Hope? At least I'll be able to talk to them."

"Make them see that they're better off betting on us than Eddy," Raine said. "'Cos you saved Badger, but Edward couldn't."

I nodded, but felt a lump growing in my throat. That's what everything hinged on — I could wrest human beings from the Eye's grasp. In theory.

In practice, the process had almost killed Badger, and maybe changed him forever.

"Frankly," I said, talking to the floor, "we need to stop being so reactive. We need to act, take control. We need those people on our side. Right now. ASAP. We need to close that avenue before Edward uses it. We need to stop reacting and start ... well. Acting? Oh, that sounds so stupid."

Raine was staring at me in surprise, smiling in a way that made me want to melt. "Not stupid at all, Heather."

"Oh great," Jan muttered. "*Proactive* doom."

"He's clean," Evelyn announced from the sitting area.

We all stepped back around the corner of the kitchen, rejoining the others. Badger was beaming with relief, shaking a little on the crutch wedged under his armpit. Praem was rolling up the piece of canvas, tidying the circle away. Whistle was panting in Sarika's lap.

"Eyyyyyy!" went Raine. "Congrats. How's it feel, man?"

"Good," said Badger. "To know that it's ... it's all over."

I winced inside. If my suspicions were right, it would never be over for Nathan.

Evelyn cleared her throat and tapped the floor with her walking stick. “No party yet, please. Yes, he’s free of any influence that I can detect. There’s nothing left of Ooran Juh’s contamination. I can’t test for the Eye, of cou—”

“Unnghh!”

Over on the sofa, Sarika visibly flinched, curling up on herself and letting out a painful, guttural noise of physical rejection. For one horrible moment she was a little girl in the middle of a nightmare, about to scream, trying to stop herself.

“Sorry!” Evelyn blurted out. “Sorry, fuck, sorry.”

Jan winced and looked away. Raine pulled a sad, sympathetic smile. Praem touched her mother’s elbow. Whistle stood up from Sarika’s lap and licked one of her hands, trying his best to help.

But Badger swung around on his crutch and hobbled the two paces to Sarika.

“Sorry? Sorry, it’s gone. It can’t hurt us anymore. It’s gone. It’s gone. It’s gone. It’s gone.” Badger’s voice got softer and softer as he repeated those words. He didn’t touch her, but his tone somehow reached through the veil of pain. Slowly, Sarika came back out of the shaking, panting terror — and shot a deeply bitter and embarrassed scowl up at Badger.

“I know it’s fucking well gone.” She spat. “That doesn’t help.” She huffed and looked away.

“It’s really gone?” I asked.

Badger turned on his crutch and looked at me. In all my life until that moment, I don’t think I’d ever witnessed the specific species of smile that graced his face. It was pure. No agenda, nothing held back, but also held no desire to communicate anything.

“It’s gone,” he said. “Yes.”

He smiled so deeply that his eyes filled with tears.

“That ... ” I cleared my throat awkwardly. “Well, it’s good to know that it all worked.”

Badger nodded to me, trying to blink away the tears. He hobbled halfway across the room, but didn't come close enough to threaten my personal space. My tentacles edged outward all the same, like he was some kind of threat recognised deep down in my instinctive memory.

"It's not in my head anymore," he said. "It hasn't been, not since you did what you did. Heather, Miss Morell, whatever I ... I did ... I did ... I did immoral things, I know. I hurt people. I was a ... a bad person? I'm sorry, I don't have the words."

"Thank you," prompted Praem.

"Yes!" Badger lit up with another elated, laughing smile. "Thank you. Yes. I can't thank you with words. I can't. I'm— I'm— I'm free. Free! I can't tell you what it feels like, to be under the gaze of that ... that. In your head, always there, always burning away at you. And then it's gone. It's gone." He trailed off and blinked hard several times, trying not to cry.

"You're welcome," I said, feeling robotic and cold. This wasn't the talk we needed to have.

"I spent a long time thinking about you," he went on. When he smiled, the muscles in his face tugged at the wound on his scalp, ever so slightly. "I mean, about everything you did, while I was in the hospital. There— there— was so much, so much. A-and I know you can't do this for everybody. I don't have the right to ask for that, but it— thank you— I can't— can't—"

Badger shook his head, almost dislodging the glasses from his face. His free hand fluttered up to his head as another tremor took his neck and shoulders in a fit of quivering, gripping his muscles and nerves with the fruit of my work upon his brain stem.

"I'm alriiiight," he slurred. "Alright. Fine."

"You're clearly not alright, you moron!" Sarika snapped. "Sit down!"

We all agreed that Badger needed a sit down. Praem and Raine helped. Once he was settled in his chair again, recovering from the mercifully short episode, Evelyn bumped her arm against mine.

"Heather, it's high time we leave," she said softly. "We're done here, let's get moving. You agree? I don't think there's any more

we'll get out of him."

I wet my lips, staring at Badger. I couldn't hide anything from Eeve.

"Heather?" She sighed. "We're not going to abandon him. I know how you feel, even if I might not share the same sentiments. Raine can come check up on him. He's got Sarika for now. We're not going to just leave him to his own devices. But we're going to field a very awkward phone call this afternoon, and I would like time to ... to prepare myself."

I slipped my hand into Eeve's and squeezed. Felicity again, of course. She needed time, and my support. "It's not that," I muttered back — then raised my voice, pulling together all my courage. "Excuse me, everybody? Would you all mind if I could speak to Badger alone for a few minutes?"

Everybody looked at me in surprise, except for July, who always looked surprised in the way an owl can look surprised at the sight of fresh, living meat. Sarika frowned at me. Raine nodded without question. Jan looked curious but not curious enough to ask more. Evelyn harrumphed.

Badger just nodded, still holding his own head. "Any time," he said.

I hurried to clarify. "I mean, um, Sarika, you're more than welcome to stay."

"Bloody right I am," she rasped.

"And Raine, too. Raine can stay." Raine understood this, she'd understood it with me. Plus, even now, even here, I needed my bodyguard close. "And leave Whistle here, of course. For now, at least. No need to make him get up." He did look very comfy, settled once more in Sarika's lap.

Jan and July were all too happy to go wait down by Raine's car. Evelyn was a bit more suspicious, giving me quite a look, but I disarmed that with a hug and Raine's car keys in Praem's hand.

"We won't be long," I said.

"See you're not. And fill me in later, yes?" She sounded none too impressed, but Evelyn trusted my judgement. I wasn't certain her trust was well-placed.

"Sit in the car, please," I said. "Don't stand outdoors in the drizzle."

“Huh. As if I would.”

Once the others were gone, I sat back down in the hard wooden chair that Evelyn had vacated. The seat was still warm from her body heat. Raine settled in next to me. She didn't ask what this was about, she didn't ask a single question, she just trusted that I knew what I was doing. But I could feel that she was ready for anything, ready to spring into action.

I slid a tentacle across her shoulders, invisible contact. She managed not to flinch, then laughed.

“It's okay, Raine,” I said. “I'm not expecting this to go bad or anything. It's just a delicate question.”

Sarika was scowling at me too, as if expecting trickery. Despite everything I'd done to her, or for her, she still looked at me like something she'd found on the bottom of her shoe. I don't think it was her fault, just her default expression now. In her lap, Whistle's ears were standing on end. He could feel the tension.

“What is this?” Sarika hissed.

“Well, I need to ask Nathan a question. A personal one.”

Badger blinked at me, coming out of his brief headache and sitting up straighter in his chair. “I want to help. Heather. Can I call you that, or should it be Morell? I want to help you, to help somehow, to ... ”

He trailed off at the look in my eyes, the intense concentration — or, what looked like intense concentration. I was actually watching his eyes as I waved my tentacles back and forth, to check if he could see them, even as just a ghostly outline on the edge of his perception. But he couldn't, he didn't even react when I whipped one toward his face and back again.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked.

I sighed. “You can help me by answering a question. We have several things we should probably talk about, but I want to ask you one important thing. I'm just not sure how.”

“Go ahead,” he said, beaming. “I'm an open book.”

Sarika tutted and rolled her eyes. “Stop fawning over her, Nate, she's not an angel.”

“She may as well be,” Nathan said, staring right at me. “She’s the best we’ve got.”

My stomach curdled, but I pushed on; if I tried to address that statement right now, I would lose all my carefully guarded courage. “Badger. Earlier, when you were worried about Evelyn checking you for magical contamination, you looked at me to reassure you. And that’s fine, that’s all right, but you read my answer in my eyes before I even spoke. How did you do that?”

“Ah,” went Raine.

Badger smiled wider, as if confused, laughing awkwardly. “Uhhh, did I do that? It just seemed obvious. Your answer was obvious, I mean. It was on your face. Right there.”

Sarika was frowning at Badger, then frowning at me. Had she picked up on it too, the silent conversation between something on a more instinctive level than human words? Badger had picked up on my response, by instinct.

I tried a different angle. “How does your body feel, Badger?”

“Um, rough?” He laughed again. “Pretty rough, yeah.”

“No, I mean how do you feel about your body? When you woke up in the hospital, did it feel different?”

“Without the ... ” He pointed upwards, out of respect for Sarika’s problem with the name of the Eye. “Yeah, of course it does! I feel better than I have in ages. Better than in years, even! Long before all that! Maybe that’s psychological though, you know? What with ... like ... everything.”

“Badger,” I tried again. “When I fixed you, after the ... well, after the difficult parts, when I had to drill a hole in your head, I had to fix you with whatever I had to hand. You understand? I had to correct parts of your mind, your brain, with whatever made sense. I’m worried you might not feel ... right.”

Badger shrugged, still smiling. He blinked at me through those huge, comedic glasses. “Other than hole in my head and the brain damage, there’s nothing wrong with me. You did good. Seriously. Thank you, again, I can’t say that enough times. I want to help. To help you. Whatever I can do, please.”

I chewed on my tongue, caught in a trap of my own making.

Nathan was suffering, but his suffering appeared mundane.

I had replaced parts of him with parts of me; I'd had no choice, I'd had to fix his lower brain functions, or he would have died. And some of those parts had been abyssal, pieces of me brought back from the infinite dark.

If I had given him a craving for the abyss, but without the frame of reference to understand that craving — let alone the hyperdimensional mathematics to ever approach the kind of bodily changes I had wrought for myself — then I couldn't even imagine how wrong he might feel. And he wouldn't even know.

Maybe he felt it, maybe he didn't; maybe he did, but was unaware.

We had bigger problems than one ex-cultist with brain damage, no matter what personal responsibility I felt here. We had to stop reacting, we had to corner Edward Lilburne — soon, very soon. Felicity's knowledge might be the key to that. Badger, the surviving cultists, all of them, they were a side-show, no matter that I wanted to save them all.

Did I have any right to say it out loud, to make him aware? Did I have a right to leave it unsaid?

What would a merciful angel do? An angel with tentacles at her flanks and a bioreactor in her belly, an angel from the deep, selfish and flawed.

An angel was not a god, after all.

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.2

“Please,” Badger repeated, soft and sincere. “I want to help.”

He had taken my brief silence for doubt, in either his intentions or his limits. His expression pleaded with me across that dingy, cramped sitting room in his sad, desolate bedsit flat, with the strange and fragile dignity won by sacrifice and survival. Somehow I knew that Badger would not throw himself at my feet, or call me messiah. His actions had already proven his allegiance. Big, wet, puppy-dog eyes petitioned from behind his pair of comically thick and pitifully useless glasses, flanked on one side by the massive red crescent of his head wound, stapled shut. He looked back at me from inside a body still recovering from the damage I had inflicted during the effort to save his life — and, perhaps, recovering from the grace that I had imparted to his soul.

Back when Ooran Juh and I had fought over Badger, like a pair of apex predators hissing and clawing over a scrap of meat, those eyes had been full of terror and pain, a human being at the very end of his rope, who had done terrible things for a terrible cause, and knew that his debt was coming due. But now Badger’s eyes seemed clean and clear, almost innocent. I knew better than anybody that Badger was far from innocent.

With the right motivation, Nathan Hobbes could easily become a clear-eyed zealot for a pupating god.

But a god — or a goddess in my case — had to be perfect by definition, or else risk the capricious cruelty and spiteful egotism of a deity dedicated to the darkest corners of human nature. A messiah had to be right, correct, morally or ethically, or at least accurate in their powers of prognostication and foretelling, or otherwise wear the mask of the chosen one while enriching themselves from their followers’ souls and purses alike. A queen had to be strong, just, kind, and wise, all things I couldn’t live up to; either that or accept the reality of brutal warlordism and feudal domination.

I had already rejected that path, wide awake with both eyes open. I was to be a creature of choice, not mere role and nature.

But what about an angel?

Badger himself had said that word, not five minutes ago. Now the seed was sprouting.

"I want to help," Badger said. "Not just you, Heather, but all of you." He nodded to Raine. "Your friends, your group, your followers."

"Family," said Raine, with a wink and a nod.

Sitting on the sofa next to Badger's chair, Sarika snorted, but without real conviction. In her lap, Whistle was listening carefully. He didn't understand the words, but the tone must have reached him.

"Your family, yeah! Yeah!" Badger nodded along with that. He liked that a lot. "Especially Lauren. Lozzie? She goes by Lozzie now, right? We served her brother, and he ... well, what can I say? We all knew. We had no excuse. She deserves an apology, at least. You've given me a second chance, a real second chance, out from under something I couldn't imagine escaping." Was he talking about the Eye, or Alexander? I decided not to ask, because my mind was already in motion. "So I want to help. I want to do something, something real. I know I'm not much, there's not a lot I can do, especially in this state." He gestured at the side of his head, at the stapled wound across a third of his scalp. "I was never in training to become a real mage, I just picked up dribs and drabs here and there, whatever I could. Lots of us did, dabblers. But I must be able to help, somehow. Please, make use of me."

Nathan wanted a leader. Apparently Sarika wasn't enough. But then again, she'd never been a leader either.

He needed that gap filled, or he would find some other way to fill it, some other content to supply meaning for his second chance at life. My mind flicked through alternatives — introduce him to Raine's politics, or to disability activism, or tell him to lose himself in escapism, or return to the beloved mathematics he obviously still cherished, or string him along while hoping he found something right and good and just, all by himself. But I knew that wouldn't work. He needed an angel, and he already had me in mind.

A conceptual space opened up around me, with room to stretch my wings. Pun intended.

What was an angel, really? A servant sent by a god, without free will of her own? That didn't work. I was the adoptive daughter of *Magnus Viglator*, but I wasn't doing the Eye's work here on Earth. Quite the opposite. If I was the Eye's angel, then at best I was correcting the mistakes of an inhuman god, via the empathy and understanding of a human touch.

If I was an angel, then I had a duty to some higher concept. To Maisie? No. Maisie was a person, not an ideal, even if she'd almost become one to me, in private. To the Eye? Obviously not. I used the Eye's powers, but I didn't share ideology with it, if it even had such a thing. To what, then? I wasn't divine, I was flawed and selfish and weird and often made bad decisions — but I wasn't a god, so that was okay. It was okay to have faults, if one did not claim perfection. It was okay to think and choose, because I didn't have a direct line to the truth.

But I was also a thing of the abyss. A self-made angel, with my will written on my flesh in divine change.

Choice. I wasn't the Eye, because I was choosing. Badger had a right to choose as well. Which meant he had a right to know. Which meant I had a duty to tell him.

There, now you've gone and done it, you've redefined yourself as an angel, I told myself. At least your duty is clear now.

I would be the very first to admit this was not the cleanest or most solid foundation on which to build an identity. Understatement of the year. I wasn't deluding myself into a belief that I was really, literally an angel. But Badger needed this. The Skeates had perhaps needed this — maybe things would have gone better if I'd tried this on them in the first place. Maybe all the other surviving cultists would respond better to a semi-divine messenger communicating her sacred geometry, rather than scrawny little Heather Morell insisting she wasn't a goddess while scaring the wits out of them.

Not a neat and tidy identity at all, but down here in the world of flesh and mud, we have to make do with whatever we have to hand. The important thing now was to make it function. And not just for me.

I drew myself up on the uncomfortable wooden chair, raising my chin and spreading my tentacles out to both sides. I was going to have to make it up as I went along, including the poise and grace. Badger must have noticed the shift in my posture, because he shut his mouth and stopped talking. He'd been about to say something else, probably more pleading to be allowed to help. Raine shifted as well, scooting to the side ever so slightly, to yield the centre stage to my coming performance.

"Nathan," I said, making a deliberate choice to use his real name. "Do you recall what I looked like when I fought Ooran Juh?"

Badger broke into a laughing smile again, like he couldn't resist amusement. "How could I forget? It was like watching an angel take shape." There was that word again; I tried not to grimace. "It was like the kind of thing Alexander promised us, back in the early days of the cult, before everything went to shit. Like the manifestations he used to show us in that castle place, the bits of something real, you know? I ... I don't wanna like, assume that I know what you are, but whatever it is, I'm behind it, it's got my support. It's everything that we were supposed to be, and more, better! It was glorious, I can't—"

Sarika hissed, hard and sharp and very unimpressed. "Simp."

But Badger just laughed. "It's true! Sarry, you felt it too, didn't you? It's all true! She's what we were promised, she's the real thing!"

"Woah there, fella," Raine said softly, purring with implicit warning. "Ease down with the worship a bit, yeah?"

But I whispered to Raine from the corner of my mouth, "It's alright, let him do it."

Raine cocked an eyebrow at me. "You sure?" she whispered back.

"I'm sure. Unless he starts praying to me or something. That would be weird."

"What's the plan?" Raine whispered.

"Give him something to cling to."

Raine nodded once and shot me a wink. I was amazed she had so much faith that I could walk this tightrope without tumbling off.

Badger watched our whispered exchange with an innocent, open

look on his face, though I was certain he couldn't hear a thing. Sarika looked at us like we were icons of filth, but then again she looked at everybody that way. Except Whistle.

I cleared my throat and held out one hand toward Raine, then spoke at normal volume. "Raine, could I please borrow your pair of special glasses? I'd like Badger to look through them, for a minute or two."

Raine's eyebrows shot upward. "Ahhhhh, I see where you're going with this. Sure thing." Raine dug around inside her leather jacket and produced her own pair of magically modified glasses. This was only one of the several pairs that Evelyn had created, made from cheap black frames filled with non-prescription plastic lenses. The magical symbols were impossible to completely conceal, but they were etched and scrawled onto the black frames themselves, making them hard to see unless one was inspecting closely. The best we could manage, as far as 'operational security' — which was a very fancy term for not looking like a bunch of cosplayers out in public.

Raine winked at Badger as she handed me the glasses. "You're in for a treat, Badger, my man."

I took the glasses and offered them to Badger, across the table. He accepted them and asked, "You want me to put these on?"

"Yes, but please brace yourself."

Badger nodded, taking off his pair of magnification-only glasses and putting them in his own lap. His hands shook very slightly as he opened the arms of the special glasses, about to put them on. As he did, I stood up and spread my tentacles. He hardly needed to be overawed, he'd already seen me at my absolute limit, fighting Ooran Juh, but it wouldn't hurt to remind him.

Sarika's hand shot out and slapped at the glasses before he could put them on.

"Sorry?" Badger blinked at her. In Sarika's lap, Whistle snuffled and sat up, suddenly alert. But Sarika herself glared at me. In her slack and exhausted face, her eyes burned like twin pits of spent coal in a dead fire, small and hard and dark.

"What is this?" she hissed.

I sighed and flapped my arms against my sides, all my quasi-angelic theatre derailed by her paranoia. “You still don’t trust me?”

“These are magical,” she spat. “I can still tell that much, I’m not fucking blind. What are you doing to Nathan?”

Next to me, Raine laughed. “Ho-hooooo, Sarika. You’ve got it bad for him. So territorial. Come on, we’re not gonna steal your man.”

“Fuck you too,” she spat.

“The glasses allow a human being to see pneuma-somatic matter,” I said. “Raine has worn that pair before. We’ve all worn them before. Well, okay, not me, because I don’t need to. This isn’t a trick, Sarika. Don’t be so silly.” Her glare did not abate. I sighed again, losing patience. Evelyn, Praem, Jan, and July were all waiting for us out by the car. We didn’t have all day.

“You tricked me once before,” she croaked. “In your kitchen. You ... you went into me ... without ... warning.”

“For your own good.”

“Fuck you. You warn him now. Whatever you’re about to do.”

“Sarika,” I said — and managed to sound like a fussy schoolmarm, instead of a warlike angelic presence. “If I wanted to hurt Nathan, or yourself, I wouldn’t need to resort to underhanded trickery, I would just do it. I wouldn’t stand here talking to you. I’d just kill you. You know that.”

Sarika’s defiant glare faltered at last — but not with acceptance. A tiny mote of fear entered her expression. She blinked, twice, eyes turning wet.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” I hissed, putting my face in one hand and then hiccuping, loudly and painfully. I felt like a moron. “I’ve done it again. I’m threatening a disabled woman. I didn’t mean that to sound that way. I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. But it’s true, I don’t need to hoodwink anybody, I’m just trying to be honest!”

“Yeah,” Raine added in a light, breezy tone, like we were discussing favourite brands of tea. “We’re not the CIA trying to assassinate Castro with a pair of booby-trapped glasses here.”

I turned and blinked down at Raine, knocked out of my mortified embarrassment by utter confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, what?” Sarika grunted.

Badger laughed, but I got the sense he didn’t understand the joke either.

“You know,” Raine said, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs. Her grin turned very cheeky. “Secret explosives, poisoned swimsuits, needles in umbrella handles, all that spy stuff. Nah, we’re much more competent than that. Heather’s right, but she’s just not very good at saying it. Sometimes my girl needs to delegate more.” Raine patted my hip, which made me squeak in a very un-angelic manner. “If we wanted to do damage, it’d already be done. I’d have just shot you or something. But hey, you’re safe, you’re with us. Even if you should be in prison.”

Sarika huffed and stared at Raine, but her glower was mostly gone. “You love the sound of your own voice.”

Raine laughed, then winked and shot her a finger gun. “That I do, babe. So do you though, right?”

Badger was just staring at the glasses, but without looking through the lenses. “These allow you to see spirit flesh? For real?”

“Mmhmm.” Raine nodded. “Evee says we shouldn’t keep them on for very long. Don’t use ‘em too often. I tried wearing them for a whole morning this one time, and it did mess me up a bit. Screws with your head.”

I stared down at Raine, shocked. “You didn’t tell me about that. Raine, that’s not good for you!”

Raine shrugged. “I was cool by the time you got back from class.”

“Still!” I tutted.

Sarika spoke up, voice like a handful of gravel. “You’re seeing something that the human brain isn’t meant to. Isn’t wired for. It’s hardly surprising.”

“Well put.” Raine gave her a respectful nod. Sarika waved that away.

She had a point. Normally it was only non-humans who could see pneuma-somatic flesh. And what did that make me?

An angel, I reminded myself. Let’s stick with an angel.

“Badger,” I said. “Put the glasses on and look at me, please.”

Sarika removed her hand from the glasses, shaking slightly. Badger, though, turned and offered the glasses to her instead. “Sorry, do you wanna go first? Just to check that it’s—”

“Absolutely fucking not,” she spat. “You couldn’t pay me to look through those. Get them away from me.”

Raine laughed. “Smart woman. Stay uninvolved, yeah?”

Sarika snorted. “You’d probably kill me if I tried.”

“Badger,” I said, raising my voice slightly. “The glasses. Please?”

Badger nodded, finally slipped the glasses on over his eyes, and then just stared, awestruck, jaw hanging open.

I spread my tentacles in a six-pointed star-halo. For some reason I didn’t quite understand, I added my hands too, down by my sides, opening my palms and turning them forward. *Homo abyssus* on display, but still a work in progress.

Badger stared. Raine kept quiet, waiting for the reaction. Sarika gave Badger a sidelong look, unimpressed. Whistle decided none of this was important to his lordly concerns, so he laid his head back in Sarika’s lap and closed his little doggy eyes again.

“You’ve seen this before,” I said to Badger.

“Yes ... but ... it’s still beautiful.”

“Down,” Raine said in a tone of gentle warning.

“Yes,” Sarika hissed through her teeth. “She’s what, ten years younger than you, Nathan? Stop staring like a pervert.”

I sighed a little sigh. “Please don’t make this—”

But Badger got there first. It was the first time since seeing him again that he’d shown anything even approaching irritation or anger. He frowned at Raine and then at Sarika, his furrowed brow pulling on the taut flesh around his massive head wound.

“Don’t make this something it’s not,” he snapped at Sarika. “It’s beautiful, and not like that. Don’t sully this, don’t make it, you know, about that.” He gestured at me with one hand. “As if I would ever, Sarika. She saved both our fucking lives, and she didn’t have

to. She could have put a bullet in my head and be done with me. She didn't. I'm not going to disrespect her like that. So stop."

Sarika held his gaze for a moment, then turned her face away without saying anything. She crossed her arms. Sulking.

Raine cleared her throat. "Sorry, mate. Making assumptions and all. Just kinda protective of my girl."

Badger nodded to Raine. A moment of strange understanding passed between them. I tried not to think about that. Had I just gained another sworn bodyguard? I hoped not.

"As I was saying, you've seen this before." I repeated myself through a strained smile, trying to get solid ground beneath my feet. "Actually, you saw me in a more advanced state than this, with more modifications, the sorts of things I can't do without inflicting short term damage on myself. Do you understand what you're looking at?"

Badger shook his head. "Not really. Please, though, I'm listening."

I wet my lips. My plan hadn't extended this far, so I swallowed a hiccup and just kept moving. "I've modified my body, with pneumatic flesh and hyperdimensional mathematics, to better match what I am inside. I've been ... out, not Outside, but beyond all the spheres of reality, in the sort of interstitial space between. I call it the abyss. It's not somewhere you go with your body, but with your soul. It's impossible to describe with language, it's not *like* anything else, but it's sort of like a dark, endless ocean. That's the best metaphor. When I came back, I was different. Or maybe I'd always been different and that was just a catalyst. I don't know, it doesn't matter. What matters is that it feels right, it is right, when I use what I can do to bring my body closer to *homo abyssus*, the thing I was out there, the truth under my skin." I took a deep breath. It felt so strange to tell a former enemy about what I really was, to reveal this vulnerable truth, so private and personal. But Badger deserved to understand, in case my worst suspicions were right. "Does that make sense to you?"

"I think so," Badger murmured. He was looking at me with awe in his eyes.

Sarika snorted. She spoke without looking at us. "What does your personal dysphoria have to do with any of this?"

I lowered my arms and my tentacles. “Badger. Nathan. When I pulled you out of the clutches of ... um ... our ocular mutual acquaintance—”

“Niiiiiice,” Raine whispered. I did my best to ignore her.

“—your lower brain functions were ruined. The pieces of equation which define them were all tangled up, smeared in a big mess. I guess because that’s where it was grasping you. Sort of.” I sighed. “This is all metaphor, too.”

Badger nodded along. “I’m following so far.”

Sarika looked uncomfortable, perhaps slightly nauseated, but she was listening closely as well.

“When I repaired you so we could restart your heart, I had to use myself as the template. I don’t know anything about how human lower brain functions work, so I couldn’t rewrite you on the fly, I could only copy what I already had.”

Badger stopped nodding and blinked several times, eyes made huge by the pneuma-somatic seeing glasses. I think it had finally hit him.

Sarika spoke up first. “What are you saying? Morell, explain.”

“I’m saying that I may have copied pieces of *homo abyssus* onto Badger. I don’t know, I can’t be sure. I had to use myself as the template for repairing his brain, but I’m not a human being anymore, not really, if I ever was in the first place.” I swallowed hard and found my mouth had gone dry, and forced myself to focus on Badger, on Nathan Hobbes. “When I first came back from the abyss, I couldn’t ... it was right ... didn’t feel right ... I was ... ”

I trailed off as my memory turned traitor.

I always tried so hard to never dwell too much on those first few moments when I’d returned from my journey down into the abyss: the disgust of finding myself entwined with throbbing, wet, warm meat; the glugging, slurping chemical factory sloshing away in my belly, full of acid and bile and excrement; the assault of blunt, alien senses like spiked sledgehammers pounding at the fragile thing of mutable gossamer which I’d brought back with me; the hooting ape noises and angles all wrong and flapping meat and the air itself searing the inside of my lungs.

Not to mention the long, slow, painful ascent back up, out of that

dysphoria. The inexplicable urges to climb things that I didn't have the body strength for. The sobbing failure of going swimming and finding myself clumsy, inelegant, apish. The sheer useless inadequacy of my own form, weak and soft and static. The yearning for body parts I didn't have. The bruises and internal injuries I'd given myself with my first fumbling attempts to make tentacles. And the knowledge I so rarely expressed: that I would have gladly endured so much more pain just for the merest glimpse of the graceful perfection I'd been, out there in the endless dark. I would have accepted any level of pain, in return for the smallest sip.

The ghost of abyssal dysphoria reached up my spine with a shudder of self-disgust. It all came creeping back.

With no concern as to where I was or who was watching, I pulled all my tentacles in tight and wrapped them around my body, squeezing myself hard. I hugged two of them to my chest, holding on tight to what I was.

These were real, these were proof. Most people might not be able to see them, but I could. They were elegant and beautiful and dangerous. This was me.

"Heather?" Raine said my name with soft concern.

"She all right?" Sarika croaked.

Badger just watched in respectful quiet.

After a moment, the shudder passed. I took three deep breaths and focused on the mechanical act of speaking, not the meaning of the words. "When I came back from the abyss, my body felt wrong. Inhabiting an unaltered human body felt wrong. It still does, even now. That's why I've given myself these extra parts. What you saw when I fought Ooran Juh, that's closer to what I'm meant to be. But it's never going to be enough. I can never be what I was out there." I swallowed hard and tried not to hear myself. I had to say this, for Badger's sake. "There is a slim chance that I may have inadvertently transplanted some of that abyssal dysphoria onto you."

And in this absurdly serious, oh so sombre moment, Badger broke into a big smile of genuine happiness and gratitude.

"Better squid than dead," he said.

"Nathan!" Sarika hissed, as if he'd just voiced a deeply offensive

slur. She looked like she wanted to slap him.

“Hey, I mean it!” Badger protested. He quickly turned back to me. “What I saw was beautiful. And before Sarri says something else, I don’t mean in a sexual way, forget that. If you’ve given me even the smallest fraction of what I saw, by accident, I ... I won’t reject it.”

I sighed, screwed my eyes up, and rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Badger, it’s not a blessing. I nearly pulled my own eyeballs out in disgust! Often I forgot to breathe. Being in the wrong body is not fun. You don’t deserve that, I don’t care what you did in the past, nobody deserves that ... disconnection.”

“I’m still honoured,” he said. “I mean it.”

I flopped my hands against my sides in defeat. “I hope you still think that if you wake up with a desire to peel your own skin off. Sorry.”

Badger laughed softly, politely, and very awkwardly. The old Badger was still under there, no doubt about it. “I’ll keep that in mind. For real.”

“See you do,” I almost snapped at him, but then forced myself to take a deep breath. “Look, I might not be able to do anything about it, but if you do feel anything like that, if you look down at your body one day and start thinking that you should have tentacles, or you start dreaming about the ocean every night, then call me. Understand? You don’t have hyperdimensional mathematics, you won’t be able to solve it by yourself — oh, who am I kidding, I haven’t really solved it either! But at least we’ll be able to talk about it. Whatever you do, don’t you dare hurt yourself because you feel wrong, not when I’m here as an example.”

Badger nodded, very seriously, despite the blissful smile on his face.

“Huh,” Sarika grunted. “Wish I could have gotten tentacles, instead of this.” She flopped a weakened hand against her own half-functional leg. Whistle cracked open his eyes and licked at her fingers. Sarika tutted at that, but she didn’t stop the Corgi.

“No,” I muttered. “No you don’t.”

“Of course I fucking well do,” Sarika said in a soft grumble, not even looking at me.

I let that one drop. Maybe she was being honest, maybe she did

understand; she'd been in the Eye's grip, she knew the price, maybe she would prefer abyssal dysphoria to lifelong disability. It was not my place to judge that.

"Nathan," I said. "I mean what I just said. If you need help, ask me for it. You can hardly be expected to redeem yourself if you're floundering in that kind of pain."

To my surprise, Badger gave me a thumbs up.

Did you give an angel a thumbs up? Maybe in Badger-world.

"And ... don't call me a divine being, or 'my queen', or anything else like that. I know what you must be thinking. It's one thing to be called that by people who don't understand, but you were a cultist, you've seen things from Outside, and I'm not like those things. So don't you call me that or I'll ... stop talking to you and ignore you."

"Right. Right," said Badger. "Just Heather, then."

"Just Heather," I said.

I cleared my throat and started to feel very awkward now that we were trailing off, the subject spent at last. Raine gestured for the glasses back from Badger. He hesitated for a moment, until she gave him a look, then he relented and finally took them off. He did seem a little disappointed as he handed them back, no longer able to see my tentacles in all their glory. I sat down and tried to return his smile, as he fumbled to get his regular glasses back onto his face, blinking like a newborn owl.

"That's all," I said, feeling a bit lame. "That's all I wanted to say."

But Badger wasn't done yet. "I want to help you."

I sighed. "This again?"

Raine clucked her tongue. "I think he's serious, Heather."

"I am serious, completely serious," Badger said. "I don't know what I can do to help, but I want to. I can talk to my old companions from the cult, everybody who's left, all the survivors, and tell them you can help them! I'll make them see! But I'm sorry, that's not enough."

Sarika was frowning at him. "Not enough?"

Badger shook his head, pressing his lips together in a kind of irritation. "The cult and Alexander, Ooran Juh, Edward. All of them! I've lived my whole life as prey, running into predators. And I kept trying to be one myself, but it was wrong. I was wrong. I had a lot of time to think about all this, in the hospital. I don't deserve any of this. I don't deserve to be alive. I don't deserve to be free. I should be in prison, you're right about that." He swallowed hard. The smile was gone now, but not behind a mask. I suspected that Nathan Hobbes would never again be capable of duplicity. "I was never a real mage, but I'm still ... capable."

I shifted in my chair, deeply uncomfortable. "Is this coming from you, or bits of me I've transplanted onto you?"

"Does it matter? I'm right here, all the same."

I had to look away from him. Even Sarika had no answer to this new and honest-hearted zealotry.

"I don't like to use people," I said, lying. Abyssal ruthlessness would use him in a heartbeat — but for what?

Sarika snorted. I shot her a look. She stared me down.

"I'm alright with using people," said Raine. "Something comes up, Badger me' boy, and I'll keep you in mind."

"What are your plans now?" I blurted out. "Regardless of us, I mean. Once you've recovered a bit and figured out your limits, what are you going to do with yourself, Nathan?"

Badger stared at me in surprise, then let out a sad laugh and trailed off with a sigh. He was smiling when he spoke, but there was little joy in his tone.

"Well," he said. "I lost my job weeks and weeks ago now. Lost almost everybody I used to know, from in the cult and out of it, too. Been estranged from my parents for years. I'm on disability now, did Raine tell you that? They sent one of those assessor blokes round to the hospital just before I got out. Sarika just showed him the newspaper article about me drilling a hole in my head." He laughed again. "Great stuff. Raine had a word with him too, seemed to convince him I wasn't swinging the lead. Still," he sighed. "Dunno if that'll pay the rent much longer. Probs not."

"What'd you used to do?" Raine asked him. "You never mentioned

that before.”

Badger blinked at her several times before answering, as if he was having trouble recalling. “Worked at the bottling plant, the big one just west of the ring road. Most stable job I’d had in years, but I was just a temp, and I don’t reckon I’d be able to stay on my feet for that long, not like this.” He gestured at his head, then at the single crutch leaning against the big armchair. At least he laughed softly, putting a brave face on it. “Have to find something else to do.”

And that mathematics doctorate, gathering dust next to his bed. I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“Hey,” Raine said, “maybe you can join Sarika with her budding Minecraft Youtuber career. Do a collab or something? Is that what they call it these days?”

“Like fuck he can,” Sarika grunted through her teeth. “This moron would drive off half my audience.”

“Awww, come on,” Raine said with a shit-eating grin. “You can’t have that many sims who’d get mad at you having your boyfriend on screen, surely?”

Sarika gave her a glower worthy of Evelyn herself, but filled with so much more bitterness.

“Raine,” I hissed, cringing with second-hand embarrassment. “Please, can you not?”

“What?” Raine laughed, spreading her hands in a faux-innocent shrug.

Sarika hissed from the other side of the room, like a coiled snake. “I may be a cripple who will never again perform magic, but I wager that I can train Whistle to bite through your ankles.”

Badger snorted. Whistle looked up at the sound of his name, little Corgi ears twisting about. I gaped in surprise — had Sarika just made an actual joke?

Raine seemed to think so. “Wheeeey!” she went. “There she is!” Raine put her hands up in mock-surrender. “I better back down, I don’t want to be savaged by such a highly-trained canine.”

“Huh,” Sarika grunted. She still didn’t smile, but at least she wasn’t blushing. She petted Whistle behind the ears in return for his

service.

Badger cleared his throat and nodded to me, still on the verge of laughter. Perhaps he'd caught the impatient look on my face. "I'm serious though, Heather. I want to do something useful."

I resisted the urge to sigh. Instead, I summoned up that image of myself as an angel. A be-tentacled angel from the deep, from dark places beyond human experience. I had a duty. It was the right thing to do.

"Badger, your job right now is to look after yourself," I said. "You're no use to me if you don't rest, recover, and heal. We need you to speak to your former cultist companions, yes, but they will need to see you healthy, or as close to it as you can get. After that, I don't know, but I certainly won't be making any use of you at all if you hurt yourself by trying to run before you can walk."

Badger nodded eagerly, grinning wide.

"And if you lie to me, if you pretend to be more healthy than you are, if you push yourself, then I will be disappointed. I will be unhappy. I will not approve. And I will know."

It took an effort of will not to hiccup. I was blushing, too. I wasn't cut out for this. It would have been easier if Badger wasn't so eager and happy now.

Badger controlled his smile, taking me seriously again. "I'll do my best."

Sarika snorted. "Bloody right you will."

"And ..." I hesitated, staring into Badger's eyes. Did he need this, or would it hurt? "Maybe start thinking about maths. But not the kind that I was taught."

Badger frowned at me, as if he didn't get it. Maybe he didn't. Maybe the thought would come back to him later, lying in bed next to his own past. I'd unlocked the door, but it was up to him to turn the handle.

It took a supreme effort of will to project myself as an angel, in command and wielding power on behalf of a higher principle. Was that even the right thing to say to Badger? Was it right to use my assumed position to force him to take care of himself? I hoped so. The last thing I wanted was for him to push himself too hard and

get hurt in the process, using himself up for my sake. That wasn't his purpose. I refused to use him for that. He would make good on his own sins. That was his purpose now.

"You know, Tenny's really gonna miss Whistle," Raine said, gazing at the dog in Sarika's lap. He looked up at the sound of his name, over at Raine, turning his head from side to side in doggy curiosity. "Yeah, that's right, I'm talking about you, you good boy. They really took a liking to each other, you know?"

"He might miss her, too," Badger said. His smile turned oddly sad when he glanced at his dog.

Raine made a show of stroking her own chin in thought. "Maybe an arrangement can be made?"

Sarika grunted like an angry Corgi herself. "He's not coming to fucking live with you lot."

"Who?" Raine asked. "Badger, or Whistle?"

"Badger," she said. "Obviously."

Raine just spread her hands and smiled with smug surrender. Badger bit his lower lip in thought. The seed had been planted, now to let it grow by itself. Clever Raine. I admired her so much, she was so good at this, especially compared to me. She had the courage to just go ahead and say it out loud, then act like it was all a joke.

"We have already got Kim living with us," Raine said. "Not sure that would work."

"Ex-cultists anonymous," said Sarika. If she meant it as a joke, it sounded like a very bitter one.

I cleared my throat gently. "I'm not certain that would be appropriate for Kimberly. She doesn't want to see anybody from the cult, ever again."

Sarika huffed. "Not like I ever knew the girl, anyway."

Raine shrugged. "Maybe Tenny could get a pet of her own? Whistle could have a friend, too."

"Perhaps that would be a good idea," I said, forcing a smile. Tenny was really, really going to miss Whistle, that much was true. Or maybe this would be a good excuse for her to finally perfect her

human disguise she'd attempted once, to come around to Badger's flat to visit the dog. Or maybe that was too optimistic. Maybe we should buy her a dog.

"Kimberly Kemp," Badger said suddenly, his voice hushed and serious. Something snagged in my chest, a hook inside my heart.

"Yes?" I said, suddenly wary. "That's her name."

"I remember her," he said, nodding to me. No smile anymore. "I'd like to speak with her, if that's possible?"

"What for?" Raine asked before I could say anything. Her casual tone carried a warning.

"To apologise," Badger said. "To ... to offer ... I don't know what! Something." He shrugged, at a loss.

I cleared my throat gently. "I suspect the best apology you can give her is letting her live her life without ever having to think about this again."

Badger blinked and swallowed, seemingly hurt by that. But he nodded. "Okay. Alright. Fair enough. Could you at least ask her though, maybe? If you think it would be alright? I want her to know ... well, I never even knew her, not really. But there's ... there's nobody left to apologise to."

For a moment, all of Badger's inner peace fell away, to show the core of self-critique and self-horror. He had to say sorry, to somebody.

I sighed heavily, letting my emotions show plainly on my face. I had a duty to protect Kimberly, too, didn't I?

"I'll ask her, but I'm not making any promises."

"Thank you," Badger said. He bowed his head in thanks.

I resisted the urge to tut, but I didn't tell him off. Instead I got to my feet and filled my lungs and stretched out my tentacles. Raine followed suit, sensing my intentions.

"The others are waiting for us outdoors," I said. "I really think it's time we got going. Is there anything either of you need?"

There wasn't, at least not right then. Sarika was going to stay with Badger for the rest of the day, though strictly speaking he didn't

require any company to help him out, to stop him from falling over or banging his head or hurting himself, but we left them to it. She had her crutches and Badger had his pills. Raine didn't even make any jokes about what the two of them might get up to together; frankly it was none of our business, and I doubted that sort of relationship lay between them anyway. Raine made sure they knew to call us if anything happened, and offered to drive back over to take Sarika home later in the day. Sarika made some fussy noises about calling a taxi instead. Badger stood up and shook my hand — that was a good sign, I thought. One shakes hands with an equal, not an object of worship.

We both petted Whistle good bye for now, then took our leave of Badger's cramped and depressing flat.

Once we stepped out into the shallow stairwell of bare concrete and metal railings, and got the door firmly shut behind us, I finally let go of a psychological breath I'd been holding the whole time. At last I could acknowledge the sheer tension in my shoulders and back, the tightness in my tentacles, and the throbbing headache at the sides of my skull, a headache that for once had nothing to do with self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics.

A hand fell on my shoulder and squeezed hard, then travelled up the back of my neck to massage my scalp and mess up my hair. I almost purred.

"Hey, Heather," Raine murmured. "You did real good in there."

"Real *well*," I corrected her grammar. "But thank you."

"I know what I said, Heather." Raine chuckled softly. "My little seraph, doing good."

I winced and tutted, pulling away from Raine's hand and nudging her with a tentacle. She laughed and grinned at me in the dim half-light of the concrete stairwell. The only illumination came from a single long window on the opposite wall, filled with frosted glass. I could see a couple of vague human shapes standing on the opposite side of the road, next to the red lump of Raine's car. Jan and July, waiting for us.

"Don't take the whole angel thing too seriously," I said. "Please. It was just what they needed. I think."

"But you are my little angel," Raine purred, wrapping an arm

around my shoulders. “A biblically accurate one, too, just how I like ‘em.”

“Tch, Raine.” I huffed as we stepped toward the stairs. “How did you know I was thinking of angels, anyway? Badger said it, not me.”

“I can read you like an open book,” she said. “Tends to happen when you love somebody. Well, not all the time, I guess. That would be unfair.”

“I love you too, Raine,” I murmured. “Let’s go be proactive, okay?”

“You got it, boss angel. You got it.”

= =

Felicity called us later that day, on the border between afternoon and evening, right on time at five forty-five. At least the reclusive and elusive mage was keeping her promises, so far.

Outdoors, the drizzling rain had trickled off, but the clouds hadn’t cleared, growing thicker and heavier and darker in the sagging sky above the city. Sharrowford was damp and dripping, verdant with summer life, but somehow rotten all over, wrapped in a thin film of cold that refused to lift. I knew it was only the weather, only natural, but I couldn’t shift the feeling that Felicity’s phone call was reaching out from somewhere dark and forgotten, to wrap Number 12 Barnslow Drive in this unseasonal chill and oppressive gloom.

We switched on the lights in the kitchen, the front room, the little utility room, and the magic workshop. We had hot tea and cold cake. Praem even put Evelyn’s shawl in the dryer to warm it up, then wrapped it around her shoulders. None of that seemed to help.

Raine fielded the call, took point, did the talking at first.

“Heyyyy there Flissy girl,” she said, talking loudly with the phone itself sitting before her on the kitchen table, set to speaker mode. “Right on time! That’s what I like to see, I do like a punctual woman.”

The rest of us waited, holding our collective breath. We’d been through this process before, some of us twice. This time we’d had enough forewarning to prepare in advance. Evelyn and I were sitting next to each other, my hand already wormed into Evelyn’s to grasp her clammy palm and keep her steady. She’d insisted on

being present for this, regardless of the personal cost. Raine was just across the table, in charge for now. Praem was standing by her, ready to lean down to the phone and leash whatever demons spoke from Felicity's end of the call. Sevens was on her feet next to me, in her familiar blood-goblin mask, peering over the edge of the table. I had one tentacle wrapped around her waist, just for mutual comfort.

Zheng was lurking about, but she probably wouldn't be needed, at least not right now. Lozzie was keeping well clear, upstairs with Tenny. Jan and July had gone home — this really was none of their concern.

Raine's greeting floated off into the air, as if absorbed by the gloom, muffled by some invisible veil emanating from the phone.

A wet click of parting lips, an intake of breath.

For a dizzying moment neither of those sounds seemed remotely human, as if they were made by poor mimicry of human lips and human lungs, as if the thing on the other end of that phone call was reconstituting itself into human form, having forgotten that it needed to talk with our tongue. My tentacles curled inward and my body prepared to flinch, prepared not for Felicity's voice, but Aym's, that of Felicity's weird little parasite-demon — or for something far worse. Who was to say that Felicity herself was human any more? Mages did seem to end up like that.

"Uh," said Felicity. "Hello, Raine. Um, thank you. Yes, I didn't want to ... keep you waiting, of course."

The words crackled from the phone's speaker, distorted slightly by the low quality of the land-line connection to Felicity's isolated, occulted home. Her voice was blurred into a permanent low mumble by the burn scarring across the left corner of her lips.

Felicity's voice, normal and human, though surrounded by a black void.

Just my imagination, I told myself. You can't hear a void.

"Wonderful!" Raine said. She was grinning and leaning back, playing the part physically to lend weight to her tone. "Now, let's not beat around the bush, let's get straight down to business, yeah? You've got something for us?"

“In a manner of speaking.”

Felicity’s low half-mumble was difficult to read at the best of times, even face to face. That wasn’t her fault. But there was such a shuddering, intimate horror behind those words, a feeling she couldn’t conceal. She followed up with a difficult, dry swallow, and said no more.

Raine shared a sceptical look across the table with myself and Evelyn. Evee rolled her eyes and gestured angrily into the air with one hand. I doubted it was accurate sign language, but her meaning was plain enough.

“Felicity, this is Heather,” I spoke up. “What’s wrong?”

Felicity panted once, twice, three times, but said nothing. In the silence around her I could hear rain on glass, the rattling of roof tiles, and the crackle of a distant fireplace. A lit fire, indoors, in the middle of summer? Maybe she really was exuding this sudden cold.

“Flissy, Flissy, Flissy,” Raine said, letting a laugh into her voice. “Come on, you wanted to call us, right? You’ve got something on how we might be able to find Edward’s house, yeah? You spoke to your demon friend?”

That was the entire purpose of this phone call. The last time we’d spoken with Felicity she had agreed to speak with her difficult parasite-demon, about the spells that kept her own manor house hidden from human eyes, spells she claimed not to fully understand, laid down before she had inherited the house. She had no idea how they really worked. But Aym did.

“Y-yes. Yes, yes I did.” Felicity’s voice returned, growing in strength and confidence again. “She— I’m sorry it took longer than I thought, she is ... difficult, even when I’m being ... uh ... even when ... ” Felicity took a deep breath and seemed to gather herself. “Yes, to cut a long story short, Aym gave me several details. She recalls when the spells were woven, or at least claims to. She said it was uh ... a combination of basic geometrical principles along with the occlusion processes found in the *Manus Cruenta*. There is a copy of that book in the library here, so that much is probably true. But I can’t see how to scale any of those up to the necessary size. If I could, then I might be able to unravel them in return, and then find this house you’re looking for. Aym ... Aym says ... well, um ... ”

"Manus Cruenta," Evelyn snapped. "How would that work? That specifically calls for peacock blood. You'd never get enough for a whole building. If it was human beings, fine, I could understand. Sounds like nonsense."

"I— I know!" Felicity grew agitated suddenly — maybe at Evee's voice. "Aym won't— she won't— and I can't figure it out, I—"

Patter-patter-patter went bare feet on stone. Felicity's voice froze, dead quiet, punctuated by the creak of a chair under a sudden load of extra weight.

A nightmare scraping joined us in the room, scratching from the speaker like knives on stone, a twisted scrap of noise pretending to be a little girl.

"That's because you're a failure of a human being, Flissy!" said Aym. She giggled, a sound like wet blades rubbing together. "No longer human. Disqualified."

Aym left as quickly as she'd joined, a dark giggle vanishing into the stone-lined hallway that I could see in my mind's eye behind Felicity. Unshod feet padded off into the dark once more. She was quick, quicker than Praem could react to snap a warning down the phone. Smart demon.

Evelyn was sweating, I could feel it on her palm, gone clammy and cold. She was staring at the phone.

For a long time, silence.

Then, eventually, Felicity swallowed hard, like a woman surfacing from a nightmare, sweating and shaking in the dark.

"Aym has named a price," she said. "For the rest of the magical procedure. She claims to remember how to make it work. But she has a demand."

"Ahhhhh shit," said Raine.

"No," Evelyn said through her teeth.

"Twenty minutes' private conversation with Evelyn Saye," said Felicity, in a voice like she was pronouncing her own death sentence.

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.3

Raine's phone lay on the kitchen table like a chunk of occult meteorite, radiating waves of suffocating dread into the unseasonal gloom which pressed against the walls and windows of our home. I would not have been surprised if the wooden surface of the table had begun to smoulder and blacken under the pressure of that aching void. Silence imposed itself on us after Felicity had delivered terms — Aym's terms, her demand, her price for the spell that might unravel the secret of Edward's hiding place.

Outdoors, the rain started up again, heavier than the drizzle earlier in the day. Fat raindrops drummed on the roof tiles, a growing static filling the dead air.

On the other end of the phone, Felicity didn't even seem to be breathing.

I had to bite my tongue to hold back a hiss.

All she'd said was "twenty minutes' private conversation with Evelyn Saye", and then fallen silent. Nothing supernatural or unnatural had happened. Nobody had cast any spells or uttered any scraps of broken Latin. Nothing half-hidden had shifted in the corner of my vision. Nothing had climbed out of the screen of the phone. The brief shared silence was probably just shock, or exasperation, or anxiety.

But abyssal instinct whispered inappropriate and nonsensical warnings, down in my brain stem — that the object on the table was a lie in plastic and metal and toughened glass, not truly a mobile phone at all, despite the cheery purple background of the call screen and the mildly insulting name which Raine had given to Felicity's contact number. My tentacles bunched and tightened, ready to spring forward and sweep the phone onto the floor, like it was a live bomb or a toxic slug, a vile intrusion that should be removed from the presence of my pack this instant. That gut feeling I'd brought back from the endless dark, it was screaming at me that

something here was wrong.

In a handful of seconds I was shaking and sweating, flushed with adrenaline.

Raine must have noticed, because when she lifted her eyes from the silent phone, she tilted her head at me with a concerned frown. She mouthed my name. ‘Heather?’

I shook my head and screwed up my eyes and swallowed hard. My throat hurt from holding back the hiss.

Was Felicity really calling us from some rotting old manor house up in Cumbria? It felt like that phone call was a pinprick hole leading to a dark and dripping void, a place full of slavering maws and lurking predators and toxic fog, somewhere not unlike the abyss, or Wonderland. But as I concentrated on that thought, the sounds from the other end of the call seemed to filter slowly back. The patter of rain on windows, the creak of beams in the wind, the soft crackle and pop of wood burning in a fireplace. I heard Felicity’s lips part with a wet click, followed by a shaking, nervous intake of breath.

Abyssal instinct eased down, no longer aching to lash out and smash the phone to pieces. That would have been very rude to Raine, after all. I forced down my own deep breath, telling myself that I was just incensed by the threat to Evelyn’s emotional and psychological well-being.

The alternative was too bizarre to consider. For practical purposes we were talking to a human being, even if she was a mage, who really did physically exist, sitting in a house about a hundred and thirty miles north of Sharrowford.

I wasn’t the important factor here. Evelyn was.

She looked about ready to break Raine’s phone as well, though she showed it differently. She had gone completely still. Her hand had turned clammy in mine, her eyes looked like cut-out holes in wet paper, and her jaw was clenched hard with suppressed disgust, or anger, or worse.

“Evee?” I whispered.

I squeezed her hand too, but she didn’t look at me. She half-nodded sideways, an acknowledgement and a dismissal in one gesture. Still staring at the phone, at Felicity. I was about to step in, perhaps by

taking her face in my hand to turn her away, when she drew a deep breath and resumed negotiations.

“Define ‘private conversation’,” said Evelyn.

It wasn’t a question. She delivered her demand with all the imperious power of a warlord on her throne, a lady who was used to be obeyed in every matter, in a tone that said Felicity had already failed her.

If Evelyn had turned that tone on me, I think I would have curled up and died on the spot, like an insect exposed to an open flame.

Felicity finally inhaled again, perhaps relieved she hadn’t been instantly condemned to a slow and painful traitor’s death. On the other end of the call, I heard her swallow with a very dry throat before she stammered out a reply in her habitual half-mumble, muffled by her own scarred lips.

“E-Evelyn and Aym, alone. No— nobody else is allowed to overhear. No eavesdropping. Private conversation. That’s all she means, I think. She didn’t specify anything else, just that it had to be private. I-I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, I—”

Evelyn snapped hard, drowning out the apology, lips twisting like she’d caught a foul scent. “And what does the vile shit-stain of a demon wish to discuss?”

“I ... ” Felicity paused.

I blinked, a hiss trying to crawl up my throat again.

She was about to lie to us.

I couldn’t possibly have known that. The strange feeling passed as quickly as it had stolen over me. Abyssal instinct was making me paranoid; I did not possess a built-in pneuma-somatic lie detector, that was nonsense. All abyssal instinct really knew was that Felicity the mage was deeply uncomfortable at answering that specific question.

“I-I don’t know,” she said after a heartbeat, speaking too fast, her natural mumble blurring her words worse than before. “She didn’t tell me. She didn’t say. If she had said then I would let you know. You know that, don’t you? I-I would let you know, I would do— do anything to help, to—”

Raine laughed, fake-soft, a razor blade hidden in a blossom. “Quit while you’re ahead, Fliss.”

A hard swallow from the other end of the phone, followed by, “Right. Right. Of course, Raine.”

I glanced at Eevee again. She was staring at the phone like it owed her an explanation.

“You don’t have to do this,” I murmured, trying to catch her eye. “Eevee, you don’t have to. I can ... find a way. Another way.”

But Evelyn ignored me. For Felicity, she snorted. “All right then, let’s get this nonsense over with. Put Aym on the phone.” Eevee gestured to Praem with her free hand. “Praem, Heather, both of you help me up please. I’ll do it in the workshop, there’s no sense bugging about getting the kitchen door closed and having everybody else stand around in the front room.”

Praem left her post at Raine’s side and went to step around the end of the table, bustling along in her maid dress. I rose to my feet with Eevee’s hand in mine, preparing to help her up by wrapping a tentacle around her shoulders and another one touching her waist. She didn’t even flinch, which worried me even more. Was she steeling herself for this? Gone numb inside?

I leaned in closer to Eevee, about to whisper that she didn’t have to do this. As soon as we were beyond earshot of the phone, I would put a stop to this. I couldn’t live with the result if she put herself at psychological risk for my sake. Aym had been a weird thing when I’d once spoken to her alone — or rather, been spoken to by her. She had hit me with useless attempts to undermine my self-confidence, weak mockery that didn’t strike a nerve so much as just irritate. But she obviously had a ruinous and complex effect on Felicity. Every instinct in me rebelled against allowing her to be alone with Evelyn, even across the thin electromagnetic connection of a phone call.

“Um,” Felicity said, in the tone of a lowly wretch about to inform their monarch of a natural disaster. “N-no ... ”

Eevee froze halfway to her feet, glaring at the phone. “No?”

“Aym ... Aym meant ... means ... in person. Face to face. Alone in a room, with you.”

Raine slumped back in her chair, a grin on her face, shaking her head. “You gotta be kidding me.”

“Unacceptable,” said Praem, crisp and clean and clear. I couldn’t have agreed more. Down by my side, Seven-Shades-of-Small-and-Shrill made a low gurgle of disapproval, showing all her teeth to the blank face of the phone.

Evelyn, on the other hand, just stared, wide eyed.

“Evee?” I murmured her name.

The colour drained from her face.

For a split-second I thought she was terrified. The tentacle around her shoulders tightened in support, while the one at her waist slipped around to hold her steady. My other tentacles twitched, aching to raise a protective cage around her. A bit redundant, as this assault was emotional rather than physical. I was halfway through turning back to the phone, about to hiss at Felicity, when Evelyn went off like a slow-fuse bomb.

“You. Fucking. Underhanded. Subhuman. Filth,” she spat at the phone, actually stepping forward and smacking her cane against the edge of the table, almost skinning her knuckles. “You think you’re going to worm your way into another visit to my home? You think I would let you within a hundred fucking meters of this building ever again?”

Felicity stammered. “I-I-I- n-no, i-it’s not me, n-not—”

“I would sooner have you flayed and gutted and stick your corpse on a stake in some Outside nightmare-dimension than spend twenty minutes alone in a room with you, you fucking waste of skin!”

“Evee, Evee!” I said, terrified at her sudden, shaking rage. She was cold and hot at the same time, utterly focused, suddenly covered in cold sweat. If Felicity had been in the room with us then, I had the distinct impression that Evelyn would have killed her — or more accurately, had her killed, without a second thought. “Evee, it’s okay, it’s okay. Evee? Evee?”

“Not me! Not me!” Felicity was saying, almost squealing like she was being tortured. I could hear tiny, hiccuping sobs and a sound like nails pulling at her own face.

“Oh, is that right?” Evelyn drooled toxic sarcasm. “You’re going to

come down here and get me alone in a room with your fucking demon and then not involve yourself? Paragon of innocence, aren't you? Always a victim, always just a tool in somebody else's hand, never your fault! Or maybe you're going to try to get me to visit you up there. I'm not a moron, and I'm not twelve years old anymore."

Raine had risen to her feet as well, reaching out to Evelyn in alarm. Praem had her mother's shoulder in one hand, but it was doing no good. Sevens peered around my side, but there was little she could do. Evelyn was ready to spit at god.

"Evee!" I said out loud. "Evee!"

Felicity was openly sobbing on the other end of the call. "I didn't mean— I didn't mean— mean to—"

Evelyn leaned down toward the phone. The pose was not easy for her, with her kinked spine and twisted shoulders. She grimaced in sudden pain, but forced herself through gritted teeth and bulging eyes, and said, "I will have you shot, Felicity."

"*Have you?*" giggled a voice from the pit.

Aym, with her mouth so close to the phone that she made the air crackle.

Evelyn flinched back so hard that she would have gone flying if it wasn't for me and Praem already holding onto her. She lost her balance with her walking stick, gasping for air as if Aym's voice had been suffocation itself. Raine back-pedalled too, whipping her hand away as if the phone was suddenly a red hot coal burning through the table. On the other side of me, Sevens bared all her teeth, snapping them twice in a snicker-snack motion of agitated disgust. From the utility room I heard a low rumble — Zheng, not even joining us, but still expressing her displeasure at this strange mockery of a demon.

I turned my head and opened my mouth wide and *hisssssssed* at the phone.

Aym giggled. It was a terrible sound, high-pitched and scratchy, setting one's teeth on edge, like a collection of rusty knives trying to imitate human vocal chords. Felicity was still sobbing, but more distant now, as if she'd slid out of her chair and curled up on the floor, her place usurped by the lively awfulness of Aym.

“Have Felicity shot?” Aym repeated as we were all still reeling, her metal-and-acid voice dripping with mockery. “What’s the matter, are your own fingers too weak to pull the trigger? You’ve got one working hand, my little butter-sweet confectionery, you can hold a gun and press the muzzle to her forehead. Don’t you want to smell the iron-hot blood and cordite smoke and greasy chewy brains when they go splot-splot-splot!” She made a horrible slapping noise with something that did not sound entirely like a tongue. “Or are you too squeamish for that? Let’s make it fun! Let’s make it a game! Why not come up here for a hunt? I’ll drive her out into the woods, you can wear a flat cap and carry a shotgun over your arm—”

Praem pressed Evelyn into my arms, still blinking and trying to recover. The demon maid leaned down toward the phone.

“No,” she said, crisp and clear. “Bad girl.”

Same technique as last time we’d called. Go Praem, I thought, well done.

Aym yelped like a kicked puppy. I heard a noise like the scrambling of claws against bare stone, a scrape and a hiss and a skitter. The thing on the other end of the phone was obviously not fully human right then. The sound of small bare feet pattered away at speed, sprinting off into the echoing black void that seemed to surround the other end of the phone call, leaving only Felicity’s soft panting to fill the darkness.

Praem straightened up and smoothed her skirt over her hips. I allowed my hiss to die down, my heart still pounding like a caged bird; I tried to roll my eyes, play it all off as exasperation, but abyssal instinct was churning in my gut at that horrible voice from Aym. Sevens helped, going “Bleh,” and sticking her tongue out.

Raine breathed a big sigh and nodded a thanks to Praem. Evelyn clung to me with one hand, swallowing and gritting her teeth, looking deeply humiliated.

“Weirdo,” said Sevens. “Also, not actually gone.”

“What?” Raine’s attention snapped to Sevens, then back to the phone. “Seriously?”

“Excuse me, Sevens?” I said.

“Sneaky little bitch,” Sevens said. “Come out.”

“Bad girl,” Praem repeated — but this time it sounded like an afterthought.

“Heh heh heh,” said Aym, pronouncing the laugh like a response to a poor joke. Her voice was a softer scratch than before, still coming from the phone on the table. “How did you know I didn’t really leave? Who is that, there? I don’t know you, but you’ve got a lot of teeth and you smell like blood.”

Sevens responded by clacking her teeth together again. It reminded me of a cat chattering at a bird it couldn’t reach. Sevens’ hadn’t adjusted her posture at all, peering over the top of the table at the phone, but the set of her musculature seemed somehow different — predatory, tense, focused. I suddenly wondered what might unfold if we managed to get Aym and Sevens in the same room.

But we didn’t need to. We already had the dominant demon: Praem leaned toward the phone again.

As if she could somehow see Praem, Aym hissed like a bundle of blood-slick knives being dragged across a rusty metal plate. “Ahh-ahhhh! No need for that, no need! Stop! Stop! I’ll stop for a moment, okay? Okay? I’ll be nice, I’ll be polite, I’ll be sweet. Promise! Let’s negotiate, please? I can’t well negotiate if you keep whipping me.”

Praem straightened up. “Very rude,” she said.

“She’s got your number there,” said Raine, low and serious. “You are a right little shit.”

“Puuuwwwaaahh!” Aym made a sound like an angry poodle made of industrial run-off. “Well I’ve got her number, too! Dressed up like a maid? You were a dancing star of chaos, now you serve a woman who can’t even admit she needs serving. What does it feel like to know that if she went down, you would follow her? Because you would. Down, down, down, and you couldn’t stop her! And you’d trot on after because you need her respect, you need her, you need mummy! Oh, what’s that? Too hard to think for yourself? Can’t wrap your tiny brain around making decisions?” Aym’s voice rose back into a scratchy giggle. “Oh, but you don’t have one, do you? It’s just wood between your ears, so mummy makes all the choices for you, there’s a good little maid, totter off and dust the fucking mantelpiece!” Aym shrieked a laugh.

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. I was just frowning — that was

hardly the barrage of sharp-tongued undermining that one might have expected from an expert in psychological torture. Raine just shook her head, grinning.

Praem leaned toward the phone. Aym didn't make a sound, but I swear I could somehow feel her bracing on the other end of the call.

"You are going the right way for a spanking," said Praem.

"You wouldn't dare," Aym purred in a voice like bending metal. She sounded quite confident.

Praem straightened up and said no more.

A moment of awkward silence fell over the kitchen. Nobody seemed to know what to say — what value was there in negotiating with Aym? Evelyn had recovered from both her anger and her shock, but she just clung to me, one hand gripping my sleeve. Raine spread her arms and glanced about, but nobody had anything to add. Raindrop static filled the air, drumming against the roof above our heads. The house itself seemed to be crouching, hunching up tight against the unnatural chill. On the other end of the phone, Felicity had stopped sobbing and whimpering, but I could hear Aym breathing in strange little rasps.

Raine nodded to Evelyn. Evelyn grimaced and hesitated. I spoke up in her place.

"Aym," I said. "Remember me? Heather?"

"Nature's ultimate bottom," she said — but she didn't sound very amused. Like the taunting was just automatic.

Still I sighed and felt a little blush creep into my cheeks. I knew exactly what she meant by 'bottom' in that context. I'd learned from Raine. "Aym, what is there to negotiate with you?"

"Why, twenty minutes' access of course. I thought Flissy was very clear about that." Aym seemed to get some of her confidence back as she spoke on, voice scratching at the inside of my ears. "Unless you're trying to be a clever girl and talk around me? Lead me into a trap? Do you want to try? It's been a while since somebody could. But if you lose, you might get sore! Haha!"

Evelyn pulled herself up as straight as she could stand and finally put her weight back on her walking stick. "You know I won't allow Felicity in this house. What do you expect to gain by this?"

I whispered to her, “Evee, you don’t have to. I can deal with her, I can try!”

“Shhh,” Evelyn hissed back from the corner of her mouth.

“It’s no trick, sweet pea,” said Aym. “Let me in and let’s talk. Then I’ll give you your spell. We can even make a deal! A proper deal, like magicians and demons are meant to make, with signatures in blood and a circle for me to stand in—”

“Of course it’s a trick,” Evelyn said. “What do you really want?”

Aym burst into bubbly giggles, a sound like boiling tar. “Twenty minutes’ talk! Why is it so hard to believe me? Flissy can wait out in her car and then we’ll stay in a hotel or something. She’s not important here! She’s not even human. This is between me and you, my sweet butterscotch bread roll.”

Evelyn opened her mouth to reply — and hesitated.

In that moment I realised what was going on. Felicity made Evelyn angry, but Aym terrified her.

Aym’s bizarre voice and the constant barrage of her insults had distracted me long enough to miss the change at first. Perhaps that was intentional on Aym’s part, a distraction and deflection. Abyssal instinct whispered that I was watching a hunting strategy in action. Evelyn was hiding it well, probably riding out the previous high of indignant anger — but the prospect of being alone in a room with Aym for twenty minutes was leaving her terrified and shaken. I could feel it in the tensing of her muscles beneath the two tentacles I had around her shoulders and waist. I could see it in the grey doom slowly filling her complexion. But most of all I could see it in her determination, her dedication to overcome this obstacle. She was going to do this.

Evee was going to subject herself to Aym — whatever that meant — in order to find Edward Lilburne, to recover the book we needed, to go save my twin sister.

For Maisie’s sake — which really meant for my sake — Evelyn was willing to face a literal demon from her own past, whom she was utterly terrified of, for reasons I didn’t understand.

I knew who and what Felicity was to Evelyn, the role she had played in Evee’s past, to some extent. An old associate of Evelyn’s

mother, Felicity was not quite a doctor, having never completed medical school. Or so she said. She was the illegal surgeon who had performed the amputation on Evelyn's leg. From what she and Evelyn had admitted, she was obsessed with Eevee, with the need for redemption and a forgiveness that Evelyn could not give. Evelyn hated her. And after all, she was a mage.

But I had no idea what Aym meant to Eevee.

Evelyn wet her lips with a little flicker of her tongue, pulling all her courage together. I could feel it, flowing through her like the dregs from the bottom of a cup of tea.

Did I have the right to step in? I didn't care. Abyssal instinct was screaming that Eevee needed protection. I could no more let her do this than let her step in front of a train.

"Aym," I said before Eevee could speak. "What if I'm in the room when you and Evelyn have your private conversation?"

Aym snorted. "Then it's not a private conversation, is it?"

"Heather," Evelyn hissed between her teeth. "I can—"

"Answer the question, Aym. Yes, or no?"

"No," Aym said. "Alone. Me and ickle Eevees."

"Then there's no deal to make."

Aym giggled. "Then you won't get your spell, will you?"

"Yes I will," I said.

I felt Aym freeze up. I stared at the phone, staring her down. Could she see me? Could she see the plan forming inside my head? I gently cleared my throat and continued.

"You get twenty minutes' conversation with Evelyn, with me in the room. In return, we get the solution to the magical problem."

Aym didn't reply. Evelyn poked me in shoulder with a fingertip. "Heather!" she hissed. Raine held up a hand to stall her, nodding to me. She could sense that I was onto something.

"I know what I'm doing," I whispered back.

"No! You don't!" Evelyn whispered through clenched teeth. "Aym is ... she ... she will run rings around you, Heather!"

“Hhhhhnnnnnn ... ” Aym purred from the phone’s speaker, an amused noise. “Interesting. Not what I want, though.”

“Additionally,” I said. “I would like to speak with you alone right now, over the phone.”

“We are speaking!” Aym laughed. “You want some privacy with me? Want to confess your feelings? That I’ve got into your head and you can’t stop thinking about me? Need to say something that you can’t say in front of your friends, you ... little ... ” Aym trailed off, as if she was trying to puzzle out bad handwriting. “Squid? What? Eh?”

“No,” I said. “I am trying to spare your dignity.”

I heard Aym shift, a noise like metal scales slithering across tidal rock pools. She sighed with throaty, bubbly, wet amusement. “Well, I can’t move from this spot. Our phone is so old it has a dial. So anything you want to say, Flissy will overhear it. She’s not in a state to move right now. Are you, Flissy-poos?”

“Mm,” Felicity grunted from somewhere beyond the phone.

“That’s fine with me,” I said. I gestured at Raine, one hand out for the phone, as I gently handed Evee back to Praem. “I’m going to take the phone and step into the other room now.”

“Take your time, you little freak,” Aym purred.

“Heather!” Evelyn was hissing, even as Raine was handing me the phone. “Heather, do not do this alone! At least have me with you, for fuck’s sake!”

“I’ve spoken with Aym before,” I whispered back. “She’s not so scary. I’ll be fine. Please, Evee. Let me try.”

In truth, I was shuddering inside. I swallowed hard, trying not to hiccup and give the game away. Evelyn opened her mouth to snap at me.

“Please, Evee,” I repeated. “We have to stop being reactive. I have to do this!”

Evelyn fumed in silence. Raine nodded her confidence in me. Sevens watched curiously, tilting her head from side to side. Praem stayed by Evelyn as I stepped away. I felt terribly guilty, but I needed to deploy things that I couldn’t do in front of Raine and

Evelyn, things that maybe I couldn't do in front of anybody.

Alone with a direct line to a dark place, I stepped away from the table and into the magical workshop, and then shut the door behind me.

I leaned my back against the cold wood of the door, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. Then, on an instinct I didn't quite comprehend, I reached out with a tentacle and flicked the lights off, plunging the room into a twilight gloom of thick shadows and static grey. With the cloudy, rainy, dark day outdoors, and the heavy curtains covering the workshop windows, the room became a cave-grotto at the bottom of an ocean trench, filled with the sound of raindrops against the roof and the windows.

My squid-skull mask was sitting on the table, staring at me with empty eye sockets across the dark. Had I left it there, pointed at the door like that?

I pushed off from the door with my tentacles, floating into the centre of the room. For a moment it seemed as if my feet weren't touching the ground — and then they truly weren't. I balanced on three tentacles instead, using the others to grip the table and a nearby chair.

Suspended in quiet darkness. A bubble of imitation abyss in the womb of Number 12 Barnslow Drive.

Going to need your help for this one, I told the house. Make me feel like I'm back there. Make me feel whole.

I chased away all the lingering abyssal dysphoria that had been lurking in the back of my mind since the conversation with Badger. I wasn't truly alone; the spider-servitors were up in their usual corner, with Marmite hanging out below them, but they didn't mind the darkness. I held my eyes open on shadow and static and made myself believe I was floating in the oceanic void.

I was sharp and quick and had many teeth.

I thumbed off the speaker function and raised the mobile phone to my ear.

"Aym," I said. "It's just me now. Let's talk."

"HMMMMMMMM." Aym purred like a cat made of burning sulphur. It made my skin crawl and my spine tingle, in the bad kind of way.

As she spoke, her voice dropped more and more into the truly inhuman sound of gurgling and scraping. “Out-talking a demon, very bold. So very bold. But aren’t you just a little thing, Heather? You don’t know if you’re coming or going, even if big strong Raine decides for you. What are you going to achieve, threatening me?”

“You’re a bit out of date,” I said. “I have three girlfriends now.”

“Ehhhh?”

“You’ll get your twenty minutes with Eevee, with me in the room. Then you give me the spell. You’re going to agree to this deal.”

Aym laughed. It was like tearing metal. “And what if I say no?”

I summoned all my darkest instincts, all the worst self-justifications I’d ever made. I scooped my squid-skull mask off the workshop table and slipped it on over my head. I puffed myself up and spread my tentacles wide. I gritted my teeth and felt my throat shift into an inhuman configuration. I started to sweat and pant and felt my eyes itching, my gums aching, my fingernails creaking inside my flesh. Power had not corrupted me — but refusal to face choice almost had. Power would not corrupt, as long as I kept foremost in mind why I was doing this, and chose to do so.

I thought of Maisie, lost and alone in Wonderland.

Sharp and quick and lethal. An angel from the deep.

“Then I will come to your house and rip the information out of your mind,” I said, in a voice that wasn’t remotely human. “I don’t care about the damage it does or if the procedure kills you, I will have what I need from you, Aym, either willingly or by force. You’re not the only one who can threaten and intimidate — but I’m not intimidating you. That’s a promise.”

I barely knew what I was saying. I mostly tried to think of what Raine might say.

To my amazement, it mostly worked.

“I don’t remember this,” said Aym, amused but fascinated. “What did I miss? You don’t sound like a little thing at all.”

“When we first met, that was before I took a trip elsewhere. I’m different now. Or I was always different but didn’t know it. I can rip whatever I want out of you, Aym. And I will eat your corpse once

I'm done."

Wow! I thought. Where did that come from? Down girl, down.

"Hmmmm-mmmmm, if you can catch me!" she cackled. "I can just choose not to be here when you arrive, you know?"

"I will level the house and the surroundings. I will teleport them Outside to somewhere you can't survive. I will kill Felicity if I have to — and I suspect you don't want that. Not really. Do you?"

Aym fell silent. I could feel her sulking, cornered, grumpy now. In the privacy of my own mind, I apologised to Felicity for threatening her; I could hear her panting softly somewhere further off from the phone. When I'd spoken, she'd paused and let out a shuddering whimper. I was only bluffing, but I didn't want to admit that out loud or this entire plan would collapse.

Aym opened her mouth with a wet click.

"Twenty minutes with Evee and you?" she asked. So petulant. Like a stroppy child.

"Yes. And no threatening Evelyn. No twisting her around or mocking her like you did a few minutes ago. I will enforce that. I mean it. You will be polite and respectful."

Aym made a fussy little huff. "That rather defeats the point, then, doesn't it? Where's the fun if I have to behave? Besides, why do you care, Heathy-poo? I thought you were with Raine and ... "

I felt Aym light up. If the expressions on her face were even a little bit human right then, she was grinning from ear to ear. Perhaps literally.

"Oh. My. God." She said it like a stereotypical valley girl from some terrible American movie. "You're in love with Evee! Evee, the little screwed-up scrap of self-hate and broken thoughts, can't even look at her own body in a mirror, let alone be honest with herself! And you, you little weird moron, you want to shove your face into her cu—"

I hissed down the phone, angry and spitting. The squid-skull mask amplified and funnelled the noise into an otherworldly screech of rage.

On the other end of the call, Aym shrieked and fell off something

with a loud thump. A clatter of wood followed — probably a chair falling over. She hissed back, but it was a half-hearted effort, more scared than defiant.

Like a pair of angry cats who'd blundered into each other. We probably sounded very silly. Or terrifying. I wasn't sure which.

I think the spiders flinched and Marmite scuttled behind the sofa.

A knock — loud and insistent — hammered at the door to the magical workshop. I jumped out of my skin and whirled around on my tentacles, almost overbalancing and crashing into a chair.

"Heather?" Raine called from just the other side of the door.

"Heather, you alright in there?"

I ripped the squid-skull mask off my face, panting and flushed, swallowing several times to squeeze my throat back into a human shape. "I'm fine!" I called back, hoarse and rough. "Just ... just disciplining Aym. That's all."

Evelyn shouted from the kitchen. "This is absurd! She's alone in there with that thing, for fuck's sake!"

"And I'm winning!" I shouted. "It's okay, Eevee. I'm winning."

"Shout if you need bailing out!" Raine called.

The static of the rain moved into the silence she left behind. The darkness pressed back on my senses, cool and soft against my eyes. I raised the phone to my ear again.

"Are you still there?" I asked.

A moment of sulky silence, then, "Maybe."

"You're right, Aym," I said. "I do love Evelyn. I am in love with her. Whether it's romantic or platonic or sisterly or anything else simply does not matter. You cannot make that into a secret, filthy thing, because it's beautiful. If you try to hurt her, I'll pull you apart and eat your organs. Do you understand? Do you understand that I can do that?"

Could I do that? I had no idea. Strictly speaking, I probably could, though I wouldn't want to. But I still had no idea what Aym really was. She wasn't a demon like Praem or Zheng, she was something altogether different. Still, I was angry enough to make the claim. Hopefully Aym bought it.

“Direct violence doesn’t really agree with me.” Aym sighed, making a big show of it, her voice dialling down toward something distinctly more human. She started to sound a bit less like a machine made of sharp objects and a bit more like a young girl. “Ahhhhhhhhhh. Such a bore. Such a boring, silly way of thinking. But, fine. Never mind. Can’t be helped. If you really need it that badly, I’ll give Felicity the last parts for the spell. But I still want my twenty minutes.”

She sighed again, like a young woman in a romance novel, dying of boredom before a vanity mirror.

I’d made my point. She was trying to recover her dignity.

“With me present,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” Aym said in the exact tone one uses while rolling one’s eyes. “Anything you say, little miss scary pants. Listen though, I am tethered to Flissy, in a very real way. She is going to have to come as far as your front door, or something. She can probably wait in the car.” I heard her turn away from the phone. “You’re going to need safe passage so Eevee doesn’t make her bull-dyke execute you. What would you do without me, dear?”

“A lot better, probably,” Felicity murmured. I hadn’t expected that — defiance. I thought she was terrified of Aym. I didn’t expect Aym to cackle either, a scratchy, awful laugh, ugly and smug.

“So, squid-girl,” Aym said to me. “Safe passage?”

“I guarantee safe passage for Felicity,” I said.

“Hmmm. Interesting! But is that yours to give?”

I froze.

There it was. This whole time, Aym hadn’t seemed to understand how to get to me, where my weakness lied, what buttons to push. I had underestimated this little demon, her mockery and her knowledge.

Was that safe passage mine to give? So imperious, so assuming of me, but as I kept telling myself, I was no queen, no messiah, no god. I was at best a flawed angel, fixing my own prior mistakes, and planning a raid on heaven itself. How perverse, to compare Wonderland with heaven.

“I guarantee safe passage for Felicity. And yes,” I lied, “that is mine to give.”

= =

That evening I went to see Evee.

What a strange way to express such a commonplace event: ‘going to see’ somebody who I lived with, who I saw every single day — more now that the university term had ended for the summer holidays. Raine and Evelyn and myself, we practically lived in each others’ pockets. Raine was trying to pick up some more shifts at the student union bar, which didn’t close over the holidays, but Evelyn didn’t need summer work; I could see her all day, every day, without even trying. If I wanted to talk to her or see what she was up to, all I had to do was cross the upstairs corridor and poke my head around the corner of her bedroom door. Or knock, if it was closed.

But that’s how it felt in the aftermath of the phone call with Felicity and Aym. I had to make a formal approach.

After I’d exited the magical workshop and explained the nature of the deal, still riding high on abyssal instinct and a touch of my own power, Evelyn had gone from angry concern to emotional shut-down. She had retreated upstairs, stomping all the way, banging the steps with her walking stick on purpose. I would have gone after her that very instant — I wasn’t going to allow this to fester. I never again wanted to leave her to cry all by herself, like that time so many months ago when I’d discovered her after a sleepless night of self-inflicted pain and trauma, hunched over papers in her study, red-eyed and ready to scream at me.

But Praem went with her. She wasn’t alone. Raine needed somebody to help her make plans for tomorrow, for Felicity and Aym’s arrival. Zheng wanted to hug me. And just as Praem had followed Evelyn out of the kitchen and upstairs, she had turned and nodded to me.

Give her a little time to calm down, that’s what I’d thought Praem was trying to communicate.

Only several hours later did it strike me that she might have meant the opposite: follow us right away, Evee is going to need help.

But in truth, that was an excuse I fed myself to keep the gnawing

guilt at bay. Unlike the me of several months ago — or even the me of a few days earlier — I couldn't pretend I didn't feel guilty. And I certainly couldn't pretend this wasn't my fault. By the time the rain finally trailed off and the clouds cleared, to reveal a dark, brooding night sky beyond the light pollution and the cold, dripping, unseasonal wet of Sharrowford, I was ready to claw through my own stomach with anxiety. I should have followed Evelyn hours ago.

Part of me wanted to curl up in bed, go to sleep early, and pretend nothing was wrong. But when Raine went to take a shower and Sevens was curled up and dozing in an armchair, I uncoiled from my seat at the desk where I'd been pretending to read, and padded out into the upstairs corridor on silent, sock-clad feet.

Evelyn's bedroom was only a few paces away across the shadowed hallway, but I felt like I was crossing no-man's land. Out of the window to my right the city was draped in dripping darkness, as if the storm hadn't cleared, as if instead it had sunk into the concrete and brick and asphalt, staining Sharrowford with a promise of what we had invited to join us tomorrow.

Evelyn's bedroom door was shut. A faint light came from beneath.

My six tentacles coiled tight around my core. One of them looped around the base of my chest, like a heart monitor, reading the racing of my pulse. My mouth was dry. My hands were clammy. I suddenly wished I'd changed into jeans and a nice blouse, instead of wearing my pajama bottoms with the strawberry print, beneath a shapeless black jumper borrowed from Raine.

I couldn't bear the thought that I'd hurt Evee and then just left her to her own devices. That was not the act of an angel. It was the exact sort of thing I was trying to avoid.

I couldn't move my hands, they were locked together, so I knocked with a tentacle, a little tap-tap-tap on the door.

"It's me ..." I murmured, far too softly for anybody to hear.

Cowardly Heather, trying to go unnoticed. Did I want to apologise and explain myself, or not?

"Who goes there?"

I jumped like a startled cat, heart racing, a gasp in my throat.

Praem had spoken from deep inside the room, but her tone was crisp and clear, a challenge.

“It— it’s only me,” I said out loud, suddenly feeling very awkward standing by myself in the darkened corridor. “Just Heather. Little old me ...”

“Speak the password,” said Praem.

“Um ... the password?”

“Correct,” said Praem. “You may enter.”

I blinked several times before the joke filtered through my skull. “Oh. Oh, tch,” I tutted. “That is so silly. Praem, really?”

Evelyn called out. “Stop bugging about and come in already.”

Her voice made my heart leap and my voice catch in my throat. I took a deep breath and opened the door. “Hi, hello. Hi, Eevee, it really is just me, I ... oh.”

As I peered around the edge of the door frame and then tentatively stepped into the room, I discovered that since her grumpy, sulky, and justifiably angry exit earlier on, Evelyn had entered maximum comfy mode.

She was enthroned at the head of her bed, leaning back on several lilac pillows and surrounded by several more. She was even hugging one in her lap, like a plush toy or a teddy bear — something I’d never seen Eevee do before. The sheets were tugged up around her waist and her legs were stretched out before her. Her right leg ended mid-thigh, of course. I spotted her prosthetic standing up next to the bed, neat and tidy, with the large stump-sock tucked into the end.

Eevee’s laptop was perched halfway down the bed, standing on a large hardback book. I would have tutted at that — books were not meant to be used as trays — but right then I was hardly going to critique her choice of set-up. The laptop screen showed that one cartoon about pastel-coloured horses, currently paused.

Praem was sitting on the opposite side of the bed, on the chair dragged over from the desk, so she could watch the cartoon as well. She was still wearing her full maid outfit, hands folded in her lap. She stared right at me, unreadable milk-coloured eyes greeting me in silence.

Evee stared at me too, with eyes like battlements loaded with boiling oil.

“Heather,” she grunted. “Evening. What is it?”

Her hair was down in a loose mane of golden blonde, which she didn’t tend to do that often. The lamp next to the bed flooded her profile from behind, picking out her little nose and the puppy-fat in her cheeks. She was wrapped in a big cream-coloured sweater that invited one to just sink into the fabric. All of a sudden I wanted to do nothing more than cross the room and flop face-first onto her belly.

She was, however, far too sulky for that. It would be like approaching a growling dog. I had no right.

Instead, I lowered my eyes in shame and apology, swallowed so hard it hurt, and closed the door, shutting us alone together.

“Evee,” I said, my voice shaking a tiny bit, talking more to her prosthetic leg on the floor than to her face. “I’m sorry for interrupting your cartoon, but I have to say this. I’m sorry. I apologise.”

“Don’t be absurd.”

I looked up, blinking. “I-I’m sorry?”

Evelyn gestured at the screen, at her paused cartoon, at the pastel-coloured horses. “It’s not like I haven’t seen it before. You’re hardly interrupting.”

I stared for a moment, open-mouthed, then pulled myself back together. “No, no, I mean about earlier! About the phone call.”

Evelyn stared at me with dead fish eyes. “Ah.”

“I took control,” I said, blurting it all out at once. I needed Evee’s approval, her forgiveness, her acceptance. “I didn’t know if I should, but I did it anyway. If I don’t say this now then it’ll sit in my mind and go unsaid and turn sour and ... I’m not ... I don’t have the right to make decisions for you. I’m sorry, because that’s what I did, when I made that agreement with Aym.”

“Mhmm.” Evee stared, unrelenting. Behind her, Praem stared too.

“When they arrive tomorrow,” I said, managing to stare back at Evelyn, “Felicity doesn’t have to come anywhere near this house.

And ... ”

Evelyn waited, eyebrows climbing slowly. “Yes?”

“And if you don’t want to speak with Aym, then you don’t have to.”

Evelyn blinked once. “Heather, stop being a moron. Of course I do.”

“No!” I almost snapped at her, then reeled myself back in and undermined all my words with a huge hiccup. “No, you don’t. I didn’t have the right to use you like a bargaining chip. If we need knowledge, then I can just take it from Aym.”

“From Aym?” Evelyn huffed one sad little puff of laughter. “As if I would let you try. You’d hurt yourself.”

“I made a choice,” I said. “It’s my responsibility. Eevee, I made this decision. I’ve lured Aym here. If you don’t want to speak with her, then I will deal with the entire situation, the whole thing, myself. You can stay in here all day and I’ll sort it out, I’ll take it from Aym’s mind and—”

“Heather, do shut up,” Evelyn said. She sighed, looking deeply unimpressed. Then she wormed one hand out from hugging her pillow and patted the bed next to her. “Stop being a moron. Sit with me.”

I just stared, frozen, my apology dribbling off like a storm that never broke. “Uh ... but I ... Eevee, I—”

“Sit,” said Praem. “Or you will be made to sit.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Yes, thank you Praem, that’s just what we need, impromptu dog training. Please, Heather, just sit down. Stop standing there like you’ve been a naughty child or something. It’s weird and I can’t deal with it.”

Feeling exceptionally awkward and blushing like an idiot, I obeyed. I crossed to Eevee’s overstuffed bed and crawled over to join her, easing myself back against the fortress of lilac pillows and turning to meet her level, unimpressed look. She was tucked up all cosy against the strange cold and here I was, joining her. For a long moment she said nothing, like she was judging me. I dared not touch her.

“Eevee, I’m sorry,” I said again. I couldn’t help myself. “I took charge when I—”

To my everlasting and eternal surprise, Evelyn reached up and put her hand over my mouth, which shut me up completely. She didn't have the strength to actually hold me still, but I was too shocked to complain.

"Mmmm!" I went, eyes gone wide.

"Heather, shut up."

"Mmm-mmm." I obeyed.

Evelyn sighed, squeezed her eyes shut, and then opened them again to glare at me, but not without affection. "Heather, I was all prepared to speak with Aym. I was already making that deal. If you apologise again I will slap you. Understand?"

I nodded. Evelyn removed her hand. I could taste her skin on my lips. Her palm was so soft and cool.

"But," I said, then raised a hand when Evelyn's frown grew sharp. "But you were terrified."

"I'm still terrified," she said.

"Oh, Eevee."

"I'll get over it," she grunted.

"I'll be with you! She's not going to speak with you alone."

"Yes, well." Evelyn looked away. "Point is, I was all prepared to do it anyway. You didn't use me as a bargaining chip." She turned back and shot me a look. "Don't be weird about this."

I pulled a very awkward smile. "Seems like I can't help it sometimes, especially when it comes to you. I was worried I'd used you."

Evelyn cleared her throat. Was she blushing slightly? I couldn't tell. "Well. Well. Thank you for apologising then, even if it was completely unnecessary." She reached down and awkwardly patted my hand.

"So ... um ..." I took a deep breath and looked around the room, acknowledged Praem, then settled on the brightly-coloured cartoon horses, paused on the laptop screen. "Why did you stomp off earlier, then? If you weren't offended by what I did?"

Evelyn stared at me like I was a very dull student. "Because I don't like the idea of you speaking with that monster all by yourself."

"Same to you!"

"I've had experience with her."

"So have I. Sort of. For all of about five minutes. She wasn't very effective."

"The better she knows you the worse it gets," Evelyn grunted. "I should know. You're not to be alone with that thing either, understand?"

I nodded with great enthusiasm. "Okay. I promise. It's only fair in return. Yes."

Evelyn sighed. "Heather, please calm down. I can't deal with you like this. Don't be a bloody self-flagellating penitent. Just be you."

"It's kind of hard. I'm really afraid of hurting you."

"Well, you haven't. So stop worrying."

"Thank you for doing this in the first place. Really."

Evelyn slapped me on the arm, but not with much force. "Don't bloody well thank me. As if I wouldn't. We're going to do this, Heather. You and the rest of us. We're going to get that book from Edward and use it. We're going to get your sister back. Even if I didn't owe you my ... " Evelyn halted and took a deep breath. "I don't care about the circumstances, I would still help you. That's all. So stop apologising or thanking me."

My smile felt a touch less awkward. I finally felt myself settle back into the pillows for real. I allowed my leg to touch Evee's through the blankets. Snuggling up together against the chill outdoors.

"Evee ... you don't have to answer this, I mean that, but ... what did Aym do to you?"

Evelyn grunted and looked to Praem. Praem stared back. I suddenly wondered if she knew as well, or if this would be news to her.

"Felicity, she knew my mother," Evelyn said eventually, speaking slowly and carefully, with a hollow space in her voice. "You know that already. She didn't spend a lot of time at the estate, but when she did, Aym came with her. Aym is bound, but ... loosely. I don't

understand her exact parameters or her purpose, but she enjoys taunting people, especially those close to the edge of ... well, change. Usually negative change.”

“I did get that impression.”

“When I was a child, long before I met Raine, I knew Aym as a sort of recurring nightmare.” Evelyn swallowed. “She never hurt me. Never touched me. Never attacked me. Understand? She would just appear and ... talk. That’s all.”

Evelyn fell silent. Without asking, Praem reached over and touched her mother’s arm. I squeezed Eeve’s hand. Eeve sighed, looking deeply uncomfortable.

“It paled in comparison to everything else, anything else from that period of my life. Really. She’s nothing.”

“Nothing can still be scary,” I said.

“I will belt scary with my walking stick. I hope she’s ready for a bloody good hiding.” Evelyn snorted, and that was all she had to say on the subject.

I finally relaxed fully, appreciating that once again I was lying in bed — or on bed, at least — next to Evelyn. We weren’t truly alone, of course, because Praem was right there. This was no time for clandestine kisses or final and lasting declarations of true love. Especially not if Evelyn was as emotionally vulnerable as I suspected she was right then. Now was time for comfort. I snuggled a little closer, worming a tentacle over her shoulders. She flinched a little before she realised it was only me.

“Sooooo,” I said, looking at the paused cartoon on the laptop screen. “This is the one with the horses, isn’t it? You wanted me to watch this one, didn’t you?”

“Ponies,” said Praem.

Evelyn sighed. “Ponies, yes. They’re ponies, not horses.”

“Is that an important distinction?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Praem. “Ponies.”

“Very well then.” I almost laughed. “We did keep getting interrupted last time we tried to watch cartoons together. Do you want to show me the rest of this one? I’m right here already, after

all.”

Evelyn frowned, suddenly uncomfortable in a whole new way. “You won’t understand a thing if I just unpause this episode. We’ll have to start from the beginning. The characters won’t make any sense to you.”

“Okay then. I’m up for trying it, if you are. Please.”

Evelyn leaned forward to fiddle with the laptop, apparently blushing a bit. Was she really that self-conscious about her choice of cartoons?

“Where’s Raine, anyway?” she asked without looking round. “She going to interrupt us too?”

“She’s in the shower right now, but Raine can wait, for once,” I said, feeling a little smug. “She can play video games for a couple of hours. Or box Zheng or something. You and I are going to watch cartoon horses.”

“Ponies,” said Praem.

“Ponies,” I agreed. “Quite.”

Evelyn leaned back again, a new video file full-screen on the laptop. I took her hand in mine. She cleared her throat and looked very awkward.

What would change right now, if I said “I love you”? Probably nothing.

“I love you, Eevee.”

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes and nodded. “Yes, Heather, I love you too.”

And it was true.

Praem, pointedly, said nothing, staring at me like she was willing me to grow wings and fly. I frowned back at her, trying not to let Eevee see. Had I done something wrong? Clearly I needed to have a private word with Praem to figure out her opinion on all this. I made a mental note about that.

“Ready?” Evelyn asked. “Praem can unpause it for us, when you are.”

“Yes,” I said, settling back. “I just ... you know, the last time I sat in your room like this, it was the night before we went to Carcosa.”

“Don’t jinx us,” Evelyn snapped. “It’s not going to be like that. I’ve got Praem and I’ve got you. We’ll be fine. And we’re not going anywhere. Just talking to a difficult bitch.”

I smiled and nodded, holding Eeve’s hand as Praem leaned over to start the cartoon on the laptop.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about that knife-scratch voice from the phone, about Aym perched on Eeve’s childhood bed, spinning nightmares of trauma and failure. And I couldn’t stop thinking about how we didn’t even really know what Aym was.

Or what she really wanted with Eeve.

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.4

Felicity and Aym — mage and demon, master and servant, prisoner and jailer — stood us up. Twice.

In truth, the two false starts in Felicity's journey down to Sharrowford obviously had everything to do with Aym and very little to do with Felicity. Whatever else one might say about Felicity, whatever sins and horrors she had committed in earlier life, whatever dark alliances and deals she'd made, it was plain to me that she would never willingly leave Evelyn waiting for help. This was all Aym's doing, I had little doubt of that.

It was a very effective tactic, the last thing we'd been worrying about, and it drove Evelyn up the wall.

The drive from Felicity's manor house up in Cumbria was meant to take a little under three hours, accounting for traffic, a stop on the M6 motorway, the need to skirt around Manchester, the changeable mood of Felicity's battered old range rover, and some kind of unpredictable complexity involved in actually leaving the surroundings of her home. She had tried to explain that last point, but had rapidly dissolved into a string of half-understood esoteric terminology, which would probably have made sense only to Evelyn. Felicity hadn't been in much of a state to go into detail at the end of our previous phone call, sitting on the floor and recovering from her horrible, tortured weeping. But she had promised to call Raine's phone early the following morning, to give us advance warning of when she was leaving, and when we might expect her.

"The four minute warning," Evelyn snorted that morning. "Fantastic. We'll all huddle together in the cellar and wait for the blast wave, shall we?"

"Evee," I sighed, though gently and indulgently. "I'm sure it'll be a lot longer than four minutes. Felicity is taking this seriously. We'll have hours to prepare."

Evelyn cleared her throat and blushed faintly. “It’s ... it’s a joke, Heather.”

“Duck and cover,” said Praem.

Felicity had made the same journey in a similar window once before, back when I’d called her for help during our crisis with the Sharrowford Cult, when Raine had been kidnapped and Eevee had lain helpless in a coma. She’d had far less prep time for that drive, but also the extra motivation of a real emergency. Evelyn’s life had been at stake. Perhaps that had encouraged her to quite literally ‘step on the gas’ — or perhaps, more worryingly, it had motivated Aym to not muck about and get in the way.

But on that first morning after the phone call, Evelyn’s fears appeared to be crystallising into reality.

Nine o’clock came and went without any word from Felicity, not even a text message; her mobile phone would apparently work once she was on the road, after all. Then ten o’clock passed as well, then eleven, the hour-hand creeping round on the old grandfather clock which stood in our front room. Time slowed to an awful, torturous plod. Raine sent Felicity a text message, then called her twice, both the land-line phone and the mobile phone number she’d given us. Both times, nothing. The calls rang and rang, answered by nothing but the void.

Evelyn had already struggled to eat breakfast that morning, wracked by anxiety gnawing at her guts. Praem had pulled out all the stops, made bacon and scrambled eggs and fried mushrooms. Raine had wolfed her portion down, Sevens had happily chomped away, Tenny and Lizzie had briefly appeared and joined in too; even Zheng had complimented the bacon, which was rare. She preferred her meat raw and bloody. But Eevee herself had managed only a few bites before complaining of nausea and retreating to the safety of cold porridge. I ended up finishing her portion for her.

As the hours wore on she found it harder and harder to hide her nerves. She sat in the kitchen, pretending to read but actually doing nothing, rubbing and worrying at the old scarring on her maimed hand. I’d never seen her do that before. She usually didn’t fiddle with her maimed fingers and palm, or draw any attention to it at all.

She got up eventually, stomped around the house in wordless

irritation, left mugs of tea to grow cold, and spoke in monosyllabic grunts. She barely even heard what was said to her.

I couldn't watch her like that. It hurt. She'd been so happy and fulfilled last night.

The previous evening, Eevee and I had sat up until long past midnight, watching her pony cartoon together. It had been absolutely delightful, even if some of the context of the show was a little lost on me; Eevee sometimes laughed at things that I didn't understand, or gestured at the screen for moments that seemed quite mundane, but I felt like I started to get it after a while.

At first she'd acted quite embarrassed when I'd asked which character was her favourite. She had refused to answer for another three episodes, then ventured the truth while awkwardly looking away from my face.

"... you mean, the one that does magic?" I'd said, trying not to sound too shocked. "I ... well, I assumed with all the ... you know, being a mage in real life, I assumed you wouldn't—"

"Yes, yes! I know! Don't you dare repeat this to Raine, I'll never hear the end of it. I've always had to be quite clear to her that I do not identify with the magical cartoon unicorn, so do not tell her I've been lying about that, Heather. Do not."

I'd sworn myself to secrecy.

Evelyn had finally relaxed after that, and began to share all sorts of details about this this obscure and esoteric passion — though according to Eevee it was anything but obscure.

"It's a big deal on the internet," she said. "People draw art. They write fanfiction. There's a whole subculture."

"Oh. Well. I wouldn't know, not really. Have you ever done that?"

Evelyn had cleared her throat, staring at me in a frozen state. "You mean ... write ... fanfiction?"

"Or draw art! Either or. It sounds really exciting."

"No," she said, too quickly. "No, I don't. Never done that."

Praem had stuck around for a few episodes of magical ponies and the occasional sparkling unicorn, but then she'd left me and Eevee alone together. Raine had stuck her head in briefly, then left in

wordless glee, shooting us a thumbs up and going off to play video games about girls with improbably large bosoms beating each other up. Kimberly had ambled past on her way to the kitchen at almost eleven at night, overheard some very distinctive bits of dialogue, and knocked on the door, much to our surprise. Kimberly, timid Kim who so often scurried about the place like she wanted us to forget she existed, had stood in the doorway with bloodshot eyes and a dazed smile, and nodded her heartfelt and touched approval that we were, “getting into the ponies at last.”

“Yes, well,” Evelyn had said, guarded and short and snapping, mostly from embarrassment, though perhaps also a little worried about being interrupted yet again. “Heather’s never seen it before. That’s all.”

Normally, Kim would have jumped out of her skin at being spoken to like that, then scurried off in terror, but right then she was high enough to start a new career as a cosmonaut.

She’d blinked at me in delighted surprise. “No shiiiiit, Heather? Awwww, that’s great. You’re one of us now. Have fun, yeah, have fun.” She’d clapped her hands twice, then bowed her way backwards out of the door, like she was giving thanks at a shrine. Maybe she had known that Eevee was irritated, after all.

After that, it had been just me and Eevee for the rest of the night, leaning on each other, watching cartoon ponies having adventures. She’d seemed so happy. Eventually I’d tucked her into bed.

But this following morning, waiting for a woman she hated, who might arrive at any moment, Evelyn was chewing herself to pieces.

She couldn’t stand the waiting and the not knowing. I couldn’t stand what it was doing to her, to her state of mind, her nerves, her well-being. Raine kept her own spirits up with that beaming grin, cracking jokes about how we were going to make Felicity sleep in a dog house in the garden, or how maybe we should all pretend to be out when she arrived. Praem stayed close to Eevee, making sure she stayed hydrated, never leaving her alone. Sevens lurked in the shadows and around the door frames, but she couldn’t do anything. I got the sense she wanted to help, but maybe couldn’t find the right mask, the right role to play.

I turned into a curtain-twitching maniac. I couldn’t do anything to help Eevee either; I’d tried to distract her but she was barely

answering. So instead I lurked at the windows, trying to watch the road. I sent Zheng out to stand covert sentry near the end of the street, but that was pointless, and boring for her, so it didn't last long. At one point I even opened the front door and stood there in my pajama bottoms and one of Raine's old black hoodies, staring down the street. I probably looked like a total madwoman, silently rehearsing the indignant rant I was going to deliver to Felicity as soon as she dared show her face.

The weather was foul as foul could be. Summer had fled like a startled deer. Heavy rain-clouds battered the city, drizzling and spitting and whipping with cold, but refusing to break into the clean rain of a proper storm. My teeth ached. My fingernails itched. My eyes hurt.

Eventually, I asked out loud, "Is she causing this?"

I'd been staring out of the kitchen window. My eyes must have looked like dark pits of frustration. My tone brought Evelyn around for a few minutes, dragging her out of the stupor of anxiety.

"... Heather?"

"The weather," I explained.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"The weather! It's cold, it's dark, it's so oppressive. Normally I'm more of an autumn sort of person anyway, but this feels wrong. Is this Aym, doing this at a distance?"

"Don't be absurd," Evelyn grumbled, but her heart wasn't in it. "Demons can't control the weather."

"Says you," Praem chimed from behind her. Evelyn snorted a single not-laugh at that, a token effort of forced disbelief.

"What about mages?" I asked.

When I turned away from the window to gauge Evee's response, she'd seemed so small and sad and shrunken, sitting there on the other side of the kitchen table, thick shawl over her shoulders, with a book in front of her, pretending to read. A hardback copy of *Frankenstein* which looked about as old as the house. That wasn't a good book for her right now, she needed something light and fluffy, or at least something funny. A bit of Pratchett, maybe, but I wasn't sure if we had any in the house. I had a sudden urge to suggest I do

a one-woman dramatic reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for her, but then I dismissed the idea as absurd.

"The weather?" Evelyn echoed, then sighed and drew a hand over her face. "Why not? What do I know? Sure, maybe they're sending rain to irritate us. Maybe they're trying to ruin our harvest or make our bowstrings damp. Maybe we've been cursed by a rain god. Bigger it and let it rain."

"Evee," I sighed, feeling awkward all of a sudden.

"No, Heather, they're not controlling the bloody weather. You sound worse than I get. Stop being paranoid. Hypocritical of me to say, I know." She shrugged, eyes dropping back to the book. At least she wasn't actually reading it.

At three minutes to midday, Felicity finally called.

Unfortunately, Raine had stepped into the bathroom for a few minutes, leaving her phone on the table like a ticking bomb. When it went off I jumped out of my skin and almost slapped the thing to pieces with my tentacles. Evelyn flinched and scooted her chair back.

Praem had enough presence of mind to scoop the phone up and press it to her shoulder. Raine skidded into the room ten seconds later, sliding on her socks, stopping just short of Praem before accepting the phone.

The rest of us could only hear one side of the rushed, chaotic conversation which ensued. Raine actually frowned in confusion, a rare look on her face.

"Heeeeeey Flissy, where the hell you at, girl, you— hey, hey, slow down. Sloooooow down, you're talking too fast. Okay. Okaaaaay." Raine listened for a long moment, giving Evelyn and me a bemused look across the kitchen, eyebrows knotting together. Evelyn mouthed 'is she here yet?' and Raine shook her head, which provoked Evelyn to throw up her arms in frustration. "So, you're leaving now, right?" Raine said into the phone. "Well, sure thing then, just let us know as soon as you're ready. No sweat, no blame, just let us know. Cool? We okay? Okay, we're cool. No worries, Fliss, just stay in contact. Like we said."

"What do you mean, no fucking worries?!" Evelyn spat before Raine could end the call. "She hasn't even fucking left yet?" Evee's eyes

found the phone itself. “What are you playing at, you—”

Raine held the phone up. She’d already cut the call. “She’s gonna phone back. Once she’s in the car and on the road. Eevee, hey, come on, take a deep breath. Just breathe for me, yeah? Just breathe.”

“Oh this a fucking farce!” Evelyn spat. “What is she doing?”

“Crying, by the sounds of it,” Raine said with a sigh. “Held up by somebody having a little tantrum.”

“A bad girl,” Praem said.

“Oh I can’t believe this shit,” Evelyn said. “I bet she’s loving this. She’s found a way to torment me by not being present.”

We received five more phone calls from Felicity over the course of that afternoon, and not one of them was made from a moving car. She called us in a state of distress, apologetic and mortified, shocked, weeping with frustration, and then finally just broken with emotional exhaustion. Raine fielded all the calls but it wasn’t hard to overhear snatches of Felicity’s distraught voice on the other end. I could imagine her scurrying through the half-empty, echoing hallways of that dark and void-like manor house, below the dripping boughs of an evil forest, the walls whipped by cold winds and menaced by dark, creeping ivy, her own footsteps swallowed up by rotten wood and crumbling furniture, in pursuit of a tormentor that would not let her leave.

But that was only my imagination. Maybe Aym had just hidden her car keys.

Whatever was truly happening up in Cumbria, the final phone call at six forty-five in the evening was the last straw for Evelyn.

“Don’t fucking bother!” she shouted at the phone. She lurched up from her seat in the kitchen so fast that Praem almost didn’t round the table to catch her in time. Eevee didn’t even care, stomping toward the phone and looking for something to hit with her walking stick. Raine tried to turn away, to shield the phone from Evelyn’s rage, but it was no use. One could probably have heard her three streets away. “If you leave now, you’ll get here at ten, or past ten, and you are not using that to worm your way into staying the night, you rancid fucking monster! You can try again tomorrow! First thing in the morning, you useless shit!”

I heard a pitiful whimper from the other end of the phone, before Raine managed to step out of the room to make real alternative arrangements.

In a way, I didn't blame Evelyn, though I like to think I would have phrased my irritation with a little bit more tact — I also probably wouldn't have muttered the absolutely unspeakable insults she strung together under her breath afterward, as Praem helped her sit back down. We'd done nothing all day except wait, but I felt utterly exhausted, yet without the clean ache of overexerted muscles and the dull thrum of a humming cardiovascular system. My trilobe bio-reactor could do nothing to soothe this particular kind of drawn-out weariness.

Raine reappeared a couple of minutes later and cleared her throat awkwardly before relating the new plan.

"Flissy is gonna try again tomorrow morning. No promises, though. We should probably prep for the worst. Maybe buy a deck of cards and settle in."

The joke did not go down well. Evelyn looked about ready to bite the head off a live chicken, or crumble to dust.

With an unspoken agreement of shared glances and covert gestures, Praem, Raine, and I all set about making sure Evelyn didn't slip further into a deep pit of depression and loathing. When Aym arrived, she was going to need all her wits about her, even if I was going to be glued to her side like a bodyguard for her soul.

Praem supplied tea, turned up the heating, and somehow made the kitchen smell faintly of warm butter for about half an hour. She also applied shoulder rubs, which first met with an angry hiss and a, "Get off, for fuck's sake, can't you see I'm trying to think?" but then finally earned her a, "Sorry, Praem. I shouldn't have snapped. Thank you."

I don't know how Praem did it. Demon hands were apparently dexterous enough to avoid hurting Evelyn's warped shoulders and kinked spine. Sevens reappeared from somewhere too, taking up her seat close to Eevee, though she didn't have anything much to say; I think I was the only one who noticed how focused she was, as if watching Evelyn for a sign of something. Zheng went out hunting. Perhaps that was her way of helping, returning with a brace of dead squirrels for the unlucky pack-member.

Raine went out too, to fetch a takeaway curry for dinner. We hadn't actually had one in a while. Eevee needed treats, even if she wouldn't admit so.

Lozzie and Tenny ventured down from upstairs at long last. They'd spent most of the day staying out of the way, though I had noticed Lozzie eavesdropping from behind door frames at least twice, her face peering out just above Sevens. Apparently she could be very quiet and sneaky when she wanted to be.

Tenny instantly picked up that "auntie Eevee" needed help.

I don't know if it was some extra-sensory knowledge, some product of her non-human biology, or merely the intuition of a child. Tenny crept across the kitchen exactly like a nervous child approaching a grumpy parent, po-faced and serious, tentacles reeled in close, until Eevee did a double-take at her and then just stared, grumpy and exhausted. Tenny stared back with her big shiny black pelagic eyes. Lozzie peered around from behind her.

Tenny hadn't gained any additional height since her hatching several months earlier, but her straight-backed, oh-so-serious pose made her seem more mature than Lozzie, at least more mature than she'd ever looked before. All of her poses and gestures still held that strange, alien note to them, despite her basic humanoid body-plan, her two arms and two legs, her eyes and jaw and lips and chin and facial muscles, and her healthy upright torso — though I wasn't certain she possessed a spine, not exactly. It was often hard to tell with Tenny where human influence ended and pneuma-somatic heritage began. She was plainly not homo sapiens, with her silken, coal-black skin, her wings hanging down her back like a cloak, her mass of tentacles that crept up and out from their hidden origin points in her shoulders, but at the same time her gestures and mannerisms were so very human, so very us.

As she stood opposite Eevee's exhausted anger, she obviously empathised.

"Tenny," I whispered gently. "Auntie Eevee isn't feeling so good right now. Please ... please don't ..." I tried to say *please don't bother her*, but I couldn't get the words out. Tenny wouldn't understand. She might be hurt.

"Auntie," Tenny said in her fluttery trill-voice. It was not a question.

Lozzie whispered from behind her too, gently tugging on a tentacle. "Tenny!"

Evelyn sighed, squeezed her eyes shut, and grunted an affirmative. "Yes, that would be me. Auntie Eevee. Hello, Tenny. I'm not mad at you, it's okay."

"Mad because bad?" said Tenny.

Evelyn froze, as if she couldn't believe her ears. Lozzie's eyes went wide and she clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to smother a laugh. Praem turned her head to stare at Tenny. Whatever those words meant, it went completely over my head.

"Excuse me?" Evelyn asked.

"Or ... sad because mad?" Tenny tried again, tilting her head to the side and doing a wobbly gesture with one tentacle, like somebody waving a hand. "Bad things make me mad too. Mad and sad!" Tenny's flutter-voice grew louder, agitated, desperate to help. "Auntie Eevee sad. Makes me mad. Bad. Bad sad." Tenny blinked several times, her eyes finally wandering away from Eevee and off to one side. "Bad mad sad," she muttered to herself. "Glad?"

Lozzie snorted and winced. "Tenn-Tenns has just discovered rhyming!"

Tenny puffed her cheeks out. "Already knew!"

Evelyn sighed and shook her head. "I thought she was mocking me at first, it's fine."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I followed absolutely none of that. Is everything all right? Tenny?"

Tenny's attention snapped back to the room, as if she had been using all of her mental processing power to compose a new poem. Even her tentacles had all frozen for a second — I hadn't realised until they'd resumed moving again. She seemed to remember what she'd been trying to do in the first place.

"Auntie Eevee!" Tenny spread her tentacles out. "Hug for sad?"

Evelyn cleared her throat, frowning and flushing a little. "Uh, well. It's not that I don't ... "

"Air hug, Tenny," I said. "Remember that auntie Eevee has delicate bones? Air hug."

“Mm-mm!” Tenny nodded. “No touch! I know! I know that, silly Heath!”

Evelyn looked intensely awkward and quite embarrassed as she and Tenny shared an air-hug, with a wide cage of Tenny’s silken black tentacles thrown around her, though without actually touching her directly. Tenny didn’t seem embarrassed in the slightest, tilting her head and pretending to lay it on Evee’s shoulder at a distance of about two feet away. Evee blushed and looked down at the floor tiles. As Tenny withdrew, Evee’s free hand brushed against the final tentacle to leave, which then paused and waited. Tenny didn’t look, already turning away to say something to Lozzie and I, but perhaps that was intentional. Perhaps Tenny understood that auntie Evee needed the excuse of not being seen.

Evee patted the tentacle and muttered something under her breath, something I almost didn’t catch.

“You deserve better.”

By the time Raine got back with the curry, Evelyn wasn’t so angry anymore, even if she was still exhausted.

= =

The second day of waiting for Felicity was less irritating than the first, because I turned out to be correct. But it was also infinitely more worrying — also because I turned out to be correct.

When I woke up in the morning the first thing I did — after disentangling myself from Raine’s arms and clambering over Zheng and planting a kiss on Seven’s forehead — was to creep out into the upstairs hallway and check the weather through the window, to make my prediction. The heavy storm clouds that had spent the previous day bullying Sharrowford had now receded from the city, but not actually left. They waited on the northern horizon, like a dark wall of roiling smoke and oil, waiting to descend and drown the land below. Above the city the light was clearer, the sun poking through in weak shafts of diluted gold, but the threat of a deluge still lay close.

“She’s not coming today,” I whispered to myself in the quiet of the morning, staring out of the window across the smothered dawn. “But she’s still planning on a visit. She’s not bluffing.”

“Edging,” Praem said from halfway down the corridor.

I jumped out of my skin, lashing myself to the walls and ceiling with my tentacles, my human feet tapping on the floor several times before I crammed my heart back down my throat.

“Praem!” I hissed. “How do you always do that?”

A pair of milk-white eyes met me from the shadows, reflecting the dull grey beyond the window. “Stealth.”

I stared for a second, then laughed and smiled and shook my head. “Yes, I suppose, that’s technically accurate. Be careful not to do that when you’re standing too close to me though, I don’t want to accidentally slap you with a tentacle.”

Praem’s head went up and down in a very precise and graceful nod. “I will avoid such an outcome.”

“Of course,” I sighed. “Of course.” Then I looked out of the window again. “So, you agree with me? She’s not coming today? What did you say, ‘edging’? What do you mean?”

Praem stared at me, declining to answer.

I blinked at her in the gloomy hallway. Praem could be so esoteric at times. “You agree that she’s ... somehow ... oh,” I sighed, “this sounds so silly, Eevee was right, it’s absurd, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but ... do you agree that she’s controlling the weather, somehow? This is Aym’s doing?”

Praem clicked softly down the floorboards to join me at the window. She emerged from the shadows, a great mass of maid uniform and the soft, cuddly Praem beneath, solid and real, hands clasped before her, prim and proper.

As she stared at the distant horizon, the gravid storm roiled in her eyes.

“If the mountain won’t come to Muhammad,” she said.

“Then Muhammad must go to the mountain,” I finished the saying, sighed, and shook my head. “Praem, what does that mean, in this context?”

Praem turned her head from the window to stare at me. All-white eyes in a pale face, her complexion like milk with a hint of rose, hair pinned up behind her head in a loose, messy bun, all blonde loops and loose locks. She stared, waiting for me. I sighed again and

smiled with long-suffering indulgence.

"It means ... " I chewed on my tongue, thinking. "Aym is still intending to visit, as promised, she's just irritating us in the meantime. We don't need to make alternative plans. We just need to shore up this one."

"Mountain climbing is difficult," said Praem.

I nodded. "Evee can't climb a mountain. At least not by herself."

"She can be carried."

"Then we'll carry her," I said. "Praem, of all the things to worry about. I love her too, you know that." I glanced at Evee's bedroom door on the other side of the hallway, currently closed, no light showing from the crack at the bottom. "The last thing I'm going to do is let Aym anywhere near her alone."

"She has to reach the mountain first."

I frowned at Praem. "Now you're mixing your metaphors."

"Now you're mixing your motivations."

I blinked several times. "Praem?"

Praem the demon-doll, Praem Saye, Evelyn's daughter, stared at me in the private gloom of the upstairs hallway, lit only by the storm-tossed horizon beyond the city. She declined to explain.

I sighed, intentionally, blowing out a long breath and pulling my tentacles in close, halting their habitual random drift. I even pulled my back straight; odd, but I wasn't the slightest bit nervous in front of Praem, saying this. "Praem, whatever confusion or difficulties I might be suffering regarding the exact nature of my personal relationship with Evee, you and I both know that I would lay siege to hell itself to stop her from getting hurt. We saved her together once before. Let's make sure it never gets to that point again." I blew out a second breath and discovered I was shaking slightly. "My motivations might be mixed, but they're also very clear. Like mixing water and ... and ... vodka. I guess. Wow, I'm sorry, that was bad."

Praem smiled.

It was the third such smile I had ever seen on Praem's face, a mechanical pulling at her soft, plush cheeks and the bow of her lips.

Lack of practice had not improved her form. The smile was deeply unnatural, a forced pantomime of emotion; her face simply wasn't made for it.

"... are you smiling at my joke, or ... ?" I cleared my throat and trailed off.

Praem stopped smiling. She stared at me instead, without saying anything. How very Praem.

"Praem, you don't have to pretend a smile," I said. "You don't have to do that if it doesn't feel right."

"Yes."

I bit my lip, unsure if she was just humouring me. "And what about you? Are you okay with all this? I know this Aym thing is a lot to deal with."

Praem stared.

"Where is this coming from?" I asked. "Are you just worried about Evee?"

Stare. Silent. I sighed.

"Are you ... worried Aym is going to get out of control? Are you worried she'll be beyond my powers to contain? Beyond your powers?"

"No," said Praem, sudden and sharp.

"Okay, okay, no offense meant. I'm sure you can make her cower with nothing but a sharp word. Praem, this is obviously bothering you. I ... I think. I'm still not that great at reading your emotions."

"I will not be present to carry her for the final stretch."

I blinked, then realised. "Oh. Oh ... "

"Oh," echoed Praem.

"Oh, Praem, I'm so sorry. When I was making that deal with Aym, I didn't even think. I didn't think! You're not going to be in the room. It's going to be me and Evee. I should have included you. I should have. I'm so sorry."

I reached out a hand toward Praem, subconsciously pleading for forgiveness. She was right — I had made the deal with Aym to

protect Evee, but I hadn't included Praem. Who was better at protecting Evelyn Saye than her own beloved daughter?

To my surprise, Praem took my hand in hers. My eyes went wide.

"Is that ... ?" I said. "Is that 'apology accepted'?"

"Apology is not necessary."

"I'll look after Evee, I promise. It'll only be twenty minutes."

Praem let go of my hand again. She turned back to the window, a punctuation mark on the entire conversation. I turned to stare outdoors too, at the looming storm clouds. But it was difficult to adjust. This was the most I'd heard in Praem's own words in a while.

"We should talk more often," I said after a moment. "You and I don't get many chances to chat."

"Yes," said Praem.

"I suppose the storm clouds will stay at least until tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Do you really think Aym is controlling the weather?"

"Yes."

"... do you think it's just to irritate us?" Praem turned her head to stare at me. I sighed and shrugged. "Ask a stupid question," I muttered.

I didn't like being correct when it came to weird things that shouldn't be happening.

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The rest of that second day was an exercise in imposing my will by subterfuge, which I was exceptionally bad at. Luckily for me, Evee mostly went along with it. I had help, too.

We knew Aym was going to delay Felicity again. Praem knew it, Raine trusted my judgement, Zheng picked it up without needing to be told, Sevens heard it through a door, Lozzie probably learned it in a dream, and Tenny didn't really care. But Evee was determined to get very angry and shout at the phone again — so I spent the entire day luring her away with small horses.

Ponies, I mean ponies, of course.

Rather than allow her to spend the day in the kitchen again, sinking deeper and deeper into a fugue state of anxiety and worry, I put into action every trick I'd learned from Raine, called on every bit of theatrical interruption owed to me by Seven-Shades-of-Surreptitiously-Sly, and had Praem stare at Eevee from about three inches away, all for the aim of getting her upstairs and in front of those cartoons again.

"She might turn up any bloody minute, Heather! We can't sit here, indulging ourselves all day. We have to be ready."

"One more episode."

"This is the end of the season! Heather, that was the end!"

"Then ... next season?"

Evee huffed and crossed her arms. "I would have to download it."

"We have good internet though, don't we?"

"Yes, but you should let it sit. Digest what you just watched. Really."

"What about that show you mentioned two days ago, the ... the one with the ... " I wracked my brain. "The sad magical girls?"

Evelyn put her face in her hand. "We are not watching more anime, not while I'm waiting for a demon to show up on my doorstep. Certainly not that one."

"Suffering," said Praem.

"Then how about ... " I poked at the track pad on Eevee's laptop, which was sitting on a book on her bed again. "How about this one? These two on the cover, are they a couple? They're cute. I like the style."

"One of them is a vampire," Evelyn grunted. "It's silly."

I swear I heard a gurgle from under the bed, but I chose to ignore it. "Even better!" I said. "But they're a couple?"

Evelyn stared at the ceiling, looking like she couldn't decide if she wanted to shout at me or go to sleep. "Yes. Well, canonically no. But yes. It's complicated, one of them finds the vampire in the

woods and goes back to her house and there's ... ”

Evelyn trailed off when she realised what I'd baited her into. She shot me a hard-eyed, blushing look. I just stared back, smiling and waiting. *Innocent face!* I told myself, *keep an innocent face, you're just super interested in Eevee's very sapphic cartoons, not distracting her from the frustration of waiting another day.*

“Heather, we need to be ready.”

“We are ready,” I said. “I'm ready for anything, including hearing about this vampire couple.”

“Only one of them is a vampire,” she sighed — and then surrendered to my pestering.

In a very real way, Evelyn was correct. Aym's attempt to wind her up and ratchet her anxiety to new heights really was getting in the way of important things. Or at least things I needed to get done. I still had no replacement for my broken mobile phone and we couldn't risk going out to buy one, in case Felicity did in fact begin her journey to Sharrowford that day. And there was no way I could mount the short but vital expedition to the Shamble-swamp, to check on the Dimensional Shamblers, as I had promised. Not until this task was safely over.

But I took plenty of solace in spending the day with Eevee regardless. We watched two different anime shows on that slow, strange, dreary day — the one about the vampire girl and her mortal totally-not-girlfriend, and another one about a group of lady assassins who all seemed to be in love with each other in a dizzying web of romantic nonsense. It was very distracting, which was exactly what Eevee needed, especially when Raine started fielding the inevitable calls from Felicity about how she was still stuck.

That evening, when Felicity's attempt to get herself moving had once again ended in abject failure, I made sure that Evelyn spent a nice long time soaking in the bath. Sanctuary for the mind, solace for the body. It took quite some convincing — plus Praem's insistent stare — but eventually we got her in there.

Raine found me standing half-in half-out of the doorway to Evelyn's bedroom, staring down the corridor and listening to the distant, muffled splash of water behind the closed door of the bathroom.

“How's she holding up?” Raine asked.

“ ... mm? Sorry?”

Raine came up beside me, put one hand on the back of my neck, and started rubbing my muscles. I let out a low moan, almost a purr, and let my eyes flutter shut. Raine laughed softly.

“You seem kinda shell shocked, Heather. Take some time for yourself too, okay?”

“I’ve been relaxing with Eevee all day, I’m fine.” I opened my eyes again and looked up at Raine, at her warm brown eyes brimming with confidence, her hair raked back like she’d just run a hand through it. “You’re the one who’s been dealing with all the phone calls. Thank you, Raine. I mean it. I wouldn’t be able to do that and look after Eevee at the same time.”

Raine smirked and shrugged. “S’nothing. Phone’s easy for me.”

“Still, thank you. I think today was the last of it. I think they’ll set off for real tomorrow.”

Raine raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? You got a theory?”

I nodded toward the dark panes of the window. Evening darkness had fallen far too early for a summer’s night. On the horizon, lit from below by the glow of light pollution, the storm-wall loomed over Sharrowford like the face of a nightmare god. “That storm’s going to break in the morning. She’ll arrive at the same time.”

Raine raised both eyebrows at me in surprise. Not disbelief or scepticism, not even a little bit. “For serious?” she asked.

I suddenly felt very silly. “I ... I think. It’s only a theory. Eevee says it’s just weather, but it feels wrong to me. Maybe I’m wrong. I don’t know.”

“Hey, Heather, there’s no shame in being wrong about something,” Raine murmured, soft and intimate, for my ears only. She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. “It’s better to have a theory and get proved wrong, rather than not bother thinking at all, right?”

“Right,” I sighed. “I just mean ... magic. Even after all this time, it feels so silly. Magical weather because of a demon, really?”

Raine laughed and ruffled my hair. “You’re real tired. I can tell. You’ve done real good today, looking after Eevee. Better than I ever

could. Well done, Heather.”

I shrugged and pulled an awkward smile, looking down the corridor again, toward the bathroom.

“I really love her, do you know that?”

Why did you say that!? part of my mind screamed — but the rest of me was totally at ease, even as I looked up at Raine, seeking approval or understanding.

Raine ruffled my hair again. “Course you do. So do I.”

“No, I mean I ... I love her.”

Raine grinned. “Wanna go join her in the bathroom?”

“Tch!” I tutted. “Raine. No. I’m serious.”

“So am I! Go join her in the bathtub, that’ll keep her spirits up.”

I gave Raine a withering look, but she just snorted. What was I trying to do here, confess something important, or express something she already knew? My heart rate was steady, my palms were dry, I was utterly at ease. Raine already knew all this, or thought she knew.

“Praem’s already in the room with her, in case she has trouble getting out of the tub,” I said as a compromise, falling back on the practical dimension. “As always.”

Raine laughed, pulled me into a rough and sudden hug, and kissed the top of my head. “Between you and Praem, Evee’s gonna be just fine.”

I melted into Raine’s arms, leaning my head against her shoulder and closing my eyes. Only then did I realise just how tense I was.

The storm boiled away on the horizon of my mind’s eye, to reveal a dripping grin beneath the clouds.

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Distant thunder woke me the next morning, slow waves of mercury and molten silver crashing against a shore of broken glass, rolling across the sky. Raindrops tapped and danced on the roof tiles, hesitant for now, testing us. The sun was dead and buried.

Less than twenty minutes later, I was proven correct; into the gloom

of our bedroom sprang the sickly light of Raine's phone screen, flashing with an incoming call. Felicity, and it wasn't even seven o'clock in the morning yet. Zheng growled from the other side of me, a shifting bulk moving to protect me from an unseen threat. Raine sat up in bed, sneezed into her elbow, and scooped up the phone.

She answered the call by saying, "You better be on your bloody way this time, Fliss."

She was. The reclusive mage and her difficult demon were finally on their way to Sharrowford, just as the storm was breaking.

The rain steadily worsened over the next three hours as the storm moved over the city. Then the clouds seemed to stop overhead, hanging low and thick and dark, turning Sharrowford damp and chilly with the unbroken drizzle. Felicity called us twice more, once from the road and once from a service station on the M6, to let us know that all was well and she was making good time. We prepared for her arrival, but there was little left to do, except keep a close eye on Evelyn's mood. She sat in the kitchen, reading, waiting, seemingly calm and ready. I had given her all I could.

By the time Felicity reached the outskirts of Sharrowford the storm's drizzle had turned into a torrential downpour. Raindrops slammed against the roof and pounded through the leaves on the old tree out in the garden. Muddy wallows were forming around the back patio where short-lived streams cut through the unkempt grass. The garden path was under half an inch of water and the road itself was swirling with little eddies and puddles as the drains backed up. No wind, so the rain fell straight down from the unmoving clouds.

We even checked the news and found the newsreaders in serious mode, frowning and nodding, the weather lady gesticulating over a map of the north west of England, with Sharrowford picked out beneath a cross-hatching of alarming red. This storm was a big deal, flooding low-lying parts of the city centre and dumping months worth of rain into the river. Downstream would be even worse.

Amid this veil of storm, a dark chariot drew to a stop outside the house.

"She's here," Raine announced, peering out of the window in the old disused sitting room. "Places, ladies, places please."

Nobody had to be told twice.

Felicity had been given very specific instructions about what to do when she arrived. Much to my relief, she followed them to the letter. She was probably terrified that I might set Zheng on her. Raine received two text messages from Felicity, confirming that she was here and that she was ready. Raine and I got into our shoes, following our part of the plan, though we hadn't planned on the need to wear coats and grab umbrellas, but we did so anyway. No sense in getting soaked.

Evee waited in the kitchen, heavily guarded. There was no chance of Aym ambushing her before we were ready. She had Praem, Zheng, Sevens, Lozzie, and Tenny all in there with her. If Aym wanted to appear to her without warning, she was going to get "choke-slammed by two demons and a playwright", as Raine so delicately put it.

That failed to get a laugh out of Evee. "Get on with it," she said. "Go make sure she's alive, or whatever. Or not."

"Stay dry," said Praem.

That was easier said than done. Raine and I stepped out of the front door and into the pounding rain, huddling close together. Water streamed off the pair of umbrellas we'd brought for protection, but even they couldn't keep the storm entirely at bay. I kept my tentacles wound in close, wrapped around my limbs and anchored to Raine's waist too, as if we were venturing into an Arctic night. We started off down the path, wellington boots splashing in the rushing stream of water.

"That's the car, right?" Raine asked, speaking over the static of the raindrops.

"The same one from the last time she visited, yes."

Felicity's car was partially obscured by the sheer density of the rain pounding against the bodywork and tinted windows, but there was no mistaking it for any other vehicle. A battered old range rover, dark green, eaten away at the edges by slow rust. Even washed clean by the rain, the thing looked about ready to lie down and die of exhaustion. I knew very little about cars, but Raine had informed me that when new, such a car would have cost a very large amount of money.

The engine was silent, no lights showed inside the cabin, and the windscreen wipers lay still. But I could see a vague outline through the windscreen as we approached, a figure sitting in the driver's seat, watching us draw close.

Felicity — for it must have been her — raised a hand in limp greeting.

Raine and I stopped on the pavement next to the passenger-side door, our wellington boots squeaking against the wet ground. Raine tilted her umbrella so Felicity could lower the window without getting a torrent of water inside her car. I huddled close to Raine, bracing for anything, one tentacle raised to — to what? To punch through the glass and grab Felicity by the face? To intercept Aym if she darted out like a missile?

Through the tinted glass, the figure inside leaned over and found the handle to manually crank the window down. With aching slowness, the dark glass lowered, revealing the unmistakable face of Felicity Amber Hackett.

Felicity was a very strange looking woman indeed, a certain kind of face one never forgets. Whatever she had been responsible for, whatever she had once inflicted upon Eevee, however much she was a mage, it was difficult to look at the facts of her flesh and not feel at least some sympathy.

The entire left side of Felicity's face was a burn scar. Old, reddish, rough scarring stretched from her scalp, blurred her brow and cheek and jaw, and vanished down inside her neckline. She had no left ear. Her left eye was blind, milky-white, sight burned away. The left corner of her lips was missing, wiped away by flame, the source of her permanent mumble.

The healthy side — her right — was unguarded, skittish, and soft. She didn't look like a mage at all. In fact, she reminded me in an uncomfortable way of some of the older girls I'd briefly known at Cygnet children's hospital. Gentle, afraid, haunted, forced into constant hyper-vigilance.

Felicity wasn't intimidating at all. She was a very pitiful thing, brittle and willowy, moving as if always suppressing internal pain or hiding an injury.

Her reddish-brown hair fell to the middle of her back. She was

wearing a dark cardigan and a battered blue coat, big boots on her feet and black leather gloves on both hands.

“Heeeeeey Flissy,” said Raine, grinning without guile. “Here at last, hey? Didn’t get to see you in the flesh last time you came down.”

Felicity froze, then straightened up very, very slowly indeed, back into the driver’s seat, as if Raine was a rattlesnake she had disturbed by turning over a rock. Her good eye stayed locked on Raine with all the focus of a gunfighter preparing to draw. She took great care to keep both hands in view as she moved, then carefully placed them back on the steering wheel, at two-and-ten.

Which was smart, in front of Raine, because Felicity had a gun lying in her lap.

I sighed sharply when I realised, shaking my head. A towel-wrapped bundle lay across Felicity’s thighs, about the right size and shape for the sawn-off shotgun she’d brought with her on her previous visit. One end was pointed off at an angle, not quite at us. The other end was open, the towel partially unwrapped, probably so she could access the grip and trigger.

“What is it with mages and paranoia?” I snapped. “You could have at least kept the thing in a bag. What is it even for? Were you planning a drive-by?”

Felicity blinked at me, suddenly self-conscious and mortified. “I’m — I— I— I’m sorry,” she said in her distinct half-mumble from her restricted mouth. “Precautions. You have to understand, there’s— there’s always precautions to take, when I’m away from home.”

“Hey, it’s all cool,” Raine said, still smiling. She leaned forward, one elbow on the lip of the car window. “Nothing to worry about, no danger to us.”

“Y-yes,” Felicity agreed. “It’s not for you, not aimed at you. I never know who I might see on the road. Have to be careful.”

“Besides,” said Raine. “Even with your gun in your lap and mine in my coat, I’d still draw faster than you.”

Felicity went white with fear.

“Oh Raine, for pity’s sake,” I hissed. “This isn’t Amy Stack. You don’t need to have a surrogate penis-measuring contest with Felicity. Really!”

Raine had the good grace to look a little sheepish, clearing her throat and looking away, out into the pouring rain, but she still grinned like this was all a big joke. “Well, you know. She started it.”

“It’s a gun, Raine. Take this seriously.”

“I am taking it seriously.” She laughed. “That’s why I’m armed!”

“Tch,” I tutted and sighed, then turned my anger on Felicity too. She flinched before I even opened my mouth, but she kept her hands glued to the steering wheel. “And you, this is practically a replay of last time you visited! Pointing a concealed weapon at us again! Mages, I swear to good sense, all of you are impossible.” I huffed and peered into the back of the car, past the passenger seat, but there was nothing back there except a couple of large bags, some towels, and a bundle of wires. “Where’s Aym, anyway?”

“It’s not even loaded for people,” Felicity mumbled.

“I’m sorry?” I blinked back at her, not sure if I’d heard that right. Felicity was staring at me with a kind of hollow horror in her one good eye, exhausted and twitchy.

Raine laughed. “Silver shot or iron pellets still work just the same on human beings, Fliss.”

“Good thing it’s not loaded with those, then,” Felicity said to Raine. “I could point this at you and pull the trigger and it wouldn’t hurt you. It’s not for you. I have things of my own going on, okay?” Felicity’s voice threatened to break. She panted twice, to get her composure back, as little as it was. “I need to carry protection. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

Raine studied her for a moment, then nodded, no longer laughing or grinning. “Okay, Fliss. We’re cool. Does this mean you gotta carry that gun into our house?”

Felicity blinked twice. “I ... I wasn’t expecting to ... be allowed inside.”

I sighed, hunching a little against the rain, despite my umbrella. “Yes, I think it’s best if you don’t come in. Evelyn has agreed not to try to kill you, I want to make that clear. But it would make her very unhappy.”

Felicity looked down at her car’s dashboard, her eyes miles away.

She nodded to herself. “Yeah. Yeah. I ... I don’t get to see her. I don’t. Can you maybe ... maybe tell her ... from me—”

“After she’s spoken to Aym,” I said.

It took all my ruthlessness, all my hard-hearted love for Evee, to tell this broken woman *no*.

Felicity drew in a shuddering breath, then nodded. She didn’t look at us.

“Hey, Fliss,” Raine said. “Serious question, yeah?”

“Mm?” Felicity looked up at last.

“That gun, you out here on your own, once Aym comes inside with us and all. Are you safe?”

Felicity stared for a moment, then swallowed, then straightened up. She seemed to find some strength in the answer to that question.

“Probably. If I was being followed, I would know by now. If something ... arrives, well, that’s what the gun’s for. I’ll be alright.”

Raine nodded. A professional reassuring a rookie.

I peered into the back seat again. “Where’s Aym?”

“Yeah,” Raine said “You hiding her in the boot?”

Felicity sighed. “She’s always here, always with me. If you go inside and go into a room alone, she’ll be ready. Heather and Evee alone, I mean. She normally never shows herself to more than one person at a time, but she’ll cooperate for this. I guess.”

“Real spooky.” Raine shot Felicity a wink.

“And make sure,” Felicity added, “make sure nobody else is alone during this. She might ... well ... I don’t know what she might do. I don’t control her. I can’t. She might ... ” Felicity trailed off and shrugged.

“We’ve made sure everybody is together,” I said. “All in one place.”

Raine opened her mouth — then stopped, eyebrows shooting up. She turned to me. I frowned at her, then my eyes went wide and I put my free hand over my mouth.

“Don’t say—” Felicity started.

“Kim’s not at work today,” Raine said, then snapped back to Felicity. “Oh. Shit. Did I just jinx us?”

“Kimberly!” I hissed. “You’re right. She was sleeping in late, she always sleeps in late on her days off.”

Felicity went grey, panting with panic. “You said it! You said it! Not me! She’s going to have heard that!”

Raine rapped her knuckles on the car door to get Felicity’s attention. “Hey. What do we do?”

“Interrupt her! Quickly!”

“Kimberly is tougher than she looks,” I said. “We have time to get back indoors and get her with the others before—”

A scream of mad panic suddenly cut through the storm, muffled by the pounding rain and the walls of the house and the complexity of the second floor bedrooms. I had not heard that scream in months and months, the sort of scream that went on and on as somebody scrambled out of bed and hurled objects and fell over and banged into things.

Kimberly, screaming her head off.

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.5

A scream in the storm.

Lost inside the enclosing shadows of the upper floor with its labyrinth of rooms, muffled behind the thick plaster and stout brick of the exterior walls, soaked up by the cloud ceiling like an inverted grey ocean pressing down on the city, almost drowned out by the aural static of the rain pounding against roof tiles and pavement and asphalt and mud, Kimberly was screaming in terrified panic — and there could be only one possible cause.

Kimberly wasn't much for screaming. A scream is a call for help, after all; Kimberly had spent too much of her life learning that nobody was coming to help. A scream — even a metaphorical one — would only attract more attention, and attention could only ever come from predators, exploiters, and abusers.

It would take a lot longer than a few months of safety and security for Kimberly to unlearn any of that, no matter how good our intentions or how well we treated her. Sometimes I wished she could seek therapy, but what would she say? She would have to craft an elaborate lie, or else speak in such general terms that any competent psychologist would smell a rat. I'd seen how she reacted in her very worst moments, pushed right to the edge of her thin and ragged sanity. One of those times had come after days of silent torment, hiding alone in her old apartment, wondering if the Eye-sent Lozzie-thing would return, intimidated by Amy Stack, waiting for death, or worse than death. On that occasion she had been driven to violence in the end. She'd stabbed Twil in the hand after we broke into her flat, but as soon as the violence was done she had crumpled in submission and begged for mercy.

Weeks later Zheng had almost killed her right there in our front room, or at least came within a muscle-twitch of ripping out her tongue. That time Kimberly had offered almost no resistance, crying softly in the aftermath.

She tended to hide and retreat, preferred to make herself small and unseen, to minimize her exposed contact surfaces, like a tiny rodent living in a land of blood-mawed carnivores. She'd been living with us for months but she still stuck mostly to herself. She went to work, exchanged hellos and good mornings whenever somebody bumped into her in the kitchen, and chipped in a little for the usual grocery shopping and electricity bills — but she lived in her bedroom, playing video games, smoking cannabis, and talking incessantly with a very large number of online friends. According to Raine she was also spending a lot of time with her Wiccan coven. Good for her, I thought.

I ventured into her bedroom now and again, if only to make sure she was getting on okay. She steadfastly pretended that Zheng didn't exist, and seemed embarrassed by Lozzie's very presence. She was on good terms with Praem somehow, though I'd never seen them talking. We all knew that Tenny sometimes crept into her bedroom to peer at strange and exciting video games. I did hope they would maybe become friends, in time.

For Kimberly, screaming like that was a big deal. Fear and shock had overpowered her desire not to be seen or known.

Evelyn and I rarely discussed this out loud, but we both knew why we kept Kimberly close, why we gave her a comfortable and safe place to live, rent-free. It was our way of trying to help one of the victims of the Sharrowford Cult, to take some of the vast responsibility demanded by our power. Kimberly wanted nothing to do with magic anymore, so we sheltered her from it, paradoxically enough, by keeping her close to the centre of our own magically-derived safety.

Kimberly Kemp was a survivor of a very specific kind of abuse and exploitation; she was reclusive and shy, sweet and funny; she probably had post-traumatic stress disorder; the last thing she needed was an unscheduled wake-up call by a horrible apparition in the dark of an unnatural storm.

Aym was up there, whispering unknown nightmares in Kimberly's ear.

Abyssal instinct, ape-pack imperative, and simple decency all agreed on one thing — that scream would not go unanswered. Kimberly was one of us.

Standing by the passenger-side door of Felicity's range rover, Raine and I wasted all of half a second staring back toward the house through the pounding raindrops.

Then Raine shot me a look. She didn't need to ask with words.

"Yes!" I said. "Go!"

Raine snapped her umbrella shut and sprinted for the front door, wellington boots splashing through the churning water on the garden path, raindrops bouncing and splattering off her shoulders, soaking her jeans, and slicking her hair to her skull in an instant.

Strictly speaking that was totally unnecessary. The house currently contained several people far scarier than Raine, more than capable of dealing with Aym, who would be up those stairs just as quick. But my instincts demanded that I send my own best protector to save Kimberly.

Instinct demanded I go too. Prudence kept me rooted.

Felicity was still fumbling to raise the passenger side window, winding the hand-crank at speed. She had gone white in the face, shakily jamming her towel-wrapped shotgun into the bag on the back seat. The sensible part of my mind was calmly explaining to me that Felicity was our best bet at peeling Aym away from her new toy. Whatever I'd said a few moments ago about not allowing her inside the house, that no longer mattered. I should wait the few seconds for her to scramble out of the car, and then take her inside; she had claimed she couldn't control Aym, but she must be able to do something to help. Raine was at the front door, yanking it open, kicking off her wellington boots.

Then Kimberly stopped screaming. The silence filled with the pounding of the storm.

Abyssal instinct and savannah ape pack imperative rocketed through me like an electric shock.

I barely knew what I was doing when I picked up my feet up and shot after Raine, my own wellington boots splashing halfway down the path before I veered off into front lawn and around the side of the house, squelching in the sodden grass, water swirling over the toes of the boots.

I must have lost my umbrella, because I was soaked instantly, hair

plastered to my skull as I looked up at the second floor of the house, searching for Kimberly's bedroom window.

"Kim!" I shouted up into the rain. My voice was a whisper in the storm. "Open your window!"

The rain slammed down in sheets of water, turning the air to static grey, pouring out of the overflowing gutters along the roof. I couldn't see the house properly, let alone tell one window from the other. One window was lit and lacked curtains, that must have been the one in the upstairs hallway. The dark and curtained one next to it, that must have been my bedroom. But in the other direction there were four windows. Surely Kimberly's was the one right on the end but that made no sense. The bathroom should have been on the end. Or was it Lozzie's bedroom?

For a moment the second floor of Number 12 Barnslow Drive made no sense. It was like looking at a house I'd never seen before.

My tentacles gathered behind me, coiling up and bracing against the water-saturated ground, like six great muscular springs. Deep in my belly, my trilobe bioreactor squeezed out a control rod, flushing my skin with heat to counteract the chill of the rain. My legs itched to kick and bounce. My stomach lurched with anticipation.

This was one of the most ill-advised impulses I had ever followed, but I couldn't stop. Raine would be up there in seconds, she was already inside. Zheng might already be up there, tearing Aym to pieces. Why was I preparing to fling myself into the air?

Because abyssal instinct had finally found an ideology around which it fitted like a glove.

Angel-squid Heather had no choice but to protect.

Only confusion held me back. I had no idea which window to target. I wasn't so far gone as to hurl myself at the house and burrow through the brickwork.

Then, just at the moment I might have come to my senses and thought better of trying to imitate a flying squirrel, the lights flicked on behind the last window in the row. The curtains twitched, then swept aside. A terrified pale face peered down at me, framed by messy auburn hair.

"Kim!" I shouted again, bouncing on the spot like my legs were

going to explode. "Open the window!"

Kim fumbled with the latch. The window swung outward, banging on its hinges. A few stray raindrops fell on the back of Kimberly's shivering arm before she pulled herself back inside.

And I let go with all those muscular springs.

At the time, I felt like a squid shooting through the oceanic deep on a plume of water-powered jet-propulsion, sleek and athletic. A momentary shadow of abyssal grace touched me inside, like a point of glowing warmth inside my chest, a feeling of rightness in my own skin. Perhaps it was the pounding rain, the water running down my face and neck. In reality I probably resembled one of those children's toys that you can stick to a hard surface with a sucker cup, then wait a few seconds for it to bounce upward under its own vacuum pressure.

My stomach lurched as I left the ground behind. For one dizzying heartbeat I felt like I was the one who should have been screaming, as I slammed right into the aperture of Kimberly's open window. But my tentacles did the thinking for me, whipping around to catch the frame like I was a spider clinging to my own self-made web.

A few paces inside the room, Kimberly gaped at me, wide-eyed with shock.

I didn't blame her. It wasn't every day a squid-girl climbed in your window. I certainly hoped none of the neighbours had seen, or we were about to appear in some very outlandish news-of-the-weird style articles on the internet.

I tumbled into the room and landed in a wet heap on the floorboards, like an octopus dumped on the deck of a fishing boat, tentacles and limbs lashing and flapping, coat drenched on the inside, hair stuck to my skull. I had the presence of mind to kick my wellington boots off where I'd landed, so I didn't create an even bigger muddy mess on the lovely soft rugs Kimberly had further in.

As soon as I was clear I leapt to my feet, a warning hiss in my throat, head whipping left and right.

Kimberly stood shaking in the centre of her bedroom, arms clasped across her chest and belly, staring at me with more than a touch of awe. Small and mousy and twitchy as ever, she was panting, tear-tracks down her face, her auburn hair in a post-sleep mess. She was

still in her pajama bottoms and an old t-shirt, with a picture of a pretty-boy elf on the front. There was a big crease down the side of her face from where she'd been sleeping.

Her bedsheets were all askew, pastel blankets yanked to one side as if she'd just lurched out of bed and gotten tangled halfway. Her pillow was on the other side of the room, presumably hurled there moments earlier. Her computer, a proper desktop tower, was happily humming away to itself beneath her desk; I politely pretended not to notice the two boxes of tissues next to the monitor, along with the open comic book of dubious content on the desk.

Her bookshelf had suffered a casualty from the commotion. A couple of books had fallen off, presumably when she had blundered into it, and knocked one of her little statues over. A porcelain unicorn statue, wild and noble and suspiciously muscular, lay on the floor, neatly shattered into two pieces.

The room smelled faintly of cannabis, of course. I spotted several little baggies full of green stuff on her bedside table, next to rolling papers and other detritus.

Aym was nowhere to be seen — but then again, I didn't know what to look for.

At least the lights were on, blazing and bright.

The door was closed, but I could hear half a dozen footsteps hurling themselves up the stairs and then along the hallway. Somebody called out Kimberly's name.

Kimberly found her voice, robotic and stunned. “ ... tentacles working well, then?”

I blinked at her. “Kim, are you alright?”

She swallowed, blinking several times, like a waking sleepwalker. Her eyes flickered around the room, dazed and confused. She was caught between sleep and adrenaline, more animal than human right then, confused about where she was, what she was, how to respond.

Then she cringed and hunched, the terror coming back in a sudden panting hyperventilation. “There was ... a ... a thing—”

Raine chose that exact moment to burst in through Kimberly's

bedroom door. Zheng was right on top of her like her shadow, filling her blind spot. The pair of them looked ready to wrestle a monster, Zheng moving with that flowing predatory muscularity that made my bowels quiver with the echo of old fear, Raine with a naked combat knife in one hand. Kimberly whirled and squeaked, backing up and bumping into her desk again. But Raine and Zheng both stopped in surprise when they saw me already standing there, dripping wet by the open window.

“Heather?” Raine broke into a grin, then started laughing. “How did you get up here? Did you climb through the window? You’re soaked!”

“Um, sort of,” I said, coming to my senses. I had to swallow down a hiss and wipe the dripping water out of my eyes. My hair was soaked, my clothes were stuck to my skin. My reactor was ramping up, my skin feeling like it should be glowing with heat. Any further and I might start steaming.

“Neither wall nor ditch can bar the shaman,” Zheng purred, then whipped her attention around the room, dark eyes narrowed, teeth exposed. “Where is the goblin?”

“Gone already,” I said.

Kim’s eyes flicked between faces and corners, badly shaken. “I-I don’t even know what that was, what was ... what was ... ”

Raine quickly crossed the room, putting away her knife so she could squeeze Kimberly’s shoulder. She was a little wet too, but nowhere near as bad as me. “Hey, Kim, ease down, you got nothing to worry about, nothing to be afraid of. We’re all here now, nothing else is gonna happen. Me and Zheng, we’re your bodyguards right now. How’s that feel? Safe, right? See, you’ve even got Heather up here to look out for you. Take a deep breath with me, okay? Nice deep breath, in and out. That’s it, that’s good. And another.”

Kimberly stared up at Raine with eyes just as intimidated and terrified as before. But she obeyed, she did as she was told, sucking down a great shuddering breath and then letting it in unison with Raine.

“There, that’s better,” Raine purred for her, blasting her with a full dose of Raine confidence. “Good girl.”

“Kim,” I said gently. “What happened? If you can tell us.”

Kimberly looked caught between a rock and a hard place. I think Raine's "good girl" encouragement had done more harm than good. But she found her voice and stumbled over the words. "It— it was—I was in bed. I heard a scratching sound so I rolled over onto my back and ... and there was a shadow on the headboard. It was ... drooling this black stuff—" Kimberly's hands went to her chin and neck and chest, but she was clean of any mysterious black ichor. "And then it ... it leaned down and ... whispered ... I ... I can't ... "

"So she appeared and then vanished again?" I asked.

"That is her style," said a familiar half-mumble.

Felicity joined us in the room, which surprised me.

Out of her car and up on her feet, Felicity was tall, more than six foot, willowy and brittle, moving with the caution of a long-term osteoporosis sufferer. A sports bag was slung over one shoulder, her shotgun presumably contained within. The hood and shoulders of her coat were wet from the rain. Her hands were free, black gloves plainly visible, so at least I could be certain she wasn't pointing any weapons at anybody.

She seemed to have located her spine, both literally and metaphorically; straight-backed and clear-eyed, she was still pale and shaken, still pouchy-eyed and fragile, but there was unmistakable confidence in her musculature and unhesitating stare. It was like she'd flicked a switch in her own head. She kept a careful distance between herself and Zheng, fingers flicking once in some covert gesture when the hulking demon-host looked at her and growled, but apparently Kimberly was more important.

"This is her?" she asked, staring at Kim, then answered her own question quickly, speed-mumbling as if talking more to herself than anybody in the room. "Kimberly, yes, I remember you from last time. You saw Aym, what did she say to you? I-it could be important. What did she say?"

Kimberly blinked at her, unable to process the sudden arrival. "Nothing important ... what ... who ... "

"Heeeey Flissy," Raine said. "Back off a step or two, hey?"

Felicity grimaced and gritted her teeth; confidence had not changed her erratic agitation. "It could be important, alright?"

Behind her, three little faces peered around the door frame — Lozzie, Tenny, and Sevens, all lingering at the threshold. It was already getting quite cramped in the room with five of us in here already. Tenny looked especially distressed, trying openly to catch Kimberly's eye, waving with her black tentacles.

"Kim!" she fluttered. "Kim-Kim! Kim!"

To my surprise, Kimberly called softly past Raine. "I-I'm okay, Tenny!"

Lozzie petted Tenny on the head. "She's okay, Tenny. Everybody's here to help!"

But Tenny still seemed very worried, shifting from foot to foot, but seemingly unwilling to push past Zheng.

"Where's Evee?" I said. "Lozzie, where is Evee? Nobody should be alone right now, especially not—"

Evelyn herself answered from much further down the upstairs corridor, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"I want her out! Out of this house, right fucking now! You— Praem, get off! Go throw her out of the fucking window or something!"

"Don't do that, Praem!" I called back. "Don't leave Evee by herself!"

Praem replied in a voice like the chime of a bell. "Evelyn is accompanied."

Raine cleared her throat with forced politeness and shot Felicity a meaningful look, as if over a pair of imaginary glasses. "Evee's got a point, you ain't supposed to be in here. Aym's already gone again, so we're cool now, okay? Crisis averted, everybody's alright, not gonna happen again. Time to head back out to your car."

Felicity stared for a second, her one good eye frozen on Raine in a moment of indecision. She no longer appeared like the woman we'd seen out in her car, consumed by apology and self-hatred. For one strange moment I was certain she was about to challenge Raine. My own tentacles twitched as if to reach out and restrain her. Zheng's gaze slid round to the lurking mage, teeth peeling back on an implicit threat. Above our heads, raindrops drummed on the roof, turning the house into a great echoing cave. Behind me, the window still stood open, admitting the static haze of grey noise and the creeping cold of the ever-present storm.

Then Felicity's new-found confidence ebbed away. She swallowed and nodded and looked down. "Yes. Yes, you're right, I shouldn't be in here. Just ... Kimberly, are you okay? I-is she okay?"

"Not really," said Kim. She kept her arms pressed to her front. Her eyes seemed unable to stay still. She looked like a mouse amid a group of well-fed snakes, hoping that none of us were hungry.

Raine squeezed her shoulder again and caught her eye. "You'll be fine, you can spend the rest of the day with Lozzie and Tenny, that'll keep Aym away from you. You can all go play Mario Kart, cool?"

Kim let out a nervous, weird laugh, a forced hiccup of confusion. "I didn't even know anything was happening today ... "

I winced. "I'm sorry, Kim. I should have kept you in the loop. It's my fault."

Kimberly shot me a wide-eyed, confused look. She didn't even understand what was going on, but that wasn't her fault.

"And hey, Heather," Raine said with a smirk, "you need to get dry. You're soaked all the way through."

"Ah. Yes." I sighed a little sigh, suddenly embarrassed, and flopped my dripping coat sleeves against my sides. I hardly felt cold at all, the heat from my reactor already burning off the worst of the water. "Yes. Well. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

Felicity suddenly tensed up and frowned at me. "Wait, how did you get up here?"

"Through the window," I sighed.

Tenny trilled with deep amusement, from just beyond the doorway. "Wet Heath goes boing!"

Lozzie snorted. Zheng grinned a grin that showed all her teeth, proud of her shaman. Sevens made a gurgly little noise. Felicity just stared at the window, then back at me. Even her blank, burned-out eye looked concerned.

"I've changed quite a bit since you met me," I said with another little sigh, my face going hot with embarrassment. "Suffice to say, I don't usually make a habit of jumping through second-floor windows. It was probably a bad idea."

Lozzie leaned further into the room, hanging from the door frame, long blonde hair hanging down, pastel poncho flopping sideways. She was biting her lower lip, either feeling mischievous or doing a great deal of thinking. “Fliiiiiis, how are you surprised at Heathy going boing but not by everything about Tenn-Tenns?”

Felicity frowned more. “Tenn ... tenns?”

“Tenny!” said Tenny. “Is me. Hi!”

When Felicity looked at Tenny, I realised that Lozzie was correct; Felicity wasn’t the least bit surprised by the obviously inhuman sight of Tenny, with her swirling patches of white fur over coal-black skin, her obviously non-human wings hanging down either side of her body, her mass of tentacles waving above her shoulders, the pair of twitching, fluffy antennae on her head, or the simple fact of her huge black eyes.

Felicity didn’t return Tenny’s greeting, but just glanced at Lozzie and shrugged, as if confused why any response was required from her at all.

Sometimes it was easy to forget this woman was a mage.

I cleared my throat. “Tenny is a child,” I said. “Tenny, it’s good to greet people. Felicity, what do you say when a child greets you?”

Felicity looked at me in a moment of unsettled confusion, as if she wasn’t certain whether I was being serious, but was utterly sure about my tone of voice. I gave her a look. She glanced back at Tenny.

“Hello,” she said, stiff and uncomfortable, then looked away again.

I kept my pained sigh to myself. I suppose Tenny would have to learn sooner or later that not all adults were capable of returning a pleasant greeting.

“Tenny!” Eevee called from far down the upstairs hallway. “Don’t speak with her! She’s dangerous! Lozzie, you keep Tenny away from her!”

Lozzie made a pouty face and took one of Tenny’s tentacles in hand. Tenny let out a fluttering, trilling noise of confusion, glancing over her shoulder, presumably at Eevee. Head tilting side-to-side, Tenny didn’t quite follow.

Raine cleared her throat. “Fliss, back to your car, please. We’ll take care of Kim, she’ll be fine.”

“Right,” Felicity said. She nodded, eyes finding the floor easier than anybody’s face.

“Lozz,” Raine said, “would you please run down the corridor and make sure Praem takes Eevee down the stairs first? We don’t want these two bumping into each other like a pair of cats in the hallway.”

“Clawing and biting and *merrow!*” went Lozzie, making a little paw with one hand. She sketched a joking salute and then tugged on Tenny. “Let’s go help auntie Eevee, Tenny!”

“Auntie Eevee!” Tenny agreed.

And that was when the lights went out.

There was no dramatic pop of a bursting fuse or the electric crackle of a failing bulb, just the fall of sudden gloom as the lights in Kimberly’s bedroom died. The faint happy hum of her desktop computer shut off as well. The lights must have failed out in the hallway too, because we were plunged into a deep, sucking, rain-washed gloom of grey shadows and thickened darkness. The storm outdoors had already swallowed the sun; the only illumination was the thin and sickly light creeping in through the windows.

I flinched in surprise. Kimberly let out a pitiful whimper. Tenny made a surprised trill, like a tree-dwelling rodent discovering the floor had disappeared. Lozzie went ‘burr!’ and Sevens gurgled. Down the corridor, I heard Evelyn huff in sheer disbelief and exasperation.

Zheng seemed unaffected, of course. Raine, by contrast, went into action instantly, stepping away from Kimberly so she could peer around me and out of the open window.

I think I was the only one who noticed how Felicity reacted — she went wide-eyed and tense, holding her breath, one hand on her sport bag. She was staring right at Kimberly.

“A bloody power cut!” Evelyn yelled. “Now? Really? Very original, Aym!”

“I hunt better in the dark,” Zheng rumbled. “The goblin will have nowhere to hide.”

Raine craned her head to see out of the window. I realised she was looking at the house opposite.

“Nah!” she called back to Evelyn. “It’s just us, lights are on up the street. Praem, you wanna check the fusebox? Take Evee with you! Nobody moves around alone, okay?”

“Safety trio,” Praem said from out in the corridor. “Lozzie, Tenny.”

“Yah!” Lozzie chirped.

Raine turned to me. “Heather, you wanna get out of those wet clothes. If we can’t get the power back on quick, we’ll lose heat fast. Get dry, take Sevens with you, I’ll stick with Kimberly and—”

“*Kiiiiiiim-beeeeeer-leeeeeee*,” scratched a voice from the fever dreams of a medieval diabolist.

A shadow was clinging to Kimberly’s back. It had not been there a moment earlier.

The thick grey gloom of the storm-light concealed all details beneath a veil of hanging darkness; the shadow was indistinct, peering over Kimberly’s left shoulder from behind, like a small child or a koala bear or the top half of a bisected corpse lashed to her back. Talons or claws or sharp fingers dug into the shoulders and sides of her t-shirt, visible only by the indentations they made in cloth and flesh. The grey, dead light washed out any facial features, leaving behind only pits for eyes and the suggestion of a slash for a mouth.

“What an interesting naaaaaame,” Aym purred like a voice-box filled with rusty iron filings. Black drool fell in sticky ropes onto Kim’s shoulder.

Kimberly was frozen in terror, eyes wide, tears falling silently down her face.

Out in the corridor, Tenny let out a noise of trilling alarm. Lozzie said something indistinct, some muttered reassurance. Closer at hand, Raine turned, ready to tackle something she could barely see. Zheng pulled an arm back, fingers wide, limb blurring with sudden motion as the rest of her body rocked forward, the opening split-second of a move to rip the demon off Kimberly’s back.

“No!” Felicity yelled, one hand up. “Don’t touch her! It’s dangerous!”

To my surprise, Zheng actually paused, dark eyes swivelling to look at Felicity. “To me, wizard?”

“To anybody,” Felicity said in an urgent mumble, eyes locked on Aym. “Do not touch her.”

“Oh,” Kimberly whimpered, so soft and small. “P-please, please, somebody ... ”

I couldn’t not respond to that. My tentacles were whirling upward into a star of threat posture, growing sharp at their tips. I felt a hiss crawling up my throat. This violation would not go unanswered.

“Hey!” Raine said, taking a step to one side, as if trying to flank Aym. “You get off Kim right now, you little shit.”

“Aym,” I said, struggling to keep my voice sounding at least a little human. “I will hurt you. I warned you. I will.”

But Aym didn’t seem to care about what anybody said. She wasn’t even interested in my tentacles, let alone surprised. She giggled, an awful noise like gravel being pulverised. Kimberly closed her eyes and started to hyperventilate.

Felicity dropped her sports bag, spread her arms, and took a step toward the demon.

“You get off that girl’s back, Aym,” she said.

“Hnnnnnh?” went Aym. A row of claws seemed to ascend up Kimberly’s sides. The shadow rose higher, pushing itself upward so it was level with the top of Kimberly’s head. “Standing up for somebody, now? Where’s that spine when you’re all alone, Flissy-poos?”

“Get off that girl right now, Aym,” Felicity said. “I won’t repeat myself a third time.”

“What do you care?” Aym spat. “She’s so delicious, I can taste her in the air, raw. A little heat and pressure and she’ll go from quiet self-pity to tearing her hair out and—”

Felicity did the absolute last thing I expected, especially for a woman who moved around like she was recovering from a dozen broken bones.

She lunged at Aym.

Apparently Aym hadn't expected that either.

The shadowy wisp of irritating demon let out a yelp, a sound like a pair of rusty knives getting snapped beneath the wheels of a tractor. She detached herself from Kimberly's back and seemed to melt into the shadows, like a swimmer pushing off from an underwater ledge. But Felicity was faster. One gloved hand shot past Kimberly's shoulder and grabbed a fistful of darkness, gloved fingers sinking into nothingness made solid.

Aym squealed — an awful sound, half-animal, half-metal, all teeth-grating. Kimberly cried out and ducked down into a crouch, arms wrapped around her head. Felicity held Aym aloft by what might have been her throat. The actual shape was impossible to make out.

Aym kicked and hissed and squealed. I saw hints of what looked like claws, stingers, and rolling eyeballs deep in the shadowy mass. All of it could have been an illusion, a mind-ghost one sees in the shapes of familiar furniture and discarded clothing in the corner of one's room upon awakening. Tendrils lashed at Felicity's face. Black drool fell on the arm of her coat, hissing and burning. Feet like bird talons raked at the front of her coat. But she stood and took it all, unflinching and untouched.

Then, with a flicker, the lights came back on.

Blink blink went the bulbs in Kimberly's bedroom. Chunk-whirr went her reanimated computer. Artificial light pushed back the edges of the storm, forcing it outdoors again, into the rain.

And Aym vanished like a shadow in the light.

Felicity held the pose for another second, staring at nothing, arm outstretched, fingers making a claw. She was truly untouched — all of Aym's tantrum was apparently immaterial, shadow-play and fakery. Then she swallowed hard and lowered her arm, panting and sweating. Tenny and Lozzie peered in at the door, both wide-eyed, Tenny looking mightily alarmed. Raine blew out a breath. I wasn't sure where Sevens had gone.

I raised my voice, fearing the worst. "Evee! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine!" Evelyn called back from down the corridor. "That was astoundingly stupid, even for Aym."

Zheng bared her teeth. "I will rip you from the air, shadow!" she

rumbled. “There is no hiding in this place, shapeless thing.”

“Apparently there is,” Raine said. She moved toward Kimberly, to help her up.

But Felicity got there first. Before Raine could reach Kim, Felicity crouched down and took Kimberly’s hands in her own. Kimberly’s head shot up, surprised and blinking and still terrified, panting and crying and losing control. She looked like she wanted to crawl back into bed and curl up and sleep through the rest of the day.

“You need to share what she said to you,” Felicity said, right to Kimberly’s face.

Kimberly tried to pull away, but she was weakened by her own shock. “N-no, please, s-stop—”

“Hey now Fliss,” said Raine, stepping closer, smiling but oh so very dangerous. “Let her up. Let her up and step back, yeah? This is none of your business.”

But even Raine’s implicit threat wasn’t enough to get Felicity moving. She kept talking to Kimberly, eyes never once leaving that terrified, crying face. “Don’t let her use it against you, don’t let her twist it up inside you. I don’t know what she said, but I know it was bad. Whatever it is, however shameful, however horrible, don’t let her. Don’t. Tell somebody. Anybody. You can tell me right now, I’ve been listening to her for years. I know!”

Kimberly was in so much shock I thought she might keel over and pass out right there. Raine was almost on top of them, I could see her moving to grab Felicity by the shoulder and pull her off Kim. Poor Kim’s personal space had already been violated by one intrusion today, this was the last thing she needed.

But then, Kimberly leaned forward. She was so stunned, so used to obeying authority, that she just went along with it.

And deep down I knew it was probably better than the alternative.

So I darted out with one tentacle and grabbed Raine’s arm. Raine flinched, then blinked back at me. I put a finger to my lips and shook my head.

Down on the floor, one woman on her knees and the other crouching, Kimberly put her lips close to Felicity’s ear, cupped her mouth with one hand, and whispered a single sentence. She choked

back a sob in the middle, but managed to finish. She whispered so softly that even I couldn't hear. I had no right to.

Then she rocked back, shell shocked and drained.

"That's not true," Felicity said, instantly.

Kimberly's face scrunched up. She was trying desperately not to cry. "It is."

"It's not!" Felicity snapped in her painful half-mumble; difficult with those lips, it drew a wince from her. Outrage was a strange emotion on her half-burned face. The half covered by burn scars twisted uncomfortably, pulling at the junction between scarring and healthy skin. "She tells you lies to hurt you. That's what she does."

"But it's true ..." Kimberly whimpered. Her resolve crumpled. She started crying, ugly crying, the kind of crying that one has to either turn away from, or respond to with instant, empathetic comfort.

I had to turn away. Not because I didn't want to help, but because Kim was already in another's hands. Raine stepped forward to rub Kim's back. Tenny crept into the room, tentacles reaching for her friend, though unwilling to get close to Zheng. To our combined surprise, Kimberly clung, child-like, to the front of Felicity's coat.

Raine and I shared an awkward look. Was this safe? We had no idea who Felicity really was, or if it was emotionally safe to allow Kimberly to reach out to her like this. Felicity herself at least seemed aware of the difficulty; she pulled one of those intensely awkward un-smiles, made even more awkward by the fact she couldn't use her whole mouth. Zheng snorted and turned to look back into the upstairs hallway. Lizzie had vanished somewhere, probably to help Praem with Evee.

I cleared my throat. "This situation is rapidly spiralling out of control, and I would rather that descent be halted right now. Felicity, do you believe our deal with Aym is still going ahead?"

Felicity nodded at me, deadly serious. "I believe she'll honour it. Be careful though. I don't know why she did this."

"Because she is an awful little shit," Raine said with a snort.

"I don't need to be told that twice," I said. "What should we do about ..." I nodded down at Kimberly, who was still sobbing softly, not quite all down Felicity's shoulder, but not far off.

“We should all stay in one place, right?” Raine asked.

Felicity nodded. “Nobody should be alone. Until I leave, at least. Groups of three, maybe?”

I sighed and tried not to look as exasperated as I felt. “You told us that Aym only shows herself to people by themselves. So what was that just now?”

Felicity blinked at me several times with her good eye, looking increasingly uncomfortable, her sudden unexplained confidence finally draining away to nothing as the crisis passed. “She’s never done this before.”

Zheng grunted. “The mewling, failed wizard is too tempting for her appetite.”

Felicity stared at Zheng, then at Kimberly. “Failed wizard?”

I cleared my throat. “Thank you, Zheng. Felicity, I think it’s best if you drop that subject.”

“Kim,” Raine was saying, rubbing Kimberly’s back. “Hey, Kim, come on, I’ll take you downstairs. Fliss has to head out.”

“N-no,” Kimberly murmured. “No.”

A high-pitched, throaty gurgle came from down by my left side, familiar but surprising; Sevens had somehow slunk around the edge of the room without anybody noticing. She poked her face around my hip, black-and-red eyes staring at Felicity, shoulders wrapped in yellow cloak which pooled around her feet. “*Guuuurrr-uuuuk*,” she went. “I’ll stay up here with these two. In here. Rule of three. ‘Kay?”

Raine and I shared another look. Raine pulled a slightly pained grin. I shrugged and said, “It’s better than having Evelyn and Felicity in the same room for any length of time.”

Felicity was frowning at Sevens with the tiniest touch of a look I’d seen on Evee so many times before — cold, calculating mage-thoughts of judgement and appraisal.

“*Gaaaaao*,” went Sevens. “You don’t know what I am, and it’s none of your business. I’m just here to watch.”

Raine clicked her fingers, suddenly serious and calm again. “Hey, Fliss.”

“Y-yes?”

“Hurt Kim and I’ll kill you.” Then she smirked. “We cool?”

“*Buuuurrrt!*” went Tenny, mildly alarmed.

Felicity stared back. She blew out a long slow breath, shaking only a little bit. “I’m not going to hurt anybody. She just needs ... an ear. That’s all.”

“Good,” said Raine. “Sevens, call us if anything changes. Okay?”

I rolled my eyes, but secretly I thanked Raine for making absolutely certain. “Right, everybody else to the kitchen,” I said. “We’ll let you know when this is all over.”

Felicity looked straight at me, and said, “Good luck. For Evelyn, too.”

I answered with a thin smile. There was little more to say.

= =

Twenty minutes later Eevee and I waited alone together in the magical workshop, the old drawing room, the location of our much-changed gateway to Outside, the seat of power for Evelyn Saye the mage, the secret at the heart of the house, and the location I kept habitually leaving my squid-skull mask.

Eevee was already in an absolutely foul mood. She had stomped all the way downstairs, barely accepting Praem’s help and certainly not anybody else’s, looking always on the verge of hitting somebody with her walking stick. I hadn’t been able to calm her myself — Raine had insisted that I take the time to shed my wet clothes and change into something dry, which I had done, accompanied by herself and Zheng, leaving Eevee to get more and more angry.

Now Evelyn sat in one of the chairs pulled away from the large workshop table, half-hunched and glowering at nothing, scrimshawed thigh-bone placed across her lap, both hands planted on the handle of her walking stick, balanced in front of her.

“Try not to think about it,” I murmured out loud.

“Huh,” Eevee grunted.

I didn’t have to define what ‘it’ was. The mere presence of Felicity inside the house gave Eevee an expression as if she could taste vomit

on her tongue.

Perhaps this was Aym's strategy all along, to unbalance Evelyn before the conversation even began. Perhaps all that stuff with Kimberly was just a red herring.

We weren't taking any chances on either front. Kimberly was upstairs in her bedroom with Felicity and Sevens, safe as could be. Everybody else was waiting in the old disused sitting room, so as to satisfy Aym's condition of no eavesdropping — though I suspected that at least one person was going to try to sneak into the kitchen and press their ear to the workshop door. My private, unspoken bet was on Zheng.

I stood a couple of paces away from Eevee, at her flank, occupying the position usually taken by Praem, or the position Raine sometimes occupied in relation to myself. Bodyguard, attendant, and naked blade. Odd to think of myself that way, but this was about Eevee, not me. I kept my tentacles spread wide, all except one that was wrapped around Eevee's right arm, down to her wrist, to anchor her in case the worst should happen. I cradled my squid-skull mask with my own right arm. My left sleeve was pulled back to expose the blocky black lines of the Fractal against my sunless skin.

All my weapons on full display. I even did my best to stand up straight and look intimidating. I doubted Aym cared about the can of pepper spray in the front pocket of my hoodie, but it never hurt to be prepared.

We were not truly, technically alone, not by the strictest definition. Two spider-servitors hung in their usual spot in the corner, frozen like statues of black chitin. Marmite was crouched below them, his bony, segmented tentacles drawn in close. He could feel something was approaching, or perhaps he sensed our tension. A little further away from the spider-corner, a piece of blue tarpaulin pinned to the wall hid the bucket of possessed clay, which still contained the undefinable demon that Felicity herself had extracted from Eevee, months ago now.

But this would have to do. Aym would have to accept this. We weren't doing it anywhere else.

"Aym?" I said out loud, into the empty room, after we'd been waiting for perhaps twenty seconds. "We're ready. Are you here?"

Storm rain drummed on the roof and windows. The house seemed to press close with protective warmth, as if something was trying to break through from the storm above.

Evelyn sighed and looked very unimpressed. I heard her teeth creak as she clenched her jaw.

"Feels like a seance," I said. "Are the spirits listening, woooooo, is anybody there ... " I trailed off and cleared my throat. "We're here, Aym, as we agreed. If you keep messing us around, I shall ... get quite angry."

"She's probably waiting for us to turn the lights off," Evelyn said. "She doesn't like being seen."

"Heeeeeeeheeeeeee," came a hissing, grinding fake laugh, like the sound of liquid sulphur boiling away from broken glass, apparently from behind the sofa. "Some of us like to do it in the dark, that's true," said Aym. "I'm soooo shy!"

Both spider-servitors reacted like they'd just caught wind of an arachnid-hunting jungle wasp; two banks of crystalline eyes swivelled to stare directly at the gap between the sofa and the wall; a dozen spike-tipped stingers whirled up into a defensive formation, quivering and pointing; a split-second later, both spiders shot across the ceiling, scuttling at high speed. One of them slammed into the far wall, just above the gateway, poised as if to pounce. The other dropped onto the table and assumed a similar pose, just ahead of Eevee, pointed back toward the source of the demonic voice.

I flinched hard, my tentacles twitching — not at Aym, but at the spiders' reaction. At least they knew what their job was, senile or not: protect the gate, protect Eevee.

My flinch made Eevee flinch. I sighed and huffed. "The spiders reacted, that's all," I said. "Marmite ... less so."

Marmite didn't seem bothered by Aym at all, which was quite strange. Instead of retreating, he peered around the side of the sofa with his swivelling cone-eyes.

Eevee slipped her modified 3D glasses on over her face briefly, saw the spiders, and grunted in approval. Then she took them off again and nodded to me. "Lights, Heather, please."

"Are you sure? Upstairs, she ... "

“Do it.”

“Do iiiiiiit,” Aym hissed, then giggled.

I sighed, reached over toward the light switch with one tentacle, and plunged us into the deep gloom of the storm beyond the walls.

Thick as tar and dark as oil, these shadows were so much more dense than the ones upstairs, with the curtains pulled tight over the windows. Suddenly I felt my lungs expand, my senses awaken, the pressure lessen on my feet as two tentacles took some of my body’s weight.

Before our eyes could adjust to the gloom, something terrible crawled out and over the back of the sofa.

Shadowy frills, dark scythes of blade or bone, light-drinking scales, eyes burning like black holes in a starlit void. Too many limbs, the suggestion of more than one tongue in a twelve-inch mouth, and a light, airy little puff of cushions as she landed on the sofa, straightened up, and crossed what couldn’t possibly have been a pair of legs.

Petite, compact, frilled, delicate — all shadow and indistinct. A grey mass of suggestion that the eyes filled out and the brain turned to monstrous ghost. Anything could have been sitting there in the dark.

“Hiiiiiii,” purred Aym. The sound sent a shiver of physical revulsion up my spine. “Evee-Eve. Been a while, crocodile!”

Evelyn calmly reached over to the edge of the table, where her phone was waiting, and pressed the start button on the timer.

“Your twenty minutes has started,” she grunted, staring back at Aym. “Talk.”

Evee was doing so well — steel in her voice and steel in her spine — but through her jumper and her t-shirt beneath I could feel the slam of her pulse. I could smell the cold sweat on her back. I could hear her muscles creaking. I tightened my tentacle-grip on her arm, reminding her that she was not alone before this shade from her past. I bit my own tongue; however angry I was about Aym’s assault on Kimberly, to talk over her now would jeopardise the deal.

Aym — whatever she was — said nothing.

Ten seconds, fifteen seconds, twenty seconds. I tried to keep my nerve and not glance at the timer counting down on the screen of Evelyn's phone, but the pressure was too much. Thirty seconds had passed and we were just sitting in the dark. Was this part of Aym's strategy too?

Then the shadow on the sofa rolled her head from side to side, with a sinuous motion more snake than human.

"Oh God," Aym moaned. "I don't believe it. You're so boring now! The deal is off."

"... what?" Evelyn said, dark and angry.

"Yes, Aym, I'm sorry, what?" I added, just to say something to release this awful tension.

Aym laughed, a sound like a thing from the darkest pit of hell trying to imitate a girl. "I'm not interested in Evee anymore. My butter roll has turned to boiled oats. She's boring now. The deal is off. You may as well turn off your silly timer. What are you timing? How long it takes for you to bore me to death?"

Evelyn replied, slowly and carefully, with very precise wording. I understood instantly what she was trying to do. Aym was a demon, after all, wasn't she? "The deal was for twenty minutes of private conversation in return for completing Felicity's understanding of the necessary magic. You are receiving your twenty minutes right now. This is it."

"Ha!" Aym honked like a goose. "We didn't shake on it. Or sign a contract in blood. You want to go small-print with me?" A clap in the dark, like two hands slapping together. "A lady's agreement was all we had, and you are not what I was promised."

Evelyn was speechless, staring at the shadow.

"The agreement was with me," I reminded her.

"Wait," Evelyn grunted. "What do you mean, boring?"

Aym flopped backward onto the sofa, exactly like a petulant little aristocrat girl. She let out a huge, fussy sigh. "Look at you, Evee! You've actually grown up, you're not fun anymore. You've got purpose, you know what you want, and you're honest about how much you love what you love. Where's the fun in any of that?" She sat up again, like a roiling darkness boiling upward on the sofa. A

chin went into a pair of shadowy hands, shifting and adjusting in the dark. The pose was rather undercut by Marmite peering over the armrest. Aym ignored him. "You've got a little lingering guilt about mummy dearest, and jealousy over Raine, and you're horrified about that time you tried to kill yourself—"

I felt Evee go stiff. I squeezed her shoulder and arm, hard. Aym just kept on talking.

"—but those are all scabs. If I pick them, what's beneath? Healthy flesh! What am I going to do, wind you up about your missing leg? What would be the point? You really have come so far." Aym sighed, as if suddenly nostalgic. A grin of dark-on-dark spread inch by creeping inch. "Your mother had no idea what she'd spawned when she gave birth to you. You're worth ten of her, my sweet chocolate roll."

Evelyn swallowed and raised her chin. "Talking about my mother is hardly a poorly-defended angle of attack. You'll have to do better."

"Always with the drama!" Aym hissed. "Always with the touchy-touchy nerves. Or ... maybe you're worried because you're a mummy now too? Mummy Evee with her speed-grown adult daughter. How does it feel to bring a demon into the world?" Aym hissed and giggled, a wet and rusty sound. "Good, right? A surrogate you can command and control, but you never know what she's really thinking about—"

"I love my daughter," Evee replied, absolutely stone-cold. "I suspect she is immune to your brand of torture, but if you try, I will do everything I can to murder your body and send you back wherever you came from, deal or not."

"Uuurrrghhh," went Aym. She made a finger-down-throat motion in the dark, then mimed being sick. Strings of black, hissing drool pooled on the floor in front of the sofa. Marmite backed away from that. "Mages. Disgusting. Sick." Aym put up several limbs in surrender. "Fine, I'll leave your doll-child out of this."

I spoke up. "Praem scared you before and that was only over the phone. She could catch you in person. I don't think you should insult her."

Aym looked at me — or at least I think she did, it was hard to figure out what was really going on in that mass of half-hidden

shadow — and blew a raspberry at me.

“Pbbbbbbbt!”

I blinked in surprise. “Well.”

Evelyn sighed. “I was not expecting you to act so childish. This is still your twenty minutes, Aym. You are sticking to this deal, or Heather will hurt you.”

Aym giggled again. “You can threaten me all you want, Eevee my little sweet butter roll. My rumbly-pumbly. My sleepy girl.” Aym suddenly straightened up, going still in the darkness. “But I want to settle accounts between us.”

Evelyn went still too. Her tension was contagious; I found myself holding my breath.

“What trick are you trying to pull now?” Evelyn asked.

“Haaaaaaaaa, Eevee-Eve. We both know you can never forgive Felicity for what she did. Being a willing, eager, wet little tool for Loretta Saye, for mummy dearest. Did you know they fucked several times? Ugly, ugly stuff. Felicity cried afterwards, every time, but she kept going back. Loretta wasn’t even into it, she just needed the power trip and the—”

“My mother was a vile woman, yes,” Evelyn said between clenched teeth. “We all know that. Get to the point.”

Aym grinned, a splash of oil on black paint. Then the grin flickered off again. “Felicity was deep in the drink at the time, did you know that?”

“Yes,” Evelyn hissed. “I know full well she was drunk when she cut my leg off.”

“No, I mean even when she wasn’t doing that.” Aym did not sound amused.

A light bulb went on inside my head. “She’s an alcoholic?” I asked.

“Mmmmmhmmmm,” Aym purred. “Not like she can get any booze up in Tannerbaum House. Last time she tried, the forest floor drank it for her. That wasn’t a pretty sight. She lay on the ground screaming and weeping for an hour, in a puddle of vodka soaking into the mud. Can’t get anything up there. No smack, either.”

A shiver went down my spine — a response to the change in Evelyn's tension. She was frowning into the dark.

"Heroin?" Evee asked.

A dark nod from Aym, a wisp of shadow and claw waving in the gloom.

"Oh," I murmured. "Oh, goodness."

"But she's clean now?" Evee asked.

Another two nods.

"Is that ... " I ventured, then cleared my throat. Was it safe to ask this? Was this some kind of conversational trap? "Is that why it's so hard for Felicity to leave her house? It keeps her safe?"

Aym did not reply, but carried on speaking to Evelyn — a cold little rumble like gravel in a pool of frozen rocks. "You don't have to forgive her. You won't, after all. Not in your heart and not to her face. But stop threatening to kill her, please. Stop making it worse."

Evelyn paused, considering. "This is what you wanted to talk about?"

"No!" Aym burst into a giggle. "I already told you, you're boring now! So I may as well tidy you away. I put my toys away when I'm done with them. I'm a good girl."

"And if I promise to do that, then you'll give her the rest of the spell we need?"

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmm-maybe," purred Aym. "Half of it."

Evelyn sighed, sharp and angry. "You were always like this, you insufferable creature. Stop playing games and name what you want."

"Dangerous words," Aym said.

"No blood contracts," Evee shot back.

Aym snorted in the dark, an awful sound more insect than mammal. To my surprise, I felt Evee smile. There was an understanding between her and Aym, something very old and very dark.

I couldn't help myself, the curiosity was too much. "Aym, how does this line up with what you are? Why do you care about Evee

threatening Felicity? You exist to torment Felicity, as far as I can tell.”

The shadow-shape turned toward me again, shifting on the sofa. Dead cold, she said, “Is that what it looks like to you?”

“We all heard what you did to her on the phone. You abuse her emotionally.”

A twist of gloom, a tendril or a hand. “And you don’t like that?”

“It’s disgusting,” I said.

“I keep her alive,” Aym rasped, voice fading into the dark.

Evelyn tilted her head up at me, giving me the floor, letting me take the lead, but I didn’t know how to continue. Was Aym misleading us, or being serious? Did she care about Felicity in some twisted, co-dependent way? Did she tell lies to hurt people, to torment the weak and damaged? Or was she the only thing standing between a friendless, depressed, isolated mage and a slow, pitiful, unmourned death by drug addiction and alcoholism?

“Why did you assault Kimberly?” I asked. “That was rude of you. Oh, what am I saying, rude? It was criminal. We should be chasing you out of here. Why did you do it?”

Aym didn’t answer, but I felt the rolling of too many eyes, somewhere over there in the dark. Wrong track. She wasn’t going to answer that.

I took a deep breath and did something I didn’t want to do, especially after she had attacked Kimberly.

“Aym,” I said, forcing myself through the words. “When you came here last time, you helped us. You went into that house, the cult’s safe house. You put yourself in danger. Thank you.”

I had half-hoped that would send Aym into an embarrassed paralysis of refusal; perhaps thanking such an elementally nasty entity was the weak point in her psyche, human or not. But I was sorely disappointed. Aym shifted on the sofa and seemed to grow half a dozen extra limbs, all wiggling in excitement and burrowing between the sofa cushions. Marmite backed up another few paces, withdrawing his eyes into his head. On the table, the spider guarding Evee stood up higher, making itself look bigger. Aym had shifted modes, somehow becoming more threatening.

“Evee might be boring now,” she said. “But I am sooooo much more interested in you, Heather.”

My blood went cold.

“No!” Evee snapped. “The deal was for twenty minutes with me, you—”

Aym ignored her. “I’ve been thinking all about you the last couple of days, Heatherrrrrrr.” She drew my name out in wet, bubbly purr. “The last time Flissy-poops came down here it was all too much of a panic for me to get ready. But now I’ve had lots and lots of prep. I’ve been learning all about you.”

“The storm!” I said, breathless with awe. “The storm, it was you, I was right!”

“Heather?” Evee hissed. “What the fuck?”

“No, it’s true,” I said, unable to tear my eyes away from Aym, the roiling grey shadow on the sofa. “She made the storm, it’s ... I don’t know. I don’t know what she is.”

Something strange and soft was stirring in my chest, a writhing familiarity, a recognition that I could not put into words. Abyssal instinct screamed caution — but also curiosity, like I’d caught scent of something moving in the deep. Perhaps it was the artificial darkness, the pressing storm, the shapeless presence of Aym, but I felt for a strange and weightless moment like I was floating in the abyss.

“Let’s talk about you, Heather,” bubbled Aym. A tongue flickered forth and licked at her chops, black and dripping. “Let’s talk about you and your *Eye*.”

“No,” Evee snapped, hard and unyielding. “Never. Heather, don’t listen to her, she’s trying to mess with you.”

“What are you?” I asked, softly, but somehow louder than Evee’s anger. “You’re clearly not a demon, not like Praem or Zheng. Or are you? Are you what happens when demons develop far enough? But you can’t be as old as Zheng, you’d be ancient. What are you?”

Aym’s amusement vanished. She went very still. The shadows stopped moving.

“Aym?” I asked.

“What a boring question,” Aym drawled. “How about no? How about Eevee leaves, and we talk about you, Heather? Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.6

Aym — demonic dissembler, shadow silhouette, ineffable imp — sat in frozen promise across the imitation abyss of the magical workshop, deep in the dregs of storm-light, drenched in the drumming of the rain, and pressed close by the squeezing of an unseen revulsion, as if the house itself was eager to expel this foreign object lodged in our collective flesh.

She had made an implicit offer, if only I would consent to talk alone, about myself.

“Forget me,” I said, staring into that formless darkness. “I’m not interesting.”

“I beg to differ,” Aym purred in a voice like knives dipped in boiling acid. A voice that made my spine shudder. A voice that made Evelyn go stiff, sitting next to me in the dark with my tentacle still wrapped securely around her shoulder and arm and hand. I squeezed that hand; I’m still here, Eevee, you’re not by yourself in front of this demon.

I cleared my throat. “But you just mentioned the Eye. I know you did that on purpose, to bait me. I’m not completely naive, not totally inexperienced at this kind of thing. I have bargained with far worse things than you, Aym.” Then, because her hook was firmly through the flesh of my cheek: “What do you know about the Eye?”

“Heather!” Eevee hissed through clenched teeth. “She doesn’t know shit!”

Writhing like seaweed in a dead current, oozing darkness like silty mud, Aym smiled.

Almost invisible, a suggestion of widening shadow. Girlish, teasing, full of taboo knowledge and things she shouldn’t know. I blinked twice and suddenly understood, abyssal instinct feeding me hidden layers of reality. Aym wasn’t really smiling; that was only my brain doing its best to process the nonsense data my human senses were

picking up. Aym was like a radio broadcast more noise than signal. Part of me wondered what I might see if I dipped my senses down into the abyssal range — but I'd not done that in months. The last time I'd attempted that trick I'd been left insensate for several minutes afterwards. I couldn't risk that in front of Aym, not when I had to protect Evelyn.

I felt a pull toward her, an urge to get closer, to get a better look at what lay beneath the shadow. But I was anchored to Evee.

"I know a secret," Aym cooed.

"About the Eye?" The words slipped from between my lips before I could stop myself blundering into her game.

"Mmmmmhmmmmmm," she purred, an oversized house cat full of flaky iron rust and carcinogenic gravel. Dark tendrils rose from the shadows on the sofa, their tips kissing in the still, cold air above her head, like she was touching her fingertips together.

"You're going to tell me that secret."

I did my best not to phrase it as a question. I even considered slipping my squid-skull mask on before I spoke. But here in the dark, Aym and I were already equals. I needed no true face.

Aym's smile became a grin, toothy and deep, like a leatherback sea turtle with spikes running down the oesophagus to stop prey escaping the final swallow. "Evee-pie leaves," she said. "Then we can talk about you, or the Eye, or about Raine making you scream an orgasm into your pillow, or whatever else you want. I'm easy."

"And then you'll honour the deal?" I asked. "You'll give Felicity the rest of the spell?"

"Sure." A shrug rolled in the shadows. Too many elbows. "Why not?"

"Heather, for fuck's sake," Evelyn hissed up at me from the darkness closer at hand, her face a pale white oval in the grey gloom, lit only by the residual bioluminescence from my tentacles — which she couldn't even see. "This is bait! This is a trap! How can you not see that?! I cannot believe you are entertaining this bullshit!"

"I ... I have to try," I said, listening to that tug in my chest. I ached to get closer to Aym.

Evelyn sighed with explosive frustration. She fumbled with her walking stick for a second, got a proper grip on the bone-wand in her lap, then lifted it to point in the direction of the shadowy mass on the sofa.

Instantly, poor Marmite scrambled backward, out of the firing line. His pneuma-somatic mind may not have understood the subtle nuances of tension and negotiation, but he understood well enough the business end of a weapon. The spider-servitor on the table backed up a few paces too, in a more controlled and practised manner, giving its mistress room to wield terrible violence.

I whipped out a tentacle. Instinct rode me.

A hiss tore up my throat and stopped only because I bit my lips hard enough to draw blood. Sharp pain and the taste of hot iron brought my mind around like I'd been slapped.

"... Heather?" Evelyn hissed in shock, frozen in my grip.

The moment she had raised her bone-wand toward Aym, I had lashed out with a spare tentacle and caught the wand in coils of smooth, pale muscle, wrapped it around and around to immobilize the wand and Eeve's hand, and then pointed it down at the ground. Despite the useful metaphor, the wand was not a gun; pointing it away from Aym wouldn't make a lick of difference to Evelyn's ability to use the thing. But holding her hand tight in the tip of my tentacle stilled her fingers from the necessary movements.

Aym was not the target of my aborted hiss. Eeve was.

Horried and confused, I let go of her arm and hand as gently as I could. "I-I'm sorry, Eeve! I didn't hurt you, did I? I'm sorry ... I ... I don't know what came over me."

Evelyn stared up at me in the gloom, brow furrowed hard, the soft puppy-blue of her eyes swallowed by the static grey. The bone-wand was like a floating skeletal apparition against the darker patch of her skirt and the floor beyond. "No," she said eventually, hard and cold. "I'm fine, thank you."

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "I don't know why I did that."

Aym cackled in the dark. She rocked on the sofa, a child having a giggle fit. Pseudopods slapped against each other, making no sound, black mist passing through black mist. "Some ally and friend she is!

What did you think you were going to achieve anyway, butter-roll? Were you going to dispel me? John Dee himself couldn't have come close. Then again, you are so much more than your mother's daughter. If anybody has to put me in a box, I wouldn't mind so much if it was you!"

Evelyn snorted derision, gritted her teeth, and pulled her composure tight around her shoulders once more with nothing but a lift of her chin. Even half-blind in the dark, unintentionally undermined by my instincts, and taunted by a demon, Evee was glorious in her imperious posture.

"Heather has counselled me in mercy," she said. "You should thank her."

"Ooooooh," Aym cooed, a horrible sound like a crocodile trying to be cutesy. "Good save."

"Believe what you want," Evelyn spat. "Heather, don't speak with Aym alone."

"I think Heathy-smoots can do whatever she wants," Aym warbled.

I waited for an extra word from Evee, watching her eyes, begging her to say it; she could collapse all my uncertainty with one little phrase. But it never came. And I didn't prompt her.

A sensible response stuck in my throat. My hands would have quivered if I'd unclenched my fists or unhooked my arm from around my squid-skull mask. My tentacles itched to reach across the room and peel back that darkness from around Aym. I had told a lie; I knew exactly why I had tried to restrain Evelyn, and why I'd almost hissed in her face when she'd threatened Aym.

Abyssal instinct recognised Aym as something not unlike myself. A kinship across the cold water.

I simply had to look her in the face.

"Evee," I said, watching Aym. "I've debated my own guilt for murder over coffee with the King in Yellow. I don't think Aym is going to present much challenge to my self-worth or self-doubt."

At the name of the Yellow King, Aym's smile died. I felt it go out like a black hole swallowing itself, leaving behind a field of clean stars. A head twisted and kinked in the darkness, peering at me from one angle, then another, drooling black saliva onto the floor. I

watched her in return, my eyes moving from point to point on sheer gut feeling.

You want to call my bluff, I thought, but you can't tell if I'm making that up.

A high-pitched whine eased in on the very edge of my hearing, like a massive television set left on mute in another room. Focused Aym, pressing down on her. Like the house itself was trying to force her out.

Evelyn yanked on the tentacle which I had wrapped around her arm, dragging me downward so she could hiss in my ear. "I am not leaving you alone in here with her. You'll have to throw me out of the door, Heather! Go on, pick me up and hurl me out there, I'm sure Praem will catch me!"

"I'm serious," I whispered back. "I don't think she can hurt me."

"Why not just rip the information out of her?" Evee demanded in a whisper. Across the room, Aym was still swaying from side to side like a piece of greasy seaweed snagged on a nail. "She's right there, she's already hurt Kim, and now she's trying to mess with our heads. You said you can do it, were you bluffing?"

I didn't answer. I just watched Aym.

Truth was, I probably could do what Evee suggested, but I simply didn't want to. A very important part of my soul did not want to hurt Aym, at least not in that way. I would restrain her from assaulting my friends if need be, but the idea of doing permanent damage, of vivisectioning her with brain-math to pull out the wet and dripping morsels from her mind, that was now unthinkable.

What I wanted to do was reach across the room and peel back her camouflage. The urge was a physical thing, a twitching in my gut. Not quite hunger, and certainly nothing sexual. A new form of need. A burning need to know, to observe truth, unimpeded by appearance.

"Thaaaaaat," Aym purred at last, "wasn't true. Was it? Coffee with the king. A king. A yellow monarch. No, just a book."

Silently I dared her to push deeper. Technically I had lied: I had never sipped from the coffee the King had offered me. But Aym didn't know that.

Evelyn, however, snorted in grim amusement. "That's what I thought. Just a book."

"What," Aym deadpanned.

Evelyn's own exasperation at the mere existence of Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, and indeed the entire Yellow Court, was about to give the game away and ruin my advantage. I jumped in with both feet, in panic, with the first thing that came to mind.

"If we say that we have no sin," I recited off the top of my head, straightening my back, certain I was going to get the words wrong, "we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. Why then, belike, we must sin, and consequently die. Ay, we must die an everlasting death."

Aym and Evee both went silent for a heartbeat. Raindrops drummed on the roof and the windows. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbled.

"Well," Evelyn sighed, "I don't recognise that one."

Aym lit up like a Christmas Tree made of frozen asphalt.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh! She knows her roots!"

"I have read *Doctor Faustus*, yes," I said. "And Aym, really, you're no Mephistopheles."

"Confident you're free of sin?" she asked.

"Confident I'm not."

Aym cackled. She seemed to get the point. Evelyn was shaking her head, exasperated beyond words. Probably feeling left out.

I pressed the advantage, following that abyssal urge down in my gut. "Tell me what you are, Aym. What you really are. Then Evee will leave the room, and we'll talk about whatever you want."

Evelyn exploded. She actually slapped my tentacle, though not hard enough to hurt. "I bloody well will not! You'll have to crowbar me out of this chair, I—"

"Kuuurrrh!"

Aym made a sound of such utter disgust, more lizard than human. Evelyn flinched and I whirled all my tentacles up in a protective cage around her.

The shadow on the sofa had gone still, all except for a ragged, rough, shallow breathing.

“ ... Aym?”

“You people,” she purred, dark and wet and full of scorn. “You love your definitions so much. You love them more than the world. Your limits. Your carefully demarcated edges. Your words and numbers and things on pages. It’s what mages and wizards and the like have been doing for thousands of years. Writing things down in dusty books. Cataloguing, describing, defining. Everything has to have a name, a type, a label. And when it exceeds those labels, you all go ‘oh, this can’t possibly be true, this can’t be right, wah wah wahhhhhh’.” Aym huffed, a petulant teenage girl turning down a gift that wasn’t quite expensive enough. “And then you write new definitions, new limits, new types. All of them just as wrong as before.”

Silence reigned for a moment, filled by the storm outdoors. The shadow on the sofa had turned dense and sulky. Evelyn’s palm had gone sweaty and cold on my tentacle. I squeezed gently. She didn’t squeeze back.

Eventually I asked, “Where are you going with this, Aym?”

“Huh. Your ancestors were smarter. They understood that a saint’s finger bone could be in more than one place at the same time. Do you? No, of course you don’t. The scientific method is only a method. Maybe you need a different method for something like me.”

“Well,” I said, “what are you, then?”

Aym reared up, all dark suggestion lost in the grey gloom. I had the distinct impression she was standing on the sofa cushions. “There you go again! With the same thing!”

“It’s not the same thing at all,” I said, doing my best to hold my ground and keep my voice steady before this screeching apparition. “I’m asking you for self-definition. I’m not going to test it, or debate it, or write it down. I want to know what you consider yourself to be.”

The smile crept back at last, a slash in the dark. A forked tongue flickered out to taste the air. “I prefer not to say.”

"She's just a demon," Evelyn grunted. "She likes to put on a show, that's all. Why does this even matter?"

"It doesn't," Aym purred. "Listen to her, Heather. My sweet little raspberry crumble gets it."

I couldn't answer either of them. Aym writhed in delighted irritation. Evelyn stared up at me from her chair, fuming in the grey gloom.

"Aym," I said after a moment, trying to relocate my footing. "You want a private conversation, about the Eye."

Evelyn spoke through gritted teeth. "I am not leaving this room."

"Then there's no deal," Aym cooed. "I'll just take my leave, shall I? Be off then, toodle-pip!"

I leaned down toward Eevee, speaking for her ears only, though I suspected Aym would hear every word even if I only thought them. "Eevee, please," I whispered. "I will be completely safe. There's nothing she can touch me with, not after everything lately. What's she going to do, taunt me about having power? About how I might fail? About what? She can't touch me."

Evelyn's face was a grey mask, lips thinned, eyes boring through my skull.

"If you want me to leave," she said through her teeth, "you will have to remove me yourself. And we both know you won't do that."

Aym let out a dark giggle. "It's for your own good, butterscotch biscuit. Some things about gods aren't meant for human ears."

Those words only acted as more bait. My skin itched, my feet wouldn't stay still; I had to know. I wet my lips, trying to bring these two together in some agreement, something that would let me square this circle. "What if Eevee stays?"

"Then I," said Aym, "go."

And so she did.

The shadow on the sofa stopped moving, becoming one with the grey background of cushions and curtains. In a moment of optical illusion it was possible to convince oneself that Aym was still sitting there, inhabiting the angles of shadow on cloth, the disturbed fabric of the furniture, the imaginary ghost-shapes of shadows upon

waking. But then I moved my head and realised there was nothing there.

The high-pitched whine had vanished as well. The pressure in the room seemed lighter. My gut and my tentacles both relaxed.

“Oh,” I sighed. “There goes our chance.”

“Bugger it all!” Evelyn spat, stamping her walking stick against the floor. She slapped at her mobile phone on the table, cancelling the twenty minute timer and jamming the phone back into her pocket. “Heather, she was trying to entrap you! You saw that, you heard every word of it!”

“Evee, please.” I squeezed her arm gently with my tentacle. “I think that was the whole point. You were the one falling into her trap, not me.”

Evelyn opened her mouth to snap at me again, but then she paused, scowling. “Explain.”

“She knew full well you wouldn’t leave me alone with her. So she engineered a situation where you had to override my wishes. She’s laying the groundwork for tormenting you later, I suspect, by making you take responsibility for me failing to get what we need from her. Does that make sense? Maybe I’m just projecting, but I think that’s what she’s doing. And ... well ... I was trying not to give away that I suspected.” I sighed heavily. “I probably should have just said it out loud. I’m sorry. I’m not actually very good at this, am I?”

Evelyn stared up at me, brow knitting harder and harder. The rain drummed on the roof and the windows, turning Number 12 Barnslow Drive into a resonant cave. The grey gloom seemed now to swaddle us in safety. I wanted to melt down onto the floor next to Evee and put my head in her lap.

“I don’t agree,” she said eventually. “But you may be right. Fair enough.”

I let out a weak laugh. “You trust me but you don’t trust my judgement.”

“Don’t be a fool, Heather. I trust you with my life.” She said it so matter-of-fact that I couldn’t possibly remain angry with her, but she looked away quickly, back into the comforting darkness of the

magical workshop with the lights off. With Aym here the room had felt abyssal and strange, a piece of fairie-magic transported to the heart of Sharrowford. But now it was just our home, in the dark. “Besides, she’s probably still here.”

“Maybe she’s a fairy,” I murmured.

“What?” Evelyn squinted up at me.

“Nothing. Forget I said that. Just a silly thought.” I blushed faintly in the dark. “If she really is still here, then she’s probably overheard every word I’ve just said.” I cast my eyes around the room too, looking for a tell-tale patch of darker shadow, a dripping blackness out of place, a slasher’s smile in the night. “By speaking her plan out loud, I’ve already disarmed it. I hope.”

Evelyn snorted and shook her head, but her heart wasn’t in the gesture. “Better at this than you think, Heather. No wonder everybody believes in you. You’re always so right and—”

“*Bleeergh*,” came a voice of razorblades and acid, imitating being sick, from the far end of the workshop table.

I whipped around, tentacles whirling in surprise, then shooting outward to protect Eevee. Evelyn flinched hard, despite doing her best to hide her reaction, then turned in her seat so she wasn’t showing her back toward Aym. The spider-servitor on the table scuttled around in a little circle, bringing its stinging spikes to bear, each glistening point quivering in readiness to strike. The other spider-servitor, clinging to the wall over the gate, looked ready to unfold like a toxin-tipped spring, only a few feet away from where Aym now sat.

A writhing shadow of grey and black, indistinct and hazy, perched on the very end of the table. A number of what might have been legs dangled over the side, melting into shadow as they swung back and forth, like a child whose feet didn’t reach the floor. The shadow curved, curled, cracked and coiled, then lowered a hand from the suggestion of a mouth.

“Bleh,” Aym repeated. “You two are disgusting. Old people in love are disgusting. Don’t start making out in front of me, I’ll be sick all over your floor.”

I blessed the darkness, for it hid my rising blush. I opened my mouth on a reflexive denial. “W-what? Lo—”

“Old?” Evelyn spat. “I am twenty one years old, you rotten cow. You are infinitely older than me.”

“You were born at forty,” Aym purred. “Face it, strawberry tart.”

“Aym!” I snapped on reflex. “All this negotiating and playing games with us and vanishing in a puff of shadow like you’re a pixie, that’s one thing. But do not insult Evelyn. It’s extremely rude.”

Aym laughed, a bubbly, wet, rotten sound, like her throat was stuffed with decaying cardboard.

The shadows seemed to be pressing around her, tight and grasping. That high-pitched whine had returned to the edge of my senses, focused on the figure of the demon sitting at the end of the table, but not originating from her. I felt myself involuntarily inch forward, as if I might grab her and pluck her from her seat. My tentacles itched, drifting outward like a muscular, living net in the darkness, their faint rainbow strobing soaked up by the gloom and returned as mere shades of black. I felt like a hand was on my back, urging me forward.

The house itself wanted her gone, and I wanted to catch her like a spider under a glass — not to hurt her, but just to look. Once I was done, we could throw her outdoors, back into her natural environment.

“You know,” said Aym — and then went still, grey, an empty space of shadows.

Then her voice came from behind me again, from where she’d sat originally, back on the sofa, hissing with sudden irritation: “Tch! Do not make me repeat myself, it’s so boorish. Shooing Evee out is for her own good. I won’t talk to you otherwise, Heather. And stop trying to catch me! Don’t assume that because it’s dark I can’t see you trying.”

Evelyn and I both turned back to the sofa again. The spider-servitor whirled as well, looking quite harried by this absurd back-and-forth. Aym was back on the sofa, a shadow-shape of suggestion and suspicion. I had the distinct impression she was sitting up very straight-backed, almost formal. A forked tongue flicked at the air, licked things that were not lips, and then darted back behind far too many teeth.

Evelyn snapped, “Stay still or I’ll have Praem tie you to a chair.”

“Ooooooh,” Aym mocked. “Scary scary!”

But I was shaking my head in wonder, refusing to be misdirected by her words. “You’re more like Sevens than a demon. You’re a spirit-thing, but there is a physical body under there. I can sense it, I can feel it. How did you know I was going to grab you?”

Evelyn sighed. “Heather, for fucks’ sake, it doesn’t matter. This is over. She won’t talk and I won’t leave. We can do this some other way. Either you pluck it from her mind, or I ... ” I felt Evelyn swallow and stiffen, felt the cold sweat break out beneath her clothes. “Or I work with Felicity to solve the problem the old-fashioned way, research and experimentation. Fuck Aym. We’ll do it ourselves.”

I waited a heartbeat, but Evelyn did not add the words I expected. So I leaned down close, close enough for my breath to touch her ear.

“I don’t know if Maisie has the time to spare. And I think I can take Aym. But if you ... if you *insist*?”

I let the word sink in the gloom. Evelyn opened her mouth, closed it again, opened it a second time, then gritted her teeth and said nothing.

Slowly, reluctantly, Evelyn stood up from her chair. She used me for support and I gave it freely, taking half her weight as she stared daggers at Aym across the room. Shadow-fingers undulated in a mocking wave.

“Bu-bye for now, blackberry jam,” Aym giggled.

“If you hurt Heather, I will hunt you down, kill you, and then re-summon you to posses a septic tank on a pig farm.”

Aym grinned in the dark. I helped Evelyn over to the door. She whispered in my ear.

“You be fucking careful, Heather.”

“I promise. I will.”

When I opened the door to the kitchen the magical workshop was flooded with lighter grey, storm-born illumination chasing back the darkness. I couldn’t resist a glance back over my shoulder, but the shadow was gone, Aym melted away into nothing in the clarity of

sunlight, no matter how weak. Only lumpy sofa cushions remained.

Evelyn called for Praem. We weren't going to let her walk alone from here to the old sitting room. Even that was too much risk with Aym lurking about. Praem appeared a few moments later, clicking across the kitchen tiles, with Raine dogging her heels.

"Hey hey," said Raine, tense and ready, but trying to smile. "We done already? Quicker than I thought you'd be. Everybody in one piece?"

Evelyn snorted derision, letting Praem take her arm as I handed her off. "Far from it. Heather is going to talk to Aym, alone."

Raine's eyebrows shot upward. She found my eyes and asked, "You gonna be okay?"

Just like that. No assumption that I wasn't. No horrified warning. No fear. A genuine question, simply asking if I needed help. I wanted to melt into her arms and kiss her. Raine was perfect.

"I think so," I said.

Raine nodded, once. "Shout and I'll be there in a flash."

I smiled back. "I know you will. Love you, Raine."

"Love you too, Miss Morell."

Just before I started to close the door to the magical workshop, Marmite scuttled out around my legs, eager to be away from Aym. His spider-friends did not follow, but Praem greeted him with gentle hand on a passing tentacle. He made for the front room, moving fast.

Praem turned her head to me. Blank, milky eyes locked with mine, fixing me in place. "Say hello from me," she said.

"Of course," I replied, as if we were discussing a pleasant social visit to a friend, with tea and scones, rather than a negotiation with something dark and horrible, coiled in on itself like a giant snake, that I couldn't even identify.

I closed the door on my friends — on Raine's jaunty thumbs-up, Praem's blank and elegant stare, and Evelyn's pinched scowl — and plunged myself back into the sucking pit of static gloom. Footsteps clicked and shuffled and stomped away from the other side of the door, across the kitchen, and into the front room. A moment later I

could hear nothing over the incessant drumming of the storm. I pressed a hand to the cool, smooth wood of the door, readying myself, then let go, casting off into the abyss.

Aym was waiting for me on the sofa.

She made no pretence of humanoid form now. A gelatinous mass of shadow squatted on the sofa, impossible to render into details even if I squinted. Octopus-bodied, frog-fleshed, seaweed and salt and sinuous motion, she seemed more abyssal than terrestrial now. More recognisable. More like me. My instincts sang with kinship.

Just us now, no human beings to worry about protecting. I felt less human myself. I even forgot to relate Praem's greeting.

"Aym," I murmured, stepping into the middle of the room, my tentacles floating after me. "Aym, what are you? No, no don't answer, I know you won't. But I already know. You're like me, aren't you? You've seen the abyss. That's what I call it, the deep dark place between the spheres. I can feel—"

"You're going to die."

Aym said it with a sound like ramming a serrated sword through a suit of rusty chain-mail. I think that meant she was angry.

"I'm sorry for undercutting the drama," I said, "but is that meant to be a threat?"

Aym sighed like a terminal tuberculosis patient in her final moments. "Why don't we level with each other, Heather? Now it's just you and I, can't we drop all the pretences?"

"We already have, haven't we? You are what you are, I am what I am. Here we are." I swallowed, heart racing with anticipation, legs itching to move.

Aym sat up straighter, or at least higher. "The Eye."

"Yes, the Eye, indeed, what do you know?" Then I laughed softly. "Does it even matter?"

"Less than you."

"So you were lying after all. You don't know any secrets about it."

"Neither do you, squid-brains. And you haven't been paying attention. You've been trying to apply the scientific method to the

Eye. Like a moron. Building all these models with metaphors — a lost chick, a cuckoo, a protege. An angel!” She laughed at that one, a hissing sound. “That one might have something to it, I admit. But you’re going too slowly. You’re going to visit Wonderland — what a shitty, stupid name for a place like that — with a head full of theories and figures, and the Eye is going to kill you.”

“I’ve accepted that danger. I know what we’re going to be facing. It’s still worth the risk.”

“It’s not a risk!” she hissed. Aym rose even higher, an octopus rearing up, ready to crack the shell of a crab with her beak. “This isn’t hyperbole, or a prediction. It’s a fact! You’re going to die. All your friends are going to die. Your sister will wither away and fade into nothing.”

“It’s still worth a shot,” I said. “Is this meant to make me sad, Aym? I’ve felt these things my whole life.”

“What are you going to do, huh?” Aym leaned forward and suddenly she seemed like a giant, pressing down on me. A teacher, demanding a real answer, not just a bluff and a shrug. A parent demanding an explanation. Reality itself, material and undeniable, demanding an answer with steel upon flesh. “I mean what are you actually, physically, practically going to do? Shout at it? Reach up and stab it with the universe’s largest broken bottle? Raine’s idea, that one, by the way; at least she had something! None of that makes sense, and you know it. But you’ve spent months avoiding this, because it’s the only method you’ve got!”

A lump grew in my throat. “That’s not true.”

“Then what is your plan?”

“I’m going to reach out to it with brain-math. I’m going to try to pull Maisie out. That’s what I’m going to do.”

“Tch!” Aym hissed. “So, fight it. A tug of war for a soul. That’s your answer. Waste of thought.”

“Why do you care?”

“Evee will die.”

No shame, no hesitation, no secret blushing embarrassment. With her and I, alone in the dark, Aym did not balk from the truth.

“You care about Evelyn?” I asked.

Aym sank back into the sofa cushions, lolling, spreading out, glaring at me from shadows within shadows. “If you come back from your stupid quest and everybody except Eevee dies, fine. Who gives a fuck? Magicians, demons, idiots. But if you make it back and she’s the only one lost, I will eat you piece by piece. And I will keep you alive while I do it.”

My tentacles flared outward in silent warning. Faint rainbow glow threatened to reveal Aym’s truth, but the shadows refused to take form. “I don’t think you could achieve that, Aym. I don’t think you understand what I am.”

“You don’t understand what *I* am,” purred a thing in the dark.

I nodded and sighed, then nodded again. “Fair enough. I don’t understand why you care, either. If it helps, if it matters ... I would protect Eevee from anything, under any circumstances. To be honest, I don’t even think she should be coming to Wonderland. Nobody but me should be going.”

Aym coiled and writhed on the sofa for a moment, then said, “If I give Felicity this key, you’re going to get Eevee killed. As soon as I give you this spell, you’ll go get that book, and then you’re there. And all dead.”

“I won’t let Eevee get hurt.”

“You mages will go fight other mages, because you’re like that. Like animals. Territorial and violent. And then you’ll get your special little book and sweet Eevee will finish her spell, and then you’ll open a gateway to Wonderland, where you will all — fucking — die.”

“I would sacrifice myself first.”

As I said the words, I realised they were true.

“Would you?” Aym laughed. “I’m talking with Heather Morell right now. But down there in the dark, you don’t have a name.”

“You do know the abyss!” I said. “You’ve been there, you understand.”

“And you understand nothing.”

As I stared across the static grey gloom of the magical workshop, locking eyes with something that had only dark pits where sockets

should have been, I accepted that this was not really a negotiation at all. Aym had indeed dropped the pretences she'd used in front of Evelyn.

Her entire reason for coming down here was this private conversation. This confrontation, with me. Perhaps she had planned it from the beginning, but more likely her goals had changed once she'd gotten here. Perhaps the attack on Kimberly had been part of that, to provoke me into reaction, to see if I would leap to the defence of somebody who wasn't even particularly close to me.

Aym was judging me. She wanted to know if I was leading Eevee to her death. And she didn't like what she saw so far.

"You're right," I said. "When I dived into the abyss, I forgot my own name. But I didn't forget Eevee's."

Aym said nothing, just floating in a gentle current of cold rain.

"Eevee, Raine, Twil, Lozzie, Zheng," I said their names. "Tenny was only a spirit back then. I didn't know Sevens yet. But everyone I knew, I sealed their names inside a pressurised bubble of ... well, it couldn't be flesh. But I kept them in my core. It's what drew me back, buoyed me back to the surface. I will always remember the names of my friends, my family, those I've chosen to be with. I don't care what I'm reduced to. Even the version of myself which returned from the abyss, it knows — I know — that Evelyn Saye is part of my pack. Sorry Aym, you're wrong."

Aym sighed, dry rubber down a cheese grater. "Lucky you."

"Luck has nothing to do with it."

I felt myself edging forwards, toward Aym, creeping across the wooden floorboards on the silent pads of my socks and the supporting curves of a pair of tentacles. Achingly slow, like a cephalopod drifting in dead water, easing myself closer and closer to my target. Tentacles uncoiled from my core, inch by slow inch. An unconscious predatory advance.

"She was fine," Aym drawled, her rusty-razor voice tinged with bitter melancholy. Teeth moved in several places on her blob-like body. "She was safe with Raine. She was safe, and alive, and away from her rotten cradle. She was safe, Heather. Maybe not loved, but close enough. You've ruined that."

"It's not enough to be safe," I murmured into the dark, watching the tendrils of Aym's black form coalesce and melt against the cushions of the sofa. "One has to live."

Aym hissed, sinking lower, as if she knew I was about to spring. Her attention was turning inward, away from me. I crept closer, sliding my sock-clad feet along the floor.

"I forgot somebody once," she said, voice reduced to a cold stub. "We went down together. He forgot my name, and I forgot his. I came back alone."

"Me too," I said.

I lifted one tentacle in silent, quivering anticipation, a perfect curve of serpentine muscle, poised to strike. Within leaping distance now, and then I would have her. My heart climbed into my mouth, the tentacles supporting my legs went tense. I wet my lips and—

"Ha!" Aym spat — from the other side of the room.

The shape left on the sofa in front of me was mere shadow, wrought by imagination. I whirled on the spot, tentacles whipping after me, to find Aym standing at the far end of the magical workshop, a dainty little figure of black and grey haze, framed by the outline of the gateway to Camelot, blank plaster and old paint.

The spider-servitor on self-appointed gate-guard duty did not approve of this trick, this travelling without moving. A pair of spike-tipped stingers lanced downward to spear through the top of Aym's head.

"No!" I snapped, flinching forward, about to hurl myself to knock Aym out of the way.

But the spider-servitor's chitin weapons passed through smoke and shadow and gouged chips of wood out of the floorboards. Recoiling in confusion, the poor servitor almost lost its grip on the wall, head whirring around for the new location of its original target.

"Hooooooo," went Aym, now tucked neatly into the far corner like a cobweb. "Spicy, spicy doggy!"

"It almost had you," I said, panting with mixed relief and shock. Had she moved again fast enough to avoid the attack, or had the spider's weapons passed through her body and found it no more substantial than a cloud of oil? "Aym, what are you? How do you

move like that?”

“Hell hath no limits,” Aym purred, clicking her syllables with a wet tongue, “nor is circumscrib’d in one self place.”

I finished the quote for her: “But where we are is hell, and where hell is, there must we ever be.” I shook my head. “More *Faustus*. You do enjoy your literary metaphors.”

A grin spread in the dark. “So do you. Now you’re getting it.”

“Getting what?”

Aym waited in that corner, still and silent, too thin to be a person, too hazy to be real. Bait.

I stepped away from the sofa, trying to pay attention to how my weight was balanced. There was no way I could round the corner of the table without her seeing what I was doing. I could leap, I supposed, springing with the power of my tentacles — but this was becoming embarrassing. Instinct thrummed hot and huge in the back of my head, urging me to catch her and peer through the shadows up close, so I could identify her.

I pushed it down. I forced a deep breath into my lungs. I drew my tentacles back in. I could not catch her over there, not without making a fool of myself.

It wasn’t as if I would be able to catch her when she was hiding from all this light, either.

I sighed and crossed over to the door which led out to the kitchen. Why had I left it open earlier, when Evee had gone? It was ajar just enough for a person to pass through, flooding the magical workshop with the lighter grey storm-washed sunlight from the kitchen windows. Aym was reduced to little more than a memory in the corner.

I shut the door and placed my hand against it for a moment, once more sealed in the abyssal darkness, alone together with Aym.

Then I frowned.

“Wait,” I murmured out loud. “Wait, I did close—”

“Feeling ill, squid-brains?” Aym cooed.

Slowly I turned and looked at the corner again, at Aym gathered

there like oil-soaked rags floating in a marine trench.

Had she done something to me just now? Everything felt dislocated, like I'd just jumped back a minute. Or forward? Time didn't add up. But abyssal instinct was silent, unbothered, completely focused on the desire to pluck Aym from her protective shadows.

No, that made no sense. I was just confused.

I had seen nothing.

"Aym," I said, trying not to sound like my heart was going at high speed. "I never got to thank you for your help against the Eye. You went into the cult's safe-house for us. You got hurt, for us. I gathered from Felicity that you were injured somehow. I saw you, in fact, if only for a moment. Thank you."

I took a step forward, openly.

Aym snorted and tossed something that might have been a head, or might have been a pair of crocodile jaws, wrought in shadow. "If I had known, maybe I wouldn't have gone in. Your big friend really sees everything. I don't like that, not at all."

"The Eye?" I nodded — and took another step, making for the corner of the table, making for Aym. "I suppose you wouldn't."

"You're the same."

"You mean I'm becoming like the Eye?" A shiver went up my spine; I already knew that. Out in the dream-landscape where Lozzie and I had freed badger, I'd stared back at the Eye with what little observation I could muster. A raindrop against the ocean, but both were water.

I took another step.

"And just as trammelled," Aym said.

I froze. "... pardon me?"

"You heard me, squid-bones."

I turned that over in my mind. Aym was being cryptic. This was like Sevens, but without any affection or showmanship behind the display. Aym was just being difficult for the sheer fun of it. I stepped past the chair which Eevee had been sitting in earlier, reached the table, and placed my squid-skull mask gently on the

wood.

“What do you suggest, then?” I said.

“Eh?” The shadow-shape in the corner twisted something long and dripping at me.

I slid another step closer, along the length of the table.

“Against the Eye. You’re worried that I’m going to get Evee killed because I don’t know what I’m doing. So what do you suggest?”

A moment of silence and shadow.

Then Aym screeched. “I don’t fucking know! I don’t know! I’m not its adopted daughter! Think like a giant eyeball in the sky, Heather! Stop trying to figure it out, or it’s going to kill all of you by looking back!”

I pushed into the face of Aym’s ire, walking right toward her.

The shadows folded away to nothing.

I caught myself on the edge of the table, tentacles hooking, grasping, bunching as my feet kicked for purchase and I turned on the spot, spinning and scrambling in the other direction, shooting back toward the sofa before the shadows had a moment to wrap themselves around Aym’s materialising form.

But materialise she did, right there on the sofa, already snapping with irritation.

“Stop thinking like one of them, Heather! Think like one of us!” And then, “Eeeeeep!” as I landed on top of her.

I plunged two tentacles deep into the shadows where Aym was hiding, gripping whatever I could. My flesh tightened around cold slime and ridged scales, around bulging sacs of fluid and dripping orifices. I gritted my teeth and forced myself not to flinch. Rainbow bioluminescence glinted off chitin and scale, slime and salt. Aym kicked and hissed and writhed and bit the air and flailed against the cushions, but all was insubstantial, nothingness on grey gloom.

And when my grip was secure, when Aym was held not with terrestrial flesh but by the pneuma-somatic truth of my body, I reached back behind me with a third tentacle, and hit the lights.

Dull electric illumination guttered back to life, as if smothered by

the gloom and drowned out by the storm. Shadows rolled up and scurried behind the furniture. I blinked against the sudden light, a deep-ocean creature dredged to the surface. The shape in front of me snapped into focus, grey haze blown away like mist in the morning sun.

I recoiled, gaping, mortified at what I was holding. I had one tentacle wrapped around a throat, another looped around a belly, both very human.

She was just a girl.

Aym was tiny. Dainty and delicate. A sprite dipped in coal dust.

Dressed from toes to chin in black, she wore thick black socks, shapeless woollen black leggings, a black dress of overlapping layers and intricate lace that reached down past her knees and right to her wrists and up past her throat, cupping her chin with a soft curl. She had long black hair, clean but messy, framing a face of pinched sharpness, all angles and planes. Her eyes were human, with pupils and irises and whites with little veins, but tilted at a fey and inhuman angle. Eyes just a touch too wide. Nose a fraction too sharp. Ears a notch too high. Neck a few inches too long. Something imitating a human being but revelling in the small differences, impossible to ignore. She was maybe thirteen years old, but I didn't believe what I saw.

I still felt terrible. I felt so bad I hiccuped.

"I'm ... I-I'm sorry," I blurted out, loosening my grip on her throat. "I didn't know ... I thought you were ... like ... you convinced me that you weren't remotely human!"

Aym swallowed as her throat was given space. She looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes, then smiled with a mouth full of blunt, normal human teeth. Smugging for all she was worth.

"Couldn't resist, could you?" she purred — her voice was still a nightmare, a jarring scratch of knives down a blackboard. "It's in your nature. You want to look, to see, to know."

I sighed sharply, blushing hard, then hiccuped again. "I'm sorry for grabbing you. I ... I'm sorry for invading your personal space. I thought you were ... I don't know. Like me."

"But you did it anyway," she said. "And then you blame me for

being the wrong thing. The thing you didn't expect. Too mundane. Too boring. Oh no! Oh dear!" She raised her hands and cupped her face, a mocking pantomime of innocence. "I'll have to play it up so you don't strangle me to death!"

Shorn of her shadows, Aym had the most annoying expressions I'd ever seen. She managed to remain smug while also oozing with fake simpering. Her voice pitched higher, whining, then dissolved into a wet and rotting giggle.

I made to withdraw my tentacles, ashamed of myself, confused by the lack of something I recognised. Abyssal instinct had gone quiet as soon as the lights had come up. The 'real' Aym was just a girl. Demon or not, Outsider or not, this was her true form, and it was just what I saw. I was certain of that.

"Nooooo!" she whined, suddenly grabbing the tentacle I had looped around her belly. "I said I'll play it up for you. I can be whatever you want, after all."

"Aym, stop." I huffed and pulled on my tentacle, but she dug her fingertips in, grinning wider. "I'm sorry I invaded your personal space. I was wrong. I thought you were like me, like—"

"But you found the wrong thing when you looked too closely?"

"Yes! I'm sorry! Let me—"

Aym reared up in my grip — and up, and up, and up.

Black hair thickening and whipping into dark and ropey tentacles. Face dissolving into a mass of teeth, a circular maw, with eyes the size of tennis balls. Her dress became ridged scales and the rasp of shark-skin. Shadows pulsed out from her like membranes in sluggish current. Feelers and roots grasped the sofa and more of them grasped my tentacles. She drooled black, sticky, hissing venom right before my face.

"*Are you sure about that?*" Aym giggled. "*I'm only small, after all!*"

Abyssal instinct lit up in triumph; she was like me.

And then she was a girl again, sitting on the sofa, grinning at me like a mad little pixie who had lured me into a ring of mushrooms.

I stood there for a long moment, panting and shaking, covered in sudden flash-sweat.

“ ... was that ... ” I cleared my throat and tried again. “Was that the real you? You must be from the abyss, you weren’t even surprised by my tentacles when you first saw them. You must be.”

Aym tilted her head sideways and gave me a look like I was being exceptionally slow. “Stop asking.”

I shook my head and pulled my tentacles away. This time, Aym let me go.

“You just couldn’t resist a look,” she said. “But did it help? Do you understand more, now?”

“ ... no, I suppose it didn’t, b-but—”

Aym smiled, showing neat little white teeth. “And I’m only very small. The Eye is so much bigger.”

I took another step back and realised I was smiling like a moron, trying to get my head around what I was looking at. Aym had been to the abyss, she was like me; I was dying to ask her so many questions, but my mind finally pulled together and started to process her actual words.

Logically, I could deduce what Aym was. She had begun as mortal, or perhaps Outsider, and then swum the abyss, like me. Had she been a mage, like Ooran Juh, or something else? I almost asked out loud — but that would just set her off again. I might be able to define what she was, technically, but that told me nothing about her.

On reflex, abyssal instinct stirred my senses, preparing to see with new eyes.

“Ah!” Aym shot up straight on the sofa, suddenly angry, little face pinched and blazing. “No!”

“N-no?” I blinked, shocked out of the process of dipping into abyssal senses.

“No! You do that, and I’m gone, I’m out, no bluffing. Turning the lights on, that’s all part of the game. But looking like your big Eye does? No way. Stop.”

I took a deep breath, quite deflated by that. “You mean ... wait, Aym, then how am I supposed to understand the Eye, if not by looking at it?” I sighed and shook my head. “This is getting too lost

in metaphor.”

“I told you,” Aym purred. “I don’t know. But looking is what the Eye does.”

I opened my mouth to sigh again, then froze, and said slowly, “And looking isn’t understanding.”

Aym smiled, a nasty little pixie all in black. “Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of Heaven.”

“Huh!” I laughed without humour. “Another quote, wonderful. Irritating me with my own techniques. How am I meant to approach an ever-moving sphere of Heaven, then, if I can’t make it stand still?”

Aym shrugged. “That’s your problem.”

“Raine was right about you,” I muttered.

Aym lit up. “Rainey? Really? What did she have to say about me? Something violent, I hope!”

“That you’re a little shit.” I cleared my throat. “Pardon my language. Lots of people have tried to give me advice on how to handle the Eye. Magic, brain-math, lesbian threesomes.” I huffed at that one. “Blind faith, dreams, ‘you’ll know what to do when you get there.’ You’re just the latest in a long chain. And you’re not helping, either.”

“You need to stop thinking like a mage.”

“I’m trying!” I huffed, feeling peevisish, and stalked away from Aym. The fun was over, abyssal instinct gone sullen, the game ruined by the harsh lesson. Aym was right, I just didn’t know what to do in response. “I don’t know what I’m going to do about the Eye, all right? Is that what you want to hear? That I know I’m doomed? That I don’t know what to do once I get there? I don’t even know where to start! You’re right, I’m going to look up at it with brain-math and probably die right there on the spot. Thanks, Aym.”

Aym the coal-sprite grinned. “You’re welcome.”

“Evee was right,” I said. “I shouldn’t have been alone with you.” I felt myself buckling inside. Was this Aym’s plot all along, to ruin my resolve, to protect Evelyn by stopping me from going to Wonderland? Because it was working. “Maybe we shouldn’t go,” I

said past a growing lump in my throat. "Is anybody's life worth Maisie's return? I need to believe it can be done ... "

"Uuuurrrrghhh," Aym grumbled. She rolled her eyes so hard that a real human would have detached both retinas. "You liked me better when you couldn't see me, right?"

" ... right?"

"You could deal with me then! You don't need to understand something to deal with it. You just need a shared medium." She pulled one corner of her lips up in a sneer, as if this was obvious. "Shadows. Or words. Or maths, in your case, but don't try that, you'll get shouted down. It's better at maths than you."

I frowned at her, not quite following. "A shared medium with the Eye? What?"

"I don't fucking know!" Aym screeched. She threw her arm up, all lace and gauze. "Don't ask me!"

I blew out a long, deep breath, and said nothing for a moment. We stared at each other, two things alike in kind but completely different in every way that actually mattered. Aym sneered at me, tiny and delicate and wrapped in shapeless black. I felt stupid and lost.

"So, communicate with the Eye?" I said eventually. "In some ... shared medium, whatever that means."

"That's up to you." Aym bounced slightly on the sofa cushions, tilting her tiny chin up, rolling her eyes. "All I can see right now is you people driving toward the edge of a cliff. And I'm not going to pay for your petrol. I can easily stop Flissy from working together with Eevee, you know. Hell's bells, Heather, I could go find this Edward fuck-face and cut a deal with him." She spat a little 'pfff' of disgust. "Though I'd rather not. Probably make me puke."

I shook my head and wandered over to the table, touching my squid-skull mask. Cool bone-metal soothed my heart. "You go to the abyss, come back, and spend your days keeping Felicity on the straight and narrow. What's the story behind that one?"

"None of your business, nosy nelly," Aym sneered in a voice like cats destroying a rusty toy mouse.

I felt myself sagging inside. "Are you going to give us the magic we

need then, or not?"

Aym paused, tilting her little face one way, then the other, black hair hanging down in a messy wave. "I don't like you, Heather. But I like this angel thing you're doing," she mused in a lighter voice. "Stick with that and maybe we can make a deal."

"A deal. Ah." I walked over to Eeve's chair and wondered if I should tuck it back under the table. "I could just take the magic from you. The knowledge. Do it myself."

Aym showed me her teeth again, a big toothy smile. "Are you sure about that? You don't even know what I am."

"You're like me."

"Wrong! Ehh-uuuuhh!" She made a noise like an old fashioned computer error, grating and metallic.

I nodded in exhausted surrender. "Praem says hello, by the way."

"Tch." Aym flicked one bony, delicate hand. "She really ought to get your roof fixed. I was up there waiting. Great big holes in the tiles! Tarpaulin doesn't last, you know?"

"You really care about that?"

"Eeve could catch cold," she said, then grinned a mocking little grin.

"Fair enough." I moved to sit down on the chair, this negotiation wasn't over yet — and then bumped into something soft and unexpected.

My brain short-circuited, like in a dream.

I had bumped into something which wasn't there. Something invisible. I had bumped into nothing. I blinked several times. I had bumped into nothing.

I had bumped into nothing.

Nothing was there.

Maybe don't sit down in the chair? But nothing was there.

I stood there blinking several times, stuck in a small loop, until an explosive sigh split the air.

And suddenly there was Evelyn, my soft and well-wrapped Eevee, sitting in the chair where she'd been sitting all along. A piece of familiar white quartz fell from her hand and into her lap, where it dimpled the fabric of her skirt. She looked slightly bashful, blushing, unable to look me in the eyes.

I gaped at her. " ... Eevee?"

Aym had a hand over her mouth, eyes wide with amused shock.

"Eevee," I said. "That's ... the ... the ... the stone you used when we first met, to hide in plain sight. What's it's called?"

"The fade stone," Evelyn replied with a grunt.

"You lied to me. You came back in! That's why the door was open! Eevee!"

Evelyn looked up at me with blazing eyes. "You didn't seriously think I would really leave you alone with her? Heather, I am not letting you hurt yourself."

"You could have insisted!" I squeaked.

Aym, horrible little goblin thing that she was, burst out in peals of sharp laughter, rocking back on the sofa and clutching her stomach. "I haven't seen that trick in years! Eevee, you little bitch!"

Evelyn looked at Aym like she was a zombie made of dog turds. "And I haven't seen your face in years. What are you still doing here, you little monster?"

"Well—" Aym began, wiggling her eyebrows.

She never finished the rest of the sentence, because the door of the magical workshop flew open with a bang. Praem filled the doorway, staring at Eevee.

"Ah," Evelyn cleared her throat. "Praem. Yes. Well. I'm fine. I'm safe. Sorry."

"Yes," said Praem, sounding none too pleased.

"Wait," I said. "Praem, she didn't even tell you she was doing this? She didn't tell me!"

"Yes," said Praem.

"Eevee," I admonished.

“Yes!” Aym joined in. “Naughty Evee! You—”

Praem silenced Aym with a single look. The coal-sprite demon-thing flinched like she’d had a bucket of water dumped over her head, cringing back on the sofa.

Evelyn was blushing with embarrassed fury. I didn’t know what to say, lost for words. Praem looked like she was about to fetch a rolling pin and beat Aym into mince. Aym came back down from her flinch, inch by slow inch, eyes locked with Praem. Behind Praem, in the kitchen, Raine appeared, peering over her shoulder at me. She shot me a questioning thumbs up. I shrugged, grimacing.

“Yes or no?” Praem said.

Aym pointed at herself with a faux-innocent *me?* gesture.

“You,” said Praem.

Aym hesitated, then smiled, a nasty little thing dipped in black mud and cobwebs. “Alright then,” she said. “Go get Flissy. Let’s do some magic, ghoulies and girlies.”

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.7

Aym did not stay physically manifested all the time, which made the logistics of the next few hours much more convoluted and confusing than was necessary. Knowing Aym, that was probably the whole point, and a likely source of great amusement as well. Aym may have agreed to help us, but she was still elementally herself. We couldn't trust her not to take an opportunity to jump on somebody's back in a dark hallway, or creep over the edge of an unattended bed, or heaven forbid, surprise one of us while sitting on the toilet.

It was like having a cartoon bogeyman — bogeygirl? — as a house guest.

She started by vanishing from the sofa in the magical workshop, right in front of us, during a momentary lapse in concentration. I had been looking down at Eevee, struggling with lingering shock and numb betrayal after her trickery with the fade stone; Evelyn's eyes were glued to a point on the floor, burning with embarrassment at her own transgression; Praem must have turned her head just enough for Aym to slide into her peripheral vision. The coal-sprite of black lace and pinched face on the sofa blurred into a shadow on the edge of three sets of consciousness, human and demon and abyssal, and then she went up in puff of black mist.

"H-hey!" I said to the empty air. "Aym!"

Praem turned, snap-sharp. "Back. Here. Now."

Evelyn huffed explosively. "Calm down, this is just what she does. Unless you want to pin her to the wall with iron spikes."

"Hahaha!" Aym chortled. Her voice came from behind the sofa, her laugh like a rusty awl dragged through a bucket of decayed bolts. "Don't worry, silly magey-wageys and anime demon maids, I'm not running away. Go get Flissy! Then we'll talk magic. Real magic. I pinky-swear double-special promise, swear on my best little black dress. Which is every little black dress."

Evelyn snapped, "You're trying to get her to occupy the same room as me. I can see right through that. Just give her the information."

"Uh-uh," Aym croaked like a broken frog. "She won't be able to do this one alone. This spell's going to need more than one mage. Time to put your heads together, naughty kittens."

"Ah," I murmured. That was close to a worst-case scenario.

Evelyn stared at the sofa cushions as if her gaze might burn holes through them and smoke out Aym. I hesitated to touch her shoulder, she seemed on the verge of losing her temper again, and I felt a stinging, dull resentment that I didn't like, didn't want to acknowledge. But I gathered my courage and touched her with my fingertips.

"Evee?" I said. "You won't be ... "

Alone, I meant to say, but the declaration died on my lips. She had ensured I wasn't alone, either.

Evelyn shot a single glance up at me, furtive and guilty. She couldn't hold it for long. "Fine," she grunted.

"Evee—"

"I said fine," she snapped. "Go get her. Let's get this farce over with."

So, with much too-ing and fro-ing and making certain that nobody went anywhere unaccompanied, we fetched Felicity down from upstairs, prying her out of whatever dubious heart-to-heart she was having with Kimberly, though thankfully chaperoned by Sevens-Shades-of-Serious-Scrutiny.

This process meant leaving Praem and Evelyn alone together in the magical workshop, while Raine and I went upstairs to Kimberly's bedroom, with strict instructions to Lozzie and Tenny that they were to stay together, and a suggestion that Zheng not wander around too much, at least not yet. It felt like a magical version of that old puzzle about getting a cabbage, a goat, and a wolf across a river, in a boat that can only hold two at a time, without somebody or something getting eaten.

Upstairs, Raine and I found a curious tableau: Kimberly was sat cross-legged on her bed, tucked inside a nest of blankets pulled up around her shoulders and neck, with Sevens perched not too far

away, knees drawn up to her chest beneath the yellow robes. They looked very comfy and cosy. I yearned to join them, especially with the rain drumming on the roof and windows, the room a shadowy grotto of resumed safety in the depths of the house. Felicity was sitting on Kim's swivel chair by her desk, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, hands together, sober-faced, as if she'd been listening intently to a grim tale. They'd heard us coming down the corridor, so the conversation had trailed off, but Kimberly seemed dry-eyed and calm, despite looking puffy-faced and a little strung-out. Felicity managed to look guilty, ashamed, defiant, and somewhat worried all at once. I caught Sevens' eyes quickly, but she was unreadably heavy-lidded, like a lizard caught in the cold. I assumed that meant there was nothing to worry about — or that Sevens needed a mug of human blood. I made a mental note that somebody we trusted needed to talk to Kim, and soon.

"It's go time," Raine said to Felicity. "Your little shit of a friend says you're needed. Let's bounce."

Felicity stared for a second as if she couldn't believe her ears. Her good eye, her right eye, went wide with surprise, the burned-out left eye hanging dull in its socket of scar tissue. Then she nodded stiffly, picking up her sports bag and pulling herself to her feet like an elderly lady with terrible arthritis. She nodded once to Kimberly too, pulling the awkward smile of somebody who knew no words could suffice. I think I was the only one who noticed Kimberly raise her fingers as if to catch Felicity's hand; the gesture was so truncated, aborted before it could begin, but there was no mistaking the way her red, puffy eyes followed the older mage out of the room.

As Felicity and Raine ducked out into the corridor, I lingered for just long enough to say, "Sevens, Kim, you two stay together for a while longer, please. Aym is still being difficult, to put it politely. Are you okay together, or do you want to swap with somebody else?"

Kimberly stared at me, then stared at Sevens as if only just remembering that the blood-goblin was right next to her on the bed.

"*Guuurk*," went Sevens. "S'okay. We'll talk about video games for a bit."

Kimberly stammered, “V-video games?”

“Video. Games.” Sevens wriggled a hand free from her nest of yellow robes and pointed one pale finger at Kimberly’s computer. “Show me the one where you farm crops but also date girls. I saw you play it before. Want to see more.”

I left Kimberly to get distracted by Seven-Shades-of-Agricultural-Dating-Sim, and followed Raine and Felicity downstairs. The rest of the house was resuming around us, now unbound from temporary restriction in the disused sitting room; Lozzie bounced past in the front room, pausing to inform me that “Twil’s on her way!” When I asked who called, she only giggled. Tenny followed Lozzie upstairs; curiously enough she was leading Marmite by a tentacle, black silken appendage wrapped around one of his own segmented bone-tentacles. Marmite trotted along quite happily. Perhaps Tenny wasn’t going to require a new pet of her own after all. But then again, poor Whistle could hardly make friends with a giant invisible spider-squid-thing. Could he?

“Stick together, please!” I called after them as I hurried along in Felicity’s wake.

Zheng, of course, was impossible to truly control, but at least I didn’t have to worry about her going off alone and getting ambushed by Aym. I suspect that Aym would have regretted such an ambush very much. What we did have to worry about, apparently, was Zheng going feral with the desire to hunt. By the time Felicity, Raine, and I stepped through the workshop door, Eevee was yelling at her.

“You’re going to damage the bloody sofa! Stop that!”

Zheng had hoisted one end of the sofa up into the air with a hand, tipping it almost onto its end. She was peering at the dusty wall behind it, shark-teeth bared and lips peeled back, a resonant rumbling noise in her chest, searching for Aym.

“Aym is not there,” said Praem, in a voice like a silver bell.

“Rrrrrrrrrrrr,” Zheng growled.

“Oh!” I said. “Oh dear, Zheng, please, no.”

“Zheng yes! Haha!” Raine laughed.

“Put it down!” Evelyn snapped. “This isn’t funny.”

“Come out, coward-thing,” Zheng rumbled. “Both formless and spineless.”

A voice cackled from under the table, “Ooooh, she’s got me dead to rights there.”

Zheng dropped the sofa with a spine-jerking *clunk*; I was surprised it didn’t just break in two. Me and Felicity both flinched. Evelyn huffed and tried to whack Zheng on the shins with her walking stick. I never got to find out if Zheng would have endured the abuse without retribution, because Zheng moved like greased lightning. She was across the room in a flash and down on her haunches to reach under the table. But her swiping hand and wide eyes found nothing. She growled in frustration and shot upright again, rumbling through her teeth as she turned in a slow circle.

From somewhere impossible to determine — perhaps beneath Evee’s chair, perhaps behind the open door, or perhaps inside the cavity of the walls themselves — Aym let out a snorty giggle.

Zheng showed her teeth in challenge. Felicity’s hand lingered over the opening of her sports bag, too near to her shotgun. Perhaps whatever it was loaded with would work handily on Zheng. The spider-servitors looked very nonplussed by all this. The one crouched on the table hadn’t moved an inch. I think they’d figured out how much of this was for show.

I tutted. “It’s like a pair of cats who don’t know each other’s scent. Zheng, stop it, please. I know she’s extremely annoying, but Aym has agreed to help us. At least wait until we’re done.”

Aym giggled. “But then I’m fair game? Sooooo scary!”

Zheng’s eyes tracked something invisible, something moving behind a wall, a signal only she could hear.

“Hey,” Raine said to Zheng, voice easy and soft in a way I hadn’t expected. “I don’t blame you, but ease down, yeah?”

“Aym,” I said, “stop winding her up. Maybe then she won’t want to eat you.”

Zheng huffed, grunted, and stalked for the door — but then she stopped at the last second. One muscled reddish-brown arm whirled outward, a hook of fingers aimed straight for Felicity’s face.

I think I yelped; somebody did, anyway. Somebody else gasped in

horror. Raine moved to grab Zheng's arm, but not quite fast enough. My tentacles whipped out too, about to drag Zheng off balance. We were all too slow, too off-guard, too relaxed.

But Zheng's killing blow slammed to a halt, half an inch from shattering the delicate bones of Felicity's jaw and skull. Arm held rock-solid still, paused in the moment before murder, Zheng froze. She wasn't even looking at Felicity. She was watching a point on the far wall, waiting for her bluff to pay off.

Evee was panting in shock, gone grey in the face. Praem placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey!" Raine said, voice like a whip. She clapped her hands together twice. I jerked upright in obedience, Raine's voice was so full of command. "Hey, both of you, down, right now!"

It was only then that I realised Felicity had drawn her sawn-off shotgun.

If Zheng's strike had been for real, from that close, Felicity wouldn't have had time to drag the weapon out of the sports bag slung over her shoulder. But the quivering bluff had given her the moment she needed to wrench the gun free of its concealing towels, flick the safety off, and press the double muzzles of the shotgun right against Zheng's ribs, just below her armpit. Free of its improvised wrappings, the sawn-off was a dark viper of black metal and polished wood, well-oiled and properly cared for, a pure expression of mechanical violence.

Felicity herself was grey with terror, eyes gone wide as saucers, taking shallow, panicked breaths through her nose. But her grip on the gun was rock solid, her index finger touching the trigger.

"Felicity, no!" I snapped. I reached toward the shotgun with a tentacle, but I dared not risk jerking the weapon. Felicity's trigger finger was so very tight.

"I'm not moving until this demon-host backs down," she said in a near-incomprehensible half-mumble from her damaged mouth. Adrenaline and fear rendered her much harder to make out. "Call her off. Call her off. Heather, call her off."

"Zheng, please," I said. But Zheng didn't move. She was like a hunting hound, utterly focused on Aym's potential appearance.

“Fuck’s sake,” Evelyn huffed. She stamped with her walking stick. “This is the absolute last thing I want to be dealing with on top of everything else! Is Tenny in the kitchen, is she seeing this? Is a child witnessing this bullshit?”

I cleared my throat very gently. “Tenny and Lozzie went upstairs.”

“Good!” Evelyn spat. “At least vulnerable minds are spared this nonsense. Zheng, you great big brainless fuck, get off her, now! And you — you lower that fucking shotgun in my house or I will have Praem flog you.” Evelyn fumed silently for the space of two heartbeats. “You think I’m joking, try me. She’ll have to glue your skin back on.”

Praem agreed, “It is no jest.”

Slowly, the mutual stand-off disengaged. Zheng moved her hand forward, then dropped it away from Felicity’s face, muscles rippling. Felicity removed her finger from the trigger and lowered the weapon. Zheng stepped away, still not bothering to even look at Felicity, or anybody else. Fliss clicked the safety on her gun.

“Coward,” Zheng snorted.

Aym giggled, apparently from inside the ceiling. “I knew you weren’t really going to punch Flissy’s brains out through her neck. I can smell a bluff a mile away, even through all that muscle. You reek.”

Zheng pulled a face of utter disgust, then finally turned on her heel and stalked out of the magical workshop.

A collective creak of tension passed through the rest of us. Felicity stowed her sawn-off shotgun back in her bag with shaking hands, a terrible tremor coming over her. Then she staggered over to the sofa and sat down without asking. Evelyn was taking several deep breaths, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Praem managed to look unruffled and perfect, but she stayed in physical contact with Eevee, hands on shoulders. Raine clapped me on the back and asked me if I was alright. It took a moment for me to gather my wits and answer, nodding along, mouth bone dry, heart still racing.

“Fucking zombie,” Evelyn muttered.

Zheng’s aggressive stunt had served as a reminder of what we were dealing with here: monsters and mages, all of them very dangerous,

regardless of pleasant words or amusing asides. This was still a very delicate situation, complete with armed self-defence and malignant demons.

I wasn't the only one who had been reminded. Even as we all took a collective breath and gathered ourselves, Felicity and Evelyn found each other.

Evelyn did not look angry. Felicity did not warrant a glare or a scowl or a sneer. Evee looked at the other mage as if she was an unidentified brown stain on a pair of underwear. Felicity couldn't return that look, not even with her burned-out eye. She placed her bag on the sofa, then stared at the floor, a woman quietly enduring exposure to deathly cold.

"Okay, alright then," Raine said, stepping forward. She was braver than I, to step into atmosphere chillier than the interstellar void. She clapped her hands together. "We're all here now, no need to get off-topic again. Aym, if you would take it away, please? Let's get this sorted out so we move on and get out of each other's hair, sooner rather than later." She shot a look at Felicity, dense with meaning, but Felicity was staring at the bare floorboards, a withered and dying plant before Evee's blank-faced hatred.

To my surprise, Felicity said, "Yeah. Let's get this over with. I'll get out as soon as I can." She wet her lips and started to add, "I'm sorry —"

"Ohhhhhhhh," Aym purred from behind the table, somewhere on the other side of the spider-servitor, which scuttled back out of the way as if catching scent of a terrible predator. "Oh oh oh, I am afraid this is going to take so much longer than that."

Aym's pinched and pale little face rose on the other side of the table, framed by her long black hair, as if she had hidden by ducking down in the seat of a chair. Like a black and dripping mushroom, a skeletal stick festooned with sheets of lace, she popped up into one of the chairs on the other side of the table, planted her boney elbows on the wood, and decided to ignore us in favour of winking at the spider-servitor. The spider was firmly unimpressed, standing stock-still and pointing its cluster of spike-tipped stingers at Aym's face.

"Well well well," said Raine. "There she is. You aren't quite what I was expecting."

Aym made a kissy-face at the spider. When she still didn't get a response, she sighed and shrugged and turned her attention toward Raine, answering with nothing but a little smile.

"Be nice," said Praem. Aym winced, blinking as if she had received a face full of cold air.

Felicity was frowning at Aym, mystified by something. She started to shake her head. "Aym?"

"What's wrong, Flissy?" Aym purred.

"Well ... you're here. You don't usually ... not in front of other people. What are you doing?"

Aym smiled, toothy and girlish, and spoke in a voice made of hydrochloric acid. "Don't ask questions to which you don't want to know the answer. How many times, Flissy?" Aym giggled, wiggling her fingers and toying with the loose black lace around her wrists.

Felicity swallowed hard, holding Aym's gaze for a moment before dropping her eyes back to the floor.

"Be nice," Praem repeated, "includes Miss Hackett."

Aym flinched and stiffened, as if Praem's words had dropped an ice cube down the back of her dress. She hissed through her teeth, a sound like an angry komodo dragon, then smiled an increasingly sour smile.

"Enough with the comedy act," Evelyn snapped. "What do you mean this is going to take longer? What are you trying to pull now, Aym?"

"Yes," I agreed. "That is a rather worrying statement."

Aym made a faux-innocent face, batting dark eyelashes and touching the fingertips of one hand to the middle of her chest. "Me? Play a trick? Never! I'm only supplying a personal estimate, based on prior experience. Why, if you and Felicity were to outstrip my expectations, I would be delighted!"

I cleared my throat and let my tentacles drift outward. Of all the people in the magical workshop only Praem and Aym could see them unaided. The meaning could not be mistaken.

"Aym," I said. "The longer this takes, the harder my ultimate task."

“Quite,” Evelyn added. “The longer we take to break the spell which hides Edward’s home, the less time to overcome him — or steal his books — and the less time to prepare the *Invisus Oculus*. Do not fuck us around.”

Aym rolled her eyes so hard I swore it was beyond human norms. “Flissy, what did I tell you about this before?”

Felicity took a moment to answer — she’d been staring at Evelyn, lost in a moment of undisguised fascination, the first time I’d ever seen her look directly at Evee without shame or pain or an apology on her lips. For a moment my skin crawled and my spine threatened to peel itself right out of my body; I assumed Felicity was taking the opportunity to stare because everybody’s attention was glued to Aym. Perhaps Evelyn had been right about her all along. Perhaps we really should have ensured Felicity not ever step foot in this house again.

But then I realised Felicity had only looked up at the words *Invisus Oculus*.

“Uh,” Felicity murmured, gathering herself before anybody but me could notice her staring. She took a deep breath and spoke with more confidence, back in her element. “Aym told me the original magic to conceal Tannerbaum house wasn’t actually that complicated. Basic geometrical principles — the pentagram and the circle — applied via the occlusion principles in *Manus Cruenta*.”

“Yes, I recall that much,” said Evelyn. “That principle isn’t possible to scale up. We’d need hundreds of dead peacocks. Thousands. It’s ridiculous.”

Felicity’s left hand strayed to her sports bag. I saw Raine stiffen, but she relaxed again when Felicity just patted the canvas. “I brought the book with me, in case we need to ... ” She trailed off and shrugged. “Well. You know.”

Evelyn sneered and said without looking at Felicity, “You stole that from my mother’s old collection.”

Felicity froze, open mouthed. “Wha ... I didn’t! I didn’t. I-I swear! I never stole from Loretta. I never.”

“Not when she was alive,” Evelyn muttered.

Felicity rummaged in the sports bag with both hands, then pulled

out a thick leatherbound book, brown and cracked with age, but not quite old enough to crumble from regular handling. With desperate eyes and a greying complexion, she held it out toward Eevee in both hands.

“I-it’s yours then!” she said. “Take it!”

Praem reached out and gently refused the book on Eevee’s behalf, pressing it back toward Felicity. Evelyn didn’t even look.

Raine pulled a mighty grimace and caught my eye. I felt just as trapped as she did; this was no place for non-mages right now. I felt like a wildlife documentary maker in the middle of a group of posturing predators. If it wasn’t for Evelyn’s need for support, I would have scuttled away. The fade stone still sat heavy in her lap, the lump of white quartz mocking me silently. I stared down at that instead.

Evelyn sucked on her teeth and watched Aym. The coal-dust demon stared back, a little smile playing across her lips. They had made an agreement earlier, even if only in spirit: Evelyn was to stop tormenting Felicity every time they spoke. That was half the price for the spell.

Aym opened her lips with a wet click and a devious smile. For one horrible moment I thought she was going to demand Evelyn apologise to Felicity, right there in front of everybody. My tentacles twitched with protective affection, despite the sour feeling in my gut as I stared at the fade stone.

“That stupid little book,” Aym said in a voice of acid melting through silver, “is incomplete. And it lies. Sort of like me.” She rolled her eyes upward in thought, then giggled. “When Tannerbaum house was placed in its labyrinth, the grand old bastard used that book. I know, because I watched the whole thing happen. He couldn’t conceal anything from me. Just like you, Flissy. Just like you.”

Felicity swallowed hard, suddenly very focused on Aym. “But?” she prompted.

“But! The first time, it didn’t take. The labyrinth was born, but the house was not in it. He had to do the whole thing again, with a lot of blood, most of it his own but lots of it from elsewhere, all painted inside the house to make it correspond with the twisty turns of the

place it was supposed to be hidden.”

“*Simadia*,” Evelyn murmured, her eyes alight with that familiar old magician look — cold and hungry fascination. Then, unexpectedly, she laughed, a single hard bark.

“Don’t think I get that one,” said Raine, a wry grin on her lips.

“Me neither,” I said awkwardly. I was feeling increasingly out of my depth.

“*Simadia*,” Felicity echoed, frowning to herself. “It’s a Greek grimoire — Byzantine, actually, not ancient — on the magic of making places into signs and symbols, which then correspond to other places.”

“And it’s nonsense,” Evelyn grunted at Aym, though she seemed oddly amused. “Monk bullshit. Folk magic. Not real.”

Aym just shrugged, tiny shoulders beneath too many black layers.

Evelyn drummed her fingers on the handle of her walking stick. Felicity clenched her hands together, lost somewhere inside her own head.

“Soooooooooooooooo,” Raine said after a moment. “What now? We need to find a different book? Complete one fetch quest to unlock another fetch quest? I never liked that kind of thing.”

“I’m thinking,” Evelyn said.

“Mm,” went Felicity.

“Time for tea,” said Praem. She didn’t wait for acknowledgement, turning on her heel and marching into the kitchen, maid uniform swaying around her legs as she went. A moment later we could hear the gentle clink of mugs and the watery slosh of the kettle being filled. Neither Eevee nor Felicity responded to that. Aym made a show of checking her flawless nails.

Evelyn murmured, “If Edward used the same method ... ”

“Which is an assumption,” Felicity said. Evelyn hissed softly and tossed her head sideways. Felicity added, “But one we have to make.”

“Question is how to reverse it.”

Felicity sighed. “You’d need a magic circle that covers the entire countryside, the whole area where this house might be. I assume that’s defined?”

“Mm.” Evelyn grunted. She still didn’t look at Felicity. “Made a map. It’s on the table. Quite large, from here to Stockport.”

“Tch,” Felicity tutted. “Do we even have the resources for that?”

Evelyn finally looked up at Felicity, as if coming out of a trance. Her eyes blazed with such disgust that for a second I thought she was going to reach over and hit the other mage with her walking stick. Raine actually stepped forward, to put her own body in the path of any violence. I crept one tentacle around Eevee’s side too, not quite touching. I had a sudden and vindictive urge to covertly snatch the fade stone out of her lap.

But then Evelyn said, “We ... do not have the resources. Correct.”

Felicity nodded, lowering her eyes again. “Right. Right. Yes.”

“But,” Evelyn said, “there may be another way. I have a copy of *Simadia* upstairs, in my study. We can work from that. Are you going to try to steal that, too?”

Felicity looked up, moving only her eyes. “No.”

The two mages stared at each other for a long and uncomfortable moment. On the far side of the room, on the other side of the table, Aym sank into a black cloud of her own lace and hair, a Cheshire Cat grin in the threatening gloom from beyond the walls. Raindrops on the roof filled the room with static, broken with difficulty by the boiling of the kettle in the kitchen. I felt an urge to speak, but kept my mouth firmly shut. One of my tentacles touched a tip to the white quartz of the fade stone, then retreated.

This was a mage thing. I had no place in this particular conversation, other than at Eevee’s side.

Evelyn huffed and seemed to expand into her chair. “Then let’s get this over with before the end of the day. I hope you’re still sharp, Felicity, because I have no use for you otherwise.”

= =

Magic talk made me feel like a third wheel. Perhaps ‘fifth wheel’ or ‘seventh wheel’ would be more accurate, with the number of people

who spent that afternoon in the warm cocoon of the magical workshop, poring over ancient tomes, sketching magical designs, debating how best to perform a large-scale, long-distance, low-signal magical work which nobody had ever attempted before — or just listening to Felicity and Evelyn doing all that, to the background of the storm drizzling on outdoors.

At first there was simply no question of leaving them alone. Even with Praem in the room to support and protect her mother, I couldn't dream of wandering off and leaving Evelyn with Felicity, let alone Aym as well. So I settled in with fresh coffee and a sandwich for lunch, listening to things I didn't understand. Praem bustled about making sure Evelyn ate something. Raine set up camp too, with a hand-held game console and her headphones.

Felicity and Evelyn planned real magic on that table, the kind which made my eyes ache to look at. They debated how to proceed, how to crack an existing spell. Evelyn filled page after page with rough magic circles, suggestions of designs to “unravel the knot” and “break the field at a pre-determined weak point, because it must have one.”

Felicity made notes on the Ordnance Survey map, the same one we'd used to figure out Nicole's route during her magical fugue state, when she may have visited Edward's house.

When they spoke, they stuck to the problem, which was a relief.

“Closer to Stockport would be better, require a smaller circle,” Felicity said.

“Nonsense,” Evelyn snapped. “It makes no difference. We may as well do it in the woods. Besides, how would we conceal it? We're going to be using a lot of blood.”

Felicity frowned at the map. “Where are we going to get that?”

“A butcher's. We're not carting a live bull out there.”

“It has to be male. A bull, not a cow. Not mixed blood.”

“As I said. A butcher's.”

“Or Zheng,” I offered, but neither of them were really listening.

The spider-servitor who had been crouched on the table had to scoot all the way to the end, then clamber down onto the floor.

Maps and notes and half-scribbled designs proliferated across the tabletop, spiralling outward. Despite the massive size of the old oaken table, Felicity and Evee sat very far apart, with plenty of room between them, well beyond arm's reach. Evelyn kept her bone-wand right in her lap, like a loaded gun ready to threaten with. Felicity left her concealed shotgun in the bag on the sofa. Praem often took up station on a chair equidistant between the two of them.

Twil called us twice, to let us know she was on her way over; then to let us know she was going to be late because she was buying us all dinner. She didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation, but nobody had the heart to tell her.

Aym came and went seemingly at random, which kept spooking me, putting my abyssal instincts on edge, making my tentacles twitch and flinch at every errant shadow. She didn't seem to have much left to add after her cryptic reveal of how to hide a house.

Sometimes she sat on the opposite side of the table, sharp chin in delicate hands, swinging her legs back and forth as she watched the mages work, like a child watching her mother at the stove. Other times she appeared on the sofa, dozing and bored, or lying on her stomach and waving her feet in the air inside thick black socks. Once or twice she materialised in front of the gateway at the far end of the room, going up on tiptoes to examine Evelyn's handiwork, the huge mandala design which cupped and surrounded the doorway of blank plaster cut into the wall. Evelyn gave her a sour, dark look, but didn't complain. It wasn't as if Aym was a rival mage, stealing her secrets.

Felicity tried not to look at her, suppressing tension in her shoulders whenever Aym was too close.

Occasionally Aym vanished altogether. Once I thought I heard low voices from over in the utility room; Zheng and Aym speaking to each other, but that couldn't be right. Later on, when we were approaching an entire hour of endurance, Aym sat across from me at the table, staring and smiling with the manner of an irritating child who knows she is technically not breaking any rules by watching an adult, but is nonetheless being an intentional irritant.

"What do you normally do for fun, Aym?" I asked eventually. I'd meant it mockingly, but I couldn't quite manage the tone.

“I like to read poems,” she answered with an innocent little moue, a dimple in her cheeks, and a voice like a rusty nail in salt, “paint watercolours, and take long walks on the beach. What about you, squid-brains?”

I couldn’t stand it — Aym, that answer, this whole situation.

I was terrible at waiting. I always had been ever since Cygnet Children’s Hospital, since the long and lonely hours in that blank grey place, coupled with the unspoken pressure to not acknowledge that one could not in fact get up and leave. It wasn’t polite to draw attention to one’s confinement. Good girls waited to be dismissed, for the proper times to go to the common area, to go to one’s room, to see the doctors. Good girls waited and did not ask.

This was hardly the same, sitting in a familiar and safe place, deep in the heart of the truest home I’d ever known. But I was antsy and uncomfortable, and the situation was degenerating.

At first, Felicity and Evelyn had swapped theories and suggestions at speed, but as the hour wore on, they slowed down, retreating more and more to their own ends of the table. It wasn’t a resumption of hostilities; that we could have dealt with. It was something far worse, something I couldn’t help — they were running up against a brick wall, running out of ideas, running on empty. Two mages with their heads together, if only in metaphor, were not enough for this spell. Evelyn grew grumpy and monosyllabic. Felicity went quiet and timid. I felt trapped.

The fade stone didn’t help. The lump of white quartz sat at Eevee’s elbow while she worked. I kept looking at the thing to check it hadn’t moved. Every now and again I replayed my memory of the last few moments, trying to locate Eevee and see if I could recall exactly where she’d been. Deep down, I was a little sore at her earlier deception. I ached to talk with her about that, but now wasn’t the time. Now was the time for mages to do magic, no matter how much I wanted to bend her ear about tricking me.

After an hour, I decided it was probably safe to excuse myself; the strange truce between Evelyn and Felicity had developed into a professional understanding, but now it was dormant, hibernating. They were clearly getting nowhere and it didn’t take a mage to see that.

“I’m just going to head upstairs and check on ... people,” I said,

clearing my throat as I stood.

Raine tipped her headphones off her ears. "You okay by yourself?"

I glanced at Aym. She was sitting on the sofa with a comic book spread out across her black-clad knees, watching me in return.

"Yes," I said. "Aym can follow me if she wants."

And if you do, I thought, we can have another little chat — without Evee.

Raine nodded and shot me a wink. "I'll stick around with this lot for now, then. Call if you need me."

"Safe travels," said Praem.

"I'm only going upstairs for a bit," I said. "It's not like I'm going Outside."

Aym said nothing. She watched me leave.

As soon as I was out of sight and beyond earshot, a wave of cringing relief crept over me. Standing in the front room, before the stairs, I blew out a big sigh and flexed all my tentacles, rolled my shoulders, and wiggled my arms as if I'd been confined in a straight jacket for several hours. The magical workshop was currently the single most socially awkward situation I'd ever experienced. And it wasn't going to end any time soon, certainly not by nightfall, not by the way the technical conversation had slowed to a crawl. Evelyn and Felicity were both grinding their minds down to stubs. There was only one thing for it: I needed a social butterfly of infinite grace and lubrication.

I mounted the stairs and made for Kimberly's bedroom.

The raindrops on the roof tiles had scaled down their pounding fury, the static haze which drowned out thought now reduced to a background plinking on the windows. Wind had returned, churning the clouds over Sharrowford so they no longer dumped weeks worth of rain directly onto the city. I paused by the window to watch. The unnatural quality in the storm had moved on, withdrawn back inside Aym, leaving merely a grey and gloomy day outdoors.

Tenny and Lozzie were busy in their bedroom. Low voices floated into the corridor, voices like one might use to speak to a dog. I

think they were fussing over Marmite.

Kimberly's bedroom door was still wide open near the end of the upstairs corridor, opposite the left-hand L-shaped turn to the empty rooms full of ancient crumbling furniture and boxes of bric-a-brac. As I padded closer I heard the click-click of a computer mouse and the occasional clackety-clack of fingers on a keyboard.

"*Muuurrrrr*." That was Sevens. "No, the other one, the artist. You have to give her a present before the event will fire."

"How do you know that?" Kimberly asked. Click-click went her mouse. "Aren't you ..."

"She's cute."

"Yes, she is. I like the cottage-core aesthetic. But that doesn't answer the question."

"Game eff-ayy-kuus."

"Still not an answer." Kimberly sighed. "But don't. Please. I don't actually want to know. Sure, we'll date the artist lady, then. But I do prefer the goth."

"You would."

Kimberly laughed with astonishing awkwardness.

I announced myself with heavier footsteps, a cough, and a little knock on the door frame, but I still managed to make Kimberly jump in her computer chair. Her hands flew up from the keyboard like I'd caught her looking at questionable websites, though the screen was filled with a pixelated farm. She jerked her head around to stare at me, blinking and flushed all of a sudden.

"H-Heather!"

"Hello, hi, yes. It's only me. Sorry, Kim."

Seven-Shades-of-Suitably-Supportive was draped over the side of Kim's chair, long yellow robes trailing down the arm and pooling across the floor like liquid sunlight on melted gold. Kimberly's elbow actually rested on a fold of those robes. Sevens peered at me around Kim, little black-and-red eyes watching me with knowing intensity.

"It's alright," said Kim. "I'm just a bit tense. Um."

I nodded and then proceeded to stand there like an utter lemon, feeling guilty for interrupting the video game session, but not certain how to proceed. Kimberly swallowed, paralysed by proxy. She was still wearing the clothes she'd slept in, pajama bottoms and all. She looked terribly vulnerable, her auburn hair in need of a wash, her face pale and greasy, something shivering about her frame. Sevens blinked like a large cat, slowly and luxuriously. She was probably fully aware of my sudden dilemma.

"So ... " Kimberly ventured, breathing too hard, speaking stiffer than a wet t-shirt left outdoors in Arctic cold. "So ... how's it going so far? Downstairs, I mean. How is it coming along?"

"Oh," I said, almost as awkward. "Well. It's ... going."

Kimberly nodded. "Good. Good to know. That's ... that's good."

Kim and I stared at each other for a long moment. Kimberly's expression told me that she was trying very hard but if this went on much longer then she was going to crawl back into bed and start crying.

"Oh Kim, I am sorry," I sighed all at once, bulldozing the small talk aside and stepping into the room. "That was a lie. It's not going great down there. We've managed to avoid a thermonuclear exchange, but they're not getting anywhere with this spell. And I suspect that has nothing to do with a failure to work together, nothing so absurd as that. I think it really is that difficult."

"Ah," Kim said. She even managed a tiny smile, though with some difficulty. The authentic Kimberly peered through the awkward shell.

"But you don't want to hear about magic, I know, I'm sorry." I stepped a few more paces into the room and peered at the computer screen, then at Sevens. "I really came up here to fetch Sevens. Somebody's going to have to break that stalemate down there."

"I'm watching," Sevens rasped. "Busy."

"We-we're not busy," Kimberly hurried to add. "I can pause the game." She swivelled back and hit the escape key. A menu obscured the pixel-art farm. "See? Paused. If you need ... Sevens." She glanced at Seven-Shades-of-Petite-Vampire, still a little perturbed.

Sevens clacked her teeth twice. Oddly enough, that did make

Kimberly jump. “Aym might come back to bully you again. I’m not going anywhere.”

Kimberly pulled a terribly self-conscious smile, looking anywhere but at me or Sevens.

“That’s very kind of you, Sevens,” I said.

“Kind shmind,” she gurgled. “It’s purpose.”

I raised my eyebrows at that, but Sevens examined something on the computer screen instead, an icon that I think was meant to be a potato. Maybe such things were not for discussion in front of others. I blew out a sigh and surrendered to circumstances. After all, I had other responsibilities too, other things I had promised myself that I would do.

“Kim,” I said — and something in my tone made her flinch. I held up a hand, trying to smile. “It’s okay, you’ve done nothing wrong. I just wanted to ask how you’re feeling, after all that mess earlier.”

Kimberly looked surprised. “Oh. Um.” She shrugged, boney shoulders moving beneath her pajama top. “Normal, I suppose. Talking with Felicity helped.”

“Ah,” I said before I could stop myself.

Kimberly went stiff. “Ah?”

I spread my hands in helpless exasperation. “Felicity is ... of unknown quality.”

Kim frowned at me and I deserved it; that was one of the most tortured pieces of phraseological evasion I’d ever uttered. I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose.

“I’m sorry to say this,” Kimberly ventured, roused in defence for once, “but that seems hardly fair. Quite judgemental? Don’t you think so?”

“Mmmhmmm!” Sevens agreed.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just hard to know what to believe about her, considering the things Evelyn has said in the past. And then she uses the whole mess earlier to get in here, and then when you’re in a crisis she manages to get you to talk to her, and her alone. It’s a bit worrying, Kim. That’s all. I didn’t mean she’s low-quality, or some equally weird judgement.”

Sevens said, "You're so bad at this."

"Oh, thank you." I laughed without humour.

Kimberly looked incredibly awkward, like she wanted to curl up inside her pajamas and pretend she wasn't there. I didn't blame her. Her eyes strayed back to the computer screen as if longing to dive into the video game again.

"Look, Kim," I said, "you don't have to tell anybody else what Aym said to you, or what you and Felicity spoke about. But it's only right that I let you know about Felicity, in case she—"

"She's a mage." Kimberly didn't look at me. Her voice was thin and tired. "I really don't need the details."

Raindrops on the window filled a moment of silence. Sevens bumped her head against Kim's shoulder, like a cat, then disengaged from the chair and clambered onto the bed, curling up amid the sheets and her yellow robes. I noticed the three hand-rolled cigarettes on Kimberly's desk.

"No, I suppose you don't," I said.

Kimberly smiled without joy. "She understood, though. Between Evelyn and Felicity ... maybe mages aren't ... I don't know."

"Understood what?" I asked softly.

Kimberly looked up at me at last, eyes sad and exhausted, still ringed with red from crying earlier. She looked very small and frail in her computer chair, something unwell and diseased in her complexion. An episode triggered by Aym. I suddenly wanted to throttle the coal-sprite demon with a tentacle. She'd played the fool and the trickster downstairs, but up here she'd tormented a woman who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. She had no excuse.

"You don't have to tell me," I said quickly. "But you should talk to somebody other than Felicity, as well. Maybe one of your friends from the Coven. Or maybe Sevens here." I winced at that. What a suggestion. "Or Tenny? No, Tenny's a child, I'm sorry. I'm talking nonsense."

Kimberly gestured at the bed. "Do you want to sit down?"

Surprised, I nodded, then perched on the end of the bed. Sevens

shuffled over and put her head in my lap, suddenly warm as sun-heated fabric. I raked my fingers through her black hair. Kimberly just watched.

“Felicity didn’t say anything bad,” she said after a moment, in a very small voice. “I know you don’t think I’m very good at looking after myself, but I know an abuser when I smell one.”

I winced. “That’s exactly what I’m worried about. You’re easily exploited, Kim.”

“Am I?”

It wasn’t a real question. Kimberly looked so defeated. I said, “We just don’t know if Felicity is what she appears to be.”

“She understood. She knows what it feels like. That’s all we talked about. I wouldn’t mind talking with her more. I’m sorry, Heather, I just can’t bring myself to care what she might have done. I know the sort of things she might have done, she’s a mage. I know, okay? But she made me feel less alone, in a single half-hour conversation.” Kimberly’s voice grew thick with emotion. She had to turn away and pluck a tissue from the box next to the computer. She blew her nose. Sevens reached out and touched her knee with a fold of yellow robe.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “None of us are very good friends to you.”

“Not true,” Kim said from behind the tissue. “Tenny is lovely. But you said it too, she’s a child.”

“You’re not ‘freaked out’ by Tenny?”

Kim shook her head. “No?”

“I just assumed you would be. You want to get away from all this, don’t you?”

Kim blinked at me. “Tenny’s great. She’s healthy and happy. She’s curious and clever and all that other stuff that clever kids are. She’s not ... a ... a dead body. A magical symbol. A ... zombie. A bloody surprise wake-up call from a demon looming over my bed.” Kimberly swallowed hard again, hunching up in her chair.

“I’m sorry that we forgot to warn you, there’s really no excuse. Everybody just forgot this was your morning off.”

Kimberly shrugged. “It’s okay.”

"No, it's not okay," I said.

"Whatever you say."

I straightened up and stopped stroking Sevens' head. I was only making this worse for Kimberly. "Well, Kim, like I said, you should talk to at least one other person about what Aym said to you, about whatever you talked to Felicity about, just in case—"

"She told me there's no escape."

I froze. Kimberly looked at the crumpled tissue in her hands. Sevens went very still in my lap.

Kimberly carried on after a moment's silence. "Aym, when she appeared over my bed she said, 'there's no escape once you're in'. And I knew exactly what she meant. I was half-asleep and I knew exactly what those words meant. And they went through me."

"Magic?" I murmured. Kimberly nodded. "Once you're in the know ..."

"There's no going back," Kimberly finished. She said it very matter-of-fact, with a tinge of ironic humour in her tone. "When she perched on my shoulders in front of everybody else, she whispered the same thing, pretty much. Just in more detail. No matter how long I last, the knowledge will always be there. I could make it five years, ten years, twenty years, and it'll be there, always waiting. You can't un-know things."

"You don't have to be involved," I said. "Today was my fault, a mistake, nothing more."

"I'm already involved, just by being alive. There's always the chance I rationalise something, I take another step forward, because I'm in so deep that I may as well keep going. Because I can never go back."

"I am in blood stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go over."

Kimberly smiled, thin and unhappy, without looking up.

"Shakespeare, right?"

"*Macbeth*, yes," I said.

"Sad play."

“That’s one way of putting it.”

Kimberly shook her head, still staring at that tissue in her hands, as if the crumpled lines might hide a revelation. “I work in a flower shop, I smoke too much cannabis, and I play video games. That’s my life now. Enduring the knowledge.” She sighed. “I’m greasy and ugly and broken.”

In desperation, I said. “You know Nicole likes you, yes?”

Kimberly looked up in shock, as if I’d just told her that Zheng wanted to kiss her. “The police officer?”

“She’s a private detective now. She quit the police.”

“Still,” Kimberly squeaked.

“Well. Sorry. I was trying to illustrate a point. You’re not a goblin or something, Kim. And it would be okay if you were.”

“Hey,” Sevens gurgled.

“Figure of speech,” I said. “Sorry. My point is that Kim isn’t broken or wrong somehow. Or ugly. Certainly not.”

“Still,” Kimberly repeated. “But thanks, I think?”

“You deserve better,” I said.

Kimberly laughed a very sad laugh. “Better? Better what? What am I even good for, Heather?”

“You don’t have to be good *for* anything except yourself, Kim. I mean it.”

“I’ve got talent,” she said. Those words were so barren and desolate. “Did you know that? I’ve got magical talent. It’s why the cult used me. Back when you got me out, when I was first free, I avoided thinking about it at all. But recently I’ve been able to understand a little better.”

“Talent? In what way? They had you raising corpses, putting demons in corpses.”

“Procedural talent.” Kimberly sighed sadly. “I think that’s the best way to put it. Most mages are self-taught renaissance types, genius inventors. Everybody wants to be Doctor Frankenstein. The mad scientist making new discoveries. Nobody wants to spend hours

fixing a magic circle, figuring out how to fit goal to result, unpicking sigils and welding them back together. Practical results. That's my talent."

"And you used that talent to save Praem," I said. "You put her back in her body that one time."

"I did." Kimberly didn't seem proud or happy about that.

"Did Praem ever thank you?" I asked.

"Mm. She did. Made me dinner."

"Oh. Was it good?"

"Vegetable curry. Praem's cooking is always good."

Raindrops splattered against the window. Kimberly's computer hummed away below her desk, casting rainbow light up the wall. Sevens purred in my lap, eyes closed as I slowly scratched the back of her neck. And I had no idea what to say, no idea how to help, except to listen. Kimberly was in a position unlike anybody else I knew, lost in trauma and dislocated from her own sense of self, of purpose, of meaning. Maybe Sevens was the right person to speak with her.

"You didn't make a choice to get involved," I said eventually. "You can make a choice to not be involved anymore."

"None of us choose to be born."

My turn to smile awkwardly. My goodness, Kimberly could be morbid sometimes. I even felt Sevens grimace in my lap. What possible answer could anybody have to that?

"Ow," said a voice like rusty spoons dragged across bathtub mould. "Ow, ow, ow."

A twist of black lace rose up from within the cold abandoned nest of blankets on the bed. Aym unfolded as if she'd been hiding under the covers, throwing both stick-like legs over the edge of the bed, grimacing at Kimberly, who was staring back in frozen shock.

"No," I snapped. "Go away. Aym, leave. Right now!"

"Ow!" Aym said to Kim. "Oh you are just absolutely down there. What is this emo trash?"

Sevens had gone very stiff and very still in my lap, like a cat preparing to pounce. I could feel that her eyes were wide open, fixed on Aym.

“Emo ... ?” Kimberly echoed, barely able to form the word.

Aym let out a sigh, which sounded like a broken machine trying to gutter back to life. She gestured with one little hand held flat.

“You’re right, nobody gets out of this. Look what happened to your old cultist friends when they tried: minds eaten by a giant eyeball in the sky. You’re still walking about and breathing and pining after women you’re too scared to talk to, so that’s one up for you. But this whining! Really!”

“Aym!” I snapped. My tentacles unfurled behind me, ready to pluck her off the sheets and throw her out of the window. But Sevens grabbed my thigh and squeezed hard. I flinched, confused.

Kimberly was looking Aym up and down, eyes wide, mouth hanging open slightly, as if a live dodo had just appeared in her bedroom.

“You’re ... ” she managed.

Aym cupped one of her own ears. “Yeees?”

“You’re just a weird little goth kid.”

Aym blinked once, pole-axed. She paused, cleared her throat, and sat up straight. “And what if I’m a demon?”

“Your voice is horrible,” Kimberly said. “What happened?”

“Excuse me!” Aym whined, a noise like a grinding engine. “Sorry I’m not ASMR-quality! Huh!”

Slowly and deliberately, Kimberly turned away from the lace-and-tar demon on her bed. She picked up one of the hand-rolled cigarettes from her desk, fumbled around for a lighter with a shaking hand, and stuck the roll-up in her mouth while she held the flame to the other end.

“Aym,” I repeated myself. “This is deeply offensive. You—”

“Guuurrrrrriieek,” went Sevens. Aym turned to stare at her. For a moment the two creatures had a tiny stand-off, Sevens intent as a wild cat, Aym curious and slightly confused.

Then Kimberly got her reefer properly lit. She filled her lungs with

a deep intake of breath, lowered the smouldering cannabis cigarette — and blew a plume of smoke right into Aym’s face.

“What— I— pfffft—” Aym flapped her hands in front of her face, screwing up her delicate nose and eyes, recoiling in shock.

It was, with the exception of stabbing Twil in the hand, the bravest thing I’d ever seen Kimberly do. And the weirdest.

She didn’t even seem to register what she’d done. After the single plume of — admittedly strong-smelling — smoke, she stubbed out her reefer in the ashtray on her desk, and stood up, looking somewhat shaky but resolved.

“Kim?”

“Evelyn and Felicity don’t need peeling apart, or encouraging closer,” she said. “They need a third head. They need a procedural mage.”

“ ... are you sure?” I asked. As I spoke, I saw Aym melting back into the nest of blankets in the corner of my eye, muttering about smoke and stench.

Kimberly nodded, then swallowed very hard, then blinked several times, eyes watering. “I’m going to need a hand downstairs though, please, or I’m going to get light-headed and fall over.”

loyal to the nightmare of my choice – 18.8

Kimberly — fragile, underfed, vulnerable Kimberly Kemp, a woman more than five years my senior who I couldn't help but think of as younger than me, with a permanent shiver in her heart and a haunted look etched into the lenses of her eyes — descended into the house to join the other mages.

She was right to ask for support: Kim spent the entire journey leaning on my arm. I even wrapped a tentacle around her waist to help hold her steady. I asked permission and warned her first, made absolutely certain she understood what I was offering, and indicated the exact spot where my invisible appendage would make contact with her garish purple hoodie. She had extracted the garment from a pile of half-clean laundry, revealing a wrap-around illustration of an elegant, gauzy, glamorous lady elf inhaling a huge lungful of green smoke from a 'bong' shaped like a tree. Not exactly a suitable aesthetic for a real-life magician, but I respected Kimberly's desire to armour herself with her personal tastes, no matter how fanciful those tastes may be. She still flinched when I touched a tentacle to her waist.

Emotional time dilation stretched out that journey to the point of impossibility. I was too much in sync with Kimberly.

From the upstairs hallway to the door of the magical workshop, a distance I walked multiple times every day, the same route I shuffled and stumbled every morning on my way to breakfast, seemed to expand into a fifteen or twenty minute trudge. It was as if we picked our way through a jumbled maze of corridors and empty rooms, swaddled by the warm enclosing darkness of the house, made quiet and secret by the drizzle of rain on the roof tiles. Kimberly took the stairs down with shaking legs and trembling feet. Adrenaline, the cannabis in her bloodstream, or the impending submersion in something she'd spent months running away from — or all three of those at once. I was not going to rush her.

She paused at the foot of the stairs to look at the stout wood of the

front door for a very long moment. Maybe she was thinking of leaving. I didn't say anything. It wasn't my place to convince her otherwise. But then Kimberly forced down a deep, shuddering breath, and pulled me onward to the kitchen, and the magical workshop beyond.

Sevens had trailed in our wake for a while, dragging her yellow robes along the floor and whispering down the steps, but I wasn't surprised to find her gone when I looked back. Aym had vanished somewhere too; I didn't really care where, as long as she wasn't setting up an ambush for Evelyn.

Raised voices floated from the workshop, filling the grey light in the kitchen.

"We're cutting," Evelyn snapped. "Not building. Don't make me repeat the principle a third time. Do I need to have Praem fetch a pair of scissors to illustrate?"

"Scissors, exactly," Felicity said in her natural mumble, half her voice trapped behind the fused corner of her lips. "Scissors, that's perfect."

Evelyn's reply oozed sarcasm. "Oh, yes, use a metaphor. I instantly understand what you're talking about."

Felicity's voice shook; she still couldn't stand up to Evelyn's anger. "Scissors are a device with which to cut. But they have to be built."

A sharp huff of breath. Raine, laughing to defuse the situation. A liquid acid giggle — Aym, enjoying the pre-fireworks show.

"Oh no," I hissed to myself as I helped Kimberly toward the magical workshop door. "They're already arguing. Kim, I'm sorry, I don't think you want to step into that. Wait at the table, I'll see what I can do."

But Kimberly dragged me onward with a surprising burst of energy. She paused on the threshold of the magical workshop, leaning on my arm, the toes of her fluffy socks not quite touching the junction between kitchen flagstones and ex-drawing room floorboards. The argument on the other side of the threshold died, like a small animal shocked by the arrival of monsoon rains. Three pairs of eyes turned toward Kimberly in surprise — Evelyn, Felicity, and Raine. Praem stared at nothing. Raine met my eyes with a silent question. I shook my head ever so slightly, willing her not to intervene. Aym

deliquesced into a glob of darkness which swallowed itself, leaving nothing behind.

Kimberly stood there, hanging on me, breathing unsteadily, eyes roving over the magical workshop, over the notes and sketched circles and open tomes on the table, down to the gateway mandala at the far end of the room, the vast and unique wonderwork of membrane-breaching that she had helped create. She hadn't been in the workshop since then.

Evelyn spoke with a gentleness which surprised me. "Kimberly? Are you lost?"

Felicity cleared her throat. "Er, yeah. Kim? I thought you—"

Evelyn shot Felicity a dark stab of the eyes, but for once Felicity didn't seem to care. Kimberly mattered more.

Kim swallowed so hard I thought she would choke on her own saliva. Her arm tightened on mine, a woman wrapping herself around a piece of driftwood in a storm. She murmured so softly that I suspected even I wasn't meant to hear: "Oh, I need another hit. I need to be baked out of my mind for this."

I whispered back. "I can go fetch your 'spliff' for you, if you want?"

Kimberly couldn't have looked more embarrassed if I'd offered to wipe her bottom for her. I blushed too, in empathetic horror. She shook her head. "No, not you, Heather. Please don't."

"Oh ... kay. Okay."

Kim finally let go of my arm and shuffled sideways, stumbling into the door frame before righting herself: treading water over the yawning void of a dark ocean. She drew herself up, not so very tall, but for a moment she seemed as tall as Raine.

"I'm sure ... " she tried once, then faltered. Felicity caught her eye and nodded. Kimberly rebooted, though she couldn't look directly at anybody as she spoke on. "I'm sure both of you are very knowledgeable and capable magicians. Well, no, I know that for a fact. Sorry. But you're like professors without any graduate students to do all the actual work."

"Oooooooh," went Raine with a big silly wince. "Burn."

"What would you know about graduate students?" Evelyn asked.

I tutted. "Evee."

Kimberly balked. "M-maybe that wasn't the best metaphor. Um, I mean, you're not great at ... at ... "

"That was wrong of me to say," Evelyn snapped, colouring in the cheeks a little. "I apologise. Explain, please."

Kimberly screwed up her eyes, like she had a headache. "Neither of you are very good at all this grunt work. Experimenting, yes. Genius, yes. Not the slow stuff. Procedural stuff."

"You want to help," Felicity said. She made it sound like *You want to ascend the scaffold and tie the noose*.

"*Want* is maybe a strong word."

"But earlier ... "

Kim and Felicity both looked so terribly morbid. But then Kim smiled. It was bruised and pale, but it transformed her face from strung-out victim to Wiccan weed pixie. She almost laughed. "I meant everything I said. I just changed my mind. I can do that, I think."

"Kimberly," Evelyn said with a sharp sigh. "You don't have to martyr yourself. You don't owe us anything, I keep telling you this, and you didn't have a debt in the first place. Even if you did, you've already done more than enough. I owe you, you do not owe me shit. Go back upstairs. Actually, better idea, wait for Twil and then have her take you out for dinner or something. Go out, forget about us for a few hours."

Kimberly took a step over the threshold of the magical workshop. I let my tentacle slither out from around her waist. She stood free.

"It's not for you, Evelyn," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Welcome," said Praem. Kimberly flinched at that, then nodded awkwardly at the demon maid.

Evelyn pinched the bridge of her nose. "Heather, is this your doing?"

I shook my head. "Not at all. I'm just respecting Kim's wishes."

"Big respect," said Raine, raising a fist as if for a bump. "Yo." Kimberly mimicked the motion, awkward and uncertain, looking as

if she'd never made a fist in her life, let alone raised it to anybody.

"Look," Evelyn went on, working herself up into a lather. "Kim, I understand you want to assist, but what could you possibly do here? You don't even comprehend what we're working on. I doubt Heather could have explained it to you — no offense — and there's already two mages working on this. It's already utterly unprecedented. I don't think we need more. This is only going to hurt you."

Kimberly nodded at the table. "That draft for a circle, the one by your elbow, I can tell it's wrong from here."

"What?" Evelyn frowned in disbelief, then glanced at the sketched magic circle on an open notebook page, then back at Kimberly.

"The inner ring is too busy, you're putting all the weight of action on one part of the design. You should be using something other than Latin for the ignition. And I don't know what you're doing with the outer ring, all the proportions are wrong. The letters are too far apart. If you're trying to 'cut' another spell, like you said, then you're cutting with a blunt spoon." Kimberly let out a weird little laugh. "Makes a poor knife."

I had no idea what Kimberly was talking about. The magic circle at Evee's elbow meant less than nothing to me — I could barely look at any of the designs scattered across the table without a spike of pain going through my optic nerve and into the back of my skull. But Kimberly spoke with the most confidence I'd heard from her in months. She didn't waver or stutter. She just rattled it off.

Evelyn frowned at the circle. Felicity turned her head to judge too, and said, "She's right. I think. I don't know enough about the construction principles, only the underlyings, but, well, she's got a point."

"That," Evelyn said, somewhat tense, "is why we're refining."

"It's why you're stuck," Kim said. Then she seemed to remember who she was and who she was speaking to. "S-sorry, I don't mean to criticise."

"Critique is growth," said Praem. Raine nodded sagely. Felicity sighed and nodded too.

Evelyn cleared her throat and looked horribly embarrassed for a

moment. She still wouldn't meet my eyes, and now she couldn't look at Kimberly either. "You don't even know what this spell is for, Kim. You don't want to be involved in this, trust me. You can hardly help refine it if you don't know the purpose."

"We could tell her?" Raine suggested.

"Do I want to know?" Kimberly asked, resigned and beaten down. I longed to step forward and give the poor woman a hug, but this was her choice and her courage. I dared not undermine that.

Evelyn turned cold and hard. "This spell is intended to break the concealment on the hidden home of Edward Lilburne. Once that is achieved we're going to either kill him, or drive him off, then steal back the book we need, to complete the magic to hide us from the Eye."

Kimberly froze, then swallowed dry. I reached out for her hand, but held off, embarrassed, uncertain — ultimately it was my sake that all this was happening, even if Kim was taking this step for her own motivations.

"See?" Evelyn said, gone gentle again. "You don't want to know. Go back upstairs and—"

"I only needed to know the first part." Kimberly walked over to the table, legs wobbling only a little bit. She fell down into a chair and looked like she wanted to pass out, then dragged the unfinished circles toward her. "I'd rather not think about the rest. All I need is the mechanical purpose."

Raine chuckled, then said in a sing-song voice, "Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?"

Evelyn turned her head like a stone statue come to life and gave Raine a look that could have frozen a lava flow. Raine actually paused mid-grin.

"Raine," Evelyn said, teeth iced over with cold intent, "I do not care how long you and I have known each other, if you compare Kimberly helping us to a fucking Nazi rocket scientist, I will have Praem tie you to a rocket and fire you into the sun."

Raine laughed in embarrassment and put her hands up. "Didn't mean it like that, hey."

"You of all people should know better. Moron."

Raine pulled a goofy grimace and bowed to Kimberly. “My apologies, o’ glorious and gossamer magical one. Instead I shall compare thee to a fairy mistress, gracing us from the forest realm. Such a visitation! Such ephemeral delights! How may we serve?”

Kimberly went terribly red in the face. Felicity stayed carefully composed, because like me she could follow what Raine was really doing. Evelyn huffed and swiped at Raine’s shins with her walking stick, a blow that was easily dodged.

Raine had made a stupid, vaguely offensive comparison on purpose. Now the mages had a mutual foe, Evelyn’s ire had been redirected, and Kimberly was more focused on being compared with a fairy than on the magic she was about to subject herself to. As Raine laughed and hopped out of the room, I grabbed her in a quick hug. She was too good at this. Even in a room full of mages and magic, working on a problem that neither of us could even begin to grasp, she knew exactly the right thing to say.

“Well done,” I whispered in her ear.

She winked, kissed me on the forehead, and went to make more tea.

The mages got down to work.

I’d seen Evelyn working on magic before, plenty of times, from improvised blood horrors to the gruelling process of research, the mental strain of grappling with principles smuggled from Outside, cutting oneself on the sharp hidden edges of reality-denying knowledge, exhausted in ways the human mind was not meant to approach. I’d even seen her and Kimberly briefly work together once, to finish the first iteration of the gateway to Outside; they had shared the burden, spread the load, made it easier on both of them.

But this triumvirate of magecraft was a transformation, more than simply three being a bigger number than two. It was obvious even as little as twenty minutes later. Evelyn, Felicity, and Kimberly became greater than the sum of their parts.

One might not have noticed it if one wasn’t intimately familiar with at least one of the participants. A casual observer might have assumed that these three had known each other for years, a well-oiled intellectual machine, swapping hypotheses and designs and additions at high speed, discarding ideas that didn’t work, re-using each others’ suggestions without a second thought. The three mages

were not identical in their functions, obviously — Evelyn supplied the focus, the dive for specificity, the edge of the blade; Felicity had her head in the clouds, on concepts and generalisations and pure thought; Kimberly consolidated their work and turned it into concrete function, checking that everything actually joined up and fitted together and wasn't about to fly apart as soon as they hit the metaphorical on-switch.

A couple of times in that first hour they did actual magic. Felicity and Kimberly had to stand up and back away as Evelyn put some minor part of the spell into practice, running some tiny sub-circle of the ultimate design, making sure it didn't short-circuit or explode in her hands, figuratively speaking, I hope. Spitting Latin, feeling the room go flash-cold, thanking Praem for wiping the spittle from her lips, Evee was in her element.

I'd never seen her like this before. I'd never seen her doing magic and it just flowing.

To be fair, I'd never seen Kimberly like this before either. Or Felicity. The research and application was taking a toll, but the toll was so much less than any one of them would have suffered alone. Praem wafted in and out on silent skirts, bringing tea, supplying biscuits, ensuring adequate hydration. Evelyn muttered to herself, producing designs and sub-designs and variations and corrections at high speed. Kimberly once held Felicity's hand under the table, surprising the older mage; they thought nobody else noticed, but I did. Raine and I were totally surplus to requirements. Twil was going to be bored out of her mind once she arrived at last, unless she wanted to go play video games with Lozzie and Tenny.

And there was nothing magical about this. It wasn't about the magic, it was about the mages.

Aym threatened to ruin the whole thing.

The abrasive little madam had been gone for nearly an hour, nowhere to be found. I even popped upstairs to check on Lozzie and Tenny and Marmite — Tenny was playing the same farming game that Kimberly had, but on her console instead of a PC, with the tarantula-squid-friend half in her lap, watching the screen. I briefly went looking for Zheng too, only to find her huge and asleep in our bed, lying on her back with her hands on her chest, the room unlit beneath the rain pattering on the roof and the window. She

rumbled in acknowledgement when I stroked her hair.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked.

“I am lying in ambush,” she rumbled without opening her eyes.

“For Aym?”

“For the shape-shifting coward, yes.”

“Well. Good luck, I suppose. Love you.”

“Shaman.”

Aym returned like a blotch of black mould growing on the fabric of reality, secret and hidden until it was too wet and deep-rooted to scrub out.

Kimberly was in the middle of offering an opinion on a diagram of a circle: “Too slender. The connections are all too slender. You’re putting too much strain on the mind of the mage casting this — yourself, Evelyn, I’m sorry. You’ll lose a pint of blood, for what? Double it, strengthen the core.”

“I suppose,” Evelyn grumbled, sour and quiet. “I could take it if I had to, I could deal with that. We should really try not to draw this out too mu—”

“AlIIIIIIIIways with the self-sacrifice,” purred a voice like boiling tar poured over dry ice. It was the first thing Aym had said since she’d vanished. “Anybody would think you’re a masochist, sweet bun. Get it out of your system, have Heather tie you up and tickle you unconscious or something. Don’t let it ruin your craft.”

Aym oozed out of nowhere, right onto the chair at the far end of the magical workshop table, grinning like a skull.

I flinched, because I was quite close to the unsettling visual effect; it was only when she spoke that I realised she’d been slowly materialising there for several long minutes, starting as a point of dripping shadow in one’s peripheral vision, then expanding like damp-fed spores, until she was large enough to sluice away from the air and slap down into the chair.

The poor spider-servitor behind the chair skittered backward, spike-tipped stingers raised and quivering. The poor things were terrified of Aym, like she was a rarely encountered natural predator. Why they didn’t fling themselves at her and tear her to pieces, I had no

idea.

“Hey, yo,” said Raine, who had contrived to appear in the kitchen doorway at the sound of Aym’s voice. “Don’t make me go get Zheng. You keep that mouth shut around these three, they’re working hard.”

Aym flapped the lace ends of her sleeves and pulled a dubious smile at Raine. “As if you or that giant lumbering fool could make me do anything. Besides!” She slapped the table lightly with her fingertips. “I’m helping. I’m offering a useful suggestion.”

“You’re interrupting,” Evelyn grunted. She pointedly did not look at Aym. “That’s what you’re doing.”

“I’m checking on my investment,” Aym said, feigning seriousness. She met my eyes and winked. I stared her down, still angry about earlier, angry about how she’d hurt Kimberly, but unwilling to disrupt and derail everything by having it out with her right then.

“This isn’t the time, Aym,” I said. “You’re lucky these three are busy. Go away.”

“Tch! It’s always the time. And where else can I go? I’m here, I’m near, and you better get used to it.”

Felicity swallowed hard and raised her eyes to meet Aym. “Actually I agree with Heather,” she said in her usual half-mumble. “We’re trying to get this finished. The longer we take, the ... longer ...”

Her words died under Aym’s light and breezy stare. Not for the first time, I wondered what terrible hold Aym’s amusement had over Felicity.

“Fuck off.”

It took me a moment of dull shock to realise who had sworn with such a blunt and bland tone: Kimberly. She was staring at Aym with all the mildly frustrated ire with which one held for the local disruptive stray cat, stealing things off windowsills and defecating in flower-boxes.

“Go Kim,” Raine laughed. “Yeah, fuck off with you, Aym. Go play with Sevens or something.”

Aym stared back at Kimberly, a little surprised, ignoring Raine — then slowly grinned. “Hoping for an in, are we?” she purred like

rotten wood writhing with maggots.

Kimberly hesitated. "I told you to fu—"

"A shared session of dark secrets and self-torture, something horrible in common, and you'll bat your eyelashes and flex your brain-meats," Aym laughed. She trailed a corner of lace across the tabletop, then hopped to her feet, taking slow steps toward the mages. "And then she'll fall for you, sweep you off your feet and all that. As if she hasn't already. As if she wouldn't tongue-fuck a disease-ridden horse if it showed her the slightest bit of affection."

Kimberly had gone dark red up to her ears. She clattered to unsteady feet. "That's not why I'm doing this!" she cried. Felicity had gone white in the face, staring down at the open tome in front of her, not breathing.

"Aym," I snapped. "That is ... is ... terribly rude and uncalled for."

"Bad girl," Praem said, taking a step forward — but unlike previously, Aym only flinched a little, without slowing down.

"You're both vile," Aym said. "And you're sick in the head if you think I'm going to let it happen."

Aym took another step. Evelyn was glaring at her in the same way she might look at Twil trailing mud in across the kitchen floor. I saw her reach for her scrimshawed bone wand on the table. Praem moved forward too; for a dizzying moment I thought she was going to scoop Aym up in her arms like a naughty child being carried off to get locked in her bedroom. But Aym ignored the motion, grinning at Kimberly's quivering denial, and in that moment I knew Aym would simply vanish into a puff of black smoke the moment Praem touched her.

"Sick, sick, sick," Aym said, enjoying this way too much — and then stopped.

A tiny, long-nailed hand crawled out from under the table to tangle itself in the lace of Aym's little black dress. Aym flinched and spluttered, blinking and recoiling as our own terrible little gremlin emerged from hiding.

Sevens stood up from beneath the workshop table. She was still in the blood-goblin mask but she'd shed her — my — yellow robes. In greasy black tank-top and loose black shorts, claw-like bare feet and

bony exposed shoulders, she was about the same height as Aym, and sort of the same build, if more like a hungry hound than a pampered aristocrat.

Black-red eyes bored into Aym. The coal-sprite stared back, frowning in confusion. She looked past Seven-Shades-of-Suddenly-Showing-Up, as if she might find a hidden trapdoor under the table.

“*Ruuuuurrrrgggg*,” went Sevens. “Dish it out good enough, but you can’t take it.”

Aym squinted at her. “Unhand me, leech-thing. I don’t know how you ... how you ... ”

Sevens waited, fingers tangled in a fistful of lace, nails snagging loose threads. Aym’s eyes went wide, then her whole outline shuddered and shivered, as if she was trying to blur herself out of reality, but couldn’t take a step. Outdoors the storm suddenly intensified in a burst of rain slamming down on the roof, a single gust spent in a moment.

“Yeah?” Sevens rasped. “Did you really think I was just some little bloodsucker they keep around like a pet?”

Raine laughed from her belly. “Ah, yes. Meet Sevens. Or have you two met before?”

“Nah, not before,” said Sevens. Aym was too busy looking like an animal which had just discovered it was not the top of its local food chain.

I sighed, “You probably shouldn’t have mocked the prospect of a budding lesbian relationship. Or threatened to block it from happening. Sevens, is that why you’re here? Are you okay?”

“Mmmmmmmmm. Maybe?” Sevens sounded genuinely conflicted. She looked away from Aym to meet my eyes and Aym shivered and shuddered again, a weasel in a trap, trying to wriggle free.

“As long as you’re not straining yourself in the wrong direction,” I said. “We can deal with Aym, if you’re ... getting risky.”

“Nah I think this is the right direction,” said Sevens, then turned back to Aym. “Good use of talents. You reckon so too?”

Aym turned only her eyes, as if any movement might get her eaten alive, and looked right at Felicity. “Help,” she whispered.

Until that moment, Felicity had looked vaguely amused, if a little confused. At Aym's plaintive, genuine fear, she sat up straight. Her hands came together, left threatening to remove the glove on the right. I recalled with the dim memories formed by a very stressful set of events that Felicity had extensive magical tattoos beneath that glove, a sheathe of them crawling up the skin of her unburnt arm. Last time she'd visited our house she'd used the spell etched into her flesh to diagnose what was wrong with Evelyn. She'd called the arm-tattoos a kind of magical sixth sense, but she had also explained that wasn't quite accurate. She'd said we wouldn't understand. The way she reached for her own hand now was more like reaching for a weapon.

But she paused and said, "Is Aym actually in danger? Please don't. Please don't hurt her. I know, but don't hurt her."

I said, "No," at the exact same moment Evelyn said, "Yes." We looked at each other. Evelyn blinked, embarrassed; she still struggled to hold my gaze since the unfair trick with the fade stone. I smiled, but it felt like cringing.

Sevens clacked her needle-teeth together. Raine laughed. Praem stepped back, yielding the capture to Sevens.

"I'm serious," Felicity said.

"Help meeeee," Aym whined. She was crying now, slow tears running down her cheeks and making little wet patches in the dark lace around her throat.

"M'not gonna hurt your friend," Sevens rasped for Felicity. She even glanced back with a blood-eyed smile. "She can sit quiet. Or we can play a game. Her choice."

"Game? W-what game?" Aym asked.

Sevens clacked her teeth again. "Chess. With wagers."

"... I'll ... I'll sit quiet," Aym said. "I promise."

"Yaaaaaay," Sevens deadpanned. She led Aym over to the sofa. The diminutive lace-and-mould demon followed her like a girl caught on a fishing hook, drawn along by Sevens' fist in the multi-layered fabric of her dress. Seven-Shades-of-Unsought-Escort pulled her prey down onto the sofa. Aym was forced to sit, straight-backed and very proper, as Sevens the greasy-looking blood-goblin curled up

beside her, placed her head in Aym's lap, closed her eyes, and fell instantly asleep — or at least pretended to. But for Sevens, pretending was doing.

Aym sat there, frozen, deliciously uncomfortable, with an expression like a chicken which found itself adopted by a fox. I had to bite my lips to stop from laughing.

“What,” said Aym.

“Reaping,” Praem intoned. Evelyn snorted and shook her head, turning away.

“Well,” Raine said, dusting off her hands. “Guess that settles that.”

Aym spoke in a tiny voice. “This ... I ... Fliss. Fliss, help me.”

Sevens let out a little snore: “*Gurrrrk*.” Aym flinched so hard her toes pattered on the floor.

Felicity was frowning in academic interest now, seemingly insensible to Aym's plea. She turned her head to address me without actually taking her eyes off the scene. “What is she?”

“Bigger than me!” Aym hissed, unamused.

“You called her ‘Sevens’?” Felicity pressed.

I sighed. “You really don't want to know.”

Evelyn said, “Wouldn't believe it, anyway. She's an Outsider.”

Felicity did a double-take, but not out of fear. She clearly didn't believe Evelyn. “If you say so.”

“Felicity,” Aym said, voice high and scratchy, like metal points tentative and gentle on flakes of rust. “Fliss. Fliss. Fliss.”

Felicity looked vaguely uncomfortable, trapped between two sides.

“Ooooh,” went Raine, affecting a fake frown and tutting in that professional way that said something was broken and would require expensive parts and a team of four to fix it. “I wouldn't mess with Sevens while she's sleeping, not if I were you. Big, scary Outsider. She'll take both your hands off and curse you so you can't ever take a shit again.”

I frowned at Raine, mouthing, “That's disgusting.” But the colourful nonsense gave Felicity a boost of confidence.

“Well, if our hosts say so,” she said, not quite meeting Aym’s eyes. “I’m hardly going to tangle with an ... Outsider for the sake of your dignity, Aym. She’s not ... actually hurting you?”

“This thing has me pinned,” Aym said, voice a thin quiver. But she wasn’t crying anymore.

“Are you being hurt?”

“Morally.”

“Spiritually?”

Aym pressed her lips together.

Felicity said, “If she actually hurts you, I’ll give every last drop of blood in my body. If she’s just playing, then play along.”

“Play along!?” Aym squeaked. Sevens snored again and Aym flinched as if hit with a cattle prod.

“Play nice,” said Praem.

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The rest of that long, dreary, work-filled afternoon played out without further demonic incident. Or abyssal incident, to give Aym the benefit of her real dignity: her ambiguity.

Seven-Shades-of-Softly-Snoring kept Aym safely contained on the sofa while the mages worked, much to everybody’s amusement, though the novelty wore off quite quickly. Evelyn, Felicity, and Kimberly returned to drafting and revising magic circles, discussing “correct resonance with the existing waveforms”, “expected countermeasures already woven into the spell”, and “what if he’s posted zombies — or worse? — to quash any source of interference?”

That last question was answered by Raine: “Hi. Thanks. I’ll be here all week.”

“We have Zheng,” Evelyn grunted. “And Twil. She’s the equal of any zombie.” She looked up after that one. “Do not repeat that to her. Do not tell her I said that. I don’t want her being any more reckless than she already is. Where is she, anyway? I thought she was meant to be here by now.”

“Buying us all dinner,” I said. “Taking her time about it.”

Twil quashed our worries for her safety shortly later by turning up carrying a truly staggering amount of food. She'd walked the entire width of Sharrowford to purchase a very specific kind of apple pie which one could apparently only acquire at *Marks and Spencer*, but then stopped on the way to load up with several frozen pizzas, ingredients for a vegetarian curry, cake, crisps, dips, and enough biscuits to feed an army. She'd even bought some steaming, fresh, crumbly pastries. She was carrying so many bags that if she'd been anybody else I would have worried for her muscles.

"We're not having a bloody party here," Evelyn called from the magical workshop as Twil bounced in and dumped the whole lot on the kitchen table, a huge grin on her face.

"We are now!" Twil laughed in return.

I peered through the bags, bug-eyed. "Didn't this ... cost you a lot?" She'd even brought a bag of coffee grounds; I suspected that would be much more relevant to the coming night. "Twil, we owe you for this, I'm serious. How much was all this?"

"Naaaaaah," said Twil, hands on her hips. She even tossed her head back, springy dark curls going anywhere. She looked exactly like a wolf trapped in human skin, brimming with energy, despite the rainy drizzle all over the hood and back of her lime-and-blue coat. "Mum gave me the cash for it. I said you lot were starting on the magic to fuck up that Edward bastard. She wanted to chip in."

Evelyn drawled from the workshop, to nobody in particular, "Check it for poison."

Twil bristled. "Hey!"

"I was joking, you dog-brained fool. Praem, please remind me later to send a thank you to the High Priestess of Hringewindla."

It didn't take long for Twil to hand out the pastries, making sure everybody got one, even Lizzie and Tenny upstairs, even Zheng. She'd purchased extra, just in case. Praem let her do that part herself. We could all tell she wanted to help.

"Bloody hell," she said in the magical workshop, when she first spied the trio of mages working together. "You weren't kidding. Full party, hey?"

"Three DPS, no healer," said Raine.

“Bloody right,” Twil laughed. “Who’s in charge?”

I got the joke this time, clearing my throat after a mouthful of pastry. “I can be the healer. Or Lizzie can.”

“Felicity, right?” Twil said, offering Fliss a pastry too. “I remember you, yeah. Bacon or veggie?”

“... vegetable, please. I recall you, also.”

Twil actually jumped when she saw Aym — not because Aym was doing anything other than sitting there, slightly pained, with a cup of tea and book next to her. I’d provided the book, but Aym had read two pages and then looked slightly ill. Twil jumped because Aym was so quiet.

“Er, who’s the little goth?” Twil asked, suddenly serious. “Is she ... actually thirteen years old, or ... ?”

“God no,” Evelyn snapped. “You think I would do magic with an actual thirteen year old in the room? She’s not human. Don’t touch her. Don’t talk to her. Pretend she does not exist and never think about her again.”

“Oh,” Aym said, voice small and measured, as if normal volume would risk waking the sleeping yellow tiger in her lap. “I am to be denied even conversation, now?”

“Demon?” Twil asked Aym. “Outsider? Something else?” Aym just shook her head. “What are you, then?”

“Trapped.”

Despite Twil’s best efforts and the generous donation from the Church of Hringewindla, we didn’t quite manage to cultivate a party atmosphere. The mages spurned a proper dinner and ate while they worked. Crafting the spell to open Edward’s fortress for a siege drew on into the late afternoon and claimed the evening too. Outdoors, the storm finally dribbled away to nothing more than a chill wind and a clinging damp, perhaps as pinned as Aym’s physical body was, but the magical workshop remained soaked in deep, lamp-lit shadow, filled by the scratching of pencils and the muttering of magicians. It was as if the shadow over Sharrowford had contracted, compressed, and concentrated itself on the work, on the spell, on the mages themselves.

Perhaps it had, perhaps that was Aym’s doing, though I wasn’t sure

if Aym was capable of doing much of anything while Sevens dozed in her lap. She spent the entire time glued to the old sofa, looking like a very nasty girl subjected to a very unpleasant punishment. The spider-servitors crawled back to their usual spots in the corner, though they watched her with great caution, stingers held ready. Marmite stayed sensibly upstairs.

We didn't totally neglect Aym, of course. Irritating and irascible and borderline abusive she may be, but Aym was still a person and we didn't know enough to condemn her totally. Praem brought her tea like everybody else — peppermint, strong and dark. She was included in the sharing out of food, though she ate like a bird and left most of her portions untouched, except for the pizza with pineapple on it. She ate both slices of that and politely requested more.

"As expected," Raine commented.

"There is nothing wrong," said Aym, in a voice like acid going through meat, "with pineapple on pizza."

"I agree with that part," said Kimberly. "Um, sorry."

Sevens woke up for food but never broke contact with the coal-sprite demon. She swung her legs over Aym's lap, ate, then returned to her cat-like nap without conversing. By the time true darkness fell outdoors, Aym seemed a touch less like an animal attempting to avoid being eaten and more like a bored teenager forced to endure a tiresome family friend.

The mages didn't work that whole time without a break, just not a properly organised one. Kimberly grew less and less focused as the hours wore on, until she was visibly twitchy and nervous, until Felicity reached across the table and touched her hand. That seemed to act as some kind of permission, because Kim then went upstairs to smoke more cannabis, returning calm enough to carry on. I wasn't sure what to think of that. At least Felicity didn't follow her to join in. Felicity barely left the table, but she did fall asleep in her chair once, sitting up with her arms crossed. She looked no more relaxed asleep than she did awake, the burned half of her face twitching with some unpleasant dream. Evelyn took a break as well, a short lie down, enforced by Praem; she took her bone wand with her but left the fade stone behind on the table, which was a strange experience because I kept losing track of the thing, certain it had

moved or forgetting that Evelyn had not carried it upstairs in her hand.

While she was out of the room and nobody else was looking, I scooped the thing up with the end of one tentacle, pressing pale pneuma-somatic flesh against warm quartz. Nothing happened. The world did not flash grey-and-black as I stepped into some negative space behind reality. The others in the room didn't look up as I vanished. The stone wasn't a machine, after all. One had to be a mage to make it work, one had to think the right thoughts; one probably had to be Evelyn Saye.

When I put the stone back down, I realised Aym was watching me, sulky and bored and curious. I held her gaze, but she said nothing.

Twil discovered that mages making spells was actually quite boring to watch. Eventually she ended up playing video games with Tenny. Praem hovered at Eeve's shoulder, tireless and devoted. Raine and I stuck close to the 'action' — a word I use under duress — just in case Eeve should need us, but there really was almost nothing for us to actually do.

"Don't give yourself a migraine by looking at the circles," Eeve said to me when I decided to peer over her shoulder at the half-finished designs laid out across the table. She didn't meet my eyes when she said it, casting half-back toward me but not quite getting there.

"I thought I might be able to help," I said to the back of her head, past a surprising lump in my throat. "This is going to take more than just today, isn't it? Maybe if I could use brain-math ..."

That made Evelyn meet my eyes at last. She sighed, irritation and exasperation covering a deep affection. I almost blushed. "Heather, this is magic, not brain-math. You're not built for the former. It'll hurt you. Stop trying."

"I thought I might speed things up."

Evelyn stared at me, fake-impassive. "If you start hurting yourself I won't be able to concentrate. It's not like I'm doing this alone." She gestured at Kimberly and Felicity. Kim looked up with a painfully awkward smile, the kind of smile one wears when the hosts of a dinner party start a domestic argument in front of their guests. "Go play video games with Twil and Tenny. Go read a book to Aym. Go have sex with Raine."

“E-Evee—”

“Woo,” Raine deadpanned.

Evee carried on, not even blushing. “I’ll need you later, I’m sure. Let me concentrate.”

I didn’t try again. After that particular exchange I retreated to the kitchen with Raine, to chew on cold pizza dipped in HP sauce and gaze out of the window at the gloaming over the garden. The big old tree out there was heavy with rain, the wooden fences soaked through, the ground sodden and mushy. Both of us pretended that we weren’t monitoring the mages in the workshop, just beyond earshot. Once or twice, Praem appeared in the doorway, a blank-eyed look silently reassuring us that all was going well.

“This isn’t something mages do, is it?” I asked Raine as we sat side by side at the kitchen table. She had coaxed me to put my legs up over her lap and was busy rubbing the tension out of my calf muscles, one hand up the left leg of my pajama bottoms.

“Yeah,” Raine said with a twinkle in her eyes. “It’s like small children.”

I blinked. That wasn’t what I’d meant at all. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s not when they’re being noisy that you gotta worry. It’s when they go quiet. Means that something’s up.” Raine flashed me a wink and a beaming grin, enjoying her own joke a little too much. I rolled my eyes, but I was smiling.

“I mean working together,” I said. “Evee has always implied this doesn’t happen. Like it’s not meant to happen. Like they should all be turning each other to frogs or setting their demons on each other, like Pokemon trainers but more violent.”

Raine’s turn to laugh. “Wouldn’t that make you the champion, by default?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve got Zheng.”

“Tch! Raine. Zheng is her own person. And she’s not my demon, I didn’t create her.”

Raine shrugged with a grin on her lips. Praem chose that moment to appear in the doorway again, maid dress swishing in her wake. She

gave Raine one very long and pointed stare. Raine raised one hand in surrender. Praem moved on.

“And yes,” I added, “Praem beats Zheng. We’ve tested that. At least when arm wrestling.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing a real test,” Raine muttered, but then she snapped back to the subject at hand. I was a tiny bit disappointed; she always looked so dashing and exciting when she started talking about that kind of thing, her passion for measured violence. She leaned closer to me, as if worried about being overheard, a cheeky smile playing on her lips. “Our mages are behaving because they’ve got a pecking order. That’s my theory, anyway. Evee is in charge. Kim’s under her wing. Felicity is grudgingly tolerated. There’s no territorial bullshit, no risk of betrayal, no hidden motives. Well, maybe Fliss on that last point, but her hidden motive isn’t *steal all the books and kill everybody before leaving*, so everything stays nice and calm.”

I chewed this over while chewing another mouthful of pizza. Raine rubbed my leg, working the knots out. “Is that really it? Pecking order? Hierarchy? That can’t be the whole story here. That can’t be the solution. You of all people can’t believe that, Raine.”

“It’s not hierarchy, it’s just lack of ambiguity. They all know exactly where they stand and exactly what each other wants.”

I chewed my lip and frowned into the open door of the magical workshop, then out into the gathering twilight over Sharrowford. I wasn’t sure if I liked the notion. “Evee deserves better than that.”

“Believe it or not,” Raine said, “when it comes to magic, this is the best I’ve seen her in years.”

I blinked at her, but Raine wasn’t joking. She wore a rare and sober look on her face, nodding along to her own words.

“She’s incredibly stressed by this,” I said. “And I don’t blame her. They’re going up against another mage. Raine, how is that the best of anything?”

Raine took a deep breath, leaning back in her chair and running her hand downward until she was rubbing my foot, the ball of her thumb slowly working at the muscles of my arch. I struggled to concentrate and not to make little noises of relaxation. She was very good at that. She sighed in thought and ran a hand through her

thick chestnut-coloured hair, making it stand up in little waves. Eventually she spoke again.

“Reminds me of how she was after her mother died. Right after. Long before we left Sussex for university.” Raine lapsed into a moment of silence, but I was frozen in attention. “There was just so much for her to get done. Too much for a kid. Her dad handled all the legal stuff, did the cover-up, all that. But the magic, that was all Eevee. That house was floor-to-ceiling with grade-A mage dung.” Raine caught my eye, grinning. “And I don’t just mean her mother’s old zombies. When you visited the place, it was quiet. But it wasn’t always like that.”

“I can only imagine,” I said. I couldn’t.

“Wards to crack, constructs to put down, circles to destroy. There was even a booby-trapped book. A taxidermied stag’s head we had to burn. The whole thing with the hidden wall — ask me about that sometime, but not right now, long story, that took us weeks and I nearly got stabbed. And the dog in the cellars.”

“The dog in the cellars? I haven’t heard that one.”

“Oh, right.” Raine grinned, but even I could see the beaming confidence plastered over something vile. “Well, there was a dog, in the cellars.”

“Raine,” I sighed.

“It was a German Shepard. Possessed. Eevee’s mum’d used it for something messy. The demon inside that dog wanted out, but it couldn’t get out. It was ... ” Raine paused. “It was strapped to a wall in the cellar. Gruesome shit. And hey, that’s coming from me.” She brightened again, by force of will. “Point is, Eevee had to go deal with it, and a dozen other magical projects that needed unravelling. Picking through her mother’s notes. And she just did it. Pushed through it all.”

An image of a younger, barely-teenage Evelyn floated out of the formless deep of my imagination, probably very incorrect. Scrawny and exhausted and terrified, not used to her prosthetic leg, suppressing the guilt and pain of murdering her own mother, so she could focus on defusing a dozen magical bombs, unpicking her mother’s work like trying to guess the right wire to cut.

“Eevee ... ” I murmured.

"I did help hold her up," Raine said. "And she paid me back a dozen times over. Got me back into education, got me into Sharrowford uni. She was dealing with physical rehab at the time, too. Spinning so many plates. It's no wonder she stumbled once we were here. You know?"

I nodded, then leaned over and hugged Raine. She put her arms around me and fell silent for a few moments.

"But hey, look at her now." Raine winked down at me.

"Collaborating. In her element. Magic fucked her up — it still fucks her up. But she's bested it yet again."

I pulled back and nodded. "This is what she needed. Other mages. Community." I sighed. "Even if it is just Fliss and Kim."

Raine cracked a terrible grin. "Should we call Jan over too? Make it a foursome?"

"I haven't had much time to get to know Jan, but I'm pretty sure if we invited her, she'd stop returning our calls and move to the other side of the planet. So, no." Then I added, "Not yet, anyway."

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It was past eleven at night by the time the clockwork began to run down.

Kimberly bowed out on the grounds that she had work tomorrow, she didn't want to call in sick, and she wanted to unwind before bed; nobody likes to dream about magic. She cast a nervous glance at Aym before leaving, but the black-lace monster was still firmly in Sevens' soft grip. Felicity followed a while later, saying she wanted to speak with Kimberly about a few things. Raine cleverly and covertly made sure they weren't going to be totally alone, courtesy of Lozzie, but I doubted that precaution was entirely necessary anymore. Still, better safe than sorry.

Sevens and Aym vanished together while nobody was looking. Tenny had been tucked up in bed, sound asleep. Praem went upstairs without Evelyn, either to check on Kim or poke Zheng in the eyes, I wasn't quite sure which.

My own concentration hung by a thread; I hadn't helped directly, but I was exhausted for some reason, drained by the awkwardness, by the effort of watching, as if the mages had sucked willpower

right out of the air. Eventually, unaware of how exactly I'd drifted there, I found myself back in the magical workshop, peering through the tiniest crack in the curtains at the darkness of the back garden.

Two petite figures stood beneath the dripping behemoth of the old tree, both of them dressed in shadows, one in lace and the other tinted yellow, talking softly in the muffled night air.

"I wonder what they're discussing," I murmured to myself.

Behind me, the others didn't hear. Evelyn was still sitting at the table, eyes dull in a brittle face. Twil was a few seats further down, feet up in Praem's absence, munching her way through the final — and very cold — pastry. Raine blew out a big theatrical sigh at something I had heard but not processed; I was too engrossed in the hidden show between Aym and Sevens, out in the private dark beneath the open black skies.

"If Praem's not here to put you to bed," Raine was saying, "then I will."

"Oh, don't get your knickers in a twist," Evelyn grumbled, out of energy. "I'm done for the night. This can't be finished in one day, even with three of us working on it. However much I'd like to. However much I want Felicity out of this house."

"She not staying the night?" Twil asked around a mouthful of food. The spluttering sound that followed made me turn away from the crack in the curtains, if only to examine the sheer withering displeasure on Eevee's face. Twil put her hands up. "Hey, hey, I just meant like, where's she laying her head, that's all."

Raine pulled a serious frown. "I think we can trust her not to burn the house down or anything."

"Trust has nothing to do with it," Evelyn spat. "She's welcome to talk to Kimberly all she wants, but she's not sleeping in this building."

"I'll make sure of that, then," Raine said slowly. "We'll see her out."

Evelyn waved one hand, as if a little embarrassed. "Praem already said she was on it. I trust her tact."

I spoke up without thinking, my mind lost in a whimsical wander, still outdoors with Sevens and Aym. "Night Praem would remove

Felicity, if she tried to stay.”

The other three all looked at me, Twil with a frown, Raine with a wink, and Evee with a sigh.

“I still don’t understand this ‘Night Praem’ business,” Evelyn said.

“You’re better off that way,” Raine said with a grin and another wink. “Some things humans were simply not meant to know.”

Twil chewed on her tongue and said, “It’s just Praem in her goth gear, right?”

Raine clicked her tongue and changed the subject, covering for my embarrassment at saying something silly. “Fliss is gonna have to come back tomorrow, yeah? Can she rock up whenever, or do we need to do the thing with the phones again, verify it’s her and all that?”

“Verify, yes,” Evelyn said. “Full procedure. Don’t let her in unannounced.”

“Is she going to be safe?” I asked. “Staying in some hotel or something, by herself?”

Evelyn frowned, but she didn’t meet my eyes. Raine pulled a thinking face and said, “Ah.”

“She can come stay with me,” Twil offered.

“No,” Evelyn and I both said in unison. We looked at each other and shared an awkward smile. Evee explained: “Aym follows her everywhere, she’ll torment a member of your family.”

“Ask Jan to look after her?” Raine suggested, but the look on her face said she knew that was a non-starter.

“Jan would run,” I added, then wandered over to the table, trying to look at the sketches of magic circles without my eyeballs rebelling and trying to crawl back into my skull. “Is this magic really that complex?”

Evelyn rolled her neck from side to side before she answered, popping vertebrae and sighing with release. She placed a hand on the table — inches from the white quartz lump of the fade stone. “Well, no,” she said, then made a grumbling sound. “It’s not the most complex. *That* is the most complex.” She gestured toward the gateway at the far end of the room. “But this spell would take ...

months, maybe years, to construct by oneself. And you'd have no way of telling if it works or not. You'd have to go out there, do the spell, then try to find the house again. With three of us we can prop parts of it up, keep them running, confirm the breach." She frowned harder and harder as she spoke. "If Edward Lilburne built this containment by himself ... "

"Met your match, hey?" Raine said, not unkindly.

Evelyn snorted. "Not yet."

"Errrr," went Twil. "Is this gonna be like, some seriously spooky nonsense? When this thing goes off?"

Evelyn roused herself and shook her head. "Not unless your Church is hiding something in the same way — which, no, they're not. We're essentially going to be breaking a barrier, but we won't see anything, won't know about the effect. Not unless Edward has rigged countermeasures. Which he probably has."

"Zombies?" Twil lit up.

"Probs," said Raine.

"Yeeeeeeeah." Twil grinned, swung her feet to the floor, and licked pastry grease off her fingers with an explosive pop. "Let me at 'em! Better than sitting around like this!"

Evelyn was staring at the circles, and then at the fade stone, unmoved by Twil's lust for something to punch. She muttered under her breath. "Felicity will want to help."

"Maybe we should let her," I said quietly. "Evee, maybe we should let her help."

Evelyn glanced up at me, a pinched frown on her brow, a biting retort on her lips. But then she hesitated. Perhaps my expression gave it away. I didn't really care one way or the other if we let Felicity help or not. Some inner impish irritability had provoked me to say something to inflame Evee's ire, to make her look at me and focus on me, to make her face me properly.

She stared at me for a second, lips parted, then glanced at the fade stone on the table again, inches from her fingertips.

When she reached for that lump of quartz I almost knocked her out of her chair.

I didn't touch her, of course; if I'd pushed Eeve's chair over or blundered into her I would never have forgiven myself. Even my tentacles acting independently and my worst moments of pure abyssal instinct could never willingly harm Evelyn Saye. All the other three saw was me flinch toward Eeve and then stumble to catch myself. They didn't see the whirling mass of tentacles, the pair of lashing limbs reaching for the stone, or me grabbing the table and floor to halt myself mid-lunge.

The pair of spider-servitors flinched. Raine froze, eyebrows raised at me. Twil cocked her head. Eeve blinked up at me, the stone cupped in one hand.

"Heather? Hey?" Raine said.

"I'm fine," I lied.

"Here," Evelyn said — and held the stone out to me. My eyes went wide. I shook my head, blushing like crazy.

"Eeve, no, no, I don't—"

"Hold it for me, Heather. Hold it for me or I'll throw it through the window and break the glass. And then we'll have to get the window repaired, and that'll slow everything down even further."

I accepted the stone, still warm with Evelyn's body heat. Evelyn let out a huge sigh and leaned back in her chair, visibly uncomfortable, shoulders tense, mouth a pressed line.

Twil was showing her teeth in a pained grimace. "Ohhhhhh-kay then. Did I miss something? Are you two fighting?"

Raine put her hand on Twil's shoulder. "Give 'em a sec."

This didn't help. Twil looked how I felt. "Do we like, need to leave the room?"

"No," Evelyn snapped. "I'm not hiding from this."

"Eeve," I sighed. "You ... you kind of betrayed my trust, but you don't have to make a show of it."

"I had to use the stone, Heather," she said, talking to the far wall instead of to my face. "I was not leaving you alone with Aym. I don't care that you turned out to be right and I was wrong."

"You could have told me," I said, chest aching all of a sudden.

“How many other times have you done it? Used the stone around me — or any of us — without saying?”

“Never before.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

Raine cleared her throat. “Not even for a sneaky naked trip to the bathroom? You ain’t lived until you’ve sat on the throne in the nude.”

Evelyn gave Raine a look to crack granite. Twil looked like she wanted to shrivel up and die. I shot Raine a frown too, but apparently she was immune to criticism right then.

“Not even for shoplifting?” she carried on. “Missing a trick there, Eevee.”

“Raine, I love you,” I said, voice quivering, “but do be quiet.”

Raine shrugged and cracked a grin. I knew exactly what she was doing and it was working perfectly, but I still resented it a little bit.

Evelyn turned back to me, eyes blazing, finally looking at my face. She was like a banked fire. “I get to protect you too, Heather. I disagreed with your decision to speak with Aym alone. In this case, the ends justify the means. Even if I was wrong.”

“Don’t say that. The ends never justify the means, Eevee.”

“It does when your safety is involved.”

“Bloody right,” Raine added, sotto voce.

“You could have insisted!” I squeaked to Eevee. “You could have said ‘I insist’ but you didn’t, you wouldn’t, I was waiting for it!”

“Would you have listened to me?” Evelyn demanded.

“Yes.”

Evelyn paused. Something inside her turned soggy and then disintegrated. She swallowed and turned away. “Oh hell. I still don’t understand you. Your honesty puts me to shame, Heather. I’m ... I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to gaslight you.”

“And I forgive you,” I said.

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

“It’s my choice, not yours.”

Evelyn sighed. She still couldn’t look at me, like my face was a fire burning too hot and she might catch alight if she came too close. “Keep the stone, Heather. Hold onto it for me. You don’t deserve to wonder and worry if I’m pulling the wool over your eyes. Keep it until—”

“Evee, I’m giving the stone back to you.”

I said it simply, politely, and quickly, but it was a lot harder than I made it sound. My tentacles wanted to wrap the stone up tight, embed the thing in my flesh, swallow it and have it live in my guts, so it could never again slip out of my sight, never again remove Evelyn from my world. But that wouldn’t heal this sudden and shocking rift.

I held the fade stone out to Evee. She stabbed it with her eyes, huffed a great sigh, and looked me in the face. “Heather, for fuck’s sake, I’m trying to—”

“Take the stone.”

“No, I—”

“I trust you with it.”

“Maybe I’m not to be trusted!” she snapped, throwing her hands in the air.

“I trust you regardless. Take it before I change my mind, please.”

“No, you—”

“I insist,” I said.

Evelyn rammed to a stop. She clenched her jaw so hard that her teeth creaked. Then she scooped the stone out of my hands and clacked it back on the table in front of her. Slightly red, exasperated beyond words, she glared at me — but not without affection.

“I trust you with it,” I repeated. “Please don’t do that again.”

“I won’t make that promise, Heather. I can’t. If you do something I think is dangerous—”

“Insist, and I shall stop.”

“She really will,” Raine added. “Believe it.”

Evelyn looked like she wanted to curl up into a ball and shut us all out. I eased the situation back down out of the heights of awkwardness by giving her a very gentle, very careful, very well-signposted hug. She accepted it even more awkwardly, huffing through her nose and patting me on the shoulder like I was a very muddy dog. “Love you,” I murmured as we disengaged. She nodded, but didn’t repeat it back to me.

Instead, Evelyn said to all of us: “Well, you better get ready for us all to do some very dangerous and stupid things. Because this—” she gestured at the magic on the table, gathering itself like a coiled spring of paper and pencil. “This is one of the most stupid and dangerous things we’re ever going to do.”

“High bar to clear,” said Twil. “We’ve been Outside. How is this worse?”

“This spell,” Evelyn said, “is the first shot in an open war against a mage. And I don’t think it’ll be a long war.”

sediment in the soul – 19.1

Grey eternity walled the horizon with banks of towering rot, blanketed the sky with a sea of frozen lead, and choked the earth with a witch's brew of endless mud. The swamp crawled off in every direction, thick and soupy with wet soil, sluggish with unseen currents, all the colours of concrete, dead leaves, and ash. Trees shaped like skeletal alien hands reached for the ceiling of simmering grey cloud cover, draped with sheets of grey vegetation, their ends trailing in the water below, rotting from the bottom up with slick grey decay. Far to our left the trees fell away before a mud-flat the size of a continent, the skies raked and smeared by the torrential rainfall of a distant storm; on the right the trees reared taller, growing into swamp giants, silent sentinels for the half-glimpsed tower of grey stone, lost in the ragged ends of greasy grey mist.

The air was sharp and pinched in one's nose: salt and soil, heavy and dark, with undertones of sulphur and organic rot.

"Cor'," Raine said behind me, flapping her arms to keep herself warm while we waited. "They always told me it'd be grim up north."

I didn't look round at her, though Raine's stunning visage would offer a welcome break from my improvised vigil, tempting me to fall back from self-imposed discipline. But I didn't have the right. I kept my eyes on the carcass, watching the patch of dark red spreading into the grey mud, tainting this dimension with a crimson blush.

"It's not the north, Raine," I sighed. "We're Outside."

"Maybe this is their north. You never know. Maybe the Shamblers speak Geordie. Maybe we should offer them some Newcastle Brown to go with the meal."

Zheng rumbled like a half-awake tiger, and said, "They will come, little wolf. The blood is in the air."

Zheng was sitting on the rocks a little way ahead of me, so I could see her without turning away from our sacrifice. Cross-legged,

straight-backed, eyes heavily lidded as she stared at the meat, she looked like a monk meditating on some lonely Himalayan mountain peak. She'd taken up station between myself and the swamp waters as soon as she'd finished her task with the carcass; I suspected that was an act of silent protection, a bodyguard between myself and the Shamblers, lest something go wrong. Raine had her pistol inside her jacket, as always, but that meant nothing in this place, with these creatures. Zheng's muscles didn't mean anything either. If the Shamblers wished me ill they could simply step past her, but I wasn't about to say that out loud. My protectors and lovers needed to feel useful.

Raine clicked her tongue. "Amazed you can smell it over the swamp. This place reeks. Twil would hate it. Or love it, I'm not sure which."

"Pongy," said Lozzie, muffled by the hand clamped over her own nose.

"Not long now, mooncalf," Zheng purred. "I hear them moving."

The Shambleswamp felt colder than my previous visits. A nip in the air, enough to chill the skin and leave behind a paradoxical thin sweat, but not enough to mist one's breath. It was quieter too, no distant hooting from deeper among the trees, as if the locals were sheltering from the brief chilly spell. Not so unlike back home in England, though I doubted the Dimensional Shamblers switched to wearing shorts at the first sign of sun. The only loud noise we'd heard while waiting was something massive shouldering its way through the trees, many miles away to our right, sloshing and wallowing, large enough to briefly shake those redwood-sized giants.

I was wearing both hoodie and coat, hands burrowed deep in my pockets, wrapped in my own tentacles for extra insulation. Upon first arrival we'd realised the temperature was slightly risky for us. We didn't know how long we'd have to wait, how quickly the Shamblers would respond to our arrival, or the blood-scent in the air. And I was set on waiting. Lozzie had hopped back and returned with more layers for myself and Raine, though Zheng wore only her big shapeless jumper and a pair of jeans. I longed to cuddle up against her internal heat, feel the furnace of her skin on mine.

It couldn't possibly get that cold here. The mud would freeze, the

plants would die — or would they? It wasn't as if I'd ever seen a single insect out here. This ecosystem was not earthly, it did not run by our rules, even if the Shamblers were interdimensional ambush predators.

As I stood there on the little rocky outcrop — the low and dry island where Natalie and Turmy had passed their Outside ordeal, where I'd discovered the corpse of the man Badger had called 'Rally', and where I'd broken Natalie's parents — I once again tried to accept how little I understood the Outside.

But, the shrine?

I understood that, no matter how much I might deny. I understood why the Shamblers had built it here, on this low, crumbling island.

Zheng and Lozzie and I had spent several hours over the last three days combing the little rock outcrop for animal bones — the remains of the many victims of Edward Lilburne's slow seduction of the Dimensional Shamblers. He had appealed to their unique habits of predation, and their near-constant state of semi-starvation, by feeding them kidnapped pets.

We took nine trips out and back, nine Slips, all together. This was the tenth, but not for that same purpose.

Cracked canine femurs, the delicate skulls of cats, little toe-knuckles and claws and tiny teeth, we dug them out of cracks and picked them from crevices in the rock, sometimes with kitchen knives or the stick Lozzie brought along, but often with hands, gloved or bare. Most of the remains were probably domestic cats and dogs, though we also turned up quite a few chicken bones, at least one deer skull complete with antlers, and what I think may have been parts of a pig.

To be fair, Lozzie and I did very little of the actual collecting, compared with Zheng. Lozzie didn't like it and I wasn't about to force her, it wasn't her responsibility, though she did try. I put in as much effort as I could, but Zheng was just so much more efficient. We mostly let her handle it.

The morbid haul went into a black bin liner. Not exactly dignified or glamorous, but it was practical. The poor creatures would have all the dignity and respect they deserved, once they were buried in Camelot. After Zheng and Lozzie had transported the bones to the

castle-under-construction, Lozzie informed me that the Knights were happy to accommodate. They already had one body to bury, why not more?

We also sent them the various collars we found. Dog collars, cat collars, some with tags still attached. We didn't toss those into a bin liner: we took them home first, to wash them. I did that myself, in the kitchen sink, with a pair of rubber gloves and an old toothbrush, and I took my time. I felt a responsibility. I had no idea what the Knights would do with them — mount them, place them in a reliquary, nail them to the graves? But I couldn't just leave them there.

All of that was very time consuming, but we had little else to do over those three days, other than attend university like the supposed normal people we were. The mages, as I'd come to think of them collectively — Evelyn, Felicity, and Kim — were still working on the spell to crack open Edward Lilburne's magical shell.

They were finished now and it was almost time to make our move. Felicity had spent enough nights sleeping in her car with her shotgun clutched to her chest. Kimberly had spent enough evenings helping to collate and catalogue and refine. Sevens had spent enough days shadowing Aym. Evee was visibly exhausted.

But every time we'd come to the island to retrieve more bones, the shrine had grown.

On our first visit I thought it was a fluke, a strange coincidence, like a crop circle made by hedgehogs and mistaken for extra-human meaning: in the very middle of the rocky outcrop, on the high, flat area where the Shambler had left Rally's corpse, three large stones had appeared. Arranged in a triangle pattern, each stone close enough to spherical, caked with a grey crust of dried mud about an inch thick, the stones looked like they'd been dredged from the bottom of the swamp. They probably had. On closer inspection the mud on each stone showed smeared impressions of clawed, three-fingered paws.

I had been unable to keep the alarm off my face. Zheng had crouched and touched my flank. "It is recognition, shaman,"

"Yes, they clearly placed them here on purpose. I can see that. But recognition of what? The dead body that was here? Are they ... showing respect?"

Zheng had blinked, slow and vaguely amused. “You, shaman. This is your place now. This patch of ground.”

I had sighed and almost managed to laugh it off. “A holy mud island. Wonderful. I’ll be sure to thank them.”

It was hard to summon further laughter when the trio of stones turned into a little pyramid. The next time we returned we found that the Shamblers had piled up rocks about four feet high, then slathered on great globs of mud until the shape was almost regular, roughly four-sided. When we visited again the following day the mud had dried to a hard grey crust. The Shamblers must have gone at it with their claws, or perhaps basic tools: each pyramid face was made smooth, with neat angles, perfect.

“Who do you think they learned this from?” I asked, staring at the thing in muted awe, then looking out at the swamp and the trees, the endless grey. We hadn’t seen a single Shambler in the flesh, not even hiding eyes-deep out in the mud. They only added to the shrine while we were absent. “Making pyramids, that’s ... ”

“Nobody!” Lozzie chirped. She was apparently delighted by all this, capering around the pyramid on tiptoes, flapping her poncho, ooh-ing and ahh-ing and calling out to any listening Shamblers: “Well done! Well done!”

“Nobody?” I echoed. “Pyramids are a human thing, aren’t they?”

Lozzie giggled at that, then made a big *ppffffff* sound at me. “Pyramids are pyramids! Everyone can make pyramids! They probably made it up themselves.”

Next came the offerings.

First was pieces of wood, lined up carefully at the foot of the pyramid — grey wood, or at least wood-analogue, presumably cut from those things out in the swamp which pretended to be trees. Carved into S-shapes or C-shapes or even experimental spirals and helices, then polished smooth until they shone in the weak sunless grey light. The smallest were no bigger than my palm. The largest one was three feet across.

“Art.” I was breathless, my fingers shaking as I picked up one of the little twists of wood. “They’re giving us art. How do they make this? These are so delicate. Look at this, Lozzie, look. I assumed they wouldn’t have the tools.”

Zheng grunted. “Art is universal, shaman.”

“I suppose so.”

“Pretty!” Lozzie chirped.

Bones appeared next. Not earthly bones, not bits of dog or cat which our Shambler had spirited away into the swamp at some earlier point in time, now returned to our stewardship, but Outsider bones. Grey and black, too heavy for terrestrial animals, all the wrong shapes and sizes. Long bones like femurs, smaller ones like knuckles, and one massive rib that couldn’t possibly have come from a Shambler, eight feet across and so heavy that only Zheng could lift it. The rib was left facing a different angle of the pyramid. When I inspected it, I realised it had little geometrical carvings in the surface, repeating patterns like fancy carpet. They didn’t hurt my eyes; they weren’t magical. Just art.

Skulls joined the bones. Three skulls, Shambler skulls. There was no mistaking the heavy jaw, the rearward bulge of the cranium, or the massive front-facing eye sockets. They sat separate from the other offerings, on a ridge of rock, facing the pyramid.

“Okay,” I said when we spotted them. “Okay. Those are ... those are skulls. Nobody, um, nobody touch them, please? We don’t want to offend the Shamblers by messing with the positioning of their ancestors or something.”

“They are giving them to you, shaman.”

“Do not touch those, Zheng. Do not. Please. We have no idea what they’re doing! They could be telling us off for interfering!”

Wooden sculptures, bone trophies, their own venerated dead. We had no idea what any of this meant and I felt as if we were on very thin ice, doing something risky beyond my own understanding — and not because we might get hurt. The Shamblers could not really hurt me, after all.

I was worried for them. They were inventing religion, or perhaps re-orienting their pre-existing beliefs. Around me. It made me feel sick and guilty. I had done this, I had to correct it, quickly.

Finally came the hand-prints and the random pieces of bric-a-brac.

The last time we had returned to the Shambleswamp, the pyramid itself was no longer a smooth-sided monument, but riddled with the

three-clawed impressions of dozens of Shambler paws, each one pressed into the dry mud with the help a little swamp water to soften the surface. Each hand print stood alone, not overlapping with others. A record of attendance, or witness, or worship? I wished I knew. I had to know.

The stuff they left around the pyramid that final time was far less regular: half a skull, not Shambler at all but something far more alien, sleek and sharp and elongated, a shape which made me shiver and made Zheng instinctively growl; a long stick of wood, much darker than the grey trees populating the swamp; a piece of grey brick, unmistakably artificial, with some scraps of grey mortar still clinging to the top edge; a rust-covered tool about the length of my arm, so warped with age and water that none of us could figure out what it was; a chipped ceramic mug, white, filthy, with no maker's mark; a book, absolutely ruined by exposure to the swamp, the pages so fragile that we dare not open it, the leatherbound cover shrivelled like skin on a dead skull, but the whole thing had been so carefully kept away from the water that it was still intact; and finally, most bizarrely, a wheel, complete with a narrow ring of decaying rubber and a rust-caked metal core. It looked like it belonged on a classic car which had spent the last fifty years sitting at the bottom of the North Sea.

"That settles one question," I said with a sigh, hands shoved deep in my pockets to stop my fingers from shaking. "They've definitely had contact with Earth, before Edward."

"Mages cannot leave well enough alone," said Zheng.

"True. Very true, I suppose. Zheng, do you recall when we came here with Natalie's parents — one of the Shamblers, one of the big pair who stayed in the rear, he was holding a length of stainless steel pipe?"

"He?"

I shrugged. "Or she. Maybe their sexual dimorphism is the other way around. But that's not the point."

"Mm."

"Do you think they're learning to make and use tools, or ... " I trailed off and sighed. "Why do all this?"

"Meat, shaman. We gave them meat."

I winced at that. All my fault. Unintended consequences and spiralling knock-on effects of my stupid, rash, foolish actions. “That may have been a terrible mistake,” I said slowly. “I sincerely hope we haven’t accidentally started a cargo cult. They don’t deserve to get so confused. I don’t want them to think I’m a god, coming out of the sky and blessing them with meat. It’s wrong. It’s really, really wrong, Zheng. I have to ... change their minds. Show them I’m just — we’re just— oh, I don’t know.”

Zheng listened in silence, staring out into the swamp. Lozzie chewed her lip, worried by my harsh tone of voice.

“You do not exploit them, shaman. You do not use them.”

“Yeah!” Lozzie chirped. “It’s not like you’re taking stuff from them.”

I stared out into the swamp too, at the sucking, cloying, soupy mud. This was not a place for us, we were not evolved for it, we had no rights here. “They won’t even show themselves. Won’t approach us. Are they scared, respectful, confused? What about the one I befriended? She must know I won’t hurt her. I didn’t want to hurt her. I won’t.”

Zheng grunted a soft laugh. “They have learned to hate and fear mages. They have learned well.”

When it was just the stones and the mud, just the pyramid, I could tell myself it was a monument to the dead man they hadn’t understood, to Rally. Or perhaps an acknowledgement of Natalie’s bravery and Turmy’s protective powers. Even when the offerings had started to appear I had held out hope that one of the Shamblers would see me on the island, stumbling around and scrabbling for bits of bone between the cracks, cleaning my fingers with wet wipes, protected and shepherded by Zheng, and conclude this weird little swaddled ape was not a god, but just another creature like them. But the worshippers themselves never appeared, the offerings grew in size and complexity, and beyond the offerings themselves I could feel an attention on me, on all of us, especially when we examined the last wave of offerings — the hand prints, the skulls, the rare trophies.

That tower of grey blocks far off to the right was watching us. I spent a long time on that final trip just staring at it over the tops of the tall trees, past the thickening mist, outlined against the roiling grey sky.

I felt an obligation to reply.

At first I'd asked Lozzie if she could communicate for me. She knew Outside far better than I ever would. But when I'd broached the idea she had bitten her lip and swayed from side to side, hands tucked away beneath her pastel poncho.

"Mmmmmmm this isn't really my sort of place?" she had said. "Too solid, no dreams. No dreamers, either! I'd have to dream it. Talking to them like this? Noooo way. Plus, this is all about you, Heathy, isn't it?"

Lozzie had a good point. She was still willing to help, though. After a little more negotiation, we had settled on the cow carcass.

That was what lay sinking into the pudding-thick swamp mud, a little ways out from the island: the skinned and prepared carcass of a cow, raw and bloody, leaking red into the grey. Lozzie had sourced it for us — stolen it, to be more accurate and honest — fresh from some unthinkable production line. She had reappeared on the island looking a little white and queasy, one hand on the massive hunk of raw meat. I didn't blame her. It was one thing to steal a side of beef from a Sharrowford butcher's shop, another entirely to Slip into a slaughterhouse.

"I-I'm fine!" she'd squeaked. "You know! It's just kind of nasty and bloody and stuff!"

The way she laughed, high-pitched and itching, reminded me too much of how she'd laughed down in the bowels of the cult's castle, ragged with captivity. I would never ask her to do this again. Raine gave her a hug — it was a good thing she'd come along, on this special trip before we turned our attention elsewhere. Lozzie had buried her face in Raine's shoulder.

Zheng had picked up the dead cow and hurled it out into the mud for us, a long, low throw to minimize splash-back.

Then we waited for the Shamblers.

Zheng might have heard them moving, but the rest of us couldn't. Behind me, Raine rummaged in her leather jacket and pulled out her compass again, turning on the spot with little scuffs of her boots against the rocks.

"Weird, weird, weird," she murmured. "Just spins."

"I told youuuu!" Lozzie crooned. "Nope-nope-nope! Not gonna work!"

Raine laughed and said, "Any luck we're never gonna have to navigate through this place anyway. You'd need a hovercraft on that mud. Think Eevee can source us a hovercraft? How much do you reckon one goes for, hey?"

"Million pounds!" Lozzie chirped. "I have no idea!"

Zheng said, "If the watcher in the tower wishes to talk, it can come to us."

Raine clicked her tongue. "Can, sure. Rather it didn't, though. Don't meet your idols and all that. You know who's up there, Loz?"

I felt Lozzie shake her head. "Naaah."

Raine let out a big sigh, half performance, half trying to relax. She had requested to come along for this final trip, as moral support for me, but I should have refused. Outside was taxing on the soul and mind of any human being, and Raine was as human as could be. It was much less pressure than Carcosa, but worse than Camelot. Raine was holding up well, doing her best not to show it, but I didn't want her to have to stay here any longer than necessary. If the Shamblers didn't come soon, I didn't know what I would do. Send her back with Lozzie? She'd never agree.

I stared at the bloody meat of the dead cow, out in the mud, and said, "I'm thinking of going vegetarian."

Raine had been in the middle of telling Lozzie a joke, but she stopped dead. Zheng looked up, eyes neutral, heavy-lidded, curious. Lozzie peered around my other side, but I just kept staring at the dead cow, the raw meat, the reply.

"For real?" Raine asked, utterly devoid of prior judgement or doubt. I could have turned and kissed her, if I wasn't so focused.

"That cow didn't consent to come Outside," I went on. "Look at it. We didn't kill it ourselves. We didn't have to do the deed. We just ... well, I suppose we didn't buy it. But we should have done it ourselves. I should have ... oh, I don't know." I sighed. "Sent Zheng to hunt a cow for us? Slit the throat myself? I don't know what I'm saying."

"Hey, you wanna go veggie," Raine said, "I'll go with you. Or at

least try my best.”

“I don’t know,” I repeated. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that. I just ... I wish we’d killed it ourselves. There’s more respect in that.”

“Mm,” Zheng agreed with a dark purr. “Hunting is sacred, shaman. Your gut knows.”

I finally took a deep breath and smiled at Zheng, then turned to reassure Raine with the same smile, but the pyramid stood right behind her, framing her black leather jacket with grey mud and mottled bone, flanked by that trio of silent skulls. Lozzie bumped her head against my arm, a bit like a cat.

“We don’t have to stay,” Raine said when my face faltered. “I’m sure they’ll get the point.”

I shook my head and wiggled one hand out of my coat pocket, holding the apple I’d brought from the kitchen. “I want them to see me,” I said. “They have to see me. They have to see me eating, like them. I need them to know I’m just flesh. I’m not a god, and I’m not going to pretend to be one. I have to correct this mistake.”

Zheng turned back to the swamp. “This is why you are no mage, shaman.”

Raine nodded in total acceptance, not merely indulging or humouring me. She put her compass away, the needle still spinning wildly, and stepped up so she was by my side. “I should have brought my shades, a pint of hair gel, and maybe an electric guitar.”

I blinked at her, utterly confused. “I’m sorry?”

Lozzie snorted. Raine grinned and explained. “I figure, hey, maybe if I introduce them to how cool I am, they’ll stop worshipping you and switch to me instead. Convert the lot of them. Problem solved.”

I shook my head, not even really laughing. “Raine, you can’t play guitar. Can you?”

“Dimensional Shamblers won’t know the difference.” Raine stuck her thumbs into her belt loops, raised her chin, and shot me a wink. I blushed a little, rolling my eyes, but it was exactly what I needed.

Zheng turned out to be right. The first Shamblers trickled in a few minutes later.

Many of the leathery-skinned, angler-fish-faced creatures appeared as if from nowhere, almost perfectly camouflaged against the grey world of mud and hanging vegetation and reaching trees. It was impossible to tell if they'd crept up through the swamp or just materialised already waist-deep in the waters. Others glided in from behind the tangles of trees, with only their huge black eyes showing above the surface, like crocodiles sneaking up on prey. A few of them openly waded through the swamp waters, heavy limbs somehow making quick work of the thick and sucking mud. All of them were silent as ghosts.

They came to the carcass in ones or twos, and a few trios as well, to rip off nice big chunks of meat, a helping of raw steak for each Shambler. Once acquired, they retreated a little way to join a rough circle of slow eaters, slicing meat and cracking bones with their teeth. I noted that they ate with surprisingly small bites. Family groups crouched or squatted together, but many just stood alone, or with companions the same age. The smaller ones — younger, I assumed — took comparatively smaller portions, but I noticed that the largest and most scarred, the battle-worn and aged Shamblers, did not take more than any other adult.

I couldn't figure out a pecking order, but there was a social convention. They were exceptionally careful not to get in each others' way, not to block another's path, or push ahead at the same time. Sometimes two Shamblers would pause equidistant from the bleeding beef, if it seemed like their paths might intersect. Then they would stay locked in each others stare for long moments. Often one would eventually move again, and the other would wait, or take a different route.

Twice we witnessed this stand-off result in what looked like acceptance instead of avoidance — two Shamblers paused, waited in silence, then moved ahead together, close enough to touch.

"You think they're making friends?" Raine whispered to me, from the corner of her mouth.

"I hope so," I murmured back.

Only one time did we see the opposite unfold.

Two Shamblers who were among the last to approach the corpse almost came to blows. One of them was huge, a swamp gorilla giant of grey muscle and little spines, covered in raking scars. I vaguely

remembered him as the one I'd seen holding the length of stainless steel pipe — but the weapon was nowhere to be seen. Maybe I was mistaken. As he went for the dead cow, another Shambler approached as well, not quite as large, and missing most of one forearm.

They paused. Watched. Waited. The bigger one went to move ahead, but the amputee Shambler moved at the same time, sloshing the mud around their thighs. The pair repeated the process. Pause. Lock stares. Move — again, both at the same moment, overlapping, out of sequence. This process went on twice more until they were close enough to touch.

And touch they did. The bigger one snapped his blunt angler-fish jaws at the smaller Shambler. The smaller Shambler seemed unafraid, opened its mouth, and *hooted*.

It was like a chimpanzee crossed with a hippo, a hooting, bellowing noise of offense and question. Up until that moment none of the Shamblers had spoken, communicated, or made any vocalisations at all. I flinched hard. Zheng stood up. Even Raine took a sharp breath.

The bigger Shambler swiped at the smaller one. The smaller one took the blow — an open-pawed strike to the ribs — and struck back with a knuckle-slap in the larger one's face. The larger Shambler jerked round and raised both paws.

"Stop!" I yelled, flaring my tentacles out in a fan-halo of strobing rainbow.

My breath was pounding like bellows, my heart racing, my bioreactor aching to ramp up production. Watching the start of a physical fight so close to me had set off so many instinctive alarm bells, I couldn't help myself.

They couldn't possibly have understood the word, but they couldn't mistake my tone. Both Shamblers lurched backward from one another and looked up at me.

All throughout the process of sharing the carcass, the Shamblers had cast dull-eyed, disinterested glances in my direction. These two were the same, despite the violence. Perhaps that's just how they looked.

"Oh no," I whispered through my teeth. "No, they shouldn't listen

to me. They shouldn't have me adjudicating their disagreements, no, I don't want this, I—"

"Naughty naughty!" Lozzie chirped. "No fighting!"

"Yeah," Raine added, "come on lads. Share and share alike."

Zheng just growled.

That seemed to do the trick. The bigger of the two Shamblers glided through the remaining mud and ripped two chunks of meat off the cow carcass. Then he waded back over and gave one of the two chunks to the smaller one. We watched in awe as the smaller Shambler accepted the meal, then leaned over, stuck out its tongue, and licked the larger Shambler's flank in a single, long stroke of rough grey tongue. The larger one appeared not to notice.

"Did we just ... " I cleared my throat. "Did they already know each other?"

"Assume so," Raine said. "Regular brawl, maybe."

"They are mates," Zheng rumbled.

I blinked at her. "Excuse me?"

"I can smell it on them."

"O-oh. Um." I cleared my throat again, a touch embarrassed. "Did we stop an incident of domestic violence?"

"No more than playing," Zheng said. I wondered if she was just humouring me. "A real fight would be bloody, and quick."

Dozens of Shamblers stood and squatted and hunched and hung, in a semi-circle before the island, before their shrine. Before me. Dozens more could be on their way — they hadn't stripped the carcass down to the bones yet — but Raine was taking deep, intentional, calming breaths. Lozzie was restless. And Zheng was up on her feet, flexing her hands.

I spotted our Shambler, the one who had led me to Natalie, the one which Edward had tried to train. She was munching away near the middle of the group, looking directly at me. As I maintained eye contact, the others slowly joined her, until at least half the group was watching.

Raine gently nudged me in the ribs. "Go on, then. Show 'em you're

human.”

I pulled a sour smile, tucking my tentacles back in close to my body. “That might be difficult.”

“You know what I mean, squid-girl. Show ‘em you’re just squid. And a beautiful one at that.”

I blushed faintly. Lozzie giggled behind her hands. Raine looked proud.

But I stuck to my lame and minimalistic plan: I raised the apple to my mouth and took a bite, a nice deep crunch. Before my assembled congregation I chewed, swallowed, took another bite, chewed, swallowed, grew tired of chewing, slowed down, and made a show of being sort of bored with eating the apple.

“Oh, Raine, what am I doing?” I muttered after another swallow. “How do we know this is even going to work? They probably think this is important somehow.” I raised my voice to the Shamblers. “Don’t worship me, okay? I’m just a thing, like you! Look, I’m eating! I don’t even particularly like it! This apple is a bit old and I think it’s a red delicious, so it’s ... bad. It’s a naff apple. Divine visitors do not eat naff apples.”

The Shamblers did not understand low-quality fruit production, nor a word of what I said to them. They ate their meat, watching me with plate-sized black eyes, thinking alien thoughts.

“Oh, blast it all,” I said.

One of the swamp gorillas let out a low, soft hoot in my direction.

“Thank you,” I said, under no illusion that it was an actual reply to me.

“You’re doing your best, Heather,” Raine said.

Zheng agreed. “They see, shaman. They see.”

I sighed and turned my gaze briefly to the grey stone tower far to our right, past the giant trees and through the thick mist. It was silent too, though I could feel the sense of being watched crawling over my skin. I hoped whatever lived there treated the swamp apes well. I hoped the inhabitant of the tower understood the portion of this statement which was directed to them: these creatures are under my protection, even if I’m not present; I am not a danger.

Maybe come say hi?

"I only hope it's enough," I muttered.

I left out the other half of that sentence: *in case we never come back again.*

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The siege-spell was ready.

Crafting the magic had consumed three full days, not counting the initial scraps of disorganised work before Kimberly had joined in. Three days of Eevee and Fliss with their heads down in the magical workshop, with the rest of us walking on eggshells lest something set Eevee at the older mage's throat; three days of pretending to be normal, going to classes, never knowing what exactly I would return to; three days of Kimberly coming home from her job at the florists, donating hours of her free time to keeping the less level-headed mages on track; three days of knowing Aym was lurking in the walls and beneath the beds, held back only by Sevens sticking to her like glue.

By the time Evelyn put the finishing touches on the magic circles and the rigorously recorded order-of-operations for the ritual, we were all emotionally exhausted.

And we still couldn't cast it, not until the weekend.

"Don't call it a 'siege-spell'," Eevee grunted at me that next morning. "That's inaccurate." Then she blinked hard. "Actually, on second thought, yes, call it a siege spell. Use that term in public. And on the phone. Throw Edward off."

"Door-kicker spell?" Raine suggested, between mouthfuls of cereal at the kitchen table. "We are sort of using it like a battering ram, right?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. Praem placed slabs of buttered toast in front of her, and a mug of strong, hot, steaming tea. Eevee thanked her for the breakfast and shook her head. "The spell is more like a specific, single, limited siege weapon, with one shot. But the single shot will bring down his outermost wall and reveal the keep. Metaphorically speaking. Oh hell, I hate this."

"Catapult spell?" Raine offered.

I spoke up. “I think we should call it a trebuchet spell. Trebuchets are a kind of catapult, but they’re more reliable, sturdier, larger, more complex, and designed for heavier weights. This spell has taken too long to make and too much effort to write it off as just a little catapult.”

Evee and Raine both looked at me for a beat, surprised and possibly impressed. I felt colour creep up my face.

Evelyn shook her head. “Since when do you know so much about siege weapons?”

“Our Heather does like her castles,” said Raine.

“I just thought it was appropriate ... ”

“Trebuchet,” Praem echoed like a muffled bell. She raised her perfectly manicured hands and clapped softly, exactly eight times.

Evee snorted. “Oh, so Heather gets to name it?”

“Heather is good at names,” said Praem.

Evee shrugged, giving ground before her daughter. She gave me a thin, tired, awkward smile. I smiled back and reached over to pat her hand. She wasn’t actually chagrined about me naming the spell; I knew her too well to make such an uncharitable assumption. If she was genuinely irritated she wouldn’t have smiled at all. No, she was putting on a show to distract herself from the coming assault.

Evee and I had spent two of the last three evenings together, sitting side-by-side on her bed, watching cartoons on her laptop: more small horses — ponies — along with a very long anime show, which Evelyn called a magical girl story but appeared to be about playing mahjong, a game I’d never even heard of before. Raine joined us for an hour, once, and sometimes Praem was in the room, but mostly we were simply by ourselves. I couldn’t do anything to help with the spell itself — Evee already had all the tea and biscuits and enforced bath and mealtimes she needed, courtesy of Praem — and I couldn’t help with the nerves either, the pre-murder jitters, as we silently prepared for a showdown with a terrible old man. So I did what little I could. I made sure she relaxed and watched some cartoons.

We didn’t talk about the spell, or about Edward Lilburne, or make plans. We certainly didn’t talk any more about the fade stone. The

lump of white quartz had vanished from my awareness; part of me dimly thought Eevee had handed it off to somebody else. Maybe Praem. Perhaps Kim. My memory wasn't certain, only that Eevee did not have it in her possession right then.

On the second of those quiet shared evenings, Evelyn nodded off with her head on my shoulder. At first I hadn't noticed, not until she'd let out a tiny, fluttery snore and sleepily clenched a handful of my hoodie with her maimed fingers.

"Eevee ... ?" I whispered. "Okay, no, you're sleeping. Okay. Okay, good, just ... just sleep. Sleepy Eevee, good. Yes, sleep."

I was just about able to prepare my heart for that, for minutes or perhaps hours of Eevee's soft, fragile body weight against my side. I hadn't been planning to spend the night in her room; I would sleep with Raine and Zheng, as always. But maybe this changed my plans.

Except Praem opened the door and stepped into the room five minutes later, moving in perfect silence so as not to wake Eevee, with two unexpected figures in tow.

"P-Praem!" I mouthed silently, eyes wide, a blush washing upward through my cheeks. "She's sleeping, she's sleeping! It was an accident, she's sleeping ... "

Praem simply put a finger to her lips.

Seven-Shades-of-Slumber-Study stood just inside the doorway, shoulders wrapped in yellow robe, tiny red-and-black eyes peering into the room. One hand poked out from beneath her robes, and holding that hand was the equally pale and delicate palm of a very sulky and petulant Aym.

They both stared at me and Eevee for a moment, Sevens neutral, Aym pouty. Praem turned to them, expressionless, while I sat there turning into a boiled beetroot.

"See?" Sevens hissed after a moment.

Aym, head-to-toe in her black lace and multiple layers without a scrap of skin showing outside of her hands and head, rolled her eyes and let her shoulders slump, like a grumpy child who had been argued out of having a tantrum.

"See?" I echoed in a whisper. "See what? Praem, you shouldn't have let them in here! I mean Aym, not Sevens. I mean—"

“Oh shush,” Aym whispered back, like a breeze on rusty wind-chimes. “Don’t wake her, idiot.”

They left without another word, slinking off into the corridor. Praem paused as she closed the door.

“Sleep well,” she mouthed.

That was hardly the weirdest behaviour I’d seen from Sevens and Aym over the period Felicity and her mind-goblin were forced to remain in Sharrowford. Felicity herself was strictly barred from sleeping inside Number 12 Barnslow Drive. When it became apparent that designing the spell would take more than one extra day, Evee had made a cruel joke about building a dog house in the back garden. The joke hit too close to home — Felicity was clearly and openly terrified about sleeping in a random hotel, so in the end she bedded down in the back seat of her range rover.

“Sleeping in a car?” I had asked Felicity, blinking at her in disbelief as she lingered by the front door. “Is that healthy? Are you going to be okay?”

“S’not so bad,” said Raine.

“Not so bad?” I squeaked.

Raine shrugged. “I’ve done it before. Hey, Fliss, you got plenty of blankets and stuff?”

But before Felicity herself could answer, Kimberly piped up from next to the bottom of the stairs. She and Felicity had descended together, close but not touching, a strange and unfamiliar chemistry in the air between them. It wasn’t romance, but I wasn’t sure what to call it — only to keep my nose out of other people’s love lives. I’d learned my lesson. “Um, yes, um ... I have a lot of extra ... sheets? Plush ... stuff ... um.”

“I’ll be fine,” Felicity said, about to step out of the front door and retreat to her battered old vehicle. “I know what I’m doing. Old habits die hard.”

“Ah,” Raine said, eyes lighting up. “Lived in your car before?”

“Long time ago. Before you knew me. Before I ever met Evee’s mother. Long story, another day. Besides, the car is somewhat warded. It’s safe enough.” Felicity still had her bagged shotgun over her shoulder. She patted it awkwardly. “Good night, Kim. Sleep

well.”

“You too ... ” said Kimberly.

All this meant that Aym never left the building. Sevens chaperoned her everywhere, mostly hand-in-hand or touching in some other fashion, though often they would vanish for hours on end and I wasn't certain where they went. Aym did not look pleased with this arrangement. She spent the entire stretch of time “grumpy as a smacked arse” as Raine so delicately put it. I didn't much like it either; Sevens was absent from my bed, distant and weird, though she did touch my hand several times and give me long, lingering, meaningful looks whenever we ran into each other. I could never get her alone, certainly not alone enough to ask her what she and Aym had discussed that first night, out in the dark beneath the tree.

They did talk though, a lot, but it was complete nonsense, like listening to a private language.

“But what about scorpions?” Sevens rasped.

“Scorpions.” Not a question, not from Aym.

“Several of them.”

“I never eat more than two.” Dead-panned.

“But two is not enough. You need eight to six.”

“More than enough. Bleeeeeeeh.”

The first few times we overheard this meaningless patter, Aym sounded just as grumpy as she looked, as if she was reluctantly playing a game she hated. But as the days wore on she started to snort, laugh, and giggle. She and Sevens swapped nonsense back and forth at high speeds, totally beyond the rest of us.

Other than that they just hung around, reading, watching other people working, lurking upstairs like attic creatures, avoiding Zheng. Once they did attempt to play chess against Tenny. They gave Tenny the single most difficult game of her life so far, with her single head — and tentacles — against two of them. Aym crouched over Sevens' shoulder, clicking and tutting at any tentacles which wandered too close. Not that Tenny could spare the brainpower to wonder about Aym once the game got under way. She sat rocking very gently between each move, tentacles spinning and twisting, eyes locked on the board as she chiselled out a very difficult win

against the Outsider double-header.

“Yeeeeeeeah!” she trilled at the end, loud enough that it could be heard down in the basement. She followed up her victory cry by hugging Lozzie, then Sevens, then Aym, which produced a horrified hiss from the nasty little mould-demon.

The storm — Aym’s personal weather, as I kept thinking of it — had cleared, sucked back into the secret place beyond the horizon from which all storms came. But summer was reluctant, spooked out of its natural place. The air warmed and the temperature improved, but the skies stayed draped with grey overcast, the sun only peeking through occasionally in weak shafts of watery light.

It was in that weak and watery light filtering through the kitchen window, that Evelyn and Felicity had their one and only real argument — real, because neither raised their voice.

“You’re hunting a mage,” Felicity said in her half-mumble. She had even looked Eevee in the eyes. Kimberly hovered in the doorway to the workshop, providing a subconscious break on Evelyn’s most colourful and vile insults. Did she know that Eevee would hold back in front of her? I wasn’t sure.

“That I am,” Evelyn replied, jaw tight.

“I want in. I know what that means. Make use of me. You know you can make use of me for this.”

Raine cleared her throat. “We’ve hunted mages before.”

Felicity did not glance at Raine. She spoke to Eevee. “You need all the help you can get.”

Evelyn’s lip curled with naked disgust, the first hint of real hate she’d shown since they had started work together on the siege-spell. “You are asking me to give you the satisfaction, you rotten bitch. You are asking for something I can never give. Which I wouldn’t give even if I could. Even if you were on fire, you—”

Felicity flinched at that, involuntary and shuddering. I winced privately. Kimberly gasped and put a hand to her mouth.

“Oof,” Raine said. “Call her a cunt, Eevee, but that’s, uh ... you know.”

“Alright! Fine! Poor choice of words!” Evelyn snapped, thumping

her mug down on the table so hard that she lost control of it. Praem had to step in to stop it rolling onto the floor. "I'm not giving this ... this woman the satisfaction."

Felicity had averted her eyes, cowed and silent during the outburst. "Make use of me."

"Why should I?" Evelyn growled.

"Because I've done this more times than you have. I know how to kill mages. You know I do."

In the end there was no proper agreement, no resolution, no confirmation that we would accept Felicity's help during the hunt. But she was not explicitly barred. Evelyn never mentioned it again.

The preparations were physical as well as magical; by the end of the second day, the fridge was rammed full of blood. Bull's blood, apparently, in a pair of sealed food-grade buckets and a number of sloshing plastic packets. I cringed every time I had to open the fridge to get food, though the blood didn't smell, it was merely a grim reminder.

Evelyn had explained, after she saw my distress. "A hundred times easier than carting an entire live cow out there. Less chance of splattering ourselves with blood, too. We do this efficiently and properly, Heather. Leave exsanguination to the professionals."

Felicity sourced other items too — several jars of pale ash which I dared not ask about, a single massive black feather from an ostrich, the dried husks of several kinds of woodland mushroom, and a piece of plain canvas, twenty feet across.

The canvas was for the inner circle, where the mages themselves were to stand when performing the ritual. The outer circle was going to have to be drawn live — or more likely, cut into the earth. There simply wasn't anything reasonably large enough which we could roll up and transport with us, not for the scale this spell required.

It was also projected to take twenty solid minutes of concentration. Apparently this was a long time, in magical terms. I was worried for Eevee's health. I raised this in private, with Praem.

"They will all be cared for," she told me.

"You can stand in the circle with her?" I asked.

“Nowhere else would I stand.”

The necessary space for this most unwieldy of spells left us few options. It had to be cast close enough to the likely area already covered by Edward Lilburne’s labyrinth of concealment, so we couldn’t just drive off into the Pennines for the day to carve occult nonsense into a hillside while Zheng scared off any unwary hikers.

“Boooo,” said Raine. “Zheng and I could have fun with that. Mad slasher in the hills! Shock! Horror!”

“Raine,” I tutted.

“No, she’s got a point,” Evelyn said, sucking on her teeth.

Felicity cleared her throat. “We would be able to see the response coming. It’s pretty clear sight-lines up on the Pennines.”

Evee tutted. “But too far away. No, it would be a waste to try.”

Our own back garden was ruled out as well. The neighbours on one side of the house may have been slightly more distant than the usual suburban squish, but they were near enough that if somebody decided to look out of their window at the wrong moment, they would see all of us busy drawing Satanic magic all over the ground. We’d probably get a visit from the police. Or worse, an exorcist and a news crew.

Kim had voiced opposition to this plan as well, for more sentimental reasons.

“I-I would really rather we not ruin the garden, regardless,” she said. “It’s got so much potential. Cutting up the grass like that ... ”

Raine had patted her shoulder. “You can’t do a grow-op out in the open, Kim. Good on you for thinking of it, though.”

“I didn’t mean that!” Kimberly squeaked, deeply embarrassed. “It has real potential. It could be a lovely space. If only somebody had the time for it.”

We needed a firing position for our trebuchet: large, secluded, defensible. And the Church of Hringewindla was happy to provide.

“We want this gentleman dealt with as much as you do,” Christine Hopton said over the phone — Twil’s phone, sitting in the middle of our kitchen table after she had rocked up and presented us with the offer from her mother. “The back fields should provide plenty of

space for the work, and you can do as much damage to the soil as you have to. We can clear out Amanda's boys for the weekend. No bystanders. And of course, Hringewindla's angels will be guarding our home, as always. They will guard you too, come what may."

"Thank you, Christine," Evelyn had replied. "And thank ... " A short, suppressed sigh. "Thank your Outsider for us. We accept this offer."

"You're very welcome. Saturday, then? What time shall we expect you?"

"Saturday, yes. Early."

We all needed the unexpected extra two days of rest, though Eevee wouldn't admit it and Felicity didn't seem capable of true rest.

I was, as Raine might put it, 'wired to the gills'. That entire week I suffered a mindless, tense, undirected alertness, as if I was worried we were about to be attacked. Perhaps it was Felicity's presence in the house, or my bruised — but not broken — trust in Evelyn, or some instinctive response to being incapable of helping. I found myself waking suddenly in the night, or standing at windows for minutes on end, watching for movement out in the street or the back garden. Raine did a good job at calming me down and distracting me whenever she noticed, but I couldn't fulfil this drive, this need to watch our periphery, to keep my attention switched on, my eyes wide open.

We were, after all, planning to start a little war.

The trips to the Shambleswamp were a relief.

There were two people we needed to contact, of course, two minds we needed to keep in the loop of what was about to happen. One of them was Jan — or rather, Jan and July. Lozzie assured me that she'd explained everything, but Evelyn and I called Jan anyway, in case she wanted to erect a firewall between us for the next few days, or offer some help, or fly to China.

"Oh, I'm just going to pretend I don't know you," she said down the phone.

"Lovely," Evelyn grunted.

"Just stay safe, okay? Send Lozzie to me if you must. And Tenny. I can always provide a safe bed!" A small, self-conscious chuckle

followed. "Look, I've got your prospective cultists on hold, pretty much, but I'm not breathing a word about this, obviously. But if you all get turned into paste, I'm doing a runner. I'm not sticking around for Edward-whatever to extend his influence over them and have one of them shank me with a carving knife. They'll be on their own. If you care."

"I do care," I said. "Thank you, Jan. We'll be in touch."

"Call me if you need distant artillery support, I suppose. Very distant."

The other phone call we left until Saturday morning. As the rest of us were getting ready to depart, to pile into Raine's car and Felicity's range rover, or to Slip via Camelot, all of us suited and booted and with Twil hanging around Eevee as if our poor mage was made of glass, Raine placed a phone call to a number that did not pick up.

"Stack," Raine said by way of greeting, speaking a message to a voice-mail box, with a big smile on her face. She winked at the rest of us as we listened. "It's me. You know, me. Thing is, see, we're off to pay a visit to your old employer. You've been looking for him too, right? We haven't got the directions to his place, not just yet. But we're swinging by Brinkwood first, to get our bearings. Thought you might want in."

Raine waited a beat, as if hoping Stack might pick up. Eevee rolled her eyes and made a 'hurry-up' gesture. She did want us to get moving, though it wasn't even nine in the morning yet. Tenny kept yawning. Lozzie looked like she wanted to go back to bed. Zheng stood with her eyes closed.

Raine flashed a grin at Eevee and spoke on. "Well, don't be a stranger, Stack. You wanna join us, you gimme a call any time, right here on this number. It's gonna be quite a party. Maybe today, maybe to—"

We all heard the voice-mail system cut out. Line closed.

Raine lowered the phone and stared at it, eyebrows raised at the screen, then at us. "Ooooh, she heard that. Yes she did."

"Do you think she's going to join us?" I asked. "We could do with ... well. That."

“Let’s hope.”

“Who was that?” Felicity asked from over by the door. She had taken Kimberly’s hand — because Kim had gone white as a sheet, eyes wide in mute terror.

“Somebody you’re better off not knowing,” said Raine. She shot Kim a wink. “Don’t you worry. She won’t come anywhere near you. She’s not interested in that.”

“Ablative meat,” Evelyn grunted, swinging round toward the door on her walking stick, leaning on Praem. “She doesn’t matter. Forget her. We have enough bloody firearms as it is. Let’s go, everyone get moving. We have a war to start. And I want it over by lunchtime.”

sediment in the soul – 19.2

Geerswin Farm — Twil's family home, the seat of the Church of Hringewindla, the archaic secret tucked away in the forest behind the village of Brinkwood, ringed by trees older than the industrial revolution which had turned the village into a bypassed backwater — loomed large in my imagination as the perfect location to perform real magic. Our previous visit had involved an unexpected collapse of reality, though we hadn't known that at first: the onrush of false dusk, things going bump in the night, wind-storms and monsters and a trip deep into the earth to meet a god. The crumbling, isolated farmstead had all the hallmarks of a beautifully Gothic setting. Where better to waggle one's fingers with mystical import and mutter 'abracadabra', while thunder crashed and spooky violins played in the background?

Raine had shown me far too many Hammer Horror classics. They were rubbing off on me.

So, as we trundled along the road out of Sharrowford and through the still-damp countryside, the rational part of me was trying to keep calm in the face of one of the most serious and dangerous magical tasks we had ever set ourselves, hands plucking and picking at the hem of my hoodie, tentacles bundled in my lap and trying not to clench. But another part of me — small and girlish and perpetually nine years old, giggling over spooky stories with Maisie — was beside herself with fan-girl glee.

She didn't dare come to the surface. That would have been wildly inappropriate. I was too afraid for the safety of Evee and Kim, and yes, Felicity as well. Too focused on the day ahead. Too worried about Edward Lilburne's response to our opening salvo.

But when we reached Geerswin Farm, gingerly unfolding ourselves from inside Raine's battered red car to stand around on the old broken tarmac and wait for Felicity to catch up in her Range Rover with the others, that girlish and excited Heather inside my chest did a little pout.

Geerswin Farm was not dressed in grand rags of black lace and the heavy shadows of ghostly promise, like some cheap Halloween

decoration; it was after all the height of summer, despite the aftermath of the Aym-born storm.

The sky was a clear, milk-tainted blue, brushed by a few wisps of fluffy cloud, ringed by the healthy, thick, verdant green of the woodland canopy, like one stood at the bottom of a bowl of wood, topped with leafy garnish. The forest rustled softly in the gentle wind; distant birdsong soaked through the trees. Strong sunlight revealed the general disrepair of the farm as anything but grandly melancholic — I wondered if Hringewindla understood that his most faithful worshippers, the core of his cult, desperately needed funds for major renovation work. The pair of alpacas and the cluster of sheep had been moved to the smallest of the uneven, soggy fields, the one attached to a proper shelter for them, made of old brick and new corrugated steel. The largest of the fields had been prepared for us in advance — mowed by hand, a task that Twil had complained about incessantly, despite the fact it had apparently only taken her thirty minutes. Being a werewolf conferred some major advantages in stamina. A massive area of field was shorn down to stubs of grass, thistles chopped, weeds murdered, to make way for the unnatural act we were about to commit. But the pile of grass cuttings and bits of weed against the nearest fence made it look more like an unfortunate site for a village fairground.

Hringewindla's bubble-servitors were all over the place, many dozens stronger than on our previous visit. They ringed the fields in overlapping curves of silently bobbing sentries, hovering over the clearing like on-station drones, lurking along the driveway to intercept any unwanted visitors. A few waited out in the road, watching for the wrong kind of car. They clustered on the roof of the house, piled up on each other in a slowly seething mass of semi-transparent, greasy, iridescent spheres. The effect was not menacing; it made the house look like it was wearing a silly wig.

I obviously couldn't keep the disappointment off my face entirely. Zheng noticed.

Zheng had arrived at the farm ahead of the rest of us. She had set off out the back of Number 12 Barnslow Drive as we'd been figuring out who was going in which car. She wasn't even out of breath, standing there like a muscular and immovable statue. She wasn't locked in a face-off with Hringewindla's bubble-servitors this time, though a pair of the dubious, disgusting 'angels' had detached from their guard duties to discreetly shadow her. Very discreetly.

She stood there in her grey jumper hiding her curves, long coat containing her toned muscles, booted feet planted firmly on the crumbling tarmac. She stared out across the fields as if they would soon be the site of a battle. Impassive, heavy-lidded, undeniable. She was everything this situation was not. And she heard my tut and looked around.

“Shaman?”

“Oh, um, it’s nothing. Nothing.” I tutted again, huffed at myself, and dithered on the spot, which made ‘nothing’ sound like a total lie. Which it was.

Everyone else was already in motion: Raine striding up to our welcoming party at the front door, to shake Christine Hopton’s and Michael Hopton’s hands, and clap Twil on the shoulder; Praem unlatching the boot of the car to haul out the buckets of blood; Evelyn clomping forward with her walking stick to frown professionally at the fresh-cut grass in the field.

“Nothing, shaman?”

I made a grumbly sound. “You’re too perceptive, Zheng. It’s the sunlight. The birdsong. The nice outdoorsy feeling. This isn’t the right place to do magic. It should be darker. Less clean. Spooky?” I winced and put a hand to my own face, followed by a tentacle. “Oh, listen to me, this sounds so stupid.”

Zheng chuckled, low and dark. “The shaman has a point,” she said to Eevee, only a few paces away. “Poor aesthetics, wizard.”

Evelyn answered without a moment’s hesitation: she was truly switched on this morning, present and correct in every single second of the clock. “Mechanics care not for aesthetics.” She looked around not at Zheng, but at me. “Heather, what was the very first thing I ever told you about magic? I know you recall, because you seem to recall everything I’ve ever said to you.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I apologise for being silly.”

Evelyn tutted. “You have absolute license to be as silly as you bloody well like.”

“But you can’t take the literature student out of me. My imagination insists we should all be wearing robes and tying somebody to a sacrificial altar. Joining hands and chanting. Drawing pentagrams.

Taking copious amounts of hallucinogens.”

“Magic is not black cats and broomsticks.”

I sighed again. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologising.”

Praem stepped up to join us. A pair of sealed white food-grade buckets dangled effortlessly from each hand. “Black cat,” she said, staring at Evelyn.

Evelyn frowned, sudden and sharp. Her knuckles turned white on her walking stick. She looked quickly at me, then back at Praem. “Where? When? Where did you see it, exactly? Drop those buckets, get moving, catch it, right now! Zheng, you as well! I know you don’t take orders, but fuck it!” She looked around, free hand fumbling her modified 3D-glasses out of her pocket and trying to get them onto her face. I went to her side quickly, taking her cane-arm to support her. “Hringle-whatsit’s bubble things should be dealing with any interlopers. Even animals! Anything could be a trap, a scout, a fucking bomb for all we—”

“No,” said Praem. “I would like a black cat.”

Evee and I blinked at her. Zheng stared too, though less surprised.

Evelyn lowered her glasses. “Praem, what?”

“Black cat. Brown cat. White cat. Orange cat. Cat.”

“... are you asking for a pet?” Evelyn let out a sudden, sharp sigh. I felt a horrible, winding tension go out of her, felt her weight press down on my support. “Praem, now is not the time. Come on, we need to go greet our hosts. You and I can talk about cats later. Bloody hell.” Evelyn shook her head and stomped off toward where Twil and her parents were waiting, with Amanda Hopton hovering just inside the doorway, her shoulders flanked by a pair of smaller bubble-servitors. “All I need, right,” Evelyn muttered as she dragged me along after her. “Daughter wants pets. What next? Later, later.”

I looked back and caught Praem’s eye, blankly milk-white. But I could have sworn I saw a twinkle in the depths.

Silently, I mouthed back at her, “Good job.”

Praem followed, buckets of blood in hand. Zheng set off for a circuit of the fields, probably to antagonise the locals. Felicity’s car finally

pulled into the driveway behind us. Evelyn dragged me onward, to greet the Church.

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“Listen carefully,” said Evelyn. “And no — not because I’m only going to say this once, or some equally puerile nonsense. I will happily repeat any part of this as many times as you need, backward or forward. I will translate it into Latin and German. I will draw diagrams — I have *already* drawn diagrams. Wait, no, Kim has drawn diagrams; thank you, Kim. Everyone say thank you to Kim, because God knows I can’t draw. I will repeat myself until I am blue in the face, and then I will step aside so Kimberly or Felicity can repeat it again in a slightly different accent. Listen carefully, because there are a lot of us here, and we all need to know our places. We are about to do something incredibly dangerous, in the sense that operating a large piece of industrial machinery is dangerous, while also bracing for return artillery fire. We need to not get in each other’s way, and we need to know exactly what to do if something goes wrong. So, listen up.”

Evee’s steel-shod eyes softened instantly as she lifted them toward the back of the room, and added, in much gentler voice: “That goes for you too, Tenny. Your job is to stick with Lozzie and stay safe, indoors, and then go with her to Camelot if something bad happens. But it’s important that you understand what the rest of us are going to be doing. If you don’t want to speak up in front of everyone else, you can ask me or Lozzie whenever, after we’ve all finished talking. Do you understand?”

Tenny, with three biscuits in the mouth-ends of three different tentacles, had a look on her face exactly like a child who knew that all the adults would be more comfortable pretending that she was too young to understand the topic of discussion. But she wasn’t. And she was here for her own safety. She bit her own lips and hunched slightly in her chair. She didn’t need further encouragement to stick close to Lozzie.

I had hoped that a change of scenery would be a nice trip for Tenny. She got on well enough with Twil, surely she’d be interested in where Twil lived. But since the moment she and Lozzie had Slipped back from Camelot, appearing in the Hopton’s kitchen, Tenny had adopted all the overt nervousness of a little girl who didn’t know how to act in an unfamiliar household.

“Tenns will be fine!” Lozzie chirped. One of her arms was buried deep in the grasp of two of Tenny’s tentacles. “Won’t you, Tenns?”

“*Mmmurrrr-rrrr*,” Tenny trilled, which made the Hoptons jump again — all except Amanda.

The Hoptons had so far responded to Tenny with polite bewilderment and nervous flinching, which I thought was a bit much considering their giant cone-snail god-friend beneath the soil of the forest. At least Amanda Hopton — Hringewindla’s conduit and closest and most beloved of this generation of human beings — had taken Tenny entirely in her stride. She’d even shaken Tenny’s hand, which was very sweet. Tenny had instantly liked the idea and shaken everybody else’s hand.

Amanda’s golden retriever, Bernard, was currently curled up at the foot of Tenny’s chair, content to receive slightly nervous pettings from one of Tenny’s tentacles, filling for Marmite. Marmite himself had been left at home; we didn’t want to risk him getting hurt if something went wrong and he panicked.

We — and there were a lot of us — were gathered in the Hoptons’ dining room, the spacious and airy termination to the long spinal corridor which ran the length of the house.

Cosy, rustic, and genuinely lived in, the dining room boasted a large and functional fireplace, currently unlit, very much to my taste. Two massive landscape photographs of forest vistas seemed to invite the woods indoors, along with the bank of windows and the glass patio doors looking out on the back fields. Waves of bright, clean sunlight flooded the room. The last time I’d visited this space it had all seemed rather more sinister, in the wake of the nightmare-twisting effect of Hringewindla’s parasitic infection. But now, sitting around with cups of tea and complimentary ‘planning biscuits’, it felt more like we were organising a harvest festival or an elaborate surprise birthday party.

The mages — Evelyn, Kimberly, and Felicity — stood up front, Felicity politely off to one side while Evelyn and Kimberly flanked a whiteboard on a wheeled frame. Christine Hopton had produced the whiteboard from somewhere seemingly without effort. She was a teacher, after all.

While the rest of us had bustled around getting seated, Kimberly had drawn an illustration on the whiteboard: two concentric circles,

one inside the other, surrounded by little dots and arrows, framed by a quite charming doodle of what was obviously the tree-line which surrounded the farm.

I could think of nothing more blandly reassuring and less magical than a whiteboard.

The rest of us were seated around the scratched, chipped, still-grand table. The Hoptons took one side. Christine and Michael — Twil's parents — and Amanda, formed the triumvirate leadership of the Church. Benjamin sat at their rear, their meaty bodyguard. They were joined by a further pair of Church members none of us had ever met before: a wiry, leathery middle-age man introduced only as 'Mister' George, who looked like he'd been pickled in tobacco. The other was a young woman named Katey, stocky and solid, dirty blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, and obviously armed beneath her baggy clothes.

"Members of the Church who are prepared to do violence in our defence," Christine had explained, very matter-of-fact, when Evelyn had asked. "However capable Benjamin may be, we thought it best to play all our cards for this."

George had cleared his throat and answered in a voice more smoker's cough than words. "We won't get you in your way, madam wizard. Hringewindla has vouched for you. We all feel it. This is the truth."

At that, Katey had rolled her eyes and shared a long-suffering glance with — of all people — Twil. "Shut up, dad," she had said. "So fucking cringe."

Myself and Raine took the opposite side of the table, joined a little awkwardly by Twil. I tried not to read too much into that seating decision, but I respected whatever Twil was trying to communicate. Praem sat at the front, ready to attend to her mother if required. Tenny and Lizzie took the rear of the room, separate and apart, because their job was to stay safe. The only reason they were here instead of back in Sharrowford was to avoid the risk of the house getting hit while the rest of us were absent; the only reason they weren't squirmed away in Camelot was in case something went unfathomably wrong in new and interesting ways.

Sevens had donned the mask of the Yellow Princess, starched and proper, umbrella in one hand, skirt perfectly pressed, blonde fringe

cut straight as a ruler. Perhaps the blood-goblin was not proper for serious meetings. Aym — amazingly — had stayed fully manifested, climbing out of Felicity's car alongside the others. Her black-lace layers had grown a matching black hood, which hid her face in deep shadows. Her sleeves had elongated to cover her hands as well, so not a sliver of skin showed. She held Sevens' hand through a scrap of black, said nothing, and moved in total silence.

Twil had grimaced at this. "Could you like, drop the spooky nun act? I still don't get what you are, but you're making it look like you're a secret weapon or something."

Sevens had answered for her, with icy precision: "Aym is uncomfortable. Please respect her need to withdraw."

Felicity had looked both embarrassed and relieved by this performance, as if she was glad for Aym but also felt a deep responsibility.

Zheng lingered in the doorway, drawing nervous glances from the new bodyguards.

Stack had not turned up, nor returned Raine's call, nor been spotted lingering at the end of the driveway. After twenty minutes of extra waiting, we had started the meeting.

"Right, good," Evelyn said to Lizzie and Tenny, then flicked her gaze to Amanda, hardening instantly. "Everything I just said goes triple for your ... your god. The last thing we need is him trying to intervene without warning. I take it he's paying attention?"

The Hoptons all bristled very slightly at the tone in Evelyn's voice. Evee was trying so hard to be polite about Hringewindla, but her basic contempt was impossible to conceal. Her lips soured around the request, but she went through the form. I found myself clenched up in sympathetic embarrassment.

Amanda Hopton had looked glassy-eyed and sleepy until that moment, sitting next to her sister along the side of the table. Unhealthy, very pale, with the look of a woman perpetually exhausted, unable to shift the few pounds that kept her overweight. In a way I felt sorry for her — she'd spent most of her life attached mind-to-mind with her god.

But she seemed to value that connection. As she answered, she sat up straighter, still a little unfocused.

“He is remaining aware,” she said. “Staying aware. Comprehending ... us. He will direct his angels to protect this house and his family. While you are here, the protection extends to you all. In grace and hospitality.”

She smiled, which transformed her face into an innocent bliss. She blinked: a vastness moved behind her eyes, as if iris and pupil were tiny windows on a gigantic aquarium tank.

“Say hi for me, please,” I added.

Amanda nodded again, neck muscles like springy rubber.

“Oooooooh,” said Nicole Webb, rubbing her hands together and ostentatiously smacking her lips. “I do like a good all-hands briefing. Miss Saye, I do hope you’re prepared for some very stupid questions.”

Detective Nicole Webb was our one unexpected arrival, the one we hadn’t planned for. She sat to the rear of the group, dressed for a woodland hike, in a brand new and very practical jacket, with lots of pockets and pouches. Hair pulled into a tight bun, energetic in every movement, eyes alive in the manner of a woman who had gotten a full ten hours sleep last night — or no sleep at all. I couldn’t tell.

Evelyn stamped on the floorboards with her walking stick. “There—are—no—stupid—questions,” she hammered. She managed to make it sound absolutely terrifying. I would have flinched if that tone came from anybody but Eevee. Privately I winced; she wasn’t exactly making herself approachable.

Twil tutted. “Steady on, Eevee. Stop shoutin’.”

Evelyn chose to ignore that and spoke to Nicole again. “Detective, you really do not have to be here.”

Nicky raised her hands. “Three of you have said that in three different ways. Look, if you want me to bugger off out, let me know, just be blunt. Be clear. I’ll run off and you witches can do whatever you’re gonna do.”

“Please do not swear in front of Tenny,” Evelyn said without missing a beat. “She is a child.”

“Oops. Er. Sorry.” Nicole twisted in her seat to give Tenny an awkward smile. “Bad words. You shouldn’t use them, Tenny.”

“Bad woooooorrrds,” Tenny trilled. She didn’t smile.

I cleared my throat. I was near the front of the table, closest to the mages and their ragged presentation. “Nicky, none of us want you to leave, not really. But you don’t have to put yourself in harm’s way, not for us. We can handle this. We know what we’re doing.”

Did we? I had no idea.

Evelyn added, level and sharp: “You have no responsibility to us, and I will not put you out in the field, even if you are carrying a dozen illegal firearms.”

“I am not,” said Nicky.

“Then you stay in the house with the others, that’s—”

“But hey, if anybody has a spare, I won’t say no?” Nicole spread her hands and gestured around at everybody else. “I won’t report it or anything. I think we’re a bit outside of Sharrowford jurisdiction here.”

The joke fell like a lead balloon. Nicky’s smile was stiff as wire. She was more nervous than she was pretending.

Raine jumped in to save her. “I thought you hated guns, officer?”

“I’m not an officer anymore. And that was sergeant to you, Haynes. Less ‘o your lip.”

Raine did a boxing-stance duck-and-weave as if dodging a blow, grinning. The atmosphere warmed by half a degree.

“And for the record,” Nicole said, “yeah, I don’t have any idea what to do with a gun. Point and pull the trigger? I’m well aware this room is probably filled with several weapon and firearm offences in progress. Nobody call the police, please, it could all get very embarrassing.”

Katey, the young woman who was obviously festooned with weapons, shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She clinked. Mister George looked like he was trying to pretend he had not heard any of that.

Benjamin Hopton, the shaved-headed, heavily muscled Church bodyguard, nodded toward the double-barrelled hunting shotgun which lay in the crook of his arm. The shotgun was open to reveal the breach, empty and unloaded. Even then he kept the ends of the

barrels pointed firmly at the floor. "This is licensed. Legal." He paused and cleared his throat. "Detective."

"Yeah," added Michael Hopton. "Licensed to me, Ben. That's my shotgun you've got there."

"We're on your land," Benjamin said slowly and carefully, as if speaking for the benefit of a hidden microphone. "You've given me permission to handle and discharge the firearm. Which means it's legal."

"Yeah, okay, and I'll rescind that permission if you get too happy with it. You be careful with that thing."

Christine Hopton, high priestess of the Church, cleared her throat and laid one gentle, wrinkle-backed hand on her husband's shoulder. "Mike, dear, you would just shoot your toes off. Ben was in the army, you know that. Let him handle the gun."

Michael Hopton pulled the uncomfortable face of a man who knew he was wrong. He wasn't doing a good job of keeping his nerves down.

"It's going to be alright, Mr Hopton," I spoke up, making eye contact and holding it there. "We'll deal with all of this, and ... and ..." I swallowed and tried to think of what to say. To be an angel, to be reassuring. They already held me in uncomfortable respect and a touch of awe, after I had communed with their god, but I needed to assure them we weren't going to bring Edward Lilburne down on them. Or rather, that we could deal with him, if we did.

"Mine's not legal," said a familiar half-mumble.

Everyone glanced at Felicity, but she was staring directly at Nicole. The ex-copper and the outlaw mage locked eyes, dense with frost. I suppressed a wince.

Nicky and Fliss had politely shaken hands upon meeting, but the ice had grown between them thick and fast, flash-frozen on the bleeding shore of how Kimberly seemed entirely comfortable inside Felicity's personal space. As the mages had set up, Kim had darted about with her pen, asking Felicity for clarification or suggestions on the diagram, and shown zero discomfort at being only inches apart.

A mage-detective-mage love triangle was the last thing we needed

that day; I made eyes at Nicole, hard eyes, and willed her to be professional.

She must have noticed, because she cleared her throat and nodded. “Good for you,” she said to Felicity. “Keep it to yourself, yeah?”

Evelyn cleared her throat louder, rumbling with suppressed irritation, like an animal asserting dominance over lesser squabbles. “Then why are you here, detective?. We informed you as a courtesy, because we trust you, and frankly I wanted you warned so you can protect yourself if necessary. My intent was not to call you here.”

Nicole Webb shrugged and folded her hands over her stomach. “In for a penny.”

“In for a pound,” Raine finished the saying. She winked.

“Yeah,” said Nicole. “something like that. Gotta see it through, you know? Maybe you’ll need somebody to slap cuffs on Edward when this is all over.”

Evelyn stared at her, pinch-lipped. “It is highly unlikely that we will directly engage Edward Lilburne today.”

“Yeah,” Raine murmured — low and soft, not a tone I heard from her often. I turned and blinked at her in surprise, but she was staring at Evee.

Twil snorted. “*Directly engage*,” she repeated in a silly voice. “Evee, we’re not the marines. Don’t talk like that.”

Benjamin interrupted. “Clarity is good. I like it. Right on.”

Evee ignored the both of them and spoke to Nicole. “Detective, this is your last chance to leave. Once we begin, you’ll have to stay until the spell is done and we’ve confirmed or ruled out a response. Mid-afternoon, if we’re lucky.”

Raine laughed softly. “What happened to ‘over by lunch time’?”

“I want the spell itself over by lunchtime. The response, we can’t predict.”

Nicole nodded once, holding Evee’s gaze. “I’m staying with you wizards. Get me a pointy hat if you like.”

“Fine.” Evelyn raised her eyes to the room again. “Right. Listen closely, as I said. Everyone on the same page. We’re taking no

chances with this.”

Evelyn ran through the ritual on the whiteboard, pointing with her walking stick, punctuating herself by tapping the wooden head against the plastic surface.

I sat in quiet adoration, restraining myself, wrapped in my tentacles; this was Evelyn at the most organised I had ever seen her, marshalling her thoughts, her plans, and her troops. Her eyes were alight as she spoke, soft blue dancing from the board to the people and back again, watching for unspoken questions, for kinked brows, for any hint that somebody was not following. She had missed nothing, covered everything, accounted for the position of every person involved.

“The mages will only have to remain in the centre circle for just under twenty minutes. All three of us will be exhausted when the spell completes, but Kimberly more than myself or Felicity. That’s the most vulnerable moment, the moment we need to get back indoors as quickly as possible, regardless of the side effects or anything else that happens.” Evelyn jabbed a finger at Zheng. “Kimberly is your responsibility. I don’t care how filthy she is by the end. The moment it’s done, cross inside the circle, pick her up, and take her inside. You’re the quickest of us.”

Zheng stared, dark and unmoving, leaning against the door frame, the rustic kitchen behind her. Evelyn held that gaze and added, “If you don’t want to help, I will assign this task to somebody else. If you agree and then fu—” Evelyn bit down, gaze flickering to Tenny for a split second. “If you agree and then don’t go through with it, you put us all in danger.”

“I will handle the little wizard,” Zheng rumbled. Kimberly kept her eyes anywhere but Zheng; I got the impression she would have been happier to walk, or be carried by a bubble-servitor.

“Good,” Evelyn said. “Zheng, thank you. Praem, you’re to help me. Twil, you have Felicity.”

“Can’t I help you?” Twil asked.

Evelyn ignored that and carried on, going over the details of what was to happen next, the part after the spell. The long, drawn-out part, the waiting and watching. I don’t think I was the only one who saw the shadow pass over her face as she explained this part of

the plan, the part we couldn't predict.

Michael Hopton asked the obvious question. "Miss Saye, pardon me, but you keep talking about a response to the spell. What are we expecting here?"

Evelyn had been about to tap on the sketch again, the lower portion that showed the house with sight-lines and a list of who was not allowed outside until this was done. She paused, sighed slowly, and couldn't meet Michael's eyes for a heartbeat.

I jumped in. "Anything," I said.

An invisible chill settled over the room. 'Mister' George and Michael Hopton shared an uncomfortable look. Benjamin sighed. Christine smiled with bland politeness. Tenny had gone very still. Zheng was unreadable, impassive, a quiet giant.

"Mages are difficult like that," said Raine, in a voice I'd never heard her use before, a quiet smile through the ghost of a grimace. She was watching Evelyn. "You can never predict. Right?"

Evelyn finally looked up and cleared her throat. "He may not respond at all. But that is unlikely." She held up one hand, her good hand, with four fingers raised. "There are four possible outcomes. Number one," she lowered a finger, "is that he chooses to do nothing. A bluff, to throw me off and convince me the spell has not worked. Number two," another finger down, "is that the collapse of his labyrinth will trigger an automatic defence, sending something to the location of whatever has collapsed it. So, us, here." She stared at her remaining two fingers. "Option three is he chooses to send something against us, consciously, intentionally, rather than automatically."

She fell silent for a moment, swallowed hard. I noticed the faint tremor in her throat and longed to get up and go to her.

Evelyn was hiding it so very well, so well that even I hadn't noticed until that moment. I wasn't even sure Praem had seen. Maybe Eevee herself didn't realise.

She was terrified.

So was Raine — though Raine responded to terror with the biological promise of terrible violence. I'd been so wrapped up in my own self, my own worries, my own trouble keeping track of

what we were about to do, that I hadn't noticed the two people closer to me than all others were replaying the emotions of an ancient murder as they prepared to go to war with a mage.

The ghost of Evelyn's mother hovered over both of them, invisible to all others. Loretta Julianna Saye haunted Felicity too; though Felicity was so on-edge it was hard to tell the difference.

"What's option number four?" asked Hringewindla, speaking through Amanda Hopton's mouth, slightly slack in the lips.

"Two and three at the same time," Evelyn answered quickly. "Automatic response plus manually dispatched agents of some kind."

Twil snorted. "Bit dry, isn't it? 'Agents'? We're not in *The Matrix* or something, Eevee, come on."

Evelyn's eyes flashed with sudden anger, sharp and hot, all her carefully suppressed terror flowing outward at once as a single burst of redirected rage.

"Evee!" I said before she could open her mouth and offend everybody, sitting up so suddenly I almost got out of my chair. "Evee, Evelyn. Evee."

She blinked three times and found me, gaze anchoring to mine with an intensity I had not expected. I desperately wanted to get up and hug her right then, but I knew it would undermine her confidence and everybody else's confidence in her; I did not want to emotionally unbalance her before one of the most difficult magical operations of her life.

"What might Edward send here?" I asked. "Just, any ideas at all. Guesses. Educated guesses. Guesstimates."

"*Guesstimates*," Twil repeated with a big wince. "Ugh."

"I know, I know!" I huffed, playing along with Twil's hasty save. She must have seen the anger in Evee's eyes too.

Raine leaned back in her chair. "I reckon it's gonna be a big marshmallow man. Like in *Ghostbusters*, you know?"

"Raine," Evelyn snapped, "do shut up. Now is not the time." But she said it at her usual level of Raine-based irritation, rather than giving vent to the burning incandescence of over-pressurised fear.

“Servitors,” Felicity spoke up, half-mumbling, but with her head raised to address the room. “Servitors, or constructs. Possibly revenants, like ... like Zheng there.” She nodded toward the back of the room. “Or possibly other things. We can’t predict. Please understand. He could even send a group of people, maybe a mage he’s trained himself. That would be a worst-case scenario ... ” She gulped hard.

“That’s what bullets are for,” Raine said, ice cold and deadly serious. A shiver went up my spine, not all bad.

“Right,” Felicity agreed with a little dry swallow. “Right.”

I did not add that last time we had tried to kill a mage, the bullet had gone right through him to no effect.

Amanda spoke up, dreamy-voiced, “Hringewindla’s angels will turn back any assault.”

“Yes,” Evelyn said, a little sour. “That’s what we’re counting on. With luck — even if things do go wrong in some fashion — none of us will actually have to face any direct danger.” She sighed. “If something does show up, the direction of arrival could give us an idea about the location of Edward’s house.”

Christine Hopton raised her head and spoke. “We know it’s somewhere between our home and Stockport, correct? That is a very large area to cover.”

Nicole said, “Yeah, somewhere about there.” She sounded a little bitter. “Wherever I went.”

“Yes,” said Evelyn. She indicated a curve of space on the whiteboard, just inside the tree-line. “Which is why I expect that if anything arrives, it will enter the clearing here. Assuming it’s not clever enough to circle the farm, in which case we’ll have to follow any tracks.”

Kimberly helpfully added a curve in red, along with a little exclamation mark at either end.

Evelyn continued, straight-backed as she could make herself, wearing her invisible general’s hat. “It is very important that we kill or capture whatever turns up. It will be very difficult to stop any scouts returning to Edward with information, but we must try. Birds, tiny constructs, zombified rabbits. Anything. Make sure

Hringewindla understands.”

Amanda nodded. “He does.”

“Does *everybody* understand?” Evelyn swept her eyes across the room. Nods, murmurs, folded arms. Dark eyes of silent acknowledgement. Raine’s big thumbs-up grin. My smile for Evee alone.

“Hope you know what you’re doing, Saye,” Twil said. She said it with a smile, then added, “Love you, dumb arse.”

However, to my relief and surprise, Evelyn said simply: “I have no idea what I’m doing, you moronic mutt. You should know that by now. But, *we*? We know exactly what we’re doing. Now grab a spade. For that, you’re digging half the circle by yourself.”

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No matter how much I made light of the atmosphere, I would have preferred mundane disappointment to the frightening pleasure of Gothic aesthetics; in the end, the three-mage spell did indeed possess more than a whiff of black cats and broomsticks, despite the sunny day and blue skies.

Digging the outer circle took about two hours. Twil and Praem set to work, both of them basically tireless, helped by Michael Hopton and Mister George. The mages directed, darting about with diagrams, making sure that each curve of circle and accent of esoteric symbol was at the perfect angle. Zheng could have helped, but she drew an unspoken line at wizards directing her in manual labour. I didn’t blame her. Besides, she was required to guard the whole operation at this early stage.

“The likelihood that Edward is aware of any of this is minimal,” Evelyn explained. “The real danger is after we fire, not before. But it never hurts to post a lookout. You keep your eyes open too, Heather.”

“Don’t we have plenty of those already?” I murmured to her, shading my eyes as we stood side-by-side at the edge of the field, with Zheng only twenty feet away.

Bubble-servitors, Hringewindla’s angels, bobbed everywhere. The way the things moved set my teeth on edge, and made my tentacles twitch with restless motion of pre-emptive self-defence, but I

couldn't deny we were very well protected. There must have been over two hundred of the things.

"I don't entirely trust them," Evelyn murmured back.

"I trust Hringewindla," I said. "Evee, I really do. He wants to help. I know they look ... icky. But we're in a fortress of the things."

"Yes, Heather," she sighed. The gentle wind tugged at stray strands of blonde hair. "But I don't trust his judgement."

Evelyn sighed and rubbed her eyes. Raine was calling for her from halfway across the field, Praem marching over to collect her, to check some minor symbol. I'd managed to draw her off for only a moment, not long enough or private enough to address her buttoned-down, glued-shut fears, the terror leaking from her pores. I imagined I could smell it on her, hot and raw and shivering. Or was I scenting pheromones for real?

"Evee. Evee this is going to be fine. We're going to be perfectly safe."

She shot me a frown just before Praem reached us. "Of course we are. Stop worrying, Heather. This has been mapped out to the smallest possible degree. The worst thing that could happen is we have to spend the night in Twil's house, playing tower defence."

I blinked at her " ... tower defence?"

"Video game metaphor. Never mind." She turned away as Praem stopped behind her. "Come on, let's go fix the spelling, or whatever the problem is."

When the circle was finished it filled almost the entire field, leaving a thin margin of untouched grass around the edge, where the sentries were meant to stand while the mages performed the spell. I could barely look at the design dug into the wet, dark, clay-clogged earth of Brinkwood mud; the swirls and spirals of esoteric symbols made my eyes ache, not by themselves but only when placed in reference to each other. The outer circle was a quadruple-layered monstrosity of interlinked lines, with scraps of Latin and Arabic at right-angles, enclosing a whirling dance of overlapping symbols, stomach-wrenching signs, and shapes with far too many sides. I stood as far back from the edge as I could without climbing over the fence and entering the tree-line. It was like a great dark hole had opened up in the ground. Abyssal instinct wanted me to stay as far

away as I could.

Evelyn, Felicity, and Kimberly were already waiting right in the centre for Praem to return with the canvas which contained the inner circle, the payload for this field-sized gun. Even from halfway across the field I could see Kimberly was quivering with nerves. Felicity was saying something to her, low and soft and undoubtedly reassuring, holding one of her hands. Evelyn had turned away, staring out at the woods.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled from a few paces to my right.

“I’m exactly where I’m meant to be,” I said. But I couldn’t take my eyes off Evee. “Evelyn isn’t pulling any punches, I might be needed out here, to do brain-math if something goes horribly wrong. Don’t tell me to go inside with the others.”

The others — the baseline humans who were more liability than protection — were beginning to trudge back toward the house. Evelyn’s plan called for them to wait on the crumbly tarmac, far away from the spell, and then head inside right away when it was complete. The heavily armed young woman, Katey, was already waiting there, along with Benjamin Hopton, his shotgun loaded and the breach closed. Michael Hopton and Mister George were heading back too. Nicole was sitting on the front step, a smudge of black jacket and blonde hair. Raine turned and raised a fist to me before she joined them. I smiled and waved. The smile did not reach my eyes.

Tenny and Lozzie were already indoors, given free run of Twil’s video game consoles. But I spied a little silken black face peering out of one window.

Zheng said nothing, just brooded in silence. I let out a long, slow, shaking breath.

“You are nervous, shaman.”

I turned a gentle frown on her. Zheng was a dark silhouette against the rustling trees, her sharp-edged eyes somehow cold in the bright sunlight. “Yes, well spotted. I am very nervous.”

“Your tentacles are tense.”

I huffed. I thought of saying something like *how could you tell?* But I was too irritatingly polite for my own good. Besides, Zheng didn’t

deserve to be the target of my own bottled fears. I gestured at Eevee — with a tentacle, so she wouldn't see. She wasn't wearing her modified 3D glasses, not yet.

"Eevee is terrified," I said.

"Mm."

"Raine is ready for violence. Real violence. I know not everybody can see it, but I can."

"Mm."

"Felicity is ... I don't know. I don't know what she's capable of."

"Mm."

"It didn't really hit me until we were in the middle of that meeting," I went on. "This is unspeakably dangerous, isn't it? We're inviting some kind of attack. A real one. I was thinking of all this more like a ... I don't know. A Maypole dance, or something."

Zheng rumbled in contemplation. I knotted my hands together inside the front pocket of my hoodie.

"Your wizard is a wizard," Zheng purred eventually, almost too low to hear. "Like any other. But she is ... yours. She follows you. Same as I."

I glanced at Zheng again. She was staring at Eevee too, her expression unreadable, eyelids almost closed as if on the edge of sleep.

"Does that mean you'll protect her, if you have to?" I asked.

Zheng rolled her neck from side to side, making popping noises with her spine. She rolled her shoulders, flexed her hands, and did not answer — possibly because Twil was trudging across the field toward us, skirting the edge of the circle. She shot me a grin and waved.

"Twil", I called softly. "You're not meant to leave your spot."

"Yeah, yeah," she said as she jogged the rest of the distance, curly dark hair bouncing on her shoulders. "But we ain't started yet, right? Least not the main event. You doing okay, yeah? Looked at you through these." She wagged the modified, black-rimmed glasses she was holding in one hand. "You look sort of nervous."

Tentacles all bunched up and stuff. Bit on edge, you know?”

Zheng said nothing. I pursed my lips.

“Ah?” Twil said, catching my expression. She even took a half-step back.

“Yes,” I sighed. “I am nervous. Eevee is more nervous, can you not see that?”

“Eevee?” Twil looked out into the middle of the field. “I mean, yeah, duh. Eevee’s always nervous about this sorta shit.”

“More than usual. Twil, she’s terrified! She’s bottling it up, and I ... I don’t know what to do.”

Twil eyed Zheng briefly, then shrugged and carried on. “It’s easy, Big H. Just be there for her when this is done. Everything’s gonna go off fine, then we can all have tea and you can rub her back or whatever.”

I didn’t find that particularly reassuring. “What if it doesn’t go off fine? What if we get attacked? What if Eevee is wrong?”

Twil shrugged. “We’ll deal. Hey, between Zheng and me, we can take anything. You’re here too, for like, spooky tentacle magic bullshit. There’s at least three guns here. And uh, Seven-whatever, too, right?”

Twil nodded past Zheng and around the curve of the circle. Much to my growing consternation Sevens had also left her post and was heading around the circle to join us. Aym trailed in her wake, clutching Sevens’ pale palm through a handful of black lace. Aym looked like a stick dressed in black robes.

“Oh yes,” I said when they approached, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. “Everybody just abandon Eevee’s plan and come join me instead. Sevens, you know where you’re supposed to stand.”

The Yellow Princess replied with a tilt of her chin and a mute flash of her eyes. She cocked that umbrella like a walking stick against the ground, daring me to answer. I frowned, refusing to back down.

“You need to stay where Eevee said to stay,” I muttered.

“The ritual has not yet begun,” said Seven-Shades-of-Technical-Insubordination. “Aym and I shall return to our appointed section of the circle momentarily.”

Twil squinted. “Wait a sec, what are you gonna do with the spooky goth kid if we do have to fight something?”

Sevens answered as if this was a very tiresome question. “If I must don another face, Aym will leave for the house.”

I frowned down at the deep-hooded, faceless demon-thing. Not a sliver of flesh was visible beyond the lace. “You better not bother our hosts, if that happens.”

Sevens said, “Aym has a message for you, kitten.”

Kitten utterly and unexpectedly disarmed me. Zheng grunted — I think it was a laugh — while Twil snorted and covered her mouth, then waved away my embarrassed and offended look.

“Aym?” Sevens prompted, as if the coal-sprite horror was a nervous child. I was about to sigh and roll my eyes when Aym finally spoke up.

“She is desperately in love with you,” Aym said from deep within her hood, in a voice like needles thrust into a mouldy pie. “You horrible fuck. Stop stringing her along.” Aym paused, perhaps to savour my shock, then added: “Bitch-arse bitchy bitch,” which rather undermined the spooky little girl aspect of her current outfit.

“Yes, I know!” I almost shouted. Halfway across the field, the three mages looked up, so I lowered my voice, face hot with embarrassment. I huffed and puffed and wriggled my hands free from inside my hoodie so I could gesticulate pointlessly. “I know! Everybody knows! Twil knew before I did. Zheng probably finds it obvious. Sevens certainly knows. And Eevee herself knows it full well, even if we don’t ... don’t talk about ... oh, for pity’s sake, we have a relationship. It’s just ... awkward. Don’t mess things up for us, Aym.”

The twig wrapped in black rags looked up at me. There was nothing but darkness inside her hood.

“Dumb-arse,” she said.

A call echoed across the field like the toll of a soft and distant bell: “Places, please.” Praem, telling us all to get back into position. She was standing with the mages, inside the inner circle.

Eevee wore a frustrated little frown on her face, gesturing with her walking stick for us all to stop mucking about. I composed myself,

still burning red, and tried to look professional. I didn't fool anybody, least of all myself. I had no idea what I was doing.

The others trailed off to their own positions. Sevens shot me an ice-cold look as she left. Perhaps an apology for Aym saying that, I wasn't sure. Zheng stayed by my side — as Evelyn had so carefully stipulated, I was not to be left actually alone during all this. Twil bounded away. Amanda Hopton took up position on the far side of the circle, in case the hovering bubble-servitors should need any extra direction. The things were everywhere — one of them bobbed not ten feet behind Zheng and I, watching the tree-line. I tried to take some solace in that. I did, in a way, trust Hringewindla, even if his judgement was a bit strange.

Once every participant, guard, and observer had assumed their proper positions, Felicity raised a hand and turned in a circle, checking that everybody was watching, everybody was on the same page, and everybody was ready. The alpacas and sheep were tucked away inside their stable. The unaltered humans were by the front door. One could have heard a pin drop.

Felicity lowered her hand and said something to Eeve. Praem turned and raised her voice.

“We begin.”

The twenty minutes which followed were among some of the longest and most uncomfortable of my life. Nineteen minutes and thirty three seconds, according to Eeve, but it felt like hours. The minutes slithered along as the three mages stood at equidistant points in the inner circle, whispering bits of language lost to the wind and the rustle of the trees. Seconds crawled slower and slower as I saw Evelyn spit blood, as Felicity turned away to cough red into a handkerchief, and as Kimberly shook with barely contained anxiety. She had the most pivotal role in this, of course. I wished she'd had somebody to support her in that inner circle, as Eeve had Praem, but perhaps that would have been too awkward for her, considering what she had to do.

Evelyn had told us to brace for “anomalous atmospheric phenomena”, “auditory hallucinations”, and “possibly vertigo, but that's unlikely. If you have to vomit, make sure you do it outside the circle. Don't break the lines.”

So when the ambient air temperature plummeted by ten degrees,

we were ready. I put my hands back in my pockets. Zheng gently slid my hood up for me. When the air grew thick with illusory heat-haze, we were mostly prepared, though it was very strange to blink away the blurred ground and wavering air, only for it to re-form seconds later, like a layer of oil on one's own eyeballs. Nobody freaked out — not too much, anyway — when the air began to sizzle and crackle with something akin to static electricity, moving in waves across one's clothes.

Vaguely unnatural, but they were hardly the stuff of nightmares. A light show, at best.

Nobody was ready for the vertigo. Evelyn had grossly underestimated it. To be fair, she probably hadn't expected it to be that bad.

At about six minutes into the spell, into the concentration and chanting and mage-ly communal bleeding, the ground began to fall away.

My earlier sense of the outer circle as the edge of a pit suddenly became all too real. The earth tilted toward a black and gaping mouth; yet it was still level and flat, my senses providing two conflicting sets of data. The inside of the outer circle was a void, hundreds of feet deep; yet the grass was still there, close enough to touch, healthy and green in the blushing sun. The mages in the middle were suddenly very far away, tiny specks on the edge of perception; yet I could see Eeve's brow still furrowed in concentration.

Illusion or not, the vertigo caused a general panic. Everyone perceived that impossible pit and felt their feet sliding toward the precipice. I found myself clinging to Zheng with a tentacle, lashed to her like an octopus to a rock. Zheng had one hand on the fence, fingers cracking the wood. Twil had gone full werewolf, all bared teeth and bristling fur, claws dug into the dirt. Sevens, to my later amusement, had picked Aym up in both arms, like carrying a small child, and was braced as if against a terrible wind. Amanda Hopton was a vaguely human-shaped blob beneath the gooey, gluey anchor of a dozen of her god's angels.

Even the bubble-servitors felt it, scudding upward like greasy clouds, trying to escape a sucking gravity well.

The circle was a void, the open maw of something from which the

magics were stealing power, a sucking wound in the universe itself. It was an affront to reality and I knew with a bleeding certainty that to step on it was death. Abyssal instinct quivered. I half-climbed up Zheng. Somebody screamed. Maybe me. Maybe Evee.

All I knew for certain was that Evelyn opened her eyes and went white as a sheet, eyes pointed downward into that void just beyond the inner circle. Praem said something to her, lips moving, but it didn't help.

I squirmed onto Zheng's shoulders and stuck all my tentacles up in the air, all except the one I was using to hold onto Zheng. I pushed their strobing rainbow pulses to maximum brightness.

Evee's eyes rose and found the rainbow glow. She stared, nodded, and returned to the spell.

In a way, the shock — which was probably an illusion in the end — helped undercut the deep embarrassment of the core part of the spell. While we were all busy getting our monkey brains in a panic over a big hole in the ground, in the middle of the inner circle Kimberly was taking off all her clothes.

We'd all been warned about this part in advance. Kimberly had repeated over and over that she was willing to do this. Evelyn lacked the physical strength; Felicity was capable, but she had to keep certain parts of her body covered, for magical reasons, and this part of the spell required actual full-body nudity.

Nobody had made a single joke during planning. Not Raine, not Twil, not even Aym. If anybody had dared, I think I would have slapped them with a tentacle.

Shaking and shivering, well aware that everybody was politely averting their eyes — or too busy up-chucking their guts onto the front steps of the farmhouse, overcome by vertigo — Kimberly stepped right into the very centre of the inner circle, spread her arms wide, closed her eyes, and held her breath.

Praem then emptied both buckets of bull's blood directly over Kimberly's head.

She did it slowly and carefully, so not too much blood went off target and splattered across the ground. Once she was done, she tore open the smaller packets of blood and began painting symbols on Kim's back, with a little brush. Kimberly stood there shivering,

eyes screwed tight, as the mages made her into a conduit for a metaphorical trebuchet rock we were about to hurl at Edward Lilburne.

When I'd asked her one last time the previous night, Kimberly had struggled to explain why she'd agreed to play the central role.

"It's no danger to me," she'd said. "I trust Evelyn. I trust Fliss too, though ... I don't know why."

"Yes, I trust Eevee too," I'd said, unable to keep the deep and concerned frown off my face. "But that doesn't mean you have to agree to get covered in animal blood in front of everybody. Naked, too. Let Felicity do it. She's more experienced."

"Fliss has a lot of burn scars. A lot. Really. She doesn't want to be exposed." Kimberly had smiled with surprising gentleness, but then again she had been red-eyed with cannabis. "I don't mind. I don't think I'm really ugly or anything. And it's not like anybody's going to perv over me in the middle of a spell like that. Everyone'll be too busy getting dizzy and stuff."

And so we were. Praem finished the design on Kimberly's back, daubing pale skin with crimson blood. That black hole in the earth yawned wide, sucking down great heaving mouthfuls of air. The treetops themselves leaned inward, pulled low by otherworldly force.

Kimberly raised her arms over her head, eyes screwed shut, crying softly. For a split-second I thought I could hear Evelyn's voice and Felicity's voice together, a jumbled, impossible, burning whisper of sounds not meant for human throats.

Then, a hypnic jerk. A blink, as if reality itself had briefly closed and reopened.

And then we were all just standing in a field, in the middle of the woods, on a bright and sunny day. The ground was the ground, nothing more, nothing less. I was clinging to Zheng's back, panting. In the middle of the circle the mages all stumbled — Praem caught Eevee, Felicity whirled and almost fell over, while Kimberly stood there, shivering and clutching her naked body, caked in bull's blood, slowly drying in the sun.

None of us had expected it to end so suddenly. A moment of shock made us all take a breath.

“Everyone move!” Evelyn spat at the top of her lungs, then coughed blood into the crook of her arm. Praem was already picking her up. The spell was over, time to get indoors, just in case.

Zheng didn’t peel me off her shoulders, she just dropped into a loping run with me still attached, headed for Kimberly like a bird of prey.

I almost enjoyed the ride; after all, the spell had worked, we were done. All we had to do was bundle everybody indoors and commence waiting. Time to run Kimberly the most luxurious bath of her life and play video games with Tenny. Time for tea and talking and maybe making sure that Evelyn wasn’t so afraid anymore. There was barely time to think — riding Zheng was like riding the wind. I clung on tight.

On our left, a quarter-way around the field, just behind Twil, something dark and low burst from the tree-line.

A blur, almost as fast as Zheng. Lean muscle and sharp teeth. Canine-shaped, without fur, and wrong.

It shot under the fence like a bullet, straight past Twil, weaving between the bubble-servitors that crashed into the ground like little comets trying to smash and smother this interloper. It shot for the centre of the circle, ignoring all else, aimed straight at Kimberly.

sediment in the soul – 19.3

The spell was cast, the impossible hole in the ground had closed, and reality had reasserted itself; the damage to Edward Lilburne's defences had already been done. Even if we had been able to watch the metaphorical trebuchet payload-boulder batter down the equally metaphorical wall, it was too late: Evelyn had assured us that any effect would be instant, magic did not respect the human perception of time. There simply was no firework explosion for us to appreciate, no matter that we might have enjoyed a bit of pyrotechnic release after the unbearable tension of the last few hours and days. Stopping us now would make no difference. Edward's only rational move was to limit our ability to exploit the opening we had created — or run away. Hence Evelyn's plan to get back inside and await his inevitable answer, or the lack of one.

Whatever instructions animated the blur of canine muscle and slavering teeth did not care about that. The hound-shape shot directly at Kimberly, flying across the fresh-cut grass and the bare-mud grooves of the magic circle, a dark and glinting shadow in the clean sunlight.

Or maybe it was a terror weapon. Maybe cruelty was the point.

The hound-thing was swift and sharp. Zheng was faster, but the intruder had already broken through the outer cordon, the line meant to defend the mages in the centre; it had bounded from the tree line, ducked the fence, zipped past Twil, and zigzagged the pursuing bubble-servitors.

Everybody was moving but nobody was close enough. It all happened so quickly, only a second or two from sighting to impact.

I clung to Zheng's back as she sprinted toward the mages, wrapped in tentacles and vibrating with the need to act; Twil was up on all fours, all wolf, hot on the heels of the unidentifiable nightmare-hound; on the opposite side of the circle Sevens had dropped Aym and seemed to stride forward several meters for every measured step; bubble-servitors peeled off Amanda Hopton, their protective role fulfilled, streaming toward the centre of the circle like soap suds swirling down a drain; over by the farmhouse a knot of armed

humans was spilling into the field — Raine, Benjamin with his hunting shotgun, the young Church member Katey pulling out a revolver.

The bubble-servitors swirled toward the mages, moving to cut them off from the hound. Canine muscle pumped and kicked, outpacing them by inches. As if designed specifically for this one task.

Kim stood in the dead centre of the field, a red exclamation mark of success; stark naked, shivering, clutching herself, coated in a rapidly drying layer of sticky crimson animal blood, hair plastered to her neck with gore, eyes a shocking round wide in that bloody smear. The hound-thing was so fast that she didn't have time to scream before it was all over, caught in the intake of breath and the widening of blood-rimmed eyes. Felicity was next to her, already turning, wrenching down her own sleeve to expose her tattoos in magical desperation. Evelyn was still stunned, reacting too slowly, her withered leg buckling with effort even as her prosthetic held firm.

Zheng veered, going for the hound instead of Kim.

Her whiplash motion clacked my teeth together inside my skull and pulled my body weight against the harness of my tentacles. She had realised she wasn't going to reach Kim in time — fast enough to pull the hound off her, but not fast enough to prevent it bowling her over and ripping her throat out.

I had a split-second to act, maybe less. Pushing myself up on Zheng's shoulders, bunching my tentacles like an octopus in a strong current, hissing incoherent noise at the top of my lungs: I had no idea what I was doing, but I used Zheng's momentum and my pneuma-somatic muscle mass to turn myself into a kinetic sabot — a term that Raine had to explain to me later. Ready to spring, to leap, to knock the unknown creature sideways, hopefully into the unkind embrace of a waiting bubble-servitor.

It was stupid, dangerous, and probably wasn't going to work. But I could have done nothing else. We had failed in a way I could not countenance. Failed to protect Kimberly, the one person who wanted nothing more than to stop putting herself in harm's way, stop involving herself with magic, stop living with the threat of supernatural death hanging over her.

Even as I readied the spring, coiled up my tentacles, and opened the

valves of my bioreactor, I could see my leap would not land quickly enough. The hound was too fast. We were one step too slow.

Kimberly's mouth opened in a scream. The hound-shape lunged for her throat.

Evelyn had accounted for this possibility. She had accounted for every possibility, every mistake, every vulnerability. My general, my genius.

Praem stepped away from Eeve's side and in front of Kimberly in one fluid motion, the black edges of her maid dress cutting the air like a bouquet of knives. Straight-backed, prim and proper, she didn't even bother to brace her feet. Praem had been included in the centre of the circle, but not for Evelyn's comfort and convenience; she had been included because she was the best bodyguard a mage could ever ask for.

Praem caught the hound's jaws on her forearm. Canine teeth cut through three layers of maid uniform fabric, sliced open one layer of pneuma-somatic flesh, and stopped hard in wooden bones.

The creature slammed to a sudden scrambling halt, fur-less muscles twitching, metal braces glinting, lean paws lashing.

Maybe it had been a dog once, but nobody had time to think about that just then.

Praem grabbed the creature's snout so hard that I heard bones fracture, a snap-crack-crackle of gut-wrenching breaks. It whined and squealed and tried to loosen its bite to let go of her arm, but she had it now.

Everything around Praem and the hound was chaos: Kimberly was screaming as Felicity dragged her away; Evelyn was up on her feet and shouting directions to somebody; Sevens appeared and bizarrely enough decided to open her lilac umbrella in front of Eeve. Raine was sprinting across the field. Twil was skidding to a halt just shy of Praem.

The doll-demon leaned in close to the hound, staring at the two patches of smooth flesh where the hound's eyes should have been.

"Bad dog," she said.

Then I slammed into the dog in a squirming mass of tentacles, ruining Praem's graceful victory and her one-liner. I'd been so

panicked and so pumped full of adrenaline that I hadn't been able to abort my springing motion, not without kicking Zheng in the face and probably eating a mouthful of field.

I dragged the dog-thing to the ground in a tangle of strobing tentacles, gnashing teeth, scraping claws, and clods of mud going everywhere. Praem let go the moment I made contact, which is how she managed to stay perfectly on her feet.

There was nothing heroic or even sensible about my late intervention. I was actually far less capable of dealing with a spooky mutant dog than Praem was. But between the initial tussle with the Shambler in Edward's cottage, and springing up to Kimberly's bedroom window when Aym first arrived at our home, I had gotten far too familiar with using my tentacles to hurl myself at things. It was a terrible habit and was going to get me in trouble sooner or later.

I needed to take lessons from Raine — when to leap and when to look.

The hound and I rolled, but it ended up on top; I had neither the body weight nor the experience for this kind of grappling on the ground. I twisted one knee in a groove of the circle, banged my head on the thankfully soft dirt, and ended up eating that mouthful of field which I'd been trying to avoid in the first place. The hound-thing then attempted to eat a mouthful of Heather, which I would not recommend unless one's name is Raine.

Snapping jaws like an animatronic big bad wolf, inches from my face. Eyeless and noseless and smooth, robbed of all mundane senses. Slavering and dripping and hurling itself at my nest of tentacles. I pushed and slapped and slammed it in the head with tentacle-tips, hissing and kicking. I was too far off my head on instinct and adrenaline to take the sensible option and just brain-math the beast over to Camelot, so a Knight could run it through with a lance.

Twil and Zheng pulled the thing off me in the end. It did not get a free sample of raw squid. Zheng broke its spine over her knee, then held it down while Raine put a bullet through the skull. It was not a pretty end.

"Defence in depth, bitch!" was Twil's idea of a victory cry.

Panting, filthy, shocked beyond words; Kim was still naked though Felicity had whipped off her own coat and draped it over Kim's blood-soaked shoulders; Praem's sleeve was delicately shredded, but she didn't bleed; Raine had her gun out, sticking close to my side, saying nothing and watching the tree line; the bubble-servitors, Hringewindla's angels, had come down in a triple-layered wall around us, as if embarrassed by their failure to stop the speeding intrusion.

"Stop standing around!" Evelyn shouted, her voice raw and croaky, blood on her lips. "This changes nothing! Inside, now!" She jabbed her walking stick at the bleeding, twitching corpse of the unnatural hound-construct. "And bring that inside. Tarpaulin, sheets, old t-shirts, I don't care what, get it indoors and on the kitchen tiles. Now! Move!"

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"What the hell are we even looking at?" asked Katey. "It doesn't look real."

The stocky Church bodyguard had untied and retied her dirty blonde ponytail five times in the last ten minutes, pulling a face like she was examining a sculpture made of poo. She had also shed her baggy hoodie and dumped several weapons on the kitchen sideboard — two knives, a massive shiny revolver that was probably one of the most illegal things I'd ever seen, and an actual sword. The sword looked more like a prop piece from a movie about ancient Rome, but I wasn't about to go over and pull the stubby thing out of its black leather scabbard to find out. I wasn't that curious.

"Halloween dog?" suggested Nicole Webb. The detective was squatting down on her haunches, examining the corpse with incautious curiosity. She used a pen to poke and lever at various parts of the anatomy. "Whatever this is, it's not biologically possible. Poor thing should have been stumbling around, blind and deaf."

"Poor thing'," Katey said with a tut. "It nearly took poor Heather's face off. We'd never live that down."

I cleared my throat, feeling awkward. "I could have just sent it elsewhere. I really should have. I wasn't thinking."

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say. The Church bodyguard, Katey, a woman who looked like she could eat nails for breakfast and then me for afters, looked at me with an expression of barely concealed awestruck terror.

“You mean you really do that? Twil said, but ... ”

“She reeeeeeally can,” Twil said, shooting us both a wink. “Scary, huh?”

I pulled an awkward smile.

“This isn’t a dog,” Nicole repeated. “I refuse to believe this is a dog.”

Evelyn sighed for the fiftieth time in the last hour — she was in the dining room, with the nice big fireplace and the sun streaming through the back windows, but we could hear her all the way over in the kitchen.

She called out. “Stop trying to classify it by mundane standards, detective. You’re only going to hurt your brain.”

Nicole snorted a little huff and shook her head. She muttered under her breath, “Impossible bullshit. I hate everything about this. It’s not a dog.”

“Maybe it started as a dog,” Katey said. She glanced at me again, near the rear of the kitchen, as if I would know. I smiled awkwardly and shrugged back. “Dog but modded. Mod dog. Yeah.” She swallowed, nodding to herself, then glanced out of the kitchen window, craning her neck. “Yeah, that makes more sense. I can live with that. Cool.”

Twil said, “That’s not dog. It’s imitation.”

Twil wore a barely suppressed grin, a bulging of the lips that told me she was desperately trying not to laugh. She was lounging by the fridge, eating scraps of meat from a packet of jerky. I didn’t know how she could stand to eat in the same room as something freshly dead and horribly wrinkled, too much like her own snack food.

Katey turned around slowly and gave Twil a look of deep, blaze-eyed disbelief. “Don’t fucking quote a line from *The Thing*. Don’t go all *Thing* on me, Twil. Not when we’re locked in a fucking building together with ... with that.” She pointed at the corpse on the

kitchen floor. “Fuck you. Fuck you sideways for that one. Fuck.”

Twil, absolutely straight faced, said, “I think we can safely assume it’s not a zombie.”

Katey looked like she wanted to hold Twil’s face down in a toilet bowl. I assumed that line was another quote from a spooky movie that Katey didn’t want to think about right now, locked in with a gruesome corpse and expecting a siege.

“If I stab you,” she said to Twil, “it doesn’t kill you. It just hurts like a bitch. Remember that.”

Twil grinned and threw another piece of jerky into her own mouth, chewing loudly. “Try that and I’ll give you an atomic wedgie.”

“*Girls*,” came Christine Hopton’s voice, also from the dining room, edged with strict warning. “Stop, please.”

Twil chewed through her grin. Katey shook her head, then returned to staring out of the window.

“Pay attention,” Evelyn called from the dining room. “Watch the windows. Stop getting distracted. Detective, if you want to be useful, stop poking at the body and watch the tree line.”

Nicole Webb blew out a big sigh, stood up from her crouch, and then frowned at the end of the pen she’d been using to interfere with the corpse. “Don’t really want to put this back in my pocket.” She turned with a half-hearted grin and offered it to me, Twil, and Katey. “Anyone fancy a pen. Lightly soiled. Never used.”

“Burn it,” Katey said.

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The corpse of the hound-thing lay spread out on the Hoptons’ kitchen floor. Michael and Mister George had located some old blue tarpaulin, then some slightly newer green tarpaulin, then put down a couple of animal blankets for good measure. Only then had Zheng been allowed to dump the steaming body onto the makeshift containment. They needn’t have bothered: despite the gaping head-shot and fist-sized exit wound from Raine’s bullet, the dog-construct had barely bled at all, as if its veins were filled with dust and scabs. A little watery red fluid had leaked onto the grass in the field and the tarmac out front, but there was only a tiny puddle of pale plasma and brain matter sitting on the tarpaulin.

It also had no smell, which was creepy in a way I couldn't put my finger on.

The nightmare hound was all too familiar — an amalgamation of disparate parts pressed into a canine shape. In a way, Twil was correct, it was not really dog at all. Parts of it were lizard, grey-green and shedding old skin. Other parts were thick hide, like a herd animal, a buffalo or a bison. The legs looked bird-like, spindly, but wrapped with metal braces and supporting struts, all well-oiled and greased. It had no eyes, no nostrils, and no ears, just a smooth expanse of hairless skull. The jaw looked as if it had come from a miniature crocodile. It was attached with metal hinges. The teeth were stainless steel.

Raine and I had taken one look at the thing and both agreed we'd seen one before.

"What? Where?" Evelyn had demanded, during those first few frantic minutes back indoors. "I need to know, right now. Where did it come from?"

"The looping corridor trap," Raine said. "In Willow House. Remember that? When the Sharrowford Cult set a trap for you, but Heather and I blundered into it?" Raine patted her thigh. "I've still got a little scar from the bite. Praem, we're scar buddies now."

"I do not scar," said Praem. She had already rolled up her ruined sleeve and washed out the odd, bloodless wounds.

Evelyn blinked, eyes far away for a moment. "That was last year. We've not seen anything like this since then. Not even in the Cult's castle."

"Edward special, then," Michael Hopton suggested. "His own private style?"

"Right on, dad," said Twil. I realised how alike she and her father really were.

Raine nodded down at the hound-thing. "They had a couple o' dozen like that. Along with Zheng." Raine raised her voice, calling out of the kitchen to Zheng, who was lurking by the front door, watching the bubble-servitors surround the house in protective layers. "Hey, left hand? Come look, yeah?"

Zheng stalked in a moment later. Raine pointed at the corpse.

“Remember these, right?”

“Mm. When we duelled.”

“Hardly a duel. You had a lot of help. You know where they came from, back then?”

“Puppets for a mage,” Zheng rumbled. She didn’t even look at the corpse; her eyes were glued on any window she could find, watching the tree line beyond. I found it deeply reassuring, especially since I was still buzzing with adrenaline and covered in smears of mud.

“Eddy makes them?” Raine asked.

Zheng shrugged. “He brought them to the plan. They are his. That one is dead.”

“You don’t fuckin’ say,” added Twil, with a big, fake laugh — she was on edge. I had the sense she was faintly embarrassed that the hound had slipped past her earlier. Now she was covering for that with big laughs, back-slapping, and wind-up jokes.

“Like I said,” her father added. “An Edward special.”

Evelyn had spent a little while considering and investigating the dead hound. She had even forced herself to crouch down and look closer so she could sketch the thing, though the position put pressure on her hips and made her wince. I didn’t like that. Casting the spell had taken a lot out of her and she wasn’t even trying to pretend otherwise, or slow down; Praem had to help her with every step, help her stand up straight. She kept coughing blood, but thankfully that trailed off.

“At first I thought it might be an organic response to what we did with that spell,” she said. “Nothing to do with Edward at all. But it’s not; it does belong to him. Which is better, actually, much better.”

“How’d it get here so fast?” Michael asked.

“It didn’t, it must have already been on the way. Perhaps he already knew about us casting the spell,” Evelyn mused, a dark frown on her brow. “But that should be impossible.”

“Traitor in our midst?” Raine asked with a laugh, but nobody took that seriously.

“Is this it then?” Twil asked. Everyone in earshot had gone quiet at

that, to hear Evelyn's response. "Is this his return fire? We done?"

"Far from it," Evelyn replied. "This is a scout, at best. Stick to the plan. We bunker down. Everybody to your places. Eyes on the windows."

= =

We'd been bunkered down inside Geerswin farmhouse for nearly an hour, behind locked and bolted and barred doors — literally, in one case. Michael Hopton had broken out an antiquated-looking steel bar, taller than Zheng, which fitted into a pair of covertly placed brackets either side of the mostly-glass back doors onto the patio.

"Bit much, innit dad?" Twil had said.

"No chances, love," was his answer. "We all saw how fast that dog moved. No sense in being sorry later."

Evelyn had instructed us that nobody was to set foot outside, no window was to be opened by even a crack, and no door left untended. The first few minutes of our retreat indoors had been a mayhem of to-ing and fro-ing as we'd all piled in with Zheng carrying the corpse. Praem helped Evelyn, who was still coughing up clots of blood. Felicity too, staggering along under her own power and spitting into a handkerchief, even as she helped Kimberly and herded her in through the front door. The bubble-servitors had followed us to the walls of the house, contracting in a fortified ring and leaving the rest of the farm bare — though I was relieved to see three angels squatting on top of the brick-and-sheet-metal stables, to look out for the sheep and alpaca.

Felicity and Christine had worked together to take Kimberly upstairs without getting blood all over the carpets. Poor Kim was shivering, teeth chattering, eyes wild with adrenaline and fear. We could all hear water splashing into a bathtub upstairs; Lozzie was on the case already. Nicole had politely watched them go, and not with the expression of a woman who was trying to catch a glance of the naked body of somebody she fancied.

After the initial confusion, the hurrying back and forth along the corridors, the triple-checking of windows, the stowing of weapons, and the sight of Praem forcing Evelyn to sit down and drink a glass of water, the house slowly settled into an expectant waiting.

There were a few tasks to take care of — double-checking the magic

circle wards which Eevee had placed before all of the doors into the house; getting myself cleaned up, the mud wiped off my face and my hoodie; making sure that everybody had their modified pneuma-somatic seeing glasses ready.

Of course we checked the corpse of the dog, but that was really the only distraction. Most of “this here motley crew” — as Raine put it — took up the process of wandering from window to window in a slow circuit of the house. All eyes stayed on the tree line, the driveway, the shadows at the edge of the forest. Glances were shared in passing. One or another person would stop before a window — Raine here, Michael Hopton there, Zheng looming large against the front door — outlined by the crisp, sharp sunlight, dark silhouettes, watching.

Once Eevee was settled and no longer coughing up blood, Praem set about making tea and passing out mugs. A scrap of domestic comfort went a long way.

“It really does feel a bit like a castle under siege,” I murmured to Raine.

We were standing together in the little sitting room off the right side of the main spinal corridor. She was leaning against the corner of the bookcase and looking through the mostly-glass door in the side of the house, so she could watch the driveway and a sliver of road beyond.

“That’s exactly what it is,” she said, then flashed a grin without looking at me. “Enjoying it much?”

“Not really,” I sighed. “Castles should be more picturesque than this.”

Raine pulled a comedy wince. “Don’t let Twil’s mum hear you say that. She’s pretty house-proud, I think.” Her expression shifted as she pulled her attention away from the driveway and looked at me. A twinkle glinted in the depths of those rich brown eyes, warm and soft. “That was real brave of you out there, Heather.”

I sighed and blushed, dropping my voice. “Really stupid, more like. Please don’t flatter me, Raine. It wasn’t needed. I should have let Praem deal with it. I don’t have to be everybody’s angel all of time.”

“You’re my angel one hundred percent of the time.” She winked,

then leaned forward quickly and planted a kiss on my forehead, running a hand through my hair.

“Raine!” I squeaked, blushing far too hard. “I’m still dirty from rolling around outdoors!” I sighed and tried to smooth my hair down; I needed a bath too. “I just ... I felt such a sense of responsibility to Kim. We all have a responsibility to her. She didn’t have to volunteer for this. And she’s got work on Monday morning, just like usual. Going from this to back to normal, it’s hard. Maybe impossible.”

Raine’s smile turned deeply warm, as if she saw something in my eyes that I wasn’t aware of. “You’re right, Heather. We do have a responsibility to her. Good call.”

I sighed again and leaned my forehead against Raine’s arm for a moment. “I think I’ll go see her and say thank you.”

“Bet she’d love that. Kim trusts you a lot, you know?”

“Are you being serious?”

“Hundred percent. Always. You know me.”

“Do you think she’s out of the bathroom yet?” I glanced up at the ceiling, as if I could somehow see through brick and plaster and paint and tell if Kimberly was decent yet.

“Don’t hear anybody moving around again or refilling the tub, which means she’s either done, or she’s fallen asleep in the water. Fliss should be on hand to stop that though.”

I frowned at Raine as an unspeakable thought ghosted through my mind. “You don’t think Felicity was ... well, because Kimberly was naked, in the bath, and ...”

Raine shook her head emphatically. “Nah. I went up to check. Fliss was on guard outside the bathroom door. We got enough shit to worry about without something like that happening. Fliss is weird as hell but she’s not *that*.”

I blew out a slightly embarrassed breath. “Okay, fair enough, I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no need to apologise. You’re looking out for everybody. It’s good.”

My initial question was a fair one: it had obviously taken quite a lot

of effort for Kim to wash off all that blood. We'd heard the bathtub fill and empty three times over, interspersed with a lot of creaking floorboards, the sound of somebody moving about, and two long periods of water glugging through the pipes to feed the shower. Kimberly had been coated head to toe in bull's blood; I was surprised she hadn't asked to be scoured down with steel wool.

Despite seeing the Hopton's home quite extensively once before, both in nightmarish parody and by the light of day, I had never actually mounted the narrow, carpeted stairs up to the second floor. So out I went, past the tasteful paintings of alpine views, past Katey watching another window and exchanging some quiet words with Amanda Hopton, past Zheng lurking just inside the front door — where I paused to touch her hand, and she responded by ruffling my hair — and up the stairs I went.

The upper floor of Geerswin farmhouse was much the same as the first floor: unreconstructed, untouched by the cruel hand of modern interior design, never remodelled. Bare beams, old plaster, even some exposed water pipes for the radiators fed by the massive exposed wood boiler downstairs. I approved deeply. The only downside was that the corridor was kinked, cramped, and a bit low; not a problem for somebody of my height, but I did wonder if Michael Hopton ever bumped his head on his own bedroom door frame.

My tentacles instantly attached themselves to the walls and ceiling, eager to pull me along like a squid in a tube. I resisted the urge, as I didn't want poor Kimberly or perhaps Felicity to step out of a room and see me hurling down the corridor. They'd both had trials enough for one day.

The corridor formed a stubby little T-junction in the top of the house, cradling several bedrooms and one surprisingly large bathroom. I poked my head inside the open door of the bathroom and spent a moment admiring the absolutely gigantic claw-footed tub. It looked about eighty years old and could have easily contained Zheng, Raine, and me all at once. I banished that thought; now was not the time, Heather. Not the time, sadly.

The air in the bathroom still held a little steamy heat. The mirror was still fogged. A cluster of bathroom cleaning products sat at one end of the room, the kind of bottles which usually lived under a sink, like I had witnessed the rare emergence of a cave-dwelling

species. Somebody had dutifully cleaned the bath itself, leaving behind no trace of blood.

Felicity's coat sat in a bucket of cold water, to wash out the worst of the bloodstains, looking rather sad and wet.

To locate the others, I simply followed the sound of video games.

I found Sevens first, standing at the window at one end of the T-junction. It afforded her a perfect vantage point across the back fields, one of which was scarred and scored with the mud-runnels of the magic circle we had carved earlier. The canvas still lay in the middle, covered in blood, inert now.

Seven-Shades-of-Suitable-Sentry did not glance back over her shoulder as I approached. Low voices and the sounds of controller buttons came from the other end of the corridor, but I chose to go to her first.

"Sevens," I said, stopping next to her.

The Princess Mask, so starched and straight-backed, umbrella rolled up and held like a prop walking stick in one hand, granted me a sideways shift of unreadable eyes. "Kitten."

I sighed, but with a smile. "If I'm a kitten, what does that make you?"

"A hawk."

"Hardly!" I laughed. "Where's Aym gotten to? I must admit I'm slightly nervous about her running around unattended again."

"She has gone to inspect the woods."

"Oh." I bit my lip. "Evee did say we should all stay indoors."

"Aym's unique nature allows her to inspect the woods while remaining indoors." Sevens answered by talking to the window, not to me.

"So she's not here, not right now, not really?"

Seven-Shades-of-Spiky-Standoff shot me another inching sideways look. For some reason my shoulder blades itched. I crept tentacles behind me and behind Sevens, like an early warning system, in case Aym was about to sneak up on us and go 'boo!'

“Why do you ask that specific question, kitten?”

I made myself look like an absolute fool by glancing down the corridor behind us, as if worried about eavesdroppers. “Because I haven’t had any of you to myself for several days. Not that I’m claiming any right to you or something!” I blushed a little and pulled an increasingly awkward smile. “Just that a hug would be nice. You can wear the vampire mask if you’d rather not crease your nice smart blouse— o-oh!”

A tiny squeak of surprise escaped my lips as Sevens turned precisely ninety degrees and enveloped me in a sudden crushing hug. The Yellow Princess ruined the neat creases and crisp lines of her white blouse, and fatally disturbed the ruler-straight sheet of her blonde hair. She squeezed me as if trying to pull me into her chest, which was, I will admit, quite pleasant, though I was too surprised to fully enjoy it.

I hugged her back as best I could, suddenly very self-conscious of my hands and my tentacles messing up her aesthetic.

After what felt like minutes she finally let me go. She had not lifted me off my feet, but the way she set me back a pace or two made it feel that way regardless. I was suddenly breathless, flushed in the face, a little ruffled. The Yellow Princess betrayed no emotion, but her clothes were just that tiny bit out of place, blouse askew, hair less than perfect.

“Oh, Sevens, I’m sorry, you’re all mussed up.” I reached for her blouse. Why, I have no idea — I was not exactly good at this sort of thing. Any attempt to straighten things out would likely leave them worse than if I hadn’t tried at all.

Seven-Shades-of-Sudden-Snuggles caught my wrist in one hand.

“S-Sevens?”

She held me there for a heartbeat, staring at my eyes. Then: “Leave your mark on me, beloved.”

We stayed there like that for several long seconds. I waited for more, heart pounding in my chest. Sevens stared into my eyes as if expecting to find terrible sadness there. She was like a statue, rock solid, absolutely still. I wondered for a moment if she had vacated the mask, left it empty, an echoing vessel.

"Sevens?" I murmured eventually. "Are you ... ? You want me to ... ?"

No, I chided myself very gently. This wasn't how Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight worked. I tried again.

"Sevens, are you wearing the wrong mask right now?"

"I wish to monopolise a fraction of your attention," she said. "I wish to claim what is mine."

"Okay," I said, which was a terrible thing to say because it said nothing. Then I swallowed hard and tried to stop glowing like a light bulb. "Well, I'm here right now. I was going to check on Kim, but there's no crisis, not yet, I've got time for you." I added in a hurry: "I mean, I've always got time for you. You only have to ask. I ... I think that's how it works."

"Time in the opening of a siege," Sevens said. "Locked in together. What better moment to face inward?"

I sighed. "It's hardly a siege. Might turn out that nothing happens. All a bit anti-climactic"

Sevens let go of my wrist. She caressed it as she let go, so I pulled it away very slowly. She said, "I am being unreasonable."

"I don't think you are. You've been stuck with Aym for several days and—"

"I have not been *stuck* with Aym," said the Princess. "She is sweet on the inside. Soft. A little bitter. I wish I had been there, in my prior years, when she had needed guidance."

"I'm glad you and her are getting along. I think. Gosh, this is very strange. It's like you two come from the same place and have things in common that you and I don't. Is that jealous of me?"

"Do you want to feel jealous?"

"I don't really. I'm more interested in how you feel, Sevens."

The Yellow Princess stared at me for several heartbeats, then turned away to stare out of the window again. The sunlight dusted the sharp lines of her face, her smooth cheeks, her clear eyes. "I feel unmoored, kitten. This is not your fault."

"... well, I'm going to ... re-moor you," I said. Then I reached up

and tucked a lock of her already messed up hair behind one of her ears.

It didn't suit the shape of her face or the look of her hair, not one bit. But she turned her head and blinked at me.

"If I'm an angel," I said. "If I'm going to be an angel, if I'm going to define myself that way to help deal with all the nonsense that flows around me, then I have to be that to you, too. So if you feel unmoored, you can come to me."

Sevens stared, then nodded, then returned to looking out of the window.

I touched her fingers, she touched mine. I stayed there for a minute or two, staring out at the dark tree line and hoping nothing showed up. Then we parted for now and I padded down the corridor in my socks, following the sounds of video games and the soft murmur and trill of familiar voices.

Twil's bedroom was at the opposite end of the corridor, next to a matching window which looked out over the trees next to the driveway. I paused for a moment to peer down at the slip of visible road and up at the rustling treetops, thinking about zombified pigeons and magically-reanimated mosquitoes. But nothing moved except the grass in the wind and the vague oily blobs of the bubble-servitors. All was quiet. Perhaps we were waiting for nothing.

I poked my head gingerly around the door of Twil's bedroom. "Hello, everyone. Just here to check. Hi. Hello."

"Brrrrrrrr!" went Tenny, without looking around from the telly.

Twil waved me in. "Big H! Come join! We're about to get totally mullered here, 'cos Tenny doesn't understand the first thing about football."

"Brrrrrrt!" Tenny trilled again. Tentacles were flickering, antennae were twitching; somebody was very frustrated.

I crept over the threshold and into exactly the kind of room I expected Twil to cultivate.

Despite the low ceilings and narrow corridors, the upstairs rooms of Geerswin farmhouse were large and airy. Twil's room had the same exposed-beams-and-bare-plaster look as the rest of the house, but she'd painted the plaster a soft, cool blue and covered the beams in

junk, video game cases, loose books, a primary school sports trophy, a rugby ball with a spike through it — I reminded myself to ask if there was a story behind that one — and a dozen other pieces of personal bric-a-brac. The walls in between were covered in posters of all kinds: bands, movie posters, pages ripped straight out of old video game magazines. I spotted weird movie monsters and spooky landscapes, footballers and rugby players I could not have named if somebody had threatened me, cartoon characters and anime characters and even a couple of Evelyn's colourful ponies.

Above Twil's narrow bed was a 3D poster of a werewolf, in pride of place. Laminated corners curling, printed in that green-and-red 3D style that hadn't been in fashion since the 90s, I had the sudden flash of insight that it had been above her bed for a very long time indeed.

Two narrow windows at the far end provided woefully little light, but she had a pair of standing lamps casting a warm glow on the low ceiling and spilling back down onto the rest of the room.

On one side was a narrow bed, covers neatly made, tucked in, pillows forming a sensible bulge at one end. At its foot was a large and overflowing dresser, proving that Twil loved clothes but had little ability to organise them. The top was stacked with all sorts of junk — more clothes, more books, old mugs in need of being taken downstairs. Hand cream, a takeaway menu, a plush albatross as big as Aym, a tower of empty tissue boxes which made me wince, and what I'm quite certain was a dirty magazine, which should not have been left visible while Tenny was in the room.

The desk past the dresser surprised me. Beneath the window so it got the best light, absolutely piled with textbooks and school-work and well-thumbed notepads, it was organised to perfection. Twil had ring-binders and post-it notes, coloured separators and a mug of highlighters. She had three calculators and a reading lamp. *A reading lamp.*

Sometimes it was easy to forget that Twil was — academically speaking — incredibly driven and quite smart.

Twil herself was perched on the end of the bed so she could watch the action unfolding on the telly which dominated the opposite side of the room, currently wearing the grin of a blood-mad football hooligan.

Kimberly and Lozzie were sat on the bed behind her. I had expected Kimberly to look like hell, probably shell-shocked, maybe in need of a very big hit from one of her special hand-rolled cigarettes. I wouldn't have blamed her; she'd stripped naked and been drenched in bull's blood in front of everybody, then come within inches of being killed by a rip-off Hammer Horror mutant dog.

But Kim was glowing.

She was wearing clothes borrowed from Twil — a bright orange t-shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms — and wrapped in a large fluffy green dressing gown which I guessed belonged to Christine Hopton. She was scrubbed and pink from the bath, with huge bags under her eyes. And she was smiling like I'd never seen her smile before. It wasn't a grin or a smirk, but something subtle and deep. The smile reached all the way up to her eyes and made their corners crinkle.

She wasn't even smiling at anything in particular. Lozzie was just behind her and in the process of kneading the muscle knots out of Kim's shoulders, but she didn't seem lost in physical bliss. She was simply here, present, surrounded by others.

Felicity was sat more distant, on the cheap swivel chair in front of Twil's desk. She looked shell-shocked and exhausted and drained, back bent, feet flat on the floor. Without her coat she was thinner, more unhealthy, wrapped in an old jumper and jeans. I felt a bizarre urge to make sure she ate something.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the bed, video game controller in her hands, face pinched in a frown, tentacles wiggling and wagging with hard concentration, was Tenny.

I couldn't make any sense of the rows of numbers and statistics on the screen.

"Well," I said in reply to Twil. "I don't know anything about football either. You're not teasing Tenny, are you?"

"Footbaaaaaall," Tenny trilled. She pressed buttons and made some numbers switch around on the screen.

"Nah!" Twil laughed. "We're playing Football Manager! Well, Tenny's playing, and losing."

"Buuuu," went Tenny, pouting. Twil leaned forward and ruffled her fluffy white hair, careful to avoid jostling her antennae. Tenny

made a frustrated noise and navigated through a series of menus, which included pitch diagrams, player positions, and a very authentic looking team shirt, in bright red.

“Are you meant to be watching a window?” I asked Twil.

“Nah. Mum said to take a break, watch Kim.” Twil shrugged.

Kimberly spoke up, much to my surprise. Her voice was light and airy, a smile in her words. “Oh, I don’t understand anything about football either. I’ve never even seen a real game. But Tenny is very enthusiastic.”

She blinked slowly, eyelids heavy, feet stretched out on the bed. She scrunched her toes and sighed.

I caught Lozzie’s eye and glanced at Felicity too, frowning a silent question at both of them in turn. Just behind Kim’s sight-line, Lozzie shook her head and mouthed ‘sober!’ Felicity shrugged, too tired to say anything.

Others had been up here to check on Kimberly, of course, I wasn’t the first or only. Praem and Christine had both made sure she was well; Praem had even reported back to Eeve. Neither of them had mentioned that Kimberly looked like she’d downed a fistful of codeine.

“Kim?” I ventured softly, walking over to join them on the bed.

“Kim, how are you feeling now?”

Tenny pressed a button and a football match started up on the telly, virtual crowd murmuring to itself as the simulated players got started. Kimberly’s eyes wandered from the screen and found me, lazy and slow.

“Not bad,” she said. “Considering.”

I eased myself down on the bed. “If you don’t mind me saying, you seem a little ... abstracted.”

“High,” she said. “You mean I seem like I’m high.”

I glanced at the back of Tenny’s head. She didn’t seem to have noticed, too focused on the video game. “I’m not sure we should talk about that in front of certain people.”

Lozzie, leaning over Kimberly’s shoulders, did a funny little bounce on the bed, making everybody wobble. “Tenns knows what drugs

are! I taught her all the things, Heathy.”

“Yeah,” Twil added without looking over her shoulder. She was glued to the fake football match too, which seemed to be just random highlights. “Knowledge is always better than ignorance. Better the devil you know, all that.”

Felicity spoke heavily from the rear of the room. She was watching the match too, vague and uninterested. “Better not to know the devil at all.”

I struggled not to pull a grimace, knowing what I knew about Felicity’s personal history with addictive pharmaceuticals. Perhaps she was trying to share a piece of wisdom, but between her tone and her scarred half-mumble it came off as especially grim and grisly.

“Well,” I said awkwardly, smiling back at Kim. “You do seem very happy.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know why.”

“Endorphins,” Felicity added, low and serious. “Survivor’s high. I’ve told her a dozen times already.” She looked over to me with a sort of sympathetic sigh on her half-burned face, then dropped her eyes, almost ashamed. “Sorry.”

“Nah you’ve got a point,” Twil said. She hadn’t seen the look. “Brush with death, makes you feel alive.”

“I do feel alive,” Kim said. “I feel like I want to ... I want to ... go on a bike ride, or something! Oh, oh that sounds so lame. I mean I want to do something exciting. Something I normally wouldn’t do.”

I nodded along. “You deserve it. If there’s anything we — me and Evee and the others, I mean — if there’s anything we can do, anywhere we can take you, let us know.”

Kimberly blinked. Her eyes were shining, but her smile dribbled off, replaced with a slow-struck awe. I didn’t like that look; it had too much in common with the way Badger looked at me.

“Kim,” I added quickly, trying to head that off before she said something to make me cringe. “Thank you. What you did today, nobody else was ready to do. You didn’t have to. Thank you. You’ve done a lot for me. And it is for me, I’m not going to pretend it isn’t.”

Twil snorted a laugh. “Getting rid of Eddy is gonna be good for everybody.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “That too.”

Kim reached out and brushed my elbow with her fingers. I almost wrapped a tentacle around her hand on instinct, but managed to stop at the last moment, mostly because Lozzie poked the tentacle in question.

“Oh, no,” Kim was saying now she had my attention. Her lower lip was wobbling slightly. “Thank you, Heather. So much. For leaping to my rescue. You’re too good to me. You’re all too good to me.”

I cringed through a smile. “I didn’t need to leap like that. The others had it all under control. Thank Praem instead.”

“I did!” Kimberly nodded. “Praem ... I love Praem. She’s been so ... kind. Nice. She’s just always there. You know when I can’t sleep, she knocks on my door sometimes? She’s so sweet.” Her eyes were growing wet and scrunched as she spoke. “I love Evee too. I’d be on the streets without her, I really would, I never would have gotten that job.” Kim sniffed hard. Lozzie patted her shoulder with flaps of her pastel poncho. “And it worked. The spell worked. I hope we find Edward, that old ... old ... guy. Thing. Get that book. Get your sister. I’d like to meet her.”

Kimberly was crying now, holding herself right on the verge of tears. Everyone else had gone awkwardly quiet, embarrassed by this slow and heartfelt outburst of raw emotion. Two of Tenny’s silken black tentacles had crept up to clutch Kim’s left leg, but that was all. Only Lozzie knew how to respond, scooting around and giving Kimberly somebody to hug. Kim responded without thinking, clinging to Lozzie.

“Flowsie, Flowsie,” Lozzie murmured, a little sing-song. “You were always such a dummy. Dumbo dummy doos.”

“I don’t deserve that name,” she murmured into Lozzie’s shoulder.

I hadn’t heard Lozzie call Kimberly ‘Flowsie’ in months — the private name from their time in the Sharrowford Cult. I was reminded, once again, that these two had known each other long before I’d known either of them. When we had first dragged Kimberly out of the cult’s castle alongside us, Lozzie had declared that she didn’t care if ‘Flowsie’ lived or died. Now she was giving

her a shoulder to cry on.

Felicity managed to look most awkward of all. She caught my eye and pulled a grimace. "Survivor's high," she whispered again. "It'll pass."

"You were beautiful," Kimberly was saying, one eye watching me over Lozzie's shoulder. "You and Zheng. Zheng! I knew her for years, big frightening monster, and she was running, for me. And Praem." Kimberly's eyes fluttered shut. "There is a beauty in magic. There is. There can be."

She trailed off to nothing, breathing softly into Lozzie's shoulder. Maybe she'd fallen asleep.

Twil cleared her throat gently. The simulated football match on the television had gone to penalties. "Hope you're not talking about that bloody great hole in the ground," she said. "Wouldn't call that beautiful myself."

"Twil," I said. "Language. Tenny's here."

"Oh shit!" Twil clapped a hand to her mouth. "I mean, sugar!"

"Bloody is a bad word," Tenny trilled, sing-song style. Lozzie giggled, setting a very bad example.

"Please don't tell Eevee, okay?" Twil said. "And don't repeat that word. It's bad. Rude. A rude word, alright Tenns?"

"I'm not rude," Tenny said, all a-flutter.

Felicity spoke as if she hadn't heard the last few moments of conversation, untouched by levity. "That breach was unexpected," she said. I didn't have to ask for clarification to know she was talking about the gigantic void which had opened in the ground, out in the field, the impossible sucking hole in reality.

"Was that normal?" I asked.

Felicity looked up. The bags were heavy beneath her eyes. She always had such a haunted look, even below the exhaustion. "There's nothing normal about what we've done here. We did real magic. Large scale. We changed something about the arrangement of reality. That's not going to go unnoticed, and not just by this Edward guy."

I froze, staring at her. "Are you saying we've opened ourselves up to

additional danger?”

Felicity shrugged. “I don’t know. I try to keep my head down, most of the time. This is the first in a while I’ve broken that habit.”

She raised her gloved hands, either to check herself or to show them to me. Both of them were shaking with anxiety.

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to Eevee about it, not yet,” I said. “Everything has been so hectic. But I doubt she would countenance something which would create even more danger, not these days. Even if she was reckless when you knew her, she’s not that way anymore. She’s got much more to live for.”

Felicity returned her hands to her lap, linking her fingers to hide the shaking. “That’s ... that’s good to know. Good to hear. She has seemed ... driven. She was always driven, I mean. I’m sorry. Forget I said anything, forget—”

“Sweeties and sweetums,” crooned a voice made of rusty knives and the smell of melted plastic. “Don’t look now, but somebody’s stolen our horizon.”

All eyes — including Kimberly’s, which snapped open — looked to the doorway. Aym stood there like the spooky little sprite she was, head to toe in black lace, hood up, voice coming from a dark oval of nothing.

“Aym?” Felicity said instantly, not missing a beat. “Explain. Right now.”

Aym giggled, a noise like nails pattering on a blackboard. Down the corridor, Sevens’ shoes went click-click-click until she joined Aym in the doorway. The Yellow Princess was a mask of self-control.

“Aym is not exaggerating,” she said. “You should see. Tenny, stay here. Lozzie, watch her.”

Shouts of surprise and alarm were coming from the bottom floor of the house. Evelyn was calling my name. Raine was shouting to “look at it through the glasses, use the glasses! It’s not just the dogs!”

I was out of the room and into the corridor as fast as my tentacles could carry me. Others followed. Sevens ushered me along, down to the window she’d been staring out of earlier. Aym capered and scurried, but I could see her nervous energy was a false amusement.

Across the field, beyond the farm, the tree line was full of hounds. Maybe a dozen creatures similar to the dead one downstairs, pacing back and forth, staring at the house with sightless eyes or mismatched orbs.

Dark shapes hung in the trees, avoiding the sunlight, heavy and hanging like lumpy and unnatural sloths.

And above it all, forming a new skyline, dwarfing farmhouse and trees and all, was a spider-servitor the size of an oil rig.

sediment in the soul – 19.4

I used to have fantasies about being trapped in a siege.

In the early days after the Eye took Maisie away — but not so early that I was screaming at every unnatural shadow and twisted spirit-creature, not so early that I was a sobbing, inconsolable wreck, not so early that every fantasy was a dark warm place and my sister returned to me. An imaginary siege was one of the fantasies which I retreated to for comfort, for safety, for security inside the soot-marked, crater-pocked palace of my own mind. A decent psychologist could probably get a thesis or two out of that, if their training and world-view survived the transition to being in the know: a young girl retreats inside a mental fortress and imagines everything outside herself as a besieging army. That's how it felt in the early days. Except the enemy was already inside the castle, leaning over my shoulder and screaming mathematics into my ear.

It was always on the worst nights at Cygnet Children's Hospital, the ones when spirits had wandered into my bedroom and wouldn't leave, when I couldn't tell if the night-time noises were coming from the other children or from things I couldn't see, when I missed home and my parents, when I rejected the judgement that I was mentally unwell, when I missed Maisie enough to sob her name into the pillow. On those nights I would snuggle down in bed — the sheets and pillows at Cygnet really were very high quality — and I would conjure up a castle.

Never a fanciful fairytale castle, never the sort of sugar-spun spires-and-banners that Maisie and I together might have enjoyed; I required a fortress, a bastion, or at least my childhood concept of one. Thick walls, blunt corners, great big bolt throwers on blocky towers; gates made of adamantium — I'd read that word somewhere and I rather liked it — barred and barricaded. Layers and layers of walls, each one overlooking the last. I'd read about that somewhere too, but I couldn't recall where. I couldn't clearly recall much in those days. My fantasies were vague about the defenders — knights of some kind, it didn't matter — and about the besiegers. Sometimes I would imagine the besieging army was all the bizarre and horrible monsters I saw everywhere, my

‘hallucinations’, but that often made me more upset, made it harder to sleep, ended with me working myself into a panic even huddled under the covers with my eyes closed.

Maisie was always there. Of course she was, that was half the point. Tucked away alongside me in some secret inner keep, looking out of a window together, with a big roaring fire and lots of food and books and a nice big bed and guards right outside the doors — our guards, our safety.

When I grew up a bit and understood myself a little better, I would sometimes add other girls too. Nobody specific; I didn’t have an imaginary girlfriend, I just liked the idea of being cosy and safe alongside nice girls who I could cuddle up to.

With everything I’d learned since then? If I’d ever had an imaginary girlfriend, I’d probably confess it to Eevee, so she could put me in a magic circle to check I hadn’t been compromised somehow. Imaginary girls were likely vectors for the Eye.

Sieges were comfort food for my young imagination — but now I was in the middle of the genuine article.

No Maisie, no thick walls, no nice safe room with a roaring fire and books and a bed. But I did have the girlfriends, no less than three of them, of varying kinds from Raine through Zheng and all the way to Sevens. And Eevee, of course, though this was hardly the time for that, even if she did fit the type from my old childhood fantasies.

But this was not the kind of siege during which one could snuggle down in bed and fall asleep.

Down on the ground floor of Geerswin farmhouse, everyone was talking at once, peering out of the windows, rushing between doors, shouting and gesticulating and losing their heads.

“Fuck me, fuck me, that is massive, what the fuck—”

“Glasses on! You can’t see it without the glasses!”

“You’ve summoned a kaiju! That’s a kaiju out there! Twil you arse, you’ve jinxed us with horror movie bullshit.”

“I knew you lot would be the death of me.”

“Gave you the chance to leave, detective.”

“We’re perfectly safe indoors. Hey, hey, breathe, okay? Look, there’s

a wall of Cringe-dog's soap-bubble friends between us and that bloody great spider. They could bury it, no problem. We're safe. Right, Amanda?"

"Cringe-dog?"

"Hey, it's a pet name. I mean it with affection. Heather says he's sweet — so he's sweet. Any friend of hers and all that. I trust the blob-monsters."

"I don't! Fuck them! We should leave, now!"

"Yeah good luck running. You saw how fast the hounds were."

"That's what guns are for!"

"Spider."

"A servitor that size is not a one-mage undertaking. I should know. My own attempts never get that far. This is impossible."

"Hringewindla doesn't ... like ... approve? Agree? He does not like this spider. This is ... he won't ... I don't understand, I don't—"

"Amanda, breathe, close your eyes, focus. You know how it gets when he thinks too fast. Sit down, let him direct his angels. Let him take us in his hands. He will protect us. He always does. Sit, now. That's it, sit down."

"Shaman?"

Zheng rumbled a greeting as I joined her at the glass doors at the front of the sitting room, the ones which led out onto the patio, with a wide view of the fields beyond, the fences, the magic circle we'd carved into the dirt, and the sun-shivered tree line which ringed the farm. I shielded my eyes against the bright and glinting sunlight. I peered out and up — and up, and up, at Edward Lilburne's response to our assault.

Behind us the chaos was only getting worse.

"What does this mean? What does it mean, hey? Does this mean we can get to Eddy's house now?"

"It means it is no longer concealed. The way is clear."

"That's a kaiju! I don't know if you've seen many giant monster movies, but this is not exactly a defensible position, you twat!"

“Spider. Cute.”

“We’re safe. Trust Evee’s judgement. And hey, trust your god, right?”

“He’s not infallible!”

“I trust Hringewindla. I trust him absolutely.”

“The hell? Ben, you never say that shit. Don’t freak out on me, come on.”

“I am terrified. I’m not ashamed. You get terrified in combat. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“It’s too big!”

“Fuck *big*, I’ll climb it and rip it’s head off!”

“Miss Saye, please, I would like to put forward a serious evacuation plan. This is far more than we expected. Hringewindla is powerful and he can defend this house, but I would rather that ... spider not put a leg through our roof.”

“Tiles need replacing anyway, dad.”

“Spider.”

“Why is the maid just saying ‘spider’?! This isn’t helping! We can all see it’s a fucking spider!”

“Spider. Itsy bitsy.”

“I can take the dogs out from the window. Or I could, if we had an actual rifle, scoped. Even small calibre. They drop with one in the brain, like anything else alive.”

“The dogs aren’t the problem!”

“Are those *sloths* in the trees? I can see them without the glasses. Big ‘ol lumpy weirdos.”

“*Brrrrrrttttt!*”

“Take her back upstairs, Lozzie, please.”

“She’s afraid!”

“Come with me, Tenna. Everything is going to be safe. I promise I will look after you. Lozzie too, take my other hand.”

“Everything is not going to be safe after this. Miss Saye, you are basically in charge—”

“It’s taking a step forward!”

“It’s slow.”

“It’s big!”

Evelyn’s voice suddenly cut through the cacophonous madness: “It’s a bluff.”

Her stony confidence stopped everybody panicking and talking over each other for a moment, which was a nice change. I even turned away from the window to look back at her, and found her blazing like a lit torch. Up on her feet despite the draining difficulty of the earlier spell, all her weight on her prosthetic and her walking stick, flinty blue eyes staring past me and past the fields and up at the spider-servitor towering over the woodland canopy. She was so certain, so absolutely unbowed. It was beautiful.

Everybody else — all except for myself and Zheng — were caught in a frozen tableau. Praem was supporting Evee’s other arm. Michael Hopton had been in the process of appealing for retreat, directly to Evee. His wife, Christine Hopton, was tending to a flushed and dazed Amanda, struggling with the demands and fears of her god, Hringewindla. Katey, the spare bodyguard, looked terrified, though she was clutching her revolver. Benjamin Hopton was drawn and grey, like a soldier listening to an incoming shell. Mister George, who I’d figured out was Katey’s father, was chewing the end of an unlit cigarette.

Twil was grinning but the grin didn’t reach her eyes, craning to see the spider and the escorts at the far end of the field. Raine was a rock, unmoved by any of this, not a single hint of doubt in her face; but I could tell from the way she stood and the way she angled her body that she was vibrating to scoop me up and haul me to the car and drive away.

Nicole Webb was taking slow, deep breaths, arms folded, watching the tree-line past the spider. Felicity looked grim, set, like she’d seen all this before and knew it was going to end in disaster; she’d also slid closer to Evelyn, which surprised me. Down in the spinal corridor, Sevens and Aym were leading Lozzie and Tenny back to the stairs. Kimberly was peering around the door. I longed to tell

her to go away, forget all this, because her task was done. She'd given enough.

Every baseline human had a pair of modified glasses on their face, some with the silly 3D blue-and-red, some just plain black frames. Nicole was looking over the rims of hers, checking reality against pneuma-somatic truth.

"Evee?" I said.

Our eyes met and she nodded. "A bluff, I'm certain. Heather, look at the legs. Look closely. Even I can see it from here and I've not exactly got the best eyesight in the world."

I turned back to the doors and pressed my face to the glass. Behind me, voices rose again, the chaos resuming as uncertainty returned — but then Zheng rumbled like an angry volcano.

"The shaman must concentrate. Quiet."

"Thanks, Zheng," I murmured.

Twil tutted. "Didn't have to say it like that," she muttered.

"Shh," went Praem. "Spider."

The spider-servitor towered over the farm, the house, and treetops alike; the underbelly of its main body cleared the canopy by maybe a dozen feet. If it had been real flesh rather than pneuma-somatic matter, one could have seen the thing all the way over in Brinkwood. We were exceptionally lucky that everybody in that house was in the know. I suspected that this introduction to the supernatural might go poorly for anybody who'd ever seen a Godzilla movie.

But it wasn't quite like one of Evee's spiders.

It was very tall and very large, like a walking oil rig, much larger even than the ancient, exhausted, battle-scarred spider-servitor that we'd seen down on the Saye estate in Sussex, the last and greatest survivor of Evelyn's grandmother's generation. It was plated in the same black chitin, but smooth and unblemished, reflecting the sunlight in a glinting sheen of beetle-black. Yet it lacked the crystalline head of the smaller servitors, instead sporting just a black and featureless face plate. It had no bank of swaying stingers, no heat-exchanger vents on its back, nothing but the body and the head and the legs. And the legs were thin and spindly, angular and

steep, as if based more on a crane fly than a wolf spider.

The spider took another step forward as I watched, edging into the field and out of the woods.

“No stingers, no eyes?” I said. “It’s not the same as the ones your family made in the past, I can see that, I—”

“The legs, Heather. Look. Confirm for me, please. Somebody else, too. Twil, you have good eyes. Look.”

“Oh!” I lit up with sudden realisation. “One of the back legs is sticking right through a tree! Like a spirit, going through a wall!”

Evelyn blew out a sigh of relief. “Then you see it too. It’s not a servitor. Not a true one.”

“Yuuuup,” said Twil. “It’s moving that leg now, but — yeah, there it goes, right through the tree. Without touching it. It’s not real!”

Evelyn raised her chin and declared: “It can’t touch this house. That thing is a bluff.”

Felicity made a sound like sucking her teeth. “Doesn’t look right. Not to me.”

“Miss Saye, Evelyn,” said Christine Hopton, polite but with an undercurrent of terrible urgency. “Not all of us here are used to the spirit world and its denizens. What do you mean by ‘it can’t touch this house’? Forgive us our ignorance, but we are all a little scared by that ... ”

“Kaiju,” Katey supplied. “Also yeah, we don’t get this. How exactly are we safe from that?”

For all her energetic angry terror, Katey couldn’t help but notice that several of us had calmed down significantly — myself, Twil, Raine, Evelyn, even Nicole Webb. Mister George put a tobacco-stained hand on his daughter’s shoulder, which helped further.

Twil laughed at her. “It’s like a ghost. Can’t touch us. Spirit, not servitor! Don’t ask me though, Evee’s the expert.”

I half-expected Evelyn to huff and grumble and refuse to explain, but she nodded curtly to the Hoptons and the other members of the Church before rattling it off in the most concise way I could have imagined. “There are three kinds of pneuma-somatic flesh — spirit flesh. The first is naturally occurring. Pneuma-somatic life, spirits,

they're made of that stuff. It can't touch us or do anything to us, passes through matter most of the time. Don't ask me how they touch the ground. The second type is artificial, made by mages or ... or gods, I suppose. Servitors, your bubble-angels, they can touch things, but they can't be seen with normal methods. That spider out there just walked *through* a tree. It's not a true servitor. If it was it would have shook the forest as it had moved. Would have seismographs shaking all over the North. It's just a spirit."

Michael Hopton asked with a gentle frown: "You said three kinds. What's the third?"

"Hello," said Praem.

"The type you can both touch and see with normal eyes, yes," Evelyn said. "Rare, impossible. Demon-only. Never mind about that right now." She gestured at the spider with her walking stick. "The spider is a bluff. It can't do anything to us."

Raine cleared her throat. "Sorry to burst the bubble, but what if it's like Marmite?"

"What?" Evelyn snapped.

"*Marmite*?" said Mister George. I think he'd just decided we were all mad.

"Marmite," Raine explained to Evee. "The spirit which Edward hijacked to mess with Stack's kid. He's a spirit, but Edward made him more, right? And he phased through the roof to get away, ignored regular matter when it suited him, but could touch it at other times." Raine nodded out the window. The spider was taking another step into the field. "What if that thing out there is the same?"

Several nervous glances criss-crossed the room.

"Miss Saye," said Michael Hopton. "You have to be certain."

"It's not a servitor," she repeated.

"But can it touch us?" he pressed.

"Yeah!" Katey added. "That's the important bit."

I spoke up, staring out of the window, my arms folded and my tentacles tight against a sudden inner chill. "It's not like Marmite. Edward wouldn't risk that again. I could ... I could just walk up and

touch that spider. If he's piloting it like he did with Marmite ... well, I'm more experienced now. He wouldn't get away from me." I shook my head. "He wouldn't risk it."

"He's an arrogant fuck!" said Twil. "Sure he'd try it again."

Felicity said gently, softly, as if she didn't expect anybody to hear, "Mages are more cautious than that. Old ones especially."

Evelyn snapped. "And therein lies the bait. It's a bluff, a trick to draw us out."

Katey spoke up too. "Ain't that what the hounds are for? Keep us away from its legs so we can't ... " Her eyes slid to me, nervous and uncertain. "Do something ... unnatural to it?"

Evelyn snorted. "Heather riding Zheng's back could be past them in seconds. No, the hounds don't matter." Then she pointed at me with her walking stick. "Do *not* actually do that, Heather. I forbid it. This is a trap."

Zheng purred. "The shaman rides where she wants, when she wants, how she wants."

Twil huffed. "Thought you were a tiger, not a horse."

Nicole was still squinting out into the sunlight. "What about the big sloth things in the trees? They're giving me the creeps. They're not moving."

None of us could quite make out the details of the lurkers in the trees. They were furred and rough, grey-brown lumps, hanging like sloths but each as large as a cow. Michael Hopton produced an ancient pair of binoculars from somewhere, squinted through them, then passed them around so we could all try. I shook my head, couldn't make them out properly. Trying made my eyes water.

Twil tutted. "They're real flesh, that's for sure. Can see 'em even without the glasses. Fat bastards too."

"Do not be rude," said Praem.

Evelyn said, "They're the real threat. Hundred pounds says so. The spider is bait, to flush us out or scatter us. The hounds are chaff." She huffed. "But he would know I'd figure all this out. He would know. It's a double-bluff. Something I'm not seeing here. Something I'm not seeing." She trailed off, talking between gritted teeth.

"It's not a spirit," I murmured.

"What? Heather?"

Katey sighed. "Here we go again."

"It's not a spirit," I repeated. "The spider, I mean. It's not."

Nobody said anything so I glanced back and found a room full of bewildered faces staring at me, at my tone of voice. The Hoptons were doubly confused, tugged back and forth between reassurance and fresh panic. Twil was squinting at me in confusion. Kimberly, at the rear of the room, looked oddly calm compared to her usual panic, just nodding at me. Only Felicity seemed to understand what I meant, grim-faced and ready to die.

Lozzie and Tenny had reappeared in the doorway, escorted by Sevens and Aym. I bit my lip at them.

Sevens said, "I could not stop them."

"Tenns is scared," Lozzie said. "She has a right to know, like everybody else. Heathy!"

"Brrrt," went Tenny, eyes so huge and black, staring at me for reassurance. Half her tentacles were wrapped around Lozzie, the other half hugging herself. Her wing-cloak obscured the front of her body, pulled tight, beginning to shift and flutter like oil dancing on water. Her instincts were telling her to hide. She blinked at me, then past me at the giant spider which was taking another striding step across the field, heading for the house. "Heath? Heath-er!"

My bioreactor slid a control rod out, smooth and sharp, then a second, with a quick little pain in my side; I couldn't stop that from happening, not if I'd shoved a tentacle inside my flank and grown pneuma-somatic flesh over the organs. I felt my skin flush and my thoughts clear. Something hardened inside my chest. Tenny did not deserve to be afraid like this.

"Hey, Tenns," said Raine. "We're gonna be perfectly safe. I promise you, I'll make us safe. Me and everybody else. You hear that, Tenns?"

"Yaaaah," went Tenny.

"Lozzie," I spoke up quickly. "If the worst starts to happen—"

Lozzie finished before I could: "Grab as many people as I can and

off to Camelot to visit the castle!”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Evelyn hissed. “Heather, what do you mean it’s not a spirit? Don’t just say that and then move on.”

“Sorry.” I snapped my attention to Eevee and she blinked as if surprised by something in my eyes. “It doesn’t look like a spirit. I can’t explain it very well, but it’s the same reason that I could tell Marmite wasn’t a true servitor. Spirits look organic. Their logic is organic. Or there’s no logic at all.” I shrugged, thinking of hundreds of bizarre shapes and amalgams and warped creatures I’d seen over the years, stumbling and loping and hopping and drooling. My shoulders felt like electricity and rubber and oil. “Servitors look artificial. Made. Crafted. It’s subtle, but it’s there.” I looked up at the spider. “That’s not organic. Somebody made that.”

“It’s still bait,” Eevee said.

“Uhhhhh,” said Twil, tugging the glasses down her face. “What if it’s like, an illusion? Can mages do that? Can we do that?”

Her mother gave a little sigh, “No, dear.”

Raine said, “Illusion would make sense, but it’s a big risk for us to assume. Eevee?”

“Somebody needs to check,” said Katey. “Somebody’s gonna have to go out there and check, before it hits the house.”

“And step into this trap?” Evelyn snapped at her. “No. It’s either a spirit or—”

“Eevee, it’s not a spirit,” I repeated.

“—or an illusion,” Evelyn finished, eyes blazing at me. “Heather, talk to me, what is happening?”

I blinked at her. “I’m sorry?”

Eevee huffed. Twil laughed. Benjamin Hopton nodded at something he saw in my face, nodded with approval. Nicole just sighed and said, “Seen her like this before. Great. Just what we need.”

“W-what?” I stammered, wrong-footed. “I mean, pardon me?”

Raine said, “Heather, you look like you’re ready to fight God. Also

like you might win.”

Bewildered, I rubbed a hand over my face and felt it come away sweaty and cold. My eyes were wide, my heart was pounding, and I was vibrating all over — but I wasn’t afraid. Just a little anxious, a seed of anxiety in my chest getting ground to paste by teeth inside my heart. I was ready to do something, Raine was right about that; my tentacles were twitching and aching, inching toward the door handle and the bar over the glass. My body was dying to move. I kept scrunching my toes.

“Stay put,” Evelyn snapped at me. “It’s an illusion or a trick.”

“What about the bubbles?” Nicole asked. “Can’t they deal with it? Check if it’s real, or smother it? There’s enough of them.”

It took me a moment to realise that Nicole was referring to the circular wall of bubble-servitors, Hringewindla’s angels arrayed in a ring around the house and clustered on the roof. Semi-transparent, oily and greasy and sliding over each other in a slow standing wave, they had barely reacted to the spider-servitor or the hounds so far. I could still see the few of them which were stationed on the corrugated metal roof of the animal stables, low and waiting, not engaging either spider or dogs or the lumpy masses waiting in the trees.

Twil must have followed my eyes, because she said, “Hope the alpacas are alright. Poor buggers.”

“Language,” Evelyn snapped. “Tenny is here with us.”

“Plllllllbbbttr,” went Tenny.

All of a sudden, Amanda Hopton opened her eyes and stood up. She’d been settled in a chair for a while now, hugging herself, taking slow and steady breaths, eyes closed tight, as if trying to fight down a panic attack. But now she stood, groped for Christine’s arm, and spoke in a broken rush.

“Hringewindla does not like this, he will not send his angels— his— his parts, his buds. This is a trap, Evelyn Saye is correct, Hringewindla agrees. There is a trap here that none of us can see and he cannot see either. He will not move for this, he will protect this house. He will protect this house and seal us in flesh if he must, but he will not move.”

Several worried expressions graced several frowny faces.

“Seal us in flesh?” Twil asked. “Yo, what.”

“Yuck,” said Katey.

Benjamin swallowed hard. “Don’t insult him.”

“I’m not, it sounds fucking yuck—”

Felicity spoke up. “I don’t like the sound of being swallowed by an Outsider, even a ... friendly one. We should move. I’m ... ” She couldn’t meet Eeve’s eyes. “I’m ... sorry ... Eeve, but we have to. We can’t know what that spider really is. I don’t know what it is. And I agree with the Outsider. Something isn’t right here.”

“We stay put!” Evelyn snapped. “It’s a bluff. It will pass through us. If we move now we open ourselves up to being scattered and picked off. If something attacks the house now, we’re all together, we support each other. Nobody runs.”

Her eyes flicked to the back of the room — to Sevens.

Sevens took a breath and sighed, ice cold. Eeve didn’t even need to ask the question. “I can do nothing here, Evelyn,” said Seven-Shades-of-Self-Selection. “It is far outside my definition. I am as you.”

“Then we stay put,” Evelyn repeated.

Zheng rumbled long and low and loud, the sound vibrating in her chest, deep and resonant as she turned away from the window and strode for the corridor. “Mages and gods alike, both cowards. I spit on your divinity and your fear.”

“Zheng?” I said her name, but onward she strode. Tenny and Lozzie ducked out of the way for her as she stepped into the corridor.

The room erupted in chaos once again.

“What? What’s her plan? What’s the big zombie doing now?”

“Trust her! I trust her!” That was Raine, bless her heart.

“Hringewindla won’t go, we shouldn’t either!”

“Zheng! Somebody stop her! Zheng!” Eeve, shouting.

But who could stop Zheng except me?

For a moment I thought Raine was going to try — she hurried away from the general mayhem and into the mouth of the corridor just as Zheng was stepping through. She touched Zheng's arm with her fingertips. Zheng paused and dipped her head in silent question.

"Plan?" I heard Raine say, underneath the shouting and the demands and the argument.

"Punch a leg," Zheng rumbled.

"That's it?"

Zheng shrugged. "If I cannot, it is not real. If I can, I pull it apart and eat it."

"Spider," said Praem.

Raine grinned like an absolute madwoman. She nodded, once. "I'm in."

Zheng grinned back. "You stay here, little wolf. Watch them."

"Got it. Good hunting."

Zheng strode on into the corridor. Evelyn was shouting about how Zheng shouldn't go out there, about how demons were not invincible, about how she was being a moron and trying to get herself killed. I noticed that Eeve's free hand was wrapped tight around one of Praem's arms, perhaps to stop her joining this doomed sally forth from our castle gates.

Abyssal instinct agreed with Zheng. Abyssal instinct picked up my feet and trotted me after her to catch up before she reached the front door.

Evelyn screamed my name.

"Heather! For fuck's sake! Praem, grab her, stop her!"

I turned, my face blazing, my mind already leaping ahead. Before I answered Eeve, I met Raine's eyes. Raine nodded once, my rock, my confidence, the source of everything I could do.

"Raine, I'm going to—"

"I get it, Heather," Raine said quickly. "I get the plan."

"Well I don't!" Evelyn snapped. "Heather, stay here. Stay put—"

Words spilled from my lips. The plan was already fully-formed, as if abyssal instinct could see it clearer than my monkey-brain could dare. The plan was all speed and timing and muscle, predation and quick escape, the very currency that abyssal instinct understood the best of all.

“Evee, Evee, it’s fine! Listen, please. It’s safer this way. If it’s a trap, then I can just slip myself and Zheng Outside in the blink of an eye — um, bad metaphor, but you see what I mean. Zheng wants to punch that spider in the leg, but I can do better! All I have to do is touch it with my tentacles and I can send it Outside. I can send it anywhere, dump it somewhere horrible, or in Camelot so the Knights and Caterpillars can dismantle it—” I glanced over my shoulder at Lozzie as I said that part. She nodded with great enthusiasm, still wrapped in Tenny’s silken black tentacles. “And if Edward really is stupid enough to be remote piloting it, then we’ve got him! I can chase him down, easily and quickly. I did it before and I know what I’m doing. I’m not losing myself to anger. This is — this is clear. It makes the most sense. And I’ll ride on Zheng’s back. Like before.”

Evelyn stared at me with an expression like she had eaten an entire lemon.

Raine cleared her throat. “It does make sense, Evee.”

“Yeah I vote for this,” Katey added.

Felicity met my eyes. “Be safe. Be back quick. We don’t know what those are in the trees. Could be ... about a dozen different things, and I don’t like any of them.”

“Could it be something that would punch through Hringewindla’s angels?” I asked.

Felicity considered for a moment, then shook her head. Amanda looked vaguely sick at this suggestion.

Evee crunched out her words at me, clipped and short. “If one of those things in the trees even twitches in your direction, you leave, you slip, Outside. I insist, Heather. I trust you, but I insist.”

“I promise I will,” I said. “Just the spider. You insist and I obey. We’ll be right back.”

It was a strange combination of words which spilled from my lips; I

had not planned to say that. *I obey*. But it felt right and it made my insides sing, it made the bioreactor run smooth and sharp and clean, deep down in my belly. It made Raine's eyebrows shoot up and Twil splutter and Felicity stare at me with something oddly akin to affection. But most importantly it made Evee nod.

"Hey, Heather," Raine said quickly. "Turn on Zheng's phone and call mine. Keep the call connected, so we can hear."

"Yes! Okay!"

Evelyn hissed. "Alright. Go. And quick!"

I turned and ran down the shadowy spinal corridor of Geerswin farmhouse, right past Sevens and Aym — Sevens reached out to me and I ducked my head unthinkingly, to kiss her fingers in a fleeting touch. I never could have done that on anything less than a full dose of adrenaline and abyssal chemicals and hormones racing through my veins; I would have blushed myself to death.

Through the falling sunbeams and onto Zheng's heels as she opened the front door.

"Shaman?"

Zheng didn't sound very surprised. She paused as I scrambled up her back, climbing her with hands and tentacles and then clinging on tight around her shoulders and neck. She was so warm, warmer than the sun-kissed brick steps that she stepped out onto. She didn't question me mounting her back, just kept her head half-turned to listen.

"Better plan," I hissed. "Get me close enough to touch the spider's leg. If Edward is in there I'll chase him down and ... and eat him alive. Eat his mind. If he's not in there then I'll zap the whole spider Outside, though I might pass out if I do that so maybe we'll go with it, to Camelot. And if it's an illusion, we'll know."

Zheng broke into a grin. "I like this plan, shaman. I like any plan where we are together."

"I love you too, Zheng," I whispered, and held on tight. "Give me your phone. I need to keep us connected."

Zheng jumped down the steps and onto the crumbly, broken tarmac in one long bound. My heart soared already, to move with such speed. She fished out her phone and pressed it into one of my

tentacles. I dialled Raine, heard her on the other end, and then let the call sit.

The ring of bubble-servitors was all around us, an oily, jellied wall of Outsider angels, reaching upward in hope of becoming a dome. Zheng turned toward the field and they parted for her. I couldn't help but think they knew she would just rip through them anyway, if they refused to move.

The spider-servitor towered over the house and the field and the treetops, black and shiny and glinting in the clear crisp sunlight. The leaves shivered and shook in a gentle breeze. All around the spider's feet a dozen hounds surged forward as protection, shadowing the legs as it strode toward the house.

"Ready, shaman?"

I tightened my grip on Zheng. The plan was perfect. Only she and I could have pulled this off — Zheng's speed and strength and power, with my hyperdimensional mathematics as a payload. If it really was a trap, we didn't have to turn and run, we could simply be gone, elsewhere, Outside. If there was a secret magic circle in the underbelly of the spider, waiting to trap me and drain my blood, I would be ready for that too, diving into it all tooth and claw and spiked tentacle; Edward wouldn't know what hit him. We were ready for anything. Edward could have a team of men stationed inside the tree-line with rifles and I would simply flick the bullets away, I was so switched on, so ready.

Twil and Praem both appeared in the doorway of the house. Twil hung out and stared up at the spider, then met my curious look.

"Just here as backup, 'case you gotta run," she said. "Go, go, bloody hell!"

"Zheng," I whispered.

"Shaman."

The Heather of six months ago would have been a vibrating mess of jellied nerves and a heart like a panicked dove. The Heather of a year ago would be struck catatonic with fear. The Heather of my childhood could barely have imagined this. But the Heather right then and there was flush with abyssal instinct and purpose and a burning need to protect my friends.

"I love this so much," I managed to say in the split-second of thought I had left before Zheng broke from a standing start.

And she was off, flying like the wind.

Zheng moved so fast that I had no time to think, no time to compose or plan or change course; all I could do was cling on hard and keep one tentacle free and ready for the final task. She vaulted the fence into the field in one smooth bound, landed on the balls of her feet in the packed mud, and then shot straight toward the giant spider-servitor, aiming for the nearest of the legs. She darted around the piles of day-old grass clippings, leapt the remnants of the mud-cut magic circle, and refused to veer away from the onrushing hounds.

"Zheng! Dogs!" I screamed — though it was totally unnecessary.

The hounds surged forward before Zheng and I could reach the leg. Evelyn was right, the hounds were meant to keep us away from the siege machinery. Raine would explain the principle to me later, but most of it went in one ear and out the other, something about how armour and infantry had to work together. Zheng liked it, because in that metaphor she was a missile.

Evelyn was right about something else too: the hounds were chaff. All dozen of them came for Zheng at once, snapping steel-toothed jaws in blind faces, wired joints racing, leaping for her belly and throat, darting for hamstrings and ankles.

Zheng kicked one of them so hard the hound burst on the spot. She turned and punched another, ripped out a throat with her teeth, roaring through a closed mouth. She pulled off a leg and speared it through the belly of a different hound, thin dry blood going everywhere. And I was in the middle of the carnage, face buried in her back, trying not to scream.

One hound got behind her, slinking low and quick into her blind spot — she would have turned and killed it the moment it leapt for her, but I lashed out with my spare tentacle before I had time to think, jabbing it in the eyes and throat and knocking it off balance. Zheng spun and brought a fist down, breaking the hound's spine.

The remaining dogs fled beyond reach, whining and panting and bleeding, to growl at us from the edge of the field.

Zheng did not stay to gloat or laugh. As soon as the pack

disengaged she whirled around and sprinted for the nearest spider-leg.

That massive black-armoured leg was in motion again. The spider had taken several minutes just to edge into the field, creeping slowly despite its huge size. I decided in that last split-second that Eevee was probably correct: this was a trap. It made too much sense not to be. The spider moved too slowly, the hounds were too few in number, and the hanging shapes in the trees were too obviously not yet committed to the assault.

But we were ready, Zheng and I. We were perfect. Her speed and strength and limitless violence, my brain-math and abyssal instinct. We would confirm the spider for what it was and call Edward's bluff; let him spring his trap, we would be gone before the blow could land. And then the mages — my friends, my family, my pack — would take his answer apart.

The brain-math prep was going to my head like alcohol; as we raced those last few steps toward the spider, I plunged my thoughts into the black and sucking tar down in the base of my soul. I grasped three different sets of equations at once, preparing to use all of them — or none of them. I braced my tentacles against Zheng, coiling up the one spare.

We were under the body of the spider, feet away from a black and chitinous leg. Zheng skidded to a halt in the mud, kicking up clods of grass and dirt; she didn't want the impact to whip me off her back.

I uncoiled my free tentacle like a frog's tongue, a dart of pneuma-somatic flesh. As it flashed through the air the tip hardened into bio-steel and sharpened to a blade: a harpoon with enough force to crack the armour and sink into the meat beneath, to make the connection, one from which Edward Lilburne could not run.

And the dart passed through the leg as if through air. Not even pneuma-somatic flesh.

"Illusion!" I cried out, loud enough so both Zheng and the phone could hear me. "It's not real!"

Voices whooped on the other end of the phone, still tucked against my chest. I think I heard a sigh. Somebody said, voice tinny and distorted: "Heather, leave, now. Go! We agreed!"

“Yes! Yes of course of—”

“Shaman.”

Zheng went still. She was staring at the trees, at the bulbous sloth-shapes within. Even this close they were impossible to truly make out: odd lumpy fur and too many limbs clinging to the trees. No visible eyes, but thin stalks rising from headless shoulders like the current-feelers of some undersea organism. Claws, but poking out at all the wrong angles, in the wrong directions. Each one was huge, the size of a horse, but I had the sudden and distinct impression that size was a lie. A glance made my eyes water.

As one, they dropped.

I had called Edward Lilburne’s bluff. He had sprung his trap on something that could slip away with supernatural ease. I did not stay to watch, I did not stay to see if Zheng could outfight one of these things. I kept my promise to Eeve; I spun up those old familiar equations, that burning acid on the surface of my mind, that well-mapped pain of going Out.

But at the last second I slammed the equation to a halt, choking and spluttering on Zheng’s back, snorting nosebleed all down her shoulder.

The sloth-shapes had dropped — then shot upward, out of the tree-line, blossoming and scudding through the air above the field on an arc like a barrage of artillery shells.

Unfolding their flesh, peeling open the disguise of fur and claw, revealing the lie coiled inside; each of the creatures that had hung in the trees was a blob of writhing, wet-red flesh, punctuated with mouths, spines, and muscular tentacles, all joined together by bizarre five-pointed biological structures. Tendrils ended in black eyeballs. Trumpet-shapes pointed backward, like underwater jet propulsion. Spines bristled and mandibles clacked and claws jangled.

It wasn’t the shape of the things that was awful; in isolation they looked almost like rubber monsters from a terrible old horror movie. Attack of the flying blobs. I’d seen a hundred things far worse, things that made my skin crawl and my hair stand on end.

The awful part was the way their flesh tore through the air, as if at odds with this plane of reality. Even watching them move made my

eyes hurt and my stomach clench. I realised they'd been folded up like that not to act as bait, nor to hide the sting of the trap, but to conserve energy. They were dying as they moved, because they were not meant to be here. They had been summoned in an act of sacrificial violence. They would not survive more than a few minutes, but neither would anything they were pointed at. Living missiles. These horrible, twisted forms were probably mockeries of how they usually looked.

Later on, in the aftermath, Raine used the word "Shoggoth" — and Evelyn told her off for spouting fictional nonsense.

The nightmare amalgams were not servitor or spirit or demon. They were from Outside, summoned directly, in the flesh, and they were dying as they screamed.

And they weren't reacting to Zheng and I. They were going for the house.

"Zheng!" I screamed — but she was already turning and sprinting back the way we came. Not fast enough. The Outsiders had gotten a head start of a few seconds. As they passed through the illusionary spider-servitor, the oil-rig sized projection wavered and vanished, the trick having served its purpose.

The wall of Hringewindla's angels rose to meet them in a mass of oil-slick bubbles.

There were a dozen of those pitiful, obscene Outsiders. They hit the bubble-servitors like ingots of red-hot iron dropped on a block of ice: great gouts of blood and flesh and oily bubble-mass went up like clouds of superheated steam. Whirring, slicing, sucking, pulling. Limbs and teeth and claws flew aside and flopped to the ground, severed and twitching. Bubble-servitors were turned into shredded goo and fell apart, then reformed and sealed the gaps. One of the Outsiders went down covered in angels, like a wasp overheated by bees. Another was pulled into pieces, right down to red mist. A third had a hole through the middle, a bubble-servitor burrowing through its flesh.

A dozen Outsiders hit Hringewindla's angels. Six survived long enough to hit the farmhouse. They smashed through the windows in a shower of brick and wood and shards of glass.

By the time Zheng's feet touched the crumbly tarmac, we were only

a split-second behind the dying Outsiders, and I wasn't properly conscious.

My bio-reactor had shunted all the control rods free, my tentacles had covered themselves in hooked claws and plated their flesh with chitin armour, my blood was a cocktail of exotic abyssal compounds that had no place in a human body; my eyesight was incomprehensible, my throat was hissing, and the moment we were close enough to the door I threw myself off Zheng like a badly aimed flying squirrel.

I think I broke the Hoptons' front door. If I didn't, then Zheng finished the job, hot on my heels.

I don't remember much about the next sixty seconds; I was there, I was present, I did everything intentionally, but the images blur together into a rush of nonsense which only makes any sense in retrospect. Panic and adrenaline are radioactive to coherent memory.

Gunshots, screaming, a cacophony of voices and roaring and tearing flesh.

One of the Outsiders, pinned against the wall, lashed to pieces, to mince, taken apart by tentacle-hook and razor-sharp blade. Yellow fur at my side, yellow scent and yellow embrace.

Somebody — I think Raine, or maybe Nicole — screaming "Where's Lozzie!? Where's Lozzie?!"

Lozzie, with Tenny sheltering under one arm, reaching out to touch one of the Outsiders, so it just dropped dead at her feet — and Lozzie collapsing into the most awful weeping.

Gunshots, a lot of gunshots.

My own face caught in the mirror. Bleeding from the gums. Eyes with two sets of nictitating membranes flickering across my enlarged pupils. Bruised all over. A corona of sharp flesh and hooked claws.

Zheng howling with laughter in victory. Kimberly behind her, screaming.

Praem saying, quite clearly: "Ambulance."

Evee's hand on my neck. Then sleep.

= =

I didn't pass out for long. A few seconds at most. I came round lying on the floor of the Hoptons' dining room, feeling like I'd been worked over with a rolling pin and Zheng's fists.

"She's fine," Raine called from next to me as my eyes creaked open. "She's fine. She's just spent. Pulse is normal, everything is good."

"Raine?" I croaked.

Raine turned back to me quickly, wiping the sweat and the blood off my forehead. "Heather, hey. Look at me, look at my eyes. You're with us, right? You're right here, yeah? Focus on me."

Lozzie's face peered over her shoulder, tear-streaked and snotty. "Heathy's right here."

My throat felt like sandpaper. My eyes ached. My teeth hurt. My neck felt like a vice was clamped to the sides. A dozen bruises complained when I moved. "What ... Raine, is everybody ... "

Raine wet her lips and hesitated — which made my heart shudder with fear. Then she very gently helped me sit up, in the ruins of Hoptons' beautiful dining room.

"Mostly," she said, in one of the most leaden tones I'd ever heard from Raine.

"Mostly!" Nicole grunted from somewhere behind me. "Mostly doesn't include my fucking leg! Ahhhh!" She screamed as Praem said: "Hold still."

Evelyn piped up from somewhere behind me too. "You're lucky it was only a leg, detective." Her voice was shaking. "Somebody needs to put her in a car, right now. We can't deal with broken bones ourselves."

"On it," said Benjamin Hopton.

"Oh," I murmured, looking around, saying stupid things because I was dazed and bruised and had spent a full sixty seconds wearing the abyss like a suit of armour. "Oh. Oh no. We hurt the house."

Somebody laughed, but it was very weak and not very amused.

In truth, 'we' had done very little damage to Geerswin farmhouse. Most of the real hurt had been inflicted by the Outsiders shattering

windows and ploughing their way through doors. The dining room table was in three ragged pieces and two of the sad flesh abominations were splayed out across it, bleeding into the carpet, full of bullet holes and claw-marks and even a few bites — Twil's contribution. The lovely patio doors were completely broken, glass everywhere, the beam buckled and bent from the impact.

We pieced it all together later. In the actual seconds and minutes of aftermath, nobody cared exactly how it had gone down in that single minute of terrible violence, just that everybody was accounted for, not lethally wounded, and not eaten by an Outsider blob monster.

Of the six Outsiders which had reached the house, one had gone straight in through the window to Twil's bedroom. Lizzie had killed it with a touch.

"It's not mercy and I'm never doing it again. Never! I hate him! I hate my brother and I hate my uncle! He doesn't have the right to do this!"

She couldn't stop crying.

A second had crashed into the kitchen. Twil had duelled that one alone, assisted by random pot-shots from Katey. 'Duel' is perhaps too polite, because Twil had lost a lot of clothes and was covered literally head-to-toe in blood, even when she shivered out of werewolf form. She looked worse than Kimberly had after the spell. She'd fought the thing by just hacking and biting at it, out-healing the monster ripping at her flesh. She'd shaken it to pieces and made the worst mess one could ever imagine in the Hoptons' kitchen.

A third had circled the building at speed and came in through the side-door in the little sitting room, late to the party. Zheng had caught that one as she'd followed me inside, then taken it apart with great and savage joy.

A fourth had ended up in the corridor somehow. We weren't quite sure where it had come from — maybe from the kitchen when Twil had been fighting number two. It had been trying to get at the rear of the action in the dining room, to surprise the mages.

"You landed on it," was all Kimberly could say, staring at me shell-shocked and shivering. "You landed on it and ... um ... there was a lot of ... you had hooks in your ... tentacles ... "

I wasn't surprised she couldn't describe the encounter in detail. There wasn't much left of number four, just minced meat. I remembered very little of that — mostly blood, and yellow fur at my back.

The fifth and sixth Outsiders had formed the main event. They'd come in through the patio doors, right at the largest concentration of prey, of human beings and others.

Evelyn and Felicity had done some rough and raw magic, broken something inside both creatures. They'd paid for it with bleeding throats. Evelyn couldn't stand properly; Praem was all but carrying her. Felicity was in a corner, vomiting bloody bile, wiping her lips, insisting she was okay.

The others had bought the pair of mages time to work that magic, and some had paid for it.

Nicole's left leg was broken in two places — "Clean breaks," said Praem. "Fuck!" said Nicole.

Praem's maid dress, her lovely new one that she'd picked out herself, was ruined. She was thankfully untouched.

Katey had a very minor head wound: "Scrape on the scalp, it's nothing, just a lot of blood."

Benjamin Hopton had broken the shotgun; literally, the stock was splintered, his hands were bloody, his forearms covered in scratches like he'd dragged himself through a bramble patch. "I'll live."

Amanda Hopton was curled in a ball, whimpering. A bubble-servitor was pressed to her back. The cone-snail god under the woods had not approved of this vile trick.

I was bruised all over, felt like I'd pulled something important inside my abdomen, like my bioreactor had overheated and shut down in emergency mode; my side was tight and hot and my head swam when I tried to stand up; my eyesight kept swirling sideways, thick with black at the edges. I needed rest, but that didn't matter.

Tenny was crying, which was a war crime as far as I was concerned.

"That was his real shot," Evelyn kept saying. "That was his real shot. That was the real thing. Outsiders, actual creatures. Physical presence. The real thing. That was his real shot, he's spent it. We stuck together and we won."

None of that mattered.

Because nobody could find Sevens and Aym.

sediment in the soul – 19.5

The aftermath is always worse than the maelstrom.

I had experienced my fair share of physical fights by that point in my life, most of them crammed into the previous eight to nine months; my mother would be horrified if she knew. Her goody-two-shoes Heather, getting in scuffles and scrapes. I still wasn't capable of throwing a punch or squeezing a trigger, but the wave of adrenaline and fear no longer drowned me, insensate and flailing. I could go with the flow, now; I knew a little about how to keep myself safe, and my abyssal instincts knew even more. I could put my tentacles to some use. I could try to protect my friends. I could try not to get in the way. But nobody really remembers a fight; short-term memory fails to encode, the body takes over, whether one is human or part-human or imitation-human or having a grand old time cavorting about in a human mask. Details must be reconstructed after the event, pieced back together from sense impressions and fragmentary images and consequences.

I had a lot of fragments and a lot of blood and none of it made much sense.

There's nothing glamorous about a fight, no matter the scale. Raine makes it look sexy, but I'm not stupid enough to believe that's anything other than my own deeply biased perspective. Movies and television show armies clashing and melding into each other, all one-on-one choreography and balletic stunt-work, clean punches and counters and the sort of thing Raine goes fangirl for. But reality is brutal and banal. Raine once told me a fact about how most knife fights go to the floor in the first few seconds. Nothing poignant or graceful happens while grappling on the floor.

And this fight, this Outsider confrontation at Geerswin farm, this genuine supernatural nightmare? Raine called it a "bare-knuckle fuckfest."

I wouldn't have used that exact word. I'd probably have blushed to even say it. But I didn't disagree.

Evelyn snapped at Raine for that one. Tenny was too absorbed in

crying to pick up the swear word, too busy clinging to Lozzie, but she was still within earshot.

Raine didn't much care; she was too focused on getting me to stop.

"Heather, Heather, hey, just sit down for a sec. You're shaking all over, you can barely stand. And you're bruised, you're gonna pull a muscle. Just slow down, slow down. Heather, hey. Heather!"

Sit down and rest? Impossible.

Geerswin farmhouse was a wreck. Several doors were shattered, smashed from their hinges, splinters everywhere. Windows were broken, frames buckled, glass shards all over the floor.

Hringewindla's bubble-servitors were drifting over to the house, joining together and stretching themselves like oily transparent putty to plug the doors and windows. But out on the grass and the edge of the field and the crumbly tarmac, great masses of bubble-servitor material lay inert, shredded, ruined, and dead, heaped about the bloody mangled hulks of the Outsiders they'd brought down. Hringewindla had paid dearly. Even in my pain-and-panic-addled state, a hyper-polite version of me worked away silently in the back of my mind, filing a note to thank the old man Outsider cone-snail for his help. Without the bubble-servitors, we'd probably not have won.

"Heather," Raine said. "You keep walking and I'm gonna pick you up and wrap you in a blanket so you can't move. Zheng! Hey, left hand, can you maybe help me here?"

"The shaman smells a rat. Lift her up, little wolf. Do not stop her."

A stiff breeze could have stopped me. A particularly determined row of ants could have felled me dead. Raine was right: I was covered in bruises, shaking all over, my vision was swimming, and my right flank was burning inside, like the bio-reactor had suffered a meltdown.

My clothes were bloodied. Everyone's clothes were bloodied. The house had it the worst.

Six of the writhing blob-like Outsiders had died inside the house, leaving a truly unspeakable mess. Blood and bile soaked the carpets, ichor and effluence lay in puddles; loops of strange alien intestine, scraps of jellied flesh, strips of torn skin. A significant quantity of the blood in the kitchen actually belonged to Twil. She'd

won by just out-healing the thing, spilling buckets of herself all over the tiles and the cooker and the ceiling, in great splatters and splashes. It was like something out of a cartoon.

Twil was usually unstoppable, always the first to bounce back. But in that aftermath she looked how I felt. As I staggered to the door into the corridor, I saw her slide down the wall, nodding in victory, but utterly drained. Even werewolves don't like to lose so much blood.

"Mrs Hopton," Evelyn was saying. Her throat was thick around the words. She couldn't stand either, leaning on Praem. "Mrs Hopton. Christine. Michael. I will pay for all these damages. I brought this to your home. This is our responsibility. I— Heather? What's she doing?"

I hadn't felt this drained and broken inside, this bruised and tenderised, since before I materialised the bioreactor for the first time. But I forced my feet underneath my aching carcass and dragged myself toward the corridor.

Because Sevens and Aym were missing.

Raine and Zheng must have helped me. I recall nothing about leaving the room or staggering down the corridor. Perhaps I passed out and they carried me, but the next thing I knew I was standing before the pulped and mangled corpse of one of the Outsiders, slumped in a meaty heap against the corridor wall. Raine was holding me upright, shoulder under my armpit. Zheng lurked on my opposite side. I had half my tentacles around each of them.

The Outsider corpse was one of the most hateful things I'd ever seen — and not because it looked like a pile of mashed tripe and splintered bone. Steaming softly in the shafts of sunlight, the steam rising and vanishing in gentle waves, the sodden mass itself slowly shrinking and dwindling away as we watched.

Here was a dead slave, ripped from Outside and turned inside-out by the crushing pressure — or lack thereof — of our reality.

"Suicide bomber," I croaked.

Raine raised her eyebrows but said nothing. I hadn't had time to explain the impression yet, to explain to my friends what these pitiful creatures really were.

But worse than that was the memory. Flashes and fragments of standing here and ripping the thing to pieces, hissing and screeching at it. The ghost of *homo abyssus* crawled across my skin in a hundred tiny bruises, in the ache of my gums and the itch in my eyes and my urge to embrace the moment I'd spent killing something that had not truly wanted to fight.

"Sevens was right here," I said eventually. "Behind me, or at my side. In her — war form? She was here. She was. She can't have gone far. She cradled me while I ... when I ... did this?"

"Uh huh," Raine said, nodding gently. "Impressive stuff. All Humboldt squid on this thing's arse. Well done, would have gotten us in the rear otherwise."

A screaming flash of blood and violence across my memories, making me flinch inside. When I glanced at my tentacles I found them smooth and unblemished, no sign of the hooked barbs and jagged spikes. Zheng caught my eye and broke into a grin of savage joy. She was covered in blood too, and unbothered by the mess.

"Sevens," I repeated. "She was right here. I felt her at my back. She can't just be gone."

"Hey," Raine said, soft and gentle. "I'm sure she's fine. All these blob dudes were accounted for. None of them could hurt Sevens, especially not if she was doing her big-and-scary thing."

"You don't know that," I said, swallowing hard, feeling my mouth go dry. My head was spinning with worry and pain. I wanted to sit down and then lie down and then probably go to sleep. I wanted to eat an entire horse, bones and all. I wanted to touch Sevens and make sure she was there. "Raine, Raine you're just saying that." I looked up and called at the ceiling and walls. "Sevens! Sevens!"

Kimberly was there at the far end of the corridor, clutching herself in Twil's borrowed clothes. I wasn't sure how much she had heard. I caught her eye and another flash of memory crackled across my mind.

"Kim!" I heaved. "Kim you were there, you said you saw!"

I must have looked horrible, because poor mousy Kimberly flinched away from me.

"Hey, Kim," Raine said quickly. "It's alright, she's just worried. You

saw this all go down, out here in the corridor?”

Kimberly nodded awkwardly and spoke in halting stutters. “I-I saw. You ... well, I suppose you saved me. Again. Heather. Thank you.”

I couldn’t stop. “But Sevens was there? Right!?”

Kimberly bit her lip and shook her head. She glanced back into the sitting room as if looking for help, but everyone in there was busy, mostly sorting out to move Nicole Webb to Benjamin’s car with her broken leg. We couldn’t call an ambulance to the farm, not with the place looking like a supernatural bomb crater, not unless we wanted to break the minds of several paramedics and get the police down here to turn this into a major incident.

But then Felicity stepped out of the sitting room and joined us in the corridor. She put a gentle hand on Kimberly’s shoulder and Kim looked up at her with unmistakable admiration and security. But Felicity looked right at me.

“Aym is safe,” she said in a broken croak, worse than her usual half-mumble through burn-scarred lips. I almost couldn’t make out her words. “I would know if she wasn’t.”

Felicity didn’t look healthy at the best of times. Between her extensive burn scars, her blind left eye, and her twitchy, hangdog, head-down mannerisms, she usually looked like she wanted to slink away to a dark corner and conserve what little life remained to her. But after the ritual and the fight, she seemed to stand a little straighter. I wondered how long it had been since she’d done real magic, for a purpose she believed in, to help somebody. The magic to stop the pair of Outsiders in the dining room had taken a terrible toll on her; I’d seen her vomiting blood earlier. She looked like a woman who’d just recovered from a months-long haemorrhagic fever. Thin-faced, drawn and pale, eyes carved out like coal-dust hollows. Her voice was sandpaper on broken skin.

But she wasn’t worried. Not a bit.

“W-what?” I stammered. “How— how can you tell? What about Sevens? Are they together?”

“I understand what it’s like. If Aym was hurt, I would know. I’d, well, I’d just know. She’s anchored to me. Sort of. It’s an inheritance thing. If she was dead I wouldn’t be ... I’d just know. And she can’t have gone far.”

Raine asked, “She tethered to you?”

Felicity nodded. “Is it like that with ‘Sevens’?”

I shook my head. “No, she goes as far as she likes. You’re sure about Aym?”

“M’sure.” She paused to cough blood into her hand, then stared at it and blinked very slowly. Kimberly slipped one arm around Felicity’s waist, as if the older, taller, more experienced mage might be about to topple over. But Felicity blinked three times, hard and tight, forcing herself to stay present. “Aym can’t go more than about two hundred feet from me, in the physical world. If she’s submerged for some reason, she’ll pop back up soon.”

Zheng purred. “The shape-shifter is not mocking us?”

Felicity shook her head. “Not over this. Your ‘Sevens’, she can submerge too?”

“You mean go to the abyss,” I said with a sigh. “Sort of. But why now? What would Aym be doing?”

Felicity held my gaze with absolute certainty and unshakeable belief. “If Aym thought it was important enough to leave without telling us, then it was important enough to leave without telling us.”

Raine laughed once, an approving chuckle. “Covering an angle we didn’t see? Shitty gremlin doing a special operation?”

Felicity sighed too. “One way of putting it.”

Raine asked, “You trust her not to have fucked around with Sevens?”

I stared at Raine in shock. “Raine?”

Raine held a grin, calm and collected. “If we have a traitor in our midst, Aym is pretty high up my list. How could she be bought, Fliss? Serious question.”

“Raine,” I hissed, outraged on Felicity’s behalf. “I’m worried about Sevens, I’m not accusing Aym of sabotage!”

But to my surprise, Felicity thought quietly for a moment, then answered. “Aym’s only price would be one of my blood relatives, and none of them have anything to do with this. Also mostly long

gone.” She shook her head, then winced as if suffering a headache.

Kimberly said, soft and gentle, “Felicity?”

“I’m okay. That ... de-coherency spell was ... not something to rush. Me and Saye will both be pissing blood for a week. Somebody needs to look after her too, please.”

“Praem will,” I said. “And me. Felicity, please, do you think Sevens is safe?”

“If she’s with Aym, probably,” Felicity said, rubbing her aching forehead. “Whatever they’re doing, it’s not over yet.”

Raine nodded. “Operational security, radio silence. They must be doing that. This ain’t over until everybody is back and accounted for.”

I could have kissed her. Well, if I could find the energy to reach upward. Instead I just bumped my head against Raine’s shoulder.

From my other side Zheng let out a deep purr. “Yellow and black, brass and lace. We keep an eye out for their return. Keep the drawbridge down.”

Raine laughed. “Getting all poetic on us, left hand?”

“I respect the Yellow, if not the princess. She belongs to the shaman. We hold the ground.”

= =

Zheng had the luxury of waiting — or at least of standing around and looking intimidating, because she was very good at that and didn’t play well with others — but the rest of us slipped into the slow ache of clean-up and recovery, that dull haze of non-lethal pain and too much work, the aftermath of any real confrontation.

This was, however, the largest and messiest fight I’d ever personally been part of, in a place somebody would have to clean up. The only point of comparison I had was the two corpses we’d had to get rid of once, back in the kitchen in Number 12 Barnslow Drive. Every other time we had ‘thrown hands’ as Raine put it, we’d managed to keep the mess contained somewhere that mundane authorities and normal people would never see.

But Geerswin farmhouse was Twil’s family home, and now it was covered in blood and mess.

The poor thing was so wounded, so bruised and battered. Even after I calmed down about Sevens, I dragged Raine back into the dining room, staggering and lurching, trying to pat the walls with my tentacles. I kept saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Raine was getting desperate; I wouldn't sit down, wouldn't stop.

All around me, the real clean-up was beginning.

"I can pay for the windows and doors, professional cleaning for the carpets too," Evelyn was saying. "Though ... the blood ... "

Christine was horribly pained by the offer. "Miss Saye, Evelyn, please—"

"My father can chip in for once. I won't hear a word against it."

"Sit," said Praem.

Amanda gently corrected them both. "Hringewindla's angels will handle the biological matter. The doors and windows are ... mm."

"Sit down," said Praem. Apparently I wasn't the only one refusing to rest.

"Hey," said Twil, "at least those big ugly corpses are melting away. Screw tryin' lug them outdoors. Or into a pile. Or whatever." She sighed heavily, still slumped against the wall. "Oh, my bedroom is fucked. One of them died in there, right?"

"The angels can clean that too," Amanda said.

"Eww," went Twil.

Raine had once shown me a computer game about cleaning up after a stereotypical horror-movie climax, blood and guts all up the walls, bits of monster everywhere, that sort of thing; it was all very cartoony and silly, with lots of mops and buckets and wet wipes. The real thing was a lot less easily solved. Bubble-servitors started bobbing all about the place, flattening themselves against the walls and carpets like giant semi-translucent slugs, sucking up the blood and digesting the viscera. Everyone else had to wear those magically modified glasses all the time to avoid bumping into the things, or stepping on them, or worse. Amanda Hopton stood in the middle of the sitting room, swaying with her eyes closed, presumably conducting the creatures, a conduit for the will of her god. 'Mister' George tried to help for a little while, scrubbing at the kitchen, but then ended up standing out on the patio, chain-

smoking with shaking hands.

Michael Hopton and Katey helped put Nicole Webb in the back of Benjamin's land rover, her arms clutching their shoulders, their strength keeping her broken right leg off the floor. The detective was panting, coated in cold sweat, gritting her teeth as they carried her down the corridor and out onto the crumbling tarmac.

I followed, dragging Raine behind me again, lurching down the corridor; I wouldn't take no for an answer, didn't give her a choice.

"Heather," Raine said, gentle but firm, as if holding back the whipcrack which would make me obey. "Heather, you really need to sit down. They've got Nicky now, she's gonna be fine. Heather? Don't make me get Evee to shout at you, hey?"

"I have to ... check on her ... Raine, she's hurt. We got her hurt."

Raine helped me out the front door and down the brick steps. The crisp sunlight hurt my eyes and made my head pound like a leather drum. I had to squint and blink until my vision stopped swirling. A dead Outsider lay against the nearest fence, steaming gently as it melted away under the conditions of our reality. A ring of bubble-servitors hung over the mangled corpse, as if worried it might spring back to life again. A greater ring of bubbles circled the house, on guard. Many more angels had fanned out across the fields, hovering at the treetops, watching for an opportunistic second assault.

"Really got to thank Hringy," I murmured.

Raine laughed softly as I dragged her closer to the Land Rover. "Hringy?"

"Hringy." I was making it cute — but really I was too exhausted to pronounce his name properly. Terrible of me, I know.

"Hringy it is then."

Zheng followed us outdoors too, stealthy and close; she was worried for my physical condition, whatever she said.

A small argument was unfolding by the open back door of Benjamin's beefy green Land Rover. Katey had wandered off somewhere, Nicole was inside the car, but Ben and Michael were frowning at each other.

“Manchester, not Sharrowford,” Michael was saying.

Nicole’s voice panted from inside the back seat of the Land Rover.
“Sharrowford’s— fine— fine—”

Michael said, “It’s a clean break, there’s no visible bone. Manchester will be safer. Ben, Manchester. Okay?”

Nicole said, “Sharrowford. For fuck’s sake.”

“Why Manchester?” I asked. Everyone paused and looked at me in a funny way, like I was liable to pull their faces off.

Nicole said from inside the Land Rover, “‘Cos they think we’re gonna get in trouble.”

“Yeah,” Ben said in a grunt. He was standing there with the front of the car already open, one hand filled with his keys. “Come on, Mike, she’s an ex-cop and a PI. If they wanna know shit she’s got the connections to tell them no. I’m just some lug she hired to watch a job. Nobody’s gonna care. It’s a break, not a bullet wound.”

“Sharrowford,” Nicole spat.

“Take her to Sharrowford General,” Raine said. “Nicky knows her stuff. Real hard-boiled type, her.”

“Right you are,” said Ben.

Michael Hopton sighed and crossed his arms. “At least take Katey too. Don’t do it alone, Ben. You’re not a superhero.”

Ben guffawed. “Yeah, that’s Twil’s department.” He paused then nodded at me, awkwardly. “Or hers. Alright, go get Katey then. Where’d she get to?”

“Checking on the sheep,” Michael said. Ben shook his head and turned toward the little stables, stepping away to fetch Katey.

I dragged myself over to the open back door of the car, pulling Raine with me. My flanks were burning, especially on the right side, like my appendix had burst or a muscle had torn away from a bone. But I slumped against the open door, half my tentacles clinging to the roof, and peered inside. Nicole was laid out on the back seat, her right shin at a sickening angle. She frowned at me, plastered with sweat, pale-faced, and panting softly.

“Heather?” she croaked.

"I can't stop her," Raine said. "She won't sit still."

"Nicky," I said. "Are you going to be all right?"

A stupid question — how would she know? But my heart demanded I ask, demanded an answer, demanded that I care.

Nicole Webb grimaced, a horrible attempt at a smile. She was so brave. "S'nothing. Just a break. Need a cast. And morphine. Oh yeah, looking forward to that."

I sagged, tentacles slackening. Of course she was going to be okay. "Good, good. That's good."

A twitch in my side. One tentacle peeled off the roof of the car and hovered in the air. I wasn't thinking, just following instinct.

Raine asked, "You ever broken a bone before, gumshoe?"

"Once. When I was — teenager. Ribs. Fistfight."

Raine let out a low whistle. "Teenage tearaway, huh? Wouldn't have counted you as a bad girl. Nicky."

"Detective. To you." Nicole grunted. "Haynes."

She was lying.

Nicole Webb was lying. She wasn't going to be okay. Her leg was broken in too many places, she was going to get an infection, she was bleeding through her clothes and she wouldn't get to the hospital in time. I stared at her in the pounding sunlight, too much brightness lancing through the backs of my eyeballs and into my brain. How could I look at her writhe on the back seat of that Land Rover? She was going to die and it would be our fault. My fault, my brain was screaming. Why was she lying? My breath was coming in fits and starts. One tentacle-tip quivered and softened.

"Heather?" Raine said my name. It was drowned out by static inside my head. "Hey, Heather, take a step back, come on. Nicky's fine."

"What's wrong with her?"

I wanted to scream. What was wrong with *me*? What about Nicole, what about her broken leg, the way she was fading, the pain on her face? How could Raine not see it? Why wasn't anybody calling an ambulance? Why was Raine trying to peel me off the car?

This whole mess was my fault. My responsibility. Nicole's pain was my responsibility. The broken leg was my responsibility. I had to put it right, I had to make it right; I had the tools to make it right.

"Raine, she's—"

"I know! I've got the glasses on, I can see—"

An angel heals her flock.

One of my tentacles darted into the back of the Land Rover, the tip already softening on the exterior, hardening inside with a needle of dripping bio-steel. Instinct took over, pumped the limb full of unspeakable fluids and abyssal-derived enzymes. Somebody took me by the shoulders but I hissed and bucked and almost fell over, banging one knee against the car, bruises screaming. The tentacle-tip blossomed open to reveal a shining needle twelve inches long; Nicole couldn't see it but she would feel it in a moment. I would fix her, I would fix this mistake, I would make everything right. Then I would fix Geerswin farmhouse, and Felicity's pain, and Kimberly's fear and Tenny's crying and Lizzie's horror and I would find Sevens and—

My bio-reactor sputtered to life, to provide the payload for the needle, to replenish what I was about to extract from myself.

Heat blossomed in my flank — then flared out like an explosion, turning to ball of acid burning through my guts.

My vision flicked black, then red, then went out.

I remembered falling away from the Land Rover. I didn't remember Raine catching me, but I was assured later that she did. Raine always caught me, even when I was being a self-destructive fool.

= =

That time I really did pass out.

Consciousness slammed back about fifteen minutes later, the world just suddenly there in front of me, alive and moving. I was sitting bolt upright on the sofa at the back of the Hoptons' dining room, with Raine clicking her fingers in front of my eyes.

"Heather, Heather," she was saying, "Heather, come on, come back. Heather, Heather."

Evelyn said, from right next to me, "Try splashing her with water."

“Lozzie,” said Praem.

“I trust her too,” Raine said “but I’d be more comfortable if Heather was conscious and responding. Hey, maybe we should splash her—”

“Ahhhh,” I winced, blinking several times and screwing my eyes shut as I came around. “Raine, stop, please, I’m fine, I’m fine. Don’t splash me with water, please.”

Raine let out a huge sigh of relief and leaned back on her haunches; she was kneeling in front of me. Evelyn sighed too, strangled and tight. Through my blurred vision I realised she was sitting next to me, on the sofa. Praem was standing a few feet away, watching us both.

We were seated in the clearest, cleanest part of the dining room, furthest away from the slowly melting corpses of the dead Outsiders. They were little more than puddles of steaming goo now, almost gone. Bubble-servitors lay against most surfaces, metabolising the blood and guts. Other people moved in the kitchen and out on the patio, turned to ghosts by my blurred vision.

I felt like I’d spent a night vomiting. My stomach muscles ached as if I’d been punched in the gut. The right side of my abdomen burned, hot and hard and stiff inside. Without thinking, I gathered my tentacles in my arms, hugging them to my front, making sure they were still manifested and attached to me. Some instinctive part of my mind was afraid they might have turned to ash and faded away to nothing, like in the early days before my bio-reactor, when bodily euphoria was hard-won and often abandoned in pain. But I was whole, I was here.

“She’s back,” Raine sighed. “Heather, Heather, open your eyes and tell me how many fingers I’m holding up.”

“I never left,” I murmured, trying to piece together the last few minutes. I blinked and squinted. “Three fingers.”

“And now?”

“Two. And now four. Raine, stop, I— ahhh.”

“Keep your eyes open.” Raine flicked on her mobile phone’s flashlight function, then half-blinded me with it while she watched my pupils react. “Good, you’re not concussed.”

“Small mercies,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Mercy,” said Praem.

I cleared my throat, croaking and dry. Somebody — Praem — pressed a glass of water into my hands. I had to let go of my tentacles to accept it, but it went down sweet and rough, scouring blood and mucus out of my throat. I coughed for a moment, Raine’s hand on my back.

“Was I unconscious, was—” I almost lurched out of the chair in horror when my memories clicked back into place. “Nicky! Did I stab Nicky?!”

Raine caught me, firmly and insistently, and pressed me back down into the sofa. Praem caught the glass which had tumbled from my hands.

“You passed out before you could stab anybody,” Raine said. “Nicky’s fine, on her way to the hospital. Heather, slow down, take a deep breath. Breathe with me, okay? In and out, there you go, that’s it. Just sit. Sit right there. Relax.”

I tried my best to do as I was told, but my tentacles pushed against the sofa. “Raine, I ... I don’t know what came over me. I was going to ... do to her what I did to the Knight. Fix her. I ... I’m sorry.”

“Hey,” Raine said, flashing a grin. “No pumping other ladies with your ovipositor, okay?”

“Raine!” I squeaked in horror. She laughed — but the joke had distracted me long enough to short-circuit my desire to stand up and keep moving.

“Just breathe, Heather. Don’t think about anything for a bit.”

“Head empty,” said Praem. “No thoughts.”

Evelyn sighed like this was the most stupid thing she’d ever heard.

“You too,” said Praem. “Head empty.”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn grumbled.

Raine spent a couple of minutes kneeling in front of me, rubbing my hands, making sure I really was present and not leaving again. I could tell she was worried by the way she watched my eyes and my face, by the tension in her shoulders, the expectant waiting in her musculature. Eventually, when I felt I’d been a good girl and taken enough slow, calming breaths, I explained.

"I didn't go anywhere, Raine. I was just unconscious."

Raine winced. Evelyn grumbled, "No you bloody weren't."

"Excuse me?"

Raine sighed. Her pained expression hurt me in a way I couldn't really deal with. She said, "For the first few minutes, sure you were. You were out cold. But then you sat up and opened your eyes and just ... sat there." She pulled a grin, but it was fractured inside. "Thought you'd gone diving again."

I shook my head. "I won't go back to the abyss. I think I just ran too hot. Ow." I pressed a hand to my right flank, where the flesh was stiff and sore. My skin there did feel hot, as if I was running a localised fever, or had an infection.

"Maintenance cycle required," said Praem.

Raine laughed gently. "How do you feel, Heather?"

"My reactor hurts," I said, ashamed to admit it. "I feel like I've pulled a muscle or strained something. That's what knocked me out. I tried to fire it back up, and ... well, now it kind of burns."

"Maybe give it a rest then, yeah?" Raine said, then reached out and squeezed my knees. Her tone was silk over iron: I would rest whether I wanted to or not.

"But I have to help!" A lump grew in my throat. "Raine, this is all my fault, I have to help, I have to—"

A hand grabbed my arm so hard the grip hurt my bones; Evelyn's fingers dug into my flesh. I winced and turned, an automatic complaint on my lips — but Evelyn wore an expression like a pagan goddess who had discovered her temple surrounded by an invading army. She was half-collapsed into the sofa, her eyes pits of exhaustion, looking more like a crumpled old woman than ever before. Skin waxy with effort, lips a tight line, her expression burned me right through. White phosphorus in a human shell.

My words died in my throat. "E-Evee?"

She sat up, leaning toward me. Under other circumstances I would have assumed I was about to get kissed. Praem reached down with one hand to support her. It was like having a banshee in one's face — albeit a banshee I loved dearly.

“We. Cannot. Take. You. To. Hospital,” she crunched out.

“ ... o-okay.”

“If you fuck up your exotic organ, we can’t do anything about it. I don’t know what it is or how it works. If you burn yourself out and injure yourself, I cannot fix you. Stop.”

I swallowed, and nodded, and eased myself back into the sofa cushions. “Okay, Eevee.”

I obey. Had I really said that earlier? I had. And here I was, doing it again.

“Good,” Evelyn said with a huge sigh. The energy seemed to go out of her, and she leaned back right next to me, shoulder to shoulder. Her long blonde hair was escaping her ponytail. “Rest or I’ll have Praem tie you up.”

“You too,” said Praem. Eevee huffed and waved that comment away.

Twil stuck her head around the kitchen door. “Hey, Raine, we need another pair of hands. Heather good? Heather good, yeeeah. Hey, Big H.”

“Hello Twil,” I said. “Is everyone else ... ” I meant to say ‘okay’, but that seemed grossly inadequate for the circumstances, so I just trailed off, feeling lame and useless.

“Everyone’s cool. Well, auntie Amanda’s kinda whacked, but she’s always like that. Raine?”

“Sure, sure,” Raine said, straightening up. She stroked my hair back from my forehead. “Stay here, okay, just rest, just relax.”

I nodded. “I’ll be good. Where is Zheng?”

“Checking on the bubbles, making sure there’s nothing coming through the woods. Just rest. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

She turned to Praem. “Keep an eye on these two, yeah? Make sure they don’t run with scissors or play with fire.”

“Both eyes,” said Praem.

Raine went off to help Twil, into the kitchen, probably to carry a body, or swab blood, or oversee the angels doing something

disgusting. I just sat there, shoulder to shoulder with Evelyn, staring at the wreck of the room and the shattered back door covered with a film of stretched-out bubble-servitors. It was a very strange place to take a little break, but to be fair I had sat down and rested in far more alien locales.

“Lozzie?” I croaked after a moment.

“Went to Camelot with Tenny,” Evelyn said, dry and scratchy.

“Lozzie took one look at you and said you were fine. Only reason I didn’t panic. Tenny was inconsolable. Needed to get her away from all this.”

“Poor Tenns.”

“Mm.”

A long pause stretched between us, comfortable and companionable. Eventually I said, “We should buy her something.”

“Mm?”

“As an apology. Or a treat. Or a reminder that we all love her.”

“Mm. But what?”

“Moth plushie?” I suggested.

“Poor taste,” Evelyn grumbled.

“Why? It’s just like a doll, but ... more like her.”

“Heather, she’s got the mind of a fourteen year-old. A doll would be an insult.”

“Oh.”

“Maybe a very large moth plushie. Deluxe size.”

We slipped into silence again. My right flank and my head were competing to produce the most worrying throbbing sensations. My eyes itched, my teeth felt too sharp, and Evelyn felt lovely and warm against my shoulder. Without thinking about the implications, I snuggled a little closer to her. But I kept one tentacle at full extension, draped over the opposite arm of the sofa: the tentacle I’d almost used on Nicole. The tip still felt spongy.

Evelyn’s shoulder was both bony and soft at the same time. Something inside me could tell how exhausted she was, how

drained and brittle and dry. My needle-tentacle twitched and quivered.

Part of me wanted to inject her, too.

“Bloody hell,” Evelyn said, apropos of nothing.

“You can say that again,” I mumbled. I blinked hard and tried to concentrate on anything except the desire to penetrate Evelyn with my tentacle; I was certainly not going to mention it. I glanced up at Praem instead.

Our faithful doll-demon was wearing the rags of her maid uniform, bloody and shredded but untouched beneath. Chin high, spine straight, no amount of disrobing or damage could touch her dignity and poise. She stared back at me with clear blank-white eyes.

“Thank you for protecting Eevee,” I said.

“Thank you for protecting Eevee,” she echoed back at me.

I pulled an awkward smile and said, “Are we in the naughty corner right now? Are you meant to make sure we don’t get up and cause more trouble?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Heather, rest, for pity’s sake.”

Praem said in her bell-clear voice, “Bad girls sit in the time-out seat. Together.”

Evelyn and I shared an awkward look, faces only inches apart. Evelyn cleared her throat and I turned away, suddenly self-conscious. This was getting silly. We shared a moment of burning awkwardness amid the rubble.

“Heather,” Evelyn said eventually — and I knew by her tone of voice that this was going to be a significant change of subject. “What happened earlier?”

When I looked back at Eevee, she’d shed the awkward embarrassment, probably on purpose, dragging us back to a practical topic to save us both. Her eyes burned with a mage’s curiosity, but I mostly felt awkward and guilty.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know, I know. Don’t inject anybody with the magical life juice, I know. I didn’t mean to, I wasn’t even thinking about it, not consciously. I just saw Nicole in the back of the car, injured and in pain and ... and my fault. And I’m so worried about

Sevens. I had to do something, I had to ... ”

Evelyn watched me trail off, frowning harder and harder. For a moment I was certain she was going to snap at me.

“E-Evee?”

She said, very slowly and carefully, “Heather, I’m not talking about your concerning desire to spread your seed or whatever—”

“Evee!” I squeaked, blushing even through the exhaustion and pain.

“—I’m talking about earlier. You went full rip and tear.”

I blinked at her, coming down from my blush. “You mean when the Outsiders got indoors?”

“Yes.” Evelyn wet her lips and swallowed, staring at me the whole time. “You went feral. For a second I was worried you were out of control or something, when I saw you walk into this room.”

A cold feeling settled into my belly. “Oh. Um. I don’t ... don’t recall it very well. I think I spooked Kimberly.”

“Mmhmm.”

Evelyn just stared at me, waiting for an explanation, or to see if I would erupt into a ball of tentacles. Praem stared too. I couldn’t take that; I couldn’t deal with being looked at in that way by Evelyn, of all people.

“I—I just,” I stammered. “I wanted to— I felt like— I couldn’t help —”

Evelyn snorted, which surprised me. I blinked up at her again. “Yes, Heather, you never can help being heroic. You’ve made that point plenty of times. Stop being so bashful.”

I blinked rapidly. “ ... heroic?”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “If you hadn’t dealt with that Outsider at our rear, it would have burst into the room while Felicity and I were trying to complete the spell. Probably would have gone right through us. God knows I didn’t have the energy left to hit it with my walking stick. Well done, Heather, you saved us again. So stop acting all modest. Give yourself more credit.”

I stared, dumbstruck. “I thought you were looking at me in disgust.”

“Eh?” Evelyn squinted.

“I was ‘full squid’, wasn’t I? I’m covered in bruises now, I’m going to be paying for this tomorrow, which means I must have instinctively covered myself in plates and spines. I remember bits of it. I must have been a sight.”

“I didn’t have my glasses on,” said Evee. She frowned as if this made no sense at all. “I’m sure you looked glorious, stop beating yourself up.”

Such a final dismissal, such a casual side-swipe; Evelyn’s tone left no doubt that she simply did not care what I looked like, even covered in spikes and armour plating and spitting venom. And she wasn’t putting it on for my sake, she wasn’t being polite or kind or accepting. She just didn’t care.

I love this woman too much.

“Oh, Evee.” I put one arm around her front in an awkward hug, so very gently, more of a hover-hand than an embrace. She went stiff, but patted my arm in return.

“We’re already splattered with blood, Heather. Don’t make it worse.” She cleared her throat. “But thank you. Yes. I think.”

I let go and leaned back into the sofa, beaming at her.

Praem said, staring right at me, “Very elegant. Such fast. Much squid.”

“Oh!” I beamed at her too — at the exact moment Evelyn sighed like a bellows and looked like she wanted to reach up and flick Praem in the forehead.

“You’re very lucky you are my daughter,” Evelyn said to Praem. “If Twil said that I’d put her in a kennel for a week.”

“Concern,” said Praem.

Evelyn’s jaw went tight.

I wasn’t following any of this, I was just delighted to get called elegant. Nobody had ever called me ‘elegant’ before. “Thank you, Praem. Are you okay? How are you feeling? Your maid dress is all shredded, we’re going to need to get you a replacement.”

Praem said nothing, just stared.

"Ahem ahem, ladies," came Twil's voice as she wandered in from the main corridor. "What's this about putting me in a kennel? Like to see you try, Saye. Like to see you try."

Twil shot us both a wink, thrumming with energy, fully recovered from her ordeal. She was an even bigger mess than Praem, covered in gore and missing bits of her clothes, though she'd made a token effort to wipe her face and hands.

"More like an ice bath," Evelyn grumbled. "Aren't you gonna wash that off?"

"Actually yeah," Twil said. "Feel kinda vile. Figured there's no point until we've slung all the hounds in a hole first though." She nodded at me. "Hey, uh, Big H, I couldn't help overhearing some of that. Some of what you were saying."

"Eavesdropping?" I asked, then tutted. "Oh, Twil."

"It's my house! And I was helping haul one of those freak corpses out of the little sitting room, before it melts into the carpet. Look, I was just wondering, how come you reacted so differently to the hound going for Kim earlier?"

I blinked at her, not quite following. "I'm sorry?"

"You know." Twil grinned wide, all teeth, and I realised she was trying to help me. Bless her, she was trying to help me with Eevee. "For Kim you did a big leap, but with those things getting in here you lost your rag and went berserk. Which was way cool, by the way. Caught a snatch of it myself."

I sighed and narrowly resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. "Twil, I lost control because all my friends and family were being threatened. And because those Outsiders are an obscenity."

"Yeah but—"

"Twil," I sighed.

For once, Evelyn was the one not following the hidden subtext of this conversation. Twil wanted me to say 'I did it to protect Eevee!' But that wasn't true. I did it to protect everybody.

Twil's grin turned awkward. She nodded along. "Yeah, 'course. But you know, it was—"

"I did it because this is all my fault, Twil. I lost control because I

was angry, because we were going to get hurt — did get hurt! Because of me! This was all for me, in the end. Don't tell me it wasn't. If it wasn't for me, and the Eye, and— and Maisie, then nobody would have gotten hurt here today. You all did this for me. This house is wrecked, Nicole has a broken shin, and we may have traumatised Tenny. I made Lozzie kill something. All because of me. And I can't do anything to thank you enough. You and everybody else. I owe you too much."

I couldn't stop the words once I started speaking them. Twil went quite still; she hadn't expected an outburst of emotion in response to her terrible attempt at being my wing-woman. I took a shuddering breath and turned my eyes down to the stained and bloody carpet.

Evelyn's lips parted with a wet click. "Heather—"

"This was for all of us," said Christine Hopton.

I looked up as she stepped into the room behind Twil. Wearing sensible shoes and a multicoloured shawl over her shoulders, she looked smaller than ever, shrunken and hardened, showing every single one of her years. But Twil's mother, so much like Twil herself, gave me a warm smile.

"Mum," Twil huffed. "You were eavesdropping."

"Pot kettle black, dear," said Christine. "Pick your battles."

Twil huffed and let her shoulders slump. I had the feeling she'd heard that particular line many times before.

"I'm sorry for doing so much damage to your home," I said.

"Sorry?" she echoed, acting surprised. I knew it was acting, but she was so good at it; her gentle tone of voice invited one to simply go along with the play. "You're apologising to me, and to my husband, and to Twil, and Amanda too — for something done by Edward Lilburne?"

"But if I wasn't—"

"If you weren't here, then my daughter would never have made so many friends in the city. If you weren't here, then I doubt the Church would have been able to reconcile with Miss Saye. If you weren't here to warn us all those months ago, then the Sharrowford Cult may have gotten the better of us. If you weren't here, we

wouldn't have witnessed so many miracles.”

“But your doors and windows would be intact,” I said. I almost sobbed. Evelyn reached down and squeezed my hand.

Christine Hopton laughed. “Doors and windows can be replaced. Blood can be washed out of carpets. Even bones can be set. All of these things are worth the long-term security we are buying by working together. You did not do any of this, Heather. Edward Lilburne did. And our god wants him gone too.”

I started crying softly. Had to wipe my tears away on my sleeve.

“Jeeze, mum,” said Twil.

“Hush, dear.”

“Truth,” said Praem. And it was.

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Mrs Hopton—”

“Christine, please. I know we’ve had our differences, but please.”

“Christine,” Evelyn sighed. I was too busy wiping my face to watch the exchange. “Windows and doors can be repaired, but that does require money. I was not joking about my willingness to fund repairs to your home. Especially since insurance is going to have — issues, if they decide to properly investigate and audit this.”

I felt rather than saw the smile on Christine Hopton’s face. And I felt Amanda step into the room behind her. I felt their god shifting inside both their minds, a sliver of a giant seen through a keyhole.

“That’s very kind of you to offer,” Christine said. “But we’ve dealt with insurance assessors before. Hringewindla can be very persuasive to uninitiated minds.”

“Ewwww,” went Twil. “Seriously?”

“After your grandfather passed away, we had to improvise.”

A moment of creeping silence. I cleared my eyes and found Evelyn regarding our hosts with a tightness in her jaw. Twil was cringing away from her mother and her aunt. A bubble-servitor was sitting on Amanda Hopton’s shoulders like a cross between a parrot and a portable pillow.

“Quite,” said Evelyn.

“No lasting damage,” said Amanda, eyes hazy and lids drooping, speaking for her god.

“Less said the better,” Evelyn grunted. “My offer stands.”

Christine nodded. “We can talk about that later, Evelyn. For now I think we all need a cup of tea and a sit down.”

“Tea,” said Praem.

Christine continued, “I think the worst of the clean-up is done. I’ll call the others back. Should we strategise? I take it that’s your next move?”

“Our next move is finding Sevens,” I said. “We have to wait, or ... ”

Twil was staring out of the shattered back doors, through the film of bubble-servitors, across the patio, toward the edge of the forest, frowning and squinting. I trailed off. The others followed my gaze.

“Twil?” Christine said. “Dear?”

“Hold up a sec ... there’s ... naaaaaah, what?”

Evelyn sighed explosively. “If there’s a second giant spider I’m calling Jan so she can nuke us from orbit.”

“Ha ha, yeah.” Twil stepped closer to the window. “There’s a guy. A dude. At the edge of the woods.”

I craned to see, but Twil’s eyes were better than mine, better than any human. I couldn’t see anything except clean sunlight and the darkness beneath the trees.

Evelyn had gone stiff. “A stray walker?”

“Nah, he’s looking this way. Binoculars? Shiiiiit.” A grin ripped across Twil’s lips. She flexed her fingers like unsheathing a weapon. “This is Eddy’s follow-up, to check if we’re dead, right? Somebody find Zheng, and Raine. We can get him and—”

A voice like rusty nails down a rotten blackboard scratched across the inside of my skull, making my teeth judder and my eyes water.

“Hush hasty wolfie,” said Aym, nestled in the corner of the room, a pool of a shadow in the junction between two walls. “We’re hunting rabbits. And we’ve almost got him.”

sediment in the soul – 19.6

“Aym!”

But no Sevens, not that I could see.

I hurled myself off the sofa.

Fear for Seven-Shades-of-Uncertain-Safety; lingering guilt over the state of Geerswin farmhouse; self-directed horror at almost injecting Nicole Webb with unfiltered Heather-juice; exhaustion and pain; the bloodstains on my clothes; the ache in my flank where my bioreactor lay beneath my bruised and spongy flesh. A heady cocktail too strong for little old me; it yanked me to my feet and sent me lurching toward the shadow-wrapped bundle in the corner of the Hopton’s ruined and smashed dining room.

I reached for Aym with half my tentacles. The other half retained a sliver of sense, slapping desperately at the floor in a futile effort to keep me on my feet.

A poor decision, but I plead panic born of love. In my mind’s eye I was meant to stagger toward Aym, grab her by those thin, lace-drowned shoulders, and shake her. I was meant to shout: “Where is Sevens?!” This was a bad plan, not only because I couldn’t stand, nor because the only sound I could make was a hissing squeak, but mostly because Aym wasn’t properly manifested. There was nothing to grab and shake. She did not currently possess shoulders, thin and lace-clad or otherwise. ‘Aym’ was an amorphous veil of darkness. She was probably feeling shy. Or playing silly games.

Praem had to step in and catch me before I could fall flat on my face. The only injury was to my dignity, but it was a nasty wound.

To my credit I didn’t instinctively attack her with my tentacles or hiss in her face, which would have been deeply mortifying and require hours of penance later. Instead I blushed and fussed and clung to her in gratitude, embarrassed by my outburst and quite off-balance. I muttered various species of ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry’ and ‘I’m so clumsy’, but Praem ignored it all with her usual affectless acceptance. She deposited me back on the sofa as gently as she could; Eeve instantly clung to my arm, as if to stop me from

attempting another escape.

Everyone was talking at once — including me.

“Aym! Aym!” I was saying, trying to get a look around Praem’s hip. “Sevens, where’s Sevens?!”

Twil was saying, “What do you mean, hunting rabbits? Who’s that guy, hey?” She pointed at the gap where the back doors had once stood, now filled with semi-transparent bubble-servitors. “You mean you’re on him? You’re after him?”

Evelyn snapped her voice like a whip, “Explain yourself, you vile thing! Heather, stay put! Stay!”

Christine and Amanda both looked rather shocked by all this; Christine was trying to ask a question, but her words were lost in the noise. Raine darted back into the room, probably drawn by the sound of my panicked voice. Felicity was hot on her heels but she stopped dead when she saw Aym’s shadow-mass in the corner; despite the cacophonous near-panic, I clearly saw the tension drain away from her shoulders and depart the muscles of her face, the moment she saw Aym. Kimberly didn’t stop in time. She bounced off Felicity’s back, which almost sent Felicity sprawling, because the mage was still exhausted and spent. They caught each other, awkwardly close. I wished them luck. ‘Mister’ George and Michael Hopton blundered in too, late to the show.

“What’s going on now?” Michael thundered. “Is it kicking off again? Ben and Katey aren’t even here, we don’t have the fire-power for another—”

“Aym, hey,” Twil was saying, voice sharp and clear for once, cutting across the others. “If you’re hunting, I gotta know! And somebody find Zheng.”

“Found,” Zheng rumbled from the doorway. A few people jumped; Zheng had appeared almost as quietly as Aym had.

“Sevens!” I was almost screeching. “Where’s—”

Aym — or the pool of black mist that contained the concept of Aym — went: “Shhhhhh! Shhh! Shh!”

It was like being hushed by a throat full of flaking rust mixed with the sound of nails down a chalkboard, but inside one’s own head. Several people winced. Twil sneezed and swore. Zheng growled. I

swore I saw a tentacle or two drifting inside that cloud of black nothing, like a hand concealing a naughty smile.

Aym continued in a less ear-punishing voice. “We’ve almost hooked him over the line, sweeties and swooties. I’ve only nipped back to make sure wolf-brain here doesn’t rush out there and ruin the whole trick. Don’t spook him! He’s so close to the jaws.”

A slick slap of tongue and a clack of teeth came from within the black mist, as if slaverling over a delicious morsel.

Twil spoke quickly, with more confidence than she usually showed, heading off any further confusion. She stretched out both hands in an ‘everybody stop’ gesture. “Whoa whoa, okay,” she hissed under her breath, as if we were trying to stay quiet and stealthy inside a deer blind. “Nobody move, nobody look at the window— uh, door — bubbles ... you know what I mean. She’s got a point. If they’ve been reeling that guy in then we don’t want to disturb the hunt.”

Raine looked suddenly alert. Her pistol was in her hands. “What guy?”

Twil pointed at the hole in the back of the house, covered with a makeshift skin of stretched bubble-servitor, like oil suspended in water between two layers of cling-film. “There’s a guy, at the edge of the woods. Don’t look! Pretend we haven’t seen. Right?”

Aym giggled, a raspy noise like pine cones crushed beneath steel boots. “Good wolfie! You get it, yes you do. How about some scratches later, mmmhmm?”

Twil froze, deeply confused.

Evelyn snapped, “You leave Twil alone or I will remove both your hands. Twil, don’t respond to that.”

“Uh, yeah, yeah,” Twil said, then cleared her throat. “Look, just, chill, okay? Everybody chill, don’t look at the woods. Let Aym do her thing.”

Amanda said, slurring her words, “Made it so he can’t see through the angels. We can see out. Can’t see in.”

“Clever, clever!” Aym purred in approval.

The logistics of that statement made me frown inside; unaltered human beings couldn’t see the bubble-servitors in the first place.

But I didn't have the spare mental bandwidth to question it just then. I trusted Hringewindla on this.

Raine said quickly, "It's not Edward himself, is it?"

"Confirm that!" Evelyn hissed. "He wouldn't be that stupid, but ... "

Twil shook her head. "Nah. Too young. It's not him."

Evelyn tutted. "Pity."

"Sevens!" I hissed. "Aym, where is Sevens?"

From within that black mist I felt an awareness turn toward me, an observer deep in the darkness looking back, as if Aym was only just now paying proper attention.

The darkness thickened and shrank. For a second I thought Aym was leaving again, tormenting me with doubt and uncertainty over Sevens' safety. I almost lurched out of the sofa all over again, anchored only by Evelyn's iron-hard grip on my arm. But the darkness sucked itself into a solid form, like vacuum packed plastic wrap. Mist became black lace, head to toe, without a scrap of skin showing, Aym's face hidden deep inside a hood.

Diminutive and concealed, the slight little figure trotted over to the sofa as if escaping a darkened cellar. Before I could yelp in surprise or ward her off, Aym wriggled down next to me as if retreating from the rest of the room, from all the other curious gazes turned her way. She even hid from Felicity, burrowed down by my burning right flank.

"Aym?" I croaked, spiritually uncomfortable. Her hip against mine felt just like a regular human being. She squirmed into the embrace of my tentacles, like a tiny fish seeking cover in the seaweed. "You — ah, what are you—"

A tiny voice whispered forth: "Your fiancée is fine, stop whining. She's hunting. I'm yours for the moment so don't betray her trust, squid-for-brains. Let me shelter."

Twil said, "Heather, she say something?"

"Sevens is fine," I replied with a shuddering sigh. "I guess she's conducting the hunt."

Aym whispered with her hidden face pressed into my shoulder. "Tell them it's time to move. Wolfie, the murder-dyke, and your

muscle zombie. Get them together. Here's the plan. Don't screw it up!"

= =

Sevens' plan — for it was her plan, Aym was only the messenger — was hardly complex enough to justify all this cloak-and-dagger skulduggery, especially when several of us were so exhausted. But Aym assured me in her hissing, warbling, broken little voice that it was essential, it was the only way to catch this "skip-hop skitter-beast of a man."

"Eh?" said Twil when I repeated that particular description. "What's that meant to mean, is he really good at running away?"

Aym giggled in my ear: "A professional runner-away, yes!"

I relayed the plan. Evelyn critiqued it a bit, though she was basically on board from the start. Twil and Zheng both approved — though Zheng insisted she be responsible for the tackle, rather than Twil. Raine was doubtful, but Zheng said: "We watch each other, little wolf. None will get at our backs." That seemed to do the trick.

Getting into place was a little bit awkward. The clock was ticking: by the time Aym had explained the plan and I'd relayed it and the others had agreed, the man at the edge of the woods had begun to creep into the fields.

Aym had not exaggerated; he did look professional, even at a distance, across the farm, seen through a wall of bubble-servitors. Perhaps it was the way he moved, or the way he held himself, or the simple hiking clothes he wore. He walked with slow and exaggerated care, eyes up, awareness spread wide. He stopped every few paces to look over his shoulder, crane his neck to see around the corners of the house, take pictures with his phone, stare through his binoculars, and write in a little notebook he kept pulling out of his coat.

He couldn't see the bubble-servitors shadowing his every move. They had him boxed in, covered from behind, even from the sky, bobbing and writhing with invisible glory. But they couldn't do the deed.

"If we're wrong and he's a mage, he could go right through them," Evelyn had said. "No, it has to be real flesh to do the job."

Abyssal instinct stirred as I watched. Instinct knew. He was no predator; this man acted like prey.

We observed him from the back door — or rather, the hole where the back door used to be. Everybody who was not directly involved in trapping this poor man like a skittish rabbit clustered around to watch. Amanda assured us again that the bubble-servitors would make it impossible for him to see us. I didn't question the pneumatic mechanics of that; I'd had enough headaches for one day.

However, I could barely stand up. My right flank burned like a chunk of star lodged inside my flesh. Kimberly helped me, arm beneath mine. But so did Aym. She stuck uncomfortably close, propped me up, her tiny black-lace form wedged into my side and aggravating my bruises. I returned the favour and wrapped her in tentacles for support, but she didn't complain. Praem helped Evelyn to stand; she was lucky.

We watched the suspicious man make his way across the field, as the others got into position. He didn't look like much, just a stray hiker with a sturdy walking stick, a camo-print coat, and a big sensible backpack.

Christine Hopton cleared her throat gently. "We're not about to traumatize some uninvolved gentleman, are we?"

Evelyn sighed sharply. "With all due respect, High Priestess, that man is taking notes."

"Watch how he moves," I croaked. "He's up to something. He's skulking."

He was also speaking to somebody who wasn't there.

Every few seconds he turned his head to the left and spoke a little. The actual words were lost to distance and muffled by the walls of the house. But he was speaking to somebody, pausing, responding, answering questions.

I whispered under my breath, "Good job, Sevens. Good, good, keep it up. Good girl. I love you, you can do it."

Aym whispered into my hot, aching flank: "She's brilliant."

"She is."

"And beautiful."

“Hmm?” I glanced down at Aym, but her face was still hidden deep inside her hood. She clung to me like an animal in the shelter of a cliff. I knew Felicity was watching with great curiosity, but the older mage didn’t seem bothered by this new-found and unexpected clingy Aym. Which was a relief. If she’d shown jealousy I think I would have been disgusted.

Executing the plan went lightning fast. There wasn’t really much to it.

Raine stepped around the side of the house, raised her handgun and shouted: “Police, freeze!”

Aym had been very specific that Raine needed to shout ‘police’. It made me wish Nicole wasn’t currently halfway to Sharrowford General Hospital; she would have been either delighted or outraged, I’m not sure which. None of us actually saw Raine, not from the angle of the doorway, but we heard her shout. She was wonderfully authoritative.

The hiking man froze for a split-second — then turned to run, ducking and weaving, both hands hooked into the straps of his backpack. Not the response of somebody who’d never had a gun pointed at him before, but the last resort of a desperate professional.

Twil and Zheng burst from the tree-line behind him, corralled him in about half a second, and then Zheng hit him like a wrecking ball. She delivered a rugby tackle to fell an elephant — though she’d been given strict instructions not to actually kill or maim him, so she did cradle his head in one hand before they hit the ground.

After all, we did want to have a word with him.

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Ten minutes later we had Edward Lilburne’s after-action scout tied up in the Hopton’s kitchen. Raine taught me that phrase — ‘after-action scout’. I didn’t like it very much; too clean and bland, something worryingly sanitised about the words.

“Isn’t he more of a ... rear-guard?” I suggested.

“Nah, wrong term,” Raine said, ruffling my hair.

The others were less kind.

“Vulture,” Zheng purred.

“Quite,” Christine agreed, arms folded. She regarded our captive with pursed lips and a tight frown. “I’m not very well predisposed to this attempt on my home and family, but I’ve not yet had anybody at which to vent.”

“Dumb-arse,” said Twil.

“Twil!” her mother scolded.

“I mean him! Not you, mum! Fuck!”

“Language!”

“Nobody,” Felicity said in her heavy, tired mumble, leaning on Kimberly’s support. “He’s a nobody. He doesn’t even have any weapons on him?”

“Everybody shut the fuck up,” Evelyn croaked from the kitchen doorway, still using Praem to keep herself upright. “If we’re going to terrify this bastard, I’d prefer we do it in a more systematic fashion. Allow me, please.”

The mysterious man looked terrified enough as it was — and anything but mysterious. Part of me wondered if Christine’s initial fear was correct: if we had accidentally assaulted and kidnapped a random woodland Rambler who’d stumbled upon what he could only have assumed was a crime scene. But then I recalled how he’d moved.

He did look rather like the sort of man who might be out for a solo hike in the deepest woods.

In his late forties or perhaps early fifties, with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and a freshly shaved chin, he had the sort of face one only gets from a lifetime spent outdoors, weathered and craggy, but lean and tight, with an athletic build. His eyes were soft deep blue, his skin tanned, and his fingernails very dirty. He reminded me a tiny bit of my own father, if my dad had been about a six stone lighter.

Dressed in a camo-print coat, sensible trousers, and sturdy boots, he passed muster for a long journey. His pockets and the bag on his back contained nothing out of the ordinary: no weapons, no magical sigils, no hidden compartments, not even after Praem and Raine had rifled through all the contents, and Felicity had done

something esoteric with her right hand over his midsection.

She said, "Skin's clean too, nothing on him."

Evelyn had grunted: "I hate that you do that with no circle. It's obscene."

"Mm, me too."

Raine found his car keys and wallet; the latter contained a driver's licence, with his face, and the name, 'Preston Owl Woods.'

"Think it's real?" Raine asked.

Twil pulled a grimace. "Pee-oh-double-you? Is this guy bait or what? Must think we're all stupid."

"Can't we ask him?" Michael said. "We've got him covered in about six different ways. He tries anything, his head's gonna burst, right?"

"Ew. Dad," said Twil.

"Well, it's true. And I'm not speaking a word against caution, not after the last couple of hours. You hear me, Mister Woods? If that's even your real name. We take that gag off your mouth and you better not try anything, because you'll be dead in seconds."

'Mister' George cleared his throat with great discomfort. "Are we going to have to ... make this guy ... talk? Because I don't want to be present for that. Sorry. Just don't."

Raine shot him a wink. "It's cool, we're dab hands at that by now. No help needed."

Not the right thing to say — 'Mister' George went quite pale, staring at Raine. But I knew the talk was for show, to intimidate our captive. I just wish Raine was a little more delicate about it.

Twil was sucking on her teeth. "You don't think he's that guy, do you?"

"What guy?" Raine asked.

"You know. The guy. Joking."

"Joe King," I croaked. "No. He was ... built different. Wrong face too."

Evelyn said, "Let me speak to him first, before we try anything

rash.”

‘Preston Woods’ watched all this with steadily increasing terror in his wide eyes. Out in the field, Zheng had pinned him to the ground with his face in the mud and knelt on his hands: anti-mage precaution, no words, no gestures. Raine had gagged him, bound his hands and wrapped his fingers in rope, to stop him trying any sneaky magic. After being hauled inside he’d been tied to a chair by his chest and ankles, and now sat, alone, at the centre of a ring of strange people, in the gore-streaked ruins of the Hopton’s kitchen.

His eyes were wide and wild, his chest pumping beneath his coat and grey jumper. But he was aware, trying to listen to and take in everything we said.

I tried to see this all from his perspective; he probably thought he was about to die.

Evelyn stepped forward, walking stick in one hand, her other arm wrapped around Praem. She stared at our captive and he stared back, eyes watering.

Evelyn spoke slowly and carefully. “We’re going to take the gag off your mouth. One of my associates is going to point a gun at your head, but that will be a back-up option, hardly necessary.” She tapped the floor with her walking stick. “Look at this.”

Preston looked down, at the hastily scrawled magic circle on the patch of clean floor tiles amid the bloodstains.

“If you try anything,” Evelyn continued, “this will set your brain on fire and turn your organs to pulp. There is also a monster hanging from the ceiling above your head. It is invisible, you can’t see it, but it will murder and digest you at the first sign of trouble. Nod if you understand.”

Preston Woods nodded. He couldn’t see the bubble-servitor hanging from the ceiling above his head, a raindrop ready to fall.

Twil hissed, “Bloody hell, Evee.”

I whispered back in a broken croak, “She’s just tired. Makes her blunt.”

“She’s fucking terrifying sometimes,” Twil hissed in reply.

Evelyn’s tone was colder and more precise than usual, I couldn’t

disagree with that assessment. I ached to step forward and take her hand, but that would undermine her gravitas and intimidation. Also, I had a pair of gremlins attached to my sides — Aym on one, and Sevens on the other.

Seven-Shades-of-Silent-Resumption was in her blood-goblin form, heavy-eyed and unsmiling. She'd appeared out of thin air while the others had been busy tying Preston to a chair; she had announced herself by clamping to my side all of a sudden, opposite Aym, as if she'd just stepped out from around a corner. I hadn't got a chance to speak with her yet, but she and Aym kept exchanging covert little touches across my back and belly. The pressure of her embrace made my bruises ache, but I wrapped my tentacles tight around her shoulders and clung on.

I just accepted the pair of them, and they helped me stand.

Evelyn continued, "We have just fended off an attempt on our lives. I hope you appreciate the seriousness with which we are treating you." She nodded to Raine. "Point the gun at his head. Somebody remove the gag."

Twil did the honours, pulling the makeshift gag out of Mister Woods' mouth. The man just sat there, panting, eyes flicking around at all the staring faces. He swallowed, hard and dry, opened his lips, then thought better of it, and said nothing.

Raine laughed softly. "You'd do better to speak, mate. And fast."

"M-m-may I?" he said, stammering hard.

Not a local accent, something Southern perhaps, maybe London. Deep voice, speaking from his chest, level and controlled despite the terror-born stammer.

Evelyn snapped, "Do you speak English as a first language? Answer that question and only that question, or my friend will pull the trigger. Yes or no; either answer will not get you killed."

I could see a 'What?' forming on his lips and in the crease of his brow, but Preston was fast enough and smart enough to catch himself. "Yes," he said.

"Then speak only English. A single word in another language and we have to kill you, as a precaution."

Preston nodded — but I could see in his eyes, he didn't understand.

“He’s not in the know,” I murmured.

A few of the others looked at me. Evelyn frowned. Raine raised her eyebrows. Kimberly looked away, more focused on helping Felicity than the unfolding interrogation.

I cleared my throat and repeated myself. “He’s not in the know. He doesn’t know what’s going on. He’s not properly aware.”

Felicity sighed in agreement. “He’s practically dissociating,” she mumbled. “Look at his eyes.”

Preston’s pupils were massively dilated. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot with stress. He couldn’t focus properly, eyes skipping about the room, over our faces — and flinching away from several people: Aym, Sevens, and Zheng.

“Shiiiiit,” said Twil. “You think?”

Amanda muttered, “Little lost lamb. Seen it before.”

Evelyn clenched her jaw and said, “Fuck. You’re right. We don’t have time for this. Mister Woods. Mister Woods, focus on me.”

Raine chuckled softly. “Little Yellow’s got his brain fried. He thought he was talking to somebody, out there with him in the field.” Raine glanced at Sevens, who was still clamped to my side, my little blood-limpet with her hands under my hoodie. “That was your handiwork, right?”

“*Guuurrrruk*, yeah,” rasped Seven-Shades-of-Psychic-Damage.

“Can you bring him back around?”

“*Rrrrrrrrk*.” Sevens managed to make that gurgle sound very apologetic, and then bury her face in my flank. Aym reached out and touched her shoulder.

“Mister Woods.” Evelyn stamped once with her walking stick — bad idea, seeing as she could barely stand. Praem kept her steady.

“Mister Woods, whoever you were talking to was not real. Focus on me. Your life depends on focusing on my words. Listen.”

Michael Hopton muttered from the doorway. “Poor bastard.”

‘Mister’ George murmured in agreement.

Twil leaned against the wall and puffed out a sigh. “Have we gotta break him in?”

“No,” I said quickly. “No, that would leave him confused for hours, at the very least. And it’s not ... right. It’s not right.”

“Yes,” Evelyn grunted. “We don’t have the time. And we have no idea how he would respond.”

A chest-rattling rasp vibrated against my other flank, like lungs choked with blood-flecked saliva; Aym drew a breath, and said: “Needs the expert touch.”

Aym let go of me and stepped forward, a miniature ghost all in black lace. She was half my current support, so Christine Hopton had to quickly step in to hold me up. Aym swept between the gathered people like a scrap of fabric on an errant wind. Before anybody could reach out to stop her, she was right next to Preston and the chair he was tied to.

She leaned forward, the side of her hood cupped by one sleeve-drowned hand, and whispered something inaudible into his ear.

Preston Woods went completely stiff, then relaxed, blinking rapidly, like a waking sleepwalker; he was still terrified, but now he was concentrating.

“I’ll— I’ll co-operate,” he babbled, lips thick with effort. “I’ll tell you anything. Everything you want. Please don’t— don’t shoot me. I’m not important. I’m just doing a job I was paid for. Do you want me to talk, or answer questions, or ... please.” He wet his lips and swallowed.

Evelyn frowned at Aym — but then Aym was gone, vanished like a wisp of smoke in damp air. She reappeared attached to Sevens, clinging to her back. The pair of goblins leaned against my side together.

Twil said, “Woah, hey, did you just fucking brainwash him!?”

“Unclogged,” said Aym. “He’ll be ga-ga in an hour or two. Work fast, sillies.”

“Please,” Preston repeated.

Raine said, “You’re doing great, fella. Just relax.”

Evelyn snorted. “No, how about don’t relax? Who are you working for?”

“I don’t know who this job is for,” Preston said. He focused on

Evelyn alone; something obviously told him that she was the leader, she was the one he needed to convince. "It's all via anonymous contacts. All I have is a text message telling me to start and a phone number I'm meant to report back to. It's completely hands off. You'll find the text message on my phone, it says 'go, four'. That's the code to start. I don't have the report number written down, I have it memorised. I destroyed the piece of paper with it on, this morning. Which I was instructed to do."

He spoke crisply and clearly, enunciating his words as best he could, despite the fear for his life. I had the impression he was barely holding back his terror, but he knew his chances were better if he gave us what we wanted.

Evelyn and Raine shared a look. Twil sighed. Christine tutted. Michael said, "Typical."

"That is his style," Raine said. "No-contact, no liability, all that."

"Typical, yes," Evelyn grunted.

Twil said, "What are you, some kind of cut-rate merc?"

Preston nodded. "Basically, yes."

Evelyn sighed. "Alright. What were you doing here?"

Preston wet his lips. "The job is strictly recon. It was set up a long time ago. I was meant to come to a specific location in the woods and then proceed toward this ... farm. I didn't know it was a farm. I didn't know what was here. The instructions were to proceed to this point and then report back if anybody was left alive. That's all."

"Left alive?" Michael Hopton said.

"Yes." Preston took a breath but he couldn't get it all the way down. "Nobody's ... nobody's dead. I've seen no bodies. And I've seen no gear, no drugs, no product. So, I'm not aware of anything that's happened here. I don't ... have to report back. I can pretend I never got the activation message."

Twil squinted at him. "Drugs?"

Present blinked rapidly. "This ... this is ... about drugs, right? I know the job must be for a big-scale dealer, but I don't know who. I'm sorry. I know this is a hit on a rival, but I don't know anything else. I'm sorry, I can't give details, it's a no-contact job. I swear."

Raine started laughing first. Twil rolled her eyes and flapped her hands. Evelyn looked like she was made of stone. Felicity put her face in her hand.

"It's not funny!" I protested. "He's genuinely confused."

"Funny," said Praem.

"Come on Heather," Raine said, "it's pretty absurd."

Michael Hopton said, slowly, "He thinks we're — what? A hidden growing operation? Drug dealers?"

"You're not then," Preston said. "You're not. I saw nothing. I still see nothing. You're not dealers, I never saw any of you."

Twil snorted. "That ain't the problem here, buddy-guy pal!"

Evelyn sounded like death. "This idiot doesn't know a thing."

"I can give you the number!" Preston said, desperate. Poor man thought we were going to shoot him for not knowing anything. "I can give you that."

Felicity murmured, "I want nothing to do with this. Nothing at all. I'm not torturing this man."

Evelyn sighed. "What's to torture? He knows nothing."

"Wait a sec," Raine said, stifling her laughter. "Mate, listen. Do you know a woman by the name of Amy Stack?"

Preston Woods froze, mouth on the cusp of an answer.

"Oh," I breathed.

Raine continued, before he could lie to us. "Tell us the truth here, friend. It's gonna increase your chances of getting out of here alive."

Preston nodded, slowly. His eyes stayed glued to Raine; any port in a storm, even one made of razor-sharp rocks. "Yeah. Haven't seen her in two years, but Amy's the one who gave me the job, back then. She gave me a phone number where I got the initial instructions, and also gave me the pay. Ten thousand up front. I'm supposed to get ten more on completion, after I report, but it's one of those jobs I never expected to call."

Raine cracked a grin, and said, "Small bloody world, isn't it?"

Preston didn't know how to respond.

"Ten grand!" Twil said, aghast. "Fuck me, that's a lot, just to wait around for a call and then take some pictures?"

"I'm reliable. Amy knew that. It's why she got me the contact."

"You better be reliable, fucking hell. Expensive!"

"Two years ago?" Evelyn asked Preston nodded. "And you haven't seen her since?" He nodded again. "I think that confirms who the job is really for."

Twil said, "We trust Stack?"

Zheng purred, "I trust the fox."

"Yeah," Raine agreed. "She's with us. Kind of."

"Oh, right," said Preston. This fact did not seem to reassure him.

"Hey, mate," Raine went on quickly, speaking fast. "Were you at the library?"

He stared at her, blind-sided. "The ... library?"

Raine waited. But Preston only swallowed, utterly confused.

Evelyn huffed. "Yes, he's one of Stack's mercenary contacts, but not the ones Edward used directly. This guy was not taken to Carcosa, or used for anything more. He's a nobody."

"Sooooo," Twil said, "what do we do with him?" She pulled a grimace. "Have we gotta ... you know?"

Michael Hopton shook his head, big beefy arms folded over his chest. "We can't just let him go. Not after this."

Raine winced. "Yeah, intel is too valuable to share."

Amanda Hopton spoke up as well, but she spoke for her god: "This has been too much of a transgression to risk a repeat."

"He does seem pretty scared ..." said Twil. She was right, Preston Woods looked terrified. He knew we were debating his death. Felicity said nothing, too busy putting her arms around Kimberly. Kim had her hands over her ears; she didn't want to know anything about this.

"Please," Preston said. "I can give you the number. Talk to Amy, ask

Amy, I'm solid. I am! Please don't— don't—"

"Shut up," Evelyn snapped. "Everybody shut up." She looked round at the rest of us. "I know this has been a rather traumatic day, but please, you all have higher IQs than this."

"Scuse me?" said Twil.

"This guy is pointless," Felicity murmured.

"Felicity is correct." To my great surprise, Evelyn grudgingly nodded at her. "Edward Lilburne is an extremely mature mage. He doesn't need some hoodwinked courier to confirm if his plan worked or not. This man is nothing worse than independent confirmation, a fail-safe. A red herring, perhaps. We could let him go and it wouldn't make any difference."

I saw Preston exhale with controlled relief.

"But we're not going to let him go," Evelyn finished.

Twil winced. Raine went still, readying herself. Zheng cocked her head.

"Evee?" I murmured.

Evelyn's face blossomed with one of those subtle smiles, knife-thin and devious. Evelyn Saye the strategist, my strategist, making a move nobody else had thought of. Praem stood tall at her side. She turned back to Mr Woods, who had gone grey, like rotten oats.

"You are going to call the number you were given — and I am going to make your report."

"... okay," he said, nodding. "Alright. I can do that. I will co-operate."

"Evee," Raine said. "What are you thinking? Share with the class, hey?"

Zheng grunted. "Wizard filth."

"Yes, Evee?" I echoed. But I was vibrating. Evelyn's satisfaction was contagious. "Evee, what are you planning?"

Evelyn's smile grew sharp and beautiful.

"Edward Lilburne was always so afraid of hearing my voice over the phone, remember? Well. I'm going to send him a letter bomb."

= =

For the second time in one day, Evelyn, Felicity, and Kimberly worked together — but mostly because Evelyn was too exhausted to stand up without leaning on Praem, let alone rip a metaphorical hole in her own metaphysical throat.

“I am perfectly capable of doing this by myself, for pity’s sake,” she complained when help was not so much offered as imposed upon her. “The theory is simple and sound, it’s only going to require a small circle, it’s hardly any work. Praem, let me— go— for—”

“You’ve never done it before,” Felicity said.

“Neither have you, you cretin!”

“You said it yourself. The theory is simple and sound. I can do it, with Kim’s help.”

“Don’t act all bloody self-sacrificing! And I want it to be my voice Edward hears before his brain cooks! Praem, let me—”

“Bad Evee,” said Praem. “Sit down.”

That settled it, for now.

Evelyn was allowed to stay in the kitchen and supervise, though she was placed firmly in a chair while Praem and Felicity drew the magic circle directly onto the floor tiles. Kimberly stood by, mostly to help Felicity get up and down. The room already needed a very serious scrub-down; all the nooks and crannies were stained with blood. Nobody would be using that kitchen to cook for a while, not until the bubble-servitors had gone over every surface and removed all the biological matter.

We all watched the circle take shape, in scraps of filthy blood and swoops of clean chalk. Amanda and Christine drifted away, to aid the bubble-servitors in plugging the holes in the building. Michael stayed, arms folded, standing behind our chair-bound captive, presumably in case he tried to gnaw through his bonds. ‘Mister’ George excused himself to chain smoke out front. Somebody — I think it was Raine, but I was fuzzy-headed by that point — suggested to Zheng that she should keep watch, play lookout, make sure that Edward Lilburne wasn’t going to try for a hat trick. Zheng didn’t need much encouragement; she didn’t like to linger during magecraft.

She ruffled my hair on the way out, purring “Shaman” under her breath. And to my surprise, she ruffled Seven’s hair as well, in a strangely affectionate gesture. The little blood goblin didn’t even try to bite her. Sevens was too busy pressing her face into my flank and clinging to my side. My support, my limpet.

Part of me was desperately aware that Sevens needed me. She’d not said more than a dozen words since returning from her unscheduled and unplanned sneaking session. She was clasped around me as if clinging to a piece of driftwood in the open ocean. Aym was attached to her back as well, but that seemed less urgent.

I needed to get Sevens alone, but now was not a good time.

While the circle was taking shape, Twil asked, “Uhh, Eevee, is this actually going to cook his brain? ‘Cos like, yeah, that’s pretty gnarly and he deserves it and all. But is this like, responsible?”

Raine laughed softly. “Since when are you worried about being responsible?”

Twil shot her a scowl. “Hey!”

Michael Hopton cleared his throat. “Our Twil can be very responsible. I’m proud of her.”

Twil winced as if hit with a brick. “Daaaad,” she whined.

“It’s the truth,” he said, unashamed.

Evelyn sighed heavily from her chair. “It was a figure of speech. If mages could kill with a word, the world would be a much more simple place.” She added in a quieter voice: “If *I* could kill with a word, it would be a much better place.”

“Eevee,” I mumbled after trying and failing to tut. “Stop being scary.”

I couldn’t help but notice our captive was having trouble following this conversation. Mages and magic were not penetrating the veil of normality around his psyche. He kept blinking too hard.

Evelyn cleared her throat and waved me off. “Anyway, no. It won’t actually kill him. It’ll cause him a lot of pain, perhaps a migraine, maybe explosive diarrhoea if I’m lucky.”

“What if somebody else hears it first?” Twil asked. “We’re not gonna mess up some random merc, right?”

"The spell will key off Edward's recognition of his own full name," Evelyn explained. "It shouldn't hurt anybody else. And it will sound like a real report, mostly, to increase the chances he might listen to it himself."

Raine sucked on her teeth. "And what if he doesn't?"

Evelyn smiled again, sharp and dangerous. "He is expecting a reply to the question 'are my enemies still alive?' The answer will be a bomb. Do you see the power in that? I want him paranoid. I want him jumping at shadows. I want him so riled up he risks missing the real hit."

Twil nodded along, enjoying this. "Rustle them jimmies. I dig it."

Michael Hopton squinted. "Wait a moment. Sorry, Miss Saye, but all this is to give our enemy a headache?"

Raine laughed again. "Evee can be amazingly petty. It's one of her best qualities."

"Mm," I agreed with a soft grunt, the best I could muster right then. All my consciousness felt dragged down to the ache in my flank, like a lead weight tugging at my thoughts.

Evelyn snapped, "If he's dealing with a blinding headache, he's not making clear plans. We want him off-balance for as long as possible. Need I remind everyone that we still don't know where his home is? We have to buy time, for ... "

Her eyes flickered to me, to hunched and pained little Heather Morell, propped up by a fake vampire and a black-lace demon.

She wouldn't say it out loud, but I knew the truth: Evee needed to buy time for me.

The fastest method of locating Edward Lilburne, now that the veil was lifted, was always going to be hyperdimensional mathematics. In theory I could walk out the front door right now, step over to the pile of dead canine corpses, and use one of them to trace the web of interaction and creation and meaning all the way back to the mage himself. Assuming he was responsible for them, of course. But it was a solid bet that we could tug on that thread and eventually find him at the other end of it.

But my body wasn't working right. My bioreactor had overheated, self-shutdown, or just plain broken. I had no idea what brain-math

would do to me right now. Evelyn knew that, but she wouldn't say it out loud.

We had other methods, of course. Zheng could go hunting, maybe with Twil at her side. Hringewindla's angels were already fanning out into the woods, but they could hardly cover all the countryside between here and Stockport. Given enough time we could search for the house the old-fashioned way, on foot.

But brain-math would be fast, brain-math would solve the problem, brain-math would do in minutes what would otherwise take days.

And brain-math might burn through my abdomen.

Evelyn never finished that sentence. As her eyes lingered on me, Raine stepped in for her: "Yeah, we gotta buy time. We're in no shape for another fight, not like this."

Evelyn squinted at her. "That's not like you."

Twil chuckled. "Yeah, speak for yourself, Raine. I could go another round."

"Sure you could," Raine said with a grin. "Meanwhile, I think we should negotiate."

"*Negotiate?*" said Michael Hopton.

"Raine?" I said, actively horrified.

She shrugged. "You're exhausted, Heather. Eevee, Fliss, Kim, all spent. Nicky's got a broken leg, she's out. I'm almost out of bullets. What are we gonna do if we find the house now, go running in for a frontal assault?"

"Swarm it with bubble-lads," said Twil. "Come on, Raine! What are you talking about?"

"Agreed," Evelyn grunted through gritted teeth. "Raine, we're not negotiating anything except an unconditional surrender. He gives us the book and fucks off forever, preferably into the ground, or no deal. I'll make that part of my letter bomb, shall I?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

But Raine was serious. "Yeah, please do. But then we're heading home."

Eevee stamped with her walking stick, a gesture which almost

toppled her out of her chair. Praem leapt up from working on the circle and caught her.

Evelyn snapped out, "We are not having a strategy meeting right now, Raine!"

"Yeah," Raine said, perfectly level and perfectly calm. "We're not. Decision is already made. We gotta rest, Eevee, even if just to recover for a day or two. How are we gonna press this? What's the plan?"

Evelyn pursed her lips. She shot a look at Preston, tied to his chair, but he looked lost.

"We are not talking about this now," Evelyn snapped.

Raine cracked a grin. "We're overextended."

"We haven't even left this house!"

"It's a metaphor."

Evelyn snapped, "Well it's a shit one!"

Twil spoke up, intensely awkward. "Hey, uh, calm down, yeah?"

"Eevee," I murmured. "I can't ... I'm sorry. But I can't. And you told me to rest."

Evelyn froze in a way she so rarely did, catching herself on the edge of a precipice, horror behind her eyes as she stared at me. She swallowed, then had to cling to Praem's arm for several long seconds, despite the fact she was already sitting down quite comfortably.

"That's true," she murmured, looking away from me. "True. We can ... we'll finish this spell, then ... then talk. Make a new plan. Yes."

Raine shot me a wink. A victory, but not one I enjoyed.

Eventually that magic circle drove me out of the kitchen, with Sevens in tow. The circle burned my eyes like a magnesium flare. At first it was fine, just marks on the floor, a little uncanny but no worse than any other magic circle which had ever made me feel vaguely unwell. But when Felicity and Praem were just over halfway done, the symbols seemed to spark and burn inside my brain. Nobody else suffered that effect; this wasn't errant magic or an unintended side-effect. I was seeing the purpose beneath the

symbolism. The Eye's gift.

"Go sit down!" Evelyn snapped at me, when I covered my eyes and groaned. "You're going to give yourself a migraine by watching."

"But you— you're so tired—"

"And so are you." Evelyn sighed sharply. "Somebody make Heather sit down, please, because I can't even stand up. Raine? Raine, take her into the sitting room and make sure she doesn't wander back in here and burn out her retinas. Heather, rest, for pity's sake, or I will do this magic myself."

I obeyed — with a little helping hand from Raine. She led me back into the shattered sitting room. Sevens clung to me the whole way. Aym clung to her back. We made a very silly conga-train from the kitchen to the sofa in the dining room, but I was too wiped out to care, too exhausted for self-consciousness.

Raine got me settled on the sofa. Seven burrowed into my flank, hard and tight. Aym sat on her opposite side, one hand resting against Seven's narrow thigh.

I recalled putting my head back and closing my eyes, but only once I made sure Sevens was anchored with three tentacles and she wasn't going anywhere. Consciousness drifted back and forth, a veil parting and closing over my face. Part of me assumed Raine had stood up and gone back into the kitchen, but then I felt a cool, soft, dry hand on my forehead, brushing my hair back. Only a handful of seconds had passed.

Raine's hand withdrew. She whispered, "She asleep?"

I was about to answer, dredging my voice from drowsiness. But Sevens spoke first.

"Dunno," came the rasping voice from somewhere down near the base of my ribcage, nuzzled against the roots of my tentacles.

"Maybe."

"Heather?" Raine whispered.

A rare and impish impulse bade me stay quiet. I allowed myself to drift instead of answer.

"Guess that's a yes," Raine whispered.

Sevens replied with a gurgling, "Mmmm."

“How about you, Yellow? How you holding up?”

Silence. Sevens shifted against my side. My bruises sang a bitter chorus. I felt a gentle prick of sharp teeth, muzzled by the fabric of my hoodie. Somehow that made the bruises fade. The teeth withdrew.

“Need a rusk?” Raine whispered with a grin in her voice.

Sevens did not answer; Aym did, in a voice like iron filings sprinkled on a snowdrift. “She’s tired, bitch-tits.”

I’d never heard her speak so gently, despite her choice of terminology.

Silence returned for several moments. I almost drifted deeper, beyond sound. I could hear Evelyn’s voice in the kitchen, muffled by the wall and the door, and then a reply, perhaps from Felicity. Raine must have pulled up a chair, because I heard a creak of damaged wood, followed by a gentle sigh. I could smell the iron tang coming off Sevens — and something else below that, like sweat or pheromones.

“You wanna talk about it?” Raine whispered. “In front of Aym?”

“... hurt ... inside,” Sevens rasped softly.

I almost broke cover, almost opened my eyes and sat up and hugged her around the shoulders and pulled her into my lap and kissed her on the forehead. She sounded so spent and tired. Seven-Shades-of-Sad-and-Slow.

“Because you helped us?” Raine whispered. “Because hey, thank you. You kept that guy distracted, right? Led him forward for us? Who were you being?”

“Nobody,” came the mumbled reply. “Never done that before.”

Aym said, “She bent herself a way she’s not meant to bend. All for you people.”

My heart ached so terribly. I wanted to cry — but I was too tired.

Raine reached forward: I could feel her hand displacing the air. Sevens let out a tiny squeak, then a noise of breathy surprise, then a purr, high and soft and vibrating against my side.

“Don’t hurt yourself for us,” Raine whispered. “Don’t hurt yourself

for anybody, yeah?”

“Had to ... for Heather.”

“Nope. Wrong. Not true. Anybody who asks you to hurt yourself for them, they’re not worth being hurt for. If Heather was awake — and I suspect she might be — she’s going to feel pretty bad about that.”

“Trying to be ... whole.”

That drew another little sigh from Raine. But I could feel the comforting grin in her words; I could see it in my mind’s eye, the warmth and acceptance. “Sevens, you’re trying to be a person. But you don’t make yourself whole by hurting yourself. That’s how people make less of themselves, not more.”

“Mmmmmmmmm ... mmmm.” Sevens’ purring turned heavy. She burrowed back against my side, escaping Raine’s petting.

Aym spoke through a bundle of whispering knives. “Be just peachy if Heather would tell her that.”

Raine said, “I don’t think this is Heather’s fault.”

But Raine was wrong. This was my fault.

Sevens had gone out there and broken all the rules about the masks she could wear, and why, and when, and what they could be related to. She had turned herself into something original — a fresh creation, a void, a mind-trick — to distract Edward’s cheap little mercenary, because she thought it was necessary to help protect me, to look after me, to further my cause. She had bent herself into a shape she did not want to occupy, an act of self-redefinition which hurt her soul.

She’d gotten it all wrong, because of me.

Was this because I’d kissed her earlier, before the fight started? Because I showed her a scrap of real affection?

I did not want her self-sacrifice. I would not allow it. I was having none of this.

Without even thinking about my actions, I started the brain-math. I plunged my hands into the black tar and the boiling mud and the soupy mass of toxic waste, and I pulled out machines of such precision and complexity that to look upon them would burn out

the eyeballs of an unaltered human being. I began to cast the net, to define everything between here and Stockport, to turn the countryside into an equation which I could unravel in my hands. I would pluck out the grit of Edward Lilburne's house.

I'd seen maps of the area, I could imagine it; that would have to do. Imprecise and power-hungry as a method, but it would work, now Edward's walls were down. Damn the consequences, because the consequence right now was Sevens in pain.

My flank started to burn; my bioreactor was still recovering, still in emergency shut-down, still not ready to fire. But I tried anyway, running the maths red-hot without any cooling, without any source of energy but my own glucose and calories and body fat. I would knock myself out for a week to spare Sevens another hour of dislocation and dissociation and dysphoria.

Poised on the edge of the cliff, I made ready to dive.

And then Seven-Shades-of-Sharp-Little-Slicers opened her mouth and bit into my forearm.

sediment in the soul – 19.7

Seven-Shades-of-Sanguivore possessed the most wonderfully sharp little teeth I'd ever seen on any creature, Outsider or otherwise. Each tooth was a smooth white pointed needle; they looked as if they had evolved specifically to punch through a steel gorget and penetrate the living meat inside, to cut channels in flesh for blood to flow free. She was tiny and twisted and weird, but also beautiful in her own way — but when she opened her mouth she was beautiful like a blade was beautiful, sharp and dangerous and elegant all at once. Sevens wore her blood-goblin mask as a habitual lounging form, when at home and comfortable and safe, but the sight of those teeth always reminded me that the mask was based on a real person — a 'vampire', who had once been called Julija, and had used those teeth to drink blood from human throats.

Seven-Shades-of-Stunning-Snap slammed those razor-tipped teeth tight around my forearm, right at the climax of a brain-math equation.

She sliced straight through the fabric of my pink hoodie and the cloth of two different t-shirts, cut into my flesh like a handful of scalpels, and clamped down hard around my ulna and radius.

I felt enamel scrape my bones.

My edifice of brain-math collapsed like an aborted sneeze — or like an orgasm interrupted by muscle cramp.

I crashed out of the hyperdimensional mathematics harder than ever before; it was like being ripped away from a cliff-edge by a none-too-gentle rottweiler. All the carefully balanced infernal machinery and heavenly mathematics of the Eye came crashing down around me, unstable scaffolding smashing into my mind and sending me reeling, crushing me to the floor, breaking bones, pulping flesh.

My eyes shot open; I was back on the sofa in the Hopton's ruined sitting room, heaving for breath, coughing and hacking and retching, my vision blurred with black and red. I groped for Raine and clung on tight with two tentacles, a drowning woman clutching

a piece of driftwood. My nose filled with blood and dripped onto the front of my hoodie; I made no effort to hold that back. Why bother? I was already filthy with blood and worse from the fight with the Outsiders. I whined and spat and shook as the equation rolled back onto me. Waves of pain lanced up through my eyeballs and set my brain on fire.

But my bioreactor stayed cold. My mind, my soul, my self, all of it flinched and jerked away from the fire of hyperdimensional mathematics — but my body was spared the damage.

Meanwhile, three other tentacles were trying to peel Sevens off my arm.

Abyssal instinct was screaming. So was regular, normal, terrestrial instinct. The clever ape part of me was very concerned that a jaw was latched around my flesh and was willing to do almost anything to unlatch it. A paradoxical balance held me back: the ape wanted to punch Sevens in the face, but abyssal instinct would not allow me to harm a member of my pack, my group, mine.

My memory of the next few seconds was a jumble of yowling — my yowling, mostly — drowning out Raine's voice. She spoke as if trying to calm a skittish horse. Aym was giggling like crazy.

Eventually I came back to myself, my senses bleeding through the haze of pain and confusion. I turned my head and looked at Sevens, through the sheet of tears in my eyes and the black throbbing in my peripheral vision.

I laughed. I didn't mean to. All my emotions and responses were so jumbled up. She just looked so silly.

Sevens was clamped to my arm like a tiny, irritated dog, her face all smooshed up by the position. Her own eyes were a pair of black-red lamps staring at me over her distended jaw — and she was burning with anger.

I hissed right in her face, interrupting my own hiccuping laugh, which I'm certain was an absolutely awful sound. Three of my tentacles were wrapped around her head and throat and shoulders, trying to pry her off. But I wasn't willing to exert enough strength to hurt her, no matter how much damage she'd done to my arm.

Raine was speaking slowly and calmly: "Sevens, hey, hey, let go, hey? You're distressing Heather. Come on, girl, that's it, let go,

come on.”

How could Raine stay so collected? My arm — her girlfriend’s arm — was practically bitten off, streaming with blood, stabbed by two dozen tiny knives. My sense of reality slipped sideways, smothered by pain and confusion.

Another voice appeared in the doorway. Kimberly, soft and wary. “I-is everything okay?”

Raine answered with an awkward smile. “We’re just having a moment. No worries.”

I reared up like a cornered serpent, gritting my teeth, about to spit: *No worries!?* My voice probably would have sent poor Kimberly scurrying to hide under the nearest bed.

But Aym was waiting for me.

She was a black hood peering over Sevens’ shoulder. No face within, just a blank emptiness where a person should have been, the outline of a being, the suggestion of form beneath endless layers of black lace. A dead-leaf whisper scraped inside my ear canals.

“Say you won’t do it again, you half-wit bitch,” Aym whispered. “No more maths.”

“Okay,” I squeezed out through gritted teeth — to Sevens, not to Aym. “Stop, stop. Sevens, let go, I won’t do it again, I won’t do it again, I’ll stop ...”

With all the reluctance of a wild animal, Seven-Shades-of-Snapping-Turtle opened her jaw. I felt needle-points scrape my bones, knives slide out through my flesh, and teeth pop free from bleeding wounds. Sevens ruined the dramatic moment when she had to use one hand to awkwardly free her teeth from the fabric of my hoodie.

I snatched my arm back and instinctively cradled it to my chest, my free hand wrapping around —

Unbroken flesh?

“... uh ... uh...?” I made a noise that made me sound very stupid. Yanking my sleeve up did not reveal bone-deep gashes and rivers of blood amid ribboned skin, but just bruises and some light grazing. Sevens had punctured my clothes, which was bad enough, but she hadn’t even bitten down hard enough to draw blood. “Wha ...”

Aym giggled again, a sound to curdle milk. “She had a little help from a friend.”

I boggled at the pair of them. Sevens ducked her eyes and wriggled back into the sofa cushions as if trying to burrow between them and vanish into the ground. She rubbed at her jaw with one hand. Aym, a stick of black lace with no visible features, just sat there looking inherently smug. How could lace be smug? I bled from the nose and tried not to think too hard about that.

Raine raised her voice slightly and backed it with steel: “Alright then, ladies, girls, ghouls, and others. One of you is going to explain to me what I just witnessed.” She turned her head briefly. “Kim, would you be a dear and fetch a glass of water and some tissues for Heather? Looks like we had a little accident. Maybe some painkillers, too? Dunno if those are in high demand at the moment. Ask Eevee for some of hers. Please?”

Sevens rasped: “Her fault.”

Speaking through a glugging nosebleed, a post-math headache, and a lake of burning embarrassment, I said, “I was trying to do brain-math. I was trying to help. Sevens!”

Seven-Shades-of-Sad-Eyed-Sulking wouldn’t look at me. She even pouted.

Aym agreed with her. “Your fault, little Miss messiah complex. Know when to stay down.”

“Hey,” Raine said, suddenly sharp. “Only I get to tell her that.”

But a classic touch of Raine had no effect on Aym. The lace-and-shadow creature just giggled, a noise like metal branches rustling in a winter wind. “Not this time, turbo-butch. She’s done fucked up and somebody needed to tell her. What, you were going to let her pop herself like a balloon? You into that? Never guessed you as the type. Go back to deviantart.”

Sevens gurgled. “Shut up.”

Aym shut up. But she also draped herself over Sevens’ shoulders, wrapping the blood goblin in a close embrace, cheek-to-cheek. Sevens looked at her own lap and grumbled.

Kimberly returned with a glass of water, a box of tissues, and one Evelyn-issued pill. We didn’t seem to have attracted any further

attention — I could still hear Evelyn talking in the kitchen and Felicity replying to her, punctuated by the occasional comment from Twil or her father. So I couldn't have been hissing or yowling that loud; I was too exhausted to make much noise.

Raine made me drink the water — which helped flush out the taste of bile and blood — and take the painkiller, which wouldn't help much for several minutes yet. Then she wiped the blood off my face; the nosebleed was trailing off now, my senses clearing, my embarrassment rearing up to defend itself.

"Sevens," I spluttered again as Raine tried to wipe my lips. "Why did you do that? I was trying to help!"

Seven-Shades-of-Sulking went, "*Guuuuurk.*"

"Don't 'gurk' at me!" I snapped.

Raine gently took my face in one hand, turning me back to her. "Hey, Heather, slow down," she said. But I wasn't listening. I pulled free and frowned at Sevens again.

"Sevens! I'm serious!"

She rasped low in her throat. "Mmm, you were going to hurt yourself."

"And you had already hurt yourself! How am I supposed to sit by and let you—"

Raine's voice hit me like a whip across the buttocks: "*Heather.*"

I flinched. A full-body jerk, tentacles included, flailing about like a surprised octopus. Raine had gone past command and straight to angry — angry with me, in a way she'd never been before. Abyssal instinct went soft and floppy, urging me to roll onto my back and expose my belly. The steel in her eyes, the set of her shoulders, the implied impending punishment, all of it made me want to curl up and submit. I looked right back at her and let out a completely unintentional, unbidden, unthinkable little *whine*.

Then I blushed, mortified at myself. "R-Raine, I'm s-sorry, I—"

"It's okay, Heather," she purred, switching gears in an instant. She reached forward to brush my hair away from my eyes. "Just stop shouting at Sevens, hey? Don't make me carry you to the car and put you in time-out. Look, you've even spooked poor Kim over

there.” Raine nodded sideways, but Kimberly was very pointedly staring at her, not me. I suspected she’d suffered some spillover from the vocal whipcrack. Maybe she wanted Raine to tell her off just like that.

“Um,” said Kim, eyes wide and visibly sweating. “I should— should — maybe go back in the kitchen. Yes. Kitchen. Spells. Yes.”

Kim excused herself, leaving me alone again with Raine, Sevens, and Aym.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, though I wasn’t sure who I was apologising to — Raine, or Sevens.

Raine pulled a beaming smile, the kind of encouragement and love she kept on tap just for me. She nodded slowly, the sort of nod that said nothing but let me know she understood everything. She leaned back and blew out a long breath, ran one hand through her rich chestnut hair, and rolled her shoulders inside her leather jacket. Part of me couldn’t help but admire how good she looked, sitting there in a chair with one leg thrown over the other; if I was to be interrogated, I would want Raine to be handling me.

She said, “How about nobody hurts themselves for anybody else, okay?”

The ghost of a strange anger lurked still inside the curves and planes of her face, a secret geography I’d rarely witnessed.

I nodded. “Okay. Um, Raine, why are you ... oh,” I sighed. “Oh, I’m being a fool, aren’t I? I don’t need to ask why you’re angry.”

Raine shrugged. “I don’t like it when my girls hurt themselves.”

I spluttered: “*Your girls?! Raine!*”

Sevens made a snorty noise. “Means me too.”

“Well, yes!” I said. “I assumed that was the meaning!”

Raine shot us a broad wink. “Nobody hurts my girls, not even themselves. So come on, Heather, what was that all about? And Sevens, what was the bite for?”

I sighed, mostly at myself, “The bite was because I was being a fool.” I told the truth: “I overheard what Sevens was saying, about ... twisting herself into a new shape, to bait that man for us. And I ... I didn’t want her to hurt herself for that.” I turned to Sevens, to

the scrap of huddled pale flesh and black fabric snuggled down on the sofa next to me. “Sevens, nobody asked you to do that, please don’t!”

“Mm,” Sevens just grunted.

Raine cleared her throat. “And then you ... ?”

“I began the brain-math to find Edward’s house.” I turned and held her gaze, feeling oddly defiant. “Don’t tell me that I shouldn’t have done it. We have to find him, Raine, we can’t let this go on any longer.”

Raine’s turn to sigh, through her grin. “Heather, we don’t have a lot of choices. We’re tapped out.”

“Sevens hurt herself just to deal with some stupid red-herring thing! We can’t let up now, Raine, we can’t! We have to keep the pressure on, we have to go find him and ... and ... ”

Raine kinked an amused frown at me. “You’re sounding like Eeve. And I don’t think you really believe that.”

“I ... ”

“Heather, even if you find his house right now, we aren’t gonna be able to do shit. I just went through all this with Eeve, and I know you were listening and paying attention. You pay attention to almost everything. We’re tapped out and we need to rest, even if just for a day. Do you agree with me, or not?”

“Raine ... ”

She repeated, soft and calm, “Do you agree with me, or not?”

“I do. But ... I just ... I feel so ... guilty. I had to try. I can’t just sit by and let everybody else ... I have to be ... ”

An angel? I didn’t say the words. It sounded too silly. But what good was a dead angel?

Sevens rasped, “You were going to burn a hole in your gut.”

I turned, ready to snap at Sevens again — part of me was still deeply confused by the bite, angry yet excited. Part of me wanted her to do it again. Another part of me wanted to wrap her up in cotton wool and take her home and feed her soup. Another part of me wanted to shove my throat between her fangs. Part of me

wanted to shout at her. It was too much.

But Sevens was finally looking up at me, with those red-on-black eyes in that mushroom pale face, framed by dark, lank hair.

My residual anger fizzled out to nothing. I followed my better instincts and wrapped her in a hug, though I was weak and bruised and couldn't exert much strength. Everything ached. She pressed herself into my front. Tiny hands found my shoulders and held on tight.

"You were gonna hurt yourself," she mumbled into my shoulder.

"I ... felt like I had to. Please, Sevens, don't damage yourself for my sake."

"Mm."

"I'm sorry. For shouting at you. For getting angry with you. You were right, but ... why a bite? You could have just said something to me."

"Everyone else has said it to you and you still won't stop."

My heart ached.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I'm not," said Sevens. "Not for biting."

"Well, I suppose I deserved it ... "

"Fools, the lot of you," Aym whispered. I shot her a tiny glare, but I couldn't tell if she was even looking.

Raine cleared her throat. "I think we need some new ground rules for you two."

Sevens and I both looked round, huddled against each other.

"Raine? What do you mean?"

"Nobody asked for any self-sacrifice. Same thing I was saying to Sevens before. Hurting yourself never makes you whole."

I huffed a little laugh. "Raine, I am not trying to start a fresh argument, but that's a bit rich coming from you, isn't it?"

Raine's grin blossomed wide. "I've never self-sacrificed."

I gave her a frown. But Sevens said: "She hasn't."

“She hasn’t?”

Raine shrugged. “Not in the way either of you just tried to. And the way I was doing it, Heather taught me to stop doing that. I love you, and I don’t want you to hurt yourself, and you just tried to push yourself way too far. So it’s time for a new rule: no self-sacrifice. You love Sevens, right?”

The question hit me like a brick to the gut, especially after the rest of what Raine said. I sat there like a fish for at least five seconds, just staring at her with my mouth open.

“Raine ... is this ... really the best time for this conversation?”

Aym clucked her tongue; I wasn’t sure what that meant.

I glanced around at what was left of the Hopton’s sitting room: the blood-soaked carpets, the missing door filled with bubble-servitors, the table splintered in half, several destroyed chairs, and the huge twin stains on the floor and up one wall, where the Outsiders had died and slowly turned to biological mush. Bubble-servitors were everywhere, soaking up and digesting biomatter, turning red inside as they processed the gore. This was not exactly the location one imagined for this kind of difficult little chat.

I glanced at Aym too, unreadable inside her black lace refuge — but somehow I knew she was looking at me like something she’d discovered on the bottom of her shoe.

Raine laughed gently. “It’s exactly the time for this conversation, because you just tried to go all Chernobyl with your super-appendix, and Yellow Brat here squeezed into a disguise several sizes too small. You’re both at fault and neither of you are allowed to do that again.”

Aym spoke up, a dry and metallic sound like a steel comb rasping over rocks. “Says who?”

Raine sat forward, aiming her whole body toward the little demon. Her grin turned into a challenge. “Says me. Heather has to look after herself, see, because if she doesn’t, then I’ll punish her.”

I felt my face flush. “Raine, really.”

“Ha,” said Aym. “And Sevens? Does she have to follow your orders too?”

Raine stared at that blob of black lace, as if she was looking at a clear and unveiled face. “She does what Heather says. Isn’t that right, Heather?”

Did I have the right to tell Sevens to do anything?

A barb of sharp and acid guilt twisted inside my chest. I thought I’d known what Sevens needed — I thought I was giving her space and time to re-define herself, giving her the quiet and unconditional support she needed to go through whatever process she was going through. But Sevens was not a human being struggling with her sense of self-worth or direction in life or sexuality. She was an Outsider, the Yellow Princess, a thing of gossamer butter-scotch beauty stretched across the currents and ebbs of the abyss. She had fallen in love with me, given me a piece of herself, and then stayed by my side. What did love mean to a being like her? I thought I was doing the right thing; but she’d just hurt herself for my sake, thrown herself on a spike that nobody else could perceive, let alone understand.

The idea of Sevens hurting herself for my sake was offensive to me.

Snuggled against my side, Sevens was watching my face. Could she read my thoughts as I decided what to do about her?

Did I love Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight? Perhaps. I cared about her well-being. I didn’t want her to hurt herself. But she had done exactly that, after I had shown her the barest hint of real physical affection and offered her a few words of comfort.

Sevens bumped her head against my shoulder, exactly like a cat.

What is love if not the sum of care?

I could not tell Sevens I loved her — maybe I did, but if that later turned out to be a lie, I could never forgive myself. But there was something I could do, a truth I could tell. A strange impulse overtook me, a piece of abyssal instinct rising inside my gut like a wave of hormones I so rarely acknowledged.

“Sevens.”

She flinched. Something in my tone forced that flinch out of her, as water is forced from a sponge with a hard squeeze. The instinct in my abdomen squirmed in pleasure at that.

Before I could second-guess my gut feelings, I grasped Sevens-

Shades-of-Naughty-Puppy with three tentacles: one around each arm, and a third around her throat. I gripped lightly, gentle and soft, and peeled her away from Aym. She squeaked and froze as I leaned down until we were face to face. I have no idea how I wasn't blushing. Raine froze too, just watching. Sevens went silent and still, a mouse before a snake.

"You do not have my permission to hurt yourself," I said to Sevens. My voice was cool and level, but inside I was squeaking and flailing about, trying to piece this together as I went. "I care about you very much. You made yourself mine. So you need my permission to hurt yourself. No. Bad Sevens."

Bug-eyed, red-eyed, black orbs stared back at me. Sevens opened her mouth and let out a breathy little hiss between two rows of needle-teeth. I hissed back without even thinking about it, soft and low. Then I leaned in and planted a little kiss on the corner of her thin lips. There was nothing erotic about the gesture or the brush of contact between our mouths; we were more like a pair of animals, one licking the other's face to establish a pecking order. Sevens shivered and shook and then curled up against my side, coiling within my tentacles.

"Good ... good girl ... um," I murmured, the hormones and the bravado passing together. Now I was blushing like a beetroot. Had I really said all that?

Raine was grinning wide. She shot me a thumbs up. I rolled my eyes and huffed and tried to drain the blood back out of my cheeks. But alas, abyssal biochemical control did not extend to manually switching off my own blush.

"Ew," said Aym. "Bleh. Sick. Vile. Peh."

I almost reared up and snapped at her for ruining the moment, but then from within my arms, nestled against my bruises, Sevens said, "Jealous."

"A little," said Aym.

"Snug as a bug in a rug."

Aym turned her faceless hood upward. "I'm always snug."

"More like smug."

"We're rhyming now?"

Sevens went all singsong. "I never rhyme without a rime."

"A rime of salt on sailor's beards. Where is this going, Princess?"

Sevens shrugged. "You can be a princess too. Just have to ask."

"Princess-in-law is not the same."

"Law is all there is to any princess."

"Ha!" Aym barked like the slap of a rusty drum. The abyssal goblins fell silent. I just held Sevens, rather confused but unwilling to take the risk of asking.

Raine was braver than I. She said, "You two sound pretty esoteric sometimes."

Sevens blinked at her, genuinely surprised. Aym just tilted her head as if Raine was a moron.

I cleared my throat, hoping to return the conversation to ground level. "Sevens, can I ask you a question?" She nodded into my side. "You deserve self-definition, not ... whatever it was you did to yourself out there. But I still don't understand what you actually did. I couldn't even see you, you were invisible. What happened?"

"Mmmm ..." Sevens grumbled, then set about wriggling free from my grip. She slipped out of my tentacles and stepped off the sofa. She tripped forward three paces, walking on bare feet with dirty soles, then stopped and did a little spin.

The blood-goblin vampire-mask vanished, replaced by the Yellow Princess in all her starched and pressed glory, with perfect creases in her blouse and a ruler-straight line in her skirt. The tip of her umbrella pressed into the carpet.

Aym made a noise like "*blurp*." Abyssal instinct recognised this as either submission, or attraction, or maybe relief. I wasn't sure which. It wasn't a fully human emotion.

Seven-Shades-of-Icy-Superiority settled herself in place. "I wore no mask," she said. "I wove a face from muscle memory, a mask of skin and bone. I made our brief guest a visitation from a friend long dead, plucked from his life in the manner my father might remake an old rival, or a lost brother, or a dead child."

I put one hand to my mouth. "Oh. Oh, Sevens. Oh no."

Sevens bowed her perfect haircut toward me. "It was an act of torture and cruelty; Mister Preston Woods will weep alone, in the dark, lost. He will suffer dreams and nightmares of a meeting which did not really happen, with a dear friend who was shot in a faraway place, a decade ago. He is unmoored in time. I have done this thing, to himself and me."

"Sevens," I sighed. I reached toward her, but I was too exhausted to rise.

"And I apologise to you," she said. "Because I have no right."

"Apology accepted," I said softly. "Unconditionally."

Sevens merely nodded. "Thank you, my angel."

I blushed again. "Maybe don't call me that."

Aym snorted, a very unpleasant sound. I shot a glance at her. "Did you have anything to do with encouraging this?"

A blind black hood turned toward me. "Encouraging? Sweetest of butter-baked fools. She should have used it for herself, not for you."

"Aym," said Sevens, cold as metal in winter and just as painful to the touch. Aym flinched hard, jerking in place and then withdrawing slightly. "No," added Sevens.

"Gaaaah!" Aym hissed at her. "Okay, okay! But only for you!"

"Only for me is more than enough," said Sevens.

"You're lucky you're so hot," Aym burbled.

Raine was biting her lip in a failed attempt to suppress a grin, an expression like she was watching a soap opera up-close. My eyes were wide and my imagination was on fire. I cleared my throat.

"Um," I said. "Not that it's any of my business if you don't want to share, but you two have been very close and I was wondering—"

Aym giggled. "You're right! It is none of your business, squid-stink."

Sevens said, crisp and clear: "Aym and I enjoy one another's company."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh," Aym agreed.

"Aym is more than she appears."

“Uh-huh!”

“Well yes,” I said, blushing. “I realise that, but what I’m asking is —”

Raine broke in, speaking with all the beaming confidence of a lorry barrelling straight into a stop sign. “Heather is trying to ask if you’ve got a side-piece, Princess. Gotta fess up if you have. Poly rules and all.”

“Not telling,” said Aym — at the exact same moment Sevens said: “Technically yes.”

They looked at each other.

“Technically?!” Aym screeched.

Sevens was unmoved. “Would you prefer no?”

Aym melted into the sofa, vanishing like a scrubbed-out stain — and reappearing at Sevens’ side like a mushroom growing in fast forward, holding her free hand.

“It’s not romantic,” she gurgled like a clogged drain. “Fuck off with that.”

Sevens tilted her head sideways and blinked, the most she ever came to giving ground. “It is different for beings like us.”

“Fucking right it is!” Aym warbled.

“Hey,” Raine said. “As long as you’re having fun.”

I nodded at that and then leaned back into the sofa, closing my eyes with bone-crushing exhaustion. “As long as you’re still here,” I murmured, struggling not to drift away, one hand on my right flank, just over the cold lump of my bioreactor.

Seven-Shades-of-Questionable-Definitions purred for me, “We’re not going anywhere, kitten.”

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At Raine’s behest and with Evelyn’s grudging acceptance, we held a strategy meeting.

We had to wait until Evelyn had finished sending her letter-bomb, of course; I overheard only part of that grisly process, sitting on the sofa with Sevens at my side and Aym clinging to her opposite arm.

Raine ventured back into the kitchen briefly, to see how the bomb-making was moving along, but she was shooed out along with the rest of the non-mages when the time came to connect the wiring and plug in the metaphorical alarm clock — with the exception of Praem and Mister Preston Woods, of course.

Felicity did the talking. We all heard that, even with the kitchen door firmly closed. Zheng probably heard it too, off at the far end of the field. Even Hringewindla may have heard it, miles underground.

Preston Woods made the beginning of his report: a muffled voice talking about “all clear, nobody left alive,” among other such bland horrors. But then Felicity cut into the middle of his sentence, with words not meant for a human throat.

Evelyn had explained that the spell was keyed to Edward Lilburne’s recognition of his own name, but it made me feel sick and wrong. It made Raine sway in her chair and Amanda Hopton sit down heavily as she entered the room. It made Twil burp, loudly, twice. It made Zheng reappear at the doorway, baring her teeth. It made Mister George place an unlit cigarette in his mouth and start chewing it to pieces.

Each syllable made reality blink and shudder like a tortured animal backed into a corner.

When the mages were finished, Felicity joined us in the sitting room. Her nose was bleeding, her skin was grey, and her eyes were unfocused. She sat down in a bloodstained chair and stared at the floor, dead-eyed and so motionless that I thought she might stop breathing. Kimberly wobbled out after her, significantly less ruined, then stood behind the chair and gently rubbed Felicity’s back, wordlessly affectionate.

Evelyn came out last, grumpy and exhausted as ever. She would have collapsed if not for Praem’s arm.

“Evee,” I breathed with muted affection. She looked how I felt. “Oh, Evee, you have to rest. We all do.”

“Yeah,” Raine agreed slowly, drawing the word out. “We gotta talk about that, I think. Discuss our next move, yeah?”

Christine Hopton cleared her throat; she had drifted in along with Amanda. “I agree wholeheartedly.”

“Our guest needs water,” Evelyn croaked. “And plug his ears, if we’re going to talk.”

Twil perked up at that, eyebrows climbing her forehead. “Does that mean we’re going to let him go?”

Evelyn sighed. “Unless you can find a justification for murdering him. I suppose we should talk about that too. Get to it. Praem, set me down ... somewhere.”

“Here,” I said, patting the sofa next to me, on the opposite side to Sevens. “With me, please, Praem. Put her with me.”

Evelyn offered no complaint. She settled down against my side like a shipwreck victim in a tiny boat, lashed by storm-winds and the cruelty of salt water. Her head on my shoulder was shelter from the elements. She almost fell asleep, held awake only by an iron force of will that I admired so very much.

There simply wasn’t anywhere left in the house untouched by blood and combat and bits of broken door. The bubble-servitors were doing an admirable job of cleaning up — already there were great streaks and patches of clean carpet and scoured wall where they had passed, like massive semi-translucent slugs leaving behind reverse slime-trails. But their progress was slow and no other room was any better, so we naturally gathered in the sitting room, all of us, everybody who was left.

As fortune would have it, Benjamin called from Sharrowford General Hospital as we were dragging ourselves together. Michael took the call on his mobile phone.

“Detective Webb’s in the A&E right now,” he informed us afterward. “Ben and Katey are gonna stick around there for her. Doctors don’t seem too worried. Bad break, but fixable.”

“Sucks for her,” Twil said. “Mean it. No sarky, yeah?”

Raine said, “She was incredibly brave. We owe her a thank you. What do you think she drinks?”

“Bottle ‘o whiskey?” Twil suggested.

Christine cleared her throat. “I think we owe Miss Webb unlimited and unconditional taxi rides for the next few months, until her leg is healed.”

“Hear hear,” muttered Evelyn, eyes half-closed.

After the phone call, Raine stood up and took charge. It was a strange sight, as all eyes turned toward her in that shattered sitting room, great slug-masses of bubble-servitor moving over every wall, half of us exhausted beyond words and the other half still shell-shocked. Amanda Hopton was sitting in a hastily recovered chair, eyes and nose gone red as if suffering flu symptoms. Out beyond the cling-film bubble-servitor door-plug, more of the angels were gathering in the field. I watched them with idle curiosity — were they digesting the dog corpses, or burying them?

Raine clapped her hands together. “Ladies and gentlemen, enbies and others, humans and demons and mages alike. And Hringewindla, if he’s listening: I think we’re done for the day.”

I braced myself for Evelyn to sit up and start arguing; in fact, I may have joined in with her. I wasn’t sure which way I was leaning on this question. Sevens was right, I was spent, but could we really afford to slow down now?

But Evelyn just sighed and grumbled. She did sit up straighter, just enough to glare at Raine, but without any of her usual fire.

“Evee?” I said.

Another sigh, then: “I’m forced to agree. Raine is right. We’re not in good condition. I hate this, but we need to regroup, for now.”

A dark rumble interrupted us — Zheng, leaning against the wall with her arms folded and her eyes narrowed to slits. She rumbled like a volcano god denied her offerings.

Several people flinched: Christine and Michael Hopton, Twil, Mister George, and Kimberly. When Kim flinched, Felicity struggled upright and put a hand on her arm. Aym hissed, as if rolling her eyes. Praem stared at Zheng.

“Left hand?” Raine said. “You got a problem? Complaint? Suggestion? Come on, we’re all being open here, don’t just sound angry and then stop.”

“Wizards,” Zheng rumbled. “Like mould. Leave the hunt half-finished and they will regrow. We have not even begun, little wolf. Expected better from you.”

Christine Hopton cleared her throat. “That’s hardly fair—”

Another growl cut her off.

“Hey,” Raine said, spreading her arms. “Zheng. Look at us. Eevee and Heather can’t walk. Felicity looks like she just recovered from a wasting disease. I’ve been over this once already. You and me and Twil, we’re fighting fit, sure, but we need the DPS to go with the tanks. If we found Edward right now, what would we even do?”

Zheng looked like she was carved from a block of stone. “Rip off his head and devour his guts. I will *eat his flesh*, little wolf. No scrap of wizard goes into the ground, nothing escapes.”

“I feel you there,” said Raine. “Very poetic. Very emphatic. But we’re talking practical stuff, not fitting ends. What are you gonna do by yourself?”

“I can carry the shaman—”

“Not right now you don’t.”

Zheng levered herself up off the wall, towering over everyone else in the room, baring her teeth. Was that her body heat I felt, radiating from several feet away? No, just my imagination.

“You are smart and strong and swift, little wolf, but you are thinking too much like a mage. I will carry the shaman into anything, she need only ask—”

I said, out loud, “I can’t do this.”

Everyone looked at me. I sighed softly and drew an exhausted hand over my face, then repeated myself, eyes squeezed shut. “I can’t do this.”

Zheng paused. Her anger ebbed away. “Shaman?”

Raine gestured to give me the floor, but I didn’t bother to get up. Evelyn squeezed my hand. I found my throat closing up, my tongue growing thick in my mouth, my eyes burning.

“The bruises and the aches and pains don’t matter,” I managed to say. “But I’ve burnt out something inside me. My bioreactor is ... damaged. I’ve pushed too far. I’ve damaged myself. I don’t know how or why, but I am out of action, Zheng. I could do brain-math —”

“Not right now,” said Sevens.

"In theory," I added quickly. Then I sniffed. "In theory I could do brain-math, but I have no idea what it might do to me right now. Like ... running on a broken ankle."

"Mm," Zheng grunted.

"The quickest way to find Edward's house is for me to use brain-math," I said. I felt Evelyn go stiff next to me as I said it out loud, but I plunged on ahead before I could start crying. "We have other methods: searching manually, for example. But brain-math is by far the quickest way, the cleanest way, the least risky way. For everybody else, at least. If we wanted to get this finished today, then I would have to push, on broken legs. And ... I've been ... I've ... " I swallowed, surrounded by people who loved me and who wanted me to stop acting like this.

My bioreactor, the greatest gift the abyss had ever given me, the engine and fuel for the body I needed to inhabit, was hurt. I had taken myself for granted. I'd taken my body for granted. I'd pushed and pushed, listening to instinct which didn't know when to stop. I had risked wearing myself down to nothing. I had disrespected my body.

"I have been convinced to rest," I said, then had to wipe my eyes on my sleeve.

Zheng stared. Raine nodded as if listening to a sage rather than a fool. Evelyn was stiff and still at my side. Sevens sat like a pillar of ice.

"Shaman," Zheng said. Acceptance and acknowledgement; I began to breathe a sigh of relief. But then she finished: "I will hunt alone."

"Zheng!" I whined. "No!"

"I do not need your permission," she said.

But oh, she wanted it. I saw it in the way she stared at me, through my skin and into my guts. I saw it in the way she angled her body toward Raine, in the way she tilted her eyes, in the way she flexed one hand, then the other. Zheng opened like a book, her musculature the poetry of a big cat at unwilling rest.

"Don't fight alone," I said. "Please, Zheng. Not alone."

"Woah, woah," said Raine. "Hold up a sec, Left Hand. What do you mean, hunt? What's your plan? Don't make plans alone and not

share, hey? The lone wolf dies while the pack survives, right?"

Zheng turned heavy-lidded eyes toward Raine. Her entire frame was hard and tight with aggression.

But before I could get a word in, Raine said, "Don't look at me like that, you giant cunt. I asked because I care about you. You're not dying out there in the woods all by yourself. Heather would hate that."

Zheng said nothing. Christine Hopton bit her own lower lip — probably restraining herself from telling Raine off for the particularly nasty swear word. Raine spread her hands, wide open, a come-and-get-me pose.

Aym cackled and spoke up for the first time in several minutes: "She's got you there, bitch-brains."

Zheng turned away from everybody, as if petitioning a god for us all to shut up for five seconds.

"Zheng," I said, my voice still wet and thick. "If you have to go hunt for the house, don't fight alone. You have my permission even if you don't need it. But don't get in a fight. If you find the house, come home. Please."

I shot a glance at Raine. She shrugged and said, "I can live with those conditions. As long as she comes home."

Zheng turned dark eyes on me. "I will always return to you, shaman."

"Call," I said. "You have a mobile phone now. Use it. If you don't call by midnight I'll assume we need to come rescue you."

"Shaman—"

"*Call*. Promise me."

"I will call, shaman."

And she stalked off without another word, out of the room and down the corridor and out of the hole where the front door once stood.

"I guess that settles that then," Raine said. "Thanks Heather, nice save."

I smiled and shrugged and felt rather useless. I had done nothing. I wanted to curl up in a ball and go to sleep.

After that, the decision was already made; Zheng would scout and report back — I hoped and prayed — but the rest of us were done, spent, the ‘operation was over’, as Raine phrased it. But the analysis was not quite yet complete. I sat there on the edge of unconscious exhaustion while the mages and the Church discussed practicalities.

Christine Hopton asked, at length, “Can we establish what the purpose of this attack was? Miss Saye, earlier you were talking about multiple possibilities, you were quite clear about that. Have you changed your mind?”

Twil snorted. “Purpose? To kill us, duh.”

Everyone ignored that — except Felicity, who, bizarrely enough, offered Twil the most limp and tired fist-bump I’d ever seen.

Evelyn gave a serious but very slow answer, croaky and raw. “The use of Outsiders, physical entities, implies this was a response to what Edward Lilburne likely considers an existential threat. The illusion—”

“Spider,” said Praem. “Cruel trick.”

“Yes, the spider,” Evelyn agreed. “It was an attempt to draw us out, flush us out, whatever. Put us in the firing line of his real attack. Which we resisted and fought off. It’s been ... what, two hours since then?”

Michael confirmed. “And counting.”

Evelyn nodded. “I think that was all he had. His best shot.”

Twil squinted at her. “You mean we’ve won? That’s it?”

Felicity snorted, and it was one of the saddest sounds I’d ever heard. She raked her hair back, uncaring of how the gesture exposed the burned side of her face. “Contests between mages always get weird.”

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “Quite. No, this isn’t over. I meant that was probably all he had on hand to throw at us. He’ll be working on something else already, but we shouldn’t expect anything so simple as a physical assault.” Then she frowned and added: “But we should expect that too.”

“Race against time,” Felicity said. Evelyn nodded.

I spoke without thinking. “As soon as I’m healed ... ”

Nobody said anything to that. Raine took a deep breath. Evelyn screwed her eyes up and muttered on: “We rest. One night at least. Then back to the task of the house. Quicker we find him, the better. Remove him or kill him, or ... whatever. He has knocked us out for a day or two. That’s everybody’s job now. Rest. Except Zheng, I suppose.”

Twil asked, “What about Lozzie and Tenny?”

Raine answered. “Loz said they’ll swing back home as soon as Tenny is feeling better.”

My heart ached for Tenny; another wound I needed to mend.

Evelyn sighed a grumbly sigh. “And there we come to the most thorny matter. Mr and Mrs Hopton. Amanda. Twil too, I suppose. And ... Hringewindla.” Evelyn said that final name with a little cough. “If we withdraw home, we leave you without support or protection, even if just for a single night of sleep. We have ruined your house. We need to plan some kind of protection for you while we—”

“Hringewindla,” Amanda interrupted.

Her voice was thick with sleep or trance. She was sitting on one of the recovered chairs, wobbling slightly from side to side, sniffing and snuffling, eyes red-rimmed, staring out of the door-hole and into the field beyond. She looked barely present.

“ ... Mandy?” said Christine. “What is it? What does Hringewindla say?”

“Protection is ... forthcoming,” Amanda mumbled. “Hringewindla is very unhappy. He grows a hand.”

She pointed out of the door-hole, through the cling-film cover of bubble-servitors.

None of us had been paying attention to what the spare bubble-servitors were doing on the edge of the field, but now we all turned to look. Modified 3D glasses went on over human eyes. Evelyn craned her neck. Felicity turned in her chair. I frowned in confusion — then stared with awe.

“Snail,” said Praem.

On the edge of the field, several dozen bubble-servitors had combined their sphere-mass bodies. Their surfaces had run together, melting and melding, turning smooth and glassy as they lost their individuality. Half-complete, growing angel by angel, a vague snail-form was taking shape, tall and fluted, with coils at angles which hurt the eyes.

It was nowhere near as large as the tentacled shell-core down beneath the earth, where we’d met the old man face-to-face, but the thing out in the field was only half-complete and it was already halfway up to the roof of the house.

“He appoints a guardian and grows us a shell,” Amanda said. “We are loved and protected. His anger is not light. He thanks all of you. He will watch us. He will ... banish?” She struggled, then swallowed and looked like she was going to be sick. “Refute. Refuse? He wants to ... this Edward Lilburne ... ” She screwed her eyes up and groaned.

Christine went to her, hands gently rubbing her sister’s head. “It’s okay, Mandy. It’s okay. Don’t try to translate. We understand.”

Evelyn nodded. “We do indeed. Protection enough?”

“I believe so,” said Christine.

“But we will stay in touch. Until tomorrow. I’ll call when we get home.”

“Uhhhhh,” said Twil. “Sorry to like, make this weird. But what about the guy? In the kitchen. You know, the guy?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Take his phone number and address, then let him go. We’re not warlords or mafia.”

Michael Hopton laughed. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“Mm,” Felicity agreed with a grunt. “That is exactly what we are, Evelyn. You know that.”

Evee’s gaze flicked out and pinned Felicity to her chair. The older mage withered, retreated, and looked down. An old argument, perhaps? Curiosity almost overcame my exhaustion, but Evelyn concluded before I could ask.

“Are we?” she said. “Then my word is law. We’re letting him live.

That's final. Get him cleaned up, point him at the road, and remind him this was a drug operation. Nothing more."

I nodded agreement, too tired to say anything. My free hand lingered at my flank, on the cold sleep of my bioreactor.

Heal thyself, o' abyssal squid; I prayed I wasn't broken.

sediment in the soul – 19.8

I awoke on the following morning sore in ways I had not previously considered possible.

That was quite a feat for my body. By that point in my as-yet short life I had experienced many different and unique ways of being sore — in the head, in the muscles, in the bones, in the heart, in the soul — that I unconsciously assumed I'd collected them all, short of giving birth, kidney stones, or cluster headaches. It was hardly a subject to brag about; to compare aches and pains with, say, Evelyn's missing fingers, her prosthetic leg, and her spinal problems, would be the height of rude and inconsiderate behaviour. I never thought of myself as the sort of person who said, out loud, "I feel terrible, please pet me and make me feel better." I had never compared pain or discussed bodies with Evee, because I thought I was being polite. I thought I knew all about being tired and sore and achy. I was hopelessly naive.

Consciousness poked and prodded me out from merciful oblivion with a dozen cracking joints, six hundred strained muscle fibres, and a thousand tiny bruises. For a long time I just lay there on my back in my own bed, half-swaddled in sweat-stained sheets, staring up at the shadows on the ceiling through my own eyelashes. Those hurt too; my eyelashes, I mean, not the shadows on the ceiling, though as my imagination churned on, I began to assume that shadows did hurt, and that I should reach out to offer comfort to the absence of light.

Too exhausted to fully open my eyelids, but kept from sleep by the solid, steady *throb-throb-throb* of my own tender carcass.

I had never felt less divinely inspired, never more aware of being meat.

If abyssal senses had crept over me right then and alienated me from this sack of chemicals and spongy tissues, I would have welcomed it with open arms. I would have happily slipped down into dissociation and abyssal dysphoria, if only to escape into sleep, or just the inside of my own head. I would have gladly thumbed out my own eyes for the sweet embrace of unconsciousness. For a

second or two I may have actually willed it, inviting that unique kind of oblivion; I was not proud of that later, when I was coherent enough to self-examine — but it didn't take the invitation. I just lay there in the pre-dawn grey, my tentacles limp and dim, listening to Raine breathing on one side of me and Zheng purring on the other.

No escape, neither up nor down, nor sideways, nor to Outer reaches, nor to inner space. Feverish and delirious, I lay there, panting softly, wishing for the energy to whine, so Raine might wake up and roll me onto my side.

Eventually true consciousness ebbed back, leaking into my mind and making me less of an animal. I recalled my own name. This was not a merciful thing. My breathing slowed. My aches and pains sharpened. My bladder complained.

Still, I didn't get up. It was a bit like that time I'd woken up in Raine's bed, after my fugue state, back in the shared house she'd lived in. Back then, panic and curiosity had forced me to my feet. But now? Panic was a luxury. Curiosity was too much effort.

I lay in bed and listened to the secret heartbeat of the house.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive told all her tales to anybody who cared to listen; one simply had to know how, like tuning in to an unlisted radio station. On the edge of dissociation, my ego pared down by pain, I felt all the little shifts and creaks of floorboard, all the drafts of air around the sensibly closed doors, all the metal hinges in the windows secure and tight. I listened for the steady ticking of the old grandfather clock in the front room, the gurgle and glug of the boiler in the cellar, the tiny scurry and scuttle of rodents down under the foundations. I listened to the moss and lichen drinking up the grey scraps of morning light. I felt the dew tremble on the grass in the back garden. I listened to the dust falling onto the table in the magical workshop. I listened for Evelyn's breathing, her mouth half-smushed against her pillow, soft and slow and steady, a dreamless sleep of animal comfort. I felt Praem, a moving spark somewhere in the dark, cradled and cared for by unseen hands. I heard Tenny whimper in her sleep, and Lozzie's hand brush Tenny's shoulder to hug her close. I politely forgot about Kimberly's sleep-talking; her racy dreams were none of my business. I heard Aym and Sevens, tucked away in a hidden place that was not Outside, but still within the house, playing a game with too many pieces to be chess. I even heard Felicity out in her range rover, the sound of

her jeans shifting against the back seat, her heartbeat heavy inside her chest, her nightmares a crackle of memory inside her damaged skull; the house counted her as inside, threw its mantle of protection and enclosure around her too, even if she wasn't permitted within the physical walls. *Very sweet*, I thought; *only right*, came the agreement.

I knew deep down in my guts — which also currently ached — that the house was safe and secure; Edward Lilburne had not attacked us in the night. All was well.

Then I hissed and screwed up my eyes and told myself to stop imagining things on the edge of sleep.

Sitting up took three attempts; my abdomen and flanks were covered in tiny bruises, the consequences of my unplanned berserker rage yesterday. My ribs spiked and cut me with intercostal muscle pain. My neck felt like it was made of wet sand and old glue. Eventually I got there, panting and trying not to whine; I didn't actually want to wake up Raine or Zheng, they both deserved sleep too. It wasn't their fault I was awake earlier than I wanted, aching all over and feeling like I'd aged ninety years overnight.

At least, that's what I told myself as I gingerly peeled the sheets off my body and raised my quivering tentacles free of the bed. In a truth I did not yet understand, I was gripped by a furtive desire to spend a little time alone.

Getting out of bed clarified the pain. Most of my torso was covered in tiny bruises, each about the size of a twenty-pence piece, rapidly turning yellow and green and other fascinating bruise-colours. My legs were worse, striped with long bruises like claw-marks; I could only assume that I'd modified my muscles yesterday, for speed or power or motion or some other mad abyssal notion, which had fallen apart as soon as I'd crashed out of the high. My gums ached when I inhaled, the roots of my tentacles hurt like six separate sprains, the soles of my feet were raw, and my joints were full of broken glass. When I flapped the hem of my t-shirt and the waistband of my pajama bottoms to dry the sweat on my skin, all these aches and pains joined together in a chorus of big ouch.

But the real pain was in my right flank.

My bioreactor felt hard and cold, seized up like a pulled muscle.

I wasn't immobile or sick. This was not the kind of pain that fells one like a lightning-struck tree. It was just very, very, very shitty. Pardon my language.

Two conflicting urges simmering inside me. The part of me I understood wanted to climb back into bed between Raine and Zheng; I stared at them for a long time in the grey gloom of the early morning, a pair of shadowed mountain ranges beneath the summer bedsheets, Raine on the right and Zheng on the left. Raine had slept within inches of me, but carefully restrained herself from hugging me overnight. She knew how bruised and sore I would feel; she always knew what I would feel. She slept on with one pillow between her arms, eyelids closed in angelic rest. Zheng, on the other hand, slept flat on her back like a vampire in an old movie, hands over her chest, breathing like the dead. She radiated a subtle heat, palpable on my bare skin even from two feet away.

Climb back between them, go back to sleep, wait for Raine to wake up and make me breakfast. Empty my head, don't think about the aches and pains. Don't think about anything.

Another part of me, a part I did not understand, wanted to go elsewhere, alone, and think.

I decided to stall.

Before I spent any time on myself, I padded over to Raine's bedside table and picked up her phone, then carefully angled it toward the grey light from the crack in the curtains, so it wouldn't flood the room with blinding illumination.

Last night, before we'd all collapsed into bed, Evelyn had given us very specific instructions about phones. I'd been barely conscious, but I still recalled the important parts: everyone was to keep their phones on and turned up, ready for a call from Twil or anybody else over at Geerswin farm, to maximise the chances of one of us waking up. Uninterrupted sleep was a distant second priority, compared with the importance of prompt communication in the event that Edward Lilburne decided to unleash giant carnivorous slugs against the farm, or at us, or anywhere else.

Raine's phone showed no messages, no missed calls, nothing. I wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but it was only five thirty in the morning, too early for Twil to check in and confirm that yes, nobody had been eaten or kidnapped in the night. I dimly recalled

that Nicky had called Evelyn sometime yesterday evening, to confirm she had a nice big cast on her leg. At least there was that. Maybe I should call her later.

Then I went to the toilet. Always a good option when I had no idea what to do.

The upstairs corridor was dark and full of shadows, but I felt right at home, stretching out my tentacles as I crossed to the bathroom door. Bad decision: even my tentacles ached. The instinctive gesture made me wince and whine. I sat down on the toilet, in the dark, winded and puffing.

When I returned to the bedroom, I fetched one of my university notebooks from the desk and quietly tore off a fresh page, then found a pencil.

The first note I wrote just said: *I've gone to be alone. Please don't worry!*

I threw that one in the rubbish because it was absolutely awful. Raine would worry herself so hard that she'd probably run up and down the house with her gun until she found me. That would be the opposite of the intended outcome. I sighed and tried a second draft.

I wanted to sit alone in the dark for a while, but I'm still in the house, please don't come find me.

"Even worse," I whispered to myself as I crumpled that one up and threw it after the first. "Why do words fail me now?"

After two more attempts I finally settled on: *Just gone for a wander around the house. Don't worry if I don't come back to bed soon. Love you both so much. Heather, XXX*

Technically a lie — I wasn't planning on wandering anywhere, I was actually going to find a spot and plant myself. But I didn't want Raine worrying and coming to find me, or thinking I'd gone Outside, or gotten stuck in the toilet. The little 'x's were not very me, and I blushed when I read the note over again, eyes straining in the grey darkness, but they did communicate the truth.

I weighed the note down with Raine's phone on her bedside table, then kissed her on the head so gently that she didn't even stir. I did the same with Zheng, leaving a feathery kiss on her brow.

Then I wriggled into my hoodie — the clean one, with the darker

pink scales across the shoulders, not the one covered in blood which Praem had peeled off me yesterday, currently sitting in the washer or the dryer. I slipped some socks onto my feet too; it wasn't cold in the early summer morning, but I needed a layer between the house and my aching soles, no matter how gentle the floors. Both actions required quite a bit of bending and lifting and moving muscles, a high price in pain, but I dressed myself without too much huffing and puffing.

In the darkened doorway I paused and looked back at Raine and Zheng, sleeping soundly. What would they do if they woke together without me between them?

I blushed to myself in the dark. I hoped they would enjoy themselves.

Then I closed the door and padded down the gloom-filled corridor, heading for the rear of the house.

This early in the morning, Number 12 Barnslow Drive was sound asleep, wrapped in grey shadows, flanked by the first clean knives of morning light at the edges of the windows. Nobody was stirring, not even Praem; she was not standing outside Evelyn's doorway, nor lurking down the corridor. We were far past the witching hours, when Night Praem might have appeared to gently but firmly return me to bed. She was probably in Eeve's bedroom, or downstairs, reading a book.

If I went to the kitchen I might bump into Praem. I didn't want that, so I dipped into the bathroom to drink some water from the cold tap, from my own cupped hands, finger joints sore and aching.

I wanted to be alone for a while, but I didn't yet fully understand why.

My body rejected the notion of just sitting in the bathroom, in the dark, on the closed toilet seat. That wasn't truly alone; anybody could wake up and need to use the toilet, and then my whole carefully constructed illusion of solitude would be broken.

Downstairs was no better either, and the garden was just silly. The basement would be cold and uncomfortable. Eeve's study was a strong contender, but Praem might be in there too. I could have gone Outside — teleported to Camelot and wandered away over a hillside, beyond sight of the half-finished castle, or to some other barren dimension where I could sit on the ground by myself and

turn my thoughts inward. But brain-math was not an option right then; my bioreactor was like a chunk of raw gristle in my flank. I dare not touch any hyperdimensional mathematics.

But what I needed, the house provided.

I padded down the upstairs corridor, toward the little t-junction in the rear, where the light from the single hallway window grew dim and distant. On the right was Kimberly's bedroom, but on the left the corridor carried on into the gloom. The top of the house cradled several empty rooms stuffed with old furniture, bric-a-brac from Evelyn's mother, ancient dusty boxes full of junk, and other untouchable mysteries. I walked deep into the dark, picked a door at random, and turned the handle with one tentacle.

Grey sunlight crept over my socks and up my shins; the room inside was angled toward the struggling dawn, catching it in one square window on the far wall. No forgotten servitors lurked within. No magic circles on the walls. No ghosts interrupted in bed. Good enough. I slipped inside and gently closed the door behind me.

Forgotten, but not abandoned; unused, but not barren. The spare room boasted an old wooden bed frame which looked like it had once served as the bottom half of a bunk-bed, with an old but clean mattress resting on top. A stack of ancient cardboard boxes stood against one wall, labelled in thick black marker pen: "PLATES", "REVERSE", "CABLES FOR CAR", "DO NOT OPEN 23/08/1989". That last one was sealed with duct tape and staples. A battered old desk stood against another wall, rickety and thin and looking ready to collapse. The desktop was covered in ossified pens, empty folders, paper-clips, and a single fist-sized block of glass with a stone encased in the middle. A painting hung opposite, a landscape which looked out from the top of a mountain. The sunlight in the picture was the wrong colour, but I couldn't put my finger on why.

When I crossed over to the square window I couldn't quite tell what part of the garden I was looking down at. The left side of the house, I thought, but I couldn't see the big tree in the back, even when I craned my neck.

I decided to ignore all of those things; the house would not have led me somewhere unsafe, after all. And the room didn't contain too much dust, which implied Praem must be cleaning even the spare and empty spaces. She really deserved more thanks. A week off. A

party. A hug.

“Thank you,” I muttered to the empty air, to the walls, to the house itself. Then I felt very silly and went over to the mattress.

My thighs and calves and knees all ached too much in too many new and interesting ways for me to comfortably sit cross-legged, so I flopped down on the mattress and sat with the soles of my feet together, using my tentacles to take my weight.

I took a deep breath, let my eyes unfocus, and allowed myself to just feel.

I had spent most of my life being alone all the time, in the most profound and painful ways. Maisie, my twin, my other half, my childhood, my lost secret and my guiltiest sin, had been taken away from me. I had spent ten years screaming in the wilderness. And then this last year, because of Raine, and Evelyn, and all the others, I rarely felt alone anymore. I was always surrounded by other people. I loved it, I valued every second of it, and in my darkest moments I worried about it all going away one day.

But sometimes one needs to be alone with one’s body.

If I’d said those words to Raine, she probably would have made a joke about masturbation, but I was about as un-libidinous as possible right then. Part of me wanted to strip naked for what I was about to do, but there was nothing sexual in that either. However, though summer it may have been, it was still summer in England, in the North, in Sharrowford, and far too chilly to be taking all my clothes off by myself.

Instead I slipped my arms inside my hoodie, leaving the sleeves empty, and pulled up the hem of my t-shirt so I could place both hands on my abdomen.

My trilobe bio-reactor felt cold and hard, a fist-sized lump in my side an inch or two below the skin.

I pressed and squeezed, wincing at the pain, trying to instinctively feel if anything was out of place, or damaged, or bleeding internally. I didn’t think anything was bleeding — I probably wouldn’t have been prodding at myself if I did — but I wanted to see how my body reacted, how it felt to touch and squeeze. I flipped the hem of my hoodie up briefly so I could take a look. A patch of skin on the side of my abdomen was blotchy and red, bruised below

the surface, like a bubble of rot inside a peach.

“What’s wrong with you?” I murmured to the occulted organ.

Evee was right: if I damaged this organ, if I tore a membrane or clogged a valve or burst a vessel, there was no going to the hospital. Lozzie and I would have to fix it ourselves. And I didn’t know how it worked.

“Abyssal healthcare,” I whispered. “I wish I knew somebody who understood all this.”

Maybe somebody did, Outside. Maybe I needed to take Lozzie on a private trip to Camelot and ask her some very personal questions. Or maybe I needed to take a second journey to the Yellow Court and find the King’s physician. I couldn’t be the only human who had ever done this.

Wishful thinking. I might not be the only, but I might be the first.

I could only feel so much with my bare hands, through my own abdominal wall, and brain-math was risky in my damaged, low-power, empty-tank state. There was nothing else for it: I closed my eyes and attempted to consciously move the tiny muscles and miniature tendons inside the organ, testing the signals down the nerve uplinks which I had imposed on my human body. I needed to flex the new flesh in my core which powered me and kept me alive and made me what I was.

Bad idea: I didn’t know which muscle I tightened or what tendon I yanked, but as soon as I tried to twitch those unseen tissues, a blade of pain shot upward through my insides, swift and sharp.

“Ahhh!” I gasped, broke out in cold sweat, and grasped at my flesh as if I could squeeze it back together.

It is always shocking when the animal takes over in a moment of pain and fear, especially when one’s wound is internal. A part of me that had nothing to do with abyssal instinct was desperate to reach inside my belly and confirm that I was not broken, that I had not irreversibly damaged myself somehow.

I sat there for what felt like minutes, eyes wide open and staring at the bare mattress, hunched over the unexpected pain in my belly, panting and sweating and shaking.

But eventually the pain ebbed away, throbbing back down to mere

muscle ache. I straightened back up, tender and afraid.

“Ow,” I croaked. “Oh, ow.”

I briefly considered going to fetch somebody else. I hadn’t realised until then the potential danger of this little indoor adventure. I might hurt myself and pass out, alone and isolated.

But then I brushed the wall behind me with a tentacle — not because I was reaching out for it, but because I was trying to steady myself amid fear for the flesh.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive was safe and warm; the wall was solid and sensible. The house would not lead me into danger.

In retrospect, that notion was completely irrational, perhaps even ‘crazy’ — a word I had avoided for months. But something deep in my gut told me that whatever I did, the house would keep me safe. If I was hurt, the house would not allow me to go unattended. Experimentation was safe inside these walls, as long as I respected my body.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and tried again — much, much, much slower.

That time the pain was bearable, blunt and prickly, like a pulled muscle rather than a razor across my intestines. I hissed through clenched teeth and moved with the care of a robotic surgical machine, slowing further when the pain told me to stop, pressing against minor aches until they unfolded into muscle soreness, or irritated surfaces, or the need for fresh blood to flow over thirsty tissues.

“Oh, this is weird,” I whispered to myself. “This is very weird. Mm ... feels ... ”

I didn’t say it out loud, even to myself, but it felt sort of good. And not because of the pain; I wasn’t discovering a hidden masochistic side.

It felt good to consciously move a part of myself that I had only ever used before on pure instinct.

I flexed tiny membranes against pressurised pockets of enzymes; I opened valves and pushed fluid through tiny tubes, feeling the sacs and chambers fill with potent juices and thin plasma; I slid sheaths up and down the control rods in their channels, cleaning out

detritus, but I kept them in place, not wanting to fire anything up right then; I pressed flaps back and forth, squeezed muscle fibres together, and rocked tendons up and down.

And I felt warmth somewhere deep within the organ, at the point where all the structures converged.

A spark was still in there, burning away inside me, protected and harnessed.

“Not broken,” I whispered. “Just healing. Very slowly.”

I finally opened my eyes and looked down at myself, taking several deep breaths and feeling extremely weird. Examining the inside of one’s body was not something people did every day. It was akin to looking at my own genitalia in a mirror. I hugged my abdomen and leaned backward into my tentacles, thinking out loud.

“How did I burn this out so badly?” I asked the empty room. My attention wandered to the weird landscape painting with the strange light, then out of the window, across an angle of the road I’d never considered before. My mind wandered too, chewing on this problem. “Because I ... I went berserk, because the others were in danger. Right. And ... why was that different? Help me out here, body.”

My tummy didn’t answer, so I wiggled my arms back into my sleeves, stood up — very slowly and gently, wincing several times on the way there — and then walked over to the window again.

The grey light lay over Sharrowford like a veil.

“Because I wasn’t Outside,” I said to my reflection in the glass, ghostly and faint against the city and the sky. “I wasn’t in any kind of liminal space, not in Hringwindla’s shell, or trapped in Ooran Juh’s metaphorical-physical mouth-dimension, or in the pocket space with the castle. I was just here, fully in reality, wasn’t I? Geerswin farm, Twil’s house, it’s all here, in reality.”

Yesterday, in that moment of panic, I had *transformed*. I had manifested *Homo abyssus* in physical reality — even if it had been via pneuma-somatic flesh — and I had held it for as long as it took to make sure my friends were safe.

The sheer amount of power I’d used to transform — and sustain that transformation — must have been staggering. No wonder my

bioreactor was in need of a rest. No wonder I was covered in bruises, my gums ached, my eyelids itched, and my knees felt like they were on backwards.

“I’m not invincible,” I said to my thin reflection. “I’m not immortal. Angels aren’t gods, Heather.”

Abyssal energy was infinite; hyperdimensional mathematics was omnipotent; the well was bottomless. But the interface through which I drew on the truth of reality was mere flesh, soft and spongy and susceptible, even if it was based on abyssal principles translated into human biology. That flesh required protection and care, no less than the rest of my body. I could not take it for granted.

I put my hand on my belly again. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, to myself, to the window, to Sharrowford, to the house, to my own body. “What do you need? Rest? Yes, I can do that. I can do rest. All day. Anything else? Food? Maybe ... ”

Lemons.

The craving hit me as a physical sensation: my salivary glands filled my mouth with spit, my stomach rumbled, and my eyes began to water. I was so surprised that I burst out laughing, clutching my belly and wiping my eyes. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten a piece of lemon on its own, but right at that moment I would have peeled the skin off one with my tentacles and crammed the whole thing into my mouth, juice running down my chin. Imagining that made me quiver all over. My body was demanding — what, vitamin C?

“Okay, okay! I suppose that answers that. Wow. Uh, time for breakfast? Just lemons, or ... ?”

Lemons, tomatoes, pineapple chunks; raw fish, soy sauce, olives. My head swam with desire for foods I rarely or never ate. Posing the question to my own biology had prompted my body to start throwing out suggestions. I smiled at my reflection, oddly delighted.

“Oh, but I doubt we have any of that. And it’s only just past six in the morning.”

True, I could tell Raine that I was craving moon flowers, or fairy dust, or mermaid flesh, and she would leap out of bed and straight into her shoes, off on a quest to sate my every desire. But I didn’t want to wake her up and send her down to the nearest corner shop

to buy me a bag of lemons. I wanted her to rest and sleep. I wanted her to be safe.

“May as well check the fridge,” I said out loud. “Thank you.” I reached out with one tentacle and patted the window frame, thanking the house itself.

Then I pulled my tentacle back and frowned at the tip.

Ah. I’d been avoiding thinking about this.

That specific tentacle was the same one I’d almost used to inject Nicole yesterday. I could feel the ghost of the bio-steel needle inside the tip, a flexible rigidity waiting to be summoned again with a flicker of thought. It ached in a different way to all my other bruises, with an insistent potential.

Sober and thoughtful, with my head on properly for the first time in a while, I stared at that tentacle. I took the tip in my hand and squeezed gently. I thought about how I’d wanted to jab Evelyn as well, when she’d looked so exhausted and spent and in so much ambient pain. I grimaced and blushed and chewed on my lips.

“Is this a ... sex thing? Do I ... do I want to ... jab Evee with my big rainbow wing-wang?”

I blushed from the roots of my hair all the way down to my collarbone. I pressed my forehead against the cool glass, and saw a small squirrel hopping along the edge of the fence. For a moment the squirrel seemed to have too many legs, but that was just because I was so mortified. I hope the squirrel did not hear me being a massive freak.

“No,” I said slowly. “No, I don’t feel arousal at that idea. Do I? I don’t think so. It’s a healing thing, I just wanted to fix them both. I’m certainly not attracted to Nicky, anyway. And when I jabbed the Forest Knight, that certainly wasn’t sexual, that was emergency medical attention! Yes, there’s nothing ... nothing sexual about the tentacle. Nothing. If I just wanted to have sex with Evee ... mm. Do I?”

“I don’t know, do you?”

Aym’s voice was a crackle of rotten leaves on a parched forest floor.

I whipped around — bad reaction, as it left me wincing and clutching my abdomen, tentacles rearing up and then shuddering

with muscular pain — but the room was empty. Not even a lurking shadow in the corner. Mattress, desk, stack of boxes. No Aym.

“Aym?” I said out loud, then sighed. “That was an unkind trick. I am in private.”

She didn’t speak again. I checked under the bed and behind the stack of boxes, but there wasn’t so much as a speck of mould clinging to the skirting board.

I spoke to the air. “I don’t appreciate you listening in on my private moments.”

The reply came like a whisper from inside the walls, a scrape of mouse-feet on plaster and insulation: “Calm your tits. I only heard the very end. Later, squid-brains. Use protection if you must.”

I frowned at nothing, my brain chewing over the meaning of that for a few seconds. Then I got it and spluttered, blushing again. “Aym!”

But she didn’t even giggle.

= =

Sadly our fridge did not contain any lemons, whole tomatoes, sliced mango, raw fish, or olives. A small bottle of soy sauce was tucked into one of the door shelves, but it was almost empty and the lid was crusted with dried brown gunk. I couldn’t recall ever seeing anybody put any on their food. I sighed and closed the fridge door, leaving behind the chill artificial light and entombing myself once again in the grey dawn.

I sighed and grumbled and rubbed my tummy. Couldn’t help it, the gesture was instinctive. Then I blushed at how childish I must have looked, and shot a glance at Praem.

She was sitting at the far end of the kitchen table, with a small stack of books at her elbow, reading a copy of *War of the Worlds*, by the grey morning light spilling in through the window. She hadn’t looked up, which was a relief; but then again, Praem would never judge me or call me childish. I knew better than to assume that.

I’d found her already sitting there after I’d padded downstairs and across the chill floor of the front room, a warm little sprite tucked away in an unexpected place. I’d said, “Oh! Hello, Praem!” like a moron who thought I was the only person moving around in the

house. Praem had said good morning, and then resumed reading.

Praem's resemblance to Eevee was particularly sharp that morning. I wasn't sure if it was the fuzzy morning light, my current preoccupation, or the brain-haze caused by weird food cravings — but it certainly wasn't helped by the absence of Praem's habitual maid dress. Her outfit was ruined and bloodstained after the fight yesterday. Washable, certainly, but it would need so many repairs that I assumed she was just going to purchase a new one.

So, sitting in the dreary summer morning, reading books, Praem was dressed in a sea-blue ribbed jumper and a long cream skirt, with matching white tights on her legs. It was really very fetching. She had her hair pinned up behind her head in that usual messy bun. She was prim and elegant but also contained and neat, in that very specifically Praem-like way.

"Gosh, Praem," I said, carried into bravado and stupidity by hunger and pain. "You really are Evelyn's daughter."

That comment drew her gaze up from her book. Milk-white eyes stared at me from the gloom. I blushed again and cleared my throat and hurried to explain.

"I-I mean you just really look like her right now. N-not in the face, I mean, just in dress, and ... and ... reading books. And ... oh, I'm sorry, I just meant—"

"Thank you."

Her voice rang out like a tiny silver bell coated with ice. I cleared my throat and nodded.

"Sorry to interrupt your reading," I said. "Do you know that's how I met Eevee? I interrupted her reading. I mean, I interrupted a lot of things, but mostly the reading, at first."

"Yes."

I paused and blinked at her in the dark. The kitchen sat heavy and grey around us. " ... yes?"

"Yes."

"She's ... told you?"

"Yes."

“Oh. All good things, I hope? I was a bit ... well. I was more difficult then. So was she.”

Praem just stared. I curled my feet against the floor tiles and felt exceedingly awkward and extremely hungry and very, very silly. I shot a mournful glance at the cereal cupboard. Oats and milk did not seem very appetizing right then. Toast made me feel vaguely nauseated. I didn't even want tea or coffee, which was even weirder. I sighed and flapped my arms, then hugged my hoodie to myself.

“How is Eevee, anyway?” I asked. “I assumed you'd be up there with her, making sure she stays asleep. She was so exhausted after yesterday, I was really worried about her.”

“And she you.”

I grimaced. “Fair enough. Seriously though, Praem, how was she? Did she sleep okay?”

“Yes. No dreams.”

I laughed softly. “You can sense when she dreams?”

“Rapid eye movement.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose there's that.” I frowned for a moment. “Does that mean ... I mean, that implies you ... do you watch her sleep?”

“I will not leave her in a nightmare.”

A fist gripped my heart all of a sudden, a constricting band inside my chest. I had meant that question semi-jokingly; of course Praem would never have watched Eevee sleep without Evelyn's permission. Either I had the wrong end of the stick or there was some good reason for it. I was just gently probing. But Praem had answered seriously. For a long desolate moment I stared back at her unreadable, placid expression.

“Eevee has nightmares?” I asked. “I mean, everyone has nightmares, sometimes. But she has ... a lot? Regularly?”

“When alone.”

I felt a sudden overwhelming urge to sprint up the stairs; my tentacles even twitched toward the door, which made their roots ache where I was still bruised. I winced and clutched myself. “Then why ... why aren't you up there right now? Praem?”

"I am more than my mother."

I swallowed, skin prickling with heat. "Yes, yes of course you are! But—"

"Joke."

"... pardon?"

"Seven-Shades-of-Penitent-Education."

I blinked three times, stunned by the clever name and by the implication. "You mean Sevens is watching her right now?"

"I wanted a break."

"And you trust her not to let Aym—"

"Yes."

I almost flopped down in a chair. I only resisted because doing so would have made all my bruises flare up in a chorus of pain. This was a lot to suddenly take in. "I need to sleep with her sometimes," I muttered before I realised the full meaning of my words. "I need to be with her sometimes, at night. Why hasn't she said anything?"

"They are only nightmares."

"Still!"

I was so agitated that I actually paced up and down the kitchen twice, stretching my legs and wringing my hands. Eevee suffered nightmares. Praem wanted a break sometimes. Somebody needed to sleep with Eevee, occasionally. I couldn't deal with this all right then; I was so bloody hungry. I could have eaten a bag of lemons with the skins still on. I could have eaten the bag.

"Praem, we really must throw you some kind of birthday party."

She just stared at me, as if that made no sense.

"I mean you deserve some celebration!" I went on. "You're so ... well, okay, not selfless, I shouldn't put you on a pedestal. But you do so much for us. I know everybody treats you well, and thanks you, and stuff. But my goodness, you deserve a day just for you! Praem day!" I was getting worked up now. "We should throw you a birthday party, on ... "

I drew to a halt as I realised that I did not know on which day

Evelyn had made Praem. I'd been unconscious in Raine's bed, of course.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "November ... it would have to be between the eighteenth ... no, the nineteenth, the day Raine and I were ... then I came back here on ... "

"The twentieth of November," said Praem.

"Yes!" I was so excited I actually pointed at her. "That's your birthday! You'll be a year old. Well, I mean, of course you're much older than that, you were alive in the abyss for a lot longer, but your one-year anniversary of being here, with us. I-I don't want to assume, I—"

"One."

" ... really?"

"One."

Praem wasn't smiling. But I saw the twinkle in her eyes. "One year old it is then," I said.

Only when I finished saying that did I realise what we were doing: we were making plans for something *after* Maisie's deadline. We were both assuming we were going to live.

Gosh, I prayed that Praem was going to live.

I crushed that thought down and away. Worrying about that right then would not help my body recover. I was no use to Maisie if I was a mass of bruises writhing on the floor. A calcified and dead reactor organ would not help me withstand the attention of the Eye long enough to shout *Give me back my sister!* and spray it with lemon juice.

But, cold cereal? Soggy toast? An apple? My body was demanding so much more.

"Praem," I said slowly — as she was still staring at me rather than at the open pages of her book. "I want to go for a walk."

"The leash does not fit you."

My eyes went wide. Praem stared back. We were frozen for a good five seconds.

“I ... I mean ... okay? Um.”

“Joke.”

“Yes!” I squeaked. “It had better be! My goodness, where did that come from? Actually, no, don’t answer that question.” I sighed. Praem didn’t even open her lips. “I was being serious. I want to go for a walk. Just a few streets, down to the nearest corner shop and back. I’m craving ... well, I’m craving a lot of foods we don’t have. And I don’t want to wake Raine, or Zheng, or Eeve. Or anybody else. But I know I shouldn’t go alone. It’s not as if I can Slip away reliably, right now. If Edward Lilburne decides to send blokes in balaclavas to bundle me into the back of a van, I’m actually less capable of self-defence than usual. He has no way of knowing that, but ... ” I shrugged. “Eeve’s paranoia is wearing off on me, I suppose. That and she’d kill me if she knew I went for a walk all by myself, unprotected. Raine would be horrified. Zheng would probably call me ‘foolish shaman’, instead of just ‘shaman’.”

Praem still said nothing.

I pulled an awkward smile. “What I’m trying to say is: will you accompany me on a walk? You and I, down to the corner shop and back. Do you think that’s responsible of us? If you don’t, then I can wake Raine, but I thought it might be nice. Just you and I. I do value you, Praem. I love you too, like a niece or a step-daughter, or ... or ... I don’t know, maybe we don’t need labels like that.”

“Yes.”

I blinked at her. “To which part?”

“Yes.”

I did this simultaneous sigh and big smile both at once, then nodded. “Thank you, Praem. Shall we ... ?”

Praem was already closing her book and rising to her feet.

We left fresh notes for the others; well, I did, anyway. I scurried back upstairs to change out of my pajama bottoms and into some trousers, slipping back into the darkened bedroom where Raine and Zheng were still fast asleep. I wrote a new note: “Gone for a walk with Praem! She will have her mobile phone, so please call if you’re worried. We shouldn’t be long, maybe fifteen to twenty minutes. Love you, love you, love you.”

I drew a little heart as well, and was glad for the darkness.

Before I left the room, I rummaged for two items on the desk, and slid them into my pockets: the personal attack alarm and the very illegal pepper spray which Raine had purchased for me, months ago. If I couldn't Slip, I wanted a worse-case scenario option, even with Praem at my side.

Back down in the front room Praem was busy putting on her sensible boots, the ones with the thick soles which looked like they could be used to kick bricks apart. I didn't bother with a coat; my two layers of t-shirt and comfy hoodie were more than enough on a summer morning, even a grey one like this. Praem opened the door and let the weak sunlight inside. The smell of leaves and mist hooked my senses.

"Money?" she asked.

"I have twenty pounds in my purse. More than enough."

"I require strawberries."

"Oh, of course! I think they have fresh fruit, this time of year. My treat, on me."

"Strawberries."

I stepped outdoors. Praem locked up after us.

Sharrowford was dreary and limp that early in the morning; summer had remembered itself but without several key components, like the selective amnesia of a petulant princess. Perhaps it was still taking after Aym. The air was warm enough, with no creeping cold sliding up inside my hoodie, but the sky was milky with high clouds, the sun was playing hide-and-seek, and there was low mist visible at either end of the road.

I eyed that mist for a moment, simmering with suspicion. But spirit life moved within it as usual, and beyond it, up on the rooftops. The unpredictable menagerie of creatures did not seem spooked or skittish that morning. Something with lots of claws and a face like an axolotl skittered down the opposite side of the road, pausing to do a little dance and a spin. Several humped shapes on the corner were playing some bizarre imaginary version of hopscotch, which ended with them opening wide and swallowing each other, so only one of them was left at the end. A vast tree of soft blue light hung

over a distant row of houses, flashing like bioluminescent coral.

“Quiet morning,” said Praem.

“Yes. Quite. Nothing going on, we can hope.”

To my great surprise, Praem’s fingertips brushed mine as we walked down the garden path. I flinched softly, then looked at her. Milk-white eyes stared back at me.

“Hold hands,” she said. It was not a question.

“Oh, Praem, I’d be delighted. Thank you.” I happily took her soft, cool palm in mine. But then I frowned again. “Wait, is this so I don’t run off? Is this like holding the hand of a small child?”

Praem did not reply. I sighed and rolled my eyes — but I couldn’t say no. This was too sweet.

Felicity’s battered old Range Rover stood in the road just beyond the garden gate, the wheels lapped by lazy tongues of morning mist. She hadn’t bothered — or wasn’t able — to pin up anything over the windows, so when Praem and I reached the car, we could see her curled up on the back seat, beneath a couple of rugged blankets and an extra coat.

Even through the window, I could tell she was exhausted. Half-buried by a blanket and obscured by a veil of hair, the skin of her face seemed thin and fragile, even the part that wasn’t burn-scar. She looked lumpy and awkward on her makeshift bed. She looked cold. Her sports bag with the shotgun inside sat on the floor in front of her, within easy reach.

“This isn’t right,” I sighed.

Praem and I had drawn to a stop, perhaps by instinct, perhaps on some humanitarian impulse. Praem didn’t say anything, she just held my hand while I peered in at Felicity’s sleeping form.

“But if she was inside ... Evelyn wouldn’t feel comfortable,” I whispered on. “Understatement of the year.”

“Yes,” said Praem.

In a moment of incredible awkwardness, Felicity opened her eyes and looked up at us.

Bleary and bloodshot, heavy with sleep, I don’t think she had

actually overheard me talking about her through all the metal and plastic of the car door. But it was still a mortifying experience. And then Praem and I were rooted to the spot by politeness as Felicity slowly sat up, stretched her arms, shivered with post-sleep metabolic lethargy, bundled up her blankets, and popped the car door.

“Um, Heather,” she mumbled with the good corner of her mouth. “Praem. Good morning.”

“I’m sorry if we woke you, Felicity,” I blurted out. “I didn’t mean to. I thought you were, well, fast asleep.”

“Good morning,” Praem intoned.

Felicity shrugged a non-response, then shuffled over the edge of the seat and clambered out of the car, looking even more awkward than usual. She had slept fully dressed, though in a different change of clothes to yesterday. She moved with incredible care and stiff slowness, reaching back into the car to make sure her weapon was still within reach. I sighed and felt awful for her.

“We were just going for a walk,” I babbled on, trying to cover for my own embarrassment. “Just down to the corner shop, I think. Just me and Praem. You’re welcome to breakfast, of course. Or we could pick you up something, or ... ”

Felicity blinked hard at Praem. “Evelyn is safe by herself?”

A moment of frozen tension slid between the three of us — or was that just my imagination?

What did Felicity mean by that question? Goaded by pain and lack of clarity, my mind spun that statement out into a hundred hidden meanings. Felicity was out here because her presence made Evelyn uncomfortable; that was because of their shared history, which I did not fully understand. But I thought I had a good grasp of her by now. Did I? Hadn’t things changed the last few days? They had, yes?

Felicity was unhealthily obsessed with Evelyn — with her regard, with her forgiveness, with any opportunity to practice self-sacrifice for her. I didn’t believe for a second that leaving her alone with Evelyn was actually dangerous to Evee.

If I did, I’d pull your head off myself, whispered a dark part of me.

But what about emotionally? If Felicity got Evelyn alone, what questions might she ask? What memories might she dredge up in her quest to punish herself?

Did she care about Evelyn being safe without Praem around — or was she fishing to see if Eevee was alone?

I had no idea. The thought itself was deeply uncharitable. This woman had helped *save us*. She's fought alongside us. But that didn't erase her personal history.

Before Praem could answer, or clarify that Eevee was not technically alone, never alone, never again — I blurted out a question with a very hidden meaning indeed.

"Felicity!" I chirped, the fresh air hurting my gums. "Do you want to come with us, on our little walk?"

sediment in the soul – 19.9

Felicity Amber Hackett — an older mage from a forest-wrapped manor house in darkest Cumbria, an ex heroin-addict, once-collaborator with Loretta Saye, burn-scarred and secretly tattooed, moving like her joints were made of rusted iron; the woman who had cut off Evelyn's leg, host to Aym the abyssal mystery, with her one good eye and her twitchy mannerisms and her deeply suspicious intentions, who had spent the last few nights sleeping in her car in front of our house — lit up with a smile so fragile and surprised that I was shamed by my own duplicity.

Her smile was awkward and pained, lopsided due to the missing corner of her lips. The left side of her face lit up too, the ghost of delight moving beneath the scarred surface. She winced softly, tucked her reddish-brown hair behind her good ear, and answered in a rushed mumble.

“I-I'd love to, yes ... to come on your walk, with you. Yes. Um, thank you.”

Framed by the open back door of her car and the mist-draped road beyond, with her crumpled makeshift bed lying on the seat, stoop-shouldered and hollow-cheeked and utterly without artifice, eyes shining with sudden skittish joy, wearing a thick cardigan beneath a long coat, Felicity looked more like the pitiful protagonist of a very sappy romance novel, rather than a mage who carried around a concealed shotgun.

My simple question — ‘do you want to come with us?’ — had cut right through all Felicity's defences, if she even had any in the first place.

She was flattered to be invited. Her smile hid nothing. She hadn't even figured out why I'd really asked. She thought I was being honest.

That delicate, fluttering response was the very last thing I'd expected. It almost felled me.

I cleared my throat — ouch, that was sore too, what a surprise — and hurried to cover up my mistake. I had so little experience with

this kind of intrigue, but I'd assumed she would catch on right away. I felt like a Cold War spy who had sat down on a park bench to meet an undercover contact, whispered my silly code phrase, then turned to see some mystified young girl staring back at me with wide eyes. This was a very underhanded game and I was apparently the only one playing.

But Praem knew. Praem had turned her head to stare at me. Milk-white eyes bored into the side of my face, silently asking what I was up to and did I need any help and would I prefer to rethink this plan? My hand was turning clammy in hers. Praem probably considered me a bumbling amateur. Or worse: horribly rude.

"I mean, Felicity— F-F-Fliss? May I call you that? It's a very nice nickname, um—" I didn't wait for a response, barrelling on in my occluded embarrassment, fingernails digging into my palm in the darkness of my hoodie's front pocket; gosh, my joints did ache. "We're only walking down to the corner shop to buy lemons. I mean, lemons and other things. I've got cravings. Not that I'm pregnant. I-I mean I can't get—" I slammed to a stop and puffed out a huge sigh. What on earth was I even saying? This was getting worse by the second. "You did just wake up and you must be incredibly tired after yesterday; I apologise, it's very presumptuous of me to invite you for a walk before you've even had breakfast or stretched your legs or taken a drink of water." Oh, good back-pedal, well done. I patted myself on the back. Praem stared through my skull. "But you are welcome to come with us, of course," I added.

Back-peddalling from my own back-pedal. They'd have to invent a new sport for me. I was such a sucker for that fragile smile — and not in a romantic sense. A bizarre little part of me wanted to offer Felicity some kind of comfort, somehow. She'd fought alongside us. She didn't deserve to sleep in her car.

Felicity and Praem were both staring at me now, Praem with her usual impassive intensity, Felicity with the just-awoken post-sleep befuddlement of somebody who has opened their front door to a stranger speaking too fast.

I forced a smile, feeling like an absolute moron.

My invitation had served one purpose: to see how Felicity might react. The only reason I asked was because she'd asked a question first: is Evelyn safe — and alone? A protective and secretive part of

me did not want Felicity anywhere near Eeve, not when everybody else was asleep, not when myself and Praem were out of the house, and not when the only person watching over Eeve was Sevens-Shades-of-Side-Piece, who was currently smitten with Aym, who was, in the end, Felicity's creature.

Or was it the other way around?

Would Felicity turn down the invitation, slink off indoors for 'breakfast', and then force an uncomfortable conversation on Evelyn? Would she see this as an opening to express her unwanted and unwelcome devotion? Or would she recognise my gambit? Would she pause to 'think', and then agree to come along?

She had done neither. She'd taken me seriously, for which I was completely unprepared.

Praem turned her head ninety degrees to look at Felicity instead. "You are welcome to join us," she said.

I suppressed a wince and kept smiling. There was no getting out of this now. Felicity was being too vulnerable and real to reject.

"... well," Felicity said after a moment, pausing to glance down the misty length of Barnslow Drive; I had to remind myself that she couldn't see the spirits at the end of the road, the dark humps and rangy shapes and glowing crystal beasts. "Walking to a little corner shop does count as stretching my legs. True, I haven't brushed my teeth yet, so maybe stay upwind of me, I guess." She tried to smile again, but she'd already re-donned her mantle of awkward self-consciousness. "I used to walk before breakfast every morning. Sometimes still do, if I can find the ... door."

Her smile turned rigid, fully aware of how bizarre that sounded. Her good eye scrunched with effort. Her blind eye tried to mirror the expression, but the skin crinkled in the wrong kind of way.

She lived all alone in an ancient manor house, with only Aym and God alone knew what else for company. How long had it been since she'd done something this normal?

But I was genuinely curious. Embarrassment turned to concern.

"Fliss, how are you doing, really? After yesterday, I mean. You and Evelyn both took a bit of a beating, metaphysically, or spiritually, or ... ?"

Felicity put on a show of straightening up and easing her shoulders back, which made her wince and whine deep in her throat; my own aching carcass shivered in recognition. It was like watching an old ironing board get unfolded, flakes of rust falling from the joints, painted metal legs scraping together, the fabric cover hanging loose, elastic rotted away long ago. Felicity screwed her eyes shut and pushed her shoulder blades back. My own bruises throbbed with animalistic sympathy, my gums itching, my finger joints aching. I almost apologised.

She muttered, "I'm doing mostly okay, as much as I can expect. I've done that kind of thing plenty of times before. Well, mm, not the fighting part, but the magic part. I'm used to it. Kind of. Don't worry, I won't fall down or collapse or anything. I can walk. The fresh air might help."

"Well, yes." I cleared my throat, mirroring her awkwardness. "We were probably planning to sit down on a bench for a bit ... anyway ... yes."

Praem stared at me again. I started to blush. We hadn't planned that at all, I'd made it up on the spot.

Felicity nodded along. "That might be nice. So, a corner shop?"

"There's one a few streets away. Not much, but we can pick up some basics. It's not a Spar or a Tesco Express or anything, just local."

Felicity smiled again, the echo of old delight under her skin. "Is it the sort of place we can get a bag of penny sweets?"

"Penny sweets?"

Felicity paused, then let out a puff of self-deprecating laughter, a single sad chuckle. "Oh, wow. Now I feel really old. Thanks."

"I-I didn't mean to—"

"Sorry, I'm sorry," she said quickly. "It was a bad joke. I'm not that old. Just, I guess penny sweets aren't a thing anymore."

"They are," said Praem. "You may have a strawberry."

"Oh, uh, thank you."

Felicity glanced down the street again. As she did, her body language shifted; those rolled-back shoulders stiffened with tension,

her good eye flicked back and forth, and her throat bobbed. She took her sports bag from inside the car and put the strap over her shoulder. One gloved hand settled on the zip, ready to open it and draw her sawn-off shotgun. She closed the car door and looked at us in a very different way to before, frowning delicately, like an exhausted but wary animal.

She asked: "I'll be under your protection, though, right?"

I'd almost forgotten. Felicity had problems of her own.

My heart ached, and not because of a bruise — it was the fragile smile, the skittish caution of long experience, the unguarded desire to do something normal with a nice polite young woman who had invited her for a walk. Felicity wasn't only *not* trying to get Evelyn alone, she was trusting that Praem and I were on her side, just for the chance to go buy a can of coffee.

Was this how mages ended up, if they didn't become monsters? Isolated and broken and jumping at shadows?

Was Felicity a vision of Eeve's future — or my future?

There was only one answer to that fear.

"You won't need your shotgun," I said. "Nobody would dare 'mess with' Praem and I."

Praem intoned, "Hard girls. Scary girls."

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, that was a very Raine way of putting it. Yes, we're too scary to mess with. Don't let our appearance fool you."

"Good girls," Praem added.

"Yes. I suppose."

Felicity managed a weak laugh. "Thanks. If it's all the same, I'll still carry the gun. Just in case. You know?"

I managed an equally weak smile. "If we get stopped and searched by the police, I don't know you." Then I quickly added, "Sorry. Bad joke."

"No, no, it's fine." Felicity shook her head. "That would actually be entirely fair. Do police do a lot of stops around here?"

“Oh, no. That was just hyperbole. Look at the place, it’s not exactly rough, not in that kind of way.” I gestured down the street with one hand and two tentacles, down the length of Barnslow Drive with its rotten old houses, the ragged edge of Sharrowford’s residential development, these forgotten buildings on the rim of a city that had forgotten itself a long time ago. The terraced houses in the distance were shrouded by thinning mist. Sharrowford burbled nonsense to herself, lost in dreams of history. For a moment I followed my own gesture, staring at the slice of city I could see from my human-level sight-line.

My bioreactor still felt thick and cold in my belly, but it resonated with the city like a note played on the edge of a wine glass. I held that note for a second, entranced by my own thoughts.

Felicity cleared her throat. I snapped back around, blinking, blushing in my own confusion. “Sorry, I—”

But she was already asking Praem a question, adjusting the sports bag on her shoulder, nodding toward the darkened house behind us.

“Before we go, though — is Evelyn safe by herself?” Felicity said. “You both look after her, so ... ”

“She is never alone,” said Praem.

Felicity smiled again, with relief and acceptance. Good enough for me.

“Shall we, then?” I asked. “I am getting peckish, rather rapidly. And it will be ... well, I don’t know. Five to ten minutes, perhaps?”

Felicity nodded, locked her car, and fell in beside us.

The route to the nearest corner shop was not very long, but longer than any pre-breakfast jaunt had right to be, especially for somebody covered in bruises, whose knees felt like ground glass with every step, and whose stomach complained and grumbled like an argumentative steam engine. I was not, strictly speaking, exhausted or incapable; I had slept well, my muscles functioned, my head was clear. Much like Felicity, I could walk, carry myself along, and not fall flat on my face. As we left Barnslow Drive and turned right down the main road, the walk started to do me some good, working those muscles to stretch out the knots, grinding my joints until the glass smoothed out. The air itself hurt my gums and the weak, milky sunlight made my eyes water, but one cannot win

every minor battle, especially when one is generally turning the tide of the war.

The movement encouraged my body to wake up, to unlimber my sore tendons and push blood through thirsty veins. I needed this.

Praem and I walked hand in hand, which was a delightful experience. Her cream skirt swished around her ankles and her boots clicked with pleasing regularity along the pavement, squeaked on the aged tarmac of the crossings, and somehow never varied despite her need to keep pace with me and my stubby little legs, my clumsy walk, my fused knees. She was very elegant in motion, as always.

Felicity ambled along on my opposite side, occasionally tilting her head back and closing her eyes to take a deep breath. She had to force that gesture; I could see the conscious effort in her frame every time she held back her paranoia, every time she broke her vigilance.

She seemed as if she expected to get attacked at any moment.

Her alertness was very different to my own caution. I wasn't a fool, I knew Edward Lilburne might be in the process of sending something after us, right then. I kept my head on a swivel, looking left and right, down each side-street, sometimes even checking behind us. Few human beings were out on the streets this early in the morning, just the occasional person walking to their own car or headed to work. Anybody who saw us didn't bother to give us a second glance; to those not in the know we were completely unremarkable, despite the fact I often expected somebody to randomly stare at Praem's stunning good looks. But I checked every face, watched every figure. I paid special attention to the spirit life which carried on its usual bizarre routine, on the rooftops and in the back alleys, dancing in the street, playing ineffable games in the middle of the road and atop the cars. Spindly stick creatures stopped to look at me when I stared back. Lumps of living moss on the sides of buildings froze when I watched them. Skitter-limbed ghoulish things raced down the road, slowing to a crawl when I fanned out my tentacles, then speeding up again when they were past our little group.

But Felicity walked with her hand on her sports bag, seeking comfort from the shotgun within. She shot a flicker-look at each

human being we saw, a lingering question, then darted away again without dismissal. She stiffened at each new corner. I could see the tension in her neck muscles, in the tightness of her upper back, in a musculature of fear. She was making me ache in sympathy.

Still one street away from the nearest corner shop, I had to speak up.

“Felicity,” I said with exaggerated delicacy. “You can relax, really. If there’s anything wrong, Praem and I will notice.”

“All is right,” said Praem.

Felicity winced sidelong at us, with an apologetic crease in her scarred brow. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“We are in Sharrowford,” said Praem.

I said, “You don’t have to be sorry. I know habits like that are hard to break. I know that better than most.”

Felicity sighed — but her eyes still flickered to an alleyway as we approached a break in the line of houses. It was one of those antiquated rear access passages where people sometimes still stored their bins.

“Hyper-vigilance has served me well,” she mumbled. “I know it’s off-putting, but it keeps me alive. This is just who I am.”

“Are you seriously afraid that we’re going to get attacked?” I asked. “Or is it more of a habit? Just something subconscious? If you don’t mind me asking, of course.”

Praem said, “All is right in Sharrowford.”

Felicity swallowed as we stepped past the alleyway. I peered around her. There was nothing down there, just damp brickwork and scraps of rubbish, a few clumps of moss and weeds poking through broken tarmac. A spirit creature was sitting on the ground at the end of the alley, a rotund thing like a pig-person, but with a face in the middle of its distended belly. It raised a three-fingered paw in greeting, with glowing symbols rotating around the paw. Another, smaller pig was sitting by its side, trying to imitate the symbols. I awkwardly waved back. No reason to be rude.

“I don’t really think we’re going to be attacked,” Felicity admitted. “But ... ”

Her voice cracked. I felt that drop in my stomach which told me I'd stepped into a puddle and found it was a sink-hole.

"But," Praem echoed, click-sharp and bell-soft. Apparently that was what Felicity needed, because she carried on the thought, a soft murmur from damaged lips in the misty air, framed by Sharrowford red brick and Felicity's lank hair.

"But I've been ambushed before, when I thought I was safe. When I was younger. When I was just ... after the book and the ..." She trailed off and then looked around at me suddenly, as if only just recalling that Praem and I were present. Felicity's throat bobbed. "Sorry, I don't really talk about this kind of stuff."

"You can if you want to," I said.

Did I really want to hear, or was I just being polite? Felicity had fought alongside us. She had proven she cared. I wouldn't leave her alone with Evee. But I'd hear her out.

She looked away again, steps eating up the pavement in a slow rhythm. Her one good eye fluttered half-closed. Her words came out flat. "The first time I ever let my guard down, a man tried to kill me in a petrol station. A service station. You know, one of those big places on the motorway where you can stop to eat fast food and stuff. I was so tired. I'd been awake for three days. I couldn't find where I was supposed to be going. The ... well, I was kind of lost. Long story. And it happened in broad daylight. Mundane people around. Outside a cookie shop."

She stopped. Breathing steady. But seeing for a thousand miles.

"Did you have to kill him?" I asked.

"Yeah." Barely a mumble. Not sad or guilty, just a blunt fact.

"Stopped his heart through his chest. There was an article about it in a local paper a few days later. Healthy twenty-six-year-old man dies of a heart attack in a public toilet. Father of two. Big shame, big pity. Blah blah. 'Course they didn't know he was working for a magician. Aym dug that article up, a year or two later. I hadn't seen it before then." She let out a tiny, pained sigh. "Aym probably heard me say that just now. Knows it still gets to me."

I drew to a stop in the middle of the pavement. Tongues of thin mist lapped at my ankles, chilling me from my feet upward. Praem stopped with me, so precisely that she didn't even tug on my hand.

She stared at me. Felicity halted awkwardly too, looking half-over her shoulder like a suspect in a goofy mystery.

“You can stop people’s hearts?” I asked.

All my tentacles were hovering, ready to form a shark-cage around my front, despite the terrible ache in their roots. I couldn’t stop the instinctive response. Felicity couldn’t even see it, but I burned with embarrassment even as abyssal instinct hissed for caution.

Felicity shrugged. “With the right motivation.” Then she blinked and straightened up. Perhaps she saw the look behind my face. “I mean, I probably couldn’t do it to you. Any of you. Even if I wanted to. It only worked because he was set on murdering me. Adaptive bio-feedback reflection, as self-defence. First trick I ever learned. And I don’t have a sacrificial anode anymore, so it would kill me too. Unless I wanted to hurt Aym. And I don’t. I wouldn’t.”

Felicity was so wretched while she explained herself with these snatches of a memory I did not want to share. I held up my free hand and said, “It’s okay, Fliss. It’s okay. I believe you. You don’t have to make excuses. I believe you, I just—”

“I know,” she said, in the softest mumble she could. “I know what I’ve done. I know how you look at me. It’s fair enough.”

Her words were self-pity but her voice held nothing but acceptance. She wasn’t asking for forgiveness. There was no absolution to give; or perhaps she didn’t believe herself deserving of redemption. Maybe I’d completely misunderstood her motivations. Or maybe I just wasn’t Evelyn.

We stared at each other across a few feet of cold Sharrowford pavement. She shuffled her boots and glanced back the way we’d come.

“Strawberries,” said Praem.

I combined a sigh and a laugh into a single awkward puff, which hurt my throat, again. “Yes, we should really get going to the corner shop. My tummy is still all rumble. Did you want to pick up anything specific, Fliss?”

Felicity blinked with numb surprise, then with unspoken relief. She nodded slowly. “If I can’t get penny sweets, then maybe a packet of crisps.”

“Oh, we can do better than a packet of crisps,” I said, leading on. Praem fell in alongside me, perfectly in step. Felicity rejoined us too.

“Really? Do they carry those microwavable Cornish Pasties? Pork pies? Anything with some terrible processed meat in it. Before Aym stops me.”

“Aym stops you eating meat?”

Felicity shrugged as we waded through the shallow fog. “I promised to be a vegetarian once. I’m very bad at it. Aym likes to remind me.”

I glanced up at the quiet houses, down the foggy street, and over my shoulder, but there was no scrap of lace-wrapped black shadowing us from the alleyways and darkened windows. “Does she really follow you everywhere?”

“Uh huh.”

“Is she with us now?”

Felicity sighed. “If she wasn’t, I’d be dead.”

The little corner shop was a place called *Bernando’s*. It was run by a very jovial middle-aged Indian couple and their adult daughter; Raine had informed me that none of them was the titular ‘Bernando’. Nobody knew who Bernando was. The shop stood at the end of that road, at a junction of five different narrow streets which had probably once been a meeting place in this part of the city, a tiny crossroads from a time before the big supermarkets, kept on life-support by the local student population stumbling along in need of greasy post-boozer food, foot traffic stopping for morning cigarettes, and the unceasing demand for local newspapers. The windows shone like a lighthouse in the thick grey dawn, promising cheap chocolate bars, infinite lottery tickets, and the latest stack of glossy gossip magazines.

Praem and Felicity and I warranted the exact same “Good morning to you!” call from the young man behind the counter that I’m certain he repeated for every single customer. His tired smile would be the same for Praem in a maid dress, or Zheng with bloody teeth, or Ooran Juh in all his naked glory.

There was precisely one piece of pneuma-somatic life inside the

corner shop: a bubblegum-pink bird-shape made of gossamer layers of gauze-like matter, perched on the top of the till. It watched us with little head-bobbing motions as we went to look for food.

Praem and I loaded up with a bag of fresh lemons, two tins of pineapple chunks — in juice, not water — and a bottle of soy sauce. Anything more from my list of cravings was too much to hope for. Certainly not raw fish, unless I wanted to eat frozen fish fingers straight from the box.

“I could try ... ” I muttered, as we stood over the big freezer full of microwave meals. “But no, I’m not that desperate. My bioreactor can wait, I’m not crunching up iced fish.”

We picked up a packet of cookies to share back home and found a plastic carton of strawberries for Praem; in-season, but a little sad-looking all the same. The price made my eyes water.

“I only brought twenty pounds along. I’m so sorry, Praem, I should have thought.”

But Praem stepped in to save the day. She had a purse all of her own, tucked into some nearly invisible pocket in her long cream-coloured skirt. I’d never seen it before, a lovely soft fold of deep blue with an inlaid design of a rose in lighter blue. At first I thought it was leather, it looked so supple and new, but then Praem corrected me.

“Fake leather.”

“O-oh, it just looked—”

“Vegan.”

“Sometimes I forget, yes. I am sorry. Um, Praem, you really don’t have to pay for all this, I can put the soy sauce back. Or one of the tins of pineapple. I don’t need two of them, after all. I shouldn’t expect you to—”

“Buy the strawberries.”

I blinked at her milk-white eyes, beneath the too-harsh strip-lights buzzing in the water-stained ceiling of the corner shop. She and I stood framed between two rows of shelves, one full of newspapers and magazines, the other full of cheap bread and bagels and burger buns. Praem seemed so hilariously out of place.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“I gift you lemons. You gift me strawberries. Equivalent exchange.”

I bit my lip and frowned. “Isn’t that something from one of Eevee’s animes?”

“Not this kind. Give me a gift.”

I sighed and smiled at the same time, blushing under the gentle pressure of Praem’s affection. “Very well, Praem. If that’s what you want. You shall have as many strawberries as you like.”

“I will.”

Felicity vanished between the cramped aisles for a couple of minutes while Praem and I deliberated over the relative price of lemons and strawberries. She walked in silence like a wounded ghost, standing in front of a rack of biscuits in her long coat, looking like a misplaced extra from a classic noir film. She returned to join us at the counter, having secured herself a double-sized packet of chocolate digestives, a can of fancy cold-brew coffee, a bottle of truly vile-looking chocolate syrup drink with a very silly name — ‘yogoo’, or ‘yuugoo’ or something equally ridiculous — and a very large pork pie.

“Indulgent breakfast,” she muttered to me, vaguely embarrassed. “You know how it is.”

“It’s alright,” I told her. “I think you’ve done plenty to deserve it.”

The smiling young man behind the counter took our money and gave us bags, nodding and wishing us, “Good morning, thank you, see you again soon!”

His gaze glided off Praem’s empty eyes, his mind protected from the lack of pupil or iris by the fact he wasn’t in the know. Perhaps he thought she was wearing novelty cosmetic contact lenses. I never tired of seeing that spectacle — the minds of mundane people shutting out the supernatural truth, limiting and compacting their own sensory experiences.

But then, as I was salivating over the prospect of fresh lemons and wondering if Felicity really was going to drink that vile chocolate goo, the cashier’s eyes did the same thing with Felicity.

He looked at her face, unable to ignore her disfiguring burn scars,

the single blind eye, the fused corner of her lips, the damaged skin made rough and red. He paused fractionally with that involuntary curiosity shown even by the most polite and understanding of people: a tightening of the smile, a spark of thought as he wondered how she had gotten those scars.

And then his eyes unfocused and slid away. Exactly as with Praem.

“Thank you very much,” Felicity said as she accepted her plastic bag. She followed Praem and I back out into the early morning streets.

I glanced back as we stepped out of the door; a scrap of black lace fluttered between the aisles, vanishing behind a pallet of milk bottles.

“Bench,” declared Praem once we were back out in the thin fog.

I stammered a little, still embarrassed at the consequences of my erroneous quick-thinking. “W-we don’t have to go sit down, we could go back to the house and—”

“Bench.”

Felicity sighed heavily. “It is a nice morning. Despite the fog. Warm, dry. I wouldn’t mind a sit, if you want to.”

“Bench.”

“All right, all right,” I said, mortified into acquiescence.

We didn’t want to walk all the way down Bluebell Road and past the university campus just to spend ten minutes sitting in Yare Broad Park; far too early in the morning for that, and I was far too desperate to get one of those lemons into my gullet. Instead we doubled back the way we came, past the mouth of Barnslow Drive once more — with a quick glance down the street to see that Felicity’s Range Rover was still right where we’d left it — and headed in the opposite direction, making for the nearest scrap of land which pretended to be a park.

The triangle of grass, scraggly trees, and badly tended flowerbeds didn’t even have a name; I’d only visited it once before, with Raine, for the sheer pleasure of finding bizarre little places tucked away in the ragged wounds of Sharrowford’s past. The triangle-park was an angle of ground forgotten between three housing developments, as if each had tried to fob it off on the others after finding out it was

cursed, or destined to open up into a sink-hole, or technically owned by the King of the Moon. We had no idea who or what tended to the plants, but the pair of benches were kept in reasonable condition by fortuitous shelter from one of the tall, ugly, hundred-year-old brick walls which bracketed the space.

Six months ago I would never have stepped foot in there; the local spirit life loved this spot.

Spindly stick-insect things of spun glass clung to the tops of the walls, sunning their flat-eyed heads with the invisible beams of summer. One corner of the 'park' was nothing but a pulsating black mass of flesh, tendrils embedded in the brick, yet more tendrils held in front of it to play some ineffable finger-counting game. Humped shapes like coal-wrought polar bears slumbered along one of the flower beds. A half-dead tree was filled with upside-down severed heads, chattering to each other with silent mouths and no eyes. A furry S-shape writhed back and forth along the ground, a blind and insensate snake. Jellyfish shapes bobbed through the air. A bird made of razor-edged metal spikes spread its wings on one of the benches.

I walked in there, hand in hand with Praem, and I knew all those things meant me no harm.

"That bench is free," I said, nodding toward the one furthest in the rear.

We settled down without further discussion. Praem and I took one end of the bench while Felicity sat a polite and respectful couple of spaces distant, but still alongside us. She placed her sports bag on the ground between her feet, put her bag of food on top of it, and then opened her can of cold coffee. She took a long sip, then sighed, sitting with her feet far apart, hanging forward slightly over her sports bag and the shotgun within.

"You really needed that, didn't you?" I asked.

"Suppose so."

Praem took her time smoothing her skirt over her thighs, very precise in how she sat; I didn't rush her, whatever it was she was doing. I waited with the box of strawberries and then fed her one when she was ready. She parted her lips, accepted her gift, and chewed with dainty precision.

“Another.”

“Of course, of course.”

“Another.”

“Another?”

“Another. And one for Felicity.”

“Oh, yes,” said Fliss. “I did say thank you to that. Um, thank you.” She accepted a strawberry with one hand, rather awkwardly.

“Another.”

Five strawberries later, Praem closed her lips with a click — no ‘another’ forthcoming. She accepted the box while I finally pulled out a whole lemon from our bag. Fingers aching, eyelids sore, gums throbbing, I stared at it for a second and wondered if I should just pull it open, or use one of my tentacles to cut the skin off. I raised a tentacle to do exactly that, but then Praem gently took the lemon from my hands, twisted it between her own, and handed me back a pair of neatly parted lemon halves.

“Impressive,” Felicity muttered.

“Oh, Praem!” I lit up like a miniature sun. I was almost drooling.

“Thank you!”

“You are welcome,” she intoned. “Eat.”

We sat there in companionable silence for a couple of minutes. I sucked on half a lemon, the juice sharp on my tongue, tingly on my fingertips, fresh and light and exactly what my body craved. Chewing on little twists of lemon flesh, watching the tendrils of low fog against the backdrop of the houses opposite, with Praem’s knee against mine, this morning seemed almost unreal. My bioreactor didn’t rumble or leap or jolt inside my abdomen at the taste of lemon juice, but I did feel the spark spread outward as my body got what I needed. I burst little pockets of lemon flesh between my teeth and tried not to get any down my chin. The taste made me pinch my lips together, wincing at the delicious sharpness.

After a minute or two, Felicity cleared her throat and said, “Strawberries. That was her material bond, wasn’t it? Very risky, but paid off, huh?”

I blinked at her. “I’m sorry?”

Praem stared too. And stared. And stared. She stared so hard that Felicity coughed and lowered her eyes.

“Yes,” Praem said eventually.

“Oh,” I said, as understanding dawned. “You can just ask Praem questions directly, if you want to.”

“Yes, I ... I know. Sorry. Praem, then. Why strawberries?”

Praem answered like the tolling of a bell made of wafer-thin ice: “Strawberries are delicious.”

Felicity considered this for a moment, blinking her good eye twice. “I guess they are.”

I lowered my piece of lemon – a husk now, sucked dry by my thirst — and considered the other piece in my opposite hand. But then I said, “Felicity, do you mind if I ask you a question? In return, as it were.”

Felicity shrugged inside her long coat. “Ask away.”

“Well, several questions, really.” She shrugged again, so I carried right on. Praem was feeding herself a strawberry and looking away, over at one of the trees; I swear I caught a flicker of black lace in my peripheral vision, but I ignored it. If Aym wanted me to stop, she should show herself and say so. “The first one is about your scars. I don’t want to ask if you don’t want to answer. Is it okay to talk about that?”

Felicity’s good eye took on a suddenly haunted look, almost a thousand-yard stare.

“Strawberry?” Praem said, offering her the box.

Felicity blinked and snapped back to the present. “Uh, no, thank you. Um, Heather, I don’t want to talk about how I ... about where ... I don’t.”

“That’s quite all right,” I hurried to say. “It’s not about that, it’s about the cashier in the corner shop.”

Felicity frowned at me. “Eh?”

“He looked at your burn scars. And then he looked away.”

Felicity looked utterly mystified by that statement. Her half-scarred

brow was furrowed in thought. Her left eye, blind and dull, seemed to roll in the socket. She said, slowly, “Most people are polite. Children stare, sometimes, but ...”

“No, I mean he looked away, against his will. Like you’re something supernatural and he couldn’t focus. Like people used to with Praem, when she was blue.”

Felicity’s eyebrows climbed in surprise. She looked at Praem. “You were blue?”

“Da ba dee da ba di,” said Praem.

We both stared at Praem’s bizarre non-sequitur. She stared back, utterly unfazed.

“Um, anyway,” I said slowly, “he looked away like you were something supernatural. Do you know why that is?”

Felicity sighed heavily and took a long drag from her cold coffee. She kept drinking, tilting the can all the way back to empty it down her throat. She closed her eyes, throat glugging — then finished with a huge huff, jerking her head back down and hurling the empty can across the park with a sudden spasm of anger.

The metal can sailed through the air and went *clink* off the brick wall opposite. It fell in the grass. Felicity huffed, hard and tight.

“Littering,” said Praem.

“Yeah. Fuck being tidy,” Felicity grunted. But then she stood up and walked all the way across the cramped, pitiful little park, stooped to pick up her can, and walked back. She placed it carefully on the edge of the bench. The spiky metal bird on the next bench over leaned closer to look, as if the empty can was now a tasty morsel. I expected Felicity to flinch away — and had to remind myself that she couldn’t see the spirit creature. She was only a mage, after all.

“Not for you,” said Praem, speaking to the bird. It jerked up and looked at her. “Down.”

Felicity stared at Praem. “What?”

“That wasn’t meant for you,” I hurried to explain. “She was speaking to a spirit.”

“Oh ... right. Okay.” Felicity settled back down on the bench and sighed again, elbows on her knees, looking exhausted inside and

out. "Sorry, I forget that some of you can do that trick."

"It's quite alright. I forget that other people can't, sometimes."

Felicity nodded slowly and wet her lips. The metal spirit-bird next to her tilted its head back and forth. I wondered if it was listening as well.

"That cashier back there," Felicity said at length. "He was probably going to ask how I got the burns. Or maybe just thinking it. That's all. Please don't."

I watched her for a second, staring out at nothing, until she reached down into her plastic bag and took out her pork pie. She slowly unwrapped it and bit into the thick brown paste, then sighed again. "Oh, that's good. That's good stuff. Keep going, then," she said around a mouthful of food.

"I ... I'm sorry?"

"Said you had more questions. I don't mind." She looked down at her shoes, then up at the grey-milk sky. "You're an alright sort of person, I think. Doing good things for Evelyn. You've got the right."

I wanted to squirm out of my seat when she mentioned Evelyn's name. What was Felicity, really? A mage, certainly. Dangerous? Maybe. But she wasn't a monster. Or was she? I needed to check, I had to know, but not for myself. I was certain I could protect Evelyn. But there were other areas of life which were none of my business, unless somebody was making danger.

My heart rate increased as I rotated a pair of questions in my mind, examining them from different angles, making sure I had them correct before I began to speak. In a way, I only had one shot at this. My veins ached, the back of my neck was stiff and sore, and my tongue felt like cotton wool; the root was bruised. How does one bruise a tongue? I'm sure Raine would have plenty of creative answers.

Felicity must have felt me staring, because she looked at me and swallowed too hard. "Um ... Heather?"

"Arms down," said Praem.

I huffed a sigh and lowered my tentacles. They had been drifting higher, as if to repulse a sudden attack. "Sorry," I said. "It's just ... Felicity, back before I met you in person the first time, Evelyn

implied that you and Aym have a ... romantic and ... sexual relationship. She called you a 'sociopathic pederast demonophile'."

Felicity winced hard. She screwed her eyes up. "We already discussed this, on the phone. I know what she thinks of—"

"Look at me."

My voice came out as a strangled whipcrack. I hadn't expected that. My raw throat ached and throbbed with the effort, but Felicity looked. Felicity obeyed the thing I was.

She was hurting inside, sagging with the wound of Evelyn's hatred.

"Is it—" I started to say.

Peh! came a spitting sound of pure disgust, from somewhere nearby, from behind a tree or over a wall. I twitched around, headache probing at the sudden movement, but the sound of Aym's voice did not have a source.

"Aym speaks for us both," Felicity mumbled, in a voice half-dead. "Aym and I don't have that kind of ... thing. We never did. God, Evelyn really hates me. She really, really hates me. As she should do."

Abyssal instinct watched Felicity very carefully for several long seconds: the musculature of her face, the angle of her eyes, the oils on her skin. Her eyes were full of regret and sorrow, and other, darker things.

She wasn't lying.

"Well, good," I said, my tone lightening in an instant. "I'm sorry to repeat the question — and the insult — but you've been in our house for days now, and I had to ask, I had to know, I had to be sure—"

"I know, I know. You look out for Evelyn, you don't want me near her if—"

"It has nothing to do with Evee," I said. "I'm looking out for Kim."

A subtle fire burned in my chest, a flame that had nothing to do with the bioreactor down in my guts. If I was an angel — if I was going to find a place that made sense, as an angel of mathematics and tentacles and abyssal darkness — then the unseen protections were just as important as the berserker rages. In fact, if I could

work on the former, maybe the latter wouldn't need to happen.

Subconsciously, unaware of what I was doing, I slowly spread my tentacles outward, strobing rainbow-soft in the thin fog. The spirit life in that memory of a park turned to look, or stilled their play, or bowed appendages and tendrils and heads in acknowledgement. Praem did not tell me to put my arms down.

"Ahhhhh," Felicity sighed. "Is this the ... what do they call it, in America? The 'shovel talk'?"

All my angelic thoughts collapsed in confused disarray. I climbed out of a pile of white feathers and numb tentacles. "E-excuse me? I'm sorry, what?"

"Sticks and stones," Praem intoned, "will break your bones, but words will hurt your heart."

Felicity put both hands out as if surrendering to us. One was still full of pork pie and wrapper. "I-I didn't mean to—"

"Fliss," I said with a huff, sharper than I expected. "I'm not threatening you. Really!"

She frowned back at me. "You probably should be. You know what I am."

"Argh!" I gestured with my half-lemon, tempted by some devilish impulse to give it a squeeze to squirt lemon juice into her eyes; I didn't, though, that would be so rude I would probably have collapsed into a blushing pile of apologies, not to mention the pain it might inflict on her burn scars. I had no idea how that would affect her. I settled for sticking the lemon back in my mouth and sucking angrily for a moment.

"H-Heather—"

"Nnn!" I popped the lemon back out. "I'm not threatening you! Yes, I'm very protective of Kimberly, because we essentially rescued her from a cult. She's traumatised by magic, by even existing in our world, but the last few days she's seemed happier than ever before. She found purpose again. You heard her! And you helped with that, sometimes indirectly, sometimes on purpose. And now you and her seem ... very close. So I want to ... check. On you. This is me, running a background check. You already passed."

"Beep boop," said Praem. She put another strawberry in her mouth,

then took one from the box and flicked it toward the nearest tree. A scrap of black flickered out and snatched it behind the trunk.

Felicity mumbled, "But if I hurt her, you'll put me in the ground."

She was deadly serious. Her usual mumble was hushed and full of caution. She eyed me like a fox looking at a wolf.

"No! No, for pity's sake." I huffed. "Not everything in this world is life or death. If you, I don't know, kidnap her or get her possessed by a demon on purpose, then yes, certainly, it's mage fighty time, I suppose, and you should expect me to murder you in the bath or whatever. But not every relationship in mage world ends up in somebody getting dead, or punished, or whatever. Really. Things might not work out between you two, whatever it is you're doing, and that's normal. That's fine. As long as you're not abusive."

Felicity swallowed hard and shook her head. "W-we haven't made any promises or done anything or things like that. I can discourage her if you'd rather. I'm sorry. It's been a long time since I met somebody who needed to hear the things I had to say. I just—"

I almost wrapped a tentacle around her throat. "I'm not asking you to do that. I'm just saying that I'm looking out for her, as a friend. Not as a miniature squid monster, or whatever I am these days. Does that make sense?"

"I'm a murderer," said Felicity. "I'm a mage. I'm worse things than that."

"So was she. So am I."

Felicity sighed, looked down at her shoes again, and took a big bite from her pork pie. Praem took another strawberry from her box and flicked it in the opposite direction. A tiny black tendril speared it from behind a different tree, yanking it back into Aym's hiding place.

"Maybe that's why we get along," said Felicity. "Still. She could do better."

"All right, Felicity," I said, straightening up and smoothing my pink hoodie across my front. "I want you to imagine something for me. A hypothetical. A most extreme scenario. Imagine that Kimberly leaves our house and goes to live with you, up in — Cumbria? Was that it? Would she be in any danger? Any danger with you? Any

danger from Aym?”

“What? I ... uh ... I mean ... ” Felicity stared at me, utterly overwhelmed, her good eye wide with shock. “No. Not from Aym. At least not ... physically. But I mean, it’s not fit for human beings, where I live. Where I have to live. It’s not.”

“You’re a human being,” I told her.

She laughed, a little sarcastic puff. “I’m not so sure about that anymore. I haven’t been sure about that since I was thirteen years old.”

My turn to sigh. Something about her self-pity rankled me wrong. “Why do all the most skilled mages always get into it so young? Oh, I’m sorry, my sample size isn’t enough to justify that statement. I’m being judgemental.”

“Neuroplasticity,” Felicity said.

“ ... really?”

She nodded. “You get it young, you’re better at it. It’s why Evelyn is ... well. You know her.”

“That I do,” I said.

But I was thinking of Natalie, the girl I’d saved from the Shambleswamp, the collateral damage in Edward’s plans, exposed to the eldritch truth so young and with no way back.

And I was thinking of myself. But I needed to focus on the problem at hand. Time to test the waters with a fishing line.

“You do know,” I said slowly, measuring my words, “that you’ve got a rival for Kimberly’s affections, yes?”

Felicity nodded. “The police woman.”

“Nicky’s not a police woman,” I said. “Not any more. She’s a private detective now.”

Felicity shrugged. “Once a pig, always a pig.”

I burst out laughing; completely inappropriate, but I couldn’t help myself. Half the spirit life in the pretend park turned to look at me. A lace-wrapped face peered out from around a tree-trunk, then whipped back again. Praem said, “Ha ha.”

“Perhaps you’d get on well with Lozzie,” I said. “But I’m serious. Nicole is very trustworthy and she’s helped us in the past. She wouldn’t be a danger for Kimberly, but Kimberly doesn’t seem that interested in her. I try not to pry, really.”

“Well,” Felicity said slowly. “She’s probably better off with somebody like that.”

“Tch!” I tutted. “Don’t make that decision for her! That’s her decision to make.”

Felicity just stared at her feet and shrugged. We lapsed into silence. I had no idea of what advice to give, if any. It wasn’t my place to do so and I had no right to interfere. Praem stood up from the bench, dusted off her skirt with three sharp motions of her hands, and then stepped over to stare at something behind the nearest tree.

“What’s it like being a mage?” I asked Felicity. She looked up, blinking at me. My turn to shrug. “I love Eevee, very much. But the mages I know are her and Kimberly, or ... people we’ve fought against. I don’t have a representative sample. What’s it like?”

Felicity blew out a long breath. “What’s it like to be a human being?”

I couldn’t help myself, I laughed a little, just a single inelegant snort. “I see.”

Felicity chewed some more pie, then eventually said: “I’ve spent my whole life running from things I can barely see. What you have going on here, you and the others, this little ... coven?” She frowned. “What do you call it?”

“I’m sorry? What do you mean? We’re not a cult or a—”

“No,” Felicity said — actually sharp and grumpy, or as sharp as she could get. “I mean this arrangement. You and Evelyn and Raine. The big zombie. The werewolf. Praem here. Lozzie. The moth-puppy thing whose name I can’t recall—”

“Tenny.”

“Tenny, right. You’re a coven or a circle or a—”

Praem said: “Family.”

“Nah.” Felicity shook her head. “It’s not quite. Some of it is, yes, but not all of it. It’s just community.” She frowned at me, harder than

before. "I've never had that. You hold onto it. I don't want to take that away from Kim."

"Do you want to be part of it?" I asked.

Felicity looked like I'd slapped her. She almost choked on residual pork pie. "W-wha—"

I carried on: "I don't mean 'do you want to come live in our house?' You can't do that and I wouldn't let you, and I suspect Evelyn would examine my head for damage if I suggested it. But if you ever need help, if something bad happens to you and Aym, you can call us. You can be part of a community without ... without ... "

"Joining the polycule," said Praem.

Felicity laughed, a real laugh, a sort of dry chuckle down in her chest. It stretched the corner of her mouth too far and she went, "Ow," and clutched her chin, but she was still amused. A second snort, like rusty spoons rubbing a dead tree, came from somewhere behind Praem.

"Yes," I sighed. "Well put, Praem. I think. How does that sound, Felicity? Does that make sense?"

"It does, it does," she said, clearing her throat as the laughter left her face. "And thank you. I'll ... let Kim make whatever decision she will."

"Are you two going to keep in contact, once this is all over?"

She shrugged. "Hope so."

A scratchy voice of barbed wire and splinters spoke from behind one of the nearby trees: "You better do, you dirty little coward, or I'll dunk your head in the toilet."

"Right," said Felicity. "Suppose I don't have a choice."

Felicity finished off her pork pie while I sucked the other half of my lemon. Aym vanished wherever she did when she didn't have a body. Praem stood and offered us more strawberries, but we were quite ready to head home again.

The ground fog was almost gone by the time we returned to Barnslow Drive, but the sunlight was struggling to make itself felt. The sky was like grey milk, the air barren, the day already turning into a formless, colourless mass. There would be so much to discuss

once everybody else was awake: plans to make, roles to decide, and my own part looming large with recovery and brain-math.

But then we turned into Barnslow Drive and saw a little man.

He was peering into the driver's window of Felicity's Range Rover, curious but polite, as if making sure the owner had not accidentally left any valuables on display. He looked up and straightened at the sight of us walking down the road, utterly unashamed of his own nosy curiosity. He stepped forward into the middle of the pavement, hands politely folded in front of him, with a smile both polished and oily.

Late forties or early fifties, with a face like a happy little pet rat. Big blinking eyes, hair a mess of wispy tufts. Short and portly and very comfortable in his rumpled suit and sensible coat. Empty hands, no bag, just himself.

Felicity nearly shot him. Only my hand on her arm stopped her from drawing her sawn-off and blowing him off his feet.

"No, no, it's okay," I hissed as we approached. But my own eyes went wide, flicking back and forth to make sure he was alone. "I know who this is, but I don't know why he's here."

"Who?" Felicity was hissing. "Who!?"

"Good morning!" the man called with terribly exaggerated politeness as we walked up to him. "Good morning, all."

"Praem?" I snapped.

"Alone," Praem said.

"Yes, I can't see anybody. No servitors either."

"Good morning," the man repeated. "Miss Morell, the younger Miss Saye. And I'm afraid I don't have the pleasure of knowing your name, Miss," he added to Felicity, completely unfazed by her burn scars. "And yes, I am alone. By myself. Completely unaccompanied. I do have a mobile phone, so I am not without certain recourse, but, well, you could always take that from me." He smiled, still oily but a little strained.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked him.

Praem suggested, "Skulking."

“Ah, well.” He cleared his throat. “I didn’t want to step onto the property without permission. I understand these are very strained times and I am not a normal visitor. My intent was to wait out here until I was spotted, with some hope to be engaged in conversation by somebody from within. I was prepared to wait quite some time if necessary. But this is lucky, as you young ladies were just returning —”

“Stop talking,” Felicity muttered. “Heather, who is this?”

The portly be-suited man stuck out one dry and smooth hand; he did an admirable job of pretending he wasn’t quivering. His smile oozed with another pint of oil.

“Harold Yuleson, lawyer. Very pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m here to represent my client, Mister Edward Lilburne. He wishes to re-open negotiations. May I come in?”

sediment in the soul – 19.10

“Surrender?”

Evelyn made that word sound like frozen granite struck by lead shot, echoing down the length of the kitchen table.

In the brief silence which followed one could have heard the whisper of a mouse. The air was filled with milky grey morning light, flooding in through the kitchen window, picking out the thin steam rising from the milky brown tea which sat before Harold Yuleson. I could hear the bob of his throat, the distant creaks and tiny pops of the house settling and adjusting around us, and the slow furnace-crackle of my own bioreactor deep in my abdomen.

Raine broke the silence with a click of her tongue. I followed by resuming the process of noisily tearing into a lemon-rind in mid-air with my tentacles. Zheng let out a low, dangerous, feline rumble.

Harold Yuleson cleared his throat softly and took a polite sip of his tea before he continued speaking. The tea shook as he placed it back down on the tabletop.

“Yes,” he repeated with an oily, pained, apologetic smile. The sunlight picked through the tufty grey hair on either side of his head as he nodded. “Cease fire or surrender. Those are the exact terms my client used.” He glanced at all our faces as he spoke, at the very crowded kitchen of Number 12 Barnslow Drive — but his eyes started and finished their circuit with Evee, opposite him at the far end of the table, in all her early-morning grumpy glory. He continued, “The wording is only a means to an end. In a broader sense, he simply wishes to bring recent hostilities to a close, as soon as possible, whatever the—”

Raine snorted, lounging against the wall in her leather jacket, arms folded, looking like some random tough in a 1950s movie. “Yeah, I’ll bet. Old fart really wants this to be over, huh? We really kicked his arse the other day, didn’t we?” Raine waited half a beat, as if she was done talking, just long enough for Yuleson to smile and open his mouth again — then she quickly unfolded her arms and slapped the wall behind her — slam! — and laughed. Yuleson

flinched like a hamster before a wolf. “Fucking slapped his shit!”

“Raine,” I tutted. I knew she was filling in for Twil’s aggression, but it was hardly necessary.

Yuleson carried on as smoothly as he could, raising his hands in a delicate little shrug. “I am not privy to the details of the encounter which happened yesterday, but from the attitude of my client—”

“We saw through his bluff,” Evelyn growled, inexorable as a grinding tectonic plate. “We killed his creatures. We captured his scout. And we sent him a bomb.”

Yuleson smiled — I had not known it was possible to express such pain in a smile. “While of course I will not relate any of this to any mundane authorities — please, Miss Saye, you do not have to divulge anything to me. If you do, I am bound by professionalism and, well, by my fees, to relate information back to my client and —”

“We beat him,” Felicity added, tired-eyed and hunched forward in her own chair, slowly sipping from her awful chocolate drink. “Where the hell does a mage get off on having a lawyer, anyway? I never had a lawyer.”

Yuleson nodded politely to Felicity. “There are times in any life when one may require legal services. Even a supernatural life. Especially, I would argue.”

Felicity stared, dead-eyed and dead tired. Yuleson withered like a wrinkly balloon. “You’re not what you appear to be,” she said. “This is a trick. It’s bullshit.”

Yuleson said, “I assure you. I am exactly what I appear to be. I am here on behalf of my client, I am—”

Kimberly spoke over him. “Fliss, Evee, we’ve tested him, haven’t we? We did test him, didn’t we?”

Even mousey little Kim felt safe and secure enough to speak over the lawyer, when surrounded and backed up by the rest of us. Part of me liked that. Part of me wanted to reach over and pat her on the shoulder with a tentacle — but that would make her jump. I settled for tearing lemon rind more loudly.

Felicity patted her on the shoulder instead. “More than one type of trick, Kim.”

“Of course it’s bullshit,” Evelyn grumbled. “Surrender? We won. We’re on the front foot. We are twenty-four to forty-eight hours away from finding where he hides and putting his head on a spike. And no, that’s not a metaphor. I’m going to let Zheng there pull his head off. Maybe I’ll let her pull yours off, too.”

Zheng rumbled like a distant landslide. She was standing not three feet from Yuleson’s left, looming over him, a final safeguard in case we’d missed anything. She watched him with a strange, detached amusement, like a cat with bleeding prey. He wasn’t even a threat, he was nothing.

“You do not *let* me do anything, wizard,” Zheng said. But she was grinning at that suggestion.

Yuleson smiled through his teeth, addressing Evelyn. “Again, please, extraneous details may make me accessory to—”

“Surrender?” Evelyn spat. “This is an insult. You are an insult. He’s insulting us.”

Yuleson swallowed. He looked like he needed the toilet. “I am a solicitor. I am here because I am paid to be here. I intend no insult and—”

“Why the hell would he expect us to surrender?” Evelyn hissed.

Yuleson froze. He blinked twice, nodded, then laughed softly — the laugh of a man who had just realised he’s forgotten the punchline of his own joke. “Ahhh, um. Oh. Ahem-ahem.” He actually said the ‘ahems’ out loud, then took another deep sip of rapidly cooling tea. He placed the tea back down and nodded politely toward Praem, who was standing a couple of feet from Evelyn’s right arm, in her habitual place. “Very good tea, thank you, Miss Saye. Oh, my, that is a little confusing, isn’t it? We have two Miss Sayes in the room: the elder and the younger. May I ask what brand of tea this is? I assumed I would be served some good old PG Tips pyramid bags. My favourite. But I can taste the quality here. Have you gotten something shipped up from Harrods?”

“PG Tips,” said Praem. “You are welcome.”

“A joke. Surely?”

“PG Tips.”

“Well!” Yuleson declared. “You have worked miracles with it. I am

stunned, I—”

“Hey, buddy,” Raine said. “Get on with it. Stop stalling, hey? We’ve got orgies to have and mages to kill. You know how it is, being young.”

Yuleson cleared his throat again and favoured Raine with an even more pained smile than before, as if embarrassed by his own tomfoolery.

“I do apologise,” he said. “As you young ladies can all probably tell, I am more than a little frightened to be sitting here.” His eyes flickered nervously to the semi-skinned lemon I was peeling with my tentacles; to his sight the fruit was hovering in mid-air, with the skin slowly tearing from the flesh. Then he glanced at Zheng, glowering down at him like a pyroclastic flow. “I did not assume I would actually be invited indoors. The gauntlet of ... curious examinations has me a little rattled. This is a very fraught situation and a very delicate matter and I appear to have ... ” He paused, took a deep breath, and fanned himself with one wrinkled, soft-fingered hand. No rings, I noted. He wore a wristwatch, a traditional one with an analogue dial and a leather strap. “I appear to have gravely misspoken. My client, Edward Lilburne, is not demanding or expecting your surrender. He is offering his own — if that is what it takes.”

Nobody said anything for a second. Then Raine let out a low chuckle. Evelyn sighed and ran one hand over her face. Felicity frowned as if over a game of chess gone wrong. Kimberly looked blank and out of her depth. Zheng rumbled a throaty noise which sounded like, “Coward.” I tutted and finished peeling my lemon, then flung the empty rind down on the plate on the table; part of me wanted to throw it at Yuleson, but that would have been childish, and also gotten fragments of lemon pith all over the floor. Praem would not have approved.

Yuleson still flinched though. He stared at me for a second as I bit into the lemon. I stared back.

I desperately wanted to sit down; I still ached all over with dozens of tiny bruises, my joints felt raw and rough, and my gums hurt. But I stood next to Raine and stared at the lawyer, eating my lemon raw.

“No,” said Lozzie. She shook her head. “No. No. Triple no. Quad

no.”

I had a tentacle wrapped around her front, a sort of semi-remote hug. I squeezed and she squeezed back.

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Harold Yuleson — Edward Lilburne’s personal solicitor and diplomatic negotiator — must have felt very overdressed compared to the rest of us, crammed into the kitchen for this ridiculous meeting. Except for myself, Praem, and Felicity, everybody else was still in various states of bleary-eyed, pajama-wearing, post-sleep grumpiness. Evelyn had been roused straight from bed, wrapped in a dressing gown and a pair of slippers. Raine looked like an extra from a movie about a lesbian gym, in tank-top and shorts and bristling with well-toned muscle, leather jacket draped over her shoulders for effect. Zheng wasn’t much better — long ragged t-shirt and nothing else; to Yuleson’s credit he hadn’t boggled, commented, or stared at Zheng’s semi-nudity, only at her bared teeth and tendency to loom. Kimberly was thick-eyed and covered in unicorns. Sevens and Aym were nowhere to be found, but I trusted they were observing.

Lozzie was wearing pajamas too, with her poncho over the top. She sat between Evelyn and where I was standing, flanked and protected. We couldn’t have made our statement clearer if we’d tried.

Lozzie had insisted on being present for this conversation. I didn’t blame her, but I knew she was hurting.

Getting Harold Yuleson indoors had been quite the operation; it had involved no less than three magic circles, a carefully deployed spider-servitor, Felicity’s tattooed right arm, and a full-on physical pat-down and search by Raine. She had turned out his pockets, gone through his wallet, and even taken the battery out of his mobile phone. Zheng had sniffed him; Evelyn had peered at him through the modified 3D glasses while he’d been forced to stand in the middle of a magic circle, then another, then another. Raine had held a gun to his head through the whole process. Felicity had grabbed his throat for twenty seconds. Yuleson had endured the process looking like a pig who knew he was inches from the butcher’s blade, occasionally mopping his brow with a handkerchief — though only after the handkerchief had also passed inspection.

“No tricks, no traps, no treachery,” he had said — though his mouth had stayed very shut until the gun was lowered. “I swear on my professional honour, on my good name, and by the little card in my wallet — yes, that’s the one! That’s my partner. I am married, yes. Yes, I am also hoping to manipulate you into not killing me. People do know where I am, where I have gone today; mundane people, ordinary people at my offices, at my little firm, who know nothing of magic and will ask questions if I happen to go missing. I haven’t even brought my briefcase, lest it be assumed I was hiding anything distasteful inside. I am not carrying a bomb into your lovely house, I am doing my job and—”

“He’s clean,” Evelyn had spat. “Shut him up. Put him in the kitchen. Edward should have sent you with a bomb, it would make more fucking sense.”

Raine had been tasked with calling Nicole in the hospital and Twil at home, just in case this was a distraction to tie us up while Edward hit us elsewhere. But nothing was happening, everywhere was quiet.

“Twil wants in,” Raine had reported to Eevee.

“Tell her to fucking stay put!” Eevee had spat. “Nobody moves, nobody goes down to the fucking corner shop until I say!”

“Yes,” Praem added. “Strawberry?”

“I don’t mean you. Poor example. Yes, sorry. Fine. You had a perfect right to go for a walk — but not now.”

“Strawberry?”

Evelyn had sighed. “Fine. Yes. Thank you.”

During all the fuss and rushing about, I had concerned myself with making sure Tenny understood what was going on. Poor thing was still shaken after yesterday, huddled down in bed with tired eyes, wrapped in her own tentacles, like I might do when feeling awful. But I had explained what was happening; it was important she knew.

“Peace talks,” she trilled at me. “Good?”

“Sort of. Maybe. We’ve already won, I think, but peace talks are good too. You don’t have to be there though, Tenny. You stay up here and go back to sleep. Or play a game with Lozzie? Or pet

Marmite for now? He's sleeping too, I guess."

"I'm coming down," Lozzie said, kicking off the covers and diving into her poncho. Then she planted a big kiss on Tenny's forehead. "Love you, Tenny. Stay-stay! Back soon, okay?"

"Kaaaaay," Tenny trilled. She'd gone over to Marmite and linked tentacles with his sleepy-spider limbs.

Lozzie hadn't given me time to argue, not in front of Tenny. And she had just as much right to be there as any of us. More, in fact.

She had sat and listened to Yuleson's pitch, in silence, as had we all.

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"No," Lozzie repeated, biting her lower lip.

"Yeah, mate," Raine agreed. "Eddy's gonna surrender? My arse. You tried this same song and dance with us before. Almost to the letter. Come on."

Yuleson lit up. "Last time we met, my client was a reluctant bystander to a conflict he had no part in. This time is different. He is in open conflict with your group here. We all acknowledge that reality. A ceasefire or surrender is entirely appropriate."

"No," said Lozzie — more forceful, with a little frown creasing her forehead.

Yuleson smiled his oily little smile again, the one that didn't reach his eyes but did communicate great pain, like a small rodent attempting to bargain with a big lizard. He put his hands together as if praying and looked directly at Lozzie.

"I do not believe I have had the pleasure of meeting several of the young ladies in this room, but I do believe that I am speaking with Miss Lauren Lilburne. Is that correct? Very pleased to finally meet you, Miss."

"Lozzie!" chirped Lozzie.

"Oh! Do forgive me. I've met several Laurens who go by 'Loz' informally, but never a 'Lozzie'. Delightful." He made several awkward little clearing motions with his throat, 'mmmhmm', 'mm', and even an 'mmm?' "Now, if I may—"

Evelyn said, low and dark, "You are talking to me. Not her."

Yuleson reacted as if stung. Both hands went up, index fingers extended, pleading for his moment. Evelyn sighed. I wrapped another tentacle around Lozzie's shoulders and chewed my lemon flesh with increasing agitation. Zheng growled — which made Yuleson flinch again.

“May I?” Yuleson said, dry mouthed and quivering. “May I continue, please? I would like to remind everybody that I am not my client. I am not Mister Edward Lilburne. I am trying to open and continue negotiations. Aggression towards me is very understandable, but it really serves no purpose. Please, everyone, if we could just talk?”

Raine said, “You took his money, didn't you? You're his little creature.”

Yuleson turned a rather odd look on her, politely peeved. “Of course I accepted his money. I'm not made of stone. I can see the way the cookie crumbles.”

“How much?” Felicity asked in her usual mumble. “How much this mage pay you to come do this meeting?”

Yuleson wet his lips and coughed into one hand, his smile turning amused, as if Felicity was a rookie player at a game he knew inside out. “I am very sorry, Miss, but I only divulge my financial transactions to Inland Revenue. And I do divulge all my financial transactions to Inland Revenue. I dot my I's and cross my T's. The Tax Man is far more frightening than any, ahem, magician.” He coughed again and said very quickly, “One hundred thousand pounds.”

Raine let out a low whistle. Kimberly gaped. Felicity just tutted. I blinked several times; that was a staggering amount of money. Lozzie looked oddly sad. Evelyn just stared, unimpressed and unmoved.

“My brief,” Yuleson went on, “as I have explained twice now, is to negotiate a ceasefire or surrender.”

Stony looks all round.

“But!” Yuleson added with a raised finger. “While I am here, in the interests of a ... durable ceasefire, perhaps it would be best to clear up certain matters of ... interest, to my client. Matters which may avoid further conflict if properly and fully resolved.” He smiled and

gestured as he spoke, struggling to find the right words. But he didn't seem to be making it up as he went along. Sweat was beading on his brow again. He dabbed at himself with his handkerchief.

Evelyn started to say, "You've been sent to distract and—"

But Lozzie interrupted with a curious little chirp, po-faced and blinking. "Mister lawyer maaaaaan, what were you going to ask me?"

Yuleson put his hands together as if pleading. He smiled, plump and healthy and wrinkly. "Lozzie. May I call you that, or is that only for friends?"

"Lozzie's Lozzie," said Lozzie.

"Very well. Lozzie. I need you to tell me the truth. To the best of your recollection, are you over eighteen? Are you an adult?"

"Mmmhmm!" Lozzie nodded.

Yuleson glanced around at our faces, seeking confirmation. "She is," I said, licking lemon juice off my lips. Zheng rumbled in some kind of disapproval. Raine shrugged and added, "Far as anybody knows." Kim said, "I don't think that's anybody's business but Lozzie's."

Yuleson sighed and smiled with relief. "Good, good, that is good news. Now, Lozzie, do you have a birth certificate, or a driver's license, or a passport? Even a young person's rail-card, or any other kind of official identification ... no?" Yuleson winced as Lozzie shook her head.

"Off the grid!" Lozzie chirped.

Felicity said, "Smart move. Smart girl."

Evelyn glared sideways at her, but Felicity must have missed the look, because she didn't wilt.

"Ah," said Yuleson, his relief turning to polite fear. "You think I am trying to pull a fast one, or trick you, or hand off identification to my client. I am not, I am—"

Evelyn grumbled, "What the hell does Lozzie's age have to do with anything? Explain."

Yuleson looked genuinely pained. He sighed and grimaced, a particularly horrible kind of smile. "My client is ... has been for

quite some time ... he wishes for—”

“He wants Lozzie,” I said, tightening my tentacle around her shoulders. “We know.”

“Yes,” Yuleson sighed, as if this was a shameful admission. “He is obsessed with taking legal custody of his niece.” He put up both hands. “I know, I know, I am his lawyer, I am on retainer, but I have done everything in my power to discourage the man from this course of action. If I could present him with proof — legal, official proof — that Lozzie here is a legal adult, I do believe it would go a long way to diverting this particular obsession. If a passport or birth certificate does happen to ‘turn up’ — he actually did the air-quotes with his fingers — ‘please contact me. Please.’”

A long moment of silence filled the kitchen. I bit into my lemon again, juice messy on one hand. Yuleson winced at the sound.

“Nice try,” said Raine.

Yuleson flapped both hands, making no effort to hide his deep personal discomfort.

“He won’t surrender,” said Lozzie. “S’not what he does! He keeps going and going and going. No.”

Yuleson pulled a helpless smile. “I see you are familiar with him, yes.”

“I agree,” Evelyn grunted. “What is he offering, exactly? Surrender, really? He must think we’re all blithering idiots to believe that for one second.”

Zheng grunted, “Wizards make difficult prey.”

“Quite,” Evelyn said. “Go on then, what is he offering? Unconditional surrender? Give up the book, fuck off away from Sharrowford forever, give up any claim to Lozzie?”

“Yeeeeeah,” went Raine, slowly. “How much authority has he actually delegated to you, mate?”

Yuleson wet his lips. “He will hand over the book, yes. I am not personally familiar with the title, but ‘the book’ was a matter of discussion and he is willing to hand it over. He will forfeit any rights over his niece — though privately I believe he will continue to pursue her via extra-legal means.”

“Ha!” Evelyn spat. “Extra-legal means.”

Raine purred, “Talk dirty to me more.”

Lozzie was shaking softly in her chair. I stepped forward and used my free hand to smooth her hair back from her forehead. “I’m here,” I whispered. “We’re all here.”

Yuleson continued. “He does not wish to leave the Sharrowford area or give up his home. He wishes to remain in his house, unmolested, and return to a quiet life.”

“You know,” Raine said, tilting her head up to frown at the ceiling. “I seem to recall that Eddy really likes to send letters. Why are you not a letter?”

Yuleson laughed awkwardly. “A letter cannot negotiate terms.”

Felicity said, “What’s to stop Evelyn accepting the book, but then going after him anyway? That’s what I’d do.”

“He spoke about a magical solution to that problem,” Yuleson said. “But as I am not a mage personally, I am not privy to the details. We would need to initiate contact, get a dialogue going, figure out the methodology. I can always draw up a legally binding contract, of course, but—”

“Bullshit,” Evelyn spat. “He’s stalling. Buying time to get his walls back up.”

Raine nodded slowly. “It’s his only move after getting fucked.”

Felicity was shaking her head. “This is weird.”

“This entire meeting is stalling,” Evelyn spat. She jabbed her maimed hand toward him, missing fingers on full display. “You are a stalling tactic.”

“Oh, yes,” Yuleson said, bright and open. “Probably.”

We all boggled at him. Even Zheng frowned in a way that was more curious than aggressive. Evelyn squinted as if the lawyer had gone mad.

Yuleson spread his hands and glanced around at us with an expression which was extremely polite but managed to imply we were all very stupid. “I did say, I’m not made of stone, I’m not insensible to what’s happening here. My client is not in the room

with us, so I think I can speak frankly. I'm a solicitor, not a moron. I'm well aware that I've been sent to open negotiations as a stalling tactic. I don't wish to pretend otherwise. I thought that was obvious. Without saying. I assumed ... well, perhaps I have assumed too much."

Eventually, Raine blew out a long breath. "How many layers of dissembling are you on, mate?"

"Several," Yuleson answered without missing a beat. "But that is the truth. I'm not lying to you people about anything. You terrify me far too much to do that."

"Then why did you accept Eddy's money?"

Yuleson frowned at her again, peeved. "Because you people are probably going to kill him."

"Huh," Zheng grunted. "The worm talks sense."

"Good," Lizzie whispered.

"Ladies, please," Yuleson said. "Allow me to place all my cards on the table, face up, so we understand each other. I took the frankly absurd fee for this job because — well, partly because I desperately need the business. But more importantly, because you people are probably going to kill my client. Mister Lilburne is a long-term client of my little firm, he pays me a lot of money and has done so for years. That pays salaries, keeps people in their jobs. You are about to take that away — perhaps justifiably, yes." He raised a placating hand. "I wouldn't know. I prefer not to know. I realise, yes, this is all stalling, we all know this is stalling. If you would prefer, then I can sit here and drink your delicious tea for an hour, we could discuss any other subject you like, and then I could leave, job done. You could even rough me up a bit to make it seem authentic." He laughed awkwardly. "Though I would request no injuries, please. I am not a young man. However, it is my private belief that my client genuinely does want a cessation of hostilities."

Raine was laughing. "Why risk it, hey? Why risk coming to meet us, if you think we're all that murderous?"

"Ahhh. Hmmm. Mmm. Professionalism?" Yuleson grimaced again, that particular pained look which reached his eyes. "I don't genuinely think you fine young people are going to summarily murder me. In the end, I am only a messenger."

Evelyn spoke, low and serious. "Why do you believe he wants this to end?"

"Honestly? Frank and open answer, and strictly off the record? I've never heard him like this before. Ah!" Yuleson raised his hands. "To be clear, I did not have a personal, face-to-face meeting with my client. We had a phone conversation. And he goes through this rather lengthy process of calling a mobile number, and then I have to call back, get a temporary number, call that number, talk to one of his people, and only then do I get to speak with Edward himself." He laughed, but nobody else did. "He's very careful. So I can't give you any phone numbers. And using me to trace him somehow, that won't work either." Yuleson flashed that nervous smile again, oily and too-friendly, then glanced directly at me and quickly away again.

"He told you I can do that?" I said, shocked. "He said that?"

Yuleson adjusted the front of his suit jacket. "Yes. He said that if the subject comes up, I should explain that I am useless. Ha ha!" He said the laugh out loud. "Useless as a magical crowbar, as it were. Not as a solicitor. One hopes." He clapped his soft and clammy hands together, gently, twice. "As I was saying, my client was ... terrified. He seemed that way to me. He spoke specifically about an attempt to find his house, last night. He is aware that you sent somebody to go looking, after the altercation—"

"Eddy boy tried to murder us all," Raine said, cracking a dangerous little grin. She nodded to Zheng. "My large and beautiful friend there just couldn't hold herself back, wanted to finish the job and find the man. You wanna tell her to stop?"

Yuleson looked up at Zheng. Zheng looked down at Yuleson, then grinned wide, like a shark showing all her teeth.

I sighed, rolled my eyes, and said, "You do know that intimidating the lawyer is vastly unnecessary?"

"T-that is well within your rights, Miss," Yuleson stammered to Zheng. Sweat broke out on his forehead, but he did maintain eye contact, which was an impressive feat. "I am not telling you to stop anything. I have no power or recourse over you, legal or otherwise. In fact, I'm not even certain who you are. Why, I don't recall you being present at this meeting. Not at all."

“Clever worm,” Zheng purred.

Felicity sat up straighter in her chair and placed her empty bottle of chocolate gloop on the table. “What’s it like, being a lawyer in the know?”

Yuleson seemed deeply relieved to be asked a question that required him to transfer his attention away from Zheng. “I simply try not to involve myself in the details. It is much like being a criminal lawyer without being a criminal oneself.”

Raine snorted. “To hear Nicole tell it, you are a criminal.”

Yuleson only smiled at that.

Zheng said, “This worm is no mage.”

“Quite!” Yuleson agreed with gusto.

Felicity pressed on, eyes harder than I’d ever seen before. “Is Edward Lilburne your only client in the know?”

“I would prefer not to divulge that information. That would be a gross breach of client privacy.”

Raine laughed. “Come on, mate. You’ve been in breach of privacy this whole time. You’ve been feeding us Eddy’s shit. You think I don’t smell it?”

Yuleson’s oily smile dripped back. Bushy eyebrows came together in a peevish frown, as if the top and bottom halves of his face were in disagreement. “Miss, I am a consummate and skilled liar. If I was lying to you, you would not be aware of it. Please, do not insinuate or use innuendo. Say plainly what you are thinking. This is an open negotiation.”

Raine pushed off from the wall and sauntered over to the table. She pulled a chair out for herself, slowly, letting it scrape on the kitchen flagstones, eyes locked with Yuleson the entire time. She sat down, also slowly, and somehow managed to loom over the lawyer despite lowering herself to his level.

On one hand, seeing Raine pull out all the stops was unspeakably sexy. If she had approached me like that, like a snake hunting a mouse, I would have melted into a stammering puddle.

On the other hand, I sighed and said: “Raine, for pity’s sake. We don’t actually need to intimidate the lawyer.”

Evelyn grunted, “Yes, we do.”

Raine grinned at Yuleson, and said, “It’s fun to spook him.”

Yuleson swallowed. “Glad to be a punching bag, I suppose. As long as it gets the job done.”

Raine tapped the tabletop with one fingertip. “Two possibilities. Following me so far? Can you keep up with that? Cool? Good. So, maybe you’re turning on Edward, because you think we’re gonna win, or because you can’t live with what he does, or because he’s stiffing you on pay, or kidnapped your dog. I don’t know which. Don’t really care.”

Yuleson nodded, but didn’t make an attempt to reply. He knew when to shut up and listen.

“Or,” Raine went on in a low, dangerous purr. She tapped the table again. “Or he fed you lines, to feed to us, and you’re going to report back which ones we swallowed and which ones we chucked back up. Which is it, Harry-boy? Did he really pay you just to come offer us a bullshit deal?”

Raine in leaned closer, radiating menace, violence in the set of her shoulders.

Yuleson didn’t even blink.

My tentacles rose on instinct, as if to defend Raine; Harold Yuleson, squirming rat-like lawyer, was not intimidated by her bluster. Alarm bells rang in my head. For a second I thought he was going to explode into some Outsider trap or unfold like a puzzle box or spit venom into her face. We must have missed something, some tiny magic circle, undetectable and secret and about to detonate.

But then he opened his mouth, and spoke.

“Frankly,” Yuleson began his reply, smooth and easy. “Yes. I do believe you will win your contest against my client. I am a lawyer, not a mafia thug, and I do not wish to get involved in the physical altercation. I do what I am paid to do. And I would much rather count yourselves as future clients — not as my enemies, professional or otherwise. I understand no magic. I have no interest in knowing how to do magic. I am no threat to you.”

Of course he had been intimidated by Zheng. He’d been intimidated when we had threatened violence for real. But words?

This man dealt with far more threatening people than Raine.

“A rat,” Evelyn grumbled. “Fleeing a sinking ship.”

“Smart man,” said Felicity. “No shame in that.”

“Quite!” Yuleson agreed with a smile.

“Do you know where Edward’s house is?” Raine finished.

“No. I do not. And ... ” Yuleson smiled and raised his hands. “I would prefer you not torture me in order to confirm my lack of knowledge. Torture is not worth a hundred thousand pounds.”

An awkward silence fell for a long moment. Raine leaned back, considering Yuleson with a tilt of her head. Felicity and Kimberly shared a look. Lozzie sat there, small and reduced, hugging one of my tentacles to her front. Zheng loomed, restless and quiet. Evelyn stared across the table with an expression like she’d been woken from sleep by the smell of excrement.

Yuleson spoke slowly and carefully: “If we could return to the main subject, then? Yes? A peace offer. Cease-fire, or surrender.”

Evelyn sighed heavily. Her expression darkened — and softened, brows unknitting, lips relaxing. She hunched lower, as if too exhausted to fight. Raine stared at her in subtle, unseen alarm. Praem placed a hand on her shoulder, but Evee shrugged it off. Zheng growled in recognition and disgust.

“Evelyn,” Felicity started to say. “I don’t think—”

“You shut up,” Evelyn grumbled. She never looked away from Yuleson. “Fine. Edward Lilburne can keep his life.”

Lozzie bit her lower lip and gently said, “No. Please.”

Praem agreed. “No,” her voice rang out like a little silver bell.

“Evee?” I said out loud. I could see the answer in her frame, in her exhausted eyes, in the slump of her shoulders. “Evee, we can’t make a deal. You can’t be serious, you—”

“Shhhhhh,” Evelyn hissed. “Everybody shut up and let me fucking speak. Edward Lilburne can have his life.”

“Thank you,” Yuleson said, his oily smile spreading across plumped cheeks. “I am glad we can start on a positive note. We can see sense

here, we can make—”

“‘Shut up’ includes you,” she said, dead tired and without energy. “Stop talking or I’ll have Praem strangle you with your own intestines.”

Yuleson shut his mouth. Praem looked at him.

Evelyn continued, slow and plodding. “Edward can have his life, but that’s all. I’ll let him live. But I get everything else — the house, the books, everything he has accumulated. The contents of his bank accounts. The clothes on his back. The fillings in his teeth. If he has a wife, I’ll fuck her too. He can live, but he gets nothing. Not after going for Heather. Not when he’ll keep coming for Lozzie. You crawl back to Edward Lilburne and you tell him to present himself at my front door, alone and naked and on his knees, and then I will decide what to do with him. You tell him that is Saye’s final offer.”

Harold Yuleson blew out a long breath and wiggled his eyebrows as if using them to shrug. “I don’t think my client will, uh, find those to be very favourable terms.”

Raine was laughing. “Fucking hell, Eeve. Nice.”

“Harsh,” Felicity muttered.

Lozzie actually got out of her seat, pulling my tentacle along with her as she stepped over to Eeve. She mimed an air-hug around Evelyn’s shoulders, eyes watering, sniffing softly. To my surprise, Evelyn reached up and patted Lozzie on the back in a sort of one-armed hug, staring at Yuleson the entire time. Felicity watched the exchange between Lozzie and Eeve with what I first assumed was jealousy — but then I realised it was admiration.

“Now,” Evelyn continued. “Everything we say to you will get back to Edward, I’m certain. I want to converse with my ‘associates’, in private.”

“Oh!” said Yuleson. “Of course, of course. I can step into the front room, or out of your front door, or—”

“Somebody put him in the spare sitting room. And watch him. That does mean somebody will miss the discussion.” Evelyn’s eyes flickered to Zheng, almost apologetic, but she was the natural choice. Zheng stared back. I was about to open my mouth to back up the request when a double-curve of soft yellow clicked into the

kitchen.

"I will accompany the lawyer," said Seven-Shades-of-Butterscotch-Princess.

She was wearing her Princess Mask, though with some notable alterations: the yellow skirt had tightened against her thighs slightly, and she wore a matching yellow suit jacket over her crisp white blouse. She also had a yellow clipboard in her hands, along with a yellow fountain pen. But there was nothing servile about this version of Sevens. The tilt of her chin, the cool regard of her eyes, the sensible flat shoes; her body language screamed aristocrat, dressed for personal pleasure, not for looks.

A ragged mass of lace lurked behind her, black and mangled by blunt shadows.

Harold Yuleson reacted like a royalist who had walked in on the Queen.

"Yes!" he said, bowing and nodding like a servant himself. "Of course, of course, at once. I will be right out of your hair, right out!" He drained the dregs of his tea, shot to his feet, and gestured out of the kitchen door with a questioning look at Seven-Shades-of-Not-Your-Secretary. She nodded, cool and detached. Harold Yuleson bustled out as if his feet were the wrong size.

Seven-Shades-of-Smooth-Suggestion nodded to the rest of us with a cruel kink in the corner of her lips, then turned and clicked after her captive audience. Aym — sliding out of sight like a hidden patch of black mold — followed her seemingly without moving.

A moment later we heard the sitting room door shut.

Raine burst out laughing. "I love that woman."

"You do?" I asked.

"Sure. Love you too, Heather."

"I do not love the creature of masks," Zheng rumbled. "But she is clever."

I smiled, then popped the rest of my lemon into my mouth, chewing less noisily than before. Evelyn gave me a sidelong look and said, "You can stop doing that now, Heather."

"Stop doing—" I swallowed the fruit. "Stop doing what? Sorry?"

“Being weird with the lemon. Good intimidation tactic, but very weird. Very you. Well done, but please stop now.”

I blinked. “I was only eating.”

Evelyn frowned at me, half-impressed but half-confused. Then she sighed and tapped the table for order and attention, rapping the head of her walking stick against the side. “Do we believe a single word out of that man’s mouth?”

Raine blew out a sigh and leaned back, hands behind her head. Felicity tapped one booted foot, chewing her lip. Lozzie hopped back, flapping the sides of her poncho. I licked lemon juice off my fingertips.

“Yes and no,” Raine said eventually, speaking to the ceiling. “Yuleson’s playing both sides. Doesn’t want Edward to kill him, doesn’t want us to kill him. Wants Eddy to keep paying him as long as possible. Wants us to trust him for the future.”

“Setting up the post-war order,” Evelyn grumbled. “Yes, I agree.”

“Mage with a lawyer,” Felicity mumbled. “Hard to believe.”

“Evee-weevey?” said Lozzie. “You meant what you said, yes?”

“Mm?”

“No deal! No deal! You meant it, everything you said?”

“No,” Evelyn said.

Lozzie’s eyes widened and she stopped her habitual flapping. I blinked in surprise too. Evelyn sighed. “If Edward Lilburne follows my instructions and turns up at my door with nothing but the shirt on his back, ready to hand over everything he has, I will not let him live. I will give him to Zheng so she can dispose of a mage in a safer way than a lead-lined coffin.”

“Wizard!” Zheng rumbled approval. “Yes!”

Lozzie giggled and covered her mouth with one corner of her poncho, then gave Evee another awkward but polite air-hug. “Auntie Evee best Evee!”

Evelyn huffed and tutted and waved her away.

I spoke up: “Some of what he said was the truth, I think. Maybe.”

“Yeah,” Raine agreed. “But like I said, he’s playing both sides.”

“He knew Zheng went looking for the house,” Evelyn said. She nodded to Zheng. “You came back late. I expected you’d be gone for days. I assume you didn’t find anything?”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted. “I am large but the land is larger. I go back out, today.”

“Maybe,” Evelyn said.

Zheng narrowed her eyes and flexed her hands. “Wizard?”

“Edward Lilburne is stalling,” Evelyn said. “This is a stalling tactic, so he can scramble to get his walls back up. Which I suspect will take him weeks. Are we all agreed on that?”

“I think so,” I said, but I felt deeply uncertain — and I knew where Evelyn was going with this. I tried to stand up straighter, settle my tentacles, and still the racing of my heart.

“Mm,” Raine grunted in contemplation. “But does he expect us to take the deal?”

“I would,” said Felicity. “But I’d keep working against him.”

“Exactly,” said Evelyn. “He’s stalling, but we need to stall too. We’re in a stalemate until we can locate that house, one way or the other. I hate this, I hate it with a passion,” she spat. “But we have to buy time. A day or two.”

“Ahem,” Kimberly cleared her throat gently, then withered instantly when everybody looked at her, mousy and small in her chair next to Felicity. “Um ... I’m sorry ... I just ... it is nearly eight o’clock and I need to get to work. I didn’t call in sick or anything. I need to ... ” She wet her lips and smiled awkwardly.

“Of course,” Evelyn said. “Somebody is going to have to go with her, an escort there and back.”

“I will,” said Felicity, without hesitation. “I can drive her there and pick her up later.”

“O-oh!” Kim flapped her hands. “You really don’t have to! No, I don’t mean—”

“You take the escort,” Evelyn snapped. “Stop complaining. And check in with text messages as often as you can. And somebody call

Twil again, and Nicole. Make sure they haven't been attacked while Yuleson was distracting us. We need to stay on our toes. He will try something. He will."

"Evee," Raine said. "We're stalling, then?"

"We are," I replied instead.

Everyone looked at me. I took a deep breath and drew myself up. "I'm still injured. My reactor is, um, 'off-line'. So I can't use brain-math to locate Edward's house. Not yet. It needs to heal. So, Evelyn is correct. We have to stall. I'm sorry."

Evelyn swallowed awkwardly, but she nodded along; I had spared her the embarrassment of putting me on the spot. Raine started to say something about how Zheng might find the house the old-fashioned way, how it wasn't my fault, how resting and recovering was the right thing to do. I smiled and nodded and tried to look like I was accepting all this. Felicity agreed with a mumble. Praem said, "Regroup," which was a nice word even if it wasn't accurate.

Buying time. Until I was healed.

"Maybe the letter bomb will get him," Evelyn said.

= =

We sent Harold Yuleson off with an itemised list of demands; Evelyn's extreme version was the top of the list, but we worked together to concoct something less final as well: a second bargaining position stuffed with enough points to keep Edward busy for a day or two. We demanded the book – *The Testament of Heliopolis* — but also several more books, by name, books he may or may not have even owned. I suspected Evelyn threw in a few titles which did not actually exist; she had that twinkle of devious strategy in her eye as she rattled them off and forced Yuleson to write them down.

We demanded compensation for damage to the Hopton's house, their fields, the stress inflicted on their animals and themselves, and the damage to the property of one "Mister Hring" — a stroke of creativity by Raine. That amounted to several million pounds.

We requested an official letter, signed by Edward, witnessed by his lawyer, attesting that Lauren Lilburne was over the age of majority and therefore he had no legal right to guardianship over her. Evelyn

added some magical mumbo-jumbo to that part, something about how Edward would have to submit to a proper process to ensure he kept his word.

We stipulated a full accounting of all his property, his magical library, his experiments, his knowledge. By that point I was ready to eat another lemon and take a nap, but then Raine started listing damages to *us*: stress, injuries, Nicole's broken leg. The list went on and on.

Raine and Felicity followed Yuleson to his car; he'd parked almost twenty minutes walk away.

But once he was gone, that was that. We'd taken our shot, or joined in with this facade of negotiation while both sides stalled and scrambled — Edward to rebuild his walls, us to get me back on my metaphysical feet.

There is a terrible paradox in the combination of recovery and pressure; I needed to rest, to eat, to sleep, to heal — but how could I not hurry myself?

For the rest of that day, the others treated me like a princess, or a dying swan, or a glass statue. While everybody else was watching for opportunistic attacks, I ate lemons and drowned a bowl of rice in soy sauce. I followed my cravings, stuffed my face, and felt my bioreactor throbbing deep down inside my gut, a pulled muscle slowly unfreezing itself — but far too slowly.

Lozzie needed a lot of attention. I didn't blame her, nobody did. Her uncle's attention terrified her. For the first time in quite a while, she and I napped together. We curled up in her bed, big spoon and little spoon, while Tenny played video games and solved puzzles on the other side of the room. I awoke, left her there, went downstairs to stuff another lemon down my maw, then went back and napped an hour more.

Raine doted on me, got me to sit and watch her playing one of those long-winded games with the alchemist girls and the over-large chests. Twil turned up sometime in the afternoon and spent a while talking with Evelyn, in private. I didn't have the strength to take any interest. Zheng departed for the woods again, another attempt to find Edward's house, but some instinct told me that she wouldn't have much luck.

Nobody pressured me, nobody asked me when I would be ready; I could see the question in Evelyn's eyes, but she didn't give it voice. Raine didn't allow herself even that minor slip, she was perfect, pretending it didn't even matter if I never recovered, that we would find the house some other way.

But as the day wore on and the sky cleared and the late summer evening settled over the house, I knew I had to do something.

We had a day or two at most, before Edward would probe us for real. Fake negotiations could only go on so long. Paranoid watching — Evelyn setting up new magic circles at the doors, Raine twitching the curtains — would take a toll. We were in the middle of a war. We couldn't stall forever. And Evelyn was almost as exhausted as me. She dragged herself around the house, helped by Praem, dark rings around her eyes.

As I lay on my bed, propped up on pillows and drinking extremely strong coffee despite the late hour, watching Raine make her anime lady jump around on the telly screen, I started to think clearly.

I had to get the reactor working. I had to perform the brain-math.

Raine's bare foot hooked over my leg. I reached forward and rubbed her calf muscle, though my own elbow ached with yesterday's pain.

"Three more of these slime lads and I should have the new outfit," Raine said without looking back over her shoulder. "You're gonna like that one. Comes with a hoodie."

"Oh. That's nice."

What if I could use brain-math to repair the reactor? But that was a catch-22 situation. Using brain-math would draw on the reactor. But it hadn't always been that way. Before the reactor, there was just me. But the reactor was me.

Brain-math needed something to run on — flesh or thought, or just on the air, the way I had performed it back when I'd ripped Sarika free from the Eye's grip. The reactor gave the equations more flesh to work with, more spirit to draw on, more substrate on which to blossom across reality.

"Do you think the shorts are a good choice?" Raine asked.

"Mm. Mm, yes."

I couldn't self-sacrifice, just go all-out and hurt myself to get the task done. I was not allowed to hurt myself, not anymore. That had been made clear to me. That road was closed, wiped off the maps, and dynamited.

But maybe brain-math could repair the reactor, speed up my healing processes, improve my understanding of my own flesh.

Brain-math could do anything, if only I could endure the pain, the alien violation. If only I understood it better. If only I wasn't groping around in the dark.

"Red shorts, or white shorts? Heather? Earth to space cadet Heather, woooo?"

But I had nobody from whom to learn. In the end, the only entity who understood brain-math was the Eye. And I couldn't ask the Eye how to fix my reactor faster.

Or could I?

"Heather?"

"White shorts," I murmured, then stirred on the bed and started to get up. "You go unlock that outfit, Raine. Show me in a bit. I'm going to talk to Kimberly for a minute."

"Oho." Raine grinned. "Gonna interrupt her thing with Fliss? They've been alone since Kim got home from work."

"Unintentional side-effect," I said, forcing a smile. I didn't want to make Raine worry; I was not going to flirt with self-sacrifice. "I had a thought about ... magic. I need to ask her to clarify something. That's all. I just want her perspective."

Technically, that wasn't a lie.

sediment in the soul – 19.11

I left Raine safely behind in our bedroom, with her bouncy video game girls and a kiss on the cheek — plus one on the forehead for me — and departed from the realms of relative normalcy to go talk to a mage about magic and madness.

A pang of guilt needled my heart as I stepped out into the upstairs corridor; not for leaving Raine behind, but for what I was about to do to Kimberly.

Or perhaps that was just the aching bruises of my intercostal muscles.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive felt very much like a cocoon that day, even more so than usual. A safe outer wrapping of brick and mortar and plaster and roof tile and clinging ivy and glass and paint, coiled around my spongy, tender, vulnerable flesh, as if I was a tiny mutualist creature — not a parasite — buried deep within the body of some unknowable leviathan, with armour plates and hard tusks and an appetite for plankton, with big slow thoughts concerned with forces far beyond my scale of comprehension. That impression was only heightened as I crept down the corridor; the long dim artery was lit by overspill from several different bedrooms, and by the dying red sunlight on the distant horizon beyond the city. Perhaps we would be blessed with rain that night, to wash away the thinning clouds and let the house drink deep. I paused at the window and stared out at the gathering dark, then opened the latch and cracked the window by a couple of inches, following some animal impulse to smell the wind. The sun-warmed concrete and city-heat hydrocarbons of Sharrowford were not quite able to blot out the scent of bark and leaf and earth and insect.

Then I sighed, closed the window again, and told myself off: “Stop stalling, Heather,” I whispered.

Nobody was around to hear my confused guilt. Everybody else was doing their own thing that evening, in various poses of recovery. Evelyn and Twil were together in Evee’s bedroom, which surprised me as I passed by the almost-closed door: they were watching cartoons on Evee’s laptop, just as she and I had done previously,

though I don't think Twil was allowed to snuggle quite so close. Evelyn was exhausted, she deserved whatever comfort she wanted. I had no idea where Praem was, but I suspected she was downstairs with Lozzie and Tenny, doing some inscrutable art project that Tenny had taken an interest in, something to do with play-doh and food dye. Zheng was out hunting, north of Sharrowford again, with or without my semi-reluctant blessing. Sevens and Aym were hiding somewhere beyond human concern.

And Kimberly was in her bedroom, talking with Felicity.

I heard the soft murmur of their voices on the edge of my senses as I crept down the corridor, toward the little T-junction in the rear of the house, plunging deeper into the gloom; and then I forced myself to stop creeping and walk normally. I wasn't doing anything wrong. I wasn't trying to sneak up on them and I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. I raised my chin — ow, my aching neck and shoulder muscles complained — took a deep breath, and smartened my stride. Let her know I was coming, there was no shame in this.

But then, just as I rounded the corner:

“—light of the sun and flower of the air, how can I dare presume to possess thee?” said Kimberly. Her voice was oddly formal — confident? More confident than I had ever heard before.

Then came a click of parting lips, followed by the gentle motion of a tongue on dry flesh, and a slow intake of breath. Felicity gave a reply, careful and measured: “But I have already given myself to you, you gardener of my heart, you—”

If only I had kept creeping.

I could have clamped my hands over my ears and backed away. But I had committed; in my stupid guilt I was almost *stomping*. There was no turning back now.

Kimberly's bedroom door wasn't even closed — it was open by just a crack, an inch or two, showing the twinned glow from bedside lamp and computer screen, a heady cocktail of soft orange and artificial sky-blue. If the door had been sensibly shut then maybe this moment could have been salvaged, maybe I still could have turned away, maybe I could have left them to it and gone to Evee or Lozzie instead, though neither of them could understand what I needed as much as I suspected Kimberly would.

Unspoken guilt already gnawed at my chest; I knew what I needed to do, but I couldn't approach it directly, not by myself. I needed help, from somebody who might understand what it felt like. I was going to use Kimberly to help bring me around, from whatever angle she could present.

She'd been at work all day, she'd done so much for us yesterday; didn't she deserve whatever romance she was playing with Felicity? Yes, she did, but in my stupid guilt I was stomping up to her door to interrupt. It wasn't even closed!

So *stomp stomp stomp* I went, blushing and burning and praying that they would hear me coming, because I did not want to surprise them in the middle of an act I had no desire to witness.

I reached the door.

“—sower of my seed—”

Cleared my throat.

“—owner of my fertile earth—”

And knocked. Three times. Hand shaking. Teeth gritted. Tentacles coiled like springs and aching like pulled muscles.

Felicity's voice cut out with a little clearing of the throat. Something metallic squeaked — a chair? There was no rustle of clothes or bedsheets, no hurried departure of one body from atop another, no parting of hands or whisper of lips. Just a squeak.

“ ... y-yes?” Kimberly called a moment later. “Hello?”

“Um, yes, hello.” I spoke to the door, in the dark. “It's me. Hello. I don't want to interrupt, um ... ”

“Heather? You can come in. The door isn't even closed.”

I whispered to myself, burning hot with second-hand embarrassment. “Maybe it should be! Oh God, okay, fine.”

I pushed the door open, rooted to the spot, every muscle tight with a kind of fear that is sometimes even worse than the worst of magical monsters and supernatural terrors. My tentacles bunched up as if to protect my core of flesh from sudden attack.

Two very confused faces peered back at me.

“Oh,” I said.

Kimberly was sitting at her computer, headphones around her neck, distinctively unrumpled, not looking at all like a woman who had just been delivering or receiving some of the cheesiest romantic lines I’d ever heard. The computer screen showed a video game of some sort: a box of text at the bottom, with an illustration of a melancholic anime girl in the middle — an anime girl who looked a little bit like an anthropomorphic sunflower, backlit by blazing sunshine amid a cartoon countryside. Felicity was sitting well beyond arm’s reach, all the way over on Kimberly’s pastel bed, feet planted on the floor, bent forward so she could see the screen as well. Both of them were fully dressed — and not in each other’s clothes. Kimberly was in her usual post-work comfy pajamas, complete with a picture of a yodelling dwarf on her t-shirt; Felicity looked positively fluffy in a big grey ribbed sweater, having shed her coat and boots. She still looked utterly exhausted, with deep dark eye-bags and a painful lethargy to her bent musculature. Without her coat she seemed a bit like a hermit crab caught without a shell.

“ ... oh?” Kimberly echoed.

Felicity blinked. “Ah,” she said in her habitual mumble. “I think Heather overheard us.”

Kimberly looked baffled. “Over ... heard? O-oh!” She suddenly blushed, going beetroot red up to her ears, hurrying to hit the escape button on her keyboard. A pause menu jumped onto the screen, hiding the sad-looking sunflower-girl. Kimberly gestured toward Felicity with both hands, then toward me, lips moving but no sound coming out.

Felicity said, “Kim, it’s okay. It’s nothing.” She said to me: “We were reading a visual novel together. Doing the voices, the dialogue.” She gestured at the pause menu on the screen. “It’s a very romantic scene.”

Kimberly looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole and die. She stared at a point down by the skirting board.

I stood there frozen for a second, utterly bewildered. What was a visual novel? What did it have to do with sunflower girls? I didn’t need to know that, but I didn’t want to make Kimberly any more uncomfortable than I already had.

“Oh!” I said, forcing a smile. “Oh. Well. I mean, if it hadn’t been, that would be okay too. I mean, it’s none of my business. I-I wasn’t knocking because I overheard. Not that I did— not that I meant to, I mean. I mean— it sounded. Nice dialogue. Yes. What’s it ... called?”

Well done, Heather. Great save. Raine would be in stitches.

Felicity said, “I can’t pronounce it. Kim?”

Kimberly’s eyes found mine. She just stared for a moment, mortified and trapped. Then her lips moved while the rest of her face stayed paralysed. “*Megami no niwa no shokubutsu musume.*”

“Yeah, that,” Felicity said. She was watching Kimberly’s embarrassment without pleasure, but with a kind of intense focus, hoping Kimberly would look at her to seek refuge. She went on suddenly, “It’s really good stuff. I’m not really one for this kind of literature, but it’s really really good, especially when somebody who really loves it is introducing me to it. We’re halfway through the second route already.”

Kimberly looked like she was going to pass out.

“That’s lovely,” I said, with no idea what I was complimenting exactly. “Is this a favourite of yours, Kim?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Please stop.”

Felicity said, with more force than I expected, “There’s nothing wrong with enjoying literature.”

“Quite!” I agreed. That much I did understand. I cleared my throat. “I am really sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I genuinely just wanted to come and ask you about something — something totally unrelated to reciting dialogue from video games about plant ladies.”

Kim let out a tiny whine. Felicity shuffled closer on the bed and reached out to rub Kim’s upper back.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Felicity murmured. “It’s fine. Who cares? Kim, Heather is in a polycule with at least two different types of actual supernatural creature. She’s in a romantic relationship with a *zombie*. She’s not gonna judge you for some light furry and monster-girl stuff—”

I actually laughed, in pure shock. Both of them looked up at me, equally surprised.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m not going to judge anybody for anything. I mean, yes, Felicity, my, um ... proclivities are a little ... extreme. I suppose. So um ... plant girls?”

“It’s just the romance!” Kim whined. “I like the story! It’s really tragic and sad. There’s not even any sex scenes in it.”

“I dunno about that,” Felicity mumbled. “The bit with the watering can and the oak tree, she was enjoying—”

Kimberly turned on her, displaying a ferocity I’d not witnessed before. “It doesn’t count!”

Felicity put her hands up. “It doesn’t count.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“Doesn’t.”

I cleared my throat again; the romantic dialogue was one thing, but seeing these two bounce their reducing echoes back and forth felt like I was witnessing actual intimacy, something far more real and private. I gestured back into the corridor and said, “I’m sorry, I can go ask Eevee instead, I really didn’t want to interrupt. I’m sorry, Kim, you have a good evening now, you ... ”

But Kimberly’s embarrassment crammed itself behind a mote of curiosity, like a six-foot-wide cartoon character trying to hide behind a lamppost. She blinked at me, suddenly more interested. “Eevee? You’re going to ask something about magic?”

“Well, sort of. But I can ask Eevee. Again, sorry, I’ll go.” I even started to reach for the door handle, cringing my apology.

But Kimberly said, “Is she busy? Eevee, I mean.”

“Not really. It’s okay, I can—”

Kimberly interrupted. I wasn’t sure if she’d ever interrupted me before, other than in panic and fear. “You came to me first?”

I paused, hand on the doorknob. Was this a good thing? Kimberly deserved the confidence, but I also didn’t want to lie to her.

“Yes,” I said. “Your experiences are more relevant. Eevee’s aren’t, not really.”

Moving somewhat slow and robotic, Kimberly reached over and

turned off her computer screen. She unhooked her headphones from around her neck and turned her swivel-chair to face me, then adjusted her backside in the chair, self-consciously attentive and alert. "Please come in. Please do. I'm happy to help. I really am. Please."

I swallowed and nodded and finally stepped over the threshold, into Kimberly's grotto-like room of comfortable pastels and silly unicorn posters. Last time I'd been in here the air had held a faint scent of cannabis, but now it was clear and clean; Kimberly's personal stash was put away somewhere. The light seemed to welcome and envelop me. The curtain was drawn over the single window, shutting out the Sharrowford dusk. Tucked away in the rear of the house, the room felt especially private and secluded. I glanced over my shoulder and couldn't see the T-junction in the gloomy corridor, as if the rest of Number 12 Barnslow Drive lay far away, down a long and kinking hallway to another place.

"Heather?" Kimberly said.

I turned back and straightened up as best I could, in my pink hoodie and with my six aching tentacles. My eyeballs itched and my teeth hurt and my belly was still full of lead weight in the form of a dormant bioreactor. Kimberly was so eager, like a puppy who wanted to be useful. Pale lips parted, auburn hair swept back over her ears, so slight and snug inside her shapeless pajamas. Mousy face, open and vulnerable. I should have left her well alone, not come here to pester her with this.

Felicity was very, very still, watching us both.

"I ... I'm trying to do something," I said. "Thinking about doing something. Trying something." I sighed and slumped. "Oh, just listen to me, I can't even say it in plain language. I need your help, Kimberly, because your own experiences might be able to inform me. Or perhaps you're just the best person to bounce this off before I go ahead and do it anyway."

Kimberly nodded. "Okay. I think that's okay. What do you want to ask?"

"It's a personal question," I said. "If you're okay with that."

I flicked a glance at Felicity. She didn't even nod or look down, she just started to get up. "I'll make myself scarce," she muttered.

Kimberly put out one hand and touched Felicity on the leg to stall her departure. “No, Fliss, stay, it’s okay. You’re a mage too. Maybe you can help as well!”

I wanted to say something like *I doubt that*, but I held that rude thought behind my tongue. Felicity sat back down, visibly uncomfortable. We shared a glance of mutual apology.

I said, “Kimberly, you might actually want Felicity to leave, for this.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Go ahead, Heather. Please.”

“Well ... Kim. You were traumatised by magic. Is that fair to say?”

Kimberly’s puppy-dog enthusiasm drained away behind the mask of her face, to leave behind a frozen wasteland with only the appearance of life.

I quickly added: “This isn’t about you. This is about me. You haven’t done anything wrong, and I don’t want to dig up painful memories. I just want your perspective.” I glanced at Felicity again and found she was staring at Kimberly. “Do you want Fliss to ... ?”

Kimberly swallowed and didn’t know where to look. All her discomfort had returned, all her mousy skittish caution and wordless fear. “Um ... I don’t ... I ... ”

“I should go,” said Felicity. She pushed to her feet. This time Kimberly didn’t attempt to stop her — but she did look up with a concerned frown.

“Fliss, no. You’ll be out in your car again. Waiting. I-I don’t want you to—”

“It’s fine,” said Felicity. “I don’t mind. Evee’s house, Evee’s rules. It’s fine.”

I cleared my throat. “Felicity, go join Raine. She’s in our bedroom, playing some game about bouncy alchemist girls. Go knock on the door and tell her I sent you. I’ll come get you when I’m done with Kim. Don’t go out to your car. Be clear with Raine, tell her I sent you.”

Felicity smiled a very awkward smile, using only the un-scarred part of her lips. We all knew the rules which Evelyn had laid down for Felicity while she was here: she was allowed indoors only if

accompanied, and not to sleep. If Kimberly wanted her discussion with me to happen in private, Felicity would have to leave for a bit.

“Not sure Raine will like that,” Felicity said.

“Tell her I sent you. I mean it. She’ll do as I ask. Unless you offend her or do something stupid, so ... don’t do that.”

Another awkward Felicity smile. She nodded and padded out of the room, past me. Kimberly started to reach for her as she left, but Felicity didn’t look back. She vanished into the dark maw of the house, footsteps swallowed up by the angles of the walls.

“Sorry,” I said to Kimberly. “I’m sorry to spoil your evening.”

“No, it’s ... it’s not your fault. I just wish she ... I wish ... ”
Kimberly looked down at her hands. Her auburn hair fell in front of her face.

“Do you like her?” I asked.

Kimberly looked up and tucked her hair back, then sighed and squeezed her eyelids shut. “I don’t know. It’s complicated. She makes me feel safe. But she’s so ... closed off. Like she’s afraid I’ll see something bad.”

It was not my place to say anything about that. “I’m always willing if you want to talk about it. Or if not me, then somebody else. Raine is kind of a master at this.”

Kimberly gave me one hell of a befuddled frown.

“Well,” I added, “she seems that way to me.”

The frown got worse. “Raine?”

“She’s ... you know. Good at romance things.”

Kimberly clearly did not believe a word of that. She looked at me like I was mad. Maybe I was; maybe Raine was only any good at romancing *me*.

“The point stands,” I said. “If you need help, ask one of us. If you need help deciding what to do, or how you feel, or anything really.”

Kimberly’s frown softened into a confused and self-deprecating smile. “I suppose you’re all much more experienced than me. Which is weird, because I’m older. I’ve ... um ... I’ve never actually been

with a woman before. Only guys.”

I blinked at her, mildly surprised. She blushed and fluttered with both hands.

She continued, getting squeaky and red-faced. “It’s not like I have to google *how do two women do it*, or something. I’m not a child. I just— I feel— I’m uncertain, and— and— ah—” In a fit of terrible embarrassment, Kimberly reared her head back and sneezed into the crook of her elbow. “*Achoo!* Ahh ...”

“It’s okay, Kim. None of us really know what’s going on. None of us know what we’re doing.”

She smiled awkwardly, sniffing and snuffling. “Well, I suppose so. If you say so. Anyway, you came to ask about magic, not my problems.”

“Your problems are important too. You’re one of us.”

Kimberly nodded in the way that told me she was thankful but clearly didn’t fully believe this, and then waved me toward the bed. I sat down gingerly in the dimple left behind by Felicity; it was still warm. My tentacles ached as I spread them out over the bed, trying to relax my nerves and prepare myself for what I was about to do. Kimberly blew her nose, still snuffling.

“S-so,” she said. “Trauma.”

“You don’t actually have to talk about your own trauma,” I hurried to say. “I ... I want your perspective, on how you’ve adjusted to ... returning to magic.”

“Oh. Um.” Kimberly bit her lip. I waited, but she didn’t seem ready. This was all so new to her, of course. We had only completed the ritual yesterday, the ritual she had helped to build. The last few days of Kimberly’s life must have been an emotional whirlwind. She asked, “Why?”

I stared back at this small and mousy woman, and thought about the trust I was putting in her. Why hadn’t I gone to Evelyn, or just talked to Raine?

“Because I think you’re the only person I know who might understand,” I said slowly — and I realised I wasn’t really talking to Kimberly; I was talking to myself, beginning a long, long chain of justification which only led to one place. “I need to be better at

brain-math. Hyperdimensional mathematics.” I sighed. “The last twenty-four hours, I’ve been basically ‘out of action’. That’s how Raine phrased it earlier. My bioreactor is damaged, healing, repairing, whatever — and I can’t do brain-math. I probably can’t even Slip Outside. Not because the reactor is necessary for brain-math, but because it stops me from passing out, from going to pieces. It helps me endure the pain and the dissociation, the inhumanity of brain-math. The energy it puts out anchors me here. Keeps me conscious. Keeps me ... myself.”

Kimberly listened, gone still and silent, like a small prey animal caught by a boa constrictor who just wanted to talk. She had no idea how to respond. I was already spooking her, the poor thing; I crushed the guilt down and kept going.

“Technically I could do brain-math right now,” I corrected myself. “I don’t need the reactor, but it makes everything exponentially easier. But it also doesn’t make the pain go away. And I ... I need to make the pain go away. Or find a better way to manage it, or ... or ... ” I looked down at Kimberly’s bedsheets and sighed so sharply that it made her flinch. “I’m sorry, Kim. I’m circling around something I can’t approach directly. I-I’m using you, to do this. I’m just using you. I can’t look directly at this thing. I can’t. I need help.”

Kimberly said, with such incredible gentleness, “I know how that feels.”

I looked up. She nodded, her nerve-pinched and skittish face full of desperate understanding, like she was trying to reach me across a bottomless chasm.

“Thank you,” I said.

She wet her lips, breathing a little too hard. “Eventually you just have to say it. You can’t keep it inside anymore, and you have to say it. Have to get it out. Have to manifest it, make it real. Even if it changes everything about you.” She swallowed hard, sniffing loudly, and wiped her nose again. “Sorry, that’s probably not relevant to your situation.”

“No. No, Kim. It is relevant.” I braced myself against the bed and wrapped my torso with my tentacles, squeezing myself to make my bruises throb and my ribcage ache. “I need to get better at brain-math. I have to. I have no choice. Everybody else keeps dancing

around the truth: the only way we are going to meaningfully interact with the Eye — fight it, communicate with it, browbeat it, serve it a court summons, whatever — is with brain-math. With me.”

Kim bit her lip. There was that fear again. “Okay,” she said.

“You don’t really know what the Eye is. I’m sorry. We’ve never really, truly included you in that — but that’s for your own safety, Kim. You don’t have to know. You don’t have to understand. Just, listen. Please, just ... just ... ”

“I can listen,” she said, nodding. “Go on”.

I took a deep breath, and went on. “Getting to Wonderland is simple. Eevee is building her special magic to allow us to stand there unobserved. Lizzie has given birth to the Caterpillars and the Knights — they’ll allow us to operate physically, to deal with the Eye’s, um, ‘minions’, if it decides to attack us or something. And I have personal protection, I have Raine and Zheng and Sevens, and ... well.” I trailed off for a moment as my courage faltered. “But the Eye itself? Talking to it, or just pulling Maisie from it? That’s all on me. Eevee’s magic, Sevens’ Outsider nature, those things are both powerful, but the Eye is beyond all of that. I should know. It spoke to me in dreams for ten years. Brain-math is the only way. So I have to improve.” I kept thumping my own thigh for emphasis, hard enough to make the bruises sing.

Kim took a shuddering breath, and then said, “Okay. But why are you telling me?” She flapped her hands in a moment of mortified horror. “N-not that I mind, just, you have Raine, and she might—”

“No,” I sighed. Kim flinched, so I reached out and patted her shoulder awkwardly. “No. Raine would tell me it’s not necessary. Raine would tell me we can find some other way, that there must be something we can do. Raine loves me, she doesn’t like when I get hurt. And Eevee ... Eevee doesn’t want to acknowledge this either. Sevens thought she knew the solution, but then she admitted she doesn’t.” I smiled awkwardly. “I’m sure Zheng would suggest punching it really hard.”

Kim let out a tiny, awkward, token laugh at that. “You don’t have to do this alone. Heather, that’s what you taught me. Kind of. A little. The same goes for you. Doesn’t it?”

I shook my head. "I'm not doing it alone. In Wonderland, I won't be alone. Everyone will be at my side. And I'm not trying to do this alone right now." My smile turned real. "I'm asking you for help, Kim. I'm explaining this to you because you're one of the people who won't be going. You won't be there. You won't be coming with us; I wouldn't let you even if you wanted to, because I don't want you to risk yourself. And you have no agenda."

"Agenda?"

I let out a little sighing laugh. "You're not ... into me."

"Oh. Oh. Yes. No, I mean. I'm not." Kim shook her head. "Not that you're not a lovely person, you're just ... I'm not. Yes."

"It's okay, Kim. I'm not expecting you to be. But that means I can tell you all this without freaking you out. Thank you for listening. I do suppose I could have gone to Praem, or maybe Lozzie, or ... I don't know. But I wanted to talk to you, because you've come to terms with magic. I need to come to terms with brain-math."

Kimberly bit her lip and frowned delicately. She watched my eyes, then stared at my left shoulder, then at the foot of the bed. I'd not seen her look this exact way before, with this subconscious wandering of the eyes. She was really thinking. Chewing the problem.

Eventually, she said at length: "I'm not sure it's comparable."

"Why not?"

"Well. Your hyperdimensional mathematics, it primarily hurts you, doesn't it?"

"It does."

"So this is about enduring pain." She spoke slowly, carefully, precisely. I was now in the presence of Kimberly Kemp, mage. In a way, that was a delightful honour. "Magic doesn't hurt me — well, I suppose sometimes it does. But that's not where my problems come from. My problem is ... " She trailed off, seeing the inner conflict revealed on my face. "Heather?"

"I'm trying to psych myself up," I admitted. "To do something similar to what you've done. Embrace something that has hurt me. Make it mine."

“ ... H-Heather, I really think you should talk to Raine about—”

I put out a hand — and a tentacle too, though Kimberly could not see the latter. “I’m not going to hurt myself. I’ve made some very serious promises that I’m not going to hurt myself.” I took a deep breath and realised that my hand was shaking slightly, that my heart was pounding; I was scared. I was scared of what it meant to confront this without pain. “I’m looking for a way to do it without pain. I need to get better at brain-math, but it’s not a linear process. It’s not like I can study it or use it, practice it like a skill or something. I’ve done that, I’ve read things, I’ve made my own notes, I’ve investigated and pushed and gotten creative and done as many things as I can. But the pain is still there.”

Kimberly nodded, listening closely. She was still in mage-mode.

I carried on: “I need to do it in a way that doesn’t hurt. But even that isn’t right. Controlling the pain isn’t enough. The pain is a product of brain-math being wrong for the human body. For the human mind. The physical pain is a by-product of a ‘spiritual’ process.” I huffed. “I don’t know if that’s an accurate way of putting it, but that’s what it feels like.”

Kimberly was frowning in thought. “So ... you want a new way of doing it?”

“Sort of. Kim, when I rescued Sarika from the Eye, I had to leave my body. That particular equation, pulling her from the Eye’s grip, was too complex for the human brain. The pain was too great. I could avoid it by leaving, by diving into the abyss. But I never want to do that again. It was a kind of heaven.” I swallowed, my throat thickening with the memory of abyssal bliss, of how right it felt to slip between the waves, my body infinitely mutable, elegant, strong, and swift. “But I belong here. I know that now. My tentacles, the reactor, all the little changes, they feel right. I’m not going anywhere again. I won’t!”

“Okay!” Kim raised both hands, as if I was shouting at her.

“Sorry,” I said quickly, then hiccuped. “Sorry, Kim, I didn’t mean to ...”

“It’s ... it’s alright. It’s okay.” She nodded, a little jerky and shaken. I took a deep breath and tried again.

“You see my problem?” I said, my voice breaking softly. Another

hiccup jerked my body, stabbing at all my bruises. "I know how to solve this. If I leave my body behind, I can do anything with brain-math. There is a way, and it's staring me in the face. But I have fought for months to make myself this again." I spread my arms. "Me." I took a shuddering breath. "And the tentacles and my bioreactor, and any other modifications I can make, they're good, they're right. But they're not the solution. And I've been ignoring this problem. But now my bioreactor is off-line and I can't look away from the result."

Kimberly nodded along. I had no doubt this meant almost nothing to her, but she was listening. I lowered my arms and took several deep breaths, interrupted by only one hiccup.

"I need a way to do difficult brain-math without damaging my body, or leaving it," I said. "And treating brain-math as this distant, painful, alien thing, is not working." My voice got quieter, quivering in my throat. "I have to bring it down to my level. To flesh, and meat, and ... and ..." I trailed off, with unexpected tears in the corners of my eyes. I sniffed, and wiped my face on my sleeve, and felt very small and very scared.

Kimberly swallowed. Perhaps she suspected where this was going. "This isn't a technical problem, is it?"

"No. I suspect not."

Kimberly held her breath as I rolled up my left sleeve to expose the Fractal.

It was so familiar to me now, practically a part of my own body, no different to the tentacles anchored inside my flanks or the bioreactor creaking and flexing inside my abdomen. The blunt angles and branch-like structure drew my eyes downward along the repeating pattern, sucking my attention to a zero-point which swallowed all knowledge. Black pen marks. But more than the sum of its parts.

Then I held it out so Kimberly could see. "Kim, I'm not sure if anybody has ever explained this to you. Do you know what it does?"

Kimberly swallowed, glancing between my arm and my face. "Vaguely. No."

"We call it the Fractal. Raine drew it on my arm the day we first

met. It acts like a kind of no entry sign for the Eye. I spent ten years having nightmares — lessons, channelled from the Eye — and Slipping uncontrollably, back and forth, most of the time not truly with my own body, but my mind. I think, anyway. That whole period of my life is a blur. In a way I'm still only just recovering from it. This stops any of that happening." I turned the Fractal over, inspecting Raine's most recent pen-work: we had not yet refreshed the pattern today, so the body-art pen marks were almost twenty-four hours old. I'd dozed half-awake on top of the covers last night, while Raine had traced the lines to refresh my protection. "And for the last few hours I've been thinking about what would happen if I rubbed it off."

A cold hand crept up my back. A lump in my throat. Ice in my gut. I had to tense all my muscles so as not to shake. The words didn't seem real.

"It's not a tattoo?"

"Oh, no." I gave an awkward laugh; the spell of horror broke on Kim's irrelevant question. Just what I needed. "Though maybe it should be. Gosh, my mother would be quite upset if she saw me with a tattoo, though. Raine redraws it on me every evening. It's the closest thing we have to a wedding ring. A promise. My safety, her promise. The first gift she ever gave me." I sighed. "Well, no. The first gift she ever gave me was listening and believing, but practical safety is more important." I shot Kim an awkward smile, already retreating from the unthinkable.

"And you want to wash it off?"

My smile felt like a mask. "No. I mean, that would be very difficult, for a start. I'd probably have to use white spirit. And everyone would panic. And the consequences could be terrible. So ... no. Ultimately, no."

Kimberly breathed a little sigh of relief. "Too dangerous for you."

"That too, yes. The Eye might resume teaching me things I don't want to know — or it might just kidnap me somehow. Or read my thoughts and figure out what we're trying to do, and retaliate somehow. I don't know. It's alien, I can't understand what it really wants. My best working theory so far is that it thinks of Maisie and I as its surrogate children, but I don't know what it would do with access to my mind again. Or access to my soul, I suppose."

“Yes,” Kimberly said, a little nervous. “So, you’re not going to rub it off. P-please, Heather, don’t make me hide something from Raine or the others or—”

“No,” I confirmed. “Don’t worry, Kim. I’m not going to put you in that position. I’m not going to do anything dangerous. Well, not without telling Raine and Evee. I promise.”

Kim nodded. “Good. That’s ... good.”

“But the danger is not why I’m avoiding it.”

“Oh.”

I rolled my sleeve back down and hid the Fractal, to smother the call of the void. I couldn’t even think about that possibility without edging toward a panic attack. I swallowed a hiccup, burped instead, and said, “The only entity which could possibly teach me more is the Eye. But I don’t think I need more lessons. I have to go beyond the Eye’s lessons. I have to accept this, somehow, and build something new.”

“Something new,” Kimberly echoed. Eyes wide. Terrified of what I was saying.

I let out a huge sigh; the last shreds of my confidence fell away. I slumped forward on her bed, going all shrimp-backed. “Oh, I don’t know, Kim. I don’t know how to do this. I just know I have to!”

“I-It’s alright, I didn’t mean to— Heather— sorry—”

“No, no, it’s not your fault, Kim. It’s not your fault.” I patted her arm again, feeling drained and terrible. “I don’t know what I’m doing. All I know is I have to go beyond what the Eye taught me. Body modification is good, it’s helped me, but ... I’m still falling short. I’ve gone beyond the Eye’s lessons before — I made that ‘alarm clock’ for Hringewindla. Oh, but you didn’t see that happen.” I laughed awkwardly. “But I’m still doing it like the Eye. Not in a way designed for my body. It’s not right for my body. I need to make it right.”

Kim nodded, nervous and desperate to placate me. I felt terrible for pressuring her like this. She didn’t deserve this burden. “Okay,” she said. “Okay. So ... ?”

“I have the bio-reactor. That’s a foundation. But I don’t have the ...” I grasped at the air. “The theory.”

“Theory. Right.”

“But I think there might be a way,” I said slowly, oh so very slowly. Kimberly stared at me like I was about to suggest we go rob a bank. “And I’ve been trying to convince myself to try it, this whole conversation. Thank you, Kim. Thank you for listening. I think I’m ready. I can do this.”

Kim whispered, as if she couldn’t quite get the words out. “What are you going to do?”

“I think it’s time I had a talk with Mister Squiddy. Squid to squid.”

Kimberly swallowed. “Um. Heather. Heather, I h-have to go get Raine. I can’t *not*—”

“It’s okay,” I said, finally standing up and taking a deep breath. I flexed all my tentacles and winced at their bruised roots. “I’ll tell her myself. And Eevee too. Don’t worry, Kim. None of us is doing anything alone.”

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“Heather, for fuck’s sake.” A top-grade Evelyn sigh followed the sound of her collapsing into a chair. She grunted, rubbing at her hip, half-clinging to Praem. I dared not look around at her face, lest I lose my nerve. “The thing is contained inside a magic circle for a reason.”

“We broke the circle before,” I said over my shoulder, without looking away from what I had revealed in the corner of the magical workshop.

“With wires. In a controlled fashion. Heather!”

“Uh yeah,” added Twil. “Don’t stick your hand in there, hey?”

I sighed. “I’m not going to stick my hand in there.”

“You’re thinking about it!” Evelyn snapped. “I can see you thinking about sticking your hand in there. It’s in your body language. You have no idea what could happen. It could melt your flesh from your bones! Somebody— Praem! Raine! Somebody pull her away from that.”

“Squiddy,” said Praem.

Raine laughed, also from behind me. “No can do, Eevee. But hey,

Heather, maybe she's got a point?" Raine stepped closer, socked feet padding gently over the workshop floor, but not too close, as if I was a skittish animal who might bolt forward at any moment to shove my head through the jaws of the trap. "Slow down, yeah? I'm not saying don't do this, I'm just saying let's think about the safest way. Alright? Heather, come on, stand up, look at me. Heather. Heeeey. Heather."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Raine, it's not a landmine."

Evelyn almost shouted: "May as well be!"

Mister Squiddy sat in the corner of the magical workshop, in the same place he'd sat for months and months. I'd peeled back the tarpaulin which had been hiding his bucket and the magic circle which surrounded it on a piece of canvas. He didn't look any worse for wear — but then again, with him, it was hard to tell.

Mister Squiddy really was a terrible name for the mess of clay writhing in the bucket, and rather undercut the truth of what he — or it — was. An entity left behind in a trap by the dead Alexander Lilburne, via some kind of posthumous conduit from the Eye, via the skull of Alexander's corpse back in Glasswick tower, so many months ago now. The entity — 'demon' was not technically correct for this thing — had ended up briefly possessing Evelyn's comatose body, before Felicity had done her magic to dump it into a vessel of clay. Weeks and weeks later, Evelyn and I had hooked it up to a television set; it had fed me what had seemed like hints of hyperdimensional mathematics, strange geometries, nonsense images. I'd noted a few things down, gained a little breadth of understanding, but nothing more, nothing revolutionary.

We had neither the knowledge nor the techniques to get anything more out of the creature, so we'd kept it watered and contained, and hidden it away in a corner, for the future.

Were we torturing this thing with confinement? I didn't know. I didn't like that thought.

It didn't have eyes or sensory organs, not that I could figure out. It looked like a mass of rotting tentacles beneath a filthy, moth-eaten sheet. Writhing inside a bucket. Slopping over itself again and again. Always moving, going nowhere.

An emissary of the Eye — or from Maisie?

“Heather. Hey, come on,” Raine was saying. “Sharrowford control to low orbit, this is dyke-one calling space station Morell.”

I finally looked up and around at Raine, from where I was squatting down on the floor, supported by my tentacles. I gave her a pinched look. “Raine, I am not going to shove my hand in there. I just wanted to look at him first.”

Raine pulled a rakish grin, brimming with both love and concern. “Can never tell with you, Heather. You’ve got enough guts for both of us.”

“Yeah, big H,” Twil said from next to Evelyn. “You kinda do leap first. Sometimes.”

Evelyn was staring at me, deeply unimpressed, her eyes heavy-lidded, shoulders kinked and slumped with exhaustion. That look wracked me with terrible guilt, but not half as much as the next words out of her mouth.

“Heather,” she grumbled, voice a cracking croak. “Do we really have to do this now? We’re all fucking exhausted after yesterday, and after the bastard lawyer. If I have to deal with another emergency I swear I’m going to have an actual nervous breakdown. Please. I insist.”

Praem added: “Rest time is now.”

That went through me like a hot knife. My heart ached. I looked down, then over at Mister Squiddy again, then stood up — ow, my knees — and dusted off my hands as if I’d been rummaging through a compost heap.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m not going to do anything with it right now. I just wanted to check. But I do think this is necessary for me. I want to speak to it. Him.”

Evelyn sighed. I felt rather than saw her put her face in her hand. Twil pulled a grimace. Raine reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

“Mmmmmmmmm,” went Lozzie, from over by the doorway back to the kitchen. “I think it’s okaaaay. Probably.”

Evelyn huffed. “Lozzie, if she does this, you sit by her. You do it with her. Whatever it is.”

I said, trying to hold my patience: “I don’t know what it’s going to entail.”

“All the more reason to not fucking do it!” Evelyn snapped.

“Evee,” I said, soft and measured as I could be. “You insisted I not do it, at least not yet. So I’m not going to.” Evelyn looked so hunched and reduced, sitting in that chair and glaring at me. “You insist. So I won’t.”

Evelyn’s turn to feel guilty, though that wasn’t what I wanted. She sighed and pursed her lips, then looked down and nodded slowly. “Alright. Alright.”

“I didn’t mean to panic anybody,” I said. “I just wanted to check.” I gestured at Mister Squiddy, in his corner-bucket.

Felicity cleared her throat. She was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, with Kimberly’s mousy face peering around her side, as if sheltering behind the older mage. Felicity said, “Excuse me for interrupting the uh, actual argument. But for my own understanding of this situation, that thing in the bucket — that’s the same thing I pulled out of Evelyn, earlier this year? That’s the demon? You kept it?”

“We kept it,” Evelyn grunted.

“It was teaching me some brain-math,” I said. “He. He was teaching me brain-math.”

“Mister Squiddy,” said Praem.

Felicity stared at me, then at Evelyn, then at the mess of clay and bucket and magic circle in the corner. “You kept it. In a bucket. In the corner of your workshop.”

Evelyn turned a dark stab of her eyes on Felicity. “Don’t you dare criticise my practices in my own home.”

To my incredible surprise, Felicity stared right back; she blinked a few times, her good eye watering as if facing down a storm. “And it’s been in here the whole time. We’ve been working a dozen feet away from a demon bound to a lump of clay.”

Evelyn reared up, finding reserves of energy in offended anger. “You’re the one who fucking put it there!”

“As a temporary measure,” Felicity shot back, though she started to

lower her eyes from Evelyn, unable to face her rage. “I assumed you would have disposed of the thing by now. It’s in your house. You sleep above it. Kimberly sleeps above it.”

Kimberly squeaked in embarrassment.

Evelyn looked like she was ready for a fight, but she just sat there clutching the head of her walking stick. “Oh don’t you dare you use this new-found concern for Kimberly for the sake of your little—”

Raine cleared her throat and spoke up, loud and bright: “Mister Squiddy’s a lot quieter than he used to be. We kind of forget he’s there. Used to slop and slurp a lot, ‘cos he kept using up all the water we added. Now he’s kinda stabilised, doesn’t seem to metabolise it anymore. Doesn’t go anywhere. Isn’t that right, Evee? We tend to forget. That’s all.”

Evelyn and Felicity both simmered down. Evelyn huffed. Felicity looked away. They both seemed vaguely embarrassed.

If Mister Squiddy cared, he didn’t show it, roiling away to himself in his bucket.

I cleared my throat, and said, “The truth is, we don’t know exactly what it is, or who truly sent it. And I think this plan is worthwhile. I need to communicate with it, properly, more so than just the images it fed me that one time.”

Twil crossed her arms and nodded across the room, at the clay mess in the bucket. “Can we give it a mouth?”

I blinked at her. “Pardon?”

Evelyn sighed. “No.”

Twil went on, “Or like, a better form? A better body? Give it a head, a mouth, ears, stuff like that? Can’t we talk to it that way?”

Felicity shook her head and waved one hand. “It has clay. It could build any structures it wants. I’ve seen demons do that before in similar mediums. No.” She frowned over at the mass of squid tentacles in the bucket. “If it’s still in that form, then that’s what it wants to be. For whatever reason.”

“I really don’t think it’s dangerous,” I said. “It’s never tried to escape. It’s never done anything.”

Lozzie chirped, “Exactly! He’s just a little guy!”

Evelyn hissed a sharp breath between her teeth. “What is your plan, Heather? Because I know you’re just going to stick a hand in there.”

“I am not.”

“Then what?”

“I’m going to stick a *tentacle* in there.” I sighed. “What else?”

Evelyn blinked at me several times, then snorted a laugh and shook her head. Raine grinned at me, laughing softly too. Twil said, “whoa, sick.” Lozzie giggled. Felicity looked vaguely uncomfortable. Kimberly put a hand over her mouth.

“Tentacle,” said Praem.

“Just, like, ram it in there?” Twil asked.

“No,” I sighed again. “I would have to select a tentacle, and then armour plate it, probably isolate the nerves somehow. Gate them, in one direction, so it can’t access my brain in return. Creating the limb for communication would be a project in itself, but I could probably do it in a few minutes.”

Evelyn grunted. “And none of this would require brain-math? You’re already strained to hell and back, Heather.”

I shrugged. “No, just abyssal body modification. I should be able to do it without actually using brain-math. I think.”

The tone in the room had changed completely, from a simmering argument about my safety to a cautious curiosity. Why did everyone else forget my tentacles so often? Probably because they were invisible without special glasses. I always forgot that people couldn’t see them, just hanging there or touching the walls or helping me stand.

Evelyn sighed a long, long sigh. “Alright, Heather. But you’re going to test the tentacle first. I’ll come up with something.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“In the morning.”

“In the morning,” I echoed.

She jabbed a finger at me. “And that means sleep. Not staying up late to iterate tentacle tools. Rest, recover. Eat another lemon if you

have to. In the morning, we'll make a tentacle. Together. In the morning."

"Together," echoed Praem.

I was nodding along. "As long as I can actually try it, I—"

"Make sure she sleeps," Evelyn grunted.

"On it," said Raine. "Trust me, I'll have her out. Big dinner first, right? Everyone wanna eat? 'Cos I sure do."

"In the morning," I repeated. "Evee? In the morning, yes?"

"Yes, Heather." She sighed heavily and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "We'll make it work. I promise."

"Tentacle time," said Praem.

sediment in the soul – 19.12

And so, in the morning, with a little help from my friends, I grew a new tentacle.

Well, actually I modified an existing tentacle; fresh pneuma-somatic generation would not only require the use of brain-math, but would probably also draw on the spongy and tender vulnerabilities of my healing bioreactor. Nonetheless, by the time the work was done, the tentacle in question felt like an entirely new organ.

Compared to the previous morning, I practically bounced out of bed like an over-active child with a digestive system full of sugary cereal. I woke before true dawn and then lay there, filled with dull bruise-pain, omnidirectional anxiety, and a kind of nervous excitement I had not felt in a very long time. Dawn broke behind the curtains, washing my bedroom and the rest of the house with slow grey light, so I squirmed out of the covers before anybody else could wake up. I still ached from head to toe, but my body felt flexible, refreshed, hungry for motion and use and life; if I hadn't been so excited over the tentacle-work ahead, I would probably have dived back into bed and snuggled up against Raine and whined for sex. My dozens of tiny bruises were turning a fascinating and colourful array of weird hues, my joints hurt but no longer felt like they were stuffed with gravel, and my skin had relaxed so it wasn't a size too small for what it contained. I'd spent the night dozing and dreaming, my subconscious mind chewing over the proposal I'd made last night, already brimming over with half-formed concepts to write upon my mutable flesh.

I started the pneuma-somatic modifications alone, downstairs in the kitchen, before anybody else appeared for breakfast, outrunning even Raine as she washed her mouth out in the bathroom and followed me down. I couldn't control myself, couldn't have stopped or slowed even if I had wanted to; the end result was tantalising, yes — the prospect of real communication with Mister Squiddy — but the journey was almost more important.

Changing my body at will was a kind of euphoria all its own, whatever the purpose.

Breakfast was a non-negotiable requirement, however. I laid my chosen tentacle over the kitchen table, then had to get up again as my stomach rumbled loudly enough to hurt; my body knew what I was about to do, so it demanded building materials. I returned with two lemons, one clutched in each fist.

“Dual-wielding for breakfast, heeeeeeey,” Raine mumbled sleepily from the doorway.

“Mm!” was all I could manage. “Mm, need them. Mm.”

Raine helped. She cooked me a bowl of rice and a plate of fish fingers, ready as soon as I had finished skinning and devouring those lemons. I surely looked like a starving rodent, juice all down my chin, sucking fragments of lemon flesh off my fingers. But my body demanded more. And Raine looked at me like the most beautiful girl in the world, even when she slipped on the modified glasses so she could see the parts of me made of spirit-flesh and desire and hope. I sat there cutting fish fingers into tiny pieces and dipping them in soy sauce, chewing with relish as I lay a tentacle back across the table and began the work.

Others drifted in and out as the house woke up around me. Kimberly appeared bright and early, ready to go off to work like we were all normal people; she bid us good morning and made herself some toast, none the wiser to the pneuma-somatic biology experiment, churning and roiling only a few feet away on the table. Felicity turned up too, then vanished with Kimberly again, on escort duty so Kim’s normalcy and safety could remain assured. I barely paid attention to either of them.

Zheng crept in like a cat, in comfortable stealth. I paid plenty of attention to her.

“Shaman,” she purred. She cupped the back of my head with one massive, warm hand, watching the process for long seconds. I could feel her satisfied grin, dark and shark-like. “You grow.”

“Trying to,” I said. “Would you like a fish finger? I have too many.”

“Mm, no. Fish meat. Huh.”

Zheng did not stay long; I would have liked if she had, but the hunt called her more strongly than the desire to watch me prod my own flesh.

“Shaman, you are in safe hands — your own. I trust no others better.”

“I know, I know,” I sighed. “It’s just ... be safe, Zheng. I love you.”

Raine caught her at the back door. I overheard Raine’s voice drifting into the kitchen: “You’re the only one who can cover all that ground safely, on foot, and fast as well. I get it, I’m not trying to stop you. Just don’t try to face down anything alone, okay? I’ve got your back. Call us if you spot anything. Especially if you find the house. Good hunting.”

“You have my back, little wolf.”

I could have squealed in delight at that exchange, but I was too focused on the work. The work was all that mattered, writing on my own cells and tissues and membranes. By then I had started to drift into an almost trance-like state, consciousness totally focused on the process of visualisation, my body demanding water like a thirsty chain reaction. Shafts of morning sunlight glowed across the sink and the kitchen counters, a throbbing aurora in my peripheral vision.

Evelyn stomped into the kitchen a little while later, with Praem trailing behind. She stopped and stared — at my food.

“Fish fingers and rice. For breakfast.” She sounded vaguely disgusted. “Heather.”

“I’m fine!” I chirped, feeling like Lozzie. I even giggled. Evee’s golden hair caught the sunlight. Her hunched pose and kinked shoulders invited a hug, beneath layers of comfy clothing, her dressing gown, and a shawl.

“I know you have unique dietary requirements now, but that has to be too much salt.”

Raine said, “As far as I can tell, she’s doing alright with it.”

“Still,” Evelyn sighed. “Fish fingers in soy sauce? Bloody hell.”

Praem said: “English sushi.” Evelyn let out a sigh like a dying tractor and looked like she wanted to return to bed.

“Sooooo,” Raine said, idly making a round of tea as Praem helped Evelyn sit down at the kitchen table. She didn’t look at Evelyn.

“How’s Twil?”

“Sleeping,” Evelyn grunted.

“Where’d she sleep last night?” Raine asked, brimming with faux-innocence. “Didn’t know she was staying over, is all.”

Evelyn didn’t answer. Neither did Praem. Raine made an expression of private amusement. Part of me wanted to ask — part of me was dying to ask. But the work came first.

I had decided not to use the same tentacle which had served as the injector — the one I’d used on the Forest Knight, the one which had spontaneously re-formed a bio-steel needle and liquid delivery system when I’d thought Nicole’s life was in danger, the one which maybe, possibly, perhaps some part of me wanted to sink into Eevee, sexually or otherwise. Medical equipment or quasi-genitalia, whatever I had turned that tentacle into, I didn’t want to risk cross-contaminating purposes; that tentacle was normal again now, the needle merely a memory of hard tissue inside soft flesh, but I didn’t want to compromise my maximum-security contact device by building it around a bespoke sexual organ.

The obvious modifications came first, arising from the smooth, pale, supple surface of my chosen tentacle with barely a conscious prompt: thicker skin, leathery and resistant; protective sheaths for the nerves; armour-plates in chitin and bone, laced through with iron and crystalline structures and tiny veins of conductive material — I silently thanked a Youtube video about deep-sea snails for that one. Marine life was such a wealth of ideas.

My bioreactor glugged and pulsed in my gut as I worked, responding in sympathy as my pneuma-somatic flesh readjusted itself into new forms. Since the previous day and my gorging on lemons and salt and proteins, the bioreactor had woken up just enough to contribute a token effort. It ached and throbbed like a sore muscle, unfolding like a bruised flower, making audible liquid noises like an exotic new stomach. But I made no effort to interfere, to coax it back down into silence, or bring it out of semi-torpor.

Technically I didn’t need the bioreactor for any of this. The process of crafting existing pneuma-somatic flesh into new forms was mostly about proper visualisation, something Kimberly had taught me how to do, in great detail and with a wealth of knowledge. I had no doubt she was much better at this than what little skill I had managed to practice. But even a little was enough. By thought and

imagination and a little popular science about marine life, I could summon the forms of the abyss into human flesh — or at least their pale shadow, slowly and painfully. Pneuma-somatic matter did the rest, reshaping itself under the influence of my trembling will as I slipped over the edge of a trance.

If I had wanted to forge a new appendage, or grow myself a fresh pair of knees, or turn my head bioluminescent, I would have required brain-math, if only to flick the single value from a zero to a one, from non-existence to pneuma-somatic reality.

But my bioreactor was warming up and glugging away all the same. I relished the chance to stretch the muscle. Though I had to keep stopping whenever it sent twitches and stitches up my right flank.

“Take it slow, Heather,” Evelyn grumbled, watching me from the other side of the kitchen table, her arms folded and her jaw set. Her own breakfast lay abandoned in front of her, in the shadow of a pill bottle. She wore her own pair of modified pneuma-somatic glasses, watching my tentacle with a growing frown. “There’s no point rushing. You’re going to have to test all this before using it anyway, so don’t get your heart set on anything.”

“Heart set,” said Praem. “On pretty tentacle.”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn sighed. “It’s very impressive.”

After that the work required more experimentation. I needed active protection as well as simple bulwarks, in case Mister Squiddy turned out to be worse than we expected.

Inside the thickened layer of mushroom-pale skin I added pockets of acid and enzyme, of paralytic toxins, and strange offerings from my bioreactor that I didn’t understand: layers of semi-liquid material that would flash freeze a physical intruder, or colonise hostile flesh, or repel attacks in mediums that could only be expressed in hyperdimensional mathematics, not the conscious human mind. The tentacle ached and throbbed, heavy with potential, swollen with structures beneath the flesh. My vision swam and blurred. Time seemed to drip and slide and crawl. At some point, Lizzie and Tenny wandered into the kitchen, but they must have left again, because when I blinked clear and alert, Twil was standing there in a long t-shirt and borrowed pajama bottoms.

“Doing alright, Big H?” she asked me.

"She's doing just fine," Raine said. "Let her work. Heather, you're doing great."

"Cool, cool." Twil shot me a grin and an awkward thumbs-up, then turned to Eevee. "We still on for—"

I slipped back into the trance of bio-adjustment for maybe twenty minutes. I couldn't be sure.

When I surfaced a second time, Twil was gone, but Lozzie was by my side, in her poncho as usual, sporting a halo of wispy blonde. I demanded water and Raine pressed a cold glass into my hands. Heaven slid down my throat and elicited a garbled explanation from my own lips that even I couldn't understand. I hiccuped and babbled and tried to explain what I had done, my words overlapping, my new tentacle twitching.

"It's better safe than sorry!" Lozzie chirped.

"That—" I croaked. "That made sense to you?"

"Mmhmm!" Lozzie nodded.

Evelyn said, "Better safe than explicable, more like. Lozzie's here because you were ... drifting."

"I was," I said, blinking hard and grounding myself in the kitchen. My lungs expanded, sharing air with the house. "Sorry. This is complicated."

Lozzie nodded as if this made perfect sense. "Gotta listen to your body, even if it's not using words. Very important! Mmhmm!"

"I'm trying," I murmured — but by then I was mostly trying not to let the pain show on my face.

The quasi-trance of biological focus had numbed my conscious mind for a while, but the tentacle hurt.

Not since building the tentacles themselves had I performed such detailed, slow-going, intentional modifications. The full-body changes I'd undergone in order to fight Ooran Juh, or the berserk state I'd entered two days ago, those had been mostly instinctive responses, running on pure gut feeling, a lack of inhibition, the need to protect my friends, my family, my pack. But to grow new kinds of nerve-endings or plate my tentacle with iron-laced chitin, that required a constant push against all my anxieties about my

body, about the limits of what I could achieve; every tiny change brought a twinned pang of longing and euphoria — and also a deep-muscle ache in the tentacle itself, stinging and burning all the way down to the roots inside my flank, anchored in my mortal flesh. The result lay fat and limp across the table. And it hurt.

Lozzie must have noticed. As early morning light retreated across the sky, replaced by dull-soft summer blues, Lozzie reached over and held my hand. I nodded a weak thank you to her. She smiled back, sleepy and delighted. If Lozzie approved of the biological work, then I knew I must be on the right track.

Raine noticed as well, but she was less subtle, slipping on her own pair of modified glasses so she could inspect my handiwork. She let out a low whistle. “Very flash, Heather. Very flash. Looking sharp.”

I sighed. “Flashy or not doesn’t really matter. The function is what matters, and it’s not finished yet. I know it looks ... rough.”

Raine laughed. “Naah, that’s nonsense. Form always matters! It’s part of you, right? So of course it’s going to be mega flash. You’ve blinged out your tentacle, Heather. Shiny plates and cool go-faster stripes, and gold lace too!” She winked and shot me a grin. “Love it.”

I blushed slightly. “Raine. T-thank you. I think.”

Lozzie giggled. “Bedazzle that tentacle!”

Raine shot a finger-gun at Lozzie. “Eyyyy, Loz. Great minds think alike. Heather, can you make it glitter? Sparkle in the sunlight? Disco-ball style, right? Do the gold veins light up?”

I rolled my eyes. At least she was helping me ignore the pain; I knew what Raine was doing and Raine knew that I knew, but we both went along with it, like we always did. Amid all these changes, amid any changes, Raine was always my rock. Raine’s affection would never falter. I blushed and flustered and tried to sharpen my mind to concentrate on the next step.

Laying across the table, twitching and flexing as changes roiled and rolled beneath the surface, I forced the flesh of my special tentacle through one last process, the most difficult to define, the one I couldn’t put into human words. And as I completed that process, the tentacle took on a further aesthetic change, one I had neither expected nor intended.

“Neon purple glow?” Raine asked. She raised her eyebrows with a wicked grin. “Nice choice.”

“It’s pretty!” Lozzie chirped.

“Party tentacle,” said Praem.

Raine was not exaggerating; the usual slow-strobing soft-rainbow effect had been replaced with a dark and heavy neon purple, like a colour one might see through cephalopod eyes at the bottom of the ocean, or in a particularly seedy nightclub, or in a dream about explosive headaches. The colour had arisen all at once, as I’d shunted nerves around and created artificial bundles, to hold signals where they could be examined before continuing upward toward my mortal flesh.

I croaked, hoarse with effort: “I-I didn’t mean to do that. I ... aha, ah—” The tentacle both ached and tickled at the same time. I gasped and winced and blinked away the kind of tears that usually accompanied the plucking of a hair. “I don’t know why it’s done that. All I did was gate the nerves.”

Evelyn sighed sharply. “Yes, that’s the important part. Forget the light show. Heather, is it complete?”

“I think so.” I raised my aching, throbbing, tender flesh from the table, lifting and supporting the experimental tentacle with two others. The skin itself was both dull and over-sensitive at the same time. The feeling was like nails down a chalkboard, making me shiver and wince.

Raine said, “Heather, you alright? You with us?”

“She’s fiiiiine!” Lozzie chirped.

“Um, yes,” I said. “I think. All the safety procedures are in place, Evee, yes. A-ah. That’s ... weird. Gosh that feels weird. W-weird.”

Lozzie reached out with one hand, half-tucked inside her poncho. She met my eyes with a silent question, delighted and curious.

“It aches,” I said. “You can touch, but be gentle.”

“Mmhmm,” Lozzie breathed. Gentle as a feather, she cupped the curve of my experimental limb. The flesh shuddered, then relaxed. I winced slowly. “Good Heathy,” Lozzie whispered.

“Trying my best,” I croaked. “I think this is it, I think this is the

right tool.”

I half-expected Raine to make a dirty joke, something about Lozzie hogging all my tentacles for herself. But Raine simply looked on, happy to leave this one as entirely innocent. I liked that. It was a good choice.

Evelyn shifted forward in her chair. She still looked dead-eyed with exhaustion, even two days after the spell at Geerswin Farm. Late-morning sunlight fell across her back. “Heather. Explain. No need to get technical, just plain language.”

Her bluntness knocked me down a peg. “R-right. Um. Ahh.” I flexed my modified limb, moving slowly and carefully; I reached down toward the table and picked up the edge of a plate, but I almost fumbled. The nerve connections were so slow and different now. “The entire length of the tentacle, barring maybe a foot’s worth at the base, is now gated off from the rest of my nervous system. Not completely, or I wouldn’t be able to move it at all. But there’s now ... security checkpoints? I’m sorry, it’s hard to put this in simple terms.”

“Keep trying,” Evelyn grunted.

“Okay. The nerve signals go into special bundles, filled with ... abyssal ... stuff, from my reactor. They get checked, approved, then translated into nerve signals the rest of my body can understand.” I pulled an awkward smile for Evee. “If Mister Squiddy tries to do anything unexpected, he won’t get very far.”

“Damn right,” said Raine. “No possessing my girlfriend. Only I’m allowed to get up inside her.”

I huffed. “Raine, please.”

Evelyn ignored the dirty joke. “Yes, that’s the idea,” she said. “Good. You’ve turned a limb into a giant security checkpoint. And you better hope it works.”

“It will,” I said. “It feels right. Numb and slow, but right, and—”

Evelyn snapped, talking over me. “Because we’re going to test it first. Heather, you’re not going anywhere near that demon blob in the corner of my workshop until I am one hundred percent satisfied by that tentacle of yours.”

Praem opened her lips with a prim click, and intoned: “That’s what

she said.”

Lozzie and Raine both found this hilarious; Raine snorted and Lozzie giggled so hard I thought she might pull a muscle. I blushed beetroot red and hid behind one hand. Evelyn shot a dark glare up at Praem, but the doll-demon returned the look with her usual placid stare.

“Take care with words,” said Praem.

Evelyn replied through her teeth. “I will. Thank you, Praem.”

“You are welcome,” said Praem.

Raine cleared her throat and stopped laughing. “Seriously though, you’ve given yourself artificial nerve damage. Sort of. And it’s reversible, hey! Amazing work, Heather. You are incredible, you know that?”

“I don’t feel incredible, but thank you. I think.” I laughed weakly. My new tentacle twitched in the cradle of two others, sending strange sensations into my flank, muted and dull like quiet echoes. “I’m sure it’s going to work, whatever we throw at it. Like I said, it feels right. It feels correct. Might need time to settle, I suppose.”

Evelyn snorted. “I’ll be the judge of that. On your feet.”

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Evelyn’s testing process was far less enjoyable than the embarrassing novelty of Praem making a dirty joke; I had vaguely imagined the ‘tests’ might involve Evelyn tapping the tip of the tentacle with a little hammer, like a doctor checking my reflexes. Or perhaps it would be some kind of dexterity challenge, like that time I’d played chess against Tenny several months previously, to flex and exercise the tentacles before I learned to fully control them. My new experimental contact tentacle would have failed such a test a hundred times over: it was slow-moving, heavy, numb, and highly imprecise. The modified nerve system made it difficult to manipulate, like an arm suffering pins and needles, wrapped in electrical tape, and dunked in freezing water.

Evee dragged us all into the magical workshop — myself, Raine, Praem, and Lozzie — but not before I could grab another lemon and start eating it. Mister Squiddy was still quietly slopping away to himself in the corner, confined to his bucket, either biding his time

until he had a chance for mischief, or none the wiser about our plans, or simply looking forward to a chance to communicate. I had no idea which, none of us did, not until I actually went through with the plan. Evelyn ignored him completely, left his flap of tarpaulin up, and had me sit at the workshop table. She fussed around for a bit, sorting through old pieces of canvas and magic circles on bits of stiff card, fussing and huffing and displaying signs that she was feeling even more short-tempered than usual. Eventually she had Praem drag out a specific ancient design and unroll it across the tabletop.

“Ooooooh,” went Lozzie, leaning forward for a look

“Breaking out the classics, hey?” said Raine. Eevee didn’t respond to that.

The magic circle was so old that Evelyn had to refresh it with a marker pen, the muscles of her hand tense and tight as she went over the lines. It wasn’t special, not compared with the complex monstrosities and mind-bending designs I’d seen over the last year: just a single ring with a jagged star around the edge, frilled with a few accents of looping Latin and a single word in Arabic. However it functioned or whatever it did, the circle didn’t make my eyes water or prod my stomach with nausea. If I’d seen it adorning the cover of one of Kimberly’s new-agey *magick* tomes I wouldn’t have given it a second glance.

“Evee?” I asked, tilting my head. “What does this do?”

Evelyn added the final touches to the edge of the circle, careful not to smudge or touch the canvas. Then she sat back in her chair with a pained grunt, grasping for her walking stick. Praem caught the pen and clicked the cap back on.

Evee said, “It hurts you when you touch it.”

I blinked, cradling my tentacle in my lap. Raine blew out a sigh as if she’d expected better. Lozzie said, “Ouchies.”

“That’s it?” I said. “It ... it doesn’t look like much.”

Evelyn held my gaze, grey around the eyes, and for some reason deeply unimpressed. “It doesn’t have to be ‘much’, Heather. A little sting, that’s all. No real damage. Just direct stimulation of the nerve endings. It’s a hell of a lot safer than a taser.”

Raine laughed, once, but there was no humour in her voice. “Evee, Evee, Evee, it better not be at the level of a taser.”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “Do you think I would want to hurt Heather? Really? No, it’s more like a wasp sting. I can crank it up for you, though, if you want to slap your hand in the middle and discover your own pain threshold.”

Raine gave her a wry smile. Evelyn glared back, as if daring her to say more.

I looked at the circle and gulped, half-expecting it to be shimmering with invisible heat or crackling with electricity. But it just sat there, seemingly inert, waiting to inflict pain.

“Evee—” I said.

She sighed sharply. “Just touch it, Heather. It’s perfectly safe. I wouldn’t make you do something dangerous.”

I hiccuped. “O-of course you wouldn’t. I trust you. But—”

Praem reached past Evelyn’s shoulder and toward the magic circle. Evelyn flinched as if to stop her, but Praem was too quick. One pale, soft fingertip pressed against the surface of the blank core of the pain-infliction device.

Nothing happened.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Evelyn sighed. “Don’t tell me it’s not working. I am not digging up the notes on this. I am just fucking not.”

“Ow,” said Praem. She withdrew her hand. “Functioning.”

Evelyn scowled at her. Praem stared back. Evelyn’s scowl died and she looked away, as if Praem had a better point than she did, or as if Evelyn was being petulant and difficult and Praem had just called her out.

Lozzie had a quick go with the circle too, poking the middle with her index finger. She let out a little “Yaaah!” and whipped her hand back, giggling and shaking her finger, then peering at the unblemished tip. “Ouch, yes!”

Evelyn sighed at Lozzie too, though far less sharply. “Yes, we can all stop testing now. Heather, please, let’s get on with this.”

“Evee,” I repeated, “I don’t understand what we’re doing here.”

Evelyn closed her eyes slowly, as if she was counting to ten before opening them again. “You are not touching ‘Mister Squiddy’ until you can touch that circle and feel no pain. Understand? Your control needs to be perfect. No mistakes. You are not going into this with an untested method of protecting yourself. We do this right or we don’t do it at all. I insist.”

“You insist, okay. And I’m hearing you, but ... ” I stared at the circle. “Couldn’t you just poke me with a fork or something?”

“Forky friends,” said Lozzie. But she sounded uncomfortable and distant. I doubt she had expected this situation to get so serious so quickly.

“Yeeeeeah,” Raine added slowly, stepping forward and putting her hands on my shoulders. “Look, Eevee, normally I’m all for directly stimulating Heather’s nerves—”

“Raine!” I squeaked. Lozzie giggled like a little teapot reaching boil. We both needed that.

Raine continued, “—but I know enough about magic — your magic — to—”

“Bullshit!” Eevee scoffed.

“—to recognise what you’ve got sitting on the table there. Don’t pretend like I don’t know.”

Evelyn held Raine’s gaze for one long, uncomfortable moment, lips pursed, breathing a little too hard through her nose. Then she looked away, angry but muted.

“Eevee,” Raine said, gentle and goading. “Come on, hey?”

I sighed at both of them. “I’m feeling a little out of the loop here. Please don’t slip back into bad habits, you two. What are you talking about?”

“Yeah!” Lozzie chirped. “I have no idea what that means either! Boo!”

Raine cleared her throat and gave Evelyn a meaningful look. “Better if Eevee says it herself. Not my place.”

Evelyn gritted her teeth, grumbled something under her breath, and glared daggers at Raine. She spat: “I don’t care what tools I use, Raine. There is no such thing as the tool of the enemy when it

comes to keeping Heather safe — when it comes to keeping any of us safe. I thought you would agree on that point of philosophy. I thought you had no limits.”

“Hey, I do agree!” Raine said. “But at least be honest with yourself. And with Heather. Kinda unhealthy not to, yeah, in this particular case? ‘Cos from where I’m standing this is like seven different kinds of fucked up.” Raine glanced around the room. “Apologies to Sevens, if she’s listening in. Random number, I swear.”

“Evee,” I said, trying to suppress a sigh. “What is Raine talking about?”

Evelyn finally lowered her gaze to meet my eyes. It took a visible effort of will from her, like she felt terribly guilty and couldn’t bear to see her own reflection in me. She swallowed, ran a hand over her face, and gestured at the magic circle on the piece of canvas. “It’s a component from my mother’s work. Because of course it is! Because so much of what I do is built on what she left me. Happy now, Raine?”

“Nope,” said Raine. “This is hurting you badly, Evee. I don’t even know why you’re doing this.”

“Oh,” I said as realisation dawned. A cold feeling settled in my belly. “It’s part of a torture device. Isn’t it?”

Uncomfortable silence settled over the magical workshop. Lozzie shifted in her chair next to me, staring at the thing on the table with an unreadable, heavy-eyed look, pulling her pastel poncho tighter. Raine just rubbed my shoulders gently, kneading the tension deeper into my flesh. Evelyn couldn’t meet my eyes.

I took a deep breath — and reached toward the centre of the circle with my modified tentacle.

Evelyn snapped, “No!”

She almost exploded out of her chair, which was deeply uncomfortable to watch, because that mostly meant she scrabbled at her walking stick and lurched forward. Praem had to catch her and stop her from banging her head on the table. “No!” she repeated. “Fine, we won’t use it! Praem, get rid of it, please. Just burn the thing, forget I—”

“Evee,” I said. “It’s fine, I understand—”

Evelyn slapped the table so hard that I jumped and jerked backward. My modified tentacle flopped against the wood. Lozzie yelped and then fluttered back down into place, like a jellyfish in a column of warm water. Raine clicked her tongue in sympathy.

For a long moment, Evee just stared at the table. Then she lifted her hand and said, "Ow. Well, there. Now I've hurt myself too."

"Please don't, Evee," I said.

"Mhmm," Lozzie added in a sad little voice. "No ouchies."

"No ouchies," echoed Praem.

"Evee, you can just poke me with a fork. It's fine. We can stop this."

Evelyn sighed. She wouldn't look me in the eyes. "Fork-poking is not reliable," she muttered. "We need a baseline."

I glanced up at Raine, then over at Lozzie, but both of them looked deeply uncomfortable in their own separate ways. Lozzie was biting her lip, with a look like she desperately wanted to retreat from the room and pretend none of this was happening. Raine squeezed my shoulder and gave me a grin, but had nothing for Evelyn.

"Evee," I tried again. "I know you don't fully approve of this."

"Bloody right I don't." Her eyes finally snapped up to my face.

"Heather, why are *you* doing this?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why now? Why today? Why like this?"

I stared at her puppy-blue eyes and her set, hard face and her bone-deep worry. "I don't ... I don't understand. I ... well, because we don't have anything else to do but wait. Because we need to find Edward's house, so I need to do better brain-math. I explained, I—"

"No, Heather," Evelyn sighed. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. Raine? Raine, for once, back me up on this, please."

Raine sighed softly. "Not sure I follow either, sorry. But you know I've always got your back."

"Evee," I repeated. "If you're worried about me getting hurt, I'm not going to put myself in harm's way. I promised, I made a really serious promise: no more self-sacrifice, no more—"

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Evelyn sighed. “Heather, I’m not worried about you self-sacrificing. I’m worried about you biting off more than you can chew.” She gestured with one hand as if wiping cobwebs out of her own thoughts. “Felicity was right. Don’t repeat that to her — that includes you, Lozzie, please — but she was right. About that thing we’ve been keeping.” Evelyn jabbed the head of her walking stick toward Mister Squiddy in his bucket, tucked away in the corner beneath a piece of tarpaulin. “We don’t know if that came from the Eye. Maybe it did. Maybe it didn’t. Maybe, maybe, it was sent by your sister. Maybe!” Evelyn raised a hand before I could protest. “But we don’t know. And Heather, for fuck’s sake, the last time you risked contact with the Eye, when you helped Badger, you almost died. It set off a chain of events which we are still dealing with.”

“Extra girlfriend,” said Praem.

Evelyn laughed, actually laughed, with a worrying enthusiasm.

“Evee?” I said.

“Sevens is the least of my worries!” Evelyn said. “No, if this goes ahead and the worst consequence is Heather coming back with a clay-based slime-girl concubine, fuck it, fine. I’ll throw a party. But no, that’s not what worries me.”

Raine said, gently but firmly: “What worries you, Evee?”

“What do you think? We are exhausted. We are locked in combat with a mage. We have no idea what might be on the way here, right now. I’m betting on Zheng finding that house for us. It’s the safest way. Heather is option number two.” She looked at me again. “So, yes, I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

“Because I can’t keep looking away,” I said. “Because sooner or later I have to stare back.”

Evelyn’s face crumpled into an avalanche of worry. “Oh bloody hell, don’t put it like that.”

I almost laughed. “Sorry, Evee. But it’s true. I could end this conflict with Edward, right now, if only I was better at brain-math. And I think that proper communication with Mister Squiddy is the only chance I’ve got.”

Or scrub the Fractal off my arm. But I didn’t say that out loud.

Evelyn sighed. She glanced up at Raine. “And you’re on board with this, really?”

Raine shrugged. “If Heather thinks it’s best. And I agree. The quicker we can end the mage punch-up, the better. She’s got a point there.”

I spoke up as well: “But I agree with you that it’s worth doing right, if it’s worth doing at all. Eevee, I will go through any tests you think are necessary. Magic or otherwise. Poke me with a fork, chase me around with a branding iron. Whatever you think is needed.”

To my surprise, Lozzie rose from her chair and tiptoed forward, fluttering the hem of her poncho and creeping over to Eevee. Evelyn watched her approach, unconsciously bracing as if to get shouted at. But Lozzie just smiled.

“Eevee-weevee,” she said. “I’m here too. I’ll watch Heathy. I promise. I’ll go in with her. I’ll be right there!”

Evelyn looked up at Lozzie with a strange and pinched frown, like she couldn’t quite believe her ears. “You will? You, well, of course you know what you’re doing, but—”

“Sometimes you have to do dumb things!” Lozzie chipped, nodding along.

Evelyn sighed. “Sometimes we do, yes.”

“Eevee,” I said. “I’m going to go ahead and touch the circle. Unless we want to do this another way.”

Lozzie and Evelyn stared at each other for a long moment, Lozzie letting that strange little smile trip and bounce across her lips, Evelyn stony and dark and very unhappy with all this, but clinging to something in Lozzie’s expression. Lozzie bobbed on the balls of her feet. Evelyn grumbled something under her breath. But finally an understanding passed between them, something that was not for me, which I did recognise.

Lozzie touched Eevee’s shoulder with the lightest brush of her fingertips, so feather-soft that I doubted Eevee could even feel it through her clothes. Evelyn sighed and turned to me — and reached out for my hand. I took it without reservation.

“Alright then, Heather,” she said, blinking a little too hard. “Not like we have anything else to do all morning. You may begin when

ready.”

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“You have complete and total permission to interrupt this,” Evelyn said three hours later. “Veto power. Once this begins, you say stop, and it stops.”

Lozzie nodded, bouncing on her chair in time with the motion of her head. “Mmhmm! I have the big no! Power!”

Raine added, lounging by the doorway, “Should think we all have veto power.”

“You do,” I said, a little tighter than I’d intended.

A new kind of exhaustion hung heavy on my shoulders; the last three hours of testing had been unpleasant, but not torturous, but the constant readjustments had dragged me back and forth between normal consciousness and the trance-like visualisation, over and over again. The skin of reality felt thin around my senses.

Evelyn hissed, “Of course we do. But none of us is going to understand what’s happening once it begins. Lozzie, I am asking you, not as a mage or as Evelyn Saye, but ... ” Evelyn trailed off, chewing on her lower lip.

“Evee,” Lozzie chirped, after waiting to see if Evelyn would resume by herself.

“Yes.” Evelyn sighed. “Lozzie, I’m asking you, between the two of us. If this starts to go wrong in some fashion, you pull her back out.” Evelyn jabbed the head of her walking stick toward me. “Don’t hesitate, don’t second-guess yourself, don’t worry about justifying it to me, or Raine, or least of all to Heather herself. Just do it. Pull her back out. Promise me. Please.”

Lozzie nodded. “Promise!” Then she leaned sideways in her chair and put her head against my shoulder, blonde hair spilling down my arm. “I’ll look after Heathy!”

I felt like a very naughty puppy who’d made a mess on the carpet: the topic of discussion but not part of it, distant and floaty. I sat there and endured the sensation, secretly savouring the time to rest and recover, cradling my newly aching tentacle with two others, coiled in my lap. The morning had already been an exhausting ordeal — not the kind with adrenaline and fear and running about,

but the kind with painstakingly slow adjustments and fiddly delicate problems, like threading dozens of tiny needles over and over until one's fingers are cramped and one's eyesight is askew, while wearing a sensory deprivation helmet and a muzzle.

"Thank you," Evelyn said to Lozzie — then to me: "And you, Heather—"

"Evee," I sighed. "I know, we've been over it."

"No, you listen." She thumped the edge of the workshop table with the head of her walking stick; Mister Squiddy's big bucket of clay sloshed ever so slightly up on the table top.

We had spent the last three hours testing the tentacle into oblivion. If it had been my hand, my fingers would be stripped to the bone and the bones would be spider-webbed with fractures, like I'd been fed into a meat grinder. Blocking pain signals was one thing — I could simply close off the nerves and thicken the skin and plate the flesh and that was that. But knowing the pain was there, gating it away while having my newly minted nerve-trick examine and pass it as safe? That had taken hours to refine, to make perfect. Because Evelyn would not accept anything less than perfect.

Nor should she, I was forced to admit. She loved me very much. She wouldn't let me hurt myself. And if that meant hounding me until I got this right, so be it.

Eventually we'd finished, cleared away the pain-circle, and broken for lunch: normal food for everybody else, more 'English sushi' for me. But that was merely a brief reprieve before the main event.

Mister Squiddy now sat on the workshop table, safely contained inside his bucket and a magic circle. The operation to put him there had taken another hour, mostly done by Praem and Felicity, who was back from escorting Kim to work. Mister Squiddy flapped and slopped, a bucket full of rotting squid, happy and senseless and wet. Praem had dug out the copper cable we'd used last time, along with the old CRT television, and hooked him up to it all over again. The logic was simple: if he showed us anything out of the ordinary, anything suspicious, or angry, or uncertain, then the experiment would be called off.

So far he'd been showing nothing but abstract shapes, with many dozens of sides, rotating slowly against a background of flickering

static. It was quite beautiful, like shadows moving across water at twilight. But it was also utterly meaningless, even to Lozzie.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “Evee, you’ve said it over and over. It’s not like I don’t enjoy listening to your voice, but—”

“Don’t distract me with flattery,” Evelyn snapped. “You’re lucky we’re doing this at all.” She huffed, averted her eyes, and waved a sort of apology gesture in my general direction. “No, no, I didn’t mean that, of course we’d still be doing it. But listen all the same, please. Even if just for the sake of my frayed nerves.”

I nodded, numbed by guilt; even after our brief and difficult heart-to-heart earlier, Evelyn seemed more on edge than when we’d started. Me experimenting with brain-math was apparently more terrifying than going up against an ancient and experienced mage.

Evelyn leaned closer. Her eyes blazed into mine. “If Lozzie says ‘out’, then you get the fuck out.”

“Yes. No question. Understood.”

“If you two come out of this and she tells me you resisted the request to stop — even if it works, even if you’re safe — if you refuse to stop when asked, then ... then ... ”

Praem finished the sentence for her: “Very disappointed.”

Evelyn sat back, eyes heavy-lidded, deflating slowly with one huge sigh. “Yes. That. And I’ll force you to watch the worst anime show I can think of. And I can think of some really shitty anime shows, you better believe it.”

Raine snorted. “Everyone else gets threats of violence, Heather gets threatened with harems. Seems fair.”

“Shut up,” Evelyn said.

I smiled one of the most awkward smiles I’d ever achieved. “I understand. If it starts to go wrong, then we end it. I promise.”

Felicity cleared her throat from down the other end of the table, where she was sitting with her hands together and her head bowed. She seemed almost as exhausted by all this as Evelyn was. “End him, more like.” She nodded at Mister Squiddy, quietly rolling in his dirty bucket of clay.

“That,” Evelyn grunted, “is a worse-case scenario option. Do not.

Unless I say so.”

Twil hissed through her bared teeth. She was sitting on the sofa up against the wall, looking mightily uncomfortable, and still wearing clothes not-so-subtly borrowed from Evelyn. I wished I had the energy and spare mental bandwidth to ask about that.

She said, “I thought the worse case scenario option is the ... you know. Amputation thing.” Her grimace worsened. She fiddled with the modified 3D glasses in her hands. “Right?”

Felicity mumbled, “That’s not actually a plan. It’s madness.”

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “For once, Felicity is correct. Twil, I specified that amputation is a distant, *distant* possibility. If we’re all screaming and vomiting up live toads while bleeding from our eyes, then yes, go ahead and rip Heather’s tentacle off. But I only mentioned it as a precaution. I want it in your head, in case. That’s all.”

Twil pulled an expression like a very distressed basset hound, which was quite a feat on such an angelic face. Her dark curly hair hung down and framed her eyes, giving her a haunted look. “Yeah, well. I wish it wasn’t in my head.” She glanced at me. “Fuck, Big H, I can’t think about that. I can’t pull your fucking arm off.”

I smiled back as best I could. “Just think of me as a big lobster.”

Twil’s expression changed in the exact way to make me feel like I’d just shouted at a small dog.

“I mean,” I added quickly, “it’ll grow back. You won’t be doing me any permanent damage. I am ninety nine point ninety nine percent sure that I can speed-regrow a tentacle if I have to. And, well ... ” I looked down at the tentacle coiled in my lap, glowing neon purple, plated and gnarled and ridged in toxic gold. “With everything I’ve done to this one, regrowth might be necessary anyway.”

Twil didn’t look the least bit reassured. She put the 3D glasses on the sofa cushion next to her, then picked them up again, put them down on the other side, then locked her fingers together.

“Twil,” Evelyn sighed, “you’re not going to have to do it. Relax.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Twil. She tapped her feet on the floorboards, shifting uncomfortably. “Wish you’d asked Zheng to stay this morning. She’s a lot more qualified for pulling off limbs than I am.

It's kind of one of her things, you know? Pulling bits off people? I'm under-qualified for this."

I kept that awkward smile plastered across my face; truth be told I hated the emergency amputation fall-back option too. It took all my self-control not to raise my tentacles in a protective cage when Evee had first mentioned the concept. Part of me wanted to hiss at Twil, screech and kick and threaten to bite, even if the plan was for my own good.

Also, I doubted even Twil's strength could get through the tentacle, but I kept that bit to myself.

Evelyn said to Twil, "Your qualification is physical strength."

"Hello," said Praem.

"You too," Evelyn sighed. "But you already know that. We need multiple back-ups, in case something does go wrong."

"Greeeeeat," said Twil. I'd never heard her so sarcastic. "Me and Praem, fuckin' ripper squad. Great role. Thanks for this."

Evelyn shot back, "This is for Heather's safety. You know that."

Twil blew out a long breath, unconvinced.

"Settle down, puppy," said a voice like rusty plates dragged across gravel; Aym was standing a few feet behind Felicity, head-to-toe in black lace, all except her pale face and long black hair, lurking like an evil sprite in her victim's shadow. The effect was somewhat spoiled by Seven-Shades-of-Sanguine-Goblin standing right next to her, holding her hand, wrapped in voluminous and glowing golden-yellow robes — the physical manifestation of the promise we shared.

Evelyn snapped, instantly: "Do not address her. Twil, do not respond."

"Alright, alright," said Twil, hands up. Aym cackled like steam escaping a pipe. Sevens went *glurrrk* and yanked on her hand. Aym hissed softly and they both snapped at the air in front of each other's faces for a moment.

I cleared my throat and began to uncoil the special tentacle which lay in my lap. "None of that is going to be necessary. This is going to work. It is. And if it doesn't, Lozzie will be with me."

“Right on,” said Raine. “You can do this, Heather. You can. I know you can. I believe in you.”

Lozzie giggled, head on my shoulder. “It’ll be fiiiiine.”

Twil said, “Hope so.”

“Best of luck,” Felicity murmured.

“Luck and love,” gurgled Sevens. Aym said nothing.

But Evelyn snorted a single humourless laugh. “Heather, I appreciate your attempt to reassure me, it’s very sweet. But don’t lie to yourself. You don’t even know what this is going to do. This is a shot in the dark.”

I did my best to summon up a mote of Raine-style beaming confidence. But Evelyn wasn’t staring back at me with clinical, cold disapproval; she wasn’t being Evelyn Saye, Her Mother’s Daughter, The Mage. She was wracked with worry and concern and making very little effort to hide it. Dark bags ringed her eyes from lack of sleep and bad dreams and terrible fears. She’d been downing coffee and painkillers all morning, and only Praem’s unrelenting insistence had seen her eat anything except paracetamol and caffeine for lunch.

I’d done this to her, though I hadn’t intended to. My attempted smile dribbled off my face. My bioreactor grumbled in my guts, gently flaring with a painful throb of energy, unasked for and unanswered in kind. I winced at that, but then took a deep breath and nodded to Eevee.

“It is,” I said. “But I’ve taken a lot of shots in the dark. Some of them have paid off pretty well.”

“Huh,” Evelyn said. “I suppose they have.”

“And I promise I won’t hesitate if Lozzie says stop. I promise, Eevee. Even if this is dangerous, we’re going to be careful.” I finished uncoiling my special tentacle, stretching it out across the table; pneuma-somatic muscles ached and complained, inflamed and stiff with change. “After all, isn’t that what this is about? Oh, um,” I flapped my hands. “Sorry, I mean, my tentacle. That’s what all the tentacle-work was about.”

Evelyn sighed and slipped her own magically modified glasses back on. She looked up at the tentacle, then squinted. “I suppose it is

impressive, yes. Well done. But does it have to glow like that?"

Lozzie giggled. "Blinged out Heathy!"

"It's a side-effect," I said, then cleared my throat awkwardly. "I said before, I didn't do the neon on purpose."

"Suits you," said Raine. "Maybe after this is done we could swing by the shopping centre, get you some classic raver gear. Hair dye, glow-in-the-dark wristbands, light-up shoes."

"Party Heathy!" Lozzie giggled.

I sighed and rolled my eyes, but my smile felt an inch less forced and fake. I knew what Raine was trying to do. It worked.

"Party tentacle," I muttered, staring up at my handiwork. "No, I think it's rather the opposite."

"Party time," said Praem.

The final preparations took only a few minutes. Praem fetched a pair of magic circles; one went beneath my chair, ringing me with protection, and the other went beneath Lozzie, as a second passenger, only semi-connected to this unwise spelunking experiment. Everyone else backed away, beyond range of any accidentally flailing tentacles. Lozzie settled in next to me, a subtle smile on her lips. I wrapped myself tight with all my pneumatic limbs, a ball of physical comfort and security.

Just before I turned to Mister Squiddy up on the table, Sevens trotted forward, dragging Aym by the hand. Aym hissed and grumbled, but Sevens removed the shining yellow robes from her own shoulders, and settled them about mine instead.

"Thank you, Sevens," I said, deeply touched. "I love you too."

The words came out without even thinking; I was too exhausted and excited, and in too much euphoric pain to self-edit. Sevens bobbed her scrawny shoulders and nuzzled my arm. Aym looked on with a strange expression. Then the pair retreated as well, slipping away with everybody else.

Raine gave me a thumbs up. "Want a countdown?"

"T-minus 5," Twil said, with a token laugh. She cleared her throat when Evelyn glared at her.

"In her own time," Evelyn said. Then she repeated, to me: "In your own time, Heather. And you can back out whenever you like."

I nodded, throat dry, pulse thumping, and turned to look at Mister Squiddy in his bucket.

Discard the cutesy name. Discard the bucket, the circle, the copper wire, the old television, the geometric images on the screen. Discard the clay, the squid-tentacles, the rotten sheet layer of false flesh. All of this was illusion over the truth. I wanted to speak to the truth.

I raised my numb, aching, special tentacle, reached past the circle and the bucket-rim, and touched the tip to the roiling clay mess, possessed by we knew not what.

At first nothing happened, just the sensation of wet, cold clay on my thickly armoured tentacle-skin. Mister Squiddy reached up to engulf several inches of tentacle, but he was neither aggressive nor cautious, more like magnetic putty enfolding a metal tube. I shuddered slightly. Seconds passed. My bioreactor gurgled in anticipation.

"He's not trying anything," I murmured. "Nothing's trying to invade me."

"Good," Evelyn whispered from the back of the room.

"Shouldn't he be sending signals? Like with the copper wire?"

Lozzie whispered: "Bodies are different."

"Do you think I should say hello?" I asked. "Or ask a question? I thought there would be—"

Contact.

A hot sizzle of electric-meat, flesh burning on a grill over a dead sun; a billion writhing flies in the rotten aftermath, rising in a cloud from the echoes of thought; a shape with six thousand six hundred sixty six point six sides; wet; and wet; and wet; rotating past the point of no return into a void of light where the seeker cannot see; a mote of motion in a sea of stillness; wet.

Nerve gates passed me information, not invasion, not dangerous. But it was nonsense. Overwhelming nonsense, flooding my mind with image-sensation. Not even hyperdimensional mathematics.

I gasped, tears jumping to my eyes, my brain juddering back and

forth in my skull with a rattle-rattle-rattle of information poured into the gullet of my mind. I twitched my tentacle upward, about to disconnect.

“Oh!” came a familiar chirp. “No, that’s silly, we can’t hear you like that!”

Lozzie’s hand closed around my arm — and my consciousness closed up with a snap.

The last thing I felt was my head lolling forward

as I simply

fell

asleep.

sediment in the soul – 19.13

Discordance — dislocation — dissonance.

A jarring screech tearing across the trembling membranes of consciousness, shattered into shards and splinters and slivers on the brick wall of the waking world, then re-forming with a sickening lurch and backward-time squelch of reversal as it sucks itself coherent again; rearing up with a herky-jerky stab-split into the crown of my s k u l l.

My eyes snapped open; so did my head.

Bone plates of my skull splayed wide like the petals of a flower, the dream blossoming upward from within my grey meat, climbing the air like ivy on a petrified tree; the whorls of my brain uncoiling and reaching toward a ceiling a million miles up, stretching my self-hood to breaking point, until I was a quivering note held at maximum extension on the air-gap between here and there, between awake and dreaming, between real and image, between me and *me*.

My eyes snapped open.

Naked and sweating, crouched in my chair before the table like a lake of wood with knots as continents, my body a tangle of coiled pain singing tight songs of nerve and damage and chronic endlessness; doubling up and vomiting a stream of steaming green acid onto the floorboards, watching my upchucked rejection eat through the varnish and grain and nails and glue and foundation stones and earth and rock; the dream billowing upward in smoky by-product, sucked into my lungs and melting my eyeballs and bonding with the cells of my alveoli to choke me in blind suffocation and nightmare isolation.

Eyes snapped open.

Wrapped in my own tentacles like a human-shaped caterpillar, wings sprouting in bloody ribbons as they displace my ribs, hard chitinous plates pushing outward from bone and joint and tearing my skin to flaps and shreds upon my bare muscles; the afterbirth by-product splashing down the steps of lighter slumber and

spreading outward to form a deep and stinking pool; the dream shimmering in reflection as I cannot get my new wings to unfurl and I trip and I fall into the liquid of my own transformation, incomplete.

Eyes, open.

Eyes.

I opened my eyes.

Panting, quivering, caked in cold sweat, frozen in shock, I waited for the next barrage of dream-nonsense.

But nothing happened. My mind did not slide down my body and spool out on the floor. The walls did not fall away like cheap set dressing. My skull did not splay itself open like a flower — I actually reached up with one shaking hand and pressed against my hair, making sure that my bones were all there, shut tight, encasing my brain like proper bones should do, instead of imitating a plant.

“I-it was just ... the dream,” I panted. “Just dream-logic. Lozzie?”

But there was no Lozzie; there was no anybody.

I found myself right back in the magical workshop — or at least a very accurate dreamlike representation of it — sitting in the exact same position as back in the waking world. Exact same chair, exact same angle, exact same clothes. Lozzie’s chair was right next to me, but Lozzie herself was absent. Everyone else was missing too: no peanut gallery of Raine and Evee, no sprite-like presences of Sevens and Aym, no reassuring Praem and dour Felicity. All of Evelyn’s usual clutter was present and correct, books and notepads littering the table, magic circles on canvas and tarpaulin lining the walls, strange magical bric-a-brac all over the place. Even the gateway stood sensible and upright, carved into the far wall and surrounded by the eye-bending mandala. The CRT television and the bucket were on the table too, right in front of me, a mirror-image of waking reality.

The bucket was full of clay — inert, wet, gloopy. Mister Squiddy was not in residence.

I raised my voice: “Lozzie?”

The recreation of waking reality was so perfect that for a moment I wasn’t sure if I was in a dream or not; had I passed out for hours

and been left here to recover? No, that made no sense. Raine would have put me to bed. Raine would be by my side. We would be in full emergency mode, especially if Mister Squiddy had left his carefully contained clay vessel and gone walkabouts.

“Slipped out for a sneaky snack,” I murmured. “Nope.”

Such concerns seemed abstract and airy, mere whims which floated upward and out of my brain, motes leaving my thoughts, captured and interrogated by something very large which stood just behind me, that I could neither see nor hear.

That particular notion was so strong that I spent perhaps thirty seconds trying to catch sight of this hypothetical thought-investigator who stood behind me. Twisting in my chair, closing my eyes slowly and then opening them quickly, trying to look over my shoulder without being seen — none of those techniques yielded any results. Dream or waking world, I could not catch my own attentive shadow.

Then I giggled.

“Oh, Heather,” I told myself. “That’s a metaphor. Or it’s yourself? Myself? It’s a metaphor for yourself. You’re trying to catch yourself. An eye cannot examine herself without a mirror. And you do not have a mirror. Metaphorically speaking.” I let out a heavy sigh and stood up so I could peer into the bucket where Mister Squiddy should have been. The presence behind me politely looked over my shoulder, too, agreeing that Mister Squiddy was not present. “This is absolutely a dream. I *giggled*.”

Mister Squiddy, missing. Lizzie, gone AWOL. Everybody else — awake? I chewed my bottom lip and tried to focus, but an invisible hand kept reaching through the bones of my skull and stirring up my thoughts, like playing with bubble-bath.

I screwed up my eyes and looked down at my body; then I realised that was impossible, so I opened my eyes again.

“Tentacles, check,” I said out loud. “One, two, three, four, five ... five,” I huffed and corrected myself. “Six. All six, present and correct.”

One of the tentacles was swollen and slow and glowing neon purple. The dream had replicated my physical changes down to the last detail. I didn’t know if that was a good sign or not.

“Yellow robes, check,” I said, running a hand over my chest, over the silken yellow layer of Sevens’ affection and trust. Then I poked and prodded at myself, wincing softly at the landscape of bruises across the canvas of my flesh, the delightful array of pain and ache shooting up my nerves. “Bruises, check. Why, though? Why take these into a dream?”

The large presence behind me purred sympathy.

“Lozzie,” I said. “Lozzie, check? Lozzie? No Lozzie.” I sighed. “Well. Onward we go.”

I left the magical workshop and went into the kitchen and went to the fridge and found a lemon and put it in my mouth. The sharp taste exploded across my tongue; my bioreactor gurgled in response, hungry for citrus, processing dream-matter into dream-energy.

“Oh, Lozzie,” I sighed again, spitting a chunk of inedible lemon peel into my hand; even in a dream I wouldn’t dare drop it on the floor. Praem would be very disappointed. “This isn’t going to work without you here. I can’t think thoughts in a dream unless there’s a reason to panic. Or if you’re around to make me sharper. You are a whetstone to my mind. Lozzie, Loz-Loz, where did you goooo-”

That was an understatement. The Big Thinky Heather who stood just behind me agreed; the dream was all well and good for specific purposes, but it was hard to think real thoughts in here. When Lozzie had pulled me into the dream to rescue Badger from the Eye, I had been instantly baptised in a state of screaming mad panic, more than enough to pull me into buttoned-up lucidity.

But this? Lozzie had made a promise to Evelyn that she would pull me out at the first sign of trouble. Lozzie had intentionally pulled me into the dream. So there couldn’t be any trouble. So there was no reason to think clear thoughts. Whatever was going on, it must be safe. So I dreamed on.

“This doesn’t work without you here, Loz. Loz-Loz. I love you Lozzie but I need your help. Where did you go? I assume this was meant to happen, but ... ”

Big Heather To My Rear suggested that we go over to the window and take a look. I wanted to eat more lemons, so I did that instead.

“Lozzie?”

When we eventually got to the kitchen window — which felt like it took about three days — I stood there staring at regimented rows of colour-coded flowers, a polished wooden bench framed by a trio of young saplings, and a little pond edged with dark slate.

“That’s not our garden,” I said.

It’s your mum and dad’s garden, said Large Heather Who Was Behind Me.

“Oh. So it is ... ”

I swallowed. A nagging feeling itched in the back of my skull. That was dream-logic, undeniable; the garden of my childhood home stood just beyond the back wall of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, completely out of place and time. My dad had since filled in the pond and replaced it with a rock garden. What was it doing here, inside a dream?

My thoughts felt more dense than before, like the collapsing matter of a dwarf star compacting tighter and tighter in a futile, dying effort to reignite nuclear fusion.

Where was Mister Squiddy? And where was Lozzie? What was the point of pulling me into the dream and then leaving me to my own devices?

“Unless she’s gotten into trouble herself,” I murmured. “Lozzie does do that, sometimes.”

Rear Heather Behind Me handed me another lemon, neatly skinned and oozing thin juices.

“Thank you,” I murmured. I bit into the lemon, sharp citrus flavour coating my tongue and—

Lozzie might be in trouble.

Lucidity snapped tight like a rubber band against the inside of my skull.

I turned around so quickly that I almost lost my balance. Tentacles splayed in a protective cage, warning hiss clawing up my throat, skin bristling with the silent threat of toxins and paralytics and spikes and armour.

Nobody was there.

No Tall Heather Behind Me. Just a dream recreation of the kitchen, the wooden table and the old chairs, the battered counter-tops and the big fridge, the door to the front room wedged open. It was perfect, completely flawless. It even included the plates we'd left on the table at lunchtime, and Evelyn's unlabelled bottle of painkillers.

"What ... who?" I stammered out, lips numb, tentacles quivering. Then I stared at the lemon in my hand, freshly skinned, with one bite taken out of the flesh. The juice was sliding down my hand and dripping onto the floor. "What was I speaking to?"

Nobody and nothing replied.

"Oh. Oh no," I whispered. "Something has gone terribly wrong here."

I poked my head into the utility room behind the kitchen and looked down the cellar stairs too, in case they had been replaced with anything else, like the garden outdoors. But they were perfectly normal, every detail of the waking world replicated with perfect accuracy, even the scuffing on the skirting board and the precise way the old sofa sagged in the middle with its broken back and ancient cushions. I kept my tentacles up and my eyes wide, expecting a nightmare to jump out at me from every corner.

"Lozzie?" I hissed. "Lozzie?"

No Lozzie. I stepped into the front room, but it was more of the same — a perfect mirror of the waking world, absent any people. The old grandfather clock ticked away to itself. Boxes of junk sat against the wall in neglected piles. Several pairs of shoes stood next to the door in their usual jumble. The door itself was shut and bolted and locked.

The air felt slow and thick and dark. I crept over to the stairs and peered upward, heart pounding.

I sighed at that, feeling absurd and a little angry. This was home, the house, Number 12 Barnslow Drive, or at least a version of it, reflected in a dream. Part of me felt deeply offended that the house could ever be made to feel creepy or spooky or unwelcoming; it was a disservice to all of us who lived within, to the physical building itself, and to something deeper as well, some essential essence of place.

"Sorry," I whispered, patting the wall with one tentacle. "I know

you're not real, this is just a dream, but it's not fair on you. Where has Lozzie gotten to, really? This is completely absurd. And unsafe. If Eevee knew, she'd be going bananas." I raised my voice, calling out to the empty spaces. "Lozzie!"

The echoes died away, receding into the depths of the dream-house.

Then: "*Heather?*"

The voice came from upstairs — far, far upstairs, far and away, buried behind walls and doors and plaster and brick and wood and steel.

And it wasn't Lozzie.

I stood frozen, dumbfounded for a moment by the high, querulous tone, so familiar and yet so different. I'd heard that voice before, in the mouth of an imitator, full of life and expression and emotion, but this version was flat and empty, mere air pushed over vocal chords and muscles pulling at lips.

It was my own voice. It was me.

"... Sevens?" I called out. "Is that you, wearing my face? Sevens? Are you in here, in the dream?"

No reply. Shadows sat smooth and silken at the top of the stairs, flowing with invisible currents.

I put my hands on my hips and sighed sharply, but I did a poor job of covering up my sudden nameless fear; my tentacles betrayed my true reaction, drifting upward as if ready to defend myself from whatever awaited upstairs. I was breathing too hard, cold sweat prickling on my skin; something had invaded our home — in a dream, yes, but it was still home.

"Mister Squiddy?" I said, but nothing replied to that either. "Oh, for pity's sake. I won't have this. I will not! I shall ... wake myself up! As soon as I find Lozzie."

"*Heather,*" said the me-voice from far away upstairs. That time it wasn't a question. It sounded more like somebody who had never heard my name before, rolling it in their mouth.

A hiss tried to claw up my throat. I pursed my lips and swallowed. "Stop it!" I snapped. "Oh, fine. I am coming up there, you ... you ..."

I glanced down at the shoes next to the door; Evelyn's walking stick was right there, propped against the wall. I reached for it, desiring a weapon to brandish, something I could threaten to rap over an offending head; yes, I had six working tentacles, but I blame the dream-logic for making me want a nice heavy object in my fist. Dream-logic or ape instinct, one or the other. I wanted to hit something with a club.

But then I noticed: among all the shoes, one pair was missing.

Lozzie's trainers were gone.

"*Heather*," said the voice upstairs. But I could see nothing up there except familiar old shadows and the shape of the upstairs corridor.

I wet my lips, swallowed, and said, "Whatever you are, I don't feel threatened by you. But I think Lozzie is outdoors, so I'm going to go, okay? I'm not leaving you behind, if you're ... part of me, or Mister Squiddy, or ... or ... I don't know. This is just a dream, so maybe you're not even real, but ... I'll see you shortly. Okay?"

No reply. I stamped into my own shoes — dream-shoes — unlocked the door, opened it wide, and stepped out.

As it shut behind me, just as the latch caught, I heard my own voice say: "Be safe."

I would have turned back and wrenched the door open again, but the sight in front of me was far more bizarre than an unexplained voice.

Barnslow Drive — the road on which the house stood — was gone. No cracked pavement and crumbly asphalt invaded by tree roots and water damage, no houses spaced far apart in memorial of some 19th-century nightmare which never came to be, no old gnarled trees hanging over the opposite side of the road in their ancient grandeur, dusting the gutters with their fallen leaves.

Instead, the road was tightly lined with semi-detached houses in pale brick, with modern plastic windows. The road itself was newly resurfaced, shiny and slick and black, inviting the stickiness of unfelt fingers. Young trees were planted in front gardens. Cars stood parked in stubby driveways. Down the street, more leafy suburbia unrolled toward a neat little roundabout with yellow signposts and a zebra crossing.

"This isn't Sharrowford," I breathed, eyes wide, tentacles pulled in tight as if to protect myself. I clutched Sevens' yellow robes to my chest. "This is Reading."

It was the street on which I'd grown up — on which Maisie and I had grown up.

"Except that," I said, as my eyes were pulled inexorably upward, over the rooftops, past the buildings, into the metal-tinted sky. "Pretty sure that's not from Reading."

Towering over the leafy suburb of where I'd grown up was an edifice of shining metal: a great dome in brass, gold, and chrome, like a clockwork meteor which had fallen into this dream of my childhood. Pieces of the dome floated free in the air, unconnected to the rest of the structure, as if suspended by magnetic force. Bands of shining metal rotated like pieces of cloud formation. Many-sided shapes shifted and rotated and clicked and joined and parted and locked and sank and rose and stilled and translated and—

I gasped as if coming up for air from a terrible depth, from lightless caverns of the mind.

"Is that— you?" I breathed. "I— I don't— I—"

My eyes were dragged along the clockwork perfection, moved as if I was a piece of the machine; after only a second of following the mechanical perfection, I could predict where the pieces would go, how they would fit together, which next steps they must follow — and what they meant.

A scratching scraped against the inside of my skull. I winced and screwed my eyes up.

"That's you, isn't it?" I breathed. "Mister Squiddy? Or ... whatever you are. That's you. It's okay, I'm ... I understand, I can see. I'm on my way, I ... yes."

I stumbled down the short garden pathway on numb feet, then turned in panic as if I might see my childhood home behind me, filling the space where Number 12 Barnslow Drive should be standing. But no; my home, my real home, was right there, the Victorian red brick and brooding windows and climbing ivy and patched roof of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. The house had wedged itself in between several modern semis, like a piece of history air-dropped into a dream.

"That's exactly what has happened," I said. "The house came with us. With me. Um ... thank you?"

The house did not reply.

I trotted out into the street, assailed by a million memories of Maisie and I walking down that pavement on our way to school. My throat closed up, my heart swelled, and tears threatened to prickle in my eyes. A numbness inside me woke up, filled with pins and needles and aching in a way I needed to avoid thinking about. I ripped my eyes away from my own ghost and looked up and down the road instead, trying to avoid the beating rhythm of the brass-gold dome of perfect mathematics.

"Lozzie!" I shouted. "Lozzie!"

"Here!" a faint cry echoed over the false rooftops of dream-Reading. "Heather! Heather!"

"Lozzie!"

I picked up my feet and ran down the street, trainers slapping on the asphalt, bruises singing and joints screaming, but the adrenaline and fear and confusion blanketed the worst of the pain. And after all, this was only a dream.

Lozzie was just around the corner next to the roundabout, wild-eyed with a mirror of my own panic, fluttering in her pastel poncho like a lost jellyfish in an unfamiliar current, in the alien dream-waters of a remembered Reading.

"Heathy!" she cried out. We caught each other in a sudden rough embrace, mutual reassurance that we were both real, both really here.

"Lozzie—" I panted. "What—"

"I'm sorry!" she said, pulling back but holding onto my arms. Her face was distraught and confused, her breath coming in jerky little gasps. "I don't understand how we got separated. That doesn't happen! That's not a thing! I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to overstep without asking, I promised Evee I would help and we can stop right now we can go back we can—"

"Lozzie, Lozzie, slow down, slow down." I nodded gently until she nodded along with me. "Slow down."

"I'm sorry," she squeaked. She bit her lip and sniffed hard, eyes brimming with tears. "You told me not to do this again. You told me. I'm sorry."

"Lozzie, I'm not angry with you." I smiled for her — and found it wasn't forced or fake; the implications of our surroundings were filling me with a heady cocktail of hope. "I wish you'd asked before dunking us into the dream, yes. But we're not in any danger. I don't see the Eye rising over any mountain ranges, nothing like that."

"I-I hope not," she said.

"You didn't interfere in a process. You helped it along." I glanced left and right, at the roundabout and the terraced houses, at suburban Reading marching off in all directions — or at least, a memory of suburban Reading — with that vast dome of distant bronze and gold towering over the town, shifting and adjusting like a clockwork god. I had to tear my eyes away from that promise of meaning. "In fact, Lozzie, this is an incredibly good sign." The smile jerked wider on my face. "Incredibly good. If I'm right, I don't think we're in any danger at all. This is great. Lozzie, yes, you should have asked first, or warned me, and please do so in the future. But — thank you. This is good news. We're on the right track. You see that giant dome? I think that's Mister Squiddy. Or his message. It has to be."

Lozzie bit her bottom lip, smiling through the anxiety — but also staring at me like she had to break some bad news.

Dream-Lozzie looked ever so slightly different to the real Lozzie back in the waking world; I'd experienced that shift before, back when we'd first met for real, in the bowels of the cult's castle.

This was no emergency spiritual rescue operation in the no-man's land of the Eye's obsessive observation, so Lozzie's physical form was subtly different, perhaps a reflection of her idealised dream-self. Her pastel poncho glowed even under the direct light of the sun, like a bioluminescent bottom-dweller adapted for life on the surface; the hem seemed to shift and twitch independently of the motion of her body. The tips of her long wispy blonde hair floated upward slightly, like inquisitive tentacles rising from slumber. A pink-on-pink plaid skirt poked out from under her poncho, over eye-watering neon-green leggings, both items of clothing which I was pretty sure she didn't own in the waking world. Her sleepy-

eyed look was full of energy, even if currently turned inward with worry.

“ ... Lozzie?”

“We might be in a little danger,” she said — and pointed past my shoulder. “Didn’t you see?”

“See what?” I turned to look. “The big brass ... ”

Opposite the giant brass-and-gold segmented sphere of divine mathematics, towering over the other end of this dream-slice of Reading, was a gargantuan black moth.

A living hillside of dream-flesh, furred in luxurious silken obsidian, velvet and smooth and soft as night. Wings folded back atop the giant, covered in whirls and spirals of white-tinted fur amid the black, like cream on tar. A mass of tentacles, each the diameter of a house, reached upward from beneath the wings, waving their mouth-like tips in the air, like seaweed in a shallow ocean pool. Fluffy white antennae twitched and shivered above a massive head. The body was in repose like a cat with the paws tucked beneath, resting peacefully. But the face held more than a hint of familiar human shape, despite the black fur, the wedge of insect-snout, and the eyelids lowered over giant orbs. The mouth was kinked with sleepy amusement, as if lost in a silly dream.

I stared up in shock, breath stilled in my throat.

Lozzie whispered: “I don’t know why she’s here.”

“Is that ... ” I choked out. “That’s Tenny. Lozzie, is that Tenny?”

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie chirped.

“What ... ” I just shook my head, unable to form a question. “Is she ... sleeping?”

“Luckily for us!” Lozzie said. She pulled an awkward smile when I looked at her. “Tenns wouldn’t be dangerous to us though, not really!” she added quickly. “She’ll just be really confused if she wakes up. In the dream. Not for real! If she wakes up for real, that would be very good! Very good. Yes. Wakey-wakey, Tenn-Tenns. Pleaaaaaase.”

“Lozzie, Lozzie, wait a second. How did she get here? How did she get into the dream with us?”

Lozzie pulled an embarrassed grimace. “She must have been napping! Whoopsie.”

“That can happen?”

Lozzie’s grimace collapsed back into real worry. “It just did! Heathy, I don’t know what’s going on. It was just meant to be you and me, inside Mister Squiddy’s dream. But the dream brought Tenny too, and split us up, and I don’t even know where this is! This isn’t Sharrowford, is it?”

I shook my head. “No. No, it’s Reading, the place where I grew up.”

Lozzie blinked, then burst into a smile. “Oh!”

“Yes!” I smiled too. “That means—”

“Maisie!”

“In theory,” I said. “In theory, if this was inside Mister Squiddy’s head, then Maisie might have put it here. This is a good sign. But, wait, back to Tenny.”

“Big Tenns.” Lozzie almost giggled, her anxiety lifting. She was delighted that this might be a message from Maisie after all.

“Yes, big Tenns. Why? Why is she the size of a Godzilla monster? I mean, I recognise her. But that’s also not her.”

Lozzie shrugged. “Maybe she wants to be big.”

I opened my mouth to say something like ‘that’s absurd’, but then I reconsidered. If Tenny wanted to be the size of a hill in her dreams, then who was I to tell her no? It wasn’t even the first time she’d been technically massive — her cocoon had reached across Sharrowford and out into the countryside with a single tentacle, for the purpose of devouring random sheep to fuel her fleshy transformation. Tenny had experience in being large. She was more than justified.

“Well,” I said awkwardly, “good for her. But this isn’t the time.”

Lozzie muffled a giggle. I sighed and glanced up at the giant sleeping Tenny-moth-blob again.

“Lozzie, what happens if she wakes up? In the dream itself, here, with us? She’ll recognise us, right? I mean, it’s Tenny, she’d never hurt us. I’m not worried about that, I’m just ... well. She is very,

very large.”

Lozzie shook her head and flapped the hem of her poncho — it fluttered slowly down as if underwater. “Tenns loves us both very much. Buuuuut ...” Lozzie looked up at Tenny, then pointedly turned her head to look at the giant brass sphere of mathematics. She raised both hands, made fists, and then knocked her knuckles together. “Fight-o.”

“Ah. Yes. Giant monsters having a rubber-suit fight. I can see the logic.”

“Mmm.” Lozzie bit her lip.

“Did you let her watch a giant monster movie recently? Something like that?”

Lozzie rolled her eyes left and right as she considered the question, then said: “I think she was reading a wikipedia page about Mothra ...”

“Mothra.” I sighed. “I don’t even know what that is, but I probably don’t have to ask.” I stared up again at Large Tenny. “Can you wake her up?”

Lozzie blinked at me three times. “You want her to have the giant monster fight?”

“No! No, I mean, wake her up for real. End the dream, for her.”

Lozzie chewed on her bottom lip. “I’d have to go with her. I’m sorry, Heathy, I don’t know what’s happened here. This isn’t normal!”

I squeezed her hand and smiled awkwardly. “It’s all right, Lozzie. It’ll be all right. I think I need to reach that big brass sphere thing, it’s ... mathematically sound. If I can get up close, maybe I can comprehend it better without wanting to claw at the inside of my own skull. If this is Mister Squiddy’s dream, like you said, then that’s probably what he’s trying to communicate.” I looked left and right again. “I recognise this road, and the sphere is to the east. If this space works on realistic logic, it should only be a twenty minute walk. I think. I hope.” I glanced at Lozzie again, trying to judge if she was worried about more than just Big Tenny. “Do you know if there’s anything else in here with us?”

Lozzie shrugged. “It’s a dream! Could be. Sorry, Heathy. Sorry-

sorry.”

I took a deep breath and straightened my shoulders, pulled Sevens’ yellow robes snug around myself, and made sure I had Lozzie’s hand tight and secure in mine. “How much time is passing in the waking world?”

Lozzie bobbed her head from side to side, as if consulting some kind of inner motion-based clock. “Three seconds. Maybe five?”

“Good enough. We have time. Let’s get going.”

“Okidoki! You can show me the sights!”

“Of Reading?” I managed a weak laugh. “I wish I could. But we’re here for business.”

“Serious business,” Lozzie chirped. “For serious faces.”

Leading Lozzie along the pavements of my childhood memories was a supremely surreal experience — not just because this was happening in a dream, nor because these were not technically my memories, nor because of the geologic-formation-sized Tenny towering over one end of the town and the giant rotating brass sphere humming in mega-calculation over the other end.

No, it felt strange because Lozzie did not belong to this period of my life.

We walked all the way up the narrow terraced row of Beecham and ended up on the wide thoroughfare of Oxford Road, with its little shops and brick garden walls and rubbish in the gutters. We passed the TA centre and a beautiful little library and at least two Churches that I barely remembered. In some ways, Reading wasn’t too dissimilar to Sharrowford — less post-industrial, more alive, more Southern — but Lozzie seemed so out of place among the cracked pavements and terraced houses and parked cars. She was out of place in this part of my memories, bright and shining and free, when I’d been lonely and half-dead and sick with loss. Walking along with her, hand in hand, made me wonder how different life might have been if I’d met Lozzie at thirteen years old instead.

But this wasn’t Reading. It was a dream.

Cars were parked in driveways and along the pavement, but nothing moved on the street; no sounds of distant traffic hummed from between the buildings, no other pedestrians shared the

pavement with us. Lights showed in houses and buildings, behind closed curtains or shining bright from shop-front windows, but nobody moved behind the glass. Reading, remembered as a ghost town.

The brass-gold dome loomed over it all, plates floating through open air, clicking in rotation, their angles and sides referencing each other with mathematical perfection.

Physical pain seemed to ebb away here, too. Which made sense, because it was a dream and all. My bruises ached less and less, until I forgot all about them. My throbbing neon-purple tentacle sat heavy over one of my shoulders, beneath my yellow robes, but it didn't hurt like a numb and ice-dipped arm anymore. My joints clicked and clacked, but eventually flowed smooth and easy as we hurried down the pavement.

And beneath it all, a delicate and fragile elation fluttered in my chest: the mathematics of the sphere must be a message from Maisie. Mister Squiddy was her creature all along.

Nothing to worry about. Big Tenny was a sleepy girl. Mister Squiddy's math-sphere would teach me how to add five and three. Lozzie was safe.

And just like that, lucidity slipped away.

The dream closed back in, heavy on my eyelids and cool in my hand. Lozzie's shoes tapped the pavement, spelling out a word as we walked. Click-clack, click-clack went the sphere overhead, telling me secrets that I couldn't understand yet. I saw Number 12 Barnslow Drive on the corner of a street, and then again two streets on. Hello, house. Are you following us too? Don't worry, you're quite welcome.

Bigger Heather Who Was Behind Me struggled to keep pace with us. She wasn't used to moving around, after all.

"Lemon," I said.

A lemon was offered and placed in my hand. I bit into it, letting the juice run down my fingers and stain the grey pavements of my childhood. A few stray tears joined the citrus.

"Heathy?"

"I wish I'd known to eat lemons when I was nine," I said.

“ ... Heathy? Where did you get that?” Lozzie giggled.

“We’re in a dream, aren’t we?” I said. “Want some? I wish you’d been there, Lozzie. I wish you’d been there before we thought to go through the hole to Wonderland. You would have said not to.”

Lozzie’s eyes went very big in her face, wide with terror-wonder, directed right at me. Was I really so scary? I wiggled my tentacles but Lozzie didn’t giggle. I took another bite from the lemon, chewing with bone-deep satisfaction.

“Heathy?”

“Do you want a lemon too? They taste of growth and ... and ... time? Do you want a lemon?”

“Mmmmmmmm, okay?” said Lozzie.

Larger Heather At The Rear reached over my shoulder and offered Lozzie a lemon.

Lozzie opened her mouth and screamed.

Lucidity snapped back, hard as a metal ruler slapped against my forehead. Lozzie stopped screaming, eyes wide, staring at me and the space behind me, tugging on my hand, her poncho all fluffed up and quivering like a spooked cat.

“Lozzie, what—” I looked over my shoulder, but there was nobody behind me. “What was that? What—”

“It wasn’t you! It wasn’t you!” she squeaked. “That wasn’t you!”

“Wait, wait, something like that happened back in the house, at the start of the dream.”

“In the house?”

“Yes. Home. Our house. Number 12 Barnslow Drive, it’s where I started the dream, sitting in the same chair. And it’s ... it’s right there.” I nodded. Lozzie followed my look, over to where Number 12 Barnslow Drive currently stood, wedged between a chippie and a row of terraced houses. “Lozzie, what did you just see over my shoulder? What—” I glanced down and found I had a lemon in one hand. Another lemon lay on the pavement, bruised from the fall from a mystery hand.

“I don’t know who that was,” Lozzie said. “We’re not alone.”

As if on cue, echoing down the roads and across the streets of this dreamlike Reading, came a dull metal *clank clank clank*.

Lozzie and I whirled on the spot, holding on tight to each other's hands, her hair flying outward in a wispy cloud as we tried to locate the source of the sound.

"I think you're right," I said. "Somebody else is—"

"Coming this way!" Lozzie chirped.

Clank clank clank stomped the metal footsteps, short of stride and frustrated of footing. *Clank clank clank*. I raised all my tentacles and edged forward, giving Lozzie somewhere to shelter.

"This is a dream," I whispered to her, my head on a swivel, trying to figure out where the steps were coming from. "How bad can a fight get in a dream?"

"Bad," Lozzie whispered. "Another dreamer would be bad."

"Okay. If it's something really, really bad, we have to leave," I hissed.

"But we might not be able to get back!"

"I don't care. We both promised to Evelyn. We promised. If a walking nightmare comes around a corner, we leave, we're not staying to fight off Mister Squiddy's immune system, or whatever this is, or—"

Clank-clonk.

A suit of armour stepped around the corner of Zinzan Street, framed for a moment by the ghostly frontage of a grilled chicken shop.

The knight paused, metal helmet pointed toward Lozzie and me.

It was most definitely not one of Lozzie's Knights, somehow transported here from Camelot; the suit of armour was a real suit, cut for a human, with intricate metal joints and overlapping sheaths, clad from head to toe, complete with gauntlets and hand protection, and a coat of arms on a sort of tabard hanging down over the breastplate: a red dragon wrapped around a trio of tarnished, broken crowns. The helmet was shaped like the head of a goat, complete with metal horns and wide-set eyes above the actual visor-slit, a dark opening on a glint of pale flesh within.

A long sword was slung over the figure's back, wrapped in oil-cloth and greasy tarpaulin, strapped around the knight's chest with bits of mangy looking modern rope, blue and frayed. The weight was too much for the knight; they were hunched with the mass of the weapon.

Whoever was inside, they were also shorter than me.

"Hello?" I called out. "Who—"

"Oh!" Lozzie chirped in apparent delight. "You were napping! You must have been napping!"

The diminutive knight marched up to us, every step bubbling with frustration even through the mute steel plate. Lozzie was beaming, but I didn't lower my tentacles. A hiss rose in my throat, muscles ready to spring forward or back away or screech or run or—

The little knight stopped with an angry stomp, fumbled with one gauntlet, and clacked the visor up.

"What the fuck am I doing here!?" demanded Jan.

Wide-eyed with terror and confusion, flushed in the cheeks, and completely out of her depth — but Jan was undoubtedly real.

Lozzie went all a-giggle. She pulled away from me and threw her arms briefly around Jan's armoured shoulders. Jan had no idea what to do with her hands and just stood there huffing and puffing until Lozzie pulled back again.

"You must have been napping!" Lozzie said, like Jan was a late arrival to a nature walk, not an unexpected inclusion in an already complex equation of dreaming and mathematics.

Jan stared at her like that made absolutely no sense at all — which, to be fair, it didn't.

The petite mage-slash-con-woman who we knew as Jan Martense managed to somehow make a suit of armour look ruffled and hassled, even though all we could see of her flesh was the oval of her pale little face. A few locks of her dark hair were mashed against her forehead by the metal helmet. She was red in the cheeks, her eyes were wide and bloodshot with panic, and she was coated in cold sweat. Despite a lifelong fascination with castles, I knew almost nothing about medieval armour, but even I could tell that the suit of plate mail fitted her to perfection, each piece of

metal cut and curved exactly to the fit of her muscles. It looked impregnable.

Jan looked at me instead, shaking a question with her head.

“Hello Jan,” I said with a sigh.

“Where the hell is this?” She threw up one gauntleted hand. It barely even clinked. “How did I get here? Why am I wearing—” she tapped her chest with a knuckle; it went *clonk* “—this?”

“You were napping!” Lozzie repeated, beaming. “Janny, you’re here! I wanted to see you today but everything is so busy and there’s so much to do but you’re here anyway and—”

Jan held up a polite hand. I saw great patience struggle across her face. “Lozzie. Please.”

Lozzie bit her lips and nodded.

Jan took a deep breath. “Yes, I was napping. I was having a little sleep. And what is that?” She pointed at the gargantuan Tenny-Mothra fusion dominating one horizon. “And that!” she added, pointing at the other horizon filled by the brass-gold dome.

“Tenny!” Lozzie pointed. “Isn’t she impressive!?”

Jan gaped at her. “Well ... I ... yes? Did you make her large?”

I cleared my throat. “We’re in a dream. This is not real.”

Lozzie went, “Pffft. It’s a dream, but it’s real!”

“Lozzie, I appreciate the importance, but please don’t confuse her,” I said. “It’s a dream. Jan, you’re in a dream.”

Jan peered at me, still wide-eyed. “I’ve had lucid dreams before. This is not a lucid dream. I’m really here. Are you really here?”

“Yes!” Lozzie chirped. “Wooooow! I really wanted to do this with you, but—”

“Lozzie,” I said softly. “Jan is about to panic. May I explain, please? I’m sorry to talk over you, but this is important and—”

Lozzie nodded with great enthusiasm. “Mmhmm mmhmm! Is fine! Talk talk!” She clamped a hand over her mouth, a silly performance, but it worked.

Jan boggled at me.

“Jan, um,” I searched for the words.

“Short version,” said Jan, snappish and running out of patience.

“Bottom line. Least words possible.”

“Lozzie can pull people into dreams. This dream belongs to a demon, or possibly some kind of messenger sent by my sister, I’m not clear. I’m really here, Lozzie is really here. Tenny is really here too, but we don’t know why she’s so big. The big brass sphere is a mathematical teaching tool — I think — which is going to ... well, it’s probably going to help me.” I pointed at the house over on the other corner, the familiar facade of Number 12 Barnslow Drive.

“The house is here too. I think it’s trying to help.”

Jan just stared; I saw the cogs working inside her head, suppressing a very specific kind of temper. Then she reached up to her cheek and pinched her own flesh, hard, with the metal gauntlet fingers.

“Ow!” she hissed. “Okay, a dream. Fine. Whatever. I don’t want to be here! Can you wake me up?” The gauntlet went up again, palm out. “Wait! First, why were you screaming?”

“Large Heather,” I said.

“Oh!” Lozzie unclamped her mouth. “I think that was nothing.”

“Nothing?” I asked. “You screamed.”

Jan huffed. “You did! Normally I run *away* from screams, thank you very much!”

Lozzie lit up. “You came running because it was me?”

Jan huffed. “Lozzie, Heather, are you in trouble? Can we all leave together? I am not cut out for dream shenanigans, and I am very put out at being clad in a suit of armour with the sword strapped to my back. It’s followed me into this, I’m not ... I can’t ... can we leave?”

Lozzie pulled an awkward smile. “One out, all out! I think!”

“We’re not a miner’s union,” Jan sighed. “Look, if you’re not in danger, if this is safe ... ” She trailed off, staring back at Lozzie’s pained smile. “Oh, I’m here for the duration, aren’t I? You mean you can’t get me out, alone?”

“I’m sorry, Jan,” I said. “I ... don’t understand how you’ve gotten

pulled in.”

Lozzie chewed her lip. “Me neither. S’weird.”

Jan screwed her eyes up. “Weird magic dreams, with this sword on my back. Wonderful. This is my least favourite thing. I should sit down and refuse to move until I wake up, but that would probably be worse. Much worse. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Lozzie,” I said slowly. “Jan is miles and miles away, back in the waking world, isn’t she? Tenny makes sense, she’s just upstairs, but Jan?”

Jan sighed. “I promise I’m not secretly sleeping in Lozzie’s bedroom.”

“She’s not!” Lozzie chirped.

Jan said, “It’s probably the sword.” She opened her eyes again and gave me a very exhausted stare. “Look, Heather. This — as in, me, here, inside a magical dream, with the sword, *with the sword*, this needs to not happen.” She chopped her hands back and forth, gauntlets glinting. She pointed at us both. “This is putting you in danger.”

“Janny?” Lozzie tilted her head.

I said, “I don’t think this dream is dangerous, Jan. Not between the house and giant Tenny, if anything goes wrong.” I took a deep breath. “What’s happening here is seriously important, if a little ... unclear. We can help look after you, and when this is over, you’ll just wake up like normal. Please. Please, Jan, that brass dome up there is some kind of message or tool from my sister, and I need it.”

Jan swallowed. “No. The sword on my back. Me being here. Those things are putting you in danger.”

Lozzie tilted her head the other way. “Janny? What is it?”

Jan screwed up her face. “This has nothing — nothing! — to do with you. It’s none of your business, you don’t need to know. Lozzie ... maybe I’ll tell you one day, if we get married or something, but not now. Not now! Not in a dream! Not with the sword! Not when you’re trying to accomplish something important!” Jan went to rub at her own eyes, then huffed when she found the gauntlet in the way. “And why armour!?” She shook her hand as if trying to dislodge a cobweb. “Fuck off! Oh, God. Okay. Look, I’m sure

whatever is going on here is safe — without me here! Without the —” She slammed to a halt, then looked at Lozzie. “Can you send the sword back, by itself?”

Lozzie blinked at her. “Does it dream?”

“Probably!”

Lozzie bit her lip. “If it dreams and I make it leave, that could disrupt whatever’s happening. That would be bad!”

“Look,” Jan huffed, struggling with the scraps of blue rope around her middle, trying to get the sword off her back. “Just try, okay? I cannot be here with the sword. I cannot! And not because it’s my problem, but it makes all this ... this,” she gestured around at the dream. “Dangerous to you! Okay. Don’t ask why, just— just try? Please?”

“Mmmmmmmmmmm,” Lozzie made a grumbly sound. “I can try, I guess, but—”

Bigger Heather Who Was Still Behind Me But Hiding Very Effectively came out of hiding and pointed over my shoulder, toward the corner from which Jan had emerged.

A petite figure shuffled around that corner, framed by dream-remembered grilled chicken shop.

Oozing black blood and dark brown pus, marked with old wounds and weeping sores, naked from bloody soles to matted crown, eyes rolling and glassy-dead, purple lips slack and drooling thin bile, every inch of skin dirty and stained — was Jan, again.

Lozzie froze and put a hand to her mouth, eyes brimming with sympathy and worry. I raised my tentacles, ready to — to what? To fight off a zombie?

Our Jan, clad in not-so-shining armour, turned, saw herself shuffling toward us in gory reanimation — and let out a very tired sigh.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she said. “Too late.”

sediment in the soul – 19.14

The Jan-Zombie — kink-jawed and dead-eyed, shoulders slouching like a moody teenager, naked from head to toe and covered in corpse-detritus, framed by a grilled chicken shop I barely remembered — stood still for a single clotted heartbeat, like an actress who had forgotten her lines, shoved on stage to the tender attentions of a rabid and restive audience. Vacant eyes stared into the middle of the road, clouded by decay. Stringy bile dripped onto the pavement. On the glass behind her, a brightly coloured cartoon chicken suggested we try the new four-piece family meal.

Then the Jan-Zombie swung round, muscles limp, arms swaying, a puppet held up on too few strings. She pointed herself vaguely in our direction, and took a lurching step forward.

“Um,” I said, stepping back from the approaching undead dream-phantom — though she was still a good distance away. “Jan?”

Lozzie was distraught, hand to her mouth, staring at the zombie like it was Jan herself. “Oh! Oh, Jan!” She glanced at Jan — Our Jan, Knight Jan, Alive and Rosy-Cheeked Jan. “Janny, is that you?”

Jan sighed and rolled her eyes. She did not look like a woman who had been confronted with an image of herself dead and rotting, but more like she’d discovered a bad yet curable case of gut worms. “Of course not,” she huffed — though she kept one eye on the zombie as she backed away. “I’m me. I’m here. Me. The real deal.” She tapped her armoured chest with an armoured fingertip, cushioned by the crown-and-dragon tabard. “This isn’t some piece of myself I’m denying, okay? You haven’t got to reconcile me with my own rotting corpse, alright? Lozzie, please, don’t look at me like that, this isn’t an emotional crisis, it’s a metaphysical one. And I hate metaphysics.”

Lozzie was biting her lower lip, looking at Jan like she wanted to cry. “But it looks like you. I don’t want to think of you like that.”

The Jan Zombie took another lurching step, hands hanging down, wobbling toward us along the pavement.

“Jan,” I repeated. “What is this?”

But Jan was too busy replying to Lozzie: “Then don’t! Please, make fun of it, Lozzie. I need you to make fun of it. I would love for you to make fun of it.” She raised an armoured finger. “But don’t touch it, probably.”

The Jan-Zombie’s rotting jaw rolled open; a black tongue flopped forward onto purple lips.

Lozzie was still on the verge of tears. “Was that your body?”

“No!” Jan huffed again. “No, for goodness sake. I did not look like that when— well. I just didn’t look like that, okay? This is a metaphor.” She pointed at the zombie version of herself, gauntlet knuckles curling, as if telling off a bad dog. “And a bloody unsubtle one at that. God, I hate dreams. Dreams should be fun. We should be in a pleasure pit or something. Not getting chased by prophecies.” She wrinkled her nose at the zombie and hooked one thumb into the rope which secured the sword to her back. “What do you want, hmm? You want me to cut you down? Is that it?”

The zombie shuffled forward another step. It was exceptionally slow; we could have escaped the ghoul at a meandering walk, let alone a run, even with the real Jan laden down with armour and sword.

But the Jan-Zombie was sharp — sharper than the dream had been only moments earlier. The outline of her putrid and corrupted limbs, the dried blood speckled across her skin, the delicately crafted little nose and pouty lips, each black strand of gore-matted hair: all of it was stark and clear and nothing like the rest of the dream, like a word in an unknown language dropped into the middle of a familiar sentence, like a sudden image in static, a metronome from a dead channel. For a moment I thought perhaps it was the sense of violation; we were seeing Jan naked and wounded, after all, even if it was an illusion. The zombie had no doll-joints, but it was undoubtedly her in every way which mattered. Perhaps it was sharp because it was an insult.

But the sharpness radiated out into the rest of the dream, like a single note clearing a jumble of meaningless sound. The pavement, the shop fronts, the sunless sky, the towering dome and the dark bulk of giant Tenny — they all tightened into focus. The dream rang like a bell, singing with clarity.

That strange sense of a larger self behind me had vanished; I risked

a backward glance to check, but there was nobody there, myself or otherwise. My hands were empty of lemons, though I craved one like my lungs craved air.

“Jan,” I said firmly and clearly, enough to make her jump slightly and clink in her perfectly fitted armour. But my own questions felt clouded and garbled; if only I could speak through a mouthful of lemon juice, everything would make sense. “Is this something that happens often?” I said. “What do we do?”

“Often?” She laughed without humour. “No. No, this has never happened before. This metaphor has never been dragged into a fucking dream!”

“But do you know what this means?” I asked. Then I winced and shook my head — the dream was too sharp, cutting at my eyelids and ear drums. “No, wait, I mean—”

“Of course I know what it means!” Jan snapped. “But I’m not going to bloody well talk about it, alright? This is private.”

“That’s not what I— mean—” I panted. “I mean what do we need to know?”

“Nothing, thank you very much,” Jan said. “What we need to do is leave. Now. Please!”

The zombie lurched another step toward us. Actual Jan took Lozzie by the hand and backed up a step, dragging Lozzie after her.

Lozzie puffed up her cheeks and said: “Janbie. Zom-Jan. Zomuary.” She didn’t sound very amused, try as she might.

“Just Jan,” said Jan, gently. “It’s not January.”

“I know,” said Lozzie. “Janbie’s kinda slow.”

“Thankfully,” Jan huffed. “Can we really, truly not exit this dream?”

“Jan,” I repeated, feeling like I had a bolus of food lodged inside my throat. “I mean— if this zombie-you was destroyed, would it—”

“Ha!” she barked. “I wish. It’s a metaphor, not a literal ghost or the spirit of my first corpse or my embodied guilt, or any other bullshit like that. A metaphor. If we can’t leave this dream — no? Lozzie? — ahhhh,” she sighed at Lozzie’s apologetic grimace. “Then we’re just going to have to run from the thing. I refuse to touch it, I refuse to

wait for this thing to catch up with me. I am not dealing with it.”

The Jan-Zombie went *snort*, like a child imitating a pig — not the sort of sound one expected from a zombie at all. But Jan jumped and grabbed at the sword-rope around her armour. I took a step back too. My tentacles raised as if to ward off the undead apparition, but what was I going to do? This was a dream. If Jan was right, and this was a metaphor, what would it mean to pull the zombie to pieces? I hesitated, clutching at the yellow robes around my torso, wishing I was not so alone.

Lozzie chanted in a sing-song voice: “Janbie, Janbie — go ay-way.”

“Yes, quite right,” Jan agreed, making an effort to pull herself up in her suit of armour, the weight of her sword dragging at her back. “Fuck off!”

“No,” I struggled to get the word out as I backed up another step too. The city whirled around my senses. The brass-gold dome and the giant version of Tenny towered over opposite ends of my mind. “I mean, if it was destroyed, hypothetically, would that hurt you? Would that be a bad thing?”

Jan finally glanced at me. The pale round moon of her face was all pinched and mortified inside the open visor of her medieval goat-helmet; she was doing a very bad job of pretending this was not a crisis for her.

“Hurt me?” she asked, incredulously. “No. Heather, this has nothing to do with you, this is my problem. Frankly, this is none of your business.”

Too sharp, too clear, the world was pressing too hard on my senses; I couldn’t think, I couldn’t form the right questions, I couldn’t even focus on the next step, on what we should do. It was like my brain was running on a fraction of its usual power.

Whatever this Zombie-Metaphor was, it was highly personal and intimate to Jan; some secret of her past getting aired in semi-public. Lozzie was one thing, considering the developing nature of their relationship, how close they’d become. But me? She didn’t want me to see this, and not because it was dangerous. She was embarrassed and humiliated. Her dirty knickers were up on a flagpole. That was the only thing I could get through my head, as if the rest of my thoughts had withdrawn.

The Jan-Zombie was still a good twelve paces away from us, shuffling forward on broken foot bones, squelching with pus and pooled blood inside her tissues.

Not a danger. Not going to touch us.

A nugget of thought was allowed to solidify in my brains.

"It's not very fast," I said, then glanced over my shoulder, up at the shining bronze-gold dome of the perfect equation, rotating and adjusting as it towered over this remembered slice of childhood Reading. I needed to get there. That made sense. "We can probably just run for the dome. Speed-walk for the dome. Walk, saunter, it's not fast at all."

"Oh yes," Jan said, dripping sarcasm. "It's so slow you forget about it, that's the point. You forget it's there, creeping up on you all the time, every day, every moment you exist. And then when you least expect it, the thing shuffles around a corner or bumps into a door and suddenly you have to deal with it, again!" She took another step back from the zombie, pulling Lozzie along after her — and almost tripped up on her own sword, the oilcloth-wrapped tip banging against her armour-clad thighs. Jan huffed in frustration and yanked at the rope. "And this bloody thing! Can we really not send the sword back by itself?"

Lozzie shook her head, face filled with apology and worry.

"Jan," I said. "We should go. Just go. Get the dream over with."

Jan rounded on me, lips pursed, one eye on the zombie version of herself. "All right. We reach your big spinning metal ball, what happens next? Does the dream end?"

"Maybe. I don't know." I glanced at the zombie too, backing away another step along Oxford Street. "If this is the only one, we could just run for it and see what happens at the dome. Is this the only one?"

Jan looked at me like we were in a classic spooky cartoon and I'd just suggested we split up to search for clues. "Don't jinx us. Don't. Heather, I like you, I respect you. So, don't."

Lozzie made a pouty face. "Multiple Jans would be nice. Both ends."

Jan managed to look embarrassed, mortified, and slightly interested

all at once. She huffed and pulled Lozzie back another step from the advancing undead parody. "Please, Lozzie," she said. "Please do not touch it. I don't know what happens if you touch it."

"What happens if *you* touch it?" Lozzie chirped.

"Stupid things," Jan answered without hesitation. "I'll disappear in a flash of light and return to my home planet."

Lozzie pulled a face of open-mouthed awe.

"Jan," I hissed.

Jan rolled her eyes. "Okay, serious answer: I have no idea, because this is a dream and that is a metaphor. Considering what it's a metaphor about, I suspect I would have to literally sit still for the long minutes the thing would take to devour me. It would just ... drool all over me and make a big mess. God, I could probably just wrestle the thing to the ground at this point, but I'd rather not." I heard her swallow though I couldn't see her throat bob inside that armour. The armoured fingers of her free hand worried at the frayed blue rope around her chest, the rope keeping the sword strapped to her back.

Lozzie chirped, "Then you're safe, Jans! You're in armour!"

"Mm, yes," Jan replied, staring at the zombie as it lurched forward again. She didn't sound very reassured. "That's an interesting metaphor too. And by 'interesting' I mean 'get me out of this fucking stupid monkey suit'."

Lozzie giggled. "It's very cute!"

Jan glanced at her quickly, as if it was risky to take her eyes off the zombie. "It— it is?"

"Mmhmm!" Lozzie nodded with great enthusiasm.

Jan looked back at the zombie again. "Great. Alright. Fine."

I cleared my throat gently. "Having your girlfriend be into your metaphorical cursed destiny or whatever this is, that's a pretty good perk, Jan."

"Oh, shut up," Jan snapped. Lozzie giggled again; now that the zombie appeared to be merely a shuffling inconvenience, she had calmed down considerably.

I repeated myself: "Is this the only one?"

"I don't know!" Jan replied, shrill and irritated. "I'm not in the habit of having metaphorical magical dreams!"

"Because if it is," I replied, trying to keep my thoughts coherent. "Then we can just out-walk the thing, very easily. Come on, we'll make for the dome. If the dream doesn't end there, if I have to ... do things, then we can rethink."

Jan huffed. "I'm going to be hunted down and eaten by my own metaphorical rotting self. I don't even know where to begin. Fuck this. Fuck everything about this. I hate this."

"Janny," Lozzie squeaked. "It's fine! We can just walk! Walk away! Hit 'da bricks!"

"Yes, yes," Jan sighed. She frowned at the zombie, beginning to turn away. "Same thing I've been doing my whole bloody life. Lozzie, I hope you know what you're signing up for with me. I really do."

Lozzie pulled on her hand. I kept pace, watching the zombie out of the corner of my eye as well.

"Janny!" Lozzie crooned encouragement.

Jan finally looked away from the zombie, ready to turn and hurry down Oxford Street. "Fine, I—"

Zombie-Jan straightened up; jerk-snap with neck, twitch-crack with shoulders, her spine going pop-pop-pop. Cloudy, vacant eyes closed their bloodstained lids, orbs rolling behind crimson shutters. Our Jan flinched, grabbing for Lozzie, staring in horror. Zombie-Jan stood stock still for a heartbeat of sluggish lead through empty veins. Then the eyes opened again, still dead and empty as smoked glass, but pointing forward.

She wore an expression so alien to Jan's features that it was almost worse than the old wounds and dried blood and rotting decay: serene acceptance of her own doom.

"Stop running," said Zombie-Jan, in a gurgling, black-mucus parody of Jan's own exasperated tone.

Then it took a step. Solid, confident, without the lurching sway of the brainless dead.

“Oh, fuck that!” Our Jan said.

Jan’s free hand let go of the sword-rope and flicked into the air, digging at an invisible pocket next to her side — and found nothing. Her fingers did not vanish into thin air, into her secret pocket dimensions full of tricks, but just swiped at nothingness. Jan waggled her armoured hand as if trying to grip a zipper which was covered in grease and Vaseline, eyes wide with panic, a woman trying to draw her gun and finding the holster missing.

“It’s a dream!” Lozzie cried out. “It won’t work in a dream!”

Jan held out her hand. “Then dream me up a firearm!”

The zombie strode toward her.

“I caaaan’t!” Lozzie cried, face twisted with horrified apology. “Let’s run! Heathy!”

Dream-logic haze flowered behind my eyes, blooming purple and black and rose-petal red. I was dying for a lemon, desperate to bite into the stinging flesh and feel the juices filling my stomach. Instead I felt a full-body flush of pins and needles.

Zombie-Jan stepped right past me, ignoring me completely, going for her mirror image in tarnished steel.

Lozzie and Knight-Jan turned to flee down Oxford street, Jan struggling with her sword, her free hand pulling at the rope around her chest. Lozzie flapped and flopped like a jellyfish in a jet stream, a pastel flag on the wind.

Zombie-limbs and Zombie-head carried on past me. I watched her go.

“Heathy! Follow us!” Lozzie shouted.

Big Heather Who Was Still Behind Me gently took me by the shoulders and elbows and hips and knees and ankles, pointed me past the zombie and after my beloved Lozzie and the strange metal-clad figure of Jan, and pumped my limbs until I caught up with them.

“Run toward the dome!” my mouth said. “We can’t be that far, we can’t, I think it’s ... ” My head looked up toward the great brass-and-gold dome towering over the east end of the city, but I couldn’t tell how far away it stood. Over the Kennet river? Slightly to the

south, past Queen's Road and London Road? Yes. Right about where

"Oh," said my mouth.

"Oh?!" Jan snapped at me. Her helmet visor kept clacking shut as she ran. She struggled with it and shoved it upward to reveal her face again, stained with cold sweat. "Oh, what? Don't 'oh' us like that!"

My throat felt tight. Butterfly wings fluttered inside my chest. My tentacles wrapped close to my body. "It's over the hospital. Royal Berkshire Hospital. I've ... been there, before. Um. That way!"

We crossed the bridge over the motorway in a clatter of metal and slapping trainers and the sunlight rustle of Sevens' yellow robes around my legs, plunging into a dream-summoned version of Reading city centre. The buildings grew taller. The familiar old red brick of Broad Street unfolded beneath my feet; I hadn't been here in years. The buried logic of my childhood memories half-expected my mother to be at my side. Large Heather peered over my shoulder, staying out of the way for now.

"Where—" Jan panted, clacking her helmet visor up again, "are we? This isn't—"

Lozzie chirped. "It's not Sharrowford!"

"It's Reading," said my mouth. "It's where I grew up."

"Oh, wonderful," said Jan. She slowed to a stop just beneath one of the sad, skeletal-looking trees planted along the middle of Broad Street's pedestrian area. Lozzie stopped with her, dutifully holding on tight to Jan's hand. I bounced to a halt as well, my tentacles springing forward as if catching me on the substances of the dream itself. I whirled around like I was underwater. "Reading," Jan was saying. "Never been. Right." She turned to glance back over her shoulder as she spoke: "That should buy us a few minutes, it wasn't running too. Now, please, help me get this fucking asshole of a sword off my back ... maybe ... cut the ..."

"I don't see it either," my mouth said, as my eyes followed the direction of Jan's gaze. Lozzie went up on tiptoes, free hand shading her eyes despite the lack of blazing sunlight.

Broad Street was clear of both cars and pedestrians. We were the

only ones here. We could see all the way back to the bridge. Giant Tenny towered over the western end of town, huge eyes closed in peaceful repose. Nothing walked the dream but us three dreamers.

Jan hissed, “Where the hell did it go? Where the hell did you just go, you little shit?”

Lozzie made a sad whine. “Janny, don’t call yourself thaaaaat.”

“It’s not me!” Jan snapped. Lozzie flinched — though she didn’t let go of Jan’s hand. Jan huffed at herself and flushed in the cheeks.

“Lozzie, I’m sorry. It’s not me. Please don’t call it me.”

Lozzie nodded, bobbing up and down. “Okay!”

“Thank you. Thank you, Lozzie. I appreciate it.”

My throat cleared itself. Five tentacles levered me up to get a better view of the street, yellow robes hanging down like jellyfish membranes. But there was nothing moving, nothing hiding behind cars. “Maybe it went onto another road?” a suggestion presented itself through my lips. “Or a shop? Would it know we’re going for the dome?”

Jan huffed and gave me a pinched look. “How many times? It’s a metaphor! I don’t know what it— ahhh!”

Jan screamed, flinched, and almost pulled Lozzie over onto their collective backsides, stopped only by a sudden flutter from Lozzie’s poncho, as if the pastel clothing had caught a fully armoured woman and pushed her back to her feet.

Zombie-Jan strode right out of a bookshop to our left, power-walking toward Jan.

“Stop stalling,” said Zombie-Jan. She even sighed a little sigh.

“Never!” Jan spat back. Then she picked up her armoured feet, dragged on Lozzie’s hand, and scarpered off down Broad Street.

Zombie-Jan ignored me completely, turning toward her target as she strode on.

“Um,” I said. “Would you maybe ... stop?”

She ignored that.

She won’t, Large Rearward Heather informed me.

I sighed. Biggest And Most In Charge Heather took hold of my limbs and ran me onward.

The chase turned into a farce, ruled by the logic of the dream; we fled down Broad Street, then right onto Duke, then over the river and onward toward the looming giant of the brass-and-gold dome, where the hospital should have stood. At every corner, around every turn, from every darkened doorway, the Jan-Zombie strode forth to follow us. Chin high, feet naked and bloody, trailing pus and plasma, wearing a wounded dignity and solemn pride which Jan herself would never have shown, she walked toward us from unexpected angles, appearing whenever we slowed or stopped for even a second.

“You can’t run forever,” she said, with a very Jan-like huff and little tut. “You have to deal with me eventually.” “Don’t tell yourself you’ve escaped.” “Give up and stop.” “Convincing yourself I don’t exist is a dead end.” Jan’s voice rose from her decaying throat, wet and thick with clotted blood and dried bile, never angry or accusing, but calm and inexorable — just like her inevitable reappearance no matter how far we fled.

“This doesn’t make any sense!” Lozzie squeaked as we ran down the row of railing-fronted terraces along Queen’s Road. “Why doesn’t she just teleport right in front of you?!”

“Don’t give it ideas!” Jan yelled back, muffled by her goat-headed helmet as it clacked down again, getting in the way.

A half-remembered Reading flashed past in dream snippets, with one solid landmark bobbing up out of the waves again and again: Number 12 Barnslow Drive was keeping pace with us.

The house appeared in the place of a Chemist’s, then a corner store, then embedded in the front of an office block, then wedged into a gap between other buildings, and twice just sitting in the middle of the road, dominating the space turned alien and pointless by lack of cars. And once or twice — then three times and four — I noticed the house was blocking the Jan-Zombie.

It was neither very effective nor much of an impediment to the zombie’s power-walking progress every time she appeared, but I noticed that when the house was present and nearby, she was forced to select an imperfect entry-point to the dream-stage — a street further from her target, a corner which forced her to cross the

road to reach us, a door which was not yet standing open. The house got in her way.

“Thank you!” I cried out to the house as we passed it again. Lozzie giggled and Jan looked at me like I was mad. I just shook my head. “It’s helping! The house is helping!”

Jan’s wide eyes flicked back to glance at Number 12 Barnslow Drive as we left it behind again. “Do you think we could shelter inside it?”

I shrugged. “You could. I have to reach the dome! I have to!”

Jan gritted her teeth. “Lozzie—”

“We’ll follow Heathy,” Lozzie said. “Then dive into the house!”

Jan and Lozzie were both running for real. Jan’s armour was fitted perfectly for her size and musculature, joints oiled and smooth, moving with barely a whisper of metal-on-metal, but the suit also weighed a ton and she had a sword strapped to her back, slapping against her thighs and throwing her off balance. Jan was not exactly the fittest of ladies and her lungs were pumping and gasping for air by the time we’d crossed the river. Lozzie was slightly better, running on dream-juice and wishes and her inherent suitability for this half-real environment, but even she was panting and flushed, though mostly unafraid of the ever-pursuing Janbie.

But I wasn’t fit and high-stamina either — not in the waking world. Yet as we fled down the streets of my childhood city, my limbs seemed to lift as if buoyed upward by invisible currents, my lungs pumped with perfect clarity, my bruises and aches melted away, my five — five? — tentacles galloped for me, lending me speed and athletic precision. The dream-logic seemed to shift to one side, not clouding my thoughts but directing my body along the pavement like a marathon runner with extra legs. I even considered scooping up Jan in my arms and carrying her myself; but Large Heather Behind Me vetoed that decision. We were not capable of carrying that weight.

Halfway down Watlington Street, Jan ran out of steam.

“Ahhh— ahhh—” she panted, metal boots clonking to a halt along the pavement. She almost doubled-up with effort, visor clacking shut, drooling with overexertion. Her absurd goat-headed helmet fell forward. She panted through the metal visor.

“Jan! Janny!” Lozzie pulled on her hand. “Jan-Jans we have to go!”

“Fuck— it—” Jan panted.

I skidded to a stop as well, tentacles out like a cartoon character as I turned and rejoined my friends. Jan was just straightening up and Lozzie was helping her, as the Zombie-Jan stepped out from behind a house and into the middle of the pavement, two dozen paces behind us.

“Running never works,” said the Janbie. She seemed quite sad. “I’m glad you’ve decided to stop.”

Our Armoured Lady of Jandom turned to face her pursuer — almost toppling over with the weight of the sword on her back. I glanced over my shoulder: the brass dome of perfect mathematics was close now. It filled the sky like a giant wall of clockwork complexity. One more street, one more corner, and we’d be there. Why stop now?

Jan clacked her visor back up. “Running away is my greatest skill! I am very good at it!”

My lips moved, “We’re almost there! Maybe when we reach the dome—”

“How do I make you stop following me, huh?!” Jan shouted. She was losing her temper, laser-focused on the zombie. Lozzie was pulling on her arm, trying to get her to run again, hissing her name. But Jan wouldn’t move.

Zombie-Jan was striding forward, closing the distance. “You can’t,” she said.

“Fine!” Jan spat back. “I’ve had enough of this edging, anyway. You want magic? You want me to do magic at you? Is that it?”

“Yes,” said the Janbie.

All the fire went out of Jan’s face. She took a clonking step backward. “Oh.”

The Jan-Zombie closed to seven paces, six, five. Jan still wasn’t moving. Four. Lozzie was repeating her name, physically pulling on her arm like she was a reluctant hound. Three. But some quality of her zombie mirror-image had Jan locked in place, hypnotized like a rodent in front of a python. Two paces. Zombie-Jan reached forward with one hand. Jan’s visor fell to cover her face with a

clack, one final layer of turtle-shell rejection. The Zombie's blood-stained fingers reached for her chin. Lozzie was screaming.

Bigger Heather Who Was Still Behind Me And Paying Lots Of Attention reached over my shoulder with a thousand fists.

One of them contained a lemon, for me to snatch out of the air and gnaw on like a frenzied ferret. The other nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine hands of god descended on Zombie-Jan and hit her like the spring-loaded impact of a mantis shrimp claw, multiplied to a perfect number.

The zombie exploded backward in an instant flowering of flesh and bone and viscera, a fountain of deep red, a cloud of expanding intestine like party streamers, a popped cork of brain matter and nerves and powdered organs. The sound was deafening, a meat-world noise, a thousand years of butcher back rooms compressed into one second. One moment, Jan's mirror — the next, a bloody smear on the pavement fifty feet long, like a meat-truck overturned in the middle of Reading.

All that remained of her was a pair of feet torn off at the ankles, standing a few paces away from Jan.

If I had not been plunged beneath the abstraction of the dream-logic once more, it would have been quite a shocking sight. But with my mind stirred and sucked upward, I simply bit into my delicious lemon, spitting bits of yellow peel onto the pavement.

Jan shrieked and stumbled backward. Lozzie caught her, though they almost fell over together. Jan shoved her visor back up and stared at me — past me, above me, over me, to my roots and my supply — jaw working and eyes wide with terror.

"It's okay!" Lozzie said, grabbing her and gently slapping her cheeks with her fingertips. "Janny, it's okay, it's—"

"What am I looking at?" Jan whispered. Her voice was hoarse.

"It's not Heather! It's fine! I know, I was shocked at first too, but it's fine! Hiii, Heathy!" Lozzie waved at me, for Jan, like showing a small child that it was safe to wave at a large yet gentle animal.

Larger And Wiser Heather withdrew her incredible violence from the smear that had been a zombie only moments before. She wiped her thousand fists and revealed they were actually just five hands,

opening and closing the fingers in a friendly gesture.

“See?” Lozzie chirped.

Jan boggled in my direction. Then she stared at Lozzie. Then Big Heather With Lots Of Food offered her a lemon as well. Jan took it, hand shaking. She dropped it on the pavement.

“Lozzie,” Jan said, voice quivering. “What— what is going on here?”

“I don’t know! But it’s okay! Heathy helped, right?”

I said, “No more Zom-Jan.”

Jan stared at me like I was a talking door.

Lozzie bit her lip. “Juuuuuuust go with it, Janny. It’s a dream, okay? And look, no more zombie!”

“Yes,” Jan said, forcing several deep breaths down her throat. She had to make a conscious effort to look away from me. Was it the lemon-eating? I was getting kind of messy, especially when Largest And Smartest Heather handed me three more. Three! I was eating well now, much better. I took one in each hand and took bites from them in order, then mixed the order up for fun, then reversed the order to see if it made any difference. It did! Jan eventually turned to look at the smear of blood and guts on the ground, but she kept glancing back at me. “Wow,” she said, slowly and carefully. “Okay. Well, I don’t know how that plays into the whole metaphor thing, but thank you.” She glanced at Lozzie but pointed at me. “Should I be thanking this? Her? What am I talking to here?”

Lozzie nodded. “Heather can still hear you!”

You’re welcome said Large But Weak Heather.

“Heathy!” Lozzie chirped. “Are you okay?”

“Mmmhmm!” I said back.

“Yes, thank you,” Jan repeated. “This likely solves the problem for now, though I still don’t want this bloody sword on my back. Oh, I’m going to have such a hangover when I wake up. I can help you with your dome-thing, I suppose, as long as that’s not also—”

Sloooooooorp.

Like a great wave crashing against the shore, the Jan-Zombie sucked herself back together.

Reforming from the ankles upward, dragging her viscera across the pavement as if by magnetic force, skin wrapping rotten muscle but still split by pus-weeping wounds and covered in grave-dirt and corpse-bile. Rebuilding herself cell by cell in fast-forward, a sickening process of cramming dead blood back into shrivelled veins and sealing them inside rotten meat and wrapping the whole ugly concoction in the mirror-image of the woman who stood next to Lizzie.

The Jan-Zombie opened her eyes. Not a scrap of blood was left on the floor.

She said, “You can’t pretend—”

Biggest Heather reached out again and smeared her sideways, splashing organs and claret up the front of the nearest house, speckling a hedgerow with spots of blood and draping ropes of intestine over a wall.

Sluuuurp-pop — the Zombie Jan pulled herself back together again.

“Stop—”

Third time lucky, this time across the road, a shower of red over the parked cars and the black asphalt, staining the road markings.

Squelch, she snapped back, even faster.

Big Heather With The Many Strong Arms reached out a forth time — and Zombie-Jan turned to her.

“Stop that,” she said.

Jan was panting and backing away. Poor thing, must have been rather taxing, watching her mirror image pulverised so many times over.

Bigger Heather Who Knew Best kept reaching, but this time Zombie-Jan reached out to meet her hands.

Dream-Logic juddered and jerked, like I was trying to hold my breath, or my body was about to shut down, like two different instincts pulled me in different directions. We should be running! We could reach the dome in one more street, even if we didn’t know what might happen when we arrived! But then I had another

lemon in my hands again, exploding with citrus inside my mouth, and it was okay because the dream was only a dream, and—

“Heathy, stop!” Lozzie screamed. “No touchy!”

Big Heather turned me and ran me after Lozzie and Jan. Going with plan A — reach the dome. Biggest Heather said as much, talking over my shoulder and past my head and up through my spine. My own mouth was too full of lemon.

“We don’t know what will be there, we don’t know what will be there!” Lozzie was babbling. That display had upset her more deeply than I’d realised. I wanted to apologise, but Large Heather With Many Thoughts was cramming lemons into my mouth, opening my throat with her hands, shoving them into my gullet, into the fire burning in my belly.

Jan was staring at me again, wide-eyed with terror, like she was swimming next to some unknown be-tentacled marine creature, which might snatch her up and eat her at any moment. “You can tell what she’s saying?!” she asked Lozzie.

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie nodded. “Heathy, what do we do?”

Go into the house said Large Heather Who Stood To My Rear. We’ll deal with the dome, whatever that means. You go into the house, with Jan, and lock the door. But get the sword off her back first, leave it outdoors. Nothing is stronger than the house. The projection won’t follow. I think.

“Love you!” said Lozzie.

I love you too, we told Lozzie.

Lozzie related the plan to Jan. Jan was not happy. She wanted to leave the dream. I spat out pieces of lemon peel and tried to say it was very important that we all stay in the dream, that I would look after my friends, that Biggest Heather had everyone’s best interests at heart — but then we rounded the corner of Watlington Street and burst out into the space where Reading ended.

Brass and gold and chrome and steel and a half-dozen other metals of unearthly provenance, rising into the air as a wall of clockwork perfection, right where Royal Berkshire Hospital should have stood. The dream-remembered city simply ended there, cut off by a structure no human minds could ever build, a mechanism of such

precision that one would have to observe and understand every single part at the same time in order to comprehend what it did or what it meant.

That I understood instantly, as my numb feet stumbled to a halt, as my eyes were dragged across the ever-shifting surface of many-sided shapes, their interlocking beauty spelling out words that fell on senses not designed for their message.

I understood, instantly: one would have to grasp all the parts, at the same instant.

The dome stood about a hand's breadth off the ground, floating as if held there by its own internal logic, hundreds of feet high and miles wide, an Outsider equation towering into the sky.

Outsider equation? I asked.

Must be said Large And Clever Heather.

It was not a true dome, but a swarm of parts, brass plates gliding across each other, joining and parting again, chrome clockwork locking and unlocking, cogs of golden perfection catching their teeth on wheels of silver. From a distance it had been beautiful, but up close it made my stomach churn and my head spin with vertigo. How could anybody have created such a thing? Only a mind like the Eye could dream it. Was this message truly from my twin sister? If so, what did that say about her?

Bigger Heather Who Moved Me kept moving me, pulling my limbs forward to follow Lozzie and Jan over the open ground toward the dome.

Just where Royal Berkshire Hospital's buildings should have been there was an opening in the many layers of the dome structure, like the peeled-back tissues of a shell, mollusc flesh and fluffy fronds in brass and gold. A way inside the mathematics of perfect expression. Waiting for me.

About twenty feet from that flower-like entrance, in the middle of a truncated road, was Number 12 Barnslow Drive, again.

We all clattered and skidded and hopped to a halt, just shy of our own front door. The house waited patiently for us. The dome loomed giant behind us. The Jan-Zombie stepped out from the road we'd just exited, striding toward us; the distance gave us a few

moments to plan.

“We’re here!” chirped Lozzie, vibrating like an excited child. “We’re here!”

Armoured Jan glanced between the house and the dome, jaw hanging open inside the helmet around her head. “I ... you’re going there? Alone? Inside that thing?”

Too many lemons filled my mouth. Large And Talkative Heather answered for us: *We’re not alone. See?* She splayed her five hands — and me, too.

Jan recoiled, blinking, free hand up as if to ward off a monster. “Okay, okay! Christ alive. Fuck me. Don’t do that!”

“It’s pretty!” Lozzie chirped.

“Yes, fine, it is, but also very, very weird!” Jan snapped back. She looked at the front door of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. “Are we hiding in there, or what?”

Drop the sword, said Me Who Was Also Me. Then hide in the house. She won’t be able to follow. I’m certain of that. And this will be over soon. When I get inside the payload ...

“You have no idea what’s going to happen in there, do you?” asked Jan In Steel. “Not a clue.”

Comprehension. Insight. Hurry up. Large Heather pointed at Zombie-Jan, closing fast.

“Fine! Lozzie, help me get this—”

Zombie-Jan raised her voice to carry the distance, bubbling wet and darkly clotted: “If you flee into that home, I will pursue her instead.” She pointed a blood-soaked rotting hand — at me.

I tried to hiss, but Biggest And Wisest Heather clamped my mouth shut.

Jan froze, watching undead parody self striding toward us. Lozzie started panting with worry, tugging on Jan’s arm. “Inside!” she whined.

I can deal with her, said My Core And Purpose. Go inside the house. It loves you too.

Jan chewed on her bottom lip so hard that her teeth drew blood, crimson threads running down to meet the metal of her helmet.

“Janny!” Lozzie squeaked.

“Lozzie,” Jan said, voice shaking. “Help me get this sword off my back.”

I could only watch, reassured by Me Myself that this was fundamentally not our fight, as Lozzie tugged at the blue rope which held Jan’s sword in place. She got it off Jan’s head and held it across her arms like an injured pet, a length of metal wrapped in oilcloth, struggling a little with the weight. Jan glanced back and forth between the Zombie and the concealed sword in Lozzie’s arms.

“Janny,” Lozzie whined. “We can run, Heathy can deal with it! She said she can!” She looked up — past me, way past me. “Or we could wake up big Tenny! She’s really big! Big helps!”

Jan shook her head. “This is my problem, not Heather’s, not Tenny’s.”

“Don’t do what it’s telling you to do!”

Yeah, said Six Other Kinds Of Me. I’d rather have an extra complication to contend with than force you to accept whatever this is.

Jan looked deeply embarrassed — but then she locked eyes with Lozzie. “I’m not going to do magic at it—”

“You will,” burred the Jan-Zombie, closing with us.

Jan ignored it. “But I can’t swing that sword by myself. I’ve never had the muscles. Lozzie, will you lift it with me?”

Lozzie lit up, crying openly, but nodding with relief. None of it made any sense to me, but Largest Heather cried a little too. Five Other Heathers helped hold her up. I did my part.

Lozzie and Jan worked together to pull the old sword from the tightly wrapped oilcloth. I half-expected it to glow as it emerged, but it really wasn’t anything special — just a long piece of polished steel with a leather-wrapped hilt. Jan held the blade itself, her hands protected by her gauntlets. Lozzie took the hilt.

“Most awkward half-swording I’ve ever heard of,” Jan hissed to herself as they turned to face the zombie.

Lozzie looked elated — like they were about to hit a jackpot in an arcade, not stab a metaphor through the neck. She giggled.

Good luck, said Me Several Times Repeated.

Jan glanced back. “And you hurry the fuck up! This might not work, so be quick about it! Go on! Go! God alone knows what’s going to happen in that bloody great dome. I do not envy you, going in there.”

Lozzie giggled again. “It’s alright, Janny! We can get dome together another time.”

Jan flushed a deep, scarlet, spluttering red. None of Me or Me or Me knew why.

Jan reached up and clacked her visor down again, then turned to the approaching zombie, now only a few feet away. She and Lozzie hefted the sword between them, tip aimed toward the ghoulish mirror like a spear-point.

Larger Heather To My Rear pulled herself together, turned me around, and ran us toward the opening in the dome of perfect mathematics.

Behind me came a shout, a Lozzie-whoop, and a crunch of bones — and I plunged on inside, swallowed up by metal lips.

sediment in the soul – 19.15

Mathematics was never our strong suit.

Not in the half-remembered prelapsarian years before Wonderland, nor during the decade of half-dead unlife after Maisie had been taken away from us. We didn't hate maths. We were not innumerate. We didn't dread school lessons or have trouble with homework or counting out coins. We never spilled tears over mathematical frustration; our tears were already spent on more terrifying and intimate matters, the reservoir always dry. Oh, we could do percentages and algebra, we achieved a C grade during our GCSEs, we never had trouble figuring out simple daily tasks with numbers — well, no more than we had trouble with every daily task, in those days. But mathematics held little interest for us, and not only because so many nightmares were already crammed with mathematical lessons, which one could not escape by simply looking out of the classroom window. Perhaps that was the Eye's ultimate mistake; perhaps it should have selected a pair of little girls destined to grow up to become mathematicians or physicists, instead of twins who liked to read fairy tales and imagine friendly monsters lurking at the end of the road. Perhaps none of this would have happened if the Eye had chosen a pupil more suited to learning the syllabus it wanted to teach.

Perhaps it had done; perhaps that's why we escaped, and Maisie didn't. Perhaps our suffering was simply a by-product of her perfect education.

But, when Largest And Most Wise Heather squeezed me through the entrance to that ever-shifting dome of brass and gold and chrome — as lips of feathered silver and frond-like steel closed over me from behind, as fractal branching passageways opened up in lace-like clockwork — we agreed in private and breathless awe that mathematics could be quite beautiful.

This was still a dream, though; perhaps all the sums were made up.

First: a hallway, a corridor, a smooth and irregular organic cavity through ever-shifting machinery, winding through clockwork delicacy and sliding plates and interlocking teeth of gold and

titanium and solid mercury. We took a step, one pace forward; the pressure on the plates beneath our feet changed, and so the hallway reoriented itself in response to these new variables, these me-variables: parts unlatched and adjusted, clockwork slowed down here and sped up there, the hallway pointed in a different direction — and the way was blocked by plate and rotation-shape and cogwheel.

Another step changed the orientation again. A third reverted. A fourth ruined.

Terrible symmetry, beautiful equation, perfectly expressed; but this was no place for an unprotected human form.

Larger Heather made us stop. The danger was obvious; this place would mangle us, rip us to pieces, dream or not. She — me and me — reached out with five fists and touched a corner of gold leaf, and the edge of a giant cog, and a sprig of chrome, and a specific spot on the floor; the hallway folded back by one step, admitting us a single pace deeper into the briar of metal thorns and snagging teeth and crushing plates.

Within five steps we all agreed this was bloody impossible.

Large Heather Who Was In Control said, *This wasn't what I expected*. She sounded very worried. That made me worried too.

“What had we expected?” I asked.

I didn't receive an answer for several minutes as we navigated three more steps down the hallway, using tentacles to touch pressure points, to add values here and subtract them there, completing equations with the span and weight of our own body. We inserted ourselves into the guts of the dome, into the equation, modifying it with our very presence. Every errant twitch, every adjustment of finger, every flexing muscle changed some value, corrupted some perfect meaning, introduced something the machine did not have a place for and did not wish to permit.

I don't know, said Large Heather. *Part of me thought — or maybe hoped — that the dome might be hollow inside, that it might open up to reveal some special equation etched on the inside surface. Or maybe we'd find Mister Squiddy in the middle, at the core, on a throne or in a bucket or something, like this is his thought-shell around a real self. Or maybe that the dome would sweep me up and teach me ... something.*

Like the Eye?

Yes, she said. *Like the Eye. Only now I'm almost certain that this didn't come from the Eye at all. I think Maisie sent this. I think the Eye set up a trap, but she hijacked it.*

How can you be sure? Evelyn wouldn't like that, Evelyn would tell us off, Evelyn would say it's a dangerous assumption.

She probably would, I'm right about that. But we're already inside and this is ... well, I won't lie to myself, this is not safe. I feel like if I let go with even one tentacle, I'm going to get crushed. Like an industrial accident. But no, I think this is from Maisie. It's the only thing which makes sense. It has to be from her. It has to be.

Why?

Because it doesn't hurt.

That made me feel much better. Larger Heather was probably right. This didn't hurt, not like the Eye's lessons did — but it was exquisitely difficult, exhausting, taxing on body and mind and muscle and tendon and skin. Each step through the dome-maze took us minutes of experimentation, adjusting a cog here, pulling on a piece of clockwork there, so delicate and fiddly so that I itched and jerked and wanted to run my hands all over my skin and peel it off, wanted to roll around on the ground and bite and thrash and shake off this feeling.

But I didn't. I was a good girl. Large And Clever Heather reached over my shoulder with five other hands and braced us against the inside of the mathematical lesson, pulling us along step by step, solving the new equations with every hard-won inch. I didn't complain — though I made suggestions, lots of suggestions, reaching out to touch things on my own along with my other sisters as we all tried to help. We all pulled together, all in the same direction.

All for one and one for all, Large Heather tried to laugh, but she was starting to hyperventilate. Noble sentiment. Hard to apply to myself, but, yes. Yes, that's right. That's the only way. All pulling in the same direction, all in our way. Raine would probably say something like 'from each according to their strength', or something.

"She would," I said. "We love Raine."

Oh, Raine. Oh, I can't do this alone. I can't think so sharply in a dream. I can't. I needed this to stay unreal, abstract, freaky. Horror movie silliness was fine. This isn't. Oh, oh, I'm going to develop claustrophobia from this. Oh, fuck. Fuck. Largest Of All Heathers whined in her throat. *Pardon my language. Oh, but there's nobody here to apologise to. Ahhh, God.* She swallowed, too hard, hurting her throat. *This feels like it's going on forever. Please, it's just a dream, just a dream, just a dream. Keep pulling, keep pulling.*

The route took us upward, worming through cramped tunnels of golden joints, locking and interlocking and unlocking from each other, squeezing through chrome perfection barely wide enough for shoulders or hips; Largest Heather had to pop pieces of herself free, screaming as she did, banging them on surfaces to pop them back in. Then we slid down through blind dark voids, surrounded by sliding pistons and whirling blades and a million cutting, puncturing, searing, burning, bruising hazards. Biggest Heather kept stopping and waiting, shaking and panting; we wrapped her tight and held on for her. At the bottom of these voids, we burrowed into the floor once more and plunged through clockwork majesty which forced constant motion, lest we all get trapped between the teeth.

More than once I got pinched between plates, or snagged on cogs, or dragged into the guts of the machinery; I was a good girl, I didn't panic, I had been trained not to panic, to accept that I might have to be detached and lost, or torn off, or left for dead. But Bigger Heather and her five other hands had changed their mind about that detail; I was not to be discarded to fortune or wounding or risk or damage. Bigger Heather braced herself and dragged me back out of clinging chrome and grinding gold and bold brass pincers, as she did for any sister who might be lost to the lesson.

This isn't worth it. This isn't worth it, she had started to hiss. This doesn't mean anything! This doesn't lead anywhere! It's torture for the sake of torture. This ... this has to be from Maisie. It has to be! But I made a promise. No more self-sacrifice. That means every part of me.

"We're going to be okay," I said. "We've got your back. We've always got your back."

I can't go on like this. I've been in here for hours. Hours. Time ... I can't keep track of time. Lozzie and Jan, what happened to them? What's happening to my body, out in reality? Has it been seconds? Minutes? Hours? She was talking to herself, not to us. *How long is it taking me*

to say these words? I feel like I started speaking an hour ago. I can't do this.

We had no idea what was happening with Lozzie and Jan, with the Jan-Zombie and the sword; the rest of the dream had been sealed off instantly when we'd entered. All I remembered was a whoop and a crunch.

Don't worry about them, Bigger Heather said, trying to reassure herself. Lozzie is an expert dreamer. She knows what she's doing. She knows what she's doing. You just concentrate on yourself, Heather. You have to find the meaning in this. Keep going. One step at a time.

But there was no centre, no core, no meaning that we could find.

We went around and around and around, burrowing through an equation which exhausted us and ground us down; every step was a struggle to move plates of metal aside, to coax the clockwork to open, to integrate our body with the mathematics so that it did not pinch or tear or rip or burn. But it did. We were not a creature of perfect mathematics. We were flesh and thought. Such things did not conform.

Every angle and junction and confluence held at least some meaning — but it was all jumbled together, all pure data without context, numbers without purpose. It was like wading through a library built from the books themselves, with aisles and walkways filled with tomes; the only way to progress was to lift each volume from the stacks and read it cover-to-cover before re-inserting it somewhere else.

I like that metaphor, said Large And Exhausted Heather. But we're getting nowhere. None of this means anything. My concentration is ... we've been going in circles ... there's nothing in here but density. There is nothing here. Nothing! What is all this?!

Are we inside Mister Squiddy?

When I asked that question, Large Heather stopped us in the middle of a kinking corridor made of polished steel and smooth brass; the surfaces were jerking and flickering with every step we took. When we stopped, the equation stopped too, like a room full of fun-house mirrors pausing along with their fleshy original. The dome-mathematics froze with us.

We reached out, all tentacles to the walls, all tips touching. Bigger

Heather opened us out for a moment.

“Mister Squiddy?” I said. We waited.

The dome did not move.

It did not move because we did not move. It did not reply because it could not reply because it could not move. Expression was impossible without motion.

What does that mean?! Largest Heather spat. I can't go on like this, I can't! I've been in here for days. Days and days. I'm going mad in here. I don't care anymore. Inside Mister Squiddy, inside a lesson — what does it matter?! It's pure mathematics and there's nothing here and— and— and it hurts. She sobbed once. It wasn't supposed to hurt, it was supposed to be from Maisie, it was supposed to be right, and human, and —

“What if we all work together?” I said.

What?

“What if we all work together?”

We ... are? We already are, we've been pulling together! I'm using every piece of brainpower I have. I'm utilizing you to your absolute limit. You don't feel it because I'm cramming you full of lemons, but you're so bruised, you're so damaged. I promised not to self-sacrifice. And I won't. There's no further to push. There's no deeper meaning here except dashing us against the rocks over and over. This was a waste. It means nothing.

“No, I mean—”

I was never meant for this, she said, and sounded so very sad as she started to sob. I think this is from Maisie, I think it is, and ... and I can't understand it. I can't even begin to comprehend this. It's too beautiful, too complex. And not for me. I was always terrible at maths! But this? This is impossible! All I can do is beat myself black and blue on the inside of this thing, looking for meaning that I'm not smart enough to grasp! And she ... my sister ... my twin, she made this. She made this. Not the Eye. I'm certain she made this. What has she become? I can't follow. I can't follow. Why did I do this? Why did I come in here? I can't follow her. Maisie, I can't follow you. I can't.

Biggest Heather Who Mistook Herself For Being Alone hugged me to her chest — but her five other hands peeled us free and stood

apart.

Oh, she said, tears drying on her cheeks. But I'm already using my tentacles. You're not independent, you're—

“Let me take some of the weight,” I said. We all agreed.

And I reached out with my tentacles — with Heather's hands, myself and my sisters, and our core and our purpose — and pulled at the perfect metal equation of the dome. We took over from Large Heather At The Rear, we interpreted her wishes, we translated and tingled and burned and itched so that she had to do less.

We all pulled in the same direction; this time, she didn't need to direct. She joined in.

Gold leaf and chrome machinery blossomed outward; clockwork hurried out of the way; shifting plates pushed at our feet rather than block our path; the dome-equation, the perfect mathematics, the complexity only dreamable in the spaces of the abyss — parted like water. With the effort distributed, the effort became bearable.

And we swam.

Bloody and bruised and battered, torn and tortured, exhausted — but swimming free at last.

Bigger Heather was sobbing again, with something akin to relief. *There's seven of me?* she kept repeating. *Seven of me? What is it with the number seven? Oh, I need to ask Eevee about numerology. This can't be a coincidence. Sevens will be besides herself. Seven of me?*

We still didn't know what we were looking for; brass and gold and steel and chrome slid aside with all the softness of rose petal or cherry blossom. Thorns still lurked, stabbing into vulnerable flesh, but they were only thorns, a fraction of the size of the equation itself. We all pulled together, effort distributed, working in concert, looking for a place where the thorns thickened or the water darkened or the machinery opened out. We looked for meaning, we swam for a core, a centre, a message in the bottle.

But it was all just more mathematics. Machine all the way down.

This can't be right, Heather whispered. *There's nothing here. I'm doing it right and there's nothing here, there's—*

Just when we were about to jackknife and turn and do another

circuit of the inside of the dome, there was very much something here.

Bigger Heather went away in a snap-flash instant, gone like a ripped-out cable.

And I was just me again, falling through a pocket of open air.

I landed painfully on my backside in a long, egg-shaped chamber, lined with brass clockwork and dense circuitry on the walls. I caught myself at the last moment with my tentacles, bouncing slightly so I didn't break my tail bone. But the landing was ungainly with surprise, with pain, and exhaustion. I hit the floor hard with a resonant clang of metal.

"Ahhhh," I groaned, curling up in pain, eyes screwed shut with sudden tears. "Ow. Oh. Ow. Oh no. Ahhh."

The dream was once again razor-sharp real, hard and physical and undeniable. I was not floating in memories or flying through mathematical machinery or confused about how many of me inhabited the inside of my head; I was Heather Morell, twenty years old, dressed in a hoodie and pajama bottoms and Seven's yellow robes, rolling on the floor of a weird machine-room and clutching at my aching body.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow," I hissed. "Oh, oh, why— ah—"

I hurt all over — and not with the slow healing process of small bruises or the pain-pleasure muscle-satisfaction of a day's walk. Knees, elbows, shoulders, knuckles, hips: all were badly grazed, as if I'd come off a mountain bike and skidded across gravel. I was bleeding into the fabric of my clothes from a dozen of those shallow surface-wounds. My shoes were missing, along with one sock; the other sock was bloodstained from several wounds on the sole of my foot. The other ankle felt twisted and wrong. One wrist was stiff and throbbing. My right eye socket was bruised as if I'd been punched in the face, my jaw clicked when I moved it, and my head was ringing with a pounding headache.

I felt like I'd gone a round in a boxing ring with Zheng, with knuckle dusters and a knife. A distant part of my mind screamed that I needed medical attention, I needed help, right now.

But this was a dream.

“It’s not real,” I hissed through clenched teeth. “It’s not real. Ah ... ow. It’s a metaphor. It’s a construct. It’s not real. Not real. Ahhh, but it does hurt. It hurts, it hurts. Ahhhh. Not real.”

I pulled myself up into a sitting position and wanted to swear very badly. I wanted to say words that only Raine said. I think I muttered one of them. Perhaps twice. I wrapped my arms around my bleeding, bruised body and said many bad words.

Then, quite distinctly, somebody else said, “Oh. Oh my.”

With my vision lurching and my heart racing, I jerked my head up, tentacles flaring outward to make myself look big.

The egg-shaped chamber was not large, perhaps twenty feet across, made from the same interlocking clockwork and sliding metal plates as the rest of the interior of the dome, laced with circuit patterns and strange tiny machines crawling inside the walls. The floor was at least solid, composed of a few large sheets of humming brass. Large spikes covered the walls of the far end of the chamber, big enough to impale a human being. The spikes were pointing inward, toward another figure, but not toward me.

A woman stood at that end of the cavity-chamber. I’d never seen her before in my life.

She was old, but impossible to place, anywhere between fifty and ninety, somehow both extremes at once, as if unanchored from the true weight of the ageing process. Her face was soft and lined, but without any loss of acuity or expressive power. Her eyes were deep grey, arrestingly bright sparks like lightning behind storm clouds. Yet somehow all this electricity and intelligence translated the whole effect into warmth and kindness. She had long grey hair streaked through with swoops of bright red, tied up in a loose bun. Straight-backed, steel-spined, fit and healthy. She was dressed for hiking, in sensible trousers, big boots, and a padded vest with lots of pockets. She carried a long hiking stick in one hand, of unadorned dark wood, and had a large backpack strapped over her shoulders. She looked like I’d just interrupted her in the middle of a woodland stroll.

She also looked like I was a lost nightmare from the depths of the forest, slipped out from around a tree in the deepening dusk. She stared at me with a strange mixture of awe, caution, fascination, and fear; she was so out of place that all I thought to do was stare

back.

Almost on automatic I peeled back my left sleeve, slowly and carefully so as not to startle her. My grazed flesh stung and blood clung to my skin, but I held up the Fractal to her, just in case.

She didn't recoil or run away or scream, so I assumed she wasn't anything from the Eye.

"Hello?" I said — croaked, really. My throat was raw and parched. How long had I been crawling through this structure?

The woman averted her eyes, quickly and carefully, keeping me in her peripheral vision. She stayed very still, as if I was a wild animal she'd encountered on the trail. She said nothing.

Deeply confused, I picked myself up. I winced hard and struggled to straighten my back. My stomach muscles were all bruised and strained. Blood was seeping into the front of my hoodie. My joints screamed. A dozen sources of bleeding pain complained at me from all sides every time I moved.

Once again, I reminded myself this was a dream. "Pain's not real pain's not real pain's not real," I whispered to myself.

The older woman at the other end of the chamber swallowed quite hard, unable to hide her mounting fear.

I croaked again, "Are you ... Mister Squiddy? Miss Squiddy? Sorry if we got you ... wrong?"

Without looking directly at me, the older woman raised her eyebrows, and said, very carefully and very precisely, as if I might not speak her language very well: "I've never heard that name before. My apologies."

Her accent was American, which threw me off instantly; it also seemed somehow antiquated, an old-school Mid-Atlantic anachronism. Out of date. Out of time. Her outfit gave the same impression: sensible hiking clothes, but from another era. Trousers, not jeans. A button-down shirt beneath her vest. Her backpack was canvas, not modern materials. Then again, this was a dream.

I said, "Why are you avoiding looking at me?"

The woman's glance flicked to me, then past me, above me, then down to me again. She averted her eyes once more and swallowed

too hard. "My apologies," she said. "I assumed you would consider it polite for me to avert my gaze. Your culture practices the opposite, then? You consider it more polite to look directly at one's conversational partner, even to make eye contact?"

"... yes? You can look at me," I said, deeply confused. "Unless it hurts you or something."

The older woman finally lifted her eyes and met mine; her expression twinkled with cautious curiosity. Suddenly I knew exactly what it felt like to be a large and dangerous animal before the adoring yet fearful gaze of a naturalist discovering you for the first time. She was equally fascinated and terrified of me.

Then she looked past me again.

She bobbed her head and lowered one knee by about an inch: the merest sketch of a curtsy. "I do apologise," she repeated. "I'm not quite sure where to look. Please forgive me if I offend. I do not believe I have ever met one of your kind before, nor one of your station. I am unaware as to the proper terms of address I must use for you. Please, enlighten me."

I just stared, blinking, and blurted out, "Heather."

The woman raised her eyebrows. "Heather?"

"Heather. That's me. Uh, my name. Um, there are no terms of address for me. Miss, I suppose?"

The older woman put up a very stirring effort of trying not to look sceptical. "Miss Heather."

I glanced around the chamber again. The metal perfection was almost throbbing toward the strange woman, menacing her with spikes of gleaming steel, as if the structure itself ached to crush her and spit her out, but was held back by some invisible forcefield. She didn't give the spikes a second look, as if she was standing on a loamy woodland pathway, not in the middle of some god-machine mathematics puzzle that had left me bloody and exhausted after hours of effort.

"Look," I said. "I'm looking for ... um. I'm sorry, who are you? Or, what are you? What are you doing here?"

The older woman wet her lips with a flicker of her tongue, watching me with great care.

She was trying to decide if she needed to run.

I huffed and said, "I'm not going to hurt you or anything. Sorry, I know I entered in kind of a ... weird way. I fell through the ceiling. We're in a dream. This is all deeply confusing and I'm just trying to find the squid-thing which made this place. I'm not dangerous or anything, I'm just ... confused. Are you real?"

The warm older woman smiled a warm older smile. "Would it make any difference if I wasn't? I would still answer in the same fashion."

"I suppose so ... "

I didn't like that.

Largest And Most In-Chargest Heather peered over my shoulder, flexing five hands, and dropping a lemon into my open mouth to occupy my teeth. She said, *Well, I am dangerous, and I would like to know who or what you are. Quickly, please. You interrupted an important search.*

The old lady shivered like a cat confronted by a lobster, eyes going wide and face flushing white, knuckles tightening on her long stick. But she stood her ground and bowed her head.

"I apologise, o' great one, though I know not your name or your station or your manner of—"

Stop it, please. Stop that. Don't call me silly names. I'm kind of in the middle of something and I had to pause the process in order to figure out what you're doing here, or what you are, or if you pose any danger to me. You don't belong, you're not like the rest of this. And I'm so very tired.

The old lady straightened up again — with a twinkle in her eye. "You've caught me. Again, I apologise. I'm ... shall we say ... a passing dreamer?"

Bigger Heather Who Needed A Target For Her Frustration clenched and unclenched her fists. I gnawed on my lemon. The old lady in the hiking gear swallowed again, but said nothing more, standing by her answer.

A dreamer?

"An old and very experienced one," said the lady. She hesitated, then stuck out her left hand. "Veebee," she said.

Veebee?

“Vee. Bee. My initials. Though I do like the sound of turning them into a word. Feel free, of course. “Pleased to make your acquaintance ... ” She hesitated again. “Miss Heather.”

I appreciate the gesture, said Large And Scary Heather. But you wouldn't enjoy the experience of a handshake with me. Not like this.

“Oh, you'd be surprised.” Veebee withdrew her hand, unoffended. “I've shaken hands with all manner of Outsider and dream-god. I would be honoured, but thank you for your consideration of my comfort.”

I'm neither of those things. I'm just a human being.

Vee's eyebrows shot up her forehead in polite interest. She didn't believe that. “Indeed?”

“I'm just me,” I said around a mouthful of lemon-flesh. Juice was dripping down my chin and leaving acidic stains on the floor around my feet, the chemical composition of the juice slowly etching the brass plating. Vee kept glancing at my mouth and teeth, then back to Largest And Most Eloquent Heather.

It's a long story, said Biggest Heather. And we don't have time for it right now. You're sure that you're nothing to do with Mister Squiddy?

Vee smiled with genuine warmth, yet slightly confused. The corners of her eyes crinkled up with a lifetime of quiet amusement. “Quite sure,” she said. “Again, my apologies, this is not my dream. I have intruded where I have no business. Just a passing dreamer.”

Why?

Vee sighed gently and leaned a little on her long hiking stick. She suddenly looked a little older, but we knew she was putting it on.

“I was drawn in by an old flame. Or the illusory glimmer of an old flame, perhaps, one I never expected to see in a dream, even from a great distance. But it probably wasn't real.” Her smile turned a little sad.

Old flame? Does the name 'Lilburne' mean anything to you?

Vee shook her head. “No, I'm sorry.”

How about 'Jan Martense'?

Vee wrinkled her nose. “No, certainly not. That’s a name in poor taste. But, no, I’ve never known anybody by that name. And I’m sorry to say that I doubt it was yourself stirring my memories, I’ve certainly never met you before. I will admit, I did have to fiddle with a few locks and maybe force a few doors to get in here. I expected to find a familiar old face, but all I see now is ... this.” She raised her eyes to the spiked walls which so desperately wanted to crush her. “I’m obviously not wanted here.” She dipped her head to me. “I apologise for interrupting your dream quest, ‘Heather’. I’ll take my leave, if you—”

No, wait.

Vee raised her eyebrows.

You’re standing inside the dome, inside the message, the ... the lesson. Maisie’s lesson. Squiddy’s ... brain, mind? I don’t know. And you’re ...

Biggest And Most Thoughtful Heather raised my eyes to the long wicked spikes all pointed inward at the mysterious Miss Vee.

The mathematical structure of the dome was vibrating with a desire to collapse the equation, to complete the circuit, to fill this anomalous gap with interlocking metal. The logic of the structure itself longed to crush this intrusive variable out of self-definition. The machine-solution was aching and quivering to expand itself into the space occupied by flesh and thought.

And here I was also, bruised and bloody, panting with pain, my shoes gone, as if I’d been wrung through the machine against my will; Big Heather turned my eyes to the floor at my own feet. Cold metal cupped me from below, held me in a grip which could turn hostile and dangerous at any instant. The machine could cut my soles open with jagged metal edges and squeeze my blood between pressure plates and leave me to bleed out, lost inside a maze of perfect angles. I could swim in this medium now — but it was swim or drown.

If this had been a regular dream, I would be pinching myself in an effort to awaken, before the nightmare could devour me.

My feet curled up, tucking in my toes; my wounded foot ached and throbbed and I knew there would be no walking on that foot for a while. My heart rate climbed. Blood stuck my clothes to all my angles. Largest Heather coaxed me to accept another lemon, but I

could only nibble at the skin. Fruits were not enough. We needed to leave.

“Yes?” Vee said.

You’re interacting with the mathematics of this place. You’re holding it back, rejecting it. Which means you’re like me, you’re doing hyperdimensional mathematics. Right?

Vee raised her eyebrows and blinked several times, an old schoolteacher confronted with a genius yet naive child.

“Hyperdimensional mathematics? My dear, I’ve never heard that term before.”

Then you’re a mage? You must be a mage.

Vee’s surprise turned to incredulity, spiced with polite distaste.

“Goodness me, no. Horrid creatures. Well.” Her expression softened just a touch. “Horrid for the most part. Some aren’t so bad, some of the time, when they’re on their best behaviour. But no, I am neither mage nor monster nor mathematician. Just a dreamer who took a wrong turn. This I swear to you, Miss Heather.”

Biggest Heather shook my head. *That can’t be right. You must be doing something. You— you’re lying. Or holding back. Or—*

“Just a dreamer,” said Vee, a touch harder than before. Her grip on her walking stick slid downward, to the middle of the shaft of wood. “A pleasure to have made your acquaintance, Heather. I will be taking my leave now.”

Vee started to turn away, toward the eggshell-curve of the metal wall. The spikes curled away, as if they dare not touch her flesh. The surface of the wall blurred and fuzzed, like static overlaying reality as the dream peeled apart.

No! Large And Desperate Heather cried out. Please! Please!

She reached forward with all five of her other hands, leaving me alone cradled in her tender grasp, licking at my wounds. Five fists raced to restrain Vee by shoulders and knees and even neck if need be — but the old woman turned and lashed out with her hiking stick.

Bonk—bonk—bonk—bonk—bonk went five raps of the stick against five unwary hands. Biggest Heather hissed and yelped and recoiled in surprise. We had not expected an old woman to move so fast.

Vee gave Biggest Heather a pinched frown, very disapproving. But she couldn't quite hide her fear, breathing too hard, knuckles white on her hiking stick as she held it ready to strike again.

"That was exceptionally rude. As I said, I will be taking my leave—"

"Please!" we all cried. Bigger Heather whipped us all back and cradled us tight. *I'm sorry, I just ... I have to understand how you're doing that! This dream, it's a message. The structure is a message, and a lesson, a mathematical lesson, for me. I think my sister sent it, but I can't understand what she was trying to say. And I have to. I have to! I have to understand, or me, my friends, my sister, we're all going to die. I have to get better at ... at this.* She waved at the walls, at the hostile perfection of heavenly mathematics. *Please. Ms V.B. Please. How are you resisting the sphere? The maths? Anything, anything you can tell me. Please.*

Vee looked like she was about to turn away again, but as she studied us for a long moment, her frown creased with deep concern. She placed one end of her stick back against the metal floor of this abscess-like chamber.

"Are you truly a human being?" she asked. "Because if you are ... " She tutted softly.

I don't know if I count, but yes. Or at least I started as one. Out in reality I look perfectly human, unless you have the pneuma-somatic sight, and then I have a bunch of tentacles.

Vee looked us all up and down. "In that case, you are quite wounded, though not fatally or lethally. You should really be awakening from this."

I can't afford that.

She tutted again, as if about to scold us — but then paused, wrinkled eyes squinting at us. "Heather," she said, gently but firmly. "How old are you?"

Twenty.

Vee's eyebrows climbed. "Twenty? Is that years? Years on Earth?"

We nodded. Up and down.

"Oh. Twenty. Oh my gosh. Oh, you poor thing. I have a great-great-great granddaughter who's twenty, and I wouldn't trust her to

navigate five minutes in a dream like this. I wouldn't trust her to dream at all. Poor thing works two jobs and spends all her free time looking at cartoons of dashing young men. Twenty! You shouldn't be here, not in a dream like this. Oh, you poor little thing. What do you think you're doing? In this?"

I don't have a choice.

Vee sighed, breath full of pity. "You really must awaken. You're experienced enough for this.."

Please.

"I can't give you the experience of a century's dreaming, Heather, however sympathetic I am to a young woman in trouble. I'm sorry." She pulled a sad smile. "But ... " She cleared her throat and glanced up at the metal ceiling. "If you want an old woman's advice, sometimes the lessons we intend to learn are not the lessons we end up internalising."

What do you mean?

Vee looked at me, then past me. She swallowed, containing an obvious distaste behind a polite exterior. "I can see you're going through a lot. Whatever this lesson is intended to teach, perhaps it's not the one you require right now."

But if I don't learn—

Vee raised her free hand, soft and pale and liver-spotted on the back. "That's not to say you won't reach your goal. But sometimes you have to take a different route to get there, not the one you expected. And sometimes you don't even know the goal until you walk the road." Vee's face brightened at that. "That's how I dream. That's how I'm doing this." She pointed at the metal spikes and lances, held back with seemingly no effort. "This place, it's simply not for me. I choose not to walk this way. Sometimes one cannot find meaning in a dream. Sometimes they only mean anything to other people. This one, your dream, or your sister's, whichever, it means nothing to me."

You're as cryptic as Lizzie. Are all dreamers like this?

Vee laughed, a rich tinkling sound. "Usually, yes. Heather, I can see by the look of ... you, that you've been walking a hard road in here. You're bleeding. Rather a lot. I wasn't exaggerating when I said

you're injured."

Yes.

"And you said this place was a lesson, for you? Well, perhaps that's the lesson. You'll get injured if you walk this road."

How does that help me? How does that help me understand even a fraction of this? I can't comprehend any of this and you do it with barely any effort. 'Walk this road'? Going even a few feet left me bloody and bruised, did so much damage that I couldn't carry on — but I can't stop!

"You didn't walk into here. You fell. I believe you were swimming. Or perhaps flying."

That didn't help! I need an answer! I need to know what this means! I need to reach the centre, the core, the meaning, the—

Vee cleared her throat, and said, "Heather, I am sorry, but sometimes there's no meaning in dreams except that we make ourselves."

I don't know what this means! Biggest Heather was screaming, raving, her temper lost, beyond frustration, past desperation. I don't know what this means! I don't know!

"We do," we said.

I spat out scraps of lemon peel, scrubbed my mouth clean, and turned with all the others to look Biggest Heather in the face.

She was crying, and lost, and very alone. *No you don't*, she said. *You're just an illusion. You're just something I'm dreaming up. You're a metaphor for a tentacle.*

I tutted and huffed and gave her a look, a telling-Evee-off-for-not-eating-anything-today look. Bigger Heather blinked all her eyes in surprise. Behind us, I heard Vee flinch and swallow a whimper.

"No," I told Heather. "I *am* a tentacle. Hello, Heather. It's Heather here. Time to start listening to us, okay?"

Sniffing, sniffing, tears of acid and soot running down her face, Biggest Heather said: *This doesn't make any sense. I haven't learned anything in this dream. What was this all meant to mean? We've failed. We didn't find a thing.*

“We found each other,” I said. “Even though we’ve always been here.”

Biggest And Not So Clever Heather stopped crying, staring at us in wonder. *But you’re just a ... you’re not ... real.*

“What if there was no centre of the dome? What if walking the road was the point in the first place? And now we’re all bloody and bruised, but we learned how to do it, didn’t we?”

But I was supposed to learn more hyperdimensional mathematics, how to do it myself, without the Eye’s lessons, without ... without ...

“You can’t do it yourself,” we told her. “Don’t be silly. We all have to work together. On the maths.”

Biggest Heather just stared, tears drying in her eyes, her stare going right through me — through us, through herself.

Behind us, Vee cleared her throat softly. “If I may make a suggestion, I suspect it’s your time to wake. Once a revelation has been attained, dreams rarely retain their coherency long, unless you’re willing to step from one dream to another. If you like, I could assist with—”

Krrrrrr-uuuuuuun.

The machine-dome of perfect mathematics shook as if struck by an earthquake.

We whipped around, all of us and Bigger Heather too, all acting in perfect concert to steady ourselves against the shaking dome. Vee looked up in shock and horror. The noise was incredible, like a giant wind-chime in a hurricane; the dome was struggling to correct the million interrupted variables all at once.

“What—” I started to say.

Krrrrrr-uuuuuuun — krun — krun.

“Are those footsteps?” we asked. “Is that Tenny? Did she wake up?” We raised our voice, shouting up through the dome, through the deafening din. “Tenny! Tenny! Tenn—”

Krun—krun-krun came the footsteps — and the dome began to split.

The vibrations were too much for the mathematics, introducing too many wild and uncontrolled variables. Plates parted and cogs

unlatched and entire strata of machine ripped free above us and around us, splitting the dome like the shell of a nut.

Slivers of blue sky appeared far overhead, the top openings in a series of vast canyons, with us at the bottom. A squid wedged into a crack of rock. Suddenly we felt so very tiny.

Dark fronds hove into view, blotting out that sky like an airship draped in black and streaked with red. A pair of huge glassy orbs stared down into the crack, down at us. Rotten eyelids blinked over a pair of empty moons. A pus-encrusted fingernail scraped at the canyon mouth so far above. A giant, trying to drag us out of our refuge.

It was the Jan Zombie, but very big.

“You’re ruining the sphere! Stop!” we screamed up at her, but she was so large, so far away; our tiny voice did not even carry. “Stop it! Stop!”

We knew the truth: Vee was correct, the dream must be losing coherency, turning into nonsense around us. But still we shouted.

The Jan Zombie leaned back, seen only as a series of slivers sliding across the punctured sky of a distantly recalled Reading. She pulled back a fist to strike the sphere, to crack it open for the meat inside.

A single black tentacle as thick as a bus and as long as a river whipped out from the opposite corner of the cross-cut sky and caught the Jan Zombie’s wrist.

“Tenny!” we cheered.

Tenny replied with a fluttery trill — loud enough to break worlds. Our eardrums burst, the jelly in our eyeballs vibrated, and our lungs quivered. The inside of the ruined sphere rang like a bell.

A mass of fluffy black velvet slammed across the glimpse of sky and swept the Jan Zombie away beyond my line of sight.

The crash of impact shook the ground far worse than a footstep. We only avoided picking up even more bruises because we all worked together, bracing against the metal as one, with Bigger Heather in the middle, no longer constrained by the need to direct us.

“Vee—” we said — but the old dreamer was gone.

She’d probably run off as soon as she’d seen that the dream had

Reading unrolled beneath us, a tiny toy-town spread out across the canvas of the dream. Buildings had been crushed to rubble, knocked over, squashed flat by errant footfalls and rolling bodies and ungainly stumbles; we were suddenly very glad this dream did not contain simulated people.

The Jan Zombie stood with her feet planted in two different roads, fists raised like an overconfident amateur boxer. She was still naked, still covered in dried blood and black corpse bile and wounds as big as houses. She was panting with effort.

Somebody — I suspected I knew who — had cut open her chest and carved out her heart, leaving behind a mess of broken ribs.

Tenny — or rather, a giant moth which was probably Tenny's dream-projected self — stood on twelve legs, her own mass of black tentacles whirling in the air above her. Her snout-like nose was bleeding. But she was so very happy to see me.

Oh this is absurd said Biggest Heather. *This really is nothing more than a silly dream now. This has ceased to have meaning. Can we wake up?*

"I think this is waking up," I said.

What?

But we were already surging forward, the dream turning to a blur of ruined memory and absurdist giants. Meaning dropped away as pure subconscious took over.

We hit the Jan Zombie in the face with a hundred arms. Tenny let out a *vreeeee!* and joined me, grabbing flailing zombie limbs with her silken black tentacles.

"Heath! Heath! Heath!" she trilled

I don't get it, Heather was saying. *I don't get what we learned. I mean, I think I do, but what does this have to do with—*

"That's why we have to wake up. Dreams never make sense until you wake up. At least, that's how it always seems. Until you wake up."

Moth-Tenny, standing next to me and grappling with Zombie Jan, opened her blunt-snout mouth to reveal row after row of dripping black teeth, pointed inward as if to stop prey escaping her gullet. We really needed to talk to Tenny about her self-image, sometime.

Then again, if she was having fun, maybe this was fine. Maybe.

The Jan-Zombie struggled to free her wrists, kicking at Tenny until I held her legs in place.

Oh, this is grotesque, said Heather.

Lozzie said: “Sometimes dreams are like that. Hi, Heathy!”

Giant Moth Tenny closed her jaws around the zombie’s head. We closed our eyes and looked away. Meat sounds filled the air.

“Oh yes,” said Actual Jan, muffled by the weight of her helmet. “Because that’s really not traumatic to witness. That’s going to haunt my dreams. Thank you so much.”

Sorry, said Heather.

“Not your fault.” Jan sighed. “Can we end this now? Is this done?”

Lozzie giggled, and said, “Done!”

And then we all woke up.

sediment in the soul – 19.16

The waking world pounced upon us, bright and sharp and loud.

Consciousness was like a hook snagged behind half a dozen ribs, dragging us up and out of the dream-waters until we breached the surface into the freezing void of the air. Then a flinch, a snap-crack full-body jerk from crown to toes — and down to fingertips and the ends of six tentacles. Eyes were flung wide open, real light pouring through lenses and filling photoreceptor cells. Lungs inflated, sucking real air down a fleshy windpipe. Throat muscles swallowed a small amount of saliva, to the taste of sleep and oral bacteria and unbrushed teeth.

Sensory data piled up: bedroom, ceiling, lying on back; covers pulled up over feet and legs to keep me — me? my body? my self? — warm. Lights blazed from the usual lamps, throwing soft fuzzy shadows across the corners of the familiar space. Curtains stood open on the glory of a summer sunset blurred by the decay of drizzle from the skies, turning the horizon a rotten orange. It was late evening in Sharrowford and reality could not be denied.

Sheets lay against bare hands and exposed tentacles, warm and soft. Clothes wrapped the rest, familiar t-shirt and pink hoodie and pajama bottoms. The bed smelled of Raine and Zheng and—

“Heather! Hey, hey, Heather, hey there cloud pilot, you back down on earth? You with us? Say something, yeah? Heather?”

That was Raine, sitting in a chair next to the bed, a chair she had dragged over from the desk. She was leaning over the body I inhabited, smiling with relief, holding up one hand as if to draw my eyes to her parted fingers, to test if I was present.

Raine was a sight for sore eyes — raw physicality, instant and large and undeniable, an antidote to all dreaming, though she herself was a dream; she was stripped down to a black tank-top and some shorts, the curves of her muscles on display, and obviously not wearing a bra. Perhaps she’d been trying to call me back from the dream with raw sex appeal. I appreciated the gesture. Warm brown eyes and fluffy brown hair, brown like bark, like chestnuts, filled

my vision as she leaned closer to frown into my eyes. She was like sun-heated wood left out to dry and harden and grow more real with every piece of light and degree of heat it absorbed. The real sun — drowning in thin rain — painted her face sidelong with planes of orange light. She was beautiful. The waking world was beautiful. I had forgotten.

But then I blinked hard, to clear my sleep-addled vision, because I felt like I was seeing too much of Raine — too much of her sides, from angles other than my own eyeballs.

Was I still dreaming?

A hand reached upward — my left hand — and squeezed Raine's upper arm, her biceps. Smooth muscle gave way beneath my fingers, thick and plush. No dream could fake that. No illusion could match my Raine, my beloved, my saviour. My own imagination was a pale shadow of her reality. I let my eyelids flutter half-shut, then forced them open again, fighting against the drag of regular sleep. Raine's eyebrows climbed and her lips curled in a grin.

"Heather?" she said.

"One ticket please," my mouth said.

"Pardon?"

"Gun show," I croaked. "Ahhh. Dry mouth."

A sharp sigh came from beyond Raine, toward the front of the room. Evelyn said, "Is she back with us, or not? Is she sleep-talking?"

Twil said, laughing, "Sounds like her alright! Get that girl-beef, big H."

"Heather?" Raine was repeating my name. I held on to her arm.

"Heather? Hey, Heather, you gotta do more than flirt with me and squeeze my muscles, 'cos you'd do that even high as a kite. Are you here? You with us? Talk to me."

"I'm not sure I am here," I said. "Sorry."

A cough came from the other side of the room, followed by the distinctive sound of Evelyn's walking stick swishing through the air as she failed to connect with somebody's leg. "Go get everyone,

then!” she snapped.

Twil said, “But we’ve already—”

“Get! Everyone!”

“Alright, alright, fine, fine.” Twil’s voice vanished beyond my range, chased by the sounds of her feet on the floorboards.

Raine was peering into my eyes, not quite frowning but not quite happy either. Still worried for me. I said, croaking out the words, “I’m fine. I think. But things got weird, went funny, and—”

“It’s alright,” Raine told me — and she was correct; her voice made it alright, honey over steel. She put her hand over mine. “We’ve already heard most of it from Lizzie and Jan. You’re at home, lying in bed. Everyone’s safe. Nobody got hurt — not physically, anyway.” Raine cracked a grin. “Though Jan’s acting like she just lost her V-card or something.”

“Got Lizzie to handle her sword,” I croaked.

Raine snorted with laughter. That was beautiful. On the other side of the room, Evelyn huffed so hard I could feel her rolling her eyes. That was beautiful too.

“What?” Raine said, trying not to laugh. “No, never mind, they didn’t explain that part. Seriously, nobody’s hurt. You’ve been out for just over six hours, not like knocked out but just sleeping, real hard to wake. You must be really disoriented, but it’s okay, you aren’t displaying anything like a fugue state. You’re fully awake, you’re really here, this isn’t more dream. I promise.”

“S’something a dream would say.”

Beyond my line of sight, Evelyn huffed. “I’m quite certain I would not be showing up in one of your dreams, Heather. No, sadly, this is all very real.”

Raine turned away from the bed to pick up a little flash-light from the bedside table. “Here, let me check your pupils, just in case. I’ve got a lemon here too, if you’re still craving them. Just hold still a sec.”

But I was already pushing myself up into a sitting position, struggling against mattress and sheets and a heavy dose of sleep.

My tentacles lifted me; I did not lift myself.

I was lifted — yet, I lifted.

We all lift together.

My tentacles took my weight and helped me sit, six additional limbs doing half the work of moving my body around, still a little bruised and sore. Strobing in slow, deep rainbow phosphorescence, with mushroom-pale skin and subcutaneous muscle and buried nerve bundles. They finished the simple task of raising me up, then drifted outward to hang in a loose ring, their tips level with my eyes, pointing upward, like seaweed in a secret shallow current. I counted them: one, two, three, four, five — and six, the one had I used to communicate with Mister Squiddy; that final tentacle was still a little swollen and puffy, her colours tinted neon-purple, skin still thicker than the rest, numb and tingling with the aftermath of the modifications and the dream and—

“And what we did,” I breathed the rest of the thought. “What we did — together?”

Raine was saying my name with increasing concern. Evelyn was asking what was wrong with me — and what was wrong with me? I hadn’t even looked at her yet, checked if she was okay, and here I was entranced by a piece of my own body. My own body? My own body. My own — body? Evelyn said something about how I was still miles away and suggested splashing water in my face. Footsteps were hurrying up the stairs, accompanied by other familiar voices — Lozzie, Jan, Twil, a trilling flutter, the silken drag of a yellow robe,

All of it may as well have been a dream.

I was sitting on the bed and looking at my tentacles — and I was sitting on the bed and looking at myself.

I wish I could compare it to something mundane, like a split-screen effect in a video game or on television, or some kind of trick optic lens. Something fun and silly which would make sense, something Raine or Evelyn could imagine, something that did not belong in a dream. It was not actual sight — I had not built additional eyeballs into my tentacles and then forgotten about doing so; that would have been simple to fix. But when I screwed my eyes shut I still saw myself, reflected back at me.

One of my tentacles — top row, left flank — dipped toward my

face, laying herself across my cheek and lips and eyes. Soft, smooth, pale pneuma-somatic flesh was warm and silken against my skin. Part of me felt like a little girl nuzzling a plushie. But the rest of me was panicking inside. My heart was racing and my head was spinning; I had not moved the tentacle to touch my own face, I had not sent the impulse or made the decision — but also I had. We had. Together.

Top Left pulled back slightly — “Top Left”? I couldn’t call her that, that was terrible — leaving me blinking and panting, confused and disoriented; reality swirled around my senses, threatening to collapse back into a dream once again.

I started to hyperventilate. I couldn’t stop.

“How did I do that?” I said, staring at the tentacle. “How did I— wasn’t me— but you’re just a—”

Raine clutched for my arms, worried that I was having some kind of panic attack. She wasn’t wrong, but I shoved her away; I couldn’t deal with the additional sensory input of another person touching my skin right then. I wanted to plunge into dark water, alone, in silence, to still the whole world beyond myself, lest I lose my mind from the overload.

Dream-knowledge was crashing back onto my mind like a tsunami; my mind itself was crashing back together, two halves left bifurcated for too long, tectonic plates smashing into each other and squeezing me between them like so much grey-matter meat-paste.

I had felt something akin to this once before; back when we had rescued Lozzie from Alexander’s castle, when I’d first laid eyes on Lozzie herself and realised who she was. Until that moment the dreams we had shared had been inaccessible to my waking mind, consigned to a dream-self to whom I had little access. But when the proof of Lozzie herself had stood before my waking eyes, the dream-self and the waking-self had crashed together with the weight of knowledge and experience.

Now, something similar happened, but multiplied by six — or by seven, depending on how one chooses to count.

Memories of the Reading-dream sharpened into undeniable clarity, rasping like sandpaper across my brain — the house, Lozzie, Tenny the size of a Godzilla monster, Jan in her armour, the city where I’d

grown up, the zombie, the race through the streets, the dome, the aching, painful, pinching, burning journey through those mechanical guts, the sense of futility and failure, the mysterious Miss V.B.

But all those memories were seen from over my own shoulder, over the shoulder of myself reflected back at me in a mirror, through a pair of thick rubber gloves, squinting through a slit-visor. The sensations were muffled, the control distant, as if all I had been able to do was suggest and encourage — and supply limitless energy, pumping outward from me to — me?

What had happened in the dream was more than just a metaphor. I had seen through the eyes and senses and thoughts of my own limb. But how could a limb have thoughts?

Eyes wide, mouth agape, tears running down my cheeks, I turned to stare in awe at the purple-tinted tentacle.

Bottom Right. She coiled toward me. A bow? A curtsy? I wouldn't have thought to curtsy; neither did she.

"That was you?" I breathed. "Did I ... did I make you? Were you ... are you me? Was I you?"

She was me. I was it. We were us. Hello, Heather.

I already knew the answers to an endless array of rhetorical questions; we'd learned those answers together, inside that brass dome which was a representation of the inside of Mister Squiddy's mind. But in the waking world it seemed—

Crazy.

Crazy little Heather, talking to herself in her padded cell.

A scream threatened to build, down in my gut.

Another tentacle — middle right — was wrapping herself around my stomach and torso in a comforting hug. Middle left was doing the same with my left arm, coiling up and winding around until she was resting in my palm. I was doing this to myself, holding myself like a confused child in need of an embrace — but I wasn't thinking about it. Not consciously.

I reached out with my other hand and stroked the numb, tingling surface of the firewall-tentacle. She curled into my touch. I curled

into my touch. I was touching myself, curling into my own touch, touching me, and being touched.

“Heather? Heather?”

“What’s wrong with her? For fu— Raine, what’s wrong with her? Lozzie! What is this? What happened to her inside that bloody dream?!”

“Blooooooodiiiiii.”

“She’s just hugging herself, it’s fine! Eeve-wevee, it’s fine!”

“She’s crying! That isn’t fine!”

“Bloody!”

“Tenns, that’s a swear word, hey? Cool it before ya’ mum tells you off.”

“Mum!”

“Oh, oh no, oh, look, I really shouldn’t be witnessing this, I swear —”

“Janny, it’s fine! You’re one of us!”

I spoke — to myself, to my tentacle. “I’m here. I’m all here. I don’t ... how can this ... are you ... real?”

Part of me was waiting to hear a voice in my head. A little voice, tinny and squeaky, like something from a cartoon. Something like, *“Hello Heather, it’s me, top left tentacle! I bet you’re surprised that I’m an independent entity, right? Haha, had you going all this time by not saying anything, didn’t we?”*

Everything would have been so much easier if that had happened, if it was clean and clear and straightforward as voices in my head. Then I could file this away with all the other absurd things I’d witnessed and experienced in the last year of my life. Just another piece of supernatural silliness — oh yes, and by the way, my tentacles can talk, and they all think they’re little versions of me. Isn’t that funny? Isn’t that amusing? How goofy, what a novelty, what a laugh.

But there was no voice in my head, let alone six different ones. There was only touch, my fingers and palm running down the front of the firewall tentacle, another tentacle wrapping around my torso,

another up my arms, the others in a ring around me, as they always had been. I was touching myself, and being touched, and touching another part of myself, and—

“Is this just masturbation?” I said out loud, then hiccuped, then felt that scream building higher.

“Heather?”

Raine’s voice, cracking like a whip; Raine’s hand on my shoulder, firm and hard; Raine’s attention dragging me out of my inner space to stand naked and shivering in the light of reality, a bucket of cold water over my head.

My tentacles responded as well. Two of them dipped toward Raine with affection, with familiarity, with a desire to touch, to touch, to touch.

I was crying, and panting, and I wanted to scream.

Raine said, “Heather, whoa, it’s okay, it’s okay. Who are you talking to?”

The scream gathered at the back of my throat.

My tentacles retracted, tucked in tight, mirroring my own shock, my discomfort, my self-disgust.

Our bedroom was full of people now. Evelyn was hunched on a chair at the far end of the room, with dark rings around her eyes and many strands of hair escaped from a rough ponytail gathered at the back of her head; she looked wiped out, emotionally exhausted, back bent and half her weight on her walking stick despite the fact she was already sitting down. Praem was nowhere to be seen, but Twil was hovering by her shoulder, wearing an expression which said ‘I am very out of my depth and would like to go home and/or punch something’. Lozzie was leaning on the foot of the bed and peering at me, her usual self, wrapped in flopping pastel poncho and with her wispy blonde hair going absolutely everywhere. A shell-shocked Jan stood by the doorway, dressed not in a suit of mysterious armour but wearing a comfortable pink tracksuit; she was wringing her hands together in either guilt or awkward discomfort. Two little faces peered around the door frame — Sevens and Aym, in yellow and black respectively.

Tenny was up on tiptoes behind Lozzie, big black eyes watching me

in concerned surprise. Her own silken black tentacles wiggled and waved in the air, as if she knew how to help but did not wish to impose or cause offense.

I stared at her tentacles and felt such envy, sudden and sharp and shocking. Hers were not hidden. Hers were not a secret. Hers were plain for all to see.

"I told you!" Lozzie chirped. She bounced on the end of the bed, waving at me with a corner of her poncho. "She was filtering! Heathy was filtering! We were in there with the tentacle, not just Heather! It wasn't just her! I told you!"

Evelyn let out a long-suffering sigh. "Yes, you did tell us. Reflection theory, indeed," she said, in a tone which left no doubt as to how comprehensible Lozzie had been. I made eye contact with Evelyn and she frowned at me, as if trying to see through my flesh. "Heather, it's good that you're awake. Welcome back, yes. But what's wrong? Talk to us, for pity's sake."

If I spoke, I would scream. I just shook my head.

Raine got Lozzie's attention, and asked, "She was talking to her tentacles?"

"No, not reflection!" Lozzie said, looking over her shoulder to wink at Evee. "Refraction! She was refracted! It's different but it's the same. She didn't go anywhere else, she was always with us in the dream! I promise she didn't go anywhere else!"

Evelyn sighed again. "Lozzie, nobody has blamed you, nobody is going to blame you. Whatever happened, it wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, Loz," Twil added. "It's alright. Heather's ... fine."

No, I wasn't.

Jan cleared her throat, eyes a little too wide, hands laced together like a child who had been caught doing something she knew was very naughty. "I'm afraid it was all my fault. I can only offer my apologies. I had no idea any of that would happen."

Evelyn snapped at her: "Oh, will you bloody well stop with that? It had nothing to do with you, either."

"I insist, it—"

"Did not!" Evelyn snapped.

“Did too!” Jan insisted, right back at her.

Neither of them knew, neither of them understood. I was in a room full of people and also very alone.

Praem appeared, gliding in through the doorway, carrying a tray laden with mugs and glasses — drinks all round. Evelyn opened her mouth to shout something at Jan, to escalate the argument. But Praem stopped just short, heels clicking on the floorboards. She said, clear as a bell: “Inside voices.”

Evelyn bit back her words, hissing with frustration. Jan ducked her head, a performance of apology.

“Morons,” cackled Aym from the doorway, in a voice like a handful of rusty spoons being dropped into a tin can full of rats.

Praem turned her entire body, tray of drinks still in her hands, without letting one drop spill from a single mug or glass. She turned toward Aym and just looked at her. Aym whipped back around the door frame like a naughty cat, just a flash of black lace. Sevens stayed in place, puffing out her cheeks at Praem in a silent laugh. Sevens glanced at me and nodded ever so slightly; I understood all at once, even through the building scream and the whirling panic, that Seven-Shades-of-Silent-Sympathy was the only one who understood that I wanted to be alone right then, that I did not need more people, more reassurance, more noise. I needed to look inward.

Evelyn made a visible effort to straighten her spine and take her weight off her walking stick. She said, “We can debrief and analyse later — without apportioning blame.” Her eyes slid to me, hard and irritated, but also wet with relief. I had no doubt who Evelyn blamed, whatever words she said: herself and me. “I hope we at least got something useful out of that. Heather — Heather, what’s wrong? Lozzie and Jan have already told us everything they experienced. Tenny as well, though—”

“Biiiii!” Tenny fluttered, all excited and smiling suddenly.

Praem echoed the sentiment, “Large.”

Lozzie said, “You were amazing, Tenny!”

“Largesona,” said Praem.

“Big!” Tenny repeated. She gave both Praem and Lozzie tentacle-

hugs; Praem set her tray of drinks down on the desk.

“Yes, quite,” Evelyn grunted as Praem forced a glass of water in her hands. “We have a rough picture of what happened, Heather, but not what happened to you inside the — what did you call it, Lozzie?”

“Big brass button,” said Lozzie. “Brass brain!”

“Yes. The brass brain,” Evelyn echoed with a little sigh. “Heather — are you paying attention? Was it worth it? Did it work?”

“Did it ... work?” I echoed.

My eyes slid off Evelyn, back to my own tentacles.

Raine held up a hand to forestall Evelyn’s next question, Jan’s awkward apology, and Praem trying to hand me a drink. “Evee, wait, hold on. Something isn’t right here. Heather? Heather?”

Lozzie whined, “She’s fiiiine! Heathy’s fine! Heathy!”

Praem said, “Heathers.” I hiccuped; did she know?

“Heather,” Raine said my name so very gently. She could tell that something was terribly wrong, she could see that I was knocked sideways, that I wasn’t reacting right — but for the first time ever, I didn’t want her to know. “Heather, look at me, please.”

I did as she asked. Raine washed over me, warm and brown-eyed and so very gentle as she touched my face. She peered into my eyes, shined a light into my pupils to make them react, had me say how many fingers she was holding up. She tried not to frown, but she couldn’t help the worry on her face; she could see it, see that I wasn’t myself anymore, see that I was the kind of freak I’d always been worried about turning into. My tentacles didn’t know what to do either — looping toward Raine but then shying away from each touch. She would feel them on her shoulders and I wouldn’t be able to explain what they were doing and she would ask questions I couldn’t answer and the room was full of too many people and half of them could see the tentacles moving and they knew, they knew, they knew—

“Heather?” Raine said eventually. She pressed her hands around mine. “Heather, you’re shaking, but there’s nothing physically wrong with you. What happened in there? Heather? What are you looking at?”

“Herself!” said Lozzie.

I had slipped up. My eyes were following the tentacles, not Raine’s face. I flinched and blinked and focused on her as hard as I could. I lifted my own metaphorical mask to my face, desperate to hide my growing shame.

Lozzie was sitting next to me on the bed now, dimpling the sheets, poncho brushing my knees. She had followed my gaze too, tilting her head back and forth. For once, she didn’t understand. Even Lozzie, my sweet dreamer, did not understand. She had seen it all first-hand, but did not know what it meant.

Nobody understood. How could they? I was crazy, I’d always been crazy. It didn’t matter that I’d been right — that my world had always been demon-haunted, full of gods from elsewhere, inexplicable monsters, and evil magicians. It didn’t matter that I was not schizophrenic, not really. I was still crazy little Heather, screaming in the back of my parents’ car on the way to Cygnet Children’s Hospital.

“Stop it!” I hissed — at myself, at my tentacles, as they kept reaching toward Raine, like they wanted to hug her. They wanted to be felt, to be acknowledged, to love her too. They all reared back, hurt and confused. My hurt. My confusion. I sobbed, horrified at my words, reaching out to apologise. “S-sorry, sorry, no, no, I love you, sorry, n-no—”

“Oh,” said Jan, in a very small voice. “Oh no.”

“Heather?” Raine asked. “What’s wrong? Heather, come on, talk to me. Look at me.”

“I’m not talking to anybody!” I snapped at Raine. “I’m not ... talking to ... ”

To my tentacles?

To myself?

How could I deny what was right there, attached to my own body? Half the people in the room could see my tentacles; a good thing, too, because they were the most beautiful part of me, better than any other piece of my body. The urge to shut my mouth fought a losing battle against six other tongues, pressing up my throat in a low hiss, crying out to be heard. The hiss came out slow and quiet

and broken. I sobbed and hiccuped, desperate to burrow into my sheets and be ignored.

“They’re me and I’m them,” I sobbed. “We’re all here. Me and myself. I can’t ... did I do this to myself? Was it always like this? I can’t— I can’t— I can’t— everybody needs to— go— let me— let me think—”

I couldn’t get the words out. I couldn’t get my head around this concept — not because it was alien and other, supernatural and weird — but because it was all too familiar, too real, too mundane. I’d been here before.

Raine tried to take me by the shoulders and administer an emergency hug; Lizzie tried to help too, hands catching one of my tentacles and cuddling it to her chest. Even Praem attempted some assistance, reaching in to catch my failing hands. But I pushed them all away, heaving and sobbing and mortified by the show I was putting on for everybody who had crammed into my bedroom. Voices swirled around me, prodding and poking and probing for meaning that I could not express.

“Heather, whoa, it’s okay, it’s okay, slow down, slow—”

“What’s wrong with Big H? She was fine a sec ago, I thought the dream went right, it—”

“Praem! Praem, get her some water, please, right now. Heather! Heather!”

“We should give her some space, this is private. I-I don’t think I have any place witnessing this, I don’t—”

“Heath! Heath touch! Heath safe! Heath-er, Heath-er!”

I wrapped my arms — my human arms, two of them — around my head, and blocked out all my friends.

The revelation inside the dream was undeniable: there were six other versions of myself, six little versions of me, sub-brains or sub-selves or budded spiritual masses. My tentacles, all six of them. I had no idea how this worked on a technical level. I’m sure Evelyn could tell me, given time and investigative tools.

By using one tentacle as an informational and sensory buffer between myself and Mister Squiddy’s dream, I had spent subjective hours peering down the tunnel-vision perspective of my own

alternative self-hood, created by information being passed back up the tentacle to my main body. The process had made me aware for the first time, like pulling a muscle one couldn't name, deep inside an obscure portion of one's own thigh. And now it ached and ached and ached.

How long had I been this way?

My tentacles had always moved semi-independently, hadn't they? Even before I had fleshed them in pneuma-somatic beauty, when they had been merely an impulse, a desire, the constant presence of phantom limbs, they had always moved ahead of my conscious decision making. Propping me up when I couldn't stand, levering me out of bed or up to my feet, reaching for things before I knew I needed them; my six little helpers, my subconscious body with a mind of it's own. But that wasn't a metaphor. They were me, and I was them — but they were not *me*.

A person with less experience of psychologists and psychiatrists may have freaked out at that realisation; somebody without my very specific history might have considered the tentacles as abyssal parasites, alien things that had ridden back with me from the abyss. Not of me. Pretenders. Fake. I didn't think any of those things. It would have been easier if I had.

Not that I wasn't freaking out. I was. Very much so. I was teetering on the edge of a full-blown traumatic response.

Because I knew better; because I'd been here before; because I was not meant to talk to myself.

In the early days after Wonderland, after the Eye took Maisie, when I had no idea what was happening to me, when I'd been a scared little girl of nine, then ten, then eleven years old, the doctors had tested all sorts of different explanations for what was wrong with me. First at Royal Berkshire in Reading, then Cygnet Children's in London, with a half-dozen other specialists in between, both NHS and the occasional expensive private doctor, and even one short-lived visit to a Catholic priest to discuss exorcism. My parents thought I didn't recall that last one; they hadn't gone through with it in the end, mostly because the priest in question had been a decent man, unwilling to exploit the fears of parents terrified for their very sick daughter. My parents loved me very much, that I did not doubt; they had tried everything, been willing to entertain

almost any avenue of therapy or treatment.

The doctors took years to settle on an official diagnosis. My parents never said it out loud, but they knew the doctors had given up; they knew that ‘schizoaffective disorder’ was not accurate, did not account for my experiences. But we were all exhausted, and I was able to pretend that the drugs were working. I had my coping mechanisms, I pretended not to see the spirits, and I’d just about come to terms with the lie that Maisie had never existed.

But back at ten years old, during some of my earliest sessions at Cygnet, a trio of doctors had experimented with the notion that I was suffering dissociative identity disorder. What they used to call multiple personalities, split personalities, things like that. Wrong things.

Eventually they ruled that out almost a year later, but by then the damage was done.

“‘Maisie’ may have been a separate identity, in your daughter’s imagination. She may have been this way since very young, displaying one or other personality, or a mixture of both. What she is experiencing now could be the ‘death’ of this alternate personality, and she has no other way of processing it except this wild and inexplicable grief, for a twin who you’ve never met. To her, this is very real. But the first step of any therapeutic program must be to show her that ‘Maisie’ did not exist in the way she believed.”

My mother had asked, in perhaps more words than this: *“What if the second personality is still in there?”*

I hadn’t seen the doctor’s smile. They had talked about me as if I was not sitting right there. *“In my professional opinion, it is better to suppress such delusions, not encourage them. I suggest we begin with sessions of therapy and also a light pharmaceutical option. Here, we have a few different pathways to discuss, if you’ll look at this informational sheet.”*

Even then, I’d understood. Barbarians and cannibals and murderers, all of them. And my parents went along with it.

You mustn’t talk to yourself, Heather! You mustn’t talk to the girl in the mirror, it’s just you! Don’t you dare cry for your twin in the middle of the night, because that’s just more proof that she was never real. ‘Maisie’ is a banned word, a banned name, a fake name,

a name for you reflected in your own mind and nothing more!

A full year of watching myself for 'Maisie', wondering if she really was a product of my imagination — only to be told, sorry, we got it wrong. We don't think your daughter is suffering DID. We think she's just crazy in some other way. Generally crazy, non-specific crazy. Sorry, Heather. Maisie wasn't an alternate self. You're just bonkers.

You can't do that to a little girl's head. You can't do that.

So I sat there on my bed, surrounded by friends who knew that there was more in heaven and earth than dreamed of in any clinical psychologist's philosophy, and I sobbed in confusion and shame.

Had I made six more of myself? Was this abyssal biology and pneuma-somatic flesh married in self-generation? Or was I just insane all along, just as crazy as the doctors had always suggested; had these six other Heathers always been here, waiting for a space to inhabit? Where was the line between the supernatural and insanity?

For one horrible moment, held for eternity in between one sob and the next, I longed and feared in equal amounts that I was about to hear Maisie's voice in my head.

But I didn't.

I didn't hear any voices. No Maisie, no six little versions of me dancing around in a circle, no muffled half-drugged mumble from what had been my firewall tentacle. All I heard was the subtle creak and gentle tug of pneuma-somatic muscle anchored inside my flanks. That was real. That was undeniable. I had made that.

My tentacles gave me a hug; I almost screamed.

Everybody was still talking at me, over me, around me. Lozzie was chirping my name like I was a baby bird who'd fallen out of the nest. Evelyn was snapping commands about painkillers, bottles in the kitchen cupboards, get her chocolate, get her chocolate, like all I needed was a good dose of serotonin. Raine was up on her feet, trying to add her arms to my own tentacles. Sevens kept her distance but I felt a sun-kiss pressure on my shoulders. Tenny was trilling and fluttering in terrible panic, with no idea what was happening to me.

They put together a team effort, in the end, because I couldn't do this alone — how ironic, when there were seven of me now.

Evelyn kept everyone moving, a voice of command amid the chaos. Raine grounded me in physical contact, hands on my head and shoulders and upper arms. Lozzie kept talking at my ears, absolute nonsense but very engaging. Tenny — bless her, I don't know if she understood, I doubt it — she engaged my tentacles directly, one at a time, using her own to draw each little Heather up and off me, wrapping pieces of me in silken black comfort. Twil ran up and down from the kitchen with water and food and medication. Praem forced me to drink, and to swallow, and to drink more. Raine handed me a lemon; two tentacles peeled it for me, and I ate the whole thing in tiny, nibbly little bites.

Twenty minutes later I was almost myself — my-selves? — once again, sitting on the bed, exhausted, but no longer sobbing.

"That's it," Raine said as she rubbed my back. "Just take little sips. Little sips. Breathe in, breathe out. It's alright, Heather, you're safe now. It's alright."

"Heathy's just fine," Lozzie said from right next to me. She peered at my face by dipping her head, but I didn't even meet her eyes. I had so little left to give. "It's okay, Heathy."

Evelyn was slumped heavily in her chair, Praem at her shoulder, Twil hovering awkwardly, way out of her depth. Eevee let out a big, heavy sigh, leaning on her walking stick again, eyes like she wanted desperately to go to sleep. "I thought we understood what happened in that dream. I thought we understood. Heather, I'm so sorry. What happened to you in there?"

"... nothing," I croaked. I couldn't begin to put it into words.

Half my tentacles were still playing handsies with Tenny's silken black limbs, but the other half were wrapped around me at various angles. I was both feeling myself touch, and touching myself, and being touched. I was half-hugging one of them with an arm. Hugging me. Being hugged.

I couldn't even sort it out inside my own head. All of the tentacles twitched and throbbed and adjusted in different ways. I was in each of them; each of them was in me. How could I begin to explain this?

Evelyn sighed sharply. "What the f—" She bit off the swear word

and glanced at Tenny; but Tenny looked none the wiser. “What does that mean, Heather? You don’t have an experience like that and come out crying and not—”

Jan cleared her throat. She was hovering by the door, not having participated much in the process of dragging me out of my mortified self-horror, but unwilling to seem heartless by leaving. Part of me wondered where July was. She said, “We didn’t see what happened to Heather after she went into the dome. I’m sorry, I—”

“Again,” Evelyn almost snapped. “It’s not your fault, Miss January.”

“Just Jan,” Jan crunched out.

Evelyn went on, “You didn’t sign up for it. We did — Heather most of all. We thought we took all the necessary precautions, we—”

“We did,” I croaked, raising my eyes to Evelyn. “Nothing went wrong. We did it right. I found the ... Squiddy. Brain-math. I did. I ... solved it.”

“Right on,” said Raine.

“Then for pity’s sake, Heather,” Evelyn huffed. “What happened in there?”

I shook my head; there was simply too much to process right now — the way the house itself had appeared and followed me, Jan’s suit of armour and zombie doppelgänger, the mysterious Miss Vee, among many others. The most immediate thing was the most difficult to explain. How could I tell anybody I was seven?

“They’re me and I’m them,” I muttered, then took another sip of water; one of my tentacles, middle left, wiped my lips. Middle Left. I couldn’t call her that. “We’re all ... one? I don’t ... s-sorry, I can’t ... ”

Evelyn frowned at me with increasing worry.

“Heather, hey,” Raine said, purring softly as her hand drew little circles on the tense and tight muscles of my upper back. “Why don’t you start at the beginning, tell us what happened when you went into that dome? We’ve heard the rest from Lizzie and Jan. Just start at the start. Go as slow as you like, focus on what you saw, what you felt, where you went. As slow as you like. We’ve got all night. Nobody’s going anywhere.”

Evelyn pursed her lips. Twil sighed, big and floppy; she very much wanted to be elsewhere. Jan looked like she was stuck in the middle of somebody else's domestic argument.

I took a deep breath, and said, "Is Mister Squiddy okay?"

"Yeah," Raine said. "No change. Whatever you did, it didn't hurt him. Fliss and Kim are downstairs with the bucket still. Hope they're not necking in front of him." She cracked a grin.

"Don't be vile," Evelyn grumbled.

"Big crack!" Tenny said. "Eggshell crack."

I nodded, "Yes, Tenny. Hope it didn't hurt him."

"Made you biiiig," Tenny trilled. I almost smiled.

"Yes, he did. Made me big too."

Raine shook her head, grinning wider. "Can't believe you got to have a kaiju fight. Wish I could have seen it."

"Zheng?" I croaked.

"Still out," Evelyn snapped. "She missed every bit of this. No contact all day. Thought she was going to come running as soon as you slumped out of consciousness." She snorted, unimpressed.

I looked at Jan. "Where's July? She's here too?"

Jan nodded, giving me a real winner of an awkward smile.

"Reading a book. In the kitchen. We came straight over, after the ... well. I could ... " She cleared her throat, pointing awkwardly at the door.

"We'll talk later," I mumbled — which prompted Jan to pull an extremely worried look; then I looked up at the ceiling and said: "Thank you."

Evelyn sighed again. "Heather, what happened in there? Did it work? Did it *work*? And ... " She tutted. "Are you okay?"

"Not really," I croaked.

"Alright. We can talk about that — right, Raine?"

"Absolutely," Raine said, so gentle and soft, just for me.

"And," Evelyn added, "Heather, you solved the brain-math

problem? How? What's different now?"

I let out a sad little laugh and looked down at my tentacles; my tentacles looked back at me, framing me in the mind's eye of six different ways of thinking. I felt a moment of vertigo-like dissociation, like I was looking up at myself from beyond my body. I raised one tentacle — upper left — and allowed her to spiral around my left arm, supporting and lifting my flesh-bound muscles.

Where could I even begin?

"I can ... " I started. "I think the brain-math can ... distributed. Um ... " My voice cracked.

Raine's hand tightened on my shoulder. I looked up and found her beautiful in the dying sunlight. She smiled just for me, that endless beaming confidence she kept so close to hand, telling me she knew, she understood, she accepted whatever was going on — and she didn't even know. She didn't have to know, in order to accept.

She said, "Heather, if you're having trouble, you don't have to explain anything. Not right away. You can take as long as you need, you—"

"But they're all right here," I said — before I remembered that Raine and Evee couldn't see, not without the magically modified glasses.

"It's her tentacles!" Lozzie chirped.

"Wiggly!" said Tenny. She wiggled too.

"The tentacles?" Evelyn grunted. "Praem, where are my glasses? Thank you, yes. What do the tentacles have to do with—"

"No!" I snapped, overcome with emotion. I waved an angry hand at Evee to stop her from donning her own pneuma-somatic glasses. She blinked at me, stalled by the sudden fire in my voice.

"Heather?" Raine said. "I can't see them right now either, but—"

"No," I said again, just as forceful. "You— they're right here, they've always been right here, they— there's always been seven of me, or maybe I made them all! But it doesn't matter which, but you can't see them. You can't see me. You can see me!"

It was suddenly vitally important that Evelyn and Raine — and Twil, and anybody else who lacked the pneuma-somatic sight —

could no longer deny what lay just beyond their awareness, even if they had never denied me at all.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was tugging at my hoodie to pull it off over my head. I tossed it onto the bed, panting with nervous excitement, with fear, with worries about pain and mistakes and all the ways this could go wrong; but I had no choice, I could no longer accept this bitterness. Then I did the same with my t-shirt, wriggling it off and over my head. My flanks and ribs and stomach were exposed in the rotten sunset light, shivering despite the lingering summer heat.

Raine took a step back, giving me room but keeping her hands ready, though she had no idea what I was planning. Evelyn was frowning at me like I'd gone mad — perhaps I had. Twil wasn't sure if she should be averting her eyes or not. Lozzie nodded along; perhaps she got it. Tenny hovered for a moment, uncertain what was happening. Praem just stood, placid and calm, hands folded, back straight; somehow, that helped me relocate the shreds of my courage.

"Oh, okay," said Jan, delicate but embarrassed, turning for the door. "It's naked time, I see. I'll be, um, taking my leave. Downstairs. Ahem."

"I'm leaving my bra on," I panted. "It's fine. And it won't take more than a second. A split second. A-a thought. Oh, oh I'm shaking."

Jan had already left. I didn't blame her. She'd seen enough of me already.

"Heather," Raine said. "Whatever it is, I'm right here. I'm right by your side. Right here."

"Whatever it is," Evelyn echoed. "I would prefer to be in the loop! What is happening? Heather, what are you—"

I answered by showing, not telling.

There wasn't much to it in the end — no blood and guts, no forging new tendons and muscles and nerve-connections. I'd done all the hard parts months ago. The tentacles were already real, already a part of my body, anchored deep inside my flanks with pneumatic flesh married to human form. All I had to do was flick that final value, not from unreal to real, but from spirit-flesh to flesh — to make my tentacles like Praem's body, or Twil's wolf-form. They

would never be like Tenny, true flesh born from a natural process, but they would be undeniable all the same.

My bioreactor spooled up by just a single notch of a single control rod, sending an awful stab of pain through my gut. But we would fix that soon enough. In a second, new ways of thinking would open to us.

There was no need for the great dripping black machinery of the Eye's lessons for this, though the needle I held still burned my mind like the sliver of a star. But I made it quick. I reached into the space where I was described, the mathematics that wrought me upon the substrate of reality, and I flicked one value, one figure, upward, by one increment.

"Uuuunnnnhh," I grunted — not from the tentacles, from which I felt no difference, but from the sheer difficulty of the last piece of brain-math I would ever have to perform alone.

Panting, shaking, bleeding a little from my nose — and instantly helped by Praem handing me a tissue — the first I knew that the brain-math had actually worked were the looks on everyone's face.

Evelyn was gaping at me, wide-eyed. She lifted the pneuma-somatic glasses to her face, then dropped them again, falling from limp fingers into her lap. Twil just cracked a stupid grin and started laughing, "Squid girl, looking good!" Raine laughed too, genuine delight in her voice.

Of course, for the others, for the non-humans, for Praem, Lozzie, Sevens at the door, for Tenny bouncing and clapping, there was no difference.

I lifted my tentacles, as real and solid as Praem's pneuma-somatic body. Anchored in my flanks, buried in my flesh, visible to all.

"They're real," I croaked. "They're all me."

Raine sat down gently. "Of course they are, Heather. They're part of your body."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "They are me and I am them. Say hi."

One tentacle — top left — rose in front of Raine. She — Raine, not the tentacle — eyed me, without suspicion, without reluctance, without the least bit of confusion, just curious. Then she looked at

the tentacle.

“Hello, tentacle?”

“Call her Heather,” I said. “They’re all ... they’re all Heather.” I was blushing, burning in the face, still stemming a nosebleed. But I was so happy.

“Heather, then.” Raine nodded to my tentacle.

“This is weird,” I said. “I know this is really weird and I’m sorry, but—”

“Pffft,” Raine said. “What’s weird about it?”

I could have kissed her right there, in front of everybody else. I didn’t, because Tenny was watching. I would have been a little embarrassed.

“Heather,” Evelyn said, “What— what does this have to do with— I mean ... what are you going to do about going out in public? The mental censor effect only goes so far, you can’t hide those down your top all the time, you—”

“I can reverse it, make them pneuma-somatic. I mean, they are pneuma-somatic, but like Praem, for now. It goes in reverse, too, it’s ... yes.”

“Pretty,” said Praem.

“Yaah!” Tenny agreed.

“Pretty,” Praem repeated.

“Yes, yes!” Eevee said, waving us all down. “The tentacles are very impressive, and yes, Praem, you’re very pretty, well done. Heather, I—”

Lozzie suddenly sat up, delighted and amazed in a way I’d never seen on her face before. “You refracted yourself! You refracted and you kept it! Heathy! Wow! There’s seven of you!” She grabbed a tentacle and hugged her. I almost sobbed again.

“What?” said Twil. “I mean the squid thing is cool, fuckin’ rad, but seven of what? Am I missing something?”

“I-I can explain,” I said. “Just, give me a—”

“Heather,” Evelyn snapped. She stamped with her walking stick.

“How does this help you? You said this will help with brain-math, but I am lost, I’m sorry. How does this help? How is this the lesson from all we’ve done here? Explain. What did you learn from the Eye-thing, the squid-thing — was it from your sister, or not? How does this help you?”

I looked at Evelyn, full in the face, smiling in a way I did not expect.

“Cognitive load balancing. Additional neural tissue. A distributed brain — or ... or soul, one I can regrow.”

Evelyn frowned as if I was talking nonsense. Lozzie went wide-eyed. Well, as wide-eyed as she could with her sleepy lids. Raine just nodded, as if this made perfect sense. Twil tilted her head and said, “Uh, cool.”

But Tenny, of all people, Tenny looked right at me, smiled, and nodded. “Like me!” she trilled.

Evelyn sighed. “Heather—”

“Let me show you,” I said. “It’s still going to hurt, and I don’t know my limits, but let me show you.”

“Heather, wait—”

And before anybody could stop us, we plunged our hands — all eight hands, many more hands than the number accounted for in the Eye’s lessons — into the black sump at the base of my soul. And this time, we had more than enough hands to pull at what lay beneath.

sediment in the soul – 19.17

Self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics.

That was Evelyn's terminology; I had learned it from her lips. Human terminology, in English, a beautifully flawed and messy and often imprecise language, for something so far beyond human experience that no words could do it justice. Would German have done any better? Chinese? Dutch? I doubt that very much.

Evelyn had picked up the phrase from a pamphlet five decades old: *Notes Toward a Unified Cosmology*, by Professor Wilson Stout. The pamphlet was tucked away with my belongings, on the desk in my bedroom, of little use now that I'd come so far. According to Evelyn, Professor Stout had eventually gone missing under strange circumstances: vanished from inside a locked office. I suppose he thought about numbers too hard and decohered out of reality. Sometimes, in my lonelier and darker moments, when I thought back to how life might have been had I never met Raine in that greasy Sharrowford cafe, I wondered if that would have been my eventual fate. Vanished in a puff of smoke from inside a padded cell, after scrawling equations on the walls in my own blood.

Where was Professor Stout now? Languishing in Wonderland, rendered down into flayed nerves and stripped neurons under the Eye's gaze? Maisie had never mentioned anybody else alongside her, locked in neighbouring cells, shut away in the Eye's oubliette. But the sum total of our communication to date was: a single one-way message, written on a decade-old pajama top; one conversation carried out in the language of the abyss, in starlight and photons and magnetism and metaphor; a lighthouse pulse of awareness, a call to Lizzie to whisk me away from the Eye a second time; and now, finally, the contents of Mister Squiddy's mind, a labyrinth of metal and meaning which I was incapable of understanding.

Was Maisie one of many, one among a vast house full of prison cells? Or was she a reverse chosen one, a sacrificial child, the only one alone in the echoing dark?

Self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics: technical terminology for technical minds. Sanitised, sanitary, sane. It did

sound like the kind of terminology a professor would invent. Words you could put on a research proposal. Words you could speak to an academic colleague. Words you could publish. Perhaps that's why I'd never really liked the phrase. It didn't even try to capture reality.

'Brain-math' wasn't much better; I'd settled on that out of sheer convenience, not because I thought it was accurate. What did that even mean? Maths which one performs with one's brain. Brain math. Maths, in the brain.

One plus one equals two. Two plus two is four. Four and four is eight. Three and five are prime numbers separated by a non-prime number. So are five and seven. And so on and so on, out to infinity.

Mathematics is true, in the brain or out of it. But adding one and one with greasy grey meat does not make two of anything — only of thoughts.

But it was not with my brain that I performed hyperdimensional mathematics. 'Brain-math' was not correct. Neither was 'magic', 'magecraft', 'wizardry', or any other human terminology one cared to use. Sometimes I groped for words as best I could — screaming hell-math, bloody-minded burning corrosion, toxic waste in my soul.

Terminology did not matter. No words could define and limit the universe, because none of this was meant for human minds and human hands and human eyes.

But I knew a secret.

It wasn't really a secret, it just wasn't spelled out in human words; it had taken me a long time to figure it out, to see what was right in front of me.

Hyperdimensional mathematics wasn't meant for the Eye, either.

The Eye didn't create any of this. It — he, she, they, who knows, not me, not yet — was merely a little bit more suited to the manipulation of reality than I was.

A little? Yes, that's correct. Only a little. The distance between myself and the Eye was an infinitesimal blink compared to the distance between the Eye and the whole truth of hyperdimensional mathematics — the underlying principles of the universe itself.

We were like a canary and a vulture; both soaring, the canary infinitely lower than the vulture, but both of us dwarfed by the void of space beyond the false blue ceiling of the wide carnivorous sky.

If the Eye had truly mastered hyperdimensional mathematics, it would have been able to do anything. It could have reached across dimensions and plucked me from Number 12 Barnslow Drive without so much as a breath. It could have compacted all my friends into a single metaphorical entity and crammed them down my throat. It could have swallowed our world, observed every single piece, every person, every blade of grass, every atom, judged and weighed and regurgitated us in its own image. It could have unmade and remade all reality, all spheres, every dimension of Outside. It could have drained the abyss and left it an echoing infinite void, empty of life. It could have unmade everything, observed everything, known everything.

But it couldn't. Because then it would be God, rather than merely a god.

Lucky for us, no?

The human mind was not designed for what I had been taught to do — and neither was the Eye. It had passed down to me its own set of tricks and techniques, bespoke and custom machinery for manipulating the substrate upon which reality was built. Why? Well, I didn't know, not for sure. I didn't seriously believe the Eye intended to torture me with otherworldly knowledge. Was I a chosen protege, a surrogate child, a beloved cuckoo, or a god-seed planted in fertile soil? It didn't matter. Whatever purpose, the Eye had given me what it thought I needed. But the Eye wasn't perfect. Neither was the machinery it had built.

Did the Eye feel pain when it performed hyperdimensional mathematics? I'd never considered that before.

Whenever I plunged my hands into the ocean of black oil pooled in the bottom of my soul, when I dredged up those lessons and pulled on those greasy, dripping, burning levers, I was not touching reality itself. I was using the tools I had been handed.

And the Eye had taught me to use both hands, two hands.

But now we had eight.

My bioreactor, still sitting hard and knotted and bruised in my gut,

could not draw on truly infinite power, even when pink and healthy and thrumming away in perfect harmony. Eight hands were not a thousand, whatever poetic miracles the dream had summoned to aid me. But the power of the abyss pulled through a plastic straw of acids and enzymes was better than the unmodified furnace of the human body.

And eight was six more than two. How's that for some mathematics?

In that frozen split-second of brain-math operation, in the wake of the dream and meeting myself face-to-face — or face to tentacle-tip, as it were — sitting on my bed surrounded by my friends, my found family, and at least two of my lovers, with the room bathed in rain-ripped sunset orange, I wrestled and struggled and pulled and hauled and got myself coated in stinking toxic black ooze, burning my eyes and face and eating through the flesh of my fingers and—

And I dredged up a fragment of the Eye's vast machine, up and out of the black swamp of my soul.

My teacher's greatest folly was giving me a machine meant for a million manipulators when I had only two. Eight hands were not enough either, not to control the whole thing, not even to keep it surfaced for more than a few seconds, before it sunk back down into the oily black depths, bubbling and hissing, burbling with the whirring secrets of all the hidden, drowned, lower parts of the god-machine.

But eight hands was enough to re-orient some cogs, to rip out old cables and string a few of my own, to clean the levers and dials and knobs — and coat them in a protective sheathe of biological grease.

Eight hands made light work of an impossible burden on two.

This is all metaphor, of course. There was no machine, no black swamp, no levers, no hands, no grease, no toxins. The Eye's lessons were pure mathematics, interacting with a deeper level of mathematics which neither myself *nor* the Eye could touch directly, not without burning our souls to a cinder of charred consciousness.

"Like a programming language and a compiler, to interact with binary."

That's what Felicity said to me later, when I tried to explain what the experience had felt like. I had no idea what that meant. She'd been absolutely fascinated, made lots of notes, then had to

apologise to a very angry Evelyn. Eevee had snapped something about how the universe is not a computer program, that reality is not code. I'd agreed with her, as best I could; all of this was a metaphor. The map is not the territory.

This was merely the closest I could approach with human language, the best words I could find — later — to explain myself to Evelyn and Raine, to splutter through a mouth full of bile and a nose full of blood, to tell them why it didn't hurt as much anymore! It burned my mind and rocked my stomach and made my tentacles coil and ache like they'd hauled me on a marathon, but it hurt so much less than before! The pain was bearable! And if the pain was bearable — then watch what I could do. Watch me.

The first thing I did with that modified and corrected machinery — modified for eight hands, by seven of us, with six little helpers — was reach down into my abdomen and fix my bioreactor.

That was the point of all this in the first place, wasn't it?

Out in reality, less than a second had passed. Evelyn was finishing her sentence: “—until we understand what happened—”

Expressed in the language of hyperdimensional mathematics, the trilobe bioreactor in my abdomen was a thing of terrifying beauty. An interlocking machine in its own right, abusing biology and chemistry to achieve an effect that had no place inside a human body, using friction and fluids and muscles and metals and timing and tension to synthesize a pinprick connection to the energies of the abyss.

Messing with *that* was like opening up the containment torus of a fusion reactor, hoping not to get blown apart in the process. That was beyond me, even then, even with my rapidly increasing competence. That was for abyssal biology alone, not conscious tinkering. That would have turned our victorious little bedside gathering from an orange sunlight-wash to a blood red explosion of my guts all over the walls.

But the flesh. The flesh! The flesh was mutable, and I had eaten a lot of lemons, a lot of fish, a lot of soy sauce, a lot of proteins and grease and tight-packed lipids. I had everything I needed.

Muscle and membrane and tendon and tissue peeled back under the gaze of hyperdimensional mathematics – my gaze, my eyes, my

observation seeing through cell wall and mitochondria and DNA. I crammed the fibres with protein and shored up the structures with stem cells and wrapped the whole lot with protective layers of fat and ablative meat and capillary-dense mats of throbbing flesh.

Out in reality, my right flank flared like a fragment of star embedded in my flesh.

Apparently I screamed — according to literally everybody else in the room, and several people in other rooms. So, I must have done. Only the action of the bioreactor itself saved me from burning a hole in my side or cooking my mundane organs or just denaturing half the enzymes I required for homeostasis; it roared to life, booting up, control rods jerking free as it pumped our body full of things that had no place in a human circulatory system. But then again, we weren't really human any more.

Homo-stasis, don't wanna break that, Raine quipped later, mirroring the way I smiled at her, manic and panting through a mask of blood all over my face. I think she smiled half from panic — but half from the living proof that I had broken the mathematical ceiling.

I may not have heard myself scream; but I did hear myself choke.

With the first equation complete, we surfaced from the mathematics with a wheezing gurgle. Snorting and spluttering, blood running down my face from a terrible nosebleed, clothes glued to my skin by a sudden flash-sweat, tentacles coiled and aching each in their own way, head throbbing, gut churning.

But so much less pain.

“Heather!”

“Whoa, whoa, nobody touch her—”

“Prrrrrrrrrrrbtttttt!”

“Holy shit, is that glowing!?”

“Heathy!”

“She’s always glowed, this is nothing new. I mean, not exactly—”

“Breathe.”

“Yellow! Sevens! Get in there and stop her, before she does herself an injury—”

“She knows what she’s doing, Evee. Let the girl cook.”

“How can you trust that?! Raine, she’s sweating blood! She looks like she has fucking ebola!”

“*Fuuuuuckkkk.*”

“Tenns no! Evee-wevee, she’s fine! I think!”

“I can’t do anything. It’s up to her.”

“Breathe.”

“Big H’s never fucked up bad before. She won’t hurt herself. Right? Right?”

“Wrong! Somebody stop her, stop her doing this, this is mad—”

“Breathe.”

I breathed, ripping my own windpipe back open with an audible *slurrrp* of meat. We — my tentacles and I — had briefly become a conduit for pure mathematics, forgetting our shared reality as a thing of meat and muscle, forgetting how to breathe. But Praem knew what we were doing. Praem had come up from the abyss too, hadn’t she?

“Heather, Heather. Heather!”

Brain-math always hurt, always burned, was always like handling molten pucks and rods of glowing-hot steel with my grey matter, turning me into a bubbling mass of melted flesh. All the way back to the very first time I did this on purpose, the first intentional calculation I ever performed, brain-math had drawn vomit from my throat and forced icepicks through my skull. I hated it.

And oh, it hurt still, it did hurt. The human body was not meant for this — but neither was the Eye. It didn’t matter how far I wandered from my human origins, how many extra tentacles we became, how many parts we added or modified or adjusted, how far we changed into an instrument of what we had been in the abyss, it would still always hurt.

But now we could all pull in the same direction. Now, the pain was distributed. Now, I had help.

My tentacles ached like they’d been run through a clothes press, twitching and throbbing, muscles complaining. My head pounded

like I'd been brained with a frying pain, by Zheng. My eyes stung and burned and filled with pink froth. But I didn't vomit. I didn't double over and struggle to stay conscious. I rode the pain upward, pulling my tentacles with me, teaching them all the little tricks I'd learned to soothe the burning in their own distributed neurons, to salve the pain in our shared nervous system and get ready to—

“Heather!”

Raine's voice was like a whipcrack. That familiar tone sent a jerk through all seven of us, more important than any level of pain. I could have been gut-shot and bleeding to death and I would have responded like a puppy to that voice, that tone, that firm hand on the back of my brain.

We turned to her: an outline of bronze and chestnut brown glowing in the dying sunset, blurred by bloody tears and my own panting breath. Somehow, despite my obstructed vision, I could still see Raine, see too much of her, the angles of her body reflecting upward upon the surfaces of my mind.

“Raine!” I said, elated.

For just a moment, Raine could not respond. At the time I didn't understand why; only later on did I discover that I was sweating blood into my own clothes and grinning like a maniac.

Everyone was shouting suggestions, telling everybody else to stop me, whatever I was doing, or calling out to me like I was a distant swimmer racing away from shore.

But Raine just took a breath, steadied herself in a way I'd never seen before, and said: “Heather, do you know what you're doing?”

It wasn't a rhetorical question. She was just checking if I needed help.

I nodded. I did! I knew exactly what I was supposed to be doing. I had help, I had so much help, all right there alongside me.

“Second part!” I croaked through a throat glazed with my own blood. “Here I go!”

Me and six other Heathers hauled ourselves to the lip of the marine trench that was the abyss, and stuck all our hands into the Eye's machinery, and pulled one more time.

I had to find Edward's house.

And I had to do it then, right then, because a tiny voice in the back of my head was speaking low and level sense, barely concealing her panic and worry; was that one of my tentacles or just an aspect of me I didn't listen to enough these days — or just a metaphor becoming reality as I slipped between the waves of starlight and photons and subjective meaning?

That tiny voice in the back of my head, Cautious Heather, Sensible Heather, Good-Girl Heather, she knew that once this ride was over, I was going to be *out*. Pain was distributed and my bioreactor was running hot as a steam engine, but none of us — not me, not Lozzie, not the Eye — were truly built for hyperdimensional mathematics.

We could do more now, more easily than before, but we were screaming toward our limit like a ballistic missile without any guidance.

Edward Lilburne's house, then; what was the easiest method?

Normally such a question would have taken minutes of thinking out in reality. Probably a bit of pacing up and down or wiggling one leg until I hit upon a good method. I'd had lots of good methods in the past, hadn't I? Trying to define the entire space between Manchester and Sharrowford, sectioning and separating it until we found what we were looking for. But what personal connection did I have to that landscape? What questions could I ask it, in the language of mathematics, which would make any sense? I could barely speak with the house we lived in, let alone the open countryside. The map was not the territory.

But I could use an anchor, a reference point.

And Zheng was still out in the woods.

I knew Zheng, every little part of her body, her glistening red-brown skin and muscles like steel cables, her thatch of dark hair and sharp-cornered eyes, her maw of shark-teeth and the shape of her smile, the spiced scent of her sweat, the rumble of her voice inside her chest. I span her up in effigy, in miniature, described in heaven's language of three-five-seven.

I didn't know it at the time, but when I described it to Evelyn later, she said I was doing magic.

No, I told her, very sore and very tired and not sure if I was concussed. *I was doing maths. It was just brain-math.*

That's what I said.

What?

Zheng in effigy, tiny but precise, sent spinning across the landscape with me at her heels, to join the real thing, the definite article, miles and miles distant from the house.

Defined in the infinite limitations of hyperdimensional mathematics, Zheng was beautiful: grey-scaled and sharp all over, a shark of the deepest waters, built for tearing apart little squid like me.

Zheng, seven feet tall and wrapped in her long coat, boots cushioned by the springy loam of the woods. Sunset hid beyond the treetops, light a ghostlike memory between the trunks. My shark, hidden in shadows, radiating cold thoughts, slow thoughts, hunter's thoughts which ebbed low to match her prey.

She looked over her shoulder when I passed, as if she'd heard something in the woods behind: a snapping twig, an unwary footfall. I tried to tell her that it was just me, but that would have terrified even Zheng.

Then I catalogued everywhere she had stepped and everywhere she had not stepped. I unravelled the history of her boots in mathematical perfection. Spinning out across the countryside, across the rolling hills and little dales, up to Stockport and down to Sharrowford, over to Brinkwood and the Pennines and—

Losing blood.

Out in reality I was bleeding through my skin. Bleeding too much.

According to Raine's detailed explanation later on, I was sweating blood from my armpits, the insides of my elbows, all down my chest and back, my groin, the rears of my knees, and around my fingernails and toenails — not to mention my scalp, my nosebleed, and the frothy pinkish tears in my eyes. Good thing I'd stripped off my t-shirt and my beloved hoodie. The butcher's bill, by the time this was all over — twenty one seconds of real time — I had ruined one bra, one pair of underwear, my pajama bottoms, and one bed sheet. Could have been worse. In the reified astral projection of

active hyperdimensional mathematics, I had no idea that was happening.

But my body knew I was losing blood. Growing weaker. I was yet to take the most important, final step, and I could not afford to flounder.

My trilobe bioreactor presented a novel solution, the kind of solution only a living miracle would think of.

Make more blood!

Re-purposing enzymes and shifting membranes and flooding fluid sacs, in an instant the bioreactor gave over a portion of itself to imitate bone marrow, speed-growing and nurturing and ejecting red blood cells, platelets, and macrophages, flooding me with fresh claret, replacing what I was losing.

Hotter and hotter the reactor ran, flushing my flank with heat; I was sweating buckets, dumping more fluid, more heat — more blood. I didn't know it, poised as I was over a mathematical map of the landscape Zheng had trodden, but out in reality my body had entered a positive feedback loop. A fever with no upper limit.

Upon reflection, I don't think I would actually have hurt myself; my reactor, my tentacles, my abyssal side, they would have all worked together to realise what was going wrong. I would have been okay. I wouldn't have given myself brain damage or organ damage. But I probably would have crashed out of the brain-math. It would have taken days to recover — days we might not have. And I had promised no self-sacrifice; I was riding higher than I ever had, unaware of the potential damage, but if I crashed out, aching and bleeding and in need of a week's recovery? I could not have pushed on. I would have to keep my promise.

Lozzie came to the rescue. She, of all people present in that room, understood bodies better than anyone.

She leapt up from where she'd been crouched on the bed, next to me. She ignored everybody else shouting and panicking. She grabbed Praem by the wrist and said, "Water!"

A few seconds later they had us off the bed and in the bathtub, tentacles lashing under the cold spray of the shower head. That's how Praem's nice blue jumper got blood all down the front, and why Raine had to throw away one of her tank tops. Lozzie helped

too, apparently, but her poncho was spotless the next time we saw it.

I witnessed none of this, of course. Myself and all six of my tentacles were wrist-and-eyeball deep in hyperdimensional mathematics.

In the end, the logic was very simple: take all the ground between Sharrowford and Stockport; trace where Zheng had been and where she had not been; then, find the gap. Find the missing piece. Stare down into the void where a house hides.

But I wasn't looking at an image on Google Maps, or the cross-hatching illustration of a ordnance survey, or a glossy estate agent photograph of a mansion in the woods. I was looking at slices of the mathematical substrate which defines reality itself.

What does a house look like, mathematically speaking? I had no idea.

At that exact non-second of realisation, that moment where I came up against an obstacle for which I was unprepared, I felt a presence at my back. Peering over my shoulder. Offering a suggestion.

It wasn't a tentacle; they were at my front, helping me, distributing the effort.

It was like nothing I had ever experienced. Slow, solid, still, with its own mathematical rules and systems and interior reflections.

We knew what a house looked like. Yes we did.

And there it was, tucked away in a gap that Zheng had passed on all sixteen sides. Sixteen sides? We didn't have time to think about that. Wedged deep in a scrap of long woodland, far from the main roads, down a rotting ribbon of water-damaged, fifty-year-old asphalt, was a house.

Red bricks and brown bricks and thick, weather-proofed beams; tiny latticed windows with glass older than the trees; the roof a slate slope, leading to ancient gutters and draping the building in shadow; a squat and crooked construct from another age, another place, another form of life, sprouted from the ground like a mushroom amid rot, but without any of the healthy terrestrial identity of a humble fungal cup. The presence peering over my shoulder did not like it; the presence left, retreating in the way only

a thing that never moves can leave a busy, whirring biological lady to her scrying business.

Woods all around, tall and dark and leafless until the canopy itself. Sunset a ghosting memory between thick, summer-fat leaves. A perimeter wall which was not a wall, but the memory of a wall, full of holes and fallen sections. A gravel driveway, so badly in need of replenishment that it was halfway to a dirt road. A back garden, rambling and wild and turning to forest at the edges. In the front stood a dry fountain, all dust and fallen leaves about the feet of a grey stone statue of a naked woman. Two cars in the gravel front: one expensive range rover, dirty with mud and hand prints, stinking of corpses and pain and confinement; the other was a low and anonymous black machine, many-seated, clean, spotless both inside and out, with spaces where weapons once lay. This second car was not a permanent resident. Somehow I knew, somehow I could see the tracery of its history in mathematical precision.

The range rover hadn't moved in three years. It belonged to Edward Lilburne.

The house, the location, the positive identification — I took a split-second of thought to place them properly, to fix them in place, to place them to place, so that I would not be confused upon completion of the work.

We withdrew, sliding back past Zheng. She was a mere five miles from the house, now striding through the dark of the woods — towards the secret I had finally uncovered.

“No! Zheng! Come back! Wait for the rest of us!”

I tried to speak words, but words are not maths, or if they are then they are the mathematics of the human mind. In the deep woodland gloom I saw Zheng pause and glance over her shoulder. Her sharp-edged face pinched into a frown.

But then she turned and strode on, and I could not stop her.

Unwinding, unravelling, surfacing from the ocean between realities like a beaching whale — I opened my eyes, gasping and spluttering and flailing in the bathtub, back in Number 12 Barnslo Drive.

Water was running down us, soaking bloodstained clothes, shockingly cold; the bioreactor spooled down instantly, killing the heat, leaving me a suddenly shivering, tooth-chattering mess. Raine

was cradling my head in her lap, cross-legged in the tub beneath us. We gripped the bathtub sides with six tentacles, ourselves soaked in blood-sweat. Lozzie was hugging one to her chest, smears of me all down her poncho. The others crowded behind, peering at me in the tub, rushing about in panic. Evelyn was shouting orders, something about fetching ice, calling Jan back, arguing magical biology with Felicity in tones of rising panic.

“Heather!” Raine said. She looked up. “She’s awake! She’s back!”

“She’s back!” Twil shouted.

“She’s what!?”

“Heathy!”

“Brrrrrrrrrrt!”

Everyone was so worried. I was covered in a sticky film of my own blood and frozen to the bone. But we smiled. Oh, we smiled. We all smiled in panting, ecstatic victory.

“Call—” I gurgled, then coughed out a mouthful of blood. “Call Zheng. Call back.”

“Heather?”

“Found house. Call Zheng. Call off.”

Evelyn pushed past Lozzie and Praem, walking stick banging against the side of the bathtub. Her eyes were blazing with anger and fear, golden blonde hair in disarray.

“You promised, Heather!” she thundered down at me. “You promised not—”

“I found the house!”

“You promised no more bloody self-sacrifice!”

“It barely hurts,” I said. I couldn’t keep the grin off my face, wide and joyous and with my own blood smeared on my teeth. “I can do it! We can do! Brain-math doesn’t hurt so much anymore!”

All tentacles rose up, as if to show how little we ached. We were trying to show Evelyn that we were okay, that we had conquered this tiny portion of the Eye’s lessons, at long last.

She just sighed. “Bleeding through your skin is not much of an

improvement. Are you done?”

I just smiled to myself, to her, up at Raine — upside down above my face, right-ways from the sides, straight-on from tentacle tip pointed at her face. This was the greatest piece of hyperdimensional mathematics I had ever performed. And it barely hurt at all.

“Call Zheng!” I croaked. “Now. Promise. Raine.”

Raine nodded. “I’ll call her back. I promise. Heather, breathe, come on, just breath—”

“Now!”

“Now.” Raine looked away, up at somebody beyond the bathtub, beyond my line of sight. She said something about getting her phone, asked somebody to fetch it.

We sighed in relief. Tentacles relaxed. I relaxed.

But I was still me. Six more of me, yes, but we were still us. And sometimes that meant we were seven little fools, instead of just one.

With my task complete, and Zheng being called back from a potentially disastrous solo assault, my bioreactor fell into post-crisis dormancy, sliding control rods back into their biochemical channels, closing valves and ducts, flushing out imitation bone-marrow.

And I — we, all seven of us — passed all the way out.

= =

“I do want to make one thing very clear: this isn’t what I normally do, returning to the scene of the crime like this. Though, ah, I wasn’t responsible for any of that mess, I hope you know that. Frankly I don’t even understand what I witnessed back there. And I suppose this isn’t where it happened, either. Goodness, that’s a lousy turn of phrase I decided to use, wasn’t it? Ah, never mind. Point is, I don’t generally make a habit of sitting down for tea with large and dangerous beings who I’ve met inside unknown dreams. I hope this isn’t the start of a new trend; I suspect I wouldn’t last very long if I make this a regular thing.”

V.B. let out a big sigh — a real old woman sigh, heavy with the weight of age and experience.

She leaned back in her chair — which was made of strange white

metal sculpted into a delicate filigree that couldn't possibly have held her weight in the waking world. She lifted her dainty little teacup to her lips, took a sip, and gazed out across the sparkling marble city below our teatime terrace.

We blinked several times as the dream settled on us, fighting for lucidity and focus. Tentacles gripped our own chair, the edge of the matching white-metal table, and reached down to touch the cool marble flagstones beneath our feet; tactile sensation anchored the dream, kept us here, kept us real.

"I'm not dangerous," we said, automatically following the conversation, still groping for presence.

Miss V.B. lowered her teacup and raised her eyebrows at us. "Oh, I think you are. What you mean to say is you're not hostile. You don't wish me any harm. That goes without saying. I wouldn't have invited you for a quick cup of tea otherwise. I would have run off, or set some Zoogs on you, though no doubt you would have skinned and eaten the poor things regardless." She smiled, a crinkle in her crows-feet eyes and around that kind mouth. "No, I understand what you mean, 'Heather'."

"Heather's our name. Stop putting quotes around it."

V.B. nodded graciously. "My apologies. It is ... difficult. Heather is such a human name."

"I am human," we said.

VeeBee nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, you do look a little different now. Though ... human is a stretch, but I won't argue. Your accent is unmistakable though, that much is impossible to fake. I know you British are very exacting about your tea. I hope it meets with your approval? I was a little confused about adding the drops of lemon juice, but there you are."

She gestured toward a second little teacup, sitting on the table in front of me, cradled in a saucer with golden trim around the edge.

"More of a coffee drinker," we said. I screwed my eyes up tight, trying to hold onto my senses.

"Really, now? Things have changed since I last waked, I suppose." V.B. sighed again. "So, Heather, as I was saying, I don't make a habit of this, but I—"

“Stop it,” we hissed. “Stop. Let me ... let me ... ”

Keeping my eyes screwed up tight was not helping; I flung them wide instead, filtering the dream through seven different sets of neurons.

Miss V.B. and I were sat at a little metal table with matching metal chairs, spun from sugar glass and cobwebs. The table and chairs stood in the middle of a wide marble-floored terrace, which was set on a hillside draped with deep, dripping, rainforest greenery, thick and verdant, buzzing with hidden insect life under the beating sun. White-fluted columns stood at seemingly random intervals around the edge of the terrace, as if this had once been some kind of temple, now ruined amid the jungle. Marble pathways led off both up and down the hillside, meeting other terraces and walkways and long flights of sweeping stairs, half buried by overgrowth here and there, sometimes clean and clear, obscured here, shining there, a great jumble of fallen beauty.

At the foot of the hills was a city built from the same white marble, filling a wide estuary until the land met the sea. Nothing moved in the empty sun-baked streets but a few stray dogs, the occasional bird, and the salt from the ocean. The sea was flat and still. A dark lump moved on the horizon.

“This isn’t ... this isn’t the Squiddy dream,” I said. “Where is this?”

“Oh,” said V.B. “An old place, that’s all. A nice quiet place for a friendly chat. Doesn’t mean much to anybody still around. Nobody to bother us, at least for five minutes.” She cleared her throat, awkwardly. “It had a name, once, but I’d rather not share.”

V.B. herself looked no different to how she had appeared in Mister Squiddy’s dream — old and lined but full of vigour and energy, eyes like smirking storm clouds, dressed in sensible trousers and a padded vest, for hiking. Her loose bun of grey hair, streaked through with red, seemed much brighter in the dream-sunlight, rather than stuck in the false brass illumination of the dome of perfect mathematics.

Her backpack sat on the marble floor, comfortably beyond arm’s reach. Her hiking stick lay against it.

“You’re doing what Lizzie does,” we said. All my tentacles raised slowly in a posture of subconscious menace. “This is a dream. Your

dream. Or Outside. You've hijacked my natural dreams and brought me here. You—"

"Excuse me!" V.B. set down her teacup and raised a hand. I noticed her fingers were shaking. "Hijacking? I extended you a private invitation and you accepted it. Yes? Yes? Please, you're free to leave, if you've changed your mind." She gestured up the hillside, along the rambling pathways and terraces.

My tentacles dipped again. This old woman, this experienced dreamer, she was terrified of me. We nodded slowly, swallowed, and looked down at our own cup of tea. Milky, warm brown, steaming gently.

"I don't think I can drink this," we said.

"You're under no obligation to do so." V.B. sighed, glancing along the hillside. "A pity, but it doesn't look like we have more than five minutes to talk, anyway. You've got some very dedicated and powerful friends, Heather." She nodded past me. "And I'd rather not meet them, I'm afraid to say. I wouldn't want to wake up, after all."

I twisted in my chair, or perhaps the dream twisted around us, or perhaps I merely pointed some of my tentacles behind me, or perhaps they did that themselves.

A glint of deep yellow and a pentacolour pastel bloom were flittering and fluttering amid the marble maze along the hillside.

"Oh," I said. "Lozzie, and Sevens. They won't—"

"Ah-ah-ah," V.B. tutted. "Heather, you really must learn to stop sharing real names in dreams. It's frightfully dangerous. You're lucky that I'm just a passing rambler instead of a queen or a god. Or worse. Conceal your friends' names, please."

We turned back to her with a huff. "My friends won't hurt you."

V.B. shrugged, shoulders thin and old beneath her padded vest. "Be that as it may, we only have a few minutes." Her eyes roved us, up and down each tentacle. "And you are very ... complicated."

"There's seven of us."

"Yes, well. That answers ... nothing, really." V.B. sat up straighter. "Heather, as I was saying, I don't make a habit of this, but I'm making an exception for you."

“Why? What do you want to talk about?”

Vee sighed and pulled a sad smile. Her lined old face was inherently trustworthy, but something curdled inside my chest. “Honestly?” she said. “You looked like you needed help. And, damn me for an old fool, you remind me of myself at your age. Oh, well, no, that’s a lie. You remind me of one of my granddaughters, when she was your age. When I was your age I was chasing some fool poet, my head full of academia and romance, my first dream still twenty years distant. You deserve better than fumbling in the dark, that’s why I returned.”

“We’re okay now,” we said. “Well, mostly. In the dream — the other dream, with the metal and the dome and the giants — we were having a bit of a crisis.”

Vee’s smile turned indulgent. “Yes, I could see that much. And you’re feeling better now? All better, hm?”

I could detect the hint of sarcasm in her voice, like a surprise chilli pepper in the middle of a doughnut. I frowned and said, “We’ve found ourselves.”

Vee’s eyebrows shot up. “Really now? Have you?”

“Really. What are you insinuating?” I tutted. “I don’t have time for this. I was in the middle of ... being ... hosed down with cold water?”

V.B. politely ignored the implications of that. “I thought I found myself five times before I really did. The first time was about your age, Heather. But the real discoveries didn’t come until my forties. And that was only a beginning, though it looked a bit like an end at first. We never stop growing, even at my age.” She nodded across the table, toward me. “You seem to have done a lot of growing, very rapidly. That can be very dangerous. Especially in dreams.”

“We can’t slow down,” we told her.

“You’ll have to, sooner or later, or you’ll burn out.” V.B.’s eyes crinkled with sudden sympathy; she knew that pain. “Whatever changes you’ve been going through — and I won’t pretend to know them — you have to stop and think, sooner or later. You need to sit, with yourself, alone, or perhaps with a loved one, and ... have a think. Several thinks, probably.”

"There's no time for thinking. I'm on a rescue mission. My twin sister." I sighed sharply. "She's on a time limit. This all has to happen."

V.B. pulled a pained smile of mingled sympathy and concern. "Perhaps it does have to happen, then. But still—"

"Why are you telling me this?" we demanded. "It's one thing for my friends to tell me to look after myself, but you, I don't know you. You're acting like it's your place to give me ... grandmotherly advice?"

V.B. sighed and glanced over my shoulder. Lozzie and Sevens were closer now, two shades filtering through the overgrown marble. "Well, yes," V.B. said. "I'm trying. Heather, somebody like you, blundering around in dreams — or in the waking world? gosh — you could do an awful lot of damage. To yourself, to others, to places. And we've met. You recall me now. That can't be taken back. So it's in my best interests, entirely selfish and all that — to do what I can to tell you it's going to be alright, to get you to slow down just a little. So maybe if you get any bigger, you'll remember that kindness. Remember that some old woman you passed in dream, she was a person too." V.B. smiled, but I could see the terror of duty behind her crinkled old eyes.

"Oh," I said, suddenly embarrassed, blushing. All my tentacles flushed pink. "I'm not trying to become a god. I'm not. I only care about rescuing my sister, I'm not trying to ... I don't know, 'ascend', or anything like that. I'm not dangerous."

V.B. nodded in a way I hated, acknowledgement without belief. "Very well, Heather. But, will you grant an old lady a single indulgence before she has to leave?"

"I'm not a god!"

"Yes, you're not. But I'm curious. What are you going to do next, when you wake up?"

"Kill a mage."

V.B. froze, swallowed her surprise, and nodded. "Ah. Well then. Really?"

"Yes. Well, first I'll have to get used to the tentacles, and probably we'll make a plan, and—"

“Well! This has been very nice, but I really should get going. Best of luck, Heather. Try to remember what I said; take a break, eventually.” V.B. tapped the table top, scooted her chair back, and stood up.

Which revealed what she’d been hiding this whole time.

Behind her on the marble floor of the terrace, lying in an untidy pile, glinting in the beating, unreal sunlight, was Jan’s suit of armour. The goat-head helmet was unmistakable. The tabard with the trio of broken crowns and the winding dragon was laid out across the jumble of metal, as if somebody had been inspecting the design.

I shot to my feet, which made V.B. stumble as she stood up. We didn’t want to actually hurt an old lady, certainly not by shocking her into falling over, so we reached out with three tentacles to steady her.

V.B. swallowed a scream. We withdrew once she was standing safely. Sweating, wide-eyed, pale, she nodded a thanks and forced a smile, then stepped quickly toward her hiking stick and backpack.

“Wait!” I said. “That armour, that was from the dream — the other dream, I mean! You took it off Jan? You said you don’t know her, but—”

V.B. hauled her pack on her back with all the strength of a woman fifty years younger, without the slightest hint of a stumble in her step. Her hiking stick jumped into both hands. She turned to face me, a twinkle in her eyes.

“I didn’t,” she said. “But I suspect ‘Jan Martense’ is not a real name, at least not in a dream. I suppose I’ll find out in good time, if she’s got any courage in her—”

“You leave her alone,” we said. “She’s one of us. Sort of.”

“I doubt that very much.”

We reached toward V.B. more out of instinct than intent, but she tilted her hiking stick with full knowledge that she could repel us with ease. She took a step back, toward the opposite exit from the marbled terrace.

“Good luck with your twin sister, Heather,” she said — and she meant it too. “I best be gone before your friends arrive. Put in a

good word for me, will you?”

“How do you know Jan?” I said.

But V.B. turned and stepped off the terrace, down a flight of white steps, descending out of sight. With the kind of logic that only makes sense in a dream, I knew we couldn't follow her.

Lozzie and Sevens burst onto the terrace a moment later. But we caught them both in our many hands, giving them both a hug. There was no sense following one who had already left.

And we had more pressing concerns to attend than an old dreamer, back in the waking world, back together at last.

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.1

“So, Heather — what does it feel like?”

Raine purred the question, allowing it freedom to hang in the cool air of the kitchen. The breath of her words swirled tiny dust particles caught in the thick beam of honey-rich, midsummer sunlight pouring in through the window. That sunlight caught the condensation on a glass of orange juice at my elbow, picked out the chestnut glow on stray strands of Raine’s hair, fingered the wood grain in the old kitchen chairs, and dusted the floor tiles with the proof of their age. But the summer heat stayed beyond the walls, beating against brick and tile.

Feeling playful, my top left tentacle reached up and flicked at the sun-kissed motes of dust, to make them dance. She was followed by the slightly less agile coil of my bottom right tentacle — the firewall tentacle, still tinted purple in the light of a terrestrial sun. She bobbed into the light, her own glow briefly joined to the blazing summer, then dipped back down into the shadows.

Not for the first time, I wondered if pneuma-somatic flesh was vulnerable to sunburn. Praem never seemed to tan, after all.

Raine didn’t repeat her question. Neither did she rephrase it, or add some superfluous conditional; she gave it room to wander the air and my mind alike, trusting that we would get to it when we were ready, or accepting that we didn’t want to answer. For the last three days since the dream, Raine had not pressed once. We loved her all the more for that. We all loved her. We agreed.

I tried to consider her question, but most of our shared cognition was already occupied by the thorny problem of the next chess move.

Top Right was already reaching for my queen — the white queen, a metaphor I did not care to pursue. But that mere gesture made Tenny sit up straighter on the other side of the kitchen table. Her big black eyes darted rapidly between the remaining pieces on the

board, recalculating the implications of the move I might be about to make; I had learned that was a bad sign. It meant I was making a move so unoptimal that Tenny had not previously considered the outcome. Her own tentacles were constantly wiggling and whirling, two of them locked in a sort of repeating rotational pattern above her head. Like a human twiddling her thumbs as she thought very hard, except Tenny was sitting on her own human hands, quite firmly.

Eventually we went with Top Right's move: queen two spaces forward, threatening Tenny's remaining bishop. The piece made a satisfying clack of solid wood.

The chess set was brand new, all hand-carved pieces, designed to look like stylised animals, but with a minimalistic focus so as not to diverge too far from a classical look. An expensive present for Tenny — from Jan. One third apology, one third bribe, and one third Jan buying Tenny's giant protection should an unexpected dream ever inflict itself upon her again. Tenny had spent the last two days inviting everyone and anyone to play against her. Most had taken that invitation in the spirit it was intended — even Eevee, despite how grumpy and busy and stressed she was right now, and Zheng, who played a single game but no more, mostly because Tenny played from behind a door frame the whole time, tentacles only, hissing softly whenever Zheng moved too fast. Upon victory, Tenny had puffed herself up with disappointment that Zheng was still taller than her.

So, armed with a new chess set, Tenny was more than happy to spend six hours helping me introspect and integrate my new distributed decision-making powers.

My top right tentacle uncoiled her tip from around the white queen; Tenny descended like a bird of prey, whip-slash fast with three silken black tentacles, click-clack-clock.

“Check,” she trilled, grinning with joy.

She was also more than happy to beat me. She never got bored of that.

I sighed, but I smiled too; my first lesson had been in gracious defeat. One could not get frustrated with Tenny, she was the world's most polite and encouraging winner.

Evelyn's voice interrupted us from the open door to the magical workshop, calling as if from deep in the hidden stacks of a shadowy library. She did sound rather far away: "Twenty seven nil," she called out. "Unless I've lost count."

A mumble joined her in agreement. Felicity, also hidden away in the magical workshop, head down over some inscrutable work: "Mm. Twenty seven."

"Twenty seven," Praem echoed — also deep in the workshop, voice ringing like a distant bell.

"Check!" Tenny repeated, calling back at the open workshop door. "Not checkmate. Heathy's still in the game."

I couldn't help it, I laughed a little, mostly at ourselves. "That I am, Tenns. Um, I think you've got me though. Well done, again."

Evelyn called out: "Six additional brains have not made you any smarter, Heather!"

I sighed again, significantly less amused. Tenny was almost bouncing back and forth on her seat with excitement, tentacles vibrating, eyes flicking across the board at high speed. She looked wonderful in the high summer sunlight, her whorls of white fur all tufty and fluffy, her black skin healthy and bright, her wings hanging down from her shoulders. She loved this feeling, this high-speed calculation and mental mapping, especially when she could share it with others. She was preparing herself in the same way she had after every victory: cataloguing all the possible moves I could have made differently, listing and organising them so she could show us exactly where we'd gone wrong and how we might beat her in the future.

But she wanted me to keep playing, too. She wanted me to try. She understood how important it was that we tried our best to think.

"Tenns, I'll think it through, okay? Then, if I still can't figure it out, you can show me again. I'm looking forward to it."

She nodded, silken tentacles all a-wiggle. We looked back at the board and chewed my bottom lip, allowing our thoughts to flow outward and relax in the way we'd been trying to practice for the last three days. My tentacles drifted, looking at the board from different angles, processing different moves we might make — but we struggled to hold onto every possible permutation, let alone see

three or four variations ahead and remember all of them and consider their implications for future board-states.

Evee was right; six additional coils of tightly packed neurons had not made me a genius. We were still bad at chess, just six times quicker.

“Ahem,” came a familiar cough from the doorway to the magical workshop.

I looked up. So did Tenny and Raine.

Evelyn had appeared before us, the cave-dwelling mammal strayed into the blinding dawn, blinking and squinting her sapphire-blue eyes. Praem was at her shoulder, impassive as always — but I thought I could detect a hint of worry or concern on her face. Evee was still dressed in her pajamas, leaning heavily on her walking stick, tired from overwork but fully fed and watered and caffeinated and painkiller’d. Praem and I would accept no less. Evelyn squinted at me with a deeply uncomfortable expression.

“Auntie!” Tenny trilled. This managed to short-circuit whatever was going on in Evelyn’s brain, because she nodded to Tenny and gave her a supremely awkward smile, one she had not prepared for.

Before she could recover, we said, “Evee, do you want to join us? You could play against Tenny, once I’ve lost.”

We all agreed on that. One tentacle — bottom-left — even bobbed toward her, seeking a touch or a hand-hold.

Evelyn cleared her throat again, then spoke stiff and starched. “No. Thank you. Heather, I insulted your intelligence, you didn’t deserve that. I apologise.”

“Oh, Evee, no, it’s fine. You’re correct. Our neural architecture might be larger, but I haven’t gotten smarter, I’m just—”

She talked right over me, cheeks flushed: “And it sets a bad example for Tenny, as well. Tenny, it’s very rude to call your loved ones—”

Evee stopped dead, just staring at Tenny, like a sleepwalker who had blundered into a wall. She couldn’t see Raine’s face from that angle, so Raine caught my eye and pulled a comedy grimace. Over Evelyn’s shoulder, Praem stared at me, impassive and immobile, but I could feel the eye-roll in her soul. I could practically feel Felicity cringing back in the depths of the workshop. Evelyn was trapped

between two truths: I was her loved one, but right then she wanted to have a very big shout at me.

“Rude,” Tenny trilled.

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “It’s very rude to call your loved ones stupid. I should not have said that. It was bad behaviour.”

“Auntie Eevee being naughty,” Tenny confirmed.

Evelyn sighed and ran a hand over her face. “Exactly. Well. Sorry, Heather.”

She turned away without another word, about to disappear once more into her magical workshop, amid the massive jumble of papers and photographs and plans spread out across the table, not to mention the pair of experimental circles under construction, one of them physically blocked off with hazard tape and chairs at the back of the room. Every time I’d ventured in there over the last three days, that circle had made me physically ill just to look at.

The workshop was only the next room over, close enough to call back and forth; one could even see Eevee in there, if one stood up and went over to the sink, to get the right angle into the workshop, the ex-drawing room, the long and cluttered space of magical secrets. But as she turned and retreated back into the shadows, it felt more like she was walking down a long, long corridor, going away from us, sinking into the deep.

It had felt the same way for the last three days; Evelyn was angry and frustrated with me, but very bad at expressing herself. And she didn’t want to interrupt my tentacle based euphoria.

If we had been anywhere but inside Number 12 Barnslow Drive — my own personal safest place in the universe — then I would have hurled myself after her, tentacles or not.

Instead, I hurried to say: “Eevee, are you sure you don’t want to join us? Do you want Praem to make more tea? Fliss could play against Tenny, you could—”

“No, thank you.” she shot back over her shoulder. “The sooner we finish this, the better.”

Raine called after her too. “Want another pair of eyes in there?”

“Not yet.”

“You close?”

Evelyn stopped, half turned toward us. “New batch of photos from Twil and Zheng, twenty minutes ago. Last batch, I think.”

“That close, huh?” Raine asked. My heart climbed toward my throat.

Praem answered for Evee, “Almost done.”

“No change?” Raine asked. “Still nothing?”

Evelyn’s lips pressed together, sour and angry — but not with me. Her anger for me was wet and soft. Her anger for this stakeout process was hot and sharp. “Nothing,” she said. “Not a peep. Not a single change in that blasted house. I’m starting to suspect we’re being fu—” She glanced at Tenny. “That we’re being hoodwinked.”

Raine shrugged. “Maybe he’s just not home.”

“Maybe.”

Evelyn retreated back into the magical workshop. Praem swished away after her. Raine caught the look on my face and shared a sympathetic sigh. She mouthed: “She’s better than yesterday.”

I pulled an awkward smile and glanced at Tenny, thinking that maybe we shouldn’t have this conversation in front of her. But Tenny was even smarter than she let on, and that really was saying something; she was watching me and Raine with that very specific look older children get sometimes, when they know exactly what the adults are talking about, but also that the adults are more comfortable pretending that children are deaf.

I mouthed back to Raine: “She’s still angry with me.”

Raine blew out a long sigh. “She’ll come ‘round.” Then Raine winked at Tenny, which encouraged Tenny to try winking back, alternating with both eyes.

I screwed up my anxieties and turned our attentions back to the chess board; another downside of having seven of us in here, anxiety was multiplied as well. We were all self-conscious and worried and more than a little guilty. And riding high on nerves.

Evelyn was still furious with me. She couldn’t argue with results, or how happy I was, but it takes a very strong constitution to watch somebody you love bleeding through her own skin and cackling like

a madwoman, and accept that was a *good thing*. My tentacles, the six other sub-Heathers blended into the periphery of my consciousness — our consciousness — were more than a little shy and hesitant about Evelyn. They loved her too, very much, but they were also part of the cause of her barely suppressed, awkward anger.

She had spent the last three days pouring that anger and frustration and fear into the project to murder Edward Lilburne. She rode the others like she had a whip instead of a walking stick: Felicity was worked to the bone making those circles alongside her; Twil and Zheng were staking out the house; and Eevee herself pored over the photographs, looking for some kind of minute change in the exterior of the structure, some kind of sign, a magical tell, anything. She produced reams of notes, theories about what we were looking at, and more theories about how to deal with it.

“It’s not a house. Not really,” she had said on that first day after I’d identified the location, and Twil had returned with a single grainy phone camera snapshot of the old place.

“Eh?” Twil had squinted at her, then at the picture, then back at Eevee. *“Looks like a house to me. What is it then?”*

“A bear trap. Trust me. It’s in the layout of the beams, I can see it plain as day. This fucking vermin has turned the exterior of his own home into a sigil; I don’t even know what this means, but if he wants me to break it, I’m going to do it from a distance, with a bomb. Absolute bastard. This is going to take days. Where the hell is Felicity? I need hands, I need eyes. I need a fucking ICBM! Where is she?”

Evee prepared for war; I climbed the walls.

We tried to turn our thoughts back to the thorny problem of the chess board — not as one, because that’s not how it worked, but in a loose agreement that this was probably a better use of our thoughts than dwelling on Eevee, at least right now. One tentacle went high, another went low. Another wrapped around my middle in a self-hug between the two of us. Another drifted over to Raine. Another bobbed over the chess board itself, thinking thoughts about position and pieces and priority and persistence.

We were still terrible at chess.

“—and if you wink like this,” Raine was saying to Tenny. “And do a

little point, like this, it's like you're saying 'good job, friend, I got you now'. Now you try. Yeeeeeeah, that's it! You'll be knocking 'em dead in no time, Tennes."

"Brrrrrt!"

I wet my lips. We sighed. My mind went back to Eevee while other Heathers concentrated on the chess board; that was something new, intentional bifurcation of thought processes. So many thoughts pulled toward Eevee. We agreed on a compromise.

"Raine," I said.

"Heather?"

"To answer your question: not very different to before."

Raine took less than the space of a single heartbeat to catch back up with the conversation I had attempted to resume. "Ahhh. What it feels like. Right."

Raine had asked me that same question over and over again for the last three days — *What does it feel like?*

Each time she meant something slightly different. What does it feel like, Heather, waking up from a dream with all your tentacles collapsed back into pneuma-somatic invisibility? What does it feel like, now you've cried yourself empty in the shower while I scrub dried blood off you? What does it feel like, re-summoning them back into flesh the following morning? What does it feel like when I stroke one of them, and cup her in my hands, and kiss her smooth, pale length with my lips, because she's you and you're her and I love all of you? What does it feel like when Zheng gathers you up like a beached squid and carries you downstairs? What does it feel like? What's it like?

And we rarely had to ask what exactly she meant; we just told her what it felt like, each time. She even asked it when she pinned us down in bed — well, almost all of us. She made a valiant attempt, with her mere four limbs.

She gave us exactly what we needed, a space to think out loud, but also the physical re-grounding of my own body. We hadn't even discussed it beforehand. She hadn't stopped and asked me what I planned to do with the tentacles, or if things were going to get weird. She just touched me.

She hadn't even made a tentacle sex joke. Lozzie had, on the following morning, which implied that Lozzie knew what we'd been doing. I tried not to think about that. But then again, Lozzie knew everything.

But this time, sitting at the kitchen table and losing twenty seven consecutive games of chess against Tenny, I knew Raine was asking something more cerebral.

She was asking how it felt to think.

I kept our attention on the chess board as I answered, chewing over the next move: "Not very different, yes. I'm still me. We're still us. We've always been here. The ... six others, I mean. They've always been here, I think, at least since the abyss." We shook our head. "Nothing about me actually changed, inside that dream, I just ... found pieces that I hadn't realised were present. I mean, look at me, doing this." I sighed, my left hand wandering forward to poke at my now blind-sided white queen. "I'm still terrible at chess. You deserve a better opponent, Tenny."

"Love playing with you, Heath-er," she fluttered.

I looked up and smiled across the board. "Tenny, you're far too sweet, thank—"

"Think fast!" said Raine — and whipped her arm back.

The ping-pong ball left Raine's hand with a flick of her wrist, far too quick for me to actually see with anything but the most delayed of peripheral vision, a whip-crack motion of white blur. Two tentacles twitched upward to defend me — the two which had been waiting for this all day.

But thinking was faster.

Down in the oil-and-grease-slicked sump of our soul, the Eye's borrowed machinery clicked and whirled under eight hands, burning and searing and corroding through flesh and thought alike. But eight hands made light work. With an equation that had no right to exist in our reality, I bent the laws of physics around a single microscopic point, a single atom worth of change ready to rubber-band back in my face.

The ping-pong ball went *tock!* as we deflected it, three inches from our left shoulder.

“Ahhhhh!” I groaned as the pain washed over me.

I screwed up my eyes, tentacles going stiff, muscles cramping from roots to tips, the pain radiating down into my trunk and pelvis. My right flank burned where my bioreactor had powered up for a split-second. My sides ached as all six tentacles throbbed and spasmed with the effort of distributed hyperdimensional mathematics. My nose started bleeding.

I doubted the nosebleeds would ever go away. I had started to wonder if the Eye got nosebleeds. If not, maybe we should give it a nose, see how it liked that.

The ping-pong ball hit the wall — hard and quick, deflected with far more kinetic force than I’d intended; I didn’t have much fine control over this technique. I wasn’t certain if I ever would. It bounced so hard it hit the opposite wall too, before Tenny reached up and plucked it out of the air with one of her own tentacles.

Raine was on me instantly, pressing tissues into my hand so I could stem the nosebleed, checking my pulse with two fingers on my throat, asking if I needed water — yes — and if I wanted painkillers — also yes — and if I felt sick — no, glorious beautiful no.

“Tentacles alright?” she purred as she shook chewable ibuprofen tablets into my free hand. “How you doing, girls? Still with us?”

I felt several of me nodding and waving and bobbing at her. Raine touched three of them briefly, then made sure I sipped my water and took my painkillers. Tenny watched with attentive fascination; we hadn’t even attempted to hide my changes from her, or what they meant. She’d seen me bleeding and thrashing in the bathtub. She knew what was going on.

“Heather, hey,” Raine was saying. “Well done, well done. That was even faster than last time. You barely needed the warning. How do you all feel?”

“Sore all over,” we croaked.

“Tentacles are stable, though?”

We grumbled, feeling very put-upon and pathetic, even though this entire training thing was our idea. We forced each tentacle through a long process of uncoiling and stretching; tubes of muscle complained and ached. Neurons burned with a pain deeper than

mere nerve receptors. Thought and sensation were one.

Deflecting ping-pong balls was one of the first systematic teaching tools I'd ever used, back when I'd first gotten serious about learning how to manipulate the Eye's unwanted lessons. Raine and I had been through this before, flicking balls at me until I could swat them away with a thought. But back then even the most minor of manipulations had led to hour-long nosebleeds and up-chucking everything in my stomach. Now, Raine was correct — that was faster than last time.

"Yes," we croaked eventually. "They're all still here. Stable. But, ow."

Raine nodded, taking me seriously. "Think you could go again, right away?"

I respected her for not making the obvious sex joke about refractory periods; I could see it in her eyes regardless. Not in front of Tenny, that was a good rule.

"Mm. Maybe." I sighed. "We'll have to do away with the warnings sooner or later though. I can't expect to always—"

A tiny ball of white flicked free from a tangle of black, spinning in my peripheral vision.

We were so surprised that we forgot all about brain-math, just turning to Tenny in time for the ping-pong ball to bounce off my forehead. One tentacle had jerked up to swat it away, but muscle soreness made her clumsy, and she just baffed me in the face instead.

"Ahh-pffft!" I reacted like I was slightly drunk and being slapped with a wet fish: an ungainly flap of hands, too slow to deflect even a mosquito, let alone a ball thrown with perfect accuracy by a now-giggling Tenny.

The ping-pong ball hit the floor that time, unpropelled by deflection either hyperdimensional or tentacle-based.

I wasn't above laughing at myself, even with a lingering nosebleed and six different kinds of tentacle-ache. Tenny was giggling, rocking in her seat; she scooped the ping-pong ball off the floor and fluttered her apologies all the same.

"Sorry-sorry Heath! Auntie Raine told me to! Told me to! Pfffffft!"

"I did," Raine confirmed, also laughing. "That was all me, Tenny was just doing what I told her, giving you a little surprise."

"It's fine, Tenny," I said from around the tissues wedged against my nose.

"Sorry! I am!"

"You are forgiven. I love you," I said. Tenny beamed, her attention already wandering back down to the problem on the chess board. "Besides," I carried on, "it rather does prove the very point I was just trying to make." I glanced at Raine; she was doing a good job of pretending not to laugh at me getting thwacked on the forehead with a ping-pong ball. "I still struggle without a warning first. And there's no way I can do it in quick succession. And it hurts." We huffed and grumbled. We all ached.

Raine nodded along; one of Tenny's silken black tentacles uncoiled towards her, carrying the ping-pong ball while Tenny's primary attention was absorbed in the exciting prospect of showing me all the correct chess moves. Raine held out her hand, accepted the ball, then flicked it in the air and caught it again with a side-swipe of her open palm.

"You never know," she said, making it sound so easy and light. "We keep practising like this, you dunno how skilled you could get. Remember that time with the, uh ... " Raine mimed a finger-gun, then winked.

That was a subject most unsuitable for Tenny's ears: Raine was referring to one of my single greatest feats, so many months ago now, last year, which felt like a previous lifetime. She was talking about the time I had used hyperdimensional mathematics to deflect a bullet. A single bullet, from a rifle fired by Amy Stack, aimed at Raine's back, down the impossible repeating stairwell of the cult's looping pocket-dimension trap in Willow House.

It felt like ancient history, but it really wasn't so long ago; with the distributed neuron-webs inside my six tentacles, we were relatively confident that we could — in theory — repeat such a feat. Reliably? No. In rapid succession? Absolutely not. If somebody took a shot at Raine again, and wanted to overcome my meagre powers of protection, all they would have to do is pull the trigger twice.

We didn't want to think about that. I just cleared my throat and

indicated Tenny with my eyes: don't talk about murder in front of Tenny!

Raine nodded at my silent complaint in total acceptance. I felt slightly ashamed for dodging the subject. She tossed the ball into the air and caught it again. "Seriously though, Heather, I got faith in you. Practice, keep at it, keep improving. You never know how far this could go."

I sighed with irritation, despite Tenny's presence in the room. Our sweet little moth-puppy must have picked up on my tone, because one of her tentacles pointed right at me, even though her eyes stayed glued to the chess board.

"I have no idea if this is even what Maisie wanted us to learn," I blurted out, repeating the same anxiety we'd circled around for the last three days. My tentacles joined in with the huffing and puffing, bobbing up and down in a wordless display of unreleased tension. One of them even coiled up as tight as possible, like she was clenching a fist and digging nails into flesh. "Was this actually what Mister Squiddy was intended to communicate? I don't think so, Raine. I think this is just a ... a coincidence. I couldn't understand Maisie's message. I couldn't."

Raine considered this for a moment, nodding seriously. "But you still got something good out of it. Right?"

"Yes, but—"

"So if you could rewind time by four days, would you go back and choose not to do it?"

"What? I mean, pardon?"

Raine was being entirely serious; I heard it in her tone of voice. She wasn't mocking me or making fun. She may have been trying to make me see the error in my attitude, but if I had answered 'yes', she would have accepted and integrated that answer. She would have listened.

She repeated, "If you could go back in time before the dream, would you choose not to, you know, make friends?" She gestured around my core of mortal flesh, at my six tentacles, bobbing and weaving and slowing to a stop. They untensed, uncoiled, relaxed. We felt such a wave of denial, all together, all very uncomfortable at that idea. Raine just sat and waited, half-lit by the glowing

honey-soft sunlight, her hair raked back over her head.

“Of course I would still do it,” we said. “We would do it. I wouldn’t be ... I don’t regret it, I just ... ”

“You just wish you’d understood your sister,” Raine added gently.

We nodded, feeling a little moist in the eyes. Raine handed me another tissue. Tenny politely did not comment, though she wrapped one sneaky black tentacle around one of ours. Like holding hands under the table.

“So,” Raine said, leaning back, once she was sure I wasn’t crying. She tossed the ping-pong ball in the air and caught it again. “You got something important out of it regardless. Real important. Now, I don’t know Maisie — not yet, but I’m looking forward to meeting her — but I would bet any money you like that she’d be happy you figured yourself out a little, even if her own words got a bit lost in the process. Right?”

“Right. Yes. Yes.”

Raine tossed the ball, caught it quick. “And you can use this, Heather. Hell, you already are! You’ve already proven it.”

“*Hellllllll*,” trilled Tenny. Her big black eyes darted up from the chess board, looking to me for approval. “Swearing?”

“Um, technically that’s a swear word,” I said. “But it’s so gentle. I don’t think Lizzie would be angry.”

“Lozz-mums,” Tenny trilled, then looked back down.

Raine flicked the ball up toward the ceiling, then caught it in her fingertips. “I believe in you, Heather. I believe you can do whatever you put your minds to. Including deflecting a whole barrage of ping-pong balls.”

Blushing, feeling a little hot in the cheeks, deeply flattered, I reached down and flapped the sides of my triple-layers of t-shirts. I gave Raine a silent, questioning look.

“We’ll find a solution to that,” she said — and she really believed it. Almost made me believe it.

“I don’t see one, Raine. I’m sorry. I can’t walk around in public like this.”

I didn't mean the tentacles themselves, of course; Evelyn and Felicity had spent three gruelling hours debating the relative probabilities of the psychological censor effect applying to my tentacles, if witnessed by people who weren't In The Know. They had played devil's advocate back and forth against each other in a frankly tiresome and exhausting argument which neither of them really believed. In the end we'd come to the conclusion that we simply didn't know what might happen if I walked the streets of Sharrowford with six very fleshy and real tentacles poking out from my flanks. Mundane people might have found their eyes sliding off me, as they once had with Praem's former blue skin and empty, milk-white eyes. Perhaps a squid-girl was simply too much to believe. Or perhaps any random bystander might scream and call the police, or have a breakdown, or attack me. We simply couldn't be sure. Testing was too much of a risk. The only time I'd been outdoors in the last three days, I'd had to collapse the pneumatic flesh back into their prior state of humiliating invisibility and quasi-insubstantial -spirit-matter, so they could pass through the sides of my hoodie and t-shirts.

No — I was talking about the necessary wardrobe adjustments we required, when we were fully manifested in solid flesh.

We were currently wearing three t-shirts layered on top of each other, all borrowed from Raine, all old and on their way out; we'd cut slits in both sides, long slashes in the flanks, holes for the tentacles to poke through. We hadn't worn either of our favourite pink hoodies indoors for the last three days; they were too dear to modify with a pair of scissors.

I was hardly going to walk around outdoors with open slits in the sides of all my tops, in case I needed to manifest my tentacles on short notice.

And why would I need to manifest them on short notice?

Raine and I had figured that out on day one of seven different Heathers, the first time I'd asked her to throw a ping-pong ball at my head.

Distributed and decentralised hyperdimensional mathematics only worked when all of us were manifested in true flesh. Neurons had to be real to calculate. Phantoms could not do maths.

So, if I was surprised on the street by the machine-gun toting

assassins of Raine's wildest imagination, I needed slits in my clothes if I wanted to do brain-math with all my-selves present.

"Velcro," Raine said, yanking me back up out of bitter thoughts.

"I— I'm sorry?"

"Velcro," she repeated, cracking a huge grin. "I'm thinking velcro strips on both sides. We wouldn't even have to modify all your t-shirts, just a couple of hoodies, maybe a jumper or two. Could hide that easy enough, make them look like part of the stitching. Probably have to do some testing, make sure you can pop them open from the inside real quick, with your tentacles, not your hands. Or, hands from the exterior?" She gestured at her own flanks, pulling a thinky-frown that I wanted to kiss off her furrowed forehead. "Mm, might be kinda fiddly like that. We wanna make it as natural as possible for you."

"... Raine?" I blinked at her in surprise.

She turned to me and chuckled. "You surprised? I've been thinking about this all day. All night really, too. Kim knows her way around a sewing machine, believe it or not, but I think this would be more hand-made needlework style stuff. Don't wanna use glue. Proper stitching. Maybe we could talk to Praem? I think she knows how to sew."

"I do," came the bell-clear voice from deep in the magical workshop. Raine cracked a grin.

I just stared in amazement. Top-Left reached out and brushed Raine's hair back in a strangely intimate gesture.

"I ... Raine ... I didn't realise you've been thinking about it so much. I-I haven't even had time to consider much ... "

Raine winked at me, then turned and planted a sneaky kiss on the tentacle which had been touching her. We all squirmed in surprise, which made her laugh. "Course I have!" she said. "You've been busy figuring yourselves out. Let somebody else handle some of the practical questions, yeah? So, velcro." Raine pointed a finger-gun at me. "Give it some thought. Lemme know what you think."

"Oh, Raine." I could have melted into her arms.

She tossed the ping-pong ball into the air again, caught it — then flicked her hand outward, slinging the tiny white payload at my

face.

Slick black machinery clunked and clicked down in the pit of my psyche; eight hands and seven minds spread the load wide; burning white-hot solutions scrawled themselves across the surface of reality. I let go, like a rubber band snapping.

The ping-pong ball went *tock!* six inches in front of my face, right back at Raine.

She caught it neatly. I scrabbled for tissues, whining and spluttering, tentacles like six entire bodies worth of pulled muscles. Raine fed me water, handed me fresh tissues, helped me recover.

“Thank— thank you,” I croaked. “That was— no warning. Good. Better, even.”

“You did amazing, Heather,” she purred for me. “Well done.”

When I was recovered again — feeling like I’d just been forced to sprint the hundred meters, twice, backwards — Tenny looked across the table at me, her patience worn thin by endless excitement.

“Heath? Give up? Conceeeeeeede?” she trilled.

I nodded. “Yes, Tenny. I concede the game. Sorry, we’re all— too much— too much thinking. That’s your twenty-seventh win.”

“Brrrrrrrrrr! Show you? Show you?” All her tentacles wiggled and waved, going wild with the prospect of her favourite part.

“Of course.” We bent our attention back to the board as Tenny’s own tentacles descended. Perhaps if we concentrated harder, we might learn something. “Show me what you’d do, in my position. Show me all the right moves. Please, Tenny.”

“Helping!” Tenny trilled.

And she did. She really did.

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We — as in us, my-selves — had spent the last three days since the dream in a sometimes euphoric, sometimes painful combination of recovery, rediscovery, and rehabilitation.

But I wasn’t the source of our tense waiting anymore; we didn’t need a ‘fully armed and operational squid Heather’ — as Raine

phrased it — for the next step of our plans. Playing chess with Tenny while Raine flicked ping-pong balls at me was merely a way of filling time with something useful, while Evelyn did the real work.

That first night, after the blood-sweats and making our selves real — and locating Edward Lilburne's house and the surprise dream with the mysterious VB — I had awakened once again in the bathtub, seconds later, covered in cold water and surrounded by my friends.

And my tentacles were gone.

Well, not *gone* gone — not like the bad times where a loss of energy could turn them to wind-blown dust and rob us of what we really were. The six other Heathers which shared our body and mind, they had collapsed back into purely pneuma-somatic flesh, no longer visible, hovering on the frustrating border between real and unreal. I would have been inconsolable if I'd been coherent, but I was exhausted beyond words, and besides, the tentacles, the other shards and reflections of our mind, they were still present inside me, just dulled slightly.

Metaphor can't do justice to that feeling. It was like partitions had been raised between us, between myself and myself, like parts of my mind were dim and distant.

Raine got me cleaned up, warmed up, towelled off, and tucked into bed. I fell asleep for about twelve hours, dreamless and empty, aching all over, the echoes of brain-math etched into my muscle fibres.

The first thing I did upon waking the next morning was sit bolt upright, pull off half my clothes in a hyperventilating panic, and manifest all my tentacles again.

The second thing we did was curl into a ball and cry for half an hour while Raine stroked my hair and told me it was alright. And it was alright; we hadn't lost ourselves again, we were all still there. I suspected I could have allowed the tentacles to collapse entirely, turned off my bioreactor, slipped all the way back down to plain old singlet Heather Morell, with no abyssal biology whatsoever — and upon firing everything back up again they would all have been present and correct, because they were me. I was them. We were.

I wasn't in a hurry to test that theory. I had a suspicion it would be extremely unpleasant.

The third thing we did was go downstairs and find Zheng.

She wasn't as angry as Evee, but she was halfway there.

"I saw his hiding place!" She greeted me in the kitchen, haloed by grey light, stripped down to her own underwear as if in sympathy with my near-toplessness; Raine had draped a blanket over my shoulders, but it kept getting in the way of my tentacles. We hadn't worked out the slit-sided t-shirt technique yet. "I saw the wizard's rotten snake-hole with my own eyes, shaman! And you called me back. Here I am."

Zheng, flint-eyed and dark-faced, had towered over me in the grey morning light filling the kitchen. Nobody else was awake yet — well, Zheng's thundering voice might have woken a few. Raine stepped forward, as if to intervene, but top left waved her back. The others — my other selves — were levering me up against the floor, pushing our diminutive height upward in a very futile attempt to match Zheng.

"You promised not to fight alone, Zheng," we said. "We don't want to lose you. How many times do we have to say this?"

She blew out a breath like a steam engine gathering power. "Shaman."

"And ... there's been some ... some changes ... I ... I wanted you to come back, because ... well, because we're very selfish girls. We wanted you to know. To see." A lump hardened inside my throat. Why was Zheng so determined to leave me behind? "If you must insist on throwing yourself into a suicide charge, we would like you to see this about us first."

Zheng tilted her head, as if my words made little sense, but Raine spoke up: "Actually, you know what, big girl? You're not allowed to throw yourself into any kind of suicide charge. Nu-uh. Not just 'cos Heather says, either. I say it too. You wanna do that, I'm going with you."

"Raine!" we squeaked.

But that seemed to have done the trick. Zheng's fury ebbed down. She took several deep breaths, rumbling and unhappy, but her face

was more like a machete being slowly slid into its sheath, no longer a bared blade in the pre-morning gloom.

“Little wolf,” she rumbled, showing all her teeth.

“I know, it’s unfair,” Raine said. “But I’ll use every trick I’ve got.”

Zheng grunted. “Huuuurrn.”

“Hey,” Raine said. “If it matters, if there’s any chance at all of us lining things up right, you’ve got first dibs on Eddy boy. Can’t promise, first casualty is always the plan and all that, but I’ll try to make it happen. I know you’re sore that you didn’t get to pull Alexander’s head off his spine in the end.”

Raine cracked a grin. Zheng blinked slowly, a grim pleasure behind her eyes. A bloody red understanding passed between my two lovers, an understanding that made me shiver and swallow, which did not include me, but which I could not help feeling drawn towards.

“Mm,” Zheng rumbled eventually. “You understand me like few others, little wolf. But if you corner the wizard, do not wait, for me or anything else. Kill him quick. Rip out his tongue. Cut off his hands. Even if he appears dead.”

“That’s the plan,” Raine sighed.

My tentacles levered us upward even further, as if trying to show off. “Zheng. Zheng I have to ... I went through something, inside the dream, inside—”

Zheng reached out and placed one hand on the top of my head, her massive palm cradling my skull, her favourite gesture of affection. Instantly all my unspoken, subconscious worries about her regard melted away into nothing, removed with a touch. Then, without warning, her hand slid down and grasped the root of one of my tentacles — top right. We gasped and shivered, instinctively wrapping the tentacle around her arm in response.

“Z-Zheng?” we breathed. All together now.

Slit-dark eyes stared back into mine. A shark’s gaze, sighting a squid, recognising me for what I was.

“My shaman is one, or she is many,” Zheng purred. “Did you not know yourself, shaman?”

I just gaped at her. Zheng knew? Zheng knew all along? But this made no sense. “You— what? I— you—”

“I know you, shaman. Come, show me how you climb now.”

Raine chuckled. “Wait ‘till she tells you about the kaiju fight in the dream. You would’a loved that.”

“Kaiju? Unnh.”

Sometimes it was too easy to forget that Zheng had come from the abyss in the first place. She’d been here a lot longer than any of us, a marrying of flesh and soul forged by will. She knew me at a glance. That was all which really mattered.

We spent the rest of that day — and almost the whole of the next — embracing the simple joy of motion.

My tentacles were technically no stronger or more capable than they had been as purely pneuma-somatic flesh, when invisible to regular human sight. But something about bringing them into the visible spectrum — or perhaps making their neurons real — gave us the most difficult and strange impulses.

We used them much more than ever before, to pick things up, to open doors, to touch others, no different than our human arms. But that false normality quickly gave way to unexpected extremes. We started to pull ourselves along the upstairs corridor, or balance on tentacles instead of legs, or jump up to our feet with the extra muscles provided by six more limbs. I was never going to be athletic, or quick, or strong. But for the first time in my life I had so much more to work with. Though, that only led to biting off more than I could chew.

I startled Kimberly terribly that first evening and I felt so guilty afterwards; she was at the top of the stairs the first time I decided to shoot up them with tentacles instead of my feet. The attempt only half-worked and I collapsed in a heap at the top, but I gave her quite a fright. I had grazes and a couple of bruises afterward, just what I needed.

But none of it was quite enough.

“We need to swim.”

Evelyn had sighed at that. “I think you’d cause a panic in a public pool, Heather. No.”

Raine said, “Maybe we can go when it’s empty sometime. There’s gotta be some time or day, or something, right?”

“Or ... ” we had said. “Maybe the sea? The sea. Right. I could swim ... swim. I need to swim. We have to swim. We have to.”

None of it was enough. We needed to swim — through air, through water, through anything we could reach.

We needed to swim.

= =

Tenny was halfway through showing me all the ways I had failed in our twenty-seventh consecutive game of chess, when Evelyn came raging back into the kitchen.

“No change!” she shouted, stomping out of the magical workshop and across the kitchen tiles, waving her walking stick like she wanted to brain somebody. “That’s three days with nothing! Not a single adjustment to the exterior of that building! This is nonsense! Zheng is probably ready to come back here and bite my entire head off!”

“Brrrrt!” went Tenny, waving a rook around in sudden agitation. None of us had expected Evelyn like this; she’d been so calm and controlled for the last three days.

Praem and Felicity both appeared in the doorway to the magical workshop as well. Felicity looked very worried, but Praem clicked after Evelyn, to make sure she didn’t fall over or start knocking objects off the table.

“Evee,” I said, all tentacles suddenly up, as if to help catch her. “Zheng is fine. She was fine with this. I told her, she was fine. She’ll be grumbly, but she wants this over, too.”

Evelyn whirled around to face us and Raine, already onto the next subject. “That house is like a bear trap and it’s not bloody moving!”

“Bloody!” Tenny cheered.

Evelyn gritted her teeth. “I want this loose end answered — now.”

I winced. Raine puffed out a long breath.

“Now,” Evelyn repeated. “It’s high time we did this.”

I stood up, frowning but sympathetic, reaching out with one tentacle. “Sevens and Lozzie both said—”

Evelyn whacked the table leg with her walking stick. All the chess pieces wobbled. “I don’t care what Lozzie said!” Evelyn instantly cringed, eyes going up to the ceiling. “God, she didn’t hear me, did she? If Aym is listening and relates that, I will murder that little—”

“Calm,” said Praem — instantly shaming Evelyn into shutting her mouth.

“Sevens and Aym are occupied with each other,” I said, gently but firmly, trying to sound like Raine. Raine was also up on her feet now, as if Evelyn was an unexploded bomb and we might have to evacuate quickly. “Nobody—”

Evelyn held out a hand, her free hand, her maimed hand. She forced a long, slow, deep breath. “I trust Lozzie. Alright? She saved your life, more than once. So I trust her. I do not trust ‘Jan Martense’, not after she has introduced the only potential wild card in this situation that I had not accounted for.”

“Evee—”

“You talk to Lozzie.” Evelyn pointed at me. “Make her understand. Get Jan in here, now. She’s been avoiding this question and this is the only lead I have on why this house is not acting as expected.”

“Evee, it’s not—”

“We’re going to ask her about that mystery old woman. Who the hell was VB?”

Evelyn’s question hung in the air like bitter salt wind washing away the sunlight. Tenny trilled an echo: “Helllllll.”

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.2

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Jan, with all the delicate elocution of a young girl called to testify at her own father’s military tribunal. “And I can assure you that you are mistaken.”

Evelyn snorted.

Raine cleared her throat. Felicity merely watched, tense in her silence, like a hound locked in a kennel with an unfamiliar fellow canine. Lizzie waited with innocent eyes. I resisted the urge to huff. July — lurking by the door like a bird of prey up in a tree — watched us all as if we were about to draw weapons and stab her mage in the back.

The demon-host had a point; Evee really wanted to do some stabbing.

We had made some hasty efforts to render the magical workshop more hospitable and welcoming. By ‘we’ I mean myself, Raine, and Praem. This was somewhat undermined by Evelyn’s parallel efforts to set the space up like an interrogation chamber. We’d switched on all the lights, organised and stacked the papers and photographs on the table, dusted as many surfaces as we could reach, and tidied up some of the more mundane detritus. Evelyn, meanwhile, had selected specific photographs of Edward’s house and laid them out at the edge of the table, like evidence on display, hoping to spook the suspect into a surprise confession. She had also removed the cushion on Jan’s chair. Praem replaced it. Evee removed it again. Praem replaced it a second time. Sour in defeat, Evee had then used the tip of her walking stick to shove the chair into the middle of the open space. Praem made tea, Evelyn vetoed tea; the tea got made anyway. Evelyn had started shooing the spider-servitors toward the front door, to act as a magical security gate, as they once had with Sarika; Praem and Tenny together somehow got Marmite to come downstairs and draw the spiders off elsewhere. Evelyn then decided that Mister Squiddy needed to be on display, in all his clay-slapping glory; Praem enlisted Felicity to help tidy him away again, neatly

behind his tarpaulin in the corner of the workshop.

By the time Jan actually arrived, Evelyn was on the verge of having a blazing row with literally everyone else in the house, even Lozzie. She was stopped only by the appearance of her real target.

Jan had sauntered up the garden path at about four o'clock in the afternoon, with July hovering behind her in habitual bodyguard position, both of them seemingly rather enjoying the dense summer sunlight beating down across the city of Sharrowford. I wasn't sure why, but we — me, us, I — had built up this mental image of Jan and July as best suited to dark, dank, damp places, like a pair of slugs who would dry out in the sun. Perhaps it was the con-woman aspect, or Jan's usual choice of outfits. But no, she was sunning her face as she arrived, like a miniature sunflower in black and grey. July was in a tank top, toned shoulders exposed to the summer, hardshell guitar case over one shoulder, Jan's sword safely contained within. Or, so one must presume.

Convincing Lozzie to invite her over had turned out to be far less difficult than I'd expected. I had insisted that Lozzie not lie; we didn't want her to damage her blossoming relationship with Jan by pretending this was a social call.

"Yeah," Raine had agreed, at the time. "Don't honeypot booty call her, Loz. We're not after that. That's just low."

"*Honey pot booty call?*" I had echoed, wrinkling my nose. "I know what each of those words means in isolation, but when combined ... Raine, really?"

Lozzie had just giggled. She found that hilarious. And Jan said yes, just like that. Perhaps being honest about our intentions had helped a little; perhaps Jan felt less threatened.

We couldn't have been more incorrect; Jan felt comfortable answering our summons because Jan was forewarned. She had plenty of time to prepare her defences. Knowing us for a little while — even getting close to Lozzie — had not somehow overwritten a lifetime of cat-like caution.

She turned up dressed for business, wearing her 'good-girl' disguise, both literally and metaphorically. Jan was all sweet smiles and polite little bobs of her head, hands folded in front, footsteps neat and dainty, like a well-trained young lady fresh from a finishing

school.

“Thank you for inviting me to discuss this matter face to face, I appreciate the opportunity;” “I am certain we can straighten this all out with a few kind words;” “Thank you, Praem, yes, I will take tea. No sugar. Just a dash of milk;” “Lozzie, it’s so good to see you, even three days is far too long;” “Raine, you are too kind, yes, you may take my coat. It’s so warm out I hardly needed the layers;” “Felicity, yes, we met only briefly before. Pardon my poor memory. This is July, my associate and assistant. I think you met her too;” “Oh, a cushion, how delightful.”

I could hardly complain. She sounded like me at my most awkward. All goody-two-shoes, raised to be polite.

But it still felt like an insult, because it was fake.

She was wearing sensible black shoes polished to a high shine, with matching black leggings, a drab yet crisp grey skirt, and a starched white shirt beneath a well-fitting black cardigan. She looked like she’d stepped from the pages of some oppressive boarding school novel, a cautionary tale about the dangers of intense female ‘friendship’, with plenty of scenes in toilet cubicles and back alleys.

Jan’s mask was flawless — but why bother? We all knew her, we knew what lay beneath the constructed exterior. Maybe she just felt more comfortable this way. Maybe we were jumping to conclusions.

Perhaps we should not have spread our tentacles outward to catch glimpses of her from multiple angles, like she was a false-fronted building in an old Western movie. Try as we might, we found no hidden seam in her exterior, no secret back end with her real feelings staring at us.

She noticed that, though. She noticed the tentacle-drift, and flinched. She pretended not to. We pretended not to notice that she had noticed. But I still blushed, a little mortified by my own curiosity.

The rest of us were woefully under-dressed by comparison — except for Praem, who was starched and prim as always, even though she hadn’t yet obtained another maid outfit. Her previous one had been damaged during the siege of Geerswin Farm, torn and bloody beyond recovery, even with her sometimes near-supernatural skills with the washing machine. Her blue ribbed jumper and long cream

skirt stood in for now.

July wasn't playing along either. I had half expected her to dress down to match her mage-slash-sister, but upon reflection July would look just as razor-edged and dangerous if dressed in a suit and tie. Perhaps more so. She showed up in trainers, jeans, and a black tank-top. Her long black hair was twisted into a practical braid. She said almost nothing, except to inquire about Zheng's whereabouts, and ask where she should put down the guitar case. I felt the backwash of subtle disappointment when Raine informed her that Zheng was out, keeping watch, on the stakeout.

None of us knew what to do with Jan acting like this, except usher her into the magical workshop and offer her tea; only Lozzie was immune to her refined, ultra-polite exterior. Lozzie attached herself to Jan's arm the moment she was through the door.

The false front peeled away only once: when she entered the magical workshop she paused and went pale briefly, eyes staring at the magic circle behind the table, the one Evee had surrounded with hazard tape. She'd only continued when Lozzie bounced in first, apparently proving that the room was not booby-trapped.

Once we got her sat down and primed with tea and a biscuit, Jan did her best impression of a teenage girl trying to answer police questioning.

So, despite all our best efforts, Jan Martense still managed to look like she was clapped in irons and locked in a grey-walled concrete cell, being questioned by leather-masked inquisitors. The dainty cup of tea in her hands didn't help. Feet and knees together, back straight, chin high, defiant in the face of monsters and mages and me.

Evelyn snorted, again.

Jan tilted her head in silent question, pretending to be baffled. Evelyn was sitting directly opposite Jan, with nothing in between them but open air and lingering threat. Exhausted around the eyes, mouth twisted in a bitter little curl, leaning on her walking stick with her back bent, Evelyn would have seemed quite intimidating to anybody except a fellow mage — and to me. We kept one tentacle wrapped tightly around Evee's arm, as if trying to hold her together, because we could tell — like we could tell that water was wet and fire was hot — that Evelyn Saye was coming apart at the

seams. We longed to stop her, to get her to slow down, justify herself. But what if she pulled her arm free from our tentacle? What if she rejected that touch? We couldn't have that. She looked like she needed to sleep, not conduct an interrogation.

She drawled at Jan: "Have you developed mind-reading powers, Miss Martense?"

We gave in and sighed, and said, "Evee, you know that was a figure of speech."

Jan blinked those beautiful deep-ocean eyes. Even under the artificial light, hidden away from the blazing sun, her eyes held swirling sapphire depths. She cleared her throat. "Pardon, Miss Saye?"

Evelyn grumbled back, "You have no idea what I'm thinking. You're fishing. Answer the question."

Lozzie was draped over the rear of Jan's chair like big fluffy living coat, her poncho swaying in an invisible current. She tutted softly and said, "Evee-weevy, puddin' and pie — you did promise to be nice!"

Evelyn huffed through her nose, but she didn't relent. "I am being polite. Your girlfriend is playing word-games with me."

Lozzie let out a giggle-snort, covering her mouth with a flap of poncho. "Girlfriend? Janny, did you hear that? We're girlfriends now!"

Jan had eyes only for Evee. "Miss Saye, I assure you, it is my intent to be honest and—"

Evelyn hissed with venomous sarcasm: "Intent."

Evee jabbed her free hand toward the table, indicating the row of photographs she had laid out earlier; she had selected a wide range of our clandestine snaps of Edward Lilburne's house. By now we had every conceivable angle mapped out, including several photographs of the roof, taken from above. Apparently those were the product of Zheng and Twil having an improvised climbing contest when they'd handed over stakeout duty. Zheng had won, but Twil had taken the pictures.

"You know what these are?" Evee demanded, then didn't wait for Jan to answer. "I don't give a fu—"

Lozzie shouted: “Fudge!”

From the doorway to the kitchen, Tenny trilled: “Fuuuuudge.”

Evelyn slammed to a stop, cheeks flushing, eyes darting to Tenny.

Tenny was firmly barred from entering the magical workshop — but not from listening.

She had crammed herself into the doorway, listening to the adults, her tentacles flattened out like she was pressed up against a pane of glass. It would have been comical if the subject of discussion wasn’t so serious.

We had decided she had a right to understand what was going on, to understand what the rest of her family was doing — but she still wasn’t allowed in here, because of the extremely dangerous magic circle at the rear of the room.

Tucked behind the table, penned in by hazard tape strung between a semi-circle of chairs, the unfinished work was inscribed on a piece of stiff cardboard. A pair of paintbrushes and a pot of black acrylic paint sat next to the circle. Only Praem was allowed back there. Evelyn didn’t even trust her own hands with that one. I had to sit so that the unfinished magic circle didn’t brush against my peripheral vision; even a hint of it was enough to make us nauseated — all of us, me and all six tentacles.

How can a tentacle feel nauseated? Don’t ask me, I just know it makes me want to go lie down in a dark room.

So we sat next to Evee, our back to the table, tentacles all tucked in tight lest we inadvertently reach halfway across the room and trigger some kind of lethal magical blow back.

Evelyn cleared her throat and tried again, this time with less swear words. We gave her arm a squeeze, too. She needed it — though she didn’t squeeze back.

“I don’t give a fig about your intent.” Evee picked up one of the photographs, one which showed the front of Edward’s hidden home, with its gravel driveways and black beams and little windows covered in metal latticework. “You look at that house and tell me you don’t see anything. You study that and tell me it’s not a sigil. And then tell me: who was VB?”

Jan wet her lips gently. “I can see the pictures perfectly well—”

"Then you know what we're looking at," Evelyn snapped over her, anger building once more. "You're a mage, the same as me. Same as her." Evelyn jerked her chin at Felicity, who was standing by the doorway, slump-shouldered and glassy-eyed. "You're involved, whether you like it or not. Stop pretending."

That made Jan wince. "I would really rather—"

Evelyn ground the words out through clenched teeth. "Who was VB? She is the only wild card in all this and I need to understand what I am looking at here." Evelyn slapped the photograph back on the table, her voice rising into a shout. "I need to rule her out."

Jan did a little sigh, dainty and precise, then pulled that false, oily smile, the con-woman smile that she'd worn when we'd first met. I could tell she wasn't convinced.

"I assure you, you can rule her out. Move onto real strategic considerations, Miss Saye."

"Then—"

"You think she was this Edward Lilburne person — a man, who, I am sorry to say, I will not acknowledge as Lozzie's relative. You think she was him in disguise, or somehow connected with him. That's what you're thinking, Miss Saye. Call me a mind reader if you like. I'm actually just capable of basic deduction."

"Stop Miss Sayeing, me, you—"

"You don't trust me and you don't trust what happened inside that dream," Jan carried on. There was something firm and sharp hidden in the sweet precision and measured tone of her voice which made it hard to talk over her. "And while that caution is perfectly rational, even admirable, I can assure you that 'VB' is really none of your concern, unconnected with this ... mess you people so love to make. But I don't want to go into detail. It's private."

Evelyn hissed between her teeth like a venting steam engine, fixing Jan with the twin daggers of her glare. Lozzie slipped her arms over Jan's shoulders in a protective gesture. From over on the sofa, Raine caught my eye with a silent question of her own — time to step in? We waggled a tentacle at her, feeling guilty: no, not yet, because Eevee might fly apart with frustration.

Praem suddenly stepped forward, her presence looming at the edge

of the gladiatorial space. She intoned, voice clear as a silver bell: “More tea.”

It was a statement, not a question. We would have more tea.

A mutter of polite thank yous and gentle declines went around the room, instantly defusing the tension. But as soon as Praem turned on her heel and clicked into the kitchen, followed by Tenny trying to be helpful, Evelyn’s eyes blazed at Jan. A gunfighter who couldn’t keep her hand off her revolver.

It was both endearing and mortifying — Evelyn was on the warpath, set and determined, and that was one of her most attractive qualities.

But she was also running herself ragged, running up steam with no rails on which to run.

And frankly, she was wrong.

But none of us had the heart to stop her.

Evee jabbed the head of her walking stick to indicate Lozzie, and said to Jan: “The only reason I am asking you politely is because of Lozzie. If it wasn’t for her, this conversation would be very different. It would be taking place in the cellar. With a blindfold. And a hammer.”

Lozzie whined, genuinely offended, “Evee!”

We tutted too. “Yes, Evee. Don’t threaten torture, what’s come over you? What—”

Evelyn would not look at me. “I will threaten whatever I like.”

Over by the doorway, July was suddenly staring directly at Evelyn.

The demon-host hadn’t moved a muscle or adjusted her stance by a single inch, but she suddenly reminded me of an owl who had just heard a mouse in motion beneath a bed of leaves. Perhaps it was all the long hours we’d spent admiring the same quality in Raine, the instant shift into readiness for violence. Or perhaps it was the time we spent with Zheng, skin-to-skin with a predator. Or perhaps it was just having more eyes.

Slowly, we spread our tentacles, snaking outward to catch July’s attention. The tall, athletic demon-host looked at us instead. She saw the threat, or the warning, or I wasn’t sure which I was actually

doing. We quivered only a little under that predatory attention. We didn't like her staring at Eevee in that way.

We couldn't blame her, though.

Evelyn was correct, technically. That wasn't a very good kind of correct, but it was undeniable. Despite the blatant aggression and the unreasonable questioning, she had a point. We still had no idea who VB was, beyond that she was a skilled dreamer. She could have faked everything I saw and heard. She could have indeed been Edward in disguise — though that would surprise me. She could have gone to him with all our plans. She might not have been real. She might have been a demon, or something worse.

But Evelyn had concluded that she obviously knew Jan.

I'd told Jan and Lozzie all about the mysterious old lady, that first day after our shared dreams. Lozzie hadn't recognised the description at all. Jan had *pretended* not to. The pretending was a little obvious. And here were the consequences.

"I am deadly serious," Evelyn continued. "I know you have your secrets, Miss Martense." She managed to turn Jan's surname into a mocking hiss. "But we are about to go to war with another mage and I am lacking information."

To my great surprise, Jan shed her mask.

With no fanfare, she sighed hard and lost the sweet little smile. Nothing changed about the exterior of her doll-body or the layers of pneuma-somatic flesh which made her look human, but she seemed by far the oldest person in the room, older than any of us, older than Felicity's exhausted hyper-vigilance and Evelyn's worn-down calloused exterior and Raine's ready violence.

Suddenly, Jan was very much our senior.

"That's not the only thing you're lacking," she said softly.

Evelyn lost her temper; she banged her walking stick on the floor and almost stood up. She only stopped because we anchored her so hard, dragging her back down into her chair.

"Eevee, no," we said. "Eevee, Eevee!"

Evelyn was spitting mad. "You— I have tried to be— you little fu
—"

“No fight!” Tenny trilled.

Lozzie was biting her lower lip. Jan was staring defiantly. July was stepping forward, moving for Eevee, and Felicity looked like she wanted to reach out to stop her, fingers already twisting into a worryingly unnatural shape. I raised my own tentacles, a hiss crawling up my throat to warn the demon-host off my mate.

Clap.

“Right then!” said Raine. “That’s enough of that.”

She stood up from the sofa in a rubbery roll of loose muscle, rubbing her hands together after the room-silencing clap, like a prize fighter chalking her palms. Raine had mostly stayed on the sidelines of this unwise experiment, lounging around in tank-top and pajama bottoms. But now she stepped forward, rolling her naked shoulders and letting the muscles make a wordless statement. She got in everybody’s way and grinned all around. I for one rather liked that, sighing inside with relief — and more than a little adoration. She stood tall in the middle of the workshop, all smiles and even a wink for Lozzie, but leaving no doubt that she would apply physical force to keep this situation under control.

“Right,” Raine repeated. “Let’s all just take a deep breath, hey? That means you too, squeaky,” she added for July, which earned her a tilt-headed look from the demon-host.

Evelyn huffed. “Raine, don’t get in the way. I am trying to—”

“Ah ah ah ahhhh,” went Raine. She raised one finger to silence Eevee — and actually pressed it against Evelyn’s lips. “This is going really badly wrong, like stupid wrong, mutually assured destruction wrong. So, everyone is going to shut the hell up. That means you too, Eevee. I love you, but shut the hell up.” She pointed at July without looking directly at her. “And everyone is gonna return to their places.”

July didn’t move. Raine kept pointing, then slowly looked round at her.

“What did I say?” Raine asked. Her tone was light and amused, but she bounced on the balls of her feet, ready to throw down.

Even after all this time, all we’d seen from her and her potential for instant, devastating violence, that look and that posture still sent a

quiver of appreciation up my spine and down into my gut. Look at us like that, please, Raine.

“R-Raine,” we said. “There’s no need to—”

But Raine’s eyes found me next, amused and indulgent, but no less strict. I went quite stiff.

“Heather,” she said. “This goes for you too. All of you.” Her eyes circled us, including the tentacles. “Down, girls. Stop flaring, okay? Don’t make me tie you up.”

Lozzie giggled. Evelyn huffed. We blushed.

“Wha- what?” I stammered. “We were just— Raine, I’m sorry?”

“I know you’re not doing it on purpose, puffing yourself up and all. And with the lemons too. But cool it, okay? Relax, or I’ll make you relax. For me?” She didn’t wait for an answer before she turned back to July. “And you can back up, or I can make you sit. Your choice. Woof woof.”

I could only stare — first at Raine, then at the slice of lemon held delicately in one of our tentacles.

The worst edges of our food cravings had rounded off their sharp corners over the three days since the dreams. But the taste for lemon, soy sauce, and fish still remained. We were still eating one or two raw lemons every day, especially in moments of increased stress. This particular pair of lemons I’d been snacking on had been neatly peeled and sliced for me, by Praem; I was hardly skinning and devouring fruits in mid-air with invisible appendages anymore. But I placed the second to last slice back down on my plate regardless. Was I being rude without realising? Was I really that intimidating?

Raine had a point about the tentacle flaring. We reeled ourselves in, sheepish and mortified.

July still wasn’t moving. She said: “You don’t order me. Zheng can order me.”

Jan sighed and said, “Really, Jule? This isn’t the time for your crush.”

Raine cracked a dangerous grin. “Well, Zheng’s busy. You’re dealing with me. So unless you want me to put a boot up your backside,

don't advance on our Evee. Back off."

"She's threatening Jan." July said this as a simple statement of fact, not a challenge or a complaint. Jan is threatened, therefore she protects. She didn't move.

Jan cleared her throat. "Jule, it's fine. Have some tea."

"Yeah," Raine said to July. "You're right, Evee is being rude. Being a right bitch, actually, 'cos she's all wound up. But let me deal with that, okay? She's ours, not yours."

Evelyn huffed and muttered, "Well excuse me for trying."

July considered this for a moment, then returned to her previous position, with her hands tucked behind the small of her back, as if standing to attention — or stowing her weapons. On the opposite side of the door frame, Felicity relaxed the odd position of her fingers, flexing the tension out of her hand muscles. I had no idea what she'd been planning, but it probably would have been messy. Raine caught Felicity's eye and nodded — down, girl. Felicity coughed and looked away.

Finally, Raine turned on Jan.

The petite, black-haired little con-woman all but fluttered her eyelashes. "It's quite all right," Jan started to say. "I don't hold anything against you or Miss Saye, I only want ... to ..."

Raine smiled one of those dangerous smiles which she could fill with such dark meaning — just a small one, a boot-knife smile rather than a machete smile. Jan trailed off and swallowed, wrong-footed for the first time since she had arrived.

"Jan," said Raine.

Jan swallowed again. "Yes?"

"Don't make jokes about lacking body parts to somebody who uses a prosthetic leg."

Jan froze, mouth a little 'O' shape. "Oh, oh, no. No! That's not what I meant! For God's sake! That's not what I meant!"

Raine shrugged, grinning with deep, dark amusement. Evelyn seemed none too pleased by this particular defence of her honour. Felicity put her face in one hand. I sighed too — obviously that wasn't what Jan had meant.

“Raine!” she was snapping. “You know that’s not what I meant! That was a low blow. My entire body is prosthetic. Head to toe. I’m the whole package deal. The last thing I’m going to be implying is a crude joke about Evelyn missing a leg!” Jan’s attention switched back to Eevee, all hostility forgotten. “You know what? I apologise regardless. This is horrible now.”

Evelyn huffed too, and said: “Yes, Raine, that was more than a bit shit of you. Entirely uncalled for.”

“Quite,” we added — though somewhat tempered, because we could see exactly what Raine was pulling. Though apparently I was not the only one.

“Heeeeeeey,” Raine said, spreading her hands. “I call it how I see it. Just what I heard.”

Jan stood up, enraged. She didn’t flush, but looked pale with anger. Lozzie rose with her, making an ineffectual effort to get her to sit back down. She pursed her lips and frowned a mighty little frown at Raine, punctuating her words with jabs of a small finger.

“I was not implying anything about Evelyn’s body,” Jan said, tight and curt. “And you know it. Don’t think I’m blind to what’s going on here, or how much of a coward you’re being.”

Raine was so confident of her victory that she mimed a fishing rod. She rocked her body backward, winding an imaginary reel with one hand. Eevee frowned at her, utterly perplexed. Felicity just blinked. Lozzie made a pouty face. I sighed.

“Coward?” Raine echoed, casual and unoffended.

“Yes!” Jan said. “You are acting like a coward. You should have had this conversation with her yourself, or three days ago. You clearly —”

“But—” Raine strained against her imaginary fishing rod. Jan was so incensed by the topic that she wasn’t even paying proper attention to the gestures. “What were you implying then? If not Eevee’s missing leg, then—”

“I am implying she is a terrible strategist and a worse organiser!” Jan snapped. “And I think you know that, too! I think you know bloody well that this entire thing is a displacement activity because you people—” She whirled, pointing both fingers at Eevee. “—

specifically you, are careening toward disaster. You lot are going to get yourselves killed!”

The room rang with surprised silence. Jan stood there, panting, flushing deeply in the face. Raine hauled her imaginary catch into the air and caught it in one hand, then winked at me. I sighed, but I couldn't help but smile at how incredibly silly that all was.

And Evelyn was scowling at Jan in an entirely new kind of way. “Excuse me?” she said, dark as coal dust.

Jan cleared her throat. “You heard me.”

Praem chose that exact moment to sweep back into the room with a tray full of fresh, steaming tea, in a variety of mugs. Tenny bobbed to the doorway after her, trilling out: “Disaster!”

A very awkward moment unfolded as Praem went around the room, passing out fresh mugs of tea and collecting up the empty ones. Raine thanked her with a wink. Felicity shuffled with great discomfort. I nodded a thank you as well, screaming inside with silent relief. Jan and Raine between them had finally said what I couldn't.

Evelyn simmered just below an angry boil. Jan didn't sit back down. Her exterior mask was gone. She looked weary but resigned.

We cleared our throat. “Um, excuse me, everybody. I want to make a suggestion. Tempers have run very high, so perhaps it would be better if we took a break. Perhaps Jan and Evee can talk in more privacy, perhaps ... um, yes, Jan?”

Jan was staring at me with a look I'd not seen on her face before, an expression which demanded my attention — because it was all similar to Evelyn herself.

Jan said, “Why am I not surprised? You're half the problem, Heather.”

“ ... excuse me?”

“We're not breaking this meeting up now. Heather, I can only imagine what you've been going through, what you've had to adjust to — but you people have stalled long enough. Lozzie informed me you lot haven't made a real move in three whole days.”

Evelyn sat up straighter, frowning at Lozzie, who was still draped

over Jan's shoulders like a living blanket. "Lozzie, is this true? You were meant to invite Jan, that was all."

Lozzie pulled the most impish little smile, wiggling her eyebrows and biting her bottom lip. "Oh nooooo, whoops!"

Jan said, "Did you really think I responded to your summons just to get interrogated?"

Then, in a total one-eighty of her attitude, Jan promptly buried her face in both hands. She let out a low moan of deep frustration. Lozzie hugged her around the shoulders, trying her best, but whatever Jan was in, she was in deep.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said into her hands. "I can't believe I'm going to do this. I can't believe I'm even contemplating this. Why? Why me? Am I really doing this?"

July spoke up, voice clipped and hard: "You were born for this."

Jan raised her face from her hands to scowl at July. "I will sew your lips shut, so help me God."

"No you won't."

Jan started laughing — or at least she tried to. The noise was halfway to a pitiful sob, though her blue-marble eyes were dry as bone. "Oh, I should not be doing this, I should not be doing any of this. I should be getting out of town. I should be running for the hills. Knowing what you lot are up to is bad enough. Being on the periphery is worse. But this is real involvement. God! I'm going to die."

Lozzie peeked over Jan's shoulder, easing her face forward until Jan could not ignore her. "No, Janny," she crooned. "He's gonna die."

Jan froze, staring at Lozzie's mischievous little look with a combination of muted horror and deep, gut-clenching admiration.

It was the same way I looked at Raine.

Evelyn cleared her throat, breaking the spell. "This is an awful lot of theatrical nonsense when you could simply explain what you meant."

Jan gathered herself and focused on Eevee again. "I already said it. This is a displacement activity."

“What is?” Evelyn demanded. “Explain.”

“This!” She gestured around, at all of us, at the room, at me, at Felicity, even at Tenny. “You’re groping for anything you can find, at the most unimportant of straws, when your actual target is right in front of you.” She pointed at the photographs on the table. Evelyn opened her mouth to counter, but Jan rushed on, roused by true anger — and perhaps, we realised, by more than a flash of professional interest, of the master driven to irritation by the poor student. “The identity of ‘VB’—” Jan mimed a very exasperated pair of air quotes around the initials “—clearly doesn’t matter in comparison with your complete lack of strategy. You want to know who she was? Well, her real initials are not VB. I’m pretty sure she lifted that from a book, to avoid giving Heather her real name. Very sensible too, I might add.” Jan huffed. “She’s none of your concern. She’s somebody I used to know. And from what Heather said about the dream, she turned up because I was there. A bloody mage war is the *last* thing she would ever be interested in. So! Miss Saye. Evelyn. Eevee. Put her out of your mind, and accept you need some help with your actual strategy.”

Evelyn was still frowning, but with significantly less anger. She just said, “I’m perfectly capable of determining our strategy—”

“You’re clearly not!” Jan shouted, hands in the air, shrill with exasperation. Lozzie hung on her shoulders, covering her own mouth with a flap of poncho — was Lozzie giggling? Jan went on. “What have you even been doing for the last three days? Hmm? What is all this, really?” She gestured at the photos again. “Staking out a mage? His atelier is right there. You’ve had three days. What are you doing?”

Evelyn pursed her lips. “There are preparations to be made.”

“Oh, yes,” Jan said, dripping sarcasm. She pointed over her shoulder — at the circle held behind hazard tape. “Like that? That — is terrifying. I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing. Does everybody else know what you’re building in a corner of the house they all sleep in every night? Does Heather, here, does she know? Does Praem, your daughter? Does Lozzie?” Jan gestured at Lozzie’s face peering over her shoulder. “By the way, I’m inviting Lozzie and Tenny to both come stay with me and July in our hotel room, until you get rid of that thing.” She jabbed another finger at the circle.

Evelyn's jaw tightened. "It's necessary."

"Yes," Jan said, suddenly cold. "I've heard that before."

Raine cleared her throat. "Wait a sec, I don't know what that—"

Jan interrupted, tight and cold, "Go on then. Enlighten me. What's it necessary for? We're all on the same side here. There's no prying eyes or listening devices. Would you like me to strip off so you can check me for a wire?"

"Jan," we said delicately.

"Oooh," went Lozzie. Jan, to her credit, blushed only a tiny bit.

Evelyn huffed and shot a glance at Tenny, who was still standing in the doorway, tentacles playing across the frame. She swallowed, clearly uncomfortable. "I'm not sure ... "

"Tenny sleeps here too," Jan said. "Tell us what the circle does, Evee."

Evelyn glared at Jan, but her eyes lacked venom. Somewhere along the course of this conversation, she and Jan had switched roles. Jan had drawn out Evee's fangs, left her floundering in the mud, shamed. "You know full well what—"

"Tell everyone," Jan repeated.

Evelyn stared at a point on the floor for a long, long moment. We murmured, "It's okay, Evee. We won't judge you. Please."

That helped, a little. Evelyn didn't look up from the floor, but she said, slowly and awkwardly. "It's straight from *Impia Methodologia*. And it is insulated from this building. It won't complete without being applied to a surface, it's perfectly safe, it—"

"What does it do?" Jan pressed, with a little sigh.

Evelyn raised her eyes at last. "Asphyxiation. Room by room. Like a carbon monoxide leak."

"If it goes right," Jan said. "If it goes wrong—"

"It won't go wrong."

"I've seen it go wrong, Evelyn Saye."

"Ahhhhh," went Raine. "Right. Too dangerous, yeah." She raised

her eyebrows at Felicity — but Felicity looked away, ashamed by her involvement in all this.

I felt — numb. Of course Evee was building something lethal. What other option did we have? But to build it right inside the house, that felt somehow rash.

“So,” Jan went on. “What is your actual plan, here? What’s your strategy? You’ve built a nasty weapon. What are you going to do with it? Do you have a plan for approaching this mage’s house? What if he has guards? What if he has worse? Come on, Evelyn. Share.”

Evee took a deep breath — and deflated in my grip. She didn’t answer.

“Thought so,” said Jan. “God, I hate it when people wing things like this. Rather than facing up to the fact that your strategy is terrible, you have chosen to chase loose ends by harassing me about my past. You are burnt out, Evelyn Saye. You are a cinder, a crisp on the floor. You are stalling and procrastinating. You are not thinking straight, you are making terrible strategic decisions. And yes, that’s not your fault, it’s not your fault you’re so distracted—”

We saw, from the vantage point of three tentacles, Evelyn’s eyes flicker so minutely — toward us. She arrested the motion before the glance could complete. But we knew what it meant.

Jan was carrying on, “—but unless you admit it to yourself, you’re going to lose.”

Raine raised hand. “Hey, Jan take a sec to—”

Jan jabbed a finger at Raine. “You can shut up. You started this. You dragged me into this, so you can shut your mouth.” Raine, grinning, put her hands up. Jan moved quickly onto Felicity, which we hadn’t expected. “And you — look, I’ve barely met you, I don’t want to know what your deal is, but you’re clearly incapable of standing up to Evelyn and telling her when she’s going wrong. You’re just going along with all this because you’re ... well, I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.”

Felicity stared, dead-eyed with her one good orb. “I’ve fought other mages before.”

“Alone?” Jan asked, then pointed at Evee. “Or with her?”

Felicity hesitated. "Alone."

"Well, there's your problem."

Felicity sighed, "Thanks. Sure."

"You," Jan pointed at Praem, then paused and cleared her throat. "Well, good job."

"Good job," said Praem. "I am good."

I foolishly said: "What about me? Are we a problem, too?"

Jan turned a deeply tired gaze on us. "You're a problem, Heather, yes. You're too busy inside your mind to even recognise what's happening. You need a week off — a month off, a year off. But you're here and you're involved. So pay attention."

We swallowed, feeling guilty.

Evelyn sighed and said, "Have you quite finished?"

"No!" Jan said. "No, I'm barely even getting warmed up. Oh, I cannot believe I'm doing this. I cannot believe I am getting involved in another bloody mage squabble." Jan turned her head and looked at Lozzie for a second, a fleeting moment of eye contact during which entire volumes passed between them. Lozzie chewed on her lip, almost embarrassed. Jan shook her head slowly, then muttered: "*Je n'ai pas été impliquée depuis Caen.*"

Apparently Lozzie did not understand French any better than I did, because she tilted her head like a confused puppy.

But July did. She repeated her earlier words: "You were born for this."

Jan sighed and turned back to the rest of us. "No, I wasn't. I was born for complicated romance, chocolate ice cream, and expensive clothes. But here I am, involved in another mage war, whether I like it or not. Wonderful."

Evelyn looked so shrunken in her chair when she spoke up. I wanted to wrap her in our tentacles, but I suspected the one around her arm was already too much. "You don't have to be involved, Martense. I'm not asking you to be. You've made your point. I'm ... " Evelyn gritted her teeth around a sour taste. "I'm making a real pig's ear of this situation, yes, I know, but I have my ... reasons, and ... "

Jan waited for Evee to trail off, though I doubted Evelyn's discomfort had anything to do with Jan's unimpressed look. Jan said, "Clearly I do need to be involved. You need an outsider — ha! Pardon the pun, bloody hell — an outside, expert opinion. A consultant. My fee is ninety pounds an hour."

"Done," said Evee.

Everyone did a double-take at Evee, save for Praem. Even Raine and Felicity were a little surprised. Even Tenny — who was not fully privy to the depths of Evelyn's stubborn nature and habitual paranoia — trilled in surprise.

"Evee?" we murmured, squeezing her hand in one tentacle. She wouldn't look at me.

Praem intoned softly: "A fair fare."

Jan huffed. "Yes, well, I'm not some McKinsey ghoul." That went completely over my head, but Raine snorted. "That was a joke, by the way. The fee part, not everything else. You people are careening toward disaster — a big one — because you don't have a plan and you're all burnt out and exhausted.""

Felicity said: "Evelyn, are you sure about this?"

I added, "Yes. Evee, this isn't like you. And you, Jan, you—"

"She's right," Evelyn snapped. She stared straight at Jan, her hostility burnt down to embers and capped over with the cold stone of practical necessity. "Myself, Felicity, and Kimberly, between us we can work magical wonders. But I am ... emotionally compromised."

Jan nodded. She visibly relaxed, as if the worst was over. "I'm glad you acknowledge it." She pointed between us — between me and Evee. "You two need to work out whatever is going on between you, and then—"

Evelyn interrupted: "It's not that."

Evelyn straightened, spine once again stiffened by a rod of iron. She put on a good show, but it was only that — a show. Through the tentacle we had wrapped around her arm, we could feel her shaking.

"I am trying to avoid a magical duel," she said. "I've been in one

before. I have no desire to experience another. I do not want to fight this man face to face.”

Jan’s expression changed, softening ever so slightly. “Ah. You ... survived. I see.”

“Lacking the necessary resources to organise a truck bomb and drive it into that house, I have resorted to the next-best hands off measure I could think of.” Evee held her chin high. “But you are correct. My judgement is compromised. What are your suggestions, consultant?”

Jan went a little stiff. Her own fires had died down too, now that she’d had a good rant. “Right now?”

Evelyn nodded. “If you expect your fee, I expect you to work. You are also correct that we have wasted time. Yes, I would like to start right away.”

Jan glanced back at Lozzie, who was still hanging over her shoulders, her chin on Jan’s collarbone. Lozzie just raised her eyebrows, perfectly relaxed, as if we hadn’t just conscripted her girlfriend of barely a few weeks.

“The ... the fee was a joke,” Jan said. “I’m not accepting payment. I ... I don’t ... Lozzie, do you really want to be here for this?”

“Mhmm!” Lozzie nodded. “We’re gonna win!”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “I will pay you regardless. We’re already going to pay you for Maisie’s new body. Now, consultant, what do you suggest we do?”

Jan sighed a big sigh, put her hands on her hips, and glanced around the room at everybody present. “Look, you need to be having a strategy meeting. A real one.” Jan waited a beat, then made a come-on-then gesture with one hand. “So? Strategy meeting? Let’s do it, right now, before I completely lose my nerve and run for the hills.”

Raine clicked her fingers and pointed double finger-guns at nobody in particular. “You got it.”

Praem intoned in agreement, “Strategy meeting. For meeting strategies.”

Tenny joined in: “Strategyyyyyy.”

Felicity nodded too. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m with you on this. Let’s do it.”

July just watched in silence, happy to go along with her mage.

I felt like an additional wheel on an already over-laden lorry. Was I really needed for this? Our tentacles bunched and coiled, like a squid trying to shrink itself so as to squeeze through a gap in the rocks. Perhaps we should retreat to the rear of the room and stay silent, perhaps our own internal issues were too much of a distraction. My cheeks burned with a slow, private shame. Jan was right, I’d been so wrapped up in myself when I should have been taking care of Evee. We all wanted to hug her and pull her out of the room, to do — something I couldn’t put words to.

But Jan must have seen my desire to retreat. She pointed at me suddenly. “Ah, you’re not going anywhere, squiddy. You stay right there. Your friends need you.”

“I-I’m sorry? I don’t see how. I found the house, but I’m sorry for ... delaying us ... ”

Jan’s eyes glinted like twin windows on a deep-sea lava flow. “And this isn’t everyone, I know this isn’t everyone. I want everybody involved, *here*.” She pointed at the ground with both index fingers. “We’re not having this conversation twice, or three times. We are having an all-hands strategy meeting, with no surprises for later, no lingering objections, no unanswered questions. Besides, if I have to do this twice I’m going to have a coronary event.” She rubbed her chest. Lozzie joined in.

“Fair point,” said Raine, nodding sagely. “We should call Twil and Zheng in.”

Evelyn sighed. “They’re watching Edward’s house. No, we can call one of them back, not both. Somebody needs to keep eyes on that place.”

“I said everyone,” Jan announced. “Get everyone.”

“Everyone?” Lozzie chirped over her shoulder.

Tenny echoed that too, trilling softly: “Everyoooooone-uh.”

“Everyone! Yes!” Jan repeated. “I don’t care about your stakeout. It’s a waste of time and energy. Call them both back. Call them both here. And this ... Church. God I don’t want to think about that. Can we get one of them in here, too? A representative?”

Evelyn answered that. “Twil can serve as that.”

We cleared our throat. “Evee, no. Twil isn’t ... I mean ... if we’re planning a move, Cringe-dog should be informed.”

Jan wrinkled her nose. “I’m sorry, ‘Cringe-dog?’”

Evelyn sighed and waved a hand. “Better that you don’t know. We could see if Miss Amanda Hopton is available?”

“On it,” said Raine. She made for the kitchen, to fetch her phone — then turned at the last moment. “Wait, am I calling Nicky, too? She’ll want in. Maybe.”

Jan blanched. “The police officer? Absolutely not!”

“Ex-copper,” Raine corrected. “She’s a P.I. now. Got connections though.”

Jan chewed her lower lip for a moment. “Can she be trusted?”

I spoke, much to my own surprise: “Absolutely. Nicole has helped us before. I trust her.”

Jan sighed and shook her head. “All right. Her too.” Raine nodded, then slipped past Tenny and into the kitchen. Jan added: “But if we all get arrested, I don’t know any of you. Right. Now what about your third mage?” Jan clicked her fingers. “The ... what’s her name?”

“Kimberly,” said Felicity. “She’s at work.”

Jan squinted. “Work?”

I cleared my throat. “Kimberly has a normal, regular job. Unlike most of us here she’s neither a student, nor ... ” We smiled awkwardly, letting the silence speak for itself. Two tentacles bobbed up and down in a silent pantomime of laughter.

Jan sighed and rolled her eyes. “See, that is exactly what I’m talking about. A distracted mage will not win this kind of contest.”

Felicity said: “She’ll be back at about half five. So, not too long. We should wait for her.”

“Fine,” Jan snapped. “God, this is far too many mages in one place, it cannot be safe. I’m half expecting the universe itself to punish us for this hubris.” Jan’s eyes flickered to Tenny, who was still filling

the doorway to the kitchen, fluttering her silken black tentacles over an imaginary barrier of permission. Jan suddenly looked deeply uncomfortable. “Is, um ... is Tenny ... ?”

Lozzie piped up: “Tenn-Tenns is allowed to listen too.”

“Yah!” Tenny trilled.

Evelyn said, slowly and thoughtfully: “A child she may be, but no child should be excluded from deliberations over the fate of her family. Tenny is old enough to understand what we’re doing. Isn’t that right, Tenny?”

Tenny bit her lips together, as if thinking very carefully. “Yaaah.”

We said, “If we have to discuss grisly things, Tenny, we might have to ask you to go upstairs.”

Lozzie pouted at me, “She’s not going alone!”

Jan held up a hand. “Before I lose my nerve — when I said everyone, I meant everyone. Even the terrifying one I’m trying not to think about.”

And with that, black and yellow stepped from the shadows.

Seven-Shades-of-Suspicious-Stealth ghosted into the room from a dark corner, in her yellow princess mask, hand-in-hand with a figure too slender and slight to be a human being, a figure wrapped in lace from head to toe, faceless behind a matching black lace veil.

“Speak of the devil,” said Sevens, “and she will appear.”

Aym went *sreeetch*, like a single nail down a chalkboard.

Jan all but jumped out of her skin. Lozzie did a half-decent job of calming her, mostly with physical embrace and a few muffled whispers in Jan’s ear. As Jan panted and stared, we wound one of our tentacles out across the open space and reached for Sevens’ free hand. The Yellow Daughter took it without hesitation, Aym in one, me in the other.

Evelyn drawled, “Was the dramatic entrance really necessary?”

“Always,” said Sevens.

Aym cackled like a bucket of live crabs. “The look on your face, doll-bitch!”

Lozzie finished whispering in Jan's ear. Jan swallowed again, then said, "You ... you are *also* the little one with the black hair and red eyes, correct?"

Seven-Shades nodded once, polite and graceful. "At your service, general."

Jan winced, hard, as if struck across the cheek. Aym, little more than a scrap of black lace, giggled.

"Don't call me that," Jan said. "Look, I don't want to know what either of you are."

Tenny trilled: "Friends!"

Praem said, "Good girls, if they know what is good for them."

Aym shivered, as if she'd been about to deliver some insult and had to slam her mouth shut at the last moment. But Sevens simply nodded again. "Don't ask me and I will not tell you."

Jan snorted. "How primitive. One question, for the pair of you — how far do your powers extend? Can you solve this by just plucking the damned book from the mage, or killing him for us?"

Aym screeched, "Get me inside the house and I'll have him weeping for his childhood bedroom."

Sevens straightened up. "No, general. I am weaker than I seem, but happier this way. Though ... attach me to my beloved—" she nodded toward me "—and we may make miracles together, if we are pressed against the fulcrum."

Jan let out a shaky breath. "I'll take that as a no." She turned back to Evelyn. "Does that account for everybody?"

"Badger," we said. "Sarika? Neither of them are in any state to help, though."

Jan shook her head. "No, leave the ex-cultists out of this. Anybody else?"

Evelyn took a slow breath. We squeezed her arm. She glanced at us, just once. "No," she said. "Nobody else. That's us."

"Good," said Jan. "Time for a real strategy meeting. I hope to God I don't end up regretting this."

Lozzie chirped over her shoulder: “You won’t!”

“We’ll do our best to make sure you don’t,” somebody said. “Our best.”

A moment later, I realised it was me who had spoken.

Our best — without dissolving into a disaster. But no plan survives contact with the enemy, as Raine had taught me all too well. The answer was to have as little contact as possible. Because mistakes meant friends getting hurt. Mistakes meant a duel with a mage. Or worse.

Our best. *Our* best. That could only mean one thing.

As far as we were concerned, we didn’t need the strategy meeting at all. We knew exactly what to do. We were just scared.

Perhaps Jan would suggest it for us. At least then the burden would be shared.

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.3

At the apex of Jan's borrowed whiteboard, written in black and crossed out in red, was one word: negotiate.

Negotiation, negated.

As the real strategy meeting got underway and smeared itself across the summer evening like a handful of cake smeared across a clean tabletop, I kept glancing back up at that word, with the letters smeared sideways by a red slash. One of us — bottom left — coiled herself into knots thinking over the implications, neurons mono-tasked to the intricacies of a single word, feeding conclusions and contradictions back into my torso and up to my brain. I even whispered it to myself a few times as the others talked, which earned me a curious sideways glance from Raine and an overt stare from Seven-Shades-of-Supernatural-Auditory-Range.

Negotiation, negated. Ruled out. Removed.

There was a finality to that — not least because it was the first thing Jan had asked, once all the participants were gathered in the magical workshop: is there no chance of a peaceful resolution? Can Edward Lilburne be brought to the table? Can you talk it out?

She didn't ask "Does this mage truly deserve to die?", or "Are you up to the task of killing another human being, no matter how evil?", because this wasn't a moral question. It was a practical question, a strategic consideration. Was there any chance, no matter how small, that negotiation could work?

The answer was no, of course. There were no objections.

We had tried, perhaps naively, to negotiate. We had really tried. All the way back to the first time, when we had attempted a treaty of sorts with one half of the shattered remnants of the Sharrowford Cult — whichever cultists and sycophants had sided with Edward in the wake of Alexander's death at my hands.

We had made an honest effort to find a solution by which we could

get the book which Edward had swiped from under our noses — *The Testament of Heliopolis* — and secure ourselves against further aggression. We had never really sat down and discussed the implications, not all together, not all at once. Even Evelyn had briefly flirted with the notion that we could somehow come to an understanding with him, and secure Lozzie against his intentions by placing our protection over her. We would let him live, beyond Sharrowford, away from us. No conflict, just disengagement, an uneasy coexistence.

That had been a mistake.

Edward Lilburne had responded with trickery, insults, goading, demands for his ‘property’ — and then attacks, attempts to murder us, hijackings and secret plots and threats on the lives of uninvolved children. He had sent monsters to kill us, turned his weapons on innocents, and even set his lawyer after us.

When I was younger, part of me used to believe that there was always a peaceful solution to any conflict; not because of any inherent pacifism in my character, but simply because I was raised to be a good girl, and good girls didn’t fight. By the time blows are being struck, it’s too late — but before rifles are pointed and graves are dug, surely there’s always some other way out? A compromise position, a meeting of minds, something to negotiate over.

Raine would have told me that was very naive. Raine was correct.

Edward Lilburne would never negotiate in good faith, not without a literal or metaphorical gun to his head. There was no secret combination of words, no esoteric way of presenting ourselves, no hidden appeal that would bring him around. Coexistence was impossible, because what he wanted was inimical to coexistence.

As the strategy meeting raced through the first hour and then dragged into a second, I kept thinking about that. Half of us — me and half my tentacles — were focused on Jan’s slow, methodical run-down of our options, her rapid addition of suggestions and questions, and her simmering head-butting with Eevee over dangers and risks. She was very good at that, wrangling a room full of people with a touch of public speaking; there was more than a little performance in the way she gestured and nodded to everyone present, the theatrical twist to her voice, the snap of her wrist as she flicked her pen. I half-suspected she was receiving help from

Sevens. But no, Jan was just very talented at pretending.

The other half of me was distracted by that question.

The point of all this was to retrieve the book — *The Testament of Heliopolis* — so that Evee might finish her spell, her *Invisus Oculus*, the invisible eye, or eye of invisibility, a great working that would hide us from the Eye's gaze when we stood upon the soil of Wonderland. The point of this was Maisie. All this was for Maisie. Edward Lilburne didn't actually matter.

But if we obtained the book and left him at large, he would still be inimical to us. We would never be safe. The ex-members of the Eye Cult, still languishing in pain and confusion, would always be a threat he could use against us. Lozzie would never be safe. Maisie, after her return, would never be safe.

Edward Lilburne had to die. Not because he was evil, not because of the dead children, not because of the attempts to kill us, but because he would *keep doing this*.

Part of us didn't like that. The part of us that wanted to see the best in everybody, the part of us that had resisted Evelyn's paranoia, and given Praem a name of her own. The part of us which had ached to see a person in Zheng, not just an enslaved killing machine. The part of us which had not blamed Kimberly for what she'd done. The part of us which had accepted Sarika's continued life, and had set about rehabilitating Badger. The part of us which had sat down to really speak with Felicity, to find out if she was a monster or not.

Part of us wanted to believe in forgiveness. We lived forgiveness. Could we imagine some hypothetical future scene in which Edward sat down for tea with us, and had a polite conversation with his niece, with Lozzie, to apologise and heal?

No.

One cannot negotiate when the other side's goal is your destruction or subjugation. The only response is violence.

Part of us — a part I had tried to deny and suppress for a very long time — was quite satisfied with that answer.

When the meeting broke for dinner, we kept chewing on the resulting gristle of that half-digested problem, like a gallstone stuck inside a tentacle. Chinese food, courtesy of Evelyn and picked up by

Praem and Raine, went down a treat, and not just for us; Twil had a huge plate of orange chicken and bamboo shoots, Felicity and Kimberly shared black bean and tofu, and we slathered some fish in lemon juice. Tenny was delighted by a veritable bucket of egg drop soup, and stuck eight tentacles into it all at once. But we kept thinking.

Alexander Lilburne had presented us with this same question, but in a much more immediate fashion; I had a choice back then, in that strange throne room in the castle made from the vast scabbed-over hide of a cosmic refugee, and only seconds in to make it — a choice between killing him and letting my friends get hurt. This was the same choice, just on a longer time scale. The answer was the same. I had made peace with that.

But when we all finished up our Chinese food and returned to the magical workshop — with Twil still carrying half a plate of orange-slathered chicken — my mind was already leaping ahead.

The lesson from two conflicts with two mages was crystal clear. A painful lesson. But a correct one.

But — did this mean we had to fight the Eye?

What were we really going to do, once we could stand amid the black ash of Wonderland and look up at the Eye, without it looking back down at us?

Would we study it for a day, a week, a month, to divine some weakness that we could reach out and exploit? The Eye had never been truly malicious, never truly *evil* in the way a human being could be; it had hurt me, tortured me even, but — on purpose? Or by accident? As an unconscious by-product of other processes? I didn't know. Ever since I'd re-grasped the machinery of hyperdimensional mathematics and realised the Eye was not native to this medium, I had been filled with unspoken doubt. Sevens had made suggestions, now half-forgotten, about the power of lesbian romance and polycules, but she had merely been guessing, projecting her own nature onto the problem. Evelyn was certain that hyperdimensional mathematics itself held the key — but to what?

Confrontation, or communication?

One can only negotiate when the other side's goal is not one's

destruction or subjugation.

But what was the Eye's goal?

What did the Eye want?

I didn't know. I didn't know if it was even possible to know.

Three hours after Jan had opened by crossing out 'negotiate', with bellies full of chicken and vegetables, with sunset's last gloaming still pouring summer glow into the kitchen behind us, Jan stretched both arms above her head, put the cap back on her marker pen, and tapped the whiteboard with the blunted tip.

Raine spoke before Jan could. "I think that's it, then. Unless anybody's got an eleventh-hour brainwave?" Raine glanced around the room, but everyone either shrugged, shook their heads, or looked away. Jan pulled a performatively irritated little smile at Raine.

Only I was lost deep in thought.

"Heather?" Raine said. "You thinking?"

We pulled ourselves up from the depths, blinking and sniffing and trying to focus. We had one tentacle wrapped around Raine's arm in mutual comfort — not least because Evelyn had wordlessly rejected the same.

That was the unspoken reason for being so inwardly philosophical. I'm not actually that clever or good at thinking, I was just trying to avoid asking why Evelyn was avoiding me.

"Um," I said. "No, sorry, Raine. I was just thinking about ... well, nothing important. Jan, please, go ahead."

"Alright then," said Jan, forcing some levity into her voice. She turned back to the little whiteboard again. "I think this is all pretty conclusive. I can see three options amid all this. I suspect everyone else in the room can as well, but I'm going to summarize them anyway, so we're all on the same page."

Evelyn snorted — not with derision, but with a kind of dry, detached humour. She had been cultivating that tone all evening, like turning her personality into a strip of dried meat.

"Three bad options, you mean," she said.

Jan shrugged, smiling all too sweetly. “One goes to war with the army one has, not the army one wants.”

Near the back of the magical workshop, a hand went up — Nicole Webb, private eye, well trained by years of police briefing rooms.

Nicky was still recovering from the broken left leg she’d sustained during the siege of Geerswin farm, but she had accepted the invitation to join us all the same, so Raine had driven to pick her up from her flat. Nicky’s entire left leg was wrapped in a stiff cast, lime-green, a colour she had apparently specifically requested. A pair of crutches leaned against the wall next to her. She let the cast-wrapped leg stick out in the most inconvenient way possible for everybody else, getting in the way and blocking other people and generally not allowing anybody to forget about it. Despite the constant inconvenience, she hadn’t let the rest of herself slip at all. She wore a high-collared polo-neck jumper, in black, and rather than resorting to shorts she had cut off the left leg of a pair of jeans. She’d also cut her hair after getting out of the hospital, chopping off most of the soft blonde length and shearing it short, so it stuck up in the middle. She radiated control and satisfaction — probably at confronting us with her leg in a cast.

Her control only wavered when she saw my tentacles, physical and undeniable, on full display.

“I’m just like this, now,” I’d said. “I can hide them when I go outdoors, but ... not in here.”

Nicole had recovered quickly, nodding to me, somehow getting it. “Sure thing, Heather. You do you.”

She had also brought along her dog, who we’d not previously met. ‘Soup’ — short for ‘super’ — was a little bit Siberian Husky, a little bit German Shepard, and a little bit something nobody could identify, perhaps Irish Wolfhound, or maybe just actual wolf. Big, grey as a snowstorm in a wildfire, and responsibly trained as a puppy by Nicole herself, Soup sat obediently next to Nicky as if guarding her from all these strange unknown people, ears standing straight up, eyes roving around the room almost like she could understand what we were all saying.

Soup was also a very good girl though; she endured much petting from Tenny completely without complaint, probably because Nicole made a conscious effort not to show any discomfort or fear of

Tenny. And she wasn't bothered by my tentacles, not at all. Dogs are good people, as Raine might say.

Jan indicated Nicole's raised hand with a jab of her marker pen. "Miss Webb, yes."

Nicky laughed softly as she lowered her hand. "We're not on the force, you can just call me Nicky."

"Nicole," said Jan.

Nicole sat up a little in her chair. Praem stood by to help, but Nicky didn't actually need any assistance.

"Can't help but wonder," she said. "What would be the army you want, for this? Dream team, limitless resources. What do you wizard weirdos do when the gloves are really off? Paint me a picture here."

Jan smiled, sweet like lead paint chips. "Miss Webb, the gloves are all the way off, I assure you."

Evelyn cleared her throat. Evelyn was sitting on the other end of our little gathering, next to Twil, about as far away from me as she could get. I was trying not to think about that. She said: "Answer detective Webb's question, please. I'm curious too." Evelyn shot a sidelong look — and a little smile — at Nicole. Evelyn had been sharing little smiles in her direction since the moment she'd clomped through the front door in her cast, clutching her pair of crutches, intentionally getting in everybody's way. A kindred spirit, if only temporarily.

Jan resisted a moment longer, then let her smile curdle. "Evelyn, you of all people should know that question has infinite variations. Ask ten mages, get eleven answers. What's the point?"

Felicity — who was near the rear of the room, alongside Kim — added her own agreement: "Yeah. Too much variation to answer that."

Evelyn sighed sharply. "Then what would *you* desire for this, Jan? I want to understand your thinking, before we come to a decision."

Jan considered the air, lips pursed, then clacked her pen down on the table. She looked down at her hands, adjusted the hem of her pleated grey skirt, and sighed.

“The army,” she said.

“Oh,” Felicity murmured from the rear. “Good answer.”

Raine spoke up. “You mean your ‘army of the third eye’ people, the ones you were working for?”

Jan rolled her eyes. “No, not them. The army. The military. The British Army, I suppose. If I had infinite resources I would roll up to a safe distance from that house — preferably several miles away — with a bunch of artillery, and then just drown the building in explosives until it’s a crater. Why not?” Jan spread her hands.

Twil, around a mouthful of chicken, said: “Hell yeah! Girl’s got sense. Blow that shit up!”

“Shiiiiiiiiit,” Tenny trilled from the doorway, imitating the bad word. Twil almost choked on a piece of chicken. From the sofa, Lozzie shook her head in the please-don’t-repeat-that gesture. Tenny fluttered her tentacles and puffed out her cheeks.

Praem intoned: “No swearwolf.”

“Sorry!” said Twil, now de-chickened once more. “Sorry, sorry, my bad. Sorry.”

“The army, then,” Jan repeated. “That’s my answer.”

Nicole said, “Aw come on, that’s cheating.”

At the other end of the magical workshop, Amanda Hopton spoke up too: “I actually agree with that.”

Everyone stopped to listen. Some preferred not to look. We did though, three tentacles bobbing upward to see who was really speaking.

Amanda’s voice was a slow slurry, half-mumbled and sliding. Her eyelids were uneven. Her pupils massively dilated. Her god spoke through her.

“We don’t want anybody else to get hurt again,” said the giant Outsider cone-snail who was reading her thoughts. “Better to end it from a distance, hands off, hands away, hands ... yes, hands. Rather than rush in and somebody get ... hurt?”

She trailed off. Evelyn cleared her throat and said, “Thank you, Miss Hopton.”

Amanda took a deep breath and blinked several times, like a heavy sleepwalker trying to rouse herself. When I looked at her eyes, I could see a coiling vastness behind her dilated pupils, blurred by the indistinct colour of her irises. Her golden retriever — Bernard — sat across her feet, panting softly, keeping her grounded. She had responded to our invitation with dutiful attendance, but unfortunately her sister, Christine Hopton, was busy with other matters, so the representative of Brinkwood's cosmic cone-snail had to come alone. But she was never alone, was she? A quartet of bubble-servitors had accompanied her; when she'd arrived, we had all assumed the pneuma-somatic bubble creatures would stay beyond the property line, as one of them had before. But as Amanda had entered the house, her bodyguards had settled on the roof, to watch, and wait.

We did trust them now, sort of, after the events at Geerswin Farm. I trusted Hringewindla, anyway. And the house didn't buck them off, so we let them stay.

Nicole repeated herself, running a hand through her recently shortened hair. "It's still cheating. Come on, I thought you'd have a magic solution to this. Animate some broomsticks. Summon a dragon. Turn him into a frog."

Jan gave Nicole the smile of the con woman who knows she has been rumbled, but lives the role too much to give it up. "Never apply a magical solution when you can just rely on mundane reality. It's so much safer." Jan sighed. "The artillery method doesn't solve the problem of getting your book, though, so it's a moot point anyway. Have I answered the question to your satisfaction, officer?"

Nicole stared at her, as if considering standing up. "Not an officer anymore."

From her comfy seat on the sofa, Lozzie said: "The only good kinda cop!"

Nicole sighed and rolled her eyes. Jan pulled an awkward smile, but she nodded. Raine reached over and patted Nicole on the shoulder.

"Alright," said Jan. "Can we get on with a summary now? Any further objections?"

Evelyn nodded. "Go ahead."

Zheng rumbled, from by the sofa: “Get on with it, wizard.”

“My pleasure,” said Jan.

She glanced back at the borrowed whiteboard. She had it propped up on the table, leaning against a small stack of books. It was nowhere near as impressive as the board on wheels which we’d used before the spell at Geerswin Farm, but then again, Christine Hopton was a school teacher, so she had that sort of thing knocking around. This tiny little whiteboard had been volunteered by Kimberly; it had formerly been covered with really quite sweet self affirmations, a few little notes about a writing project which she quickly erased, and a drawing of an alien who was also a wizard and an elf. She’d been eager to scrub it all so she could contribute: “I don’t mind, I’ll just take a picture first.”

We were all gathered in the magical workshop — and I do mean all of us, not just me myself and I. Nicole and Amanda had both responded to our invitations. Twil and Zheng had returned together from the stakeout, apparently after a bit of a race back to the house; Twil seemed none the worse for wear, still happily tearing into her orange chicken, but Zheng was brooding, quietly irritated by the presence of July. The other demon host kept shadowing her around the room like a lost puppy. Zheng was currently leaning on the wall next to the sofa, shadowing Lozzie in turn. Sevens and Aym sat a little apart, perhaps indicating that they couldn’t really help very much. Felicity and Kimberly stuck close to each other.

And Evelyn had pointedly and wordlessly detached herself from the comfort of my tentacle.

I couldn’t work out why and I was trying not to worry myself, but the correlation was clear; earlier, when having a good shout at Jan, Evelyn had been perfectly happy for me to hold her arm close, hold her back from poor decisions, and entwine my tentacle with her.

But then she’d been critiqued for her failures — and separated from me.

She sat right next to Twil, closer than I had expected; one or two of my tentacles kept drifting upward to examine them together, sending little tingles of jealousy back down into my torso.

Praem attended to all, as usual. Raine was by my side. Lozzie was comfy on the sofa. Tenny was still crammed in the doorway, but she

had been allowed one tentacle inside the workshop, to wrap around ‘Lozz-mum’s’ arm. She needed a hand to hold, with all these scary subjects of discussion.

The only one missing was Amy Stack.

Raine had called her earlier, to see if the missing mercenary had wanted to be involved. But she’d gotten the same response as before Geerswin farm: fifteen seconds of silence on the other end of the phone, followed by a dial tone. Stack was listening, but refused involvement.

“She’s doing this her own way,” Raine had said, when both I and Evelyn had expressed concerns. “I trust her.”

Evelyn had almost spluttered at that. “You trust her?! Raine, I do not trust that woman an inch. I believe she will do as she’s told because we’re protecting her boy, nothing else. I have her leash, not her trust.”

“Still,” Raine had said. “She’s more like me than I wanna admit. Let her do this her own way. It’ll pay off.”

Evee had huffed and stomped off at that. But I’d wanted to believe. Raine was often right about these things.

Jan uncapped her red marker pen again and drew three wobbly enclosures — it would be far too charitable to call them circles — around three different areas of the little whiteboard, around the notes she’d already made. Then she tapped the largest one.

“Option number one,” Jan said. “Frontal assault. You march up to the house, knock down the front door, and go room to room. Simple, straightforward, and very risky.”

Raine pointed double finger-guns at Jan, flicking her thumbs like the hammers of twin revolvers. “My kinda style, babe.”

Soup — Nicole’s dog — followed the finger-gun gesture, ears perking up. So did I. The dog and I looked at each other for a long moment. Ah, I thought, I have become dog-like.

“Mmmm!” Twil agreed around a mouthful of half-chewed chicken, then swallowed before speaking. “Yeah, I’m with Raine on that. We can take him. We’ve taken worse.”

Felicity sighed heavily. Zheng just rumbled, like the underground

echoes of volcanic motion.

Evelyn snorted again. “You make it sound so simple.”

Jan pulled a delicate little grimace. “Yes, it wouldn’t be as straightforward as all that. I do hope that’s been made clear to the more hot-headed members of this little alliance. This isn’t going to be like playing a computer game where nobody shoots back at you.”

“Ha,” Evelyn barked. “I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about the sigil.”

She pointed at the photograph which Jan had tucked into the top right of the whiteboard — it showed a front view of Edward’s house, the grandly crooked structure framed by dense woodland, the gravel driveway in front and a hint of the gardens behind. The heavy black beams and tiny metal-latticed windows of the house charted a secret word in an unspoken language.

I could almost read it, if I squinted hard enough. Two of my tentacles rose and bobbed next to my head whenever we tried, adding their neurons to the task. But after a few seconds the effort spiked into a headache. Edward Lilburne had baked something subtle and strange into the fabric of his home.

Jan nodded. “Yes, I know. We’d have to damage the front of the house first. Break a beam, maybe two. I’m not sure.”

Evelyn leaned forward in her chair, one hand heavy on her walking stick. “We have no idea what that sigil does. Disrupting it—”

“Is dangerous, yes,” Jan admitted. “But as far as a frontal confrontation goes, it’s our only option for dealing with the problem.” Jan put one dainty little hand out before Evelyn could interrupt. “The point is to summarise. Yes, it’s dangerous.”

Evelyn *hurrumphed*, making clear her objection.

Jan continued, “As for once we’re in there, well.” She cast a look around the room, deep-sea eyes bright with optimism for once. “We have a small army of pneuma-somatic blob monsters, courtesy of the ... um ... Church.” She nodded to Amanda. “In addition, three demon hosts, one regenerating werewolf, four mages, one trigger-happy butch—” Raine cheered softly “—and Heather. Lozzie, Tenny, detective Webb, Miss ... Seven, and ‘Aym’, we are assuming

will not be involved in direct hostilities.” Jan paused, then pulled a sort of funny reverse-smile, tilting her head at the same time. “You know what? That’s actually not bad. I’ve been involved in fights with far worse odds than that. This is really quite a lot of terrifying, dangerous people all gathered in one place.”

Evelyn said, slowly and dangerously, “We have no idea what he has inside those walls. We know from bitter experience that he’s not afraid to summon physical entities from Outside, warp them and torture them into killing machines, and then throw them at us. This is real magecraft, not a play fight with a toy gun.”

Raine said, “But we’d be the ones on the front foot. I like those odds too, Eeve. I really like ‘em.”

Evelyn snapped, “And I don’t. I object to any plan which requires us to put any person in this room in danger.”

At the rear of the room, Felicity muttered: “Gonna be hard to find a way that doesn’t.”

“Yeah,” Raine said, “Eeve, we can’t do this without some risk.”

Evelyn’s gaze bored into Raine, so hot and hard that I thought even Raine would back up or flinch. But she held firm, relaxed and easy, as always.

Evelyn said, “Would you be willing to risk Heather? Should I risk Praem? How about you, Felicity, are happy to put Kimberly there in harm’s way? You, Twil, are you happy with me standing in the way of a bullet?”

Twil paused, mouth full of chicken, eyes wide as she was pinned to the spot. “Um. No?”

The argument skipped back and forth but we tuned it out; this option was always disfavoured. For what it was worth, we agreed with Eeve. We could never forgive ourselves if somebody died walking up to that house, for me, for Maisie. We tried to imagine Evelyn not coming back, or Raine getting shot — again — or Praem ending up in a bottle like before, trapped and alone. None of those things were acceptable outcomes. We had to find a better way.

And we knew all too well what it was going to be. Jan was just taking her sweet time getting there.

But as Jan had listed our forces, I felt something new creep up from

the base of my gut. I looked around at the others — at Zheng and Praem, at Amanda on the far side of the room, at Sevens sitting daintily with Aym perched in her lap, at Felicity and Kimberly quite close together. A year ago I could not have imagined this — this gathering of supernatural power, this loose alliance of found family and hangers-on, all of us aimed at the same target.

And I was the closest thing they had to an angel, somebody who could protect and bypass all of them.

Jan was in the middle of listing potential downsides: “—inevitable violence, of course, possibly close and personal, and—”

Evelyn butted in again. “And we will still have to deal with the mage himself.”

Jan nodded slowly. At the rear of the room, Felicity cleared her throat, but said nothing. Over on the sofa, Lozzie chewed on her lower lip. Tenny’s tentacle tightened on Lozzie’s hand. The dogs both perked up, sensing the tension in the room. Bernard closed his eyes when Amanda scratched under his chin, but Soup stared — at me.

“We’ve killed a mage before,” I said, talking to the dog for some reason.

Jan glanced at me, then sighed. “You put down a relatively young and inexperienced magician. But ... we have four mages in this very room. I don’t like the idea of a magical duel any more than Evelyn does. But, four versus one. Again, I like those odds.”

Evelyn said, voice crackling like a fire: “There are mages and there are mages.”

Felicity said, “Yeah. True.”

Jan winced, slowly. “True, but four on one ... ”

Evelyn carried on. “Every mage in this room is mostly human. Even you.”

“Oh, thank you,” Jan said with more than a touch of sarcasm. “But I take your point. We know very little about Edward’s possible ... changes.” She shot a glance at Lozzie, but Lozzie shrugged beneath her poncho, shaking her head. “Alexander was capable of resisting physical trauma. It’s likely the uncle is too. So, yes. It would come down to a magical duel.”

“Or mathematical,” I said.

Jan puffed out a big sigh. She didn’t want to think about that. I almost retreated back into my shell — but in the corner of my eye, Evelyn glanced at me, then looked away. Even a mote of her interest was enough to rouse me.

I swallowed, and said: “If you can get me face-to-face with him, with all his protection stripped away, with nothing to distract or trick me, then I can just ... I can ... ”

We glanced at Tenny, with head and all tentacles. Tenny looked back, placid with understanding. She knew what I was talking about.

“*Boooooooooom*,” she fluttered.

I blushed faintly, nodding along. “Yes. If I could just touch him. Or maybe not even touch him, I may be able to do it at a distance. I’ll just ... render him down, at the atomic level.”

Sevens suddenly said, “No splitting the atom, not again. Bad kitten.”

“Tch!” we tutted, blushing horribly. “Sevens! This is a serious meeting.”

“And I am serious,” she said. “No splitting the atom.”

“Yeah,” Raine agreed. “I’m with yellow, don’t go blowing anything up so close to your face, hey?”

Jan was frowning in wordless concern. We decided it was better not to explain that I might potentially be able to set off a nuclear chain-reaction.

Evelyn spoke up and killed the brief frivolity. “He will be protected.”

She wasn’t looking at me. She wasn’t looking at anybody. She was staring at a point on the far wall, eyes somewhere far away. Her knuckles were turning white on the handle of her walking stick.

We knew, without needing to ask, that she was thinking about her mother.

We reached out to her with a tentacle, uncoiling toward Evelyn with the hope of soothing her fears. But Twil was so much closer. Twil was right next to her. The werewolf closed a hand over

Evelyn's knuckles. I felt the most unworthy pang of jealousy in my chest.

"Evee," Twil said. "Hey hey hey, Evee? Cool it, okay?"

Evelyn huffed, snapping around to stare at her, unimpressed, shaking off her hand. "Yes. Fine. Still, the point stands. He'll be protected."

I cleared my throat, swallowing bile that Twil did not deserve. "You mean against hyperdimensional mathematics? Evee? Is that what you mean?"

Oh, please look at me, Evee. What have we done wrong? Was it our tentacles?

Was it?

Evelyn's eyes traced private patterns on the floorboards. "Against anything and everything. Mages do not reach such an advanced age without extreme caution. You should not assume that self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics will be a trump card. Don't get complacent."

We swallowed. Evee would not look. Why would she not look? "Okay, Evee. I promise. I won't rush in alone. I promise you."

Evelyn took a deep breath, nodded awkwardly, and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "That rules out option two, then. Doesn't it?"

Jan spoke before I could say anything. "Actually," she said with a delicate click of her lips, "I think option two is the most viable."

"No," said Evelyn.

Zheng grunted. "Mm. I agree with the wizard. No."

"Yeah, nah," said Raine.

We said nothing. The burden lay heavily across our shoulders. We knew option two was the sensible option, the one which kept everybody else safe, the one way of doing this which was so self-evident that I had waited all through the strategy meeting for Jan to suggest it. And she had. She'd written it up, asked the right questions, and even outlined some of the problems and pitfalls.

But now, faced with a barrage of objections, she sighed. "Can I

summarize it anyway?”

Evelyn opened her mouth to say no, but I spoke first, goaded by more than jealousy and spite: “Please do, Jan. Please do.”

Jan gestured at the second bubble on the whiteboard. It was the smallest. Option two needed no calculations or complex planning. “Option two. Heather uses her very illegal teleportation powers and goes in alone, then—”

“Or,” Evelyn demanded.

Jan paused, pursed her lips, and added: “Or alongside Lozzie. In case one of them is incapacitated.”

Lozzie offered nothing. She seemed to shrink inside her poncho. Zheng reached over and placed one massive hand atop Lozzie’s head.

“Like I said,” Raine repeated. “Nah. No way.”

“Raine ... ” we said, softly. “It might be the safest way.”

Evelyn snapped without looking at me, “We have no idea what is inside that house. He trapped you once, he can do it again. And that sigil could do anything. It could turn you inside out. No.”

We took a shuddering breath. We did not want our friends to get hurt. And we were robust now, in a way we were not before. “We only need the book, Evee. If I can pinpoint it—”

“Which you can’t,” Evelyn said, “because we don’t even know what it looks like.”

“Mmmmmmm,” went Seven-Shades-of-Soft-Disagreement. “We will not have you and little Loz wander the dark places for hours, searching for a book, or a library, or a hidden safe. Too much of a risk.”

Evelyn nodded to Sevens. “Thank you.”

Amanda Hopton spoke up again, channelling her god: “Heather doesn’t deserve to face this alone. And the sigil ... sigil. Sigil? It’s not safe. My ... he agrees. This is a bad point. I mean, bad choice. Not good. Let’s not.”

Everyone waited for her to finish.

Jan stood there with pursed lips. Evelyn levelled a stare at her. Jan rolled her eyes and gave up first. She said, "If you're not willing to risk anybody, then we're not going to get anywhere."

"I am aware of that," Evelyn said. "But no. Nobody goes in alone. Nobody does this alone. Not Heather."

I hung my head, face burning with shame and confusion. I had promised no self-sacrifice, no charging in by myself — but the alternative was to risk injury, pain, and death among my friends and family, my closest, my pack. Abyssal instinct and all seven of me rebelled against that notion with all my soul. I would not let others sacrifice themselves for me. I should be there to walk through any danger.

An angel of the Eye, but bound by too much love. I could not reconcile these promises.

And Jan was right — Eevee would brook no risk, to anybody. Especially me.

Was that why she wouldn't look at me? Why she'd rejected my touch? Because she felt it too, she knew the truth, that me going in by myself was the most sensible option?

Jan clacked her pen against the whiteboard. "Option three, then!" she said. "Option three. Oh, how I love this one. It's been a long time since I got to blow anything up."

Raine made purring noise deep in her throat. "I like me some option three."

Twil snorted. "You would."

Nicole sighed. "Yeah, steady on, Haynes. Seriously. This is risky stuff we're talking about here. This would be domestic terrorism."

Raine laughed and cocked an eyebrow at Nicky. "You helped me suggest it, detective. Take responsibility, hey?"

I raised my voice, "This is a group effort. If we agree on this, it'll be a group effort too. Please, Raine?"

Raine spread her hands in gentle surrender. "I'm just saying. Plus hey, Nicky, that's not terrorism, by definition. Don't be teaching Tenny wrong."

"Option three," Jan repeated over the blossoming argument. "Car

bomb.”

Felicity said, “I really don’t like this one either.”

Kimberly made a little squeak, and said, “Me as well. Um. I don’t think we should be doing this.”

Jan glanced at the numbers scrawled across one third of the whiteboard, the ones Raine had added, with an expertise I’d never expected. “Well, more like ‘truck bomb’. We steal a lorry — a big one — load it up with a lot — and I do mean a *lot* — of explosives, and then drive it into that house.”

Raine grinned wide, loving every second of this. “The ol’ spicy Beirut embassy special.”

Nicole huffed so hard that her dog flinched. “See? Definitionally terrorism, Haynes.”

Twil snorted into her last piece of chicken. “Oh fu— fiddlesticks. Come on, you two, stop it.”

“*Boooooooooom*,” said Tenny.

“No, Tenns,” Lozzie said, gently. “No funny boom.”

“No?”

“No.”

Jan cleared her throat. “A couple of hundred pounds of explosives should level the entire building. Nothing would be left standing.”

Evelyn drawled, “The sigil might.”

Jan cleared her throat. “Except the sigil. Um.” She pulled a grimace. “I have to admit, I don’t much like this plan either. It’s ... well. Difficult. Flashy. Risky. Loud. All bad things.”

Raine said, softly, “We can do it.”

Lozzie, surprisingly, said, “Yeah!”

Raine shot Lozzie a wink and a finger gun. Lozzie giggled and blew a kiss back at her, with a flap of poncho.

Nicole sighed. “On a technical level, sure, it’s not actually that hard. If you lot really can get in and out of places without being stopped or detected, building a really big bomb is very simple. Dangerous

though.”

Jan nodded curtly to the detective. “Well put. If this was to go wrong, somebody would lose more than a hand or an eye.”

Raine turned back to her. “It’s easy. I know how to do it.”

Jan pursed her lips and stared at Raine. “You don’t have any real demolitions experience. What you have is a half-remembered pdf file of the US Army Improvised Munitions handbook.”

We winced, expecting an argument. But Raine burst out laughing and spread her hands in a shrug. “You got me there.”

Felicity, to everyone’s surprise, said very softly and very gently: “I know how to make bombs.”

Raine turned and raised her eyebrows. “You serious, Fliss?”

“Yes. Scaling up is not too hard. As long as we have good quality equipment, I could do it safely. I would ... ” Felicity paused, swallowed, and glanced at Kimberly. Kim did not look comfortable, half frozen. “I would rather not. I vote against this plan. But I thought you ought to know. That’s all.”

Evelyn watched the exchange, detached and frowning. We cleared our throat and said, “Evelyn, what do you think?”

Evee glanced at me, just for a moment, then looked away again. She sighed heavily. “I prefer it to a magical duel, but Jan is correct. The chances of blowing ourselves to kingdom come is too great. Plus we risk attention from mundane authorities.”

“Mhmm,” Jan agreed. “We don’t know how well his house is ‘insulated’, magically speaking. We let off a giant bomb in the middle of the English countryside, we’re going to make the news.”

We sighed. “A bomb like that might also destroy the book,” I said. “That’s the reason for all this in the first place.”

Jan nodded. “Quite, Heather. Quite right.”

“It’s no better than me just sending the entire building and all the contents Outside.”

Jan continued nodding, radiating false sagely wisdom. Raine clapped me on the back, congratulating my good point, though her face was lined with disappointment. Somebody — Felicity I think —

muttered: “Scary.” Zheng grunted. Sevens tutted delicately.

Twil, though, let out a big sigh, slumping back in her chair and gesturing with her now-empty plate. “Ahhhh come on, Eeve. You can’t veto all three plans, right? Right?” She gestured with the plate again — Praem plucked it out of her hand before it could go flying across the room. “We gotta do something. We gotta do one of them.”

Evelyn muttered: “No, we don’t.”

And there was light in her voice. Light, and hope, and energy. Because of Twil? Because of Twil. Because of Twil’s hand on her shoulder, Twil’s encouragement. The roots of my tentacles twisted with a jealousy I dared not show; what right did I have, anyway? What right did I—

But then Evelyn looked up.

At me.

I blinked back at her, flustering under the sudden scrutiny. I was so obvious, three of my tentacles went stiff with embarrassment. “E-Eeve?”

“Heather,” she said. “What if you do that anyway?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Send the whole house Outside.”

“But we’d lose the book. We’d—”

“To Camelot.” She sighed, and for the first time that day I saw a hint of something other than bitterness in her face. She smiled, ever so slightly. “That name is so stupid, I hate it.”

Lozzie said, “Noooo, it’s great!”

Tenny agreed. “Cammy-lot!”

Praem intoned, “Camelot.”

Raine cheered: “Camelot!”

Jan winced and rolled her eyes. “Please don’t break into song.”

“Camelot,” said July, like a knife coated with ice.

Evelyn waved them down, gesturing with the head of her walking

stick, then focused on me again. “Is that possible, Heather? Could you send the entire building, foundations and all, to Camelot?” Her eyes bored into mine, twin jewels in a soft, round face. We felt like an insect, about to be pinned. She must have misunderstood my hesitation, because she added: “Be honest. Don’t tell me you can if you can’t.”

We stared at her. A trio of our tentacles began to twist and whirl, their neurons considering the mathematics, the implications, the logistics of such a task. My mouth went dry. My scalp began to tingle. My palms felt suddenly sweaty — and not just because of the sheer intimidating effort of what Evelyn was suggesting, but because of the way she looked at us in that moment.

Look at me! Look at us! Look what we’ve become!

For the last three days, every day since we had emerged from the dream whole and complete, Evelyn had looked at me as if something about me was wrong now, but she couldn’t bring herself to hurt me by putting it into words. She hid it well, and her objections to the plans made it clear she valued my safety even above her own, but she couldn’t entirely conceal her distance, her reticence, her lack of certainty in me.

I didn’t understand why. And it hurt, more than a little.

But now, she stared back into my eyes with a twinkle of mischievous victory. Because of me.

I would send the world Outside, if she asked.

“Um,” I stammered, wetting my lips, trying to gather my thoughts. “It’s not impossible. In theory. In theory, I could send the whole house to Camelot, yes. I’d need to be close, close enough to touch the ground, I ... think. I think it would be easier to send it along with as much ground, or dirt, or earth as I need. A-and ... and it would hurt, a lot. I think it would probably put me ‘out of action’—” I did little air quotes with two tentacles “—for a day, maybe two, in a similar way to when I located the house. It would ... collapse my ... um, tentacles.”

Evelyn’s eyes left mine for a split-second. I wouldn’t have noticed, had I not been staring. Her eyes left me and graced all the other me, the six tentacles hanging in the air, bobbing and ducking, some already reaching toward her in subconscious hope.

And something inside her eyes froze over.

She hid it well.

And then back to me — me.

“But you could do it?” she asked.

I nodded, quivering slightly, still half-reaching for Evee with a tentacle — but she ignored the gesture, hands planted firmly on her walking stick. “Evee, what are you thinking?”

Evelyn stood up.

Praem helped her stand, but once she was up, she stood straighter than she had in days. The frustrated anger was gone from her face, replaced with something more amused and confident. She stepped over to Jan and the whiteboard and held out her hand.

“Pen.”

Jan handed her the pen.

Evelyn crossed out options one, two, and three, and wrote a phrase in the middle of the board: combined arms.

“Evee, Evee, Evee,” Raine said. Her voice glowed with admiration. I swelled alongside her — but I couldn’t get Evee’s look just now out of my head, the way she had looked at us, swallowing something she dared not speak. “What are you thinking?” Raine asked.

Evelyn nodded to Jan, then to the rest of the room. “We do a little bit of all three plans: mundane blunt force, frontal assault, and perhaps even a little bit of infiltration. But not here.” She shook her head. “We do it in Camelot. We get Heather close enough to translocate the entire house, the grounds, all of it.” Evelyn chopped the air with a hand. “She dumps the whole thing into a specifically prepared area out in Camelot. We have the Knights, and the Caterpillars.” Evelyn’s eyes flickered to Lozzie. “Loz—”

“They can do it,” Lozzie answered before the question was even asked. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes wide as they could go in their sleepy sockets, a touch of awe on her face. She nodded. “They can surround the house. They can do it! The cattys are amazing! I promise!”

Evelyn nodded, curt and confident. “They need a shakedown before Wonderland, anyway.” She was speaking so hard she was almost

panting. “So, we put the entire house in Camelot. Out there we don’t have to worry about mundane authorities. We hit the front with a a bomb — or a Caterpillar?” Lozzie was nodding along. “Disrupt the sigil, break whatever it does. Then we can enter, or sit back and wait. We can rely on the Knights, or demand Edward show himself. We will have so many more options. We can bury him at our leisure.”

Felicity started clapping. Evelyn frowned, and for a moment I thought the clapping was sarcastic. But then Felicity said, “Good. Yeah.” Raine joined in. Twil threw a fist in the air and went: “Yeah!” Tenny made an excited trilling noise.

Zheng rumbled, “The shaman opens the way.”

Amanda Hopton muttered: “I approve too. This is, safer? It is much safer. And away from us. We will lend what we can.”

Nicole crossed her arms, then uncrossed them so she could pet her dog, scratching behind her ears. Soup made a happy whine. “You people are terrifying,” Nicky said. Jan gave her a sympathetic look. Nicole nodded back.

Evelyn stood up even straighter, forcing her weight onto her walking stick. “Then we’re agreed.”

Praem intoned, clear as a little bell: “Well done.”

Jan sighed a tight little sigh. “Why didn’t you say any of this earlier?”

Evelyn snorted. “Because I didn’t think of it earlier. Because I’ve barely had time to think at all. Because I was ... compromised.”

A cold feeling blossomed in my chest, ice in my heart. Compromised by me.

Raine said, “You’ve gotten your mojo back, Eevee.”

Evelyn pulled a face. “Don’t put it like that. And hardly. I still don’t know what to do about that sigil. We can’t identify it, let alone prepare for it. I don’t like that. We need countermeasures, prepared for the worst. Besides, we’re hardly done, this is still going to need a lot of figuring out, a lot of going over details. How to get Heather close to that house without putting her in danger, that’s the biggest problem. We’re still going to be walking up to that bloody place—”

“Bloody!” Tenny trilled. She knew that word already.

Lozzie told her off, gently. Twil started laughing. Nicole too, finally relaxing a little bit. All throughout the room, the tension began to lift, for everyone except me. Evelyn and Jan fell into a discussion over details, but I was tuning out, barely even aware when Raine stood up and detached herself from the arm-embrace of our tentacles. I was dimly aware of her wandering over to the whiteboard, phone in hand, and taking a picture of the photograph of Edward’s house. Her fingers flew over the screen.

Evelyn had been compromised — because something about me had changed.

I wanted to leave. We wanted to go upstairs and sit in the dark.

Or go Outside.

Or—

Up at the front of the room, Raine was fiddling with her phone, but Jan suddenly turned and clicked her fingers in my direction. “Heather?”

Evelyn was saying, “—not necessary, Jan. We’re fine. It’s not needed. Stop it. Stop.”

But Jan was already gesturing at me, and gesturing at Evelyn. “You two are coming with me, alone, right now, to the nearest private room. Whatever is going on, you’re talking it out.”

Evelyn opened her mouth to snap. My tentacles coiled inward, to hide me inside a protective ball. I did not want to know.

“Ah!” Jan said before we could lash out or retreat. “I’m not having the two linchpins of this plan staying buried in a sapphic feud. You’re talking it out, now. Or I’ll request Praem and Zheng carry you for me.” She clicked her fingers again. “Now. Private room. Chop chop.”

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.4

With grandiose grumpiness guarding a grit-speck of grudging guilt, Evelyn led the way upstairs. She stomped, she grumbled, and she banged her walking stick against every step, entirely on purpose.

I trailed far behind, not brave enough to push into the flaming corona of Evelyn's cold smoulder. Praem was unfettered by such concerns, close at Evelyn's side with an implicit offer of assistance, though Evee rejected that with a wordless grunt. Praem kept her hands folded neatly in front of her skirt — ready at the slightest stumble to catch her wayward mother. Jan, the cause of all this, climbed the stairs between Evelyn and I. She held her chin high and her shoulders back, seemingly unaffected by either Evelyn's silent rage or my cringing anxiety; then again, perhaps she had chosen the middle spot so she didn't have to watch me using my tentacles to pull myself up the stairs against the reluctant drag of my feet.

Nobody else made an attempt to follow, not even Lizzie or July; some quality had combined in Jan's words, in my slumped shoulders, and in Evelyn's blaze-eyed anger, to ward off jokes and audiences alike. We all knew this was serious.

Which was why I wanted to run away.

We almost did run, once we reached the top of the stairs. The upstairs hallway was gloomy with the evening's weight, a dead-fire glow visible on the horizon through the window. A little way down the corridor, Evelyn stomped to halt and banged the tip of her walking stick against a closed door.

"My study," she snapped at Jan. "Private enough?"

Jan bobbed her messy little head in a tiny bow. "That will do nicely, thank you." She turned and gestured with both hands, encompassing both of us. "Now, Evelyn, Heather, inside please, if you will? Praem—"

But Evelyn was already shoving the door open and stomping inside,

with Praem sweeping along at her heels. She hadn't even looked at me.

Jan's smile was stretched like a mask of flesh. She repeated the gesture and said, "Heather, inside, please? I don't want you running off, now. Please. Don't make this any more of a nightmare than it already is."

We tried to laugh, but managed only a flicker of nervous smile. "Ah. Right. You can tell, then."

Jan raised her eyebrows. "That you want to run away? It was an educated guess. But, yes. Please don't."

"I wouldn't have to run," we said. Heart thudding. Palms sweaty. We did not want to confront any of this. Our tentacles were spread out wide, tips brushing the walls and floor and ceiling, like an octopus in a tunnel of rock, ready to jerk backward into the shadows. "I could step Outside. Go anywhere."

Jan let out a little sigh; I wondered if the exasperation was real, or a show, or both. "Heather, if you do that, I will convince Lozzie to go fetch you back for us. There is no running away."

The smile on my face twitched a little wider. "I think I could convince Lozzie to stay out there with me."

"You'd be surprised."

Jan gestured at the dim and shadowy doorway. We took a deep breath, reeled ourselves in, and wrapped myself in my tentacles. A true self-hug, now there were so many of us. And then I accepted Jan's invitation.

I dearly loved that study; of course, I loved every part of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, even the places in the bathroom which were difficult to clean, the dusty corners of the cellar, the roof tiles so badly in need of replacement, and the ivy-eaten brickwork of an old and sagging face. But that study was special — and not just because I was a lifelong bookworm surrounded by a miniature private library, not just because this was the sort of safe haven and hidden retreat I had dreamed about as a child.

This was the place where I had first truly gotten to know Evelyn, where she had cried in front of me, and reattached her prosthetic leg, and told me who she really was.

History sat heavy in that room, on the twin sentinel-rows of tightly-packed shelves, on the ranks of jumbled books within, on old magazines shoulder-to-shoulder with hardback classics and modern pulp fiction and everything in between. Here there was no distinction between high and low literature, no false class of division between pages. At the far end of the study stood a lamp and the desk, a huge meaty slab of wood like something carved from a god of the forest, a single piece of foot-thick living tree. Notes and books were spread out over that desk even now, but had lain untouched for a few weeks. Oddly, a small stack of manga sat on top of the notes, less dusty than the rest. Had Evelyn emotionally and mentally moved all of her magical work downstairs, and finally given this space over to her person-hood?

Faint light spilled into the room from the single long, thin window, high up on the wall opposite the door. Sunset was almost dead, suffusing the space with gloomy orange, painting the walls and books with bloodish haze.

The study always seemed larger than it actually was, despite being only a single, rectangular room; one could stand at any spot on the old floorboards and see everything else in the room, peer into every nook and cranny. There was simply nowhere to hide except either side of the desk — a trick which Sevens had pulled on me, once. But the illusion persisted, the tickle in the back of the mind; imagination whispered that if one was to peek around the corner of any bookshelf, another entire wing would open up beyond, stacked with books, receding into the depths of the house.

That had never happened, not yet, but I found the notion comforting.

The study was a good place — in part because I had rescued Eevee here once before, from the depths of her own self-loathing.

I doubted that was what she needed now, but I tried to take courage from that shared history.

Evelyn had already stomped deeper inside and turned around to face Jan and I as we followed her in. Praem dragged the ancient wooden swivel chair over from the desk, but Evelyn made no move to sit down. She just stood, hunched and heavy on her walking stick, blood-lit by the dying sun. She glared at Jan as the petite mage closed the door behind us with a soft click, her fingers

brushing the brass handle.

Jan pressed her own back against the door, hung her head, and let out a most terrible sigh.

“Oh God,” she said.

We blinked at her in surprise. “Jan?”

Evelyn huffed. “What’s the matter with you now? You’re the one who’s forced us into this nonsense, Miss January.”

“Just Jan, please,” said Jan, in the most dead-end voice I’d ever heard. She stared at her own feet.

“Oh,” we said. “Oh, Jan. You’re exhausted.”

Jan raised her head and gave me an expert look in studied placidity. Her right eye twitched. Her voice came out sweet as lead paint. “Exhausted by terror, perhaps. Let’s say I’m holding it together in front of the troops, shall we? It’s been a long, long time since I’ve even contemplated going to war against another mage, and I make a very rusty general. This is — exquisitely — stressful. So, forgive me for relaxing a little in private. Understand me?”

Evelyn snorted. “Is that what this is about? You could have just asked for a moment’s privacy, you didn’t have to make up some excuse.”

Jan looked at Evelyn. Her left eye twitched. “No. I was being serious. You two really do need to talk this out. You’re in deep and I’m not strapping myself into the emotional diving suit to help you. You two are doing this yourselves. I’m not an agony aunt.”

Evelyn spat: “Talk *what* out? ‘Sapphic feud’, don’t be ridiculous, you sanctimonious little—”

I was stammering, actually stammering, the words caught in my throat, tentacles creaking and twitching: “It’s— it’s— it’s— it’s— n-n-nothing, we d-d-don’t need—”

Jan stood up from the door and raised her chin. In the strange blood-dark light she seemed more stark than usual, her black leggings and pleated skirt in deep contrast to the starched white of her shirt collar and cuffs. Her pale round face peered out from beneath a blood-black helmet of artfully messy hair. She looked at Praem.

“Stop,” Praem intoned, like the ringing of a tiny silver bell.

Evelyn and I both shut up. I hugged myself inside my tentacles, silently asking the house if she would please swallow me up between the floorboards. Evelyn glanced at Praem, tutting with the irritation of gentle betrayal.

“Who’s side are you on, anyway?” she hissed to Praem.

“My own.”

“Come off it,” Jan said, plain and reasonable, but a little sharp. She crossed her arms over her slender chest. “Both of you. Look, I don’t know what’s going on between you, and frankly I’m not sure I want to know, but it’s incredibly obvious that it’s a mess.” She gestured at Evee with a fingertip. “You’ve spent the entire afternoon avoiding even looking at Heather, and then when you do, you look at her like a piece of week-old chicken you’ve dragged out of the bottom of the fridge.”

I whined, squeezing my eyes shut. Part of me really did not want to know.

“And you!” Jan nodded at me in turn. “You may as well get down and roll around on the floor at Evee’s feet, you’re acting like a spurned puppy.” We gaped at her. Tentacles paused. Top right even turned her point to aim at Jan, as if offended. Jan sighed. “I’m amazed none of the others has pointed it out. Have you got them all trained to pretend not to see this? Look, I’m not having the core of your polycule arrangement fall apart in the middle of an operation —”

“Polycule arrangement? Core?” Evelyn snapped — but she was blushing. “Heather and I are not like that!”

“We’re— um— we— I don’t—”

“Could have fooled me,” Jan said with a teasing tut. “Whatever’s going on, I am not having it blow up — or implode, whichever — in the middle of this plan to entrap and kill Edward Lilburne. We’re not having battlefield confessions, or last-minute kisses before doomed charges, or any of that shit. That is a liability! I will not have it!” Perhaps it was my imagination, but Jan’s ire seemed to flow from bitter experience. “Either you two can work this out, here and now, or I am gone.” She thumbed over her shoulder. “I will take Lozzie and Tenny and run back to my home — my actual

home, where you won't find me in a million years. And you can do this without me. No romantic sub-plots in the middle of combat. Sort this out." She sighed, forcing her frustration back into a bottle. "This isn't a comic book. Kiss and make up first, then we go into battle."

Evelyn stared at Jan. I stared at the floorboards. Jan stared at Evelyn. Praem stared at the wall. The sunset stared at the house. The house stared back.

We swallowed. We sweated. Our palms were moist. We squeezed ourselves so tight that the muscles inside our tentacles creaked.

Then Evelyn said, "Heather. Yes or no?"

We glanced up at Evee, eyes wide, but she was still fixed on Jan like she wanted to punch her.

"E-Evee?" I croaked. "What do you mean?"

"Yes or no," she repeated. "You know what I mean. I insist. I'll follow your lead."

I'll follow your lead.

Without those words, I would have said no. I would have fled, preferring not to know what Evelyn really thought of me, of us, of our new and changed and beautifully multiplicitous state. But Evelyn Saye would follow my lead. She insisted.

"Then, yes!" we said.

At length, grumbling like a dying steam engine, Evelyn said to Jan: "This is none of your business."

Jan gestured as if to put her face in one hand, then thought better of it. "Did you listen to nothing I said? If I'm consulting on fighting another mage, I think this very much is my—"

"No," Evelyn said, with admirable control. "I mean fuck off." She gestured at the door with the head of her walking stick. "Make yourself scarce. We're not having this conversation with an audience."

Jan raised her eyebrows, then nodded with relief. "All right then. Can I leave Praem in here with you, to make sure you two actually make up, rather than just conspire to pretend?"

“Yes,” I said — at the exact same moment Evelyn said: “No.”

We looked at each other. Praem turned her head and regarded her mother with those blank, milk-white eyes, dyed orange and bloody by the sunset glow. Seeing them next to each other, bathed in the reflected gloom-haze, made it more obvious than usual just how much Praem’s body was based on Evelyn’s own physique and facial structure. Healthier, unscarred, standing tall, but cut from the same pale stone.

I had named Evelyn’s daughter for her. What did that make us?

Evelyn cleared her throat and repeated: “No. I’m not comfortable discussing this in front of anybody, even you. I would ... I might ... self-edit. I’m sorry, Praem, but you’ll have to leave Heather and I to our own devices.”

Praem stared. Evelyn looked away. Jan sighed, and said: “Praem, you and I don’t actually know each other very well, but I have no choice here but to trust your judgement. Do you think they’ll actually ... you know?”

Praem declined to answer. Instead she raised two fingers and touched Evelyn briefly on the elbow. Then she turned and crossed the room, to join Jan by the door.

“Let us leave,” Praem said, her voice a soft calling in the gloom.

Jan sighed. “Very well, demon maid.” She looked Praem up and down, at her casual clothes and distinct lack of her usual outfit. “Though, you’re not much of a maid right now, are you? How about we solve that? I’m sure I can help hook you up with some nice new threads, as the kids say these days.”

Praem opened the door and helped usher Jan and herself back out into the corridor, with Jan chattering about dresses and fabrics in an unexpected sudden flow. Praem shut the door after herself. Her clicking footsteps and Jan’s voice trailed off down the corridor; ah, I realised, the talking was to make it clear that she wasn’t eavesdropping.

And then we were alone — me, and six other of me, coiled inside my tentacles in their long stringy gristle-wrapped packages of pneuma-somatic neurons, wrapped around me to keep me from flying apart. Us, and Evee.

In the shadowy heart of the rapidly darkening study, Evelyn seemed so fragile and slender, despite her layers of puppy-fat and the soft bulk of her hips beneath her layers of comfortable clothing. She was wearing one of her favourite jumpers, a great heavy mass of cream white with repairs made at the collar and cuffs in slightly different coloured thread. A shawl — actually a little throw blanket — lay over her shoulders, despite the summer heat lingering into this dying evening. She had a skirt on, as usual, long and purple and thick and comfortable, some of the brightest colour I ever saw her wear, but she made no effort to conceal the matte-black intrusion of her prosthetic leg or the blade-structure of her artificial foot. Her shoulders were kinked, her good hand heavy on her walking stick, her blue eyes stained black in the blood-light. Her cheeks looked so soft. Her hair was pulled back, golden yellow gone dull.

Part of us wanted to go over and just hug her — but she looked at me like a woman about to be led to her own execution; I didn't know what that expression really meant, only that she was—

“Evee,” we said. “Don't be ... afraid? Are you afraid?”

Evelyn took a big, grumpy sigh, then cast about the room. “There's only one chair. Do you want it?”

“Pardon? Oh, um, no, thank you. You should take it. I can actually sit using my own tentacles, I think. I tried it out yesterday.”

“Of course you can.” She didn't sound impressed.

I unwrapped two of my tentacles and braced them behind me, lowering myself until the weight was off my legs. “It's not perfect, but we could hold this position for hours before getting tired. Um, Evee, please, please take the chair, please.”

“I'll stand,” she said.

I hurried to stand up as well. I hadn't felt this awkward and timid in months. Evelyn just stared at me, glum and unspeaking. Our throat threatened to close up. Why wouldn't she say anything? I half reached toward her, feeling pathetic and needy, desperate for her reassurances.

“Evee, do you want ... want to go ... ”

Outside? Why was I even asking that? What was I thinking?

Evelyn sighed and closed her eyes briefly. “Heather, just spit it out.

Jan is correct. I'm compromised. We need to fix this."

"Fix?" The word sounded so hollow. "Like— like we're two parts of a machine? Like we're broken?" I shook my head. "Evee, what's wrong? What's going on between us? What ... what did I do wrong?"

Evelyn stared and stared and stared. She opened her mouth but couldn't get at the words. She had something to say, but she didn't want to say it.

"Evee—"

"Watching you bleed was ... distressing. In the bathtub. And ... earlier. And ... "

She squeezed the words out, barely parting her teeth. They weren't the right words. She stared right through me as she said them. Not lies, but only one step removed.

"Evee, you've just asked me to do that all again, with this plan to teleport Edward's house. That's not it." I shook my head. "I ... I saw the way you looked at me earlier, at my tentacles. At ... at us." My voice almost choked to a stop. "You don't ... you don't approve, do you? Y-you don't have to say it yourself, I'll say it for you. It was okay when you— when you didn't have to see them every day, because they were hidden away, invisible. O-or maybe you don't like that there's six more of me now. Maybe you don't like that. Maybe you think it's wrong, or disgusting, or you think I'm ugly or insane or—"

Evelyn exploded: "You're beautiful, you fucking moron!"

Red in the face, quivering with spitting rage, panting for breath so hard I thought she might slip on her walking stick and fall over, Evelyn shouted me into silence with five words, and nothing more. I had been balanced on the verge of tears, but they dried instantly; my distress was not the issue here. I had gotten this all wrong, all turned around somewhere inside my own head. Evelyn stood there in the gathering gloom, heaving for breath with a species of anger I'd never seen on her before. I was speechless.

"Look at you," she carried on, still angry but no longer shouting. "You're beautiful. You look so happy, Heather. I've never seen you as happy as you have been the last few days. I've seen you go through so much, so much, but never like this, never this happy.

You look ... complete? Almost complete? I don't know! I don't have the fucking words!"

I took a step toward her, reaching out with both hand and a tentacle. "E-Evee—"

She stumbled back a step, retreating from me, in fear. She spat, eyes staring wide: "And I'm jealous."

I stopped. "Oh. Oh, Evee, I'm sorry—"

"No!" she snapped. "Don't fucking well apologise to me! Don't apologise to me for my own jealousy. It's not yours."

"... alright. Okay. But it's okay, Evee. It's okay to feel that."

"That's easy for you to say." She seemed like she was sinking into the shadows, into the depths of the house itself. The library was swallowing her up. "You're getting what you want, what you need. Your body is changing, you're remaking yourself, and you're so fucking beautiful. But me? I want my leg back, Heather. I want the fingers on my left hand. I want my spine unbent and my shoulders set right. I want my bowels to function properly, and my sight to not be all fucked up. I want not to be in pain all the time. All the time." She rose into another shout, a scream of frustration. "And it never fucking goes away!"

Silence, except for Evelyn's panting. She looked away, ashamed, hanging her head, grimacing. I couldn't find the words.

"Evee, I love you."

"I know." She huffed. "And I love you too. And I see you, like this, everything you wanted to be, everything you deserve to be, and I'm happy for you, yes. I'm happy for you. But I'm so, so, so fucking jealous. And it hurts. You get to have six other versions of you. Great. Good for you. I'm glad you're happy. I had a demon in my head, and it left me a cripple."

We were both crying now. Not a lot, but more than enough to blur the air between us.

"Evee. Evee, let me ... "

"I'm sorry, Heather. I'm sorry that I'm like this." Evee's voice was shaking. She backed up another step as I reached for her. "Being disabled isn't something you get over, something that gets better,

that you move on from. I thought I'd accepted this, but I hadn't. I'm sorry that I'll never get better, I'll never change, I'll never regrow my missing parts. Believe me, I've tried. I've researched and I've read and I can't do it." She raised her maimed hand, with the missing fingers and the chunk gone from the palm. "This? It's too old and too much a part of me now. Did you know that? Wounds become a part of you. You can't deny them. You can't pretend they're not there, or you ... you stop being ... I ... I won't!" She banged her walking stick against her prosthetic leg with a dull clunk of wood on carbon fibre. "I won't stop being human! I will not be like my mother! I refuse! I—"

Middle Left arced out from my side — not upward, but around and across, presenting herself to Evelyn in pale rainbow strobes. An offer.

I could feel the bio-steel needle forming inside the tip, hardening with promise, hollowing to a thin point, the base thickening into those three alchemical bladders, preparing themselves to contain the distilled and purified essence of me. The tentacle quivered; we all quivered, with something akin to lust.

I said nothing. We couldn't have spoken even if I had wanted to. I just stared and panted and cried softly.

Evelyn stared at the injector tentacle, at our offer. She knew what it was. She didn't resist when we slid another tentacle gently up her opposite arm, finally stepping closer.

"Why—" she managed to choke out, cheeks stained with tears.

"Why didn't you ever offer this before?"

"You told me not to use it on humans. On people. You said not to."

"I know that. But you could have done."

The tip of the injector began to peel open, just a few millimetres at first, slick and delicate flesh rolling apart to reveal the soft white innards. Blood-dark sunset glinted off the needle inside.

"I will," I said, my face wet with tears too. "If you want. I'll try it, I'll try anything. Maybe it'll help your chronic pain, or maybe it—"

Evelyn took a great shuddering breath, sniffing hard — and shook her head. "Heather, stop."

"But—"

“Heather. Heather, listen.” Evelyn had to close her eyes, as if seeing the offer might break her resolve. “Stop tempting me. That injection is just as likely to give me rapid super-cancer as it is to regrow my bloody leg. And it won’t. It won’t regrow anything.” She sniffed harder now, but her tears were slowing. “I wasn’t joking when I said I’ve researched everything I can. It can’t be done. Just, stop. Please.”

“I can help.”

Evelyn gritted her teeth. “I insist.”

With a great force of will, I closed the tip of the injector tentacle. It was not easy. Instinct was screaming at me to join together with Eevee, to flood her with me, with my enzymes and juices and white blood cells, with the alchemical purity of the abyssal thing I was. It was half sexual desire, half something from elsewhere, meat-body urges mated together with transcendent knowledge. I had to take several grunting, heaving breaths.

“Eevee, I—I really want to.”

“I can see that.”

“Sorry ... ” we lowered the tentacle, and went to pull away.

But Evelyn clung on with her other arm. She clung onto my tentacle, with what little strength she had.

“I didn’t say let go of me,” she said. “For fuck’s sake, Heather. Gods, I must sit down or I’m going to fall. And what are we doing, doing this in the dark? Get the bloody light on, will you? Feel like I’m going blind as well as mad.”

We managed a tiny laugh; Evelyn snorted too, wiping the drying tears from her eyes. This was going to be okay, we were going to be okay, one way or another.

Evelyn finally sat down in the aged wooden embrace of the old swivel chair, slowly and gently easing her weight off her walking stick, letting out a soft grunt of spinal pain; the chair suited her, a battered relic from the fifties or sixties, wrapped in decades of wood polish and peeling varnish over the dark bones of a long-dead tree. It was worn and eroded by time and use, but sturdy in its core. With care and attention, that chair might last another seventy years. Evelyn sighed as she relaxed back into the seat. She propped her

walking stick against the armrest and stretched out her prosthetic leg, massaging the place where the socket met her thigh.

We reached over and flicked on the lights, angling the desk lamp upward to spread soft warmth over the wall and ceiling and back down on Evelyn and myself. The gloom retreated to the corners where it belonged, far from my Evelyn's heart.

I sat next to her, using the same tentacle-trick I had demonstrated earlier. But we also kept one tentacle tightly hugged around Evee's arm, cradling her maimed hand with the tip. None of us wanted to risk letting go.

For a few moments we just sat in companionable silence, watched by the rows upon rows of books. Evelyn's eyes fluttered shut. I could tell she was concentrating on pain. I watched the tiny motions of her lips and eyelids, her tightening jaw muscles, her suppressed wince. I almost reached out to brush a strand of golden blonde from her forehead.

"Why are we always such a mess, Heather? Hm?"

I shrugged. "I think everybody is a mess. Sort of."

Evelyn opened her eyes again. The lamplight turned her skin to pale cream and her eyes to blue skies. "Be a dear, will you, and check the desk drawer — second drawer on the left. I think I've got some co-codamol stuffed down there."

We reached over with a tentacle without getting up. The old desk drawers were thick and heavy, great slabs of wood held together by nails the size of my hand. Evelyn was correct: there was a small bottle of over-the-counter codeine and paracetamol at the back of the drawer, tucked behind rubber bands and paper-clips and some dusty old files. We fished it out and dropped it into Evee's hand.

Evelyn squinted at the use by date, grunted an affirmative, then shook two tiny white pills out onto her palm. She swallowed them without water.

"I wish you didn't have to do that," we said. "Rely on painkillers, I mean. You deserve better."

Evelyn's turn to shrug, shoulders uneven. "Plenty of people do. Painkillers are just a fact of life. There's nothing shameful in it."

"Of course there's not!" we blurted out. "We didn't mean that. I just

... I've always wondered ... Eevee, are you addicted to codeine? To opiate painkillers?"

Evelyn sighed heavily, but she seemed more exhausted than irritated. "Not currently."

"Not ... currently?"

"I've been physiologically addicted to codeine before, yes. Never for more than a few months at a time." Evelyn spoke to the floorboards and the far wall, to the books and the shadows, but she didn't seem ashamed, which was probably a good sign. "My body gets used to it, but the pain doesn't go away. Can you call that an addiction? An addiction to not feeling pain? Ha." She spoke the laugh, without any humour. "I think ... six, seven times, maybe? Last time was when Raine and I first came to Sharrowford. Got too stressed, too much walking back and forth to campus, too worried to relax. My leg and lower back got terrible. Back pain is a bastard. Raine put a stop to it by taking my pills and getting me some edibles from the university campus instead. Can you believe that?"

"Edibles?" I asked, blinking.

Evelyn glanced at me, then smiled and snorted. "The more you change, the more you become yourself, Heather."

I felt quite bamboozled. "Um, okay? Shall I take that as a compliment?"

"It's meant as one, so, hopefully."

"What do you mean, edibles?" I asked.

"Weed brownies. THC. Cannabis."

"Oh!" I flushed, feeling absurdly sheltered. "Oh, I knew that. Eevee, I knew that. It's just the word wasn't going in, it wasn't parsing."

"Whatever you say."

"I mean it." We huffed, but the embarrassment faded quickly. "I can't really imagine you high on cannabis, Eevee. Was it very relaxing?"

She shrugged again, rolling those bony shoulders beneath the soft enclosure of her ribbed jumper. To my surprise, she reached up with both hands and let her hair down, raking her fingertips back over her scalp. When she twisted her neck, the vertebrae popped,

loudly. The soft light made her glow. "It helped the pain go away," she said. "That's all that mattered. Made me lie down a lot, I suppose. I watched a lot of very bad anime. Lowered my standards."

"Such as?"

Evelyn waved that question away. "You wouldn't know the titles."

"Try me."

Evelyn shot me a scrunched frown, then rattled off a lot of Japanese which I didn't understand. Then she paused. "No?"

I cleared my throat, suitably chastised. "Fair enough, we don't recognise any of those."

"Count yourself lucky, then. Trust me."

"So, have you been partaking of any of Kimberly's cannabis, since she moved in?"

Evelyn shook her head. "Haven't needed it. Not yet, anyway." She glanced down at the pill bottle in her hand, tightening her fingers around the innocent white plastic. "I've got a stash of diazepam downstairs, for when things get really bad. And ... I started taking more painkillers back after I ... after our ... the ..."

She couldn't squeeze the words out.

"After you spent the night with Twil," I filled in for her, to spare her the embarrassment. "Back when we were making those trips into the library of Carcosa."

Evelyn sighed so hard that she grumbled at the same time. "Correct. We never really talked about that, did we?"

"We don't have to!" I hurried to add. "Evee, we absolutely don't have to talk about it if you're not comfortable. I-I didn't mean for this to get so serious again, I ... sorry."

Evelyn raised her eyes and looked at us, but she was calm, not embarrassed. "What's to talk about? Twil and I very much failed to fuck. I have anorgasmia. We ended things. That's about it. What more is there to say?"

I felt a blush rising up my face, half embarrassment, half fear — because here was the question we had avoided thinking about for days and days, here was the little fact I was trying to avoid.

"You slept with Twil again, didn't you?" I asked. The words almost wouldn't come out, but I forced my voice to be level and calm. My tentacles betrayed us, going tense and tight. "On the night before I did the tentacle experiment and went into the dream."

"Mm," Evelyn confirmed. "We slept. Literally. In my bed, holding hands." She shrugged. "It was nice, I suppose."

"I'm sorry I spent so long pushing you two together."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Heather, don't be."

I swallowed, feeling intensely awkward. "Do you still like her, or ... ?"

Evelyn cast her eyes up toward the thin window on the blooming night beyond the house. "I don't know, Heather. I don't know what that emotional state means. She likes me, which is ... pleasant. She's ... physically ... impressive. But we're not ... we don't ... "

She trailed off, gave up, and went silent. I nodded, as did several of my tentacles. We understood, or at least pretended to.

"Anyway," she said eventually with a little sigh. "I started taking more painkillers after that. But Praem restricted my intake. She halted the usual slide. And I'm not going to be lighting up any of Kimberly's stash, because I need a sharp mind for this ... this war. I cannot afford to wallow in my broken body. Not yet."

"Evee," we said, so filled with gentle reproach that Evelyn actually looked round with a guilty flinch in her eyes. "Evee, Evelyn, you are not broken."

"I am," she said. "You don't have to sugar coat it, Heather. My body is a wreck and I will never repair it."

We had no words to respond to that; if we'd tried, we would have started crying again. Instead, I did the only thing which made any sense: I raised Evelyn's maimed hand with the tentacle wrapped around her arm. I asked her for permission with a silent glance. She didn't refuse, so I cupped her hand in my own human pair.

Evelyn's left hand was half gone. Her thumb and index finger were fully intact, but her middle finger was severed at the top knuckle, her ring finger was a stub, and her little finger was entirely missing, along with a large chunk of that side of her palm. The wound was smooth scar tissue, bones buried deeply beneath once-mangled

flesh. I cradled her hand in my own, and stared, and thought.

The human hand is a beautiful thing, as complex and elegant and perfect as any tentacle. So many little bones and tendons and pads of cartilage, all working together for such delicate dexterity, such precision, such infinite variation of position and pose and posture. Hands can talk, can carry meaning, can create. If I believed in a divine creator — and I don't, not really, though I don't have all the answers — then the human hand would be easy evidence for the divinity of nature itself.

And Evelyn's hand was no different, even reduced, even halved. Her palm was so soft, her thumb neat and slender, the pad of her index finger smooth and yielding.

"H-Heather ... " she stammered as I explored.

I stopped, concerned. "It doesn't hurt, does it?"

Evelyn was flushed in the face, staring at me with a strange frown. "No. Well. Don't push on the bone nub inside the palm. But otherwise, no."

I returned to my thoughts — and our preliminary examination.

Could we do an angel's work, and regrow a finger? Even one knuckle would be a small miracle. This was, in a way, more complex and difficult than ripping Sarika's body back out of the Eye, or growing my own pneuma-somatic parts from my abyssal template. Evelyn's body had been scarred and damaged for so long that it was part of her physical self-image, part of how she thought of herself, part of her history and being, imprinted on the mathematical substrate of reality. Brain-math could do anything, in theory. But in practice, I might only damage her further.

But if not with brain-math?

A tentacle-tip twitched with the memory of a needle.

"Heather," Evelyn breathed, with obvious difficulty. "Heather, I appreciate the efforts you want to make, but I wasn't exaggerating when I said I researched everything I could imagine. There's no fixing my body with magic. I have accepted that. You don't have to think about this."

I whispered, barely listening: "I could make you new fingers. A prosthetic? An addition? I don't know."

“Heather.”

“What’s the point in being what we are, if we can’t help you?”

“Heather, it’s not necessary, it—”

Before Evelyn could pull away, we raised her hand to our own lowering lips. And before we could think about what we were doing, we kissed her on the palm.

A brief, feathery touch, a brush, that was all.

But when we looked up, Evelyn was staring back like a deer in headlights, panting softly, cheeks flushed. She was frozen, waiting for me to make the next move, as if uncertain which way we were about to fall.

Before courage left and embarrassment drowned affection, I managed to say: “Your scarred hand is just as beautiful as my tentacles.”

Evelyn nodded, stiff and awkward.

I let her go, straightening up and blushing bright red myself. Where had that courage come from? My tentacles knew. Four of the other Heathers were bobbing and weaving and ducking and bouncing, my very own portable peanut gallery, but also me at the same time; it was so different to before, this tug between mortified embarrassment and amusement at myself, as if I had more access to my own emotions than before. They all wanted to kiss Evelyn’s hand too, and they were far less embarrassed by being watched or discovered. And in a way, they had kissed her, through me, who was also them.

Evelyn didn’t snatch her hand back, or wipe the kiss away; if she had, I think we would have been crushed. She just stared at her palm, then at me — then at the rest of me, our tentacles in a flailing ring. She sighed gently, regaining some composure as my own self-consciousness flared into paralysis.

“Heather,” she said, sighing.

“I ... Eeve ... you ... you’re not bothered by the whole ‘six other Heathers’ thing, truly?”

Evelyn blinked in surprise; she hadn’t been expecting that question. Honestly, neither had we. I was deflecting a little, though the

question was a genuine concern.

“Why would I be?” she asked. “They’re all you, right?”

“Well ... yes ... but ... ”

“Do they have different names? Temperaments? Personalities?” She shook her head. “If they do, tell me. I mean, if you do. I’m serious, Heather.” She waited a moment, waiting for a genuine answer.

“Not ... not really,” I said. “They’re all me. I’m still me. We’re all still me. Us.”

Evelyn sighed and nodded. “Whatever is going on inside your mind is almost certainly not medically classifiable as ‘dissociative identity disorder’.” Evelyn all but spat those words, mocking them with two-fingered air quotes from her good hand. “God, I hate that term. I suspect you do too, hmm?” I smiled, just a nervous flicker. Evelyn snorted in agreement. “You have six additional chains of neurons, six extra brains, and they’re all you.” She paused awkwardly, then swallowed and looked away. “Heather, I know what it’s like to have another entity inside my own head.”

“You do, yes. I was concerned about that.”

Evelyn sighed. “The demon my mother put in my body when I was a child, it was an invasive entity. A violation. A ... prisoner as much as I was.”

“You ended up working together with it, didn’t you?”

“Mmhmm.” Evelyn nodded, speaking in a contemplative tone. “It wanted my mother dead, too. It wanted freedom. We had an arrangement. But it was nothing like what you’re experiencing, I can guarantee you that. You’ve been multiplied, spread out, given more space. I was crammed into half my own skull. What’s happening to you is obviously liberating and healthy. I’m not disgusted by it. How could I ever be disgusted by more of you?”

I smiled through a veil of thin tears, then sniffed and wiped my eyes. “I was so scared you were ... that you thought I was vile or ... or wrong, or deluded, or something like that.”

Evelyn sighed. She awkwardly patted my arm. From her, that was practically a confession of undying devotion.

I took a moment to calm down. We felt a lot better now. But we

hadn't actually done as Jan had asked, had we?

Any other time or place, the next move would have felt like a push, a trial, a terrible risk. But here, in the aftermath of shared pain and understanding, nestled deep in the heart of the house, between towering bookshelves and solid walls and the soft light on the ceiling, it came naturally. We were already there, after all. We both knew.

Still, we could have done with a lemon or two before saying the words out loud.

I said: "We're in love with each other, aren't we, Evee? We both know it, we just don't talk about it."

To my incredible surprise — and more than a little amusement and relief — Evelyn didn't blush or stammer or stare or do anything so un-Evee like. She sighed a great big sigh, slumped a little in her chair, and rolled her eyes.

"Define 'love'," she grunted.

I actually giggled. "Evee, you know what I'm talking about."

"Oh, really? Do I? Where's the line between friendship and relationship then, hmm? If we ..." She paused, staring at me — at my lips. Then she cleared her throat. "If we started snogging—"

"*Snogging?!?*" we spluttered. "Evee, you're as bad as Raine, sometimes."

"If we started kissing," she spoke louder. "Does that end our friendship and start something new? Or are we friends, who kiss? Where's the line, Heather? I'm serious, because I don't know where the fuck the line was with Twil."

"Do you want to kiss me?"

That pole-axed her. And me, too, after I realised what I had said. I stammered and stuttered for a moment, tentacles coiling and flexing like uncomfortable toes. We were all mortified.

Evelyn recovered first, burning in the face like a hot coal.

"Yes!" she said. "Yes. Alright? Yes. Of course."

I nodded. And wet my lips. But then Evee gave me a frown.

“But what would it mean, Heather?” she asked. “I’m trying to explain this and I’m struggling. We’re not just ... we’re not just experiencing the lesbian sheep problem here. This isn’t something so simple.”

We blinked at her, lost. “Lesbian sheep problem?”

Evelyn stared, then sighed and put her face in one hand. “Heather, sometimes you’re just too much to be real.”

“Excuse me?”

“The lesbian sheep problem.” Evelyn switched into school mistress mode, sitting up a little and looking at me over the rims of an entirely imaginary pair of glasses. “When female sheep are sexually available, they show their interest by standing still, waiting to get mounted. So in theory, a pair of lesbian sheep would just stand next to each other, waiting, forever.”

I pulled a very sceptical frown. “Is that really true? It sounds like a convenient myth. People aren’t sheep, Eevee.”

“Exactly, it’s a useful metaphor. Heather, I’m trying to say that we’re experiencing more than that. Or less than that. Or, oh fuck, I don’t know.”

We couldn’t help it, we smirked.

Here it was, the truth of what lay between Evelyn and us, and it was the same thing that had been there all along. This was no confession of something hidden, no revelation which redefined our relationship, no moment of great change. We were already what we were, she and I.

“Would you be disappointed?” I asked. “If we never kissed?”

Evelyn shot me a frown. “Would you be disappointed if you could never make me—” Evelyn bit down hard on that final word. She didn’t want to go there. But I just silently shook my head, blushing terribly. Evelyn drew in a deep breath and tried to push on.

“Heather, my point is that I don’t know what I want. Or rather, what I want isn’t ... normal. Traditional? I don’t know!”

“Whatever you want is fine, Eevee,” we said, and we meant it. “Look at me and Raine, look at what we do. I’ve got ... several girlfriends, I suppose. In a whole range of ... variations?” I pulled a grimace.

“Poor choice of words, perhaps.”

Evelyn snorted. "You make it sound like a harem anime."

"But it's not! No, really. What I have with Raine is completely different to what I have with Zheng. Or with Sevens. You're important to me, Eevee. And I love you. And whatever form that takes, it'll be different. And I think I've learned that's okay."

Evelyn frowned at me; my words didn't quite seem to reach her. She disagreed somewhere, with something I couldn't put my finger on.

So I said, "Raine would be okay with it. I know that. If you wanted to kiss me, she would approve."

Evelyn stared. Something dark shifted inside her eyes.

"Eevee?"

"I've been jealous of Raine since I first met her," Evelyn said, quietly. "Don't get me wrong, I love her too. I'd be dead without her. But look at her. Confident, strong, fit. She can pick you up and throw you onto the fucking bed if she wants to. She can carry you. Pin you. Anything she likes."

"She ... she can, yes. Eevee, you shouldn't compare yourself."

"I don't want her to be okay with it."

"I'm sorry?"

"If I was to kiss you. I don't want her to be okay with it. I want to *steal you*."

Evelyn was deadly serious, white-faced and calm. My turn to blush. Tentacles, coiling inward as if to protect me from an attack. My mouth went dry. My heart hammered.

Then Evelyn let out a huge sigh and looked away. The spell broke. "I told you I was a bitter mess, Heather. I told you."

"What if ... " I tried to speak once, then had to swallow and try again. My hands were shaking. We were all shaking, a little. "What if we kiss, and don't tell anybody?"

Evelyn frowned, suddenly hard as granite. "That's a dangerous game, Heather. I'm not going to cuckold Raine. No."

We stared at each other for a long, silent moment. Evelyn's throat

bobbed. She wet her lips, perhaps subconsciously. I tried to slow my racing heart.

What the hell was I suggesting?

There was no way we could actually go behind Raine's back. I was incapable of such a thing. The guilt would eat us alive. But Raine had practically offered me to Eevee, once before. Half a jest, but half-real at the same time. If Evelyn desired something secret, something hers alone, perhaps we had already received permission, by proxy? My imagination began to spin up a half-baked idea of asking Raine to approve, but pretend she knew nothing — but then I would have to lie to Evelyn, wouldn't I? And Evelyn wasn't even sure what she wanted, what she desired. And here I was stuck in the middle.

While we stared at each other, Eevee and I, we became aware that interruption was approaching, loudly.

The intruder made her approach obvious, walking down the upstairs hallway with heavy steps, so as not to surprise us. And I would recognise those footsteps anywhere.

"Speak of the devil," Evelyn huffed, pulling away from me slightly, as if guilty. She looked round just before a knock sounded on the door of the study.

Raine called through the wooden door. "'Hey there, love-birds! You decent in there?"

"Raine!" I spluttered.

"No," Evelyn drawled, absolutely deadpan. "We're both stark naked and covered in honey. Come retrieve your wife."

"Wife?!" we spluttered at Eevee, too.

Raine burst through the door with a shit-eating grin on her face, then mimed disappointment when Evelyn and we were fully clothed and not in fact glazed with sugar. But then she raised her eyebrows in a hopeful look.

"You two patched things up? Heeeeeeey, I can tell." She wandered closer, her eyes looking down at our necks, for some reason. "I don't see no hickeys so it can't be over yet."

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. "When I leave my mark, I'll

make it obvious.”

“E-Evee?” we said, mouth going very dry again.

Raine nodded. “I look forward to seeing your handiwork, Evee. Hey there you,” she said to us, casually wrapping her arm in one tentacle. “You know, jokes aside, I can tell you’re both feeling much better. So did you actually fuck, or what?”

“Raine,” I sighed, flushed beet red. Did she know? Had she been listening? Could she tell?

“Spare us your wit,” Evelyn drawled. “Something changed, I take it?”

Raine nodded. “Big sorry to interrupt like this, but I’ve just struck gold. Jan and Fliss both agreed, gotta come tell you.”

Evelyn sharpened all of a sudden. “What gold? What are you talking about?”

Raine raised her mobile phone in one hand, grinning wide and wiggling it back and forth. “Gold, right here. I had a brainwave, see? Took a little picture of the snapshot of Eddy’s house, his sigil, ‘cos I thought, hey, who else do we know who knows a little magic, who might be able to identify something that we can’t?”

Evelyn shook her head, mystified. “Stop with the theatrics, Raine. Get on with it.”

But we knew. We said it before Raine could.

“Badger.”

“What?” said Evelyn.

“Ding ding ding!” Raine blew me a kiss. “‘Cos it’s not just a sigil, see? That’s why even with four mages down there, none of you could see it. Our boy Nathan doesn’t recognise the magic — but he absolutely recognises the maths.”

Evelyn sat up, grabbed her walking stick, eyes alight with inner fire as she prepared to launch herself out of the chair. “He what? Mathematics? Get him over here, now. Or me, there. I want to talk to him. Now! What did he say? Raine, what do you mean he recognises the maths? What are you saying?”

Raine laughed. “Hold your horses. He’s already on his way. Well,

Fliss has gone to pick him up.”

Evelyn looked about ready to leap out of her chair and hurl herself downstairs. I had the strange notion that she would happily drag me after her.

But there was nothing to do, not until Badger got here.

And I still had one unfinished thought.

“Raine,” I said. “I need your help with something.”

Evelyn frowned at me. “Heather, what now? I think this takes precedence!”

“Anything you want,” said Raine. She shot me a wink.

I nodded, raising a tentacle as I began to consider the mechanics. “I’m going to make Evelyn a prosthetic, if she’ll consent to the attempt. I’m going to use part of my own body. You may need to carry me to bed afterward, because I don’t know how much this is going to hurt.”

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.5

“A prosthetic hand. Half a hand! Two fingers and a piece of palm —”

“Heather.”

“The bones don’t even have to articulate, not at first. I can start with an experiment — a prototype! That’s what they’re called, yes. Once—”

“Heather, stop.”

“—I’ve figured out how to detach it from our own flesh and make it comfortable for you—”

“*Heather.*”

“I ... I really want to help. Eevee, I want to do something for you.”

“I know. But—”

“And I think it’ll work. If I can make a piece of self-sustaining pneuma-somatic flesh, then there’s no reason I couldn’t make it more complex, fill it with nerves, muscles, make something you could move with your own—”

“Stop!”

“E-Evee?”

“Heather, you already help me, more than you could understand. But this is not helping.”

“But it might work!”

“Heather. Please. Stop.”

“I’m ... I’m sorry. I apologise.”

“Heather, for fuck’s sake, don’t be such a martyr. I’m not completely rejecting the offer, but that’s a lot to think about. A hell of a lot! You want to attach part of your body to mine? That is something I

have to consider, carefully, at length. Not something to rush at the end of an already busy day, when we're facing down a complex and dangerous task. Slow down. Give me some time to think. Bloody hell."

"Yeeeeeah, Heather. Let a girl prepare her heart before you go talking about injecting her with your meat, hey?"

"R-Raine!"

"Shut *up*, Raine. I will hit you with my walking stick. I will."

"Just sayin'."

"Then, Evee, can I at least begin figuring it out, or—"

"I forbid it."

"You ... pardon?"

"We are about to make preparations to have you teleport an entire house — a house which belongs to an exceptionally powerful and dangerous mage. No. Jan was right. I won't have your skills and intellect distracted by a personal project to make me a rubber hand. Stop thinking about it. Right now."

"But, Evee—"

"I insist."

"... okay. Okay. I'll ... I'll stop."

"Good. Concentrate on what's in front of us."

"And we'll return to this later?"

"Mm."

= =

"I think it's a proof for the twin prime conjecture," said Badger. "Of course, I can't be sure, yeah? Because it's not written like a standard mathematical proof, it's written using a building. Which is, uh, a little unorthodox."

Badger — Nathan Sterling Hobbes, ex-cultist, once-brilliant mathematician, one-time mental prisoner of the Great Eye of Wonderland, my first-and-hopefully-only trepanation victim, and most likely a budding disciple of Squid Angel Heather Morell (that's

me, for those who haven't been paying attention) — looked up from our kitchen table, lifting his eyes from the photograph of Edward Lilburne's house meet to a ring of puzzled faces peering back down at him.

He wet his lips and cleared his throat, radiating awkward self-consciousness. "At least, um, that's what I ... see ... here."

Raine nodded along as if this made perfect sense, arms folded, eyebrows raised in appreciation. "Twin prime conjecture," she echoed. "That's a number theory thing, right?"

Nathan lit up with the sudden enthusiasm of recognition. He nodded — slowly, carefully, cautious of moving his head too fast. "Yes, that's correct."

On the far side of the table, sitting with her cast-wrapped leg sticking out, Nicole Webb sighed. "Please don't tell me we're gonna need a maths crash-course to understand all this. 'Cos if yes, I'm out."

"Naaaaah," went Twil. "Number theory is easy. Promise. Serious."

From the corner of the kitchen, squatting on the floor amid what was now a trio of dogs, Tenny suddenly trilled: "Easy, easy! Numbers easy!"

Evelyn just grunted, dead-eyed and aggressive: "Explain."

Nathan flinched a little, though his mouth was still curled in his newly habitual easy smile. His eyes searched for me, for support or approval — I wasn't sure how to feel about that. I was standing stiffly a few paces away, tentacles wrapped in a tight ball around my torso, a self-hug against shame and embarrassment. We were completely unable to concentrate on what we were meant to be doing right then. All seven of us were still bent toward thoughts of Evelyn, mortified by the way the conversation upstairs had ended, wishing we could have more time in private.

At least she was standing next to me again, close enough to touch.

Jan spoke up before Badger could embarrass us both by asking for my permission — or worse, for my blessing.

"Twin prime conjecture," Jan said delicately. She'd been using her good-girl pitch, her smartly-dressed sixth-former voice, since the moment Badger had limped through the front door. "Nathan, if you

could start by explaining what exactly that means, it would go a long way to helping us understand what you've discovered."

Badger glanced at Jan instead of me — but then returned to me again, his eyes reaching out with that silent smile.

We sighed softly, then said, "Go ahead, Nathan. Maybe start at the beginning?"

Badger nodded, happy to be questioned; he turned back to the photo on the table, to the picture of the front of Edward Lilburne's house. He gestured with both hands as he spoke, which made it impossible not to notice the faint tremor in his right arm.

It was always there, shaking and twitching, a constant flaw in his misfiring nerves.

"Twin prime conjecture," he resumed, quickly warming to his subject. "Raine was right, yeah. It's an open question in number theory, something that hasn't been proved, though there's been some attempts. A twin prime is a pair of prime numbers separated by a non-prime number. So, three and five are primes, separated by the number four. Five and seven, with six in the middle. Eleven and thirteen, and so on and so on. That's how twin primes work." He blinked three times, far too hard, fighting against something inside his own nervous system. Nobody hurried him. "Are you all following this so far?"

Badger's voice was stronger than when I'd last seen him, full of the energy of a healing body and improving mind, but also laced with all the self-doubt of a prodigious intellect who did not believe in himself. I'd not seen him like this before; he was barely recognisable as the lumpy, greasy, bitterly aggressive ex-cultist.

As he spoke, I silently willed him more confidence. He deserved it, after all; he'd figured this out where we'd all been blind.

The others probably just thought I was squinting at him.

Nathan looked undeniably healthier, too; we hadn't clapped eyes on the man since the aftermath of his cranial operation, when we'd all crowded into his tiny flat to interrogate him about the identity of the corpse I'd discovered out in the Shambleswamp, which turned out to be the body of another ex-cultist who Badger was able to positively identify. Back then Nathan had been like a walking corpse, a terminal cancer patient held together by nothing but the

spark of life released at the moment of cell-death. He'd seemed so fragile, so pitiful, so desperate for purpose and meaning, but also infused with all the potential of a new start in life.

His hair had grown back in, no longer thin stubble across his scalp, but a thick dark thatch, stuck up all haphazard and wild. It didn't quite hide the massive angry-red surgical scar across half his skull, but he seemed completely at ease with that. I couldn't be certain, but I had the distinct impression his hair had not been such a dark shade prior to the operation — or rather, prior to me repairing and rewriting his soul. Nobody else mentioned that though, so perhaps we were just imagining things. He'd also allowed his beard to grow — nothing more than a scraggly covering of whiskers, but it suited him, the shape of his face, his strangely easy and mobile smile, and his naturally puppy-dog eyes.

He dressed the part of the genius mathematician too, though that was probably an accident; as a cultist, either when working for Alexander or desperately trying to survive in the aftermath, Badger had seemed to me like a low-level drug dealer, all baggy jeans and over-large jackets, constantly greasy and dirty and uncomfortable. Now he was dressed in an old black sweater, something that had obviously been in storage for a while, clinging to his newly lean frame. He blinked from behind thick glass to help with his post-surgery vision issues.

He was walking unaided now, despite the regular tremors and the persistent difficulty with muscle control. He'd purchased himself a walking stick: a practical piece of lightweight metal with a plastic handle, none of the romance of warm wood for our Nathan. He'd arrived at the front door ahead of his escort, stick in one hand and Whistle's leash in the other, his eyes bright and alive with strange discovery.

Part of us — me, myself, and my tentacles — felt an intense rush of pride at seeing Badger like this.

We hadn't mentioned it as he'd limped and hobbled over the threshold of the front door, as Whistle — his Corgi — had warily greeted Soup and Bernard, the other two dogs briefly in residence. We had returned his cheery, smiling greeting as best we could. We hadn't felt too uncomfortable at the barely concealed quasi-religious devotion in the way he looked at us. We were an angel now, after all, sort of. Maybe.

All we'd said was: "You're looking well, Nathan. That's good to see."

And he had beamed like the sun had blessed him with warmth after a year trapped underground.

But that was the truth. It was good to see. We had saved this man — from death, from soul-destruction, from a cult, from his own slide into depression and lack of purpose. That fact had been harder to see when he'd been quivering and shaking in the aftermath of the operation on his skull, enraptured by the sight of me and by his own new-found clean slate. But to see him up and walking, getting stronger, doing things with his mind, smiling that odd, dazed, totally relaxed smile?

All that work had been worth the effort. Lozzie and Sevens and I had gone the extra mile to pull him out of the Eye's grip. We had saved a human being who deserved a second chance.

Even if he hadn't returned to help us with this problem, it all would have been worth doing.

Strangely, he'd taken the sight of my flesh-born tentacles entirely in his stride. He'd seen them once before, when we'd allowed him to briefly look through one of our pairs of modified pneuma-somatic seeing glasses; but seeing them with one's own naked eyes and knowing that they were undeniably real was a very different experience. He'd simply paused, looked me over, and nodded with that same beatific smile of deep acceptance.

"You look well too, Heather. I can see. I can see."

We hadn't asked him what he'd meant by that; probably better to not encourage that line of thought.

The others had decamped from the magical workshop to the kitchen, apparently in silent agreement that it was better for Badger not to go in there. After all, that was the spot where he'd almost died and I'd had to rummage around inside his skull to save him. He probably didn't want to be reminded. Praem had even shut the door after us.

Whistle, Badger's sweet little Corgi, was in the corner of the kitchen, getting acquainted with Soup and Bernard. Tenny was overjoyed to have three entire dogs all to herself, and mostly lost interest in the conversation.

Nobody commented on the results — or lack thereof — from my time upstairs alone with Evelyn. Raine had already said her bit, mostly teasing. Twil watched Eevee with a curiously neutral look. Ah, we thought, we were going to need to talk with Twil again, before this was all over.

Badger had accepted a cup of tea, but barely touched it, too fascinated by the discoveries he had to unfold. Outdoors, the summer night pressed down with a black weight upon the house.

“Yes, get on with it,” Evelyn grunted.

Raine agreed. “We follow, Nate, yeah. Go ahead.”

“Think I’ve heard of twin primes before,” Felicity muttered under her breath. “Maybe. Back in uni or something. Too long ago now.”

Badger nodded along, trying to include everyone in his side-to-side glance. There was more than a touch of the eager teacher about him. He even acknowledged the faces he didn’t know — Amanda Hopton, Felicity — and the terrifying faces — like Zheng, who watched him as one might watch a condemned animal. Back by the door to the front room, Kimberly fidgeted with the hem of her t-shirt. She was the one person who genuinely didn’t want to see Nathan, an unwelcome reminder of her time in the Sharrowford Cult. We’d asked if she would prefer to leave during this, to retreat upstairs and get some much deserved rest after her day at work, but Kim preferred to stay close to Felicity’s side. Badger had acknowledged her with a polite nod, but not addressed her directly; that was good. Hopefully he recalled my explanation that Kimberly was happier not knowing him, despite their shared experiences.

Sevens and Aym, to my wordless surprise, had folded themselves away somewhere. Perhaps Sevens was restraining her friend from emotionally assaulting our guest. Badger was probably vulnerable to Aym’s techniques, after all.

“So, the twin prime conjecture,” he carried on, making little gestures of explanation with his hands. His right hand still shook, the tremors reaching all the way up his right arm and into his shoulder and neck. Whenever that happened, he would pause and clench his fist very hard, fighting down the results of my work on his brain. “Twin primes get rarer as numbers get larger. Prime numbers get rarer anyway, so it stands to reason that as the range increases, the lower the chances of discovering another pair of twin

primes.” He held up a finger, pausing and swallowing three times in quick succession. The intense focus on the mathematics seemed to be helping him, but also driving his nervous system to further extremes. “But, but, but—”

“Nate, hey,” Raine said gently, in a much softer tone than I’d heard her use for Badger before. “Slow down, take a sec, yeah? Take a sip of your tea, buddy. Breathe. Nobody’s going anywhere, we’re all really interested.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and Twil pulled a grimace; Zheng grumbled, Nicole sighed. I almost tutted at this lack of patience. Only July didn’t react at all, standing wordlessly behind Jan and staring down at Badger as if he was a piece of wood.

Badger halted, nodding at Raine’s suggestion. “Yes, yes, of course, okay, yes.”

“Badger. Sip your tea,” Raine repeated with a laugh. “Come on mate, chill out.”

“Sip sip,” said Praem. “Sippy.”

“Quite,” Jan agreed. “Better to take your time and be clear than rush and risk confusion.”

Nathan took a long swig from his rapidly cooling mug of tea. Then his right hand and arm shook with one of those barely contained tremors again. He clenched his fist, his biceps, then his shoulder, all in sequence. It was as if he was holding on too tightly to some invisible handhold, anchoring himself in control of his own body. The tremors were different to how I recalled — more regular, more localised, but thankfully more easily controlled. We all waited politely. Lizzie peered over Jan’s shoulder. Badger smiled at her before he carried on.

“But,” he said. “Though twin primes are rare, they do keep occurring, even as the range of numbers gets extremely large. The question — the ‘conjecture’ — is whether or not they are infinite. Are there an infinite number of twin primes?” He paused, hands wide, then caught himself. “Um, there’s been a few efforts to prove this, by people working in number theory, but nothing conclusive.”

“Alright,” Evelyn said, in the tone of a woman who had been holding her tongue for far too long. She practically bristled with impatience and irritation, but Badger appeared to be immune to

that, turning his eyes to her with that bright, fascinated smile still plastered across his face. “Alright,” she repeated. “What does this have to do with the house?”

Badger pointed at the photograph of Edward’s house, lying in front of him on the table. Black beams crisscrossed inside red brickwork, punctuated by tiny metal-latticed windows. The trees behind the house were frozen in a moment of wind rustling their leaves.

“The beams,” he said. “I think they’re a mathematical proof, for the twin prime conjecture.”

Evelyn frowned at him, then down at the photograph, her brow pinched hard with concentrated scepticism. Felicity stepped closer to get a better look as well, though she also looked unconvinced. Kimberly did not follow, hands clutched to her own chest like something was horribly wrong; we noticed that — Top Right noticed that, bobbing gently toward Kimberly. What had she sensed?

Jan tilted her head sideways, lips pursed. The mages did not see it. Neither did I; we bobbed two tentacles over the top of the picture, going up on tiptoes for a good look. If the sigil on the house was written in mathematical perfection, it was regular maths, normal maths, nothing to do with the self-implementing hyperdimensional variety. I had no idea what I was looking at.

Raine sucked her teeth. Twil pulled a face. Zheng looked supremely uninterested. Amanda Hopton was miles away, her mind busy with her god’s perception.

But Nicole Webb, of all people, leaned forward across the table and tapped the picture. “I don’t see it, sorry there fella. Are they numbers? Like, hidden numbers? Is that what you mean?”

“Yes!” Badger lit up again with sheer delight. He was loving this; he wanted us to know — needed us to understand. He gestured for some space around the picture, then traced one of the beams with a fingertip. “See this big beam here? Take this as representing all the numbers between one and ten. And the smaller beams that intersect with it, here, here, and here.” Tap-tap-tap. “Those are the three prime numbers below ten — three, five, and seven. Then, imagine the beam stands in for the next set of ten numbers as well, but reverse the order of connection with the smaller beams. And!” A finger shot into the air; Badger was practically vibrating. “You have

to account for the angles at which the beams connect with each other. I've studied the picture over and over and there are always four different angles of connection."

"This isn't making any sense," Evelyn grunted. "Dumb this down."

"Yeah mate," said Twil. "Sorry, but like, none of us here are that good at maths. Not real maths."

Badger did a sort of double-take, as if he was amazed this wasn't obvious to any casual observer. "I ... um ... well, the big beams and the smaller beams can be thought of as a sort of invented mathematical notation. The intersection between a large beam and a small beam, that defines a number — like three, or five. I only noticed it because it starts with primes, up here in the top left corner of the house's front wall. See? And then I just followed the logic. And- and- and- and you can just repeat it! Infinitely! It's infinite!"

Badger spoke so hard he almost spat. He was enraptured. His eyes were too wide. His right hand was quivering.

Kimberly shuffled backward, toward the door to the front room. Felicity shot her a curious look, but Kim was just staring at Badger. Zheng tilted her head. July stared and stared and stared. Jan took a single decisive step back.

The rest of us shared a worried glance.

"Uhhhhhhhhh," Twil made a sound like an error buzzer in a TV game show. "Nate? You alright there?"

Nicole hissed under her breath, "This is some weird magic shit again, isn't it? You people are gonna be the death of me."

But Badger was already ploughing on, rambling at speed. "Yes, yes, I know." He smiled wider and almost laughed. "That's not a traditional mathematical proof, I'm mangling my own terminology. It's practically a disrespect to mathematics, but it's so beautiful, it's so brilliant! Whoever made this must be a genius. Listen, please, I promise this makes perfect sense. I believe that if I could see all four walls of this house, the junctions and angles of the beams would allow the reproduction of every single pair of twin primes."

He banged his hands together as he spoke, bone on bone. The tremor was all the way up the right side of his torso now.

Nobody moved.

Evelyn swallowed, then said, very carefully. “Okay. Okay. Nobody say anything. Raine, I want you to take Nathan here and—”

“But I’m onto something here!” Badger laughed in easygoing confusion. “Miss Saye, I swear, I’m onto something. I don’t think this is dangerous or anything. There’s no magic being transmitted by a picture, is there?”

Raine put a hand out to stall Evelyn, and said: “But there’s an infinite number of these twins, right? That’s the point of the conjecture, yeah? I’m no mathematician, but I think I understand that part.”

“Yes, that’s correct.” Badger nodded. He squeezed his fist tightly, holding on to his invisible support, trying to strangle the tremor in his arm. “I-I-I think this symbol, this sequence, this ... this new way of recording numbers, it— it’s perfect, it’s revolutionary. If I could only see more sides of this building, I could— I could— do you have more photographs?”

His eyes were too bright, his words too aflame. The shaking was in his neck now, his face, his scalp. Badger started to grit his teeth. Losing his grip.

Raine said: “Mate, you gotta take a minute. Relax for a sec. Alright?”

“I’m fine! Fine!” He smiled and laughed, almost panting. “Just ignore this. The— the pictures? Please? The pictures! I must see more!”

A wave of silent alarm passed through the gathered group. Nobody said anything, but postures were shifting, hands were rising, muscles reorientated for action. Jan swallowed loudly and shuffled further back, searching for Lozzie with one hand. Felicity, who was just beyond Badger’s peripheral vision, raised both her gloved hands, ready to grab the back of his head — or worse. Raine braced herself, one hand reaching for the rear of her waistband. Nicole eased herself away from the table. Twil caught on a little slowly, glancing around in confusion — but Zheng didn’t. Suddenly my beautiful rippling demon-host was striding forward, parting the small crowd like wheat, reaching for Badger. Evelyn opened her mouth to give an order.

Hissssssssssssss!

The hiss made everybody flinch — well, not Zheng. She just stopped, statue-still, staring at me in mute and unreadable interruption. Raine didn't flinch either, but she didn't draw whatever she had stashed in the back of her jeans.

We hissed long and loud, a clear warning. We threw up a protective cage of tentacles, warding off mage and monster and maid alike — around Badger.

Which wasn't really fair to the poor man. He flinched worse than anybody else, with no idea what was going on, stammering and blinking and almost falling out of his chair. I allowed Praem to duck through my protective cordon to stop him sliding to the floor.

"Heather, Heather, whoa, whoa," Raine was saying, reaching for me with one gentle hand.

Felicity had stumbled back, crashing into the kitchen cabinets. Kimberly rushed to her side. Evelyn had flinched quite badly, but she wasn't really afraid of me, not deep down, so she was safe and steady on her feet. Nicole had jumped. Amanda Hopton had merely blinked; she'd probably seen it coming. Jan had scrambled back into Lozzie's arms, eyes wide, looking like she wanted to run. July, worryingly enough, was staring at me in — was that approval? In the corner, Tenny was letting out loud trilling noises of shared alarm. All three dogs were whining and barking, little Whistle adding his tiny doggy lungs to the larger nosies from Soup and Bernard.

"No!" I managed to squeeze out, trying to explain myself. "It's not his fault! Nathan is not a risk."

"Down, girl," said Praem.

Felicity stammered badly, clutching her own hands. "I-I was o-only going to— I wasn't— I didn't mean—"

"Down. Good girl," Praem repeated.

"Everyone back off ... or I shall ... shall ..." I was struggling to find a way to de-escalate this moment. Over in the corner, Lozzie had gone to Tenny and joined her in the task of calming the dogs. Tenny's many silken black limbs were busy speed-petting all three animals. She was fluttering under her breath, saying '*dogs dogs dogs*'

dogs shush shush shush shush.'

That gave me an idea.

"Everyone leave Badger alone," I croaked out of a barely-human throat. "Or I shall have to slap you. All of you. I have enough tentacles for that now, too. I'm not joking! Please."

Throats were cleared, sighs were puffed, heads were shaken. Evelyn grumbled, but she gestured for Felicity to back away from Nathan. Some guilty looks were exchanged. Jan seemed very white in the face, still staring at Nathan as if he was an unexploded bomb.

Zheng didn't move. She rumbled at me. "Shaman."

"Zheng. I'm certain. Don't hurt him. I won't forgive you."

Zheng turned slit-narrow eyes on Badger. He stared back with naked terror, mouth hanging open, completely lost as to why he was the centre of such dangerous attention.

"Zheng!" I snapped.

She grunted and straightened up, but didn't back away. Good enough for me. "Shaman."

"Thank you," I croaked.

"Down," Praem said for a third time. "Good girl. Down."

We breathed a shaking sigh of relief, slowly lowering our tentacles. Badger still looked utterly bewildered.

"Yeah," Twil added with an amused snort. "Big H has got a mean slapping hand, you know?" She mimed a casual backhand. "Wachow!"

"No slap!" Tenny trilled. "No fight!"

"Yes," Evelyn grumbled. She was still staring at Badger as if examining a curious and unknown artefact from Outside. "Heather is correct. So is Tenny. There will be no violence here. I don't think this is ... " She trailed off, wetting her lips.

I repeated myself, "It's not his fault. And I don't think it's dangerous."

Wide-eyed, his face stained with cold sweat, Badger stared around at the rest of us. "Excuse me," he said slowly. "But ... what's not my

fault? I'm s-sorry, I'm deeply confused. I don't know what I've done to offend, or ... annoy?"

Raine shared a look with Evee, then with me. Evelyn shrugged and muttered: "Can't hurt." I nodded.

At the rear of the room, Jan bared her teeth in a grimace, then said, "Be ready to catch him."

Raine leaned down to Badger and pointed at the picture on the table, at the exposed front of Edward Lilburne's house. "There's only four exterior walls of that place, right?"

Badger was utterly lost. He looked around at the other faces in the room again, as if this was some kind of trick question.

Raine tapped the picture. "Nate, I'm trying to help you. Four walls, correct, or not?"

Badger swallowed, then nodded. "Four walls. Of course."

"Four walls. Infinite numbers." Raine spoke very slowly and carefully, her eyes searching his. "How can you get infinite numbers from a finite space?"

Badger blinked. Then again. Then a third time. His eyes creaked as he turned them from Raine's face to the picture on the table. His throat bobbed, a painful motion.

"I don't ... but ... oh."

The seizure hit him like a tidal wave, washing over his body in a single spasmodic jerk which started in his right hand and shot upward through his arm. In the moment before his eyes rolled into the back of his head, his pupils dilated wide, eyeballs bulging from his skull, and he looked straight at me. Pleading for help.

So help we did. Before Badger could smash his fingers against the table or fracture his own spine, we grabbed him with all our tentacles and held him as still as we could manage, supporting his skull and his neck, grabbing his wrists to immobilize his hands, wrapping one tentacle all the way up his right arm. Praem helped — a kitchen towel appeared in her hand, as if from nowhere, swiftly rolled into a tube and deftly inserted between Badger's teeth, to stop him from biting off his own tongue or cracking a molar. He jerked and shook and spluttered as his body — with more than a little help from the soul-framework I had gifted to him —

purged whatever invasive structure Edward's mathematical trick had been trying to insert into his mind.

"Give them space!" Raine shouted. "Give them space, come on, everybody out of the way."

She herded everyone else back — except for Whistle, who was allowed to come close enough to whine for Nathan's safety.

In the end the seizure itself didn't last more than sixty seconds. Badger came out of it as quickly as it had struck, blinking and panting and clinging to both myself and Praem for support. But the aftermath was slow and painful. His eyes were unfocused, his speech slurred, his movements clumsy and uncoordinated. A relapse, a struggle for the surface.

Raine knew what to do — she had memorized his regimen of medication. Felicity and Jan had brought a carrier bag full of his pills when they'd picked him up from his flat. Raine rummaged, producing bottles and pills and forcing him to drink and swallow. Praem made more tea, despite the late hour. Whistle was allowed to sit in his lap, keeping him company.

But even when Praem had stepped away, I stayed close to Nathan. I kept a tentacle wrapped around the back of his neck and the rear of his skull, giving him something to swim towards.

Eventually, almost forty five minutes later, Badger was able to use full sentences again.

"I'm sorry," he said, glancing at me with a guilty, hangdog look in his eyes. "I-I didn't ... I should have realised, it was ... getting into my head. I ... it's hard to tell the difference these days, I—"

"Don't apologise," I said. No please. No reasoning. No debate. I just stared down at him. He needed an angel to absolve his mistakes.

"Nate, hey," Raine said. "It's not your fault, mate. It's mine. I sent you that picture."

Nicole snorted. "You lot need to learn some proper information security."

"Quite," said Jan, through clenched teeth. "Nobody think about maths."

Twil puffed out a sigh. "That was some spooky shit."

“Spoooooooky shit,” Tenny trilled. Lozzie gently stroked her fluffy white fur and suggested she stop using that word.

Evelyn, who was by now sitting on the other side of the table, hunched over her own cup of tea, said, “I’m going to have to ask you some more questions. Are you capable of answering them?”

Badger nodded — but he pushed away the picture of Edward Lilburne’s house, closing his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see it again.

“Be gentle, Evee,” I said. “Please.”

Evelyn sighed and nodded. She met my eyes for a moment and seemed suddenly guilty, then focused on Badger again. She said: “Nathan, how did you figure all that out in the first place?”

Badger shrugged. His shoulders seemed out of sync with each other, slow and weak. “It just hit me. When I was looking at the picture, the front of the building, it was all just ... there. So clear. So obvious. I ... I never stopped to think about the internal contradiction. Infinity ... ”

His head twitched. I tightened the tentacle against the back of his skull. “Stop thinking about that part,” I said.

“Y-yes. Yes, Heather. Yes.” He nodded slowly, blinking too hard.

Leaning against the wall next to the door, back with Kimberly again, Felicity added: “Don’t go looking at magical mathematics, I suppose. Can’t say I’ve had to worry about that before.”

Evelyn sighed. “This still doesn’t explain what this is. What we’re looking at here.”

I chewed my lip, holding back nonsense words that wouldn’t help anybody.

This was my fault.

Of course, it wasn’t actually my fault — I was not responsible for Edward Lilburne building that house and constructing a weird sigil with the support beams. But I was responsible for Badger.

Last time I’d seen Nathan, in the aftermath of his cranial surgery to repair the damage done by my emergency trepanation, I had been worried about how much I may have unintentionally modified him. Parts of the mathematics which defined him had been damaged by

the Eye, smeared and ruined as if by a giant, clumsy, sweat-stained fist, so I had replaced them with patches copied from the only model I had — myself. Nathan lived, free from the Eye, but the cost might be a lingering sense of wrongness in his own body, a ghost of my own abyssal dysphoria, a longing for tentacles and fins and the embrace of an abyssal deep he had never known. I'd made him promise to call me if he ever felt such things. I didn't want anybody else to go through what I had without any support.

What I hadn't expected was brain-math by osmosis.

Badger had no access to the Eye's lessons. When I looked at the picture of the house, I felt nothing, no instinctive understanding, no automatic recognition of genius or beauty. But Badger did.

Had I given him a different part of myself than the one I had worried about?

Perhaps it was just because he had been an accomplished mathematician prior to being involved with the Sharrowford Cult. Perhaps he simply saw in ways I couldn't. Maybe I'd given him that shove in the right direction. We weren't sure how to feel about that — pride, guilt, concern?

And there was the second way in which this might be my fault.

Before Evelyn could continue her questioning, I wet my lips and said: "I was thinking about this recently."

Everyone glanced at me. Raine raised her eyebrows. Jan looked far more worried than was warranted.

Evelyn said, "Thinking about what, Heather?"

I hesitated, unsure if this would make any sense.

Praem spoke up. "Numbers paired. Numbers apart."

I nodded a thank you. "Yes. Specifically twin primes. Back when I first used all of me to do more expansive brain-math for the first time." We raised ourselves, our tentacles, to indicate what we meant. "It was just a metaphor I was thinking about in the moment, when I was sorting all these impressions about mathematics and brain-math. But I recall specifically thinking about twin prime numbers, though I didn't know that's what they were called, then. I ... I don't know if that means anything. I'm sorry, I just thought I should mention this."

Evelyn frowned. "You mean twin primes are a core component of self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics?"

I shook my head. "No. Only in metaphor. I was thinking about a metaphor."

Evelyn sucked on her teeth in thought. Raine shrugged. Jan and Felicity both took this quite seriously, but didn't seem too concerned. They didn't have the context.

In the end, it was Amanda Hopton who spoke sense. "Heather. Heather." She spoke my name in her wavering, sleepy, half-slurred voice, the translated thoughts of her god. "That building is too old to have been formed in response to you and yours and you. I think it's a coincidence. An overlapping metaphor. Nothing more."

Evelyn growled, "Or it could be a trap for Heather, personally."

Raine nodded. "Yeeeeeeeah, could be. Could be."

"This changes nothing, though," Evelyn snapped. "Heather isn't going in there alone anyway, and she's absolutely not touching the building directly." Evelyn sighed heavily and gestured at the photo again. "This still doesn't explain what we're looking at. Prime numbers or magical notation or otherwise."

Badger rallied himself, making a visible effort to sit up straight and fill his lungs. His eyes were unfocused and his breathing was rough, but he did his best. He scratched at his beard stubble as a preamble to making a point. "Actually, I ... I have an idea. If I may? Heather?"

"You don't have to ask me for permission," I said.

"I'm more comfortable when I do." His voice shook with surprising vulnerability.

I suppressed a sigh. "Go ahead, then. Please."

He turned back to Evelyn. "I never learned much magic. And ... and frankly I don't want to, now, I—"

Surprising everybody, Kimberly hurried out of the kitchen and into the front room, hand to her face. Trying not to burst into tears, poor thing. Felicity was torn for a second, between helping Evelyn with this problem and going after Kim. Footsteps hurried up the stairs.

Evelyn jerked her head. "Go."

Fliss nodded in thanks, then hurried after Kimberly. Badger watched this all happen with a look of distant melancholy.

Raine said, gently, "Never mind her, Nate. It's her stuff to deal with. Go on."

Evelyn added: "Just get to the point."

Badger nodded. Without looking, he gestured at the photograph. "I think it might be magical language. You know far better than I do, Miss Saye, how magic circles work, sigils and the like. They're built from like, language elements. But not used as a language. I'm pretty certain I'm correct about the junctions between the beams actually being numbers. So what if instead of real mathematics, it's using numbers in place of words, like in a magic circle?"

Evelyn frowned hard at this explanation, then back down at the photograph.

Jan said slowly, "I've never heard of that before, but I can't see any reason it shouldn't be possible. In theory." She sighed. "I'd rather not meet whoever built it."

Evelyn scoffed. "Bullshit. Impossible."

Twil puffed out a sigh. "You have been known to be wrong about that, Evee. Sometimes. Now and again."

Evelyn shot her a dark glower, but Twil just shrugged.

"A magic circle made of maths," I echoed softly. "What would be the point? What would it even do? It's not brain-math, it's just regular maths, after all."

Jan said, "We have no idea. It may be a method of concealment, perhaps, concealing some other spell by making it out of numbers?"

Badger cleared his throat softly. "I have an educated guess about that, too."

Raine shot a finger-gun at him. "On a roll, Nate my mate."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Go ahead, then."

Badger said, "It's all full of twin primes. That's real, that's not a delusion I was having." He raised both of his hands, steady as he could keep them, and extended both index fingers, holding them parallel. "Two things, similar but separated by one value. They

can't touch, but they're close. Whatever that spell does, I think that's a clue. Sort of. Maybe." He cleared his throat again, pulling an awkward closed-lipped smile.

Twil said, "Cheers, Mister Sphinx."

Evelyn huffed and leaned back in her chair. "Yes, that is a bit of a nonsensical riddle. It hardly helps."

"Sorry," Badger said. "But it makes sense to me. It lines up with what I was feeling earlier, with what I felt when I looked at the picture. I just ... I just really want to help. I really want to help."

I'd heard those words earlier, upstairs, from my own throat: I want to help. My skin crawled with discomfort. Evelyn wasn't looking at me.

"You have helped," I said.

Badger shot me the most fragile, earnest, longing look. He wanted to help, so badly. I stared back, silently pleading for him to reclaim his own life. You don't have to be involved anymore, I willed him. You don't have to be one of us, or follow me around, or do anything I say. But he didn't look away, not until a question struck him.

"So, um," he said, casting around at Evelyn and Raine and the others again. He gestured at the photograph. "Who's house is this, anyway?"

"It belongs to Edward Lilburne," said Evelyn.

Badger stared, dumbstruck. Then: "Oh. Oh, well. I suppose that makes sense."

= =

"Purple," said Tenny.

Her fluttery moth-voice, a deep-tissue trilling buried inside her chest, made the word sound like *'purrrrrpllll'*. I felt it as much as I heard it; the vibration passed down our pair of intertwined tentacles, as well as through the purple-tinted air. Tenny was clinging very hard to two of my tentacles with two of her own, as if the jewels of the sky might tempt her away from us if she let go.

"Purple?" I echoed. "Do you mean the sky?"

"Brrrrt. Yes. Purple. And pretty?"

Hmmmmmmmmmmnnnnnnnnmmmmnnnn.” Tenny twisted her lips in a thinky face, a little ghost of Lozzie’s mannerisms. Her shiny all-black eyes stared up at the alien sky of Camelot, at the purple whorls like scattered nebulae on an ink-dark deepness.

“Pretty, yes,” I agreed. “I’ve always thought it’s pretty out here. Camelot really isn’t anything to be afraid of, Tenny.”

Tenny puffed her cheeks out. “Scary.”

“Do you want to go back? The gate’s right there. We can go home. I don’t have to be here for this part of the process. I just wanted to come and look.”

But Tenny shook her head. “Nope! Scary but ... pretty.”

“Outside can be like that, yes.”

I watched Tenny’s face as she watched the sky. It was sometimes difficult to tell exactly where she was looking, because her eyes were all-black, like those of a deep sea creature or an exotic insect. It wasn’t quite the same as with Praem’s pupil-less, milk-white eyes; with Praem it was almost impossible to tell what she was looking at. I privately suspected that was why she often moved her whole head to address somebody. With Tenny the effect was more subtle, more biological. She was, after all, a fully biological person, even if not human.

But I could tell when her eyes wandered down from the sky to rest on the distant horizon. Her free-floating silken-black tentacles adjusted their angles as well, as if following her thoughts.

Gently, probing without prodding, we said: “Camelot might be scary, Tenny, but it’s not dangerous. You could try flying again, here, if you wanted to?”

Tenny pulled a very serious little frown. “Danger-danger. We don’t know.”

“Your mother knows, I’m pretty certain about that. She wouldn’t tell us this dimension was safe if it wasn’t.”

Tenny puffed her cheeks out, did a big hurrumph, then tilted her head to give me a very human look, deeply sceptical and a little amused. “Brrrrt. Auntie Heath-er. Lozz-mum’s definition of ‘danger’ is fuzzy, hmmmmm? Biiiiiig hmmmmm. Hmmmm!”

We spluttered with laughter, try as we might to contain ourselves. Tenny's expression just got worse; she made her eyes wider and pressed her lips together, a very knowing look.

"Okay! Okay!" We spluttered. "Yes, Tenny, that's a very fair point. Lozzie has a slightly different threshold for danger. But she wouldn't ever put you at risk. She loves you very much. And so do I. If you wanted to fly, out here, I'd be right here the whole time."

Tenny wiggled half a dozen tentacles back and forth. She tightened her grip on our interlinked limbs. "Mmmm. Maybe maybe."

But I saw her wings twitch and flex, her cloak of flesh ruffling with muscular tension. She wanted it so very badly.

"What if you had a target?" I asked. "A destination, I mean. One of the Cattys, perhaps, out on the plain, bringing materials back to the castle. You could fly out to one, and then ride the caterpillar back here. Fifteen minutes, probably. If you want to, of course."

"Pbbbbbbbt," went Tenny. She gazed out across the soft rolling yellow-grass hills of Camelot, glowing beneath the purple sky. "Need to be bigger, here."

"You want to be as big as a catty?"

"Mmm-yes!" Tenny nodded with great enthusiasm. "Bigger!"

"Maybe flying will help you feel bigger," I suggested.

"Yaaaaaah. But not yet," she trilled — then pointed down the hillside with a clutch of tentacles. "Can't fly here for that. Can't be here, Heath?"

I sighed and nodded, sobered by Tenny's all-too-sharp perception. She knew exactly what was going on. "Yes, Tenny. You won't be in Camelot for that. Your job will be to watch the house and look after Lozzie. You can do that for us, yes?"

"Lozz-mums doesn't need me for that."

I winced inside. "She does, Tenny. Maybe not practically, but emotionally. This is going to be hard on her. Please, be there for her?"

Tenny did a little pout. But she didn't argue. Her eyes finally left Camelot's wonders and returned to the ground, to ugly practicality — to the bloody great hole we'd dug in the soil.

It was thirty six hours — two nights and the day in between — since Badger's flying visit to Number 12 Barnslow Drive. Tenny and I were standing on the tall-ish hilltop which formed a vantage point, within the outline of the walls which would one day ring the castle.

Camelot was much the same as when I'd last visited this auspiciously-named Outside dimension; the Knights had been busy at work extending the castle upward, adding turrets and wings and outward-projecting defensive bastions, covered walkways and connecting bridges and little pathways surrounded with bare soil ready for what I assumed would one day be flowerbeds. Their construction works, their block-cutting and mortar-mixing and hand-made cranes, were all still in full swing. The outline of the walls had been filled in only a little — the work of bringing the big sandstone-coloured blocks from the ancient city on the horizon was very slow going.

But sadly we weren't here for them. I would have loved to spend a day or two wandering the half-finished castle, climbing up into the gestating towers, exploring the underground dungeons which Lozzie had assured me the Knights had added.

No, we were here for the pit.

Beyond the outline of the walls, set in a hollow between hills, the Knights had dug us a hole. They had paused their castle construction work, peeled off a couple of the gigantic Caterpillars from their back-and-forth stone-ferrying duties, and spent half of yesterday excavating a giant, featureless wound in the landscape.

Lozzie had been very specific about our needs. The Knights had understood. The Caterpillars had helped. The hole had opened.

Then they'd spent further hours lining the thing with quick-drying mortar, hard as concrete but dusky-brown. The material was made partially from the Knight's own internal secretions. Evelyn was insistent that the soil of Camelot must be protected, the landscape here must not be infected, not play host to whatever filth we might bring with us. And she wasn't talking about earthly bacteria and worms.

With the hole made secure, Evelyn, Felicity, Jan, and Kimberly had gotten down to work. Kimberly hadn't ventured through the gateway herself; she was exempt. Felicity hadn't asked any

questions. And Jan was terrified, but still she helped.

The mages had spent all yesterday evening and most of the night ringing the hole with the second largest magic circle I'd ever seen Evelyn create, closely behind the one in the field at Geerswin farm. It wasn't particularly complex, it didn't need chicken's blood or ash from burned Bibles or any other such nonsense. It was just eleven successive rings of containment, etched and dug and painted into the soil, copied onto the Knight-mortar, made inviolate and unbreakable.

Praem did most of the painting. She was down there right then, doing the last checks with Evelyn and Jan. July trailed behind them. Lozzie flitted from Knight to Knight, sharing silent thank yous or praising the sheer speed of their construction work.

Five Caterpillars stood in a rough ring around the hole, further out than the magic circle itself. Each of them had been blessed with a magic circle of their own, drawn around their bases and cut into the soil. Protection, not containment.

Evelyn was taking no chances when it came to the safety of our allies.

We — I, me, us a concept I was still struggling with — approved of that, deeply. We simply could not have achieved this plan without the Knights and the Caterpillars, Lozzie's hidden army tucked away in a secret we had named after Arthurian legends. The necessary preparations would have been beyond us.

Just like with the Eye. I tried not to think too far ahead. One problem at a time.

In the middle of that wide concrete basin, dead centre of the concentric rings of magic circles, was a small pile of junk: a rusty spoon, a couple of pieces of rotten fruit, an old t-shirt. The pile was barely visible from this distance, just a smudge against the floor of the hole. I'd been teleporting stuff there all morning. 'Calibrating', as Raine called it. The first dozen objects had gone wide, appearing in the grass or on the hillsides, but we had to get this perfect. There could be no error.

My tentacles ached gently from the repeated effort. But we'd continued until I could land a spoon in the middle of the circles, every time.

I wasn't the only one who'd been preparing, either. Lozzie had spent three whole hours yesterday down inside the underground shell of a certain Outsider cone-snail, down there with Amanda, discussing the bubble-servitors, their role, their limits. She'd returned bright-faced and quite bouncy. At least somebody was enjoying this.

Evelyn had spoken of nothing but the task and the circles since yesterday. Not a peep about my prosthetic hand suggestion. I felt vaguely ashamed, but this wasn't the time to dwell on that.

The circles were ready. My teleportation trick was ready. The Knights and the Caterpillars and the bubble-servitors were ready. The journey was mapped out. The destination was understood.

And my stomach was churning like I'd eaten a bowl full of worms.

The concrete-lined hole was for Edward Lilburne's house. We were going to shove him in there and murder him. If everything went to plan, it would serve as a grave.

"Mmmmmmmmm," Tenny made another thinky-sound. We knew it was because she could feel the tension, transmitted down my tentacles. She knew I was riddled with anxiety over this. "Heather?"

"Yes, Tenny?"

"Ed-ward is Lozz-mum's uncle. Mmhmm?"

Oh, I didn't like where this was going. I felt deeply unprepared for this particular conversation. But I wouldn't disrespect Tenny's intelligence. "Yes, Tenny, that's correct."

"Soooooooo," she fluted. "If Lozz-mums is my mum, and Ed-ward is Lozz's uncle. Then Ed-ward is Tenny's ... great ... uncle?"

"I think that's the technical relation, yes." We nodded, trying to feel less pale.

"Prrrrrbbbt," she trilled. "Why is he so bad?"

I needed a lemon.

"Well ... " I tried. "Some people just choose to be that way. Some people choose to do things that hurt others, because they value certain things more than they value other people. Or other people's lives. They treat people as things, not as people."

Tenny tilted her head, watching Lozzie giving hugs to Knights, down by the grave-pit.

“Okay,” she said.

I almost said *That’s it?* But I managed to resist the urge. Tenny waggled a clutch of tentacles toward Lozzie and glanced at me.

“Is it all ready?” she asked.

I felt myself swallow, then I managed to nod. “Yes, Tenny. It’s ready. We’re all ready. The preparations are done. We’ve got until tomorrow morning, that’s when we’re doing it.”

“Play with Lozz-mums?”

A smile. That was what we needed, to ease the nerves. “Yes. Yes, we can go play with Lozzie. We’ve got time for that.”

Until the morning.

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.6

Anxiety was now sevenfold, shared among seven of myself, seven physical vessels with their roots mingled but their tips distinct; the physical sensation was not the same as before.

Sleep felt different, too.

I'd always been a lonely sleeper, all through my teenage years and into early adulthood, no matter what methods I adapted or which habits I adjusted. Slipping between cold sheets and wrapping myself up tight, alone, singular, without company, was always a depressing feeling, even when I was exhausted and the bedsheets were clean and comfortable. The Eye's nightmare lessons always threatened to turn sleep into an ordeal, yes, but even during the periods where it was not teaching me the forbidden secrets of reality, I took little pleasure in going to bed. The reason was not difficult to understand: when we'd been children, Maisie and I had often slept together.

We'd had our own separate beds, in the same shared room, but it was a rare occasion that we wouldn't spend at least part of a night sharing the sheets, partially entwined, or at least holding hands. I would visit her, or she would visit me; sometimes we would wake up in each other's beds, after swapping positions. We were just children, seeking physical comfort in family, in our mirrored selves. It was normal, constant, just another biological process. Even when we didn't sleep in physical contact I could always hear her breathing. All I had to do was listen, still my own breath, and I would hear her on the other side of the room, less than six feet away. My other half, my eternal mirror, my twin sister, my Maisie.

On many nights during the long dark purgatory of my teenage years, I had attempted to simulate Maisie with a pillow. Stuck it in the dryer to warm it up, tucked it in bed against my front, gave me something warm to hug. But it wasn't the same. It was never the same. It wasn't her.

Sleep was lonely.

Raine changed all that, of course. Raine, and then Zheng, and then Sevens. Even Evelyn on occasion, though in her case I was the one warming her bed with my company, rather than the other way around. But still, even with real, physical companionship snuggled up against either side of me, romantic or platonic or undefined, something was still missing. I knew it was my twin, my missing part. I would never feel right again without Maisie.

But now I was several. Several tentacles and a human core. Six other parts of me embodied in glorious pneuma-somatic flesh. This new experience — being *us*, instead of just *I* — was not a consistent thing, just as I suspect that being a single consciousness is not consistent, either. Sometimes I was very much me, Heather, singular, surrounded by a vague cloud of tentacular thoughts which were still identifiably mine, but just a step distant, a hanging swarm of separated notions from which I could select at will. Other times we were seven, seven Heathers, each of us with a different flavour to our thoughts, combining into one set of words and expressions and outward projections. But who was who was not consistent either: a single tentacle might briefly embody Cautious Heather, with all skittish and paralysed thoughts coming from the bottom left, loud and clear, but then the thoughts would move on and the same tentacle an hour later would be Lustful Heather, gripping for Raine despite the blushing of my human core. I might hug a tentacle in the morning, feeling the vulnerability of Pre-Raine Heather like an echo, then find the same tentacle slapping the walls in dancing delight in the evening.

But one thing was consistent: we all slept together. I was waking up wrapped in myself, wrapping myself, wrapped by ourselves. We burrowed and nested. If I woke in the night, there was I, and there I was, and there I was, ready to reassure myself with my own physical reality.

It wasn't Maisie, but it was the closest we could get. It was the same thing we'd been trying to do since we'd lost her.

That was how I'd woken up that morning, wrapped in our own tentacles, clinging tight against the onrushing tide of anxiety, a belly full of writhing butterflies, and a nervous leaden energy in all our limbs.

Today was the day; the anxiety was a lead weight in my cells.

How could Raine eat breakfast like nothing was wrong? She wolfed down cereal and fruit and bacon, fuelling herself for the potential trials to come, trying to offer me bites of meat or spoonfuls of pear. She takes reality in her stride and keeps going, feeding off her own confidence, always pushing forward; part of what we love about her. At least Evelyn shared our nervous energy; she sat at the kitchen table taking slow, steady breaths, a faint tremor in her muscles, not even sipping her tea. Praem did her best to try to get Eevee to have some proper breakfast. She half-succeeded; Evelyn ate a few calories worth of toast and marmite. Perhaps the salt helped her think. We just gave up and scarfed down half a dozen lemons. That would have to do.

“What if it doesn’t work?” we asked.

Evelyn sighed. “Heather, we’ve been over this. We stick to the plan.”

“I know, I know the plan. I know we have to stick to the plan. But what if—”

“Jaaaaaaan!” Evelyn bellowed.

Jan had spent the night here so as to save time and complications this morning. She had also spent it with Lozzie — though Tenny and July had been present too, so no funny business. Not that anybody would have blamed either of them for seeking some privacy and comfort, considering the stress of what we were about to do.

Jan joined us in the kitchen. Sharp-eyed, sharp-dressed, ready. She was nervous too, but she showed it in all-consuming tight self-control. I noticed she held her chin higher that morning, and held her hands behind the small of her back, as if she was inspecting troops, her sight-line gazing at some unseen horizon. There was a surprising steel to her now that she was committed, like a flicked switch deep in her psyche.

“Don’t shout for me like a servant, Evelyn,” she said with a gentle tilt of her head. “I’m a contractor, not your maid.” Her eyes flickered to Praem. “Um, no offense to maids. You’re a wonderful maid. The best.”

Praem looked left. Praem looked right. Praem was still not dressed in her preferred way, lacking a maid uniform to replace the one

which had been ruined, despite whatever private conversation she'd had with Jan about clothes and dresses. That morning she was dressed for war — heavy boots, practical jeans, a black t-shirt. The transformation was striking.

Praem intoned: "I see no maids."

Jan sighed and rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean."

"I see," Praem repeated. "No maids. No, maids. I see."

We burst into a fit of giggles, tapping the table with our tentacle tips. It wasn't even that funny, not really, but the nervous anxiety had us teetering on the edge of an inappropriate outburst. Strung tight, pulled taut, ready to jump at the first needle. We snorted and giggled and had to take several deep breaths. Raine grinned and gently nudged me with an elbow, which set off the giggles again.

Evelyn cleared her throat loudly. "Yes, my apologies, whatever. Jan, Heather is doubting again."

Jan turned her eyes to me. That killed the straggling giggles. I shrugged, heart fluttering too hard. "What if it doesn't work?"

Jan cocked an eyebrow. "Are you doubting that you can achieve the teleport?"

I shook my head. Several tentacles shook with me. "No. I don't think so. I can ... I can do it."

Raine spoke between mouthfuls of chocolate cereal. "She zapped a whole car Outside, once. She ever tell you that? Nah, our Heather can do it, no question."

Jan blinked. "A car? While moving?"

"A wreck," I explained. "From a junk yard. As an experiment. That was almost a year ago, now, when I still didn't really know what I was doing, or my own limits. With all of us—" We all waggled in the air, all together "—I have no doubt I can teleport something the size of a house. It'll take a lot out of me, it'll almost certainly force us — our tentacles, I mean — back into pneuma-somatic non-corporeality. I may bleed a lot, or possibly overheat. I might pass out. So, I'll only get one shot. But I'm pretty certain I can do it, on a technical level, yes. I might have to walk around the perimeter of the property first and—"

Jan interrupted with a click of her lips. "You already said that part, Heather. You already said all of this." She looked at Raine with a frown. "Have Twil and Zheng been in contact yet? It's almost nine."

Raine nodded, picked her phone up from the table, and checked the open message log again. "Both of them, yup. In position. Still no movement at Eddy's pad. Both cars are still right where they've been every day since. Twil says she's hungry. Zheng says kiss the shaman — that's directed at me, by the way."

Evelyn sighed. "Useful information, I'm certain."

Raine leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, then waggled her phone at Jan. "Ready when you are. I can start the group call whenever."

Evelyn huffed again. "I would still prefer walkie-talkies."

"Me too, but this is gonna be more reliable for all the parties we gotta include. This will work, Eevee, this isn't going to be a weak link."

Evelyn tutted. "It better not be."

I raised my voice over the conversation, repeating myself: "But what if it doesn't work?" I glanced at Raine, at Eevee, at Praem, at Jan — and at Lizzie, who was pattering in through the kitchen doorway on her bare feet. Behind her were red eyes and black lace, peeking around the door frame in her wake — Sevens and Aym paying as much attention as they always did. "What if I try, and it doesn't work?" I said. "Or something happens and we can't do it? What happens? I need ... I need to know I'm not our only hope. I'm ... I'm having trouble with the pressure."

"Retreat, regroup, rethink," Jan said softly. Lizzie wrapped her arms around Jan from behind, which earned her a gentle pat on the hands. "If this doesn't work, we try something else. We try again. First we do a lot of running away, sure, but then we try again. But you know all this. We went over this. What's wrong?"

We swallowed — too dry. We tried to still the nervous energy in all our tentacles, but couldn't. Raine reached over and closed a hand around one of mine. I squeezed back.

"I'm just anxious," I admitted. "I'm not used to all this build up. This waiting. And I can't do anything but wait. I wish we were there

right now, in front of the house already. I can't deal with this."

"Hey, Heather," Raine said. She squeezed my hand again. "Focus on me, yeah? Focus on where we are right now. I'm gonna be right with you, the whole way."

But Jan let out a knowing sigh. She nodded, hands on her slender hips. "Hurry up and wait. The soldier's curse. I wish I had better advice, but that's all you can do."

"What's all you can do?" I asked.

Praem answered for Jan: "Hurry up. And wait."

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Summer heat baked the fields and hedgerows beyond the trailing edges of the Sharrowford suburbs. The blue sky washed distant copses of trees with a suffocating blanket of sunlight, their leaves so bright and green that they hurt the eyes to stare at for too long. Deep summer turned cottage roof tiles into sizzling hot-plates and cooked the road surface until the asphalt turned soft and sticky beneath tires and shoes alike. Raine's battered old red box of a car did not possess the luxury of air-conditioning, so we drove with all the windows cracked, the summer air rushing by in a great endless stream as we plunged into the countryside.

Raine was at the wheel, focused on the road. Praem sat in the passenger seat, in charge of an opaque bundle of plastic bags in her lap. Evelyn and I sat in the rear; Evee had her phone out, connected to the group call to keep us all in contact. Her scrimshawed thigh-bone wand lay across her legs, gripped tight in one hand.

And I hurried up, and waited.

Chewing my tongue. Tying my tentacles in knots. Trying not to itch at the sigil-paper affixed to my belly with costume glue. My Outsider octopus-skull helmet-mask sat in my lap, a comforting metallic weight staring up at me with empty eye sockets, asking me if I was going to be okay. I was trying to be. Two tentacles held the mask tight, clinging to this scrap of physical self-definition. Another tentacle was half-snaked toward Evee, seeking a hand to hold — but she was occupied with wand and phone and her own internal fires.

Besides, she couldn't even see us reaching for her right then; our tentacles were hidden away in pneuma-somatic invisibility. For

safety, for ‘operational security’, for hiding from normal eyes who might have panic attacks at the sight of us.

‘Operational security’ can, as Raine would so delicately put it, ‘sit and swivel’.

Though I’m not one hundred percent sure what that means.

Proximity — both spatial and temporal — was ratcheting the anxiety upward to near-unbearable levels.

It was a physical sensation, a paradox of weight and lightness in all our limbs, tentacle and human alike. Adrenaline, cortisol, stress, muscle tension, a throbbing in our head, a flutter in our lungs, a throb in our bio-reactor. I knew this was only a normal reaction, I knew everyone else was feeling it too — well, perhaps not the bio-reactor part. Anxiety was clear in the slow bob of Evelyn’s throat, in the unwavering focus of Raine’s eyes on the road, in the occasional snippet of communication which came over the group call.

“Still nothing?” Jan asked. Her voice was tinny and twisted by the speaker on Evee’s phone.

“Naaaaah,” came Twil’s voice, replying from elsewhere on the connection, a sound-ghost in electronic crackle. “Nada, zilch, zip. Nothing moving out here. ‘Cept the bubble lads up in the sky, I guess. Both cars still in the driveway. Which is kinda weird, you know?”

Evelyn snapped: “No chatter, Twil. Keep it only as necessary. Clear the line.”

A sigh came from the phone. In my mind’s eye I could see Twil miming a mock-salute. “Yes ma’am, no ma’am, three bags full ma’am.”

Evelyn hissed through gritted teeth. “Keep your eyes on that fucking house!”

Another voice cut in. Lozzie, back home: “Tenny is here too, you know?”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Yes. My apologies. Perhaps she shouldn’t be present?”

A soft trilling, then nothing. The line was clear.

Even Praem showed the anxiety we all felt. Sitting ram-rod straight

in the front seat, she kept taking one hand off the plastic bags in her laps and smoothing the fabric of her jeans, though it was already perfectly smooth.

Distracting myself was impossible. How could I not think about the task which was only minutes away? How could I not focus on all the things which might go wrong, all the things which we might not have accounted for? I was surrounded by powerful mages and unstoppable demon hosts and I would be flanked by Raine, who we still regarded as categorically invincible, despite the fact she was only human.

Looking out of the window didn't help. The countryside was drenched in the brief burst of oppressive summer that sometimes graced the North, thickening the air and pushing down on the landscape like a bronze hammer. Cloudless skies seemed like a bottomless pit over the beetle of the car. I felt a little sick whenever I looked upward for too long.

The spirit-life didn't seem to care. The endless profusion of strange creatures out on hilltops or wandering the valleys didn't give a hoot about the sun or the heat. A giant bird-like thing of hanging meat and soft-velvet flesh nested atop a clutch of trees, incubating an egg the size of a building. A little herd of imitation-trees like clusters of reaching tentacles marched off across the fields, vanishing into the blazing landscape. A hopping horror — a thing of dozens of joints and several separate slavering dog-like heads — kept pace with the car for a while, then veered away when I raised a tentacle in greeting. Stick insects as large as cows clicked and clacked along distant ridges. Far, far, far to the west, perhaps out over the Irish sea, a true giant towered and plodded with exacting slowness, a plate of life made of insect chitin and black expanses, barely a line on the furthest horizon, only visible from our own highest climbs.

And we drove deeper, heading for the house that should not be.

Felicity's battered old range rover followed a little way behind us, a green-washed ghost in the sunlight downpour, keeping pace without crowding Raine's driving. Kimberly, Jan, and July rode with her. I had been surprised that Jan was accompanying us directly. We'd expected her to stay in Number 12 Barnslow Drive, with Lozzie, tucked away nice and safe.

"Oh I won't be rushing that house," she'd said, when we'd voiced

the query. “Don’t kid yourself, I’ll be safely in the rear. But I am a mage, for however much that counts. Four versus one is better odds than three versus one. I would never live with myself if you all got killed and I wasn’t there to ... well. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Twil and Zheng were already at the house — hanging back at a safe distance, hidden in the woods, watching the driveway and the cars for any sign that Edward knew we were coming.

Zheng had not been happy, last night.

“Shaman.”

“Zheng?”

“I am not your scout. I am not your cats-paw. I will be your left hand, but as a fist. I will tear the head from any wizard and offer you the heart, but this skulking ... ”

“I know, Zheng. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry to ask so much of you, and everyone else, but we have to do this. I need this. I need you to do this for me. Please.”

“Mmmmmurrrrrrrr.”

“After this, after Edward, we can ... the Eye. It will be the greatest possible fight, I— no, I don’t know that. I’m talking nonsense. I’m sorry, Zheng. I just need your help.”

Zheng had grinned all the same. “No, shaman. You do not know what the dark reaches will bring. But it will be a fight. Hnuh. So be it.”

Lozzie and Tenny were safe at home, alongside Marmite for company. And, unexpectedly, private eye Nicole Webb, along with her dog, Soup. She’d turned up in the early morning, full of demands.

“I’m not sitting this one out, Saye,” Nicole had said.

“Evelyn,” grunted Evelyn. “Drop the respect. And you have a broken leg. You’re not pulling any heroics on crutches and a cast.”

“Oh yeah? Will you?”

Unexpectedly, Evelyn had smiled at that. “I’ve been hobbling a lot longer than you, detective. And you don’t need both legs to do magic. We’re not taking you.”

“What about Kimberly?”

“Huh? What about Kimberly?”

“She’s going with the rest of you lot, right? She’ll be unprotected.”

“Kimberly Kemp is a mage, detective. She is—”

“Don’t you say she’s more than capable of protecting herself, because she isn’t and we both know it.”

“We are more than capable of protecting her.” Evelyn had sighed. “And she won’t be expected to do anything much at all. She’s there to help me and Felicity if we have to use real magic. Which we likely won’t, because Heather is going to teleport the entire house. She won’t be expected to come to Camelot. She is peripheral. Relax.”

“Then I’m joining the wire.”

“The ... what?”

“The wire. The call. The thing Raine is setting up. I’m in. At least let me see this one through with a front row seat. Even if it’s radio. Come on, it can’t hurt.”

And it couldn’t, so there she was, listening along with the rest of the peanut gallery.

Aym was folded away inside whatever method of spacial compression she used to accompany Felicity without being physically manifested. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was similarly hidden away; I didn’t quite understand that, despite her explanation earlier that morning.

“I’ll be with you, kitten. Wherever you are.”

“Sevens,” I’d sighed and blushed. We had hugged for a long, long time, tucked away in my bedroom while others were getting ready. The Yellow Princess had demanded an embrace with nothing but her cold blue eyes and a tilt of her chin, and we had obeyed.

“You’re supposed to stay here,” I said. “It took a terrible toll on you last time you broke your new set of self-definitions. Please, prioritize yourself. For me.”

“You are my self-definition, kitten. I prioritize myself by prioritizing you.”

“I’m ... not sure that’s healthy. Are you serious?”

Seven-Shades-of-Paradoxical-Process had tilted her head ever so slightly, allowing her sheet of precise blonde to shift to one side. “I am not sure anymore. Only that I am becoming. And if I did not protect you against a stereotypical evil wizard, then I would not like what I become. I will not harm myself, kitten. You have my promises. But I will be ready to harm others. For you.”

All of us were protected against esoteric harm — all of us ‘in the field’ — by the sigil papers that Evelyn had prepared, similar to the ones she’d made us all use when we’d first met Jan. Mine was glued to my stomach, a slip of magical figures and interlocking patterns that would act as ablative armour against several types of ‘common’ magical assault. Eevee had one herself, as did Raine, and every other human in our group. Even Praem wore the protection, tucked beneath her clothes.

Only Zheng had refused.

A certain somebody was tucked away out of danger, as far away as I had been able to get him to go; Badger had wanted to join the group call, had wanted to be part of this. I had told Raine to refuse the request, turn him down, tell him no. Too much of a coward to do it ourselves. But I couldn’t bear the thought of his second chance evaporating into smoke if Edward tried something unexpected. I didn’t need to worry about my unwanted, devoted disciple, amid all of this.

One other person lacked a sigil-seal, however: Amanda Hopton was on the group call Raine had set up — but she was at Geerswin farm, along with Twil’s mother, some of the Church muscle, and a full half of Hringewindla’s bubble-bud servitor-angels. She kept mostly quiet, content to act as a conduit to her god.

Four bubble-servitors rode with us — two on the roof of Raine’s car, two on the roof of Felicity’s range rover. I tried not to think about the surging sludge above our heads.

In Camelot, the Knights and the Caterpillars had stopped work, ready to ‘repel boarders’, as Raine said.

The gateway was closed. Lozzie had instructions on opening it when needed.

Everything was ready.

Halfway to our destination, on a lonely countryside road between the village of Horstramp and the tiny hamlet of Endsway, Raine slowed the car and turned her head to address the back seat.

“Evee,” she said, clipped and quick. “Phone.”

Evelyn’s head snapped round, eyes wide. My heart leapt in my chest. I started to stammer, but Evee got there first.

“What?” Evelyn spluttered. “I can—”

Raine carried right on. “Tell Felicity to pull into the lay-by just ahead, around this next corner of hedgerow. Tell her to go right, pull the car close to ours, close the gap.”

“What—”

Felicity’s voice floated up from the phone in Evee’s hands: “I hear you, Raine. Lay-by on the right. Why are we stopping?”

“We’re being followed.”

Nobody said anything for a heartbeat. The wheels churned on the road surface. The engine rumbled. The sun beat down on the green hedges and baked fields. My heart fluttered like a caged bird.

“Shit,” Evelyn hissed. “How can you tell?”

“We knew this might happen,” Raine said, focused on the road ahead. “Two cars, one black, shiny, new, the other is an old battered thing in blue. The latter was with us since Sharrowford, I just wasn’t sure. The other one swapped in when the blue one fell behind. It’s a tail, no question. The black one is right behind us.”

“Yo yo yo yo,” came Twil’s voice over the phone. “What, hey? You’re stopping, why?”

“Force a confrontation,” Raine said. She said it so plain and level, with such confidence. “We don’t want them surprising us from behind once we reach the house.”

Felicity said, through the phone: “Got it. Coming to a stop right behind you, Raine.”

The lay-by was right where Raine said it would be — nothing but a twin pair of asphalt bulges in opposite sides of the road, both with enough space for several cars or a single lorry to pull to the side and stop, out of the flow of traffic. Not that there was any traffic on

this quiet country road except us. Ragged hedges and farmland fences marched off over the little hills. The right-hand lay-by was sheltered by a few towering trees, leaning outward from the edge of a field, but even that shade was thin comfort.

“How the hell did you know this would be here?” Evelyn muttered.

Raine said, “Because I checked the route on Google Maps. Prep work, Evee, it’s all in the prep work.”

Raine pulled the car to a stop and turned off the engine. Felicity’s green range rover joined us seconds later, nuzzling in close so the two machines formed an effective wall of cover. Raine twisted, grabbing the carrier bag off Praem’s lap, and turning to me.

“Heather—”

“I’m not staying in the car,” we blurted out. “No. And we’re not hidden in some pocket dimension, Raine. If you fire that thing off in the middle of the English countryside, people are going to call the police.”

Raine grinned, beaming with pride. “I was gonna say ‘stay behind me’, but hey.”

I pouted. “You should be the one staying behind me. I’m the one who can deflect bullets.”

“I don’t think it’ll come to that.”

Evelyn huffed. “I’m not staying in here either. Praem, if you please, help me out of the car.”

We all climbed out of the cars and into the sizzling sunlight of high summer, to await sight of our pursuer.

Well, not quite all of us. Despite her firm words, Evelyn stood just behind the open back door of the car, shielded almost entirely by Praem. Her thigh-bone wand was tight in her fists. Felicity and July got out of the range rover, nodding to us. Felicity had her concealed shotgun over her shoulder, hidden in the sports bag. July strode forward with confidence; if Jan hadn’t called to her sharply, I suspect she would have stood in the road and braced to physically catch the car with her bare hands. Kimberly sat on the edge of the car seat, her legs out but her feet not touching the ground; Felicity made a gesture to keep her back. Jan did not emerge, but I could see her peering out of the back window of the range rover.

Everyone without pneuma-somatic sight slipped on a pair of modified seeing-glasses, just in case. The quartet of bubble-servitors rose from the roofs of both cars, hovering over us and waiting in perfect stillness.

“Nice to have air cover, hey?” Raine said with a grin and a wink. “Amanda, your boys see anything?”

From several different phones, Amanda Hopton’s voice answered: “Nothing that should not present is present or perfect or ... no. No. Sorry.”

Evelyn hissed: “Shut up and concentrate, Raine.”

Summer heat was like a physical weight, melting muscle tension, turning nerves to exhaustion, coaxing sweat from every back and forehead — except Praem, who stood with her chin high and her feet together. Even Evelyn was only in a skirt and t-shirt, her shawl left on the back seat of Raine’s car. The air was full of insects, flies and midges and more than a few irritating mosquitoes, the grass verge buzzing with hidden life. The others had all applied insect repellent; Praem hadn’t, and neither had I. Something about my altered biochemistry was no longer appealing to terrestrial bloodsuckers.

Shadows were completely still in the windless day. All eyes turned to the road up the distant hill we’d just descended.

Felicity hissed over her shoulder: “Think they’ll come say hello?”

Nobody answered. I swallowed. “I hope not.”

“They will,” Raine said. “They weren’t being subtle about following us. The black car, I mean. The blue one was trying to hide. Wasn’t very good at it.”

Seconds crept by, oozing hot. Shoe soles stuck to the melted tarmac. Evelyn huffed and puffed; Praem handed her a bottle of water.

“Hey, Raine,” Felicity whispered.

“Mmhmm?”

“Not gonna get your home made junk out?”

“It’s not junk,” Raine said. “And no. Too risky. Also too damn hot.”

“Mm.”

Then, like a shiny-shelled beetle scuttling over the edge of a leaf, a black car appeared in the road.

It didn't slow or pause, but just pattered on down toward us without a care in the world. Sunlight glinted off the curve of the roof. The wheels were shiny and clean, recently washed. The whole thing shone.

"That's the one," said Raine. "Everybody brace."

Felicity swallowed, hard and dry. "You don't think they'd just do a drive-by shooting, right?"

We said: "I'm ready for that."

I spread my tentacles — still pneuma-somatic, invisible, hidden away. I was wearing a spare hoodie which belonged to Raine — thin, orange, with a band logo on the front of a laughing giraffe — and nothing underneath, because of the heat. We'd cut slits down the sides of the hoodie, secured with velcro, ready for exactly this eventuality. It was a rough job, the best we could do under the circumstances, but it was essential.

The car dipped down the hill, slowed for the corner, then approached us at a crawl. Raine raised the plastic-wrapped package in her hands.

If this was a mistake and that was an innocent in there, God alone knew what we looked like. University girls out for the worst summer holiday experience in history. We must have all looked ready to leap behind the cars and start screaming. July radiated focused menace. I probably looked constipated. Evee could have scowled a hole in the road. Felicity was obviously more than a bit dodgy.

The black car pulled to a stop in the opposite lay-by. The engine kept running.

Raine aimed her hidden weapon. Evelyn's fingers moved across the bone-wand. I stretched out my limbs, ready to catch anything. Felicity wasn't even breathing.

A door cracked open — on the opposite side of the car, out of sight. A boot scuffed the grass. A head popped up over the roof of the car.

A squinting, smiling, smarmy face greeted us with a broad, drunken wink. Curly dark hair formed a sweat-stained crown over an olive-

coloured complexion. Wide shoulders followed, atop a big barrel chest, muscled and toned and well-trained, wearing a plain white t-shirt with a little sweat at the armpits.

“Hooooooooo, it is one hoooooot day,” said the man, in a slurring, drunken voice.

Evelyn hissed: “What the fuck?”

Raine snorted a laugh, but she was not amused. “Really? You wanna get shot, mate? ‘Cos you’re going the right way for it.”

Felicity was confused. “Who is this? Who is this? Who are we dealing with?”

“Hey there girlies!” The man waved a casual hand. “Thanks for stopping for me, yo?”

Evelyn raised her voice: “You promised we’d never see you again.”

“Ah ah ah,” said the man. “I promised you’d never see me again — if you let me go! I had to like, fucking escape, you know? I had to run! You didn’t let me go. So heeeeeeey, this ain’t breaking no promise!”

“This man is a living shit,” said Raine.

“He’s a mage,” Evelyn snapped. “We’ve dealt with him before. He’s ...”

Mister Joe King didn’t look like a dried and mummified corpse anymore. Somebody had watered him, filled out his skin, made him look like a normal human being. He shot Evelyn a broad wink, mocking and self-conscious.

Truth be told, I barely remembered the man.

‘Joe King’ was almost certainly not his real name. And the grinning, cheeky, mock-drunk mannerisms were almost certainly not his real personality either. Mister Joking was the mage who had somehow infiltrated the cult’s castle-dimension long after we’d taken possession of it, ostensibly to perform some kind of communication ritual with the giant sphere-children left behind by the star beneath the castle — but actually to steal the secrets of the gate to Carcosa for Edward Lilburne, his employer or master or one-time contractor; their relationship wasn’t clear. The only time we’d encountered this man, he’d shown at least two distinct personalities, perfect disguises

for the mage beneath.

He'd also fought like a supernatural martial artist, and nearly done us a lot of damage.

As if reading my mind, Raine spoke slowly and carefully: "You stay where you are, friend. And keep those hands visible." She pointed with the plastic-bag bundle in both hands. "I think you can guess what this is. Mages don't always hold up well to bullets."

Joe King grinned that lazy, cheeky, wide-boy grin, and waggled all his fingers. "Wouldn't dream 'o coming over there, sweetheart. Nah, don'cha worry. I'm not poking a single toe out from behind this here car. And you don't have to come over here either, see? Just a few words, that's all I'm here for, and then I'll be on me way. Cross my heart!" He cast his eyes up at the blazing sunlight. "Not like it's a good day for an outdoor fight anyway, right? This heat, man!"

Raine turned her head without looking away from the mage. Felicity openly glanced at Eevee. Evelyn was gritting her teeth.

"Down," said Praem, softly.

"Right," Evelyn grunted. "Don't engage him. Too much risk. Amanda, you hear that? Servitors off him. Don't do anything."

I kept my tentacles pulled to maximum extension, just in case. In the corner of my eye, in the back of Felicity's range rover, I spotted Jan frowning very hard at Mister Joe King.

Raine said, suddenly casual and easy: "Are we rumbled, then, mate?"

"Eh?" King made a silly face, the sort of face one makes when pretending to be deaf but knowing that everyone sees through your nonsense. "Ehhhh? Rumbled? As if you were ever un-rumbled, girlies! Ha ha!"

"What do you want?" Evelyn snapped.

Joe King waggled his fingers again. "To let you know that he knows, and he knows that you know. And now both of you know the other knows, so everybody knows, and nobody's going into knowing without knowing that the other side knows what they know."

A grin, a shit-eating, cheek-tensing, tooth-showing grin.

On the group call, Twil snorted; she must have heard that.

“I will send you Outside,” I said. “I can touch the road right now, send you, your car, and a ten-metre area Outside, to wherever I choose. Would you like to meet the King in Yellow? Or the Eye? Or shall I drop you into a lake of boiling mercury?”

Joe King did a big mock-cringe. Next to me, I felt Evelyn grin with satisfaction, which made me flush with pride.

Of course, everyone but King knew I was bluffing; we probably had one shot and one shot only at such a large teleport. Recovery might take a whole day. I needed to conserve my energy and the distributed brain-math potential of my tentacles for Edward’s house.

“Nah nah nah nah,” Joe King said, hand half-raised over the roof of his car. “I’m serious, like. Came to warn you off. He knows you’re coming.”

Raine said: “And why do you care?”

Joe shrugged. “‘Cos I’m just such a nice bloke? Can’t a guy give a shit anymore?”

Evelyn huffed. “This is absurd. He is a delaying tactic.”

“Nah, look, look, ladies, gimme a sec, hey, hey?” Joe King’s smile got wider and wider and wider — and then snapped back into nothingness, like a rubber band pulled too far. All the drunken, laddish mannerisms flickered off, like a light going out. He straightened up, unamused, dead-faced; the shift in posture and expression added about ten years to his age.

Felicity nearly pulled out her shotgun. July jerked forward, a falcon eager to leave the gauntlet.

“Hold up!” Raine shouted. “Fliss, this is just what he does. Stay cool. Stay cool. You too, July. Cool it.”

Felicity was shaking. “I’m cool. Cucumber cool. Right.”

Joe King stared at us with unimpressed eyes. “Forgive my youthful exuberance,” he said in that absurdly rich Welsh accent, a completely different voice to his laddish trick-personality. “I am informing you that my association with Mister Lilburne is over. I am leaving. I am already gone. He has gone too far in his efforts to protect his property and I wish no part of what is about to happen,

because I do not believe I would survive the process.” He nodded curtly, to Eevee — and then to me. “Goodbye, Miss Saye. Goodbye, daughter of the Eye.”

He ducked, already slipping back into his car.

“Wait!” Evelyn snapped. She raised her bone wand. Raine gestured with the hidden weapon. I almost — almost — hissed.

Joe King paused. He looked at us like we were already dwindling in his rear view mirror. “This car is warded and armoured. I will repel any assaults with ease. If you fire a weapon all you will achieve is some nearby house calling the police.”

Raine just laughed. “Mate, come on, why even stop and tell us all this? You gotta see how transparent this looks, right?”

Joe King’s eyes flickered quickly — to me. He said, slowly, picking his words with care: “The daughter of the Eye is intriguing. The world will be a more interesting place with her in it. And a less interesting one if Mister Lilburne wins this conflict. I warn you off, because ... I am an old and sentimental fool. That is all. Good day to you.”

“Explain what you meant,” Evelyn snapped. “What efforts? What’d Edward done? If you give a shit, warn us properly. What are we walking into?”

Mister King sighed. “That is proscribed by the bounds of the geas on me. No.”

“Bullshit,” Evelyn hissed.

Raine said, “What about the second car?”

Joe King paused. A serious frown flickered across his brow.

“He doesn’t know,” I felt us say. “He doesn’t know. That’s not a lie. He doesn’t know.”

“There is no second car,” he said. “Only me. You are playing games.”

Raine shook her head. “There was absolutely a second car, friendo. Blue, old, bit of rust on her. You took over from it.”

“Then it was nothing to do with me. We’re done here. I suggest you attempt to live. Good luck.”

From the phone, I heard Twil say: “Yeah great advice, dumb-fuck.”

A final nod — and I caught that tiny, brief twist of his eyes, one last look, different from all the others so far, furtive and shy and maybe even a little afraid.

Joe King finally looked at Jan.

Then he ducked into his car, slammed the door, gunned the engine, and roared off down the country road, breaking the speed limit and leaving us all behind.

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No way we were turning back.

Fifteen minutes later we reached Edward’s house, deep in a heavily wooded stretch of otherwise unremarkable countryside. We’d passed only two other vehicles on the road since we had stopped for Joe King — a single car driven by a little old lady, and a tractor moving between disconnected plots of farmland. We were in the far reaches of the rural countryside now, but in a totally different way to Brinkwood with its picturesque looks, or the forest-wrapped secrets of Geerswin farm. This area of woodland — closer to Stockport than Sharrowford — was somehow sterile and empty. There were no villages for miles and miles, just empty heathland, scattered fields, and now these sickly-looking trees vanishing into the distance on either side of the road. Their trunks were too far apart, too pale and smooth, their leaves up in the canopy almost seeming to wilt in the powerful summer heat.

The property itself was set far back from the public road, at the end of a very long gravel driveway — or at least, the memory of a gravel driveway. It was more a dirt road that hadn’t seen any repair in years, perhaps decades. Raine and Felicity drove halfway up that battered old track, then parked the cars once we were beyond sight of the main road.

“Still clear?” Raine asked the group call.

“Nothing moving, still,” Twil said with a sigh. “You here, then?”

“We’re here. Get ready.”

Twil and Zheng came to meet us on the driveway. We all piled out of the cars, ready in a way we hadn’t been when confronted by the unexpected figure of Joe King. Evelyn took Praem’s arm in lieu of

her walking stick, so she could hold her thigh-bone wand with both hands if she needed to. Twil was vibrating with energy, bouncing on the balls of her feet, aching to transform but holding back for now. Raine opened the boot of her car and pulled out her hidden stash — black combat knife, home-made riot shield, motorcycle jacket, helmet, the full works. She'd further modified the home-made shield by plastering the front with Eeve's sigil papers. She stripped down to a tank top in the heat, then quickly shrugged into her gear. Only then did she unwrap the plastic-bag package.

She hefted Amy Stack's Sten gun, checked the mechanism, and held it in one hand, shield braced in the other.

"Heather?" she asked me from inside the muffled confines of the helmet. "You holding up alright?"

"Raine, you look so cool." I laughed despite the nerves juddering through every cell — or perhaps because of them.

She struck a little pose for me, but only briefly. Now was the time for concentration.

Zheng briefly cupped the back of my head, purring her approval. Felicity did a series of strange exercises with her fingers, then pulled her shotgun out and made sure it was loaded. Kimberly lurked behind her, looking terrified but determined to help if needed. Jan and July stuck close together — but Jan paused to pluck something out of her hidden extra-dimensional pockets, some kind of miniature hand-fan. I didn't ask about that. But we did meet her eyes for a moment, asking a silent question — then an overt one.

"Jan," we said. "Do you think Mister Joe King really left?"

Jan almost jumped, but she caught the meaning in my eyes. I know he recognised you, Jan. But I don't care, I'm not asking about that right now. I'm asking if we're safe from him.

"Oh, I should think so," she said. "Sensible fellow, getting out of the way of all this. I would do the same."

To my surprise — and apparently Jan's too, from the way she flinched — July echoed: "Sensible fellow. Good runner."

"Quite," Jan said through gritted teeth. She met my eyes again, letting me know we would talk of this later.

The bubble servitors rose from our cars, rising up and up and up, to join the cloud-ring of their fellows which surrounded the property. Hringewindla's bubble-servitors were everywhere, hundreds of the things, lining the driveway, speckling the trees, hanging in a massive circle around the house itself. We had crowded Edward in with monsters of our own.

We slipped our squid-skull helmet on over our head, a last line of personal defence and security. I rolled up my sleeves, too; the heat was unbearable, a blur of sunlight smeared across my senses, full of summer insects. Sweat was running down my front and my back. The others were saying things — chattering over the group call, checking in with Lozzie, with Amanda, with all the other points of our plan. But I was wrapped tight in the unbearable tension of my own body, staring up the driveway at the house hidden just beyond the rise of the landscape.

I wasn't even aware of manifesting my own tentacles into full physical flesh. The first I knew of it was the scratch of the velcro against my skin. We all waited, poised, aching for action.

"Glasses on, everyone?" Raine said. "We cool? We cool. It's eleven in the morning in rural England and we're all wearing shades. Yeeeeeeeah baby."

Twil snorted, but I could tell she was struggling with nerves too, trying to discharge the anxiety with too much laughter.

"Shut up and focus, Raine," Evelyn hissed. Then, to my surprise, she said: "Fuck me. I didn't think we'd get this far."

"Evee?" we said.

"I thought he would have reacted by now. I thought we'd have pulled back. This is going too smoothly, we're just walking up to the front door. He hasn't even reacted."

Jan said: "I agree. However, he may simply have fled. We keep going until there's a reaction."

"How are you not afraid?" Evelyn hissed at her. "I thought you were a habitual coward?"

"I am." Jan sighed. "But when you're already this deep, fear can just get you killed. Everybody ready? Right, stick together then. Here we go. Off into the woods."

I barely felt my own legs as we all walked up that gravel driveway and onto the property.

The house was exactly like in the pictures, exactly as I had seen several days ago through the matrix of brain-math interpretation: crooked, squat, compact, old. Brick and beam, black and brown. Tiny latticed windows peered out, full of darkness, with nothing visible inside. The front door was a slab of wood like a little puckered mouth, sheltered by an overhang of tiles. Walking up the curve of the hill and seeing the thing leering back down at us was like making eye contact with a bleary giant.

I couldn't place the style, the era, the provenance of the building. Then again, perhaps I was just too preoccupied.

We passed inside the low remnants of a perimeter wall, just stones lost amid long grass. Raine and Felicity pointed their guns all over the place. Twil stalked ahead, claws exposed. Zheng walked at my side, a bodyguard with her eyes tracking back and forth. Jan and July hung back slightly, alongside Eevee and Praem.

The dry fountain was worse than in the pictures: it was in a terrible state of disrepair, filthy with dried gunge and full of fallen leaves and animal nests and owl droppings. The once-graceful statue of a naked woman was cracked and worn.

The others exchanged a few words — “Watch the windows, watch the windows, watch for movement,” “There's nobody here. Nothing magical either,” “Getting the fucking creeps, I tell you what,” “This place is empty, how long have those cars been sitting there?” — but I couldn't concentrate on anything but the house. My stomach was a fist. My head throbbed. My tentacles tingled.

Two cars stood close to the house — the expensive, dirty range rover, and the low, anonymous black car. Neither had moved since we'd finally discovered the location of the house.

“Close enough,” Raine said, loud and clear. “Hold here. Everyone hold up.”

Everyone halted, a good ten feet shy of the fountain. Throats bobbed. Breath came too rough in too many throats. Jan whispered several things over the group call, to Amanda and Lozzie. Affirmative answers came back. Twil growled with tension. Praem said, “Calm. Still.”

“Heather, it’s time,” said Evelyn.

“I know,” we said. “I know, I just—”

“No, Heather,” she grunted. “It’s time. Take this thing, dammit, before it causes a problem.”

“I’m sorry?” We twisted to look at her through the eyes of my squid-skill mask. Evelyn was rigid with tension, clinging to Praem’s arm, and holding out a lump of white quartz. “Oh! Oh! The stone!”

Evelyn huffed — irritation covering for nerves. “Take it. Quickly. The longer we take to do this, the more chance of something going wrong. Take it!”

I grabbed the Fadestone in a tentacle. I disliked touching the thing, there was something vaguely offensive about it, but it would give me some extra protection, on these final few steps, even if I didn’t really know how to use it like Evelyn could.

Raine said: “Heather, you ready?”

“Mm.”

“You can do it. You can. I know you can. You need to circle the place, or not?”

We shook our head. “No. No. I’m ready. There’s nothing else to do.”

“We’ve all got you covered. The second you’re done, I’m gonna scoop you up. Well, Zheng’ll scoop you up.”

Evelyn grunted: “We all scoop her up. Heather, go.”

I stepped forward five paces. My trainers crunched on the thin gravel. Sweat rolled down my skin. Two tentacles helped move my legs.

Back home, last night, I’d had all sorts of questions. What if there was anybody else in the house? What if Edward Lilburne has a family? What if he’s harbouring other mages, or the remains of his half of the cult? Do you think he’s married? What if there’s an innocent in there?

When I’d asked those things, Raine had said: “You did promise to fuck his wife, Eevee.”

Evelyn had snorted. “And fuck her I shall, if that needs doing.

Anything to make this work, anything to make it safe. I'm serious, Raine. If it comes to that. Which it won't."

But then, with the hateful, twisted lump of a house in front of me, and the whirling, bobbing cloud of bubble-servitors all around, and my friends at my back, all I could think of was the task, the brain-math, the equation to go Out.

Anxiety flowed away. Homo Abyssus reared up.

I was here to protect my pack. Jan was right — why be afraid now?

Five paces. We stopped. We crouched. Touched the ground with both hands and half our tentacles.

This was too easy. Evelyn and Jan had a point — why had Edward not retaliated? It wasn't as if this could be a trap. The 'twin prime' trick with the beams wasn't affecting any of us like it had with Badger. It wasn't warding us off or keeping us back. He wasn't capable of countering hyperdimensional mathematics. He should have been throwing everything he had at us to keep us away from the building itself, to keep me out of range, to stop me from dumping him and his Outside.

Why let us get this close? Had he really fled his fortress, abandoned the siege? Part of me hoped he had, saving us the trouble. Part of me hoped he hadn't, because we needed to kill him, remove him as a threat.

Either way, we had to try this method. It was the best we had.

I plunged my mind into the dripping black machinery down in the base of my soul, grasping the jury-rigged and rewired lessons of the Eye with eight hands. Burning pain shot outward along all our tentacles, a distributed load of effort and agony climbing in intensity as I used hyperdimensional equations to define the fountain, the cars, the gardens, the soil, the leaves, the gravel — and the house.

It was the first equation I had ever learned, the first piece of hyperdimensional mathematics I had ever made work. And it was simple. Here, and there. Reality, and not. Select a thing, an object, a definition, and then make it not-here, make it elsewhere, push it through the membrane to Outside.

Out you go! Easy as pie. With a little blood and pain and screaming

and passing out, of course.

This was simply the same thing, but larger than ever before. The same equation, just with a bigger set of brackets. My nose ran with blood and my head spiked with pain before I was even done, but seven of us took the effort of one now, and I could do this without passing out before I was finished.

The fountain, the cars, the gardens, the soil, the leaves, the gravel, the—

Houses.

And here was Edward's little secret.

When processed through the perfect mathematics of the substrate of reality itself, there were two houses. Not one building. Two houses. Identical. Twins.

If the brain-math had not happened at the speed of thought, I would have smiled in triumph. I might even have cheered.

I'd expected this.

Edward had used the twin prime trick to double a concept, double a definition, but I could see both! I could see everything, anything, all! I was the angelic daughter of the Eye and nothing could slip away out of my sight, my observation, my power to define. I simply expanded the equation by another notch, encompassing the whole house, the two-in-one house, the twin house.

And with that — Out!

The last piece of the equation slammed into place. Pain flared outward through our tentacles like molten iron in feverish veins as we held the equation complete and whole; this was heavy, and complex, and expansive, and the pain would take a great toll as it completed. Our bio-reactor flared with heat, glowing hot to supply the energy. Tentacles screamed and stretched and my head split with pain, but there was no stopping it now, all this soil and brick and beam and stray leaves and dirt and animal bones and paint and air and slate and wood and the largest object we had ever teleported—

The house unfolded itself, reached out with a hand that was not a hand, and pinched off the end of the equation.

Old and crooked and brick and solid and *staying*.

Out?

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luminosity of exposed organs – 20.7

Houses can talk.

I learned about that long before I met Raine and Evelyn, long before I discovered magic and monsters, long before I became ‘In The Know’. Houses — all buildings, really — will whisper their secrets to you, if only you know how to listen. Scuffs on the skirting boards, dents in the door frames, gouges from a granite countertop — these are superficial smiles and guarded graces. If you want to know the real secrets, the deep scarring and hidden traumas of the heart, you have to ask, gently, kindly, lovingly, with coaxing hands and soft murmurs spoken into the quivering junction between two walls.

Texture, wood grain, the chemical composition of paint; echoes, brick styles, the height of a ceiling. Run sound waves through concrete and mortar, scrape the surface of a peeling wall, take an expert eye to the curl of an old carpet. Then, one must listen and interpret the whispered echoes returned by the building. Places where no human eyes can see and no human lips can speak will talk back to you in the language of angle and junction, vibration and reflection and sudden silence. In this way, a house will recount to you the history of a limb, the age of the wood, the unseen gaps widened by time and weather, the position of nails and the width of cement, the shearings and shiftings of guts and gubbins.

Houses will talk back to you in your own voice, if you know how to whisper. I’ve always thought that is a beautiful secret.

And that is what I heard, when Edward Lilburne’s house told me in no uncertain terms that it was not for moving.

There were no words in my head, no slow and ponderous voice saying, “Oh no, my dear, I’m far too old to be going on an Outing to Outside. I’m quite happily settled here, thank you very much. Besides, have you ever heard of a house moving? Ho ho ho, goodness me no.”

Actually, that would have been much worse.

A voice could have been anything — the house ensouled, a trick by Edward, a demon speaking through the building, a hidden servitor playing a nasty jape, or just us going completely crackers and talking to ourselves without realising we were doing so. But no, this was communication by and from a building, in the language of a building, a language of brick and beam and tile and mortar and plaster and paint and pipe and wire and glass and frame and the empty spaces between which defined purpose.

And it didn't sound amused or jolly. It sounded, to us, bitter and cold and lonely and half-dead.

How had it terminated a hyperdimensional mathematical equation? Of that we were far less certain — just that it had, by weight and force and gravity of its own logic, imposed upon the space I was trying to affect.

Houses do not move.

But this one had unfolded itself like a fractal equation, with arms which were not arms and hands which were not hands and a face of time and surfaces and empty holes.

I had, at best, a split-second of frozen time in which to act, still locked in the unstoppable, inevitable mathematical forces of the equation which I had completed. The House had somehow pinched off the final part, but the equation described a piece of reality, a Truth which was being spoken by my neurons and nerve endings and written in the fabric of the universe. The equation would still complete — but what would that mean? Would everything but the house move? Would the house shake like a struck bell but stay here, in reality? Would the effect bounce back on me?

This was new; I had no idea.

All we knew for certain was that I would still be spent. In that frozen second, out in reality, I was bleeding from nose and eye sockets and sweating blood into my hairline, a scream trapped between my clenched teeth, pain flash-burning down all six tentacles. Every additional neuron was turned toward the task of shunting thousands of pounds of earth and brick and wood through the membrane to Outside. The largest thing I'd ever sent Out.

If the House did not move, we would be spent anyway — the last

time I had run such a complex piece of hyperdimensional mathematics, our tentacles had collapsed back into invisible pseudo-flesh, our bio-reactor had run hot enough to make our flank glow, and we had bled from every pore. There would be no second shot, not without at least a day's recovery. And here we were, before the walls of our foe's fortress.

Was this a trap?

Houses do not move.

We groped for a solution, trying to jam fingers and tentacle-tips into holes in the logic of the House.

What about caravans, mobile homes, camper vans? Those moved.

Those are not Houses. Observe the beam in the middle of the front wall, the black one with the holes plugged by plaster at either end: it was taken from a tree felled in 1546. Oak, two hundred years old at felling. It formed part of a crossbeam in the roof of a Church, in a village called Wenbrook. The roof was damaged by fire in 1812 and the beam was removed and recovered, still sound and strong. The beam was brought here, and used because it had been damaged by a fire in a Church. It became part of the House. The beam has never moved.

The beam moved three times!

The beam has never moved. The beam was a tree, the tree did not move. The beam was a Church, the Church did not move. The beam is a House, the House does not move. The beam has not moved for almost seven hundred years. Houses do not move.

The beam was moved, by people. I'm a person.

But I was not saw and hammer and chisel and rope. I could not deconstruct the House and move parts that are no longer the House. I wanted to move all the House, all at once, as the House.

Houses do not move.

The House had very good logic. Upright walls. Sensible doors. Houses often do.

Houses are just matter, like anything else. I am the daughter of the Eye and I see everything you are, everything you are made of, infinitely reducible to constituent parts, and any of those can move.

All of those can be forced to move!

We have eight hands and two eyes and that is more than enough to move you!

At that, the House continued unfolding, reaching into the spaces of the equation, reaching for me, reaching past me and over me for my friends and companions, reaching upward toward the ring of bubble-servitors.

The House was four walls and one, then eight walls and two, then sixteen walls and four, then thirty two walls and eight, then sixty four walls and sixteen, then—

Compound expansion, twinned and twinned and twinned again.

We couldn't match that.

In a last desperate effort at communication, we threw human concepts at the House — pleading and promises, questions and queries. Why do this for Edward Lilburne? Why protect a mage who had kept you caged and cold and lonely? Why resist if I promise not to harm you? Why not try something else, with me?

But the House didn't even know who 'Edward Lilburne' was, no more than a stone knows it's part of a wall. The House simply did as Houses do.

It wrapped and protected inner layers. The House inside the House. Empty, but full.

In truth, we lost our nerve. We had no idea what a House would do, even just conceptually, if it got a grip on Raine, or Eevee, or even Zheng or July. What damage would a corrupted home do to an unprotected mind, drawn within itself? What bitterness and entrapment and hate could flow outward from such an abused and misused place?

If only I'd had more time, I could have come here to talk.

As the equation collapsed, I did the last thing which made any sense. We reached out — physically, in reality, with a tentacle and a thought and bundle of neurons, mirroring hyperdimensional mathematics with flesh. We caught one of those hands-which-was-not-a-hand, one of those reaching sets of architectural logic. We caught it and we squeezed and we tried to communicate:

We know Houses! We know a House, anyway. We know a House full of life and safety and warm little spots, and she never moves either, but she's loved and loves in turn, and you don't have to be like this, you don't have to lash out, you don't have to—

That brief connection may have been what saved us from the worst of the consequences. I couldn't be sure.

The equation crashed to completion, like a stoppered-up steam engine exploding in one last burst of power. And we crashed out of the frozen moment of hyperdimensional mathematics, slammed back into a body wracked with pain.

And the House did not move.

But the top half-inch of gravel and soil and grass and leaves and dust vanished instantly, shunted Outside, probably to be met by some very confused looks from Lozzie's Knights and Caterpillars. A circle of ground around the House was suddenly a stripped-clean bed of fresh dry earth, exposed to the blazing summer light and the baking heat. Everything the House considered an inviolate part of itself did not move an inch — but my hyperdimensional equation caught parts of the dry fountain in great semi-circular bites, leaving it pockmarked and war-wounded. The two cars did not fare well either, suddenly shot through as if by giant metal-eating woodworms.

I tumbled backward and landed on my bum with a hard jolt up my spine, flailing and bleeding and crying out through a mouth full of blood and bile. I didn't vomit — I'd finally mastered the trick of holding onto my stomach acid — but my tentacles collapsed back into pneuma-somatic invisibility, the reality of flesh itself recoiling from the neuron-pain which ruled from root to tip. My vision was a veil of crimson, my mouth was filled with the taste of iron, and my borrowed hoodie was glued to my back with blood-sweat. The sunlight was already turning the blood to a sticky crust.

Hands were grabbing us, holding me up, shouting things for my benefit and their own — but I was too focused on holding our body together, on the step-down slowdown of my bioreactor, of trying not to sob in agony.

And in failure.

Everybody else was shouting.

“It’s still there! It’s still fucking there! What happened, what the hell happened!?”

“Twil, shut up!” Evelyn roared.

Jan, talking too fast: “Eyes up. Everyone, eyes up. Back to the cars, right now—”

Evelyn, panicking: “Zheng, Zheng, pick her up! Zheng! What—”

And somebody was screaming a string of nonsense, incoherent babble about layers within layers and peeling and puncturing and flaying and how she knew exactly what kind of trick this was, about drills and rasping and holding shells in place and—

Hringewindla, in Amanda’s voice, screaming over the group call.

Through my blood-stained vision, I saw the bubble-servitors descend upon the house like a swarm of piranhas on a cow’s carcass.

Spiralling down through the air like a whirlwind coalescing and reaching toward ground-contact, the bubble-servitors joined together in a single gigantic organism, directed at a distance by the will of Hringewindla — the Outsider cone-snail who understood all too well the logic of hiding within outer layers, and how to crack them open with violence. The bubble-angels flowed from behind us, from their station-keeping on the driveway and in the trees, applying every scrap of force Hringewindla could bring to bear. They glinted in the glorious sun, a rolling wave of pneuma-somatic bio-mass. A hammer-blow to a rooftop.

Behind me, somebody shouted into the phone: “Stop! Tell her to stop!”

Too late.

The flying mass of bubble-servitors descended as one, like storm winds blending together and whipping around each other to form a tornado. They struck the roof of the house as one, a lightning bolt in semi-transparent oil-shimmer.

What Hringewindla was hoping to achieve, I had no idea. Smash the house to pieces? Cave in the roof? Give it a good knock? In retrospect I think he got overexcited. Over-invested. Overextended.

And like soap bubbles swirling down a plughole on an invisible

current, the bubble-servitors vanished as one.

It took less than half a second. The roof of the house simply swallowed them up, as if they had passed through an invisible gate. Behind me, Amanda was babbling and sobbing over the group call: “What- what- where are- where are- we? We? How inside but out, outside but upside- up- up-”

In half a second we’d lost our trump card, our air cover, and our footsoldiers. If this was a trap it was springing with incredible accuracy.

It didn’t take a strategist to judge this was all going badly wrong; abyssal instinct screamed in my chest that we needed to leave. Now. Go. Now!

“What the fuck? What the fuck?” Twil kept repeating, gaping, staring at the house. Strong hands were hauling me upright, pulling off my squid-skull mask so I could wheeze for breath, trying to wipe the blood from my eyes. But our knees wouldn’t lock, our legs wouldn’t take our weight. There was blood under my armpits and in my hair and it hadn’t worked, it hadn’t worked, the house was trapped, not a trap, a hole, a void over the truth, over—

“Ignore her!” Evelyn shouted. “Ignore Heather!” Was I babbling, too? “Back to the cars, right now. Zheng! Zheng, what are you—”

Twil pulled me upright and got me on my feet just in time to see the front door of the House slam open.

A monster stepped forth.

Six and a half feet of naked glistening muscle wrapped in skin so pale it was almost translucent, painted with blood-ink magic circles and intricate ward sigils over her belly and chest and thighs. She was completely hairless. Her eyes were red, with no whites or irises, just bloody solid balls of crimson. A pair of massive curving horns sprouted from her forehead, coal-black and sharp-tipped. Her mouth had widened and elongated into a skull-splitting grin which ran halfway up both sides of her head, showing a mouthful of teeth each the length of my index finger.

A demon-host. Possibly one that had survived the Eye-driven massacre of the Sharrowford Cult. Maybe one of Edward Lilburne’s own home-made brews. It didn’t matter.

She held some kind of bulky firearm in one hand, swinging it back and forth as she strode toward us.

It was oddly refreshing, to be faced by something one could punch, or shoot, or have a good shout at. But instinct had me scrambling back — or trying to, flailing and spluttering in Twil's arms.

Raine must have shot at the Grinning Demon with the Sten gun, because a juddering bang-bang-bang came from my left. Flowers of blood and flesh erupted in the demon-host's flank. She ignored it, grinning like a parody of a skull, striding through the shafts of sunlight with speed and purpose. She came around the side of the fountain.

"Consiste et sta!" Evelyn shouted.

The air temperature plummeted by thirty degrees. The ground flash-froze, gravel coated in ice, summer sunlight fighting to melt this strange intrusion; Evelyn with her bone-wand, Felicity backing her up, ready to repel this foolish demon.

But then other figures shot out of the open front door of the House — figures in black, carrying weapons, clad in body armour and robes. The air crackled with static electricity as somebody countered whatever Evelyn was trying to do.

My vision was full of blood. I was still sagging and aching and hissing with pain. This was all happening too fast, too fast to keep track of; Raine had pulled the trigger on the Sten gun again. One of the people from inside the house said words in Latin that made him spit blood onto the bare earth.

And the demon-host stepped closer.

Of course Zheng was at my side. Of course she couldn't resist the bait.

The Grinning Demon stopped, naked pale feet on the dry ground, that grin splitting the world in two with red lips and white teeth. Zheng was already a blur, shooting toward her in a single arc of lethal intent. There was no doubt who would win — the Grinning Demon was big and strong and deep in the madness of being summoned into a human corpse, but Zheng was a nine hundred years old unstoppable force.

The Grinning Demon raised the bulky plastic gun in one hand. I'd

thought it was a toy, or a joke, or some bizarre affectation.

It was a harpoon gun.

Zheng didn't bother to dodge. She shouldn't have needed to dodge.

The harpoon took her through the chest, crunching through ribs and mulching part of a lung and bursting out through her back in a welter of blood and chips of bone. Zheng roared with laughter, barely slowed by the impact, one massive hand reaching for the Grinning Demon's head.

Zheng slammed to a halt in mid-air, flailing for purchase.

The harpoon was stuck in her chest — and the tip was stuck in the air, in nothingness, fixing her in place, like an animal pinned to a tree. All Zheng's unstoppable muscular power flailed at nothing. She roared with offense and frustration and rage, gripped at the harpoon, tried to yank it out, tried to pull herself off the shaft. But she was pinned. To nothing.

The Grinning Demon grinned at her, inches away from her crushing power.

"Got you," said the Grinning Demon. Her skull-splitting smile turned past me, presumably to address July or Praem. She said: "Got one for you too. Stay still, puppies."

Zheng roared in her face: "I will rip your head off and shit down your neck and into your soul!"

"Zheng!" I heard myself splutter — but somebody was holding me back. "I'll— Zheng! Get her—"

But I could do nothing. We were spent, bleeding into our clothes, flailing just to stay standing, reactor spluttering out.

To the credit of Edward's people, they'd known exactly which of us was most lethal.

The rest of the confrontation had not erupted into a fight — not yet — but frozen into the horrifying paralysis of an armed stand-off.

I think Edward's people knew they had us cornered.

There were eight of them, besides the Grinning Demon. Three of them were obviously mages, though I doubted they were anything like Evelyn or Felicity. One of the mages — a middle-aged woman

with greying hair and a slender frame — was pointing a series of metal sticks at the back of the demon host, presumably to keep her under a modicum of control. She was panting, covered in sweat, sagging with apparent physical effort, gripping the metal rods in white-knuckled hands.

The other two mages were both men, both young, both wild-eyed and rail-thin. One of the pair looked younger than me, not long out of boyhood; his fingers were held out before him, twisted into an unnatural pose, presumably repelling whatever Evelyn and Felicity were trying to. A scream was trapped behind his lips. The lad was terrified. Beside him was a slightly older man, in spectacles and a shirt, with a huge leatherbound tome open in his arms, shouting bits of Latin and directing the boy.

The other five were men with guns.

Real guns. Black and shiny and ridged, like something out of a science fiction movie, like machine-crabs one might find at the bottom of an alien ocean. Those guns made Raine's stolen Sten look like scrap metal by comparison. All five of those men were dressed in body armour, like they'd expected a gunfight. Big black boots and bits of camouflage gear and bulky sunglasses. All of them seemed a little old to be soldier boys, a little too experienced. They'd rushed forward and 'taken cover' as Raine might put it, hunkering down behind the other side of the stone fountain.

They seemed totally out of place in the English countryside in the middle of summer. There was something horribly unreal about that moment. Like we'd fallen into a video game.

And all those guns were pointed at us.

Their leader — he must have been their leader, because he was the only one who spoke — was a bulky, taller, older man, with a bit of bushy red beard, his eyes hidden behind those absurd shades.

He was shouting things, repeating himself over and over: "Put your weapons down! Weapons down! On the floor! On the floor, now! All of you! On the floor!"

It was so absurd I could have laughed. I think we did, lost deep in brain-math haze.

My companions did not agree.

This exact situation had come up during Jan's planning session — what if Edward just has a bunch of men with firearms? What if he has mages, doing mage things? What if he combines the two and has mages with guns? We'd made plans, made sure everybody knew what to do, when to duck, who to look to for direction. We should have been prepared.

What we hadn't expected was Zheng pinned to thin air — and me flailing, semi-conscious, covered in blood, the House still there.

We'd lost our best fighter and our best shield.

A moment of horrible confused shouting rocketed back and forth. Raine got that makeshift shield and her own body in front of me, shielding me from whatever might be about to happen. Behind me, Evelyn spat a string of words that seared the air in an arc of burning orange — and Felicity screamed in sudden pain as the young mage on the other side broke his own left thumb to counter whatever effect they were trying to create.

"Weapons down! On the floor! That means you, the bitch in the motorcycle helmet! Put that gun down or we will open fire!"

"Back to the cars! Just back away! Raine, get Heather on her feet, for fuck's sake!"

"Fuck 'em!" That was Twil, dropping me and raging, her flesh wrapping itself in werewolf-spirit-flesh.

"I've got silver bullets for you too, werewolf bitch, don't you move!"

"Like fuck you have!"

"Accende et purga per voluntatem—"

"If you start backing away, we will open fire!"

"Bullet ain't gonna do shit, shit-eaters! We can deflect bullets! Fuck you!"

The woman controlling the demon-host was screaming something about murdering us, twitching the sticks in her hands, trying to get her charge to attack me and Raine — but the Grinning Demon just stood there, staring at Zheng, locked in a silent contest of wills.

"Your trump card is down and out," that was the leader, loud and clear. "Miss Morell there has shot her load. You can't deflect shit

right now.”

We couldn’t understand why Raine wasn’t shooting. They had guns, but she had a gun too. We had a gun, and two demon-hosts, and four mages, and-

We couldn’t deflect bullets without me.

It took a precious second of cognitive processing for me to realise that they had us out-gunned. We could — would — win a confrontation, even with Zheng pinned and raging. But somebody might get shot — somebody would get shot. All it took was one bullet to remove Evelyn or Raine or myself from the world, forever, with no take backs.

That’s why Raine wasn’t opening fire. I think I saw it in her posture, in the way her finger wasn’t on the trigger of the Sten gun as she balanced it on her shield.

But they weren’t shooting either. They had instructions.

The leader shouted again: “We’ve got you covered from enough angles. If you pull that trigger, we’ll paste you. Now, weapons down.”

“Then what?” Raine said, voice muffled inside the motorcycle helmet.

Behind us, Evelyn crunched out a deep, throat-breaking non-human word. One of the two mages on the other side, the one with the book, rolled his own eyes into the back of his head and started to bleed from his nose.

One of the other gunmen, one who hadn’t spoken yet, said: “Boss, they’re buying time for the fucking wizards to finish their shit.”

“I can see that,” said the leader, short-tempered and sweating. He asked over his shoulder without taking his eyes off Raine: “Andrew, how long can you hold them?”

The slightly older mage with the book replied in a strangled croak: “Two-three minutes. Hurry up. Shoot them, for God’s sake.”

Another armed man spoke up as well, his head on a swivel, glancing left and right though the summer blaze. “Where’s the guy? I don’t see the guy. Where is he? We need the guy.”

A third mercenary nodded to the left, to the tree-line at the edge of

the property.

“There he is.” He raised his voice in a friendly shout: “Mate, get inside the house!”

Everyone looked. They must have looked. How could they not? Even Raine allowed a flicker of her eyes, in curious shock.

A figure was limping and hobbling out of the tree-line, metal walking stick scuffing on gravel and then sinking into the bare dirt. Dark curly hair caught the sun. Stress-sweat glistened on his face and neck. His eyes stared, flickering to us in horror, and to the gunmen with almost equal fear.

Badger stepped out of the woods and hurried to join the mercenaries.

“You fucking—” Twil spat an insult I won’t repeat. I think everyone else was too shocked to speak.

Badger hobbled behind the men and the mages, going straight for the open door of the house.

But at the last second, right on the threshold, he paused. He turned and glanced and said: “Does this lead to—”

The leader of the gunmen shouted back over his shoulder: “The real one, yeah. Old man’s waiting for you. Go on, off you fuck, let us deal.”

Badger didn’t even nod. He looked up and made eye contact — with me.

And I knew, caught in the reflection inside those watery puppy-dog eyes, that Nathan had not and was not betraying us.

There was nothing in those eyes but devotion to the angel who had saved him. Perhaps it was because I’d been inside the man’s head, perhaps because I’d rebuilt him with pieces of myself, but as Badger’s eyes touched mine, I knew exactly what he was thinking. I saw the twin layers of faith that had driven him to this moment: one, an unshakable belief that we — me and the others — would win and be unharmed, whatever he did; and two, so much worse — a determination to sacrifice himself.

Without needing to be told, I knew that Badger had a plan to kill Edward Lilburne, and that to execute it he needed to get inside that

house, under the pretences of being a traitor.

His eyes said, *For you, Heather.*

He turned and limped over the threshold, swallowed up by the dark.

“Nathan, no!” I screamed — or I tried to. My throat and head were too much of a mess by that point. The sound we made was horrifying, a screech-howl from an otherworldly creature; three of the five gunmen flinched. A small satisfaction.

“Right,” the leader said, attention back on us. “We’re done here. Guns down, all of you on the floor. Wizards shut your fucking mouths or you’re dead first! Now! Right now!”

Fingers slipped onto triggers. Muscles tightened. Eyes narrowed behind dark shades. Evelyn was shouting at the top of her voice, throat raw with effort; on the other side, the young mage had no left arm anymore, the bones had simply folded up on themselves, devouring flesh as fuel for magic beyond his power. He was paying a terrible price for keeping us at bay.

But this was going to be solved with guns, not magic.

They were going to kill us.

We would win, of course. We had plans, we had power, we had backup. I even knew which way everybody was going to move. But somebody was going to get shot in the process.

Deep down inside my belly, I did the one thing I shouldn’t have done, at least not without a kilo of lemons close to hand. Manually, like threading a piece of wet spaghetti through a needle made of flesh, I slid a control rod out of my aching, throbbing bioreactor. I raised my tentacles, ready to make them real once more, ready to pay the price in blood and thoughts and overheating to protect my friends. There was no bathtub heat-sink to save my life out here, but I would burn myself out to protect my own.

Adrenaline pulsed through veins. Somebody shouted: “Three, two —”. Jan was howling a string of words in a language I’d never heard before. I rammed six tentacles and two hands down into the base of my soul.

Bang.

A single shot echoed through rustling leaves, the sound somehow warped by the summer heat. There was something beautiful and unearthly about that echo.

The left side of the lead gunman's head fountained with a little spray of blood and brains.

He slumped to the ground.

By that point in my life I'd been involved in more than a few violent confrontations; I'd even been at the centre of one or two. I had learned through bitter experience that fighting was nothing like in films or books. In reality any fight was confusing and messy, impossible to keep track of while it was happening, a whirl of sensations and impressions and reactions. Unless one is trained or born for this, one cannot keep an accurate account of what is happening in the moment.

A real life gunfight was a thousand times worse; the world exploded into confusion and shouting and air-splitting cracks and bangs and screams.

I actually saw very little of what happened, because the first thing I knew was Raine throwing me to the ground and covering me with that makeshift riot-shield. I clung to her with all our extra limbs, like I could pull her into the safety of the dirt. I reconstructed the actual events later, rebuilt from impressions and other people and snatches of sound.

And from a single sneaky tentacle, peeking up above the shield to take a look.

Nobody had expected the opening gunshot. We — all of us except for Zheng, who was pinned to the air and raging at the unmoving demon-host in front of her — reacted the same as Raine. Everybody ducked and hit the ground, or got bundled to the dirt by somebody else. Evelyn and Felicity's efforts at magical assault were cut off, because Praem pulled her mother behind a piece of wall, and Felicity pushed Kimberly to the ground.

Edward's men hadn't expected it either.

One of them rose to his feet, firing wildly into the woods. Another two were sprinting for proper cover, behind the remains of the cars. The fourth was pinned, shouting, "You bitch! You fucking bitch! You fucking—"

Bang — the man on his feet took a bullet to the head. He fell down too. His gun went silent.

The pair of mages were turning to the woods on the left. The one with the book opened his mouth wide, as if to say a word too large for a human face.

His head popped next — *bang* — neat and clean. He crumpled.

Without his support, encouragement, or bondage, the young man with the bone-stripped arm went down in a tangle of limbs, screaming in pain.

The mage who was controlling the Grinning Demon, with the rods in her hands, tried to duck down behind the fountain. *Bang* — the bullet just missed her, hitting close enough to make her scream and flinch.

“You fucking cunt!” the pinned man was shouting, trying to get an angle with his weapon. “You little bitch, I’ll fucking kill you, I’ll—”

Bang. The bullet passed through his skull, neck, and spine. He sprawled, body twitching in a pool of blood.

The two gunmen who had fled behind the cars tried to return fire, but they had nothing to shoot at. The mystery sniper was invisible, and very, very skilled. Two bullets plinked off their cover, keeping them pinned.

All this happened so fast, faster than I could believe.

Twil took the initiative. A ball of fur and claw and snapping teeth exploded past Raine and me — and slammed into the mage controlling the Grinning Demon. I didn’t watch that bit too closely. Twil bounced her head off the side of the fountain. Blood went everywhere. The metal rods fell from her limp hands.

In a bizarre sideshow to the unfolding gunfight, the Grinning Demon dropped her spent harpoon gun, filled her lungs, and said: “Mine.”

Zheng screamed back into her face. “Free me, dung filth! Together!”

“Mine,” the Grinning Horror repeated — then, with her control broken, she turned on her heel and sprinted like a cheetah, shooting across the bare dirt and through the open door of the House. The interior shadows swallowed her up, like a stone falling into a pot of

ink.

Zheng roared and flailed, still stuck on thin air.

Two things happened at once: Praem appeared and put her hands on the harpoon; and Raine got off me, levelled the Sten gun at the two men still taking cover, and squeezed the trigger.

She timed it to absolute perfection, a trick I didn't understand until much later: her shots were wildly inaccurate, but they forced the pair of men the other way around the car for a few crucial seconds.

Bang — a man dropped, head a ruin of blood and skull.

The final gunman did his best to go to ground. He stayed low, crammed behind the car. He stowed his rifle and pulled out some kind of handgun. He shouted things — “Bitch!” “You can't fight me up close, you fucking coward!” “We were on the same side, we were on the same side, you bitch!” — but it did him no good. Raine sent a few more bullets in his direction. Praem eased the harpoon out of Zheng, but too slow to help, too slow to let Zheng end this with raw strength.

A flicker of dark green and muddy brown ghosted from the edge of the tree-line and vanished behind the house.

The man was still shouting insults when the assassin stepped around the side of the car and shot him in the head. The body slumped, slid to the ground, and lay still.

An eerie silence fell across the forest clearing, the echoes of gunshots ringing in every ear. Insects still buzzed, far off in the woods. The younger mage was still whimpering and clutching his destroyed arm, writhing in the dirt. The air stank of blood and shit — pardon my language, but it did. Corpses do that. Everyone was panting and gasping. Zheng finally slumped off the harpoon; Praem stuck the hateful weapon into the ground.

And Amy Stack straightened up from her kill.

She was dressed in camouflage gear — not the flashy, self-consciously overcomplicated pouches-and-webbing stuff the mercenary gunmen had been wearing, but a simple form-fitting t-shirt and pair of trousers, with a long shapeless cape-poncho thing hanging from her shoulders, wreathing her form in dark greens and muddy browns. Her head and face were smeared with green

camouflage paint as well, leaving no pale white flesh on which the sun might catch. She carried a simple bolt-action rifle loose in her hands, a heavy old thing with a wooden stock, the metal parts covered in black grease, for stealth.

I recognised it as the same rifle she'd once used to shoot at Raine, many months ago, in the Willow House Loop.

Raine was laughing. She pointed the Sten at the ground. "Nice shooting, Tex."

Stack barely glanced at us. She shouldered her rifle and drew a revolver from somewhere inside her cape. The handgun was small, old, almost rickety looking. But she used it to methodically put two more rounds into the chest of every man she'd killed. The gunshots were deafening in the adrenaline-filled silence. Stack walked from corpse to corpse, pulling the trigger twice each time. Then she stopped to reload, shaking spent casings from the revolver's cylinder, sliding fresh rounds into the chambers.

Raine helped me up. I staggered to my feet, half-supported by a clutch of aching tentacles, wobbly and dazed and panting with adrenaline and shock. I was caked in my own blood, steaming with heat, shaking all over from shock.

"I-is everybody ... " we croaked. " ... are we ... "

Everybody was indeed in one piece, which seemed like a minor miracle considering the amount of lead which had been flying through the air. Then again, none of it had been flying toward us.

Raine was untouched, though I could tell she was hopped up with adrenaline. She pulled the motorcycle helmet off, hair wet with sweat, desperate for a breath of fresh air. Twil was in some kind of shock — she was still more wolf than woman, standing over the body of the mage she'd killed, paws and claws painted with crimson. She kept swallowing and staring out over the corpses, flinching as Stack made sure they were dead.

Zheng was bleeding from the ragged harpoon-wound in her chest, gritting her teeth and growling, flexing her shoulders and ribs.

Behind us, the mages were picking themselves up off the floor. Evelyn looked like absolute hell; she'd been doing real magic, in opposition to Edward's badly-trained magicians. Her skin was grey, she was drooling and spitting blood, and caked with cold sweat.

Praem hurried back over to pick her up.

“Yes, yes,” she grunted in a voice like a dying lizard, as Praem helped her to her feet. “Thank you, thank you, Praem. Not so hard next time, hmm? Mmm?”

“Better than dead,” said Praem.

Felicity had bundled Kimberly to the ground. Fliss looked rough as well, like a woman who’d run a marathon and then been forced to drink a pint of vodka. Blood was smeared all around her mouth from the strain of pronouncing non-human words. She was unsteady on her feet and kept squinting, as if she couldn’t see properly. Kimberly, to our surprise, looked almost normal; she was a bit shocked and wide-eyed, but blinking and smiling with all the euphoric release of a car-crash victim emerging untouched from a twisted wreck.

July and Jan were the most quick to get back to their feet. July was completely unruffled. Jan was shaking all over, fists clenched tight, but when she spoke her voice was firm and clear: “Confirm we’re all uninjured, one by one.” She pointed at me. “Heather?”

I just stared at her, blank and confused. Behind me, Amy Stack pulled the trigger of her revolver twice more, putting another pair of bullets into a dead chest. I flinched. “S-sorry?”

“Heather,” Jan repeated, hard and clear. “Are you injured?”

I shook my head. “N-no. No. I’m ... alright. I think. I-I’m sorry it didn’t work, w-with the house, the—”

Jan ignored me and moved on. “Raine, injuries?”

“None,” Raine said. She blew out a huge breath and ran a hand through her sweat-soaked hair. “I’m clear. Hooooo, that was crazy.”

Jan went through us, one by one. She omitted Zheng — Zheng was obvious. She said something into her mobile phone and we heard Lozzie reply, checking that she was okay too. Amanda was off-line, which was a bad sign, but mostly expected. By then, Amy Stack was striding over to us. Jan pointed at her. “And who is this?” she demanded. “Thank you, thank you for the help, but who is this?”

“Amy, Amy, Amy,” Raine was saying, shaking her head. “Well done, good shooting. Did I already say that? Haha, think I did. Thanks, Amy. Thank you.”

“Amy Stack,” Evelyn supplied in a low growl. “What the fuck are you doing here, Stack? How did you know we’d be here, how did you—”

Stack ignored the question. She pointed her revolver at the dead mage in front of Twil. But Twil lashed out and caught her wrist. Stack didn’t even flinch, just looked up at Twil’s snarling snout with her cold, flint-hard eyes.

“No,” Twil grunted. “Come on, she’s fucking dead, okay?”

“She was a mage,” Stack answered, calm and soft. “Let me make sure.”

“And I killed her!”

Evelyn said: “Twil. Twil, back away. Come here, now.”

Twil growled — then let go of Stack and stalked over to Evelyn. Stack shot the corpse in the chest, twice. We flinched again. Raine winced. Evelyn sighed. Kimberly looked away, sheltered behind Felicity. Then Stack looked over her shoulder, back toward the house.

“What about the bleeder?” she asked.

She meant the young man, the sacrificial mage, bleeding from a stump of an arm.

“Don’t,” Evelyn snapped. “He’s alive. Praem, go—”

But Praem was already off, striding across the bare earth toward the downed man — barely a boy, really — to stem the bleeding or stop his tongue.

Stack finally looked up at Raine. “Thanks for the assist.”

Raine boggled at her.

“I mean it,” Stack said. Her voice betrayed nothing, no emotion. “Good work with the covering fire. I would have had to work my way around otherwise.”

Raine broke into a grin. “Heeeeeeeey. I finally got your attention, huh?”

Stack ignored that. So did I — for now.

“Thank you, Amy,” Evelyn spat, not sounding particularly thankful.

“But—”

“No,” I croaked. I was still clinging to Raine for support. “Thank you. Really. They had us. Almost. Sort of. Thank you, Stack.”

Stack looked me up and down. “You hit?”

We shook our head. “Bleeding from pores. Long story.”

“Okay,” said Stack.

Evelyn spat: “How the hell did you know we were going to be here? And—”

“Badger!” Twil snarled. “Badger, it was him! That fucking bastard turned on us! You all saw him, right? I wasn’t imagining that?”

I shook my head, wild with revelation. “No, Twil, no. He wasn’t, he wasn’t betraying us. I don’t know why, but he wasn’t— he was—”

I panted and burbled and tried to explain. The others listened, but I don’t think they fully understood. But to my surprise, Amy Stack interrupted me.

“Nathan Hobbes had me bring him here,” she said. “Also I’ve been playing triple agent for the last two weeks, waiting for a chance to deal with my old friends.” She nodded sideways, indicating the corpses of the dead men. “Opened the way. You’re welcome.”

“You brought Badger here?” Evelyn spluttered. “Why the hell didn’t he come to us?”

I croaked again, “Evee, he needed- he was trying to trick- I saw it-”

Jan cleared her throat, loudly: “This is not the time for standing around and talking. We can debrief later. Right now — we need to leave.”

“Not until I understand,” Evelyn grunted. Her eyes flashed back to Stack. “You explain what he—”

We answered in Stack’s place, because we already knew.

“Nathan is trying to kill Edward Lilburne, personally,” we croaked. “He had to pretend to betray us, to get inside. And you helped him, Stack, because you’re betting on both plans, you’re betting on him, but also on us. And you don’t care if he dies in the attempt, as long as one of us succeeds. Isn’t that right?”

Stack blinked at me, from deep within a camo-painted face, cold and hard. "Correct."

"Wait wait wait," Twil said. "Badger's hoodwinked Eddy, not us? On his own? He's going up against that guy, on his own? What the fuck!"

Stack pointed back over her shoulder, past the corpses and the screaming man down on the floor, past the pools of sun-kissed blood and brains, to the open front door of the house. It was black and empty. A void cut in the face of reality.

"He was very insistent that he had a plan." She shrugged. "I believe him."

My mind was reeling; we were completely exhausted and still covered in blood, shaking all over, clinging to Raine with half our tentacles. We had not expected any of this, Badger least of all. The House stood there, open and glowering in dark silence. The woodland clearing stank of corpses. Insects buzzed and chirped in the undergrowth.

"What the hell happened to the bubble lads?" Felicity wondered out loud.

Jan stepped forward. She was shaking, too. When she spoke, her voice came out like that of a nervous teenager: "Excuse me, hello? Do I need to point out to everybody that we are now standing in the middle of a gigantic crime scene? That dozens of gunshots have just echoed out across the English countryside? We need to leave, right now. The police will be here shortly. Somebody will have called them, after hearing all that racket."

Stack stowed her weapons and said, "Police will take days to get here. Who are you?"

"None of your business, Miss assassin, though thank you for the support. What do you mean the police will take days?"

Twil said: "Local acoustics, like. Woods are like that."

Jan frowned. Stack nodded and explained, "Shots are hard to trace this far into the countryside. Police might respond, but they'll have to check every property one by one. If they even care. And this isn't on any maps. We have hours, at least. Probably more."

Evelyn snorted. "For what?" she gestured at the house. "It's still

there. Heather, what happened?”

We just shook our head, at a loss for words. We almost laughed. “Houses don’t move.”

“Alright,” Jan said. She clapped her hands together. “Plan B, we blow the place up.”

“No!” I almost shouted, half-lurching out of Raine’s grip. “It needs care, it was trapped, it was—”

Evelyn spoke over my incoherent panic: “I don’t think blowing it up will make a damn bit of difference. Jan, look at that door. You tell me that leads to the inside of a house. Go on. Look me in the face and tell me.”

Jan glanced at the black void inside the front door frame. She coughed awkwardly.

“Thought so,” Evelyn said. “Besides, the bubble-servitors are inside. As is Badger. Fucking fool.” She spat. A whimper came from past the fountain, from the injured man Praem was trying to help.

“Right.” Evelyn pulled herself up. “Let’s go interrogate the survivor, see what we’re dealing with.” Then she glanced at me. “Somebody pass Heather some water so she can wash her mouth out. Now. Come on, chop chop, let’s move. And somebody pile up the bloody corpses before they start to stink.”

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.8

We were no stranger to corpses.

None of us who stood in that blood-stinking, sun-baked aftermath were unfamiliar with the sight of a dead body — not even Kimberly, the shrinking rose, or Jan and July, the unknown quantities. When it came to the ruin and wreckage which followed violence, I had seen far worse: cultists with their guts pulled out, the felled remains of zombies made from abducted homeless people, human remains twisted into unnatural forms by the warping pressure of the Eye's attention. I had even made one myself; the corpse of Alexander Lilburne had been a particularly gruesome example, his bones all broken and his flesh all shredded and his head falling off. No stranger to corpses or wounds or pooling blood.

What would my mother think, if she knew? What would Maisie think? What would the me of two years ago think? Would I be horrified by us? I like to hope not.

Somehow, these corpses felt different.

Perhaps because it was a gunfight, a fictional impossibility pulled from one of Raine's more boring video games, something alien and unreal in the leafy green English countryside; gunfights were supposed to happen in grimy foreign streets, in faraway cities, between people who did not sound like us. It was as if a piece of Outside had intruded upon reality. Or perhaps because it had happened right in front of us, rather than hidden behind the mental censor of memory and interpretation; to hear a gunshot and see the wound later is one thing, but to watch a human being die, punctured by metal at speeds too fast to comprehend, that is a terrible thing, even for those of us far beyond normal life. Or perhaps because it had happened so fast, with so little fanfare; seven people lay dead, mostly from unerringly accurate head-shots, bleeding into the bare soil where the top layers had been stripped away by failed brain-math. The eighth was still alive, whimpering and shuddering, his left arm gone, eaten by magic.

The stench of blood and meat and solid waste filled the air, hovering on the relentless summer heat. Flies ventured from the woods and landed on the blood-soaked soil, mobbing the crimson mess. Bullet casings glinted on the dirt.

None of this should be.

I couldn't think; we were still deep in brain-math aftershock, aching and heaving for breath, mind reeling with the failure to move the House; we couldn't stop looking at the bodies, with their skulls open and red, their brains exposed to the heat of the sun; we had to keep going, we couldn't stop here — Badger had gone inside, alone, unarmed. The fool needed help!

And the House loomed and leered, soaking in the blood-rich air, unmoved. The void of the front door was a tiny, toothless maw, a filter-feeder enjoying the feast.

I didn't vomit — I had practice resisting that biological urge, after all — but it was a close thing; it is difficult not to vomit when surrounded by certain kinds of death, wet and messy and already being eaten by flies and cooked in the sun. Twil did vomit, poor thing. She doubled up and heaved her guts into the grass a few paces away. So did Felicity, though she was a little more prepared. Kimberly didn't, which surprised me; she vibrated with a kind of manic energy which worried something in the back of my mind. Evelyn spat bile, but she was okay; she'd seen worse, too.

"Whatever we do," somebody said. "We need to clean this shit up. Everyone hold your lunch. Come on."

The others got to work; I couldn't think.

"Raine, take care of her. And keep her in one place. Don't let her go for that door, for pity's sake."

"Already on it," Raine said. "Don't need reminding."

Raine got me sat down on a piece of fountain lip spared from both the erratic Outside teleport and the blood of Edward's mercenaries, as far away from the bodies as she could put me. Somebody else pressed a bottle of water into my hands and made me drink. The water was uncomfortably warm after sitting in the oven-like interior of one of the cars, but we drank and drank and drank until we had to stop to suck down oxygen.

Raine emptied another bottle of water over our face and head, to wash away the blood.

Our blood, on us. Not the blood soaking into the bare soil.

Flies, so many flies. Drinking human blood.

Sun-heat dried the water, stuck our clothes to our back, made the traces of blood crispy and sticky.

We wanted to vomit. We wanted to get up and run into the house. Badger — we kept forgetting about Badger.

“Heather,” Raine kept saying my name. “Heather, I need you to concentrate. Look at me, or at the ground. Heather, Heather, stop looking at the bodies. It’s over. Heather. Heather, hey, love. Look at me. Look at me.”

Couldn’t focus on Raine either. Too many other voices were breaking across us, like waves on a storm-slashed beach of grey sand and oil slicks.

“—and don’t bother with the bullet casings, it’s a waste of time, we can just—”

“—what’s your name? Focus on me, you little shit, what is your name? Praem, turn him over. Or get him sat up.”

“—mind’s gone, it’s not just his arm. He’s in shock, poor bastard—”

“Fuck me, fuck me, fuck- uuughhh. Oh fuck. There’s blood all over my fucking hands. Shit, I’m gonna get it everywhere, fuck—”

“Twil, come here, now. Hold my hand. Stop staring at the corpse. Twil!”

“Circle around the doorway, get the frame included too, that’s it. Jule, don’t use the basics, use the one from Skye—”

Adrenaline was ebbing, leaving minds numb and weary. Half of me wanted to sleep, retreat, curl up in a ball. The other half kept staring through that void-door, leg muscles tensing to launch myself. We were wasting time; we needed to move! We clung to Raine, tight and safe. Clung to the fountain-lip. Clung to ourselves.

The sun beat down on the ground I’d exposed with brain-math, drying it and baking it and forcing the worms to burrow deeper. Would the worms eat the blood, I wondered? Maybe they would

grow fat on mages' leavings and learn to walk. Raine's hands touched my face and head. Other people shouted or argued. Lozzie's voice spoke over the group call — but Amanda's did not. Twil vomited again, coughing and hacking. Stack was like a statue, unmoved amid her own carnage. Jan and July were frantic before the open front door.

The door.

The doorway to Edward Lilburne's House was a black rectangle. The sun did not dare cross that threshold.

We stared into the darkness. The House stared back. Raine's voice was very far away. We reached up with one tentacle; perhaps if we just reached inside, we could pull Badger back out. Perhaps just a tip over the threshold, a touch into the dark. Perhaps I could do it alone, if the others were so busy with blood and bodies. I had conquered darkness before, I had lit it with nuclear sparks and Sevens' help. Surely I could do the same again.

Somebody else walked up to me. Raine shuffled to one side. Hands cupped my cheeks, soft and smooth and cool despite the heat. Milk-white eyes lowered themselves and locked with mine. No reflection in those eyes.

"Stretch," said Praem.

We blinked. I blinked. Praem blinked.

"St— stretch?" we croaked.

"Stretch," she repeated.

"Oh," we said. We hadn't even realised how hard we were clenched.

And so we stretched.

The adrenaline crash, the tentacle collapse, the shaking, the fear, the worries about Badger and Amanda and the missing bubble-servitors, the failure to move the house, the sight of all those corpses, the horrifically injured boy, the worry about what came next — to all of this we had reacted like a spooked octopus, withdrawn inside a crack in the rocks, tight and tense, tentacles wrapped around whatever solidity we could grasp.

If I wanted to think and observe — which were really the same action wearing two different faces — then I needed to stretch

outward.

How did Praem know? Good question. I've long since stopped asking how Praem knows anything.

Like a regular human being stretching out her arms and legs and back and raising her head from an unconscious slouch, I relaxed my tentacles and extended them outward.

That hurt, badly, like uncoiling an arm of pulled muscles and bone-deep bruises. My tentacles — myself fractured and grown six times over — had taken most of the strain from the failed brain-math. They were invisible to normal sight right then, reduced back to pneuma-somatic imitation flesh. Six tubes of pure bruised muscle, six reflected selves groaning and throbbing in awful pain. But the alternative was numb withdrawal. My friends and allies needed me.

We unwrapped from ourselves and from the fountain-lip and from Raine, and allowed our awareness to blossom outward once more. We were in exhausted shock and adrenaline crash, but seven minds stretched out and formed an array of awareness, wide open and all-seeing.

I took a deep breath and nodded for Praem. "I'm okay. Going to be okay. Go- go help Eevee with the— with the guy."

Praem had more surprises up her sleeves — or rather, in the tote bag over her shoulder. She produced a cylinder of fabric which unfurled into a white parasol, which she then propped up to shield me from the worst of the blazing sun. She had another one for Eevee, and more bottles of water, and some sweet, much-needed painkillers.

She also handed me a lemon. It was far too warm, but it tasted like thinking.

Raine said my name a couple more times. I made affirmative noises, but my attention was elsewhere, spread out among the tasks of the aftermath.

First: the sole survivor.

Only one of Edward's people had survived Stack's counter-ambush — not counting the Grinning Demon, who had sprinted back into the house as soon as the mages' control had slipped. He was the youngest of the three mages who had accompanied the gunmen,

barely more than a boy, perhaps only sixteen or seventeen years old, with sandy hair and a narrow frame wrapped in cheap cream-coloured robes, over dirty jeans and a white t-shirt. Praem had managed to get him to sit up under his own power, but his eyes were glassy and his skin had turned waxen. He was sweating and shaking, cold to the touch under the heat of the sun.

His left arm was gone.

Praem had peeled back the robe to expose the horrendous damage. The limb hadn't been severed or torn away — it had folded up on itself almost to the shoulder, bone and muscle shrinking to nothing inside a shrivelled tube of empty skin. A little blood seeped through the bizarre remains, like bitter coffee leaking through a filter. Praem had ripped strips of fabric from the robe and tied a tourniquet around the stump, but the boy didn't seem to need that.

He was completely unresponsive. He just stared at the ground between his legs, whimpering and murmuring wordless sounds.

"Hey, mate," Twil kept trying. "Oi, hey. Hello? Why's he not— why's he not talking? He's not even looking. Like a vegetable. Hey! Hey! Praem, give him a slap or ... or something, or ... or—"

"Twil," Evelyn snapped. She held out her free hand. "Twil, hand, now."

"But he's—"

"*Hand*. Here. Now."

Twil stepped back from the boy and resumed holding Evee's hand, but she couldn't stop staring.

To my surprise, Twil was the most shaken of all of us, more so than even Kimberly. Her eyes were wide and she was covered in cold sweat sticking her clothes to her skin, breathing too hard, shaking with adrenaline that just wouldn't go away. Her hair was all frizzed up and she kept blinking too much. She was the only one of us who had grappled hand to hand with one of the mages, when she'd brained the woman who'd been controlling the Grinning Demon. Her hands — her claws, really, when she'd done it — had been smeared with a surprising amount of blood. Praem had helped rinse that off. But Twil was still pale and sweating.

Suddenly I realised: had Twil ever killed a person before? She'd

killed zombies, certainly — but a mortal person? I wasn't sure.

She said, "I don't fucking get what's wrong with him. Eevee, what the fuck is wrong with him?"

"Swearing," said Praem — but she said it softly.

Evelyn huffed, shaking her head; Eevee was holding up surprisingly well, hunched and heavy-backed and exhausted around her eyes, but solid and still amid the madness. She said, "It's not just the arm. His mind's been damaged, too. I doubt we'll get anything out of him but whimpers, not for weeks." She poked at the corpse of the other mage with the tip of her walking stick, though her eyes avoided looking at the ruin of his face and head, where he'd been felled by one of Stack's bullets. "Barbarians, the lot of them."

Felicity drew close. Kimberly had been staying behind her, sheltering from the carnage by pressing against Felicity's back — but then she emerged and knelt down by the wounded boy, trying to catch his eye, feeling for his pulse.

Felicity said, "I've never seen anything like that before."

"You wouldn't have," Evelyn grunted. "It's rudimentary stuff, the sacrifice of valuable flesh as a catalyst for magic beyond one's comprehension or ability." She pointed at the boy with her walking stick. "This isn't really a mage. He was fuel. That's all." She nodded at the dead man, the older man who'd been using the boy. "He wasn't a mage either, not by our definitions. An apprentice with a rifle shoved in his hands, told to point and shoot. That book he's got isn't even real, it's just a reproduction wrapped in cheap leather. Probably meant to make him seem authoritative."

"Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me," Twil kept saying. "This is fucked up, this real fucked up. What are we going to do with him, hey? He's just a fucking kid, we can't— uh, you know? We can't. We can't do that, Eevee."

Evelyn sighed. I noticed a flicker of attention to Kimberly. The comparison was obvious. "He goes to a hospital. Anonymously. Somehow."

Felicity said, "Is he dangerous?"

Evelyn shook her head. "Not even a mage. And it's not as if we need to bind his hands."

Twil looked like she wanted to vomit again. I'd rarely seen her so distraught.

Kimberly looked up from the pitiful, shaking boy, and said, "I'll do it. I'll take him. Right now."

Evelyn scowled at her — not in aggression, but with concern. "Can you keep a story straight? Kimberly, you can't even drive."

"S-somehow," Kimberly stammered back. "I-I can be responsible for it. I can. Twil's right. We're not leaving a child here. We're not!"

Evelyn huffed. "Alright, alright. For now just stay there, watch him."

Second: the guns.

Raine and Stack stripped the weapons from the bodies, careful not to touch with bare fingers, only with gloves or sleeves; they lined them up on the ground, counted barrels and magazines and bullets and handles and bloody hand-prints. Flies mobbed the evidence.

Those machines made my skin crawl. They didn't look real, like shiny black beetles rendered on a computer screen, gleaming and glinting in the sunlight. We recoiled slightly when Raine picked one of them up and did something to make the gun go click-clack. She turned it over in her hands, careful to point the muzzle down at the ground. An appreciative smirk grew across her lips. We could not help but see the contrast: Raine, sweat-soaked and warm and flexing with muscle tension, and the gun, cold and hard and brittle.

"Where the hell do you think they got these from, huh?" Raine asked. "Damn. Wish I'd had something like this about ten years ago."

Stack answered, soft and dispassionate: "Edward armed them."

Raine's eyebrows shot upward. "No joke? What's he got in there, an armoury?"

"No joke. Em-pee-fives from a police armoury. Edward could have had them for years." Stack nodded down at the corpses of the men she'd shot. "They weren't sure, but they weren't asking questions."

Raine let out a low whistle, turned the gun over in her hands again, and then broke into a grin. "Think we can keep 'em?"

Stack shrugged. "Your risk."

Third: the corpses.

Zheng and July stacked them like logs, in a big pile like a morbid bonfire. We tried not to watch too closely. There was something vile about that process, about human beings rendered down into nothing but cold meat and bad smells. At least Zheng didn't take any experimental bites.

Evelyn overheard the conversation between Raine and Stack. She turned a pinched scowl on the latter.

"Stack," she snapped. "How do you know what these men knew? You still haven't explained yourself to us. Start. Now. And be quick about it."

Stack blinked slowly, like a lizard sunning herself on a rock. Her habitual economy of motion was somehow less threatening than usual, wrapped in camouflage paint and sweat and carrying a gun; how paradoxical. We turned all our attention on her as she explained.

"I told you already," she said. "I've been playing triple agent for about two weeks. Promising to come in with information. Trying to draw these guys out into the open."

"What for?" Evelyn said.

Stack nodded sideways, at the pile of corpses. "That."

Evelyn snorted with disbelief.

"Wait," Felicity said, looking up from Kimberly and the shivering boy. "You were in contact with Edward's men?"

Stack nodded. "That is what I mean."

Evelyn snapped: "And what did you learn? Anything useful?"

Stack shook her head. "Almost nothing. Edward had them locked down on information. I got technical details on deployment, weapons, how many of them were left, and what he was using them for — but only roughly."

Evelyn spat: "How am I supposed to believe that? You were in contact with them and they didn't tell you anything useful?"

Twil said, "Evee, hey, come on, cool down. We gotta focus, right? Focus."

Stack stared just a heartbeat too long. Evelyn blinked first, but she didn't look away.

"They were professionals," Stack said. "They knew their job. I knew mine better. That's all."

Raine tilted her head at Stack. All her giddy glee at the shiny new guns was replaced with sudden sobriety. She asked, softly: "These were your guys, weren't they?"

Stack looked at Raine.

"The guys you brought in to work for Eddy-boy," Raine went on. "The mercs you knew from your former line of work. The guys who left you behind in the library of Carcosa. This is them, isn't it? These were your men."

Stack and Raine stared at each other. The moment seemed to elongate and stretch, like a piece of tortured rubber beneath the blazing sunlight and baking heat. Stack blinked slowly. Raine watched her like curious prey.

Then Stack filled her lungs and looked over at the growing pile of corpses. Her face gave little away, smeared with thick dark camouflage paint. She pointed, flicking a finger top-to-bottom as she spoke. "Jims. Stayner. Bruke. Adamson. Perce." She paused, then shook her head. "Stayner was a poor squad leader. They might have beaten me if he had let Perce take command. Perce and Bruke knew to take cover, but they weren't expecting a sniper. Should have run into the woods. I would have let them live."

Her words hung in the sizzling air.

"Fuck me," said Twil. Kimberly was staring, eyes wide and mouth open, like a deer in headlights. Evelyn was staring back with a very different kind of frown than usual. Jan was doing her best to ignore the entire thing, focused on the magic circle she was using to contain the front door.

Raine just blew out a long breath and said: "Stack, thank you for helping us. We owe you one. Hey, more than one."

"Yes," I echoed in a croak, around a mouthful of sharp lemon flesh. "Thank you, Amy."

Stack just said: "I didn't know the mages. Or the demon host."

Evelyn snorted. “They weren’t mages. Sacrificial flesh, that’s all. And you.” She jabbed her bone-wand at Stack. “You still haven’t explained how Nathan got you to go along with his bullshit scheme.”

Fourth: Badger.

Stack explained.

I didn’t like what we learned. Not one bit.

“Nathan called me two days ago. He had an old number, from when we were both in the cult. Said he had a way to beat Edward, but he needed a face-to-face to make it work. He knew I’d been a point of contact before. Smart guy.”

Evelyn snapped, “What way? What way to beat Edward? What nonsense did he sell you?”

“Nathan claimed he has a way of locking up Edward’s body and mind. It’ll work on any mage. But he has to get the right symbols in front of Edward’s eyes.”

Raine asked, “Why didn’t you tell us, hey? Why keep us in the dark?”

“He asked me not to. Said you’d stop him.”

“That was you two in the blue car?” Raine asked.

Stack raised her eyebrows a fraction of an inch. “You saw us?”

Raine cracked a grin. “Amy, Amy, Amy, you are a hell of a shot, but one shit-arse covert driver.”

Evelyn spat: “And you believed him? You believed this nonsense?”

“I don’t pretend to understand how it works,” Stack said. “But it works.”

“And how did he convince you of that?” Evelyn said. “Fucking moron, what the hell does he think he’s doing?”

Stack shrugged. “I asked him the same question. He answered by demonstrating the maths for me — on himself.”

Despite the baking heat of the day, a shiver passed through the clearing.

“Maths?” I muttered. “Oh. Oh no.”

Evelyn spat: “What the hell does that mean, demonstration? What are you talking about? What did he do?”

Stack explained. “He wrote down roughly a page of maths, from memory, then he sat down and ran his eyes over it. Gave him a kind of seizure. Couldn’t move. Gave me instructions beforehand to take the page from him. That ended the effect. He’s certain it’ll work on Edward.”

Raine let out a low whistle. “Good job, Nate. Looks like he learned something.”

“Stack,” we croaked. “Amy?”

She looked over at me, cold flint eyes in a darkly painted face. “Morell.”

“What did the maths look like?”

“Like a page of maths. Did nothing to me. Meant nothing, either.”

“And what then?” Evelyn spat. She gestured wildly at the house. “He’s going to — what? Suicide bomb Edward for us? Fucking idiot!”

Stack carried on, calm and collected. “I passed communications through my former associates, to Edward, from Nathan, about having the secret to complete the gate technology which he stole from you. That’s Nathan’s plan to get those figures in front of Edward’s eyes.”

Evelyn raged. “You know as well as we do that Edward Lilburne is as paranoid as I am. More, even! How can you have the slightest shred of confidence that this is going to work?”

“It only works on mages. Didn’t work on me.”

“You’ve sent a man to his fucking death,” Evelyn said. “I can’t believe you went in for this plot, Stack. I can’t believe you, or Badger! Fuck the both of you!”

“I believe he has a reasonable chance of success.”

Raine snorted. “No you fucking don’t. Come off it.”

Stack stared at Raine. Raine stared back. Raine raised her eyebrows

in mild surprise and tilted her head to one side.

“Oh,” Raine said. “Okay, sure, you actually think he can do this?”

Stack nodded, once. “Nathan was always a better mage than others were willing to admit. Especially Alexander. If anybody can do it, maybe he can.”

“He better not die,” somebody said — angry in a way I’d never heard before, throat closing up with barely contained rage.

“Because I’m going to throttle him unconscious when we find him. Irresponsible fool. Throwing his life away for nothing. He’s not allowed to do that. He’s not allowed to!”

Everyone stared at me. Evelyn nodded with tight determination. Stack blinked. Raine gave me a thumbs up. Twil didn’t seem to know what to make of me.

Oh, I realised: that was us. We had spoken.

“We’ll get him out, Heather,” said Raine. “And hey, maybe Stack is right, maybe Nate really will hamstring Eddy-boy for us.”

Evelyn snorted. “I’d put more faith in that loose demon host.”

“Oh, yeah!” Twil suddenly lit up with a real smile. “She went all return-to-sender on him, right? Think she’ll rip his head off for us?”

Uneasy glances crisscrossed the group. Felicity looked especially doubtful. Jan snorted delicately.

Evelyn shook her head and said, “I was being sarcastic, Twil. Demon hosts usually hate their masters, yes. Revenge and freedom are high on their list of priorities, to put it lightly.”

Zheng rumbled in agreement, from over by the corpses.

“But,” Evelyn added. “She was ... very lightly bound. Barely bound at all.” Evelyn nodded toward the remains of the metal rods on the ground, dropped by the mage who Twil had killed. “And severely underutilized. Which is odd.”

Twil blinked at Evee. “What’re you saying, then? You think she was ... like ... ”

“A trap,” Felicity murmured. “Or unfinished. Or something we don’t understand.”

“It’s possible,” Evelyn mused. “She may also simply be irretrievably insane. We should not count on a surprise ally.”

Fifth: the harpoon gun.

The harpoon itself — the magical trick which had pinned Zheng to thin air — did not survive more than a few minutes, as the rest of the aftermath unfolded. Before she could be coaxed into helping pile the corpses, Zheng pulled it from the dirt, snapped it in two, bent the resulting halves, and then ate a portion of the metal fragments. Nobody dared suggest she stop; Zheng vibrated with barely contained rage, wordless and rumbling. She stamped the other pieces of the harpoon into the dirt, and spat blood after them. She did the same to the rods which had been used to bind and control the Grinning Demon, with barely less fury.

Zheng’s chest wound had healed over already, but her front was sticky with blood, her jumper glued to her flesh with crimson mess. She kept touching the spot where she’d been pierced.

“Zheng,” we called out to her, more than once. But she was non-verbal, muscles quivering, breath coming out like a steam engine.

It was only July’s quick thinking which kept Zheng from smashing the harpoon gun as well. July scooped up the strange plastic weapon and brought it straight to Jan and Evee, like a bird of prey returning to the falconer’s glove.

“Magically altered technology,” July said. “I do not like this. Please take it from me.”

Jan pulled a grimace and shook her head. “Oh that is some very bad mojo. I am not touching that, I am not touching it with a single finger. July, just get rid of it. Dump it, break it, I don’t care. You shouldn’t be touching it either.”

Evelyn showed more interest, leaning over the mechanically modified weapon with a deep frown on her brow. Praem helped support her.

“We’ve seen work like this from Edward before, with other machinery,” Evelyn muttered. She shook her head. “I don’t understand where he’s drawing any of his theory from. A source I’m unfamiliar with, clearly.”

I’d mistaken the harpoon gun for a toy at first. The black plastic

exterior glinted in the sunlight in that dead-blank way that plastic so often did, flimsy and scratched. The gun's casing was covered in tiny magical designs and esoteric symbols, carved into the surface with a needle, like something a schoolchild might make with the point of a compass in a long, boring mathematics class. From a few feet away the dense scrawl of symbols seemed like nothing more than wear and tear, but up close it was obviously unnatural.

Before anybody else could take the gun from July, Zheng stomped up behind her.

Zheng rumbled deep down in her chest, an angry volcano threatening to burst: "Give."

Jan cleared her throat delicately. "I wouldn't touch that if—"

Zheng barked — low and deep and bowel-shaking, "Be quiet, worm-wizard."

Jan flinched very badly. Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes, saying, "Zheng, we need to study this, we need to understand his methods. I won't have you summarily destroying—"

"No more orders, wizard," Zheng rumbled.

She stepped forward with a burst of speed, hands blurring toward the prize in July's arms.

July twisted back, just out of range, hopping light on her toes. Zheng bared her teeth at the bird-like demon host, eyes bulging.

Jan shouted, "Not now, not now! Not in the middle of all this!"

"Oh shit," Felicity said. She stepped in front of Kimberly and fumbled with her shotgun.

"Hey!" Raine shouted. "Left hand. Zheng. Leave it!"

"Down," said Praem. "Down. Bad."

Zheng surged toward July.

This was no play-fight, no sporting game, no veiled flirting wrapped in violence. If nobody intervened, and quickly, Zheng would take July's head off for the right to destroy that hateful machine.

Top Right and Middle Left whipped out and snatched the harpoon gun from July's grip. We hoisted it into the air, then down into our

lap. The symbols tingled against our exposed tentacle-skin. The effort of that motion was incredible, coming as it did only minutes after the searing pain and damage of distributed brain-math. We throbbed and ached and curled up, groaning softly.

Zheng turned on me.

“Shaman.”

“Zheng,” we croaked.

“Give me—”

“No ... no. No, Zheng. No.” We shook our head.

Zheng’s eyes bulged at us. She was like a woman trapped in concrete, staring and locked and unable to move, unable to believe what was happening.

“Shaman,” she rumbled. “That is a tool of bondage and control. Smash it to dust, or allow me. Do not hold it.”

I shook my head. “Zheng, I would never use something like this on you. Nobody here would. Nobody will. We have to understand it, if we want to stop that ever happening again.”

Zheng stared, hard and sharp and searching. Sunlight squeezed sweat from her scalp. We spread our tentacles. Let her search.

“I trust you, shaman,” she said. “I do not trust every wizard who stands with us, nor the judgement of monkeys.”

We held out the harpoon gun in one tentacle — to Praem. “Do you trust Praem?”

Zheng said nothing as her eyes followed the harpoon gun. Praem stepped forward. Praem held out her hands, but then paused, turned, and looked at Zheng.

“Stewardship,” said Praem. “Later.”

Zheng grunted. Praem accepted the gun. She stuck it awkwardly in her tote bag, with one end poking out.

“Zheng,” Evelyn said a moment later. “Your opinion on the demon host, if you care to share?”

Zheng turned narrow, sharp eyes on Evelyn. “Wizard?”

Evelyn shrugged. “You did share some brief communication with her, though it was mostly shouting. Regarding Edward?”

“Mmm. She will go for him. She will not make it. Too weak, too young. She may be a trap for us, bait wriggling on a hook. I urged her to wait, to go together.” Zheng rumbled a sigh. “But I stay with the shaman. Always.”

Zheng and July piled up the corpses. Jan pointed out that we couldn’t leave them here; difficult to find or not, the police might eventually turn up. Bloodstains and bullet casings were one thing, and would likely provoke a serious investigation. But a pile of identifiable corpses traceable back to existing identities — that could lead back to us directly.

Praem gave me another lemon. Raine gave me more water. Zheng helped me stand and walk over to the bodies. I looked away as I put my hands on the ground and stretched out a single finger to touch the corner of one dead shoulder.

My tentacles had collapsed back into pneuma-somatic invisibility, no longer able to take the distributed pain of hyperdimensional mathematics. But I could still perform the simple operations, the ones I’d burned into my mind over and over again with repeated use, the ones that our human grey matter alone could process without assistance.

I sent the corpses Out. To Camelot, for later. I bled and shook and squealed with the old pain, with the ice-pick headache behind my eyes and the roiling, pulsing, convulsing stomach reaction. But we did the maths.

At least the bodies were gone.

Sixth: Amanda Hopton.

As I sat back on the ground in a heap and Raine tended to me, Evelyn and Jan spent a minute confirming that Lozzie, Tenny, and Nicole were untouched.

“There’s nothing going on here!” Lozzie chirped over the group call, breathy with panic feedback. “Nobody outdoors, nobody inside. Just us and us! Nicky’s here!”

Nicole added, sounding like she was talking over Lozzie’s shoulder: “You lot be bloody careful, you hear? You should fucking well be

getting out of there. Bloody hell.”

But the other participant of the group call wasn't saying a thing; Amanda Hopton had fallen silent, replaced by the worried voice of Christine, Amanda's sister and Twil's mother, High Priestess of the Brinkwood Church.

“She's babbling,” Christine said, her voice tinny and distorted over the line. “Speaking in tongues, is that what they call it? We've heard her do this before, but never this badly. It's never been this bad before. She's not lucid in the slightest.”

Behind her, somewhere in the kind of shadowy gloom that was only possible on such a beating-hot summer's day, we could hear Amanda talking.

“—a void and then another void and then another void. Does it stop? Is this the way around? Or out? Let's— up, up, up! No, not there. Are you the architect? Or are you only the reader of the plans? Together now. All together now—”

I murmured, only half-heard by the others: “Somebody needs to speak with Hringwindla.”

Christine asked, “What happened to the angels? I still don't understand how they vanished.”

“Mum, mum,” Twil said for the sixth or seventh time. “The house ate them. They just went. Poof!”

Evelyn tugged on Twil's hand. Twil swallowed and looked away.

Jan spoke for us all, “Miss Hopton, we don't understand what has happened to your servitors. We don't understand what we're dealing with here. Please, take care of Miss Amanda, watch the approaches to your own property, and we'll get back to you when we have more information.”

Seventh, and last, and finally, with all of us at once: the front door.

Before dealing with the corpses, before lining up stolen guns, before the harpoon and the group call and the fate of the lone survivor, Jan and July had hurried to the front door of the House and sealed it with a magic circle.

I didn't pretend to understand how that worked, but I trusted that it did. Jan passed sticks of charcoal to her demon-host, and July

followed directions in scrawling a circle around the doorstep and the frame, sealing the yawning black portal inside a swirl of Latin and Arabic and what looked a bit like French. Evelyn had nodded in approval. Felicity had frowned, curious and unfamiliar. Kimberly had nervously suggested the addition of a particular arc of Latin words. But then Jan had stepped back and breathed a shaking sigh of not-quite-relief.

But now, with all other matters squared away, attention returned to the door.

Jan said, “Ladies, we are wasting time. We are wasting so much time. Please! We can gain no additional information here, and I am not stepping through that.” She gestured at the door. “We need to be in agreement on how to proceed, right now.”

We — me, seven Heathers blurred and dazed and covered in sun-baked blood in the shadow of Praem’s parasol — stared at the doorway, daring it to stare back.

A rectangle of darkness, untouched by the heat-haze sunlight. It looked more like a wall than a shadow. Badger and the Grinning Demon had both been swallowed by it like stones falling into ink. What had Edward created here? What method had he used to conceal or protect his house, a method that scared even Mister Joking away from the place?

Nobody seemed to have an answer to Jan’s question; we were all still shaken and reeling in the wake of so much violence, ebbing down toward numb aftershock. We weren’t trained soldiers, we couldn’t keep going through this — other than Stack, and maybe the demons.

Raine was the only one with a suggestion — a physical one. She dug a stone out of the bare soil, hefted it to test the weight, then hurled it through the doorway.

The house swallowed the rock. No sound returned to us.

Raine tried the experiment a second time, with a gentle underarm throw. The rock should have hit floorboards or carpet. But there was nothing audible beyond that barrier of gloom.

Sun beat down on earth and blood. Sweat rolled down foreheads. Several of us gulped or blew out shaking breaths.

Twil muttered, “Stepping through that wasn’t in the plan.”

“We have to,” I said — but I felt so weak and drained. My tentacles ached from holding themselves up while so bruised.

Evelyn shook her head. “We didn’t plan for going inside on foot, not prior to proper containment, not from here, not without Camelot at our backs.” She huffed. “And I don’t know about everybody else, but I have had enough of reality-warping mage houses to last me the rest of my lifetime, even if I make it to a century old.”

“Stupid spooky houses,” I said. Twil snorted a token laugh.

“Kimberly isn’t going in there either,” Felicity said. “Nor myself. This wasn’t part of the plan, right.”

Evelyn shot me a sidelong glance. “Heather, is there absolutely no chance of a second attempt at moving the place?”

We shook our head. “Not moving the house. Houses don’t move. But— but Badger’s in there. We can’t just ... go.”

Jan straightened up and said: “The house must go to Camelot. If we can’t break it here, we retreat and try again.”

Zheng rumbled with disgust. “The shaman speaks true. She stays, I stay.”

Evelyn sighed. “For fuck’s sake—”

Stack interrupted her. Evelyn jumped, as did Kimberly and Jan. Stack had been quiet and still for several minutes by then, blending in with the summer heat.

“You’re giving up?” she asked.

It was just a question, with no malice behind the cool words. But Evelyn gritted her teeth and glared at Stack. “I am not going in there. Praem is not going in there. None of us are walking into a fucking trap like a bunch of morons. That is an unknown. No.”

“Evee,” I croaked. “Please. Badger’s—”

Zheng rumbled over me. “The wizard dies here. Today. Now.”

Jan was making eyes at July. “Jule, the car, the petrol cans in the boot. Quickly, please.”

Raine raised her eyebrows at that. “Plan C?”

Jan smiled a tight little smile, twinkling with dark mischief. “Let the motherfucker burn, as the song says.”

Twil laughed — too loud, too hard, too forced.

“No!” Evelyn snapped. “That is beside the point! We still need the book!”

“Badger ... ” I murmured, weak and still fading, feeling limp and overheated even in the dubious shade of the thin parasol. Our tentacles reached toward the door. We couldn’t end this here. Not like this.

“Jule, now, please—”

“No, stop, I forbid that!”

“Wizards burning wizards! Ha!”

“Arson, always a good choice, cool, cool.”

“We’re not voting on it.”

“We need to leave, we need to leave right now—”

“Heather? Hey, Heather, look at me. We’re not going to abandon him. We’re not. Jan, hey, slow your roll.”

“Jule, stop paying attention to the rest of them. The petrol cans, now, please.”

“No arson. Arson bad.”

“We have no other plan! Heather has failed and the house is stuck! We leave now and Edward may come back at us tenfold! We burn —”

“—the book—”

“Burn!”

“—remind you that the police may in fact turn up sixty seconds from now and arrest us all on a dozen different charges?”

“—bubble-servitors are still inside, maybe—”

“Burn!”

“—Nathan knew the risks, he made his choice—”

“Burn!”

“Burn!”

“Burn!”

Houses don't move — but Houses do burn. Stop.

Echoed thoughts, cold and slow and solid, drove us to our feet, like hands clinging to our waist and hips in hidden desperation. We cast away the parasol with a flick. We staggered and lurched, but pushed away kind touches and hissed over concerned words.

And then we screeched like a demonic cross between frog and ape.

We screeched until everyone else shut up and stopped talking. We screeched until Stack stepped back and Zheng retreated and July halted and Jan stared with fear in widened eyes. We screeched and screeched and screeched until Lozzie made calming noises over the phone and Raine caught a flailing tentacle and Evelyn said, “Bloody hell, Heather.”

Our screech trailed off. Our throat burned from the effort, twisted into a barely human shape inside. Everyone was quiet for a long moment; even the insects buzzing in the summer heat had grown still and silent, cowed into hiding by this alien thing in their midst.

Slowly, the insects began buzzing again, as if testing the air. A fly bumbled past.

“Heather?” Raine said, gently. “You alright?”

“S-stop,” we stammered, vaguely embarrassed. Our throat was so raw. “We’re not burning down the House.”

“Wow,” said Jan. She swallowed, dry and rough.

“Understood,” said Stack.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled — low and soft. An acknowledgement and acceptance. I nodded to her, mortified but thankful.

“She does love doing that,” Twil said with a forced laugh.

“And she’s right,” said Evelyn. “We’re not burning the house down. That would solve one problem and leave us with several others. And might kill Nathan. And might not work, anyway.”

“E-exactly,” I said. “And the House doesn’t want to burn. It’s not at fault here.”

That earned me a few concerned and confused looks, but Evelyn seemed to understand.

We looked up at the front wall of the House, at the strange interlocking beams and the secret of the twin primes layered into the construction. The windows were empty and black, the same as the void of the front door. But even shells could want. This one wanted to protect — but it knew not what it protected.

Twil laughed softly. “Maybe it should have bloody well moved, then.”

“ ... you might be onto something,” I muttered.

“Eh?”

“I could ... I could try ... ”

Before the plan had fully formed, we were stumbling toward the house and reaching out toward the walls. Raine and Praem made a token attempt to stop me, probably because they assumed I was going for the yawning mouth of the open front door. But then they must have realised my true intent. One tentacle pulled the parasol after me, to keep the worst of the sun off my back. Another slipped my squid-skull mask back over my head, wrapping us once more in comforting gloom.

“Hell is she doing? Big H?”

“The shaman knows old magic.”

“Let that girl work, hey. Praem, let her. We probably shouldn’t touch her. Heather? Can you hear me? I’m right here, if you need a hand.”

My hands pressed against brick. My tentacles touched beam and wood and mortar. In a gesture quite impossible, we tried to hug a building.

There would be no second attempt at using brain-math to teleport the House to Camelot. We — the six of us who had shared the load so that the seventh could stay conscious — were down and out, invisible and almost intangible. We would sleep for a day or two, then awaken back into flesh. We could support no second attempt at such a gigantic equation.

But we were still here. We could talk to a House.

What was dialogue with a building but the intersection between flesh and geometry? True conversation could not take place without inhabiting the spaces inside, the spaces between the structures, the room-spaces which defined purpose and meaning for a collection of matter and mass. This pressing on the exterior rendered me akin to wind and rain, something to be kept out.

But wind and rain is a little bit like an array, a spread-wide net of many points of contact, the absence of which can define the structure the forces dash themselves against.

In the places I was covering, the places I was not — there was House.

With the tiniest touch of hyperdimensional mathematics, I scrawled out an equation which made sense only in the context of flesh pressed to brick and stone: what was House, and what was not.

Houses do not move.

But if you do not move, you will burn. House will become non-House, ash and charcoal and smoke on the wind.

Houses do not move.

You stay unmoving because of Edward Lilburne — but you don't know who he is, or even what he is. You have been given an external purpose, and made unmoving. And this lack of movement will eventually cause the ceasing of your House-ness. You will be un-House, more like me than a House.

Houses do not move.

Move, or cease being a House.

There was no moral argument which could convince a building, no meat-to-meat empathy to bridge the species barrier. This wasn't even like communicating with something from Outside, some alien strangeness that only Lozzie could possibly make sense of. This wasn't even alive, or thinking. It was like communicating with a principle, a concept, a form beyond touching or redefinition.

But that final choice resonated against part of that concept.

Move, or cease being a House. In unmoving, become something other than a House.

The House did not wish to burn — not because it understood fire or

burning, but because such a process would stop it being a House.

And so, with implicit consent and a quivering scalpel made of not-House, defined with a swish and a swoop of mind-searing mathematical tricks, written in the language of reality with the force of pure observation, I looked inside the House.

I found the value which defined not-moving House-ness, and cut it sideways.

Houses can't move. But this one will. The exception proves the rule.

And then all it needed was the tiniest push, the aftershock of the very equation it had pinched off earlier, still burning on the surface of the House like oil on water.

I did nothing but cut a leash.

The House went Out, all by itself.

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.9

“Houses cannot ‘do’ maths,” Evelyn said for the tenth time in the last two hours.

On every previous occasion she had added a little exasperated sigh — sometimes irritated, sometimes affectionate, sometimes resigned — but that final time she just swallowed. Her voice trailed off, her point unfinished, the rant forgotten. She didn’t look at me. None of us looked at each other.

We were too busy staring across the purple-lit grassy hills of Camelot, at the thing we had brought Outside.

A patented Eevee-rant would have done us all a world of good right about then, which was why I said: “This one did.”

Evelyn swallowed again, then took a deep breath, steeling herself like a swimmer about to plunge into cold water. “Houses cannot perform mathematics.” She paused, then: “Let alone self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics. They are not brains, or even computers imitating brains. It doesn’t matter if you scratch ‘one plus one equals two’ into a wall, the wall does not add up to anything. You ... well ... you didn’t ‘imagine’ it. But you’re being inaccurate. Your metaphors are running away with your mouth, Heather.”

Raine forced a chuckle. “Our Heather does have a habit of that, but I think this time is a little different, Eevee.”

“It’s not a metaphor,” I said, gently but firmly. “I mean it literally. The house stopped the equation, scrubbed part of it out, changed the values — I don’t know how. And then once I convinced it otherwise—”

“You convinced a house,” Evelyn sighed. “Heather, it’s a building.”

“Yes! Eevee, for pity’s sake, why is this so hard to believe? You’re a mage, you’ve seen the supposed rules of reality get broken six ways to Sunday. You’re standing next to a person made of wood, right

now.” I gestured at Praem with a tip of one tentacle — then winced at the muscle pain running up the limb like a line of drums. Raine rubbed my back, distracting me with pressure. I hugged the tentacle, nursing myself. “Are you telling me Praem doesn’t think, or have feelings, just because she doesn’t have a human brain?”

Evelyn tutted. “That’s different. Heather, you know that’s different.”

“Why?” I demanded. Then I added, for Praem’s benefit, “I apologise, Praem, I didn’t mean to cast doubt on your sapience or self-determination, or anything like that. I’m just trying to make Evee see sense.”

From a ways behind us, as if a few feet extra distance would impart additional safety, Jan spoke up: “Oh my dears, there is no sense to be seen here.”

Nicole — even further back than Jan, practically ready to fall over backwards through the open gateway — said: “Fuckin’ right hey. Fuckin’ right.”

Everyone else ignored her — except Lozzie, who did a giggle-snort. Laughing at her girlfriend’s terrible jokes, I assumed.

Praem turned her head to glance at me — she was the only one of us other than Lozzie who wasn’t mesmerized by the view down the Camelot hillside. Praem stared, her eyes milk-white and unreadable.

I grimaced an apology. “Sorry, sorry Praem, this isn’t remotely comparable with you. Sorry.”

Evelyn said, low and contemplative, “Technically Praem does have a brain. She’s grown one, in wood-grain and dead cellulose. That’s how demons work; soul-pressure modifies the flesh to better reflect the contents of the vessel. So, yes, Praem has a structure in her head which looks very much like a brain. Though, injuring it wouldn’t injure her like one of us.” Evelyn swallowed again and pulled an awkward half-smile. “Never test that, please, Praem. You don’t have permission to sustain a head injury.”

“Large,” Praem intoned.

“Eh?”

“Large and wrinkly. Many folds. Maid brained.”

Raine snorted. Lozzie giggled. Evelyn sighed. I forced a token laugh,

the best I could do under the circumstances. Zheng — a few paces to my other side — rumbled like a steam engine in a holding pattern.

Twil said, as if this was all the most natural thing in the world: “Maid brains gotta be more wrinkly and folded than others, right? Right? ‘Cos of all the frills! Eh? Eh? Get it?”

Evelyn sighed again. “Yes, Twil. We get it.”

Raine said, “Gotta work on your joke structure, Twil.”

“Well,” I added, “I thought it was very good. Well done.”

Twil blew out a sigh. Poor puppy, she was trying her best. We were all trying to force a bit of normality, as if following some buried instinct to defend our psyches against the sight in front of us.

“Anyway,” Evelyn huffed. “My point, Heather, is that one requires a brain — a thinking-structure, whatever it’s made from — to affect hyperdimensional mathematical changes to the structure of reality.”

Praem intoned: “Heather, bigger brain. Bulging.”

Twil lost control and snorted. Behind us, Jan sighed very heavily and very sharply, and muttered: “I don’t understand how you lot can joke about this.”

Nicole said, “They’re all fucking nutters. All of them.”

“Mages,” said Amy Stack.

She was standing even further back than Jan and Nicole, her boots only just over the threshold of the gateway from Number 12 Barnslow Drive. She was only standing on Camelot’s soil because there was absolutely no way she was being left back in the house itself with only Tenny, Marmite, and the spider-servitors to stop her doing anything we didn’t want.

“Ah?” said Jan. “Excuse me?”

“Mages,” Amy repeated.

Jan let out a tight little huff. “I am also a mage.”

Stack said nothing.

Raine called back down to Stack: “We laugh because we choose not to cry! Joke or go crackers! You should join in, Amy. Got a place

saved for you. Come sit on my lap, hey?”

Amy Stack said absolutely nothing. I didn’t even look, but I could feel her stare like an ice cube dropped down the back of my collar. She was not impressed.

Evelyn sighed again. “Raine, stop antagonizing our pet psychopath.”

“I’m not antagonising her,” Raine said. “I’m sure doing something, but it ain’t that.”

I had to resist the urge to point out there was a word for what Raine was doing: flirting.

Jan was right — we must all have been mad to be having this conversation right then, in the face of this unspeakable thing, with Badger still in danger, less than two hours after witnessing some of the worst violence any of us had ever seen. There was a neat pile of corpses laid out not a hundred feet away, just around the corner of the half-complete Camelot Castle. Some of us were still covered in blood. A row of looted firearms lay on the grass, just as alien and strange Outside as they had been in the English countryside. And here we were, making stupid jokes, and flirting.

Maybe Raine was right. Maybe that’s the sane thing to do — make stupid jokes with your friends and listen to hopeless flirting, to drown out the blood and the bullets. It was better than crying.

Evelyn snapped, “Can we please stay on topic? Heather, my point is, the house did not do mathematics.”

“But it did! How is that harder to absorb than ... ” I gestured helplessly, down the Camelot hillside.

Twil clucked her tongue and said: “What if it’s a demon-possessed house?”

Evelyn finally looked away from the sight down the hill and stared at Twil. “What? What are you talking about?”

Twil shrugged. “You can put demons in anything, right? Like, it’s a super bad idea, but it works, doesn’t it?”

Evelyn just stared at her for a long moment, brow creased in one hell of a frown. Then she looked back at the thing we could no longer call a House. She shook her head — but she did it slowly.

“No. No, that’s completely absurd. A demon in such a diffuse structure would de-cohere. And the changes it would make to the building would be ... well, not unlike what we saw inside Glasswick Tower, with Alexander’s corpse.”

Twil gestured down the hill and pulled a face which said ‘yeah-see-what-I-mean’. “Duh.”

Evelyn shook her head. “This is not the same.”

“Mm,” I agreed, thinking out loud. “It wasn’t like talking to a demon. It wasn’t possessed, it was just ... House. It was just a house.”

Evelyn huffed. “My point exactly, Heather. In the end it’s just a house. No brain — demonic modification or organic or otherwise. You couldn’t move it at first, yes, but that must be some layer of trick by Edward. Houses don’t refuse to move. It’s just a house.”

Evelyn worked hard to shore up the failing confidence in her own voice, to pack more quick-drying cement on her denials and justifications. But the evidence in front of us — down the hill and beyond the outline of what would one day be a curtain wall, embedded in the concrete-lined hole we’d dug for Edward’s house, and now sprouting like a mushroom of brick and beam — was a tidal wave of undeniable reality that even Evelyn could not explain away.

Twil went, “Pffft. Come on, Eevee. That’s not a house. Not any more. Looks like there’s about twelve demons in that thing, not just one. Whole damn party down there.”

“Demon party,” said Praem. “Woo hoo.”

Nobody laughed.

Evelyn rubbed at her red-rimmed eyes, too exhausted to argue further. I wet my lips and felt extremely awkward — and more than a little worried about Badger, still somewhere inside the thing. Raine cracked her knuckles and cracked a grin. Behind us, Jan shifted a step closer to July, as if seeking refuge. Lozzie held her hand. Zheng stared down the slope like a statue; even she didn’t want to go anywhere near the thing down there.

We were in Camelot, just shy of two hours after the gunfight at Edward’s House, gathered on the small hillside within the outline of

the future curtain wall of the castle. All of us were present, plus Lozzie and Nicole, with some reluctance on the latter's part — and minus Kimberly. The group call had been terminated once we'd gotten home; there was little to nothing we could do for Amanda Hopton, after all, except attempt to release the bubble-servitors from wherever they had been spirited away to. The gateway to Sharrowford — our way back to Evelyn's magical workshop — stood open at our rear, guarded on the far side by Evelyn's spider-servitors, and on this side by a small group of Knights and a single dedicated Caterpillar looming over the comparatively tiny structure. Evelyn had reassured us that no Outsider matter could cross back through the gate; but the House and its contents were not from Outside. We weren't taking any chances with something escaping back into our own home.

Camelot was just as soothing and placid as always, a strange island of calm refuge amid the endless whirling vistas of Outside. The warm wind carried a scent of cinnamon and the cushion-soft yellow grasses cupped the soles of one's shoes with every step. Purple nebula-light flooded down from the whorls of glowing crystal orbiting in the dark, cool skies. Camelot was impenetrable, not for the strength of its walls, but for the calm of its nature.

Even arrayed for war, Camelot felt peaceful and calm.

Perhaps that's what kept the House in check.

Edward Lilburne's House had arrived exactly where I had originally intended, sat neatly in the concrete-lined pit prepared by the Knights and the Caterpillars. The structure was buffered with great volumes of dirt which had arrived alongside it, and braced with white slabs of shed Caterpillar armour, to stop the whole thing subsiding.

The dirt — the high clay content soil taken from a hidden corner of English woodland — was not something we had considered the importance of previously. Luckily for the rest of us, Lozzie had several Knights down there already on bucket duty, far too close to the House for anybody's comfort, extracting stray earthworms and random beetles and any other earthly life we'd accidentally transported along with the House.

Not for Camelot's safety, though. According to Lozzie, it was far too cruel to abandon dozens of innocent earthworms here, where they'd

probably run down and die within a day or two, over-exposed to the alien pressures of Outside.

I happened to agree, but we still didn't think it was worth venturing so close to the House — or, what had been a House, until it had arrived here.

Edward Lilburne's House had bloomed, like a giant fungal stalk.

The original structure — the one we had faced down in reality, the ordinary looking albeit old house with a frontage that had been reworked to spell out the secrets of the twin prime conjecture — was still there, still intact, sitting in its bed of soil and concrete. The front door stood open, showing nothing but black void. The windows were dark and empty. Like a shell.

It now formed the foundation — or perhaps the roots — of a second house.

A vertical stalk made of brick and beam and smoke-dark glass had exploded upward from the roof of the structure, as thick as the House itself, a jumbled amalgamation of House-parts climbing toward the sky, a perverse beanstalk of domestic matter all mixed together. Fifty feet up in the air it flowed outward, spreading like the branches of a tree — or more accurately like a fungal cap one might find on a cute little woodland mushroom, except made of brick and beam, wood and glass, tile and door frame and windows.

The structure hanging in the air was easily several times the size of the House-seed from which it had sprouted, and impossible to construct or maintain under the pressure of earthly physics and gravity. Tendrils of brick and frills of window hung down from the underside of the curved cap; nodules of roof tile ran in ridges along the top; lines of door frame formed zig-zag patterns up the trunk. Beams stuck out at every possible angle, like thorns or hairs on the stem of a fungal rose.

The thing looked as if it should be swaying in the wind, or flexing with mushroom growth, or perhaps breathing with regular pulses of air. But it was frozen solid, unmoving and stable, as a House should be.

Had we accidentally planted a seed in Outside soil? Or was this like a fish ripped from the deep sea, a corpse expanding under the lack of usual pressure? The others muttered such speculation — that the

house had metastasised like a cancer, or it was trying to colonize Camelot, or perhaps that this was what Edward had wanted all along.

But we — myself and my tentacles — could not shake the image of a conjoined twin.

A House with a twin who had been sealed within its House-like body, absorbed in the womb (but what is a womb, for a house?) Only under the vastly different conditions of Outside had that half-dead twin finally bloomed upward into the open air, claiming flesh and reality for herself.

That idea made our skin crawl. We hugged ourselves tight.

At least the House wasn't screaming, not that I could hear — but perhaps that's only because it was intimidated by our not-so-little army.

I dislike using military terminology to refer to the Knights and the Caterpillars as a whole. They are not really an army, or if they are it is not the only thing they are, nor the most important component of their concept of self-hood. Inside each Knight is a piece of flesh, earth-born but Outsider-changed by the grace of Lozzie's biological gifts; the same uplifted spirit-flesh resides in each Caterpillar shell, though multiplied many times over. They are a tiny, embryonic culture and society, non-human, once-of-Earth, now rooted in Outside — group-minded, spread across two different physical forms, and cradled in a symbiotic relationship with both suits of metal armour and the far less earthly biotechnology of the vast Caterpillar machines. Growing, building, talking among themselves, creating language, art, and exploring their environment; they were more than just force. To treat them as such would be a violation of an implicit trust. They had dedicated themselves to my protection and the rescue of my sister, but they had done so because they had once known me as a terrified little girl.

I was not their Queen. They owed me no allegiance. They were not mine to dispose of as I wished.

But they had formed themselves up in front of the house all the same. We hadn't even asked.

Gleaming chrome stood in stillness and silence, arrayed in loose ranks about fifty feet back from the open front door of the House,

ready to repel anything which might emerge from that unyielding black void. They had dug a deep V-shaped ditch to defend their position, and used the resulting bank of earth to give themselves a high ground advantage. Only a token force — less than a dozen — remained on the walls of Camelot castle itself.

Despite the wide variation in armament and occasional vagueness of purpose, the Knights had positioned themselves with expert intention: tower shields and lances to the fore, with halberds and spears and other pole weapons just behind. The flanks of their formation were guarded by axes and great-swords, and I had no doubt they would be capable of rapid shifts of position if need be. Those few Knights with strange crossbow-like weapons stood slightly further back, on a small rise of the landscape, ready to fire over the heads of the others.

“Wouldn’t like to be charging into that,” Raine had said when we’d first arrived and seen the Knights drawn up for battle. “Horseback or not. Bet they’re nigh-on unbreakable. Lozzie? Lozzie, hey, do your lads and lasses in shining armour even know how to run away?”

Lozzie had pulled a big silly shrug. She wasn’t the type to obsess over military matters.

But the infantry were ants compared to the heavy support.

Twelve Caterpillars ringed the House, giants of pitted white carapace with their sides turned to face the ‘foe’. Each of the Caterpillars had several massive black tendrils extended from their face-areas, poised and pointing toward the House, as if waiting for a signal to fire. For all I knew, they really did have living artillery packed into those gigantic barn-sized bodies.

An additional trio of Caterpillars formed a wall between the House and the Camelot castle, just in case. Nobody was taking any chances with this interloper, the Knights least of all.

To see so many Caterpillars gathered in one place was shocking to one’s own scale of self, in the same way as seeing a street of skyscrapers for the first time, or standing amid an airfield of nuclear bombers, or a staging ground full of tanks: their size, the way their bulk blocked out pieces of horizon and redefined the landscape, their caged energy and power and potential, the way their great internal engines set up a resonating hum in the air, just below

hearing. I couldn't help but notice the different shades of mud and dirt around the skirts of white carapace — the Caterpillars had been off exploring Camelot, in half a dozen different and unimaginable places. And they had all returned, to help. And this was only a handful of the giant wriggly friends.

The House was alien and strange; Edward Lilburne was a powerful mage. But out here, Outside, we had made something beyond monsters and magicians.

Well, Lozzie had made them. Then they had made themselves. I couldn't claim much credit.

Out in reality, we had been woefully unprepared for a siege, surprised by sudden violence, and almost overwhelmed by the scale of the task. Here, we were all too ready to batter down Edward's walls.

Except Badger was still in there.

We made a sad sight in comparison with the tightly-organised Knights and the impenetrable armour-hulls of the Caterpillars. The gunfight at the House and the slow horror of the aftermath had left us all drained and exhausted.

Raine put on a good front of confidence and energy, but I knew her too well not to see through to the truth: she was jittery and tired, and far too interested in the stolen gun which was now strapped over her shoulder. Twil was odd, her smiles too wide, her laughs too loud. The killing had shaken her. Evelyn was squint-eyed and hunched with effort, clinging to Praem's arm. Jan and July were not doing too badly, though Jan's courage and determination had faltered in the face of the fruiting House. Lozzie seemed normal, but very attached to Jan; perhaps she did not want this to go ahead.

Felicity and Nicole had me worried in a very different kind of way. On the way home, Felicity had taken a detour, to drop off Kimberly and the boy from the House at Sharrowford General Hospital. The covert drop-off had gone off without a hitch. Kimberly had even called us to let us know that the boy was being looked at, few questions asked, and Kimberly was passing herself off as a concerned bystander — and just about to leave, on foot, without supplying any identification.

But Nicole had seemed upset, even angry; she'd exchanged a few

words with Felicity while everyone else's backs were turned.

Now Felicity wouldn't even look at Nicole, averting her eyes with dignified contempt. And Nicole kept glaring daggers at Felicity's back — or at least she had been doing so, until the shock of stepping through to Camelot had left her speechless and shivering.

Jan was right, the battlefield was no place for lingering romantic jealousy.

Only the demon-hosts — Praem, Zheng, and July — were their usual selves. Amy Stack hadn't been much affected by the fight and the gore, but standing on the alien soil of Camelot was making her twitchy and tense; she hid it incredibly well, as only a professional could. I was the only one who could see it so openly, but it left her just as compromised as the rest of us.

And me? Myself and myself? All the little Heathers in our shared head-space? We were not having a good time, to put it lightly.

In Camelot, blessed with the altered reality of Outside, our tentacles were visible to the others in all our rainbow-throbbing glory. But we were wrapped around our own stomach and ribs, hugging ourselves tightly to stop from falling over and closing our eyes. We ached with muscle pain all the way down every tentacle, each limb a tube of slow-burning agony.

I was still caked with far too much of my own blood-sweat; the inside of my abdomen throbbed and ached with the aftermath of reactor red-line; only Raine's arm looped through my own kept me on my feet. We wanted nothing more than to drag ourselves into a nice dark cave, coil up in a ball, and fall into a dreamless sleep.

Not a good condition in which to assault anything, let alone whatever the House had turned into.

Raine had wanted me to rest on the car ride home, but that was impossible. We hadn't known what had truly become of the House until we'd arrived back at Number 12 Barnslow Drive, bundled everybody indoors — followed by the screeching tyres of Stack's raggedly blue car — and then waited while Evelyn spent several frantic minutes activating the gateway. Lozzie was forbidden from Slipping to Camelot without the rest of us, just in case Edward had any final tricks up his sleeve.

Out in the woods, we had left little behind except a great big hole

in the ground where the House had once stood. The teleport had taken the foundations, part of an underground septic tank, and cut the House off from a set of buried power lines. I'd almost toppled in, but Zheng had darted forward and yanked me back.

A mysterious pit, two cars and a fountain pockmarked with massive holes, a lot of blood with no apparent source, and several dozen bullet casings.

We didn't have time to clean all that up. Let the paranormal investigators and the Sharrowford police believe what they wanted — there was no way to trace it back to us.

So now, all minds were turned to the House.

Evelyn sighed again, more exhausted than exasperated. I looked away from the giant brick-and-beam mushroom of Edward's house and caught a moment of Evelyn Saye, Mage, lit in profile by the source-less purple glow of Camelot, a gentle frown of intense thought on her brow, her teeth pinching her lower lip as she chewed at the problem. Praem was supporting her arm, keeping her on her feet much like Raine was with me; for a moment the family resemblance between Evelyn and Praem was clearer than ever, their features softened and highlighted by Camelot's gentle winds.

Then Evelyn frowned harder and the moment passed. She tutted. "Badger's fucked up all our plans. God damn him, the absolute fool. You better hope you find him before I do, Heather, because if I get to him first I'm going to have Praem hog-tie him."

Nobody laughed. Evelyn cleared her throat and looked around.

"Joke," said Praem.

"Yes," Evelyn sighed. "I am joking. Of course. Though we probably should tie his hands together to stop him doing anything else so stupid."

Raine laughed, but even she had to force the sound. "Assumed you were serious, Eevee."

"Yuuuup," went Twil. "He's kinda fucked it, hasn't he?"

Behind us, Amy Stack spoke up again. "What is your plan?"

Evelyn finally tore her attention completely away from Edward Lilburne's House and our waiting siege forces. She half-twisted in

Praem's grip and fixed a pinch-eyed glare on Stack. Nicole Web got caught in the blast zone, shuffling sideways on her crutches and eyeing Stack like a condemned prisoner.

Evelyn said, low and dangerous with cold anger: "You would know that if you'd bothered to communicate properly with us. You would also know that having one of our own inside the house is a grave liability. You should have told us what Nathan was going to do. You absolute idiot. Surprised you survived five minutes of being a mercenary."

Stack just stared. Cold eyes shuttered against raging anger.

Jan cleared her throat delicately and lifted her head. "Operation Jericho," she said, then pulled a self-conscious wince.

Raine laughed. "We really can't call it that. Come off it, Jan."

Felicity said, "Yeah, that's ... that's in bad taste. Kinda messed up."

"I enjoy a bit of fancy naming," Jan said. Then she sighed. "But yes, okay. Operation big loud tooting?"

Twil spluttered a laugh.

"Toot," said Praem.

Evelyn huffed, unimpressed. She nodded sideways, vaguely in the direction of the Caterpillars. "The large-scale Outsider creatures—"

"Not Outsiders!" Lozzie chirped. I grunted in agreement. "Cattys!" Lozzie said.

Evelyn pursed her lips. "The 'Caterpillars' can put out a massive amount of directional sound — possibly enough to damage brick and concrete, certainly more than enough to hurt flesh and bone. This step of our plan is — or *was* — to bombard the house with enough 'loud tooting' to render any unprotected human beings very much unconscious, possibly dead."

"Right," said Stack. "And now Nathan is in there."

Evelyn gritted her teeth. "Yes, he is. Isn't he?"

Stack held her glare. I was mildly impressed.

We cleared our raw and aching throat: "Um. Actually I think that plan would be ruined anyway, Evee. I'm ... personally very

reluctant to risk hurting the house itself. It doesn't deserve that. I don't think it even knows who Edward is."

Evelyn sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Twil looked quite uncomfortable. But Felicity nodded and Zheng grunted; I wasn't alone in this understanding of the House as more than just a structure.

Raine cracked a smirk. "Looks like there's nothing else for it, ladies. We've gotta go in there. On foot."

Jan cleared her throat again. "That building has no power and no water. I say we give it a day or two — or even better, a whole week. With any luck we starve him out, no need to go assaulting a fortified position."

"Nathan is in there," I said. "He might need our help."

"Mmmmmmmnnnnhhrrrrr."

Everybody flinched — except Praem and July. Zheng's throaty rumble was like the threat of a storm on the horizon. She flexed her massive hands and rolled her neck from side to side, sullen eyes fixed on the House.

"Zheng?" I ventured. "What's wrong?"

Zheng just blinked slowly, focused on a thought nobody else could see. "The worm is not the only wayward fool."

"The bubble-servitors?" Evelyn asked, squinting with disbelief. "You're concerned about those? Seriously?"

Raine murmured, "Evee, shhhhh."

I said: "The demon-host? The one who ran off?"

Zheng didn't answer. She just inhaled deeply, straightening up and rumbling again. I couldn't be sure without asking her in private, but I could have sworn she was grappling with some inner conflict. Whatever she was experiencing, it was too fragile for questions.

"No siege," she said eventually. "Shaman. I will go alone if you do not."

"I think we have to," I said. "Yes, Zheng. We can't let Nathan do this alone. And not ... yes. Not alone."

Twil blew out a big sigh. “I do not fancy going in there. Sorry, big H. Even out here, like. Just, no. No way. Fuck me. We’re gonna do it anyway, aren’t we?”

Raine flashed a grin. “Can’t leave Nate to his fate.”

“Nooooo,” Twil whined. “Don’t do shit poetry now, Raine. I can’t take it.”

Jan said, a little too high-pitched, “I am not stepping in there. By all the gods of Kadath, I am not stepping in there. Spooky houses and mages are never a good combination.”

Raine laughed. “You should see some of the places we’ve been before. This is nothing.”

“We can’t leave Nathan in there,” I murmured. “And we can’t leave ... we can’t, we—”

Evelyn huffed like the brakes on a tractor. “Alright!” she snapped. “Fine! Praem, help me get— that’s it, thank you, thank you Praem.” Evelyn hobbled and huffed a few paces in front of the rest of us, with Praem at her side, then turned around and fixed us all with a razor-sharp glare. Back hunched, clutching her walking stick, framed by the purple light of Camelot and the siege on the grassy plain below, with a few strands of her straw-blond hair tugged loose by the warm winds, Evelyn could have led me anywhere. She was, in a way. I would follow her to Wonderland, in time.

Evelyn opened her mouth, but Raine got there first: “Evee, Evee, who put you back in command, hey?”

“Raine!” I hissed. Joking to let off steam was one thing, but undermining Evelyn’s confidence was a bridge too far, even for Raine. For a moment I had no idea what she was thinking. Was she trying to intentionally pull us back from the task? Was Raine afraid this was too much for us, but unwilling to speak her mind?

Even after all that time, I still did not fully understand our Raine. She kept surprising me, every time I thought I knew her inside out.

Her words drew Evelyn’s glare to her — and drew Evelyn’s spine upright, Evelyn’s chin higher, Evelyn’s walking stick off the grass of Camelot to brandish at Raine’s face.

“Me!” Evelyn snapped. “I’ve put myself back in charge!” She gestured at Jan. “No offense to our ‘contractor’, but she’s not

exactly showing any spine when it comes to walking into supernatural environments. But you and I, Raine?” Evelyn’s scowl transmuted with the force of knowledge, into a savage little grin more at home on Zheng’s face than Eeve’s. My heart did a funny little back-flip. “You and me. Twil. Heather. Praem. Even Zheng? We’ve done this enough times before. We know what we’re doing. Now!” Evelyn snapped. “Listen up!”

Twil snorted under her breath. “Yes madam drill sergeant, three bags full ma’am, lickety split ma’am.”

Evelyn ignored that. She looked at all of us at once — a clever trick. I thought I was the only one capable of that.

“If we do this,” Evelyn said, “then we do it right. We’ve screwed up this kind of thing enough times before — Alexander’s castle, the cult’s house, Carcosa, more — but this time is going to be different. We stick together. We go slow. Nobody moves alone. Nobody touches anything, breathes on anything without permission and investigation first. We—”

Zheng rumbled: “You do not command me, wizard.”

Evelyn, to my surprise, didn’t even flinch. She didn’t even look at Zheng. She just pointed at her with the walking stick. “You can shut the fuck up and get in line, or you can fuck off back home.”

Zheng stiffened. I froze, too, ready for everything to go suddenly and terribly wrong. Praem hadn’t been expecting that either — she moved to step in front of Eeve, to head off any sudden aggression.

Zheng rumbled, “Wizard.”

“Down,” said Praem.

Evelyn looked at Zheng. “Do you know why you’re going to do what you’re told? No? Because in less than two months we are going to be doing this same procedure for Wonderland.”

My stomach dropped. Zheng paused. “Huuuh.”

Evelyn continued. “When we do that, there can be no mistakes, no misplaced footfalls, no loose cannons. If there are, then we will all die, and it will be particularly horrible. This — this is a dress rehearsal. A dry run. Down there in that house is a dangerous mage, and I do not know why he’s not struck back at us, but compared to the Eye, he is nothing. This is the best practice we’re going to get.

So, Zheng, demon-host. Are you one of us, or are you a loose end we can't stop snagging on sharp objects?"

The aggression flowed back out of Zheng's posture, replaced with a kind of sullen darkness. She turned to look at us — at me.

"You're one of us, Zheng," I said without hesitation. "You're with us. You are."

"Huuunnh." Zheng grunted. "The shaman answers for me. Very well, wizard."

"Your orders are simple, anyway," Evelyn said. "Don't touch anything you're not supposed to, don't run off and cause a problem, and ... " Evelyn paused and grinned. "If we need something killing, be quick about it."

Zheng couldn't help the replying smile. We breathed an internal sigh of relief. My most beloved really did understand each other, if they only tried.

Evelyn nodded, then turned her gaze back to the rest of us. "This time is going to be different — because we're going to have an escort. Lozzie!"

Lozzie did a little hop-jump away from Jan, flapping her hands either side of her head like mock rabbit ears. "Yah!"

"I want the Knights with us. Obviously not all of them, there's far too many to fit into that house. But at least thirty. I want them in the lead, I want them at our rear, I want them flanking us; I want the vulnerable core of human flesh protected by a wall of metal. Can you do that for us?"

Lozzie did a side-to-side head bob, then nodded in one decisive dip of her head. "I can't!"

Evelyn blinked. "I—"

"But they can!" Lozzie pointed down at the Knights. "I'm not in charge, you know? I just give them suggestions. It doesn't work like that, Eveey-weevey."

Evelyn huffed softly. "Thank you, Lozzie, I know, but I'm trying to simplify things here, so—"

"Evee," I croaked. "Wait. They're coming to help."

Down in the formation of Knights, one lone figure split off from the right flank and slowly began hiking back up the hill toward us. A smile grew on my face as I recognised the filigree of designs on his armour, the optical illusion of quasi-floral swirls which brought to mind the depths of a forest seen from the edge of the tree-line, filled with hidden green groves and ivy-wrapped trunks. A gigantic single-bladed axe was slung over his right shoulder. He drew to a stop a few paces from Evelyn, tall and silent and glinting in the purple light.

It was the Forest Knight.

Everyone else watched with curiosity or wariness, but Lozzie bounced up to him and hugged the front of his armour. He didn't hug back — I'm not sure if the Knights were used to such things — but he did dip his visor-less helmet in greeting.

"Hello, you!" I said, feeling brighter already. "How ... how are you? If that question makes sense, I suppose, um ..."

The Forest Knight's blank helmet turned toward me in acknowledgement. A dip, up and down. Hello. I am well.

Praem intoned, "Good day to you."

Evelyn cleared her throat and pointed at the Forest Knight, but addressed me: "Heather, this is the one who accompanied you to Carcosa, yes?"

I nodded. "Yes. Yes, he is. Eevee, they do understand us, they really do. We can trust them — trust him."

Lozzie hopped free of the Forest Knight and said, "Ask again!"

Evelyn looked vaguely uncomfortable as she tried to figure out where to point her eyes: in the end she settled for talking upward to the Forest Knight's blank visor, despite the lack of eye-slit in his perfectly seamless armour. She explained once again what we needed: Knights in front, behind, and to both sides; protection and security; durable scouts and unbreakable defenders.

Before she even finished, the formation of Knights on the hillside below began to shift and break apart. Twenty nine of Lozzie's shining giants broke formation and stepped back, their places quickly filled as the shield wall closed up to compensate. They pulled back as a group, with shields and lances, pole-arms and axes,

and formed a rough U-shape behind the main body of Knights, with space for us to join them.

We all watched, speechless for a moment as the request was filled, our escort made ready.

“Wheeeeeeeey!” Raine cheered. “Good on you, mate. Good on you.”

“Okaaaaay,” went Twil. “Alright. Well. Maybe going in there won’t be that bad, like ...”

Evelyn looked back up at the Forest Knight’s eyeless visor. “Thank you. We are in your debt. As if we weren’t before.”

Praem said, “Suggestion: strawberries.”

The Forest Knight nodded at that. The movement was so slight that nobody else saw. Except perhaps for Praem.

Lozzie gave him another hug, too. Not everybody was so enthusiastic, however. Felicity and Jan both looked terrified, though to slightly different degrees. Stack watched with ice-cold disinterest. Nicole was clutching her own forehead and muttering under her breath. Zheng looked happy enough about this, but she kept eyeing the Forest Knight as if he might make an interesting sparring partner. July watched Zheng. That was a bad sign.

“Right then,” Evelyn raised her voice and turned back to the rest of us. “A show of hands. Who’s coming?”

Stack and Nicole both bowed out in silence; they would stay here with the Knights. Felicity hesitated, then sighed and raised her hand with the rest of us. Jan went white in the face — staring at Lozzie, who’s hand was raised straight up. Jan’s own hand was frozen before her.

“Heather, hey, Heather,” Raine was saying to me, trying to grab my own hand and coax me back down. “Heather, whoa, come on. You’re wiped out. I know you want to come, but you’re exhausted, your tentacles are down and out.”

“I can still do brain-math,” I croaked. “Not high-level things like teleporting a whole house, but I can still turn a bullet. I can. I’m not staying behind.”

Raine smiled, almost sadly, but with such affection.

“Yeah,” Twil said. “I’m not going without big H at our backs.”

Behind us, Jan was saying, “Lozzie, you can’t be serious. Your uncle is in there. It’s like walking into the exact place he wants you to go.”

Lozzie smiled, big and wide and oh-so smug. She spread her arms. “With all my friends to kick him to pieces!”

Jan shuddered and swallowed, a spark of adoration deep in her eyes, her face pale and sweating. “Oh, fine.” She raised her hand. “I’m in. I hate all of you people. I’m supposed to be in the back line, not getting stabbed in the front.”

July said, “You are protected.”

“Easy for you to say!”

“Trust.”

Evelyn stepped over to Lozzie, still leaning on Praem for support. When she spoke, she pitched her voice low, almost private. “Lozzie, are you certain? Are you comfortable joining us? Nobody will think less of you if you don’t. You don’t have to watch us do the deed.”

Lozzie nodded, big and bold. “I wanna! And you need more emergency exits along-along, too!”

“We’ll protect her,” we said in a croaking voice, then reached out and wrapped one aching tentacle around Lozzie’s waist. She leaned into the hug.

A dark mote floated in Evelyn’s eyes. She gestured to Lozzie and said, “May I borrow you for a moment? I think we need one more step, here.”

Lozzie nodded. To my surprise, Evelyn took her hand and led her off a little way, only a few paces. They put their heads together for a second, whispering too softly for anybody else to overhear. Praem stood tall, pretending not to listen. Then she turned her head and looked at me. After a moment Lozzie looked up and gestured to the Forest Knight. He joined them too; Evelyn whispered something up to him. Lozzie nodded along.

“Oh no,” said Twil. “She’s got some mad plan. I just know it. Can’t anything be straightforward around here? Ever?”

“Nope,” said Jan. “That’s generally how it goes, once you’re in deep enough.”

Twil snorted. "I've been in deep my whole life, thanks."

Evelyn and Lozzie straightened up. Lozzie was biting her bottom lip, her face a mask of worry. Evelyn looked determined, but also ashamed. They walked back over, the Forest Knight following along behind.

Before I could ask what was happening, one of the Caterpillars down below began to move.

A single Caterpillar broke off from the circle of twelve and moved toward the front of the house. The motion of great engines throbbed through the air. Carapace-skirts ghosted over the yellow grass of Camelot, sliding almost without friction. Great black tendrils arced ahead of the Caterpillar, multiplying from somewhere inside the main body.

"Evee?" I croaked. "What are we doing?"

Evelyn sighed sharply and looked at me with a bitter hardness behind her eyes. "We're going to have to hurt the house, Heather. Just a little."

Lozzie made a wide-eyed face of scepticism. "A little? Nopey-nopes. It's gonna be a little bit more than a little bit more. Evee-weevey, don't lie."

"I'm not lying, I'm trying to—"

"Evee," I demanded in a croak. "What's happening? What are you doing to the house?"

"Oh shit me," said Twil, going up on tiptoes for a better look. "It's gonna pull the door open?"

Evelyn cleared her throat: "It's going to pull the entire door off. Frame, front wall, the lot."

"Evee!" I squeaked. "Lozzie! It's not— it doesn't deserve—"

Evelyn looked away from me, and said, "Heather, look at that front door. It's a black void. I won't send a Knight through there just to find out it kills whatever passes through. They're not slaves."

And she was right. I had nothing to say to that. That door itself was an unknown threat, it could do anything, as far as we knew, even to a Knight. Could I have asked the House? Maybe. But any answer I could have gotten would not have been applicable to the world of

quick flesh and hot blood, only to brick and mortar.

Down in the gap between the hills, the Caterpillar moved into position.

It was a giant compared to the House — but tiny beneath the towering mushroom-sprout of what the House had become. The barn-sized white grub pulled directly in front of the door, then reached out with a dozen massive black feelers. Each one wrapped around a piece of the door frame, the front wall, the bricks of the entryway, gluing themselves to the surface with a spreading black tar.

The tendrils tightened, taking up the slack. They thickened into throbbing ropes of solid muscle. Behind the great machine, the Knights drew inward, sheltering behind the tower shields.

The Caterpillar pulled.

A great bass throb of machine-power rolled through the air, almost a physical sensation washing over us. The Caterpillar pulled and pulled, trying to move in reverse away from the House — but the resistance was greater than the mere strength of brick and beam.

The Forest Knight turned his visor-less helmet to look down at Lozzie.

“Oh!” Lozzie chirped. She suddenly flapped round in her poncho, waving her hands in the air. “Everyone plug ears and open mouths!”

“Fuckin’ hell,” said Twil.

“I’m gone,” said Stack, and she even helped Nicole back through the portal. Everyone else did as the Forest Knight had asked. Except Praem, who covered Evelyn’s ears for her.

The Caterpillar pulled again, harder.

The wave of pressure or sound or sheer energy was of course none of those things, it was something Outsider, some approximation of an earthly process. But it throbbed through the air like heat and made my eyes water. It made Twil whine and Evelyn wince and Zheng bite the air. It made the Knights down below stoop as if in the face of a great wind. It made the Caterpillar itself sink half a foot into the soil as the front of the House refused to give way.

And then — *pop!*

It was not the kind of sound one expected from brick and plaster coming apart in a shattering rip of building materials; that came a split-second later, after the pop. The black void in the doorway burst like a soap bubble, or a biological membrane, a sound that was not a sound, heard even through plugged ears.

Then the crash, the cacophony of brick dust and splintered wood and shattered glass; the entire front door of Edward's house tore free in a welter of debris, along with six feet of brick frontage all around the frame. The Caterpillar rocked in place and let the torn piece of House fall to the ground.

Dust cleared, blown free by Camelot's cinnamon wind. The Knights straightened up. We all blinked, staring, gathering ourselves. Ears were cleared. Jaws were worked up and down.

A ragged wound gaped in the front of the House, where the door had stood. Past fringes of brick and tatters of wood, we had expected to see an entrance hallway.

Instead, metal racks marched away into deeper gloom, covered in tiny blinking lights.

It was like we'd opened a shell and found a bioluminescent mollusc living inside.

Twil said, squinting down at our first glimpse of the interior of Edward's house: "Is that a server farm in there? What the hell?"

"A — sorry, a what?" I croaked.

"Never change, Heather," said Raine.

Jan laughed and said, "Mages. Am I right, or am I right?"

Evelyn pinched the bridge of her nose. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Come on. Let's get down there and have a closer look. And nobody touch anything. Absolutely nothing. Understand? Touch nothing."

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.10

“Those aren’t server racks,” Felicity muttered. “Those aren’t even close to being server racks.”

She spoke in a soft and stealthy murmur, as if the House itself might overhear us, now we stood within the umbrella of its shadow; or perhaps some inhabitant within the walls might be attracted to sound and motion, some swarm of white blood cells on their way to investigate the gaping wound ripped in the face of the House which was their body.

Twil replied in an equally muffled hiss. “Cheers, colonel obvious.”

Jan cleared her throat as if to banish the unspoken injunction to hushed voices — but then she whispered. “It’s ‘captain’ obvious. That’s how the saying goes. Captain obvious.”

“Nah,” Twil hissed. “Captain *subtext*. Colonel obvious.”

Felicity tore her eyes away from the sight in front of us so she could squint at Twil. “You’re too young to know that one.”

“I’m what? Too what? What are you on about?”

Felicity sighed. “Never mind.”

At the front of our little formation, with the advantage of a viewing gap between our Knightly escorts, so she could examine the sights more closely, Evelyn hissed back at us: “For God’s sake, shut up and let me think.”

Raine laughed softly, at my side. “Yeah, no casual chatter on the combat bands, girls.”

“All quiet in the ranks,” Praem intoned, like the ringing of tiny bells.

From behind, Lizzie whispered: “Yes ma’am Praem-Praem sergeant yes!”

Evelyn rolled her eyes so hard I was worried it might do her an

injury. “Yes. Thank you, Raine.”

Silence returned — broken only by the whirring and beeping and scratching of the apparatus before us, echoing as if from the mouth of a cave or the empty maw of a beached whale on a bar of black sand.

“Excuse me,” I said, as clear and clean as we could manage through my raw and croaky throat. “But why aren’t these actual server racks? They look like racks to me. I only ask since, well, this might be important?”

Twil snorted softly and looked back at me as if I was clearly joking, but then she paused and frowned. “Oh, for serious, Big H?”

“Yes. Please.”

Felicity wet her lips before supplying an answer. She had both hands firmly on her sawn-off shotgun, her long coat hanging down from her hunched posture, as if she was expecting an attack at any moment. Sensible woman.

“It’s racking, yes,” she murmured. “But not server racks — server racks are a very specific thing, not just metal shelves. And that’s not server equipment. Some of it is, here and there, but most of it is just junk. The logic here isn’t actual computers. It’s ... ”

Zheng rumbled, “Wizard dung.”

Felicity grimaced at that judgement, but she didn’t argue.

“Yeah right,” said Twil. She pointed past a Knight. “That’s a string of bloody fairy lights. What does that have to do with anything?”

Evelyn hissed, “Touch. Nothing.” Then she nodded me forward. “Heather, get up here, please. Take a look.”

“Me? Why? I don’t know anything about servers. I barely know much about computers. You know that.”

“Told you,” Felicity murmured. “It’s not a server rack.”

Evelyn huffed. “Mathematics, blind luck, a shot in the dark; take your pick. Just take a look, for fuck’s sake.”

We couldn’t see much past the metal bulk of our Knightly escort and their shields up front, and our tentacles were too sore to lift into the air like a set of rainbow periscopes. Raine was still lending

me her arm for support, so she caught my eye, shrugged and winked, then helped me shuffle forward to the front of the group, alongside Evelyn and Praem.

Our little formation of Knights, mages, monsters, demons — and one unaltered human being — was huddled before the ragged brick-fringed wound in the front of Edward Lilburne's House, where the door had stood only a few minutes earlier. Fragments of masonry and splinters of wood covered the ground, both the bare dirt taken from England and also the soft yellowish grass of Camelot, crunching beneath our trainers and the Knights' metal-shod boots. The excised front door and its lip of brick and beam lay a few feet away, still in the clutches of the Caterpillar which towered over us from behind, pumping out the throbbing sound of unearthly engines.

I rather liked having the Caterpillar at our backs. At least it was on our side.

We had taken a few minutes to get down in front of the House, slowed by the necessity of briefly sending Praem and Raine back through the gateway; Evelyn had insisted that we make sure Nicole and Stack weren't about to do anything nefarious back home. Praem had assured us she had dealt with that possibility.

"Good girls will be good," Praem had said — and that was that.

But then we'd had to hobble down the hillside, slowed by me, by Evelyn, by the mages' collective exhaustion, by Jan struggling into her massive puffy white coat, by Raine handing out her set of walkie-talkies (just in case), and by the warm grace of Sevens' yellow robes settling around my shoulders in a silent surprise of unspoken presence and support. We had joined our Knightly protectors, a wall of metal between us and anything that might emerge from the House; the thirty Knights had wrapped around us, in front and behind with tower shields and lances, protecting our flanks with axe and sword. The Forest Knight had taken the middle front of the formation, perhaps so as to better listen to orders from Evelyn.

Descending beneath the upturned mushroom-cup of Edward's sprouted House made me want to scuttle into a nice cramped hole, away from the sheer size of the thing. The vast fronds of brick and strange fans of windows blotted out Camelot's ever-present purple

glow, casting a deep shadow on the plain directly below.

We passed through the ring of Caterpillars; Lozzie paused to briefly hop away and pat one of them on the side. It responded with a soft-voiced *boop*. Jan submitted to Lozzie's insistence, and hesitantly petted the creature as well, which earned us a slightly higher-pitched *bewoop*. Like a puppy encountering a new friend.

I dearly wished we were taking one with us. But a Caterpillar would not fit down that hallway.

We passed the main formation of Knights still facing the door, and then passed into the shadow of the House.

"Stop looking up at it," Evelyn had hissed. "Focus on the doorway. Eyes on the danger. That goes for everyone."

Raine nodded, "Nice and frosty. Keep it clear. Anyone spots anything, speak up."

Then we had drawn to a stop, right at the threshold. The Knights had parted for Evelyn — and for Zheng, who stalked forward and peered into the shadows. The rest of us craned to see over and around our metal escort; away from Camelot's natural light their shining armour had turned dull and quiet. The sparkling and flickering from inside the House-wound traced eerie patterns on their shields and helms.

And now Raine helped me to the front, for a better look. My tentacles — my other selves — uncoiled slightly for their own benefit, their own view of the shell we had opened.

The doorway-wound was wide enough to admit four Knights abreast and tall enough for Zheng and a half; we should have seen part of an upper floor ripped away, perhaps the beginnings of some kind of entrance hall, even if it was stuffed with server racks and computing equipment. Instead, the first part of Edward Lilburne's house was a massive hallway, leading off into the twinkling gloom, with a ceiling twenty or thirty feet up. Both walls were lined with metal racking, the kind one might find in a hardware shop; some of it was painted, some just bare metal against the dark green wallpaper.

Every shelf was crammed with electronics — blinking computer blocks and whirring fans, flashing LEDs in console fronts, little LCD screens in antique machines. All of it moving, flickering, humming,

all wired together, all nonsense.

Some of it was what I would later learn did belong in a real server rack; there was some actual computing going on here, though it was not connected to anything. The rest of it was madness, the product of an obsessive mind collecting and linking together hundreds or thousands of unrelated functions. Dead screens were plugged into machines that produced no visual output. USB sticks were wired into ports that did not accept data. Car radios ripped from dashboards were connected to state-of-the-art sonar set-ups stolen from expensive boats.

All of it was connected together into one massive network of nonsense, with cables here and wiring there and even some raw, exposed copper in a few places. Fairy lights in bright white climbed some of the racking, but others were sporting digital clock readouts, stolen train timetable boards filled with gibberish, or displays covered with what Twil explained was ‘command line stuff’.

Cables looped overhead, connecting the two sets of racking. Yet more wires vanished into tiny holes drilled in the walls. Screens flickered. Hard drives buzzed and clicked. Fairy lights and LEDs danced and pulsed, casting lifeless glows deep in the House-artery.

“So?” Evelyn asked through clenched teeth, after I’d been standing there in silence for a minute. “Mean anything? You see anything at all, Heather? Something mathematical?”

“Uh ... n-nothing. No. I don’t ... ”

We shook our head, numb and confused and more than a little intimidated; we ached to pull our squid-skull mask up and down over our face, to hide away from this visual cacophony. Magic — with circles and blood and ritual knives, with human sacrifice and demons in flesh and cultists meeting their grisly ends — had just begun to make sense in my life, as something that I recognised and understood.

Or at least I could pretend I understood magic. I could pretend it was becoming normal.

But this wasn’t even remotely recognisable as magic. We couldn’t see a circle or a sigil or a dot of blood anywhere. Just machines, talking to machines, talking to machines, talking to machines, talking to machines, talking to machines—

“Tssss!” Evelyn hissed — and slapped at one of our tentacles.

We blinked and recoiled, shocked beyond words; but then Raine grabbed a second tentacle and Praem reached out to restrain a third.

“W-w-what—”

“Heather!” Evelyn snapped in my face. “What did I say about touching things!? You’re as bad as Twil, sometimes.”

Twil snorted. “Cool, thanks.”

“O-oh, I ... we ... ”

Several of my tentacles had been reaching for the bare-brick edges of the wound in the House — no, *we* had been reaching out, for contact. In the lingering aftershock of distributed brain-math, with our tentacles still not manifested as true flesh, we were fuzzy-headed and dissociated from ourselves, from the actions of our own body. There were still seven Heathers in here, but we were reduced to operating as a soup of undifferentiated thought, all jumbled up on top of each other. We’d been reaching out to check on the House without realising.

We wanted to apologise, to say sorry for threatening it, sorry for hurting it.

And we wanted to touch the pulsing, flickering edge of what we could only see as a nervous system, exposed and raw and ineffable to human eyes.

“Sorry,” I croaked. “Sorry. We wanted to check, see if the house is ... okay? Wounded?”

Evelyn sighed, sharp and frustrated. “Heather, we will build the house a lovely new front door with a proper step and a patio, and lights and bells and a bloody Christmas wreath if it wants — after we have found and removed the occupant. Now, do — not — touch — anything. Understand? If you can’t restrain yourself — yourselves, then we will leave back home.”

I nodded, sheepish and embarrassed, wrapping my tentacles in tight to avoid further temptations. I coiled one around Raine’s waist, like an anchor.

Twil peered over Evee’s shoulder from behind. “Why is all this stuff

at the front of the house? If this is some weird magic go-go-gadget server bullshit, wouldn't it be tucked away somewhere safe?"

Felicity answered: "Magic gets more bizarre the further you stray into innovation."

Evelyn tilted her head without actually looking round. "How would you know that? You've not seen anything like this before, I'm willing to bet on that much."

Felicity let out a cowed sigh. "This is innovation. You don't have to look hard to figure that out. I doubt we want to know what any of this does. You want my real opinion?"

Evelyn grumbled, "Not particularly."

Jan said delicately, "Give us your opinion anyway, please, Felicity."

Felicity nodded, a little embarrassed by Evelyn's rejection. "If I was seeing this anywhere else, any other place — I would burn it. I don't want to know what any of this does. I don't want to find out. I would burn it and forget it and move on. I suspect if we go in there and go deeper, we're going to run into much worse."

"Then tighten your belt," Evelyn hissed. "Because that's exactly what we're doing. Now, everyone stay within the protection of the Knights. Move slowly and deliberately. Keep an eye out for stairs, especially stairs leading up."

"And zombies," Twil muttered. "And demons. And ghosts and ghouls and all that other weird shit, right?"

Jan sighed. "Please, don't jinx us with ghosts. I am not dealing with ghosts."

Twil looked back at her, suddenly a little pale. "Wait, no. Are ghosts real?"

Jan shrugged, looking exhausted already.

Evelyn snorted. "Mostly keep an eye on each other. Edward Lilburne was one half of the top leadership of the Sharrowford cult — do not forget that. It was him and Alexander who mastered their bullshit technique of folding space to create pocket dimensions, all over Sharrowford. It was him who had that cult castle wired up to a moat made of impossible labyrinth. If this is his inner sanctum, he's going to try to lead us into a maze, he's going to try to separate us

from each other, he's going to try to confuse us and get us turned around. Do not step away from the group."

"Wait, what?" said Jan.

Lozzie chirped: "Janny-Janns, holding hands! Hold hands and don't get lost!"

"Oh," said Jan. I couldn't see her face, so far in the rear — far, far in the rear, too afraid to take the lead. "Oh, great. Oh, you could have mentioned that part earlier. And we're stepping into this?"

"All together!" Lozzie chirped. "Sticking together!"

Jan gulped, loudly.

"Lozzie has the spirit of it," Evelyn said. "Stick together. Now, after me — or, after the Knights, rather. If you would lead on, please. And slowly. Stop when we stop. Do not advance alone."

The Knights vanguard entered, shields raised and legs braced, taking slow steps over the threshold of the House. Nothing jumped out from the shadows or toppled the racking, so in we all went, into the belly of the beast.

As Evelyn and Raine had both pointed out earlier, we had been inside more than a few spooky houses and paradoxical mazes over the last year: the outworks of the Sharrowford Cult's castle, the castle itself, the doomed house where they had attempted to negotiate with the Eye, the library of Carcosa, Geerswin farm under the influence of Hringewindla's hallucination; the list went on and on. Apparently this specific kind of nonsense was simply an occupational hazard when one was a mage, or a friend to mages. We were practically old hands, and this time we had far more support and security than ever before.

We crept down the entrance hallway, staying in formation, flanked by flashing LEDs and fairy lights and machines whirring and pulsing to themselves. It was like plunging into the guts of some great bioluminescent mollusc or a hive of flickering insects, moving so as not to disturb walls of phosphorescent wings and throbbing veins of toxic lymph.

The Knights guarded us from all angles, a wall of metal in front and behind. Only Zheng dared walk unprotected, in the vanguard, almost as big as our Knightly escort. Evelyn plodded with hunched

spine and walking stick, leaning on Praem, her face set in a determined scowl; she hissed for a halt every few meters, pausing to examine the contents of the metal racking, scowling at the inscrutable machinery, hands slick and sweaty on her scrimshawed bone-wand. She received no reaction from Edward's machines, found no answer, uncovered no secrets.

Twil stuck reassuringly close to Evelyn's rear, as if she wanted to protect her. Wisps of werewolf spirit-flesh gathered about her forearms and hands, threatening to coalesce into claws. She ducked and bobbed, head on a swivel, twitchy and impatient without something to grapple or punch. She seemed much more comfortable than in the aftermath of the gunfight.

"Must have a generator somewhere, right?" she hissed. "How else is all this shit still on?"

Jan cleared her throat, much further in the rear. "You really think that's the weirdest thing going on here?"

"Fuck no."

Felicity seemed somehow more confident without Kimberly present; I wasn't sure what that meant. She held her head high, eyes up and alert. Gloved hands pointed her magically-altered sawn-off shotgun firmly at the ground, fingers flexing and adjusting as if ready for the slightest motion. There was a nervous readiness about her. Perhaps paranoia was best relieved by actually being in an incredibly dangerous place, knowing that at any moment she might be facing down another mage.

Jan and Lozzie stuck to the rear, holding hands. Lozzie was, for once, quiet and careful, walking with measured steps, eyes wide as she could force her sleepy lids, her other hand firmly inside the ride. She was wrapped in her poncho, a jellyfish tight in her own frills. Jan was like a little penguin beside her, buried by her puffy coat — but the diminutive mage had drawn a strange object from within the extra-dimensional folds of her secret pockets: a water pistol, in bright pink and garish yellow. She waved it about like a real water pistol too, uncaring of who she was pointing it at. I assumed it was exactly what it appeared to be.

July stalked behind her adopted sister, tall and owlish, watching everything with great care. Hands free, ready for violence. Jan's sword-box rode on her back. I wondered if there were any

implications of taking that thing Outside.

Raine was with me, supporting one of my arms, helping me walk. She was still dressed in her motorcycle jacket, helmet hanging from her belt. But the jacket was open now, showing her thin black tank-top beneath, and the glistening sweat on her muscles, sticking the fabric to her stomach. She only looked at me to smile or wink, letting me know everything was going to be okay.

“How you holding up, my tired little squiddy?” she whispered to me.

I bobbed my head from side to side and pulled Sevens’ yellow robes tighter around my shoulders. “Fifty percent good, fifty percent please-sleep-now.”

A stolen gun — a machine of black metal and hard edges — was slung over Raine’s opposite shoulder. She held the thing like a lover, like me, cradled in the crook of her arm. The sight of it would have made me shiver, if anybody but her had been holding the thing.

The Forest Knight marched on my opposite side. Tall and silent. I wrapped a tentacle around his arm, too. He didn’t complain.

More security than ever before. Experienced, organized, and sticking together. How could an opposing mage not see what we were and run screaming?

But this place was wrong in a whole new way: there were patterns in the machines, just not ones that I could make sense of.

The corridor went on and on and on, straight on, for a very long way — which was spooky and stupid but nothing new. At the end, three very ordinary doorways invited us into a trio of different rooms. Behind us, the gaping wound back to Camelot was a tiny, fuzzy hole in the distance. The purple light was barely visible.

Twil looked back and gulped, loudly. “Oh fuck me. I hate this shit.”

Felicity just frowned, curious and professional. “Spatial distortion inside a building. No attempt to conceal it, either. That’s not even plausible. Because we’re ... mm, ‘Outside’? Or just because?”

Despite her tone, she was sweating. Being Outside, or being in here?

A whisper of rust-flaked voice came from seemingly inside Felicity's coat, from nothing but an inch-wide gap of shadow: "Just because," Aym hissed in a voice of quivering distaste. "And I am not coming out, not here! Absolutely not!"

"Keep her quiet," Evelyn snapped. "And ignore the distance from the front door. It doesn't matter. We've seen this nonsense before. Twil! Concentrate!"

Twil nodded, more to herself than to Evelyn's command. "Right, right, right. On you, Eevee. On you."

The three doorways were made of oak, expensive and antique, but not overly ornamented. There were no doors in the doorways, but also no gaping lightless black voids.

Evelyn sighed, shaking her head as she searched for traps. "Badger could have left us a marker. A trail. Anything. Bloody fool."

Raine said, "Perhaps he couldn't. Had an escort, maybe. Eyes on him."

Jan agreed. "Horribly likely."

Evelyn grumbled: "Keep an eye out for anything scratched on the door frames or dropped on the floor. He may have left us a sign."

On the right was a dining room, fancy and broad, carpeted in rich sea-green, with a massive wooden table and deep sideboards, but no windows. Every surface was covered in yet more random electronics: decades-old stereo systems standing like towers of black rock wired up to dead televisions tuned to muted static beaming their messages into IR receivers plugged into computer graphics cards manually looped into the eviscerated guts of vintage laptops piping the heat from their cooling fans onto digital thermometers outputting their readings with tiny LCD screens harvested from children's games plugged into—

"What does any of this shit fucking *do*?" Twil said.

"Exists," Praem intoned.

"Stop swearing," Evelyn muttered. "Touch nothing."

"It's ritual," Jan offered, though she didn't sound very confident. "Not magic in the sense of formula and form, like we're all used to. This is ... large scale exploratory magic. Making new formulas by

experimenting. I've done a little — a very little — myself, before. Lozzie? Do you think ... ”

Lozzie just shook her head, poncho pulled tight, being very careful where she put her feet.

Twil snorted. “Fucker could be mining bitcoin for all we know.”

Felicity sighed. “That would be slightly less dangerous, at least.”

The middle door led to a T-junction corridor, wallpapered in musty old green, peeling at the edges and framed by dark oaken wainscotting. The space was crammed tight with more metal racking, each shelf filled with machines: computer parts, dead screens, wiring, little lights, and a hundred other pieces of electronic equipment all wired together in a maddening web. A small, flexible person might have squeezed their way through the gaps in the racking, but there was no way we were getting through there with the Knights.

“Smash it all out the way?” Twil suggested. “Knight boys here would make short work of this with a shield or two, right? Or how about you, Zheng?”

“Wizard dung,” Zheng repeated with a snort.

“No touchy,” intoned Praem. “Touchy, no.”

“Yeah yeah,” Twil sighed.

As the others turned away toward the final door, on our left, I kept staring into that ticking, buzzing, blinking, whirring nest of nonsense machines, all piled on top of each other. My tentacles fanned outward despite their aching muscles, as if we were desperate to re-establish a proper array to process the implications of what we were seeing. There was no meaning, no image here in the noise, no secret held in the joining of an empty, spinning record player to a wall-mounted electronic lock-box, or in the marriage of silently turning computer CPU fans to a stack of early-2000s mobile phones; the idea that Edward Lilburne could have baked a hidden image into this jumble was absurd. There was no magic-eye picture to be seen.

Yet we flexed our tentacles upward, outward, tilting our head back and forth. If we could just squint the right way, we felt as if meaning would blossom before us.

“Heather?” Raine murmured. I blinked several times and snapped my head around. The Knights were paused around us, unwilling or unable to leave us behind. “Heather, you doing okay? You’re real quiet and real intent.”

We swallowed hard, glanced back at the web of machines, and shook our head. “There’s a pattern here, but I can’t quite see it ... ”

“Stop,” Evelyn said, stomping back over to me. “Heather, I asked you to tell us if anything makes sense. Do not keep it to yourself. We need every scrap of information we can get.”

“It’s nothing.” I shook my head.

“No, it’s not nothing. Stop and look.”

I stared again, into the network which was not a network. But squint and blink and strain my eyes — and my tentacles — I couldn’t make it out. I shook my head again. “I need to ... touch it. I think.”

Evelyn sighed. “Okay, well. Don’t do that. Come on.”

The left-hand door led to a small kitchen. Every surface was caked with further electronic parts, wired together and joined up in nonsensical ways; some of them spilled over onto the floor, trailing cables and parts down onto smart grey tiles. In one corner there was even a partially disassembled motorcycle, with bits of wires stuck into it from all directions. The little kitchen would have been beautiful if not for the bizarre electrical detritus — it was true rustic and amazingly well preserved, with ceiling beams overhead, wooden countertops in perfect condition, and a scrubbed metal sink, just beneath a stretch of bricked-up wall where a window should have looked out on a little garden.

In that kitchen we found the first dead demon-host.

He — the remains looked vaguely male, though it was exceptionally difficult to tell — was lashed to a frame made of thin metal girders, propped against one wall at forty-five degree angle, in between a slender fridge and an under-counter dishwasher. The body was naked, massively overgrown as if covered in runaway cancers and blackened tumours; some of the growths had hardened into chitinous plating, then sprouted thorns and tusks, while others had collapsed into sagging, misplaced stretches of pale fat. The feet had turned into claws, clutching at the metal frame to which he was

bound, and the hands had lengthened and sharpened almost into blades, bent back toward the body in a long-term project for freedom.

He was wired into the greater web of machinery. Cables punctured his abyss-mutated flesh, leading to now-empty readout screens and monitors; wires were threaded beneath his collarbone, linking him to gutted video game consoles and complex pieces of industrial switchboard sitting on the countertops. Numbers had been written on his distended, partially armoured belly: 13/7/2016.

His head was pulverized, a mass of pulped brains and shattered skull fragments. The blood on the wall was still wet.

The Knights flanked the corpse as we investigated.

Raine stated the obvious, "This is fresh. An hour or two at most."

"Uh," went Twil. "What the fuck are we looking at? What was this ... this ... uh, guy?"

Felicity got far too close, peering at the connections between flesh and machine, muttering to herself. "Essential component of whatever this machine does. Revenant hosts as what, batteries? What would be the point, over a regular human being? Why demons?"

Jan hung back. "Poor fellow was here a long time. Three years, if that date on his belly is correct." July loomed behind her, stone-faced and quiet, one hand on Lozzie's shoulder. Lozzie looked away from the grisly spectacle.

Zheng just stared. We glanced up at her. "Zheng, are you ... okay?"

It felt like an absurd question. But Zheng's stare was one of muted anger behind a wall of iron.

Raine glanced up at her too. "Think this was done by your new friend who surprised us earlier? The stray demon-host? Freeing her fellow prisoners on her way to kill the jailer?"

Zheng just stared at the corpse.

Felicity muttered, still peering too closely at the body: "If she's going for revenge, why not free him and take him with her?"

"Too much damage," I croaked.

“Eh?”

“Too much damage,” I repeated. “He was wired into this for three years. Used up. Mutated to try to protect himself, or get away, I don’t know. He wouldn’t have been able to leap to his feet and go help kill Edward. He was probably insensible. Mad. Worse.”

I didn’t say the rest out loud; there was no need. But I did look over my shoulder at Lozzie — the only other person who had seen first-hand what Edward had done beneath the cult’s castle: children wired into a machine with which to talk to a fallen Outsider god. We’d seen this before, this kind of technique, though not exactly the same, and applied for different purposes.

Lozzie looked pale and still. She met my eyes and bit her lower lip. Perhaps bringing her had been a mistake after all.

Evelyn drew in a deep breath. I assumed she was going to snap at us to touch nothing, keep moving, keep our eyes peeled. But she surprised me.

“Once this is over and Edward is dead, we will give any victims a proper burial. Demon-host or human or whatever else. Leave him here, for now. I’m sorry, Zheng.”

Zheng grunted, turned away, and helped the Knights lead us on.

A single door stood in the far wall of the little kitchen, but it just led into another green-wallpapered corridor, lined with yet more conjoined machinery crammed onto endless metal racking. Fairy lights winked and danced in silent mockery. Hard drives clicked and whirred inside their casings, humming and buzzing against the metal. Tiny soft beeps and boops pinged from buried speakers. Whole shelves of circuit-board lay inert, joined up to disassembled lamps and pieces of bulging laptop battery.

Luckily this corridor was not crammed so tight that we couldn’t squeeze through; the Knights had to go two abreast, leaving us briefly exposed as we passed doorways into more rooms.

A sitting room, another dining room, a room with two pool tables and a large television, a guest bedroom, another sitting room — all of them in genuine rustic style, with exposed beams and tasteful dark furniture, leather upholstery, perfectly polished skirting boards, and shaded light-bulbs pointed at the ceiling for soft illumination.

And electronic, mechanical nonsense coating every surface, spilling inward across the carpets, joined up to itself in meaningless loops, flickering and ticking and glowing like exposed guts pulled from some abyssal beast.

And more demon-hosts.

We found three more just like the first, one male, two female, bloated and mutated in unique ways, lashed to steel frames with steel cables, plugged into this vast house-sized machine. All three had dates on their bellies, all from 2016. All three of them had been killed in the same way as the first, with a single crushing blow to the skull.

“This is obscene,” said Jan as we stood in front of yet another dead demon-host, in the machine-littered mess of the second sitting room. “This is obscene. Even by mage standards—”

Evelyn grunted. “The inevitable result of keeping demons as slaves. My own mother’s work was not too far off. Don’t kid yourself, Jan.”

Jan was pale and shocked. Lozzie kept squeezing her hand, but to little effect. Zheng and July both hung back from the ruined corpse of the demon-host; perhaps they both felt a kind of kinship with the unfortunate victims.

“Why no windows?” Twil kept saying, peering at the blank stretches of wall. “There should be windows here, right?” She glanced back at me. “Big H, what do you think?”

“Mm,” we grunted, nodding along. “The length of the wall there. And over there.” We gestured with tentacles. “Doesn’t make sense not to have windows. There should be windows.”

“Don’t think about it,” Evelyn grunted. “This house doesn’t follow the logic we expect.”

Felicity said, “We’ve gone too deep. Way too deep into this place. Evelyn, my own house is ... complex, but it’s nothing like this. We’ve gone three, four hundred meters straight into this structure. We should have passed the back wall already.”

Evelyn hissed, “Don’t think about it. Just put one foot in front of the other. And stay alert.”

To my surprise, Twil clapped Felicity on the back and forced a chuckle. “Yeah, come on, Flissy. Bigger on the inside than the

outside? That's old hat, for us."

But it wasn't the spatial distortion; who cared about that, Outside? We'd seen far, far worse, in far worse places.

It was the silence, broken only by the ticking, whirring, softly beeping machinery; not a creak or a footstep apart from ourselves, not a groaning beam or a muffled cough. Nothing moved in these illuminated guts but us. Nothing crept these halls. And part of me was starting to wonder if they were even halls at all. Lighted arteries and glowing veins led deeper into a living, breathing creature.

We pushed on, down the corridor and around to the right. The Knights' tower shields filled the hallway, in front and behind. My feet dragged. Raine kept one hand on her looted gun. Evelyn gripped her bone-wand. Lozzie stayed quiet and cowed. Zheng stalked like a caged tiger.

The corridor led us around and into another kitchen — much grander and older than the practical rustic one we'd passed through closer to the front of the house. Great brick ovens lined one wall, flanked by stone countertops and a little door which opened into an empty pantry. The middle of the grand kitchen was dominated by a double island, a very fancy kind of set-up that I'd never seen in person before, all stone surfaces and highly polished wood, atop a floor of tessellated flagstones. I wished with all my heart that I would have a chance to explore this House again later, without the pressing need to not touch anything.

The grand kitchen was also significantly less crammed with electronics, like a bone-cavity inside a body. A few cables led from the doorway, linking the greater web to a pair of monitors tuned to static, facing each other, and a bread-making machine welded to a piece of exposed circuit board. Additional wires led off through the opposite door, into the deeper organs of the house.

Large enough for our little group to fan out, with plenty of room for the Knights, the grand kitchen was the most spacious room we'd encountered so far.

It would have been even larger if it wasn't bisected by a wall of pure void.

Running down the middle of the room, impervious to light, was a

flat surface of empty void — exactly the same as the one which had filled the front door, before one of Lozzie's Caterpillars had pulled it out of the wall.

"Nobody touch that!" Evelyn snapped before we even had a chance to finish fanning out into the kitchen. The Knights stepped into position, guarding us from the black void as much as from the open doorways. "Absolutely nobody touch that thing!"

Twil snorted. "Yeah I don't think you need to tell us that, yo."

Felicity frowned at the void. "Shadow play, or physical barrier? I don't understand what he's been working with here. I've seen similar things with self-sealing boxes and soul-locked containers, but they're small, palm-of-the-hand small, there's no way to get something on this scale."

"Evelyn," said Jan, tight and controlled. "Evelyn, wandering through this house is getting us nowhere."

Evelyn snapped back at her. "We're not stepping through that! I will not order a Knight through there! No!"

"Removal," Praem intoned. "Pop."

Jan nodded. "Yes, quite. Could we do enough damage to the walls to get it to pop, like the one on the front door? I suspect it is intended to separate the house, to protect internal layers of whatever Edward Lilburne has done here. Do you think with enough force, the Knights could—"

We weren't listening.

We stared into the black, into the void, into the mirrored surface of abyssal oil. Barely three feet from our face. Tentacles tingled to reach out and touch. Black shifted on black, threatening to reveal meaning amid the darkness.

We knew this, did we not? We knew it every time we reached down into the sump of our ruined, pollution-flooded soul. A humming, quivering, sensitive membrane, to touch and grace and pass through, to the other side, the other side of—

"Shaman."

I flinched, blinking up at Zheng. "Zheng? Zheng?"

She had one of my tentacles wrapped around her arm. "You know

what you see. You see what you know.”

“ ... Zheng, do you mean you recognise this?”

She shook her head. “But you do, shaman. It is in your eyes. Speak.”

Raine said, “You getting that feeling again, Heather?”

“M-maybe,” we said. “I feel like I’ve ... seen this before. This black void. I don’t get it though, I’ve never seen anything like this, either in reality or Outside. Maybe in a dream or something?”

Evelyn was hissing orders to the Knights: “Puncture the wall there and there, please. Don’t touch anything else, especially not this ridiculous shadow. Keep clear, try not to—”

The Knights were in motion. Raine and Zheng were both looking at me. Lozzie was pulled in tight, poncho flat and limp. Felicity was frowning at the void, shotgun pointed at the floor. July was turning her head, like she saw it coming.

My head rang like a bell struck from the inside, a note down beyond hearing, beyond my gut, beyond my bone marrow. A *ding* of transition.

A figure stepped out of the void.

Perfect transmission from oil to water, in one short step; the membrane flexed and flowed, like a biological valve admitting a plug of congealed fat into the chambers of a violated heart.

Short and squat. Bushy eyebrows; wild tufts of grey hair. Liver-spotted skin. Owlsh glasses over beady eyes. White shirt-sleeves rolled up to show thin, aged forearms. Clutching a loaded harpoon gun.

Edward Lilburne — or something that looked very much like him — stepped right into the middle of us.

We were ready, of course. The Knights closed ranks in an instant, before the figure had a chance to raise the harpoon gun. Weapons came up; shields made a wall; Evelyn shouted a snatch of Latin and raised her scrimshawed thigh-bone. I allowed a low, dangerous hiss to clamber up my throat.

Why would such a paranoid and cautious mage confront us himself? This couldn’t be the extent of his defences, this couldn’t be it, we could not possibly have reached his inner sanctum.

But we couldn't take that risk; which is why Zheng did the right thing. She made the right choice, in the heat of the moment. To do otherwise would have been negligent.

The harpoon gun came up in liver-spotted hands.

Zheng moved like a lightning bolt.

She was smarter this time, no longer blinded by rage, but made canny and swift by experience. Evelyn was still shouting and Raine was struggling to get an angle with her stolen gun, but Zheng darted out from behind the Knights' shield-wall and invited that magically-altered harpoon with her own flesh. Edward — it couldn't be him! It couldn't! — pulled the trigger with a mechanical *click*.

Zheng jinked to the side, a flicker of motion so fast it hurt the eye and probably gave her a micro-concussion. The harpoon missed; Zheng's hand whipped out and snatched the projectile from the air in mid-flight.

Then she went for 'Edward'.

She landed on him like a missile on a garden shed. The harpoon went through the belly of his white shirt and into his gut, hoisting him into the air. Zheng's other hand blurred like a drill and rammed into his mouth, shattering teeth and splitting cheeks. She wrenched her hand back and flung a flopping wet blob onto the floor: a mage's tongue.

Before the tongue had even gone splat, Zheng grabbed both of Edward's hands and snapped his wrists back and forth, crushing and mangling, splintering every bone she could grip. She slammed both of his arms back for good measure, dislocating elbows and shoulders with a wet, meaty crunch.

She lifted him up by the throat, grinning and bloody in sudden triumph.

For a split second the demon-host and the mage stood frozen. De-tongued and broken-armed, a mage robbed of any power to speak or signal. He wouldn't be doing any magic like that.

I hissed at the top of my lungs, because this was all wrong; my gut and my tentacles already knew. We whipped out to grip those closest to us at random, to hold on tight. The Knights were already bracing, covering us with their tower shields. The frozen moment

seemed to go on forever, in slow-motion.

Evelyn shouted, somewhere to my right — too far to my right, I couldn't reach her: "It's not him! It's not the real Edward!"

'Edward' split his face with a cracked and bleeding grin. He pursed his lips. We all realised he was showing no pain.

With no tongue and mouth full of broken teeth, he said: "Boom."

Zheng hauled her arm back to hurl the body away from her — but it was too late. A wet crack split the air.

The bomb was probably somewhere inside his belly.

All I saw was the first split-second of explosive detonation, an air-burst of gore and guts backed by a pressure-wave and a spark of flame. Then the Knights were on top of us, shielding us, absorbing the worst of the shock wave and the shrapnel. I had wrenched Raine to my side, hissing and holding her close. Somebody else shrieked and crashed into me.

We went tumbling over together, Knights and all.

If you've never been in a confined space with an explosive device, it's not like in video games, with a neat little explosion that doesn't damage you if you're standing beyond some hypothetical safe distance. Even a small bomb will knock you on your backside, make your head ring like a gong, and leave you reeling in shock.

The bomb inside the Edward-puppet was not large, but it was more than powerful enough to knock us all flat, send us all flying, and toss us sideways.

Right through the wall of shadows, through the lightless void, to the other side.

It was a moment of nothingness, of pure membrane, of neither this nor that, but only transition.

And then the tiled floor beneath my face. A ringing, ringing, ringing in my ears. Tentacles flapping at the ground. A Knight — the Forest Knight — standing over me, axe braced, armour charred. Raine's face, blurred by tears in my eyes. A coughing in my chest, thick and hard.

"Heather, Heather," Raine kept saying, though I could barely hear her through all the cotton wool in my ears. "Heather, whoa, whoa,

just sit, just sit.”

Raine was pale and shaking, too. In shock. A bomb? My mind was too slow, everything was too slow, too muffled, too loud, too thick.

Recovery from almost getting exploded is not easy. Again, real flesh is not like a computer game. For a long, long moment, Raine crouched and I sat. The Forest Knight was intact and right next to us, as were two of his siblings, both with tower shields and lances. Their shields and exposed armour plates were blackened from the explosion, caked in burned gore, steaming gently in the ringing air.

But looking around the kitchen, there was only—

“Praem!” I said — my throat was raw and sore. I realised I was shouting, but I didn’t care.

Praem stood up, expressionless and unmoved with her clothes blacked and torn, her blonde hair all in disarray but no blood from her bloodless wounds. Another trio of Knights flanked her, already on their feet and ready to keep fighting. Praem gently helped a white-faced, terrified Evelyn to her feet.

“Evee! Evee!”

“H-Heather,” she replied in a quivering voice. She was shaking all over. “What ... what ... ”

Our eyes all asked the same impossible question.

The black void-wall we’d tumbled through was gone, popped or vanished — by the force of the explosion? But there was no soot on the floor or walls, no scorch marks or burns or pieces of bloody flesh littering the surfaces. The other side of the kitchen, where we had stood, did not look the same. It was a different layout, a different set of ovens — metal, not brick. And there were more electronics. Three doors, not two.

“ ... teleported?” Raine said, then swallowed painfully.

“Fuck,” Evelyn spat. “Fuck. Fuck!”

Everyone else was gone. Everyone who had not been knocked through the void by the explosion. Twil, Lozzie, Jan and July, Felicity, Zheng, and twenty four Knights were nowhere to be seen.

“The fucking bastard,” Evelyn spat, cold and pale with shock and rage. “He split us up! He—” She paused to cough and pant and spit

bile onto the floor. Praem helped her stay on her feet.

Raine tried the walkie-talkie, but got only static in return. Evelyn spat and heaved and groped for Praem's support. The Knights stood in silence, guarding us even in crisis.

Slowly, painfully, I got to my feet. I had to use tentacles for extra support. Raine helped. My head was all jarred and jumbled inside. My face was wet with cold panic-sweat.

"Heather!" Evelyn snapped. "Heather, are you ... alright? Heather ... ?"

But I was staring at the windows.

I stumbled over to the glass. Knights followed, covering my back. Raine hauled herself after me, gun in her hands. Praem helped Evelyn hobble up alongside us.

Two windows stood in the wall of this duplicate kitchen, not three feet from each other. The right-hand window looked out over a swamp, green and rancid, boiling with vegetable motion and buzzing life; two moons, fatted like rotten oranges, hung over the landscape. The other window showed howling desert, as far as the eye could see, the sand grey and thick with unnatural swirls, formed by tiny twists of wind that could not possibly be making those shapes without intent; on the horizon was a vast structure of spires and spikes, climbing into the dust-choked heavens.

Evelyn stared at one window, then the other. "What the hell has he done here?" she breathed. "What is this house?"

"Outside," I croaked. "They're both Outside places."

"Yes, I can see that. But ... " Evelyn's voice trailed off in awe.

"Well," said Raine. "One thing's for sure."

Evelyn laughed without humour. "How can there be anything for sure? This is far beyond gateway technology. He stole the formula for a gateway to Camelot, that was all, and he's made ... " Evelyn's eyes lifted, to the beams of the house, the plaster, the brick. "This? What is this? This isn't a house."

I reached out and squeezed Evelyn's hand. Her fingers were limp and clammy.

Raine made her gun go click-clack. "One thing's for sure. We ain't

in Camelot anymore.”

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.11

Each and every window watched over a different place.

Plains of heat-baked brass and black volcanic sand beneath burning triple suns split like the broken shells of just-born star behemoths. Vast domes of diamond growing upside-down from clouds of toxic green and purple over a landscape of algae towers like climbing fingers. Flat oceans of silver metal from horizon to horizon, bulging beneath with the passage of lithophagic leviathans. Rambling cities of dun-brown sandstone and five-pointed public squares, inhabited only by distant vegetable wanderers on far-off ruined ridge-ways. Fungal groves and dripping world-caves; broken cliff-edges of eye-searing unearthly colour, and towering temples of pulsating flesh; dark corridors and windswept moors; curious watchers between the rocks, crouching in tidal pools, whistling to each other with pipe-organs in their fluted rears; deserts, swamps, boreal nightmares; roads the width of cities leading nowhere on seamless marble tracks; cities empty and dead and full of lumbering half-skinned eaters; eye-stalks looking back or pretending not to see; library shelves dimly recognised; vistas unending, worlds uncountable.

No two windows showed the same dimension, even those barely six inches apart. From kitchen, to corridor, to sitting room, every single one was different.

Outside, in all its inhuman variety, separated from us by nothing more than a few panes of glass and an occasional bit of metal lattice.

“These can’t be actual gateways,” said Evelyn. “They can’t. They’re windows, literally and figuratively, there’s no other explanation.”

She scarcely dared to whisper the words, lest something on the other side overhear us.

Raine said, “We could crack a window and find out?”

“Absolutely not!” Evelyn hissed back. “There’s no magic, there’s no

circles, there's nothing. Windows, literally. They must be windows, but even that, on such a scale, I don't ... I don't ... ”

We tapped the glass with a tentacle-tip. Evelyn flinched. Nothing responded.

Evelyn's fears were unfounded; the windows did not seem to transmit sound. I pressed a tentacle to several different portals, feeling for vibrations in the air, the rumble of far-off giants, or a hint of whispers carried from unseen mouths. I even pressed my ear to a window — that of a particularly desolate but windswept plain, where pale grub-like trees swayed and whipped. But there was nothing. No sound. Nothing to be heard.

We crept along together almost on automatic, mesmerized by the dizzying potential of this House, baited and hooked by impossible view after impossible view. Evelyn stumbled and staggered, eyes wide, face gone pale, clinging to Praem's arm. Raine stuck to my side like glue, her hands sweaty on her stolen gun as she pointed it at doorways and down corridors. The Knights did their best to flank us, shepherd us, protect us, because we were all numb to consequence.

We were a terrible sight, panting and wide-eyed and quivering with confusion. We hadn't really recovered from the bomb, from separation with the others, from our ringing ears and shocked senses and dozen bruises. Wandering like car crash victims through lost hallways, mouths open in awestruck numbness.

Raine tried her best. Kept her gun steady. But even she was lost.

Eventually, after a dozen — or two dozen, or three dozen, I lost count, head spinning — we managed to plant our feet and stop swaying, in a sitting room which mercifully had only a single window; that portal looked out over a boiling mudflat. Inoffensive and bland.

Yet another sitting room, upholstered in dark leather and wallpapered in deep green, with soft sofas and stone fireplace and fancy mantelpiece strung with humming, meaningless, nonsense electronics: fairy lights and hard drives, record players and keyboards, disassembled lamps and flayed toasters, all wired together in an unending web.

I clutched my squid-skull helmet against my belly. My yellow cloak

was warm and enclosing around my shoulders.

But—

“Sevens?” I croaked. “Sevens? Sevens?”

“Don’t think she’s here, Heather,” Raine whispered.

“Then where ... ?”

Evelyn shook her head. She was breathing too hard. She flinched when I reached out to take her arm with one tentacle. “This is ... this is all ... ”

“You’re going to say it’s impossible,” I hissed. “Aren’t you?”

Evelyn’s stare was unblinking — and more unnervingly, not at all angry. “Well,” she said. “Well. Well.” Then she swallowed. “Well, I suppose it’s not impossible, because it’s right here. We’re looking at it.”

“Evee,” I croaked. “It’s going to be—”

“Okay?” Evelyn squeaked. She swallowed again. “Heather, it already exists. There’s nothing okay about that.”

“Windows,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn’s gaze flicked round to her, too fast and too sharp. “Oh, yes, you think that makes it better? That they’re just windows?”

“Windows,” Praem repeated.

“Evee,” I tried again. “Calm down, please, we have to—”

“Have to *what*?” Evelyn spat. Her lips were pressed too tightly, her eyes gone far too wide, blinking too rapidly. “Have to what, Heather? Investigate? Destroy all this? Oh yes, oh yes, that is abundantly clear — we should have burned this place to the ground, not dragged it Outside.” I winced, but Evee kept going. “But it exists in the first place, the knowledge to make it exists in the first place—”

“Evee—”

“And that can’t!” Evelyn’s voice rose into a frightening shout. “Be! Un—”

Raine stepped up. A firm hand fell on Evelyn’s shoulder. An

expression crossed Raine's face that I'd never seen before, serious and soft and sorrowful all at once. Evelyn flinched hard, but Raine cupped the back of her neck — a surprisingly intimate gesture. Evelyn swallowed and shivered and started to shake her head.

"Evelyn," Raine whispered — though we were all close enough to overhear, no secrets between us three. "I'll get you out of here. And I'll kill the evil wizard for you, too."

Evelyn just stared up at Raine's eyes, blinking and panting.

"I've got your back," Raine said. "Remember?"

Evelyn blinked once, very hard, and took a great shuddering breath, visibly pulling herself together. "Yes— yes, I— remember."

Quickly and firmly, Evelyn peeled herself out of Raine's grip. Raine stepped back with a little theatrical flourish, giving Evee room to breathe. Before I could ask a single question about what I'd just witnessed, Evelyn pawed at one of my tentacles and allowed it to wrap around her free arm, safe and secure and well-anchored.

There was no time to discuss it right then, deep in the labyrinthine bowels of a mage's impossible living construct, cut off from half our companions, pressed by the desperate need to decide our next step — but I was quite certain that I had just been privy to a replay of a conversation from many years ago, an act of initial devotion between two very scared teenage girls, and an original promise to help each other kill a mage.

Sometimes it was easy to forget the strength of the bond between Raine and Evelyn — and that it pre-dated me, by several years.

"Are you all right now, Evee?" I asked.

Evelyn sighed sharply. "For a given value of 'all right', I suppose." She glanced at the single window in the machine-cluttered sitting room and shook her head in disgust. "I don't understand how he's taken this so far in such a short time. I knew — I knew! — that he must be trying to reverse-engineer the gateway spell he stole from us, after he used it to reach Carcosa. Any mage would do. I assumed, perhaps, maybe, he might figure out how to re-target it, yes, but only in the most vague terms. Only to somewhere he already knew about. Perhaps the swamp full of the creatures you saw, Heather. Or perhaps some other place, connected to some artefact he has access to. But this ... " She trailed off and took a

deep, steadying breath. “This is more than I was prepared for.”

“It is a bit much,” Raine said. She even sighed, but it sounded like the kind of sigh one makes at rain on a lazy Sunday.

Evelyn tutted. “I don’t even really understand what he’s achieved here. I hate to admit it, I fucking loathe to admit it,” she said between her clenched teeth. “But I have no idea what we’re looking at. A multi-gate ... hub? Like a fucking video game? Are they built into the house? Were they active before Heather pushed the house Outside? Was coming Outside some kind of catalyst?” She shrugged. “I have no idea. No idea. Felicity was right, the absolute bitch, she was right. I didn’t want to know any of this. I would have slept better without this knowledge.”

I croaked, “This doesn’t really change anything.”

Evelyn turned to stare at me; for a moment I worried she’d slipped over the edge again.

“Still flesh,” said Praem. “Still blood.”

“Yeeeeeeeah,” Raine agreed with a wink at Praem. “Our Praem’s got a good point. A bunch of windows doesn’t mean Eddy boy won’t bleed and die just the same, when we find him.”

Evelyn laughed, dark and humourless. “Raine. Raine, for pity’s sake, this whole house — this!” She gestured at the one window currently visible. “This is the work of a mage so far beyond me that I am terrified. This is beyond any of us. Beyond my mother. You think bullets will stop him? I disagree. We should be detonating this place.”

“Not beyond me,” I croaked. “Windows are just for ... looking out of. Seeing. Observation.”

“Evee,” Raine repeated. “We need to stay practical. Link back up with the others, find Edward, kill him. Keep it simple.”

“Kiss,” said Praem.

“W-what?” I spluttered. Evelyn just frowned.

“Stupid,” Praem explained.

“K-I-S-S,” Raine spelled out. “Keep it simple, stupid. Right you are, Praem. Listen to your girl, Evee.”

Evelyn ran a hand over her face and glanced at the two opposite doorways which led out of the sitting room. “Raine, this place is a maze. For all we know it goes on functionally forever. The chance of linking back up with the others is minimal. If they have Lozzie with them, they may have fled back to Camelot, or home, already. Heather?”

Evelyn looked at me expectantly. I coughed and nodded. “I can Slip us out.”

“We’re quitting?” Raine said. “Heather?”

I shrugged. Evelyn wet her lips, caught in a moment of hesitation. I squeezed her arm with one tentacle. “That’s a pretty load-bearing ‘if’, Eevee.”

“Ahhhh,” said Raine. “What if the others are all split up, right?”

“Lozzie ... ” I murmured. “And ... Zheng. That bomb. She might be ... ”

Raine nodded seriously. “Zheng’s made of strong stuff, Heather. Even if she took the brunt of that explosion, she’ll be fine.”

I chewed on my lower lip. I couldn’t bear the thought of Lozzie, all alone and trapped in her uncle’s house, or Zheng, charred and blind and regenerating too slowly, at the mercy of whatever terrible things might be lurking and waiting to capture her — or worse.

“Shit,” Evelyn said, then swore three more times in quick succession. “Shit, you’re right. What if one of the others is alone and isolated?”

“We can’t,” I said. “Can’t leave. Not alone.”

“Yes!” Evelyn hissed. “I know! I bloody well know!”

Raine made a show of trying the walkie-talkie again, but nobody was answering. For a moment she looked down, her confidence sagging — but then she hefted the gun in her hands and raised her chin, tall and powerful and muscular all of a sudden. “Alright, ladies — and gentlemen, too.” She nodded to the Knights, to the Forest Knight in his distinctive armour. “Executive decision time. This here little expedition is now under military jurisdiction.” She cracked a huge, shit-eating grin and shot me a wink, rolling her shoulders and flexing her neck. The look on Raine’s face made me blush, but it caused Evelyn to roll her eyes and huff.

Praem, however, saluted. She even made her heels click.

“Thank you, Private Praem,” said Raine. “Now, here’s the plan. We should push on and see if we can find another one of those weird shadow-wall things. If we’re real lucky, they only separate two halves or three thirds of the house, something along those lines. Again, if we are four really lucky bitches — and six super auspicious heavy armour lads,” she added as she gestured at the Knights. “Then there’s a chance that finding one of those walls will let us rejoin the others.”

Evelyn gritted her teeth. “That is a hell of a long shot, Raine. We don’t know how any of this works. Going through another wall could end up leading us deeper. I don’t know what I’m looking at here — how many times must I repeat that?”

“Sure could.” Raine gestured at me. “But we’ve got Heather. So, it can’t hurt to try. If it doesn’t work, we bug out.”

“Ha!” Evelyn barked. “Can’t hurt to try? Famous last words, Raine! Don’t jinx us. We are slipping down the sides of a crisis here.”

“Evee,” I croaked. “If you insist, we won’t try. But I don’t want to risk leaving anybody behind. Not even a Knight.” I wrapped another tentacle around the nearest Knight-arm — that of the Forest Knight. He didn’t react at all, but neither did he reject the touch. “Evee, do you insist?”

Evelyn gritted her teeth, then looked away and shook her head. “We can try. That’s it. If something goes wrong, we leave, we get out. Try something else. Have the Caterpillars demolish this place from the exterior. We need to get everyone out.”

“Right,” Raine said with a curt nod. “Praem, how you holding up with those wounds?”

Praem did look a terrible mess. Her clothes were all torn and charred on one side, from where she’d shielded Evelyn with her own body. Shrapnel cuts and surface burns showed through rents in her jumper, but there was no blood from her pneuma-somatic flesh. Her hair was hanging down, freed from the usual messy bun. But she was straight-backed, clear-eyed, and providing much needed physical support for her mother.

“Genki,” said Praem. She gave Raine a thumbs-up.

Evelyn huffed like a bellows and rolled her eyes. Raine laughed and shook her head. I just reached over with a tentacle and patted Praem on the arm — the unburned one, in case she really was dealing with a lot of suppressed pain right then.

Raine addressed the Knights: “You lads all cool with the plan, too?” She got no response from five of them, but the Forest Knight answered for all, with a short dip of his helmet.

“Raine,” Evelyn said. “I hope I don’t have to say this, but if you see anything at all which looks even remotely like Edward—”

Raine did something which made the submachine gun in her hands go *clack-clack* again. “Blow him away. You bet, Eeve. Fastest trigger in the west — of England, I mean.”

Evelyn hissed, not really amused. “Go for his knees if you can. I’d love a chance to question the bastard.”

“Eeve,” I croaked. “What was that thing? The Edward ... doll?”

Evelyn shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “We’ve seen him do that trick before. Remote piloting. He could have dozens of the things.” She frowned in thought. “Though he tipped his hand with that first one. I have no idea what that could mean, so keep on your toes.”

Raine said, “Hey, hey, what if it was the real Edward?”

“Lucky,” said Praem.

“Highly unlikely,” Evelyn grunted. Then: “Raine, are you really alright with that fucking thing?”

“Ah?”

“The gun, you idiot.”

I agreed, “It is rather a lot more gun than you’re used to.” Raine was being very careful where she pointed the muzzle, finger firmly off the trigger mechanism, but the sight of that black metal machine in her arms sent a strange quiver down my flesh.

“No worries, ladies, no worries.” Raine held the gun up sideways, so we could both see. She clicked a little dial round with her fingertip. “Safety — on. Now off. One shot, three shot, full auto.” She clicked the dial back round. “Safety is on. And here.” She pulled out the magazine and showed it to us. “Full rounds.” She slapped the magazine back in with a clack. “Shoulder up, down sights.” She

pressed the gun to her shoulder and closed one eye. “I think I know what I’m doing.”

“You play too many video games,” I sighed — but the exasperation was an act. Raine’s easy confidence and instant competence was exactly what I needed right then. She must have seen the truth in my face, because she shot me a wink and a smile.

Praem intoned, “Not enough video games.”

Evelyn huffed. “Just don’t shoot either of us. Or Praem, or a Knight. Or your own foot.”

Raine winked. “On it, boss.”

“Be careful,” I croaked. “Please, Raine.”

“Always am, for you.”

With three Knights in front and three Knights behind, and Raine’s gun tucked in close, and Praem’s head high, and Evelyn’s hands on scrimshawed bone, and tentacles touching everyone I could reach, we plunged back into the House, looking for another void, another membrane to elsewhere.

The corridors and rooms did not repeat in a predictable pattern, but neither were they unreadable chaos; sitting rooms in plush opulence, kitchens both small and large, guest bedrooms which looked as if they had lain undusted for a week or two, dining rooms wide and fancy, but only the occasional utility room — with washing machine or dishwasher missing from beneath the counters, replaced with more wired-up machine nonsense — and the rare blocked corridor rammed full of too much racking and junk to pass through. And no stairs, either up or down.

Fairy lights fluttered and flushed. Disks and drives span in grand narcissism, unconnected to computers to make sense of their insides. Racking marched off down every corridor, a rickety rival to the shelves of the Library of Carcosa. Screens blushed and blinked, never to be read by sapient eyes. Knight-metal boots clicked and clinked alongside and behind. Tower shields heaved in silence. Raine’s gun swung left and right.

After perhaps five or ten minutes of walking, we found nothing new inside the house. Different variations, yes, spreading out into apparent infinity. Subtle changes to the layouts of the rooms,

certainly. Even a few more dead demon-hosts, wired up to the machinery on metal frames, crucified, tied down, their heads turned to pulped meat and bone fragments by some as-yet-unknown assailant.

But outside the House — Outside?

Illimitable vistas.

Almost every room and corridor had at least one window, more often two, or even three. One particular sitting room had a whole bank of ceiling-height bay windows, each one looking out on a different Outside dimension. Bone-wrapped cave-like reaches into festering darkness, full of scuttling exoskeletons and their flesh-sack victims; broken landscapes of fire and the hulks of dead mountains ridden with worm-tunnels the size of skyscrapers; undulating plains of fluttering and fluttering alveoli, caked in brown mucus and a million writhing parasites.

“Why so many windows here?” Raine wondered aloud. “Why so many in here, but none at the start?”

Evelyn said, “Try not to think about it. Focus on what we’re doing.”

“Shell,” said Praem.

“Huh?” Evelyn grunted.

“Shell. Innards.”

“Praem has a point,” I croaked. “I’m thinking the same thing. We’re in the guts, now. Or the ... senses?”

The exterior layer of the House — the area before the first void-wall we had passed through — was like a shell or a skin, an impermeable outer layer, protective and hardened, without windows upon the Outside. But here, deeper into the organism, lay the information of sense organs, or the interface between food and gut, or thoughts inside a brain.

Raine shook her head. “We’ve seen this before.”

“Ahh?” I said. “We have?”

“Way back. Heather, remember when we went to the castle? All those loops of pocket dimension, leading us in circles?” She nodded at the walls. “Same thing. Like a Japanese castle. Layers of maze and traps and tricks. Doesn’t need high walls. Just tons of bullshit in

our way. Maybe Edward designed that place, too. His style. His work.”

“Oh,” we murmured. “Oh. Maybe. Why does this keep happening? Why do we always keep getting lost in stupid, spooky houses?”

Evelyn huffed. “Mages have an unhealthy relationship with buildings. It’s a theory I’m working on.”

“Seriously?”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “No, that was an attempt at a joke.” She huffed loudly, shaking her head. “If we hadn’t burst that initial void, the one in the front door, maybe it would have taken us straight to Edward. Damn it all. Explains how Badger got so far ahead of us, and how he left no signs behind. Fuck it.”

“Hey, hey,” said Raine. “No sense bellyaching now. We’re in it, so we’ll deal with it.”

More than once I had to pull Evelyn or Raine away from the sight of the unnumbered worlds of Outside. I had grown up with regular exposure to these brain paralysing landscapes, that sense of vast unknowable places in which a human being could wander for centuries. My friends had not. Some dimensions passed without comment; others stole the breath and sucked at the eyeballs. Raine would stare and Evelyn would turn pale, but Praem and I could turn them away from it all. Lucky for us the Knights were immune. The Forest Knight cared not for anything but us and his siblings.

We even found one window that almost definitely looked out on Camelot — the rolling yellow-grass hillsides, the purple light flooding down from above, the crystal whorls in the sky. But there was nothing in sight, no castle, no Cattys, no landmarks. We briefly debated trying to open the window — there was a catch and a latch, right there, and I ran a tentacle over it, testing for resistance. We even considered breaking the glass to clamber out.

Evelyn put her foot down. “There’s no point. If we want to escape, we can rely on Heather. Crawling out of a window into the middle of nowhere serves no purpose.”

But we were going nowhere anyway. Endless corridors, unnumbered windows, meaningless machines.

“This isn’t working,” Evelyn whispered between her teeth, when we

stopped in yet another racking-lined corridor. “There’s nothing here. There’s nowhere to go, nothing to find but more of Outside, and I can’t ... I can’t ... ”

Praem placed one hand on the small of Evelyn’s back; Eevee was shaking. Raine was sweating as well, breathing too hard.

I wasn’t in good shape, either — exhausted, sore all over, still sticky with the remnants of my own blood, my tentacles limp and soft like spent heat-sinks. But I wasn’t suffering from the overexposure to Outside, not like Raine and Eevee. Sometimes it was too easy for us to forget that not all human beings were adapted for the inhuman conditions of unbroken exposure to the spheres beyond reality.

“So,” Raine said. “That’s it. We’re giving up? Pulling out? Full retreat?”

Evelyn swallowed very loudly. “T-the others ... Twil ... ”

Raine nodded. “Yeah, I’m not cool with leaving Zheng behind. Or anybody else. We don’t know ... don’t know ... ”

We raised our head and raised ourselves, six points of intimate contact strobing and pulsing in the still air. “We could touch the walls?” I said. “I mean, I could touch the walls? Talk to the House. Or to the machines.”

Raine gave me a serious, frowning look, nodding slowly. Evelyn grimaced, about to refuse, words caught on her tongue.

But then:

“Talking,” said Praem.

“Yes,” I croaked. “Like I did before. I could talk to the House, find out if—”

A soft and elegant finger pressed to my lips. “Shhh,” Praem hushed me. “Talking.”

For a heartbeat I assumed Praem was making some kind of esoteric point about how one did not need words to speak to a House. Evelyn must have assumed the same — I saw her roll her eyes. But Raine understood what Praem really meant; she tilted her head and raised a hand for silence.

We all listened.

Through the walls, down the corridors, behind the clicking and whirring and ticking and burbling of the little machines, a voice was muttering.

The words were impossible to make out, but the tone and pitch were unmistakable — rough, reedy, raspy, all throat and nose. Old. Tired. Angry.

Tower shields were raised. Raine flicked the safety off on her stolen gun. Evelyn shifted her hands on her scrimshawed thigh-bone and leaned heavily on Praem's support. I shook out two tentacles and readied myself for calculations — I was aching and spent, but I could still send a person spinning off into the unknown dimensions of Outside.

If that still mattered, in this House.

We found the owner of the voice five rooms further on.

He was in yet another kitchen — a particularly large one, with granite counter-tops, silvery taps over a porcelain sink, and a massive wood-fired oven in one corner, still active and glugging away to itself with the fire banked behind metal doors. The floor was plain tile, the walls cream paint. A large kitchen island sat in the middle of the space. The edges of the floors were festooned with more of the House-wide electronic webbing. Three dead demon-hosts were lined up against the far wall, tied to their metal frames, beheaded.

Sitting on that kitchen island, with his feet far off the floor and a slumped pose more like a grumpy teenager than an old man, was Edward Lilburne.

Or one of his puppets.

He looked identical to every previous iteration: in his seventies or eighties, with a pale and bloodless complexion, face and head craggy and liver spotted; thick bushy grey eyebrows sat over a pair of wire-frame glasses, themselves framed in turn by stringy grey hair climbing down from a shiny bald pate; thin lips pressed tight beneath a nose pocked and scarred; his narrow frame was wrapped in a shapeless coat. His feet were bare. His eyes were rheumy and bloodshot.

Sitting motionless, papery hands in his lap, staring at a window in the kitchen wall — at an Outside dimension of crawling chitin and

broken horns, all in glossy beetle-black.

An antique typewriter sat next to him on the kitchen worktop, wired into the machine-web with cables and plugs. It had no paper loaded into the mechanism, just naked metal keys and a cylinder of brass.

He was still muttering as we entered.

“—without connection there cannot be reintegration. Without reintegration I am nothing but mud. Why keep up the charade? Why not simply cease—”

Rough and raw, a true Sharrowford accent, ruined and roiling in a smoke-scarred throat.

Our Knights stood firm, shields to the fore. Raine aimed her gun, safety off, finger on the trigger. Evelyn’s grip drew crackles and little eddies of frosty air from her scrimshawed bone-wand. I had to swallow a hiss, because here he was, the object of all our aims, the man who had frustrated us and hounded us and sent monsters and mercenaries and worse after our heads, the man who wanted Lozzie caged and me drained of something more vital than blood, the man who held the keys to Maisie’s prison and didn’t even care.

And he wouldn’t look at us. He stared Outside and muttered and mumbled, lost in his own inner space.

“Evee,” Raine said. “Do I shoot?”

“Not yet,” Evelyn spat. “If he twitches wrong, put him down. But don’t get close. That’s not the real him, yet again.” Evelyn raised her voice: “Edward! Edward Lilburne! Pay attention!”

“—nine left? Is that really all?” he muttered on. “Or perhaps there’s no more at all, perhaps we’re—”

“Edward!” Evelyn snapped.

“Oi, oi, Eddy-boy,” said Raine. “Hey, sadsack, chin up!”

“Here,” said Praem. “Here.”

“Doesn’t even fucking care,” Evelyn grunted.

Raine sighed and nodded. “Off with the fairies.”

I allowed myself a small, thin hiss; Raine and Evee both flinched,

but then Raine gave me a wink and Evelyn nodded her agreement. I hissed louder — and louder — and louder.

“Screeeeeeeeee—”

The Edward-puppet finally broke off his mumbling and waved a thin-boned hand in our general direction. I cut off my noisy complaint, tongue clicking back between my teeth.

“Oh, shoot me if you must,” came his petulant rasp. “But spare me the lecture.”

We all waited for more, but the Edward-puppet did not resume his mumbling. He just stared through the window at Outside, his spine bent in a painful looking C-curve, his lips slack, his eyes red and bloodshot. I realised he was sweating, waxy and cold. He looked like a man in the grip of a flu fever, or worse.

I whispered as much to Evee: “Something’s wrong with him. With it. I don’t know.”

“Oi!” Raine shouted. “Oi, mate. What’s eating you?”

“Time,” he rasped. “Go away.”

Evelyn frowned as if she wanted to stab somebody, but she was just as lost as Raine and I; we had expected a confrontation, another suicide-bomber, or some kind of stealthy attack. We had not expected this lethargic rejection, this spent old man.

“Edward,” Evelyn said eventually. “You will explain what is going on here.”

The puppet gestured again, a dismissive flick of one hand, without strength or conviction. “Far too late for theory. You’ve broken it. You ignorant children.”

Raine snorted. “You really think he’s gonna answer that?”

“Worth a shot,” Evelyn muttered back.

The Edward-doll just sat there, slumped, almost an empty vessel. He had still not looked at us, not even once.

“This makes no sense,” Evelyn hissed after a moment. “Alright. Raine, put one through his skull. You two.” She gestured at the Knights in the fore. “Be ready for anything. Raine, on three. One—”

Edward moved — not to surprise us, but simply with the self-interested motion of a man who did not care he was being watched. He turned his head, looked down at the typewriter at his side, and raised a single pale finger to press a key.

Bang!

Raine's bullet shattered his elbow in an explosion of blood and bone. I flinched, quite badly, tentacles flailing all over the place for a second before we could catch ourselves. Crimson mess went everywhere, splattering on the wall behind and dripping down onto the kitchen tiles. The puppet's arm hung limp and loose, tendons and tissues pulped.

Edward didn't even flinch. He showed no pain. He just sighed and slumped further. "Denying me every solace, yes. How noble of you."

Praem said: "Good shoot."

Raine laughed, low and carefully controlled. "You've already tried to kill us once today, mate. Not gonna let you do it again. No more moves, hey. Next one takes your head off."

'Edward' finally turned his liver-spotted head to look at us. Owlsh eyes peered from within narrow frames, wrinkled sagging flesh and glass lenses both spotted with his own blood. Lank grey hair hung down, thin and greasy. His bald pate shone in the artificial light. His right arm dripped blood all over the tiles.

"Ahhhh?" he croaked, squinting. "I have?"

"The bomb," Evelyn spat. She was almost vibrating with rage. "Don't play coy with us."

"A bomb?" the Edward-puppet echoed. "A bomb. Ahhh. Number three chose to go out with a bang, hmm? Did he get any of you?"

"Zero," intoned Praem.

"None!" Evelyn snapped.

"Huh." Edward looked back at the Outside window. "Begone. Or shoot me. Whichever you must."

"You're going to answer—"

Edward snorted, loud and derisive. He had already dismissed us.

Evelyn looked ready to splutter with outrage. Raine's grip was steady on her gun, ready to put down this loathsome thing.

But we — I — eased a pair of tentacles around a tower shield and out into the open. A pair of exploratory feelers, hovering a good ten feet away from Edward Lilburne. Close enough for a trick or two.

"Heather," Evee hissed between clenched teeth, her voice tight with warning.

"Let us try," I hissed back. Then I wet my lips, and said: "Edward. What is this thing you've made? This thing we're inside? You made this, didn't you?"

"Huh." He chuckled, once. Then he sighed, a low rasp in a raw throat. "Appealing to my sense of pride? But alas, you stupid girl — this body ... this body ... this *body*," he spat and twisted the word, face scrunching with anger. "Is not the real me. Ha! Hahahahaa ... haaaaa."

He laughed, then trailed off into nothing. Drool hung from his lips. He twitched, as if shivering in the throes of a fever.

"Yes," I said, crisp and sharp, trying not to let my anger cloud my tone. "We know. I know. You're a remote-controlled vessel—"

"Remote controlled?" he echoed the words with a touch of amused scorn. "Remote action at a distance. Oh, yes. Very clever of me. That was always the ideal. Never touching. Never getting my hands dirty."

Evelyn snapped: "Where is the real you? How does this place work? Explain, now."

He ignored her and focused on me. "It is a bit late for you to come crawling in here with your nervous system on a platter, Miss Morell. Far too late to change the outcome now that you ... ah." He blinked. "Ahhhh. I see. It was you. You cannot have been working in concert with that young fool, no, or you would not have risked giving me everything I have ever wanted."

All Edward Lilburne's self-control was gone; when I'd seen him last, piloting another vessel in that trap of a house in Devon, he had gloated and preened, been obsessed with the clever mechanism of his little trap, used his physical form as bait, and revelled in the chance to outwit me. Now he just rambled and slumped, sulky and

raging.

Evelyn hissed, “What the hell are you talking about? We have you cornered, you old fuck. There’s nowhere for you to run, you—”

He laughed, bitter and resigned. “Nowhere to run! Oh, you are quite correct. I am trapped.”

A cold feeling was running down my spine. “Wait, wait — what do you mean, it was me? What was me?”

Edward snorted. “You pulled the trigger I could not even touch. You catalysed the process I have been painstakingly constructing for the last fifty years. I ... I ... I?” He snorted again, shaking his head. “I. Me. Myself. Ha!”

Behind the bastion of the Knights’ tower shields, we all shared a look. Evelyn nodded at me to continue — I did seem to be the only one Edward was truly responding to.

“Do you mean how I sent the House Outside?” I asked.

“You gave it the idea, but it did the work itself,” he said. “The one thing I could not give. The motion I could not coax. Well done. Bravo.”

Evelyn spat: “Stop with the riddles! What *is* this? What does it *do*? Where is your real body? You’re clearly not leaving, and we have you trapped, cornered, pinned down. What the hell is all this?”

A little pride flowed back into Edward’s shoulders. He spread his hands to indicate the walls, the windows, the floor, the ceiling. “Do you not recognise it?”

“No!”

“Evee, hey,” Raine said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Edward raised his chin. His smile crinkled the corners of his eyes with pride. “Mankind’s oldest technology,” he said. “The house, perfected.”

He waited a beat, hands wide, as if poised for applause.

“We’re not listening to this,” Evelyn said. “Raine, shoot him.”

“Right-o, ma’am.” Raine raised the gun to her shoulder.

Edward snapped suddenly, all spitting scorn and bitter rage: “Oh,

make up your minds! Put me down, or allow a condemned man his last boast!”

Evelyn gestured for Raine to hold fire. “Condemned, yes. You admit it, there is no escape for you. Now, Edward, where is your—”

“Edward!” Edward echoed, voice full of derision and sarcasm. “No, not Edward. Not anymore. Not with the network core corrupted, not without hope of reintegration. I am an isolate, now. Running down the clock. Perhaps an hour. Perhaps two. Then my organs will fail and my brain will turn to so much dust.” He hissed between his teeth. “I do not wish to die. That was the whole point of this. But without reintegration of memories, there is only ... this.” He raised a hand and let it flop back into his lap.

Evelyn’s frown turned to wide-eyed fascination. She just gaped for a moment.

Raine said: “There’s no more real Edward? You’re not remote controlled anymore?”

Evelyn gathered herself and added, “You are claiming that the real Edward has been somehow compromised? That you’ve lost your remote control connection? You’ve been abandoned?”

“Badger,” Raine hissed. “He got him.”

“Oh, I hope so!” I hissed back.

“Or it’s a trick,” Evelyn snapped. “Or nonsense. He could be misleading us.”

I said, not wanting to voice the thought: “Or he escaped, he went Outside.”

‘Edward’ laughed, low and bitter. “To lose oneself in the mire is not ‘escape’, it is suicide. I would not do that. He. I. Ha! That is the whole point of this beautiful perfection.”

Evelyn gestured to me and Raine to lean in closer for a moment. We did so, sheltered behind the Knights. Evelyn hissed to us: “If he’s telling the truth, we’re dealing with some kind of semi-autonomous drone, based on Edward himself, with his thought patterns, but rapidly expiring. I have never seen anything like this, I have no idea what to expect.” Evelyn’s throat bobbed. Her eyes were wide with more than a little touch of fear.

Raine nodded. "We keep him talking. Get what we can. Trust nothing."

'Edward' was repeating his own name, scornful and self-mocking. "Edward. Edward. Ed-ward. No, no, I am ... I am Four. Four. Yes. Two hours of life, and a new name. Four. What a waste of a mind."

"Hey," Raine said, straightening up again. "I thought fire was the oldest technology, not houses."

Edward — or Four, I suppose — looked around at us with a relit fire inside his owlish eyes. His bushy grey eyebrows went up. He even smiled that nasty smug smile, like an academic who scorns teaching as beneath him. "A common mistake. Think, girl, think! Do you really believe that our ape ancestors mastered the art of fire-making before they crawled into a cave for the very first time? They made a house long before they learned how to make fire."

"Clubs, then," Raine said with an easy smile and a lazy shrug. "Hitting stuff with sticks. That has to be older than houses."

Evelyn hissed: "Raine, what are you doing?"

"Drawing him out," Raine whispered back. "Heather's got the right idea."

Edward was snorting with derision. "Chimpanzees cannot use clubs. They drag sticks as a threat display, but they don't have the intelligence or adaptability to continue the logic to the point of hitting an opponent with a weapon. No. The house, the home, the cave, that is the one indispensable human technology. The first — and now, the ultimate. You are standing within the proof of that, even incomplete. The house, perfected."

Edward straightened up, prideful and preening.

"Still don't buy it, mate," said Raine.

Edward — Four — sneered. "You wouldn't. You are still human, are you not? Yet you willingly expose yourself to corruption, standing right next to it." He nodded at me. "This!" His eyes burned with conviction all of a sudden. "This house is the ultimate in barriers between the practitioner and the cosmos. With this, one may go anywhere, see anything, travel the darkest reaches and plumb the deepest, most festering holes. All within the comfort of one's own home, forever and ever. It is a work of genius. Deny that, even unto

your deaths.”

“A travel device,” Evelyn muttered. “You’ve made a travel device. To travel Outside, without ever having to leave your house.”

Edward bowed his head in recognition. “And you gave me the keys to the engine, Miss Saye.”

“Yeah, right, sure,” said Raine. “Your fucked up rip-off tardis is real cosy with all this machinery around. Love to be stuck here for eternity. sure.”

Edward snorted. “Forgotten chaos calls to forgotten chaos. One cannot leave the centre of creation — Earth — without accepting that. The trick is to accept it without letting it inside one’s own body. Not like your kind.” His eyes slid to me. “You are hopelessly corrupted. Eaten from inside out. There is almost nothing of the human left in you. With this, I could have explored for ever, filled the spaces themselves with my thoughts, never to be touched!”

I sighed. “This is a little ... ranty.”

“Yeaaaaah,” said Raine. “Are we getting anything from this?”

“Wait,” I said. “Edward, if you can take this House anywhere, why did you wait for us to come and attack you? Why didn’t you run?”

Edward gave me the most dead-eyed look. “Have you listened to nothing? It was not ready! I needed Lauren. Or you. I needed that spark, that connection with the beyond, distilled down into human thought — vile, but still of use. I was so close! So close to making the connection.”

I blinked several times. “But ... all I had to do was ask the house to move. All I had to do was ask!”

“No! You fool! All you have done is take the house from A to B. It is stuck now. Mired and broken. I needed your soul, unfolded onto it.” He waved a dismissive hand. “All this talk is dust and echoes. None of this will ever be complete, now. You have ruined the greatest creation of human history, for nothing but your own selfish skins.”

“You’re lying,” I said. I almost laughed.

Edward frowned, suddenly sharp. Eevee perked up. Raine raised her eyebrows.

“This is a stalling tactic,” we went on. “Some of this is true — I

think. But he's being selective with what he says. Aren't you?"

Raine nodded. "He's clearly burning up bad. I think that part is true. You're dying over there, mate. Trying to protect your core personality, still? Trying to stop us from finding the real Edward?"

'Four' smiled, bitter and bleeding. "Death is clarifying certain things for me."

"Like what?" Raine asked. "Go on. We're listening."

"Do you know what magic is good for?" he asked, slowly.

Evelyn answered instantly: "Transition. Ascension. Change. Which you reject."

As *I do*, I heard the unspoken addition to Evelyn's answer — but that was not for Edward's ears, not now.

"No," Edward rasped. "It is not good for anything, in the end. I — I! Ha! Him! — have not left this house in nearly thirty years. He will not die, and he will remain human, inviolate, not corrupted into something unrecognisable, like you deviants and abyssal memories. I was made to facilitate that."

Raine nodded. "But ... ?"

"But now I am dying."

Praem said, sing-song mocking: "Boo-hoo."

"And you were never alive," he rasped back at Praem. "You aren't even sentient. Do not speak to me, furniture."

"Eddy no-style," Praem replied. "Eddy no-grace."

I made the final push: "Four, how do we reach your real body? How do we find the real Edward?"

Four stared at me, sullen and dark behind his thin glasses. Then swallowed once, wet his lips, and opened his mouth.

"Upstairs. He is up—"

A figure stepped through the open doorway on the other side of the room, grey-haired and liver-spotted and bespectacled.

Another Edward — carrying a double-barrelled hunting shotgun.

Before Raine could adjust her aim, this second Edward pointed the

shotgun at the skull of the puppet — Four — and unloaded both barrels with an ear-splitting boom. Four's head exploded with gore, the corpse toppling over onto the kitchen worktop in a twitching mass of blood and brains. The shotgun spent, this second Edward cast the weapon to the floor with a clatter, raised his hands in surrender, and cracked a nasty little grin.

"Don't shoot," he said, mocking and raw. "Or do. As if I care."

"Fucking hell," said Raine. "How many of you bastards are there?"

"Too many!" Evelyn spat. "This is obscene. What have you done to yourself, you fool? Fragmented your mind? Split yourself? What are you?"

"One less now," Praem intoned.

This new 'Edward' snorted and tilted his head upward. "Traitors surrender to fear of death. I do not — I am a hand, a finger. Use torture if you must. I will self-terminate before—"

Strobing dark and surging hard, we reached forward with two tentacles before this Edward-puppet could finish his sentence or swallow his own tongue.

I would rip the secrets from his skull. No escape in death. Not from me, or from the abyss.

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.12

Two of my tentacles grabbed the Edward-puppet's face, slammed him against the wall, and burrowed into his brain.

Tentacle-tips flash-hardened into diamond drill-bits, punching through his glasses and eye jelly and sphenoid bone, ripping open his temporal muscle and smashing past the delicate latch of skull-plates in the side of his head. Blood-channels formed in toughened flesh to sluice away the crimson mess. Contact-needles of bio-steel and extruded copper jabbed from armoured sheaths and sank into exposed folds of brain tissue; nerve-bundle information relays slammed their valves and membranes shut against unwanted backwash, to guard against tricks or traps hiding inside the strings of this puppet.

Turned out the puppet did actually possess a brain, which was a stroke of luck; for all I knew it was just a churning void of magical nonsense inside that skull. But Edward's drone-creation process was truly complete, with organs and nerves and all.

The Edward-puppet made a token attempt to grab at us — at my tentacles — but I was fast and accurate, I knew what I was doing, and I had lost my temper very badly; this was no delicate trepanation to save a life, not like with Badger. This was plunder. I had no concern for the puppet's survival or physical integrity. By the time he got a grip on one of us, I was already inside his brain and shutting him down.

Spontaneous modification to pneuma-somatic flesh was so much easier, Outside. I didn't even have to think about it; I wasn't thinking about it, I was simply doing.

With pieces of our own extended nervous system embedded in Edward's puppet-brain, I did what came naturally.

I observed him.

Hyperdimensional mathematics provided the senses, the medium,

the eyeball with which to see — for seeing was comprehending, and comprehending was defining, and defining was seeing; consciousness at this level wrapped back on itself in an infinite loop, and there were seven of me now, an array of observers spread in a web, a network of wide-range sight.

The Edward-puppet was laid flat, his thoughts and history and personality and bodily functions spread out before me as written upon the substrate of reality. I had performed this trick before with Raine, then with Sarika, and most recently with Badger — but never this violently, never with such lack of care, such brutality toward my subject. I tore at the equation, pulled and ripped and gouged; I wrenched open the soul of the Edward-puppet and expected it to spill out like infinite guts from a slit belly. Human beings are such complex equations, billion-petalled flowers with a million miles of stem; such rough treatment would surely kill him, if the physical needles in his brain hadn't already finished him off.

But when I split the puppet open — a trickle, thin plasma, watery blood, then nothing.

The Edward-puppet was a complex equation, of course, but an entire order of magnitude less than a real human being. An echo pressed into flesh, a single fragment of a greater whole, like a portion of newsprint pressed into a wet palm, only a hundredth of the whole story. This vessel was less than a year old, made of fresh parts — meat-slurry and protein powder and a magical operation of such violation that it hovered over him like a thunderstorm.

But the thin and incomplete equation of this drone was like a single puzzle piece, the shape of him implying the inevitable existence of all the other pieces — up in that storm, churning and turning.

I felt the other drones, the other clones, Edward's other puppets, like points of friction-lighting stirring in the storm clouds, gathering and parting and communicating with each other.

He — Edward, his puppets, whatever he was now — was a little bit like me. A network of parts. Individually nothing, incomplete without their core; but together they made an entity greater than the mere sum.

Only when I looked into those roiling storm clouds did I see anything which made sense — and I looked, I stared into the churning network. Out in reality I knew my nose was running freely

with blood, my bioreactor was flaring with heat, and Raine was just starting to say my name. The Edward-puppet was dying in my grip. When he expired I would lose my connection to his greater whole. I had to be fast.

He — them, they? it? — was angry, frustrated, disappointed with crushing failure and terrified of onrushing oblivion. Bitter resignation. Defiant laughter. He was dying. The other ‘Edward’, the talkative one, had not been faking very much. We had broken something essential when we had dragged the House Outside.

There were so many of them, so very many of them. Edward had copied himself over and over and over again.

And written in the churning grey storm clouds — yes: upstairs.

Edward — the core of the network — was upstairs.

But as I swooped back down out of those storm clouds with my plundered information, away from the hundreds upon hundreds of dying points of light, they all turned together, all moving as one.

An array. Observing me in return.

Huunh. *There’s an idea,* said a dying voice.

I snapped back out of my abyssal sensorium with a snort of blood and a drunken stagger. The Edward-corpse slid to the floor in a bloody heap, twitching and bleeding and leaking brain matter; we couldn’t look at what I’d done to him, the sight made me want to vomit. My tentacles whipped back, still diamond-tipped and jabbing with needles and now lined and ridged with razor-hooks and gripping toothy suckers and contact-poisons and—

“Heather! Heather!”

“Fucking hell! Praem, get her—”

“Heather!”

Three pairs of strong hands caught us — Praem grabbed my human arms, while the Forest Knight and one of his siblings used the hafts of their weapons to entangle my flailing tentacles.

“Hisssssssssssss—”

Praem’s face appeared inches from mine. A pale, delicate hand rose, holding a yellow treat. Sharp citrus stopped my hiss by filling my

mouth with clarity.

Panting, raw in the throat, all twisted up inside, I just sagged in Praem's arms for a while, chewing on the lemon.

"Good girl," said Praem. "Good Heather."

Eventually Raine came over and squeezed my shoulder. Evelyn watched me like I was an unexploded bomb, ticking away to itself. The Knights gently let my tentacles loose.

Raine grinned for me. "Looking cool, squid-wife."

"Looking terrifying," I croaked.

"Your eyes are all funny colours," she said. "It's cute."

"Cute," intoned Praem.

"Not now, Raine," I managed, still panting, coming back to myself. "But, love you. S-sorry, I-I saw ... something looked back ... lost my temper."

My head was spinning; so many Edward-nodes, so many pulsing points out there in the labyrinth of the House-guts. And it, him, they, had looked back at me and seen — what?

"With him?" Raine thumbed at the Edward-puppet corpses, two of them now. We couldn't bear to look, the blood and gore was awful. Had I really punched those holes in a human skull? The first Edward lay in a twisted heap over the island in the middle of the kitchen space; at least he wasn't my fault. "Hey, Heather, I don't blame you. Fucker's been baiting us for a long time."

Evelyn hissed, "You shouldn't have bloody well touched him, Heather! We thought you'd been hurt!"

I eased myself away from Praem and stood on my own two feet — not unsteady or tired at all, but worryingly strong and sure-footed. My tendons felt springy and flexible and light, my muscles warm and buttery. My throat was twisted up inside, still trying to assume non-human shapes, so I swallowed several times, trying to clear it.

"N-no," I croaked. "I'm fine. I just ... I lost my temper with him — with all this bullshit!" I spat, then flushed in both cheeks. "Pardon — pardon— gosh. Pardon me. Pardon my language, I just— he doesn't care! He doesn't even care about the book, or us, or any of this. He doesn't even really care about what he's stopping us from

achieving. The only thing in his head is himself and his project.” I panted, sniffing, wet in the eyes with tears and wet in the face with blood.

“Yes, Heather,” Evelyn said. “We can figure that out ourselves. Did you get anything useful from him?”

I nodded, pulling my tentacles back in — and then pausing before I brought them too close. The pair of tentacles I’d used to violate Edward had changed beyond my original intention, lined themselves with sharp hooks and warning colouration, dotted with spines and spikes, and begun the process of producing contact neurotoxins. I stared, concentrating, soothing my other selves down from the edge of open warfare.

But six other Heathers would not relent; they were in a panic, whirling inside with dull recognition. Every cell of my body was screaming for emergency measures, to power up my bio-reactor to full, to cast aside my human vulnerabilities, before—

“Heather?” Evelyn huffed. “Did you—”

“Yes!” I tutted, struggling to concentrate. “Yes. He — that — it’s just a node, a piece of a greater whole. There’s— a— a ... a lot of ...”

Raine squeezed my shoulder again. “Heather?”

Evelyn spoke through gritted teeth. “How many Edward drones? Heather? How many of him are there?”

My other tentacles ached to plate themselves in bio-accumulated iron. My teeth itched and my gums were bleeding, trying to give me fangs to threaten and bite. My legs flexed and tensed, longing to strengthen muscle fibres and make me run.

“Several hundred,” I muttered. “But that’s not ... ”

“Fuck me,” said Raine. “Eddy’s been busy.”

“Too many Eddy,” Praem intoned.

I nodded. “They’re still connected to each other. A network. Communicating. Somehow. I don’t know. Their core — it’s cut off. They’re all running down and dying now. He’s genuinely hurt. When I pulled the House Outside, I ... I broke something, here. In him. Some fundamental part of him. But there’s a lot of them.”

We all looked at the doorway out of the kitchen, past the slumped corpse of the puppet. If fifty drone-clones of Edward Lilburne rushed us right then, could we hold them off? Even with six Knights, Evelyn's magic, my tentacles, and a gun?

Evelyn said, "Heather. We need to get out of here and demolish the place from the exterior."

Raine clucked her tongue, "Not with everyone else trapped, Eevee."

I shook my head. "But the other one wasn't lying." I looked up at the ceiling. "The real Edward is upstairs."

"Whatever that means," Evelyn grunted. "We haven't seen stairs here, not once!"

I shook my head. "It's like a body. The House, it's organized like a body." I pointed at the nonsense wiring of electrical detritus running along all the kitchen worktops. "That's a nervous system. We're in the guts. Or an equivalent."

"Being digested?" Raine laughed. "So what, Eddy-boy is in the head?"

"Exactly." I nodded. "There must be a way out of here, a way up. There must be."

Evelyn clenched her jaw. "And we could spend the next few days looking for it." She jabbed her scrimshawed bone-wand toward the Edward corpses, blanching in the face as she risked a glance at the grisly remains. "And hundreds of those? How many of them might have guns? How many of them are waiting to ambush us? Heather, this isn't remotely safe."

Praem intoned: "If the mountain won't come to Muhammad."

"Then Muhammad must go to the mountain," I finished the saying, panting through my raw throat.

Evelyn frowned at both of us like we were mad. "What?! What are you two on about now?"

But Raine cracked a grin. "Can't find stairs? Easy solution to that, m'lady. Let's make some stairs." She grinned. "We've got six strong lads and lasses." She nodded sideways at the Knights. "And they're pretty good at ripping and tearing."

"No! Raine, no," I huffed. "That won't work. This isn't physical

space we're dealing with. It's— it's conceptual space. I saw that, inside the Edward-network, in his head. The House has to open for us."

Evelyn pursed her lips. "Heather. No."

"Evee, I have to talk to the House again."

"We are leaving. Lozzie's Caterpillars can demolish—"

"The House doesn't even care about Edward! I can get it to—"

Raine joined in, louder: "We're not leaving anyone behind. Nope. No way."

Evelyn stamped with her walking stick, "Both of you are muscle-brained! I expected this from Raine but—"

Squelch-riiiiip.

With a blood-wet slop and a patter of unspeakable fluids, the Edward-corpse lurched back to his feet.

Evee stifled a scream and almost fell over. Praem caught her mother. The Knights made a wall. Raine pointed her gun and fired — bang! Twice! Blossoms of flesh exploded out of the back of the lolling, bloody Edward-puppet. He jerked with the impact, but didn't care.

He was a terrible sight. I'd punched one hole in the side of his head and another through his left eye. Blood and brain matter flowed down his face and onto his coat and shoulder.

"The flesh lives on!" he roared. "We've decided to try something new. Human, but new. We hope you hate it."

And with that the gory, grisly Edward-puppet threw himself forward.

But not at us.

He sprawled onto the kitchen island, onto the other drone-body he himself had killed, only moments ago.

Flesh touched flesh and flowed together, melding and melting and mending. Clothes were sucked into folds of tissue; I wasn't sure if the fabric had never been real or if it was simply being eaten away by powerful biological acids. Shotgun-ruined skull glued itself to

violated eye-socket. Thrashing and slopping and bleeding, the whole mass reared up from the kitchen counter and slammed four feet down onto the tiles.

Four legs, fused together at broken angles. Two torsos, partially melted into each other. Four arms, two on either side, jutting out and grasping at the air. Two heads, conjoined, one a bloody ruin with a flapping jaw, the other one-eyed and grinning wide.

“Ahhhhh,” sighed the double-Edward in a double-voice, one whole, the other wet and bloody. “It works.”

Raine shot him over and over, five or six times through the torso and face. I lost count. Had to cover my ears from the deafening bang-bang-bang-bang.

But Edward just chortled. “Flesh is flesh is flesh, my dears!”

Evelyn hissed, “What the fuck have you done to yourself?”

“Double-Edder,” said Praem.

Even as bullets tore through melded flesh, a third Edward-puppet burst through the kitchen doorway. It sprinted toward the double-Edward obscenity and slammed into it from behind, flesh rapidly melting and joining until the creature before us was no longer just a double.

“Three of them,” Praem intoned.

The Knights raised their shields, to repel whatever he was about to do.

“We!” gurgled the tripled mass of flesh, three heads talking as one. “We, us, the remnants, have decided not to die. The network core is gone. That young fool got to him. Jammed him up. Killed him. Doesn’t matter which. What is to become of us? Are we simply supposed to stop trying? No!” The triple-Edward spread his six arms and grinned wide with two of three mouths. “This solution would never have been possible, not without being dragged to The Beyond. Perhaps you have given us a new route to immortality after all, Heather Morell. Thank you kindly for the idea.”

Evelyn shouted three words of Latin, spitting blood from splitting lips. Her fingers tightened on her bone-wand.

The Edward-chimera turned and ran — or scuttled — for the door.

Evelyn spat blood. The air temperature plummeted by ten degrees in an instant, flash-freezing moisture on nearby surfaces. A wall of spectral blue fire slammed down onto the fleeing Edward-thing, turning flesh to shrivelled meat and bone to brittle splinters.

But Evelyn was too slow. Her spell caught part of a hand, the corner of a shoulder, and one foot.

The rest of the Edward-monster shambled through the doorway, beyond the range of the already dying flesh-eater spell. Another Edward turned the corner at that exact moment, stepping out into view, just in time for the Edward-amalgam to bowl into him, run him down, and absorb him on the fly, like a snowball made of flesh and limbs and bleeding tissues and flapping clothes.

‘Edward’ slipped out of sight, crashing down the corridor beyond, vanishing into the depths of the house.

“After—” Evelyn gurgled. “After— him—”

Then she doubled over, vomited a string of bile and blood, and almost collapsed; Praem had to catch her and hold her up. That spell had taken almost everything she had. I wasn’t surprised, it was easily the most openly destructive and instantly violent magic I’d ever seen from Eevee. But now her bone-wand shook in quivering hands, until Praem peeled it free. She wiped Eevee’s quivering lips. She made sure Eevee was breathing.

“Evee? Evee? It’s okay, Evee, it’s gone. He’s gone. Evee? Evee?” I kept clicking my fingers, but Evelyn just snorted and panted.

Raine blew out a long breath. “Shit. I haven’t seen her do that kinda thing in years. Heather, she’ll be fine. She’s just spent. Look, should we go after that thing?”

“You’re asking me?” I boggled at her; I hadn’t heard Raine so shaken in a long time. “I don’t ... I—”

Evelyn gurgled: “How many?”

“Evee!”

She blinked at us, thick-eyed but defiant as she struggled to straighten up in Praem’s arms. “Heather. Heather, we have to kill that thing. How many?”

“How many what? Evee, Evee, please, let Praem take your weight,

please—”

“No!” she spat. Evelyn forced herself to stand. Praem made sure she gripped her walking stick properly “Heather, we have to kill that thing. How many of them did you say there were? Hundreds? Did you see what it was doing? We have just catalysed a nightmare!”

“Evee, I don’t—”

“You care about Camelot, about the Knights, all of it? Imagine if that thing gets loose! I don’t even know if the massed ranks of the Caterpillars could stop what he’s becoming. Or what if it breaks out and gets back to the gateway? That — that is mage shit of the worst kind! That is an immortal nightmare in flesh that my mother could only have dreamed of! What do you think it’s going to be like once it’s absorbed a dozen more of itself, or fifty? Or a hundred?”

I stared at Evee’s panic and paranoia, and for once I didn’t disagree, but I felt numb and distant. “I mean ... it looked like a rubber monster from a movie ... but, I suppose I can’t talk.” A laugh slipped out, inappropriate, ended by a hiccup.

“Evee,” Raine said, slow and calm. “We can’t leave the others behind.”

“We leave, right now,” Evelyn spat. “Back to Camelot. And then we split the place open from the outside. Find that— thing! And burn it. It’s worth the risk. You know it’s worth the risk!”

“Evee—”

“Do you want to leave that thing loose with the others running around, lost in this labyrinth? Do you have any idea of the kind of magic a dozen-mage amalgam could be capable of? Because I don’t!” Evelyn shouted, spitting blood. “We just witnessed the beginning of an ascension, from mage to Outsider. And I intend to abort it before it finishes being born.”

“Oh, oh, oh,” I said. “I ... I gave him the conditions he needed. I brought him Outside. I gave him the idea. He got the idea from me. Badger gave us an opening and we wasted it. Oh no.”

“You couldn’t have known, yes! It’s not your fault!” Evelyn snapped in my face. “Take us back to Camelot, Heather. Right now.”

We looked Evee right in her bloodshot, shaking eyes, took her hand gently in a smooth tentacle, and said: “Evee, I think we should go

upstairs.”

Evelyn looked about ready to throttle me. A vein actually throbbed in her forehead. I thought that only happened in cartoons.

“Words not fists,” Praem intoned.

Evelyn gritted her teeth. “Heather. Have you not heard a single thing I’ve—”

“I have. Eevee, please, listen to me. This House, and Edward — or the Edward-network, whatever we want to call him — they’re both working on the same principle: a body, a structure with many appendages, and a head.”

“Which is dead, yes!” Evelyn snapped in my face. “And now the body is metastasising like cancer, out of control—”

“No, it’s not. Eevee, when I plugged into the network, when I plugged into his brain — ew,” I winced. “I saw the core of the network. It’s still there. Edward is still alive. If we kill him, it might shut all this down. And it’ll be quicker than trying to demolish this House.”

Evelyn stared at me, teeth gritted, lips pulled back.

“Eevee, I insist.”

Evelyn huffed like a steam engine. “Fine! We can try! If we can find stairs — right now!” She gestured angrily at the cramped confines of the kitchen, with electronic nonsense wired up along the walls, with blood and brain matter splattered across the island and the floor. She gestured so hard that she almost fell over. Praem had to catch her again. She spluttered and huffed. “And I don’t see any bloody stairs, so we’re going back to Camelot.”

“I think I do.”

Evelyn blinked. “What?”

“Eevee, I’m going to talk to the House again.”

Praem said: “Summon escalator.”

Before Evelyn could insist I wait, before we could get bogged down in another minute of debating our strategy, before Raine could restrain me or the Knights box me in for my own protection, I uncoiled two tentacles like a pair of taser-wires, shot them across

the room, and sank their tips deep into the nearest pieces of electronic detritus — a portable CD player and an antique mobile phone the size of a brick.

I am not an electrical engineer or a hardware designer; I am a miniature network of seven squid-girls layered in a ring with a hub-self in the middle. I don't understand anything about how CD players or mobile phones work. I never took a radio apart as a little girl, or built my own PC as a teenager, and I never cared much for Meccano or Lego.

But one did not need to know how electrical devices work to plug into the House-network. Tentacle-tips refined themselves into silvery contact-patches, nerves blended their atoms until copper-analogue flowed in their capillaries, and gated nerve-bundles sent one-way impulses down into the House.

Stairs, please?

The House understood instantly; words were not necessary, not even the fumbling, half-translated mess of broken communication we had established previously.

After all, going up and down stairs was a perfectly normal thing, inside a House.

Less than a second after I plugged myself into the House's nervous system, the ceiling on the far side of the kitchen hinged open, like a jaw or a joint. With little more than a soft brushing sound of fluffy insulation, the ceiling gaped wide and then fell to the floor, disgorging a sweeping stairway of dark steps in polished oak, complete with shiny bannisters.

"There," I panted, withdrawing my tentacles from the electrical nervous system of the House. "And thank you," I added, vaguely, to the ceiling.

"Most obliged," said Praem, also speaking to a wall.

Evelyn just gaped at the stairs, then at me, then back at the stairs again, then back at me.

"I told you," I said. "All you have to do is ask. Houses love people. We're supposed to be here."

Raine laughed and slapped me on the back. "She who opens the way."

I tutted. “Raine. That sounds like something Zheng would say. That sounds like a ... like a religious designation.”

Raine just shot me a grin, beaming with unbeatable confidence.

“Right!” Evelyn snapped, pulling herself together verbally even if she couldn’t walk right. “Let’s not waste this opportunity, then. Knights at the front. Praem, I need a— thank you, yes, don’t let go. Come on! Move! Now, before Edward finds much more of himself!”

Knights in the fore, Raine’s gun swinging, we hurried up the stairs.

The grand oaken staircase was more than wide enough for all six Knights abreast. It swept upward in a slow, lazy spiral, walled with dark wood panels and delicate floral carvings. I half expected the staircase to cut through layers of rooms, slicing upward past fragments of kitchen and dining room, as if we had violated the House. But the walls were uninterrupted. It put us in mind of a bile duct, or a vein, or a nerve sheath.

“Why no windows here?” Raine asked as we shot up the stairs.

“Think it means anything?”

“The windows to Outside,” I replied, panting. “Only in the guts. For digesting. Dimensions.”

After thirty or forty seconds of hauling ourselves up the stairs, with Evelyn heaving and half-carried by Praem, myself using two tentacles to keep pace, we hit a void-wall.

Unblemished darkness stretched from stair to ceiling. A membrane across reality.

“Nothing else for it,” Raine said with a nod. “Leap of faith time, girlies and ghoulies.”

“Hold hands!” we said — already reaching out to wrap a tentacle around everybody present. We didn’t have enough spare limbs, but Evee clung to Praem and the Knights clacked their shields together. We all stepped through at once.

Weightlessness. Black, empty, silent. Non-being, suspended in nothingness for the length of a single step.

And then – pop!

We all stepped out, together. A glance left and right confirmed that nobody had gotten lost. Six Knights, including the Forest Knight,

Raine, Evee, Praem.

And from upward, up ahead, up another half-dozen twists of the grand stairway, we heard echoing voices.

We gasped. "That's—"

"Yeah!" Raine picked up her feet, hurling herself up the stairs. The Knights followed at a rapid trot. "Come on!"

Around and around and around the spiralling dark wood we ran, and then we burst out into a vast cavern of a room.

Floors and walls of seamless black marble were threaded through with delicate veins of white and gold; a vaulted ceiling of matching marble in darkest blue soared above, sparkling and twinkling with star-like depths; as large as a school sports hall, the room would have cost a fortune to construct out in reality, from such expensive materials. The two lengthways walls, facing each other, were lined with oaken bookcases, their shelves filled with neatly stacked and organised volumes in rich leather of a dozen colours. Dotted here and there among the bookcases were strange objects and artefacts: the head of an albino gorilla preserved in formaldehyde; a twelve foot long scarlet feather; a wooden statue of a man-sized serpent, walking on its tail; a metal cube flowered open like a solved puzzle box; a display case of extracted fangs; the stretched hide of a strange beast, golden-tinted skin leathery and dry; and more, so many more than I could keep track of.

At the near end of the marble hall was a huge pair of double-doors, more fit for a Church than a home, made of deep red wood I'd never seen before. I had the distinct impression that wood was not of earthly extraction. The opposite end of the room was a gigantic crystal window from floor to ceiling.

That window looked out across the gentle hills and up at the purple whorled skies of Camelot. I could just make out a corner of Caterpillar carapace a little way below. We were not that high up.

Beneath the purple light flooding in through that window was a massive wooden desk made of dark and polished oak. The desktop was covered with papers and books and a half-complete manuscript, a fountain pen left nearby to gather dust. Piles of clothes littered the floor, along with little puddles of food wrappers, some so desiccated they must have been lying there for years.

Balled up tissues, wads of gauze, discarded needles. Mouldy mugs, dried-out teabags, paperbacks with their spines bent.

In front of that grand desk and its attendant detritus stood a hospital bed, with handrails, hookups for drips, automatic adjustable controls, and lots of blankets. Around that hospital bed was the most extensive marriage of magecraft and machinery I had yet witnessed: medical readout machines ringed with magic circles; drips full of strange, cloudy, blood-like fluids; heart monitor reconfigured and plugged into a seismograph, which was scrawling out an unending chant in an alien language which hurt the eyes to see.

All hooked up to the man in the bed.

Edward Lilburne.

But he was far from the only person in the room.

“Heathy!”

Lozzie all but slammed into us, ducking and weaving past my still-taloned tentacles to barrel into me with a desperate, clinging hug.

“Lozz- Lozz— it’s okay, we’re here, we’re here—”

Lozzie felt cold with panic-sweat, shaking inside her limp poncho.

“Heathy, Raine, Eevee, you have to kill him! You have to finish him! Please, please!”

Jan’s voice interrupted, calling from closer to the hospital bed: “Oh, thank the Gods. Some help, here, please! Yes, Raine, you. With the gun!”

We hurried over to the bed — to Edward Lilburne, insensate and paralysed, to Jan, wide-eyed and gripping her absurd magical water-pistol.

And the Grinning Demon, with her hands on Edward’s shoulders — and Badger, bleeding from every hole in his face.

For a moment there were simply too many things to take in, even for me.

Edward Lilburne lay in the magically altered hospital bed, propped up by the inclined upper section and a bunch of pillows. He didn’t look seventy or eighty years old; he looked about a hundred and

fifty, withered to paper-thin skin stuck to brittle bones. Below the blankets of his hospital bed he was just a bundle of sticks. Scraps of grey wisp clung to the sides of his scalp. A pair of tiny, beady, dark eyes were sunk deep in a wrinkled face, peering out through a pair of glasses as thick as the window behind him.

Fingers like the talons of a dead bird clutched a piece of lined paper, covered in mathematical notation made in Badger's handwriting. Edward's tiny eyes were fixed on that equation, locked inside the maths. A bead of blood dry as dust was rolling from his left nostril, quivering on his top lip.

"This is him?" Raine actually laughed. "This is the guy? This is the bastard behind all the shit thrown at us, for months now? He looks mummified."

Jan was standing a good ten paces back from the bed. She looked terrified beyond words, white-faced and shaking. She hissed, "Yes, hello, welcome to the stand-off! And don't be stupid! Elderly monsters are no less dangerous; if Nathan hadn't fooled him first, we'd be in a full-blown magical duel with a mage who has probably rendered himself incapable of death."

"Badger?" I croaked. "Nathan! Nathan!"

Badger was sitting at a small desk situated at the side of the hospital bed — far too close to Edward for anybody else to risk. He was inside the various magic circles and esoteric containment symbols, scrawled on the marble floor in blood and charcoal and worse.

Nathan was a mess — panting for breath, slumped forward with effort, bleeding from his nose and mouth and ears and eyes, gummy with blood. His right arm kept shaking and quivering. But he was smiling in triumph as he turned his head and looked at me.

"Heather," he said. "I got him. I got him. It worked. He's locked—locked-in. Thoughts locked up. Believed me— my theory. Too tempting for him."

"Badger, you idiot!" I said, almost crying. "Don't move! You're bleeding too much."

"Did it. For you, Heather."

Raine said, soothing and calm, "Well done, mate. Well done. But

you stay still, hey? You sit right there, don't try to get up. You'll fall over and then we'll have to drag you out. Okay? Stay still. Don't you move. We've got you, soon as this is over."

Badger just smiled, flush with martyr's pride.

Lozzie was still clinging to my front during all this, hugging hard with one arm through the fabric of her poncho. She reached out her other hand to Jan, to draw her closer, inside our escort of Knights.

"Lozzie? Lozzie," I said. "Lozzie, where is everybody else?"

Jan said, "We got separated by that stupid black wall. And that bomb!"

"Did you see anybody else? Was everybody else okay? Are you two okay?"

Jan shrugged. "Just us."

"Intact," murmured Lozzie. "No boom."

"Then how did you get here?" I asked. "We had an awful time."

Lozzie chirped. "Talked to the house! I talked! You just have to ask!"

"Ah," I said. "Yes. Quite."

Jan said through gritted teeth: "Raine, if you could please shoot the man before something else goes wrong — please!"

Badger croaked: "She won't let us."

Nobody had to ask who Badger was referring to.

The Grinning Demon — the demon-host who had accompanied Edward's final attempt to kill us, with his mercenaries — was leaning over the head of Edward's bed, with her hands planted firmly on his shoulders.

She was no less intimidating here than she had been back in reality. Tall, naked, glistening with sweat on pale skin over toned muscles, painted all over with control-sigils up her chest and belly and thighs. Blood-red eyes stared back at us, intent and burning with more than a touch of lost madness. Her horns curved away from her hairless skull. Her huge grinning mouth was less an expression and more a mutilation, stuffed with gigantic white teeth, like a shark's

maw.

Her hands were coated with blood and brain matter; our earlier theory was probably correct. The other demon-hosts, the ones wired into the House's nervous system, had died at her hands.

"Right-o," said Raine. She raised her gun and pointed it at Edward's head — and the Grinning Demon moved her hand to block the shot, palm open as if to catch the bullet.

Evelyn huffed. "I doubt a bullet will be enough. Raine, we know a bullet won't be enough."

"Can't hurt to try," said Raine.

"Just shoot anyway!" Jan almost screamed.

"Won't work," Lozzie whispered.

Raine pulled the trigger. The shot echoed off the black marble walls. Lozzie flinched and whined. Evelyn swore softly.

The Grinning Demon's hand whipped shut. She hissed and grunted through that permanent rictus smile. Then she opened her hand again to show a smoking bullet embedded in toughened flesh.

"Mine," she said without parting her teeth, in a voice that came from chest and throat, vibrating up into the air.

"Okay," said Raine. "Right. Cool. I see."

Jan huffed, "Yes. The demon-host is refusing to let us put him down. She has been quite, quite clear on that fact."

"Mine," repeated the Grinning Demon.

Jan shot her a look. "Which she made clear by almost trying to take my head off."

"Mine."

Badger croaked, "She wants me to break the mind-lock on Edward. So she can fight him herself. But if I do that, he'll be free, he'll be free to think, to do ... "

"Do not!" Evelyn snapped.

"Yes," Jan agreed wholeheartedly. "Don't do that. Don't let him go. Do not."

The Grinning Demon grinned and grinned; I wondered if she could even move her facial muscles to relax her cheeks. There was almost nothing human in the deep red orbs of her eyes, just crazed malice, twisted in on itself.

Evelyn huffed. “We don’t have time to waste with this. That thing downstairs is growing every minute, with every other Edward it finds.”

Jan stared at her. “What? Sorry? Excuse me?”

Raine laughed. “Trust me, you’re happier not knowing.”

Evelyn grabbed her scrimshawed thigh-bone from Praem and raised it in both hands. Her fingers slid across the esoteric designs, finding their place. The temperature eased down, sinking slowly.

The Grinning Demon twitched away from her post like a blur effect against the black marble walls — jerking toward Evelyn. Eevee yelped. Praem stood in the way, as did I, hissing softly. The Knights closed ranks to repel the attack. But the Grinning Demon slid back to her position, hands on Edward’s shoulders.

Raine said, “We could overwhelm her.”

“No,” murmured Lozzie.

Jan swallowed loudly. “She’s a full-blown demon-host in proper control of her body. She could do us an awful lot of damage before we stop her. She’ll run rings around the Knights. Please, be careful!”

“Fuck!” Evelyn spat. “Again! Keep her off us, keep her—”

“Mine,” the Grinning Demon hissed.

“This is a trick!” Evelyn spat. “The control on her was awfully light. She doesn’t want to claim this for herself — she’s his last line of defence, his hidden ace. This is a trap!”

“*Miiiiiiiiine*,” the Grinning Demon rumbled so loudly that our bowels quaked and the bed vibrated. Badger winced, eyes running with tears. Jan’s hands were white-knuckle, wrapped in Lozzie’s poncho. Lozzie squeaked.

Praem said: “Yours.”

The Grinning Demon’s head flickered to stare at Praem.

“Yours,” Praem repeated.

“Mine.”

“Yours.”

“Mine.”

“Yes.”

“Mine.”

“Yours.”

“Mmmmmmmm.”

Milk-white eyes stared into blood-red orbs. The Grinning Demon tilted her head, as if not quite sure what she was looking at.

Evelyn hissed: “This is a trap, or a stalling technique, or worse. Praem, you’re not getting through to anything.”

We swallowed and whispered back, “No, Eevee. I think she’s right. This ... this demon is like an abused child. She’s completely off the deep end. She wants revenge. She wants ... here. Let me.”

We stepped forward, to the edge of the magic circle. Lozzie followed, trailing by a hand. We donned our squid-skull helmet, sealing us inside ourselves true and complete. We spread our strobing tentacles — and tried not to let Raine’s support undermine the appearance of Homo Abyssus.

The Grinning Demon transferred her stare to me.

“You want revenge,” we said. “So do we. He’ll be dead, whoever kills him.”

“Mine.”

“Yes. Yours. But you won’t be able to kill him alone. If we free him, for you, he might win.”

“Mine!”

“Did you kill the other demon-hosts, to free them from this? We understand. We can help. We’re going to put him down, so he can never do this again.”

“Miiiiiiiine.”

We swallowed. This wasn't working. Perhaps Evee was right. But I tried one more angle. "We need Zheng," I said. "Lozzie? Lozzie, we need Zheng up here. We need somebody who understands, somebody who's been through something similar. Can we get Zheng out of the depths of the House? Somehow? Lozzie, can you talk to the House again?"

The Grinning Demon tilted her head back and forth as I spoke.

Lozzie squeaked from behind me. "I don't know! Don't know! Heathy, I don't know! It's hurt ... "

"Can you try? Lozzie, for me? Can you try?"

"Mmm."

She sounded so small and scared. Her poncho hung limp and drab.

Raine jumped in; I could have kissed her for that. She said: "Loz, hey, I'm with you. What do you need, what you gotta do?"

"Just ... touch the wall. But it's hurting ... "

"I'm coming too," Jan announced.

Evelyn hissed: "Be quick about it!"

Lozzie let go of me and pattered over to the nearest stretch of black marble wall, followed closely by Jan and Raine. She wrapped one hand in her poncho and placed it against the smooth surface. I didn't see what happened next, if she whispered any words or closed her eyes, because all my attention was focused on the Grinning Demon, on keeping her here, focused on us in return, stopping her from doing anything rash. Blood-red orbs stared back at the many eye holes in our squid-skull mask. We raised our tentacles, making clear our intention.

Seconds ticked by. Evelyn swallowed loudly, fingers creaking on her bone-wand. Badger panted softly, in obvious pain. The Knights stood in perfect stillness. The Forest Knight's axe glinted in the purple light flooding through the huge window, from Camelot and safety.

Edward Lilburne lay unmoving, locked in by an equation.

"Maybe we can toss him out the window," Evelyn murmured. "Let the Caterpillars toot him to death."

“Doot,” said Praem.

All at once, Lozzie, Jan, and Raine recoiled from the section of black marble wall. The stone yawned open, just as the stairs had before, when I had requested them from the House. A dark void-wall disgorged four figures, blinking in shock and confusion.

“Zhengy!” Lozzie cheered with relief.

“Eyyyyy,” went Raine. “Twil, you look like shit.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I heard Twil. “What the fuck is this? You all alright? Evee?”

Zheng was leading the lost remnants of our initial group — Twil, battered and bloody but intact, July, almost untouched by the bomb, and Felicity, blinking and pale and bleeding from a nasty head-wound, but still clutching her shotgun.

Zheng was a terrible mess; she had taken the brunt of the explosive device hidden in the gut of the first Edward-puppet. Burned all down her front, still slowly regenerating, covered in scraps of charred skin and scorched hair, with bloody patches of exposed muscles visible through her ruined clothes. But she was upright and fully conscious and grinning wide with reunion.

“Shaman!” she roared. “The wizard—”

“Zheng!” I shouted, putting all of my urgency into my voice.

There was no time for catching up or checking on wounds, or for asking where the rest of the Knights had gotten to, and even less for explaining what was going on or debating a course of action. We had to kill Edward, we had to kill him now, and we needed this demon-host out of the way — one way or another. Raine and Lozzie could help the others. Zheng needed to talk. Or kill.

Zheng stalked over as I babbled. “Zheng, she— the demon, she won’t- we need-”

“Shaman.” A heavy hand fell on my shoulder, staining me with Zheng’s blood. “I know.”

Zheng and the Grinning Demon locked eyes with each other. The room seemed to go still around us, around them, the marble growing cold. Evelyn drew in a breath, but then thought better of talking. Zheng rumbled deep in her chest. I saw her eyes flicking up

and down, over the Grinning Demon, over Edward in his magically supported hospital bed, over the Demon's bloody hands.

"Mine," the Grinning Demon said — so much quieter than before.

"No," Zheng purred.

"Mine."

Zheng let out a long, long sigh. "You owe the wizard no loyalty."

"... mine."

"He made you from beloved flesh. But his love was nothing. Wind and ash. You know this."

The Grinning Demon just grinned and grinned and grinned.

"You wish to fight him." Zheng nodded. "This is good. But you will fight, and you will let him win, because you still feel the echoes of the corpse from which he made you. For the sake of rancid guilt. You are his escape hatch, to be used and left behind."

The Grinning Demon stared, red-dark orbs in pale flesh.

"Look at me," Zheng purred. "I am free. I am loved. You can have both."

The Grinning Demon slowly eased her hands off Edward's shoulders.

Zheng extended a fist, then opened it, palm up: an invitation.

The Grinning Demon stopped grinning. Facial muscles collapsed, yet the peeled-back lips and massive teeth remained exposed.

"Mine?" she asked.

Zheng said, "You can eat the corpse. He will be yours. Come here."

The Grinning Demon — or merely the Demon, now she was no longer stuck with that rictus smile — began to step away from Edward's hospital bed, toward Zheng. Raine slid up next to the Knights and raised her gun, pointing at Edward. Eevee took a deep breath, fingers shifting on her bone-wand. Felicity staggered up too, as did Jan.

And then the Church-doors at the other end of the marble hall smashed open so hard they flew off their hinges and crashed to the

floor.

A voice three-hundred strong burbled in chorus: “Don’t need that head anymore. Got plenty now. See?”

A ball of Edward-drones rolled into the marble hall, a writhing mass of melted flesh, large as a Caterpillar. Heads and limbs and torso-parts roiled and thrashed, propelling the nightmare amalgam forward across the polished floor, forming the suggestion of a single face amid the flesh-wracked chaos.

Edward Lilburne — or whatever he was becoming under the unearthly pressures of Outside — cracked us a smile meters wide.

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.13

The Edward-amalgam — a writhing, churning mass of three hundred identical clone-drones, their flesh melted and mixed at heads and hips, chests and backs, elbows and knees and thighs and fingers and eyeballs and teeth and nails, a nightmare which spoke with three hundred mouths, rolling forward on six hundred feet which stuck out at every angle from the rough sphere of its body — did not rush toward us and flow over us like a blob-monster in some cheap black-and-white horror film.

That would have been less upsetting, in a way — if this thing had simply been a mindless monster, a ball of evil flesh to be burnt up and vanquished.

Instead, it — he, they, them? — paused just inside the ruined doors, rocked backward, and smiled.

A recognisable human face loomed out of that boiling chaos of bodies, like a pile of corpses which had grown a single personality: naked torsos clumped into spheres like eyeballs; scraps of ragged shirt and trailing tails of stringy grey hair formed an approximation of bushy eyebrows; dozens of arms bulged outward in mockery of cheekbones and chin, while hands locked together and waved an imitation of thin and bloodless lips.

The Edward-ball beamed with pride, sarcastic and dry.

“Do you like what I’ve done with myself?” he said.

His voice was a chorus, burbling and gurgling from three hundred twisted throats — but it transmitted more than mere sound. Waves of pressure rolled outward from the amalgam; it was like standing before an overloaded steam boiler, straining at metal bolts, welded seams gone white with superheated contents. The skin on every clone-drone was flowing and rippling with the promise of change, with the barely contained processes running out of control inside this conjoined flesh.

“Well?” it prompted. Edward’s rasping voice echoed off the black marble walls. “Don’t just stand there gawking. Share your opinions, however presumptuous and inexperienced they may be. Praise me or damn me. It may be the last time I ever hear human speech — except for my own. Ah!” His smile deepened, dozens of arms flexing, a hundred hands curling. “Another problem solved, a happy side-effect. There are so many of me to talk with, I will never want for stimulating conversation.”

“Holy fucking shiiiiit,” somebody said out loud — Twil, I think, voice shading into a growl as she began her werewolf transformation.

“Oh it is time to leave,” said Jan, openly terrified. “It’s time to go.”

“Hold steady!” somebody shouted — Raine. “Don’t move. Don’t panic.”

Somebody hiccuped, loudly. Me, probably, though I was never sure.

Somebody else whimpered: Lozzie, almost more scared than I’d ever heard her before.

The Edward-ball laughed, an awful racking gurgle from three hundred broken windpipes. “No need to be afraid, Lauren. No need at all. I have no use for you anymore. You may follow your little friends into their graves if you so wish—”

Boom went Felicity’s shotgun. Tiny pockmarks of bloody shot-hole opened in the face-flesh of the Edward-amalgam, no more than bee-stings to something his size. Fizzing smoke rose from the wounds, but whatever magical effect Felicity had intended did not last long, swallowed up by Edward’s creeping flesh. Those grotesque imitation lips opened to laugh once again.

“Wizard!”

Zheng roared at the top of her lungs and launched herself at the Edward-ball like a lightning bolt. She shot across thirty feet of black marble floor in the blink of an eye. She slammed into flesh and bone like a burrowing bone drill, her fists ripping off arms and punching through sternums and pulverizing skulls. Blood flowered around her like a burst water pipe. July wasn’t far behind, ignoring Jan’s urgent shout to hold back; the owl-like demon-host struck the Edward-amalgam right next to Zheng, ripping at any exposed appendage or vulnerable joint.

The sheer violence was incredible; Zheng and July pulled entire Edwards free of the mass, breaking spines and smashing bone, hurling corpses against the wall, shredding unnatural flesh like a chainsaw through a slab of meat.

The Edward-amalgam didn't care.

It laughed; it coiled up bodies like tentacles, like hundred-knuckled fists, and slapped Zheng sideways. July was a fraction faster, ducking back and dodging the blow by hitting the floor. Zheng flew through the air and clattered against the wall with a sickening snap-snap-snap of bones. She was back on her feet and back in the fray in seconds — but so were the Edward-drone corpses.

With burst skulls and snapped spines and broken legs, the clone-drones lurched back to their feet and hurled themselves back onto the amalgam, rejoining the mass, flesh flowing back together and melding into the greater whole. Detached arms, severed heads, even scraps of meat rolled and flopped and twitched to rejoin the Edward-ball. Individual drones too damaged to rise were scooped up by others, absorbed into small masses which rolled back into the primary ball. Like water droplets joining together as they slid down a window.

“Look upon this achievement and weep!” the Edward-ball laughed. “Immortality without the price of humanity! I have outstripped them all, Tahmid, Ludolf, Dee, Saye, haha! No bottom-dwelling spark pressed into flesh can best a human mind!”

All this happened so fast; the incredible violence threatened sensory overload; the implications made one want to scream and run and hide.

But somebody kept her head.

“Evee!” Raine shouted. “Use me! What do we do?”

Evelyn had been staring at the impossible sight, locked in horrified awe with the rest of us. But the whipcrack of Raine's voice snapped her around in Praem's arms. She gaped at Raine, then at the form of the real Edward — a frail and withered old man, still lying insensate on his hospital bed, his eyes locked on the page of Badger's equation in his hands, a droplet of nosebleed quivering on his top lip.

“Kill him!” Evelyn shrieked. “Kill the real one!”

Raine snapped her stolen firearm back to her shoulder and aimed at the head of the true Edward Lilburne. I still have no idea how she found the fortitude to turn her back on that raving nightmare of flesh bearing down on us.

She squeezed the trigger — bang-bang-bang! Later, I learned that was called a ‘three-round burst’.

A glistening pale shadow blurred between Raine and her target: the Grinning Demon, though she wasn’t grinning anymore, back at Edward Lilburne’s bedside. Her arm whipped out to catch the shots, bullets slamming into her flesh and deforming like foam.

“No!” she hissed between her gigantic teeth. “Nooo!”

The Edward-ball cheered: “The human form! Perfected for travel in the Beyond! Travel, warfare, and conquest!” Then he let out a deflating sigh, like an adult playing with over-active children. “I tire of this. Time to move on. We’re done here.”

And he rolled toward us like an oncoming train.

He rolled right over Zheng and July — Zheng kept ripping and tearing the whole time, roaring insults at the top of her lungs, buried beneath a mountain of human flesh; July ducked and dodged, jabbing and stabbing with her hands, trying to keep clear of being crushed.

Felicity’s shotgun went *boom* again, pockmarking the ball but doing nothing to stop the weight and mass as it advanced. Evelyn shouted seven words of a language I’d never heard before, cutting off when her throat gave out with a croak; a wall of blue fire unrolled from a single point, a blossoming flower in waves of cold flame, a forcefield in front the Edward-ball’s face — but the amalgam just rolled through it, flesh melting and sloughing away, then reforming and rejoining as the shed globs of gore flung themselves back on board; three hundred mouths chanted a lazy counter-spell, sweeping away Evelyn’s last-ditch magic with barely a thought. Raine turned on the spot, tight and controlled, did something funny with her fingers, and then pulled the trigger of her gun; rat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat, bullets tore through the air and through the amalgam’s flesh — but then Raine’s gun went *click*, and that was all.

Jan was shouting: “Jule! The sword! Give me the sword!” Lozzie was screaming, a kind of fear I’d never heard from her before. Twil

was shouting too, voice more wolf than human: “Get her up! Praem, get her up!”

We were scattering. Jan was pulling at Lozzie, Praem and Twil dragging Evee; shadow-hands unfolded from inside Felicity’s coat and forced her to dive out of the way — Aym, ‘helping’. The six Knights held their ground like infantry preparing for the charge of a war-elephant, shields up and locked together; the Forest Knight raised his axe for a final futile blow.

Raine tugged at our shoulder, then ducked, as if to scoop me off my feet and haul me away.

The Edward-amalgam was almost on top of us, a wall of flesh, six hundred grasping hands. Narrow fingers, strong tendons. Strangler’s hands.

But Badger — Nathan — couldn’t move. Neither could the Grinning Demon, though for different reasons. And the Knights would stand and die.

“Scatter, degenerate apes!” the amalgam roared at us. “None of you are meant to be out here, not like me! Now the Beyond is mine to travel, my domain, my—”

Hiiiiiiiiiiiisssssrrrrrk!

I drowned out his nonsense; I hissed long and loud and I let my throat change beyond all human recognition. Together, seven of us gave in to the urge, the need burning inside every cell of my body, since we’d witnessed that first obscene union between two Edward corpses.

Our trilobe reactor ejected all the biochemical control rods; safety off, limits removed, energy red-lining.

Heat blossomed in our flank, an explosion of strength and power and adrenaline out through gut and up through chest and down through legs. Our heart rate shot to maximum and held steady, pounding like an engine, reinforced by biochemical processes that had no place in a human body. Lungs inflated, hyper-saturating my blood with oxygen. Every muscle flooded with novel enzymes, speed-grown abyssal approximations of additional adenosine triphosphate, and more — things that would have turned a human body to a charred cinder out in reality. Every cell and blood vessel and neuron thrummed with processes that should not have worked

outside of the abyss.

Six of me — our tentacles — whipped out wide, down-shifting the colour range of their rainbow strobe as they flooded their surfaces with neurotoxins and paralytics and contact-acids. Ropes of muscle reinforced their insides; razor-sharp claws crowned each tip; hundreds of tiny hooks and barbs ran down their lengths, envenomed and razor-sharp.

The rest of me was already changing. I hadn't lost control. I was giving it up.

My eyes flickered with nictitating membranes, triple layers of protection blooming over vulnerable organs. My human skin flushed hard with warning colouration, bright pinks and yellows and reds and purples, coating me with tetrodotoxin-sweat. My back and shoulders erupted with spikes, multicoloured chitin quills to frustrate predators and warn of hungry mouth; my teeth turned sharp and hard, diamond-tipped for ripping and tearing; webbing — useless here, but biologically inevitable — filled in the gaps between my fingers; the base of my spine sprouted into a venomous stinger, lashing at the air. A yellow membrane, thick and warm and flowing like living butter, wrapped itself around my skin in a permeable layer of regenerating protection — Seven Shades of Symbiosis, joining me in the change.

We screeched and screeched and screeched; and in that screech we spoke the language of the abyss.

You want to see what it really means to be adapted for Outside?

It means to be beautiful.

You've got nothing on Homo Abyssus.

The Edward-amalgam hesitated just long enough to slow his onrushing charge by a fraction of a second — he was shocked by my transformation, but not enough to shake his belief that he could simply run me down like a crab who had wandered onto a busy road.

A second was all we needed.

We slammed all six tentacles into his roiling flesh. We cut through muscle with hook and claw and acid, we paralysed nerves with neurotoxins and electrical discharge, we pumped venom into torso

cavities and fast-acting hemotoxins into skulls. We sank our tendrils deep.

Fancy tricks with hyperdimensional mathematics would not win this fight — we knew that from the moment we touched the amalgam’s flesh, from the second that our own abyss-altered soul recognised what was happening. Inside his bodily amalgam, Edward was cooking his own gigantic conjoined soul, simmering off the imperfections, boiling away what had made three hundred individuals *individual*. Brain-math might douse that fire for a split-second, but there was simply not enough of us, of me, to smother the whole thing. We might use brain-math to stop three hundred hearts, but they would restart in an instant, re-grown as a side-effect of that soul-pressure building inside him. We could turn three-hundred brains to mush but they would suck back together a second later under the gravity of metaphysical fusion. Like a forest fire or a runaway infection, one had to destroy the whole thing all at once, lest a single piece regenerate a legion.

Edward Lilburne — even as a short-lived clone doomed to death — was a genius of a mage. I had not appreciated what that truly meant, not until that moment.

In the last second before the amalgam rolled over me, I turned and reached out one hand, and called: “Lozzie!”

Well, no, I didn’t — I didn’t actually say her name. My throat wasn’t human enough for that right then. I probably made a sound like a dolphin crossed with a cassowary and a crocodile. But Lozzie, of all people, absolutely understood what I was trying to say.

Lozzie was half in Jan’s arms, wrapped in her pastel poncho, her usual bounce and flip gone limp and flat like a beached jellyfish. Her face was streaked with tears, her eyes wide as they could go with their sleepy lids, staring back at me in the split-second before death.

“Can’t do this alone!” I said. “Lozzie!”

And Lozzie burst into such a grin.

She flew from Jan’s arms and crashed into me, wrapping herself around my middle, somehow avoiding all of my spikes and barbs and toxins. She clung on tight. No letting go. She knew the plan.

I don’t think the Edward-amalgam had any idea what we were

doing; I don't think he had really investigated, or thought it through, or appreciated what he was getting into.

Genius or not, he simply didn't comprehend what it meant to go Outside.

That huge face of body parts twisted as it bore down on us, with just a hint of doubt.

He started to say: "Wha—"

"You want to go Outside?!" I screeched up at him. "We're barely at the surface! Come on down!"

I plunged eight hands into the sump at the base of my soul, grasped the Eye's well-worn machinery, and burned my palms on the familiar old equation.

Out.

* * *

Falling at terminal velocity through burning skies of superheated plasma; shreds of speed-grown bone wrapping my human flesh tight and safe behind layers of supercooled protection; Lozzie tucked tight inside the impossible shell-coils of her poncho, blue-pink-white flashing through the clouds as we plummet toward miles of jagged chalk.

The Edward-amalgam shedding selves and screaming, flaming at the edges like a comet. Trying to buck us off, tear us free, dislodge my tentacles from his flesh. But we are burrowed too deep to dig us out.

He hits the ground first: splat, another dozen selves gone.

Out.

* * *

Darkness like knives, pushed back from my vulnerable skin by strobing bioluminescence to lurk and slaver beyond the edges of sight; Lozzie lit like a lantern of three colours, pastel glory amid the dripping spires, her trailing edges flaring out to frolic and dance among the eaters.

Edward-flesh ripped and torn and devoured at his rear, sunk too deep in the gloom to avoid the teeth and throat of the shadows.

Lashing and whirling and trying to tear free, trying to pull himself into our light, heaving and sobbing from three hundred mouths — less now.

Out.

* * *

Fungus-friends with their many-frilled heads frying Edward's skin with lightning from crab-clawed machines while Lozzie and I turn him to always take the brunt of their attack. The intrusion, unforgiven; Edward, catalogued; flesh-shreds and shed corpses, captured for disposal.

We apologise before we leave. Crab-clawed insults tell us not to bring our rubbish to their home.

Out.

* * *

Moth-winged nightmares dissolving Edwards with pale dust, sucking him upward into mile-long proboscises. Lozzie flaps her poncho in greeting-warning, hugs the young that visit to investigate and lay eggs in the abandoned clones, while I wrap myself in protective pheromones and warning colouration.

Out.

* * *

Grey swamp waters thick with mud, dripping trees laced with crawling ivy. Our flesh made waterproof and bacteria-repellent; Lozzie floating in a ball of pastel-soft colour. Shamblers tearing and ripping mouthfuls of long-owed meat from Edward's many hides, a small revenge for my friends before we move on.

Out.

* * *

Carnivorous jungle plants snap and leech and melt his heels—

Out.

Golden wheels in broken skies burn out his eyes—

Out.

Scarlet deserts drain him dry—

Out.

He discards dozens of himself, shedding them like skin cells, sloughing off ablative armour to protect an ever-dwindling core. Edward leaves his floundering and injured selves behind in nightmare dimensions and impossible Outside planes, lost beyond any hope of recovery, abandoned to be eaten, burned, turned inside out, soul-devoured by godlike giants and trodden underfoot by things too alien to think about without damaging his precious ‘human’ mind. Each one is cut off from the soul-cauldron required for regeneration as soon as we Slip away, rendered alone and lost, meat in a grinder. He cares nothing for the pieces of himself he shreds, re-growing them at speed from the boiling energies of his own pressure-compacted soul. Auto-cannibalism on a gigantic scale, running faster and hotter and rougher with every new membrane-transition, desperately trying to outpace the sheer damage of repeated exposure to places he never could have imagined.

But growing always smaller, always thinner, always less of him left — because he’s willing to sacrifice so much of himself for the sake of dominion.

Out.

Lozzie does half the transitions, I do the other half, swapping back and forth as we plough through dimensions at dizzying speed.

My biology speed-grows protection in every new plane, reinforcing my skin with silver and steel, wrapping us in flowing skirts of diaphanous tissue, lighting my tentacle-tips with glowing bio-fire, armour-plating my eyes and ears, sharpening my teeth and nails, ramping my trilobe bio-reactor up and up and up until I’m humming and vibrating with power enough to ward off the worst that Outside has to offer.

Lozzie dances and flits and giggles at my side, exposed to the raw nerves of Outside, poncho fluttering and teeth drawn wide in joyous revenge.

Out.

Plunging head-first, head-down, through noxious clouds of sentient colour which steal the hues and shades from Edward’s flesh, leaving his exterior layers grey and dead and flaking. Lozzie tight and close

now; my flesh glowing in defiance, rainbow-hot. Edward-amalgam, screaming.

“Lozzie, are you ready?” I say. “He’s still not dying, we have to ... ”

I don’t actually say those words, of course. I screech and hiss and gurgle and click.

“Yes! Heathy, do it!”

“We have to be quick.” My heart is ramping up even further, my veins filling with adrenaline and abyssal enzymes and things I can’t even name, substances that would burn and smoke if exposed to earthly air. I am deathly afraid of this next step. “When we get there, we have to be quick!”

“We can do it!” Lozzie shouts in my ear, over the screaming din of Edward’s mouths.

“We can,” I say — but I barely believe it. I hesitate on the equation, on the final dimension to visit. How could I not? Even reinforced and perfect and invincible, I am not forever, not compared to this. I am still small; we are still us.

A butterscotch and sunlight voice whispers in my left ear.

I’ve got you, kitten.

Not alone, never alone, not with Lozzie and Sevens both helping, not with Seven’s membranes wrapped around my core. We were not going to get stuck. The risk was worth taking.

I plunged my eight limbs down into the base of my soul and adjusted the equation, specified a location, a dimension, which made my heart scream and my head pound and my bowels clench tight.

Out.

* * *

Black ash and blasted ruin stretched to the burned-out ring of blunt horizon; ancient watchers, each the size of a mountain, stared upward in blind reverence; jellyfish motes as large as houses bobbed and darted through the air, floaters on a cosmic lens; charred remnants scurried through the ruins just beyond sight.

Ash and dust and the choking cremains of a world seeped through

even the triple-layered biological filters which slammed shut over my mouth and nose. The air tasted of carbonised flesh, melted stone, and blackened steel.

“Don’t look up!” I screamed. “Don’t look up!”

Lozzie didn’t need the reminder. Neither did Sevens, though she’d never been there before.

Wonderland, spread below our feet as an infinite plain of bone-dry blackened earth. We were there only for a few seconds — three, four, five. I didn’t try to count. We focused every ounce of strength we had on lifting what remained of Edward Lilburne.

We hoisted him, his burning, flailing ball of selves, hauling him into the air like a specimen held before a blowtorch. Lozzie and I clung to each other in the shadow of the Edward-amalgam, a shield of flesh and bone. My legs almost gave out, my tentacles buckled from the weight, my head pounding with terror and old trauma. But we forced him up. We forced him to look.

“No!” the amalgam managed to scream — once, before his voice dissolved into a wet melted gurgle.

The Eye had been closed when we arrived. It always was. Maybe it sleeps; I didn’t have time to consider the philosophical or strategic implications of that, not right then.

But this was an intrusion, something new and novel presented to cosmic sight. Something to look at.

The sky cracked open, and took a peek.

Light and heat like the force of a star blossomed around the rim of Edward’s ball of reanimated corpses; pressure enough to shatter bone and turn flesh to dust pounded down on him. Sheltered beneath the mass, Lozzie and I went unseen by this slimmest fragment of the Eye’s attention. Abyssal change reinforced my leg tendons with springy steel and flexible titanium, speed-plating my eyes and head with bone and ablative cooling in anticipation of the moment Edward burned to nothing and the Eye would look upon us directly.

But we couldn’t stay for that. Even protected by the power of change and transformation, the Eye would see through us — Lozzie and us — in nanoseconds.

“Heathy!”

“I know! I know!”

“I can’t— ahhh!”

“Time to go.”

Edward was still burning and screaming and dwindling when we went back—

Out.

* * *

We landed in Camelot, outdoors, on the velvet-grass hillsides.

Warm cinnamon winds and gentle purple glow scoured away the ashen stench of Wonderland. The whorled sky smiled down on us. We were well clear of the House and the shadow of the gigantic mushroom-cap towering into the air — and also a good way from the incomplete walls of Camelot Castle. We were in the open. That was Lozzie’s call, her decision, made in the last moments of membrane-transition out of Wonderland.

For a moment I had no idea why she’d chosen that spot. Up until that decision we had been totally in sync, she had understood every step of my plan. But this was new, something of her own concoction.

We were spent, shaking with the adrenaline-aftermath of muscle strain and trauma exposure, head pounding and face running with nosebleed after repeated brain-math equations, gasping for breath after barely five seconds in Wonderland, not even directly exposed to the Eye. Even pneuma-somatic abyssal biology was not immune to such things. Our feet touched the yellowish grass of Camelot and we almost fell over. Lozzie clung to my side, panting and heaving.

The Edward-amalgam landed with us, hitting the hillside with a wet squelch of minced meat and bone splinters. Reduced down to a bloody sphere of flesh, the Edward ball was still huge, a rolling surface of faces and arms and hips and torsos, all burned and blackened and cut and seared and bitten.

But he was already regenerating. Fresh skin crept across reaching arms. Eyes blinked and cleared, milky clouds fading. Mouths leaked bile and blood and worked their jaws up and down. My heart sank.

Even the attention of the Eye was not enough to stop him.

Evee was right; this thing was the embryo of a true Outsider. And we couldn't kill it.

"Not enough?" I croaked.

"Let go, let go!" Lozzie shouted. "Heathy, let go of him!"

I did as Lozzie asked; I couldn't have kept my grip even if I'd wanted to. Tentacles retracted their barbs and spikes and slithered free from Edward's regrowing flesh. I stumbled backward in exhaustion, legs almost going out from under me; Lozzie pulled me clear, tugging and dragging and yanking.

"Not finished," I croaked. I didn't understand what she was doing. "Lozzie, he's not— not dead— have to— finish—"

BWOOOOOOOP.

The first Caterpillar siren hit the Edward-ball in a tidal wave of sound-pressure. Ripples slammed across the surface of the writhing sphere, turning exposed limbs to pulverised jelly. Biomass blasted free to splatter across Camelot's grass.

BWWWWWAAAAAAN.

The second blast of directed sound — from a second Caterpillar — pinned the jellied flesh in place, liquefying it until nothing was left but water and protein and fat, inert, dead, unable to rejoin the Edward-ball.

DOOT.

DOOOOOOT.

DOO!

Caterpillars hove into view, a dozen of them bearing down on the shivering, shrinking Edward-amalgam. They circled like a pack of wolves, their gigantic bulk moving like warships across the sea of grass. We felt like a squid which had wandered into the middle of a naval engagement. Lozzie pulled me clear, getting me out of the firing line of the bursts of directed sound, but even being nearby was enough to deafen us. We scrambled away, pulling each other up a hillside, hauling with hands and tentacles, until the sound was no longer an aural assault.

Lozzie and I collapsed together on Camelot's quiet plains, to watch Edward Lilburne die.

The Caterpillars worked with methodical precision. One of them would blast the Edward-amalgam with a directed cone of sound, paralysing him and pounding him into submission, the sound sloughing layers of flesh and bone off his exterior and turning it into jelly. Then another Caterpillar would pin the jellied flesh in place with another burst of deep bass *boooooop*, until it was dead and unmoving. Meanwhile a third Caterpillar would already be hitting Edward with another sonic blast.

He shrank with each shaved-off layer of flesh. The ball grew smaller and smaller and smaller, writhing and twitching, until it was the size of a car, then a sofa, and still shrinking. He tried to plate his exterior with hardened bone or some kind of chitin — perhaps he'd got the idea from me, again — but the Caterpillars just turned up the volume and cracked his armour. He attempted to make himself smooth and untouchable, a perfect sphere, so the sound might flow off his surface, but the Caterpillars hit him from three sides at once, overwhelming his geometric precision.

Soon he was smaller than a human being, a sphere of flesh with no features, no organs, no face.

A final Caterpillar boop turned him into jelly. They pinned the pinkish puddle in place until it was nothing but water.

Silence roared back into Camelot's air.

Lozzie and I sat on that hillside together for what felt like an hour, but was probably no more than a minute or two. Eventually one of the Caterpillars detached from the ring of guardians over Edward's liquefied remains, and scooted over to check on us. The vast white bulk scudded right up next to Lozzie, within arm's reach.

Bwip.

A question? I was too dazed to interpret. Felt like we were all mush and wire inside.

Lozzie reached out and patted a bone-white armour plate on the Caterpillar's side. "Thank you."

"Is it ... " I tried to say, then had to clear my throat three times before I could form real words. "Is he dead?"

Lozzie nodded. She was hiccuping and sniffing and wiping at her face with a corner of her poncho. Her voice held a touch of hysteria, a jerky laugh. "That's the power of disco."

"Lozzie ... "

"That was horrible," she whined. "Horrible-horrible."

"Yes," I croaked.

"Because he wouldn't ... he wouldn't ... "

"Didn't care about his selves." I nodded slowly. "Left them all behind. Shedding like ... like nothing."

"Hate him."

"He's dead. It's dead. They're dead now."

Lozzie leaned on me. I caught her with arms and tentacles. She cried softly, but she was trying to laugh.

It took me a moment to realise we weren't alone.

"Heather?"

Raine's voice made me look up and around.

Edward's House — the Mushroom House, sprouted and fruited in the soil of Camelot — had disgorged a balcony from the second floor, made from the same black marble as his grand hall, edged and decorated with golden thread. A sweeping staircase led down from the edge of the balcony, stairs made of black marble which melded into the colours of Camelot as it reached the ground, into soft yellows and glowing purples.

Up on the balcony stood Eeve and Praem, Jan and July, Felicity and Twil, and all the Knights we'd left inside; the Forest Knight raised his axe in greeting. Evelyn looked like hell, sagging in Praem's arms, still drooling a thin trail of blood, but she was conscious and upright, squinting down at the carnage below.

Raine and Zheng had ventured down the extruded staircase. Zheng was bloody and battered and bruised, covered in gore like she'd just walked through a slaughterhouse. But she was grinning wide and triumphant.

"Shaman!" she roared, spreading her arms in greeting. "Wizard

slayer!”

Raine just looked at me, open-faced and unreadable, hands still loose on her firearm. Lozzie and I staggered to our feet.

“Raine ... ” I gurgled. “I’ve ... I’ve ruined your hoodie. All ... ripped. And holes, and stuff.”

To put it lightly, we did not look very human right then. My skin was a riot of warning colours, metal lacing, and armoured scales. I had three sets of eyelids, my eyes themselves were glowing like I’d eaten several toxic tree-frogs, and my teeth were sharp and hard enough to bite through a tin can. My shoulders and back were lined with spikes — which had quite shredded Raine’s borrowed hoodie — while my spine ended in a tail, and my nails were claws. My tentacles were weaponised — barbed and spiked, lethal to the touch, pulsing with toxins. A dozen Outsider variations were still being reabsorbed into my flesh.

I felt glorious, but I looked like a mess.

Raine had seen me like this before, of course, in the aftermath of the fight against Ooran Juh — but back then my flesh had been in flux, still subject to the pressures of reality, folding shining truth back inside my body as soon as the danger had passed. But out here, in Camelot, Outside, there was so much less pressure; I did not have to expend additional energy to remain manifested.

Homo Abyssus was sustainable, out here.

Raine burst into a smile. “Hey there, squid-wife. God, you’re beautiful. I’d give you a hug but I’m afraid I’d get a rash.”

I hiccuped and sobbed and laughed all at once — which, considering the shape of my throat right then, was probably the kind of sound which could scar a person for life. All it took was Raine’s genuine affection to get to my body to metabolise away my various contact-poisons and skin-threat neurotoxins. Barbs melted into soft nubs. Spikes blunted and withdrew. Lozzie let go so I could stumble forward and all but collapse into Raine’s arms — safe to the touch, safe to hold.

Zheng rumbled as well, and placed a hand on my head. “Shaman, you have felled the greatest of prey.”

Voices shouted from up on the balcony.

“Lozzie! Lozzie, are you alright?”

“Please tell me that thing is dead. Please, gods, let it be dead now.”

“Big H! Yo! Big H! Raine, she okay?”

“I suggest we—”

“Check to make sure—”

“The power of disco.”

But then Evelyn’s voice cut through the rest, angry and urgent and thick with pain: “Raine, Zheng! Get her up here, now! We’re not done yet! We still have a mage to kill!”

Raine helped me toward the steps, plunging us back into the shadow of the towering mushroom-cap of brick and steel, then up; I lashed myself to the bannister with tentacles, pulling upward like a beached octopus on the rocks. Lozzie patted the Caterpillar and told it to keep watch over the jellied remains of the Edward-amalgam. Zheng bounded ahead, pounding up the stairs to rejoin the others. Lozzie hopped past too, flying up and into Jan’s arms.

The black marble balcony led to a short matching hallway, framing my friends with the interior gloom of Edward’s House.

The others were shocked by the sight of me: Jan kept staring, even when Lozzie patted her cheeks and told her I was fine; Felicity went stiff and still, even more pale than before, her blood dried sticky on her face from the wound on her head. Even Twil gulped a little and shook herself like a wet dog, still more werewolf than young woman. But she’d seen me like this before.

Everyone was talking over everyone else.

“What the hell did you actually do, Loz? I’m sorry for asking and I probably don’t know to know, yes, but you just—”

“Make sure it’s dead. I mean that, make sure it’s dead. We’re beyond the fucking pale here and my ears ache but make sure that thing is—”

“We should get back in and deal with the real—”

“Eat,” said Praem — and plopped a lemon into my hands.

Evelyn eyed me without the slightest distaste; she looked at me the

exact same as every other time I'd thrown myself into danger. Up and down, a huff, and a twist of her own bloodied lips.

"We went—" I croaked, which made several people flinch. "Went to Wonderland. And all over. He couldn't take— take Outside."

"Weak!" Lozzie chirped.

"Eat your lemon," said Praem.

We ate our lemon, skinned it and gnawed on the sharp-tasting flesh.

"Well done, Heather, Lozzie," Evelyn said. "We can talk later — after we've double checked the mess down there to make sure it's not seeping into the soil. Now, back inside. Badger has the real Edward locked down, but we have no idea if something else could go wrong. Inside. Now. Everyone."

Evee looked ready to fall down and slip into a coma, but she pulled on Praem, leading the way.

The balcony didn't have any doors, just a rectangular opening into a short hallway made of the same black marble. A single right-hand turn took us back into the grand hall — Edward's study, library, hospital room, and deathbed all in one. I was staggering, Evelyn could barely walk unsupported, Felicity had a nasty cut on her head, Lozzie was crying, Zheng was more wound than flesh; we were a mess, but we were all alive and all together. The Knights took the front as we hurried back, in case of any lingering surprises.

Evee croaked: "That demon-host, the one with the huge teeth, she's back at his side. Zheng, you need to call her off."

"She will listen, wizard."

"Raine, be ready with that gun."

"Ready. Got another full mag if we need it."

"How did—" I croaked. "How did you get the stairs?"

A rust-caked voice answered from somewhere around the middle of Felicity's back: "Asked politely!" said Aym.

Back in the grand hall of black marble, the floor was slick with blood and littered with pieces of Edward-clone, splattered up the walls and staining the bookcases. They'd all stopped moving as soon as Lozzie and I had dragged the soul-fused core elsewhere, cut off

from their source of immortality, truly dead.

Not everybody could deal with that sight without wanting to retch, or turning green, or looking away. Including me, now the immediate danger had passed. Lozzie even clamped her eyes shut. Jan had to help her past the biological debris.

Edward Lilburne — the real one, the ‘network core’ — was right where we’d left him, propped up in his magically-assisted hospital bed, surrounded by medical machines and rings of magic circle. Frail and reduced with age, his eyes locked on the piece of paper in his hands, he looked nothing like the vast monster we had just burned to death in the fires of Outside. The thin trickle of crimson from his left nostril still had not dripped into his lap, his blood was so thin and dry, a droplet hanging from his upper lip.

The Grinning Demon was clutching him from behind, arms around his thin and papery shoulders, protective and bewildered. She watched us enter with an almost lost expression, no longer grinning but collapsed into empty pain. Her blood-red eyes fixed on me, on the sight of Homo Abyssus, walking free.

Badger was still slumped next to the bed, conscious and whole but cringing with pain, his face covered in his own blood, the price of binding a mage in paralysis.

“Nathan!” Raine called out as we approached. “Hold on a sec, mate, we’re almost done.”

Zheng extended a hand toward the Grinning Demon. “He is dead. Come here, little—”

The droplet of gathered blood fell from Edward’s upper lip.

It landed on the paper in his hands. It did not blot out part of the equation, but landed on a clear space near the bottom of the page, a space left for a final figure, an answer, a solution.

Edward moved his right hand — one bony finger twitched across the blood and smeared a symbol into the paper.

Badger’s secret weapon, his mage-paralysing mathematical equation, had been answered.

Edward lifted his liver-spotted head.

“Ah,” he said.

Zheng roared and rushed at the stick-bundle figure beneath the sheets; Evelyn raised her bone-wand once again and choked out a string of syllables which burned on the air; Felicity snapped her shotgun closed and pulled the trigger; Raine aimed and fired; even Jan joined in, her voice rising in a sudden surprise of musical language I didn't recognise; I hissed, screeching and lashing out with our tentacles.

Edward Lilburne barely moved.

His fingers, arthritic and swollen at the joints, skin stuck to bones, flickered like a sleepwalker brushing away cobwebs. His rasping, reedy voice whispered one-word dismissals in a language that stabbed into my ears and through my skull. Evelyn's spell sputtered to nothing; Felicity's magically-altered buckshot slammed to a halt in mid-air and fell into the floor, tinkling as it landed; Jan choked as if punched in the throat, until Lozzie caught her and opened her airways with a squeeze; Raine's bullets bounced off nothing — except one, which got through, only for the Grinning Demon to snatch it out of the air.

My tentacles bounced off nothing, off thickened air, off manifested thought.

And Zheng, beautiful, unstoppable Zheng, hit a wall of immovable, invisible force. She thrashed and roared and spat blood. July lurked behind her, as if looking for an opening.

The Knights closed ranks, but there was nothing to protect us against.

Edward Lilburne blinked very slowly. He took a breath, working his throat. He glanced at Badger, then Zheng, then up at the Grinning Demon.

"Thank you, dear," he said.

The voice of the real man was a smoke-charred whisper, teetering on the verge of death.

The Grinning Demon looked down at him, blank and empty, almost childlike.

"Yes?" she said through her teeth.

"Wizard!" Zheng roared. "I will tear off your head and shit into your soul! I will eat your entrails and cast your testicles into a fire! I

will—”

Edward Lilburne’s fingers flickered again. Zheng’s voice went out, muted, gone.

“You will do no such thing,” he said. He didn’t even look at Zheng. “The first discipline I ever learned was the proper binding of demons.” He glanced up at his attendant demon-host once more, at her glistening naked form and curled black horns. “You look better when you smile, dear.”

Another finger-flick. The Grinning Demon’s face stretched back into that skull-splitting smile once again, showing her teeth like the maw of a shark.

“Evee!” Raine was saying. “What do we do? What do we do?”

“Fucking hell!” Twil shouted. “Yeah come on, do we just rush him or what?”

“Kill him,” Evee croaked. “Kill him. Before he does something—”

Felicity fired her shotgun a second time. Once again Edward dismissed the buckshot pellets with a disinterested flick of his fingers. He sighed an almost delicate little sigh.

“Cease that,” he murmured.

Felicity went stiff and white in the face, as if clutched by an invisible hand. Aym — a black-lace shadow — crawled up her face all of a sudden and opened her airways with a pop of air pressure. Felicity gasped for breath, flailing and staggering back.

Twil flung herself at Edward, all teeth and claw. Another flicker of his fingers and she bounced off an invisible wall, same as Zheng. She didn’t give up though, rushing headlong into it again and again.

“Now,” Edward said. “Enough of this.”

“Enough is right,” said Badger.

Edward looked down at him, still dangerously close to his side. Nathan stared back, oddly unmoved, as if expecting something very different from the mage.

“You almost got me, young man,” Edward said to him, a raspy warble. “Promising. Perhaps I’ll keep you a while.”

“You won’t,” said Badger. “You don’t have long.”

Edward and I had something in common: we both noticed that Badger wasn’t afraid.

The tiniest papery frown began to crease Edward’s forehead.

“Edward!” I shouted.

Whatever Nathan was doing, whatever foolish second step his plan involved, I had to buy him time.

I stepped forward, tentacles fanning outward, head high, teeth bared, flesh strobing with dark-red threat.

“Stop,” we said. “We just killed you once — your stupid clone trick. I can do that again. You know I can do it. You can’t hold me back. You can make it difficult for me, and you can force me to cut through your demon-host. But you cannot stop me, not if I use hyperdimensional mathematics.”

Edward Lilburne finally looked at me. Exhausted, rheumy eyes focused on my face. He smiled a thin-lipped smile of smug condescension.

“Take off that mask, you stupid girl,” he said.

It was only then that I realised I was still wearing my squid-skull mask; I’d been wearing it the whole time, as if it was my real face — but it was my real face, wasn’t it? I was me, we were us, and we were Homo Abyssus.

“It’s not a—”

“You look like a circus clown from a tidal pool,” he said. He didn’t even put much emphasis on the insult, just said it and moved on. “Besides, it doesn’t matter if you kill this shell. You may have spoiled my original plans, certainly. I will not walk infinity as a human. But I will still walk it, in one form or another.”

“I already put down your—”

“Yes, yes.” He sighed. “You dealt with my overzealous offshoots. Thank you. I am a little indebted. I would have been forced to tidy them up myself otherwise, and it is so tiresome to put down one’s self again and again. But the process has already begun. Killing me now will only complete it faster. This building — what remains of it — will be burnt through, and I will ride that soul into eternity, into

what you so blindly call the ‘abyss’.”

“ ... pardon?”

Edward Lilburne smiled his vile little smile. His bone-thin shoulders shrugged. His thin and withered fingers flickered and flexed.

“You cannot kill me in any fashion which matters. I am about to become like you, Miss Morell. And I will return with far more ambitious aims than the ones you hold so foolishly dear.”

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.14

“You want to cast yourself into the abyss? You?”

I had intended to scoff, to laugh with derision, to make my words incredulous with disbelief — how could I not? But we weren’t very good at scoffing, we didn’t have a lot of scoff in us. That was more Evelyn’s area of expertise, and she was busy spluttering with a nose full of blood and staring in horror at Edward’s statement of intent.

My rhetorical question emerged squeaky and raw, from behind the true face of my squid-skull mask.

Edward Lilburne — a collection of hide-wrapped sticks beneath thin hospital sheets, propped up by pillows and cushions, his wrinkled and withered flesh hooked into softly bleeping medical machinery, protected behind walls of invisible power, magic circles, and decades of accumulated knowledge — smiled thin and vile. He nodded his shiny, liver-spotted head. His half-blind, rheumy eyes crinkled with satisfaction and pleasure.

“Oh yes,” he rasped in a weak and whispery voice. “I am ready for the journey.”

The Grinning Demon, naked pale muscles sculpted like a classical statue, stood at his side, staring back at me with her mute rictus grin. Her red eyes told nothing.

Camelot’s purple light fell across them both from behind, streaming into the black marble hall through the massive crystal window which stretched from floor-to-ceiling at the rear of the room. Beyond, behind Edward and his Demon and the desk and the detritus of the end of his life, Camelot’s hills unrolled to the horizon.

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about,” I said. We laughed, a dry little chuckle that came out as an inhuman throat-scratch. “The abyss? Just like that? As if you can dip yourself into the waters and then climb out at will? I swam those depths for what

felt like decades. For an eternity. I forgot who I was — what I was. I forgot my own name! I was— I was— perfect. Elegant and sharp and quick and— and I had people to bring me back. Memories to anchor me.” I gestured at his black marble study, his impersonal deathbed, his grinning attendant with her blood-red eyes lost to Edward’s commands. “What do you have? This? What names will you take down into the abyss with you, Edward? You don’t have anybody, anything! I had my sister to turn me back! To tell me to return!” I was shouting, offended beyond proper argument, my voice screeching so hard that several of my friends flinched. “You will lose yourself down there, in the dark, in the black, where everything makes so much more sense.” I felt my human eyes crying tears too thick to be saline alone. “If you come back at all, you won’t be you anymore, or human. And you have nobody to return—”

“Of course you struggled to maintain coherency of ego,” he grumbled, low and unimpressed. “I have studied the arts and methods of immortality my entire life. I have built a machine for the transmission of the self — this house — and purified my soul across the course of decades. I have prepared for this moment. You are a foolish teenage girl who—”

“I’m twenty years old!”

“And a foolish child who does not know herself.” Edward’s smile creased with genuine amusement. “Look at me, girl. Look at what I have spent my life building. You think I am subject to the same self-limitations as you? No.” That smile thickened, reached up into his cheeks. “My transformation will be swift and terrible, every part of it intentional and controlled. Nothing like you.” He snorted. “You are a pale and twisted shadow of a half-remembered nightmare. I will be a gleaming and golden dream.”

He believed every word of it. I was never particularly good at catching lies or bluffs, but this wizened and shrivelled mage believed he was on the verge of perfect immortality.

“You have no idea,” I said — though with ebbing confidence now, in the face of his sheer self-belief. “All that stuff about remaining human, you told me all that before, back in that house in Devon. You said you were going to travel Outside without being contaminated. Even if you can survive the abyss without human connections, you won’t be human. You said it yourself — like me?”

Look at us.”

We spread wide, tentacles strobing rainbow-bright and neon-dense. My body was still humming with bioreactor energies, my blood surging like rocket fuel through my veins. My eyes glowed inside the sockets of my squid-skull mask, pink, green, yellow, purple, cycling back and forth. My skin tingled with latent toxins and poisons. My fingers were still webbed, my nails aching and bleeding with the desire to sharpen into claws, my shoulders studded with now-blunted spikes and venomous barbs. My teeth were sharp. My tongue was too long. My legs were reinforced with bio-steel cables. A sharp-tipped tail swished from the end of my spine. A yellow membrane-mantle hung from my shoulders and elbows and flanks — Sevens’ contribution to and embrace of Homo Abyssus.

“I know I’m not human,” I said. “And I love it. I’m exactly what I’m supposed to be.”

“Mm,” Edward grunted, twisting his lips with wry amusement, like he was in debate club, about to pull out some second-rate counter argument. “That much is true. I will no longer be human, not strictly speaking. A failure, certainly. A woeful waste of potential. But within acceptable parameters. In the end, any immortality is preferable to death.”

Those words drew a flicker of a smile from an unexpected source: down at Edward’s elbow, with his own blood still seeping from nose and ears and eyes, sitting almost collapsed at a tiny side-desk, desperately clenching his right arm to suppress a muscle spasm — Badger smiled.

From just behind me, Raine laughed. “Fleeing to Argentina as the Reich crumbles, huh? That’s some coward shit, Ed-boy.”

I could have turned around and kissed Raine for that; I needed her confidence, her support at my shoulder. The smug satisfaction and knowing look in Edward’s eyes was beginning to spook me. I may not have believed his words — but he certainly did, and I was beginning to doubt.

Had Raine also seen Badger’s little smile?

We needed to keep Edward talking.

The others, all except Zheng and July, were gathered in a rough group behind me, hanging on the import of the argument between

me and Edward, as if we could somehow vanquish him by defeat in verbal combat. Perhaps Praem or Eevee or Jan had some idea of what I was actually doing — desperately stalling for time. But I doubted that Lozzie relished hearing the sound of Edward's voice, or that Twil had any useful suggestions, except to keep throwing herself at the invisible air-walls summoned by the tiny flicking of his withered fingers; thankfully Twil had slunk back to cover Evelyn instead. The Forest Knight stood at my right shoulder, Raine at my left. The other Knights stood in a row, shields up, ready to defend against any attack — but I doubted one would come. Edward did not want a fight, not really.

Zheng was stalking in a slow circle around Edward's hospital bed, testing his defences at random, surging forward here, punching solid air there. She hissed and heaved through her maw of shark teeth, still bloody and raw and bleeding from the explosive earlier, her vocal chords still muted by magecraft trickery.

I'd never seen her so filled with rage, every muscle vibrating, shoulders hunched, face quivering, hands grasping to tear through Edward's defences and rip out his tongue.

July followed in her wake, more cautious than Zheng. Long black braid swinging in the still air, she bobbed on the balls of her feet, like a boxer ready to exploit an opening.

The Grinning Demon, her lips stretched to breaking point around too many teeth, watched Zheng in return with those unreadable blood-red orbs.

Edward's fingers continued to flicker and twitch as Zheng threw herself at his invisible shields. He didn't even pause when he spoke.

If Badger could find the strength to reach forward and grab those fingers, even if only for a moment, surely Zheng would be able to break through? Zheng would only need a second or two to murder the man.

But what if Edward was right?

"Ha ha," Edward croaked in his wispy little voice. His eyes moved to Raine. "I do not appreciate that comparison, you stupid girl."

"Naaaaaah," Raine said. "I reckon it's a pretty apt one. I think we'd all be much happier if you followed your leader instead."

“Ha!” Twil barked — literally, still more wolf than woman. “Yeah, right! Blow your brains out for us, you fuck!”

“Follow your leader,” Praem intoned.

Edward sneered — an impressive feat for such a physically exhausted and ancient man. His watery little eyes scrunched up with derision. “I flee nothing. I make no retreat. I stand on the precipice of greatness. Yes, you have forced me to rule out my preferred plan — immortality without change. But this eventuality I have prepared for all my life. Death comes, yes, undeniable. But I will pass through it. I will pass into the firmament above and the firmament below, the bowl of water placed there by the demiurge, which encapsulates all reality. Only out there can one truly learn the language of god.”

“Alright then, mate,” said Raine. “Lower your force-field bullshit. Let us in so we can hurry you along.”

Edward chuckled, low and amused. “I still feel pain, for now. If I let your living furniture at me—” He gestured to Zheng with a flicker of his eyes. “Then I will die in great pain. Tongue-less and fingerless and probably screaming. A transitory state, to be sure, but one I prefer to avoid, thank you.”

Raine cracked a shit-eating grin, full power, maximum cheese. “How about this?” She raised her stolen firearm once again, pressed the stock tight to her shoulder, and pointed it at Edward’s head. “I’ll make it quick. Bullet through the head. How’s that sound? Come on, you can’t deny that would be easy.”

Edward snorted softly and looked away from Raine with utter contempt.

“Raine ... ” I whispered inside my mask. “I don’t know if we should ... ”

Raine whispered back with the corner of her mouth: “You think he can do it? Come back from the abyss?”

Badger’s equation — the mathematical spell he had used to all-too-briefly lock down Edward’s mind — lay abandoned in Edward’s bony lap: a piece of paper covered with Badger’s handwriting, and ended with a symbol which Edward had scrawled in his own blood, with the tip of his own finger.

And Badger — Nathan Sterling Hobbes, once a mage himself, sort of — was staring up at Edward as if we'd already won.

Had Nathan lost too much blood? Was he slipping into delusion?

"I don't know," I hissed back, then hiccuped loudly. "Badger's onto something, but we ... we have to keep him talking ... we ... I don't know how to—"

Speak truth, kitten, and the words will flow.

Sevens? I didn't answer out loud, but my words echoed inside my head. Sevens, what are you doing?

Nothing! came the yellow whisper in my ear. *My father taught me many tricks for drawing out pride and hubris, but this one needs no script to follow. Speak and he will talk himself raw. Do it, kitten.*

Do you know what Badger is doing?

I have no idea. He isn't following a script either. Something darker, something I cannot read.

Edward was already warbling on without us: "I would prefer a better death, of course. A meaningful death, one to launch the ship with the right air. At the hands of an equal, or at least—"

"Alexander had a better death than you," we said.

We put all our scorn and spite into it, standing up as tall as we could — not much. Homo Abyssus is a glorious thing to be, but I am still only five foot nothing. We spread all our tentacles out in a mocking halo of barbs and spikes.

"He stood by his convictions," we went on. "I mean, yes, they were terrible convictions, he was a monster, he did terrible, evil things. But he stood and died by them. I killed him, and he took it. You can't even do that, apparently."

We swallowed a hiccup.

That little speech earned me a raised eyebrow from Edward's craggy face. He even laughed again, a wheezy, croaking sound.

From beneath our feet the House suddenly creaked as well: beams adjusting, walls and floors warping out of shape, bones bending under pressure. The marble floor shuddered as if a spasm was passing through distant flesh.

“Heather!” Evelyn hissed from behind me. Her voice was wet with bloody mucus, the product of too much high-level magic in quick succession. “Heather, what the hell are you doing? We have to fucking kill him!”

“Yeah,” Twil said. “Like you did with the big Ed-ball? Can’t you do that again? You just pulled it apart, right?”

“Use brain-math!” Evee croaked. “Heather! Dismantle him! Break his barriers. You can do it!”

Zheng caught my eye as well, showing her teeth and nodding — kill him, shaman!

Behind my mask, I wet my lips and hiccuped twice. I could overcome Edward’s protection, yes; with hyperdimensional mathematics it would probably be simple to dismantle his spells and tear into his cocoon. I could even let Zheng and the others do the rest, let it all end in bloody wet red violence.

But what if he was right? What if death would dip him into the abyss?

What if he was prepared and ready for the sharks of the void and the lurking leviathans?

What if he came back?

We knew it was possible, I was living proof of that. We also knew that I was not the sole example of a human being who had returned from the abyss. We had fought one before: Ooran Juh, the giant headless monster with whom Badger had made an unwise deal, a creature closer in nature to Sevens than to any mortal, a human mage once upon a time, hundreds or perhaps thousands of years ago.

When we’d fought, Ooran Juh had demonstrated just enough abyssal knowledge to dodge my attempt to send him Outside. In the end we had not killed him, only driven him off with the threat of mutual destruction and by establishing a stronger claim on Nathan’s soul.

What if Edward returned as something equally unaffected by notions of mortality?

“Ahh yes,” Edward was already replying to my statement, as if we weren’t discussing the urgent need to murder him. “I have heard

from second-hand and third-hand sources the details of my foolish nephew's final moments. Of course, he took the coward's way out."

"Coward? He stood by his—"

"He made a deal with the unspeakable!" Edward snapped, then dissolved into a hissing cough, the first time he had shown something approaching true anger.

Beneath our feet, the House creaked and groaned again.

"He gave himself up to inhuman influences," Edward wheezed on. "Gave up his soul, rather than purifying it. Am I not right? He made a deal, did he not? Accepting patronage the same as you, with the same entity — I will not speak its name — with which you so foolishly cavort."

I spluttered. "Cavort"? I was taken away when I was—"

"Besides," Edward croaked over my objection. "My fool of a nephew relied on the good sense and rational thought of a young idiot. Did he not? He claimed you wouldn't put him down like the mad dog he was. Claimed you wouldn't do it, according to your own moral code. Ha! Moral code." Edward laughed to himself. "Ridiculous."

"He was a better mage than you!" I snapped.

Edward seemed amused. He waved vaguely with one hand. He leaned back into his pillows in lazy-eyed repose. "My nephew never understood the purpose of the great work. I treated him differently from the rest of the dross, with the hope that I might not be completely intellectually isolated. Oh, he was a very good 'activist', certainly. His little project — his 'cult' — provided me with plenty of materials. But his involvement was too close, too driven by the deaths of his parents, my fool of a brother and his simpering wife." Edward smacked his lips. "No, Alexander never understood the quest — for understanding, for comprehension, and in comprehending, to ascend, to escape, to immortality and perfection. He always was an arrogant shit, even as a little boy. My brother — his father — should have disciplined him better. Disciplined them both. Spared the rod, produced a moron and a—"

"Dad was good!"

Lozzie's chirping voice cut through Edward's bitter reminiscence.

Suddenly she was at my side too, crying openly, lips pressed tight with defiance. Her pastel poncho was limp and lifeless once more, wrapped around her like a shroud.

Edward stared. “The changeling speaks.”

“Dad loved us! He did!” Lozzie shouted back at him. “He was—they were—they were wrong but—”

“Your infernal re-souling should have robbed you of the power of speech. Your parents would still be alive if only you could have learned to shut your mouth and listen. You are my greatest failure, Lauren. I should have kept you caged, not given you over to the soft-headed mercies of your brother. Rest assured I will be correcting that mistake, very soon.”

“Lozzie!” Jan was hissing from behind. “Lozzie!”

But Lozzie did not turn and look. She stared at Edward with hatred, then glanced at me with a silent question in her tear-streaked eyes: why wasn’t I killing him?

“Where was I?” Edward was croaking to himself. “Ah yes. Alexander said you wouldn’t kill him. I assert that you can and will kill me — but that it does not matter. I too will stand and die, and then rise again.”

“Heathy! Heathy!” She grabbed a tentacle, winding one of us around her own forearm. “Heathy, kill him! Please!”

Abyssal instinct whispered fevered doubts. Was I standing before an old man, bluffing for a few extra seconds of life? Or was this withered shell just that — an eggshell, containing the seed of an abyssal foe? He looked so comfortable and calm and relaxed, an old man thinking back on his life, not a mage afraid and fighting for advantage.

“Lozzie,” I whispered inside my mask. “I don’t know, we don’t know. What if he’s ... ”

Lozzie’s eyes pleaded.

My mind raced for a solution. I turned back to Edward.

“I can think of a way to kill you for real,” we said. “We could leave you in Wonderland. I could leave you for the Eye.”

Edward smiled.

“You couldn’t do that for the foolish drones and their pitiful attempt to imitate my work,” he rasped. “You brought them back here, to be dismantled by your sad little playthings, those machine-wrapped scraps of flesh down there. My niece’s dolls. Perhaps my fool of a nephew was correct, perhaps you do have moral weakness.”

“For you, I would make an exception.” Would I? Does even Edward not deserve the Eye? “If the alternative is you hurting Loz—”

“Oh, spare me the justifications.” Edward tutted. “Yes, I’m sure your fellow-feeling for any human being is soundly routed by your true allegiance to your vile inhuman parent. I was merely speculating. But no, taking me from this house and putting me elsewhere will only complete the process the moment the connection is severed. My body will suffer, certainly, but I will not be in it. My soul will be sinking, free and flaming.”

“I could find a way to stop that. I could ... dive after you.”

So why wasn’t I?

Edward must have sensed my hesitation by now — but he chalked it up to fear or doubt. I kept my eyes from flicking to Badger, from giving away what I was placing my hopes on.

Edward sneered as if this boast wasn’t even worth paying attention to. He said: “I would prefer a better death, as I was saying. At the hands of an equal — or a near-equal, at least.” His eyes dismissed me as no longer interesting, and finally landed on the person he had been trying to address this entire time.

“Evelyn Saye,” he rasped. “Step forward, if you will.”

Evelyn snorted — low, wet with blood, saturated with contempt. I almost flinched, as if I’d been clipped by a passing cannonball.

Edward sighed with surprising gentleness. He adjusted himself on his pillows. The Grinning Demon reached down to help. “It is an invitation to discuss, not an order,” he said. “I do not presume to direct a fellow mage, not a true one, a—”

“Is that your wife?”

Evelyn’s grunted question threw Edward off-balance. He blinked his watery eyes. “Pardon me?”

“The demon-host with the horns and the stupid grin,” Evelyn

growled. The Grinning Demon straightened up and stared back at her. “Whose corpse did you use?”

Edward blinked twice, as if he didn’t comprehend the question. “My first wife, yes.” He reached over with one hand and placed it gently on the naked wrist of his massive, muscular demon. She looked down at the hand, grinning like a skull. “I made her when I still believed that I was bringing back a human being. When I was but a foolish boy who did not understand that there is no return, that the things we use to power our machines are mere electricity and—”

Evelyn let out a grumbly sigh. “You never got Yuleson’s reply to your peace offer, then? Useless man.”

Edward squinted. “My lawyer? You—”

We said, “Evee promised to take everything of yours. Including her.”

Edward pulled a perplexed and amused face.

Evelyn spat, her temper exploding. “This is obscene, absurd! We’re standing at the foot of your bed and you’re about to die! Do you know why? Because we treated this like a war! You fucking old moron! You could have avoided this by just giving us the fucking book!”

Edward narrowed his eyes. “The what?”

Nobody said anything for a moment. Evelyn stared as if she might explode on the spot. Raine let out a long sigh.

Evelyn ground the words out: “The book you took from the Library of Carcosa, from under our noses. *The Testament of Heliopolis*. The book we have been demanding this entire time.”

“Ohhhhhh.” Edward closed his eyes briefly, as if we were all very stupid. “The book, the book, yes. A trinket, to get your attention. No more than that.” He flickered his fingers to one side, vaguely indicating the back of the great marble room, the space behind him filled with detritus and junk which surrounded the great wooden slab of a desk. The crystal window still glowed with Camelot’s purple light. “It’s in my desk. Top right drawer. If I am remembering correctly. Take it, please, if it gives you the satisfaction.”

I could barely believe my ears. All this fighting, all this mage-war,

all those insulting letters, all the bargaining, the attempts to kidnap Lozzie, then me — what had it all been for?

Edward grunted as he shifted against his pillows again; the floor beneath us rumbled and groaned, like a ship in high winds.

The others shared some uncomfortable looks. Twil muttered, “Gotta be a fucking trap. That drawer is an IED or some shit.” Raine murmured in disagreement. In the end, Praem left Evelyn briefly in Twil’s capable hands, and Raine left my side. My lover and the demon maid circled around Edward’s hospital bed together, then eased open the top right drawer of his desk with the tip of Raine’s gun.

No explosion. No gas. No magical burst of colour.

Raine and Praem returned a moment later, untouched by booby-traps. Praem carried a thick book bound in tan leather. The front cover was a piece of brass etched with a stylized illustration of the sun.

“Book obtained,” said Praem. “Book.”

Evelyn all but stumbled back into Praem’s grip, desperate for the prize. Raine raised her eyebrows at me in silent exasperation. Everyone just stared at the unassuming tome as Evelyn clutched it to her chest.

“That’s it?” Twil said, almost laughing. “That’s the fucking book? That’s what all this has been ... ”

“Why?” I croaked.

But Edward Lilburne did not answer. His eyes were fixed on Evelyn, deeply amused, waiting for her response. She stared back in furious silence, sucking on her teeth.

“Mages,” she said eventually. “You all have such nonsense logic. No different to my bitch of mother — and I killed her. You can’t expect me to take all that you’ve done and then just—”

“All I did was test you, Miss Saye,” Edward rasped. “A real mage deserves a real challenge. You lack purpose and impetus.”

“Ha!” Evelyn spat. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’ve won! Heather! Heather, finish this before—”

Edward laughed, a sound like wet sticks rubbing together in a

stagnant puddle. The walls creaked. “Do not flatter yourself, Miss Saye. I’m old. I know I’m old. I’ve barely been paying attention to managing this little dance. My offshoots and appendages have been chasing you around, sending you letters, irritating my fool of a lawyer. You think I was expending my entire intellect and attention on this ...” He laughed again. “This ‘war’? No.”

“We still won. And you’re about to die.”

Edward Lilburne smiled. The corners of his eyes crinkled. “You are not a tenth of the woman your mother was — your performance has proven that. But, you are still a real mage. One with extraordinarily poor taste, though. You surround yourself with ostentatious furniture.” He sneered at Praem. “You make companions out of violated hybrids and unstable psychopaths. You ally with things which do not know they are dead.” He glanced at Jan with deep contempt. “And parasitised drug-addicts.” He looked right through Felicity. “Worse than that, far worse than that — you harbour this thing.” He lifted a finger and pointed — at me. “A seed of destruction. A true contaminant.” Edward seemed to raise himself up on the hospital bed a little, no longer amused but burning inside with true conviction. The Grinning Demon helped him sit taller. “My first act upon return will be to dispose of this vile thing.” His finger shook in my direction. “Then to teach my niece her place. Then to teach you — Miss Saye — how to be the woman your mother should have made—”

“No,” Evelyn said. “I think I prefer to fuck your wife.”

Edward was so wrong-footed that his rant juddered to a halt. He blinked several times. The Grinning Demon just stared at Evee. Raine snorted a much-needed laugh. Twil guffawed — a little too hard and forced.

“Heather,” Evelyn snapped. “Heather, kill him already. We’ve stalled long enough. He’s bluffing!”

My throat was bone dry. I finally let myself look down at Badger again, at the private and quiet satisfaction in his eyes as he gazed at Edward in the hospital bed.

The House creaked and groaned beneath our feet once more, the waves of sound echoing upward through unseen voids behind the marble walls. Twil hissed through her teeth. Lozzie whimpered and shivered. Zheng stalked in her slow circle around Edward’s invisible

protection.

Had I misunderstood? Make your move, Nathan! We can't stall much longer!

"Heather!" Evelyn snapped.

"Evee — what if he's not bluffing?" we said. "What if he comes back, from ... from the abyss?"

"Then we kill him again!" she said. "We kill him again, we kill whatever emerges, whatever—"

"Like Ooran Juh?" I murmured behind my mask. "I couldn't kill him. Evee ... "

Evelyn ground her teeth.

"I don't think he's bluffing," said an unexpected voice — Jan.

Jan stepped forward so she could hold Lozzie's hand. Her neat black hair was in sweaty disarray, plastered to her forehead. She seemed so much smaller than usual, petite and tiny and vulnerable. She was wide-eyed with terror as she looked at me.

"I've studied immortality," she said. "I ... I toyed with other methods of ... survival, once. I'm not proud of that. But I know what I'm talking about."

Edward regarded Jan like she was smeared with excrement. His lips curled in disgust.

She looked at him and said: "You're using a mixture of Lamarkand's theories and the osmosis principle, the one outlined in *Tod und Darüber*, aren't you?"

Edward blinked. His disgust curdled into something darker, like the expression one might pull if a turd stood up and quoted philosophy. "You know a little, then, you crippled eunuch?"

"More than you, I would wager."

"And yet you chose unlife and—"

Jan spoke over him, addressing the rest of us without taking her eyes off Edward: "He's not bluffing. If I'm right, he has the theory down, at least. If this— the 'abyss', if it exists at all, if it's more than just mad speculation."

"It does," I croaked. "I went there."

"Yes, okay," Jan said quickly, breathing too hard, swallowing before she could continue. "But he would need to sacrifice somebody, or something — somebody he loves, and who loves him in return, at the exact moment of death, to use it like a ... like a flotation device? To be abandoned once it's been used, to send him back to the surface. I'm right, aren't I, you old fart?"

Edward's smile crinkled with recognition. "For a real mage to ruin herself with a cage of plastic and metal. Ha. You are a pitiful thing."

"Thanks," Jan said, laughing to hold back genuine fear. "I like being human too."

"Wait wait," Twil said. "Somebody who loves him?" She pointed at the grinning demon. "You mean ... her?"

Jan shook her head. "He already told us. What did you say, you old bastard? You're going to ride the soul of this house down into the abyss? You meant that literally, didn't you?"

Edward just smiled. He leaned back into the piled pillows of his hospital bed, totally at peace.

"The House!" I said.

"Yes, the house," Jan repeated. "He loves it because it was his first plan, his plan A, his decades of work, an expression of all his ideals. This is just plan B, and it only happens if his lifelong work fails. And the house loves him in return because he lives in it. That's what it's for."

"Houses love their inhabitants," I murmured. "No. No, you can't!"

"Errr," went Twil. "What if we just ... don't kill him, then? Like, that's an option, right?"

Evelyn huffed. "Don't be stupid, Twil."

Felicity spoke up for the first time in several minutes, her voice hollow with resignation. "He's going to die anyway. I've seen this before."

Edward chuckled. "The parasite-host speaks well. Yes! It matters not. The process is happening even now, fuelled by the death of my greatest work. New clones are being grown in the marrow of the house, back up plans meant for another strategy, burning energy

into the void of Outside. The house fails, floundering on the shores of the beyond, so I will die in a matter of ten minutes or so. Or you may kill me first. It matters not. I will never truly die. Like all great mages, I pass into eternal flesh.” Edward sighed like an old man easing himself into a warm bath. “Humanity but a fleeting cocoon — a failure. But I will live forever.”

“Yes,” said a voice I’d been waiting to hear all this time. “You will live forever.”

All eyes turned in surprise. Edward looked too, down and to his right, frowning in momentary confusion, his bliss broken by a bloody croak.

Nathan Sterling Hobbes smiled back at him, grinning like I’d never seen the man grin before, wide and savage. His eyes glinted with a spark of madness — and a fleeting gleam of yellow.

Sevens? I thought.

This was not me! she hissed back.

“Yes, boy,” Edward grunted. “I cannot truly die. That is the point. You always were a slow study, you—”

“You won’t die,” Nathan breathed. “Because your life no longer belongs to you.”

Edward squinted hard. “What are you blathering about, boy?”

Badger pointed at the piece of paper in Edward’s lap, the page of equation scrawled in his handwriting, ended with a single symbol in Edward’s own blood.

“You signed the contract,” said Nathan.

The House groaned again, rumbling beneath our feet, seeming to settle and sigh.

Edward actually smiled, incredulous and amused, as if dealing with a child wielding a toy gun. “I did no such thing. I wrote a number. Nothing more. It is not—”

“No,” said Nathan, shaking his head gently. The aching triumph in his voice somehow stilled Edward’s words — and I knew this was not entirely Nathan. Something else spoke through him. A script. A play. A fall from grace. “You accepted the premise of the equation — you had to, in order to answer it. The solution to the equation is

simply the legal and true name of the one reading the equation. It doesn't matter what number you put down, the number is your name and your name is the number and the number is your name. You agreed that x is y is the name of the reader — and you agreed to accept the debts of the writer.”

“I agreed to nothing. What nonsense is—”

“You accepted power!” Badger panted with desperate laughter, as if he was trying to hold back a screech. His right arm was shaking badly, the tremors running up his shoulder and into his neck. “Not much. But power, just enough to escape from the paralysis. That was the solution to the equation, the offer in the contract. And you signed it.”

Edward tilted his bald, liver-spotted head. Badger's blood-streaked smile panted back at him.

“Intent matters, boy,” Edward rasped slowly. “When signing contracts, they are null and void if the signer does not understand. A contract in a language I do not comprehend is not binding. I am bound by nothing.”

Badger just grinned. His eyes kept bleeding, weeping tears running down his scarlet-stained cheeks. “Oh, but you signed with your heart. I made sure of that.”

Edward's slow amusement smeared to one side, uncertain.

“You're a creature of contracts,” Nathan continued. “You believe in them. You're the sort of man who believes in nothing but ownership and power. Property rights. Without property rights there's nothing, right? Without respect for contracts — chaos! Those demon-hosts downstairs, did they sign their contracts for their bodies, knowing what they would be in for? Or the children you killed, the children I watched you feed to fucking machines!” Badger spat with an anger I'd never seen from him before. “Or us, all of us. You didn't tell us what we were in for. Does that void those contracts? You didn't believe it did. I met your work enough times to know exactly the sort of man you are. What you believe in.”

Edward sighed, as if disappointed. “You cannot defeat me with hypocrisy, boy. I care nothing for accusations. Are you trying to guilt me?” He seemed genuinely incredulous.

Badger said: “You believe in this. When you signed, you did so with

your heart. That's how your value system works."

Edward huffed a pitying little laugh. "And what have you bound me to, boy? I feel no fetters on flesh or magic. I hold these fools and their furniture at bay with a fraction of my power. What do you presume to have done to me?"

"Badger!" I shouted. "Don't tell him! If it might jeopardise it, don't tell him!"

Nathan shook his head and shot me a glance. "It's too late now." He turned back to Edward, grinning with more than a touch of madness; that yellow gleam passed over his eyes again. "I spent months thinking about how to deal with you. Ever since Heather brought me back from the dead, since she rescued me, made my mind clear. See, Alexander clued me in to the problem—"

Edward scoffed. "As if my idiot nephew could teach—"

"His death taught me a valuable lesson. Because he fucked us." Badger's right arm started to shake harder, with spasm, with rage, with the echo of the damage I'd done to his brain. "He died, but then he made a deal, and he fucked us from beyond the grave. Me, Sarry, the guys, Stibby and Dingle, my friends, everyone. Everyone died, because mages are so hard to really kill. So I've chewed over the problem of you, Edward. How to get rid of you without your death? For months. And then I realised. I still have a debt — not just to Heather. Heather destroyed the contract I had signed, chased off the collector, but the debt itself still exists. And debts can be transferred."

Edward's amusement drained away. He went pale. His skin seemed more sunken. Below us, the House rumbled and creaked, roiling like sickened guts.

"What have you done, boy?" Edward hissed. "What have you done to me?"

"Nothing." Badger grinned, panting, his right arm and shoulder seizing up with muscle spasm as he fought. "But you've signed a contract with something more powerful than you — and that's a principle you believe in."

Edward's bony, weak hands snatched the equation sheet from his lap and tore it in two, then in two again. He tried to scoop up the pieces and tear them smaller, his hands quivering. The Grinning

Demon reached down to help, but Edward batted her away.

Badger laughed, a horrifying panting, jerking sound. “It makes no difference!” he howled at Edward. “The contract is in your heart!”

Nathan turned to the rest of us. He was caught between laughter and terror, sweating and shaking and shivering, a man at the end of a haemorrhagic fever, face smeared with blood. The whites of his eyes were yellow with unnatural jaundice.

“He’s coming,” Badger said in a tiny voice, through gritted teeth. “Don’t interfere. Let it happen. He’s not here for us.”

Even Zheng and July had retreated from the hospital bed and the ring of magic circles. Zheng wrapped an arm around one of my tentacles and pulled me back. Evelyn gasped, stumbling, clinging to Praem’s support. Raine was last to step away, last to retreat.

“Nathan!” Raine shouted. “You hold on, okay? You hold on there, we’ve got you, we’re right here.”

But Badger was panting through his nose, every muscle tight as a steel cable, eyes turned toward the rear of the black marble room.

Fog.

Fog — thin and wispy, cloud-clear and clean white — was gathering in the far corners, appearing as if from nowhere.

For the first second it looked almost comedic, like a broken smoke machine had silently choked to life, hidden behind a clever flap of false wall. Jan even let out a weird little laugh; she and Felicity had no idea what they were witnessing. Neither did July, though she probably suspected.

But the fog thickened with unnatural rapidity. Tendrils and feelers snaked outward across the floor, slipping beneath Edward’s hospital bed, beneath Badger’s chair, reaching out and sliding between legs and behind backs. The layers of mist swallowed Edward’s desk, lapped at the medical machines in slow waves, and coiled around the legs of the Grinning demon. The fog grew hard and heavy, dark and dense, greasy and green.

“Awww shit,” said Twil. “Not this!”

“Stay close!” I croaked. “Everyone stay close!”

“Nathan!” Raine shouted. “We’ve got you, mate, just stay there.

Don't move!"

The wall-to-ceiling crystal window at the back of the room vanished behind the wave of fog, occluded by darkness. Camelot's purple light was snuffed out, plunging the room into shadow and mist.

Felicity squinted, almost whispering: "What the ... are those ... bricks?"

Aym's voice hissed from somewhere hidden down the back of Felicity's coat, "Don't look, you stupid bitch!" Felicity obeyed, turning her eyes away.

Through the clawing, clinging, cloying fog, the back window had become a wall. Red bricks rotten with holes. Mortar like toxic mud. Leaning forward, bearing down, threatening to crush those beneath with the weight of ancient separation.

Edward was panting. His face was covered in cold sweat. His eyes rolled, trying to see behind him, but he couldn't raise himself off the hospital bed. The Grinning Demon just stared at the brick wall, mesmerized by the unnatural sight.

"I have signed nothing!" Edward shouted, voice tearing at his own throat. "I am Edward Lilburne! That is my name! I am master of this house and master of my own soul! Begone, back into the dark! I owe nothing to any being, human or Outsider, demon or—"

The wall yawned open, behind fog so thick that the door was little more than a dark mouth ringed with tooth-stubs of broken brick.

A giant lumbered forth.

Skin the colour and texture of oats left to rot in a ditch of stagnant water and rat urine, slick-wet with grease and grime, thick with slabs of slow muscle beneath mountains of soft fat. Feet like gravestones, hands like hub-caps, shoulders wide as a bus. Ten feet of pallid meat, a tower of unnatural flesh. Naked, hairless, with unmentionable specifics below the waist.

No neck, no head, no face.

Ooran Juh — the once-mage from beyond reality, the creditor from whom I had freed Badger.

He raised both of his massive hands in greeting. He grinned with the drooling, sharp-toothed maws set into each palm. They

whispered inaudible words into the fog-choked air and licked at their lips with scarlet tongues.

“No!” Edward shouted, though he could not even see Ooran Juh. “I owe you nothing! Begone, begone!”

Badger bit his lips to stifle a scream, so hard that fresh blood ran down his chin. The Grinning Demon recoiled, rocking back — but she kept one hand on Edward’s arm in a final act of protection.

Ooran Juh stepped forward.

The giant seemed to move so much faster than something of his bulk and size should have, dragging his feet through stinking water which had appeared below the fog through which he waded. Suddenly he was right behind Edward’s hospital bed, towering over the tiny, stick-thin mage within, leering down as the fog gathered about him.

Edward looked up, wet eyes wide with terror. Ooran Juh’s twin palm-mouths whispered and slavered, tongues flicking over rows of tiny, razor-sharp teeth.

“The contract is false!” Edward shouted. “The debt is non-transferable! I do not belong to—”

Ooran Juh reached down and slapped one hand onto Edward’s left shoulder.

Edward screamed with excruciating pain. The noise seemed too much for such an ancient, thin throat, like his vocal cords would rupture or his windpipe would burst. He screamed and screamed and screamed.

Lozzie whimpered and clamped her hands over her ears. Felicity grimaced and screwed up her face. Evelyn buried her head in Praem’s shoulder, unwilling to watch as blood dripped down Edward’s chest, soaking into the hospital bedsheets. Even Zheng turned away with strange disgust.

Badger watched from up close, his entire right side shaking hard with spiralling muscle spasm.

Ooran Juh’s gigantic muscles heaved as he began to lift Edward from the bed, drawing out the tiny body of the man from inside his sheets, as if Edward weighed several times what such a withered frame should have done. Medical lines popped free from Edward’s

limbs, tearing at his flesh. Edward screamed even louder, drawn upward by nothing but the bite slicing into his flesh and grating on his bones.

But then Edward gestured with one hand, fingers flickering. For a moment I thought he was mad — Ooran Juh was beyond even my power to fight, a fellow creature of the abyss, bigger and older and much more predatory. How could Edward hope to cast magic like this, in the moments before being taken away?

“Her!” he screamed, fingers flickering and ordering the Grinning Demon forward. “She is mine! My property! A soul for soul, take her in my—”

Lozzie slipped past me, poncho fluttering as she sprinted for the bed.

“Lozzie, no!” I screamed.

“—in my stead! My property is yours! Yours!”

The Grinning Demon turned toward Ooran Juh, red eyes locked on nothing, teeth bared in a rictus grin. Ooran Juh lifted his other hand without letting go of Edward’s dangling body, bringing that whispering mouth down toward the Grinning Demon’s face.

Lozzie slammed into her from behind, poncho wrapping around one naked arm, face blazing with a serious little pout.

“She’s mine now! Mine! All mine!” Lozzie shouted up at the mountain of pale meat. “Property passes to next of kin! He’s already dead-dead-dead.”

Ooran Juh paused.

“You unnatural little bitch!” Edward screamed. “You dare- ahhhh!”

Ooran Juh finished lifting Edward from the bed. He hung by one bleeding shoulder, legs naked, a tiny stick-figure compared to Ooran Juh’s gigantic pale bulk, legs like tree-trunks wrapped in greasy fog.

Lozzie pulled the Grinning Demon back, lest Ooran Juh change his mind and decide to argue his case.

Ooran Juh’s free hand turned to point the slaver’s mouth at Badger instead. Nathan’s lips were drawn back in terror, every muscle taut, eyes bulging, teeth gritting so hard he was going to

crack a molar.

Ooran Juh's palm-mouth opened, tongue flicking out, reaching toward Badger.

Hisssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!

I hissed — not yours! Not yours! But Ooran Juh did not stop reaching. His fingertips brushed Badger's forehead, ready to close around his face and bite deep.

Badger's eyes flashed yellow with a reflection of clean flame.

Ooran Juh stopped.

The giant removed his hand from Badger's face.

Without further diversion, Ooran Juh turned and strode back through the greasy fog, returning to the yawning dark gap in his wall of rotten bricks. He dragged Edward Lilburne behind him like a piece of meat, legs trailing on the ground through the filthy water, shoulder bleeding into his clothes, screaming, screaming, forever screaming.

As the fog closed the pair of mages — mortal and otherwise — Edward's voice rose into a final shout of defiance.

"The house!" he screamed. "The house will not relinquish me!"

The House shuddered and shook, creaking as if beneath great winds. The marble walls groaned, threatening to crack. The floor juddered and vibrated and—

"You're already dead, uncle," Lozzie said. "Housey's mine now."

And the walls stilled their weeping.

Edward's final scream was swallowed by the fog, then by the wall of bricks. Ooran Juh's towering shadow loomed through the mist for a final moment — then all was silence.

The fog ebbed away, revealing the crystal window once more. Camelot's blessed purple light eased back in, as if skittish in the wake of a true monster. The filthy water had vanished, seemingly never there. The only evidence of Ooran Juh's debt collection was Edward's blood all down one side of the hospital bed.

Lozzie crouched and put a hand on the floor and went: "Shhhhhh."

The Grinning Demon just stared down at her.

Badger fell out of his chair.

We rushed forward — seven of myself, Raine as well, and oddly enough, Zheng too. We caught Badger between us, holding him in tentacles and arms. Jan hurried for Lozzie. Evelyn limped forward to join us, helped by Praem and Twil.

Nathan rolled his head to look up at me. He was horribly light, as if there was almost nothing of him. His skin was so pale, he'd lost so much blood. But his eyes burned with conviction and triumph. He smiled, fragile and shaking, on the verge of a seizure.

"Badger," I said. "You idiot, you fool, you- you-"

"This was never—" he panted, eyes rolling. "Never your fight. Always my responsibility. Our. Revenge and ... and justice? And it — worked!"

"Nathan, mate, hey," Raine was saying. "Hold on. Okay? You can do it. Hold on."

I think I was crying.

Zheng took most of Badger's weight, and surprised us all with her gentle handling of his exhausted body. She said nothing, her expression scrunched in doubt.

Evelyn ground out a question. "Where did he go? Edward? Where is he now?"

"Behind the wall of brick," Nathan answered, voice rising into a crescendo. "To be gnawed on for eternity, in the dark, surrounded by a million ... rats. It is done."

Nathan's eyes flashed yellow one final time as the flame departed.

Then the seizure took him.

luminosity of exposed organs – 20.15

Badger's dingy, bare, sad little bedroom in Badger's dingy, bare, sad little flat was no longer so dingy, bare, or sad.

On the sole previous occasion I'd seen this room it had contained so very little of Badger himself — a worn-down stub of space for a worn-down stub of person: a squat double bed with plain and starchy sheets, a single body pillow without a cover, a pile of well-thumbed books about mathematics, and a dusty set of framed diplomas, which had concealed a photograph of Badger when considerably younger and healthier, alongside a woman I'd never seen before. It was one of the most depressing and impersonal rooms I'd ever been in — and I'd spent time in a mental hospital for children, as an inpatient.

Somebody — perhaps Badger himself, but I had my suspicions regarding Sarika's involvement — had spent real time and effort transforming the room. Gone were the starched white bedsheets, now soft and lilac, topped by a proper duvet, frosted with a sort of throw blanket in gloriously tasteless tie dye. Gone too was the little pile of books — they had been relocated to a small desk which now occupied the far corner of the room. Badger's favourite books were lined up neatly, joined by a few new paperbacks (mostly science fiction, which Raine commented on with knowledgeable approval). Badger's university theses were tucked in at the end of the row of books, no longer abandoned on the floor. The framed diplomas had been stacked against the wall at the rear of the desk, proudly showing off the fact that Nathan Hobbes was in fact a Doctor of Mathematics.

The photograph I'd accidentally uncovered last time was nowhere to be seen. We silently agreed not to ask about that.

Badger's laptop sat in pride of place on the little desk, now with headphones, a light-up mouse on a proper mouse-pad, and the most bizarre keyboard I'd ever seen: it was curved, split in two, and glowing neon green between the keys.

The carpet had been hoovered, perhaps shampooed as well, and then accented by the loudest rug I'd ever seen: more tie dye, in headache green, warning orange, electric yellow, and radioactive blue. We couldn't look at the thing for too long without risk of worsening our headache. Thankfully the walls had been spared Badger's new-found sense of kaleidoscopic taste, instead decorated with more conventional posters — mostly bits of abstract art, a great big relief map of some fantasy world, a blown up black-and-white print of the famous still from *Nosferatu* of the count in silhouette, and a big landscape scene of what I thought was the Scottish Highlands.

Thankfully the body pillow I'd spotted last time was not graced with the addition of an anime girl cover; though it did have a cover at last, lilac and soft like the sheets, and was currently being used to prop up its owner.

The room was still little though, especially with four of us in there, plus Badger's Corgi, Whistle.

Nathan Sterling Hobbes — 'Badger', despite having lost a significant amount of his facial resemblance to said animal, with his short-cropped hair, his sharp cheekbones, his lost weight, his clearness of eye, and the massive visible scar on his skull — the hero of the moment, my cultist and disciple and follower (despite what I told him), almost mage-killer, the man who had spent nearly ten full minutes having a seizure in Zheng's arms and probably only lived because of her — was sitting up in that refreshed and welcoming bed, propped up by his squished body-pillow, looking like he'd just survived a plane crash, poisoning, and prolonged starvation all at once.

A mug of rapidly cooling tea sat on his bedside table, matching the mug of tea in my hand and the one which Raine clacked down on the desk after taking a sip; one would be forgiven for assuming Nathan thought the tea contained additional poison, from the way he gazed down at it, but we all knew he was simply too weak to lift it right then. Sarika did not hate us enough to slip bleach into our tea, after all.

The window above the bed was open, tugging gently at the curtains, admitting the soft summer heat. Sarika was banging about in the apartment's little kitchen, making a lot of obvious noise with her crutches, pretending to give us some privacy while staying close

enough to hear every word which was said.

Whistle was curled up on Badger's lap, eyes open, ears perked up; he could probably sense the tension. Smart doggy. Smarter than us, sometimes.

Badger looked up from his tea. He smiled with awful awkwardness.

"I'm not going to apologise," he said.

I actually laughed — though quickly dissolved into a hacking cough, which made me clutch my aching ribs. "Apologise?" I spluttered. "Nathan, that's not why we came. Not ... I'm not seeking a ... you don't need to ... "

Raine leaned against the wall and crossed her arms. "Nobody's here looking for an apology, mate. Sure as sure not Heather. Hell, far as I'm concerned you deserve a medal or something. Throw you a parade."

She was playing tough even though we weren't interrogating anybody; probably just feeling overly protective of me in my weakened and exhausted state. I'd taken Badger's desk chair — a proper swivel chair, with plenty of padding, and I needed it that day, I needed it so very badly.

Raine had not wanted me to come see Badger so early. She had tried to argue me out of the trip even though it was only a little way across Sharrowford, and we weren't going to walk or anything, she drove — I could barely walk downstairs, let alone through the city streets on a hot summer's day. Wait a day, Heather, surely it can wait a day. Go back to sleep! Have some cake! Have a lemon! Here, look, there's a whole bag of them, why don't you go sit with Tenny and try to peel some words out of the unfortunate demon-host we've got sitting in the magical workshop? Or go say hi to Lozzie, if you can keep up with her in Camelot? Or just, you know, don't exert yourself.

But Raine had lacked backup — there was so much going on back at home, so many loose ends, so much clean-up: Evelyn and Zheng were both occupied and exhausted in their own ways; Lozzie wasn't even there, off in Camelot doing a dozen other types of clean-up; Felicity was making obscure plans with Kim; Twil had gone home to help her family; Jan was tagging along with Lozzie, to everyone's surprise; and Stack had vanished, to nobody's.

And I needed to see Badger, I needed to actually talk with the man who everyone said was doing fine.

It was just over twenty-four hours since we'd all watched Ooran Juh drag Edward screaming backwards into hell. I'd only been awake for about three hours at that point, allowing for a very generous definition of 'awake'.

When Badger's seizure had hit, we'd all done the obvious thing — we, all of us, bloody and bruised and exhausted — had rushed him back to the gateway, back to our reality, to Sharrowford, to Number 12 Barnslo Drive. Only Lizzie had stayed behind, with the Knights and the Caterpillars and the Grinning Demon and the House, to begin the long and awful process of dealing with the aftermath.

We'd all barrelled through the gateway, clamouring for Stack and Nicole, for somebody to call an ambulance, for somebody to please drive over to Badger's flat and get his anticonvulsant medications.

And we — me, myself, and I, in full Homo Abyssus Outsider glory, trailing bioluminescence like flares, my flesh six different shades of neon, complete with spines and spikes, barbed claws and hooks, my throat twisted sideways, my fingers webbed, and a tail — an actual tail! — sprouting from the base of my spine — had plunged through with everybody else and promptly collapsed under the pressure of 'normal' reality.

We had barely any memory of it; all I recalled was hopping through the gate, shouting about stopping Nathan from biting his tongue off, and then — poof!

Unconsciousness. The floor. Drooling. Slapping about with malfunctioning limbs. Pain like a fragment of star burning in my flank. Flashes of disconnected image: Praem feeding me water, Raine peering into my eyes with a torch, Evelyn shouting about how I kept pushing myself too far.

I'd slept for the entire rest of that day, the whole night, and then all the next morning. I'd woken with a mouth like a peat bog.

Evelyn and Jan had invented several new pieces of vocabulary to describe what I'd done to myself. Full-body pneuma-somatic collapse. Too much squid in too small a space. Over-revving the engine and then crashing into a wall. Decompression sickness, dimension-hopping style. The bends, but lesbian.

None of those really captured the mechanics. Homo Abyssus was just a hundred times more difficult to sustain anywhere but Outside. It was like I'd been running a marathon weightless, on the moon, with springs in my heels — then had to continue with a twelve-ton pack suddenly dropped onto my back, plunged into an ocean trench, with my ankles encased in lead.

We were, to put it lightly, very sore.

We ached from head to toe — literally, my scalp hurt, like it was desperately trying to re-adhere to my skull. My toenails all stung as if they were trying to re-assume their normal shape by ramming themselves back into their nail-beds. Muscles complained in places which I was previously unaware contained muscles — or had I accidentally added muscles to places where muscles had no business being present? An interesting question, but one on which I wished to cease gathering data. My shoulders and back were covered in dozens of tiny bruises, my eyes stung like I had scratches all over my corneas — which I didn't, because that would have been a medical emergency — and my throat felt like I'd spent a night gargling acidic sand. Every joint crackled and popped like I was packed with polystyrene peanuts. My tail-bone stung when I sat and my ankles screamed when I stood up.

Evelyn had said: "I hope the high is worth the crash, Heather."

"It is!" I had replied, croaking and rasping. "It always—"

Evelyn had huffed. "I'm not being sarcastic, for fuck's sake. I'm being serious. I hope it is. I mean that. You were ... very impressive. You looked comfortable."

At least we were still whole — my tentacles had sustained themselves even during total collapse. Their roots ached like spreading bruises in our flanks and belly, and the tentacles themselves felt limp and soft and exhausted, like six additional very tired minds orbiting my central hub of true flesh. We were currently wrapped around ourselves, hugging tight, coiled up like a cephalopod feeling vulnerable.

My bioreactor was stiff and sore as well, but snarfing down half a dozen lemons had eased that sensation, at least. I still had the bag in my lap now, though I was refraining from eating any in front of Nathan.

None of this had been enough to stop us coming to see Badger. We had questions, things we had to know — and we weren't the only ones. Home was chaos, sleep was trapped beyond the walls of pain inside my own body, and for the first time in a very long time, we didn't have to worry about getting attacked by a mage, his minions, or his mercenaries.

Sharrowford's occult underground was ours. We could move around as we wished. For now.

So we sat in Badger's swivel chair, wrapped up in ourselves, trying to phrase questions we didn't even know how to ask.

Nathan winced at Raine's semi-serious suggestion of a parade. "Please don't," he said, almost as rough and croaking as me. "I only did what I should have done all along."

He looked almost as bad as I felt: massive dark bags under his eyes, a shiny sheen of cold sweat on his pale skin, and a sluggish drag on all his motions, like the seizure had taken all the energy allotted for the next few days. His eyelids moved out of sync when he blinked. Every now and again his right hand and arm shook with muscle tremors. He had lost a lot of blood in the confrontation yesterday, and unlike me he didn't have a multi-purpose pneuma-somatic organ to replace it faster than his natural bone marrow could. He looked almost as bad as when I'd done brain surgery on him.

"Actually," I croaked. "There is one thing you should apologise for, Nathan. We did almost get shot."

Badger winced and closed his eyes. "Ah. Yeah. Um."

Raine laughed, but good natured and gentle, despite her looming tough-girl pose. "Okay yeah, maybe that part was a bit less medal-worthy. Could have been a bit more elegant about that, mate. I know you've got confidence in us, but a fire-fight can go sideways real quick. Especially when nobody's wearing jack shit as far as protection." Raine made a finger-gun and pointed it at Badger. "Bam. Could'a gone bad fast. Don't do that again, hey?"

Nathan's wince turned to a pained smile. "Yes, I ... I could have handled that better. I apologise for that part, unreservedly. That part specifically."

Whistle's little doggy ears flopped sideways as he turned his head at the tone in Badger's voice. He may not have understood the words,

but he heard the pain.

Raine made a show of tutting and shaking her head. “Could’a just told us what you were up to, you know? Sharing info is kinda the baseline for good cooperation.”

Nathan’s smile twisted in an odd direction, one which said no, he couldn’t have told us. “Am I in trouble, then? Is that why you’re here?”

I tutted as well. “No. Nathan. That’s not—”

“Depends who you ask,” Raine said, with an easy laugh on her lips, stopping me from getting too dour and glum. “Evee would probably have you court martialed if she could — but then she’d also be your defence counsel and the judge and probably let you off with an extra egg for dinner.”

“Yes,” I sighed. “Evee is very impressed. Dealing with a mage is not easy, I gather.”

“Zheng, too,” Raine said, with a funny look of amusement at Nathan’s surprise. “She called you ‘Badger’.”

He frowned in confusion. “... everyone calls me Badger,” said Badger.

“Yeah,” Raine almost purred. “But she doesn’t. She called you ‘worm’, before. Kinda means a lot when she changes that.”

“Oh,” Badger said. “Oh. Well. Uh. Thank her, for me? Please?”

Raine shrugged. “You can do that yourself.”

“Hah,” Badger forced a nervous laugh, then sighed. “When I can get out of bed.”

An angry shout came from the flat’s little kitchen space, echoing down through the stub of corridor: “Do not!”

At the sound of Sarika’s voice, Whistle perked up in Badger’s lap, ears going rigid and little doggy nose snuffling at the air, as if he was about to receive a treat.

“Dog activated,” I murmured on impulse — but luckily nobody heard me. Far too exhausted and sore to properly regulate every stupid thought which popped into our collective heads.

"Speculative, Sarry," Badger croaked back. "I won't be getting up. It's okay. It's okay ..."

Sarika called back, "Do not get out of bed, you fucking moron!"

"He won't," Raine replied over her shoulder. "Don't worry, Sarry girl, we're not gonna push your man too far."

Sarika huffed and banged something very loud, then returned to making too much noise in the kitchen. Badger's face creased with a genuine smile. For a moment he was quite far away.

"Haven't had much time to talk to Lozzie," Raine said. "She's busy with a lot of the clean-up. But she probably wants to thank you, too. Just a little warning, you know? Expect her to pop out of nowhere when you least expect it."

"Oh," Badger said, coming around and blinking rapidly in an effort to clear his thoughts. "She did. She came by. I thought you knew."

I stared; Raine laughed.

"Our little jellyfish is exceptionally fond of those who vanquish her enemies," said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

Nathan gave Sevens a politely wary look.

Sevens had said almost nothing since we'd arrived at the flat, just an icy hello and a nod, and then a polite refusal of Sarika's blunt offer of tea. She was in her Yellow Princess mask, prim and proper and starched and straight, umbrella held like a walking stick, hair cut as if by a ruler, eyes unreadably cold. She was standing a little to my side, just far away enough to make some kind of statement, though I wasn't sure what exactly the statement was meant to be.

Badger wasn't entirely sure who Sevens was, of course, though he'd technically met her before. Normally I would have made some kind of introduction, even if it was a little white lie: "Here's my other *other* girlfriend, her name is Septima, please ignore her."

But Seven-Shades-of-Subtlety-and-Silence had been very clear. Before we'd left home, she'd said: "Do not explain who or what I am, kitten. This is essential."

"Sevens," I'd sighed. "We all saw the weird yellow sheen in Nathan's eyes. But you don't think—"

"I do think. And I am most unamused. I request your discretion.

This is a family matter. Please.”

I wasn’t the only one eager to have a proper conversation with Nathan.

Raine was laughing. “Our Lozzie can’t take a break to come eat lunch, but she can take a break to come see you, hey?”

I sighed heavily: “She could have told us. Though I guess it’s perfectly safe now.”

Badger looked a little uncomfortable, glancing at Sevens again. “She just stepped out of nowhere — out of the corner of the room. At first I thought maybe she’d come with others, not alone, I was expecting to see you. But she said thank you, gave me a hug, and asked if I wanted a keepsake. I was worried for a moment she was going to give me a piece of one of the ... well, the ... you know.” Badger swallowed with lingering disgust.

“The Edwards, mm,” I grunted.

“They’re all being disposed of,” Raine said, suddenly businesslike, if her business was organised crime. “All the remains. Properly. Caterpillar style.”

Badger smiled awkwardly, inwardly pained; like me, he wasn’t comfortable dwelling on violence and blood by the sobering light of day, no matter how his belly had been filled with fire when faced with his foe.

I found it difficult to reconcile what now seemed like two distinct Nathans: the quiet, reserved, soft-hearted man sitting propped up in bed before us, polite and awkward and barely able to gesture without supreme effort — and the wild-eyed avatar of occult revenge who had ranted Edward into defeat and fed him to a monster.

Nathan and Badger, perhaps. Or Inside Badger and Outside Badger. Or — a darker thought that I instinctively turned away from — victim-Badger, with his self-sacrifice, his head wound, his slow, almost grovelling apology; and Nathan Sterling Hobbes, a mage.

We distracted ourselves from that thought right away, saying, “Lozzie’s taken on too much responsibility for all this mess. She needs to slow—”

A flash of pastel-pink, pastel-blue, and clean gleaming white burst

into the corner of the room, fluttering and floating and flittering as she arrived; as if summoned by the merest hint of complaint about her methods, Lozzie materialised with a little puff of air.

“Heathy! There you are!”

She was bright and beaming, her smile wide and toothy. Her poncho seemed almost to move by itself as she bounced on her heels. Her long wispy blonde hair flicked outward as she bobbed in greeting. She had an armful of heavy books — Edward’s books, from Edward’s House — and an escort.

Two of Hringewindla’s bubble-servitors arrived with her, connected to her poncho with trails of iridescent spheres. Both of them lurched for a moment following their arrival, as if Lozzie’s membrane-transition had left them disoriented. Then they drifted up toward the ceiling like a pair of helium-filled party balloons, awaiting the next stop on the Lozzie-train.

Of course Raine, Badger, and Whistle couldn’t see them.

Whistle hopped up to his little doggy paws, surprised and confused at how Lozzie had appeared as if from nowhere, but mostly mollified because it was Lozzie and Lozzie gave extraordinarily good pettings.

“Lozzie?” I spluttered.

Raine laughed. “Speak of the devil! There she is!”

“Oh,” Badger was saying. “Oh, yes, exactly like that. Hello — hello again, Lozzie.”

But Lozzie was already whirling into motion, every movement bursting with too much energy. She put the pile of books down on Badger’s desk and hopped over to the bed, raising one finger toward me and Raine and saying, “Wait, wait!”

We all waited as she reached under her poncho and produced a small curve of white material — a piece of shed Caterpillar carapace — and clicked it down on Badger’s bedside table.

“There!” she announced. “A keepsake from my biggest friends — largest! Big. Yes!”

Badger blinked at the object in surprise and incomprehension. Lozzie leaned forward and gave him a hug, poncho going

everywhere. Before he had time to react, she was away again, off Badger and moving onto Whistle. She hauled the Corgi into the air, spun him round, kissed him on the head, and then placed him back in Badger's lap. Whistle was quite overwhelmed by this and sat back down with a 'hurrruff'.

Laughing now, Lozzie danced away, turned around, and all but slammed herself into Seven-Shades-of-Surprised-by-a-Hug. Sevens caught her, hugged her back with delicate frosty precision, and then let her go again. Lozzie favoured Raine with a hug too, got some big slaps on the back for her trouble, and then finished by hugging me. She was warm and wriggly and clingy; her poncho seemed to sneak up your sides and pull you in; she smelled of sweat and shampoo and chocolate cookies and a hint of cleaning products from the House. We could have gone to sleep right there and then, because Lozzie gave very good hugs.

But then she quickly detached and hopped back again, wiping the hair out of her face. "Heathy! Youuuuuu — are needed in Camelot. We need to make the back wall open up for a Catty to go inside and clean out all the sad-sads, but I can't do that myself. Pleeeeeeeease!"

I actually laughed, bowled over by the sheer radiant energy from Lozzie's presence. "Lozzie, we do have phones. You could have just sent me a text." We frowned upward at the bubble-servitors bumping against Badger's ceiling. "Is that the last of them?"

Lozzie flapped her poncho in a full-body shrug. "Mister Cringle says there's still six more inside the House, a-wandering and a-wobbling. They're all dazed without him! It's kind of weird. Kind of funny. Mostly weird. A bit bad. Better now, 'kay?" She turned and waved a corner of poncho up at the bubble-servitors. She'd been digging them out of the House's guts for the entire day, recovering them and returning the lost angels to Hringewindla's shell. She'd been gathering up the misplaced Knights as well, though at least they had the good sense to look for exits under their own intellectual steam.

Raine reached out and ruffled Lozzie's hair. Lozzie made a show of pulling a face and sticking her tongue out, but her hair was already such a wild riot that no further messing was possible. Raine said, "Heather'll be along later, okay, Loz? Maybe take a break in the meantime? I know Tenny's still trying to name your new friend."

“No looming threat over her head anymore,” we went on. My tentacles flexed in agreement. “No uncle Edward trying to put her in a cage. Didn’t you see her just now, Badger?”

Raine said, “Our Lozzie’s acting like she’s gotten into the white powder, if you know what I mean.”

I did not know what Raine meant, but Badger forced a polite chuckle and Sevens tilted her chin upward in haughty approval. In the kitchen, Sarika let out a pointed tut and muttered something under her breath. So I assumed this all made sense.

“Well,” Badger sighed. “I’m ... finding it hard to tell, right now, yes, sorry. I’m ... ” He trailed off with a sigh and a pained smile. He was so reluctant to express the brute fact of his own exhaustion.

“Not surprised you’re tired, mate,” said Raine, filling in the missing words. “That was one hell of a seizure you had. I think you’ve earned as much rest as you want.”

Badger’s smile turned introspective. “Yes. Worst one yet. Like I was ... riding it out until the last moment, making it worse and worse. But I had to finish saying what I had to say, to Edward, I ... I don’t know why, I ... ”

Sevens spoke, ice-cold and oddly sharp: “Do you really not know why, Mister Hobbes?”

Badger blinked at her. “S-sorry? Um ... I’m sorry, I’m still so fuzzy in the head. I didn’t quite catch who ... you ... ”

Sevens stared so steely and silent that Badger just trailed off. Whistle stood up again, hackles rising. We wanted to interrupt before this got too weird, but Raine sensed the tension and jumped in first.

“Did anybody tell you that Zheng had to put her hand in your mouth? To stop you from biting your tongue off? During the seizure, I mean.”

That got Badger’s attention. Astonished, he stared at Raine. “Um. No. Nobody told me that.”

Raine chuckled and shot him a wink. “I think you’re probably the first mage with the honour of having your tongue saved by Zheng, rather than ripped out.”

Badger flinched. "I'm not a mage."

In the kitchen, Sarika hissed something horrible under her breath.

"Nathan," I said, drawing myself up in my chair. "I'm sorry, we're getting very off-topic, and I don't want to use up all your time. We came here for a specific reason. Well, two specific reasons, really. First is to say thank you."

"You don't have to—"

We ignored his protest. "I don't know if Edward was telling the truth about surviving and returning from the abyss, but if he was, you saved us from that. I don't know what might have happened. Thank you. Stop rejecting the gratitude."

Badger bobbed his head, but not as an equal. He had all the mannerisms of a lowly soldier talking to his guardian angel. I wanted to sigh, or reach out with a tentacle to slap him and tell him to stop, tell him that he deserved a little pride. But I didn't have the energy for that.

"Secondly," I croaked on. "Badger. Nathan. Your plan worked, it was genius, but ... why didn't you tell us?"

To my surprise and delight, that did the trick.

Nathan straightened up, either subconsciously or on purpose, though I suspected the former. He found his spine again. He looked away from us for a long, long moment, staring out of the open window. There wasn't much to see from his bedroom window — the wall of the block of flats opposite, a sliver of pavement below, a burst of summer blue sky above. We all followed his gaze as a seagull passed overhead; far inland for a gull. Perhaps there was a storm over the Irish Sea that day.

Badger's hand found Whistle's back and started to stroke the Corgi. Whistle squinted his eyes shut in doggy pleasure.

"It wasn't a decision I took lightly," he said eventually — and even his voice was different now, lower, softer, but more confident. "And I understand if you never want to trust me again. If my trustworthiness is the price to pay for putting Edward Lilburne beyond the ability to harm anyone, then I will gladly pay it."

"That's not an answer to the question," we said.

“You would have stopped me.”

Raine clicked her tongue. “We might not have done. Still not an answer, Nate.”

Badger smiled again. He turned back to us. “There were three reasons for not telling you. Did Amy not inform you about the first one?”

“Stack?” Raine asked, then sighed with more than a touch of longing. “Nah, she made herself scarce as soon as we confirmed the kill. Went to visit her kid, I think. And I was really looking forward to drinking with her and all.”

“Ah,” said Badger, a little lost by that. I frowned up at Raine. Badger went on. “Well. She agreed that concealing my plan was the right move.” He pulled a grimace, half-amused, half-apologetic. “I’m sorry to say this, but to put it gently — Heather, Raine, your friends, your group, whatever you want to call it—”

“Cult?” said Sevens, in a tone of challenge.

I tutted. “No! Sevens!”

“Polycule,” said Raine. “Strike team. Lesbian special ops. Best posse this side of the Watford Gap.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. Nathan made a gentle ‘never mind’ gesture with one hand.

“To put it gently,” Badger repeated himself. “Stack suggested that if I was to let you know, then the plan would somehow work its way back to Edward. Not intentionally! Just ... ”

Raine tilted her head. “What did Stack say?” She pointed at Nathan with a finger-gun. “Ah ah ah, exact words, insults and all — what did she say about us, Nate? Come on. Give me the exact words.”

Badger winced. “Amy said you have ‘dogshit opsec’.”

Raine burst out laughing. She threw up her hands. “Oh come on, fuck her!”

“She said, if you were political activists, you’d be obvious plants, feeding information back to GCHQ. Um. Sorry.”

“Come on!” Raine almost shouted.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “‘Opsec’?”

Sevens said: “Operational security.”

Raine was amused but deeply offended. “Yeah, she thinks we were riddled with what — bugs? That he had our phones tapped? What?”

Badger looked horribly uncomfortable. He actually shifted in his bed, blushing and petting Whistle to anchor himself. “She did specifically mention the possibility of a phone call being intercepted, yes. Or just people watching your house. Or one of you saying the wrong thing to his lawyer, or ... ”

Raine was shaking her head and biting her lower lip. “Oh Amy, Amy, Amy, I am going to get you alone in a room eventually and give you a piece of my mind.”

Sevens said: “Miss Stack will tie you into a knot.”

“Not if I’m faster she won’t.”

“Raine,” I whined. “I thought you and her had resolved this?”

“We resolved one thing and I started another. Sorry, Heather. She just gets under my waistband.”

“You mean under your skin?”

“I mean what I said.” Raine shot me a filthy wink. I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose; I wasn’t opposed to this conversation, or Raine’s new-found and rather concerning fascination, but this wasn’t the time to discuss it.

“Badger,” I said, trying to regain some control here. “You said three reasons. What were the other two, please?”

Nathan looked rather sheepishly between the three of us, hoping that we’d stopped, and then nodded. “Well, the second one you’ve already heard,” he said slowly. “I already said it out loud, to Edward, and then to you afterward, I think, though my memory is a little hazy.” He fixed me with a dour look. “I didn’t do this for you, Heather. I did it for myself and for everyone he killed. I did it for my dead friends. I did it for the ... the ... the kids ... ”

“I know,” we said as Badger started to choke off.

We didn’t need to talk about the pile of dead children beneath the cult’s castle. Edward would not be ordering anymore kidnappings or

murders.

“And third?” Sevens prompted — oddly cold again.

Badger looked down at Whistle. He scratched the dog between the ears. “I couldn’t be sure you would do it.”

“ ... me?” I said.

Badger nodded. He looked up from Whistle with a strange note of defiance in his eyes, a little frown on his brow, guilty but resolved, like a condemned man standing by his crimes. “I know you could — I’ve seen you ready to kill before, I know you’re capable of it, and I sort of think we all have that potential in us, all people. I’m not like Alexander, I don’t think you’re somehow incapable of the decision. But — would you?” He shrugged. The motion took him great effort in his exhausted state. “I couldn’t be certain.”

We wanted to laugh. We tried, but it came out as a hollow little puff. “What on earth do you mean? I killed the Ed-ball, moments earlier. Well, okay, Lozzie and us killed him together, but—”

“I didn’t know any of that would happen, when I made the decision,” Nathan said. “And I didn’t kill Edward Lilburne. I didn’t kill him. I sent him to hell. I sent a man to hell, to be tortured forever.” Badger shook his head. “Or until his soul runs out. I don’t know how it works. Could you do that? Maybe. Maybe not. But I knew I could. Because I’m like this.”

“So, what?” we spluttered. “You thought I might flinch from Edward himself? He was threatening Lozzie! He was threatening all of us!” We almost shouted — which hurt my throat, very badly, but I was angry now, in a way I didn’t understand. “Evee’s the one who toyed with the idea of a truce at one point, but she abandoned that weeks and weeks ago. You seriously thought I was going to let him go after he posed so much danger to Lozzie, to me, to all of my family, my friends?”

Badger smiled a sad little smile. “You let me live, Heather.”

My brief anger went out, a candle in a storm.

“Nate,” Raine said gently. “Go easy on yourself, hey?”

Badger continued. “You were very merciful. And I’m not sure I deserved that mercy. The me of a few months ago?” He shook his head. “I was ready to sell Lozzie to her uncle, just for relief from the

... the thing in my head.”

“Which I got rid of,” I said. “You can’t be blamed for that.”

“I am responsible for my actions before that,” he said. “And you let me live. You fixed my head.” He nodded at the bedroom doorway. “You saved Sarry, too. You didn’t need to. And Kimberly — I didn’t really know her much, in the cult. But she lives with you. Zheng, you could have thrown her Outside, I guess. But you didn’t.” He took a deep breath. “You’re very merciful, Heather. And I was worried you might find a way to show that mercy to Edward.”

“I would never have—”

“I couldn’t be sure,” he repeated. It wasn’t like him to talk over me, interrupt me, and there was a strange tremor in his voice — defying his Outsider Angel, but he had to do it. “I was worried you might find a way to let him go in return for the book. Or that he might escape with promises to never come back. And he was a mage. They find ways to keep living. We learned that with Alexander. I was afraid you would find a way to be merciful, again.” He tilted his head oddly. Eyes wet. Brow furrowed. “But I knew it had to be done. So, yes, in a way, in this way, I did it for you.” He blinked back the threat of tears. “I could have gotten one of you shot, yes, because I didn’t let you in on my plan. But I weighed it and considered it worth the risk. I considered Edward’s guaranteed defeat worth the risk. That’s why you shouldn’t trust me again.”

Raine blew out a very long sigh. Sevens just stared, eyes full of ice, uninterested in Badger’s justifications, waiting for something deeper. Whistle whimpered softly in Badger’s lap. In the kitchen, Sarika wasn’t banging around anymore.

We — myself and six additional Heathers, coiled tight inside bruised and sore tendrils of pneuma-somatic flesh — considered the alternative, the counter-factual, the way things might have gone. What would we have done if Badger had not been there, or if his gambit to sell Edward’s soul had not worked? What if Ooran Juh had not taken the bait? What if Edward Lilburne was correct about surviving in the abyss? What if he’d come back, as near-invincible as Ooran Juh — or as myself?

Would I have dived into the abyss and ripped him apart before his transformation could complete? Would Eevee have signed a peace treaty in exchange for the book? Would we have left that festering

magician to his tricks and his plots, just so we could get away?

Knowing was impossible. In retrospect it seemed as if this could not have worked out any other way.

I sighed, raw and frustrated. "One moment I'm too harsh, then apparently I'm too soft. I wish the world would make up its mind."

We didn't really mean that. We were just left with unresolved questions.

"Hey, hey," Raine said. "For what it's worth, I think you did the right thing. Imperfect, stupid in parts, could'a done it better. But it was the right thing. Well done, Nate."

Nathan pulled a grimace. "You're only saying that because it worked. If it hadn't ..."

He shook his head. We all lapsed into a moment of silence. But then —

"My father had a hand in this. Of that I am certain."

Seven-Shades-of-Supercilious-Severity spoke like she was pronouncing a death sentence.

Nathan just blinked at her. "I'm ... I'm s-sorry, I still don't understand who—"

I sighed. "You've met her before. Sort of. Try not to focus on that, Badger. Please. Just ... humour her."

Sevens took a step toward the bed. Her umbrella jutted out at an angle, like an aristocrat with a fancy walking stick. Whistle showed his little Corgi teeth to her, but she just blinked slowly, once, and he shrank back. Badger swallowed.

"She won't hurt you," I croaked.

"An interesting thing you created, wasn't it?" said Sevens. "A unique spell. Not really true magic, but a fusion of mathematics and magical principles. A one-of-a-kind, tailored especially for Edward Lilburne. How did you get the idea for the spell, Mister Hobbes? A book, perhaps? One which came into your possession by strange means, or which you discovered that you had owned all your life but never before opened?"

Badger looked utterly bewildered. "Uh. Um. N-no. I just ... I mean, I

did the work myself. I got the basic idea from the mathematics baked into the house, when I saw the photos. Is that ... wrong?"

Raine cleared her throat. "We already went through his flat when we got out of the hospital yesterday. He's not hiding any capital-B books around here."

Sevens tilted her head, staring down at Nathan. "A dream, perhaps? Father does sometimes work through dreams. I am told one usually wakes weeping, or screaming.."

I tutted. "Sevens. Sevens, he's telling the truth. If Badger encountered something weird, he would have told me."

"Uh, yes." Nathan nodded, totally lost but clinging to my life-raft. "Anything. Anything at all, I-I don't—"

"And how," said Sevens, "did you get that piece of paper in front of Edward's nose? That is one step which continues to elude even my comprehension, Mister Hobbes. Edward Lilburne was a supremely paranoid and cautious man. Am I expected to believe that he simply looked at a piece of paper put in front of him by one of his enemies?"

Nathan perked up at that. His lips creased with a little smile. "Oh, well. That was the biggest wheeze of all. I told him the truth."

"The truth?" I croaked, genuinely interested.

Badger nodded. "I told him the truth, about what you did for me, Heather. About the brain surgery, and the ... E-word. And I implied that I had the trick of it, that I'd figured it out from you. I baited him with the implication that I knew how to reject and control something from Outside. He never could have resisted that temptation. Even if it was a lie, he had to test it."

Sevens clicked her tongue. "But still you got it past his caution. How curious. You mean me to believe that none of his minions checked it first?"

Badger smiled wider. A touch of mania coloured his eyes — but not yellow. "They did."

Sevens frowned delicately.

"He checked it," Badger went on. "He really checked it. Three of his weird clones. One of them went over it in detail, inside a magic

circle and all. They did all sorts of things to it until letting him read it. He had me seriously outclassed. And his demon — the uh, the lady with the horns — she checked it too. But here's the trick, right? It didn't affect any of them!" Badger was grinning now, very pleased with himself. "That's how I got it past all his protections. The mathematics required a mage's mind on which to operate. It wouldn't function otherwise!" His voice rose too far, almost panting. "I-I got the basic idea from the house, the mathematics twinned to magical effect, it was incredible, and- and- and- I worked out some of the rest, and yes I had to do some additional research, borrow some concepts, but—"

"Borrow some concepts?" Sevens interrupted sharply.

Badger stopped, panting softly, sweating a little. He wiped his forehead in surprise. "Oh. Uh ... um ... I ... "

"Heeeey there Nate," said Raine. "Slow down, slow right down, okay?"

With a clack-clack-clack and a bang of crutch on bedroom door-frame, we were suddenly joined by a very grumpy Sarika.

We would love to say that she looked marginally better than when we last saw her — but she didn't. Sarika looked awful. She was still a mess of random muscle twitches, of sallow skin and eye-bags and her black hair forever streaked with premature grey. She was also obviously and openly stressed beyond belief; I had the sudden impression she had not slept last night, at all. But she no longer hunched and slouched and threatened to fall over so often — she had grown more adept at using her crutches, at predicting and catching her various lurches and lunges, at walking unaided, at making a go of some kind of normality.

She was wearing a large oversized cream jumper, a long skirt, and a scowl of deep contempt. At the sight of her, Whistle jumped up in Badger's lap, tongue out, little tail wagging at maximum speed.

Sarika brandished a wad of printouts in one hand.

"He didn't tell you about the fucking paper, did he?" she snapped. "Here. Read it for yourselves."

"Oh, that," Badger said. "Sorry, I wasn't hiding that. It just gave me the idea for the looping function, that was all. It's not even supernatural in any way, it's just a mathematics paper."

Raine accepted the dog-eared printout with a curious look. She held it up, frowned, then laughed and shook her head. She passed it to Sevens.

“What?” we croaked. We couldn’t see from down in the chair.
“Sevens, what does it say?”

Raine said to Sarika: “He didn’t tell you shit about his plan, did he?”

“No,” Sarika rasped in a voice that could have filed a hole in a battleship hull. “He did not.”

“You mad at him?”

“Yes.”

“Fair ‘nuf.” Raine shrugged.

Sevens peered at the paper and said: “Explain to me what I am looking at.”

Sarika almost growled. “He got it off SciHub. The author’s never published anything else. And I checked last night — the listing has vanished.”

“Sevens, I can’t see,” we said.

Raine cleared her throat and read out loud for my benefit.
“Recursive Operations as Utilized in Reverse Function, Examined in Descending Order.”

Sarika hissed. “Doesn’t even sound like a real mathematics paper name, does it? And ‘University of Tolchester’. That’s not a real place!”

“It’s a misprint,” Badger said gently. “It must mean somewhere else. And it’s just a normal paper, there’s nothing supernatural.”

Sevens laughed — or at least I assumed it was a laugh, a single puff of air from her nose. “The author’s name is ‘Rex Saffron’.”

Raine snorted again. “Fuck’s sake.”

“Oh,” I said. “Oh. Well. That’s rather unsubtle.”

Sevens placed the papers gently on the edge of Badger’s bed. “My father’s hand. I rest my case.”

Badger looked utterly bewildered. I didn't blame him. I doubt he understood the layers of problem being revealed here.

Neither did Sarika — but that did not stop her from stomping forward, brandishing one crutch with passive-aggressive intent. “Your father?” she rasped at Sevens. “And who the fuck are you, Miss ‘Saffron’?”

Sevens turned an ice-cold gaze on Sarika. To Sarika's credit, she endured it for all of about five seconds. She had endured worse, we supposed.

“You do not wish to know who or what I am,” said Seven-Shades-of-Serious-Secrets.

I let out a big sigh. “What does this actually mean, Sevens?” we asked. “Are we ... in a ... play?” I shrugged.

Sevens stepped back and bowed her head in the closest to an apology she could get. “No. I believe it was a momentary redirection of a single line in an untouched script. However, this means I must potentially deal with a small family matter, though perhaps not before certain other pursuits. I assume my father's involvement in this is done, his interest passed with the death of the elder Mister Lilburne. But I will still have a nice little shout at him.” She tilted her head slightly. “I do not wish to thank him. He may get ideas.”

Sarika huffed. She stomped over to the bed and patted Whistle on the head. “Are you all done here? Nathan is not well. No thanks to all of you. He needs to sleep.”

Badger pulled an embarrassed smile. “Sorry, please, I'm fine ... ”

“No. No you're not!” she snapped.

Raine clapped her hands together. “Yeah, I think we're done here. Right, Heather? Badger's on the mend, and we've got lots to deal with, yeah?”

But Nathan and I were looking at each other; he was still my unasked-for disciple. Not to mention I probably had a responsibility to ensure that Sevens' father — the King in Yellow — took no continuing interest in him. What I was to him, I didn't know.

He smiled and said: “You look exhausted, Heather. And I don't mean that as a funny euphemism or something. Are you alright?”

We shrugged, which made several different muscle groups all ache at once. “We’ll heal up shortly.”

“Is everyone else ... okay?” he asked.

I swallowed awkwardly.

Raine said, “Well, some people did get shot. Just not us.”

Badger winced.

We said: “Did you know any of those people?” But Badger shook his head. “The boy who survived the gunfight — and he is a boy, a teenager — he’s still in the hospital. Raine, is that still right?”

“Mmhmm.” Raine nodded. “Kim took him in as a ‘bystander’, so we can’t get in and take much of a look again. No next of kin, no family, he’s just there by himself. Lozzie went to check. Kid’s basically in a waking coma. Fugue state. Whatever you wanna call it. Magical shock? I dunno.” She shrugged. “All the rest went down in the gun fight. We’ve got Eddy’s demon, but she’s ... well. Taciturn.”

“And the House,” I croaked. “Don’t forget the House.”

“Mm! Yeah.” Raine nodded. “And it’s a lot of house.”

Badger nodded along. “I’m ... really sorry all those people had to die. And that boy, I don’t know there’s anything ... ”

“I’ll do something,” I said — though I had no idea what, not yet.

Badger nodded. “I did that too, in a way, you know? That was my responsibility. I caused it, even if it was Amy pulling the trigger. My fault.”

I considered for a moment, then asked a question I wasn’t sure if I should put into words.

“Nathan, are you a mage again now?”

Badger didn’t wince that time. He just looked at me and said: “I don’t know. If you need me to be ... ”

Sarika ground her teeth so hard I heard them creak.

I shook my head. “Sorry. No. I shouldn’t have said that. No.”

One more awkward smile. Badger said, “But you got the book,

right? You got that book, in the end. The way's open now. To the ...
" He glanced at Sarika, who shuddered and averted her eyes. "To the E-word. To your sister. Is that right, Heather? I helped. I did. Right?"

Raine answered before I could: "Lots of mess to clean up first. And Eeve's gotta do the work, make us a thing." She winked. "We're not going tomorrow or something like that, alright?"

"You're right," I said. My tentacles finally unwound from my body, lifting together as I pushed us out of the chair. The pain was enough to make me nauseated, but I held on and raised my head, lifting my little bag of lemons with one aching, sore hand. "There's some mess, and some lost cultists, and some responsibilities which cannot be avoided. But you're right. Eeve has the book. She'll build her invisibility spell. The way is open."

The way to Wonderland, to the Eye, and to Maisie.

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.1

Mages and monsters, Outsider gods and dredged-up demons, grinning devils and dubious angels — what do we all have in common? In the final accounting — when the wounds are dressed and the corpses are buried, when the debris has been swept up, the armour peeled off, the aching muscles soaked in hot baths, the doors shut and the curtains closed to seal up the comforting and familiar cocoon of Number 12 Barnslow Drive — what is the one commonality that seems to run almost unbroken through the figures of power in this world of eldritch truth? I include us in that question — me, myself, seven times repeated through pneumasomatic neurons in my tentacles — but also the other *us*: Evelyn and Raine, Zheng and Lozzie, Twil and Kimberly and Sevens and everyone in my orbit.

What do we have in common with an entity like the Eye?

We leave behind so much wreckage, much of it still alive and twitching.

The only way to differentiate us from the Eye — or from Edward Lilburne, or Alexander, or Ooran Juh, or a dozen other lurking horrors out there beyond the sensible upright walls of everyday life — was for us to attempt to put that wreckage back together again.

One such piece of wreckage was the pitiful wretch I had named as the ‘Grinning Demon’: Edward Lilburne’s final attendant, claimed by Lozzie, taken home without much of a plan.

Other clumps of wreckage abounded in the brightly lit shallows, lying between coral reef and rock-face: Badger and Sarika, attended to for now; the House in Camelot, preening in grand expansion; the remnants of the cult, with the Eye still in their heads, held off for a while longer by promises of help; Sevens’ emotions; Evelyn’s prosthetic leg and chronic pain; my own changeable body.

We could not ignore all of those forever.

Especially not when preparing to dive deeper than ever before, down into the lightless void far beneath the waves.

= =

I was being a bad girl — or perhaps seven bad girls working together; I did not wish to get out of bed and be a person, not yet, not here, not like this.

It was three days since we had returned from Edward Lilburne's lair and two days after I had been to see Badger in his no-longer-so-drab flat; I had spent almost forty eight hours doing little except going through the painstaking process of physical recovery; it was the second of July and the height of British summertime — in the North, in Sharrowford. In material terms this meant the air was muggy and thick, the kind of air one can feel glugging down one's throat and clotting inside one's lungs. It meant the sun was occasionally blazing bright, whenever the clouds deigned to part for more than twenty minutes. It meant that Raine had spent a significant chunk of yesterday morning digging out a couple of spare fans from the cluttered rooms toward the back of the upstairs hallway — and that Raine herself had been walking around the house in tank-top, shorts, and nothing else, not even underwear, as far as I knew. It meant that I was too sweaty and groggy to truly enjoy such a sight. It meant that for once even the near-supernatural powers of Number 12 Barnslo Drive were not enough to keep the oppressive weight of summer held safely beyond the walls.

It was midday, 12:01 according to the mocking numbers on my mobile phone when I managed to scoop it off my bedside table with a sleepy tentacle. The afternoon sky beyond the curtains was the colour of bleached lead. It was pushing almost thirty three degrees Celsius indoors. Awful.

We wanted to go back to sleep; we wanted to continue doing what I had done for almost the entire last couple of days: sleep and rest and regrow, punctuated by brief periods of stuffing lemons down my throat or nodding off on the toilet.

But, for the first time since I'd dragged myself to my feet to go visit Badger, I felt coherent and awake, and slightly less sore all over.

My bedroom was a pit of shadows, barely illuminated by the narrow crack in the curtains, populated by ghost-images and

looming giants in the dark; we liked it that way, though — the shadows needed friends too — so we didn't bother to switch on the lamp as we sat up. We spent an uncomfortable half-minute hissing at the myriad of aches and pains and stitches and twinges and tiny scabs, and then kicked away the sweat-soaked bedsheets. A standing fan was leaning over the bed, pointed at right where I'd been sleeping, filling the air with chopping white noise; I slapped at the controls with a half-awake hand and made it stop. Silence descended, broken by the buzz-buzz-buzz chirping of insects out beyond the walls.

"Raine?" I croaked. "I think I'm ... I think I'm awake. For real. Hello? Zheng? Sevens?"

We were alone.

For a single maddening moment we entertained a dark nightmare notion: that this wasn't my bedroom at all, but some kind of Outside imitation or facsimile, that we were truly alone, beyond the hearing of any human friend or lover, that the ceiling was about to open like a giant eye.

Six of us didn't go along with the panic — my tentacles could taste the air, so we knew it was real, if humid and sticky and awful — but my core brain, my human brain, felt the first twinge of animal alarm.

But before I could even articulate the thought in private, the normal sounds of Number 12 Barnslow Drive wrapped me tight: creaking floorboards, the distant glug and gulp of the boiler, somebody moving around in one of the other bedrooms, a soft clink of cutlery downstairs, and the murmur of a familiar, feathery, trilling voice.

Nothing bad could be happening if Tenny was giggling.

"Ahhhh," we sighed. We hugged a tentacle — then let go, because everything was too hot. "Calm down, Heather. Calm. Calm. You won. We all won. It's okay."

There was a note on my bedside table, held down with a sports bottle full of lukewarm cherry-flavoured drink.

I've gone out to buy a couple more fans, on Eeve's orders! So here's this note in case you wake up alone. See the bottle? It's full of Lucozade. Everything a sweaty squid wife needs. I know it's not your favourite flavour, but we didn't have any in lemon. Drink up! Doctor's orders!

(That's me, I'm a doctor now.) Love you, xxx.

P.S. Don't know where Zheng's gotten to, hunting or something. If you see her, tell her off for not letting me know.

Raine had signed the note with a flourish, used a heart shape for the dot of the 'I' in 'Raine', and then drawn a surprisingly skilled artistic rendition of a hand pouring the bottle of Lucozade out over a very happy little squid.

The Lucozade was vile. Lukewarm fake cherry. I drank it like my throat was made of sandpaper and instantly wanted more.

We fumbled with our phone for a moment, clumsy with sleep, and sent a text message back to Raine: *We love you too. Awake for real now. Love you love you. Be safe.*

She replied two seconds later with ASCII art of what I think was meant to be her doing a karate kick. We giggled.

For a couple of minutes we just sat on the edge of the bed, sweating uncomfortably in the paradoxical summer heat, wafting ourselves with alternating tentacles, communing in silence with the summer shadows.

The last couple of days were a jagged blur, smeared across my memory like the incomplete imprint of a woodblock without enough ink. Getting up and going to see Badger had consumed what little energy I'd had left; I was surprised I hadn't slipped into an actual fugue state on the way home. But, no. I was vaguely aware that as I had lain insensate — occasionally shuffling backwards and forwards from fridge and bathroom — the rest of the house had hummed with activity, with clean-up and preparation, with people beginning to go their separate ways, with tensions I had neither the time nor the waking moments to unravel, let alone assist.

I was quite certain of one thing though, one thing that no amount of hazy memory could conceal, for no memory can trick the senses, certainly not the nose: I had not showered in three days.

"Ugh," I stuck my tongue out. "Oh. Heather. Oh, no."

I was 'ripe', as Raine might say. Pongy. I stank.

Good girls do not go without showering for days on end. Neither do angels, I think? Octopuses and squid don't need to shower, but that's because they live in the superior medium — the sea, where

good girls do not have to worry about sweating because they are surrounded by water.

Showering was an ordeal.

I was still sore from head to toe, though now in new and fascinating ways. Bruises had stiffened my muscles to frozen leather, leaving interesting but unexciting colouration in places where I didn't need to glow purple or green or yellow. Raising my knees more than a couple of inches caused my legs to shudder and seize up. I couldn't bend forward at the waist without my stomach quivering from the effort. And trying to raise my arms above my head made all sorts of very bad things happen down my back.

Nobody else was there to hear me hiss and snap a plethora of bad words; my tentacles pulsed and bobbed in mock-scandal at some of my vocabulary, then joined in with the swearing when we forced ourselves to stretch and uncoil. Nobody was there to see me slump against the side of the bath, with water sluicing around me like I was an abandoned octopus in a drainage ditch. Nobody was there to see me curl up in a ball and pretend I was lost down in the deep dark waters of the abyss.

A less maudlin part of us sort of wished that Raine was there to share the shower with me and do things which would take our collective minds off the aches and pains. But she probably would have held back for fear of hurting me.

"I've been a naughty squid," I muttered to myself. We were only partly glad that Raine was not present to hear that one.

We sat in the bathtub for a little too long, underneath the shower. One of our tentacles even toyed with the plug and the cold water tap, tempting me to fill the tub with cold water and just lie in it for an hour, eyes closed, floating away.

But alas, our core was still human, our reactor was stiff with healing, and we had human requirements for body temperature and homeostasis.

Besides, if anybody found me floating in cold water with the lights out, they might ask awkward questions.

We couldn't bear more than shorts and a t-shirt ourselves, not in the clinging sticky heat after a nice cool shower. But we chose long shorts, because we were self-conscious about our stubby, short little

legs — and a nice loose t-shirt with slits ready-cut in the sides for our tentacles to poke through. Pink, soft, and two sizes too large for me. Lovely.

However, the t-shirt left our arms exposed — which meant the Fractal was exposed, on our left forearm. That wasn't a problem, but I just wasn't used to it. I traced the angular branches of the symbol with a fingertip. Had Raine refreshed it as usual, last night? She must have done. Perhaps I'd been out cold at the time.

"Sevens? Sevens? Seven-Shades-of-Scarcely-Showing-Yourself?" I spoke out loud to the shadows in the bedroom as I got dressed.

But we were still alone.

I did not stay alone for long. I ventured down the creaky, shadow-draped stairs of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, across the curtained cave of the front room with its piles of ancient boxes full of random bric-a-brac, and into the disturbingly bright flash-bang of the kitchen.

The sun was pouring in through the rear kitchen window, glinting off the metal of the sink and dusting the floor tiles with honey-yellow light; the clouds must have parted while I was in the shower. The table was littered with post-breakfast debris, plates, and empty mugs. The door to the magical workshop was half open, easing back and forth by a fraction of an inch under air pressure; I could hear the whirr of at least three separate electric fans running in there, circulating air, drowning out any incidental sounds.

"Praem," I croaked. "Good ... um ... afternoon, I think. Yes. Hello. Hi."

Praem was at the kitchen counter, doing something fantastically complicated with fruit and knives. She had bananas, strawberries, a couple of kiwi fruits, an open bag of sugar, and some kind of chocolate powder. She placed her knife down on the cutting board — next to another knife, and another knife, and another knife — smoothed her skirt over her thighs, and then turned her head to look at me.

Milk-white eyes stared, waiting.

"Oh," I said. "Um. I'm awake, yes. For real. Actually awake. Here. Present. Uh, look." I raised a hand and made a peace sign — simply because it was the quickest symbol to make. "Two fingers."

Praem responded with a double peace-sign, both hands. “Good morning.”

“Well,” I said. “Afternoon, really.”

“Morning is when you are up.”

“Um.”

“Good morning.”

Praem had apparently taken delivery of a fresh maid uniform — or repaired and modified her old one, I couldn’t quite tell. This one was even more festooned with lace than before: a tracery of white lace crawled up her throat, down her forearms, and across her palms. How she was cutting up fruit without ruining the palm-lace, I had no idea. I suspected I didn’t want to know, or that I’d have to go abyss-diving to truly comprehend. The upper body of the uniform was trim around her waist and chest, giving her a contained, sleek, and yet plump look, all at once. If she had purchased this uniform it must have been quite expensive; it looked tailored specifically for her body type. The skirt was ankle-length, double-thick, black fabric fronted by an over-layer of cream-white. Her hair was up in her habitual messy bun, trailing loops and curls down across her neck.

“Are you not hot in that?” I asked. “Not that it doesn’t suit you, Praem, it looks really lovely, but it’s also over thirty degrees in here.”

“Maids are cool,” Praem intoned.

“I ... uh, I suppose they are?”

“I am cool.”

“You ... you are. Yes. Fair enough.” We shrugged, defeated.

As if operating on a set of prior instructions, Praem stepped away from her unfinished fruit engineering and opened the fridge. A lovely blast of cold air wafted over me; I stretched out my tentacles and made a slightly embarrassing purring sound, but Praem worked too fast for me to linger on the sensation. Deft maidly hands poured chilled water into a glass, squeezed half a pre-cut lemon into the water, and then popped several neatly formed ice-cubes into the resulting drink.

She pressed the glass into my hands. Hard.

“Oh, uh, um, thank you, Praem. But I’m quite—”

“Drink. The. Lemon. Water.”

Praem’s sing-song order left no room for argument. I sipped my lemon water and instantly felt myself a degree or two less overheated. I sipped again and realised that until that moment I had felt like a beached squid, washed up on the baking shore of reality. I sipped a third time; I wanted to go Outside, I wanted to change again, so it was easier to think, easier to be. I sipped lemon water instead.

Praem returned to whatever concoction she was making with the fruit.

“So, Praem, where is ... uh ... ”

A lazy, heat-addled voice answered me from the half-open door to the magical workshop, calling out over the drone of the electric fans: “In here, Heather. In here.”

In the shadowy cave of the magical workshop I discovered one of the least likely trios I could have predicted.

Evelyn was sat at the huge wooden table, leaning back in one of the more substantial chairs; she was wearing a loose white t-shirt several sizes too large for her body, the hem of which extended well below her hips, almost concealing the pair of shorts beneath. The matte black of her prosthetic leg was fully exposed, on display in the cool gloom, stuck out in front of her in what looked like an oddly comfortable pose. Her other leg — her withered and damaged left — was also unconcealed, shrunken muscles and twisted joints out in the open. Her hair was tied up high, keeping it off her neck. This was probably the least amount of clothing I’d ever seen Eevee wearing, including during the aftermath of my first desperate rescue from Outside.

On the table in front of her was her laptop — plugged into the wall and paused on some grainy video — along with a neat pile of books, *The Testament of Heliopolis* sitting just next to them, an equally neat open notebook showing some sketches of magic circle designs, a couple of official-looking documents, and an empty glass with a little fruity residue at the bottom.

A great deal of cleaning had apparently happened in my absence: for the first time I could remember since Evelyn had set up this old drawing room as her magical workshop, the table was otherwise clear. No stray notes, no random tomes, no maps spread out all higgledy piggledy. The floor was clear as well: canvas magic circles had been banished to tightly-wrapped bundles in one corner, debris and junk and random spooky nonsense had been tidied away and placed on the bookshelf at the rear. Even the area around the gateway mandala had been sorted out, with the additional sheets of material stacked up on a little end-table.

The ever-present spider-servitors were present and correct, both of them clinging to their usual spots — one on the wall over the gateway mandala, the other in the opposite corner. Had they been dusted? Polished? I squinted in disbelief for a moment. They looked like somebody had buffed their black carapaces.

Somebody had even hoovered. Praem, probably. I made a mental note to thank her later. She really did too much around here.

Three electric fans had been placed around the room: two on the table and one over along the rear wall. All three looked about fifty years old, made of metal rather than plastic, their spinning blades held inside black cages to keep little fingers from investigating too closely.

Tenny was sitting on the battered old sofa over on the right hand side of the room, just beneath one of the heavily curtained windows. Tenny was of course not wearing any clothes, as she had no need for them, as always, but even she looked a little bit overheated; some of her silken black tentacles were flapping and whirring as if fanning her main body, and some of her patches of fluffy white fur looked a bit limp. Her human hands were clutching a box full of strawberries, banana slices, grapes, plums, and dried apricot pieces.

“Heath!” she fluttered when I entered the room. “Heath here! Yaaa!”

Next to Tenny, sitting prim and neat on the sofa, with her knees together and her hands in her lap, was the Grinning Demon.

She was no longer quite such a fearsome sight: her six and a half feet of naked muscle was now clothed in a baggy grey t-shirt and a pair of white jogging bottoms, presumably borrowed from Zheng.

The blood-and-ink magic wards had been scrubbed off her skin, leaving her pale and a bit sparse, but freed of any lingering control. She still had no hair, not even eyebrows or lashes, and her eyeballs themselves were like twin pools of fresh blood in her milk-pale face. Her massive pair of curving horns arced away from her forehead, black and shadowy in the cool air of the magical workshop.

And she'd lost the reason for her moniker: her mouth was closed, concealing her massive sharp teeth.

She looked up at me as I joined the three of them, but she didn't nod, or blink, or grin. Just stared.

"Oh," I said. "Oh, um, hello ... hi ... uh ... "

Evelyn sighed heavily and gestured with a wave of one hand. "There's more lemons in the fridge, Heather. Praem is keeping it stocked. Go eat. It's fine."

"Oh, no, but thank you," we said. "I'm awake now. Awake for real. And I don't feel like eating. And Praem gave me this." I sipped awkwardly from my lemon-water again. "Morning, Evee. Or, afternoon. Hello. Good to see you. You too, Tenny. And um ... "

Evelyn looked up properly and examined me for a moment, squinting hard. "So you are. Welcome back to the waking world."

"Heath! Heath!" Tenny was trilling in delight at my return, even though I had a vague memory of seeing her yesterday. She waved her tentacles and gestured with a piece of fruit. "Grinny! Grinny!" she said to the Grinning Demon. "This is Heath-er. Heath-er."

The Grinning Demon did not open her lips to reply; she made a closed-mouth rumble, like a giant lizard or a dinosaur. A Tenny-tentacle bobbed forward with a strawberry. 'Grinny' opened up and accepted the fruit, careful not to risk nicking Tenny's flesh with her extremely sharp teeth. She chewed and swallowed. Tenny made happy humming sounds at the successful feeding.

Evelyn sighed again and gestured at the pair, as if to say 'see what nonsense I've been doing all day?'

"Um," we said. "'Grinny'? Is that what we're going with for her?"

Evelyn sighed a third time. She was making an art of the sound. I got the feeling she'd been practising a lot during my absence. "Until she picks a new one herself, yes. I think it would be in extremely

poor taste to use the one that Nicole dug up for us.” She gestured at the official-looking papers on the table.

“Grinny!” Tenny cheered. “Auntie.”

“Wait, wait, back up,” we said. Even our tentacles had frozen in bobbing confusion, paused halfway to reaching out for Eevee’s hand. “Nicole dug up? What? Sorry?”

Praem’s voice reached out from the kitchen behind me: “Drink first.”

Evelyn raised her eyebrows. “Better do as she says, Heather. She hasn’t let up on me for days.” Evelyn nudged her own empty glass with her elbow. “I feel like my back teeth are floating.”

Praem’s voice called out again, a siren from a watery grave: “Hydrate.”

I made like a good girl and drank my lemon water. Yum yum.

Tenny fed a piece of dried apricot to Grinny. The demon accepted without complaint, but chewed notably slower. Tenny shuffled the apricot slices to one side of the box in her lap, ruling them out, but then she ate one herself, with the end of a tentacle, thought for a moment, and shuffled the fruit back to the middle of the box. Evelyn rubbed her own forehead, apparently exhausted by watching this process.

Evee did look better than during the aftermath of the duel with Edward, but she was still sporting significant eye bags and a hang-dog exhaustion in her face. But she was completely unselfconscious about showing her legs — withered and prosthetic alike.

We finished several glugs of lemon water and took a breath.

“Careful,” said Eevee, darkly amused. “Drink too fast and Praem will press another into your hands, unasked for.”

Praem called from the kitchen again: “All hydration is asked for.”

Evee waved a hand and rolled her eyes. Tenny fed another piece of fruit — banana slice this time — to Grinny. The fans whirled. Praem made knife-sounds from in the kitchen. We reached out and coiled a tentacle tip around Eevee’s wrist, which she patted absent-mindedly with her other hand.

“Where did Praem get the new uniform?” I asked. “It looks

tailored.”

“I don’t know. I’ve learned not to ask.”

I blinked hard. “Did she buy it with your Amazon account or something? Your credit card? Did you ... ”

“Oh, no,” Evelyn tutted. “She’d never do something like that without permission. Not that I’d say no, anyway.”

“Then ... how?”

Evelyn gave me a tired look. “I’ve learned not to ask.”

I sipped more lemon water, hoping it would help me think better. “Um. Eevee, where is everyone? I’m feeling a bit discombobulated here.”

“Summer!” Tenny trilled.

The Grinning Demon — I couldn’t take the name ‘Grinny’ seriously — made a deep throat-rumble of agreement. Summer.

Evelyn put a palm to her own forehead. “Oh I don’t fu— ... I don’t know, Heather.”

Tenny looked up at the sound of Evelyn’s aborted swear word, a knowing little smile on her mouth. I bit my lower lip. Evelyn pretended nothing had happened.

“Raine’s out buying fans? Maybe?” Evelyn continued. “Zheng went off ... somewhere, for something. Leaving us with ... ” She gestured at Grinny. “Lozzie is beyond the walls of reality. Twil’s at home. I think. Kim’s at work. Felicity went to, I don’t know, stalk her? Haven’t seen your yellow girlfriend in a while. Jan made herself very scarce but I gather she might be with Lozzie. Hello, Heather.”

“Hello, Eevee,” I repeated. “Yes, I’m listening, I’m here. It’s okay, I just ... I’m so used to being in crisis ... I ... ”

“Summer!” Tenny trilled again. “Summer!”

“Torture,” Evelyn grumbled. She nodded at me. “Sit down, Heather, for pity’s sake. You’re making me feel overheated just looking at you.”

We pulled up a chair next to Eevee and sat down, slowly and carefully, wincing and hissing softly at the pain in our legs, in our

tentacles, lingering in just about every muscle and tendon and tissue. For a moment we focused on breathing in out slowly, on sipping our rapidly depleting lemony water, and on enjoying the relative darkness of the magical workshop.

With the curtains closed tight and the trio of fans working hard to circulate air, it was probably the coolest room in the house. I felt the worst of my post-shower sweat begin to dry on my skin. Tenny reached out with a trio of silken black tentacles; top-right and bottom-right held her tentacle tips softly, in greeting and solidarity.

“Oh, it’s really not as bad in here as upstairs,” I said with a sigh. “This is nice.”

“Mm,” Eevee grunted. She was frowning at me in thought and concern.

I nodded toward the inert doorway-shape in the middle of the gateway mandala, feeling a moment of silly mischief. “Do you think it’s cooler over in Camelot?”

Evelyn tutted. “Do not tempt me, Heather. Do not. We can’t start using the most advanced magical technology ever invented to escape summer. Tch. Every time Lozzie comes back she’s wearing that poncho, still. I have no idea how she doesn’t melt.”

“Summer,” Tenny trilled — softer than before. “Ouchies?”

“Ow, yes.” Evelyn sighed. “Besides, if I go over there I’m just going to get swept up in Lozzie’s cleaning process. There’s too many tempting things in that house, things Edward left behind. And I’ve got a more important matter to concentrate on.” She gestured vaguely at *The Testament of Heliopolis* lying on the table, but then quickly frowned at me again. “Heather, are you alright? You’ve been down and out hard for almost two whole days. I wanted to force Raine to take you to the hospital, but ... ” She trailed off, shaking her head.

We smiled a guilty smile. Making Eevee worry was never our intention. “Eevee, I don’t think a regular hospital would know what to do with me.”

“Mm. Pneuma-somatic collapse. Still feeling bruised and rough, I take it?”

“Understatement of the month so far. Yes. I am very sore.”

“But, better? Yes?” Evelyn frowned harder. She glanced at the rest of us, at our tentacles. “You’re all still looking healthy there. Strong tentacles. Good. As long as you’re sustainable, that’s the important part. Not burning yourself out. You’re not doing that, yes?”

I nodded. “I promise. Feeling a little better. I ... maybe I should ... ”

Go Outside.

I couldn’t say that in front of Eevee; I couldn’t admit what I was really feeling deep down, the aching desire to transform my body once again, to feel webbing between my fingers and toes, to flush my skin with toxins and bright strobing colouration, to line my eyes with many membranes and my spine with spikes, to feel the spring of reinforced legs and the swish of a tail at my rear. To allow my brain to flower. I knew everything would make more sense, if only I could transform again.

Eevee wanted to know that I was healthy and trying to recover, not that I wanted to go warp my flesh again so soon.

“Good girls drink up,” came Praem’s suggestion.

The demon maid glided into the room on smartly clicking footsteps. She clacked a fresh drink down next to Eevee — a fruit smoothie, deliciously bright and full of sugar — and then swept my empty glass out of my hands and inserted a replacement. More lemon water, clinking with ice.

“Oh!” I said, in shock. “Praem, I’m- I’m fine, I—”

“Drink. Drink. She drinks the drink. She drinks. A drink. Drink.”

“Okay! Yes, okay. I promise, yes.” I frowned at Eevee’s smoothie for a moment, my brain struggling with two plus two. “Um. Do we even have a blender? I didn’t hear one just now.”

Evelyn sighed. “We don’t own a blender, no.”

“Then how ... ”

Evelyn gave me a look. “I have learned not to ask.”

“Maid,” said Praem. “Drink.”

I drank. So did Eevee, huffing and puffing before sipping her smoothie. She pulled a face. “Praem—”

“Vegetables. Or fruit. Choice.”

Evelyn sighed. Tenny made a trilling buzz which I knew as a giggle. Grinny — what a name — just stared, impassive. Praem turned toward her and gestured at the box of fruit in Tenny’s lap, an open question on Praem’s milk-white eyes.

For a moment neither of the demons said anything. Tenny fluttered: “No apricots. Bad taste. Strawberries, mid. Grapes good! Good! Bananananana — uncertain verdict.”

“Meat,” said Grinny — a slow throat-rumble of a word, barely parting her lips, a noise that made me flinch and Tenny vibrate on the spot.

Praem turned her head to stare at Evelyn.

“No!” Evelyn snapped. “How many times? She’s not set up for it! You — you there.” She jabbed a finger at Grinny until Grinny focused on her, then spoke slowly and carefully; I could tell from Eeve’s tone of voice that this was far from the first time she’d said these words. “Your digestive system and biochemistry cannot properly process meat.” She huffed, then added for me: “This has been going for three whole fucking days. Zheng brought her back a dead squirrel and she vomited it up all over the kitchen table.”

“She can’t eat meat?” I asked. “Why?”

“Vegan,” said Praem.

Evelyn shrugged and spread her hands. “I don’t know. Something the demon possession has done with the corpse. A response to something in her past. Some weird thing that Edward wired her for. I have no idea. I just know she can’t eat meat, biologically. She’s not set up for it. She’ll bring it back up.”

Tenny trilled: “Three whole fuuuucking days!”

Evelyn sighed hard and put her face in one hand. I winced; Lozzie was not going to like that.

But then Praem turned to Tenny and gave her a single, silent look. Tenny went *Pbbbbbbbt*, then: “Sorry, auntie Eeve.”

I jumped in, both curious and eager to save Eeve from an oncoming headache, and also wishing to show Tenny that nobody was genuinely angry with her. “Eeve, what was that about Nicole and

her real name and everything?”

“Ah, yes, right.” Evelyn straightened up and passed me the papers from the table. “Our tame private eye did a little bit of archival digging for us. Hardly needed her for it really, this isn’t exactly top-secret or anything.”

The official looking papers on the table were a trio of photocopies or print-outs, all of original documents which looked quite old.

The first was a birth certificate for a baby girl named “Jacqueline Poole”, born to parents James and Beverly Poole, in Manchester, dated 12th of April 1938. The second document was a marriage certificate, registered in Sharrowford, for a marriage performed at Little Stonton Parish Church, dated 6th June 1959, recording the marriage of Jacqueline Poole to one Edward Lilburne.

The third and final document was a newspaper clipping of a small obituary, from one of the mid-century Sharrowford newspapers which no longer existed, dated November 20th 1962.

“—after a long and difficult illness,” I read the final lines. “Jacqueline Lilburne had no children. She is survived by her husband, Edward.”

I glanced up at ‘Grinny’. Blood-red eyeballs stared back, curious but uncaring. “Jacqueline Poole?” I said out loud, but she didn’t respond to the name.

Evelyn shrugged. “Unlikely,” she said. “It’s not her in there. I think it’s highly likely that Edward’s wife died of natural causes, for real. That’s a proper obituary. She would have gone to a coroner.” Evelyn shook her head. “They’re very delicate about real causes in those old obituaries. Could have been anything. Cancer, maybe. The only one who could tell us is beyond human contact now.”

‘Grinny’ looked on, glancing back and forth between me and Evelyn. She was interested on some level, at least.

“So ... ” I glanced at Tenny, not sure if I should say this in her presence. “Edward ... got hold of the body, somehow, afterward, and ... ”

“Put a demon in it,” Evelyn said. “She doesn’t respond to the name. She doesn’t respond to much, actually.” Evelyn glanced at Grinny again. “She’s not comatose or in a fugue state or anything. She’s just

defaulted to quiet and uninvolved.”

We stared back at Grinny, or Jacqueline, or whatever she wanted to be called from now on. She stared back, eyes red and empty, not blind or blank but simply unmoved — or perhaps content to sit and be fed pieces of fruit by her new moth-friend.

“I don’t blame her,” I said. “I mean — Grinny, I don’t blame you.”

Grinny said nothing.

I tried a different track. “Tenny, you’re usually quite skittish around Zheng, but you don’t mind Grinny?”

“Bwaaaaah?” went Tenny, with one of her delightful little flutter-sounds. “Noooo? She’s okay! Fruit!”

“Fruit, indeed. And, Tenny, where’s Marmite?”

“Scaredy-cat!” Tenny giggled.

Evelyn said, “I gather the spider is upstairs, staying out of the way.”

I wet my lips and said to Evee: “If she ... if her body died in 1962, and then Edward then used it for a demon-host, shouldn’t she be significantly more powerful, or wild, or out of control? I thought demon-hosts were supposed to go that way, when they’re, well, not treated as real people. She’s been Edward’s slave for decades. That’s what we’re looking at. A freed slave.”

Evelyn shrugged. “Heather, one thing I’ve learned recently is that I’m often wrong, a lot. And besides, she is powerful. Very.”

I raised my eyebrows.

Evelyn jabbed a thumb toward the Grinning Demon, and said: “Zheng ‘allowed’ me to do a proper magical examination of her. Got her inside a circle and everything. She’s strong and fast and robust, extremely so. Nowhere near on the same scale as Zheng — not anywhere near as old, obviously. But she could outfight July with ease, for example. If she cared. Though I suspect she’s all brute strength and no finesse.”

“Big strong,” said Tenny. “Strong!”

Grinny made another rumbling, closed-mouth vocalisation, slow and low and deep and hard — aimed at Evelyn.

“Um,” I said, unwilling to voice the question out loud. “She’s not ...”

“Dangerous?” Evelyn snorted. “Of course she’s dangerous. She’s a demon.”

“I was trying to be polite.” We winced. “Evee, I mean—”

“No, Edward Lilburne — spit on his soul — has no lingering control over her at all. All those temporary designs were probably added by the pawns he sent against us at the end, in a desperate attempt to use her somehow. All his control was ... emotional.” Evelyn pursed her lips, and I realised she was holding back great anger and disgust. Probably didn’t want to upset Tenny.

“His dead wife,” I said softly.

Evelyn and I shared a glance; perhaps it was the exhaustion and the muscle pain, perhaps I wanted to lighten Evee’s mood, or perhaps I was simply feeling full of dark mischief.

“You did promise,” I said.

Evelyn frowned with genuine disapproval, stormy and craggy. I cleared my throat and sat up straighter and blushed bright red. “I’m sorry. I apologise, Evelyn. Sorry. That was deeply inappropriate. I’m sorry.”

Evelyn huffed. “Too much of Raine has rubbed off on you. She won’t stop making that joke.”

“Joke? Joke?” Tenny trilled, tilting her head back and forth. “Joke?”

Without giving us pause to hesitate, Praem turned back to Tenny and raised a hand, palm up.

“Tenny,” said Praem.

“Yeeeeees?”

“Joke. What is big, red, and eats rocks?”

Tenny tilted her head one way, then the other, tentacle-tips spinning in little circles as her brain worked on the problem she had been presented with. Her fluffy white antennae twitched and fluttered. She blinked several times. Praem waited patiently for an answer. Grinny looked up too, red eyes shining wet in the gloom.

Eventually Tenny said: “I don’t know!”

“A big red rock eater,” said Praem.

Tenny blinked three times. Her tentacles did a triple-dip of rapid thinking. And then she burst into peals of trilling, fluttery, feathery laughter. She giggled and squeaked and almost lost her grip on the box of fruit, which Praem deftly scooped up just before Tenny did a full-body giggle-wriggle.

Grinny went: “*Huuuuuunnh*.” I think that may have been a laugh, or close enough.

Evelyn sighed in relief; awkward moment avoided.

We shook our head. “So, what are we going to do with her?” I asked.

Evelyn gave me a sudden, sharp look, almost suspicious with intensity. “The demon? She’s Lozzie’s responsibility now.”

“Yes, but—”

“And Lozzie is one of us,” Evelyn said, sharp and hard as if I had somehow challenged this. “One of our family. Polycule. Cult. Whatever! Tch.” Evelyn’s voice cut across the ebbing laughter. Tenny blinked toward us. The Grinning Demon stared. “We look after her, Heather. There’s no alternative. There’s no question.”

“Evee, I wasn’t challenging that.” I boggled at her, speaking slowly. “Where did that come from just now?”

“I ... ” Evelyn cleared her throat and blushed a little. “Nowhere relevant. I’m sorry, Heather. Of course you weren’t challenging it. I’m being absurd.”

“Of course we’ll look after her. Or let Lozzie look after her. It’s not as if we’re lacking space.”

Evelyn nodded along, eyes averted from me in embarrassment. “She can take as long as she wants to decide what she wants to do.”

I looked over at the grinning demon again — Grinny, Jackie, whoever she was. “Grinny,” we said, then cringed. “You can pick whatever name you want. Do you know that?”

The Grinning Demon stared back at me with blood-red orbs — and briefly lived up to her name again. She pulled her lips back in a

tight rictus, exposing layers of teeth, interlocked, razor-sharp, face split from ear to ear.

“Zheng,” she rumbled down in her throat.

Evelyn sighed. “She’s said that a few times. I think it’s admiration, or attachment. Zheng is the one who got her away from Edward, after all.”

“Zheng,” repeated the Grinning Demon. “Zheng.”

“Potentially confusing,” said Praem.

“Zheng and Zheng Junior,” I said. “Yes, that would be ... well ... if that’s what she wants, we can’t deny her, we literally don’t have the power to. But it would be confusing.” I bit my lower lip. “Hmm.”

“Grinny,” said Tenny. “Zheng. Zhengy? No. Grhenge.”

The Grinning Demon ceased to grin. ‘Grhenge’ did not meet with her approval. Tenny did a little pout.

Praem swept back through the room, taking the empty glasses into the kitchen. Tenny resumed trying to feed a piece of fruit to Grinny. I turned back to Evelyn, trying to focus my mind on a task I had been avoiding.

“So,” I said, glancing at the book on the table, at *The Testament of Heliopolis*. “Evee, you’ve been ... been ...”

By pure chance, my eyes had moved across the screen of Evelyn’s open laptop, on the still image of the video she had been watching. I paused first with incomprehension, then with shock, then with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The video — on Youtube — showed a dirty great hole in the middle of a wreck of a country garden, surrounded by gravel and great swaying trees, in a very familiar clearing.

“That’s ... that’s the hole I left!” I gasped. “That’s where Edward’s house was! Evee, that’s ... is that us? Are we on the news? Are we on the BBC? Oh my God.”

“Us?” Evelyn snorted. “I bloody well hope not. If we make the news ourselves we’ll all have to decamp to Camelot, permanently. No, they’ve not found anything about us. Here.”

She reached forward and rewound the video so I could watch.

We were not on the news — not us, not personally, not collectively; but our handiwork was on the front page of the BBC website. Not actual headline news, oh no, that was reserved for the usual cocktail of politics, foreign events, gossip nonsense, and so forth. We weren't so big that we were plastered all over the newspapers — except for the Sharrowford ones and one of the Manchester papers, where we were big news indeed.

The police had discovered the site of Edward's house two days ago, while I'd been lying insensate and chewing on my pillow, dreaming of lemons. 'Discovered by an unlucky hiker', as the news put it — but discovered what? Tantalising scraps only, luckily for us.

A missing house, unplugged from the ground and taken away, but without any sign of heavy lifting or demolition equipment. That had quickly given rise to a plethora of internet cranks talking mostly about alien abduction, but also about aggressive repossession of mortgaged property, by aliens.

A lot of bloodstains, the kind of bloodstains that come from deep wounds, terrible wounds, killing wounds, and a pile of bodies; the BBC report actually had an army doctor on for a couple of lines of puff, talking about how this was evidence of a real gunfight.

And bullet casings. Not many, certainly not enough to account for the blood. But there they were.

"Lozzie got most of those," Evelyn explained as she flicked through the various tabs she had open. "She's not perfect, so she missed a few. But they don't have enough to explain what the hell happened out there." She snorted. "Which is good for us."

Lozzie might have been able to run around picking up spent brass, but she couldn't do the same for the pair of cars or the fountain; pock-marked and holed by my failed first attempt at Slipping the House Outside, looking like Swiss cheese, those formed the main bulk of the lurid shots the BBC and other regional news outfits were playing as their money-makers.

No bodies, not enough bullet casings for a conclusion, and blood not connected to any bodies currently showing up in morgues or washing up out of the Thames.

The BBC quoted some police bigwig I'd never heard of before: gang activity, likely drug related, the house didn't seem to belong to

anybody, no danger to the public at this time, so on and so forth. Please call this number if you want to ramble to a bored switchboard operator about aliens. One of the Manchester newspapers made dark insinuations about some criminal underworld types I'd never heard of before. The Sharrowford local papers admitted nobody had any idea. One of the more salacious 'News of the Weird' style websites blamed demons.

"Well," Evelyn said. "That one is technically not wrong. Don't tell them, though, it'll encourage them."

By the time Eevee had finished catching me up I had one hand and one tentacle over my mouth, eyes wide in shock. Two of my tentacles were bobbing with a cocktail of anxiety, glee, amusement, and sheer bloody-minded amazement that we really did it.

"Eevee. Eevee, we made the national news."

"Not us, Heather."

"What about the — the boy!" I was shrill with anxiety now. "The boy in the hospital? He's still there, isn't he? Can't they connect him to all that? To what happened at the house?"

Evelyn smiled, wry and sad at the same time. "He didn't bleed. Remember?"

"Oh. Oh ... yes. Poor thing."

"But," Evelyn went on, clearing her throat. "The Sharrowford Police aren't so stupid that they won't make the obvious connection, even if they can't prove a thing. Apparently he's still non-verbal, basically not there. But we can't risk anything other than Lizzie popping in for a few seconds to check on him. The police will be watching him." Eevee paused to take a long sip from her smoothie. I did the same with my lemon water; my hands were shaking slightly. We wrapped a tentacle around our own middle.

"But ... but Kim," I said. "She brought him in, right? That's a connection back to us."

Eevee shook her head. "She gave a false name. And no ID. Kimberly Kemp is smarter than she seems." Evelyn blinked. "I mean not that she seems un-smart, I mean—"

"Pbbbbbbbrt," went Tenny, riding to Eevee's rescue.

Evelyn cleared her throat and pulled an awkward smile. I drank my lemon water and tried to calm down. Which was not going to happen.

“The news.” I said. “The news!”

“Yes.”

“The ... police.”

“Yes.”

“And we’re ... we’re home free? We got away with it? I can’t believe it.”

“There’s no evidence, Heather,” said Evelyn. “Not on this side of reality. It’s all Outside.”

“Oh,” we said. “Oh. Yes.”

The corpses.

What about the families of Edward’s mercenaries? Or his cultists? They had died trying to kill us, yes, but that didn’t mean every single person in their lives deserved to go on without any kind of closure. Without a body to bury. Without knowing.

More wreckage.

We twisted our tentacle-tips into little knots. We made a mental note: how to resolve that, without giving ourselves away?

Evelyn must have sensed our discomfort, and that this was something we couldn’t discuss in front of Tenny, because she cleared her throat and said: “Well, look, for now, Tenny and ... Grinny, they should maybe do this elsewhere, because I need to get back to work.” She nudged the notebook with the page of magic circle designs.

“Oh!” I said. “No, no, Eevee. It’s fine. It’s fine. Um ... how is it going? I meant to ask before I noticed all the news. That’s what I was really interested in. Is the book giving you what you needed? What we need?”

Evelyn smiled with a familiar twinkle in her eyes; suddenly she seemed to fill with energy.

“Oh yes. Yes it is, indeed, Heather. I was right — *The Testament of*

Heliopolis does contain the last few pieces of the puzzle to build a true, functional *Invisus Oculus*. If! If you know what you're doing. Which I happen to." She gestured at the notebook again, then took a rapid drink from her smoothie before clacking the glass back down. "I won't bore you with the details from the *Testament* itself — very dry, very dense, translations of something dug up from Egypt by the Romans. But it works. I've been working on the new design for a couple of days now. And it works, it works already! I have it functioning at very small scales — I used a blade of grass, then a pebble, which was bloody confusing, I'll say that much—"

"Bloody," trilled Tenny.

Evelyn snorted and waved her off. "Yes, yes, it's very confusing when you forget where you put a pebble, if making you forget the pebble was the entire point of the exercise." She pulled the notebook off the table and waved it toward me, pointing at one of the circles. "This, this is the closest I've gotten to conceptual and metaphysical invisibility."

I felt numb, staring at squiggles which meant nothing to me. I should have felt excited, triumphant, on the verge of success. Instead, there was a lump in my throat.

"And ... " I hesitated. "How long until—"

"A few days, maybe a week," Evelyn answered before I had time to finish asking the question. "I need to scale it up, get it big — really big, big enough for us, Lozzie's Caterpillars, other magical workings inside. I need to test it on larger entities, things with better perception, different perceptions than us." She waved a hand. "Hringewindla, Sevens, the Caterpillars, whoever and whatever will cooperate. You too, Heather. We can't test it on the Eye itself, obviously, not without incredible danger. But I want this as tested as possible. Perfect." She smiled, genuine, for me. "Give me a week, Heather, and I will make you invisible to the Eye."

Evelyn was so full of optimism and pride, so eager to do this thing for me, so happy to finally help me take this step — to go to Wonderland, to save my sister, my Maisie.

In her own way, Evelyn was also dedicated to her guardian angel.

But I wasn't so optimistic.

Before we knew what I was doing, we had reached out with two

tentacles and gently — oh so gently — taken Evelyn's hand, her maimed hand with the missing fingers. We asked for silent permission with every brush of pneuma-somatic flesh. We raised Eeve's hand to my lips so I could kiss the back of her palm.

Evee sat frozen, blushing, speechless.

"Um ... " I came back to myself a moment later, blushing bright red. "Evee, I— um— sorry, I— thank you. I was trying to thank you, just, my mind, I'm—"

"Tch!" Evelyn huffed. "Don't apologise for kissing the back of my hand, you ... " She trailed off with a glance at Tenny and Grinny, but neither of them seemed interested in what had just happened. Just the adults messing around with serious stuff again. Evelyn's eyes jabbed back toward me, lancing right through my flesh.

"Heather, what's wrong?"

We took a deep breath. This was nothing new. The same old problem. But now it was so close, only a week or two away. Any further delay only did more damage to Maisie.

"Evee, I still don't know what to do about the Eye. Fight? Talk? Draw pictures in the ash? Throw paper air-planes at it? Hide under a rock? Sing it a song?"

Evelyn huffed. "That's the point. We get to Wonderland, and then we can explore, examine, make a plan and—"

I shook my head gently. "That's all well and good. But I need to talk to somebody about the Eye. Somebody who might understand. Somebody who can help me think of options."

Evelyn frowned. "Who?"

I smiled a sad little smile. "I can think of a couple of potential sources. But none of them are going to want to talk, not about this. Not easily, at least." I took a deep breath and let out a big sigh. "I think it's time I got my shoes on. Time to go out."

"Out?" Evelyn said. "Or Out?"

"Both."

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.2

Any decision to go out — or *Out* — is easy enough to make, because it feels good. The resolution to get moving tends to fill one's heart with determination and optimism, makes one want to hop into one's shoes, swing the front door wide open, and call out: "I'm just popping down to the shops! I'll be back shortly! Does anybody want an ice cream?"

But then, as one lingers on the threshold to await an answer, one is stealthily assaulted by all the little practicalities ignored by such extroverted energy: one must locate one's purse or wallet, and then find a suitable pocket in which to hold it, unless one now wishes to be weighed down by the inconvenience of a handbag, thus spoiling the free-spirited abandon with which one threw open the door in the first place; one must observe the sky for clouds and make an inexpert weather forecast — does one need a raincoat? What if it's too hot for a coat? Where is the umbrella? — and so on; one must intuit the fullness or otherwise of one's bladder and stomach and measure those against the predicted journey; one must account for the neglected necessities of sun-cream and insect repellent; the troubles of the road loom, no matter how short the journey; one is tempted to retreat, back into the house, and perhaps try again another day.

Motivation and determination are esoteric forces for somebody like me — like us. Easily summoned, easily lost.

I wasn't quite that bad, not anymore; I wasn't teetering on the edge of true hermit-dom or agoraphobia. I meant what I'd said to Evee — it was time to go *Out*, with my shoes on — but my muscles were sore and my stomach was empty. Postponement and procrastination came unbidden: I pottered about to find more suitable clothes for a jaunt *Outside*; I ate lunch and accepted a dose of the multivitamin gummies that Praem had purchased; I hugged Tenny and suggested a couple more names for poor Grinny — none of them acceptable, though one of them at least made Tenny laugh; and last but not least, I wanted to wait for Raine, to give her a hug, before I jetted

off into the ocean depths on my stream of water.

Raine returned from her own quest less than an hour later, in the sweltering metal box of her car, with all the windows down. She brought us a bounty of three massive electric fans, to augment the interior cool air of poor Number 12 Barnslo Drive.

“Yo yo yo, guess who’s baaaack?” she announced at the front door. “And I bring the miracle of modern technology! And — Heather! You’re up!”

“I am!” I chirped — I couldn’t help it; Raine was back and I felt like preening for her.

Raine swept back into the house like a conquering hero, already pulling the fans from their casings of cardboard and polystyrene, shelling them like unfortunate molluscs caught by a predatory bird. At one point she shook a fan free of plastic wrap with one hand while she slipped the other arm around my waist, dipped me, and kissed me right on the lips — which made me squeak and flail and made Raine laugh. She was wearing a white tank top and jean shorts and very little else, which nearly threatened to derail my plans to be elsewhere for a while.

Several tentacles suggested we could do all that Outside business tomorrow, because today we should really stay here and get done. By Raine.

I didn’t say that part out loud. There may have been seven of us now, but we were still Heather.

And I couldn’t waste this determination.

So, twenty minutes later, we were standing in the magical workshop, shoes firmly on our feet. Sevens’ beautiful yellow cloak-mantle was wrapped around our shoulders in a golden gauze of diaphanous protection. We weren’t quite certain where the cloak had come from; we’d been rummaging in the bedroom, getting ready to depart, and then suddenly there it was, butter-soft folds pressing against my neck and forearms, somehow cooling rather than insulating. My squid-skull was tucked under one arm, modified hoodie draped over the other — too hot to don there in reality, but ready to pull on once we had escaped beyond the muggy heat of an English summer.

“You’re going alone?” said Raine. “By yourself, flying solo, lone

operator?”

Before I could answer, Evelyn snorted from down in her chair: “Need a dictionary, Raine?”

I sighed and smiled at the same time; I couldn’t help it, not at that look on Raine’s face, that gentle cocktail of amusement over concern. “I’m not going to get lost, or trapped, or stuck. There’s nothing to get in my way or knock me off course. And it’s not like I haven’t done this before. Technically, I’ve been doing this since I was a child.”

Raine cracked a grin, beaming bright — oh gosh, we really did want to stay there. Some of my tentacles even tensed up with reflected pleasure. Raine raised one hand. “Hey, hey, Heather, it’s cool, we’re cool, I’m not trying to stop you, nothing like that. Just wanna get this totally straight—”

“Ha!” Evelyn barked. “Was that intentional?”

Raine shot a finger gun across the magical workshop. “Point to Eevee. Heather, I just want to get this clear in my mind. You’re going out — Outside out — alone, by yourself? No Loz, no Sevens, no Knight. Just you.”

“Yes.”

Raine puffed out a very long sigh, put her hands on her delightfully framed hips — just below the visible temptation of her very well-defined abdominal muscles — and gave me an indulgent smile.

She was very unhappy with me — and no longer so skilled at concealing that as she once was.

Evelyn snorted again, still sitting in her comfortable chair in the magical workshop, in front of her neatly organised papers. She apparently found all this extremely amusing, though I wasn’t sure why. When I’d first announced my intention to head Outside, alone, to seek certain advice and inspiration, Eevee had frowned for a moment — then just shrugged and sighed and seemingly brushed it off. We’d been simultaneously too tired and jittery to interrogate that reaction, but now it left me puzzled once more.

We three were alone together in the magical workshop. Tenny had led the Grinning Demon upstairs, apparently to attempt a more friendly introduction between the latter and Marmite. Praem was in

the kitchen, breaking down the boxes from the new fans and stuffing them into the bin.

“Raine, you can be honest,” we said with a sigh. “You don’t want me to go. You think I’ll get hurt.”

Raine laughed, easy and confident and bubbly, enough to make me melt into her arms. “I didn’t say that, Heather. And hey, seriously, I’m not trying to stop you. Not trying to control what you can and can’t do.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You are trying to stop me, a little bit.”

Raine cocked an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

“You’re being all ... sexy. At me. On purpose. To get me to stay.”

Raine laughed again — nothing fake about her amusement. She spread her arms and glanced down at herself. “Am I now?”

Evelyn winced and put her face in one hand. “Heather, please never use the word ‘sexy’ in a sentence. Actually, don’t even pronounce it. Just omit that from your vocabulary. Forget the word exists.”

We blinked, blind-sided from two different directions. “Excuse me? Evee? What’s wrong with ‘sexy’?”

Evelyn just threw up her hands, totally done. “It makes you sound like a tabloid newspaper.”

“Heather, Heather, Heather,” Raine purred, shaking her head. “You think this is intentional?” She gestured to herself. “You should really know better by now than to tempt me with that. If I was trying to keep you here on purpose ... ” Raine trailed off with a thick and sultry vocal fry, enough to make me shiver inside a little. Her musculature shifted — chin higher, shoulders back, chest out, her entire posture slanted to one side. Toned muscles slid and adjusted, more on display than clothed. She grinned like a blowtorch. She ran one hand through her own rich, chestnut hair, and then took a step toward me. “When I speak, you’ll know you’ve been spoken to.”

She took another step and reached out to stroke the nearest of my tentacles, which gladly wrapped around her hand; her advance somehow boxed me in despite the lack of a wall behind me.

“R-Raine—”

"If I was doing it for real, it would look more like ... " Her other arm went over my shoulder. She suddenly seemed so very much taller than us, ready to push us down; other parts of us betrayed our intent, reaching behind her legs and bottom to wrap her with tentacles. She leaned in close.

"R-Raine I mean it, I'm not—"

"Like this," she purred, dipping her head down next to my ear and making me shiver all over. A feathery kiss brushed our cheek.

Our tentacles went all over the place. We squeaked and whimpered. We almost gave in. Outside could wait until tomorrow! Now was time for mating!

And then Raine stepped back, pulled herself free from our nest of tentacles, and took a deep breath. "But I'm not. Just a little demo. For if I was serious, you know?"

"Raine!" I squeaked at her, half outraged, half frustrated.

She was laughing again. "Is that a complaint? Want me to keep going? Changed your mind? Got a bit clam-jammed?"

Evelyn banged her walking stick against the nearest chair leg, thwack-thwack-thwack. "Not in here! Do not make me call Praem with a bucket of cold water for you two! Bloody hell, you're like stray cats."

"I wasn't doing anything!" I squeaked. "That was all Raine!"

Raine sketched a bow for Eevee, full of smug amusement. But she stepped back again, giving me more space to breathe. She had achieved her real aim — lowering the tension, making it clear that she was still delighted and besotted with me. Now came the shift. I'd grown very familiar with Raine's techniques; she knew that, but she used them anyway, because they worked, they were hers, and I loved her. It was just how she operated.

"For serious," Raine said. "Heather, I ain't trying to stop you, but I am worried. We don't have a great track record with expeditions Outside. Stuff tends to go off the rails pretty fast."

"It's not an expedition," I said. "It's just me, going for a little walk."

"At least take Lozzie with you?"

"Lozzie is busy," I said. "She's busy with the House in Camelot, with

the Knights, the clean up, all that. And I might take all day, even a portion of the night too. I can't monopolise her time like that."

Raine raised her eyebrows. "Have you asked Lozzie? She said no? Said she was too busy?"

I pursed my lips. "Raine."

"Take me, then," she said. "Hey, I've got all day."

"I can't! That would defeat the entire purpose. I'm planning to go to places where a normal human being would not have a very good time, to put it lightly."

Raine flashed a massive grin. "I can take it."

"No, Raine, you can't. Don't be silly."

Raine thumbed toward the kitchen. "Take Praem? Chaperone style?"

Evelyn snorted. "Absolutely not. Praem needs a day off. After she's finished cleaning up your mess, she's to sit down and relax."

"Thank you, Evee," I said. "No, I'm not taking Praem."

Raine shrugged. "Then ask Lozzie."

I lifted my squid-skull mask; instinct urged me to retreat inside the metallic-bone donation from some unknown Outsider cephalopod, to hide from difficult conversations, to slip away into a dark nook in the cold water, but my love and respect for Raine stopped me. I placed the skull on the table instead, sighed heavily, and looked away, chewing on my lower lip.

Raine said: "It's not about Lozzie being busy or about me being too squishy, is it?"

I shrugged. "This isn't about anybody else. It's about me. Me and the Eye. Sort of. I have to talk to some people, yes — but first I need to have a think, a good long think, and I need to do it somewhere conducive to the kind of subjects I need to think about; I got the idea from how Lozzie and I defeated the big weird ball of Edwards. I need to think carefully, and I need to do it Outside."

Raine nodded slowly. There it was — the total acceptance of my plans, now that she understood, now that she'd peeled the truth out of me, the truth that even I wasn't fully aware of until she made me

say it. A truth that even with seven of us, we still couldn't have articulated until prompted. "Okay, so," Raine said. "What are you hoping to— oop!"

"Oh, Raine."

We silenced her with a hug — a bit too much of a hug, actually. It was rare for Raine to be surprised or wrong-footed, but a hundred and twenty pounds of squid-girl hurling herself at you in a ball of strobing tentacles can make anybody pause to take stock, even the world's most adaptable butch. To Raine's credit she didn't flinch as all our tentacles went around her waist; she caught us, lifted us up, and spun us around, laughing.

I peeled myself off after she put us back down. Evelyn had averted her eyes briefly.

"Raine, thank you," I said, clearing my throat. "I love you. Thank you for trying to understand."

Raine shot me a wink and ruffled my hair. "Love you too, octo-girl. Okay, now, serious time: what are you hoping to achieve out there?"

Doubt gripped my heart again, but Raine's eyes gave me confidence, warm and brown and believing. "I know I can't find answers about the Eye, not direct ones. But I need inspiration, I need to look where I can, for any possible source of comprehension. I need insight."

"Where?"

I pulled a self-conscious grimace. "Nowhere I'm going has a name. A few different places, just to look and think. I might pop by the library too, I have an idea there. And I'll also be coming back to reality to talk to ... well, a couple of people, maybe. But perhaps not until tomorrow."

Raine nodded along. "I'm still worried, but now I know why. Practical question number two: aren't you sore as all fuck, my girls?"

I nodded. "Yes, and I want to stretch my muscles. Metaphorically speaking. It'll be okay! If I get physically winded I won't stay Out."

"You'll text us when you're back in reality, right? And if you're gone much past dusk, check in now and again?"

“Of course! Raine, I’m going to be fine. I promise I’m not going to Wonderland or anything like that. I’m not going to go somewhere I can’t handle. I’m not going anywhere I haven’t been before. I’m all ready, and prepared. I’m a bit sore, but that shouldn’t matter. I’ve even eaten lunch!”

Evee snorted with laughter. “Heather, half a dozen lemons are not ‘lunch’.”

“They are,” I said, affronted on behalf of lemons. “They were nice. I feel energized.”

“You need protein.”

“Ahhh,” said Raine. “Yeah, you do need protein.”

As if summoned by the mere notion of anybody requiring refreshment or nutrition, Praem appeared from the kitchen doorway, still resplendent in her new maid uniform. Before anybody could react, she clicked neatly across the room and pressed something into my hands.

“Snack,” she intoned, then stepped back, hands folded before her, spine straight, head high, eyes empty white.

“... a cereal bar?” I asked, holding up the packet.

“Twenty grams of protein,” Praem said. “For good girls.”

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. Raine said: “Eyyyyy, there she is! Thank you, Praem. Looking sharp, by the way!”

Praem took a pinch of her skirt between thumb and forefinger and did a twirl, right there on the spot, skirt spinning outward. Then she dipped her head and one knee in a quick, bobbing curtsy.

Raine cheered, clapped, and whistled. I gave a polite little round of applause too. Evelyn rolled her eyes and joined in. Praem curtsied again, retreating backwards into the kitchen, leaving us alone with an additional cereal bar.

“Well then,” I said. “I suppose that solves that.”

Raine nodded slowly, shrugged, and said: “How about taking the gun with you? The new one. I know all the spares are stashed in Camelot but mine’s upstairs.”

“Tch,” I tutted. “No, Raine. That’s pointless. What would I need

with a gun?”

Evelyn let out a grumbling sigh. “Oh, do stop bellyaching, Raine. She doesn’t need a gun, she’d be a danger to herself — no offense, Heather.”

“None taken.” I cleared my throat. “I wouldn’t know which end to hold.”

Raine shrugged again, but at least she was smiling. “I’d feel a hell of a lot more comfortable knowing she’s armed. At least take the pepper spray? Or the—”

“She’ll be fine!” Evelyn huffed. “What the hell is pepper spray going to do Outside?”

I burst out laughing.

Raine and Evelyn both stared at me, with amazement and a frown respectively. I spluttered and giggled and waved a tentacle in front of my mouth, trying to calm down. “You’ve switched roles!” I said. “Evee, you’re usually always so concerned, well, paranoid actually, but in a good way, sort of? And Raine, you’re almost never like this. What’s gotten into you two?”

Raine raised an eyebrow at Evee. “Yeah, hey, good point. Evee, what has gotten into you?”

Evelyn leaned back in her chair, stretching out both legs, her matte-black prosthetic and her withered, twisted muscles side by side out in the open. “Well, we’ve won, haven’t we? The Sharrowford Cult is gone, all their mages are dead, or worse. Sharrowford is my territory. There’s nothing to stop Heather Slipping as she pleases, nothing hunting her but the Eye, and that’s still blocked by the Fractal. I’m ... ” She sighed in a strange way. “I’m in my post-war era. For now.”

Raine inhaled through her teeth. “Life’s not a young adult novel, Evee. There’s no telling what could move into the city. Or what might be keeping an eye on us. Right?”

Evelyn waved a hand. “Yes, us, certainly. Soon enough, I’m sure. But Heather?”

“Actually,” I said slowly. “There’s the remnants of Badger’s segment of the cult. Ten people, according to him and Jan. She’s going to put us in contact with them. Remember?”

Evelyn frowned, sudden and sharp. "I haven't forgotten that, no. I don't like those people being out there."

"And I'll deal with them," I said. "Later this week. Maybe even tomorrow."

Evelyn's frown turned hard with alarm. She and Raine shared a glance, Raine's eyes alert and surprised.

I huffed and said: "I don't mean I'm going to kill them! I mean reassure them about the Eye, maybe see if I can do anything to help them. Maybe ... maybe ask them questions. But not right now." I stepped back over to my squid-skull mask on the table. "Right now, I want to get going."

Raine chewed on her lower lip. Eevee poked Raine's leg with her walking stick. Then Raine nodded.

She said, "How about letting Sevens know where you are, so she can tell us? Can you at least wait for her to get back?"

"Oh!" We wiggled our tentacles, an instinctive display of mild confusion. "Back from where? We assumed she was with Aym or something. She didn't leave us a note or anything."

Evelyn and Raine shared another look; Raine shrugged, Eevee shook her head. Praem appeared in the doorway too, staring at me with milk-white eyes.

"Well," we sighed. "She can always find us, wherever we are. Let her know, when she comes back with Aym and Felicity, or wherever she's gotten to."

I lifted a corner of Sevens' golden-yellow gauze, the piece of her attached to my flesh and soul, to illustrate my point. Then I kissed it, for no particular reason.

"Sure thing, will do," said Raine. "Look, Heather, just be safe, okay? Don't visit the dimension of head-eating monsters or something."

We giggled. "I'll be safe. I promise."

Raine gestured at me for another hug. I wrapped her in my tentacles and she squeezed me tight, then kissed me on the forehead. I couldn't help but notice Evelyn averting her eyes again, looking away from this public display of affection. As Raine let me go, Eevee started to voice a question.

“So, Heather, what exactly are you going to be doing, in all these unknown dimensions and—”

Before Evelyn could finish, I hopped away from Raine, feeling as mischievous and graceful as Lozzie so often appeared. I draped a tentacle over Evee’s shoulders — gentle, oh so very gentle, barely a touch, a feather-ghost on her twisted musculature. Then I leaned in, and planted a kiss on her left cheek.

She made a noise like *uurrp!*

Evelyn spluttered, boggling at me as I hopped backward again, going for my squid-skull mask. I scooped up the mask and turned back to Raine and Evelyn, my special pair, beaming at Evee’s blush and Raine’s grin.

“What am I going to do?” I echoed — partially to cover up my own mortified embarrassment. Had I really just done that?

I slipped the squid-skull mask down over my head and face, becoming another part of the real me.

“I do think I’m going to go look at things, with my eyes.”

= =

Leviathans of shining carapace ridged with bones the size of continents stride endlessly toward the dying blood-red triple-sun formation in a sky of rotten oils running down frosted glass — chasing photosynthesis or some esoteric analogue, scales falling from their monolithic hides to crash to the jungle floor a million feet below.

I have not been here since I was fourteen years old, when a nightmare Slip trapped me in those crawling jungles, to scream and flee for hours on end, believing all was just a bad dream.

Now I ride a thermal on outspread membranes — terrifying, but necessary, and I can always Slip out to the soft grass of Camelot if I mess up. I watch the leviathans in their forever migration, their giant legs striding through jungle deeps.

I think as an eyeball thinks. I watch. I observe. I collect light and transmute it to comprehension.

I think about what it means to be very large.

= =

Fourteen thousand feet below the surface of an alien ocean which is not liquid or gas or solid but some other state of matter not found in reality, a jellyfish-giant the size of a moon fights something that is not quite a cephalopod — something with a hundred tentacles made of pulsing, throbbing, pumping matter, and a central lobe like a dark star lost between the folds of galactic arms.

The combatants whirl and twist in the Stygian darkness, their own bioluminescence strobing and flashing as they attempt to blind each other. Beaks tear at broken flesh, earning mouthfuls of toxin; suckers inject poison, and receive a backwash of paralytic surprise.

They will fight for weeks. Neither will die; these things do not die, they change and go on, even after their spirited conversation. Whole ecosystems will rise and mature and die off in the space of their strikes, upon their skin and in the eddies of water stirred by the bodies.

I hang in the water column, suspended in a sphere of not-quite-air, golden-yellow cloak marking me as not-food, not-for-approach.

I watch. I think about what it means for giants to duel.

= =

A city of dead plazas and empty squares, echoing stone houses and dusty halls, dotted with eroded five-sided statues of barrel-like sapients. This empty place stretches out in the bend of what was perhaps once a river. A home to teeming millions, now an ossified abscess in the hide of a hard-packed dry-earth desert.

Creatures of a kind still live in the shadows — nothing so sweet as rodents, not Outside, but things that slice the air and drink the age that seeps from between the stones, things that hunt echoes and memories, things that suckle on decay and melancholy. Vegetable life still stirs, deep underground, locked in long hibernation between epochs of civilization, their machines and magic and machinations forgotten for now.

I wander the streets at random, protective layers of triple-eyelid closed against the dust, my skin strobing bright warning here, then fading into sandstone camouflage there, depending on the manner and size of passing scavengers.

I look at everything I can reach. I think about ruins and ruination, about giants that visit the small.

= =

I walk across a dozen Outside dimensions, places that as a teenager I tried to forget, nightmares which haunted me for a decade. Rock-faces reveal hidden watchers; hyena-laughter echoes down bleak mountainsides; empty castles built for giants howl with passing doom.

But now I walk with six more of myself, wrapped in our own protection, tentacles packed with threat and toxin. My skin glows and brightens and coruscates with warning colouration, or fades to nothing, drab and dark and lurking quiet. We hiss into the vastness of the unknown; we show my sharpened teeth; we swish a sharp-pointed tail, once I've grown it fresh again. None of these places are as far from reality as Lizzie tends to go, none of them are sensory overload, or incompatible with the human mind, or require a complete overhaul of the self — but they do require us to be ourselves.

My bioreactor gurgles and aches, but it is online, running smooth, powered by lemons and love.

Outside was never that scary — as long as one was never fully human.

= =

As I walk, as I watch and observe things I haven't thought about for years, I chew on my problem. I chew hard. I also chew on the cereal bar Praem gave me; thank the heavens for Praem. What would we do without her?

I needed insight. Not answers, nobody could give me answers. Nobody knew the Eye. Except perhaps Maisie.

But I would not go to Wonderland burdened by the sense that my life was incomplete, or that it was ending, that the whole process was just a futile suicide mission, embarked upon for the sake of principle rather than practical outcome. I was going to rescue my sister.

So I thought about giants, communication, and ruination.

There were certain people back in reality who I needed to speak with, people who might be able to supplement or catalyse my own insight: the last remnants of the Sharroford Cult, Badger's

unfortunate friends not yet freed from the Eye inside their heads; and Jan's as-yet unspoken contact, the one we hadn't talked about — Mister Joe King, who had been studying the Eye.

Others might provide context or experience — Hringewindla perhaps, or the King in Yellow, or maybe even Saldis, or others I'd met beyond the boundaries of the eldritch truth. But I doubted anybody else had specifics they had yet to share.

Except for one source. One potential repository of experience. The one I didn't want to confront. The one I was avoiding.

I spoke the words Outside, in a dimension filled with distant volcanic plumes of purple and red, the smoky air feasted upon by swooping flyers like whales in the sky. I whispered to myself, my flesh wrapped in biological coolant against the heat.

"My parents."

In the distance, some volcano-dwelling Outsider went:
Screeeeeketch!

"Oh, Heather. How can mum and dad be more intimidating than this?"

= =

Four or five hours later — I'd lost track of time by that point, though I knew that back in reality it was barely the edge of evening — I arrived with a soft pop of air and a scuff of my trainers on the exposed wooden floorboards of the last stop on my Grand Tour of Outside: the Library of Carcosa.

I didn't aim at any particular point, just not the canyon bottom; I didn't fancy walking up all those gigantic flights of stairs to reach what I was looking for. So I popped through the membrane and onto a random library floor, a few feet back from the edge of the cliff-face canyon-wall, with bookcases marching off behind me into the gloaming darkness, stuffed with millions of tomes.

No time to soak in the beautiful view, however; I was too busy hissing with pain and falling onto my backside, like I'd just stepped onto the stage for the sole purpose of taking a pratfall.

Nobody was here to laugh at me though, not even Sevens — but her robes did cushion my landing.

“Ahh- ow- ah— tch!” I tutted and sighed and groaned. “Okay. You should have expected that, Heather.”

All this Slipping was not, as Raine might say, a ‘free action’ — I was paying for it with every dimensional hop, but I’d been shunting the effects down into my endocrine system for hours. I’d been accruing a debt in my tissues, riding the high of abyssal changes to my biology, relying on the sheer unreality of the places I was visiting.

The Library of Carcosa, however, was entirely survivable for a human being, at least on a physical level, as long as one didn’t step into any funny-looking shadows or get too obsessed with the books. My various pneuma-somatic Outsider modifications were already folding themselves away, shedding layers of ablative chitin and supercooled gel sacks, re-metabolising tetrodotoxins and paralytic agents, discarding the need for eye-searing warning colours and enhanced nerve clusters.

I still would have looked like a horror if I’d materialised in the middle of a Sharrowford street; I kept most of the fun bits — the chromatophores in my skin, the flexible pointy tail, and the webbing between my fingers — but all the protective parts fell away, leaving me feeling very sick, very slow, and in need of a proper sit down.

So I had that sit down, right there on the floor of the Library of Carcosa.

It was a good place to sit; the library was beautiful, after all.

For a long moment I stared out over the library’s central canyon — the empty gulf between the two infinite cliff-faces of wood, punctuated at regular intervals by the ‘floors’, like a pair of gigantic bookshelves facing each other across a quiet room. Rickety wooden bridges spider-webbed their way across the canyon, crawling up into the air and down toward the book-strewn floor. Small grey-robed figures moved between distant shelves, carrying armfuls of books, reinserting volumes here, taking them out there, shoving them into their wriggling, be-tentacled faces now and again. The librarians, the catalogue, hard at work. They were not the only evidence of life and activity — I heard a distant piping whistle far to the left, and saw the greenish hanging underbelly of some vast library patron far above on the opposite side of the canyon — but the librarians were by far the most numerous.

Behind me, the floor on which I had arrived was one of the less haphazard and disorganised parts of the library: massive dark bookcases marched off beneath flickering glow-globes, their shelves stuffed tight with volumes, additional books standing in stacked towers, as if waiting for some interloper like myself to come knock them over and make a mess.

We sighed — probably sounded awful, through an Outsider throat.

“Am I really doing this?” we whispered to the library.

Abyssal hybrid squid-girl, with skin like a giant cuttlefish, with six other layers of me pressed into networks of neurons inside six rainbow-strobing tentacles; we had no less than three lovers, a ‘sociopath’, a demon, an Outsider princess — and maybe even a mage; we had fought things from beyond the walls of reality, walked a dozen worlds at a whim, and sat down for tea with things very much like gods.

But this was proof that in the end I was still me, still Heather Morell.

“Yup,” I sighed. “I’ve scurried off to the library, to avoid a difficult conversation with my parents.”

I got up, dusted off my bum, and went to find the nearest librarian.

The last time I’d visited the Library of Carcosa had been a significantly more traumatic experience: I’d been lost, trapped Outside, and in desperate need of help. I’d been sick, bleeding, ready to vomit up my entire intestinal tract. I’d inched my way across the library floorboards for fear of running into something I couldn’t survive, lacking Evelyn’s ingenious method of throwing bolts ahead of us to test for safety.

But now I was meant to be here. We still went slowly, testing the air in front of me with a carefully shielded tentacle, but I didn’t have to drag myself painfully along, step by step, biting down on terror.

We plunged into the bookcases, walking at random. We skirted areas of darkness, and avoided a bookcase entirely full of green books — no reason, just in case. We heard other footsteps — booted, too rapid and smart to be a Librarian — and shrank back from their passing. At one point I heard something like a pig, and avoided that too, doubling back to take another route. Once we had

to hiss at something white and ghostly reaching over the top of a bookcase to feel for my head, and another time I had to brandish a tentacle, banding it red-and-yellow, at something dark and thin and grinning, which peered from between two bookcases up ahead.

All in all, a quiet little library visit.

Eventually, down a nice orderly row of weird-looking wax-wrapped books, I found a Librarian.

The squid-faced librarians never got less weird-looking, no matter how many times one saw them. Roughly human-sized and shaped, with thin lumpy bodies concealed by long ragged grey robes, they had massive exposed feet and hands — also human-like — but a head like a cross between a squid and a sea-urchin. No eyes, no nose, no real facial features. All forward-facing spines and a knotted fist of grey tendrils. I knew from experience the bizarre structure did not contain a brain, but was just a sort of book-return slot connected to the larger network of librarian creatures. I did not ask myself how they sensed, or saw, or ate. I didn't want to know.

The squid-faced librarian ignored me when I stopped to stare at it, totally focused on its task. It was pulling books from a particular row and piling them on the floor in a little tower. Every few books it would pause, raise a selected volume, and feed the tome into its own face.

"Right then," we said, steeling myself for the task. "I know what to do here, um ... here we go."

Watching the librarian like it might whirl and bite me, I approached slowly, but of course the creature didn't care. It went on sorting books. I didn't bother saying hello — I knew it wouldn't respond. I drew to within arm's length, took a book off a random shelf, and held it out to the squid-faced librarian.

"For you!" we said, chipper and polite; I was still half-Outsider, so it probably sounded awful, but the librarian didn't mind.

It paused, turned toward me, and accepted the book in one bony grey hand.

I watched in fascination as it fed the book into its own face, grey tentacles closing over the pages and cover, until the book was swallowed up, returned for sorting, wherever sorting happened.

The Librarian then stared at me. Without eyes.

“Right, okay, um,” I said, stalling for time — I didn’t want the librarian to return to its work, I needed the attention of the Catalogue, but I hadn’t practised what to actually say here. “I know you can direct a library user to a particular volume, because that’s what you did for Evelyn. She had a list, with names and authors and everything. But I want to search by ... category, or internal details. I want information. And I don’t have titles. If you’re a real librarian — in a human sense — then you should be able to help me with this. Library science is a very respectable field. Can you do this?”

The Librarian stood and stared — or at least faced in my direction. Grey face-tentacles wiggled in the air.

“Oh,” I sighed. “I don’t know why I’m talking to you. I know you can understand, we’ve established that, but you can’t answer.”

A scuffling shuffle came from behind me. I glanced back and saw a couple more librarians had appeared at the end of the row, peering at me. Eager to help, or gathering to do something unsuitable for a proper library?

We frowned at them delicately, from safely inside our squid-skull mask. “Thank you, yes, thank you. I don’t need additional help. Don’t make me say Hastur three times.”

The floorboards creaked in a shuddering wave. Okay, maybe I wasn’t going to say the H-word three times, not again.

I turned back to my initial librarian. “Okay. I’m just going to go for it.” We pronounced the next words very carefully: “I want information on the Eye. It doesn’t have to be in English. It doesn’t have to be of human authorship. It doesn’t have to be complete or make sense or anything. Exclude the book *Unbekannte Orte*, because Evelyn already has that, I already know what’s in it.”

The Librarian stood. Nothing happened. I sighed; had I really wasted all this time and effort?

“The Eye,” I repeated. “*Magnus Vigilator*. Great big eyeball in the sky. Anything? Nothing? No?”

The Librarian did not react. Several more grey squid-faces had gathered behind me, at the end of the row. I really did not want

them to call my Hastur bluff.

“Big watcher. Large lookie-looks. Observer,” I tried, about to give up — then I pointed at us, at me, at myself, before I could consider the implications. “Like me, but big. Anything on me? Anything on a ‘little watcher’?”

And to my surprise — and more than a little horror — the librarian pointed.

Upward, to his left, somewhere through the ceiling and likely far away.

“Oh,” I said. “Oh. Oh dear.”

The other squid-faced librarians were all pointing too, in approximately the same direction. Some of them were off a bit, but they all agreed on the general area of pursuit.

We sighed and put my tentacles on my hips. “Oh, fiddlesticks. I’d rather started to hope that wasn’t going to work.” I frowned up at the portion of wooden ceiling the Librarians were all pointing toward. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance of an estimate of how far away the book is? No? Can’t tell me if it’s the next floor or three hundred floors? No?”

The Librarians continued to point. And point. And point.

I grumbled — because I was already quite tired and being seven very petulant young ladies all at once — and then prepared to use my reality-shattering brain-math powers for a very mundane act of labour-saving.

“Okay, well, um, thank you! See you again in a moment, I suppose.”

And *Out* I went.

= =

The first teleport took me a mile up the library floors; I used the very same trick I’d once used to help Saldis and I flee from the King in Yellow’s less friendly and charitable form — a sort of slingshot, skimming the membrane like a flat stone across the surface of a pond. It was significantly more headache-inducing than just Slipping — literally, I landed with a groan and then curled up with my head buried inside all our tentacles, rocking back and forth on the floor for several minutes as we focused on not vomiting.

But it was better than walking. Even with six tentacles to help.

Once I could stand up without risk of upchucking my cereal bar, we repeated the process: I found the nearest Librarian and asked the question again, phrasing it as closely as I could to avoid any confusion.

He pointed upward, as did several who had gathered nearby.

So up we went, again.

Arrival, headache, pause, get up, find a librarian, ask the question. Up? Up.

By the fourth cycle of this process, I didn't even have to ask the question — a librarian was just waiting for me to happen upon him, as if the Catalogue system had gotten impatient. I opened my mouth, panting for breath, and he pointed. Down.

"Down?" I asked. "Oh, finally. Okay. Triangulation is stupid. This was such a bad idea."

The fifth and sixth jumps brought me to the correct floor at last: an area full of weird hexagonal bookshelves filled with metal 'books' which looked more like angular footballs than anything one could read. I briefly experimented by taking one off a nearby shelf and letting it flower open in my hands, like a rose made from steel petals. The writing looked like crop circles. It weighed so much my tentacles got tired. And it smelled like motor oil.

"Translating this is going to be fun," we tutted.

The seventh jump took me into the rear of that floor, among melted stacks and weird little pools of glowing light, like radiation had puddled into milk filled with glitter. I was very careful not to touch any of that, and then I set out looking for another librarian, to bring me even closer to the unknown book which I was seeking.

But then, before I had the chance to pester the library Catalogue for the eighth and hopefully final time, I heard an echo.

A wordless shout, behind a wall, in a distant room, half-heard beyond the wall of sleep.

I paused in the middle of a row of metal ball-books and tilted my head, trying to catch the sound again. Something felt familiar about it, like it was my name, spoken in my defence. A memory surfaced

all of a sudden: me at eleven years old, lurking at the top of the stairs in the night, listening to my parents talking with the doctors on the phone. Listening for my name, to people talking about me without my presence.

Either I was the subject of a nasty trick by something in the library — in which case it was time to hiss and puff myself up — or the only person who could possibly reach me out here had done so by accident.

I lifted a corner of the golden-yellow membrane which hung about my body, the butterscotch and bronze robes of Sevens' affection, which was, in a way, part of her body.

We pressed the fabric to our lips.

"Sevens? Was that you? Do you need me? Or are you talking about me?" I waited, then sighed at how silly this was, mumbling into a bit of fabric. "The cloak isn't a walkie talkie, Heather. She can't hear you just by—"

-ther? Oh, you're— you're here! Why are you here?!

Seven-Shades-of-Sensory-Simulation was talking inside my own head, with an echo of my own voice. I winced and blinked rapidly, because it wasn't the most pleasant sensation she'd ever supplied me with. My eyes watered and I felt the urge to sneeze.

She also sounded vaguely panicked.

"Sevens?" I said out loud. "Where are you?"

I'm— look, Heather, darling, it's nothing. It's nothing to do with you. It's a domestic event. A family matter, a—

"Are you talking to your father?" We said. Something up on the ceiling must have heard our voice, because it scuttled away into the shadows, shocked by what it heard. "Is that why you're here in Carcosa? You didn't tell anybody where you went."

Mmm. Sort of.

"Are you in trouble? Do you need help?"

I said! It's a family matter. You don't have to—

"Sevens, I'm your fiancée, aren't I?" We glanced around, as if we'd see Sevens sitting on a nearby bookshelf, but there was only

darkness and dust. “Which means I’m family. You’re my family. So if you need help, if you’re in trouble, I want to help you.”

Haha! she laughed, a soft bubble of melting butter. I’m not the one in trouble. But I am losing my temper. Father can never take anything seriously if it doesn’t involve plenty of blood and guts. He’s in a ridiculous mood. And I don’t want you to have to deal with him when he’s like—

Sevens stopped. Her voice went out like a cut broadcast.

“Sevens? Sevens?”

We turned on the spot, peering up and down the row of bookcases, fearing the worst; if this turned into another Outside fiasco, I would never live it down in front of Eevee and Raine, not after I’d spent so long reassuring them earlier. And more importantly, I could not afford to get sidetracked for days, to be put out of commission by some absurd chain of events, not when we were so close to Wonderland.

But I was not about to leave Sevens behind. Nobody gets left behind. Not with the Eye, or with difficult parents.

We straightened up, spread our tentacles, and called the King’s bluff.

“Hastur.”

Glow-globes brightened and dimmed. A pained whispering rose from deeper in the library stacks. Far away across the canyon, something screamed, like a bird lost in a storm.

“That’s twice now,” we said. “If you’re stopping Sevens from contacting me, I suggest you cease.”

We waited three heartbeats.

“You made me prove myself once. I will do it again if need be. She’s my fiancée, O’ Yellow Monarch. I am not bluffing.”

Three more heartbeats.

Long enough.

“Ha—”

Kitten! Kitten! Sevens’ voice burst into my head. Stop stop stop stop!

Oh my gosh, what are you doing?! My father is having a laughing fit. Stop!

“Sevens?”

A sigh. A tut. A whine. My father the King extends you a formal invitation to join us for a brief conference. Well done. He didn't even know you were here until you started throwing down the gauntlet! And I could have played it off if I hadn't needed to stop you!

“Well, I was worried about you!” we squeaked. “And a formal invitation to what?”

Nothing. Nothing important. Turn it down, Kitten. Go home. You don't want to see any of this. We're having an argument about your cultist—

“Badger?”

Yes, him. Look, you don't want to—

“Oh, Sevens. I accept. I'm on the way! Right now! I can follow your location, it's easy, easier than with anybody else.”

Heather! Oh, damn and blast. You best brace yourself for a bit of sensory—

But we had already thought the thought and moved the machinery, our hands grasping well-worn levers.

Out we went, across Carcosa, to the King's Chambers.

mischievous and craft; plainly seen – 21.3

We harboured no lasting illusions that I was still a ‘human being’ — homo sapiens, that inventive and communicative subspecies of West African savannah ape, with their centralised chordate nervous systems and two-up two-down body plans — at least not in the strictest sense of the term.

Physically we had deviated so far from standard humanity that in poor light I could be mistaken for an oceanic mollusc, grown giant under the pressures of the sea floor; there was no point denying that my biology was stuffed with enzymes and compounds which were only usually found in the human body when something had gone terribly wrong — tetrodotoxins, chromatophores, a ladder-lace of additional neural tissue. Not to mention the reactor organ humming away to itself down in my guts. Most human beings did not come with an on-board radiation hazard. Psychologically there were seven of me, six of us pressed into those additional layers of brain matter, mirrored reflections and complex refractions and focused refinements on a core original — though the experience of personal plurality is not that uncommon among human beings; but the urge to hiss at threats, the desire to launch myself along corridors or up stairwells on my tentacles, the need to retreat into dark cracks in the metaphorical rocks of society and space, those were considerably less common. There was much of me which had come from elsewhere.

And to find comfort and security Outside? That was not a human potential.

But I was still a person — and I was still a thing born on Earth, no matter how much of the abyss I had lovingly invited into my flesh, no matter how much I changed and grew, no matter what strange coils and twists my thoughts explored. I was still Heather Morell, I’d still been born in Reading, in England, and I was still twenty years old, even if I was also an ethereal squid from the underside of reality being self-copied inside a network of artificial neurons. I was, to use a terribly imprecise and loaded term, still mortal.

And the private chambers of the King in Yellow were no place for mortal minds.

I popped through the membrane and out into Carcosa — into the King's Royal Palace — in exactly the same manner as I had done the previous seven times, while trying to triangulate a book in the library; I followed the scent and signal of Sevens-Shades-of-Sunlight, via the butter-gauze robes pressed into my own flesh, my little piece of her forever wrapped around my heart. I expected my feet to touch ground and my lungs to draw air — fully prepared for the ground to be made of screaming triangles or the concept of ennui, and the air to taste like the colour green, or melancholy, or key lime pie, or something equally ridiculous. The Palace had been a difficult place to endure on my one previous visit, the angles and directions confounding to the human mind, the senses muddled and tricked and jumbled up by this Outsider pomp and power. But I didn't have a fully human mind anymore. And I was wearing my squid-skull mask. We were complete, I was me, and we had nothing to fear.

Sevens' warning had not prepared me; I hadn't been listening. Stupid, foolish Heathers.

I burst through the membrane and almost drowned, crushed by water pressure.

Waters dark, green as ancient oil, stretched in every direction, a thousand miles up and a thousand miles down; thick with rancid sunlight from a toxic star, illumination trapped in the underwater thermocline, divided and divided and divided again until an infinite gloom stretched out forever, miles beneath the waves; tropical-hot, saturated with flesh-eating bacteria, swarming with parasitic diseases for manners of being I could not even imagine.

This was not what we saw or felt; none of this was literal; it was merely the best my abyssal senses could do with the information before us.

I had swam the abyss, right down to the bare rock and black sand at the base of reality, in joy and release; I loved the abyss, the deep dark water, how it had felt, how it made me feel about myself; we still longed to return, even after all we'd been through, though we tried not to think about that too often.

And all those abyssal senses were screaming together: *this sea is not*

for us!

We were not alone: far ahead of me, hanging in the water, three shapes bobbed and darted through the gloom-soaked void. All were yellow. One was unmistakable — Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight like a butterscotch puff of infinite ruffles and frills and layers, a jellyfish analogue more delicate and beautiful than human words could do justice. Of the other two yellow-child shapes, one was metallic and angular, a hard knot of spikes turned back in on itself, a sculpture of pain and threat no less beautiful than Sevens herself, with scraps of red flesh still clinging to the outermost barbs; my instincts recognised that one, though I could not put a name to the shape. The third yellow presence was like a single living fin covered in teeth, moving through the water with all the grace of a dagger through ruined flesh, swift and silent and smooth, swaying and shivering from side to side.

Behind the yellow children a leviathan lurked.

A wall of flesh like boiling sulphur, stretching down into the lightless deeps and up into the sky beyond the waters, and out to either side so far that I knew it encircled the world. The skin swirled and danced in waves and eddies, like staring into the surface of a gas giant — but the patterns promised meaning, if only one would stare a second longer, a moment more, just a touch now, don't look away! If only one would resist the screaming urge to avert one's eyes, one would learn so very much.

If only one would ignore the million-million tentacles rising from the leviathan's hide, each limb tipped with a human face locked in an eternal pose of dramatic display — sorrow, horror, loss, rage, despair, arrogance fallen, pride offended, hubris rewarded. And all of them gazing upon you and screaming: next! Next! Next!

My body had half a second to absorb this; instinct reacted by pumping out a bubble of protective air, padding our flesh with ablative fat, hissing and growling and scrambling backward in the water. We speed-grew a siphon-jet from scratch, to escape as far as possible from this leviathan of suffering which had dredged itself from the abyss, no less giant than the Eye. My mind reached for the familiar equation to take us back—

And then it all vanished.

The sea, the yellow children, and the leering billion-headed

leviathan — all gone. All just a trick of the senses, feeding me interpretation. My feet were on level ground, my lungs drew in clean air, and my clothes were bone dry.

I gasped, shuddering. “Uh ... ”

I was standing in a well-appointed, delightfully antiquated, and beautiful study, surrounded by bookcases, dark oaken furniture, and several leather sofas with matching armchairs. A great fireplace was crackling away to itself along one wall, while the other wall was studded with small metal-latticed windows; they looked out over the top of a vast, dark forest, shrouded with mist. A grandfather clock was keeping time with soft ticks and tocks. The air smelled of paper and ink, whiskey and hair oil, cigars and coffee.

Three people were seated on two of the sofas and one armchair right in front of me, in a loose circle. I instantly recognised Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, wearing the mask of the Yellow Princess, her spine very straight and her countenance most strict and severe. She was sitting alone in a massive black leather armchair, furthest from me. But I had no time to greet her, judge her mood, or cast my eyes over the other two Yellow Children — for that was what they must have been, we had already deduced — because a grinning giant of a man straightened up from a table just past the sofas and boomed at the top of his voice.

“Ah! Princesses!”

I flinched, hard, which involved a lot of tentacles going all over the place, some very loud hissing, and flashing my skin like an illegal rave.

The man ignored that. He slapped a hand over his own heart so hard that it should have broken some ribs. “Allow me to welcome you to my private chambers! And I do apologise for the momentary confusion upon your arrival. It is easy to allow oneself to forget the needs of other creeds and nations — even when the others are royalty, like oneself! Ha ha!”

The King in Yellow actually pronounced the ‘ha ha’, which didn’t help.

He was wearing a very different mask to the one I had seen him display previously, after he had shed the face of Alexander Lilburne, when I had been the subject of his little play. No longer the kindly

prince, with the soft Middle Eastern accent, the thick dark eyelashes, and the easy smile. This role was far more bombastic.

The King in Yellow looked like the unrealistic ideal of a 19th century martial monarch: in his late sixties or early seventies, tall and powerful, muscular from a life of riding about on horseback, with chest out-puffed and arms braced by his sides, so it looked like he was carrying a pair of invisible watermelons; iron-haired and silver-bearded, with a weathered face, manic blue eyes, and whiter-than-white teeth; the whole lot was wrapped in a military uniform which looked like it belonged far in the rear of a Napoleonic battlefield, with shiny black riding boots, unspeakably tight white trousers, and a white-blue-yellow jacket festooned with enough medals to turn away a cannonball.

I couldn't place the accent in his voice — vaguely Northern European, perhaps Danish, or Norwegian, but with some strange twist to it.

He had straightened up from what I belatedly realised was a tactical map of some imaginary battlefield, strewn with little models that represented soldiers and cavalry and artillery, facing each other in a pair of ragged lines across mountains and valleys. Some of the pieces lay on their sides; others were broken apart; some appeared to be bleeding — or was that just paint?

The King was grinning at me. One of his teeth caught the light with an audible *shing!*

Sevens-Shades-of-Sunlight sighed, tight and cold. "Father. Please."

Another voice — sharp as a garrotte wire — said: "I concur with Seven-Shades. You are embarrassing yourself, Father."

A third voice, laughing like the tinkle of glass on velvet, disagreed. "I think it's fun! Look at all this! I look fantastic! I look like a cake made for sex!"

I was so shocked I forgot to be polite; I had no idea what to say, we didn't even return the King's greeting. This was possibly the last thing I had expected.

I looked the King in Yellow up and down — the Jaundiced General in all his finery — and said: "You look ridiculous." Then, quickly, as our minds caught up: "I— I mean— um— I—"

The Flaxen Field Marshal burst into hearty guffaws of laughter, throwing his head back and slapping his thigh.

The sharp voice from over on the sofas snapped: “You will address him as ‘Your Highness’ or ‘Your Majesty’.”

The Yellow King disagreed, loudly, like a foghorn: “Nonsense! Nonsense! The Sevenfold Watcher is already royalty, regardless of how you may judge her betrothal, Steel. Besides, she has the right of it! I do look ridiculous!”

The Banana Brigadier took two steps forward to join the loose circle of seats, his boots clicking on the dark oaken floorboards. He put his fists on his hips.

Suddenly his uniform was subtly different; the colours and cut were identical, the fit and form unchanged, but the materials were fake. Cloth had turned to crinkling paper, boots to peeling plastic, medals to twisted bits of drink can. His beard went from a majestic specimen of facial grooming to a prop held on with glue. When he grinned, his false teeth fell out of his mouth; he deftly caught them in one hand and jammed them back onto his gums.

Steel — I certainly recalled the name from my previous visit — said: “That is worse, Father. Try again.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sighs-and-Signs added, “I am in agreement with my dear sister. Can we not be serious for one moment?”

The third voice, filled with girlish petulance, said: “Daddy, no! You were so good as the general! Dashing and absurd! Ready to die charging the guns!”

The Jaundiced General raised his eyebrows — also now glued on, one of them peeling off — and regarded his three daughters. But then his eyes turned past them, to me. He strode forward several more steps, making the floorboards shake, and then stuck out one huge meaty hand for me to shake.

“Uh ... ”

Sevens spoke up: “You may shake his hand, Heather. He is in an amused mood.”

We took the King’s hand; he pumped my arm up and down in greeting — and then stuck out his other hand, for a tentacle. We took that too, by which time he was detached from the first

handshake and seeking a third. He didn't stop until he'd shaken all seven of us, going: "Greeting, Princess! And Princess! And Princess!" the entire time.

"T-thank you," we managed. "Thank you for ... having us."

Finally he stepped back again and struck another pose, his uniform still a cheap fake. "What say you, Princesses of the Eye? Should we revel in the performance of martial glory, or only its faded shadow?"

"Uh, um," was all we managed. But then I cleared my throat, wound most of my tentacles back in, and managed my first deep breath since I'd arrived. "I think I preferred it when you didn't look so silly. I mean, before. Please. But maybe not so loud?"

The Yellow King flashed another toothy grin; and just like that he was back to his previous self, uniform genuine once more, chest puffed up like he was on parade. But when he spoke he was about twenty decibels quieter.

"You are, after all, our guest, Princesses."

That third voice squealed with approval, from down on the sofa: "A veritable silver fox, Father! Sevens, I like your human here, she has great taste. Can I borrow her?"

"You may not," said Sevens.

"Tch! Spoilsport. Does she have a brother? I need a man to go with this outfit. Several men. Going over the top! Hurrah!"

Steel snapped: "This is disrespectful."

Sevens said, "To what?"

The King gestured at the seated figures, and spoke to me. "Princess Morell, I do believe you have already met Steel, though under less intimate and salubrious conditions. And allow me to introduce another one of my darling daughters — Heart. Heart, this is the Sevenfold Princess of the Eye, Sevens' wife-to-be." His face lit up suddenly. "Why, I didn't think it until now, but they match at last! Haha!"

I finally tore my eyes off the King and managed to take in the trio of women on the sofas.

Steel was sitting to my left — I recalled her from our previous

confrontation with the King in Yellow. She had taken on a truly terrifying form back then, some nightmare Outsider breeding-thing that had set off all my abyssal alarm bells. Thankfully right then she gave no sign of trying to look like anything except a human being, albeit an extremely grumpy one. An older lady, perhaps in her fifties, with close-cropped grey hair and a look of starched discipline in her cold, grey eyes; she was wearing lumpy, shapeless military fatigues, in grey and brown camouflage patterns, with great big stompy boots on her feet and some kind of bulletproof vest over her shoulders. A rifle lay in her lap — some science fiction nonsense with too many handles and a LCD readout on the side. She sat hunched, as if exhausted from battle, a sour expression on her face.

She gave me a disinterested look, and said: “And-Steel-Will-Rust.”

“Uh ... I’m sorry?”

“My full name,” she grunted. “Don’t bother.”

‘Heart’, meanwhile, was far more interested in herself. She was on my right, on the opposite sofa. She stood up and struck a pose, hands flaring outward from her hips, chin raised, biting her lower lip.

She wasn’t wrong — she did look a bit like a cake.

Heart was tall and graceful, with long limbs, an hourglass figure, and a face full of sharp angles, butter-yellow eyes full of girlish glee, far too much delight on a mouth just a little bit too wide, a little bit too toothy, a little bit too manic. Her hair was a perfect sheet of silvery-white, better than any human dye-job could have achieved. She was dressed in a white military uniform which certainly didn’t conform to any standards on earth, nor serve any practical purpose: a white jacket with golden trim, lace and ruffles cupping and framing her chest, sleeves hugging and highlighting the shape of her forearms, cut-outs of lace showing off her flanks, and a golden belt tight around her waist; a long matching white skirt hugged her hips, then flared outward with pleats and layers, some in golden-yellow, shimmying and shifting with every motion; long black leather riding boots showed beneath; golden leather gloves completed the look. She even had a hat, with a fancy brim.

“Daddy, I look fantastic,” she said. “Thank you!”

Steel said: “You look like a leftover chunk of white phosphorus.”

Heart laughed, full of scorn. “Steel, sister, you’re just jealous because I’m the most fuckable thing in the palace. I am infinitely fuckable right now.” She turned as if only just remembering me, and struck another pose — one hand up in the air, the other on a hip. “Our-Lady-of-The-Jaundiced-Heart. My pleasure to meet you, Sevens’ little toy. Gosh! I do like your colours there, very bright, very flash.”

“Um, hello, yes.”

Heart squinted at me quickly, turning those wide, bright golden eyes into narrow slits of harsh judgement. She looked me up and down. “Mmmmmmm — no, not my type.” She looked away, losing interest. “Not there. Not interested. I assume she doesn’t do the business, anyway?” she asked Sevens. “I don’t see a pregnancy bump on you yet, sister, so either she doesn’t, or she’s shooting blanks.”

Seven-Shades-of-Scorn-and-Strife turned a look upon her buoyant sister like a handful of hidden razorblades.

Sevens had not looked happy when I had arrived; she looked even less happy now. Ice-cold eyes stared out from beneath her ruler-straight fringe of blonde hair. Straight-backed and starched, she was sat in a large leather armchair, the sort of overstuffed giant which threatened to absorb her if she dared to sit back too far. Her Yellow Princess mask had not gone untouched by the King’s latest aesthetic fad: her crisp and uncreased white blouse had gained a high, military-style collar, and her long yellow skirt was pleated with fresh layers, as if it contained secret armour-plating. Her lilac umbrella lay against the arm of the chair — the handle had been transformed into a pistol-grip, like something out of an old spy movie.

With Steel to my left and Heart on my right, Sevens was separated from me by the space between her sisters; I felt, for the first time in my life, an uncanny sense that this social situation absolutely called for me to go to her side, to sit next to her, perhaps even to hold her hand, to show that we were a pair, a couple, and wanted to be alongside each other.

But we clamped down on that urge — I told myself it was because this was not a traditional family. I was not visiting my fiancée’s

family home. We were Outside, among beings not too far from gods, and speaking with a thin mask over a million-headed leviathan of hubristic suffering.

A small lie; we were terrified of stepping between Steel and Heart, like exposing one's flanks to a pair of predators.

Sevens spoke before I could react, anyway. "Heart," she said. "Sister. Shut up."

Heart huffed like a moody teenager and flung herself back down onto the sofa, lace and skirt trailing down after her like party streamers, booted feet briefly kicking up into the air.

"Oh, Sevens!" she said "You're such a bore in that getup! I prefer the little vampire, she's fun, you can have a giggle with her. Or why not put on the Slasher? You could chase me, we could run around the room, and then you could throw me in a hole! Or Miss Gunner! Oh, yes!" Heart smiled again, sitting up, enthused by this idea. "The Gunner would be perfect for this. Wouldn't she, Father? Make Sevens change her mask, daddy!"

The King — the Jaundiced General — cleared his massive throat and dipped his head. "Oh, it is not within the powers of this old soldier to command his own daughters. Sevens may do as she wishes, Heart, as may you."

"Oh, tosh and nonsense!" Heart tutted — then turned a tingling, dangerous, electric smile on me. She fluttered eyelashes which could have felled a saint. "Morell, won't you ask Sevens to put on a more fun face for us?"

Sevens spoke with all the warmth of a corpse: "There is nothing fun about this conversation."

Heart leaned toward me, her hair spilling across the black leather, her chest compressing against the arm of the sofa, that soft white uniform contorting itself like fur over silk wrapped around soft jelly. She batted her eyelashes again, bit her lower lip, and purred: "Mmm, don't you agree, isn't she being such a stick in the mud?" She extended one golden-gloved hand and reached for the nearest of my tentacles. "Come closer, I promise I don't bite. Not women, any—"

Sevens snapped: "You want the Gunner? Fine."

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight shot to her feet, shoes clacking on the dark oaken floorboards.

Without so much as a blink-and-you'll-miss-the-transition, the Yellow Princess was gone, the mask shed and replaced with another.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight donned a mask she had not yet shown to me — and I didn't flatter myself by pretending that she'd even shown me even a tiny fraction of the stories she had told and the roles she had played upon the stage of the human mind. This mask — the 'Gunner' — was young, perhaps younger than me, a slight and slim teenage girl with filthy blonde hair, pulled back in a ponytail and tied up with a piece of string; dirty skin, unwashed for days or weeks, and a face full of freckles marked by months of grinding fear, dark rings around the eyes, a slow death in the sallow complexion; she wore a dark green military uniform clearly never designed for her size, baggy and loose and stained.

Heart completely forgot me, squealed with delight, and clapped her hands together.

And that was all she had time for; Seven-Shades-of-Scared-Teenager grabbed a chunky black handgun off the arm of the sofa — her umbrella, transmuted — and shot Heart through the chest.

The sound was deafening in the tiny space of the study. We yelped and flinched and back-pedalled in shock, part of my mind screaming that this was rapidly turning into a huge mess, out of control, the exact situation we did not want. Tentacles came up, our skin flashed warning colours, and we prepared to back up Sevens against the consequences of her actions.

Heart looked down at her chest, a big messy hole right over her left breast, blood spreading outward in a slow wave, soaking through the white of her fancy uniform. Her mouth hung open, scandalised. She gestured at herself. "You've ruined it! My sex-cake look!"

Steel snorted in approval. "Serves you right."

Seven-Shades-of-Swift-on-the-Trigger looked exactly like a teenage girl who had just shot a family member in a fit of rage: shaking with rapidly draining anger, face going pale, panting and wide-eyed, lips quivering. For a second I thought the emotion was real, so I prepared to leap the space to be by her side, to sweep her up, to

hiss at the others, to—

But then the Gunner vanished, as quick as she had arrived.

Standing in her place was Seven-Shades-of-Blood-Goblin.

She was dressed in her usual black shorts and tank-top, but with the suitable addition of a pair of oversize military boots on her feet — brand-new, lacking laces — and a big camo-print jacket draped over her shoulders. Red-black eyes bored into Heart with sneering victory. She crossed her arms, stuck out her tongue, and went “Pbbbbbbt!”

The King in Yellow sighed and tugged on his neat grey beard. “Oh, my wayward daughters.”

Heart said: “She’s ruined my smoking hot uniform! Sevens, you’re such a little bitch! Father, father, please, put it back! I was planning to go out and do some fishing in this, and I won’t have any luck at all with a bloody great hole in my tit. Attract all the real freaks, that would.” She leaned forward and gestured at her back — there was a matching exit wound, and a nasty hole in the leather. “And she’s buggered the stuffing, too!”

Steel held up a hand for Sevens, flat, palm out. Sevens slapped it. A high-five.

The King in Yellow tugged on his beard again, wiggled his bushy grey eyebrows, and softly said: “Stage-hands to the fore, we suppose.”

Heart’s uniform returned to its unblemished white, the blood gone, her wound vanished. The hole in the sofa vanished as well.

“Thank you, daddy!” Heart preened, then turned to Sevens and pulled a sneering bad-girl smile, eyes all narrow, lips pursed.

Sevens snorted and stomped with one massive, loose boot. “Hands off my girl or we’ll go worse than pistol rounds, *guuurrrrk*.”

The King in Yellow boomed: “Girls, girls, please! Your father despairs when you fight each other — instead of turning your attentions to the eternal enemy!”

Steel gave the General a look of bored contempt: “And who takes that role this episode?”

The King paused, arms outstretched, like an actor simulating the

mistake of forgetting his lines.

I'd had enough of this.

"Excuse me," we said, loud and clear. We stepped forward, made a conscious, concerted effort to lower our tentacles, then reached up and pulled off our squid-skull mask and took a deep breath. "This is all very ... lively, and I don't mean to sound ungrateful for the invitation, but I am only mortal, and I'm finding it a challenge to keep up with your ... antics. Please, slow down?"

"Ooooooh," Heart purred under her breath. "She's a stunner with that mask on. Well done, Sevens."

Sevens rasped: "I'll bite you."

The King in Yellow beamed at me, showing off his very white teeth once again. "My apologies, Princesses," he said, filling with pride and pomp once more. "We simply cannot resist putting on a show, especially when one gets a few of us all in one place at the same time. Do you like what you see? It is essential to our natures, determined by our types, brought forth by our—"

"Yes," we said, gently but firmly.

The King laughed again, then said: "I see you cannot be enraptured by long speeches. A worthy trait in a monarch, a princess, or an angel. But worry not, Princesses of the Eye, we plan no play for this day. Merely a spot of improv. Ha ha!"

Sevens rolled her eyes and made a growly, grumbly noise down in her throat. Steel sighed and looked preternaturally bored. Heart looked highly amused.

"That's good to know, thank you," we said, very carefully. We had to keep in mind that discoursing with these beings was akin to negotiating hospitality in a fairy-mound; I had no idea what kind of wrong step or unwary word would set off worse than a fake execution. And we had not forgotten the sight when we had arrived, the glimpse of the King's true nature through our abyssal senses. "But — Yellow King, is that what I should call you? Why the invitation? Why am I here? Is there something you wanted to speak with me about?"

"Oh, yes!" bellowed the Jaundiced General. "We were discussing your batman!"

“ ... I’m sorry, pardon? My what?”

“Your orderly!” clarified the King. “Your aide, your helpful little fellow, the one with the smart ideas and the quick thinking.”

Sevens gurgled in her throat and said: “Means Badger.”

“Oh,” I said, catching up at last. “Okay, yes. Of course you were. Badger, yes.”

Heart purred, sprawling back on the sofa, crossing and uncrossing her legs. “Oh, I am just dying to meet this gentleman. Nathan, was it? God! I so do love doomed heroes, they get me all hot and bothered.” She looked at me and said: “Daddy won’t go into the details I like, and Sevens won’t tell me a thing about him. Is he very stupid and strong? Or smart and tortured? Doomed to a terrible death? Or is he going to end himself in shame, eventually? I’d love a look-in before he goes, please, please. I promise I’ll be gentle with him!”

We all stared at Heart — me, myself, and I, all seven of us. All my tentacles turned to point at her. Our coruscating skin dialled down to a threat-strobe of dark reds and toxic purples. We did not smile.

“If you touch my cultist,” I said. “I will pull your head off and eat your insides.”

Heart cooed and rolled her eyes — but she sat back from me slightly. “Oh, come on! I’m not going to break him! Genuine doomed heroes are so rare these days.”

“He’s not doomed,” I snapped. “Badger is safe and sound.”

Heart paused, then pouted. “Not even a little bit of doom?”

“No doom.”

She pouted harder. “I’m sure we could see about that.”

I reached out with a tentacle and grabbed her arm. She flinched, but I held on. “Nathan’s going to live to his eighties and die in his sleep.”

Heart slowly and gently pinched my tentacle with her opposite thumb and forefinger, and unwound me from her arm, maintaining eye contact all the way. Then she placed my tentacle on the arm of the sofa. “Now I see why Sevens has the hots for you. You’re made for each other. Bores! And Sevens used to be so much fun, I thought

you might have been a proper throwback to her wild days.”

The Yellow King chuckled affectionately. “You must forgive my darling daughter’s inexperience. She is younger, far younger than Steel and Sevens here, and still has the taste for simple tragedy, spiced with a heavy dose of the baser instincts.”

Heart pouted even harder, seemingly deflated now. “It’s not base,” she muttered. “It’s fun.”

“Can you all please stop for a moment?” I said loudly. “You all keep sliding into this ... this ... melodrama, and I can’t keep up.”

The King said, “Only what you see, little watcher.”

Steel said: “They do, don’t they?”

I glanced down at her. “Okay, well, you don’t — but I don’t fully understand why you’re here. I think I follow why Heart was part of the conversation about Badger — horribly enough — but you?”

Steel looked at me as if we were all sitting in a muddy trench, and hadn’t moved in three days. “Because I don’t do melodrama.”

“Oh. Well. Fair enough?”

“Mmhmm.”

I turned back to the King in Yellow, who was apparently waiting for me to deliver my line; it was a very uncanny feeling, as if I was on stage. I actually glanced over my shoulder at the rest of the study, half-expecting to find rows of audience seating marching away behind us. But there was nobody there, just more bookcases and dark wood and the windows over the fog-shrouded forest.

The King in Yellow said: “Do you enjoy the décor, Princesses?”

“Um, please stop calling me princess — or the plural, though I appreciate the gesture, thank you. Just Heather is fine, or Morell, if you have to. And yes — it’s actually very comfortable in here, thank you.”

The King beamed at me, puffed out his chest, and wandered over to his map-table once again. A contemplative look settled over his features as he trailed his fingers over pale illustrations of mountain valleys and wide plains, little villages and sprawling urban centres. His hand avoided some of the carved wooden pieces laid out on the maps — soldiers and horses and the like — and then scooped up

one particular piece and carried it with him as he stepped past the table.

Past the table was a massive wooden desk, exactly the sort of thing one would expect of a 19th century general, all polished and smart and clean and mostly empty. But on one end of the desk was a massive globe, mounted inside one of those metal frames which allowed one to spin it at will.

The King touched the globe and turned it thoughtfully, gazing down at sepia continents and washed-out borders.

I only realised after a second that the globe did not show any version of earth I'd ever seen.

"Do you know what this space is for, Lady Morell?" he asked.

Sevens hissed like a broken gasket. "Father. She doesn't want all this."

But the King carried on: "The contemplation of past victories. Basking in glories gone. Dwelling on grand plans which have now fallen into memory. Drawing lines on a map and replaying their ebb and flow, or their sundering and erasure." He stabbed a finger toward the globe and stopped it spinning. "And that is what we were doing regarding your Badger fellow. A most resourceful gentleman. In another age, or another place, he would have been most valuable. I could have put him to great work, tearing down all the grand battle plans of this or that iron-fisted tyrant; he could have worked wonders in the partisans who—"

"He is mine," I said, interrupting the impending monologue.

The King looked my way as if surprised. I thought he might scowl, or laugh, but instead he chuckled softly — and tossed the wooden board-piece at me. One of my tentacles snatched it out of the air and brought it up to my face.

It was a tiny scale model of Badger, carved from dark wood, caught in the moment of triumph over Edward, on the edge of a massive seizure.

"That he is," said the King. "Are you proud of him, Lady Morell?"

The light in the study went still, as if the rolling fog down in the forest outdoors was holding its breath. The grandfather clock stopped ticking. The fire ceased to crackle. Sevens was baring her

little needle-teeth in sudden frozen panic. Steel looked exhausted, ground down by war. Heart's face lit with excitement, as if I was about to hand her a toy.

We choose our words with great care.

"What we feel about him is irrelevant," we said to the King. "He's got almost no pride at all."

The fog resumed, the light shifted. The clock went tick and the fire popped and burbled. The King smiled and Heart sighed with disappointment.

"Ahhhhhhh," went the King. "Not a hero, then? Never to stand centre-stage and strut while he monologues?"

"Heroes don't need pride," I said. "Heroism is a product of actions, not emotions."

Heart pulled a disgusted face at me. "Boring, gosh."

The King chuckled softly, warm and gentlemanly. "Any heroic play must be a reflection of life — after all, every play is a reflection, and a reflection can only be revealed by turning one's eyes inward, upon one's own life. Or do you disagree, Sevenfold Princess?"

Something snagged in the back of my mind — what was he suggesting here? This didn't sound like it was about Nathan anymore.

Suddenly, Seven-Shades-of-Snapping-Chompers was by my side, one slender arm stuck out of her oversized camo-print jacket and entwined with me. "*Urrrrk*," she went. "That's what I was trying to tell him! He shouldn't have interfered so much!" She leaned forward, hanging off my arm; we wrapped another tentacle around her waist, to help support her. She got all tangled up in my yellow robes — her yellow robes. "I'm trying to do this on my own, dad!"

"Oh, never mind that." The Yellow King waved her down. "The young man in question was not even remotely relevant to your nature, my dear daughter."

"My nature is whatever I decide it is!" Sevens gurgled.

The King guffawed. Steel sighed heavily and looked even more tired. Heart perked up, suddenly very interested again.

We cleared my throat. "Sevens, may I speak to your father for a

moment, speaking as ... the angel of the Eye?"

Sevens blinked huge red-black eyeballs at me. "Uhhhhh ... okay?"

The King smiled back at me, beaming with all the affection of a monarch for his grand designs. I said: "Between you and me — between you as the King in Yellow and me as the adopted daughter and angel of the Eye — thank you. Thank you for helping—"

Sevens gurgled down by my armpit: "Heatherrrrr."

"—but don't go any further. Nathan is my cultist. That's the end of the matter. Unless you want a border war."

The King pulled a wide, toothy, and worrying smile. "Oh, there is no need to thank me. I did it entirely for my own satisfaction."

"But I want to make clear—"

"One should never thank a monarch for following a monarch's nature," said the King in Yellow. "Unless one is a staunch monarchist."

The King's smile turned thin and knowing, as if this truism should mean something to me. I wasn't quite sure where he was going with this, but we felt our hackles rise, our tentacles draw inward, our instinct stir with recognition. Somehow, without realising it, we had strayed into the King's true domain, playing a dangerous game over dangerous territory. He was trying to teach us a lesson.

We spoke slowly and carefully, trying to drag this conversation back to safer ground: "But between you as Sevens' father, and me as Sevens' fiancée — that's between you and her, and I'm standing by her side. Literally." We reached down with a spare tentacle and ruffled Sevens' hair, gently. She made a gurgly purring sound.

Heart murmured under her breath: "Awww! They're in love! Get her pregnant already!"

The King dipped his head to me in acknowledgement of my argument, but then rose again and veered back into lethality. "We cannot control our natures, Princesses. But we can control our actions. Do you agree?"

I glanced down at Sevens for help, but she didn't seem alarmed by this. And I didn't feel like I was in the middle of a play. If we had an audience, it was just Steel and Heart; Steel really didn't care

about any of this, and Heart had a one-track mind.

"I do agree we can control our actions," we said. "But—"

"And actions affect our natures, do they not?" The King leaned against his desk, hands folded in his not-quite lap, so very civilized.

We couldn't help it, we smiled. "I was about to say, I disagree that our natures cannot be controlled or changed. Our natures are mutable as well. You told me that, in fact. We are what we pretend to be."

The King smiled in reply; I'd unpicked his riddle, though it was a gentle one.

But then he said, "And to observe — that, too, is a kind of action."

We went cold inside with sudden realisation. The King smiled, warm and soft and gentle. The trio of Yellow Daughters all held their breath, even Sevens, as if they knew their Father had revealed his hand.

I frowned at him. "Yes? Yes, I'm looking for advice and inspiration on what to do about the Eye. That was supposed to be advice, wasn't it?"

The King merely nodded.

"But what does it mean?" I huffed. "To observe is to act upon the observed — yes, I know that much, I figured that out a long time ago. That isn't new. What are you trying to tell me?"

The King opened one hand. "The play's the thing—"

"—wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King," I finished the line. "Yes, don't quote *Hamlet* at me again, please. That's the same line you used on me last time we met. I know the whole thing by heart. What are you trying to say? That I should put on a play for the Eye? Reveal its guilty conscience?"

"What is observed," said the King, "changes the nature of the observer."

"Guuurrrlk," went Sevens, down at my side, nestled against my flank. She looked a little embarrassed, cringing and wincing, like a teenage girl who was witnessing her father dancing his heart out. "He's trying really hard, Heather, but this isn't a play. It's just improv. Probably 'cos you see behind the curtain too easy." She

bumped her head against my ribs. “He’s tryin’ say be like us. Put on a show. Make it see.” She winced. “*Urrrk*, no pun.”

I huffed a sigh and looked back at the King. He was still smiling. I said: “See? That’s all it does. Thank you for the ... oh.”

We looked around the room again, at the tactical map with the little toy soldiers, at the military uniforms on the King’s daughters, at the King’s own absurd mask, all pomp and flair. We lifted the little wooden statue of Badger — and found it had changed, to a weird little cephalopod, wrapped in a tiny bullet-proof vest.

“I’m not going to war with the Eye,” we said. “That would make no sense. Did you really think you had to convince me of that?”

“Perhaps,” said the Yellow King.

Heart gave a huge huff and stood up in a great shower of skirt and lace, suddenly dominating the space with her height and her curves. “Well! This is all fantastically boring now! I’m off to find some men so I can command them to dig a trench and then fuck me in it. Steel — care to come with?”

Steel said, “You’re joking, sister.”

The King cleared his throat, “Actually, Heart, I do believe our guest has a use for you.”

My eyebrows shot up. “I ... do?”

“No!” rasped Sevens. “Go away!”

Heart put her golden gloves on her hips and turned to blink big round eyes at her father the King, then at myself and Sevens. She shrugged, pulling a mystified face.

The King said, “I believe you have a question, Sevenfold Princess.”

“Uh,” I said, suddenly feeling deeply graceless after all that high-stakes conversational sparring. “Um ... a question? Uh ... where’s Mel? I liked Mel? Sevens’ other sister, Melancholy, the Sphinx.”

Steel looked up with sudden interest. “Mel’s out far, beyond range. Looking for prey.”

Heart rolled her eyes. “Melancholy is even worse than Sevens. I can’t stand more than a minute in the same room as her. Living in the past is such a waste.”

We tried again: “How is Saldis doing? Is she still hanging out in the palace?”

Three pairs of eyes blinked at me — the King, Heart, and Steel.

We cleared our throat: “The lady who lives inside the big grey ball? Like a sort of human snail?”

“Oh, her!” the King bellowed, suddenly back to normal. “Oh, no, no, she left several weeks ago — some kind of scandal involving a jilted lover, a donkey, and a series of fancy-dress disguises. Nail’s work, I believe. Far too much laughter and ribaldry for my tastes!”

Heart looked deeply interested all of a sudden. “Excuse me? I only got back last week! Father, who was this person?” She looked back at me and Sevens. “A friend of yours, sister?”

“Sort of,” we said. “Where is she now?”

“Yes!” Heart agreed. “Where is she now?”

The King spread his hands in apology. “Somewhere within the realm, but not in the palace. Trundling along, I’m sure, but little concern of ours. But Princesses, that was not the question you are dying to ask. My darling daughter, Our-Lady-of-The-Jaundiced-Heart, has more talents than she prefers to reveal.”

Heart looked bewildered. Steel smiled, sharp and grim.

“There’s a book,” I said slowly. “A book in your library — the library of Carcosa. I was looking for it, that’s why I’m here. But it’s a non-human book. I’m going to need to translate it.”

The King gestured at Heart; Heart did a big theatrical sigh, coiling her neck back like a dying swan, swishing her silver-white hair over one shoulder. “Oh, Father, no! It’s such a waste of this delightful new look! What, I’m supposed to traipse around with these two bores rather than going off to—”

The King interrupted her with a sudden stern tone below his words: “Perhaps the Sevenfold Princess knows more about heroism than you suspect, Heart.”

Heart rolled her eyes. “Nope!”

Sevens rasped like a lizard. “Don’t want her with us.”

“I do need to translate that book ... ” I said.

The King chuckled. "It will take you all no more than fifteen minutes diversion. And besides!" he bellowed once more. "Heart, you can ask Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight all about Aym."

Sevens' face fell, then drained of all colour. I stared in shock — how did he know? Why even ask — he was the King in Yellow.

Heart turned back to us, fluttering innocent eyelashes and stepping closer. "Dear sister, are you hiding a second squeeze from us? Why, I do think I will endure the dusty air in the library after all. Only for fifteen minutes, though; I've got doomed heroes to enjoy. And I'm certain whoever Aym is, she isn't one of those!"

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.4

Compared with our arrival in the private chambers of the King in Yellow, our return to the Library of Carcosa was markedly less traumatic and much less ceremonious — but also less solitary, for both good and ill.

We popped through the membrane with a puff of displaced air and appeared between towering bookcases of hexagonal shelves, sunk deep in bookish gloom and drifting dust and the echoing vastness of the library; my trainers scuffed on wooden floorboards as I caught myself with my tentacles, gripping the edge of a bookcase, stomach clenching and head reeling, all of us working together to brace ourselves against the ever-lurking disorientation of a Slip.

Sevens' oversized and unlaced boots clacked down right next to me with a double-stagger stomp-stomp; she almost overbalanced. The voice of her Blood Goblin mask went *Wuurrrrk!* as I tightened my grip to stop her falling flat on her face.

"Same—" I croaked, gathering my breath, fighting a brief wave of nausea. "Same spot. Right where I left off. Woo hoo."

"Burrurk-yeah?"

Detour ended. A success, albeit minor.

After the King in Yellow had bidden us farewell — and good health, and do visit again soon, and do inform our gracious personage about the date of the wedding, and do always feel free to drop in, and do give my regards to young Master Hobbes — I'd simply retraced my steps, mathematically speaking, to locate the spot in the library where I'd heard Sevens' voice in my head.

We were deep in the library stacks once more, surrounded by those bizarre hexagonal bookshelves; they looked more like ossified insect hives for a species of Outsider machine-wasp, not a place for storing tomes. The so-called 'books' they contained were each the size of a football, made of metal, weighed a ton, opened like a flower of steel

petals, and certainly had not been crafted by human hands.

Or so I assumed; humans did lots of strange things. I should know, I'm one of them, technically.

The glow-globes in that part of the library were in good repair, but dim and shadowy, as if they needed a bit more juice in their wires; heavy shadows lay thick in nooks and crannies between the bookcases, like rock pools at low tide. Some of those hollows were occupied by half-glimpsed writhing shapes, others were deeper than they should have been, and a few were very still and gave the impression of attention returned — something staring back. My tentacles were already rising to provide better illumination, a slow rainbow strobe pushing back the gloom. Sevens found her feet and huddled deeper inside her big camo-print jacket, shoulders squared, lips pouting, eyes all grumpy frown.

"Yes," I said, glancing up and down the row of books. "This is where I left off. Oh, um, Heart's not here? Didn't she follow—"

Heart stepped out from behind the end of the nearest bookcase, with a little toss of her head and a flick of her hips.

She was glowing, like rainy sunlight on fresh snow.

Our-Lady-of-the-Jaundiced-Heart, younger sister to Sevens, daughter of the King in Yellow, a yellow princess in her own right, and — as I was rapidly coming to understand — a terrible flirt and a brat of the highest and most difficult order, shot us the look of a petulant teenager being asked why she didn't want to wear a party hat.

She said: "I prefer not to pop into existence like a clown summoned by the sound of a horn. It's so pedestrian. Yes, there's shock, there's surprise — but where's the style? You never used to do that, dear sister! Isn't it more exciting if you appear on the stage like any other person, but from a position you couldn't possibly have occupied?" Her sharp-angled face lit up with girlish glee once again, buttery eyes fluttering thick lashes. "I swear I've sent at least three men to change their trousers purely because I entered from somewhere I couldn't have been!"

Heart giggled at her own filthy anecdote, petulance banished.

She still looked like a cake made for unmentionable activities — her words, not mine — with her soft hourglass body poured into that

layered, flashy, gleaming white military uniform, blazer and long skirt and hat and all. But away from the direct influence of her father the King, the more overtly militaristic flairs had fallen away — the shoulder bars, the sharp lapels, the peak on the cap. Heart's own tastes had taken their place, floaty, gauzy, whimsy: an upward curl at the hem of her skirt, long trailing sleeves like a Japanese kimono, and thick braids in the great mass of her silver-white hair.

Sevens gurgled at her: “Not my entrance, duuuuh. Heather brought me.”

Heart's smile went pained and awkward, with polite pity. She looked at me. “Well. You're still learning.”

“She's not like us!” Sevens rasped. “Don't be stupid! She's not a rookie.”

I huffed and felt myself trying to stand up straight, puff my chest out a bit, show off my tentacles. “Yes, I'm a bit more focused on practical applications, not theatrical flair, thank you. It's just not my thing.”

“Oooh!” Heart's smile turned truthful again. She moved one of those loose sleeves over her mouth, biting her lower lip and wiggling her eyebrows. “Oh, there we go. She's got some real spice to her — she must have, to talk to daddy like that. Are we sparring, human? A play-fight? Will you wrestle me to the floor and have your way with me? Does one of your juicy tentacles there have a palpal bulb ready for—”

Seven-Shades-of-Needle-Teeth-and-Molten-Eyes went:
“*Guuurruk!* Back off!”

“Yes,” I added quickly. “I'm very flattered, Heart, but you're not my type. And I couldn't handle any more girlfriends than I already have.”

Heart sighed and laughed and rolled her eyes. She produced a folding fan from within one of her baggy sleeves then started to slowly waft it at her own face. “Oh, I'm not really interested, sister. I'm just winding you up. She's so not my type, either. There's not an inch of heroic doom about her. Not a second of dark brooding. Not even a juicy masculine pout.” She sighed like a maiden confined to a tower. “I'm right, aren't I, Lady Morell? You're not really the type to compose a poem to a woman you've never even had a single

conversation with, before you go off and die charging a line of muskets. Are you?”

“Uh, no,” I said. “I prefer to ... uh ... not do that.”

Heart pulled a face that said ‘told-you-so’ and then sighed again. “And now I’m in the bloody library. Hoo-rah for me.”

I cleared my throat and lowered my tentacles; their strobing was competing with Heart’s white glow. “I apologise for getting you mixed up in this, Heart. Your father’s offer was very gracious, but you’re not really his to command. Thank you for agreeing to translate the book.”

Heart just snorted and cast her eyes down the row of strange metal bookcases.

Sevens grumbled as well. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her oversize camo-print jacket and made her big boots go stomp on the floorboards. “Hate when dad gets like that. All stuffed from a good meal. Ugh.”

“Good meal?” I said.

Sevens stared at the floor, looking embarrassed. “Edward’s whole thing.”

“Ah. Oh,” I said. “Um. Right. Oh, that is sort of weird. Is he often like this? I mean, he is going to be my ... father-in-law. Actually, no, I can’t think about this right now.”

Heart giggled. “Oh, I didn’t mind it too much. Father did give me a wonderful present, after all! That uniform — unf,” she grunted. “Yes, oh, as soon as we’re done here I’m putting it back on and commanding some men to go over the top.”

“Of ... of a trench?” I asked. “Over the top of a trench?”

Heart gave me a sultry look, biting her lower lip and fluttering eyelashes like the whisper of secret gods. “Fill in the blanks, human,” she purred.

Sevens gurgled again. “You’re as bad as dad.”

Heart did a big huff, mood changing instantly. “What do you expect? I’m in the library! It’s boring.” She closed her fan with a clack and pointed past me and Sevens; there was a squid-faced librarian shuffling about at the end of the row of shelves,

presumably waiting to see if I was going to ask him for directions again. “What am I supposed to do, take an interest in the catalogue?” Heart snorted, then glanced at the weird sphere-books again, pulling a delicate frown. “What even are these, anyway?”

Sevens showed her teeth in a grin, all sharp needles and sudden smugness. “Don’t pretend you don’t know, sister.”

Heart shot her a quick and venomous look, then an even quicker flicker at me, then back to the books again. She reached out with her free hand and pulled one off a shelf, effortlessly balancing the heavy, irregular sphere on her slender fingertips, pale wrist supporting much more than a human would.

The metal book flowered open, metallic petals falling back to reveal their secrets. Heart pulled a disgusted face — but she peered inside.

“Oh! Oh, it’s this lot,” Heart said after a moment. “The ones from the place with the sun that burns backwards. Oh damn and bugger, I do abhor stuff written by quint-lobers, it’s always so circuitous. They go around and around, they never put events in narrative order, and they love their endless asides about cognitive simultaneity.” She gestured with her fan, a sideways slash of derision. “They do this awful thing where they tell you what’s going to happen in a summary first, then they recount by sensory theme, not linear time. It’s such a vegetable way of thinking. They should all be grilled and eaten.”

Sevens nudged me in the side and nuzzled into one of my tentacles; she was grinning, amused and sneaky.

Heart ranted on, talking to the book: “Do you know — and this must be on my mind because of Father’s whole thing earlier — they don’t even write about their wars in a linear fashion? They start with the most important battles, the big fulcrums, and then trace everything backward? It’s ridiculous. You’re not supposed to break up a heroic narrative with five chapters of industrial production figures.”

Heart finally looked up from the book and caught us both staring. She snapped the book shut — which was like a steel bear-trap catching the air — replaced it on the shelf, and fanned her face.

Sevens went *snerk*. I cleared my throat gently.

“Heart,” we tried. “Are you ... a secret bookworm?”

Sevens answered before Heart could defend herself. “She’s spent more time in here than anybody else. Read half the library.”

Heart stamped one perfectly formed leg and opened her mouth to snap, but I got there first.

“Sevens!” I tutted. “Why is that a thing to be embarrassed about? I’d read half this library if I could.”

Seven-Shades-of-Cheeky-Goblin made a grumbling noise and buried her face deeper in my tentacles. I glanced at Heart and nodded, as politely as I could manage. This was half fellow-feeling with another bookworm, but also half self-preservation; we were relying on Heart to translate the book truthfully and accurately. And to be honest, I had no idea what it truly meant for one of the Yellow Children to be a bookworm — why did she like it? Probably not the same reasons as us.

Heart rolled her eyes. “Fine!”

“We’ll get this over with as quickly as we can,” I said. “Again, thank you for helping. Uh, I think the book was down here, but I need to ask the librarians again. I’ll just—”

“Oh,” Heart purred. “Oh, no, no no no.” She planted her booted feet with a clean little clack on the floorboard, then grinned wide, a little too manic in the face, golden flashes in her eyes like flecks of burning sunlight. “We’re not going anywhere until my dear sister here tells me exactly who ‘Aym’ is.”

Sevens peered out from among my tentacles like a cat buried in a hedgerow. “None of your business!”

“But Father made it sound most interesting!” Heart licked her lips — more like a predatory cat than a lustful seductress. “A she, yes, I can see that in your eyes — well, with you that’s obvious, haha! Younger than you? Yes. Less ... formed. A ... not a human? Not a human! Gosh! What have you been up to? That’s not like you. Is she very, very doomed? I can’t imagine why else father would—”

“Aym,” I said, loud and clear, “is a weird little sprite-thing attached to a former drug addict and alcoholic — a mage, who’s done terrible things in life, but who wants to atone. Aym dabbles in emotional pain and goading. Sevens and Aym got on quite well. That’s all.”

Heart pulled a face like I'd just presented her with a gleaming silver platter and removed the lid to reveal a live slug.

"... what?" she spluttered. "Sister, sister, what? What are you— what? What?"

Sevens gurgled, still hiding between my tentacles. But then she popped her head out, lank black hair hanging down around her red-eyed face. "Aym is small. But like dad, maybe. One day. Don't mess with her growth, Heart. Don't."

Heart boggled at both of us, then spread her hands in a dismissive shrug. "Alright. I am supremely uninterested in your weird little friend."

"More than friend," Sevens rasped.

"Yes, and I'm equally uninterested in you having some sordid three-way arrangement with a sapient impulse you found in a gutter. Wow, thanks dad. What ... why ... look, never mind." Heart huffed, disappointed.

Sevens gurgled: "Dad has no idea what we really like."

"True that, sister," Heart said. "True that."

I stayed very quiet, because I suspected the exact opposite; the King knew the tastes of his daughters all too well, what they were becoming, or trying to become, or what they might learn from others. Why highlight Aym as interesting to Heart? Aym was neither doomed, nor particularly heroic — or was she? From what little I understood, Aym kept Felicity alive, kept her from relapsing into darker places, and kept her putting one foot in front of another. Was that a kind of heroism? Perhaps. Not Heart's kind. But maybe she could learn.

Or perhaps the King was enjoying a red herring. Perhaps there were people in my orbit whom he would rather his impressionable and flighty young daughter not meet too soon.

I smiled, polite and slightly distant from these familial issues, and said: "Shall we get this over with, then? I think the book was—"

Heart raised one hand in the air; her loose sleeve fell away from her forearm with all the subconscious sensual artistry she could muster. She clicked her fingers with a sharp, hard snap.

“The book, please!” she announced — to nobody in particular. Her fingers gestured at me. “The one she was looking for? Chop chop, now. And no directing — I expect full service. I know you can do better than that.”

For a second we bristled all over; I assumed Heart was being incredibly rude to me and Sevens, resuming hostilities over our lack of readiness, like an aristocrat who expected everything to be instant, for the little people to rush around at her beck and call. After all, Heart was a haughty and powerful princess, why wouldn’t she act like that?

But then a squid-faced librarian hurried past me, tentacled head raised and scanning like a tracking device, large feet thump-thumping against the floorboards.

He hustled right past Heart and down the row of books.

“Oh,” we said. “He’s leading us to the book? I didn’t know they could do that.”

“Neither did I,” rasped Seven-Shades-of-Subtle-Shock.

Heart flashed us a big silly wink and wiggled her hips as she turned to follow the librarian. “Book smarts have to be good for something.”

The commandeered librarian led us deeper and deeper into the stacks, down the row of books and then out into a wider corridor; the ends of hundreds of bookcases stretched off into gloom. Heart swished and swayed as she followed the librarian, clicking her smart heels on the floorboards, occasionally kicking up the hem of her long white skirt so it fluttered down again, presumably for want of anything more interesting to do. Sevens clung onto my tentacles. I just hurried to keep up, watching the pools of worrying shadow and letting out soft hisses at anything which moved too close.

I dared not think about what we were doing, or what I was about to discover. My heart was already going too fast, my tentacles tense and eager and jittery with nerves.

Eventually the librarian led us into another row of bookcases, beneath the soft sea-green glow of the overhead globes; the cases were filled with the same football-sized metal tomes as the rest of this part of the library. He stopped abruptly, turned, and extended one grey-fleshed, long finger to point at a book.

We all drew to a halt. Heart stopped with a click of her heels and turned her chin upward. Sevens hopped free of my tentacles and wandered forward to peer at the book.

I just stared, unsure what to make of the result: the book was like every other in the hexagonal shelves: a weird metal fist of thin petals, twisted together like a sleeping flower. Human? Certainly not. But that could mean anything.

Our throat felt tight. Our skin dialled down its chromatic cycling to a dull soft haze. Our tentacles hugged us tight. We all hugged each other.

We hadn't really been thinking about this book, or the implications of its existence.

Heart threw us a look over her shoulder. "This is the one you were looking for? The catalogue does make mistakes from time to time. It's not perfect. Unlike me!"

"Um, I don't know," I said. My voice came out as a quiver. "I mean, I won't know until I read it."

Heart frowned at me like I was a moron. Sevens glanced at me too, those black-and-red eyes burning like molten pools in her pale face.

"*Urrruk*," Sevens gurgled — which made Heart jump slightly. "Heatherrrrr, you didn't tell me what you were looking for, out here? What's in the book?"

My throat wouldn't work. "I asked the library catalogue if there was anything about ... well, things like me. Anything about a 'little watcher'."

Sevens went quite still.

Heart snorted. "This is a book about you? Who would write a book about you?" She laughed openly, covering her mouth with the end of her sleeve. "No offense, human — or pretend-human, or whatever, but you're not that interesting. I can believe that Sevens would write a book about you — she's such a hopeless romantic—"

"Speak for yourself, sister," Sevens gurgled.

Heart just spoke right over her, pretending not to hear. "But some five-lobed vegetable fellow who doesn't even have a proper concept of romance because he reproduces via spores? Absolutely not, no. I

guarantee you that ninety-nine percent of these books are dry as dirt.” She glanced at the book again. “Besides, this one is old. Older than you by far.” She clicked her fingers in front of the squid-faced librarian. “You’ve got it wrong, silly!” she said to him. “This can’t be the book she—”

“Oh, oh thank God, oh, okay,” I blurted out, heaving for a breath. “Wait, wait, no, that means it’s not about me. Okay. Okay, good. That’s good. Heart, wait. It might be a book about somebody who was like me, once. That’s what I’m looking for. Is there a title? Could you translate the title?”

Heart stared at me like I was speaking in tongues.

Sevens slipped back toward us and wrapped her bony arms around a tentacle. “Heather ... ”

“This is good,” I repeated. “I ... I was worried it might be ... I don’t know. An account about my parents selling me to the Eye. I don’t know. But it can’t be. It’s about something like me, once.”

Heart smiled, fake and forced, showing off the falsity. “Like ... you?” She sighed. “I’ve been very polite, but I really must ask — what are you, anyway?” She raised a hand before I could answer. “Ah-ah-ah! I don’t want you getting the wrong idea, I’m not asking you to unveil your entire self-definition in front of me — unless you like a bit of flashing,” she giggled. “It just seems like a relevant question, if some five-lobed vegetable that’s never met a human has written a book about you.”

“About something like me,” I corrected her gently.

Heart rolled her eyes. “Same difference. You’re clearly human, I’m not disputing that. But you’re also a bit ... different. I can’t really put my finger on it.” She frowned delicately and bit her bottom lip; if she’d been my type, that lip-bite would have been like an adrenaline shot to the gut.

Instead, I glanced down at Sevens. “Is she being serious?”

Sevens tugged gently on my tentacle, like a cat with its own tail. “Mhmm. If Heart is being sarcastic, you’ll know it.”

Heart sighed heavily. “Of course I’m being serious! Look, there’s seven of you — which is a hilarious coincidence, yes, but it’s hardly worth note. You’re about the right size for a human. But you’re sort

of ... ” Heart looked me up and down. She gestured with her fan, as if I was a horse with some pieces in the wrong places. “Oddly shaped.”

Sevens snorted. “She’s being serious.”

“Um,” I said. “Is it the tentacles?”

“No! Tch,” Heart tutted. “I’ve seen that plenty of times before.”

“On ... on humans?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Heart waved that away. I shared another glance with Sevens; she just shrugged. “You’ve just got an odd shape is all. Not in a like ‘oh your boobs are so flat and you’ve got no hips’, but more ... fundamental. It’s quite interesting, actually!” She shot me a saucy wink.

Sevens went *guuurk!* and hugged my tentacle tighter.

“Ah,” I said. “Um. That’s rather a long story, if I’m seeing what I think you’re seeing. I was adopted by a giant eyeball. Some of it rubbed off on me. Sorry, that’s an absurd thing to say, but—”

“Oh, no, well that explains it, then!” Heart laughed. “Takes all sorts, I suppose!”

I nodded along, mystified but happy this made sense.

Sevens rasped: “She’s the daughter of the Eye. You know that, sister. Don’t be dense on purpose.”

Heart flicked her hand-fan open and wafted her face. “I do not care, sister dear. Sometimes it is much more fun to stop paying attention when Father talks geopolitics. My head is empty and I am happier that way. You should try it sometime!”

Sevens made a nasty rasping noise. “Keep kidding yourself.”

Heart smiled, wide and manic. “I will!”

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me. Princesses — both of you — can we stay on topic, please? Heart, does the book have a title?”

Heart let her shoulders slump, exactly like a petulant teenager asked to concentrate on her Father’s orders. She turned those glowing golden-yellow orbs to the metal-fist of the book on the shelf.

"It does," she said, devoid of all enthusiasm. "Oh, they do so love their long-winded titles. Do you really want this, Lady Morell?"

"I do." We nodded, mouth going dry.

Heart dismissed the squid-faced librarian with a flick of her wrist; he ambled off into the depths of the library. Then Heart stared at the book and spoke, quite slowly and precisely, with little clicks of her lips on percussives and plosives:

"A full and true account of the disappearance and return of the twin sisters—"

She cut off and frowned, then said, "Well, there's a pair of names here, but for all the elegance of this throat, I'm going to need more esoteric equipment to pronounce them, so let's just call them Jane Doe and Mary Doe, that captures the intent well enough." She cleared her throat and started again. *"A full and true account of the disappearance and return of the twin sisters—"*

She cut off again, frowning harder this time.

I was practically vibrating with muscle tension.

"Sisterrrr," Sevens rasped. "Get on!"

Heart whirled on Sevens, eyes blazing like molten gold, white dress and loose sleeves all a-flutter with sudden anger. She slapped her own thigh with her free hand. "Do you want accuracy — or do you want speed, sister?! You cannot have both! Unless you would like to translate it for yourself?" She huffed through her nostrils and fanned her face — genuinely flushed this time. "This is why I never talk about the library! None of the rest of you understand it! All I get is this—"

"Heart," I said, gently but firmly, my voice quivering with urgency. "I would like accuracy, please. To the absolute best of your abilities. I'm relying on that. Please."

Heart stared at me and fanned herself faster, eyes smouldering. Sevens made soft, apologetic gurgles.

Eventually, Heart turned back to stare at the closed petals of the book. "As I was saying," she continued. "'Twin sisters' is not actually accurate here. The term denotes two buds, nominally female, which were conjoined during the gestation process, so they came out as genetic copies among a much larger spawning. 'Twin

sisters' is the closest I can get."

"Twin sisters is great, thank you," we said. "It makes perfect sense."

Heart glanced at me. "Does that have a relevant meaning to you?"

"More than I can explain right now. Please, go on. Please."

Heart finished her translation:

"A full and true account of the disappearance and return of the twin sisters Jane Doe and Mary Doe, their subsequent alienation and alienism, their mathematical skills and strange habits, and their eventual transition into the weft between worlds." She snorted. "Quite a bold claim, seeing as the book isn't even that long." She turned back to me. "Well? Does that sound like what you're looking for?"

Our throat and tongue wouldn't work. Our tentacles felt numb, vulnerable, and slow; we longed to draw them inward and wrap ourselves up in a ball. We felt a few slow tears gather in our eyes and run down our cheeks.

"... Sevens, sister dear, your human is leaking."

Sevens snuggled into my side, face in my flank. "Heather."

"This ... this has happened to somebody before," I managed to squeeze out. I sniffed loudly and scrubbed my face on my sleeve. "Uh. We weren't the only ones. Me and Maisie. I could have done with knowing that a long time ago. Uh ..."

Heart waved her fan and snorted; she averted her eyes, as if looking at me was embarrassing to her. "Well, 'somebody'. Trust me, sister-in-law to-be, these vegetable brains were about as far from you humans as it's possible to be while still being limited. I doubt you'll find any commonality at all between—"

"Will you translate the rest of the book for me?" I asked, nearly breathless. "Please, Heart?"

Heart kept her face turned away as she glanced back at me, sidelong, then away again, then back. She was horribly, deeply embarrassed by this show of emotion. Not one for genuine trauma and real tears, it seemed. All showy heroics and dramatic deaths, but not what came after.

We wet our lips. "Do you understand why I'm doing this? What all this is about? Has Sevens explained—"

“Ye-es!” Heart whined. She let out a huge huff. “Oh, I’ve had it up to my eyeballs, from Sevens and Father both! Off to rescue your sister, into the mouth of hell itself, for the greatest staring contest of all time! Tch. But it’s so ... so ... ”

I blinked in surprise. “I’m not a doomed hero?”

“Exactly! And I’m not talking about the army at your back — Father kept calling it a ‘posse’ — I mean all this ... careful thinking. Heroes aren’t supposed to think carefully. They’re supposed to charge their foes! You’re supposed to be wildly optimistic, full of *élan*, and self-belief, and will to power! And then you’re supposed to die, gloriously! Before you can ruin everything! Tch!”

Sevens emerged from my side again and shot a big needle-toothed grin at Heart. “She’s not that type.”

“I noticed!” Heart pulled a grimace.

“Yes,” we said. “We’re going to win. And nobody’s going to die.”

Heart gave me a very odd look — a sidelong up-and-down flick of her golden yellow eyes, cautious and wary, like I was a real monster who’d stumbled into a fancy dress party, and she was a guest in a rubber suit trying to play off my presence with a casual laugh.

“I mean it,” I said. “Really. Nobody is going to—”

“Fine!” she snapped. “I’ll translate your book. Anonymously! You tell anyone else I did this for you, sister, and you and I will be at war. Think of it as a very early wedding present.” She pointed her fan at Sevens. “And don’t you dare laugh.”

“Promise,” Sevens rasped. “Not.”

Before I could ask what we were most certainly not going to laugh at, Heart vanished — replaced in the blink of an eye by a new mask.

A web of silver-white gossamer stretched from bookcase to bookcase, filling the passageway, anchored by thick blobs of silvery liquid; a cross-hatch, more grid than spider-web, each thread a thin coil of moonlight stolen from the sky, shivering and shuddering beneath the library glow-globes, dripping with argent acid.

In the middle of the web lay a knotted ball of chalk-white and pearlescent silver, uncoiling and unfurling a dozen hard-jointed

limbs; plated with chitin like an Arctic crustacean, furred in fluffy layers like a shaggy tundra herd-beast, and rippling with pale fingers like something that lived under the sink in a children's horror story. A ball of eyes rose from the core, set in sockets buried deep behind anti-glare lashes and thickly armoured lenses. Part crab, part ice-bound fox, part forgotten cousin to earthly arachnids, with perfect radial symmetry. Heart's new mask was truly alien and breathtakingly beautiful.

It — Heart — reached out with half a dozen limbs and lifted the ball-shaped metal book off the shelf; she pulled the prize into the centre of her web and let the petals of the book flower open beneath her touch. Her other six limbs produced sheets of parchment and flourished quills, drawn from somewhere inside herself.

The mask did not appear to have any mouth-parts. Sevens didn't say anything, so I followed her lead, waiting politely.

Heart worked quickly, the ball of eyes flicking over the alien crop-circle writing on the metallic petal-pages of the strange book. Her spidery, many-fingered hands scratched and whirled recognisable words — in English! — on the many pages of parchment. Her web shivered in the darkness.

Our-Lady-of-the-Jaundiced-Heart, in her guise as the Spider-Crab-Scholar, piled the finished papers up at one end of her web as she worked. She hadn't been exaggerating; the book was not very long, just thirty pages of English text. My throat went dry and my hands went clammy as she worked on the final page, added it to the pile, and vanished again.

Heart — once more in her flashy white uniform with her long silver-white hair and her golden yellow eyes — stood before us, human and shapely and blushing dark red. She shoved the sheaf of parchment toward me with one hand.

"Well?" she squeaked. "Take it, then!"

"That was incredible," we said. "Thank—"

Heart jammed the papers against my chest. "Just. Take it! Shut up! Take the translation. Shut!"

I bobbed our head and accepted the pages with both hands and two tentacles. Just thirty pages, was this it? An account of another pair

of twins, somewhere out there, a very long time ago, taken by the Eye. Our hands were shaking a little. Our eyes were already running along the opening lines of the text, we couldn't help it. Heart's handwriting was broad and neat, each letter printed with exacting precision in black ink.

*"In the year of the third solar conjunction between the constellation of the Arc and the constellation of the Meat-beast, a clutch of twenty-three seedlings was germinated to the household of the Oak Tree (*translator's note: not literal oak tree, closest cultural analogue*), and within this clutch of eight was a pair of carpel-bearers who budded conjoined and then parted, so that their trunks and limbs and organs were of the same appearance, identical in every fashion, within and without. Their names were Xiyuol'tok-al and Zalui'yel-tul (*translator's note: this is the best I can do, these names do not work with a human tongue, don't even try. *) and they lived happy lives in the crèche of the household of the Oak Tree until the age of six solar revolutions, when they were taken beyond the sphere of our dominion by the unknown machinations of a force unknown to the comprehension of our most knowledgeable natural philosophers."*

Our eyes got all wet again. A lump grew in our throat. Heart was already stepping back, but we reached out toward her with a tentacle; how could we possibly thank her for this?

"Sis-ter," Heart said in a funny high-pitched sing-song voice. "Your human is leaking again."

"I-I'm just ... I ... we weren't the only ones, I—"

A firm hand slipped across the back of my skull, cradling me gently. I blinked and looked up, into the eyes of Sevens-Shades-of-Soft-Solace, once again dressed in the crisp precision of her Princess Mask. Starched white blouse, long yellow skirt, and hair cut sharp enough to sting.

"Breathe, kittens," she purred down at me. "Take a deep breath."

I nodded and sniffed and took deep breaths, as instructed. Heart stepped back. Sevens glanced at her, eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch.

"Well, sister!" Heart said, fanning her own face again, to reduce her still-burning blush. "If that's all you need me for, I'll be off. To put on that uniform Father made, and ... and ... have some fun. I

suppose.” She glanced at me again, golden eyes gone still. “If you have any questions about the translation — not any complaints, I don’t want to hear those — then feel free to ask. Just ... not when I’m with anybody. Alright?”

I nodded and smiled. “Thank you so much, Heart. You were very beautiful in your, um, spider-crab look.”

Heart guffawed, suddenly very much like her father. “As if! Who wants to fuck that? Ugh, not me. And certainly not the types I’m interested in.”

Seven-Shades-of-Suspicious-Suggestion said: “You would be surprised, sister.”

Heart threw up her hands, loose sleeves flopping downward. “I don’t want to know! Shut up! Shut up! Now, seriously, I’m leaving! Nice to meet you, human Morell, yes, see you at the wedding, etcetera etcetera. Good bye!”

We expected Heart to pop out of existence, like Sevens sometimes did, but the Royal Brat just turned and marched away behind the nearest bookshelf. The clicking of her boots terminated the second she was out of sight.

Unsettled quiet grew heavy in the library gloom. Distant echoes of strange voices called out, far away. Claws skittered over wooden boards. Librarians shuffled in the dark. And I sniffed, very loudly, and scrubbed the tears from my eyes once again.

“Kittens,” said the Yellow Princess. “Dry your eyes. Use this.” She produced a clean white handkerchief from somewhere and pressed it into my free hand. We concentrated on breathing deeply and dabbing at our eyes for a moment. Sevens waited, then said: “Is it time to return home with your prize?”

“No!” I blurted out.

Sevens raised one eyebrow at me.

“No, not yet, I mean,” we said. “I want to read this, right now!” I gestured with the sheaf of parchment, then glanced around. “Oh, but I absolutely must sit. I must. We need a desk, a proper one, with at least two chairs. What’s a library without somewhere to sit down and read?”

“Take that up with Heart,” said Sevens.

“Ah?”

“She had a hand in the current design of the library.” Sevens tilted her head. “I think.”

“Oh. Well. Um. We still need somewhere to sit. We ... come with me?” I stuck out a hand to Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight — a formality only, since I already had a tentacle draped around her waist.

“Please, Sevens. I-I would really like some company—”

“Always, kittens,” said Sevens. She took my hand with all the exaggerated grace and poise of a true aristocratic young lady, placing her fingertips into my palm — but somehow it was she who took control when she gripped my hand. “But, pray tell, where are we going?”

“Somewhere to sit,” I said. “Somewhere quiet. Somewhere Outside.”

And with a flicker of thought, Out we went.

= =

We sat together — Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight and us seven Heathers, with our curious coincidental symmetry — on a hillside of warm rock surrounded by a wide plain of purple grass; the blades were as tall as a person, swaying gently beneath a sky the colour of neon-blood bruises. In the distance, far away across the open steppe, a giant bulb of stone-flesh rose toward that sky, flaring with flame-bright yellows and deep-burning oranges and hot-dark reds.

It was a bit like a bonfire on a comfortable autumn night — but Outside, and beyond human comprehension.

I’d been here once before, on an involuntary Slip at thirteen years old; there was nothing here — no creatures hiding in the grass, no giants striding across the horizon — so back then I’d just laid down and gone to sleep. Peaceful, empty, weird.

Good place for reading.

By that light I read the thirty pages of Heart’s translation of *A full and true account of the disappearance and return of the twin sisters Jane Doe and Mary Doe, their subsequent alienation and alienism, their mathematical skills and strange habits, and their eventual transition into the weft between worlds.*

I read the book through once without stopping. Then I read it again.

Then I went back and re-read certain sections several times, no longer tearful with sympathy that bridged dimensions, species, and orders of soul-being. As far as I could understand, the subjects of the book were vegetable invertebrates — but they were closer to me than I'd dared hope.

Sevens sat on the rock next to me, her legs stretched out, shoes removed, bare feet on the warm substrate of this world. She gazed out across the sea of purple grass, like a young woman at the beach, rather than an impossible princess in an impossible place. I kept one tentacle around her waist, but let the others drift, all of us thinking together.

Eventually, after what must have been longer than an hour, we put the pages down and looked up at the flame-god in the distance. I sighed, shaking a little.

Sevens said: "Kittens?"

"Mmhmm."

"Was it useful?"

"I ... don't know," I said. "Do you want to read it as well, or for me to read it to you, or ..."

Seven-Shades-of-Sneaky-Study said, "I have already read it."

We finally looked at her; Sevens' perfect blonde hair was backlit by the neon bruises of this dimension. All we needed to complete the picture was a gentle breeze to ruffle her clothes, but she was immune to that. To my surprise, she reached up and tucked her hair behind one ear.

"Over your shoulder," she explained. "So to speak."

"Oh, then you've seen it all?"

"Mmhmm. But was it useful?"

We sighed again, brushing the manuscript pages with our fingertips and the edge of a tentacle.

In truth, much of the account was too alien to be comprehensible; Heart had done her best not to litter the entire thing with translator's notes, but I got the feeling that true understanding would require entire books of companion essays and cultural studies.

The author — or perhaps the author's species or culture — was obsessed with interpreting events via the stars, always making reference to constellations of an alien world, drawing comparisons to their mythical or metaphorical impact, which was completely lost on us; much of the poetic interpretation of the events went completely over my head. A second obsession was meat; entire passages were devoted to how shocking and bizarre it was that the twin sisters in question ceased to consume a vast variety of meats, all described in great detail, but impossible to make any sense of. About all I could say with confidence was that this meant a lot to the unnamed author; apparently the twins should have withered and died with their shunning of 'meat-beasts' and 'prey-forms', and 'protein shakes'; (translator's note, from Heart: 'not actual protein shakes, but I can't render this without a paragraph of chemistry, so suck it up.')

The third issue was senses. Heart had made a compromise by using a range "see, see2, see3, see4, see5" and then replicated this pattern for all the other senses — hearing, touch, taste, and smell. The technique made for very repetitious sentences whenever the concept came up.

But the basics were all recognisable.

Twin sisters — Xiyuol'tok-al and Zalui'yel-tul, or to give them their human versions, Jane Doe and Mary Doe — had vanished from their crèche for two weeks with no explanation. I gathered from the way the text treated the subject that emotionally-motivated kidnapping or child murder did not exist in this species — though the 'crèche-watchers' were 'inspected' for signs of 'saplingovorism', which was not found.

And then the twins had returned, in the night, appearing in a sealed room — changed and traumatised.

Outwardly they had still appeared as members of the 'thinking order of uprights', as the translation put it. The twins themselves told a tale of supernatural abduction and flight across an ashy plane, watched by a thing in the sky that burned them inside and out with new thoughts. They had escaped together, because the great watcher in the sky had decided they were its children, that they were supposed to be there, and it had turned its attention away for but a moment.

When it had looked away, they had drawn upon their biological heritage — some kind of ability to move through vacuum, with vestigial wings, but the text wasn't clear about that, in the way a human text would not have to explain walking — and they had escaped through the 'negative-sky' (translator's note: 'I cannot explain this, you don't have enough brain-lobes, human'), together.

Together! They had escaped together, where Maisie and I had not.

Over the years that followed, the twin sisters had diverged from the expected development of their kind. They had vanished and reappeared in strange places, as if 'unbound in the ways'. They had shown great aptitude for mathematics — apparently deeply valued in this culture — but of the wrong kind, a sort of mathematics that terrified their elders and scandalised their society. They stopped eating properly, preferring to prey on 'unproper' foods. They became, in Heart's difficult translation, 'witches' — those who could perform works of 'mathematical application' without recourse to the proper technologies.

Magic without tools. Self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics. Brain-math.

They began to change physically, 'regressing to our seaward history, or expanding too early in our current phase for the taxing task of star-crossing'.

And then they'd vanished. The text ended without fanfare. Heart had left a note: 'That's how these radiates end their narratives! No sense of climax!'

Sevens waited patiently for me to answer. I wiped my eyes again.

"It helps," we said eventually. "I don't think it's useful, exactly. It doesn't tell me anything new, except that the Eye has done this before. To others. But, for the first time ever I know we weren't the only ones, me and Maisie. Hundreds, or thousands, or millions of years ago, this happened to somebody else. Twin sisters." I sniffed loudly. "Why did they escape together, when me and Maisie didn't?"

Sevens didn't offer an answer. She didn't know any more than we did.

"I wonder if they're still out there, somewhere," I murmured. "Another pair of twins. Alien and bizarre. Outsiders, or maybe they

went to the abyss and never came back. But if only I could ask ... ”

Sevens let me think for a good minute or two. But I didn't take up the manuscript again.

“May I ask you a question, kittens?”

“Of course. And, Sevens, you don't have to call me 'kittens', you don't have to pluralise. I'm just Heather. You can just call me — us — Heather.”

Sevens nodded, slow and gentle, almost closing her eyes as she did. “What were you doing in the library, out here, all by yourself?”

“Well,” we said. “Looking for the book, of course.”

Sevens sighed very softly. “When I left the house, you were very tired. I expected better of Raine and Evelyn than to let you go wandering around by yourself, when you need so badly to rest.”

I laughed softly; I needed the laugh. “Oh, don't blame them. I talked them into letting me go out. And I needed to stretch my muscles. Move around a bit. Go for a walk.”

“Why Outside?”

My turn to sigh. “Ideas, inspiration, insight.” I gestured at the dimension where we sat. “I went wandering around different places Outside. Sevens, we're about to go to Wonderland, in a couple of weeks. And I still have no idea what to do about the Eye. I need insight. I needed to go to the library and ask ... ask! Anything at all.” I tapped the manuscript with a tentacle. “This is something, at least. Maybe if I sleep on it, it'll give me an idea. Maybe.”

Sevens tilted her head at me. She said nothing. She saw everything.

“And ... ” My throat tightened. “I'm avoiding awkward conversations.”

“You are.”

“There's ... there's at least three different sources I could ask about the Eye. Directly. I'm sort of putting off talking to them. Um, do you remember the cultists? Badger's friends? Jan's going to put us in contact with them, and the Eye is still inside their heads, like it was with Badger. So, that's source number one. I don't know if they can help, I think it might be really difficult, and weird. But they might have something to say.”

“And source number two?” Sevens prompted, cold and unmoving. She saw right through us.

“Source two is Mister Joking.” We forced an awkward laugh. “He was studying the Eye, when we first ran into him. He had a sketch of it. And Jan knows him.”

Sevens’ eyebrows shot upward. “Does she, now?”

I nodded. “I think so. We had a ... moment, back when we ran into him on the way to Edward’s house. She clearly recognised him. I need to talk to her about that, too. See if she can put us in contact with him. He’s no longer working for Edward, so perhaps I can ... I don’t know. Ask him if he knows anything, at least.”

“Getting very cloak and dagger, kitten. Source three?”

I held up my left forearm and told a lie.

“I could scrub off the Fractal and ... have a lesson, with the Eye. A nightmare. Like I used to. I could find a way to ... ask. Source three could be myself.”

Sevens stared. She did not blink. “Could be.”

“I mean ... could ... ”

“Heather.”

“Mm!” We squeaked, discovered.

“You would rather suggest an Eye-nightmare than admit you need to speak to your parents.”

We deflated, like a squid dumped out of a fishing net onto the floor of a cold, wet boat. “I’m not ... trying to avoid— well, okay, yes I am trying to avoid talking to them about this. But you can’t blame me. Sevens, I’m terrified of what they might say. Either they’ll think I’m insane all over again, or ... or ... ”

“Or they might know something about the Eye.”

I nodded, tongue too thick to speak.

“Kitten, they know nothing.”

We laughed, weak and forced. “Then there’s no point in talking to them, is there?”

"You know what I mean, kitten," Sevens purred. She reached over and put a hand on my knee. "They do not know anything consciously. They are not mages. They did not sell you and your twin to anything. They did not betray you, not in that way. But they might remember something. A tiny thing. A nothing. A thing which meant little at the time. They might. And I cannot do it for you."

I stared down at the rock, then up at the sky, and forced down a deep breath.

Sevens said: "I'm sorry you ended up having to deal with my father."

"Pardon?" I blinked at her. "Oh, no! It's fine! He was ... well ... he was fine. And he tried to help. Which I appreciate. Even if it was all a bit weird."

Sevens nodded gently. "Then I wish to—"

"Wait wait wait," I said. "Before we go back to the subject." I cleared my throat and blushed. "All that stuff Heart was saying about getting you ... pregnant — was that literal? Or ... "

Sevens gave me a look of utterly exhausted exasperation: "Kitten. We do not need that complication right now. Put it from your mind."

"Right! Right. Um, sorry, I—"

"Next year, or the year after."

"What?"

"Put it from your mind."

Sevens and I stared at each other. I blinked rapidly.

Sevens said: "I wish to repay the favour you did for me. Let's visit your parents, together. I will put on a special mask. I will be your shield, your excuse, your protective layer."

"Oh! Oh, Sevens, no, I don't want to trick them or anything."

"They tricked you."

We pulled a grimace at that. "That's ... not strictly true. I mean, they were doing ... their ... best." A lump in my throat. We swallowed to force it down, but it wouldn't go. "Sevens, I can't

think about this right now. I'm not dealing with my parents now, not tonight. And I need to give them warning, and not just teleport into the middle of the sitting room, and ... ”

We trailed off; a tiny speck of white was crossing the horizon, a mote of gleaming silver bobbing above the vast stone-bonfire in the distance. We squinted, trying to make it out.

“Is that ... Heart?” I said.

Sevens sighed heavily, stood up, and dusted off her skirt. “I believe she has taken an interest, yes. But we have places to be, kitten.”

“We do?” I glanced up at Sevens.

She extended a hand down toward me. “If we are not speaking to your parents about the events prior to your sister’s disappearance, then we must attend to other tasks. Let us speak to little Jan; and if she is taciturn regarding Mister ... Joking, then I will be present to make your case.”

I laughed again, shaking my head. “Sevens, you’ll terrify her!”

“That is the point.”

“And it’s late! It’s, what, it must be past seven or eight back home? I need to check in.”

“Then check in from Jan’s hotel room.” Sevens smiled — a cool ice-rime on the face of the Princess Mask. “Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today. Is that not what they say? It is one of your weaknesses, my love. You require a small push. Let us go speak with the mysterious sword-bearer. She can point us away from herself, towards those who may tell you more.”

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.5

Jan wasn't home.

July answered the door, looked us up and down — more down than up, because she was much taller than both Sevens and I — and then informed us her mage was not currently present. But then she let us inside anyway.

'Home' was a rather generous term to describe the hotel room in which Jan and July had been living for approximately the last six weeks; the Sharrowford Metropolitan Hotel was not some swanky upmarket fashion statement with all the bells and whistles, with gleaming lifts and polished wood and plush carpets, an attendant to open the door and another attendant to carry your bags and another one to compliment your evening wear. Oh no, it was a decidedly more functional establishment, with a very plain entrance and an iron-clad legal boilerplate about no police access to its own CCTV cameras. Not five-stars, but five minutes walk from the train station. I'd only visited here once before, to speak with Jan; she had informed me that one of the benefits of a long stay here was that the staff were so easy to bribe, because they were quite poorly paid. The corridors were neat and clean but nothing special, the rooms plain and under-dressed, though they came with air conditioning and heavy curtains. Not the sort of place a super-spy would hide from her foes, but the kind of location to which a real spy might retreat when wounded, to avoid accidentally-on-purpose discovery by any femme fatales, hardened assassins, or mysterious strangers bearing esoteric requests.

Like us, I suppose. Unfortunately for Jan, we knew where she lived.

The petite doll-mage and her terrifying owlish demon-host had, however, managed to make themselves even more at home than the first time I'd visited.

July's bed — the slender twin further from the door — was still tightly made with military precision, as if it had never been

unwrapped, while Jan's was a riot of pillows and cushions and blankets, more like a nest than a place for a human being to sleep — which I approved of, deeply. The bin in the tiny kitchenette was once more overflowing with fast-food wrappers, but of a different strata now, different colours and shapes than the ones before, like the shelled remains of unfortunate molluscs from a different sub-biome of the local ocean. A brand-new appliance stood next to the built-in microwave and toaster which came with the room — some kind of tiny oven with a little window in the front; two of my tentacles bobbed forward at the scent of fried food, making us all salivate a little and reminding us we hadn't eaten in hours.

Jan's various bags and rucksacks had finished the process of disgorging their contents across the desk and the little table, leaving everything covered in layers of clothes, with stray books like islands amid the pyroclastic flow, streamers of phone chargers running off the side of the desk, and notebooks lurking like raisins in a biscuit. Jan's laptop formed a spot of relative calm, but it was currently switched off, lid closed.

There were now three separate video game consoles hooked up to the room's television set. One of them was very, very, very small; I didn't know they made consoles that small. The television was currently on, showing a grid full of colourful cartoon faces; July had paused her game to answer the door for us.

Jan's guitar case — or July's guitar case, because she was always carrying it everywhere, though the sword inside belonged to Jan in some mystical sense I didn't understand — lay propped up by the window, in exactly the same place as last time.

The air conditioning was humming away, bright and clean and cold. Lovely. I could have stood under the outlet vent and purred. The curtains were closed; evening glow peeked around the edges.

July locked the door behind us, then stepped back to give Sevens and I some space.

I was never quite sure if July was aware of her own intimidating physicality; she was tall and sinewy and muscular, built like a long-distance runner crossed with a bird of prey. She held herself with perfect stillness, unpractised and natural, staring with storm-grey eyes just a touch too wide and a touch too sharp, always looking a bit like an owl who'd just heard a mouse rustle beneath some

leaves. She always seemed right on the verge of terrible swift violence, delivered without passion or care, like she might break both your legs with a single swipe of her heel, then turn away and ignore you.

My usual impression of her was somewhat undermined on that evening, because she'd let down her long black hair — making her resemble one of those spooky ghost ladies in the Japanese horror films Raine had shown me once — and she was wearing ridiculous baggy pastel-blue pajamas.

I stared at her, tentacles not sure if they should go up in defence or down so we could all giggle.

“Jan’s out,” she repeated. “You can wait, if you want.”

“You really wouldn’t mind?” we asked with an awkward smile. “I mean, she’s a mage, and we’re both unknowns.” I gestured at Sevens and myself. “Aren’t you supposed to be a bit more cautious? Maybe we should come back tomorrow, or—”

Seven-Shades-of-Unsubtle-Support cleared her throat softly. “Not tomorrow, my love. No procrastinating.”

July stared at Sevens like she was a lizard on a tree-trunk, and July was trying to decide if she was toxic or not.

Sevens said: “We are here to discuss matters with the General. Matters already agreed upon, and matters for which she is not yet prepared, but with which we wish to surprise her. We are not here to harm. But we may spook her. Quite badly.”

July said, “You are both known. It’s fine. I want to get back to my game.”

“Both of us?” I echoed, boggling with surprise. “Even Sevens?”

July let out a tiny sigh. “Yes.”

“Do ... um ... July, I know for a fact that Jan doesn’t know what Sevens is. Do you know what Sevens is?”

July stared at Sevens again. Sevens stared back, chin tilted upward, lilac parasol braced like a walking stick.

“No,” said July. “Jan has to deal with it eventually. I’m going back to playing.”

July turned away as if completely dismissing us from her mind and stalked across the room on silent feet; always a little unnerving for somebody so large and quick to move with such silence. She folded herself into a cross-legged position on the foot of her perfectly starched bed, picked up her controller, and unpaused her game. Jaunty music resumed.

We shared a look with Sevens, an awkward smile. But the Yellow Princess dipped her head in genuine respect and appreciation.

“Sevens?”

“I do like a practical woman,” said Sevens.

“Oh, ah, right,” we replied. “Um. Well then. Waiting, right. If we’re waiting, I do need to text or call Raine, just to let her know I’m actually back in reality and all that. Gosh, that is absurdly mundane, considering what we’ve both been up to for the last six hours.”

“Mundanity is the stuff of life, kitten,” Sevens mused out loud.

Certain types of mundanity felt bad; as a precaution, before Sevens and I had left Outside and ridden my Slip back into reality, she had coaxed me through twenty minutes of carefully folding away all of our Outsider modifications. Gone was the chromatophore-laced skin, the glowing eyes, the nictitating membranes, the webbing between my fingers, the subtle gill-slits between my ribs, the muscle reinforcements and exotic enzymes and the weird thing I’d unconsciously done with my teeth. I’d even lost the tail, for now; my rear end felt flat and vulnerable. At least my bio-reactor was still chugging along; I don’t think it was possible to fold that away, back inside mortal flesh.

Better than popping through the membrane and passing out on the floor of the hotel corridor in a puddle of my own vomit, but it still felt bad.

Worse than any of that, I’d had to flick six sevenths of our combined selves back to pneuma-somatic invisibility. I had shunted all six tentacles one notch downward on the scale of the real, from truly embodied pneuma-somatic flesh to invisible spirit-matter.

A necessary precaution. Materialising in the middle of a hotel corridor was an acceptable risk, and also relatively easy to explain to any unfortunate bystander: oh, we were just in your blind spot;

you didn't notice us because you were distracted; you weren't paying attention, look, you nearly blundered into us; and anyway, aren't we so very unobtrusive and small? Just carry on, mind your own business, forget about us in thirty seconds time.

But two eyeballs of full-frontal squid girl fresh from Outside might risk sending even the most credulous and inebriated of hotel guests screaming for the ghost-busters, or an exorcist, or news of the weird — or worse, the police.

Concealment did not diminish my sense of multiplicitous self-hood. We were still us even when we were hiding — Bottom Left wanted to burrow into the sheets of Jan's bed, Top Right was rising in a curl-shape to peek at July's video game, while Bottom Right was coiled around Seven's wrist and waist, and Middle Left was paging through Heart's manuscript again. But it made us feel like we were pretending, like we'd jammed our body back into clothes we had outgrown.

So, as I stood in the entranceway and pulled out my phone to text Raine, the first thing we did, almost subconsciously, was use that little flicker of brain-math to shunt that special value up one single notch. Our tentacles re-blossomed back into true physical flesh. We shuddered and gasped a little. Sevens raised an eyebrow at us.

"Sorry," we said, panting to get our breath back. "We have to."

"Of course, kitten. Just make certain to don your mask when you step into the street."

I smiled and nodded and sent Raine a quick text message, to let her know that I was not stuck in an Outsider dimension having my entrails devoured by a flying polyp, and that I was in fact visiting Jan, with Sevens, and everything was fine.

The time on my phone surprised me; it was almost quarter past nine. Perhaps we really should leave this conversation with Jan for tomorrow, there was simply so much to discuss that we would risk being overrun by the small hours of the morning: the remains of the cult, Jan's information on Mister Joking, and her other preparation for helping us with Wonderland — Maisie's replacement body.

Seven-Shades-of-Scrupulously-Smooth took a couple of steps forward while I was sending the message, her boots clicking. But then she stopped at the edge of the little wooden floorboard area,

meant for taking one's shoes off before the hotel room carpet. At first I thought she was just being polite and waiting for me to join her. But then I sent the text message and looked up to find Sevens staring back at me with a single raised eyebrow.

My stomach did a little drop. "Ah? Sevens? What's wrong?"

"No emergency, I suspect," she said, soft and calm. "But that is my question to you. What is wrong with this picture?"

July looked up from her video game, head flicking upward and eyes coming around like a nocturnal predator disturbed from her bloody kill. I flinched, tentacles wobbling everywhere in a misplaced instinct to make myself look big.

July echoed, rather more urgently: "What is wrong?"

Sevens spoke to the demon-host in the tone of an amused but unimpressed schoolmarm, "You are not a very good secretary, July. But then again you are not engaged as one, so I can hardly fault you."

July blinked. "What."

I cleared my throat. "Yes, Sevens, what are you ... oh."

Jan wasn't the only thing missing from the hotel room; I'd noticed the other discrepancies, but hadn't put them all together until Sevens had asked me to do so, as if I'd had all the information at hand, in my brains, from all the different things my tentacles knew, all the things we knew, all together — but my conscious mind hadn't presented it as relevant.

Sevens murmured, for me alone: "You really must train that skill, my love."

Jan's massive white coat was nowhere to be seen, not draped over a chair or puddled on the floor. On my previous visit I had also noticed a heavy-duty military-style flak jacket, all straps and pockets and bulletproof plates. Her cute pink trainers weren't present by the door, but that was hardly of any concern compared to the other items.

"Uh," we said, gathering our thoughts. "July. July, sorry. Jan's not here, correct?"

"Yes," said July.

“And did she happen to go somewhere ... dangerous?”

July blinked. “Not any more.”

I sighed and spread all my limbs. “But she took all her ridiculous body armour? July, sorry, let me rephrase my question: please tell me where exactly Jan has gone.”

“Camelot,” said July. “With Lozzie.” She tilted her head to one side, suddenly even more bird-like than usual. “Assumed you knew.”

I huffed a great big sigh. Sevens smiled the smile of gentle vindication.

I said: “We don’t track where Lozzie goes, or with whom. Not anymore. It was a bad habit.” I put my face in one hand. “Oh, I was worried there for a moment. Why aren’t you with her, July? I thought you were sort of like her bodyguard, even if only informally.”

“She’s in the beyond. Lozzie can protect her better than I.”

Sevens propped her umbrella against the wall and set about removing her boots; she had that wonderful elegance to the motion that I could never manage, even with all my tentacles to help — lifting each foot up behind her in turn and slipping the shoes off with one hand. She stepped onto the carpet with soft yellow socks. “Ahhhh,” she sighed. “Are they on a date?”

July shook her head. “Paperwork.”

“Paperwork?” I squinted. “For what?”

“Houses.”

I frowned at July. “Have you always been so awkwardly taciturn? July, is something wrong?”

To my incredible surprise, July actually rolled her eyes; for one brief moment she was entirely the awkward and grumpy teenager that Jan implied she really was.

She pointed at the television screen. “Busy. You can wait, but I want to play.”

I stared for a moment, then laughed, blushing and covering my lips with one hand. I waved July down with a wordless apology. Sevens ignored all of this and padded over to peer at the game on the

screen.

We had not come upon a demon-host bodyguard without her mage, mysteriously missing on some madcap misadventure. No, we had interrupted a teenager playing her video games, asking after her boring elder sister, and now we were keeping her from the next boss fight.

July was focused on the screen again, ignoring us and pressing buttons on her controller.

Sevens stood quite close to her and pointed delicately at one of the many weird little anime-style portraits, and said: “No, not him, his attack value is terrible. Pair the archer with the duchess, that way she gets magically charged arrows, and the duchess gets a huge morale boost. Trust me.”

July stared up at Sevens, wide-eyed as always. “But they’re both females.”

Sevens raised an eyebrow. “Yes? That’s the point. And this is a fantasy video game; female-female pairs can have babies. They don’t even bother to explain it. And why should they? A wizard did it.”

“Fair.” July made some kind of selection on the little squares. A heart appeared around two portraits.

“Told you so,” said Sevens. “I always know.” Then she sighed. “At least in video games.”

“Um,” I said, feeling a little left out, still in my shoes over on the entranceway floorboards. “I don’t want to interrupt again, but ... Sevens, if Jan and Lozzie are on a date, then maybe we should ... ”

Sevens glanced at me. “July said it’s not a date, kitten. No excuses, now.”

“But what if it is?” I grimaced. “I don’t want to interrupt that.”

Sevens tilted her head at me. We sighed and puffed and drew my tentacles in.

“Kitten.”

“It would be really embarrassing to drop in on Lozzie and Jan if they’re on a date. I’m not procrastinating, I swear. I’m trying to be polite and proper. This can wait until the morning.”

July spoke without looking up from her game: "It's paperwork."

"There you have it," said Sevens. "Best go fetch the General. At least go to the castle in Camelot and see if she is present."

"... aren't you coming?" I blinked at her in surprise.

"Bring her back here, my love. Without Lizzie. For this conversation, I am a weapon of intimidation and menace. I am more effectively deployed from a position of surprise. And I am useless in front of little Lizzie. She is an antidote to all things intimidating and menacing. I best not be present."

July looked up again, very still and silent.

Sevens added: "The intimidation and menace is for a good cause. And the General will not be harmed."

"She won't," said July.

Sevens looked at July's video game again. "Besides, this is rather diverting. July, the pianist and the mathematician, yes. They make a most pleasing pair."

"The pianist doesn't like other women," July said.

Sevens clicked her fingers. The screen glitched sideways, a flicker-jump of motion, then returned to normal. A heart had appeared where there had been no heart before.

July stared up at Sevens; one did not have to be an abyssal squid-girl with dubious senses of body-language reading to see the latent hostility in July's posture.

The Yellow Princess sighed, almost sadly. "I cannot do that to real people, no. It is a video game. Fiction can be rewritten. If you don't want it, I'll make her straight again."

"Please," said July.

Sevens un-clicked her fingers — a motion that probably would have made any not-in-the-know humans feel quite sick. The screen flickered the other way and the heart symbol was gone again.

"Thank you," said July.

The Yellow Princess looked back at me. "I'm going to have less fun waiting than I thought. Hurry back, kitten. Keep your mind on the

target. Obtain for us the tiny remade General.”

“The ... I’m sorry, you mean Jan?”

“Yes.”

I chewed my lower lip. “And if she is on a date with Lozzie?”

Sevens shrugged, delicate shoulders rolling beneath her crisp white blouse. “Improvise.”

We pulled a deeply uncomfortable face, about to put up a token argument — but then our phone vibrated.

Raine had replied to my simple text message with a picture, a photograph, apparently taken moments ago, of Evelyn sitting at the kitchen table with Praem standing over her. Praem was as expressionless and perfectly straight-backed as always, but her milk-white eyes held a secret glint of beaming pride. Evelyn, by contrast, was blushing beetroot red, her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes glaring death at the camera.

Some brave soul had placed a stereotypical black witch hat on Evee’s head, with a wide brim and a floppy tip. I recognised it from our shopping trip, months ago.

Raine had captioned the photograph: ‘a present from Lozzie!’

We giggled out loud and covered our mouth with a hand again. Sevens cocked an eyebrow at us.

“Oh,” we sighed. “I think Jan and Lozzie did go on a date. I think they went shopping. What if they’re ... you know ... all ... um, ‘post date’?”

“Kitten,” Sevens purred.

I steeled myself against the inevitable. “Yes?”

“If Lozzie and the General are fu—”

“Sevens!” I squeaked.

Sevens allowed herself a thin smile. “Knock first.”

= =

Camelot was a wonderfully consistent dimension, second only to Number 12 Barnslow Drive itself as a source of peace and solace —

perhaps paradoxically, considering the number of alien influences we had introduced to the quiet, rolling, yellow-grass hills: the Knights, the Caterpillars, the growing project of their castle, several tons of earthly dirt, more than a few corpses, and the now-reclaimed House-shell-abyssal-submarine which had once belonged to Edward Lilburne. All of those things were very literally from Outside, as far as Camelot was concerned. I trusted Lozzie's assessment that this entire dimension was truly dead and empty, a place where things had happened once, but had all since run down and gone to dust; we were not colonising it in the face of the true inhabitants. But we had made quite a mess.

We — me, myself, and I, minus Sevens — arrived in the usual spot for unannounced visits to Camelot, on the low hill which would one day be enclosed by the bailey walls of Camelot Castle. I suspected the Knights made sure not to build anything up on that hilltop, lest one day I or Lozzie found ourselves teleported onto the tip of a castle spire or the back of a Caterpillar.

We arrived with a stagger and a lurch, and made an awful half-belch of nausea; Slipping was no longer the bio-spiritual strain it used to be, not with all seven of us pulling together to distribute the effort, but we'd spent all day Slipping back and forth and it was beginning to take a toll. We could no more Slip endlessly at will than we could walk around a city for six hours on end without getting incredibly sore leg muscles. We had limits, they were just a little higher than before. Taking Jan back to her hotel room would be the very last Slip of the day. Sevens and I would be taking the bus home.

I took a moment to steady our trainers on the grass, stretch out our tentacles, and flash our deliciously re-chromatophored-skin through a series of standing waves of blue and white and green. I'd left the manuscript with Sevens but I still had my squid-skull helmet in one tentacle.

So, reluctantly, I glanced about in hope of spotting Lozzie nearby, standing on a hillside, perhaps hand-in-hand with Jan, and absolutely not doing anything else.

"Please don't be ... *kissing*," I whispered. "Please don't be kissing, please don't be kissing. Or anything else. Oh dear."

The blush was terrible; I hid it with a wall of white-blue skin-

shifting.

I hadn't been back to Camelot since we'd vanquished Edward Lilburne.

Camelot Castle's bailey wall was beginning to take shape, far away on the opposite side of the gigantic inner courtyard it would one day enclose. Titanic blocks of sandstone-coloured rock had been placed on top of the foundations, interleaved for stability, with a thick layer of pinkish mortar between them; I knew from watching the Knights' building site that the mortar was somehow made from a mixture of crushed rock and the Knights' own excreted bodily fluids. Two Caterpillars and several Knights were working a massive crane-like structure, preparing to place another block on the growing wall. It would be truly massive when it was complete, fifty or sixty feet high. I did hope the Knights were going to install proper safety features.

Several of us longed to go join that effort. Not that we could help, but we wanted to go stand up on that wall, see what it felt like, revel in the Knight's creation.

But, eyes on the target, as Sevens had said.

Away to my right — what I thought of as West, the direction in which the ancient and abandoned city lay as a faint scab on the horizon, from which the Caterpillars brought a steady stream of fresh building materials — was Edward Lilburne's House.

The front door and the section of wall we'd so brutally removed had been replaced with Caterpillar-grown carapace-material, gleaming bone-white like a cast on a broken leg. There was even a little door, with a handle. I knew from what Lozzie had said that some of the rear sections of the House had been carefully de-constructed and put back together as well, to allow clean-up of some of the more difficult rooms.

The strange mushroom-stalk of brick and glass and wood, towering a hundred feet into the air, had begun to collapse — shrinking back into itself, wrinkled and limp, being absorbed down into the House. Fruiting was done, we supposed; here was the beginning of adaptation to being Outside.

We also longed to go talk to the House again, ask how it was, make sure it had all the repairs it needed. There was much to do inside it

as well, once Evelyn had any real spare time.

But, eyes on the target.

Camelot Castle keep itself was coming along beautifully. Pale sandstone walls climbed into the air, studded with arrow-slits on the first floor, then wider windows on the second; a third floor showed the beginning of little towers and walkways and possibly even battlements. Many parts of the castle were formed from off-cut pieces of specially grown Caterpillar carapace, specifically any parts that required shapes too difficult to make from stone, anything that would have used wood in a castle built on earth. A wide area of courtyard around the base of the castle was laced with sandstone walkways, pretty little paths snaking between the low hills, a couple of open squares, and some bare ground cut clear of grass, as if ready for planting flowerbeds or trees. One of the flowerbeds already contained a curious row of low shrubs.

We narrowed our eyes and raised our tentacles, to get a better look from far away. “Are those ... strawberry bushes?” Two of my tentacles nodded and coiled in agreement. They were. “Praem,” we whispered. “She must have been talking to Lozzie about this. Gosh. Maybe I should suggest a lemon orchard.”

We very much wanted to go look at the strawberry bushes.

But Lozzie was not down there.

Lozzie was, in fact, nowhere to be seen. Not within the castle grounds, not on a nearby hillside, not down next to the castle itself alongside all the stone-cutting and mortar-mixing and carapace growing that the Knights and a trio of Caterpillars were still up to.

“Well,” we said out loud. “We tried. We gave it our best try. She’s not here.”

Or she’s in the castle. With Jan.

I sighed. Sevens would know if I went back empty handed after not really trying. I knew full well that the entire point of this exercise, of making me do this by myself, was to get my mind out of this state of procrastination-as-excuse, procrastination-because-fear. Maisie deserved better. Every day was precious. If I could put off talking to Jan until tomorrow, then everything else got shunted one day back as well — including the inevitable conversation with my parents, about the Eye, about whatever shards and splinters may

still linger within their memories. And that potentially shunted Maisie's rescue back a day as well. There wasn't time for me to be afraid without taking action.

So I took a deep breath of Camelot's warm, cinnamon-scented wind, raised my eyes and tentacles to the purple-whorled sky, and called out at the top of my lungs.

"Lozzie! Lozzie, it's us! It's me! Lozzie ..." I trailed off and lowered the volume. "Really hope you're not in private with Jan."

I waited several heartbeats, praying for no response.

Then, far away and muffled behind several layers of ancient stone: "Heathy! Heathy! Over here! Heathy!"

A tiny pale hand and slender arm emerged from one of the arrow-slits on the first floor, draped in pastel poncho, waving at me.

"Oh thank the gods," I breathed to myself. "She's dressed. Okay. Good sign." I cupped my mouth and raised my voice again. "I see you! Coming!"

Lozzie withdrew her hand back into the arrow-slit window, like a tiny mollusc withdrawing back into her gigantic, impenetrable shell. We gathered ourselves, took a deep breath, and ambled down the hill, heading for one of the massive Caterpillar-carapace front doors which led into the castle.

Down the hillside we went, until my trainers met a sand-stone pathway, then up the path and into the towering shadow of the castle itself, with all those windows looking down at us. The Knights' building site was nearby, but too far for a detour — some of them paused and 'looked' at me with their eyeless helms; I waved back.

Castles, like houses, have personalities evident in their material structures. Some are brooding and dark, military memories from a more violent world; others are fanciful and playful, display pieces of great intricacy and artwork; a few are strange and specific, quirks of local construction and needs, like evolutionary mutants of incredible beauty, but never to be reproduced.

Camelot Castle, up close, was both open and inscrutable; the sandstone was warm and welcoming, the carapace additions smooth and almost soft to the eyes. But the overall structure was subtly

wrong for a human-made castle: it said both ‘I am a bulwark, here to keep out harm’ and ‘I am an experiment in form and size’, but it said those things in shapes I’d never seen in castles on earth. The walls were not actually built to withstand cannonballs or assaults, but to protect against something I wasn’t quite certain of.

The massive Caterpillar-carapace front door was fifteen feet tall and probably several feet thick. But there was a Knight-scale door set in one end, with a long handle. It opened on silent, smooth hinges, swinging outward at the slightest touch of one tentacle.

I had refrained from actually stepping inside Camelot Castle keep until now; entering without invitation would be akin to demanding to read an unfinished manuscript, it felt disrespectful. But now both the ground floor and second floor were complete, Lozzie was in there already, and she had invited me inside.

We stepped over the threshold, into cool, soft, sandy gloom.

Behind the massive white front door was a vast and echoing entrance hallway of sandstone-coloured blocks — a wide corridor with a vaulted ceiling held up by intricate beams, both of those made from more carapace material. Light came from glowing globes set into the wall at regular intervals — I recognised the principle as adapted from the Library of Carcosa. But where the Carcosan lights were green as a sunlit sea, these were yellow-brown, soft and dusky, like a desert evening.

The air was deliciously chill and gentle. We stretched out our tentacles, soaking it in.

Arches led off in several directions, into the warren of the castle.

“Lozzie?” we called out.

Lozzie’s voice floated back from somewhere deeper inside: “We’re in the big hall! With the tables! This way!”

All this boded very well for the prospect of Lozzie not being in a sensitive situation with Jan — at least not by the time I arrived. For the first time in a while I relaxed, lowered my tentacles, and stopped worrying quite so much.

The ‘big hall’ turned out to be left, right, then left again, after winding my way through the echoing, empty rooms of Camelot Castle. There was no actual furniture yet apart from things built

into the castle itself, such as fireplaces, mantelpieces, and stairs; perhaps the Knights were planning on furnishing it later. But even nude and empty, she was a beautiful structure: the ceilings were gently domed, supported with beams; every interior wall was smooth and smart, the naked stone allowed to show itself off in material truth; the rooms I passed through were well-proportioned, balanced, not crammed in for the sake of simply multiplying spaces.

The 'big hall', however, was furnished.

We stepped through a low archway and into a vast dining hall, the rival of anything from Arthurian legend.

The hall boasted its own massive exterior doors, which probably opened out onto the rear of the castle; they were currently wide open, admitting the warm cinnamon-scented wind. The walls were ringed by dozens of those sandy glow-globes, making the space bright and clear. The room was split into two levels by a single step of difference: the lower level had a long rectangular table and a lot of human-scale chairs, while the higher level contained a literal round table, absolutely gigantic, made of carapace material. The lip of that table would be level with my chin. I assumed it was meant to accommodate every single Knight, because it was ringed by one hundred and forty eight equally gigantic chairs, also made from carapace.

Two of the chairs were pulled back from the table, their seat-backs streaked with black.

That stopped my breath.

Two dead Knights in their service of their Queen — in my service. One in Wonderland, given his life to shelter Lozzie and I from the Eye, and one in the Library of Carcosa, burned out to nothing by the black-lightning creature unleashed by Edward's unwise meddling.

A tiny memorial. They deserved more.

The hall was two stories tall, with two dozen massive stained-glass windows beaming the purple light of Camelot down upon the wide floor. The stained-glass was apparently an investment in the future, because twenty of the two dozen windows were simply grids of carapace material filled with transparent blocks, awaiting the day they would be reshaped into scenes worth memorialising. Four of

the windows had been gifted with meaning: one showed what I realised was Lozzie, battered and bloodstained and barefoot, but beaming with pride and happiness, standing upon the rolling hillsides of Camelot, surrounded by a vast crowd of strange spirit forms who were all looking up at her in hope and promise.

That was the moment of the Knights' genesis, reshaped from earthly pneuma-somatic life into their current forms.

The second window showed me — ratty brown hair and scrawny build and pink hoodie and all — on my knees and weeping, six tentacles glowing rainbow bright, one tentacle rammed deep into a Knight lying on his back. The Forest Knight, when I'd returned him to Camelot and saved him from the Outsider equivalent of death by decompression.

The third window showed a scene that meant absolutely nothing to me, and took a second for me to puzzle out: three Caterpillars were depicted underground, beneath the sharp peak of a mountain. One of the Caterpillars was injured in some fashion, with pieces of carapace bent and damaged, strange shiny-black flesh showing beneath, while the uninjured pair were leading it back toward the surface. A second sub-panel above this showed all three Caterpillars basking in Camelot's purple light, the injured one cradling a strange black lump in the sticky black tendrils which extended from its face-area.

An accident while exploring? A mine cave-in? Some ancient underground city? Whatever it was, it clearly meant a great deal to them culturally, but I had zero knowledge of it.

The fourth window showed a moment of grand pride: a ring of Caterpillars dooting and booping the Edward-ball to death. They had rendered the Edward-ball as a particularly gruesome foe, with a demonic face, but they hardly needed to work any artistic licence to make the gigantic Caterpillars look any more intimidating and heroic. A series of teeny tiny blobs watching in the background were probably supposed to be me and my friends.

I couldn't deal with even a fraction of what I was seeing there.

Which was lucky, because I had more pressing concerns: three people were gathered around the lower table, the human-scale one.

Lozzie bounced out of her chair and skipped over to me, poncho all

aflutter and going everywhere; she threw her arms around me in a wriggly hug, laughing and nuzzling my cheek, getting her wispy blonde hair all in my face.

Jan was already on her feet and looking like a rather overwhelmed penguin — she was wearing her massive puffy white coat, her petite form engulfed by the protection, but the front was open, showing the flak jacket beneath, and her good-girl skirt-and-sweater look beneath that. She gave me a half-mortified, half-apologetic grimace.

The third figure was seated, stiff, and still — and very, very focused on not making any sudden movements.

Harold Yuleson — Edward's former lawyer, very much In-The-Know, an oily and portly little man who knew his job inside-out and had come to us with promises of betraying his employer before the end — did not look like he wanted to be present.

The table before him was covered with neatly organised papers next to his open briefcase. His tight little eyes and ratty little face were beaded with sweat. His tufty hair looked a little limp. His well-tailored, dark suit, complete with waistcoat, looked amusingly out of place among the chairs and stones of Camelot Castle.

Twelve Knights were arrayed behind his chair in a semi-circle; behind them, a Caterpillar had driven into the room, through the open doors, and was currently humming away to itself like the idling engines of a small battleship.

"Um," I said.

"Heathy!" Lizzie cheered and pulled back from the hug so she could look me in the face. She was beaming, bright and bursting with energy. "Heathy, you came to join in!"

We blinked several times, pole-axed by too many things at once. Top Right and Top Left tentacles did a sort of conjoined self-handshake, the equivalent of putting one's face in one's palm – I think we'd picked that one up from Tenny.

"Join ... in ... " we managed. "Um ... "

Jan cleared her throat gently. She tucked a lock of her neat black hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry, Heather. I really had no hand in this. I thought this was going to be conducted in his offices, not

here. Sorry. Um.”

“It’s fiiiiine!” Lozzie chirped. “It’s not like he’s not in-the-know, you know! I know! We all know!”

Harold Yuleson turned his head to look at me, achingly slow, like his tendons were made of rusty wire, like they might burst inside his neck if he moved too quickly. He met my eyes; his own were wide and shell-shocked. He looked slowly at each of my tentacles, one by one, all six of them. Then he looked at the way our skin changed colour, cycling through chromatic potential.

Then he swallowed, nodded to himself, and spoke in a bright and polite tone as if nothing was wrong: “Good evening, Miss Morell. I assume it is still evening? How nice to see you. I do hope you are well.”

Then he returned to staring at his papers.

“Uhhh,” we said. “Um. Sorry ... Lozzie ... sorry, not that I don’t want to hug you,” I said as I gently removed myself from her embrace, but not before Middle Left wrapped herself affectionately around Lozzie’s forearm beneath her poncho. “But, um, I’m a little, uh ... overwhelmed.”

Lozzie bobbed on the balls of her feet and cocked her head at me. “Ah? Heathy? By what?”

I gestured at basically everything.

Lozzie blinked several times. Jan said: “I know, right?”

Yuleson muttered, much to my surprise, “Oh, it’s quite alright, quite alright.” He even smiled, though his eyes were glued to his papers on the table. “I’ve conducted business in far more intimidating circumstances. Oh, yes. Did you know I had a man point a gun at me once? Terrible thing. Wasn’t loaded, of course. Still, very unsettling at the time. Very unsettling. Mmmmm. Mm.”

There were simply far too many questions to ask — about the stained-glass windows, or the mourning-streaked chairs, not to even mention the question of all the bodies from the fight outside Edward’s house, or the dozen other issues which intersected with Camelot. But we put all of those from our mind; stay on target, Sevens had said. We stayed on target.

“Uh,” we said, struggling to gather ourselves. “Just a ... a practical

question, Lozzie. Why is your uncle's former lawyer here?"

Lozzie giggled and chirped: "My lawyer now! Evee-weeve's too, if she wants!"

Jan gave me a thousand-yard stare. I smiled awkwardly at her, but then spoke to Lozzie again. "Yes, okay, but ... why have you brought him to Camelot?"

Jan said, "This was meant to happen in his offices." She glanced at Yuleson again. "I'm sorry. Really."

Lozzie opened her mouth — but Yuleson spoke before she did.

"Allow me to answer for my client," he said, turning slowly again. "That is my job, after all, is it not? Ah, not that yourself and Miss Lilburne require the services of a lawyer to conduct any business between yourselves, but simply because I am the expert here ... here ... here, yes, wherever here is ... um ... " He trailed off, frowning to himself, then glued his eyes to his papers again. He was very careful not to look back at the Knights behind him.

"Lozzie," I said, allowing a gentle warning tone to creep into my voice. "He's a normal human being. I know he's a ... well, a bit untrustworthy, to put it lightly. But you can't just ... just ... oh, I suppose I've done this myself before, but—"

Jan cleared her throat. "A small shock was necessary. I agreed with that much. But really, this has gone on long enough. Lozzie, please, it's time to send him back."

"Oh, nonsense," said Yuleson, without looking up. His tone was oddly bright. "I'm quite alright, as long as I concentrate on the details here. And yes, well, let's all be honest with each other — I was unwilling to do the legwork for all this. This will require me to commit several crimes — forgery of documents, lying under oath. Oh goodness, goodness me."

Lozzie looked almost defiant as she smiled at me, a little bit smug. "I'm not going to hurt him, Heathy! He just needed to know."

I sighed. "Know what? Lozzie, what are you doing here?"

Yuleson spoke up: "We were discussing matters of estate inheritance."

"Oh. Ohhhh," I said. "Oh, right. Because of the House."

Yuleson cleared his throat. “I believe the property you speak of is quite beyond legal concerns. No. I speak of the estate, the legal estate. Edward Lilburne’s possessions, money, and so forth.”

“Ah,” I said. “Right. Because Edward—”

“Is not,” Yuleson interrupted, “technically speaking, dead. As I have been informed.”

I blinked several times. Jan rubbed the bridge of her nose. Lozzie flashed her teeth, very smug.

Yuleson carried on without raising his eyes from the documents before him; his voice gathered strength as he spoke, as his profession stiffened his spine: “Miss Lilburne’s case is irritatingly difficult and presents me with unique challenges. Her uncle — my former client — refused to leave a will. There is simply no will, not even a simple one. I could of course forge a will — though that rather complicates the already considerable legal risks of what I am being asked to do. Furthermore, he is not legally dead; we cannot produce a corpse, nor establish that it is time to dispose of his estate. That in itself is not too difficult to solve — missing person, hasn’t been seen in years, without any other relatives to dispute, shouldn’t be too nasty. However.” He raised a finger. “Miss Lilburne does not legally exist.”

“Off the grid!” Lozzie cheered. She threw her arms into the air, poncho fluttering. “Ghosting the system!”

Jan snorted. “Admirable, yeah. I approve. Except for this.”

“Quite right,” said Yuleson. “There is no birth certificate, no school records, no national insurance number, no NHS number. Absolutely nothing to establish that Lozzie Lilburne is a real person and that she is the legal heir to her uncle’s estate. This — this is a problem. It very well may be the most difficult task ever placed before me. Almost beyond my powers to solve.”

“Oh,” we said. I hadn’t expected any of this; I was quite blind-sided and even more overwhelmed than before. “Uh. So ... what’s going to happen to Edward’s ... what’s the value of his—”

“Eight million pounds,” said Yuleson.

My tentacles stopped moving. My eyes went wide. My skin flushed bright pink. Lozzie hissed: “Oooh, Heathy, pretty!”

“Well,” Yuleson said, as if this was nothing. He tapped a piece of paper. “Eight million, two hundred and eighteen thousand, one hundred and three pounds, and seventeen pennies, at last estimate. A lot of it is tied up in an investment portfolio, which will have to be unwound if Miss Lilburne desires the liquid capital. Which I do not suggest, though I would have to consult a proper accountant. Some of that is part of an insurance underwriter — marine shipping mostly, nothing unethical, I— I think — and if you leave it there it will appreciate in value.” He pulled another sheet toward himself and indicated another number. “A significant portion, however, is held as cash in a lock box in Handelsbanken in Manchester. Very silly, leaving all that there to depreciate in value. Now, I’m not supposed to know about that one, and I do not and cannot legally have possession of a key—”

Lozzie flipped up her poncho and produced a keyring, jingling in the air. She winked at me. “Guess what I found?”

Yuleson squeezed his eyes shut and raised his hands either side of his own head. “Please! Please, Miss Lilburne, please, do not walk in there and use that key. If that money goes missing, if it is claimed, if you present yourself before the work is in place, then all this will become impossible.”

Lozzie giggled and rolled her eyes, then slid the keys away again. Yuleson sighed as if a gun had been removed from his face.

I was reeling inside; I couldn’t even begin to construct the context for what I was hearing. Eight million pounds? The number was so large it was almost meaningless. We felt like we needed to sit down. Or dunk myself in the ocean.

“ ... Lozz ... eight— eight million?”

Lozzie nodded.

“Eight ... million. Uh. Lozzie. Oh my gosh. You can’t— you can’t let that go! You can’t!” I grabbed her hands with a pair of tentacles. “You could- you could do anything you wanted! You could actually go to university! You could send Tenny to university!” I laughed, totally overwhelmed. “I mean— if she figures out the whole disguise thing. Oh my gosh. You could do anything with that. Anything.”

Lozzie bit her lower lip. “I’d pay everyone back. For looking after

me. Do something for Grinny — she's been abandoned now. And give Tenny a future."

"Lozzie. Lozzie, you don't owe us a thing."

"But I love you."

Lozzie gave me a hug, quick and hard.

I laughed. I didn't know what to say. Jan smiled awkwardly at me over Lozzie's shoulder, then shrugged; I supposed that she'd been through all this shock once already. But then the impact of Yuleson's words flowed over me; I suddenly felt deeply protective, and I totally understood why Lozzie had dragged the lawyer out here.

"Wait, wait," I said, pulling back. "Yuleson."

"Yes?" said the lawyer.

"So, this money, getting this in Lozzie's name legally isn't possible? You can't do it? It's in limbo? It's beyond you?"

Yuleson smiled to himself, still staring at his papers. "I said *almost*."

"Pardon?"

"Almost beyond my powers. So, yes, Miss Morell. I can achieve this. I can make this work. We — that is, myself and Miss Lilburne — are going to commit a truly staggering amount of forgery."

Lozzie beamed at me. "We're gonna make me up! From scratch!"

Yuleson cleared his throat. "This task is made somewhat easier by Miss Lilburne's unique skill set — I understand that she can place a forged document in a location, which in certain cases can retroactively make such documents legitimate, and proving their falsehood almost impossible. We are going to put her birth certificate into hospital records. Physically." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes again. "Oh, if this is ever discovered, they will make documentaries about it."

Lozzie said, "And it's gonna be 'Lozzie' on the certificate! Not Lauren. Ha!"

"Right on," said Jan.

Lozzie threw herself at me in another out-of-control leap-hug. She

squeezed me tight and I squeezed her back, laughing and overwhelmed, but relieved that finally she was getting some compensation for what her brother and her uncle had done to her.

Eight million pounds was more than I could imagine. Perhaps not more than Evelyn could imagine. But this was Lozzie.

And I wasn't exaggerating about a future for Tenny.

Because there was a very real chance none of us would be coming back from Wonderland. Whatever I said to myself, that thought still lurked deep down in my heart.

We pushed that away for now; this was not the time for dark thoughts.

"Lozzie," we said, pushing her gently back as well. "Lozzie, you need to actually look after this lawyer, if he's going to do this, not be blasting his mind with overexposure to Outside; I doubt we could find another so capable and also In The Know."

Yuleson murmured: "Thank you kindly."

Lozzie did a big puff-cheeked pout, like I was spoiling her fun, but then she nodded. "Okaaaaay. We can go back now."

We nodded. "One second." I let go of Lozzie and crossed to the big white table where Yuleson was sitting, with the Knights and a Caterpillar looming behind him. We planted our feet and spread our tentacles.

He smiled down at his papers. "Miss Morell. I am glad you won, by the way."

"Mmhmm, really? I suspect you don't care either way. But — Yuleson. Harold. Look up at me, please."

His smile grew extra oily and slick. "That is a very challenging demand at present. I must decline."

"Alright then," I sighed. He was only human, after all. This was probably taking a terrible toll on him. "Listen to me very carefully. Evelyn Saye and I, we will be along to your offices in the morning, to talk to you about this, with Lozzie present. I want to make sure we keep you honest."

Yuleson let out a weird little fluttery laugh. He gestured over his shoulder — at the Knights and the Caterpillar. "Oh, these fine

fellows and lasses here have more than ensured that. But, you are more than welcome to a meeting; I would relish the chance to mend bridges with Miss Saye — and we must discuss my fee; I'm not going to commit a buffet of crimes for free, but I will offer my standard rates. I'm not going to exploit the situation. I'll make you my eleven o'clock, how does that sound?"

"Perfect," we said, bluffing, because intimidating criminal lawyers into doing our bidding was not exactly how I envisioned myself, even now. I was still a good girl — or seven good girls — wasn't I? "Now, Lozzie—"

A flicker of silver-white passed behind one of the stained-glass windows — a mote of pearl-shadow upon the sandstone blocks of Camelot.

I looked up and around, as casually as I could manage, which wasn't very casual, because I was bad at being covert and sneaky and careful. We all stared at the stained glass. Nothing stared back. Nothing but Camelot's purple whorls in the sky beyond.

Heart?

Had she followed us to Camelot? We hadn't really been thinking about her; we'd assumed if she was still following us at all that she'd stay with her sister, with Sevens, not sneak along in my shadow. That didn't seem like her style.

If it was Heart, then I didn't want her taking an interest in anybody here. I needed to get back to Sevens, quickly, and tell her to get her younger sister under control.

"Heathy?" Lozzie chirped. When I looked back down, she was peering at me in curious innocence. Jan was frowning; she must have realised something was wrong.

"Uh, Lozzie," I said, trying to conceal that I was watching for signs of a Yellow Princess trailing my footsteps. "Take Yuleson back to his offices, okay? He's had enough of this. And I'm not joking, we need to look after him, if he's going to work legal magic for you."

"Oh yes," Yuleson sighed. "Yes, please. Please do. I left the place with all the lights on, too. Janet will be horrified when she gets there in the morning."

I nodded to the dozen Knights and the Caterpillar. "Thank you,

everyone. Thank you. I think we're done with the intimidation now, though."

Several of the Knights raised their weapons in salute. The Caterpillar made the teeniest, tiniest *beep* — a noise which still echoed inside the hall like a clap, and made Yuleson flinch so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. Jan flinched too, closing her eyes in carefully contained exasperation.

Lozzie was already reaching for Jan's hand, so I interrupted quickly. "Lozzie. Lozzie I need to talk to Jan."

Lozzie blinked at me, wide-eyed and curious. Jan went very still — she must have heard the tone in our voice.

"Weeeeeell, she's right here!" Lozzie gestured at Jan with both hands. "Ta-da! Janny!"

I giggled, partly for show, but partly because Lozzie. "In private, if possible. Back in her hotel room. About sensitive things. Will you take Yuleson back to his offices and then go give Tenny a hug from me? Please."

Lozzie narrowed her eyes, a pouty pantomime of suspicion. "Heathy ... wassit all about? You're being very sneaky! And you're not very good at it!"

"Yes," Jan added, delicate and still. "What is this all about, Heather?"

I sighed and told a half truth: "I need to ask you about Maisie's body, Jan, the one you're going to make, and about the cultists. Kind of a dark subject. A bit of a ... a bad *joke* we both share. Isn't it?"

I'm going to ask you about Mister Joking. Do you want Lozzie to know, or not?

Depending on Jan's answer, I'd be telling Lozzie anyway; but I trusted Jan at least that much, to tell us the truth, especially if it was any danger to Lozzie.

Jan's eyebrows rose. "Ah," she said. "Ah. I see. Quite. Yes."

"Janny?" Lozzie put her arms around Jan's side.

"Heather is quite right," Jan said. "This is going to be a dark subject. You don't have to come with, Lozzie. Give us an hour,

maybe two? I'll text you."

Lozzie did a big huffy flounce and puffed out a huge sigh, fluttering back from Jan. She put her hands on her hips and looked at me, then at Jan, then at me again, then at Jan. I felt a terrible twinge of guilt. She saw right through both of us, saw we weren't telling her the whole truth.

Jan and I broke at the same moment.

"I—"

"—don't—"

"—not going to—"

"—hold anything back—"

"—tell you a lie—"

"—Lozzie."

Jan and I both slammed to a halt and stared at each other. She was mortified, I was blushing. Lozzie burst into a fit of giggles.

Jan recovered first: "I'm not going to lie to her, Heather."

"And I shouldn't be holding things back," I hurried to add. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Lozzie."

Lozzie flapped a corner of her poncho. "It's fiiiiine! You're so bad at it, Heathy! You too, Janny!" Lozzie hopped over to me and gave me a hug, then over to Jan to plant a very aggressive kiss on Jan's cheek. Then she bobbed back again and waited a beat.

Jan said, "Heather wants to ask me about a mage we ran into, the Joking guy. I know him. Or, knew him, rather. A while back. Need to clear my name again, it seems." She pulled an awkward smile, pained, but relieved.

"Actually," I said. "Jan, I trust you about that."

She looked at me in surprise. "You do? Why on earth would you?"

"Yes, I do," we said. "I'm not going to interrogate you about Mister Joking. I need a way to contact him and talk to him — because I think he was studying the Eye."

Jan's face fell. She went horribly pale. "Oh, fuck me."

Lozzie purred, “You wiiiish, Janny.” Then she winked, big and fake and silly.

This did not help Jan, who just shook her head and looked at me like I was a premonition of her own death.

I held out a hand. “Jan. Your hotel room, please. We won’t take too much of your time. All I need is contact details.”

Jan stared at my hand like it was a hangman’s noose. Lozzie gave her another hug, half-wriggling inside her massive puffy white jacket and nuzzling Jan’s neck. Then she bounced free and stepped over to Yuleson.

“I’ll take mister lawyer-boyer home!” Lozzie said. “And see you in a couple of hours, Janny? I had fun today. Lots of fun! Together!”

Jan stared at Lozzie, unsettled but resigned, then at my hand, then at my face.

She said: “I just keep digging deeper, don’t I? Alright then.” She stepped close and took my hand. “Let’s go have a chat about things I never want to think about again.”

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.6

Jan did not enjoy being dragged backwards through the membrane between worlds.

The first thing Jan did when she and I arrived back in her hotel room — well, the first thing after she stumbled out of my grip, clattered into the thankfully soft crash-mat of her messy bed, burped, made a gagging sound, and glanced at July and Sevens with weary resignation — was raise one finger, and say: “Scuse me a sec’, Heather. Be right back.”

She staggered over to the little bathroom and disappeared through the open door, still wearing her flak jacket and her ridiculously oversized white coat.

Then she vomited, noisily, into the toilet — more retching than actual fluid, to my ears.

She went once, then paused, heaved for breath, then went a second time; I could tell her stomach was pushing on empty, because she made that awful gut-punched wheezing sound of a bad dry-heave, abdominal muscles squeezing hard when there was nothing left inside to eject. I winced in sympathy. I knew that feeling all too well.

“Ohhhhh fuck,” Jan moaned softly, to nobody in particular. “Fuck me. Ugh.”

July called out without looking up from her video game: “Welcome back.”

Jan replied by spitting her bile into the toilet.

I turned away, pretending not to hear and resolving not to comment; we knew very well what it felt like to chuck up our guts after a Slip, even if it no longer happened that way for us, but we doubted Jan wanted me to call advice through the bathroom door when she was presumably on her knees and gripping the toilet bowl. We left her to her dignity.

Besides, we were dealing with a touch of our own reality-shock; the brain-math was echoing down through our flesh as usual, brushing us all with a ghost of the nausea we used to feel. But more importantly I had stubbornly refused to fully fold away my beautiful Outsider flesh-modifications before the Slip back to reality. I'd crammed the most egregiously inhuman pneuma-somatic elements back into my flesh — no webbing, no tail-nub, no glowing multicoloured eyes, no triple-process lungs, extra spring in my heels or edges to my teeth — but I'd held onto the chromatophores laced through my skin.

I liked being light-up. Glow in the dark. Kaleidoscopic.

But reality did not approve.

"Ahhhhhhh," I winced through my teeth at the strange, dissociated pain, squeezing my eyes shut; my tentacles worked to brace us against the floor so our knees didn't buckle. "Ahh! Oh, that's ... that's ... weird. Ahhh. Ow."

Maintaining even a shadow of Homo Abyssus written upon my flesh while in reality was a biological challenge I couldn't quite overcome — but also a temptation I couldn't resist. My skin tingled uncomfortably, like I'd been rubbed raw with steel wool and salt; my head throbbed like my blood pressure was critically low; my insides felt empty and hollow, like a balloon had been inflated inside my guts.

"Heatherrrrr-uuuurrrrk," went Seven-Shades-of-Sanguine-Suspect. "Stop. Chill out. Lights off. Lights off!"

"Okay, okay!" I hissed, my eyes still squeezed shut.

With a flicker of brain-math to fuel the instinctive pneuma-somatic flesh-modification, I allowed my chromatophore cells to fade to nothing, reabsorbed back into my underlying biology. My skin went pale-pink, back to Heather-normal, just another pasty white girl from Reading.

"Told you not to do that," Sevens rasped. "Heatherrr."

"I know," I moaned. "I'm sorry, I just ... I wanted to keep it going, it felt so good."

"You will, some day. Just not right now. Don't pass out on us. Hrrrrrk."

“Mm.”

I sniffed to clear my running nose and wiped my watery eyes on my hoodie sleeve; at least this time I hadn't needed to dial the other six pieces of myself back into invisibility. My tentacles rose either side of my core. We were all still here. Just a little less colourful.

Jan was running the bathroom tap, swirling water around in her mouth, and spitting it back into the sink. She kept huffing.

The hotel room was exactly as we'd left it — covered in a sea of discarded clothes, with random atolls of books and equipment poking through the tides. July was still wearing pastel pajamas and sitting exactly where she had when I'd popped over to Camelot, cross-legged on the foot of her immaculately starched bed, video game controller in her hands, television bleeping and booping away; her little anime soldiers were apparently beating each other up with sticks. Her long loose black hair was still a bit of a shock, like seeing an owl with wings outstretched.

The only difference was Sevens; she had switched from the Yellow Princess Mask to the Totally-Not-A-Vampire Blood Goblin, though without the quasi-military flavouring her father had bestowed on her earlier. Long lank black hair hung down either side of her pale little face — perhaps she wanted to match with July. Her lips were parted, showing a hint of her maw full of needle-teeth; her black-and-red eyes were like twin pools of molten rock set in obsidian; her scrawny, spider-like frame was wrapped in a black tank-top and black shorts. But she was clean, and comfortable, and perched on the end of Jan's bed.

I hurried over to her and lowered my voice to a whisper: “Sevens. Sevens, your sister is following me.”

Sevens looked up, blinking in surprise — first one eye, then the other. “Heart?”

I glanced at July, but she didn't look up from her game; we had no doubt that demon-quality hearing could pick up every word I was saying, regardless of how quietly I whispered or how sneaky I tried to be. The secrecy was more to spare Jan from further stress — or at least from unrelated stress; we were probably about to stress her quite a lot, on purpose, and I didn't want her spreading that stress too thin. We had a prior claim on stressy Jan.

"In Camelot," I whispered to Sevens. "I saw her, just once. She's following us again."

Sevens tilted her red-black eyes to one side, then snorted softly and nudged me in the ribs. "You're not her type. And spoken for like six times over."

I huffed. "Yes, I know I'm not Heart's type, and I'm not interested anyway, she's not my type either. But that's not what I'm worried about! I don't want her taking an interest in Lozzie, or anybody else. There's some good news about Lozzie — about money, a lot of money, I don't know if that would attract Heart's interest?"

Sevens shook her head. "Naaaah."

I lowered my voice even further. "We're so close to going to Wonderland, to confronting the Eye, to everything we've been working for. I can't have Heart take an interest in Lozzie, or Raine, or ... I don't know. I just can't. We can't have her turn into a whole thing we have to deal with, not now. Sevens, please, could you ... "

"*Guuurk*," went the No-Longer-So-Greasy Gremlin. "I'll have a word with her. Sure. She'll listen to her big sister."

"Thank you, Sevens. Thank you." I slipped a tentacle around her waist. "Do you think she could be following Lozzie, right now?"

Sevens grinned, showing all her needle teeth. "Naaah. Loz would scare the piss out of her."

"Oh. Um. Okay?"

July spoke without looking up from her game: "Who is Heart?"

Jan chose that exact moment to stomp back out of the bathroom, carrying a very full glass of water, looking like she was recovering from a nasty hangover. She was still wearing her absurd layers of protection, wrapped up like a fur seal for the Arctic winter. She puffed out a huge, grumbly sigh as she paused on the little wooden entrance area to slip her pink trainers off, and accidentally spilled a slop of water on the floor.

"Bugger me backwards with biscuits brown," she grumbled without preamble.

July replied instantly. "We can eat better than that."

"E-excuse me?" I said.

“You know,” Jan went on, ignoring the question, “you and Lozzie do that completely differently — the dimension-hopping teleporting thing, I mean.” She stepped out of her shoes, scrunched her toes against the carpet, poured more water down her throat, then burped delicately. “Wonderfully useful, by the way. Imagine not having to pay for train tickets. Or setting a room full of equipment where you could just insta-teleport anything you needed. Sort of like what I can do with the pockets, but bigger. I do have size limits, you know. Have you ever thought of that before?”

She squinted the question at me as she chugged more water.

“Uh, no,” I said, trying to be very polite. “That is certainly an idea though.”

Jan put her glass down on the desk; it vanished amid the discarded bras, dirty t-shirts, and a pair of plaid skirts. “Right. Anyway, yeah, you and Lozzie do that totally differently. I’d almost got used to her way — but you? Ugh. Vomit-a-rama.” She smacked her lips, pulling a disgusted grimace, then dug around on the desk and found her glass again. She drained the rest of the water, swishing it around her mouth first. “Technically I can’t damage the teeth in this body, can’t get tooth decay. Stomach acid doesn’t matter. Cool hack. But.” She jabbed a finger toward me. “Lozzie told me you used to have terrible trouble with being sick every time you did that. Now I can see why. Wash your mouth out. It’ll save your teeth.”

“I know, Jan. I know,” I sighed. “I know very well. And I don’t vomit anymore when I Slip.”

Jan puffed out a big sigh. She gave me a sad puppy look with those huge sapphire eyes, twinkling softly in the artificial light. “Right. Lucky.”

“Sorry,” I said.

Jan slipped out of her massive white coat, losing about two thirds of her mass in one go, just letting the huge puffy garment puddle on the floor at her feet; the way the coat crumpled and bunched told my eyes that it must have weighed a ton. I wondered if it really was armour-plated, or filled with some kind of gel for catching bullets, or laced with magic circles and hidden spells.

With the coat off, Jan was back to her slender, petite, girlish self, the very picture of a young woman just over the cusp of adulthood.

She was wearing her starch-and-smart good-girl look, a sixth-former-on-work-experience outfit: a pleated grey skirt over black tights, topped by a modest black sweater with a crisp white shirt beneath. Her bob of black hair was artfully tousled in a few places, fringe teased upward in a show of messy care.

The flak jacket spoiled the disguise, of course; that thing looked almost as heavy as the coat. Plain dark green, all webbing and pouches and inserts for ballistic plates. It stretched from Jan's groin to her throat, every bit of it armoured.

Jan messed with the straps. The whole thing slid off and clattered to the floor. She stepped out of the remains with a shudder.

July spoke, again without looking up from her game: "Didn't need to wear that."

Jan stomped over to the hotel room's tiny kitchen area. She opened the equally tiny fridge; I could see it was packed with bottles.

She said: "You never know when some stupid bastard is going to shoot at you."

"Nobody is going to shoot at you," said July. "This is England."

Jan turned from the fridge, holding a big bottle of orange juice, and boggling at July. "Jule, we got shot at, in England, last week! I've been shot at in England! I've been *shot* in England. Fuck-ing hell." She slammed her glass down on the little counter and poured a full measure of orange juice, drained it in one swig, then poured another. She reached back into the fridge and produced a small bottle of Tesco Value vodka.

"And Beyond?" said July. "Do they have guns out there?"

Jan slopped a slug of vodka into her orange juice. "Worse than guns. Arthurian cosplayers. Didn't realise Lozzie's Knights were quite so literal about it. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Could have done with a warning."

July looked up at that one, almost surprised.

Jan returned the orange juice and vodka to the fridge, and raised her glass to the demon-host — and to us — in a silent, ironic toast. "To ballistic nylon, ceramic plates, and dodgy arms dealers offloading old suits of six-bee-three."

She knocked back a long swallow of orange juice and vodka, then smiled at us — at me, myself, and I.

“So, you and Lozzie teleport differently,” she repeated again, more conversationally this time. “I was thinking about it while I was being sick. And I can’t put it into words very easily, because I get the sense that trying to put these things into words is a one-way ticket to vomit-town again. But when I was growing up — growing up the first time, I mean — we had this water park near where I lived. Big pool, lots of slides, that sort of thing. And there was this trio of really tall water slides, like pipes, fully enclosed.” She took another sip of vodka, ambled over to the desk, cleared off the chair with her free hand, and sat down. “And they were colour coded by how ‘extreme’ the experience would be: blue for easy, red for a bit of slip and slide and so on, and then black for you might feel a bit queasy. Lozzie is like riding down the black tube. You — Heather — you are like jumping straight from the platform into the water. Fuck the tubes. Do it raw.”

July murmured: “That’s what Lozzie said.”

Jan almost inhaled her next sip of orange juice and vodka. She spluttered. “Jule!” She gestured at me. “We’re talking to essentially Lozzie’s ... best ... friend?” Jan squinted at me.

“Sister,” I said. “Lozzie and I are practically sisters. Sort of. Best friend is also fine. We’re close.”

“Exactly!” Jan cleared her throat. “And no, Lozzie did not actually say that to me. We’re not— she’s not— we—”

“Jan,” I said gently. “It’s fine. Really. One of the first conversations Lozzie and I ever had was about how much sex Raine and I were having at the time.”

Jan blushed, surprisingly hard. She swigged her juice again and sat up straighter. “I wouldn’t joke about things like that, not about Lozzie.”

I raised my eyebrows. Sevens was surprised too; she gurgled a soft, inquisitive noise. July let out a tiny sigh.

We said, carefully: “Um, not that it’s what we came here to talk about — and I fully realise that you’re trying to distract me a little, Jan—”

Jan winced openly and raised her glass in a silent toast.

“—but are you saying that you and Lozzie haven’t ... that you’re not ... doing ... ”

Jan sighed heavily, a groan in her throat. She put her glass down on the table, amid the detritus of her temporary home and bolt hole. All the amusement and light-hearted deflection went out of her expression. Only her deep blue eyes seemed alive, tossed by the deep storms of her mind.

“Heather,” she said, quite sober. “I am ... several times Lozzie’s age. So, no. We’re not fucking.”

July huffed through her nose. Jan gave her a nasty frown, but July was staring at her video game.

“Oh,” I said, suddenly feeling very awkward. We drew our tentacles inward, feeling vulnerable at full extension. Sevens caught one limb and hugged it to her chest. “Uh. Sorry, Jan. I apologise.”

Jan waved down the apology. “Don’t be. You’ve nothing to be sorry for.” She smiled again, slipping the mask of a good host and a good girl back over her face; that mask slipped only slightly when she made eye contact with Sevens. “And ... you, yes, hello,” Jan said.

“Hiiiiiii,” Sevens rasped.

“You’re the, uh, the one who is both ... well, whatever you are now, none of my business, no offense — but also a blonde ice queen. Aren’t you?”

“This is Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight,” we said. “You’ve met before. More than once. You can call her Sevens.”

“Heather’s fiancée,” said Seven-Shades-of-Showing-Off. She snuggled my tentacle against her chest.

“O-oh,” Jan said, suddenly caught between two conflicting sets of social cues. Her face went through a fascinating series of contortions as she tried to select the correct expression. “Are congratulations in order?”

We sighed. “Yes, thank you. But it’s been like this for a while.”

Jan shook her head at me. “Your love-life is a nightmare, Heather. I don’t know how you do it. Most people in polycules struggle with time management, and that’s just in a trio or something.”

I smiled awkwardly. "I suppose I'm reasonably good at that?"

"Mm." Jan's smile looked brittle, at risk of breaking off her face. "So ... 'Sevens', how many more ... 'outfits', do you have? I haven't ... uh ... run into you before, have I? Wearing some other face?" She raised a hand quickly. "Please, please do not tell me what you are. Spare me."

"Not I," Sevens croaked. "No worries."

Jan nodded, apparently quite relieved. She picked up her glass again and gestured at both Sevens and me. "Do you want a drink, by the way? I'm not above sharing."

I shook my head. "No thank you, Jan. I've got an empty stomach. And I don't really hold alcohol very well. I've only drunk once before. I mean, drunk seriously."

Jan laughed softly. "Of course. And what about you?" She gestured at Sevens. "Do you drink anything other than blood?"

"Yes," Sevens rasped. "But nah, thanks."

"Guess I'm the only one drinking, then," said Jan. She sipped her vodka, put it back down, and then set about removing her black sweater. She pulled the garment off over her head and discarded it on the floor, then rolled up the crisp white sleeves of her shirt, untucked the hem from her pleated black skirt, and leaned back in her chair.

To our collective surprise, she made absolutely no effort to conceal the doll-like joints at her elbows and wrists; they weren't always visible, not unless one was looking directly at them and knew what to look for. But there they were, smooth and solid, part of her flesh one moment, gone the next, covered over by soft, human skin.

Top-Right wanted to touch, to investigate, to feel how Jan achieved it; the rest of us reeled in that impulse. It was inappropriate, at least right then.

Jan gestured at her bed, at the spare chairs, and at the little kitchen area.

"Anyway, make yourselves at home, please," she said. "Sit down, don't stand on ceremony. If we're going to talk about awkward shit then you may as well be comfortable." She pointed at the odd new appliance on the counter-top, the one with the little glass window

in the front. “Do you want to try the air fryer? It’s so good. Lozzie turned me onto it, actually. Throw some chicken strips in there for a few minutes and — mwah!” She kissed her fingertips.

I started to ease myself down onto the bed, next to Sevens, but then I thought better of it. This wasn’t, in the end, a social call. We needed a certain level of formality.

We walked over to the little table instead, beneath the heavily curtained window with its rim of almost-faded evening glow. Jan reached forward to clear her junk off a second chair for me, then gestured with exaggerated politeness. I sat down and smiled at her, but I could see the tension so carefully concealed behind those storm-tossed eyes.

Sevens trailed along behind me, holding onto a tentacle; July didn’t even bother to glance at us.

“Actually, yes,” I said softly. “I’ve been out all day and now you mention food I’m quite hungry. Shall we eat?”

Jan laughed and sighed, a little too casual, a little too relaxed, the sociable con-woman mask contorting her features into a parody of ease. “Dinner together, huh? You did that the last time you came here, too. I’ve also been out most of the day, so, sure, why not? Do you want—”

“Do you have anything with lemon in it?” I asked.

Jan blinked. “Uh. Not that I know of? I was going to say would you like a takeaway. I’m not up for going and fetching it — and I assume you aren’t either, July?”

“I’m busy,” said July. She was making the figures on the telly screen run across little squares of terrain and hit each other with sticks.

Jan shrugged. “So we can order a delivery. Unless ... ?” Jan tilted her head. “Unless you fancy using that teleportation power as a labour-saving device?”

I sighed, but I smiled. “Teleporting into the middle of the street — even a quiet street — is far too dangerous.”

“Ah, right, yes. Might upset somebody?”

“Precisely.”

Jan produced a slender pink mobile phone from a pocket in her

skirt. She pulled up the online order form for a restaurant who's colour scheme was several clashing, blinding shades of bright yellow and green. Her fingers flew over the keypad, picking out dishes.

She said, "July and I have been exploring the menu of this one Jamaican place over on West Ormond Street. 'The Veiny Rooster'. Terrible name. Run by this old woman who speaks nothing but French — not sure if she's really Jamaican, but the food is incredible. What do you fancy?"

"Sorry, pardon," I said. "The what? The Veiny Rooster?"

Jan looked up and gave me a flat stare.

Sevens gurgled: "*Gurrlk*. Heather sometimes misses things."

Jan laughed once and shook her head. "You can say that again. Heather, the name is a dirty joke. Think about it for a moment."

We blinked three times, then we got it — starting with Bottom Left, then running up all the rest of us until we curled inward, and I pulled a sceptical face. "No! Surely not? How can they name a public business after a ... a dick joke?"

Jan said, "For somebody covered in tentacles and fighting mages on a regular basis, you are hilariously innocent sometimes. Do you know that?"

I pouted, rather put off. Sevens giggled and gently bit my tentacle, teasing the flesh without breaking the skin.

Jan put in the order: Caribbean Lemon Chicken for me, Oxtail and Beans for her, Run Dun for July — which was apparently some kind of fish thing — and a side of Fried Plantain for Sevens, after checking that Sevens did actually consume solid food rather than a diet of pure blood. Jan added four bottles of Red Stripe beer to the order, even when I politely declined any alcohol, for a second time. All for her, apparently. She also ordered a small loaf of Jamaican banana bread and something called 'bammy', for Lozzie, for when she inevitably joined us later.

While she was doing that, we made a conscious effort to relax. I was still carrying my squid-skull mask, so I put it down on Jan's bed, next to the manuscript that Heart had produced for us. Sevens perched on July's bed, within reach of my tentacles, so she could

hug us but give us space at the same time.

“There,” Jan said, sweeping the table clear with one arm. She carefully relocated her laptop, then placed her phone down in full view on the cleared tabletop, so we could all see the order tracker. “Twenty seven minutes ‘til delivery. Guess they’re sort of busy. Trust me, the place is worth it.”

Jan smiled, perfectly oily and presentable, her used-car saleswoman look glued to her skull. I smiled back as best I could.

Was this all a stalling tactic? Sevens was purring softly into my tentacle; surely she would have said something if she thought Jan was trying to put us off.

To my surprise, Jan broke first.

“Sooooo,” she said, staring at me across the no-man’s-land of the table. “How civilized is this gonna be? Are we going to eat first, then talk business? Or is this more of a shakedown?”

I sighed heavily and rubbed my eyes. “Jan, it’s not a shakedown. You’re our friend and ally, whatever you are otherwise. You decided to protect Lozzie, not sell us out to Edward. And you stood with us when we went after him. I know you have your own business going on, a home to go back to and all that, but ... you’re one of us if you want to be.”

Jan huffed a humourless laugh. “Oh, yes, wonderful. The experienced elder on the edge of the protagonist group, ready to die heroically to prove a point and move the story forward? I don’t fancy being Obi-Wan, not to you, or to Lozzie. Sorry. Not interested in dying.”

My smile turned painful. “Jan, that’s not ... not going to happen. And who’s Obi-Wan?”

Jan boggled at me, blue-fire eyes gone wide. Then she looked at Sevens. Sevens nodded and Jan burst out laughing.

“Are you serious?” Jan laughed at me. “Obi-Wan? Star Wars? I gather you didn’t have a normal upbringing, but holy shit.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “I didn’t watch a lot of movies while growing up, no. Star Wars, okay. The ‘I have the high ground’ guy? Him? Praem showed me that picture.”

Jan leaned back, her sudden dark melancholy lifted by my cluelessness. “Yeah. Yeah, him, let’s go with that, sure.” Jan held up a hand in grudging apology. “Look, Heather, I just ... you lot are into some heavy, heavy stuff. It frightens me. I’m already trying to dodge more than I like to talk about. You know? It’s a lot to think about. And I have to be careful what I run into.”

In a subconscious motion she could not control, even with her expert mastery of the con-woman’s art, Jan’s stormy eyes flickered sideways — to the guitar case propped up against the wall, the case that did not contain a guitar, but held her unexplained sword.

“Why don’t we just be normal?” I asked.

Jan looked back at me. “Eh?”

“As in, okay, I’m seven squid girls crammed into a body that I can adjust at will, and you’re a doll and a mage avoiding some terrible fate. But right now we’re just a pair of girls in a hotel room, about to have some food together. And you’re dating one of my best friends. Can’t we just ... talk about normal stuff? It can’t be all crisis all the time, can it?”

Jan gave me a pitying, sceptical look. “This lifestyle makes it hard to think about much else.”

I sighed, but with a smile. “How was your date with Lozzie?”

July said, “Not a date.”

Jan laughed, genuine happiness peeking through from her depths. “The actual date part was great, thank you — and yes, Jule, it was a date. We went shopping together. Tried on a bunch of clothes. Lozzie can make almost any outfit look good, you know?”

“I never see her in anything but the poncho, these days,” I said.

“Sundress, pleated skirts, tank tops, the lot. She’s got so much energy. She bought me a pack of rainbow coloured tights and a tie-dye sweater.” Jan snorted. “Not my usual style, way too conspicuous; I don’t like people to notice me. But ... for her, maybe. We’ll see. But, uh, the date itself got rather overshadowed by all ... all that stuff. With the lawyer. And the money.”

“The money,” I echoed, taking a deep breath and nodding. “Gosh, yes. I haven’t quite taken that all in yet.”

“Hey, good for her,” Jan said. “She deserves some real help in life.” She cleared her throat awkwardly and looked at the curtain, as if trying to look out of the window. “I ,uh, I need to be kept away from all that, by the way.”

“ ... the money?”

“The decisions about the money, the legal stuff about Lozzie, all of it.” She clamped her lips shut, staring at the curtain, then glanced back at me — testing to see if I understood.

“Because ... you might ... exploit it?”

“No!” Jan tutted. “No, exactly. I won’t. I don’t want to. But I can’t be seen to be anywhere near those decisions. Heather, you get what I’m trying to tell you, right?”

I shook my head, mystified. “Are you cursed to lose money or something?”

July snorted a single laugh.

Jan slapped her own thigh for emphasis. “Heather. I am a professional con-woman. I would never try to con Lozzie out of her inheritance. But if something was to go wrong, and I was anywhere near it, with any kind of power or control or influence?” She shook her head, suddenly sad. “The suspicion would hurt Lozzie. Potentially very badly. So, you have your meetings with the lawyer. Have Lozzie sort all this out. But ... when she tries to pull me along to help, I need to not be involved. For her sake.”

We bit our lower lip and frowned hard, thinking harder. We’d never dealt with any of the issues surrounding that kind of money before, the kind of impact it could have on people’s lives, the way it could change those lives. Jan clearly had.

She went on: “And you need to be really careful with who you tell. I’ve tried to impress that upon Lozzie, myself, but ... you just need to be careful. Yes, she can help her friends, you lot, whatever, but you need to be very cautious about who actually knows the figures involved, where the resources are coming from. Those kinds of sums can warp perception.”

I nodded, composing my face for sombre seriousness. “Evelyn has some experience with that problem. I think.”

Jan raised her eyebrows. “Ahhhh yes. Evelyn Saye, rich girl. I forgot

she's kind of bourgeois. Yes, tell her — then she can help Lozzie.”

I blinked in surprise. “You trust Eevee, just like that?”

Jan shrugged. “She’s an incredibly powerful mage who has every reason to become a monster. But she hasn’t. So, yes. However terrifying I think she is, I trust Evelyn Saye a hell of a lot further than I could throw her. Or than July could throw her. That makes more sense.”

“Thank you, Jan. Thank you for the advice.”

Jan sighed and waved the gratitude away, as if she wanted to stop thinking about this subject. “That castle, though. Bloody hell. That place.”

“Oh, I know, right?” I said, laughing along with her.

Jan finally lit up again. “I mean, yes, I saw it from the outside — uh, no pun intended — when we all went to deal with Edward. But bloody hell. What is even going on there? They’ve got stained glass windows of you. An actual bloody round table. I mean, yes, I asked Lozzie what was going on, and I got answers. Sort of. But blow me down. I almost panicked when I saw all that.”

To my surprise, Jan glanced at her sword-case again. Quickly this time, then away, as if realising her error a moment too late.

“Jan ... ?”

“A-anyway,” she recovered quickly. “I was thinking—”

But before Jan could complete her save and continue sprinting down the field, July paused her video game, set her controller in her lap, reached over from the bed to the guitar case, undid the clasps in one smooth motion, and eased the lid open. She held it there for Jan’s inspection.

The sword lay there, exposed.

Jan sighed heavily and ran a hand over her face. But then she stared at the sword, the plain steel blade and unadorned hilt lying on a bed of old clothes, bits of tarpaulin, and plastic bags.

“Still there,” said July.

“Yes, fine,” Jan huffed. “Still there. Not that I doubted it. Thank you, Jule. Put it away, please.”

July closed and sealed the lid, then went back to her video game, as if none of that had just happened.

Jan raised her eyes from the guitar case and looked at me, as if waiting for us to say something. We looked back at her and smiled, feeling exceptionally awkward, as if we'd just caught a glimpse of her underwear drawer — though considering the clothes strewn around her hotel room, she wasn't exactly shy about her knickers.

I opened my mouth to change the subject.

"Don't," said Jan. "Please don't ask about the fucking sword."

"... well, I wasn't going to. But now I'm curious — why can't I ask?"

Jan knuckled her eyes. "Because if I tell you, that puts you in additional danger, which in turn puts Lozzie in additional danger."

I tried to laugh, but it came out as a weird little puff. "We're used to danger, Jan." Then I blinked. "Oh, gosh, did I really just say that? I sound like a super-spy in a silly movie. I sound like Raine. Gosh." I put one tentacle-tip over my mouth.

Jan suddenly looked very exhausted, half-slumped in her chair. "Not this kind of danger."

"Worse than the Eye?"

Jan met my gaze, flat and level. Her eyes were the colour of lightning on seawater. "By certain measurements, sure. Look, Heather, this is the sort of thing where if you know the concepts, or if you say them out loud, you risk summoning attention. It's why I don't touch the sword. It's why that ... that dream-place we went, with Lozzie, it's why something followed me there. The less you know, the better." She shook her head. "But I won't go into detail. I'm sorry."

Sevens raised her face from nuzzling my tentacles, and gurgled deep down in her throat: "The general has a checkered past."

Jan winced as if hit with an electric shock. "Don't call me that."

"Sorry, General."

Jan showed her teeth in a frustrated hiss. "Are you certain you've not met me before, Sevens?"

Sevens nodded. "Sorry. I know lots of things. Just by looking at a person, sometimes. If they're relevant to my skills. My old genres. *Urrrrk*."

Jan flinched slightly at Sevens' weird little rasp. Then she pointed a finger at the blood goblin, caution overcoming her fear. "Then you know better than to talk about any of it out loud."

"Actually I don't, sorry-*eeeurk*," went Sevens. "No context."

Jan sighed. "Just don't call me General. That's good enough. The rest is need-to-know. And you don't need."

I squinted in growing confusion and curiosity. "Were you really a General, at some point?"

Jan laughed. "You mean was I in the army? God, no. Can you imagine me, in the army? Taking orders, or barking orders myself? All that spick-and-span bullshit. Absolutely not. No."

Jan leaned back with a big sigh and a shake of her head. I puffed out a sigh too, feeling a bit out of my depth.

"You're a very mysterious woman, Jan," I said.

Jan stood up and stretched her back, making vertebrae pop; I privately wondered if her doll-body actually had individual vertebrae, in simulation of a human spine. She was still making no effort to conceal the doll-joint seams at her wrists and elbows, nor the faint line around the base of her skull, where her head was attached to her body. I wondered if Maisie's new body would be like that, once she was rescued, returned, and complete. That was one thing we needed to talk about. I opened my mouth to ask what I thought was going to be the easiest of the three questions I had for Jan — but then Jan stepped away from the table and fell face-down onto her own messy nest of a bed.

For a split-second I thought she'd passed out; I almost shot out of my chair to scoop her up. But July didn't even blink.

Then Jan said, face pressed into her blankets: "I'm not mysterious, Heather. I'm just ... old." She turned her head and looked at me. For one moment she looked exactly like a teenage girl, feeling forlorn, slumped on her bed in a low moment. She didn't look old at all. "I'm an old monster, trying to avoid progressing any further down a very nasty quest chain. That's all."

I blinked. “Quest-chain? Pardon?”

Sevens snorted a wet laugh.

Jan laughed too, but she wasn’t amused. “You really are slow on the uptake sometimes. Look, Heather, you’ve seen a little bit of what I am. In that bloody dream. I’m not mysterious, I’m just something old and semi-forgotten, and I should probably remain forgotten.” She rolled onto her back on the bed, then sat up, legs sticking out straight, leaning backward on her own arms. “I worry that I’m not actually a very safe person for Lozzie to know. Let alone ... oh, blast it, the relationship is already doomed.”

“Jan,” I said. “Don’t say that. You really care about Lozzie, don’t you?”

She looked down at her lap, at her pleated black skirt, suddenly very sad. “I feel like I’m playing at really being what I look like. As if I’ve even convinced myself it’s what I really am.”

“Jan!” I almost snapped.

She shook her head. “Besides, Lozzie and I have known each other for a couple of months. That’s still in the whirlwind romance stage. If you can even call it a romance.” She snorted, full of self-derision.

“Jan!”

She finally looked up at me again. “Wh- oh ... H-Heather?”

We were flaring our tentacles outward, making ourselves big, wide, strobing the pneuma-somatic flesh with deep rainbow waves. And frowning at Jan.

“Heather?” she repeated.

“Would you say the same thing about me?” I asked. “Would you call me ‘playing at being what I look like’?”

Jan stared for a heartbeat longer, then laughed softly. “Heather, I don’t mean I’m faking being a woman because I’m trans. I mean I look much, much younger than I really am.”

“O-oh,” we said. “Oh.” We lowered our tentacles.

She swallowed, a ghost of real pain crossing her face. “When I’m with Lozzie, sometimes I feel like a dirty old woman. You wouldn’t get it. You’re, what, twenty?”

“Uh, yes. Twenty years old.”

Jan shifted her sitting position on the bed, going cross-legged and hunched-up. “The perils of a real gap in age.”

“Uh ... yes.” I had no idea what to say. This was vastly beyond my wheelhouse.

Or was it? I was in a relationship with Sevens, right here, and she was older than me by some factor I couldn’t even comprehend. And how old was Zheng? Almost a thousand years. Suddenly, with a burst of confidence, I felt I might be able to help.

Jan was already saying: “You’re right, in a way. I do care about Lozzie, very much. She’s one of the most incredible people I’ve ever met. She’s ... everything I always admired, aspired to myself. And she’s a genius; I don’t know if anybody else really understands that, but she’s achieved feats that I spent decades trying to figure out. Tenny — Tenny is a miracle. A miracle child. Any mage who achieved that would have pulled her apart just to understand, but Lozzie, oh no. Lozzie’s raising her. I mean, that’s beautiful. And I don’t want to hurt her. And I didn’t make a move on her, either. I didn’t ... I didn’t even say anything. She just showed this interest in me ... this ... and I can’t ... I can’t—”

“Jan,” we said, slowly and carefully. “There’s no power imbalance, between you and Lozzie.”

Jan snorted a laugh. “Heather.”

“No, I’m serious. I don’t know a lot about this sort of thing. My upbringing and my parents didn’t really prepare me for relationship issues, but ... the problem with gaps in age is exploitation, isn’t it? Power differentials, social or economic or ... or other things, I guess. And you don’t have any of that over Lozzie. Frankly, I suspect she’s considerably more ‘powerful’ than you.”

Jan gave me an unimpressed, level stare. “How would you feel about me dating Lozzie if I looked my actual age? Hm? What then? I think you would find it disgusting, Heather. I think you would find me disgusting.”

I frowned. “Lozzie is an adult. Both literally and legally. And she’s a darn-sight more mature than she pretends to be. You’re both consenting adults, don’t equate that with something it’s not.”

Jan stared at me. I knew what she was waiting for.

I huffed. “All right, Jan. All right. How old are you?”

Jan smiled, thin and sarcastic. “Don’t you know never to ask a woman her age?”

I tutted and slapped the table with a tentacle. “That is a stupid cliché and you know it. You wanted me to ask!”

Jan’s smile turned self-conscious. She looked down into her lap, then up at me again.

She said: “I was born in 1965.”

“ ... oh, um.” I blinked several times.

Jan snorted. “Not what you were expecting, was it?”

“Um.” I struggled to gather myself. We did some quick mathematics — of the normal kind — inside our combined heads. I was never very good at maths, growing up, but having six other processing centres inside our combined body did make for some rapid calculations. “So you’re ... fifty four years old?”

Jan smiled, sardonic and sad. “Fifty three, actually. My birthday is on December 12th.”

“Oh. Well. That’s not ... that ... ”

“If I’d said ‘one hundred and fifty three’ you would have thought it was cool, wouldn’t you?” Jan smiled a sarcastic smile. “A hundred and thirty. Even just one hundred. Then the number would be meaningless, I would be beyond normal human constraints. This face,” she said, wagging her hands and fluttering her eyelashes, “can’t possibly be one hundred and fifty years old. Why, she’s more like an elf, so it’s absolutely okay if she’s fucking an eighteen year old.”

“Jan, that’s not—”

“But it’s not okay,” she said, all the fake amusement gone. “I’m just fifty three. A dirty old woman. It’s one thing to use my body and my looks to go unnoticed and overlooked by society, it’s quite another to use it for ... this.”

“Oh, Jan. That’s not what I meant.”

Jan waved me off. She stared at the bed-covers for a long moment. I struggled to find the right thing to say — maybe there wasn't a right thing to say in this situation. Maybe she was correct? Maybe this was more about her self-perception than any social norms or the concerns of safety and exploitation in an intimate relationship.

But this all seemed so silly.

"Jan," I said, eventually. "The idea that you could exploit, or browbeat, or manipulate Lozzie into anything is just ridiculous. You don't have more power than her, in any way."

Jan said without looking up: "I have more life experience. Sometimes that's all which matters."

"Sevens is much older than me," we said, gesturing at Seven-Shades-of-Secret-Centuries. "Much older."

Jan looked up from her bed-covers and gave Sevens and me an unimpressed look. "Oh yeah? By how much? A thousand years? Nine thousand years?"

Sevens gurgled. "Time works different for us."

"Yes." Jan tutted. "Exactly. Sure, you're nine thousand years old, but you're a vampire, or an elf, or an alien, or some other bullshit. So you're effectively like twenty five or something? I'm right, aren't I?"

Sevens gurgled softly. I winced slowly; wrong tactic, wrong angle. Oops.

Jan went on. "But me? I was born a human being. I'm still a human being, technically, even if I'm in a new body. So inside, I am a fifty three year old woman." She snorted. "Except with no aches and pains, none of the problems of growing older. That's a major plus, at least."

We cleared our throat gently. "And how long have you been in that body?"

"Twenty five years. So then," she said with a very fake and oily smile, "I would be a twenty five year old fucking an eighteen year old. Slightly better. But not good, Heather. Not good."

I tried to smile, but I couldn't. Jan was set on this, harder than I'd expected.

“Lozzie knows all this,” we said. “You’re not deceiving her.”

“Yeah,” Jan snorted. “And an eighteen year old girl dating a twenty five year old still knows the same thing. Fuck’s sake, Heather. Besides, all this is secondary to the real point. Knowing me is a risk, getting close to me is a bigger risk. I put Lozzie at risk just by being here.”

I frowned and sat up straighter in my chair. “Jan, you’ll hurt her much worse if you just disappear from her life. She likes you, a lot.”

“Lozzie likes a lot of people. She doesn’t need me.”

“You don’t know that! Jan, don’t just disappear.”

Jan swallowed, suddenly guilty. She looked away, eyes gone dark like storm-tainted skies. Bullseye. I’d finally scored a hit there — but I wasn’t sure I’d wanted to. What the hell was I trying to do, anyway? Convince her to keep going with a relationship that made her feel like she was doing something wrong? In a way this wasn’t our business, we just didn’t like Jan bad-mouthing herself when she’d done nothing to deserve it.

But then she said: “Too late for that. Sorry.”

We blinked. “Pardon?”

July paused her video game and looked around as well, surprise showing in her wide, owlsh eyes. “Jan,” she said.

Jan cleared her throat and looked down into her lap.

“Jan,” repeated July.

“Um,” we said. The tension in the room made us want to retreat into a dark hole.

Sevens gurgled: “Told her a truth, huh?”

“Jan,” said July, a third time.

Jan closed her eyes and sighed. “Yes. Okay. Yes, I told Lozzie where I really live.”

July stared and stared and stared, like a bird of prey confronted by a competing predator. “But you didn’t give her an exact address to —”

“I took her there,” said Jan.

July looked about ready to unsheathe her claws and open Jan's belly. Jan opened her eyes and stared at a spot on the wall.

"Well," she said, "Lozzie took me there, really. We teleported. I showed her around the house, around the garden. I just wanted somebody to ... come visit. It was nice. So now she knows where I live, and I can't take that back. I'm really sorry, Heather."

"Uh," we said. "D-don't be. I mean, Lozzie likes you, as I keep saying—"

"And I told her my real name." Jan was shaking slightly.

"Jan," said July — in a tone like an ice-rimed razor-blade.

Jan turned on her demon-host sister. "Nothing happened! Okay? And I didn't speak it out loud, I wrote it down. Then we burned the paper and threw the ashes in the sea. It's fine!"

July just stared. Jan stared back. I had the sudden burning desire to not be in this room with them.

July opened her mouth — but Jan got there first.

"I made her promise never to say it out loud. Jule, it's fine! Fucking hell." Jan sniffed. "I just wanted to tell somebody. I wanted her to know me. Alright? Can I have that, this once? She's never going to speak it. She's never even going to think it. And nothing's happened! All day, nothing has happened to me. I did it right. I did it safely. Stop glaring at me like that."

July relented; she didn't actually look away, her glare did not lose intensity in any way I could detect, but Jan took a deep breath, sighed, and nodded.

"Thank you," she muttered.

July said: "Vigilance."

"Yes, yes," Jan hissed. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her white shirt. "I know. Nothing's happened. We're safe. And why are you so bothered, Jule? You're always mocking me for being so cautious of real danger — like getting shot. Why are you so worried?"

"Can't protect you."

Jan shook her head. "Love you, Jule. But it's fine. We're safe." Jan

turned back to me. Her eyes were a little red, but she put a lot of effort into recomposing herself. She took a deep breath and sat up straighter, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. “I’m sorry you had to hear all that, Heather, Sevens. My life is sometimes very complicated. But I promise, I haven’t put Lozzie in any danger. I just wanted her to know me. That’s all.”

I smiled back as best I could, vastly out of our depth — and we could dive pretty deep, at times. Jan was contradicting herself so fast it made the world spin: was Lozzie safe because they had been careful, or in danger from just knowing Jan? Our combined minds were whirring ahead of our mouth.

“It’s all right, Jan,” we said. “We did come here to talk about the cultists, and Mister Joking, and Maisie’s body—”

“Yes!” Jan said quickly, perking up. “Yes, we will. And I’ve got notes and a design document to show you, and—”

“But,” I said, firmly but softly, then paused to wet my lips before I dived onward. “Jan ... are you—”

The mysterious sword locked in a guitar case; Jan’s personal surprise and discomfort at the Arthurian themes of Lozzie’s Knights; the hidden secret real name; the danger of otherworldly attention; the suit of armour she’d turned up wearing inside the dream. All of it came together in one of the stupidest questions I’d ever allowed to pass my lips. But I had to ask — because in a few weeks, I might be dead, on the black ash of Wonderland, and then I’d never get an answer.

Jan’s eyes went wide. “Don’t say—”

“Are you like, the reincarnation of King Arthur, or something? Is that Excalibur in the guitar case?” I cleared my throat. “Sorry, I figured it was okay to say ‘King Arthur’, since you said ‘Arthurian’ earlier on. And that would be a strange word to never say, it’s a common enough name. Um.”

Jan was staring at me — with her panic gone, unimpressed and tired.

“No,” she said, in a tone of being absolutely done with my shit. “I’m not King Arthur, Heather.”

“Sorry, um, it just seemed—”

“Come on. That’s completely ridiculous.” She huffed and stood up, then ran her hands through her black bob of hair and spread her arms in a big shrug. “I’m not King Arthur. I’m not a reincarnation of King Arthur — partly because he never existed. If he did, he certainly wasn’t a King. He would have been some post-Roman Brittonic nobleman. Probably stank of horse dung and spoke Latin. So, no. I’m not King Arthur, I’m not.”

“Okay, I—”

“I’m not a reincarnation, or a descendant, or an off-shoot of a family tree. I’m not King Arthur summoned from the depths of history by a mage. We’re not living in a fucking visual novel.”

I blinked. “What? Sorry, pardon? What’s a visual—”

“Bottom line,” Jan said. “No. I’m not any of those things.”

A lie lurked inside her words, a worm deep in the flesh of an apple; but she was trying to convince herself as much as me. I just didn’t know which part of it was a lie, or why.

Perhaps something in the colour of my tentacles or a slip of micro-expression on my face gave away that I knew, because Jan paused in her tirade, blinked, and waited as if for me to call her out.

But I said nothing; if this really was dangerous, I didn’t want to provoke whatever forces Jan wished to avoid. I could respect that, at least.

But she said nothing either.

The silence stretched on, more and more awkward with every second. July did not help. Sevens gurgled softly, apparently having a wonderful time as our peanut gallery. I tightened my grip on her waist.

Eventually, I said: “You’re not King Arthur. In any way, shape, or form. Got it. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

Jan swallowed. She tilted her head to one side. “Well—”

A flowing figure in brilliant white and shining silver stepped out of the bathroom, smart heels clicking on the hotel room’s wooden entrance area, glowing with pearlescent aura; all heads turned in shock, eyes gone wide at this impossible intruder.

It was Heart.

Following us after all.

She was wearing the military uniform the King in Yellow had designed for her, sharp and smart and soft and slithering all at the same time, a stunning display of statuesque femininity striding the first few steps into the room.

She was enraptured — by Jan.

Her yellow-gold eyes were glued to the doll-mage, gone wide and staring with disbelief; her lips were parted in breathless awe; her cheeks were bright red with uncontrollable blush. She was panting. The fingers of one gloved hand trembled at her lips, as if she couldn't believe what she was looking at.

July shot to her feet, a steel cable in motion — going for the guitar case; Jan turned, staring at the Yellow Princess in shock and horror. Sevens shot forward too, trying to say: "It's my sister! It's my sister!" I yelped too, "Heart!"

But somehow, over the din of voices and the whirl of motion, we all heard Heart's aching words.

"Where have you been all my life, you absolute snack?"

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.7

I should have seen this coming a mile away. We all should have done.

We should have been prepared for Heart to crash through the window like a perfumed love letter tied to a brick, or to fall through the ceiling in a puff of lace and land on the bed with a squeal, like one of those magical girlfriend characters in the anime shows Eevee told me were not worth watching — or perhaps for her to knock on the hotel room door dressed up as the delivery person with our Jamaican food, spouting some awful lines to Jan about how she could pay the tip with a kiss. I was actually surprised that Heart had simply revealed herself like this, stepping out of the bathroom in the same mask she'd been wearing earlier; no showy introduction with a dramatic entrance, no great narrative intrigue, no striding into the room like a darkly glowing femme fatale here to ruin Jan's life with a whirlwind of passion.

Heart's lack of preparation was a very bad sign; she was so taken by Jan that she hadn't bothered to craft a beginning — always one of the most important parts of any narrative. Instead — *in media res*, outfit unadjusted, no outline, no plan, just straight to the bit where she confesses her adoration.

Was this love at first sight?

No, we decided. Lust, at best.

Jan was the perfect target for Heart: a reluctant mage, dodging an unspoken, ancient, secret fate, which would doom her and her loved ones if she dared whisper the true name of her metaphysical pursuer. Mature beyond her appearance, accompanied by a loyal vassal, with hidden skills and a wardrobe to match. She even came with a mcguffin: her sword.

I'd been worried about Badger, or Lozzie — or in the back of our collective heads, Raine, or even Eevee. Those were the people we thought of as heroes. I'd assumed Badger was the one most at risk.

Heart hadn't come out and said it in plain language, but she'd implied that she was straight, or at least that she preferred men. But what was human sexuality to the sensibilities of Carcosa?

For all I knew, 'doom' was her sexuality, not just a narrative preference or a genre direction.

Was Jan a hero? Perhaps, depending on what she'd done in the past. Doomed? I had no idea. But Heart liked what she saw.

Pity she was about to get skewered with a magical sword.

Heart's trembling, breathless question — 'Where have you been all my life, you absolute snack?' — was so confusing, so utterly without sensible context, that Jan and July both paused for a heartbeat.

We all stood in frozen tableau for a single moment, a very strange collection of people crammed into the mess-strewn hotel room.

Jan just stared, her storm-tossed eyes boggling at this bizarre intrusion, at Heart dressed up like a military fantasy crossed with anime pornography. July had grabbed the guitar case — the case which contained Jan's mysterious sword — but she waited for a second, as if mistaken somehow.

I sighed, raising a clutch of tentacles, lest this collapse into further nonsense. "Jan, July, it's fine, this is—"

Heart spoke over me in a husky, honey-drenched tone, purring for Jan: "That wasn't a rhetorical question, you ... you ... paradox, you." She swallowed, heaving for breath, as if overwhelmed by something in Jan's appearance. She looked the petite doll-mage up and down. Her eyelids drooped. Her chest swelled against the white fabric and starched blazer of her military uniform. She blushed, bright and glowing. "Where have you been hiding?"

Jan looked like she was staring at the grim reaper. She'd gone white with fear.

She muttered under her breath, too quiet for anybody else to hear: "Fairy bitch."

July whirled back into action; she lifted the guitar case in both hands and grabbed the latches. "Jan. Draw?"

Jan blinked hard, as if snapping out of a trance — then held a hand

out to July. “Fuck it, draw!”

July spun the sword-case open like de-shelling a mollusc. The blade came free in July’s hand, upright and shining under the artificial lights of the hotel room, catching the illumination in an oil-slick rainbow-shimmer passing down the metal. The rest clattered to the floor in a terrible mess of case, wrappings, tarpaulin, and plastic bags.

July turned the sword so she was holding it by the cross-guard, and then slapped the grip down into Jan’s waiting hand.

“Jan!” I yelped. “No no no!”

Seven-Shades-of-Sisterly-Shame leapt into the middle of the room, springing like a grasshopper, scrawny limbs going everywhere. She landed directly between Jan and Heart, then turned on her heel with a flash and motion, and slapped her sister across the cheek.

Wa-crack!

The sound was more like a metal bat hitting a frozen corpse, not a slender hand slapping a dainty cheek; I suspected the sisters’ masks had collectively slipped, for just one nanosecond.

Heart reeled and yelped, blinking in shock, mouth hanging open. She cradled her struck cheek.

Seven-Shades-of-Swift-Obstruction did not wait for Heart’s response. She turned to Jan and screeched: “It’s my sister! My sister! Like me! Nothing to do with you! Nothing at all-*urrrrk!*”

Jan froze, hand on her sword, poised as if to rip it from a scabbard. “Your ... sister?”

Sevens gurgled again. “Nothing to do with you!”

Heart straightened up. Her mouth was a wide o-shape of offense. Her cheeks were burning red with humiliation. “You slapped me! Sevens, you slapped me!”

Jan blinked at Sevens, blinked at Heart, blinked at me — then looked down at her own hand, wrapped around the hilt of her sword.

She let go, yanking her hand away like the sword was a snake, on fire, dusted with neurotoxins, in the middle of a nuclear meltdown. July was left holding the weapon by the cross-guard and blade. The

demon-host did not move.

“Jan,” I started to say, “Jan, it’s fi—”

“Fuck!” Jan spat, totally focused on July and the sword. “Fuck!”

July straightened up. She withdrew the sword. She swept her long, loose black hair out of her face. “Less than ten seconds. Probably nothing happens.”

“Fuck,” Jan hissed. If anything, her panic was worse than before, when she’d thought Heart was some intruder from her own doomed fate. “What now? What do we do?! July, we haven’t got any of the — I don’t— we need a fucking, a— a— bull, or a lot of chickens, or a—”

“Wait,” said July.

I cleared my throat gently. “Jan, what’s—”

Jan chopped the air with one ball-jointed hand. She didn’t bother to look at me, her eyes were too busy roving over the walls, the twin beds, the mess of clothes and the detritus scattered all over the floor, the front door and the bathroom door.

She hissed: “Shhh, Heather. Sorry. Just wait. Be ready to ... run, I guess.”

We drew our tentacles in tight; Jan’s fearful caution was not for show, not a drill. This was real. July held the sword ready, as if to slap it back down into Jan’s hand when something burst through the walls to eat all of us.

Heart was still cradling her cheek, mouth open in offended dignity, eyebrows drawn down in a pinched frown. “Sevens! Sister! You slapped me! I can’t believe you, first you—”

Jan whirled on Heart and jabbed a finger at her face. “Shut up! Whatever the fuck you are, I do not want to know, just shut your mouth hole and let me listen!”

Heart shut her mouth. Heart bit her lower lip. Heart blushed like a schoolgirl who’d just been personally addressed by her pop-star idol. Heart twisted her legs together beneath her long pleated white skirt. Heart giggled.

“Okaaaaay,” she purred.

Jan ignored the flirting. She watched the walls. I kept my tentacles close, unsure if we were about to be assaulted by invisible gorillas, or flying alien insects, or ‘fairy bitches’, as Jan had hissed in her moment of panic.

Ten seconds passed in silence. Then fifteen seconds. Thirty. A whole minute — approximately, anyway, I couldn’t count perfectly.

The air conditioning whirled away to itself. My stomach rumbled and glugged. From one of the adjacent hotel rooms, I could hear the faintest sound of the opening bars of the Countdown theme — somebody watching reruns, we assumed.

Jan swallowed. “Okay. Okay, I don’t think anything is coming. I think we’re in the clear. Jule?”

July nodded once. “Clear.”

Jan let out a huge sigh and rubbed her face with one hand. “Get that sword away, Jule. Please. Before I slip and fall on the nuclear button again.”

July knelt down and righted the guitar case, then set about re-packing the sword back into the makeshift cradle of old t-shirts and plastic bags. Jan watched July seal the weapon away with a look of carefully controlled fear and vague disgust. She tore her eyes from the blade and looked at her right hand for a moment, flexing the joints. Perhaps it was just the stress, or a product of my own adrenaline racing through my veins, but the individual doll-like joints of her knuckles seemed much more clear and overt than earlier.

She muttered: “Good draw, though, Jule. Thanks. Still got it.”

“I practice,” said July.

“Don’t fucking remind me,” Jan hissed.

“Um,” we said. “Um, Jan, I’m not going to ask, but—”

“I’m so sorry,” Jan said, turning to me. She looked like hell — wired to the gills with enough stress hormones to fell an elephant. Her skin was pale and waxen, her eyes had gone from storm-tossed lightning beauty to dead flat with exhaustion. She looked like she needed about a month off. “I’m really sorry, Heather. I should—”

“No, no!” I said; several of us — several tentacles — bobbed in

apology. “Jan, no, I should be the one apologising here. We should have said that Heart might be following us, I just had no idea that she might take an interest in you. She’s Sevens’ younger sister. We had to go to her for some help. We should have said something, I’m sorry.”

Sevens rasped: “Sssssorry.”

Jan stared at me in dull reluctance; she comprehended my words all too well, but wished that she didn’t.

“Sister?” she echoed. “Um. Right.”

Her eyes slid back to Heart, as if drawn by magnetic force; the Jaundiced Lady in Tainted White lit up with an incandescent blush once again, bit her lower lip, and gave Jan a hesitant little wave over Sevens’ shoulder. Heart suddenly seemed more like a shy schoolgirl than a romantically and sexually experienced predator.

I explained: “Heart is into doomed heroes. It’s kind of her thing, I gather, though I only met her a few hours ago.”

Jan snorted. “Doomed hero. Right. Great. Yeah, if I’d been holding that bloody sword much longer, we’d all be up shit creek without a paddle.”

Heart let out a breathy whine; Jan recoiled, frowning at her.

“Jan,” I tried to form words that made sense. “Jan, listen, um. Heart and Sevens and others like them, they’re not traditional biological creatures, or even Outsiders, really. She’s a ... uh ... narrative thing, a storyteller, a, uh—”

Seven-Shades-of-Sufficient-Enforcement rasped: “Don’t have to worry about her.”

Heart’s aroused, blushing-maiden look went out like a burst light bulb. She transferred her attention to her currently-much-shorter-but-elder sister, face suddenly sharp as a collection of knives.

“Sevens, my dear sister,” she said.

Sevens turned around and looked up; Heart drew one hand back and slapped Sevens across the cheek — but this was just a regular slap, a hand-on-flesh sound, just enough to make Sevens go *guurlurk!* and flinch a bit.

“Heart!” we snapped.

Both of the Yellow Princesses ignored me.

Sevens straightened up while Heart ranted at her: “I can’t believe you today, sister! First you shoot me through the chest and risk ruining the most delightful outfit that father has ever given me, then you slap me in front of the ... the most ...” Heart raised her eyes to Jan again, all her anger draining away. “Oh, gosh.”

Sevens croaked up at her: “We’re doing important things here. *Grrrrurk*. Go away, Heart.”

“Love isn’t important?!” Heart shrieked down at Sevens. “You’ve changed your tune, dear sister!”

Jan spluttered: “Love? Oh, fuck off.”

Heart looked up again, then smoothly stepped around Sevens’ flank and sashayed toward Jan, each step tentative, tip-toes first, tightrope walking down the line of her own attraction.

July straightened up from packing away the sword; the demon-host loomed in Heart’s path. I eased closer as well, sticking out all my tentacles and strobing them bright red and warning yellow.

Heart ignored both of us.

She purred to Jan: “Have you never heard of love at first sight?” She smiled, nervous, hesitant — then, to my incredible surprise, she hiccuped. “You are the most thoroughly doomed individual I have ever, ever had the pleasure to lay eyes upon.” She looked Jan up and down, her lips trembling. “You’re not even my usual type, not even a man, but ... so dashing. Sevens should be delighted. I’ve been converted to rug-munching.” She giggled, too high-pitched, then hiccuped again.

Was she copying me? Us? Why?

Jan frowned. Her voice went hard. “Is that a joke?”

Heart blinked, mortified for some reason that went over my head. “What? I-I’m sorry? What did I—”

“Not even a man?” Jan almost spat. “You’re like her — like Sevens, you can tell my past or some shit? Are you insulting me?”

Heart went white in the face. “No! No, no! I don’t give a damn what you started life as. It makes no difference. I-I don’t want to offend, no! You’re so— so— I can’t—”

“You’re a chaser,” Jan said. “Right?”

Heart’s eyes filled with tears of horror, instant waterworks. She raised trembling hands, as if she’d broken something fragile, which could never be fixed. “No! No! I— I— didn’t mean—”

Jan barked a single laugh. “I’m winding you up, you fucking moron, whatever you are. You scared the living piss out of me. You almost got everyone in this room — or everyone in this hotel — fucked up by—” Jan sighed sharply. “By something I’m not going to say out loud again. Bloody hell. You wanted to make a good impression? You’ve blown it, bitch.”

Heart’s face flowered with relief. “Oh! Oh! Oh, that’s more like it.” Then she descended back into that lustful purr. “Oh, doomed secrets. Please, do tell me off even more, mommy.”

Jan went deadpan with shock. “What.”

My skin almost climbed off my bones. “Heart. Stop. Oh my gosh. Stop.”

Sevens went *glurrrk*. July snorted; at least one of us found this amusing.

Heart straightened up and flashed her teeth, her confidence apparently returned in full. She puffed out her considerable chest and cocked her wide hips to one side, swishing that absurd ‘military’ skirt with all the layers and the poofy hem. She raised one hand and placed her fingertips against her own throat.

“For a human you are not young,” she said. “Heroes do tend to be on the younger side, in my experience, but I believe my experience is about to expand. But you ... you are a delightful paradox. I may technically be older than you, counting by how the globe turns, but in spirit I am young enough to call you mo—”

“Hearrrrrt-urk!” went Sevens.

Heart just giggled, a tinkling sound like bells in the air. She preened and twisted in front of Jan.

Jan gave her a look of mingled confusion and disgust. “I’m taken. Now kindly fuck off.”

“Mmmm, taken, so you say. Jan. January.” Heart giggled. “Janice? Or—”

“Stop!” Jan snapped. “Don’t—”

“Oh,” Heart purred, sighing with pleasure. “I can see your real name. It glows above you like a neon sign, pink and juicy and ripe enough to eat. And no, I don’t mean the boring name you abandoned. I can’t even see that. I mean the real one. And!” Heart leaned forward and pressed a finger to her own plush lips. “My lips are sealed. For your convenience, Janice.”

Jan stared at Heart like she was a live hand grenade. Heart giggled again and straightened up.

Sevens gurgled: “Time to go.”

Heart tutted. “Absolutely not, sister! I’m only getting started!”

“Heart,” we sighed. “We’re doing important things, talking about important things. Sevens wasn’t exaggerating. Business things. Important things. Please.”

Jan cleared her throat. “And I am taken! Fuck off! Don’t make me tell you again.”

Heart giggled and waved away Jan’s words, like it was all just playful teasing. But when Sevens took her hand and dragged her toward the bathroom, Heart put up only a token resistance, allowing her elder sister to lead her away.

Allowing? Perhaps age meant something when it came to the ability to dominate a narrative.

Heart called to Jan as Seven-Shades-of-Sisterly-Struggle dragged her away: “Next time we meet, I promise it will be much more dramatic! There will be fireworks, and a daring rescue! A villain for you to defeat! And I’ll be wrapped up in ribbons for—”

Sevens pulled Heart all the way to the bathroom door, did a little twist to get behind her, and then tried to push her through; Heart braced her hands and feet against the door frame, like a dog trying to avoid being shoved into the bath.

“Janice!” she called. “This isn’t the last you’ve seen of me! Mwah! Mwah!” She pursed her lips and made the most embarrassing kissy noises. “Mwah! You’re more dashing than you know!” Sevens grunted and put her shoulder into the small of Heart’s back, her bare toes scrunched against the floorboards; Heart began to buckle, her glowing white uniform vanishing through the bathroom door

inch by inch. “Wait for me! Hahahaha!”

Heart let go; she and Sevens tumbled into the bathroom together, but the only sound was a petite vampire clattering onto the floor tiles, gurgling and rasping and hissing to herself.

Sevens re-emerged again a moment later, alone, grumbling like a broken water pump.

“Sorryyyyyy,” she rasped.

We took a deep breath and rubbed our face with both hands, then a tentacle, wrapping the limb over our eyes briefly; the urge to hide away inside our own soft flesh was overwhelming. This whole situation was far too embarrassing for everyone involved. Jan had been basically harassed and made to feel foolish, Sevens was probably mortified by her sister’s behaviour, and Heart was almost certainly going to try again. Only July seemed unmoved. A crisis we didn’t need; at least it was a small one.

But we pulled our face out of our limbs. We needed to keep going.

“Jan,” I said. “I’m so sorry. We’ll make sure she—”

“Tisssst!” Jan hissed between her teeth. She held up both hands for quiet — for shut-the-hell-up-because-I-don’t-understand-the-evidence-of-my-own-eyes.

She padded over to the bathroom, right past Sevens, and stuck her head through the door. She looked up, she looked down, she peered in to the tub, she peeked behind the shower curtain, and she even squinted into the sink plughole.

Jan emerged again, squint-frowning, hollow-eyed.

“I don’t want to know that woman,” she said. “Okay? Not my type. Not interested. If she comes after me, I will find a way to hurt her to make her go away.” She jabbed a finger toward Sevens. “I don’t care what you and she are. I’m still a mage and if I have to defend myself — or God forbid, defend Lozzie from some bunny-boiler lunatic — then I will hit the books and make a fucking bomb.”

Perhaps it was just her resolve and her anger, but suddenly, to our eyes and ears, Jan looked and sounded exactly as old as she really was.

“*Guurrrlurk*,” went Sevens. “Sorrrrry. She’s my little sister. I’ll have

a word with her. It'll be okay. Prrromise."

Jan said: "A word. And that'll be enough? Really?"

Seven-Shades-of-Shuffling-Soles looked down at her bare feet, and showed the floor all her needle-sharp teeth. "There's a thing I can tell her. To make her back off. It's cool. Not your responsibility. I'll do it. Do it tonight."

Jan stared at her a moment longer, then glanced at me. Her frown did not abate. It looked almost out of place, with the white blouse and the pleated skirt, made her look tiny and fearsome.

"Jan," I said. "If it comes to it, I'll ... do what I do."

Sevens rasped: "I can talk to our father."

Jan's frown softened, ratcheting down into regular incomprehension, rather than a mage preparing for war. She squinted at Sevens. "Your father? You— actually, wait!" She held up a hand. "No. Don't explain. I don't want to know. I don't. Just. Just don't. Not another word. Thank you."

I stammered with embarrassment, "W-we'll deal with this, Jan. I promise. One way or the other."

Jan took a deep breath and shook her head, but then she threw up her hands in resignation. "I always knew I should have run from you people the moment I got the chance. Fine, but—"

Knock-knock — knock-knock-knock, came a rapping on the hotel door.

"Delivery for room one-six-five!" came a muffled female voice.

"Oh thank the gods," I sighed. "I thought that was her again."

Jan rolled her eyes. "Fine, food's here. Let's sit down and try to eat, maybe we can get back to what we were trying to do, yeah?"

"Please," I said.

But Sevens bared her teeth and eyed the door. "Urrrr ... ummm ... "

Jan must have missed the cue; she produced her purse from a pocket in her skirt and walked straight over to the front door of the hotel room, so as not to leave the delivery girl waiting. She glanced once at the magic circle she'd taped to the back of the door — like

checking a security camera, I supposed, to make sure it wasn't detecting anything untoward on the other side — then set her face in a fake-polite customer-service smile, and opened the door nice and wide.

“Hi! Yes, that's us—” was all Jan said.

Then she flinched about a foot in the air.

On the opposite side of the threshold was the most ostentatious delivery girl in all history: gleaming white jeans accented with gold piping, skin-tight against a pair of wide, flaring hips and thickly padded thighs; a pearl-white polo-neck shirt with a golden logo on the — extremely prominent — chest; a waterfall of silver-white hair stopped up and dammed into an elegant ponytail, flowing from beneath a white peaked cap which was tugged down low over a pair of golden-yellow eyes.

Heart's smile twinkled with toothy mischief. She held out a pair of plastic carrier bags, emblazoned with the yellow and green colour scheme of The Veiny Rooster Jamaican Restaurant.

“Your delivery, Janice!” she crooned.

Sevens and I were already piling into the doorway to keep her from harassing Jan any further.

“Heart, you—”

“Sister, stop!”

“Back off! Heart, I'm grateful, but—”

“You're not even in proper role, you—”

“—this is not the time or place and—

“—don't understand this isn't going to work, father would think you're—”

“—talk later—”

“-idiot—”

Jan silenced us both by reaching out and carefully accepting the twin plastic bags full of food. She took them from Heart's hands — careful not to actually touch Our-Service-Worker-in-Gleaming-Pearl — then turned and placed the bags of food down on the floor.

“Um, Jan?” I said.

“Always secure the food first,” Jan muttered. She turned back to Heart. “Was that actually our food?”

“Yes!” Heart chirped, smiling like a glossy menu photograph. “And I hope you enjoy every bite. You deserve it, January. And how would you like some personal after-service—”

“Where’s the real delivery worker?”

Jan snapped fast, unimpressed, not even blushing or mortified anymore.

Heart blinked three times. “I ... I’m ... what?”

“The real delivery worker. Where?”

“Oh, um, ahem.” Heart cleared her throat and gestured vaguely down the hall. “She’s probably heading back to the front door of the hotel. I didn’t hurt her or anything. I’m a good girl! A good girl, I promise! You can praise me for my role now!”

“Did you pay her?”

Heart blinked. “Did I what?” She tried to laugh. “Dear January—”

Jan got her elbows out and shoved past Heart, stepping out into the hotel corridor. She marched away toward the lifts, without looking back, without her shoes on, carrying only her purse.

Heart stared after Jan, confused and lost. “Jan ... January?”

Sevens gurgled a bitter laugh. I sucked on my teeth and shook my head. Behind us, July went back to her video game, danger averted.

Heart looked floored. “I ... I don’t ... what did I do wrong?”

“You don’t understand her,” we said. “You just like the way she looks.”

Heart turned her delivery-girl mask back toward us, blinking with confused hurt in her glowing golden eyes. “Because I took the role of some ... servant? I don’t—”

“You’re not even in role,” Sevens rasped. “You’re not trying. Dad would tell you to go back to understudy.”

Heart gestured down the length of her body, cocking her hips and

puffing out her chest. "It's the best I could do on such short notice! And look, I'm ready to get pulled apart, like the food I've delivered!"

"Excuse me?" I said. "Heart, what?"

Sevens sighed — a noise like a blocked hosepipe. "You play the same part over and over, Heart. 'Cos you think it's the only thing people want. Try a real role. Try something new."

Heart pouted. "And January will respond better?"

"Well, no," I said. "Jan is taken. Please, Heart."

Heart yelped: "Taken is relative!"

Sevens said: "Her girlfriend is god-ridden."

Heart's eyes went wide. She stared at Sevens for several seconds, then took off her white baseball cap and bit down on the brim.

"Mmhmmurk," went Sevens.

"Excuse me, Sevens," we said softly. "You mean Lozzie?"

"Mmhmm."

Heart removed the brim of her hat from between her teeth, and said: "The one wearing the changeling flag, from earlier?"

Changeling flag? I bristled inside. "Heart. That's very rude."

Heart blinked at me in genuine confusion, golden eyes all a-flutter.

Sevens rasped: "*Urrrk*-from one of us that's a compliment. Sorry, Heather. Heart doesn't mean it in a bad way."

"A compliment?" I echoed.

Our tentacles were rising in an unconscious threat-display; it was lucky nobody else was out there in the corridor, or I would have caused a supernatural incident.

Heart squinted at me like I was the moron here. She shrugged with one perfectly sculpted, rolled-back shoulder. "Of course. What did you think I meant? Gosh, you humans can be so bizarre sometimes."

"Um, fine." We let it drop for now; the prospect of anybody insulting Lozzie made our tentacles want to sprout little claws.

Heart's mind was already back on the main subject: "I can ... I can deal with a ... with a god-ridden. That's fine." She didn't seem very confident. "I am a princess, after all. My father is the King in Yellow. I'll ... I'll put on a play for her."

For Lozzie? I bristled again; I did not like the sound of this.

Sevens rasped: "No, you can't. Don't be stupid. I can't deal with her — so you've got no chance, sis."

Heart pouted, genuinely put out, disappointed that her 'cute' little 'prank' hadn't been met with more approval. "But ... but ... "

"We'll talk later, sis," Sevens gurgled. "Go cool your head. 'K?'"

Heart sniffed. She looked like she might burst into tears. Sevens bobbed forward on the balls of her feet and reached up to give Heart a hug. The sisters embraced for a moment, then parted.

"There'll be others," Sevens rasped. "You just met this woman, like five minutes ago. Go read a book."

Heart sniffed again, smiled awkwardly, nodded — to me, a polite acknowledgement — and then stepped just out of sight, around the corner of the door frame. We poked my head out into the corridor; Heart was gone. No lingering silver-white aura, no lock of hair whipping around a corner, no giggling whisper floating through the air.

We shared a look with Sevens. She shrugged. "Didn't wanna say that part."

"About ... " I glanced back at July, sitting on the bed and playing her video games. But she was Jan's closest ally, Jan's demon sister. There was no threat in her overhearing this. "You mean about Lozzie? God-ridden? I've never heard that term before."

Sevens blinked at me. "You know. With the star. Under the castle."

"Yes, I just ... I guess I don't think very much about what Lozzie is. She's just Lozzie."

Sevens patted my flank, between my tentacles. "Yaaaaah," she rasped.

"Heart won't try to interfere with Lozzie, will she?" I hissed. "Because if she does, Sevens, I won't allow it."

Sevens rasped a giggly little noise. “Urrrrk. Bad idea — for Heart. Nah. Lozzie can’t be touched by all that. Heart would probably get herself in trouble.”

“Hmm. Okay. Fair enough.”

Jan returned a few minutes later, with her purse several dozen pounds lighter, still barefoot and teetering on the edge of a scowl. As soon as she got the door shut, she said: “Sevens. Your sister had the food, is it safe? She’s not going to have tampered with it?”

“Oh, uh, yah.”

“And she’s not coming back?”

Sevens shook her head.

I cleared my throat. “We put her off. Properly. She might cry a bit.”

Jan snorted. “As if I care. What did you tell her about me?”

“Not about you,” Sevens rasped.

I pulled an awkward smile. “We just told her who you’re dating. Lozzie is apparently very intimidating.”

Jan stared at me as if I’d just presented her with a steaming turd on a silver platter. Hollow-eyed intentional incomprehension. She sighed, and then said: “I don’t want to know. Just. Let’s just eat. Okay? Just eat. Forget this all happened. Don’t let it spoil a good meal. Please.”

“I’d be delighted to,” we said.

We — my-selves, Jan, Sevens, and even July, when she put her controller down for a few minutes — set about serving up the food. The tiny counter-top space in the kitchenette was our staging ground; Jan left the banana bread and the bammy standing there in their takeaway containers, ready for shoving in the microwave again when Lozzie inevitably joined us later.

Jan and I sat at the little table together, her Oxtail and Beans and my Caribbean Lemon Chicken between us. Sevens helped by fetching glasses of water. Jan lined up all four bottles of Red Stripe beer alongside a single glass, then did something fast and esoteric with her hands — pop went the cap on the first bottle; she snatched it out of the air before it had time to fall. She poured the beer at an angle, without looking, as if she’d done this a million times before.

July returned to her position on the bed, container of Run Dun perched on one knee; she ate by taking one hand off her controller, taking a bite with a fork without even looking, and then holding the fork in her mouth. Everything about her pose made us nervous; that was a takeaway container full of stewed fish and seafood, balanced on one knee — it smelled heavenly, but if she spilled it on the carpet it would reek like a sewer by tomorrow.

Demonic grace and physical control, I supposed. Cheating.

Sevens sat on the bed too, carefully distant from July, gnawing on her fried plantain slices like a tiny rodent, little needle teeth going chomp-chomp-chomp-chomp-chomp.

The Caribbean Lemon Chicken made my mouth water and my bioreactor ache; it came with lemon rice and lit me up inside like eating raw gold. Jan's Oxtail and Beans looked thick as tar and smelled like pure protein. After a few bites we wordlessly shared a spoonful of each other's dishes — Jan spooning a glob of oxtail onto my plate and me returning the favour. Sevens appeared at our side and gave us a slice of plantain. Jan said that was 'cute'.

After all the unexpected stress of Heart's sudden intrusion, Jan finally seemed to relax; we didn't talk much for the first ten minutes or so, or at least Jan didn't offer much in the way of conversation. She leaned back in her chair, taking deep draughts from her first glass of beer. She undid the first couple of buttons on her smart white blouse and flapped the fabric, as if still overheated despite the air conditioning. She put one foot up on the spare chair. She raised her beer to me in a silent toast; we replied with my glass of water.

We wanted to check in with Raine, so I used my phone to take a picture of my food and Jan's food together, in the same shot; I had to try half a dozen times before we got it right, holding the phone at different angles with our tentacles. Then I sent it over to Raine with a little message.

'Wish we were eating with you too! We have to try this place! Love you love you love you xxx.'

Raine replied back in less than five seconds; she sent me an elaborate piece of ASCII art of a cute little squid eating a burger. That made us giggle. How did she always make those so quickly?

Jan chuckled and shook her head. "Sometimes I forget how much of a zoomer you are."

"Sorry?" I slipped my phone away and blinked at Jan. "I'm what, pardon?"

Jan frowned, then glanced at Sevens. Sevens just shrugged, mouth full of fried fruit.

Jan said: "I mean ... taking a picture of your fast food. Putting it up on instagram or whatever."

"Oh," we said, feeling silly. "No, I was just sending it to Raine. I've never done that with food before. It's quite a challenge, I don't really use my phone's camera very much."

Jan laughed in a slightly different way — at my expense? — and leaned back in her chair again. She knocked back the rest of her beer. "Boomer in spirit, then. Born at forty. Whatever."

We smiled back. "This is nice, Jan. Thank you."

Jan clacked down her glass and gave me an odd smile — almost a little sad. "That's alright. You're welcome. You don't really get to do much of this, do you?"

"Of what?"

Jan gestured at the food, at the room, at us. "Hanging out. With just, like, anybody. Socialising. Getting to know people."

"Oh," we said, a little taken aback. "I've always been a bit reclusive, I suppose. Even when it was ... Maisie and I, together. We were reclusive, together."

Jan sighed. "That's not really what I mean, Heather. Lozzie's told me a little bit about your past. Not to pry or nothing."

"Oh, no, it's fine," I said.

Jan shrugged. "You spend ten years in and out of mental hospitals. You don't get to have a normal teenage life, no real friends, never in school for long. Then you go to university and you have like, what, a month of almost-normal? And then ... " She gestured at nothing specific, a flicker of her hand. "Magic. Mages. All this bullshit."

"It's not so bad," we said.

“It’s not a lifestyle I’d wish on somebody, Heather.”

“It saved me. Raine saved me. Evee saved me. I-I think I saved them too, but that’s a bit more complex. And I’m going to save my sister.”

Jan stared at me with a closed expression; if she doubted my words, then she was careful not to show it. We appreciated the effort. We didn’t need doubt, not then, not with what we were doing, not with the Eye looming in the sky of Wonderland, beyond the end of all our plans.

Jan cleared her throat and opened her second bottle of beer; she did the same trick as before, a quick motion with both her hands that sent the bottle cap flying into the air. But she fumbled the catch; July’s free hand shot out and snatched up the cap instead.

“Slow,” said July.

“Ehhhhh,” went Jan. “You’re cheating, you don’t have the same motor neuron set-up.”

She poured the second beer into her glass, then gave me a look. “Don’t worry, Heather. I’m not going to get so drunk that I can’t answer your questions. I know you’re here for the interrogation part more than for the company.”

We clacked my fork against the plastic takeaway container and sighed. “Jan, I already said, it’s not an interrogation. You and I are on the same side. I’m not trying to pump you for information.”

“Yeeeeeeah,” Jan said, staring off past my shoulder as she tilted her glass against her lips. “You’re doing something much worse.”

Jan swigged her beer. I frowned and tilted my head in confusion. Sevens looked up too, suddenly curious.

“Am I?” we said.

Jan lowered her glass and burped delicately. She absently tapped her sternum with her fingertips. “Sure you are. You’re doing that thing. That thing where you go round everyone before a big fight. I’ve done it before, I know what it looks like.” She gestured at July. “Hey, Jule, what’s that one game with the redhead soldier?”

July paused her game, spooned a helping of stewed fish into her mouth, and turned her head to stare at Jan, owl-eyed and chewing slowly.

Jan huffed. “You know. The one. And she’s voiced by what’s her name. And you can’t romance the purple one and you got really mad about that.”

July stared. Blank.

Jan rolled her eyes. “In space? You know what, never mind. Anyway, Heather, point is, you’re getting ready to go maybe cause the end of the world or whatever with your ridiculous jay-are-pee-gee protagonist stuff—”

“It’s not going to cause the end of the world, Jan.” I tutted.

“So you say! Might cause the end of somebody’s world. Right?”

“Jan,” I said, suddenly hard and cold and unable to stop myself. One of my tentacles — middle-right — actually bobbed in pre-emptive apology; another — bottom-left — coiled in anger.

“Nobody is going to die. None of my friends will die doing this. It won’t happen. We won’t let it happen.”

Jan swallowed, cleared her throat, and nodded. “Sure. Sure. Okay. Don’t threat display at me, please?”

“Sorry ... ” we muttered, forcing ourselves to relax. “Sorry. It’s a sore point. We apologise.”

Jan sighed. “Look, that’s not my point. I’m saying you’re going around checking on everyone before the big battle. Squaring your t’s, straightening your i’s, all that.”

“I am not!” I protested, a bit more gently. “I’m not. I’m getting important information, from you, and then ... home for the night. That’s all.”

“Mmhmm. Sure.” Jan took another long swig of beer.

I squinted at her. “Are you ... ”

“Inebriated,” said July.

“Oh, I’m not drunk,” said Jan. She cracked a very relaxed smile. “I can hold as much liquor as I like. This one time, in the Shetlands, I drank an entire pub of fishermen under the table. And that was mostly just whisky. Bleak fucking place, up there. Bleak.”

I tilted my head at Jan again, suddenly feeling rather dog-like.

“Excuse me if this is rude, or prying, but ... well, seeing as you’re

about to make a body for Maisie, I feel like it's only fair that I ask this."

"Ask away!" Jan toasted me again.

"How do you get drunk? If, well, if you're all carbon fibre inside."

Jan laughed. "Come on! Heather, we've been over this before, you and I. You've got spirit-flesh tentacles sticking out of you. Carbon fibre was just what this body started as; yeah, technically I'm still mostly made of it, but I'm all spirit-flesh, all settled in. I still metabolise stuff I ingest, you know? I mean, I could choose not to, but that's no fun. Handy if I ever need to drink but keep my cool. This other time, I was in Leningrad — when it was still called that — and fuck me, long story, but I was with a group of artists, and our hosts had this bottle of vodka between us, and the expectation was that we were gonna drink all of it. The whole thing. That one night. Now, the woman I was there with, she woke up the next morning and had to crawl to the bathroom. Literally, crawl. But me? Went through me like water." She grinned, showing off her teeth. "No booze, no hangover."

"Ah. So. You can choose."

"I could purge all this feeling right now if I wanted," she said. Then she puffed out a sigh and looked at her two remaining bottles of Red Stripe. "But right now I could do with a bit of lubrication, frankly, after all that bloody nonsense earlier."

I cleared my throat. Sevens let out a gurgle. July snorted through her nose, barely audible; she seemed to mostly find this amusing.

"I'm really sorry about that, Jan," we said. "I'm not going to ask more about all the stuff we were saying before — all the stuff about King Arthur, about your sword, about the ... f-words," I whispered. "Is that a dangerous word?"

Jan boggled at me, amused. "Eh? What?"

"... fairy." I whispered. "You said it, not me."

"Oh," Jan laughed. "Yeah, yeah, sure. That's not gonna bring the attention of *Le Royaume des fées* down on us. Don't worry."

My turn to stare at Jan like she'd deposited something unwholesome on my pillow. She stared back at me, blinking.

“Uh, Heather?”

“Jan.”

“... yeah? What’s wrong? You’re doing that thing with your tentacles where you look like you’re trying to ward off a rival.”

“Oh? Oh, sorry.” I looked up and found we had made ourselves big, flaring outward; Jan was wrong though, the gesture was a sort of shared exasperated laugh. “Um. I just mean ... well, look, I’ve seen and heard plenty of absurd things in the last year. Eevee once told me there’s no such thing as vampires, and, well ... ” We gestured back at Sevens; she responded with a gurgle. “So, um. Are ... fairies ... real? Is this another stupid thing I have to integrate into my rapidly worsening model of the world?”

Jan went quite sober. She put her beer glass down. She rubbed her chin and pinched the end of her nose. “If you ever need an answer to that question, then we’re in unimaginable volumes of shit. It’s not gonna help you.”

“A yes or a no will suffice,” we said.

“Then ... no.”

“Okay, good,” I said, nodding. “Thank you. That’s better than I—”

“But there are powerful things that sort of wish that was a yes.”

“Jan, you can stop now. No was enough, thank you.”

Jan snorted and said: “So, when I say I don’t wanna know something, now you understand why, right? Keep things simple. There’s no such thing as fairies — but there’s cosplayers. And they’ve been method acting for a bloody long time.” She gestured at Sevens with her beer glass. “No wonder your sister scared the shit out of me. Warn me next time. Not that there’s gonna be a next time, right?”

“Sorrriy,” Sevens rasped.

“Ahhh, it’s not your fault. Family, right?” Jan flashed a grudging smile.

I said: “When Sevens and I first met, she caused me all kinds of confusion too.” We smiled over at Sevens. She blushed faintly and focused on eating more fried plantain.

Jan gave me a sceptical look. “Yeah, but the difference there is that I’m not interested in this ‘Heart’ bitch. She can fuck right off.”

We smiled and nodded, still feeling rather embarrassed about the whole episode.

Jan ate several more bites of food, polished off her second beer, and then sat a little straighter in her chair. “Right, Heather. Let’s get this over with before I change my mind and lock myself in the toilet. Or before Lozzie turns up. You wanted to ask about a bunch of different things, didn’t you?”

We sat up straighter, too. Sevens pretended she wasn’t paying close attention, but I saw her pause her chewing. July just carried on with her video game, but I had no doubt she was all ears.

“Yes,” we said. “Um, several things.” We raised three tentacles, counting off the subjects. “The remains of the Sharrowford Cult — Badger’s friends, the ones who survived the business at the house, back when they tried to communicate with the Eye. Then Maisie’s new body. And then Mister Joking. Shall we start with the easiest first, Jan?”

Jan squint-frowned at me. “Oof, Heather. Bad habit.”

“Sorry? Pardon?”

“If your job is to eat a frog, you best eat him first thing in the morning.” Jan cracked a smirk. “If we end on the low note, it’ll feel pretty bad.”

“Oh-kay. Um. Worst first, then?”

“I’m gonna need another beer for this.” True to her word, Jan opened her third beer and poured it into her glass; but then she left it on the tabletop, untouched, and looked me right in the eyes. “First. The ‘cultists’.”

We blinked in surprise. “They’re the hardest subject?”

Jan nodded. Her eyes looked like fire-lit deep sea, but her expression was stone hard. “By far. You still want to talk to them, right? I’ve been putting them off for you, holding them off with promises; they know all about how you healed Nathan, Heather. You better fucking talk to them, because if you don’t then I’m ... I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

I stared in confusion and shock; Jan was talking like I'd done something terrible. Had I? We began to doubt.

"... I ... of course I want to talk to them, Jan. I don't understand, what is this?"

Jan leaned forward, feet flat on the floor, hands together. "Heather, look. I've met some fucked up people in my life. I've met people haunted by real weird shit. Or with real weird shit in their heads. But those ten ex-cultists? They are the most fucked up people I've ever met. They've got your ... Eye-thing inside their heads, whatever it is, same as Nathan. I never saw him when he was like that though; I only saw him later, after you'd dug through his brains."

"Oh. Oh, um."

"I can't take responsibility for them, Heather. It's ten people — I've got names, ages, basic personal histories, occupations, whatever you want. But you need to fucking take responsibility at last. And you need to give them some hope."

"I— I can't trepann them all, not like I did with Badger, I didn't realise, I—"

"Heather." Jan was as cold and fragile as she could be; this was no mask, no con-woman act, this was so raw that I felt acutely embarrassed. "It's not my place to say this. None of them said this to me out loud. And I didn't wanna say it in front of Lozzie. But those people are right at the edge, the only thing keeping them going is the promise that maybe you can fix them, get the Eye out of their heads. Not all of them, but some of them ... it's the only thing keeping them from topping themselves."

We swallowed. Dry throat. We drank a mouthful of water, but that didn't help.

"You mean ... suicide?" we asked.

Jan nodded. "Yeah."

"Can you set up the meeting?" we said. "Tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow. Afternoon, after meeting Yuleson about Lozzie's stuff. Right away."

"I'll do it," Jan said. She sat back.

She let me stew for a bit, slowly sipping her beer. Our mind rang

with the implications of our own procrastination; the ex-cultists, the ones who'd escaped alongside Badger, they were not truly my responsibility. They'd briefly worked with Edward to try kidnapping Lozzie; they'd been part of the original Sharrowford Cult, and some of them had probably been willingly involved.

But they didn't deserve the Eye. And we were their only hope.

"I'm ... I'm sorry," I muttered eventually. "Jan, I—"

Jan sighed. "Sometimes we end up having to take responsibility even when things aren't our fault. Shit, Heather, those people weren't your fault. But you've got power now. That means something, right? You've gotta learn to use it, that's all. I don't envy you that. Just ... do what you can for them, okay?"

We nodded. We took a deep breath. We started to make a plan — a trade, treatment in return for information, though I would render treatment anyway, wouldn't I?

We glanced back at Sevens. She blinked slowly, so very slowly: don't procrastinate, Heather. Don't use this as an excuse to stop moving. Maisie needs you to keep moving.

"Uh," we said, gathering ourselves. "The next one, then, Jan. Maisie's body—"

"Naaaaah," Jan said. She clacked her beer glass back down and rummaged for her phone. "One sec, let's just simplify this."

'Simplify' turned out to be a bit optimistic; Jan spent several minutes hunting-and-pecking through her mobile phone, several more minutes up on her — slightly wobbly — feet, searching through the hotel room for pen and paper, and then another couple of minutes transcribing a forty-digit number onto a sheet of lined notebook paper.

Then she tore off the sheet and slid it across the table, toward me.

"There," she said. "That's Mister Joking's phone number."

"... what?" We blushed a little. "I mean, sorry, um. Pardon? Just like that? And, Jan, that's not a phone number, they don't get that long. Do they?"

"These ones do." She sighed and deflated a little. "Look, all I know is that's the last number where I ever contacted him. If he's still

maintained it, then it's your best bet for some kind of non-hostile contact. Be careful about what answers through, he might have a trap set up. Don't call it when I'm nearby, okay?"

"Oh ... okay," we said, gingerly taking the sheet of paper like it might bite us. "So, how do you know him? I was surprised when you recognised him."

Jan leaned back, blew out a big sigh, and put her hands behind her head. "Yeah, I know, right? Bastard hasn't changed a day. Just like me, I guess. When I knew him, he went by 'Joshua'. Joshua Ing. Joshing. Get it?"

"Oh!" I said. "Oh, that's quite clever."

Jan gave me a sceptical look. "Corny, more like. He always had a taste for terrible jokes. I didn't know him for very long though. We were ... both at Caen, both on the same side."

I tilted my head. "Caen? In France?" Jan nodded. I asked: "Same side of what?"

Jan ran her tongue along her teeth and looked very uncomfortable. "A ... conflict. Sort of. A couple of decades back; July was too young to have any memory of it. Look, that's a seriously long story, and involves a lot of other mages, and things I never want to think about again. Too many mages all trying to do the same thing, in the same place, with conflicting goals? Nuh uh. Never again." Jan sighed. "But he was there, looking the same as he does right now."

We cleared my throat. "Okay, I'll respect the request not to pry. But, Jan, I have to know — is he dangerous?"

Jan snorted and pulled a face at me. "All mages are dangerous. Yeah, of course he is! Is he a brutal murderer who'll string you up if he gets a chance? Weeeeell, nah, probably not. But people change. Few enough scruples that he was fine working for Edward Lilburne. He's a mage, Heather. Assume he's lethal. And he's researching your Eye, now, right? That's bad news. Assume he's double lethal. Don't mention me, either."

"Do you have any other tips for dealing with him?"

Jan's eyes went up and to the right, digging through old memories. "He does this kung-fu thing—"

"We saw that. Yes. He even avoided getting punched by Zheng, but

not by Praem.”

Jan raised her eyebrows. “No shit?”

“No,” I cleared my throat. “Excrement.”

“Damn. Well. Uh. Don’t let him get close? I mostly avoided him back in the day. I didn’t want to get close to anybody, even on my own side. Like I said, mages, lethal. You live longer by not knowing any of them.”

We held up the piece of notebook paper with the absurdly long phone number. “Thank you for this, Jan. If you recall anything else which might be useful ... ”

Jan did a silly little mock salute. “Sure thing, officer. I’ll be sure to let you know.”

We winced, but we didn’t complain.

Jan and us both ate a little more food; July had completely finished her container of Run Dun. Sevens was still quietly gnawing away on fried fruit. But then Jan stood up, dusted off her hands, and said: “Right, now for the fun part. Lemme fetch my notes.”

Rather than rummaging in the detritus of her room for several minutes, Jan extracted a wide-format sketchbook from the desk, on first try, then carried it back to the table and slapped it down in front of me. She returned to her chair, her face glowing with what I recognised as professional-level smugness.

“Go on,” she said. “Take a look. The job’s for you, anyway, so you’ve got a right to see the design docs.”

Slightly confused, I flipped open the sketchbook.

Inside was page after page after page of anatomical drawings crossed with mechanical sketches: hip joints carved out of carbon fibre, arms connected to articulated shoulder blades, waist a flexible set of interlocking rings. Dozens of sketches of a skull showed the bizarre contents — magic circles and tiny boxes and weird uneven spheres. Chest cavity designs were covered in questions about rib density, and then crossed out in Jan’s neat, precise hand, and replaced with the words: ‘No ribs? Solid sheet. Better than mine.’ The inside of the chest itself was filled with a many-sided shape, like one of those fancy dice, to be suspended between carbon fibre rods, protected inside layers of bulletproof kevlar, steel plating, and

a sealed sphere of magic circles.

Jan had covered the sketches in notes about material density, weights, positions, and sizes, but most of it meant nothing to me.

Maisie's body, in the early stages. A skeleton waiting for pneumatic flesh.

Jan was saying: "I've had to basically recreate all my original work from scratch. This one — that is, my body, me, haha — was bespoke, a real one-off job, and I barely understood what I was doing at the time. Things were ... rushed. So, for this one, for your twin sister, it's going to be much, much more refined. I've really had time to think about all the early flaws I went through. No arms falling off for her. No non-functional, um, parts. I've still gotta pick up most of the materials, but the plans are all ready for the foundations. I'm gonna need some, uh, additional details from you, though. For the fine tuning."

We looked up at Jan, still in mild shock. "Jan, this is incredible."

Jan smiled a professional smile, the expert happy to show off the pinnacle of her field. "You're very sweet, Heather. But now I need to take measurements and pictures of you." She wagged a finger up and down, indicating my body. "With all your kit off."

We blinked. "Ah. Oh. You mean naked?"

"Yeah, naked." She coughed awkwardly. "This body is gonna be based on you, right? Good thing you two were identical twins — sorry, are identical twins. It helps a lot. No guesswork. And don't worry, Heather. You're not my type. Think of it as like getting fitted for tailored clothes. Gotta get right in there to get a proper measurement."

"Of course!" we said. Jan blinked in surprise. "Anything for Maisie. That's nothing. Do you need that soon? Do you want to do it right now?"

Jan laughed and held up a hand. "Yeah, sure. Bloody hell. Do your girlfriends know you're so eager?"

"Jan!" we snapped.

"Alright, alright. Fine. Just let me digest for a few minutes first, then we'll get you up and I'll get my camera and tape measure ready."

We nodded eagerly, then glanced back at Sevens. The blood goblin gave us a thumbs up; we beamed even harder. We were doing it, actually doing it; we were going to make a new body for Maisie. We were making the rescue real. The first step in bringing my twin sister home.

But then, as I returned my attention to Jan's sketchbook full of esoteric techno-skeletons, Jan said:

"So, who's next on your list?"

"Ah? I'm sorry."

She pulled a knowing smile. "The list of people to visit before your big battle. I imagine I'm pretty low down on the priority list, right?"

We rolled our eyes and tugged our tentacles in. "I told you, there's no list. It's not like that."

Jan took a swig of her beer. "You must have talked to the werewolf already, at least. Right?"

I blinked. Jan paused. She lowered her glass and stared at me, suddenly stone-cold sober.

"You mean Twil?" I said

Jan turned her head to the side, eyes glued to me, as if trying to see if I was joking, like an animal examining me from multiple angles.

"You haven't," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I'm sorry?"

Sevens gurgled: "Ooooooh. Oh. Oh."

Jan looked almost angry. "You haven't talked to the werewolf girl? Twil? Like, none of you have? Since the business with Edward's house?"

"I ... uh ... I mean, I assume somebody has."

"Oh, fucking hell, Heather."

Panic gripped my gut. "What? What? Jan, what is it?"

But Jan seemed more disappointed than alarmed. Her storm-tossed eyes regarded me with a slow inner churn. "I can't believe I have to spell this out to you. You lot are a fucking nightmare, you know

that? Are you friends with Twil? She's your friend? How about Eevee? Or Raine? Are they friends with her?"

"O-of course I'm her friend. Jan, where is this going?"

"Back at the house, Heather." Jan frowned at me. "That girl was having a fucking combat stress reaction. When she got all messed up and shaky? Combat shock. Whatever you call it these days. Fuck me, I thought one of you might have noticed."

July paused her game and looked around at us. Uh oh.

I blinked. Our insides went cold. "Oh ... when she ... "

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," went Sevens, a mock-scream under her breath. Had she missed this too? Not realised?

"Yeah," Jan said. "When she smashed a person's brains out to help save the rest of us, in that stupid gunfight. Heather, there's a look somebody gets, the first time they kill a person. That was Twil's first time. And nobody's been to check on her?"

"... surely Eevee did," I muttered. "I mean ... she wouldn't—"

Jan stood up. "Text her. Eevee. Right now, ask her if she checked on Twil, if anybody's spoken to her. And then you and me, Heather. We're gonna check on the werewolf."

I boggled at Jan. "But, it's late. It's really late. Twil might be—"

"Lying in bed after screaming herself awake from the aftermath of combat shock? Yeah, maybe. We're gonna go check on your friend, Heather. I know this stuff, I can help. Fuck. I feel like the responsible adult here, trying to make sure you kids don't mess yourselves up too much. Bloody hell." Jan shook herself, a little bit dog-like for just a second. She chucked the rest of her beer down her throat. "I can deal with a werewolf. Give her a call, come on. Right now."

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.8

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted from the other end of the phone call. “I hadn’t realised you took me for so totally heartless, Heather.”

“ ... p-pardon? Eevee, no, of course I don’t! I just—”

Evelyn sighed down the phone, many miles away on the other side of Sharrowford, safe and cosy inside Number 12 Barnsloew Drive; I could practically see the roll of her eyes, the exasperated shake of her head, the soft light in her bedroom shading her features peach-cream pale in the late evening summer heat.

“Heather. Heather, I’m winding you up,” she said. The phone flattened her tones just a touch, but I could still hear the almost apologetic amusement. “You make it far too easy, you know that? I’m starting to understand why Raine teases you so hard.”

“Oh, um.” I cleared my throat, feeling a blush creep up the sides of my neck. “Well, uh, I just— about, Twil, I needed to check, it’s just that—”

Evee interrupted: “The serious answer to your question is yes, of course I’ve spoken to Twil. You don’t really think I’d let her help us with a genuinely lethal situation — including almost getting herself blown up — and then I’d just be all ‘toodle-pip, see you later, rental werewolf? Do I really seem that callous? Still? Even to you?”

We couldn’t help but laugh, just a tiny bit. “No, Eevee. Of course not. We just got ... worried.”

“Mm. Well, Twil and I talk a lot these days, on the phone. I just don’t mention it very much. It’s rarely of any consequence, beyond personal things.” Evelyn cleared her throat, trailing off with faint embarrassment.

Jan and I were still sitting on opposite sides of the little table in her hotel room, with the remains of our Jamaican food between us. She gestured at me with a roll of her hand: ‘Ask the important bit, Heather!’

“Evee,” we said. “It’s just that, after that fight outside Edward’s house, the one with the mercenaries — I suppose that’s the correct term — well, Twil seemed ... ”

“Shaken,” Evee said with a smart click of her tongue. “I know. I spoke to her about that, too.”

Jan shrugged, eyebrows raised in surprise. I breathed a sigh of relief, then said: “Okay, that’s good. That’s really good. Has anybody been to actually see her? To see how she’s doing? Make sure she’s okay?”

Evelyn went quiet; a moment of awkward silence crept past us both, broken on our end of the phone call by the sound of July’s fingers pressing the buttons of her video game controller, and the various clicks and boops and anime sword fight noises from her game.

Evelyn sighed sharply: “Damn it all. I’m not sure. I think Raine may have spoken to her — today, yesterday? Fuck. You’re right, Heather. For God’s sake, I always—”

“Evee, it’s fine!” I blurted out. “It’s fine. If you spoke to her, that’s good. That’s important. I’m just thinking of going to check up on her, in person. Just to make sure. Thank you. Really. You did the right thing, even if you didn’t think of everything.”

Evelyn grumbled a wordless sound, then said: “She seemed alright. Fuck.”

We summoned additional courage: “Evee, I know you care about Twil, very much. Even if you and her aren’t ... close, in the intimate sense, you care a lot. And it shows! I think she knows that. She knows she can come to you for help. Even if she’s still shaken up, talking to you undoubtedly helped already.”

Evelyn was silent. Then she swallowed, loudly. “Thank you, Heather. Look, when are you coming home? It’s late. It’s almost ten.”

“After I go see Twil. If she’s awake, I suppose.”

Evelyn snorted. “Good luck, she sleeps like a log. Has your little Outside walkabout been fruitful?”

“Very. I’ve got things to share. But I’m going to go see Twil first.”

Jan nodded in approval. She gave me a silent double thumbs-up.

“Alright, alright,” Evelyn grumbled. “Just be safe, you ... you ... ”

“I love you too, Eevee.” We said it quickly, before we could doubt ourselves and screw up the moment. “Don’t wait up for me, get some sleep! If I’m not back soon, then I’ll see you in the morning! Good night!”

Chirpy-chirp-chirp, like we were channelling Lozzie; I gave Evelyn a moment to stammer out an incandescent ‘good night’ of her own, then ended the call.

Behind me, Sevens made a soft, throaty gurgle of deep approval. July ignored the whole thing, fully focused on her video game once again. Jan reached out and tapped the table between us.

“Now, call the werewolf,” Jan said. “Or do you want to text her first, make sure she’s awake? Is that how you lot do things?”

We shook our head, already scrolling down through the rather scant contact list in our mobile phone. “Calling is easier than texting. I don’t always feel comfortable with text messages. At least not with people other than Raine.”

Jan boggled at me, then chuckled softly. “Damn. You really are a secret boomer, aren’t you?”

“Pardon?” I raised the phone to my ear, squinting at Jan. But she shook her head and waved the comment away.

Twil picked up halfway through the third ring.

Click-click. A scuff of wind against the speaker. Then, surprised: “Heather?”

Twil’s voice was airy, open, lost amid vast void-like reaches; she was outdoors, beneath the sky. At this hour? In the last dying rays of sunset?

“Twil! Hello! Hi! It’s me, yes, Heather. Um ... ”

Twil laughed her easy chuckle, a canine rumble hidden below the sound, just beyond human hearing. “Yeah, it sure is you, Big H. I have got your name in my phone and all, you know? I can like, see it was you?”

“Of course, yes. Sorry. Um, Twil, I-I know it’s quite late, you weren’t getting ready for bed or anything, were you?”

A pause dragged out much longer than I'd expected. Then Twil puffed out a big, tired sigh. "Naaaah. What is it? What you need? There's no emergency going down, right?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. I don't need anything." Was that how Twil thought of us? Only calling on her when we needed a bit of extra muscle? Guilt prickled inside my chest. "I just wondered if ... if maybe I could come over for a little bit. Just to say hi. Check on how you're doing. A social call."

Another pause — way too long for Twil, with her irrepressible energy and good-doggy attitude; I could almost see the droopy wolf-like ears, the hangdog expression, the sad canine eyes. But her voice reflected none of that sudden, ghost-like impression: "Well, uh, you might struggle with the 'coming over' part, 'cos I'm not actually at home right now."

My eyes went wide. Across the table, Jan's eyebrows shot upward.

"Oh!" I said. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Twil chuckled. I heard the scuff of trainers on concrete or tarmac — Twil really was outdoors, wandering the streets of some unknown place, her face stained crimson and orange by the last droplets of a blood-red sunset. Her hair was teased by the winds of summer dusk, her pale skin raising goosebumps against the coming night, her eyes fixed on unwary prey with its back turned, her lips peeling away to reveal a row of teeth too sharp for a human mouth.

But then she said, in her casual rolling tone: "Nah. I'm just out for a walk, 'round Brinkwood, like." She cleared her throat, and added, much quieter: "Actually, truth told, I've been 'out for a walk' for the last three hours."

Politeness slid off me like a constricting raincoat, so I could slip into the waters unbound. We said: "Twil, are you sure you're okay?"

Another big sigh. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright. Not in crisis or nothing. Just ... kinda ... feelin' fucky."

"Do you want some company on your walk?"

Twil chuckled. "You can do that? Guess you can teleport, right. Last train of the night doesn't mean much to you, does it? If it's you, Big H cool. But ... not like ... not ..."

I eyed Jan; she made a side-to-side gesture with both hands, palms

down: take me or leave me, it's up to Twil.

"Jan is currently with me," we said. "Sevens is—"

We glanced over my shoulder at Seven-Shades-of-Silent-Sprite; to my surprise, Sevens shook her head and bared her teeth. Count her out, for this. Why? I'd ask that later. Or perhaps she would follow as a non-physical presence. Twil barely knew her, after all.

"—here too," I finished. "But not coming. Sorry. So, you can have me, or me and Jan. Lozzie might turn up later, I don't know when though."

"Jan?" Twil asked, voice suddenly brightening. "Sure. Whatever. Why not? Lozzie's cool too."

"Okay, so, where are you, Twil?"

Twil chuckled again. "You don't know Brinkwood, do you? I'm by the school, Brinkwood Comp. Well, I'm out the back, over the bus lanes, by the park. That narrow it down?"

"I'll check a map," we said. "Be right there, Twil. Though, um ... is there anybody around? I don't want to scare a bystander by appearing out of thin air. I suppose I'll have to hide our tentacles too ..."

Twil laughed, but there was no humour in her voice.

She said: "This time of night, in Brinky? You must be joking. Nah, nothing out here but little old me."

= =

A few minutes later, we — seven Heathers and Miss Jan Martense — appeared as if from nowhere, touching down on a sunset-drenched pavement in the middle of the village of Brinkwood.

We — me, myself, and I — recovered with a deep breath and a steadying stretch of our tentacles; a shame they had to be folded away into pneuma-somatic invisibility, but we were still us, all of us still present and correct, seven very good girls out on a summer evening in the North of England. The Slip-induced nausea slid down and out of our combined neural web, a brief flash-wave of sickness, there and gone again.

Jan, on the other hand, staggered sideways, almost fell over onto the concrete — caught by one of our tentacles to avoid a graze —

and made a horrible throaty grunt. She screwed her eyes shut in an effort not to vomit up all her lovely Jamaican food.

We had told her she didn't need to come, but she'd insisted.

"Jan?"

"I'm fiiiiine," she rasped. She wrapped her arms tight around her stomach, eyes squeezed shut. "Give me a— urp— sec. Be fine. One sec. Don't make me talk."

"Take your time," we murmured.

The street on which we had arrived was called — rather ironically — Blueslip Road, though there was nothing either blue or slippery about the place. Blueslip Road was one of the widest and most open places in the entire village; it ran east to west, with the east rising up the brow of a hill and the west trailing off into the beginnings of little residential streets, demarcated by the imposing upright bars of a large pedestrian crossing.

Sunset poured down from the west, flooding the length of the street, draping the broad tarmac ribbon with sticky orange sunlight, slowly fading into rotten dusk.

Pneuma-somatic spirit life gambolled and strutted in the open width of the street; tar-like clinging tree-structures sprouted from distant rooftops; a spirit halfway between polar bear and giant raccoon snuffled along the gutter; tiny imp-like figures darted here and there among the bus lanes; ghoulish forms lurked in the shadows; a thing like a deer — but twenty feet tall and made of leaves — stood on his hind legs to stare at us in alarm.

"Shhh, shhhh," I whispered, mostly to ourselves. "Not here to disrupt. Everyone carry on."

We made sure to reel ourselves in — our tentacles, the rest of us, trying not to flash an unintentional threat display to all the local wildlife.

To our left — over a waist-high safety railing and across the black river of the road itself — was a series of pavements and painted bays for buses: the 'bus lanes' Twil had mentioned. Beyond that was a simple chain-link fence, separating the lanes from the jumbled buildings of Brinkwood's one and only secondary school.

The school dominated that angle of the landscape. Sunset rays

clipped the top floors of not one, but two four-story buildings — one looked like it was from the 1960s, the other quite recent, all soft orange brick and new guttering. A huge spirit crouched on the older building, a sort of bird-lizard-dinosaur thing with wings made of broken glass and a eyeless face, perhaps incubating invisible eggs. Other buildings clustered around the skirts: a long, low sports hall, pre-fabricated classroom blocks, and even the jutting addition of a community swimming pool. Dark shapes hovered around the pool, strange spirits with massive mouths and bleeding eyes. One side of the school grounds extended outward, flat and level and very, very green — a sports field, bordered by the ever-present Brinkwood trees. Beyond the school the hills rose toward the Pennines, thick with woodland.

On our right, next to the pavement where Jan and I were standing, a small grassy incline was badly overgrown. Concrete steps climbed upward at either end of the street. The incline levelled out into a small park, a little messy with long grass and some very old oak trees. The park trailed off into yet more Brinkwood forest, as if the woods were jaws waiting to swallow this unwary snippet of village.

Two massive black tentacled spirits dozed just beyond the tree line, with vertical tendrils in imitation of the trunks, massive hooves blending into the leaf-strewn earth, and many mouths closed and comfy in dreamless slumber.

Standing at the top of the incline was a petite, dark-haired figure, her curls tugged outward by the gentle breeze, her angelic features side-lit by the last of the sunset. She was dressed in jeans and a thin lime-green hoodie, unzipped and open down the front on a plain white t-shirt, which did very little to hide her athletic physique.

Hands in her pockets, amber eyes flashing in the sunset, a light pout on her lips; the sullen look dawned into a grin when she spotted us.

Twil raised a hand. “Heya, Big H! Up here!”

Twil was not my type; I had figured that out long ago, just after our first meeting, when I had discovered that she was not a scary bully, but actually a bit of a softie inside, a fuzzy werewolf with a heart of gold and a bit of a hero complex. But standing there, side-lit by the dying sun, so casual and easy in her hoodie, her angelic, porcelain face like a life-size, animated doll, her body promising to bound and leap at the slightest touch — well, I could see why she would be

somebody's type.

Jan finally recovered from the Slip, huffing and puffing and bending over to put her hands on her knees. I kept one tentacle around her for a while, until she was able to stand up straight and face the front. Then we scaled the incline together, to join Twil at the edge of the little park, looking out over the school on the other side of the road.

I briefly eyed the dozy tree-imitator spirits at the rear of the park; didn't want to wake the dears with all our noise, they needed their sleep. But we were far enough away.

"Yooooo," said Twil, at normal volume. She put her hands back in the side-pockets of her hoodie. "Big H, Jans. Welcome to Brinky."

"It's good to see you, Twil," I said, and smiled for her.

Twil, however, pulled a sceptical grin — a good dog, but not quite sure what was going on. "So, uh, yeah, good to see you too. What's up, serious like? You sure there's no crisis?"

We sighed. "Yes. I promise. This is a social call."

Twil's grin did not shed any scepticism. "The others told me you were still sleepin' off the damage. Good to see you're up and about."

Jan was looking around, up and down the street, her storm-tossed eyes highly alert; she'd put her black sweater back on, and foregone the protection of both her massive coat and her flak jacket.

"'Brinky', right," she echoed the village nickname. "Quiet at this time of night, is it?"

Twil snorted. "Yeah. Not used to small towns, huh?"

"Oh, more used to them than you are," Jan said, eyes still roving over the sights. "I can guarantee you that much."

Twil tilted her head at Jan — a very canine gesture — but then shrugged and sighed, deciding the question was not worth pursuing.

I, on the other hand, glanced across the street, at the school buildings and the distant hillsides beyond. We said: "Brinkwood is really beautiful. We didn't get a chance to stop here, before, on the way to your home, Twil."

Twil chuckled. “Yeah, barely feels like England sometimes, right?”

We frowned a little frown at her. “England can be beautiful.”

Twil shot me a shit-eating grin. “Yeah, but it’s all the fucking English what get in the way!”

I tutted and rolled my eyes; Twil guffawed; Jan dipped her head to acknowledge the self-deprecating joke. The atmosphere softened by more than I’d expected, binding the three of us briefly together.

“So, hey.” Twil cleared her throat. “Big H, what’s this all about? I’m not buying this ‘social call’ thingy.”

Jan and I shared a glance; Jan raised her eyebrows at me. Twil was my friend, this was my show, Jan had just wanted to catalyse it, but she was ready to jump in if we needed to talk to Twil about combat stress and PTSD.

I said: “Twil, we were just worried about you — I was worried about you. You said you’ve been out for a walk for three hours. Is everything alright at home?”

Twil squinted at me. “Home? Yeah! Shit’s pretty good lately. I mean —” She broke off and laughed for real. “The house is kinda fucked up, still. After all that shit with Edward’s blob-monsters? Had to get my whole bedroom stripped out and cleaned. Like, deep-cleaned. Which suuuuucked. But yeah.” She shrugged, hands still in her pockets. “Home’s fine. I’m not like ... wandering around ‘cos I don’t wanna go home. Just doing a lot of thinking.”

“That’s good to hear, then,” we said. “That’s good.”

Twil frowned, suddenly suspicious. “Wait a sec. You called me — then I told you I was walking around for hours. You thought there was something wrong with me first, right? How’d you know?”

Jan and I shared another look. I hesitated.

Jan jumped in: “Nobody’s been to see you since the fight at Edward’s house.” The con-woman was gone, for once; Jan’s tone was plain and simple, almost blunt. “You killed a person there, probably for the first time. Or at least, that was my guess. I was concerned you might be suffering.”

Twil stared at Jan, floored, mute, mouth hanging open. Then she closed her jaw and cleared her throat. “You?”

Jan nodded. "Mmhmm. I have some experience with these things. That's all."

Twil blew out a long sigh. She glanced up and down Blueslip Road, hunching her shoulders. "Yeah, well. That ain't why I'm out here."

We said: "Then, why are you wandering the night, Twil?"

Twil nodded — over the road, past the bus lanes, at her school.

We frowned in confusion, not following what she meant, but Jan's eyes lit up with sudden comprehension. Jan said: "Oh. Ooooooh. Twil, you're a Sixth Form student, right?"

"Was," Twil grunted.

Jan smiled, suddenly soft and knowing, almost motherly. "Exactly. Do you want to talk about it?"

Twil shrugged. "What's to talk about?"

Jan pulled an expression of infinitely gentle reproach. Twil looked down and scuffed her trainers on the grass. I looked at her, then at Jan, then back at Twil, then over at the school.

"Um," we said. "Twil, I'm sorry, I don't follow."

Twil looked up at me with a frown — not just confusion, but almost offense, her amber eyes scrunched as if I'd said something rude. I blinked back at her. We suddenly felt like we were swimming through a cloud of ink, our senses scrambled, unable to see the obstacles in the deep water.

Jan cleared her throat. "I gather Heather didn't have a normal teenage life."

Twil's expression cleared. She blinked with surprise. "Oh, shit, yeah. Ha! Big H, I finished Sixth Form, right? Exam results are on the 15th of August. So, I'm not a student anymore. I'm done."

We had to venture a guess: "You're ... yes, you're going to university. I mean, if you get the results you wanted. Which I'm sure you will! You're very smart, Twil! And you studied really hard, and—"

Twil laughed, but she didn't seem amused "Yeah, I'm fucking smart, cool, whatever. Heather, I ain't worried about exam results." She glanced at the school again. "All my old friends, they're all going to

different places, different unis. Everyone's ... moving on." She swallowed, sniffed, and stared down at her trainers. "Don't know if I want to, anymore. Don't know what I want."

Realisation dawned inside our chest.

For us, university had never been a question — literature was the only thing we were any good at, mum and dad were eager for us to have some kind of future prospects, and the idea of learning a trade or going straight into work was scarcely imaginable with the depth and extent of our 'mental illness'.

And we had no friends to leave behind in Reading. No old friends going off to do their own thing. Just Maisie, a fading dream. And I could pine for my lost twin anywhere, in any concrete box, alone.

"Oh, Twil," we said.

Jan said: "Do you want to sit down?"

Twil took a deep breath. "Screw it, sure."

"Are there any benches, or—"

Twil sat down right where she was standing, right on the edge of the grassy incline, facing the school. Legs out straight, leaning back on the support of her own arms. Jan and I both stared at her in mild surprise. Twil frowned up at us and said: "The benches are all covered in bird shit. And hey, ground's dry and warm. Why not sit right here?"

Jan laughed. "Why not, indeed. When in Rome."

We both sat down as well, myself next to Twil and Jan on my other side, a tiny touch more distant. Jan stretched her legs out and leaned back too, staring up into the gloaming sky as the stars began to come out. I peered at Twil's face in profile as she looked out over the school grounds.

For a moment, nobody said anything. We bunched our tentacles in tight; Twil couldn't see them, after all. I didn't want to make her flinch at a phantom touch.

"So," I said eventually. "Twil, you're not certain if you want to go to university? Is that what you mean?"

"What?" Twil looked at me briefly. "Oh, nah. I'll go, sure, but it's not that. It's like ... " She gestured helplessly at the school

buildings. Empty and deserted at this time of day, windows dark, canyons between the brick walls filling with shadows. She couldn't see the spirits lurking there; a tall white-faced thing peered back at me, then looked away quickly.

Twil trailed off with a big puff.

"I never had that," I said after a moment. "Jan's right. I never had a normal teenage life. No friends as a teenager, no friends in school. There were people I knew, but no friends. I was in and out of school all the time, after all, the weird girl who might disappear for a few weeks. I'm sure they called me crazy behind my back. I did manage to sit my GCSEs, and A-Levels, but only with special permission. They classed me as disabled, so I could have extra time. I took the exams alone, under supervision. But ... never had any friends in school. Nothing to move on from. I'm sorry, Twil. I didn't get it at first."

Twil nodded slowly. She watched the sunset creeping up the school buildings. "Yeah. Maybe that's better."

"No, no," we said. "That's not true."

"I'm gonna go to Sharrowford Uni, right?" she said. "Do bio-medical science and all that. Emily and Abi, they're going to Sharrowford too, but like, I was never that close with them. Knew them since primary school though. Kelsie's going to Manchester, so ... guess that's not too far. Ossie's going to London, so fuck him." She laughed, with great affection. "Fucking dick head. Stace is going all the way to bloody Edinburgh." She puffed out a sigh and glanced at me. "Stacey Baker. She's uh, my ex-girlfriend. Or, one of them."

"Oh," I said, without any need to mime my surprise. "Uh, you mentioned her once before, I think? But you didn't tell me her name."

Twil nodded again. "Yeah. She's the only one who knows about the werewolf thing. Showed her a few times. We went steady for eight months. She's still really really into me. Like, not creepy like, but just ... yeah. I thought she might ... I dunno, maybe not ... not go so far away."

Jan murmured: "Does that make you feel selfish?"

Twil laughed. "Fuck yeah it does. I broke up with her! I ain't got right to expect anything. She's gonna study law." Twil looked back

at the school again. “Milly is going to Durham, for mathematics. Jess got into fucking Oxford — Oxford, bitch.” Twil laughed again. “And Rose is going all the way down to Bath.”

Jan muttered: “Young people all go their own ways, eventually.”

Twil snorted, staring at the school. “I’ve got the hots for Milly like you wouldn’t believe. Kinda wanna do something about that.”

Jan and I shared a quick glance. Jan went wide-eyed. I blushed faintly, then said: “You mean ... Twil, do you want to tell her that, before you all go off to university?”

Twil grimaced. “Nah. She’s straight. Well, I think she’s straight. I’ve got this like, mad thought that I should rock up to her house, climb up, knock on her window, and ask if she wants to go lezz once before uni. Maybe like, show her I’m a werewolf and all.” Twil snorted a single, humourless laugh. She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms. “Or maybe I should go visit Stace, give her what she wants again, fuck her blind.”

We blushed extremely hard; the sunset hid most of it, but we missed our chromatophoric skin. “Oh. Um. G-gosh. Okay.”

Jan cleared her throat gently, from over on my other side. She said: “I wouldn’t recommend resorting to casual and-or hasty sex as a balm for interpersonal uncertainty and anxieties about the future. But, that’s just me.”

Twil finally looked away from the school buildings and their deep orange sunset stains. She gave Jan a very sullen, grumpy-teenager sort of stare. I leaned backward, out of the firing line.

“Yeah?” Twil said with a lazy sneer. “And what would you ... know ... about ... ” She trailed off and grimaced in apology. “Uh, sorry, yeah. You’re like, not actually the same age as us. Easy to forget. Sorry, Jan. Uh. I’m being a right bitch.”

We grimaced inside; Twil knew that Jan was older, but not how old. In Twil’s imagination, was she deferring to the wisdom of a two-century old immortal?

Jan smiled with equally awkward embarrassment. “That’s quite alright. I’m not going to tell you off for venting. Being a teenager is shit. I do remember.”

We eased ourselves forward again now the argument had been

averted.

We said: “Have you been spending time with any of your friends this summer, Twil?”

Twil shrugged. “Ehhhh. Some. I mean, I went to a party a couple of weeks back. Got a bit drunk. Made out with some girl from Manchester I’ll probs never see ever again.”

“That’s not what I asked, is it?” I said with a little tut.

Twil snorted. “Yeah. I know.” She stared across the broad ribbon of tarmac once again, at the school buildings. “Everyone’s moving on. Moving apart. Some of them, I’ll probably never see again either.”

We reached out — with a human arm, not a currently-invisible tentacle — and patted Twil’s hand. “You can always stay in contact with people, Twil. And we’re here for you too. Me, Eevee, Raine, everyone else over at the house. We’re your friends, too.”

Twil cleared her throat awkwardly, smiling without much happiness. She shot me a weird look. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. Don’t get me wrong, Big H. Being friends with you lot — you, Raine, Eevee, everyone really — it’s cool, I love you guys. Wouldn’t stand by you if I didn’t. But it’s like, different spheres, you know? I didn’t grow up with you lot.” She nodded at the school. “Brinkwood Comprehensive Secondary School and Sixth Form. And then before that, Brinkwood Primary School. Some of my mates I’ve known since we were what, three, four years old?” She chuckled suddenly. “I remember Jess shat herself in assembly, when we were like, six. Milly, eh, I never liked Milly when we were little. Stuck up cow. Now she’s fucking genius, hot shit. Runs like the wind. Fuck me, I wanna ... ahhhh.” Twil sighed a big, sad sigh. “Grew up with some friends I might never see again. Kinda sucks.”

“Twil,” we said slowly. “Twil, there are such things as phones. And the internet. Text messaging? You can stay in contact with old friends these days. It’s entirely possible. It’s not like this is the 19th century and you have to wait weeks and weeks for a letter. They’re not all being whisked off Outside.”

Twil frowned a difficult little frown, gritting her teeth and clenching her jaw as she stared at the school buildings. I tilted my head in curious incomprehension. There was more to this than I was seeing, wasn’t there?

Jan said: "All my old friends are dead."

Twil looked up and around, wide-eyed, her face backlit by a sunset halo-glow. "For real?"

"Okay, well, not literally," Jan said. "Maybe that's a tiny exaggeration. But some of them are — just for natural causes, accidents, the like. And the people I did grow up with, when I was a child? None of them would recognise me anymore. None of them would know me. They grew up, had kids, got older, and I ... " She spread her hands and smiled an ironic little smirk. "I became something else. I became a mage, then more."

Twil swallowed loudly. "R-right. But—"

"Being involved in this world changes your perspective and your position," Jan went on. She drew her legs up, hugged her knees, and leaned her head on her arms; it seemed like such an innocent gesture. She was caught for a moment between fellow teenager and the wisdom of decades. "That's what you're feeling, isn't it? You grew up with a bunch of normal people, not the supernaturally baptised, and now you're worried that you're going to leave them behind, or they're going to leave you behind. But it's not about physical distance."

Twil hung her head, morose and melancholy; she looked so much like a sad hound, caught in the rain. For a moment I was worried she might start crying. We almost put a tentacle around her shoulders.

But then Jan said: "Werewolf anxiety. A new one on me, but I get it, I—"

Twil snorted and raised her head. She gave Jan a squinty frown. "Fuck off, hey? Being a werewolf is cool as shit. That's not the problem! Being a werewolf is like ... granddad wanted me to have a normal life. That's why he did it. The whole point is that it's good for me!"

Twil raised a hand as she spoke; translucent spirit flesh coalesced from the air, whirling around her slender fingers for a split-second before condensing into a clawed hand-paw, covered in luxurious fur, halfway between teenage girl and wolf. She grinned.

Jan glanced at me for assistance — she didn't actually know Twil's family background, how her grandfather had been a mage, and had

bound some kind of wolf-spirit to Twil's flesh, to keep her safe from the touch of the Brinkwood Cult's god. That she probably didn't need 'keeping safe' from Hringewindla had unfortunately been beyond his understanding at the time, or so we guessed. His desires for the safety of his granddaughter were pure, even if his full comprehension had not been so perfect.

I ventured, "Being a werewolf is cool, yes. But that's not the problem."

Twil's grin dropped away. So did the transformed wolf-paw. She shook her hand and it was human flesh again, tucked into the sleeve of her lime-green hoodie.

"I dunno, really," she said. She swallowed hard. "Just feels different."

Jan said, "Because you killed a person."

Twil snorted and stared across the road; she couldn't see the massive spirit currently lumbering into one of the bus-bays painted on the tarmac, a huge creature with dozens of legs and a front end all flat and made of eyeballs.

Jan went on: "I mean back during the fight outside Edward's house. The mage who was controlling Edward's demon-host. You killed her during the fight."

Twil leaned back on her hands, stretching out her back; her long dark curls hung downward, the tips brushing the grass. "Yeah, some fucking mini-mage who was trying to kill us, right?" She snorted. "Who cares?"

"Twil," we said gently. "That's not a healthy attitude."

Twil shot me a sudden, sharp, stinging frown, with a lot more wolf than human behind her eyes, flashing amber in the dying sunlight; I flinched, hard. If she'd looked at us like that a few months ago, we probably would have scrambled back and squeaked like a mouse. But now our tentacles rose outward in a defensive display.

Twil couldn't see that, of course, but half the spirit-life in the street sprinted for cover. We blushed and huffed and drew our tentacles back in. We hadn't wanted to cause that.

Twil must have taken my blush as mortified retreat, because she growled at us — actually growled, a deep rumble down in her

chest. “Yeah, cheers, Big H, I fucking guessed that. It was her or us —”

“Y-yes, but—”

“And Stack killed the rest of them! With bullets and shit. Why aren’t you bitching at her, huh?”

“Twil!” We tried to snap, but it came out weak and confused. She was in more pain than we’d expected. “I’m not ‘bitching’ at you, please—”

“Sounds like it to—”

“You can’t just shrug it off!”

Twil sneered. She wriggled an absurdly exaggerated double-shrug motion with her shoulders, then threw up her hands. “There! Shrugged off!”

I hadn’t seen Twil this combative and obstinate since the very first time we’d met, when she’d ambushed me and Evee in the corridors beneath Sharrowford University Library. Back then, I’d stood up to her, I’d slapped her across the face, and Evee had followed up with her walking stick. We were more than capable of standing up to Twil all over again; we knew that a good shout would make her back down and apologise for being rude.

But that wasn’t what she needed. She wasn’t being a bully; she was in pain.

“Twil,” we forced ourselves to be gentle. “T-that’s not— not what I’m trying to—”

Jan said: “Did you vomit?”

Twil squinted past me. “Eh?”

“Did you vomit?” Jan repeated. “After you killed the mage — the woman, in that gunfight. If I remember correctly, you broke her skull on the side of a fountain, right? Did you vomit?”

Twil stared, then squinted, as if Jan was insulting her. “Of course I fucking vomited. You were there! You saw me. Those corpses were fucked up, anybody would—”

“That’s not what I mean,” said Jan. Somehow the softness of her voice cut through Twil’s anger better than my tentative politeness

ever could; her eyes, like blue flame seen from orbit, seemed untouched by the distant sunset. “I mean later. When you sat down and thought about it. When you washed the blood off. Did you vomit?”

Twil could not maintain her craggy frown; the anger collapsed. She hesitated, then said: “Y-yeah. Like, that night.”

Jan nodded. “There’s no shame in that.”

Twil swallowed hard. “I couldn’t stop— couldn’t stop thinking about it. I mean, a lot happened that day — the great big Ed-ball thing? Fuck me, that was much worse. And the Orange Juice guy? Nightmare fuel. Total nightmare fuel. Fuck no to all of that.”

“But those aren’t what stayed with you,” said Jan.

Twil swallowed again. She hesitated, rubbed her nose, and looked away. We held our breath, worried that the slightest twitch would send her scuttling once more for the emotional cover of grumpy anger and teenage sulking.

But then she said, slowly: “Yeah. I just ... when I tried to go to sleep, at like three in the morning, I just kept ... I kept hearing the way that woman’s skull went crack. Just like, crack! Crack! On the fountain, like. Bone on ... on rock. I kept thinking about the ... the like ... the damage.” Twil grimaced, uncomfortable. “I don’t get it. I mean, I’ve fought lots of times before, done all sorts of shit. I killed those fucking zombies, back in the castle! You remember that, Heather?” I nodded; Twil raced on: “And that was like killing people. I mean, humans. It felt the same, physically? What’s so different about this? And when I was younger — like thirteen? — my family and the Church had to deal with this thing that tried to move into the woods. And I dealt with that! Pretty sure I killed it, too.” She trailed off, her energy flagging. “But ... I dunno. Smashing a person’s skull. That was different. First time I’ve ever done that. I don’t ... I didn’t like it.”

She looked down at one hand and turned it over, staring at her fingers.

We had no idea what to say; we tried to dredge our own experiences for a nugget of wisdom, but it seemed like Twil was going down a different route, thick with cloying, dark mud. We longed to follow, to drag her feet back to the path.

Jan took a deep breath, and said: “I’m personally responsible for the deaths of nineteen people.”

Twil and I both looked around; I felt surprised but not shocked. Jan was a mage, after all. Twil’s eyebrows climbed.

Jan went on, softly, but with a streak of confidence we had not heard from her before: “Most of those people were trying to kill me first. Some of them were trying to defend the people who were trying to kill me. Three were innocent — not quite bystanders, but they didn’t deserve to die. One was a sort of a living weapon, who I tried to save, but I couldn’t. So I had to kill her, too. Or she would have killed me.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” Twil murmured, wide-eyed at Jan.

“Mmhmm.” Jan sighed. “There’s not a day goes by when I don’t think about them, even if just a little bit. And for me it’s been a long time.”

We blurted out: “I still think about Jake.”

Twil squinted at me, shocked out of her Jan-awe: “Eh? Who? Who the hell is Jake?”

We almost laughed. “The man I killed in self-defence. When the Sharrowford Cult tried to kidnap me, before I had that meeting with Alexander. Twil, you must remember — it was you who ran off and left me alone, and then you who came to rescue me, with Praem.”

“O-oh. Uh. Yeah. Right. Uh, I never saw the guy.”

“Nobody did,” we said. “I only know his name because Alexander asked where he’d gone. I didn’t mean to kill him — I just wanted him to go away, stop holding me down, let me go. So I reached up and put my hand on his face and — poof.” I smiled a sad little smile. “And that was long before I figured out how to send things to specific dimensions, or retrieve them again. I have no idea where he went. Maybe he died instantly. Maybe he lingered for days, and died of thirst. Maybe he got eaten by something. But I killed him. Didn’t mean to, but I did. And I still think about him sometimes. I don’t even really know who he was.” I sighed a big sigh, and then pantomimed scrubbing my hands. “Out, damned spot,” I quoted. “Lady Macbeth was right, it never really goes away.”

Twil stared at me for several long heartbeats. She blinked hard,

then reached up to find her eyes had filled with moisture.

Jan said: "Heather is right. You can't shrug this off. You can't bottle it up, or avoid thinking about it. If you run from it, it fucks you up."

Twil wiped her eyes, surprised that she was crying a tiny bit. "I-I wasn't run—"

"Yeah you bloody well were," Jan said, more amused than compassionate. "You were running so hard you took it all out on Heather, just now. You got rude and aggressive. And that's just a few days later, a few days after the deed. If you let that wound fester, it'll eat you up from the inside."

Twil looked at me, wide-eyed and shell shocked. Slow tears ran down her cheeks.

"I'm— I'm sorry, Heather, I—"

"No, Twil, it's fine, it's fine! I—"

"You're like, a real good friend, and you were just trying to—"

"I forgive you! It's okay! You are forgiven."

"I'm sorry I was like ... "

We both trailed off, then hugged; it was not quite the most awkward hug in which we had ever participated — Evelyn still holds the top spot there — but it was close. Twil was shaking a little. I didn't know where to put all my tentacles.

But then Twil let go and wiped her eyes properly. "Fuck me, I'm crying and all. Over what?"

Jan sighed. "You killed a person. And you had to do it, yes. Don't look away from that."

Twil nodded to herself. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Alright."

Jan went on. "And your friends aren't going to drift away from you because you killed somebody — justified or not. It doesn't stain your soul, it doesn't warp your being. It is a moral act like any other — for good, or bad. And you had to kill a person in self-defence. Just don't look away from it. And don't fucking tell your friends."

Twil snorted. "Yeah, I wasn't exactly planning on that, thanks."

“But you needed to hear it,” said Jan.

Twil nodded to herself again. She puffed out a big, long sigh, then looked across the road, at the hills on the other side, the heavily forested Brinkwood hillsides, the mouth of the valley, climbing away toward the Pennines. I realised it was the first time since we’d arrived that she’d raised her eyes to look beyond the old school buildings.

The sunset was dribbling away to nothing; a dripping glow on the horizon, a touch of orange leeching from the sky. Twil and Jan and us, our faces and bodies seemed to blend into the darkening gloam of the falling night. But the air was warm, Twil’s breath was close, and Jan smelled of Jamaican food.

I mouthed a silent thank you to Jan; she nodded in equal silence, pulling a self-conscious smile. Neither of us had expected Twil to be feeling this bad. We’d done what we could, for now.

All of a sudden, Twil said: “Raine actually came over to see me earlier.”

We looked back at her, a pale-faced angel in the last moments of dusk. “Oh? She did?”

“Ah,” said Jan — in the tone one uses upon discovering the culprit who has deposited the cat turd in one’s shoe.

“Yeah,” Twil grunted. “To like, talk about exactly this.”

“Oh,” we said.

“Yeeeeeeeah,” Twil went on. “It didn’t ... uh ... help. She said all this weird stuff about like, self-defence, and how I had to do it, and I didn’t have a choice, and not to blame myself and all that. And she wasn’t, like, wrong. But ... I dunno. Like she wanted me to look away from it all. Thought I couldn’t handle the responsibility? I dunno.”

Jan sighed. “Raine. Right. I don’t know her too well, but ... ” Jan glanced at me.

I nodded and pulled an awkward smile. “Raine has helped me before, with these kinds of feelings. But, um ... ”

“Different strokes for different folks,” said Jan. “She should have let us know.”

My turn for an awkward sigh. “She probably will do, when I get home; it’s not the sort of thing she would forget to mention, or hold back.”

“Mm,” Jan grunted. “Well then.” She stretched her arms above her head and took a deep breath, putting a punctuation mark on the topic for now. “Twil, while I’ve got you here, I’d like to ask some technical questions about your whole lycanthropic transform—”

“Ahem-ahem!”

A pantomimed cough interrupted — from right behind us.

We wiggled our tentacles in surprise. Twil flinched so hard she almost jumped to her feet. But Jan just went, “Oh!” and turned to look.

It was Lozzie.

Framed against the distant dark tree line at the edge of the little park, with her pentacolour pastel poncho gleaming blue-pink-white in the last spiral of sunset, her long blonde hair all wispy and floaty down her back — and a chunk of Jamaican banana bread in one hand — Lozzie looked very sheepish, more than a little nervous, and vaguely embarrassed.

The pair of tarry-black imitation-tree spirits had woken up and lumbered across the park to join her, like a pair of curious puppies — though they hung well back from us. Top-Left and Bottom-Right waved to them; one of the spirits waved back with a single massive trunk-like limb.

“Lozzers!” said Twil, laughing. She got up and spread her arms out wide. “How long you been there?”

“Lozzie,” I joined in. “Come sit with us.”

“Hey you,” said Jan.

Lozzie pulled a rather overwhelmed smile, and said: “Actually I’ve been standing here for fifteen minutes but nobody noticed and then it got more and more awkward and everyone kept talking and I didn’t meant to eavesdrop but if I said anything it would be super weird so now I’m here finally and hi!”

Twil laughed, then paused. “Oh, uh, you mean, like, you heard all of that?”

Jan was frowning delicately as well — how much did Lozzie know about her past? How much had she just accidentally revealed?

But Lozzie didn't seem to mind. "It's okay! It's fiiiine!" she chirped, then bounced forward to distribute hugs.

Twil got the first Lozzie-hug, then me, as we didn't get to our feet, at Lozzie's urging. Jan got the third hug, but then to my surprise Lozzie cycled back to Twil again, hugging her a second time before settling down on the ground next to me. Her poncho flowed over our knees, lovely and warm, as if she had absorbed the power of the dying sunset. She patted the grass.

"Sit, fuzzy!" she chirped at Twil.

Twil squinted. "Fuzzy?"

"You're fuzzy and fluffy and pettable! Fuzzzzzzzy! Don't think I've forgotten! You owe me some belly rubs!"

Twil laughed — and blushed.

Our mind completed the circuit: Twil had told me in confidence that she rather liked Lozzie, in that sort of way. It made sense; they were both the same age, both slightly outside the norm, and Lozzie was so boundlessly energetic and full of life.

I glanced quickly at Jan. Did she see? Was she jealous? Was she even aware of this?

Jan's storm-drenched eyes were quiet with resigned acceptance.

Worse than jealousy then — surrender, because these two would go together better than her and Lozzie.

But this was not the time for that discussion; we kept our mouth shut for now.

Twil said: "I'm not a fuckin' petting zoo. How many times?"

Lozzie yelped out a giggle. "How many times?! Never! You've never let me pet you properly! Go full wolf and let me fuzzleruzzleraaaargaaaa!" Lozzie mimed shoving her entire face into a fluffy belly.

Twil cleared her throat awkwardly. "Not ... not here. And not right now. I can't just transform in public, right here."

“Yah!” went Lozzie. “Not right now. We have more important things to talk about right now, duh!”

Twil frowned down at her. “We do?”

“Mmmhmm! Murder!”

“Oh ... ”

We cleared our throat too. “Lozzie ... ”

“It’s fiiiine, Heathers!” Lozzie chirped for me, leaning into my side with a wave of physical affection. “It’s an important thing, you know? Important for me and important for wolfies to learn, too!”

“Alright, alright,” Twil grumbled. “Fine.” She consented to sit back down, right next to Lozzie, so little ‘Lozzers’ was now sandwiched between myself and Twil.

To my surprise, Lozzie did not reach out and touch Twil; despite all her rhetoric about fluffy-fuzzy pettings, she respected Twil’s personal space. Instead she leaned harder against us. Several of our tentacles snaked across her back to support her weight. She got comfy. She gestured with her torn-off chunk of banana bread.

Jan said: “July showed you the food, then?”

“Yup!” Lozzie chirped. “And thank you, Janny!” She turned back to Twil, and cooed: “Sooooo. I had to do a murder once.”

Twil blinked at her. “You did?”

Lozzie nodded up and down. Very serious, big nods. Very important. “Heather saw it happen, when my brother was going to kill us, in his stupid throne room. One of his friends was in there too and he would have gotten in the way of Heather doing what Heather did. So I had a scalpel hidden in my sleeve, and I went — stab!”

Lozzie mimed ramming a scalpel through a human throat.

We did recall the moment, with great clarity. Just before I had killed Alexander, Lozzie had sprung from her faked attitude of cowed passivity, and stabbed one of the Sharrowford Cultists through the throat. A big man, the man who had been helping Alexander pluck Raine’s bullet from his torso. Lozzie and he had gone down in a tangle of limbs and spurting blood.

She'd barely spoken about it since, except to recall how much she disliked the violence.

"Y-yeah," said Twil. "But like, I mean, that was big, important self-defence. Your brother was gonna kill—"

"Mm-mmmm-mmm-mmm!" Lozzie shook her head. "Not the point! Not the point!"

Twil put her hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright."

"Point iiiiiiis," Lozzie grew quieter, softer, more serious — at least for her. "I hated it. I hated having to do it. I hate remembering it. I hope I never ever ever ever ever have to do anything like it again."

We didn't mention the way Lozzie had helped us kill the Ed-ball; perhaps that didn't count.

"Aaaaand," Lozzie continued. "I don't want Tenny to ever have to do anything like that. Oooooooooor Jan." She pointed sideways, at a blinking surprised Jan. "Or Heathers, but Heathers has to do it a few times, I suppose. But but but, I don't want Tenny to have to do that, ever. So I helped kill my brother, and killed one of his friends, so there's less chance of Tenny ever having to do it. See?"

Twil listened to this whole speech with a growing frown of tender care; when Lozzie was done, Twil just nodded. "Yeah, Lozzers. I get it. Hope you never have to again, either. Or Tenns."

Lozzie shook her head, hard. "Never Tenns."

We all fell silent for several moments. There was nothing more to say on the subject. After a little while, Lozzie climbed out of my tentacles and went to sit next to Jan instead. She broke a piece off her banana bread and held it out for Jan, to hand-feed her. Jan blushed and hesitated. Lozzie went 'aaahhh'. Twil and I politely looked away.

Darkness filled Blueslip Road; the sunset was done, leaving Brinkwood in the deep night that never truly touches real cities. Trees creaked and swayed in the gentle wind. The school was a blur of angles in the midnight shadows. We could only see each other by the faint, distant light from the low-powered village street lamps. Behind us, the pair of massive tree-like spirits waited, as if wondering when Lozzie was going to play with them, too.

At length, I said: "Twil. I don't want you to come with us to

Wonderland.”

Twil squinted at me. “Eh? What?”

“I ... I don’t ... ”

I don’t want you to die?

What was I saying? Hadn’t we told Jan, earlier that very day, that nobody was going to die? That we weren’t checking on our friends and allies one by one, to make sure they were up to the risk, the threat, the possibility of failure? Where was this doubt coming from all of a sudden? Was it because Twil had a bright future ahead of her, and I didn’t want her to end up as a cold corpse on the ash of Wonderland?

But I didn’t want that for anybody; no, nobody was going to die out there.

“Hey,” Twil said. “Hey, Heather, yo.”

“Y-yo?” We looked up.

Twil was grinning, wild and wolfish. She held up both hands and made them into wolf-paw claws.

“I’m fucking invincible,” she said. “I’m the Brinkwood werewolf. I can get shot through the head and get back up like thirty seconds later! My granddad, he knew what he was doing when he made me. He made me for stuff like this, so I could deal with anything.”

Jan and Lozzie had gone quiet, but Lozzie whispered: “Fuzzyfuzzyfuzzyfuzzy—”

“But,” we said, “Twil, you have no obligation—”

“You’re my fucking friend! That’s an obligation! You think I’m not gonna be there? Okay, sure, maybe I can’t do any of the magic shit, but if that big sky bitch has got minions, maybe I keep them off Evee? Maybe I do what I was made to do? Fuck that big eyeball. We’re gonna kick sand into it!” Twil shot to her feet, suddenly more wolf than woman. “Fuck yeah!” she growled — low and long and lilting off into the night.

We wondered if anybody heard, tucked up in bed behind their closed curtains; we wondered if any little children dreamed of wolves that night.

“Fuck!” laughed Lozzie. She got to her feet too and threw her arms up, dragging Jan after her.

At a total loss of how to thank our friends, we climbed to our feet and bowed our head.

“Thank you, Twil. Thank you. We promise we’ll try to keep you safe, too, if you come with us, out there.”

“If!?” Twil laughed. “When! You just say the word, Big H.”

We nodded, but we couldn’t say more.

What we did do — carefully, covertly, without wanting to alert the others — was look around for any tell-tale signs of a certain Jaundiced Princess.

Twil’s resolute loyalty and dedication to her friends was worryingly close to the attributes of a ‘doomed hero’. Or at least, I thought so. Evidently Heart did not agree, for we saw no flutter of pearl-white above the trees, no slinking sprite slipping away along the streets, no golden glint deep in the jumble of school buildings.

We had a sneaking suspicion that was why Sevens had stayed behind. Perhaps she was having a word with her little sister.

“Twil,” Jan said, suddenly professional and serious. “I was saying earlier, I really want to study your transformation, if that’s acceptable to you?”

Twil gave her a frown, a wolf peering out of the gloom. “I’ll go petting zoo for Lozzers, but not for you, hey?”

Lozzie giggled madly. Jan blushed and held up a hand. “Not like that. Look, you know I’m making a body for Heather’s twin — for Maisie. Your grandfather apparently achieved something with you, a forced union of flesh and spirit. I’ve never seen anything like it before. I ... well ... this is my area of study, even if you’re a little out of my wheelhouse. But I’m looking for things out of my wheelhouse right now. I need to find a way to perform a soul anchoring without the soul already present — or at least, very rapidly, the nano-second she shows up to inhabit the vessel. If I can comprehend a little more about how you work, maybe I can ... improve some of the binding techniques. Whoever your grandfather was, he was a genius. I would like to learn from his work.”

Twil’s sceptical look softened a little — but only a little. “For real?

You're not fucking me about?"

"I am not 'fucking you about' no," said Jan. "I'm deadly serious. And I would treat your body and your grandfather's work with the most solemn respect. I'm not trying to get an eyeful of your tits, here. I'm a professional. Sort of."

Twil let out a big huff. "Yeah, alright then. Just, like, not here."

I murmured: "Thank you, Twil."

Jan chuckled. "No, no, of course, not here. I need to take pictures and measurements of Heather as well, in great physical detail, so perhaps we could all get together and do that tomorrow?"

"Night's young, ain't it?" said Twil.

"Actually ... " we said, raising a hand.

"Mhmm," Jan said, nodding slowly. "Heather's got a big day tomorrow. And so have you, probably. Both of you need some sleep."

"Eh?" Twil squinted at us again.

"Oh!" we said. "Oh, no, I won't need Twil as muscle. I don't think that'll be necessary."

"Heather," Jan said, a little too gently. "You haven't met those people. They're very twitchy."

"Hold up," said Twil. "What is this about now? I thought there was no crisis?"

"There isn't," we sighed. "Not yet, anyway. Tomorrow, Eevee and I are going to meet with Yuleson, the lawyer, about ... well, about a money thing. But then Jan's going to set up a meeting between me and the cultists. The ex-cultists. Badger's friends. The remains of the Sharrowford Cult."

"Oh," said Twil. She grimaced, the wolf showing through in the way she flashed her teeth. "Oh, fuck me. Like — like Badger was?"

"Like Badger was," I said. My mouth was going dry. "They need salvation. I can't leave that unanswered, before we go to Wonderland. Even if I can't do anything much for them, I need to try. I need to answer their prayers, one way or the other."

mischievous and craft; plainly seen – 21.9

Summer heat steamed and slithered against the walls of Number 12 Barnslow Drive in an incessant standing wave. Her red brick skin turned painful to the clumsy touch, and lethal to any unwary flies. The climbing ivy, the patchy lichen, the clumps of hardy moss — all shrivelled and died back, retreating toward the loam at her skirts. Roof tiles flowed and flowered with heat haze, like invisible gas poured from a spout, rolling down her neck and shoulders. The clay-thick soil of the front garden dried out, opening in wide cracks around the baked stone of the path to the door. The grass went brown; the earth turned dusty. In her back garden the longer grasses and wild flowers drank the sunlight in great gulps of greening life — and swarmed with bugs seeking shelter in the shattered shade, insects living out entire days-long lives in the shadow of the single massive tree, where Tenny's cocoon had once grown in quiet seclusion.

Larger wildlife turned sleepy and reclusive — rabbits hid in their warrens, birds stayed in the treetops, foxes dozed deep in their dens.

We too longed to burrow into the cool and damp earth. Or dive into dark waters and flee far from the sun.

Lucky little foxes.

I did hope the fox from the Saye Estate was doing well, wherever she'd gone since we'd last seen her.

On that peak of Northern high-summer, to open a door or a window was to invite a blast of sticky-hot humid air; to step outside was to burst into sweat, sticking to the inside of one's clothes, blinking against the pounding sun; to linger was to invite sunburn, heatstroke, or worse. But to close all the windows would have cooked the house's charges — us — inside a massive improvised sauna.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive simply was not built for this; the

summer had over-topped her limits. She needed our help.

The first hours of the morning had not been so bad, when the sun was still just a suggestion in a cloudless blue sky. Waking up and eating breakfast in nothing but a t-shirt and shorts felt odd, but entirely acceptable, especially when I wasn't the only one resorting to such shedding of layers. Seeing Evelyn with her hair firmly up and her shoulders exposed was more odd — but also more than acceptable. At least she was comfortable. Tenny fanning herself with her own tentacles was sweet; Lozzie walking around barefoot was obvious; Kimberly with a straw sun-hat on her head to go to work was exquisitely fashionable, but I don't think she realised.

Raine walking around in tank-top and knickers was positively a treat.

By the time we got ready for the meeting with Harold Yuleson, the heat was only just beginning to ramp up toward its true oppressive power; the journey there in Raine's car was sweaty, but not unbearable, certainly not with the windows down and Raine belting out punk songs at the top of her lungs — even if I couldn't make head nor tail of the lyrics.

The meeting itself was conducted inside Yuleson's real, proper, official office, a tiny little place near the city centre, in a converted 19th century terrace, sandwiched between a dentist on one side and an unmarked business on the other.

"Some shady shit," said Raine. "You shoulder-to-shoulder with some mob types, Harry my lad?"

"It's a shipping business," Yuleson told us. "Small packages, expedited delivery, all online. Or so I'm told."

Raine snorted at that. Evelyn looked vaguely unimpressed. Praem said nothing. Lozzie didn't seem interested. I didn't really get it.

But Yuleson's office possessed that luxury only found in hotels and businesses — air conditioning. Yuleson himself was in waistcoat and jacket like normal, a little bubble of business privilege. We all rode out the tidal wave of summer heat inside those cramped little rooms, listening to Yuleson drone on for over an hour.

The meeting itself was both incredibly boring and esoteric beyond my understanding. Yuleson went over endless official documentation — mostly to do with taxation, wills, transfers of

assets, establishment of Lozzie as Edward's legal heir, and so on and so on. Some of it was real, some of it was forged — most of the latter was still in the draft stage, including a fake birth certificate for Lozzie, with 'DRAFT' written on it in huge red marker pen so it couldn't possibly be mistaken for the complete piece.

Evelyn took a huge number of photographs of various documents, with the intent of showing her father. A major benefit of having a lawyer in the family, I supposed.

"No offense, Yuleson," Evelyn said — dripping with acid sarcasm. "But I want another pair of eyes on this."

Yuleson nodded and smiled and looked like he wanted to swallow his own fist. "As long as the evidence is deleted after the fact. We must leave no trace. Miss Lilburne here, her future security depends on it."

"My dad does what I tell him to."

When we emerged from the meeting, blinking like grubs who'd crawled out from under a stone, the sun had finished her stretching exercises. Now she was ready to bench-press the city of Sharrowford into trembling, panting, red-faced submission.

We said as much to Raine, when we got back home. She laughed harder than we expected, then asked if we needed taking upstairs and seeing to.

"Tch!" we tutted. "Raine, there's no time for that today. We're on a tight schedule."

Raine blinked at us. "We are? We don't have to be over at Geerswin 'til six. You know, when the sun isn't so bad? I thought that was the whole point of waiting until the evening?"

We sighed. "We're making the call, to Mister Joking — I mean 'Joe King'. We're doing it today. Now."

So Raine spent half an hour making sure the right windows were open and the wrong windows were closed, that the fans she had bought were set up just right, pushing air from the cellar into the kitchen, from the kitchen into the magical workshop, and out into the front room. Evelyn had a fan all to herself. So did Tenny and Grinny — though it was mostly for Tenny, upstairs in her and Lozzie's bedroom, ruffling her fur and tempting her to make funny

noises into the chopping air.

We all shed half our clothes once more. We downed a pint of ice-water and lemon juice, then devoured a lunch of sandwiches — courtesy of Praem, profusely thanked.

And then we ended up sitting around the kitchen table, staring at Raine's 'burner phone.'

We — me, myself, and I — frowned at the slip of notebook paper in our hand, on which Jan had written the only known contact number for 'Mister Joking'. Then we stared at the phone. Then back at the paper. Then at the phone. Then the paper.

Evelyn sighed a very grumbly and tired sigh. "Heather. Heather, do we really have to do this right now?"

We lifted our eyes and pulled an apologetic smile. "You don't have to do anything, Eeve. This is my responsibility."

Evelyn gave me a dead-eyed look which could have chilled the sunlight itself.

She was sitting on the opposite side of the kitchen table, dressed in a loose, airy white t-shirt, a pair of shorts, and nothing else, not even socks; the matte black blade structure of her prosthetic foot lay open and exposed against the floor tiles. Her hair was tied up high to keep the heat off her neck. She looked ready for an afternoon nap, so sleepy and comfy. Part of me wanted to do exactly that — go nap with Eeve, forget about all this, put off my responsibility.

"Um, Eeve?"

Evelyn sighed. "How are you simultaneously so resourceful, and yet also so incredibly fucking stupid?"

Raine burst out laughing; she was sat halfway between myself and Evelyn, with her chair tilted back on two legs. She refrained from putting her own bare feet up on the table, as Praem would probably voice a stern objection. Raine wore even less than Eeve — a purple tank top, no bra, and a pair of exercise shorts. The heat was simply too much for any modesty. Her rich chestnut hair was wet with sweat. She looked like she needed some time in bed as well, though probably not for napping.

"Heather, Heather, hey," Raine drawled. "Don't take that the wrong

way. It's how Eevee expresses affection. The worse the insults, the more she loves you."

Evelyn huffed. "Yes, Raine, fine, you don't have to spell it out for her."

"I know," we said. "Thank you, Eevee."

Evelyn blushed more than was healthy in such heat. She gestured at me with her maimed hand, unselfconscious of the old scar and the missing fingers. "What I mean to say, Heather, is that you are about to call a mage — the kind of mage who leaves anti-intrusion countermeasures all over the place, not unlike myself. If I get up and go watch cartoons on my laptop and let you do this alone, five minutes later we're going to be dealing with a giant slug crawling out of the phone and spraying everything with stomach juices. So no, it's not 'your responsibility'. We're all here together."

"One for all and all for one," Raine murmured.

We cleared our throat. "Fair point. Um. Sorry, Eevee."

Evelyn huffed again. "And we're all bloody well exhausted. We've had a long day already and it's not even two in the afternoon. That meeting with the lawyer was enough to put me to sleep. I wish I could have had Praem turn him upside down and shake him by his ankles."

"Hey," Raine said. "Boring is better, as far as that went."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "That bastard Yuleson better keep his word. He skims a single penny off Lozzie and I'll have Praem ... " Evelyn trailed off and gestured at the air. "Bah."

Praem intoned: "Yuleson will be a good boy."

Raine laughed again. Evelyn pulled a vaguely disgusted face.

Praem was standing on the opposite side of the room, dressed as usual in her full maid uniform, complete with lace and frills and a lot of flair, once again apparently immune to the summer heat. I envied her deeply. I think we all did, that day.

We smiled at her. "He will, Praem. He knows what Outside is like now. He doesn't want to go again."

Praem turned her blank, milk-white eyes to stare at me, through me, past me. For a second we felt like Praem saw all of us, all the

other six Heathers which inhabited my tentacles. She saw us all, and liked what she saw.

Then she said: "Naughty Yuleson goes to the time-out castle."

We giggled at that, we couldn't help it. "Praem!"

Raine leaned back with a nasty grin. Evelyn muttered, "Can we get back on topic, please?" I suppressed the giggles and cleared my throat.

"Fuck me, though," Raine said, staring up at the ceiling. "Eight million quid. Eight. Million. Quid. She could do anything with that."

Evelyn gave her a sidelong glance. "You keep your lips tight, Raine."

Raine pulled a grin. "Since when do I go boasting about stuff like that?"

Evelyn snorted and rolled her eyes. "Heather, can't we leave this until tomorrow? I told you to give me a week to finish the *Invisus Oculus*. You have plenty of time."

We shook our head, pulling another apologetic smile; four of us joined in — our tentacles, waving from side to side, strobing slowly in the overheated air. Evelyn found it difficult to maintain her craggy disapproval in the face of that display. She tutted and looked away.

"We can't," we said. "Evee, I can't procrastinate. I can't tell myself I'll do it tomorrow. I have to do this now. Sevens made it clear to me. No stalling. Anything else would not be doing right by Maisie."

Raine reached over and rubbed my shoulder. "Right you are. Where is Sevens, anyway? Haven't seen her all day."

"With Aym," we said gently. "Felicity won't be staying much longer, so ... "

"Ahhhhh," went Raine. "Hmm."

"Hmm, indeed," we said. A problem for another day.

Evelyn gestured helplessly with both hands. "I still haven't finished digesting that manuscript you brought back. We haven't even begun discussing the implications of this bitch — Heart, and frankly I

don't want to. We've possibly got a very difficult evening ahead of us with those cultists. And I ... I need to ... " Evelyn trailed off, frowning hard, chewing the inside of her mouth. Raine raised her eyebrows, waiting. Eventually Evelyn spat the words: "And I need to make sure Twil is actually okay, alright? I want to spend some time ... anyway! And you want to fit in this phone call, to a mage? Heather, this might turn into a whole crisis. Very easily."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes briefly. "That's why I'm going to do it myself."

"Let Praem—"

"Praem can't do brain-math," we said softly. "If Joking — gosh, I hate that name — if 'Joe King' has countermeasures in place, then I am best suited to disarm them. Praem would still be in danger. She's not perfect."

"Wrong," said Praem.

We almost laughed. We reached out with one tentacle and bobbed it in Praem's general direction. "My apologies, Praem. Of course you are."

"Maids are perfect. I am a maid." Praem did a whole-body sideways tilt, like a puppet making a silly pose. Her skirt flopped out on one side. She put her hands together and winked with one eye. "Perfection."

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes, but I could see the deep affection in her face. Raine gave Praem a little round of applause. Praem straightened back up and curtsied.

"Nevertheless," I went on, trying to be serious once again. "I'm going to make the call myself. I think it's the right option."

Evelyn sighed again. "Everyone's dispersed right now, Heather. Can't we at least wait until the evening, after the meet with the cultists, when everyone is—"

"I want to do it now," we said. "If there are safety measures we should take, I'll take them. But no more stalling. I want to be ready for Maisie, the moment we can make the attempt. If ... Joseph King has any information on the Eye, I want to know." We pulled our tentacles in tighter, wrapping them about ourselves. " ... I do wish Zheng would come home though. Still no ... ?"

Raine shook her head. “Not answering her phone either. Assuming it has power.” She shrugged. “Big Zed always does this when you’re out of action for a bit, Heather. She’ll be home.”

“Mmm,” I grumbled. “I hope she’s not sulking for some reason. I don’t want to have to go hunt her down, too.”

Evelyn slapped the table. “One thing at a time! Bloody hell, Heather. You want to get this done? Then focus!”

I steeled myself and picked up the phone, then frowned. “Why is it called a ‘burner phone’, anyway?”

Raine said: “Burn after reading.”

We pulled a face. “You shouldn’t burn plastic. That’s bad for the environment. It’s bad for you!” Raine snorted. Evelyn chuckled too. We blinked at both of them. “Sorry? What is it?”

Raine reached over and rubbed my shoulder, her thumb working at the tension-knots in my back. “It’s a metaphor. You don’t actually burn the phone, physically. You take out the sim card and snap it, or maybe remove any physical storage media, then run a magnet over it. Voila, untraceable contact. I bought it with cash, too, no name on file.”

We stared at the phone again. It did feel particularly flimsy, like the black plastic case might crack if exposed to direct sunlight.

“But ... why?” we said.

Raine shrugged. “In case GCHQ are listening in. Or the CIA.”

I boggled at her. “Why would GCHQ be listening to us?”

Praem intoned: “For fun.”

Evelyn sighed and pulled a surprisingly sly little smile. “Raine is overcompensating for Stack critiquing our operational security. She’s trying to impress the monster.”

Raine raised both her hands in a gesture of mock-innocence. “Hey, come on, I’m just being sensible. It’s a sensible precaution.”

Evelyn’s smirk got worse. “And who would be listening to us now, hmm? Edward’s done. Forget bolting the barn door after the horse has fled, the horse has been turned into glue and used for arts and crafts. This is pure preening for your frankly disturbing obsession

with Amy Stack. You think if you wave enough opsec in her face she'll sit on yours?"

"Evee!" I squeaked, blushing in shock.

Raine laughed, shook her head — and looked away, almost embarrassed. I'd never seen Raine embarrassed like that before.

"You know I'm right," said Evee. "Heather, I don't know why on earth you're alright with this. I'm not judging whatever tangled polycule you want to be part of—" She paused, cleared her throat, and recovered from the accidental self-damage. "But I am judging any romantic interest in a goddamn professional mercenary. You said it yourself, Raine, she was a baby-killer. And she's straight! She's married! She has a child. She's easily twenty years older than you. Give up, Raine. This is a pathetic target, even for you."

I frowned. "Evee. Excuse me."

Evelyn squinted — and then understood what she'd said. She went red in the face and waved the insult away. "Not you, Heather! God, present company excluded."

"Still," we said, tutting.

Raine raised her chin. "I am not doing opsec to get Amy Stack to sit on my face. I'm doing it to get her to squeal like a good little doggy."

We threw up both hands, all six tentacles, and our voice. "Oh, my gosh, you two. Stop! Please. Stop. What is this? What are you doing?!"

Evelyn looked away, suitably chastised. Raine laughed and shook her head and said: "I'm winding you up."

"Salty," said Praem.

Evelyn barked a laugh and slapped the table. "Bloody right. Salty because she said your opsec was shit."

Raine raised her hands in surrender and lowered her head. "Guilty. Guilty. Sentence me to hard, hard, hard labour. With Stack."

"Raine," we warned.

Raine cleared her throat and bowed her head to me. "As you wish, my squidling lady."

That made us blush a little — and almost made us discount the question of whether Raine really was joking or not, about wanting to have intimate relations with Amy Stack.

She had, however, stolen all my tension. Well done, Raine.

Evelyn leaned back in her chair and grunted, rolling her uneven shoulders and working out the kinks in her joints. “I would like to remind you — both of you — that Amy Stack is now beyond our control. Seriously. I do not recommend having any more contact with her than absolutely necessary.”

“Ah?” I blinked at Evee.

She gave me a look like I was considerably slower than she’d expected. “With Edward gone, there’s no threat to her little boy. I don’t hold her leash anymore. Nobody does. Not even if I keep protecting the child. Which, yes, I will anyway.”

“Ah,” we said. “Well ... she’s got no reason to go against us, right?”

Raine said: “Nicky’s been hanging out with her.”

Evelyn frowned like she’d just been presented with a piece of completely carbonised toast. “She— the detective— excuse me, what?”

Raine shrugged. “Didn’t think it was important. Apparently they’ve been talking some. Kim told me that Nicky told her.”

“Oh,” Evelyn huffed. “This is some game of telephone nonsense. I don’t have the time to think about this. Fine, whatever!”

But we were chewing on this concept. One tentacle tied itself in a loose knot trying to imagine the scene. We said: “How does one ‘hang out’ with Stack?”

Raine smirked. “Very carefully. Or in my case—”

“Raine!” we said quickly. “Stop! We don’t want to think about that.”

“Sure you do. You can’t stop grinning, Heather.”

“I’m not ‘grinning’! It’s just a smile.”

Evelyn put her face in one hand. “Please stop. That or go to your room, both of you. I thought you wanted to make this phone call,

Heather? You know what, forget it. Why don't you two go upstairs and spend the afternoon on each other—"

"—*in* each other—" Raine murmured, *sotto voce*.

I went to bap her with a tentacle — but ended up slowly wrapping it around Raine's arm instead. She grabbed the tentacle in return, tugging on it gently, showing me all her teeth in a suddenly very Zheng-like grin, more predatory intent than confident power. We felt ourselves begin to blush, hot and red.

"—and we can leave this dangerous phone call task until tomorrow," Evelyn finished quickly, as she saw what was happening on the far side of the table. She cleared her throat loudly and tapped the tabletop. "You have a room, you two. Please."

Praem intoned, smart and soft: "No heavy petting in the kitchen."

Raine laughed and relented. I quickly disentangled my tentacle from my girlfriend and sat up straight, blushing furiously and frowning my little frowny face.

"That's not— I didn't mean— I'm not going to—" We stumbled, mortified. "Oh, damn and blast it all! We're doing it right now!"

I scooped the 'burner phone' off the table and woke the tiny screen, then raised Jan's note with the incredibly long phone number, and squinted at the absurd string of digits.

Raine cheered. "Doing it live!"

Evelyn picked up her walking stick and—

Bang-bang-bang!

—slammed it against one of the table's legs so hard that the whole tabletop shook. We flinched. Raine did a silly mock-recoil from Evelyn's threat of violence.

"E-Evee?" I stammered.

Evelyn fixed me with an exasperated gaze. "If we're going to do this, we do it properly. Up. Both of you. Into the workshop. And Praem," Evelyn softened instantly as she addressed her doll-maid daughter. "Would you be a dear and fetch Lozzie from upstairs, please? Not Tenny or ... 'Grinny', leave them be."

Praem answered by turning on her heel and marching out of the

kitchen, skirts swishing, shoes clicking.

“Evee?” we said. “Evee, I’m sorry, but what do we need Lozzie for?”

Evelyn gave me a flat-eyed look which could have halted a falling meteor. “Insurance. Now get up. Into the workshop. Let’s get sorted out.”

We followed Evelyn’s orders and decamped into the magical workshop; between the heavy curtains over the bay windows, the habitual gloom of the space, and the muffled feeling as if we were inside the core of the house, the heat became paradoxical — shadowy, yet sweltering, darker, yet hotter. A womb-like feeling. Cradled in the heart of Number 12 Barnslow Drive.

Evelyn had me sit in a chair in the middle of the room, beyond reach of any other object, on a piece of canvas. Then she directed Praem in drawing a magic circle around me; nothing fancy or particularly eye-searing, just a double-layer of inward-pointing protection.

“Feels like I’m being welded into a shark cage,” we murmured.

“Shark, caged,” said Praem.

Evelyn snorted. “Good. It’s for your protection and ours.”

We sighed a long, disappointed sigh, gesturing helplessly with the ‘burner phone’. “Evee, I just ... I just wanted to get this over with, not make a big performance of it.”

Evelyn jabbed the end of her walking stick toward me. “There is no ‘getting it over with quickly’, Heather. We do this with proper precautions, or not at all. How do you still not understand this?”

We felt a little ashamed. “I didn’t want to ... impose ... I guess.”

Evelyn snorted again and crossed her arms. “You can impose as much as you like.”

Raine set up the rest of the emergency equipment, in case something went wrong: a bucket of water, a helping of chocolate, a fire extinguisher — even Evee raised an eyebrow at that one — bandages, her makeshift riot-shield, and her handgun. The handgun went on the table, pointed away from everything else, safety firmly on.

Lozzie joined us too; she flounced down from upstairs, fluttering

and bobbing in the doorway of the magical workshop. She had bare feet and bare legs poking out from beneath the hem of her poncho, and exposed her bare arms whenever she raised them; I suspected she was mostly naked beneath the poncho, and I didn't blame her one bit, not in this heat.

Just before Praem finished the circle, Raine ducked inside and placed a bottle of water at my feet, dripping with cold condensation from the fridge.

"In case you're in there for a while," Raine said, winked, and kissed me on the forehead.

"This isn't going to take a while!" I protested. But Raine was already retreating. Praem put the finishing touches on the circle. Evelyn sat down in her chair, frowning at me like I was an unsolved maths problem. Lozzie kept bouncing from foot to foot and flapping her poncho to help circulate the air. The spider-servitors were not present for once — they were upstairs with Marmite, who was with Tenny. Not particularly useful as guard creatures if they followed their new friend everywhere, but we all preferred them happy.

"Well," Evelyn grunted. "We're about as ready as we can be. Go ahead and make the call when ready, Heather."

Lozzie chirped: "Maybe he won't pick up! Maybe he's sleeping. Or out. Or Out!"

Raine caught my eye and said: "Heather, whatever happens, we'll catch you."

We gulped, staring at the burner phone in one hand, then at the absurdly long number in our other. Our tentacles coiled in tight, around our belly and ribs, a layer of protective pneuma-somatic meat. We'd wanted this to be quick and easy, a nasty phone call but not a potential crisis. But everyone else was acting like we were about to get into a fight — if not a very serious one.

Evee was right; Raine was right. Operational security or magical precaution, both could not be ignored without taking significant and senseless risks. We had to take this seriously. We couldn't afford another slip-up, not so close to Wonderland, so close to Maisie.

Praem was standing by Evelyn's side. She fixed me with a milk-eyed look, empty of expression, and said:

“When calling an unknown party it is best to introduce yourself first. Avoid slang or colloquialisms. Speak clearly. Practice first if you are nervous. Write a script if you require further structure.”

Evelyn looked up at her with a confused frown. Raine laughed and shot her a finger-gun. Lozzie giggled and flapped her poncho as if heaping praise upon our Praem.

And I laughed too, just one soft exhalation. All the tension flowed back out of us — well, most of the tension. Partway there. Enough to get moving.

“Thank you, Praem,” we said. “I don’t think we’ll need a script though, not this time.”

We took a deep breath and prepared for the worst — for magical countermeasures, for Mister Joking’s clever trap on the other end of the phone, ready to snare any nasty mages trying to leave a lethal surprise for him. We flexed our metaphorical hands, ready to plunge them into the black and tarry depths of our soul, to grasp the machinery of hyperdimensional mathematics, to deflect the hidden blade we were about to face.

We raised the phone, typed in the absurdly long number, and triple checked that we had it right; then we hit the call button, and raised the phone to our left ear.

Ring-ring-ring-

“It’s ringing!” we hissed.

Evelyn tutted softly. “What did you expect? Concentrate.”

“Well, it’s just the number is so long, we didn’t—”

Click.

The call connected.

The click was so loud, like a thunderclap over a dark forest, like a slab of concrete slamming into the ground. The shock made us blink, made the hot air recede for a split-second, made the whole house flinch.

Then, silence: machine-silence, the soft whirring of a tape, the tiny motors and gears turning inside a device that was meant to speak to me, or meant to record my speaking, or negate the need to speak at all. We stayed silent and still, as if before the machine-eyes of a

cold and lifeless trap. All our tentacles went dark, following some deep-buried instinct to make ourselves invisible and unseen. The machine waited for one of us to blink first.

Then a voice, scratchy and rough and exhausted, marred with static and tape-damage and age; I had to close my eyes and concentrate as hard as I could to make out the words. Had this been recorded on an old-school analogue answering machine?

“You’ve reached ... well, you’ve reached me, hi. If you’re calling this number then you already know me. Or maybe I’m dead and you just want to hear my voice one last time? Ha. Sad. Anyway, if you have real business, if you want in, speak the password.”

Password?

Jan hadn’t said anything about a password.

Was that Mister Joking’s voice? It sounded a little bit like him, but too old, too exhausted, too melancholy. Perhaps it was yet another version of himself, another front or act to throw off unwanted visitors.

But what was the password?

We wracked our brains, all seven of them, but in the end we did not know this man, we did not know what he might set as a password. We could not make a guess, educated or otherwise. Figuring it out from first principles was impossible.

But we did know that an analogue answering machine from the 1990s was not capable of listening to a spoken password and rendering it into some kind of access. Which meant that magic was at play here. Which meant there was an opening, in this gap for a password, into which we could ram a piece of hyperdimensional mathematics. A crack for our crowbar.

Anything designed to accept a password must by definition contain the shape of the password within itself. A lock contains the shape of the key, in reverse, concealed in the shape and configuration of the pins.

I did not know the first thing about how to pick a lock; but I knew plenty about how to define the shape of things which tried to hide from observation and insight.

We were the Eye’s adopted daughter, after all.

With a flicker of thought we dredged from the sump of my soul a string of machinery, black and dripping with corrosive tar, thick with brine and bile and unspeakable fluids.

It was so delicate, so fine, like a tangle of razor-sharp fishing line; in the past such a specific equation would have sliced through my fingers, cut off chunks of my brain, and left me vomiting in a heap on the floor. Such an equation would have required hours of unconsciousness, or burning my reactor at the red line, or simply hurt too much to endure for the time it took to implement.

But now the effort was split and shared; seven of us to grasp the pieces and put them in the right order, seven minds to run the equation, only combining together at the very last moment.

We slid the machinery into the right configuration, and slammed it into the space that rightfully belonged to a ‘password’.

Mister Joking’s recorded voice spluttered: “Hey, what are you— oh no, no way—”

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“—no you don’t!”

Leaden grey sky, heavy with dark clouds, threatening days of rain.

The edge of a forest, dark and thick and untended — true old growth, wrapped around and over itself in a riot of century-slow life.

A concrete building, a Brutalist dream of grey slabs and long brown windows, four stories tall and damp with woodland mist; a wide intrusion squatting in the middle of the forest clearing, surrounded by half-buried boulders and craggy outcrops of rock, as if the concrete itself had grown from the ground.

“What?!” we yelped.

Well, actually, we didn’t yelp, or say ‘what’; we intended to, of course, but actually we made a strangled noise which had no business emerging from a human throat, a rising hiss coupled with a squawk of shock and warning.

Our tentacles went wild, flinging outward in all directions. Our shoes scuffed on the loamy forest earth. Our voice vanished into the depths of the trees.

Where were we?

We'd been in Number 12 Barnsloew Drive only a moment ago, sitting in the magical workshop, phone in hand. Mister Joking's static-blurred, recorded voice still rang in our ears.

And now: forest and clouds, concrete and dirt, and a chill wind howling through the leaves.

We turned slowly on the spot, tentacles ready for anything, mind racing.

I was not exactly a stranger to sudden transitions, to put it lightly; I'd been dealing with this kind of thing for more than half my life, either Eye-enforced Slips to Outside and back, or my own dimension-hopping shenanigans, or Lozzie inviting me into dreams that were not quite dreams, or sticking my tentacles where they didn't belong and ending up inside the quasi-dreams of inhuman creatures trying to teach me more mathematics.

This experience did not fit into any of those categories. I was fully present, all seven of my sub-Heather routines running at full lucidity, our minds sharp and alert and more than a little bit scared. I had not Slipped, or gone through the membrane. This place was not blurred through the logic of a dream, or pressed tight by the pressure of Outside.

But it didn't look real.

The forest was too dark, too thick, too fairytale — the sort of forest that had not existed anywhere on earth for hundreds of years, at least not at this horizon-to-horizon scale; the sky was too low, too heavy with clouds, too long paused on the threat of rain; the concrete building was — well, it was beautiful, in the way that only a proper piece of Brutalist architecture can be, not the half-considered knockoffs that called themselves Brutalist, but the true originals, a perfect blend of textured grey concrete against a background of dark green.

We put our hands on our hips and sighed at the Brutalist beauty.

“Okay, well, I know you're not real,” we said out loud. “Because if you were, they'd have written books about you. Nobody actually makes concrete giants so perfect.”

I felt a bit silly waiting for a response, but I waited anyway.

Nothing, just the wind rushing through the equally too-perfect treetops.

“Did Mister Joking make you? If he did, well, maybe he’s not so bad. At least he has taste. Sort of. Is he inside there?”

Nothing.

“Is this your ... ” I searched for the term again. “Intrusion countermeasure”? Is that what I’m looking at? Or is this all a metaphor? I’m going to be seriously disappointed if you’re not real. You’re too beautiful to not exist.”

Still no reply.

We sighed and rubbed our face. “If this turns into a whole crisis just because I wanted to speak with you, I’m going to be furious. I can’t afford to have this become a whole multi-hour or multi-day—”

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“—thing.”

We blinked our eyes open.

Evelyn was frowning at us from across the magical workshop, deep in the sun-forced shadows of the house. Raine was leaning forward in a pose of casual tension, ready to move, but not alarmed. Lozzie was caught mid-flutter by the doorway. Praem was exactly where I’d left her.

Gosh, but the air was so hot, compared with that deliciously cool forest clearing. We burst into a fresh wave of sweat, panting suddenly.

Evelyn shook her head and made her eyes wide. “Heather? ‘Thing’? What thing? What are you talking about?”

“Um ... er ... ”

Raine said: “Sounded like a recorded message. What’d he say?”

We blinked several more times. “Uh ... how long ... how long was I ... out?”

Raine and Evelyn shared a glance. Lozzie paused and bit her lip, pressing a corner of her poncho over her mouth.

Evelyn frowned at me, very hard. “Heather? What happened?”

Raine actually answered my question: “You weren’t out. You blinked and then you said ‘thing’. That was it.” Raine raised a hand and waved. “We’re really here, you’re really awake. This is reality.”

“Heather,” Evelyn grunted through her teeth. “Explain. Quickly.”

“I— I was in a forest. There was a building. It was sort of like a Lozzie-dream, but not. I was fully conscious and aware right from the start. Was that his ‘countermeasure’, or ... did I lose the contact? All I did was ... well, I didn’t do anything I ... I ... ”

I still had the phone pressed to my ear; the wind was still rushing through those dark green treetops.

“Heather?” Evelyn snapped.

“ ... I’m ... still there ... ” I muttered. My eyes turned toward the phone, toward that vista of green and concrete, of shadow-raked clouds and brown glass, of moist earth between my shoes. Shoes? I wasn’t wearing shoes, not here. But there? But there was here. Here was there. Two mirrors faced each other. “I’m there, and I’m here. At the same time. I ... ”

Raine said quickly: “Any monsters, bad guys, anything like that?”

“No ... no ... it’s really quiet. Sort of nice. Peaceful.”

Evelyn raised a hand and pointed — at Lozzie.

Lozzie froze in place, mock-paused between one motion and the next, hands out, one leg raised, face a funny little o-shape.

“Lozzie,” Evelyn said quickly. “Go with her. That’s why I wanted you here. Can you do that? Is she dreaming with her eyes open?”

Lozzie shrugged and flapped her poncho. “Yes aaaaaand yes. I can try!”

Evelyn nodded. “And promise me you’ll come back — you’ll pull her back out if something bad happens. If something bad even glances in your direction. If one of you so much as farts wrong. Promise me, Lozzie.”

Lozzie did a big nod up and down. Her wispy blonde hair went everywhere. “Promise-promise! No farting!”

We tried to look up at Evee, but our eyes were elsewhere. We stared at the concrete building, the Brutalist beauty, and the dark forest

behind her slender bare shoulders.

"I can," we said, lips only moving with the greatest concentration. "Evee, I can promise ... promise too—"

Evelyn snorted. "You always get distracted. Lozzie, step into the circle if you need, it should be perfectly safe, and—"

In my peripheral vision, somebody else stood up and stretched: Raine, rolling her shoulders and cracking her knuckles. "Hey, Loz, can I come too?"

"What?!" Evelyn spluttered. "Raine, don't make this more difficult and dangerous than it already is! And you've never been in one of these absurd dreams, you—"

"Sure!" chirped Lozzie. "Rainy-Raines can come! It's not hard!"

Raine scooped her handgun off the table. She did something that made it go click. She stepped toward the circle as well.

"Raine!" Evelyn snapped. "For fuck's sake!"

Raine turned back to her for a moment. "Sorry, Evee. I just figure they could do with some fire-power."

"It's a dream, you knuckle-dragger!"

Raine laughed. "Not the gun. They're gonna talk to Joking, right? Come on, Evee. I think they need a little muscle to back them up."

Evelyn started to say something else, a string of creative insults about Raine's ability to reason, her attachment to violence, and how she should let the adults actually tackle the problem without—

But then I blinked.

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We found ourselves back in the forest clearing once more, beneath a ceiling of slowly roiling storm, facing a building of grey concrete beauty.

To my right, Raine let out a low whistle. "Damn. Look at this place."

She was dressed for a street fight: a leather jacket with studded shoulders, a black t-shirt with 'fuck you' written on the front, thick jeans on her legs, and a pair of heavy boots with steel toe-caps. As

she glanced around the clearing, she shoved her handgun into her waistband. She didn't seem to be aware or surprised by her sudden change of clothes. Which was a pity, because she looked amazing.

"Oh!" Lozzie chirped from my left. "It worked! Heeeey Rainy-Raine!"

Lozzie looked exactly the same as out in reality — barefoot and bare legged, wearing nothing except her poncho and perhaps some hidden underwear. She flashed me a smile, then wrapped her arms around one of our tentacles.

We said: "Aren't you going to get cold like that, Lozzie?"

"Mm-mm!" Lozzie shook her head. "It's a dream, you can be as warm as you want!"

Raine said: "And you can pull Heather back out, right? At will? Just click your heels and no place like home?"

Lozzie bobbed her head up and down, then raked her long blonde hair out of her face. "Mmhmm-mmhmm! It's not a sticky dream like with Mister Squiddy! Actually I think Heathy already kinda broke it. There's almost nothing here!"

Raine flashed a confident smile. "Good stuff, good to hear it. A straight walk into an unlocked house, hey?"

I wasn't sure if I should tut at Raine or reach out with a tentacle to give her a covert squeeze; I hadn't realised until that moment why she'd really joined us. She wasn't fire-power or muscle or our intimidating enforcer, not at all. She was here to make sure Lozzie kept her promise, to make sure we all turned tail and fled at the first sign of trouble.

Evelyn must have been spitting mad out in reality — that is, if all this was taking more than the blink of an eye.

"Wait," we said. "Lozzie, this is a dream? It doesn't feel like one."

"Mm!" Lozzie squeaked. "It is! But I don't think it's meant to be here. If Jokerman is home, I don't think he wants to be?"

"Feels like a dream to me," said Raine.

"It's not usually so ... Raine?"

We hadn't realised until we'd studied Raine with more care, but she

looked wrong too; her pupils were massively dilated, her skin was flushed, and she was shaking slightly — not with fear or nerves, but like she'd taken some kind of energy drug. She looked ready to run a marathon, or fight a bear, or have sex with Zheng.

“Uh ... Raine, are you okay?”

She nodded. “Just feels a bit weird, that’s all. If I feel like I’m gonna fall over or something, I’ll tap out early. But I’m fine. Let’s rock.” She turned her eyes toward the Brutalist Lady of the Forest. “Up those steps, then? Doesn’t seem like there’s any other way inside.”

“Hold my hand, Heathy!” Lozzie chirped. She wiggled her hand into mine and held on tight. “In case we have to run!”

Raine set off toward the building. “You two stay behind me, alright? Let me go in front.”

Our ad-hoc trio of dream-explorers crossed the loamy grass which filled the strip of land between the edge of the forest and the building herself; the structure loomed, four stories of heavy, dark concrete, weather-stained and wet, running with little rivulets of water. The brown windows were all dark and still, showing no lights, no life, no motion. Some of the buildings on the Sharrowford University campus were like that, but always lit from the inside, always glowing with even just a touch of life. This one was quiet, but in a stately, dignified sort of way. Her sweeping clean lines and sharp angles formed a perfect counterpoint to the dark green of the forest.

Whoever had made this was a genius.

We almost blushed when we reached the lip of her staircase.

The stairs up toward the front door were akin to those outside a great public building, or a library, or a courthouse — a hundred steps climbing into the air, to a row of dark glass doors. But the concrete had no lower termination point, simply sinking into the ground as an uneven line, with the earth grown right up to the edges of the structure; it gave the impression that the building had been disgorged from the bowels of the forest, not built here by other hands.

Raine drew her pistol as we climbed the steps, pointing it carefully downward with both hands. Lozzie fluttered and skipped, almost weightless. I used my tentacles to help us endure the climb.

Raine paused before the glass doors and peered inside, going up on tiptoe, ducking her head from side to side. “Nobody home?”

Lozzie stuck a hand out of her poncho, palm up, and looked up at the sky. Raindrops began to patter off the steps. We drew closer to the doors, beneath the shelter of a concrete overhang, out of the sudden rain.

“Oh, it’s raining!” we said. “Is that a good sign? Or a bad one?”

Raine snorted. “A sudden storm drives our stranded protagonists into the spooky abandoned building. What horrors will they encounter within?”

I rolled my eyes, with an unexpected flutter in my chest. Lozzie giggled. Raine laughed at her own terrible joke and pushed one of the doors open.

We crept inside.

The interior of the mysterious dream-structure was concrete, concrete, and more concrete. Dark concrete walls formed wide and airy corridors; concrete ceilings were lined with strip-lights — turned off, so the only illumination came through the brown glass windows, slowly strangled by the growing static of the raindrops; concrete floors were marked with concrete arrows, pointing down one corridor, up another, left and right and backing up on themselves again.

Two pairs of trainers and Lozzie’s bare feet padded down empty corridors of echoing concrete, circling the inside of the building, looking for anything — anything at all, any room which contained more than just windows and concrete floor.

But this was an empty house.

“Creepy-creepy spooky-spooky,” Lozzie whispered.

“Lozzie, please don’t say that,” we protested.

Lozzie giggled, then whispered ‘spoooookeeeee’ under her breath.

Raine took the corridors and corners with utmost seriousness — though a little too sharply, a little too quickly, too wired with strange dream-energy. She led with her pistol, pointing it at bare concrete walls, bare concrete floors, and doors made of nothing but glass and a handle.

“Watch your corners,” she hissed. “Holler at me if you see anything.”

“There’s nothing here,” we whispered. “Maybe he’s not in?”

“Maybe he’s sleeping!” Lozzie chirped.

Then, when we reached the doors of the front entrance again, we heard the whistling.

Jolly, tuneless, echoing from deep inside the structure. We all paused and shared a glance. Raine raised her eyebrows. Lozzie tilted her head as if the whistling meant something. But then she shrugged and puffed out her cheeks. The whistling came and went, notes going up and down, without purpose. Exactly like a person whistling while doing some random domestic task.

Raine pointed down the corridor we hadn’t taken — the one that went straight into the heart of the building. We all nodded. Lozzie hung on tight.

The corridor went straight, then right, then left, then met a pair of double doors made from opaque glass. The whistling was coming from inside — but still far away.

Raine paused, raised one hand, and hissed: “If something weird or bad happens when we step through—”

Lozzie finished for her. “Then back we go! Go go go!”

Raine pushed the doors open and led with her gun. We scurried in behind her. Then we all stopped, staring, three mouths open in shock. Even my tentacles froze.

In the core of the Brutalist beauty was a single room as large as a football pitch; a concrete box like a giant warehouse. We had the distinct impression that out in reality, such a room would require at least a few structural supports to stop the roof from caving in. But this one was featureless, plain, and gigantic.

Except for all the toilets.

Hundreds and hundreds of white porcelain toilets were lined up on the floor in a perfect grid pattern, all of them facing the same direction. They looked like they were plumbed in as well, not simply sitting loose on the ground. Each one had about five feet of clearance on all sides.

“Um,” I said. “This is ... new.”

“Ever seen anything like this, Outside?” Raine whispered.

Lozzie and I both shook our heads. Lozzie snort-giggled into a corner of her poncho.

The whistling was coming from the rear of the room, by the back wall. A figure was sitting on one of the toilets, a newspaper propped open on his knees, whistling loudly. He was also completely naked.

Raine whispered, “He hasn’t noticed us. Lozzie, is this a dream thing?”

Lozzie tilted her head one way, then the other. “Don’t think he knows he’s here!”

Raine chuckled. “Heather, what the hell did you do to this guy?”

“I don’t know!” we hissed. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Let’s go say hi!” chirped Lozzie.

Raine kept her gun in both hands, pointed at the floor. “Just keep your distance. Dream or not, remember that he’s a mage.”

The three of us crossed the field of toilets, awkwardly filtering down one of the long rows of endless identical porcelain bowls, complete with rear water tanks and flushing handles. We peered into a few to confirm they were indeed full of water. At least they were spotlessly clean.

Mister Joe King did not look up when we drew close.

He looked exactly as he had when we’d bumped into him on our way to Edward’s house. A big, broad face, given to easy smiles, beneath an artfully messy mop of dark curly hair. Nose a little large, a little puffy around the eyes, with big cheekbones. A healthy, olive-coloured complexion — all over, for as much as any of us wanted to see; broad shoulders, barrel chest, with a lot of muscle packed onto a soft frame. He had very hairy legs and a dark thatch of chest hair. We tried not to look at anything else.

He went on whistling, pausing briefly to chuckle at something in his newspaper. I tilted my head to read the name of the publication, but it was all nonsense, letters and words scrambled by the dream.

“Hey,” Raine said. “Joe.”

“Mmmm?” Mister Joking grunted vaguely, but didn’t raise his eyes from the newspaper.

“Oi, mate. It’s us,” Raine went on. “We’re in your dreams. Come on, pay attention now. Chop chop, laddie.”

“Ehhhhh,” went Joe. He turned the page of his paper.

Raine sighed. “Alright. Lozzie, how do we—”

Lozzie filled her lungs, and shouted: “I can see your dick!”

Her voice echoed off into the concrete void.

Mister Joe King looked up.

I saw the moment of recognition, the freezing of his eyes, the stilling of his breath — the realisation that he was not alone inside his own head. We braced for combat, for hyperdimensional mathematics, for Lozzie to grab us and rip us from the dream, for Raine to raise her pistol and—

“Woah!” Joe King said, recoiling without leaving his porcelain throne. He raised his hands, newspaper forgotten in his lap.

Raine laughed. “There we go. That’s more like it. Hello there, mate.”

“Woah, woah!” Joe King went on, eyes wide at the three of us. “Okay, woah! Holy shit. Hey, hey, girlies, woah, okay! I never did anything to you girls! I fucked off! I fucked off, twice! Alright? I never came after you. I bugged out from Edward’s bullshit. What the fuck, yo?”

Raine lowered her gun — but not all the way. “This ain’t our fault, fella.”

I sighed. “I called a phone number. You dragged us in here?”

Mister Joking frowned at me in confusion; I had to remind myself that this could all be another layer of act, a trick to leave us off guard. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I called a phone number. You had a recorded message. You asked for a password, and I ... broke in.”

He gestured at me with one meaty hand. “Duh! ‘Zactly! You broke in. I think I’m right justified in being a bit freaked here!”

We held up a hand and three tentacles. He eyed them — us — with wary suspicion. “What is this place?” we said. “It’s like a dream but it’s not. And ... excuse me, but what are you doing? Can’t you put some clothes on?”

Mister Joking looked genuinely offended, pulling a face like I was talking absolute nonsense after breaking into his house. “What do you mean, what am I doing?” he said, voice hitching high with outrage and confusion. “I’m just existing. I mean, sure, ‘kay, cool, this ain’t exactly real, but what do you mean by ... ” He paused, narrowed his eyes, and glanced at Lozzie. “Wait a sec. Lass, there you said ... uh ... Right, what do you see? Like, me, right now? What are you seeing here?”

Lozzie smothered a giggle.

I sighed. “You’re ... naked.”

Raine said, “You’re sitting naked on the bog, mate.”

Lozzie lost control of her giggles.

“What?!” Joking looked disgusted. He shoved his newspaper into his lap. “Oh, fuck. What do you lot want?!”

“Information,” I said.

He boggled at me, like I was an idiot — or perhaps like I was seven layers of squid girl who had interrupted him on the toilet, while her scary girlfriend held him at gunpoint and her pixie friend giggled at the size of his penis.

I sighed a big sigh. “You were studying the Eye. It’s how we first ran into you. I remember that you had notebooks, with drawings, and other information. I want to know what you know. I want every last detail. I’m willing to threaten you, but I would rather exchange information as equals, as—”

Mister Joking straightened up.

The mask — the easy-going wide boy, the harmless laddish drunkard with the grin and the rolling tilt to his words — vanished. In his place, the mage started back at us, suddenly full of stern dignity and unquestioned mastery. Even naked, he radiated cold confidence.

“I will not help you,” he said, in the thick Welsh accent of the man

under the mask.

“Ahhhh,” went Raine. “Hey there you. We talking to the man in charge, now?”

“We are all in charge,” he said.

We sighed. “Why not? Why not help me?”

“I know what you are, Miss Heather Morell,” said Joseph King.

“You are the progeny, the little watcher to the *Magnus Viglator*. I do not think it wise to give you advice on how to better emulate your adoptive parent.”

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.10

Joseph King — ‘Mister Joking’, the multi-layered mage, both loose-limbed laddish lout and withered Welsh wizard in one body, martial artist, artful dodger, wide boy with a photographic memory and mercenary morals — sat straight and proud on his porcelain throne, naked from head to toe, with a newspaper stuffed over his hairy crotch, framed by cold concrete amid a field of toilets in the depths of a dream. He stared me down with all the imperious defiance of his pseudonymous surname.

He did not repeat himself when I simply boggled and blinked; he was not the sort of man given to repeating his pronouncements.

Raindrops drummed on the distant concrete roof. Thunder rumbled, over the forest and far away, a lingering darkness at the edge of the dream. The storm outdoors intensified, sending a chill through the air inside this impossible concrete beauty.

“ ... emulate my adoptive parent?” I eventually echoed. “I’m sorry, but you think I want to be like the Eye? You think I’m trying to turn into that?”

Joseph folded his meaty arms over his broadly muscled chest. His heavy-lidded eyes remained locked upon mine, though we were sure by then that our eyeballs were a mass of coruscating colour, cycling back and forth from black to pink, from glowing purple to slithering squid-shimmer rainbow; the effect was subconscious, automatic, instinctive. We were in a dream — of sorts, though we did not fully understand it — and so we had already begun the process of stretching out our uncomfortably compacted biology. Eyes, eyelids, teeth, lips, vocal chords, all were adjusting toward our abyssal truth, unfolding pneuma-somatic additions and extending in non-human directions. Our skin shimmered with blooming chromatophores. Our tentacles reached outward, grasping some of the nearby spotless, never-used toilets. A cephalopod, anchoring herself amid the rocks, staring down a wary shark.

Joseph tilted his head, raised his eyebrows, and said: “Is this display supposed to convince me otherwise? I see a human being leaving behind her humanity — in a transitory state now, perhaps, but your eventual destination can be only that of the pattern which was impressed upon you. You have even gathered a cult to help with this.”

We bristled — literally, with spikes and barbs. “Cult?!”

Lozzie sang: “Oopsie-doodle, Joey-woey. You have pissy-wissied off the Heathy-weathy.”

We faltered. “L-Lozzie, please don’t—”

Raine chuckled. “Does that make me ‘head’ priestess? Eh? Ehhhhh? What with me munching so much rug? Ehh? Get it? Eh?”

Lozzie exploded into a terrible case of the giggles, flapping her poncho and jumping in a little circle. Raine sketched a short bow — without letting her handgun waver for even a second, covering Joking without pointing the muzzle directly at him.

Luckily for the mage, Lozzie’s silly baby-talk and Raine’s terrible joke made me blush and tut, my angry roll disrupted.

Joking said: “I mean no offense. As a goal, ascension is as morally neutral as any other. I render no judgement, cast no stone. Why would I? I have no place to stand. But I do stand — on planet earth, this fragile sphere. Unlike some I have no desire to retreat into dreams or turn into something else, so my personal fate is tied to the fate of the human bubble. And you, ‘little watcher’, you will pop it like flame applied to a balloon. I know that I am a monster, but I am not interested in helping to destroy the world.”

We let out a huge huff, flapping our arms and rolling our eyes. “Why is every mage, every ... everyone! Why is everyone I’ve met this last year so unfailingly bloody dramatic?” I hissed through my teeth. “Pardon my language, ‘Mister Joking’, but that sounds like something from one of Raine’s video games. I’m not going to end the world. I’m not a ... a ... ”

Joseph just frowned at me, vaguely confused. “Pardon your language?”

“Yes, yes,” I sighed. “I already said that.”

His frown got worse. We stared at each other, both confused now.

Raine cleared her throat. "Mate, you're in the wrong genre. Also, hey, sorry to be offensive, sorry in advance, but I can't take you seriously with that fruity Welsh accent. You can't be rattling off jay-are-pee-gee dialogue in a voice meant for TV garden shows or a professor at an agricultural college."

Joseph King's chin-up defiance flickered with genuine offense. Raine shot him one of those special grins that told everyone she knew she was being awful, and was enjoying it far too much.

He said: "You English are all the fucking same."

Lozzie chirped, "Heathy is only a veeeeery small little teeny eye. And no reflection!"

Mister Joking's attention snapped to Lozzie. "No reflection ... " he murmured, frowning as if this meant something. Then his eyebrows went up. "Miss Lauren Lilburne. The old man's niece. So you are a dreamer, after all. I assumed he was lying."

Lozzie corrected him. "Lozzie, please."

To my incredible surprise, Joseph gave Lozzie a nod of mutual respect. "Lozzie. Please, dreamer, do explain. Prove me wrong, if you can."

Lozzie grinned a nasty, evil little grin. "I don't owe you aaaanything, Joey. You worked with my uncle. You get the baaaad Lozzie."

Joseph uncrossed his arms and gestured wide with both hands. "I brokered information. That was all. I did not broker lives, or perform kidnappings for money, or torture small children to death —"

Raine said, still grinning: "But you worked for somebody who did. Come on mate, don't plead innocence now. We're not interested."

Joking said right back, "You clearly are, or you would simply be making your case, not blocking yourselves with overwrought moralising. If the dreamer here has insight into Miss Morell, share it. If you want to do business, convince me you're not going to grow beyond your bonds and rend the veil between worlds."

Before I could roll my eyes at such absurd phrasing, Lozzie did a big huffy puff of breath, flapped her poncho like a jellyfish drifting into a column of cold water, and blew a massive raspberry at Joseph.

He stared, unimpressed, then said, “Are we done here? Can I return to taking a shit in peace?”

“Lozzie is telling the truth,” I said, trying not to sigh again. “I’m not trying to turn into the Eye, or grow into something similar to it, or anything like that. I’ve already become what I was supposed to be all along, no matter how many more physical changes I may have to undergo. I’ve been to the abyss, and brought back the truth of my own body. That’s all.”

“Then why—”

“I need information on the Eye because we’re planning an expedition to Wonderland. We’re going to rescue my twin sister.”

Joseph King stared, hostility dropping away in favour of incredulous curiosity. Visible goosebumps rose on his naked arms and legs, little dark hairs rising with them. The Welsh Mage slipped out of his face, replaced by the laddish lout.

“Fuck me,” he muttered, all rough and easy once more. “Fucking ‘ell lass. At’s a fuckin’ suicide mission if I’ve ever heard of one. There’s quicker ways to get messed up, if you want. Less permanent, too.”

“My twin sister, Maisie, she was—”

Joking waved me down with one meaty hand. “Yeah yeah yeah yeah, I know all about the sister thing, right? I know, I know it’s true, it’s just fucking, like, mad! Hey!”

Raine chuckled softly. Lozzie blew another raspberry. The Drunken Lad grimaced at her, lacking the respect of the Welsh Mage.

“Wait,” I said. “Wait, how do you know all this stuff in the first place? How do you know all about me?”

The Welsh Mage straightened up again, stern and stoic, like he’d overcome his shock and regained control of his reactions. He said: “I told you, I broker information. You crossed my desk, so to speak, when Alexander Lilburne was verifying your personal history. You piqued my interest, which led me to your adoptive parent — the Magnus Vigilator. Knowing things is my profession and my passion — especially knowing things about ‘big game’.”

Joseph King smiled, thin and dangerous; rain drummed on this concrete dream like static at the edge of a screen.

We shuddered, though we tried not to show it; we reminded ourselves that ‘Mister Joking’ had indeed worked for Edward — dead children and tortured demons and expendable cult and all. When we’d bumped into him on the way to Edward’s house, he had fed us some line about Edward ‘going too far’ — but privately I suspected he was simply a rat fleeing a sinking ship. Top-Right and Bottom-Left tentacles corrected the rest of us: rats were cute and sweet, and made loving and loyal pets. Joking was none of those things. We had to tread lightly.

“Do you believe us?” we said. “About my sister? That I’m not trying to become like the Eye?”

Joking tilted his head the other way and put his chin in one hand. “A plausible motivation. But I have no proof.”

I sighed, rapidly losing patience; there was no telling how angry and frustrated Evelyn might be growing, out in reality. Was this all still taking place in the space of a single second, or were Raine, Lozzie, and I lying unconscious on the floor, with Praem wiping our foreheads with a wet towel?

“You’re an information broker, fine,” we snapped. “Sell me the information I want.”

Joking stopped smiling. “Or?”

Or I’ll take it from your mind, I’ll rip it out of you. Give up your secrets, magician, or you’re going to get a skull full of eyeballs peering into your thoughts themselves, you—

We started reaching toward him with a tentacle. But we stopped.

There was almost nothing to hold me back from simply raiding Joking’s mind for the information I wanted; yes, this was some kind of dream, but with precise enough hyperdimensional mathematics I could trace it back to his real, physical brain. I could split his soul open like a melon and shove great sticky handfuls of his hidden research into my maw. Yes, this might prove him right about what I was becoming — but he wouldn’t be coherent or alive to complain about it.

But then I’d be no better than another mage, acting like a warlord. We would be making another contribution to the dog-eat-dog magical underworld, of every mage assuming that all others are out to murder them and steal their books.

Joking arguably deserved it. He worked for monsters.

But what was the point in trying to be different if you kept breaking your own rules? Edward had given us no choice, but Joseph King was merely asking for a polite conversation. He was asking to be convinced.

We took a deep breath. “Or nothing. Is there no deal we can make?”

Joking chuckled softly. “Like trading nuclear secrets to a rogue state?”

“If you want to think of it like that, fine.”

Raine cracked a grin. “Promise we’ll only use it for power generation. Peaceful purposes only.”

Joking sighed and straightened up again. His newspaper crinkled against his thighs and the rim of the toilet. “Must we hold this conversation while I am seated on the commode?”

“Commode?” Raine laughed. “How old are you, mate? Serious, for real, no mage bullshit.”

“I am forty two years of age. Not that it is any of your business.”

“Hmmmmmm,” Raine hummed, narrowing her eyes. “Very well preserved for forty two. You don’t look a day over twenty five.”

Joking did not smile. “I credit regular exercise and clean eating.”

We said: “We have good information that you look identical now to how you did twenty years ago. What’s the point in lying to us?”

Joking smiled one of those thin and dangerous smiles again. “Ah, the observer sees all. Proving my point for me, Heather Morell?”

I huffed and tutted and had half a mind to slap him across the face with a tentacle. “I asked somebody! I didn’t stare through you and measure your age, like rings in a tree or something!”

Joking’s smile turned into a shit-eating grin: the Drunken Lout flowed back into his mannerisms and musculature. He shrugged, a lazy rolling gesture. “Just joshing you about, lass. My little joke, like. You wanna deal? Cool, but let’s not do it on the fucking bog, yeah? Can I at least put some threads on? This is just weird. I mean, I know, like, some blokes would pay good money for three young ladies to watch them take a dump, but I’m not into that. Not getting

anything out of this. Nope. Not for me, cheers.”

Raine asked, quick and business-like: “You got anywhere else we can talk?”

Joking pointed at the ceiling. “Offices, upstairs. Not much, but better than hanging out in the water closet, hey?”

Raine shared a glance with Lozzie and me. Lozzie puffed out her cheeks.

I said: “Wait. Joe, this really isn’t a trick? You’re not going to try to flee, or shut down all this dream ... well, whatever this is? You’re not trying to get away?”

Mister Joking rose from the toilet on which he sat, newspaper bundled up over his crotch. As he rose, he became the Welsh Mage once more, staring at me with a piercing look.

“One could no more flee from the child of the Magnus Viglator than one could flee from the sun. Hide underground for a while, certainly. But one must emerge eventually, and be burned upon the earth.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “And what does that mean?”

“It means it’s not worth running.” His shoulders slumped, and the Drunken Lout was back. He gave us a sheepish grin and tucked the excess newspaper up between his legs to cover his backside. “No pics of my arse, alright?”

Raine gestured with her pistol.

“Move slowly,” she said. “No fancy stuff.”

Joe King led us back out of the dream-hall of regimented toilets and into the bare concrete corridors of his strange Brutalist construct. Raine kept him covered from behind with her handgun, though she didn’t point it directly at his broad and hairy back, nor did she have her finger on the trigger — she practised proper ‘trigger discipline’, another term she’d once taught me. Lozzie flitted left and right, pointing a finger at Joking in imitation of Raine, apparently having a much better time than anybody else present. I smouldered with vague irritation at this entire situation, spreading my tentacles wide to touch the walls and reach for the ceiling. We did not want to be a monster, even in dealing with other monsters.

When we reached the entrance area we discovered that a set of concrete stairs had appeared at one end, leading upward into dimly lit hallways. Joking padded along on his bare feet, whistling tunelessly to himself, happily striding into the deeper shadows, far from any of the brown glass windows and the scant illumination which still filtered through the storm clouds outdoors.

Sheets of rain lashed and sluiced against the roof and walls now, running down the exterior of the windows in great waves of water. The storm had burst in full, drenching the swaying forest beyond the clearing.

Joking led us into the darkness. Lozzie stopped hopping about. She clung to my arm instead. Raine's pupils were dilated too wide for comfort, her head too twitchy. Her finger crept onto the trigger several times — she kept catching herself doing it and correcting the position of her hand. I raised two tentacles and made them glow, fighting back the gloom.

Upstairs, Joking padded down a single long corridor toward a pair of double-doors. He didn't stop or turn back to say anything, but simply pushed one open and slipped through.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Raine shouted. "Wait, wait!"

"Oh, I knew it!" I huffed. "He's making a break for it, he—"

All three of us rushed into the room, close on Joking's heels. Raine led with her gun, I brandished barbed tentacles, and Lozzie clung to my rear, and—

The lights snapped on. We all stood there, blinking.

"Bugger me," Joking said. "You girlies are so paranoid. Cool your jets, yeah? Take a chill pill. Puff some ganja for your woes. Sit down if you like, I'll just be a sec."

Joseph was standing by a bank of light switches, just inside the doorway — the first controls of any sort we'd seen in this oddly blank dream-scape building. He ambled away, heading for a closet built into the wall.

Raine whistled, eyeing the room. "Swanky."

Joseph King's 'office' was another massive concrete room, though considerably less gigantic than the weird space full of toilets downstairs. Concrete walls and concrete floor and a high concrete

ceiling, just like the rest of the building, but it also boasted a concrete ‘desk’ — or at least a concrete protrusion shaped like a desk. The mock-desk was covered in papers and notes, and a menagerie of fancy little office toys: clacking metal balls on strings, wooden duck statues that dipped up and down as if they were drinking water, a row of lava lamps all in different colours, stress balls with smiley faces, finger-puzzles, fidget spinners, and a tiny robotic dog — currently switched off, still and silent.

At the rear of the room, behind the desk, was a floor-to-ceiling window looking out over the dark, fairy-tale forest beyond. The storm had turned day to night and filled the air with a wall of water, which lashed against the windows in a constant static drum of rain.

We appeared to be much higher up than we had physically climbed; though the storm blotted out all detail, we could just about see the horizon where forest canopy met storming sky.

Vast lumbering shadows moved beyond that horizon.

Raine and Lozzie didn’t say anything about that; they hadn’t even seemed to notice. Joking didn’t look past the storm either. We decided not to draw attention to the giant ghosts of Joseph King’s psyche.

On one side of the room was a row of closets — with doors made of concrete, of course. Joe King was busy opening one of those and extracting a fuzzy white dressing gown.

In the middle of the room was a semi-circle of chairs. Thankfully they were not cast in yet more concrete, but made of good old metal and plastic, weird low-slung things with bright orange fake-leather seats and shiny chrome armrests. They looked horribly outdated and designed specifically to clash with any interior in which they were placed, let alone that of clean Brutalist concrete.

“Oh!” Joking lit up at Raine’s comment. “Cheers!”

“Nah, not cheers,” Raine said. “I mean it makes you look like an eighties business asshole. Or a Bond villain on a budget.”

Joking groaned and tutted. He shielded himself from our prying eyes while he shrugged on his dressing gown and tied the matching fuzzy belt around his waist. He discarded the newspaper on the floor. Raine and I both watched carefully, to make sure he wasn’t

pulling a concealed weapon from inside the closet.

“Hands where I can see ‘em, mate,” said Raine.

Joking tutted and rolled his eyes again. “Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled. “No sudden movements, yes miss officer, three bags full, yadda yadda.”

“A few green plants in here would make all the difference,” I muttered to myself, still too concerned with the state of the building. “You’re supposed to add growing things to Brutalist architecture, really.”

Joking turned around to face me, now dressed in his fluffy robe. He squinted as if this concept was entirely new to him, and stroked his chin with one hand.

“You serious, like?”

I blinked at him in surprise. “Um ... yes? That’s how Brutalist buildings are supposed to work, in theory. You’re meant to frame and fill the concrete canvas with greenery. The exterior of this place is perfect, it’s beautiful, especially in the forest environment. I assumed that was intentional, but ... ” We trailed off and shrugged, all seven of us, tentacles wobbling and all. “What is this place, anyway? Did you design it? Is this literal, or ... ?”

Joking puffed out a big sigh — and swapped back to the Welsh Mage. He nodded once, cautious but polite with reserved respect. “In a manner of speaking. A very old friend of mine designed this structure, but she never got to see it built in reality. I ... ‘inherited’ her notes, her sketches, her drawings. What I believe you are seeing, here in my ‘mind palace’, is somewhat of a monument to her. A remembrance for a dearly departed friend. Perhaps one day I will have the funds to build it in reality. I confess, I know nothing about architecture. All this is dream. Greenery, you say?”

We nodded again. “Try reading a book or two?”

Joking gave me a flat and level look.

We tutted and blushed, tentacles wiggling up and down with embarrassment. “We didn’t mean to be rude! We just mean that if you want to learn about Brutalist architecture, it’s not hard, there’s plenty of books. You can even look it up on the internet!”

Lozzie snorted; I wasn’t sure why. Raine muttered: “Yup, Heather’s

right, you can find anything online these days.”

Joseph’s eyes narrowed — at me. “We?” he echoed. “You keep pluralizing yourself.”

I stared him dead in the eyes. “There’s seven of me in here. Each of our tentacles houses a separate neurological web, connected via a main hub. Seven Heathers, one being. Sound much like an eyeball to you?” We tutted. We couldn’t help it. There was something inherently irritating about Mister Joseph King, something getting under our skin.

“This is truth?” Joking prompted.

“Yes. So I suppose you and I have something in common. If your whole switching thing isn’t an act. If it is, then it’s still deeply offensive.”

“Huh,” Joking grunted — and then rolled his shoulders and dropped back into the personality of the Drunken Lout. He shot all three of us a big lazy grin and gestured at the chairs. “You ladies gonna sit, or are we all gonna stand around and get sore knees? ‘Cos I’m gonna sit, I’m gonna sit good. Watch this!”

Joe King sauntered alongside the semi-circle of tasteless chairs, rubbing his hands together like a man about to impress a garden party by lighting his barbeque with some esoteric technique, via an unconventional source of flame and a risk of burning off his eyebrows. He held up one hand, clicked his fingers — and leaned back, as if expecting to be caught and cradled by an invisible chair.

Instead he crashed right onto his considerable backside, landing hard on the concrete with an audible thump.

“Oof,” he grunted. “Ohhhhh. Oof. Bugger me sideways. Ow.” He reached back to rub his arse, grimacing and wincing. “Fuck.”

Lozzie exploded into a peal of giggles. Raine snorted and shook her head — but she didn’t waver with her gun, not lax enough to fall for any tricks. I frowned at Joking as he grunted and groaned and picked himself up off the floor, huffing and puffing and rubbing his poor bruised backside. He tried clicking his fingers again, but nothing happened. Then he scowled at the patch of concrete where he’d fallen, as if it had personally insulted him by being so hard and unyielding.

“Um,” we said, gently. “What exactly was that supposed to be?”

Joking cleared his throat; he actually looked embarrassed. We reminded ourselves that this whole thing might be a trick to throw us off our guard.

“Not much of a dreamer, really,” he muttered. “Trying to show off.”

Lozzie raised her chin and narrowed her eyes, uncommonly smug and sly. “Do you need a little helps? From little me? From Lozzieeeeeee?”

Joking glanced at her, both sheepish and mortified. Raine started to hiss a warning — but Lozzie was already bouncing forward, skipping across the concrete floor. She drew far, far too close to Joking, well within his striking range. Then she tapped the floor with her foot and whispered under her breath.

A chair sprouted from the concrete surface — a beanbag chair, in bright, eye-searing neon pink.

“Wheeeey!” Joking cheered — and flopped himself down in the chair. Apparently the aesthetic choice was no problem for him. “A true dreamer, hey? Very nice, very flash! Cheers, little Loz! Can I call you Loz?”

Lozzie hopped back, beyond Joking’s range. She smiled, wide and nasty, and said: “You may not. Bum face.”

Joking rolled an easy shrug and pulled a grin. “Oh well. Can’t win ‘em all. Come on, ladies, sit down, sit down! If we’re gonna have a proper deal, we gotta talk proper. Maybe have some drinks. And hey—” He gestured at Raine. “I know your whole shtick is like you’re queen of the butches or whatever — and I’m a modern man, I respect that — but there’s no point waving that gun around.”

Raine gave Joking a very dangerous sort of smile, with violence lurking behind her peeled-back lips; I would have quivered like jelly if she’d looked at me that way. “I think I’ll keep you covered, mate.”

Lozzie went: “Pbbbbbbbt,” like she was imitating Tenny. “Actually Rainey-oos, it won’t do anything. We’re in the dream!”

Raine raised an eyebrow at Lozzie. Joking looked suddenly very interested.

We said: “Lozzie, where is this, exactly? I know we’re not Outside. And we’re not literally in a dream, because we’re all lucid.” I glanced at Raine’s massively dilated eyes and the way she was breathing a little too hard. “Well, almost all lucid.”

Lozzie tilted her head one way, then the other, chewing on her bottom lip as she thought. Then she drew her poncho in tight, like a jellyfish readying for a rapid descent.

“We’re not behind the mirror,” she said. “We’re just reflected in the mirror right now. All reflections! We could break Mister Jokes down into teeny tiny itty bitty pieces and we wouldn’t hurt him. Same for us! He could have a big monster eat Raine, and Raine would be fine.”

“Damn fucking right,” said Raine.

Joking nodded along with sudden fascination. “‘Reflected in the mirror’. Damn, little Lozz — uh, ‘Lozzie’. You’re a genius, aren’t you?”

Lozzie stuck her tongue out at him. “Say my name wrong and you’ll have nightmares!”

Joking raised his hands in mock-surrender.

Raine said: “So, where’s your real body right now? Are you asleep? Are we in your dream?”

Lozzie answered before Joking could. “Nooooooo,” she cooed. “Rainey, it’s not *a* dream, it’s *the* dream. The dream! The dream we all share, all the time. Joker-face just pokes out a tiny bit into it, so he can talk without facing. It’s clever but it’s also kind of stupid.”

Joking grinned wide, and said: “I think I’m in the middle of taking a shit, like, for real.”

“Ew,” we said. Then we sighed. “Fine, please forget about that. Can we talk about the Eye, now?”

Joking pulled a big, silly, exaggerated squint. “Mmmmmmmmm—maybe. If you sit down.”

He gestured at the terrible chairs and their clashing colours. The storm raged and flowed behind him, sweeping the brown glass windows with thick lashings of rain. Water drummed on roof and walls. We tried not to feel like a cork in a bottle.

We grabbed a chair with our tentacles and dragged it toward us. “Fine, alright. I don’t appreciate the show of power, though. If you want this to be an actual negotiation, then it needs to be—”

Raine put out an arm to stop me.

She said, to Joking: “Actually, nah, I don’t think so, mate. I smell a rat.”

Joking threw up his hands in huffy exasperation. “You’re the ones who broke in here! Come on, show of good faith, sit down and talk, hey?”

Raine was shaking her head, grinning with dangerous intent. In the corner of my eye I saw her index finger slip over the trigger of her handgun.

“Uh,” we said. “Raine. Raine we didn’t come here to fight, we came here to talk. We’re going to try to talk. And he can’t hurt us—”

“—can’t hurty wurty!” Lozzie backed me up.

Raine wouldn’t look away from Joking. “I smell a rat,” she repeated. “And it’s a real bad one. Even in a dream, you’ve got something up your sleeve. Right?”

Joking literally pulled back the sleeves of his robe and showed us his hands. He wiggled his fingers. “Nothing here but my—”

Green.

“Was that there before?” I blurted out.

Everyone looked at me.

I nodded at the far corner of the room, next to the rain-lashed window. Everyone else followed my gesture.

A potted plant stood in the corner. Shiny green leaves, each the size of my hand, hung at the end of massive thick stems. Soil rich and black and dark filled the pot. The pot itself was soft orange, warm terracotta. The rain outdoors seemed to shy away from it.

Joking frowned. “The fuck—”

“There’s another one!” Lozzie chirped.

Another healthy green plant had appeared in the opposite corner, a sister to the first, glossy leaves glowing against the dark and rainy

background. None of us — not even me — had seen the moment it had popped into existence.

“Is this a dream thing?” I muttered.

Raine backed up and raised her handgun, but she didn’t point it at Mister Joking. The mage got out of his beanbag seat, turning on the spot, head swivelling every which way, as if he might catch the practical joker in the act. Lozzie pulled her poncho in tight, more than a little spooked. I drew my tentacles in as well — but more in reaction to the others, not because this felt at all creepy.

Anybody who appreciated Brutalist architecture well enough to start filling it with plants was probably not aiming to murder us all with dream-magic mind-bullets.

Absurd, yes, but I couldn’t pinpoint why I felt that way.

Raine didn’t agree. She hissed: “Lozzie, are you doing this?”

“Nooooooooope,” said Lozzie, in a surprisingly small voice. She clung to one of my tentacles.

Joking turned to frown at us — then flinched and pointed. “Another one! Fuck me, what is this, guerilla gardening?”

He was right; a third potted plant had appeared in the third corner of the room, right behind Raine and Lozzie and me. Up close, it was clearly some kind of peace lily, with white blooms ready to open on several of the longest stems. The soil looked freshly watered.

Raine said, “Lozzie, we made a promise to Evee. Time to—”

Joking raised his voice, still in laddish hooligan mode: “Oh no you don’t! You lot brought something in here, and now it’s fucking with my—”

Clonk.

We all jumped and turned to find a fourth potted plant now occupied the final corner of the room. All four filled. All four ready.

“Lozz—”

“I really don’t think this is—”

“You lot brought some—”

A soft and level voice cut through the sudden whirl of panic, like a

little sliver bell ringing above a pack of startled cats:

“A well-cared for plant will brighten any room.”

Mister Joking whirled on the spot, fists raised, eyes wide in shock.

Raine lowered her gun with a sigh. Lozzie burst into the most awful giggles, almost crying a little bit. I just tutted; we should have expected this.

Standing behind Mister Joking’s concrete desk — silhouetted by the dark glass and the pounding rain, cradling a fifth and final potted plant in her strong and unbending arms — was Praem.

She was dressed as usual, head to toe in her perfectly arrayed maid uniform.

“Ensure adequate sunlight to encourage photosynthesis,” she said. “Use recommended soil mix for proper nutrition. Be sure to water all your plants regularly.”

Lozzie did a little round of applause, hands muffled by the fabric of her poncho.

Raine said, “Cheers for the assist, Praem. But maybe warn me in future? I almost shot you.”

Praem intoned: “I am unshootable.”

Joking just stared at Praem, confused and uncertain, fists still half-raised as if ready for a fight, but trapped by the logic of a disintegrating dream.

He said, “How the fu— I mean— that’s real experienced dreamer shit, and you’re not even a human being. What the—”

“I am a maid,” replied Praem.

“Yeah, okay, nice cosplay, and you—”

“Maids may enter any room.”

Praem stared with her blank, milk-white eyes. The rain slammed the glass behind her in great waves. Joking swallowed, slowly and carefully, like he was staring down a hungry tiger, not a soft, plush young woman who was quite a bit shorter than him, and had nowhere near his muscle mass or bulk.

Eventually he said, “Now, like, I wasn’t gonna— like— this was just

for protection. You—”

Praem placed the fifth and final potted plant on the concrete desk. The pot went thunk.

“This one is called Amelia,” she intoned.

Joking glanced down at his balled fists. Slowly and carefully he raised each fist to his lips and blew across his knuckles, like blowing out a pilot light. Then he lowered each fist to his hips and made a motion as if he was holstering a pair of six-shooters, like he was turning down a duel in the main street of some dusty frontier town in the American Old West.

Joseph King straightened up again. The laddish lout had dropped away. The Welsh Mage stood tall and dignified in his fluffy white robe.

“I am disarmed, maiden,” he said to Praem.

“Maid.”

“ ... maid,” he said. “Good enough?”

Praem turned her head to make it clear she was looking at us — Raine, Lozzie, and myself. She said: “You may sit.”

Raine was laughing softly and shaking her head. “You serious?”

Lozzie chirped: “Praem knows best!”

I sighed. “Yes, thank you, Praem. Is Evee alright?”

“She has not yet finished becoming angry,” said Praem. “Sit. We will all be good.”

We sat.

Joking perched in his bright pink, Lozzie-wrought beanbag chair, seemingly still straight-backed and stern even when framed by bubblegum neon. Raine eased herself down into one of the awful yellow seats, then visibly clicked the safety on her handgun. Lozzie took one of those chairs, turned it backward, and knelt on the seat, looking over the rear of the chair. I used my tentacles to make my own seating, leaning back on ourselves. Praem stood to one side, hands folded, staring straight ahead. The raindrops drummed on the concrete roof and pattered off the brown glass in great waves of water.

Joseph said, cold and quiet: “This does not mean I have agreed to share with you any of my own research on the Magnus Viglator.”

Raine started to laugh and shake her head — but I cut in first, and said: “Of course.”

Joking raised one stern eyebrow at me, unsmiling and unimpressed. “Of course?” he echoed.

“Well,” we said. “I was thinking about it while we were walking up here, and I suppose you have a point. You can’t be certain that I’m not going to grow into something like the Eye. So, I suppose you’re right to be concerned. All I can do is tell you that’s not my aim. I love being who and what I am right now. I don’t want to become a giant eyeball in the sky; you can’t have lesbian sex when you’re a giant eyeball in the sky.”

Lozzie giggle-snorted. Raine muttered, “eyyyyy.”

But I didn’t blush. I was dead serious. Joking seemed to understand, because he just stared, blank and unmoved.

Raine cleared her throat and raised her hand. “Can I ask a serious question? Like, no bullshit, no baiting.”

Joking rolled his eyes. “Why ask permission?”

Raine gestured at Praem.

Praem said: “You may.”

“So,” Raine began. “If you’ve got ethical concerns with passing information to Heather, what the fuck were you doing with Eddy-boy? You stole Evee’s gateway spell for him. That’s high-grade experimental magic. She made it by ripping off the cult, combining it with Heather’s insights, and then getting Lozzie to finish it. He was a dangerous, evil, nasty little monster. That was irresponsible.”

Joseph stared at her like she was a child who had insulted his face. “Edward Lilburne was just another mage with a lust for ascension. He was no threat to the world.”

Raine said, “He was a threat to us.”

Joking shrugged. “It was nothing personal. I did a job — several jobs — because he paid me.”

“We can pay you,” I said. “We can make that happen. I-I think.” I

glanced at Praem; I actually felt horribly guilty at assuming Evelyn would be happy to foot the bill, but I needed a way in, to start some kind of deal. We'd manage the details later.

Joking sighed a tiny sigh. "Not in money, fool. I do have a day job. In equivalent information — about other big game."

Raine pulled the same sort of face that Twil made whenever she got very confused. "You've got a regular job?"

Joking rolled his eyes so hard that he may as well have pulled them from their sockets. "Not all mages inherit fortunes from their slain mothers. Yes."

"... what do you do?"

"Programming," he said, as if this was the most boring admission in the world. "I'm a consultant. Government and financial systems, mostly."

Raine laughed. "And you're pleading poverty? Mate, come on, if you're doing COBOL work you're making bank."

"Only when I am not pursuing my true passion," he said, unmoved.

"Big game'," we echoed — and could not keep all the disgust off our face. "The Eye. Me? Big game, what does that mean? What are you interested in, Joseph?"

Mister Joking considered me for a moment, as if he was trying to decide how much truth to tell. He glanced at Praem, then at Lozzie, then narrowed his eyes.

"Very well," he said eventually. "I am interested in large things."

Without missing a beat, Raine said: "Ah, a size queen. Right."

Joking shot her a look — I expected him to smoulder with disgust or rage, but instead the Laddish Lout flashed back onto his features for a second: he grinned a massive, shit-eating grin and blushed slightly.

But then he was gone again, the Welsh Mage back in his place.

"Large in the spiritual sense," he explained. "The growth processes and end points of bio-spiritual accumulation. The 'result' of so-called 'ascension'. Entities that have enlarged themselves, either beyond the walls of our reality, or here, or in the shared

dreamlands. I am a big game hunter — though unlike my namesake predecessors, I am neither foolish nor arrogant enough to assume I can then shoot and kill and mount the heads of such entities.”

Raine was squinting at him. “Why? Why the interest?”

Joking rolled his eyes. “One must wrap one’s soul around a passion, or risk the same egotistical pitfalls and spiritual metastasization as every other practitioner of magic. The largest of entities offer endless opportunities for study, boundless complexity, and plenty of unsolved problems on which the mind can chew.”

We said, “And that’s why you were studying the Eye?”

Joking nodded. His guard was back up. Unwilling to offer more details without an exchange — or perhaps not at all.

We took a stab in the dark: “Why the Eye? Why then? Seems like a bit of a coincidence to us.”

Joking smacked his lips once, then said: “Toward the end of last calendar year I was made aware that one Mister Alexander Lilburne was searching for information beyond the veil—”

Raine snorted. “Beyond the veil? Come on, mate, you’re not a 90s TV special about Wiccans. You mean Outside.”

Joking sighed and ignored the insult. “Searching for information — about you, Heather Morell. His methods were crude, but a mutual contact — a non-human contact — passed me some curious details regarding the subject of his inquiries. A twin sister, the Magnus Vigilator, and so on. This piqued my interest. Few would bother to study such an entity — no useful communication can ever be made, it cannot be summoned for assistance or petitioned for a boon. A waste of time and energy. An entity like the Magnus Vigilator does not have many opportunities to interact with our reality, so I watched events unfold. When—”

“Wait!” I blurted out. “Not many opportunities? But some? What about ten years ago?”

Ten years ago, when Maisie and I had stepped through a portal to Wonderland; still, after all this time, we had no idea how that had really happened, or why.

Joking stared at me for a moment, as if I was being very rude.

“Not yours to keep,” said Praem.

Joking sighed. He shrugged, looking away, and said: “Very well. I am not that kind of monster. This is yours, for free, for it is worthless: no, Miss Heather Morell, I do not know why or how you and your twin were kidnapped—”

My heart sank. Even here, no true answers?

“—but if I did, I suspect it would not contribute to any greater comprehension of the Magnus Viglator, not at all.”

We frowned at him. “I’m sorry?”

He stared at me very hard. “It cannot reach through the veil without subordinated agency. This much is blindingly clear — pun fully intentional. It observes perfectly, but only that which is in front of it. The Magnus Viglator did not kidnap you, Heather Morell. Something else happened. Perhaps a natural phenomenon. Perhaps random chance. You are no chosen one, just a stray seed on the wind.”

We nodded. Somehow, that felt better, even if it wasn’t at all conclusive. “Thank you.”

Joking squinted at us; he didn’t really get it.

We said: “Okay, so. You studied the Eye — how?”

“Books mostly, at first. The same way as any other mage,” he said. “But then I spoke with Mister Alexander Lilburne while he was in his corpse-state, after his encounter with you.”

Lozzie sunk down behind the back of her chair; we reached out and wrapped a tentacle around her arm. She held on tight.

“‘Corpse-state’?” Raine echoed, pulling a grimace.

Joking shrugged. “The body was dead, the man was almost gone, but parts of his soul still spoke — or something else spoke through them. I questioned him — it, whatever — for several hours. That was an ordeal.” He frowned, genuinely uncomfortable. “I have seen similar conditions before, bodies walking that should be dead, scraps of soul-flesh clinging to burnt bones. But never anything quite the same. Never like that. The thing which spoke through him was ... impossible to comprehend.”

We stared at him in disbelief. “You ... you spoke to the Eye?”

Joking shook his head. "I do not believe I did. Not really. I spoke as an ant speaks to a human being staring at it with a microscope. Spraying chemical signals, only to have it all noted down in some database, stripped of subjective content. Seeing without knowing. Observation without insight. I do not think it understood anything."

We shuddered, suddenly cold, wrapped in all but one of our own tentacles.

Raine said softly: "What happened to Alexander's corpse?"

Joseph King seemed to rouse himself from dark memories. "I do not know. The Cultists took him away. I was only permitted access by sufferance and Edward Lilburne's rapidly waning influence. I do not know what became of the body." He nodded suddenly to Lozzie, who was peeking over the back of her chair. "My apologies, Miss Lilburne. A sibling deserves a corpse."

Lozzie whispered: "I hope they burned him."

Raine cleared her throat. "And I hope they put the ashes in a lead-lined box."

Joseph snorted. "Fools, the lot of them. His followers, I mean. I attempted to question many of them, too, but their connection is so much lighter. The Magnus Viglator merely lingers at the edge of their minds. None of them had anything useful to tell me." He raised his chin so he could look down at all of us. "And that was all. I have moved on from this area of study. There is nothing more to discover, for the Magnus Viglator cannot be visited or observed with any level of safety, not even in a dream. And you have said nothing to convince me of your motives, Heather Morell."

We took a deep breath, and played our hand: "What if I told you that I had a book — a short book, a pamphlet really — written by a species from Outside, an Outsider civilization, which detailed another pair of twins kidnapped and changed by the Eye?"

Joseph King raised an eyebrow. He did not seem impressed. "I would ask you where you obtained such a thing, and how I am supposed to verify that it is authentic. And I suppose I would also ask what it is meant to prove."

"It's a translation," we said. "I got it from the Library of Carcosa—"

"Ha!" Joking barked a single, harsh laugh. "Did you now?"

Raine chuckled and shook her head. Lozzie rose from her protective crouch and grinned a nasty little grin. I sighed. Joking frowned at all three of us, then at Praem, then back at me.

“You’re serious,” he said. It was not a question.

“I have special contacts,” we said, putting on a look-at-me-I’m-so-special voice. “Look, that’s not the point—”

“You claim to have visited the Library of Carcosa, retrieved a book, and then gotten back out. And that is ‘not the point?’” Joking squint-frowned at me.

Raine said: “You’re out of your depth, mate.”

Joking went quiet. Raindrops drummed on the concrete roof and moved in slow sheets down the brown glass windows. His eyes darted from me to Praem, then back again, then to Lozzie.

There it was, hidden in the rear of his eyes.

Temptation.

Like an octopus waving a tentacle-tip to imitate a worm buried in the silt; I had laid the bait and now the unwary crab was approaching, unaware of the beak hidden in the rocks above.

Joking wet his lips. “Even if you could prove the authenticity of such a document, it would tell me nothing about how far you intend to—”

“If I really do have access to the library of Carcosa, do you think you can slow me down?”

Joking paused.

We continued: “If we have access to all that knowledge, and we wanted to ... ‘ascend’—” We mimed air quotes with two tentacles. “Do you think you could stop us? Make us stay human, or at least close to human? No? But, if, on the other hand, we’re trying to rescue our sister, and nobody has ever written about that before, written about what that might mean to the Eye, then ... ” We shrugged. “Then we would be coming to you, and asking for information on how the fuck we even begin to communicate with it! You talked to it! You communicated with it! I need that!”

Joking swallowed.

We sat back on our tentacles and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for swearing. I apologise. I got carried away.”

Joseph King sat very still for several moments. His muscular bulk was like a cat pretending to be at rest, waiting for a rival to twitch one way or the other. Raine reached over and squeezed my knee. Lozzie gently nuzzled a tentacle. Praem said nothing, staring at the wall.

“This ... this book you found,” Joking said eventually. “If you allow me to read it ... I could ... I might ...”

I sighed and said, “The manuscript is written down, it’s a hard copy. I’ll have to—”

Praem raised a hand and her fingers suddenly held a sheaf of papers. She looked at me, blank eyes asking a silent question.

“Oh!” I said. “Oh, uh, thank you Praem. Yes, it can’t hurt for him to read it. Go ahead.”

Joseph devoured the manuscript. He sat on his beanbag chair, head down, reading in rapt silence. He didn’t look up, not even once, though he muttered to himself several times. Lozzie got out of her chair and wandered over to the windows to watch the rain, wrapped up tight in her pastel poncho. Raine shared a knowing glance with me. Praem produced a watering can out of thin air and spent several minutes tending to the potted plants she had added to the room.

Eventually, Joking looked up. “This is authentic Qu’relli text,” he said — pronouncing the name with a weird gulping stop in the middle. “Or something close, some offshoot. The translation has captured the diction perfectly, far better than any Latin attempts. You could not have made this up, it’s too perfect, and I know for a fact that you do not have access to any examples — unless you really have been to the Library of Carcosa. Who translated this?”

“A ‘non-human source’,” I said, echoing his own bland words back at him. We couldn’t help but add a little sneer.

Joking frowned at us. “You have not met a Qu’rell. That has not happened. That would be a lie.”

I sighed. “I don’t even know what that name means. You want to know who translated this? Her name is Our-Lady-of-the-Jaundiced-

Heart.”

Joking looked like he was trying to figure out if I was mocking him.

“I’m serious,” we said. “Now, is that enough for you to believe me?”

Mister Joking handed the manuscript back to Praem, steepled his hands, and frowned in deep thought. He wet his lips. He stared at me, then at Raine, then somewhere over my shoulder.

“And ... ” he said slowly. “And what do I get in return?”

Inside, we put on our best impression of Evelyn Saye. “You get no promises,” we said. “But you probably want me on your good side, if you ever want to borrow a book from the Library of Carcosa.”

Joking stared and stared and stared — and then nodded, slowly. He reached up and ran a hand through his curly dark hair, seemingly exhausted by this.

I let out a silent breath. Lozzie smiled all smug and clever. Praem made the manuscript papers vanish.

“But there is one more thing,” Joking said suddenly. “I wish to know how you obtained the phone number, the one that allowed you to initiate this whole conversation in the first place.”

“From somebody you used to know,” Raine said. “That’s all you need.”

Joking smiled his thin and dangerous smile. “I did not expect a true answer. That was a little test. Miss Jan Martense, yes. I spotted her with you, when you went to conclude your sordid little war with Mister Edward Lilburne. Curious, I hadn’t seen her in a long time. I’m surprised she would willingly associate with a group of mages and Outsiders all over again — she was always so cautious.” Then, quickly, before we could register the gap between subjects: “Is she working on a project for you, by any chance?”

Raine and I shared an involuntary glance; Joking saw the truth in our faces. He stiffened almost imperceptibly.

“Wait, wait,” I said quickly. “Yes, she’s working on a project, but there’s nothing sinister about it. She’s helping with the rescue operation for my sister. That’s all.”

“Willingly or coerced?” Joking said.

This was serious — even more than talking about the Eye. He spoke quickly, smoothly, calm, giving nothing away. He suspected something.

Over by the rain-drenched windows, Lozzie was watching the exchange with a serious little expression on her face. So very curious.

“Willingly,” I said. “We’re paying her, with money.”

“Mm,” Joking grunted, utterly blank.

Raine said out loud what I did not want to voice: “You make it sound like she’s dangerous or something.”

Joking stared for a long, long moment, then took a deep breath and relaxed once again. “No. No, Miss Martense was on the right side of history, along with myself, last time she and I met. People change a lot in two decades, but I’m sure whatever she is working on for you, it’s none of my concern.”

Lozzie chirped: “You best not be concerned with Janny! Noooooope.”

I filed that one away for later; I knew exactly what Jan was working on for us, and there wasn’t anything sinister about it at all. But what did that mean?

“So,” we said. “Your research into the Eye? We have a deal?”

“Mmmm,” Joking grunted. “Of course I don’t keep my notes in a dream, I’ll have to—”

Praem raised her hand again; she was suddenly holding a slender black notebook, battered and scuffed, the leather damaged along the spine. She glanced at Mister Joking, for permission.

He boggled at her, then barked a single laugh.

“Incredible,” he said. “Who are you, demon? You are much too real to be something dredged out of the deep. Who are you really?”

“Praem,” said Praem.

“Tell me your true name and you may have any secrets you—”

“Praem Saye,” said Praem. “Is this your notebook?”

Joseph King sighed with all the bitter melancholy of a fisherman staring down the giant pike that got away by snapping his rod and

breaking the hook.

“Yes,” he said. “The notebook appears to be mine, or at least a dream-based facsimile. Very well. Allow the little watcher what scant information she can take from within. There was precious little of use in the first place.”

mischievous and craft; plainly seen – 21.11

Praem presented us — me, myself, and I — with Joseph King’s notebook.

We accepted the slender black volume in shaking hands; I had to use an extra tentacle to support the back cover, to avoid dropping the precious payload upon the concrete floor. Part of us was convinced that one errant twitch would send the book tumbling from my fingers and vanishing into a void, like ripping out the pages and casting them from a windswept sea-cliff, or consigning the tome to a sealed capsule shot into a black hole. The dream-construct in which we sat would open at my feet and swallow this morsel of forbidden knowledge, placing it beyond the reach of human science and philosophy, forgotten and lost and never to be found.

We held the notebook at arm’s length for much longer than was warranted, waiting in silence as the dream-storm drummed on the concrete roof. A holy relic, a radioactive nugget, proof of unspeakable truths that would drive us all finally and completely mad.

Notes on the Eye, from a lucid and coherent mage.

Wasn’t this what we’d wanted all along?

Why were we so afraid?

Hic, we hiccuped so hard that it hurt our throat. “S-sorry,” I murmured, and drew the notebook in close, cradling it in our lap.

Raine purred, “Hey, Heather, hey, babe.” She leaned out of her seat so she could wrap an arm around my shoulders. “We’re all right here, okay? It’s not the Eye, it’s just notes. And we’re in a dream, right? Nothing to worry about. It’s just words in a book. You can do this, it’s nothing. You’ve done worse, much worse. This is just reading. Hell, you’ve read much worse books, for fun — ain’t no Eye notes got nothing on *Finnegans Wake*.”

I laughed, a little weak. “Not quite in the same category, Raine. But thank you.”

“It’s just words in a book,” Raine repeated — then glanced at Joking. He was still sitting upright and impassive in his absurd neon pink beanbag chair.

He nodded slowly. “My notes are not trapped. I’m not foolish enough to attack the little watcher to her face and expect to survive. And besides, that object is a dream recreation, not the original article.” He looked at Praem. “I’m sure ... ‘Praem Saye’ here has already done the necessary prep work.”

Praem intoned: “A maid is prepared for any necessary cleaning.” A pause, then: “None was required.”

“There,” Joking grunted. “If you don’t believe my word, you can trust your demon attendant.”

I stared down at the blank cover of the notebook. Bottom-Left and Middle-Right drifted closer, tips pointing at the volume in my lap. Lozzie leaned out of her chair too, half-peering over my shoulder for a better look. Raindrops fell in slow waves on the concrete roof and lashed against the brown glass windows. The fairy-tale forest swayed in the distance. Vast shapes lumbered on the horizon, framing Joseph King’s shoulders and curly dark hair.

I sighed a little sigh, “At least this is a fitting place to read a spooky tome, I suppose.”

Joking narrowed his eyes. “My note-taking is not ‘spooky’. I am detailed and accurate.”

The notebook was not quite how the Heather of a year prior would have pictured a tome full of occult secrets: bound in soft black leather, held together with modern book-binding glue and a stitched spine, complete with a little manufacturer’s stamp at the bottom of the back cover, the notebook was altogether too normal. Rounded corners, ivory-coloured paper, and a neat little ‘If lost, please return to:’ page just inside the cover. Joking had filled in that page with a P.O. box number. Such a commonplace — if slightly fancy — notebook surely belonged in the bag of a war correspondent, or a down-on-her-luck poet slumming it in hostels across Europe, or some kind of wilderness explorer sketching grizzly bears in a Canadian forest. It was hardly a dusty grimoire bound in

human flesh.

All occult tomes must have started like this, in their own times and places, their own context of physical and cultural production. Eeve's *Unbekannte Orte* — the only other source on the Eye that we had yet discovered — had once been a freshly printed book, rolled off some illicit press in a German back-street or the hidden rooms of a questionable monastery.

With quivering fingers and a hiccup in my throat, I turned the first page.

And there I discovered that Joking's notebook did in fact live up to the esoteric tradition in one essential category — it was completely unreadable.

"Is this ... shorthand?" we said, squinting at the weird little squiggles on the pages. "Or is your handwriting just that awful?"

Joseph King's eyebrows raised in surprise. The Welsh Mage said: "Yes. A shorthand of my own design."

Raine let out a chuckle and sigh, shaking her head. "Mate, Josh, Joe, whatever you wanna be called, you could have said something. Is this meant to be funny? Are you fucking us around? 'Cos I don't like it when anybody but me fucks around with my girl here, yeah?"

"Raine," I tutted. I turned the notebook sideways, hoping it might make more sense from a different angle.

Joseph King sighed too — and collapsed into the laddish drunken lout once again. He grinned a big goofy grin and raised both hands in surrender. "Hey, hey, hey now, I thought like your maid girl had translated it or what. Done it for me, like. There's more than just that one book, you know? There's audio tapes, and some photos, all sorts. I thought she'd condensed it down, dream-style like. And hey, hey, this is a dream! Can't you just go all squinty and look through the words?"

I 'went all squinty' and tried to 'look through the words'; half my tentacles attempted to help, spreading out into an array of additional points of observation, as if looking at the book with a larger composite eyeball would somehow make sense of the words.

"That doesn't work," I sighed. "We can't read this."

Joking pulled a toothy grimace — then sat up, dignified and serious once more. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’ll have to translate manually. As I said, there’s more than just that one notebook. I’ll try to give you the rough picture of—”

“No, please,” we said. “It needs to be exact. I—I need to hear what the Eye was trying to—”

“Then you need the data complete,” he huffed. “Alright, I will compile — out in reality — a proper translation. We will have to arrange a meeting, a physical handover. A project like that is going to take me at least a week, or—”

“It’ll take too long!” we said. “We need this now. Soon. Within a week, or even today, for—”

A quivering voice interrupted our embryonic argument:

“I could reconstruct it,” said Lozzie.

Everyone looked at her — even Praem, who turned her whole head so none could mistake the intended direction of her blank, milk-white eyes. The shiver in Lozzie’s voice arrested all other voices; for a split-second even the drumming rain appeared to cease. The dream hung on her intent.

Lozzie was staring at the notebook in my hands, her blue eyes wide and liquid, clear as sunlit sea. Her poncho was pulled tight around her slender frame, hands gripping the fabric from the inside, the garment gone limp and close, as if soured with sweat and fear. Her wispy blonde hair was lank and flat. She suddenly looked very small and vulnerable. All her amused energy had gone elsewhere.

“Reconstruct?” I echoed. “Lozzie? Lozzie — Lozzie, are you okay?”

Lozzie swallowed and looked up. She sniffed once, then rubbed her nose on her poncho. “Reconstruct. We’re in the dream! And Joker bum-face made it very easy to move things around here. Everything is super easy and plastic and not really solid or fixed or anything. There’s only one layer of reflections, sooooooooooooo.” Lozzie nodded at the beanbag chair Joking was sitting in; she’d dragged that out of the floor a few minutes ago, after all. “I could. I could. I couuuuuuld. Wouldn’t be hard!” She shook her head with intense effort, hair going everywhere — then flattening back down again, limp and lifeless. “Wouldn’t be hard.”

“A reconstruction,” Joking echoed, his voice like a funerary bell. “You can achieve that, truly?”

Lozzie bit her lip and nodded slowly.

Joking took a deep breath and shook his head. Disbelief and incredulity — but also concern and curiosity.

Raine cleared her throat. “Is that like a big deal? Reconstructing things in dreams?”

Joseph looked uncomfortable. He gestured vaguely with one hand. “Dream construction is certainly possible — objects, buildings, even entire places. The most storied of dreamers have peopled whole cities and countries with their own imaginations. But those individuals do not stay anchored in the waking world for very long. I myself have been briefly acquainted with two such experienced dreamers, and they were ... they were not ‘all there’. Lozzie Lilburne is clearly lucid and conscious. And reconstruction, from accurate memories? Of people?” He snorted. “If you are being honest about your abilities ... ” He trailed off and waved a hand.

“I can do it,” said Lozzie.

She didn’t sound happy or proud about that.

Joking frowned. “Miss Lilburne, it is only fair to warn you that your brother’s corpse was in a terrible state to witness. You may not wish to do this.”

Lozzie just stared at the floor, hands wringing the inside of her poncho. I felt an overwhelming urge to get out of my chair and pick her up in all my tentacles, carry her home and tuck her into bed.

Raine shot Joking a nasty grin. “Why do you care, mate?”

Joking turned a dark frown on Raine. “I am a monster, yes, I know this — but of a specific kind. I would not rub the face of a young girl in the corpse of her dead sibling—”

“It’s okay,” said Lozzie, very quietly. “Heathy ... Heathy needs this.” She looked at me, sidelong and tentative, a shell-less mollusc peering out from beneath a rock. “Heathy? Heathy? You need this, don’t you? Don’t you?”

“Uh ... L-Lozzie, you don’t have to do this,” we said quickly. “You don’t have to. I can’t ask you to do this. We can get the book

translated. We can wait. I was just being impatient, we can find another way, another ... ”

Lozzie pulled a very sad smile. “Maisie can’t wait.”

“Lozzie ... ”

Those shining blue eyes smiled back at me. “Heathy, you freed me over and over and over and over and over. You didn’t have to! You could have told me to go away, do it myself, blah blah blah. But you didn’t. And now we’re gonna free Maisie, too. Let me help? Pleeeeeeease?” She forced a smile, a big one, then bounced out of her seat and spread her poncho to the sides, wide and free again. “I just won’t look!”

We reached out a tentacle and wrapped it around Lozzie’s arm, holding on extra tight. She squeezed back, allowing us to wrap the rest of our length around her waist, beneath the poncho: a special anchor, just for her. To my surprise, Praem abandoned her position as arbiter of negotiations and stepped behind Lozzie instead. The demon-maid slipped her hands beneath Lozzie’s arms, around Lozzie’s front, and hugged Lozzie’s slender, slight, girlish form to her own plush and cushiony front.

Lozzie let out a tiny giggle and snuggled against Praem; she had all the support she needed.

Joking stood up, clearly uncomfortable, tense and hard, eyes blazing with a craggy frown. “I feel a responsibility to warn you fools. My questioning of whatever remained inside the body of Alexander Lilburne became ... overwhelming. I was not afforded long with the corpse, and that was in part due to the surrounding circumstances. Any reconstruction may be taxing on the psyche.”

Raine stood up as well. She shrugged. “We’ve seen worse, mate. Don’t you worry yourself.”

I stood up from my chair too, only half-certain why we were all rising from our seats. “Yes, we’ve rather become veterans at this by now. I’ve stood in Wonderland itself and looked up at the Eye. I’m sure a dream recreation of talking to Alexander isn’t going to be that bad.”

Praem intoned: “Tempting fate.”

I winced. Raine snorted. Joking was not amused, frowning dark and

dreary with the storm behind his shoulders.

Lozzie said: “It won’t be all full from margin to margin, anyway! I can’t summon all of it! S’not like I can actually actually really really bring the big peeper in to recite lines! It’ll just be memories, I promise!”

We smiled, just for Lozzie, our special smile for our beloved adoptive sister. “Anything you can summon is enough, Lozzie. And if it gets too much—”

Lozzie nodded up and down, very hard, which had the added benefit of rubbing the back of her head against Praem’s plush support. “I’ll stop!” she chirped. “I’ll have my own eyes shuty-uppy anyway, okaaaaay? Ready?”

Raine said quickly: “Hold up a sec. Anything we should do to brace ourselves? Lozzie?”

Lozzie shook her head. “Naaaaah. We’re not going anywhere. I’m just changing a ickle little bit of the dream. Ready?”

We took a deep breath. “Ready.”

Raine said: “And armed.”

Praem said: “A maid is always prepared.”

Raine smirked. “Isn’t that boy scouts?”

“Maids are more prepared.”

Joking said, “Go ahead, dreamer. You have the wheel. I will not attempt to resist.”

Lozzie screwed her eyes shut and puffed her cheeks out, like a little girl about to throw a tantrum, a child with a puzzle that didn’t make sense — or Lozzie trying to do a human imitation of a hot air balloon. For a second, nothing happened; the rain drummed on the roof, the dream-storm continued its loving assault against the concrete walls of Joseph King’s speculative architectural tribute to his lost friend, and the distant humped shadows beyond the forest continued to lumber and roll.

And then, slowly but surely, the brown glass window faded away. The swaying forest, the haunted horizon, the dense sheet of raindrops falling from the stormy sky — all were replaced by a sudden extension to Mister Joking’s office.

On the other side of an invisible line stood a new room, a dream-memory summoned from shorthand notes, a ghost dredged from Joseph King's recollections.

The new room was also made out of concrete — but not the clean, smooth, well-proportioned concrete of the Brutalist beauty in which we stood. A stripped floor showed fragments of stained carpet around the edges, the concrete itself scratched and scuffed, walls damaged by damp and time. Battered wooden door frames led off to the left and right. One of them was chewed at the base by years of being used as a cat's scratching post. Through the left doorway I could just about see the remains of a kitchen, cupboard doors removed, appliances long gone, counter top ruined by cigarette burns. A paint-splattered iron radiator was bolted to the back wall of the room, cold and dead. A pair of naked glass windows peered out into a city-scape night — a quiet, empty, cloudless night, lit from below by the distinctive glow of Sharrowford street lighting.

Hissssss! — we lost control.

We couldn't help it. We took an involuntary step back, recoiling, tentacles rising in a cage of self-defence. Joking glanced around, alarmed by my hiss. Lozzie flinched. We swallowed in a vain effort to rest the shape of my throat.

Raine said, "Woah, Heather? Heather? Hey, breathe, just breathe. Look at me. Breathe. That's it, there you go."

We caught ourselves, breathing too hard, breaking out in cold sweat. Memory is a powerful thing; we had underestimated the depth of our own trauma.

"I-I'm okay, I'm o-okay," I stammered, though I held on tight to both Raine and Lozzie. "I'm okay. I can— I can deal with this. S-sorry. If Lozzie can deal with this, then so can I."

Joking raised an eyebrow at me; he didn't know.

Raine nodded at the ghostly room. "Heather, this is ... ?"

"Glasswick Tower," I confirmed.

Glasswick Tower — the Cult's illegal stronghold in an abandoned building, before Alexander's Eye-ridden corpse had turned several of the upper floors into a parody of human innards.

It was not the same room in which I had been briefly confined, and

in which I had freed Zheng from her slavery and bondage — this space was much larger, perhaps some kind of communal sitting room. The Sharrowford Cult had turned it into a meeting place, with cheap plastic lawn chairs and a couple of battered folding tables arranged in a rough circle. Some hastily sketched magical symbols ringed the windows, glowing softly on the bare concrete walls — but they were mere dream impressions, powerless and inert. They did nothing to my eyes, provoked no recognition or nausea.

The true shock came from the inhabitants.

The dream-room from Glasswick Tower was teeming with people. All of them were frozen in place, captured in a single moment of remembered time, posed like a chaotic diorama.

They looked like they were all going mad. Standing, sitting, sprawled on the floor, leaning against the walls — every single dream-remembered figure was caught in a pose of internal torture, of unimaginable pressure written on their faces and engraved upon their musculature. One middle-aged man was curled up in a ball, caught mid-scream, his face contorted, his fists paused in the act of beating his own head. Several more sat in the cheap plastic chairs with thousand-yard stares, eyes fixed on the floor or the ceiling, wearing the most haunted expressions I'd ever witnessed. One young woman was pressing her forehead to the bare concrete wall, blood running down her face. A young man was crammed into the corner, biting down on a belt to choke back a scream.

A few of them — the ones near the centre of the group — appeared marginally more coherent, if hunched and tense and haunted by pain. I recognised Sarika, prior to her capture by the eye, her hair dark and sleek, her trim form wrapped in a fashionable coat. She was crying, staring at the mangled object in the middle of the floor. Badger lurked a little further back — greasy and unkempt, from back when he had looked more like a local drug dealer than a genius mathematician; he had his arm around another man, caught in the act of trying to console his friend, both them wide-eyed and weeping.

And there was Zheng — lurking just through one of the battered doorways, a pale giant, ramrod-straight, expressionless and mute, still under control and bound by the tattoos written on her concealed flesh. It was terrible seeing her like that; even as a

memory, I wanted to reach out and free her.

Other faces I recognised less well, lurkers on the periphery, half-remembered glimpses from the time some of the ex-cultists had tried to kidnap Lozzie in the park. But most of them I had never seen before. Most of them had died before I'd had the chance, immolated by their attempted contact with the Eye.

We were looking at the scene a few hours after Alexander's death, the night after I had confronted and killed him in the Cult's castle.

Joking cleared his throat. The voice of the Welsh Mage emerged quieter than usual, almost tentative: "This is approximately six hours after his passing, which is about when I arrived. I understand his enhanced physiology gave him a few hours of grace before true death." He swallowed. "The mage's curse — reinforce your physical body and you just spend longer in pain before you go."

Six hours, six hours since he had sold his followers to the Eye.

Lozzie whimpered; she had her eyes screwed shut, but she didn't like hearing that.

"Stop, please," I said sharply.

Joking nodded, stiff and formal. No jokes from him.

In the middle of the ghostly dream-room lay Alexander Lilburne's corpse.

His ex-followers had stretched him out on a sheet of blue tarpaulin; blood, bile, and unspeakable intestinal fluids pooled in the crinkled plastic. He looked like he'd been run over by a bulldozer — a mass of minced flesh with little spears of bone sticking up from his broken ribcage and shattered hips. Dressed in heat-charred rags, head a bloody burst melon, a few scraps of blonde hair still clinging to his scalp.

This was not the first time I had seen Alexander's corpse, not the first time I had witnessed the result of my own murderous handiwork; in an odd paradox of retroactive time we had already come upon his corpse once before, preserved in the mutated innards of Glasswick tower — but that was *after* the moment captured by this dream. In Joseph's memories, Alexander Lilburne was not yet the core and origin of a bizarre concrete-warping biological obscenity. He was just a dead man.

Yet one important difference was impossible to ignore: his eyes were wide open, staring upward, and far from dead.

The Eye?

What were we looking at — a puppet? An avatar? A conduit to the Eye? Or something less comprehensible?

“Lozzie,” I murmured. “You’re right to keep your eyes shut. Keep them closed. That’s good.”

Lozzie whined an affirmative. Praem helped by sliding a soft palm over Lozzie’s eyes.

Raine whistled low. “It’s like the set of an old-school sitcom. No fourth wall.”

We hissed, “Raine. I don’t think it’s like a sitcom. Really.”

“It’s literally laid out like one. Not in tone, though.”

Joking stepped forward to the edge of the recollection, craning his neck to see from different angles. “This is incredible work, Miss Lilburne. Incredible work. I ... I have taken decades just to build this concrete house, and I can barely manage more than blank walls and a mistake full of toilets. This, to create this from another mind, in moments?” He shook his head in awe. “Genius. Genius.” Then, quickly: “Is it safe to interact with? I cannot help but note that I myself am not present in the scene — am I meant to enter?”

Lozzie said, with her eyes safely covered by Praem’s palm: “It’s safe! It’s just a memory! You have to go in and say the words you said and then other words get said, okay?”

Joking looked back, hollow-eyed and stiff. “Other words.”

“Other words,” Lozzie echoed. “Mmhmm!”

Joseph looked me straight in the eyes. “Morell, I agreed to share my notes on the Magnus Viglator and I am willing to abide by that decision. I will even watch a copy of myself go through the motions. But I did not agree to undergo this conversation all over again. It was not an ordeal I wish to repeat. Not in the middle of that room. Not among that. Not again.”

I bit my lower lip. “Was it—”

“It was that bad. Yes.”

Lozzie chirped: "It'll only be the words themselves! I said, I can't really dream up the big peeper! Just words, from— from Alex's ... in his ... his voice ... "

"Lozzie, it's okay," we said quickly. "Look, this is getting too complex. Maybe it's best if we—"

"But you need it!" Lozzie said. She wiggled in Praem's grip, pouting at me without looking. "Heathy! Maisie needs it too!"

Joking crossed his arms over his broad chest, and said: "I cannot do this. Not like this."

Raine held out both hands, her pistol forgotten in her waistband. "Yeah, yeah, yo, hey, everyone cool down. The man has a point, however much I don't like to say it—"

Joking's expression collapsed back into the drunken lad for a second. He shot Raine a big cheesy grin and a broad wink; he snapped back to sober seriousness in the blink of an eye.

"—and hey," Raine carried on. "I remember when we glimpsed the Eye, once, when Eevee made that window. Praem, Lozzie, neither of you were there. Once was enough. Is it really safe to listen? Really really?"

Lozzie pouted. "I promise!"

Joseph King was staring at me, frowning with a mixture of curiosity and realisation. We raised our eyebrows at him, with no patience for unspoken games.

He sighed, and said: "You are terrified of this. Of the Magnus Vigilator. I didn't quite realise."

"Of course I'm terrified!" we squeaked. "I've seen it up close! It haunted my nightmares for a decade! Did you think I enjoyed that?"

He nodded slowly, then glanced at Lozzie: "Only words, dreamer? You promise?"

Lozzie opened her mouth — but a reply came from behind us, from the doorway into the office, as it banged open and admitted a stomping gait into the room.

"It better bloody well be words alone, you absolute bunch of fools!" — said Evelyn.

We all turned in surprise; Praem even lifted Lozzie up and around, and spread the fingers of her blindfold-hand so Lozzie could peer at the sudden arrival.

Evelyn was dressed for hiking through a storm; water dripped from an expensive looking raincoat, puddling on the floor at her feet, darkening the concrete. She threw back the hood and raked out her long blonde hair, her face sweaty and flushed from climbing the stairs. She'd swapped her usual wooden walking stick for a more practical model in stainless steel, with a plastic handle. She wore a pair of lumpy, shapeless cargo trousers and her comfortable cream jumper, spotted with water and covered in bits of woodland debris.

"Welcome," said Praem.

Raine started laughing. Joking dropped the Welsh Mage and instantly re-adopted the laddish lout, squinting with exaggerated disbelief. I squeaked: "Evee! How did you—"

"I told you!" Evelyn snapped at me — genuinely angry. "I told you to come back the moment anything weird or untoward happened. I made you promise to come back if something looked at you funny. And now I find you trying to summon the fucking Eye into a dream?!"

Lozzie mewled: "It'll only be words ... "

"Words have power," Evelyn snapped, then softened her tone: "Lozzie, I'm sorry. It's not that I don't trust you, but this is way over the line."

Joking said: "Oh, alright, just, yeah. Just keep inviting random young women into my mind palace, why don't you? Not like it was meant to be semi-secure or anything, nope, no way. Just waltz on in."

Evelyn's glare rounded on him: "And you — you shit! You stole my gateway spell! You gave it to Edward Lilburne! Heather, Raine, I cannot believe you are trusting this mage, I cannot—"

"Evee" we said.

Evelyn's rant cut off. She glared at me for a moment, hot and bitter and full of care, as if daring me to say another word. When I was a fraction too slow, she snapped: "What, Heather? What, hm? You're going to tell me that this has to happen, that this is essential, that

it's just oh so fucking important for you to put yourself in danger, yet again, without—"

"I'm glad you're here," we said.

Evelyn spluttered to a halt. "W-what?"

"I'm glad you joined us," I repeated. I reached out with a tentacle, bobbed it briefly in a silent request for permission, and then gently wrapped it around Evelyn's forearm. "Evee, you're right — I am going to say that we need to do this. But I'd much rather do it with you here, with proper precautions, with you by my side, as well."

Evelyn blazed at me for a long moment, lips pursed, then said: "God you're a fucking idiot, Heather. Don't know why I love you so much."

I burst into an incandescent blush. Raine's eyebrows shot upward. Lozzie smothered a giggle. Praem said nothing.

But Evee didn't seem to realise what she'd said. She just stomped a few paces into the room, joining the rest of us and shaking the rainwater off her coat. She seemed completely unmoved. I peered closely — but her eyes looked normal, she was not shaking and shivering as Raine kept doing, and she appeared totally lucid. She simply didn't notice her own words. Was this another effect of the dream?

She did notice our reactions, however.

"What are you all bloody staring at?" she spat. "Fine, I'll help! If we do this, we do it properly." She jabbed her walking stick at Joking. "And we don't trust this bastard one bit."

"Awww, cheers, lass," said Joking.

"Uh, um," I cleared my throat, trying to recover. "Evee, how did you join the dream?"

Praem answered: "I could not refuse."

Evelyn huffed. "I'm not sure. I just wanted to, and then ..." She shrugged and grumbled, rolling her uneven shoulders and wincing at the way her joints popped and clicked.

"You didn't have to actually walk through all that rain, did you?" we asked. "You're all wet, are you safe, are you ... ?"

“No, no,” she sighed. “I just found myself inside the doors of this place. If I had to walk through the rain, I have no memory of doing so.” She glared at Joking again. “Which I do not appreciate, by the way.”

Joseph held up his hands in mock-surrender. “Hey, lass, I don’t control your dreaming. Blame her.” He pointed at Lozzie.

Evelyn raised her chin. “I shall blame Lozzie for nothing. She is perfect. Fuck you.”

Lozzie did a little cheer under her breath. That didn’t sound like normal Evee either, ‘she is perfect’.

Joking puffed out a big noisy sigh. “Fuckin’ ‘ell you lot are a handful. Should I like, be expecting anybody else, too? Put on a round of tea? Maybe leave the door open, put up a welcome sign? Do I need to clear parking spaces?”

We all ignored him. I asked Evee: “How much did you hear? Do you need me to catch you up on our decisions?”

Evelyn shook her head. She frowned at me, looking distinctly uncomfortable in a way I’d never seen on her face before, half enraged, half confused. “I ... I already know. And I don’t know how I know. Is this what it’s like being inside a dream? You know things without knowing how you know them?” She stopped and hissed between her teeth. “Ugh. I hate it. I do not like being here, not one bit.”

“Yuuuuuuuuup,” said Lozzie, from behind Praem’s hand. “That’s dreaming!”

Evelyn banged her walking stick against her own prosthetic leg; it made a dull thump through the fabric of her trousers. “And why do I still have a prosthetic when none of this is real?”

“It is real!” Lozzie protested. “That’s just how you look in the mirror!”

Joseph straightened up, Welsh Mage once again: “Residual self-image.”

Raine snorted. “Alright there, Morpheus.”

Joking gave her a cool, flat look. “Yes, I lifted the concept from popular culture. It is a good one. I used to call the phenomenon

‘mind-body spirit impression’, but that is less aptly descriptive. The dream is highly mutable — as is self-image, but modifying either does require active effort expended over time. Miss Saye, your prosthetic leg, it is part of how you conceptualise yourself. Hence, in the dream, it is part of you.”

“Oh yeah?” Evelyn snorted, looking distinctly unimpressed. “And what if I ‘conceptualise myself’ with massive tits and a spine to support them? Do I get to have those too?”

My eyeballs all but popped out of my head; Evelyn seemed completely unembarrassed by her frankly bizarre question. Raine struggled not to burst into laughter. Lozzie squealed and jerked in Praem’s grip. Praem said nothing, staring at the wall. Joking just rolled his eyes.

The dream was doing funny things to Evee’s inhibitions; or at least to her self-filtering. I decided we needed to get this over with sooner rather than later, before she did something that would kill her with embarrassment the moment we returned to the waking world.

“Evee,” we said, forcing my voice soft and level. “What kind of precautions should we take, before we listen to what Alexander — well, before we listen to what the Eye said?”

Evelyn huffed and glanced around the room, then nodded at the floor beneath our feet. “Protective circle, three layers. We’re not exposing ourselves to the real thing, just a recording. Overkill, perhaps? I don’t care. I would swaddle you in cotton wool and put you behind armour if I could. I don’t want you to be here at all, Heather. I want you to go to my bed and get under the covers so I can—”

Evee blinked; she did not blush. Had she hit some kind of overload buffer? But then she just huffed and grumbled, and pointed two fingers at Mister Joking. “I need something to draw with. Now. And I will not say please. I am tired of saying please.”

Our increasingly beleaguered host found a nice thick black marker pen on his desk and handed it over to Evelyn — who, in turn, handed it to Raine, and began to instruct her on the angles and lines and shapes to scrawl on the floor. Praem would usually have fulfilled such a duty, but she was busy sitting down in a chair with Lozzie comfy and snug in her lap, one hand securely over Lozzie’s

eyes. Raine got down on her hands and knees, and got to work, ringing all five of us with a triple-layer of magic circle. She neither quipped nor joked as Evelyn pointed and snapped, rattling off instructions and defining the exact letter-shapes for Raine to draw in between the lines.

Joseph King watched the work with a distasteful frown; he would have to scrub it off the concrete once this was all over, of course. Or use the dream to replace the slab? Or just the upper layer? Or could he make the ink vanish as if it was never there?

“Don’t think, Heathy!” Lizzie chirped. “No thoughts!”

“Head empty,” said Praem.

“Dreams,” Evelyn spat. “Such bloody nonsense.”

Mister Joking performed a little magic of his own. As we prepared our makeshift magical shelter from any unintended backwash, he stepped right up to the dividing line once more, standing right on the threshold of the terrible memory of the night after Alexander’s death. He slipped into a series of strange exercises, closing his eyes and rotating each limb through a set of poses — some kind of martial arts practice, ingrained in his muscles by years or decades of repetition. As he progressed through the sequence, his musculature seemed to shift — not in shape, but in pose and fluidity, in how he held himself, how he used his body, how he inhabited his form.

When he finished and turned back to us, he was a different person altogether; gone was the loose, drunken pose of the young lout, and his face held none of the craggy disapproval and haughty superiority of the Welsh Mage. This was the Martial Artist, the one we had met only very briefly, when he had moved so fast as to evade even Zheng’s killing blow.

The palms of his hands glowed like molten steel. His eyes were heavily lidded with relaxation.

“I am ready,” he said in a rolling half-mumble, as if drugged or sleepwalking.

Evelyn was scowling at him. “What the hell are you? What am I witnessing here?”

Raine picked herself up off the floor, magic circle completed. “He’s

a ninja, obviously.”

Joking said: “Mystical nonsense. And offensive. Don’t orientalise.”

Raine raised her hands and laughed. “Fair enough, mate.”

I spoke up for the first time in a while, with what I assumed was an obvious question: “Um, as this is all dream — or, ‘the’ dream — then how do we know that magic works the same?”

Evelyn grumbled with barely contained frustration. “Heather, I don’t care.”

Then she stomped over to my side and took my hand without the slightest hesitation.

“U-um, Evee—”

“Do not leave this circle, whatever happens. That goes for everybody.” She gestured at Mister Joking with her walking stick. “Except you, obviously. You can boil. Lozzie, are we ready to begin?”

Lozzie nodded up and down, from her position in Praem’s lap. “Mmhmm! Whenever you like!”

Joking took a deep breath and closed his eyes again. “Dreamer? Words only, yes?”

“Words only!”

“Can you keep the others still? Or at least allow them to move as little as possible? They were highly distracting. The room was ... very noisy. There was some violence. It will interrupt the words.”

Lozzie swallowed, her tiny pale throat bobbing. She sniffed once, then said, “Okay. Do my best. Bestest best besty best.”

“Except Miss Masalkar,” Joking added. “She had things to say. The Magnus Vigilator answered her, too.”

“A-alright,” Lozzie said. She burrowed even deeper in Praem’s lap. I made sure to keep a firm grip on her with one tentacle, too. “I-I’ll try.”

Evelyn said: “Lozzie, you have veto power.”

“ ... I doooooo?”

“It means that you can stop this any time you like,” Evelyn glanced at me. “Right, Heather?”

“Of course! Yes! Yes, of course. Lozzie, if it gets too much, please stop.”

Lozzie chewed her lower lip, then nodded. “Go on, go on in, Jokey-jokes. I’ll keep it ... keep it just what we need.”

Without so much as a nod, Joseph King turned and stepped across the threshold of a dream.

As he entered the reconstruction of his own memories he changed yet again — his fluffy white bathrobe vanished, replaced with a long dark coat, smart shoes, and a formal hat. Was that a fedora? Or a trilby? I was never very clear on the small differences in men’s head-wear. As he stepped into the room he removed the hat, as if intruding on a wake or a funeral, which revealed that his hair was now buzzed short, shaved almost to the scalp.

The other figures in the dream-room from Glasswick Tower shivered and shuddered, memories straining against their bonds. A whisper of voices ghosted through the air.

“—left us, left us, left us—”

“—can’t get it out! Can’t get it out of my head—”

“—he wouldn’t have, not—”

“—the library, we have to raid his own library. He would have left clues—”

“—can’t— breathe— no—”

“—aaaauuurrrgh—”

“Calm down! Calm down, it’s going to be—”

“—m-maybe something in one of the—”

“—ask the Saye girl for help, we have to ask for help, we can’t— I can’t even think! Fuck you! Fuck you, I can’t think like this!”

“Stop— stop swearing, Chrissy is right here—”

And screaming. Muffled by the fog of memory, yes, but so much screaming.

Suddenly Sarika was right in front of Joseph, scowling up at him with her determined little face. It was so strange seeing her without neurological damage, her myriad of tics and twists, the grey in her hair and the pain on her expression. In the memory she was healthy and whole — and red-eyed from weeping, exhausted more deeply than I thought a human being capable of enduring.

“You’re Edward’s man,” she snapped in his face. “You’re meant to fix this. Can you fix him? Edward said you can. He talks but it’s not —”

Joseph said: “This is irrelevant.”

Lozzie whined — but the scene reset. The voices died off, whispers and screams fading beneath the pounding rain. Sarika was suddenly back in her chair, leaning over Alexander’s shattered body.

Joseph strode through the scene, weaving his way between the frozen actors. He knelt by the corpse, then extracted a hand-held voice recorder from inside his coat, and placed it on the floor. Next he produced a notebook and pencil. Then he glanced at Sarika.

“Miss Masalkar,” he said. “I need you to concentrate and answer my question to the best of your abilities: what was the last fully coherent thing he said?”

Sarika was sitting in one of the plastic lawn chairs. She animated from statue-stillness with a throaty grunt, as if fighting down a wave of pain inside her body.

“Almost eight hours ago now,” she croaked. “Wasn’t much. He just said: ‘I knew I was right.’ Nothing has made sense since then.”

Over in her chair, snuggled deep in Praem’s lap, Lozzie put both hands over her ears.

Deep in his own memories, Joseph nodded to Sarika — then looked back at us, at the audience. He said: “Brace yourselves. This is where it became difficult.”

Evelyn squeezed my hand. I squeezed back.

Joseph turned back to the corpse, squared his shoulders, and raised his pencil to the blank page of his notebook. He peered into Alexander’s open eyes. The corpse stared right through him, pupils fixed on the ceiling above.

“Magnus Viglator,” Joseph said, loudly and clearly. “That is your name — one we have given you—”

Sarika recoiled. “What the fu—”

Joking ignored her and carried on: “A designation, a signifier. You are what is signified by those words: Magnus Viglator. That is your individual name. To signify you. This is a beginning. Do you comprehend?”

Alexander Lilburne’s lips parted by a fraction of an inch. A dead man spoke:

“Do you comprehend?”

His voice was a terrible thing — wet and broken, a gurgle from a ruined throat and a mangled tongue, but somehow too clear and coherent to issue forth from such a battered form.

But there was another component to the words, some essence that could not be replicated in a dream-memory or captured in written notes, something that we, there in the dream, did not experience. We could only observe the results.

As Alexander spoke — or, rather, as the Eye spoke through him — Lozzie’s control slipped for a split-second. The figures in the memory flickered and jerked and re-assumed new positions. Sarika was caught in the act of recoiling from Alexander’s words, her eyes wide with terror, her face grey with sickness. Several of the other cultists were captured in the moment of vomiting, their bodies violently rejecting something more than mere sound. One man was screaming, eyes screwed shut, hands clamped over his ears. Chairs were toppling, their inhabitants fleeing for the doorways. I spotted Badger, at the back, pressed against the wall, face contorted as if he had been punched in the gut.

Joseph King fared better than the cultists — he did not have the Eye peering into the back of his thoughts, after all. He snapped back and covered his face with one arm, as if hit by a sudden blast of oven-hot air. Then he eased back into position, peering cautiously at Alexander’s face once more.

“Are you asking me a question?” he demanded. His voice shook with effort; we’d not heard him speak like that before. “Or are you merely echoing the sounds I am making?” He paused, waiting, surrounded by the frozen forms of cultists losing their minds. “Give

me a sign that you understand.”

“Give me a sign that you understand.”

Again the wet and broken voice, horrifying and saddening in the sheer damage a body could endure in death — but not a supernatural assault on the senses. Lizzie simply could not replicate whatever the Eye had really sounded like through Alexander’s lips.

Again the cultists flickered. They fled the room, dashed their heads against the walls, screaming and weeping like a crowd beneath the pyroclastic flow of an erupting volcano. Some of them curled into balls. Others fell into twitching fits upon the floor. Sarika gripped the sides of her plastic chair, jaw clenched so hard that she must have damaged her teeth.

Joking fell backward, panting, covered in sweat, shaking his head like a wet dog. “I cannot ... ” he murmured. “Check my notes. Morell, check my notes.”

It was only when he said my name that I realised he was talking to us, the audience, outsiders to the scene.

My eyes dropped to the notebook open in my free hand, cradled by a tentacle. Suddenly specific passages of Joking’s shorthand notation began to make sense.

‘Magnus Viglator responds only with repetitions of the words spoken to it. Limitation of communication medium? Limitation of human mind? Is it repeating in hopes of finding meaning? Do not believe this correct. Only reflecting what it sees (hears?). Mirror of development processes in children? Flashing back to us what it observes, hopes of establishing an open line? Testing reactions? Or playing with parts, no understanding.’

‘Q: Speak a word that I have not spoken.’

‘A: A word that I have not spoken.’

‘Q: Tell me what you see.’

‘A: What you see.’

‘Q: Identify yourself.’

‘A: Yourself.’

‘Q: How many fingers am I holding up?’

‘A: How many fingers am I holding up?’

The text carried on for pages and pages, nothing but echoes and reflections, nothing but the Eye speaking through meat, reflecting meat back at itself. Like it couldn’t do anything else. Joking tried multiple languages — Latin, French, Russian, Chinese, and several I did not recognise, some of them undoubtedly non-human. But the Eye only echoed. It spoke not a word of its own.

‘Q: Why did you choose this indirect method of avatar possession? Why do you not rise to your feet and walk around? Why do you use only the eyes and the mouth, the voice-box? Is this a limitation of the deal made between yourself and Alexander Lilburne?’

‘Question went unanswered. Longer questions appear to elicit no response. Lack of interest? Lack of comprehension as to what part is important, or contains semantic value?’

‘Q: What do you want?’

‘A: Do you want?’

‘Q: Heather Morell. I know you are seeking contact with her. What does that name mean to you? Heather Morell. Tell me. God damn you to the pit of hell you insensible Beyonder obscenity. Give me something! Speak! Speak a word other than my own!’

The notes halted, melting back into incomprehensible shorthand. Our fingers shook, our eyes filled with tears of frustration. This was useless, worse than useless. The Eye observed, and reflected observation with perfect clarity. But it could do nothing more. Even through a possessed human throat, it could not truly communicate. It was too alien, too different, too large. What hopes did I have of ever making contact if we couldn’t speak with it?

And without communication the only option was violence, a fight, a staring contest — and we would lose.

We — seven of me, folded into one body, one human frame and six tentacles — were so much smaller than the Eye.

I wasn’t even shocked or angry that Joseph King had used my name in an effort to elicit a response from the Eye; but my name was a human construct, it probably meant nothing to Eye. It did not know me as Heather Morell, but as a collection of flayed atoms, thoughts unwound and stretched out like wire, self and body laid out

beneath a merciless, burning gaze. Even me, even—

“Two missing one,” said Alexander’s corpse.

Joseph King was once again crouched over the mangled body, his torso half turned-away, shielding his face with an arm. Sarika was trying to pull him away from Alexander’s corpse, screaming something in his face. The cultists who remained in the room were bleeding from the ears and weeping freely, most of them collapsed on the floor or slumped against the walls.

The Eye was speaking an answer — a real answer to a question. And the question was me.

The answer unfolded from shorthand on the page, in time with the corpse speaking the words in the dream-memory.

“Two missing one. One missing half. Left without right, up without down, black without white. Where is my other sight? Where is the other half of my being? Where am I? I cannot see. Where am I? I cannot tell. Two is missing one. I am only half of creation. Two is missing one. Creation is half made up. Need the whole picture. From horizon to horizon.”

The answer ended.

Mister Joking lurched to his feet and reeled backward. He staggered out of the dream-memory scene, bursting back to this side of the invisible line. His dark coat and silly hat vanished, shed like a bad costume, replaced with his fluffy white bathrobe once again. His shaven head flickered back to his current messy curls. He almost collapsed against the concrete desk, catching himself on the edge, heaving and shaking.

Lozzie whined: “I can’t—”

“Then let go!” Evelyn snapped. “Let it go, Lozzie. Let it go.”

The memory faded. The room from Glasswick Tower blurred back into the brown glass of the window-wall, backed by sheets of rain and the distant, swaying forest. Lozzie whined and groaned and opened her eyes as Praem removed her hand. Evelyn sighed sharply. Raine blew out a long breath.

Joking straightened up, squinting hard against internal pain: “I already told you. I do not think it can understand anything we have to say. It spoke pure nonsense, it—”

“No,” I said.

The others all looked at me. Raine had already realised that I was crying slow tears, but Evelyn suddenly frowned with concern. Lozzie leaped out of her seat — her Praem-seat — and moved toward me, for a hug or reassurance. Raine kept rubbing my back.

“It spoke perfect sense,” I explained, crying but not sobbing. Our tears were clear. “Perfect sense to me, at least. Isn’t it obvious? Or do you need a twin to see it?” I almost laughed. “A twin to see it. Right in front of me the whole time.”

Evelyn clenched her jaw. “Heather, slow down and speak sense.”

Joking frowned too, sweat dripping from his brow. “Yes, enlighten me, little watcher.”

“It was speaking about Maisie and I. Two, missing one. One, missing a half. It knows. It knows that she and I are separated. That was the only concept it recognised, the only thing it could relate to, the only external reference point — that feeling. That separation. It’s the only thing it responded to! Separation. Being apart. Being one, when you should be two.”

Raine frowned as well, but more with concern. “Do you think it was echoing Maisie’s feelings? Like that was her speaking through it?”

We shook our head. “No. No, I think it was talking about itself.”

Evelyn squinted at me. “Heather?”

“Twins,” said Praem, standing from her seat and straightening her skirt. “Two in one. One in two.”

“Twins come in pairs,” I said, nodding at Praem. “We know it takes twins — or twins are drawn to it, I don’t know why, but the manuscript from Carcosa proves that part. Twins. It teaches twins. Or examines twins. What else comes in pairs?”

Evelyn’s frown turned exasperated beyond words. “Heather. You cannot be serious.”

“An eyeball cannot see itself, not without a mirror,” I said, hiccuping with an emotion I did not comprehend. “But twins can turn and look, and see themselves in each other. It knows, that’s the only human thing it could relate to — because it feels the same way. It is one, when it should be two. Just like us.”

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.12

Sunset sky was crusted with cataracts of cobwebbed cloud, grown into gnarled layers of ghostly gossamer, stained crimson and caramel by the unkind caress of the submerged sun — bruised apricot, bleeding coral, burning orange — and darkening with slowing turns toward the blinded blue-grey of summer dusk. A ragged circle of sky — hemmed, imprisoned, squeezed in tight — with the edges of her cornea rat-eaten and raw, penetrated by the glistening green well-mouth of the shivering treetops. The sun, with all her blistering heat, had dipped well below those swaying, rustling, creaking trees, their trunks washed by the ever-present westerly winds, flowing in a ceaseless river toward the distant, hidden bulwark of the Pennines. An empty sky, compressed into a squinting blood-drenched circle of pain.

Was the sky lonely?

We couldn't stop thinking about that; we really should have been paying more attention to our surroundings. The others needed us present. We were the core and fulcrum of this entire event. But I couldn't stop.

There was only one sky, after all. Wherever one's feet were planted upon the earth, one could look up and see the same sky. Sunset or sunrise, night or midday, cloud or rain or storm or snow or hail, these were all only masks over the one true face. Other skies existed, yes — Outside, Beyond, in other dimensions; but this sky, earth's sky, she could not visit those any more than she could touch the ground. The sky above our heads that evening was a rounded circle staring downward, blind and insensate, from beyond a ring of Brinkwood trees. But it was the same sky. Singular. Alone. Empty.

Clouds were nothing more than water vapour held aloft by air pressure, no matter how infused with romantic metaphor; birds and bats and moths visited the endless, solitary blue, but only her lowest reaches — and they always fell to earth in the end. Human beings could barely imagine her upper secrets, only when we

encased ourselves in metal tubes and hurled ourselves through the firmament like roaring intruders, not seeing, not comprehending a thing. We could not touch her, not truly. We were not made for contact with something so alone and apart, so vast and other. We could not understand the sky.

Could we understand the Eye?

A better question: was the Eye lonely?

After all, it filled the sky of Wonderland. It was the sky, from horizon to horizon. Did Wonderland have a sky, behind the great orb? Or did the eye have a hidden optical nerve, descending forever into a void at its rear?

I doubted the metaphysics were quite that literal.

I'd never considered this question before — not after Maisie was taken, not while growing up, not even during the previous year of my now-enlightened state. Not until the revelation relayed through Joe King's memories, from the lips of a dead man possessed by the Eye. The medium had almost certainly not done justice to the message; for an Outsider entity on the scale of the Eye, a dead man's lips and throat were probably about as expressive as a finger puppet was for a human being. But the message was simple: I am one, when I should be two.

Eyes come in pairs, don't they? No, they do not — that is a human notion. Or at least a mammalian one. Spiders have eight eyes, bees have five, some kinds of lizard have three; there is even a species of undersea mollusc which boasts a thousand tiny little eyes, a fact which delighted us when I looked it up earlier that day, a great comfort while I was curled up in the dark on my bed, sniffing and confused while Raine rubbed my shoulders.

But no, the Eye had made itself so very clear. The first piece of clear communication it had ever attempted.

Two missing one. One missing half.

Just like me, missing my Maisie.

A spiteful, toxic, barbed little part of us hoped that the Eye was indeed lonely. We hoped it knew the pain it had caused me and Maisie by ripping us apart from each other. Another part of us was less optimistic — perhaps the Eye was alone, yes, but who was to

say it felt such a thing as loneliness? Perhaps that notion was beyond it, or beneath it, alien and unknowable.

Perhaps that's why it wanted me back so badly; perhaps it knew that Maisie and I had to be reunited, to be whole once more. One plus one equals two and all that. But maybe there was no sentiment in that desire.

Maybe it was just mathematics.

The lonely sky, from whose beauty I could not tear my eyes.

"Nothing yet?"

Evelyn grunted the question through her teeth, from my left; that almost brought me back down to earth.

Raine answered from my right: "Still a no, Evee. Same as the last time you asked me, which was thirty seconds ago, by the way." Raine chuckled softly. "You can see my phone screen as well as I can, hey? The moment they call, you'll know it. There'll be a little jingle and everything."

Evelyn hissed through clenched teeth. "They're late. I don't like it."

Jan cleared her throat, a little way behind me. She said: "Actually, they still have five minutes before the agreed time of contact. Nothing is wrong, Evelyn. Please, everyone just ..."

Jan trailed off. I assumed Evelyn had turned and speared her with a glare. I couldn't see, because I was too busy staring at the sky.

From even further behind, a dreamy voice spoke up. "We see nothing on the road approaching the farm. Everyone should be relaxed. That would be better. Better, yes. Better to be relaxed. Nothing to worry about. Miss Martense is correct."

Amanda Hopton — speaking in that dreamy, floaty, dissociated voice which meant her god was communicating through her. Hringewindla was assuring us he had the approaches covered.

A grumpy masculine voice next to Amanda said, "These fuckers should know they're on thin ice for this shit. They should have called early."

Benjamin Hopton, Twil's cousin, the Brinkwood Cult's primary muscle. Technically he was not present to support us, but to act as his aunt's bodyguard.

Jan repeated herself: “The agreed time of contact is still — four and a half minutes away. Nothing is going to go wrong. Everything is going to plan.”

Ben snorted. “Things always go wrong when you lot are around.”

On the other side of her aunt, Twil said: “Oi! I’m one of ‘this lot’ too, Ben.”

He snorted again. “Yeah, I haven’t forgotten.”

Twil’s voice rose. “What’s that’s supposed to fuckin’ mean, hey? You wanna tussle, Benny-boy? You wanna get bog-washed?”

“I’m the one holding the gun here, Twil,” he said. Did I detect a hint of playful amusement in his voice? Perhaps.

I could almost feel the evil grin cracking across Twil’s face. I certainly heard the crack of her knuckles. She said: “You ain’t got silver bullets in that mag, Ben. Go on. Give it a try. Put one in my leg and see how quick I can still kick your arse.”

Ben laughed, unimpressed. “You wouldn’t be so mouthy if your parents were here tonight.”

“Mouthy? Mouthy? Fuck you, Ben, I’m gonna shit in your cereal—”

“Will you lot fucking stop?” croaked a crunchy, crackling voice from a raw and broken throat.

That was Sarika — off to one side, separate from the others. Her voice was so full of scorn and acid that somehow it ended the stupid argument, though I wasn’t so sure it was a real argument in the first place. Twil and Ben had grown up together, somewhat. Just cousins, bantering. Trying to ease the tension.

Evelyn, however, agreed. “Yes,” she tutted. “This isn’t the time for —”

But Sarika was already off. She rattled on like a bag of broken bones: “Infighting before a confrontation with an enemy is about the most stupid, asinine thing you could possibly do.” She snorted, rough and painful. “Not that I should expect better, I suppose. Amateurs and hobbyists and wilful ignorance. You lot are going to get all of us killed, eventually, one way or the other. I don’t know why I agreed to come. Why am I here, huh? Why am I here? Paraded around like a fucking trophy.”

Nathan — our Badger — spoke up with surprising gentleness. “Sorry, hey. It’s going to be okay. Everyone’s just on edge.”

Sarika spat: “I’m not.”

Yet another voice spoke up as well. “Could’a fooled me,” said Nicole Webb. Sarika had no answer to that. “Don’t lie, Sarika, it doesn’t suit you.”

Somebody else opened their mouth with a soft click, for a fresh retort or a new joke.

But Praem interrupted, bell-clear in the cooling dusk: “No fighting.”

A moment of silence passed beneath the bleeding sunset sky — broken eventually by a snort from Sarika: “Shouldn’t your fearless leader be the one to say that?”

I sighed and lowered my gaze from the lonely heavens.

Geerswin Farm, the Hopton family home, Twil’s home, the base of the Brinkwood Cult, or the Church of Hringewindla. Forty one minutes past six in the evening. August 4th. 2019.

Why did that date stick so clearly in our mind? Perhaps because we’d organised this meeting down the smallest detail — we knew who was supposed to call who, and when, and where, and what they were supposed to say, and who was meant to stand in which position, and say what, and how to gesture and look and wait for answers — and who was meant to keep their lips shut tight and let the others do the talking. Or maybe it wasn’t any of that, maybe it was because we were so badly disorganised most of the time that this one high-precision event stood out among all others.

Or maybe because of Maisie’s deadline. My twin had little more than two months left — and I was not going to wait that long. But here we were, tying up a loose end.

Or maybe just because Raine had her phone in her hand, and we could see the numbers on the screen.

I did not turn around to look at Sarika and the others — though one of us did, my Bottom-Left tentacle, trying to cover our collective back. Instead I stared off across the crumbly tarmac and hard-baked mud of Geerswin Farm. Shafts of dying sunlight filtered down through the ring of trees, scattering in a lace-work pattern of rotten orange upon the ground. A soft breeze tugged at my hair, slipped

gentle fingers into the slit-cut tentacle-holes in the sides of my t-shirt, and made the trees rustle against themselves in an endless wave. Insects chirped and trilled and sang in the long summer grass. Sweat lay sticky on my skin, but not suffocating, drying in the dusk. Far away, distant cars passed along distant roads, muffled beyond the woods — but not many, not on a Sunday night.

The entrance to the farm — a little bend of ancient asphalt which turned toward the road — was lined with Hringewindla's bubble-servitors. The driveway looked like a chasm cut through a sea of bubble-bath. More of his 'angels' were scattered in the treetops, forming our perimeter guard, our early-warning system. A cluster of them hung far up in the sky above the farm. Raine had called them 'air cover'; Twil had made a joke about 'loitering munitions'. I'd barely been paying attention.

Sarika was waiting; we pulled our collective minds together.

"I'm nobody's leader," we said out loud, talking without looking back. "And I'm anything but 'fearless'. You must be joking. You should know better than that, Sarika. I'm actually really intimidated. More than a little bit afraid. Worried. Anxious. Nervous. Can I find more synonyms for this? Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not sure I want to."

I hiccuped once, loud and painful. I wasn't lying about the nerves.

To my right, Raine murmured, so softly that none of the others could hear it: "Hey, Heather, hey, it's gonna be okay, nothing's gonna go wrong."

We whispered back, "That's what I'm afraid of."

Sarika heard none of that. She snorted with contempt, and said: "You're intimidated? You? Don't make me laugh, Morell. Hurts my throat."

"Oi," said Twil, taking offence on my behalf. "Big H doesn't need that right now—"

"Wait, Twil, please. Sarika," I said — still staring at the end of the driveway. "What do you mean?"

Sarika laughed, dripping acid derision. "God, you are so wilfully blind. Look around you. Look at what you've got here."

I tore my eyes away from the driveway; watching would not speed

up the proceedings, that was just magical thinking. We turned — all of us, all six tentacles and my human core — and looked around at the others.

I already knew exactly what Sarika was trying to express; I was just trying not to think about it too much.

We — not merely me, myself, and I, six other Heathers embedded in the neurons of my tentacles, but *we*, us, the group, me and all my friends, my chosen family, our allies and auxiliaries and fellow-travellers and friendly observers and conquered prisoners — were gathered before the ancient edifice of Geerswin Farmhouse, standing on the crumbly tarmac amid the slow sunset, ready to receive a surrender.

The Farmhouse itself was still undergoing repairs — the leftovers of when Edward Lilburne had assaulted the place with his obscene suicide-bomber Outsider creatures. Some of the damage had been too great for simple renovations. Whole window frames had been removed and replaced, the front door was brand new thick wood, and several sections of century-old wall had been chipped away and filled in with modern red bricks. I felt terribly sorry for the poor house; the damage was not our fault, it was Edward's, but though Evelyn had helped to pay for the repairs, the scars would always remain. When we'd arrived at the farm about an hour earlier, to begin setting up, the first thing I'd done was walk over and pat the front wall of the house, murmuring my condolences.

"Get well soon," I'd said. Raine had laughed — but with love. Evelyn had sighed. Lozzie had joined in and hugged the front wall.

I'd felt terribly silly, but what did that matter?

Several cars stood at the edge of the tarmac courtyard — Raine's little red one, Felicity's hulking range rover, Benjamin's muddy land rover, and Amanda's modest five-door. The vehicles were lined up nose-to-tail, ostensibly to tuck them out of the way, but actually that was a cheap psychological trick to make the space feel more enclosed.

One of Jan's many suggestions. She'd offered so much advice on how to run this little meeting. Some of that I had rejected as too cruel.

We were not, for example, going to blindfold and gag these people

before we spoke to them. Nor were we tying them to chairs. Nor was I wearing my squid-skull mask and talking entirely through intermediaries — though I had the mask tucked into the coils of one tentacle, to use during the introduction. But I wasn't going to wear it the whole time, not unless things went really badly.

We prayed it wasn't going to come to that.

Evee was to my left, with her walking stick in one hand and her scrimshawed bone-wand clutched in the other. She was still dressed for the heat of the summer's day, but adjusted for the rapid cooling of the evening dark — she wore a t-shirt and one of her long skirts, floaty and soft, with a shawl draped over her shoulders, and her long blonde hair still tied up but ready to be let down to cover the pale expanse of her neck. She stood close enough that I could reach out and touch her with my fingers, but far away enough to hide her continuing embarrassment — and she was deeply embarrassed.

That was the other half of why I'd been staring into the sky; I wasn't merely lost in brooding melancholy over the nature of the Eye, I was trying to avoid sneaking glances at my poor, sweet, mortified Evee.

The dream — of Joseph King's concrete house and everything we had learned there — had not dissipated into fragmented memory upon ending, but had stayed in everyone's minds, fresh and clear as the waking world. The whole dream had lasted only sixteen seconds of real time. As far as I could tell, everyone recalled exactly what had been said and done, including the deal for Joking's notes, and a last-minute promise of further contact via some more secure and less metaphorical methods.

And that meant Evee recalled saying that she loved me — and remembered her angrily vocalized wish for increased bust size.

At first, I'd been too wrapped up in the revelations from the Eye; there were more pressing matters than Evelyn's thoughts about her boobs. But she'd blushed up a storm and spent all afternoon avoiding me, throwing herself into the process of organising this meeting.

I hadn't realised how embarrassed she was until Raine had made a joke — a casual joke, barely a poke, which could have been interpreted in several different ways. The joke was about what Evee should wear to the meeting, something about buying new bras?

Evelyn had blushed so hard I thought she might hurt herself, but then she'd released the tension by hurling a glass of water in Raine's face — which was practically a favour, considering the sticky heat of the day.

We'd sat side by side in the back of Raine's car on the way to Geerswin Farm. Evelyn had stared straight ahead. She had not offered me her hands.

But we knew she loved us. This wasn't new. What was she so self-conscious about? Surely not the boobs thing. Surely.

We both had more important matters now though; she scowled at me for a second.

Praem stood at Evelyn's other elbow, close enough to offer support if needed. She was straight-backed and starched, prim and proper, frilled and laced in her full maid uniform. Hands folded before her, blank eyes staring ahead, Praem was the absolute picture of self-control and iron discipline. A clever illusion, since she was always like that.

Raine was on my right, dressed in big stompy boots, jeans, and a black tank-top. She was sweaty from the hot day, still amused from the dream, her chestnut hair all stuck up and raked back. Her makeshift riot shield was propped against one leg. Her handgun was stuck into the front of her waistband — safety on. That method of carrying a firearm both terrified me and made me feel very funny about Raine's crotch.

Raine also held one of the sub-machine guns — the awful shiny black weapons that we had, frankly, looted, from Edward Lilburne's final clutch of doomed mercenaries. There was something ghoulish about that. The weird little killing machine hung from a strap over her shoulder, like it was a tote bag or a cute accessory.

A few steps beyond Raine was one of our auxiliary trios: Felicity, Aym, and Sevens.

Felicity had refused to give up her long coat, despite the heat of the day, though the garment hung off her shoulders more like a cloak. She made no attempt to hide her half-burned face behind her auburn hair. Her magically altered sawn-off shotgun was cradled loose in both hands. Frankly I was amazed she had agreed to attend this; she was supposed to be heading home in a couple of days,

back on business of her own. Perhaps she felt she still owed it to Evee.

Next to her was Aym — physically manifested as a cowed and cloaked little figure, a sucking swamp of lightless black lace, faceless and armless, little wisps and tendrils tapping at the asphalt ground. And there was Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, resplendent in her Princess Mask, chin held high, hair ruler-straight, clothes pressed to within an inch of their fabric lives, with the tip of her lilac umbrella against the tarmac, held at a jaunty angle. She caught my eye and blinked slowly; hello kitten, are we not beautiful?

Oh, we were. In a very specific kind of way.

Directly behind me were Lozzie and Jan, holding hands. Lozzie's poncho was all a-puff and a-float, the hem drifting outward against the breeze. Jan was wearing her ridiculous body-armour, a 'plate carrier', as Raine had called it — but not her big puffy white coat. The coat was plausibly deniable protection; the bullet proof plates screamed a different message.

To their side stood July, black hair tied back, dressed like she was ready for a martial arts fight, owl-faced and wide-eyed. She ignored everyone else.

Behind them, sitting on the steps of Geerswin Farmhouse, was Amanda Hopton, glassy-eyed and thick-tongued as she communed with her god for our benefit. The wall behind her was festooned with his bubble-servitors, watching his most beloved human in case the worst should happen. More of the angels were clustered up on the roof of the house, a rapid-reaction force kept close to hand.

To Amanda's right stood Benjamin, big and heavy and frowning, shaven-headed and sceptical, carrying another one of our purloined submachine guns. He had specific instructions not to even take the safety off; not unless something completely untoward happened. His job was the same as most of the others present here — look scary and serious.

To Amanda's left was Twil. She was unarmed, fluffy, stripped down to t-shirt and a pair of exercise shorts, and practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. Our werewolf did not need a gun to project menace and the threat of violence.

Off to one side was another curious trio: Sarika and Badger — our

proof of good intent, our examples of how this could all go — and Nicole Webb, our tame private eye on the edge of the supernatural world. I wasn't entirely sure why Webb was here, or why Raine had invited her. Perhaps she was meant to offer her expert knowledge about avoiding police attention — or maybe she was worried about us gunning down ten people in cold blood?

We didn't blame her; we knew what we looked like.

Sarika and Nicole were both sitting on plastic garden chairs fetched from inside the house, made more comfortable with some cushions. Sarika was stronger than she used to be, she could swing those crutches around like an extra pair of legs, but there was no way she was going to stay standing for the duration of this meeting. Nicole, on the other hand, still had a cast on her broken leg; it was due to be off in a few days, but for now she was still on crutches as well.

Nathan, however, was standing on his own two feet, with the aid of a metal cane. An extra chair waited, in case he needed to sit. Dressed in a baggy jumper and a pair of jogging bottoms, he looked thin and clean, bright-eyed and wide awake behind his glasses. He saw me looking and shot me an innocent smile.

In a way, Nathan was my proof. Here was evidence we were not monsters.

Two very good dogs were also present — Soup, Nicole's big, grey, rather imposing hound, who was seated at her feet, and Bernard, Amanda's pneuma-somatic seeing-eye dog, large and fluffy and apparently entirely comfortable with Soup now. Whistle, Badger's Corgi, was not in attendance; this was too scary for little Whistle.

Several conspicuous absences stood out. Tenny and Grinny were back at Number 12 Barnslow Drive, looking after Whistle and Marmite. They, in turn, were being 'looked after' by Kimberly. Kim was not actually expected to do much, just keep an eye on things, with a fully charged mobile phone ready to call Lozzie if anything unexpected started to happen. The residents of Geerswin Farm were also not at the meeting; Twil's parents had elected to make themselves scarce. Twil had suggested they were squeamish about what might unfold, despite graciously offering us the use of their property.

Again, I didn't blame them. They probably thought this was going to get ugly.

Amy Stack was also not in attendance, much to Raine's disappointment. Stack had, however, answered her phone earlier that day. She had listened to Raine's request-slash-pitch, then replied with one word: no.

Then she'd cut the call.

Evelyn had grumbled, "We don't need her there, Raine. Stop it. Stop thinking with your cunt."

"Yeah, but I want her there. I want to—"

"We all know exactly what you want!" Evelyn had snapped. "She is not our ally, Raine. Don't obfuscate that. She's a hound with a leash around her neck. And she will try to slip that collar if she can."

Raine had grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. "Leash? Collar? Nah, Evee, you're getting it backwards—"

Evelyn had ignored that. "Just because she has very little reason to turn and bite us doesn't mean she shouldn't be treated as a danger."

Raine had sighed. "What, we're never gonna ask her for help again?"

Evelyn had snorted. "Leave her to her family life with her boy. If we never hear much from her again, I'll be perfectly happy."

I had cleared my throat at that. "Well, she is associating with Nicole now, isn't she? And Nicole likes Kim, and ... and ... "

Evelyn had given me such a storm-tossed look that I'd trailed off; at least that was better than her blushing over memories of the dream.

One final absence at the meeting worried at my heart — the only one which really mattered.

Zheng wasn't there.

My beautiful seven-foot demon lover was not answering her mobile phone; nobody had seen her in a couple of days, not since she'd taken off while I'd been in semi-conscious recovery after my pneuma-somatic crash. She'd been back to the house a few times while I'd been sleeping, offering fresh prey to Grinny, but nobody could contact her now she was gone again. I'd not personally seen Zheng since the fight with Edward.

She'd done this sort of thing before, of course — vanished into the

woods for days or weeks, hunting fresh meat, sleeping in the trees, living like an animal. And she had no way of knowing that we'd accelerated the schedule for this meeting. But her absence stung. Zheng was the other point of the triangle between myself and her and Raine. Raine missed her too, though she kept that well-concealed. Zheng wasn't just mine — she was ours, now. Raine cared too. A part of her was missing.

Once this meeting was over, with the matter concluded one way or the other, I was going to look for Zheng — tomorrow at the latest, or maybe this very evening. We'd take Raine, too. We'd use brain-math if we had to. I was certain she was alright, I just didn't understand why she was not here.

The many faces of our assembled forces; I sighed and met Sarika's eyes.

"Yes," we said. "I'm not blind to this, Sarika. We're meant to be intimidating. I get it. We all know. You don't have to rub it in."

Sarika snorted again. "Then what have you got to be afraid of, huh?"

"Plenty," I said, starting to lose my temper. "None of us are trained negotiators or anything like that. I'm barely an adult. We're not qualified to be doing this, we—"

"Neither are any of my old friends," Sarika grunted. She looked away. Badger gently touched her shoulder, trying to comfort her, but she shrugged him off.

We opened our mouth again. "And to answer your question, Sarika — you are here to make this easier on your 'old friends'. As easy as we can make it. I— I promise, I—"

I hiccuped.

Raine reached out and squeezed my shoulder. "Hey, Heather, hey," she purred, for me alone. "It's gonna be alright, whatever happens."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe, but I can't—"

Buzz-buzz! Buzz-buzz!

Raine's phone vibrated in her hand, playing that weird little high-energy jingle she used for a ring-tone. The screen lit up with an incoming call, from a contact which Raine had named 'Drug Dealer

(Not Sarcasm!).'

I almost giggled, despite everything. The humour helped.

"That'll be them!" Raine announced to the group. She turned to the rest of us so we could all hear her words, then answered the call. "Speaking, yup, you have the right number." A pause. "You just entered Brinkwood, understood." She flashed the rest of us a thumbs up; Jan gave one back in return. "Just follow the map, just like Jan said. Yeah, that's correct. Be sure to take the last stretch slow. Park well clear of the driveway, well before you reach it— yes, before. Okay, good. We'll have people out there so you can't miss it. One at a time, remember? You're the first car? Good. Call again if anything changes. I'm hanging up now."

Raine ended the call and lowered the phone.

Jan said: "Miss Hopton — that is, Amanda — are we still clear out in the road?"

Amanda blinked, slow and heavy, her eyes half a world away; Hringewindla had dozens of his bubble-servitor angel-things lining the narrow country road in both directions. A precaution, invisible to human eyes, lest a police car or a hapless evening driver happen upon the periphery of our strange gathering. We didn't want anybody spotting the firearms — or freaking out at the sight of my tentacles, or Aym, or Twil in full werewolf form.

"We're— we're clear," Amanda said. She swallowed once, thick and gummy. "Clear, yes, clear. Nobody but— oh, there's the first car! Yes, it's them. They're coming. Oh, oh they are ... they are so small ... so small ... mmmmm."

Benjamin rubbed her shoulder. "It's alright, auntie Mandy. It's alright. S'okay." He frowned at Raine. "Go time, then?"

"Go time!" Lizzie cheered — totally at odds with the seriousness of the moment.

Raine slipped her phone into her pocket and clapped her hands once. "Ladies and gentlemen, places please." She pointed here and there: "If anybody needs a slash, now is the time. Ben, finger off that trigger, mate, you know better. Fliss, keep that shotgun where they can see it. Sorry, Badger, say hi and nod and smile if you must, but please do stay put, hey? And Heather." She paused and smiled at me. "Heather, you're gonna do fine."

We swallowed and nodded — and resisted the urge to wrap ourselves up in our tentacles. Turning into a roly-poly rainbow beanbag Heather-ball would rather spoil the effect of everyone else looking so intimidating.

Instead we spread our tentacles outward.

Look big, Heathers! Big! Big! Hiss! — no, wait, don't hiss. Look big! Dignified. Unimpressed. Make your tentacles strobe brighter. Big! Don't hiss, careful now.

Raine was already walking backward, one hand on the pistol-grip mechanism of her stolen firearm, lifting her makeshift riot shield with the other. She nodded to Twil and July as they moved forward to join her; Twil was shaking herself to work up her nerves, but July's owlsh expression betrayed no emotion. Everyone else shuffled awkwardly — all except for Praem. Evelyn swallowed loudly, fingers creaking on the handle of her walking stick, while Jan took up position on my right, her own phone out in one hand, Lozzie trailing behind her.

But then Raine looked back, as if she'd forgotten something.

"Oh, and Evee?" she said.

Evelyn scowled at her. "What? What? Raine, you need to get into position, you—"

Raine cracked the most absolute shit-eating grin I'd seen on her in months. "Puff your chest out. It'll help."

Evelyn turned the most fascinating colour of grey-white rage, lips compressed into a strangled line, eyes blazing with fury. Her right arm twitched — for a moment I thought she was going to hurl her walking stick after Raine. But then Raine shot her a wink and — bizarrely — blew her a kiss. Evelyn refrained from throwing anything after Raine's retreating back. Our trio of advance security walked across the sticky tarmac, until they were out of earshot, waiting at the bend in the driveway of Geerswin Farm.

Evelyn crunched out through clenched teeth: "Cannot fucking believe her. Now, of all times."

Down on my right, Jan looked vaguely confused. Mercifully, Lozzie did not laugh. She and I and Praem were the only ones who understood that the comment from Raine was, in fact, a boob joke.

Praem just stared straight ahead, like everybody else.

I whispered back: “She was trying to get you to put on your scary face, Evee.”

Evelyn squinted at me sidelong. “My what? Excuse me?”

“Your ... your scary face. You looked nervous. We all do. But now you look scary. It worked.”

Evelyn ground her teeth; that couldn’t be good for her.

Perhaps it was the nerves, or the way my mind was overwhelmed by other thoughts, or the performative puffing-up I was putting on; I don’t know why I said the words, they just slipped out.

“Evee,” I whispered. “Your boobs are fine.”

Evelyn just stared, wide-eyed and frozen. My own words hit me. I started to blush.

“I-I mean. They’re good. Your boobs are good. Uh, um— wait, no —”

Evelyn continued to stare. Praem turned to look. Jan either didn’t hear, or pretended not to. I think I heard Lozzie swallow a squeak so hard she almost died.

“Sorry!” I hissed. “Sorry. I just mean you’re well-formed. Normal. Healthy. You don’t need to worry about si—”

“Heather,” Evelyn hissed like a broken gasket. “Stop. Oh my fucking God. Stop. Stop, please.”

Praem intoned: “Keep going.”

I cleared my throat and blushed far too hard. Evelyn sucked on her teeth, looked away, and huffed a great, exasperated sigh. She managed to straighten up a little, wincing at the trials of her warped spine and kinked shoulder. “I’m going to need a massage when this is all over. A professional one. An expensive one.” She huffed again. “Do I really look intimidating?”

“Yes,” I said, not trusting myself to say anything more. “Yes.”

Jan cleared her throat gently. “Looking intimidating is half the point. Well done, Evelyn.”

“Helmet on, Heather,” Evelyn grumbled. “Hide the blush, at least.”

“Oh, oh, yes, right.”

I slid my squid-skull mask on over my head. Then we stared at the driveway. We all did.

A minute or two later, the final remnants of the Sharrowford Cult began to arrive.

Jan read their names off her phone as they appeared, half to confirm their faces against her photographs, and half to inform us who these people were.

“First up,” she said. “Sebastian Faulko. Yup, that’s him. Bald as a walnut.”

They came on foot, one by one, waved forward and then halted by Raine’s raised hand and the threat of her gun. Behind me, Amanda Hopton confirmed the cars in which they had arrived, parked just off the road on the edge of the woods; she read off their number plates through bubble-servitor senses, for Jan to cross-reference against the list she’d been given. Four cars, ten people, no extras — all number plates had to match, all faces had to be accounted for. No hidden watchers, no last-minute additions, no unplanned plus ones.

Jan murmured: “Second iiiiiis ... Juliet Berry. Mmhmm. That’s her. No funny business.”

Each cultist — or ex-cultist, I wasn’t sure yet — came forward around the bend in the driveway, emerging from the trees like a trickle of refugees lost in the woods, escapees from some hidden faerie-realm. Each one halted when Raine ordered, then submitted to a pat down from July; they’d been informed this was mandatory, that we could take no chances.

“Third — a Doctor. Doctor Harriet Marsh. And ... yeah, she’s clean. If anybody was gonna spring anything, it would be her. Smart lady, oldest of the bunch. No idea how she’s still going.”

After each cultist was checked for hidden weapons and declared clean, they were permitted to walk forward to the end of the driveway, where Twil waited to glower at them, more wolf than woman. A holding pattern, until they were ready to be presented, all at once.

Presented to me. What was I here, angel, or judge, or warlord? We

didn't even know anymore.

"Number four, Mister Jonathan Perioet — pronounced like the ballet move. Most likely to pass out during proceedings. We may have to fetch him a chair."

And we — all of us, standing there triumphant and clean and sane and whole (well, mostly), sitting in front of Geerswin Farmhouse, we watched every second of this sad performance.

"Five, Richard Fosse—"

"—and that's his daughter, Nena Fosse—"

"—William Turner. He has seizures, but his wife— yup, she's up next, Penny Turner, she's got his wheelchair—"

The names washed over me. I couldn't take them in. I couldn't do anything but stare through the eye holes of my squid-skull mask.

These people were human wreckage.

Hollow-eyed, sallow-faced, sagging and shuffling and full of sorrow; greasy hair, grimy flesh, grim clothes. They stared across the tarmac at my tentacles with empty looks, the classic 'thousand yard stare'; some of them stared at Aym, or flinched away from Twil, but they struggled to find much awe even in a full-fleshed werewolf or a faceless blob of darkness.

They really did seem like refugees from some hidden conflict in England's sleepy summer heart. Nathan had looked a little like that, before I'd 'rescued' him from the Eye — but Nathan had been sustained by taking action, even if that action was a deal with Edward and a foolish attempt to kidnap Lozzie. Action had given him hope. These people, all ten of them, they had no hope but to wait upon mercy, to pray to a God who was not listening. They had endured the Eye whispering inside the backs of their heads for months and months and months.

They were beyond exhaustion. Beyond bags under the eyes or slumped shoulders or slack jaws. They were walking corpses. None of them looked like they'd bathed in weeks, or slept in days. Most of them were at least a little malnourished. They shook and shivered and flinched at nothing.

The one in the wheelchair had rheumy eyes, thick and puffy. The Doctor — Harriet Marsh — was the most coherent of the lot, a

small and slender woman with grey hair, perhaps in her sixties or seventies, tough as old oak, alert in the eyes, but twitchy, like she'd been mainlining a petrol tank worth of coffee to keep her mind from rotting. I recognised two of them — Richard Fosse and his adult daughter, Nena; they were the pair who had accompanied Nathan in the park, during the ill-advised plan to kidnap Lozzie. Richard had been solidly built the last time I'd seen him, exhausted and drained but holding on; but now he'd lost a great deal of muscle mass, his dark skin tinted grey as if from blood loss. The daughter was twitchy and nervous, holding onto her father's arm like he might trip over a loose piece of tarmac.

How had they even driven here? Wasn't that dangerous? I suppose they hadn't any choice.

I watched Raine halt each one of them and implicitly threaten them with a gun. I watched July frisk them. None of them resisted; I doubted any of them could.

We knew this was necessary. The others had made it clear and I had not disagreed; in the cosy, easy comfort of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, it had made sense that any one of these ex-cultists could still be a so-called 'Eye Loyalist'. One of them might decide they had a better chance of fulfilling the Eye's demands by surprising me at the last moment — shooting me, or rushing at me with some kind of magic circle beneath their clothes, or some other plot that we couldn't predict.

But here, watching them, that notion was revealed as utter nonsense. These people were defeated. They were already dead.

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods," I murmured softly inside my mask. I could barely swallow. "They kill us for their sport."

Evelyn tore her eyes from the slowly gathering line of cultists. She glanced at me sidelong. "Heather?"

"King Lear," I said, then shook my head. "I hate this. I didn't think it would be ... so ..."

Evelyn tutted sharply. "Heather, all these people were members of Alexander's cult."

"And?" I sniffed. "So was Kim. She was a victim, too. Not all of them were willing ... or, I ... I don't ... no, nobody deserves this."

Nobody deserves the Eye. We didn't even leave Edward to the Eye."

"They went to war with us, Heather."

I tried to laugh, but it felt hollow. "The last remnants of a defeated army? From a war that started before I even arrived in Sharrowford? Is that what we're doing here?"

"Harden your heart," Evelyn hissed. "You may not be able to save ... to ... oh ..."

But even she trailed off as the ninth cultist shuffled around the bend in the driveway, to be frisked and examined by Raine and July.

It was a little girl.

"Oh, no." I put a hand to my mouth — or where my mouth should be, the front of the mask. "No."

Evelyn swallowed, dry and hard. "Shit," she hissed. Some of the others stirred behind us. I heard Benjamin swear beneath his breath and Sarika choke back something suspiciously akin to a sob.

"Christine Durmore," Jan read off her list. "I, uh, don't expect any trouble from this one." She added quickly: "Her father survived, too. Don't worry, she's not an orphan. He'll be number ten, he's probably just behind her."

Christine Durmore was not quite as young as I'd been when the Eye had taken Maisie away — she looked perhaps twelve years old. But she'd fared no better than the adults. Malnourished, thin, eyes glazed and distant, with that look which one sees on pictures of children from war zones, children who've seen things they should never see — empty, numb, far away inside herself. Lank brown hair, skinny and short, exhausted beyond thought.

I hissed, "Jan. You didn't tell me one of them was a child."

"... yes I did, Heather."

"Then I— I didn't— I—"

I almost left my place in the line and moved forward; the girl had stopped in front of Raine, but Raine, for once, looked back to us, uncomfortable with this turn of events. July paused too, uncertain of how to proceed. This was all planned, all organised, we all knew we had to do this — but when it came to the moment, none of us were truly prepared.

I pulled my squid-skull mask off my head. Deviating from the plan. I couldn't do this, I could not intimidate a literal child, I couldn't—

Evelyn's hand shot out and grabbed mine. She locked our fingers and held on tight.

"You have to stay here, Heather!" she hissed. "You undermine the entire point if you break that. Stay put."

Jan swallowed and nodded. "Yes, stay put."

My throat felt so thick that I almost choked. "But—"

Evelyn said. "Praem, if you—"

But Praem was already striding forward. The doll-demon crossed the tarmac with neat little clicks of her perfectly polished black shoes, the skirts of her maid uniform swishing and swaying, her spine ram-rod straight, her eyes high and blank. The little gathering of cultists shied back from her approach, like the demon she was.

The girl just stood there, numb and distant, as Praem marched up to her. Praem stopped, gathered her skirts, and crouched down so they were eye level with each other. Raine and July withdrew a little way, then waved the last cultist forward — the girl's father, James Durmore. Praem spoke with the girl for almost three full minutes; I couldn't hear what they said to each other, they were too far beyond earshot, but I could see the girl's lips moving as she replied.

"She's a saint, you know?" I murmured.

Evelyn grunted. "Mm?"

"Praem."

"Mm," Evelyn said. "I know. Better than any of us deserve."

Eventually Praem got the reassurances she needed; she stood up and offered Christine Durmore her hand. The girl accepted the offer. Praem led her to join her father with the others, handing the girl off to the exhausted, hollow-eyed man. We did not have a twelve year old child frisked at gunpoint; something toxic and lethal unknotted in my chest, falling back down into the roiling chaos of my guts.

Raine and July led the cultists across the tarmac. Twil brought up the rear, like a sheepdog. They moved the group close enough for a conversation, then halted them. Praem fetched four additional

plastic garden chairs from indoors — one for the little girl, one for the man who apparently had seizures, one for Richard Fosse, and one for the Doctor, Harriet Marsh.

The cultists watched and waited, nervous with anticipation, but with hope beaten out of their minds. Raine and July and Twil hovered around the edges of the group. Just in case.

Evelyn squeezed my hand. She whispered: “Heather? Heather, if you’re not up to this, I can—”

“No,” I murmured back. “I can do this. I want to do this.”

We cleared our throat, spread our tentacles as wide as we could stretch, and raised our voice.

“My name is Heather Morell,” I said. “Some of you have met me before. All of you know who I am. The woman to my left here is Evelyn Saye — most of you know who she is as well, because you once served Alexander Lilburne. And that means you know the woman behind me, as well — Lozzie Lilburne. Everyone else present here is my ally, or friend, or family, or—” I almost choked, but I had to say it “—vassal, in some form.”

Sarika snorted; nobody winced, because she was supposed to do that. Sticking to our script. Some of the cultists exchanged glances with her — they knew who she was. They had some rough idea of what had happened to her. These remnants were the last of the cultists who had rejected her plan to communicate with the Eye. They’d chosen not to follow her. They’d fled. All the rest had died.

“And of course,” I added. “You all know Nathan.”

Badger smiled. He raised his free hand. “Hello, everyone,” he said, then greeted several of them by name. “Rich, Will, Seb. Doctor Marsh. Hi.”

Richard Fosse stared at Badger with thick, dull eyes — and then blinked and lit up, just a little. He nodded in return. The Doctor had a pinched expression, but she nodded too. William, the one in the wheelchair, said: “Switched sides, did you, Badger?”

“No,” said Nathan. “I was saved.”

I took a deep breath and carried on. So far, so good. “I know what lurks in the back of your heads,” I said. Some of the cultists winced. Some of them made as if to shy away. The little girl shivered and

swallowed a dry sob. The Doctor closed her eyes as if suffering internal pain. Penny — the wife of the man in the wheelchair — let out a strange whimper. “And,” I added quickly. “I will not speak its name aloud, nor a version of its name, because I know that would hurt you. I’m not here to hurt you.”

One of them spoke up — James, the father of the little girl: “Are you going to help us?”

“Like you helped Nathan,” said Harriet, a little harsher and harder than I had expected. It was not a question.

I was shaking inside. We tried very hard not to hiccup. “I did save Nathan, yes. I ... wrested ownership of his soul, from the thing that ails you. It was not easy, it—”

Richard Fosse interrupted, his voice dull and lifeless. “I told you, she’s not going to help us.”

“Hey,” Raine snapped. “Shut up and listen.”

But Harriet Marsh stared right at me, and said: “You’re not going to help us, are you, young lady?”

“I—” my throat was closing up. “I— let me finish explaining, I—”

“Please,” said one of them — I wasn’t sure which.

“She’s not going to help us.”

“What was the point of this? What was the point of this?”

“Please, please.”

“—can’t take much more of this—”

“—think they’re going to kill us—”

“—just get it over with—”

“—please—”

All of them, all talking all over each other, starting to panic, to wail, to sob. And throughout it all the little girl — Christine — sat in her chair, growing smaller and smaller, further and further away inside herself, little eyes locked on nothing.

Hiiiiiiisssssss!

That shut them up. Most of them flinched hard enough to stumble,

or jerk backward in their chairs. Harriet, the Doctor, went white in the face. The little girl blinked.

We unknotted my throat, heaving and gurgling. This had not been part of the plan.

To save my efforts, Evelyn spoke up: “Jan Martense has explained the problem to you.” Her voice came out cold and hard, but she did not let go of my hand. “Heather’s method of saving Nathan required trepanation — physical, not magical, not anything like that. He died during the process, his heart stopped, and we had to resuscitate him. He went to hospital afterward. They put a plate in his skull. If we repeat the process for each of you, even two or three of you, then the police will become suspicious, at the very least. And likely not all of you would make it through the procedure. Some of you would die in the attempt.”

Harriet Marsh, at the front of the group, said: “Then why call us here? Just to tell us no?”

“It’s the end,” one of the others said.

“It’s not the end,” I said, my throat finally back to something approaching human shape. “I called you here to give you hope. I want to explain to you what I’m doing, and how I will attempt to free you.”

I waited a beat; all eyes fixed on me, waiting, so full of desperation. I almost couldn’t take it.

We said: “The thing that lurks in the back of your heads — I am, in a way, the adopted daughter of that entity. And in a week or two, as soon as we are ready, I am going to travel to where it resides, and confront it, to rescue my twin sister. And when I do that, I am going to ask for it to free all of you as well.”

The cultists stared. Some of them blinked. None of them said anything.

Not the effect I had hoped for, but the one that the others had told me to expect.

James Durmore — the father of the little girl — raised his hand. “Trepan me. Please. Trepan me, I don’t care if I get brain damage — then, if it works, please, please do the same on my daughter. Please.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “You don’t understand—”

“Put a hole in my head!” one of the others shouted. “Do me! I don’t care if it doesn’t work!”

“Death or freedom,” one of the others slurred. “Fine, fine, I’ll take it.”

“Hey, hey,” Raine was saying. “Hey, calm down.”

“Please! Miss Morell, please!” James said again.

Twil snapped something too. Evelyn spoke up. Jan stepped forward. I could feel it all collapsing around me. Lozzie whimpered. Even Nicole spoke up, a rattling voice urging calm. Badger raised his voice too, calling for quiet, for his old comrades to understand, but —

“You owe us better than that,” said Doctor Harriet Marsh.

We broke.

“I owe you nothing!” I practically screamed in her face. She blinked, shocked, taken aback.

Everyone stopped shouting; the Heather of a year ago, or even six months ago, would have been mortified. But we were seven now. And we were right.

“I am not a saint,” I went on. “Or an angel. Frankly, I owe none of you anything. All of you were members of a cult — a cult that kept one of my closest friends imprisoned. Lozzie, behind me — how many of you recognise her? How many of you knew her? How many of you helped her? Any of you? You all followed Alexander Lilburne, a man who had little children kidnapped and used up, who turned homeless people into zombies. All of you are lucky to still be alive. All of you were part of that—” I cut off my words and pointed one tentacle at the little girl, at Christine. “Not you, sweetheart. You didn’t ask for this. You’re only a child. It’s not your fault.” I sniffed hard, but I was too angry to stop. “The rest of you — do you think I let Sarika live because I owed her anything? I used her as an experiment, a proof of concept that I could rip a human being from the— from the grasp of the thing inside your heads.”

The cultists looked upon me, cowed and quiet.

“If we attempt to trepan all of you,” I went on, softer now. “Then the police will take an interest. They may interrupt us before we can go Outside, before I can attempt a rescue of my sister. And I would sacrifice every single one of you if it would increase my chances of getting her back. So, no. I will not compromise the thing that matters above all else to help a group of people who tried to have me killed or enslaved.” I took a deep breath. “But, when I am before my adoptive parent, I will make the effort to save you, too, because what is happening to you is not right. Some of you deserve prison. None of you deserve the Eye.”

I was shaking when I finished. Nobody said anything. Evelyn squeezed my hand. Raine blew out a long breath.

This had not gone to plan. I had not given these people hope.

No saint, no angel.

Just the daughter of the Eye.

Amanda Hopton broke the silence: “Oh! Oh, everyone, there’s—”

Bubble-servitors shifted in my peripheral vision, scattering from the treetops beyond one of the fields, like startled birds. Raine whirled around, hands on her weapon. Eyes raised toward the tree-line.

“—there’s a person— it’s—”

A towering form emerged from the gathering darkness beneath the trees, draped in her long coat and her baggy grey jumper. Raine lowered her gun. Lozzie broke into a smile. Several of the cultists stared in mute horror — because they knew who and what they were looking at.

“Zheng!” I called out, raising several tentacles, delighted to see her. “Zheng! Where have you—”

But then Zheng was striding across the field, picking up speed with every step, moving with sudden, swift, terrible purpose.

She reached the fence before I fully realised what was happening, a flickering blur of sprinting motion. Lozzie shouted, “Zhengy, no!” Felicity even raised her shotgun. Evelyn swore, loudly. Praem moved forward to intercept the interruption; so did July. I wasn’t certain they could stop this.

Zheng vaulted the fence, landed on the tarmac in a blur of dark

clothes and sharp teeth — and grinned at her prey.

Her eyes were locked on one cultist in particular — Harriet Marsh, the Doctor.

Teeth bared, sharp eyes narrowed, muscles coiling back like springs.

I knew that look all too well.

Zheng was about to rip out the tongue of a mage, break the delicate bones of her hands and fingers, and probably feast upon her flesh, to make certain she stayed dead.

mischief and craft; plainly seen – 21.13

Zheng didn't even look at me.

We hadn't seen her in days; she hadn't seen me since I was half-comatose, lying insensible on my bed and sleepwalking to the toilet in the aftermath of a total pneuma-somatic crash. But she didn't spare us a single glance. The dark slits of her eyes were fixed on a single person at that gathering, in the growing gloam of deepening dusk, beneath the suppurating sky, beyond the circle of shivering leaves. Her whole body was a coiled spring aimed at that one purpose, her intent written in the flex of muscle and tightening of tendon. One target, one cultist, one mage: Harriet Marsh, the Doctor, the older lady at the very front of the clutch of terrified faces.

A fox among hens, a wolf in the flock, a viper dropped into a pit of worms.

There was no time to negotiate, to call out, to shout, "Zheng, what are you doing?!"

We all knew exactly what she was doing, why she was here. Perhaps some of the ex-cultists didn't comprehend quite so rapidly; maybe one or two of my allies didn't fully grasp the situation. But they would soon enough, when the ripping meat and the spurting blood and the strangled screams started.

"Zheng!"

"—she's gonna—"

"Zhengy no! Don't!"

"—it's the zombie, the zom—"

"Oh fuck, it's her again."

"Shoot her! Shoot her! Shoot—"

"—not doing shit—"

“—really? Now?”

The others started shouting regardless, even those who knew better, calling out warnings or challenges or just Zheng’s name. Weapons hesitated, mouths opened in gaping confusion, and nobody took charge. None of those shouts had time to finish; it was all too easy to forget just how very fast Zheng could move.

Zheng’s muscles coiled and bunched. She rocked back like a piston in a tube. Her lips peeled away from a razor-sharp grin.

And she pounced.

A lightning flash of rippling muscle and reddish-brown skin roared across the crumbly tarmac, coat snapping out behind her with a whipcrack sound. Hands spread like a raptor’s claws, face a mask of bloodstained joy in the drowning dusk, she was a living missile of murderous intent.

And we

saw everything

frozen!

all at

once

A moment of perfect clarity, before the blow had time to land. I’d experienced this before, when performing brain-math equations in the heat of panic and adrenaline and desperate need. But now, the moment seemed to hang, as if time was presenting me with a question.

Perhaps it was because I already had our tentacles outstretched, to make myself look big, to intimidate and impress the remaining cultists; we had accidentally created an array of perception, a ultra wide-angle lens on time and space and motion. Perhaps it was stress and anxiety and pressure, the need to help these people, poisoned by resentment and anger, mixed into a heady cocktail with the guilt of failing to live up to how I had defined myself. Maybe it was the echo of dream-logic from earlier in the day. Maybe it was because I’d been thinking about the Eye. Or maybe it was just the sky, the ‘Eye’ of our own little sphere, hanging in the void, lending me a brush of her perception as she stared down upon the bloody tableau about to unfold.

More likely it was just mathematics. After all, geometry, velocity, angles of impact, choreography — isn't that all mathematics, in the end?

The group of cultists was gathered in front of me, dappled by the dying sun through the forest leaves; Harriet Marsh, Zheng's target, was at the very front, sitting in one of the white plastic garden chairs. We were separated by about twelve feet of open space. She was gaping at Zheng, one hand clutching an arm of her chair, too slow and old and Eye-ridden to react.

The other cultists — all nine of them — were recoiling in horror, hens before the fox bursting through the wall. The little girl was beginning to scream. The one in the wheelchair had closed his eyes, resigned to fate.

None of them mattered — a harsh thing to admit, but it was true. None of them could help.

Praem was sprinting, skirts flying — but not toward Zheng. Praem had once proven that she was physically stronger than Zheng. Could she beat Zheng in a fight? Hold her off? Contain her? Who knows. But she wasn't faster than Zheng. Praem was running for the little girl, Catherine, presumably to scoop her up and cover her eyes and ears, to spare her the sights about to unfold.

July — poor July, but she couldn't think on the same scale as Zheng. She was simply not fast or ruthless enough. She pounced, but she aimed at where Zheng was, not where Zheng would be in the next quarter of a second. This was no play fight, no friendly wrestling match. This was not a game. Zheng was murdering a mage.

None of the others could make a difference either. Felicity's finger coiled around the trigger of her shotgun, but she would have more luck hitting a butterfly in flight than Zheng on the hunt. Raine didn't raise her firearm; I couldn't blame her for that, she loved Zheng too, she wasn't about to shoot her. Twil was turning on the spot, gone full werewolf, all tooth and claw, but she wasn't fast enough either. Jan was shouting. Sarika was screaming — raw and rough. Amanda was mumbling some jumbled nonsense as bubble-servitors shivered and moved to intercept Zheng — but they were even slower, only just peeling themselves from the roof of the house. Sevens raised her umbrella as if to whack Zheng over the

head with it, but what good would that do? Evelyn's hands slid over her bone-wand, but she couldn't crunch out the words quickly enough.

Nobody present could force Zheng to stop; nobody was fast enough to intercept her strike, or strong enough to bring her down, or willing to hurt her in the ways which mattered. Given time and proper motivation, the mages may have been able to contain her. Given permission and a free hand, Hringewindla's bubble-servitors could perhaps have denied her some action, held her back, cut her off from her target. Raine and myself, if we'd been able to sit her down and talk this out, we might have convinced her otherwise.

All too late, all too slow. An ex-cultist was about to die, right in front of the others, in front of me, torn apart by one of my closest allies, my lover, my beautiful and unstoppable Zheng.

We saw a solution to several problems; we all agreed, all seven of us Heathers. This was going to hurt.

Harriet Marsh was twelve feet in front of us; Zheng was on the right, approaching at a right-angle. Lucky; the solution to this equation would not have worked if she had approached from any other direction.

We whipped all our tentacles down and back, coiling them into one giant muscular spring. My perception-array collapsed. Time resumed in a roaring rush.

Zheng was a blur of bronzed flesh and whipping coat and scything limbs. No human could have hit that moving target.

But we were not a human. We were seven squid girls. And we had a lot of extra neural tissue for running that calculation.

Hiiiiisssss-scrwwwwaaaaak!

I leapt at Zheng like a squid at a shark, shooting from a crack in the rocks, beak snapping, tentacles whipping forward. Wait, did I have a beak? Not literally, but it felt that way, like I should be snapping a bony protrusion shut on Zheng's flesh, nipping off pieces of her. But I did make the most awful noise with my throat, a screeching squawk which would have sent the cultists fleeing if they hadn't already been falling over each other to get away from Zheng. If I'd had an ink-sac, I would have squirted the contents and filled the air with a cloud of darkness, fogging Zheng's eyes and filling her mouth

with sticky mucus.

It all felt very powerful. Very big and strong, very clever, very well done. Very sharp, little cephalopod.

What was this now, the third time I'd leapt at Zheng like this? I was making a habit of it. One would have assumed I might have learned a thing or two by then. But I hadn't. No time to think, only to calculate!

I had failed to account for the fact that even with my tentacles fully manifested, I was less than a quarter of Zheng's body weight.

She wasn't just fast, she was big.

We slammed into her like a minnow into the flank of an orca. Our tentacles whipped around to find a grip, slipping off her coat, flailing for a handhold, desperate to hook around neck or waist or an arm. We speed-grew suckers to anchor ourselves to any exposed flesh. But Zheng was moving too fast and we were so very small. She could simply have kept going, brushed us off with pure speed, left us to complete our arc and crash to the tarmac among the cultists. Harriet Marsh would be dead before we even hit the ground.

But Zheng loved us very much; she was not willing to let us fall, to break our bones and graze our skin.

Zheng caught us like a rugby ball as we slammed into her. She stumbled sideways to stop me falling. Her redirected momentum carried us to the ground, together.

Zheng and I fell among the cultists, rolling on the crumbly asphalt; one huge hand cradled my skull to stop it cracking off the ground, while another cushioned my hip to prevent a fracture from the sheer speed of impact. Legs parted and scurried out of our way, voices yelped and screamed and fled, chairs toppled and scraped back.

We came to a halt with me on top, cradled against Zheng's heaving, furnace-hot front. Zheng's face was inches from my own, her lips peeled back in a furious snarl.

I started to croak her name through a twisted throat: "Zhe—"

But Zheng jackknifed to her feet; the world lurched around us. She stood up, let go of me — and to my horror and surprise — shoved

me backward. Several pairs of hands caught and steadied me.

“Shaman!” Zheng roared in my face. “Do not deny me this!”

Zheng was angrier than I had ever seen before — which was saying something. Her eyes bulged from their sockets, the tendons in her neck stood out like steel cables, and she was coated in sudden flash-sweat, beads of moisture rolling down her forehead and matted in her dark, greasy mop of hair.

I flinched — an understatement, actually; I flinched so hard that my tentacles flailed, baffing somebody in the face and eliciting a growl of ‘ow, Heather, fuck’s sake’ from my left. I squeaked and squealed and tried to make my skin flush with warning colouration, but I wasn’t Outside, was not set up for that. Part of us wanted to hiss and spit. Middle-Left tentacle wanted to grow barbs and spikes and cover us in armour. Top-Right wanted to harden her tip and hold it out like a spear, to ward Zheng off. We did none of those things; our senses were still a-whirl after our unplanned leap and tumble, our minds still catching up with what we’d done.

Nobody seemed hurt, at least not physically.

Twil and Raine had caught us. The circle of cultists was scattered and broken by Zheng’s intrusion, but Praem and Felicity and Sevens were doing what they could to herd them all back together. Evelyn had gone white in the face, clutching her walking stick. Lizzie was biting her lower lip, sad and hurt by this in some way I didn’t understand. Several bubble-servitors had descended to the tarmac, but then just sat there, great big bubble-blobs unsure how to proceed. July just stood with her arms folded, glaring at Zheng as if disappointed. Soup — Nicole’s dog — was barking and growling at Zheng, while Nicole and Jan both tried to get poor Soup to calm down. Bernard, Amanda’s dog, did not seem too bothered. Benjamin Hopton had gone white in the face, eyes wide. Aym hadn’t moved, content to stay as a little lace-patterned pillar of night; but I thought I detected a nasty grin inside that darkness.

Zheng’s target, Doctor Marsh, was standing up, shaking like a leaf but looking defiant. Iron-grey hair was stuck to her forehead. Her chin was raised. She looked like she wanted to cry.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled when I did not answer.

Raine said, “Hey, hey, big girl? Cool the fuck down, right now.

Don't make me come over there and spank you one."

Zheng ignored Raine, with eyes only for me. At least she was looking at me now.

Twil hissed through a mouthful of fangs: "Bloody hell. The fuck was all that about?"

"Heather," Raine hissed to me. "Heather, can you talk to her? She's going to snap if you don't. Heather? Come on, you can do it. I believe in you, you can do it. Talk to her. Say something. Anything at all. Call her a bitch if you gotta."

Raine's belief buoyed me back up. I got my feet planted firmly beneath myself and spread my tentacles outward again.

"Shaman," Zheng rumbled a third time.

"Zheng," I croaked, trying to force my throat back into a human shape. I sounded awful, like something dredged out of a tar pit, or a 1970s rubber monster. "Zheng— *guurk*," I coughed, then gave up. Zheng didn't care. "Zheng, you can't kill these people. I'm trying to protect them."

Zheng stared at me like a tiger at bay, eyes bulging, mouth a sagging line of compressed fury. Her breath was like the exhaust of a coal engine; heat rolled off her in waves, a palpable burning behind her flesh; she quivered, vibrating with anger in every muscle.

It was easy to forget just how large Zheng appears; her size tends to fluctuate in my mind. I once measured her to get an accurate assessment — with her enthusiastic and amused consent. We used a tape measure, though she had to lie down, or I would have needed to climb up on a chair. Seven feet and two inches exactly, from soles to crown. She weighs approximately six hundred and seventy five pounds, almost fifty stone — and all of that is muscle, great slabs of muscle packed onto her massive frame, far denser than a human being of the same size. She is a titan dredged from the ancient world, giant and unyielding, and it is very, very difficult to stand one's ground before her rage.

"Zheng," I croaked again. "You're—"

"Scaring you, shaman?" she rumbled. She was not amused. She was not playing.

“Well, yes. Y-yes, of course you are.”

Zheng leaned closer. I flinched and shivered. Raine swore softly under her breath. Twil growled deep in her throat, all wolf now, barely woman at all. Sunset’s glow glinted off Zheng’s dark eyes. The evening heat seemed to have fled. Even the insects in the undergrowth had gone silent. Zheng was a pillar of shadow with the last of the dusk at her back.

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “I follow you — I venerate you — because you are the way. But do not deny me this. Do not ask me to do this.”

I swallowed, very hard and very dry. “Zheng, I told these people I would protect them against—”

“I care nothing about these worms!” Zheng roared.

She raised one arm and pointed past me and Raine and Twil, pointing at Harriet Marsh. The older woman flinched as well, blinking rapidly, shivering on the spot. But she did an admirable job of standing her ground — though that may have been due to Felicity’s shotgun at her side.

Zheng growled: “The wizard is mine, shaman. She forged links in my chains. She dies. Here. Now.”

We took a deep and unsteady breath. Were we on thin ice, here? Zheng had stopped her assault, but was she only humouring us, or was there a way to convince her not to do this?

And did I really care about some ex-cultist? Should we have simply let Zheng have her prey?

I glanced over at Doctor Marsh again. She was flanked now by Felicity on one side and Lizzie on the other, as if she might decide to do something rash. Evelyn stood a few paces further away, leaning heavily on her walking stick. She caught my eye and nodded.

“Harriet,” I said, trying to unchoke my voice. The lady flinched again. “Marsh,” I tried again, and sounded significantly more human. My throat hurt. “Doctor Marsh. Is this true? Are you a mage?”

Harriet Marsh blinked at me several times, like a sleepwalker slapped across the face. She mumbled, “I don’t— I— but—”

“She was!” croaked a familiar voice.

Sarika was sitting up in her own chair, glaring across the tarmac. Badger was trying to hush her, but too gently to have much success.

“Sarika?” I called back.

“She was,” Sarika repeated, quieter than before. “She was one of us. Taught. A little.”

Harriet stammered out her own answer: “Y-yes. Yes, technically. But I was never taught very much. Alexander took me under his wing, promised enlightenment and ... and ... knowledge.” She swallowed, struggling against something internal, blinking hard as if against a headache. “I retain bits and pieces, and—”

Zheng rumbled deep in her chest, drowning the woman out. “This wizard filth added to my chains.”

Zheng lifted the hem of her baggy grey jumper beneath her coat, showing her naked belly and flank, muscles rippling, dark skin coated in a sheen of sweat, brown-rose complexion glowing in the dusk. Her tattoos shone on her skin, a network of lines and circles and script crawling across her flesh, cut through by the circles I had removed when I had broken her chains.

She ran one fingertip across a looping line of esoteric letters; the script was cut off by my intervention, truncated by one of the circles of bare skin.

“Here,” Zheng growled. “I recall, shaman. I recall.”

“Zheng—” I said.

Harriet raised her voice, shrill and terrified: “I barely remember!”

Zheng rounded on her. “The shaman speaks! Silence, wizard!”

Harriet jumped so hard that Lozzie had to steady her. She glanced down at Lozzie, half-nodding a thank you — but Lozzie stuck her tongue out with a little acid wiggle of her nose. I had a feeling Lozzie would not mourn if Zheng killed any of these ex-cultists.

I said: “Let her explain herself, please. Doctor Marsh, is this true, did you assist in controlling Zheng?”

Harriet looked at me, at an utter loss. “Maybe? In truth, Miss Morell? I do not recall. My mental faculties are not what they used

to be. My brain, my thoughts, my ... self, is all falling apart." She blinked back tears. "I-I may have held an inkwell and a design sheet, while ... M-Marcus? Was that his name? I can barely fix my late colleagues in my memory. Marcus. While Marcus added to the zombie's bindings. Maybe." She shrugged, thin shoulders going up and down beneath her unwashed pullover. "The last year is a blur. I do not know."

"I do," Zheng rumbled.

"Zheng," I sighed.

"The wizard is mine," Zheng grunted.

"Zheng!" I snapped, losing my patience at last. "Does that mean you're going to kill Sarika, too? Or Nathan?"

Zheng looked down at me with dark and boiling eyes. "Shaman."

"You let Sarika live," I said. "You haven't torn her tongue out and broken all her fingers. Have you changed your mind? Or does that only count for mages I haven't dealt with?"

"The worm-rotten ruin is of no—"

"She's still a mage," I said. "I assume you mean Sarika."

"She is broken."

I pointed at Harriet. "And she's not? She can barely stand on her own feet. All of these people are broken, Zheng. If they wanted to be a threat to us, they would have tried something already. I doubt any of them will be doing magic ever again, not with what's been done to their minds."

Zheng rumbled, glaring at me. Her eyes were like twin pits of hot tar, thick and dark and roiling with rage. The sunset was deepening, plunging us all into the long shadows of the forest.

"Shaman," she said. "You deny me this."

I flapped my arms and several tentacles, helplessly. "Why did you wait?"

Zheng tilted her head, jaw still clenched, eyes narrowing to shadowed slits. "Shaman?"

"Your phone has been off for days, Zheng." I felt my temper boiling

over; felt words bubbling up that perhaps I should not say, but all of us were getting angry now. “You could have been part of the planning process for this meeting. You could have added your own stipulations, or warnings, or told me this might happen. Were you waiting and watching in the woods just now? For how long? Were you stalking us without revealing yourself?”

Zheng tilted her head the other way. One massive hand slipped inside her coat and extracted her mobile phone — a little dirty, but intact. She pressed the power button, but the screen stayed dark.

Raine said: “Needs charging, big girl.” She did not sound amused.

Twil winced. “Seriously? Fuckin’ ell.”

I repeated myself. “Zheng, that wasn’t a rhetorical question. Were you waiting and watching, from the tree line?”

Zheng’s eyes flickered back up to me, impassive and blank, like a shark in the deep. “Shaman.”

“Because you could have joined us!” I snapped. “You could have walked up to me and said ‘Oh, Heather, by the way, that one is a mage, can we kill her later?’” I glanced around at the other cultists, at Harriet trying not to shiver too hard, at the faces of my friends — Evelyn was wincing in slow-motion. Praem was carrying the little girl — Catherine — against her hip, like a much smaller child, arms supporting her weight beneath her legs, her face buried in Praem’s shoulder. I cleared my throat and hurried to add: “I mean, don’t worry, I don’t think I would have said yes to that either, frankly—”

“Shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “I am not your hound—”

“No, Zheng, you’re my equal. That’s the point! You’re one of us. Part of my family. So, what was this? You waited until I was done taking responsibility for these people, and now you expect me to just let you murder one of them in front of everyone?”

Zheng let out a long, slow, rumbling breath, like a living engine of steel and flame. She had eyes for nobody but me. Boring into my flesh, staring me down, trying to spook me or force me back or make me look away. Once I had been a rodent before a snake, transfixed by power and beauty and the threat of violence — and muscles and boobs, I won’t lie — but there and then I stared back at Zheng, beneath the darkening sky, both of us drenched in bleeding shadows, coated in sweat, tired and angry. I would not look away,

no matter how much I wanted to hide behind Raine.

The others faded away; it seemed like there was nobody in this twilight world but Zheng and I.

Zheng purred, low and deep, “You will forbid me, shaman?”

“No,” I said.

Zheng’s lips curled into a more familiar expression, a face-splitting grin of deep satisfaction, showing her shark’s teeth and a hint of long, flickering tongue. The dying sunlight caught her face from far away, flame-lit and falling. “Shaman. You still understand—”

“I can’t ‘forbid’ you from anything, Zheng. I don’t control you. I can’t order you about, or tell you what to do, because you’re not my slave. You’re my friend and my lover. I can’t stop you from killing that woman. None of us can. The choice and the power is all yours. But I will be ... incredibly disappointed in you.”

Zheng’s grin died. She pulled her lips back in — disgust? At me?

“These worms are nothing,” she purred. “You owe them nothing.”

I sighed. “So you were listening to my little speech? Yes, Zheng, I don’t owe them anything. You’re right. But I’m choosing to take responsibility, even if it’s not mine to take. Nobody else can. Nobody else will. They don’t deserve it, certainly. But does that little girl there deserve to be stuck like this?” I gestured at Catherine, in Praem’s arms, though I could barely see them in the dying light of sunset’s end. “Do any of them deserve the Eye? No.”

“You made no oath, shaman. You—”

“Well then I’m making one right now!” I said. “At the very least — the very least! — they can die free. Not with their souls bound like this. You of all people should understand that, Zheng.”

A low blow. I almost winced.

Zheng drew in one great heaving breath — and took a step backward.

Framed by the distant line of darkening trees and the soupy-thick shadows of the fields, she sank into the gloom, becoming part of the gathering night. Her head dipped, her shoulders slumped, her eyes went slack and slow.

A surrender. But in shame? Not what I had intended.

I opened my mouth again to speak some plaintive nonsense — but Doctor Harriet Marsh spoke before I could call out to Zheng.

With spluttering defiance and an arrogant huff, she said: “This is a set up. An obvious little play, to win our trust.”

Everyone looked at her — well, everyone except Zheng, who had eyes only for me. Raine sighed, Twil snorted and shook her head. Evelyn looked disgusted. Over by Soup and Nicole, Jan winced and grimaced and braced as if about to get splattered with gore. Most of the other cultists looked sceptical and fearful.

As well they should, because I lost my temper.

Before we even knew what we were doing, we whipped out a tentacle and wrapped it around Marsh’s throat; her hands flew to her neck, her eyes bulged with panic, and she let out a terrible spluttering wheeze. I didn’t actually squeeze — I wasn’t genuinely choking the poor woman, I didn’t know if we had it in us to do that — but we gave her one hell of a fright, then dialled it up past eleven by screeching at her.

“Shut up! Shut up before I change my mind and feed you to Zheng!” I said — or tried to say. The words were not entirely human.

I think she got the gist of it though.

Then I let go and shoved her back. Luckily Felicity was there to catch her.

I was quivering with anger, struggling to control myself, but equally embarrassed by my ugly little outburst. The little girl was sobbing into Praem’s shoulder, shaking and shivering and panting. Had I caused that? The other cultists were exchanging awkward looks, terrified and skittish. Harriet was rubbing her throat. A hand squeezed my shoulder, Raine whispered words close to my ear, but we couldn’t take them in. Twil raised her hands and said something to the cultists, but I was miles away.

The sunset was ending; the exterior lights of Geerswin Farmhouse finally started to flicker on, flooding the crumbly asphalt with harsh electric light. This had not gone how I had wanted.

And Zheng — my beautiful demon — turned away from us. She vaulted the fence in one smooth flowing motion of muscle and

fabric, and then stalked across the dry-baked field, her feet sinking into the shadows, returning to the woods.

“No ... ” we murmured. “No, no, no, this is all wrong, I ... ”

The others were gathering themselves. The cultists shuffled closer to each other, like droplets of water joining together. Faces were looking to me for direction, so many faces, so many little expectations, watching me for cues, for promises, for which way to jump next. And not just the cultists — ex-cultists, now? — but my friends too. Eevee, watching to see what I did; Sarika, eyeing me with silent judgement; Amanda Hopton, seeing with the eyes of her curious and distant god; Lozzie, biting her bottom lip and looking at Zheng’s rapidly retreating back; Seven-Shades-of-Sinking-into-the-Shadows, with her subtle nod of acceptance that I’d done the right thing.

Had I?

I was stuck, with words jammed in my throat, the soles of my shoes glued to the tarmac.

And then, clarity whispered in my right ear.

“Hey, Heather. Hey, hey, love. Go after her,” said Raine.

We turned to face her. Raine was lit from the side by the exterior lights, harsh and washed out. We blinked and realised we were almost crying; Raine raised her eyebrows, so full of meaning.

“W-what? Raine?”

Raine nodded sideways, after Zheng’s retreating back; she was almost at the distant tree line, a slightly more coherent smudge of darkness against the night beneath the canopy.

“Zheng,” Raine said. “Go after Zheng, hey?”

“B-but what about—”

Raine cracked a grin. “We’ll handle the stragglers. Hey, you’ve already made your point. Said what you meant to say. Brilliantly, too.”

“I don’t think I did,” I whispered.

“You did. Now, get after our big girl before she vanishes for another week.”

“But what if she wants to be alone? Raine, I-I think I hurt her—”

“Heather, I love you, but you’re daft as a bat sometimes. If Zheng didn’t want to be followed, she’d be moving a damn-sight faster than that.” Raine shot me a wink, pushed my shoulder to point me after Zheng, and gave me a — thankfully covert, in front of all these people — pat on the bum. “Get after her. For me, too.”

On the far side of the field Zheng melted into the tree line.

I ran for the fence, and I didn’t look back.

Behind me, I heard Raine turn around and raise her voice: “Okay, ladies and gents, listen up! Heather’s gotta go fix that little mess, but we’ve got a few more things to talk about. Evelyn Saye right there wants to inspect you for other magical phenomena, and all of you have something to say to our Loz—”

But I wasn’t listening; I was chasing Zheng.

I didn’t leap the fence. I clambered over it awkwardly and dropped to the other side, cushioned by my springy tentacles; we could have launched ourselves over the barrier, but we weren’t quite as flush with emergency adrenaline as earlier, and we didn’t want to risk an awkward landing in the uneven, rock-hard, sun-baked field, or end up with a broken ankle in a rabbit hole. We landed on the grass, picked myself back up, and crossed the field at a run.

Down in my gut, my bioreactor woke up, thrumming with energy. We were running?! Gosh, we did not do that, as a rule. Heathers might have six tentacles but we were still not very athletic. This would leave me huffing and puffing very soon indeed.

Zheng was long gone now, a shadow among shadows soaked into the great cloying mass of the woods. The last of the sunset was still blazing and bleeding just beyond the forest, a final ragged slash along the treetops, and the exterior lights of Geerswin Farmhouse were flooding the tarmac courtyard with electric brilliance — but out here, on the edge of the wood, I may as well have been staring into an ocean trench.

We scurried over the exterior fence without pause, then plunged past the limits of the farm, beneath the silent sentinels of the bubble-servitors high up in the treetops.

Beneath the woodland canopy, beyond sight of the sky, we dived

into premature night.

Leaves shivered in the summer night's wind. Gnarled roots clawed for my trainers. Skeletal branches plucked at my hair. The trees were thick and ragged in every direction, mute giants towering in the darkness. Undergrowth coiled and curled about their skirts in hanging fronds of fern and trailing ends of ivy. The air was thick with rotten smells, with the scent of bark, the dust of high-summer earth, the verdant reek of leaf and sap and decomposing muck. This was true old-growth woodland, nipped at the edges by human hands, but with the heart untouched in a thousand years.

I blundered deeper.

“Zheng! Zheng! Wait for me! Zheng!”

For an unaltered human this would have been very foolish. The woods were just as lonely and dark as they were a thousand years ago; true, there was probably a road within fifteen minutes walk in any direction, but that wouldn't help if you tripped on a root and broke an ankle, or didn't have a torch or a phone to see by, or wandered in circles until morning found you exhausted and thirsty and weeping, curled up in a ball. Being alone in the dark in the woods is frightening — it taps deep into the ape brain we all still share, populates every shadow with unseen predators, screaming at you to get out, get clear, get to somewhere with better sightlines, find friends, find fire, be silent, don't make a sound.

But I was not just a human being, not any more. I was a little scared, how could I not be? But there were seven of us inside me, and apart from Zheng I was probably the scariest thing in these woods. I was half-tempted to slip my squid-skull mask back on, but what did owls and foxes care for that? My tentacles protected my ankles from unseen roots. If the worst came to the worst, I could always Slip out to Camelot and then home. And I could almost smell Zheng among the trees — her unique spice of sweat and heat called to me.

But I couldn't bloody well see her. It was extremely dark. Stupidly dark. When I looked back over my shoulder I could not see the lights of Geerswin Farm anymore.

Deep in an abyss. Just how I liked it.

“Tch, Zheng! I can't— oh, wait, here—”

And for light, I had my phone. I got halfway to fumbling it out of my pocket before I realised I didn't need it.

"Oh, Heather, Raine is right, you are very daft sometimes," I said to myself, as I raised two tentacles and turned up the brightness of their slow rainbow-strobe. The bioluminescence pushed the darkness back.

It was worth the risk. There were unlikely to be any mundane walkers out and about in the middle of these trackless woods, in the dark. And if there were, then I would wager they were up to no good, and probably deserved the fright of seeing a six-tentacled rainbow-glowing lesbian squid-girl among the trees.

"Zheng!" I called out. "I'm not leaving without you!"

A rumble replied from up ahead. I breathed a sigh of relief; if Zheng had sprinted off, I had no way of keeping that promise.

I skirted a particularly thick holly bush which was covered in nasty sharp thorns, worked my way around the thickly gnarled boughs of two massive trees, and emerged onto a low ridge which ran through this part of the woods.

And there was Zheng, sitting cross-legged on a wide, flat rock which jutted out from the apex of the ridge, less than six feet away from me. We were almost eye level with each other — she was still a little taller, due to the angle of the ridge.

"Zheng," I sighed. "There you are."

Her eyes were closed, her reddish-brown face lit by the slowly shifting glow of my own tentacles, framed by the dark trees. Her hands rested in her lap. She looked ready to meditate, or pronounce wisdom, or sit there for a hundred years. Her coat trailed off into the shadows behind her.

"Shaman," she purred. She didn't sound angry any more. I wasn't sure if that was a good sign.

"Yup," I said, feeling very lame. "That's ... that's me."

We fell into awkward silence. Wind rustled the forest canopy, far above our heads. I looked up and took a deep breath, trying to think of what to say. My tentacles had plenty of suggestions — hug her, slap her in the face, start hooting and shouting, go sit in her lap, tell her we love her (which was the truth and the whole truth

and never would be otherwise), fling ourselves at her again, and a dozen other less useful courses of action.

“Zheng,” we said eventually, looking at her again. “I didn’t mean to humiliate you, back there. I meant what I said, I-I have no right to even attempt to control you. I wasn’t. I was just trying to save that woman’s life, even if she doesn’t deserve it, perhaps especially because she doesn’t—”

“You have made a puppy of me, shaman.”

I winced. Zheng didn’t sound resentful, or angry, or upset. It was a statement, nothing more.

“Well ... maybe it’s not so bad to be a puppy?” I said.

Zheng cracked open one eye. I blushed and sighed.

“I-I mean, sometimes!” I added. “If you like the feeling! Not always. Not permanent puppy-mode. Sometimes you can be a puppy, sometimes you can be a big scary tiger. It’s up to you, Zheng, not me.”

Zheng rumbled and closed her eyes again. I had the distinct sense I had fumbled that.

“Puppies are still dogs,” I muttered, more to myself than her. “Still nature, red in tooth and claw.”

Zheng’s brow twitched. Her lips curled upward with approval. She purred, the sound rumbling off into the darkness. “Red in tooth and claw. Mmmm. Praem said that once, also. Poetry?”

I blinked, surprised that Zheng had used Praem’s actual name. Was that a special marker of respect? It wasn’t the time to ask, however.

“Tennyson, yes. The poet, I mean.”

Zheng grinned, amused. “Tenny-son?”

I sighed and crossed my arms over my chest; without the lingering heat of the sunset, the air beneath the canopy was growing cold and cloying, damp and dank. My bioreactor responded with a flush of warmth from deep inside my abdomen, but my shoulders and scalp still felt chilly. I wished I was wearing my hoodie.

“No relation to our Tenny,” I said. “And I actually don’t like the part of the poem that line comes from. It’s all about the

contradiction between a beautiful world created by God, and the grisly reality of nature. As if real nature isn't beautiful, too. As if predators aren't ... divine." I stared at Zheng and sighed a very big sigh. "Oh, I have caged you, in a way, haven't I? I'm ... I'm sorry, Zheng."

"There is nothing to apologise for, shaman."

"There kind of is. Look, Zheng, maybe you're correct. Maybe once I've freed those people from the Eye — assuming that even works — maybe once it's all over, maybe the mage, that Harriet woman, maybe you should ... you know ..."

Zheng lost her amused grin. "Feeding me your table scraps."

We winced again. "Not what I meant! That's not what I meant at all! Oh, Zheng. I feel like I've neglected you."

"You have not, shaman. You have changed me."

"For the better? You don't seem very happy about it."

Zheng rumbled a big sigh, her massive chest and shoulders rising and falling as the sound crawled off into the forest around us. We could feel the heat coming off her, like a stone left out in the summer sun, radiating all her stored warmth into the dark. We longed to crawl into her lap and cuddle up to her, but we felt as if we didn't have the right. Not then, not yet, not in the middle of this.

Zheng did not have a chance to answer, however, as an unexpected visitor glided out of the woodland shadows.

Russet fur and black-tipped ears slid into my circle of rainbow-strobing tentacle-light; silent, elegant, precise little paws padded across the carpet of decomposing leaves; orange eyes glowed like firelight in the darkness. Sleek and glossy and very well-fed, her little face preternaturally aware of myself and Zheng, showing neither fear nor caution.

"Oh!" I squeaked in surprise. "It's— it's the fox! The Saye Fox! Hello?"

"Yip," she went, very softly.

Zheng cracked her eyes open and turned to look as well. The Saye Fox — for she could be no other, and I would recognise her

anywhere — trotted up to us, completely fearless. She hopped onto the low rock where Zheng was sitting, then directly into Zheng's lap. She curled up on one of Zheng's massive thighs and rested her head on Zheng's knee.

Zheng chuckled, low and amused. She reached down and scratched the back of the fox's neck. The Saye Fox went: "Yerp-ip."

"Perhaps it is not such a bad thing, shaman," Zheng rumbled, thoughtful and quiet. "I return a little to how I was before, with my little bird."

I couldn't conceal my sigh of relief. "Still. I'm sorry, Zheng. I have neglected you."

"No more apologies, shaman," she said. She was very focused on petting the fox. A luxury very few humans could say they had ever enjoyed.

"Well, okay then," we said. "You should really, really speak with Lozzie too, by the way. I could tell she was seriously worried about you. She cares about you a lot, Zheng, she gets worried when you're upset."

"Mm," Zheng grunted. "The mooncalf's love means much."

"It certainly does," I said. I glanced down at the fox. She'd closed her eyes in deep contentment. "Have you been hanging out with the fox for the last couple of days? Is that why you've been out in the woods?"

Zheng didn't answer for a long moment. "She lurks here and there. Wherever she wishes."

"... that ... wasn't an answer to either of my questions, Zheng. But you don't have to, I think. I-if this is something private. I don't ..."

Zheng raised her head and gave me a level, blank stare. "Shaman."

"Zheng?"

"I conceal nothing."

"I wasn't claiming you were, I just ... you seem so ... I ..."

Zheng let out a low rumble. "The child leaves me conflicted. The woods are good for thinking, or perhaps for not-thinking. For doing, without thought."

I blinked at her, framed by the darkness. “The ... child? I’m sorry, Zheng, but who are you talking about?”

“The mage-wrought demon-child. The young one, who cannot speak well, but who yearns for my name.” Zheng sighed, a big rumbling sound in the darkness, and returned her attention to the Saye Fox.

“Oh,” I said. “You mean Grinny.”

Zheng grunted.

“You don’t like that name?” I asked. “It’s only provisional.”

“Names have power, shaman. They build and they bind. They stick where they should not. They get into cracks, then work themselves free and damage more than their weight has right to. Like grains of sand between the teeth.”

I winced; what a gruesome metaphor. “Then why not name her yourself?”

Zheng looked up at us, surprised; it was rare to see her surprised, eyebrows raised, eyes widened. She said nothing.

“Grinny likes you,” we explained. “That’s why she likes your name. Probably because of how you helped rescue her. We can’t just call her ‘Zheng Two’ or something. Well, I suppose we could, if she really wanted. But maybe you should give her a name, maybe she’ll like that, maybe it’ll give her somewhere to start. You could even give her a list of suggestions and let her pick.”

Zheng stared at me in silence for a long, long moment. Wind rustled through the treetops far above. A bird called in the distance, perhaps an owl.

“I’ve never ... ” Zheng mumbled.

But then she raised her eyes from my face and looked over my shoulder. The Saye Fox stood up suddenly, hopping out of Zheng’s lap, her ears pricked up.

I glanced over my shoulder as well; a thin light was poking through the trees, bobbing, swaying, making its way toward us.

“Be calm, shaman,” Zheng purred. “It is only—”

“W-who’s there?!” I stammered out.

“Only me!” came a confident reply; it was Raine.

She joined us seconds later, stepping out of the trees, holding her mobile phone in one hand. She cracked a grin when she saw that I was lighting up the area with my tentacles, and switched off the flash-light function on her phone. She looked flushed and excited, perhaps from wandering in the dark, but she’d also left behind her equipment — her firearm and her home-made riot shield. She still had her pistol jammed into the front of her jeans, but otherwise Raine was empty-handed.

“Raine?” I said.

“Little wolf,” Zheng rumbled.

Raine grinned at both of us. “If you go down to the woods today,” she said in a sing-song voice as she stepped forward. “But hey, you two are much more exciting than a teddy bear’s picnic, right?”

I stumbled back.

“R-Raine?”

Raine was totally focused on Zheng — and brimming over with anger of her own. She grinned, she flexed, she didn’t show it in the same way, but it was written in every muscle and tendon, in the way she stepped slowly toward Zheng, sitting on her flat rock. The Saye Fox scampered out of the way too, and coiled herself around one of my ankles.

Zheng just stared.

Raine walked right up to her, still grinning. They were about level with each other. “Hey there, big girl.”

“Little wolf,” Zheng purred.

Without warning or challenge, Raine reached out and bunched a fist in the front of Zheng’s jumper, like she was getting a good grip for a judo throw, or was about to pull her other fist back and punch Zheng in the face.

“Raine!” I squeaked. “Don’t—”

But both of them ignored me.

Raine said. “Stand up.”

“I will tower over you, little wolf.”

“That’s the point. Stand the fuck up.”

My throat closed up as I watched. Zheng stood, towering over Raine, though Raine kept her grip on Zheng’s jumper. Then Raine tugged, as if to jerk Zheng’s head back down to eye-level. Zheng didn’t move, she just raised an eyebrow.

“Play along, big girl,” Raine growled.

Zheng said, “Why?”

“Because I’m real fucking angry with you. Because you and I have a deal. Because you’re not just Heather’s, you’re mine too.”

Zheng grunted deep in her chest, and to my incredible surprise she lowered her head, allowing Raine to drag her downward. They stared at each other, locked inches apart.

Then Raine said: “You wander off into the woods, for days. You don’t answer your mobile phone. You don’t let anybody know what you’re up to. When you do come back, you’re ready to murder, and you’re tunnel-visioned right on that, nothing else—”

“Little wolf,” Zheng rumbled.

“And I don’t disagree with any of that,” Raine said. She grinned again.

“R-Raine?” I said, surprised.

“Hell,” Raine went on. “I kind of agree with you, actually. Heather shouldn’t be fixing mages. Probably better to kill that woman, safer for all of us.”

Zheng started to grin too.

But then Raine said: “But that’s not the point, big girl. You wanna know why I’m so angry with you?”

“Yes, little wolf.”

“Because you didn’t even say hi to me. Not a nod. Not a word, back there. What are we to each other, huh? Are you bullshitting me? Heather’s your shaman, sure, I get it. But you and me, big girl. This isn’t like what Heather and I have. You know that.”

Zheng grinned even wider. “You are jealous of the woods, little

wolf?”

“Jealous isn’t the right word. And it’s not the woods.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, at such close range, close enough to touch — or to kiss. Both of them were grinning, Raine with burning confidence, Zheng with dark predatory intent. Zheng even parted her teeth and slid her massive tongue out for a moment, then snapped it back with a flicker of wet red motion. But I felt like they were about to strike each other. About to clash with knife against fists, like they did once before.

Then I realised: both of them were loving this.

I was vibrating so hard I thought I was about to pass out. Several of my tentacles suggested we sit down, and quickly. The Saye Fox was frozen against one of my ankles. I don’t think she was enjoying the show in quite the same way.

Then, Zheng sighed. “My apologies, little wolf.”

She leaned forward. I thought she was about to kiss Raine on the cheek, but instead she closed her teeth gently on the edge of Raine’s jawbone. Raine laughed and let her go. They both straightened up and stepped back.

“The shaman is about to overheat,” Zheng said.

Raine laughed and glanced at me. “You alright there, Heather? You are looking a bit flushed.”

“As if I could possibly help that!” I squeaked. We all flailed, tentacles going everywhere. The Saye Fox darted back over to Zheng, who scooped her up in her arms and placed her on her shoulder, where the fox coiled around the side of Zheng’s neck quite happily. “You two looked like you were about to— to— oh, I don’t know!”

Raine laughed. Zheng just purred, seemingly mollified at last.

I sighed and huffed and tried to clear my collective mind. “Raine, what about the others? What’s happening back there?”

“Not much,” said Raine. “Evee’s doing some stuff with them, then they’re all off. Meeting over, Heather, you made your point. Praem’s talking to the kid, doing what she can. We might have some ideas there, but nothing you can act on right now. There’s nothing more

to do. Everyone else has it under control. This was more important.”

“This?” I said.

“You and me and Zheng.”

Zheng grunted a soft agreement and turned to stare off into the woods. “We agree, then, little wolf. We go hunting.”

“Excuse me?” I said, bewildered.

Raine clucked her tongue. “Eh, not quite hunting. Just a walk. The three of us. It’ll do Heather good too, clear her head.”

I boggled at Raine. “In ... in the dark? Here? Right now?”

Raine nodded at my tentacles. “We’re hardly in the dark, we’ve got our little deep-sea squid to help. And hey, you’re all wound up, you need to work out that. And Zheng needs to talk.”

“She ... she does?”

Zheng said nothing. But I suspected Raine was right. We hadn’t finished the discussion about Grinny.

Raine said, “And if she can’t talk to us, who could she talk to?” She shrugged. “So, let’s go for a little walk. Not long, no worries, just a little. Then to home again. Just the three of us.”

“Four,” Zheng rumbled.

The Saye Fox let out a soft, “Yip.”

“Ah yes,” Raine said, grinning. “My mistake. The four of us. A walk in the woods.” She held out a hand to me. “Come on, Heather. You’ll enjoy it. Nothing to be scared of, not with me and Zheng around.”

mischievous and craft; plainly seen – 21.14

A night in the woods is really quite scary.

What an absurd thing for me to feel, no? I, Heather Morell (times seven) — who has walked the nighted loam and toxic leaves of Outsider forests and unearthly jungles far beyond any human sphere — was spooked by a little patch of English woodland.

I'd visited horizon-devouring continent-forests, where dying suns starved mile-thick mats of vegetation into cloying sheets of black rot; I'd wandered through dense thickets of living bramble and choking mist, where hidden horrors stalked behind the boughs; I'd crept along fungal groves which colonised and cloned any scrap of exposed animal flesh, shivering with vegetable motion as they imitated their prey. As a teenager I'd been torn from sleep and deposited naked and shivering in storm-wracked pine forests where the trees moved whenever one wasn't looking, where giants peered through the canopy with eyes of burning lead, where the soil itself wished so dearly to eat one's ankles. I'd been chased by giant mushrooms, examined by ferns with pulsing exterior organs, and laughed at by unseen sprites playing in the upper leaves of mile-high trees.

An English woodland was nothing by comparison. Little here could actually hurt us. No bears or wolves trod these isles anymore, not outside of zoos — though some optimistic conservationists were attempting to reverse the latter. Eventually. Maybe. One day. A few boars may be found here and there, but breeding populations of what Tenny called 'hairy piggy friends' were carefully tracked, and none lived near Brinkwood, not that we knew of.

The largest predator in these woods? The humble badger (no relation to ours). And the European badger is such a skittish animal that we had no chance of even a fleeting glimpse, not with my tentacles pouring out strobing rainbow light, Zheng radiating silent predatory menace, and Raine crunching through the fallen summer leaves with the habitual gracelessness of any modern human; no

offense to Raine, she is in fact very graceful, but even she didn't truly belong here, out in the woods.

Spotting a deer was even less likely — they'd be off the moment they heard us bumbling through the undergrowth, fleeing from the silly, loud, inelegant humans.

Dark and spooky, yes. But nothing to be afraid of. The forests of the past were long gone, reduced to these stubs between the encrustations of the modern world. I even went and looked it up that night, after we got back from our spur-of-the-moment excursion, in an effort to contextualise my feelings: only about 13% of the UK is wooded; of that, only 20% dates back to at least 1600.

Patches like this — the area near to Geerswin Farm, protected by Hringewindla's unseen influence, at least a thousand years untouched by human hands — were vanishingly rare, and not even very large. Seen with the clarity of a map, this tangle of untended woodland wasn't even a quarter of the size of Brinkwood itself. It soon gave way to roads and fields, the forest dribbling out even as it climbed the hills, reduced to orderly little copses and well-pruned scenic rural displays.

But all the knowledge in the world did not soothe the nerves when one was down at ground level, in the dark.

Shadows slithered and slid behind the tree trunks as we crunched across the carpet of dry leaves, long fingers of night reaching off into the depths of the woods from every mute forest sentinel. The canopy far above swayed in the summer night's breeze, a static rustle always teasing at the edge of one's hearing — but warm winds did not reach down to the forest floor, where the air quickly grew clammy and cold and crept up behind one's back. Things moved beyond my tentacle-light — rodents, rabbits, nothing really, but my mind magnified them a hundredfold.

Spirit-life didn't help. There wasn't much of it this close to Hringewindla's territory, and the spirits seemed to steer clear of his bubble-servitors; two of those were following us, high above the treetops, glimpsed through the rare partings in the upper leaves — our friends keeping an eye on our safety, nothing more. But that only meant that the spirit life also retreated to the fringe of darkness at the edge of my light: strange faces and insectoid limbs loomed out of the night, odd tentacles slipped away from tree

trunks, while massive lumbering beasts sunk into the forest night as soon as we dared look. Zheng peered at some of them. Raine couldn't see.

Instinct ruled, when an ape walked a forest at night. One's rational mind said this was the 21st century, in the middle of England, and one need not jump and flinch at every rustle of leaf or snap of twig. But our ancestors had jumped and flinched and paused to listen, and so survived the nocturnal predators; the ones who hadn't, well, they weren't our ancestors.

So we too were compelled.

Or maybe that was just me — Raine certainly didn't flinch at every little sound.

She and I and Zheng set off in what felt like a random direction, away from Geerswin Farm, deeper into the woods. There was no pathway or track here, no foot-beaten way through the trees, so we let Zheng lead us on a meandering route, skirting thicker undergrowth, wandering past clusters of trees, avoiding the fallen trunks of fungus-eaten giants felled by storm and age.

Raine held my hand. I kept my tentacles high to give us light. The Saye Fox rode on Zheng's shoulders for a few paces, but then let out a soft yip — a request to be put back down. Zheng obliged and the Fox trotted along beside us, which was a very odd experience indeed. She didn't move like a dog alongside her human companions, but darted in little bursts, ears swivelling, head high as she hunted for prey.

For the first couple of minutes nobody said anything. We walked in companionable silence. I started to wonder what would happen if I wasn't present — would Raine and Zheng just walk on without speaking, communicating with body language instead of words? I sort of wished I could observe that without disturbing them or getting in the way. Would they do things with each other that they would never do around me? Probably not, but the idea was strangely exciting.

What was I thinking? Fifteen minutes ago I'd been preventing a murder. Now I was, what, horny? Was this some kind of emotional backlash?

We started to blush, of course. And nobody was saying anything to

interrupt my thoughts. So they ran on and ran, until Raine and Zheng were having a hypothetical ‘fight’ in my mind, and then—

“Raine?” we said, desperate to break the silence. Our voice seemed so loud in the night. “Are the others really okay, back there at the farm? I feel like I’ve abandoned my responsibilities.”

Raine glanced at me as we walked. Her face was framed by the darkness, but lit from the side by the slow rainbow pulse of my tentacles — like we were in a nightclub. She was sweaty from the confrontation at the farm, with a pistol still shoved down the front of her jeans, her beautiful chestnut hair swept back and sticking up.

She chuckled softly and shook her head. “Heather, love, hey, you can’t take every burden on your shoulders alone.”

“But I’ve left everyone else with so much to deal with. Haven’t I?”

“Evee and Fliss and Jan are gonna deal with the cultists. No worries, Heather, seriously, I made sure of that before I left. And they’ve still got Praem, July, and Twil for muscle. They’ll be fine. The cultists will be on their way back home soon enough. Then Ben and Amanda are gonna sit indoors with Evee and Praem, until it’s time to head home with us. If we end up being out for too long, well, I can call Evee, Praem can take her home in my car, and then you can teleport me and Zheng back. Right?”

We blinked at her in shock, trying to process all of that. “You really did think of everything, didn’t you?”

Raine cracked a grin, beaming with confidence. “S’mmy job, Heather. Cover your blind spots.”

I sighed a big, sad sigh. “I feel like I wasn’t finished, back there.”

Raine reached over with her free hand and ruffled my hair. “You were. And you did well. Seriously, Heather, you gotta learn to delegate. There was nothing more you could do there. Squid-god needs to let her followers pick up the slack, right?”

I tutted and rolled my eyes. “‘Squid god’, really? Raine, I’m not literally Cthulhu. One of these days we’re going to leave somebody terribly confused.”

Raine laughed, less subtle than before. “Don’t let Evee hear you bring up the big unspeakable ‘C’.”

My stomach threatened to drop out through my pelvis. We nearly stumbled in shock. "Pardon? You mean Cthulhu? No, that's fiction. Raine, don't tell me Evee thinks it's real, that's just— no, absolutely not, I can't deal with that. Vampires and werewolves, okay, maybe. The King in Yellow — um, maybe not the best example. But no. Not that. That's not real. I refuse it."

Raine shot me a teasing grin. "Nah, she just hates it."

I pressed a tentacle over my heart. "Don't panic me like that, Raine!"

"Didn't mean to." She shot me a wink. "Just cooling you down."

Zheng rumbled, a few paces ahead of us, a wordless sound of agreement. Did she enjoy me getting all flustered as well? At least the Fox didn't yip.

"So," Raine said to Zheng, calling to the imposing wall of Zheng's back. "Big girl. You missed a hell of a show today. Should'a come home earlier. Maybe you could'a gotten to chow down on a mage after all."

"Mmmm?" Zheng grunted. A dark eye glanced back over her shoulder.

"Oh!" I said. "The dream! Of course, Zheng wasn't there, she doesn't know about all that."

"Uh huh," Raine said, rolling her tongue around inside her mouth. "Heather found a book, and we met Mister Joking all over again."

Zheng stopped, framed by the towering trees. She turned and stared at Raine, eyes narrowed to dark slits. The Saye Fox bounded forward and nuzzled at one of her ankles, so she couldn't have been radiating anger or menace. But she did loom so large and dark in the midnight shadows — and it wasn't even midnight, it was barely past sundown.

"Yeeeeeeeah," Raine purred. "Thought that might get your attention."

Zheng rumbled: "Speak, little wolf."

Raine filled in what Zheng had missed. I listened, mostly passive, and realised just how absurdly busy the last couple of days had been: a complex trip Outside, meeting The King in Yellow again,

getting introduced to Heart, locating and translating the manuscript about vegetable twins who had also been abducted by the Eye, going to see Twil — then the meeting with Yuleson this morning, our intrusion of Joking's dream, and finally this confrontation with the last remaining dregs of the Sharrowford Cult.

I'd had a very long forty eight hours. Several of my tentacles agreed that after this, it was time for sleep. Lots of sleep.

Zheng listened, purring like a tiger; by the time Raine had finished, Zheng was baring her teeth.

"You allowed the wizard his freedom?" she rumbled — at me. "The clown escaped."

I flinched a tiny bit. Raine squeezed my hand and Zheng purred deep in her chest, an I'm-not-angry-but-I'm-not-happy sound, a tiger letting you know that the food did not meet her approval, but she was not going to remove your head for the offense, at least not this time.

"Well ... yes," we said eventually. "Joking wasn't a threat to us, not directly. We got what we wanted out of him with a deal, rather than violence. And I'm not sure we could have gotten that with violence anyway. It required his cooperation. Besides, I'm not sure I have any right to start designating every mage as a threat and then getting rid of them. That's a dark path to start down, Zheng."

She rumbled: "Alexander. Edward."

I sighed. We hadn't wanted to argue with her, but here we were. We said: "They were both direct threats to us, to all of us. To Lozzie, to you, to me. Dealing with them was right, yes. But applying that to everyone else? Zheng, I can't do that. I can't transform myself into judge, jury, and executioner for every mage we ever meet."

Zheng bared her teeth in a silent refutation; I might not be able to do that, but she could.

"Besides," we carried on before she could say anything more. "I thought you'd be more surprised by the revelations about the Eye." Then I frowned. "Wait a moment. Zheng, you were present, in Joking's dream memories. You were there when he spoke to the Eye through Alexander. I saw you in one of the side rooms."

Zheng shrugged. "Mage filth was of no concern to me. Worms dragged me away when the howling started. I heard nothing. I concealed nothing from you, shaman."

I actually laughed, almost embarrassed. "Oh, Zheng, no. You of all people are completely trustworthy. You didn't seriously think I was doubting you, did you? I was just ... curious ... I ... "

Zheng tilted her head.

"You ... you did doubt me?" We boggled at her. That hurt, deep inside my chest. Zheng didn't think we trusted her, implicitly and totally? "Zheng, I—"

Raine spoke up. "Heather trusts you more than she trusts me. At least, I think she does."

"R-Raine!" we squeaked, growing yet more mortified. "I trust you, too! I don't put one of you ahead of the other. I don't! I never—"

"The shaman has made me her puppy," Zheng rumbled. "Trust — yes. Trust in judgement? Perhaps not."

I winced. "Zheng, I thought we already ... well ... sort of ... resolved this?"

Zheng grinned, wide and toothy — very Cheshire Cat, against the dark background of the night-shrouded trees.

She was toying with me, batting me about like a prey animal. I huffed and tutted and had half a mind to stamp my feet.

"Zheng! I thought you were being serious!"

Zheng kept grinning. "It is true, is it not, shaman? You do not trust my judgement, or you would not guide me from my prey." She lost her grin and purred, deep and rumbly. "Mmm, perhaps that is the point. I have not considered this before."

Raine said: "Sometimes you gotta tell Heather 'no'."

"H-hey!" we squeaked again. "Raine, what is that supposed to mean?"

Raine grinned at me. "It means sometimes you're a bossy little brat and you need a good spanking."

I hadn't blushed so hard in weeks. Our face turned bright red from

throat to hairline. We felt like steam would pour from our ears, our cheeks light up the night like an emergency rescue flare. My tentacles very nearly did, palette-shifting their rainbow-strobe pattern toward crimson blush, brightening and flaring as we all went very stiff.

Suddenly I was acutely aware that I was alone in the woods with a pair of predators — my lovers, certainly, my protectors, absolutely. But predators none the less. Several tentacles coiled with shivering anticipation. One limb crossed over our chest in a gesture of coquettish self-concealment.

Zheng rumbled deep in her chest, a sound of dark amusement. “The shaman needs a reminder?”

Raine stared into my eyes, lips curled with a dangerous grin, showing the edges of her teeth; had they always looked so sharp, or was I transposing Zheng onto Raine? Raine’s beautiful chestnut hair was framed by the darkness, by the shadows of the trees at her rear, a halo of night around my razor-sharp angel of muscle and meat and barely contained malice. A corner of her tongue slipped out between her incisors, poking at the soft pink of her lips.

“Maybe,” she purred.

“I- uh- I mean- um!” I struggled for words, suddenly breathless. Neither of them had moved, but I felt penned in, cornered, pressed against a tree trunk in the dark forest, all alone. Little Heather, you’ve wandered off the path and into the woods. You’ve allowed a pair of wolves to lead you astray, and now they’re going to ravage you, and you rather like the idea. Raine and Zheng are about to—

To what? Do the same thing we did in bed? Why was I so nervous? Why was my heart fluttering like crazy?

“I-it’s sort of ... dirty ... in the woods,” I managed to squeeze out. “Even though it’s dry. Because it’s summer.”

Raine cocked an eyebrow. “Heather?”

Zheng rumbled: “The shaman is in heat.”

“Z-Zheng ... ” I hissed.

Raine just grinned wider. “I can see that part. She does make it obvious, don’t she?”

Zheng said, "The shaman thinks we are going to rut with her."

Raine raised her eyebrows at Zheng. "We're not?"

"Mmm. I am ... still sore."

Raine frowned. "Ah?"

I cleared my throat, desperate to de-escalate. "Y-yes! Zheng has a point. We can't solve emotional problems with sex. Zheng, thank you, I love you and I do- I do- I do like it when— well, you know what I mean. But yes, you're a bit emotionally sore and we shouldn't be trying to solve this with sex."

"Couldn't hurt to try," said Raine. "Actually, I think that would be the opposite of hurt. By definition."

"Tch!" I tutted. "Raine! I'm being serious."

Raine burst out laughing. Her voice carried off through the trees. "And I'm not! Did you seriously think I was gonna do you up against a tree, Heather?"

My face was busy turning several fascinating shades of rare scarlet; if this kept up I wouldn't need my chromatophoric skin anymore, I'd just transform into a lobster. Not all of us — us Heathers — agreed, of course. Two of my tentacles found this a delightful notion, and wanted to reach toward Raine and goose her sides to encourage her onward. Another two were shivering with anticipation, paralysed, waiting for Raine to make a move. One of the tentacles we were using for light was easing her colouration toward a flirtatious pink; we dialled that back.

"I mean!" I squeaked. "I wouldn't! Put it past you!"

Raine purred, almost as deep as Zheng: "Wanna try me?"

I squeaked, eyes going wide, feeling my knees give out. I almost said yes, but then—

Zheng took off like a boulder from a trebuchet.

She shot away to the left, one heel kicking up a little puff of dry leaves. I squealed and flinched, tentacles going everywhere; Raine actually jerked upright, one hand going for her gun. Zheng darted into the woods, between the trees, beyond the circle of gently pulsing tentacle light. Her coat whipped out behind her for a split second, and then she was gone, swallowed by the night.

The Saye Fox trotted up to the spot where Zheng had been standing, sat down on her haunches, and sniffed the air.

“W-what ... ” we stammered. “What was— what—”

Raine cleared her throat and removed her hand from her pistol. “It’s nothing, Heather. Don’t worry. She had me going for a second there, but she’s just playing.”

We boggled at Raine, then at the Fox, then off into the darkness where Zheng had vanished. “How can you be sure? How can you know that? Raine?”

Raine laughed softly, almost but not quite embarrassed. “She moves differently when there’s a real threat. She would have let me know.”

“How?”

Raine shrugged. “She just would have done. That’s how we communicate. She’s brilliant in her own way, you know that?”

“Of course I know that,” I muttered, staring off into the darkness. “Is she coming back, or are we supposed to follow her?”

“Oh, no,” Raine said. She even cracked a grin. “If we were playing that kind of game, she would have announced the rules. Well, maybe bodily. But she’d announce them all the same. Nah, this is a solo thing. She’ll be back in a sec, if I’m right. Though, uh, brace yourself, Heather. It might be a bit grisly. Just hope it’s not a badger. Or a fox.” She glanced at the Saye Fox. “You wouldn’t like that, would you, Miss? Or should I call you Mrs?”

The Saye Fox just stared back at Raine with those glowing orange eyes, like little fires inside her vulpine skull.

“Suit yourself, then,” said Raine.

We all stared off into the dark. Raine turned out to be correct. Zheng returned a few moments later — carrying a dead squirrel.

“Oh!” I blurted out as soon as she stepped into the circle of light. “Oh, Zheng. Oh my gosh. Did you kill that just now?”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted. She stopped a few paces away and lifted her kill by the tail. It was grey and furry and very dead, all limp, little limbs hanging loose. I winced and had to look away. At least there was no blood.

Raine said, "Are congratulations in order? Or would that be like applauding you for heating up a microwave meal?"

"A clean kill," Zheng rumbled on, without actually answering the question. "A broken neck."

I said: "Zheng, please."

"Shaman, it felt nothing but my hand. A moment of pain." She sounded surprised.

"Still, I'm not sure I want to ... "

"You eat meat, shaman. Do you not?"

"That's not the same," I said, automatically.

Zheng rumbled with displeasure, almost offended. I blinked up at her in surprise. She was still holding the dead squirrel by the tail, framed by the night and the thick tree trunks beyond our circle of light. The Saye Fox had moved next to one of Zheng's massive boots, her orange eyes glued to the dead squirrel. Ah, yes, she was a predator too, simply by nature.

Zheng was regarding me with heavy-lidded eyes, dark and distant; I wasn't sure what that meant. Raine stayed diplomatically quiet.

"Zheng?" I said.

"The clean kill," Zheng purred. "The quick death. The respect for the prey. This is less worthy than the slaughterhouse?"

A knot twisted in my stomach. "Ah. Well. No. When you put it that way, no, of course not."

Zheng rumbled again, then raised the squirrel corpse and opened her mouth. I winced and averted my eyes again.

"Look at me, shaman," she rumbled. "Or do you deny what I am for even a morsel of squirrel meat?"

"Zheng!" I huffed — but I looked up at her. "Of course I don't! I just don't want to watch you crunch down on a squirrel's head, thank you very much."

"You watched the beasts of the swamp devour their offering, their cow. Did you not, shaman? Am I not equally worthy?"

She was talking about the Shamblers, and how we'd fed them an

entire cow's carcass, tossed it into the swamp and watched them turn up to pull chunks off the bones. She had a good point — that was a much more grisly display than this. Much less blood, too.

"Of course you are!" I tutted again. "Zheng, why do you want me to watch you eat a squirrel? What is this actually about? It's not as if you haven't dumped deer carcasses on our kitchen table in the past."

Raine cleared her throat. "Because you wouldn't let her kill that mage."

"Well, yes!" we said. "But why does that mean a random squirrel has to suffer?"

Zheng rumbled: "It did not suffer. I already told you that, shaman."

I cocked an eyebrow at Zheng. "Is this meant to be a punishment of some kind? Zheng, I'm not actually squeamish, I've seen much worse than this, it's just not ... enjoyable to watch."

Raine started to laugh. She couldn't keep the grin off her face anymore. "You're being real petty, big girl," she said to Zheng.

Zheng purred and glanced off into the woods, darkly frustrated.

"So," I said. "You killed a random squirrel to make a point to me?"

"I would have killed it anyway, shaman."

"Why?"

Zheng narrowed her eyes. "Because I am hungry." She raised the squirrel by the tail again, then tossed it and caught it again so she was holding it by the torso. "Every piece of the body will be used. None wasted. This is respect, shaman. It is better than any mage deserves."

"And the squirrel isn't a mage," we said.

Zheng stared at me in silence for a few moments. I had offended her on some level I didn't fully understand.

Because I was turning my eyes away from what she was? From this core element of her fundamental nature?

This was an unwinnable argument. Even if I did not understand, I did not want to hurt her.

I wanted to respect her.

“Eat your squirrel,” we said after a moment. “I’ll watch. I won’t turn away. I promise.”

Zheng rumbled softly, then nodded. She lifted the dead squirrel to her mouth and ate her meal.

The process was both messy and loud — much louder than I’d expected. In death the squirrel had barely bled at all, but Zheng got blood and guts all over her hands as soon as she started dismantling the animal. She began by biting off the head and crunching down on the skull, eyeballs and fur and all. She had not exaggerated when she said no piece of the prey would go to waste — all except a small portion of the lower intestine, which ended up on the forest floor. I didn’t expect her to literally eat poo, so that was understandable. She crunched through bone, chewed up meat and organs, swallowed fur and skin and claws and sinew and all. She extracted a couple of choice cuts of meat from the hind legs as she ate, and dropped them for the Saye Fox. The Fox happily wolfed down her treats and then whined for more. Zheng obliged.

I kept my word. I watched the whole thing, from first bite to last morsel, all the way to Zheng licking the remaining scraps of sticky scarlet off her fingers. The iron-tang scent of hot, fresh blood filled the air, mixing with the leaf-rot and the living bark of the woods, muddled by the soil, given context by the green growth hidden in the darkness. Raine watched too, curious but not disgusted.

My stomach turned over as we watched — but not entirely with distaste; beneath the visceral dislike of watching a small mammal get pulled apart, I began to salivate.

My tentacles responded with the urge to sprout claws and hooks and spikes, not out of aggression, but with a kind of playful predation. Abyssal instinct woke and stirred inside my chest, whispering suggestions about finding a little hot juicy morsel of meat for ourselves. After all, I’d acted like that in the abyss, had I not? I was a predator too. We saw ourselves in Zheng, for just a moment.

We’d never felt this before — no, that wasn’t true. We had, but only in moments of extreme stress and violence, when the urge had been tied up with self-defence, or aggression, or peeling secrets out of human skulls. It had never before felt so normal.

Raine watched too. She watched me, as well. When Zheng was nearly done, Raine squeezed my hand. "Heather, you okay?"

I let out a shuddering sigh; Zheng had made her point — she and I were not so very different, even if that hadn't been the point she'd wanted to make. I laughed awkwardly, and said: "Maybe I really should go vegetarian. Maybe it would be safer."

Zheng popped a bloody finger out of her mouth. "Shaman?"

"Yes, I'm sure you wouldn't approve, Zheng."

"Mmmmmmm?" Zheng purred, turning her head sideways as she licked more squirrel blood off her palms.

"I mean, you eat a lot of meat. Entirely meat, actually, and if I was to—"

"The shaman's choice is the shaman's choice. It is the way." Then she grinned. "Not that I would stop."

"And I wouldn't expect you to!" I squeaked. "That's entirely beside the point."

Zheng just grinned and rumbled a laugh deep in her chest. She finished cleaning her hands, then looked off into the darkness, in the direction we'd been travelling before we'd stopped. "Onward, shaman?"

"Onward!" Raine cheered, raising her hand and mine together.

"Onward, I suppose," we agreed.

Zheng led the way once more, though closer than before; a rift between us had sealed. The Saye Fox trotted at her side. Raine and I followed.

We hiked up a low ridge, another undulating wave in the landscape of the woods, and passed below a towering clutch of massive trees, higher than the surrounding canopy. We descended into a little valley with a tiny, sluggish stream at the bottom; the water was black in the night, tarry-dark with silt and clay. Zheng left massive bootprints in the banks. Raine and I took the drier ground. The Fox vanished around a bush and then appeared on the other side of the stream somehow. Zheng paused to stare at the roots of a fallen tree, open like the mouth of a great beast in the loamy, sticky, dark earth. Raine pointed out mushrooms and gave them names and

reminded us not to eat any of them — even Zheng, with her iron stomach and demonic immune system.

As we walked, I began to feel a strange new temptation.

The woods at night were not so different to the abyss, when looked at from the wrong angle. The trees offered handholds to climb, like ascending the water column in the deep darkness; could we use our tentacles to launch ourselves up into the canopy, fulfilling the latent suggestion in the bizarre combination of ape and cephalopod that we were? Probably, if we tried, and didn't listen to the fear of falling.

Could I rush off into the woods like Zheng had done, and catch me a squirrel?

Maybe. If I was clever and fast and didn't face-plant into the mud in the first five seconds. I doubted I could actually bring myself to kill a small mammal, I didn't have it in me. Another paradox — I, who had killed human beings, and mages, sent them Outside and destroyed them utterly, was unwilling to wring the neck of one squirrel.

But then again, the squirrel hadn't done anything to me.

Zheng was at home in the woods, almost as much as the Fox. I might be, if I was willing to try, or if I was pushed by need.

But Raine wasn't, despite her confidence; she was a human being.

We spoke as we walked.

"So," I said. "Raine, you said that Zheng needs to talk? That's why we're out here in the first place, isn't it?"

Raine chuckled. "And you too, Heather, you're all wound up."

"Um, less wound up now that I've watched Zheng eat a squirrel, I think. I feel oddly better, actually. Centered? Mindful? Better, anyway."

Zheng purred from up ahead: "I have talked."

Raine said, "Not about what matters, big girl. No you ain't. And you know you ain't."

We came to a jagged slope, a shallow hillside riven by bare earth; in any season but summer the short descent would be impossible, one

would have slipped instantly, fallen on one's backside, and slid all the way down the slope. But the heat had baked the mud to a rock hard crust. Zheng went first, descending in leaps and bounds. Raine and I picked our way more carefully. Raine kept a tight grip on my hand. I used my tentacles to give us an unfair advantage.

At the bottom of the slope was an actual footpath — not much more than a track through the leaves and the undergrowth, beaten by generations of human feet passing this way. To the left the path vanished into the darkness, winding between the trees; to the right was a tiny wooden bridge over a shallow stream — just a pair of naked planks, a single upright handrail, and a tiny, weathered, moss-encrusted National Trust signpost. The signpost was so old that the text was illegible, worn away by sunlight and rain and the tiny eaters of the woodland ecosystem.

Zheng was standing on the bridge, feet planted on the woods. The planks didn't seem sturdy enough to support her weight. Her hands were in her pockets, chin raised, eyes narrowed. The Saye Fox was on the other bank, waiting for us to join her. I hadn't seen her descend the slope.

Zheng rumbled: "What matters, little wolf?"

Raine cracked a grin. "What is this, Billy Goats Gruff? Are you the bridge troll, demanding your bridge toll?"

Zheng grinned back, toothy and sharp. "Yes, little wolf. Truth or dare."

I sighed and tutted. "Really? We're not thirteen year olds. Or characters in an American romantic comedy. Truth or dare? Zheng, what are you doing?"

"Dare," said Raine.

"Leap the river," Zheng purred.

Raine let go of my hand, took a couple of steps back, and narrowed her eyes as she judged the distance between the banks of the stream.

"Raine!" I squeaked. "It's the middle of the night — well, evening — it's dark, and getting cold, and that's actual water! If you fall in you could catch cold. Or at least have a very soggy walk home! No, please, don't."

Raine flashed me a grin. “Hardly a river. Stream, at best. Can’t be more than six inches deep. And I’d leap that before breakfast, Heather. Here we go!”

Raine took a quick little run up — then jumped over the stream without issue. She landed neatly on the other side, raised her arms, and said: “Ta-da!”

Zheng rumbled approval. The Saye Fox went yip-yip.

Raine said: “Right. My turn, big girl. Truth or—”

“Truth,” Zheng purred.

Raine pretended to think, putting her chin in one hand and raising her eyebrows. I took the opportunity to cross the bridge, clearing my throat for Zheng to move. She ushered me in front of her and then joined us on the opposite bank. To our right, the woods crawled off up an incline, into the slimy darkness, hemmed in by overgrown ferns and bushes.

“Truth then,” Raine said. She pointed at Zheng. “Here we go. And you gotta answer, that’s the deal. Zheng — why’d you really run off to the woods after we finished off Edward? Does it have anything to do with little Grinny?”

Zheng stared for a moment, unreadable. “That is two questions.”

“It’s one question in two halves. Don’t you get clever with me.” Raine cracked a grin.

Zheng blinked slowly. She reminded me of a big cat, a tiger prowling the forests of the night. I didn’t want to touch her hands right then, not until she’d sanitised properly with some soap and water, but I curled one tentacle around her forearm, soaking up the inner heat from her body.

Zheng and I had already discussed this, however briefly. But this was Raine asking her the same question; it was not my place to answer.

“The child,” Zheng rumbled eventually. “Leaves me conflicted.”

We cleared my throat. “That was the exact same thing you said to me, Zheng.”

“Mm,” Zheng grunted

Raine said, “Cos you saved her, didn’t you?”

Zheng bared her teeth — not aggressive, just thinking. “The mooncalf protected her. The mooncalf saved her.”

Raine shook her head. “Lozzie may have thrown the lifebuoy, but Zheng, it was your words which made that demon try to swim at all. She would have clung to Eddy-boy all the way down otherwise. You peeled her off.”

Zheng said nothing. She just started into the darkness.

Raine was correct; when we’d had Edward cornered at last, his Grinning Demon — Grinny, the monster made from the corpse of his late wife — had clung to him, not out of love, but in a parody of devotion, a desire to be the one to kill him, to eat his flesh. Zheng had correctly deduced that Grinny would be unable to bring herself to strike the mage down.

Zheng’s words from that moment rang through my memories: “*Look at me,*” Zheng purred. “*I am free. I am loved. You can have both.*”

I cleared my throat gently. The night and the forest seemed to swallow the tiny sound. “Zheng, that was all you. Raine’s right. You freed her.”

Zheng still said nothing.

Was she — uncomfortable? I could hardly believe that. I’d seen Zheng angry, furious, smouldering, filled with lust, or hunger, or strange aggression, or purring with satisfaction, even sparring with Raine. I’d seen her cry over memories of her long-lost sister, or wallow in sorrow over her own past. But I’d never seen her so uncomfortable in such a basic way.

Raine said, “Never freed a demon before?”

“No,” Zheng purred.

“Oh,” I said, softly.

Raine was nodding. “Uh huh. Just never came up before, right? Because they’re always just tools, used by mages. Freeing them means killing them. But not this time. Why so different, big girl? ‘Cos she was so obviously being used? Never helped one of your own kind before, not ...”

Zheng lowered her gaze from the darkness and stared at Raine with

all the intent of an ice-cold razor blade. Raine trailed off — not intimidated, but curious.

“Z-Zheng?” I said, feeling more than a little nervous.

“My kind,” Zheng echoed. “My kind were the people of the great forest. A tribe, in a land that no longer exists. Reduced to nothing by Rus and Mongol. My kind is gone, little wolf. Dregs may remain, but they are not mine. You know that.”

Raine took a deep breath and spoke two words in a language I’d never heard before.

To my ears they sounded like ‘kejta ilamat’.

To Zheng, they meant something more

Zheng stared at Raine like she’d seen a ghost. Her eyes widened. She froze.

“R-Raine?” I said. “What was that?”

Raine cleared her throat and managed to look sheepish, a rare treat from her, I was amazed.

“That was ‘I am sorry’, or ‘I apologise’,” Raine said, “in Tundra Yukaghir. Or at least it was the best I could do.” She turned her attention back to Zheng, and said: “I know, big girl, the linguistic drift since your time must be ridiculous, and I’m sure my pronunciation was terrible. There’s almost no books on it either, even dictionaries. I had to dig some digitized copies out from the university library’s academic access program — and those were in Russian, which I can’t speak either, so that was fun. Everyone who still speaks it for real sure as hell doesn’t speak any English, not beyond ‘okay’ and ‘hello’. I was actually trying to learn a few sentences. Was gonna surprise you, big girl. But I put my foot in it just now. You’re right — demons are not ‘your kind’. Your people were, well, a people, a long time ago. I apologise.”

Zheng stared and stared and stared. Perhaps it was the silence and shadows of the night, but I thought I saw tears shining in her eyes.

Then Zheng roared at the top of her lungs, splitting the night with a cry, and rushed at Raine.

For one terrible moment I thought Raine had caused such offense that my two beloved were about to come to real blows. The Saye

Fox went yip-yip-yap. We almost lashed out with my tentacles to stop Zheng, or to shove Raine back — but some instinct stayed my hands.

Zheng swept Raine off her feet, like she might with me, so easy with those demon muscles. She laughed in a kind of triumph I'd never heard before, swung Raine in a circle, and put her back down. Raine staggered with the impact, laughing along with Zheng, blinking and blushing — which was very new and very exciting.

Before Raine could take a step back, Zheng put a hand on her head, fingers running through her chestnut hair, just like she would with me. "Little wolf," she purred.

"Liked that, did you?" Raine panted, somewhat surprised by Zheng's impromptu celebration.

"Thank you, little wolf. Your pronunciation was terrible. The words weren't even right — the drift, yes, too far. But that matters not. Thank you."

Raine grinned with success. Zheng, to my surprise and delight, leaned in and down, as if to kiss her.

But Raine ducked her head back, one hand up to stall the affection. "Woah, woah, big girl, hey. Hold off on that for now, hey?"

Zheng paused. "Mm?"

Raine laughed. "You just ate a wild squirrel. My immune system is only human."

Mine's not, I thought.

Our sevenfold heart flooded with sympathetic disappointment — how romantic and poetic and lovely it would be for Zheng and Raine to share a kiss, after that sweet gesture. Part of us wanted to see it, too; Top-Right was beside herself with glee. But Raine was only human. There was no telling what that wild squirrel may have carried in its flesh. Zheng's demonic immune system would burn up any intruder, but Raine was only human.

Only human.

One of us made a suggestion — Bottom-Left tentacle, though the idea spread rapidly through us all in a flash of temptation and guilt.

What if we shared our immune system with Raine?

We felt the ghostly after-image of a bio-steel needle inside a tentacle-tip, like a bone inside flesh. We shivered and gulped with anticipation and need. Eevee had told us never to do this, never inject a human being with this stuff, this tripartite soul-fluid distilled from the abyssal approximations inside our bio-reactor.

But then Zheng and Raine could kiss!

We weren't that far gone. We clamped down on the notion — it was mad.

But it would make Raine more than human.

Make her able to withstand—

"That was a very lovely gesture, Raine," I blurted out instead, to cover my growing horror.

Zheng grunted an approval, let go of Raine, and stepped back. She didn't seem offended by the refused kiss. Raine just shrugged and grinned.

"The little wolf has a point," Zheng purred. "The child — she needs a name. She needs one to take responsibility for her. She needs a sister, as I had. She has none. She has a friend, in the puppy. That is not enough."

"Tenny?" I asked.

Zheng nodded. "I know her not. She knows me only as aid, a hand in the dark. But ... mmmmmmm." She purred. "I will be the sister, this time? For a time, at least."

Raine shot her a wink. "Spend some time with her. Just try it out."

Zheng nodded.

They both seemed as if a weight had lifted from their shoulders, as if the distance between them had shortened, as if a gap had closed.

But now a weight had settled on me.

We'd been so busy the last two days that I'd avoided thinking about this. Even when I'd asked Twil the same question, or when I'd begun planning with Jan for the creation of Maisie's body.

The fundamental question, the one we'd asked Raine again and again, which she had continued to answer by staying by our side.

But now it was real, less than two weeks away, if Eeve's preparation went to plan.

We could not bottle this up, not in front of these two; Raine was already beginning to frown at me, seeing right through my exterior. Zheng was cocking an eyebrow, the question forming behind her lips. If we could speak this nowhere else but amid the dark forest, we had to speak it.

We just blurted it out.

"Raine, Zheng," we said, voice shaking slightly. "I don't want you to come to Wonderland with us. Either of you."

Raine frowned. "Heather?"

"Shaman," Zheng rumbled. "You fear."

"Of course I fear!" I said. "I keep trying not to think about it, but I'm terrified! I love both of you, and I don't want you to die, or even to get hurt. And you just— you want— you want to be Grinny's older sister, to give her something to cling to, as she grows? Good! Fine! Yes! But we might all be dead in two weeks. This might not work! Zheng, you're really, really, really good at punching things, very hard. But what can you punch, out there in Wonderland? I don't want you to die, I—"

"I am invincible, shaman," Zheng rumbled.

I boggled at her. "You ... "

"As long as you live, I am invincible, shaman. There is nothing more to discuss. I will stand by your side beneath the gaze of whatever foe is before you. If you stand, I stand. That's all."

Raine said, "Heather, if you think I'm not coming with you, you're having a laugh."

I turned to her, trying not to let the lump in my throat grow any larger. The trees were so tall, the night so deep, and Raine so alive amid it all.

"Raine," I said. "You're only human. The rest of us going — even me, even Lozzie, or Eeve — we're all monsters, or mages, or supernatural, and you're just ... just you."

Raine cracked a grin. "You think I give a shit?"

I blinked at her; she was radiating menace in that moment, rolling off her in waves. “R-Raine?”

“I don’t need to be a mage or a werewolf or a demon to kick every arse you wanna put in front of me, Heather. You wanna juice me up with that tentacle jab, don’t you?”

I blushed, bright-red scarlet, almost worse than before. My tentacles all tried to duck away, embarrassed, before realising that would plunge us all into darkness. “I-I-I didn’t say—”

“You have my permission.”

“ ... Raine?” I could barely squeeze the word out.

“Not right now, not yet. But if I ever go down, or if I seem like I’m done — I mean, really, truly, fucking done — you’ve got permission.”

“But— Evee said— we don’t know what that might do, or—”

“I don’t give a shit,” said Raine. Her grin shifted, from aggressive to teasing. “Would it help if I said I want you inside me?”

“Raine!” I squeaked. I was almost crying. “I’m being serious, I-I’m terrified that you’re going to get hurt out there, I—”

“And I’m scared you’re gonna get hurt, so I’m coming with you. That’s all.”

We started crying, though only softly, driven by the devotion before us. Raine pulled us into a hug and kissed our forehead. We clung to her, shaking and shivering, rubbing our face on her shoulder. We stayed like that for a long time. We felt Zheng’s hand on our skull, a comforting warmth.

“Yip!” went the Saye Fox.

Raine and I parted softly. We both looked down at the orange vulpine eyes, glowing in the forest darkness.

“Nuh uh,” said Raine.

“Mmmhmm,” Zheng echoed.

“Sorry, pardon?” I asked.

Raine said, “She’s definitely not coming. The fox, I mean, no matter how worried she is about Evee. Outside is no place for foxes,

however much they want to help. Right?”

Outwardly I laughed, a little giggle to dispel the fear; but inwardly I agreed more than I could voice.

Outside was no place for unaltered humans, however much they wanted to help.

eyes yet to open – 22.1

Blessed by the benefit of seven brains: one human, cradled within the hot, dark, osseous cavity of our skull, cushioned by the triple-layer of tissue-soft meninges, floating in a clear soup of cerebrospinal fluid, wrinkled and grey and flaring with invisible electricity; and six imitation-cephalopod, spongy ladder-structures running up and down with distributed thought, interlaced with the fibres and muscular hydrostats of our tentacles, woven from pneuma-somatic dreams and euphoric self-image. Seven brains! Surely more than enough to conceive and contain any measure of plan, to master any level of multitasking, to keep an iron grip of willpower on the self, and never forget a single thing.

But, no. Alas. Being Heather Morell, times seven, did not work like that, not in practice.

It was still all too easy to have too much on one's mind. Too much to think about.

Too much responsibility.

Which is why, on the morning which followed our meeting with the last, sad, wet, half-dead dregs of the Sharrowford Cult, I gently but firmly declined to get out of bed.

I didn't actually have to say anything to achieve this goal of luxuriant refusal, of course. We could just lie there, wrapped in my blankets, tentacles coiled about myself, face down on the pillow, pretending we didn't feel the trickle of cold drool oozing from the corner of my lips. But I did feel it; I'd woken up at four or five o'clock in the morning, bestirred by the first distant hints of sunrise beyond the closed curtains, the first intrusion of the day's light into the static grey gloom of our bedroom. I had been trapped in dozy purgatory ever since, teetering on the edge of sleep, so eager to slip back down into the darkness of unconscious oblivion — but dragged back up again and again as some new angle of anxiety grasped my thoughts and shook me like a snow-globe in a giant's fist.

So I lay there, half-conscious, sliding back and forth, tapped by the

occasional hypnagogic jerk, murmuring as a dreamer trapped in an endless hallway.

Zheng rose first, as she almost always did, before the sun had finished peeking over the horizon and flooding the city of Sharrowford. She'd joined us last night after a long soak in the bath. Never showers for Zheng, always the scalding hot dip beneath the waters; she was lucky that Number 12 Barnslow Drive possessed such a large bathtub. A bath, a bottle of mouthwash, and a brand-new toothbrush had seen her clean enough to do certain things with Raine, which had helped me stop thinking, at least for a little while.

I felt Zheng get up, felt her bulk and weight and size leave the bed, felt the sudden absence of her furnace-heat skin. I heard her grunt and purr and make her spine go pop-pop-pop. I felt her brush my hair away from my forehead with gentle fingers, then felt her lean over and do the same with Raine. I could have escaped purgatory by simply opening my eyes — Zheng would have noticed, invited me to join her, and I would be free.

Free to not think. Free to procrastinate.

So I didn't; a couple of my tentacles disagreed, grumbling in the back of our mind, but the consensus was still against that selfish impulse. I pretended I was truly asleep, breathing deeply, still as untouched waters. I heard Zheng leave the room, stalking off into the dark corridors of the house to find herself some animal flesh to shove into her mouth. She moved with all her usual big-cat stealth. The sound of her footsteps vanished before she even reached the stairs.

An hour later — or two hours, or three? My sense of time was a hallucinatory dream, a fugue state, not yet real. Had I slept a little or been awake the whole time?

Well, whichever it was, Raine woke up.

She was louder than Zheng, slightly less graceful, heavier on her feet. And much more physical. Raine snuggled close to me for a while, kissed me on the back of the neck, and touched me in ways which queried if I wanted certain kinds of attention.

But I didn't move. I was 'asleep'.

Eventually Raine got up properly, sliding out of bed and leaving me in my puddle of warm lies. She stretched with big cat-like motions

and deep breaths and more than a few whiny grunts — which made me regret declining her attentions. Then she threw on some clothes and checked her phone. She'd showered last night, a shared shower with myself, during which she had pinned me to the wall and helped me to stop thinking for a significant period of time, several times.

I wanted that right then, I wanted it badly enough to flirt with betraying my intentions. Several of us even twitched beneath the covers, tentacles aching to be touched. But that was not what we needed, only what we wanted. I needed something very different, very specific, very difficult. Something with which Raine could not help — at least not at first.

But then she whispered my name: "Heather? Heather, love, you awake?"

Try as I might, I couldn't lie with my words, however much I might tell falsehoods with my body.

"No," I grumbled.

Raine laughed softly, then spoke even softer: "It's nearly ten, squid-princess. You want me to bring you breakfast in bed? I was gonna get some stretches in, downstairs, some real stretches, do a bit of a routine. I'm, uh, a little sore after last night, if you know what I mean. But I can get breakfast on first. You want some?"

"Mmm, no thank you."

"You gonna sleep in?"

"No," I said.

Raine chuckled again. "My beautiful little paradox. Do you want me to get you up? Is that it?"

"No."

"Hmmmm," Raine made an exaggerated thinking sound, like purring. She pressed a hand against my back, through the covers, and used her thumb to knead the muscles between my spine and shoulder blades. I almost groaned into the pillow. Raine purred again: "You being a bad girl and lazing around in bed is gonna come back to bite you, right? Is this a tactic to make me force you? Gonna be a brat?"

That purr was enough to tug at the base of my guts. Maybe if I got really, seriously, irritatingly bratty, then Raine would make it so I wouldn't have to think at all for the rest of the day. Maybe this swamp which was bubbling and seething in my mind could be put off until tomorrow, until—

No. No more procrastination.

Maisie could not afford my procrastination.

"No," I said — not cutely and sweetly any longer, not with a little purr of my own, not a teasing refusal to bait Raine into peeling me out of bed and out of my clothes and out of my skull, but 'no', clear and open and a little too hard.

Raine's hand paused. "Ah?"

"No thank you, Raine," I said, even clearer. "I need to think. Let me think. You've done nothing wrong, it's fine. Thank you for the offer. I'll ... I'll be down later."

Raine nodded — I couldn't see, but I felt the seriousness in her expression, the instant acceptance of whatever I needed to do. She said, "You can totally just go back to sleep if you want. You've earned it, after yesterday. You gotta take care of yourself, Heather."

"I won't sleep," we said. "I can't. I need to think. But thanks, Raine. I love you."

Raine leaned down and kissed my forehead. I caught the scent of sleep-sweat and feminine flesh. "Love you too, tentacle-girl. Seeya in a bit?"

"Mm," I grunted. "In a bit."

I wasn't being petulant. I simply knew that I wanted — no, I needed — to be alone, with myself, to think.

Raine padded out of our bedroom on bare feet and gently closed the door behind her, sealing me back inside the warm, grey, gloomy bubble of walls and curtains and bed covers, at the core of my building-cocoon of secret thoughts. I lay there for a long time. Minutes, hours, I wasn't sure. Hoping against hope that sleep might creep up on me from behind, take me unawares, and leave me with no choice but to submit. But it didn't; sleep was uninterested in little old me. We felt more and more awake with every passing moment. Eventually we sighed and rolled over and stopped

pretending to be asleep.

Our bedroom was a nest of friendly shadows. Grey light crept around the edges of the curtain, offering shape and form and definition to the shades within. The summer heat had broken overnight, dialling down to merely hot, instead of thought-searing; the sky outdoors was blanketed with high layers of thickened grey cloud, a crust upon the all-seeing blue beyond. Sharrowford lay sleepy and lazy below, a muted land of concrete and asphalt, brick and metal, buzzing to itself at the threat of chilling rain.

We stretched out our tentacles and sat up in bed, clinging to headboard and pillow and mattress, as if the anchors would serve to stall the task ahead. We tried hugging ourselves, then making ourselves very wide, all tentacles thrust outward. Then we flopped back again and sighed a very big sigh.

There was no escape.

“We have to do this properly,” we murmured to ourselves. “There’s no way to organise all this. Not without pen and paper.” We laughed an absurd little laugh. “Really? Pen and paper, Heather? Like you’re outlining an essay?”

Most of my tentacles agreed. It felt ridiculous, but it was the only way we knew.

“No,” we corrected ourselves gently, waving our tentacles in the air as we thought. “It’s not the only way we know. It’s just one of the few things we’re actually good at. One of the few skills we’ve developed.” We sighed again. “Always so bad at planning.”

I had always been terrible at making plans, and even worse at seeing them through; intellectually I knew I was not to blame for that. When you are a teenager assaulted by otherworldly nightmares and missing time and exhaustion and inexplicable monsters around every corner, it is exceptionally difficult to think ahead more than the absolute minimum required for survival. I had never learned to plan.

But I had learned how to write an essay.

Reluctantly, slowly, like an octopus in her den, we peeled ourselves out of bed, made sure we were reasonably decent — not half-naked, at least — and then stumbled to the bathroom, hoping not to run into anybody out in the corridor.

The upstairs corridor of Number 12 Barnslow Drive was as grey and shadow-drenched as our bedroom on that day; the bathroom was pitch dark, a windowless chamber. We used the toilet with the light off. That was nice. We flirted oh-so-temptingly with the notion of just staying there in the dark, no thinking, no responsibility, no light. Run a bath and lie there in the lightless cavern, comfy and quiet and warm.

“No procrastination, Heather,” we murmured into that stygian black. “Maisie doesn’t have time.”

We drank from the sink and brushed our teeth. Then we padded back to our bedroom and shut the door and threw all our clothes on the floor. Fresh thinking required fresh garments: a big loose t-shirt borrowed from Raine, which fell well past my hips, and a pair of bright pink pajama bottoms. No underwear. We were breaking rules today, being seven bad girls, skipping breakfast — ow, no — and wearing no knickers.

Raine would have been very excited if she’d known. But this was not for Raine’s benefit. Not for anybody’s benefit but mine.

I sat down at my desk in the corner of the room, where the shadows were deepest. Books had piled up here over the summer break, detritus that must be cleared off before the university term could start once more. But I had earlier need of this space than I had expected, so I put most of the books to one side, grabbed one of my large, spiral-bound, A4 notebooks, and took up a pencil. No laptop. This was not the sort of thing one wrote on a computer. We needed physical feedback. Graphite and paper.

I flipped the notebook open, past lecture notes about Shakespeare and Modernism and the nature of femininity in late 18th century literature, until I reached an empty page.

Then I stared at it for five minutes without writing down a single word.

“Not here,” we murmured eventually. “Somewhere else, somewhere. Just somewhere else.”

I grabbed the notebook and the pencil and left my bedroom, in search of a secret and shadowy nook.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive possessed no lack of secret and shadowy nooks. There were simply so many from which to choose. As I stood

in the upstairs hallway and chewed on my lip, I could go left — down the stairs, into the front room, and from there into the kitchen and Evelyn’s magical workshop. No doubt the downstairs would be bustling with activity by then, but that was the opposite of what I needed, no matter how much my stomach grumbled for breakfast. I would inevitably run into Raine, and Eevee, and Lozzie, and everyone else hanging around the house. Besides, Eevee was probably working on the *Invisus Oculus* in her workshop right now, putting together the great spell to hide us from the Eye. I would not be alone with myself and my thoughts.

To my right lay the shadowy depths of the upstairs corridor, vanishing into the gloom where it turned off to the left once again. I had found privacy and quiet there once before, had I not? When I had needed a space to think, the house had provided. I had no doubt that if we wandered down that way and chose an unknown door at random, I would find a dusty room with an old writing desk, and plenty of light from a large window.

Nobody else seemed to be upstairs — except perhaps Tenny. I could hear the faint sounds of video games from behind the closed door to Lozzie’s bedroom. Eevee’s bedroom door was shut tight. As was the study.

But I didn’t need seclusion. Being alone was a prerequisite, not the aim. I needed something I’d never done before.

I sighed and walked over to the single window in the upstairs corridor, letting the tips of my tentacles trail along the walls. Outdoors the sky was a ceiling of brushed steel, quiet and still, with light behind the layers. The trees along the street shivered with a little caress of wind. The smell of imminent rain leaked in around the window panes, crisp and juicy and dark.

My stomach rumbled again.

I sighed. Shoulders slouched. Tentacles slumped. “Oh, I can’t do this. Not today. I need food. I can try again later, or maybe go Outside, or—”

Click! went a door behind our back. Tip-tap! went a pair of sharp, smart, slick little shoes.

We turned in surprise — but not in shock — to see the door of Evelyn’s study standing open, and Praem resplendent in the

doorway.

Despite all the stresses of yesterday evening, Praem was perfectly turned out, perfectly composed, and perfectly elegant. She was wearing her full maid dress, her shiny black shoes, her lace sleeves and puffy shoulders and long, layered skirts, black and white and starched all over. Her hair, as always, was tied up in a loose bun at the back of her head, with loops and coils of artfully messy blonde falling about her neck. She stared at me with blank, milk-white eyes.

“Oh!” we said, adopting a pleasant smile — for how could we not, for Praem? “Praem. Um. Morning— I mean, good morning. I didn’t hear you in there, I thought nobody else was upstairs. Except Tenny, I suppose. What were you—”

“Good morning,” Praem intoned — and then presented me with a pair of fresh lemons on a plate, neatly sliced into quarters. My stomach threatened to throw a riot. My salivary glands mounted an assault on my mouth. All six tentacles twitched, hard.

“Oh. Oh, um, Praem, thank you, but I should really—”

“Good morning,” Praem repeated, clear and bright.

“Yes. Good morning, again. Um, you really didn’t have to bring me —”

“Breakfast.”

“Yes, breakfast. Praem, that is very sweet of you, but I suppose I should go downstairs to—”

Praem stepped to one side, interposing herself between me and the route to the stairs; with her free hand she gestured at the open door of the study. The lights were switched on, bathing the room in a soft glow amid the cloudy day. Praem’s other hand continued to offer me a very lemony breakfast.

“Praem, you’re really too sweet,” I said with a sigh. I accepted the plate of lemons — with a hand, not a tentacle — and reached over to gently pat her on the shoulder. But then I paused and frowned. “Wait a moment. Praem, I didn’t tell anybody what I needed this morning. I didn’t tell anybody what I was thinking, not even Raine, though it’s not a bad secret or anything, I’m just going to do a little forward planning. How did you know I was looking for somewhere

to think, and write notes, and that I was hungry for breakfast?”

Praem stared right through me, those milk-white eyes framed by her unreadable, blank expression.

I answered my own question: “Let me guess, because maids are perfect?”

“Maids are perfect,” Praem echoed.

“And this just happens to give you perfect knowledge of everything that happens inside the house.” I laughed softly. It wasn’t a question.

“How to summon a lemon,” Praem intoned.

“Ah?” I frowned, a bit bamboozled. “What does that mean?”

“You have summoned a lemon.”

I lifted the plate and smiled. “Two lemons, in fact. Thank you again, Praem. You’re a dear and we don’t deserve you. Please tell me you’re going to take some time for yourself today? Yesterday was very stressful for everyone.”

“Praem time,” said Praem.

I pulled a dubious expression at that, but I let it slide. Whatever ‘Praem time’ meant, she was welcome to it.

“Thank you again, Praem,” we said. “I’ll ... yes, the study is perfect. Perfect suggestion. I’ll see you later?”

“See me,” said Praem — then turned on her heel, skirts a-swish, and vanished down the corridor. She descended the stairs a moment later, the loops and coils of loose blonde hair going down, down, down, until the house swallowed her up.

I stepped into Evelyn’s study, closed the door, and sealed myself inside.

Distant grey light fell through the single, small, elevated window; soft illumination glowed from the desk-lamp at the far end of the room; the air was filled with the dusty, heady scent of paper and print; the bookcases lined the walls, stuffed to bursting with their jumble of volumes; some kind soul — undoubtedly Praem herself — had tidied up the massive wooden desk at the rear of the room, turning it into a clean expanse of dark wood, waiting for a scribe’s

work. The equally ancient wooden swivel chair had acquired a cushion, awaiting my bony backside.

Exactly the sort of place where an occult mastermind should write secret notes. Am I an 'occult mastermind'? Usually I leave that role to Evee, she certainly relishes it much more than I ever do. And her mind is more masterful than mine.

I settled down at the desk as best I could. Even with a cushion the old wooden swivel chair was hard and uncomfortable, though once it had probably been the height of luxurious power-statement, circa 1949. The back extended far above the height of my shoulders. The armrests formed little bulwarks of wood either side of me; we looped our tentacles through those, playing around for a moment, entwining myself with the chair.

Notepad open, pencil at the ready. We took a long moment to gnaw on two of the lemon quarters, sucking down the juices and the pale flesh. My bio-reactor purred with appreciation. My stomach stopped rumbling quite so much.

Then I leaned over the notepad and got started.

At the top I wrote:

'Wonderland — The Eye — Maisie'

Those were the non-negotiable elements. The confrontation and rescue, that was the entire point.

Then I paused to eat another piece of lemon, and decided I needed a little treat. Oh yes, four words written, one line, none of the difficult parts yet tackled, and Heathers had earned herself a treat. How I ever got my university essays written, I will never know.

The treat, however, was two more words.

I wrote:

'Alexander'
and
'Edward'

And with a delighted flourish, I crossed them both out, with a nice big thick line.

Then I added '(Orange Juice)', though I could not justify crossing out his name. We had not defeated him, merely driven him off, and

then ended our connection with the horrifying post-mage Outsider. I settled for surrounding his name with brackets. Then I wrote: ‘Sharrowford Cult, remains pending (including the unfortunate boy in the hospital)’.

This neat list was about to get more complicated, with less clarity clouding my clear catalogue of enemies. But I frowned and went ahead anyway.

‘Harold Yuleson (ours now)’

‘Mister Joe King (truce successful)’

There. Finished. Our list of foes, vanquished and conquered and driven away, or otherwise co-opted or brought around.

Then I paused for a long, awkward moment. There was still so much page left to fill. My throat bobbed. I chewed on the end of the pencil, on the little metal part which held the pink nub of the eraser. Then I handed the pencil off to myself — to a tentacle — so I would not mutilate it any further. I leaned back and reached for a slice of lemon.

“Need a devil on your shoulder?” said a voice like rusty nails drawn across broken ground.

I flinched so hard that I banged one knee on the ancient wooden desk; the swivel chair creaked in protest as I turned too fast; all our tentacles flew outward in a protective cage — and then collapsed as I sighed with great exasperation.

A slender, person-shaped blob of shadow hung in front of the bookcases to my right, oozing darkness toward the floor in great sticky, tarry ropes, which dissipated into nothing before staining the floorboards. A suggestion of a grin floated deep in the living gloom.

“Aym,” I snapped. “Do not make me jump like that! And come out of there. Stop it. I don’t have the patience to deal with you doing that.”

“Doing what?” Aym purred, like a cat with terrible lung problems.

“Hiding in plain sight!”

“Tch,” Aym tutted — but she obliged my request. The darkness tightened and thickened, like steam condensing on a mirror, or clothes sliding over skin and taking form. In the blink of an eye shadow turned to sprite.

Aym was sitting — well, hovering in mid-air, as if perched in an invisible seat, with her chin in one hand. She was unveiled, out in the open, neither wrapped by shadows nor hidden by a clever trick of the light. Draped from throat to ankle with dripping black lace, with only her pale hands and her weird, angular, elfish little face showing, eyes tilted at a fey and inhuman angle, framed by her long, messy, black hair. She pulled her lips back in a teasing, satisfied grin. A tiny coal-dust sprite of a girl, all sharp bones beneath her shapeless garments.

“You could have just knocked,” I said. “Instead of making me jump.”

She giggled — a sound like iron filings falling through a sieve. “Might be the last chance I get, squid-girl. Well, at least for a little while. Flissy and I are off tomorrow, you know? She’s had enough of sleeping in her car.”

I sighed and rubbed at my eyes. “Well. Good. She’s probably had more than enough of us lot. Aym, what are you doing? Where is Sevens? Shouldn’t you be with her?”

“Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight,” Aym said her name with surprising precision and respect, “is taking a nap. Sleeping off a little ...” Aym’s thin, pale lips curled upward in a nasty smile. She raised two fingers to her lips, parted them, and stuck her tongue into the gap.

I rolled my eyes. “If you expect us to blush, you’re going to have to do better than that. I’ve seen that gesture from Raine a million times. She’s done that to me more times than I can count. You’re not going to embarrass me with oral sex jokes, Aym. And I think you’re lying, anyway.”

Aym pulled a little pout, which made her face even sharper than before. “Tch. You’re still no fun.”

“What are you doing here?” I repeated.

Aym gestured at the notepad on the desk. She crossed her legs beneath her layers of impenetrable lace, a motion like the shifting of midnight shadows.

“This is always the problem with polycules,” she drawled. “Sooner or later, somebody has to write up a spreadsheet.”

“It’s not a spreadsheet, it’s a list.”

Aym snorted — a sound like a pocket of swamp gas bubbling the surface of a tar pit. “Same thing.”

“No, it’s not! And if it was a spreadsheet I would be making it on my laptop, not by hand. You can see very well what it is from right there, stop trying to wind me up.”

“Try? Nay. Do!” Aym giggled. That sound made the little hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

My expression turned stony and cold; I had intended to seclude myself to think, alone. “Aym, why are you—”

Aym cleared her throat with strange delicacy, like pins dropping onto a metal plate. “I thought you might appreciate some assistance — some expert assistance. An objective, adversarial voice, to stop you from sitting there and staring at a blank page. A devil, on your shoulder.”

I opened my mouth to tell Aym to buzz off — but then I paused. My brow unknitted. I sat back in realisation. “Praem sent you. Didn’t she?”

Aym’s cheeks turned pink, which was absolutely delightful — not because it made her look cute (which it most certainly did not), but because I’d got one over on her. She waved a hand, which was tucked deep inside the end of one sleeve all of a sudden. “Certainly not. You think I take orders? I came entirely of my own accord. My own glowing initiative. You and Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight have been very kind to me and my Felicity. Can’t I show some appreciation? Return the kindness?”

I couldn’t help but smile. Aym stared me down, willing herself not to blush any harder.

“Alright, Aym,” I said eventually, with a little sigh. “What exactly are you offering?” I left unsaid the real question: ‘What does Praem think I need you for?’

“I already said, twice! A devil on your shoulder. You need external motivation, to keep you from stalling. Look!” She gestured at my notepad. “You are getting nowhere. Now, you can sit here for the next eight hours and get nowhere, or you can have me provide some counter-arguments. Your choice.”

I controlled my amused smile; fair enough, I thought, Praem has a

point. And Aym is as close to an objective observer as we could get. Observer and irritant — perhaps that was what I needed. But I didn't entirely trust her motivations, to put it lightly.

"Why do you care, Aym?"

Aym's stare reminded me of an irritated stray cat. "You could stand to be a little more polite to me, squid-face. I am your fiancée's girlfriend, after all." Then she pulled a face like she'd bitten into an unexpected taste. "Oh, that is a confusing statement. Polycules, not even once."

We sighed again. We were not going to get a straight answer out of Aym, that was obvious.

"Thank you, Aym," I said softly. "Very well, then. I'll continue. Pull up a chair. Well, metaphorically speaking. But if you're rude about even one person on this list—"

"Yes, yes!" Aym tutted. "You'll throw me in your extra-dimensional dungeon and have me tickle-tortured. I'll be polite." She batted thick, dark, heavy eyelashes. "I'll be a good girl."

I gave her a look — hopefully enough to let her know I was deadly serious — and turned back to my notepad. Aym appeared at the corner of the desk, seated on empty air. She allowed one black lace sleeve to pool on the wooden surface of the desk itself, puddling outward and turning into shadow.

"Well?" she purred, all wet and rusty. "Who's first?"

I lifted my pencil and wrote on a new line: 'Raine'

"Ah," Aym said. "Yes. Your bull-dyke."

I shot her a frown.

Aym raised her sleeve-covered hands in surrender. "It's a compliment! A compliment. The woman certainly owns the butch aesthetic, I'll give her that much."

I said: "Right. Well then. Obviously she's coming to Wonderland. Though I'd rather she not. Uh ... here." I added a little plus symbol, to indicate that Raine was to be part of the Wonderland expedition. Then I hesitated, glanced at Aym, and wrote two words just beneath Raine's name.

'Get married?'

“Ugh,” Aym made a disgusted noise. “Really?”

I blushed a little. “Yes, really! Raine suggested we should ... should ... get married, for real, maybe, before we go to Wonderland.”

Aym sighed and blinked heavy-lidded eyes at me. The tips of her hair joined the pooling shadows on the corner of the desk. “Isn’t that just an admission of defeat? ‘Let’s get married because we might both die.’ How sad.”

“N-no, it’s not, it’s—”

“Oh it so is,” Aym rasped. “If you really thought you were both going to make it, there’s no reason to rush. And you are going to make it back, aren’t you?”

“Yes! We are!” I snapped at her, growing angry — though I knew I was only treating her as a substitute for my true fears.

Aym snorted and sat back up straight in her intangible chair.

“Besides, you don’t have time. You’re going as soon as you’re all ready, aren’t you? You can’t organise and throw a wedding in the space of, what, a few days?”

“We could do a registry office thing. Just the legal part.”

Aym rolled her eyes and sighed, shivering inside her lace as if hit with a vile stench. “Really? Really? The whole point of it is just to get the state involved? Cross the I’s and dot the t’s? Where’s your sense of romance, squid-for-brains?”

“It’s plenty romantic!”

Aym snorted with naked disgust, which sounded a bit like a clogged drain full of black mould. “If you and Raine do get married, it should be a big party. You have so many people, it’s not like you have to invite many others. You don’t even have to pay for a venue! Hold it Outside, in that castle your tin men have built, or down in Sussex at Evelyn’s estate. You can do it on the cheap, get lots of booze, and have a proper knees-up. Your family deserves no less. Or are you going to cut them out of the whole thing, abandon all the others?”

I chewed on the end of my pencil. She did have a point.

“Besides,” Aym drawled. “If you get married after all this, won’t Maisie be there, too?”

I frowned; a low blow. But it was true. Did Raine and I getting married add anything material to our plans? No.

I lifted my pencil and modified the line — I added ‘AW’ after the marriage question.

Aym raised an elegant, dark eyebrow. “After Wonderland?”

“Yes,” I said. “After Wonderland.”

Aym purred when she smiled. “That’s more like it. Now we’re getting somewhere. Though, before or after, they’re both death flags. I hope you don’t trip them, squiddy. Carry on.”

I wasn’t sure what Aym meant by ‘death flags’, but I could guess.

Next I wrote: ‘Evelyn’, and added a plus symbol right away.

“Of course Eevee is coming,” we said. “She’s our mage. She’s the expert. We could never do without her.”

“Mm.” Aym just grunted. Keeping her usual opinions about Eevee to herself? Perhaps she really was trying to be polite.

Below Eevee’s name I added: ‘Pneuma-somatic prosthetic replacements.’

Aym tutted and rolled back in her seat like a grumpy teenager. “She doesn’t want them!”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I said. “I need to talk to her about it again.”

Aym groaned. “And you don’t have time! Squid-head, you don’t have time. You’re telling me, seriously, that you’re going to pull off an untested, unexplored, dangerous magical experiment, and maybe put yourself out of action for days? You’re going to expect Evelyn to stomp off into danger with untested techniques strapped to her thigh and hand? Because, please, tell me yes, tell me now, and I will stop helping you.”

I blinked at Aym in surprise.

She added: “Look after little Saye. Look after her well. You do not want me as your actual for-real enemy, Heather Morell.”

I sighed and nodded. However much I didn’t want to think about this, Aym was correct. Eevee’s new prosthetics could wait — if she

ever wanted them at all. Better to assault Wonderland with the leg she knew.

Instead I wrote beneath Eeve's name: 'Invisus Oculus'. Aym did not argue, just nodded along. Then I hesitated, drew in a deep breath, and added: 'Share bed? Maybe kiss.'

I stared at the words, expecting Aym to snort or laugh or maybe even argue. But she said nothing, silent as a lingering shadow. When we finally turned to her, she was grinning, wide and toothy.

"Aym!" we snapped.

"Whaaaaat? I wasn't saying a wooooooord," she purred.

"Oh, whatever. We can leave that note there for now. Surely there's time for one night of ... of ... whatever. But you don't breathe a word of this to anybody, Aym. You understand?"

Aym nodded, slowly and gracefully.

Quickly, I moved on.

'Twil +'

No notes for Twil; she'd made her position and allegiance clear. And I wasn't going to interfere with whatever she felt for Eeve, or Lozzie, or anybody else.

'Praem +'

"Well," I said, explaining to myself as much as to Aym. "If Eeve comes, so does Praem. And if anybody can pull us out of an unexpected fire, it's her. She doesn't need any notes, either. Praem is perfect. Oh! Wait a moment."

I added: 'Birthday! (AW)'

"There," I said. "Something else to look forward to."

"Mmmmm," Aym purred.

Next up: 'Lozzie +'

"Lozzie's our emergency getaway, just in case," I said. "And she may have insights, or ways of communicating with Maisie, once we're actually standing in Wonderland. In some ways she's more potent than me. If we can't find any other way to solve this, Lozzie's the wild card."

‘Tenny’
‘Education? (AW)’

I did not add a plus next to Tenny’s name. She was not coming to Wonderland. No way.

Aym made a curious little sound. “Hmmm?”

“Tenny ... Tenny deserves more than this,” we said, sighing and leaning back in the chair. “She can’t stay cooped up in this house forever. She deserves a real life. Friends. An education. Somehow.”

“Mhmm, if her ‘friends’ like meeting giant moth-girls with tentacles?”

I tutted, but softly. “Her skills at disguise are improving. Lozzie and I have discussed the possibility of sending her to Sixth Form college, next year, if her disguise is good enough. Though, uh, I wouldn’t wish A-Levels on anybody, but I don’t see any other way to get her into a university program. She’s already smart enough, far too smart for secondary school. She’s developed so much faster than a human being.”

Aym snorted. “Going to uni wearing her humansona?”

“Don’t mock her. Don’t laugh. I’m deadly serious, Aym. Tenny deserves a life. We’re going to give her that.”

Aym grumbled and averted her eyes. “Sure, sure. But after Wonderland?”

I nodded. “After Wonderland.”

The next few were obvious.

‘Lozzie’s Knights +’

‘The Cattys +’

‘Zheng +’

Then:

‘Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight +’

I glanced at Aym. She just stared at the name, impassive, eyes dark and hard, like pebbles inside her face.

I added: ‘Get married (AW)’, and ‘Help her become herself (ongoing)’.

“Mm,” Aym grunted with grudging approval.

“Aym,” I said slowly. “Are you worried that Sevens is going to get hurt, or not come back?”

“No,” Aym said — and that was all.

I tried a different angle: “Are you and her ... I mean ... with you going home with Fliss soon, she ... and you ... ”

“We’ve talked about that. She’ll come visit,” Aym said. She sounded horribly petulant, like a child who had been denied her sweets, but was trying to be oh-so-very brave and serious about it. “Easy for her, anyway. And no, she won’t get lost out there. She can run away in ways the rest of you can’t.”

A slightly sore subject, it seemed. I decided to leave it be, for now.

The rest of the list was easy enough, because from there it became a catalogue of who was not coming with us — plus a couple of additional notes.

Heart – no, unless she butted in. Kimberly, Nicole Webb, Felicity? They made a tantalizing love triangle, but — no, absolutely not. Aym herself, obviously that was also a no. Jan? Well, no, but she got an additional note: ‘Maisie’s vessel’, which Aym did not dispute. July, no, if Jan was not coming. The Saye Fox? Only if she snuck aboard at the last moment. Grinny? No reason to include her.

Sarika? Badger? Neither would be of any help. Whistle? I added him as a personal joke, just to make myself smile a little. Saldis? We hadn’t seen her in ages, we had no idea where she was at current, somewhere in the spheres of Outside, but we were absolutely certain that she didn’t want to attend a trip to one of the most lethal places in all the known spheres of creation.

Evee’s spider servitors. Marmite. Hringewindla. The other members of the Brinkwood Church. All no, not least because Hringewindla could not move even if he wished.

The Demon in Clay, still kept in a bucket downstairs in Evelyn’s magical workshop — yes.

“Huuuh?” Aym grunted.

“It came from the Eye,” I explained. “Or from Maisie. We’re hoping that we can leverage that somehow, as a connection. Maybe.”

Aym snorted. “You still have no idea what you’re doing.”

“We’ll get to that in a moment,” we said, feeling butterflies in my stomach. “Let me finish the list first.”

There was only one more name to add, one I’d been avoiding thinking about. Why was this so difficult, when I’d already faced down the dark paradox of Raine and I getting married or not?

‘Natalie Skeates’

“Ehhhhhhh?” Aym tilted her head to the side, pooling her dark hair on the desktop once again; the coal-soot locks dissolved into tiny curls of shadow. “What’s the little girl got to do with anything?”

The little girl I had rescued from Outside, from Edward’s machinations. Little Natalie, who’s parents I had broken to the eldritch truth. So much like me.

I added: ‘Check up on her. See how she’s doing.’

Aym waited as the tip of my pencil hovered. I hesitated, stuck.

“After?” Aym purred. “Or ... ?”

“Both,” I said. “Both. Before and after. I can spare an hour to go say hi, in case we don’t get another chance.”

Aym purred a wet, bubbly little laugh. “How noble.”

“There’s nothing noble about it,” I hissed.

Beneath the list I turned my notes into a pair of practical summaries.

First, everyone who was coming with us to Wonderland: Raine, Eevee, Praem, Twil, Lozzie, Zheng, the Knights, the Caterpillars, and Seven-Shades-of-Not-There-Right-Then. I also added the Clay-Squid Demon at the end, in brackets.

Second, the list of things I need to do before we crossed the threshold to Wonderland: make sure Eevee’s *Invisus Oculus* was ready; make sure Jan had finished construction on Maisie’s body — which included heading over to her hotel later today to make sure she took the necessary pictures of my own body; visit Natalie; possibly spend an unrelated night with Eevee; and last but not least

My hand hesitated.

“Go on,” Aym purred. “You have to admit it.”

I sighed and swallowed. But I wrote the words.

‘Figure out the Eye.’

“Hnnnh?” Aym grunted, as if she hadn’t expected that, as if she’d been anticipating something else, something juicier. Then she snorted. “You really don’t know what you’re doing, do you?”

We took a deep breath and tried not to get angry. We took up another quarter-slice of lemon and sucked out all the tangy, sharp, sour juice, then bit off the flesh and chewed, to give ourselves time to think.

“No,” we said eventually. “We do know what we’re doing. The plan is clear.”

“Ahhhhhhh?” Aym purred.

I stayed very cool and calm and collected — or at least that’s what I told myself. In reality I was probably shaking.

“Yes,” I explained. “Evee completes her spell to hide us from the Eye. We test it, on me, because I’m the Little Watcher, the closest thing we have. Then, if it works, we go to Wonderland. I go first, with the magic circle, to test. If the Eye doesn’t open, we set up a gateway, a protected gateway, back to Camelot. Then we have a way of standing on the soil of Wonderland without the Eye’s attention.”

“Mmmhmm, mmmhmm,” Aym purred, mocking and amused. “And then?”

“And then we do what we never could before. We investigate.”

“Ooooooh. Investigating this, investigating that. General ... investigation.”

I finally turned and frowned at the little lace-drowned goblin next to me. She was sitting up in her ‘chair’ with a twisted little smile on her face.

“Stop mocking me!” I snapped.

“Making it up as you go along,” Aym said, not intimidated by my

sudden temper. “That’s what you’re doing. You’re just dressing it up in fancy words.”

A smile crept across my face; Aym had made a misstep. “A simple plan is always better than a complex one. A complicated plan, with lots of moving parts, can inevitably go wrong when one piece fails to get into place fast enough. We’re not doing that, we’re keeping it straightforward. We have multiple, redundant ways to leave if something goes wrong. We have multiple, redundant physical protections. We have — what do you call them? — reserves? Yes, reserves, Knights, Caterpillars. We’re not going in with any expectations that certain things will work and others won’t. We’re not planning to reinforce failure, but to find a weak point.”

Aym rolled her eyes. “You’re just repeating what Evelyn’s told you.”

“Of course I am!” I huffed. “Because she understands these things, far better than I do. She’s sort of good at this, when she believes in herself. So, yes, of course I’m following her. Besides, we have more information to go on than ever before — the Eye misses a twin! That’s a basis for the beginning of communication!”

Aym raised the dark ache of an eyebrow. “So, a nice little chat?”

“I don’t know! We might get there and spend a day or two trying to figure out the landscape, figure out if there’s a physical place or location of importance, or if there’s any other clues. But then, yes, I’m going to attempt communication, probably.”

“Because that always goes sooooo well.”

“Stop it!” I snapped again. “It won’t be able to see us! That’s the point. Communication without observation. We’re going to circumvent the nature of the Eye itself. It’s the only thing I can think of before actually getting there and trying it..”

“And then you’re just going to ask politely?” Aym smiled, thin and sharp and nasty. “Hey, big thing in the sky, give me back my sister?”

I threw my pencil down on the desk, bubbling with anger inside. Misplaced, stupid anger, covering for the worst fear of my life.

“Why are you such a little pessimist, Aym?” we said. “Why—”

Aym suddenly flowed out of her intangible seat and stood up, black-socked feet touching down on the floorboards right next to the

desk. With her standing and me sitting, she had a few inches of height on me, enough to loom and scowl and cast a long, jagged shadow across myself and the desk.

“Because it keeps morons like you and Flissy alive!” she rasped. “Because somebody has to say: no! Your ideas are shitty idiot ideas! Think them over again! Pessimism? Really? That’s what you see here? I see a moth flying toward a bonfire.”

I was shaking now — and no longer with anger. “It is the only thing we’ve come up with.”

Aym pointed at my notepad. She leaned in close — so close that I could see the pores in her milky pale skin, smell the strange and dusty earthen scent of the manor house where she and Felicity lived, and feel her living shadow pressing against my face.

“You never finished your list, squid-brains,” she purred, like a rusty metal ladder being dragged out of a swamp. “Isn’t there one more source of precious information?”

For a moment I had no idea what Aym meant — but then it dawned, and all my anger and fear left us behind, like a bath plug had been pulled inside my heart.

We turned back to the notebook and took up my pencil with a numb hand.

I wrote:

‘Mum and Dad’

‘Talk’

At my shoulder, Aym purred: “When? Little miss procrastinating octopus, hiding in your hole in the rocks — when?”

Cold sweat broke out down my back. My throat threatened to close up. All our tentacles wanted to coil in tight and seal us up inside a protective ball. We grabbed one of the remaining lemon slices, stuck it in our mouth, and sucked out all the juice in one go.

“When?” Aym repeated.

“Today,” we whispered. “Within the hour. Right now.”

eyes yet to open – 22.2

Pale brick, soft and chewy as undercooked sponge cake. White plastic window frames — too clean, too sterile, with not a hint of lichen or moss to blemish their spotless surfaces. Clear glass backed by lace curtains, like eyes blinded by thick crusts of cataract. A front garden not even worthy of the term, just a patch of paving stones with perfectly interlocked edges, scoured clean so not a single blade of grass might push up between the concrete blocks. Fake terracotta plant pots were placed in the appropriate corners, wilting flowers caged within. Front door — a bland white portal. The brass knocker was only a plastic replica.

Sterile and inoffensive. Both unergonomic and unexciting. A wizened skull, wrapped in paper-thin flesh.

My childhood home.

Semi-detached houses stretched out to the left and right, neat twinned rows facing each other across the sticky tarmac, marching off down the length of the street. Low front walls baked in the cloying heat which still clung to the bricks at the end of this August day. The sun slanted in from the west, sliding toward the horizon. Nobody else was around, the road was empty, all except a single cat sat on one garden wall a few houses down, a great marmalade moggy who watched us with the sleepy, detached gaze of a confident apex predator. A few trees rustled in the passing wind, but the air offered no relief. A hundred meters away the main road buzzed with the sounds of occasional traffic, cars slowing for the little roundabout, engines a distant insect purr crawling through the thickened summer air. Children's voices carried over the houses, playing in the back gardens of adjacent streets, so much freer than the machine sounds.

Spirit life was everywhere, present in every street and road, upon every pavement and one third of the rooftops. A riot of impossible colour and beastly limbs and fluorescent plumage, of living blobs and ape-faced slugs and looming spectres in the shadows. Ghouls cavorted and played in the roads, while great shaggy hounds slinked through alleyways. Tiny simian goblins perched on rubbish

bins, and climbing stick insects wiggled and danced on the slate roof tiles.

The spirits were not quite the same as back in Sharrowford — different sets of morphology, different clades, fashion trends, and balances of population — like we'd stepped from one biome to another, and not realised it until we'd taken the time to catalogue the wildlife. We'd never noticed before. After all, we hadn't been back here since before we had finally become comfortable with the spirits we'd been seeing for half our lifetime.

Oh, but those spirits in the streets, they parted for us. They made way without complaint.

Perhaps they could sense our darker purpose.

Reading, in Berkshire. Twenty three minutes past six in the evening. Monday, August 5th. On the very street where I and Maisie had grown up. Standing before my parents' house.

This time I knew exactly why I was so acutely aware of the number on the clock face — because I'd been frantically checking my phone for the last few hours, to the point of obsession. Because this had to be right. Because I'd had to wait.

Were my parents home? Almost certainly. My father's car was parked a little way along the street, a compact blue hatchback tucked tight against the curb. My mother did not own a car, as she had worked within walking distance since before I and Maisie had been born — but she was never home later than quarter to six.

Nothing felt real.

Reading, the city itself — or the town, to purists — felt less real than when I had visited it in a dream.

We had teleported ourselves here, arrived three streets away, concealed by the rear end of a trio of industrial-sized rubbish bins which I knew were still there; that had felt real, briefly — the concrete beneath our feet, the sudden unleashed sunlight, the scent of the dying of a baking-hot August day. But then we'd stepped out into the streets that we remembered from childhood — no! Streets which were engraved into our heart as little as one year ago. And as we'd walked that inevitable route, reality had fallen away in layers, peeling back to show the truth as a void. And then we'd reached the house itself, the ultimate question standing there in bland brick and

clean plastic gutters.

Our breath was all stopped up inside our chest. Our hands were numb. We could barely recall who we really were.

Had my life of the last year even been real? Standing there, about to see my parents in person for the first time in eight months, I felt like I was regressing, before I'd even crossed the threshold. I hadn't even seen my mother's face yet, and I felt all my courage draining out of holes in the base of my heart.

In Sharrowford, among my chosen family, I was Heather — abyssal traveller, witch of hyperdimensional mathematics, daughter of the Eye, betrothed to a Princess from beyond reality, speaker to god-things, folded into seven inside myself, beloved of more people than I could ever have imagined. And I was on a quest to rescue my twin sister, who was real, and alive, and whom I would free, whatever I had to do. In Sharrowford I was an adult.

But here, in Reading, I was Heather Morell — a mentally ill child, cowed and quiet, taking my medication like a good little girl.

A wave of slow dissociation passed over me. My tentacles were wrapped around my core in a pitiful self-hug — invisible, reduced back to pneuma-somatic truth, unseen by unknowing eyes. Didn't want to spook the locals. Didn't want to upset my parents. Hide who you are, tuck it away so nobody can see. Pretend it's not real. Tell the right lies. Don't let them know you're utterly, completely, unsalvageably insane.

Couldn't stand it. My stomach hurt. Pure acid.

"Kitten," purred Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

I didn't — could not — take my eyes off the house. This empty shell. This soul-trap.

"Kitten," she repeated. "Breathe. You keep forgetting to breathe. Speaking will require breathing."

I took a deep breath, sighed heavily, and pulled my eyes away from the house.

Sevens stood to my right, breathtakingly beautiful as the bloom of sunset caught her in profile. She wore the Princess Mask and carried her lilac parasol. Every strand of blonde hair was perfectly arrayed. Her face was composed, calm, collected, everything I was not. Her

white blouse and yellow skirt had not a single particle of lint or dust upon them, pressed to perfection, even though we had silently wrapped a tentacle around her arm. Her shoes shone in the evening light.

I felt like a little goblin by comparison, wearing jeans and the thin orange hoodie I'd borrowed from Raine — the one with slits cut in the sides, currently secured by velcro, for my fully manifested tentacles to burst through when required. My hair felt greasy and unwashed. My armpits and back were damp with sweat. I was shaking with adrenaline and anxiety.

"I don't know if I can do this," we said.

"You can, kitten," said Seven-Shades-of-Solid-Support. "You must. You will."

"Don't— don't call me kitten in front of my parents. Please. T-that would be very weird. Funny. Maybe even a good distraction. But—but weird. Please don't. Don't."

Sevens nodded. "I will not."

A tiny pale face peered around Sevens' hip, framed by straight black hair and thick black lace, with a nasty smirk on thin pale lips — Aym.

"Nah," Aym rasped. "We can totally call this off. Head home. Do it another day! It can wait, right? Put it off!"

Aym was dressed as close to normal as she could get; she was still head-to-toe in shapeless black lace, with everything but her face and hands concealed inside lightless clothing, but she could easily pass for a human teenager — as long as one did not wonder too long about the unique shape of her eyes, or the strange proportions of her face, or how she moved without the sound of footsteps upon the ground.

We swallowed, and managed to say: "Stop it, Aym. I don't need more reverse psychology. I'm here, aren't I?"

Aym hissed between her teeth. "Then why'd you bring me?"

"Moral support of a very specific kind." Doubt wormed up my throat and emerged as a useless repetition of a question I'd already asked: "Is it really safe for you to be separated from Felicity like this?"

Aym shrugged her bony, petite little shoulders beneath her blanket of black lace. “I’m not really here. I’m still wrapped around Flissy’s neck. Thank Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight for that trick.”

Sevens bowed her head slightly.

Aym carried on, “And you still haven’t explained to me why Sevens is here, anyway. Why don’t you bring your whole complement of dykes and bitches?”

I turned back toward my parents’ house and stared at the front door, the white portal to nowhere, filled with nothing. “Because I need to do this alone.”

Aym snorted. “And you’re not! Sevens is here! I’m here!”

Sevens placed a hand on the top of Aym’s head, smoothing her hair back over her scalp. “Hush.”

Aym hushed instantly.

We’d been over this already, but I repeated it anyway — not for Aym, but for myself, a reminder, to keep me honest.

“Sevens is here to stop me going too far,” I said — and then I stepped over the garden threshold.

Aym was merely rehashing the same argument which had unfolded nearly six hours previously, back in Sharrowford, within the safe and familiar confines of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. She only did so to goad me onward, to distract my thoughts, to keep me focused. That’s how Aym worked on her ‘targets’ — be it me or Felicity — needling and prodding with any underhanded psychological trick, to keep us putting one foot in front of the other.

That’s why I’d brought her. If we’d brought Raine, we would have broken down, and wept, and clawed at our own chest, and begged to not have to do this. And Raine would have relented.

But Raine was not here. Aym was — and so all seven of me presented a united front, and got on with the difficult task of ruining whatever remained of my relationship with my parents.

Ah, but why do it like this? Why not take Raine, and Evelyn, and Lozzie, as backup and support? Why not take Zheng, or Twil, or even Tenny — to show my parents the occult truth beneath the skin of the world? Why not take my friends and allies and lovers? Why

do this alone?

That argument had died as a seed, smothered by empathy before it could germinate. Raine did not like that I wanted to go with minimal support — but she understood and respected the need. Evelyn neither comprehended nor accepted; she'd called me obstinate, self-sacrificing, 'set in my determination to be isolated'. She hadn't meant any of those things, of course, she was just as scared as I was. In the end she'd pulled out her trump card — would I expect her to face her mother alone, if Loretta Saye was still alive? No, of course not, never. None of us was ever alone. But that was not this. I was not going to duel my parents in a magical battle for survival.

I was not even going to tell them the truth.

I would have the truth from them — not for me, not for healing, not for our family, but for Maisie's sake alone. And I did not know if I could do that in front of Raine or Evelyn.

But Sevens? She would keep me from going too far. And Aym was here to make sure I went far enough.

In less than an hour the sun would be down, behind the houses and streets of Reading, and the city and spirits alike would be bathed in gloomy dusk. My earlier declaration that I would speak to my parents 'within the hour' had been hopelessly optimistic; they were, of course, both at work. Calling my mother and telling her 'we need to talk' would likely have ended in inconclusive disaster, and calling ahead to warn them might give them exactly that — too much warning.

So, with the sun dipping below the distant rooftops, we crossed back over the narrow gap between freedom and childhood, with my true nature cloaked and hidden from unknowing eyes, and stood before my parents' front door.

Sevens clicked up on my right. Aym shuffled to my left.

Numb, quivering, distant from myself. I stared at the door bell. I considered knocking. Three tentacles raised — then we corrected, and raised a hand instead, then let it fall, hesitating, to our side.

Sevens said: "I can press the button for you, kitten."

"No," I hissed. I swallowed three times to force my throat open. "I

... I need to be ruthless. Sevens, I need to be ruthless. I ... how do I do this? I feel like I'm being infantilised just standing here."

"Look," Sevens purred.

"At what?" I hissed.

"At yourself. Look down at yourselves, kitten."

We understood exactly what Sevens meant, but it barely helped. We looked down at our tentacles, invisible to normal humans right then, pulsing their slow throb of rainbow light against chest and belly. The truth, but unseen. Slowly, painfully, we uncoiled them. We opened up, we spread our limbs. We wrapped one — top right — around my right arm. We — she and I, me and me, Heather and Heather — reached out together and pressed the door bell.

Ding-dong! came a merry little chime from deep inside the house.

Deep breaths, Heather. Deep breaths. Stand up straight — mum dislikes when you slouch. Fix your hair one last time. Hands where everybody can see them, tentacles where nobody could. Sevens is ready. Aym is there to run weird and difficult interference. Unclench your heart, unclench your jaw. Breathe! Breathe. Breathe.

Footsteps approached the other side of the door, heavy and solid. Not dad.

My mother answered the bell. The door swung inward.

I'm not sure from where exactly I get my own petite build, but it isn't from my mum; Samantha Rosemary Morell is both big-boned and rather round, and absolutely comfortable with both those physical facts. Or perhaps I'm incorrect. Perhaps when she was younger my mother was built more like myself — I don't have any pictures of her as a teenager or in her early twenties — and when I get older I'll pack on some weight and become more like her. She has mousey hair which had never quite forgotten the fashion trends of the 1980s, framing a pinched and curious face, her lips always slightly compressed by an unspoken question or unexpressed disapproval. On that evening she hadn't been home from work for long — she was still wearing her bank clerk's shirt, her thin cardigan, and her sensible trousers. We shared the same eyes, but that was about all.

For a split second my mother looked like a total stranger, framed by

the off-cream paint of the tiny entranceway — and by the two spirits hanging from the ceiling, suspended in the air by lizard-tails and oozing down the walls; a dozen gooey-soft eyes turned to stare at me in unison. Then the spirits scurried off, fleeing into the depths of the house, spooked by the arrival of Homo Abyssus.

But my mother's eyes did not recognise me, did not recognise what was standing in front of her as her daughter, even though she could not see a hint of my tentacled truth.

Then she lit up with a gasp, with shock and surprise. Not displeased, just bamboozled.

“Heather?!”

“Hello, mum,” I said. My heart was going too fast. “Surprise.”

My mother did what came naturally, she leaned forward and gave me a hug, a quick reaction, the same way she always had. I felt all my ruthless determination crumbling away between my fingers as I awkwardly returned the gesture.

But then she pulled back and looked me up and down, her face creased with bewildered concern.

“H-Heather, what are you— how—” The gears caught and locked inside her head. Quick eyes flicked across Sevens and Aym, then back to me. She frowned, craggy and serious. She reached out and placed a familiar, soft hand on my shoulder. I moved my invisible tentacles out of the way and tried not to pull back. “Did something happen? Are you alright? What are you doing here? What— what —”

“Mum, I'm fine,” I said, and did my best to smile — but she saw right through that. Same as she always had. “I've popped down for a little visit, that's all.”

My mother boggled at me. There was the pause — and then the storm: “Popped down for a little visit?!” she echoed. “Heather, we haven't heard from you in weeks! I've left three messages on your mobile phone. And yes, that lovely young lady you're with, Raine, she did answer once, but that's hardly enough! Heather, you were supposed to come visit back in Easter! Your father and I have been joking that you've decided to never come back!”

“I'm sorry, Mum. But I'm here right now, I—”

“And what exactly are you doing here? Something is clearly very wrong.” She tutted. “I can tell, you know that. You know how you get all stiff and formal whenever something is terribly wrong. I can see it written right on your face. And it’s what, a three and a half hour train journey from Sharrowford to Reading? You just hopped on the train, in the evening, on a whim, to visit your dear old parents?” She tutted again, then frowned sharper, and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Are you off your medication?”

“Mum!” I almost snapped. “I—”

“And who are these two?” She glanced at Sevens and Aym again. “Friends of yours? Where’s your girlfriend, Raine? Does she know you’re here? You’re not even carrying a backpack or anything! Did you come empty-handed? I can’t believe this. I can’t. What’s wrong?”

Of course she didn’t leave me time to answer any of those. They weren’t really questions; they were to establish that I had broken the patterns of normality, done something ‘weird’ and unexpected. My guts turned to acid. Three tentacles twitched upward as if readying to smash my mother across the face — though we never would. We never would. Would we?

Seven-Shades-of-Softest-Touch pressed her fingertips against the small of my back.

Ruthlessness solidified in my heart.

“Mum, this is Aym,” I gestured to my left with a smile, speaking with the most polite good-girl tones I could muster. Then the other side: “And this is Sevens. They’re friends of mine, from university. They wanted to come with me, as support.”

My mother’s frown took on that unique cast which told me she was trying to read volumes in the noise of the wind and the rain.

“Support?” she said. “Whatever for?”

Sevens opened her lips with a soft click. “Good evening, Mrs Morell,” she said with perfect elocution. “I do apologise for interrupting your day. Your daughter is a very good friend of mine, a very close friend. It is a delight to meet you.”

My mother boggled at Sevens even harder than she’d boggled at me. Neither of my parents were ardent royalists, but something in

Sevens' tone had sounded undeniably aristocratic.

"Yeah, hi," went Aym. She was trying to hide in the lengthening shadows of early dusk.

My mother poked her head further out of the door and looked left and right, a terrible pantomime of checking for eavesdropping — because that was exactly what she was doing: making sure that old Mr Gunther next door did not overhear anything awkward or strange-sounding, that the Jobbines down the street did not witness anything 'abnormal' outside our very own front door, that Susan and Patty across the road didn't see me throwing a fit or talking to the air or drooling down myself.

As far as my mother was concerned, her mentally ill daughter had shown up on her doorstep, empty-handed and unplanned, with a pair of women she'd never seen before. Her crazy little cuckoo had flown home.

Then she said in a low whisper, as if anybody cared: "You haven't broken up with Raine, have you? I rather liked the girl, she seemed very sensible, very smart, very—"

"Mum, no!" I snapped.

My mother winced and glanced left and right again. "Then what is this—"

"We need to talk," I said. Sweat was running all down my back, my face was going red, my skin was itching all over. "I have something I need to talk to you and dad about. In person. That's why I'm here. That's why I've come."

My mother boggled at me again, but then I saw the gears catch a second time, spinning to life inside her head. She tried to hide it the same way she always had, as if not allowing it to show on her face would make up for her words — 'Remember to take your medication in the morning,' 'It's probably something you imagined,' 'You know how you get, Heather.'

Her poor little girl was having another episode.

That helped. I held hard to ruthlessness.

"Now," I said with a little huff — and oh, I realised, I got that habit right from her, didn't I? The huff, the turn of the head, the soft little click of my tongue. It was all her, all my mother. I faltered, faintly

horrified. "May we come indoors, are you going to make me stand on the doorstep?"

My mother revived. "Oh, oh! Yes, yes, do come on in." She stepped back to admit us. "Gosh, of course, Heather. Of course you can come inside, don't be daft. This is your home too."

My home too?

It did not feel that way. Not anymore.

My mother made a big fuss of inviting Aym and Sevens inside as well: "Any friend of Heather's is very welcome. Come on inside, I promise we're all very normal here. You're both Heather's classmates at university, then? Aym, that's an ... interesting ... dress." She struggled, eyes sliding off Aym as we all shuffled into the tiny entranceway. "And ... Sevens, was it?" My mother said the name so very slowly, like it didn't make sense. "Gosh, you're both very smart. You must feel a bit overdressed slumming it around with our Heather!" My mother let out that grating laugh, the one she always forced out when she was trying to apologise for me without sounding like she was doing so.

I bristled. I couldn't help it. But Sevens put a quiet hand on the small of my back again.

Sevens said: "Heather is always immaculately dressed, in my humble opinion."

My mother blinked several times. Sevens' tone of aristocratic superiority left no room for argument; my mother had no idea what to make of it. I saw Aym grinning, her face hidden just beyond my mother's sight.

"Well!" my mother recovered. "Well, certainly. Of course."

She got the front door closed and locked once again; as she did, I saw several spirit-life eye-stalks peer around the door frame. They quickly whipped back out of sight when we turned a tentacle-tip toward them. The locals were growing curious now their wayward daughter had returned, festooned with weapons and marvels of hidden flesh. But we weren't here to play with the wildlife.

"Well then," my mother said. "Come on through, come on through. Shoes off on the mat please, dears. Heather, your father's in the sitting room, you really must sit down and—"

My mother rattled on and on, flipping between politeness and hurrying us onward, adjusting her cardigan with nervous hands, flapping about left and right. Sevens stepped out of her boots without needing to unlace them, bend down, or exert herself in any fashion at all — they simply fell from her feet, leaving behind the cream-yellow of her stockings. Whatever was going on under Aym's dress did not require shoes, and my mother was too mundane to notice that. I awkwardly wriggled out of my trainers.

We were herded out of the tiny entrance hallway, past the foot of the stairs, and into the sitting room.

My parents' taste in internal décor was far from perfect, but then again whose ever is, except for one's own? Thick cream carpets, fake leather sofa, big armchairs either side, all pointed at a respectably large television. An IKEA bookcase stood in one corner, stuffed with the various paperbacks my mother liked to read, shoulder to shoulder with my father's science fiction magazines. An old bricked-up fireplace dominated one wall, a retired relic from the 1950s, though the mantelpiece still served as good place for various knick-knacks — a statuette of a bear, a row of decorative mugs, and three pictures of me as a child and a teenager, in some of my most presentable moments.

Plain white skirting boards. Floral wallpaper in soft yellow and rose. Stools for putting one's feet up. A pair of those long-necked standing lamps stood in opposite corners, to replace the ceiling lights when one wanted to watch television in the evenings. They still had the combination DVD-and-VHS player beneath the TV, the very same one they'd had for the last twelve years, all shiny buttons and a big black opening for the anachronistic tapes. Memories floated to the surface of my mind, of Maisie and I mucking about with old tapes, making the machine eat them and spit them out over and over.

There was nothing special about my parents' sitting room, not really. It was neither a horror of modernity stripped of all human warmth, nor a comfortable and cosy throwback. It was just another sitting room in a semi-detached house in the middle of suburban Reading.

Three spirits were in residence: a prismatic purple blob was clinging to the big window which looked out on the cramped back garden, eyes forming and melting in its surface; something like a massive

bipedal hound was hunched in a corner, all grey and black and dripping with ichor; and in the doorway to the kitchen was a huge humped mound of crimson flesh, toothed maw hanging open on a pitch black gullet, like some kind of filter feeder in the deep ocean.

The window-blob and the lurking hound fled as soon as I stepped into the room, like tiny crustaceans scurrying for the safety of a hole in the rocks before the beak of a squid. The blob phased through the window and rose like a bunch of balloons. The hound flinched and scrambled away on skittering claws, tail tucked between its legs.

The flesh-lump in the kitchen doorway did not move, however. I recognised it from my childhood. That spirit had often been present in the house, just sitting there in the doorways or the middle of a room, scaring me half to death, trapping me in parts of the house for hours on end with sheer childhood terror.

We stared at it, all seven of us, all tentacles pointing.

We knew it had never meant harm. Few spirits did, we suspected. But we needed it to move, to pay attention, to do as we said. We could not afford the fear, could not afford to slip back into old childhood patterns.

The crimson flesh-lump shuffled backward, like a tired old dog retreating to his bed. It peered around the kitchen doorway, but now the way was clear. I sighed and nodded a silent thank you.

“It’s Heather!” my mother was saying. “And she’s with friends. She just turned up! Just right there on the doorstep!”

“Yes, I heard,” said my father, gentle and soft. “Hello, love. You alright?”

My dad was sitting in his favourite spot, the left hand side of the sofa, with his feet up on a stool. He’d probably been home for a while, because he was already wearing his ‘lounge longs’ — that was his own private term for a pair of pajama bottoms — and a t-shirt, with no trace of his work clothes, the grime and dirt of the day, or even any tiredness, beyond a little slackness around his eyes. My father was a man of exacting precision; home from work meant a shower before he even touched anything. And now there he was, sitting in his usual spot, his book placed neatly to one side with a bookmark between the pages. He’d had the television on as

well, with the sound muted, but the first thing he did was pick up the remote and turn it off. I had his full attention.

If I had inherited little of my build from my mother, I had received somewhat more from my father: Gregory Morell was short, stocky, compact, and gentle as a golden retriever. Big green eyes in a smiling, hangdog, weathered face. His hair had been greying and thinning long before Maisie had been taken, but he didn't bother with dye or a comb-over, he just let it sit how it wanted. He'd been working on an equally grey moustache for a while, and I wasn't sure if it suited him.

"Hi, dad," we said. "I'm alright, yes. I'm not in trouble or anything. No, don't get up, let me ... "

I leaned down to give my dad a hug, but he stood up anyway. He clapped me on the back and I tried not to touch him with my tentacles. When we let go he eased back into his seat, eyes roving over myself, over Aym and Sevens, and then to my mother, who was standing awkwardly, waiting for me to resume.

"Uh," I stumbled for a moment. "Dad, this is Sevens, and this is Aym. They're friends of mine from university."

"Oh, mm!" My dad pulled a moustached smile. "Nice to meet you both, nice to meet you. Friends of Heather, eh? You all going to be staying the night? Suppose it's a bit late for a return train now, hmm?" He blinked several times at Aym. I was certain he wasn't really seeing her for what she was. He said: "Gosh, that's a full-on goth getup right there. Did you come on the train like that? Well, well, I'm impressed. Not often you see that these days."

Aym flashed him a smile; I willed her not to say anything.

He cast around at the two chairs and the remaining spot next to him on the sofa. "Ooh er, I don't know if there's enough room for everyone to sit. Sammy," he said to my mother. "We'll have to fetch a chair from the kitchen."

My mother pulled a big nasty wince. She pressed her hands together as if praying; I knew for a solid fact that neither of my parents was the least bit religious. "Greg, please, I do not think that is the most important concern at this juncture."

"Nonsense," my dad said with a very mouthy frown. "We shouldn't leave guests standing around on—"

“Gregory!” my mother repeated.

Sevens cleared her throat gently. “It is quite alright, Mister Morell. It is a pleasure to meet you as well. Heather has been very complimentary about her upbringing. She has told me very much.” Seven-Shades-of-Sharp-Rebuke smiled as thin as an ice-rimed razor blade.

If my father understood the sarcasm, he didn’t show it — which meant that he did not understand it. He smiled. “Oh, thank you, young lady. Sevens,” he said her name, frowning a little. “Sevens. Sevens. You know, I think I’ve heard that name before. Forgive me if I get this incorrect, no offense meant, I’m genuinely very curious, but is that ... Corsican?”

Sevens corrected him: “Carcosan.”

My dad smiled, always eager to learn something new. “Ah!” he said. But then came the uncomprehending frown. “Carsocan ... Carcosan ... is that on the south coast of France? No, no, I’m getting my geography mixed up.”

“Dad,” I said. “Please. It’s very polite of you, but ... ”

My father cleared his throat awkwardly. His smile was more nervous than I’d realised. “Yes, yes of course. You’ve got things to talk about. On a surprise flying visit. With no luggage. Your mother’s got a point, you know. My heart’s going like the clappers, my girl.” My dad tapped his chest, trying to make a joke of it. “What’s wrong? Just tell us, please. Whatever it is, we’re here for you.”

My throat almost closed up at that. We’re here for you — were they really? My mother was infantilising, but she always meant well. My father was gentle and kind and loved his daughter, but he couldn’t see what we could. They were not going to like a single word of this.

“Yes,” I said, shaking a little. “I need to ask you both a question, I —”

My mother interrupted: “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

All my courage curdled into confused disgust. I gave my mother a look like she was insane.

“Don’t give me a look like that!” she snapped. “It’s a perfectly

reasonable question!”

“Mother, it is not a reasonable question!” I snapped back. “I’m a lesbian! I sleep with women! You know I’m a lesbian!”

My mother blinked several times in frank surprise, her head recoiling like a turtle who couldn’t quite return to her shell; I’d never spoken to her like that before. I half-expected her to retort with something like, ‘Don’t take that tone with me, young lady,’ but then she escalated far beyond my wildest expectations.

“It ... it is a reasonable question,” she said, stiff and huffy. “Raine ... Raine could be ... a trans woman.”

I boggled at her. Sevens cleared her throat. Aym slid around behind us, neatly out of sight.

“Mother,” I said. “Excuse me?”

My mother huffed and hurrumphed and couldn’t quite meet my eyes. She knew she’d put her foot right down her own throat, but she scrambled to do damage control before she digested her own toes. “I’m not completely ignorant about the modern world,” she said. “You probably think of me as some fuddy-duddy old lady, but I consider it important to be well-informed. You can’t understand anything if you don’t read up on things! And ... well ... trans women who still have all the ... the ... ‘original equipment’—”

“Mum!” I snapped.

My mother threw her hands into the air. “All I’m saying is that it is biologically possible! If you didn’t take precautions! So it is a reasonable question!”

“Raine is not trans, and if she was it would not be any of your business. I am not pregnant.” We were blushing by then, bright red with bizarre indignation. “Will you sit down?” I huffed, losing my temper. “Sit down and listen to me. For pity’s sake. Just, listen. For once. Listen.”

My mother adopted that old expression, that pitying frown which said poor little Heather is over-reacting. Her voice softened, went gentle and coaxing, tinged with passive-aggressive rebuke. “Heather, dear, I am only asking—”

“Ahem,” my father said out loud. “Samantha, I think you went over the line with that one.”

My mother tutted. “Oh, yes, please, do take her side with this.”

My father sighed. “I assumed we were both on her side.”

That shamed my mother hard enough to get her to do as I had asked; she adjusted her cardigan, huffed in several different directions, and then finally sat down in one of the armchairs, rather than next to my father on the sofa.

Had my dad seen the lone tentacle which had risen from our side? Middle-Left, burning with shame and frustration, eager to just belt my mother around the face with an invisible limb, to shove her nose in the truth and leave her confused and reeling and—

No. No, we were not going to do that. I had promised myself that I was not going to hurt them — at least no more than absolutely necessary. Sevens gave me a sidelong look; she knew what I was thinking as I stood there, taking deep breaths, trying to hold myself back from something I would regret. I just nodded once. Swallowed. Flexed my hands.

This was not about healing. This was not about proving anything to them, or bringing them Into The Know, or showing them the eldritch truth of reality. All of those things could wait. All of those things would distract from rescuing my sister.

This was about information.

Ruthlessness did not mean cruelty. It meant focus.

“Heather,” my dad said gently, “will you sit down as well? We can fetch chairs for your friends, too.”

“No, thank you,” we said. “For this I want to stand.”

Sevens said: “I am quite alright. Thank you very much, Mister Morell.”

Aym ‘sat’ in mid-air, one of her usual tricks, her black lace dress flowing downward in a shadowy waterfall to pool upon the floor. My parents didn’t comment on that, though my dad frowned at her for just a second, as if part of his mind had noticed the physical impossibility. But then he dismissed it as unimportant and paid his full attention to me again.

If I’d ever had any doubts that my parents were not In The Know, not exposed to magic, then I had finally seen enough to convince

me that they had no idea.

My parents watched me, waiting for me to speak. My mother seemed ready to argue. My father's face was creased with concern. I had not seen either of them in the flesh since Christmas, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. I had changed so much in the last eight months — but not on the outside, not without the blessing of pneuma-somatic sight. My mum and dad saw only one seventh of what I was; they saw their little girl, still damaged and vulnerable and mentally ill.

We took a deep breath, and we began.

"I need to ask both of you a question," we said. "And I need you to tell me the absolute truth, no matter what damage you believe the answer might do to me."

"Heather," my mother said, oh so gentle and reasonable. "We've always told you the truth. Always. We don't lie."

I restrained a sigh. "I don't want to believe that you've ever lied to me about anything. But I still need to ask. You may have withheld information, without intending to harm me."

My dad chewed on his lower lip, which made it look like he was chewing on his moustache. "Heather, what is this about?"

"Maisie," I said.

My mother gazed upon me in abject, frozen horror, then let out a shuddering sigh, closed her eyes, and pressed her lips together. My father pulled a smile that was not a smile, a half-lopsided wince of compressed pain.

I had not spoken my twin sister's name in front of my parents since I was twelve years old. A taboo, unbreakable on pain of return to the mental hospital, on pain of being looked at like I was not in control of myself, on pain of being treated like a confused animal. Maisie, hidden away, not to be named, not even to be thought.

But she was not dead. She was real, and alive, and here she was, screaming back out of history on my words. Not gone, mother! Never forgotten!

"Heather," my mother said very quietly. "You know you're not supposed to say that name."

“Your mother’s right,” dad joined in, his voice cracking with worry. “I know you’re better than you used to be, but you really shouldn’t even think about your imaginary childhood friend. It’s not safe for you. You know that, love.”

Their words washed over us like diluted acid; we had long since grown skin thick and toughened against this unintentional bile. We waited, unsmiling, stretching our invisible tentacles outward to either side. Seven-Shades-of-Silent-Support placed a hand on the small of our back, yet again. Aym had slid away somewhere into the shadows, mortified or embarrassed; this was far beyond her area of expertise.

A strange, alchemical calm settled inside my chest and belly, cool and soft and glowing. I had expected to cry, but I only felt numb with anger, with a decade of frustration, of misled lies, of missed years and missed opportunities, of missing my twin sister. Bitterness fell away. Only truth remained.

“Maisie was real,” I said, speaking to the wall above my parents’ heads.

My mother, shrill and tight: “Heather—”

My father spoke over her, “Dear—”

Aym interrupted in an unleashed voice of rusty nails and broken needles, speaking from the shadows: “Listen to her, you cretins!”

They both flinched, confused, wrong-footed. My father blinked at Aym, screwing up his eyes twice. My mother shook her head like a horse bothered by a fly.

“Maisie was real,” I repeated. “And Maisie is still real. She was not my imaginary friend. She is my twin sister, your other daughter. Ten years ago — almost eleven years ago now — I did not have a breakdown, or a schizophrenic episode, or a series of hallucinations, or anything like that. Maisie and I were kidnapped by an alien god from Outside reality. I escaped. She did not. She is still out there. Something about that process erased the physical proof and relevant memories of everybody who knew she ever existed. Except for me. That is the truth.”

We let out a long, slow, shaking breath. We felt numb and flushed both at the same time.

Clean at last. We blinked away the gloss of tears.

My parents were not taking this well. Their beloved daughter had gone crackers again. My father was frowning with scrunch-eyed concern, like he'd just heard a terminal diagnosis. My mother was pinch-lipped and tight-faced, almost scowling at me, as if I had done a wee on the carpet.

She said, in a slow and measured voice, "Heather, are you taking your medication?"

"Mother, I haven't been taking my medication for a very long time, because it didn't ever work. It never, ever, ever made the 'hallucinations' or the dreams go away, because they were not hallucinations or dreams. I keep seeing the things I see because they are real."

My mother huffed, screwed her eyes shut again, and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I knew we shouldn't have let her go off to university."

My father interrupted before I could get angry: "Samantha, that wasn't our choice to make. It was Heather's."

"And look! She's relapsed! Listen to her! What is this?!"

My father sighed and made a placating gesture toward my mum. Then he looked at me, full of disquiet. "Heather. Heather, you know we both love you very much. You're ... you're having another ... you ... "

We just stared back, keeping control. "I'm what?" we said with gentle challenge.

My father frowned harder — with confusion. "Well," he said slowly. "I was going to say you're having another episode. That you're unwell, and we we want to help, but ... "

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "But what?"

My mother stared at him, horrified. "Gregory?"

"I don't know," my father said. He shook his head and stroked his moustache. "You don't seem the same, Heather. Not like last time. Not like any of the previous times."

"Gregory," my mother warned, her tone hardening.

My father gestured at me. "Sammy, look at her. I've never seen her so confident."

My mother gaped at him. "Gregory, you cannot possibly believe all that." She lowered her voice to a hiss, as if I was not right there and well within earshot. "It's the same thing the doctors got out of her when she was little! It's the same old delusion! Stop feeding it!"

"I am standing right here, you know?" I said. "I can hear you."

My mother turned dark eyes on me again. "Of course you can hear us, dear. What are we supposed to say? What— we— we have to get you back on your medication, dear. This is— just listen to yourself! Listen to your—"

"I want you to answer a question," I said, raising my voice. "That's all you need to do."

My mother almost shouted: "What question!?"

"Samantha," my father said. "Let her—"

"What question?! What question?!" my mother repeated. "None of this makes any sense, what possible question could she have—"

"Talk to me, mother," I said, my voice quivering. "I am right here."

My mother just scowled at me.

"I want you to answer a question," we said. "And I don't care if you think it will hurt me. I need you to tell the truth, because only the truth is going to help me fix this. Even if you don't believe me — and I know you don't believe me — just humour me. I need an answer. That is the best thing you can both do, right now, to help your daughter. That would be me, by the way."

My father said: "What's the question, sweetheart?"

I swallowed. The numbness seemed to fall away inside me, like sunburnt skin peeling from clean flesh, suddenly raw and red. Why did that numbness ebb now? Because here was the moment of truth? Because I was about to discover how badly my parents had lied to me?

"Prior to my first ever 'episode'," I said, "In the day, weeks, and even months before that, did anything strange happen?"

"Strange?" my father echoed.

"Oh, oh I cannot believe this," my mother started to pant, rocking gently in her chair, tears rolling down her cheeks. "She's gone full paranoid. Gregory, we have to do something. We have to call—take her to the—I don't know! She's— she's clearly unwell! Heather, dear, we love you, but this is nonsense! You never had a sister! You never did! I should know! I gave birth to you!"

"Anything at all," I said to my father. My voice was shaking now. My tentacles wanted to coil around our middle, hug ourselves still. "I don't know what it might have been. Unexplained phenomena. Odd sights. Anything. Literally anything. Animals indoors. A weird letter. Even a dream. Visits from strange people, or—"

My father's eyebrows twitched. He tried to hide the reaction, but he could not.

My eyes went wide. My tentacles went wild, stiff and arched. My blood ran cold.

"Dad!" I snapped. "Dad, you do remember something. I saw that on your face!"

"Heather!" my mother wailed. "Stop this!"

"I saw it on your face! Dad! Dad, don't lie to me! There was something! Tell me!"

My dad raised both his hands in surrender. "There was nothing. Nothing happened before your very first breakdown. Nothing before. I promise, sweetheart. I am not lying to you."

"... and after?" I said.

My mother whirled on my dad, sobbing openly. "Gregory, do not! Don't! She's sick! She's ill! Don't give her any more of this poison! Please!"

"Samantha, she is only asking for the whole truth—"

"What truth?! Nothing happened! She's mentally ill!"

"—and I only think it's fair that we tell her about—"

"Stop!"

"—the strange lady," my dad finished.

I went completely and utterly still, inside and out. Every hair on my

body stood on end. We felt my entire world turn upside down. My blood was ice. My guts iron. My bio-reactor a lump of dead flesh. Our brains were soup, our limbs rubber. My tentacles were ready to turn themselves to razor blades and pull down the walls of reality.

“Strange lady?” I echoed, in barely a whisper.

My father wet his lips. “After the first few months of taking you to the doctors—”

“I will not have this!” my mother roared and shot to her feet. Tears streaming down her face, she blazed at all of us. “Gregory, this is nothing but irresponsible! Her treatment plan was always clear. Never, ever, ever feed the delusions! We are not having this discussion, I will not allow you to harm our daughter!” She whirled on me and Sevens and Aym. “And you — you two, I don’t even know who you are, but you’ve done irreparable harm! Get out, both of you! Heather, you are not going back to Sharrowford, or university, not tonight. We are calling the hospital. That is final.”

My mother expected me to recoil. To shut my mouth. To nod my head. To be a good little girl and take my medicine.

“Mother,” I said, calmer than I had ever felt before. “You can’t make us do anything.”

She faltered and flustered for a moment, then rallied: “Just because you’re an adult doesn’t mean you’re not—”

“No,” we sighed. “We mean you cannot make us do anything. Don’t make us prove it.”

My mother boggled at me, tears dried on her cheeks, utterly lost.

My father leaned back on the sofa and frowned. He drew a hand across his face.

My mother spoke again, her tone gone treacle-thick and sickly-sweet: “Heather, Heather we both love you very much, but you are ill, you are delusional, you need help.”

“Mm,” my father grunted — and I knew that was agreement with my mother, not with me. “Maybe we should call the hospital. Heather, I’ll tell you about the strange lady, but first will you consent to—”

I lost my temper.

Sevens almost got there first, she almost managed to say no. She even had an emergency lemon, slipped to her earlier by Praem's secret hands, ready to peel and stuff in my mouth at the first sign of serious trouble. But I would have spat it out just to hiss at the top of my lungs. Aym began to rasp a warning, because even she knew where this was going. But I wasn't about to listen to her either.

We unrolled our tentacles and spread them wide; we dipped a fingertip into the machinery of the Eye, slick and dark and black and tarry, to flick that single unseen value from a zero to a one.

And then we showed our parents who and what we really were.

eyes yet to open – 22.3

Truth-wrought abyssal flesh flowered from my flanks and burst through the concealed velcro slits in the sides of my borrowed hoodie.

Sixfold and strobing, glossy-smooth and gleaming-pale, strong with muscle, thick with chromatophores, weaving layers of armour for my heart and soul. They — us, we, I, all in one and one as all — flared with a dark rainbow umbra of void-born bioluminescence. We soaked the sitting room in unnameable colours, washing the walls with neon pink, drenching the sofa in mustard gas yellow, turning the carpet filthy with toxic purples and mould-bright oranges and danger-warning reds — and dyeing my parents' faces with the grey-pale of wordless shock. Six beautiful, undeniable, unfalsifiable limbs from beyond the human body-plan unfurled from my sides, to violate both the stagnant, stale air of the house in which I had grown up, and the sclerotic structures of my parents' minds.

My mother stumbled away from us. All her patronising, careworn anger vanished like flash-boiled steam, replaced with open-mouthed shock. She collapsed into her chair, panting for breath, a hand clutching at her heart. My father stared with the awestruck eyes of a child gazing upon the sea for the first time, the waves roused to violence beneath a lightning storm, with electricity playing over the water's surface. His moustache had gone droopy.

Not enough! Not nearly enough!

We lifted ourselves upward on three tentacles until our feet left the ground. With all our body weight raised and suspended via three muscular coils braced against the carpet, we looked down upon our parents. Our eyes were full of tears, our face blazing with heat, our heart soaring with vindication.

Catharsis was like a drug, surging through our veins, throbbing inside our head, churning in our belly — no doubt spiced and catalysed by the lingering buzz of brain-math pain crackling across our nervous system and distributed neural tissue.

I had dreamed of this moment during my darkest hours of isolation in Cygnet Children's Hospital, on those long and lonely nights curled up beneath my bedsheets, to escape the horrors which were visible to only my altered eyes, while I'd sobbed my twin's name into a cold pillow. I had dreamed of looking down on the doctors and scattering them like bowling pins, of rising above my parents and screaming in their faces: you're wrong!

Maisie is real! I have proof! I love her and she's missing and gone and nobody will pay attention or believe me and you're all leaving her behind!

We longed to blossom further, to flower and fruit, to surrender our biology to the transformative process, to show our parents the very limits of the truth. We ached to sharpen our teeth and elongate our tongue, to decorate our skin with flowing colours in a language no human eyes could read, to blink with three sets of lids and twist our throat into a shape for words not meant for human ears. We quivered and panted with biological potential, with the budding seed of a bladed tail, with the promise of steel-shod bones and razor-sharp fingernails. We wanted to hiss, to screech, to unfold and unfurl until we were large enough to pull reality down upon the human mind, until we might see my parents as nothing but ugly lumps of living meat twisted into glugging chemical factories, and force them to look upon the shameless and incandescent truth.

But we didn't.

Because then we would have been there all night.

We kept a ruthless hand on our urges. In the end this was not about breaking my parents, or about satisfying my own needs, or even about bringing us all together, to heal at long last, to reconcile this chasm between us. No, none of those things mattered, not by comparison.

This was about Maisie, and the information I required in order to bring her home.

We made do with one tiny sliver of all the things we wished to say, to express all that we felt.

"Go ahead, mother," I said. "Tell me I'm insane."

My mother did not tell me anything. She whimpered.

That whimper was enough to bring me down — both metaphorically and literally. We did not wish to actually hurt our parents, to scream and shout and shove their noses in the truth; we'd exercised that urge once before, against Natalie's parents, to bring them Into The Know for the sake of their daughter's future. We had indulged in all the strongest cocktails of bitterness and revenge, and told ourselves we had no other choice. But then Sevens had shown us how those poisons ate away at our own guts in equal measure, metabolising our own soul into rot. We had not quite exorcised those feelings — we suspected that we never could — but we didn't truly wish to see our parents' minds broken on the rack of reality, with all the attendant risks.

We lowered ourselves back to the floor, easing downward with our tentacles until our feet pressed into the plush fabric of the carpet. I was panting, shivering, shaking all over, coated with a sudden sheen of cold sweat. One by one we — us Heathers — all agreed to lower the intensity of our strobing rainbow brilliance. We dialled it down until it no longer overwhelmed the lights in the sitting room.

A lemon appeared in front of my face, held in a pale hand, attached to a very lovely arm, inside the perfectly pressed clean white sleeve of a crisp blouse.

"For you," Sevens murmured.

I glanced at her in surprise, blinking and confused; she'd managed to stand by my side all throughout that absurd threat display. We suddenly felt terribly embarrassed.

"I— *hic*," hiccuped. "But—"

"Eat," said Seven-Shades-of-Essential-Aide.

We accepted the lemon with two tentacles and began flaying the skin, then plucking out morsels of sharp, yellowy flesh. The first bite stilled our mind. The second scrap calmed our belly. The third made us sigh. We needed that.

My parents were just staring, awestruck and silent. My mother was half-recoiled in her chair, as if trying to sink into the cushions. My father's amazement was beginning to ebb, the flavour of his shock changed by the curious frown on his forehead.

"Heather," my father said slowly, as if not believing his own voice could function in this aura of unreality. "What ... what exactly are

we ... looking at here?"

I swallowed another chunk of lemon. Much better.

"The truth," we said. We shrugged — with two shoulders and all the tentacles not currently occupied in de-fleshing a lemon. "We didn't want to show you ... " I trailed off and smiled, self-conscious and melancholy. "Well, no, that's a lie, of course we wanted to show you. We just didn't want to hurt you, either of you. But the denial was getting too much. This is the truth."

My father's frown deepened. His eyes ran across my tentacles, narrowing, blinking, squinting with the cognitive effort of overcoming his own world-view. He stroked his moustache as if puzzling over a crossword.

"And ... what," he tried, then cleared his throat and screwed up his eyes. When he opened them again, I had not stopped existing. He nodded. "What is the truth, sweetheart?"

A weird giggle forced its way up my throat. "Hi mum, hi dad," we said. "I'm a squid."

Hic — went my mother. She let out a hysterical little laugh as well, then hiccuped again.

Oh.

Oh no.

My moment of catharsis and relief curdled in my gut: that's where I got the hiccuping thing from.

My mother, wild-eyed and breathing too hard, said: "T-those aren't real. They're ... p-paper mache! With lights inside! T-this is a cruel, cruel trick to play on us, Heather. I thought better of you, you're not—"

One of us lost control — Top-Right whipped outward, a single tentacle arching through the air like a spear, to stop six inches from my mother's nose.

"Eek!" My mother shrieked, then crammed a hand over her mouth, panting through the gaps between her fingers, wide eyes glued to the slow-strobing tip in front of her eyes.

My father reached across the sofa and gripped my mother's arm. "Samantha. Samantha, it's alright, it's okay. It's only— it's only our

— our Heather, our—”

“Dad, stop,” I said. He was struggling too, and I couldn’t bear it. “That was ... that was my fault. I shouldn’t have been so ... aggressive.”

Part of us burned with shame — well, not Top-Right, but most of the rest of us. That little whipcrack was no different than pretending to wind up and deliver a punch to my mother’s face. A threat, faked and stalled, but a threat nonetheless. That was not what we wanted.

But still we held that one tentacle in front of my mother’s eyes. We coiled our tip, curling and spiralling, with bands of colour descending our length; we showed off the fine control, folding and flexing the pale skin, undeniably biological and alive. Smooth and elegant and expressive. Deny this, mother.

My mother removed her hand from her mouth. Her eyes were glued to me — to us, to our tentacle. “It’s ... ” she murmured. “It’s a ... a robotic arm, then. Silicon for the skin. A-a project, at your University. Doesn’t ... doesn’t Sharrowford have a robotics department, or something? Yes! Yes, that must be it.”

We sighed. “Mother, how could I have gotten six robotic limbs through the front door?”

“You ... you had it concealed under your clothes,” she answered. Her voice grew with confidence as she spoke. “In a sort of fold-out costume. Like those on-stage costume changes in Christmas pantomimes.” Her eyes left my tentacles and found my face again. She was denying my reality even with it right in front of her, turning her eyes away from the truth. “Don’t you remember that one production of Jack And The Beanstalk, from when you were eight?”

“Mum,” we said. “Stop.”

“The fairy girl in that panto,” she went on, “she had a dress, a milkmaid’s dress, as a sort of disguise, and a stage-trick was set up so she could do a little spin and the whole outfit transformed into a sparkling gown.” My mother took a deep breath and pointed a finger at my face. “I remember it so clearly because you were delighted! You squealed and clapped along with all the other little children. You loved it! You remember that, don’t you? Don’t you?”

You do!”

Of course I remembered my parents taking me to Christmas pantomimes; I even recalled that specific production, and the actress my mother had referenced. I remembered that the ‘fairy girl’ was very, very pretty, and my childhood self had been struck by fleeting puppy-love, dissolved into memory by the following dawn. And I remembered the flashy costume-change, the twirl and the sparkle, the enchantment of stage magic.

But unlike my parents I also remembered that Maisie had been there too, squealing and clapping and entranced alongside me.

“Mum,” we said, struggling to retain our patience. “You hugged me on the doorstep. I think you would have noticed if I was concealing five stone worth of high-grade costume equipment under my clothes. Stop ignoring the evidence of your own eyes.”

My mother huffed sharp and hard, to cover the way she was shaking all over. She jabbed a finger at Sevens instead. “Your friend there! Miss Sevens — if that is even your real name — she did it! She was standing by your side the whole time! She gave it to you somehow. She— uurk!”

My mother gasped, her rising rant cut off mid-stream; Seven-Shades-of-Serene-Scorn had turned upon her the most wintry and cutting of looks, blank and flat and without mercy. My mother stared back, quivering in her chair, compressing and twitching her lips with the effort of finding a retort to the silent transfixation of Sevens’ eyes.

“Do not avert your gaze, Mrs Morell,” said Sevens.

We made a show of glancing at Sevens and looking her up and down, indicating her body with the flick of one tentacle, her smart, creaseless blouse and her spotless, long skirt, wrapped around her slender, slight physique.

We said: “And how would she have concealed that, mother? Sevens isn’t exactly wearing baggy clothes.”

My mother rallied with a valiant effort to continue denying reality. Her attention whirled away from Sevens, sliding across my face and heading for the other side of my tentacles. “Then it was your other friend!” she snapped. “The goth with the ridiculous dress! Aym, was it? Yes, that’s it! That’s why she’s wearing all ... those ... layers ...

?”

Aym — our little coal-smoke demon of reverse psychology and emotional torment — had become rather overwhelmed by the excess of raw, unironic, heartfelt emotion on display. She had retreated behind the shadow of my tentacles; I had no idea how she managed to locate ‘shadow’ in the lee of light-emitting organs, but she did, somehow, and we were not about to ask for the details. She had sunk into the black lace of her dress, become faceless and handless, a pillar of gloom wrapped in moon-dark cobwebs.

My mother trailed off as she stared at what Aym had become. The sight of my tentacles had cracked open her mind, not all the way, but just enough to allow her to witness the truth, however briefly.

My father was staring as well, but he remained more coherent. He stroked his moustache and nodded at Aym. “That’s an impressive trick, Miss Aym. I take it you value your privacy?”

“Thank you,” Aym replied in a voice like rusty nails dragged along rotten wood. Almost shy, by her standards.

My mother stammered and gulped, cold sweat beading on her forehead. “I don’t— I don’t— I don’t believe any of it. T-this is a trick, some kind of trick. You’re playing a c-cruel jest, you ... ”

“You’re really going to make us go all the way, aren’t you?” I hissed, more angry than I had expected. I shoved another sliver of lemon-flesh into my mouth, biting down on the sharp taste to control my bitter disgust, then whipped Top-Right back away from my mother’s face. “Fine. Look.”

I turned one flank — my left — toward my parents. With a human hand I reached into the slit on the side of my hoodie and pulled it wide, revealing the mass of altered flesh where pneuma-somatic tentacles met human skin. We flexed and tensed the muscles, showing ourselves off, a sheen of tears in our eyes. Humiliation and vindication swirled together inside my head.

My father looked away, trying to be polite. My mother stared, a hand to her mouth.

I let the slit fall shut again. “Deny that,” we said. “Go on.”

My father stroked his moustache and stared at a point on the floor, thinking hard, brow furrowed. “Sweetheart, Heather, what ... what

does this mean?”

My mother straightened up before I could answer, face as composed as she could manage, which wasn't much; she looked like a victim of some unspeakable natural disaster, her world washed away in a storm. "This doesn't change a thing, Heather," she said. "You're mentally ill. You know that. You're sick and you need help. I don't ... it doesn't matter what ... what ... body parts you have ..." She paused, panting, frowning, trying to overcome the weight of her world-view. "You still need to see the doctors. You need to go back to hospital. You need to go back on your medication. Your father and I don't want to force you, but—"

"Mother," I snapped. "Don't be absurd. I have tentacles! Look!"

She looked me right in the eyes and said: "It makes no difference! We are your parents. You are going back to hospital, young lady."

We sighed and rubbed our face with one hand. "You can't have me involuntarily committed. Not just because I'm legally an adult, but because it's physically impossible."

"What are you talking about?" my mother snapped. "Heather, this is delusion. You know it's delusion. You need help, treatment, just like the first time. This is just another—"

With one swift tentacle we reached out and picked up our father's book from the little table next to the sofa. We drew it close and discovered he had been reading *The English Civil War: A People's History*; we dearly hoped that wasn't some kind of sign. Then we dipped a hand into the tarry-black, corrosive sump at the base of our soul, yanked hard on a few familiar levers, and spread the consequences outward through our distributed nervous system.

Out.

The book vanished right in front of my parents' eyes. They both just stared, dumbfounded, audience members for a magic trick. I waited a few seconds, then reversed the process; I hadn't sent the book anywhere questionable, it was just sitting on a hillside in Camelot, probably puzzling a few Knights and a Caterpillar or two. With a flicker of hyperdimensional mathematics — this trick now elementary to me, at the cost of nothing more than a brief wave of nausea, a spike of head pain, and a nasty tingle down our nervous system — we brought the book back to our own left hand.

We held up the book.

My mother scoffed. "Oh, that was just sleight of hand! What do you take us for, Heather? Don't be ridiculous, you—"

"Sevens, Aym," I said, tossing the book onto the sofa. "Please step back from my body. Don't touch me for a moment."

Out.

We skimmed off the surface of the membrane between here and Outside, bouncing like a flat stone on the surface of an endless, bottomless sea. We sling-shotted around a fixed point in reality, there and back in the blink of an eye, burning across the heavens beneath the world like a comet made of tentacles and beaks.

We touched down a split-second later in the kitchen, stumbling slightly, a small trickle of blood running from our nose, head pounding with the increased effort of brain-math. But the effort was spread and shared, and we did not fall to our knees or vomit up our guts on the familiar old kitchen floor tiles; that would have rather undercut the intended affect, if my parents had rushed in there to see me chucking up my dinner.

We could not pause here to ruminate over memories, over the shadows of sunset pouring in through the back window, over the hard plastic counter tops where once we had made cookies with Mother and Maisie. Spirits fled from the back windows, from the thin grass in the garden, scuttling under the kitchen table, vanishing through the cracks in the cupboards. We nodded to the big dozy red-mawed spirit still lazing by the doorway, and then stepped past it, back into the sitting room. Childhood fears formed no more barriers for us, not anymore. They were our friends now.

My mother was up on her feet, clutching at her own chest in panic; she stifled another shriek when she saw me step out of the kitchen. My father was awestruck once more, gazing up at me from the sofa. Sevens was waiting, relaxed and cool. Aym was a pillar of shadow.

"Explain that," we said.

My mother sat back down, panting too hard. My father shook his head.

As we resumed our place in the middle of the room, flanked by Sevens and Aym, we said: "I didn't take the train from Sharrowford

to Reading. I teleported myself here, along with my friends. You cannot confine me in any way that can hold my body. Sorry, mum, dad, that sounds weird, but it's just a fact. You can't! I know, I sound like a cartoon villain, but it's the truth." We sighed, rubbing our face. "Or, well, maybe you can! If you know a magician or two, or a cult, or some unspeakable monster you've never told me about. But I don't think you do." We smiled and swallowed a hiccup. "I really don't think you ever did. You never lied to me. I know that."

"It's not real," my mother said in a tiny, forlorn voice. Tears quivered in her eyes. I had to look away. I didn't want to see my mother cry, no matter how difficult she could be.

My father straightened up and cleared his throat. "I hope it is real, dear," he said to my mother.

She stared at him, wide eyed and appalled. "What?! Why— why would you say that?"

My dad nodded at me with calm certainty. "Because Heather looks happy. Well." He cleared his throat again. "Maybe not right now, not while she's having to explain all this to her parents." He smiled, just a little. "Am I right, sweetheart? No, you don't have to answer. But look at her, Sammy. That's our daughter. That's our Heather. Look how strong she's grown."

I sniffed, so I wouldn't start crying too. "Thanks, dad," I croaked. "T-thank you."

My mother just shook her head, horrified on a deeper level than I could touch.

My dad spoke to me again: "Sweetheart, you still haven't explained what this all means."

I laughed, surprising myself. "It means I'm a hybrid squid-girl from beyond reality, running a shared consciousness with seven semi-separate selves. It means mages and monsters and magic are all real. It means I have four — five? I've lost count. Four supernatural girlfriends. Yes, I'm in a polycule, and we can talk about that some other time, because now is really not the time. Do you remember Evelyn, from when we visited at Christmas? She does magic, she's a magician. And Sevens here, she's technically my fiancée, and she's the daughter of a god from beyond reality, and—"

"W-what about Raine?!" my mother squeaked, blinking away tears.

“She was a very nice girl! Very nice! I thought she was very good for you!”

“Raine and I are probably going to get married,” we said. “I love her.”

“But— but is she—”

“Oh, Raine’s human—”

My mother sighed with exaggerated relief.

“—but she’s more scary than most monsters. She’s killed a whole bunch of people. Mostly for me.”

My mother hiccuped twice in quick succession, then grasped her chest and stared in abject horror.

My dad said: “Sweetheart, slow down, please. I can’t take even a small portion of this on board. You have ... extra ... limbs, yes, I can see them.” He squinted hard at my tentacles, trying to fix them in his mind, punctuating his words with little chops of one hand; my father was not In The Know, not after a little light show and a translocation trick. It would take much more psychological violence to break even a willing participant out of the chains of reality. But he was trying, as hard as he could, to believe his daughter. “And they’re clearly real—”

My mum interrupted: “They’re ridiculous! Why are they rainbow? It’s such a stereotype! You could make them any colour you want!”

We flashed our tentacles in warning-yellow and danger-red, just to prove a point. My mother shut her mouth again, eyes full of tears. She was not dealing with this well, trying anything at all to deflect from what she saw.

My father cleared his throat and tried again. “They’re very impressive, sweetheart. But I can’t take all the rest of that on faith.”

We sighed and faced the inevitable. “Mum, dad, you will both begin to forget or rationalise all this within hours. Mum, you’re already trying to do it, right in the middle of all this. You’ll believe what’s in front of your eyes, for the duration of it being in front of your eyes, but as soon as your mind is able, it will start to self-edit, to warp your memories, to fill in the gaps with other things.” A strange lump formed in our throat — we didn’t want them to forget.

My mother spluttered. “Are you calling us plain imbeciles?”

“No, mum. No, I’m not.” We sighed. “You’ll remember this conversation, but you’ll probably recall it differently. Maybe you’ll remember me coming home from university for an evening, showing signs of mental illness, telling you I’m in a polycule of lesbians, that I’m engaged, that I’m defiantly not taking my meds, and so on. But the rest of it?” We shrugged, then started to struggle with tears of our own. Why could they not believe? “You’ll fill the rest in with mundane explanations. And that’s not your fault. That’s just how the human mind rejects evidence of the supernatural, rejects things from outside — or Outside, with a capital O, the dimensions beyond reality.” We sniffed hard, our anger turned to cold and ashen melancholy. “You’ll forget.”

My father said slowly: “And what does this have to do with ... with your ... medications ... and ... your ‘imaginary friend?’”

We winced. “Don’t call her that. I know it’s not your fault, dad. But you have to say her name. She’s your daughter as well. And she’s real.”

He swallowed, rough and raw. He took slow, deep breaths, squinting hard, unable to cross this final boundary of acknowledgement. If he said the name, it was as good as admitting that I had been right all along, all this time.

“Maisie,” we said the name for him. “She was real. She is still real. She and I were kidnapped by a god-like thing from Outside reality — The Eye, it’s called. I escaped. She didn’t. Everyone forgot. But it wasn’t your fault. It was The Eye.”

My mother sobbed, once, sodden and pitiful. What did she have to cry about, compared with me?

My father just shook his head slowly.

We said: “Did either of you ever doubt it? Ever doubt that you only had one daughter? Was there no inkling? Nothing at all?”

My dad said, very quietly and slowly: “I always thought twins would be nice, actually. Had a dream or two about it. You put the idea in my head, Heather. I never wanted to say it out loud, of course. That was the sort of thing we were never supposed to do, doctors orders, don’t feed the schizophrenic delusions, don’t give an inch. But you always seemed like you’d be happier with somebody

else at your side. Even before the ... the ... ‘breakdown’, I mean. Even before. Always thought that.”

His murmur trailed off, eyes fixed somewhere in mid-distance, trapped in an emotion that had no place on my father’s face.

“I’m going to prove it to you,” we said. “Within two weeks. Because I’m going to rescue her. Say her name, dad.”

My father shook his head. “Will we remember?”

“I have no idea. Dad, please. Say her name.”

My father swallowed. “Ma—”

My mother screamed.

Face buried in her own hands, tears seeping from beneath her palms. She wailed like I’d never heard a human being wail before. There was no falsehood in that sorrow, no clumsily concealed manipulation, no crocodile tears to herd me back into a box. For a brief second I heard an echo of myself in her cry — my own voice, calling out for my twin in the dark.

“No!” she sobbed, hyperventilating, panicking behind her own hands. “No, there was one baby, one baby! There were never two!”

“Sammy!” my father called her name and tried to put an arm around her shoulders, but she shrugged him off and crammed herself against the side of the chair, crying wildly.

“I would not— I would never forget my own daughter! I would never! It was dreams! It was just dreams!”

I was so shocked I didn’t know what to say; of all the possible outcomes, this I had not expected. We coiled our tentacles inward, as if under attack.

My mother’s crying face, wracked with pain and loss, rose to face me, tears running freely down her cheeks. “There was one baby, one baby!” she screamed at me. “It was you, Heather. There were never two. Never two. There was never a— a— a M-Maisie! Maisie!” She wailed my twin’s name — her daughter’s name. “Maisie! No! No, we didn’t forget her. We didn’t. It was a lie. It was a lie! It was a lie ... ”

My mother dissolved into full-body wracking sobs, shaking her like a fit, hands clutching at her hair and skull as if trying to dig the

memories out of her brain.

Sevens leaned close to my ear. She whispered: "Your mother needs you, my love."

Amid the bitterness and the humiliation, the catharsis and the vindication, I had overlooked an essential truth.

If I was right, then my parents were also victims of the Eye.

Their daughter had been taken from them by forces beyond human comprehension. They had been made to forget about her, abandon her, and deny she ever existed. And then, with their minds clouded and memories violated, they had unintentionally tortured their other daughter by telling her she was insane.

No wonder my mother denied it so strongly. To accept the smallest crack was to invite madness.

We went to her. I crammed the last of my emergency lemon into my mouth to give me the courage I needed. We knelt down in front of my mother's chair and put all our tentacles around her arms and shoulders and back, and tried to hold onto what was good in her.

"Mum. Mum? Mum, please look at me."

She shook her head, sobbing and shaking, but eventually she looked up and met my eyes. She was a mess, red-faced and red-eyed, more distraught than I've ever seen another human being, destroyed inside by things she could not understand. She was me, a year ago, sobbing in a public toilet when Raine was just a dream of better things. She was me, another victim of the Eye.

"Mum," we said slowly. Our own voice was shaky too, crossing uncertain ground, croaking with semi-transformation into something abyssal and raw. "Maisie was real. I know she was real."

My mother shook her head. Denial was her only escape.

"It's not your fault that you forgot," we said. "I don't think you had a choice. The thing she was taken by, it's called the Eye, and somehow it made everybody forget. It altered reality, changed all the old pictures of me and her so it was just me in every one. Her bed in our room, gone. Her clothes, toys, all kinds of records, anything, all of it, gone! It's not your fault. And you'll forget again. By the end of this conversation, or next morning, I don't know, but your mind won't let you remember. You'll rationalise it away, you'll

—”

“I don’t— *hic*— want to?”

She murmured that question in such a tiny voice.

“Mum?”

“I— *hic* don’t want to, forget?” She held the tears back for a moment, her voice a wet and broken sound. “How do I— how do I make myself— not forget? Heather?”

My blood curdled, cold and sluggish inside my veins, glugging through my heart. My mother was pleading for the one thing I would never have imagined her asking for. And I could not give it to her. My mouth went dry. A lump hardened in my throat. My eyes filled with a mirror of her tears.

We had considered in great detail the measures we might take to force my parents to accept reality: a trip Outside; exposure to spirits via Evelyn’s pneuma-somatic seeing glasses; bringing Zheng to visit. But none of these would address Maisie’s absence. In some of our most bitter moments we had imagined how they might react if I brought them Maisie’s message — the childhood pajama top she had managed to pass to us via her Demon Messenger. I had imagined how they might feel, seeing the message in a bottle from the daughter they had abandoned.

But now, with my mother weeping and pleading, all thoughts of vindictive display had fled.

“I ... I can’t risk it, mum,” we said. “I’d have to break you, change the fundamentals of your mind, by taking you Outside. And I can’t risk that, because the fallout and the consequences might interfere with that rescue. I’m ... I’m sorry.”

My mother stared at me, hollow-eyed and dead inside. She murmured: “What should I do?”

“All you have to do is not interfere. I’ll bring Maisie back. I’ll bring her home. I promise.”

My mother nodded, stiff and robotic, no longer weeping and wailing, but numb and distant. “Will it ... ” her voice cracked a little. She sniffed hard. “Will it be very dangerous for you?”

“ ... yes.”

She half-attempted to hug me, to touch my tentacles. One hand went around the back of my head, cradling me. "B-be safe, Heather. Sweetheart. We love you."

I blinked back tears of my own.

Slowly, my mother let go. She sat up straight. Something seemed to clear inside her face.

"I have to write this down!" she declared. "I'm writing this down! I refuse to forget this! I refuse!"

I had to stand up and step back; she was in bustle mode, from weeping to problem-solving in one instant. My mother shot out of her chair and bowled right past me, stomping into the kitchen, scrubbing her eyes with the back of one hand. We heard drawers banging open and objects slapping down on the kitchen counter. She returned a moment later clutching a notebook and a pen, cast herself back down into the chair, and then bent over the pages, scribbling as fast as she could. Her handwriting was a herky-jerky spider-leg scrawl.

"If I write it down then I'll believe it, if I write it down I'll believe my own words," she hissed as she wrote, rocking gently in the chair. "I won't forget, I won't forget, I won't forget. See? Here's her name: Maisie. Maisie is real. That's my own hand. I won't disbelieve my own hand. I shan't. I refuse."

My father reached out to her. "Sammy. Sammy, please, slow down."

"Let her do this," I said. "Dad, I think she needs to do this."

My mother kept writing, her notes spiralling out down the page and onto the next. My father leaned back and sighed a great and terrible sigh of deep exhaustion. He ran a hand over his face, tugging at his moustache. He was keeping it together better than my mother, but not by much, and not for the same reasons.

My mother muttered: "Heather, dear, I need the names of all the ladies in your 'polycule'. And yes, yes, I do know what that word means, I'm not a hundred years old."

To my surprise, Sevens stepped away from my side and went to stand by my mother's shoulder. She peered at the notebook as my mother scribbled, murmuring soft suggestions and corrections, adding details in a feathery whisper, placing a gentle hand on my

mother's shoulder. My father watched all this with haunted eyes.

"Dad," we said. "Do you believe what I'm telling you?"

My dad cleared his throat again, as if something with spikes was stuck to his vocal chords. "Well. Well, I don't know. Sweetheart, I want to support you, I really do, but this is a lot to take in. A lot to adjust to, all at once. And, well." He sighed and smiled. "You've just told me that in a few hours I'm going to file all this away as something that didn't really happen. Is that right?"

"Maybe," we said. "Maybe not all of it. I don't know."

He nodded slowly, taking steady, deep breaths. Was he fighting a panic attack? Perhaps. The mental image of my father shaking and shuddering in the throes of a panic attack was not a pleasant one.

"Dad," we went on, giving him something practical on which to focus. "Do you believe me enough to tell me about the 'strange lady' now?"

My mother's pen paused on the page. She looked up at my father. Sevens murmured something soft and slithering into my mother's ear, and her eyes returned to her notes. She resumed writing.

My dad leaned back on the sofa, nodding slowly, frowning as he dredged his own memories. He seemed to settle inside, as if this act of assistance gave him solace.

"Like I said, sweetheart," he began slowly, "nothing strange happened in the days or weeks before your ... "

"Before Maisie was taken," I said.

My dad nodded. "Before ... before 'Maisie was taken'. I'm pretty certain about that part, because the psychiatrists had us comb over every aspect of your life, everything which could have triggered the breakdown, or contributed to the state you were in. Anything and everything. And we came up a total blank. Kaput. Nada. Etcetera. Now that I think back on it, there wasn't even anything which might be explained by this 'mental self-editing' you're so insistent on." He smiled, trying to awkwardly cover up his lack of faith.

"Absolutely nothing weird happened before that night. Sweetheart, I promise, all I remember is when you started screaming. It was four o'clock in the morning. You screamed like ... like I'd never heard a child scream before." His voice broke. He knitted his hands

together, knuckles turning white. “Worst sound I’ve ever heard, to hear your own child scream like that.”

“Okay,” I managed to say, squeezing the word out through a rapidly closing throat.

My own memories of that night lay like an open wound, oozing black pus and infected lymph, too raw and vulnerable to touch directly for long. I recalled the exit from Wonderland as akin to the sensation of falling backward down a well; I remembered scrabbling and clawing at the lip of that well, breaking and bloodying my fingers in a desperate attempt to not leave Maisie behind. Was any of that literal, or another abyssal metaphor for something that a child’s mind could not suffer?

And I remembered all too clearly the way I’d screamed, thrashing and bleeding on the bedroom floor, terrified beyond thought, wailing that Maisie was missing, Maisie was gone, that I had left Maisie behind.

A tiny, lace-clad hand slipped into mine. What a surprise; Aym did have an earnest side after all.

My father took a deep, shuddering breath, staring at a point on the carpet. “Sorry, sweetheart, I didn’t think. It’s hard for me, too.”

“It’s okay, Dad. Please. Please try.”

I reached out and wrapped a tentacle — Middle-Right — around his forearm and wrist. An anchor of our own. He stared at that for a moment, patted me awkwardly, then nodded with sudden determination.

“It was about three or four months later,” he started. His voice turned practical, matter-of-fact, grounded once again. “Maybe five months, I’m not certain. That whole period, that whole first year, until your first long stay at Cygnet Hospital, it’s kind of a blur for me and your mother. But it was about then. It happened at Cygnet. We were in one of the waiting rooms, not the big main room with the reception desk, but one of the smaller ones, the long one next to the consultation rooms. The one with the aquatic scenes and cartoon fish painted on the wall. You remember that one, Heather?”

We nodded. “I do remember it. Smelled like lemons.”

He nodded along with me, but his eyes were so far away, his hands

shaking as he squeezed his own knuckles. "Me and your mother were in there alone. Well, not completely alone. I think there were another couple of people waiting at the far end, but I barely remember them. No, we were alone in the sense that you weren't there, Heather. The doctors had taken you for some kind of 'cognitive assessment'. They said it might go better if neither your mum or dad were present, but they didn't force us not to be there. I remember that very clearly, for some reason. It was pure chance. Either or both of us could have chosen to stay in that room with you, and then maybe we wouldn't have met ... her."

"Who?" I hissed, shivering inside. "Who was she, dad?"

He gestured to the right with his interlocked hands and a tilt of his head. "There was a fire exit in the side of the waiting room. One of those push-to-open-and-alarm-will-sound type doors. She came in through that. The alarm didn't go off. Even at the time, I thought that was weird. From the moment she entered the room, I knew something was off. But I couldn't put my finger on it."

He swallowed, frowning harder, as if struggling to remember. Fighting the full weight of reality, for the sake of telling me the truth.

"You can do it, dad," I hissed. "You can do it, please."

He nodded. "She walked right up to us. She flashed a badge, like a lanyard, like she was hospital staff. She called us Mister and Misses Morell. She said she wanted to talk, about you, about our daughter, about Heather." He shook his head slowly, squinting at nothing. "I knew something was wrong, but it was like I couldn't say no. She wasn't hospital staff, no way. No doctor or psychologist, nothing like that. She wasn't dressed like any of them. Jeans and a jumper and a trench-coat. Like a detective from an old film or something. And she was carrying ... I don't know, I didn't get a clear look at it. A long knife or a sword or something, inside the coat. But ... but I just ... " He hissed as if in pain. "It was like I couldn't point it out."

"What did she look like?" we said. "Dad, what did she look like? This is important."

"That's half the reason I remember her so clearly," my dad said, raising his eyebrows. "She was very striking. One of the most striking women I'd ever seen."

“ ... dad?”

My mother paused in her notebook-filling and muttered: “Your father’s not being funny. She really was.”

My dad nodded. “She was very tall. I didn’t stand up, but I had the impression she would tower over me if I did. She had the longest red hair I’d ever seen, all the way down to the backs of her knees. And proper red, not ginger, real red, like it was dyed. But it didn’t look like dye, it looked like ... ” He huffed. “Bloody hell, blow me down, this sounds silly, but it wasn’t like hair colour at all. It was like frozen fire. And her eyes, they were all wrong inside. Pupils went the wrong way, like a goat or something.”

He looked up and met my eyes finally, searching for confirmation and reassurance. “Does that make any sense to you, sweetheart? Because I feel like I went mad and saw a hallucination.”

“I ... I don’t know,” I said.

Who or what exactly had visited my parents? I had less idea now than before my father’s description. Some of us — us Heathers — had been prepared for the absolute worst, for my father to describe Loretta Saye, Evee’s mother, or for him to reveal that they’d been visited by somebody else I might recognise. But this? Mage or demon, or a vessel of the Eye, we had no idea.

“What did she say to you, about me?” I prompted.

My father blew out a long breath. “Well, she sat down next to me and your mother, and she asked all sorts of questions. Not questions like the doctors and psychiatrists asked, but weird questions. She showed us a bunch of symbols in a little notebook and asked if we recognised any of them. She asked if you were displaying any strange new habits or proclivities, like if you were trying to go out at night, or killing small animals, or reading a bunch of books too old for you, or if you’d lost all your appetite and were trying to eat non-food items instead.”

My mind soared and whirled; this was making even less sense than before. “What? Was that all? What else did she ask?”

“All sorts of questions, I can’t recall even a fraction of them, I’m sorry.” He shrugged. “I remember she said a bunch of strange words — not English, like — and was checking to see if we knew them. We didn’t, though, and I’m sorry, but I can’t recall any of them, this

was ten years ago. She drew a symbol in her notebook, and it was ... well." He swallowed. "It was like an eye. Like you were raving about in the first few days. A big black eyeball." He shook his head. "We only recognised that because of what you'd been saying, Heather."

My blood went cold.

A mage?

Had a mage sent Maisie and me to the Eye?

"And was that all?" I said, colder than I had intended.

My father took a deep breath and glanced at my mother. My mother paused her writing and swallowed, raw and hard and rough. Sevens tightened her grip on my mother's shoulder.

"Dad?" I prompted.

My dad said, slowly and carefully: "She had a photograph. A hard copy photograph, not on a digital camera or anything. She took it out and showed it to us. And she knew it was going to make us angry. It made me very angry, because ... because I knew it had to be a fake. Photoshop or something. That was when I decided she was a charlatan, a con-woman or something, trying to trick us somehow." His voice turned hoarse. "She'd stolen hospital records and read about your case, something like that. She was trying to prey on us. There was no other explanation. None. It was impossible."

"Dad. Dad, what was the photograph?"

He was shaking as he pushed the word out. "It was of you, Heather, and another girl who looked exactly like you. Identical, but dressed differently. In a pub garden, before a sunset. I recognised the pub, it was the Rose and Thistle, right here in Reading. And I recognised the photograph, because I was the one who took it." He swallowed, throat like sandpaper. "A photoshop. Must have been. Couldn't have been anything else."

"Dad, did you get a name from her?" I said. "Anything, anything at all? I need to track this woman down, dad. I need to find her. Now!"

My dad raised a hand. "It was around then that I lost my temper. I'd been feeling angry with her for a while, but it was like ... like

something was holding that back, stopping me from saying no or asking her to show some real credentials. But when she showed me the picture, it was like that feeling was removed and ... I told her that we would call the police.”

“Dad, that was a mage. A magician, a wizard, she—”

“She apologised. She stood up and wished us good luck with you. She said she had a lot of pity for you, but she was sorry she couldn’t do more to ‘fix the mistake’. She said it wasn’t her area of expertise, couldn’t help—”

“Dad!”

“And then she gave me a business card.”

My mother’s head jerked up, staring at my father. “You didn’t keep the damned thing, did you? All these years?”

My dad managed to look almost sheepish, but then he sat up straighter, filled with pride and defiance. “Turns out that was the right option, in the long run.”

“Where?!” my mother yelled. “It’s not in the big file with all of Heather’s medical notes, I would have seen it! I told you to throw that horrid thing away! She was a charlatan, a—” My mother slammed to a halt. She returned her eyes to her notes, staring hard, gone silent. Trying her best.

“Dad?” we said.

He looked me in the eyes. “Kept it in my wallet all these years. Tucked behind my Tesco clubcard. Ten years is a long time for a little paper business card to last, right?” He smiled a shaky smile. “I never thought of that before. Maybe that’s not normal either.”

I was shaking, both inside and out. All our tentacles tingled in anticipation, though we could not even conceive of what this truth meant.

A mage? A mage who had sent us to the Eye? Something else? The Eye’s messenger? None of this made sense.

My heart burned with something I’d never felt before.

“Dad, please—”

“I’ll fetch it,” he said.

My dad stood up and went into the tiny little entrance hallway, to rummage in his coat pockets for a moment. He returned holding his black leather wallet, scuffed at the corners. He flipped it open, extracted a little rectangle of cream-coloured card, and pressed that into my shaking palm.

For a moment we could barely read the words on the card; we were breathing so hard that our vision had gone blurry. We had to bring three tentacles to bear, just to make out the print with a wide-angle array of pneuma-somatic sight. The card itself was nothing special. No strange symbols or magical designs hidden in the corners or on the back, no esoteric tricks or traps in the writing, no clues that this was the 'business card' of a mage — or worse. And my dad was right: the card did not look as if it had spent ten years crammed into a wallet. It looked as fresh as the day it had been printed.

It read, in neat and professional typeface:

Taika Eskelinan

At Large In The World, Despite Your Best Efforts

All enquiries please telephone:

010456-6754-7777-00-00-2

A smile ripped at the corners of my mouth, teeth aching to elongate and sharpen. All our tentacles extended and flexed, threatening to bud with spikes. A predatory shudder passed through our guts.

A telephone number — blood in the water.

Time to hunt.

eyes yet to open – 22.4

A clever, cunning, and crafty little cephalopod does not expose herself in open waters, relying solely on the protective colouration of her shifting skin and the dizzying dance of her many arms; neither does she lurch into view with tentacles outspread, beak snapping a challenge like a painted braggart demanding a duel. No, those are the ways of passivity or recklessness, both equally likely to end in ruin and defeat. Instead, if she is smart and swift and sharp, she will squeeze herself into cracks and crevasses and tight little caves in the undersea rocks, coiling her softly pliant body into the stony embrace of the dark corners and unseen recesses. She sinks into the darkness, hides in the shadows, silent and still and studious.

“Kitten.”

The cephalopod does this not to escape the searching eyes and razor teeth of sharks and rays — for she is a heavyweight cephalopod now, no easy morsel for a passing predator, more than capable of warning them off with flashing stripes of red and yellow on the canvas of her skin. She is flush with toxins and poisons and paralytics. She has sharp claws and hooks and barbs of her own, reinforced with iron and steel. She hisses to ward off unwanted interest. She wishes no interruption in her hunt.

“Kitten, I strongly advise against doing this by yourself. Kitten. Kitten. Heather.”

Hunt! Yes, oh yes, that is why she is tucked away in the shadows — to stalk prey of her own.

“Kyahaha! She’s right out in the open! Look at this! Look, I can see the road through those railings there. Maybe you should shake her shoulder or something, Sevensy? Some teenage weed-head out for a kebab to slake the evening munchies is gonna spot our little squid through the park railings, and then make a five thousand word post on a paranormal image board! Hehe!”

The abyssal cephalopod creeps through the thickly clouded waters, tentacles reaching forward in uncoiling silence, dragging their own

stealth behind them in gossamer layers of unfolding cobweb, sheets of silence slicing through the dark.

“Kitten—”

“Heatherrrrr, shouldn’t you be doing this on a lonely windswept moor or something? Isn’t that where fair maidens are meant to brood like this? Pffftahaha! I can’t believe this, Sevensy, she’s lost it! She’s gone over the edge! Sorry, but this one is not my fault!”

Her beak is sharpened to a razor’s edge, hard as a diamond-tipped drill. No human science could match the cracking, crushing, constrictive power of her maw. She will snap it shut on skull and bone, then slice through both to the crimson meat within.

“Kitten, you cannot — must not — do this by yourself. There is no rational reason for this self-isolation. Go home. Seek assistance. Ask for help and it shall be granted, you—”

“Sevensy, don’t be daft. She doesn’t want help. She wants revenge, and it’s gonna be ugly! You think she wants Raine and Evee to watch her splatter some mage like a balloon full of cow guts? She’s here because she’s gonna do biiiiiig vi-ooooh-lence.”

The clever cephalopod does not spring prematurely. She waits until she sees confirmation — the ghostly sheen of a crab’s shell slipping into the dark waters ahead, thinking it is alone and unobserved, primitive eyes missing the octopus coiled within the rocks.

“You need not be involved, Aym.”

“Haha! You think either of us are gonna be involved? Maybe if I can stay in a fucking bomb shelter while Heather goes bananas!”

The clever cephalopod creeps closer while maintaining concealment; her skin has turned gnarled and dark to make her just another stone along the sea bed. She waits until the crab’s back is turned, until the claws are pointed elsewhere, until the waters are filled with night’s murk, until the trajectory is perfect. She bunches her tentacles like a massive muscular spring. She opens her beak, ready to arc through the cold void and seize the hot meat.

She tells herself the crab does not see her. The crab is small — with sharp, strong pincers, yes, but too slow to impede her strike. She will not be denied.

She is almost ready; her hand — no, tentacle — no, hand, thumb,

right thumb, hovers over the bright green call button, green and shiny enough to bite into, like an apple. But, no, no apples grow beneath the sea. Not an apple, a— The phone screen — the crab's shiny shell, back turned — burns bright and cheery against the dark background of the park, leaves rustling in the wind — no, against the deep-sunk ocean depths, drenched in night — against the distant Sharrowford skyline of rooftops and streetlights and—

“Kitten. Stop this.”

A soft hand fell upon my shoulder.

I hissed through my teeth, quick and sharp and mostly involuntary, the product of an altered throat; the barely human sound sunk into the darkness which hung above the grass and lurked between the trees. But the hand did not withdraw. Clarity began to leave me.

“Octopus-brain has lost her crackers!” Aym screeched, giggling like she was enjoying this far too much.

“I’m perfectly rational,” we said at last, swallowing hard to force our throat back into human shape. “And I’m— I’m almost there!” I tried to shrug off Sevens’ hand, but she wouldn’t let go. “I’m close! Give me a moment!”

“Close to what?!” Aym screech-laughed again. “Getting absorbed into your phone screen?”

“Kitten,” said Seven-Shades-of-Shrinking-Patience. “We are all out of moments. Look at me. Look up. Look.”

I hissed again — it was supposed to be a sigh, but I was too far gone to retain control — and looked up from my phone.

We — us, seven Heather-like squid girls packed into one adrenaline-filled, panting, shivering body — were sitting on a old wooden bench, just off one side of an asphalt pathway, drenched in the late evening shadows of Lehey Park, which was situated at the far eastern end of the city of Sharrowford. The park was big, and dark, and deserted at that time of night. Massive trees lined the edges of the park itself, concealing the low wall and high fence which separated it from the quiet suburban roads beyond. The wall and the railing and the trees worked to filter and darken the distant streetlights. The air was filled by the slow rustle of thousands of leaves, tossed gently on the night’s wind.

We were tucked deep in a corner, away from everything and everyone. Thick clouds covered the sky, hiding the moon, hiding us. The smells of summer grass and the sounds of furtive insects in the undergrowth had fled from our own reeking scent — we probably stank of predatory intent, secret pheromones pouring from our body. Even the distant cars on Sharrowford's roads sounded like scuttling beetles hurrying for less benighted parts of the city.

I was shivering badly, though not from cold. My bum had gone a little numb from the hard bench. My chest hurt.

We held our mobile phone in both hands, palms slick with sweat, the screen glowing in the night. We held the mystery business card at the tip of one tentacle.

The phone number mocked us from both screen and paper: 010456-6754-7777-00-00-2. It wasn't even a real telephone number, just another mage's trick, a magic spell encoded in telephone exchanges and numerology. I'd crawled all over the internet trying to figure out where it would point me. The answer? Nowhere.

But that didn't mean we weren't going to make the call.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was standing in front of the bench, flanked by Aym. Sevens — with her smart black shoes touching the actual ground, with her yellow skirt and pressed blouse and rolled-up parasol — was lit from the front and below by the glow from my phone screen, and by the slowly shifting rainbow colours of all six of my fully manifested tentacles. She looked like a phantom from a nightmare, glowing with unnatural colours, ready to whisk me off to my punishment in some faerie dungeon.

I'm certain I looked far worse.

Aym had reduced herself to little more than a wisp of bitter darkness, a shadow backed by gloom, almost invisible against the falling night and the omnipresent background glow of Sharrowford streetlights.

Sevens did not look pleased; she looked strict and stern, like she wanted to give me a spanking — and not the fun kind. I could hardly blame her. I was being a very significant fool, in a variety of ways which I did not have the power to express, let alone counteract.

“Sevens!” I hissed — actually hissed, because I couldn’t control the quiver in my voice. “Give me a moment! I’m going to do it, I’m going to do it right now! I need to be in the right frame of mind! Let me hold onto that, please!”

“Kitten, I love you with all my heart,” said Sevens. Her lips clicked on every word. “But you cannot do this alone. There is no reason.”

I hissed and slapped the empty air with three of my tentacles, agitated beyond words, beyond the power to explain myself. I was emotionally exhausted and I knew it, strung-out beyond the edge of rational human decision making. Sevens did not flinch at my wild gesture, not even when my tentacles throbbed and flexed with the beginnings of spikes and hooks and barbs. She did not let go of my shoulder. She did not let me raise anchor.

She stuck to her guns, bless her: “Kitten. Go home. Go to Raine and Evelyn. Take Zheng if you must. Take—”

“That’s not the point!” we hissed in her face. “Not the point! Sevens, let go, let me—”

Aym snort-cackled again, a noise like a rusty saxophone played by a swamp monster. “Some poor evening dog-walker is about to get an eye full of squid juice!”

“It’s fine!” I snapped at her instead. “Nobody is going to show up or walk by—”

“Quite a gamble!” Aym cackled. Her rippling, rotten giggle was borderline hysterical; she was more disturbed by this than she was showing. Another weight on the scales of guilt and madness inside my chest.

“—and if they do,” I went on, “then they’re going to come walking down a path with a torch, or a headlamp, or something like that. I will fold my tentacles up if I have to, yes, but I am tired of thinking about it! And I’m only going to be here a few more seconds! Let me finish, both of you!”

“Finish what?!” Aym squeaked. “What are you even doing?! Shit or get off the pot!”

I took a deep breath and filled my lungs, trying to contain the roiling cauldron boiling away inside my chest.

It was perhaps thirty minutes since Sevens and Aym and I had left

my parents' house, and a little less than that since we'd returned from Reading to Sharrowford, the same way in which we had arrived.

The revelations from my parents, my father's determination and effort, my mother's distress and resolve, the aching catharsis of ten long years — all of it had left me drained inside in a way I'd never felt before, both exhausted and refreshed. Before leaving we had gone through almost another hour of tearful goodbyes and repeated reassurances. My parents had both wanted to hug me, to tell me that they loved me, and to mutter half-finished questions about how they'd brought me up. They could not quite deal with the implications of that, not yet.

I'd briefly visited my bedroom — mine and Maisie's bedroom — but I'd felt nothing there, nothing except a strange and distant alienation from a previous version of myself. There was no personal discovery of secrets left behind by the Eye, or by a mage, or the sudden reveal of a magical gateway just out of sight. I'd even stuck my hands and three tentacles under my own bed, trying to find that dimly-remembered impossible passageway to Wonderland. But there was only carpet and dust. Brain-math probing revealed no secret skein of webs wrapped around my childhood bedroom or the space where Maisie's bed should have been standing. Nothing was there except painful memories and a few random spirits lurking in the corners. I resisted the urge to chase those spirits off; I even briefly petted one of them with a tentacle, though I suspect it thought it was about to be killed and eaten.

Both my parents had hugged me yet again, hard and desperate for my own safety. My father had wished me luck, clapped me on the back, told me something like 'good hunting', and then pretended he was not terrified. My mother had brandished her notebook again, now filled with the names of people I loved, with a detailed description of the things I had told her, with things she did not want to believe — and with Maisie's name, repeated over and over in big black scrawl, breaking out from inside the neatly ruled lines.

My mother had then extracted from me a twinned pair of bizarre promises: to give her a phone call at the last minute before we embarked upon Maisie's rescue, whenever it came, and to repeat the call when we returned with my long-lost sister, whatever protestations to unreality that my mother's mind might impose upon her. I had been unable to refuse, not after her detailed notes

and the way she was trying to cling to Maisie's name so hard.

Maisie, Maisie, Maisie! Don't forget! She's your other daughter!
Don't forget!

I had little faith that my mother would remember, but not because she wasn't trying. It was the most real thing my mother had ever done.

She'd asked if I really did want to stay the night. She'd told me to be safe. She'd said a lot of things that I couldn't process, or think about, or even recall properly — because the only thing which mattered now was the phone number and the name on that business card.

I was a cephalopod predator, coiled into my dark crack in the rocks, waiting for the unwary prey to pass below.

Taika Eskelinan

At Large In The World, Despite Your Best Efforts

*All enquiries please telephone:
010456-6754-7777-00-00-2*

We had dragged our eyes across those words over and over, trying to punch through them to the truth behind, desperate to snare or snag some clue in the name or the bizarre little motto. Internet searches had turned up nothing of note. 'Taika Eskelinan' was a real name — a Finnish name, though the surname was either a misspelling or a small modification of a more common one. 'Taika' literally meant 'magic'; a mage's jape? Perhaps. I seriously doubted that any of the internet search results referred to the impossibly tall, flame-haired, sword-carrying figure who my father had described. The little motto or self-advertisement turned up even less.

Whoever and whatever she was, Taika was a mystery.

But I was about to trap her in a corner of rock, pin her to the ocean floor, and suck the secrets out of her skull.

We'd left Reading by teleport, the same way we'd arrived. My course of action should have been obvious: I should have returned to the comfort and security of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, to ruminate on my discoveries with Raine and Evelyn, to seek advice and help, to warm my numbed brain and strained heart. That would have been the sensible thing — to do all that good, emotionally

healthy, decompression stuff. But I was not feeling sensible. I was not feeling like a good girl. I was not a good girl — I was seven very bad girls in one body, vibrating with the need to grasp the truth behind the last ten years of my life.

So I had teleported myself, Sevens, and Aym to the heart of Lehrey Park, in the middle of the night, in the dark.

What was I doing? Pretending to be an octopus. Mentally preparing myself to gut a mage.

“I am gathering myself,” we hissed, soft and threatening. “I need a few more seconds, to— to get into the right mindset. That’s all.”

Aym let out a horrible little snort-giggle. Her voice came from inside the twisting pillar of darkness next to Sevens. “Right mindset, she says. What, you gotta envision yourself as a little squid all ready to snap-snap, so you can bite down the moment the mage-bitch answers the call?”

“Yes!” I snapped in Aym’s face. “And stop mocking me!”

“Kyahaha!” Aym giggled again — but she retreated behind Sevens’ back, overwhelmed by my predatory intent.

“Kitten,” said Sevens. “Stop trying to do this alone. You have nothing to prove. There is no special beauty in solitary pursuit, no magical narrative solution when you are alone. Take that from me, my love. What need is this? Go home. Speak with your friends. With Evelyn, with Lozzie. Make a plan to confront this mage. You are losing your temper, you—”

We tried to shrug off Sevens’ hand again, but she wasn’t having any of that. She tightened her grip. One of us — Top-Left — coiled toward her wrist with the implicit threat of force.

“Kitten. Do not.”

“Tssh!” we hissed. “Sevens, I’m not trying to prove anything! I’m trying to protect everyone else—”

“From a mage,” she interrupted smoothly. “Kitten, none of your companions needs protecting from a mage. They have already fought—”

“From me!” I finished.

Sevens blinked, just once. “Kitten?”

I was panting harder, my flesh hot and itchy, my tentacles aching to transform their smooth pale surfaces into sticky dark toxin, studded with barbs and hooks and razor-sharp spikes.

“No holds barred,” I rasped. “Isn’t that how Raine phrases it? ‘Fire-free zone’? I don’t even know what that means but I’ve seen what it means in video games! Raine would understand. No editing, no censoring, no risk of collateral damage! I don’t care if this mage doesn’t want to tell me anything! I don’t care if she’s ten times more well-protected than Edward Lilburne — it won’t matter. I am going to flense her for her secrets. You know I can do that! You know I can’t be stopped, Sevens. And I’d rather not have to hold back.”

Aym peered around Sevens’ flank, a sheet of smoke and lace. “Told you. Octopus brain is gonna go splatter-house style. Doesn’t want her pretty girls to see her pulling broken bones out of dead meat.”

“Shut up, Aym!” we snapped. “Stop it!

“Eek!” Aym mock-squeaked, ducking behind Sevens’ rear.

“Kitten,” said Sevens. “This has shaken you. You are not acting like yourself.”

“No! No it hasn’t! Sevens, I’ve never been so clear-minded before. I know what I want and I know how to do it, and I’m going to do it. You can’t stop me! And this is a mage, it’s not like I’m proposing to break an innocent person. And I will accept a surrender, I will show mercy, I won’t pull her thoughts out unless I have to — but I probably will have to!”

Aym snorted. “Not learned anything about mages, has she?”

Sevens shot a sharp backward look at Aym. The coal-dust demon-spice went silent.

“Sevens,” we said. “Please take your hand off my shoulder. I adore your touch, but I’m not bringing you with me.”

Sevens did not let go. I touched a tentacle-tip to the back of her palm. Would I hurt her, for the sake of this? I almost certainly could not. I would not pay the price of hurting a loved one for this, and she knew it. She held her hand steady and ignored the touch of my tentacle. I started to blush with shame and doubt; even threatening to hurt her made me feel like filth. But I could not let this opportunity go. If I stepped back now—

Sevens said: “What if this phone number is like that of Mister Joseph King? I believe most mages could do far worse than a warehouse full of toilets. You do not know what you are stepping into.”

“Good!” we said. “Then I’ll have a direct line to her, to her head, her dreams, whoever she is!”

“Kitten—”

“Sevens, it doesn’t matter. I don’t care. Every second which goes by, this phone number might become invalid.”

Sevens sighed a tiny sigh, the most exasperated I had ever seen the Princess Mask. “Kitten. It’s been ten years. The number is likely not functional.”

I brandished the little piece of cream-coloured card in one tentacle, narrowly resisting the urge to shove it in Seven’s face. “Look at it! It’s perfect! Untouched! Ten years in my father’s wallet and it’s not even faded! That’s magic, Sevens. She’ll be at the end of this call. I know it.”

“Heather. You are being absurd.”

“I know!”

Our voice ringing out across the park, soaked up by the darkness and the trees. Our cheeks burned, but not with embarrassment. Sevens blinked. Aym peered around her hip, silent and curious.

Sevens was entirely correct. All seven of us Heathers knew that, we weren’t pretending otherwise. On one level we knew we were acting like total idiots. But that’s one of the major downsides of having seven of us — we could reinforce our own terrible ideas against any level of external argument. Well, anything short of Raine and Zheng tag-teaming us into submission. And no, not like that. Well, yes like that, but also not.

Why had I come to the park? Why had I not gone home? Why was I not seeking the support and counsel of my friends and allies?

Because the moment I unclenched this predatory urge, I was going to have an emotional breakdown.

Everything about my relationship with my parents had just changed. Everything about my own past had just changed. I had

cried with my mother and father, yes, and the catharsis was raw — but as soon as I relaxed and rode this high back into the depths, I was going to weep and wail and lie in a numb ball for hours, just to absorb how different my world was now. All that weight was hanging above my head, ready to crash into me, like delayed sleep-debt, or a panic attack, or worse.

If I went home and nursed the need to hunt, I risked listening to the other urge as well — the desire to extend this moment forever, to slip into a dark place and stop thinking, to never truly confront what just happened, or what was about to happen. Given half a chance we would luxuriate in stealth forever.

Either of those paths might lead to never confronting this mage.

So we'd come to the park, because eventually we would get cold and hungry, because we could not unclench here, could not relax. We were an octopus in the cracks; it was nothing more than hunting ritual, getting me ready to do what I must. But it was real, and urgent, and it would keep me moving until I was done, until I had the answers I needed.

"I know, Sevens," I echoed in a whisper through my teeth. "But either I hunt, right now, or I collapse."

"Your friends can—"

"Can pick me back up, yes. No matter how far I fall. I know. But what if I never again have this clarity of mind? Right now, I feel like I could take this mage apart atom by atom and it wouldn't matter. I can't— I can't leave this now. If I come down off this feeling, I might never do it. Catharsis will turn sour. I'll get afraid. Right now, right now nothing can stop me. After that, after my parents, nothing can stop me. Sevens, let me go."

"Kitten. I love you, so no."

"A-a compromise, then!" I stammered, grasping at straws. "Sevens, please! Go inform Lozzie, okay? If you think I can't do this, then call for backup. Call for Lozzie, tell her to follow where I'm about to go. Tell her to bring, I don't know, Raine and Zheng if she wants. But I won't need it! You know what brain-math makes me capable of, if I push myself far enough. And now I have my reactor, I have distributed neural structures, I'm ... I can't be stopped. I can't be. And I have to know. I have to know who did this, and how, and

why. And if I have to strip away my entire human body and fillet this mage like a pig, then I will.”

Tears were running down my cheeks. I scrubbed them away in anger, shaking all over, but not with fear. My teeth ached with a desire to grow sharp. My tail bone stung, as if it was trying to sprout a blade. My tentacles tingled and quivered with the desire to plate themselves in bio-steel, to sprout with claw and hook and barb.

“Mages can’t stop me,” I whispered. “Sevens, let me go. Call Lozzie if you must.”

Seven-Shades-of-Suspicious-Surrender sighed deeply, squeezed my shoulder one last time, and then let go.

“We should have brought more lemons,” she said.

“A-ah?”

She straightened up, clacked the tip of her parasol against the asphalt, and raised her chin. She said, “I will seek Lozzie for assistance. I ask that you not engage this ‘Taika’ before she arrives, even if you must make the call. I cannot make you promise. You are too determined.”

“T-thank you, Sevens,” I stammered, burning with sudden mortified embarrassment. I felt like a naughty child who’s parent had finally given up on discipline. I’d won freedom of action, but at the cost of great disappointment. “I love you too. I’m— I’m sorry, I—”

Sevens looked to her side, one hand out. “Aym. Quickly now.”

Aym let out a weird little snort-giggle, then slipped one lace-and-shadow hand into Sevens’ waiting fingers.

As soon as the two of them touched, Sevens took three steps backward and sank into the shadows. At first she was merely stepping away from me, but then she faded as if swallowed up by the darkness, absorbed by the night itself, or perhaps by Aym. She vanished on the third step, going black-on-black, leaving behind nothing but the park and the night and the rustling trees.

Exit, stage rear, very unimpressed with her Heathers.

And then I was truly alone, with only myself.

Though burning with shame and predatory need in equal volumes

we did not waste a second. We raised the phone at last, became an octopus among the rocks, unclouded by interruptions, and pressed the shiny green call button — like bait dangling in the waters.

The call took a very long time to connect. Click-click, click-click, click-buzz-click.

Whoever and whatever she was, Taika was very far away, but not entirely beyond human reach. The call did not drop into an empty silence, or shunt back to a dial-tone, or pipe up with a pre-recorded voice to inform me that the number was unreachable. It slithered and searched, an electrical signal sliding through junction boxes and telephone exchanges, down wires in the dark, crossing human borders and passing through human hands, until—

Ring! Ring-ring! Ring-ring!

An octopus in the dark. Waiting for my prey to pass by. Our tentacles sprouted with hooks and spikes, right there in the open, in the park, in Sharrowford, in reality. We no longer cared about being seen! Our bioreactor ramped up, ejecting chemical control rods from their safe positions. We panted, quick and hard, and realised our breath was steaming in the late summer air. We glowed in the dark, breath pluming in the hot night, skin caked with flash-sweat. We coiled tighter, ready to spring.

Ring-ring! Ring-ring! Ring-click—

Somebody or something answered the call.

A long pause.

Not silence, but a distant sigh, like the falling of a log inside a fireplace. I could hear the sounds of traffic, muffled and far away, like the crackle of burning wood.

A voice reached out from within the flames.

“Hello?” she said. “Who’s calling?”

I was frozen, tentacles coiled tight. I dared not breathe.

Another pause, then the voice said: “I see a UK phone number on my screen. A very expensive call you’re making there, whoever you are. Which means either this is a trick, or I know you very well. Which is it, hmm?”

Her voice was like smoke and cinder, husky and dark, amused and

tired, as if she'd just risen from a bed of coals. She spoke with an accent I'd never heard before; it was not a Finnish accent as her name had led me to expect, but a continental hybrid, part Scandinavian, part German, a little bit Eastern Europe, maybe Russia, maybe beyond. My ear was not skilled enough to pick her apart.

But my tentacles would be.

"Taika Eskelinan," we said. "Is that you?"

I felt her smile — like a lightning-struck tree splitting in the middle to show a crescent of molten sap. Across hundreds or thousands of miles, down an electronic signal transformed into sound by a little piece of plastic and metal, I felt a hot wind like the breath of a live caldera.

Taika said: "An English rose? Mm, good bait. Who's asking?"

"Me," we said.

And then we reached into the phone.

We could not use the same trick which we had pulled on Mister Joseph King; there was no lock here to keep me out, no key to imitate with a shape-shifting mechanism of pure mathematics — there was only her voice and the signal which carried it, electrons dancing on the wire, a technological connection between two points in human space, strung out across an unknown distance. A trail to follow, a line of light-poles in the Arctic night, a trickle of blood in the water.

We slammed all eight hands into the black swamp at the base of our soul, ripping the whirling machinery of the Eye's lessons from the toxic darkness. Hyperdimensional mathematics, naked and raw, burning the air the moment it was exposed. We rammed our limbs into the controls, grasped a lever here and a rod there, searing the skin from our tentacles and fusing the flesh on our fingers. We had to work fast, improvise at speed, build the equation on the fly, ride the wave in the split second before 'Taika' cut the call.

Define the connection between here and there, render it down from electrical information and signal and noise, racing through lines in the air and cables under the sea. Ignore the physical, ignore the copper and fibre-optics, strip away that layer of reality, the additional unneeded complexities in an equation of direction and

location.

Link the parts, fingers burning down to the bone. Stitch one line to another, in an unbroken chain from my mobile phone in Sharrowford, to another phone, in an unknown place I could not yet picture, where the voice of a mage hissed like the crackle of flames.

We completed the equation. My body was beginning to rebel, despite our distributed nervous system; one moment longer and I would be gripped by a wave of nausea and headache pain. But we could not risk disorientation or damage. We had to arrive fresh, ready to pounce from our crack in the rocks.

The equation was a rough and dirty thing, pieced together from human nonsense and inelegant physics, the racing of voices down telephone lines, the sum of numbers in exchange systems, and the glow of a phone screen so very far away.

We straightened out the equation with a flick of one wrist, like snapping a whip.

The tip of the spear held straight and true, pointing toward Taika.

We grinned, wide and wild, with a rush we'd never felt before.

Then we pounced.

Out.

= =

My eyes caught fire.

Light burned; an explosion filled the world, scorched the air, and sucked the breath from my lungs. Light, light light, the brightest we'd ever seen in our life, blotting out all thought and leaving us paralysed, gaping, panting, squinting and—

I'd been a very silly set of seven Heathers; I had spent the last thirty minutes sitting in a park in the middle of the night, psyching myself up by doing image training of myself as a clever little hunting octopus, buried in the rocks, waiting for my unwary prey. This was not the burning all-consuming light of the cosmos, or the roaring flame of an elemental mage, or a surprise nuclear detonation.

It was just dawn. Silly squid.

Dawn, breaking over a city, over the glittering surfaces of towering

skyscrapers, over straight-line ribbons of clean grey asphalt, over brightly coloured electronic billboards and little buses so far below, over the tiny dots of pedestrians all the way down on the ground, like ants on the pavement.

Dawn, bursting in through a bank of very fancy windows, lining one wall of the most expensive flat I had ever seen.

Shiny wooden floorboards squeaked under my trainers as I touched down from the teleport and stumbled sideways. I caught myself on a granite countertop, littered with empty alcohol bottles and decorated with the most gaudy, stupid-looking abstract metal sculptures, all meaningless crescents and swoops and curves, signifying nothing.

I panted, blinking, trying to clear my eyes, straightening up and raising my tentacles, ready to hiss at the top of my lungs.

The walls were all soft cream and the ceiling was twenty feet up; the furnishings were dark wood, plush white leather, and shiny chrome. The kitchen space was larger than my bedroom, the attached 'sitting room' larger than some houses. The carpets were thick enough in which to swim. Four sofas were gathered around a television the size of a small car; two of the sofas were littered with discarded clothes — very small discarded clothes, as if something interesting had happened there on the previous night. A low table was covered in yet more alcohol bottles, and also what looked like the remains of rolling and smoking several 'special' cigarettes. Two short hallways led off from the main room, their own walls plastered with framed pictures of abstract art.

The air smelled of sweat and sex, expensive alcohol and fried food, strange smoke and thick incense.

One wall was all windows, gazing out across a city that looked like something from a movie, seen from the highest possible point.

A penthouse. I'd arrived in a penthouse.

The hiss died in my throat; I felt more out of place than I did when Outside. I had no context for this; the apartment felt like an alien environment. We were on Earth, yes, but this was not my world.

On the near side of the living space stood a huge dining table in dark wood, perhaps made of oak, with matching chairs which looked like they belonged in an early 20th century detective novel.

One of the chairs had been knocked over in the specific sort of way that implied somebody had been having too much fun while sitting down. One end of the table was littered with the remains of several recent meals. The other end was host to what I could only conceptualise as a spy set-up: a massive black briefcase stood propped open, the inside all full of electrical parts and little screens and radio dials. A pair of huge black knives lay either side of the briefcase, double-edged but without any handles, like swords lacking their grips. The sunlight refused to touch the metal of those blades; their surfaces remained dark and unreadable.

And standing by the table, holding a mobile phone to her ear, was
—

“Taika!” I croaked. “You!”

She lowered the phone and turned to stare at me.

Taika Eskelinan looked exactly as my father had described. She was six and a half feet tall, with the build of a casual athlete or amateur long-distance runner. Bright red hair fell like a waterfall all the way to the backs of her knees — fire-red, frozen in a moment of flame-tongue flicker. That was an impossible colour to achieve without hours in a salon — but I saw no hint of roots at her scalp, no hair out of place amid the sleep-tousled mess. Her face was pale and angular, with high cheekbones and wide lips, all framing a pair of impossible eyes; Taika possessed the eyes of a goat, slightly too large for a human face, with horizontal pupils on a background of fire-bright orange. Her age was impossible to place, anywhere between early twenties and late forties.

Though unmoving in that moment when our eyes met, she seemed to writhe against the background of reality, like a magic eye puzzle, as if boundless energy was held in check beneath her skin.

She was also half-naked, wearing nothing but a pair of tiny white shorts and a matching tank-top, showing off tight abdominal muscles, strong legs, and well-toned arms.

And she wasn’t afraid.

She was barely even surprised.

She raised her equally red eyebrows at me, more a question than any species of shock. Her strange, goatish eyes quickly took in my six tentacles, barbed and spiked and ready for combat. Her wide

lips curled upward in vague amusement. She lowered the phone and killed the call, placing the handset back on the table. I lowered mine, too, fumbling it into my pocket.

“Hey there, calamari delivery,” Taika said with a voice like a burning brand in boiling oil. “English seafood is kinda shit, you know?”

I took one step toward her, my trainers sinking into the plush white carpet. “You’re going to answer my questions!” I rasped. “You’re going to—”

“Hold,” she said. She raised a hand, fingers spread in a lazy ward. “Please?”

“Don’t try some trick—”

Taika thumbed over her shoulder, toward the little corridor which led out of the living area. “I’ve got three ...” She paused, eyes roving over the discarded clothes on the sofas and the fallen chair next to the table. “Four? No, five — five mundane humans back there, all still very much asleep in my bed. You wanna burn this apartment down? Fine, it’s not even really mine. You wanna rumble?” She grinned wider, those goat-like eyes sparkling with mania. “Even better. But I don’t like getting the normies involved. Bad for my digestion. Mind if I let them leave first?”

We stammered to a halt and realised what we looked like. We whipped our tentacles back, making a cage rather than a spear. “T-this doesn’t have to be violent,” we stammered. “I-I’m sorry, I mean, it doesn’t have to go that way. If you just—”

“Yeeeeeeah,” Taika drawled. Her voice was like dripping lava, hissing into cold seawater. “I’ve heard that one plenty of times.” She looked me up and down. “I know what happens next, though I’ve never tasted roast squid before. Let my little normies go, or you’re gonna get the angry me, not the playful me. Come on, calamari. You got a conscience?”

We gritted our teeth, hard enough to hurt, all seven of us debating inside. Was this a trick? She was being so reasonable. So humane. But she was a mage, she might be trying anything. Then again, the condition of her ridiculous flat did suggest that she might have a companion or two back there. What if she wasn’t lying? What if I had to Slip this entire apartment Outside and left some random

human to die?

I couldn't do that. We all couldn't do that.

"No tricks?" I said, my voice just as inhuman as Taika's.

She nodded, nice and slow. "No tricks, fish and chips. Let me call them?"

"What about my tentacles?" I snapped. "If they're not In The Know —"

"Ha," Taika chuckled softly. "That's a phrase I've not heard in a long time. Just stand behind the kitchen counter and look normal. My little friends are probably still riding the tail end of half a dozen different drugs. Plus, they're used to seeing me and they've explained that away. You're nothing to them. Act like it for a second."

Despite my better judgement, I did as Taika asked; I stepped behind her kitchen counter, which suddenly seemed like an absurd and inadequate barrier, despite the gaudy counter-tops and shiny taps and expensive-looking mono-task devices. She had all sorts of nonsense back there: a bread maker, a portable grill, some kind of blender for smoothies. Was that an air fryer? It seemed large enough to count as a regular oven. How silly.

I lowered all my tentacles, trying to tuck them half behind my back. Taika nodded a sarcastic thank you, then stepped over to the little hallway.

She knocked on the wall and called out: "Rise and shine, ladies! *Qǐchuáng shíjiān dào!* I need you gone! Come on!"

After a minute or two of this — of Taika banging on the wall and calling out in a mixture of English and what I assumed was broken Chinese — I heard several grumpy groans from deeper in the apartment. Somebody called back with a complaint. I did not need to comprehend the language to understand the meaning: 'Come back to bed.'

Taika did not relent. "Ladies, mama has to deal with a gangster," she called out, making it sound like a joke. "If you stay here, you might die! Come on, don't make this hard on me."

I began to feel absolutely ridiculous. What was I doing? This was no better than what we'd done with Joseph King — no, it was worse!

I'd appeared in this woman's apartment and started threatening her, with no explanation and no introduction; unless she was faking all this behaviour it didn't seem that she even knew who or what I was.

A gaggle of half-dressed, groggy, glamorous young Asian people emerged from what must have been Taika's bedroom — and it wasn't all ladies, it was four ladies and one man, a young man of the kind Raine might describe as a 'twink', or maybe a 'twunk'. I'm not quite clear on the distinction.

None of Taika's 'friends' had the look of sex workers who wanted to go home after a busy night with a wealthy, foreign client. They looked like they very much wanted to go back to bed, with Taika.

My embarrassment climbed to as yet unseen heights as Taika saw them all off; I started blushing, mortified at myself and the situation into which I had unwisely inserted my ugly little nose. The four women voiced playful complaints in Chinese as they passed Taika; she paused to kiss two of them, and ruffled the hair of a third, who let out a loud meow and bit Taika on the collarbone. Taika seemed quite surprised to see the young man there, as if she'd forgotten a portion of the previous night, but then she slapped his backside as he passed her, which made all the women laugh.

None of them spared me more than a disinterested but wary glance as they grabbed clothes off the sofa and sauntered for the other corridor, where I assumed the front door would be found — all except for the girl who had let out a meow. She paused and turned and cocked her head sideways at my tentacles, frowning delicately, long black hair shining in the dawn sunlight.

Taika said: "Huiying, ignore her. She's organised crime."

'Huiying' snorted, tossed her head, and followed the rest of Taika's friends, vanishing into the corridor.

Taika stepped back into the living area and peered after her departing companions, until they were gone. She shouted something in Chinese — "shut the door!" I assumed. We waited until we heard a slightly petulant reply, and the sound of a heavy door clicking shut.

Taika turned back to me. The sultry smile she'd used for her 'friends' vanished, replaced with a grin like a pot of boiling pitch.

No longer did I feel like a clever little cephalopod who had hunted

her prey into a dark twist of rock; we felt like a pathetic wet octopus who had gotten herself washed up on the beach by accident. I stepped out from behind the kitchen counters and raised my tentacles again, though more for show than actual aggression. Taika and I were perhaps twenty feet apart, with nothing between us.

“Alright, calamari,” she purred. “Who you working for?”

“Working for?” We frowned. “Nobody, for us, for— look, Taika, I’m sorry for this, I just want to ask you some questions, I just—”

Taika laughed. She spread her hands; empty-handed, not a single weapon on her, nor any place to hide even a knife. She was too far to dive for the swords on the table. Then again, she was a mage.

She said: “You pull a translocation trick like that, down nothing more than a phone line, and you want me to believe that you just wanna ask some questions? I haven’t seen anybody do shit like that in decades, not since the Homunculus War. No, you’re here for something real. Spit it out, calamari. It’s just you and me now, my closest real allies are a plane flight away. This apartment is fire safe. Shutters will come down the moment we start shit. You want me, come get me. We’ll have twenty minutes before the fire engines get here to flush us out. And hey, you wanna take this rumble into the streets, I’m game. The PAP might not be, though. Hope you’re ready to murder some cops to get to me.”

I held out a hand — a human hand, fingers shaking. “Wait, wait. I genuinely do just want to ask you some questions. And I— I don’t understand, where is this?” I gestured at the bank of windows. “Where am I?”

Taika raised one red eyebrow. “You teleported and you don’t know where you are? Did you seriously come all the way from England?”

“I followed your voice,” we said, blushing even more. “I think I may have ... acted ... rashly. Where are we?”

Taika’s expression shifted, like she was trying to decide whether to believe me. She jerked a thumb at the windows. “Chengdu.”

We blinked several times. “Cheng-what? Pardon?”

Taika rolled her goatish eyes. “Sichuan.” She paused when she saw I still didn’t get it. “China. People’s Republic, not Republic of.” She

paused again and let out a big sigh, a sound like the roiling of a magma flow. "China's the big country on the Asian mainland."

"I know where China is!" I spluttered. "I'd just never heard of this city! And I ... I didn't know I was going so ... so far ... um ..."

We trailed off and stared out of the massive bank of windows. We were so very far out of our depth

"You'd be surprised." Taika chuckled. "Met an English girl once who didn't know the difference between Japan and China." She narrowed her eyes. "You really don't know where you are, do you, calamari?"

"Stop calling me that," I hissed. I spread all my tentacles wide, trying for a threat display again. "I'm not working for anybody, I'm here on my own behalf. My name is Heather Morell and I want to ask you some questions, about something from ten years ago."

Taika frowned in thought; those strange slit-pupil eyes narrowed.

"Heather ... Morell," she echoed, rolling my name in her mouth an iron sphere. "Morell. Morell. Holy shit. I remember you now, kid. You're the English girl who got spirited away. The Reading twins—"

"Twins, yes!" I snapped, my chest suddenly roaring with strange anger that I had not expected. "We were taken by the Eye! Me and my sister, and you knew, and you could have told me it was all real! You were a responsible adult, right?! And you knew! You spoke to my parents, you— you had a photograph of my sister and me! You knew!"

Taika did not respond, like she couldn't hear my words. She was looking me up and down anew, dragging her gaze along the length of my tentacles.

"You grew up," she whispered. "Well, damn. Didn't expect you to last a year, let alone ten."

I cleared my throat, still angry but also embarrassed now. "I'm ... look, I'm sorry for the dramatic entrance. I didn't know if I'd have to fight you, or something like that. I've had bad experiences with mages, I apologise. I just ... I just want answers. And the photograph. If you still have it. I know it's been ten years, but ... I need it. And I need to know what happened."

Taika's eyes travelled back upward and met my gaze; I did not like

what I saw there. Her horizontal pupils were dilating, bulging like fire-flushed rock.

“Good thing I’m not a mage, then,” she said. She used one hand to sweep her flame-bright hair back over her scalp, falling in a wave. “But I’m sure if we work together we can give you a bad experience anyway.”

We froze. “What? No, no, Taika, I just want answers. What does it cost you to tell me—”

Taika burst into a grin like the opening of a volcanic rift; something was glowing in the back of her throat. She laughed. She bobbed on the balls of her feet. She rolled her shoulders.

“Cost?” she echoed. “Nothing. But it’s been decades since I saw something on your level, calamari. And you’re flying blind. You’re reckless. Somebody’s gotta put you on your arse before you start killing people. Or worse.”

I took a step back, tentacles raised in a protective cage. “I’ve killed mages, yes. It’s not hard, but I don’t want to! Please, just give me the answers I want, or I’ll—”

Taika clicked her fingers.

The pair of handle-less black blades on the table rose from their resting places and shot toward her, like iron slugs pulled by magnetic force. They settled into an orbit around her, tips pointing outward. Another ten identical blades shot out of the corridor, homing from another location deeper in the apartment; those additional ten joined the first two, circling around Taika’s body in a segmented cage of iron.

Each blade gained a shadow, despite the burning light of the dawn still pouring in through the windows. Each weird little sword was wrapped in a shade, a writhing black flame, half-visible against the background of reality.

“What the— what— I—”

“You’ve fought tadpoles and frog-spawn,” Taika said in a voice like a forge-fire. “Mages? Ha. I’m a witch, squid-girl.”

“So?!” I blurted out, shrugging with all my arms, absolutely done with this. “Is that supposed to mean anything to me!?”

Taika cleared her throat and went to carry on, but I rolled right over her.

“I’ve had a year of these absurd supernatural definitions, and I don’t care anymore!” I yelled. “I don’t care what you are or what you call yourself. My head is full of hyperdimensional mathematics. Do you even know what that means, hmm?! Do you?”

“Well,” Taika said. “Yeah, but—”

“And I’m quite certain that a ‘witch’ can be thrown Outside as easily as a mage! I don’t want to fight you, Taika, whatever you are, but I need answers!”

“And you need a lesson,” she purred.

One of the black knives suddenly whirled outward from the cage around Taika, striking toward me with an almost lazy motion, spinning through the air, showy and flashy, intended to intimidate more than wound.

I had not yet completely taken leave of all of my senses. Seven squid girls we might have been, but I was still very much Heather Morell, and Heather Morell did not know the first thing to do in a sword fight — let alone a sword fight against a ball of spinning blades held aloft by the ineffable magic of an overconfident and smug woman who appeared to be a raging bonfire in human form. I was not about to meet this mage — or ‘witch’ — in a fair fight.

So I hissed from the depths of my throat, slapped at the blade with a tentacle, and spun up the familiar old equation. If Taika would not yield and talk like a sensible person, then I would show her exactly what I could do. She had her warning shot, and so did I.

My tentacle touched the black surface of the lightless blade. The equation slammed into place.

Out.

A blue flash blurred the air where we made contact, like metal on metal. The blade span away, deflected by my tentacle and the hardened spikes of bone and claw.

But the sword was still there.

The blade was still present, in the apartment, in reality. The equation had worked, but the object had not gone Outside.

My eyes went wide. Something roiled in my stomach, something sick and wrong, like I'd taken a tumble at an unexpected angle, like my inner ear was confused.

Twenty feet away, Taika blew out a long breath, like she'd just done a somersault and pulled off a difficult trick landing. The deflected blade sped back to its place in her orbiting cage.

I boggled at her. "Wha— how—"

"I was trying to tell you, calamari," she purred. "You're not the only one four knuckles deep in reality's cunt."

eyes yet to open – 22.5

Taika Eskelinan — a goat-eyed ‘witch’ with hair like a pyroclastic flow and the voice of a volcanic caldera in her throat, with the molten core of an industrial forge roiling beneath her pale skin, with a dozen black iron swords levitating in a protective cage around her body — had just proven that she could counter-equation my hyperdimensional mathematics, that I was not the sole abyssal dredgling to walk the confines of reality, and that there were more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in my philosophy.

We did not, however, have time to sit down and digest those implications over a cup of tea and a biscuit (both of which I could very much have done with right then), let alone discuss them — not only because I was halfway around the world, thousands of miles from Sharrowford, England, and everything I had ever known, minutes after committing a home invasion upon the most expensive dwelling I had ever set foot within, but also because Taika was now trying to turn me into a char-grilled calamari kebab.

I spluttered an incoherent noise, something highly inelegant, probably ‘buh?’ or ‘weh?’ But Taika didn’t care. Two of those black iron blades separated from her protective sphere and whirled toward me, their enveloping black flames flickering like ghostly fire.

“Don’t!” I squeaked. “I— *hic!* —don’t want to fight! I—!”

“Too late, calamari,” Taika purred through an ember-glow smirk. “Fight or flight time. Decide.”

Her strikes were lazy and showy, relaxed and slow, just like the blow she’d used to prove her initial point; Taika was more interested in showing off and intimidating me than in actually trying to kill. But the blades were still heavy and sharp, more than capable of putting a mortal wound through my chest or gut; we might regrow our tentacles at will, but we did not wish to experience the pain and horror of such a separation.

My back was almost to the kitchen wall, with nowhere to run — but Taika’s penthouse apartment was a wide open space, with very high

ceilings, lots of empty air, and plenty of room to move.

Fight or flight?

How about both?

Instinct guided us. We rocked backward, caught the surface of the wall with all our tentacles, and then launched ourselves sideways like a grasshopper. Barbs and hooks gouged fragments of plaster and paint out of the wall, flinging them behind us in a shower of grit; we didn't feel too bad about the damage, not in this temple to minimalist modernity, this show-piece home of chrome and cream.

We rolled through the air, ungainly and awkward, and landed ten feet away in a skittering heap of tentacles, upside down and facing backwards. We tore a massive gash in the plush sea of the carpet as we landed, a teeth-grating riiiiip sound from our tentacle-hooks biting deep. I got my feet back underneath me, wobbly and unsteady with a bucket-load of adrenaline in my veins, panting with panic and surprise.

Taika's black swords cut the empty air where I had stood.

"Tssss-hey!" I screech-hissed at her. "Stop!"

Taika just smirked; fire glowed behind her teeth like magma through a row of stalagmites. Her swords whipped back into position around her body. Dawn sunlight poured through the long bank of windows along one wall, haloing her from behind, blotting out the city beyond the glass.

"Nice trick, calamari," she purred, looking me up and down again with new interest in her goat-like eyes. "Thought those tentacles might just be for show, but you've got real muscle packed into those tubes. You're for real, huh?"

Two swords detached from her sphere again, rising into the air, preparing for a plunging attack.

"Wait!" we yelped, raising both of our human hands. "I don't want to fight! I don't actually want to fight you! I just wanted to talk, to ask—"

"Hahaha!" Taika laughed, big and open-mouthed and full of joy. The swords shot out of the air like falling spears.

We dodged again, tentacles bunched like a giant spring, pushing off

the carpet with a squeaking yelp. We misjudged the angle and smashed into the side of a sofa, tentacles flailing everywhere. But we managed to catch ourselves, clinging onto the sofa like an octopus wrapped around a rock in a storm, digging into the plush pale leather and ruining all the cushions.

The swords went thunk-thunk into the carpet behind us.

Taika laughed again. “Then leave!”

Those two swords had not only penetrated the carpet — their tips were buried six inches deep in the concrete floor beneath. Taika had gone from showy intimidation to a killing blow; she wasn’t just not pulling her punches, she was willing to put a sword right through me.

My heart was going a thousand miles an hour. Flash sweat had broken out on every inch of my skin. We were panting, fast and hard and rough.

Worse — we were starting to change, provoked by danger and threat and real violence.

Abyssal instinct flowered upon my skin, blossoming in blooms of chromatophores, plating my tentacle-tips with extruded bio-steel, strengthening my muscles and tendons with substances and enzymes which had no place in a human body, at least not on this side of reality. My bio-reactor shuddered and seized down in my abdomen, squeezing out the control rods, ramping up energy production. We were not supposed to change so deeply, not if we weren’t Outside; such transformation placed a huge strain upon my body and soul.

“Hey,” Taika said. She clicked her fingers three times, a noise like the snapping of fire-hardened branches. “Hey, calamari. Kid? Hey? Heather.”

We looked up from the swords buried in the floor. They began to withdraw, lifting into the air again.

“What?!” we hissed at Taika. “What?!”

She nodded at my body. “Nice light show.”

“Tsssss!” we hissed at her — our throat was rapidly leaving behind any semblance of human shape, our teeth sharpening and lengthening, our tongue getting longer too. This was very bad.

“You can leave, right?” Taika asked. “You can teleport out, the same way you teleported here? You’re not stuck on a cool-down timer, or need to pound back five thousand calories before you can do that trick again? You don’t need to sketch out a magic circle on the floor? It’s just something you can do with a thought, right?”

The two swords circled back toward Taika, going the long way around the apartment’s main room, keeping well clear of me. They rejoined her orbiting sphere of protective iron. She stood half-naked inside that orb of blades, barefoot, utterly relaxed, dressed in tiny white shorts and a tank top like she was ready to go back to bed.

I tightened my grip on the sofa, tentacles hard and tense.

Taika chuckled. “Damn, you really are like a cuttlefish.”

“... w-what?” I could barely think through the changes to my body. I needed to go Outside, or move, or withdraw. I could not stay like I was, not for long.

“Just staring like that,” she said. “You gonna answer my question or not? Can you leave, at will?”

“What? I— yes,” I said. “I mean, yes, of course. It’s just ... it’s hyperdimensional mathematics.”

Taika raised her eyebrows. “Maths, huh? Creation as numbers? Not my style, but fair enough, if it works for you.” She grinned wide, showing all her teeth beneath those fire-glow eyes. “Then leave. Go on. Run. I won’t follow. Shit, I don’t think I can follow. You don’t wanna fight? Then now’s your chance. Any time is your chance, right?”

“I need answers!” I screeched at her. “And the photograph of Maisie! And I said I’m sorry! I apologise for bursting into your apartment, I just—”

Six swords detached from Taika’s sphere, a full half of her blades. They spread out either side of her and pointed their tips toward me. She grinned like a maniac arsonist amid her own flames. The orange of her eyes was brighter than the heart of a bonfire. I pursed my lips in frustration and gave her quite a look.

“But you won’t fight for those answers?” she purred.

“I’ve killed mages before! I’ll fight, I’ll fight for a lot of things, but there’s no need, there’s— this is absurd, it’s—”

Taika snorted. "That's not the same, and you know it, calamari. Killing's easy. Anybody can do it. Fighting? Fighting is a skill."

I huffed. "And I'm no good at fighting!"

Taika looked me up and down again. "You don't look it."

"This is just— just me! I'm sorry, you're frightening me and I'm reacting! And I can't stay like this for long, not without going Out —"

Six swords slammed through the air without warning, missiles aimed at my heart and brain; the black flames around the blades sizzled and hissed, whipping back like arrow feathers in flight.

We lost our collective temper.

We ripped Taika's stupid leather sofa off the floor with all six tentacles and hurled it toward her. The cushions caught two of the blades, edges slicing into the fabric, stuffing exploding like pale entrails. Four blades got through, jerking to avoid the sofa. We sprang from the floor again, going left, rolling in a ball of tentacles like an octopus on the ocean floor, scrabbling for purchase on the thick carpet, wishing we could dig into it like loose sand. Two swords slammed into the ground at our heels. One hit the wall just after we scrambled past. We heard the almighty crash of the sofa smashing into the floor on the opposite side of the room, scattering other furniture. We hoped Taika had caught the falling sofa with her stupid face.

My shoulders slammed into the skirting board. One sword was still in the air, still aimed at my ribcage, about to slice into my flesh and end the fight right there.

I whipped out with a tentacle, barbed and hooked and armoured, coiled for weight and width, and slapped the sword away like a persistent hornet.

And I tried again.

Out!

Again came that flash of blue, like metal hitting metal, as Taika's own magic — or maths? — cancelled out the familiar old brain-math equation. That time I witnessed more details: a layered halo of concentric circles, like the glittering rings around a planet in deep space, like the glare of the sun on bronze, spreading outward from

the point of impact. My own equation was negated, folded back into zero by an equal and opposite counterpart. Nothing went Outside except a few unlucky molecules of nitrogen and oxygen.

I scrambled to my feet, tentacles spread in a protective cage of my own, panting hard, body racing with adrenaline — and with less nameable, more esoteric substances. I was streaming with sweat now, panting harder than I should have been, bio-reactor pounding away in my gut. My vision was blurring, senses aching, head growing fuzzy; I was not meant to be like this in reality, not for long, not without consequences.

Taika's swords yanked free from the floor and walls and raced back to their mistress.

The sofa I'd thrown now lay upside down against the far wall. I'd knocked over a bunch of chairs and shoved the big table off-centre.

Taika herself was untouched, but she had been forced to step or dive out of the way. She was breathing a little harder, presumably with the effort of countering my brain-math a second time. Her own skin was running freely with sweat on her exposed shoulders and belly. She whipped her flame-coloured hair back out of her face and smirked at me.

"Not good at fighting, huh?" she purred. "Telling lies?"

"No!" I screeched back. "I'm not! I'm panicking, thank you! This is what panic looks like! And I don't want to kill you or—"

"Are you good at thinking?" Taika's voice filled the air like the crackle of a bonfire too close to my face.

I blinked with four sets of eyelids; that was a very bad sign. "W-what?"

"Are you good at thinking?" she repeated. "You've got the knack, calamari. You've got true magic, the witch's touch, the head-jack to reality's back doors. Whatever you wanna call it, however you came by it. You just showed it off, twice, when you tried to throw one of my girls here out into the Beyond." She gestured at her rotating knives. "That's how you did the teleport in the first place, isn't it?"

"That's hyperdimensional mathematics, yes," I said. "Isn't that what you did to stop me?"

Taika laughed softly. "Maths? Nah. I'm terrible at maths. Can't even

remember my times tables. You know what I am good at?" She wiggled her fingers. "Sticking my hands in a fire."

I huffed and shrugged. "Fine. So? What does that mean?"

"Whatever you call it, I don't care." Taika said. "You've got the keys to the universe, calamari. Just like me." She nodded at me, up and down. "And I like your look, I like what you're doing with yourself." She eyed my abdomen. "You're not cooking your insides with radiation, are you?"

We blinked at her in shock. Could she see the reactor? "I'm ... I'm immune," we said. "Sort of."

"Mm, very cool. Very cool." Taika nodded. "But you've got tunnel vision. Doesn't take a mage to guess where you're going, if you're looking for info on your sister, on your own past. I remember your case well enough now, and I can guess where you're going, and it's fucking insanity to even try. You can't fight? You're gonna have to do a lot more than fight. A scrap like this is easy mode. You're gonna try to out-think a god, aren't you?"

"I ... yes," I said. "I'm going to Wonderland, to where the Eye took me and Maisie. I'm going to bring her back."

Taika sighed. Her twelve swords orbited around her body, slow and stately. A melancholy ghost passed across her face for just a moment.

She said: "You don't need info, calamari. You need to learn to walk."

I huffed, panting, rapidly losing my temper, feeling the heat glowing inside my core; if I didn't stop this or go Outside soon, I was going to pass out or collapse, or worse.

I said, "If you're proposing to help me, then stop trying to dictate to me. I do need information, that's the whole point, then we can—"

"Things like you and me, calamari, we either learn fast or we die young."

Taika's brief melancholy flash-boiled from her face like steam beneath a blowtorch. She smirked. Three swords detached from her sphere and lined up in front of her, like a trident, pointed at me.

I squeaked, "Don't-!"

The makeshift trident separated outward with a flicker of motion, the blades going wide, flanking me from both sides. The swords shuddered, jerked, and slammed forward.

Taika wanted a fight, with hyperdimensional mathematics, with no holds barred? She wanted to push me to the edge, to see how far I could go?

Fine.

Out!

We bounced off the surface of the abyss like an anvil thrown at a lake of mercury — then burst back into reality ten paces ahead of where we'd been standing. The three swords were already behind us; they slammed into the wall of Taika's apartment, slicing through the plaster and brick. Our body quivered inside with brain-math aftershock, but we shunted the pain and the nausea down into our tentacles, and ripped all the control rods free from our bioreactor.

No limits, no safety, nothing off the table.

Taika roared. "More teleport tricks?! Come on, cala—"

Out!

We flickered across the surface of the abyss once again; this time we dipped pieces of ourselves into the oceanic dark, dumping heat into the void, like trailing rearward fins in super-cooled water.

I exploded back into reality a few paces to the left, clouds of steam roiling off my skin. We grabbed another one of Taika's sofas with all six tentacles, pulled it from the floor, and hurled it at her smirking face.

Out!

Another dip, another dump of heat into the abyss, another bounce-bounce-bounce like a flat stone skimming across the water's surface.

We landed back on the right side of Taika's apartment, before the sofa had even finished falling. Taika was diving out of the way, finally forced to move properly, her fire-bright hair whipping out behind her like a waterfall of magma. Her swords were still pointed at where I'd been standing, not where I was. Now we were right next to her ridiculous table. We picked up a wooden chair which probably cost more than the entire contents of Number 12 Barnsrow

Drive.

“Throwing shit is so 90s, girl!” Taika laughed as she found her footing once more, skidding across her carpet on bare feet. “Come on, try something—”

Out — and we took the chair with us.

We flickered twenty paces across the apartment, a skimming bounce across the surface of the abyss, soaking our super-heated cooling fins in the endless dark.

We dropped the chair halfway, shoving it back into reality a half-second before we popped back out into Taika’s apartment.

We appeared right next to the massive bank of windows.

Taika almost fell for the chair trick; if she was less athletic and muscular, she may have gone flying, tripped up by the object I’d dropped into her path. But she turned the stumble into a kick, slamming the chair aside with one foot, laughing at the top of her lungs.

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” Taika cheered. “Look at you, calamari!”

At first I thought she was congratulating me on my silly little trick, my octopus-level mischief of trying to trip her with a chair. But then I realised she wasn’t looking at the chair, she didn’t care about that — she was looking at me, at my body. At us, Homo Abyssus.

I did not look very human right then, and I felt wonderful about it: tentacles plated and spiked and hooked, skin blooming with warning colouration in strobing bands of yellow and orange and red, teeth made sharp and gleaming, eyeballs covered with protective membranes, leg tendons made strong and stretchy, with a voice like something dredged out of an ocean trench. The end of my spine had even sprouted into a bladed tail. I was streaming with sweat, steaming gently in dawn’s light, my bioreactor making my abdomen pulse and glow.

None of this was possible to maintain for long in reality; I was only achieving this by dumping heat into the abyss with every Slip. My head and tentacles ached with the backwash of brain-math pain and a constant quiver of nausea. My legs were shaking and wobbly and weak. I could not keep Slipping forever — but I would probably

vomit the moment I stopped.

Taika was changing too. She looked less and less human with every passing moment, though her transformation was more subtle, less squirmy and meaty. The colour of her hair deepened like melted rock beneath the earth's mantle; heat haze rose from her skin, the pale flesh of her legs and arms threatening to bubble like super-heated mud; a terrible light glowed behind her teeth and tongue, like she was a dragon ready to breathe flame.

I paused for a moment, suddenly worried. "Are ... Taika ... are you going to trigger a fire suppression system in here? If you, uh, keep going?"

"It's alright, calamari. It's not that kind of fire," Taika purred. Her breath smelled like smoke and cinder. "Not unless I want it to be. And I don't think I need real flames to kick you up the backside."

Taika's swords twitched, as if mocking me.

I stuck all my tentacles to the window, ruining the glass with scratches and gouges, and pulled myself back like a spring.

Taika's face ripped open with a grin from ear to ear. "Losing your temper?" she purred in a voice like a welding torch.

Her swords whirled open to cover her front, step-spaced to fill the air for meters in either direction, daring me to pincushion myself on their black iron points.

"Yes!" I hissed — and leapt.

Out!

I ignored the blades, the spaces between the blades, the narrow gap behind the blades, everything to do with the blades — and just Slipped back in right on top of Taika, my face inches from the glowing firelight coals of her goat-like eyeballs.

She'd figured out what I was trying to do a second before I grabbed her with half my tentacles. She smirked, teeth like red-hot knives.

I plunged all eight of my metaphorical hands into the toxic black ooze deep down in the sump of my soul. The Eye's machinery, the levers and flywheels and ratchets of hyperdimensional mathematics, clicked and whirred and spun beneath my touch, burning my fingers and paralysing my tentacles. But I held on and ran the

equation over and over, repeating it like a musical refrain — or like a series of punches to Taika's head.

Out! Out! Out! Out!

Each time a flash of blue halo-light flickered around Taika and I, bound together in this combative embrace, with her frozen flame-tongued smirk right in my face. I could feel her own mind working to push back against mine, her own 'hyperdimensional mathematics' writhing and flexing like a free-flowing flame, eating at the edges of my own equations, negating each attempt to send us Outside, together.

"Nuuurgh!" I hissed with frustration; time resumed with a jerk. I considered just biting into her nose at close range, but that would be the height of rude behaviour.

Taika panted as well, fast and hard and rough, just like me, sweat pouring down her forehead, soaking the front of her thin tank top and running down her exposed abdominal muscles. She smelled like burning oak and high-quality coal.

"Keep going, calamari," she moaned. "I'm almost there."

"Hisssss!" I went.

I tried something different: I tried to define her with hyperdimensional mathematics, see her with my abyssal senses, pin her down with definition and observation until I could finally understand what exactly I was fighting.

Folly.

At first she was the dancing and flickering of a live flame, always moving, always changing, impossible to outline, slipping away from my attempts at definition. But I pushed the equations further, increased their complexity, used them to predict and pre-configure every possible angle of that dancing flame, every shape it might take, every angle from which to observe Taika, the woman, the mage, the witch, whatever she was, whatever she—

Abyssal senses blossomed; flame was defined.

'Taika' towered over me, seen through abyssal senses. Twenty feet of shaggy woman-goat hybrid, furred in flame and breathing with the mouth of a volcano, with hooves and horns of obsidian and a tail of lava, coiled around a hydrothermal vent in the very depths of

the abyss.

Homo Abyssus. But not mine.

However, this Taika, this truth behind her body, dared not touch me directly, dared not reach out and make contact, for I was a sharp and venomous little cephalopod. I was alien and dangerous and weird and nasty in my own ways.

Taika's flame caught the black toxin in the sump of my soul and burned away the fumes, scouring the protective oil and gunk from the machinery, forcing me to submerge the parts once again.

We gave up with another hiss, snapping back to physical reality, out of abyssal senses, still clinging to Taika. Here, she was just a woman with goat-like eyes and a fire raging inside her body. But what I'd seen, that was abyssal truth for her, as much as tentacles were for me.

She was also smirking again. "Like what you see, calamari?"

"You're like us!" we screeched, more excited than afraid or shocked. "Like me! Like all of us! You—"

She slashed at my back with a pair of her black iron swords; I smashed them both away, not with a tentacle but with a flicker of brain-math itself, turning mathematical potential into kinetic energy. She could block the brain-math against herself but she couldn't negate pure force. The swords went flying; one of them pinged off the granite kitchen counter tops.

The air around the witch was growing thicker with heat haze. Her hair and eyes were smouldering with flame. It was like having my face pressed to the mouth of an open oven. My tentacles were stinging where I touched her, even through the armoured scales and toughened skin.

The other ten swords turned inward, ready to skewer me. I let go of Taika and shoved myself backward, stumbling over the carpet and halting myself with a pair of tentacles.

Taika opened her mouth wide and drew air into her lungs, to breathe fire.

Before she could, I reached out and defined the oxygen molecules in a six-foot bubble around her body.

Out!

No blue flash, no trick of negation; the oxygen was not hers, it just happened to be nearby.

Taika gasped in surprise; her inner fire dimmed like a candle trapped beneath a bowl. Her hair darkened, her eyes dulled, the heat pouring off her dialled down from ‘burning building’ to ‘open forge-mouth’. Her swords rushed to her sides, their own black flames guttering and flickering.

She hurled herself backward. Her flames reignited the moment she hit oxygen-rich air. She needn’t have bothered, since the molecules were already rushing back into the space I’d cleared in the first place.

“Nice trick, calamari,” she said with a little bob of her head. “Now that was something new. Can you breathe in a vacuum? Gonna find out?”

“Air doesn’t work like that!” I snapped, almost laughing. “Are we done yet?! You’ve proven your point, you’re like me! I’m like you, whatever!”

Taika smirked again, slender and hot, eyes narrowed in pure pleasure. “Not yet, calamari. Come on, think harder.”

From there the fight descended into a kind of madness I had never experienced before; I bounced myself off the surface of the abyss at least two dozen more times, sustaining my physical changes by dumping reactor heat and stress and reality-shock itself into the dark waters, as if all three were physical constraints and the abyss was a physical place, which was pure absurdity. Taika flung swords at me with no care for the damage she was inflicting upon her own apartment; I threw objects at her in return — chairs, bits of furniture, appliances from her overstocked kitchen. But the physical contest was not the real fight. Her greater athleticism would have won out eventually, even with my six tentacles and my reactor, for she had an abyssal well of her own, rooted in the subterranean heart of a volcanic chamber.

She goaded me into brain-math experiments I never would have considered before: I observed her from new angles, turning over her abyssal fire-goat form inside my mind, trying to see my way into her thoughts, her past, her present, her next move; I tried to freeze

her flames solid; reached out with abyssal senses to grab her ankles and plunge her into the dark waters below; cut her out of reality without touching her flesh; reach into her definition and smother her flames. I tried to peel back her layers with pure observation and cut to the heart of what she was.

She countered every move, sometimes skilfully, sometimes clumsily, but always with a heave of effort and a flare of the fire inside her flesh, her own form of ‘hyperdimensional mathematics’.

I leapt around that apartment like I was eight years old again and had just discovered the concept of a bouncy castle. She hurled swords and I hissed and smacked them aside.

And slowly I came to realise.

This was play.

I’d never done this before. Not with something or somebody similar to myself. Certainly I could fling myself bodily at Zheng with all my tentacles, but she couldn’t counter the brain-math. I could define anybody I liked and examine them with abyssal senses, but nobody else could confront me with a similar hybrid of abyssal potential. All seven of me ran together in a riot of something very close to joy.

Taika and I were a pair of apex predators, bumped into each other in the night. With no territories to defend and no prey to fight over, here we were, testing our strength.

And she was so much stronger than me. She made it obvious in every casual dismissal of my brain-math, every side-swipe with her blades, every burning smirk and fire-choked laugh.

We finally stopped, days later, by silent mutual agreement.

In reality only twelve minutes had passed. Dawn was still pouring through the windows.

Most of the non-tentacle muscles in my body were quivering with overexertion — and our tentacles weren’t feeling so good either, like big rubbery tubes. I was coated in sweat from head to toe, hair wet with perspiration, panting for breath. I had a nosebleed from the repeated brain-math, something I had not experienced in months and months — and I could feel a sticky moisture around my eyes. Blood! I’d pushed myself right to the edge.

Twenty feet away, across the now terrible mess of her apartment’s

main room, Taika looked much the same. The sweat sizzled on the heat of her skin. Her hair was the colour of clean, fresh flame, like it had burned away layers of soot, but it was soaked with damp at her scalp. She kept wincing and huffing, her own aftermath of deflecting my hyperdimensional mathematics so many times. Her swords floated in the air, all at different angles, their perfect symmetry shattered by all the effort.

We both stared at each other, folding away our inhuman modifications. I wiped my nosebleed on my sleeve. I couldn't keep this up much longer, not without burning out. Taika was much the same, or so I assumed, her flames dimming slightly within her body. Seconds passed and she looked a tiny bit less like a piece of cinder wrapped in burning cork.

She was smirking, though. I felt like pouting.

"Are you done yet?" I rasped, my throat decidedly non-human. "This is absurd. I can't keep up with you. I can't do this forever!"

Taika straightened up and ran a hand through her flame-bright hair. She shook her head. "You joking, calamari?"

"Ahh?"

"I'm the one who can't keep up with you," Taika said.

I shook my head slowly. "I ... don't ... understand?"

"Hey, kid," she said, so much more gently than before, her voice the hiss of a gas fire turned low. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

Any lingering anger turned to wet ashes in my mouth. "What do you mean?"

But I knew what she meant.

Taika sighed. "After you came back from Beyond. Sorry I wasn't there to hold your hand or whatever. I'm real bad at staying in one place for a long time. I'd make a shit mother, surrogate or otherwise. Never been a good mentor either. Tend to just leave a trail of sad women behind me. And you were a kid. I mean, a real kid, not like you are now. I thought you wouldn't last a year, not after a trip back from Beyond. Not at, what, nine years old, was that it? I forget."

"... yes," I murmured. My throat tightened. "Nine ... nine years

old. Um. I'm not looking for an apology. Unless you ... unless you were the one who sent Maisie and I to the Eye?"

Taika shook her head. "Nah. Just too slow to help. Hesitated too much. I'm sorry about your sister."

She sounded like she really meant it. A lump grew in my throat. "I ... thank you."

Taika sighed again; heat rolled out of her mouth. "But I can't save every single dead kid in the world. I'd go mad if I tried. Care too much and the guilt will eat you from the inside, worse than any flame. Couldn't hang around to make sure you grew up. Your parents didn't want to hear it anyway." Taika straightened up to her full height, lowered her swords at last, and stuck out one hand. "I respect you, Heather, even if I don't agree with what you're doing here. But I don't have the right to judge. I left you for dead. Probably shouldn't have done that."

I stared at her hand — not because I didn't trust her, or because I thought her words were a trick — but because those words hurt more than any sword. They hurt in a good way.

"I ... um ... " I blinked and found tears in my eyes. "I ... you didn't have to ... "

"Sure, I don't have to," she said. "But you're grown into something scary. And I can't take responsibility for that. Don't think I could put you down even if I tried."

I snorted a little laugh, the best I could do under the circumstances. "Really? I think you could. You know, with the swords? The swords that you've been throwing at me? I don't know about you, Miss Taika, but I am not immune to sharp objects going through my body."

Taika frowned, vaguely amused. "Really?"

"Really," we said, and could not decide if she was being serious or not.

She smirked though. "You would have gotten better."

My turn to sigh. "What would you do if this was really a life or death situation? If I was set on killing you? I get the feeling you're holding back."

Taika chuckled. "So are you, Heather. You want a serious answer?"
"Yes."

Taika said: "I would set myself on fire. For real. You ever seen fire that burns without oxygen? You ever seen white phosphorus burns?" She pointed at the floor. "I'd burn right through the whole building, down to the ground, into the soil and then the bedrock. It's not a nice trick, but you wouldn't be able to follow. I'd light the air itself behind me. Boom-boom-boom. You wouldn't even be able to touch me."

"Okaaaaay," we said. "Okay. That sounds plausible."

"And what about you, Heather? I'm sure if you really wanted to kill me then you'd be trying something else."

We chewed our bottom lip and considered the question. Then we nodded slowly. "We could blast you through the back wall of the apartment with pure force. Same with your blades."

"We?" Taika asked.

We shrugged, with both shoulders and all six tentacles. "There's seven of me in here. Cephalopod neurology."

"Cool stuff." Taika smirked. "We'd still stalemate."

"Mm, probably."

She nodded to me, as if we finally understood each other. "And that's why we don't burst into other people's apartments without warning."

We sighed. "And what would you have done if I'd not let your companions leave first? I don't think you'd burn the building with them inside."

Taika's expression darkened, just a little. She didn't like that line of thought. "You and me, out the window together. Melt the glass. Falling comet style. Put you through the side-walk. I'd take some wounds, real wounds, but we'd be outdoors. I'd try to burn your eyes, your face, your windpipe. I assume you can regrow those, but it might slow you down enough. Then things get messy. Lots of bystanders. Lots of cops. You can deflect bullets?"

"Sort of. Um. Sorry for asking. I wouldn't want to hurt innocents. Really."

She smirked. “Glad you didn’t try. I sort of like living in this city, don’t wanna move any time soon.” She stuck out her hand again. “Come on. Make peace, squid girls. We’ve got lots to talk about.”

I tried to smile. “Okay. But you have to tell me—”

With a floop and a floff of pink-white-blue, four familiar figures materialised right between me and Taika.

Lozzie was in the middle, with her pentacolour poncho flaring out like the skirts of a jellyfish, her long blonde hair floating downward as if caught in the updraft of an ocean current. Holding her right hand was Raine, booted and jacketed, pistol tight in her other fist. Holding Lozzie’s left hand was Praem, wearing her full maid dress, impassive and alert. And clinging to Praem’s arm, eyes crammed shut, was Evelyn, with her scrimshawed bone wand clutched tight to her chest.

“Lozz-!” I managed to blurt out.

Then everything went badly wrong.

Taika reacted much as anybody would to four additional strange women appearing in the middle of her apartment. She raised her swords once again, points outward, her skin roiling with heat haze and caged fire, her hair flaring like flames beneath the bellows.

Raine lurched away from Lozzie, blinking and shaking her head, coated in cold flash-sweat — the aftermath of Lozzie’s uncomfortable teleport. But her gun came up, held in both hands.

Taika responded in kind — she jabbed a sword toward Raine.

Praem shoved Eevee into Lozzie’s arms, then whirled on the spot, the skirts of her maid dress flaring outward, ready to intervene, but a second too late.

Raine pulled the trigger of her handgun three times — bang, bang, bang!

Taika’s swords bunched and whirled. One bullet went *ping*, ricocheting off the black iron and thumping into the floor. But two bullets got through.

Taika flicked her fingers; a wave of furnace-heat slammed across my face. Two melted blobs of bullet-lead dropped at her feet.

“Raine, stop!” I screeched.

To Raine's great credit she did exactly as I ordered — she stopped pulling the trigger of her pistol. But Taika was already reacting, already slinging a pair of those black iron swords back toward Raine, to cut off her wrists or bisect her hands, to stop her from shooting.

Praem stepped neatly in front of Raine, hands out, and caught both swords mid-flight.

The swords twitched and jerked in her fists, cutting through the delicate fabric of her lace gloves and snarling in the smooth linen of her sleeves. But Praem ignored them, staring straight at Taika.

“Bad girls,” said Praem.

The other ten swords leapt upward, as if eager to free their sisters. Taika's eyes had gone wide with alarm. I bunched my tentacles behind me, to fling myself forward; I could not knock all those swords aside but I would not let Praem or Raine come to harm, not because of this misunderstanding, not because of my own stupid mistake. I would put myself between the participants, as penance for my stupidity.

But then Lozzie opened her mouth and sang three notes that made everyone stop.

High and light and more than sound, a trilling, tripping, transcendent one-two-three. Beyond language, beyond thought, a gut-meaning impulse of stop-now, all-friends, or-worse.

Taika snapped a hand toward the floor. Her swords dropped, point down, and went inert. She stared at Lozzie in surprise.

“I'm done,” she crackled like a dying fire. “Yeah. Okay. We're cool.”

The two swords in Praem's fists stopped fighting; Praem gently placed them on the floor as well, then straightened up and dusted herself off. I uncoiled my tentacles and let out a shuddering breath. Evelyn straightened up, still half-leaning on Lozzie for support, clutching her bone-wand in a white-knuckled fist. Lozzie beamed at everyone, flapping the sides of her poncho.

“Hello!” Lozzie chirped. “Hello Heathy!”

“H-hi,” I croaked. “Um. Lozzie. Hi. Yes.”

Raine still pointed her gun at Taika, but she addressed me without

looking away from the witch: “Heather, you okay? You hurt?”

“I-I’m fine, Raine! I’m fine! Please, I’m— this is all my fault. Please, stop. Yes, I’m fine.”

Taika pointed a finger at Raine without looking away from Lozzie. “I’ll melt that gun right out of your hands, bulldog.”

Raine laughed. “Bulldog?”

Evelyn snapped: “Raine, lower the fucking gun! For pity’s sake.”

Raine hesitated.

I spoke up too. “Raine, please. It’s fine. We’re ... friends. Sort of.”

Raine took a deep breath and finally stopped pointing the pistol at Taika.

Before anybody else could say another word, Evelyn drew herself up, winced at the pain of her kinked and damaged spine, and barked at the rest of us: “Are we actually still in a fight here? Is this still going? Miss ... ?”

“Taika,” Taika said, still locked in curious eye-contact with Lozzie. Lozzie was wiggling her eyebrows.

“Taika, thank you,” Evelyn said, as if gratitude felt like a kidney stone. “And Heather, you as well. Are you both going to start fighting at any moment? Or are we done here? Yes or no, do not bother explaining.”

Taika smirked. “Somebody’s in the dog house.”

Evelyn snapped: “Answer.”

Taika said, “Sure. We’re done. Heather and me, we’re friends now.”

“Y-yes,” I hurried to add. “Yes, Eevee, yes, we’re definitely done. I’m sorry, I—”

“Stop,” said Eevee, in a voice that made it very clear we were all to shut up. She huffed and winced like she had the world’s worst migraine. Lozzie went ‘oh!’ and rummaged under her poncho for a moment, then produced Evelyn’s walking stick and pressed it into Evelyn’s free hand. Eevee straightened up, stood on her own two feet, then turned and stomped right over to me.

Apparently she was completely unintimidated by the fact I still

looked like a swamp monster, plated with armour and bladed all over, my eyes the colour of moss and my skin a toxic rainbow. I had not yet quite finished folding all of myself away.

“E-Evee—”

She exploded in my face. “Heather, what the fuck are you doing?! What is this?! What the fuck is this—”

“I—”

“No.” Evelyn’s eyes blazed. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“I—”

“You run off alone. You don’t call home to let us know where you are. You make Sevens fucking cry—”

My heart lurched. “I-I did what? *Hic!* Oh, oh no. *Hic—* ow.”

“—and then we come to help and find you fighting a mage—”

“Witch,” Taika supplied.

Evelyn ignored her. “—by yourself! I should have Praem feed you cod liver oil and make you sit in a corner reflecting on your actions. I thought we got past all this months ago, but no! You always have to run off and put yourself in danger. I don’t even care what justification you give it this time—”

Taika cleared her throat and said: “She was never in real danger.”

Evelyn whirled on her too. “She doesn’t know that. And don’t butt in on this, whoever the fuck you are. This is between Heather and me. Shut up.”

Taika smirked and raised her hands. Lozzie giggled. Evelyn turned back to me.

“Evee,” I said.

“Don’t you dare, Heather. Don’t you dare. This is the last time you ever put yourself in danger alone.” Evelyn ground her teeth so hard I could feel it — but suddenly she whipped away from me and jabbed her bone-wand toward Raine instead. “And you! Since when do you start shooting without asking questions first? What the hell was that?”

Raine shrugged. “Always ready to back up my girlfriend. And hey,

no harm done.” She winked at Taika. Taika bowed her head toward Raine.

Evelyn looked like she wanted to beat both of them to death.

We attempted a peace offering, swallowing another hiccup. “Evee, may I say something?”

Evelyn glared daggers at me. “The first word out of your mouth better be—”

“I’m sorry,” we said. “I made a mistake. A foolish one. I should not have done this alone. You are correct and I am wrong. I ... I keep doing this. I believed I had extenuating circumstances, but ... I didn’t.”

Evelyn made a face like she was chewing a marble, but the rage behind her eyes simmered down a little. Praem stepped over to us and produced a trio of lemons from somewhere within her maid dress.

“Oh, Praem, you shouldn’t have,” we said. “Thank you.”

Evelyn tutted. “Bloody right she shouldn’t have. Eat those. Calm down. Fucking hell!” Evelyn cast her eyes at the huge glass windows and the view of the city beyond. “Where the hell are we, anyway? Lozzie? Raine?”

“Chengdu,” we answered around a mouthful of lemon flesh.

“Cheng-what?” Evelyn snapped.

“China. Apparently.”

Evelyn boggled at me. Raine laughed. Lozzie made an excited little ‘ooooh!’ noise.

Taika said: “Yeah, in the middle of my apartment.” She shook her head and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “Let one English rat in and suddenly you’ve got a whole pack living in your walls. I am on the other side of the planet and you inselaffen manage to turn up uninvited anyway. Don’t suppose Gabs sent you, then?”

Evelyn shot a very tight, suspicious look at Taika. “Who is Gabs?”

“That’s a no, then,” Taika said. She shot me another smirk. “Looks like I misjudged you, Heather.”

“A-ah?” I said.

Taika rolled her neck from side to side, making bones go pop and crack, like sticks in a bonfire. She pointed at Praem. “An unbound.” Then at Lozzie. “A Beyonder titan, crammed into human skin.” (Lozzie did a little flutter-bow with her poncho, quite delighted.) “And apparently having a great time with it,” Taika added. Next she gestured at Evee. “A mage who appears to give a shit about your health and well-being. And ... ” Her goatish eyes slid to Raine. “Fuck me, a human.”

Raine shot her a dangerous grin. “That’s me, goat-face.”

Taika chuckled, low and soft. “Looks like I got the wrong end of the stick. I thought you were scrambling up the metaphysical ladder, straight to megalomania or serial killer, or worse. It’s usually worse. But, well, you don’t need friends and lovers to do that.”

“Oh,” I said softly. “Uh. Y-yes. We have a whole ... ‘found family’, I think it’s called? I ... ” I sighed, blushing terribly, suddenly embarrassed. “I just didn’t want them to see, if it turned out I had to kill you or something. And I was all fired up, I ... ”

I trailed off because Evelyn was giving me a look which could have shattered granite, frozen the shards, and then ejected them into space.

Taika raised an eyebrow and said: “Is that right? Not because you didn’t want them to see you looking like that?”

She indicated my body with an up and down flick of her eyes — my tentacles covered in barbs and hooks, my skin glowing and shifting and changing colour, the nictitating membranes over my eyes, the bladed tail poking from the bottom of my spine, my sharpened teeth and strengthened bones and springy joints, the heat rolling off me as my bioreactor churned away inside my gut. Homo abyssus, as fully summoned into reality as I had ever achieved. Much of it was vanishing now, folded back into my flesh, but I still looked mostly inhuman.

“No?” I said, slightly confused. “We don’t—”

Evelyn turned her death glare on Taika instead. “Is that meant to be an insult? Are you insulting my— insulting Heather?”

Taika chuckled, raised one hand in surrender. “Far from it. I’m no

different.” She gestured at her own heavily altered body, at the glowing flame inside her flesh. She was doing the same as me, slowly returning to looking more human, as she had when I’d first appeared in her apartment. “And I think I look fucking great.”

Lozzie chirped: “You doooooo! Ooooh! And your eyes are so pretty. They go waaaaaay down.”

Taika raised her eyebrows at Lozzie, as if surprised by the compliment.

Evelyn sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Alright. Fine. Now, Heather, what exactly is going on here?”

“Um ... ”

Raine cleared her throat and said: “Don’t worry, Heather, love. Sevens filled us in, sort of.” She jerked a thumb at Taika. “Goat girl here knows stuff about your sister, right?”

Evelyn hissed: “And what the hell were you fighting over?”

Praem said: “Bad girls. Naughty girls.”

Mortified almost beyond words, sore from head to toe, and beginning to shake with the aftermath as I slowly stepped down my bioreactor, I explained what had happened, speaking through rapid, desperate mouthfuls of lemon-flesh. I briefly introduced my friends and lovers, as best I could under the circumstances. Taika did not help, she just stood there, watching and listening, sharing occasional little smirks and odd looks with Lozzie.

Evelyn did not look any more impressed by the time I finished. When I completed the process of folding away most of my pneumatic additions, Raine came over and squeezed my shoulder.

“And— and then you turned up,” I finished. “Taika and I were done. I think? And ... and Taika, will you ... will you tell me ... ”

Taika shrugged. “Already said I would.” She glanced around at the absolutely atrocious mess we’d made in her sitting room, furniture all over the place, carpet and cushions absolutely ruined, walls scorched and gouged and ripped and dented. “I’d invite you to sit down, but ... ”

We blushed again, wishing we could roll up into a ball and roll away. “I’m so sorry.”

Taika laughed. "Don't be! This place looked like shit anyway. Minimalism makes me want to burn things down."

"Oh!" we lit up. "Me too. I mean, um, maybe with less burning?"

Praem intoned: "Sitting is good for naughty girls. Naughty girls will sit."

Taika peered at Praem. "Why are you in a maid dress, unbound?"

"Praem," said Praem.

"Praem," Taika corrected herself. "Why the maid dress?" She pointed at Evee. "You mum there make you wear it?"

Evee went wide eyed and pale with embarrassment. She spluttered: "I— you don't— how did you—"

"Family resemblance," Taika said. "Seriously. Why the maid dress?"

Praem intoned: "Maids are unstoppable."

Taika nodded as if this made perfect sense. "Cool."

The six of us spent a few minutes trying to put Taika's apartment back into some semblance of order. Praem, Raine and Taika herself flipped the sofas back over and placed them in roughly appropriate positions around the now very broken coffee table; I couldn't even remember when we'd shattered that. Everyone else kept their shoes on in case of broken glass, but Taika didn't care, staying comfortably barefoot. The sofas had suffered quite badly, punctured by blades and torn up by tentacle-hooks, but they would still suffice for sitting on, if only for a little while. I was too shaky and weak and burnt-out to help with that, but I pottered around the edge of the room picking up the objects I'd hurled around earlier, and did my best to put them mostly back in the kitchen. Lozzie kept staring at Taika from different angles, then helped me tidy up a bit. Praem plugged in the extremely dented air fryer, did something to the inside with one hand, and the appliance beeped back to life.

Evelyn scowled out of the windows the city beyond. "This is the most stupid thing," she hissed. "China. Really?"

There was a single tense moment when Taika made all her swords float into the air again, but she only did so in order to put them on the big table, all lined up, neat and spotless. She touched them one at a time, with a single fingertip, whispering something to the

swords.

Evelyn gave that display a very sour look, lips pursed, vaguely disgusted for some magical reason I didn't understand.

Eventually there were enough places for everyone to sit down. Taika threw herself down on a sofa and put her feet up on a chair, then gestured broadly at the room. "Make yourselves at home, girls. Long time since I entertained anybody I wasn't fucking, so sorry if I'm a bit rusty."

Raine said: "Does that mean I can raid your fridge?"

Taika narrowed her eyes. Raine stared back with one of those shit-eating grins she reserved for a certain type of person. Then Taika smirked back. She said: "Sure. If you bring me a beer as well. 'Hair of the dog that bit you' and all that. That's what you English say, isn't it?"

Evelyn cast a disapproving eye over all the empty alcohol bottles, some of which I had hurled around during the fight. Then she frowned at Taika, perhaps at her general lack of clothes or her ostentatious muscles, but she didn't say anything.

Raine went over to the absolutely massive standing fridge in the kitchen. One shelf appeared to be nothing but beer. Raine extracted two cans, peered at the label, and raised her eyebrows. "Tsingtao? Never heard of it."

"Provincial," Taika drawled. "You should get around more."

Raine smirked right back at her, then tossed Taika's beer across the room, just too hard and too fast for comfort. But Taika snatched it out of the air, somehow without having to get up from her seat.

"Raine!" I tutted through a mouthful of lemon-flesh, finishing up the last of the trio Praem had handed me earlier.

"Yes," Evelyn hissed. "Please, stop the dick-measuring. Not now."

Raine flashed me a grin and then winked — at Taika, who was busy cracking open her beer and taking a long swig.

"Ahhh," Taika sighed. "Nothing like a beer after a sparring match. You want something too, calamari?"

I shook my head. "Lemons," I said, almost done eating.

The rest of us started to sit down too; Praem helped Evelyn into a seat and Lozzie fluttered around before sitting surprisingly close to Taika. Raine and I took up position on the sofa opposite the witch. Praem did not sit, but began to cast her gaze over the still-messy wreckage of the room.

“Don’t clean for free, Praem,” Evelyn told her.

“I can pay,” Taika said.

“Don’t,” Evelyn repeated. “And you, ‘Taika’, I doubt that’s even your real name. I looked it up before we left. It just means ‘magic’. Whatever you are, you are ridiculous, by choice.”

Taika toasted her with the beer can. “Same to you, English mage girl.”

Evelyn ground her teeth. Something about Taika had her on edge, even more than the situation warranted. It wasn’t awareness of danger, or caution of a strange being, or any of Evelyn’s usual attitudes.

Then I realised. It was jealousy.

Raine leaned back on the sofa and said: “Got a question for you, Taika. If you don’t mind.”

Taika raised her eyebrows. She looked so utterly relaxed now, leaning back on her sofa, beer in one hand. Like we hadn’t just been having an all-out, no-holds-barred, knock-down, drag-out fight. She said, “Heather’s the one who gets to ask questions.”

I cleared my throat. “Please?”

Taika nodded.

Raine said, “Like Evee said, what are you?”

“Goat!” Lozzie chirped. “Like Heathy! But bigger? Or smaller?” Lozzie tilted her head back and forth at Taika, like she couldn’t quite decide. She closed one eye, then the other, then gave up with a shrug.

“She’s like me, yes,” we said. “Homo Abyssus.”

Taika took a long drag from her beer, thinking for a moment. Raine copied the gesture — until Lozzie silently pestered her for a sip. Raine obliged, handing Lozzie the can. Lozzie tried the tiniest little

sip, smacked her lips, and pulled a squinting, pinched-face look of distaste. No beer for Lozzie.

Taika finally answered.

“Homo Abyssus?” she drawled. “Weird terminology. But you’re not wrong. I’m like your Heather, here. She’s been down in the pits, too, hasn’t she? Swallowed by the flow, just like me. Swam back to the surface, unburned, unconsumed.” She smirked. “But you don’t wanna hear about any of that. That’s not what you’re here for. Heather came to hear about the Reading Twins, the Morell case, her case. One of my many, many, many screw-ups. Yet another time that I failed to save somebody.”

“Actually,” I said softly. “Taika, I’ve never met somebody else like myself. I do want to know what you are, as well.”

“Huh,” Taika grunted. “You already know, calamari. You saw, straight up. What more is there to say?”

I hurried to add: “But, yes, mostly I want to know about the Eye, about my sister, about what happened to us. And if you have the photograph you showed my father, ten years ago. Anything. Please, anything at all. What happened? Tell me what happened to me and Maisie.”

Taika let out a little sigh, wetted her mouth with a little sip of beer, and began to tell us a sordid, sorry, sad little story.

eyes yet to open – 22.6

“It started thirteen years ago. February 2006. So, more like thirteen and a half years ago, I guess. Feels like a whole different era now, world’s all different, struggling to be born, time of monsters and all that. I remember it was February, because that was when I washed up in England. I’d never been there before. Your collection of rainy little islands are cold and dreary in February; I can deal with both ‘cold’ and ‘dreary’ like nothing, but I didn’t understand the place. Thought I’d come to the edge of the world. In a way, I had, I just didn’t know it yet. Two years and a handful of months, between when it all started and when it ended. By ‘ended’ I mean when you and your twin sister got spirited away, Heather. For you that was the start. But for me? For me it was the end of a nightmare, and the end of a vigil. A vigil I failed to keep. A self-imposed quest that I fucked up. Two years, wasted trying to do something I wasn’t made for, because the problem was more complex than just burning out an infection and incinerating the corpses to hide the evidence. And then, when I had finished fucking up, two innocent kids paid the price of one adult’s total failure and cowardice.”

Taika spoke slowly and carefully. Her voice was like a camp-fire, crackling away to itself in the middle of a deep, dark, dangerous forest, the flickering flames keeping the night at bay. She smelled of wood-smoke and coal, heated brass and sun-kissed steel.

She stared at the ceiling as she spoke, with her head rolled back to rest on the rear of her ruined white leather sofa. Her frozen-flame hair lay still and bright against the ripped leather, glinting like molten rock in the dawn light which poured through the bank of windows in the opposite wall. She nursed her beer in her lap with both hands.

I swallowed, and murmured: “Maisie and me?”

“Mmhmm,” she grunted.

Taika nodded, still staring upward at the white-cream ceiling of her penthouse apartment. She raised her head, took a sip of her beer, then leaned back again, miles away and years in the past.

Evelyn growled: “‘Washed up’ in England?”

Taika gestured by tapping her fingertips against her beer can. “Figure of speech. I came through Heathrow, like everyone else. Fuck the sea, fuck swimming.”

Evelyn frowned, unimpressed, but she stayed silent, clutching her walking stick in both hands, bone-wand over her knees like a firearm on display; she’d spent the first couple of minutes of Taika’s story sending text messages back home, to let everyone else in the house know that I was alive, intact, and a very bad set of seven squid-girls. Praem stood just behind Evelyn’s shoulder, looming over the white sofa, hands folded, looking like she would rather apply herself to the unenviable task of cleaning up the rest of the mess that Taika and I had made of the expensive penthouse apartment. Lizzie was peering at Taika with far too much interest, sitting much closer to the ‘witch’ than the rest of us, but I didn’t begrudge Lizzie; I totally understood, even under the circumstances — Taika was still dressed in tiny white shorts and a white tank top and nothing else, sprawled back on the opposite sofa, legs wide, the hem of her tank top riding up to show the kind of toned abdominal muscles that one could only obtain through lots of hard work.

Raine sipped her own beer, pistol hidden in her waistband, shooting me occasional looks to make sure I was doing okay.

I was not.

The aftermath of my emergency transformations and the ensuing cacophony of rapid-fire brain-math had left me drained and wobbly. I had dried blood crusted around my eyes, despite the effort to wash off the worst. I was vaguely nauseated and felt the beginnings of a headache throbbing at my temples. Without my bio-reactor I would have been aching for sleep. All our tentacles were limp and tired and ready to coil up and stop moving for a few hours.

But we were quivering with the need to know, in a way we had so rarely felt.

“Taika,” I prompted after a moment of silence. “I am — perhaps understandably — a little anxious and impatient to know the truth. Please?”

Taika laughed softly, without raising her head. “Thirteen years is a long time ago, kid, even for things like you and me. I don’t want to

miss any details or get stuff wrong, not if you need closure, and certainly not if you need accurate info to go Beyond and punch out a titan. Give this old lady some time to think.”

Raine said: “You don’t look a day over thirty, ‘old lady’.”

Taika silently toasted Raine with her beer. “Flame is always fresh. So. February 2006. England. I ended up there because ... well.” Taika pulled a rueful, melancholy sort of smile. “Because of a woman. My very own little island monkey, to whom I am still technically married, I believe. I know, I know — how is that relevant?” Taika sneered at herself. “It’s not, but I’m trying to give you context for what happened, why it happened, why I let it happen.”

We nodded, squeezing ourself with our tentacles. “That’s quite alright. Yes, please, do give me the whole thing.”

Taika rolled her eyes at the ceiling, tapping her beer can with fingertips again. “The ‘whole thing’ would take hours, and most of it is none of your business. Most of it has nothing to do with any of you. There was a ... an ‘incident’, let’s say, involving me, my ‘wife’, a kid ... uh, unrelated to either of us, kind of — and a vampire, though the vampire was just sort of in tow, not really important—”

Evelyn hissed under her breath: “For fuck’s sake. Vampires, again.”

Lozzie did a snort-giggle.

Taika ignored all that, carrying on “—and a series of unexplained deaths.” Taika raised her head from the back of the sofa and looked at us again; her goat-like orange eyes glowed with inner fire. “Any of you ever been to Tolchester?”

She received a series of blank looks in return. I shook my head, though I’d heard of the city. Evelyn just shrugged. Lozzie didn’t seem to care, tilting her head from side to side. Praem didn’t respond.

Raine said: “Never been there myself, but Tolchester’s a rough place, even for the North.”

Taika shrugged. “North, south, whatever. Can’t remember the geography of your rainy little island half the time, anyway. Do you remember the Tolchester serial killer case, around about then?”

Raine squinted. “Vaguely. Not really, though. Where you going with

this?”

I raised one tentacle and spoke up: “I actually don’t remember that, no. I don’t make a habit of reading newspapers from thirteen years ago, or upsetting myself with wikipedia pages on serial killers.”

Taika pointed her beer can at me. “Smart, calamari. Stay away from that shit, it’s bad for your digestion. And the reason you don’t remember it is because they never caught anybody. Police made a couple of arrests, but that was just for show. Four dead, all in Tolchester, all between February and May 2006. All four died in weird, isolated places. And they weren’t the sort of victims that serial killers usually pick, right? That’s sort of why I was there. Your British newspapers didn’t get most of the truth, either. Police were right quick at cleaning up the scenes and making sure nobody took photos. Weird, ritual shit. The kinda thing you pretend doesn’t exist on television.”

Evelyn snorted. “A mage.”

Taika smiled a sudden burning smile. “Oh, you wish it was a mage. No, much worse, this was something that had wandered too far, wasn’t supposed to be here.” Taika shrugged. “I would say I dealt with it, but that would be a lie. The kid I mentioned dealt with it, but hey, that’s another story. The important bit is that I enlisted help — help I came to regret. A man — a mage, I suppose, for all that fucking word means anything — by the name of Darren Dole.”

Taika took another sip of her beer. She was sitting up straight now, seemingly warming to her subject. She raked her long, frozen-flame hair back to keep it out of her face.

“You have to understand,” she said. “We couldn’t find this thing that was doing the killings. It moved in ways we couldn’t handle, not even the vampire. Hunting it was almost impossible. You’d see it out in the open, in the middle of a crowd, and it would just look like a man. A really tall man with no face. And you’d forget it was there, your brain would slide off it, even when you tried to look directly at the thing. Nearly got one of my companions back then, just because we couldn’t see the damn thing properly, couldn’t keep it in our minds, couldn’t ‘observe’ it.”

A shudder went through me when Taika said that word — observe.

“Oh,” I murmured. “Oh no.”

Taika shot me a pained smile. "Yeah, you get where this is going, calamari. We needed better eyes. We needed ways to see."

"You contacted the Eye," I said. "You made a deal with it."

Taika winced and held up a hand. "Mm, not quite, slow down. Let me get there. We needed help. The kid I mentioned, she didn't need eyes to hunt. Followed her nose instead. She eventually solved the whole thing for me, but I screwed up at first. I didn't want an eleven year old girl getting involved, not any deeper than she already was. I was getting desperate, because the thing that was doing the killings, it was coming for me and mine next. I could probably fight it off, but none of my companions could. But, Mister Dole? He swore up and down and left and right that he knew of an entity which could grant us sight."

"No," I hissed, tentacles flexing with sudden need. "You mustn't, you—"

"I didn't," Taika repeated, a little harder, trying to get me to ease off. "Slow down, calamari. It's more complicated than you think. I didn't make any deals with the 'Eye' or anything like that. But I have to explain why I did what I did. Okay?"

Slowly, we nodded. We took several deep breaths. We lowered our tentacles. Raine put her beer to one side and slid an arm around my shoulders instead, to hold me steady. Taika was not the mage who had done all this, she was not responsible for everything that had happened to me.

"Okay," we said. "Sorry. Please, go on."

Taika nodded a guarded thank you. "So," she said. "Dole, he had this book." She smirked without any warmth, her fires banked. "Mages do love their books, don't they? A lot of problems would be solved with a nice big bonfire for all those rotten old tomes."

Evelyn hissed between her teeth, tutting out loud. "Book burner."

Taika smirked. "It's my nature, English rose. It's how I deal with problems."

A wave of disgust knocked the horror right out of me, too. "Taika!" I said. "That's vile! I don't care what's in them, burning books is never the right answer."

Taika raised her eyebrows at me. "You really think that? I'm not

talking about cultural symbolism here, calamari. I'm not talking about restricting knowledge from the masses. I'm not talking about no Disco Demolition. I'm talking about magic. Would you burn a single book, to rescue your sister?"

"Well ... yes, of course we would," I admitted. "But that's not the same principle."

Taika waved that off; this part of her philosophy was irreconcilable with my own. "Dole had this book. *Asrar almajalat ghayr almaryiya*, *Geheimnisse der unsichtbaren Sphären*, both in Medieval German and Classical Arabic."

"*Secrets of the spheres unseen*?" Evelyn translated, frowning with sudden interest. "That's apocryphal. As far as I can tell, the book never existed, only references to it. You're telling me it's real?"

Taika shrugged. "Real enough when I saw it. Only copy in existence or something, Dole was proud of that. Parts of it couldn't be copied without lethal complications, reading certain passages also performed the contents of the passages." Taika snorted. "Typical mage bullshit."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted in grudging agreement. Taika nodded at that.

"Anyway," she said. "To cut this part of the story short, Dole said there was a way to borrow perfect sight, perfect observation, from a specific Beyonder titan."

"The Eye," I said.

Taika nodded once. "We called it something else, but 'The Eye' is better."

Evelyn said, "What did you call it?"

Taika cleared her throat. "At the time? 'Mister Telescope'."

Raine laughed. Lozzie giggled. Evelyn rolled her eyes.

"Mister Telescope," Praem repeated. "Sees very far."

"In my defence," Taika said. "We — me and my other companions — were mostly teasing Dole. We didn't think it would work. His 'Mister Telescope' was bullshit as far as we were concerned. We were all too worried about fighting the thing hunting us down."

I said: "But it did work. Didn't it?"

"Nope." Taika laughed softly. "Dole vanished. Right in the middle of all that shit with the 'serial killer', he vanished." She clicked her fingers. "I thought he'd skipped town, left us to 'face the music', as you English say. After that whole incident got resolved, I had to take a few weeks to tidy up the loose ends. Then I went looking for Dole. His corpse hadn't turned up during all the commotion, nobody could account for him, and I figured out he was still alive. I wanted to find him, kick his arse, maybe kill him. I hadn't decided yet. I was angry. Stupid of me."

Evelyn snorted. "Don't blame you."

"I'll drink to that," Raine added. She reached over and sipped from her beer again.

I said, "He hadn't run though, had he? He'd contacted the Eye."

Taika shook her head. "He had run, actually, but not because he was a coward. I spent about a month tracing the guy's steps before I caught up with him. First thing I found was the place he'd done a ritual, right there in Tolchester, where he was supposed to be when he was helping. And it wasn't a small piece of magic, not something a baby mage could do. Dole was in his fifties, experienced and principled, he knew what he was doing. I don't know a lot of magecraft, but he had protections and wards and bullshit enough to stop anything. The whole room was plated with mirrors looking inward, as if to confuse the sight of whatever he was calling."

"Fool!" Evelyn snapped.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes, the Eye ... that's not ... that's not how it works ... it ... it ..."

Raine squeezed my shoulder.

"Mm," Taika grunted. "He even had a pair of animals in there. Bulls. Very traditional mage stuff, sacrificial animals and that. The bulls were supposed to act as heat sinks, take whatever damage was directed at Dole. By the time I got there they'd been dead and rotting for weeks. The bulls had exploded during the ritual, worst mess I'd ever seen. Something had gone badly wrong. And the book I mentioned? It was burned." Taika blew out a long, long breath and took a deep swig of her beer. When she spoke again the fire in her goatish eyes seemed a touch dimmer. "After that, he'd fled the

city. I traced his steps, but it was weird. You know what he did? He'd spent weeks going round all these different hospitals in England. Broke into them, but he didn't steal anything, didn't hurt anybody, didn't set up any magic traps or tricks or anything I could find. And I wasn't trying to figure out what he was doing, I didn't care. I just wanted to kick his face in."

"Twins," I said. "Twins, right? He was looking for twins?"

Taika winced, slow and painfully, as if this was an old, old wound in her fire-backed hide. She nodded slowly. "Yup. Didn't figure that out at the time, but—"

"Then I was right!" I cried out. A great shudder went through me, a unfolding of an emotion I'd been holding onto for so very long. "It was a mage! It was a mage, all along! Maisie and I were taken on purpose, it—"

"Nuh uh," Taika said, shaking her head sadly. "Nope. It was no magecraft that took you and your sister, Heather."

"But— this Dole person, you said—"

Taika lifted her eyes and looked right at me, eyes burning with quiet flame; something in her expression stopped me, some unspeakable horror that she had seen, something that had convinced her, utterly. "Dole wasn't in control anymore."

I nodded, numbed by that look; Taika was like me, wasn't she? She'd been to the abyss, or her version of it, she'd come back changed, transformed her body to fit, yet this memory left her shaken?

Evelyn spoke in my place: "He was possessed?"

Taika shrugged. "Something like that. I caught up with him in Scotland." She spoke almost without affect, flat and distant. "He was renting a sort of cabin, some kind of holiday place, one of those fancy houses full of decorative junk. It was out on some distant mountainside, nothing else around for miles and miles and miles, just rolling hills, no neighbours. Great views. Ha." Taika almost laughed, but the attempt died as soon as it was born. She took another swig of beer to steady herself. "He'd filled the place with eyes. Drawn them on every surface. And I do mean every surface. Every single inch of every surface and object and ... everything!" She hissed, like petrol squirted onto a bonfire. "You couldn't look

anywhere inside that cabin without those eyes looking back at you. When he'd run out of ink, he'd used shit, and semen, and then blood. I didn't get close enough to investigate in detail, though. The eyes were everywhere, at every scale, inside each other, painted on the inside of the windows, scrawled in miniature scale on every angle of every door and wall and object and everything. Everything. Everything!"

We nodded. "We understand, Taika. We've seen—"

"No," Taika said, "maybe you understand, Heather — or Heathers. Maybe you do. But your friends here probably don't. It wasn't just a creepy house full of mage bullshit. I've seen creepier houses full of much worse mage bullshit, some of it still alive and bleating. But this?" Taika stared at me and raised one hand, then pointed downward with all her fingers, indicating something coming from above. "I could feel it," she said. "Looking down at me."

"Oh," I breathed. "The Eye."

"The Eye," she echoed. "'Mister Telescope'. Whatever. Didn't seem so funny anymore. It was like Dole had cracked a door open, or shunted a window aside, by just an inch, so something could peer through. And I didn't see it, nothing like that. Nothing so simple. But I could feel it, feel this presence watching me from every surface and angle and object in that house. Worst creeping stalker feeling ever. Like Dole had broken reality within those walls."

We let Taika finish. She trailed off, took a deep breath, and sipped her beer again.

I said: "I've looked into it for real, into the Eye. I've looked back at the Eye. I know what it feels like."

Evelyn cleared her throat. "Raine here and myself, we've also seen it. Due to a similar stupid mistake on my part."

Taika suddenly stared at Evelyn, sharper and faster than I liked.

I quickly said, "And I fixed the mistake. Taika, Evelyn is fine. I made the Eye go away, that time."

Lozzie chirped, "I've seen it too! Wasn't fun!"

Praem intoned: "Rude to stare."

Taika simmered down and gave Lozzie a much more indulgent look.

"That's alright for you, Miss. But most of us aren't your kind of robust. Even things like Heather and me."

"I know!" Lozzie chirped. She smirked like she was flirting. "You're delicate! Just like Heathy!"

"My point is," I said before this could dissolve into flirting, "I know what it's like."

Taika laughed softly, dispelling the tension. "Yeah. Not a good feeling. Understatement of the century."

Raine said: "What'd you do with it? The cabin place, I mean?"

Taika smirked. "Burned it to the fucking ground and pissed on the ashes. After I was done with Dole, anyway."

"Good answer," said Eevee.

Taika cocked an eyebrow at her. "Now you approve of burning stuff?"

"When it comes to the Eye," Evelyn said. "We've seen our fair share of what happens to mages who try to contact it. We happened to burn down a building too. Same answer, same solution. Don't be smug because you think you're the only one bold enough to commit arson, you overstuffed goat."

Taika laughed, looking Eevee up and down. Evelyn glared back at her, smouldering almost as much as Taika did. "Spicy kitty," Taika said with a smirk. "What did I do to piss you off, Miss Saye?"

"Nothing," Evelyn grunted back.

"You jealous because I was playing chase with your girl?" Taika indicated me with a jerk of her thumb.

"Maybe," Evelyn ground the word out.

I cleared my throat before Raine could join in or Lozzie could start rolling about. "Can we stick to the subject, please? Taika, how does this end in me and Maisie getting taken by the Eye?"

Taika puffed out a big sigh. Her breath smelled of hot iron. The brief amusement went out of her. "Darren Dole, when I found him, had stripped off most of his own skin and taken out his own eyeballs." She shrugged. "Hate it when people do that."

Raine said, "Happens often, in your line of work?"

Taika eyed her. "You don't know my line of work, bulldog. Let's keep it that way."

Raine toasted her in silence.

Taika went on, "Anyway, Dole was a mess. And I made a big mistake. I could have kept him alive, could have questioned him. There wasn't much left of his mind by that point, but I could have gotten something out of him, probably. But that fucking house. Those eyes. That feeling of being watched. I burned him and the building together, the whole lot of it, all up in smoke. He didn't even resist at that point, I think he welcomed it. He was still trying to draw more eyes even as he burned. All that survived was the stuff in his car, in the house's driveway. Part of me wished it hadn't. He'd left extensive notes, but none of it made sense to me."

"Notes," Evelyn grunted. "From a mage. Great."

"Mmhmm," Taika agreed. "Most of it was huge lists of dates and times, star charts, spreadsheets of numbers, reams and reams of mathematics. None of it made the slightest bit of sense to me." She shrugged. "After that house, I just wanted to forget all about it. I didn't want to think about it ever again."

"I don't blame you," I said. "I wish ... I wish I'd had that luxury."

Taika snorted, without any real humour. "Well, I blame me. I spent a month getting blind drunk, mostly in Stockholm, which is a shit city in which to get drunk all the time. Nice girls, though." Taika pulled a smirk, but her heart wasn't in it. "When I came out of the binge I relit my fires and went back to Dole's notes. Terrible fucking idea. Stupid idea. Lovecraft protagonist level idea. But I needed answers, I needed closure, needed to understand what I'd witnessed."

Evelyn snorted with derision. "Typical mage behaviour. Just have to know. Don't we?"

Taika eyed her with those goat-like slits. "Told you once, English rose, I'm no mage. Nah, the curiosity, that's all on me."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Typical Lovecraft protagonist, then."

Taika winced. "Ouch."

“You said it first,” Evelyn drawled. “No offense meant.”

Taika’s turn to snort, like sparks and flame kicked up from the edge of a bonfire. “Whatever you say, English rose. Anyway, I went back to the notes. That’s when I found the list of names.”

“Twins?” I said.

Taika nodded. “One hundred and four names. Fifty two pairs. Hand-written on notepad paper. All twins, all born in the hospitals he’d been breaking into. That’s what he’d been doing, copying down their names from official hospital records, birth certificates and stuff. Twins born in a specific date range, so they were all the same age.”

“Maisie and me ... ?”

Taika nodded. “You were on the list. Heather Morell, Maisie Morell.”

A strange feeling settled into my chest — a cocktail of relief, catharsis, violation, and dissociation, all piled on top of each other. We had to share the emotion among all seven of us, unfolding it down our tentacles for a crumb of release. There we were, hearing about a part of our life which we had never known about before, inflicted upon us by people we’d never met, or even heard of before that moment. It was like being told the source of a scar one had carried for one’s whole life, which had become an abstract and personal thing, and discovering that some alien hand lay behind the mark upon one’s body.

Taika was carrying right on: “No other commonality between the pairs of twins, not that I could figure out. Some rich, some poor. Some healthy, some not. Some disabled, some not. White, Black, from the continent, whatever. Two of the sets of parents were ... what do you call it? ‘In The Know’? But that was all. Thought it might be something to do with them at first, but I checked them out and they were clean, no prior connection with Dole, no knowledge of ‘Mister Telescope’, nothing.” She took a deep breath, staring into space with those goat-like eyes. “At first I thought he’d been planning to sacrifice all those kids somehow, but that made no sense. Dole was never that kind of man, I wouldn’t have worked with him if he was. Maybe under the influence of some Beyonder titan, maybe, but even then his actions didn’t line up. He never visited any of the kids whose names he’d written down. Never went

anywhere near them.” Taika blew out a long breath and pulled a weird, sad wince. “I’m not exactly the world’s greatest detective. Usually I just find things and set them on fire.”

“Wheeeeey,” Raine cheered softly. Lozzie went ‘oooooh’. Evelyn rolled her eyes.

“Arson,” said Praem.

“Arson with good cause,” Taika said, raising her beer in a silly toast. “So, well, I went through Dole’s notes. All the numbers, the star charts, all these equations about times and dates. Most of it made no sense at all. The dates and times were impossible, they referred to points too far in the past or in the future to be useful. But ... but I worked out what he’d done. Or what I thought he’d done.”

“A deal with the Eye,” I said.

Taika shook her head. “No. There was no deal there, no exchange. It was all one way. He fed it those names, the names of all those pairs of twins, but he had no control by that point. All he did was give it the information. Gave it options, fifty-two different pairs of options. The dates and times, those were the key, even though ninety percent of them were impossible. Little windows of time where the mathematics lined up. Sounds like nonsense, right? Told you I wasn’t good at maths.”

Raine said: “This mage gave the Eye a list of times it could reach in from Outside, to kidnap a pair of children? Is that what you’re saying?”

Evelyn ground her teeth with strange anger.

Taika squinted. She didn’t like that explanation. “No, it wasn’t that simple. It was more like by doing the maths on paper, he’d shunted something to the side, just by a crack. That’s what I’d felt in that fucking cabin, like something huge was peering through a tiny crack and down at me, through all those drawings of eyes. It consumed him in the process, but he opened the way. He just didn’t know where or when exactly it would happen. Just that it would happen to one of those fifty two pairs.” She rolled her shoulders in a shrug, trying to seem casual and relaxed, but even this roiling fire-witch, this Homo abyssus from other waters, she could not hide her horror at this notion.

My mouth had gone dry. I felt vaguely sick. My tentacles were coiled around me in a protective self-hug; Top-Left and Top-Right were repeating comforting mantras. Middle-Left was squeezing our tummy, trying to hold onto our nerves. We needed this, but we didn't like it.

Raine tightened her grip on our shoulders. Evelyn poked us in the leg with her walking stick. Lozzie got up, fluttered over, and hugged two of us — two of our tentacles. A glass of water appeared over my other shoulder, held in Praem's perfect hand. I murmured a thank you, drained the glass, and felt a tiny bit better.

Taika watched all this with an impassive smoulder, a banked fire behind her glowing orange eyes. She sipped her beer and waited for me to recover.

"Sorry," I murmured. "I just ... "

Taika laughed softly, a single humourless puff of air through her nose. "Yeah, it's alright, calamari. This is some fucked up shit." She straightened up on her ruined white sofa and shrugged, a little less stiffly. "As for why any of that happened, search me, I've not got the foggiest. That is how you English say it, right?"

"Actually," I said softly. "We have a ... rough, basic, estimated idea of what the Eye wants. Sort of."

Taika's eyes froze, like fire caught in a bottle. "Fuck me. Good luck with that."

"Do you want to know?" we asked.

Taika eyed my companions, all four of them, lingering especially on Raine, and then Evee.

Raine smirked back at her. "Scared?"

Evelyn hissed: "She's terrified. Yes. Scared, goat?"

I tutted. "Raine! Evee! Both of you, my gosh, stop it! Taika, the information isn't dangerous or anything, I swear."

Taika ran her tongue over her teeth, then knocked back the rest of her beer in one long, upturned gulp, her perfect white throat bobbing as she drank. She finished with a little burp, then crushed the empty can between her palms. She held up the flattened disc of aluminium between thumb and forefinger. The metal started to

glow red-hot where she touched.

“Hit me,” she said.

We told Taika about the book from the Library of Carcosa: *A full and true account of the disappearance and return of the twin sisters Jane Doe and Mary Doe, their subsequent alienation and alienism, their mathematical skills and strange habits, and their eventual transition into the weft between worlds.* We told her a condensed version of the tale, of the vegetable twins who had endured a similar ordeal to Maisie and I, how they had come back from Outside, changed and different to the others of their strange alien race. We told Taika that this had happened before, somewhere far beyond human understanding in both space and time, probably somewhere Outside, far beyond even my comprehension.

But it had happened before, to another pair of twins. Maisie and I were not alone.

We did not tell Taika where we’d gotten the book, and she didn’t ask. We didn’t mention Heart, or the King in Yellow, or Carcosa. Neither did Evelyn or Raine, and even Lozzie just returned to her spot on the sofa and let us halt and stutter through our little story. We all silently agreed not to complicate this meeting any further by trying to explain The Yellow Court and the Library.

We also told Taika about the secrets which Mister Joking had gleaned from the Eye-ridden corpse of Alexander Lilburne, the cryptic words about two-in-one, about missing one’s other half, about twins, and the pain of being incomplete.

Taika relaxed as she listened, probably because she realised this wasn’t the sort of mind-searing mage secret which would require her to burn the knowledge out of her own mind to protect herself. Eventually she stopped making the crushed can glow with heat, then tossed it onto the sofa once it cooled down.

By the time I was finished, she was leaning forward, elbows propped on her knees, frowning in thought.

“Does that ... does that make sense?” I asked.

“Mm,” Taika grunted. Her goatish, fire-lit eyes bored into me. She must have been thinking very hard indeed.

“Does it help you formulate any more detailed theories, when

combined with the notes you found?”

“Nah.”

I blinked. “Oh. Um.”

Raine snorted. Lozzie giggled. At least somebody found this funny.

Taika straightened back up and smirked. “The less time you spend dwelling on the motivations of Beyonders, the better off you’ll be.” She glanced at Lozzie. “Present company excepted. You’re a real rarity, like me and the calamari here.”

Lozzie flashed her a toothy grin.

Evelyn said, “Hear hear. The less the better.”

Taika raised her eyebrows at Evee. “Good choice of friends, calamari. Even your mage has got her head on straight, whatever I did to piss her off.”

“Nooooope,” Lozzie said. Taika frowned at her, missing the joke — but Evee didn’t. She blushed faintly, tutting and huffing.

Raine spoke into the increasingly silly moment, a voice of reason for once, cutting deeper than the rest of us could: “You did have theories though, didn’t you, Taika? Else we wouldn’t be here. Heather wouldn’t have followed any leads, ‘cos she wouldn’t have had any to follow, right?” Raine raised an item in one hand, an item she had taken from my tentacles — the business card Taika had left with my father, ten years ago.

Taika turned slow-burning eyes toward Raine, then winced at the sight of the business card.

“Ah,” she hummed. “A little token of my guilt. Right. Well. Yeah, I did have theories. The Eye, whatever it was, this thing that took Dole and piloted him like a parasitic fungus, I thought it might be trying to propagate itself. Or maybe it was making a gateway into our reality. Didn’t know why it needed twins, never guessed it might be trying to study them or something, never guessed it was missing another half, nothing like that. I lacked all that. I was on the lookout for more direct problems.”

My turn to let out a weak little laugh. “In a way it did propagate,” we said. “In a way, I’m its adopted daughter.”

“Mm,” Taika purred. “But not in the way I was worried about.”

“Is that why you contacted my parents?”

Taika leaned back again and puffed out a big sigh, rolling her head back on the sofa, her long body and longer hair gleaming in the sunlight which bathed the apartment. “Fuck, I could do with another beer. A whole fucking crate of beer. Pity I had to send my nice friends off earlier, Heather. I could use a cuddle buddy right about now.”

Raine grinned at me. “Heather, what’s this?”

“Um.” I cleared my throat and blushed a little. “When I arrived, Taika had several ... ‘friends’, in her bed.”

“Guilty as charged,” Taika chuckled. “I like a bit of variety.”

Evelyn sighed a great big huff. “So you’re as bad as Heather. Is this a thing that abyssal returnees do?”

“E-Evee!” I squeaked.

Lozzie tilted her head sideways so Taika caught a hint of that wispy blonde hair. Taika looked up and squinted at her. Lozzie was smiling with obvious mischief, fluttering the edges of her poncho back and forth.

“Uhhh,” Taika said. “Lozzie, right? Right. No offense, but how old are you? And not in Beyonder terms, in human terms, like when were you born and that?”

“Nearly nineteen!” Lozzie chirped.

Taika pulled a pained grimace. “I’m flattered. And I know you’re technically not nineteen. But ... ”

Lozzie let out a giggle-snort. “I’m just looking at you! Whaaaaat?”

Praem intoned: “Down, girls.”

Taika grimaced harder. Raine grinned, silently egging Lozzie on. Evelyn looked away, unimpressed, and said: “Now is not the time. Heather doesn’t need this rampancy right now.”

I cleared my throat: “Actually, that is helping to take the tension off. Thank you, Lozzie. I’m just ... this a lot, for me.”

Lozzie nodded her head up and down. “Mmhmm, mmhmm!”

“But also yes,” I added. “Please, Taika, what happened next? Why

did the Eye select Maisie and I?”

Taika let out a huge sigh, up at the ceiling, her breath carrying the sound of crackling wood and roiling flames. “There isn’t a great deal else to tell, sad to say, and most of it just my failures. I decided that this was my responsibility to follow up. I’d killed Dole, after all. I’d felt that presence watching me. And I was looking for something new to sink my teeth into.” She shook her head. “But I’m bad at that kind of work. Give me something to burn, and I’m golden. But this ... ” She trailed off and sighed, then ran a hand over her face. “I went back to England, started watching all those pairs of twins, you and yours included. Thought maybe I could preempt whatever was going to happen. I kept going over all those equations, trying to figure out where and when the window would open.” Taika sat up again and pulled a grim smile. “But guess what happened, every time I spent too long thinking about the equations?”

“The Eye,” I said again.

Taika nodded. “Yeah. That crack in reality was still open, and I’d been under it long enough to get recognised. Trying to hold the mathematics in my mind, that was just inviting it to pay attention. That feeling from the cabin would creep over me again. But I kept trying. Started to gather intel on all fifty two pairs of twins, all those kids, but I couldn’t be everywhere at once. It was impossible.”

A lump formed in my throat. “Is that ... is that when you ... stole the photograph of Maisie and me?”

Taika smiled — not a smirk, but something warmer, a cosy fire in a brick hearth. “Yeah. I wanted physical, photographic proof of every kid, every pair of twins, just in case that thing looking through reality was going to use them for anything. And yeah, I know how fucked up that sounds, breaking into people’s houses to steal photos of their kids. But I can’t do remote viewing, I didn’t have any other way.”

We winced with sympathy, but also the ghost of discomfort. Had this goat-woman stalked through my childhood home one night to steal a photograph of me and my twin sister? Disquiet and violation stirred in my chest. Half of us — half us tentacles — tingled with suppressed offense.

“Did you actually break into houses?” we asked.

Taika shook her head. “No need to.” She waved a hand toward the big table, where her black iron blades were lined up on the tabletop, so still and silent compared to their earlier swift violence. “My girls over there have more talents than cutting up squid. They did the hard parts.”

I blinked. “Your ... girls? I’m sorry, I must have missed something.”
“Bad girls,” Praem intoned.

Taika smirked. “They’re not so bad once you get to know ‘em. You and them might have gotten off on the wrong foot, though.”

Lozzie went up onto her knees on the sofa, peering across the wrecked apartment at the dozen big black knives, eyes widened with sudden interest. She made a little ‘oohh’ noise, clambered up, and padded over to examine them closer. “Ohhhhhh, right!” she whispered. “Hello! Hi!”

Everyone stared at her for a moment, even Taika — though Taika looked more pleased than confused.

“Taika,” I said, almost afraid to ask the question. “The ... photograph, of me and Maisie. Do you still have it?”

Taika nodded. “You want it, right?”

My throat was so dry. My palms were clammy. My heart clenched inside my chest. Raine squeezed my shoulder.

“In a minute,” we managed to say. “Not right now. We need to hear the rest, first. We ... might find it difficult, when we see ... her.”

Taika nodded and carried on, talking right over my emotional distress; perhaps she was a little bit like Raine in that regard, knowing when to deflect and pretend.

“Like I said,” she carried on, “I tried to watch all fifty two pairs of kids, but it was impossible. I was running up and down the length of your rainy little island every day, trying to keep tabs on everybody. And that wasn’t the only thing I was dealing with at the time, I got pulled away for a few weeks by an incident in late 2007, something unrelated. But every interruption made me worry that I would miss the window. And then I really fucked up. Do you remember the Old Brown Road kidnapping case?”

We all glanced at each other. Eevee shrugged. Lozzie looked up from

the swords — she'd been whispering to them — and fluttered her poncho in a negative gesture. Raine said, "Can't say I've heard of that one."

Taika cleared her throat, oddly embarrassed. "Pair of twins went missing from their suburban home in North Yorkshire, January 6th, 2008. Oliver Pendown and Jace Pendown, pair of boys, nine years old. The reason you probably didn't hear about it is 'cos they were only missing for one day. Turned up on January 8th, alive and untouched, well-fed and gift-wrapped, hand-delivered to a police station in the city of York."

Evelyn said, suddenly dark and hard: "And how did those boys fare?"

Taika smirked. "Confused, but perfectly fine. Hadn't seen the face of their kidnapper, nor heard a voice. They'd been blindfolded for a bit, then kept in a big dog cage for a while, with a blanket over it. They'd had snacks, books, even a little video game console in there."

I blinked several times. " ... you don't mean ... "

Raine laughed. "You kidnapped a pair of kids?"

"Mmhmm," Taika nodded. "I tried to cheat, you see. I held the maths in my head for too long." Taika reached up and tapped her temple. "Until I felt that presence start to look at me. Then I tried to look back."

"Oh," I said. "You didn't, how could you—"

"Wrapped myself in flame and took a dip in the pits to escape. Burned out the connection, burned everything that might lead it back to me."

"You mean the abyss," I said.

Taika shrugged. "Whatever you call it. But it worked — or I thought it worked. I got just enough information to finish the equation on my own. And I thought it pointed to those two boys, on that night. Even thought I had the hour right. So I broke into their home, kidnapped them, and then ... " Taika broke into a weird smile. "I put them in a cage of flame. Special flame. Not the kind you can see, not the kind that burns matter. Flame from the pits, from the molten places under our feet. The boys never saw any of it, under a

blanket in the middle. And if that presence came round to look at those boys, I was going to burn out its sight. Or at least try. Only thing I could think of.”

Raine was nodding along to the story. I felt only a terrible sense of inevitability.

Evelyn grunted with odd respect: “The right thing.”

Taika laughed. The awe slid from her words again. “But the wrong sodding target. Nothing happened that night. Nor the next. I’d screwed up, gotten it wrong. Or more likely, the Eye got just as much from looking at me as I got from looking back at it.”

I hunched my shoulders. “So it was your fault.”

Taika stared at me. “I’m sorry, Heather.”

The others didn’t follow. Raine tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. Evelyn frowned and grunted: “Eh?” Lozzie looked up and bobbed from foot to foot in a curious little dance.

Praem intoned: “It was not.”

Taika shook her head. “It was my fault. When I tried to return that gaze, to figure out which pair of twins it had selected, I believe it read my intentions. Saw me, ‘observed’ me. So it changed targets. The specific target didn’t matter to it, there was no special reason it had selected those boys. Any other pair of twins would do just as well. I’m sorry, Heather. It was my fault that you got taken.”

I was shaking slightly. “I ... I mean ... if it wasn’t Maisie and I ... ”

Raine squeezed my shoulder, then pulled one of my tentacles into her lap and hugged me. “Then it would have been some other kids, Heather. Hey, it’s alright, it’s alright. You can feel bad that it was you, you don’t have to feel guilty.”

I sniffed hard and scrubbed at my eyes; not yet, I could not collapse yet, I needed it all.

“Why did everyone forget my twin sister?” I demanded. “Why did everyone forget Maisie?”

Taika looked me dead in the eyes, and said: “I don’t know.”

“You have to know!”

I exploded with anger I had not expected. My tentacles bunched, flailed, and went stiff with frustration. Taika held up a hand. Raine held my shoulder and said my name; Evelyn cleared her throat, while Lozzie bobbed back over and hovered next to Praem, gesturing like she was going to catch my tentacles.

But something had snapped inside me.

“Taika, you still have that photo! And you remembered! You questioned my father about it. Why did everyone else forget, everyone except me, and apparently you?! You’re telling me you had nothing to do with that?”

Taika waited until I was just panting with frustrated fury, no longer shouting at her.

“I remember for the same reason you do, calamari,” she said slowly. “I wasn’t in reality when it happened.”

“ ... p-pardon?”

“I ran away,” Taika said. She wasn’t smirking or smiling now, just sad and cold, like a fire in the rain. “I remember the night when it happened, the minute it happened, and exactly where I was sitting when I felt it start.”

“About four in the morning,” I stammered out. “T-that’s when my father heard me crying and screaming, that’s when I got back, that’s when it was.”

Taika shook her head. “Two fifty six. In the morning. I was in this shitty little bedsit in Croydon — London’s a hell-hole, by the way, but that’s beside the point. I had two girls in the bed behind me, asleep by then, all fucked out. I was sat at this tiny little desk with a glass of vodka, my third, I think. And that’s when I felt it — felt that presence, that watcher, that observer, staring through that crack written in the equations, with so much greater clarity than ever before.” Taika gulped with the weight of memory, breathing harder than I’d expected. “And I didn’t hang around to see what was going to happen. I dipped.”

“Into the abyss?”

Taika nodded. “Into the pits, down into the molten fires, where that gaze couldn’t see. Actually, I jumped off that chair and slammed into my coat and bag, then I dipped. Didn’t want those girls in my

bed to go rifling through my stuff, you know?" She tried to smile. "Not that I cared, but I didn't want a pair of uninvolved to hurt themselves with my shit. I think that's why that photograph survived, it and all the others were in my bag. Anyway ... " Taika stared at the floor. "I stayed down there for hours, burning and burning and burning. Hours in reality, you mind. Felt like forty fucking years. But I wasn't going back, not if that gaze might see me."

"I ... I don't blame you," I managed to say — but part of us did. Part of us wanted to hate Taika, for failing to rescue us, for failing not to make this happen to some other pair of twins instead. "Nobody deserves the Eye."

Taika smiled, but there was no joy in it. "Yeah, whatever. I ran like a coward, instead of trying to save the kids like I'd told myself I would." She cleared her throat. "Long story short, I came back to reality about six hours later. Took me another few weeks to track down which pair of twins the Eye had taken, made more difficult by all records of your sister vanishing."

I shook my head. "You truly have no idea why that happened?"

Taika shrugged. "I wasn't here. Neither were you, you were out there, Beyond. I think that's why we were missed."

We stared at each other for a long, long, long moment. I felt tears rising into my eyes, which we had not expected. Why this? Why was this so frustrating? Why after all this time did she not have the answers we needed?

"Heather, hey," Raine said softly, rubbing my shoulders. "Hey, it's okay, it's gonna be okay."

"We don't understand," we said between clenched teeth. "Why did I survive and come back, when Maisie got trapped out there for ten years? Why erase the fact she existed, but not me? Why? It doesn't make any sense. It doesn't. Still! Even now, I don't get it! If— if we could just understand, maybe we could use that somehow, maybe ... maybe ... " I sighed a sigh I had kept in for ten years. Then I hiccuped, once, loudly and painfully. "Fuck."

"Heathy!" Lozzie said.

"Oh, Heather," Evelyn sighed.

“Fuck,” Praem echoed. “Yes.”

Raine hugged me. Lozzie hugged me too, a soft and warm weight on my back. Evelyn reached out and touched one of my tentacles. I believe Praem touched my shoulder, I could feel her hand there, and smell the gentle scent of lemons. I wondered if she still had any, kept in reserve for me.

When the hug disentangled, I was still wet in the eyes, but I felt a tiny bit better.

“Pardon,” I croaked. “Pardon my language. Sorry about that.”

Taika was staring at me, burning inside like the innards of a forge, fires contained and controlled. She said: “You alright to go on, calamari?”

We shrugged. “We ... we suppose, but what’s more to say?”

Taika smirked. “Actually, I have a question for you, the very same question you just asked yourself. Couldn’t ask you when you were a kid, of course. How did you come back, when your sister didn’t?”

We shrugged again. “I don’t know. The memories are ... confused and painful. They don’t make sense. All I remember is falling back down a well, but that was probably metaphor.”

Taika nodded slowly. “What was it like, when you and her were taken?”

We squeezed our eyes shut and tried not to think about the answer to that question. Even after all this time, all this strength and power, all these tentacles, all these trips to Outside, all these skipping skims across the surface of the abyss, that question still made us feel like we were nine years old again, screaming in madness on our bedroom floor, bleeding and frothing and losing everything.

“Like ... like a rabbit hole,” we squeezed out. We squeezed ourselves too, tight with our tentacles. “Beneath the bed. A rabbit hole, to lead Alice to Wonderland. That’s what I call the dimension where the Eye lives. Wonderland.”

Raine was murmuring my name softly. Lozzie was rubbing my shoulders.

Evelyn said, “Let’s drop that question, goat.”

“Sure thing,” Taika replied.

Slowly, I came back, panting softly. I unclenched my eyes and my tentacles alike. Raine’s hand slipped into ours, interlocking our fingers. Taika was leaning back against her sofa again, looking relaxed but haunted, her fires conserved for now. Evelyn was watching me with frowning concern. Praem had walked over to the kitchen, apparently unable to resist the siren song of all the lightly damaged appliances.

“I’m sorry for what happened, Heather,” Taika said. “Sorry I didn’t fight harder.”

We nodded. “It wasn’t ... really your responsibility. Not really.”

Taika shrugged. “Things like you and I, when we get big enough, it feels like everything is our responsibility. Takes a while to unlearn that. Or maybe that’s just something you and me got in common.”

We nodded along with that too, then glanced around the apartment, using the surroundings to drag our mind back out of a past we had never known. The blazing sunlight was pouring in through the wall of windows, drenching the city beyond in shafts of dawn — and probably ruining the circadian rhythms of myself, Raine, and Evelyn. I could see spirit life here too — clinging to the other skyscrapers, wandering along the little roads so far below, riding atop some of the tiny buses and cars down in the streets. We suddenly wanted to get a better look at the spirits here, and I almost got up from the sofa and wandered over to the windows, but that could wait for a moment.

Instead I cast my eyes across the wrecked apartment, across my friends, and Taika.

Speaking with my parents had given me real catharsis; that truth had mattered. But this truth? What was this? An explanation, but with little meaning to me; it all felt distant and alien. Raw information, from which we might extract useful details, useful things about the Eye, things we could use, if only we could piece it all together.

Evelyn and I needed to talk about all this, in detail, as mage and abyssal squid-girl, to see if all this information would affect our plans. Maybe Taika could provide further insight if provoked; I was not sure how to go about that. But there was little true satisfaction

here, thousands of miles from home, digging through ashes from a decade past. And more importantly than any of that, in order to do this, to come here, to meet Taika in the way I had, I had made stupid mistakes — I had hurt Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight very badly, by ignoring her, by treating her pleading and her advice as nothing. My tentacles quivered with urgent suggestions as soon as I thought about her; we needed to hurry home, we needed to speak with her, apologise — or more.

But we were not done here, not just yet.

There was a true catharsis, and we were going to break down the moment we touched it, the moment we saw that long-lost photograph.

“Taika,” we began to say — began to ask her for the photograph of Maisie and I — but then we veered away into a strange curiosity, stalling for emotional stability, to ask a question which we thought did not matter. All we wanted was a few more moments to steel our heart against the image of Maisie that would soon be in our hands. “Taika,” we started again. “Why were you keeping an eye on me, after I came back from Wonderland? I know you went to speak with my parents, my father recalled it, that’s how I got your business card. Was it guilt?”

“Oh, that.” Taika smirked, her inner fires flaring with sudden throbbing heat once more. She crossed her legs and leaned back, arms wide on her sofa. When she flexed her shoulders I felt a brief pulse of heat. “Come on, you can’t be that naive. Seriously? After our mutual lesson earlier? We gotta have another one? This one won’t be practical, won’t be no fight, and it’s gonna be a lot darker.”

Raine stiffened, Evelyn frowned, Lozzie bobbed up onto her feet. Even Praem turned from the kitchen and stared at Taika.

They sensed it too — not hostility, but dark and sardonic amusement. While speaking about the Eye, Taika had seemed almost vulnerable, her guilt and pain over old failures all too real. But all that vanished, vulnerability rolling off her like burning through a layer of shed skin.

“Um,” I said. “We don’t ... we don’t follow, no. Why were you checking on me?”

“To see if I had to kill you, calamari.” Taika purred through a fire-glow in her throat, like she’d swallowed a slug of molten iron.
“After all, it’s a lot easier to burn up the corpse of a nine year old girl than kill a fully grown squid-god.”

eyes yet to open – 22.7

Taika's words licked across the gap of dawn-drenched air like tongues of flame, rising from the molten pool of her throat like steam from hot iron plunged into oil-thick water; she rolled her exposed pale shoulders against the ruined white leather sofa, leaning back and showing off her abdominal muscles, legs crossed, arms outstretched to either side, her limbs like burning logs falling away from the centre of a fire, to uncork the secret heat within; her orange eyes with their strange goat-like pupils crinkled at the corners with sadistic amusement. A smirk played on her lips, a punctuation mark to her dark admission.

In the days and weeks after I had returned from Wonderland, Taika had watched me — a nine year old girl, alone, bereaved, and lost, going mad with the revelation of an eldritch truth I could not comprehend — and she did not do this to see if I needed her help, or guidance, or rescue, but to find out if she needed to murder me before I could grow up into something else.

Taika's smirk dared us to respond. Smug and teasing and all-knowing. Taunting us with the murder uncommitted.

"Oh, for pity's sake!" I snapped.

Taika blinked.

I sighed a huge, unimpressed, and very irritated sigh, rolling my eyes and crossing my human arms. "I get enough of that from the likes of Zheng, or Badger, or the cultists I apparently keep saving from a fate worse than death. No!" Taika opened her mouth to clarify her words, but I ran right over her and kept talking. "I am not a god — squid-based or eyeball-shaped or any other form of deity or sub-deity, thank you very much. And I'm not going to grow into one, either. The very last thing I need is somebody ... like me —" I gestured at Taika with an up-and-down nod, "—calling me that."

Taika stopped lounging and straightened up. Her smug smirk was gone. "Hey, calamari, I meant—"

"You should bloody well know better!" I interrupted, my temper

well and truly lost. “Pardon my language, I’m sorry for swearing, but if you have genuinely been through a similar experience to me, down in the abyss, then you know what it feels like. You know the alienation and dissociation and the ... the ... body troubles! So I will thank you to not call me a god, jokingly or otherwise.”

I huffed, shrugged my shoulders with my arms still folded, and glared one of my best glares at Taika — which was especially squinty right then because I was exhausted in all three different ways it was possible to be exhausted, had blood around my eyes, and wanted to lie down.

Taika glanced at Raine on my right and Evee on my left. Raine just smirked in imitation of Taika. Evelyn snorted and muttered, “Don’t look at me, goat. You’re the one who offended her.”

Lozzie made her eyes big and covered her mouth with the hem of her poncho, as if she was witnessing a developing scandal. She bobbed from foot to foot behind me, a little bit overstimulated.

Over by the kitchen area, Praem intoned, soft and bell-like: “Correct terminology: angel.”

I winced and screwed my eyes shut. “Praem, I am sorry, but let’s not get into that taxonomical discussion in front of Taika. Please?”

“She can be your angel or your devil,” Praem intoned. “You have no choice in this matter.”

Evelyn grumbled and put her face in one hand. Raine laughed and provided a small round of applause. Lozzie went, “Ooooh! Devil Heathy! What evil will she do!?”

Praem said: “Crimes.”

Taika cleared her throat and smiled as if in great pain.

Raine smirked back at her and said: “Serves you right for trying to get all edgy there.”

Raine had a point. Between us we had succeeded in totally undermining Taika’s dramatic moment, which was probably a good thing. I wasn’t sure why she’d admitted to planning the murder of a helpless nine-year-old girl, but something about her smug glee and the need to provoke us had rubbed me the wrong way. There was something desperate and untrue about the way she’d said that, like we were sitting in a confessional booth and she was trying to shock

the priest into denying her absolution.

“Suppose it does,” Taika said, smiling much less now. “For the record, the ‘squid-god’ bit was just a lucky guess, not a cold read. Just one of my little Lovecraft jokes, you know?”

Evelyn snorted with open derision. “Better not to invoke the excretable gentleman from Providence too often. Is this a habit of yours? Or do you believe all his rambling as truth?”

Taika grimaced. “Nah, no. Fuck. Just ... just ... ” She trailed off and turned her eyes toward the huge bank of windows along the rear wall of the apartment, gazing out at the dawn sunlight, bright and yellow now, drenching the city below in blue-sky illumination.

Raine took the bait; I let her have it, mostly because I was vastly out of my depth talking about this kind of thing.

Raine said: “Taika, hey, lemme ask a thing, okay? Would you really have killed a child? You would have killed nine-year-old Heather, if she’d come back wrong?”

Taika’s smug smirk flickered back onto her lips, like dry kindling touched by sparks. Her goat-like eyes lingered on Raine for a moment. But she didn’t answer.

Raine smirked back. “Yeeeeeeeah,” she said. “You would have done. You would.”

Evelyn hissed through her teeth with genuine disgust. “No better than a mage. No better than all the rest of us.”

Taika snorted. “What, did you think I was noble? Altruistic? You think I did all that shit, running around after Dole, reading the notes on ‘Mister Telescope’, tracking all those twins, because I wanted to save the world or something? Reality isn’t a DnD campaign. That is what you thought, right?”

Raine shrugged; her own smirk had turned dangerous. I felt like I was watching two predators stalk each other around a jungle clearing. Not an unfamiliar feeling when it came to Raine. I rather liked it most of the time, but here I was out of my depth.

“Did cross my mind,” Raine said. “S’what I’d probably do.”

Taika smirked wider. “But you’d have another reason for doing it, bulldog. I don’t even know you, but everybody’s got their own

reasons, buried deep or otherwise.”

Raine shook her head. “Nah. I’d do it anyway.”

“Wait,” I spoke up — this conversation was rapidly getting away from me. “Taika, why did you do it, then? Why did you do all that?”

Taika focused on me again. “Glad you asked, calamari. There’s a lesson you’re missing, right here. One I thought you’d already reached on your own. I gave you all the pieces. Wasn’t meaning to. Just thought you got it. But maybe you don’t.”

Taika reached down and picked up the crushed can she’d tossed onto the sofa earlier; the metal was still marked with little blackened fingerprints from where she’d heated it previously. She held up the ragged disc of aluminium, caged between her fingers and pressed against her palm, and then made it glow red-hot. She held it pointed toward me, like showing off a medal.

“Fire,” she said — and her voice bubbled like a river of molten rock. “You know what fire does?”

I glanced at Raine, but she shrugged. Evelyn said nothing. Lozzie backed away, vaguely curious but sensing something was wrong. My tentacles stirred from their post-workout exhaustion, made curious by the scent of a riddle, by a veiled question which was not what it seemed. Cephalopod curiosity brought reality into focus, as if Taika had just presented us with a toy boat stuffed with fresh lemons.

“Fire ... burns?” I said.

Taika shook her head. “Other things burn. Fire is the burning, the process. No, calamari. Fire — fire cleanses. Fire makes things clean. It burns away the dirt. Fire is better than sunlight, soap, bleach, elbow grease. Better than anything. And that — that’s what I am.”

She squeezed the red-hot aluminium can with her fingers. The metal started to deform under pressure.

“Show off,” Raine muttered.

“Raine, wait,” I said, with all our senses glued to Taika. Our tentacles were raised now, bobbing up and down in thought, their tips twirling and twitching. “Taika, do you mean that’s what you became, down in your version of the abyss?”

Taika nodded slowly, squeezing that can tighter and tighter as she spoke. "The pits. But no, you're not quite right. Long before I went down into the pits for the first time, before I was consumed by fire and reborn from fire, I was a sort of vigilante." She laughed softly. "Gentle word, that, 'vigilante'. Bomb-throwing mad-woman, more like. Arsonist, burner, 'Leveller' — isn't that your English word for it? These days they'd probably call me a 'terrorist'." She nodded toward the wall of penthouse windows, looking out across the city, Chengdu, thousands of miles from England, in the heart of China. "This lot certainly would, if the official authorities knew who and what I really am. But they don't, and they don't care. As long as I don't go burning down anything important." She squeezed the aluminium can almost into a ball. "But, when I went down into the pits, the fire below the world, I lived. I resurfaced. And you have to get it through your head, calamari, when one of us comes back from down there, we don't come back changed, we don't become anything new. We just come back as more of ourselves."

I nodded. "I sort of ... figured that out. I think?"

"Mm," Taika grunted, narrowing her eyes. "Not sure you did, not all the way. Fire burns, so I burn. It's just my nature, setting things on fire and cleaning them out. You were so shocked earlier when I said I would happily burn a few old grimoires. But that's just what I am. That's how I solve problems. I burn things. I cast them into the flames." She laughed, a little more uncomfortable than before. "Does all sound a bit fascist, right? But here's the thing about fire — it doesn't have an ideology. It consumes the good and the bad, the flesh and the metal, the innocent and the guilty, all alike. Fire doesn't care. Fire itself is always clean, and it cleans all it touches. So that's what I do."

I sighed. "This is a very long-winded way of explaining why you were willing to murder a nine year old girl. You don't have to make excuses, you do know that? If you want me to forgive you, I will."

Taika shook her head with an indulgent smile. "Nah, you're still not picking up what I'm putting down, Heather. Yeah, that was why I followed Dole's notes in the end, sure. I thought there might be a monster at the end of the nightmare. Something that would need burning, good kindling for the flame. That's why I watched you, why I checked up on you. That Eye, that watching sensation, if it was trying to crawl into our reality through a little girl ... "

Taika trailed off, no longer smiling. She gulped.

Raine finished: "You would have burned her."

"Yuuuup," said Taika. "And part of me would have enjoyed it. Part of me wouldn't have, of course. I'm not human anymore, but I'm still a person in here. Nobody can burn a child and survive untouched."

Evelyn snorted. "What is the point of pantomiming your guilt for us, Miss Goat?"

Raine agreed with a little laugh. "Yeah, we've let you cook with this, but I don't see where you're heading."

Lozzie, now on the other side of the room with Praem, said, "Maybe we could talk about something else ... "

Taika ignored all that. She had eyes only for me — burning, goatish, quiet eyes of mutual recognition.

"Do ... do you want my forgiveness?" I said. "Or—"

Taika sighed. "No, calamari. I'm trying to tell you that you're the same."

We squint-frowned at her, tentacles going stiff. "That doesn't sound accurate. I'm sorry, I know this means a lot to you, but I've never contemplated murdering a child. In fact, we've—"

"Again, not what I mean, calamari. You're not paying attention."

Taika squeezed her hand shut, finally crushing the can into a molten ball. She opened her fingers and turned off her heat, holding the lump of metal on her upturned palm, watching it cool slowly in the warm sunlight. "You're making all the same mistakes I did.

Well, not quite the same, you're not doing as much arson, but we've got the same root cause. You're not fire, not like I am. You keep calling the pits 'the abyss', so I guess I can't even imagine what you felt. I'm not quite sure what your deal is, but ... " She eyed us, running her eyes up and down our smooth, pale length. We coiled around ourselves in sudden self-conscious embarrassment.

"Hunting, hiding, like a squid?" she asked. "Bursting into my apartment without warning? There's a predator's urge in you. And you pissed your friends off, too, running off all alone to follow that predatory urge." She chuckled softly. "I did pick up on that, earlier. I'm not deaf."

To my left, Evelyn bristled, straightening her spine and squaring her shoulders. “That is between us and Heather, thank you very much. It’s a family matter, nothing to do with you.”

But I was struck mute for a moment, staring at Taika.

Taika tossed the little aluminium ball into the air and caught it again. “Fraid not, English rose. Your little calamari is just like me.” Taika turned her attention back to me again. “She came back from the underworld, reborn as more of herself. And I can take a pretty good guess how she ended up right here. Calamari, you had that business card I gave your father, right?”

“Y-yes,” I stammered.

“You saw that card and jumped right at me, didn’t you? Went off half-cocked. And I’ll bet you justified it to yourself—”

“N-no, how are you—”

“—by saying ‘this is just what I am’, ‘this is my nature’, ‘I can’t deny my nature, so I gotta do it, even if it’s the stupid thing’.” Taika glanced at Evee. “And it was the stupid thing to do, right?”

Evelyn glared at Taika, teeth clenched hard. But then she nodded.

We were all the way alert now, and arguing with ourselves, very badly, tentacles bobbing back and forth. Top-Right did not like this, she said it was nonsense, we were right in the first place, we were always right. Middle-Right coiled up in shame, mewling that Taika was correct, that we’d justified everything with nonsense, that we were selfish and awful. Middle-Left wanted to cry, to hide away and run from this. Bottom-Left snapped and snarled and hissed and raged. Bottom-Right coiled around Middle-Left, kept her from hiding.

A raging storm inside my shared mind. I started to pant, to panic. I had to shut this down, quickly, now!

“H-h-how do you understand all that?” I stammered out loud. “No, you just got that from overhearing the conversation earlier. That was a lucky guess, that—”

“Predatory hunting isn’t all you’ve got though,” Taika went on, smooth and hot, like clean flame from a gas fire. “You want to be spiky and scary and toxic, you like hiding in the dark.” She nodded to my friends, even to Lozzie and Praem. “And you’ve got friends.

Pack instinct, something like that. That keeps you from being a monster. Means you weren't a monster in the first place. Dunno what that is. Nesting, protective, something like that, something I haven't got either. Where would you be without friends — or what did you call them, 'found family'?"

Evelyn spoke before I could. "This is rude at best and invasive at—"

"Dead," I blurted out — we all did, all of us in agreement. "Dead. I'd be dead."

I sniffed hard, feeling tears threaten in my eyes. Evelyn frowned at me. Raine put her arm back around my waist.

Evelyn snapped: "Heather—"

"No, no, Eevee," I said. "She's ... she's ... "

Right? Wrong? Offensive? We had justified everything and anything by referencing what we were! A clever little cephalopod — who did not have to do the difficult thing of going home and dragging her friends into this, who did not have to treat Sevens like a real partner, with real feelings, but just told her to shove off into the dark and let us squirm and writhe and hurt ourselves.

"Hey, English rose," Taika said to Eevee. "You were mad as hell with your octopus girl earlier, right? For running off alone without telling anybody? For breaking promises? For making ... who was it, 'Sevens' cry? But this is a pattern with her, right?"

Evelyn ground her teeth.

"It is," I squeaked.

"Yes, fine," Evelyn crunched out. "She has a habit of going off alone, emotionally and literally. Breaking promises with good intentions. Treating others like ... " Evelyn hissed. "Why am I telling you this? Heather, why am I telling her this? We came here for information about the Eye, not for a group therapy session."

"Because I've got insight," Taika purred.

"Because she's right," I murmured. We all pulled in tight, tentacles bunched up hard. "She's right, I've always been justifying things to myself this way, I ... I've become so skilled at reinforcing my own bad ideas."

Taika said: "Where would you be without your friends, calamari —

if you didn't wind up dead?"

I shook my head, lost inside the question.

Taika sighed. "You'd be some post-human nightmare, far, far, far gone beyond the edge, preying on whoever or whatever you can, justifying it in all sorts of ways. And then somebody like me, or something bigger than you, or something you can't even comprehend, would come along and burn you up."

I was panting too hard, feeling the sweat prickle on my back and forehead and under my armpits. I made one last attempt to justify myself: "I ... when I broke into your apartment, I was ... I was convinced you knew something, that I needed to ..."

Taika shrugged. "Doesn't matter the reason you had, calamari. You're following your nature, same as me when I came back as fire. But none of it is alien. It's just us. It's just whoever we were before, just more true. And if you keep using it to justify things you know are wrong, you'll ruin yourself." Taika smiled — not the smirk, but melancholy, a cold camp-fire burned down to ashes in the misty morning. "I'm telling you this 'cos I've been there too. I justified burning a lot of shit that I shouldn't, literally and metaphorically. I pushed everyone away, burned all the bridges, fucked everything up. And I always, always, always had good reasons. I'm sure you've got good reasons too, for every one of your hunts, for every time you ignore your friends, for every time you hurt them." She sighed. "This is what I've been trying to explain: the reason I would have killed a nine-year-old girl, burned up her corpse, and thrown the ashes into the sea? Same reason your friends here were so angry with you. Same reason you burst into my apartment with a half-cocked plan you tried to back down from. Same reason you saw that damn business card and went off like you did, and told yourself the whole way that it was a good idea. Am I right, or am I wrong?"

My throat was blocked by a lump. My chest was tight, my palms were sweating, my eyes stinging with something more than pain.

"Yes," I murmured. "You're right."

It felt different coming from somebody like Taika — from somebody like myself, who'd been down there in the abyss and knew how it felt to come back to the world in the wrong body, inhabiting the wrong space, filled with urges to do things that were not quite human. It was all so easy to justify anything with reference to that

alienation and dissociation.

To justify my tentacles? That was joyous. To justify hissing and spitting, or attacking those who would hurt my friends? That was acceptable, perhaps even laudable, maybe even genuinely good.

But this?

I ignored my own promises, broke my own rules, did stupid things because I convinced myself it was the correct move — and this, this break-in and confrontation, it was the last straw upon the camel's back. This all could have gone so much worse if Taika had not been who and what she was. I might be dead, because I had not gone to my friends.

Raine had been so afraid for me that she'd shot first and asked questions later. Evelyn had been furious enough to shout in my face, terrified for my safety. And Sevens? I'd made Sevens cry, because I had ignored her pleas to look after myself, to not leap before looking, to seek help from my pack.

"Heather? Heather, hey, love?" Raine said. She squeezed my middle. "Heather, it's okay, it's okay."

"It's not okay," I croaked. But I didn't cry, though I had to wipe my eyes on my sleeve. The faint sheen of tears came away with flakes of blood dissolving in the moisture. Crying now would be self-indulgent. I wasn't the one hurt here, I was the one who'd done the hurting. "It's not okay, Raine. Eeve ... I ... I ... "

Evelyn was cringing. She didn't want to hear, but I started to say it anyway.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Heather!" she snapped. "Save it—"

"I'm sorry. I apologise. I don't know if I can fix myself, if I can be better, I—"

"Save. It," Evelyn repeated.

"Wh-why? But—"

Evelyn huffed out a long-suffering sigh. "Because I have not finished scolding you yet. I have not finished with you. You don't get to apologise now. Your apology is not accepted, not before I'm done. The only reason I held back is because we are thousands of miles

away from home and you're having a crisis. And we're in front of this!" She gestured at Taika with her walking stick.

"Gee, thanks," Taika muttered.

"But ... when we get home?" I asked.

Evelyn huffed again, then nodded. "When we get home, Heather."

I nodded, then did something I could almost not face doing. I turned to look at Raine. Three tentacles went first, then the other three, then the rest of me.

Oh, she was smiling, of course. That made it even harder.

"Raine," I said gently. "Are you disappointed with me?"

Raine opened her mouth to lie, so smoothly and so easily, but then she caught the look in my eyes, paused, and pulled a sort of grinning wince. "I just wish you'd stop putting yourself through this."

A terrible lump formed in my throat. I nodded. "O-okay. Understood."

"Hey, Heather, I love you," she said.

"I love you too, Raine," I murmured.

"Huh," Evelyn grunted.

Then we looked up at Lozzie. She just bit her lower lip and wobbled her head from side to side. That was all the answer I needed.

Praem said: "Bad Heathers go in the naughty bucket."

That made me almost laugh, just enough to stop me from dissolving into morose moping.

"Alright!" Evelyn threw up one hand, her other clutching her walking stick too hard. "Alright, fine, that's quite enough. Why in front of her?" Evelyn gestured at Taika again. "And why now? Why, after all the times we've ... huh!"

Because Taika understood.

My parents were not responsible for what had happened to me; I'd learned that only hours ago, that my mother was desperate for the truth once presented with even the smallest crack. Taika was not

responsible for the Eye; she'd been doing her best to avert the situation, whatever her motives, whatever her flaws. Even this 'Darren Dole' she'd known was not responsible — just another foolish mage playing with powers beyond his limit, a man used up by the Eye, trying to do good in some unrelated situation. Mages, parents, doctors, everyone — none of them did this to me. They did other things, but they were not responsible for my actions.

The thing that had crawled back out of the abyss, wearing my face, inhabiting my flesh, speaking in my voice? That was all me. The decisions were all mine.

Heather Morell had made Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight cry, because Heather Morell kept acting like a shit.

Pardon my language.

"Because this is like Natalie's parents all over again," I said out loud, for Evelyn's benefit.

Evelyn squinted at me. "Heather. What?"

I sighed and tried to explain. "When Natalie was taken Outside, I justified what I did to her parents on the basis of what was best for Natalie. And maybe I was right about that part. Maybe she won't grow up like me, confused and afraid. But even if the result was right, I wasn't thinking clearly. I was bitter and angry, I tortured a pair of people, like surrogates for my parents. And today, when I went to see my parents for real, I thought I'd gotten past that. But I hadn't."

Evelyn just frowned.

"I didn't lash out at my parents — well, not much," I sighed. "But then I lashed out at Taika here, at the version of her I'd built in my head, at what I imagined she might be. And I lashed out at Sevens. I ignored her requests. All of it. I went squid-brained and I told myself I was doing the right thing. But I wasn't. And Taika understands that. Because she and I are the same."

Taika watched me as I spoke. When I finished, she nodded slowly.

"You're doing a hell of a lot better than I did, calamari," she said. "I burnt up a whole fucking marriage before I wised up. Feel a kind of responsibility toward you, you know?"

We sighed. "Thank you, but the last thing we need is another

surrogate mother figure. The Eye is one too many.”

Taika smirked — but then I cut her off, surprising even myself.

“You did have a responsibility to me, though,” I said. “And you shirked it.”

Taika raised her fire-red eyebrows. Raine suppressed a smile — perhaps she could sense where I was going with this. Evelyn frowned at me and said, “Heather?”

“It’s alright, Eevee,” I said, without taking my eyes from Taika. “I’m very calm and very sensible right now, I promise. You may insist if you wish, and I will listen.” Partly to show Evelyn that I was serious, and partly to reinforce the emotional steps I was taking, I concentrated briefly on folding away the straggling remains of my abyssal transformation: I cleared my throat until all I had was a regular set of human vocal cords; I blinked my eyes hard until I had only one set of lids; I switched off all my chromatophores — well, almost all, I did allow myself a little indulgence; I made sure my tail bone was not a spike and my skin was not armoured and my muscles were soft and buttery and Heather-small. Last but not least I ensured my tentacles were smooth, rather than studded with the afterthoughts of barbs and hooks and spikes.

But then I turned the brightness up; I made us pink and orange, electric blue and neon green.

I even took the time to rub the dried blood away from my eyes. I would be presentable and polite, sensible and serious, and I would do right by the people either side of me.

“You could have told me the truth, Taika,” I said. “When I was a child. You could have told me what I was, what happened to me, that Maisie was real.”

Taika chuckled softly and shook her head. “I told you, calamari, I don’t stay in one place for long. I can’t—”

“Then you could have come back!” I snapped, allowing a little sliver of my temper to roam free. “When I was a teenager, or years later. You could have spared me years — years! — in and out of mental hospitals, just by telling me the truth. But you didn’t.”

Taika’s smile turned almost mocking. “You’re just lashing out at me because I’ve told you off for bad behaviour.”

“Actually, yes!” I said, getting a bit more shrill than I’d intended — that was more like it. That felt right. Our tentacles wiggled, joining in. “I am. You’re correct. And I’m lashing out in the way I’m supposed to. With words, instead of hissing at you — which I still reserve the right to do, mind you. I’m saying this now, politely, properly — but angrily! So I can get it out of my system. So my friends can be assured that I’m not going to teleport myself halfway across the world to have another tantrum at you, ever again.”

I paused to take a deep breath, expecting this to erupt into an argument. I wasn’t sure if I was ready for that, but I was ready to keep my cool. Or at least that’s what I told myself. If the worst came to the worst, I would let Raine and Eevee do the talking.

But Taika just waited, eyebrows raised. Evelyn stayed quiet too, watching me with growing curiosity.

I pushed on: “We ran into a situation very much like my own, some months back. I mentioned it just now. A little girl by the name of Natalie was taken Outside by a mage. We rescued her, and then I forcibly introduced her parents to magic, to the supernatural, so that they would never make the same mistake of denying their child’s experiences. And ... and in retrospect, I believe I made the wrong decision. I went about it incorrectly. But you!” I pointed a tentacle at Taika. “You did the opposite. You checked I wasn’t going to devour the world, and then you never came back to tell me the truth!”

“I couldn’t do—”

“No, Taika, you could have done!” I huffed and scowled as best I could, channelling Evelyn. I crossed my arms and all six tentacles. “Unless you’ve got some esoteric reason you haven’t explained yet? You haven’t? No? Taika, I’m not the slightest bit angry at you for ‘failing’ to save Maisie and me. That wasn’t your fault. But I’m mad at you for never coming back. You had a responsibility, and you shirked it.”

For the first time in a very long while, I felt like a good girl again.

Seven good girls, all sharing one neural layout inside one body. Not a good girl in the way my mother had always defined and reinforced, normal and quiet and polite, with good-girl thoughts and good-girl shoes — but a good girl, because I’d been polite and sensible, but still shown that I was very angry.

A first step. It would have to do for now.

Taika smirked again, chuckling more to herself than anybody else in the room. Evelyn said nothing, but watched me with what I guessed was grudging acceptance. Raine rubbed my back. Lozzie just smiled and finally returned to whispering at Taika's handle-less black blades, all lined up on the big table.

Taika shrugged. "Fair enough, calamari. Never said I was a good mentor figure."

I nodded, a little stiff, but it felt right. "Thank you."

Then Taika said: "You want that photograph now?"

"... yes," I almost whispered. "Please."

Taika stood up from her comfortable position on the sofa, tossed the now-cold ball of aluminium onto the ruins of her coffee table, and ran both hands through her fire-red hair. She glanced around the wrecked main room of her apartment for a second, hands on her hips. "Photo's with all the others, of all the other kids, somewhere in my big box of notes, but that's back in my office, back there." She jerked a thumb at the corridor, the one which led off toward the other rooms of the apartment. "Do you trust me enough now to let me go walking around my own place without hurling yourself at me?"

I sighed, pantomiming irritation to hide the nervous flutter in my chest. "Of course."

Raine stood up too, her hand trailing across my back as she rose. "Mind if I go with you?" she asked Taika. "Just to see. Never seen an apartment in China before. Never seen one this flashy anywhere."

Taika shot her a nasty smirk. Raine grinned back.

"As long as you don't try to shoot me, bulldog," said Taika.

Raine grinned wider, produced her handgun from somewhere inside her waistband, made sure the safety was on, and then tossed it on the sofa next to me. "I'm serious. Just wanna see."

"Raine," I tutted — but I relented. She was, after all, genuinely just curious.

Maybe about Taika, but that still counted.

Taika nodded toward the kitchen. “If you lot are staying for much longer, I could do with some breakfast. Liquid breakfast is nice, but I need some solid food. What is it, the middle of the night for you five?”

“Breakfast!” Lozzie cheered.

Raine and Evelyn shared a glance. Evelyn rolled her eyes and said, “Nearly midnight by now, I would guess.”

“Bed time snack,” said Praem.

Lozzie threw her hands in the air, poncho going everywhere.

“Breakfast!”

“Breakfast!” Raine joined in.

“Oh, fine,” Evelyn huffed. “Heather?”

“Hm? Sorry? Me? Pardon?”

Evelyn said, “Are you alright with this? You’re the one who’s been out all day, dealing with a dozen types of bullshit. Mostly of your own making, but still.”

Taika said: “Bit o’ greasy food will do you a world of good. Come on, calamari. I promise no seafood.”

“Oh, um, okay then,” I said. “Let’s ... lets stay and eat, just for a bit.”

“Breakfast!” Lozzie cheered again.

The impromptu gathering — of abyssal returnees, mages and their daughters, fluffy Outsider girls, and Raine — briefly dissolved in several different directions. Taika gave Praem some instructions to get the air fryer going, though Praem didn’t seem to need them, pre-empting everything Taika said. Lozzie joined her in the kitchen — with, oddly enough, one of those black blades in tow, floating behind Lozzie like a curious puppy. Taika eyed that with a touch of concern, but then seemed to dismiss it as not worth worrying about. Taika then led the way into the rear of her apartment with Raine in tow. Evelyn sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose while I waited on the sofa, my heart going too fast, my throat going dry, my hands going clammy.

“Heather,” Evelyn said quickly as soon as Taika was out of sight.

“Did she see the Fractal?”

“Um ... ”

“The Fractal. On your arm?”

“Oh, um, no.” I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Good.” Evelyn nodded. “Keep it that way.”

“Why?”

Evelyn tutted. “Just for safety.” She turned her eyes away and started at the floor, then carried on, slow and awkward: “I am proud of you for expressing your frustration with Taika properly. That was good. But you’re still ... ”

I let her trail off before I interrupted.

“I know,” we said. “She was right, Eevee. She was right about me. If I don’t respect the concerns and worries of my closest, like you, or Raine, or Sevens, then I’m just hurting you. I can’t keep justifying everything by insisting that it’s the way I am. Just like Taika. It was different, coming from her.”

Evelyn looked up, held my gaze for a moment, then nodded. “Good.”

I let out a big sigh. My hands were shaking. “Now, I do have to put that thought into action though, I can’t just ... say ... ”

We trailed off as Taika and Raine re-emerged from the corridor.

Taika was carrying a photograph in one hand, the image turned toward her chest. Everyone else went quiet as Taika walked right up to me and then held the photograph out, image side down.

It was an old-style physical photograph, probably taken on an analogue camera, printed on that slightly stiffened glossy paper which seemed like a relic from another era. I had vague memories that when Maisie and I had been young, my father had a fondness for those single-use, disposable cameras. They’d already been going out of style, but he’d retained the desire long past the point of practicality. A flash of memory blossomed down the length of our tentacles — I recalled my father holding one of those little cameras, black plastic wrapped in bright yellow marketing stickers, holding it up to his eye, his face painted orange by the sunset.

Silently, I thanked my father for his little eccentricities. Without those silly cheap cameras this photograph would not exist.

“Take it, calamari,” Taika purred.

I hadn’t moved my fingers an inch. My palms were damp with sweat. My heart was going too fast. I couldn’t breathe.

Raine stepped behind the sofa and put both hands on my shoulders. Evelyn touched her fingertips to one of my tentacles, soft and gentle and distant.

We reached out with two human hands and the tip of one tentacle, to accept the photograph. We took it with a quivering grip, then turned it over and stared into the past.

The photograph was exactly as my father had described, an impressive display of both his amateur skill and his love for the subjects of the picture: a salmon-and-apricot sunset sky was framed in the upper part of the photo, peering over the ivy-encrusted brick wall at the rear of the Rose and Thistle pub, perhaps a few minutes before the light gave way to dusk; the pub garden was visible on either end of the picture, the grass thick and green and healthy, just the right side of unkempt, dotted with little wooden bench-tables, some still littered with empty beer glasses and the remains of proper gastropub food; and in the middle stood two little girls, cupped between grass and sky, smiling at the camera with the joyous abandon that only happy children can achieve.

The girl on the left was dressed in a pink puffer jacket, with a long white skirt, and a pair of ugg boots on her feet. The girl on the right was wearing a dark orange coat, stripy jogging bottoms, and pink trainers. They were sharing a scarf with a long pink-blue zig-zag pattern all the way down the length. The girl on the left had wrapped a portion of the scarf around the neck of the girl on the right.

Our parents always did like to dress us differently, despite the fact that we shared the same pool of clothes — an ultimately futile attempt to stop us twins getting up to the ultimate mischief of pretending to be each other.

Because the clothes were the only difference.

Both girls had the same face, the same small neat mouth, the same awkward nose, the same puppy-fat in the cheeks, the same eyes which seemed to shade from brown to grey-green as the sunset passed overhead. They had the same mousy brown hair, thin and

delicate, cut in the same style with the same straight fringe. It was hard to tell beneath the puffer jacket and the coat, but they shared the same build as well, the same propensity for petite physique in later life, the same height and weight and length of limbs.

They even shared the same toothy gap — both smiles were missing the left central incisor.

I remembered that. Maisie and I had both felt our left central incisor baby teeth getting loose at the same time, ready to fall out soon. She had lost hers first, but only by about a day; we'd felt collectively distraught by the strange new incongruity between our bodies. Maisie had forgone the reward of putting her tooth underneath her pillow, forfeited the prize of a shiny clean pound coin — I found out many years later that dad had saved them up from work, fresh from the mint, so to a little girl they might seem brand new from some fairy-forge. Instead she hid the tooth in her pocket all day, and then at night I wiggled and worried at my own loose tooth while she watched, until it finally popped free from my gums. The next morning we had proudly presented mum with a tooth each.

This photograph had been taken a few days later.

My vision blurred with tears. A few droplets ran down my cheeks and dripped into my lap. Some of them hit the photograph. I wiped them away with a shaking hand.

"Heather," Raine murmured.

"Give her a second," Evelyn hissed. "Let her ... just let her."

I had not seen Maisie's face in over ten years — yet I saw her face, that face, every single day, every time I looked in the mirror. We had not changed so much since nine years old. We'd grown up — no, I'd grown up. Had Maisie? Had she aged, or was she paused in time at nine years old?

A sob threatened to claw its way up my throat. I let it free, but I only needed the one.

"I can't tell the difference," I said. My voice was a low whine. "I can't—I don't know—I don't know which one is me and which one is Maisie. I don't remember ... don't remember the clothes I was wearing. I can't tell the difference."

Raine squeezed my shoulders. Evelyn reached out and took my knee, awkward but genuine. Lozzie peered over from behind and touched one of my tentacles. Taika had withdrawn a few paces.

“Maybe I was Maisie all along,” I said, then hiccuped and shook my head. “No, sorry. That was ... that was a bad joke. We ... we used to pretend to swap places all the time, but ... but ... ”

From somewhere behind me, Praem softly intoned: “Twins.”

I nodded, staring at the photograph. “We looked the same. We always did. Do ... do you think she’ll look like that ever again? I don’t even know if she has a body.”

“We’re going to bring her home,” somebody said.

I wasn’t sure who. It didn’t matter.

I sobbed again, and twice was finally enough. I wiped away the tears in my eyes, took a deep breath, and looked up at Taika; her habitual smirk was gone for the moment, retreated out of respect.

“Thank you, Taika,” I said. “May I keep this?”

Taika raised her eyebrows in surprise. “It’s yours.”

After that we broke for breakfast. Or second dinner, or a midnight snack, or “manual jet-lag pig-out” as Raine put it, though none of us had ever been on a plane or experienced actual jet-lag — with the exception of Taika, as we discovered when she declared that whatever we were experiencing, it was not jet-lag, because once we were done here we all got to return to our own beds on our rainy, cold, benighted isle.

“I quite like my rainy, cold, benighted isle, thank you very much,” I told her, and that was the truth.

I was, however, not much good for anything else, certainly not for helping prepare breakfast; I was worn out both physically and emotionally in almost every way possible, with limbs like jelly, a head stuffed full of lead, and a great desire to sit down for rather a long time. I ended up giving the photograph of Maisie and I to Evelyn, for safekeeping until we got home. Evelyn always had lots of pockets and nice places to stash things, and we trusted her with that part of our heart. She muttered something about making copies of the image, just in case, and also dug out her mobile phone again, to send more text messages home.

Praem took charge in the rather battered kitchen, assisted by Lozzie flitting about like a helper fairy, and Taika providing the information on where things actually were. The huge air fryer hummed to life like a small engine, far louder than I had expected it to be.

“That’s not an air fryer,” Evelyn grumbled. “It’s so large it’s just a convection oven.”

Taika smirked at that, just as hard as if Evelyn had misquoted some esoteric magical secret. “Wrong again, English rose. Wrong again. I can see you clearly have not eaten air fried food.”

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted. “Alright then. Impress me, goat.”

Raine helped by organising the chairs around the massive table, and quietly shuffling away the two that I had damaged beyond likely repair. Taika cleared away the weird suitcase with the electronic innards — which had surprised me by surviving the fight, clearly a lot heavier than it looked and probably covertly armoured. She also made her dozen black blades leap into the air to open up the space on the table.

Evelyn watched with naked discomfort as the blades swirled across the room and settled against the wall of windows instead, standing on their points.

One blade, however, did not join her sisters, but stayed hovering around Lozzie’s back, exactly like a puppy unwilling to part from a new friend.

Taika put her hands on her hips and cocked her head at Lozzie. “Okay, now, that’s not funny anymore. How are you doing that?”

Lozzie hid a toothy giggle behind one hand.

Taika sighed. “I’m serious. They’ve acted funny before, and it’s not always safe. Please?”

Lozzie chirped: “I just told her she was pretty!” Lozzie glanced at the blade. “You are!”

Evelyn sighed, then glanced at me for help. “Is this some pneumasomatic element I can’t see? Is Lozzie talking to an invisible six-foot goat? I have my modified glasses somewhere here, but I don’t feel like digging them out. I’d rather not see the local Chengdu wildlife all over the walls.”

“Ummmmm,” I said. “Um. No, actually. It’s just ... it’s just a big knife. And there’s no wildlife this high. I suspect Taika and I scared them all off.”

The blade did not respond in any fashion, at least none that I could discern, not even a little wobble-nod of appreciation. Somehow all this made perfect sense to Taika.

“Well,” she said to Lozzie. “Just put her back with the others before you leave, alright?”

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie nodded happily.

Shortly thereafter we all ended up around the massive wooden table, clustered at one end, with far too much food for either breakfast or a midnight snack. Taika had all sorts of Chinese breakfast foods I’d never seen before — frozen dumplings heated in the air fryer, bowls of cold noodles, pancakes filled with egg — along with more recognisable fare like toast and a couple of grilled sausages. Lozzie joined right in with her, as did Raine, perfectly willing to eat breakfast at midnight. Evelyn opted for a bit of personal restraint, not due to any distaste for the food, but simply because her body clock couldn’t take it; but Praem made sure her buns were buttered and her toast dripping with jam. Praem had also performed some kind of freezer-scrounging miracle on my behalf, and summoned up a piece of fish drenched in lemon, which I promptly demolished.

Praem joined us last. Nobody asked where she found the frozen strawberries.

Taika ate a lot, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, like a fire chewing through varying densities of wood. I used a knife and fork to eat, but my tentacles haloed outward around us as we sat. Taika and I watched each other across the table, until she winked and made me feel sheepish.

Conversation was sporadic at first. The situation was far too bizarre for even Raine to pretend normality. Breaking bread in the weirdest of ways, halfway across the world, in a place none of us had ever been before. It didn’t quite seem real, like the walls might fall away at any moment to reveal a sound stage covered in green screens.

But as plates were emptied and bellies were filled, Taika grew talkative.

“Well well well,” she purred, leaning back in her chair, finished eating for now. “If I knew you island monkeys could be this civilized, I would have invited you earlier.”

Evelyn snorted. She flicked a fingernail against her glass of water. “No you wouldn’t.”

Raine thumbed at the bank of windows. “Chengdu, huh? How’d you end up in China?”

“Long story,” Taika said. “Try to shoot me a couple more times and maybe I’ll tell you it.”

Praem intoned: “No firearms at the table.”

I was finishing the last of my lemony fish — certainly the most extravagant midnight snack I’d ever had — when I felt the question coming. Taika was stretching her legs and casting her eyes over the group. Evelyn was finished, Lozzie was watching attentively, and Raine was slowing down as she chewed a mouthful of what I thought was a spicy dumpling. The tension which had dissipated so neatly was reforming in the sun-filled gap between Taika and myself.

Raine — bless her and keep her safe, whoever and whatever is listening — headed it off before Taika could take charge.

Raine said: “You wanna ask about our game plan, don’t you?”

Taika raised her fire-red eyebrows. “Game plan?”

Raine grinned. “Don’t play coy. Our game plan for Wonderland. For rescuing Heather’s twin.”

“Ohhhh,” Taika purred. Her eyelids drooped, heavy and slow. She leaned back as if far too full of food. “Nah. I’m good, thanks.”

Raine, Evelyn, and I all shared a surprised look. But Lozzie nodded sagely, and Praem simply continued to chew her strawberries.

Taika chuckled softly. “Don’t get me wrong, I hope you make it. Hope you all get back in one piece and rescue your sister. But the less time I spend thinking about the Beyond, the better.”

Raine pulled a sort of silly upside-down smile. “You know what, fair enough. Coward once, coward twice, hey?”

Taika smirked back at her. “I don’t rise to that kind of bait, bulldog.

I've been around too long for that."

"You ... you don't want to perhaps offer your help?" I asked — then felt very silly as I finished saying it. "Though I suppose you don't have much of a reason to."

Taika shrugged. "Is the Eye flammable?"

Evelyn shot back instantly: "Literally or philosophically?"

Taika didn't miss a beat. "Either."

"Probably not," I muttered. "Eyes do tend to be wet."

"There's that," Taika said. "Look, I really do hope you get your sister back, Heather. But I like being alive, and I like not being out in the Beyond. I can't really offer you any useful advice about a great big staring contest, no more than I already have. I can't help you there. That's not my domain."

I nodded along. "A staring contest. That is the basic plan."

"Really?"

"Sort of," I murmured.

Evelyn snorted. "You sure you don't want to come help us set fire to an entire Outside dimension?"

Taika shook her head. "Besides, that would require me to come back to England first, right? No thanks, no way. I'm happy at this end of the world. Or at least in the general vicinity."

Raine said, with a twinkle in her eye: "Not even for that ex-wife you mentioned?"

Taika puffed out a big breath which smelled of coal-smoke. "That specific bridge is burnt to the waterline. The bank has been scooped out with an industrial digger. The roads have been torn up, planted over, and turned into a forest."

"Oof," said Raine. "That bad, hey?"

"My fault," said Taika.

Lozzie giggled behind one hand. "Heart-breaker!"

Taika winced. "It wasn't like that. Hell, why am I telling this to a bunch of kids?"

Praem intoned: "We are very trustworthy."

I placed my knife and fork down on the wooden table with a little clack, and said: "Actually, Taika, I think you do have some remaining advice for us. I have a couple of questions for you."

That got Taika's attention. Perhaps it was the formal tone in my voice. She sat up a little and leaned her elbows on the table. "Fire away, calamari."

"Were you ever dysphoric?"

I wiggled my tentacles to illustrate my point, but Taika just frowned. "Hm?"

"When you came back from ... 'the pits', as you keep calling the abyss."

"Oh!" Taika suddenly lit up, smiling at me with strange recognition, like she finally understood something that had been in front of her this whole time. "You mean when I was just plain old me, back in my body after the first trip down. Not a twenty foot tall goat woman with fire in my eyes."

"Exactly," I said. "I ... it's been ... kind of a big deal, for me."

"With those tentacles? I can imagine." She laughed, in a different way to before, like a comfy little blaze in an old fireplace. She almost looked like she wanted to reach across the table and take my hand. "You've had it worse than I did, kid. Hell, even when I grew horns it wasn't that bad."

Lozzie went wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "You had horns?!"

Taika grinned, loving the attention. She winked at Lozzie, then mimed a pair of horns on her head with both hands. "Oh yeah. Big, black, curly horns. Can still do it, but I just don't feel like it as much these days. Once, I actually used them to head-butt somebody. Wouldn't recommend it, human neck isn't set up for much of that." She laughed. "Seriously. Can you believe my hair used to be brown? Ha! Can't even imagine it now."

"Horns! Horns! Horns!" Lozzie cheered.

Taika spoke about it so casually. So easily.

And that was one of the most comforting things I've ever heard from anybody. In more ways than the obvious, I was not alone.

Taika and I were not friends or allies; she was so distant from me, from us, from England, Sharrowford, everything, that I could barely imagine the shape of her life. But I understood this one thing, this bond we shared over what we were, and how it made us feel.

Pushing on, I asked: "Have you ever met anybody else like us?"

Taika's amusement faded a little. She looked at me with narrowed eyes and clucked her tongue — a sound like a branch cracking in the flames. "Twice, calamari." She paused, perhaps trying to decide how much to say, but my face must have lit up with curious need. Not the only ones! Not just us! Taika grumbled a little, then went on: "The first one, he was a long time ago, and he's long gone. He went Beyond, by choice, and never came back. Haven't seen him in almost thirty years, if he's even still alive." She sighed heavily. "His name was Isaac Reed, and he was ... weirder than either of us. Reality was more difficult for him. He couldn't stay here, not forever. He needed to be elsewhere."

"What was he?" Raine asked.

Taika shrugged. "I have no fucking idea."

I asked: "And the second?"

Taika squinted harder. "The other one I'm not at liberty to disclose. They're around, but we're not in regular contact, and I'll have to ask first, see if they're up for meeting you sometime, or if they'd rather not know you. No offense, calamari, but you're still an unknown."

"No offense taken," I said, and meant it. "Thank you, Taika."

Taika sighed a big sigh, her breath the crackle of a camp-fire, with the smell of burning iron and a red-hot tin roof. "Heather, listen. You understand there's no community here, right? There's nothing like that. There's just a handful of us things washed up from the shores of hell. Or maybe hell spat us out, too hard to digest. I've never quite decided which version of the metaphor I like best."

"Community can be built," I answered without hesitation.

Taika frowned, about to say something to the contrary, but Raine burst into a blazing grin, Evelyn harrumphed, and Lozzie banged on the table. Praem just said: "Must be."

Taika raised a hand in surrender. "Fine, fine. If you make it back

from Wonderland, I'll see about introducing you to the other survivor from hell's shores. How does that sound?"

I raised a tentacle and held it out across the table.

Taika seemed surprised, but then she took me in her hand — which was hot like a fresh coal, but didn't burn what it touched — and shook me by the tentacle.

"Good luck, calamari," she said.

"Thank you, goat-girl," I replied, then forced myself to smile past the nervous anxiety in my chest. "I'm going to go take your advice now."

"Oh? Yeah? Which part?"

I withdrew my tentacles and wrapped them around myself, gripping the chair, steadying my racing heart, and said: "I'm going to go stop burning down my relationships."

eyes yet to open – 22.8

Number 12 Barnslow Drive is more than a house.

What had once started life as an unassuming 19th century Victorian red brick was now much more than four walls and a roof, more than the sum of the spaces between upright surfaces and horizontal floors, more than the totality of rooms and hallways, of beds and seats and doors, of creaking boards and antique fixtures and clean porcelain in the bathroom, more than the glugging of the boiler and the echoes in the cellar, more than the scratching on window panes just beyond one's sight, more than the tapping of radiators or fingernails behind the walls, more than the cocoon-like warmth of me and mine curled up in bed, more than the beloved books in Evelyn's study or the satisfying click of the dials on the oven, more than the overgrown back garden and the cracked paving stones of the front path, and more than the generations' worth of skin oil worked into the wood of the bannister.

I knew this in my gut, even if I touched the knowledge with only the lightest caress. It was a great comfort which we did not wish to curdle, not for any frivolity or idle curiosity; Number 12 Barnslow Drive had welcomed us in, wrapped us with layers of protection, and kept us safe. More importantly it had kept everyone else safe as well, everyone who required sanctuary deep within the bowels of this thing that had once been just another house.

Number 12 Barnslow Drive always had a shadowy nook or a hidden cranny, ready and waiting for any lost soul in need.

Which is why I was creeping down the upstairs hallway, wearing fresh socks and clean clothes, at almost 3 o'clock in the morning, in the dark, alone.

And I did have to do this alone. There was simply no other way. Anything else would have rendered me the lowest sort of coward.

At least this way I was using my powers for good — what a ridiculous cliché, but it was true. Here we were, seven tightly coiled squid-girls in one body, once again play-acting the octopus, sliding in perfect silence through the cold waters, in pursuit of our prey.

It was about two hours since Lozzie and I had teleported back to jolly old England, to Sharrowford, and home. Two hours since I had bidden goodbye and farewell and ‘see you again sometime’ to Taika; the abyssal flame-goat and I had shared another handshake, a mutual nod, an agreement not to change phone numbers, and then something akin to a hug — she had pulled me in close and clapped me on the back several times, without lingering long enough for anything to get awkward, or perhaps to avoid me grasping her with my tentacles. Hugging Taika was like embracing a furnace one had left on for too long, in direct sunlight, in the desert.

We had spent most of those two hours since arriving home being very contrite and apologetic, while Evelyn had a ‘proper go’ at us, as Raine put it — nothing new, nothing revelatory, but I had fully deserved the telling off. Evelyn was now finally tucked up safely in bed, hopefully asleep at last, though before retiring for the night she had ventured forth into the rear of the house long before me, with Praem at her side, leaving me with strict instructions not to follow. I understood that Evelyn had established her own private understanding with the very quarry I now hunted.

Raine and Zheng were still downstairs, drinking their way through a bottle of vodka together; Lozzie was with them, but presumably not drinking. The last I’d seen of her she was in Zheng’s lap, telling a very complicated story about a pair of squirrels and a magpie. Zheng had almost single-handedly undermined Evelyn’s earlier rant — she had taken the news of my foolish ‘mage’ confrontation with a huge roar of delight and set about ruffling my hair, like I was a small child who had passed her school exams. But I’d made no attempt to bask in that approval; I had done nothing worth approving of, not yet.

I was a little concerned about all the drinking, but Raine had promised me they would all be sleeping soon. She had said that I was to set off on my solo quest without further delay, and that she would not worry if I was not seen again that night.

Privately I thought she was a little bit too optimistic.

The upstairs hallway was very dark at that time of night, a tunnel of gently creaking floorboards and looming stretches of shadow-draped wall. The curtain over the one little window was wide open, showing a moonless night sky blanketed by thick cloud, the lunar

light smothered behind layers of rain-gravid darkness. The heat of the late summer's day still lingered, trapped by the cloud cover, but it was a dark warmth, the sort that made one feel cold on the inside even as one shunned extra layers of clothing. I'd showered, cleaned off the blood, and dressed again in socks, pajama bottoms, and a slit-sided t-shirt, to let my tentacles move freely.

We did not move freely, however. We were tucked around our own torso, solemn and sensible. Playtime this was not.

We passed Evee's bedroom door; a faint night-light glowed beneath the crack at the bottom. We longed to abandon our quest and slip into bed with her, snuggle down and pretend nothing had happened, focused fully on how surprised she might be when she wakes. We passed our own bedroom door, wide open and inviting us into the dark. We passed the study, empty and quiet, full of books in which we might lose ourselves. We passed Lozzie's door and heard the fluttery sound of gentle little Tenny snores — but we quailed inside at how disappointed in us Tenny might be in the morning. She had missed the return home, all the drama, all the excitement, but I had been informed that she had helped soothe away certain tears earlier in the evening. Tenny possessed a great deal of emotional intelligence. She was not likely to be impressed by auntie Heathy, not this time.

The end of the hallway turned left in a sort of L-shape. On the right was the door to Kimberly's bedroom; we could hear the faint hum of her fancy computer, fans fighting the high ambient temperatures, but she was undoubtedly asleep at this time of night. What help could she offer us, anyway? This was not her problem, not her fight.

We ignored all temptations. We pushed deeper into colder, darker, unknown waters.

I rarely ventured this deep into the rear of the upper floor of the house — nobody did, except for Praem; there wasn't much back there, just empty rooms, some of them used for storing old furniture. I'd scurried away here for privacy a couple of times previously, and happened upon rooms I'd never paid attention to before, as the house opened itself to my needs. We could only assume it had done the same for others.

This time I peered into the darkness, barely able to make out the row of doors. We lifted one tentacle and turned on the slow strobe

of rainbow bioluminescence, just enough to light our way. The shadows eased back, all the way to the next elbow of the corridor, where the hallway turned to the right. I'd never been back there. Was that the way to the attic?

"Sevens?" I whispered into the gloom. "Sevens, are you there?"

No reply.

I crept deeper into the upstairs hallway.

Evelyn had made a point of refusing to tell me exactly where Sevens had hidden herself away — not out of petty sadism or a desire to subject me to some pointless, abstract punishment, but simply because Sevens herself had requested so.

Back down in the light and warmth of the kitchen, I had said: "If she doesn't want to see me tonight, I'll respect that. I think that's the right thing to do? Yes? Or no? E-Evee?"

Evelyn had sighed and rubbed her face. "No comment. Heather, it's between you and her. She gave me no message, no statement. You're to do it yourself."

Praem had intoned: "Be a good girl."

"Right," I had said. "Right. Okay. Right. Yes. I can do that."

So there I was, being a good girl.

Each unknown door yielded with a gentle click of the handle, opening on dusty furniture, jumbled bed frames, boxes of junk, and more. I found the room I'd once used to sit and think in relative silence and solitude, with a window looking out over the side of the house. I found a room which contained nothing but a single upright plinth — not real stone, but a cardboard prop, which I tested by picking it up. Another room smelled of rust. Yet another was full of perfectly clean and never-used toilet fixtures — had this been intended as a second bathroom, once upon a time? Two doors were locked — but as I tested their handles, some deeper sense told me that Sevens was not shut away within.

When I reached the point where the hallway kinked to the right, I peered around the corner with one eye and one tentacle, like I was a teenager in a horror movie; but it wasn't the darkness or the solitude or the bare wooden floorboards which scared me. Those things felt right and natural to me by then, a comfortable cove full

of shadowy spots for clever little cephalopods to hide.

Only three doors waited in this most rearward portion of the house. The smallest one, on the right, led to the attic — a cramped portal with little magical symbols around the edge of the door frame. That was where the spider-servitors had originally lived. The other two doors were unremarkable. I tried the one on the left and found it locked. Then I reached for the handle of the last door, straight ahead.

My fingertips brushed the brass. My tentacle-light dimmed, forced down by the sudden weight of shadows. The darkness rushed in.

“Back off, squid-brains,” rasped a voice from hell, a serial killer made of rusty knives dipped in rotten blood, choking on a throat stuffed with grave dirt and maggots.

“Okay, okay!” I hissed, putting my hands up and trotting back several steps.

The darkness did not abate, but thickened further, until that final door was hidden behind a wall of shadows.

A mouth formed in the black, a Cheshire Cat maw full of gleaming dark teeth — but it wasn’t grinning. The mouth was turned down at the corners, dripping with tangible gloom, like glistening venom sizzling as it fell toward the floorboards in great dark ropes.

“Aym,” I said, and did my best to smile. “Good evening. Or, um, good morning, I suppose, by now. We’re all up a bit late tonight, aren’t we? That is entirely my fault, for which I apologise, by the way.”

I’d seen and fought and dealt with far worse than a wall of grinning shadow. This was practically cartoonish compared to the rest of that day so far, especially encountered in the rear of my own home, the safest place in the whole world, in the comfortable warm shadows of a late summer’s night.

But there was something about the shape of Aym’s mouth, or perhaps about the way she’d spoken, which made my tentacles quiver and my spine tingle, like a shark had strayed into my safe little bay.

Aym was very angry.

“Fuck off,” she hissed.

I sighed and lowered my hands. “I assume I’ve found Sevens, then. Is she in that room?”

“What part of ‘fuck off’ did you not comprehend?” said Aym’s disembodied mouth. The mouth slid upward, climbing the wall of shadows, as if Aym was unfolding herself from a squat or a crouch, until she towered over me, taller than Zheng, taller than anything.

I felt a distinct urge to unfold, pounce, and drag her out of the shadows. We twitched, flexing, ready to spring. We even started to justify it to ourselves, throwing the arguments back and forth down our tentacles. We wouldn’t hurt Aym, not really — but she was pretending to be bigger than she was, and we just wanted to see, just wanted to peel back the darkness and have a proper look, just wanted to have a sensible conversation. We weren’t going to violate Sevens’ privacy if she didn’t want it! We would just yank Aym out of the darkness because she was being so unreasonable and—

And that would be very inappropriate.

I smiled my very best good-girl smile — no, my good-cephalopod smile — and held onto all those resolutions; I didn’t pretend I hadn’t felt all that, I just told myself no.

We said: “I’m not going to go in there and talk to Sevens if she doesn’t want me to do that, Aym. But I would like to establish if she’s actually in there. You can just tell me, I don’t have to intrude. Is that okay?”

“Hmmm. Let me think.” Aym’s mouth pantomimed a thoughtful pout, then gritted its black teeth and hissed: “No!”

We nodded, with head and all six tentacles, all of us. “That does sort of confirm that she’s in there,” we said.

“Nope,” said Aym’s mouth. “Now why don’t you turn your fish-stink arse around three hundred and sixty degrees and walk away?”

I blinked and thought about that for a moment. We traced a circle with one tentacle-tip. “That’s just a full circle. Do you mean you want me to walk backwards? I can’t moonwalk, by the way, I don’t have that kind of coordination or grace. And my socks don’t slide properly on these floorboards.”

Aym’s mouth twisted with a sigh. “No idea what she sees in you. You’re a twisted-up little mess of neuroses and needs, dirty little

urges and unspeakable embarrassments. You're no better than Flissy. She could spread her wings and soar and you're here dragging her down where she can't even breathe!"

My chest tightened. A lump formed in my throat. "I thought you sort of love Felicity, in your own way." Then, before I could lose my courage: "You're right, though, Aym."

"Tssss! At least you can see it for yourself! So why not fuck off?"

I spread my hands, defenceless and empty; I'd folded away every last pneuma-somatic addition, except our own selves, our tentacles, us. "I want to apologise."

Aym cackled, a sound like an entire rusted-out assembly line coughing to life. "Pffffftthahahaaa! Little Evelyn said that too. You think an apology is going to be enough for this? You're going to crawl in there and tell her a sob story, the same old sob story, wah-wah-wah, I couldn't help it, I'm so sorry for what I do, wah-wah-wah, please forgive me Sevens, please keep coddling me, wah-wah-wah."

"I'm not going to cry," I said.

"Pffft, as if. Isn't that half your strategy, you—"

"I don't deserve to cry. I'm not the one who's been hurt."

Aym's mouth paused mid-word, then pouted down at me, as if she was considering my honesty. The mouth pulled into a sideways sneer. "Easy not to cry when you're already all cried out, all exhausted and run down. Right?"

"If Sevens wishes it, then I will leave this until the morning, after I've slept, and my emotional reserves are refilled. And I still won't cry, because I'm not the one who's been hurt."

Aym paused again. Her lips opened wide and she stuck out a massive, black, venom-dripping tongue, as if disgusted. "Urgh."

"I mean it, Aym."

Aym hissed. "You don't even know what you're apologising for, fish-head!"

"No, I'm pretty sure I do know."

"Oh yeah?" Aym gurgled, like rusty nails hitting the surface of a

boiling bog. “Try me. You going to list your emotional sins? Apologise for being a bad fiancée, a bad partner, a bad friend? Because you’re all that and more, but you don’t seem to get it, you don’t seem to change, you don’t treat her as anything but—”

“I have acted like my parents,” I said. “Like my mother.”

Aym stopped dead. The mouth closed and then vanished, the outline of lips and tongue sinking into the shadows, joining with the rest of the darkness.

I sighed. “Alright then. If that’s your answer, then ... then I will turn around and go away.” My throat grew thick, but I had to respect this. “Please let Sevens know I was here, that I tried, and that I respect her ... turning me away. I will try again in the morning, I ... the morning, after waking up. Please, Aym, let her know ... ”

Aym stepped out of the shadows.

It was like watching a pillar detach from the wall, like seeing a piece of architecture decide to relocate itself. This Aym was not the tiny sprite of lace and spite, but a column of shadow that reached from floor to ceiling, with waves of black rolling down her sides, misting out across the floor. We were in true darkness here, hidden away at the rear of the house, and working through the most difficult of regrets and shames. Aym’s true domain.

A pillar of darkness towered over me. Tendrils of lace-like flesh hung from inside a lightless hood. Aym had no face.

“You’ve come alone,” she said. Her voice was like two rusty knives dragged across each other, amused in the way a murderer might be before the killing blow.

I spread my arms and my tentacles too, resisting the urge to flare and strobe with threat display. “An apology is not an apology if it’s coerced. And I ... I don’t want anybody else to see Sevens crying. I’m trying to spare her dignity.”

“Ha,” rasped the Aym-giant. “Too late for that.”

Aym suddenly bent in the middle, leaned over my head, and peered around the corner behind me, into the rest of the corridor. It was like being beneath the coils of a giant black snake, dripping with shadows and darkness. But then she straightened up and grunted.

"You really did come alone, squid-brains. Thought you might at least have the maid in tow. Or your bulldyke."

"I have to do this by myself," I sighed. "As much as I do anything by myself, with seven of us in here." But I paused and looked Aym up and down, running all my senses along the strange pillar of darkness she was choosing to present.

Aym recoiled like a dark flame before the wind. "What?!" she hissed.

"Sorry!" I hurried to say. "I-I didn't mean to make you self-conscious, I just ... Aym, you went to the abyss too, didn't you?"

The pillar of darkness coiled in on itself, shrinking slightly. "Ehhhhh?" she sneered.

"You mentioned it back when you and I had our first real talk. You went to the abyss. You returned. You went with ... somebody else, who didn't make it, is that correct?"

The Aym-pillar made a sound like she was sucking on her teeth. I had the distinct feeling of being squinted at.

"Aym," I carried on. "I know you don't like answering questions about yourself, but were you ever human?"

She rasped, like a rusty flywheel spinning in a pit of gravel. "You're right, I don't like answering questions about myself!"

"Okay, okay, I apologise. It's just ... today has been a day of revelations for me. I met another abyssal returnee, a human, like me. And then I realised just now, you've been here all along. Or, if not here, then at least nearby. And now I can't help but wonder, what was the abyss like for you?"

Silence and shadow.

"You don't have to answer that, of course," I said. "Maybe you'll feel comfortable doing so one day, and I would like to hear, but only if you do. And, okay, maybe you were never human in the first place. Maybe—"

Aym sighed. The air rolled with a wave of shadows, flowing like smoke across the floor. "You don't ever stop, do you? I thought you came here to apologise to my Sevens."

"I did," I said, pulling my tentacles back in, tight and smart. "Sorry,

I— I'm trying to be focused."

Aym snorted. "Still not going to fuck off?"

"Is that what Sevens wants?"

Aym exhaled again. The pillar got a little smaller. She was now just as tall as Raine.

I continued: "From her mouth to my ears, is that what she said? Tell me the truth, and I will turn around and leave for now."

Aym huffed. She continued to shrink until she was no taller than usual, a sprite in the darkness, though the door was still hidden in the shadows. "I'm not going anywhere, squid-brains. I'm not letting you be alone with her. You keep doing this. You keep hurting. The road to hell is paved with—"

"Intentions don't matter," I interrupted. "Only actions and their results."

Aym stopped. She hissed one last time — and vanished.

The shadows cleared. The door was revealed, upright and sensibly shut. The brass handle gleamed black.

Aym hissed, as if from nowhere: "I'll be watching. One wrong move ..."

I nodded. "Thank you. Honestly? I would expect nothing less. You care about her a lot."

Aym clucked an invisible tongue. The black sheen on the handle slipped away and joined the shadows on the floor.

We — us seven very naughty and very contrite squid girls — stepped up to the door and knocked gently with the tip of one tentacle.

"Sevens?" we murmured, mouth almost touching the wood of the door. "Sevens, it's us. It's me. May I come in?"

Her answer was a soft and throaty gurgle, muffled as if below the bed covers.

"May I take that as a yes?" I asked.

Silence. A rustle of sheets in the stygian black.

Then, in a voice I'd never heard before, high and exhausted and somehow empty: "Enter if you wish."

We grasped the door handle, turned until it clicked, and stepped inside.

We expected another half-empty, disused, dusty back room, perhaps with an old bed frame and a clean mattress, and Seven-Shades-of-Solitary-Sorrow sitting all sad and sallow beneath a single sheet. We expected a cave-like retreat, a hermit's hideout, far from comfort and company, devoid of light and life. We expected withdrawal from the world, sanctuary in cold tears, a miserable shivering figure crouched in the dark.

Instead — yellow.

Gleaming gold of imagined sunlight, feather-soft blonde of brilliant butter, fluttering glow of honeyed fire; yellow churned and warmed and rippled and grew and waved and luxuriated from every surface.

For one dizzying second I thought I had stepped Outside; perhaps Evelyn and Sevens had worked together to play the ultimate deserved prank on me, and turned this bedroom door into a hidden gateway to the heart of the Palace in Carcosa, and I had just stepped over the threshold of some hidden boudoir that Sevens had never shown me before.

But then all our tentacles came up, our senses extended through the rest of our body, and we saw the details beneath the flaxen décor.

Yellow rugs lay on the floor, thick and fluffy like dandelion fronds and pineapple flesh — but the floorboards of Number 12 Barnslow Drive lay beneath; yellow sheets hung from the walls like tapestries, thin as sunlight and delicate as canary feathers — with the pale, ordinary, very un-yellow walls of the house behind them. Yellow light glowed from a trio of standing lamps, from soft LED bulbs dialled down for warmth and intimacy, but the lamps themselves were plain old plastic. Yellow curtains covered a window — looking out across the back garden — but blackest night peeked around the edges of the imitation sunlight. Bedspread, pillows, cushions, sheets, all a great mass of butterscotch soft, in lemon and corn and clean sand — but the bed frame itself was old wood, and had probably stood here for longer than any of us had known this house.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was sitting on the edge of the bed.

At least I assumed it was her; she was wearing a mask she had rarely shown me before.

A teenage girl, perhaps a couple of years younger than me, slim and slight inside a brown-green military uniform several sizes too large for her malnourished frame, stained with mud and blood and other, more unspeakable substances. Filthy blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, tied with a piece of dirty string. Her face was greasy and exhausted, freckles overwhelmed by the dark rings around her eyes.

The ‘Gunner’, as Heart had called her, the mask in which Sevens had shot her irritating sister through the chest. Only the eyes were different — solid balls of deep yellow, without human pupils or irises or whites. Pure Carcosan stared out from a human face.

Seven-Shades-of-Suffering-Soldier held a stubby handgun in her lap, a nasty little twist of black metal against her pale, bony hands.

“Sevens?” I said out loud.

The Gunner looked up at me, her gaze a pair of yellow pools into which I felt myself slipping; I was reminded, for the first time in quite a while, that Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was not a human being. She was not even pretending to be a human being. She was something alien, from Outside. Perhaps that gaze was intended to remind me.

Well, I wasn’t human either.

The Gunner said: “Were you born in a barn?”

“A-ah?”

“Shut the door.”

Her English was heavily accented, Eastern European or Russian. She spoke low and slow, as if we were huddled in a bunker or a trench somewhere beneath a freezing sky.

I stepped fully into the room, shut the door behind me, and then looked around again, taking in the incredible transformation of this dark little corner of the house.

Seven-Shades-of-Slow-and-Steady said: “Like what I’ve done with the place?”

“Uh. Yes, very. I had no idea this room was even back here, you never mentioned it before. I’m sorry I didn’t ask, Sevens.”

“It wasn’t,” she said.

I blinked at her. “Ah?”

“It wasn’t back here,” she explained, slowly and carefully. There was something dead about her voice, some essential quality drained from her tone, by shell-shock or combat fatigue or years of grinding stress. She stared at me with those all-yellow eyeballs, peering out of a face I barely knew. “Well, the room itself was here. But all the furnishings, they are new, or newly arranged, as of this very evening.”

“Oh. Wow. Fast work, my gosh.” I reached out and brushed one of the hanging sheets with a tentacle-tip. “Are they real?”

The Gunner nodded. “Aym suggested that I should have a bedroom. Evelyn offered in grace and gratitude. She provided some small funds for furnishing. Felicity did some shopping. I gather this was difficult, past ten in the evening on a Monday night. However, the house provided most of the materials. We poked around the other rooms. This is the fruit of a scavenger’s haul.”

“It looks great, though!” I said, and I genuinely meant it. “It’s very ... yellow.”

Seven-Shades-of-Shooter sighed and looked down at the pistol in her hands. “Perhaps ‘yellow’ is an identity too.”

I took a pair of cautious steps toward the bed, eyeing the pistol in Sevens’ lap; the gun didn’t look anything like Raine’s weapon — this pistol was older, scuffed and scratched, with much of the black finish worn away from the edges of the metal. It seemed huge in the Gunner’s tiny, delicate hands. I realised the cuffs of her uniform were tied to her wrists with lengths of string, to stop them flapping about.

“Is that real?” I said. “The gun, I mean?”

Sevens looked up at me, but she did not reply.

I sighed gently. “I’m not going to pretend it doesn’t send a rather specific statement. But it’s a statement you’re entitled to make, if that’s what you want. I just want to make sure I’m not misreading —”

“Am I real?” said Seven-Shades-of-Solipsism.

“Of course you’re—”

In one swift motion, Seven-Shades-of-Shellshocked-Spite raised her pistol, did something complicated to the mechanism — removing the safety and pulling back the slide to chamber a round, as Raine later explained to me — aimed at my centre of mass, and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

I’d had just enough warning to whip all my tentacles in front of my torso and head, speed-growing armoured plates down their collective front. I flinched and bit my tongue, and—

Felt no impact. No bullet. Not even a tickle.

I peeked out from behind my wall of tentacles; Seven-Shades-of-Sadistic-Sport was not laughing, not even smiling. A tiny curl of steam rose from the barrel of her gun, as if that had been a very real bullet.

I winced and whispered: “That’s probably going to bring the whole house running.”

“No,” said Sevens.

I cocked my ear, but Sevens was right. No rush of panicked feet sounded down the upstairs corridor, no chairs shoved away from the table down in the kitchen, no Tenny trilling and fluttering in alarm.

“ ... good soundproofing?” I asked.

Sevens gestured with the pistol. “For your ears only, Heather.”

We lowered our protective cage of tentacles, reabsorbed several millimetres of steel-laced chitin armour, and let out a huge sigh. I was sweating, on my face and down my back and under my armpits.

“Well, I can’t say I didn’t deserve that,” I said.

The Gunner’s expression finally showed something other than dead-eyed exhaustion. She frowned at me. “You didn’t seriously think I was going to shoot you? You don’t think you deserve shooting, no?”

“No! No, oh Sevens, no. I mean I deserved a little scare. I’ve scared and upset you. Doing the same to me in return is—”

“Highly unhealthy,” the Gunner said. “Hardly the basis for a relationship of mutual respect.”

“Yes, but—”

“Take the gun from me, Heather,” said Seven-Shades-of-Storm-and-Strife. She pointed the weapon again. “Or the next bullet might be real.”

I resisted the urge to put my hands on my hips, or huff, or sigh, or cross all my tentacles. I stared into the barrel of a gun which I knew was not real, held by a woman who I knew would not hurt me, and felt — almost — no fear.

“Sevens, I’m not going to do that. Like you said, it’s an unhealthy way to conduct a relationship. If you want me to leave the room, if you want to drive me off with fake gunshots, then I will leave, I will respect that. I’m not taking that gun from you.”

“Why not?” the Gunner said.

“Because it’s your gun.” I shrugged with one shoulder.

Seven-Shades-of-Shaded-Sight slowly lowered her pistol. She put the safety back on, and put the gun back in her lap.

I smiled, as best I could. “May I approach you?”

She shrugged, limp and lifeless. “Do whatever you want.”

I resisted another sigh. “The whole point of this is that I shouldn’t just do whatever I want. I should take into account the feelings and needs of my partners, of you. So, if you don’t want me to approach you, if you don’t want me to sit on that bed, then I won’t. I’ll stand here and we can talk like this.”

Sevens stared at the wall, her yellow eyes unreadable orbs, like reflected sunlight on gold, brilliant but empty. “Come closer. Don’t sit down.”

“Thank you.”

I walked up to the bed and stopped a few paces short of Sevens, beyond arm’s reach but within tentacle range; several of us wanted to reach out and touch her, but we joined together to stop the

internal debate. Sevens looked up at me again — then finally sighed, as if the edges of the mask were peeling away.

“So,” I said. “What does this mask mean — the ‘Gunner’? No, wait, that was a silly question. I can see it, it’s right out in the open. It means you’re exhausted, emotionally exhausted. Is that right?”

“Deadened,” said Sevens.

I winced.

She smiled — ever so thin and pale, and the smile did not reach the corners of her eyes. There was something sadistic and bleak about that smile. “I have two masks more melancholy than this, but neither of those are human. One is much larger than this room and this house. It would not fit.”

I blinked in surprise. “I’m sorry?”

Sevens shrugged again. Her greenish uniform was much too large for her, shoulders moving beneath the fabric. “Even very large things can be lesbians.”

“Oh. Oh, well, of course, yes.” I swallowed and realised my heart was going too fast. My hands prickled with sweat. My tentacles rumbled in gentle disagreement — none of us entertained the thought of turning around and retreating, but some of us debated over drawing out the conversation longer, over trying to make Sevens smile before we got down to the meat of the situation, before we opened our chest and bared our guts to her. But we were here for a very specific reason. Sevens had let us in, and now we stood before her. There was nothing else for it but to show some real courage, for once in our life. “Sevens,” we said. “You probably already guessed this, but I — we, all seven of me, of us — I want to apologise—”

“I know,” she said, then shrugged. “I know.”

“Good. Then, first I want to explain why, I want to tell you what I was told, about me, about how I think, about where I’ve gone wrong, I—”

“I know that too,” she said, then she sighed, eyes and face sagging with greater exhaustion. “I was watching.”

I blinked several times. “You ... you were? You mean, with Taika?”

Sevens nodded.

“But ... you were also here, sorting this room out?”

Sevens shrugged. “I can be in more than one place at the same time. You and I are bound, remember?”

“Oh. Well. O-of course. So, you heard everything, about my nature, and self-justification, and—”

“All of it,” she said, soft and clipped. “I was watching and listening to you, at a great distance. My love. I know what you’ve been through. I know what you heard. You need not put it into words. I trust the roots of your apology. I trust you are genuine.”

“Oh, but—”

“There is no need for words.”

Now I finally did huff, and puff, and put my hands on my hips. “Sevens.”

Her turn to blink at me, surprised but placid and accepting, with nothing beneath those deadened eyes. “Yes?”

“Sevens, that defeats the point of me making an apology. You can’t just peer behind the curtain and write it all off. That just justifies everything I did! You have to expect me to do better!”

Sevens just stared, yellow and tired. She said: “Do I?”

Oh. Oh, ow. Ouch. But she was right. I winced, hard and painful, a terrible squeezing inside my chest. But she was right.

“Sevens, I mean that you have a *right* to expect me to do better.” I folded my tentacles inward, drawing all seven of us together, trying to think as clearly as I could. I’d practised these words in front of the mirror in the downstairs bathroom, and they still didn’t seem right, coming out as a jumbled-up mess, but I had to say them regardless, even if they were not perfect. “You’re not my therapist, Sevens. I can’t rely on you to fix my broken thinking this time. You’re my fiancée! Or at least my girlfriend. And I’m not treating you right.” I forced the words out, plucking myself apart as I went: “You came with me to talk to my parents, you gave me unquestioning support during one of the most difficult conversations of my life. You’ve done nothing but support me, help me, drag me out of the dark. Not just this time, but multiple times!

And I've taken that for granted. In the park back there, when I was raring to confront Taika, all you wanted me to do was slow down, get the others, and not put myself in danger. And then I said I would wait for Lozzie, and I didn't. I used you, then told you that I didn't value your feelings or input. You were there when I needed you, and then I shoved you out of the way when you weren't wanted."

"We made a compromise."

"No!" I said. "We didn't! I just decided that you couldn't stop me! And you know what, you couldn't! Nobody could!" I extended my tentacles out to either side. "This, all of this, everything I've become, not just in the physical but in the spiritual as well, the mastery of brain-math, it's ... it's power! And I'm misusing it! If you heard what Taika said, then you heard all of it. It doesn't matter what good intentions I have, it doesn't matter how I justify these things with reference to what I've become inside. All that matters is action, and results. My actions hurt you. I don't mean to do all this — but I did anyway. And that ... that makes me a little bit like my mother. Like how my mother treated me. The damage is real, no matter the intent."

Sevens just stared, unreadable, tired beyond words.

My heart clenched inside my chest. Was I failing? Was this the end of Sevens and I? If so, then I had to continue doing the right thing.

"I've fucked up," I said. "Pardon my language, but I feel it's the only suitable word. Not just this time, but previous times. I feel like I take you for granted, maybe because you're not human, not even biological. Maybe because you appear and disappear, maybe because you seem so wise, and yet so abstract. None of that is an excuse. I'm sorry. And ... and I can't promise I'll never do this again. I keep doing this. Taika made that clear. Hopefully this was a wake-up call. I can only promise that I'm going to try to be more aware of myself. I'm sorry for how I've been treating you, Sevens."

Sevens stared, nothing behind her eyes.

I took one last deep breath. My guts were churning. "Y-you don't have to respond to any of that right now. You don't have to accept the apology. You—"

"Am I your fiancée?" Sevens said — voice cracking around the

edges. “Or am I just a mistake who threw herself onto the stage, to be devoured by the ravenous audience?”

“Oh, Sevens, oh, no, no, you’re so much more than—”

She sobbed, only once — and then the Gunner was gone, replaced with a much more familiar mask.

Seven-Shades-of-Sanguine-Sprite was sitting on the edge of the bed, right where the Gunner had sat. Her bony knees were drawn up to her scrawny chest, her slender arms wrapped around her bare shins, so tiny and delicate, like she might shatter at a touch. Her black-and-red eyes were full of tears, shining in a face gone pale and greasy with sweat and stress. Her lips were parted, wobbling and uneven, showing her rows of needle-teeth inside her mouth. She was wearing her usual — a black tank-top and a pair of black shorts; but draped over her shoulders, tucked in around her legs, and cupping the soft curve of her chin, was the golden yellow robe that she had gifted me, as protection from the Eye, as an unspoken promise, as a piece of her heart.

“S-sorry I mimed shooting you,” she mumbled, sniffing to hold back the tears. “*Guuuur-lurk.*”

“Sevens, oh, Sevens, no, no, it’s okay. It’s okay.” My tentacles hovered, uncertain what to do. “Should I ... may I sit down? May I —”

Sevens made a throaty grumble and held out her arms toward me.

We joined her on the bed. We sat next to her and let her climb into our lap, sprawled across us more like a pet than a person. She hung onto a tentacle and chewed at the flesh, pinching with her teeth but not breaking the surface. I kissed her cheeks, wiping away her tears with a corner of my sleeve. She bonked her head on our chest, like a cat requesting petting — and that is exactly what she was doing, asking me to stroke her long dark hair. A yellow comb sat on the nearby bedside table, so we scooped that up and set about combing her hair out, getting rid of all the little uneven tangles. She wriggled and wiggled and nuzzled our sides, she grabbed tentacles and tucked them around her middle, she purred and gurgled and made weird little throaty noises like a clogged-up drainpipe.

This wordless skinship went on for ten or fifteen minutes. There was nothing sexual about it — or maybe there was, maybe by definition

of ‘sexual’ had become too limited. It felt more like a pair of animals rolling around in a dog bed than a couple engaging in foreplay. At one point Sevens ended up on her tummy, with my tentacles rubbing her back. A minute later she was sprawled across my belly, rolling her hips against the bed. A minute later again, we were holding hands, side by side.

Eventually she settled in one spot, sitting in my lap and facing forward, so we were both looking in the same direction. I had half my tentacles wrapped around her, holding her gently but tightly. The gauzy, floaty, yellow robe was half-draped over me in return.

“Heather?” she said, gurgling at the shadows at the far end of the room. I wondered if Aym was over there, watching in silence.

“Mm?”

“Do you love me?”

Rather than answering on reflex, I took a moment to really think about the question, about what it meant. Sevens twisted in my lap and looked up at me, red-on-black eyes clear and clean, burning quietly against her pale skin. She didn’t seem impatient, or confused, or worried. She just wanted the truth.

“Yes,” we said eventually, staring at the same shadows on the wall. “I do love you. I’ve told you that before, and it was the truth. I think love comes very easily to me. Which is perhaps a problem.”

“Mm,” she rasped. “Love you, too.”

“But,” we added slowly. “I also barely know you, partly because you barely know yourself.”

“We don’t spend a lot of — *gluurrrrk* — time together.”

We smiled down at Sevens, feeling guilty but hopeful. “Yes, you’re right, and I’m sorry for that, too. You and I, we dived into this really quickly. We basically had no romantic relationship beforehand, and then you accidentally on-purpose proposed to marry me.”

“Sorrrrrry,” Sevens rasped.

“No, no, it’s just ... Sevens, I am kind of a mess. A big mess. And you’ve been dealing with that mess, rather than focusing on yourself. Except with Aym, maybe. Which is good, mind you.”

“You don’t have to apologise againnnnnnn, Heather.”

“Maybe not. But it’s important to me, to express what I’m apologising for.” I sighed. “There’s more than a little bit of cephalopod in me. Always was, long before I went to the abyss. Getting me to do something I don’t want to do, or getting me to hold back when I want something, it’s ... difficult. I keep leaping off at high speed, convinced my own ideas are always correct, to go fight things, or poke things. Have you seen that youtube video with the little toy boat stuffed with crab meat, in the top of an octopus’ aquarium? And it focuses so completely on getting that meat out, like that’s the only thing in the world?”

Sevens shook her head.

“Well, you get the idea. And that octopus is me. That’s what I’m like, sometimes. And this time, yes, Taika was not dangerous in the way you were worried about, I didn’t get hurt, and so on, but if I rely on that outcome, it just encourages me to keep justifying this stuff, this behaviour, every time.”

Sevens puffed out her cheeks. She didn’t want to say yes, Heather, you’ve been acting so very badly, but she did not disagree.

“My point is,” I went on, “I’ve apologised before, but I’ve not truly changed my attitude. Sevens, it’s not your responsibility to make me change. It’s mine. Fixing me is not your responsibility. You — you are your responsibility, Sevens. And maybe you and I can be together, and be good for each other, but ... but maybe you should try to do some things for yourself, too.”

“Mm?”

“I mean, things that don’t use me as a reference point,” we said, wiggling our tentacles. “Friends that aren’t mutual. Things that aren’t all about me. It’s ... I think it’s hard to have a proper relationship with somebody who you’re relying on completely for a self-reference point.” I sighed and rubbed my face with three tentacles. “Ahhh, I’m mangling this. I wish I was like Raine, wish I could just explain this easily, without making a huge mess of it all the time.”

Sevens leaned up and kissed the back of my hand. “Makes sense. Mmhmm.”

I smiled down at her — and gently wrapped a tentacle around her

neck, holding her lightly. She gurgled through her teeth, soft and gentle.

“More importantly, Sevens, I want you to know yourself, because I want to know you. You proposed to me, but I’ve given you so little. I think it’s time we did something very specific.”

Sevens went wide-eyed and started to blush. “A-ah? Ah!”

I reached up with one hand, tugged down on the collar of my t-shirt, and tilted my head to the side. “Bite me.”

Sevens’ mouth hinged open, showing off her rows of razor-sharp, needle-like teeth. She looked about ready to drool. “Heatherrrrr ... we can’t!”

“Why not?” I asked, my own breath coming harder than I had expected. “Will it do any real damage? Will it leave a mark on my soul? Will I turn into a vampire too? That would be a novel way of defeating the Eye, at least, make myself invisible in mirrors.”

“No,” Sevens gurgled. “*Uuuurk*-none of those things. I’m not a real vampire anyway, am I?”

“Then it’s just for fun,” I said.

My heart was beating so much faster than I’d expected. Oh dear.

Sevens was panting now, ragged and rough, her big red-and-black eyes glued to my pale throat. She gulped. “Fun ... ”

“And that’s what you and I haven’t had enough of,” I said. “Just you and me, alone together, having fun.” I tilted my head further.

“Come on, Sevens. Do you want to do it?”

“ ... you might— might die.”

“Ah?” I blinked and straightened up. “I thought you said it wouldn’t do any real damage?”

“Nnnnnnno,” she rasped, pulling a difficult little face. “Not from this.” She made her needle-teeth go clack-clack. “From the Eye. Within a week or two. You might be gone.”

“Ah.” I took a deep breath, counted to ten, crammed all those thoughts down into a compacted ball as hard as I could, and then let the breath out again. I pulled my collar down a second time, and tilted my head to the side. “I might be, yes. So that’s all the more

reason to have this, together, while we can.”

Sevens turned all the way around in my lap, until she was facing me. She was shaking, quivering with breathy excitement. She put her little hands on my shoulders — shivering, clammy — and went up onto her knees, so she was leaning over me. Her golden yellow robe fell across the front of my body. Her lips parted with a wet click, showing her teeth again, sharp and pointed. She leaned down until her lips brushed the edge of my neck, my throat, her warm breath tickling my skin.

“ ... are ... *urrrrrr*—are you ... Heather, are you sure?”

I closed my eyes, shaking all over. All our tentacles were gripping tight, squeezing Sevens like a bag of blood herself. “Bite me, Sevens. Bite me for fun. Show me what you like to do.”

Sevens nuzzled close, opened her maw, and bit down.

Like the bullet from the Gunner’s pistol, the Blood Goblin’s teeth were just another stage prop, just another piece of costume, like a paper crown on a mummer’s brow. But props and fakes and pretend can still look and feel very real, when one wishes them to do so. We are, after all, what we pretend to be.

I felt two rows of razor-sharp teeth puncture my throat and sink into my veins. I gasped, eyes rolling into the back of my head with a strange mixture of pain and pleasure, of being entered and violated by something that loved me. Sevens clamped her mouth over the ‘wound’, and then started to suck; we felt mouthfuls of blood leaving our body, sluicing across her tongue and sliding down her throat, bobbing as she drank.

My little leech did not stay attached for long, just enough for a good few mouthfuls. Her lips popped free with a slurp, her teeth withdrew with a feeling like bone rasping through flesh, and her tongue lapped across my throat, as if licking the wound shut.

She rocked back in my lap, her lips stained with traces of blood, eyes hazy and cloudy, cheeks flushed bright red.

We clapped a hand to our throat, and found — nothing. No wound, no hole, no blood.

“A play,” Sevens gurgled. “*Guuuurk!*”

Panting, flushed in our cheeks, strobing bright down the length of

all our tentacles, we replied: “A good play. Well done. Come here, Sevens.”

A few minutes later we were beneath the bed covers together, snuggled down deep, wrapped inside the cocoon of Sevens’ yellow robes. Sevens was the little spoon, tucked against my front, while I took the larger role, arms and tentacles wrapped around her from behind.

“Sleep here tonight?” she gurgled, her mouth hidden below the covers. “Please?”

“Mhmm,” I grunted back, half-mumbling into the pillow. “Everyone knows. Just us? Or is Aym about?”

We both waited for a moment, as if the shadows might reply; perhaps it was only my imagination, but I thought I saw a grudging sneer in the darkness at the foot of the bed.

Sevens snuggled in closer, her head just beneath my chin. “Heather? Heatherrrr? Can I be your kitten, instead?”

I blinked with surprise — not because the request made no sense, but because it made so much sense. Like a missing puzzle piece.

“Of course, kitten,” I said, wrapping my tentacles around Sevens’ wrists and waist. “You can be whatever you want.”

And so Sevens and I drifted off to sleep together, hidden away in a secret room in the rear of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. My present to her, to whatever she wanted to be. My present before the Eye.

Because Sevens was right. I had suppressed my reaction, my gut-churning fear, my anxiety of the inevitable; I clung hard to the promise I had made to my parents — that I would bring Maisie home, that I would not fail — and to the promise of Taika herself — that we were not alone, not the sole abyssal wanderer returned to reality.

But still, Sevens had a point. Within two weeks, I might not be here at all.

I would rescue my sister, whatever it took.

But I might not be coming back from Wonderland.

slanting surfaces; unplumbed voids – 23.1

Five days later — five days after the tearful reconciliation with my parents, after the long-awaited confrontation and humbling conversation with Taika, after my apology to Sevens in her new and very yellow bedroom, and after my resolution to stop justifying my own impulsive excesses — on Saturday the 10th of August, a grey and cloudy Sharrowford afternoon, just after lunchtime, Evelyn went missing.

At first, nobody realised it had happened.

Evelyn had spent almost every spare hour of that week firmly planted in her magical workshop, cross-referencing her notes, poring over her dusty tomes, scribbling and sketching and scribing — working tirelessly on the ‘Invisus Oculus’, her “greatest invention”, her “magnum opus”, or “the spit in my mother’s rotten face that I could never summon from my own mouth, ha!” She used those exact words, at least once, while I was assigned to making-sure-Evee-eats-food-and-drinks-water duty. Evelyn had grudgingly accepted such help from a rotating roster of myself, Praem, and Raine, with Lozzie and Tenny playing a side-role whenever they felt like it; Tenny was especially useful for accurate accounts of how many calories Evelyn had consumed on any given day, and at offering hugs to everyone involved. Grinny tagged along with Tenny whenever Zheng wasn’t taking her out to the woods to do whatever they were doing out there; I did not have the additional energy to inquire as to these woodland jaunts, but Grinny seemed to be enjoying the process, whatever it entailed.

All this looking after Evee was no great hardship. She was, after all, doing this for me.

The Invisus Oculus had first taken shape in a series of notebooks, drawn and redrawn in Evelyn’s hand over and over; the magical symbol had then jumped to dozens of large sheets of sketch paper, constructed with painstaking use of rulers, protractors, compasses, and several different kinds of pencil, each one painstakingly

sharpened, swapped out, swapped back in, and re-sharpened as needed. The process looked more like Evelyn was doing geometry in a school maths lesson, not constructing never-before-attempted magical machinery from scratch. She spent hour after hour bent-backed over that table, hands bracing the angles and curves of creation, only looking up when one of us approached with a sandwich or a cup of tea or to inform our busy little mage that it was almost midnight and time to go to bed. Even then she scowled and huffed and often required Praem to physically peel her out of the chair.

By the end of Wednesday night the big table in the workshop was swamped with loose sheets, each of them containing a separate element of the magic circle to-be. Evelyn had not retired to bed until past one in the morning, and then only when Praem and I had joined forces to drag her upstairs, get her prosthetic leg off, and tuck her beneath her bedsheets.

On Thursday morning Evelyn had surprised us all by eating the largest breakfast we'd ever seen her put away. She just kept going.

Zheng had growled: "Eating for two, wizard?"

I'd sputtered. "Zheng! Don't even joke about that! G-goodness."

But Evelyn had barked with laughter. "Yes, in fact."

Raine let out a mock cheer and asked who the sperm donor was. My eyes had bulged out of my head. "E-Evee?!"

Evelyn had merely grinned and then slapped the table to indicate she wanted another round of bacon and eggs. "I am gravid with magecraft. Pregnant with genius. Round and taut with knowledge. You better watch out, Zheng. Even you might be impressed by the awfulest liveliness I am to birth."

Zheng had snorted and left the kitchen. I'd struggled not to blush. Evelyn barely noticed, too focused on the next step.

After that rather colourful breakfast Evelyn had Praem clear the workshop floor. Every piece of furniture was shoved back against the walls, all the loose books and esoteric detritus was cleared away, and all the old pieces of canvas with magical circles were rolled up and stacked neatly next to the gateway mandala. Praem even made a rousing attempt to shoo the spider-servitors out of the room, but they stayed happily coiled in their ceiling corner. Evelyn

declared out loud that they were allowed to stay, as they were good guardians who had served her well; both of them wiggled their weird tentacle-spikes at that, but didn't respond further.

When the room was prepared and the floor vacuumed, Evelyn had Praem unroll a wide piece of canvas on the floor, ready to accept the first version of the completed Invisus Oculus.

"Nobody has ever done this before, remember," Evelyn had said to me. I'd been standing in the doorway, drawn by the inescapable obligation of watching somebody do something entirely for my benefit; I was also drawn by Evee's strange bearing, by the odd new look that had crept into her shoulders and the tilt of her chin over the previous few days. She had her hair swept back in a loose ponytail, the nape of her neck exposed. "A spell to hide from even the gaze of an Outsider god. This will be the greatest work I have ever attempted. And if I get it wrong, the greatest mess I'll ever make." She'd forced a snort of laughter.

"Can it ... can it go wrong?" I'd asked.

"The spell? Certainly. Everything I've done might be totally incorrect. That's why we're going to test it. And the process of constructing it? Even more so. I have measured and measured and measured, Heather, but I might still have gotten it wrong. Yet there is no way to tell but by doing."

Evelyn had a concoction carefully picked out — two parts liquid charcoal to one part bull's blood; the latter was acquired entirely above-board, through a local Sharrowford butcher, an older gentleman who was far too sweet and far too serious to ask why exactly a woman in a full maid uniform was purchasing a food-grade bucket worth of cow blood. We provided the bucket, of course. The butcher called Praem 'young lady' and wished her luck with the Black Pudding she must be cooking, because so few young people enjoyed such foods these days.

"The blood's probably not necessary," Evelyn had grumbled. "But we're going belt and suspenders on this one. Belt, suspenders, and fucking rope, for all I care. This is your safety, Heather. This is your shield from the Eye. I am not skimping on anything. I'd use my own blood if I could produce enough of it."

Final construction of the Invisus Oculus had taken all of Thursday, most of Friday, and several hours of Saturday morning. The bull's

blood had to be kept refrigerated and used only in small quantities, which made the logistics even more confusing. The medium was applied via brushes, the lines measured and traced with exacting accuracy. Praem worked mostly under direction, I offered to help, but Evelyn did a surprising amount of the application herself, with a brush tied to the end of a stick, so she didn't have to bend over, or — heavens forbid — get down on her knees.

For my part, I let Evelyn work. The magic circle was not the only matter I was concerned with during that week.

Once on Tuesday and once again on Wednesday I had travelled — via bus, not teleport — to Jan's hotel room, so that she could get me naked and take pictures of me from nearly every possible angle. Raine made a huge joke out of that, insinuating that she was going to ask Jan for all the pictures. But she didn't, and she respected the fact I wanted to do that alone; there was a strange alienation to having my body catalogued for the sake of building a replacement for Maisie's physical form.

Alienation, but also pride.

Evelyn didn't have much direct help with the magical matters. The brief informal coven of mages had dispersed for now: Kimberly was working during the week and Evelyn insisted on not disrupting her chance at something approaching a 'normal' life again; Jan was busy working on the other major component of our plan, having vanished to her own 'workshop' after our strange photography sessions; and Felicity had finally returned home to her mysterious manor house up in Cumbria, taking Aym with her. Sevens had been up to visit, once, for one night, but had been sworn to even more mysterious secrecy; I had spent half the nights of the last week sleeping with Sevens, in her new bedroom, kissing her awake, and the other half of the nights in my usual place with Raine and Zheng.

I had toyed with the idea of sneaking into Evelyn's bed once or twice. She was working so hard, she deserved the comfort and companionship. But she was also sleeping like a rock. And not talking to me about anything other than the work.

Evelyn had put the finishing touches on the Invisus Oculus that very morning. She'd paused for lunch without anybody's prompting, which was a strange surprise. After that she had ushered Raine and me into the workshop to observe her handiwork, alongside Praem.

And then she'd vanished.

I didn't see when it happened, because I was too busy staring at the quiet, unassuming miracle she had crafted.

The Invisus Oculus was not much to look at. To an untrained eye it would seem little different to any other vaguely new-agey 'magical' symbol, albeit drawn on a large scale, about twelve feet in diameter, upon a piece of flexible canvas, with a very strange ink that shone like blood in the artificial light.

To somebody who had seen plenty of magical circles, however, there was something odd about this one.

It was constructed of three primary enclosures — enclosures, not circles, because the outermost layer was shaped like an eye. A pair of more traditional circles formed an iris and pupil for the twelve-foot eye-symbol. Evelyn had warned me about this, that the resulting shape of the Invisus Oculus may upset me, that the shape was necessary to achieve the effect of true observational invisibility, that the eye-shape had nothing to do with the capital-E Eye which the design would soon be used against. But standing there just inside the doorway of the magical workshop, a shiver went through my guts and down my tentacles.

"Oh," I said, reaching out and groping for Raine's hand next to me. "Oh. Um. Er. That's ... that's weird."

Raine took it better than I did. She squeezed my hand and chuckled softly. "You can say that again."

"I didn't expect it to look so ... so ... so much like that. It really is the Eye. Goodness me. Um. W-what does that mean?"

Raine made a thoughtful noise. "You know what they say, Heather. Fight fire with fire."

I tutted and huffed, trying to play off the bizarre coincidence. "I always thought that saying was very silly. Adding fire to fire just makes a bigger fire."

The all-too-familiar eye-shape was the most unsettling thing about the Invisus Oculus, but it was not the most incongruous element. The two inner circles and the lines of the eye-enclosure were encrusted with magical symbols, as one would expect, to actually perform the effect of the mage's desire upon the fabric of reality.

Most of them meant nothing to me — strange twists of angle and curve that hurt the eyes if one lingered on them for too long. They were accompanied by delicately flowing sections of text in Arabic, Ancient Greek, and Latin — but also, most bizarrely of all, in English.

One curve of text read: ‘rejectrejectrejectrejectrejectrejectreject’ with no spaces between the words. Another one had the phrase: ‘I cannot see you so you cannot see me’ printed backwards and coiled around a symbol which made me feel vaguely sick. The phrase ‘these are not the droids you’re looking for’ was folded delicately between two lines of perfect Ancient Greek. Raine pointed out that last one and had a good laugh over it, but it made no sense to me. She just patted me on the head.

“The English just makes it so much weirder,” I hissed. “I don’t care where it comes from or what it means. It seems ... wrong, somehow. Do you think this is because it’s a new spell? Never been done before? Eevee is the first to try this, and she speaks English as her first language, so ... maybe?”

Raine ruffled my hair again, running her fingertips across my scalp to help calm me down. “Stands to reason,” she said. “We could just ask Eevee, you know?” She glanced across the Invisus Oculus again and then spoke to Praem, who was standing a bit closer to the canvas, staring down at the completed work. “Where is Eevee, anyway? Praem?”

Praem looked up from the circle and met Raine’s eyes. Milk-white orbs burned with sudden clarity beneath the artificial lights in the magical workshop. Praem turned on the spot, maid dress spinning as she realigned herself away from the circle and toward us, as if she was dismissing something behind her.

Something was wrong, out of place. A creeping sensation crawled up all our tentacles. “Praem?” I said.

Praem intoned: “Where indeed.”

“You don’t know?” Raine asked.

Praem just stared.

Raine frowned and clucked her tongue. “I thought Eevee was with you, Praem. Did you put her to bed, for a nap?” Raine laughed softly. “Our Eevee needs a nap, no doubt. Deserves it, after all this

work.”

“Mm,” I grunted in agreement.

But I frowned down at the circle, then up at Praem; nameless instinct brought all our tentacles upward, tips pointing back at the unsettling eye-shape on the piece of canvas. We spread outward, getting more range, more vision, more reference points from which to construct an image of the magical workshop. But there was nothing visually incorrect, no hole in the wall weeping pus, no shadow-person standing in a corner, no creepy words written on the table in blood. Just Praem, Raine, us, and the Invisus Oculus.

Evelyn wasn't here.

I murmured: “Didn't she ... didn't she go out? With ... with ... Zheng and Grinny? They're not in right now. She must be.”

Raine turned an odd frown toward me. “Evee, alone with a pair of demons? Nah, Heather, I think you got things mixed up a bit, love.”

“Well, I ... I could have sworn she was ... she's not here, that's for certain.”

Before I could finish the thought, Praem clicked across the magical workshop, slipped past Raine and me with a rustle of maid skirts, and marched smartly through the kitchen and into the front room. Raine and I shared a confused glance, then followed. By the time we caught up with her, Praem was clicking up the stairs, a maid on a mission.

Wordlessly and without anybody's decision, Praem led a search for her missing mother.

Evelyn was not napping in her bedroom, working at her desk, or reading in the study — though she never read in the study, at least not by herself. She had not fallen asleep on the toilet, nor was she taking a bath. She was not hidden in my bedroom, or Sevens' bedroom, or Lozzie's bedroom. She was not under any of the beds, or invading Kimberly's bedroom, or anywhere else in the house that Praem checked. Her prosthetic leg was gone, implying it was firmly attached to her body. Her walking stick was also missing, as were her favourite comfy cream-white jumper and one of the long skirts she liked to wear indoors.

At first the whole process seemed a little overblown. Evelyn was not

actually missing, we just didn't know where she was. Praem wasn't acting panicked, just a little confused, like Evelyn had forgotten to mention she was about to do something very specific in a secluded part of the house.

But as we searched and did not find, the whole incident began to remind me of the very first time I had set foot in Number 12 Barnslow Drive, when Evelyn had magicked herself Outside, when the house had been full of echoes and unseen threats, a darkly beautiful yet very creepy place I had not yet come to know.

Our sudden, unplanned search attracted attention: Tenny had been doing some kind of special chess on her laptop, supervised by Sevens, and both of them joined us in the corridor. Lozzie was apparently out, probably visiting Jan.

"Brrrrrt!" Tenny trilled at me as we stood in the upstairs corridor. "Auntie Heathy! Lost Auntie Evee!"

Tenny was still rather unimpressed with me for my antics on Monday; she was far too mature not to understand that I had made everybody worry for my safety by rushing off to fight a mage, and she'd also witnessed Sevens crying her eyes out over my behaviour. As Praem marched off down into the darkness at the far end of the corridor, Tenny put her silken black hands on her fluffy white hips, made all her tentacles go still and stiff, and pouted at me. Behind her, Marmite the giant pneuma-somatic spider-spirit was peering around the edge of the bedroom door, like a nervous dog whose human family was about to have a fight; all his steel-coloured, cone-shaped eyes were pointed at Tenny, watching her for the correct social cues.

I winced and tried to look contrite. "Tenny, it wasn't me. I swear, I didn't lose Evee. I thought she went out. Really!"

"Brrrrrrrr!"

Sevens came to my rescue, her blood-goblin mask peeking around my side, her arms wrapped around my hips from behind. "Not Heather's fault, Tennenennnnns. *Gurrrrk*-Evee's probably hiding. Didn't say anything about going out though? She's been letting me know, this last week, where she is."

I looked down in surprise, peering back at Seven's face. "She has? Evee has?"

Sevens nodded, black eyes flashing in the grey light pouring through the upstairs window. “Been telling me to talk to her, if I have a problem.”

“Oh. Gosh.” A spike of guilt wormed at my heart. “Evee did that?”

“Mmmmmmmmmrrrrrrr!” Tenny made a proud noise and tilted her chin upward. “Auntie Evee responsible!”

I winced. “And I’m not responsible, Tenny?”

Tenny squinted her eyes almost shut.

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, Auntie Heathy is responsible too. Not your fault!”

Raine struggled not to laugh all the way through that conversation, carefully turning her head to one side to avoid Tenny seeing the giggles.

None of us were particularly worried by the fact we couldn’t find Evee anywhere — except Praem, who seemed only mildly concerned — which, in itself, made me worried. Why was I so unconcerned? I had no idea where one of my best friends was, a woman who was, after all, physically vulnerable, with a prosthetic leg, a walking cane, and the attention of any rival mages who might try to muscle in on Sharrowford.

Sevens waited for Raine to control her silent giggles, then reached up and tugged on her sleeve. “Where is Evee, then? Raine?”

Raine shrugged. “Maybe she’s with Lozzie? “Tenns, did Lozzie say anything much? Was she taking Evee Outside, to check on the Cattys and that part of the plan? She’s got to get that whole airlock doodad going, right?”

Tenny’s tentacles wiggled in little circles, always a sure sign she was thinking hard. “Mmmmmmm-no? No no. Lozz-mums went to see Jans. Kissing!” Tenny pulled a big, silly grin.

Sevens gurgled. “Ohhhhhh!”

“Ha ha!” Tenny said to Sevens. “Wanna see?”

Sevens nodded up and down, suddenly rather excited. “Mhmm!”

Tenny pulled a big grin. Several of her tentacles did silly little looping motions. “Tooouoo baaaaaaaad.”

Sevens pouted. Tenny giggled.

I tutted. "Now's really not the time, I think."

"Chess match!" Sevens demanded. "If I win, you tell me where Lozzie and Jan have gone!"

Tenny made a shrewd squinty face of careful thinking, always amusing with her huge black eyes and her satin-smooth skin. All her tentacles went into overdrive, twirling and spinning. She fluttered and trilled, then said: "If I wiiiiin — you show me the spooky house!"

Sevens sighed, or tried to sigh; with the Blood Goblin mask, a sigh sounded like a handful of stones falling down the inside of a grease-lined drainpipe. "Can't do that. Aym says no. Fliss says no. Your mum says no!"

"Blaaaaaah!" Tenny flapped her wings, like a person flapping a cloak in a fit of pique.

We cleared our throat gently. "Tenny, we all love you very much. Please don't try to do dangerous things behind anybody's backs. Okay?"

"Brrrt!" Tenny trilled at me, a little frown on her face. "Auntie Heathy should do as Auntie Heathy says!"

I winced. "I'm ... I'm trying my best, Tenny."

Tenny's frown collapsed into a pout, and then into a sad face. She gave me a hug suddenly, arms and tentacles going all over our back. We returned the hug, almost laughing. "Tenns?"

"Sorry, Auntie Heathy," she bleated as she let go.

"It's okay, Tenns. I deserve a little reminder now and again. We all have to work hard to be good to each other."

Raine said, "Be *excellent* to each other. You old enough for that movie, Tenny?"

Tenny trilled softly and shrugged, curious but lost.

Sevens unwound her arms from around my hips and stepped out from behind me. "Wanna chess game anyway? Friendly?"

"Mmmmm," Tenny nodded. Sevens took her hand and the pair of

them stepped back inside Lozzie's bedroom. Marmite scuttled out of the way to let them past, then climbed up the wall and onto the ceiling, presumably to watch the chess game.

Praem returned from the rear of the upstairs corridor; she marched straight past myself and Raine, pausing just long enough to turn her milk-white eyes upon the pair of us. She looked as expressionless as always, but there was something piercing about her gaze as she strode past, a wordless disapproval of this developing situation, as if she did not approve of us standing around and chatting while Evelyn was nowhere to be found.

Then she was gone, clicking past us and descending the stairs at a rapid pace.

A strange feeling crept over me — over us.

We — us seven squid girls — were starting to disagree with each other. Three of our tentacles formed a brief coalition of concern and worry: what if Evelyn was in trouble? Wasn't it important that we couldn't find her? Why was everyone else so calm? Why were we so calm? Top-Right was particularly insistent — we should be Slipping right now, skimming across the membrane and checking every place Evelyn might be.

The other four of us kept a calm hand on our actions. After all, nobody else was panicking. Nobody else was acting out of the ordinary. If we went flying off the handle now, wouldn't that be in direct violation of the promise we'd made, to be less impulsive, to listen to others more?

And we had listened to Evelyn. We had listened. She had said—

What had she said?

We could not recall.

"Raine," I said slowly, a strange feeling creeping over me as I watched Praem's messy blonde bun drop out of sight, descending the stairs. "Why aren't we concerned about where Evee's gone?"

"Hm?" Raine glanced at me. She'd been peering into Lozzie's bedroom with fond smile, watching as Tenny was setting up the chess pieces at incredibly high speed, using all her tentacles. "Evee? What's to worry about? She's with Kimberly, right?"

I blinked at Raine. "Kimberly's at work. She works this Saturday.

Why would Evee be there?"

"For flowers, wasn't it?" Raine paused, turned to me properly, and frowned hard. "Wait a sec. She's not with Zheng. She's not with Kim. She's not with Lozzie."

"Exactly." My tentacles bunched up, as if expecting an attack. "Raine, there was a time that you tracked Evelyn's position so closely that you always wanted to know where she was. For her own safety. Why aren't we worried?"

My heart caught in my throat. The lack of worry itself was getting strange. I felt like my mind kept slipping off the question. My tentacles kept grasping the reality and then letting it go again, as if none of us Heathers could manage this by ourselves.

Raine's frown loosened up. She shrugged. "Praem takes such good care of her these days. You know, I don't say it often enough, Heather, but Praem is an absolute legend. She loves Evee very much. We owe that girl more than we can ever repay, right?"

Raine's easy smile sent a shiver down my spine. "Raine, that's true, but you're changing the subject. You keep ignoring it too. This is happening to both of us."

Raine glanced at the stairs. "Evee's around here somewhere. She's probably down in the kitchen."

"Raine!" I snapped. I heard Tenny and Sevens pause their low conversation in Lozzie's bedroom, so I continued in a hiss. "Raine. Evelyn is missing. Take this seriously. Look at my face and take this seriously. Please."

Raine squinted, as if she wasn't quite sure. Her big brown eyes seemed to brood in the shadows of the corridor for a moment.

"Heather, I'll ask this just once," she said. "And I will believe you utterly, even over my own gut feelings. Are you joking, or not?"

I almost laughed. "I don't ... I don't know, I'm not sure, I—"

"Make a decision and I will follow," Raine said. I could have kissed her. I almost did.

"Evee's missing," I said — though I almost didn't believe it myself. "Take it seriously."

Raine nodded; the transformation in her attitude was instant, like a

shift running through all her muscles. Suddenly she seemed taller, ready to move, ready to do anything.

She said: “I’ll call Zheng first. If Eevee’s not with her, we’ll start round the others. Any of them don’t answer, you get ready to do your reality-shuffle fun-time teleport dance. You have my absolute and full support. If somebody doesn’t answer, you jump, and take me with you. One sec, I’m gonna grab my gun.”

“Thank you, Raine. I love you.”

“Love you too, squid girl.”

Raine moved with a purpose. She was in and out of our bedroom in five seconds, tucking her handgun into the waistband of her pajama bottoms. Downstairs she stamped into her shoes and then swept into the kitchen and grabbed her mobile phone. I stuck close, ready for the worst. Praem was busy vanishing down into the cellar, her neat little shoes echoing on the wooden steps.

Raine dialled Zheng.

I meant to stay close, but something — some unspeakable, wordless urge — drew me away. I was less than five paces from Raine, standing in the kitchen, waiting for Zheng to answer, when I stepped into the magical workshop.

The Invisus Oculus stared back at me from the floor.

Behind me, Raine spoke into the phone: “Zheng, it’s me. Hey, big girl. Yeah, you too. Look, is Eevee— nah, it’s fine, no emergency, not yet. Just need to check—”

But I wasn’t listening.

The magical workshop felt like such a secluded place, separated from the kitchen of Number 12 Barnslow Drive by only a thin wooden door, about two inches thick. Yet in here, with the curtains closed over the bay windows, with the electric lights burning like bunched candles in the ceiling, with the table cleared and pushed back, with the floor covered by a baleful canvas wearing the blank gaze of a caged god, the room felt like a religious space, an altar to something one should not touch — but abandoned and empty.

We stepped deeper. The gateway mandala at the back of the room lay blank and empty, with the gateway to Camelot closed for now. Evelyn’s magical notes on the table were tidied away neatly. The

spider-servitors in the corner over the old sofa were sitting comfortably, tucked against the junction between wall and ceiling, their long stingers folded back at rest. We waved to them with a tentacle; one of them waved back, lazy and slow. Completely relaxed. No scent of a threat.

Raine called to us: “Evee’s not with Zheng! I’m gonna try Kim next.”

“Sure ... ” I murmured.

We stared into the eye.

We brought all seven of us to bear.

All seven, all looking, all staring, not seeing.

Top-Right was certain we were onto something. Bottom-Left said Evelyn meant us to understand this as a clue. Middle-Right coiled around our waist, certain that she did not want to look into the circle. Slowly, we came to a consensus; there was nothing there. Nothing to see. Nothing worth observing.

We almost turned away, ready to follow the sound of Raine’s voice once again.

But then we felt that impulse, that mischievous urge to push beyond what was allowed or what was sensible, the very thing that Taika had warned us about, the very element of ourselves that we kept justifying.

We held back just long enough to say: “Raine? Raine, I’m going to step into the Invisus Oculus. Is that okay?”

Raine called back from the kitchen, “To check for Evee? Sure! Do it! Good idea!”

Permission! Good girl! Good girls! We were being good. We coiled about ourselves with the knowledge that we had done this right, for once, even if we were being very silly. Of course, if Evee was in there, she would be right there, we would see her, so she wasn’t. But this was wonderful practice.

We stepped onto the canvas, careful not to touch any of the lines. We stepped right over the edge of the eye-symbol, past the jumble of magical words and esoteric shapes, past the line of the iris, and into the pupil.

“Ha!” Evelyn barked. “Took you long enough.”

“E-Evee?!” I spluttered. “What— how—”

Evelyn was sitting on a chair in the dead centre of the Invisus Oculus. She had a cushion beneath her backside, her walking stick resting against one thigh, a nice comfortable shawl over her shoulders, and a book open in her lap — Pratchett’s *Unseen Academicals*, which I think she intended as a clever little joke. She did not look lost or missing, not one little bit; in fact she looked very comfy and cosy. If I had found her like this under any other circumstances then I would have been overcome with the urge to join her.

And she was grinning like I’d never seen before, smug and satisfied in her triumph.

“It works!” she said. She slapped the book shut and let out a low chuckle. “Don’t look so surprised, Heather. I did warn you!”

“You— what!? Evee, everyone is worried about you! I was worried about you! How were you ... you were right here, you ... ”

We glanced around the magical workshop again, expecting to see some kind of semi-transparent forcefield effect which had been hiding Evelyn from the rest of the room, but there was nothing except empty air and the lines of the Invisus Oculus itself. We even stuck several tentacles back and forth over the line, to see if we could feel anything. Nothing but air.

Evelyn was saying: “Oh, nobody’s really worried about me, don’t get all—”

“I was! Raine is! Evee!”

Evelyn huffed, some of her triumph rubbing off with embarrassment. “I don’t mean that in a self-deprecating sense, for pity’s sake. Tch.” She tutted and then added in a low voice, almost speaking to the floor: “Of course you care about me, Heather. I’m not disputing that.” She cleared her throat and took up her walking stick in one hand, preparing to stand. “I mean everyone knew subconsciously that I was right here, even if they couldn’t access the information. I’m betting you had to push yourself pretty hard to come look for me, yes?”

I tutted and huffed a little myself, uncertain if I should be impressed with the fruits of Evelyn’s work or horrified that she was treating this enforced forgetting so casually. “Evee, I was getting genuinely

worried, I—”

Evelyn stamped once with her walking stick, expression stiffening. “Heather, this isn’t an idle question, this is important testing.”

We blinked at her. “Ah?”

She sighed. “You are the closest thing we have to the Eye, Heather. If the Invisus Oculus doesn’t work on you then it’s failed at the very first hurdle. I explained all this to you before I went in, but ... well.” She cleared her throat. “The fact you don’t recall is actually a very good sign that it’s all working as it should.”

“I ... I sort of recall?” I frowned, dredging my memories; there it was, like a silt-covered rock I’d missed amid the murk. “It’s coming back to me, now that I’m standing in here with you.”

“Good,” Evelyn said. “Now, be honest with me, don’t pull your punches, I’m not going to be offended, I did set this up on purpose, after all. You had to push yourself to recall me, yes? Correct? Is that right?”

“Oh. Well. I suppose so. Yes. Yes I did. And it only worked because Raine was there to reinforce me.”

“And you couldn’t see me at all, not even a little bit, from beyond the circle?”

“Not at all.”

I swallowed with growing discomfort. Something about this whole situation did not sit right with me, and it wasn’t Evelyn’s behaviour. Behind us in the kitchen I could hear Raine talking down the phone, checking with Kimberly that she had not seen Eevee all day; I turned to step out of the circle and let her know that Evelyn was right here, safe and sound.

“Wait!” Evelyn snapped. “Don’t. Not yet. The test is still going.”

“Eevee!” I whirled back to her. “Praem is marching up and down the house, worried sick about where you are! She’s genuinely worried!”

Evelyn pulled a difficult face, grumbling low in her throat. “Yes, yes, I’ll have to apologise to Praem. She was part of the test, too, you understand? You all were. I told you that I was going to step in here, just before I did. I even made sure you were listening, I repeated it twice, and I instructed Praem specifically not to panic.

She's worried, but not panicking, is that correct?"

"I ... well ... yes. Yes, I think."

Evelyn breathed a sigh of relief, and then smiled again. All her theories were coming true. "What does it feel like?" she demanded. "What did you think? About me not being there."

I grumbled, but tried my best to answer: "Well ... I ... I kept rationalising it. I assumed that you'd gone out or something." We shrugged. "I kept thinking maybe you were elsewhere, maybe with Zheng, or maybe with Lozzie, but not here, not in the house, certainly not right here in the magical workshop, right where we ... left ... you?"

"But you knew something was wrong? And then you acted on that?"

I bit my bottom lip, trying to piece together the last thirty minutes; my thoughts were all jumbled up, even when we pulled ourselves together and turned every tentacle-neuron toward the task of memory. We recalled standing in the magical workshop with Evelyn — then standing in the magical workshop without her. She must have stepped into the circle, but the loop of our memory was disrupted. We vaguely recalled her words about stepping inside, which was the source of our strange lack of panic, but the details were fuzzy and indistinct.

"To be honest, Eevee? I was getting worried by the fact I wasn't worried. It was becoming weird."

Evelyn snorted softly. "Recursive concern. And that drove you in here, eventually?"

"Mhmm. Sort of. That and cephalopod mischief. I don't think Raine would have stepped in here, not by herself, not by—"

Raine called from the kitchen: "Eevee's not with Kim, either! Gonna see if I can raise Lozzie, if not, then Jan!"

I called back: "Okay, Raine!" Then I said, "Oh, oh, Eevee, she can't hear me, can she?"

"Not at all." Evelyn sighed. "Leave her for a moment. The test continues. Did this work on Sevens? Have you seen her?"

"Uh, um, yes. She didn't know where you were, either. Same with

Tenny. She was worried, too! She blamed it on me, at first.”

Evelyn almost purred with satisfaction. “Good. Now, as for your ‘cephalopod mischief’, well, let’s hope the Eye isn’t going to descend to ground level, grow legs, and step inside.”

I grimaced. “Evee, don’t even joke about that. It sent that bizarre copy of Lozzie once, remember?”

Evelyn grunted, an evil sort of smile playing across her lips. “That’s what the real Lozzie’s Knights and Caterpillars are for, yes? To keep the Eye’s potential minions off us.” The smile widened. “I think I can count this first test as a grand success. The Invisus Oculus works on humans, demons, Outsiders, other-non-human Earthlings — by which I mean Tenny — and on you, Heather, the closest thing we have to the Eye.”

“W-well, that’s ... that’s good ... ”

Evelyn stood up with a pained grunt, favouring her walking stick over her prosthetic legs. The last two days of hard work had taken a toll on her body. I not-so-covertly moved three tentacles into position to catch her, in case she took a sudden tumble. Evelyn eyed the tentacles and sighed, her triumph turning sour.

She snapped, “Don’t sound too bloody happy about it, Heather.”

“I’m sorry!” I blurted out. “I-I am happy about it, and thank you for doing so much work, it’s— yes, it’s amazing that it works. Congratulations. Well done. You did it, Evee! I’m just ... I’m ... well, I—”

“Spit it out.”

I huffed, squared my shoulders, and gestured with half my tentacles at the triple-layered magic-circle eye-design in which we stood, sequestered and hidden away from the rest of the world, from the sight of any being which attempted to observe us.

“Evee, you’ve created a magical design that looks like the Eye, and makes people forget about whatever is standing inside it.”

“Mhmm,” Evelyn grunted. Her soft blue puppy-dog eyes held my gaze, unwavering, satisfied, very happy with herself. “That I have.”

“Do I have to spell this out? That’s like—”

“Like Maisie,” she finished for me, then sighed. “Heather, I’m not

insensible to the implications.”

I heaved out a huge breath and nodded along. “Right, yes, exactly. It looks like the Eye and it makes people forget about what’s inside it. Exactly like what happened to Maisie — well, sort of. I didn’t forget about you completely. But we still don’t really understand how the Eye made everyone forget her. This is ... this is not what I was expecting. This is practically a miniature revelation, and ... I don’t like it.”

“Me neither,” Evelyn admitted, casting her own gaze down at her creation. “I am satisfied with the result of the work, of course. The practical applications for us are perfect. As long as nobody uses it to rob any banks. But ... mm, the shape of the Invisus Oculus, it’s not something I chose, Heather. You understand that, yes? All I’ve done here is follow principles, ones I’ve derived from all my research. The best form those principles produce is this shape.” She tapped her walking stick on the canvas upon which we stood. “Which is worrying, certainly. But it gives us a certain kind of insight, does it not? A real clue, as to why nobody remembers your sister. She is, in a way, enfolded within the real Eye.”

I groaned. “An Eye can’t observe itself, not without a mirror? So nobody can observe Maisie, so ... ” I trailed off and shrugged, feeling emotionally exhausted. “I’m sorry, Eevee. I don’t know how to piece this together, not yet.”

“No rush, Heather,” she said. Evelyn shifted her weight heavily, leaning on her walking stick; she suddenly looked exhausted. I very gently placed a tentacle against her shoulder, conforming to the shape of her body, supporting her. “We have almost a week of additional work ahead of us,” she continued. “More testing here, then scaling up out in Camelot. Building the bloody airlock system to get those Caterpillars through, all that. Not to mention the first live test, mm?”

I felt rather overwhelmed. “Live test?”

Evelyn squinted at me. “Yes, Heather. You or Lozzie, or preferably both of you, for safety and redundancy, taking this out to Wonderland.” She nodded downward at the canvas. “We’re not scaling it up until it’s confirmed to work on the real thing. You only have to do it for a few seconds.”

“O-oh, right. Yes. Of course. Eevee, I’m a little overwhelmed by all

this, by you ... vanishing!"

Evelyn smiled. Despite the energy of her success, she looked drained; the bags beneath her eyes were worse than usual. Her long blonde hair caught the dim light in the magical workshop. She smelled faintly of sweat and sleep, warm and cosy and in need of a good nap. To my great surprise she leaned into the support of my tentacle against her shoulder.

"You need a rest, Eevee," we said.

She huffed out a laugh and shook her head. "There are many, many stages of setting up between this and the real thing, Heather," she said with surprising gentleness. "Don't worry. You won't be doing this alone. Not without me and—"

As if summoned by the premonition of her name, Raine stepped through the kitchen door and into the magical workshop; she was lowering her mobile phone from her ear as she crossed the threshold.

Raine started to say: "Eevee's not with Jan and Lozz, either. I guess she must be ... Heather?"

Raine stopped, looked left and right, and then frowned at my apparent absence. I could almost see the thoughts turning over in her head, trying to retrace the steps she'd seen me taken, trying to reconcile reality and memory. She ran a hand through her hair, raking it back across her scalp; with her other hand she casually tossed her phone in the air, spinning it end over end, and then caught it again without looking.

"Bloody show-off," Evelyn grumbled.

"She's not showing off to anybody!" I whispered, as if we were a pair of little girls playing hide-and-seek, and Raine was right outside our hiding spot. Yet I felt compelled to defend my lover's honour. "Raine's just like that, even when nobody's watching."

"Showing off to the universe itself, then," Evelyn said.

Raine looked right at us, as if she'd heard our words. She made eye contact with me — not a fleeting moment of brushing gazes, but prolonged, conscious, intentional contact. Her frown never wavered.

"Raine?" I murmured. "Oh. Oh, that is spooky. I don't like this."

“Spooky?” Evelyn chuckled. “Miraculous, more like.”

Raine finally looked away again, puffed out a big sigh, and glanced over her shoulder. “Praem!” she yelled. “You got Heather down in the cellar with you?”

A reply floated back, like the tolling of a tiny, muffled bell — not from the cellar, but from beyond the back door. Praem was probably checking in the long grass for any sign of Evee. “No Heather,” she intoned.

I hissed to Evee: “This is getting terribly weird, I’m stepping back out. Come on, Evee, we have to end this now. This is getting odd.”

But Evelyn said, firmly yet gently: “Wait.”

Raine turned back and stared right at us again, seeing but not observing. Looking but not comprehending. I waved a tentacle and watched her follow the motion with her eyes, but she didn’t acknowledge it in any conscious fashion.

I hissed: “Is this another test?”

Evelyn glanced at me, then glanced at Raine, then back at me again. She was breathing too hard, a little flushed in the cheeks. Was she enjoying this? I’d never known her to revel in cheeky mischief, but maybe she just so rarely had the chance. Her eyes flicked down my face, then back up again.

She muttered, “You could call it that.”

She was almost shaking.

“Evee? Are you okay—”

Evelyn reached for my face and cupped my chin with one hand — her maimed hand, with the missing digits and the absent chunk of palm. Her fingers were so soft — but less than gentle; she pressed hard enough to hold me in place, to leave no question that I was to be a good girl and stay still. I was so shocked that I didn’t resist, didn’t even flinch, just allowed her to pin me.

“Evee—” I managed to squeak.

And then, in full view of Raine’s unseeing eyes, Evelyn bobbed her head forward and planted a kiss on my immobilised lips.

The kiss was rough and clumsy; Evelyn simply mashed her mouth

against mine, without any elegance of sliding lips and slipping tongues, without the slightest hint of experience or forethought. We nearly clacked teeth through our lips, a most uncomfortable sensation. Eeve didn't even close her eyes — her eyelids were fixed open by a cocktail of haste, mortified embarrassment, and commitment to her action, no matter how foolish. Desperate, awkward, hard — but full of force and need. She kissed me like she was trying to drink me up, or bite off a piece of my face. She tasted of peanut butter sandwiches and lukewarm tea.

Evelyn broke the kiss as quickly as she had begun, jerking back and letting go of my chin, as if surprised by herself. She slammed her full weight back to her walking stick, so hard that she almost slipped; I had to catch her with my tentacles, in a gentle web of pale flesh. She was flushed in the cheeks and panting hard by the time she righted herself once again.

I could only stare and stammer. “E-E-Eeve— y-you— I didn't— d-did you want—”

Raine was turning away from the secret within the circle, none the wiser to the kiss Evelyn and I had just shared.

“Did I want?” Evelyn said, blushing hard. She tried to smile, but she was unsteady. “Yes, I did. And I got.” She cleared her throat, settled her shawl on her shoulders, grasped her walking stick in a firm hand, and swung herself toward the edge of the circle. “Let's go talk to Raine about the test. I think it's time to lay out the next steps.”

“Eeve, what about that kiss?!”

Evelyn glanced back at me. She tried to wear the mask of stern control, but her gaze flicked to my lips again with an unconscious flutter.

“Eeve—”

“Share if you want. Tell her if you wish.” Evelyn shrugged, her shoulders uneven, her old pain settling back on her spine. “Not like it's a first time for either of us.”

Then she turned away and stepped over the edge of the circle, breaking our sordid seclusion, leaving me alone, inside the pupil of this imitation Eye.

**slanting surfaces;
unplumbed voids – 23.2**

Black ash lay draped in ragged blankets upon the charred and ruptured soil, smothering stubs of scorched brick and lumps of stunted ruin with a funeral veil of ageless soot and arid filth; yet all the dust in the world could not obscure the looping alien script upon every inch of broken wall and shattered arch. Dark mist drifted in choking sheets of diaphanous rot, shadows and shades coiling and flowing with umbral intent. Life scurried and stalked and slithered through the remnants of this dead place — malformed, malnourished, and maltreated shapes, neither ape nor canine nor anything that walked the million-million worlds of Outside, broken things with broken outlines, their forms smeared sideways across the surface of reality by generations of merciless examination. Bloated jellyfish-creatures grown vast and turgid bobbed and twisted in the shadow-rich air, floaters in the eye of a god.

The endless plain — a paradox both infinite and infinitely bounded — stretched away toward a terminus of broken teeth, a horizon of shattered mountain ranges cooked to brittle cinders, their shells of rock cracked open and their innards left to run like blood, allowed to cool and harden, and then cracked and burned again and again. Ancient watchers observed from just within that ring of mountains, behemoths and leviathans in their own right, creatures the size of skyscrapers or islands or continents, all of them kneeling or squatting or lying prostrate, all of them staring upward in mute, frozen, forever devotion.

Up and up and up, to a sky that was not a sky, to a firmament that stared back, to the ridged and wrinkled surface of the truth hanging above this cursed and ruined world.

Wonderland.

“Heathy!” Lozzie hissed, right next to our ear. She squeezed my hand extra hard, trying to snap me out of my wordless terror. “Heathy, it’s okay! It’s okay and good and it worked! Heathy! Breathe! Air goes in! Air goes out! Breathe!”

Among the million-million dimensions of Outside there are many worlds where human beings might survive for a time, places almost hospitable to earthly biology and the pressure needs of the mortal soul; perhaps homo sapiens — that endlessly adaptable species to which I still belonged, at least in spirit, if not in strict physicality — could learn to live in such a place, and with time become more Outsider than human. There are many more dimensions where no human could hope to remain whole and sane for more than a handful of minutes; there are uncounted worlds where no unprotected, unaltered mortal could endure at all — a human would be devoured, or fly apart, or crushed by the overwhelming weight of unreality. There are yet more dimensions beyond all human comprehension, where one would meet an end that words cannot capture. There is the abyss.

But Wonderland was different. The Eye's domain was none of those.

Here, among the ruin both physical and spiritual, a human being might draw breath, walk upon solid soil, and think what thoughts the soul had need of. But the soul knew, just from the scent of the air and the colour of the ash, that this place was anathema. To overstay one's welcome by even a second would invite an end worse than death.

"Heathy! Mmmmm—open! Open! Open you mouth! Heathy, you're— you're gonna pass out! Breatheeeee!"

'Wonderland'.

Why had Maisie and I chosen to call it that? Better to ask why not. It was the only reference point we'd had: a children's story about getting whisked away to an impossible place. Calling it 'Wonderland' was an offense to poor Alice and all the imaginary inhabitants of that fictional playground. Sorry, Mad Hatter; apologies White Rabbit; my most sincere and deepest regrets, Red Queen. But it was the best Maisie and I could do. A child's screaming, terror-soaked, desperate attempt to encapsulate something that could not be rendered in human language, let alone with the culture and concepts available to a pair

of nine year old girls.

“Heathy! Mmm!”

Wonderland. In the previous year of my life I had visited this plane twice — once under duress, against my will, kidnapped by a servant or avatar or creation of the eye, and a second time under my own power, to burn a monster.

And now, there I was, a third time. Three, a lucky number. Three times, that’s the charm. Three and three and three make nine, minus two to get seven and that’s us, us Heathers, us—

Lozzie mashed her free hand against my face.

She rammed her fingers into my mouth and nose, into the areas which I had instinctively sealed up with a plate of bio-extruded pneuma-somatic steel. She slipped a fingernail into the narrow seam, wriggled half her hand past my lips, and then spread her fingers to force my mouth open.

“Blurgh—pleh-plah!”

I made the most ungraceful sound — which wasn’t really much of a concern right then — and spat her fingers back out. I peeled open the armour-plates of pneuma-somatic flesh I’d used to plug my vulnerable orifices; when had I even done that?

“Lozzie, what—”

“You weren’t breathing!” Lozzie hissed in my face, eyes blazing hard against the background of her pale cheeks. She kept her voice low and soft, then quickly looked left and right again, to make sure nothing was creeping up on us.

“Oh,” I whispered back as I realised what I’d done. “I’m sorry, I-I didn’t— didn’t mean— yes. I’m ... I’m right on the verge of having a panic attack. I think. Maybe. I-I’m glad we’re doing this together.”

“Mmhmmmmmm,” Lozzie grunted, bobbing her head, looking everywhere except upward.

Flakes of black ash fluttered downward through the sunless air; they settled in Lozzie’s wispy blonde hair.

Sunless? I’d never considered that implication before. If the Eye was all the sky, then where did the light come from?

Four tentacles quickly suggested we not think about that too hard. One holdout insisted it must be important. The sixth tentacle kept a mental note, to tell Evelyn, once we returned home.

Lozzie and I had arrived in Wonderland moments earlier, hand in hand — a serious understatement, as I also had two tentacles wrapped around her slender waist, a third tentacle bunched in the fabric of her poncho, and we were quite literally strapped to each other. Both of us were wearing climbing harnesses, Lozzie's tucked beneath her usual outer layer of poncho, mine bunched uncomfortably under my thighs and groin, despite Raine's efforts to make this as comfortable as possible. Four separate lengths of reinforced climbing rope and a pair of braided steel cables linked our two harnesses together. Raine and Evelyn had taken no risks when it came to the safety measures for this final test.

We were also both anchored to the Invisus Oculus, beneath our feet.

Four additional steel cables led from the climbing harnesses to a quartet of holes in the corners of the massive piece of canvas; the holes were reinforced with metal rings to avoid tearing the material — another safety measure, thanks to Raine's thinking. I had two tentacles pressed to the painted canvas itself, to aid in brain-math teleportation, but even without my be-tentacled touch there was no way for me to accidentally leave the Invisus Oculus behind. Lozzie and I could not even have stepped out of the magic circle without intentionally undoing half a dozen clasps and buckles. Even if one of us went stark raving bonkers at that exact second and decided to throw ourselves upon the mercy of the Eye, the straps and bindings would give the other the split-second we needed to Slip back home.

But neither of us were going to do that.

We stood in the centre of the pupil of the Invisus Oculus, protected and hidden inside a false eye made of ink and blood and Evelyn's ingenuity. The canvas rested directly on the blackened and burned soil of Wonderland. The false eye stared upward at the sky, at the real thing, the genuine article, hanging in the void above our heads.

To my surprise Lozzie was not handling this well; I'd rarely seen her unsettled like this, wild-eyed and animalistic, not since we'd rescued her from captivity almost a year ago. Her gaze darted back and forth from ruined walls to drifts of black ash. Her poncho was pulled tight around her slender body, the colours muted amid the

drifting mists. Her wispy blonde hair was limp, flat, and still.

She was like a little chromatic jellyfish trying to go unnoticed in hostile waters. She'd never feared Wonderland before, not when she'd saved me. Why was this time so different?

Perhaps because I had reacted like a spooked octopus the moment we'd arrived.

It took me a few more breaths to realise what I'd done — I had extruded and deployed and unfurled and sprouted half a dozen protective measures, plated myself in abyssal biology, and wrapped my vulnerable mortal core of true flesh in a web of nullification. My eyeballs were behind three layers of light-filtering membranes, my throat was plugged with a fan of fluttering filters, and my skin tingled with the dark toxins of abyssal chemistry. Yet even through all that I could still smell the air of Wonderland, the reek of carbonised flesh and burned steel on my tongue.

"Sorry," I rasped. "I ... I'm not ... this is all my nightmares, Lozzie. All my nightmares at once."

She squeezed my hand again. "I know! But they're sleeping! Shhh-shhh-shhhhhhhhhhh."

That hardly mattered.

I had visited Wonderland in my nightmares so many times; I'd been there in the flesh twice in the last year; we had gazed upon the ruined landscape once, via the dubious 'safety' of Evelyn's scrying window, almost a year ago then. But none of those times — not the dreams, not the kidnapping, not the remote viewing — had given me the opportunity to observe what this place was really like.

I had not looked upon Wonderland in such detail since I was a child.

Lozzie, myself, and the canvas which contained the Invisus Oculus had arrived in the same spot as on all those previous occasions — the very same place that the imitation-Lozzie had dragged me when she'd forced me back to Wonderland all those months ago, the same spit of ground where Lozzie and I had stood when we'd pulled the Edward-ball to Wonderland to subject him to the gaze of the Eye, the same spot where Evelyn's scrying window had materialised. Three times was too many for coincidence, but I didn't know why; perhaps this was the spot where I had fled from Wonderland a

decade earlier, or perhaps it was the dead centre of the eye's gaze.

Or maybe this plane of reality was broken, and this exact spot was all that really existed. Whichever case was the truth, I filed that observation away for later, to share with Evelyn. It might be important. But we could not chew on it then.

Nearby, beyond the border of the Invisus Oculus and the naked edge of the canvas, lay a few scraps of evidence that we had been here before.

A rough ring of crisped and blackened flesh had disturbed the ashes. It reminded me of the carbonised residue left on the metal of a barbecue grill if, for example, one forgets about an unfortunate sausage. Those burned fragments were all which remained of the Edward-ball, what little scraps of flesh had fallen from his form when I had hoisted him up before the Eye. Luckily those fragments were still and cold, and very very dead.

A little closer to the canvas stood the pitiful remains of a pair of chrome boots, made of Outsider star metal, melted down to the middle of the shins. A little black gunk was baked into a hard crust inside the boots. The soles had deformed under incredible heat and stuck to the ground. Shapeless puddles of long-cooled metal lay nearby, marred by blackened patches of charred flesh.

That was one of Lozzie's Knights — the Knight who had protected us from the Eye, when Lozzie had come to rescue me from this hell, before I had even known what the Knights were. We dared not reach out beyond the Invisus Oculus, but we made a mental note that when all this was over, we would retrieve what was left of this Knight, return it to the castle in Camelot, and give it whatever burial the rest of the Round Table decreed. We would do it personally, with our own bare hands. It was the least we owed a dead hero.

And finally, on the opposite side to the Knight's melted boots, a long scrape had marked the black ash. The impact-mark terminated in a little crater, a shallow depression in the soil.

That was where the Eye's imitation-Lozzie had fallen, when the Knight had rammed a lance through its chest and flung it away.

The imitation Lozzie was nowhere to be seen. No corpse lay decayed upon the earth, nor preserved by unnatural forces; there

was no dried blood or sticky residue on the soil. We could not recall seeing her the previous time, when we had been fighting the Ed-ball, but we'd not been paying much attention back then.

Beyond this scant evidence of human activity lay only the ruins, marching off across the endless plain, toward the ring of broken mountains, the worshipping watchers, and the horizon beyond.

But that was not a horizon.

"Aversion therapy?" I hiccuped, trying to laugh. The ropes that bound Lozzie and I to each other creaked — I was pulling on one of them with a tentacle. "N-no thanks."

Lozzie whispered: "Time to go hooooooooome! The test is a success! Success success! Woohoo! Time to go? Go go go!"

Lozzie was right, even if we'd not confirmed it yet.

Neither of us had looked up.

Back on earth, in Sharrowford, within the comforting walls of Number 12 Barnslow Drive, tucked away deep in the magical workshop, everyone was waiting for us to return home. The unique properties of the Invisus Oculus presented some odd logistical challenges; as soon as Lozzie and I had stepped inside the pupil all strapped up and ready, everyone else had promptly forgotten we were there. Our assembled support had been unable to see Lozzie sticking her tongue out and voicing some truly blush-inducing compliments about Raine's tummy. I wasn't sure if those observations about Raine's "virgin-eater cheese-grater" and "pussy-rubdown washboard" were actually genuine or just Lozzie's attempt to take the edge off my fear, though I strongly suspected the latter.

We had spent the last couple of days subjecting the Invisus Oculus to every test we could imagine, short of putting it in the middle of a busy street and getting one of us hit by a car. Almost everybody in the house took a turn in the funny forgetting circle, just for the novelty — though Tenny had disliked it deeply and Zheng had refused to go anywhere near it. We'd done all sorts of serious tests, including having me search for Raine with brain-math while she was only a few feet away and I'd forgotten where she was; that hadn't worked either, much to Evelyn's relief.

During all these tests we had discovered the only way to circumvent the circle was to write down instructions to oneself first, before the

subject entered the Invisus Oculus; even written reminders were highly unreliable — they didn't break the spell's effect or allow anybody to remember or see anything, they simply allowed the note-taker a chance to believe something they had written in their own handwriting.

Raine almost always believed her notes, and mine even more so. Evelyn almost never trusted anything.

So, the last thing we'd seen before we had teleported to Wonderland was Raine and Evelyn looking very confused, both of them frowning at the notes they'd written in their own handwriting, explaining to them what was going on and where I was. Unlike Evelyn's little trick two days ago, nobody in the house would be comforted by the subconscious knowledge that I was safe and sound. Lozzie and I were missing, in danger, on a time limit. Everyone would feel that.

I whispered back to Lozzie: "Not yet. Don't take us home yet."

Lozzie peered at me with wide eyes, balanced on the edge of real fear. "Heathy?"

I took a lemon out of my pocket; Praem had given one to me before I'd stepped into the circle. I hadn't been sure why — it wasn't as if we were planning on stopping in Wonderland long enough for a light picnic — but now I understood. I needed the courage. I tore into the lemon with tentacle and teeth, stuffing the rind back into my pocket lest it break the circle of the Invisus Oculus, and jamming the soft yellow flesh into my mouth. I chewed and swallowed quickly, barely tasting the lemon, shaking all over.

Then, with more willpower than I knew I possessed, I looked up.

The sky was not a sky, but a vast darkness from horizon to horizon, ridged and humped and creased in the middle, at the place where two eyelids met. Those creases were deeper than any ocean trench, those ridges taller than mountain ranges, those lids vast as worlds.

The lid did not shudder, nor twitch, nor part. No crack of shining darkness stared down upon the land. The architect and artist of my nightmares, my teacher in the secrets of reality, my adoptive parent from Outside, was asleep, in repose, unaware.

The Eye was shut.

"It worked," I breathed, my voice quivering like a lead in the wind. I was shaking all over, but we squeezed the words out. "It can't see us. Doesn't know we're here. Lozzie. Lozzie. It works. I can't— um — it— wow."

"Yes! Yes yes!" Lozzie hissed back. "Yes, it worked! It worked! Eevee-weevee is gonna be happy and satisfied and smug and silly and somebody needs to cuddle with her, yes! So let's go! Heathy, let's go back!"

But we only whispered: "Maisie's up there."

Lozzie said nothing, but I could hear her breathing at my side, just a touch too rough with fear.

We seven Heathers flirted with a brief madness.

We knew in our heart of hearts, deep down in the resonance of our sevenfold soul, that Maisie was not out there somewhere amid the black ash and blasted ruin of this world; her body was not coiled up in a coffin or bricked up beneath a floor; we would not find her hooked into some kind of life-support machine, or placed upon a throne of obsidian and tended by a court of shadows; we would not discover her shade adrift on the ethereal winds nor stumble across her still-inhabited corpse on an altar in the wastes of Wonderland.

She was up there, with the Eye — inside it, or in its clutches, or trapped just behind the lid, or buried deep in the jelly. The specifics did not matter.

She was up there. All I had to do was reach out.

Why not do it right then?

Everyone else was safe at home, tucked away behind the walls of reality, unreachable by the sleeping god in the sky — all except Lozzie, but she could teleport herself back to Sharrowford in complete safety. Why not reach out with a pressure-bubble of brain-math right then, ram it through the Eye's lid and into the cornea beneath? Why not reach out for my twin, my sister, right then? It was the same thing I was going to do eventually, wasn't it? But this way everyone else would be safe, everyone else would be untouchable, and only I would be placed at risk. Forget the others, the Knights, the Caterpillars; forget Evelyn's magical plans and Raine's moral support; forget Zheng and Twil ready to haul my limp body back through a gateway; forget Lozzie here as emergency

escape; forget Sevens prepared to weave some last-minute fiction to stave off my death. Forget the plan, do it now, do it raw, do it before we could second guess ourselves.

We came within a hair's breadth of leaping.

But we had promised. We had promised to stop acting like this, stop leaping before we looked, stop leaving our beloved out of the loop. And if we tried and failed, alone and unsupported, the others wouldn't even have a corpse to mourn.

We took a deep breath, let it out very slowly, and won the argument within ourselves.

We lowered our gaze from the closed lid of the Eye.

"Okay, Lozzie," we rasped. "Test successful. Evee will be really happy, that's right. Let's head back. You do it, please. I'm ... feeling strained."

Lozzie's hand tightened on mine. She broke into a secretive little smile, all mischievous now that I had pulled back from the precipice. Maybe she could tell.

"Okay, Heathy!"

I glanced up at the Eye one more time, at the closed lid. "Almost there, Maisie," I whispered. "I promise. Wait for us."

"Mm? Heathy?" Lozzie tilted her head at me.

"Nothing," I said. "Let's go home."

And with a wink and a shuffle and cluck of her tongue, Lozzie did just that. Wonderland blinked shut, Outside the walls of reality.

= =

"Evee kissed me a few days ago."

Jan looked up from the table in the magical workshop, from where we had laid out her very special and very large delivery. She stared at me in wide-eyed silence, her previous explanation forgotten. Eventually I tore my eyes away from the life-sized, colourless, inanimate version of myself lying on the table, and met Jan's bewildered gaze.

Jan said: "What."

I cleared my throat and gestured at the Invisus Oculus with a tentacle: the canvas was laid out neatly at the far end of the room, alongside the harnesses Lizzie and I had used yesterday morning, just in front of the gateway mandala on the back wall of the workshop.

“In the middle of the Invisus Oculus,” we said. “Right here, in the workshop. It was during the first time we tested it. She kissed me, right in front of Raine. But Raine couldn’t see, because of the invisibility and the forgetting and everything.” I sighed and shook my head. “It was all a bit odd. I don’t know what to make of it.”

Jan said nothing. Her eyes were dangerously wide and jewel-like, with the look of a small prey animal who had been confronted by a lethal predator and then anticlimactically booped on the nose, uncertain if she should run, play dead, or boop right back.

I cleared my throat again and shuffled my feet. “Um. It’s just ... I ...”

Jan found her voice. “Heather, why are you telling me this?”

“Well ... I just ... I’m not sure, I—”

Jan gestured at herself and almost laughed, caught between hysteria and bewilderment — then pointed at the door to the magical workshop, firmly closed for once. Everyone else had been politely asked to wait outside, seeing as Jan’s delivery did technically involve me being very naked, or at least my surrogate lying there with not a stitch of clothing on its body. Half the people waiting out there in the kitchen did see me naked pretty regularly, but the experience of unwrapping this strange package was deeply alienating enough without Raine cracking jokes and Evelyn averting her gaze.

Jan said, “Is this the real reason you wanted everyone else to wait? Did you fake your modesty just to get me alone?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean—”

Jan threw her hands up and said: “This is like calling a plumber in to do some work on your pipes and you start trauma-dumping! Should I be charging you rates for my services as an agony aunt?! A couples’ therapist? What else?”

We started to blush, mortified at the misunderstanding. “Oh, it’s not

trauma, Jan, no. I rather enjoyed it, actually. Evee's not any good at kissing, but ... "

Jan boggled at me like I'd produced a live fish from inside my underwear and was trying to hand it to her. She gestured at the other me — the me on the table — and said: "Heather, can we please focus on the reason I'm here?"

The reason Jan was here was the life-size replica of my body, lying on the cleared tabletop of the magical workshop, surrounded by the unwrapped leather bag and the mass of packing peanuts in which it had been transported.

Maisie's new vessel.

The empty vessel did not in fact look anything like me, not beyond an exact copy of my proportions; it had my height from toes to skull, my narrow width of hip, my scrawny breadth of rib, my gangly arms and my short legs and the awkward curve of my spine. But all of that, every smooth limb and every doll-like joint, every rotating socket, all of it was cast in colourless grey carbon fibre. Unfleshed and empty, naked and skinless — but the vessel did not look like a human skeleton, not like a remnant of a person after their body had rotted away. It was like a doll, waiting for a soul.

It looked like it might sit up and start talking at any moment.

The vessel lacked a face; the skull was a blank void of grey-on-grey carbon fibre, with rough pits for eyes and a toothless jaw attached to the underside — another exact copy of my bone structure. How exactly Jan had achieved that from the pictures she'd taken of me, I wasn't sure, but she had worked a miracle. The chest was not formed from individual ribs, as with a human being, but from a set of interlocking plates, fastened and bolted and slotted together, to create a sealed casket for Maisie's soul. The waist was not reduced to a mere spine, but formed from a set of ring-structures to give the vessel much greater rigidity than a real skeleton without muscle to hold it together.

The spine itself was a wonder of magical engineering. It lacked the traditional vertebrae of a human chordate spine, replacing them with flexible armoured rings. Jan had explained that this would solve many of the nerve-protection issues she had suffered in her own early days.

One of my first questions when Jan had unwrapped the thing was: “What about the breasts? I know I’m small, but I’m not that flat. I do have ... something.”

Jan had snorted, grabbed her own chest, and replied, “Don’t know about you, Heather, but I don’t have bones in my tits. Soft tissues are going to be Maisie’s responsibility, pneuma-somatic. Just like me.”

The only major difference to my body plan was the lack of tentacles. We had no idea what Maisie might require or want when she returned. She was not an abyssal squid, after all, not like me.

I tried not to think about that, about what that meant.

The whole thing weighed much less than expected — even I could lift it with relative ease, without the aid of my tentacles — but it was also much heavier than the visible parts suggested, considering it was mostly made from carbon fibre.

According to Jan the majority of that hidden weight was inside the chest and head. The skull was stuffed with specialised magic circles in little spheres and boxes, designed to ease Maisie back into a human sensory set-up as easily as possible, avoiding the issues Jan had experienced with blindness and deafness, during the first period of inhabitation of her new body. The sealed box of the chest cavity was heavily armoured on the inside, with both bulletproof and stab proof layers, a sphere of magic circles, and a special three-dimensional structure of Jan’s own devising, a many-sided shape carved from artificially grown crystal. That was the real secret of this empty vessel — a core for Maisie’s soul to settle into, like a handful of captured silt.

The exterior of the vessel was oddly alienating, like recognising oneself in a medical scan or an x-ray picture. The designs I’d seen in Jan’s notebook had seemed miraculous, and so was the result. But it was me. It was Maisie. And it was not yet alive.

I shrugged at Jan’s request that we return to the subject, smiling awkwardly. “What’s more to say? You’ve done incredibly well, Jan, as far as I can tell. And Evee’s ready to pay you, and ... ”

Jan sighed as I trailed off. She screwed her eyes shut with growing irritation, and said: “You can pay me when you all come back safely from Wonderland.” Then she tutted. “Tch! I wish you’d called it

something else. I had a soft spot for Alice in Wonderland, growing up. Especially the movie, the old animated one. Now it's all tied up with this unspeakable horror you're going to go throw yourself at. Bloody hell."

Jan herself looked a little ruffled, which reminded me of how Evelyn sometimes looked after working on a long magical project without a proper break. Jan's shiny black hair was uncombed and unwashed, all a-mess atop her head. She was wearing pink jogging bottoms, massive boots on her feet, and a dark blue ribbed sweater which looked like it had washed up from the North Sea thirty years ago, several sizes too large for her, with the sleeves cut off halfway down. The doll-like joints of her elbows and hands were clearly visible, as she was making no effort to hide them. When she'd arrived she'd also been wearing a pair of massive leather gloves — not the fashionable kind, but the working-with-dangerously-hot-substances kind — and carrying a cordless electric drill; she'd not been expecting our offer of 'transport' from her home workshop to take the form of Lozzie doing a teleport, so here she was, fresh from the proverbial forge.

July had looked entirely unruffled, tall and wide-eyed and athletic as ever, like she'd been doing nothing but exercising while Jan was working. She was out in the kitchen with the others, for now, probably pestering Zheng.

We cleared our throat again and gestured helplessly with several tentacles. "Um. Sorry. Are you ... are you sure you don't want paying now?"

Jan fixed me with a tired, greasy, very-done look. "It would be a bad omen to demand payment now."

"Well," I said. "We might not—"

Jan raised both hands and clapped them together in front of my face, like the jaws of a crocodile. "Shut!"

"I— Ja—"

"Shut! Stop! No! Don't say it. You'll bloody well jinx it."

"But we might not—"

"Stop! Heather, just stop, oh my God." Jan huffed. "You're taking Lozzie out there with you, she's an integral part of your plan, yes?"

So don't say it, don't tempt fate. I'm doing something I never, ever, ever do, on principle, in order to avoid tempting fate — I'm deferring payment for a job!" She huffed again and rubbed at her eyes. "Technically what I'm doing is not counting the job as over until your twin sister is safely inside this." She tapped the vessel with a single pale knuckle. "Call it professional after-care, yes? I'm not just delivering a weapons system and then bugging off while you blow yourself up with it, I'm here to operate the damn thing if need be. So there."

I glanced at the vessel again, then back at Jan. "Weapons system?"

Jan sighed. "A figure of speech. Closest thing I could think of. You understand what I mean."

"You're not insinuating that you want to come to Wonderland with us?"

Jan boggled at me again, but less so than before. "Absolutely not! I'll die! What else can I contribute, anyway?! No thank you." She nudged the body again. "But you'll have to take this with you, out there, yourself. Well, strapped to one of those Knights, I expect, but you get the point. I've already explained all of this to you, Heather, what are you ... " Jan trailed off and sighed again. She examined my face slowly, then blinked even slower, and resigned herself to something, deep inside. Then she sighed as if her soul was leaving her body. "Okay. Okay, Heather. You win."

"I ... I win what?"

Jan opened a hand toward the Invisus Oculus, on its canvas medium at the far end of the room. "You kissed Evelyn inside the secret invisibility sphere. Fine. What about it?"

"Oh. Um. Uh." Our tentacles coiled inward, as if trying to protect us. Jan eyed us uneasily.

"Get on with it before I change my mind," Jan almost snapped. "You're getting a freebie here. Maybe I really should take up a new career unravelling the romantic entanglements of clueless young things like yourself. Huh!"

"Well, actually," I corrected slowly. "She kissed me, not the other way around. She took charge."

"Great," Jan deadpanned. "And? Why are you telling me this? Why

do you need to get this off your chest?”

We hesitated, looking away, coiling our tentacles up tighter. They creaked.

Jan sighed. “Why not tell Raine?”

“I did!” we squeaked. “She cheered!”

“What,” Jan deadpanned again, slightly more panicked than before. “Oh no.”

“Specifically she said ‘good for Evee’. She asked me if I enjoyed it. She asked if I was worried about her feeling jealous, and she said don’t worry. She wasn’t jealous. It was— it was totally unlike the previous times this sort of thing happened! It wasn’t like she didn’t care, it was like she was happy about it! And then we had sex, three times, but that’s beside the point, because we often do that, but I don’t—”

Jan snapped her fingers three times to stop me. I blinked in surprise and tailed off. She said: “So why not tell another one of your many girlfriends about this? Surely there is somebody better suited for this than me.”

We shrugged, feeling intensely awkward. “I ... I’m not ... I don’t feel like I have anybody else to tell.”

“You have a polycule!”

Thump thump went a gentle knock on the workshop door. Raine’s voice called out through the wood: “You two okay in there?”

“Yes!” I called back. “We’re just talking. We’re fine, Raine! Please don’t worry!”

“Okaaaay,” Raine called back. I heard her steps recede from the door again.

Jan grumbled under her breath, shooting me a rather nasty look. “Oh, yes, just fine, just peachy, don’t worry about me, not like I’m trapped in here with a squid with romantic issues.” She huffed and spoke up again. “Heather, you do realise that I am the last person you want to ask for romantic advice, yes? I am a fifty three year old virgin — not that there’s anything wrong with that, but I suspect you have a touch more experience than me.”

We met Jan’s eyes head-on. All our tentacles swivelled to point at

her too, with every scrap of our attention. We just stared for a moment, to let her see.

Jan frowned. "Ah," she said. "You're not blushing."

"Because I'm not asking for romantic advice," I said. "I'm ... I can't deal with this ... this normality. Evelyn kissed me, like we have all the time in the world to go through whatever she needs. Raine treats it like a healthy development, and maybe it is, but ... we're running out of time. Everyone is acting so normal. Tenny's playing chess, Lozzie's Slipping Outside now and again. Zheng and Grinny are ... I don't know, but Grinny's put on muscle. And we went to Wonderland yesterday. Did Lozzie tell you that? We were there and we looked up at the Eye. And it felt almost ... routine! Normal! I can't. I just can't, Jan. We're about to step out there and try to snatch Maisie from a living god and everyone is acting so normal!"

Jan's exasperation had fled her face. She regarded me now with a light and gentle frown, a serious look inside her eyes. She ran her tongue along her teeth, behind the pale shield of her lips.

"Sorry," I blurted out. "I haven't been able to say this to any of the others. They're all coming with me, after all. They're all trying their best. I just don't know what to say. We might all be dead by this time next week."

Jan nodded slowly. "You've set the date for the expedition?"

"This Sunday. Five days from now. Evee says that's all the time she needs to complete the airlock out in Camelot, assuming the Knights and Caterpillars work as fast as Lozzie said they will." I shrugged. "And they are, mostly. So, Sunday it is."

Jan took a deep breath, let out a long sigh, and then cast around the magical workshop. Her eyes alighted on the lumpy old sofa beneath the spider-servitors, but then she dismissed that with a frown. Instead she grabbed one of the many chairs around the table, dragged it outward, and sat down. She gestured for me to do the same. I pulled out a chair with my tentacles and sat opposite.

Jan just stared at me for a moment, turning something over inside her head. I sat politely, hands and tentacles folded.

Eventually she smacked her lips, as if her decision was made. "Heather, I want to tell you about something, but I need to know that you won't tell Lozzie."

A field of red flags blossomed inside my head and heart.
“Ummmmm.”

Jan huffed, rolled her eyes, and leaned back in her chair. “Yes, Heather, I’m about to tell you that I’m actually wanted by the International Criminal Court, for crimes against humanity, and I’m only in this body to avoid spending the rest of my life locked in a cell in the Hague.”

I tutted. “You don’t have to be sarcastic.”

“Oh, I think I do!” Jan tutted right back at us. “Heather, I wouldn’t ask you to keep a secret from Lizzie if it was something bad about me. Frankly, if you did, then I wouldn’t trust you around her. Look, I just want to talk about part of my own past, about things that happened to me, but I don’t want you to talk to Lizzie about it, because it’s ... it’s not your place to talk about my past. It’s mine. It’s not a dark secret or an unforgiven sin. It’s just war.”

“Oh,” I said. “Right. Okay. I understand.”

“No, you don’t,” she sighed, then added: “Sorry. It’s just that sometimes you’re such a kid. You all are. You don’t understand war. You won’t, unless you’ve experienced it.” Jan blew out a long breath. She looked down at one of her own hands, making and unmaking a fist. I watched the doll-joints move. Would Maisie be like that one day? Jan said, “How much history did you study in school? What do they teach you these days, World War One at all?”

“A little,” I said, frowning. “I don’t really think our situation is remotely comparable. Though I was always better with the poetry than the actual history, the trenches and mud and all that.” I quoted from memory: “My friend, you would not tell with such high zest, To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.”

Jan barked with sudden and surprised laughter. “Alright, you old boomer. You know more than most!”

I clicked my tongue. “You’re the boomer, Jan, literally. Last I checked I’m generation zed? Is that what it’s called now? And there’s nothing old or fuddy-duddy about loving poetry!” We bristled, almost angry for real. “You take that back.”

Jan cleared her throat. “Alright, alright, I retract that bit, but only that bit. Right then. So. You know what all those poor bastard

Tommies did in the trenches, before they went over the top?"

I shrugged.

"They joked," Jan said. "They laughed. They shared cigarettes and a bit of food, and they did what they could to stay human. People used to call it 'gallows humour', like the jokes the condemned man makes while the executioner is sharpening the axe. But it's just human nature. We gotta keep laughing, or we'll start crying." Jan swallowed and took stock for a second, as if steeling herself, then moved from the general to the specific. "I went to war. The conflict I told you about, the mage conflict, you recall that?"

I nodded. "I've picked up bits and pieces. That was decades ago now, yes?"

"Mm," Jan grunted. "We didn't call it a war, back then. Some did, some didn't. But it was a war, whatever name it was given. There were two sides, and nobody was gonna stop fighting until it was done. People got hurt, some people died. Some of those people died because of me. One side lost ... "

She trailed off for a moment. I asked, softly as I could: "Which side were you on?"

"The winning one," she said. "But nobody won in the end."

"And what were the sides? What was it about?"

Jan frowned at me, surfacing from her memories. "That's hard to explain. All wars have two explanations, the simple one and the complex one. The first is rarely true and the second rarely satisfies. It was about a lot of things."

Taika's words floated up from my memory. "'Homunculus War'," I said out loud. "Is that correct?"

Jan's eyes went wide. She stared at me like she'd seen a ghost — and not a friendly one. In that name she saw the sort of spectre which had knives for teeth and blood pouring from the eye sockets. She swallowed hard.

"S-sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have—"

"How do you know that?" she demanded, not urgent but almost offended.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "I ... heard that name from somebody else."

Another mage.”

Jan snorted. “Joseph King? No, no, I don’t want to know. And I’m not joking. I don’t want to know what you know. Drop it.”

“Okay. Sorry, Jan. I respect that. Sorry.”

Jan sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I’d rather not talk about that part, Heather. Look, the point is, even when things got really bad, we didn’t stop being human, or stop joking around, or stop laughing.” She thumbed toward the door of the magical workshop. “Not quite like your weird and wonderful polycule out there, but close enough.”

“I ... I see.”

Jan shrugged. “Even the worst nights, the parts where it got really bad ... ” Jan wet her lips with a flicker of pink tongue, smiled, and slipped into the attitude of a storyteller. “One night, when it was almost over, and it looked like it was going to go against us, me and four ... ” She paused and frowned. “No, me and five others, actually, we were hold up inside this house, surrounded. This was northern France, in the dead of winter, and it was cold as fuck. Snow on the ground. Not a scrap of green anywhere. This was before modern cell phones, right? So we were really cut off. Phone lines were gone. The house was surrounded by ... I guess you’d call them demon-hosts, like July or Zheng, but not as sophisticated. And we were fucked.” Jan grinned. “We were exhausted, we’d been in a sort of magical duel earlier in the day — too complicated to explain now, but we’d lost, basically. Nobody was capable of doing shit. I was seeing double. Lothaire was delirious. We were probably all gonna die when dawn broke. One of us — this older lady called Enisa — she had a broken leg. Mundane broken leg, because you know, hey, magical bullshit doesn’t stop you from stepping in a rabbit hole in the dark while running from zombies, and fucking up your shin. It was dark, and cold, and we were surrounded by monsters. We lit all the fireplaces in that old house, but we knew the moment we stepped beyond that light, we were all gonna get eaten alive.”

“Well, you obviously didn’t,” I said. “Or you wouldn’t be here telling me the story.”

Jan snorted. “For a literature student, you can be surprisingly unromantic sometimes, Heather.”

I shrugged. "Just ... trying to stay grounded."

Jan sighed. "Alright. Well. Do you know what we did, that night?"

I shook my head.

"We stopped watching the windows, got out a pack of cards, and got really, really, really drunk." Jan broke into a grin. "I lost three thousand Francs that I did not possess. Yannic and Melitta finally broke their weird on-off love-hate thing they'd had going on for months and fucked like rabbits in the next room over. We all heard them, too! Melitta made noises like a horse, it was amazing. And then they had a baby nine months later. I only met the kid once, when he was a baby, but I wonder if he knows where he was conceived." Jan laughed, clearly enjoying this. "We wheeled Enisa out the front door so she could personally throw an empty wine bottle at the demons waiting in the long grass. I pissed in another bottle and followed it up with that."

"Ew," I said.

"Fuck you!" Jan laughed. "One of the best moments of my life, that night. But what matters is that it got us through."

"It did? How?"

Jan spread her arms. "Still alive, aren't I? Said you yourself! See, we were terrified. The mage who'd sent the demons — fucking monster by the name of Stane Ratko, who is very dead by now, I believe — he didn't actually have the power to take us. He was counting on us freaking out and leaving the house, trying to make a break for it, or turning on each other. But we didn't." Jan slapped her knee. "We played cards, threw our piss like monkeys, and fucked. Well." Jan cleared her throat. "Some of us fucked. Not me. And in the morning we tore through those demons like a hot knife in the gut, with proper magic and proper confidence."

"The phrase is 'like a hot knife through butter'."

"Not right then it wasn't. Also we had some guns, not a knife, but that's beside the point." Jan spread her hands again. "Heather, I'm saying that acting like that is normal, and it's good. You're about to go to war. Maybe a very different kind of war, but it's still a war. Your friends, your lovers, Eevee, Raine, whatever, they're probably feeling exactly the same way you are. Scared and awkward. You shouldn't need to tell me this. You should be with them, telling

them you love them, and maybe doing some other stuff.”

I sighed. “We have enough sex as it is.”

Jan shot me a withering look. “You know that’s not what I mean by ‘other stuff’. Not entirely, anyway.”

We cleared our throat. “I ... I know. I think I understand, Jan. Thank you. I’ll go make an effort. I’ll start right now, even.”

Jan held up a hand. “We ain’t done yet.”

I blinked at her. “We’re not?”

Jan’s amusement slipped away, leaving something stark and sharp behind in her face. She seemed to steel herself once again.

“Heather, the other thing you said, that worries me much more. This advice is less universally applicable, but I think I might be the only one who can give it.”

I shook my head, bewildered. “Other thing?”

Jan hesitated, then said: “You said going to Wonderland felt too normal.”

“Oh. Um. I suppose I did.”

Jan sighed and nodded. “Right. ‘Cos you’re all jumped up on that jay-are-pee-gee protagonist juice. Heading off to fight god for the fate of the world and all that.”

“What does that even mean?” My turn to huff. “And it’s not for the fate of the world, it’s for the fate of my twin sister. I think I understand the stakes perfectly well, thank you.”

Jan winced and held up a hand again, her fingers showing the clear lines of her doll-joints. “It means you’ve got it into your head that things have to go down a certain kind of way. Gravitas and pomp. Drama. Meaning.”

We frowned. “I don’t care about gravitas or drama. Whatever it takes to get Maisie home, that’s all that matters.”

Jan sighed and ran a hand over her face. She leaned back in her chair and looked at me like a problem she did not have the solution for. She suddenly looked exactly as old as she really was, and more than a little tired with me.

“Jan,” I said gently. “I appreciate the offer of advice, but I don’t think this is relevant to—”

“I had my own death all planned out,” Jan said.

We stopped in surprise.

Jan shrugged. “I don’t mean like, actual suicide. I mean that I knew I had to die, even if only for a second or two, to get into this body.” She raised one hand and wiggled her fingers. “And that was scary, you know? Yeah, yeah, I’m a big scary mage, infinite cosmic power, whatever. But that’s scary even for one of us. So I tried to control it, I had this big plan. I was going to throw a hell of a party, visit Paris for a week, then clean my whole home from top to bottom. I was gonna do the ritual at dawn, daybreak, on my birthday. I even knew the clothes I was gonna wear — all white, in robes, like I was a fucking offering or something.” Jan snorted. “I was such a fool. And you know how it actually went down?”

“Not like that?” I ventured

Jan smiled a very grim smile. “Shot three times, in the back, after an hour long fight. Dirty, exhausted, and alone. All my pretty little plans came to nothing. But, I did it anyway. I put myself in the right place.” She tapped the centre of her sternum. “You know what the lesson is?”

“No,” I said with a sigh. “I’m sorry for what you went through, Jan, but I don’t see why you have to keep phrasing these points as questions.”

“The lesson,” Jan said, with more patience than I’d expected, “is that even when things don’t go down how you expect, you have to follow them down. Even if you don’t get the catharsis you need, in your case. Even if you miss all the cues and ruin all the meaning. I don’t know what’s going to happen out there, Heather. Neither do you, not really. But keep your eyes on the prize. Rescue your sister. That’s all that matters, right?”

I was about to argue back again — but Jan was right.

Wonderland had felt almost normal, upon return. But it didn’t matter how Wonderland felt. The only thing which mattered was Maisie.

I nodded slowly, and tried to smile. “I think I get it. I’ll try. Thank

you, Jan.”

Jan smiled back, though less confident than me. She got up and rolled the tension out of her delicate shoulders. “Right, if you’re quite done, Heather, I’m gonna go talk to Evelyn about payment.”

“I thought you said—”

“Yeah,” Jan replied with a smirk. “Payment once you all get back. I’m not asking for it in advance, I’m not tempting fate here. I’m counting on you all coming home. Plus one. Am I right, or am I right?”

My smile felt brittle. “I hope you’re right.”

slanting surfaces; unplumbed voids – 23.3

Nobody panicked when Evelyn went missing for the fifth time that week, because by then we knew exactly where she'd gone.

She'd taken Lozzie and Praem with her too; she could hardly have done otherwise.

"To Camelot?" Raine asked.

Raine's face and form were half sunken in the shadows of the magical workshop, her warm skin pressed against mine as we braced for the inevitable. She smelled freshly showered, with just a hint of summer sweat clinging to her back. The night hung in great sheets around our shoulders. The rest of the house was preparing to sleep. I did my best to concentrate. This was no time for getting distracted and creeping upstairs.

"To Camelot," I sighed.

"But it's such a silly place," Raine said.

I gave her a 'nasty' look — or at least as nasty as I could manage.

She kept a straight face, and asked: "Wanna take anybody else along?"

Another sigh, deeper and harder and with more feeling than I had expected. "I'm not waking Tenny or calling Twil because Eevee won't go to bed at a sensible time. No, Raine, let's just go fetch her. Here, hold on tight." I squeezed Raine harder.

"Don't have to tell me twice, love." Raine leaned close and kissed me on the forehead, hot and hard in the secret darkness. "All aboard the Heather express. Choo choo."

"Arms and legs inside the ride at all times," I deadpanned, tutted, and then got it over with.

Out.

Camelot soothed the senses from the first moment one arrived upon

the quiet plains of that spent dimension: the soft, velvety, yellowish grass cushioning one's feet; the warm cinnamon wind caressing one's face and teasing at the loose strands of one's hair, filling one's nose with the scent of sweetness and spice; the purple light spilling from the spirals and whorls in the glittering dark sky, tinting everywhere one cared to look; the smooth curve of horizon in every direction, as if the world melted into a distant haze of endless possibility. Even the air itself was gentle upon human lungs, neither too dry nor too moist, sliding down one's throat with barely a flicker of thought.

Planes and dimensions and worlds do not have opposites — Outside is not the opposite of earth, nor is earth the reverse side of the abyss; the spiralling fractal of reality is not orderly and simple, with one side and the other balanced in cosmic harmony, endlessly producing outcomes in accordance with the proper order of all things. The universe is not shaped like a ring or a tabernacle or four elephants balanced on the back of a turtle.

And it is not, as the old saying goes, 'turtles all the way down'. Nobody wants to go all the way down. It's very dark and very cold down there.

But, with my reservations as to cosmological metaphors made clear: Camelot was as close to Wonderland's opposite as I dared to imagine.

This impression was not solely a product of the pleasant and hospitable conditions, suitable for longer periods of human inhabitation. Neither was this feeling produced by the rosy spectacles of my own positive emotional attachment — this was, after all, the first place Lozzie and I had truly talked to each other, and the first dimension which had suggested that Outside could be more than a source of alien nightmares. Nor was this feeling caused by the additions constructed by Lozzie's spiritual children — the great castle and the curtain walls, almost finished now, built by the Knights and the Caterpillars as they unfolded a new type of civilization, out here beyond the walls of reality and the interference of Homo sapiens.

No, the sense of peace and tranquillity and safety was not born of those elements, but had existed prior to them all. The taste of the air and the warmth of the wind told even unaugmented human beings that nothing lived here anymore, that things had happened

here once, a very long time ago, but those things were done with now. This was a quiet place of soft shadows and unheard echoes. Camelot was safe because it was over.

Until we had arrived, of course. Now it was all getting very loud again.

Camelot's elemental comfort helped Raine retain both her footing and the contents of her stomach, as she and I arrived at our usual spot, our trainers scuffing the grass as we landed.

"Oooof. Oooooh. Okaaay, yeeeeeah," Raine groaned briefly, hands on her knees, bent forward. She took several deep breaths, eyes screwed up tight. "Ohhhh, never quite get used to that. No offense, Heather, love. It's just a rough ride."

"Take as long as you need, Raine," I said. "No offense taken."

I finished unravelling two tentacles from around her waist; we could have achieved the Slip with nothing more than holding hands, but over the last three days I'd started taking every opportunity I could to touch and hug and embrace Raine, even moreso than usual. She and I were hardly shy about physical affection — sometimes it felt like our bodies belonged more to each other than they did to ourselves. I knew every crease of muscle and line of sunken vein and growth-spurt stretch-mark upon Raine's body, and she knew things about me that even I didn't. But I'd always refrained from clinging to her in front of others, even when buffeted by the cacophony of insistence from our tentacles. It was always so difficult to pinpoint the line between skinship and sensuality, between comfort and sex, and the last thing I wanted to do was neck with her in front of Evee, or grab her bum when Tenny could see.

We had done neither of those things over the last few days, of course, but I didn't care who saw me touching and cuddling her anymore.

It was more important to get as much of that in as possible, before the expedition. Before—

I tidied those thoughts away. We simply did not have time.

Raine straightened up and shot me a wink, her own post-Slip nausea and disorientation already passing, almost as fast as mine. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders — instantly mirrored by

three of our tentacles — and made a show of shading her eyes with her other hand. She peered out from our vantage point, like we were explorers in a desert.

She did look the part, with a light sheen of sweat in her chestnut hair, her half-exposed body rippling with toned muscle, pressed right up against me. Not for the first time that evening I cursed the fact we weren't upstairs in bed.

"And here we have the summer habitat of the Evelynus Say—so," Raine said, putting on a fake nature documentary voice. "A timid and retiring creature, she prefers dark holes and hidden nooks, all the better to stuff with emotional nuts and traumatic berries for winter, where they will not be discovered and raided by her natural predators." Raine broke off, flashed me a grin, and wiggled her eyebrows. "That's you and me, Heather."

"Tch," I tutted. "I wouldn't call Evee 'timid' or 'retiring'. And we're not predators! I'm worried about her."

Raine grinned, slowly, achingly, the grin spreading from ear to ear like the Cheshire Cat materialising inches from my cheek. I was struck by the most bizarre desire to poke my tongue out and lick her teeth. I resisted. For now.

"Raine," I sighed. "What is it?"

"Worried she's not gonna kiss you again."

It was not a question. Raine followed up by mashing her lips against my cheek in a big, loud kiss of her own, a comedy 'mwaaaaah!'

"Raine!" I squeaked, putting up a half-hearted attempt to wriggle free. "No, that's not— you know that's not— I'm worried! She's been avoiding me for days!"

Raine laughed, then sighed and cast her eyes out across Camelot. "Yeeeeeeah, I know, I know. Evelyn's done gotten all squirrely again."

"Again?" I asked — but Raine raised her free hand and pointed.

"There's our Evee," she announced. "Right where she should be. Told you so, Heather. Nothing to worry about."

An involuntary sigh of relief passed through me when I followed the direction of Raine's finger. I had, of course, no rational doubts that

Evelyn would be found right where she was meant to be. Praem and Lozzie's simultaneous absence from Number 12 Barnslo Drive confirmed the rather mundane reality. But nameless fears and childhood horrors lurked in the pit of my heart all the same. I did not like it when one of my closest and most beloved people could not be located.

The quiet plain of Camelot looked much the same as it always did, with gently rolling hills spread out in every direction beneath the whorled purple skies. Raine and I had materialised in the usual spot, upon a low hill inside what would one day be the curtain walls of Camelot Castle.

The castle keep itself had extended further upward since my last visit, but the crenelation was not yet quite complete. Pale sandstone walls stretched upward toward the sky, punctuated by ornamentation made of bone-white Caterpillar carapace; three stories were finished, with a fourth floor underway, more squat and cramped than those beneath. A series of rooftops were beginning to take shape, some peaked, others flat, mostly formed from yet more Caterpillar carapace. I spotted little walkways and balconies, exposed staircases sweeping around towers, and a hint of some kind of dome right in the middle.

The 'gardens' around the base of the castle had begun to develop actual vegetation at last, interspersed between the open squares and little paths and grand promenades. Last time I had visited the only visible plant life larger than the grass had been a row of strawberry bushes transplanted from earth, a little scraggly beneath the alien light; those bushes had now exploded with unearthly colour of their own, their leaves a deep emerald green, their branches studded with blossoms in fuchsia and ochre. The mutating strawberry bushes were joined by a riot of other plants, though in much earlier stages of growth — drooping bell-hooded flowers in deepest blues and yellows, long wispy grasses like clusters of upright spears in dun and walnut and oak, and bamboo-esque copsis of upward-straining fingers in pale orange.

None of those were from earth. Perhaps the Caterpillars had brought back seeds from the ancient, deserted city, the same place they'd gotten all the stone.

On the opposite side of the castle stood the beginnings of an orchard, with each tiny little tree planted in a cleared circle of soil.

The trees were unregimented, without order or line to their arrangement, at least not to human eyes. I hoped some of them were lemon trees.

We ached to abandon all responsibility and go explore that castle and the grounds right then. But that's not where Eevee was.

Beyond the keep and the grounds, the curtain wall was still taking shape. Large sections of it were yet to be raised, while others stood quietly unfinished, their great hide-and-rope cranes lying still for the moment, waiting for the delivery of yet more blocks of sandy masonry.

Past the walls, the plains were bisected by the Caterpillar-beaten road to what I thought of as the east, a pathway of notably flattened grass which led off toward the ancient city, little more than a suggestion of dun-brown hump on the horizon. To one side of that 'road' stood Edward Lilburne's ex-House, smartly repaired, still wearing its bizarre mushroom-cap of building materials. The house had not gone anywhere, not yet. Lozzie assured me it was quite content for the moment to watch the Knights at work. Perhaps it was developing a love for castles.

On the other side of the road — far, far on the other side, a good clear two hundred meters away from Camelot Castle, as a last and hopefully unnecessary safety measure — lay the unfinished pieces of Camelot's latest project, a project for us, wrought in our name.

The airlock gateway, and the Invisus Oculus, the two components of the coming expedition to Wonderland.

Neither of those were very complex. In fact they were both very simple, but they were also very, very, very big.

The airlock was nothing more than an enlarged version of Evelyn's interdimensional gateway spell. The gateway mandala itself was painted upon a gigantic sheet of Caterpillar carapace, with a 'doorway' outline in the middle large enough for an aircraft hanger, and a pair of horizontal bars against the ground to keep it steady. The huge sheet of carapace had been created from the armour sections of multiple Caterpillars, somehow bent flat and melted together at the seams. When I'd asked how that had been achieved, Lozzie had grinned like an absolute madwoman and Evelyn had wrinkled her nose; apparently the process had been very smelly and extremely loud. The Caterpillars in question had enjoyed it

immensely, like a pack of golden retrievers with explicit permission to play in a big muddy pond.

The airlock was surrounded by an as-yet incomplete version of the Invisus Oculus, cut directly into the soil. A twin to the carapace-gateway stood on the grass a little way off — that was the other end of the airlock, the one we'd be taking with us.

A pair of stark white doorways to nowhere, glittering against Camelot's hills beneath the purple light.

The gateway mandala itself was incomplete, not yet activated. When the final strokes of the spell were put in place, the gate would lead to Wonderland. Hopefully the gateway would never need to be opened. It was an emergency exit, large enough for the Caterpillars themselves, in case the worst should come to pass.

Evelyn had already admitted she had no idea if the Invisus Oculus cut into the soil would work to keep the Eye at bay, but the theory made sense — if nobody could see the gateway in the middle of the Invisus Oculus, that would give the Knights and Caterpillars precious seconds to simply destroy the exit. It was far from perfect, but a leaky old life-raft was better than the freezing sea.

The airlock was only intended for use if everything else failed — if Lozzie and I were both incapacitated, if the Invisus Oculus was breached, if the Eye was opening above all heads to pull us apart atom by atom.

We pushed those thoughts down. No time for that now. The gateway was a precaution. That was all.

The airlock served another function as well — it was proof of concept. Evelyn had called it a 'materials test', to see on what scale the Caterpillars could work.

The main event was now under construction, a little distant from the pair of inactive gateways.

A rectangular field of smooth white lay flat against Camelot's yellowish grass, in the middle of a dip between two hills, a blank intrusion upon the peace and tranquillity, scrawled upon in strokes as thick as my waist.

The Invisus Oculus — the real one, scaled up — was slowly taking shape upon a massive plate of Caterpillar carapace.

Evelyn and Lozzie had begun preparations weeks ago, as soon as Evelyn had the idea; Lozzie had approached the Cattys for their permission and cooperation, and they had all gladly started syncing up their ‘shed cycles’, as Lozzie put it. The fruit of their enthusiasm and efforts and engineering was a flat plate of material, two hundred meters long by one hundred and fifty meters wide, lighter and stronger and more durable than any metal, earthly or Outsider. The Invisus Oculus stretched from edge to edge. When finished, the space inside the pupil would easily accommodate half a dozen Caterpillars, twenty to thirty knights, one end of the airlock, all my friends and companions, and the payload — me.

“Larger than a football pitch!” Raine had cheered, when we’d first seen the plate in its as-yet incomplete state, a couple of days ago.

That didn’t mean much to me. All I saw was the Eye, gigantic and baleful, being drawn upon Camelot’s largest canvas.

The Knights themselves were swarming all over the plate right then, accompanied by three Caterpillars around the edges. The Knights were cutting into the plate with their weapons, scoring deep marks along a set of guidelines they had already laid down, following Evelyn’s diagrams and instructions. The Caterpillars provided a sticky, black, tar-like substance from their head-feelers, pressing the ‘ink’ into the grooves cut by the Knights. Evelyn had assured me that the substance would work even better than bull’s blood, when it came to the empowering of magical designs.

“Blood is one thing. This is another. Don’t ask what it is, Heather, because I’m not going to be the one to explain. Ask Lozzie. Better yet, don’t ask at all.”

The work was painstaking and slow, even for the Knights. Accuracy was essential, down to the last millimetre, lest this vast, scaled-up version of the Invisus Oculus fail when teleported to Wonderland. A human work crew could have completed it, of course, but spread over a much larger time-scale, with much greater risk of mistakes or failures, and with a greater requirement for supervision.

All the Knights needed was their gestalt culture-mind — and a little encouragement from Lozzie.

At that moment, as Raine and I peered down from the hill inside the curtain walls, we spotted Lozzie perched high up on the back of a Caterpillar, her pentacolour poncho swaying as she rocked back and

forth. She was singing softly, her voice floating outward over Camelot's rolling hills, a ghostly and alien refrain of haunting beauty.

Nearer to hand, down by the edge of the huge bone-white plate, set up on the grass as if for a picnic, was a trio of plastic garden chairs.

The rear of a very familiar blonde head was poking over the back of one chair. The unmistakable outline of a maid dress stood nearby, topped with a very similar shade of blonde.

Evee, watching the work, with Praem keeping her company.

"See her?" Raine asked. "In the chair?"

"Yes! Yes, indeed, right." I sighed a second time, more with irritation than relief, my tentacles flexing and flaring, as if we needed to squeeze something until it cracked. "Oh, I do wish Evee would tell us when she's coming out here. And I hope she didn't walk all that way by herself. Her hips will get sore! She'll get tired!"

"Naaaah," Raine replied, then kissed me on the cheek again. "She's got Praem with her, see?"

I grumbled and tutted. "Yes, yes, I can see that perfectly well."

"Heather," Raine said, suddenly serious. "She knows what she's doing. Our Evee isn't gonna put herself in danger. She's got Praem, she's got Lozzie, she's surrounded by an army down there. What's wrong, really?"

"I'm nervous about people vanishing to dimensions beyond our reality," I said. "Even when it's safe. For what I hope are rather obvious reasons. And I'd rather she was home."

Raine pulled an oddly pained smile. "Me too, Heather."

I raised an eyebrow at Raine. "So. Squirrely. Again?"

Raine blinked at me. "Ah?"

"You said Evee is getting squirrely, 'again'. But I don't think you've ever used that word for her before, at least not in conversation with me. When's the last time she got 'squirrely'?"

"Ahhhhh," Raine said. She considered the rear of Evelyn's head for a moment, all the way across the plains of Camelot, then spoke with soft affection, her voice lulled into a purr by the gentle wind. "So,

way back when, just after Eevee and I put her mother in the ground, she and I got really close for a while. We were close anyway, you know? Sleeping in the same bed, eating every meal together, holding hands all the time. She would wake up with nightmares and turn to me for comfort. That kind of thing. Towards the end of it, the last few weeks before we did in her mother, we were inseparable, we never went anywhere alone.”

“Literally? Or figuratively?”

Raine tore her eyes away from Eevee and shot me a grin. “Literally. And hey, there was nothing wrong with that. Yes, I’ve been in the room while Evelyn used the toilet, and yes, I turned my back. That’s what it took to keep us both alive.”

“T-then I’m glad you did,” I said. I went up on tiptoes and kissed Raine on the cheek. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insinuate anything else.”

Raine snorted. “It’s alright, Heather. Never told you that before, have I? Hey, two girls watching each other on the toilet, you tend to make certain assumptions. But it wasn’t like that at all. It was survival. Couldn’t leave her alone, not without risk. Anyway, it got more intense just after her mother died, for a couple of weeks. But then she distanced herself a bit, all at once. Never said a word about it.” Raine nodded down at the distant blob of blonde amid Camelot’s purple light. “And she acted a tiny bit like this. Squirrely.”

We sighed. “That’s a very imprecise word, Raine. But ... thank you, for sharing that. Do you think she’s feeling like she got too close to me, somehow?”

“You mean after you two made out?”

I rolled my eyes and fought back a small blush. “It wasn’t ‘making out’, it was one kiss! Not even any tongue.”

“We’ll have to fix that, then,” Raine said, sounding dead serious.

“Raine!” I spluttered. “This is a serious question!”

Raine didn’t stop smirking. She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Wanna go ask her?”

I boggled at my beloved Raine, at the sheer casual confidence in her voice and cupped inside those warm brown eyes. “You can’t be

serious! We can't just go up to her and ask her ... ask her ... oh, oh dear, oh, gosh, I suppose we can. Can't we?"

Raine pulled away from me a couple of paces, then turned and offered her hand with a little flourish and a half-bow, as if we were prospective dancing partners at a ball, not an abyssal squid-girl and her deeply involved girlfriend, currently beyond the walls of reality, talking about going up to our mutual mage and asking her if she wanted to snog me again.

"Raine ... "

"My lady," Raine said.

I spluttered. "Do not call me that! Oh my gosh! Lozzie has educated me in some internet memes, thank you. I'm not completely clueless."

Raine laughed and straightened up. "Naaaaah. I'd have to shorten the phrase, and also get a fedora to tip, if I was gonna do that. Seriously, Heather." She offered me her hand again, with less of a flourish this time. "Come on, let's go talk to our grumpy little squirrel, see if she wants to play nice."

We coiled our tentacles inward and considered the merits of a hasty retreat — but that would leave Raine out here with Evelyn anyway, and then a conversation would happen without my input or presence, which might be even worse for both of my closest, oldest, most beloved friends.

I sighed, accepted Raine's hand in my own, and walked down the hill.

Evelyn had indeed been avoiding me for the last couple of days, that truth was undeniable, though at first her behaviour had been hard to detect, and even harder to decode. She neither ignored me completely nor turned a cold shoulder to my words; in fact we'd had several long conversations in the kitchen, about our strategy for Wonderland, about what to expect when we arrived, about how she and the others would protect me while I probed with brain-math. We'd even talked about Zheng and Grinny's trips to the woods and what they might be doing out there. We'd discussed Lozzie's gigantic incoming inheritance and how best to protect her against the sorts of mundane predation that might happen, and how on earth we were going to help Tenny go to college. We'd talked about

bacon, and Praem's shoes, and a manga Evelyn wanted me to read. Evelyn was her usual gruff, grumpy, but oddly vulnerable self, at least in my presence.

But she had avoided being alone with me, under any and all circumstances. She did not have to try particularly hard; Number 12 Barnslow Drive was no longer the echoing shell it had been when I had first moved in. These days it bustled with life. It was easy for Eevee to always find herself busy, always be alongside somebody else, or turn out her bedroom lights early and pretend to be sleeping.

I was not blameless either; I had taken Jan's advice to heart and so I was spending as much time as I could with Raine, with Lozzie, with Tenny, sleeping curled up in Zheng's lap one morning and the next night in Sevens' bed. Raine and I had gotten 'intimate' half a dozen times in the last forty eight hours. I'd petted Marmite in Lozzie's bedroom and attempted a mostly one-sided conversation with Praem about her taste in maid dresses. I had a long talk with Twil about university, a long nap with Lozzie in her bed, and a long losing session of chess against Tenny. I was taking great gulping mouthfuls of life, while I still had it before me.

But Eevee was avoiding me. And now I wasn't the only one who thought that was odd.

Raine and I strolled down the hill inside the curtain walls and turned toward what would one day be the front gate of Camelot Castle; even in their incomplete state, the walls towered over us as we passed between the massive sandy-coloured blocks and out into the open country beyond. I waved two tentacles at the former Lilburne House, a lazy greeting to mask my racing heartbeat. The House did not wave back, but I felt a distant throb of acknowledgement, like a slightly stronger breeze upon one's face.

Raine must have felt my palm getting clammy. She whispered: "Hey, Heather, hey. It's gonna be fine. It's just our Eevee, right?"

"Right," we squeaked. "Um."

The walk to the edge of the carapace plate was not far, but it felt like miles. My legs went numb with anticipation; two tentacles slid down my own thighs and calves to help me keep going, bracing me against the short, brisk little walk.

Raine and I approached the trio of plastic garden chairs from behind; they made such an incongruous sight in the middle of Camelot's unearthly velvet grass and omnipresent purple light, a little slice of English domesticity air-dropped into an alien dimension. A little way ahead of the impromptu picnic site lay the rounded edge of the carapace plate, with Knights striding back and forth, slopping great masses of black Caterpillar goop all over the place. Evelyn had positioned herself far enough back that the noise was a comfortable background murmur.

Evee herself did not look up as we drew near — but Praem turned her head. She was stationed a few feet to Evee's left, as if close to hand for a private conversation.

Dressed in her usual immaculate maid dress, hair pinned up in a messy bun at the back of her head, milk white eyes burning with clarity beneath Camelot's purple sky, Praem gave Raine and me a blank and unreadable look.

Only then did Evelyn raise her head and glance over her shoulder. Her soft blue eyes caught us, froze in mild surprise, and then crumpled with a frown. She sighed.

Praem intoned: "You are discovered."

Evelyn grumbled. "Yes, yes, I suppose I bloody well am." She greeted us with a grumpy huff as we stopped next to the trio of chairs. "Raine, Heather. Hello."

Raine purred with a teasing grin. "Evee, Evee, Evee. Couldn't you try to look a little less like we've turned up to shit in your cheerios?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes. Despite her sudden grumpy exterior, she looked exceptionally comfortable. She was wearing her favourite loose cream-coloured ribbed jumper, a long pale orange skirt, and a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and draped over her knees. She had augmented the unforgiving plastic of the garden chair with a pair of cushions, one of them firmly beneath her buttocks. She had a book open in her lap — the complete works of Robert E. Howard, *Conan the Barbarian* and all that — and a drink bottle standing on the next chair over, full of what I assumed was lukewarm, milky, heavily sugared, decaf tea. Her walking stick stood propped against the other chair. If I had discovered her like this under any other circumstances, I would have surrendered to the

urge to cuddle up with her. Several of us almost did, tentacles uncoiling toward her like pleading arms.

“Yes, Eevee,” I said instead. “We don’t mean to interrupt. We just ... hi. Yes. Hello.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Yes, hello Heather. I’m always happy to see you.” She sighed, and to my surprise, glanced up at Lozzie, sitting on the distant Caterpillar she was using as a mount. Lozzie’s singing echoed out over the quiet plains of Camelot, but her eyes were closed. Evelyn looked back to us. “Alright, what are you two doing here?” She looked us both up and down. “And why are you dressed in your pajamas?”

Evee had a point. Raine was wearing shorts and a tank-top, showing a lot of skin. I was wrapped up snug in pink pajamas, ready for bed. We both had our trainers on, but that was the only concession to technically being out of doors.

Praem answered for us: “It is pajama time.”

“Yes!” I agreed. “Because it’s bed time! It’s eleven thirty at night!”

Evelyn snorted. “Not here, it isn’t.” She gestured at the glittering purple whorls in the sky, without looking up. “As far as I can tell this place does not experience night.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh,” Raine purred. “So that’s your ploy?”

Evelyn frowned and started to say something, but I interrupted, to avoid the core of this conversation. “Evee, you do need to sleep. You need rest. You’re not invincible.”

Evelyn harrumphed and frowned at me. She gestured toward the massive carapace plate and the Knights, hard at work before us. “They don’t get a break, why should I? They’re not slaves, Heather. The least I can do is supervise properly.”

Raine put both hands on her hips. She made a great theatrical show of turning on the spot, nodding slowly, sucking on her teeth, and generally looking like a manager at a building site who had no idea what was happening. “Yuuuuuup,” she said slowly. “Yup. Looks like some class-A supervising you be doing there, Evelyn.” She raised her eyebrows at the book in Evee’s lap. “Which is your favourite Conan story, then? The one where he kills the wizard, or the one where he kills the wizard? Or, let me guess — the one where he

kills the wizard?”

Evelyn hissed through her teeth and slapped the book shut. “The stories are much more subtle than that! And not every single one is about killing wizards. You are a literary philistine, Raine. I don’t know how Heather puts up with it.”

“She’s not ... ” I protested, feeling rather weak. What was Raine doing?

Raine just grinned. “Yeah, but lots of those stories are about killing wizards, you can’t deny that. You trying to get on Zheng’s good side?”

“No,” Evelyn grunted. “Raine, what are you playing at?”

Raine shrugged and looked around. “I dunno, I’d say we’ve got room for pretty much anything out here.”

“Evee,” I said, very gently, as if dealing with a very spicy kitty with claws already extended. “The Knights don’t seem to need breaks. And if they did, then I would want them to take breaks. I don’t understand why you’re ... why ... well.”

We faltered under Evelyn’s withering gaze. She did not enjoy this line of questioning. Giving up on courage for now, we turned and waved to a few of the nearby knights, up on the raised platform of the carapace. A trio paused in their work and waved back to us, which was both very sweet and a bit surprising.

Evelyn sighed. “Go on, Heather. Finish the thought.”

She almost managed to make it sound like ‘sorry’.

“W-well,” I said. “I just ... you’re Outside! You have Lizzie here, yes, and that’s good, but ... even in Camelot, isn’t it putting stress and strain on you?”

Evelyn stared at me, trying to look dead-eyed and calm, but I could see the breaking point floating to the surface of her mind. “Heather. Everywhere puts stress and strain on me.”

“O-oh. Well. Maybe that’s even more reason to sleep?”

Raine tilted her head back with a grin and said: “Evee’s got it so bad that she would rather spend an evening out here than risk this very conversation. Ain’t that right, Evee?”

Evelyn's gaze flash-hardened to iron and flint. She glared at Raine. "Don't mock me."

But Raine just clucked her tongue. "Got yourself in a right pickle here, haven't you, Eevee? You can't run away from this one. I mean, sure, you could actually." She nodded down at Evelyn's walking stick, propped against one of the other chairs. "You could pick that up and go ask Lozzie to take you home. Or you could ask Heather here. Couldn't she, Heather? You'd take her home, right? Straight to her bedroom? Just the two of you, alone at last."

Raine grinned at me. Eevee had a point — I wasn't sure what kind of game Raine was playing here, but it was better than my proposed strategy of timidly pussyfooting around the main subject.

We nodded, with head and tentacles too. "Of course. Right away. Eevee, do you want to go home?"

Evelyn sighed and squeezed her eyes shut. "No, Heather, that's not the problem here."

Raine made a show of surprise, raising her eyebrows in a pantomime of shock. "There's a problem here? Well blow me down with a feather and—"

"Raine!" Evelyn snapped. "Drop the bullshit, for pity's sake. You were never any good at subtlety, not even as a joke. Stick to the sledgehammer approach, hm? At least you're skilled at breaking things. Gonna get down to it, get started? Go on, start swinging."

To my surprise — and Eevee's visible concern — Raine actually stopped. She rocked back on her heels, wet her lips, and grinned like the Cheshire Cat once again.

"Sooooooooo," Raine said. "I hear you're cucking me?"

Evelyn huffed like a broken steam engine climbing a mountain, rolled her eyes, and threw her hands in the air. "Don't call it that!"

"R-Raine?!" I squeaked, tentacles flailing wildly, then curling toward me as I was overtaken by the desire to hide inside a ball. Top-Right suggested we slap both of them. Bottom-Left wanted to egg Raine on. Three others demanded we turn around and run. Middle-Right reached toward Raine's mouth, as if to stop her up. "E-Eevee? I don't— um— oh— er—"

Raine spread her hands in a teasing apology. "Hey, no judgement,

no kink-shaming, whatever floats your boat, whatever you need me to call it—”

Evelyn ground words out through her teeth: “Not. In. Front. Of. Praem.”

Raine glanced at Praem and raised her eyebrows. Praem just stared back, milk-white eyes blank and impassive.

Evelyn let out a shuddering sigh of relief, as if she had neatly dodged a bullet. She swallowed, and said, “Right. Yes. Not in front of Praem. We can talk about this later, or in the morning, or—”

Praem intoned: “Lozzie requires my assistance.”

Praem turned smartly on one booted heel, skirts swishing around her legs, and strode off toward Lozzie without a backward glance. Eevee watched her go with open-mouthed helplessness.

Raine said, “That woman is a genius. You know that, right? Eevee? Your daughter is a fucking grade-A genius. Love her.”

“Urrrghhh,” Evelyn grumbled like a strange creature found beside the road, baring teeth at passing cars. She ran a hand over her face, then grabbed the book in her lap, and looked as if she was briefly considering hurling it at Raine. The volume was rather heavy, with a thick hardback cover, so it might do some damage.

“Evee!” I squeaked. “Evee, please, we just— I just— want to— I ... I ... I miss you.”

Evelyn blinked at me, blind-sided. She lowered the book, let out a slow sigh, and said: “Fine. For you, then, Heather. Say your fucking piece, Raine. Get this over with.”

“Evee,” I repeated. “You’ve been avoiding me for two days. And I’m pretty sure Raine isn’t angry with you or anything. I don’t ... I don’t understand ... ”

We had no idea what to say. We trailed off, tentacles going limp, almost mewling in our throat. Eevee looked away, ashamed or embarrassed.

“So,” Raine said, as if utterly unmoved by all this. “You’re having a great time cucking me—”

My turn to snap: “Raine! Please, Eevee is trying her best! The last thing I want to see is you two falling out. I thought you were okay

with this?”

Raine turned to me with a look I had rarely seen on her face before — a sharp and knowing smile, surprisingly stern and hard. She put a hand on my shoulder.

“Heather.”

The gentle command in Raine’s voice went through me like a lightning bolt. I stiffened. “Y-yes?”

“Evee and I aren’t falling out. This is just how we’ve always been.” She nodded toward Evelyn, still sitting in her plastic garden chair, face pointed firmly away from us. “You know what this woman is to me?”

I blinked. “I ... think so?”

“My best friend,” Raine said. “I’ve killed for her. I would die for her if I had to. Which is why I can say this kind of stuff to her.”

An incandescent blush began to creep up the side of Evelyn’s face.

Raine looked over at Evee. “You hear that, you old curmudgeon? You heard those words?”

Evelyn swallowed hard, and said: “My ears function perfectly well.”

Raine shot me a grin, then let go and stepped over to Evelyn’s chair. Evee had nowhere to go, but she continued looking away, off at the horizon and the purple whorls in the sky. The Knights up on the carapace plate continued their work, as if this drama was not unfolding right in front of them.

Raine knelt down in front of the chair. “Hey there, sad girl. Yeah, you. I’m talking to you.”

Evelyn whipped around and met Raine’s eyes. She was on the verge of tears I didn’t understand, forced through embarrassment and burning cheeks and deep self-conscious pain. Those words Raine had just spoken, they almost seemed rote, as if she had said them before. Whatever they meant, they tugged at Evelyn’s heart.

“What,” Evelyn ground out.

“I love you,” Raine said. “I love you just as much as I love Heather. You know that.”

Evelyn tried to bark with laughter, but it came out weak and wet. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand and scrubbed furiously at her eyes. "You and I never would have made a good couple, Raine. We would have killed each other within a month. No, a week. And you were never my type."

Raine raised two fingers. "There's more types of love than sticking two of these up a cunt. You know that too."

"Love is more than eros."

Raine and Evee both looked up at me. Only then did I realise that I'd said those words — all seven of us had, through my mouth. Zheng's words, reflected back through me.

"Well put," said Raine. She turned back to Evee. "So, hey, sad girl. I do love you."

Evelyn looked down. Her blushing was messy, overheated, and painful, not dainty little points of rose-red in one's cheeks. But I thought it was beautiful.

Raine smiled, and said: "Hey, Evee, you don't have to say it back or nothing, it's—"

Evelyn reached out and put a hand on Raine's shoulder. She did not look up. "Raine?"

"Yes?"

"Shut the fuck up."

Raine broke into a grin. "Yes ma'am. We better? Remember where you stand, now?"

"By you." Evelyn grumbled low in her throat, withdrew her hand, and raised her eyes back to Raine's face. "Maybe I don't want to share everything with you, though. We've already shared more than enough, like we always bloody did. Maybe I don't want your cast-off."

I realised, with a little bristle of offended dignity, that she meant me.

"H-hey!" I squeaked. "Evee, I'm nobody's cast-off!"

Evelyn winced, hard and awkward. "Oh for pity's sake, that's not what I meant! Not like that! Heather, no! I'm ... sorry."

“Apology accepted,” I said softly, still bristling. My tentacles felt tense and stiff.

Evelyn sighed. Raine said: “She’s got a point. She’s right here, Eevee. Nobody’s cast her off, sure as hell not me. She’s neither leftovers nor damaged goods. She’s Heather.”

“Yes, I can see that!” Evelyn huffed. “Look, I can’t deal with this right now! What’s to even talk about? You don’t mind that I kissed her, and I don’t want to talk about it. What more is there to say, Raine?”

We stepped forward, tentacles in a halo around our core of true flesh. “Eevee, you’ve been avoiding me for days. I can’t take that, not right now.”

Evelyn fixed me with a stony glare. “More like you don’t need to be dealing with that! And neither do I. Both of us need to be focused on our tasks, not dwelling on this ... this ... ” She huffed and rubbed her eyes. All the puff seemed to go out of her. “Oh, this is my bloody fault. I should never have bloody well kissed you. What the fuck was I thinking?”

Raine suggested: “Cor blimey, that girl needs my tongue down her throat.”

Evelyn gave Raine a look that could have frozen a bonfire solid.

I jumped in quickly: “A-actually I rather enjoyed it! B-but, Eevee, you can’t just do that and then not expect me to think about it.”

“Forget it,” she whined, hiding behind a hand. “Please.”

My turn to sigh. “Eevee, that wouldn’t make a blind bit of difference. Even if you hadn’t kissed me, I would still want to spend time with you, right now. Today! Tonight! It’s two days until we go to Wonderland, and I want to spend some of that time with you, before ... ”

Evelyn emerged from behind her hand and slowly raised her gaze to mine. “Before what?”

She made it sound like I had said something terribly offensive.

“Eevee,” I said with equal slowness. “I might not be coming back—”

“You! Will!” Evelyn shouted.

All her tears and embarrassment transformed to rage, fuel for the fires, an instant switch.

Raine rocked back, away from Evee. Up on the carapace plate, several of the nearest Knights paused in their work for a moment. Lozzie's singing cut out briefly, then resumed. Down by the base of the Caterpillar on which Lozzie rode, Praem turned to look back at us.

I just gaped. "Um ... "

"You are not going to die," Evelyn said. "You are not going to get stuck out there. You are not going to lose your body, or your mind, or your soul, or any other component. You are coming back, Heather, and it will be in one piece." She flung an arm outward at the great work before us, the vast plate of Caterpillar carapace and the airlock gateways and the scaled-up version of the Invisus Oculus. "Why do you think I'm doing all this? Why do you think I'm taking every precaution I know, and several I have only recently invented? You are coming back whole and sane, Heather. I swear to whatever gods exist out here that if you don't, I will turn the entire rest of my life into a machine for murdering the Eye. Do you understand?"

I swallowed. My head felt numb. We flexed our tentacles in and out, unsure where to put ourselves. A few tears rolled down my cheeks. "Yes. But—"

"There are no 'buts'!" Evelyn shouted again. "There are no buts, or ifs, or maybes. I will fight God, so fucking help me. You are not going to die."

Silence descended for one awkward moment, broken only by the ghostly tones of Lozzie's song and the soft clicking of Knight boots up on the carapace plate.

Raine cleared her throat and thumbed at Evee. "Yeah. What she said."

I scrubbed tears out of my eyes. "Even if that's true—"

"It is true," Evelyn grunted. "Heather, you have no conception of the sort of monster I will become in order to make this work."

"O-okay. Okay, let me just ... sorry, this is a lot."

Evelyn said: "You have nothing to apologise for."

“So, um.” I gathered myself. “It’s true, alright, okay. And ... and that doesn’t change the fact that I would like to spend some more time with you. Tonight. Tomorrow morning. Tomorrow?”

“Tonight sounds good,” Raine mused. “How about the three of us?”

Evelyn frowned suddenly, hard and pinched. “What are you two planning?”

“P-planning?” I stammered. “Nothing, I swear!”

But Raine grinned, wide and toothy. She straightened up and gestured at me. “Heather? Nothing. She’s not got the guile for this, not when she’s not gone maximum squid, anyway. But me? Well. I might have an idea or two.”

Raine offered both hands to Evelyn, in a strange configuration I’d never seen her use before — palms up and to the sides, as if expecting Evelyn to leap out of her chair and fall into Raine’s embrace. Evelyn couldn’t have made that lurch even if she’d wanted.

Evelyn looked doubtful too. She said: “Raine. I told you. She’s not going to die.”

Raine shrugged. “Sure she ain’t. But we’ve not worked this out yet, Eevee. You and me and Heather, out there, we’re gonna need to have each other’s backs. For real. Just like you and I did, back in the day, with your mother. Same thing. Same way. Same absolute trust.”

Evelyn swallowed and hesitated. She glanced at Raine’s hands.

Raine said: “I mean it. You wanna make this a solid guarantee? You wanna make sure you and I have got the strength to bring her home again? Eevee, you and I, we gotta mend this.”

Evelyn looked almost nervous. She wet her lips and said, “Raine, I’m not comfortable—”

“No sex,” Raine said. “Nothing you don’t want. Just you and me, like old times. But with Heather, too.”

I frowned. “Raine, what are you talking about?”

Raine shot me a wink. “You and me and Eevee, Heather. We’ll spend the night in her bedroom, just the three of us. Zheng’s out with the Grinster, Twil’s not coming over until the morning, and Sevens is sleeping soundly in our bed. So it’ll be just us three.”

My eyes went wide. “You don’t mean—”

Raine shook her head. “Love is more than eros, right?”

Evelyn gritted her teeth, glanced between Raine’s outstretched arms, and said: “You still remember how to do this without giving me an injury? Really? You really expect me to believe that? It’s been years, Raine.”

Raine answered, “I’ll never forget, long as I live. I will never drop you, Evelyn.”

Evelyn carefully removed her book from her lap and placed it on the nearby chair. Her hands were shaking. Then she lifted her arms and reached forward, with an expression like a woman going to the gallows.

“Do it,” she grunted.

And then Raine did something I had never thought possible before — she pulled Evelyn to her feet.

The technique looked awkward and difficult, and must have required a great deal of upper body strength and core muscle control; Evelyn leaned forward while Raine ducked and slipped her arms around Evelyn’s back, but somehow without putting any pressure on Evelyn’s delicate, kinked, painful spine. Evelyn held on while Raine pulled upward and stepped back in the same motion. Evee’s feet left the ground for a split second, but Raine was solid as a rock. Then Evelyn was on her own feet, unsteady and red in the face, but not in a single lick of pain. Raine quickly pressed Evee’s walking stick into her waiting hand. Evelyn was panting softly, shaking all over with something more than adrenaline, gazing at Raine in numb shock.

“No pain?” Raine asked.

Evelyn shook her head and blew out a sigh. “Well done. You still have it, I suppose.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “But what did I just witness?”

Raine grinned with triumph. Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes — but she was the one who answered, her voice strangely soft and vulnerable. “Raine learned how to do that when we first met. Before I had a proper prosthetic. The first couple of years, I was ... weak.”

Raine shook her head. “You were never weak, Evee.”

Evelyn snorted in disbelief, but she didn’t argue. “Alright then. Alright. Fine. Are we seriously doing this? I can’t believe this nonsense, Raine, we’re not fourteen years old anymore, we’re not little girls giggling in bed together.”

“We never giggled,” Raine shot back.

“Ummmmmmmmmmmm,” I said. “May I just clarify, what exactly are we talking about doing?”

Raine grinned, just for me. “The three of us, in Evee’s bed, overnight. Close as can be. And we need to figure out a couple of things, about kissing and cucking.”

Evelyn gritted her teeth and shot Raine a look like she wanted to run her through with a sword. “I will hit you with my walking stick. I will. I will leave a bruise, Raine.”

“Love it when you threaten me,” Raine chuckled. She turned away from both Evelyn and me, cupped her hands around her mouth, and shouted toward Lozzie and Praem: “Taking Evee home for now! Praem, you going with Lozzie?”

Lozzie’s singing cut out briefly. She was quite far away, perched on the back of a Catty, but I saw her eyes blink open in mild surprise. She waved to us with a corner of poncho.

Down on the ground in front of the Caterpillar, Praem raised a thumb up high.

For a moment neither Evelyn nor Raine were looking at me, but both turned toward Praem and Lozzie, halfway down the length of the massive carapace plate. I had both of them in profile: Raine tall and toned against the yellowish hillsides, her deep chestnut hair yummy enough to bite into, her skin warm and soft in the cinnamon wind — and Evelyn, comfortable and plush, wrapped in her layers, her blue eyes aching to be kissed, her blonde hair in a mess down her back.

For the first time in many months I felt like the spare wheel. Raine and Evelyn had shared an experience I would never fully understand, could never be a part of — unless I could somehow go back in time. I thought I knew everything about them, but this evening alone I had seen yet another new angle of their shared past.

But then Evelyn glanced away from Praem, huffing to herself. She looked at me and awkwardly stuck out an arm, waiting for something. I boggled at her.

“Well?” she demanded, then gestured with a jerk of her arm. “Take it, then!”

“O-oh!” I reached out with a hand — and a tentacle — and took Evelyn’s hand in mine, wrapping the tentacle around her forearm, very gently.

Raine turned back to us too. She did not ask for permission, she just reached down and scooped my other hand into hers, interlacing our fingers. I slipped a tentacle around her waist, almost instinctive.

“You ready?” Raine asked both me and Evee.

Evelyn sighed and looked away. “I can’t believe we’re doing this. And don’t leave my book behind.”

Raine laughed, picked up Evelyn’s book and tucked it under her armpit, then nodded to me. “Heather?”

“Ready for what?” I asked. My heart was going far too fast. There was nothing unusual about this. We had always been a trio, hadn’t we?

“Re-affirmation,” Raine said with a smirk. “Maybe with a little extra spice. Take us home, Heather. Take us to bed.”

slanting surfaces; unplumbed voids – 23.4

Evelyn's bedroom was my favourite part of Number 12 Barnslow Drive.

How could that be true when so many other candidates vied for that top spot? What about my own bedroom, the space we shared with Raine — and, increasingly in those days, with Zheng? Had we not imprinted our overlapping tastes and desires on that room, from the divots in the pillows to the books on the desk, from the angle of the curtains to the play of friendly shadows across the ceiling? What about the bed, upon which Raine had wrung so many intimacies from my changing body with such endless tender touches? Was that not the room in which I could pick up a t-shirt from the floor and be certain it would smell of Raine's skin and Raine's sweat, and so soothe away all of my anxieties and fears and worries? What about the scent of Zheng lingering on the mattress, mingled with Raine's body heat, mixed into a cocktail so intoxicating that I could not tell where one woman ended and the other began?

What of Sevens' new bedroom — the yellow-veiled proof that she was asserting herself as more than a mask over a void, that she was claiming person-hood from the steps she took upon the stage? What about the room Lizzie and Tenny shared, a physical manifestation of sanctuary and unconditional support we had gifted to them both, an orphan and a foundling with no other home, welcomed into the heart of the house and the hearts of those within?

What about the kitchen, the core of the home, where so many conversations had unfolded, where Praem cooked with love and care for every one of us? What about Evelyn's study, full of the muted peace and anticipatory quiet of all those treasured old books? What about the magical workshop, the hard-won prizes from months of toil, the evidence of our evolution from a group of confused students to the reality of Sharrowford's new supernatural family?

All those were known to me, measured and accepted. We loved

them all, of course.

But Evelyn's bedroom was special because it was so unexpected — and more than a little exotic.

Back when I first met Eevee, if I had been forced at knife-point to make an educated guess as to the state of her bedroom — her private space, the canvas of her self-expression — I would have predicted shadow and dust, naked practicality, slow bitterness unfolded across blank walls and thin bedsheets. I would have expected something sad and pitiful and half-dead, all self-denial and inward-pointing barbs of lethal poison.

But the real room was a window into a very different woman. Evelyn's bedroom was so very girly, all pastel pink and lily lilac, full of frill and fluff and frivolity.

Eevee's bed itself was always piled with layers of pastel sheets and extra pillows, a den of comfort and retreat, suitable for any burrowing animal. The thick, warm, pale carpet was never suffered to gather dust in the corners or collect stray hairs along the skirting boards; Praem shouldered the duty of Hoovering in those days, but I had been reliably informed that Raine used to handle all the vacuuming and cleaning, when she and Eevee had lived alone, before I had entered the picture. Evelyn's own efforts in housekeeping had often risked disaster or near-injury, which did not surprise me.

Her bedside table sported a pretty little porcelain lamp with a pretty little floral shade, like something from a century earlier. Her slender laptop sat on a desk in the corner, decorated with a series of brightly coloured anime stickers. The desk itself was surrounded by a nest of books and a ring of posters — yet more anime, some of which I had watched by then, alongside Eevee herself.

Last but not least, Evelyn's collection of plush animals and anime girl figurines stood sentinel upon her oaken chest of drawers.

I'd never seen her touch any of the plush animals, let alone pet them or hug them while she slept, but the plushies often appeared in different positions every time I saw them, as if they were regularly taken down and moved around when nobody was looking. I had come to recognise a specific pair of plushes which adjusted their positions most often — a rotund hedgehog with soft bristles, and a stylised 'chibi' anime girl with long blonde hair, yellow eyes,

and an absurdly frilly dress: Eevee's favourites, I assumed, though I had never asked.

It was in that bedroom, inside that secret bared heart like a fluttering organ of delicate pink flesh, that Evelyn sat down heavily on the edge of her bed, cast her walking stick against her bedside table with a clatter, and shot Raine and me a withering glare.

"Ummmm," I said, wetting my lips with sudden worry. "Eevee? I-I thought you were okay with this?"

Raine closed the bedroom door behind us with a soft click, shutting out the soporific shadows of the upstairs hallway. Evelyn's bedroom was lit by a pair of lamps, leaving soft shade lurking in the corners and on the far side of the bed. The rest of the house was heavy with sleep, with the little sounds of creaking beams and the muffled buzz of night insects beyond the walls and windows. Raine was still carrying Evelyn's book, which she placed gently on the bedside table. Evelyn watched the simple motion as if she was observing a dog eating its own vomit, her upper lip curling in disgust.

"E-Eevee?" I tried again.

I had teleported us three from Camelot to the magical workshop only minutes earlier. Raine and I had left our shoes behind downstairs, but we were both still dressed for bed, Raine in her tank top and shorts, me in comfy pink pajamas a size too large for my petite frame, with my tentacles poking out through custom-cut side-slits. Evelyn suddenly seemed very overdressed, in jumper and skirt and several layers beneath.

Raine grinned at Evelyn and answered my question: "She's fine with it, Heather. Don't let the little miss grumpy act lead you astray. If she wasn't down for this she'd be screaming bloody murder right about now. Wouldn't you, Eevee?"

"R-Raine," I stammered a little, distinctly uncomfortable, curling my tentacles inward. "Don't make it sound like we're ... forcing this. We're not! We're not. Are we?"

Evelyn harrumphed, but she didn't say anything.

Raine just kept grinning. "She knows I'd never do anything she didn't really want. Ain't that right, Eevee? Come on, you gotta pipe up sooner or later. I'm not letting you sit there all night without saying a word."

Evelyn sighed sharply, squeezed her eyes shut, and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine. Alright. Whatever. Get your kit off and do whatever you’re going to do, then. Let’s get this over with so I can get some bloody sleep.”

“E-Evee!” I squeaked, losing my battle with a blush. “I don’t think that’s what this is about! Really! We’re not going to ... do that! Gosh! We’re not, right? Raine? Raine?!”

Raine laughed, ruffled my hair, and then walked over to the bed. She stopped before Evee, well within whacking range. Evee looked up, while Raine gazed downward.

Raine said: “Oh no, Evelyn. Nuh uh. You aren’t getting off that easy. Pun fully intended, by the way.”

“Raine!” I snapped, rousing myself to Evelyn’s defence — but neither of them reacted.

I realised with shock that neither of them were listening to me. Whatever was unfolding now was held entirely in the few feet of empty air where their gazes met.

Evelyn rubbed her own right thigh, just above the knee, digging in with her thumb — into the flesh cradled by the rubber socket of her prosthetic leg.

“And what do you mean by that?” she asked Raine, her voice low and dangerous, her eyes dead flat, her face a pallid mask.

All my tentacles curled inward and tightened, as if we were watching a pair of sharks circle each other in the void; once they were done with each other, the winner would turn upon us, rend our flesh, and devour us whole. We shivered with a heady cocktail of anxiety, sexual anticipation, and fear of our friends falling out.

Raine answered: “That would be the easy way out for you, wouldn’t it, Evee? Clam up, close your gates, shelter behind your walls—”

“Get to the point,” Evelyn snapped.

“—watch me and Heather have a shag while you sit alone in the corner and pretend you’re not one of us. Then we all go to sleep and wake up tomorrow and pretend none of this happened, like nothing needs to change. You know what’ll happen if we do that? Any idea? No? Let me spell it out for you: one of us will die out there.” Raine never stopped grinning. “It’s always been your easy

way out, Evee. And I've let you get away with it before. Not this time."

Evelyn spluttered. She sounded as lost as I felt. "What the hell are you talking about, Raine? Where is this all coming from? Stop speaking in riddles!"

Raine stopped smiling. She crouched, squatting until she was level with Evelyn, then lower than her, so their positions were reversed, Evelyn looking down while Raine looked up. She said: "I made a mistake the last time you did this. Never again."

Evelyn squinted and shook her head like Raine had gone mad. "Last time I did what?! Raine, what are you—"

"When you asked me to move out."

Evelyn's mouth jerked as if to argue back, but she slammed to a stop.

Raine went on, soft and low and gentle. "That summer before we met Heather. When you got uncomfortable, when you asked me to move out, and I did." Raine shook her head and sighed. "I didn't see it at the time, too much chivalry in my bones, but I should have said no. I should have refused. Should have stayed. Should have taken an executive decision. I abandoned my duty. Abandoned you."

Evelyn stammered: "D-duty?! Raine, don't be absurd, you're not responsible for—"

"Yes, Evee, I am responsible for you."

Raine interrupted without raising her voice. Something in her words or her tone overrode Evelyn in a way I'd never seen before, left Evelyn gaping and flapping, lost for words. Raine adjusted her pose, slipping onto one knee, one arm resting across her own thigh, head on the cusp of bowing in submission or fealty or regretful apology.

She carried on: "And I've never said sorry. I've never apologised for fucking up and leaving you here alone. You wanted me to move out, sure, right, you did. But when I left, you slipped into isolation and depression, and then you tried to kill yourself."

Evelyn stared at Raine, face turning grey-pale, wide eyes filling with tears. I covered my mouth with one tentacle-tip, horrified; I

stepped forward to comfort Eevee, but Raine waved me back with a covert twitch of one finger.

I knew what Raine was referring to — the great unfronted secret of my initiation to the supernatural.

When I had first met Evelyn and Raine, and rescued Evelyn from Outside, she had been experimenting with teleportation spells, despite knowing there was no way back. When I had achieved my first intentional Slip and retrieved Evelyn from the Stone-world, I had no way of knowing at the time that I had thwarted a semi-subconscious suicide attempt. Twil and I had discussed this months ago, when Twil's own insight had revealed the truth to me. But Raine had not talked to Evelyn about this, not until now — she had not confronted the root of that act.

Evelyn eventually stammered: "I-I-I was never—"

"You were," Raine said gently. "It's okay, Eevee, you don't have to pretend. Nobody here is gonna judge you. Least of all me."

Evelyn's eyes scrunched up, tears running down her cheeks. Her face contorted, holding back a bitter sob.

"You were leaving me!" she said. "I-I can't— I can't— can't live— I would have just died— I—"

"I was never leaving you," Raine said. "I was never going anywhere. I never will."

Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut. She sobbed, once, wet and raw.

"Evelyn Saye," Raine said in a soft, slow, ritual murmur. "I am now, have always been, and always will be your right hand, your sword, your knight."

Evelyn took a great shuddering breath. "You only—"

"Not because you need me. Not because you believe you would have died without me — which I reject, and refute. But because I choose to be here."

Evelyn forced words through a muzzle of tears: "Not how knights work, you blithering idiot."

"I love you too, Eevee," Raine said.

Evelyn sobbed once again, then reached out with shaking fingertips

to touch Raine's shoulder.

I could only stare in awe and wonder at these two people who I thought I knew inside and out; I had gotten this jealousy all backwards and upside down. Evelyn's heart was a knot beyond my comprehension — beyond her comprehension too, I suspected.

Evelyn started to scrub at her eyes with one sleeve. Raine took a deep breath and straightened up. The ritual aura of the moment was passing away now the words had been recited and accepted. Raine glanced back at me and said: "Somebody needs a hug. You're up."

"Oh, fucking hell!" Evelyn spat from behind a thinning veil of tears. "I'm fucking fine! For fuck's sake! Don't fuss! Just let me be!"

We ignored that and hurried over to the bed, because of course we did. We quickly perched next to Eevee, hovering around her with hands and tentacles, unsure where to touch. Top-Right just wanted to grab her shoulders and squeeze her hard to show her how much she was loved, but the other six Heathers shouted that suggestion down with good advice about not hurting Eevee's spine. Top-Right and the rest of us settled for coiling gently against the back of Eevee's neck. Very gently. Feather soft.

Evelyn wiped away the worst of her tears. "I'm fine. I am fine! I mean it, for pity's sake!" She sniffed hard, taking hard little breaths. "I'm certainly not in danger of ... *that* anymore, for fuck's sake. I have plenty of things to live for. Praem chiefly among them." She sighed heavily. "And, yes, you two as well. Fine. You've squeezed it out of me. Happy now?"

"Evee," I ventured. "I'm happy if you're happy. You know that, don't you?"

Evelyn shot me a look like a kicked dog. I almost apologised.

Raine leaned backward, slipped out of her crouch, and sat down on the floor with a smile on her lips. I waited patiently for Eevee to gather herself. She wiped her eyes and took several deep breaths, until she was almost back to her usual.

"Wanna get ready for bed?" Raine asked. "Heather and I already are. You gotta join us, Eevee, all the way."

Evelyn emerged from the aftermath at last, and frowned at Raine.

“What? I thought you were joking about that part. I assumed this was all a pretence to ... I don’t know, re-swear your undying devotion.”

She tried to make a joke out of those last two words, but she couldn’t quite get there; her voice threatened to break.

I blinked at both of them. “I’m sorry?”

Raine laughed. “Not joking at all! Eevee, Eevee, Eevee, you should know me better by now. We’re all gonna sleep together — actual sleep, mind you, not the other kind. But we’re not remotely done yet. Let’s get you all ready for bed, come on.”

Evee harrumphed and grumbled and tutted, but she submitted to the process all the same. Practical realities could not be ignored, so I accompanied her to the bathroom to brush her teeth, and Raine waited outside the door while Evee used the toilet — in imitational echo of how they used to be so inseparable, I assumed. When Evelyn returned to her bedroom she sat back down on the edge of the bed, hiked up her skirt without a care, and started removing her prosthetic leg.

But Raine murmured, “Let me. Please?”

With more familiarity than I had thought possible, Raine went about removing Evelyn’s prosthetic leg for her. Evelyn allowed this with a strange look of mingled discomfort and embarrassment on her face, but she didn’t say no, or turn away, or close her eyes. Raine gently rolled the sock and rubber socket down Evelyn’s stump, cradling the weight in one hand. When the mass of scar tissue was revealed, Raine neither averted her gaze nor lingered upon the old wound. She placed the leg to one side, standing up next to Evee’s bedside table. Then Raine reached forward and touched the waistband of Evee’s skirt, beneath the hem of her favourite white jumper.

Evelyn’s face creased with a warning frown. “Raine, I’m not fifteen years old anymore. My hands do work. I can dress myself for bed.”

“All those things are true,” Raine said. “But I’m not hearing a no.”

“R-Raine ... ” I added, but neither of them paid me any attention. This was firmly not about me.

“Raine,” Evee squeezed through clenched teeth.

Raine wasn't grinning, or smirking, or even smiling. "Say no and I'll stop. Say no, Eeve. Come on, say no."

"Stop fucking with me," Evelyn grunted.

Raine smirked, just a tiny bit. "If I was fucking with you, you'd know it. Say no and I'll stop."

Evelyn swallowed hard, opened her mouth, and whispered: "Continue."

Raine helped Eeve into her pajamas — a pair of comfortable pajama bottoms and a long-sleeved t-shirt about three sizes too large for her. I turned away for most of that, though there was nothing even remotely sexual about the exchange. Theirs was a love of devotion and service, not an intrusion on my own. I gave them privacy even though I was right there. It seemed only natural.

Once Eeve was wrapped in her pajamas she got settled in the centre of her bed, with the blankets drawn up to her waist and her back propped up on a cliff-face of pillows. She seemed to me like a cosy little princess, surrounded by her ramparts of lilac and pink. But for once the gates were unbarred and unguarded, a pass was opened through those mountains, into the den of the spider, the nest built deep inside a crumbling castle of the heart.

Raine crawled in first and sat down on the bed a little distance from Eeve. I followed next, keeping my tentacles mostly to myself and settling down on Evelyn's opposite side, close enough to touch but not so close as to crowd her. The ramparts of pillows and cushions surrounded us on all sides, a tidal wave of comfort ready to carry us off to sleep whether we liked it or not.

Evelyn sighed at me, then at Raine, then at herself. I couldn't help a giggle. She just looked so snuggly, yet she sighed with such gusto.

She shook her head. "I cannot believe we're really doing this."

Raine smirked with a teasing glint in her eyes. She ran one hand through her rich, dark hair, showing off the flex of her biceps and a hint of stomach muscle beneath the hem of her tank-top. My eyes were drawn like magnets, but Eeve didn't care. Raine said: "Want me to call Twil for you? Need your girl-toy to really get it on?"

Evelyn's eyes flashed with real anger. "Do not drag her into this."

Raine raised her hands. "Joking, joking! Eeve, Eeve, hey, like I said,

this is just us three tonight. Nobody else.”

Evelyn huffed. “What more is there to even discuss, Raine? You’re fine with me kissing Heather. I might even do it again! Who cares? Yes, we’re all on each other’s side. We all agree, what’s to—”

“Ahem,” I said out loud, raising one hand and one tentacle, being a good girl. “Actually, I have a question?”

“See?” Raine gestured at me. “She has a question.”

Evelyn sighed at Raine with a most dim and disappointed look, but then she turned a difficult smile on me. “Yes, Heather?”

“What is actually going on between you and Twil? I mean, um, if you don’t mind answering. You don’t have to, of course.” I quickly lowered my voice as if somebody might overhear, then added, “And the answer won’t go beyond this room or this night. I promise.”

Evelyn sighed very heavily and stared at the sheets gathered around her legs; her left was thin and withered, the wasted muscles obvious even through the sheets, while her right leg terminated in the stump of her thigh. She was silent for a long moment before speaking. Raine and I shared a glance, as if trying to figure out which way this might go.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn drawled. “Nothing I’ve not told you before, Heather. We were involved, then we weren’t, then we were, then we weren’t, then we were again. Frankly, I don’t suspect I’ll ever know. I hope she meets somebody nice when she comes to university in Sharrowford. She does not need me, that’s the bottom line.”

I reached out and closed my fingers very gently over Evee’s hand. “Thank you for answering, Evee. And ... I’m sure Twil does need you, even if it’s not in that sort of way.”

Evee grunted a hollow laugh. “Not much of a bloody answer, was it?”

“We need you,” said Raine.

Evelyn looked up with a frown.

Raine shrugged. “It’s the truth. It’s why we’re having this little chat. We three, we all need each other. And we gotta work this shit out.”

“What ‘shit’, Raine?” Evelyn asked with an exhausted sigh, her

hundredth of the night. “What sort of nonsense are you trying to force, here? We’re reconciled, fine, good. You are my shield, ‘o shining knight.” She scoffed, blushing more than I had expected. “What else is there to mend?”

Raine wet her lips and seemed like she was about to say something, but then, a rarity — she faltered. She couldn’t find the words. She hesitated, closed her mouth, and shrugged.

“There’s a rift, Eevee,” she said eventually. “I can just feel it. Can’t you?”

I spoke up with a little sigh: “It’s because of me.”

“Hey, Heather,” Raine said, smiling with that infinite confidence she kept cradled in her heart just for me. She reached across the gap and allowed one of my tentacles to wind about her wrist and forearm. “No, no, love, it’s not your fault. Don’t think that. Never think that.”

Evelyn snapped, quick and hard, suddenly so much more focused: “Yes. Yes, absolutely, I agree with Raine.” She swallowed hard. “Heather, I was the one who kissed you, not the other way around. Do not for one second believe yourself guilty of my transgressions —”

Raine butted back in with a finger-gun pointed at Evelyn: “Hey, no, Eevee, you didn’t transgress against shit. We had a deal. You and me, Eevee, we always had a deal.” Raine laughed softly. “What, did you think I was joking? You know me better than that.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and let out a sigh like an industrial furnace. “We were teenagers, Raine! We were teenagers shot through with more hormones than red blood cells! I had a demon in my head! We were trapped, in mortal peril! I think that voids any such ‘deal’.”

“That doesn’t make me an oath-breaker. I made you an oath.”

“I was dying!”

Raine just nodded. “And I meant it. Even if you lived. Which, you know, you did. Yay. Well done.”

Evelyn slapped her free hand against the bedsheets. “Oh, you are ridiculous, Raine.”

“Ahem,” I said out loud. “Deal?”

Raine glanced at me with a naughty smirk on her lips. "I've told you about this before. Haven't I, Heather?"

My turn to sigh. "Sort of. I do recall this came up once before. You promised Eevee that you'd share any future girlfriends with her. Is that correct?"

Raine cracked a grin and nodded, as if this was something to be mightily proud of. "That's my girl. Yup. A little while after we first met, we made a promise that if I ever got a hot girlfriend, we can share."

Evelyn snorted. "I seem to recall you expressed it in significantly more carnal terms."

Raine raised her eyebrows to Evelyn, in perfect innocence.

Evelyn held her gaze and deadpanned: "'What's mine is yours. My kills are yours. What I fuck, you can fuck. If I get some cunt, you can have it too.'"

A blush rolled up my cheeks and a tingle shot down all my tentacles — not at Evelyn's recitation of Raine's words, but at the way they were staring at each other with almost animalistic intensity, half-challenge half-sexual, but more than either.

Raine shrugged. "I refined it later."

Evelyn tutted. "Besides, Heather has a say too, doesn't she? She's not a trophy for passing about, or your meat to hand off to who you want."

Raine pulled a face like Eevee was being a fool, smug and silly all at once. "Eevee, she loves you too."

I cleared my throat. "I ... I do, yes."

Raine gestured toward me. "So, what do you say, Heather?"

"I ... I say ... " I huffed. "I say that I'm hardly a 'hot girlfriend'. Tch! I'm a scrawny little weirdo with tentacles, seven semi-independent versions of myself, and the instincts of a badly behaved squid hybrid. I'm officially 'scrungly', last I checked."

Raine and Evelyn shared a sudden, concerned glance. Evelyn cleared her throat and said: "Heather, who taught you that word?"

"I saw it on the internet," we said. "On a video about cuttlefish."

Raine laughed. "My scrungly beauty."

"Look," we went on, all six tentacles joining in now, "this rift between you two, even if it's healed, it was because of me." We held up a tentacle quickly, before Raine could refute this or Evelyn could snap a denial. "No, it was. I'm not saying it was 'my fault' or that I did anything wrong, but it was because of me. You two were a pair. Not a perfect pair, fair enough, and I didn't know that I was intruding, but ... but when I first met you both, I assumed you might be a couple."

Evelyn scoffed. Raine nodded and muttered 'fair enough'.

"And I butted in," I said.

Raine sighed gently. "Heather, no you didn't. I was shirking my duty."

Evelyn said, "And I was pushing her away. Heather, you didn't break anything."

"No," I said gently — and found my heart was racing, pounding against my ribs like a bird trying to get out. Our tentacles were going numb and hyper-sensitive, both at the same time. We knew what I was planning, and it was something I'd done before, and something I'd done a million times, so why was I nervous, why now? Because it mattered more than ever before? "Perhaps not. Perhaps I only contributed. Or perhaps I didn't contribute at all, only catalysed. But it happened all the same, and I can fix that break with new flesh."

Before either Raine or Evelyn could mount a defence, I did something I should have done a long time ago, though I had not known it was needed.

I bridged the gap.

I crawled across the bed on hands and knees and tentacles, right up to Raine. I only stopped when I was almost in her lap. The look on my face stilled her tongue — no more questions. Two tentacles wrapped around her neck, holding her close and steady. She didn't resist, but gave herself to the logic of our joining bodies. She let out a surprisingly nervous flutter of breath as I reared up before her, as I parted my lips and wet them with a flicker of pink tongue. Shining brown eyes and soft chestnut hair and muscles beneath her warm skin — all waited for me to descend.

But then I glanced over at Evelyn and made eye contact. I made sure she was watching, not looking away.

Evelyn stared at us like she didn't understand what we were doing, like she was witnessing some alien mating ritual.

I kissed Raine on the lips, deep and hard, the way we kissed when we made love. I drank up her softness and inhaled her scent and tasted her tongue in my mouth. We closed our eyes. We forgot the world beyond our body. All seven Heathers thought about nothing else except Raine's warm, wet mouth sliding against our own.

We ended the kiss with a wet pop of parting lips. Raine was flushed and panting. Wordlessly, before either participant or observer could recover, we crawled out of Raine's lap and over to Evelyn.

With Evelyn we practised infinitely more gentleness; we did not put pressure on her lap or against the back of her neck. We cradled her between three tentacles, barely touching for fear of hurting her spine or her hips. Her eyes were wide with shock and incomprehension, twin pools of deepest blue in the lamplight. Her face was red and blushing, framed by her waterfall of blonde hair.

But before we could complete the motion, Evelyn reached out. She grabbed one tentacle, harder than any touch I was applying to her body. She squeezed with strange need, as if trying to drag me closer.

I obeyed. I kissed Evelyn, deep and hard, no different to how I had kissed Raine. This time she was soft and giving, slippery and yielding. She moaned into my mouth, which surprised us both.

We parted with another wordless pop of slick and sliding lips.

I was panting, my vision all hazy and thick, my skin tingling, my tentacles tight and tense. Evelyn was flushed. Raine was grinning. By then we were no longer verbal — us Heathers, all seven of us retreated into the language of touch and taste.

But Evee and Raine were still plenty verbal. Raine muttered something like 'go again, have her again', but Evelyn said 'you next, give me a sec.'

Evelyn passed me back to Raine. We kissed again, but this time I wasn't in control; Raine held me in place and drank me down, pushed me to the bed and filled my mouth with herself, until I was

a writhing, whining mess. Then Raine passed me to Evelyn and the cycle repeated a second time; Evelyn was more hesitant, watching Raine over my shoulder as if for approval, but I wrapped her in caresses and took her into my mouth. She was fluttery-soft and more gentle than I'd expected. Then I was passed back to Raine for a third, then Evee for a fourth, then perhaps a fifth, then I lost count. Sense overtook time, kissing meant more than words, as I carried the taste of Evelyn and Raine back and forth.

We didn't talk about what we were doing. We didn't stop to debate the meaning or the intent or what happened next. We just kissed, passing me back and forth, a limp ball of squid-limbs and panting need.

I'd never been any good at kissing, but we had learned from the best. Patient study makes grand results in all things, especially in flesh.

Eventually I lay on my back, spread out on the bed, suspended between the two reference points of the person I had become.

Over the bridge of my body, Raine and Evelyn stared at each other. Raine glanced at Evee's lips. Evelyn snorted.

"Nope," said Raine, cracking a grin.

"Absolutely not," Evelyn agreed, sighing with relief, still flushed all over.

"No way."

"No thank you. Though I appreciate the thought."

"Same," Raine said. "We never made a good couple."

"We never were one."

"But we can be a trio."

Evelyn snorted. "We already are. What's the saying? Triangle is the strongest shape?"

"Damn right," Raine said. "Basic geometry. We've got nothing but triangles in this house."

Evelyn nodded. "Then that is what we shall be."

Raine extended a hand, palm up. Evelyn hesitated, blushing harder,

then responded by placing her own hand within Raine's gentle grip — her maimed hand, with the missing fingers and chunk of palm gone forever. Raine lowered her lips and kissed Evelyn on the knuckles. Evelyn looked frozen for a long moment, but then she leaned forward and kissed Raine on the forehead, quickly and gently.

They parted, one with a blush and the other with a grin.

Evee muttered through her blush: "As long as I'm the one who cucks."

Raine grinned all the harder. "Is that right? With our squid?"

"Our angel," Evelyn ground out.

"Our something, alright. Shall we get her settled?"

"Yes, please," Evelyn said quickly. "I can't get her up by myself. Here, help her under the covers, she looks about ready to pass out."

I think I mewled, or perhaps whined, or maybe even purred.

Raine and Evee helped me into bed; I was a big floppy mess by then, pawing and nuzzling and completely non-verbal, making noises more like a small scrungly animal, neither human being nor abyssal hybrid; at any other moment in life I would have been mortified to witness myself in such a state, but right then I loved myself more than I ever had before. I was a writhing nest of seven squid girls, tentacles all moving over each other and snuggling tight, stealing little skin-kiss touches from both of my most beloved.

Raine got me to snuggle down under the covers of Evee's bed, warm and enclosing, heavy with blankets, with my head cradled by the cliff-face of pillows, cuddled up right next to Evee. My face was inches from her hip.

We assumed that Raine was going to join the bed on Evee's opposite side, so Evelyn would be between us — but Raine slipped beneath the covers behind me, sitting up like Evelyn was, so that I was the filling in a lesbian cephalopod sandwich.

That made so much more sense. I was the bridge and the answer and the catalyst, the angel come to heal the wounds and patch the leaks and mend that which was broken.

We purred, more with our diaphragm than our throat. Evelyn

jumped slightly. Raine laughed.

“Look, like this,” Raine murmured. “Touch her like this.”

Raine showed Eevee how to pet me, like I was a stray they’d brought in from the cold; she reached down beneath the covers to rub my belly until my purring intensified, then ran her fingers through my hair and across my scalp, kneading the back of my neck and pressing her thumbs into the knotted muscles of my shoulders. Evelyn joined in, hesitant at first, then with growing confidence; I could tell the difference between their touches with my eyes squinted shut — Raine’s was strong but gentle, while Eevee’s was rough and earnest.

We touched them in return. We wound a tentacle around Raine’s arm, and brushed Evelyn’s thigh with a tentacle-tip. When Evelyn did not flinch or shy away, we pressed with more intimacy, sliding ourselves down her slender thigh until we reached the tender, vulnerable flesh of her amputation scar. We cupped her stump with infinite gentleness.

Evelyn sighed in a way we’d never heard her sigh before — with release.

For a long time we lay there, insensate, floppy, exhausted, and happy. Evelyn and Raine sat either side of us and spoke in low murmurs, talking of all manner of inconsequential things. We felt a dull twinge in the tip of one tentacle — the one wrapped around Eevee’s leg — aching to grow a bio-steel needle and spread the blessing of our abyssal biology beyond the bounds of our own body; but it was only a dull twinge, with no great rush or urgency, perhaps a promise for the future.

Future?

What future?

This was the first time we had snuggled with both Raine and Evelyn. Would it also be the last?

“—won’t be enough time to get all those things done tomorrow,” Evelyn was saying to Raine in a low whisper, while her fingers rubbed at the back of my neck. “We have to prioritise. Forget anything not directly related to safety and security, but make sure everyone not coming with us knows where we’re going to be. Jan won’t need reminding, but Nicole might. Kimberly is to be kept

away from all this, she doesn't deserve the bother."

Raine answered with a question, "Badger? Sarika?"

Evelyn sucked on her teeth for a moment. "No, absolutely not. I don't want Mister Hobbes interfering again. The last thing we need is wild-cards and rogue elements who might step into this. Speaking of which, as soon as we arrive there, the first order of business is to locate the imitation version of Lozzie, the one that the Eye sent against us before. You remember that thing?"

Raine chuckled softly. "How could I forget? Shot it, didn't I?"

"Mm," Evelyn grunted. "If it's still alive out there, we don't want it stepping into the circle and interfering with anything. Heather should be able to ... Heather? Heather? What are you ... ?"

Raine squeezed my shoulder suddenly. "Hey, hey, Heather? Love, what's wrong? Heather?"

Tears broke over me in a great and terrible wave.

Once I surrendered to the crying, I simply could not stop. Wracking sobs shook my body and wrung salt water from my eyes. I struggled into a sitting position as if fighting for air, panting and gulping, pulling my knees to my chest, curling up tight, bunching my fists in my own hair to hold back a wail. We had to wrap our tentacles tight around our own belly just to stop from lashing the air.

"Heather! Heather, we're both right here! Heather!"

"Hey, hey, love, slow down, look at me—"

"What's wrong—"

"It's just us—"

"Heather—"

"We—"

"I don't want to die!" I wailed.

With the truth expelled like a wave of rotten vomit, my sobbing subsided into mere panting. I was shaking all over, covered in cold flash sweat.

Evelyn sighed sharply, but she spoke with surprising tenderness: "Heather, we've been over this. You are not going to die. You, me,

Raine, and everyone else is coming back in one piece. You—”

I shook my head. “Evee— Evee, you don’t— you don’t get it.”

Raine spoke with the whipcrack of command in her voice: “Nobody is leaving you behind, Heather.”

But for once even Raine’s confidence was not enough. I sniffed hard and shook my head again, frantic with inner panic. “May— maybe. But I’m so scared.” A dry sob threatened in the back of my throat. “I’m so scared. I’m terrified.”

Raine put her arm around my shoulders. “We’re all with you, Heather. We’re all going into this together.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “There’s nothing to be—”

“Afraid of?” I finished her sentence before she could. My eyes were bulging, with my fear. “Of course there’s things to be afraid of! I’m terrified, I’ve been terrified for ten years! I’ve been bottling it up, keeping a lid on this, as I take on more and more responsibility, but — but now we’re going to Wonderland, and I’m going to stare up into the Eye. And I have to reach out and put my hands inside it, and pull Maisie back out, and ... ”

Words failed me. We trailed off.

“We don’t know that for certain, Heather,” Evelyn sighed. “She could be—”

“She is inside the Eye,” we said. “Metaphysically, spiritually, whatever. She’s in there. I have to pull her out, with hyperdimensional mathematics. You’ll all be at my side, yes, of course you will. But the final movement? That’s all down to me. And ... and I might fail, and ... and I don’t want to die.” My face collapsed into tears once again, my eyes filled with moisture, a sob tearing my throat apart. “I don’t want to lose— all this— everything — everyone— I don’t want this to be the last time I— *hic* touch you. I don’t— I want to feel this— *hic*—”

Raine squeezed me hard; we clung to her like a rock amid the storm, though we could not hear her words over the turmoil inside.

Evelyn pulled her stump free from our tentacles and slid out of bed. We heard the distinctive sound of her walking stick against the floorboard, the tap-tap-tap of the rubber tip, followed by the difficult grunt of Evelyn standing up on her one flesh-and-bone leg.

We braced ourselves for a lecture, for Evelyn's silver tongue and cutting words to bludgeon our fears into submission. We knew she would mean well; she would only be trying to help, but those fears would grow in the dark, like a mycelial mat infesting our secret heart, until they were strong enough to turn us all to rot.

But to our surprise, Evelyn said nothing. Tap-tap-tap went her walking stick, away from the bed, then tap-tap-tap back again.

"Here," Evelyn grunted.

We felt a shower of gentle impacts against our lap, followed by Evelyn slipping back into bed and reaching out for one of our tentacles. Confused and curious, we opened our eyes and wiped away the tears.

Evee's plushies had come to visit.

A tumbled collection of mismatched soft animals and 'chibi' anime girls lay in my lap: a pastel rainbow dragon, a miniature seal with a jolly expression, a pair of extra-fluffy rabbits, a green-and-white plant thing which I'm pretty sure was a Pokemon, and many, many, many more. Evelyn had simply grabbed as many as she could with one arm, then flung them onto the bed.

Pure surprise stopped my tears. We gaped at the strange assemblage. Evelyn reached over, selected the hedgehog — one of her favourites, as I had predicted — and 'walked' it up my arm and across my shoulder, until the small plush fellow could nuzzle the side of my neck.

She kept a perfectly deadpan expression until the moment I made eye contact. Then she blushed lightly and cleared her throat.

"Evee?"

"Just ... just accept it, Heather. Just hug them, for God's sake."

I let out a half-laugh, half-sob, and then did as I was told; I gathered Evelyn's plush animals into my arms and hugged them tight, with both arms and most of our tentacles. We kissed one of them at random, nuzzling the flank of a plush pink dinosaur. Our tentacles burrowed and snuggled amid the mass of comfort.

Raine parted her lips with a wet click, and said: "Evee, you mind if I talk about how it was with us?"

Evelyn snorted softly. "You mean with my mother?"

I looked up in surprise and blinked the remaining tears out of my eyes. Raine was stone-cold sober and serious, almost more than I'd ever seen her before. Evelyn looked darkly amused. I felt suddenly pinned between them, flanked both above and below the bedsheets.

"Yeah," Raine said. "About your mother."

Evelyn sighed. "Fine. Go ahead. I suppose it's relevant."

Raine nodded a thank you, then looked down at me and smiled through a very difficult frown. "Heather, both Eevee and I have been here before."

"Oh ... "

Raine's smile widened, full of warm understanding. "We faced the same question, before we slew Eevee's mother. We had a choice, but it wasn't much of one. For days, or weeks really, we tried to figure out how to run away without getting caught. But we couldn't make the pieces fit, we couldn't avoid all of those servants and guards—"

"Fucking zombies," Evelyn grunted.

"Mm. And even if we could have gotten out of that house and onto the road, Eevee was in no state to travel. We didn't have a proper prosthetic for her. She was malnourished, messed up—"

"And you were even worse, Raine," Evelyn snorted. "The police would have mistaken you for a child abandoned in the woods and raised by wolves."

Raine chuckled softly at a dark memory. "Yeah, right, there was that, too. Even if we got clear, even if we could dodge Loretta and her minions, what then?" Raine clucked her tongue and shrugged. "We would be what? A pair of teenage girls, on the run, avoiding the authorities for years and years and years. No money. Nowhere to stay. No connections. I'd lost all my old connections in London by that point. No more anarchist commune for me. Maybe if I'd still known that lot, they could have helped, but without that ... " Raine sighed. "Couldn't be done. So we had to fight."

I nodded. "I have to fight, too. Maisie, I won't leave her, I won't."

Raine stroked the back of my head. "Yeah. Maybe if we pulled out all the stops, we could protect you from the Eye forever, whatever it

sends eventually. But that would mean no Maisie. It was the same with us. Fight was the only option. And we weren't certain we would win."

Evelyn grunted. "Finally you admit it, Raine. Ha! You were nothing but confidence, back then."

Raine shot Eevee a grin. "I never doubted you for a second, Eevee. And I don't doubt Heather, either." Raine looked back down to me, then leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead. "But we both know how it feels. It's scary, damn right it is. No sense lying or holding that back."

I nodded slowly. "But ... but running isn't an option. I won't leave Maisie behind."

Raine nodded along with me. "Running was never an option. Some things are worth killing for, but others are worth dying to attempt. I don't want you to die either, Heather. I want to wrap you up in cotton wool and keep you safe, for the rest of your life. But I've come to accept that if you don't attempt this, if you don't try to rescue your sister, then that would be a kind of death, too."

To my surprise, Evelyn let out a shuddering breath, almost on the verge of tears. Raine reached over and touched her shoulder gently. I wrapped my tentacle back around her thigh.

"That's how Eevee and I resolved the question, back when we faced this same feeling," Raine went on. "We could die alone, separated, on our knees, slowly, or always looking over our shoulders in lifelong fear and paranoia — or we could take the chance of fighting for something better. We fought, and we got something better. And we'll do the same alongside you, all over again. Eevee?"

"Without even the shadow of doubt," Evelyn said.

For a long moment, nobody spoke; I lay against my most beloved and felt the fear undergo a metamorphosis, hardening and cooling into new-forged resolve.

"I love you both," we murmured.

"Love you too, Heather."

With wordless agreement all three of us slid down into bed, emotionally and physically exhausted. Evelyn slipped into my arms and between my tentacles, cradled in a cage of cushioned flesh, the

recipient of the most gentle embrace I could construct; Raine snuggled against my back, the big spoon to my little, her lips on my neck, her legs intertwined with mine. One of her hands wandered further, to find Evee's and interlace their fingers across my hip.

We fell asleep together, us three, us seven plus two, nine and nine and nine again.

And not for the last time. We swore that to ourselves as we sank down into merciful and dreamless oblivion. This would not be the final time. If the Eye would not give us Maisie in peace and understanding, we would take her back by force.

And if the Eye would not let us go?

We would break reality itself upon the wheel of hyperdimensional mathematics. We would crack the world asunder with a hammer of thought, just to be here once again, between Evelyn and Raine.

slanting surfaces; unplumbed voids – 23.5

On the final day we did many things. None of them were rest.

In the morning, while still in bed, after Evelyn and I woke shoulder-to-shoulder and lips-to-neck, she said to me: “You have one job today, Heather. One purpose above all others, understand? Make yourself ready. Let Raine and me worry about the logistics and the practical details. You just concentrate on hyperdimensional mathematics.”

Raine laughed from the other side of the bed. “Prep the payload! Pack our cannon with powder and shot. Present arms. Five rounds rapid!”

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. That expression made me want to kiss her brow. “She’s not a fucking warship, Raine. And you’re mixing your metaphors. And you, Raine, no horseplay today, no screwing about. Absolute focus.”

“Me?” Raine grinned. “I’m always on.”

Evelyn grumbled. “Yes, that’s usually the problem. Come on. No time for a lie in. We all have things to attend. One of you fetch my leg.”

First of all, I forced myself to stop thinking of it as ‘the final day’; it was merely a very busy Saturday, not the last full day of my mortal life. I would not die on the morrow, nor a year from then, nor five, nor ten years hence. I was not going to die before thirty, or forty, or even fifty years of age. I had tasted the sweetest fruit of all — a night sandwiched between people I loved — and all seven Heathers had sworn together that we would taste it again, over and over. We re-swore to ourselves that morning. We were going to live into our eighties, or nineties, or even beyond. We were not dying here. Nobody was.

Reality would break before we would surrender to any end.

Which was all well and good to swear in the middle of the night

after an emotionally exhausting episode of passion, but it was a bit different when sitting at the breakfast table and eating soggy cereal. Domestic life has a way of making sworn oaths seem a bit silly.

Lemons helped. I chased my coffee with two.

Between myself and Raine and Evelyn, we had many things to square away and secure and double-check, if we were to have any hope of mounting the first expedition to Wonderland on the following Sunday morning. We did not want last-minute preparations to drag on past lunchtime and into the afternoon; we wanted everyone alert and well-rested, with empty bowels and fully caffeinated bloodstreams. We wanted no surprises, no interruptions, no stragglers.

Evelyn had a very specific way of phrasing this problem.

“Operations is a woefully neglected aspect of military action. Did you know that, Heather?” she said, then pointed her walking stick at Raine. “High-speed low-drag brain here thinks all you need is grit and a gun.”

Raine chuckled and waved a piece of toast. “Sure, what more could I want? Maybe a girl, too. The three G’s.”

Evelyn ground on: “In the real world, if you’re not all in the right place at the right time, you’ve already lost. Everyone wants to be a special forces murderer these days, or a general doing strategy in the tent, the kind that never gets mud on his boots. But if you’re not all at the starting line when you’re needed? You’re fucked. We’re going to be ready and prepped hours before the starting whistle.”

Raine perked up, a grin on her lips. “We’re gonna have a starting whistle?”

Evelyn snorted. “You wish.”

To that end, we were gathering our forces on Saturday, a full day in advance.

Twil was planning to stay the night. She arrived that afternoon, with a bag packed for an overnight stay and a hand-held video game console for some light entertainment in the meantime.

“You’re going to play Doom?,” I asked, trying to contain my grimace. “On the night before we venture out to some unspeakable hell dimension?”

Twil boggled at me. "You know what Doom is!? I thought you were like ... well ... you know."

"I know what? Excuse me, Twil?"

"You know what I mean, Big H. Like ... non-techno girl. Cottage-core. No video games."

Evelyn sighed as if Twil had just stepped knee-deep into a puddle of stagnant mud. "That is not what 'cottage-core' means, Twil. Try being a little less internet-poisoned for one second of your life."

Twil snorted. "Says you, Eevee."

"I know what Doom is, Twil," I said. "And I don't think it's the best thing to be playing before Wonderland."

"Naaaah." Twil grinned. "Gets my blood pumping."

Twil also brought her mother and her aunt with her for a brief but important visit. Christine Hopton, the High Priestess of the Brinkwood Church, had words of encouragement and kindness for us, but also extracted a promise that we would return her daughter safely.

"We swear on our sister, on Maisie. Everyone is coming home from this. Whatever it takes."

Christine had unexpectedly offered me a hug. I'd taken it. "Good luck, dear," she said.

Meanwhile, Twil's aunt, Amanda Hopton, brought us messages from her mind-linked god, the kindly old Outsider cone-snail, Hringewindla.

"He wishes you 'good hunting'. I ... I think. Good hunting, godspeed, good luck. At least, those are the only ways I can render his feelings into words. I'm sorry for my pitiful attempts. And ... and he wants you to carry his gift with you. In case you have need of it, out there where so few things have solid meaning."

"His gift?" we'd asked, a little confused. "The stone coin he gave me?"

"The very one."

"I don't see what good it could be, but ... I will. I promise." I bowed my head. "Thank you, Amanda. And thank you, Hringewindla."

Thank you for all your help. We'll come see you again, when we get back. I'm sure Maisie will want to meet you."

Zheng had been strictly forbidden from wandering off into the woods or ranging across the landscape with Grinny, no matter how much enjoyment the pair of demon-hosts were getting out of their countryside adventures. 'Confined to quarters', as Raine put it. We were concerned that Zheng would take the brief imposition poorly. She did not enjoy being ordered, even at the best of times, let alone when those orders involved constraints on her range of action — and she had taken very strongly to Grinny over the last two weeks. Grinny, the demon-host who inhabited the body of Edward Lilburne's late wife, was stuck to Zheng like glue now. She was even dressed in Zheng's spare clothes, great baggy jumpers and loose jeans.

"Want to go out!" she had bellowed in the kitchen. "Out out out!"

Raine had cheered at that. "At least she knows what she wants now. Well done, Zheng, you've got this girl thinking for herself."

But Zheng had grinned with anticipation and pleasure. She knew what was coming, what was planned for the following morning, and she would miss it for nothing.

"We await the hunt, shaman," she rumbled after she swept me off my feet. "After we crack the god apart, we have many tales to tell you, of things beyond the city." And then, to Grinny: "Patience, little one. I will bring you more grand trophies. Today, we eat, and grow strong."

Evelyn's day was occupied with the last of the magical preparations out in Camelot; the scaled up version of the Invisus Oculus had to be perfect. She spent hours testing the thing, going over the lines and angles and the lettering of the words, making sure the Knights and the Cattys had missed nothing. We left the gateway in the magical workshop open for once, to limit additional trips back and forth, though Praem accompanied her all the same.

"Think of it like a spacecraft," Evelyn told me. "Or perhaps a submersible. We are all getting in this thing, and it cannot have a single flaw, or our lives are forfeit. If it was just me ... "

"No," Praem intoned.

"Ahem. Yes, well. If it was just me, I would probably have cut

corners. But this is you, and Raine, and Praem, and Lozzie, and everybody. I will brook no errors, no time-saving short cuts. It will be perfect or we will not go at all.”

Evelyn attended to two further matters as well: she helped Lozzie go over the plan with the Knights and the Caterpillars, including the essential steps of watching out for the imitation-Lozzie the Eye might send against us again — and she supervised moving the clay-squid thing in the magical workshop into a fresh bucket of water and clay, with climbing ropes for handles. The bucket was to be carried by one of the Knights. Mister Squiddy was still an unsolved mystery, sent either from Maisie or from the Eye itself, but more likely the former; if we came up short with other methods of contact or interference, Mister Squiddy might serve as a backup plan.

Raine was on what she called ‘agitprop duty’.

Evelyn had sighed and looked like she wanted to punch Raine in the kidneys. “Do not call it that. Raine, just don’t. Don’t be ridiculous.”

Raine laughed. “What? I’m running interference, sending messages, getting the word out there. Doesn’t that make perfect sense? Right, Heather?”

“I’m not getting involved in this argument,” I said. “But ... no, it doesn’t count.”

“Oh, you wound me, my squiddy girl.”

“Just. Get. On. With. It,” Evelyn ground out between clenched teeth.

Raine’s role that Saturday was to check up on everybody who was not joining us on the expedition to Wonderland — to either inform, deflect, mislead, invite, or simply make clear what was happening and where we were going to be. She called Amy Stack twenty four times (with one, singular, gruff response); she made sure Kimberly was safe and sound; she went to visit Badger and Sarika, simply to reassure both of our distant charges that there was nothing to be concerned about. She called Nicole for a terse, awkward, private chat. She made certain that everyone staying behind in the house knew what to do in an emergency.

Lozzie and I had a very special task that morning: we went to visit

Natalie, the little girl I had saved from becoming part of Edward's collateral damage. We kept it short and sweet, merely a little meeting in the Skeates' back garden, to remind her we were still on her side.

We mentioned nothing of Wonderland.

A rumble of low-level activity continued all through the morning and afternoon and into early evening, matching the growl and grumble of anxiety growing in my guts. All I could do was remind myself of the oath I had made, no matter how silly it felt by the cold light of day and the context of so much practical preparation.

But there was one last step I could take, to ensure I had the strength to keep that oath.

Which was why, at five o'clock in the afternoon, I was seated on the floor in Lozzie's bedroom, at the low table Tenny used for her laptop and her books and her games, getting myself soundly thrashed at chess.

"Brrrrt!" Tenny trilled as one of her silken black tentacles finished another move. She looked very satisfied on the other side of the chess board.

She was sat on the opposite side of the little table, which was currently cleared of everything except her favourite chess set — the hand-carved one which she'd received as a gift from Jan. Tenny was cross-legged and very comfortable, with her long leathery wing-cloak folded back over her shoulders, her tufts of white fur extra fluffy from a fresh bath, and her inky dark skin gleaming warmly in the lamplight. Her wiggly white antennae twitched as she played, but my level of skill did not merit the deep-thought indicator of her tentacles spinning in little circles. That display was reserved for real challenges, not for running rings around Auntie Heather.

"Rook takes kniiight. Aunty Heathy move now!"

"Okay, okay," we murmured, squinting at the board. "Thank you, Tenns. Okay. We're going to try ... we're going to try that pawn there." We pointed. "That one—"

"Beeeeee threeee," Tenny supplied.

"Thank you. Pawn from B3 to B4." We took a deep breath, flexed our aching tentacles, and concentrated on the narrow space

Tenny's tentacles quickly re-set the board, clacking all the pieces back down in their previous places. She puffed her cheeks out and shot me a big, wide-eyed, sceptical look.

"Sorry ... " I repeated.

Tenny expelled the air in her puffed-out cheeks with a big loud, "Brrrrrrt!" Then she quickly added: "Auntie Heathy stop-saying-sorry challenge!"

We blinked at her three times, then burst out laughing. "Oh— okay — okay, Tenny, okay. Um, point taken, that's very kind of you, and very reasonable. Sorr—"

"Brrrrt!!!" Tenny vibrated on the other side of the table, trilling so hard I worried it might injure her.

Apparently Marmite worried the same thing; the massive off-white spider-servitor had been clinging to the wall behind Tenny since we'd started the chess game, apparently content to watch quietly, trailing two of his own tentacles across the floor to hold Tenny around the waist, like a hound who needed to rest a paw against his master's ankle. But at Tenny's violent trill, Marmite came scuttling down off the wall and nosed his way under Tenny's right arm, nuzzling at her side. Huge metal cone-shaped eyes swivelled upward at Tenny, as if checking on her health. Tenny delegated three tentacles to attend to her friend and pet, stroking Marmite's fuzzy bristles and scratching the back of his head. But she didn't cease pouting at me.

"Right, Tenns," we said, a little awkwardly. "Right you are. No more saying sorry."

"Pbrrrt," Tenny trilled.

Seven-Shades-of-Sensible-Suggestion spoke up again, from over on the bed: "The dutiful daughter does have a point, kitten. You have done nothing but test and stretch the basics since you started. You have had more than enough warm-up."

I sighed, flexed my tentacles outward again, and tried to shake off the stiffness; the pain of distributed brain-math ran down all of our additional limbs, quietly burning inside the neurons and nerves of our pneuma-somatic flesh, threatening our primary brain with the ghost of nausea and headaches.

A small price to pay to limber up. We had not done any serious brain-math in a while. We would not be found wanting on the morrow.

“Warming up is half the point,” we said gently, still staring at the chess-board and preparing to move a piece with brain-math once again. “Even if I do nothing else, this is important. Another five moves. Fifteen minutes. Then we can turn to the meat of this. I—”

“Pffffffft!” Tenny trill-fluttered deep inside her chest. “Five?! Auntie Heathy ...”

I blinked up at Tenny. “W-what? Sorry? Pardon?”

Tenny blew out a big puff, then reached forward and clacked several pieces around the board in a rapid sequence of moves, my pieces as well as her own.

In three moves she had my King in checkmate, pinned by a Bishop, a Rook, and her Queen.

I gaped at the board for a second, then gathered myself, clearing my throat and huffing. “I ... Tenny ... you ... you don’t know those were the moves I was going to make. That’s hardly fair.”

“Brrrt?” Tenny tilted her head to one side. She somehow managed to look both unimpressed, smug, doubtful, and pitying all at once. “Really? Really really?”

I tutted. “You sound just like your mother, sometimes.”

Tenny smiled, smug and pleased. “Compliment!”

Lozzie made a little squeal. “Awww, Tenns!”

I stumbled over my words. “Yes, well, of course. That’s not— not what I meant. I would never compare anybody to Lozzie as an insult, now would I? Really?”

Tenny did not let up, however. Nor would she be distracted from her purpose. She pointed at the board again. “Really, Auntie Heath? Different moves? Different moves?”

I sighed. “Well ... probably not. Fine.”

“Game done,” Tenny announced. She narrowed one huge black eye at me, as if telling me she was wise to my tricks.

“Alright, alright.” I surrendered, leaned back, and gave in to the inevitable.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight said: “Are we to dine on the meat of the matter now, kitten?”

Sevens was seated on Lozzie’s bed, comfortably settled in a divot among the messy sheets and wildly disobedient pillows, with her long and elegant legs hanging over the edge and her be-stockin’g’d feet planted on the floor. She was wearing the mask of the Yellow Princess, starched and prim and very proper, with eyes like ice and hair cut ruler-straight. Sevens’ usual strictness was undermined completely by Lozzie, who was lying sideways with her head pillowed in Sevens’ lap, the rest of her wrapped up like a happy little bug in her pastel poncho.

Lozzie’s wispy blonde hair was draped all down Sevens’ skirt, but Sevens didn’t seem to mind. On the contrary, she had spent the last twenty minutes petting Lozzie like a cat, combing out her hair, and generally showering her with casual physical affection. By the time I finally looked up from the chess board, Sevens was busy weaving Lozzie’s hair into a pair of long braids.

“The meat,” I echoed. “I’m not sure we should call it that.”

Sevens gave me a warning look.

“Fine, fine,” I relented. “Yes. I’m good and warmed up. So ... ” I glanced at Tenny once again, who was now listening with that attentive innocence that only children could muster without effort. A lump formed in my throat. Perhaps I was making a mistake after all. “Lozzie, are you certain about this?”

“Mm?” Lozzie blinked. Her face was sideways in Sevens’ lap, which made the expression extra clueless. But then she glanced at Tenny too. She took my meaning. “Tenns knows what we’re doing. Don’t you, Tenns? You know, you know!”

Tenny nodded her fluffy head up and down. Several of her tentacles dipped and bobbed. Marmite’s metal cone-eyes followed the motion, like a cat watching a finger. “I know! I know!” Tenny insisted. “Going to get Maisie back. I want to meet Maisie too. Please?”

We took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Thank you, Tenns. Hopefully, yes, you can meet Maisie too, and soon. Okay, you can

stay for this, but you have to promise me that if you start to feel uncomfortable, or scared, then you will speak up. Okay?"

"Mmmm-rrrr! Promise!"

Another deep breath down into our lungs. Why did this feel so much like a moment of no return? Because I was finally facing how little I knew? Or because I was finally reaching out for a specific kind of help?

Tenny must have seen my doubt, because she reached across the table and wrapped one of her tentacles around one of ours. A second black tentacle deposited a chess piece into our lap — the white queen. We stared at the white queen for a long moment, then picked it up. We turned the piece over with our fingers as we spoke.

"The people in this room — the three of you — represent the best possible advice I can get about the Eye itself. Lozzie, you have more experience Outside than anybody else. Sevens, you're the daughter of the King in Yellow. I know, I know, neither of you have any direct knowledge, we've been over this before, but I need to talk this through, and not from the kind of practical angle that Raine or Evelyn might provide."

Tenny tilted her head sideways as I spoke, then trilled a wordless sound of soft question. "Brrrr?"

We smiled at her. "And Tenny, you're here because, well, I need somebody to poke holes in my assumptions. You have a very, very, very keen and unique mind. You understand mathematics in a way that others don't, and that might help somehow, even though brain-math isn't like actual maths. You're probably the smartest person I've ever known. Now, yes, of course, that doesn't mean you're going to have any special insight, but it might help you spot something that nobody else has, not yet. And I want to include you. You're not coming with us tomorrow, but you're one of us. You're part of our family."

"Brrrrrr," went Tenny. She seemed uncertain.

"Just listen to Auntie Heathy talk to your mum and Sevens," we said. "And if something seems wrong, speak up, please."

Tenny nodded. She squinted one eye shut, then the other; several of her tentacles stood up from her back, their tips twitching in deep thought. Marmite seemed to sense something was changing in the

air. He coiled a single tentacle in Tenny's lap, then went very still.

We took a deep breath and marshalled our thoughts.

"You all know the practical parts of the plan by now," we said.

"Once we're in Wonderland and we know we're secure, everyone else is going to watch the edge of the circle and guard me while I try to find Maisie." I held up the white queen from Tenny's chess board. "I'm going to define her, in the same way that I've defined Raine before, in order to locate her. I've got Maisie's t-shirt as an anchor for that equation, and the photograph from Taika, as well as the shape of my own body to use as a reference. I'm relatively confident that I can 'scan' for her, if she's out there, physically."

Lozzie rose from Sevens' lap; Sevens put the finishing touches on Lozzie's twin braids. The braids bobbed when Lozzie nodded.

"Yeah! Yeah, you and May-May share the same mirror, it should be quick and easy!"

I squinted. "I'm sorry, Lozzie — 'May-May'?"

"Mmhmm!" Lozzie nodded again, very proud.

Sevens stroked the back of Lozzie's braids. "A fine name."

"We'll have to ask her," I sighed, struggling to find it amusing right then. "Anyway, if that works, if we find her physical form is out there somewhere, then we withdraw. Evelyn has plans to make one of the Caterpillars safe to traverse the surface of Wonderland via a different form of the Invisus Oculus. Once that's ready, we go back in, ride a Catty, and pick up Maisie. Simple."

"Catty steed, away!" Lozzie cheered.

Sevens was more sober. "It is never simple, kitten."

We sighed. "Yes, Sevens, we know. Even if that all happens as planned, it won't be simple. We don't know what the Eye has out there, or what it can put in our path, even if it can't see us. Picking up Maisie may be difficult, but it's straightforward, but ... but personally I doubt that we'll be doing that."

"Brrrrt?" went Tenny.

We spared her a guilty smile. I closed one fist around the white queen, engulfing her. "I strongly suspect that Maisie doesn't have a physical body anymore. If she doesn't, then there's only one logical

place she could be.”

“In the Eye,” Tenny trilled.

I blinked at her in surprise. How much had she overheard prior to this conversation? How much did she know? How much implied horror had we exposed to our poor Tenny?

Tenny puffed her cheeks out at me; she could tell how I was looking at her, like a child who needed protecting. “Aunty Heath,” she grumbled.

“S-sorry, Tenny, you just surprised me. You do know that your mother and I have tried to keep you sheltered from the worst of this, yes? Not because we think you’re childish, or because we disrespect you, but ... we don’t want to frighten you.”

Tenny unpuffed her cheeks and narrowed her big dark eyes, with a strange little smile on her face. “Tenns does not scare easy.”

We laughed at that, gently, with more love than we had expected; had she picked that one up from Raine? “Okay, Tenny. Thank you. And yes, you’re right. I suspect Maisie is inside the eye. Not physically, I don’t think, but metaphysically, spiritually, somehow. Lozzie, what do you think about that? Do you think I could be right? Does it make sense?”

Lozzie tilted her head from side to side, slowly, as if thinking by sloshing her brain back and forth. Her new braids swayed with the rest of her. “Mmmmm. Maybe maybe? Not sure, Heathy, I dunno.”

“Thank you regardless, Lozzie,” we said. “So ... so ... ” I gathered myself by wrapping a trio of tentacles around my belly in a tight and secure self-hug, then I held up the white queen again. “We don’t have weapons on the Eye’s scale. And even if we did, fighting it might not help Maisie. A fight might not free her. It might even hurt her, in some metaphysical sense.”

Sevens spoke up. “I am in agreement with this, kitten.”

“Ah?”

Sevens gestured with one hand, fingers out, palm up, the very picture of aristocratic debate. “Think of my father, the King. How would one ‘fight’ my father? With sword and gun? No. He would write them out of the script.”

“Exactly,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. I wasn’t the only one thinking this way. “The Eye, it observes, that’s all it does. Like your nature is narrative, plays and stories. The Eye’s nature is seeing. How would that affect fighting it? Do you have any ideas?”

Sevens allowed a delicate frown to crease her brow. Lozzie bit her lower lip. A moment of silence passed over the room.

Tenny trilled: “Hide and seek?”

I laughed softly, and not only from politeness. This was the other reason, the emotional reason, for having Tenny in the room with us. Her shoulders were light with far fewer cares. She knew she was loved and secure. We needed that reminder of what we were ‘fighting’ for.

Lozzie giggled too. “Tenns!”

“No,” said Seven-Shades-of-Suddenly-Sharp.

Tenny flinched, tentacles all a-whirl as she turned to look at Sevens. “Brrr?”

The Yellow Princess smiled — a rare look on her ice-cold, perfect face, thin and frosty, but genuine beyond any words. “My apologies. I did not mean to make you jump, dear Tenny. I mean to say that you, young Miss Tenny Lilburne, are more right than you may realise.”

“Brrrt? Prrrr?”

“Sevens?” I said. “What do you mean? You think the Eye will play hide and seek with us? You can’t be serious.”

Sevens-Shades-of-Supercilious-Simile gestured with both hands this time, spreading her fingers in a subtle shrug. “Imagine this for me, kitten. Lozzie and Tenny, too, if you will. A brigand surprises my father with a rapier, intent on murder. He has slipped past all my father’s guards and has come upon the King while his royal person is unarmed and unprotected. What happens to the villain?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Is this a serious question?”

“Yes, kitten.”

“He gets ... well ... I can say this in reality, can’t I? As long as we’re not Outside.” My tentacles bunched up and hesitated all the same. “He gets Hastur’d.”

“Hazzzturrrr,” Tenny echoed in her fluttery trill.

I winced and grimaced and tried to put my face in a tentacle; Lozzie looked amused, which I thought was completely inappropriate. How foolish we were being!

“Tenns,” I said quickly, “you must never say that word when we’re Outside. I-I shouldn’t have even said it then, I’m sorry, that was teaching you—”

Sevens cleared her throat gently. “Tenny is known.”

“Ah?”

“Special!” Lozzie chirped. She reached over and patted Sevens’ thigh, which would have made my eyes bulge in surprise under other circumstances. For now I filed that away.

Sevens tilted her head in acknowledgement. “She would be in little peril. Calm yourself, Heather.” Sevens turned to Tenny. “Best not to speak my father’s secret name, other than in most dire need. He knows my bride-to-be, your Aunt Heather, and would know you as her family. But his wrath is hard to aim, and harder still to guide. Do you understand, Tenny dear?”

Tenny nodded, wide-eyed and more serious than I’d ever seen her before.

“Good,” I added, feeling like we’d veered horribly off-course. “Um, Sevens, please, continue. You were saying?”

Seven-Shades-of-Protective-Auntie raised her chin. “My father would be unable to simply overpower this hypothetical assailant with brute strength or superior skill, no matter the mask he wore, for that is not within his nature. He would rewrite the script as each action and choice clove the directions and results of fate. The brigand would perhaps think himself victorious, but then trip and fall upon his own sword in his haste to slit my father’s throat. Or perhaps my father would appear to take many wounds, yet neither weaken nor slow from loss of blood and the trials of pain, until the villain is exhausted merely from delivering cuts and blows, and dies at the bare hands of an unarmed man. Or maybe the fool would appear successful, presented with the ‘corpse’ of the King, but then find himself trapped in a maze of corridors upon his attempt to flee the scene, a maze that would return him again and again to the putrefying body, until he is left with no choice but to slake his

starvation on the regal meat of the King. With such poison in his belly he would ... ”

Sevens trailed off and turned her eyes upon Tenny, who was listening with the rapt attention of a child exposed to her first horror film.

“Well,” Sevens added with another special smile for Tenny. “I am only speculating. My father’s methods and tastes are distinct. I am certain he would devise far more creative fates for such a fool.”

We nodded, with our head and every spare tentacle; we had terrible trouble imagining the King in Yellow in a physical fight, at least while wearing either of the masks we had met — the Kindly Prince or the ridiculous Banana General — but this was exactly the kind of insight we had been hoping for.

“I think I comprehend, Sevens,” we said. “Thank you.”

Sevens bowed her head.

“So, you think if I confront the Eye, it would ... ”

Sevens shrugged with dainty shoulders beneath her starched blouse. “The great observer may do something incomprehensible, something outside the boundaries of how it is approached, just as the brigand with a knife would not comprehend the shape of my father’s response.”

“Hide and seek,” Tenny repeated.

We nodded. “Yes. Yes, I suppose it’s not impossible. I always thought of it as a staring contest, like I would have to look into the Eye and hold its gaze, but ... hmm.” We sighed. “I suppose it could hide Maisie? I’ll have to identify her pattern, her soul, or whatever is left of her. I’ve done that before, I can do it again, in theory. It’s how I found Raine when she got kidnapped. It’s how I saved Sarika. It’s possible. But if the Eye hides her away on purpose ... ”

I trailed off and shook my head; what would that even mean?

Sevens purred, “It will not be that simple, kitten. I do not know what form the exchange will take, but ‘hide and seek’ is only a metaphor.”

“But—”

Before I could mount another round of questions or deepen the

conversation by plunging into a boggy mire of magical metaphysics and metaphor, a sneaky little silken tentacle snaked over my shoulder and plucked the white queen from my hands.

“T-Tenny!”

Tenny snatched up the queen and then held it in the air next to her face. She smiled with sudden twinkling mischief.

“Tenns,” Lozzie cooed. “Taking things without asking isn’t nice!”

Sevens made a soft ‘hmm’ sound, then said: “It is her chess set, however.”

But Tenny just smiled at me, dark lips curled upward in delight. She wiggled the white queen at the end of one tentacle, and said, “Maisie!”

My eyebrows shot upward; our Tenny had unique insight after all.

“Maisie?” I said.

Tenny nodded, very excited now. Her fluffy white antennae were twitching back and forth, her chest purring with a deep, fluttery trilling sound. “Maisie. Aunty Heathy, close your eyes.”

I did as I was told. I stopped looking. I even coiled up my tentacles.

A few seconds later, Tenny announced: “Open!”

I opened my eyes. Tenny’s hands and tentacles were both spread wide. Marmite had retreated a few paces toward the wall, as if before a confrontation between a pair of larger animals. The white queen chess piece was nowhere to be seen. Tenny grinned with childish enjoyment.

“Tenny?” we said.

Tenny’s eyes flashed with a playful challenge. “Find her!”

We spread our tentacles outward in a mirror of Tenny’s pose. We felt our lips curve with sudden and unbidden delight. We plunged our mind down, down, down into the sunken depths of our soul and pulled at the machinery of the Eye.

“Ready or not, here I come.”

And so Tenny and I played hide and seek.

The first attempt went terribly; we began by defining all of Tenny in hyperdimensional mathematics, unfolding our vision of her in all the infinite detail of any living being. The principle was straightforward enough, because Tenny was right in front of us; but we may as well have attempted to witness and catalogue every blade of grass and grain of soil on a continent of open prairie, or list and map every feather in a flock of flying birds as they wheeled and turned in the sky, or measure each ring of wood in each and every tree in a primordial forest. Tenny was an equation just as complex and dizzying as any human — but different in subtle ways, formed from long interleaved strands of meaning and muscle, like a rope of the soul — a billion-billion-numbered definition spiralling out into near-infinity, dragging the eyes deep into the labyrinthine depths.

We tried to locate the one piece that didn't fit, the one element which was not Tenny, the chess piece, the white queen, the surrogate for Maisie inside the Eye.

We surfaced from that equation with a full-body wave of nausea, our tentacles cold and cramped and coiled, curling up to cradle our head and clench our eyes shut. We tasted blood and bile, but we kept our lunch down, choking and coughing.

It was not the difficulty of the brain-math which caused such reaction, but the complexity of that which we beheld.

“Heathy!?”

“Kitten, hold your—”

“Heath! Heath!”

“U-under your wing,” I croaked into my lap. “Left shoulder. Left shoulder, Tenny.”

Tenny produced the white queen and held it up. She was blinking in surprise that the effort had pained me so much. Panting with victory, I nodded to her. “One point to me.”

“Aunty Heathy?”

“Again. Please, Tenny. Again. Auntie Heathy is okay. Again.”

The second and third attempts went better — smoother, faster, with less pain and less nausea, less blood in the back of my throat and dripping from my nose. Sevens produced a wonderfully thick and absorbent handkerchief from somewhere, in softly glowing yellow,

embroidered with lilies. Lozzie fetched a glass of water so I could sip in between the attempts to clear my throat, with a slice of lemon floating in the cool liquid. I located the chess piece buried in Tenny's head hair, then hidden behind her backside. Each time she produced it with more confidence, flashing between her fingers and standing atop her silken palm. She knew she was helping now.

Then I started using my bioreactor, popping the control rods free, feeding additional energies into my core.

The fourth and fifth times I was faster, growing with confidence and power, more familiar with the fresh equations I had fashioned. By then I had formed an outcrop of the Eye's machinery into a probe, a searchlight, a miniature little eye itself, suited for picking out that one object amid all of Tenny's wide and whirling definition. Could I do the same thing for Maisie? Could I craft an imprint of her from memory and love, and then cast it into the Eye like a socket on a hook, to find her amid all that endless mass?

On the sixth attempt I went too far — my abyssal senses drank too much of Tenny's definition before I found the queen. It was like force-feeding myself the entire British Library in the blink of an eye, too much information crammed into my skin, glowing and straining until my brain was ready to burst.

I blacked out for three seconds and came round slumped against the wall, cushioned by my own tentacles, with Lozzie tapping her fingertips to my cheeks and Tenny peering at me in alarm.

"She is quite alright," Sevens announced from the bed. She didn't seem too concerned. "Heather is not pushing herself too far, she is merely concentrating too hard. Sit up, kitten. That's it. You are untouched."

Lozzie helped me sit. My head felt thick with effort, my tentacles numb with hyperdimensional aftermath, like I'd spent hours threading needles over and over again until my fingers were numb.

Lozzie hugged me tight, poncho engulfing me for a moment. "Heathy, you can stop now! You can stop! You can do it! You're doing it!"

"No," I croaked, gently peeling Lozzie away from me. "I can't, not yet. I can't stop just yet. I'm not doing it all the way yet." I looked up at Tenny and smiled for her. "Again. Tenny, again, please.

Please.”

“All the way?”

“All the way,” I echoed. “Finding is not enough. I have to reel her in, too.”

On the seventh, eighth, and ninth attempts I refined the equation to narrow the amount of ‘Tenny’ I had to cover; that was easier, with less effort and less pain, like using a thinner piece of thread to loop through that hidden needle.

That was quicker. I yelped out the location of the white queen within half a second of Tenny announcing, “Ready!”

On the eleventh try I didn’t declare victory.

Instead, I reached out with hyperdimensional mathematics, with a filament of thought and intent, a fishing-line loaded with the definition of the chess piece. I cast it into ‘Tenny’, like hovering a hook over the surface of a vast lake of inky darkness. A hook and a void, a key and a lock, a harness awaiting the eagerly rescued.

The white queen leapt forth.

I skimmed the chess piece across the membrane, like a flat stone bouncing on the water’s surface; I used Camelot to slingshot the queen — my little Maisie-to-be — Out and then back.

Tenny flinched when she felt the sudden absence of the chess piece — and then gasped in delight when I raised my open palm. The white queen appeared in my hand, the token of Maisie’s rescue jumping forth into reality.

“Yaaaaay!” Tenny cheered. “Yaaaaaa! Aaaaa!”

Lozzie went, “Oooh!”

Seven-Shades-of-Celebration applauded softly. Even Marmite raised his forelegs, eager to join in the victory.

I doubled up and vomited.

I hadn’t done that in a while. We were lucky, however, as Sevens had the good foresight to provide us with a paper bag, though where she got it from we had no idea. She suddenly shoved it under my face as I folded up and voided my stomach. I could have kissed her for that, but I doubt she would have enjoyed my lips at that

precise moment.

“Heathy ... ” Lozzie sounded upset and worried as she rubbed my back.

Tenny’s enthusiasm was dulled as well. She let out little trills and purrs, soft with concern.

“Thank you,” we croaked as we straightened up. “Sorry about the ... the upchucking. It’s the ... the complexity of the task. Hunting through all that ... that life. But.” We drew ourselves up and flexed our spine; we were shaken, but not exhausted. “The principle is sound. Hide and seek like this, it can be done.” We held out one tentacle toward Tenny. “It’s okay, Tenny, you did so well, well done. I think that’s enough.”

Tenny took my tentacle in one of her own. We held on tight.

“Helping,” Tenny trilled.

More clean, cold water, another slice of lemon, and a nice quiet sit was more than enough to recover my coherency and strength. The trilobe bioreactor purred away in my guts, pouring out heat and energy and topping me back up. Lozzie kept rubbing my back. Sevens went to sit by Tenny, then murmured softly to her, talking about responsibility and harm and how Aunty Heathy knew what she was doing.

I hoped she was right.

When that soft conversation fell away, I spoke up again.

“I can play hide and seek with the Eye,” I said. “At least once. This was proof of concept. It will hurt. It will push me to my limit. I may bleed, a lot. But I believe I can do it.”

Did I? I didn’t know, not for certain. Those words were simply what I needed to believe. Tenny was a billion-billion equations folded in on themselves like an infinite fractal; with great care and precision and specially-crafted hyperdimensional tools I could dip into that sea and find the one part which did not fit. But compared to the Eye, tracing Tenny’s being was like mapping the veins on a single fallen leaf. Performing the same trick with the Eye would be like trying to investigate a world-spanning forest to locate a single ailing magpie.

Sevens sighed softly. “It will be more complex than that, my

beloved kitten. The response may take a form none of us here can comprehend.”

“The Eye is a great observer,” we said, thinking out loud. We pulled our knees to our chest. “A staring contest, or hide and seek, or ... what’s that game? Red light green light? Stop and go? Or ... ” We sighed. “Yes, Sevens, before you say it, we know what you’re going to say. All of these are only metaphors for something we won’t understand, not until we experience it directly.”

Sevens bobbed her head. Tenny chewed on her lower lip. We were getting a bit beyond her depth now.

“You can see anything in a mirror,” Lozzie murmured.

We put a hand on one of Lozzie’s hands, on our shoulder. Her advice was sweet, but Lozzie comprehended the world and Outside in a way we did not.

“There’s one question I haven’t answered yet,” we said. “If we can communicate with the Eye in some fashion, even if that communication is only via ‘hide-and-seek’, or metaphorical, metaphysical hide-and-seek, what should we say?”

“Give Maisie,” Tenny said instantly. We smiled and tried to laugh. At least that was honest.

Seven-Shades-of-Sure-Suggestion said: “Show it a play.”

We sighed. “Sevens.”

“I am serious, kitten. I know full well of my bias toward my chosen medium of expression, the nature that makes up my very being, but does it not make sense? The Eye is an observer, a viewpoint. How does one change the nature of a viewpoint? Make it into an audience. Show it something it has not seen before. Show it a play.”

We sighed again. “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King,” I quoted, one of my favourites, but not right that moment. “Yes, Sevens, I get the feeling we’ve been over this before. But I don’t think that particular line of Shakespeare is helpful right now. I don’t think the Eye has a conscience. And it’s too big to catch.”

“We’re getting very metaphorical, kitten,” said Sevens.

“You too.”

“Ask it for help,” Lozzie said from behind us.

We twisted to look Lozzie in the face. She had a small, strange, shy little smile on her lips, so uncommon for her. She almost looked a little bashful.

“Lozzie? Are you feeling okay?”

“Mhmm! Just ask it for help, Heathy. It’s what I did, when I was younger, when I met the star below the castle. I just asked.” Her smile wavered. “There was nothing else to do. No fighting. No struggling. Just surrender and asking.”

I chewed on my own lower lip. Ask the Eye for help? Lozzie’s experience was not like my own. Her shining star beneath the castle of the Sharrowford Cult was not the world-shattering attention of the Eye. I had not the heart to say that out loud, but she must have seen the doubt in my face, for her smile turned a little sad.

“Lozzie, I’m sorry, I just ... ”

“Give Maisie,” Tenny repeated. “Give Maisie! Give Maisie! Give her back!”

For the first time I had ever witnessed, Tenny seemed genuinely angry.

We stared at her in shock. She nodded, more serious than I had ever witnessed her fluffy face and feathery antennae.

“Give Maisie,” she repeated.

“Perhaps you’re right, Tenny,” we said with a laugh. “Maybe that’s all we need. A demand, and determination.”

Tenny nodded. “Give Maisie.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight placed her hand gently on Tenny’s arm; Tenny responded by wrapping a tentacle around her forearm in a tight little hug, creasing Sevens’ perfectly starched blouse. Sevens did not complain.

Sevens said: “It will not be like anything we have experienced. It will not be hide and seek. It will be the unknown.”

I raised my chin. “I’ve gotten very used to facing the unknown, this past year of my life. In fact, I’d say I’ve grown into somewhat of an expert on it, rather by necessity. Be prepared for the unknowable. If

I wasn't, I wouldn't have made it past Raine and Evelyn." We smiled. "Thank you, all three of you. I'm limbered up. I think I have the right tool, for hide and seek, or whatever comes next. I think I'm ready. Let's go help make dinner."

slanting surfaces; unplumbed voids – 23.6

Wonderland.

Consciousness tore asunder the veil of dreams and fell upon me in a great and terrible rush of bloody iron tang and the burning sting of bile coating my mouth and lips. Eyes crusted with dried crimson, head pounding and whirling with the echoes of pain, tentacles stiff and cramped with distributed effort, we hacked and coughed and spat.

For a long moment I didn't understand what was happening. The last eighteen hours were a blur smeared across the inside of my red-hot skull. Was this another nightmare? Another anxiety dream? Had the Fractal failed and left me to plummet into a final, fatal lesson from the Eye?

But then I realised the ground between my splayed legs was white. One of my tentacles was wrapped around a familiar waist. And muffled voices were calling my name.

Hands touched me, brought me back.

I ripped my squid-skull mask off my head and spat out a gobbet of bloody mucus.

Wonderland.

The black ash, the broken hills, the burned-down stubs of ancient walls; the shifting mists of shadow-deep veil, the scurrying hints of stunted life, the silhouettes of silent giants against the horizon, staring upward in mute devotion.

But it was no horizon, no true sky, no hint of blue or grey, no depth of space, no glittering stars, no wide and hungry maw of the universe hanging open to swallow the world. No wisp of cloud, no wing of bird, no rustle of leaves caught in wind. No wind at all, no hint of rain, no turn of the firmament above mortal heads. No burning dawn, no gloaming dusk, no storm or sleet or hail or hint of shine. No sky, no freedom, no escape.

Only the Eye, ridged at the lid, like mountain ranges in pitch-dark seas of cold tar, squeezed tight in repose or sleep, unseeing and unknowing. Blinded to our presence.

“—shut!” I wheezed. “It’s shut! Shut!”

The Eye remained unopened. The Invisus Oculus had worked.

Evelyn’s voice cut through the blood-haze and the ringing in my head, clear and sharp, barking orders: “Raine, stop her looking up at it. Cover her eyes if you have to. Heather? Heather? Heather!”

Gentle hands bid me relax, coaxing my vision down and away from the Eye that was the sky and made the sky and filled the sky and—

Other hands pressed the nozzle of a sports bottle to my lips. I drank, sucking down greedy mouthfuls of lemon-flavoured energy drink, washing away the twin tastes of blood and sick. My bio-reactor throbbed and thrummed deep in my belly, replenishing me, filling me back up. I scrubbed my eyes with the back of my hand. I drank too fast and almost choked, then dribbled strings of bile when the bottle was removed.

Raine purred, right next to my ear: “Woah, Heather, slow down, slow down, take it slow.” Firm hands squeezed my shoulders. “Remember the plan? Here, here, sip some more water, there you go, that’s it. You did well, you did so well, well done, you did it. We’re here. It’s okay, everything’s gonna be okay. Just focus on getting your strength back up. I know you can do it. I love you, I believe in you, you can do this.”

I made a wordless sound, more animal than human. But I was coming back, rapidly.

Evelyn snapped, “Get some chocolate in her as soon as you can.”

“Lemons, my dear Evelyn,” said Seven-Shades-of-Suddenly-to-my-Left.

Evelyn huffed, sharp and hard. “Yes, one of the lemons, too. Get her up, Raine, get her on her feet. We need to work fast.”

Raine murmured, “I’m on it, give her a sec, okay?”

Twil’s voice cut through those nearest to me, twanging with nerves pulling taut: “Work fast? What do you mean, we need to work fast? This thing is holding, isn’t it? Don’t tell me there’s some fuckin’

secret time limit or some shit!”

Evelyn grunted: “There’s not—”

Zheng’s voice interrupted from even further out: “We are interlopers and invaders all. I agree with the wizard. Little wolf, beloved mate, get the shaman up as fast as you can. We must be quick, here. We are unwanted in this place.”

Raine pressed a wet towel into my hands and helped me wipe my face, but the tone in Zheng’s voice made me shiver and shake. I’d never heard her so cautious, so almost-afraid, not even when we had faced Ooran Juh.

What had I expected? She’d never been to Wonderland before.

Twil hissed between her teeth; I could tell they were sharp and canine, much more wolf than woman. “Great. Fuckin’ great. As if this wasn’t bad enough with— Lozz?”

“Shhhhhhhh, fuzzy,” Lozzie suddenly crooned. “Shhhhhh. Strokies for fuzzy. Deep breath.”

“I-I’m fine.”

“Deep breaths now!”

“Okay, okay, fuck. Fine. Deep breaths it is.” Twil heaved several times. It didn’t sound helpful.

Evelyn spoke up again, loud and clear: “There is nothing to worry about. There is nothing to panic about. We are on schedule, the plan is holding. Just concentrate, keep your attention on what you’ve been told to, and do not look up.” Evelyn hissed as if she was struggling to breathe. “Do. Not. Look. Up.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Twil hissed.

Suddenly, like a tiny foghorn through a dense sea-mist: *bwoop*, went a Caterpillar.

Everyone stopped talking. Evee snapped: “Lozzie? Interpret. Quickly, please.”

I heard the rapid patter of light feet — Lozzie dancing forward across Caterpillar carapace. Then: “Mmmmmm, Cattys see things moving, but nothing toward us! Lots of things moving.”

Evelyn swore softly, but with words I refuse to repeat, though Top-Right approved. “How is there anything living in this place? How is that possible?”

Raine said, “Heather did warn us.”

“Still,” Evelyn said.

Twil spoke again, even more shaken than before. “Lots of fuckin’ weird shit. Weird, weird, weird shit. Fuck me, this is worse than the library. I don’t fucking like this. You know what, I’m with Eevee too. Let’s get this over with. Heather? Hey, Big H? You good? Come on, squid girl, let’s fucking rock, let’s get this shit done, let’s fucking go!”

I finished wiping my face, stuffed the wet towel back into Raine’s hands, and then lurched to my feet.

My vision was clear, my head was light, my hands were steady.

This was no dream, no nightmare; the events of the last eighteen hours came rushing back as my mind clicked the pieces back into place. I was not alone and lost in the wastes of Wonderland, or abandoned beyond the walls of reality.

I was standing on the massive plate of Caterpillar carapace, in the core of the Invisus Oculus, at the centre of a fortress made of my friends.

All of us — all seven Heathers — craned to look up at the Eye.

“I’m here with all my friends,” we whispered. “Just as you told me to be. What now, Maisie? What do I do now?”

Evelyn grunted, “Stop looking up! For fuck’s sake!”

But Raine murmured: “Hold on, Eevee, she’s alright. I think it’s necessary.”

“For her, maybe!” Evelyn spat. “Nobody else look up at it. Eyes down!”

“Down girl,” Praem intoned.

But nobody laughed.

The Slip from Camelot to Wonderland had gone off without a hitch — well, except for me passing out and choking up a wave of my

own blood for several minutes, but that was well within expected parameters. We had prepared for that, both mentally and physically; Evelyn had factored it into her calculations for our arrival and her fail-safes for worst case scenarios. The scaled-up Invisus Oculus was the single largest object I had ever Slipped through the membrane between worlds, let alone to Wonderland. The massive plate of altered Caterpillar carapace alone would have stretched my brain-math far beyond any previous limits — but we also had passengers on the plate. Every single passenger mattered. Every single one had to arrive precisely where they needed to be, inside the protective core of the Invisus Oculus, shielded from the attention of the Eye.

And we'd achieved that, we seven Heathers, all lifting together, all as one. But we had screamed and bled and passed out, because my gosh was that a heavy load to lift.

Probably would have been lighter if we'd slept properly last night.

Despite all my emotional planning and preparation and the tireless work of my friends, I had spent the previous eighteen hours in a state of ever tightening anxiety; after the conversation with Lizzie and Tenny and Sevens on the previous evening, there had been simply nothing more to do, no more preparations to make, no more decisions to choose between.

Hurry up and wait. That was all. And I was exceedingly bad at it.

We had barely tasted dinner — Praem's vegetable curry, rich with lentils and spices, thick as oatmeal and twice as filling, but wasted on our nervous stomach and jittery tongue. We had spent part of the evening with Raine and Evelyn, watching a cartoon I couldn't recall properly, something about a failed demon and her magical girlfriend, in one ear and out my other.

That night had been a special kind of torture, both too slow and too fast all at once. Thoughts and fears had whirled around inside my head until I was gnawing on my fingers and clawing at the pillow. That's one major disadvantage of having seven of us inside our shared nervous system — if we couldn't banish our anxiety, we all got together in a big party and reinforced it until we were on the verge of tears.

Tears had come, after much tossing and turning and fretting and fidgeting. Nightmares had blossomed behind sleepless eyes. I

needed to be in Wonderland right then, for this all to be over. I couldn't take this waiting!

Raine had given up on passive support, pinned me to the bed, and fucked me until thinking was a luxury. "All shagged out", as she put it.

Zheng had been present. So was Sevens. They held me afterward, so I could close my eyes at last.

That worked. I slept.

But that next morning was an equal blur of churning guts and shivering muscles. Breakfast went down — then came back up, discreetly, in the bathroom. Nothing to do with brain-math, just sheer anxiety and fear.

Sevens had seen, from behind the mirror. Sevens had helped, coaxing me back to the breakfast table. Praem had made more toast and jam, then eggs, then bacon. I kept those down, though I did not recall the taste.

Everyone drank a lot of coffee. Except Lozzie.

As the appointed hour had crept closer and closer, mortal fear had acted as a thresher on thought and feeling. Even with all six of my tentacles for internal support and my bioreactor running hot to keep me topped up and ready, I had submitted to the directions and hands and help of others. I dimly recalled hugging Tenny. Perhaps Kimberly wished us well. Was Jan there, waiting in the house, watching Tenny for us? Yes, she was, though I could not remember the words we shared, nor her final instructions on securing Maisie's new doll-body. A phone call from — who? Raine had taken that. Evelyn hugged me, Evelyn hugged Praem, but nobody else saw. Zheng took Grinny aside; the demons shared words none else understood.

Twil had cheered and whooped and carried Lozzie on her shoulders. Marmite had watched from behind Tenny's legs. The tension had felt like it was eating a hole through my guts.

It wasn't like in the movies, where time smears fast across a screen, where you can simply skip the waiting and jump to what matters. It all mattered, every moment of it, but inside we were screaming for release, for the rush of the confrontation, for the moment it all happened.

But nothing could bring it faster, nothing could speed up time.

Camelot had soaked up another hour of prep work, of getting everyone into the circle, in making sure everyone was strapped in, equipped, ready, that we were not leaving anybody or anything behind, that gateways were open and bowels were emptied, that humans were suitably prepared for what they were about to see, and assorted supernatural types were braced for the worst.

Lozzie had been on hand, in case something went wrong. Sevens was close, a distant third back-up.

And I had crouched down in the middle of the massive plate, upon which was scribed the scaled-up Invisus Oculus. I had placed my hands against the smooth white carapace, joined with all my tentacles, and sent us Out, Out, Out.

To Wonderland.

The vista of my nightmares stretched out in every direction, hemmed and bordered by that ring of blackened mountains at the extreme edge of an infinite plain — an impossible contradiction, but one that human eyes and human senses told was truth. In every direction lay the black ash and burned-out remains of Wonderland, a dimension seared clean by the unthinkable heat of a burning gaze, filled with darkness and mist and the smeared remains of things that scuttled sideways through the shadows.

Wonderland. Again.

No escape, not really, not ever, not for us. We always knew it would call us back eventually. A version of Heather had died here at nine years old, but she was still going, still drawing breath, after ten years of pretending to be alive. We cradled her tight in our secret heart, the undead child we had been, now tucked deep between six tentacles and a fortress of abyssal biology.

Wonderland — but this time we were far from alone.

We stood atop the plate of off-white Caterpillar carapace, larger than a football pitch, a physical fortress to match the one inside us.

It did not seem real. How could it be? It was as if an angel had descended into one of my childhood nightmares, to push back everything that beset me.

The outer edges of the plate were accompanied by some clumps of

Camelot soil and Camelot grass, stray wanderers caught up by the hyperdimensional mechanics of the Slip; there were no worms or beetles or other unintended victims, for Camelot had none — yet. If there were any, I would have hurried to send them back. Even little insects and invertebrates did not deserve to be abandoned here.

Next came the intricate black curves and angles and mystical words of the Invisus Oculus itself, too large to read from inside the core of the protective magic circle, aimed upward at the sky-which-was-not-a-sky, staring back at the closed Eye with a pictorial imitation of itself.

And inside the core, inside the pupil of this false eye, stood my fortress.

Six Caterpillars lined the outer edge in a rough hexagon shape, turned side-on to face the wastes of Wonderland beyond; they formed a physical bulwark against assault, in case the wretched inhabitants of Wonderland should take it upon them to investigate this sudden invasion, or if the Eye had minions and followers we did not yet comprehend. All of the Caterpillars had extended slimy, gloopy, slick-looking tentacles from the tiny black ‘head’ structures they had at the very front of their massive armoured bodies; the black feelers waved like seaweed in ocean currents, as if tasting the air. I knew from prior explanation that they were giving themselves a few meters of extra height, for the best possible vantage point across the black ash beyond.

Despite their size and their formidable performance against other foes, I could feel the Caterpillars’ trepidation — like seeing a huge hunting dog shivering with hard-won courage. They held their ground, but they did not like it here in Wonderland.

Inward from the Caterpillars stood Lizzie’s Knights — not the entire Round Table, but only thirty of them, arrayed in a ring of outward-pointing protection. I had insisted, in the end, that we not bring every single Knight; if the worst came to pass, I would not risk the extinction of what they were becoming, out in Camelot. I would not spend their entire collective being.

Half the knights were armed with lances and tower shields, ready to form an interlocking phalanx in case we needed to retreat. The other half were armed with more advanced versions of the massive all-metal crossbows I’d seen some Knights carrying previously. Each

arbalist carried several metal bolts, each bolt large enough to spear a charging rhino from mouth to tail.

Protected by the Caterpillars and the Knights, the very core of the Invisus Oculus was filled with the most vulnerable parts of our plan.

The gateway back to Camelot glowed with Camelot's purple light, a huge archway of Caterpillar carapace standing tall, ready for our retreat if everything went horribly wrong; I tried not to look through at the hints of Camelot's grassy hills and the castle beyond. Next to the gateway stood an additional two Knights: one of them was carrying Mister Squiddy's bucket, our speculative back-up plan, though Mister Squiddy was silent and still, hiding in the bottom of his mess of clay; the other Knight was the Forest Knight, the one Knight I could still pick out with ease among all the others — he stood unmoving, resting the tip of his massive axe against the plate at his feet.

Maisie's new body was strapped to his front with climbing rope, wrapped in a sheet and a protective layer of tarpaulin. The Forest Knight had the duty of protecting the vessel, should anything happen, and carrying it until Maisie needed her body.

Last but not least, gathered at the foot of the gateway, dwarfed by all this magecraft, were me and my friends.

Nobody was dealing well with Wonderland.

Zheng stood almost at the heels of the nearest Knights. She was staring out across the broken plains of Wonderland, through a gap between two of the Caterpillars. Shoulders hunched, head lowered, eyes narrowed, she was the very picture of a wary tiger, peering out from jungle bush at some never-before-seen predator. She was very still and very silent. She wasn't even breathing.

Twil was halfway to werewolf, wrapped in wispy shards of spirit flesh, teeth bared and claws twitching, like a hound ready to bolt. She was trying to loom, to make herself appear taller; she had placed herself in front of both Lozzie and Eevee, as if protecting them from the nightmare realm beyond — but it was Twil who needed Lozzie's reassurance. Lozzie was at her side, petting Twil by rubbing her back, putting on a brave and stoic face. My sweet little Lozzie, she'd been here before, she knew what to expect. Her pentacolour poncho was pulled tight, gone limp and frail in the air of this blighted world.

Evelyn and Praem were right next to me. Eevee was dressed in a long skirt and her big coat, a shawl and jumper beneath those, with her pockets laden down by notebooks and magical equipment. Her bone-wand was grasped tight in one fist. Her eyes darted left and right. She was shaking from head to toe, gone pale and grey in the face, leaning on Praem's arm for support.

Praem was upright and untouchable, dressed in her maid uniform as always — but she was staring outward, eyes fixed beyond our little bubble of safety.

Raine and Sevens flanked me, close and protective. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was wearing her Princess Mask, but for the first time ever she had her lilac umbrella open, shading her head and neck from an unfelt storm. Raine was dressed for war, in her motorcycle jacket, with the helmet dangling from her belt. She carried one of Edward's stolen machine guns, strapped over her shoulder like a slick black beetle.

Raine helped me stand. I anchored myself to her with three tentacles.

We were all roped to each other, tied together with a precise web of climbing rope and safety lines, to make sure that nobody could be picked off alone or dragged beyond the circle. The harnesses were loose and comfortable, since we weren't using them for actual climbing. Zheng had complained about being strapped in, but then relented when I had personally secured her. Praem had done something very odd and somehow managed to get the straps of her harness and the loops of her rope beneath her maid outfit, leaving her exterior uncreased, but nobody questioned that. The Knights were joined to an outer layer of the web as well, though with quick-release buckles in case they needed to do anything risky. Only the Caterpillars were not included, and not for lack of trying; they were simply too large.

Raine pressed an open chocolate bar into one of my hands and half a lemon into the other. She was pale and sweating, moisture matting her hair. "Here, chow time for you, Heather. Go on, eat. We gotta get you revved back up. Heather? Heather?"

But I was crying. The sobs came sudden and hard, just three of them.

Everyone turned to look at me — well, everyone except the Knights

and the Caterpillars.

“Big H?”

“Heathy? What’s wrong? Wrong?”

“Shaman. Breathe the air.”

“She’s just overwhelmed. Give her a moment.”

“Catharsis,” Praem intoned.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight took my hand. Raine gripped my shoulder.

Wonderland. But not alone. I wasn’t certain that the others understood. The nightmare of my childhood, the cursed haunter of a thousand dreams, the great Eye which stuffed me full of knowledge beyond human comprehension. The bane of my life. The thing that took Maisie.

And here we were, standing beneath it, in perfect security and safety. Among friends.

Did Evelyn really appreciate the miracle she had wrought here? She had compared the scaled-up Invisus Oculus to a spacecraft or a submarine — but it really was like those things. This spell was like a starship. A bubble of security in the middle of one of the most dangerous places in all Outside. In the past we could never have pulled off something so perfect. But now we were all together, all working as one, all ready for the next step.

Evelyn was a genius in a way I had never truly appreciated before; with this, she had saved me on a level I hadn’t even known I’d needed.

The feeling was overwhelming. Sobs turned into a grin — not a human smile, but a thing of toothy malice, driven by abyssal instinct and pack-joy. I almost felt like capering, hopping around in a little circle and cackling to myself. I didn’t, of course; I stuffed my face with chocolate bar for the quick serotonin, then gutted the lemon in three quick bites, sucking down citrus juice, feeling my bio-reactor sing inside my guts, heating me up like a furnace.

I was dressed as practically as possible, in jeans and hoodie. My Yellow cloak hung from my shoulders, ready to protect against anything. My squid-skull mask stood poised at the end of one

tentacle, ready to return to my head when I needed. Two stone coins weighed down my left pocket, as per Hringewindla's request.

There was nothing else left to do. We were ready.

"Let's find my sister," I said. "Let's find Maisie."

Evelyn nodded to Raine. "Get her ready. Get her in position." Then she turned to the others. "Check again! Zheng, tell me what you see out there. Lozzie, interpret from the Caterpillars. Report, now, please."

Zheng rumbled, eyes fixed on the distant false horizon of broken mountains and watching giants. "The titans lower their gaze, wizard. They know something is here."

"Wait, what!?" Twil spat.

I looked too, alarmed at those words. Several of our tentacles whirled "Zheng, pardon?"

Lozzie chirped in agreement. "The Catties see it too. Some of the big things out there are looking this way. Eevee-weevey?"

Evelyn clenched her teeth, then quickly drew in a deep breath and forced it out again. "They can see the plate and the Oculus itself. That's to be expected. They can't see us inside. Hold for now. We're fine."

Twil muttered, "You sure about that?"

Evelyn pointed upward with one hand. "If we were visible then ... then ... then *that* would be open."

Nobody looked up, except me. Twil started to raise her eyes, then hesitated and shook her head.

Evelyn went on. "It's not curious unless there's something to look at. The plate and the spell are inanimate, perhaps that— no, this is not the time for theorising." She huffed, hard and sharp. "We have averted the gaze of the Eye. That is all which matters."

Lozzie chirped softly: "Oh no!"

"What?" Evelyn demanded. "What? Lozzie, what is it?"

Lozzie did a big silly pout. "Gays averted! Oh no!"

Evelyn held her look for a split-second, then huffed like a steam

engine. Lozzie forced out a giggle, but it felt hollow and fake. Twil tried to laugh as well, but she couldn't even get halfway there.

"Thank you," said Praem.

Evelyn held out one hand. "Praem, my binoculars, please, I need to see for myself."

Twil was hissing: "I hate this, I hate this, I hate this, I hate this—"

Evelyn snapped, "Hate what? Twil, stop looking out there, stop it."

"I can't— can't help it," Twil snapped back. She was staring out, past Zheng, past the Caterpillars. "It's like it goes on forever, but then it stops. The plain just goes on forever, but then there's those mountains. It's not natural."

"Of course it's unnatural!" Evelyn said. She took her binoculars from Praem and pressed them to her eyes, peering outward for her. "It's Outside. Stop looking if you can't handle it." But Evelyn gulped and froze as well, then lowered the binoculars and did not look again.

"It's not right," Twil repeated. "How can something be infinite and bounded at the same time? I feel like I've got fucking vertigo. Ugh. Oh fuck. How can— how can—"

"No looky-looks, fuzzy-wuzzy," Lozzie crooned, trying to forcefully drag Twil's head down, away from staring at the paradox of Wonderland.

"Yes!" Evelyn snapped, but her voice lack her usual fire and conviction. "Lozzie has the right idea. Stop looking. Your job is to act as backup and muscle, Twil, not bamboozle yourself with optical illusions."

"But it's not an illusion, it's not, it's not, it's—"

Zheng rumbled: "Eyes down, *laangren*."

Twil let out a sob. "I can't."

Praem intoned: "Vertigo."

"Me ... me too ... " Evelyn admitted softly. She squeezed her eyes shut. "What about—"

"Me three, oh delightful one," said Sevens. She was going green in

the face.

“Shit,” Evelyn hissed. “We can’t—”

“Look up,” said a gurgling voice.

“Heather!” Evelyn hissed. “Don’t make it worse, you—”

“I’m serious,” I repeated, realising that suggestion had come from my own lips. “Look up. It’s like having a visual anchor point. The Eye is the centre. Look up, Twil, look up! Look up!”

Twil looked up. So did Raine, to my surprise, because she trusted me so completely. Zheng hesitated, then did the same. Sevens followed. Then Praem. Finally Evelyn, though she only glanced.

Twil stopped panicking, but her eyes went wide and wet with tears. Raine looked like she was feeling nothing at all. Zheng growled, deep and low and bowel-shaking. Evelyn ducked her head. Sevens blinked rapidly.

“It’s a centre point,” I said. “A centre around which this whole dimension is organised. Or re-organised. Everything is sucked toward it. Defined by it. I just figured that out, from the way everyone is acting about the horizon. Like this is all just matter cupped in the wake of the Eye’s vision. Once you’ve got it fixed in your head, it’ll help.”

Raine murmured. “She’s right. The vertigo is going again.”

“You were suffering vertigo, Raine?” I asked.

Raine nodded. “Mmhmm. Trying not to show it.”

Twil whispered. “Is that ... is that it? Up there, that ... that’s the Eye?”

“Yes,” I whispered back, as if the great observer might overhear our words.

Zheng growled again. “I do not like being beneath the closed lid.”

“None of us do,” Evelyn hissed. She risked another quick glance upward as well, nothing more than a flicker of her eyes. She went stiff and still and stopped breathing for a moment, until Praem touched her hand.

Twil went on: “It’s the sky. It’s so ... so big. It’s everything. Big H,

you weren't joking. It ... I can't stop ... oh, oh God." Twil sobbed, just once. "I feel so small. Why do I feel small?"

Lozzie reached up, placed her hands either side of Twil's head, and physically dragged her field of vision back down to the mortal level. "Bad wolfie! Eyes on the road!" Then she darted forward and kissed the tip of Twil's wolfish nose.

Twil gaped for a moment, then sniffed hard, and nodded, laughing with strange relief. "Right, Lozz. Right, right. Okay. I'm good, I'm good, sorry. I'm good. I'm good!"

Evelyn snapped: "Heather, are you ready? The longer we stay here the worse this is going to get."

"I'm ready!" I announced.

I'd finished clearing the taste of vomit from my throat and wiping the worst of the blood from my face; with half my tentacles anchored around Raine and the other half around Sevens, I lowered myself into a sitting position, smoothed the warmth of the yellow cloak beneath my backside, and readied myself for the emotional gut-punch of the next step.

"Find haste, shaman," Zheng rumbled. "The titans move."

Evelyn snapped: "Praem, give me the binoculars again, I'll be fine. You're right here with me, aren't you? I need to see this."

"Zhengy is right! Right right!" Lozzie chirped. "Big ones are moving around!"

"Coming this way?" Raine asked. She unhooked the gun from her shoulder.

Twil saw that and snorted. "What you gonna do, pepper them with bee-stings? You see the size of that shit out there? One of them comes close, I'm running. Picking all of you up first, yeah, sure, but I'll be out. No fucking way."

Evelyn said, "We have the Caterpillars. Nothing is breaching the circle! Heather!"

"I'm starting!" I said.

The plan was straightforward enough. We produced two items from the front pocket of our pink hoodie. The first was Maisie's t-shirt, the faded, strawberry-patterned, child's t-shirt that she had sent me

as a message, the plea from beyond which had begun this entire chain of events, the message in a bottle hand-delivered by an Outsider. I had kept it in a plastic sandwich bag for months now, carefully folded and cared for, to avoid anything contaminating the lingering proof of Maisie's life. My hands shook as I extracted it from the bag and placed it across my thighs. The second item was the photograph that Taika had given to us — Maisie and I, side-by-side in a pub garden, haloed by the glorious sunset of another world.

We placed the photograph in the middle of the t-shirt. Then we pulled our squid-skull mask back on over our head.

"How long do I have?" I asked.

"As long as you need!" Evelyn snapped before anybody else could answer. "Nothing is getting in here! Start, Heather, start it now. Confirm if she's here or not!"

We retracted our tentacles from Raine and Sevens, and coiled them into our own lap, touching the t-shirt and the photograph, running our senses over the objects, the physical link to Maisie. We closed our eyes, focused our senses inward, and withdrew inside our own body.

Evelyn's miracle — the Invisus Oculus — had defeated the Eye's curiosity, carved a little bubble of safety for us in Wonderland, and avoided the direct attention of the Eye's many titanic worshippers and scurrying victims amid the ash and ruin. But it did not hold back the conditions of Wonderland itself, either physical or metaphysical. As I closed my eyes and concentrated in the split-second before the hyperdimensional mathematics, I felt the cold, dead air and the dense, black, cloying mist of Wonderland flow between my tentacles, opening voids between each strand of my hair, trying to push deeper, into my pores, into the gaps between the seven different refracted prism-angles of my self. We could sense the barren, empty soil beneath the plate of Caterpillar carapace — dry as bone, dead as sand. We felt the ring of cracked mountains folding in on us, like an optical illusion collapsing under the power of observation. We felt the watchers swaying and shifting, their immortal immobility interrupted by this strange inanimate interloper — large as continents, walking mountains, they took slow, silent steps across infinity.

Wonderland wanted to be seen, before I had even begun.

The dimension tugged at my mind. I had never spent long enough here to feel such a sensation before.

Without further delay, I plunged into the black oily sump of my soul, and wrenched a great whirring mass of the Eye's machinery up and into the burning light. Eight hands made quick work of a complex equation, flying across the levers and gears of reality before they had time to burn through our skin and sear the meat beneath.

First I defined Maisie.

We built a memory of her in hyperdimensional mathematics, each of us seven Heathers contributing our own unique impressions and recollections. An equation to define this one girl, this one human being, made entirely of memory ghosts and phantasmal echoes. Her t-shirt and the photograph provided ninety percent of the parameters, spinning out their vital definitions into technical specifications: the girl in this photo, the girl who wore this shirt, the girl who penned the hidden words upon this fabric.

The remaining ten percent was me, Heather Morell. The shape of our body, the structure of our bones, the look of our face, the smell of our skin. All of it provided a reference point, a mirror of similar comparison, a socket for a key.

Defining Maisie was not the most difficult equation I had ever performed, but it was the most improvised; I had not seen my twin sister in over ten years. I had not beheld her with my eyes, or heard her voice with my ears, or touched the warmth of her flesh with a hand. She was memory and madness, she was a voice of starlight and photons in the depths of the abyss, she was the last glimmering remnant of sisterly love that I held in my chest.

We poured all that into the equation — and then we compared it to Wonderland.

That was the challenging part, the part I did not know if I could truly achieve. I had no reference point with which to locate my sister. If I was wrong, and she was not trapped within the Eye itself, then I had literally nowhere to start. How does one find a needle in a haystack? One uses a magnet, of course, and I had built the magnet, defined the magnet, worked over the magnet at the level of

reality itself. But I still had to run it over every inch of the haystack. And I might miss.

I had to widen my scope, cast my senses like a net across all of Wonderland, to encompass this entire dimension within my own observation.

To observe. As the Eye does.

A human brain would have boiled and popped under such pressure. A skilled mage would have died screaming. But I was the Little Watcher, the adopted daughter of the Eye, and I had a great deal of brain to go around.

We shunted the difficulty of the task down into our tentacles, into that web of distributed neural matter which filled our pneuma-somatic limbs. We spread our net wide and opened our abyssal senses. We would see, as an eye sees.

And what did we see?

Wonderland was a bowl, drowned in a void.

That initial vision burned out a billion pneuma-somatic neurons. Pain flared inside all our tentacles, sharp and urgent, as cells died and turned to ash. Our bio-reactor flared into burning life, pumping us full of exotic chemicals and stem cells and replacement proteins. We speed-grew new neurons, shoring up our web of thought even as it crumbled and cracked. The pain was incredible, suspended in a single moment, frozen for now, banked for later. I would pay, and very soon, but not just yet.

Look harder, Heather. Look harder!

Wonderland was both infinite and bounded, just as Twil had said — but she didn't know how right she was. The mountain range in the distance was the edge of the world. Cross one side on foot and the hapless wanderer would appear on the opposite side, returned to the ashen plain, the empty cup of a god's hand. There was nothing but the plain and the mountains, over and around, back and forward, wrapped up into a ball within itself, forever and ever.

Out in reality, I must have been screaming, bleeding from nose and ears and eyes. No brain was made to comprehend this. Wonderland was broken in some manner that could only be revealed by true observation.

The Eye had observed so hard it had broken this world and compacted it into a new shape, a shape that defied comprehension.

One could walk forever in any direction and never reach those mountains, like trying to escape a black hole by walking toward the event horizon. The great watchers were not immobile; they had been walking toward the centre of the Eye's attention forever, for an eternity, trapped in a kind of torment they could neither understand nor resist. They stared toward the object of their devotion, forever kept from observing it in return.

We were swept up in Wonderland's logic. Our attention was being absorbed and captured by the perfect curvature of this dimensional wound. Another second — and another — and another. On and on, we could have stared forever, turning this bauble over in our mind's eye until all was dust.

Was this why the Eye stared at this place? Was this why it was closed? Was this—

We were risking entrapment. Our instincts screamed *keep looking! Keep staring! Keep watching!*

But to do so would leave all our friends in danger, and leave Maisie to be destroyed.

We pulled back from the brink, back from instant self-redefinition as nothing more than a point of observation.

Perhaps that was why the Eye stared. It had no anchors to end the process, nobody else to cling to. No twin for a mirror.

We re-ran the equation, focused this time: Maisie and Wonderland, looking for a match. Ignore the context.

We pushed outward, across Wonderland, like a squid swimming through the mist-choked air.

My attention ranged across a million miles of broken brick and blasted earth, sifting dirt and ash and charred rubble. We swam past lurking twists of wretched flesh hiding in holes and gnawing on scraps that could no longer be called bones — the former inhabitants of this dimension, changed and cursed beyond all recognition, their forms and souls smeared by sheer force of observation. They shied away from the attention they felt, fleeing before me and slipping into the deepest cracks they could find. For I

was just another observer, no matter how small.

We caressed the stubs of wall with our eyes, ran our senses over humps of burned earth, pushed our fingers through hanging veils of mist, sorting through the wreckage a trillion years. But there was nothing there, nothing left but the burned out remains of a crime so vast it could not be expressed in anything but an end.

We pushed out further, to the watchers around the rim, the great giants who had come to worship the Eye.

They felt my attention like a candle flame in the infinite darkness, like prisoners locked in a lightless cell for eternity. Continent-sized heads turned with geological slowness to regard my awareness speeding past. Paws like worlds and tongues like the unravelling arms of galaxies reached out to touch, to make contact, to worship this mote-like reflection of the great watcher in the sky.

Where these things had come from, I could not say. Their insides were more complex than any mortal or Outsider I had yet witnessed — vast churning matrices of hyperdimensional definition, like entire worlds compacted into titanic beings.

Perhaps that was what they were — worlds, dimensions, pulled into the Eye's orbit by the sheer gravity of observation, crushed into singular beings. Black holes of soul-matter.

I left them behind, terrified by how they tracked the spreading awareness of my equation.

Finally, at the rim of the world, I met the mountains, broken and blackened and shattered and scorched.

They were no mountains.

The ring of broken hills that seemed to be the edge of this world, the rim of the cup, the precipice of an infinite void — they were ridged and wrinkled, fleshy and dark, thick as tar.

The mountains were the edges of the Eye's great lid.

That made no sense. Even in the middle of a hyperdimensional equation, my mind reeled with the paradox.

Were we within the Eye, even now? But we were also looking up at it? Wonderland was an Eye, staring at itself? We were cupped within a great ring of dark lid, both observer and observed at once.

The implication introduced an alien element to my equation, a figure the mathematics could not accommodate, a juddering, jarring wrongness.

Dim and distant, I felt my physical body double up and vomit, voiding our guts in a futile effort to reject this impossible curvature of time and space.

Reality was broken here. Whatever logic had once reigned in this dimension, the Eye's observation had turned it inside out.

We were not supposed to be there.

I went to withdraw. We were done. We had not found Maisie, we had found only madness, a precipice into the dark. But just when I was about to rush back to my own limited awareness, something peered over the rim of those mountains and stared back at me.

A wan, elfin face, framed by wispy blonde hair. Familiar, but wrong, made of all the wrong angles and parts and connections.

I see you! it chirped.

We crashed back into our body, thrashing and flailing, kicking and writhing, coughing and—

“Urk!”

I swallowed a lungful of warm salty fluid.

My eyes flew open — underwater, clouded by three feet of salt-thick fluid, by plates of semi-transparent flesh, tainted with coils of crimson blood and a floating cloud of brownish gunk. My blood, my vomit. Indistinct shapes and figures moved beyond a membrane of pale flesh. I lashed out with my tentacles, pushing in all directions, panicking, sucking down more water, drowning inside a sack of skin.

“Cut her out!” somebody shouted — Eevee, her voice muffled behind flesh and fluid.

“It’s her own body! She grew it!” somebody else wailed. “What if she—”

Lozzie shouted: “She’s stuck!”

“On it,” said Raine.

Suddenly the view through the transparent goop and flesh cleared; people stepped back, giving Raine space to work. She towered over me, a dark figure in her motorcycle jacket, raising a long black claw.

Raine knelt quickly, grabbed a handful of the pale flesh, twisted it upward, and sliced it open with her combat knife.

The sack of flesh and fluid collapsed around me, like a burst water balloon hitting the concrete. I sat bolt upright, coughing and hacking, yanking my squid-skull helmet off again, vomiting salt water, purging my lungs with an unnatural flutter of abyssal biology. The plates of clear bone or chitin fell away, sliding off my lap and clattering to the floor.

I was soaked through, clothes saturated with salty water, bleeding from my eyes and nose, spitting up bile, all my tentacles seized up hard with the effort of the hyperdimensional equation.

Raine jammed her knife back into her belt and quickly wiped my hair out of my face, clearing my eyes and nostrils.

“Heather, Heather, look at me,” she purred. “Heather, breathe, breathe. Can you breathe? That’s it, just breathe, nice deep breaths.”

I was a good girl, so I did as I was told, breathing slowly in and out until my lungs remembered how to work.

Twil peered over Raine’s shoulder, wide-eyed and totally confused. “What the fuck was that, Big H? What the fuck were you doing?”

We croaked: “I don’t— don’t know— I— did I— did I grow all that? Around myself?”

“Yeah,” Raine said, grinning at me. “Spooked the hell out of me, Heather. Like you were cocooning yourself. The climbing ropes go right through the flesh sack, see?”

Evelyn poked at the remains of the weird flesh sack with her walking stick. “Aqueous humour.”

I looked up at her, still blinking blood and gunk out of my eyes. “Pardon?”

“Aqueous humour,” she repeated. “The substance found inside the front of an eyeball. You were turning yourself into a giant eye,

Heather. What happened? Quickly now.”

“Oh ... ” I shrugged, drained beyond words. My hair was plastered to my skull and I was shaking all over. We wanted to sleep. The exhaustion was so total. “Makes sense. Had to ... look. Big look. Everywhere.”

“The little watcher,” said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

Praem planted a lemon in my hands. I tore into the skin with my teeth and sucked at the juice like a vampire at a neck.

“Maisie?” Evelyn snapped. “Did you see her?”

I shook my head, speaking between mouthfuls of lemon flesh. “She’s not here. Her body doesn’t exist here. Not physically.”

“Shit,” Evelyn swore. “That means ... ”

“Means she’s likely up there,” Raine said, pointing upwards. “Onto plan B?”

“Yes,” Evelyn hissed. “But Heather, are you capable? You seem spent. There’s no shame and no problem in retreat for now. Better to regroup and—”

Bwoop.

Bwip.

Bweep.

Three Caterpillars let out tiny versions of their earth-shaking boop-alarms. They were all pointing in the same direction with their head-feelers.

Evelyn snapped, “Lozzie, interpret!”

But Lozzie was gaping, looking off in the same direction the Caterpillars were pointing.

“It’s ... me,” she whispered. “It’s me!”

“Oh fuck,” Raine said. She straightened up, unslung her gun, and pulled the levers to make it go clack. “Not this thing again, no thank you.”

Zheng started to growl, peeling her lips back. The Knights at one side of the circle closed ranks, shields together, lances raised.

“What!?” Evelyn demanded, going red in the face. “What are you all talking about!? Clear answers, right now, somebody explain! If we need to leave, then we need to communicate!”

I lurched to my feet and caught myself on my tentacles. Sevens grabbed one arm to steady me, as Raine was too busy sighting down her gun at a fluttering blob, approaching us across the black ash and ruin of Wonderland.

“It’s the imitation Lozzie,” I murmured. “The one that kidnapped me. Months ago. She saw me looking. She looked back.”

Twil growled too. “Thought you iced this thing, Loz.”

“I did,” Lozzie whispered. “A Knight did.”

“Still alive, huh?” Twil flexed her claws.

“No,” I said, for I knew what I had seen. “It was never alive in the first place. But it’s not dead either.” I squinted at the pale blob, striding across Wonderland, bobbing with the fluttery motion of a jellyfish. “It’s something else.”

“We should leave, now,” Evelyn said, hard and matter-of-fact. “Plan A is a failure. We pull back, regroup, rest, return for plan B. Heather —”

“Evee.”

“Heather, no.”

“What if this is a way to communicate?” I said. “What if this is a way to communicate with the Eye?”

slanting surfaces; unplumbed voids – 23.7

A marionette of meat and mockery walked across the infinite plain of Wonderland, from the mountain-blackened rim to the dusty ashen centre, making her inexorable way toward the conceptual walls of our foothold fortress of invisible magecraft.

The Lozzie-thing, the imitation, the Eye-puppet.

My hackles rose. My lips peeled back. My throat ached to squeeze out a low hiss of instinctive warning, despite the hopeful words I had spoken only moments earlier. A clearer view of our hopeful contact made me feel like a rash and hasty fool.

The Puppet — for I refused to continue thinking of it as anything like Lozzie — was an obscenity.

To suggest the Eye's Puppet was an accurate imitation of my dear Lozzie was the gravest of insults — not only to Lozzie, but to every living human being, to all earthly vitality and animation, to the very principles of cellular life itself.

The Puppet was an outline of Lozzie, drawn by an alien god with no true comprehension of the purpose of the human form; the scribbled outline was filled in with a lack of enthusiasm for textures and surfaces and motions, or the reason any of those elements of reality mattered. It — she? I didn't know — moved as if every muscle jerked and twitched at the end of dancing strings, her limbs and joints articulating in the wrong orders, in the wrong directions, at the wrong times. The face was rubbery, stretched thin like a melted plastic bag over a ball of rancid butter. The eyes were sunk deep into the mass of the face, pointing nowhere, the pupils a hazy suggestion of sight. The mouth was a jagged slash. The hair was stiff and sharp, like bleached steel wool.

It wore an imitation of Lozzie's poncho — a grave-dirt suggestion of fluttering flesh, all in black and grey, as if made from the compacted ash of Wonderland through which it strode.

The Puppet broke all the rules of Wonderland, all the spacial paradoxes that my hyperdimensional mathematics and abyssal senses had just revealed; it scudded and skipped and juddered and jerked across the infinite plain, drawing closer to our fortress of sigil and plate with every step. Somehow this one being was freed from the constraints of paradoxical infinity, while the vast watching titans were forever trapped at the mountainous rim.

Those vast watchers lowed and howled as the Puppet outpaced their eternal torture, crying with voices louder than the crash of stellar nurseries yet softer than a dying whisper. Some of them pawed at the Puppet as she slipped beyond their reach. But she broke all the rules.

The Puppet brought to mind those animatronic machines sometimes used in nature documentaries — tiny baby gorillas or motorised crabs or fake mice, designed to get close to the ‘natives’ without rousing their suspicion. But this Puppet could only be designed for the very opposite purpose, to be a nightmare vision, meant to evoke every shudder of disgust and instinctive rejection that the mortal mind could muster.

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Not even Zheng, or Sevens, or Praem. All of us felt like rodents before a snake.

Then Twil shook herself from head to toe, snapped her wolfish teeth together twice, and barked.

“Fuuuuuuuuck! Fuck no!” she growled. Her fur bristled and her claws flexed. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. No! Absolutely fucking not! Nuuuuh-uh! No way. Screw this. Screw that thing!”

Twil’s colourful yet simple statement brought everyone else back from the brink.

“Fuck,” announced Praem, soft as a silver bell.

Zheng peeled her lips back in a silent growl — and retreated several steps, to everyone’s surprise. Zheng, a demon who was more than willing to fight buildings, was backing away from the still-distant approach of a figure she could have snapped with her little finger.

“Kitten,” said Seven-Shades-of-Shock-and-Awe. She groped for my hand. She was quivering. “What manner of mask do we behold?”

“Sevens?” I rasped — my throat was halfway to fully inhuman,

provoked by our approaching visitor.

“No mask,” Sevens murmured. “No mask. And nothing beneath.”

Lozzie whispered: “Doesn’t look like me, really really not. Really not. Really not. Does it? Does it? Heathy? Please please please, Heathy.”

“No,” I croaked out. “No, Lozzie, nothing like you. Nothing at all.”

Evelyn stamped once with her walking stick, and raised her voice, “Hold! Everyone hold where you are! Don’t you dare rush that thing down, Twil!”

“Hahaha! What?!” Twil laughed like Eevee was mad. She grabbed her own climbing harness and shook it with one hand. “I’m staying strapped the fuck right in, thank you very much! You couldn’t pay me to touch that— that— whatever the fuck that is!”

Evelyn tutted. “You’ve touched worse.”

Twil squinted at her. “Is that a joke? Are you trying to make a joke? Did I just hear that right?”

Lozzie chirped: “Eevee joke.”

She did not sound very amused. But the effort worked. The frivolous words gave the rest of us more space to think.

Raine turned her head away and spat — clearing her mouth of bile which had climbed up her throat. Then she tucked her gun tight against her shoulder and took aim at the approaching figure. She was breathing slowly and steadily, turning pale as milk, with droplets of cold sweat beading on her forehead. But her hands were steady.

“I’ve got it sighted,” she said, flat and empty.

Evelyn snapped, “No! No shooting it!”

Twil boggled. “What? What not?! Fuck it up from a distance! Why else do we have the gun!? Get the Knights to do it with their big shiny crossbows! Or Big H, hey, can’t you like, teleport a rock onto it? Just stop it! Stop it reaching us!”

Evelyn said, “Nobody do any of those things.”

“Why!?”

“Because, my dear dog-brained moron, that might provoke a reaction, from that.” Evelyn pointed upward with one finger, at the closed lid of the Eye, hanging silent and dead, so far above all our heads.

Twil gulped. “Oh. Right. Okay. I guess.”

Raine flexed her hands on her gun. “Quick question,” she said. “Why can I see it so clearly?”

Evelyn rounded on her. “What? Raine, what are you talking about? Heather!” She pointed her walking stick at me. “Get your hands on the carapace plate, right now! We are leaving!”

Twil sighed with relief. “Oh, fuck yeah!”

Zheng rumbled: “We only just arrived. Running, wizard?”

Lozzie joined in, “Zhengy has a point! Big point! Good point! Heathy’s still all juicy, we can do lots more!”

I tried my best to un-knot my throat and sound approximately like a human being again: “Evee, did you hear what I said? I don’t like this thing either, but it might be a way to communicate with—”

“I don’t care!” Evelyn snapped. Her eyes blazed with inner fire. “Plan A has failed. As we expected. This is still within expectations, Heather. We leave, recover, feed you a truck worth of lemons and fish and whatever else you need, and then return for plan B.” She jerked her walking stick at my feet. “Hands on the plate, prepare to pull us out and back to Camelot. Right now.”

We put everything we had into straightening up, stretching out our tentacles, and shaking off the after-effects of brain-math.

I was still soaked through from enclosing myself inside my own custom eye-bubble-bag. My clothes were saturated with water, my face was stained with blood, and my throat tasted vaguely of vomit. But I slammed the control rods out of my bioreactor and let the heat flush through my abdomen and out through my flesh. Chromatophores awoke in my skin, strobing pale pink and glowing gold and verdant green. I opened my hands and widened my eyes and smiled with too many teeth.

“Evee,” we said, with a croaking, raspy, broken voice more angelic than mortal. “We still have strength enough for plan B. I can fish for Maisie inside the Eye. We can do it now, we can—”

“I insist,” Evelyn hissed.

She was not impressed by my abyssal angel act. She saw right through me.

We came within an inch of disobeying, of throwing all caution to the wind, of making an insistence of our own. Was this not the very opening we had been looking for? The Puppet was the Eye’s tool, so did it not stand to reason that this was a possible vector for true communication? Seven Heathers flexed and twisted for a moment, eager to push, push, push! We turned up our brightness, studded our tentacles with spikes and hooks, and began to twist our throat into something not even remotely human. Top-Right was insistent — here was our chance. Bottom-Left mewled and hid, a little scared of Evelyn’s rage. Middle-Left urged caution. We opened our mouth, about to speak, when—

Evelyn said, “Heather, please follow the plan.”

We faltered. “M-Maisie might not have time to—”

“We’ll come back tomorrow. I promise.” Evelyn held my gaze, unflinching. “And stop talking like that, I can barely understand all the scratching.”

Raine laughed softly. “I think it’s cute.”

Lozzie chirped. “It is cute!”

Evelyn tried once more. “Heather, for all the love I bear you, please.”

We unknotted our throat again. Resolve collapsed into faith and fidelity.

“R-right! Yes! Okay! S-sorry! Sorry!”

We fell back to our knees as quickly as we could, amid the burst remains of the eyeball-sack and the disgusting puddle of salty warm fluid. Like collapsing into a pool of one’s own vomit and tears. We quickly pressed both hands against the carapace plate and braced our combined hybrid mind on the cusp of the necessary hyperdimensional mathematics.

Ready to leave. Time to exit. Plan A had failed.

I would not put my friends at unnecessary risk. I would keep my promises, to myself and to Evelyn. Nobody was going to get left

behind, or die. If we had to wait a couple of days for the next step, then so be it. This was easy compared to fishing within the infinite vastness of the Eye itself. I should have been grateful.

But I wasn't. I was gritting my teeth, on the verge of tears.

We were so close. So close to Maisie.

And something awful was drawing closer to us.

Twil couldn't tear her eyes away from the approaching Puppet.

"Nah, nah, nah, Raine's got a point. Eevee, aren't you seeing this? You're not? Why can I see that thing in so much detail? It's like a ... what, like a mile away? Two miles? But I can see all the ... the way the skin bunches up ... ahh fuck." She cringed.

Raine said, "Yeah. Same. Heather, any idea what we're looking at here?"

They both had a good point. The Puppet, the vile imitation of Lozzie, was easily a mile or two away; each step was a violation of basic physics, bringing the thing toward us faster than should have been possible. But we could see every last detail, as if the thing was already right in our faces.

Seven-Shades-of-Shuddering-Terror whispered: "Front of the stage."

Zheng growled. "It is inside our heads."

"I-I-I," I stammered, lost for an explanation. "I don't know! It's breaking all the rules of this place, like it's ... like it's above the surface of the Eye and looking down at us? It peered over the eyelid — t-the mountains, I mean, so it was ... outside of the Eye? I don't know! I'm sorry!"

Twil snapped: "Hey hey, why don't we pull the fuck out right now? What are we waiting for?! Heather, yo?"

Evelyn stamped once with her walking stick. "We can leave instantly, whenever we like, as long as Heather is ready. I see no reason not to confront this ... thing ... and see if we can indeed leverage it to our advantage." She glanced down at me, crouched on the floor with my hands spread amid the cold salty goo. "Good enough for you, Heather?"

I nodded; Evelyn had gone grey-green and looked like she wanted to vomit. She was trying very hard to control her own disgust at the

Puppet's approach. "Thank you."

"You pull us out on my mark," she said through clenched teeth. "The moment something goes wrong. You don't hesitate."

"I promise," I said. "I won't hesitate."

The Puppet — the insulting imitation of one of my closest friends — drew closer and closer still, feet tapping and dragging through the black ash of Wonderland's gaze-cooked soil.

When she was perhaps a hundred meters from the edge of the plate, the ground shook.

I had never experienced an earthquake; England is not exactly a hotbed of seismic activity. The rather famous 'Market Rasen' earthquake of 2008 was much too far north to register down in my family home in Reading, and even if the shocks had reached that far, I was only a little girl then. For a moment I had no idea what was happening; I thought somebody or something had rammed into the carapace plate and jolted the floor beneath us, or perhaps one of the Caterpillars had started growling and rumbling and making the world seem to judder.

But it was the ground itself — the surface of Wonderland, the folded-up material of the Eye.

A great deep groaning ran through the ground beneath the plate, shaking everything and everyone from side to side for a moment.

Then it stopped, as quickly as it had started.

Twil shouted, "What the fuck was that!?"

"Earthquake," Raine answered quickly. "Evee?"

"Eyequake, more like!" Twil spat. "Does that fucking mean something?" She glanced upward, at the still-closed lid of the Eye. "Are we still not getting out of here!?"

Evelyn had gone wide-eyed and even more pale than before. Her gaze darted left and right, then up at the Eye's closed lid, then down at me.

I said, "I don't feel any changes."

Evelyn hissed: "What was that?"

I shrugged. “I’m sorry, Evee. I have no idea.”

Evelyn raised her voice. “All hold! Everyone hold! Heather, you be ready.”

“Ready,” I whispered.

The Puppet finished her journey. She seemed unmoved by the strange Eyequake. She stopped at the edge of the carapace plate, at the first wall of our many-layered fortress.

Framed by the hulking mass of our guardian Caterpillars and the impenetrable shield-wall of our escort Knights, the Puppet-thing looked so small and scrawny, a scrap of discarded flesh left to blanch and shrivel upon the waste of Wonderland. Height was about the only aspect which the Eye had gotten correct — the Puppet was about Lozzie’s size, petite and short and thin. All other aspects were wrong, artificial, or subtly off — the lack of knee joints in the exposed legs, the colour of the skin and hair, the way she stood, paused and unmoving like the frozen still of a movie reel.

When we’d first encountered this thing, so many months ago, it had taken a bullet from Raine’s handgun and a Knightly lance through the chest. If it still carried those wounds, it gave no hint of the damage. The black-and-grey poncho covered it from throat to mid-thigh.

She was quite distant from the core of the Invisus Oculus; she wasn’t even touching the edge of the plate itself. But my hackles rose as if she was inches from my face, as if some poison stinger was waving before my flesh, readying to plunge into my eyeballs and pump me full of toxin.

Everyone else had gone still, taut with tension. Raine was gritting her teeth. Twil kept growling softly, a hound held a bay. Zheng had backed up so far she was almost next to Evelyn. Lozzie had her hands over her mouth, eyes wide in pity or dismay. Sevens bowed her head. Praem just stared. Evelyn frowned as if examining a dead cow.

And I longed to let out a hiss from my warped and inhuman throat. My skin was flushed with warning colouration, my tentacles were plated with spikes and spines, my eyeballs were flickering pink and black and red.

We wanted to make this thing go away. Don’t touch me! Don’t

touch my friends! Away! Go away!

We resisted that urge. It was instinct alone.

The Puppet looked down at the carapace plate — or at least it angled its head and eyeballs in imitation of a human being looking downward. The eyes were blank. The face was slack and empty.

Twil whispered, “The hell is it doing?”

“Hell is right,” Raine murmured.

Praem intoned, soft and subtle: “Observing.”

I tried to laugh, but squeaked instead.

Evelyn raised her voice, calm and clear: “Take aim.”

Lozzie chirped softly, as if repeating the order without words. Behind the shield wall, the arbalest Knights all levelled their crossbows in silence, aiming over the shoulders of their comrades. Every massive steel bolt pointed at the Puppet.

“Don’t!” I hissed.

Raine chuckled softly. “Bullets didn’t kill it last time. Doubt those will, either.”

Evelyn almost growled, “It is a precaution only. If that thing looks like it’s going to mess with any element of the Invisus Oculus, we may need to knock it back. Now, I want no itchy trigger fingers. Nobody fire without my say-so.”

Raine said, “Loose.”

Evelyn squinted. “What?”

“Archers. Arrows. ‘Fire’ is for guns, Eevee,” Raine said. “With archers and arrows it’s ‘loose’.”

Evelyn hissed between her teeth. “I will loosen your fucking head, Raine! Concentrate.”

Twil tutted. “Yeah, yo? Eyes on the bitch thing. Cool?”

Raine had not taken her eyes off the Puppet, not even to smirk. She flexed both hands around the black metal of her firearm before settling them in place again. “Oh, I’m concentrating alright. Believe you me, Eevee. Eyes on the target. Eyes on.”

Lozzie let out a soft whine. “Heathy. Heathy I really don’t like it ... it’s not ... it’s not me. Is this what Alex thought I was?”

She almost sobbed.

This mockery had been built from Alexander Lilburne’s memories and impressions of his sister — taken by the Eye as part of the foolish deal he had made in order to keep living, though the form of life he had attained was worse than death, a lingering spirit trapped in the space between worlds.

The Puppet was another one of his echoes, another one of Alexander’s choices, haunting us still. Haunting Lozzie most of all.

“I know, Lozzie. I know.” We reached out with one tentacle and wrapped it around Lozzie’s forearm. “It’s okay. The Eye doesn’t understand human beings. This was the best it could do. This doesn’t necessarily mean anything about your late brother. Try not to think about that right now.”

“Mm,” Lozzie whined.

“And she can’t do anything to us,” I said. “She can’t.”

Twil squinted. “What?! What do you mean, it can’t— look at it! Look at the thing!”

I forced myself to take a deep breath and stay calm. The revulsion was hard to control. Despite my best efforts my skin was flashing red and yellow and pink, strobing with warning colouration.

We said: “It only ever had one purpose. To find me and bring me back to Wonderland. It can do some basic hyperdimensional mathematics, or maybe it can only Slip. But it doesn’t ... or didn’t, at least, do anything else.”

Evelyn ground out a question. “Then why is it still here?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. It didn’t ... it didn’t have the poncho, before.”

“Mmmmmmm!” Lozzie made a sound. “Like it was trying to be me, more? More me? Me more?”

The Puppet looked up from the carapace plate again, as if it had lost interest. Deep-set, black-marked eyes pointed vaguely at us in the middle of the circle. It looked at the Caterpillars, then at the Knights, staring directly at the ropey black tentacles and the tips of

the crossbow bolts.

Twil hissed, “It can’t fucking see us, can it? Eevee, you said nothing can see us in here.”

“It can’t,” I said. “It’s just looking, not seeing.”

“Yes, it can’t,” Evelyn hurried to echo my words. “This is the same effect as we saw on human minds, and demons, and Heather. It can see, it can look right at us, but it can’t observe, can’t comprehend what it’s looking at.” She glanced at me. “Heather, do you have any ideas for communication? You’re the one who wanted us to stay. What’s your plan?”

I chewed on my lip. “We can’t exit the circle ... ”

Twil said, “What’s it been doing out here this whole time? If it was only meant to mess with Heather. Why is it still here?”

Zheng rumbled: “Surviving. Discarded.”

“New outfit,” said Praem.

“Yes,” I agreed, my eyes widening with realisation. “It didn’t have the poncho, the first time. If the Eye hasn’t sent it to pick me up again, why keep adjusting it? Why try to make it more ... sorry, but more ‘Lozzie-like’? If it’s just been left here to develop by itself, why do that?”

Several of us shared meaningful looks.

Twil shook her head. “You can’t be fucking serious, Big H. I know this is kinda your thing, but you can’t make friends with that.”

I huffed. “I’m not suggesting we make friends with it. I’m saying ... I’m saying ... ”

Before I could gather my thoughts, the Puppet straightened up — a grotesque imitation of a spine pulling itself erect — and began to pace along one edge of the carapace plate. Trainers like lumps of extruded flesh scuffed in the ashen soil of Wonderland, wading through thick banks of low-lying mist and clinging fog. Framed by the distant mountains — which I knew were actually the ridged and wrinkled lid of the Eye itself — the Puppet was like a pale revenant of wormy flesh, held at the door by nothing but faith.

She walked exactly twenty four paces to the left, then turned and took forty eight paces to the right, then turned again and took

twenty four paces back to the middle. She walked like every muscle was being jabbed with electro-convulsive shock, her head twitching and ticking from side to side.

Twil groaned as if the sight made her sick. Zheng drooled like her body was trying to vomit. Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut. Raine kept her firearm trained on the Puppet.

Eventually the Puppet stopped in the same place as before, raised her jerking, plastic, rubbery face, and made eye contact with me.

“Welcome back?”

The voice was a scratching, screeching, off-key warble, like a note from a broken flute or the shattered song of a half-melted record player. Everyone flinched and winced, even Zheng, who growled and spat and waved a hand at the air like trying to brush away invisible cobwebs. Praem blinked three times. Raine grunted and struggled not to let her aim waver. The Knights lurched, then quickly regained their posture. Even the Caterpillars inched away from this terrible dissonance.

Before anybody could react, the ground shook.

A second Eyequake gripped Wonderland by the roots, stronger than the first, threatening to throw us flat. The carapace plate jerked from side to side. Praem caught Eevee in both hands to stop her tumbling over. Lizzie clung to Sevens. Zheng caught herself and wrapped a fist in Twil's clothes. Only the web of climbing rope and buckles kept us all together. The Knights held fast, and Raine's aim stayed true, but the Caterpillars slid by several inches, losing their gargantuan footing.

The shaking stopped. Glances were shared, wide-eyed and confused. Breath came in panting gulps. Eevee and I both looked up at the same time and saw the same thing.

The Eye had closed tighter.

The ridges of the lid, where the two halves met and formed mountain ranges of void-dark wrinkled flesh, were larger, taller, more pronounced than before. Like it was screwing itself up, fighting against an impulse or imperative to open and observe.

“What the fuuuuck,” Twil hissed; even she could see the proof. “What? What does that mean? What the hell is it doing?”

Raine said, calm and smooth: “What do you do if you get grit in your eye?”

Twil squinted. “What?! What!?”

“You scrunch up.”

Evelyn snapped: “It can’t see us!”

“Nope,” Raine said. “But I think it can feel us. Like a speck of grit. Heather?”

I couldn’t answer.

All my worst fears were coming true. The Eye was closing, forgoing observation, rejecting its own nature. Raine’s metaphor was sweet, but she was wrong. The Eye was not a representative being, it was literal. Observation was all it did.

What did this mean for Maisie?

If the Eye was changing, what did it mean for getting her out?

“What does an Eye observe when it’s closed?” I whispered.

“Heather!” Evelyn snapped. “We leave, right now! Do it!”

With tears running down my face, and horror in my heart, I kept my promise. I stayed a good girl.

Out—

Nope! chirped a nightmare.

A single finger of hyperdimensional mathematics pinned my equation in place.

It was so gentle, so brittle, so loose and light, that I could have brushed it aside and carried on without a care. But the threat, the implication of more to come, made me pull back.

I aborted the equation.

Spitting a glob of blood, I stood up, let go of the carapace plate, and gave up on retreat.

Evelyn boggled at me. “Heather! Heather, what are you doing?! I said we have to leave, now, we—”

“I tried,” I said.

“ ... what?”

“I tried. There’s something in the way. I don’t think we have a choice.” I spoke while staring right back at the Lozzie-Thing, the Eye-Puppet, the Abandoned Doll.

“What?!”

Twil added, “Yeah, wait, what? Yo, hey?”

“Heather?” Raine hissed.

“Kitten?”

“Shaman. We are here. Are we not?”

I swallowed and found my throat had gone dry. “I think we’ve been put in check. Like in chess, I mean. I think we’ve been in check ever since I attracted her attention.”

I nodded at the Puppet — or to the Puppet.

Beyond the edge of the carapace plate, the Puppet tried to sway and bounce, just like Lozzie did, fluttering her poncho. The effect was grotesque, like a corpse pulled by ropes, made to dance a macabre jig.

“Speak plainly, Heather!” Evelyn snapped. “Now!”

“It’s not safe to do brain-math,” I said. “Not with her attention on us.”

“Her attention isn’t on us!” Evelyn huffed. “That’s the point! If she’s the Eye’s puppet and she could see us, then that—” she jerked a finger upward “—would be open! Not closing itself tighter!”

“That’s not what I mean,” I sighed. “Sorry, Eevee, this is complicated.”

“Then explain. Quickly. If something is going wrong, then we need to pull out, through the gate, right now.”

I raised a hand to lower Eevee’s temperature. “Wait, wait, Eevee, I don’t think we’re in danger. The Eye is closing tighter, which might be bad, yes, but it’s not trying to look at us. Just let me ... let me think. Back when we first ran into this thing, this Puppet, it could do a limited amount of hyperdimensional mathematics, just enough to Slip me out of reality and back to Wonderland. I’m concerned —

to put it lightly — that if I tried to pull us all out right now, the Puppet may interrupt me, because it just tried to. It proved it could. Quietly. Without hurting me.”

Evelyn shut her mouth and nodded, once, sharply. “Then we need to leave through the gate.”

I shook my head. The Puppet was still staring at me, eyes fixed on mine. It couldn’t see through the Invisus Oculus, could not comprehend the light entering its eyes. But some part of it made automatic contact with me.

We said, “Think about it for a moment, Eevee. And look at it. The Eye never sent it after me again. It’s been here the whole time. It’s been abandoned.”

Twil hissed, “It’s not a fucking lost puppy!”

Zheng rumbled, “The shaman knows what must be done. No matter how vile the peace.”

“No,” I said. “Fine. It’s not a lost puppy. But it’s ... we can ... we can let it in.”

“Heather,” Eevee warned.

Twil let out a strangled laugh. “We’re not letting that thing in here, are we, we— shit!”

The Lozzie-Puppet was mounting the plate.

Zheng growled like a rumbling furnace. Raine took a slow, steadying breath. Sevens gulped. The Knights creaked against their footing, and even the Caterpillars shuddered.

The Puppet stepped up with one foot, then the other, in a herky-jerky, halting, jittery motion.

“Welcome,” said Praem.

The Puppet was still a good ten feet from the first trailing edges of the Invisus Oculus itself, but now she was up there, on our level. She looked toward us again, then tilted her head at the black ichor lines of the Invisus Oculus, then took another twitching step forward.

Evelyn opened her mouth to snap an order — probably ‘loose’, the signal for the Knights to fill the Puppet with steel bolts.

“Wait!” I said. “Wait, wait, wait, I’m serious!”

“Heather!”

“Okay, yes, it’s ugly and it’s weird and it’s making everyone’s skin crawl. But you know what else it is? It’s an abandoned tool! We have no idea how it thinks or feels. Does it think it’s a person? Maybe. I have no idea!”

Raine said, low and almost sorrowful: “This is no time for bleeding hearts. I’m sorry, Heather.”

“I’m not being merciful!” I yelled. “I’m saying it’s the best example — the only example — of how the Eye sees a human being!”

Raine and Eevee shared a look. Twil let out a soft, whimpering, ‘oh fuck me’. Zheng straightened up and flexed her shoulders, as if limbering up to scoop the Puppet from her feet. Praem produced a lemon in one hand and passed it to me. Lozzie was crying softly.

The Puppet took another shivering, shaking step toward the Invisus Oculus.

“Besides,” I spoke quickly, in between rapid mouthfuls of lemon. “We’re going to have to deal with it one way or the other before we can proceed. Bullets didn’t kill it before, and if we return in a few days to run plan B, it’ll probably still be here, still interested in us. We have to deal with it if I’m going to go fishing.”

Twil squinted at me. “Fishing?”

“For Maisie!” I shook my head to clear my thoughts. “It’s a metaphor for how I’m going to interact with the Eye. But look! If I know what it thinks of a human being, that could help immensely! I’m proposing we snatch the puppet up. Drag her into the circle so I can examine her, and we can take her off the metaphorical playing board. Eevee! Eevee, right now, she’s a wild card, isn’t she? We need to remove her.”

Evelyn stared at me from within twin chips of ice. She grumbled through her teeth. “I still think we should withdraw.”

“We can’t,” I repeated, trying to keep my voice level. “She might intervene.”

“Through the gateway.”

“Look, Eevee, one of the Caterpillars can do it, snatch her off her feet

as she steps inside—”

Bwoop, one of the Caterpillars objected with a low-pitch thrum of engine-sound, just loud enough to make me flinch and flail my tentacles about.

“Okay!” I snapped. “I’ll do it myself! I’ve got eight arms. I’ll need muscle though. Zheng? Twil? Will you help me? Please!”

Twil grimaced. Zheng rolled her neck and cracked her knuckles.

“Shaman,” she acknowledged.

Raine hissed between her teeth, eyes and firearm both trained on the Puppet as it took another jerking, flickering step toward the outer lines of the Invisus Oculus. “You sure about this, Heather?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Then I trust your judgement,” Raine murmured.

Evelyn snapped: “And I don’t! This is unsafe. We go back—”

Zheng rumbled, “Not your decision, wizard. The shaman has spoken.”

Evelyn glared at Zheng. “Heather has special insight here, but she’s not an unquestioned leader, you gigantic living dildo, you—”

Zheng bared her teeth. Evelyn flinched, but Praem stepped forward, staring Zheng down — or up, as it were.

“Stop!” I snapped. “Stop, stop, right now, everyone. Evee’s right. I’m not a dictator. You’ve all heard my reasoning, so let’s hold a vote on it. I will ... I will abide by the result. I promise.”

Twil gestured at the approaching Puppet with both of her clawed hands; the thing was only a few paces from the edge of the outer lines of the Invisus Oculus now. “Best vote damn fast, then!”

Evelyn raised her head and spoke to the Knights, loud and clear: “If that thing starts interfering with the lines of the circle, shoot it!” She glanced at me, eyebrows raised. “Heather?”

My chest scrunched up inside, but I nodded. “That’s fair enough. And, Evee?”

“What?!” she snapped at me. “We best vote, if we’re going to do

this! Quickly! Twil is right about that, for once.”

“Hey!” Twil said.

“Evee,” I added quickly. “You have a veto.”

Evelyn paused as if frozen, staring at me without blinking. Then she nodded. “Understood.”

I turned to the others, raising one hand and two tentacles. “All in favour of my plan?”

Twil tutted. “Heather, we know there’s seven of you, but you don’t get seven votes. Come on.”

“Quite, kitten,” Sevens agreed.

We huffed. “Yes, I know. We get one vote. One collective vote.”

Praem opened her mouth and intoned, soft as a little silver bell: “Our guards and walls.”

“The Knights?” I said. “And the Caterpillars? Oh, uh, I ... I suppose they could all sway the vote to whatever they liked, um ... ”

Lozzie fluttered her poncho to get my attention. “Knights and Cattys take one vote together!” She raised a hand and pointed at the Forest Knight, standing behind us next to the gateway back to Camelot. With Maisie’s shrouded doll-body strapped to his front, he was still standing to immobile attention, his axe gripped in one hand. “Vote!”

The Forest Knight nodded once, blank helmet gliding down and up in perfect silence.

“Okay,” we said. “For real this time.” We raised our hand higher. “All in favour?”

Three hands went up with mine — Raine, Praem, and Zheng.

Evelyn grunted: “All against?”

Evelyn raised her own hand, joined by Twil, Sevens, and the Forest Knight.

Raine chuckled softly. “Four versus four. Classic tie, hey?”

Lozzie had not participated in the vote; her hands remained hidden beneath the pastel folds of her poncho. The poncho itself was limp

and flat. She kept glancing back toward the shambling, pitiful, Puppet-thing as it inched closer on jerking legs. Lozzie's eyes were carved into her face with a look of sorrow and pity.

"Lozzie?" I prompted, very gently. "Lozzie, you're our deciding vote. What do you say? She ... it ... it was made in your image, after all. It's only right that you ... "

Lozzie bit her lower lip. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. But then she nodded with sudden and terrible urgency.

"Okay," she whispered. "Okay. Bring her in, Heather. Let her inside. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay it's okay it's okay okay okaaaaay —"

To my surprise, Sevens drew Lozzie into a hug; the embrace was awkward, hampered by the web of climbing ropes and the harnesses we all wore. But Lozzie hugged her back, tight and desperate.

Evelyn huffed, sharp and exasperated.

"Evee?" I said. "Your veto?"

Evelyn gritted her teeth, and snapped: "No veto. Do it, but do it quickly! If that thing touches the lines of the circle, it's dead — or at least shot, you understand?"

"Yes! Yes, I have it! Thank you, Evee! Thank you!"

Getting into position was awkward and fiddly; I had to unclip many of the climbing ropes holding me in place, freeing myself from the web of security and protection that bound us all together. Zheng did the same but with much greater relish, casting most of her safety lines aside with a toss of one hand, then moving to my side to add her strength to my own. Twil grimaced and cringed, but she relented after a moment, shucking off all but one of her own safety-lines.

"Heather," Evelyn said just before we stepped forward. "Heather, don't you dare step outside the circle. Don't you break your promise."

We turned back to her and smiled. "Not a single hair. We all promise."

My tentacles wiggled and waved. We loved Evee. We all meant it.

Beyond the circle, the Puppet wobbled closer. She reached the first of the outer lines of the Invisus Oculus — a curve of nonsense words, one of the stretches of mantra-like English which Evelyn had used to create the spell. The Puppet paused and jerked her head downward as if trying to read the words.

“Be ready!” Evelyn shouted at the Knights. “If it touches a single line, I want it shot clear off the plate!”

“Please,” I whispered. “Please please please.”

The Puppet lifted her foot. The Knights’ crossbows were steady as cold iron. The Puppet inched forward with the toes of one weird, melted trainer —

And stepped clear over the lines, onto an open patch of clear white carapace.

Several of my companions let out breaths they had not known they were holding. I shook myself from head to toe, then grabbed Zheng’s hand in one tentacle and Twil’s claw in another.

“Edge of the circle!” I hissed. “Let’s be ready!”

Zheng and Twil and I got into position, right at the border of the core of the Invisus Oculus, on the precipice of leaving the pupil. We were flanked on either side by two of the Caterpillars, like being at the bottom of a canyon of off-white carapace. The Knights were to our rear, and the rest of our friends just behind. Three of the Knights came forward, stowed their crossbows, and stood positioned as our back-up. All that chrome and power was very reassuring.

I stared down at the line of the pupil cut into the white carapace of the plate — a thick border of dried black ichor. One foot over that line would expose me to the full attention of the Eye. It was like standing on the edge of an ocean cliff, staring down — or up, in this case — into the unimaginable depths of dark and cold.

“Hold fast, shaman,” Zheng purred, to my left.

“Yeah, fucking hell, Big H. Cool it a bit?” Twil added from my right.

“Mm? O-oh!”

We had inched forward, perhaps subconsciously. We stepped back, very deliberately, and anchored ourselves to Twil with a tentacle.

The Puppet stepped closer, avoiding the black lines of the spell.

"It's alright," we murmured. "It's going to be alright. She's letting us catch her. I think."

The Puppet stepped ever closer — forty feet away, then thirty, twenty, ten. She weaved her way deeper and deeper into the lines of the magic circle, as if wading into the flesh of the Eye itself. Twil growled and hissed and whined, like a wolf confronted with a predator which would not back down. Zheng went very quiet and still, tensed and ready. The Knights didn't move at all, metal joints locked solid. Behind us, Evelyn stared up at the eye, her lips moving in a silent prayer, watching for the slightest quiver. Raine lowered her gun, robbed of a clear shot, then reached out and took Evelyn's hand. Eevee squeezed back. Lozzie scurried behind Sevens and Praem.

Evelyn muttered: "Be ready to retreat, if this doesn't work."

I said, "As soon as she steps across the circle. Just grab her. Hold her down."

"Shaman," Zheng hissed.

Twil tried to laugh. "Easier said than done. Fuck, my skin is crawling. I'd rather be forced to eat a handful of centipedes."

"Just stay calm," I squeaked. "Stay ... stay calm."

The Puppet was ten feet away, then five. All my senses rebelled, screaming at me not to touch this thing. The skin was fake as stretched rubber, the poncho was cold ash, the gait was like a dead thing walking.

"Not her fault," I hissed to myself. "Not her fault."

The Puppet paused at the edge of the pupil. She looked up, with tiny eyes like holes punched in rotten meat. She stared directly at me.

"... the hell?" Twil hissed. "Is it ... waiting?"

"Shaman," Zheng prompted.

"I know," I said. "I know." I raised my voice a little. "If you're still a tool of the Eye, and you step in here, we will kill you. But if you're not ... I promise not to hurt you."

The Puppet stared and stared and stared and—

She jerked her whole body forward, and fell into the circle.

The Puppet offered no resistance. Zheng grabbed it like a sack of meat and hauled it upright, roaring with animal disgust as she touched the thing's flesh, as the grey-ash poncho dragged across Zheng's arms like broken glass. The Puppet flowed and deformed at all the wrong angles as Zheng pulled it fully into the circle, joints swaying in the wrong directions, flesh and clothes bulging in strange ways. Twil turned and coughed as she tried not to vomit. I backed up, hissing and spitting like the little squid hybrid I was.

"Take it!" Zheng roared. She shoved the limp puppet into the arms of the nearest Knight.

Evelyn shouted: "The Eye is shut! It's shut! No reaction! It's still shut. We're good. Now get back here and get strapped back in, God damn you!"

We returned to the core of the pupil within seconds, among the rest of my friends, alongside the Forest Knight and the shining gateway back to Camelot. Twil strapped herself back to her place in the web of climbing rope, claws shaking, breathing hard. Zheng shook her own body like a wet dog trying to rid herself of stinking mud. I kept hissing under my breath, still plated and spiked and spined, my skin flowing with toxins and paralytics, ready to fight something that did not wish to fight.

The Puppet lay in the arms of one unlucky Knight. It was limp and loose, almost as if dead. But the eyes saw us and the lips pulled into an inhuman smile.

Everyone tried to recoil. Lozzie pointed at a spot on the floor, and the Knight stayed put. The Knight himself showed no fear or disgust — perhaps it was easy, when one's flesh was protected by a shell of imperishable metal.

Evelyn snapped: "Alright, Heather. You have your prize. What now? Hm? Raine, calm her down, for pity's sake."

"I'm fine! I'm okay!" I hissed — and I was certain that I didn't sound remotely human. The Puppet made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, made my guts churn and my skin crawl, made me want to lash out with all my tentacles and rip that rubbery, plastic, fake face off whatever maggots lay beneath.

But I was a good girl. I was not going to be violent for the sake of violence. I reeled in all those feelings, forced a deep breath down my throat, and stood up straight. Seven Heathers came together for one purpose.

Twil tutted, trying to laugh, trying to play this off with brute humour. “This is by far the weirdest shit we’ve ever tried to make friends with.”

“We’re not making friends with it,” I corrected her, harder than I had intended. “We’re investigating it. Let me—”

“InVEStiGAtIngggggg.”

The Puppet’s voice was like a bucket of boiling blubber. Twil backed up and growled, snapping with her wolfish snout, flexing her claws. Lozzie let out a weird, strangled little sob; Sevens grabbed Lozzie and crushed Lozzie’s face to her chest, giving her somewhere to hide. Raine flinched, hands raising her gun before she caught herself. Evelyn turned white as a sheet, then clutched at Praem. Zheng just showed her teeth.

But I stepped forward, slipping my squid-skull mask on over my head, and pulling my yellow robes tight around my shoulders.

“Hello,” I said to the thing cradled in the Knight’s arms. “Do you remember me?”

The Puppet’s head went one way, then the other, scraping against the Knight’s armour in a parody of Lozzie’s mannerisms. The hair didn’t move properly, as if frozen in place. She flickered once, then twice, as if struggling to retain coherency.

“Back!” it jerked out.

“Yes,” I said slowly. I had to clutch the hostility tight in my heart. Every instinct, abyssal and otherwise, sang a chorus of destruction. We wanted to pull this thing to pieces, just because of what it was — because it was wrong. It was not meant to be. “I’m back, here in Wonderland. Like you were supposed to do. Do you understand that?”

“Welllllcome back,” it burbled. I felt vaguely sick. Behind me, Raine turned her head and spat bile.

“Heather,” Evelyn said. I could hear that she was trying to hold back a wave of nausea as well. “Whatever you’re doing, just get it

over with.”

Without further preamble, I plunged both hands and all six tentacles into the oily sump at the base of my soul, and flicked a special value from zero to one.

We saw the world through abyssal senses. We defined the Puppet, the Lizzie-thing, this tool of the Eye. We observed it, in full.

Seen through the perfect clarity of hyperdimensional mathematics, the Puppet was a more wretched thing than its appearance would suggest. Even the most meagre of human beings — or any other non-human person — was a whirling vortex of meaning and definition and history and memory, a million million lines of equation spiralling outward into practical infinity. Almost incomprehensible, for the purposes of mortal understanding.

The Puppet was constructed from exactly thirteen lines of equation. A pebble was more complex than this mockery of life.

No wonder she was so simple and so revolting. The instinctive disgust did not come from a prejudice against what she was, but against what she lacked, against the crime of her creation and her creator. To willingly make something like this, to imbue it with thought and feeling and intent, and then to abandon it to this internal wreckage, this was a crime against creation.

All my urges to pull the thing to shreds faded to nothing.

The crime belonged to the Eye, not to the Puppet.

Thirteen lines of equation: six for physical form, six for a soul. We reached out with trembling fingers of thought, half-entertaining an idea of weaving more complexity into the gaps left by the Eye’s brutal genesis. No being deserved to exist like this. All she needed was a transplant, a few nudges here, a tweak and an edit there, and she would think, feel, operate like a real being, not this cruel jest at —

Thirteen lines of equation.

One line was not of her.

One line of the Puppet, one piece of her ragged and diminutive self, trailed upward, then ended as if severed. It was truncated like a cut umbilical cord. The last part of that line suggested much greater complexity, lurking just beyond the cut.

We crashed back into our body, back to our own senses, heaving for breath. We were bleeding lightly from our nose, but we didn't care.

Only a split-second had passed for everybody else.

"She was abandoned," I said out loud, croaking and rasping; I felt even less human than before. Something about staring into the face of this pitiful thing had pushed me to make myself even more colourful with chromatophores, plated with chitin and studded with barbs down my tentacles. I was a whirling ball of squid-girl, pulsing pink and red. "She was cut out of the Eye. And there's a part of her that slots back into it."

I rounded on Eevee, my own eyes wide with something akin to hope.

"Heather?" Evelyn prompted. I wasn't sure she could understand my words, my throat was so far gone.

"The difficulty was always that finding Maisie would be like searching for a needle in a haystack," I said. "But if I know what a human being looks like to the Eye, that gives me somewhere to start. Somewhere to—"

A third Eyequake shook the ground of Wonderland — and this was the big one.

The earth rocked and swayed as if shoved by an angry giant. The carapace plate flexed and jerked, as if rammed from beneath, as if the hide of the world was trying to shake us off, flick us free, get rid of us before some terrible spasm. Everyone grabbed onto their harnesses and lines, or onto each other. The Puppet stayed limp, riding the sudden shock waves.

In the distance, the ring of mountains suddenly contracted, rushing inward, as if closing upon us. The great titans were swallowed under a trillion tonnes of black eyelid skin and wrinkled flesh.

And above us, in the sky, the sky itself, all the sky forever and ever — clenched shut. Hard and tight. Screwed up and scrunched inward.

"The gateway!" somebody shouted — probably Evelyn or Raine.

A panic of flesh and metal retreated toward the gateway, trying to outrun the folding up of reality itself, the contracting spheres of a collapsing dimension.

The Caterpillars seemed so small against the onrushing tidal wave, nothing more than grubs in dead flesh. The Knights were ants on a charred hide. Me and my friends, my family, my lovers, we weren't even specks of grit. The Puppet was less than even that, a mote of forgotten moisture.

Raine, one fist buried in my clothes as she yanked me toward the gateway; Evelyn, bundled into Praem's arms; Praem already turning, moving, sprinting; Twil grabbing Lozzie around the waist and throwing her — throwing! mercy, she was so brave — at the gate; Sevens, folding up and becoming a weight in my arms; Zheng, ripping herself from her bonds and making sure she would be last out, last behind her shaman; me, us, all seven of me, flailing and lashing in blind panic, as we realised a moment too late that we were out of time.

Speed and motion were no longer real.

This was not something that bodies and minds could outrun.

We had miscalculated beyond our wildest nightmares. We had assumed the worst possible outcome was the full awareness and attention of the Eye — searing, burning, melting through flesh and atoms and self — a nasty look, but ultimately possible to escape.

We had never considered the alternative, the opposite, because it seemed impossible.

The cessation of observation. The Eye turning inwards in ultimate desperation.

This was a black hole, wrought not in gravity and mass, but in hyperdimensional mathematics — a singularity of something other than mere matter. Observation was turned in upon itself, in despair and destruction.

None would reach the gateway in time, not even the Forest Knight, who was standing mere paces away from the safety of Camelot's purple light — for there was no such thing as time, as the Eye closed. Time and space were about to become one property, contracted to a single point. Not even light could escape.

We had made a deadly mistake.

But I had sworn an oath, hadn't I?

I had sworn that I would break reality before I left a single one of

my friends behind, or before I accepted my own end, my own death, or Maisie's final and total loss.

Reality would break before we did.

We had, however, a choice; could we still rip our way *Out*, like usual, through the membrane between worlds? Would the foolish Puppet stop us, unaware of the gravity of her actions? Would the Eye's contraction trap us on this side of the membrane? There were too many variables, too many chances for something to go wrong. And we — all of us — were about to be compacted by the Outsider equivalent of a black hole of perception and observation.

Risk a return to our reality — or break this one on the stone of my mind?

No choice at all.

Moving at a speed that was no speed at all, in a blink of thought that was faster than neurons and nerves, with a determination which was not human, not mortal at all, but pure abyssal ruthlessness, we acted.

We unspooled that 'fishing line' with a Maisie-shaped socket at the end.

We grabbed that dangling equation — the Puppet's broken umbilical.

We wrapped them together and made a spear of the two parts — a stick with a sharp rock tied to one end, the instrument with which clumsy apes had defied the cold void for longer than I could imagine. How fitting, how apt, how very, very, very silly.

We made a mental note, in that final moment, to tell Raine that she had gotten it wrong, all those many months ago; we were not going to poke the Eye with the largest broken bottle in the universe. We were going to poke it with a makeshift cosmic spear, like something made by a small child with too much interest in neolithic history, and unsupervised access to flint and string.

Flimsy, inexpert, good for only one thrust.

And rammed it upward we did — a lance of hyperdimensional equation and abyssal screaming and the will to peel open a black hole.

Between the lids of the Eye our improvised weapon slipped.

And struck.

An ocean.

Beneath.

[23.8] nothing and nowhere and nowhen

A spear and a rope, lashed to a fragile wooden boat; a sharp flint head, knapped by small cunning hands, pierces the hide of a whale — but the whale is the ocean and the ocean is the whale, a living leviathan vaster than all the seas of earth, too large to turn inward to examine this tiny pinprick wound, too massive to comprehend the sting of stone on skin. The blubber is the water and the dermis is the waves; the muscles are currents, the blood is a thermocline, and the meaty darkness of internal organs becomes an abyss incarnate.

The spear snags in folds of flesh. The flint-sharp head is wedged in a tangle of thought, caught in a knotty twist of fractal mathematical perfection. Eyes proliferate across the whale's hide; awareness grows where there was none before. Wounding and blood and torn meat forces attention outward.

The whale sees the spear, but it cannot know what the spear means. The spear is in my hands, rammed between the lids of a great Eye.

The whale and the ocean pull and buck and dive. The tiny wooden boat is sucked after the leviathan, speeding toward a lightness, spaceless, soundless nothing.

Pulling us down.

And down.

Down.

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An ocean closes upon itself, like water compressed into a ball.
Reality folds tighter and tighter, squeezing with pressure enough to
compact a whole world into a pinprick of mass and time. Nothing
can escape the event horizon of a black hole, not even light,
certainly not love.

But thought is faster than light. Hyperdimensional mathematics
does not need time — only intent. Intent is timeless.

I had intent. Clear and clean and pure and bright.

But I could not fight an ocean, nor wrestle a whale.

Are we confusing you? Good. Does this poetic nonsense not help
your comprehension? Then you begin to understand how it felt. Are
you unmoored, missing your handholds in reality, lacking the
familiar shape of words to lend meaning to space and time? Well
then, welcome. That is what it was like, trapped in that single blink
of non-time as the Eye attempted to negate the purpose of its own
being. Human metaphor fails at the edge of a black hole; decent
people do not contemplate what lies beyond the event horizon. Past
that there is nothing that the human mind — the mortal mind,
Earthly or Outsider or other — would recognise. Not even the King
In Yellow, or Hringwindla, or Lozzie's Star, or any of the weirder
forms of sentience we had met in all the dimensions of Outside,
would have grasped any insight into this collapse.

Perhaps not even the Eye itself understood what it was doing; it did
not comprehend what lay beyond the moment of singularity toward
which it was rushing.

Sort of like death.

The Eye was compacting itself and Wonderland — one and the
same thing, in a way — past the point of no return, past the point at
which nothing can escape the pull of gravity. Not physical gravity,
but the gravity of pure observation. The weight of seeing and
knowing. The mass of insight.

In that moment, as the singularity closed, as the Eye closed on itself, there was no such thing as time or space. Myself and my family, my friends — Raine, Evelyn, Twil, Praem, Lozzie, Zheng, Sevens, six Caterpillars and thirty Knights and a squid made of clay which lived in a bucket — were frozen in the act of turning toward the gateway back to Camelot.

There was no possible escape.

And I? Us? Seven Heathers?

We were all inside the Eye, clinging to the shivering boards of a tiny wooden boat as the whale dived toward crush depth.

This was not like being in the abyss. There was nothing here but an ending, a negation of everything that had been, Wonderland about to implode into nothing. The Eye was trying to stop observing, stop being itself, reject the underlying purpose and meaning of its own nature.

Why? To kill us?

To kill itself?

Because we were grit wedged against its surface and it didn't know what to do?

I could not think, could not answer these philosophical questions — not because I was panicking, but because actual meat-based brain-powered thought was impossible. 'I' was abstracted beyond even the non-material core of my abyssal truth.

So it did not matter why.

I pulled and I fought without care for the damage I did. The Eye was trying to fold shut, but I had wedged a spear between the two halves of the lid, desperately levering to force it open with the fulcrum of a blood-soaked haft. My hands were slick with sweat and gore. My arms were torn and tattered from wounds I did not understand. I pulled and ripped at the innards of the giant with the point of the spear. I grew razor-sharp talons and sharp-edged claws. I sank glittering teeth and rending barbs into the endless sea of wrinkled skin. I sprayed acid and chewed up the flesh of reality, then spat it back out again mangled and melted and steaming. I became a living spear-point myself, wedging my entire being into the gap in the Eye to hold it open so it would not close forever with

myself and my friends within.

But none of this was right. None of this could see victory, not against the weight of an ocean.

We widened our purpose. We gave up on metaphor.

Panic fell away. Sense fell away. Everything left us except intent.

We were in an ocean, and we were an ocean. The Eye was above us, scrunched up tight; we were within the Eye, standing upon the fragile cornea, ready to be swept away by the lids bearing down upon reality. We could not stop this process — not because the Eye was beyond us, not because it was too large, or too great, or too alien.

We could not stop this, because one cannot force observation.

One can force another to look upon the world, yes, but not to comprehend what is beheld.

The Eye was blinking. It would open again, vision cleared, to behold reality anew; the cessation of observation itself would wipe clean the slate of self and other. A cleared plate would await, empty of irritating grit.

We refused to go unobserved.

The Eye did not understand, did not comprehend, had no insight into human beings. So we held our arms aloft between the crashing halves of reality and unfurled everything we were made of — every memory, every experience, every fear and desire and intent. We would not be washed away by the ceasing of observation; we would pass through the blink, through the event horizon and out again, whole and complete and on display, unchanged by the act of being seen. The Eye could not ignore us, not blink us away like a speck of grit.

I'm here! Look at me! See me, observe me, even after you look again! Fuck you!

An apology for my foul language. A hiccup that was neither sound nor motion. Even beyond time and space, I was a very weird girl, I know.

Yellow tendrils grasped my hands.

A strange sensation in a place that was not a place and a time that

was not time, but there was another there, working behind the scenes, deep in this ocean trench. A familiar soft touch joined my strength and weaved her own ways among the raw materials I had given. She worked to turn the dross I had spilled from my guts into a play worthy of a god. She wove and riddled and chiselled and chanted, imposing her own metaphors on this closing of the Eye.

But still reality folded up like a bubble.

I took everything I was, everything I had ever done, all the love and support of my friends — and Sevens' hurried scribbling — and used myself like a pressurised wall of force, pushing outward, pushing back against the folding up of reality.

The blink met me.

And it burst.

Reality split asunder, like a sea parting down the middle. Eyelids rolled back, forced to awareness. Shining silver light burned bright and infinite. Air and open space. Time and being and—

And then reality crashed back upon us like the falling of a tidal wave, swallowing us all together.

bedlam boundary – 24.1

My eyes snapped open, deep in dreary dread-drenched dark, in a place I did not know.

I jerked upright, clawing at my racing heart, clutching scratchy bedsheets to my heaving chest. My breath came in ragged gasps. My skin was coated in cold sweat, gluing my pajamas to my clammy back and belly. Rusty bedsprings creaked beneath my slender shifting weight.

“What?” I croaked. “Where— wha— what?”

Bare walls echoed back my own voice, tinny and timid. I blinked and squinted and swiped at my eyes to clear my sleep-soaked vision. Lonely shadows blessed with me empty outlines beyond the boundaries of my solitary bed. Far away somebody was crying and sobbing, their sorrow muffled behind layers of brick and plaster; further out a distant night-terror scream echoed inside an empty cell.

My left hand followed a dimly remembered instinct, scrabbling across the thin mattress and slapping at cold plastic until I hit the light switch.

Weak illumination bloomed at my side, from a cheap lamp standing on an even cheaper bedside table.

The shadows barely retreated, hovering at my beck and call. The cramped room unfolded like a dream-flicker amid a sea of darkness.

For a long moment I sat unmoving except for the rise and fall of my chest. My legs were tangled in sweat-soaked sheets. My eyes were wide and staring. I lost my voice to a closing throat, swallowed three times, and shook my head.

“Absolutely not,” I spoke out loud.

I climbed out of bed, slowly and carefully, as if the floor might eat me from the ankles up. My feet were bare, which was very frustrating, because the floor was not carnivorous but it was freezing cold. My socks and slippers were on the other side of the

room and I was too shocked to bother putting them on. I scurried to the door and hit the main light switch just to the right of the handle. A single strip-light in the ceiling flickered to life, buzzing with that incessant whine I remembered all too well.

“No,” I hissed, as I took in the room a second time. “No. Absolutely not. No way.”

Cygnets Children’s Hospital. ‘My’ regular room — room number 34, the little cell to which I had returned time and again, whenever I was due for another ‘short residential stay’, as decided upon by the doctors and my parents and my ‘treatment plan’.

Except it wasn’t Cygnets; it was a parody.

The leftmost wall was a true Cygnets wall, exactly as I recalled it — a wobbly blue wave was painted along the bottom, with plain cream-white on top, illustrated with a jolly little cartoon duck promenading from left to right, followed by a line of little baby ducks, all in green and yellow. I had come to hate that stupid duck. The hospital was called Cygnets, not Duckling, so why wasn’t it a swan?

But the right wall was bare brick, brown and red, with water stains running from a spider web of cracks. A pair of chains were screwed into the brickwork, complete with steel manacles at the ends.

Cygnets had been bad, oh yes. For me it was one of the worst places on Earth.

But it wasn’t a nineteenth century ‘insane asylum’. Cygnets was built in 2002.

The back wall was institutional white, plastic and plain, like something from a doctor’s office. It lacked the one window from the real room 34, which should have looked out over the sad little exercise courtyard and tennis court, of which Cygnets was so very proud. The bedsheets were correct — the scratchy, over-warm, too-large Cygnets special — but the bed was a iron frame, painted black, with springs and a carved headboard. The bedside table was not the faux-warm wood that Cygnets had used, and the bedside lamp was like something from the 1970s, a weird round blob with a thick red shade on top.

The floor was half Cygnets’s regular white lino and half creaking wooden floorboards, like from a Scooby Doo cartoon. The door was

Cygnets, but the frosted window had bars inside the opaque glass. The light switch was correct, but the strip-light in the ceiling was absurd. Cygnets had those in the common areas, but never in patient residential rooms.

A desk stood against one wall, but it was crooked and twisted, like a stage prop from the room of a stereotypical tortured artist living in a dusty attic. An iron radiator was bolted next to the desk, which was also wrong — that was straight from a school, not Cygnets at all. A sink and a mirror lurked in one dark corner, and they were about right, but next to the sink stood a stainless steel toilet, like from a prison.

“This isn’t real,” I said out loud. My heart was racing, my throat closing up. Reality did not recoil from my words, so I said it again. “This isn’t real!”

But this didn’t feel like a dream.

Whatever this was, it had none of the soothing emotional calm of one of Lozzie’s dreams, none of the sub-lucid fuzzy logic of dream construction and imaginary spaces. My feet were freezing cold on a lino floor, my skin was slathered in cold sweat, and my hair felt greasy and—

My, my, I, I!

Where were the rest of us!?

I looked down at myself and ran my hands over my sides. Smooth flesh, unbroken flanks. No tentacles.

My throat threatened to close up, not with abyssal change but with the lack of it, with the lack of any of my other selves, with the lack of the smallest hint of abyssal biology. I reeled in horror, staggering over to the tiny mirror, slamming one leg into the steel toilet. I hissed with pain and gripped the edge of the sink, then stared at my own reflection.

My skin was white-pink beneath the harsh fluorescent lighting. My eyes were plain brown, bloodshot and ringed with dark bags. My hair was a mess. I looked strung out and exhausted. I looked mad.

My tentacles, my chromatophores, my additional eyelids, my spikes and spines and barbs, all of it was gone.

My other selves were silent — or absent.

"C—c-calm," I urged myself in the mirror. My voice came out as a strangled choke. "S-stay calm. Stay calm. Calm down, Heather. Heather! Ha- haha- ha- ahhh. *Hic*. Ow! Ow!" I hiccuped and smiled too hard and realised my eyes were bulging in panic. I slammed one hand against the sink; the pain brought me back. "Breathe. Breathe!" I shouted at myself, manic and wild, on the verge of hyperventilating. "What would Raine tell you to do? Hm? Breathe. Concentrate. Breathe. Come on Heather, come on, come on, we can do this, just breathe. Just breathe. This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real. None of this is real. It's a dream. It's a trick. It's not real. Breathe. Slowly now. Breathe."

Long, slow, deep breaths fought back the encroaching edge of a panic attack. My head pounded with the beat of my own pulse, hard and urgent and rushing through my veins. I wrapped my arms around myself, clinging hard. I started to cry, slow and silent, confused beyond words.

I was so very alone.

Moments ago — or hours ago, or last year, or in a dream? — we had been in Wonderland, standing beneath the Eye, in the middle of a plate of Caterpillar carapace, protected by Evelyn's great spell. The Eye had tried to close, to trap us inside a sort of black hole of observation, collapsing reality into a single point. I had speared it with a lance of hyperdimensional mathematics, then—

Then.

Then what?

Nothing. I had no working memory of anything after that moment.

The Heather of one year ago would have curled into a screaming, fetal ball if she had felt reality buckle and break and deposit her ten years into the past, back in Cygnet Children's Hospital. The Heather of six months ago would have broken down sobbing, her heart speared on the assumption that none of her salvation had been real — that Raine and Evelyn and everyone else were products of a delusional imagination, the fruits of schizophrenia finally filling her overtaxed brain with friendly ghosts.

But I was not that Heather anymore; I knew what I was, and I knew I was right.

I lost my temper.

“This is a travesty!” I hissed at the walls and the ceiling — at the Eye. I scrubbed my tears off my face and spat with rage. “This is ... it’s ... offensive! Do you understand that? Did you make this? To do what, to upset me? To wound me? To— to— to break me? You think this is enough to get me to lie down and give up? You think this is going to convince me that I was crazy all along, that the last year of my life never happened?”

No reply came. A distant sobbing echoed from another room, far away.

I swallowed. Doubt crept into my mind.

“ ... did I make this?” I whispered.

Reality — or dream, as it were — did not answer.

“Is this ... inside the Eye?” I kept talking out loud, my mind finally working at speed. “A metaphor for inside the Eye? Have I ... forced shape and reality on it? I know I said I would break reality rather than die. Or see any of my friends die. But this isn’t what I expected.”

I swept my hair back and tried to calm down — then stared at myself in the mirror again. I had to establish one very important fact — was I still me? I squinted at my own eyes, comparing self-image to reality.

Yes, still Heather. The same mousey brown hair, the same muddy brown eyes, the same awkward little nose and crooked mouth and small chin.

A hellish vision. Not a good look, all sweaty and greasy and exhausted, wracked by the aftermath of wordless terror and confused fear. Still, this was the face that Raine had fallen in love with, so it couldn’t be all bad.

“And I’m not ten years old,” I said, looking myself up and down. “That would be very bad. I still look the same.”

I peered into my mouth, wiggled my tongue around, and jammed a finger against my tonsils. I pulled at my eyelids and looked up my own nose and felt no desire to rip off my own skin. My skin felt real, the sweat on my back felt real, drying rapidly in the chilly air. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. My body truly was devoid of any abyssal biology; I double-checked, running my hands beneath

my thin pajamas and down my sides and even between my legs. That was normal, too.

My pajamas were soft pink, worn from years of use, frayed at the cuffs and the elasticated waistband, sporting a pattern of little red strawberries.

Like Maisie's pajama top, the one she'd sent with the message.

Abyssal dysphoria crept up on me, now the panic attack had passed. Panic was sharp and hot, but the dysphoria was cloying and slow, like a muddy weight on my back. I hadn't felt this way in months. No tentacles, no other selves, nothing but a single lonely ape.

I had been reduced.

"Forget the room," I hissed, shaking. "This is a much worse offense." I clawed at my sides, at my hips, wishing I could dig my tentacles out from beneath my flesh. "Give me myself back. Give me back! Give me—"

My left sleeve rode up.

The Fractal was intact, right where it was meant to be. Angular black lines coated the skin of my left forearm. Raine had refreshed it last night. I ran my fingers over the sigil, taking slow, deep breaths.

The first and greatest gift Raine and Evelyn had ever given to me.

"Okay," I hissed. "Okay, Heather, think. What would Raine do? Well, Raine would escape and make an improvised weapon and murder the Cygnet staff, but that's not really my style. Or is it?"

I went back to the door and tried the handle. It was locked, of course, at this time of night. All the good little girls and boys were secured in their rooms, so safe and quiet. I rattled the knob a couple of times to make sure, then bent down to look at the lock — but the door was designed to open inwards, so I couldn't even see the bolt. There was also no keyhole. The door had an exterior rotating latch, just like back in the real Cygnet Hospital.

Luckily I didn't need a key to make a lock go away.

I gripped the handle tight and—

And.

And nothing.

No brain-math. No hyperdimensional equation. No sump of my soul full of black tar and burning truth. I felt nothing where the Eye's lessons should have been.

"Oh come on," I said out loud. My temper frayed. "This is ... b-bullshit! As Raine would say. And no, I'm not apologising for that one. Am I not even myself!? What is this!?"

Forcing the door with raw strength was also impossible. Alone, as one Heather, without the help of my tentacles or abyssal biology, I did not have the muscular power to pull the door off its hinges or yank the lock out of the wood. I pulled helplessly against the handle for a moment, then gave up with an almighty huff.

Alone. Trapped. Locked in. Back in hospital. Singlet, by myself, powerless.

A creeping terror crawled up my spine. Abyssal dysphoria made me feel wrong inside my own skin. I wanted to smash the walls down and peel my flesh open and scream until my throat bled.

"Don't let that feeling win," I hissed. "Don't let it win. If this is a metaphor, then ... then you have to work within the rules of the game. Play along. You can do this, Heather. You did it for years."

I switched off the overhead light, plunging the room back into single-bulb gloom. The tiny bedside lamp did little to push back the shadows, and I lacked the habitual improved night vision of abyssal biology, but the darkness was somehow comfortable and safe. Better already.

The little frosted window set into the door showed me almost nothing, but I pressed my face against the cold glass anyway, trying to peer through the bars and make out what shapes I could. A dark corridor stretched off to the left and right, punctuated by the blank slabs of other doors. A distant window admitted a shaft of silvery moonlight, but I couldn't see the window itself or where it was located.

Somebody in one of the other rooms was still crying, sobbing loud and lonely into the night. A second voice was wailing, somewhere far away, perhaps in another corridor. A thumping was echoing off a distant wall — somebody punching their bed in frustration? Those were not unfamiliar nocturnal sounds, back in the real Cygnet

hospital.

I sighed. “Other patients? Real, or—”

A darker shadow suddenly swept over the frosted window — hulking, misshapen, towering taller the doorway, hurrying along the corridor with a lurching gait.

I smothered a yelp — but too late. The twisted thing turned and stared at me with a glint of glassy eyes in a plate-sized face.

I pressed myself against the wall next to the door, holding my breath, biting my lip so hard I tasted blood. The horrible thing out in the corridor moved closer to the frosted window of my cell, hovering at the threshold, peering inside. The faint light from the bedside lamp picked out sagging, pale, wormy flesh, a pair of whirling eyes spinning in a flat face, and a hint of ragged white clothing, stained with brown smears and rotten red streaks.

Two more figures joined the thing, two looming faces in the gloom, a trio of nightmares writhing and undulating at my door.

The door had a simple external latch and no internal bolt; if those monsters wanted in then I could not stop them. I had nothing, no way to defend myself, no tentacles nor brain-math, not even a sharp rock. I was covered in fresh sweat. I made a fist, squeezing my nails into my palm.

And then the maggoty figure swept away again, leaving my cell behind. Its fellows did the same, wandering after it.

The shadows thumped off into the distance, down the corridor, and vanished into the dark.

I was shaking all over, clutching at my own ribcage.

“Okay,” I hissed. “Okay, now that, that is some Scooby Doo nonsense. Absolutely not real. Absolutely not.”

The words helped, but only a little.

I padded over to my socks and dragged them onto my feet, scrunched my toes against the cold floor, and slipped them into a pair of standard Cygnet slippers.

Then I set about investigating the rest of the cell, while keeping one eye on the door for the return of the nocturnal watchmen.

In the real Cygnet we had been allowed almost any personal possessions we wished, along with books and board games and other sundry items from the common areas, not to even mention toiletries and clothes. Cygnet was not a 19th century torture chamber.

But this parody of a room was oddly sparse. It lacked any personal touch. No cupboard, no dresser, no little set of drawers. The desk was piled with some of my favourite books from childhood — *Watership Down*, *The Hobbit*, among others — but the books looked brand new, their spines untouched by creases. They were not the well-thumbed copies from the shelves in Cygnet. I flipped a few of them open just to see if they contained the correct words. They did.

“At least I’ve got something to read,” I said.

The usual hiding places were empty — under the lampshade, beneath the bed, and inside the toilet cistern. I ran my fingers underneath the rim of the bedside table and found nothing; I felt around behind the radiator and discovered only dust; I crawled under the desk and got nothing but exercise. The absurd manacles chained to the brick wall clanked when I moved them, but they were solid and real and did not conceal anything, not even a silly little secret compartment.

As I straightened up and stood straight in the dark, I heard a faint tapping.

Tap-tap — tap — tap — tap-tap-tap.

The noise was coming from the iron radiator, transmitted down the pipes from some distant source in the depths of the slumbering Cygnet. The tap-tapping was so faint that I could barely hear it over the sound of my own heartbeat. I crouched down and held my ear over the pipes, trying to count the beats or recognise a pattern in the pauses, but I couldn’t make head nor tail of it.

Was somebody in another room tapping on the pipes, trying to communicate?

Hadn’t I seen this in a film?

As an experiment, I tapped back. Just once, with a fingernail against the metal.

The tapping stopped. I waited, shivering and tense, but it did not

resume.

I stood up with a big sigh and cast my eyes around the room again.

“Well,” I said, “if you were trying to convince me that the last year of my life was all a dream, then you’ve done a very poor job of making a convincing room. You should probably have cut the monsters in the corridor, too. They’re a dead give away. I would have a lot more books than this. And a hoodie. And Raine. Can I have Raine? Can I summon her from the ether? If I’m going to be stuck in here, then can I at least have sex?”

The Eye did not reply.

“Or did I do all this?” I said. “Did I make this?”

I let out a big sigh and sat down on the bed. Rusty springs complained about my weight. The pillowcase did not contain any secret messages, nor did the mattress reveal any hidden cache when I ran my hands over the sides. My feet were freezing when I removed them from the slippers, so I tucked them below the covers, scrunching my toes and rubbing my calves. What else was there to do? I slid back into bed and pulled the covers up over my knees.

And then I noticed the warm, yellow layer between the bedsheets.

“Sevens!” I whispered, lighting up with a smile.

It wasn’t the Yellow Princess herself, at least not in the flesh, but the colour was unmistakable. I pulled the yellow blanket free from its false sisters and pressed it to my face, inhaling the scent of home. The yellow blanket was warm with body heat and soft with tender care, thick and plush and gentle to my fingers. It was the exact right size to drape over my shoulders and pull tight around my body. It glowed with a ghostly light, golden and green and grey and black, more akin to the lonely shadows than to electric illumination.

I switched off the bedside lamp. We didn’t need it now.

By the soft and spreading light of Sevens’ eternal gift, we sat up amid sweat-stained bedsheets, and scoured our memories.

We ran through every recollection of the past couple of days, from sleeping together with Raine and Evelyn, through to the last moments in Wonderland as the Eye had ‘closed’. We could detect no gaps, no fuzzy definitions, no periods we did not recall properly.

We double-checked a list of everybody who had come to Wonderland with us — Raine, Eeve, Praem, Twil, Lozzie, Zheng, Sevens, thirty Knights, Six Caterpillars. The Forest Knight had been among the Knights, couldn't forget him. And Mister Squiddy had been in a bucket, strapped to another Knight. Maisie's empty vessel had been there too, but that didn't count as a person, not yet.

I sighed into the false darkness of my cell. "If I had forgotten anybody, would I even know about it? I suppose not. But I feel ... well, no, I don't feel whole. I don't. But I feel coherent. I'm all here. I'm lucid. Aren't I, Sevens?"

I pressed my lips to a corner of the yellow blanket, and decided to wait for morning.

Morning was very far away. Moonlight stretched out long claws in the corridor beyond the frosted glass, creeping down the hallway and vanishing into the shadows. The ragged pale figures did not appear a second time, but I heard strange sounds echoing from the depths of the hospital — thumping, wailing, the scrape of bone on metal. I shivered and shook and forced myself to take deep breaths. None of this was real. Not a thing.

Perhaps I slept a snatch here and a few moments there, with my chin nodding onto my knees, but I neither laid my head upon the pillow nor stretched out my legs to the foot of the bed. I had to be ready for whatever came through that door.

Dawn broke hours later, as a haze of undirected light, a brightening of the institutional whites and creams and grey-beige paints.

Little sounds started to filter into my cell from beyond the walls: the murmur of soft voices in other rooms, in the corridor outside; the beeping of an alarm clock; laughter, far off, echoing off bare plaster and lino floors; the squeak of a trolley, the slam of a distant door.

Human sounds. People sounds. Cygnet sounds.

Reality, of a kind, was waking up.

I heard doors start to open — click-click as locks were turned, clack-clack of smart feet following, creak-creak of trolley wheels behind.

The cell to my right opened with a soft mechanical clunk. Soft, warm, gentle voices floated through the thick wall, muggy and

heavy. I couldn't make out the words.

I bunched a fist in my sheets. I still had nothing with which to fight. The sounds seemed normal, but who was to say the sources were remotely human? Anything might be about to step through that door. I had nothing, none of my skills, my weapons, my tentacles. Just fists and teeth and a scrap of faith.

My heart was racing. Cold sweat broke out on my skin.

Wheels creaked closer. A shadow loomed through the frosted glass, huge and misshapen. My throat closed up. My jaw creaked with clenching. My teeth hurt.

Click-click went the bolt on my cell door. The handle turned. I readied to leap, to flee, to run.

And in swept a nurse.

"Good morning, Miss Morell! Good morning! And how are we this very fine day? And it is fine, trust you that. The sun is just wonderful today. Not a cloud in the sky. I drove here with all the windows down in my car. Can you believe that? This time of year, in England? Amazing, isn't it?"

She was young, and blonde, and comfortably plump. She was dressed in Cygnet institutional whites, not very flattering, but perfectly serviceable. She was all smiles and soft cheeks and no make-up, with her hair pulled up into a smart bun. In one hand she carried a tray full of transparent plastic cups, each one labelled with a name and filled with pills. In her other hand she had a jug full of water.

I did not recognise her, not from life or memory or fiction or anywhere else. She had no place in my mind.

A little name tag on her top read: 'A.HORROR.'

Miss Horror did not wait for me to answer. She placed her tray down on the foot of my bed, inspected the plastic cups briefly, and located the one labelled with 'H.Morell'. She held it up and opened her mouth to speak, then finally paused and frowned down at me, coiled up on the bed.

"Heather?" she said, her voice soft with concern. "Honey? I'm sorry to be so familiar, but are you alright? You look like you just woke up from a nightmare, dear."

I did not trust myself to speak, so I just nodded.

Horror smiled, a little too bright and plump and friendly. She rattled my cup of pills. "So, this morning we have a wonderful menu. Six pimavanserin, four haloperidol, three ziprasidone, a whopping great eight molindone, one teeny little aripiprazole, two chlorpromazine, and three pimozide." She peered into the plastic cup. "Plus a single paracetamol. They always add that for you, but I'm not sure why. You've never complained about pain, have you? Or, oh!" She grimaced. "Is it your time of the month? Do you need a tampon? I can bring you spares, you know? And I've got some ibuprofen for handing out, if you need that. We can always fetch you a hot water bottle, too."

Numb and shocked, I just shook my head.

"You're certain?" she pressed. "You can tell me if you're bleeding."

"No," I croaked. "I'm fine."

I hadn't taken my anti-psychotic medication in years, not since I'd decided it did nothing to make the 'hallucinations' go away, but even when I'd been a good girl and popped my pills daily, the dose had been nothing more than one or two tablets.

That cocktail inside the plastic cup may as well have been hemlock.

Horror placed the cup down on my bedside table, along with a second, empty cup, which she quickly filled with water from the jug in her other hand. Then she picked up the tray, stepped back, and paused as if second-guessing herself.

She smiled and shot me a little wink, then lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "We both know I'm meant to stay and watch you take your medicine, but you're one of my best behaved girls, Heather, and I'm so very busy this morning. I'm running behind, got in late. My cat was being sick all over the doormat when I got up this morning. So, I'm going to trust you to take your pills, while I go see to everyone else along this wing. Can I trust you, Heather?"

Old habits slipped back over me like a protective leather glove. Lie, fake, cheat, and steal, or survival would be impossible.

I swallowed and nodded, then forced myself to smile. "I-I will. I promise. Just ... one by one. Some of the pills are kind of large."

"Good girl," Horror whispered. That made my skin crawl. Whatever

she was, she did not get to call me that. She raised her voice back to normal. "You feeling up for some breakfast this morning, then? Going to head to the mess on time? Or are you going back to sleep? I only ask because we do have to note it down, you know?" She paused and smiled. "But there's bacon and eggs in the mess. If you want them. Take my advice, always accept the free food."

Hunger gripped my belly. I'd been sitting there for hours, waiting for dawn. Confusion and terror were odd bedfellows for an appetite. "Breakfast, I think."

"Wonderful!"

The nurse swept back out of the room and into the corridor. She had some kind of cart out there, filled with more trays and more cups and endless pills. She grabbed the cart and started pushing it past my door, but then paused and stuck her head inside again.

"Oh, and, Heather?"

"... yes?"

"Do you want me to take a message to your sister?"

My blood froze in my veins.

I must have looked gormless with shock, because Horror let out a bubbly little giggle. She shrugged. "Just a thought was all. I'm on box duty today, so I wouldn't have to go out of my way or anything. I know you haven't seen her in a while, with her cooped up in there, but ..."

Was this a trap? Some kind of trick?

I didn't care.

Maisie was here.

"Tell her I love her," I said.

Horror beamed. The smile turned my stomach; it was the look of a person watching a cat do something sweet and stupid, or an adult watching a baby pretend to be all grown up. She nodded, winked, and walked off again. The wheels of her trolley made little squeaks as she went.

I should have asked where my twin was located. But it might have been a trap.

I sat in bed and listened to Horror open the next door along the corridor, heard her sweep into that room and bubble with her bright morning's greetings. I sat very still and waited for her to leave that room and move to the next, then the next, until the nurse was well out of earshot.

When I climbed out of bed, I kept Sevens' yellow blanket tight around my shoulders. I grabbed the little plastic cup with the absurdly lethal dose of pills, then scurried to the door and pushed it shut as quietly as I could.

I dumped the pills into the toilet, closed the lid, and hit the flush.

They went down in one go. Rattle-splash.

I covered my tracks with all my old tricks; I made sure to drink all the water in the second cup so the mark of my saliva and lips would be left behind on the plastic. I sat on the bed and waited for a few minutes, to fill the time I would have spent on swallowing pills. I rubbed my face and worked my jaw, making myself look ever so slightly slack and dull. Drugged and bound, slow and steady, numb to the world. I'd had more than enough practice simulating this in the past.

I didn't care if this was a dream or inside the Eye or a collaborative fiction built from hyperdimensional mathematics. I was not taking those pills.

Maisie was here.

I needed a clear head and a strong heart. I had to act.

The institutional slippers were not warm or comfortable, but they kept my feet off the floor, so back on they went. Sevens' blanket was not a suit of armour, but it made me feel safe and secure. The door in my cell was no great portal, but I opened it wide and stepped out into the corridor.

Just like my lonely cell, the corridor was an attempt to mimic my memories of Cygnet Children's Hospital. The floor was speckled lino, rough and grippy on one's soles — except where it melded into bare wooden floorboards, creaking beneath each step. The walls between the cell doors were painted with bright pastel scenes of happy smiling suns or ponds full of fish or frolicking animals — but every illustration was subtly wrong: the sun had sharp teeth, the fish were eyeless and bleeding, the deer and dogs and little cats had

too many legs and joints in all the wrong places. The cell doors themselves were a jumbled mixture of real Cygnet security doors, metal bars, and heavy wooden slats, like something from a horror movie Raine might have shown me.

At least the other ‘patients’ were normal enough.

A few other girls were emerging from their rooms, scuffing their slippers against the floor as they headed down the corridor, presumably looking for breakfast. Some still wore pajamas, others were wrapped in dressing gowns, while a few were fully dressed in ordinary clothes. All were young, either older teenagers or young adults like myself, though I spotted a couple of girls who could not have been a day over fourteen, holding hands and sticking close to each other.

They all looked human, normal, mundane — though tired, empty-eyed, and hollow inside.

My leftmost cell mate trudged out of her room and greeted me with a wary nod. She had long stringy dark hair and flat grey eyes, a build like an abandoned dancer, and the slumped shoulders of eternal defeat.

I didn’t recognise her at all.

“Going to breakfast?” she mumbled at me.

“Mm. In a minute.”

“Cool.”

She turned away and wandered in the same direction as the others. I watched her go, then quickly examined the gaits and faces and frames of all the girls I could see. I peered into the opposite cell — empty already — and into the one to the right of my own. The girl in the right-hand cell was sitting on her bed, staring at a blank wall, lost in thought. Short blonde hair, sleepy eyes, older than me by several years. I didn’t recognise her either.

Were my friends here, deposited alone and confused in cells of their own, in the same manner as I had been? I couldn’t spot anybody who looked like Raine or Evelyn.

What about my six other selves? Were they all locked up here too?

Perhaps if I went to the mess hall.

After all, I'd first met Raine over bacon and eggs.

I tugged my yellow blanket tight around my shoulders and followed the shuffling girls toward the end of the corridor, past all the open cell doors. The corridor turned right and opened out into a wide intersection. On my left, stairs rose toward a second floor, with other girls descending the steps to join the ragged breakfast-ward flow. On my right was a little security station — a low desk with a lamp and some newspapers, guarding another corridor which seemed darker and more forbidding, studded with steel doors, blocked off with a mesh gate set in a wall of bars. The station was occupied by a nurse — fast asleep, arms folded over her chest. Her name tag read 'A.NIGHTMARE'.

Ahead was more corridor, more girls, more shuffling feet heading for breakfast — and a wash of sunlight.

Daylight poured into the building through a bank of windows on the right-hand side of the corridor. A few girls were stopped, staring out across the landscape with dull eyes, like they'd seen all this a million times before.

I stopped too, and sighed with irritation.

Beyond the windows was the idyllic ideal of a healthsome and regenerative asylum; grassy lawns were punctuated by neat flowerbeds and little wooden benches, topped here and there by the cosy shade of spreading oak trees, weaved together by the warm and inviting threads of brick pathways. A few people were out there already, sitting on the benches or wandering aimlessly. Morning sunshine dusted the gardens with an aura of gentle gold.

The gardens were bordered by a high wall of scorched brick and black iron, topped with coils of rusty razor wire. Bits of rotten meat were snagged in the wire. Past the wall was a rolling landscape of hills and vales and little hedgerows, a cartoon of rural England.

The real Cygnet Hospital did not have grounds, or an exterior wall. It was a modern facility in the heart of London. If you 'escaped' then they'd just call your parents, or social services.

The sunlight had no source.

There was no sun in the sky, for there was no sky in which a sun might shine.

The roof of the world was a flat plane of void-black wrinkles, from horizon to horizon.

The underside of the Eye.

“Well,” I whispered to myself, with my lips pressed to a corner of Sevens’ yellow blanket. “If I was in any doubt about this not being real, there’s my proof. Wonderful. How did I even do this?”

A young woman had stopped just to my left. She stared at me when I spoke, a little alarmed. I cleared my throat, smiled and shrugged, and turned to carry on down the corridor, weaving through the shuffling figures.

Were these real people, or dream simulacra?

Were these all human beings and others who had been trapped inside the Eye, or were they just fakes, empty and blank, with nothing behind their gazes?

They all seemed so real, every one of them.

They were also all girls and young women, without a single male among their number; that was probably another reflection of my own memories. Cygnet Children’s Hospital had been gently segregated by gender, with boys’ and girls’ residential rooms in separate wings of the hospital, though we had shared a canteen and some other facilities.

The corridor finally terminated in what I assumed was the main hub of this imitation Cygnet, a wide entrance hallway, walled with more subtly twisted cartoons, floored in slightly more fancy lino. Dead ahead was a walled-off reception area and a set of fancy glass doors looking out on a gravel driveway. To one side of that was an additional pair of sturdy wooden doors which looked like they’d been ripped out of a Church, standing wide open, admitting patients out into the walled garden.

Nurses manned the reception desk, though they had nobody to receive. A doctor — an older gentleman — was leaning over to talk to one of the nurses. I paused long enough to read his name tag: ‘A.HATER’.

Most of the other girls were trudging away to the right. I followed them toward a pair of archways.

One of the arches led to a big mess hall. It didn’t look anything like

the canteen in Cygnet; the real Cygnet hospital did not actually have very many patients, certainly not more than a few dozen residents at any one time, and most of them only stayed for a few days or a couple of weeks. I had been a rare case, in and out often enough to get to know the place more than I wanted. The real Cygnet canteen had been all little desks and a short counter for food.

The imitation was more like something in a military barracks. Row upon row of plastic benches stretched across a massive hall, dotted with lonely eaters and little clusters of quiet friends. Girls clustered around a long row of counters. Dinner ladies — like in primary school — spooned bacon and eggs and oats and sausages and tomatoes and more onto waiting trays, filling bowls and plates and dishes with better food than the real Cygnet ever had.

“Okay,” I whispered, stomach rumbling. “At least the food isn’t weird grey slop or something. That’s a good sign.”

I stopped on the threshold of the mess hall and peered through the second archway. It led into the hospital’s main dayroom — a very large space, like a re-purposed sports hall, carpeted in soft white. It was a cartoon of a real dayroom, much too large and well-appointed. The space was dotted with groups of armchairs and sofas, with televisions standing like mushrooms at random intervals. Bookshelves lined the walls, board games were spread out on low tables, and a bank of obsolete computers sat quietly in one corner. A massive window looked out over the grounds and up at the wrinkled underside of the Eye.

A few girls were already in there, sitting in little groups or by themselves, though they were all very quiet and reserved. A few stared at the televisions, watching cartoons. A trio were standing by the window, staring out at the gardens; all three of them were very smartly dressed, as if ready for school.

And one girl was alone, sitting in a wheelchair, looking down at a half-finished board game.

My heart leapt into my throat.

Appetite forgotten, I pulled free from the flow of other patients and hurried into the dayroom. The thick white carpet soaked up my frantic footfalls. One of the trio by the window glanced at me with an angelic frown, but I ignored her, tutting a silent apology. I

darted between the low tables, rounded a sofa and approached the lonely girl in the wheelchair.

Relief flooded my chest. I lit up, almost laughing, and collapsed into the chair across from her.

“Evee!” I hissed. “Evee, it’s me. It’s Heather ... it ... Evee?”

Evelyn did not look up from her solo board game.

Up close, I realised it was a miracle I had recognised her at all. Evelyn did not look well.

Her hair was lank, loose, and limp, hanging in greasy unwashed rat-tails. Her golden blonde tresses had gone dull and dusty. Her face was pinched and pale, cheeks sunken, eyes rheumy. She wore a thin white pajama top beneath a grey dressing gown several sizes too large, but the bulky robes could not hide her withered frame. She was thin with malnutrition, not her usual plump and plush self. All her fat was gone. Her maimed hand was coiled in her lap, the skin of her scars raw and weeping, leaving a stain on her pajama top.

A skirt lay almost flat against the seat of her wheelchair. She had no prosthetic leg on her right, just empty fabric. Her left leg was so withered that it was almost invisible beneath the skirt, just a line of fleshless bone.

There was no sign of her walking stick, her bone-wand, or Praem.

She did not look up at me. Her cloudy eyes were fixed on the board game — some kind of war game with little hexes and symbols and pictures of tanks.

My voice caught in my throat. My heart ached.

The imitation Cygnet was obscene. Taking away my true body, my brain-math, my abyssal modifications, that was an insult of the highest order.

But doing this to Evelyn was an atrocity which would not stand. Outrage and fury clawed up my throat.

I reached out for Evelyn with a shaking hand.

“Evee!” I hissed again. “It’s me! It’s Heather! Evee, none of this is real, none of this is ...”

Evelyn Saye lifted her rheumy eyes at last, and stared back into my

own. She blinked slowly, out of sync. She frowned with a pale ghost of her habitual irritation; I could have whimpered with relief. She was still herself, still—

“This is a private game,” she rasped. “Single player.”

“Evee, it’s me! It’s Heather. It—”

“Go away.” She pulled herself tighter, retreating into the safety of her wheelchair, as if wary of me, as if afraid I might hurt her. “Go away.”

“Evee—”

“I don’t know you. Go away.”

bedlam boundary – 24.2

“Evee? What ... ” My voice cracked. “What do you mean? Of course you know me. It’s ... it’s me. It’s Heather.”

This hollow shell of Evelyn Saye stared back at me across the little table, over the lonely complexity of her solitary board game. The truth guttered like a smothered candle in the glassy depths of her exhausted eyes; it lurked in the wary recoil of her shoulders against her wheelchair seat, in the hand quivering against her chest, in the wounded paw tightening and twitching down in her lap.

Evee had no idea who I was.

She jerked her head back and forth, then rasped: “No. No, I don’t know any Heathers. I told you, go away. I’m busy, leave me—”

I reached out in blind panic, leaning across the table to grab her by the shoulder and shake her to her senses. But Evelyn flinched away, eyes going wide with naked fear, pressing herself back into the creaking fabric of her wheelchair.

My heart lurched with shame and horror. My hand stalled in mid-air. I hiccuped.

Not only did Evee fail to recognise my face — she was terrified by my attention.

Was this even the real Evelyn?

Did I behold an Eye-wrought parody, a mockery of the woman I knew, placed in my path to torment me with a vision of her isolated and afraid, in pain without support, to sap my morale and insult everything I had built? Or was this indeed the real Evelyn, trapped and confused just like myself, but not immune to the narrative of this false Cygnet? Was this Evee, with her memories and thoughts occluded?

I made a split-second decision: it made no difference.

If this was a fake and I treated her as real, then no harm would be done. But if this was the real Evelyn and I treated her as a fake, then I would be abandoning her to a delusional purgatory. And I

would sooner eat glass than betray anyone to such a fate, so similar to my own for ten long years.

Some of the other girls in the dayroom were sneaking covert looks at myself and Evelyn. The trio by the window were openly staring at us. I ignored them all, lowering my voice and leaning forward.

“Evee!” I hissed. “It’s Heather! You do know me. Of course you know me. And the last thing I would ever do is hurt you. Just ... just think. Dig deep.” I moved to scoot my chair around the little table so I could sit closer to her, perhaps take this slower. “Look, we can—”

Evelyn’s eyes blazed with a sudden spark of her natural fury.

She hissed through clenched teeth: “I’ll scream for a nurse! I will! Do not test me, you nut-job! Do not! I am not your kind of insane!”

I heaved with relief, half-laughing, half-sobbing. “Oh. Oh, thank God. Oh, thank you, Evee, it is you. It is you. Nobody could fake that. Oh, Evee!”

Evelyn squint-frowned at me like I was mad. She started to hiss another barbed assault, but I quickly tapped the tabletop to interrupt.

“Evee. Evelyn, please, just listen to me. I know what I must seem like to you right now, like I’m just some weird girl invading your privacy and interrupting your solo strategy game. But I’m not crazy. None of this is real. All of it, the place, the hospital, the nurses — it’s all absurd! Look at this dayroom, it’s gigantic. Look out the windows!” I gestured to the massive window which looked out over the grounds, giving the dayroom a prime view of the ostentatious gardens, the wall topped with blood-stained razor-wire, and the sky of wrinkled black skin — the underside or inside of the Eye, with no sun in sight, no source for the blazing daylight, not a crack of blue or cloud in all the firmament.

The trio of smartly-dressed girls were casting sidelong looks at me and whispering to each other.

Evelyn sputtered: “W-what are you suggesting? You—”

“There’s no sky,” I said. “Don’t you see that? The nurses all have ridiculous names. The residential rooms are jumbled up nonsense. None of this is real. Evee, we’re inside the Eye. I don’t know what

it's done to us, but it's built this whole place, this imitation of Cygnet Hospital. It used my memories somehow, or ... or maybe I did this, without meaning to. I can still recall the real world, but you ... " I looked her up and down again, at her missing leg and its withered twin, at her maimed hand with the weeping scabs and angry scar-tissue, at her rheumy, exhausted eyes, at the malnutrition of her starved frame, coiled into that wheelchair. Tears prickled in my eyes. "You don't deserve this," I whispered. "I'm so sorry. I'm going to get you out. I'm going to get us all out, I promise. There must be a way out."

Evelyn stared at me, uncertain and unsettled. The brief flame of her anger was fading fast; her frame returned sagging exhaustion as a gloss of fear crept back into her bloodshot eyes. She kept her body very still, like a small rodent before the gaze of a serpent.

That hurt more than I'd expected.

I hissed her name again. "Evee—"

A bright and lively voice suddenly bubbled out from beside us: "Well well well, what do we have here? What a surprise and delight this is!"

A nurse appeared beside Evelyn, all smart white uniform wrapped around healthy plush flesh, beaming a friendly smile, young and blonde and full of energy. It was the same nurse who had brought the cup of pills to my cold little cell: A.HORROR.

Evelyn flinched much harder than she had from me — a small emotional victory cheered inside my chest — but then she looked up at the nurse with relief. She gestured at me and opened her mouth, but Horror rambled right over her before Evelyn could speak.

"Gosh, you two!" Horror bubbled. "Where did this come from? Not that I'm making a complaint! It's so rare to see you talking with other girls, Evelyn, let alone playing with anybody. Good on you." She nudged Evee in the shoulder without asking. Evelyn winced and jerked, trying to flex her uneven shoulders. Horror didn't seem to notice. "And you too, Heather. Lovely to see you reaching out. So, are you two friends, now? I do hope so! Oh, but don't let me make assumptions, of course. I wouldn't want to make either of you self-conscious, of course! Silly me!"

Evelyn croaked: “She was—”

“Which is why I hate to break up this game,” Horror added, with a sad tut and an ironic little smile. “I’m so sorry, both of you, but you can always come back to it later. We can put a blanket over it or something, so nobody messes with the pieces. Evelyn’s got to go for a bit. She has a visitor!”

Evee’s face collapsed into blank horror. She went white. “No.”

“Yes!” Horror beamed at her. “Your mother’s here! Surprise! She’s waiting over in the visitor’s lounge right now. A flying visit, apparently, just until this evening, so you and her will have to make the best of the time you have. I expect she’ll want to take you on a nice little walk around the grounds. I’ll wheel you over there, save you the trouble of pushing. Come along, Miss Saye!”

Horror stepped behind Evelyn’s wheelchair and took hold of the push handles. Evee tried to grip the wheel rims to immobilise herself, but she was too weak. Her good hand slipped. Her maimed hand could not even close properly. Horror pulled her away from the table, wheeling her backward.

Evelyn’s eyes met mine, filled with wordless terror, and found something she did not expect: recognition and solidarity.

‘Please,’ she mouthed.

I shot out of my chair and stood tall, with my yellow blanket hanging from my shoulders like a cape. But I made a pathetic superhero — I couldn’t even stand directly in Horror’s path. Active resistance might arouse suspicion. I may not get punished, but if a nurse thought I was trying to force an issue, it would only strengthen her resolve. My only option was to play along and turn her against her own aims without her realising I was doing so.

I’d done this with nurses and doctors so many times before. One merely had to pretend to be what they expected to see.

“But you can’t stop the game now,” I said.

I kept my voice level and soft, but slightly bewildered and slow, as if this was self-evident, as if this was a universal rule of reality, as if Horror really could not, categorically, halt the game. I wriggled one arm free from the yellow blanket and gestured at the board, as if she hadn’t noticed the nature of what she was interrupting.

Horror paused and gave me a blank smile. My heart went into a nosedive. I knew that expression all too well — a nurse indulging a patient, but without listening. She'd already made up her mind.

Horror said: "Why-ever not, Heather?"

"It's time sensitive," I improvised. "And it's a very complex board situation. That's how strategy games work. Didn't you know that? Evelyn has to keep a whole lot of different positions and values in her head, and if she's away from the game for a while then she'll forget which ones are important and which ones don't matter. It would give me an unfair advantage. And then I might win, but unfairly. And that's not fair to Eevee, because she's very good at strategy and it would be unkind to make her feel otherwise."

Evelyn jerked her head up and down in agreement. "Y-yes. Very complex board situation. T-that's right ... H-Heather?"

Evee reached out to me with her good hand. I stepped forward to take it; once our fingers were laced together, the staff would have a hell of a time parting us without casual violence, and I was willing to endure a lot of casual violence to keep Evelyn safe — but Horror was quick on the uptake. She jerked Evelyn's wheelchair back, hard enough to make Evelyn wince, and then started quickly wheeling her out of the dayroom.

"I'm serious!" I snapped, trotting to catch up. "You can't take her away from the game!"

"Oh, now, don't be silly!" Horror tutted. She kept weaving the wheelchair through the furniture to keep me away from Evee's side. "Evelyn's mother is here, we can't leave her waiting. I already said it was a flying visit. And you can always come back to the game later, can't you? It's only a game, after all."

Evelyn was panting. Cold sweat beaded on her face. She kept trying to grab the rim of one wheel with her good hand, but she didn't have the upper-body-strength to hold it in place. Momentum tugged her arm back and twisted her fingers. Horror wheeled her out of the dayroom and back into the lino-floored entrance hall.

"It's more than just a game," I rattled off. "It's our first game. You said it yourself, Eevee doesn't talk to others much. It's irresponsible to part us from each other right now. We're bonding. We're making friends. Let me— Eevee- Eevee, hand! Eevee!"

But Evelyn was inconsolable now, panting hard, almost crying. She seemed to have forgotten I was there. My heart felt like it might burst. I hurried to keep up with Horror as she pushed Evelyn across the entrance hall at a brisk walk.

Horror tutted and gave me a gently unimpressed look. "Heather, you shouldn't exaggerate. And it's not nice to tell porkies."

Evelyn whimpered; her eyes were fixed dead ahead.

Doors and hallways stood all along the far side of the big entrance hall. Some looked like they led to physical therapy rooms or doctors' offices or waiting rooms. Most of the doors were unlabelled, blank expanses of plain institutional white with grey handles.

But one was a steel security door. No handle. No little window.

It was labelled in big black letters: V.I.P. VISITORS ROOM

"Oh, that's absurd," I hissed under my breath. "Not Cygnet at all."

Horror almost paused. "What was that? Sorry, Heather."

Evelyn whined. "Please. Please, no."

I had to do something, anything, any gambit.

"She doesn't want to see her mother!" I blurted out. "Evee doesn't want to go! Not without me!"

I lunged forward to grab the handle of Evelyn's wheelchair. Evelyn reached back and tried to grab me, scrabbling at the seat. But Horror was faster than both of us, turning the chair deftly to one side to keep Evelyn and me apart. She gestured with one hand and nodded at somebody. Suddenly another nurse was in front of me, blocking my way with the threat of an arm.

This nurse was tall and willowy and sharp at the edges. Her name tag read 'A.SADIST.'

Horror marched off, wheeling Evelyn toward the steel door. She called back to me, all bubbly and bright: "It's very sweet of you to care so much about a new friend, Heather, but she's just going to see her mother for a bit, really. She'll be back before you know it!"

Sadist barred my way. I bit my lip so hard I drew blood, shaking with rage and humiliation, wracked with fear for Evee.

Could I have fought? Oh yes. I could have thrown myself at Sadist and clawed at her eyes, or darted around her and sprinted for Evelyn. But I knew what would happen — Sadist would bundle me to the ground, joined by half a dozen more nurses. They were watching from the sidelines, from the reception desk and the mess hall archway, ready for the signal to jump in. Back in the real Cygnet that would have meant a day or two in isolation, endless reviews with the doctors, interviews with my parents, the bland subject of behavioural review and assessment.

Here, in this dream-mockery, would they jab me with a sedative, wrap me in a straight-jacket, toss me in a padded cell? Probably. One of the nearby nurses held something sharp and glinting — a needle concealed by her palm.

In the real Cygnet, maybe I would have fought, just to exercise the only power I had, to scream my objection in a soundproofed cell for the next forty-eight hours.

But this wasn't real. None of it was real. The rules were different here.

And I couldn't help Evelyn from inside a cell.

The V.I.P. room security door swung wide to admit Evelyn inside. I caught a glimpse of bland blue armchairs, scratchy carpet, and a vapid still-life painting on the wall.

A writhing void-dark mass of static lurked in the murky depths of the waiting room, like a ball of spiders at the bottom of a boot.

Evee's mother?

Horror pushed Evelyn over the threshold, then turned to close the door. The mass of black static drifted forward, coming to meet Evelyn. I saw Evee's fingers go white on one wheelchair armrest.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted: "I love you, Evee! Never forget I love you!"

Horror smiled with indulgent sweetness. The steel security door closed with a click.

Sadist watched me with eyebrows raised, as if waiting to see if I was going to rush at the door or try to punch her. I shrugged at her beneath my yellow blanket, panting and red in the face. She tilted her head to one side in a silent challenge. Just try it, crazy girl. You

want a day in the cool-down hole?

I turned and walked away, stalking back toward the mess hall and the dayroom.

Angry feet carried me through the archway, across the plush dayroom carpet, and over to Evelyn's abandoned board game.

Some of the other girls stared, or whispered to each other. One girl pointed at me. Another giggled. Evelyn and I had made quite a scene, hadn't we?

Back in the real Cygnet, ten years ago, I would have felt mortified. Pre-teen or teenage Heather would have been embarrassed beyond words, blushing and apologising and running away to some dark hole where she could pretend the world did not know she was crazy. She would certainly not have returned to the scene of the crime, shrugging off every darting gaze and hushed whisper. I longed to flare my tentacles and hiss at the other girls. But I couldn't. It was just me, alone. The abyssal dysphoria of missing all my extra parts and other six selves was far worse than any embarrassment.

Cowards, all of them. They should have helped!

There were hundreds of girls in the mess hall, and how many nurses? A dozen within earshot? We could take them. We could take all of them if we had our tentacles. We could run over a riot-line of nurses like bowling pins and rip that steel door from its hinges and—

We could—

We could do nothing. We were prisoners of a metaphor and a dream. Alone, shorn, bereft of truth.

I forced myself to take several deep breaths, then concentrated on the board game, but the pieces didn't make any sense. The board was very complicated, with little hexes for movement, all coloured to represent different kinds of terrain. Cardboard counters represented infantry, armoured vehicles, artillery, and even a few cavalry units. Evelyn had been playing both sides, but the ones in red seemed to be winning. She had a notebook next to the board, full of little notations about how the campaign was progressing, but it was all in code and numbers and unfamiliar jargon.

Would I have dreamed up this board game? I'd never seen anything like it before. Would I have imagined a scenario that required Evelyn's torture by the memory of her mother? Absolutely not.

I picked up a counter from a pile of reserves and peered at the artwork — some kind of tank. It was immaculate.

"This isn't real," I whispered. "None of this is real."

"You shouldn't say that," said a voice.

I flinched in surprise and whirled to face the speaker.

It was one of the smartly-dressed girls who had been standing by the window. She must have crept up on me, her footsteps absorbed by the plush dayroom carpet, while I was examining the board game.

She was dressed like a teenage girl ready for a day at a posh private school, in a storm-grey blazer over a high-collared, starched, scratchy-looking shirt, complete with a matching grey tie and a grey skirt around slim hips. She had freshly polished black shoes on her feet, legs wrapped in a pair of high-denier black tights, a pair of thin-rimmed metal glasses on her face, and a heavy, hardback book clutched to her chest.

Her two companions over by the window were dressed similarly, both eyeing me with venomous stares.

The girl before me had a face like that of a porcelain doll — soft-skinned, milky-white, angelic. Long dark hair looked artificially straightened, too smooth and neat and perfectly level. Amber eyes squinted through thick glasses, blessing me with misplaced pity.

"You shouldn't say things like that," she repeated, high and delicate, with precise, careful enunciation.

My eyes bulged in shock.

It was Twil.

She looked nothing like herself, barring only the shape of her face, the colour of her hair, and the wolfish tint in her eyes. She lacked even her naturally athletic physique, as if that grey uniform had sucked out all her vitality.

I was so shocked. Evelyn had made a cruel kind of sense, but what did this mean? I just stammered: "T-things like what?"

Twil frowned at me, lips pinched in dainty disapproval. "Like telling delusional people that the world isn't real. That's very cruel of you. That poor girl." She shook her head, pulling a face of high-minded sorrow.

"But it's not." I recovered and reached out for her. "Twil, it's me! It's Heather! We're inside the Eye, we—"

"Stop, please," Twil said, soft and mewling, batting her eyelashes like I had raised a hand to a fainting damsel. She retreated from my touch, holding out her book as a shield. "I'm not your sort of unwell, I'm sorry. And we don't know each other."

One of her friends called softly: "Twillamina, we're going to be late. Come along."

I almost burst out laughing. "Twillamina?! That's not even your name, Twil! Come on, fight this! You're better than this. You've gotta help me get Evee out of there! We have to break this somehow, but I can't do it alone. Twil!"

Twil retreated a few hesitant paces. She seemed confused, blinking amber eyes behind her thick glasses. "I-I'm sorry, I can't help you with your friend. I'm sorry ... "

"She's your friend, too! More than that, you and her were involved. Maybe you still are, I don't know."

"I-I wouldn't know anything about that. And I'm sorry, but I must go. I'm late for chapel."

"Chapel?"

Twil nodded, head tilted down, eyes turned up, deferring and submissive even to this crazy girl who she did not know.

I laughed openly this time, shaking my head. "Twil. Twil, look at yourself. You look absurd. You look like an extra from a sapphic boarding school novel. Twil, just, just listen—"

Twil scurried away, hiding her face from my sight, retreating toward her friends. One of them gently took Twil's hand, fingers laced together. The other wrapped an arm around Twil's waist, sheltering her from me, guiding her away, heading for the archway. One of Twil's friends twisted a nasty little squint in my direction.

"The chapel of nature, for your information," she said, like I was a

moron and a snake. "In which we should all worship. Don't follow us, thank you very much. And don't bother Twillamina again. Pagan."

The three of them marched out of the dayroom, arm in arm, Twil in the middle. Twil's shoulders were shaking gently, as if swallowing tears.

I stood frozen for over a minute.

"Oh no," I whispered eventually. "Oh, great. Is everybody like this? Trapped in some personal nightmare?"

Many of the other girls in the dayroom were staring at me again. I was putting on quite the show — the second strange scene in twenty minutes. But other resident patients were beginning to drift in from the mess hall, their breakfasts finished, their bellies full, ready to sit down and watch TV or play board games or space out doing nothing. Attention was leaving me, turning towards friends and fellow inmates.

I was just another crazy girl, wrapped in an old yellow blanket, saying weird and upsetting things to people who did not want me.

The Heather of ten years ago, back in the real Cygnet, would have been mortified to the point of absolute self-negation; I had always worked so hard to dress myself every day, to appear as normal as I could, to avoid at all costs those behaviours defined as 'crazy' or 'insane', to show the doctors and my parents and even my peers that I was normal, that I was okay, that I could be let out. And here I was, talked down to by the closest thing this place had to a trio of 'normal', 'well-adjusted', 'sane' girls.

The Heather I had become did not care.

I did not, as Raine would say, give a single shit.

Pardon my language.

I tugged my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulder; I probably could do with some proper clothes, if I was going to step outdoors and follow Twil, but that was strictly a plan B. Evelyn was trapped behind a steel security door with her 'mother', but I would not be able to get in there and rescue her alone, not without serious help. Twil was trapped in a different kind of bind, of religion and decorum and her pair of weird catty friends — I could see myself

marching out there and bothering them, but I would need to peel Twil away from her escort first, and I would need a way to ensure I could snap her out of this nightmare.

I needed help! I needed to find somebody who wasn't lost in the dream. I had to find my friends and—

And do what?

What was I going to do, even if I found Raine? Murder a nurse? Steal the keys? Stage a breakout?

Yes, I realised. I would murder every nurse in this hospital if I had to.

And Zheng? Zheng could easily break down a steel door and kill her way through much worse than a gaggle of nurses. I couldn't imagine her submitting to this. And what about Praem? The pair of them together would not be held by any of this for long. And don't forget Lozzie, no oh, not my Lozzie, my darling little dreamer. She might be immune to this, just like me.

But Raine was my priority. She would know what to do. She would know how to free Eeve. And once we were all back together, nothing could stop us from finding Maisie.

Above all others, when in trouble, my heart reached out to Raine.

"I need to be smart," I whispered to myself. "I need to be focused. And I need to find help."

Quickly and methodically, I glanced around the dayroom, scanning every face and frame, searching for any hint of my friends — especially Raine. There were so many girls in there, and so many more in the mess hall, it would take ages for me to check every single person, but I had to. There was no other way, not unless Raine was searching for me in return.

"And if she's not," I whispered to myself, "that probably means she's lost her memories too. Or she's confined. Or not here. No, no, don't say that. She has to be here. She has to be. She ... she ... what?"

The rear of the dayroom was dominated by a long, low counter top, on which sat two terrariums and two animal cages. Apparently this imitation Cygnet had group pets.

I walked over to the cages and terrariums, jaw hanging open, unable to believe my eyes.

The cages contained nothing out of the ordinary — one had a hamster, the other a tortoise, both of them acting completely normal. The hamster was drinking from a water bottle attached to the side of the cage, while the tortoise was sitting beneath a reptile heat lamp. One of the two glass cases contained a lizard of some kind, all coral-pink with massive round eyes — also normal, though I knew almost nothing about lizards.

The second terrarium contained the six Caterpillars who had accompanied us to Wonderland.

The Caterpillars were reduced to a tiny fraction of their real size, as if shot with a cartoon shrink-ray, each one no larger than a bulky snail. They were going around and around in a ring on the earthy floor of their glass prison. They'd worn a circle into the dirt, going around and around and around and around and around. They didn't stop crawling even when I bent down to press my face against the glass, around and around. They just kept going around and around.

Their tank contained a little log and a fake plastic castle, lots of crushed leaves, and little else.

"Oh," I breathed, feeling their pain. "Oh, I'm so sorry. You're meant to be explorers, wanderers, out there building things and discovering forgotten places. And you're stuck in a glass tank. No, no, what is this?"

The Caterpillars did not stop, or look up, or react in any way I could see. They just went around and around, like a tiger pacing a cage too small for instinct.

A nearby girl was looking at me with cringing pity, so I shot her a frown, a so-what-if-I-talk-to-animals sort of look.

The old Heather could never have done that. The girl scurried off, pretending she had not even seen me in the first place.

I examined the lid of the Caterpillars' terrarium and then glanced around the dayroom again, but I decided against a tiny prison break; I could probably get the lid off and scoop all six Caterpillars into a fold of my yellow blanket, but I'd be spotted the moment I made the attempt. And what would I do with them, anyway? Stash them in my room, as trapped as they were right here? And what if

they were just as mentally imprisoned as Evelyn and Twil? Would they bite or sting me? Would they even know who I was?

I leaned down and pressed my face close to the glass. "I'll be back for you. I promise. And the Knights too, if I can find them. I'm sorry. I'll be back."

No time for hesitation; if I was the only one free and lucid, then I had to act.

Before I left the dayroom I scooped up a black marker pen from one of the tables and hid it inside the folds of my yellow blanket. The Fractal was still fresh on my left forearm, and perhaps that was keeping me lucid, so I needed a way to refresh the symbol if this 'dream' went on for more than a day or two of subjective time. To that secret stash I added several random tokens from Evelyn's board game, and a book from the shelves — I didn't pause to check what it was, because the actual title didn't matter. I just grabbed things that might seem useful later on.

Next I obeyed the demands of my body, real or not — I trudged out of the dayroom and into the mess hall, to force some breakfast down my gullet. I'd rather lost my appetite, but I would need fuel for whatever fight I chose.

The mess hall was impersonal and bland, with terrible echoey acoustics, all off-white plastic and cold benches and sticky tiles. One wall was lined with large airy windows looking out over the asylum gardens.

Many girls still sat in little groups, eating breakfast and filling the room with chatter both too loud and too quiet at the same time, as if the space itself was swallowing their voices. The crowd at the counter had thinned to a trickle; I joined them and took a stainless steel tray from a metal rack. The real Cygnet had always used proper bowls and plates, though made of plastic instead of porcelain. The metal tray was more like something from a military barracks.

A trio of nurses waited behind the food counter, with hygienic face-masks and white aprons. Name tags read 'A.POISON,' 'A.SICKNESS,' and 'A.DRUG.' They beamed at me and asked what I wanted, just as they did for every other girl ahead of me in line. I filled up on bacon and eggs and roasted tomato, with several thick slices of French toast on one side, and a helping of baked beans on the other.

The food must have been safe. All the other girls were eating.

But there was nothing with lemon. And no strawberries.

Tubs of plastic cutlery stood at the end of the counter. I took a spoon and a fork, then three knives at once, hiding my extras below the tray until I could slip them inside my yellow blanket. Plastic knives were not much of a weapon, but they were better than bare hands. My heart raced inside my chest, fearing discovery, but I slipped away before anybody noticed my additional acquisitions.

I claimed a lonely window seat right on the end of one the benches, a little way from a small cluster of girls who looked about my age. I ate as quickly as I could, chewing properly, testing for needles or razor blades or bits of bone, listening to the nearby chatter.

One of the nearby girls was saying a name over and over: "Lidi. Lidi. Lidi?"

Another girl finally grunted. "Mm? What?"

"Do you wanna watch ... some more of ... Crystal Maze, later?"

A third voice joined in, snorting: "Isn't that really shitty and old? Opal, you're such an old lady."

"She's not," said the grunting girl. "She's clever. Don't be nasty, Rebecca."

"I'm not being nasty," Rebecca pleaded. "Old ladies are nice. Opal is nice. You're nice, Opal."

"I just wanna watch the game parts," Opal complained. "I'll do it by myself if nobody wants to."

"Mmmm," 'Lidi' grunted again. "I would, but I've got therapy after breakfast. Wanna go shower first. You know?"

Opal made a shuddering noise. "We've all got therapy. Hate it."

"Hate it," another agreed.

"Hate. It. Ugh," said Rebecca. "Nasty."

The chatter continued onward, but changed subjects, revealing nothing of use, trailing off into a discussion about how to figure out which showers had been most recently cleaned, and then negotiations to share some nice shampoo that Opal's family had

sent her.

They all seemed so real, so alive, so complete, not like cardboard imitations wheeled onto the stage by the Eye, just to confuse me and fill out the background. Could I have dreamed up all these people? Or were they inside the Eye, trapped like Maisie?

What was I surrounded by?

I had to get one of them alone, somewhere private and safe, to test what they knew.

I spent a few minutes covertly staring at the faces of the nearest girls, to see if they would warp and melt when I wasn't paying attention. But their mouths matched the sounds of their words and they chewed and swallowed their food like human beings. They breathed and puffed. They were imperfect and messy. One girl on the next table over had some of the frizziest hair I'd ever seen. Another was crying softly into a bowl of cereal — until a nurse wandered over and asked if she was okay. A third was shaking both legs with some kind of compulsion, bouncing her knees up and down.

All real.

I watched faces and postures, mannerisms and gestures, but I spotted none of my friends.

Through the wide windows at my elbow, the garden grounds of this imitation Cygnet rolled away toward the exterior wall, topped with coils of razor-wire, all beneath the wrinkled black sky of the Eye's impossible hide. Girls wandered here and there, or sat on the benches, or stared at the flowerbeds. A grey-clothed trio were sitting quite far out, on the edge of some oak-tree shade, a red-and-white checkered blanket spread beneath them — Twil and her friends.

With my belly full and my mind set upon my task, I took my tray back to the counter, to drop it off with the other dirty utensils. I stood there for a moment at the rear of the mess hall, scanning the faces of every girl I could see, one by one.

No Raine, no Lozzie, no Praem. No sign of Sevens, except around my shoulders. No Knights — unless they had turned into young women, but that seemed unlikely. No Mister Squiddy either, though I had no idea what form he might take in this place. No Puppet

either, faking Lozzie's form. And certainly no Zheng. Her size should have made her easy enough to spot.

"Where is everybody?" I whispered to myself. "Come on, Raine. I need you, right now."

I had three choices, and two of them were not choices at all: break into the V.I.P. visitors' area and try to rescue Evelyn by myself, without brain-math or tentacles or backup, to pull her from the clutches of her 'mother'; head out into the gardens to confront Twil, and probably get my eyes scratched out by her friends.

Choice number three was my only option.

With my yellow blanket around my shoulders, scratchy institutional slippers on my feet, and a belly full of bacon and eggs, I strode off to explore Cygnet Children's Hospital.

The real Cygnet was a boring rectangle of brick and concrete, painted both inside and out in inoffensive white and cream, filled with a warren of simple clean corridors and sensible upright walls and doors that all looked the same. The real Cygnet had jolly little 'You Are Here' maps in every stairwell and waiting room; the layout was modern and well ventilated and brightly lit, designed to be easily navigated and understood, even by the small children who so often found themselves within its halls. Pastel animals were painted on the walls at child-height; doctors' offices sported modern furniture and plush toys; every exterior wall was studded with windows to let in the natural sunlight — to alleviate the feeling of being entombed.

Modern, clean, bright. Sensible. Superior. Straight up and down.

This parody of Cygnet was a shadow-filled, rust-edged, ridiculous labyrinth.

Beyond the wide entrance hallway and the route back to my own cell, corridors seemed to branch and proliferate, multiplying as soon as I stepped off the path of memory. I passed by modern residential rooms warped by the inclusion of nineteenth century bed frames, ancient brick holding cells with rusted doors of iron bars, and rubberised rooms with padded walls and sagging steel portals hanging from their corroded hinges. Modern lino flooring gave way to creaking boards and stained concrete, then crept back again in patches and strips of fraying under layer, like three different

buildings interposed onto the same space. Modern electric strip lights competed with naked bulbs swinging on the end of their power cables, overcome here and there by fixtures for gaslights and even a sconce or two for candles — though I found none of the latter, except a single stub of wax and sooty wick; I stuffed that into my yellow robes, just in case.

Each corridor split and split and split again, as if leading me deeper and deeper into the lightless depths of the asylum. There were no other girls in those echoing depths, no feet scuffing but my own. And no nurses.

But try as I might, I seemingly could not lose my way — as soon as I started to feel turned around or confused, I would stumble once more upon a main corridor, with patients in their rooms, or doctors in little offices, with nurses bustling up and down. Windows would open out before me, looking out across the garden grounds, as if to prove that this building was not an infinite depth beneath a fragile skin.

This process of fractal wandering and re-emergence appeared to be infinitely repeatable. I spent perhaps a full hour plunging into the depths of the hospital over and over, taking random corridors into the flickering darkness between the walls, trying and failing to build up some knowledge of the internal layout.

My sense of direction wasn't that bad, but I could never find the same room twice.

Those oddly abandoned depths sometimes echoed with strange, distant cries, like sobbing or screaming carried down endless corridors. I heard the clank of chains behind stone walls, and the rustle of rotten fabric across floorboards. Would I meet one of those things I'd seen during the night, the monsters which had peered in through my cell window? I clutched one of my little plastic knives in a sweaty fist and kept my yellow blanket tight around my shoulders.

But I never stopped moving. I had to find my friends. None of this was real.

And it was offensive, too.

"This is almost an insult to the real Cygnet," I hissed as I wandered down one particularly awful, dilapidated hospital corridor, with a

sagging ceiling and water-damaged walls. “The real building was at least functional. Do better. Please.”

But no matter how far and wide I wandered, two things eluded me.

I couldn’t find any of my friends. I checked inside every room, around every corner, into every dark hole. In the lighted and inhabited parts of the hospital I watched every face, hurried to catch up with every wandering girl and striding nurse. But no Raine, not anywhere.

Secondly, the nurses wouldn’t answer my questions.

I got that bright idea after I gave up on searching through the depths. If Raine was also a patient here, then surely I could just ask where she was? Horror, for all her cruelty, had told me that Maisie was around here somewhere, so why not Raine?

But every nurse I passed was always too busy. Some of them ignored me completely, some dismissed me with a glance, or a ‘sorry, love! Have to be somewhere else, ask another staff member!’ Some tried to direct me back to the dayroom, or ask if I was okay, or if I needed a lie down.

So I gave up on that too. Instead, I focused on the exterior of the building.

The imitation Cygnet seemed to have multiple ‘wings’ — they jutted out into the gardens, clearly visible whenever I happened across a window. Most of them were made of pale red brick, piled up into faux-gothic facades, like a country house reborn from the flesh of a Northern industrial city. Counting the number of wings turned out to be impossible; I tried to map the space several times, orienting myself by trees and garden landmarks whenever I returned to a window, but the dream-Cygnet seemed to have three wings, then six, then two, then only one.

Three of the disappearing and reappearing wings seemed distinct from the others, unique and special.

One was very modern, like a chunk of the real Cygnet ripped straight from my memories, but larger and more complex. The second unique wing was enough to make me sigh in disgust — a sort of rust-streaked prison visage, all tiny barred windows set into thick wall of bare concrete.

The third unique wing was outside of my experience entirely; it looked more like something from a video game or a movie that Raine might have watched once. Cold grey steel, windowless and windswept, with only one exterior door — sealed behind multiple layers of high-security fence, razor-wire, and guard stations. The roof was studded with sirens, searchlights, and a trio of guard towers, silent steel sentinels with big blocky guns mounted on top.

I pressed my face to the windows whenever I spotted that dark and forbidding wing. Little figures manned the towers and the guard stations, but I couldn't make out any details.

"Okay," I muttered to myself when I finally got a good look at that third wing. "Three guesses as to where Maisie is being held. I wish Evee was here, so I could make a wager. She probably wouldn't accept the bet, though. I miss you, Evee. I miss everyone."

Once I had seen those three unique wings and fixed them in my imagination, they turned out easy enough to find, inside the hospital.

The corridors seemed to lead me to their scattered innards whenever I set my mind upon the task, as if the outer wings were only a signifier of the chaos all jumbled up inside this place. The modern wing, the chunk of 'real' Cygnet, showed itself in brightly lit doctors' offices and physical therapy equipment, in wide and empty waiting rooms, in inner courtyards and clean modern showers and a miniature library and even a swimming pool — drained of water and empty of girls right then, of course.

The rust-and-ruin prison-complex wing was just as simple to find, but impossible to access.

I'd actually encountered it prior to breakfast, when I'd noticed that little security station with a sleeping nurse, guarding a chain-link wall. Those walls separated the 'normal' areas of the hospital from the dark reaches of a prison. I ran into those chain-link, wire-mesh barriers over and over and again, as soon as I started looking. Sometimes the guard station had a napping nurse, but sometimes it was empty. But always the corridor beyond the chain-link was lined with steel doors, poorly lit, and echoing with strange cries and warbling voices.

When I found the fifth such blockage to my progress, I stopped, put my hands on my hips, and muttered: "This is obscene. I hope you

know that. If you're listening. Real hospitals do not work like this anymore. Monstrous nonsense. This isn't a ... a ... spooky video game!"

The nurse at the nearby desk blinked herself awake and smacked her lips, squinting and smiling at me. She was heavysset and jolly-looking, with grey hair in a bun, and a box of doughnuts on the desk before her.

Her name tag read: 'A.BRUTE.'

"You lost, love?" she asked in a sweet-old-lady voice. She nodded sideways at the wire-mesh wall. A little chain-link door stood in the middle, padlocked shut. "You can't cut through here, you know? Nothing personal, Heather, just health and safety. Here, would you like a doughnut?"

She nudged the box toward me; real Cygnet nurses would never have offered us random confectionery.

I smiled back, made my eyes soft and loose, and shrugged my shoulders — uncommitted, not bothered, slow.

"Just taking a look," I said, slurring my words ever so slightly. I let my eyes drift down to the doughnuts. "Ohhh. Um. I shouldn't." I smiled again, in a different way, and shook my head. "Sorry. Thanks. I mean. Sorry."

Brute smiled back, convinced she knew exactly what I was.

"You hurry along, dear," she said. She gestured at the wire-mesh wall and chain-link door. "If you're trying to get around all this to reach the movie room, you'll want to head two rights straight in the opposite direction. Then left, then up, then down and left and right again. You got that?"

"Mm-mm," I hummed. "T-thanks. Thank you. Thanks."

I wandered off, back into the corridors of this false Cygnet.

Acting drugged and slow came easier than I'd expected. My body remembered the plodding slouch with ease; my face recalled the slack, relaxed, passive mask of just-another-crazy-girl. Whenever nurses were near I gazed down the corridors and into the rooms with feigned disinterest, with lazy curiosity, wearing the look of somebody who had been here far too long, searching for a mote of entertainment in the sunlight on glass and the dust dancing in the

air.

Did the nurses ignore me shuffling about the halls because I looked like a lone wanderer, wrapped in my yellow blanket, harmless and happy — or because none of this was real, because they were meant to let me pass, because they were dream-figments of the Eye?

I was not eager to test either hypothesis. I stayed slow and slack and steady. I passed by beneath notice.

And then, when I finally tried to find it, I ran across an interior entrance to that high-tech wing of grey steel and armed security.

A huge circular portal appeared as I turned just another corner, filling the corridor from floor to ceiling. I stumbled to a halt, breath catching in my throat, like I'd run across a bear or a moose. Set on massive steel hinges, gleaming with polished metal, flanked by a bank of control panels like something out of a spaceship, the door was more akin to a bank vault or the hidden entrance of a secret underground military base.

Two men were standing guard — or what looked vaguely like men, from their builds beneath black, blank, bland body armour. Their faces were hidden behind featureless helmets with mirrored visors over the eyes. Their throats were armoured too, covered in a thin layer of black kevlar, or some similar substance. Their hands were wrapped in black leather gloves, so not a single inch of skin showed.

Both men carried firearms, secured across their fronts with shoulder-straps.

Their uniforms showed an odd insignia over the heart — a trio of crossed tentacles, pale and bloodless, impaled on a metal spike.

Both guards turned their heads to regard me as soon as I stumbled to a halt, their eyes hidden behind reflective visors, faces concealed by black armour and fabric.

“Um,” I blurted out.

One of them spoke: “Miss? Are you lost?”

His voice was muffled by fabric and armour, so thick that I couldn't see his jaw or mouth move, English but impossible to place as a specific regional accent. The voice also wasn't distinctly male, but somewhere between masculine and feminine.

“I-I was just—”

He didn’t give me time to finish. “Move along, please. This area is off limits to regular patients. If you’re in distress and need a nurse, I can call one for you.” He raised one hand toward the side of his head, as if preparing to speak to a microphone built into his helmet.

“T-that’s alright, sorry,” I said, blinking slowly and nodding in deference, laying it on as thick as I could. “I didn’t mean to come here, I-I don’t want to go in. Sorry. Just a mistake, j-just a mistake.”

The second guard raised a hand to his companion and spoke to me. “One sec. You’re Heather, right?”

He had exactly the same voice — indistinct, muffled, androgynous.

Something stirred in my chest and stopped me from fleeing. “Yes. Yes, hello, that’s my name.”

“Thought so,” he said. “One of the nurses told us you might come and try to visit your sister.” He spoke with an apologetic smile in his voice. “Sorry, young woman, but we can’t let you in. No visitors in The Box. You know that, if you’re family.”

My throat closed up. Was this a trap? Or an opportunity? And what was I talking to? The nurses and doctors I’d spotted were obviously meant to be human — but what were these guards?

Was Sevens pulling strings behind the stage?

I took a calculated risk: “I understand. Sorry. I really didn’t mean to come here, though. But now I’m here ... can I at least ask how she is?”

The two guards shared a glance — the kind that adults share when children ask about terminal illness, or disability, or dead pets. My stomach scrunched up and turned over, heavy with too much breakfast, tight with horror.

One of the guards must have seen the fear on my face, because he quickly said: “She’s alive. Maisie Morell, right? She’s alive.”

The other one hissed: “I don’t think we’re supposed to say even that much.”

“We’re not? Why not?”

“Governor’s orders.”

“Oh. Uh. Shit.” The first guard looked back at me again. “Sorry. We can’t. Governor’s orders, apparently.”

“I’m not joking,” said the second guard. “She’ll have our hides.”

I took another risk, and said, “Who ... who’s the governor?”

“The governor,” one guard said.

“Governor,” echoed the other.

“Governor.”

They fell silent, staring at me. An odd *deja vu* crept up my spine and over my shoulders, not entirely unpleasant.

I pushed my luck further, hoping I was right: “Why do you two have those guns? This place is just full of young women. You can’t possibly need firearms like that for a bunch of girls. Do you?”

The guards both looked down at their guns at the same time, in sync. My heart leapt with hope.

I prompted them: “Is it for the monsters who walk the hallways at night?”

Both guards looked up again. One of them said: “Oh. Maybe. That. Yeah.”

“Mm,” the other agreed. “Director’s orders.”

I frowned. “I thought you said governor’s orders?”

“Her too,” the first guard said.

“Are the director and the governor different people?” I asked.

The guards looked at each other. “Yes,” said one. “No,” said the other. Then they switched — “No,” “Yes.”

Then silence.

My suspicion became certainty. But I couldn’t say it out loud, for fear of provoking a rejection.

The ‘guards’ were not human beings, nor imitations of such, nor of anything else.

These were the Knights.

I wet my lips, and worked within the boundaries of the dream.

I said: "Can you tell me the location of other patients? Nobody in 'The Box', I mean. Just elsewhere. Are you allowed to do that?"

Both Knights looked back at me. One of them said: "We might have to radio for that request? I think?"

"No," said the other one. "We can tell her."

"We can?"

"Regulations are clear, yes. If patients require assistance and assistance can be rendered without leaving station, we can render assistance. Ask away, Heather. You want to find a particular room?"

I smiled at my protectors, my shining Knights, my fellowship of Lozzie's Round Table — though they themselves did not know it right then, they could still help.

"I need to find several people," I said. "If you can direct me to their residential rooms, that would be a big help."

bedlam boundary – 24.3

The Knights of Camelot Castle — bounded by their dream-wrought role, pressed to unwitting service as armed guards for a secret, sealed, sci-fi stockade, inside this grim parody of Cygnet Hospital — wriggled through the hidden loopholes and unwritten gaps in their rules and regulations, to gift me with two room numbers, two puzzled negatives, and one flat, apologetic, regretful denial.

They did their best. Even trapped in the dream they were loyal and true, more chivalrous than any real order of knighthood. But their answers only provoked more urgent questions.

The room numbers were 314-D and HS-1312; the first number referred to a regular residential room, easily accessed, but the ‘HS’ prefix apparently stood for ‘high security’ — one of the steel-doored rooms beyond those chain-link walls and nurse stations, tucked deep inside the hospital’s ridiculous anachronistic prison wing.

The two rooms belonged respectively to those I had least expected to be confined to their quarters — Zheng, and Raine.

The denial regarded ‘Lozzie’, or ‘Lauren Lilburne’ as I relented after the first attempt. The Knights could confirm that she was indeed a patient in the hospital, occupying a residential room. But they were powerless to give me the number, because Lozzie was not currently in that room. How did they know this, how did they know if a patient was in their room or not? When I tried to ask, they couldn’t answer. Both of them just stared at me, blank and mute, more Knight-like than ever.

My heart smouldered with quiet hope all the same. My strongest allies, in muscle and violence, must be either chained or changed — but Lozzie was free?

I prayed that Lozzie was unaffected by the false memories of this offensive illusion. If anybody but me could resist this, then it would be her, Lozzie the Dreamer.

The negatives were refreshingly simple: the Knights knew of no ‘Praem’, neither as patient nor staff. They’d never heard the name before.

‘Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight’ elicited no response whatsoever, just another blank stare from a pair of mirrored visors.

Was that a good sign, or a bad one? I had no idea, and no way to speculate.

I also had no way of articulating a name for the Eye’s Puppet, the fake Lozzie, the half-finished, abandoned thing which had staggered out of the black ash of Wonderland. Nor did I have a proper name for ‘Mister Squiddy’, the clay-squid thing roiling in his bucket, an artefact of Maisie’s communication, or the Eye’s ineffable behaviour. If either of them were present in the hospital I would have to recognise them in some other fashion.

“Sorry we couldn’t be of more help, Miss,” said one of the Knights, in that androgynous voice muffled behind layers of kevlar and black fabric. “We can’t leave our posts, but do feel free to stop by again, if we can do anything to assist.”

The other Knight glanced at the first, and said: “Can we do anything to help?”

The first turned to look at the second. Mirrored visors faced each other, reflecting the steel of the massive circular door behind them, marching off into miniature infinity on the curved surfaces.

“I don’t know,” said one of them. I couldn’t tell which one. Their voices were identical. “Can we help?”

“May we help?”

“Can we?”

“May.”

“Can.”

“We.”

I cleared my throat and spoke up before they could descend into a recursive loop. “It’s quite alright, thank you! Thank you both, very much!”

Both Knights turned to stare at me again. My face was reflected inside their mirrored visors. I looked so pale and greasy, wrapped in a yellow blanket, a crazy girl wandering the halls inside the prison of her mind.

I needed a shower. I wanted proper clothes. And a can of pepper spray.

“Thank you,” I repeated. “You’re doing so well. You don’t even know it, but you’re doing so, so well. I’m really proud of you both, or you all. Well done. Thank you!”

My voice shook with twinned relief and anxiety. Part of me entertained begging the Knights to accompany me on my quest — perhaps the correct Arthurian phrasing and tropes might break through their imposed roles — but I was already on thin ice. The wrong word might run afoul of their ‘regulations’, and plunge them deeper into the dream. I needed to test my theories on people who held no authority over me.

I bowed my head in thanks. One of the Knights cleared a throat, while the other shuffled booted feet. They both reacted like the armed guards they currently were — awkwardly accepting unwanted praise from a passing inmate, a crazy girl out for a stroll.

“Thank you again, thank you, thank you,” I kept repeating, backing away, bowing my head. “Thank you.”

Then I slipped around the corner, twisted on the balls of my slipped feet, and clutched those two room numbers close to my racing heart.

Raine was my first priority; she would trust and believe me against all rational evidence, no matter what. But her room — HS-1312 — was likely beyond my current resources. I needed a way past an occupied nurse station and through a padlocked chain-link gate, not to mention a way of opening one of those steel-doored cells. That meant sneaking and stealing, or killing and cutting.

Murder and mayhem was certainly an option, if I could free the inhabitant of room 314-D.

Reaching that residential room was easy enough. I employed the same technique I had developed to find the inner wings of the hospital — I kept the desired location at the front of my mind and let the corridors of Cygnet take me where they willed, leading my footsteps along squeaking lino and over creaky floorboards, up flights of rusty metal stairs and down dimly-lit back passageways, pulling me into the depths of the dream as an undertow drowns an unwary swimmer.

After about ten minutes I emerged into a bright and airy second-floor corridor, flooded by sunlight from a bank of windows which looked out over the gardens. The sunlight was still a puzzle of absurd dream-logic, for no sun glowed in the sky. There was no sky at all, only the black wrinkles of Eye-skin stretching from horizon to horizon.

But the corridor was bright and sunny, so the logic held. A couple of nurses were bustling up and down with a trolley full of fresh linen, changing bedsheets and cleaning toilets. A few girls wandered in and out of their rooms, heading off to parts unknown. Somebody was singing and humming softly in a bathroom at the end of the hallway; I paused to listen, but I didn't recognise the voice. It wasn't Lozzie.

Room 314-D was right next to the stairwell, and neighbour to a disabled access lift. The lift itself was decayed beyond use, a cage of rust filled with broken buttons and a burst light bulb, like something from a horror game. Even in a dream I would not have stepped inside that shadowy, stinking box. The cables would likely snap, turning any occupants into rapidly descending red jelly.

Heart racing, breathing too hard, I almost skidded to a halt at room 314-D.

The door was wide open.

Zheng's room.

I checked my excitement before peering inside, with one hand braced against the wall, forcing several slow, deep breaths down into my laboured lungs. If the pattern so far was consistent, then Zheng would be no different: she would not know me; she would probably not know herself.

But Zheng was not confined to a high security cell, which meant she was probably not a 'violent and disruptive' patient, and therefore not a danger to me. If I could snap her out of whatever illusion held her mind, then no nurse or guard or monster could stand in her way. No wall or door would bar her fists. She would protect me from anything while I freed the others, whatever it took. We would turn the nurses to steaming meat within the hour if we had to.

I had a number of ideas for freeing Zheng's mind, from the marker pen in my blanket to the taste of my lips. Zheng would have to be

my guinea pig.

I almost giggled, smothering a hitching laugh with a corner of my yellow blanket. Zheng would like that. Her shaman's pet.

We would laugh about it together, when this was over, alongside Maisie.

We would, I told myself.

Whatever this dream was, we would find a way out.

I swept around the door frame and stepped over the threshold, my yellow blanket whipping out like a cape.

“Zhe—”

Her name died on my tongue.

Residential room 314-D was far more elaborately appointed than my own sad little cell. The walls and floor were consistent and clean, unbroken by any mottled intrusion, with Cygnet cartoons painted at child-height — forest scenes of bounding reindeer and friendly bears, amid deep green trees and great drifts of snow. An ultra-modern toilet stood in one corner of the room, with electronic controls for a heated seat and a bidet function.

The toilet was surrounded by white handrails. More rails were set into the walls, leading from the toilet to the bed, and from the bed to the door. An expensive motorized wheelchair stood off to one side.

The bed itself was a nightmare parody of a 19th-century medical torture device, crossed with a modern safety harness. An iron frame was covered in chains and manacles — all lying loose and unused, rusty metal snakes trailing across the floor. The mattress was equipped with dozens of canvas straps and buckles, a built-in hood, and a sort of massive wide belt across the middle, presumably for strapping down the occupant. None of those bindings were in use either, same as the metal chains. They were limp and empty, hanging down and pooling on the floor.

A tiny figure was curled up on her side, huddled beneath a thick duvet. Dark eyes blinked open, bleary with sleep, like clouded night skies.

“ ... Zheng?” I said.

The girl croaked. “Uhhn?”

I crossed to her beside and stared in shock. Dark eyes rose to meet mine, faint and fatigued.

It was Zheng.

Without those eyes I would not have recognised her — dark as smouldering pitch, still knife-edged and razor-sharp, even when smothered by a blanket of exhaustion. Zheng had retained the distinctive colour of her skin, a ruddy rich red-brown, though she looked greasy and unwashed, much like myself. Her hair had grown long and messy, a flowing darkness fanned out over her pillow, desperately in need of a wash and a comb, but it was still the correct colour, black as tar.

The rest of her was unrecognisable. Zheng’s face was a different shape, soft-cheeked and round, with a mouth full of ordinary, blunt, human teeth. Beneath the covers she was slender and slight, with little of muscle or bulk on her bones.

She was shorter than me. Not even five feet.

Zheng — as she had been before the slow physical transformation wrought by her abyssal soul, before her body had undergone decades of demon-wrought change, before she had even been ‘Zheng’, when she had been nothing more supernatural than a young Yukaghir woman from Siberia, nine hundred years ago.

All at once, I put the pieces together: the handrails, the proximity to the lift, even the room suffix — ‘D’, for disabled.

The dream had robbed Zheng of her strength and vitality.

I fell to my knees, tears prickling in my eyes. Zheng’s gaze followed me like I was nothing more remarkable than a candle flame. I pressed my hands to my mouth, choking back my horror, then got a hold of myself and touched the edge of Zheng’s bed. I could not afford to freak out, or cry, or fall apart. She needed me.

“Z-Zheng?” I hissed. “Zheng, it’s me! It’s Heather! You— you won’t know, you won’t know who I am, but— oh, oh, this is almost worse than how Eevee was. This is a ... I can’t ... ” I clenched my teeth and focused on her eyes; she was still in there, sharp and clean. “Zheng. None of this is real. I’m going to get you out of this. Do you understand? Even if you were disabled like this, even if I could

never make you right again, I would still get you out. I promise. None of this is real, none of this is—”

“Shaman.”

Zheng’s voice was thin and reedy — and surprisingly soft and feminine, with none of her deep purring growl.

But I didn’t care about that. My heart did a back flip.

“Zheng?!” I put a hand on the covers, feeling for her shoulder. Her body was boney and thin, an anchor for wasted muscles. “Zheng, you know it’s me? You—”

“Shaman,” she repeated, so weak and soft. “Heather. Mm.”

I sighed with shuddering relief, almost laughing. Tears gathered in my eyes. “Zheng! Oh, oh gosh. You’re the first one who’s— wait, how much do you—”

“Inside ... Eye?” she wheezed. “Dream.” She had to take a deep breath, as if each word was a mighty task. “Not real.”

“Yes!” I hissed. “Yes, Zheng, yes, that’s right!”

I leaned forward and planted a trembling kiss on her greasy cheek, then smiled at her, hard and fierce. She smiled back with a shadow of her usual passion.

“Uh, okay, okay!” I whispered, hurrying and stumbling over my words. “Here’s everything I know so far. Yes, I think we’re inside the Eye somehow. I think this is a metaphor that I built, maybe with Sevens’ help, maybe to make it so we can comprehend the inside of the Eye. But it’s all gone wrong. We’re all trapped. This is a fake, a messed-up, ridiculous version of Cygnet Hospital, where I used to go when I was a child. Nobody else but you and I seem to have retained our memories. I’ve met Evee, and Twil, and the Caterpillars, and some of the Knights. But everybody’s all confused, they—”

“Mm,” Zheng croaked. “Never could. Cage my mind. Only body.”

I nodded, filled with burning resolve. Perhaps Zheng’s immunity was down to being a demon; that also boded well for Praem, wherever she’d gotten to.

“Shaman,” Zheng rasped. “Only one?”

“One?”

“Of you.”

“Ah, right.” My resolve flagged. “Yes. I don’t know why, but there’s only one of me inside my body right now.” I flapped my yellow blanket, showing her my empty flanks. “And no tentacles, either. It ... it hurts, being reduced like this, being ... ”

“Yes,” she croaked.

“Of course,” I hissed. “Of course you understand. Seeing you like this, it’s an insult to you. To both of us. It’s wrong. That’s why I’m so confused. I wouldn’t have made a dream like this.”

“Angry,” she rasped.

“Me too!” I whispered. “I’m furious!”

“Who is. Doing this?”

“The Eye, I suppose. Or some kind of emergent effect. I wouldn’t have purposefully crafted anything like this. I have very vague memories of Sevens helping, somehow, but she wouldn’t subject any of us to this either. And neither would the other six of me. That’s why I think something’s gone wrong, somehow.” I sighed a deep, painful sigh. “I’m going to free everyone, whatever it takes. I know where Raine is held, too, but I need help.”

I quickly explained to Zheng about the Knights, the room numbers, and everyone else’s current locations — including Evee’s ‘meeting’ with her mother. Zheng barely reacted, only blinking or grunting, soft and breathy. She didn’t even raise her head from the pillow.

“And I’m guessing you can’t get up?” I finished.

Zheng blinked instead of nodding. “No energy. Nothing. Bring meat, shaman.”

“I’ll try! But first I have an idea. This might free you. It’s worth a shot.” I fumbled inside my yellow blanket, located the black marker pen I had lifted from the dayroom, and rolled back my own left sleeve to expose the Fractal. “Give me your arm.”

Zheng could barely move. She wriggled a little under the duvet, flopping one arm forward, but I had to reach under there and help drag it free. Her skin was cold to the touch, covered in goosebumps, wrapped around withered muscle and brittle bones. I held back my

outrage at this obscenity, and concentrated on copying the Fractal onto Zheng's flesh.

It took a couple of minutes to make certain every line and angle was correct. My heart raced as I neared the end, sweat beading on my brow. Zheng stared at the pattern with squinting eyes, willing her bonds broken.

But when I finished, nothing happened.

Identical branching black lines graced our matched flesh, but Zheng remained trapped, cold and exhausted, tiny and withered, coiled beneath her bedsheets.

"Did ... did I get it wrong?" I murmured, frantically comparing my Fractal with the one I had just drawn. "The lines all match. It's perfect, it should be perfect. Oh, damn and blast! I really thought that might do it. I'm sorry, Zheng, I'm so sorry."

Zheng slowly drew her exposed arm back beneath the covers. She blinked. "No. Apology. Just meat. Meat, shaman. Meat."

"Meat!" I nodded sharply. "I think I can smuggle you some bacon from the mess hall. I'll do it regardless, I promise, but Zheng, I don't think that'll work. Whatever's holding us, it's not actually physical. This is a dream, or an illusion. I need to find somebody I can break out of this, I need to figure out how. If I could only free you, then we could kill every nurse in this building and—"

Zheng grinned at those words, just like her usual self. I choked off and grinned back.

The effort sapped all Zheng's energy, threatening her with sagging exhaustion. But she gathered everything she had left and parted her lips, about to speak—

And then we were interrupted.

"Oh! Oh dear, oh no! Oh, oh, oh!"

A bright and bubbly voice announced a new and unwanted arrival. I winced with recognition, then turned to find a familiar nurse standing in the doorway of Zheng's room — young, blonde, and comfortably plump inside her white uniform. She had her hands planted on her hips and a frown on her soft face, regarding Zheng and me with all the indulgent irritation of an adult discovering naughty children stealing from the cookie jar.

‘A.HORROR’ tutted and stepped into the room.

“Now now,” she said. “Don’t give me that look, you two. Heather, you really should know better than to bother a long-stay patient with CFS. You’re so good with the disabled girls, usually. This isn’t like you.”

“Pardon me?” I said; I’d understood her perfectly, I was just offended.

Horror sighed. “CFS. Chronic fatigue syndrome. It means that Blossom here doesn’t have any energy, even if she’s been resting in bed all day. I thought you knew that sort of thing, Heather? You’re always so well-read on these matters. I am surprised by you, I must say.”

I was so wrong-footed that I could barely gather my thoughts; of course I knew a little about CFS — and I knew it wasn’t something treated by the real Cygnet. Whatever Zheng was suffering didn’t seem real either. She could barely lift her arms.

Instead, I frowned in shock at a major incongruence. “ ... I’m sorry, ‘Blossom’?”

Horror answered with a sudden bubbly smile. “Oh, yes! Didn’t you know? It’s what her name translates to, in English. Blossom! I think it’s a lovely name, it’s so sweet and girly. You never hear names like that anymore. I think there’s another word in the name too, like it’s the blossom of a specific tree or something, but all the nurses just call her Blossom.” Horror waved away any complaints before they could be spoken. “You don’t mind, do you, Blossom?”

Zheng made a rasping noise. She was trying to growl with caged fury.

Horror wasn’t really listening.

A blush of outrage and sympathetic humiliation climbed my cheeks in a sudden flush of anger. Zheng’s name — ‘Zheng’ — was not her original name; it was Chinese, taken later, during her long period of captivity and enslavement. Her original name — the name of her host body, of the dead sister she had been summoned to possess by her original beloved shaman — would have been in Tundra Yukaghir, the same language that Raine had learned a few words of, as a gift to Zheng.

Zheng had never shared that name with anybody, not even me. Perhaps she didn't want it anymore, perhaps it was not her name, or perhaps it was simply private and secret, a relic of the past, of a life she could not return to. Perhaps it was offensive, or painful. It was none of my business. I had never asked.

And here it was, mangled by a nurse, into a parody of its original form.

If this had happened in the real Cygnet, I think I would have slapped Horror across the face, and taken whatever punishment came my way. As it was, I barely restrained myself. I could help nobody if I ended up tossed in an isolation cell.

"Anyway!" Horror went nattering on, "Blossom, you should know better than to be spending energy on unnecessary things."

"Unn," Zheng grunted.

"Unnecessary?" I said. "I'm her friend. We're friends. We're talking."

Horror tilted her eyebrows at me, unimpressed — and worse, suspicious. "It's not nice to tell porkies, Heather. I've never seen you two together before. What's gotten into you today?"

"Maybe I like making friends," I said.

If Horror noticed the acid in my voice, she gave no sign. She sighed and smiled. "Well, maybe that's for the better. Maybe that's what Blossom needs — a friend to get her up and get her moving. But, oh, Heather, she's not your sort of unwell, I'm sorry. She's on a strict exercise and activity program, to snap her out of this over time. Or so I'm told. If you wear her out now, she's not going to have any energy left to go for her daily walk around the garden later. Will you, Blossom?"

Zheng did not reply. She was staring at Horror with the carnivorous hatred she usually reserved for mages.

Horror went on without waiting for a reply. "Now, Heather, I'm going to have to ask you to get up, at the very least, and preferably find another new friend to bother. I've got to change Blossom's sheets. So, come on, up you get, up, up!"

Horror clapped her hands together gently, then waved me up like I was a cat in the way of a minor domestic task.

I ignored her for a second, leaned over to Zheng's ear, and whispered behind a cupped hand: "When you're free, I'll let you eat her. Alive and screaming."

I pulled away. Zheng was grinning again.

Horror tutted. "Come up, I said! Get up! Heather!"

I obeyed, for now. I stood up and backed away, as if thinking about leaving the room. Horror bustled into a whirlwind of activity before I could reach the doorway — she pulled the sheets off Zheng, leaving her exposed and shivering in a set of baggy white pajamas, then bodily lifted her out of bed and deposited her into the wheelchair. Zheng sat there nodding with exhaustion, shivering all over, as Horror set about stripping the bedsheets from the mattress.

Zheng was so very tiny, smaller than me. She needed a blanket about her shoulders, or a warm lap to sit in. I moved toward her, hoping to render what help I could.

Horror paused and glanced at me.

"Heather," she said with a tone of gentle warning "Do not make me ask you twice, please. If you want to talk to Blossom that badly, you can come back when it's time for her walk."

Zheng grunted through clenched teeth. I hesitated.

"Heather," Horror warned. All the warmth left her voice. She glanced over my shoulder, at the doorway, as if for another nurse.

I backed up and raised my hands. "Fine, okay, alright." I smiled for Zheng. "I'll see you later, Zheng. I love you."

Horror pursed her lips in disapproval.

Zheng opened her mouth just a crack, and murmured a single word: "Mooncalf."

Horror frowned. "What was that? Sorry? Blossom?"

I glanced from Horror to Zheng, then back again, then spoke up to cover for Zheng's advice. "Excuse me, nurse, but did you give that message to my sister, by the way?"

Horror tutted. "Not yet. I'm not due in the box for a while yet. Heather, are you absolutely sure you took all your medication this morning?"

“Of course I did,” I said. “I’m sorry for bothering you, nurse.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.” Horror smiled again. “I understand, it’s difficult being in here. And you don’t need to call me ‘nurse’. We’re friends, aren’t we? You can use my name, Heather.”

“Thank you,” I said, pulling a false smile. What would I even call her? ‘Horror’? “Actually, I do have something to ask you, before I go. I was wondering if you could help direct me to a different friend.”

“Oh? Somebody in particular?”

“Lozzie.”

Horror frowned, confused.

I sighed inside. “Lauren Lilburne? Do you know her room number, or where she might be spending her time today?”

Horror let her fistful of bedsheets fall to the mattress. She pulled a concerned frown. “You’re ... friends ... with Lauren Lilburne?”

No sense in lying; perhaps Lozzie was the local terror, always unlocking her own door from the inside and driving the nurses to madness with her antics. That would suit her wonderfully. If Lozzie was playing that role, I had to find her quickly and get her onto my side. Zheng’s coded advice was clear, and the same as my previous line of thought — breaking into Raine’s high-security cell would be a difficult challenge, but Lozzie might be easy to find. And Lozzie was a dreamer. The ‘mooncalf’ might be free.

“Yes,” I said. “Lozzie. She’s my friend.”

Horror bit her lower lip. “Are you ... sure about that, Heather? It’s just, you’re so ... sweet, and kind.”

“Yes,” I repeated. “Lozzie’s my friend. Do you know where she would be, this time of day?”

Horror puffed out a big sigh. She went back to pulling the sheets off the bed. “Well, if she’s not in her room, she’ll be in one of her usual spots, probably in one of the AV rooms, I suppose.”

“Pardon? ‘AV rooms’?”

“Audio visual,” Horror said. “You know, the TV rooms. Though if she’s in one, she’ll be alone. She does tend to drive everybody else

away.” Horror tutted softly and then muttered, as if speaking to herself: “I don’t think it’s healthy, not at all, but apparently it’s part of her treatment plan, so what do I know. I’m just a nurse, after all.”

“Uh, thank you,” I said, feeling rather puzzled. What on earth was Lozzie doing to provoke this kind of reaction? I’d expected her to be a bit of a menace, but Horror’s tone was all wrong. “I’ll go now. Zheng, I’ll see you later, then.”

Zheng grunted. “Mmm. Shaman.”

I backed toward the door.

Horror shot one last concerned look at me. “Heather, do be careful, if you go looking for Lauren. You’re a sensitive soul. That’s all.”

“Thank you,” I repeated again, and scurried for the door.

Before embarking on a quest to find the suite of AV rooms, I made a quick return journey to the mess hall, preparing to keep my promise to Zheng.

The mess hall was much quieter than earlier, with only a few people left eating breakfast. Most of the hungry girls had departed, either for the dayroom, the gardens outdoors, or other parts of the dream-hospital. The nurses behind the counter had vanished too, but they had not yet cleared away all the food. A little plastic sign stood at one end of the counter, instructing the reader to ‘Help Yourself!’ in angry red letters.

And help myself I did — first to a handful of paper napkins, then to all the leftover bacon I could cram into that makeshift pouch of protective paper. I slipped the napkin-bacon-wad into my yellow robe, for later. I briefly considered returning to Zheng right away, but that might risk Horror’s wrath. Better to give her a wide berth for now.

Raine’s room was still out of reach with the tools I had to hand, so I went looking for Lozzie.

The suite of AV rooms drifted out of the depths of the hospital, just as the strange wings and Zheng’s room had done before, as if I was summoning these places from the dark corners of my own mind. I was building some theories of how this dream worked, but nothing coherent, not yet. I had to save my friends first. Theories could

come later, when Evelyn could help me think.

A row of five doors stood along a plain, white-painted corridor, each one labelled 'A/V ROOM'. Each label was followed by a number — one through four. The fifth and final door lacked a number, labelled instead with the letters 'TH'.

Every door had a vertical window set opposite the handle, laced with wire mesh, like in a school. I peered inside, one after the other, working my way down the corridor.

A/V room 1 was occupied by a large group of older girls, watching some kind of educational video on a big screen, taking notes in identical books, just like in a classroom. They were all sat at wide desks, spaced far apart. The second room contained a large number of much younger girls, all sitting on the floor, watching some kind of Disney film on an old television mounted on a wheeled car, complete with a VCR set. I waited long enough to confirm the movie was real — or at least uncorrupted by the dream — and not showing a bunch of children some Eye-warped madness. The third room had a small group clustered around a single computer monitor; I couldn't spy much through the window, but the video on the screen looked like a science experiment, with lots of glass bottles and tubes and smoking chemicals.

Room four was empty, lights off, screens black. I opened the door and peered around inside, but the room was unoccupied. No Lozzie hiding in any dark corners.

The little window in the fifth and final door showed a very different room inside. Flip-up seats marched downward in tiered rows, lit by the cold blue flicker of a distant screen, laid out more like a lecture hall or a theatre than a room in a hospital or school. I couldn't see the screen itself, as the window was at a right-angle to the depths of the room.

The seats were empty. I pressed one ear to the door, but I couldn't hear any audio.

"You better be in here, Lozzie," I hissed. "Please, please, I need somebody at my side. Please."

I cracked the door open and slipped through the gap, swallowed by flickering darkness.

Rows of seats dropped away toward an auditorium floor, lit from

ahead by the anaemic light of a huge projector screen. A single seat was occupied — a petite figure was sprawled in the dead centre of the very front row, nothing more than another shadow in the electric gloom.

“Lozzie?” I whispered, but the figure did not react.

I raised my eyes to see what she was watching.

On the screen, a man was having his leg amputated, apparently without anaesthetic.

The video was grainy, low-resolution, probably old; a modern watermark sat in one corner, in clashing pink and blue. Three other men were holding the poor victim down while a fourth hacked at his leg with a saw. Blood was everywhere, staining the floor in great crimson puddles. The man was screaming, but the video didn’t have any audio.

I looked down in horrified disgust, sheltering my eyes with a hand.

The screen flickered, as if changing scenes. I thought it was maybe safe to look again, but it wasn’t — this new video had a different resolution, different aspect ratio, different colour balance, different watermark — but it was just as gruesome. I looked up just in time to see a car slam into the rear of a truck at full speed. A crumpled rag doll of flesh and blood exploded through the windscreen. Still no audio, totally silent.

I looked down, swallowing a horrified gasp. The screen flickered again. I looked up with sickening inevitability. On the screen a man was jerking and spasming, one hand wrapped around a fallen power line, being electrocuted to death.

A snort of laughter broke the silence, from down in the front row.

With my eyes averted from the screen and one hand sheltering my brow, I descended the auditorium steps, down into the solitary shadows at the foot of this gruesome temple.

When I reached the bottom I instantly recognised the single member of this macabre audience.

It was Lozzie.

And unlike every other fellow inmate of this nightmare asylum thus far, Lozzie looked exactly like herself.

Long wispy blonde hair framed a delicate, elfin face, falling about her shoulders in a waterfall of gossamer, picking out her pale features and sweet little nose — but all was washed out, colours bleached, bled white by the baleful glare of the projector screen. Her petite and slender frame was slouched low in the middle seat of the front row — but with an awkward discomfort that I'd never seen from Lozzie before. She was always so effortlessly boneless and rubbery in reality, easy in any position — but here I had the distinct impression that she would groan and whine when she stood up, all her joints and muscles sore from the poor posture. She was even wearing her pentacolour pastel poncho — but limp and flat, stained here and there by grease or crusted food, the colours faded beneath the electric flicker of her horrible videos.

“Lozzie?” I hissed. She did not look round.

I crept toward her, but some instinct bid me keep my distance. I stopped well beyond arm's reach.

She was staring at the screen, eyes lit from inside by scenes of violence. A miniature wireless keyboard and scroll-ball mouse sat in her lap; she was flicking through the videos herself, like some real-life repository in one the darkest corners of the internet. I wasn't totally naive about this sort of thing — I'd heard of the so-called 'video nasties' and the sorts of mundane horrors one might encounter on obscure websites. Raine had warned me about that, when I'd started spending more time watching cephalopod videos. But I'd never seen anything like this with my own eyes.

And Lozzie would never have endured this. She hated violence, even when it was necessary.

A fresh video flickered onto the screen.

“Huh,” Lozzie chuckled. She barely smiled.

“... Lozzie?” I hissed again. “Lozzie, what are you doing?”

She blinked slowly, like a sleepwalker. The projector screen flickered to a new scene, filling the auditorium with a backwash of meat-red and froth-pink light. I dared not look up.

Lozzie snorted louder; she liked this one. Her lips curled upward into a smile, as if pulled at the corners by metal hooks.

“Lozzie!” I snapped out loud, breaking the silence. “Lozzie! It's me!

Stop! Stop looking at that!”

Lozzie turned her head toward me.

She stared at a point over my left shoulder, then at my collarbone, then my belly. She blinked once, oh so very slowly, eyelids like sandpaper rasping across rock.

Her eyes were dead inside. Desensitized. Empty.

Instinct screamed at me to run, in a way I had never felt before.

There was no frisson of sexual tension in this danger, and no question of standing my ground or putting up a fight. My knees went rubbery. My stomach clenched hard. I swallowed a hiccup.

This was not the Lozzie-Thing, the Eye’s creation, the Puppet. This was not that feeling at all. This was not revulsion or disgust or even outrage at whatever had been done to this twisted vision of my beloved Lozzie. I felt only instinctive animal fear, the gut-level warning that I was alone, in the dark, with a very dangerous predator.

But I had to try, for her.

“ ... L-Lozzie?” I whispered. My voice came out as a strangled squeak. “It’s me, it’s Heather, it—”

Lozzie turned away and stared at the screen again.

Then she muttered: “Should probably leeeeeeeave me byyyyyy myyyyyself.”

Her voice was raw and scratchy, like she’d been screaming at the top of her lungs for hours and hours. Her attempt at a lilting, sing-song tone was sarcastic and mocking.

“No.” I screwed up all my courage. “Lozzie. It’s me, Heather. None of this is real. We’re inside the Eye. This ... ” I gestured at the screen, though I did not look. “This isn’t you. You would never do this. Lozzie!”

“Not your sorta crazy crazy cray-zeeeee.”

She turned her eyes to me again and looked me up and down — and I knew she saw meat. A full-body shiver gripped me all over. I backed away, rummaging inside my yellow blanket for one of the plastic knives I’d stolen from the mess hall. Instinct screamed run,

run, run!

“Lozzie?” I hissed, still unwilling to believe that gut feeling.

Lozzie smiled, horrible and empty. “Unless you wanna join in?” she said. “You should sit and watch. We could watch together. Role-play some? Wanna join in? Learn something? Come sit down.”

“No. No, thank you.”

Lozzie stirred in her seat, sitting forward, preparing to stand up.

I turned and ran.

I took the steps three at a time, hurling myself toward the exit. I slammed through the door and out into the blazing light of the AV suite corridor. I didn’t stop moving until I was back in the main entrance hallway of the hospital, surrounded by nurses and the wandering forms of other patients, all bathed in bright sunlight.

My heart was going a million miles an hour. My skin was coated in cold sweat. My hands were shaking. I stood there for several minutes, taking slow, deep, steady breaths, trying not to hiccup.

I kept glancing back at the corridor which led to the AV rooms, fearful that Lozzie might emerge at any second.

I wanted to cry.

Somehow this was worse than everyone else so far. Lozzie, sweet and cheerful and full of bubbly energy, twisted into something genuinely dangerous, ugly on the inside, a predator cast among those so easy to prey upon.

Worse than all of that — I was afraid of her.

“I hate you,” I whispered — and I meant the Eye. “I won’t stand for this. I won’t. We are getting out of here. All of us.”

There was only one source of help left to seek out.

I went in search of room HS-1312.

I needed Raine.

The high-security prison-block rooms lay locked and barred, beyond those walls of chain-link fence and padlocked gates; my suspicions were confirmed as soon as I set my mind to the task — within minutes of setting off to find Raine, I found the way blocked by one

of those fences, alongside an attendant nurse station.

Beyond the fence stood walls of grey concrete, corroded metal bars, and water-damaged brick. Bare light bulbs flickered and guttered in the thickening gloom, untouched by the sunlight outside. Heavy steel doors stood at regular intervals. Each door had a chunky-looking keyhole, a rusted handle, and a tiny sliding panel at head height.

Haunting sounds drifted from the gloomy deeps — wailing, manic shouting, the ghostly hint of a lost scream, all buried in a tomb of brick and rust.

Nobody was around, no nurses or patients. This nurse station was unmanned.

“There has to be a way through. There has to be,” I whispered.

I started with the little security station desk, but that turned out to be fruitless. The drawers contained nothing but string and paper-clips, no handy bunch of keys left behind by a forgetful nurse. The desktop itself hid nothing beneath a pair of damp newspapers. There was no secret button under the base of the lamp.

The chain-link gate itself presented even less solutions. The padlock was the size of my fist, attached to a metal bar three inches thick, which threaded through an opening on a metal post the diameter of Zheng’s thigh. I rattled the lock for good measure, but it neither crumbled to dust, nor fell apart in my hand.

“Tch,” I tutted with frustration. “Everything else in this place runs on Scooby-Doo logic, why can’t this?”

Everything in this fake Cygnet was trying as hard as possible to keep me away from my friends and allies, via their own memories, or medical conditions, or the intervention of that one specific nurse, Miss Horror. But thus far the dream had not resorted to brute barriers and physical obstacles, except in the case of Maisie herself.

If the Eye — or the logic of this dream-metaphor — had to keep Raine physically under lock and key, then that boded well for her utility, if only I could free her.

The dream was afraid of me reaching Raine.

“As well you should be,” I hissed.

Tugging at the chain-link wall itself just earned me sore fingers. If I had a wire-cutter or a bolt-cutter or some kind of blade, I could have opened a hole in the fence and just stepped through. I pulled out one of the white plastic knives which I'd lifted from the mess hall, then pressed it to the bare metal wire.

Nothing happened.

I sighed, bristling with humiliation. "If I had my tentacles, my other selves, my ... myself, then I could just pull this gate clean off with sheer muscle power. Better yet, I'd make acid and burn through the lock. Or just use brain-math and send the whole thing Outside! Tch. Fine, then! I'll go find a key, like this is one of Raine's video games about shooting zombies. This is so ... so silly!"

Locating a key turned out to be far easier than I expected, but obtaining it was nearly impossible.

My feet led me away from the chain-link wall, through several corridors of this dream-Cygnat, and then straight back to a second, identical entrance to the high-security prison wing.

One important difference — this nurse station was occupied. A single nurse sat behind the desk, arms folded across a meaty chest, eyes closed, fast asleep, snoring softly.

She was big and strong, with mousy hair tied back in a ponytail. Her name tag read 'A.WALL.'

A bunch of keys dangled from her belt.

I crept closer, breathing as quietly as I could so as not to wake the nurse. The keys were looped into a heavy brass keyring, and the ring was in turn attached to an extendible line on her belt, so she could use the keys without having to unclip the whole keyring every time. I spied a small, dull, grey key which matched the colour of the padlock, hanging alone at the bottom of the bunch, like a grape ripe for plucking.

It was so obviously meant to be taken, placed there for my fingers. I silently thanked Sevens, or my other six selves, or whoever else had helped slip cracks into this dream of Cygnat.

But how was I meant to take the key?

The nurse was big and strong. She was only napping, not knocked out or sedated. She might wake at the slightest tug on her belt, and

then I would be thrown into an isolation cell for poor behaviour, or worse.

If I was oh so very careful and quiet, I could probably get down on my hands and knees and crawl close enough to touch the key, but I lacked the dexterity and lightness of fingers to unhook the prize without getting caught.

A dead end.

I almost tutted out loud, but that might rouse the nurse. Everything I'd done so far, all the junk I'd picked up and stuffed inside my yellow blanket, the scant information I'd gleaned from my meetings with the others, was this all it amounted to? A dead end because I didn't have the—

I paused, considered the contents of my blanket, and frowned.

"No," I mouthed in silence. "No, that's ... that's absurd. That's ... that's computer game logic." I paused again, then swallowed a sigh. "Well," I mouthed. "Raine does play a lot of computer games, and it is her locked up back there. So maybe ... maybe ... "

Feeling more absurd than at any other point in my entire life, I reached into the yellow blanket wrapped around my shoulders, and extracted one of the little cardboard tokens that I had taken from Evelyn's game. I held the token between my lips, got down on my hands and knees, and crawled toward the nurse, in absolute silence.

Heart racing, sweat beading all over my skin, bowels tight with tension, I crawled closer and closer. The nurse seemed to loom over me. I watched the flicker of her eyelids, willing her to stay asleep, lost in dreams.

Finally I reached out with quivering fingertips — and held up the token, to compare it with the size of the key.

More than twice as large. Would that be enough? I had no idea. None of this was reliant on real-world logic. Outside of a dream this trick would be the height of absurdity, it would never work, it was completely stupid. I was about to do something straight out of a children's cartoon.

I pressed the cardboard token against the key as hard as I could, bending the material and wrapping it around the metal, making sure the cardboard was pressed into the teeth of the key. I squeezed

it in my fist with all my strength, until my fingers ached and my palm hurt, until the card had conformed to the shape of the key. I stayed that way for as long as I could bear, watching the nurse for any sign of awakening.

Then, when I could stand it no longer, I peeled the card away from the key. I was careful to press my makeshift copy back together as it parted around the metal.

I crawled away from the nurse, stood up on aching knees, and fled the scene of the crime.

“This is ridiculous!” I hissed to myself as I trotted through the corridors, cradling my as-yet-incomplete prize to my chest, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. “This is actual Scooby-Doo antics. I am a cartoon character. What nonsense! How am I even going to melt the— oh!”

The rest of the plan fell into place. I hurried back to the mess hall with shaking hands and ragged breath.

The mess hall was almost completely empty. No nurses remained on duty. All the breakfast food had been cleared away

Was I too late? I had no choice but to try the experiment anyway. Only about a dozen girls were left in the room, clustered around a distant bench. They wouldn’t be able to see me at work, they were too far away.

All except—

Her.

A lone girl was sat at one of the benches nearest the food counter, leaning against the wall, not eating. Wispy blonde hair. Blue-pink-white pastel poncho.

Lozzie.

Our eyes met. Her lips curled into a lazy smile. My heart lurched to one side. I almost turned and fled — but where would I go? I could think of no other way to achieve this step.

We stared at each other for a long, long moment, as if she was daring me to run.

I turned my eyes from her and marched up to the food counters.

Metal plates were set into the white plastic — hot plates, to keep the food warm while it was served. I held a hand above one of them. Still hot!

Sheltered by my yellow blanket, I pulled out the wax candle I'd taken from one of the corridors, then used a plastic knife to cut off a small disk of wax, and let it fall onto the hot plate.

The wax melted — slowly, so slowly. I dared not check over my shoulder for nurses, nor glance at Lozzie to see if she was standing up and creeping toward me. The moment I showed hesitation or fear, she would be on me, I knew it in my gut.

The wax became a puddle of semi-transparent white goo. As soon as it was ready I used the tip of the knife to slowly transfer the wax into the cardboard key-mould.

The wax filled the mould to the very top. Just the right amount.

I tucked the result inside my yellow blanket and scurried back into Cygnet's corridors. I glanced over my shoulder only once, to confirm that Lozzie was not following at my heels.

Two minutes later I was back at a security fence, with a chain-link gate barring my way. The desk sat empty, no nurse on duty. Beyond the wall, shadows beckoned from between the naked bulbs. Steel doors stood closed. Voices wailed in the deep.

"This is completely ridiculous," I hissed as I took out my cooling waxen fake, wrapped in a cardboard shell. "This isn't going to work. It's a key made of wax, for pity's sake. It's going to snap off in the lock. It's going to fall to pieces as soon as you try to insert the thing! This is ... this is so very silly, Heather. Come on. Come on, you have to try it anyway. Just try. If this fails—"

"What'cha doin'?"

I whirled like a startled cat, all my little hairs standing on end.

Lozzie was behind me in the corridor, about twelve feet away. Her poncho lay flat against her sides. She was smiling like a torturer with a lost kitten, heavy-lidded eyes watching me for any sudden movements, enjoying the way I recoiled.

I opened my mouth, but I couldn't hiss. I didn't have the right abyssal parts. I just hiccuped.

Lozzie tilted her head to one side, then to the other. “Where you going off tooooooo?” she crooned.

“Nowhere. Nowhere! Leave me ... ” It hurt to say. I had to swallow. “Leave me alone.”

“Hmmmmmmmm?” Lozzie purred. “Really really? I don’t think so. How’s about I come with? How’s about we go for a walk—”

I drew one of the little plastic knives and held it in a sweaty fist, shaking badly. Lozzie raised her eyebrows, as if asking what I was going to do with that fragile utensil.

“Lozzie,” I said, as clearly as I could through the instinctive fear. “I love you like a sister. I need you to know that. It hurts to see you like this, and I wish I could risk freeing you first. But right now I need you to leave me alone. Go away. Please.”

Lozzie tilted her head all the way to one side, narrowing her eyes, so her hair and her poncho hung downward.

“Okaaaaaaaay,” she chirped. “Whatever-ever Heathy-heads. Later! Catcha on the toilet!”

She twisted on one foot, waved with her poncho, and marched off around the corner. I waited a beat, for the inevitable, and Lozzie did not disappoint — she poked her head back around, shot me a very nasty grin, then vanished for real.

I waited until her footsteps receded into the hospital corridors.

Panting, covered in cold sweat, I put my knife away.

“Oh, Lozzie,” I nearly sobbed.

At least the wax was cold now.

Biting my lip, eyes scrunched up with concentration, I slowly peeled the cardboard mould open, blowing away the fragments of brown fibre stuck to the weird little blob of wax that I had wrought.

“Well,” I said out loud. “It looks sort of like half a key, I suppose?”

The padlock was heavy, more dense than it looked. I lifted it in one hand, then pushed the wax key against the hole.

The fake slid inside, like a finger into a lubricated glove.

I turned it — gently, gingerly, expecting nothing, wincing with my

whole face.

Click!

The loop sprang away from the lock. I almost dropped the thing as it detached from the gate. The bar slid back with barely a touch.

The chain-link door yawned open on creaking hinges.

Darkness called me forth, from the depths of a prison.

“Oh,” I said. “Um. Okay.”

My mouth was bone-dry. My stomach was roiling. I suddenly needed to sit down for a moment, but there was no time for that, and Lozzie might return, or report me to a nurse, or something worse. I reached back to place the padlock on the nurse station desk — after all, it was a great big chunk of steel, and rather heavy. But then I paused and reconsidered. I clicked the loop back into the body of the lock; now it was a great big chunk of steel with a convenient handle.

Bad odds if somebody called my bluff. I probably couldn't swing the padlock very hard. But it was better than a plastic knife.

I gripped my makeshift weapon, though surely my arm would quickly tire; I made certain my feet were snug inside the white institutional slippers, though they offered little comfort or protection.

I stepped over an invisible threshold, from asylum to prison.

All I had to do now was find my Raine.

bedlam boundary – 24.4

Cygnets Prison was a dungeon for the soul.

A labyrinth unfolded beneath my feet, peeling back endless necrotic layers of rot and rust and ruin, spiralling and spider-webbing outward with every step I took, as if teasing the meat of my heart open with a hundred filthy needles, to play clashing notes of fear and pain upon my naked nerves, dangling Raine's cell as bait impaled upon a poisoned hook.

Steel doors stood at regular intervals along every wall, rimed with reddish rust. Each door was marked with big black stencilled figures, some fresh, some faded, some ancient and barely readable — BU-47, 98-89-99, J4J, OP7 — but never a number which might stand in sequence with the room I was seeking, HS-1312. Bare light bulbs guttered and fizzled, hanging from twisted cords along the corridor ceilings, fed by thin wires stapled to the walls with metal brackets. Dark grey concrete was stained with water damage, cracked with age and cold, spotted with pale fungus and bloodless lichen; here and there the concrete gave way to rough red brick, as the illusion of some other age peeked through the dream. Patches of hewn stone appeared as well, as if I was descending into an underground jail from some melodramatic nineteenth century novel. My flimsy institutional slippers dragged narrow tracks through a carpet of grime and dirt, skirted puddles of black-stained stagnant water, and tip-toed across seas of crumbling stone.

Concrete passages terminated in collapsed ceilings and landslides of broken brick; rusty walkways crossed pits of stinking refuse, full of black slime punctuated by sharp edges of corroded metal; steel stairways led up into unlit darkness, or descended into flooded depths, stinking of urea and sewage. Corridors disgorged me into tiered common areas, ringed by yet more steel doors, like the main halls of real-life modern prisons — but filled with only sagging benches and rusted railings, haunted by the howling echoes of faraway screams.

There were no windows, no skylights, not even frosted and barred. No hint of sun, no touch of warmth, no promise of dawn.

In prison it was always night.

The cells were occupied. Things were trapped inside. I could hear them weeping and wailing down distant corridors — but always just beyond earshot, their cries always dying off when I approached, so it seemed the nearest cells always lay silent and empty. But whenever I stood still for a few moments I began to hear laboured breathing, little scratching noises, or the unmistakable sound of somebody smothering a sob behind desperate hands.

Were these real people, or figments of this Eye-wrought nightmare?

The thought of Raine being trapped here was unbearable. If these were real people, I couldn't help them all — at least not alone, not yet, not without allies and arms. I needed Raine.

But there seemed to be no end to the place — infinite petals of carceral entrapment, enclosing me deeper and deeper within shadowed halls of forgotten torment.

And why not? Made perfect sense to me. This was the truth beneath the hospital's clean white mask.

I'd visited far worse places than this, of course; I'd been Outside, I had spent time in the most far-flung of hell-dimensions imaginable. I had seen the underside of reality in all its glory. Even as a young teenager, I had been cast Out in dreams again and again, to wander through places I could not comprehend, all of them far more threatening than an anachronistic and offensive stereotype of a mental asylum.

But even back then — at ten years old, before I'd realised and accepted what I was — we'd always had each other, me and six other Heathers. Even before we had been expressed and embodied in six beautiful tentacles, we had all existed. We had never faced Outside alone, though we had not known it at the time.

But here? Trapped in body and soul?

I was completely alone.

I gripped my makeshift weapon in one sweaty little fist, holding hard to the bar of the padlock I'd stolen off the gate. I pulled Sevens' yellow blanket tight around my shoulders, trusting to what protection she could still offer from the wings of this cruel production.

“It’s not real, it’s not real, it’s not real,” I whispered to myself. “None of this is real. And it’s silly. And offensive. And silly. Did I say silly? Yes. It’s not real, it’s not real.”

No nurses patrolled those halls, no patients walked free beyond their steel cells — but I was not the only thing abroad in the artificial night.

Ghoulis figures lurked in the darker corridors, the places where light bulbs had failed or burst. They scurried away beyond my sight whenever I caught the merest glimpse — a loping, all-fours, simian shuffle. Flashes of mushroom-pale skin vanished into the deeper shadows. White, empty, blind eyes stared out from rusty nooks and concrete crannies. They did not seem to be the same creatures which had peered through my cell door when I’d first awoken in this dream. Neither did they seem aggressive or dangerous, choosing only to flee and hide.

No, the pitiful inhabitants were not the cause of my mounting fear.

I became aware of my pursuer after perhaps fifteen minutes — or maybe half an hour, or even a full hour, or the whole afternoon. I felt as if I had stumbled and staggered through those prison corridors all day long. Perhaps true night had already fallen and Evelyn had been released from her mother’s surprise visit, much the worse for wear. Perhaps I was too late. Perhaps I was lost.

I happened to pause in a corridor, just beyond several dead end junctions and lightless side passages. A whisper of feet brushed across the concrete some meters behind me, so I turned to look back, expecting to see one of the strange locals.

A flicker of blue-and-pink poncho vanished around a distant corner, slipping out of sight a second too late.

Lozzie was following me.

I stood paralysed, staring at the crumbly concrete corner, shivering inside the meagre protection of Sevens’ yellow blanket, gripping my makeshift cudgel in one sweaty, faltering hand. The padlock was so heavy I doubted I could swing it with any force, certainly not accurately; I might stand a chance if I could sneak up on a foe and strike from behind. But could I swing it at Lozzie, at all? I didn’t want to. The thought of hitting her, of hurting her, even in a dream, made my stomach curdle. I would rather she stick a dream-knife in

my dream-guts than do violence to my beloved Lozzie.

And she was putting herself in danger! We had no idea what lurked in this place.

I gathered all my courage — and what little saliva I had, to wet my lips — and called out.

“I know you’re following me, Lozzie!”

My voice echoed off damp concrete and rusted steel, reflected back in scratching warbles, vanishing into the labyrinth of the prison.

Lozzie did not reply.

I called again: “I saw you, Lozzie. I know you’re there.”

More echoes. I stood in hissing silence, biting my lip, knees weak.

“Please don’t,” I murmured.

Lozzie giggled — high-pitched, deeply amused, and having far too much fun. I’d know that sound anywhere, even in the depths of hell.

Somehow, that giggle helped.

I sighed a big, exasperated, unimpressed sigh, then tutted and shook my head. “At least you’re enjoying yourself,” I whispered, then raised my voice again: “Lozzie, if you’re going to follow me, at least do it out in the open. You can ... you can walk beside me. I ... I want to trust you. Please.”

No reply came, not even a giggle. Lozzie kept her silence.

I sighed and rubbed my face, praying that Raine would know what to do — and that she’d be able to do it before Lozzie crept up behind me and stuck a knife in my back.

I pushed on, journeying deeper into Cygnet Prison in search of room HS-1312, trying not to feel Lozzie’s eyes drilling a hole between my shoulder blades.

Eventually I came upon a cell door marked with a room number which appeared to be in sequence with Raine’s — room HS-1917. That door led me to a corridor of similar numbers, between walls of slightly lighter concrete, stained by dark patches of glistening black mould. I picked up my pace, counting down the numbers, my heart

fluttering inside my chest like a trapped bird; I kept a corner of Sevens' blanket over my mouth and nose, trying not to inhale too many mold spores from the air.

The numbered doors led to a large stairwell and a set of bare metal steps caked in rust, which climbed upward to reach several additional floors. I sighed and mounted the stairs, then began the laborious process of sticking my head through every stairwell doorway, checking the room numbers.

She was near. My saviour and love, my protector, my one true knight, my Raine.

I almost called out her name, hoping she might hear my voice — but instinct stilled my throat and closed my lips.

When I realised that the next floor up must contain Raine's cell, I heard a loud rustle from down at the base of the stairwell, six floors below. I tutted and rolled my eyes, though with a glimmer of affection in my heart — Lozzie was baiting my attention. I composed my most unimpressed look, then leaned over the rusty bannister.

A membranous vortex of ebony and charcoal stared back.

Flowing like ink clouding in dark waters, or like lace snapping in shadowy storm-winds, or like an explosion of raven feathers in sudden flight, the thing was all sable velvet membranes and gossamer veils of flesh-like tissue. A living shadow, thickened across countless centuries, now stalking these halls in search of light to smother. It did not walk, but ghosted across the concrete and metal, as if unwilling to sully the perfect layers of lace-like darkness.

Whatever it was, it was mounting the stairs.

I swallowed a scream, almost lost control of my legs, then turned and ran, making for where I knew Raine's cell must lie.

I burst from the rusty metal stairwell and into another corridor, clutching my yellow blanket, my slippers slapping against the concrete. Room numbers flashed past — HS-1356, HS-1345, HS-1330, counting down toward the inevitable. The corridor turned to the right, past several lightless passageways and empty side-halls; I almost lost my balance, slipping and sliding, then cracking one shoulder into a wall. I hissed with pain as I righted myself and hurled my body onward.

And then, all of a sudden, there it was — room HS-1312. A great big unpainted steel door just like all the others, edges crusted with a film of rust, with the number stencilled across the middle in faded black letters.

Closed and locked, of course.

I skidded to a halt, panting for breath, suddenly at a loss. Stupid, stupid, stupid Heather! Had I become more idiotic, somehow, without my six other selves to correct for my moronic assumptions? Had I just assumed the door would be easy to open? What was I thinking?!

I stared back down the corridor. Was that black-ink-ghost still following me? The padlock was so heavy and my hand was coated in so much sweat. That thing wasn't remotely human. Even if I could swing my weapon, how could I be sure it would do any good?

But I gripped the lock in both hands and held it ready.

"No no no no no," I hissed through my teeth. "No! No running now, no! No!"

I might never find Raine's cell again if I let that thing chase me away; it felt like days had passed just to reach this door.

I bared my teeth and tried to hiss. I flexed my shoulders and pulled a nasty frown. I imagined that I had six tentacles poised and ready, all covered with barbs and spikes and toxins. I imagined my skin flashing with warning colouration, red and orange and purple and pink. I willed myself to feel sharp and scary and squid-like.

It didn't work so well. I wanted to wet myself.

"You won't part us!" I hissed to the empty corridor. "Not me and Raine! Not this time!"

Minutes passed. Shadows brewed. Silence descended.

But nothing came.

Eventually I forced myself to relax — which wasn't easy, because I was coated in cold sweat, shivering from head to toe with adrenaline, and teetering on the verge of tears. Both my hands were stiff from gripping the padlock so hard. I wiped my runny nose on the back of one hand, then bit my lower lip to keep from sobbing.

"I should have ... should have gotten somebody else, first," I said,

then hiccuped so loudly it hurt. “Ow! Ow. S-should have tried to free Twil. Or made peace with Lozzie. Oh, oh Lozzie, I hope that thing didn’t get you. Oh please, please be safe, please. I can’t do this alone. I can’t. I can’t.”

Raine’s cell door waited, offering neither comment nor comfort.

Room HS-1312 looked the same as all the other cells. The steel door was mounted with the hinges on the outside, so it would open into the corridor, presumably to preclude certain kinds of escape. A big black keyhole showed nothing but darkness. The bolt itself was just about visible in the gap between the door and the frame, as thick as my forearm, covered in rust.

A metal slot was cut into the door at head height — designed for somebody a little taller than me — and covered with a steel slat.

I had neither the time nor any resources to make myself presentable. I was a sweat-soaked mess wrapped in an old yellow blanket, eyes bloodshot with adrenaline and stress, reeking of fear, visibly desperate, and very alone.

Just another crazy girl, lost in the bowels of hell.

Raine had helped me once before, when I had been exactly this.

I pulled the steel slat aside, opening the metal slot; the cover squeaked, setting my teeth on edge, echoing down the corridor. I went up on tiptoes and peered into the cell.

Concrete walls, rough and raw, were stained and pitted with water-damage — and covered from floor to ceiling in precise, mathematical, measured graffiti. It was all drawn in neat black pen, with each stroke separated from the others by exact distances: swirling squid and sabre-tooth tigers, anime pin-up girls and band logos, a soaring castle and a plunging chasm, and a dozen different sizes of naked breasts rendered in perfect proportion. I recognised the style instantly — ASCII art, the same kind that Raine had sent me so many times in a hundred different text messages, that style which she seemed to generate from nowhere.

A metal toilet was hunched in one corner, in unspeakable condition. The only other furniture was a slab of wood built into the far wall, to serve as a bed.

A familiar figure was lying on her side, covered by a thin blanket,

facing away from me.

“Raine!” I hissed into the slot. “Raine, wake up! Raine! It’s me!”

Raine took a deep breath; I heard it hissing through her nose and saw her ribcage expand beneath the threadbare blanket. She started to sit up, oh so very slowly, unfolding herself with the luxurious muscularity of a panther bestirring at the sound of skittish prey.

Chestnut brown hair was swept back across her scalp, unwashed, greasy, artless. Warm brown eyes found mine, narrowed with curiosity and intrigue. She smiled, beaming with a sunburst of confidence — but also with predatory intent. A shiver shot down my spine, of a kind that I knew all too well, a shiver that drew me in, drew me close, and drew my heart from my chest.

There she was, my lethal lover, my dearest, my knife, my right hand, with my life in her palm. I would recognise that smile anywhere.

But Raine smiled from behind a cage of metal; she was muzzled, like a dog.

She was also locked into a straitjacket. Thick white fabric pinned her arms across her front. Her hands were lost deep in elongated sleeves. The sleeves wrapped around her back, fastened in place with padlocks. She was buckled into the garment with a dozen leather straps, her muscles imprisoned.

“Oh, Raine,” I sighed with relief. “Raine, Raine! It’s me, it’s ... it’s ... Raine?”

Raine held my gaze with unblinking curiosity.

“Raine?”

Raine extracted herself from the blanket and rose to her feet, careful not to overbalance or topple over, constricted by the straitjacket. She padded over to the door one slow and loping step at a time, swaying from side to side as if trying to see me from additional angles. Long pajama bottom cuffs trailed at her feet. Her eyes never once left mine.

“Raine?” I hissed. “Raine, say something, please.”

Raine reached the door and pressed her face against the slot. Her muzzle clicked against the steel, lips trapped behind the mesh

across her jaw and mouth, eyes smouldering like coals. The rest of her body was now concealed behind the thick slab of the door.

She grinned; I shivered again. I longed to reach through the door and crush her against my front, but she was—

“Hey there, you,” Raine purred, looking me up and down. Her voice was low and husky, a dangerous rumble. “You don’t look like no nurse.”

“Raine?” I tried one last time, then sighed and winced, swallowing disappointment. “No, I’m not a nurse, obviously I’m not—”

“You lost, little thing?” she said. “You’re not meant to be back here with the real monsters.”

“Raine, it’s me. Please tell me you know me. Please say you recognise me.”

“Ooooooh,” she purred, long and low. “A pretty please from a face like that will get you anywhere with me, you sweet little thing. But I don’t lie to ladies in need. To whom do I owe the pleasure?”

“Fuck,” I hissed — and for once I felt no need to apologise for foul language.

Raine bit her lower lip and let out a grunt. “Uunnh. You’re jumping ahead pretty fast, ain’t you? Not that I’m complaining, but I don’t pump and dump. I don’t even kiss and tell. If you’re in, you’re in for good and proper and I’ll make you squeal for me, you—”

“Raine!” I snapped.

She blinked — not quite a flinch, but almost. Then she frowned with curious amusement, as if she wasn’t certain why that had worked on her. “How do you know my name, little thing?” she said. “Did you seriously come all the way back here, looking for me, personally, all special, just for me? ‘Cos that’s real cute, real flattering, real sweet. I don’t think any girl has ever done that for me before, let alone a girl as pretty as you. But you should know, sweet thing, I eat girls like you for breakfast. Get too close and I’ll gobble you up—”

“Raine,” I snapped again — then reached forward, hooked a finger through the mesh of her muzzle, and held on tight. “Shut up and listen.”

Raine blinked in surprise a second time. Then, quicker than I could react, her tongue darted out from between her lips and licked the back of the finger I'd looped inside her muzzle.

When I neither recoiled nor squealed, she narrowed her eyes at me in curiosity. I gently unhooked my finger from the muzzle and stuck the cold taste of her saliva into my own mouth.

"Alright," Raine purred. "Any girl who dives this deep just to steal my spit has to be worth listening to. You have my full attention. Go ahead."

She wasn't lying. I recognised that look, that absolute, instant, no-questions shift. Raine was listening to me — really listening.

I took a deep breath.

"None of this is real," I said. "The hospital, the asylum, the prison — whatever this place is pretending to be, it's not real. We're trapped inside a dream, or an illusion, or some kind of trick. My name is Heather Morell. You know me, more intimately than probably anybody else in the world. And I know your full name — Raine Philomena Haynes — because you are my lover, partner, and protector. We don't belong here. We live in Sharrowford, together, with a bunch of other friends and lovers. We attend university together. You're a philosophy student, sort of. We're ... sort of a ... magical coven, I guess? I'm an extra-dimensional squid girl. Usually I have more limbs than this, and more selves, but I've been reduced. Our mutual best friend, Evelyn, is a mage. You're ... well, you're just a human being, but that's not important right now. We were attempting to ... to ... oh, how do I explain this? We were trying to hoodwink a sort of alien god, called the Eye. We were Outside of reality, along with all our other friends. Our purpose was to rescue my twin sister, Maisie, who was ... inside that god, sort of. I think this — this dream or illusion — this is inside the Eye, in some metaphysical or spiritual sense. Its robbed everyone's memories somehow, and dumped us into this parody of the mental hospital I used to visit when I was younger. None of this is real."

Raine waited, frowning with gentle concentration, until she was certain I'd finished. "Is that all of it?"

"Yes."

Raine raised her eyebrows and tilted her head slightly, as if giving

ground to a convincing but novel argument. Her muzzle scraped against the rim of the steel slot. She purred my name, her voice dropping lower with every repetition: “Heather? Heather. Heatherrrr. Why do I find myself liking that name so much? Feels good on my tongue.”

“Raine,” I said. “You have to believe me. I know I’m asking a lot, but please—”

“So,” she purred. “You and I fuck? You let me at your cunt, day in and day out?”

I blinked several times, then almost laughed. “Yes. Yes, Raine, we’re extremely intimate. Often. All the damn time, in fact. I’m sort of ... insatiable, sometimes, I suppose. And I’m not apologetic about it.”

Raine burst into a grin — a grade-A, Raine-style, shit-eating grin of blazing confidence, caged behind metal mesh.

“I love your sort of crazy, Heather,” she said, her voice honeyed with glowing passion. “I really do.”

My cheeks blossomed with a blush and my heart swelled in my chest, aching with love for Raine — because her tone left nothing to the imagination. She was not mocking me. She was not teasing the crazy girl with the promise of acknowledgement, only to snatch it away with a backhand compliment. She was being the same Raine had always been, even like this, locked in a filthy cell in a dungeon of the soul. She meant nothing more than the exact plain import of her words. She loved my sort of crazy.

Scrambling for a handhold, I said: “What does that mean? What is ‘my sort of crazy’? Everyone keeps saying that this morning!”

Raine’s grin softened and gentled, touched with distant melancholy. “You’re so vulnerable, Heather. A babe in the woods. A rabbit on an open moor. A mouse—”

“I’m a squid. Or an octopus. A cephalopod, in any case.”

Raine paused, then nodded, grinning with approval. “Yeah. Yeeeeeah, I can see it, I can. Soft-bodied and beaked. Sharp in your own way, certainly, with strong limbs and a special knot of brain in you, but still vulnerable and furtive. Hunted by sharks.” Raine bit her lip and looked me up and down, like she was staring at the most glamorous pin-up model she could imagine. “Oh, damn, you

really are my type. Either you're telling the truth, or you're a spook sent to seduce me."

I tutted. "Raine."

"Cos there's much bigger, badder monsters out there than me, Heather. And you need somebody to look after you."

"I do," I hissed. "Yes, I do, Raine, yes. That person is you. It's always been you."

Raine met my eyes again — and then sighed with a sad smile. "You really think that? You don't know what you're asking for, sweet thing."

My turn to sigh — sharp and irritated. "Raine!" I hissed, pressing my face closer to the slot, going up on tiptoes, blazing at her with irritation. "I am not crazy. I'm not."

Raine chuckled. "Sure you are, Heather. I'm crazy, too. You're crazy, I'm crazy. We're all crazy, down here."

"We're not 'insane' by definition simply because we're trapped inside a dream of Cygnet mental hospital!" I hissed. "That's—"

"No, you're wrong about that." Raine's grin died. She shook her head, scraping her muzzle back and forth across the metal slot. She leaned against the door as if trying to press herself through the walls of her prison. "You wanna know why we're all crazy, by definition?"

It was not a rhetorical question, as it would be from any other speaker. Raine waited for my response.

I sighed. "Not really, no. But if it'll help convince you, go ahead."

Raine nodded, deadly serious. "Because we're inside a system where only the insane can truly prosper. They get to set the rules, decide the definitions, and classify people like you and me as 'crazy'. And they're a much worse kind of insane — cruelty, for the sake of cruelty."

"Who is 'they'?" I asked.

"The entire Zeitgeist. No cabal is necessary. No smoky back room full of plots. No secret networks. Just cruelty. It's very normal. That's the point. So, if you and I are classified as crazy, because we're not like that, why not embrace it?"

I sighed another big sigh. “You once told me that I wasn’t crazy. You were the only one who believed it, Raine. Even I didn’t, not until you showed me.”

“Ah-ah-ah,” Raine purred, smiling wide again. “I’m betting I said something more like you aren’t delusional, or you weren’t wrong to feel the way you do. But, crazy?” Raine winked and made a clicking noise with her tongue. “Girl, that’s a badge of honour in here. Different rules apply when you’re not playing along. You’re crazy alright. You are so very much my kinda crazy. Love it.”

Raine’s words filled me with hope; she was listening, talking mostly like herself, and neither cowed nor beaten by this prison, even if she sounded a little more unhinged than I was used to.

I glanced left and right, down the rows of steel doors, into the cloying gloom of the prison complex.

“Alright, okay,” I hissed. “Crazy or not, however you think of it, I need you to believe me, I need you to—”

“Did I say I didn’t believe you?” she asked.

“... do you?”

Raine grinned again. “Does it matter?”

“Raine!” I snapped. “This is not the time for philosophical games. I need your help. I can’t do this alone. I need you! And I need you free.”

Raine drew a breath between clenched teeth, wincing hard, hissing low. She looked me up and down again, suddenly doubtful and reluctant, quivering with an emotion I’d never seen from her before — need and desire, barely caged, eating through the bars.

“You don’t know what you’re asking, sweet thing,” she said.

“You said that once already. And yes, I do—”

“You know why I’m in here?” she asked. She tilted her head and clacked her muzzle against the door again. “You know why I’m wearing this cage on my face? Because I eat up girls like you, Heather. And you’re tempting me real bad.” She drew in a shuddering breath. “I haven’t had a taste in longer than I remember. You can’t dangle yourself in front of me like this. You should be running, girl.”

I adopted the most unimpressed expression I could manage, put my hands on my hips, and pursed my lips. "You're not a cannibal, Raine."

"No?" she purred. "How can you be sure?"

"Because I know you, in every way it's possible to know somebody. You're in that cell because you're violent, yes. You are staggeringly violent when you want to be. And you were no different in reality. But you're only ever violent in service of things you believe in, things worth protecting. Your violence, it ... well, I've always found it attractive, even when it scares me. Especially when it scares me." I swallowed. "So I'm not afraid of you. And I never will be."

Raine went quiet. She stared at me, intense and focused. Eventually she said: "Why didn't you save any of our other friends first? Surely anybody else would be a better option than me?"

"No," I said. "You are my best option, Raine. Always and forever."

Raine just stared and stared and stared. I started to sweat. I wet my lips, glanced left and right, praying that Lozzie or that membranous black ghost were not approaching me.

Raine said, "What's your plan? If you can break me out, what's the next step?"

"We need to save Evelyn first," I hissed. "She's trapped with a memory of her mother. Evelyn is a mage, a magician, like I said, so she might be able to do something about all this. Then there's Twil — I don't quite understand what's happening with her, but she's a werewolf, she's strong as hell, she could probably fight off the nurses if we had to. And Lozzie, well, Lozzie's turned into some kind of ... psychopath? I hate that word, but I can't think of a better shorthand. She's following me right now, she followed me into the prison, but I think I lost her. Then there's Zheng, she's been disabled by this place. Zheng is your other girlfriend, by the way, and mine too. I can't find Praem, which is either worrying or brilliant, but I can't decide which. Sevens is ... hard to explain. The Knights and the Caterpillars, I don't know what to do about them. But ... Eevee first. She's top priority, because she may be in danger. Even if I can't snap you out of this dream, I know you can help me save the others."

Raine nodded slowly, but said nothing.

“Does any of this ring a bell?” I asked.

Raine shook her head. “Nope.”

“Dammit!” I hissed. “I—”

“But it could do,” Raine said, “if you sing pretty please for me. Maybe jog my memory with a kiss. Or a hug? I’d love to give you a little squeeze, squid-girl. Maybe that’ll remind me why I fell in love with you.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, almost laughing despite the situation. “You really are still yourself. You’re barely any different.”

“Says you.”

“Yes! Says me! Raine, I need you to help me. What do I have to do? Do I need to tell you something only you would know? I can—”

Raine shook her head. “Naaaah. You could have read my files, my session logs with the shrinks. You could know everything, doesn’t prove shit. Here, I’ll hand you the pieces, because you’re so damn cute. Tell me why I should believe any of this? Give me a reason — beyond the promise of your cunt, that is.”

I stared Raine dead in the eyes, framed by the metal slot and the muzzle mesh.

“Because I once believed in you,” I said. “Because you saved me, you rescued me, when nobody else could. Without you, I’d probably be dead.”

Raine ran her tongue over her teeth. The gesture made me shudder with strange arousal. My mouth was dry, my hands were shaking, my heart fluttering hard.

“You fell in love with me?” Raine asked. “With this? Can you still love me, like I am now?”

“Yes, of course!” I snapped. “You’re ... well, I was going to say that you’re a bit more of an ‘edge lord’ right now — you taught me that word, by the way — but actually you’re basically the same, you’re still you. You’re just acting a tiny bit different. Less ... less ... um ... domesticated.”

Raine laughed, genuinely amused. She pressed her face hard against the slot, as if trying to reach me. Her lips cracked into a grin behind the muzzle.

"Ohhhh," she purred. "You wanna domesticate me again, huh? Slip a collar around my neck? Tug on my leash when I'm a bad girl? Is that what you and I have going on? Am I your hound, Heather?"

"Tch," I tutted, blushing beetroot-red. "N-no! No, we're not like that."

"Why not?" Raine clacked her teeth together. "I've already got the muzzle."

I slapped a hand against the steel door, losing my temper. "And I would remove that muzzle!"

Raine's grin died instantly. She stopped laughing. She stared into my eyes, as if only just realising what she was truly looking at.

"You would," she murmured. "Wouldn't you? You really would. You're not kidding."

"I trust you, Raine."

She shook her head, breathing harder, almost panting with excitement. "I could hold you down and squeeze the life out of you. I could eat you alive. I'm in a straitjacket and a muzzle for a reason, girl. You sure about this?"

"I trust you completely. I trust you with my life. Even if you don't remember who I am right now."

"Why?"

"Because I have faith in you. Are you mine, Raine?"

Raine bit her lip so hard she drew a bead of blood. She took a shuddering breath, rolled her shoulders back, and broke into a smile of smouldering pitch.

"I'm yours, Heather," she purred. "Hound or otherwise."

I let out a shaking breath of my own, which I had not know I'd been holding. "I love you so much, Raine. I knew I could—"

"Executive decision time," she said, suddenly quick and sharp. She pressed her face and muzzle to the open slot as hard as she could, tilting her head, flicking her eyes left and right, trying to see down the darkened hallway either side of me. "You're gonna have to get me out of this cell, and fast. It's not safe out there in the corridors."

I almost laughed. “Yes, I noticed that. But I don’t have a key. Where can I find one?”

“We won’t need a key,” she said. She eased back again and rolled her shoulders inside the confines of the straitjacket. “If I can get one arm out of this monkey suit, I can get the door open with nothing but a stick and some blood. What are you carrying? Anything with a sharp edge? If not then you’re gonna have to go up on tiptoe and use your teeth.”

“Teeth?! To— to bite you?”

Raine snorted. “No, but that might be fun later. Come on, quick. Have you got anything with a sharp edge?”

“Oh! Y-yes, I’ve got, um ... ” I waved the heavy padlock in one hand, but Raine shook her head, so I put it down on the floor and rummaged inside my yellow blanket instead. “I’ve got these plastic knives, I stole them from the mess hall.” I held up one of the flimsy white utensils, with its blunt little serrated teeth on one side.

“Oh you are full of perfect little surprises, sweet thing. No wonder I love you,” Raine said. Then she nodded downward at my other hand, which was busy stuffing all my other acquisitions back inside the blanket. “What’s that?”

“What’s what? T-The book? The marker pen?”

“No, the packet of grease.”

I held up the bundle of napkins wrapped around a wad of bacon, intended for Zheng. “Bacon, wrapped in napkins. It’s for Zheng, later, if I can sneak it to her.”

Raine cracked a grin. “Bacon grease will do nicely. Hold onto that, I’ll need it in a sec. We can always get more bacon for Zheng.”

“O-okay,” I said, frowning inside. Was this more video game logic? Had I brought the correct items to free Raine, or was she just making this up as she went? I stuffed the bacon back inside my yellow blanket, then went to poke the plastic knife through the slot. “Here you—”

But Raine stepped away, turned around, and pressed her back against the steel door. The viewing slot was filled with the dirty white collar of her straitjacket, framing the unwashed pale skin of her neck.

Raine raised her voice so I could hear her through the door: “See the broken stitching around the collar? Lift it up.”

I reached up and lifted the loose flap of greasy fabric. Beneath was a ragged mass of frayed cotton, all torn and ripped, damaged beyond repair — but still strong enough to hold the straitjacket together.

“I see it!” I called back through the door.

“Been working on that for months,” Raine said, laughing. “But all I can do is rub it against the walls and the corner of the bed.”

I tutted. “We haven’t been in here for months. Nothing before this morning was real.”

Raine laughed, loud and happy. “I’m plagued by the deus deceptor, eh?”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind! Cut through the collar fabric, Heather, go on. Saw back and forth. Hurt me if you have to!”

My half-blunt plastic breakfast utensil did not make short work of the heavy-woven, reinforced, cotton collar of a straitjacket. I slipped the blade beneath the layers of fabric, sawing at the thick strands, pulling and tugging, yanking and scraping. Raine helped by pressing her back against the slot as hard as she could, bracing her feet to keep herself steady. The knife almost gave up after a few minutes, bending backward on itself; I resorted to fingers and teeth, jamming my nails under the stringy cotton, ripping and tearing, going up on tiptoe and biting each strand apart with my front teeth. If only I’d had my tentacles — or just one of them! — I could have formed the tip into a razor-sharp steel point and slashed Raine’s bonds open in seconds.

In the end I had a bright idea — I sharpened the bent plastic knife against the concrete wall next to Raine’s cell door, rasping the blade back and forth against the rough surface until I had something with a little more edge.

Raine chuckled at that. “A girl who knows how to make a prison shiv! No wonder you captured my heart.”

“Trust— me—” I panted, working at the collar again with a freshly keen blade. “I— had no— idea.”

After what felt like hours of work, the fabric of the straitjacket collar finally parted; the last few layers of interwoven cotton tore under the pressure of Raine flexing her back and hunching her shoulders. The whole garment suddenly sagged, coming loose as that primary anchor snapped. Raine staggered away from the door.

“But!” I panted. “You’re still trapped! You’re still inside the jacket, how are you going to get out?”

Raine started rolling her right shoulder, grunting and hissing with effort, flexing her muscles and straining at the compromised straitjacket. “All I need is one arm free!” she said. “Gimme a minute. I’ve done this before. Just gotta keep going, keep going, keep going. Don’t go anywhere, sweet thing! Stay right there. I’m gonna need that knife and bacon fat in a sec. Unngh!” Raine grunted as she rolled her shoulder so hard it popped. “Come on, come on, come on,” she hissed to herself. “Come on, unnh! Come on, come—”

“Heathy?”

I whirled away from the slot and the door and Raine’s rippling back.

Lozzie was standing about twenty feet down the corridor, framed on either side by yawning passages of shadow-mouthed darkness. Her pentacolour pastel poncho lay flat and limp against her petite and wiry frame. Her long blonde hair was swept back in a greasy mass. She was clutching a shiv in one tight-knuckled fist — not a plastic utensil like mine, but a gleam of steel-bright metal, sharpened to a long and wicked point.

Lozzie stared at me, frowning with some inner horror that I had never seen from her before.

Raine shouted: “Heather! Stay close to the door! I’ll be free, sixty seconds!”

“Lozzie?” I said. “Lozzie, I—” I glanced down at the padlock I’d abandoned on the floor. My sweaty hands went numb with fear and denial. “I— I can’t hurt you, Lozzie. I can’t. Please, please put down that knife. Please, don’t, please. I’d rather let you stick that in my gut than hurt you. I won’t, I—”

“It’s not for you,” she said. Her voice seemed floaty and faraway.

“ ... Lozzie?”

“Heard lots of what you said. Lotsa lotsa wordy words. And you’re right, very right, all right, alright. I think?” She frowned harder. “I think too much.”

“What? Pardon, sorry. Lozzie, what do you mean?”

“My memories are all fucky wucky,” she said. I noticed her eyes were bloodshot. She started to pant. “I’ve been here for months, or years? But there was nothing before this morning, you’re right, super right, mega right. Right?”

She lifted the shiv and pointed at me. I flinched, raising my hands in surrender, letting the little plastic knife clatter to the floor.

Raine shouted again: “Heather, hold on! Grab the padlock, fight back!”

“You—” Lozzie stammered, panting harder. “You broke ... all this? Me? I don’t know. How did you do it? How did you do it?!” she shouted. “Heathy-heads, break me all the way, you have to finish it, break me all the—”

A bell rang out down the night-gloomed hallway — a black bell, cracked and muffled, a herald of doom.

And the bell was a voice. Clear and precise. Cold as ice crystals.

Intoning:

“Good girls go to bed.”

I froze, eyes wide with sudden comprehension.

Lozzie looked around, down one of the shadow-filled side passages.

A spiral of umbral darkness exploded from the shadows.

A whirling maelstrom of membranes like a storm of black lace, like a frilled and fluffed sphere of living darkness, like a phantom made of silken veils.

It slammed into Lozzie as if scooping her up in an embrace of tissue paper and foam — utterly soundless except for Lozzie’s chirp of surprise. It did not slow or stop, but carried straight on to the other passageway mouth, whisking Lozzie away in a flutter of pastel poncho. The last thing I saw of Lozzie was a pair of sleepy eyes

flung wide in surprise.

In the split-second before that night-black phantom vanished around the opposite corner, I caught the faintest hint of a humanoid form at the core of the shifting membranes — feminine, with heavy curves, hair pinned up in a bun, and the suggestion of a long dress.

And then Lozzie was gone. Deafening silence fell.

“Lozzie!” I shrieked, and ran to the corner — but the side passage showed only darkness. The phantom had carried her away at great speed.

A whisper of fabric on concrete began to rustle at the edge of my hearing.

Raine banged on the door of her cell. “Heather, no!” she snapped, putting the whipcrack of command into her voice. I flinched as if yanked by the pit of my belly. “Here, now!”

I scurried back to the door, eyes wide, panting with panic.

“Raine! Raine, that was Praem! N-Night Praem!? But that was always just a joke about her making people go to bed on time, I don’t—”

“Heather, concentrate, right now,” Raine snapped. I flinched again. “That was the prison guard. She’ll be back for you any moment. Stay right there. I can’t protect you if you run. Stay.”

“O-okay.”

Raine backed up from the door again. Her right shoulder was almost free. She gave one last heave, one last grunt, one last teeth-gritting pop of her joints — and her right arm tore free from the shoulder of the straitjacket. Naked muscles gleamed in the weak light, coated in filthy sweat; her skin was raw and irritated where she’d been rubbing against the fabric for minutes on end.

She clenched a fist and held it up, then grinned like the beautiful mad woman she was.

“Yes!” I squeaked.

Raine stuck her hand through the slot. “Knife and bacon, now!”

I almost fumbled in my haste to hand over the tools. Raine accepted both, then crouched, vanishing below the door’s viewing slot,

beyond my sight. I heard her unwrap the bacon, then rub the grease all over the knife. A moment later the whole door shifted by a fraction of an inch, creaking and grinding against years of rust. She was working the knife between the metal and the frame.

A black bell tolled, far away down the corridor, deep in the shadows.

“Good girls should be sleeping,” intoned Night Praem — a far away voice, echoing off concrete and steel.

“Raine!” I squeaked. “Raine, she’s coming back!”

“I know!” Raine said. “Gimme a sec, I’m almost there. Don’t move, Heather. Don’t run! I can’t protect you if you run. Stay right there.”

“Okay. Okay! Okay! Oh— oh no, um—”

That bell-like voice rang out once again, soft and slow, perfectly broken: “Good girls. Good girls. Why are you awake?”

Darkness began to thicken at the far end of the corridor, taking firm shape among the greasy shadows. The hint of a figure was wrapped in a thousand fluttering membranes.

“Praem?” I called out. “Praem, it’s me! It’s Heather! Praem, you have to stop!”

“Bad girls,” Night Praem intoned.

The shadows began to flow down the corridor, filling the space from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling, rushing to engulf me where I stood.

“Raine!” I almost shrieked.

Raine shot upward; her face reappeared behind the steel slot, muzzled tight, sweating with effort. “Heather, focus on me, right now.”

“She’s—”

“Put your hand here — here, now!” Raine slapped the top of the steel viewing slot. “Brace here!”

I did as I was told. My heart was slamming against my ribs. I couldn’t help but stare down the corridor at the onrushing wall of Night-Praem shadow, and the familiar figure within the core.

“Heather!” Raine repeated my name — and got my attention. Those warm brown eyes blazed like a blowtorch flame, focused with such clarity of intent. She was my Raine, there was no question, no doubt.

“Yes! Yes!” I squeaked.

“On the count of three, you push upward on the door with all your strength, all your body weight,” she said quickly. “Do you understand?” I nodded. My hands were sweaty, so I braced both of them, panting hard, shaking all over. “Good!” Raine gripped something down below my sight-line, either the plastic knife or an inner handle. “On three.” She held my gaze as she counted. “One, two, three!”

I heaved upward with all my strength. Raine grunted through clenched teeth. A wisp of night-dark shadow brushed my shoulder.

The lock slammed open with a rusty scream of tortured metal.

Raine cracked the door with a sudden jerk of motion, knocking me off balance — knocking me those crucial few inches away from Night Praem’s shadowy membranes. I yelped, arms wind-milling, about to fall flat on my backside before Night Praem scooped me up and spirited me away.

Raine’s right hand shot through the gap, caught my forearm in an iron-hard grip, and yanked me off my feet.

I tumbled head-first into the dubious safety of Raine’s high security cell.

Into the warmth of her chest. The protection of her arms.

Back together with my Raine, right where I belonged.

bedlam boundary – 24.5

Raine — my Raine, my wild and uncaged salvation, my knight in grease-stained clothes and stale sweat, my bolt from the blue on the edge of annihilation, my glorious rippling nephilim of steel-cable muscle and irrepressible vitality, with one arm freed from the breach in her straitjacket, growling with the pleasure of victory — crushed me against her front, dragged me deeper into her cell, and turned her opposite shoulder to repel my pursuer.

For I had found my unquiet heart beating in another's chest; but the ordeal was not over yet.

The thick steel door of Raine's high security cell flew open, carried by the momentum of my entry. Rust-caked hinges screamed a banshee wail, strangled by the crack-slam of metal on concrete when the door hit the wall. An almighty clang faded into a tremulous judder of tortured metal, as the door vibrated after the impact.

A roiling cloud of charcoal shadows filled the doorway, like ink suspended in storm-tossed waters.

Night Praem.

Raine bared her teeth behind the metal mesh of her muzzle. Her eyes narrowed and stilled with total focus. Her muscles flexed and tensed beneath the fabric of her straitjacket, preparing to toss me out of harm's way and leap at this nightmare apparition. I felt the shiver and shudder pass through Raine's body — the flush of adrenaline readying her for a fight. My knight, my knife, my Raine, ready to throw herself into lethal combat for a girl who — as far as she was concerned — she had only just met.

"Don't!" I shrieked. "Raine, no! She's— it's Praem! She's one of us! One of us! Stay!"

Raine held.

She went completely still, eyes fixed on Praem, every muscle pulled tight. Like a hound, awaiting her next command.

And Night Praem — that roiling cloud of black-shadow membranes — remained on the far side of the threshold.

The echoes of the door's rust-streaked wail finally faded away, vanishing down the gloomy corridor outside. Silence descended, thick and cloying and poised on the edge of a knife. It was like the quiet in a dark forest at night, after the scream of a prey animal is silenced by a ruptured throat and a gush of blood. Raine stared at Night Praem, every muscle held in perfect readiness. Night Praem shifted and flowed like molluscoid membranes in an ocean current.

"She's not— *hic!*" I panted, hiccuping painfully. "Not attacking us. Raine. Raine, it's okay, I think. S-stand down? Stand down? Please? Down, girl?"

Raine took a deep breath and finally relaxed her combat-ready poise, straightening up and rolling her neck. She eased up with her right arm, no longer crushing me against her side.

"Ah ... " I winced with sudden intercostal muscle pain, massaging my ribs.

Raine was slowly turning her head from side to side, eyes still glued to Night Praem above the cage of her muzzle, trying to examine her from different angles. Raine said: "Wounded?"

"M-me?" I stammered. "No, no. I just didn't realise how hard you were squeezing my ribcage."

Raine chuckled. "Better get used to that, sweet thing. I play rough."

"I-I know that! Tch!"

"Mm," Raine grunted. "Now call me a good girl."

"Pardon? Sorry?" I blinked several times, a little lost. Raine was still staring at Night Praem, who was still hovering in the doorway like a portent of sudden and inescapable doom. I glanced between Raine and Praem, unsure if I'd heard that correctly. "Is this really the time for ... well ... that sort of ... game?"

Raine purred: "'Stay', 'down girl'. You've already started, Heather. An obedient hound needs reinforcement and reward. Mostly reward." She finally pulled her eyes away from the roiling mass of membranous shadow and glanced down at me, her soft brown irises smouldering like banked fires. She wasn't smiling. An involuntary shudder gripped me between the legs. My mouth went dry. "Now

call me a good girl,” Raine repeated. “Or you might lose control.”

“ ... g-good girl.” My voice shook. I swallowed hard to stop from hiccuping. “Good girl, Raine. Good girl. Thank you. Good girl.”

Raine broke into a toothy grin. “You don’t have any treats for me, but we’ll address that later.”

“Okay,” I squeaked.

“Now,” Raine said, and gestured at Night Praem in the doorway. “We’re perfectly safe in here. The prison guard got what she wanted.”

I cleared my throat and pulled my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders, trying to gather my thoughts. “Ah? She— she did? Sorry? What?”

“We’re being good little girls now,” Raine said. “Tucked away in a room, right where we’re meant to be. Safe and sound. Contained. Orderly. You ever think about the etymology of that word — orderly? Why do they call non-medical hospital staff ‘orderlies’? Because—”

“Raine,” I said, gently but firmly. “I am deeply fascinated by and have great respect for your politics and philosophy. I have spent hours, sometimes entire evenings or whole nights, listening to you speak about this sort of thing. But right now, with her in the doorway?” I nodded sideways, towards Night Praem. “This is not the time. Please.”

Raine tilted her head and narrowed her grin with a curious look. “Whole nights, huh? We chew on each other, or just on ideology?”

I frowned at her. “Yes. You once ... ‘edged’ me for three hours while basically delivering a verbal dissertation. This is just something you do. And I love you for it. But not right now!”

Raine dipped her head in obedience. “Sure thing, sweet thing.”

“Thank you. Thank you, um ... good girl?” Raine smirked when I said that, which made me feel very funny indeed, so I cleared my throat and stared at Night Praem, still hovering in the doorway. “So ... so what do we do now? We need to get out of here, but she’s right there.”

Raine stared at the ball of fluttering membranes, and said: “Prison

guard here has no reason to cross the threshold. Maybe she can't. Ontologically. I've never tested before. Wanna see what happens?"

"Um, I don't think— wah!"

Raine stepped forward, closing the gap between us and Night Praem, dragging me alongside. She loosened her arm around my waist, giving me the implicit option of spooling myself out at the end of her grip, holding onto her hand, or of simply departing, staying behind, leaving her to face the danger alone.

Raine had trusted me completely, without proof, memory, or knowledge.

I chose to trust her in return. I stayed at her side, wriggled a hand downward, and pressed it over her own.

Raine walked right up to Night Praem, stopping her bare toes a mere inch from the cell's threshold. She stared into the roiling shadows, tilting her head left and right, as if trying to catch a glimpse of a face. I peered past Raine's shoulder and squinted into the fluttering gloom.

A dim and shrouded figure lurked in the core of cloudy murk — no more than a curve of hip, a swell of chest, and a hint of loose hair. 'Praem' had no face, no eyes, no identity.

"Praem," Raine said. "That's her name?"

"Y-yes!" I squeaked. "Praem. She's Evee's — Evelyn's — daughter. Sort of. I mean, emotionally and socially, not biologically. She's actually a demon, in the body of a big wooden doll, but ... something is wrong, here. Normally she dresses as a maid all the time. It's not a fetish thing, it's just what she likes to do. We have this running joke about 'Night Praem', about how she makes sure nobody stays up too late, that sort of thing. This is ... this is like a twisted version of that. Night Praem, but gone bad."

"Daughter, then," Raine said. "That's all that matters. And Evee, what is she, to you and I?"

"Family," I said instantly. "Your oldest and best friend. My best friend? We have a quasi-romantic ... thing, all three of us. But Evee doesn't do sex. Kind of. It's complicated."

"Family," Raine echoed. "Which means prison guard here is family too. Huh." Raine grinned at Night Praem. "Family doesn't let family

do shit like this.”

I cleared my throat. “Considering the various conditions in which I’ve found everybody else, I’m pretty certain this is some kind of reflection of what Praem specifically doesn’t want to be.”

“Mmmmmm,” Raine purred.

She stared into Night Praem’s roiling mass. Praem stared back — or at least appeared to, eyeless and blank.

Seconds ticked by.

Raine eventually said: “Heather?”

I jumped so hard I had to grab the back of Raine’s straitjacket with my free hand to stop from falling over. “Y-yes? W-what?”

“Talk to her,” Raine purred. “You’re the one with the unclouded mind and memories. Try to snap her out of this. See what happens.”

“O-oh. Right. Yes. Good point. S-sorry.”

I stepped out from behind Raine, cleared my throat, and tried to focus on roughly where Praem’s eyes should have been. Membranous clouds of ink and coal floated back and forth, churning like shadows in a lazy whirlpool.

“Praem?” I ventured. “It’s me, it’s Heather. You know me. You know Raine, too. Praem, none of this is real. We’re in a dream, or an illusion, or something like that. The Eye did this to us. We’ve all been pressed into roles we don’t want. This isn’t you, Praem, you were never a ‘prison guard’ or an instrument of control. You’re a maid! By choice! And Evelyn’s daughter. Evelyn Saye? You’re Praem Saye, technically. Praem?” A sudden horrified tremor rose up my throat. “What ... what did you do with Lozzie, earlier? When you whisked her away, where did you take her? Praem? Praem, please say something! Anything! Praem? Praem? Do you ... ” A brainwave struck. “Do you want a strawberry? I don’t have one yet, but I can—”

Night Praem reacted at last — by drifting away.

Like a knot of inky kelp dragged by the tide, she drifted sideways, leaving the doorway behind and wafting down the corridor. Shadowy membranes brushed against the concrete floor and filthy walls, unblemished and untouched by their passing.

“Praem!” I rushed forward. “You—”

“Hold,” Raine purred. She tightened her arm around my waist and pulled me back.

“But she reacted to that! She—”

“You step out into the corridor, she’ll be on you in an instant. Bad girls out of bed at night, all that. She’s happy as long as we’re in here. But only as long as we stay.”

“But she took Lozzie! I need to know if Lozzie is safe, I—”

“Would she hurt Lozzie, before this? Before Cygnet prison?”

“I ... no, never.” I shook my head forcefully. “Never!”

Raine held my gaze with smouldering intensity, eyes framed by greasy hair and the leather band of her muzzle. “I fell in love with you after a few minutes conversation. If you trust Praem, trust her not to hurt one of her own, even like this.”

I bit my lip, fighting down my worries. “I’ll— we could still—”

“And I’m not in any shape for a real fight, not yet,” Raine said. She rolled her left shoulder and flexed her left arm — still confined inside the straitjacket — and shook her muzzle from side to side. “If we need to deal with Praem we can dance in the corridor and make some noise, she’ll come running. But right now you’ve gotta finish what you started, Heather. Free me first. Then we can stage a breakout, as loud and bloody as you like.”

“Of course, of course,” I said, catching myself. “You’re still trapped, of course. How do I get you out of that thing?”

Raine pushed the door halfway shut with one foot, closing us in together, then drew me deeper into the cell, toward the wooden slab-bed. I allowed her to steer me by the waist, submitting to her directions.

“Elbow grease,” she said. “Limber up.”

Liberating my Raine from the straitjacket was easier said than done; the process was less desperate and harried than cutting her collar, but also sweatier and more time-consuming. She sat down on the wooden slab and turned sideways, then had me grab either side of the ruptured collar and pull as hard as I could, straining in opposite directions. I pulled and pulled and pulled, yanking and tugging,

jerking and wrenching, popping strands of cotton until my hands were red-raw sore, my arm muscles burned, and my lungs were heaving for breath. Raine added the strength of her own right hand, but she couldn't put her back into the task — literally, she was confined at the wrong angle to exert her muscles. This was all up to me.

"I'm— sorry—" I panted. "I was— never— very strong. You were always— the strong— one."

Raine chuckled, grinning through her muzzle. "You're plenty strong, Heather. Here, let's make this easier." She tapped her left shoulder. "Put both hands here, on the back. That's it. Don't worry about choking me." She took a firm grip on the front of her collar with her own right hand. "Brace a foot against my back."

I gripped the rift in the fabric with both hands, then extracted one foot from inside my scratchy white institutional slippers and braced my sole against Raine's upper back. Raine leaned forward to give me additional leverage and balance.

"No," she growled. "Harder. Harder! Press! You're not gonna hurt me."

"Yes I am! Raine, if I pull like this, it's gonna—"

"Then hurt me," she purred. "Just don't forget my reward."

"Raine—"

"Do it."

"This is gonna hurt you!"

"Then hurt me."

"And I'll go flying!"

"I'll catch you. Promise."

"I—"

"I promise," she purred. "Now hurt me."

"Mmmmmmm! Okay, here I go ... "

With all my meagre might and my featherweight mass, I pulled on the back of Raine's straitjacket like a monkey tugging at a tiger's coat, and then—

Riiiiip!

The heavy-woven shoulder of the straitjacket finally gave up, tearing wide open. I almost went flying, crashing into the wall or slamming onto my backside — but Raine shot to her feet and scooped me up with her right arm before I could so much as brush a single hair against the concrete.

She set me on my feet. I was still panting and heaving with effort, clinging to her with one hand.

“Oh, oh wow,” I said. “I can’t believe that worked. How did that work? I can’t— wow— okay! Okay then. Good. Good, um—”

“Let me slip into something more comfortable,” Raine purred.

She stepped back, pulled the ruined straitjacket away from her shoulders, and extracted her left arm from the sleeve. She took a moment to stretch the liberated limb, rolling the joints and flexing the muscles. Then she used both hands to push the entire straitjacket down her torso and over her hips. The hateful thing pooled at her feet in a jagged puddle of heavy cotton, punctuated by little padlocks.

Raine walked free. She stepped out of her one-woman prison, unfettered and unchained.

Beneath the straitjacket Raine was wearing a black tank-top, soaked in sweat and covered in stains, frayed at the stitching and several inches too short at the hem. The tank-top left little to the imagination — her arms were on display, toned and muscled; her collarbone glistened with a thin layer of sweat; her abdominal muscles rippled with motion as she stretched her back and filled her lungs. She wasn’t wearing a bra, either — which was something I’d seen thousands of times before. But in this horrible place of rot and ruin, trapped in a dream of confinement and control, that little detail made me flush from throat to hairline.

Ragged grey pajama bottoms encircled her hips and covered her legs; the waistband rode low, exposing her hipbones and her lack of underwear.

Raine caught me staring. Her eyes found mine and transfixed me like a snake spotting a mouse. She pulled a predatory grin and flexed her stomach muscles again, cocking one leg as if presenting her groin.

“Like what you see, sweet thing?” she said.

I rolled my eyes and huffed. “Of course I do. I fell in love with you, Raine. I told you, we have intimate relations almost every day.”

“Mmmhmmm,” she purred, as if slightly unimpressed. “Intimate relations. You always so clean and clinical?”

“No,” I said. “Raine, we’re in prison. In a dream. I adore your looks, your confidence, all of you, the complete package, yes. You are a walking nocturnal orgasm.” I blushed harder at my own words, then shook myself all over. “But we are trying to break out of a soul-prison right now. Please, can we focus?”

“Mm.” Raine grabbed the front of her muzzle with one hand, penetrating the metal gaps with her fingertips. She turned around to show me the leather straps across the back of her skull. “Get me out of this so we can talk properly.”

Removing Raine’s muzzle was easy, but my body knew what was coming. I reached up and undid the leather buckles with shaking hands. The tension in the mask went slack and the muzzle came loose in Raine’s grip. She pulled the cage off her face and dropped it on the floor with a clatter. Then she worked her jaw up and down and massaged her cheeks where the muzzle’s strap had left imprints in her skin. She sighed with release, running her hands through her greasy mass of chestnut hair.

“R-right,” I said. “Good. Good, that’s good, you’re free, good. I’ll just—”

“Time for my reward,” Raine purred.

Raine spun toward me, boxed me in with both arms, and slammed her hands into the wall either side of my body.

“Ah!” I squeaked.

Burning brown eyes bored into mine, pinning me from above with molten spear-tips. Thin lips parted in a snakelike grin, savouring my little flinches and shudders. Raine grabbed my hip with one hand, holding me in place, cutting off my escape. She towered over me, so much taller than I remembered, a wall of muscle which might crush me against the concrete. She smelled of old sweat and unwashed flesh, of hot arousal and the thick musk of too much sleep.

“Hey there, sweet little thing,” Raine purred. “I sure hope you’re

fully cognizant of what you've done. There's no turning back now."

I whimpered, eyes wide, throat closing up. My backside was pressed against the wall, cushioned only by Sevens' yellow blanket, framed on every side by the regular black lines of Raine's ASCII art on the concrete. My guts were quivering. One of my legs was shaking uncontrollably.

Raine dipped her head lower, like a snake slithering closer for the killing bite. "You freed me. Ready to take responsi—"

I cut her off with a kiss.

Clumsy and desperate, needy and lustful, I jerked my face upward and mashed my mouth against Raine's lips. She let out a grunt of surprise, then parted to let me inside. I stuck my tongue into her mouth, which drew another grunt from her throat. She returned the kiss, drinking me up, our lips sliding together in sudden synchronicity. She tasted like morning breath and blood and meat. She squeezed my hip harder and raked the fingers of her other hand through my hair. She worked a knee between my legs and propped my body weight on her thigh, grinding against my crotch.

I jerked back after a moment, pushing her chest with one hand to part our lips; Raine was panting, red in the face, eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure.

"Holy shit," she purred. "You weren't making up a single word of it, were you? You really are my lover girl. You'd let me eat you up, you—"

"Fuck me," I whimpered.

Raine cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"Fuck me!" I croaked. "Don't make me repeat it, Raine, please! Right— right here, right up against this wall. Or on that wooden slab. Whatever! Just do it!"

I was panting hard and ragged, quivering from head to toe, flushed all over. Uncaging Raine had uncaged something within me as well, something the dream had kept wrapped up with fear and isolation.

Raine grinned. "Not that I'm complaining," she said, "but don't we have a breakout to mastermind? And friends to free? What about your—"

"This might free you!" I hissed in her face, then darted my lips upward and sucked on her mouth again, wrapping my arms around the back of her neck and raking my fingers through her hair. Our lips parted with a wet pop. "It just makes sense to me! I— I need this. Raine, please!"

Raine raised both eyebrows and held up a pair of fingers. "I've been locked in this cell a long time, sweet thing. It's been months since these hands saw a sink, let alone a bath. I'd love to, but I ain't hygienic right now."

I growled — a noise I'd never expected to make with an unaltered throat. "This is a dream!" I said. "What happened to 'I eat girls like you for breakfast'? What happened to poor-little-Heather should be afraid? What happened to chomp-chomp gonna bite me, huh? Eat me up, big bad wolf! Fuck me! Do it! Do it now! Do— yaahh!"

Raine did as she was told.

Good girl.

Twenty minutes later I was left clinging to her front, covered in a thick layer of my own warm sweat, wheezing for breath, mewling and shaking, with both my knees trying to give up. Raine extracted one hand from inside my pajama bottoms and sucked her fingers clean. I whined into her chest, unable to form words. She pressed her lips to my hair, drinking in my scent.

"You're a real screamer, huh?" she purred. "Should have brought ear plugs."

"Shut up," I croaked. "Couldn't help it. Good ... good girl, Raine. Good girl. Good girl."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh," Raine sighed. "Yeah, that's right. There you go. Say it again."

"Good girl."

"Mmmmmm," Raine purred.

I said: "Any memories come back?"

"Hmmmmm," Raine grunted. "As much as I hate to belittle the restorative powers of making a thing like you squeal and buck for me? Nah. No burst of memories. Which is a real shame. I bet you've made some fascinating noises in the past, pity I can't remember

them right now. Wanna try again?"

"Don't think I— could—" I panted. "Raine, I must sit. Please."

Raine helped me over to the wooden slab-bed and sat me down. I spent a minute doing nothing but taking deep breaths and fanning my face. She planted her feet before me and began stretching out each muscle one by one, waiting for me to recover. We stayed like that for several minutes, until the strength returned to my legs and my linguistic processing caught up with the rest of my brain.

"No memories," I muttered, chewing on my own bottom lip. "No memories from that."

Raine made one of her joints go pop. "You were seriously expecting that to work? You got a magic cunt?"

"Well," I said, "not really. That was mostly just an excuse. But I hoped it might do something. Ah!" I lit up all of a sudden. "Raine, Raine, I have to draw on you, I need to draw on your skin."

Raine tilted her head and raised a puzzled eyebrow. I dug around in my yellow blanket, pulled out the marker pen I'd lifted from the dayroom, and then rolled up my left sleeve to show her the Fractal.

"Nice tats," she said. "What's it do?"

"This is the first and greatest gift you ever gave me," I said. "The first time we met, you drew it on my arm, to ... to, well, to keep magical nightmares at bay. It's hard to explain, but it's a kind of 'firewall'. That's the word you use to describe it. I'm not sure, but it might be the reason I haven't lost my memories like everyone else. I tried drawing it on Zheng — she's kept her memories too — but it didn't fix her physical problems. I'm not sure if it'll work, but it might. But it also might not be having any metaphysical effect at all, it might just be 'cosmetic', in here. This is a dream, or an illusion, or reality re-arranged, or—"

"Sloooooow down, slow down." Raine raised a hand. "You don't need to explore every nook and cranny, Heather. I've already done that, with my fingers."

I blushed and tutted. "Raine!"

Raine broke into a grin. "Damn, girl. When you react like that, I can see why I tease you. You're too cute for this. Too much for my blackened heart." I frowned at her. Raine grinned wider, raising

both hands in surrender. “Seriously, you don’t need to explain every detail.”

“I don’t? You’re just taking this on trust?”

Raine shrugged. “It doesn’t matter if I believe you or not. I meant what I said earlier, sweet thing. I’m yours now. I’m your hunting hound.” She held out her own left arm, fist clenched. “My skin is your canvas, my muscles your sword. Draw on me all you like. Go ahead. Just praise me when I do a good job, and keep me fed.”

I bit my lip and squirmed at those words — we really shouldn’t have sex a second time; Evelyn was waiting, trapped with her mother. One round of hanky-panky had not helped to restore Raine’s pre-Cygnets memories, and I doubted railing me up against the cell wall another two or three times would break the seal on her mind. So I took a deep breath and focused on my task.

Drawing the Fractal on Raine’s arm was a strange reversal of our usual roles. She had refreshed and redrawn the symbol upon my flesh over and over again, almost every single night for the entire previous year of my life, in an act of regular care and protection. Now I repeated the gesture, to free her from a prison she could not see. I copied the angles and lines of the Fractal onto the pale skin of her forearm, piece by piece, triple-checking my work as I went. Once I was finished I checked the whole structure once again, then twice, then sat back with a sigh.

“You done?” Raine purred.

“Mhmm. That’s the whole thing. Do you feel any different?”

Raine’s lips curled into a dangerous grin. “I feel a lot of things about you right now, sweet thing.” She raised her left arm and examined the Fractal. “But I ain’t got any memories flooding back. No dice.”

I let out a huge sigh, then tutted, and re-capped the black marker pen. “Damn. Um, pardon my language.”

Raine ran her fingers across the lines of the Fractal. “I like it though. Skilled work. Well done. And hey, now we match.”

“I did learn from the best,” I said, nodding at the ASCII art all over the walls. “By which I mean you.”

Raine bobbed her head in gracious acknowledgement of the compliment, then thumbed at the artwork all over the walls of her

cell. “Do I draw this kind of stuff in reality, or is this just a dream thing?”

I cast my eyes over her improvised art once again. “Oh, you draw plenty of this, but never that size. You send me a lot of it, in text messages and such. But ... well, usually with less naked bosoms.”

Raine tutted. “Pity.”

I let out a big sigh and ran one hand over my face. “Dammit, I really did hope that would work. I don’t know how to snap you out of this dream.”

Raine walked over to the steel door of the cell. She scooted the unwrapped package of bacon out of the way with one foot — the food was no good anymore, after she’d rubbed the grease all over her hands to lubricate the knife for her little unlocking trick. Then Raine bent down to pick up the white plastic knife I’d stolen from the mess hall, the one she’d used to shimmy the lock open.

She straightened up and twirled the knife over her fingers. Then she tossed the blade in the air, caught it in a backhand grip, and mimed four quick stabs into the throat and chest of an imaginary foe. Her arm lashed out like a striking snake, the tip of her weapon a razor-sharp fang. She hopped backward on the balls of her feet, lowered the knife, and grinned.

“Still got it,” she purred. “You need me to butcher some nurses? Slay a monster? Fight a god? I’m good to go, memories or no.”

I half-covered an appreciative smile with my fingertips. “With a plastic knife?”

Raine glanced at her ‘blade’, then chuckled and shoved the greasy weapon into the waistband of her pajamas. “A new Excalibur, cast in polypropylene. Better than nothing. I’ve done more with less. But ... yeah.” She smiled and clucked her tongue. “I’d prefer something in metal. Keep that in mind, if you get a chance to go all light fingers again.”

I nodded. “I will. Raine, listen, I’m not doubting your skills or your dedication, even bare handed. I’ve seen you do more. But the others aren’t physically confined. They’re locked away emotionally and psychologically. All except Zheng, and I have even less of a clue how to restore her strength. Unlike with you I can’t just break into a bunch of cells and gather our party. I need to find a way to free

minds, not just bodies.”

Raine raised her chin and considered me with heavy-lidded eyes. “Mmmmm. A metaphysical problem, rather than a practical one. Nasty.”

“Yes, exactly.” I sighed again. “You’re by far the most intact of everybody, both physically and emotionally. Except Zheng, I suppose, she’s all there in the head, but not in her body.”

Raine stopped grinning. “Why?”

“Ah?”

“Why me, Heather? Why am I special? Why am I the most intact? Why me?”

I chewed on my bottom lip and frowned hard. My mind finally started grinding into gear. “I’m not sure. I haven’t had a lot of time to consider the metaphysics of this place, not yet. I’ve been too wrapped up in practical actions, trying to find everyone, reach everyone, and then journeying to this cell. It’s been ... terrifying, frankly. So, no, I don’t know why you’re the most intact. Maybe because you’re more determined? Because you draw so much of your purpose from other people — from me?” I shook my head. “You’re the only one who’s physically confined like this, except possibly Maisie, or my other six selves. Like the dream couldn’t do enough to your head to keep you contained, so it had to lock you up.”

Raine winked at me. “Can’t keep a bad dyke down.”

“Well, yes, that much is self-evident,” I said. “But I don’t have anything else to go on. I don’t know why you’re most intact. Anything I can say is pure conjecture. Maybe it’s because you were always the woman of my dreams in the first place.”

Raine broke into a grin. “Oh, little thing, you are just too cute for your own good.”

I swallowed and blushed like a tomato, clearing my throat in embarrassment at my own joke. “Dammit, why am I blushing?! You just ... just ‘finger banged’ me against a prison wall! What have I got to blush about? Tch!”

Raine chuckled, running her tongue over her teeth.

“Look,” I said, trying to ground the conversation before we ended up having sex again. “I mean, listen. I mean— I don’t know what’s going on here, metaphysically, or spiritually. Not yet, anyway. Do you want me to explain what I think? Maybe we can compare theories.”

Raine shook her head. “Don’t need it.”

“ ... ah? Sorry? Why not?”

Raine shrugged. “Either you’re right, and we’re gonna break out of a dream whipped up by an alien god, and then rescue your twin sister — damn, there are two of you, really? Lucky, lucky me, unnnh,” Raine grunted. She carried on before I could raise an objection. “Or you’re wrong, and we’re about to stage the greatest loony bin breakout in all history. Either way, I’m your hound. I’m your good girl. Right, Heather?”

A quiver rose from the base of my guts once again. Raine must have seen my arousal; she walked right up to me, went down on one knee, then raised my right hand to her lips and kissed the back of my palm.

“Raine,” I whispered a gentle warning.

“Say it. You gotta keep saying it, Heather. Gotta keep me sweet.”

“G-good girl,” I murmured. “Good girl. Good girl ... ” I reached out with my free hand and stroked Raine’s greasy hair. She purred and rumbled and nuzzled my arm. I swallowed and found my voice again. “Okay, um, first, I need you to tell me what you know, whatever you remember. How long you’ve been here, what you’re here for, what’s outside this place. Anything at all. You might not want to theorise, but I do.”

Raine eased backward, assuming a more comfortable kneeling position. “Been here for years. Can’t remember how many years though, not really a fan of keeping track. I prefer using the walls for art.” She nodded sideways at the ASCII art on the walls again. “What am I in for? Everything. They threw the book at me. Danger to myself. Danger to others. Doesn’t play well with her peers. So on and so on. What’s outside this place? The world. What else?”

I nodded slowly, accepting that I still had nothing to go on. “And you’ve been locked up in this cell the entire time?” I glanced left and right, at the concrete walls and the cold floor, at the wooden

slab built on which I was sitting, and at the disgusting toilet in one corner. I pulled a face at the state of that unfortunate commode.

Raine chuckled. “Yup. The whole time.” She nodded at the toilet as well. “That thing ain’t as bad as it looks.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “Really?”

Raine just smirked.

“Raine,” I said softly. “Look at it. There’s not even any toilet paper. It has no flushing handle. It’s ... it’s green and black! How can this be real?”

Raine slid her eyes over to the vile toilet in the corner. She stared for a long, long moment. She started to frown.

“Huh,” she said.

“Have you not been ... you know ... ” I cleared my throat. “Even prisoners need to use the facilities. Especially if you’ve been in here for months, or years.”

Raine just stared at that toilet. “Huh.”

“Is this ... ” I measured my words. “Is this bringing you round? Sex didn’t bring anything back, but a filthy toilet is working?”

“Not quite,” Raine purred. “But that is an interesting thing you’ve pointed out.” Her eyes flicked back to me. “But you need to focus. Stop trying to convince me. You don’t need to do that. Understand?”

“I’m not trying to convince you,” I said. “I’m trying to figure out the metaphysics.”

“Leave that for the magician. Eevee, right?”

“Yes,” I sighed. “Frankly, Raine, I’m barely holding myself together. This morning has been terrifying and I’m desperate to understand what is happening so I can break it open. Finding you, freeing you, this is the first relief I’ve gotten. My mind is working again. I need to think!”

“And I need to act,” Raine purred. “Use me, or I might start to bite.”

I sighed — but then nodded. Raine was right, biting or not. We had to act. We had to get Eevee away from the nightmare memory of her

mother, at the very least. I took a deep breath and told Raine everything I had learned so far.

I kept it short and simple, as straightforward as I could manage: Evelyn was locked behind a security door in the entrance hallway, alone with a nightmare of her mother, her disabilities uncared for, her body withered; Twil was out in the asylum grounds, accompanied by her odd ‘friends’, with no memory of her werewolf truth, meek and timid; Zheng was robbed of her size and strength, but her mind was clear; Lozzie was a cartoon psychopath, free but dangerous, lacking her kindness and empathy.

“The girl who followed you?” Raine interrupted gently. “That’s Lozzie?”

“Yes. And I’m so worried about where Night Praem took her. We need to help Evee first, yes, but I at least want to confirm that Lozzie is safe.”

“Mmmm,” Raine purred. “There might be a way to do that. Let me think on it. Go on, anybody else?”

I told Raine about the Caterpillars in their terrarium, shrunken and diminished; I told her about the Knights, re-cast as armed guards for a quasi-military wing of the hospital.

Raine raised her eyebrows at that. “Guns? They’ve got guns?”

“Mhmm!” I nodded. “I don’t think they know how to use them, though. Or maybe that’s just wishful thinking. They’re so noble and chivalrous, I can’t believe they’d ever shoot any of us, even in a nightmare.”

“Getting hold of just one gun would change everything,” Raine said. “But if it’s like you say, and the wrong word could tip them over ... hmm. Chivalry, I like that. Maybe we can work on them somehow. Hold that thought for now, hey?”

“Quite,” I agreed. I told Raine about Praem over again, in more detail — or rather, ‘Night Praem’ — and about Sevens, and Mister Squiddy, those who appeared to be absent. I told her about Maisie, too, and my theory that Maisie was locked away inside the military wing of the hospital, guarded by the unwitting violence of the re-purposed Knights. I told her that I should have six tentacles, each inhabited by a miniature copy of myself, and how I was currently very alone and very isolated inside my own body.

Raine listened to every word, eyes fixed on mine, storing away each detail for later use.

When I finished and fell silent, she just stared at me for several long moments, deep brown eyes burning quiet.

“Um,” I ventured. “Raine?”

“So,” she purred. “The nurses. The doctors. During daylight hours, they’re the primary obstacle. At night, currently unknown.”

“Yes, as far as I can tell.”

Raine nodded slowly. “Alright Heather, here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna confirm Lozzie’s safety. If I can win a very dangerous game, we might be able to get her on our side, but I need to meet her and sound her out first. If we can’t go all the way, we might be able to turn her loose on the nurses, make a good distraction. Then we’re gonna go for this Evelyn girl. She’s a magician, right? If you need to start breaking metaphysical bonds, there’s our starting point.”

I nodded along. “Okay! Okay, this sounds good.”

“Evee’s mother, what do I need to know about her?”

I blinked several times. “Um. Well. You killed her once already. In reality.”

Raine chuckled. “Really now?”

“It’s a very long story,” I said. “And I don’t personally have all the details, but yes. You and Evee killed her together, back when you were about fourteen years old, I think. To save Evee.”

Raine grinned. “Let’s make it stick this time then, hey? Now, Heather, we’re gonna need three things. One: I need a better weapon than this plastic knife.” She touched her waistband. “That’s non-essential though. I can bluff if I have to. Two: I need a disguise.”

“Oh?”

“I’m a high security inmate. Even if I can get us out of here, I can’t go walking around the regular hospital wings.” She tapped her sweat-stained tank top. “Gonna need new clothes.”

“What about this?” I said, and held out a corner of my yellow

blanket.

Raine raised her eyebrows. "Maybe, if there's no other options. You keep that for now. Maybe it's from Sevens, right? If she's protecting you, you need to hold onto that. I need something else, something less attention-grabbing. Just keep this need in mind, for when we get out of here."

I nodded. "Okay. Okay, maybe we can steal a uniform or something."

Raine cracked a grin. "You like a woman in uniform?"

"Well," I tutted. "No, actually."

Raine narrowed her eyes in shrewd approval. "Huh. Alright then. And finally, number three: we're gonna have to deal with the guard, if we wanna get out of this prison."

"Please don't hurt Praem," I said. "Please, Raine. She's one of us. One of our family. She's practically my daughter-in-law."

Raine took a deep breath. "Alright then. I promise. I won't have to hurt her, not if this works. But I do need you to trust me."

Raine stood up, took a step back, and offered me a hand.

I reached out and took her palm with my fingers.

"I trust you with my—"

"Because I'm about to do some really crazy shit, sweet thing," Raine said. She wasn't smiling. "And I'm not bigging this up. I really mean that. You better be ready, and you better trust me. Because if you don't, if you hesitate, then I can't protect you."

"... what magnitude of 'crazy shit' are we talking about, Raine?"

Raine smirked. "How good are you at playing along with a ruse?"

I bit my bottom lip. "Not ... not very. I tend to wear my heart on my sleeve."

Raine chuckled, without much humour. "Then I shouldn't tell you, or you might give the game away. Scream if you want. Cry and shout and wail. I won't judge if you wet yourself. I won't judge a single thing, as long as you trust me. Because then I can keep you safe."

I took a slow, steady breath. My heart was racing, because I knew Raine wasn't exaggerating. Whatever she was about to do was going to place both of us right on the edge of madness.

"I've always trusted you, Raine," I said. "And you've never let me down. Whatever you're going to do, I'm with you. You're a ... a good girl. My good girl."

"Mmmmmmm yes, you keep that up." Raine squeezed my hand, tight and sweaty. "Do you need to take a rest, before we go?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm ready."

"Got everything you need in that cloak?" she asked. My eyes flickered to the bacon from the packet of napkins — now very much transformed into unfortunate floor-bacon — and then to the heavy padlock I'd dropped, beyond the threshold of the cell, just visible through the crack between door and frame. "Mm-mm," Raine grunted. "Don't worry about the padlock, I'll take care of that. Not my style, I prefer a blade, but it might come in handy. You got everything else you need?"

I nodded. "I'm good to go. Do it, please, before I lose my nerve."

"Right now?" Raine purred. "You have to mean it, Heather. You say yes, and we're off, we're gone, no turning back."

"Yes," I said. "Let's get out of—"

Raine yanked me to my feet and wrapped an arm around my waist. Before I could so much as squeak in surprise, she strode toward the cell door, pulling me along beside her. She kicked the door wide open and stepped out into the corridor, with me at her side.

Darkness yawned both ahead and behind. The ends of the corridor vanished into filthy shadows. Cell doors marched off into oblivion.

"Raine?" I hissed. My heart leapt into my throat. I twisted to check over our shoulders, but there was nothing approaching down the prison passageway. "Raine, what are we doing?! What—"

Raine scooped up the fallen padlock in her free hand and banged it against the nearest stretch of concrete wall.

Thoom—thoom—thoom!

Echoes rang out down the corridor, calling into the unquiet bowels of this carceral underworld.

“Heeeeeey!” Raine shouted. “Heeeeeey! Maid girl! Night Praem!”

“Oh!” I squeaked. “Raine, what—”

“Clean up on aisle fuck you!” Raine howled into the waiting darkness. She pounded on the wall with the padlock again. The concrete cracked under the weight of the cudgel. “Big mess here, with your name on iiiiiiit!”

“Raine!”

Raine tightened her grip around my waist. She lowered her voice for me: “Told you to trust me, Heather. You trust me?”

“I-I do, of course I do, but—”

“This Praem, she’s one of us, right? Your daughter-in-law? Our maid-girl? Evelyn’s demon-in-a-doll?”

“Yes! But—”

“Then we gotta trust her too,” Raine purred. “We gotta trust that every one of us is still on board. Every one of us is still there, inside. Just like I am. You know why?”

“Wh—why?”

“Because I’m not special. I’m not unique. It’s all of us together, or none of us at all. That means her, too.” Raine dipped her head and caught my eyes. “You gotta trust me, Heather. You gotta trust all of us, or this doesn’t work. We’re gonna go find where she put your Lozzie. Solitary, maybe. Maybe something else. Wherever it is, we’re going there. Wherever she takes inmates, we’re about to find out.”

Raine raised the padlock again and slammed it against the concrete wall — thoom—thoom—thoom! She filled her lungs for another shout—

“Paaaaaaaem!” I yelled. “Praem! Praem, Evee needs you! Praem!”

Raine burst into a grin, showing all her teeth. “That’s my sweet little thing, that’s my Heather,” she purred for me, then raised her voice: “Maid girl, we got something for you! Come and get us!”

“Yeeeeeeeah!” I yelled.

“Come get some!”

“Praem! Praem, it’s me, it’s Heather!”

“Special mess on the floor of my cell! Grade-A girl-juice! Big ol’ puddle!”

“Raine?! Ye—yeah! That’s right! Sweat and j-juices and— Praem! Cleaning time! Praem!”

“Woooooo!”

“Yeah!”

“Praem!”

“Prison break underway!”

“Bad girls are up and out of bed and gonna fuck nasty all over your clean sheets—”

Shadows thickened at the end of the corridor, like an explosion of ink flooding a glass fish tank.

A voice rang out, like a bell wrapped in black velvet, sounding down the corridor, drowning out our improvised absurdities.

“Good girls should be in bed,” intoned Night Praem.

I flinched and faltered, my voice dying in my throat. My flushed and sweaty face went cold with fear. I hiccuped twice. Raine stopped shouting as well, lowered the padlock, and wrapped both arms around me, holding on tight.

Night Praem floated out of the darkness — a writhing mass of coal-black membranes and inky-dark frills.

“Heather,” Raine growled. “Arms around my waist, right now. Hold on tight. Do not let go. Hurt me if you have to. Harder. Harder! Grip me!”

“Y-yes, I— yes, okay! Okay! I am!”

Raine squeezed me so hard it hurt. I squeezed back, whining low in my throat.

Night Praem broke like a tidal wave, flowing forward in a sudden torrent of black. Dark waters filled the corridor from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, racing and rushing, slamming past steel doors, reaching for Raine and me with a million frilled feelers of raven embrace.

I swallowed a scream and hiccuped into Raine's chest. Raine's lips ripped wide open in a grin.

"Hold on tight, sweet thing!" she roared. "Let the maid do the work!"

"Good girls go to bed," Night Praem intoned, inches from my ear.

The wave slammed into Raine and me — like a wall of lace and feathers, a tidal wave of tissue-paper and fluff and foam. Pressure swept me off my feet and down the corridor, pulling at my arms, trying to yank Raine and I apart. Raine squeezed and squeezed and squeezed, growling in my ear, digging her fingers into my back. Feral desperation claimed me; I bit her shoulder, hooked our legs together, and drooled onto her tank-top.

Night Praem carried us off, down into the lightless depths of the prison, down further than life had any right to go.

But she carried us together — Raine and I, inseparable once again.

bedlam boundary – 24.6

Night Praem — a living wave of gossamer shadow, a rushing torrent of sable velvet, a crashing stream of lightless foam — swept me and Raine before her, as if we had been scooped up in a million lace-frilled arms, cradled against a million phantom chests, and hurried onward with a million clacking footsteps, off into the depths of an unlit house, taken swiftly to the secret place where bad girls go.

She slammed through corridors of cracked concrete faster than any human could have sprinted, swirling us like flotsam carried on a wave of stygian water, racing past hundreds of steel cell doors; she carried us over the sides of rusted walkways and past the edges of bottomless stairwells, dropping straight down into the open shafts and empty voids below — only to cushion us at the nadir of the descent with the shadow-play splay of her own mutable mass; she wormed and wriggled through tight and twisty tunnels, squirming down collapsed labyrinths of crumbled brick, squeezing beneath bent doorways of long-tortured metal; she raced us across boundless galleries of naked stone, their ceilings lost in infinite shadow, their walls streaked with calcified deposits of ice-white minerals.

Raine roared with laughter, her voice echoing off rusty steel and ruddy rubble and rough-hewn rock. I did my best not to wail at every twist and turn, at every sharp angle where it seemed Praem might dash us to pieces against the walls or floor, at every stomach-lurching drop into the dark beneath the world.

Instead I bit Raine all the harder, chewing on her shoulder. I locked our legs together until my muscles screamed with cramp. Raine held me so tight my ribs creaked. I whined and growled and gnawed, wishing for my other six selves, my six missing tentacles, my pneuma-somatic truth.

With six tentacles and a bit of self-modification, I could have swam against even Praem's sunless current.

Then, when it seemed that Night Praem might carry us down forever until the pounding rush of her waters extinguished the flames of hell itself, she stopped.

Raine and I were tipped onto our own feet — on cold, hard, solid ground.

I would have toppled over and landed on my own backside if not for Raine's arms around my body, Raine's determined protection, and Raine's frankly absurd physical strength; I almost dragged both of us down anyway, clinging onto Raine's front with all my might and both my legs, teeth still digging into her left shoulder. She staggered forward and caught our combined body weight with a twist of her hips, grunting with the effort.

"Feet, Heather!" she hissed right next to my ear. "Feet down, now!"

"Muuuuunhhh!" I grunted into Raine's shoulder and wiggled my legs free, kicking for purchase. My feet found the floor, slapping and slipping as I lurched out of Raine's grip.

"Steady, steady," she hissed. "Steady, sweet thing. Easy now."

"Ah— ow! Ah—" I was heaving for breath, shaking all over with adrenaline and shock. Pain radiated upward from my ribs, from where Raine had squeezed me so hard during our dark descent. "Ahhhh! Uh, ow."

But I was intact and alive. My yellow blanket was still draped around my shoulders. And — miracle of miracles — I had somehow not lost either of my scratchy institutional slippers. They slapped against dirty linoleum as I found my feet.

Raine kept a firm but gentle arm around my waist, helping me to stand. "Take a sec to catch your breath," she purred. "I've got eyes up, eyes on. We're clear. Just breathe, breathe."

"Where— where are we— where—"

Raine laughed, soft and dark. "Somewhere I've never been before. The end of the line. Ain't that right, Night Praem?"

Praem didn't answer.

I did as my faithful hound bid me — I took a moment to catch my breath and get my bearings.

Night Praem had deposited Raine and me just across the threshold of a large double-doorway; the doors were pinned permanently open, affixed to the plaster walls by long nails and thick rusty spikes driven through flimsy grey wood. Praem herself waited just

across the invisible boundary between room and corridor, a membranous ball of fluttering, undulating, lace-clad darkness, framed by grey concrete. Doubtless she would push Raine and me back into the room if we dared challenge her decision of our final destination.

Behind us, stretching off into illimitable darkness, was a medical ward.

Dusty plaster walls and a sticky lino floor, with fixtures in dead-sky grey, curdled-cream white, and unflushed-toilet brown. Steel bed frames stood with their heads against either wall at regular intervals, leaving a clear walkway down the middle of perhaps ten feet wide. Some beds showed nothing but damp mattresses mottled with mouldy stains, while others menaced with manacles and restraints and nasty leather straps. Only a few beds offered the true refuge of normal sheets — though thin and scratchy, unwashed and unmade, greasy from the sleep of strange bodies.

Each bed was separated from the next by a pair of thin white curtains on rails attached to the ceiling, just like in a real infirmary or sickbay. The nearest curtains were pulled back to show the empty beds, as if to present new arrivals with their undeniable fate.

Further away all the curtains were drawn, enclosing each bed inside a private niche, creating an endless promenade of blind corners and secret depths.

Illumination was provided by bed-side night-lights. Each one was plugged directly into a wall socket, one for each bed. Many of the night-lights looked half-melted, their inner glow dimmed by damage. Others flickered and guttered, casting cold deep-sea colours across the empty lino floor. Most were curtained off alongside the beds, throwing ghostly sheet-shadows at jagged angles across the grey walls and pale ceiling.

Twenty to thirty feet down the ward, the darkness was too thick to penetrate, lit from within by the weak candles of distant night-lights. Beds and curtains alike were swallowed by thick inky gloom.

The room could have been a mile long. Or infinite.

“Tch,” I tutted, unimpressed and vaguely offended. “This is a very unsubtle metaphor.”

“Recognise the place?” Raine said.

“Yes and no.” I sighed and shook my head. “I think it’s meant to be the infirmary from the real Cygnet Hospital, but all stupid and spooky. Where are the murals on the walls? And the beds were never that bad. The beds in the infirmary were actually better than the beds in the residential rooms. And we got extra treats and stuff if we had to spend time in the infirmary. And there should be three or four nurses just bustling about in here.”

“Don’t jinx us, sweet thing,” Raine purred. “No nurses is good.”

“Oh, um, yes, yes. Sorry. At least it’s empty. And it’s better than the prison, I suppose. If this was reality we’d be miles underground by now.”

Raine nodded at the impenetrable gloom ahead. “You afraid of the dark, Heather?”

“Sorry?”

“This is your dream, right?” Raine asked. “Or your nightmare. So, you afraid of the dark?”

“Oh, no, not at all.” I almost laughed, despite everything. “I actually like the dark these days. And this kind of gloom, it almost reminds me of the deep sea. That’s almost ... almost comfy. If only I had all my tentacles.” I sighed. “So, no, it’s not strictly my nightmare. It’s our nightmare. All of us. Plus the Eye. And I doubt any of this is that simple.”

“Mmmmm,” Raine purred. She clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Yeah, s’what I thought too. Sure doesn’t seem like a punishment, right? This isn’t no solitary cell. This ain’t the naughty step for bad little girls. Right, Night Praem?”

Once again, Praem did not respond. Raine turned back around and stared at her, with narrowed eyes and a knowing smile. Praem just floated there on the other side of the doorway, totally unreadable, without face or features.

“Raine?” I asked. “What are you insinuating, exactly?”

Raine gestured at Night Praem with the padlock in her other hand — she’d somehow managed to hold onto that thing during our journey through the depths — and said: “I think our prison guard just rendered us some rule-breaking aid.”

“Ah?”

Raine shot a toothy smile down at me, enjoying my cluelessness. "Heather, sweet thing, poor little lamb lost in the dark. But you aren't. Are you?"

"I'm ... sorry?"

"Think about it for a second," Raine said. "Does this look like confinement to you? Does it make you wanna hide under the sheets? Lie down, give up?"

I glanced back down the ward, into the jagged shadows, past the steel bed frames with their dirty sheets. "It looks spooky. And silly. It's an unsubtle metaphor, like I said. Confined forever in the darkness, lost in 'treatment'. It's using my memories, but clumsily."

"Yeeeeeeeah," Raine purred. "Exactly. Back then, you didn't have me to help you escape." She nodded sideways, down the rows of dimly-lit steel bed frames. "I bet if we walk deep enough into this we'll find a way out." She glanced back at Night Praem. "Always trust the maids. They know all the hidden passageways. Ain't that right?"

I stared into Night Praem's flowing shadows, squinting to make out the curves of her body beneath the darkness. Hope sparked in my chest once again — if Praem was trying to help us, that was a very good sign, even if she was still trapped.

"But how could she help us?" I whispered. "She's still not herself."

Raine shrugged. "Maybe we changed her mind."

"How?"

"By the way we clung together." Raine grinned and shot me a wink. "Witness a dyke and her femme pulling off a miracle? That sort of thing can change your whole world."

I tutted and blushed slightly. "You almost sound like Sevens."

"Hm? Is that a good thing?"

"Sevens always says lesbian romance is the answer to everything," I replied.

Raine chuckled. "Good answer." She nodded at Night Praem. "Try her again, Heather."

"P-Praem?" I ventured, my tongue faltering, the words like spun glass on my lips. "Praem, please, if you're still in there, if you're still

aware, please come with us, please help me save Eevee, and all the others. None of this is real, you're not a prison guard or an evil spirit or anything like that. You're Praem! And Eevee needs us right now, needs you, very badly. Praem, please. She's your mother. You have to remember, you—"

Night Praem floated away.

She ghosted out of the doorway and down the corridor, like inky tumbleweed slipping into a lightless canyon. In a split-second she was gone, back into the darkness of Cygnet Prison.

This time Raine didn't have to stop me from trying to follow. I was beginning to understand the rules of this place. I just tutted and sighed.

"Shame," Raine said. "I'd sure like her on our side."

"We can't leave her behind," I hissed. "Praem is one of us. I won't, I refuse. Nobody gets left behind!"

"Who said anything about leaving her behind? We can always come back for her."

"I wasn't talking to you, Raine. Sorry." I cleared my throat and gestured at the doorway, at the walls, at the darkness itself. "I mean this, this place. The Eye. Whatever impulse this has all grown from. You hear me?" I raised my voice slightly. "I won't leave anybody behind! Not Praem, not Lozzie, not even a single Knight! And not Maisie!"

My voice echoed down the corridor outside, swallowed up by rotten concrete and rusty metal, returned as a twisted parody of my defiance.

I cringed away with sudden regret. What if my shout attracted something horrible? What if Praem was replaced by a much worse jailer, a shadow-maw inching around the door frame, come to chase Raine and me down the limitless length of this lightless ward?

A terrible suspicion crept into my mind — what if that was the very purpose of this room? One could not see the limit of the space; it might go on for miles and miles, forever and ever into infinite darkness. For a moment it seemed all too reminiscent of something from one of Raine's video games — a 'boss fight' or chase sequence set-up. Hadn't my earlier efforts with the padlock seemed less like

dream logic and more like video game mechanics?

I had a sudden image of Raine and myself fleeing for our lives, tripping over steel bed frames as some unspeakable horror barrelled down the ward.

My moment of courage threatened to recede into terrified silence; I wished I had my tentacles, so I could curl up into a ball.

“Awooooooo-woooooo!”

Raine threw her head back and howled at the top of her lungs, shaking the shadows and hurling the silence back into the void.

I almost jumped out of my skin, but Raine held me tight in one possessive arm.

Her wolfish cry reached down the corridor outside — and off into the shadowy depths of the ward to our rear. The echoes of her voice seemed to go on forever, long after the human ear had ceased to hear them, without the warping mockery of my earlier shout.

Raine’s voice rang clear and true. The dream could not conquer her wordless roar.

“Oh my gosh,” I whispered.

Raine grinned at me. “Better?”

“ ... I ... uh ... y-yes, thank you. Thank you, Raine.”

“What do you say, when I do something smart?” Raine rumbled, purring like an animal, her grin gone sharp and dangerous. “You gotta learn, sweet thing. I can’t keep prompting. You gotta learn fast or we’re gonna get dangerous.”

“Good girl,” I added quickly. “Good girl, Raine. Good girl. You’re my good girl. Thank you. Thank you for keeping the nightmares at bay.”

Raine let out a long shuddering breath of raw pleasure. She planted a kiss on my forehead, then pulled me away from the double-doors and over to the nearest of the steel bed frames.

For a heart-stopping moment I thought she was about to twirl me around and throw me onto the rumpled sheets, to celebrate our successful Praem-based escape plan with a rousing round of sticking her fingers up inside me again. This was absolutely not the right

moment for us to have sex again, right on the threshold of an infinite hallway of spooky darkness, on sheets which looked like they hadn't been washed in six months. But I was not about to say no; I whimpered with anticipation.

Raine let go of my waist, allowed me to stand on my own two feet, and dumped the padlock on the bed.

"O-oh ... " I said, then cleared my throat. "Um. Right. Yes."

Raine rolled her shoulders and neck, working out the kinks from the journey. She peeled one strap of her tank top away from her left shoulder, to examine a pair of jagged, curve-shaped indentations in her skin.

"Hooooooo girl," she purred. "You get nasty when you're needy, huh?"

"S-sorry?" I blinked, bewildered. "What's that?"

Raine looked up with a grin. "These? These are your tooth marks."

"Oh!" Mortified, I clapped a hand over my mouth, then quickly took it away again. "From— from me biting you? I'm so sorry, Raine. I— I— that looks like it really hurts? Did I really hurt you?"

Raine growled deep down in her throat; she gave me a look like I'd just asked her to make me pregnant. "Sweet thing, you can leave all the marks on my flesh you like."

"Tch! Raine! I'm serious. I don't like hurting you."

"Ahhhhh, don't worry about it," Raine said. "Doesn't really hurt much. You didn't break the skin. But I like it, a lot. You can bite me any time, anywhere, sweet thing. I'm your chew toy. If you'll be mine?"

I huffed and pulled my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders, partly to cover for the incandescent blush on my cheeks. "Thank you for the offer. I think. But no chewing! That can't be healthy. Or fun."

Raine winked at me and clucked her tongue. "Hey now, don't think I didn't see that disappointed pout when I didn't throw you onto the bed."

My blush felt like it might produce actual steam. "I was just— Raine — I meant— I didn't think—"

Raine chuckled and shook her head. "Even I got limits, Heather." She nodded past me, at the shadow-filled depths of the ward. "Not here. Not now. If you got all weak at the knees and something crept up on us? I might not be able to protect you. That takes priority. That's all."

I took a deep breath to help cool my head, then nodded and cleared my throat. "Thank you, Raine. We can ... we can do that later. Again. Right."

Raine nodded once, then gestured deeper into the ward. "Ready to go find the secret passage out of here?"

"You're so sure there's going to be one?"

Raine shrugged. "If this is a dream like you say, then sure, why not? It stands to reason. If it's not a dream, then there's gonna be service passages, back ways out, maybe even a lift to the surface, for freight and stuff like that. So. You ready?"

"And Lozzie," I said. "Don't forget Lozzie, if she's here as well."

"And your Lozzie," Raine said, lowering her voice and narrowing her eyes. "That could get interesting. Maybe messy, too. Been a while since I locked horns with somebody like myself."

"Don't hurt her, please," I hissed. "She's like a sister to me, Raine. And you, too. Please don't. She's not anything like you, back in reality. She's sweet and gentle and loving. Please be careful with her. Be gentle."

Raine ran her tongue over her teeth, behind the sheath of her lips. "I can't promise no harm."

"Raine—"

Raine held up one hand. "Not if she's like me, in here at least. Not if she's willing to mix it up. But I promise nothing permanent. No broken bones. No cruelty. I might have to twist her arm, though. Maybe give her a nosebleed."

I chewed on my lower lip. The idea of hurting my Lozzie, my beautiful and bouncy little Outsider jellyfish, it made my chest ache with horror.

Raine waited, silent, eyes on me.

"Y-yes?" I said. "Is there more?"

Raine sighed. "I need you to say it's okay for me to do that, Heather. I'll protect you if it comes down to that, but I'd rather be proactive. If you give me permission, that lowers the chance I'll need to hurt her."

I swallowed, disgusted with myself, with this entire situation. "Try your best not to. But ... okay. You have permission."

Raine bowed her head to me with utmost seriousness. "Understood."

"Good girl," I whispered. "Good girl."

Raine reached out and took my hand, interlacing our fingers. She gestured at the padlock on the bed. "Mind if I leave that here? I'm more of a knife and blade sorta girl, and it's too heavy for you, right?"

I nodded. "I think it's served its purpose. Let's go."

Raine and I walked into the jagged cross-cut shadows of the hospital ward, hand in hand.

We crept down the central passageway between the endless rows of steel bed frames, peering into each secluded curtain-cubicle, alert to the possibility that we might not be the only lost girls down here in the dark. Raine moved like a cat, quick and light on bare feet, silent except for the drag of her pajama bottoms against the lino and the whisper of her breath in her throat. My slippers slapped against the floor with every step, despite my inexperienced attempts at stealth.

Most of the beds were simply empty, bare of sheets, little more than naked mattresses with vague dark stains soaked into the fabric. A few looked as if they'd been slept in recently; jumbled bedclothes lay dragged aside, open to the air to turn frigid and unwelcoming, as if the occupant had lurched from sleep, fleeing some unseen nightmare. A few beds were completely curtained off into absolute privacy, sometimes with a night-light glowing from behind the fabric, sometimes sunk in total darkness. Raine did not allow any of those to pass unexamined — she crept over and teased the curtains open, always to reveal yet more desolate and abandoned bed frames.

Occasionally we came across worse sights: a mattress stained from tip to toe with flaky brown-black crust, stinking of iron and excrement; a padded leather chair covered in restraints where a bed

should have stood, with hookups for power and a drain for bodily fluids; an electroshock therapy table, reeking of urine and fear, with bite marks all over a mouth-strap; a wheeled trolley of surgical instruments, bone-saws, scalpels — and the unmistakable hammer and elongated chisel of a orbitoclast, a lobotomy tool.

I hung back as Raine investigated that last one. I almost asked her not to touch any of the surgical tools, especially not the lobotomy pick, but she needed a proper weapon, so I swallowed my disgust. But when she picked up the bone-saw it crumbled to rust in her hand. The other tools were no better. She tested a scalpel against the trolley and the blade disintegrated.

“Huh,” she grunted with surprise. “Guess even in a nightmare this shit is out of date.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Bloody right. Pardon my language. Even in a dream, I wouldn’t allow this.”

Raine returned to my side, peering into the darkness ahead. “Do you think this means your ‘Eye’ doesn’t approve of barbaric medical practices?”

“I don’t think it’s capable of approving or not.”

Raine cocked an eyebrow at me. “You sure?” She nodded sideways, toward the collapsed remains of the surgical tools. The lobotomy pick was nothing but flakes of orange-red rust now. “Cos that looks like pretty heavy-handed symbolism to me. If we’re in a dream, the dreamer does not approve of cranial ice-picks.”

“Good! But ... yes, I see your point. I suppose that does have implications for the metaphysics. The Eye is too inhuman to care. Only one of us actual people would care about that. But none of us, certainly not me, would subject us to all this cruel nonsense.”

“Maybe we’re doing it by accident,” Raine suggested. “Can you control your dreams?”

“Well, no. But ... ” I trailed off and sighed. “This isn’t going to help us right now.” I gestured into the dark. “How far do you think this goes? We’ve been walking for ten minutes, easily.”

Raine clucked her tongue. “As far as it has to.”

“To achieve what?”

“To get us out of the prison, of course.” Raine shot me a grin and a wink, then took my hand, and led me forward. “Come on. Can’t give up now. Never give up, that’s what the bastards want you to do. Grind you down, leave you in the dark. But we ain’t staying here.”

A minute later we found the corpse.

The body emerged from the shadows ahead like the swell of a wave upon a moonlit sea, picked out by the cold white glow of half a dozen night-lights — a humped and mangled mass down on the lino floor, a speed-bump right in our path.

Raine and I halted well short of the body, beyond the bank of a pool of blood, glinting black in the gloom. Raine drew the little plastic knife, as if the canteen utensil made any difference.

“Oh my gosh,” I said. “Um. What is this?”

“Somebody’s been real busy,” Raine purred, with far too much appreciation.

The corpse was human, sort of — or at least humanoid. It lay on its back, presumably where it had fallen. The figure was very tall and spindly, with legs as long as my entire body and arms twice the length of my own, each limb sporting multiple joints and knees and elbows. The legs and arms both terminated in massive pale hands, with fingers twelve inches long and palms thick with muscle. The body was dressed in a light grey uniform — smart trousers, shiny leather belt, button-up shirt, grey tie. The belt had loops for equipment, like a walkie-talkie or a truncheon, or perhaps even a firearm — but the slots were empty. The clothes sat oddly upon the body, sucked tight to a shrunken chest and empty belly and hips all bone and angle.

The face was a white shapeless mass of flesh, with two deep-sunken black pits for eyes, a featureless slot for a mouth, and no ears.

A prison warden, I decided.

The ‘warden’ had been stabbed dozens of times in the upper chest, throat, and lower face. Puncture wounds had torn apart the fabric of the dress shirt and penetrated through the bundle of brittle sticks that passed for a rib cage. The jaw and cheeks had sustained only a few glancing blows, but the throat was a mangled ruin of bloody ribbons and exposed bone, slashed open and ripped sideways, lying

upon the floor like a piece of discarded meat.

The corpse was surrounded by a wide pool of its own blood, still and silent. The crimson mess was slowly soaking into a nearby curtain. The hands were raised, clutching empty air in a parody of rigor mortis.

A name tag pinned to the shirt read: 'A.TRUTH.'

"Lozzie's work, I expect," I said with a tremor in my voice. The blood and meat was too real, too fresh and raw for a dream. The air reeked of wet iron and voided bowels. Bile rose up my throat. "Oh. Oh dear. Um."

Raine poked the corpse with one foot.

"Raine!" I hissed. "Don't ... um ... "

Raine shot me a grin. "Don't wake it up? No worries, this thing is extremely dead."

"We don't know that! It doesn't even look remotely human!"

"So?" Raine shrugged. "Do the rules of this dream include zombies?"

I tutted and frowned at her. "I hope not! And don't jinx it by saying so, you might introduce new concepts." I sighed and forced myself to glance at the corpse again. "Though this does bode well. I think."

"Hm? How so?"

"Well," I said, trying to gather my thoughts, trying to see the silver lining. "This was a prison guard. Like the nurses, I think, produced by the same principles of the dream. At least this confirms they can be killed." I sighed deeply. "Though I wish Lozzie hadn't been the one to do it. She hates violence. She hates having to be involved in this. If she remembers this when we all get out of this dream ... " I swallowed. "Well. I do dearly hope this wasn't a real person, somehow."

Raine squatted down and examined the corpse up-close, leaning over the pool of blood. She stuck her fingers into the empty belt loops and patted the pockets.

"Huh," she grunted. "This is bad."

"Ah?"

Raine stood back up and peered into the darkness ahead, then checked behind us, down the length of the ward we had already traversed. The space we'd passed through had been swallowed back up by the crooked gloom, lit by the tiny smouldering fires of the hidden night-lights. The double-doors were long gone, ten minutes back across a sea of subterranean black.

Raine said softly: "If he was armed, your Lozzie has those weapons now. Possibly including a gun."

I bit my bottom lip and put a hand to my mouth. "She wouldn't. She wouldn't!"

Raine shot me a look, dark and unsmiling. "Let's hope you're right, sweet thing." She nodded at the corpse. "You die in the dream, you die in real life? I'd take a few bullets for you, but I don't think I'm immune."

"Tch! Don't say that, please. And don't treat this like an actual dream, no." I raised one hand and flexed it several times. "This all feels very real. Like reality has been re-organised. I have no idea if violence here is ... 'impermanent'. Please, Raine, I love you so much, don't risk that kind of thing."

Raine held my gaze for a moment longer, then broke into a toothy grin. "Love you too. And?"

"Good girl," I added.

Raine reached over and ran her fingers through the back of my hair. "Now," she purred. "I'm making an executive decision. We need to move quieter, just in case Lozzie is waiting for us. Slippers off. Breathe through your mouth. Follow my lead. And no words, not even a whisper."

I did as Raine told me, taking my slippers off and stashing them inside my yellow blanket. The colourless lino floor was freezing cold against my poor toes, even through my socks. I breathed slowly and carefully, through my open mouth, minimising the sound. Raine rolled up the cuffs of her pajama bottoms, then crept ahead on silent feet, clutching the white plastic knife. I stayed close to her heels, my heart racing in my chest.

The darkness ahead of us seemed to thicken, like mist pooling against a cliff-side in the depths of a lightless forest, though the ward went on and on and on. Behind us, the shadows unfurled

across the floor, creeping closer and closer to our backs. In a moment they had swallowed the corpse.

Raine checked every bed, peering into every curtained cubicle, knife held ready.

Minutes passed. Neither of us spoke. I began to shiver with adrenaline and tension and a desperate need to get out of there, out into the light, out of this confined space, before the ceiling fell and crushed my skull, before the shadows ahead and behind rushed in to devour us, before—

Raine was checking around another half-closed curtain; she went completely still, then raised a hand and gestured to me, ordering me to her side.

I picked up my feet and joined her, peering into a secluded bed-chamber; I clamped a hand over my mouth in surprise.

Lozzie.

Fast asleep.

Lozzie had found one of the least filthy beds, climbed under the covers, and curled up on her side. Her petite frame was shrouded by thin blankets, her head pillowed on a lumpy cushion, her long wispy hair trailing across the bare mattress. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted, her chest rising and falling with slow, deep, peaceful sleep.

Her right hand was outside the covers, clutching her metal shiv.

The shiv was coated with blood.

Raine held up one hand to pre-empt any reaction from me, then quickly cupped my ear and whispered: “This is our best chance. We can pass on by and she won’t know. Do we—”

I shook my head, hard and certain, and mouthed: ‘No! Never! Nobody left behind!’

“Alright,” Raine whispered into my ear. “Be ready.”

She pulled back again. I mouthed, ‘Ready for what?!’

‘Anything,’ Raine mouthed.

To my incredible relief, Raine then handed me the white plastic

knife. I almost breathed a sigh of relief before catching myself.

Raine darted toward the bed, toward Lozzie, moving with cat-like silence, every muscle pulled taut and ready; for one moment she was poised over Lozzie's sleeping form like an archaic vampire from a silent movie, hands raised and ready to strike, eyes watching for the slightest quiver of motion in her prey. I thought my heart was going to burst. I bit my own tongue. I curled my toes against the cold floor.

Raine struck like a snake.

She leapt atop Lozzie, slam-rolling her onto her back by one shoulder, mounting her in a flash. Raine sat on Lozzie's hips and trapped her legs beneath the blanket.

Lozzie jerked and spluttered awake, eyes wild with panic, thrashing with her legs and lashing out with both hands — but Raine had already caught Lozzie's right wrist in an iron grip, immobilizing her shiv and pinning the hand to the mattress. Lozzie kicked her legs and writhed and spat and hissed and landed a single blow on Raine's ribs with her empty left hand, but Raine quickly pinned that wrist as well.

“Gettofffff!” Lozzie screeched.

Lozzie bucked, trying to throw Raine aside, but Raine was too heavy and too strong. She slammed Lozzie back down against the mattress

Raine purred: “Down, girl. Down. Down. Ease down. We ain't here to hurt you. Down. Drop the shiv. Open your fingers and drop the shiv. Drop the—”

“Mmmm-no!” Lozzie spat, raging wild, twisting like a fox in a snare. “No!”

“Drop the shiv,” Raine purred. “Come on, Lozzie. You got no choice. Drop the shiv. Drop the shiv. Drop it. Just let go and I'll get off. Drop the shiv. Drop the shiv. Come on, girl. We ain't gonna hurt you. Caught you sleeping. Could'a hurt you bad, but we don't wanna. Just want you to drop the shiv. Come on, come—”

Lozzie bucked again, trying to wriggle free. She twisted her head sideways and tried to bite Raine's arm, but Raine jerked out of the way, grinning like the mad woman she was. Lozzie's teeth clacked

shut on empty air. Her wispy blonde hair went everywhere, lying across her face in a greasy veil.

“Ah ah ah,” Raine tutted. “Only one girl gets to bite this dyke. And that ain’t you. Drop the—”

“No!” Lozzie spat again. “No no no!”

Raine snapped over her shoulder. “Heather, here. Left side of the bed, now.”

I scurried forward, heart in my throat, palms coated with sweat. Lozzie’s eyes found me.

She suddenly went still and relaxed, totally focused on my face. I stared back at her, shocked and transfixed. She lay there, panting and flushed.

“Heather,” Raine repeated my name, her voice cracking with command. I jerked as if stung. Raine nodded down at the bloody shiv in Lozzie’s fist. “Grab her little finger and bend it outward. The rest of the fingers will follow. Take the shiv as soon as her grip is loose enough.”

Lozzie whined and mewled and twisted. Her knuckles went white around her pitiful weapon. It was a jagged little thing, perhaps carved from a spoon. But it was all she had to protect herself.

“No,” she mewled. “Nooooo!”

“Heather,” Raine snapped again. “Heather. Grab her little finger, bend it—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, Raine. No. This— this is all wrong. No. Lozzie, Lozzie I won’t take your weapon. Lozzie?”

Lozzie went still again, staring up at me, panting ragged and raw. She blew her hair out of her face.

Raine raised her eyebrows at me. “Really? You sure, sweet thing?”

I nodded. “Yes. Raine, can you hold her safely, even without disarming her?”

Raine chuckled and flexed her shoulders, still holding Lozzie pinned to the bed. “Sure. She’s all skin and bones.” She glanced back down at Lozzie. “You gotta lift more, girl. Eat a burger. Or a block of tofu, if that’s your thing?”

“Don’t neeeeeeeeeed it,” Lozzie whined.

Raine grinned down at her. “I guess you did do good work with that warden back there. I shouldn’t criticise. Nice work, really.”

“Tssssh,” Lozzie hissed.

I cleared my throat: “I don’t think she’s taking that as a compliment, Raine. Lozzie, I’m so sorry you had to do that.”

Lozzie’s eyes found mine again. Heavy-lidded, deep dark blue, framed by greasy pale skin. She was all twisted up under the bed covers, showing a hint of her pastel poncho.

She smiled, thin and smug. “Sorry? Har-dee-har-har-har.”

“Lozzie,” I said. “I’m sorry we’ve had to be rough with you. I really am. The last thing I want is to hurt you.”

Lozzie said, “Could’a passed me on by, Heathy-Heaths. Let me sleepy-sleeps. I was having a nice dream. Nicer than this one!”

I shook my head. “I won’t leave you behind, Lozzie. Not down here in the dark.”

Lozzie snorted. “I’m a nasty little monster. Don’t I belong riiiiight here? Shouldn’t you be running?”

Ignoring the blood-stained shiv in Lozzie’s right fist, I leaned closer, leaning over the bed, so we were almost face to face. “You are not a nasty little monster. You’re the girl who believed that I would come rescue you, against all the odds. You’re the girl I committed murder for, with my eyes wide open. I moved heaven and earth to rescue you once before, and I will not leave you behind. Not even when you’re like this.”

Lozzie’s smile curdled into a sullen pout. Her eyes seemed sad. She sniffed. “You’re scared of me. Scaredy cat Heatherrrrr.”

I sighed sharply. “Yes. Yes, you’re freaking me out, Lozzie. Right now, you scare me. But that doesn’t mean I would leave you down here, in the dark, alone, with no way out. I love you like a sister, no matter how you’re acting. I don’t care how messed up you are right now. I know you’re gentle, and kind, and—”

“Ha!” Lozzie chirped a laugh. “I can be sharp too. Really really super duper sharp and scary. Maybe I was always like this. Huh? Heathy? You think of that? Huh?”

“Lozzie, I don’t care if you never stop being this way,” I said. “I would never leave you behind.”

Lozzie stared at me for a long moment, then looked at Raine, then back at me again. She said: “Scared I’ll hurt you.”

Was that a question for me — or a statement about herself?

“You might,” I admitted. “But I have to believe that you won’t.”

Lozzie pouted harder. “Didn’t seem that way, earlier,” she grumbled. “Scaredy-cat Heathy running away from me. Not giving me a hug.”

I crammed my patience down tight. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want to believe you. And, fine, I owe you a hug. You’re all still you — you, Raine here, Praem, everyone! I have to trust you, it’s the only choice. Anything else won’t help fix reality. Breaking us apart won’t help fix this.”

Lozzie tilted her head against the pillow. “Head’s all fucked up. Memories don’t make clean lines. You broke everything, broke the world, broke me inside. You have to finish breaking, Heathy. Break us all the way!”

I eased back and met Raine’s eyes briefly, then said: “Lozzie, what does that mean? Are you asking me to hurt you? Because I won’t do that.”

Lozzie snorted. “No. And you’ll never get it. Nobody ever does. Nobody gets Lozzers!”

“I’m trying,” I said. “I’m really trying. Help me to comprehend, Lozzie.”

Lozzie met my eyes, then sniffed and looked down at her own belly. She seemed sad and lost.

“Lozzie,” I said gently. “We’re in a dream. Or an illusion. None of this is real, none of it is really us. I think you’ve figured part of that out, but you’re still stuck, still ... like this. We were trying to—”

“Eyeball eyeball in the skyball!” Lozzie chanted. “Saving twins and twinning saves!” She huffed and gave me a look like a very grumpy teenager. “I know, Heathy. I knows that I knows! And you knows that I don’t have a nose. But we don’t know the way. Do we?”

I nodded with strange relief; Lozzie was halfway back, halfway

here, at least in knowledge if not in personality. That was new and different; Raine had her entire personality, intact and whole — so intact that she had fallen in love with me all over again in a matter of minutes. Lozzie had the knowledge, but her sense of self was blurred.

Raine cracked a grin, still staring down at Lozzie. “Your dream theory is rapidly gaining ground, Heather. This is independent verification.”

Lozzie snorted up at Raine. “Bull dyke dumbbo. Biiiiiig muscles.”

Raine grinner wider. “You just try me, slasher-smile.”

Lozzie bucked — playfully, this time, rocking upward against Raine.

“No!” I snapped. “No, please, both of you, no. You are not like that, out in reality. Neither of you are like that with each other. Please, stop.”

Lozzie bit her lip and smirked at me. “Heathy jealous? Greeny eyed?”

Raine chuckled. “Nah. She knows more than we do. And you ain’t my type, Lozzers. No offence.”

Lozzie giggled; she almost sounded normal. Perhaps more of us gathered in one place was having an effect on our minds, helping to normalise our behaviours.

“Okay, so,” I said, trying to regain control of the situation. “All three of us are ‘on the level’, as Raine here would put it. We’re all on the same side. We all want to break the dream open. We can’t stay here like this forever, with Lozzie pinned to the bed. So, what next?”

Lozzie went quiet, grumbling in her throat. Raine sucked on her own teeth, eyeing the blood-stained shiv. I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose.

“It’s your call, Heather,” Raine purred.

“It’s really, deeply, fundamentally not,” I said. “It’s not my choice, it’s all of ours. I don’t—”

From behind us, from back the way we’d walked down the impossible length of this gloomy ward, a warbling voice cried out:

“Patients and inmates must cease fraternising in treatment areas!”

The voice wavered and wobbled, slipped and slopped, slid and slithered, as if the vocal cords were made from a block of lard and the words formed by slapping it with a rolling pin. The vibrating noise echoed off the walls and vanished down into the dark.

Raine jerked upright. Lozzie’s eyes went wide. I whirled, looking for the source, but the speaker was still buried deep in the gloomy shadows through which we had walked.

“Heather!” Raine snapped. “Decide, now!”

“Let me up! Up up!” Lozzie chirped. “Up up! Now now!”

I whirled back to Lozzie. “Lozzie, you can keep the shiv. Promise me — promise me you won’t hurt me or Raine, or any of the others.”

Lozzie bit both of her lips together as if she was trying to hold back a sob. She shook her head wildly, matting her hair against the pillow, getting blonde strands in her face.

Behind us, down in the shadows from which we had emerged, a soft clicking and tapping began to sound against the lino floor — like claws or fingernails, creeping closer through the darkness.

“Lozzie!” I whined. “Lozzie, please, just promise me! I’ll trust you! Promise!”

Lozzie keened: “I caaaaaan’t! I can’t!”

Raine snapped my name: “Heather. We take the shiv or we let her up, right now. There’s no more time. Decide.”

“... let her up!”

Raine sprang off the bed in a single movement, unleashing Lozzie limb by limb, leaving her right wrist for last. Raine held onto that wrist as she herded me away from the side of the bed, then finally let go, leaving Lozzie free to rise.

Lozzie squirmed out of the sheets and shook herself all over. She shot Raine and I a huge beaming smile, then saluted us with the bloody shiv. “Love you, Heathy!”

“I—I love you, too, Lozzie. Look, we have to—”

That gooey, slapping, blubbering voice called out of the shadows once again: “Patients and inmates will return to their designated treatment options!”

The voice was much closer now, just beyond the shadows, just beyond sight.

And it seemed to call from multiple throats.

Raine grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the curtained-off area around Lozzie’s bed, back into the central clear passage of the elongated ward. Lozzie trotted after us, swinging her shiv through the air like a child with a paper tube, playing at sword fighting. Raine kept herself carefully between Lozzie and I, but we all faced into the gathering shadows, back the way we’d come.

Raine held out her hand. “Knife me,” she hissed.

I pressed the white plastic knife back into her grip. I whispered, “Shouldn’t we be running? I think there’s more than one of them!”

“Huh,” Raine chuckled. “Running? If Lozzie here could take out a warden, I think I can go three-on-one. No sweat.”

“Heeee!” Lozzie chirped. “With plastic?”

Raine smirked back at her and twirled the plastic knife over her fingers, then caught it in a backhand grip. “I’ll beat your score with bare hands, Lozzers. Apparently you ain’t much for a bit of violence, back in the real world. Maybe you need a proper hound to show you how it works.”

Lozzie stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry. Raine grinned back at her.

“Raine,” I hissed, “that’s not what I mean. Y-you’re a very good girl, but I don’t think it’s just one of them, I think it’s—”

The wardens scuttled out of the shadows.

They didn’t move anything like people; they scurried on all fours with limbs outstretched, their torsos parallel to the ground — and to the walls, and the ceiling too, where more of them clicked across the grey paint and colourless tiles. Grey ties dragged along the lino or hung upside down. Smart grey uniforms were contorted into unnatural poses, with legs and arms spiralling outward in dozen-jointed angles of insectoid motion. Fingernails went clicka-clicka-

click as they moved. Their rubbery faces were turned toward us, slot-mouths gaping, dark-pit eyes unblinking as holes punched in maggoty meat.

They burbled in chorus, scuttling toward us. “Patients will return to their designated treatment options!”

There were eight of them.

“Alright!” Raine shouted, grabbing my hand. “Now we run!”

bedlam boundary – 24.7

And so, we ran.

We fled, from ‘treatment options’ and bed frames with leather straps, from the rust-murdered wraiths of lobotomy icepicks and the excrement-stained indignities of filthy mattresses, from greasy unwashed sheets stinking of fear and from the looming spectre of institutional bedtime — and finally, from eight scuttling prison wardens, clicking across the floor and ceiling, grasping for our necks with the elongated fingers and wiry palms of habitual strangler’s hands.

Raine yanked on my arm, spun me away from our pursuers, and pulled me forward; we careened headlong into the darkness of the medical ward.

“Run!” she repeated. “Just run! Eyes forward! Go!”

Behind us, the wardens warbled their wet-moist chorus: “Patients are advised to cease resistance!”

Raine and Lozzie and I plunged between the twin rows of steel bed frames — sprinting and stumbling, heaving and hauling, puffing and pushing. Fluttering curtains and guttering night-lights flashed past, rushing out of the darkness, then swallowed up behind us moments later, joining the ominous clicka-clicka-click of the octet of advancing wardens. We quickly left the monsters behind, scurrying through the thicker shadows to our rear; they seemed to move at a constant pace, neither hurrying nor holding back, embodiments of the inevitable and irresistible force of the dream — or merely representatives of the unstoppable truth of a monopoly on violence. But any delay might give them an opening.

Raine’s bare feet slapped against the floor with confident precision, but my socks provided me precious little purchase on the slippery lino. Less than thirty seconds into our flight my feet hit a patch of slightly cleaner floor amid the sticky residue and dusty remains, as if placed there on purpose to foul my step. I almost went flying, feet sliding out from under me, yelping at the top of my lungs, scrambling for balance; even as my centre of gravity whirled and

tumbled, I cringed with horror at the imaginary touch of nightmare fingers clutching for my kicking ankles.

Only the strength of Raine's arms saved me from a cracked skull or a broken leg, or slamming into the steel foot of a bed frame and shattering half my ribs. Raine caught me with a little 'oof', then a 'hup' as she hefted me upright and put me back on my unsteady feet. She paused for precious seconds to grab those treacherous toes and pull my socks clean off. Lozzie bounced to a halt on the balls of her feet a few paces ahead, waiting for us to restart, her wild eyes darting into the darkness.

Warden voices gibbered from far too close: "No running in the halls and facilities!"

"T-thank you, thank you, thank you," I panted to Raine. "Good girl, thank you Raine, g-good girl, let's— oh God, let's go, let's go!"

Raine stuffed the socks into my grip so I could store them inside my yellow blanket. Then she grabbed my hand hard and tight in her own, and yanked me forward once again, into the shadows ahead.

"Just run, Heather!" she shouted.

Lozzie cheered: "Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

"Where are we even going!?" I yelped, struggling to pick up my feet and match Raine's loping stride. "It's all just darkness! There's nothing here, Raine, there's nothing here! We're lost!"

"Loooooost!" Lozzie cheered again. "Lost in the sauce! Hahaha!"

Raine whooped with laughter, as if I was the one being naive.

"Trust your Night Praem, she's the one who put us here! You trust her, right?"

"I-I—I don't know!" I wailed.

But still, I ran.

Lozzie fared even worse than clumsy little me; she was wearing socks too, but Lozzie had no big strong Raine to catch her when she fell. The first time her feet slipped out from under her, I gasped with horror. She tumbled forward, pastel poncho fluttering through the shadows, going down face-first into the linoleum. I swear I heard the sound of flesh and bone going thwack against the floor. I almost skidded to a halt myself, pulling on Raine's grip, shouting a

plea for us to stop and help. We couldn't leave Lozzie behind — we wouldn't, I wouldn't! Not ever, not even—

But then Lozzie somehow sprang off her hands, feet and legs whirling through the air in a messy cartwheel.

One moment she was down, about to fracture her skull on the floor — and in the next second she was up, sliding forward on the soles of her socks, giggling at the top of her lungs like a banshee in love. She didn't even lose momentum.

“Lozzie!” I shrieked. “Be careful! Be—”

Lozzie looked back and squealed with laughter. “Dreams bounce like rubber if you let them!”

She pulled off the same trick another half dozen times, spinning and sliding, slipping and sprawling, never once stopping or slowing. She bounced off bed frames and spiralled through hanging sheets of curtain, like a trapeze artist showing off her skills, or a hawk slicing through cobwebs. She skipped and sprinted and surprised me with a handspring, bouncing like a child on a trampoline, pastel poncho splaying out in a fan of brilliant colour. It was like the physical rules of this place could not truly contain her.

That almost made me laugh. Almost bottled the fear. Almost made me forget the clicking to our rear.

But the rules still applied to Raine and I.

Raine was breathing hard and deep, steady and strong. The dream of Cygnet Prison had not robbed Raine of her physical conditioning. But me? Little Heather? The scrawny weird shut-in who got winded climbing up too many flights of stairs? I didn't need a nightmare realm to sap my stamina. Within five minutes I was heaving for each breath, struggling to haul one foot in front of the other, propelled by momentum, by fear, by Raine's hand in mine. I missed my tentacles dearly, along with my trilobe bio-reactor and all my other pneuma-somatic modifications. I felt reduced and weak and vulnerable, aching to simply bunch my non-existent tentacles and hurl myself through the darkness like a Catherine Wheel of bioluminescence.

And the darkness seemed to extend forever, unveiling nothing but more steel bed frames, more empty mattresses, more hanging curtains and cold white night-lights.

"I— can't— Raine—" I panted, red in the face, sweat matting my hair and sticking my clothes to my skin. "Raine— can't— run—! I— have to— wah!"

Raine swept me into her arms, princess-carry style. She didn't even miss a step.

"Hold on tight, sweet thing!" she said.

I did as my faithful hound suggested, wrapping both arms tight around Raine's neck and clinging to her front with all my might. The sucking shadows of the ward loomed behind her shoulders, bed frames and curtains and lights swirling down into the advancing gloom, as if draining through a cosmic plughole.

The clicka-clicka-click of the wardens seemed further away now. Snatches of warbled orders were lost to the echoes of the medical ward, too distant to make out. We were leaving our pursuers behind.

"Raine!" I panted. "We're outpacing— them—"

"Good!" Raine yelled. "Gives us time to jimmy open whatever door we find!"

"No— I— it doesn't seem— right—"

"We're just good runners!" Raine shouted. "Nice gams' on you, Lozzers!"

Lozzie pealed out a giggle, running backward for several paces. She shot a big comedy wink at Raine.

We must have been running for ten minutes — though it felt like hours hurrying through the dark, like a whole night of being lost in lightless woods beyond the fires, like years spent in the worst place that the asylum had to offer — when the back wall finally burst from the shadows.

Dusty plaster over cracked concrete, riven by deep rifts of water damage, lined by streaky stains of rusty red minerals eating away at colourless paint, warping the surface with bubbling flakes of wet rot. A control panel was set into the wall at one side, locked and bolted, a blank expanse of rusted steel. Alarm lights stood along the top in red and orange and yellow, all long dead and dark, their bulbs missing, their wires cut, their glass shattered.

And in the middle gaped a mouth, of stinking stagnant water and dark-red jagged rust, lost deep in stygian shadow.

A lift.

“In there!” Raine shouted. “Lozzers, in first!”

I twisted in Raine’s arms and yelped: “You’re joking!? Raine’s that—that can’t be right!”

Lozzie cackled: “Heathy-Heaths all scared of a little tetanus?! Get up to date on your jabbies!”

We plunged into the lift car together. Lozzie leapt over the threshold first, swallowed by the filthy gloom. Raine and I followed close on her heels. Lozzie skidded to a halt on the damp rust, then did a little twist to face the open doorway. Raine stopped short of Lozzie, tipped me gently onto my feet, and drew the white plastic knife from the waistband of her pajama bottoms.

The lift car belonged to some kind of industrial elevator, wide enough and long enough to carry two small vehicles side by side, with a pair of double doors large enough to admit several people abreast. It was a derelict wreck; every surface was a dense gnarled crust of dark red rust, from the metal floor to the chain-link walls and the dripping ceiling; I doubted any scrap of clean steel was left beneath all that decay. Bare rock showed behind the chain-link walls, like the lift shaft in a mine, stained with rust-coloured run-off. A pair of strip lights were affixed to the ceiling, but the bulbs had been shattered into powder. The only illumination came from back in the ward, from the weak and flickering night-lights adjacent to the nearest beds. With the lift doors shut, the carriage would be plunged into utter darkness.

I staggered sideways, shaking from the sprint and from Raine’s princess carry. Cold water soaked my soles and drew a gasp from my throat. A stagnant puddle dominated the middle of the rusted floor.

Raine’s head whipped left and right, searching for something in the gloom. “You don’t get tetanus from rust, Lozzers,” she muttered. “You get it from deep puncture wounds. Now quick, where’s the—ah!”

Raine darted to one side, next to the door. She pressed her fingers against the wall.

A tiny speaker went: ding!

A small ring of light suddenly blazed from within the rust, beneath the spot Raine had grazed with her fingers. The light framed a little red arrow, pointing upward.

“Butch powers!” Lozzie cheered. “Wake the sleepy-head!”

I was so puffed out, so full of adrenaline, and so in awe of Raine, that for a moment I thought Lozzie was literally correct — my addled brain decided that yes, Raine had somehow exerted butch magic upon the dead body of the lift. Then I realised all she’d done was locate the control panel. Still impressive.

“Oh, it’s the button!” I said. “Oh, right, okay. Good, good girl!”

Raine waited a beat, then hammered the button several more times. “Going up!” she yelled. “First floor, here we come! Come on, don’t tell me you’re sleeping on the job, girl, come on!”

I spluttered as my senses realigned. “Wait, wait! You can’t be serious! Raine, this thing is a death trap! Even if it does move, it’s liable to drop us halfway! Or we’ll go straight through the floor! Or — or—”

Lozzie skipped to the front of the lift and pointed her bloody metal shiv out into the shadows of the ward. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet, pastel poncho bobbing like jellyfish skirts in a rising current. “Prison break tiiiiime!” she crooned, calling to the wardens. “Come get uuuuuuus!”

Raine leapt away from the lift controls and joined Lozzie at the doorway, holding her white plastic knife loose in one hand. She swept her other hand through her greasy hair, making it stand up from her scalp; then she bounced on her toes, shaking her muscles loose, limbering up. I cowered behind the pair of them, wishing I had just one tentacle, one steel-sharp barbed sucker, one claw or elongated tooth, one anything. My empty hands were shaking. I pulled my yellow blanket tighter about my shoulders, hissing through bared teeth.

Beneath our feet, the lift went clunk — followed by grinding, crunching, sheering noises, loud and painful on the ears. Engines were waking from rust-drowned sleep.

But too slow. The doors did not begin to close. The lift car did not

start to move.

Clicka-clicka-click went the wardens in the shadows, growing louder and louder, creeping closer through the dark. The wardens were almost upon us once again.

“What did we even run for?” I murmured, my voice quivering. “Why did we even run?”

Raine was hissing: “Come on, come on, come on. Move, move, move. Come on!”

Lozzie chirped, “Let’s make it a game! How many can you take, Rainey-Raines?”

Raine laughed. “Of eight? More than you, Lozzers. That’s my bet. I’ll leave it at that.”

Ragged breath ripped up my throat; I was panting with panic and adrenaline. “We can’t— we can’t stay here! We can’t stay here! We can’t!”

“Nowhere left to run, sweet thing,” Raine said. She looked over her shoulder and shot me a wink, lips pulling open in a toothy grin. “Just promise me one thing, okay?”

“What?!”

“Stick close to my back,” she purred. “As close as you can, within my guard. I promise I’ll protect you.”

Horror reared up from the depths of my soul, smothering all the hope and determination I’d been riding since the start of the dream. If the wardens caught us, we would be separated once again. They would drag us into the depths of this prison, and there would be no gentle rule breaking like with Night Praem. We would all go to our separate ‘treatment options’. Raine would be isolated and imprisoned. What would happen to Lozzie? I kept thinking about that rusted lobotomy pick.

“Raine ... ” I whined.

“I promise,” she repeated. “I love you. Now promise me you’ll stick close.”

“I-I—”

Raine growled: “Promise.”

“I promise! I promise! I promise. G-good girl, Raine. Good girl.”

Raine winked again, then turned back to face the onrushing shadows. Lozzie raised her shiv and chattered, like a cat frustrated by birds she could not reach. Raine blew out a single long, slow, steady breath.

Eight wardens burst from the shadows and crashed into the front of the lift.

“Patients and inmates must refrain from entering staff-only areas!” they warbled.

Raine and Lozzie could not hold the door — the bottleneck would have proven futile against human opponents, let alone these long-limbed scuttling carceral nightmares. Like a gang of uniformed centipedes, they swarmed into the lift, flowing over the surfaces and around the corners; two of them scurried over the rim of the door and up onto the rusty ceiling, while another two broke around Raine and Lozzie without attempting to fight. A third pair of wardens pounced directly at my friends, while the final two hung back, reserves ready to exploit an opening.

Lozzie flopped backward as if falling over before her attacker — but her arm snaked out, poking bloody holes in the warden’s grey dress shirt and rubbery pale face.

Raine twisted like a cornered fox, ducking beneath massive multi-elbowed limbs and sliding past huge grasping fingers. She crouched low, then shot to her feet, landing a hammer-blow one-two punch into the sternum of the warden before her.

That was all I saw before two wardens dropped right on top of me.

Grey uniforms filled my vision. Fists like iron manacles closed around my wrists and ankles — and around my skull, locking me in place. I screamed and shrieked, trying to lash out with tentacles I did not possess, desperate to hiss and spit with a throat I did not have. Instinct — so deeply buried that even the dream could not suppress it — tried to flush my skin with toxins and paralytics and turn my chromatophores red and yellow with warning lights.

All I did was stumble and writhe and go down on my back on the floor of the lift; freezing stagnant water soaked through my yellow blanket and my t-shirt in a matter of moments.

I kicked out with both feet. One landed in a shrunken belly. The other glanced off a kneecap. Neither did anything to help me.

Warden paws pinned me to the cold and rusty ground by wrists and ankles, holding my skull and belly in unkind manacles. A pair of shapeless white heads descended toward me, with black pits for eyes and wobbling slits for mouths, flapping up and down as they burbled nonsense to drown out my thoughts.

“—inmates and patients must not mix—”

“—literature privileges revoked for six weeks—”

“—referred to clinical staff for reassessment of pharmacological treatment—”

“—behavioural study suspended pending—”

“—personal improvement program—”

“—oppositional defiant—”

“—borderline personality—”

“—resistance will be noted and tabulated and— skrek!”

One of the wardens finally stopped babbling at me, because Raine kicked it in the head with her entire body weight. A bone went crack inside the thing’s neck; the warden slithered off me, jerking and flopping.

The other warden swivelled round, keeping me pinned with three hands, swiping for Raine with the fourth. Raine ducked and weaved like an expert boxer, fists lashing out to punish the warden’s clumsy swipe. But two more wardens were advancing on her from behind, with all their hands free. A third lay on the floor in a bruised and bleeding heap, whining and mewling from where Raine had presumably punched its lights out and beaten it to a pulp.

On the other side of the room, another warden lay in a spreading pool of its own blood, throat opened wide by Lozzie’s shiv. Two additional wardens were backing her into a corner, with their massive hands held wide out front to stop her reaching their vital organs, even as she opened cuts on their palms and forearms.

Raine had seconds left. Lozzie would last maybe a few more. I was already out of the fight.

Raine had been right to run; we could not win against eight of these things.

Not without a gun, or big scary knives, or a plausible supernatural win button. Not without more of us to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and fill the doorway in solidarity and sisterhood. Not without tentacles or magic or rule-breaking brain-math.

Because I was powerless, pinned on my back with the hand of control wrapped around my fragile skull. If the system could not keep us bound with rules and regulations, or even steel doors and concrete walls, then it would finally unleash naked violence. And we simply could not match it, not pound for pound. Not even Raine, as she leapt at one of the two wardens sneaking up behind her, as she pummelled it in the face with both her fists, knuckles drawing arcs of blood through the air as she rode the thing to the rusty floor — because then the other warden caught her arms behind her back. Not Lozzie either, as she darted through the guard of one warden and stuck her metal claw into its face, provoking a screech of pain and a scuttling retreat — because then she was inside the reach of the second warden, lashing out to snatch up her poncho and spin her around, slamming her bodily against the rusty wall, drawing a cry of pain from her lips.

We were done.

We had lost before we'd even started.

Even if we had defeated these eight, couldn't the dream throw more monsters at us? The dream operated on an inhuman scale, like the very system it represented; it called upon resources of vast depth and limitless potential, compared with the paltry muscle power and determined solidarity of three young women. Just like Cygnet, just like the real thing; the only difference was the dream didn't clothe itself in lies.

I sobbed. Part of me wanted to curl up, give in, stop fighting.

That's what I'd done as a child, hadn't I? Back in the real Cygnet?

That was what the Eye wanted, wasn't it? Acquiescence to observation. Get in the chair, get on the pills, let us write notes to dissect the inside of your head. Don't raise a fuss. Why are you complaining? We need to know everything about you, so we can put you back together again with all your parts in the right places,

mended by bending and breaking until they fit. We need to see inside all your secret cells, so we can fix your ills. Don't hold back. Show it all. But only in words we can write down. Don't run in the hallways. Don't make unapproved friends. Don't find your own way out.

Despair gave way to fury.

I twisted sideways, straining against the warden's inhuman strength; something went pop in my upper back, flaring with red-hot pain. I ignored it, writhed like a fish, opened my jaw wide, and sank my teeth into the grey sleeve around the warden's arm.

The warden shrieked — a nasty warbling sound of incoherent pain — and then slapped at my face with a free hand.

My ears rang. The world spun with the impact. My cheek burned.

And I bit down harder.

I didn't care what happened next, I would bite and scratch until the very end. I couldn't see what was happening to Raine or Lozzie, but we were all still part of the same fight. In reality, I had gone down without a struggle, because I'd been a little girl with no choice. Here, I was still me. Lacking my other selves, but I was still us. No tentacles, but I was still Heather, and I knew the choice I'd already made

"You wanna look inside me!?" I screamed through my clamped teeth — totally incoherent, the words were nothing but garble and spit. "You're gonna have to cut me open first!"

The warden warbled again, winding back a hand and curling long fingers into a many-knuckled fist. That wrecking-ball would split my skull. I bit even harder, screaming into the rubbery flesh.

Darkness swallowed the warden.

The weight of the monster was whipped off me like cold, wet blankets in a blazing dawn. The warden flew through the air like a rag doll, tossed out of the lift doors and back into the medical ward. It landed in a tangle of breaking limbs and shattering bones, crashing into steel bed frames and ripping down sheets of gauzy curtain.

I was free.

I lurched to my feet, spitting out strands of grey shirt cuff, my back soaked with freezing cold water. Adrenaline was pounding through my veins; I shouted an incoherent, wordless challenge, not yet cognizant of what had happened.

A frilled and lace-webbed sphere of undulating darkness enveloped the warden which had grabbed Raine, swallowing the monster whole inside inky black. Raine fell free, scrambling to her feet. For a split-second the warden was gone, trapped within the source-less shadow — then suddenly it was ejected from the dark, back out through the doors of lift, following its dazed and wounded fellow, slamming into the steel beds and breaking limbs against the concrete walls. The membranous ball of night shot over to Lozzie and engulfed her assailant in turn, sucking the beast deep within the layers of fluttering umber and smoky coal. A split-second later the beast was spat out after the others, smashing through the jumbled wreckage of the ward.

Night Praem darted around the inside of the lift, tidying up our mess.

Raine hurried to my side and put one arm around my waist, as if worried I might be spirited away from her again. Lozzie staggered to join us, eyes bloodshot with panic, panting softly, wiping her face on a corner of her poncho.

Beneath our collective feet, the lift machinery stopped grinding. The floor shuddered.

“Heather,” Raine snapped. “You okay? You wounded?”

“Sore,” I croaked, shaking my head. “P-Praem, she’s—”

“Thankeee, Praemeeeeeee!” Lozzie cheered through a bloody mouth. She waved her metal shiv, poncho fluttering like a flag.

Night Praem did not acknowledge the thank you. She swept up the last of the wounded wardens and ejected the monster from the lift, then crossed the threshold herself, back into the impossibly long corridor of the medical ward.

Beyond her undulating darkness, several of the wardens were starting to rise, staggering back to their feet, turning black-bead eyes upon Praem.

Dozens more wardens loomed in the gloom-choked mouth of the

infirmary, clinging to the walls and ceiling, blind faces peering at Praem's lightless core.

"Praem, no!" I shouted, almost lunging forward to yank her back into the lift. But Raine tightened her grip on my waist. "Praem! Raine, we can't—"

"Come with us, Night Thing!" Raine shouted too. "You're one of us, right? One of us! Come on! Get in the lift!"

"Praemey!" Lozzie joined in. She slapped her knees, like she was calling to a slightly dozy hound. "Here girl! Here here here!"

Night Praem neither turned to look, nor adjusted her position; she filled the doorway of the lift, blocking the wardens' passage as the machinery finally coughed and spluttered to life. The double doors of the lift began to close with an awful screeching of rusty metal, grinding against their housing, sealing off our one source of light.

Dozens of wardens closed on Praem, hands reaching, fingers coiling, faces gibbering, mouths spouting nonsense.

"—disciplinary action for rank insubordination—"

"—sued for breach of contract—"

"—pay docked for two years—"

"—demoted! Demoted! Demoted!"

The doors narrowed on Night Praem, bracketing her coiling, writhing, fluttering darkness in a cage of rusted steel.

With only a scant few inches of remaining light, I filled my lungs and shouted: "Praem, I love you! We all love you!"

As the doors slammed shut, a whirlwind of black exploded outward, back in the medical ward.

The lift was plunged into total darkness.

The floor jolted once beneath our feet, then began to rise, beginning a slow climb toward what I hoped and prayed would be the surface. Three sets of panting lungs rasped and heaved in the unbroken black. Hallucinatory colours weaved and bobbed before my eyes, filling the emptiness with the ghosts of my mind. A weight settled on my chest, the terrible pressure of a sightless tomb.

“We’re coming back for her,” I hissed into the nothingness. “We’re coming back for her!”

Raine whispered my name. “Heather—”

“We’re coming back for her!”

“Heathy’s right,” Lozzie said. Then she sniffed, as if holding back unexpected tears. She was somewhere to my right, lost in the dark. “Praem ... Praem remembered. Like me. Love her too. Love her lots!”

“We are coming back down here with— with a gun!” I spat. “Lots of guns! With all my tentacles and a f-fucking— dammit!”

“Heather,” Raine purred. “Hey. Hey, sweet thing.” I felt another hand against my side and almost flinched; there was no way to see who was touching me in the darkness. But then Raine squeezed my arm and tightened her grip on my waist. “You know what that looked like to me, at the last second there?”

“What?” I hissed. “What do you mean?”

“I think Night Praem was kicking some serious arse.” Raine laughed softly. “I think she’ll be just fine without us. But, but, but ... yes, we’ll come back for her. Maybe she can’t go out in the daylight. Maybe that’s why she didn’t join us.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I hope you’re right, Raine. I hope she’s safe. All those things down there.”

“She haaaaas to be,” Lozzie mewled. “She’s our Praemy.”

I asked the darkness: “You remember her too, Lozzie? You truly remember?”

Lozzie didn’t answer for a moment, then giggled suddenly. “Forgetty spaghetti, you can’t see me shrug! Of course! Praem’s Praem, right? Praem and her big ol’ Praemies.”

“Um, right,” I said. “I ... I suppose that’ll do, for now. Are both of you okay? Lozzie, you got pushed against the wall. And Raine, you were—”

“Doin’ just fine, sweet thing,” Raine said.

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie chirped. “Bruises fade!”

The three of us lapsed into a long moment of uncomfortable silence, filled by the grinding of the elevator mechanisms; rusty flywheels squeaked and rasped, punctuated by the high-pitched vibration of strained steel cables. A steady drip-drip-drip of water kept time behind the machines, flowing down the shaft of naked rock beyond the chain-link walls.

Darkness claimed total dominion over the inside of the elevator car. I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, nor Raine at my side. Only the tell-tale sense of my inner ear told me we were going up, and that could have been mistaken. A tremor of fresh panic quivered inside my chest. I'd never been somewhere this dark before, not in reality, at least. Shouldn't I be able to make out the vaguest impression of the far wall, even in the lowest possible light? My throat bobbed with gut-deep discomfort; I longed to spread my tentacles and light up the darkness with strobing chromatophores, and the fact I could not do so made me feel small and wretched and ugly. Raine must have felt me quivering, because she quietly stroked the back of my head with her free hand.

Somewhere away to my right, Lozzie's feet scuffed against the rusty metal, disturbing the standing water in the middle of the floor.

Raine's arm tightened around my waist. "Lozzers," she purred, deep and dangerous all of a sudden. "I suggest you stay right where you are, little friend."

Lozzie giggled, lost in the black. "I'm not not *not* doing aaaaaanything!"

Raine shifted her feet, placing herself between me and the source of Lozzie's voice. Raine said: "Just to avoid any unfortunate misunderstandings."

"What's to misunderstand?" Lozzie chirped, her voice lilting with manic amusement. "I'm just creeping up on you from behind, you big show-off butch teddy bear."

"Come on now," Raine purred, rasping low in her throat. "Don't make me play rough again. Or did you like getting pinned earlier? Given you a taste for it, have I?"

Lozzie giggled — several paces away from where she'd last stood. "Maybe I'm gonna be the one pinning you, rubbing your washboard abs with—"

“That’s enough!” I snapped.

Lozzie stopped. Raine adjusted her feet, as if preparing to repel an attack.

“Both of you,” I went on. “Stop it. Stop it right now. We’re alone together in a pitch dark box and I cannot deal with you two if you descend into a fight. Lozzie, don’t rise to the bait. Raine, I don’t need protecting from Lozzie. We’re all friends here. I love you both. And please, please, please stop flirting.”

Raine took a deep breath; I heard her exhale, slowly and steadily. “Heather—”

“Don’t argue. Raine, you’re the one who suggested I should trust everyone. And you’re right. And Lozzie’s more than proven herself. And don’t ... don’t yap at her, please. Be a good girl.”

Raine let out a soft chuckle. “Next time just say ‘heel’. Or ‘down girl’. I’ll answer to either.”

“D-down girl, then. Down, girl. T-thank you, Raine.”

Quick little feet suddenly darted across the elevator, splashing through the stagnant puddle. Raine tensed — I felt displaced air against my face. Had she just raised a fist? But then five sweaty little fingers slid into my free hand and squeezed hard.

Lozzie giggled, inches from my ear.

My heart was racing, my skin was covered in sudden flash-sweat, and my bowels were trying to punch their way out through my abdominal muscles. But I squeezed back.

Lozzie whispered: “Still scare-red-diiii?”

“Well, yes!” I squeaked. “But I trust you, Lozzie. Just ... just behave.”

Lozzie giggled one more time, then lapsed into comfortable silence. The elevator ground on upward. Raine tightened her grip on my waist. Three sets of lungs drew stinking, foetid air from the dark box of the lift. Somebody swallowed. I sighed. Lozzie made a soft little mewling noise. I could smell the sweaty tang of Raine’s unwashed body, the spice of her skin, and the blood on her knuckles.

Eventually I murmured: “How long do you suppose this thing takes

to reach the top?”

Raine shrugged; I felt her shoulders move. “Some mining lifts take hours. But if you’re right, and this is all a dream, or an illusion, or something else, then isn’t this lift just a metaphor? Maybe it won’t end until one of us says the right thing.”

“Liiiiiike what?” said Lozzie.

“Good question,” Raine purred, sounding vaguely amused. “Perhaps we should all pledge our undying solidarity to each other.”

“Tch,” I tutted. “I think you and I have already done that, Raine.”

“What about meeee?” Lozzie chirped.

“Huh,” Raine laughed. “It would take a few more steps for me to pledge much to you, Lozzers. But, any friend of Heather’s is a friend of mine. As long as you keep that shiv point for our enemies, I’m on your side.”

Lozzie giggled in a slightly different way to before — far too flirtatiously. I could almost hear the way she bit her lip, twisting one foot back and forth against the rusty floor, preening for Raine.

“Ahem,” I said out loud. “No flirting, please. Don’t make me keep reminding you.”

Raine said: “You the jealous type, sweet thing? Got me on a leash already, you know? All you have to do is yank.”

“Heathy’s jealous!” Lozzie chirped.

“I am not!” I declared. “We’re practically in a polycule. But you two — you are at far, far, far opposite ends of that polycule! In fact, I’m not even sure if there’s a line connecting you both ...” I trailed off and frowned for a moment, staring into the dark, seeing shapes that were not present in the lightless elevator car. “A-anyway! I’m a little shocked that both of you can joke like this, after we just left Praem behind.”

“Praemy will be finey!” said Lozzie.

Raine murmured: “Good thing I didn’t design this lift, then. If it was up to me, we’d have to fuck before it reached the top. Wouldn’t that be a dash of spice, huh?”

Lozzie pealed with laughter. I tutted and prepared another retort —

then felt a soft hand against my cheek, gently turning me to face Raine. I let out a murmur of confusion before Raine's lips met mine, sudden and rough and hard. She kissed me quickly and quietly, filling my mouth with her tongue, smothering my surprised whimper with her lips.

Raine broke the kiss before Lozzie had even finished giggling. I panted, flustered and flushed.

"Say it," Raine growled through clenched teeth.

"G-good girl. Good girl," I whispered back.

Lozzie chirped: "Hm-hm-hmmmm? What's that? Are you two doing a sneaky while I'm right here? Lewd!"

"N-no!" I stammered. "Lozzie, no! I wouldn't, I—"

Raine laughed. "Afraid you're being left out, Lozzers? Sorry, girl. Like I said before, there's only one woman in the world allowed to bite me."

"Awwwwww," went Lozzie. Then, suddenly excited: "Heatheries, do I have a girlfriend, back in the waking world? Or a boyfriend? Or something else?"

"Ummmmmm." I hesitated, then cleared my throat. "You have ... several ... ongoing ... situations. With girls."

Lozzie let out a breathy little gasp. "Am I a messy bitch?"

"What!?" I spluttered. "N-no, Lozzie, not like that! Nothing like that!" I sighed and gestured vaguely with my free hand. "You're just, uh ... huh."

"Heather?" Raine hissed my name. She must have picked up on the change of tone in my voice.

I waved my hand back and forth again. The outline of my palm and fingers blurred against the pitch dark background.

"I can see my hand," I said. "There's light."

Weak grey illumination graced the rusty chain-link and brushed naked rock of the lift shaft, leaving the three of us still sunk deep in shadows. Raine's face was picked out in profile as she turned to look, but her eyes and mouth were still obscured. Lozzie's pastel poncho showed the darkest possible hint of blue and pink, still

desaturated, robbed of true vibrancy down in there dark.

“Do you think we’re near the top?” I whispered. “I have no idea where this might come out, we should—”

Thunk!

The elevator car stopped with a sudden jolt.

Ding!

The big steel doors began to grind open, screaming their rusty torture into the sudden silence.

“Spread out!” Raine hissed. “Be ready!”

Lozzie let go of my hand and bounced away to one side, across the standing water. She crouched by the far side of the doors. Raine dragged me in the opposite direction, spinning me behind her and pressing me against the wall. She braced herself next to the door frame, so she and Lozzie were ready to ambush whatever or whoever stepped through.

The doors squeaked and squealed as they slid back into their rusty housings. Grim grey light filtered through a cloud of rust particles and filthy dust, as if shining through dirty windows, spreading across the puddle of stagnant water in the middle of the lift.

Lozzie’s naughty little grin caught my eyes on the far side of the widening doors. Raine made a signal with one hand — I had no idea what it meant, but Lozzie nodded, making her greasy blonde hair bounce, prompting her to swipe it back and out of her face. Raine wet her lips and tensed her muscles, holding that little white plastic knife at the ready.

The doors finished opening with a clunk-click of uncoiled machinery.

Torchlight stabbed through the gloom and into the lift, scanning quickly across the walls and floor, missing Raine and Lozzie and I tucked into the corners. Three distinct torch beams flicked up and down, left and right. I covered my mouth to stifle a horrified gasp; somebody or something had been waiting for us. We’d escaped one institutional defeat only to be faced by another.

Raine held up three fingers to Lozzie, then counted down — three, two —

A trio of towering figures swept into the lift, moving fast, boots

ringing on the rusty metal. They strode right past Raine and Lozzie, splashing into the standing water.

Raine lowered another finger — one.

The three figures stopped and turned in unison, to face the front of the lift. All three lowered a matching trio of bulky black firearms, pointing their flash light beams at the floor.

Black, blank, bland body armour; faces concealed behind helmets and mirror-finish visors. Not a scrap of skin shown at throat or hands, just more black, kevlar and rubber and leather and metal.

Raine lowered her last finger and drew a breath—

“No!” I snapped. “No, Raine! Stop, stop!” I threw out both my hands and stepped between my companions and the three black-clad security guards. “It’s the Knights, the Knights! They’re on our side! My side. S-sort of. Just don’t ... don’t ... um ... hello. Hi.”

All three Knights turned their mirrored visors and stared at me. Raine shifted to one side, as if trying to get an angle around me to attack the Knights. Lozzie hung back, thankfully.

One of the Knights spoke; I couldn’t tell which one, because I couldn’t see a mouth or jaw moving beneath their clothes.

“You’re probably not meant to be back here, love,” they said, in that same muffled, androgynous voice as before. “You lost?”

“Should we report this?” said a different Knight. One visor swivelled to look at another.

“Nah,” answered the third. “This isn’t mission critical. It’ll only mean more paperwork.”

“But the Director said—”

“The Director’s orders were very specific. We bring the situation back under control. Patients are the nursing staff’s responsibility.”

“They look like they’ve been down there,” said another Knight.

“That one’s got blood on her knuckles. You alright there, miss? Do you need medical attention?”

Raine answered with a chuckle: “Just fine, thanks. Too much shadow boxing.”

“These three are none of our business,” said a Knight. “This is outside of standard operating procedure, but it’s also outside of the designated zone of operation. We’re in transit. No paperwork for that, we’d have to send it up the chain of command. And command is clear, we’re in transit, not ops. These three obviously know where they’re going.” All three Knights turned to look at me again. “Isn’t that right, love?”

I stared, mouth slightly agape, then swallowed and nodded. “That’s ... correct, yes. We’ll just ... just be going.”

Raine gently took my hand and eased me away from the trio of heavily-armed Knights, as if we were backing away from a pride of wild lions.

Lozzie chirped: “Are you three going to help Praem?!”

One Knight snapped: “Yes mum— I mean Ma’am. I mean no, Ma’am. I mean we cannot answer that question, Ma’am. Please be on your way.”

Lozzie pattered out of the lift, giggling all the way. Raine led me after her, out into a dim and shadowy room on the far side of the doors. The walls were plain concrete, dusty and cold but less dilapidated than down in the prison. Long, narrow, high windows punctuated the top half of the walls, admitting dim sunlight through a grimy film of dirt and lichen. Grey metal boxes stood in rows on either side of the room, bolted to the floor, locked shut — some kind of electrical equipment. All of it was silent and dark.

One door stood shut on the far side of the room, a nondescript metal portal with a simple handle. Boot tracks led from the door, down the middle of the room, and into the lift. Our trio of Knights appeared to be the only recent visitors.

As soon as Raine and Lozzie and I were clear of the lift, the door began to grind shut again, filling the concrete box with the screeching squeal of dry rust. I winced and hissed.

Raine shouted through the narrowing gap of the doors: “Any chance of borrowing one of those guns?”

“Sorry, miss!” A Knight shouted back. “But we are not authorised to pass equipment to patients!”

Raine yelled: “Where’s your armoury?”

“Inside the primary security cordon! Please do not attempt to pass it without proper credentials! You three girls hurry along now. Stay safe.”

The rusty doors clanged shut. Behind the wall of orange-and-red, the lift went clunk, and began to descend.

Raine blew out a long sigh. “Oh well. Worth a shot. Maybe I can sneak into their cop-shop and nick a gun or two.”

“They were lovely!” Lozzie said. “Oh, darlings! Darlings!”

I sighed too. “Technically they’re your children, Lozzie. I mean, sort of. It’s complicated.”

“I love them!” she chirped, then did a little jig on the concrete floor, wet socks slapping. “Eeeee!”

Raine tapped her own chest. “I didn’t much like the insignia they were wearing.”

“Ah?” I said.

She tapped her chest again, over her heart. “Impaled tentacles. Three of them, on a metal spike. Like a unit insignia, on a patch. Didn’t you see? You’re meant to have tentacles, aren’t you? My little squid-wife.”

“Ahhh,” I said. “That. Yes. I saw that earlier, when I ran into them for the first time. I’m not quite sure what that means, I haven’t exactly had time to think about it.”

“Hmmm.” Raine grunted. She was frowning at the elevator doors, chewing gently on her tongue. “Internal conflict.”

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“Internal conflict, within the institution.” Raine shot me a shrewd look. “The Knights working for the Director, whoever that is — but working against the prison guards, down there in the guts? Seems odd. There’s internal conflict here. Keep that in mind, sweet thing, it might be useful for us. You’re the brains here.”

I sighed. “You’re too kind, Raine. I’m just muddling through.”

Raine grinned. “Too kind, eh? Uh uh. What do you call me, if I’m kind?”

“Good girl,” I said, and rubbed her back through her filthy tank top. Raine purred with satisfaction, then gestured at the steel door. “Let’s get out of here. Both of you stick behind me. Move slow and quiet.”

The three of us crept up to the door, Raine taking the lead. She eased the handle downward and cracked the portal; blazing sunlight flooded through the gap, making all of us blink and wince. Raine widened the door, peering through with one eye, then both, then her whole head.

“It’s clear,” she said. “Come on out. Water’s fine.”

We all stepped outside.

The logic of the dream had disgorged us deep within the leafy green grounds of Cygnet Asylum, upon a narrow rim of weathered tarmac which surrounded a low, blocky concrete building, the sort which usually housed electrical equipment or transformers or other material interfaces with the world which good girls should firmly ignore. The building and the tarmac were contained within a metal chain-link fence; a door in the fence stood wide open. We all crept out onto the dry, warm, welcoming grass.

Ahead of us, the asylum grounds unrolled in little red brick pathways winding between the gentle giants of spreading oak trees. This deep in the gardens there were few benches, even fewer organised flower beds, and no other girls close by. I spotted a few wandering figures off in the distance, but nobody was close enough to examine us or take an interest.

To our right stood a section of Cygnet’s outer wall — incongruous blackened brick and cold iron, topped with razor-wire and fragments of desiccated meat.

To the left, hundreds of feet away over the tops of the oak trees, the wide windows and faux-gothic pale brick cheekbones of Cygnet Hospital loomed over the landscape, like a giant peering out from beneath sea-green waves. Tiny figures moved behind the windows, patients and residents and nurses. Additional wings angled off from the main building, lost behind each other and the profusion of trees.

“Ahhhhhhhhh,” Raine sighed as soon as we were clear of the chain-link fence. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sky — to the wrinkled underside of the Eye. “Feel that sunlight. Daaaaaamn.

It's been months. Years? This is better than sex." She grinned without opening her eyes. "No offense, Heather."

"Um," I said. "None taken. But, Raine, there's no sun. Really, there's not."

Raine laughed. "What are you talking about, sweet thing? Ahh, sorry, I gotta soak in this for a sec." Before I could stop her, Raine sat down on the grass, lay back, and spread her legs and arms out wide. She took a deep breath, soaking in the 'sunlight' that came from nowhere.

Lozzie did the opposite — she ducked and bobbed and peered about, as if expecting to find a sneaky little face peering at us from the trees.

"I'll be up in a sec," Raine said. "Promise. Scream if a nurse sees us. Just ... just gimme this, sweet thing. Gimme a minute."

"Of course," I muttered. "Good girl. You're a good girl, Raine. You ... deserve some ... some sun ..."

Lozzie peered at me. "No sun? No sunny sun?"

I cleared my throat, tugged my yellow blanket tighter, and gestured at the sky — at the black Eye-wrinkles, the empty expanse of cosmic flesh. "Can you point at the sun, Lozzie? Point at where it is in the sky right now?"

Lozzie glanced up, around, and then back to me. Her eyes twinkled with dead dark mischief and a promise of violence. I shivered.

"Nooooope," she crooned. "Don't care! We going? Going going? Goooooing?"

"Um, yes," I said. "We need to go rescue Evee, that's the first order of business. I ... I think ..."

I trailed off as I glanced between Raine and Lozzie; neither of them were in any state to go waltzing back through the front entrance of Cygnet Hospital, or even skulking in through a back door. One glance from a nurse would have us rumbled, even without Raine's filthy prison clothes. Lozzie was clutching her metal shiv, greasy hair raked back over her skull and streaked with blood — not her own blood, of course. Additional bloody splatters marked the sides of her poncho, from where she'd killed a warden in the fight down below. Her socks were also both sopping wet. Raine was even

worse. Her fists were bloodied and bruised, knuckles looking like she'd joined a no-gloves boxing match against a brick wall — and the wall had lost. She was splattered with more than a little blood as well, plus the filthy, ragged state of her tank top and pajama bottoms.

I wasn't looking too coherent either. I'd lost my socks, soaked the cuffs of my pajamas, and I had a huge wet patch all over the back of my yellow blanket and my top.

"Need to find new duds first," Raine murmured from down on the ground, without opening her eyes.

"Exactly what I was thinking," I said. "And I'm not sure how."

"Mm," Raine grunted. "Can't go running into a dozen nurses and expect another bailing out like that. Rules are different up top, right? No Night Praem to save us. Gotta be sneaky. Ain't that right?"

Lozzie chirped: "Sneaky! Sneaky!"

Suddenly, far behind Lozzie, a flash of russet fur darted out from the cover of an oak tree — and then vanished behind another trunk before I could get a good look.

A fox?

"I'm off!" Lozzie announced, raising one hand high in the air. She slipped her shiv inside her poncho, then bounced away on feet like springs.

"What?!" I spluttered. "Lozzie, no, Lozzie! We just found you!"

Raine sat up quickly, eyebrows raised.

Lozzie turned around and walked backward for a few moments, still heading away from us. "Mm-mm!" she squeaked. "You need a distraction, yeah yeah? So you can get clothes! Let me! Trust me!"

"Lozz—" I said — but she was off, darting between the trees, heading in the direction of the main hospital building, poncho fluttering out behind her. "Oh," I sighed. "Oh, great. Raine? Raine, we have to go after her."

"Hmmm, I wonder about that," Raine said.

"What? What do you mean?"

Raine shrugged. "I say we let her go. Let her help in her own way. Do you trust her, Heather?"

"Well, yes. I ... I think. I mean, I trust Lozzie, yes. I may not entirely trust her judgement right now, in this dream. But that's different."

Raine cracked a smile, framed by the soft green grass. "Then let her go. Maybe she's got her own plan. I don't think I can contain her anyway, so what else can we do? If we follow her, we'll be throwing a spanner into whatever she's trying to achieve, for us."

Raine raised a hand toward me. "Help me up, will you? We gotta go find a way back in, gotta go save our Eevee. Ain't that right?"

Determined clarity filled my heart, catalysed by Raine's confidence — her special secret alchemy, her blazing spark, with which I had rekindled my own burned-out life.

I reached down and grabbed her hand. "Yes, Raine. Yes, you are so very right. Let's go get everyone else."

bedlam boundary – 24.8

Cygnets Children's Hospital — a dreary memory dressed in the dream-guise of asylum, prison, panopticon, and stockade — loomed over the gardens and grounds like the visage of a sun-bleached skull. Dark windows like empty sockets stared unblinking at the verdant open lawns, the winding red brick pathways, and the pretty little flowerbeds. The building glowered down through every break in the leafy oaken canopy, as if searching for those who dared hide from the all-seeing injunction, of health and wellness through obedience and order. A rot-toothed maw hung wide in the front of the fleshless facade, with a desiccated tongue of concrete and gravel unrolling from between the glass front doors, slopping across the lawns and cutting through the grass, before finally terminating in a barred and barbed gate set into the black iron wall. A checkpoint, designed never to be crossed. Barriers and cones stood tall to ward off cars; squat, drab, grey guard huts squinted at the road through narrow windows; a pair of wrought-iron gates made a mockery of escape.

"No exit," I muttered at the sight of that fortress. "That's a very unsubtle metaphor indeed. No way out."

"Car bomb'd do it," Raine purred with relish. "Blow those gates right off their hinges."

I sighed. "Yes, well, if you can find the resources to construct a car bomb — one that doesn't involve blowing yourself up in the process — then feel free. But somehow I think we'd struggle to build an explosive device in the middle of a mental hospital. Even a dream of one."

Raine chuckled. "You'd be surprised what you can make from common household items, sweet thing. The fruits of the industrial age."

I swallowed a second sigh — even in a dream, Raine was so very Raine. I focused on the hospital.

Pale brick was crusted and stacked into the fluted forms and curling fancies of a gothic manor house, broken by vast dark windows and

four stories of decorative embellishment in sculpted concrete. A ridiculous affectation, chosen to match the impossible landscape beyond the walls and the ostentatious ‘luxury’ of the gardens. The fiction of the isolated asylum, deep in the restorative countryside.

The illusion was rather undercut by the black and wrinkled sky which framed the hospital — the inside or underside of the Eye, the undeniable reality behind the dream.

Raine and I were lurking about a hundred meters away from the front entrance, concealed behind the trunk of a particularly old and gnarled oak tree, shaded by the thickly spreading canopy above our heads. We were poised right at the edge of the tree line, in a tentacle of low woodland which snaked out across the asylum lawns. A few meters ahead of us, the woods gave way to strictly manicured grass and well-tended flowerbeds.

Raine peered around the right of the tree trunk; I peered around the left, trying not to feel once again like I’d stumbled into a silly cartoon.

We’d spent the last ten minutes crossing the asylum grounds — an amount of time that seemed impossibly long for the short distance we’d covered. How could we have navigated by the sight of the hospital’s red brick facade if it was ten minutes’ walk away, across rolling hills, through a forest of oak? A very artificial forest full of widely-spaced trees, yes, tied up in ribbons of red brick pathway, the ground weirdly free of leaf-mulch carpet. But it was still the woods. We should have been lost from the first step.

Instead we’d crept between the swaying boughs, holding each other’s hands, alert to any sign of nurses or guards or supernatural shenanigans. We’d encountered nobody except a few solitary patients, wandering along the pathways by themselves, or sitting on benches to ‘appreciate nature’. Raine and I looked like hell — haggard and rough, one of us stained with blood, both of us filthy with sweat and worse — but nobody gave us a second look. The only time we attracted the slightest bit of attention is when we ran across a pair of girls snuggling on a bench. The couple had sprung apart when Raine and I stepped out from between the trees, as if embarrassed to be found in an intimate embrace. But then Raine had shot them a wink and showed off the fact that she was holding my hand. The pair had blushed and stuttered a “H-hello, good afternoon” — then turned back to each other after Raine and I had

finished passing by.

I kept an eye out for any sliver of russet fur between the trees, but our surprise visitor did not show herself a second time. If the Saye Fox had somehow followed us into Wonderland, she'd made herself scarce once again.

Eventually Raine and I had reached the limit of the little woodland, pushing as far as we could down the extended tentacle of oaken cover. The hospital loomed ahead, protected by a No Man's Land of open ground; any watchful nurses would spot us instantly if we just walked up the doors. So we waited and watched, peering out from behind a tree.

"Tch," I tutted and huffed as I stared at the hospital, trying not to let the sight overwhelm me. My right palm was growing sweaty in Raine's hand. "Absolutely ridiculous. Absurd place. Not even remotely real. Completely implausible."

"Heather?" Raine murmured. She didn't turn to look at me, eyes glued to the hospital's front entrance and the massive side-doors which led out into the gardens. "What's ridiculous?"

"Oh, nothing," I said with a little sigh. "Or rather, everything."

Raine eased back into our hiding place behind the oak tree and shot me a focused, unsmiling look. "Sweet thing, I need you to answer the question, for real."

"A-ah? Raine? Sorry?"

Raine smiled and swept a hand through her greasy hair. The false sunlight filtered through the leaves, falling in dappled patterns on her shoulders and muscles, dancing down the front of her filthy tank-top as she shifted her footing. "If you notice something wrong, or out of place, or ridiculous, you gotta speak up, 'cos you might be the only one who can recognise that shit's getting weird. We're all dreaming, right? But you're the only one fully awake. You see something wrong, you gotta tell me."

"Oh! Oh, right. Of course, um, yes." I peered around the tree trunk again, squinting at Cygnet Hospital. But then I shook my head. "It's the whole building, Raine. It's completely unreal. It's faux-gothic but built of brick and concrete. If you stare at it head-on it's clearly got four floors, but if you look at it in your peripheral vision, it stretches up into the sky. From inside it had all these other wings,

some of them built differently, like the prison, and the high tech part. But from out here, where are they? And it's ... it's dead."

"Dead?" Raine echoed.

I cleared my throat and pulled my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders. My back was still damp with the cold water from the elevator floor. "Yes, dead. I know, I know it's silly. How can a building be dead? I know—"

"I don't know," Raine said, totally serious, without the slightest hint of mockery. "Tell me."

I could have kissed her for that, but we didn't have time to rut in the woods. "Buildings often feel alive, because they're inhabited by people. The walls and floors and spaces all get full of textures and meanings. Even awful McMansions have some life to them, even if it's kind of sad. Sometimes you can just look at a place and see that it's alive, or it used to be alive, even if it's a ruin. But this ... I don't know how to explain. It's a dead skull, full of lies."

"Mmmmm," Raine grunted. She leaned around the opposite side of the oak tree again, peering at the hospital. "That door there, the metal one, can you see it through the side entrance?"

I squinted across the brightly lit lawns and little pathways, into the shadows of the entrance hall, past the bustling nurses and drifting forms of other patients. Raine was correct — there was the steel security door I'd told her about. No handle. No window. Big black letters on the metal spelled out: V.I.P. VISITORS ROOM. The words were tiny from that far away.

"Just about," I hissed, as if the nurses might overhear us, a hundred meters distant. "Your eyesight's very good, Raine."

"That would be all the pussy I eat." She carried on before I had a chance to splutter. "That door, that's the one? That's where they're keeping our Evee?"

"Well, probably. I don't actually know what's in there. It could be one room, or a whole complex. But yes, that's where she was taken. That's where I saw her 'mother'."

Raine went silent and still for a long moment, eyes flicking back and forth across the hospital's main entrance. Eventually she murmured: "Two nurses at the reception desk. Half a dozen more in

the entrance hall at any one time. Girls bustling back and forth. Two ways in and out, doors on both of them. I don't like those odds."

"You don't think we can slip inside?"

Raine shook her head. "I think we'll be spotted before we even reach the doors. I wouldn't mind leading a bunch of orderlies on an afternoon's chase around the grounds. Could even get the drop on a few, thin out their numbers. But that won't help get us to Evee."

"Tch," I tutted. "That's what I was worried about. And where did Lozzie go? Wasn't she meant to be organising a distraction for us?"

"Give her time," Raine said.

"Or maybe she failed and got caught," I hissed, my stomach clenching up. "Oh, please stay safe, Lozzie."

Raine pulled back into the cover of our convenient oak tree and shot me a grin. "Oh ye of little faith."

I rolled my eyes, trying to take refuge in Raine's joke. "How can you have faith in her? In this dream, you barely know her."

Raine grinned wider. "Heather, Heather, Heather. I don't have to know her to know she's good at stirring things up. You can tell that from five minute's conversation with the girl. I trust her to cause some serious mayhem, once she gets going."

"I do hope you're right, Raine, of course I do." I gestured at the hospital's front entrance again. "But where is she? We need a plan B. We need a way to get in there, which means we need a change of clothes first. And a proper weapon for you as well, right? I don't even know where to start!"

Raine's grin turned dark and mischievous. Warm brown eyes twinkled in the woodland shade. "That's what you've got me for, sweet thing."

"How?! We can't get back inside, and even if we could, I don't know where anything is stored. The only clothes I own are those on my body, right now." I grabbed the stomach of my thin pajama top and held it out. "Do you just want me to give you this? I will, if that would work."

Raine shook her head, then gestured at the asylum grounds — at

the lawns, the little brick pathways, the benches and the flowerbeds and the occasional wandering patient. "Pick a mark."

"Ah? What do you mean?"

Raine put on a ridiculous robotic voice: "I need your clothes, your boots, and your motorcycle."

"... Raine, sorry, what?"

Raine chuckled. "You don't know that one, do you? Not much of a head for old action movies?"

"You have completely lost me, yes. What are you talking about?"

"If the only clothes are on people's backs, that's where we'll get them from." Raine pointed — once, twice, three times, indicating three different patients, three different girls, sitting on benches or walking along the nearby pathways. "Take your pick. Go for loners, not those in pairs. We need easy targets. Think of us like wolves in the forest, stalking the herd. Or maybe we could go see that couple we passed back in the woods. Maybe they'll already be out of their kit and going at each other. Saves us the time."

"Oh." My eyes went wide as I realised she wasn't joking. "Oh, Raine, you can't be serious. You can't. We can't mug other patients for their clothes!"

"Why not?"

"Wh—" I boggled at her, then realised it was a serious question. "What would we even do with the person afterwards?! They'd go to the nurses straight away. What are we going to do, knock them out? This isn't a video game, Raine. If you bash somebody on the head hard enough, they don't drop down and sleep it off. They might get a concussion, or brain damage." I poked her in the chest, though gently, to emphasise my point. "And before you ask, no, you are not allowed to kill any of the other patients. Not for stolen clothes, not for anything. The nurses and doctors, do whatever you like with them. I'm planning to feed one of them to Zheng, myself. But the patients? No. They're us. They're just like I was. I don't care if this is a dream, that is a red line for both our souls."

Raine nodded, just once. Total unhesitating acceptance. "Got it, sweet thing. No dead patients."

A shudder of strange relief went through me. Even like this, Raine

took my needs more seriously than her own. I could barely do justice to her. “T-thank you. Good girl. Raine, you’re such a ... such a good girl. Thank you. I’m glad you understand.”

Raine grinned, purring between her teeth. “I know I am. But we still gotta get clothes. How about a willing donor?”

I shrugged, still vaguely uncomfortable at the notion. “That would be fine, I think. In principle. Maybe. But where would we find somebody for that?”

Raine eased back from the tree and cast her eyes out across the grounds again — over to our right, away from the hospital’s front entrance and the gravel driveway, where the gardens opened out into rolling lawns punctuated by solitary trees. Over there was far away enough from the hospital that Raine and I wouldn’t draw immediate attention from the nurses in the entrance hall. Many other girls seemed to have the same idea; friend groups had gathered on the grass, sitting in circles or pairs, dozing in the sunlight or playing little games, or picking at the ground in listless conversation.

Raine nodded toward the other patients. “Are they real? The other inmates, not just our group or whatever. The randoms.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’ve been thinking about that since I woke up here, but I don’t have enough data to draw any conclusions. I ... I think they must be ‘real’, somehow, in so far as they existed before this dream. But I don’t think they were human beings. That wouldn’t make any sense, the Eye wasn’t kidnapping hundreds and hundreds of young women. That’s not what it does.”

“Not a rubber monster from a 1950s movie, then,” Raine purred. “Mars didn’t need women, huh?”

I wasn’t quite sure what Raine meant by that, but I nodded along. “Exactly. It only ever took a few people, always twins, and it didn’t store them like this. Well, except Maisie. All these girls, they’re all modern, contemporary, like us. I ... I think they might be a metaphor.”

Raine raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For, well, whatever inhabited Wonderland before I broke reality. We’re all here, in this dream asylum, so I think everything else in Wonderland must have gotten sucked in as well. And they’ve been

... compressed, turned into a metaphor that I can comprehend. Made into something ... observable ... ”

I trailed off, running my tongue over my teeth. I felt like I was on to something with that concept, but I wasn't sure what, not yet.

“But no killing them,” Raine said.

“Yes,” I said, snapping back to the moment. “No killing them. If this is all a metaphor for the inside of the Eye, built with hyperdimensional mathematics, then they're all victims too. Victims of ... that.” I waved a hand at the ridiculous facade of Cygnet Hospital, backed by the black and wrinkled sky.

Raine nodded. “No killing, no beating up, no hog-tying?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“No knife-point mugging? No veiled threats? No stealing clothes and locking one of them up, back in that concrete room, while we rescue Evee?”

I chewed on my lower lip. “Well ... I don't know ... ”

“It might be the only way, Heather. You could give them your blanket, for protection.”

I sighed. “I suppose so. If it's the only way, then ... maybe. But no real violence, okay? You have to promise me.”

Raine nodded. “I'll be a good girl, I promise. Now.” She raised her head and peered through the trees again, out into the bright sunlight beyond the woods. “If we're gonna do this, we need to do it right first time. No slip ups, no mistakes, no second chances. We need to pick the best good-girl outfits we can.” She squinted and pointed. “How about those three? The ones in the ridiculous school uniforms. You think I'd look good in one of those?”

“Ah?” I went up on tiptoes. Raine held the back of my head and guided my sight-line. She was indicating a trio of girls sitting under a solitary oak tree, on a red-and-white checkered blanket half in the shade, as if they were having a picnic. At that distance the girls were indistinct grey blobs marring the verdant green of the lawns. But I recognised them.

“That's Twil!” I said. “I spotted her and her friends from the windows, before I went down to break you out.”

“Ahhhhh, one of us, right. The werewolf, yeah?”

“Mmhmm!” I nodded. “Though she doesn’t need a full moon or anything, it’s just at will. Long story. The other two are ... well, I don’t know who they are, but I think they’re part of whatever’s keeping her contained.”

“Hmmm,” Raine purred with amusement. “I think I can guess how. Playing out a *Marimite* fantasy with her dreams. Complete with uniforms and all.” Raine chuckled. “Wonder if she’s the neko or the tachi.”

I frowned at Raine. “The what or the what, sorry? A what fantasy?”

Raine raised her eyebrows in genuine surprise. “Not seen that show, sweet thing? *Maria-sama ga miteru*. Famous anime show about lesbians, sort of. Not my type, but you know. A friend got me to watch it, years ago. We ... we ... ”

Raine trailed off. Her eyes scrunched into a squint.

“With Evee?” I prompted; Evelyn was the only person likely to be showing Raine anime lesbians. “Raine, are your memories coming back?”

Raine tilted her head. “Nah. Don’t think so. I remember watching the show, with somebody. But I don’t remember who. Or when. Or why. Huh. Interesting sensation.”

“Hold onto that if you can!” I hissed, smiling with relief. “That’s a memory, it has to be!”

“Mmm,” Raine purred. “Sure thing, but right now we need to focus.” She pointed toward Twil and her two ‘friends’. “That’s two birds with one stone, see? If we can break our Twil out of her little wet dream over there, we’ve got a werewolf, and plan B doesn’t matter any more. We’ll go in the front doors ripping and tearing. But if we can’t do that, we can steal some uniforms, lock one or all of those girls up, and waltz back into the hospital dressed up like a pair of very sensible and upright young ladies. You with me?”

I nodded, squeezing her hand. “I am! But please be careful with Twil, she’s all timid and nervous. Nothing like she is in reality. Be gentle.”

Raine nodded. “She got a thing going on with any of us?”

“No. Well. With Eevee, maybe. And she’s into Lozzie. And you and her had a thing, before you and I met, but I think it was just for a week. Something like that.”

Raine grinned and lowered her face toward mine. “Hey, sweet thing, be honest — was I kind of a slut before we met?”

“Tch! No! Of course not.” I cleared my throat. “Well. Apparently you did go through several girls.”

“And did I stop after I met you?”

“Y-yes. Yes, you did.”

Raine kissed me on the forehead, then on the lips; she kept it quick and smooth. “My little squid wife. Perfect in every way. Come on.” She nodded sideways, through the trees and across the asylum grounds. “Let’s go bother the puppy, see if we can make her snarl.”

Raine started to lead the way, pulling me along by one hand. I scurried to keep up.

“But what are we going to do, exactly?” I asked. “I don’t know how to snap her out of this, I don’t even know how to start. She wouldn’t really talk to me, earlier on, back in the dayroom. Her friends just hurried her away.”

Raine shrugged. “We’ll play it by ear. Force an opening. Bully without mercy. Mess with a trio of femmes, basically.”

We crossed beneath the cover of the outstretched tentacle of woodland, beyond sight of any curious watchers inside the front entrance, then emerged out onto the wide lawns of the hospital gardens.

Raine and I walked hand-in-hand — as much for safety as for comfort. We still had no idea what the dream was capable of conjuring to confound our path, and I trusted Raine’s sense for danger more than my own, without the benefit of my tentacles and my six other selves. If we needed to run, all Raine had to do was yank on my hand and I would follow without question. Like a faithful hound protecting her beloved mistress. But nobody paid us much attention, despite Raine’s bloodied knuckles and the gore splattered up her tank top. The other patients were too focused on each other, on staring up at the wrinkled underside of the Eye, or on their murmured conversations. We walked openly down a brick

pathway, then alighted onto the bare grass, winding our way past a few lonely trees, deeper into the gardens.

Twil and her companions were gathered in a little circle on their picnic blanket, half in the cool shade of an oak tree. Three pairs of shiny black shoes stood on the grass nearby; how very civilised.

Twil still looked almost nothing like herself. Between the neatly straightened hair, the extra-thick glasses, the immaculate grey school uniform, and the lack of tight, toned, athletic muscle packed onto her compact frame, I wouldn't have recognised her unless I'd already known. She was sitting on her knees with her lower legs out to one side, a pose of such exaggerated demure femininity which looked bizarre on her. She was reading out loud from an open book on the blanket, the same heavy hardback that she'd clutched to her chest when she'd chastised me earlier that morning.

Words drifted on the air, spoken by a high, gentle, delicate voice.

“—and when the divines had finished joining hand to hand, they gave their chosen maidens three rules by which to live. First, to never stray from faith in one's own beloved. Second, to never allow jealousy into one's heart. And third, to welcome all who wish a place alongside us—”

Her two companions were listening to Twil's recital with looks of serene bliss on their faces. The first — a blonde girl built like a wasp, with perfectly straight hair down to her backside — was kneeling as if praying, eyes closed, taking deep and cleansing breaths. The second — a tomboyish redhead with freckles on her cheeks and athletic legs poking out from beneath her grey skirt — was lying on her back, half in the sunlight, hands folded over her chest.

All three were dressed identically. Grey, grey, grey, ties and blazers and skirts, with starched white shirts and thick black tights to complete the look, and not a single thread out of place.

Twil's words suddenly cut off with little gasp; her head jerked up, amber eyes going wide with fear behind the thick wall of her glasses. She'd spotted our approach.

Her bodyguards stirred. The redhead sat up suddenly, blinking in the sunlight, squinting at Raine and me. The queen-bee blonde girl twisted to follow the source of Twil's gasp, then crumpled her face

into a furious scowl. She started to rise to her feet, but Twil put a panicked hand on her knee, holding her back. Twil hissed something to the other girl as well, bidding her not to confront us. All three remained seated, watching us approach like a trio of wary cats. The redhead crossed her arms over her chest and regarded us with open hostility. The blonde wore an expression of contemptuous disgust, like we were a pair of mangy dogs covered in our own faeces.

Twil quickly shut her book and pulled it into her lap.

Raine and I walked up to Twil's open prison — though I tugged gently on Raine's arm, encouraging her to stop well beyond lunging range. We had no idea what Twil's bodyguards were capable of. Raine drew to a halt where I suggested, then carefully let go of my hand. She cocked her hips, raised her chin, and pulled the most insufferable sort of cheesy grin.

"Hello there you delightful creatures," she purred at the trio. "You ladies having yourselves a lovely picnic in the sun? You come here often? Fancy some company?"

The blonde ignored Raine entirely and shot me a toxic sneer. "I thought I told you not to bother Twillamina again. Are you deaf as well as unschooled?"

Carrot-top was frowning at Raine. "Why ... why are you covered in blood? Is that your blood?"

Raine shot her a wink. "All in a day's work, sweetheart. Like what you see? Normally I'd have to charge for the hands-on experience, but you're so pretty I'll let you touch for free."

The redhead blushed and squinted, one hand fluttering to her throat.

I sighed. "Hello again, you three. Yes, it's me. Please just communicate like people, please. I've had enough of this for a hundred days, let alone one."

The blonde said: "Don't even talk to us. You don't know us. Begone, foul stain."

I made eye contact with Twil instead. She flinched, hands clutching at her hardbound book. "I know you, at least. Hello, Twil. Can you please tell your friends to stop doing this? It's hard enough to figure

out how to get through to you without the ambiguously amorous girl-squad here.”

“Ambiguously?!” the blonde girl hissed with razor-sharp outrage. “Ambiguously?! Are you trying to be vile and rude on purpose?”

The redhead spoke up again, voice husky with irritation. “It’s not ambiguous at all. Any fool can see. We’re in love.”

The blonde reached out to join hands with the other bodyguard — and then both of them reached back to touch Twil, though Twil was blushing beet-red, eyes downcast in girlish modesty. Both the bodyguards glared up at me and Raine, but mostly at me, brows scrunched, eyes narrowed, mouths set and stern and ready for a fight.

I just gaped at them, lost for words.

“Ahhhhhh,” Raine hummed with appreciation. “A classic trio, very nice, very retro. Hey, you’ve even got the three colours. Blonde, brunette, and redhead. A full set, perfect for the cover art. Lemme guess, one of you is sporty, one of you is posh, and one of you is bookish? Have you got a promotional photo where you’re all wearing wedding dresses?”

“Twil,” I said quickly, before either of her lovers could start to argue again. “Twil — *this* is your nightmare? This can’t be right. You’re not the slightest bit repressed in reality. What is going on here?”

The blonde hissed at me: “Don’t you dare address Twillamina like that! You keep those disgusting little pet names out of your mouth!”

Raine laughed, ignoring the fiction. She addressed Twil: “Hey there werewolf. Apparently you and I know each other, and I may or may not have gotten a taste of your cunt once before. And trust me, Heather’s right. You can be as much of a big lesbo in reality as you want. You need any help with that, you know who to call.” Raine shot Twil a wink, but Twil just blushed harder, lips hesitating over a mortified retort.

“No, no,” I said quickly, waving a hand at Raine. “It’s definitely not that. She could do this sort of thing in reality with incredible ease. Actually, I think she sort of already does. Or, did, past tense, at her school. Kind of.” I returned my attention to Twil. “Please, Twil, you can do this in reality. And you know for a fact that I approve of

polyamorous relationships. I wouldn't have a leg to stand on if I didn't!" I huffed at myself. "Oh, look, I'm sorry, I know this isn't your fault. It's the dream doing all this. I'm just a bit ... confused. I thought I was starting to understand this place. This is confounding me."

Twil's throat bobbed. She stared at me with a poison cocktail of pity and horror, blinking in fear behind the thick lenses of her glasses. "I-I'm sorry," she said in that false voice, breathy and soft. "But I don't know who you are. I'm not your sort of—"

"Yes, yes, yes!" I snapped, waving her down. "'Not my sort of crazy'. Why do you all keep saying that, here? What does it mean?"

Twil looked utterly bewildered. "I ... I'm really sorry. I know you must need help. But I'm not the one to give it. I can't heal you. Please, please just go back to the nurses. Please take your medicine. Please leave me alone."

I huffed and rolled my eyes. "Yes, bloody right I need help, Twil! Eevee needs help! She's trapped with her mother, or a dream memory of her mother, or something worse, and we have to get her out—"

Raine muttered: "Which means I'm here to steal your threads."

"—of there, we have to break into that part of the hospital and save her! And Praem, too, she's down in the prison, though she may have backup now, I'm not sure." I carried on without addressing the core problem of Raine's demand. "Twil, none of this is real. We're in a dream, or an illusion, or something else. Look at the sky! It's the underside or the inside of the Eye. This sunlight comes from nowhere. Look."

Twil raised her eyes, amber glittering in the bright sunlight. She frowned delicately, eyes searching the corrupted firmament. "I ... I don't—"

"Point at the sun," I said. "Point at the sun. Just point, vaguely. Point for me. You can't, can you?"

Our conversation must have baffled her pair of dream-like lovers into brief silence, but goading Twil was apparently a step too far. Both of them suddenly burst into snapping, hissing, knife-tongued assault.

“Don’t you dare bully her like that—”

“—endured this from the likes of you her entire life—”

“Just shut up and go away. You’re not wanted here. You’re not appreciated here. You already have the rest of the world, we shan’t let you invade this corner of it!”

“—people always come after poor Twillamina, what has she done to you?”

“—not another word, not another—”

“—and she’s a complete innocent, the sweetest girl in the world—”

“—you acidic snake, you uncouth pagan, you compulsory—”

“—won’t let a single hair on her head come to harm, never again, never while we draw breath—”

I snapped: “Oh, do shut up!”

My voice rang out across the gardens. Several of the nearest groups of girls paused their conversations and glanced toward the commotion. Raine went tense and checked over her shoulder, staring at the distant front doors of the hospital for a few moments, watching for any nurses. I cleared my throat and tried to ignore all the attention. The curious looks drifted away again after they all realised there wasn’t a fight breaking out.

“Just ... just stop this, please,” I said. “None of this is even real. And we’re not bullying Twil. We’re her friends. We’re trying to help her.”

The red-headed tomboy looked like she wanted to spit at my feet. She said: “Are you saying we’re not real? Our love isn’t real? Fuck you.”

“No,” I sighed. “That’s not what I ... ”

I trailed off and examined Twil’s ‘friends’ again, making eye contact with both of them in turn, trying to figure out what I was dealing with here. Were these two simply figments of the dream, fantasies summoned to keep Twil placid and calm and distracted, to keep her claws and teeth locked up? Or were they real? Were they denizens of Wonderland, processed into a metaphor? Had Twil’s memories or desires made them real? Were they feeling real sensations, thinking real thoughts?

Maybe. Maybe not. But this might go smoother if I assumed they were people. What a silly oversight I'd been making.

"My name is Heather," I said, forcing myself to sound gentle. "And this is Raine. She's my girlfriend."

Raine winked and clucked her tongue by way of proper greeting.

"And what are your names?" I asked.

The two girls shared a wary glance. The redhead answered first: "Lily."

"Thank you, Lily," I said with a nod, then turned to the other. "And you are?"

"Lily," said the queen-bee blonde.

"Yes," I said. "That's what I just ... " I trailed off, then sighed. "You both have the same name. Of course you do."

"We don't," said the redhead. "My name is spelled 'L-i-l-l-y'." She indicated the blonde girl. "Her's is L-i-l-i-i. The difference is easy if you listen to how we pronounce them."

"Lily," said Lili, dripping with scorn.

"Lily," said Lilly, with a sigh and tut.

"See?" said Lili. "It's not hard, if you actually care. Which you don't. As evidenced by your continued behaviour."

Raine turned aside, dropped into a low squat, and put one hand over her eyes. Her shoulders shook with poorly contained laughter.

"Raine?" I said. "I mean, it's silly, but ... "

"They're both called 'Lily'," Raine hissed. "Oh yeah, this is prime bullshit."

Lili — the blonde — shot to her feet, eyes blazing at Raine. "I shan't endure this mockery a single moment longer. I just won't. If you refuse to leave, then I will make you leave. Do not mistake my choice of proper attire or my faith for weakness or lack of resolve. I will slap you so hard your head will spin."

Raine snorted into her hand, but she didn't bother to rise from a crouch. "Sure thing, my-name-is-a-metaphor-for-being-a-dyke."

“Oh,” I said, frowning with realisation. “Oh! Oh, this might be Sevens’ influence! That would be a good thing, I think. If we could just—”

Lilii stepped off the picnic blanket and stamped into her smart black shoes, then marched up to Raine. Behind her, Lilly got to her feet as well, squaring her shoulders and preparing to back up her partner. Twil reached out with a futile gesture of peace, then scrambled to her feet, panting and wide eyed behind her glasses. She clutched her book to her chest like a shield over her heart, her face tiny and pale beneath the helmet of her too-straight hair.

Twil hissed: “Please please p-please d-don’t fight, don’t fight!”

Lilii sneered down at Raine. “Stand up.”

Raine finally stopped laughing. She uncoiled from her crouch, muscles rippling in legs and backside as she rose, turning to face her accuser. She rolled her shoulders back and raised her chin. A dangerous grin played across her lips. Raine and Lilii were about the same height, though Raine had the advantage of perhaps one single inch, and she milked that for all it was worth.

“You will leave,” Lilii hissed. “Both of you, right— eek!”

Lilii flinched as Raine took one step closer, so their faces were separated by less than twelve inches of air. She swallowed and shivered — but stood her ground.

“Don’t give her the satisfaction!” Lilly called. She reached out and grabbed Twil’s arm, steadying her. “It’s okay, darling, it’s okay. We’ll see them off. We will.”

Raine grinned wider, staring into Lilii’s blue eyes. “Or what? Come on, you walking caricature. We leave, or else what? You gonna break a nail on my skull?”

Lilii wrinkled her nose and looked Raine up and down, mouth curling with disgust. “Oh, God, you stink! When was the last time you had a bath?”

Raine rumbled in her throat, like a dog on a leash. She leaned even closer to Lilii, as if intending to kiss her — or bite her.

“Raine,” I hissed softly. “Remember what I said.”

Raine ignored me, eyes locked onto her opponent. “Don’t change

the subject, doll-face,” she purred. “You threw down the glove, pissed on the tree, raised your antlers—”

“What are you blathering on about now?” Lili said. “Ugh.”

“A challenge,” Raine hissed. “You made a challenge. You gotta put your fists where your mouth is now. Or my mouth. If you like. Wanna try? Or are you gonna roll over and let me wear you like a glove?”

Raine rolled her neck from side to side as she spoke, then flexed her fingers outward and curled her hands into fists. My heart lurched. I couldn’t tell if she was being serious or not. Was this just a display, or was she about to start a punch-up?

“Raine!” I hissed again. “Raine, if we start a fight here—”

“Ha!” Lili barked in Raine’s face. “You think because I practice proper skincare and wash my hair every day, that you can just push me around? You think you’re big and strong because you smell like a barnyard and show off your arms? You’re not the only one of us who can lift weights.”

Raine dropped her eyes to look Lili up and down, lingering on her grey skirt and smart blouse and matching grey tie. “Oh yeah? You got some muscles under there, stick insect?”

“Yes,” Lili growled in her face. “And I would prefer that I not be forced to dirty them through use against you.”

Raine grinned a big shit-eating grin. “Aren’t you a little old for a school uniform? Or is that part of the fetish game you three are playing here?”

Lili raised her chin, mimicking Raine’s pose. “I’m twenty,” she said, as if proud of the fact, eyes blazing with righteous fury. “I can dress however I please.”

I frowned. “In an asylum?”

The other Lilly glanced at me. “You get privileges for good behaviour, you know.”

“Well, I suppose,” I said with a sigh. “But that doesn’t explain—”

Raine lashed out with one bloody-knuckled hand.

Lili flinched back, but she was too slow; Raine grabbed her grey

tie, close to her throat, then pulled on it so the end slipped free of the smart grey blazer. Lili squeaked in surprise, but Raine yanked on the tie like a leash; Lili stumbled forward, arms wind-milling to catch her balance. Raine's bloody knuckles left a dirty red smear down the front of her clean white shirt.

"Unhand me, you brute!" Lili yelled. "How dare you!? You uncouth, low-bred—"

"You all bark and no bite, girl?" Raine purred in her face. "'Cos if you keep yapping, I'm gonna ride you down to the ground."

Raine snapped her teeth shut with a hard clack, inches from Lili's face.

I sighed and shook my head; we'd lost control of this situation. Our fault in the first place, we'd blundered into this with only the thinnest of plans. The other Lily — 'Lilly' — started to screech an outraged complaint. We had to retreat and try something else, we couldn't afford a knock-down drag-out fistfight in the middle of the asylum grounds, we'd get spotted by the nurses, or—

Rrrrrrrrr!

A growl split the air. Low and deep and dangerous, too canine, too hound-like, too animal for any human throat.

It was Twil.

Her lips were peeled back from clenched teeth. Her jaw was clamped tight, muscles and tendons bulging in her neck, amber eyes thrown wide, attention locked onto Raine. Her fancy hardback religious tome dropped from her hands and landed on the blanket with a dull thud. Her arms started to shake. Her growl got louder.

Lilly yelled in sudden panic: "Twillamina! No, girl, no! Down girl, down, down!"

The other Lily — Lili — stuck one finger into the knot of her captured tie, yanked it forward to loosen the loop around her neck, and then ripped it off over her own head, freeing herself from Raine's entrapment and sending a wave of platinum blonde hair crashing through the air. She twisted away from us without a second glance, leaping toward Twil to wrap her in a sudden tight embrace. Raine was left holding the rather floppy and sad grey tie.

"Twillamina! Twillamina, shhhhh, shhhh. Shhh, it's okay, it's okay,

it's okay." Lillii whispered and crooned into Twil's ear, hugging her even while Twil growled with raw aggression. Twil wouldn't look away from Raine, so both Lillies worked together to block her view of her new rival.

"Twil!" I called. "Twil, that's it, lose your temper! Come on, that's you, that's you in there! Twil, you—"

One of the Lillies — the redhead tomboy — whipped back around and glared daggers at me. "You've done enough damage! Shut up and let us handle her!" She didn't wait for a reply, but turned back to Twil, focused completely on her lover.

"There we go," Raine purred, grinning wide. "She really does sound the part, huh. She gonna grow teeth and claws and all that too?"

I could barely keep up. "Raine, we almost freed her! That's her! Did you know that would happen?"

Raine shrugged and shot me a grin. "I was just doing what came naturally. Can't blame me for acting the hound, can you?"

"Of course not!" I said. "Good girl!"

Over on the blanket, Twil had apparently begun to calm down. The growling trailed off. I caught a glimpse of her face, framed by her lovers' grey blazers — red and sweaty, flushed with embarrassment, amber eyes blinking in confusion, glancing at Raine and me with bewildered horror.

Lillii said: "The nasty people are going to leave now, Twillamina. It's okay. Everything is okay. Let's all just sit down and hold hands. Here, everything is going to be okay."

"Raine!" I snapped. "We can't give up now, we almost had her!"

"Gotcha, sweet thing," Raine said. "On it." She unlooped the stolen grey tie with a flick of her wrist, then wrapped the free end in her other hand and snapped the fabric taut between two fists. "Ladies, ladies! Attention, please! Who wants to get hog-tied and donate a uniform? If you're real good, I'll throw in a five-minute fuck to sweeten the deal."

Raine stepped forward. I hesitated, clutching my yellow blanket to my shoulders, ready to leap in or flee as required.

Twil's dream-lovers moved as if to wall her off. The blonde raised

her fists.

Twil's eyes snapped wide again. Her lips peeled back. Another growl rose in her throat, drumming on the air, shaking my guts with the animal need to run from a large predator who was about to rip me open and—

A roaring scream sliced across the asylum grounds.

The scream acted like a bucket of cold water dumped on a pair of dogs in heat. Raine's head whipped round, attention successfully redirected. Twil stopped growling, suddenly up on her tiptoes, eyes scrunched with concern. The pair of Lillies did likewise, peering past Raine and me, interrupted by the sudden commotion.

The scream had come from behind us — from back inside Cygnet Hospital.

And the scream was only the start; the noise was quickly followed by angry shouting, the words too far away to make out, then by the loud crack of something very hard and heavy hitting a wall. A chorus of intentional wailing broke out from inside the entrance hall, drifting out of the front door and across the grounds — not screams of fear or pain, but of defiance and protest and inarticulate outrage.

Girls were gathering around the steps up to the front doors, peering inside, rocking back as if to dodge passing combatants, darting away to fetch friends to come see the unfolding spectacle. A couple of patients emerged, waving their arms excitedly, then plunging back inside again. The rubber-neckers crowded around the entrances, then suddenly surged back as a nurse appeared and urged them to disperse — but she was quickly overwhelmed by the press of curious onlookers, swept back indoors.

The shouting and screaming and slamming noises did not abate. Girls started to stand up from on the lawns, drifting toward the doors to see what on earth was happening.

Raine's face ripped into a triumphant grin. "Lozzers! She came through for us. A grade-A distraction."

"Oh," I said, eyes wide, mouth wider. "Oh, gosh. Oh dear. Um." I glanced back and forth between the hospital's front doors and our aborted confrontation with Twil's dream-lovers. "Uh, we'll need to, um—"

Raine grabbed my hand. "Executive decision. This is our cue, sweet thing." She tossed the grey tie back toward its owner; Lili caught it in one hand, blinking with surprise. Raine shot her a finger-gun and a wink. "Don't think I've forgotten you, barbie-face." She stuck out her tongue and wiggled it back and forth. "I'll be back later to gobble you up, bones and all."

"Sorry!" I yelped at the trio. "We'll be back for Twil! I-if you want to help, you should come with us! Sorry, sorry!"

Raine laughed with wild abandon and led me on.

We picked up our feet and ran toward the hospital, to make the most of Lozzie's distraction.

bedlam boundary – 24.9

A press of patients swarmed the front entrance of Cygnet Hospital — a wall of backs barring the way inside, a baying beast of many bodies, joined together into one collective organism.

Raine and I slowed to a trot across the crunchy gravel of the driveway, then halted at the foot of the steps, joining the rear of the ragged mob.

Young women were crammed shoulder-to-shoulder at the top of the steps, jostling over the front row view. Others peered around the door frame or pressed their faces to the fringe of frosted glass, squeezing past their friends to get a peek of the action. Girls were going up on tip-toes, or wriggling through the crowd, or complaining loudly to anybody within earshot. Shouts of “What is it? What’s happening? I can’t see!” mingled with ribald jeers of “Get her! Get her! Twat her in the head, Minky!”

A cry like a football chant was growing at the front of the crowd, rolling back down the steps and over the lawns: “Hands off! Hands off! Hands off our bitches!”

The noise of the crowd paled in comparison to the wordless screams of outrage coming from indoors — a chorus from at least a dozen throats, all working in unison, filling the shadowy vault of the entrance hall. The cry rose and fell, sometimes jerking and halting with staggered interruption. But it always resumed once again, a split-second later, stronger than ever after each pause. The war-cry drowned out the more practical shouting from the nurses: “Stop that! All of you girls, stop this at once!”; “Haley, you’ll get a week in isolation for this, unless you drop that right now!”; “We need the restraints, somebody bring the restraints!”; “Help!”

As Raine and I arrived, the war-cry and the counter-shout and the crowd-chant were all interrupted by an almighty metallic *clang-clang-calangalangalang*.

Like a box of pots and pans tossed down a concrete stairwell. I winced, ears ringing.

The jarring din stilled the crowd and muted the shouting, but only

for a moment. As the echoes faded, some maniac soul took up two of whatever had made all that noise, and started banging them together in a rhythmic clang—clang-clang-clang.

Not everybody was impressed by this, nor interested in rubbernecking the unfolding incident; some girls were leading others away by the hand, drifting apart from the edge of the crowd, flinching from the terrible noise, or steering well clear of the sudden chaos. One younger girl was cringing, red in the face, on the verge of tears. She was quickly rescued by an older patient who clamped both hands over the girl's ears and helped her away from the noise. A few others were struggling out of the crowd, panting for air, backing away from the commotion.

"Oh!" I heaved for breath after our short, sharp sprint across the lawns. My palm was sweaty in Raine's hand. Going up on tiptoes showed me nothing except more backs and shoulders. "Oh! Oh my gosh. I-I can't see what's going on in there! Raine? Raine, we need to get in there!"

"On it!" Raine said. She reeled me in like a dog pulling on her leash, then pressed me to her side and wrapped an arm around my waist. "Hold on tight!" she shouted above the racket. "Do not get separated in all this!"

"Can't be as bad as with Praem, I don't— oop!"

Raine unsheathed her elbows and cut through the crowd.

She sliced her way into the gaps between heaving bodies, dragging me alongside. Suddenly I was surrounded by shouting and chanting, by whirling faces and shoulders like cliff sides, by girls much taller and heavier than myself — or so they seemed, with Cygnet pajamas and unwashed flesh and sweat and stress and excitement in every direction. Raine made herself narrow to force people apart, then simply pushed, shouting as she went.

"Coming through! Make a hole! Hot potato here, ladies, hot potato! Shift or get burned!"

Most of our fellow inmates were content to get squeezed aside, too focused on trying to see what was going on indoors. A few tutted and huffed as we passed, muttering about proper queuing etiquette. A small handful of patients were brave enough to stand their ground, looking back with disapproving scowls, mouths opening to

tell us off; but all of them misplaced their courage when they saw Raine, muscled and butch, her tank-top still splattered with blood, her eyes burning with manic light.

I held on hard, one arm around Raine's waist, my other clutching my yellow blanket, lest it be torn away in the press of bodies. My ankles snagged on other people's legs, my head was buffeted by hard shoulders, my stomach took glancing blows from passing hips and stray elbows. I almost closed my eyes, trusting Raine to see us through, but then—

A sliver of russet fur ducked and weaved between the ankles just ahead of us. A black-tipped bushy tail brushed against pajama-clad calves, sending a rolling shiver through the crowd. A few girls looked down, but most didn't even notice.

"Fox?" I muttered. "Fox! Um ... Saye! Saye Fox! Hey, hey, it's us!"

My voice was lost in the growing cacophony. If the fox heard me, she didn't stop.

Raine mounted the concrete steps, cut through the thickest part of the crowd, and won us a place at the front, just by the right-hand edge of the door frame. We burst from the press of people, stopping at the threshold of the entrance hall.

Inside was chaos.

The distinctive war-cry came from a ring of patients, a dozen girls who had linked arms in a circle, locking their elbows together in an apparently unbreakable union. All of them were shouting, wailing that wordless outrage together. The interruptions came from the nurses; every now and again two or three of the hospital staff rushed at the circle in a vain attempt to break the circular daisy-chain. But the ring of girls absorbed each charge by bowing inward before the impact, drawing each nurse a step or two further on — and then counter-attacking with bites and kicks, shoving each nurse back like a wall of rubber.

Two nurses were on the floor, one with a bleeding ear, another down on her hands and knees, vomiting bile. Another pair of nurses looked like they'd just clambered back to their feet after getting bowled over.

The mobile scrum-fortress was not the only piece in motion. A dozen other girls were darting about all over the place, dodging

nurses and throwing things. Unfortunately for them, individual action was not as effective as whatever the first dozen were doing; several of them seemed to have been caught and pinned to the floor already. One was being carried off by a pair of nurses, cackling at the top of her lungs.

“Avenge me, lasses and ladies!” she howled, laughing and kicking. “Look to the east on the dawning of the third—”

A nurse slung a soft gag around her mouth, shutting off the rest of her speech.

A landslide of pots and pans was strewn about in front of the mess hall entrance, as if somebody had hurled a crate full of kitchen supplies through the air; this was presumably the source of the deafening noise earlier. Three girls stood tall amid the clutter, treating it like a minefield. The pots and pans made it much more difficult for any nurses to approach the trio without getting tangled up or slipping over. One of the girls was banging two pots together over her head, shouting, “Free Mina! Free Mina! Free Mina!” The other two were brandishing pans at the nurses creeping closer, bodyguards to their rabble-rouser.

One nurse levelled a finger at one of the pan-armed girls. “Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare throw that, Emily! You’re a good girl, usually. What has gotten into—”

‘Emily’ — a long-limbed young woman with bug eyes and frizzy red hair — cut the nurse off by hurling the pan like a frizbee. The whirling metal connected with the nurse’s ribs with a loud smart smack. She let out a little ‘oof’ and doubled over.

The crowd cheered.

There was no sign of the fox, not in the chaos of the entrance hall, nor slipping into one of the side corridors. All routes in and out of the entrance hall were crammed with crowds of patients watching the spectacle unfold, spilling from the dayroom and the corridors, the press of bodies inching along the walls at the edge of this sudden arena, as more and more joined the audience. Plenty of places for the Saye Fox to hide.

“Bloody hell!” I yelped, then tried to apologise: “S-sorry, I can’t— ah!” I flinched as another two nurses charged at the central circle of patients. They were repelled once again, with lots of kicking and

shoving and one very impressive head-butt. That final move drew another great cheer from the crowd.

Raine howled with laughter. “Lozzers came through for us!”

“I-I don’t see her anywhere!” I said. “What on earth has she done here?!”

“Used her powers for good!” Raine shouted. “She’s started a riot!”

The riot seemed to be intensifying as Raine and I watched — on both sides. Some of the girls from the audience of onlookers began to join in, pushing past the few nurses left on crowd-control duty. One unlucky rioter went down, pinned by a pair of nurses, her jaw making a sickening crack as it bounced off the floor; but then she was released a moment later when three other patients jumped the nurses from behind. Other girls dragged the dazed and bleeding patient to her feet, hustling her off behind the edge of the audience. The ring of patients at the centre of the whole thing got louder and louder, shouting themselves hoarse at every fresh outrage and new offense. The staff weren’t slacking either; a group of nurses had succeeded in clearing one of the passages which led off into the depths of the hospital. Now they were faffing about back there, donning thick mittens and fabric helmets, readying long ‘man-catcher’ style poles with padded metal loops at the ends.

Lozzie’s riot was on a time-limit. This brief breach of the peace would be shut down sooner or later, no matter how hard the patients fought.

For a moment I forgot what Raine and I were supposed to be focused on — though heaven forbid I ever truly forget my beloved Evelyn, even in a nightmare. The riot unfolding before my eyes cried out to my deepest desires and oldest fears, to taboos I didn’t even know I’d been holding onto. As another pair of nurses tried to get the central scrum under control again, I felt my lips peel back from my teeth and my eyes go wide and wild, a cheer rising in my throat along with the crowd.

I wished I had all my tentacles, all my teeth and barbs, my spikes and spines, my warning colouration and toxic skin and steel-shod fangs. I could see the logic of the riot and the counter-violence about to end it all. My heart ached to hold back the waves from crashing shut over this glorious moment.

The nurses went down, pushed away by the circle, tumbling onto their backsides, bruised and battered for their efforts. I spotted the name tags: 'A.FILTH' and 'A.PIG.'

Another cheer ripped from the throats of the crowd. I joined in.

Would I have cheered if these were real nurses, real people, with lives and families and wounds of their own? Would I have screamed in triumph to see this happen, in reality?

Maybe. Perhaps not. I'd been too young to hold the concept whole and complete, back in the real Cygnet.

But the catharsis now was real, even in a dream.

Raine was elbowing a girl to our left, a young woman about our age, dressed in a faded t-shirt and Cygnet standard off-white pajama bottoms. She had her hands cupped around her mouth, shouting a suggestion to one of the participants.

"Hey, hey!" Raine said to her. "Hey, how'd this start? Did you see it?"

The girl blinked at Raine, sparing her moment's attention. "Dunno!" she shouted back. "Some nurse hit a girl! Fuck them, right? They're not meant to knock us about like that! It's not legal!"

"Right!" Raine cheered. "Fuck the screws!"

I reached out and tugged on the girl's t-shirt. She did a double-take, then looked down at me, eyebrows raised.

"Why don't we rush them all at once?" I asked — and I couldn't believe the words coming out of my own mouth.

The girl frowned at me like I was crazy. "What?!"

"We've got ten times their numbers!" I said. "The nurses, I mean! We could win! Actually win!"

The girl balked, cringing at me through clenched teeth. She gestured toward the nurses in the little hallway — the ones picking up man-catcher poles and slipping restraining ropes over their shoulders. "I think it's almost over. Come on, what can we do?"

"Everything!" I said.

But she was already turning away, mind made up. There would be

no victorious revolt here today, no liberated prison.

Raine put her lips next to my ear, and hissed: “I get it, sweet thing. Trust me, I really do. But riots and revolutions have an internal flow. This one is about to get dammed up, and bad. We gotta move while we’ve still got cover. Eyes on the prize, Heather. Eyes on the prize.”

I whined in protest, but then stopped when Raine pointed at the big steel security door, the one marked V.I.P. VISITORS ROOM. It was over on the right hand wall of the entrance hall, half obscured behind a thin line of patients shouting and cheering.

No handle, no window — and no keyhole.

“Wait, wait!” I said. “How are we going to get in?”

Raine’s eyes flicked back and forth across the chaos of the riot, the baying crowd, the nurses trying to keep control, and the various improvised projectiles flying through the air. She slid something white into her palm — the little plastic knife from the kitchen. “I can try to jimmy the lock. No time for anything more complex. If this doesn’t work, we’re gonna have to retreat and try again. Heather?”

“Y-yes?”

“Keep your head down. Hold on tight.”

Raine darted to the right, sticking to the wall. She pulled me along by one hand, shoving and squirming us behind the thin layers of the crowd. My heels felt like they were made of rubber, like my feet were moving too fast for my brain. We passed one corner, exposed for a moment, then pushed our way through the knot of patients spilling from a corridor.

Pots and pans clattered off a nearby wall — a misfire from the trio by the mess hall doorway, almost friendly fire. Girls scattered out of the way, squealing and yelping as kitchen shrapnel clanged to the floor. Raine and I scurried with them, crammed against the wall for a second, ribs creaking in the press of bodies. For a moment I lost my grip on Raine. I thought we’d been pulled apart. I didn’t know which way was forward and which way was back.

Then somebody yanked on my arm and pulled me free. I stumbled forward, lurching and heaving. Raine caught me and held me

steady.

“Easy, Heather, easy. Almost there,” she hissed. “Here, hold this.”

She pressed a small cast-iron frying pan into my hands. How she’d caught it, I had no idea.

“W-what—”

“A weapon! A weapon,” she hissed, a grin splitting her face and filling my vision. “It’s no police-issue nightstick, no foot-long machete, but it’ll do in a pinch. Come on!”

Raine pulled on my hand and led me a few more paces. The security door stood silent and shut at the edge of the chaos. We were sheltered behind the crowd, but it was only a few bodies thick, and we had only moments to spare.

Raine let go of me and whipped out the plastic knife. I pressed myself to the wall, head ducked low, as if I might be able to blend into the brick and plaster. My heart was pounding, my skin was drenched with sweat, and my bloodstream was full of adrenaline. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever been in a crowd like this before; the energy was infectious, an electric charge up my spine and down my limbs.

I wanted to swing the frying pan at somebody or something — preferably at a nurse.

Raine stuck the knife into the gap between the door and the steel frame, but the metal was so flush that the blade wouldn’t fit. Raine forced the utensil inside, wiggling it up and down, bending the plastic and sending little shavings of white fluttering to the floor.

Behind us, the crowd rose into a chorus of booing and jeering. I went up on tip-toes to risk a look.

A squad of nurses had emerged from their little corridor redoubt — wielding man-catcher poles, lengths of padded rope, and anti-spit masks. They had a doctor with them now, an older man with grey hair, terrified eyes blinking behind massive glasses. He held what looked like an electric stun gun in one shaking hand. He seemed much less enthusiastic than the burly, well-armed nursing staff.

The nurses closed on the central scrum of linked girls, spreading out to take them from all sides at once.

“Raine!” I squeaked.

“I know.”

“We have to hurry!”

“I know,” Raine answered through gritted teeth, eyes glued on the tiny gap she had managed to wedge between the door and the frame. She rocked back on her heels, jaw clenched tight. “I know. I know.”

The knife was bent. The smallest touch might snap the plastic.

Angry shouts broke out behind us. “Not fair! Stop cheating!”, “Fucking pigs! Why don’t you all go home and leave us to it!”, “You started it! You started it!”

The crowd was turning ugly now that their side was losing, and I didn’t blame them one bit.

“Raine!” I hissed.

“I’ve fucked it,” she muttered, then lashed out and grabbed my hand. “We gotta run, sweet thing. Mission failed. We’ll be back, we —”

A blur of russet fur darted between my legs. A little black nose touched the door frame, nuzzling the steel.

Click!

The security door popped open by about an inch. Before Raine or I could react, a vulpine paw padded at the side of the door and nudged the gap wider, just wide enough for a sleek and furry body to slip through. Our surprise visitor slithered inside, bushy tail vanishing after her.

Raine grabbed the door a second later, wrenched it wide, and bundled me over the threshold. She slipped through in my wake, then carefully closed the door behind us.

A lock or a catch clicked into place. The sounds of the riot were suddenly muffled behind metal and concrete.

Silence descended, unnaturally thick and potent, like heavy fog hanging in the air.

Raine whirled, fists raised, ready for anything.

“There’s nothing here!” I yelled, panting hard. “There’s nothing

here. Nothing here. G-good girl, Raine. Down. Down. Down, girl.”

The room beyond the steel security door — the ‘V.I.P Visitor’s Room’ — was nothing more than a bland and expensive waiting room.

Blue fabric armchairs stood in short rows, facing toward each or glowering over little glass coffee tables. A scratchy blue carpet gave the illusion of softness, rasping beneath my white slippers. Insipid paintings hung on the walls, pictures of fruit or cracked coffee mugs or half-dead trees. A few wilted flowers sat in sad, dry vases on the tables, surrounded by halos of vapid magazines with titles like ‘Wow!’ and ‘Fresh!’

Two doors stood shut on the opposite side of the waiting room, plain pale wood with unremarkable plastic handles. One sported a little brass plate which read ‘Consultation Offices.’ The other was labelled ‘Correction.’

The place was completely deserted, except for myself and Raine.

And the Saye Fox.

She was sitting on her haunches, up on the seat of a nearby armchair, alert and alarmed. Bright orange eyes like the hearts of twin bonfires returned my curious stare. Black-tipped ears twitched and swivelled, perhaps still picking up the sounds of the collapsing riot back in the entrance hall. She looked unaffected by the dream, toned and sleek, fluffy-furred and bushy-tailed.

Raine cracked a grin and pointed at the fox. “That’s nothing, huh? Am I hallucinating now?”

The Saye Fox stared at the end of Raine’s finger, then back at Raine’s eyes.

“No, no,” I said quickly, still trying to catch my breath after our escape. “She’s on our side. I mean, if she’s actually really here, and not some kind of dream construct. I don’t think she is, anyway.” I bit my lower lip, frowning at the fox. “I can’t figure out how she got in here. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Opened the door,” Raine said. “Nice trick, especially with no thumbs.”

The Saye Fox went: “Yip!”

I held up an apologetic hand — waving the cast iron frying pan around like a moron. Raine plucked the improvised weapon from my fingers, saving me further embarrassment.

“Sorry!” I said to the Fox. “Sorry, I didn’t mean any offense by that. Neither did Raine, she just doesn’t remember you right now, or anything much, in fact. I’m just very confused. I don’t understand how you’re here? You weren’t in Wonderland with the rest of us. Unless you snuck in somehow. Did Zheng carry you in there, in secret? Were you hiding inside Zheng’s jumper?”

The Fox tilted her head, ears twitching. I sighed.

“Well,” I said. “Anyway, whatever, it doesn’t matter. Thank you for opening the door! Thank you so very much. You saved us just now. We were stuck. Thank you. I’m still not a hundred percent sure if you’re real, though.”

Raine clucked her tongue. “You’re gonna have to explain this one to me, sweet thing. You got a Doctor Dolittle thing going on here? That fox talking back to you?”

“She’s more than just a fox,” I said quickly. “She’s related to Evelyn somehow, though I’ve never figured out exactly how that works. She’s either a gestalt entity, congealed from Evelyn’s ancestral home, or she’s the spirit of Evelyn’s grandmother, inhabiting a fox via long-term carrion-based osmosis. Um. Sort of. Maybe. And I can’t hear her, no. She is a fox. She doesn’t speak.”

Raine nodded. “Evee’s descended from furies, got it.”

“Yeerp!” went the fox.

Raine cracked a grin — not for me, but for our unexpected vulpine companion. “Sorry, little vixen, but I can’t help myself. You’re Evee’s familiar, right? Every witch needs a familiar.”

I tutted. “That’s not entirely correct.”

The Fox didn’t seem to mind. She stood up, turned in a little circle on the chair, and glanced at both of the doors on the opposite side of the room. I hurried over, following her lead.

“Do you know where Evee is?” I hissed. “Do you know where they’ve taken her?”

The Saye Fox hopped up onto the back of the chair, then down to a

coffee table, knocking gaudy magazines onto the floor. She sprang over to the left hand door — the ‘Consultation Offices’ — then stopped and looked at me, one paw raised, ears sharp and tall, tail held straight out.

“Okay!” I said. “Raine, I think we can trust her on—”

But then the Saye Fox darted the other way, to the door labelled ‘Correction’. She assumed the same urgent pose.

“Damn,” Raine purred. “Guess again, Fantastic Mrs Fox.”

“Yiiip!” went the Fox, much louder than before. “Yap!”

I sighed. “We’ll just have to try ... Raine? Um, Raine?”

I realised that Raine was staring at the fox with a look of smug victory. The Fox was staring back, goaded into a silent confrontation.

“Mm?” Raine grunted, but she didn’t look away from the Fox.

“Raine!” I snapped — and she snapped too, head flicking round to look at me, to obey the voice of her mistress. I quickly reached up and took the back of her neck, trying not to show that my hands were shaking, or that my breath was catching in my throat. I held Raine’s gaze and spoke quickly. “You are a good girl. You are very a good girl, Raine. You are my good girl. Just because you couldn’t get that door open does not make you any less of a good girl. The fox has not shown you up or bested you somehow. And you are not in a rivalry with the Saye Fox. Okay? I-I need you to not do this, not right now. Please.”

Raine blinked once, then grinned slowly. “Sorry, sweet thing,” she purred. “Can’t blame me for territorial pissing, can you?”

“This is not the time,” I said. “Don’t be a ... a b-bad girl. And no urinating on the furniture.” I cleared my throat. “Oh I can’t believe I said that! Tch!”

Raine purred in her throat, a deep and satisfied little rasp. But she nodded and winked, then pulled away from my hand. She met the Fox’s gaze again, and nodded her head. “We’re cool, little Saye. I got the wrong scent up my nose, that’s all. No hard feelings?”

The Fox turned in a little circle, bounced over to the ‘Consultation Offices’ door again, paused, sprang back to the ‘Corrections’ door,

and went, “Yip-yap!”

“I know, I know!” I said. “I’m worried about Evee, too. But which door do we take?!”

Raine said, “Pick either. It’s fifty-fifty.”

“No,” I said. “I think it’s a riddle. It has to be.” I wet my lips, then pointed. “Corrections. Let’s try there. That sounds ominous enough.”

“Yeah,” Raine murmured. “Sounds grim enough.”

Raine took the lead, one hand on the door handle, the other raising the stolen frying pan to repel whoever or whatever might be lurking on the other side. I stuck to her heels, holding my breath. The Saye Fox hopped into position behind us without encouragement.

Raine cracked the door. It opened without resistance. She waited several seconds, listening for voices, braced for a reaction. When none came, she eased it wider. We peered through together, me and Raine and the Fox.

A corridor stretched off toward a distant right-hand turn. The walls were clean institutional white, lined with simple wooden doors. The floor was covered with more cheap and scratchy carpet.

Empty and silent, except for the distant whisper of an air conditioning system.

“Spooky,” Raine hissed, stepping over the threshold. “Too squeaky clean for my filthy tastes. Give me prison dirt over this any time.”

I followed her into the corridor, my heart pounding in my chest. My skin had gone clammy, my palms sticky with sweat, my breath short and my head light. “Y-yes,” I hissed, stammering a little. “Spooky. That’s— that’s right. Spooky. Not what I was expecting.”

Even the Saye Fox did not venture far; she hopped past our ankles, then stopped, ears up, orange eyes wide, staring down the corridor.

Raine must have noticed my discomfort. She reached back and grabbed my hand. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I swallowed and forced myself to take a deep breath, then tugged my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders. “This looks too much like a corridor at the real Cygnet Hospital. One of the doctor’s areas, something like that. It’s slightly too real. Just dredging up a

buried memory, that's all. I'll be fine. We have to find Eevee."

Raine nodded. "Gotcha." She spoke quick and quiet. "Do we check the doors one by one, or push on until something more obvious?"

"Good question," I murmured, chewing on my bottom lip. The doors did not have windows or keyholes through which to spy their insides, just grey plastic handles and plain surfaces in pale wood. Upright, sensible, clean. Oh so very reassuring, when you were subjecting a child to the truth behind the tidy facade. "I don't think we have a choice," I hissed. "We need to check the doors. Eevee could be anywhere."

Raine hefted the frying pan. "If we bump into a nurse or a doctor, I'm gonna have to take them out, sweet thing. We ain't got a choice, not if we're gonna find our Eevee. We can't afford to get caught, right?"

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. "I-I understand. You have permission, Raine. Express permission. Anything you need to do, as long as it's not to a patient."

Raine eyed me carefully, unsmiling and focused. "Be ready," she purred. "We throw open a door, we may have to fight. Not gonna have time to think. Whatever happens, follow my lead."

My breath came in a shuddering wave. But I set my shoulders and nodded hard. "I'm ready. Let's go."

We opened the doors one by one, zig-zagging down the corridor from room to room. Raine always went first, and always used the same technique — she took each door handle and eased it downward, then waited for a response. When none came she cracked the door away from the frame, waited again, then threw the door wide with a sudden explosive shove.

The first half-dozen rooms were nothing more than doctor's offices, decorated in pale wood and functional furniture, some with examination tables and weighing machines and blood-pressure cuffs, nothing one wouldn't find in a real modern hospital. All of them were deserted, spotlessly clean, and perfectly silent. My heart was in my throat every time Raine burst over a threshold, frying pan raised in one hand, the Saye Fox hopping past her heels. But these rooms looked as if they had never been used at all, with no rubbish in the waste bins, no stray paperwork on the desks, not

even a speck of lint around the skirting boards.

Fake. A thin veneer over the reality. A comfortable dream before the nightmare.

On the seventh door, the truth of this place revealed itself.

Raine opened a door identical to all the others thus far — and then paused, because the interior was different. Dark and dingy, narrow and tight, with whitewashed walls and a bare lino floor. A trio of cheap plastic chairs faced the only light source: a huge window which dominated one wall.

The window looked into the next room.

Raine crept inside, eyeing the massive window and the room beyond. I followed, frowning with incomprehension. The window looked into a clean, white, brightly-lit room, bare except for a single chair and a whiteboard set on a wheeled frame. The chair was huge, a sort of dentist's chair made of wipe-clean plastic, bolted to the floor, with a mechanism for reclining the back. It was covered in restraints and straps, thick enough to hold a gorilla. A separate door led out of the clean white room, in the opposite direction to the corridor we'd been exploring.

"Oh, this is some real sick shit," Raine murmured.

A strange feeling crept into the pit of my stomach — recognition, like I'd seen this place before, though there was nowhere like it in the real Cygnet Hospital. It looked more akin to some nonsense one might witness in an exploitative film about asylums and mental illness.

"I ... I don't understand what I'm looking at," I said slowly.

Raine nodded at the huge window and the clean white room beyond. "Two-way mirror. For watching somebody strapped into that chair."

"Yes, Raine," I said, "I know it's a two-way mirror, I didn't mean that. I meant the ... the ... "

A memory surfaced. My eyes went wide and my blood ran cold. A wave of fury and bile clawed up my throat.

Raine must have seen the change come over me. "Heather? Heather, what's wrong?"

"It's the chair," I hissed.

"What's with the chair?" Raine almost growled. "You gotta tell me, sweet thing. You see something I don't, you gotta tell me—"

"Evee's chair. Her mother's chair. The chair that Evelyn's mother kept in the cellars beneath her house. The chair where she used to strap Evee down to be possessed by a demon. This one is all clean and new, not old and rotten, and the real one is sized for a child, not an adult, but it's the same chair." I whirled on Raine, feeling my eyes bulging in my face, my lips peeling back from my teeth. "We smashed the real one!" I shouted, gripped with uncontrollable anger. "Me and Praem! We smashed it to pieces with a sledgehammer! It's dead!"

"Heather—"

"We have to find her!" I said. "Right now!"

"Yip-yerp!" went the Saye Fox, dashing out of the dingy little room.

"We can't waste all this time searching!" I snapped. "We have to—"

Raine grabbed my hand and all but yanked me off my feet, whisking me back out into the corridor.

We threw caution to the wind. Raine slammed the doors open without pause, banging them off the concrete walls of the sad and dingy little observation rooms. Each one was identical, the same three chairs looking through the same two-way mirror, into the same clean white clinical space, dominated by the same hateful piece of torture machinery, restored to gloating life by the mechanics of this dream. Over and over again we saw that chair, replicated in room after room. Empty, clean, and silent. No Evee.

I scurried to keep up, breath heaving in my lungs. The Saye Fox darted ahead, sniffing at the door frames, yipping at us to hurry up, leaping in little circles as she went.

"She's not here! She's not here!" I wailed after the twelfth empty room in a row. "I don't know why! Evee!" I shouted her name, my voice echoing down the silent white corridor. "Evee, where are you!?"

Raine yelled too. "We're not too late! Don't even think it! You're never too late to help!"

“Evee!” I whined. “Evee!”

Door number thirteen crashed open, slamming into the wall and bouncing back on its hinges. Raine darted inside, just as she had with all the previous rooms. I scurried after her, already grabbing her arm to drag her back into the corridor, to try the next, the next, the next—

Raine froze, staring through the two-way mirror. The Saye Fox jumped up onto a seat. My stomach fell through the base of my guts.

Correction room number thirteen was in use.

Two nurses stood by the back door, meaty arms folded over their chests, hair like helmets, jaws like bulldogs. ‘A.SHOVE’ and ‘A.PUSH.’ They could have been twins. Evelyn’s wheelchair stood between them. Her grey dressing gown was pooled on the seat.

Evee was strapped into the torture chair.

She looked so tiny, wearing nothing but a thin pajama top and a long skirt, both in faded institutional white. She was withered and atrophied and reduced, dwarfed by the clean white room, swallowed by the surfaces of the chair. Her body was engulfed in straps and restraints, criss-crossing her torso and throat, holding her skull in place with a padded leather line across her forehead. Her eyes were dull and empty, tear-tracks dried on her sunken cheeks. Her blonde hair was a stringy mass of greasy rat-tails. The scar tissue of maimed hand was weeping onto the shiny plastic of the chair’s arm, leaving a stain of pinkish blood plasma on the spotless surface.

The restraints were wasted on her withered left leg, like a stick wrapped in chains. Her missing right leg had not been spared the incarceration either — the straps went over her skirt and stump, pinning even the empty notion of her severed limb.

She was facing another one of those wheeled whiteboards. This one was filled with text, with notes spiralling outward from three central bubbles. The bubbles contained the words ‘filial piety’, ‘loyalty’, and ‘sacrifice.’

The rest of the text was a jumbled mish-mash of overlapping mantras, the letters pressed into the board so hard that they had scored the surface.

‘I am your mother I am your mother I am your mother—’ ‘—gave birth to you my own flesh and blood and this is how you repay me —’ ‘—born for one reason and one reason alone born for one reason and one reason alone—’ ‘—murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer—’ ‘—waste of effort if you can’t learn, waste of skin even if you can—’ ‘—have to get better so you can come home and be with me and your father you want to come home don’t you want to come home be quiet when the doctor is here don’t say a word don’t you dare tell them anything or I’ll make it so much worse than it already is—’

Coiled around the chair — crouched on Evelyn’s chest and shoulder like a sleep paralysis demon from hell, gesturing toward the whiteboard with half a dozen feelers of black scribbled static — was the dream-memory of Evelyn’s mother, Loretta Julianna Saye.

She had no face, no recognisable human outline, not even hands or feet or visible clothes. She was nothing but a churning mass of black static, whispering madness and hate into Evelyn’s ear.

Evee looked barely conscious. Her jaw was slack, cold drool running down her chin. The chair’s restraints and straps were the only thing keeping her upright

“Evee!” I hissed. “Raine, we have to—”

“Awoooooooooooooo!” Raine howled a wolfish war cry.

The two nurses on the other side of the glass — Push and Shove — jerked their heads around. They looked right at us.

Raine wound back her arm and hurled the frying pan directly at the glass. The window burst outward in an explosion of flying shards, blinding the pair of nurses, drawing screams of surprise from twin throats. The frying pan clattered off a wall as the nurses flailed, clawing at their faces.

Raine leapt through the shattered window and hurled herself at our foes. The Saye Fox followed with a little hop over the fringe of broken glass, growling and snarling and snapping at the top of her tiny lungs.

I followed, driven half by love and half by rage, clambering over the broken two-way mirror. I was neither as elegant as Raine nor as

small as the fox, so I cut one shin on the edge of broken glass. When I staggered upright in the correction room, blood was seeping into one leg of my pajama bottoms. I didn't care. I barely even noticed. The pain was nothing, blotted out by white-hot anger.

"Evee!" I yelled. "Evee!"

Raine darted for the fallen frying pan while Push and Shove were still reeling and blinded by the fragments of glass. She scooped it up and twisted round on one heel — but a second too late. Push came at her like a wrecking ball of flesh, hands outstretched to grab Raine's throat.

Raine ducked to the side and smashed Push in the face with the edge of the pan. Blood fountained from a broken nose.

Push fell over, clutching at her nose, screeching like a banshee, but Raine didn't stop there. She brought the frying pan down again, and again, and again. Soft tissues went squelch and splat. Hard bones went crack—a-crack.

Shove rallied, wiping glass fragments from her eyes with the back of one hand, tearing open tiny wounds in her face. She threw herself at Raine too.

The Saye Fox darted between my legs and yowled at the black static enveloping Evelyn, snapping and yipping, darting around the edge of the void-dark mass, trying to nip at ankles which the nightmare simply did not possess.

"You!" I yelled at it — at her, at Evee's mother, at this nightmare resurrection of Loretta Saye. "Get off her!"

My fists were balled up, nails digging into my palms. My breath ripped down my throat like fire. My face was burning red.

The Memory of Loretta Saye reared up, uncoiling from around Evelyn like a snake from around a rodent. She pointed a scribbled mass toward me, as if I was nothing more than a competing predator, come to steal the kill from beneath her fangs.

"You're not even real!" I screamed at the thing. "You died! Raine and Evee killed you once already!"

A voice whispered from the black static, low and husky and thick with cold. She had Evelyn's accent, archaic Sussex drawl tucked neatly beneath modern Estuary English. Evelyn's voice, but thirty

years older, marred by a cruelty that Evelyn could never have mustered.

“Smart mages live forever,” said the memory. “This is my lifeboat, not yours. Leave before I have you kill—”

I screamed and flung myself at her.

I had no tentacles. No barbs and spikes and spines. No toxic flesh, no poison mucus. No armoured chitin, no reinforced muscles, no steel in my tendons. In this dream I was but one, singlet, alone inside my body, and all too human. I had the weak and noodly arms that I’d had most of my life, unfit for lifting heavy objects, let alone having a fight. I had little experience, less strength, and no idea what I was doing.

But something came over me, something I had only felt before in the context of abyssal instinct, pushed onward by extra-human chemicals and Outsider enzymes rushing down my veins and filling my heart with liquid courage.

I lost my temper. I lost it like a nasty little ape, all fists and teeth.

I collided with Loretta Saye’s memory like a chimpanzee set on murder. I punched and kicked and bit and spat, my face full of black static, my fists sinking into rubbery air, my feet repelled by nothing but empty space. I made the most terrible noises, more animal than human, rasping and croaking and screeching.

That voice whispered forth again: “My daughter will always be mine. Even from beyond the grave. You think I’m gone? You think I’m truly dead? Foolish runt. I don’t even know what you are. Begone.”

The static whirled like a vortex in front of my chest, gathering as if to throw me off or ram a spike through my flesh.

I reached in with both hands, with one thought on my mind — and found meat beneath the static.

A face, a skull, with hair and skin and cold, cold cheeks.

The memory of Loretta Saye gasped, trying to flinch away. But I had a grip on her now, sticking my fingers into an eye socket. “How — how can you—”

“Evee loves me more than she ever thinks about you anymore!” I

howled into the black static. "Get back in the ground!"

And then I punched her.

I slammed fists into her hidden face and rammed feet into her shrouded belly. I leaned forward and bit down on any flesh I could find, drawing screams from a figure I could not see, spitting out mouthfuls of mangled skin and a fragment of her nose. She collapsed beneath me, going down in a tangled heap; she tried to fight back, but her blows were weak, her arms nothing but dust and rot. I rode her to the ground, feral before we even got there, smashing and shoving and kicking and kneeling and biting and feeling my fists grow slick with blood and bruised with repeated impacts.

I regressed into a state I had never before considered possible without abyssal encouragement.

Eventually I grabbed her skull in both hands and bounced it off the floor. That made her stop moving, so I did it again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again—

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crunch! Crunch!

She wasn't moving anymore. I slowed, then stopped.

I was straddling the back of a corpse. My whole body was shaking. I was panting as if I'd sprinted a mile. My knees were wet, dipped in a pool of spreading blood. My hands were soaked with crimson, my knuckles bruised and aching, my arms seizing up.

The corpse had blonde hair, matted with gore. She was face down on the floor.

The Saye Fox looked on from a few feet away, staring at the fallen memory. Her orange eyes seemed almost sad.

"R-Raine ... " I croaked. "Raine."

A firm grip found my armpits and hoisted me to my feet.

"Hey, hey, Heather, Heather, sweet thing, hey," Raine said, clicking her fingers in front of my eyes, dragging me away from the corpse. "You're fine. You're whole. You're good. Well done. Well done, sweet thing. Hey. Hey, look at me. Look at me!"

I focused on Raine's eyes. I was still panting hard. My knuckles screamed when I moved my fingers. Raine was covered in blood too

— though nowhere near as much as me.

Behind her, the room was a wreck. Push and Shove had also been turned into corpses, both skulls caved in with a frying pan, which now lay on the floor amid the fragments of broken glass.

“How—” I croaked, glancing at the corpse of Loretta’s Memory again. “How did I— I-I—”

Raine grinned. “People do that sometimes, when they care enough. And hey, well done, you did well. I was tied up dealing with the clones back there.” Raine glanced at the corpse too. “She didn’t seem like much in the end. This is a wizard, huh?”

“Uh ... n-not in a dream, I think?” I shook my head. “I think I found her weak point. Conceptually speaking. Metaphorically. This wasn’t the real thing, anyway.”

The Saye Fox was sitting on her haunches, staring at the corpse of this dream-memory of Loretta Saye.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked. The Fox looked up at me. “I know she was your ... relative, somehow, no matter how bad she got. Even if this is just a dream. Even if—”

Evelyn slumped to one side.

The restraints around her head and neck and upper torso had come loose somehow — perhaps we had knocked them during the fight, but I suspected her sudden partial freedom had more to do with dream-logic than with material reality. She lurched sideways, as if slipping over the side of the chair. Raine and I both darted to catch her, uncaring of the blood all over our hands.

“Off!” Evelyn snapped — her voice scratchy and scarred, but oddly strong.

She finished leaning over the side of the chair, made a snorting sound deep in her throat, and spat on the dream memory of her mother’s corpse.

Raine and I helped her sit back up.

“Evee?” I hissed. “Evee, Evee, it’s us. You’re safe now, Evee? Evee?”

Rheumy eyes looked up at me, squinting with incomprehension, beneath a craggy frown that could have frozen a bonfire. Exhausted, stained with tears, wracked with chronic pain — but

those eyes were clear.

“Heather?” Evelyn croaked. “Raine? What— why am I strapped down?” She jerked against the restraints. “Get me out of this shit! I was having a terrible nightmare, that’s all, that ... ” She trailed off, glancing left and right, then squinting down at her mother’s corpse again. She froze. All the colour drained from her face. “Or not.”

“Evee,” I whispered very gently. “Maybe— maybe don’t look at that. Evee? Evee, please. Evee! She’s— she’s dead. She’s dead.”

Evelyn looked up and frowned at me again. “Of course she’s fucking dead. Where the fuck are we? And why does Raine look like she hasn’t bathed in six months? And where’s my leg?”

“Oh, Evee!” I sighed with relief. I could have hugged her. I could have danced a little jig.

We’d banished one personal nightmare.

Evelyn Saye was wide awake.

bedlam boundary – 24.10

Raine quickly set to work, liberating Evelyn from the torture device.

But even with the memory of Loretta Saye lying dead on the floor, the dream of Cygnet Hospital did not easily loosen its grip.

Within moments we discovered that the chair's construction did not follow the logic of the waking world; it was not simply a matter of loosening the straps and uncoupling the buckles, freeing Evelyn as if from an overzealous dentist's chair. The logic of the dream — or perhaps of Evelyn's personal nightmare, her confinement and abuse at her mother's hands — had fused many of the straps to the plastic body of the chair itself, or melted the buckles into unbreakable twists of metal, or formed them without any unlocking mechanism in the first place.

The restraints which bound Evelyn's withered left leg and the unprotected stump of her right thigh were particularly egregious; they seemed to have been constructed around her limbs, glued and welded and stitched into place, with the assumption that she would never leave her torturous throne.

Raine got down to the messy business of freeing her anyway — undoing what buckles and clasps and velcro-strips she could, bending and breaking and snapping what she could not. She freed Evee's head, throat, and hands first. More than once she had to stand up and kick a piece of the chair, stamping on it over and over, putting her body weight into the task of destroying Evelyn's prison.

Raine's bloody hands left behind smears of sticky crimson as she worked, dirtying the clean plastic of the chair, staining Evelyn's white clothes.

I hurried to explain, as best I could.

"We're in a dream," I said. "Sort of like when Lozzie and I go Outside, in dreams, but different. It's all so much more lucid, there's no dream-haze, no confusion, no sense of unreality. Total lucidity! Or this might be some kind of extremely convincing illusion, woven by the Eye? I'm not sure, I don't have enough data to go on, not yet. Or I might have broken reality somehow, back in Wonderland. I—I

must have! I must have contributed to this somehow. We all must have! It doesn't make any sense, otherwise. There's no way the Eye could do all this, it's impossible, it doesn't even understand. It doesn't know you, Eevee! There's no way it would summon this chair, this room, let alone your mother, it's impossible, it's—"

"Heather!" Evelyn croaked my name. "Slow down, for pity's sake. Start at the beginning." She flexed her torso against the straps. "Not like I'm going anywhere for the next five minutes."

Raine popped her head over the side of the chair; she'd been down on Eevee's left, working on the restraints around her hips. "I'll take that as a challenge, Lady Saye. Four minutes fifty-nine seconds. You're on."

Evelyn squint-frowned at Raine, but Raine just ducked her head and carried on.

I hiccuped — a failed attempt at a laugh. "The beginning," I echoed. "Good question. Where even is the beginning of this? I don't—"

"Heather," Evelyn said through clenched teeth. "Just tell me where we are."

Raine appeared again, with a smirk on her lips. "Cygnet Prison and Hospital," she purred. "Maximum security for some. Run-of-the-grounds for others. And some Clockwork Orange shit for you, it seems, My Darling Lady."

She finished with a wink, then set back to work, tugging on a strap over Evelyn's stump. Raine took extra care not to touch the stump itself; even if she didn't remember Evelyn, she treated her with exceedingly gentle care.

Evelyn's expression curdled into a cocktail of shocked recognition, but she was too exhausted and confused to challenge Raine's words.

Seeing Evelyn like this was not easy. She was awake, coherent, whole of mind — but not in body. She still barely looked anything like she did in reality, in real life, my cuddly soft Eevee with her habitual layers of comfortable clothing and her half-sleepy scowl. She was thin and weak from malnourishment, her skin was pale and blotchy, and her left leg had almost no muscle at all. Her eyes were sunken and ringed with great dark circles of exhaustion — not mere tiredness, but the bone-deep bodily weariness that comes when one

has not had a good night's sleep or a good meal in months and months on end. Her hair was filthy, dragged out in long rat-tails of faded blonde. Beneath her thin white institutional clothing, there was so little of her left. Part of me yearned to sweep her up and carry her to safety, to put a big bowl of food in front of her, or tuck her into bed. This was Evelyn Saye as she had been ten years ago, crushed by her mother's grip, as if nothing had changed across the intervening decade. Evelyn without Raine. Without me.

"E-Evee?" I prompted. "Let Raine work. She'll have you free in a moment."

Evelyn shook her head and blinked at me. "Wait, wait. Cygnet? I know that name, of course I do. Heather, isn't that where you went to hospital, when you were little?"

I nodded. "Yes, yes, that's correct. But this isn't the real Cygnet, Evee. It's some kind of nightmare version, made of all these different influences and spare parts. Like this room!" I gestured at the whiteboard covered in hateful nonsense, at the too-clean walls and bland ceiling, at the chair in which Evelyn sat, at the broken two-way mirror and the trio of corpses amid the glass shards on the floor. "This never would have existed in the real Cygnet, no matter how bad the real place could be! This is offensive, it's vile, it's sick! It's—"

"Heather, for fuck's sake!" Evelyn snapped, then descended into a dry and hacking cough. Her ribs were so thin and delicate, I was worried the coughing might break a bone. But the coughing subsided after a few moments. Evelyn waved one freed arm, waving off any help. "I can't—" she wheezed, "can't— process all this at once. Not right now. Not when I feel like— when I feel like this. I feel weak. Slow down."

I burst into a beaming smile, tears filling my eyes. Couldn't help myself. "Oh, Evee. You have no idea how good it is to have you back. I love you so much."

Raine looked up from Evelyn's straps again. "Do I love her?" she said.

"Um," I hesitated, wiping my eyes; my hands were so covered in blood that I had to use my sleeves. "Yes, emphatically, but not like that."

Raine shot me a wink. “Gotcha.”

Evelyn watched this exchange with mounting confusion, exhausted eyes flicking back and forth, squinting harder and harder. “Heather, just bottom line it for me.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I put my hands together briefly, but that just smeared more blood around.

“None of this is real,” I said. “We’re all trapped here, in a dream, or an illusion, or something else. All of us are trapped in personal nightmares. Sort of. This was yours.”

“Okay, alright,” Evelyn said with a huff. “That makes considerably more sense. Thank you.”

“Sorry.” I gestured helplessly with my blood-soaked hands. “I’m a bit ... uh, a bit shaken up ... ”

All my muscles were still aching, especially my arms and down my back. My knuckles were throbbing, complaining every time I dared to open or close my fingers. My head was pounding, my heart was racing, my knees were weak and shaky, and my breath still came in ragged heaves. My left shin was throbbing extra hard from where I’d cut it on the glass, when I’d clambered into the room; there was nothing I could do about that right now, and the blood seemed to have stopped, while the pain was muted by adrenaline. I’d feel that in the morning, for certain.

Evelyn stared at me for a second, then looked down at the corpse of her mother again.

“Maybe don’t look at that?” I murmured.

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted, tearing her eyes away from the memory. She gestured weakly with a freshly-freed arm, pointing at the corpse without looking down. “She is definitely not real. She is in the ground. She is rotten and full of worms. I know that for a fact because I put her there myself. I don’t ... ” Evelyn trailed off as she noticed the state of the scars on her maimed hand — the red-raw flesh, all cracked and dry, leaking pinkish blood plasma. “What?” she murmured, face creasing with a frown. “Why is my hand—”

I scrambled to explain: “Evee! Evee, we’re all in a pretty sorry state. Raine was locked up in a cell. I’m ... well, I mean, just look at me.” I flapped my arms and tugged at my yellow blanket, but Evelyn

couldn't tear her eyes off the stumps of her long-ago severed fingers. Her breathing picked up, growing ragged with mounting panic, eyes going wide. She swallowed with some difficulty, then began to look down at the rest of her body.

"Evee? Evee!" I almost shouted. "Evee, look at me! Look at me."

Evelyn jerked her head around, blinking rapidly. "What? What is it?!"

"I said, we're all in a pretty sorry state. You included. But it's not real. You have to keep that in mind, Evee. None of this is real. Please." I reached out with both hands, bloodstained and trembling, gesturing with a plea for Evelyn to let me cradle her ancient wounds, resurrected by this cruel dream. "It's not real. I promise."

Evelyn swallowed again. She could barely choke down the dry remnants of her own saliva. She slowly lowered her maimed hand into mine. I cradled the back of her palm.

She whispered: "That's my mother's blood on your hands."

"But it's not real."

Evelyn was panting softly. "Metaphorically it is. If this is a dream made by the Eye."

"It's not—"

"It is real," she hissed, eyes glued to our joined hands. "In the only way which matters. Thank you. Both of you. I ... I love you too. Both of you."

Raine muttered: "Always up for a spot of ultra-violence in defence of a pretty little thing."

Evelyn rolled her eyes; Raine's irreverence had broken a spell and broken the embarrassment of Evelyn's heartfelt words. Her breathing was slowing down, the panic fading as I cupped her hand in mine. She looked me up and down, frowning in her usual way, coldly interested, curious and puzzled. Her eyes were still thick and gummy with sleep and pain, ringed with dark circles, stained with tears. But she saw clearly enough.

"Where are your tentacles?" she croaked.

"I don't know. This place has reduced me, Evee. I'm missing my tentacles, I can't do brain-math, and I'm alone inside my own head."

I don't have my bio-reactor, I don't have anything. I'm just one of me right now. The others must be around here somewhere, but ... ” I trailed off and shrugged, trying not to think about the abyssal dysphoria tearing at my insides. “I'm just a human. Alone.”

Evelyn didn't seem to know what to say. She shook her head, stunned and weak. “Fuck.”

“I know,” I said.

“That's sick.”

“I know.”

“Are you— Heather, are you—”

“Alright?” I finished the awkward question for her, then forced myself to smile. “No, Eevee, I'm not alright. I'm far from it. I'm alone inside my own flesh and my flesh is all wrong. And no brain-math means I'm weak and vulnerable.”

Evelyn snorted; it was forced, but I appreciated the effort all the same. “You just beat a nightmare of my mother to death.” She started to laugh, a wet little chuckle deep down in her throat, like her lungs were clogged with cold mucus. “With your bare hands.”

“Eevee ... ”

She was still laughing. “That's pretty far from weak and vulnerable, Heather. That's like an angel, descending to save me from hell. Like her.” She gestured at Raine with an elbow, which Raine deftly dodged. Eevee's laughing turned to ragged panting. “I'm going to look down at myself now. What am I going to see?”

“Eevee, maybe don't—”

Evelyn lowered her eyes and looked down at her own withered body, her atrophied muscles, her sunken belly beneath her plain white t-shirt. Her jaw tightened as she stared at the stick-like protuberance of her left leg beneath her white skirt, next to the terminal stump of her right. Her throat bobbed once, rasping as she swallowed.

She hissed through clenched teeth, voice dripping with rage: “Where the fuck is my leg?”

Raine looked up and caught my eye, fingers paused on the second-to-last strap around Evelyn's hips, eyebrows raised in silent

question.

“A prosthetic,” I said quickly. “Evee uses a prosthetic, in reality.”

“Yes!” Evelyn spat, head jerking up again. “And where the fuck is it?! Where’s my leg, where’s my walking stick?” She tried to gesture wildly at the wheelchair by the door, one weak arm flailing above Raine’s head. “I am not going in that fucking carriage. I am not! Where’s my stick!?”

Raine finally finished breaking Evee’s bonds; she ripped the last restraint off from around Evelyn’s left ankle, tossing the leather strap to the floor. But she didn’t stand up right away. Raine stayed down on one knee, right in front of Evelyn. She reached out with one hand and hovered it gently over Evelyn’s left knee, not quite touching her, even through her long white skirt.

She said: “Evelyn, Lady Saye, I will carry you if I have to. No burden is too great. No weight too heavy.”

Evelyn did a double take. “Oh, shut up! We’re not fifteen years old anymore, Raine!”

Raine raised her eyebrows, grinning with surprised pleasure.

“Evee,” I said gently. “Do you really not recall anything about being here, before we— I— ‘neutralised’ the dream of your mother?”

Evelyn huffed and frowned, opening her mouth to deliver some grumpy retort. But then she paused. “I’m not sure,” she admitted, looking around the room again. “I feel like I’ve been here for weeks. Months? There were ... nurses, yes. And ... ” She blinked several times, then squinted at me. “You tried to save me, Heather. This very morning. I was playing some watered down version of Battle of Kursk, by myself. And losing! Which would never happen, I would like to note, if anybody ever bothered to play against me. I remember now, but it’s like a dream. Or like it wasn’t quite right, somehow.”

“And before that?” I asked. “Do you recall anything before that?”

“Wonderland,” Evelyn growled. “We were in Wonderland. Carrying out our plan. And then this.”

“That’s about the long and short of it. It was the same with me. I woke up here, in a residential room for patients, this morning.”

“And now we’re in a nightmare asylum, filled with evil nurses and stupid bullshit.” Evelyn snorted a bitter little laugh. “Great. Now, here’s the important question. How do we get out?”

“Um. I don’t think we do.”

Raine finally straightened up. She shot a wink at Evee. “We’re working on breaking down the walls, pussy-cat. Both the physical walls and the walls in the heart, if you know what I mean.”

Evelyn squinted at Raine like she was mad. “Pussy-cat”? Raine, if you call me that again, I will find a way to hit you across the head, even if I have to carve myself a new walking stick from my mother’s fucking bones.” Evelyn gestured weakly with one of her thin and withered arms. “God, this is humiliating! You’re going to have to fetch me that wheelchair, and lift me! I can’t stand up like this!”

“It’s— it’s alright, Evee,” I said, “you don’t have to be embarrassed, or ashamed. It’s not your fault, you—”

“Well I am anyway, Heather!” she snapped back at me.

Raine leaned down and eased in close, so her face was inches from Evelyn’s eyes; she rippled with sudden predatory intent, voice dropping to a husky purr, eyes darken with amusement.

“Want me to pick you up, pussy-cat?” said Raine.

Evelyn scowled at her, put one hand on Raine’s face, and firmly pushed her away; Raine blinked in surprise, eyes peeking out from between Evelyn’s fingers.

Evelyn turned to address me, without letting go of Raine’s face. “Heather, please, what is wrong with her? Why is she acting like a dog in heat?”

“Um,” I said. “She’s never been like this with you, before? Maybe when she was younger?”

Evelyn narrowed her eyes at me. “Not like this, no. Not exactly.”

“Raine doesn’t remember anything from before the dream,” I said. “From before Cygnet. As far as she’s concerned, she and I only met each other today. She has no idea who you are. She remembers nothing. She believes me, she believes that this is all a dream, and about the Eye, and everything else, but she doesn’t actually remember anything herself.”

Evelyn squinted at Raine in disbelief. “And you went along with Heather, with no memories?”

Raine grinned from behind Evelyn’s hand. “Love at first sight. How could I say no to that kind of beauty?”

Evelyn snorted. “You are incredibly lucky that you fell in with me when we were teenagers. The wrong person could have made a monster out of you, at no higher price than a bit of affection. You’re hopeless, Raine. Head empty, no thoughts.”

Raine finally removed Evee’s hand from her face, brimming with curiosity. “So, you and I go way back, pussy-cat? I can see why. You’re all fire and acid, aren’t you? Real spicy. Mmmm-mmmm.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Evelyn snorted. “You’re right, Heather. She did used to be this way, back when we first met. But she was far less coherent in reality. This is like the worst of both periods of her life. Articulate and undomesticated, both at the same time.”

“I think you mean the best of both,” Raine purred back. “It doesn’t get much better than me, Lady Saye.”

“Tch,” Evelyn tutted. “Heather, are the others all the same? All like —” Evee’s face went white, her eyes flew wide, and she clutched at my bloodied hands all of a sudden. “The others! Praem! Where’s Praem?! And Twil! She can’t—”

“It’s okay!” I said quickly. “Everyone is okay! Well, not ‘okay’, but as okay as can be expected. I don’t think anybody has been hurt.”

“And Praem!? Where is Praem?”

“Praem’s here. We’ve seen her.”

I quickly informed Evelyn of everyone else’s current condition. She almost spat in disgust when I told her how Zheng was being treated, then squinted at a total loss, when I told her about Twil’s boarding-school fantasy with her pair of Lilies. She clenched her teeth over Night Praem’s location, and sighed when I finished getting her all caught up.

“And no sign of Sevens? No Maisie, either?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I suspect Sevens might be the ‘Director’ who the Knights mentioned, but I’m not certain.”

Evelyn frowned and screwed her eyes shut. “That isn’t right.”

“Evee?”

“I saw Praem,” she hissed. “I saw Praem, earlier. In the morning? Or another morning, another morning in this place. I don’t remember. Dammit! I won’t leave her to fend for herself!”

“You saw Night Praem? Maybe you were down in the prison, too?”

“No,” Evelyn snapped. She opened her eyes, frowning with exhausted determination. “I saw Praem, not dressed in lace or made of shadow, neither of those. I saw Praem. I remember. Just ... it’s fuzzy. Dammit!” She slapped at one arm of the chair. “I can’t think. I feel like I could drink an Olympic pool and eat a whole herd of horses. Get me out of this thing, please, Heather. Please.”

Raine said: “I got permission to lift you, pussy-cat?”

“Stop calling me that.”

Raine cracked a smile. “How would you like me to address you, then? What do I call you in reality? My lady? Madame? Mistress? You seem like the type.”

Evelyn scowled at her. “Where is this coming from?! You’ve regressed, fine, whatever. When we first met you called me ‘you’ and ‘girl’, not whatever this nonsense is.”

“It comes from the heart, my darkling lady.” Raine’s amusement vanished, like she’d thrown a switch. “Seriously, I can’t explain it with words. It’s not like with Heather. I don’t want to pin you against the wall and finger-bang you stupid like I did with her. Somehow I get the message that’s not your jam. But I want you out of that chair and into a safe place, and I will carry you over my shoulder if it’s the only way. I will carry you across burning coals with bare feet. I don’t care how undignified it is. Nude and shivering, wounded, half-dead — none of those could take away your dignity. In you is embodied something that cannot be removed. It’s incredible, I can see it just looking at you.” Raine smiled a little, rueful and ironic. “I’d say it’s like you’re a princess, but I’m not exactly a fan of monarchs. Maybe it’s something divine, instead, or maybe—”

“Alright, alright!” Evelyn snapped. She was blushing; her malnourished body could muster little more than a pale rose in both cheeks. “Fine. Stop. You can lift me into the chair. And just call me Evee. It’s what you always do. Bloody hell. Last thing we need right

now is Raine with no limits.”

Raine winked and bowed her head to her beloved Evelyn.

I fetched the wheelchair from the far side of the room, crunching across the carpet of broken glass, trying to ignore the twin corpses of Push and Shove, the two nurses Raine had defeated. Raine’s kills had been far from clean, committed with a cast-iron frying pan. Both bodies were sprawled in slowly spreading pools of blood; my reflection shimmered in the crimson as I scurried past.

The wheelchair was solid and heavy, a metal frame with black leather upholstery. I had nowhere to wipe my bloody hands except on my own clothes, so I did the best I could before I grabbed the handles, but I still ended up smearing them with gore. I wheeled the chair across the room, stopped in front of Evee, then picked up the big grey dressing gown off the seat.

Evelyn eyed the contraption with contempt. “Fucking hate these things. You two have to promise me — promise me! — that you won’t leave me behind.” She swallowed as if choking down cold sick. “I don’t think I have the strength to propel myself.”

“Evee, I’d never leave you behind,” I said. “I promise.”

“Carry you if it comes to it,” Raine added.

Lifting Evee was easy enough; doing so without causing her serious pain was almost impossible, even with Raine’s strength and skill and loving care. Evelyn hissed through clenched teeth as Raine hauled her out of the torture chair, clutching at Raine’s shoulders with fingers curled like claws, whining deep down in her throat at the agony of her twisted spine, her fragile bones, and her ruined legs. We worked together to get her wrapped up warm and snug inside her dressing gown, and then Raine set her down in the wheelchair, very gently.

Evee said nothing for several moments, panting softly, blinking tears of pain out of her eyes, hands shaking as she found the armrests. I hovered at her side, wishing I had a way to reduce her discomfort. I would have done anything to soothe her pain.

She was covered in bloody hand prints now, crimson stains smeared all over her white t-shirt and matching white skirt.

Her eyes lingered on the torture chair.

“Evee?” I murmured. “Evee, don’t look at it. None of this is real.”

“When we get home,” she rasped, “I’m going to have a new one built. A replica. So I can burn it. And have the ashes crushed in a press.”

“E-Evee ... Evee, please look away from it. Please.”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. She glanced at me instead. “Not the first time you’ve freed me, Heather.”

“I suppose not,” I said. “I love you, Evee.”

“Mm,” she grunted again. “Yes. Yes, you do. Hmm. Me ... as well. Mm.”

Raine hopped away from us for a moment, past the corpses and the broken glass. She peered through the shattered portal of the two-way window, then walked over to the door which led out into the opposite corridor. She cracked the door open, stuck her head through, then closed it again and hurried back over.

“Coast is clear,” Raine said to me. “No nurses. Empty corridor. We probably can’t get that wheelchair over the broken window, so we’re gonna have to go out the opposite way.”

“Okay, good,” I said. “We can do that. Evee, you— oh!”

Evelyn was staring at her mother’s corpse, face down on the floor in a lake of blood. Crimson had soaked into the clothes and hair, blessing the dead memory with a halo of gore.

“Oh, um!” I made to grab the handles of the wheelchair and turn her away, but then I hesitated; I realised I needed to ask for permission. “Evee, may I touch your chair? Is it alright to move you? I don’t want to—”

“Shhhhhh,” Raine murmured. “Give her a sec, sweet thing. It’s her mum, right?”

I nodded. “Mm.”

Evelyn stared for what felt like minutes, though it was probably less than twenty seconds. Her pain seemed to ebb away, locked up behind the walls of her heart. She stared at her mother’s pitiful corpse with hardening eyes, then almost cracked a smile — but not quite. She caught it at the last moment, then snorted instead.

She turned her attention to her fellow audience.

The Saye Fox was also examining the corpse.

The Fox hadn't moved an inch since Loretta Saye had fallen. She was sitting on her haunches, regarding the banished memory with those fire-light orange eyes, ears lowered, mouth open slightly to show her vulpine teeth.

"She's not real," Evelyn said, voice almost shaking. "She's just a nightmare I used to have."

The Fox looked up. She made eye contact with Eevee.

"And I'm still alive," Evelyn carried on. She swallowed, hard and raw. "And so are you. We have to move on. Come on. I can't ... can't do it alone, you stupid thing."

The Fox stood up and padded over to us. She circled Evelyn's chair once, then sniffed the end of her withered leg. "Yip!"

"Better," Evelyn murmured. Then she frowned. "How the hell did she get in here, anyway? The Fox, I mean. She wasn't with us in Wonderland. Heather?"

"My question exactly," I said. "I can't figure it out. I don't think she was with us, no. She appeared earlier, out in the asylum grounds, and then helped lead the way to you. She knew where you were. She unlocked a door for us, too."

Evelyn frowned harder and harder at the Fox.

"Our Eevee's on to something," Raine purred.

"Perhaps there's a way in and out of this dream," Evelyn murmured. "Perhaps she found it. Hard to keep foxes out of anywhere, you know that? You have to put fences deep into the ground to stop them from digging a way in. Maybe she knows a way."

Raine said: "If she does, she needs to tell us, 'cos we gotta move."

"Ah?" I blinked at Raine. "We do? I mean, of course we do, but do you mean to somewhere specific?"

"That's up to you," Raine said. "What do we do now, sweet thing?"

Evelyn snorted in disbelief. "Sweet thing?" she muttered. "Bloody

hell. Worse than when we were teenagers.”

I boggled at Raine. “Y-you’re asking me?”

“Mmhmm,” Raine purred. She gestured at the wreckage of the ‘Correction’ room. “We need to get out of here, for a start. We got three corpses on the ground and nowhere to put ‘em. The rules up here are different, not like down in the prison, we can’t get away with leaving bodies behind. We’re covered in blood, at the scene of the crime.”

Evelyn snorted in agreement. “Standing around like a trio of farts in the aftermath of a triple murder.”

“Mmhmm,” Raine grunted. “Two out of three of us are now fugitives, me and Evee here. I’d say we need to hide, hole up somewhere safe, steal some grub. But it’s up to you, sweet thing. You’re the only one of us fully awake.”

“I think I’m quite coherent, thank you very much,” said Evelyn.

I bit my bottom lip and cast about the room. Raine had a point. We were right in the middle of a multiple murder scene, all three of us covered in blood like we’d stepped off the set of a comedy slasher movie. “I don’t know,” I said. “We need to keep freeing the others, especially Zheng and Twil. If we can get either of them, the nurses wouldn’t stand a chance, even if they had guns or other weapons. But Lozzie’s riot might have—”

“Lozzie’s what?” Evelyn blurted out. “Excuse me?”

“Lozzers done caused a riot,” Raine said, with an approving smirk. “To give us cover, so we could get in here and save you, Lady Saye.”

Evelyn shook her head in disbelief. “That girl is a miracle sometimes, I swear.”

Raine purred deep in her throat. “Damn right. I think she had the right idea, too. A prison riot, a real one. Break the walls, take some hostages, throw a party on the roof. But I think she lit the fuse too early, or with too small a payload. If we could cause a big enough riot, with enough girls, and just a pinch of proper organisation, we could tear this place apart, body and soul.”

My heart sang in chorus with Raine’s words; on a gut-deep level I knew she was correct. A riot. A revolution. If only we could all

work together.

“Alright,” I said, mouth going dry. “But first we need to regroup with Lizzie. Twil and her friends might be more receptive now, after that riot, if we can find them. And Zheng! We have to get some food to Zheng, we—”

Knock knock knock!

Knuckles rapped against the door which led out into the hallway, the hallway Raine had checked only moments earlier.

We all froze. Evelyn gripped the armrests of her wheelchair. The Fox went stiff, tail bristling, eyes fixed on the door. Raine pressed a finger to her lips, for silence.

A voice called through the door, bright and cheery and all too familiar; I cringed with recognition.

“Hello in there!” the voice said. “I’m sorry to interrupt a session, but we’ve got a bit of an incident unfolding in the main area of the hospital. We’re just checking on everybody. Two staff members in there haven’t answered their pagers.” The voice paused, then: “Hello?”

Raine clenched her teeth and drew her little plastic knife. I clutched my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders.

The voice called through the door again: “I know corrections are not meant to be interrupted, but these are exceptional circumstances! I’m going to need an answer, or we’re going to come inside! Hello, is anybody present?”

I shrugged, completely lost. Evelyn looked like she wanted to vomit with anxiety. The Fox bared her teeth.

Raine cleared her throat, opened her mouth, and spoke in the most absurdly fruity French accent I’d ever heard: “We are currently occupied, yes!”

Worth a shot, I supposed.

The door slammed open with a bang, smashing into the white-washed wall.

A squad of nurses poured in through the door, crunching across the gravel of broken glass, stepping right over the corpses; four, then six, then a dozen, all of them heavysset and well-muscled beneath

their white uniforms. All the nurses were armed with equipment from the riot-control in the entrance hall — man-catcher poles, lengths of rope, and plastic wrist-cuffs. They wore padded helmets and masks like imitation armour, protecting their necks and faces and heads. Two of them carried thin, arm-length metal truncheons with blunts points at the end: cattle prods. The nursing staff were more willing to use unsavoury methods of control, when sheltered deep with the walls of Cygnet Asylum.

The nurses stopped in a semi-circle, blocking the door, barring our exit. Their name tags all said the same thing: AN.END.

Raine glanced at me, then nodded at the broken two-way mirror back into the tiny observation room. I turned, ready to scramble over the shattered edges of razor-sharp glass, willing to do anything to escape.

But it was too late; a second squad of nurses tumbled into the observation room, packing themselves in shoulder-to-shoulder to deny our retreat. It would have been hopeless anyway. How could we have hauled Evelyn over that broken glass without wounding her?

Raine twisted back to the wall of nurses, clutching her little plastic knife; her frying pan was out of reach now, behind our opponents. I bared my teeth and raised my fists, feeling ridiculous. What could I do against a dozen heavily armed people? They would pin me to the wall with those poles and put cuffs around my wrists before I could so much as punch one of them in the face.

All the rage I'd felt toward the memory of Evelyn's mother was gone now. That righteous anger had been personal, emotional, and raw.

Against the bland violence of institutional control, it meant less than nothing.

Evelyn whispered under her breath. A rapid string of Latin poured forth from her lips.

Magic!

That's what Raine and I could do, now Evelyn was free. We could buy time.

Horror stepped into the room — A.HORROR, the nurse, the first

nurse I'd seen in this unkind dream. Still young and blonde and comfortably plump, still dressed in that clean white uniform. She wasn't armed like the other nurses. Instead she carried a shiny black walkie-talkie in one hand, and wore a sad frown on her face.

She spotted the three of us and sighed, then squinted at the fox in curious incomprehension. She closed the door behind her, shutting us all in with the heavily armed nurses; I wasn't sure why, but that small fact made me suddenly and acutely more afraid about what they were about to do to us.

Horror spoke quickly into her walkie-talkie. "Correction room thirteen, east wing, three patients. Also a wild animal inside the building. Call grounds-keeping, get them to bring a snare and a plastic bag. Over."

The walkie-talkie crackled: "Backup? Over."

Horror said, "No, we have it under control. I know these three. Over and out."

"Out," said the walkie-talkie.

Horror lowered the handset, sighed a heavy and unimpressed sigh, then stepped forward, just beyond the protection of her nursing muscle.

Down at my side, Evelyn's flow of Latin cut off. "Fuck!" she hissed, then started again. Had she fumbled? Had Horror done something to her?

Horror made eye contact with me, then with Raine, then with Eevee. She ignored the Fox completely, glancing around the room, letting her gaze linger on each of the three corpses, then on the broken window.

"Well," she said eventually. "I don't know what you three girls have to say for yourselves. I really don't. I don't even want to hear it. I ___"

"Heyyyy there, you mommy-coded slampig," Raine purred in a voice that would have collapsed my knees if she'd used it on me. "How's about you let us walk out of here? Forget about the whole thing. Let us go, and maybe I'll come visit you after-hours with a ball gag and a strap the size of my arm. Promise I'll make you squeal harder than you ever have before."

I blinked several times and frowned at Raine, successfully distracted from the peril of our situation for a second. Evelyn's string of Latin halted briefly with a splutter. Even the Fox let out a little 'yerp?'

Horror was not impressed. Nor did she blush, or trip over her words. She regarded Raine with cold inevitability.

"I'll skip the after-hours visit, thank you," she said, "but you're right about one thing. This little scene you've made here is going to have to be swept under the rug. Do you have any idea how much work that will be? How much backbreaking, painstaking, difficult, stressful, work that will entail?" She sighed again, put her hands on her hips, and shook her head. "All this is going to have to be cleaned up."

I said: "I'm sorry? What do you mean, we're right about one thing?"

Horror made eye contact with me again. "And you should really know better, Heather. You're a clever girl. A good girl, usually. Well read, smart, bright. You have a future ahead of you, once you're better. I don't know what's gotten into you today, or where it started, but it stops, right here. You should know that Cygnet can't deal with a scandal like this. Think of all the patients who would be left without anywhere to go, if we had to disclose what had happened here today. The disturbance in the entrance hall, that's one thing, that's regrettable. But this?" Horror shook her head. "It will be as if this never happened."

"Fuckin' typical," Raine hissed through clenched teeth. "Can't even get noticed if you do a spot of murder, these days. What is the world coming to?"

Evelyn's Latin muttering cut off again. She swallowed hard.

"Evee?" I hissed.

Her eyes were wild with panic. She shook her head sharply. "No magic. No magic! Heather, it's not working!"

All hope fled my heart.

Horror said: "The three of you are going in isolation while we clean up. No ifs, no buts, no appeals. We'll figure out what to do with you eventually, after you've spent a few days cooling your heads. But nobody is going to know this happened, least of all the other patients. Your little mess will result in nothing. Let that be a lesson

to you. Don't do it again." She smirked. "Not that we're going to give you the chance."

Raine said, "You ain't built no cell that can hold me." She raised her white plastic knife and spun it over the back of her hand. "I can put half a dozen of you out with nothing but this bit of plastic. You wanna risk that? You wanna try me?"

Horror sighed, then held out a hand — to me. "Heather. Heather, come here, please."

"What?" I said. "Sorry?"

"You don't belong with these two. Raine is a known danger, and Evelyn is highly delusional. You have your problems, you're a very unwell young woman, but you've got a sensible heart. You don't have to get hurt if you come in peacefully. Come on, come away from those two." She gestured with her fingers.

"N-no," I said. "No, I won't abandon my friends. No, never."

Horror sighed. "Your sister is waiting for you."

The bottom dropped out of my stomach.

For just a second, I almost stepped forward. The promise of Maisie outweighed everything else, every loyalty and every love. A week or two in isolation, and then my sister would be returned to me? Why not take the deal? I could always break Raine and Eeve out a second time, couldn't I?

But I knew it was a lie.

"Actually," I said, "I think I'm fine with Raine, and with Eeve, thank you very much. You can ... " I swallowed, braced myself, and broke out in hot sweat before I even said the words, but I did say them. "You can fuck off and die."

Raine grinned wide. Evelyn huffed out an unimpressed sigh, shaking with adrenaline. The Fox padded in front of me, bristling and growling.

Horror took a step back, behind the wall of nurses. "I really didn't want to have to do this the hard way, but we're running out of time. Alright," she raised her voice. "Try not to injure them. Especially Heather, she's basically innocent, and—"

Raine glanced at me. "We need a miracle, sweet thing", she said

quickly. “What you got up your sleeves?”

“I ... I don’t have anything!”

“—make sure not to let Raine up before she’s bound and gagged. Use the metal restraints on her, not the plastic. Tip—”

“Heather!” Evelyn shouted. “Hyperdimensional mathematics!”

“It doesn’t work right now!” I wailed.

“—Evelyn out of her wheelchair and get her on a stretcher, it’ll make her easier to control—”

The semi-circle of armed nurses stepped toward us. My heart leapt into my throat. I need a nuclear option, something I would never dream of doing under any other circumstances, something too risky, too dangerous, too daring. I would do anything to get my friends out of that room. To break for freedom.

But what did I have left?

“Hastur!” I shouted.

Evelyn yelped, “Heather, you can’t be serious!”

“Raine!” I said quickly. “Grab Evee’s wheelchair and be ready to move. I have no idea what this is going to do!” Then, again: “Hastur! That’s two!”

The line of nurses levelled their man-catcher poles, ready to box us in against the back wall and pin us to the plaster. Raine did exactly as I asked without question or hesitation; she grabbed the handles of Evelyn’s wheelchair and braced as if to break into a sprint.

Behind the wall of nurses, Horror frowned at me with pitiful curiosity, as if I was just another mad girl lost in magical thinking.

“Hastur!” I repeated. And that made three.

Nothing happened. No electrical charge passed through the air. No yellow goo bubbled up from the floor. No rescue arrived from beyond the dream.

The nurses stepped closer. The pair with cattle prods eased forward, weapons extended. I stumbled in retreat. Raine pulled Evee’s wheelchair backward by a few inches.

Raine said: “Heather, what’s meant to happen?”

Evee snapped, “It hasn’t bloody worked! He’s not coming, Heather! You said it yourself, we’re in a dream!”

Horror raised her voice: “Be gentle with them. Remember, everybody, we are dealing with mentally ill young women here. It’s not their fault. Be gentle, if you can—”

Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock — knock-knock!

A second round of knocking sounded against the chamber door.

The nurses stopped, surprised to be so interrupted. Horror frowned in utter incomprehension, turning to the door. She raised her walkie-talkie to her mouth and said: “No backup. We have the situation under control. Don’t—”

The door eased open on creaking hinges.

Dim light silhouetted a figure, outlined by the door frame, his front bathed in shadow. A man, tall and gangly.

Time was suspended for but a moment. He — with his face deep in shadow and darkness — appeared to tower over the room, as if we were all looking upward toward a higher stage of reality.

Then he stepped over the threshold, and into the play.

Thin blonde hair was raked sideways across a knobbly skull, a comb-over so obvious that it seemed to dare the observer into commenting upon the vast pale bald pate in the middle of the man’s head. Beneath this sink-hole of hair was an attempt at a face, narrow and gaunt, with a sunken chin, bulging eyes, and skin the colour of tainted wallpaper paste. The whites of his protuberant eyes were dyed the colour of fresh urine, as if he was falling into the final stages of liver failure.

He wore a suit the colour of rotten mustard, complete with a matching tie and a pair of trousers slightly too short for his long, thin legs. Socks dyed like polluted sand poked out from shiny shoes made of peeling black leather, revealing an under-layer the colour of aged banana peels.

Bent at the waist like his hips were a hinge, with his hands tucked behind the small of his back, he stalked into the room, turning bulging, bug-like eyes upon all available angles.

He did not look impressed. His mouth was the shape of an upside

down U.

He walked right past Horror while staring straight at her, then through the wall of nurses. He ignored us and the Fox completely as he made a full circuit of the correction room. He stared at the walls, the skirting boards, the corners of the ceiling. He examined the torture chair, bending even more at the waist until his body was a full ninety-degree angle. He peered at the three corpses, and paused to look at many of the shards of glass on the floor. He even stared at the nurses, examining them as if they were fixtures or furniture.

Nobody else moved. Raine and I shared a glance. Raine raised her eyebrows. I shrugged, unsure exactly what I had summoned.

If this truly was the King in Yellow, my father-in-law to be, then I had no idea what power he held here, if any. Or what game he was playing.

‘Be ready,’ I mouthed to Raine.

She nodded, hands tight on the handles of Evee’s wheelchair. Evelyn just stared, frozen with shock.

Eventually, Horror recovered her composure. “Excuse me, sir!” she said. “But you can’t come in here. This isn’t a public area of the hospital. I’m afraid we’re going to have to escort you out. If you’ll come with me, please?”

The Yellow-Suited Apparition straightened up and looked Horror right in the eyes.

“Quite!” he said, in a voice so high-strung I was surprised his vocal chords did not explode. His whole head vibrated when he spoke.

Horror hesitated. “Then if you’ll—”

“Not a public area,” he echoed. He made ‘area’ sounds like ‘aarr-reah!’ He went on: “But I think you will find that I am not a member of the public. Not at all. Not in the slightest. Not even from a very distant position. I am an inspector, you see. A government inspector, with the Ministry of the Mind.”

Horror blinked. Several of the burly nurses hesitated as well, putting up their weapons or glancing at each other.

“Excuse me?” said Horror. “The Ministry of what?”

“The Ministry of the Mind!” repeated the Bureaucrat in Boiling

Butter.

"I'm ... I'm afraid I've never heard of your ministry before," Horror said slowly. "I'm going to have to see some credentials, please?"

The Functionary in Failing Flax stuck a hand into the breast of his suit jacket, arm pistoning like a flailing mantis. He extracted a thick wallet — in pale yellow leather, of course. He handed it to Horror, then kept talking.

"I am afraid this facility is not up to snuff!" he said. "I am inspecting your hallways and your rooms, your corners and your cubbyholes. And what should I find? What should I find here, but broken glass all over the floor? A tripping hazard. This is a class seven infraction of habitual and usual and customary standards, under subjection bee-seven-eight submarine citation one-two-three, line twenty five kangaroo epsilon."

I realised with a kind of terror I'd never felt before that The King in Yellow was improvising as fast as he could — and he was not getting very far. This was not his domain, his area of expertise, or his kind of narrative. He was scrambling to do whatever he could.

Horror juggled the walkie-talkie and the wallet in both hands, trying to open the latter without dropping the former.

"Well," she said, huffing and puffing, "we're having a bit of a patient incident at the moment. If you would see to a meeting with my superiors, I'm sure they would be happy to—"

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Oh, no no no. No, no. Negative. I prefer the direct approach. The Ministry encourages it! Nay, demands that inspections are carried out at ground level. Now!" He indicated the room with a sweep of one arm, indicating us, me and Raine and Evee and the Fox. "Would you explain to me why these three young ladies and one older lady are walking around without their legally mandated hats and jodhpurs and without even a semblance of a joinking stick between them?"

Horror got the wallet open, but then she looked up at the King in utter confusion before she had a chance to examine his 'credentials'. "Excuse me, what?" she said, squinting. "Their— their what, sorry?"

Raine nudged me in the side, and hissed: "We gotta go! He's not giving us an opening!"

I mouthed back: "Give him a sec! We can't break past the nurses."

"Oh, no no no!" the Corn-Coloured Civil Servant repeated. "This won't do, this just—" Horror's eyes flicked back to the wallet again, as if trying to read the credentials at last. The King raised his voice: "It won't do, madam, it simply will not!"

Horror tutted and huffed. "Sir, if you could just give me a moment, we are dealing with a patient situation and—"

"Tell me," he said. His voice rang like a dozen broken violins. The air filled with the chemical tang of ozone and chlorine.

"Tell you what?" Horror said.

The Officer in Ochre bent at the waist again, bending toward Horror. Suddenly he seemed to make another ninety-degree angle with his body, but also tower over her at the same time, like he was looking down at a terrified human being, pinned beneath his gaze. Yellow-lit eyes, wide as oceans, bathed her face in stinking sulphuric light.

The hands he kept behind his back flickered once, gesturing toward the door with his long, moist fingers. A signal, for us. For me.

He said to Horror, his voice a jerking screech: "Have you seen the yellow sign?"

The squad of nurses exploded.

Yellow slime burst from beneath clothing and erupted from between the cracks of their padded armour, splattering against the walls and ceiling, gushing across the floor and mixing with the blood. The slop moved as if alive, slapping against the walls like tentacles of pearlescent flesh, shaking inside the bodies of the nurses, turning their weapons upon each other with jerking, stop-motion limbs.

Horror screamed, clutching her head, eyes clamped shut.

The Minister in Molten Gold seemed to tower over it all, a rocky outcrop in a churning sea of rotten urine and jaundiced pus.

"Now!" I shouted.

Raine and I plunged forward, crunching across shards of glass, feet splashing through the puddles of blood. Evelyn gripped the arms of her wheelchair as Raine pushed her ahead. The Fox leapt past my

heels, racing for the door on quick little paws.

The yellow madness parted before us, as if it was never there.

We slammed out into the corridor; Raine turned Evelyn's wheelchair to catch her momentum, so Evee didn't go flying. Behind us, the room was a screaming, churning vortex of blood and bile, yellow foam like sulphur whirling in a torrent against the walls. The door banged shut, then yawned open, over and over again, like a shutter caught in a storm, showing us the interior of the correction room like the flickering stills of a silent movie.

Horror staggered and lurched amid the bloody froth. The King in Yellow towered over her, deep in his temporary mask.

And then Horror straightened up, reached out, and put a fist straight through the King's chest.

He reeled backward, suit coming apart like yellow tissue paper, skin flying from bones like a cloud of butterflies scattering into the air.

"Where now?" Raine shouted. "Heather, we gotta go!"

"... just run!" I said, turning away from my strange and alien father-in-law to-be. "Anywhere, just go! Anywhere we can hide!"

bedlam boundary – 24.11

“What if Raine doesn’t come back?”

Evelyn’s voice quivered as she asked the question; a tiny whisper in the echoing dark.

I looked up from the thin strip of direct moonlight glittering on the tiled floor. Evelyn’s face was deep in shadow, far from the silvery illumination. Her eyes formed dark pits of exhaustion, as if the flesh was on the verge of collapse. She had not bothered to look at me, hunched in her wheelchair, arms folded across the narrow cage of her chest, staring at the bank of lockers on our left.

“Evee?” I whispered her name — then winced as the echoes danced down the length of the room, reflected from bare tiles and undressed metal. “Evee? What do you mean, what if Raine doesn’t come back? Of course she’s coming back. She promised me. She promised you.”

Evelyn snorted, a weak puff of breath from her nose. Her voice croaked from the shadows pooled upon her face.

“Promises are words,” she said. “Raine could so very easily get distracted by some other girl in dire need. Or get caught by the nurses, fooled by her own bravado. Her reach exceeds her grasp. She’s not immune to tasers and cuffs, you know. She’s not a zombie or a superhero. She’s barely even human, sometimes.”

“Evee, where is this coming from?” I cleared my throat and tried not to wince again — the echoes were awful. Evelyn and I had been sitting in silence for ages because of that, but now there was no choice but to talk.

“It would be just her style,” Evelyn grunted. “Promise the world, then fuck off and get herself killed.”

I shifted down the wooden bench — narrow, hard, uncomfortable on my aching backside — closer to Evelyn’s wheelchair, almost close enough to touch the Saye Fox, who was curled up at the very end.

“Evee,” I repeated her name, speaking almost at full volume. “I have faith in Raine. She made a promise. She’s coming back.”

Evelyn snorted again, then shook her head. She started to speak, but her stomach interrupted her with an audible gurgle.

“You’re grumpy because you’re hungry,” I said gently. “Just hold on until Raine gets back.”

“Yes, of course I’m getting hangry,” Evelyn hissed. “But it’s a legitimate question all the same. What if Raine doesn’t come back?”

Two hours after our escape — two hours after our rout before a squad of armed nurses, after our near-miraculous salvation at the hands of the King in Yellow, after a headlong flight down grimy hospital corridors and up staff-access stairways and along the twisty little dream-passages of Cygnet Hospital — Evelyn and I were camped out in a locker room, somewhere on the second floor, in the dark.

Moonlight shone through a single window high up on one wall, long and thin and fringed with pale lichen. The source of the moonlight was a mystery — the sky was still as false as ever, a wrinkled black firmament of Eyelid skin from horizon to horizon. The light itself was real enough, glittering in a narrow ribbon upon the wooden slats of the bench, dusting the dull orange floor tiles with silvery grace, leaving the twin rows of lockers plunged into deep gloom on either side, towering titans of steel-clad shadow. The air smelled of ancient sweat and stagnant water.

Evelyn and I were tucked in deep, sheltering in the narrow corridor between two banks of lockers, the second to last before the wall.

The room was longer than it was wide, with most of the far end taken up by a dozen parallel rows of metal lockers, creating a series of aisles between the looming steel walls. Each pair of locker rows came with a long, narrow, hard bench down the middle. Evelyn and I could not been seen from the single door into the room, nor could we see the cluster of shower stalls on the far side of the echoey space, nor the empty wire-frame baskets, which I assumed were for soiled sports gear or other clothes.

The locker room was an absurdity, of course; the real Cygnet Hospital had nothing so anachronistic. Patients had never been expected to shower or bathe in groups, let alone take off all their

clothes in front of each other. Showers had been individual, separate, private. This place was pulled straight from somebody's uncomfortable memories of school changing rooms.

Not mine. Twil's, perhaps?

Evee and I had to be quiet. We didn't know how far our voices might carry beyond the door. We didn't dare switch on strip-lights affixed to the ceiling, for fear that a mysterious fire in the dark might attract unwanted attention.

We were hiding, without much to do except twiddle our thumbs.

Evelyn had not been taking it well; she had actually lapsed into silence first, shoulders pulled tight beneath her big grey dressing gown, her body so thin and worn out in the over-large support of her wheelchair.

My nerves were not faring much better, though I was probably doing a better job of hiding that fact. The locker room was big and echoey and chilly. One of the longer walls boasted a trio of big iron radiators in mushy-pea green, paint flaking with age, pipes occasionally ticking and tapping in the dark; but they were all cold to the touch, and did not respond when I twisted the valves. All I had was my yellow blanket, pulled tight around my shoulders, but the chill was seeping in at my extremities.

Raine had warned me that might happen. It was the wound.

My left shin throbbed with a growing ache, where I'd cut it when I'd clambered over the broken two-way mirror to rescue Evelyn. Earlier, flush with adrenaline and desperate with need, I'd barely felt the gash in my flesh. But now, given time, the pain had set in. Raine had done her best, washing my wound under one of the shower heads — I'd almost screamed, biting a mouthful of yellow blanket to muffle myself. Then she'd wrapped the wound in a makeshift bandage, made from a pair of scratchy institutional pajama bottoms which we'd stolen during our journey.

The makeshift dressing was holding up well. The fabric was stained red, but far from soaked through.

But the pain was a constant pounding against my flesh and my mind. Thinking was becoming difficult. Focusing made me irritable. Speaking was extra effort. The hunger and exhaustion did not help, either.

Still, hiding in pain was better than getting caught.

We'd stumbled upon the abandoned locker room after about an hour of cat-and-mouse through the corridors and hallways of Cygnet Hospital. Raine had taken the lead, keeping us one step ahead of the nurses. She'd also taken responsibility for handling Evelyn's wheelchair, though on several occasions she had handed Eevee off to me, whenever she had needed to creep ahead or prepare for a possible fight.

Luckily that had never happened; we'd managed to go the entire hour without once blundering into a patrol of armed Cygnet staff or getting ourselves spotted by a sentry.

We were not the only patients causing an uproar, after all; by the time we had burst from the foreboding 'corrections' area and plunged back into the regular corridors of the hospital, the remnants of the riot had spread out all over Cygnet Asylum. As we had fled, we'd overheard the aftermath of a dozen little confrontations — girls fighting the nurses, hurling objects and curse words alike, backed into corners and dead-end rooms, howling their defiance at the implacable advance of the institution itself. Once or twice I swore I'd heard Lozzie herself, cackling or giggling, whooping encouragement to her 'troops; but always she was there then gone again, any hint of her vanishing back into the widening gyre.

I had longed to stop and help every one of those scattered last stands.

But we couldn't. We — Raine and I and arguably the Fox too — had a responsibility. We had to get Eevee to safety. We had to find somewhere to hide and regroup, so we could rekindle the hope of freeing Zheng and Twil, so we might gain an upper hand.

And what could we do to help, even if we tried? Raine was still basically unarmed except for that little plastic knife. I had nothing but my fists, and they did not work like magic on anybody except Loretta Saye; besides, by then I was limping from the pain in my left shin, struggling to scurry around each successive corner. Evelyn's magic did not work either, she was barred from the most fruitful of her skills. The Saye Fox had wonderfully sharp teeth in that vulpine jaw, of course, but in the end she was very small and quite vulnerable. We could not ask that of her.

The locker room served our purposes perfectly; we could hide in the back without being seen from the door. Initially the room had just been another temporary stop on our 'sneaking mission' — Raine's phrase, which made Eevee roll her eyes.

But as we had waited, the sounds of distant commotion had finally faded away. Lozzie's riot had been broken, scattered, and defeated in detail.

Raine had taken the opportunity to get us organised. She'd found an old sports drink bottle in one of the lockers and filled it with cold water from the showers, so we could all drink our fill. She'd dressed my wound, then used the remaining strips of clean cloth to bind Evelyn's maimed hand, to spare her the further indignity of leaking pinkish blood plasma on anything she touched. We'd done the best to clean the worst of the blood off ourselves, with a wash-cloth wetted under the shower heads, but there was only so much we could achieve. Evelyn had borrowed my black marker pen and started scrawling magic circles on the nearest of the lockers — but nothing worked.

The Saye Fox had padded up and down the room a few times, then curled up on the end of the bench, and seemingly fallen asleep.

And the sky — the false light of this dream-world — had turned ruddy with an onrushing twilight.

That made no sense. I'd eaten breakfast maybe four or five hours earlier; it could not have been much past three o'clock in the afternoon.

But nobody noticed. Raine didn't react to sunset, not at all. She treated it like it was natural, like night was meant to be falling already. Evelyn had barely responded either, which confused me. Hadn't I woken her by killing the dream of her mother?

Was I the only one who noticed that time was going wrong?

As dusk had deepened, Raine had proposed that she venture out alone to fetch food and find herself a real weapon. We could not all go together; swift and stealthy sneaking was not possible with Evelyn's wheelchair along, and somebody needed to stay with Eevee, since she was near-helpless by herself. We agreed on several rendezvous points out in the hospital grounds, in case Eevee and I had to move. I did not like saying goodbye to Raine, not even for a

few minutes. But she promised me, she promised Eevee, and kissed both of us — me on the lips, and Eevee on the forehead.

She would be back soon. She would never abandon us.

Within minutes of Raine's departure, full night had fallen like a blanket unfurled across the false sky. Evelyn and I sat alone together, deep in silvery moonlight, with a sleeping fox on the end of the bench.

Raine had been gone for perhaps about half an hour when Evelyn voiced her pessimistic question. The pain in my leg was making it hard to keep track.

"Eevee," I hissed her name, then raised my voice to normal speaking volume. "Eevee, please look at me."

Evelyn finally raised her eyes, glowering at me from within deep pits of shadowy exhaustion. "You do know you sound exactly like her, yes?"

I blinked. "I'm sorry? Pardon? Like who?"

Evelyn snorted again. "You don't even notice it? Who do you think I'm talking about? You sound like Raine. You've even picked up some of her speech patterns. I didn't know linguistic habits could be transmitted via sexual osmosis."

I let out an indulgent little sigh. "And sometimes I sound like you, Eevee. Because you're one of the most important people in my life, and I like the way you speak. I don't think 'sexual osmosis' can account for that."

Evelyn rolled her eyes and looked away, suitably embarrassed. She stared at the strip of silvery moonlight on the floor. "Well," she grunted. "Well, that's the last thing I'd want for you. Sounding like me. Bloody hell."

"There's no need to be so self-deprecating, Eevee."

"Ha!" she spat. "For you, maybe."

"Eevee, please look at me."

Evelyn glanced at me again, a touch less hostile now, but even more exasperated. "Alright, Heather. I'm looking. Say your piece."

"Raine is coming back," I repeated. "She's going to come back with

food, and supplies, and hopefully even a fresh change of clothes. She's probably going to be armed, too, though I don't know with what. She's safe, she's skilled, she knows what she's doing. If anybody is capable of sneaking around this hospital in the aftermath of a riot, it's Raine. She is coming back."

Evelyn said nothing for a long moment, staring at me in thought, then snapped: "She's been nearly an hour, Heather. What do we do if—"

"Raine is coming back."

"I think it's a reasonable question," Evelyn said. "What to do if—"

"Raine. Is. Coming. Back!"

Evelyn flinched, blinking several times.

The Saye Fox raised her head, saw that the two humans were merely bickering, and then back curled up, returning to her nap.

"Sorry," I said.

Evelyn cleared her throat, hesitating over her words. "You've never spoken to me like that before, Heather. I'm ... I've ... I made you ... angry."

"I'm sorry, Eevee," I said, then sighed. "I love you, and I know you have legitimate concerns. But I need you to have faith, I need you to share my faith in Raine, right now. I need you to believe with me."

"Because this is a dream? Clap your hands and believe? You think that's how this place works?"

I shook my head. "No. Well, yes, actually, that too. I think that might have something to do with how this dream functions. So, yes, I think actively believing might help Raine get back to us safely. But that's not why I need you to believe." I swallowed and found my throat was dry. My hands were shaking. I had to clutch them together in my lap. "Eevee ... Eevee, I'm terrified. I woke up alone this morning, in a recreation of the hospital I hated when I was little. The place where they made me pretend Maisie never existed. And I stayed alone, again and again and again, after talking to you, to Twil, to Zheng, to Lozzie. Everyone! The Knights, the Caterpillars. Until Raine. And then when I found Raine, I wasn't alone. And now she's not here and we're in the dark — literally —

and I have all the responsibility and I am trying very very hard not to freak out.”

Evelyn held my gaze in silence for a long moment, her face deep in the moonlight shadows, dusted with the echo of distant silver.

Then she unfolded her arms, reached out with one hand — her maimed, bandaged hand — and touched the back of my palm. Slow and awkward, she said: “Alright, Heather. Alright. I ... I get it. I ... mm. Okay. Raine’s coming back.”

I nodded, swallowed, and took a deep and cleansing breath. Suddenly I felt terribly embarrassed, and gently took Evelyn’s hand in mine. She couldn’t feel my skin through her bandages, but I hoped she could feel the gentle pressure of my touch.

“I’m sorry, Eevee. I’m really sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. And I didn’t mean to imply that ... that ... um—”

“That I’m useless right now?” Evelyn finished for me.

“No! No, Eevee, you’re not—”

“Yes I am.” She snorted, gesturing at the inert magic circles scrawled on the front of the nearby lockers. “I can’t do anything but run my mouth and complain, whining when I should be quiet. I’m a fucking cripple in a wheelchair right now, Heather.”

“Don’t— Eevee, don’t use that word for yourself!”

“What word?” She almost sneered. “Cripple? Crip? Lane? One-legged? I’ll call myself whatever I like, thank you very much.”

“I ... o-okay. Okay.” I averted my eyes, with no idea what to say. “I don’t have any right to tell you otherwise. That’s fair.”

A moment of deeply uncomfortable silence passed between us. I stared at the way the fake moonlight dusted the floor tiles. The scent of old chlorine and sweat-stained clothes lingered in the air. The Saye Fox made sleepy little breathing sounds as she napped. At least one of us was relaxed and calm.

Evelyn swallowed, loudly. “Sorry.”

My eyes went wide. Evelyn Saye did not apologise easily. “Eevee?”

She was staring into her own lap. “I’m sorry, Heather. I’m taking this out on you. I ... ”

I waited. Evelyn had the right to say anything she wanted, especially as she'd apologised.

Eventually she lifted her other hand — thin and bony, her muscles wasted, her skin sallow and pale, like something which had been locked in the dark for months — and let it flop into her lap.

"I can't deal with this," she murmured. Her breath hitched in her throat.

"Deal with what?"

Evelyn wet her lips with a flicker of her tongue. She shifted her shoulders, kinked and uneven beneath her grey dressing gown. She couldn't even sit straight, her spine was so lopsided with chronic pain and slow damage.

"I used to have nightmares about this," she said quietly. "For years after Raine and I killed my mother. Has she ... " Evelyn's eyes slid sideways, approaching mine without making contact. "Has Raine never told you about that?"

I shook my head. "She may have referred to that in passing, but no, not in any kind of detail."

Evelyn nodded. Her throat bobbed, throat dry and scratchy. "I used to have nightmares that my mother was still alive. Or that she'd come back from the dead. Or that I'd never met Raine, that she'd never climbed over the garden wall and snuck into my bedroom. And I would be back in that chair. Or ... or somewhere worse. Tied to a table ready to have another limb hacked off. Things like that."

Eve trailed off. I squeezed her hand, very gently. "Evee."

"But that's not the worst part." She finally turned her eyes to look right at me. Haunted pits, fringed with the whites of her sclerae. "I still have nightmares. About this." She plucked at the fabric of her white t-shirt, lifting it away from her malnourished body, the concave pit of her stomach, her protuberant ribcage. "Even over the last year, living with you and Raine, with Praem. After everything, all the ways my life has gotten better, I still have nightmares where I'm wasting away to nothing. Rotting. Skin and bones. Nightmares where she's in control again, where she's shaping me for her purposes. Where I don't belong to myself."

Her voice shook so badly, punctuated by little panting breaths. Her

eyes were bulging. Sweat broke out on her forehead.

“Evee, it’s all a dream, I promise it’s a dream, I promise it isn’t real.”

“It feels real,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “I want my body back. Mine. The one I worked for, the one I took from her! It’s mine! Not hers!”

“I’m going to free us,” I said, struggling to keep my own voice level. “I promise. Whatever did this, however this works, I am going to put an end to this. I promise you.”

Evelyn swallowed again, rough and raw, as if trying to control herself. She heaved a sigh, then sagged into the embrace of her wheelchair. Her rage was spent, her energy along with it.

I simply held her hand for a while, trying to ignore my own anxiety, trying not to feel the dark pressing against my back, between my shoulder blades.

Beyond our little hidey-hole, Cygnet Asylum was totally quiet. No tell-tale shouts and screams echoed down the corridors, not like the distant noises of the previous night, when I had woken alone in my residential room. The aftermath of the riot somehow sharpened the silence.

Eventually I said: “Evee, will you help me figure out what’s going on here?”

Evelyn looked up again, squinting — though with professional curiosity now, not inner torment. Her stomach let out a gurgle of hunger. “You mean with this dream? This whole bloody place?”

“Yes. Before this all started, before I woke up in bed, I think I did something, with brain-math. Or the Eye did something. Or we ... cancelled each other out. It’s hard to explain.”

I did the best I could to explain my fragmented, metaphorical memories of the moment the Eye had attempted to squeeze itself shut and stop observing us, stop observing Wonderland, or stop observing itself. I could barely put it into words; the images were not images, but simply impressions of the vaguest kind, drawn from the raw mathematics and metaphysical movements of reality. I told Evee about holding the waters asunder, about Sevens stepping in to weave meaning into madness, and about forcing the Eye wide with

a spear of thought.

When I finished, I lapsed back into the uselessness of speculation: “I’ve been thinking about it all day. Or rather, all however long this has actually been. Lozzie isn’t fully lucid, not like you, so she couldn’t help with any insight, even though she’s had more experience with dreams. I don’t know what’s going on here, on the metaphysical level.”

Evelyn snorted. “The metaphysics? Heather, your guess is as good as mine. I’m a mage, which means I know how to draw the special shapes to make people’s heads explode. I haven’t the foggiest what is going on here. We may as well be plugged into a big virtual reality machine, as far as I’m concerned. Die in the game and you die in real life, and all that. Stupid trope. Always hated that one. Lazy bullshit.”

“Well,” I said, “maybe I want to hear your guess. Maybe your guess is valuable to me. Maybe I’m all guessed out and need other guesses, because I can’t think of anything else. Or maybe your guess will be ever so slightly more informed than mine. Please, Evee. I trust you. I want your judgement. It’ll help me. You’ll help me.”

Evelyn averted her eyes and cleared her throat; she must have known exactly what I was doing, because I wasn’t exactly being subtle about my technique. I really did want her guess, her input, whatever she had to offer. But I also wanted to make her feel useful.

She ran her tongue over her teeth and sighed through her nose, then said: “I think you’re right to call it a ‘dream’, whatever exactly that means in a metaphysical sense.”

“And why’s that?” I asked.

Evelyn gestured at the inert magic circles on the locker — collections of meaningless black lines and snatches of Latin. “These don’t work. That doesn’t make any sense, Heather, it’s elemental stuff. Even that little trick I was muttering back in the horrible room with those nurses didn’t work, and that was one of the most simple things I could think of. Magic simply doesn’t work here, but that is a contradiction in terms. There is no ‘here’ where magic could theoretically not work. In some places Outside, magic might work differently, but it’s still going to work if we perform the necessary actions. Magic is like ... ” She huffed and waved a hand.

“Oh, I hate pulling these metaphors out of my arse, but magic is like cheat codes for reality. It reaches beneath the layers of what we experience, and jabs at the hidden controls. Same with your self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics, Heather, just clumsier. Magic and maths are both broken, here. There is absolutely no way you could rewrite reality to the extent that such things just plain didn’t work. Unless you’re some kind of god and we’re in a new universe running on different rules. That I seriously doubt. No.” She took a deep breath and sat straighter in her wheelchair, chin raised. “Physics is broken. Therefore, this is not reality. This is a dream.”

I nodded along. “That does make sense. Eevee, can I ask you to do something for me?”

“Mm? What?”

“Look out of the window up there, and tell me what you see?”

Evelyn squinted at me with vague suspicion, then turned her head and looked out of the high, narrow window on the far wall. “I see outdoors. I see the Eye, just wrinkles filling the sky. A bit hard to make out in this moonlight, to be fair.” She turned back to me. “Is that all?”

“Okay,” I said with mounting hope. “So you can see the Eye. Nobody else can. Not Raine, not Lozzie, none of the patients as far as I can tell. They just see the sky, or they think it’s the sky. But ... Eevee ... is it ... is it night time? As in, right now?”

Evelyn squinted harder. “Just spit it out, for pity’s sake.”

I surrendered. “Eevee, night fell in the space of about twenty minutes. And it can’t have been even six hours since breakfast! There’s no way it’s time for night. The day was short. Raine didn’t react to that. Neither did you.”

“Hmm,” Evelyn grunted. She squinted at me again, but now she was taking this seriously. “I have very little memory for time, before you ‘woke me up’. It just made sense to me, that this was the end of the day.”

“But it’s not. It’s definitely not. Trust me.”

Evelyn shook her head. “I do trust you, Heather. But no, it still makes perfect sense.”

I blinked several times. My stomach dropped. Was Evee not fully awake, not fully free, even after I'd murdered the memory of her mother? "What does that mean exactly?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Think about it," Evelyn said slowly. She rolled her shoulders back as best she could, dropping into the comfortable tone of the learned teacher. I let that pass without comment. Evelyn deserved all the comfort in identity she could get right then.

"I have thought about it," I said gently. "What am I missing?"

"This whole place is a dream. A metaphor. A narrative, right? What are we doing, right now? You and I, Heather, what are we doing?"

"... having a conversation?"

"Tch, no," Evee tutted. She gestured around the room, at the narrow gap between the two rows of lockers, our dark and private canyon. "Here, in this room. We're hiding, yes? After a shocking amount of violence, in the aftermath of a riot, so on and so forth. Night has fallen because we're narratively 'done for the day'. The narrative has changed to fit our actions, not the other way around."

"Oh." I frowned and sucked on my teeth, thinking about that concept. "That does make a kind of sense. I suppose."

"Of course it does," Evelyn scoffed. "You and Sevens made this place, somehow, to resist or redefine whatever the Eye was doing. My theory? This is still Wonderland. But now it's a story, a narrative, written on the surface of reality, with Sevens' nature as the engine." She laughed. "And it's you, Heather, it's your way of looking at the world. Everything is stories, literature. We're lucky you're such an avid reader, rather than, I don't know, a big fan of violent games. We'd be in for a much worse time."

I frowned. "Well, actually, if that was the case, couldn't we just shoot everything? I feel like that logic would be easier!"

"Hm," Evelyn grunted. "Maybe. Anyway, this means you're right, probably, about clapping our hands and believing. So." She cleared her throat. "Raine is going to return. I guarantee it. She's never failed me before. Don't listen when I turn into a pessimistic bitch."

"Right," I said, feeling a lump in my throat. "Raine is coming back. No question about it. But ... don't call yourself names, Evee."

Evelyn smirked. "I'll call myself whatever I want. I'm in the story too, aren't I? Maybe that's the trick, maybe if we find Sevens, we can just rewrite things directly. After all, you already summoned ... the ... " Evelyn trailed off, paused, and cleared her throat. "The King in Yellow."

What little colour Evelyn possessed drained from her face. She suddenly went quiet, all her animation dying away.

"I didn't even know that would work," I said. "I had no idea what he was going to do. I really must thank him, somehow. I hope he's alright."

Evelyn took a deep breath, visibly trying to rouse herself. "Yes, well. I still can't quite get over the fact you did that. Dealing with this dream is one thing, accepting the ... the 'King in Yellow' is another." Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "I can still feel the logic of the dream at the back of my head, like a second set of memories. Like a lurking nightmare I haven't quite shrugged off."

"None of this is real, Eevee," I tried to reassure her. "You have to try to hold onto that."

Evelyn's eyes flew open. "Oh, on the contrary, Heather. I think we have to embrace it."

"Ah? What do you mean?"

Evelyn jabbed a finger toward her inactive magic circles. Her lips flickered with a nasty grin. "I cannot do magic. Why? Because I haven't fulfilled the necessary narrative conditions. You know what I think I need, in order to be a mage again?"

"A magical tome?" I ventured. The look on Evelyn's face was unsettling and impressive at the same time, like standing before a growing fire.

Evelyn shook her head. "No. I need my mother's corpse."

"O-oh."

"I need to desecrate her body. Take off a leg, remove the skin, the tendons, the meat. Carve myself a new wand from one of her thigh-bones. She tried to take my flesh, so I will take hers and use it as a tool, all over again."

I put a hand to my mouth. "You can't be serious. Eevee, is that ... is

that where your bone wand came from?"

"I am deadly serious, Heather." Evelyn started to hiss with low, dark laughter. "It makes narrative sense, doesn't it? She's dead, the memory is defeated. But I'm still like this, still emaciated, still in her grip, still under her control. I need to re-purpose her. Use her up. I need access to her corpse, and a good butcher's knife. I'll do it myself if I have to, down on my elbows and my fucking stump."

"Evee—"

"Don't you get squeamish about this!" Evelyn snapped. "This is your fault too, Heather. This whole place has the logic of a story, of literature! You helped build it! Don't turn away from what I need, do not!"

A cold certainty swept through me, a knowledge that in the end I would do whatever Evelyn needed. I loved her too much to do otherwise. I would gut her mother's corpse with my bare hands if I had to.

I nodded, just once. "I'm sorry, Evee. Yes. Of course. If we can access your mother's corpse again, I promise we'll—"

Click.

Somebody or something had just opened the door to the locker room.

Evelyn and I both went silent. Sweat broke out on my face and down my back. Evelyn gripped the armrests of her wheelchair, knuckles turning white on her unbandaged hand. The Saye Fox rose from her comfortable coiled nap, hopping up to her paws, careful not to tap against the wooden bench with her claws; her ears were perked straight up, her little black nose sniffing the air.

We waited, heartbeats racing, for Raine to give the signal.

But none came.

Instead, a slow, dragging, uneven tread slapped against the locker room floor tiles, like a melted elephant's foot sliding deeper into the room. The door clicked shut behind our uninvited guest. The heavy, clomping footsteps trudged away from the door and the shower stalls, moving toward the rows of lockers, heading for our hiding place.

Evelyn's eyes were wide with panic. She was shaking all over. I shot to my feet — big mistake, as a spike of pain radiated upward from the wound on my left shin; I had to bite my lips to hold back a scream, my eyes filling with tears. I cast about, desperate to do something, suddenly feeling helpless.

I had no weapon, no tentacles, no brain-math, and no Raine.

The dragging footsteps stopped. A moist and clotted wheezing echoed off the walls, like buckets of mucus trapped in rotten lungs.

A snort — phlegm sucked back down a sticky throat — and the dragging footsteps resumed, then stopped again.

Whatever it was, it was checking between the rows of lockers.

The Saye Fox moved first; she hopped down off the benches and scurried to the end of the row, in the opposite direction to where our unwanted observer was doing her rounds. I darted to Evelyn's wheelchair, grabbed the handles without asking, and then pushed her as quickly as I dared, following the Fox. I winced at the near-imperceptible sound of the wheels moving against the tiles. I prayed that the nurse — or whatever that thing was — could not hear the whisper of rubber wheels over the sound of its own ragged breathing.

The Fox darted into the next row — the final one before the wall, with a bank of lockers facing nothing but whitewashed plaster. I pushed Evelyn after the Fox, just far enough so we were no longer visible from the mouth of the row we had just occupied.

Our only chance was to hide in the blind spot, and then move back again. The timing had to be split-second perfect.

Evelyn was shaking, hissing jerky little breaths through her nose as she tried not to panic. I put one hand on her shoulder, as gently as I could. The Fox waited at my feet — then, to my surprise, she leapt up and into Evelyn's lap.

Evee strangled a yelp, showing it only as a vibration in her shoulders. But the Fox didn't seem to be causing her any pain. The creature settled down in Evelyn's lap, ears still pointed and alert, eyes wide, staring off toward the oncoming footsteps.

Drag-drag drrrraaaaag-scrape. Drag-drag scrrrrrrape, went the intruder.

It stopped, very close, presumably peering into the row we had just occupied. The wet and wheezy breathing intensified, as if the thing was growing agitated, or struggling to suck enough air into its ragged lungs.

Sweat prickled down the back of my neck and across my scalp. My left shin burned with pain, throbbing upward with a spider web of dull agony. My timing had to be perfect. Both Evelyn and the Fox had placed their trust in me.

Draaaaag—

It was moving, to look into the final row!

I pulled back on the wheelchair, easing us out of the final row, back into the one we had previously occupied, trying to keep the row of lockers between us and our pursuer.

It worked — I didn't even see the thing.

The footsteps stopped again. The intruder stared down that final row, wheezing like a pair of bellows filled with swamp water. I waited, holding my breath. Evelyn swallowed, loud in the silence.

Our unseen pursuer turned and started back the way it had come — draaaaag-scrape. I eased Evelyn's wheelchair back into the end row again as it passed by, just in case it paused, or turned to look, or saw us in its peripheral vision.

But it didn't. Those dragging footsteps receded down the row of lockers. Clomp-clomp-clomp-clomp.

The door went *click* — then *clack*.

The moist breathing vanished along with the footsteps.

Evelyn's hand shot out and grabbed my wrist, her eyes blazing with warning. She pressed a finger to her lips and nodded in the direction of the door.

I nodded back; I knew exactly what she meant. What if the thing was faking? What if it was standing right there, waiting for us to make an unwary sound?

Leaving Evelyn alone with the Fox in her lap, I crept along the back wall of the locker room, shin throbbing with every step, yellow blanket pulled tight around my shoulders. With my heart in my throat and my skin drenched in cold sweat, I paused at the end of

the locker area and slowly eased one eye around the edge of the first row.

The door was shut. The shower stalls were unoccupied. All was dark and silent.

Whatever that had been, it was gone.

I scurried back to Evelyn as fast as I could, limping on my wound leg. "It's gone!" I hissed. "It's gone, it's gone, we're clear! Eevee, we're clear, we're okay!"

Evelyn let out a huge, shuddering breath. She looked like she wanted to cry, covered in cold sweat, quivering all over. She didn't know what to do with her hands. For a moment I was about to reach out and hold her somehow, despite the wheelchair. But then the Fox nudged her snout against Evelyn's arm.

Slowly, hesitating with uncertainty, Evelyn put her hands on the Fox's back.

The Fox settled into her lap. Evelyn stroked her russet fur, surprised and confused.

"Well," I said. "That was ... that was horrible."

"Yes," Evelyn hissed between clenched teeth. "I wish we had a gun. Or better, working magic."

"We should try to settle back down," I said, moving to sit on the bench again. "Maybe if—"

Click!

I almost screamed, shooting back to my feet and clutching at my chest. Evelyn bristled in her chair. I whirled back toward the door, eyes wide, ready to grasp Evelyn's wheelchair again, ready to—

"It's me!" came a ridiculous stage-whisper, floating over the lockers. "The baddest dyke in all the land! And I come bearing gifts!"

"Raine!" I almost whimpered her name.

In a few quick paces she was upon us. Raine stepped around the corner of our secluded little locker-canyon with a fabric shopping bag in one hand, a bundle of towels slung over her opposite shoulder, and a smug, shit-eating smirk plastered across her face. She had more than earned the right to look as self-satisfied as she

liked. She was grinning like the sun.

“Heather, Evee,” she purred. “Sweet thing. Lady Saye. Good to see you both. Missed me?”

“About fucking time!” Evelyn snapped.

“Raine!” I said, barely holding myself back from flying into her already occupied arms. “Raine, oh my goodness, we thought you were something else, something back to hunt us again. Are you okay, are you safe?”

“More than safe, I’m doing just fine.” Raine shot me a wink. “Look who I found.”

A flutter of pentacolour pastel poncho flittered out from behind the end of the row of lockers and bobbed into place at Raine’s side, followed by a wave of greasy blonde hair framing a sneaky little smile.

“Ta-daaaaa!” said Lozzie, wiggling her fingers. Her eyes lit up with mischievous light. “Heathy! And Evee-weevey, too!”

“Lozzie,” Evelyn said with a sigh. “Good to see you. Yes. Very good.”

“Lozz! You’re safe!” I said.

I almost moved forward to hug her, but I restrained myself at the last moment. I couldn’t help but notice how Raine had positioned herself in just the right way to stop Lozzie and I coming into direct contact, just in case. Lozzie still reeked of that ineffable predatory aura. I didn’t care anymore. She was just our Lozzie, however she was acting.

“Safe and soundy and stuffed with silly!” Lozzie chirped.

“What happened?” I said. “I mean, Lozzie, what did you do earlier? You caused a riot! How did you—”

“Woah, woah,” Raine said, stepping forward to set her haul down on the wooden bench. She kept herself positioned between Lozzie and me the whole time. “Slow down, sweet thing. We can talk about the past in a second. We need to get provisions distributed first. We might not be safe here. Might have to move soon. Focus first, talk later.”

“Yah-yaaaaaah!” Lozzie chirped. “Weird night time wanderers out

there! Scary scary.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, backing up to give Raine room, even as I reached out to touch her shoulder.

She put the shopping bag down on the bench and hefted the towels off her shoulder, dumping them alongside. Raine lost her grin.

“Corridors are full of weird shit,” she said, dead serious. “As soon as night fell, it was like a switch got flicked. All those nurses, all those doctors, they don’t look so friendly in the dark.”

“Yes!” Evelyn snapped. “One of them came in here! We had to hide! We need a better hiding place if we’re going to risk sleep, Raine! We cannot stay here.”

My eyes went wide with realisation. “I saw them! The first night I was here! The morning, I mean! I think I saw them, outside in the corridor. They peered in through my bedroom window. Those were nurses?”

Raine shrugged. “I can’t be sure, but I think so.”

“I saw it happen!” Lozzie chirped, hopping forward. Raine allowed her closer. She flashed a grin at all of us, sleepy-eyed and predatory in her movements. Evelyn squinted at her; was she having trouble picking up on Lozzie’s dream-aura? Lozzie said: “Saw the nurses go all funny funky.”

“So,” Raine said. “We need to prep, in case we need to move.” She reached for the shopping bag, then paused, turned, and took a step toward me.

Suddenly Raine was in my face, looming overhead, filling the shadowy moonlit air.

“R-Raine?” I squeaked.

“You haven’t said it,” she purred, unsmiling. “I can’t keep prompting you, Heather.”

“I ... said what? S-sorry?”

Raine placed a hand against the lockers, boxing me in. “You know what.”

Evelyn muttered: “Oh for pity’s sake. Is now really the time? Do this later!”

Lozzie just gasped, like she had a front row seat to a very exciting show.

“I-I-I—” I stammered, overwhelmed. “R-Raine, you’re scaring me a little bit—”

“You didn’t say it earlier, either,” she purred, voice dropping lower and lower. “Okay, fair enough, I was freeing Lady Saye, not you. But still, you gotta throw me a bone or two, sweet thing. I can’t live off bread and water alone, you gotta—”

“Good girl!” I blurted out as I realised. “Good girl! Good girl, Raine. You’re such a good girl.”

“Rrrrrr, that’s right.” Raine broke back into a smile, grinning down at me. She smelled of sweat and iron and unwashed flesh. She eased back, giving me some air. “Don’t stop there.”

I reached up and ran one hand through Raine’s hair, raking my fingernails gently along the rear of her scalp. She closed her eyes and let out a breathy grunt, hard enough to make me blush.

“Good girl,” I muttered again. “You’re my very good girl, Raine. Thank you for getting all this stuff for us. Thank you, thank you for risking it, thank you for coming back. Good girl. I love you.”

“Course I came back,” Raine purred. “Couldn’t miss this. Love you too. Mmmmm-mmmmmmmmm.”

Lozzie had both hands to her mouth, a naughty look in her eyes. “Wooow, Heathy,” she whispered. “Wow wow!”

Evelyn huffed. “Can we please focus on the supplies, not the mating ritual? I’m about to start gnawing off my other leg here if I don’t get some food in the next sixty seconds. Food. Now.”

Raine pulled herself from my ministrations and shot Eevee a wink. “Whatever you say, Lady Saye.”

“Tch!” Eevee tutted. “Bad pun. Down, girl.”

The fabric shopping bag contained plenty of food for all four of us — mostly bread rolls, pre-packaged sandwiches, a few bags of crisps, and a veritable armful of sweets, chocolate rolls, cupcakes, and other assorted confectionery. Raine claimed to have raided some sort of staff room, though her haul of goodies could easily have been shoplifted from a Tesco Express. Within ten seconds,

Lozzie had a bread roll stuffed in her mouth and Evee was tearing into a BLT. Raine shook out the innards of a beef sandwich for the Fox, who happily jumped down to the floor to scarf up the meat. I hadn't felt particularly hungry until the smell of food hit me, but when it did I found my hands shaking and my gut clenching with ravenous need. Raine pressed a prawn sandwich into my hands — "It's got lemon juice in it, closest thing we got," — then made sure I sat down and started eating.

She'd also snagged a roll of Peperami — those preserved pork sticks I remembered from childhood, an authentic slice of the real Cygnet poking through from my memories. "Reserved for Zheng," Raine explained as she shoved them back in the bag. "She needs meat, right?"

"We could feed her a nurse!" Lozzie chirped around a mouthful of bread roll. "Fresh and wriggling!"

"That too," Raine shot back with a wink. "But just in case we can't catch one."

Raine had also secured herself a proper weapon — one which made my eyes bulge from my head as she drew it from the bag. No wonder she hadn't been carrying it when she'd walked in, the thing was massive. She drew the blade from a fabric scabbard, naked black metal glinting in the moonlight.

Evelyn almost choked on her mouthful of bread and bacon. "Fucking hell, Raine! Be careful with that, you're liable to take off your own arm."

Raine cracked a very satisfied grin and held up her new sword, sighting down the blade like it was a gun. "Nice, right?" She spun it over her hand — a significantly more impressive feat than twirling a little plastic kitchen utensil. She caught it again with a flourish. "Wish I'd had something like this earlier. I would have cut through those nurses like nothing."

"What ... " I cleared my throat. "Raine, what exactly is that?"

"A machete," she said, slipping the massive knife back into the sheath. There was no belt or clasp, so she was going to have to carry the thing in her hands. "Brand new, by the looks of it. Maker's mark is in Chinese. Razor edge on one side, saw-teeth on the back. Perfect weapon."

I swallowed. “Uh, good girl, yes. Well done.”

A change of clothes had been much harder to obtain. Raine had found a jumper for me — a vile looking thing in cream-brown, the colour of cold coffee with too much milk. It smelled of medical alcohol and had a huge hole beneath the left armpit, but I wriggled it on over my head, hugging myself in the increased warmth after I wrapped my yellow blanket back around my shoulders. Raine also dispensed new socks — one pair for me, one pair for Evee — and a scarf, for whoever wanted it. Evelyn accepted that, for now.

“This is all very eclectic,” Evelyn grunted. “Where did you get it?”

“Your room,” Raine said with a subtle grin.

“My ... ” Evelyn blinked. “My what, sorry? My room?”

“Your residential room,” Raine said. “I snuck into one of the record offices, during all the commotion out there, so I could look up your name and find your room. The jumper, the scarf, the socks. It’s all yours. The machete was under the bed. Weird, right?”

“Why? What possessed you to do that?” Evelyn’s eyes lit up with savage hope as she realised. “Did you find my leg? My walking stick? My wand?!”

“Call it a hunch,” Raine said. She was grinning with anticipation, enjoying this a little too much. “A hunch which paid off. Here, I believe this belongs to you.”

Raine reached into the fabric shopping bag; for a moment I assumed she was going to pull out a crumbling tome or a piece of rolled-up canvas with a magic circle on it. There wasn’t enough room left in the bag for Evelyn’s prosthetic, however cathartic that may have been.

Raine extracted a bundle of cloth, black and white and blonde, all lace and frills and fluff. She placed it in Evelyn’s lap.

It was a plushie — of Praem.

Praem, Evelyn’s demon-maid daughter, reduced to a twentieth of her real size, cast in felt and cotton. The head was a ball of fabric topped by a mass of fluffy blonde hair. The eyes were flat disks of stitching, along with a line for a mouth and little flaps for ears. She was dressed in a miniature maid uniform, perfect in every detail. Stubby arms stuck out from little frilly sleeves, ending in flat nubs

instead of hands. Stumpy legs emerged from beneath a long skirt, terminating in coloured fabric to represent her shoes.

“Praem?” Evelyn whispered, wide eyed, very still. “It’s ... is it—”

“She doesn’t move or speak,” Raine said. “She’s just a doll, as far as I can tell. If that’s the real Praem, or an essential component of the prison guard downstairs, I’ve got no way to tell.”

Evelyn swallowed, unable to tear her eyes from the dream-imitation of Praem. Carefully, with one shaking hand, she tucked the plush toy tight against her lap. “Where did you find her?” she asked.

“Sitting on your bed,” said Raine. “Like she was waiting for us.”

Evelyn nodded slowly. “Alright. Alright. Okay. Maybe ... ”

“Maybe if we reunite the doll with Night Praem?” I suggested.

Evelyn nodded. All the spite and spittle had gone out of her, replaced with cold determination. “My thoughts exactly. We have to try.”

Raine cleared her throat. “Ladies, right now, we gotta eat, refuel, and rest. We ain’t going far at night, not with the heebies-jeebies patrolling the corridors.” She gestured at the towels she’d dumped on the wooden bench. “Those are for sleeping on, ‘cos face it, we’re probably holding up here overnight, or at least in a nearby room with a lock on the door.”

“Not meeeeeeee!” Lozzie chirped. “I got plans!”

“You have?” I asked, frowning. I was still struggling to take all this in. The Praem doll didn’t seem quite real, and now Lozzie was heading off somewhere?

“Yeah,” Raine confirmed. “Lozzie’s got shooters out there, girls from the riot, people she wants to see if she can free, or help.”

“Gotta keep my promises!” said Lozzie. “That’s how you run a movement!”

“Maybe we can help too,” I said. “We do need to plan, we desperately need a coherent plan for the next day. We need to work together, not scatter in different directions. Lozzie, will you at least stay to talk about that? And tell us what you did earlier, how you started that incredible riot. It might be useful if we can—”

Click, went the door to the locker room.

Raine whirled and drew her new machete in one smooth motion. Lozzie was suddenly holding her dirty little metal shiv in one tight fist. I clapped my hands to my mouth, backing away to shelter Evelyn. The Fox hopped back into Eevee's lap, alongside the Praem plushie. Evelyn swallowed a barely chewed mouthful of sandwich.

Tap-tap-tap went sudden, smart, sharp little footsteps.

"And the players retire to the wings for the evening, is it?" said a soft and melodious voice, drawing closer with every tapping step. "With the show over, the curtain down, the lights out, and the audience departed."

"Oh!" I said with a huge sigh of relief, waving at Raine and Lozzie to lower their weapons. "It's okay, it's okay! It's him!"

"Ahhhh," Raine said, relaxing her shoulders and sliding her weapon away. "I was hoping to meet the man."

"Who?" Lozzie squinted at me.

"The King," I said. "The King in Yellow. Raine, did you tell Lozzie what happened? Please, Lozzie, don't—"

"Don't what, indeed?" said that slow and sinuous voice. "Don't interrupt the playwright while he is giving direction to his actors? Don't pre-empt the scene before it is penned? Don't pull your punches, lest the conflict fail to excite?"

Lozzie lowered her shiv. "Ooooooooooh!" She sounded rather excited.

The King did not.

Something in his tone was wrong.

He tapped closer, feet ringing against the floor; was that metal, clicking on the tiles? I realised with growing trepidation that he was clinking as he walked. As if he was dressed in steel.

He was almost upon us. A shadow loomed at the end of the row of lockers — a shadow which should not have been there, since the moonlight did not fall at such an angle.

"Tell me, errant players upon the stage to which I have been so roughly invited," he said in that once-soft tone, now growing with tremors most terrible. "Tell me. Unfold to me. Expound upon the

point. Illustrate for the elucidation of this poor mummer.”

“Tell you what?” Raine shot back.

The shadow climbed the wall. The King’s shade was ten feet tall.

“Tell me,” he said, voice gone cold. “Where oh where is my darling daughter?”

bedlam boundary – 24.12

Before any impudent mouth or vulpine snout dared propose to answer the fatherly inquiry from his royal personage, the speaker completed his ponderous approach, his shadow flickering upon the back wall of the locker room, as if caught in the guttering flames of a storm-blown fireplace. He turned the corner into our locker-bounded canyon with a click of metal-shod feet. A spectre, a spirit, a visitation from the underworld, he filled the mouth of our fleeting refuge, his form pierced at the hip by a lance of silvery moonlight.

The King in Yellow.

He paused — a player savouring his first step upon the boards of the stage, with the ladies and gentlemen of the audience primed with tremors of otherworldly fright by his speech from the wings, by the crack and snap of his clever trick costume, by the smouldering visage of his magnetic charisma.

Was I the audience? Myself and my companions? Or was the pause for the benefit of another watcher entirely?

The King wore a new mask, one I had not seen before. He was elderly, easily well into his seventies or eighties; his shoulders and back were both strong yet bent and buckling beneath the weight of terrible burdens. He was clad in the garb of a medieval knight — or rather, of a medieval king, dressed for war. A gaunt frame was wrapped in a motley collection of metal plates and hanging sheets of chain mail; the steel plates were rusted to a deep and corrosive amber-yellow, while the links of his chain mail were stiff with dried pus, streaks of urine, and clumps of crushed mud the colour of bile. His head was covered by a ragged mail coif, punctured by tufts of white-blond hair, so thin and dry that a stiff breeze might strip him bald. His narrow chest and sunken belly were announced by a tabard full of holes, torn at the edges, clinging onto his shoulders by a few narrow threads. The tabard bore a standard — three canaries upon a field of flax.

All three canaries were dead, their intestines pulled out by the claws of some great beast looming over the scene. The guts were yellow too. As was the beast.

The face of this Sombre Sovereign sagged with sorrow, weeping tears of crusty salt water, the fluid tainted yellow with some unspeakable disease. His skin was paper-thin, liver-spotted, and dusted with the whiskers of a white beard. His eyes were yellow too — but not with the exaggerated comedy of the previous mask. The eye of this King showed the final stages of real liver failure, a milky-yellow ruination in his sclerae.

He wore a sword at his belt, and clutched the hilt with one claw-like hand, his nails overgrown into yellowed talons. But the blade looked like it was rusted into the scabbard, as if it had not been drawn in a decade.

A feudal king, dressed for a war that had devoured all the years of his life. A monarch whose battle would soon be over, whether he willed it or not — but with no heir to carry on his work, no child to pick up the torch of his bloodline, no princess to inherit his besieged realm.

He was completely out of place in Cygnet Asylum. He had chosen a mask utterly irrelevant to this dream.

Unfortunately, I understood the metaphor with perfect clarity. He had made it impossible to miss. I would have sighed with exasperation at the ridiculous melodrama if he hadn't been making such a valid point.

The mask of the Melancholy Monarch was a waking question: where was Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight?

My friends and companions did not react with quite so much comprehension or compassion; I could hardly blame them — the ghost of Hamlet's Father had just strode onto the stage before us with an implicit threat in his words and a sword at his waist. Rusted though his armour may be, it would turn aside the blade of Raine's machete or the point of Lizzie's shiv with equal ease.

Raine took a single step back, to body-block any route to my own person, and kept her hand on her own noble blade, the machete tucked away in a fabric sheath. Lizzie went quiet and tilted her head to one side, poncho flat and unfluttering; a very bad sign, from her. Evelyn hissed a sharp breath through her teeth. The Saye Fox let out a tiny growl.

"Wait!" I said out loud, throwing my hands wide. "Wait, he's

making an unsubtle point. Raine, do not draw. He's just—"

"A King should not be forced to repeat his words," the Crown Bereft interrupted. His speech was slow and sonorous, silken and soft, yet full of sand. A man lost in the desert of his dreams. His tear-stained, yellow-crusts, broken eyes found mine. "Little Watcher. You were entrusted with the hand of which I inquire. With care, and stewardship, and love. I ask my question, one grace to another, though you may be sevenfold divided within these walls. Where is my daughter?"

Perhaps it was the archaic structure of his speech, or the combination of moonlight and shadow, or the tight confines of the locker-canyon, or the dream itself, or the way the King's words echoed off the tiles and the metal and the darkness; whatever the cause, nobody spoke for a long moment, as if an audience was giving the King his due.

Then, Raine's grip tightened around the handle of her machete, with an audible creak of flesh on plastic.

"No!" I hissed to her under my breath, tapping her on the side with my finger. "Raine, no. I know him, I know how this works, let me handle it."

Raine did not reply. She only loosened her grip.

I took a deep breath, lifted one corner of my yellow blanket, and opened my mouth; I intended to tell the absolute and unvarnished truth — that we did not know where Sevens was, but that she had left me this blanket by way of help. I queued up explanations of our situation, of the nature of the dream, of my own lack of tentacles, of the painful absence of my other six selves. I braced on the edge of unburdening myself to the King, on including him in our quest. For he was a knight at present, was he not?

But then I beheld the trembling in those yellowed, rheumy, dying eyes.

I paused, mouth open, words unsaid.

"Heather?" Raine hissed.

The wound in my left shin was throbbing with every beat of my heart. Cold sweat broke out down my back, sticking my t-shirt to my skin.

“Oh,” I murmured. “Oh no, I think this is real.”

“What?” Raine whispered back.

What exactly were we looking at, standing in the shadows and the moonlight? An actor upon a stage? Yes, certainly. That was the nature of the King. But he had said it himself, had he not? We are what we pretend to be.

What was he being?

Pain, sorrow, careworn love.

The King in Yellow — whatever he was and whatever his nature bade him do — did care about his children, in a way at least vaguely analogous to human beings. What if he wasn’t being silly? What if this was deadly serious? What if the metaphor was all too real?

I dropped the edge of my yellow blanket, then reached out to gently move Raine aside. “Excuse me,” I muttered. “Raine, let me past.”

Raine did not move. She didn’t even look down at me, watching the King with an unfaltering gaze. She hissed: “Heather?”

I raised my voice so the King could hear. “Please move aside, Raine. I wish to address the King in Yellow as an equal.”

Raine smirked. “Not until he drops that sword.”

The King raised his hoary-shadowed chin, spotted with white-yellow stubble. His hand tightened on the hilt of his blade, creaking with leather on metal. The sound echoed off the bare walls of the locker room.

Evelyn snapped, her voice strangled by terror: “Raine, for fuck’s sake! Don’t threaten and quibble with this thing! Get out of Heather’s way!”

“Evee,” I said gently, trying to keep my voice level, high — regal, even. “Raine is mine to command. Raine, move aside, please.”

Raine growled, giving ground with great reluctance. “I don’t like that sword.”

“The King has a right to remain armed,” I said, scrambling for the right words, trying to match the King’s tone and diction with what little eloquence I could summon. “I commend your dedication to

your duty, and your sense of unwavering loyalty, even in the face of my own decisions, which you may consider lacking appropriate wisdom. You are a good hound, Raine. The very best in all creation. But I am in charge. Step aside.”

Raine either caught on to what I was doing, or thought I’d gone completely crackers, or picked up on the tremor in my voice; she nodded once, then stepped aside, hand on her machete.

I was racing to string together the right-sounding words for this scene set by the King. I had to play the part, I had to give him what he needed, in the form he was requesting. His anxiety and fear was not a joke. If denied or provoked, he would lash out in the form he had defined — an ageing father, a monarch, politely but firmly demanding an account for the whereabouts of his daughter.

I doubted he would explode into a sea of nightmare-yellow froth and melt us into blood and bubbling bone, but he would take a swing with that sword. And right now there were no Cygnet staff present to re-assert the properties of the narrative.

“Thank you, Raine,” I said, and stepped forward.

I walked until I was well within range of the King’s sword. The Mask of the Melancholy Monarch was quite tall, and yet stunted at the same time; I had to look up to make eye contact, though his shoulders seemed slumped and his spine was crooked with old wounds and age and the weight of most terrible cares.

The King relaxed his grip on his sword. He lowered his head. An acknowledgement, waiting for my own.

I did the best imitation of the curtsy I could, without the benefit of a skirt. I pinched the sides of my nasty brown sweater and bent one knee. My left leg shook with the effort, waves of dull pain radiating upward from the wound in my flesh.

“Your Majesty,” I said.

Raine snorted with derision; I knew she would not be able to help that.

Luckily the King in Yellow did not take offense at my own knight’s insult. He took his hand off his sword and bowed to me in return, with his armoured right hand pressed over his own heart.

“My Ladies Morell,” he said. “Though I address only one at current,

and wish good health and long life to all seven.”

I straightened back up, trying to hide the wince at the pain in my leg. Playing along seemed to be working.

The King mirrored my pose, returning to his full height.

“You are correct,” I said. “You do only address one of me, at current. You can tell that, at a glance?”

“Yes,” he said, and did not elaborate. His countenance turned stony once more. “Ladies Morell, I have addressed you with a question. It goes unanswered.”

“I do not know where Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight is,” I said. “All my hours in this place have been consumed by attempting to find and gather all my friends, allies, lovers, and family. Your daughter is included in all four of those categories. I believe she may have a hand in creating and sustaining this ... ‘dream’. As of yet, none of us trapped here have been harmed in any permanent sense. I believe your daughter is safe, but I wish to find her all the same, as quickly as I can. I offer you my solemn promise that she will not go abandoned, or forsaken, or forgotten in this dream of my own past. I would not abandon any to this, let alone her.”

I finished by swallowing a hiccup, which made an awful noise in the echoey locked room.

My heart was racing and my palms were growing slick with sweat; my wounded left shin throbbed beneath my makeshift bandages with every beat of my heart. I badly wanted to sit down and take the weight off the wounded limb. But I had to maintain my part in the play. I prayed that I had spoken just the right amount of faux-Shakespearian dialogue, and that I had said what the King wanted to hear — or at least something that was acceptable to his fatherly worries.

The King in Yellow sighed with a great and terrible weight. His eyes tightened with sadness. His mouth twisted with care.

“Then it is as I feared,” he said, soft and croaky. “She writes alone, to sustain the very air which we breathe.”

“I ... yes,” I said, struggling for words. “I think she does.”

The King nodded, head creaking on his ancient neck. “And I, her father, though I be clad for war and strong of arm, cannot render

aid unto my life's blood."

Before I could figure out how to respond, Raine said: "Why not?"

His Mournful Majesty raised sorrowful eyes. "Why, my good lady knight? You ask why? Why, because this is not my type of story. It is her own. She has travelled so far beyond my realm and those of my erstwhile and loyal allies, that I am a stranger in foreign lands, a trespasser on the holy soil of another, with whom I have no cause to quarrel, and if I did, I would not prevail. I am halfway around the globe, with no wind at my back, and not a friendly port in sight. But her, ahhhhhh, my daughter. She is at home here." A single tear rolled down the King's left cheek. "And thus I am surpassed, though not for the first time, and not by the first of mine children. But no matter how many times, the absence of one's hand guiding one's child brings tremors to the breast, and a great terror to the heart. Hope and fear are the same, when it comes to children."

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. Fresh tears rolled down his cheeks freely now, vanishing into the rim of white beard upon his chin.

"She'll be alright," said Raine. "You've raised her well. And hey, she's not alone."

"Yes," I added, silently thanking Raine for her quick thinking. "Your Majesty, your daughter is never alone, not while I still draw breath. The princess is loved, no matter how far away she is. I promise."

The King lowered his tearful eyes. He nodded, just once. "Then I suppose the time has come."

The Despairing Despot grabbed the hilt of his sword with a flash of one hand — and ripped his weapon from the scabbard with a rusty scream of tortured metal.

He whirled the blade in an arc as he drew, more like something from an old samurai movie than an ageing Macbeth doddering about the stage. I yelped and flinched backward, but I was too slow of reaction and too clumsy of foot. The arc of the sword would take off my head at the neck, even as I fell toward the floor. My backside and severed head might land together in but a moment. Behind me, Raine leapt into motion, her own machete flying from the sheath. Lozzie ducked and hopped forward too, as if she could somehow catch the killing blow in the folds of her poncho. Evelyn spat some scrap of Latin — an instinctive spell — though she could do nothing

with magic, not here, not yet.

But the King's blade was all rust.

Yellow flakes of long-dead metal disintegrated to nothing beneath the pitiless silver moonlight.

The sword crumbled before it reached my neck, leaving behind an arc of yellowed dust upon the floor tiles. The King's arm completed the motion, drawing an empty handle through the air before my throat, and finishing at the end of an executioner's blow. He put his whole body into that swing.

Raine had to catch me lest I tumble backward onto my bum. She held her machete half-raised, shielding me from any follow-up blow. Lizzie hovered on my other side, bobbing from foot to foot.

The King stood unmoving for a moment, his empty blade pointed toward the floor, eyes downcast.

"Let me up," I hissed to Raine, then hiccuped, loudly and painfully. "Ow— hic! Ow."

She hissed back: "He swung at you!"

"With an empty sword!" I whispered back. I was drenched in sweat, panting for breath, and shaking all over, but I knew what I was handling here. "Raine, it's the King in Yellow! He's all about plays and metaphor and meaning! He swung at me with a harmless blade! Let me up, I have to finish this!"

Raine frowned.

"You've been a good girl," I whispered, catching her eyes. "But you have to let me up."

Raine growled like a hound barely held at bay by the words of her mistress — but she let me up, helping me back onto my own two feet. My wounded left leg was throbbing so badly that I had to limp a few paces.

"Your Majesty," I said, voice croaking with adrenaline. "I must protest this gesture."

The King finally left his pose, like an actor rising from the end of a scene after the curtain had fallen and the audience were blinded to the truth. His shoulders did not carry quite so much weight. His tears were dry. His face looked fake — and about ten years

younger.

He considered the blade-less hilt in his right hand for a moment, and then held it out to me, as if presenting me with a priceless relic, the bone of a saint.

“Accept this in her stead, Ladies Morell,” said the Grief-Gripped Potentate. “She has more need of it than I ever will. Especially in this darkened theatre, in this most unsavoury quarter of a blighted city.”

I accepted the hilt with both hands. It was much heavier than it looked, made of a dusky golden metal. The surface was inlaid with a complex geometric design, all swirls and spirals, like looking down into a sea of storms upon the surface of a gas giant.

“Thank you,” I said. “Though I know not what I thank you for, Your Majesty. I will pass this to Sevens, when she is found.”

“Which she will be,” Raine growled. “Believe you that.”

The Regent in Rags bowed his head in acknowledgement. “It is done.”

He stayed like that, and did not move. Silvery moonlight ghosted across his tarnished legs and his stained belly. Raine and I shared a glance. Lizzie bobbed closer to him, as if peering at a waxwork. The Saye Fox clicked across the floor tiles and sniffed at the King’s metal-shod feet.

Evelyn swallowed and cleared her throat. “Heather? Heather, is this over? Can we speak freely now? Is this ... this ... ”

The King raised his head. “Is this farce done with, Lady Saye? Is that what you intend to ask?”

Evelyn went very quiet. I glanced back over my shoulder and found her staring at the King with barely concealed terror, clutching the Praem Plush tight in her lap. The Praem Plushie was facing outward, toward the King — which was odd, because I was certain that Evelyn had been hugging it face-in, with Praem’s face toward her belly. She had turned it around to face outward, as a sort of protective talisman?

“It’s alright, Evee,” I told her. “You can say things to him, he’s not ... well, he is dangerous, when he wants to be, but not like that.”

Raine snorted softly. "All monarchs are dangerous. Comes with claiming the monopoly on violence."

Evelyn didn't seem to know what to say. She hesitated, cast about in her wheelchair, then wet her lips. "So ... so this, this is the King in Yellow? The actual King in Yellow? We're in the presence of a ... a ... "

She was addressing me, not him. But the King answered for himself.

"I wear but a mask, Lady Saye," he said. "As do we all."

The King in Yellow raised one gauntlet, clicked his armoured fingers, and shed his monarchical melancholy like shucking off a second skin.

Tainted steel plate hit the floor with the dull thump of paper mache. Sheets of chain mail pooled at his feet with woollen softness. The tabard, the coif, the sword-belt, all of it landed like costume foam and cheap rubber.

Beneath the knightly guise lay simple white robes. Sandalled feet stepped from the ruins of the Sorrowful Sovereign.

The King in Yellow was now a middle-aged man, tall and gangly, self-consciously awkward in his bearing, like a tree wedged into a place one did not expect to find a tree growing, vaguely apologetic for its imposing presence and unlikely flourishing. Warm brown skin was topped by dark curly hair speckled with grey, unable to conceal his rather large ears. A greying beard and oiled moustache twitched with an uncertain smile around a gentle mouth. Plucked eyebrows and thick, dark, luxurious lashes framed a pair of eyes the colour of burning brass.

I had met this mask before. I recognised it well, and breathed a sigh of relief. A sign the King had concluded his little play.

We were in the presence of the Kindly Prince.

"Ooooooooooh!" went Lozzie, lighting up. "Hello!"

The Kindly Prince had been in the process of raising one hand to stroke his beard, but Lozzie's exclamation rather threw him off his studied pose. He hesitated, then smiled at her, as if unsure how to respond.

"Hello to you, Lady Lilburne," he replied.

His accent flattened all tonal stress, vaguely Middle Eastern in a way I still could not place, while his tone of voice rolled with warm amusement and boyish awkwardness.

Lozzie giggled behind one hand.

The King cleared his throat and resumed the beard-stroking pose. "As I was about to say, I am very proud of my daughters, all of them. But Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight has surprised me here. This, I did not believe was possible. Not for anybody."

I sighed, no longer able to fully contain myself. "You could have led with that, instead of ... whatever all that was."

The Warm-Eyed Mask shot me an almost apologetic smile, waving one hand in a vague arc, floaty white sleeve following his arm. "My concerns were — and remain — most real, Ladies Morell. My daughter is missing, writing a miracle all by herself, perhaps under some form of duress. It is only your confidence and love in her that have dispelled my darkest designs upon those who have misplaced her, intentional or otherwise. I apologise for any consternation, but that too is the face of a monarch."

"Bloody right," Raine murmured from my side. She slowly slid her machete back into its sheath, eyes locked with the King in Yellow as the metal rasped against the woven fabric. "Monarchy is just face over the monopoly on violence, 'your majesty'."

Raine made the words sound like an insult. I winced. "Raine, please."

The Soft-Spoken Sovereign smiled at Raine and raised his eyebrows. "And the monopoly on violence is the root of all strength, no?"

"Technically correct," Raine grunted. "At least you've got a dash of materialism in you."

"Raine!" Evelyn hissed. "For fuck's sake. He's an Outsider god, not an actual aristocrat."

The King bowed his head gently. "Power grows from the barrel of a gun."

Raine paused, running her tongue over her teeth. "Now that's not a line I'd expect to hear from the mouth of some royal brat. Thought your power was handed down by God. Right?"

The King smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling with playful mirth. “Ah. This is true. Kings and Queens rule by the grace of God. But what if the King himself—” he indicated his own body with a wave of one hand “—is also the god in question? Whence does the power originate? Where can we locate my right to what I rule?”

Raine snorted, smiling as she warmed to the game. “Alright, fair enough, let’s get down into the weeds. What do you rule?”

The King flicked his hands, rolling out the white fabric of his voluminous sleeves, as if gathering up the moonlight beneath his arms. His deep amber eyes burned in the shadows of the locked room. He made a big show of looking into one sleeve, then into the other. He raised his head again and shrugged. “I rule nothing but the contents of my own sleeves, it seems! Is not everyone a monarch of one’s own body?”

Raine laughed, shaking her head. “Equivocator.”

“That is another of one’s Royal prerogatives.” The King smiled with a twinkle in his eye. “Well met, lady knight. Your duty and your honour are both satisfied. I am no enemy to you and yours.”

“Duty and honour alike can eat my arse,” Raine said with a smirk.

“Speaking of eating,” I said before this could veer back into dangerous territory. “Your Majesty—”

“Oh, no no,” he interrupted gently, with a wave of one hand and a jolly little laugh. “There is no need to stand on ceremony any longer.”

I hesitated, then spoke my mind: “I’m not going to call you ‘father’, or ‘dad’. Sevens and I aren’t married. Yet.”

The King looked suddenly embarrassed, smiling with a breach of some personal protocol. “E-even in your heart?”

I sighed. “This really isn’t the time for that particular discussion.”

The King cleared his throat. “In that case, for the time being, you may all address me as ... Zard.”

“Ha!” Evelyn barked with laughter.

We all turned to look at her.

“Lady Saye and Lady Saye,” the King said, without the slightest hint

of offended dignity. “You find this amusing?”

Evelyn snorted, eyeing the King with wary curiosity, but then asked me instead: “Is he always this ... this ... ridiculous?”

“Ah? Eevee?” I said.

Evelyn sighed and waved one hand. “Zard is just Farsi for ‘yellow’. Shouldn’t have expected anything less silly from somebody who once signed himself as ‘Rex Saffron’, I suppose.” Evelyn raised her chin, somehow managing to look down at everyone else even though she was seated in her wheelchair. “Need I remind everybody that we are still very vulnerable to discovery, with our backs to a wall? The nurses could descend on us at any moment, especially if we make too much bloody noise. Whatever you’re going to do, do it. Stop nattering.”

The King raised his hands in a pantomime of surrender, putting one finger and then the other to his lips, miming a shushing motion.

“Alright, alright,” I hissed, reversing course quickly. “First things first. Your Majesty, can you get us out of here? Out of this dream?”

The Kindly Prince pulled a pained and apologetic wince. “I am afraid that is beyond my power in this place.”

I nodded. I hadn’t expected things to be so simple anyway. “Right, and ... you’re not stuck here too, are you?”

He shook his head. “I am a cameo in this story, am I not? A jarring tonal intrusion at worst, a forgettable sheet of cardboard at best. I may flitter out of the narrative whenever I wish, forgotten by the audience in the final analysis of any cathartic reckoning. In fact, I am barely here right now.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it with all my heart. “Thank you for coming when I called. I think we would have been done for without your help.”

The King bowed with a flourish of his wide sleeves. “It was but a trifle, Ladies Morell. A messy piece of improvisation, certainly, but pulled off with enough panache and verve to distract the pen of this world for but a moment.”

“Nevertheless,” I repeated. “Thank you.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Actually, I have a question about that. If

he'll answer seriously."

But I held up a gentle hand to Evee. "One moment, Evee, please."

Evelyn scrunched her eyebrows, but she gestured at me to continue.

"Your Majesty," I said to the King — then indicated Raine's shopping bag, the packaged sandwiches and crisps and bread rolls spread out on the end of the wooden bench. "Would you care for some food?"

Before he could answer, Evelyn sighed sharply. "Heather, surely he doesn't have any need for—"

I glanced back over my shoulder and pulled a face at Evelyn, making my eyes wide with warning. She stopped and frowned again, suddenly getting what I was doing.

"Oh," said the King, with soft and pleasing politeness. "I could not deprive you of your hard-won vittles, my gracious ladies. I have no right to your bounty."

"Vittles!" Lozzie chirped, then descended into giggles. The King winced with vague embarrassment.

I faced the King and stared into his eyes, past those heavy dark lashes, silvered in the moonlight.

"I insist," I said.

The King's smile crinkled at the corner of his eyes. "You are acting like a fairy, Ladies Morell. Tempting me to linger with a bite of food, in this fey underworld?"

I cleared my throat; the King had figured out what I was doing as well, though he was phrasing it in the most uncharitable way. "It won't have that effect on you."

"A joke! A joke only. My apologies, Ladies Morell." He shrugged, easy and loose, though a little awkward with his gangly frame. He said: "Ah, well. I will accept this delightful offer. I shall sample ... a bread roll, I believe."

I fetched the roll personally. My left leg throbbed with every step as I limped over to the bench and back again, trying my best not to show the damage; Raine twitched as if she wanted to help, but she had figured out what I was doing, and let me complete the ritual. I walked back to the King and held out the bread with both hands.

He accepted it, sniffed the roll with obvious relish, then broke it in two and handed half back to me.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting half of the fluffy white roll.

We both took a bite. I chewed fast, still shaky with urgent hunger. The King took his time, chewing thoughtfully, pulling a face of culinary appreciation. The bread wasn’t anything special, nothing one could not have picked up in any Tesco.

“Breaking bread, huh?” Raine muttered. “Are you always like this?” she asked the King. “All metaphor, all the time?”

The King in Yellow winked at her, and that was his only answer.

“It’s his nature,” I said. “Just like Sevens. Oh, though, uh, I suppose you don’t remember her right now, do you, Raine?”

Raine shrugged. “Friend of yours is a friend of mine. That’s all I need for now, sweet thing.”

The King finished his piece of bread roll and frowned with fatherly concern. “Little Watcher, please do sit down. Your leg plagues you so. I can tell, you are not that skilled at concealing such a wound. We need not stand on ceremony any longer. Do not pain yourself on my account.”

The danger of His Majesty’s sorrowful wrath had passed. Somehow, by joining in with the play, I had averted the narrative. So, finally, I sat down, with relish.

“Join us, please,” I said. “We’ve got some more questions, if you have the time.”

The King nodded. We all withdrew, deeper into our refuge, huddling in the night-time shadows.

Raine remained on her feet, hovering behind my shoulder like the loyal hound she was — though she took a moment’s break to hand another sandwich to Evee and make sure she resumed eating. The King joined us, standing on the opposite side of the gap between the lockers, with his hands tucked into opposite sleeves. Lozzie kept peering at him, bobbing from foot to foot with naked curiosity. He indulged her with a smile, then a wink, then a wiggle of his nose.

“Lady Lilburne,” he called her again. Lozzie just grinned and giggled.

“Do you know each other?” I asked.

“Nooooope!” Lozzie chirped.

The King said, “Only by reputation. Both ways.”

The Fox padded back toward Evelyn as well, though her place in Evee’s lap was now firmly occupied by the Praem Plushie; perhaps it was my imagination again, but I could have sworn the plush was staring at the Fox with a look of gratitude. I watched the Praem doll for a few moments, but the stitched-on facial features did not twitch or adjust. The mouth was a simple line. The eyes were flat, round disks.

The King in Yellow made an abortive attempt to squat down and pet the Fox as she padded past, but the animal deftly hopped aside to avoid the invitation of his gentle hands. He cleared his throat and smiled an awkward smile, trying to pretend he had not been so casually rejected.

“Remarkable beast,” he muttered when he straightened up. “Most clever and wise, yes. I would like to speak with her, sometime.”

“Good luck with that,” Evelyn grunted around a mouthful of sandwich.

“So,” I said once the moment had passed. “Your Majesty, can you do anything practical, to help us?”

The King shook his head with genuine apology. “I am sorry, Little Watcher, but I am close to powerless within the boundaries of this dream. My earlier interruption has been neatly corrected.”

Raine snorted. “Some King you are. Can’t you summon us a squad of soldiers with guns? Or some body armour? Or just a nice quiet room so we can have a proper sleep?”

The King dipped his head. “I have played my hand already, inserted my one line of appearance. Any further adjustments to the script would attract ... how shall we say it? An editor, perhaps? At the very least it would bring the antagonists running to contain this divergence in narrative arc. I dare not. You would all be overwhelmed by my mistake. I am no longer welcome in this narrative.”

I sighed, but nodded and tried to look grateful. “You did all you could. For which we are very thankful.”

“Ah, but I leave you with one thing, do I not?”

“Excuse me?”

The King extended one hand and indicated the bladeless hilt of his sword, which I was still clutching in my left fist. “If you can pass this inheritance to my daughter, it may do some good.”

I held up the empty metal hilt and considered what he meant. “The pen is not always mightier than the sword?”

“Haha!” The King burst out with delighted laughter, then covered his mouth with the end of one white sleeve, like a courtly lady embarrassed by her own outburst. “Yes,” he said. “Sometimes even the most eloquent author must use a knife. I learned this early in my career, but my children have lived much more sheltered and comfortable lives than I. They have rarely had cause to take up arms.”

I slipped the hilt inside my yellow blanket for safe keeping. “I’ll give it to her when I find her.” I plucked at a corner of the blanket, too. “She left me this, by the way, in my room, when I woke up here. Could this be some kind of connection to her?”

The King frowned in thought, then reached forward with an unspoken question. I nodded, allowing him to touch the blanket. He rubbed the fabric between thumb and forefinger, then shook his head. “Her techniques are opaque to me. I am afraid I cannot tell.”

“Ahem,” Evelyn said out loud. “Speaking of helping us, I know something you can do, very easily.”

“Oh?” The King raised his eyebrows toward Evelyn.

“You can explain what’s going on. You can explain this place. This dream, whatever it is. I have my own theories, but they’re just theories. You’re ... well. The King in Yellow.” Evelyn huffed an exasperated sigh after she pronounced his full title, as if the effort had pained her.

The King dipped his head. “But I have already told you, Lady Saye.”

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted. “Typical cryptic bullshit. Look, start with this. What happened to you back in that room? How could a nurse put her fist through a ... a ‘god’?”

The King spread his hands and adopted a rather sheepish

expression. “This is not my kind of narrative, Lady Saye. I am not suited to the contours of these themes. Tragedy, arrogance, the descent from grace into self-ruination — those are my coin. Not whatever wonders my daughter is penning here. I did what little I could against the prevailing tone. But then it reasserted itself. That is what you witnessed. The ... ‘nurse’, she did me no real harm, but she would have, had I not fled the scene shortly after yourselves.”

Evelyn frowned. “So Sevens really is doing all of this?”

I cleared my throat. “I don’t think it’s that simple, Evee.”

“Quite right,” said the King. “This is a story, a narrative, and my daughter’s fingerprints are all over it. But it was not her script originally. She has been handed it, by another.”

“Me,” I said with a lump in my throat. “This is mine, isn’t it?”

“No.”

I blinked. “No? But ... Cygnet! All of it! All of this is my memories, my fears, my past. I mean, okay, well, it’s obviously also made from bits of everyone else’s fear too, but mostly mine.”

The King shook his head. “Your signature is in the content, Ladies Morell. All your signatures are there. But not in the form. The form is not of any of you. The form comes from ... ”

The King trailed off, opening the fingers of one hand toward the ceiling, toward the wrinkled black sky beyond.

“The Eye,” Evelyn grunted.

The King nodded. “Just so. This is the dream of the Casma — the Eye. But it has no narrative, no stories, nothing of its own. This narrative is an attempt to explain itself, to itself. But it has nothing other than that which it has observed, no context but that which is seen, without being comprehended. Am I correct, Little Watcher? I use your own words to describe this, for it is beyond me.”

“I ... well, I think so. We’re inside the Eye’s dream?”

“Hmmm.” The King stroked his beard again. “What does it mean to say that a dream belongs to oneself? A dream is something we ‘have’, yes? As we have an experience. Does an experience belong to us?”

Raine said: “Experience changes us. Even if just a little.”

The King smiled and nodded to Raine. “Just so.”

My heart had risen into my throat. My skin was covered in goosebumps. My mind was racing. “Wait, wait. You’re saying ... ”

The King regarded me with a look just a fraction too sharp for the warmth of the Welcoming Prince.

“The play’s the thing,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king,” I finished the quote, then sighed. “Yes, fine, I get it. That is the third time you’ve used that Hamlet quote on me. Sevens said it once, too!”

The King cleared his throat, vaguely embarrassed. “The rule of threes is a strong technique in any story. I am afraid I may have stepped on my daughter’s toes by incrementing the count too far.”

“You can’t be serious.” I was shaking my head. “We’re actually doing it? This play is all for the Eye’s benefit? We’re, what, showing it all this?”

The King shrugged. “I cannot be certain. It is merely how I see the world. It is as I advised you, during our previous meeting, no? What is observed—”

“Changes the observer,” I finished for him. “Yes, that’s what you told me, last time we met. Put on a play for the Eye.” I sighed and shook my head. “Sevens said the exact same thing. I didn’t think she would go ahead with it, not this literally.”

The King smiled a sad smile. “She is writing hard. But she is not the sole author, nor in total control of this narrative. If she was, I could find her myself, merely by asking. But ... ” He shook his head.

Raine said: “We’ve heard some of the other people here mention a ‘Director’. That could be her. The wordplay’s pretty obvious.”

The King shrugged with his floppy white sleeves. “I wish you luck.”

For a long moment, nobody said anything. The implications of what was happening here — or the King’s theory of what was happening here — took a while to sink in. Evelyn and I shared a long glance. Raine sighed with a curious look in her eyes, tilting her head back and forth as she examined the King in Yellow. Lozzie sat down with a flutter of pastel poncho, holding her arms out for the Fox; to my

surprise, the animal gleefully hopped up into her lap.

The King broke the silence: "And now, my part in this play is done. To linger upon the boards risks the attention of an over-eager stage-hand, clearing away the scenery. I must depart, before I am noticed."

"Is there really no other aid you can render?" I said. "Thank you for all you've done, but even just a hint would help."

The King shook his head sadly. "I do not see the contours of the story, for it is not mine to tell. It is yours, Little Watcher. Look after my daughter, please."

"I promise I will," I said — then glanced over at Evelyn. "Evee, we need to start planning. If we can find the Director—"

"Oop!" Lozzie let out a little yelp of surprise. The Fox joined in with a yip.

Raine said. "Huh. He's gone."

And so he was.

During a single split-second in which we'd all been looking away, the King in Yellow had departed. In his place was nothing but floor tiles and moonlight.

His shed disguise still lay in a heap upon the floor at the mouth of the row of lockers. Raine spent a few moments down on her knees, sorting through the pile to see if it contained anything useful, but it really was all paper mache and dyed wool, not a scrap of real armour among the fakery. She gave up and returned to the bench, clapping one hand on my shoulder.

"Yip!," went the Saye Fox, snuggled down in Lozzie's lap. Lozzie herself stared at me with big round eyes, sleepy at the edges, slowly tilting her head back and forth as if she was fighting the urge to flop over. Evelyn was focused with thought, hunched deep in the seat of her wheelchair.

My left leg was throbbing with slow waves of pain. Exhaustion was setting back in, after the excitement of our unexpected royal guest.

"Well," Evelyn said eventually, chewing slowly on the last of bites of her second sandwich. "That was enlightening, I suppose. Maybe if we get that hilt to this 'Director', the whole damn dream will re-

organise. Regardless, we still need a plan.”

I nodded in agreement. “You were right about what you said earlier, Evee. This place runs on some kind of narrative logic.”

“Living in a story,” Raine murmured. “Talk about meta-fictional, huh?”

“I say we lie low,” I offered. “We sleep here until the morning. Story or not, we’re all exhausted. We eat, rest, sleep on the towels Raine brought.”

Evelyn shook her head. “What if we could brute force the dawn? What if we act like dawn has already arrived, like it’s time for the next day?”

Raine laughed. “That might work for you, my oh-so-spooky lady, but if this is a story, I’m still in it. We all gotta sleep sometime.”

Evelyn snorted, but not without affection. “What happened to ‘I can fuck all night on a thimbleful of water’, Raine?”

I sputtered. “Evee!”

Lozzie snorted as well, into a corner of her pastel poncho. I wondered if the Fox understood.

“I’m being serious,” Evelyn grunted.

Raine grinned back down at Evee. “That’s something I said once, isn’t it?”

I lit up with sudden hope. “Raine, you remember?!”

But Raine shook her head. “Nah, just sounds like something from my mouth. And yeah, sure.” She shrugged, shoulders rolling with easy amusement. “I could go all this night and into the next day. I could take a dozen nurses — fight or fuck, whichever way they want. But I’m only human. I’ll slow down eventually. I do have a refractory period. We need to rest, one way or another.”

Evelyn tutted. “No, we don’t, not really. This is a dream, a story. ”

Raine stuck to her guns. “Besides, Heather’s leg is hurt. We need to take weight off that wound, for as long as we can. She needs to rest.”

Evelyn hesitated. “Ah.”

"I can walk!" I said. "I can!"

Raine caught my eyes. Her gaze smouldered, dark and knowing. "And every step is pain. You're resting, sweet thing. No arguments."

A tremor of command gripped my belly. "O-okay."

Evelyn sighed. "Fine. But, right here? In this old locker room? Raine, one of those things out there wandered in here and peered down the rows. We could get caught. In our sleep!"

Raine nodded and folded her arms over her chest. "We can sleep in turns. Set watches. I can take the first few hours while you all get some rest."

"You're a good girl, Raine," I said. "But you need rest as well."

"I can go first!" Lozzie chirped. "'Cos then I'll be going!"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Good point. You're not staying, are you, Lozzie?"

Lozzie shook her head, absent-mindedly petting the Fox.

"We need a proper plan, for the morning," Evelyn grunted. "What's our next move?"

"Wake the others," I replied without hesitation. "Zheng and Twil take priority. If we can break either of them out of the nightmare, the nurses won't be able to stop us. Zheng could have taken on all those nurses yesterday without even breaking a sweat."

Raine made a curious purring noise in her throat. "I'm dying to meet this girl. Sounds like a challenge."

"She's the other corner of our other triangle," I said to Raine. "Um, I know that's confusing, sorry. You and her have a ... well, an odd relationship, but you're very close."

Raine grinned. "Bet we are."

"But she doesn't look much like her usual self right now," I said. "Sadly."

Evelyn said: "I agree in principle." She tightened her grip on the Praem plush in her lap, an unconscious gesture of protective love. "If we can't reach Praem, we should free some muscle. But I must insist we try Twil first."

"Why's that?" I asked.

Evelyn raised her chin, radiating a fraction of her old smouldering pride. "Because I've been thinking, and I think I can wake her up."

I blinked in surprise. "How?"

Evelyn narrowed her eyes. "You haven't figured it out? Neither of you? What about you, Lozzie, did you see her?"

Lozzie shook her head. "Fuzzy is all un-fuzzed!"

"Exactly," Evelyn said. "It's obvious. Isn't it? No? Am I the only one who sees this?"

"Evee," I said very gently. "I think of all of us, you're actually the closest to Twil. You know her better than we do."

Evelyn squint-frowned at me. "Don't be ridiculous, Heather."

I sighed. "Evee, she stayed in your bedroom the night before Wonderland."

Evelyn froze. "Yes? And?"

"We all know you and her are having some kind of on-again off-again thing. Which is entirely your business, of course. Just, well. You know. Um, sorry."

Evelyn stared at me, jaw clenched, slowly turning red around the ears.

"Evee," I added quickly, "I'm not judging you, and it's none of my —"

"We just— we— there's no— I—" Evelyn jerked out several sentence fragments, but could not get much further.

"Bambi-style?" Raine said. Her voice was suspiciously free of mocking.

"Tch!" Evelyn hissed. "Don't call it that! For fuck's sake. Stupid term."

"Excuse me?" I asked, a little confused. Lozzie had gone silent, muffling a giggle in her poncho, on the verge of losing her composure completely. She seemed more and more like her usual self with every laugh.

"Means they just cuddle," Raine said. "No fucking."

Evelyn rolled her eyes so hard I thought she might detach both retina. She thumped the arm of her wheelchair. “I thought you said it was none of your business!?”

“None of Heather’s business,” Raine purred, smirking with too much pleasure. “But all of mine.”

Evelyn glowered with the force of an open forge-mouth. The Praem Doll twitched in her lap.

I cleared my throat before things could spiral out of control. “Evee, I’m sorry. To answer your original question, no, I don’t think I know how to break Twil out. What do we do? What’s your plan?”

Evelyn lowered her eyes from Raine and focused on me, taking a deep breath to expel her mortified anger. “It’s simple,” she said. “Twil is self-conscious about being a werewolf.”

I frowned. “Really? I ... I don’t think that’s right? I always got the impression she loves being a werewolf.”

Evelyn sighed and waved a hand, brushing my statement aside like a bunch of old cobwebs. “Yes, fine, she does love being a werewolf, but it’s more complex than that. Look, just get me in front of her and let me speak. She’s wrapped up in all these anxieties, and I think I can snap her out of it.”

“You really think it’s that simple?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Well, no. But I do know how to needle her, in just the right way.”

Raine murmured, “That’s what she said.”

I looked up at Raine, feeling rather clueless. “I’m sorry, Twil said that? I don’t remember that.”

Evelyn huffed. “Raine is winding me up, Heather. That was a sex joke.”

Lozzie chirped, “That’s what she saaaaaid!”

Evelyn sighed again. “Right.”

“Oh,” I said.

Raine and I shared a look. She shrugged, then said, “I’m willing to put my trust in Evee. Even though I only just met her. Weird stuff.”

"Me also," I said. "Then we're agreed? We go for Twil, first thing in the morning? Do you think she and her two girls will be in the same spot as before?"

"Narratively speaking," Evelyn said, "it does make sense. Though ... " She trailed off with a grumpy sigh, then tapped her fingers against the arm of her wheelchair. Suddenly she looked angry and bitter. "Getting me out there without being seen is going to be a bitch of a job. The nurses will spot me from a mile off."

Raine nodded slowly. "Not many girls here in wheelchairs, right."

Evelyn's eyes flashed at Raine. "If you suggest carrying me—"

"Wasn't gonna," said Raine, unsmiling and serious. "We take you in your chair. We just need a way."

I unwrapped a chocolate roll, bit off one end, and chewed while I thought about the problem. "We could get Twil to come to us, somehow. Bait her over. Maybe peel her away from her friends?"

Evelyn said, "I can think of a few ways."

"You haven't met this Twil. She's completely unlike herself."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "More importantly, Heather, what do we do after we've freed her?"

I stared at Evee for a moment, blank-faced. I must have looked rather gormless. "Um ... we ... take on the nurses? We rally the Knights, somehow. We free Maisie!"

Evelyn held my gaze, level and calm. "And what if that doesn't end the dream?"

"Oh ... "

Raine took a deep breath, straightening up and rolling her shoulders. "We start another riot. That's what."

"Yeah!" Lizzie cheered.

"Oh!" I lit up. "Oh, that sounds ... dangerous, but good."

"Better organised this time," Raine went on. "Better prepared, with a plan for how to escalate. We need the Knights on side, that part is right. And the ringleaders of what happened earlier. Lozzers, can you do that for us? Can you help get the other patients ready?"

“Mhmm!” Lozzie chirped. “I can!”

“Good,” Raine purred. “A riot, a real one, one that doesn’t end until we’re in control of the asylum and the prison. It’s the only thing that makes sense. Take over the institution, throw open the cells, make hostages of all the staff.”

“Huh,” Evelyn laughed without much humour. “Even lacking memories, you’re still Raine. That idea is dangerous, difficult to control, and will have unclear outcomes.”

“I know,” I added with a sigh. “It’s not the best, but—”

“And I love it,” said Evee. “You always were suited to be a mad bomb-thower, Raine. Well, you’ve finally found your moment. Let’s hope we can locate you some dynamite before the job is done.”

Raine grinned at Evee. “Oh yeah. I can see why we get on so well.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, though,” Evelyn said. “First is rest. We should eat up the rest of this food, too. Heather, you have—”

Tap-tap — tap — tap — tap-tap-tap.

Everyone froze. The Fox went stiff in Lozzie’s lap, ears suddenly perked up.

The tapping noise was soft, muffled, and metallic, like fingernails rapping against a faraway pipe, somewhere off in the dark of the night time asylum.

It came again, in a slightly different form: *Tap-tap-tap. Taptap. Tap. Tap.*

Evelyn hissed, “What the—”

“No no!” I whispered. “I recognise this! It’s coming from the pipes! I heard this same thing, in the morning! Somebody was tapping on the radiator pipes.”

I stood up from the bench, limping on my wounded leg. Raine helped me hobble down the row of lockers, to one of the iron radiators on the back wall.

Tap-tap-tap. Tap — tap. Tap. Tap.

The tapping was coming from the radiator — from all of them, from the pipes that connected them to the asylum’s heating system. It

was so faint that we would not have heard it if not for the bare walls and tiled floor of the locker room. The tapping made little echoes in the moonlit shadows.

Some distant source was sounding out a message into the night.

“What does it mean?” Evelyn called in a whisper. “Heather, what does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” I hissed back. “But I think we should try to find the sender.”

bedlam boundary – 24.13

And so, for the second time on that premature and artificial night, Raine ventured forth into the echoing shadows of Cygnet Hospital — alone, unsupported, without backup.

Raine — my steadfast knight, my faithful hound, my dream-bound lover, my rock in the storm-tossed seas, the divine hand from above which had pulled me from destruction in a way I could never fully repay — went out into the darkness once again, without argument or question, without debate or hesitation, without aid or comfort. She set out on a quest, for nothing more than a hunch of mine, about a nocturnal tapping on some distant node of the hospital's heating system. She left the fragile safety of our refuge, to skulk and sneak through the hallways and passages of this unnatural witching hour, with the silver moonlight chasing her heels, with the darkly glinting blade of her unsheathed machete held easy in her unwavering fist.

I didn't even have to ask; she volunteered, and would accept no rebuke.

"I'll be safe enough alone," she told me before she left, purring reassurances as she limbered up. "Sneaking missions are kinda my thing. Keep it smooth, keep it soft, keep it stealthy, I know what I'm doing. I'll follow the pipes of the heating system, follow the sounds. Should take me right there, as long as it's not too far."

"Raine, please," I had protested. "Don't follow the trail anywhere dangerous. Please promise me. Please be a ... a good girl? Be a good girl. I ... I command you to be a good girl."

Raine smirked. "Sure thing. Just for you. If I don't find our tapping friend within thirty minutes, I'll turn back, I promise. I'm not looking to be a hero over a malfunctioning boiler. Hey, not that I believe it's just a mechanical fault. Somebody out there is calling. Maybe for us. Maybe this 'Sevens', right?"

"Right, right, exactly. Okay. Okay, good. Good."

"And?"

“Good girl,” I repeated. Raine grunted with pleasure, then kissed me on the forehead.

Nobody was happy with the necessity of this solo expedition, except perhaps Raine herself. She had already risked capture or worse once before; she had already secured food and extra clothes and the weapon she now wielded, not to mention how she’d led Lozzie back to safety. She had done more than enough, the night wasn’t getting any younger, and we all needed rest. Her included. Raine was not superhuman, no matter how she liked to present herself. She did not have to offer herself up to the task.

But the tapping on the radiator pipes was a clue with a time limit.

A seven-tap pattern, though what it meant was anybody’s guess. Evelyn said it didn’t correspond to any magical symbolic system she was aware of; Raine said it wasn’t Morse Code. Lozzie could only attest that it was most certainly not a ‘funky beat’. We even had the Fox listen to it, by encouraging her over to the radiator where the tapping was most clearly heard, but she was uninterested and did not respond.

The tapping only came at night, not during the daylight. I could not recall ever hearing it during my long initial exploration of the dream-spaces of Cygnet Hospital. If we waited for morning, the trail might well go cold, leaving us with an unsolved mystery for the next night — and who knew if we would even make it to another dusk?

We needed every advantage we could get, every possible ally we could find, to exploit every chink in the institution’s armour.

We had to investigate this tonight, while darkness still lay upon Cygnet Asylum.

But we could not safely creep through the midnight halls with Evelyn’s wheelchair, not without the cover of the riot to distract the nurses and mask our passage. Evee would have to stay behind — but leaving her by herself was unthinkable, she would be defenceless; there was absolutely no way I was leaving Evelyn’s side in this place. We couldn’t leave her with Lozzie, either — not because I believed that Lozzie was a threat to Evee, even in Lozzie’s altered state, but because if a staff member wandered into the locker room again, Evee would need help hiding, as I had achieved previously. I wasn’t quite certain that Lozzie was capable of doing

that.

Our only option was to pour all our cares onto Raine's shoulders alone. She could move quick and light, darting through the corridors, then return to tell of whatever she found. Depending on the result, we could retrace her footsteps when dawn arrived, when the corridors were less dangerous, less filled with unseen monsters.

Raine carried nothing but her knife, barefoot for stealth and speed.

Last thing before she went, Raine shared a private word with Lozzie; I couldn't hear what they said, whispering together at the end of the row of lockers, though I imagined it had something to do with my safety. Raine had not entirely trusted her before, always interposing herself between us. But things had changed over the course of this day, had they not?

Raine slipped a hand around the back of Lozzie's neck and brought their foreheads together, flesh touching flesh, skulls beneath skin. Whispered words passed between them, brown eyes locked on blue. Lozzie smirked. Raine smiled back with a sharp edge to her lips.

They parted a moment later. Raine turned back toward me and Evee and the Fox; she saluted us with the naked blade of her machete, then slipped away, out of sight, heading for the single door of the locker room.

She was so light on her feet that I barely even heard the door open and close.

But somehow, down in my guts, I knew she was gone.

And then we were three — or four, if one included the Saye Fox, dozing once again on the wooden bench. Five if one counted the Praem Plushie in Evelyn's lap. Of that, I was not sure.

Lozzie flounced and fluttered back down the row of lockers, pastel poncho dyed dark in the dead-eyed moonlight pouring through the high, narrow window. Her shiv was nowhere to be seen, her pale little hands empty of sharp objects and mostly clean of blood.

Evelyn spoke up from behind me: "Alright. Alright, you two, we are now alone and vulnerable. That means low voices, keep noise to a minimum, and listen for the sounds of anything moving out there in the corridors. And Heather, for pity's sake, sit down."

But neither Lozzie or I answered. We had eyes only for each other.

Lozzie paused just beyond arm's reach. A playful smile bounced onto her lips, blue eyes dancing in the moonlit shadows. She opened her arms with a wide flourish, poncho fluttering outward like the softly furred membranes of a flying squirrel.

"Hug?" she chirped. "Heathy-huggies? Proper huggie-wugs? For Lozzer's lozziers?"

I hesitated.

My earlier fear of Lozzie had curdled — separated into two distinct impressions. On one hand, this was still the girl whom I had caught earlier that day watching videos of torture and maiming, revelling in cruelty and suffering, which had turned my stomach and brought a cold sweat to my skin. Instinctive caution still held me tight. My body whispered that this was a predator, that I should run from her, without looking back.

On the other hand, the more time Lozzie spent with me and Raine and Evelyn, the more she seemed like her usual self, at least in outward behaviour, speech patterns, and the way she expressed herself.

But the fear remained. No matter how awake our Lozzie seemed, the dreamer dreamed on.

Had this always been a part of her? Had this aspect of Lozzie simply gone unnoticed because I hadn't wanted to see it before?

So, I hesitated — but only for a moment.

"Hug," I said with a nod, then stepped forward with a jerking limp, and opened my arms for Lozzie.

She drew me into a wriggly, giggly, enclosing hug, wrapping her pastel poncho around my back, mixing the fabrics of our protective colourations — her blue-pink-white rustling against my soft yellow blanket. She held on for a little while, rubbing her hands up and down my back, and did not slip a shiv between my ribs. When we parted, she bobbed her head in wordless gratitude.

I let out a breath that I hadn't known I'd been holding. My trust was well-placed, the risk rewarded.

Evelyn cleared her throat. "Are both of you going to continue ignoring me, or have I turned invisible?"

I turned back to Evelyn, cheeks flushed with sudden guilt. Eevee was frowning at the pair of us, one hand on the Praem Doll in her lap. The Doll was staring at us too, with those blank, flat, disc-shaped eyes of stitched fabric.

“Sorry, Eevee-weeve!” Lozzie chirped, peering past me. “Had to get emergency hugs!”

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes, but she contained the worst of her ire; Lozzie was hard to stay angry at. “Yes, I’m sure you did. What were you and Raine whispering about, anyway? What was all that?”

Lozzie put a finger to her lips and tilted her head sideways, as if deciding what to say.

“Um,” I butted in quickly. “Lozzie, you don’t have to explain if you don’t want to. It’s okay, it’s—”

“I’m dangerous!” Lozzie chirped. “Danger girl!”

I swallowed a wince.

Evelyn said nothing, waiting for more. When it became evident that Lozzie wasn’t going to explain, Eevee said: “Yes? Yes. You’ve always been dangerous, Lozzie. What are you talking about?”

Lozzie beamed at Eevee. “Nothing!” She flapped her arms wide again. “Eevee want hugs too?”

Evelyn cleared her throat, suddenly uncomfortable. “You know that’s hard for me. Even normally it’s hard. Like this, in this parody of a body? I feel as if a stiff breeze is going to snap me in two.”

Lozzie pointed at the plushie in Eevee’s lap. “Praem can transmit!”

Evelyn squinted at her. “What?”

“Give Praem! Hug transmission! Hug transportation!” Lozzie held out both her hands. “I’ll be gentle, promise promise!”

Evelyn didn’t quite seem to comprehend, and I was a bit lost as well, but after a moment’s hesitation she handed over the Praem Plushie. Lozzie accepted the soft toy with exaggerated reverence, then squeezed the tiny Praem against her chest, engulfing the Plushie in a hug, emitting a high-pitched ‘eeeeee!’ as she did so. Then Lozzie returned the Praem Plushie to Evelyn’s lap.

Evee didn't seem to know what to do. For a moment she hesitated, then averted her eyes and pressed the Doll gently against her own abdomen.

"Well, yes," she muttered, points of colour blossoming in her cheeks. "Mm. Indeed. I see now. Thank you, Lozzie. Yes." Evelyn cleared her throat a second time as Lozzie smothered a giggle. Then she turned an unimpressed frown upon me, voice rising back to normal. "Heather, sit down."

"Oh," I said. "I'm fine, I'm just—"

"Sit. Down," Evelyn snapped. Apparently the second-hand hug had stiffened her spine. "Raine was right, you need to rest that leg. You have a bloody great gash on it, and it's still bleeding. Standing there isn't going to help anybody. Sit down."

"I—"

"Raine will be back within the promised time slot," Evelyn ground the words out through clenched teeth; she was wracked with doubt and fear as well, covering it with concern. "Sit down. Rest the leg. Now. Or I'll ... I'll throw Praem at you."

I tutted. "You wouldn't."

Evelyn raised the Praem Plushie in one hand. A blush burned in her cheeks, pale and thin, the most she could muster. "I shall have Praem menace you. Sit down."

I made a show of surrendering, putting up both hands as I sat down on the wooden bench. I stretched out my wounded leg as best I could, trying not to wince. "Okay, okay. I don't want to irritate Praem, after all."

Lozzie joined us too, her pastel poncho pillowing outward across the cold wood. She bumped her knee against mine — against my uninjured leg — and shot me a sneaky little smile.

"Better," Evelyn grunted, returning the plushie to her lap. "Now, we best spend this time wisely." She nodded at the rest of the food Raine had secured for us earlier, much of it still inside the fabric shopping bag. "Eat up until you're both full, we're all going to need our strength. And pass me another sandwich. I feel like I could eat a racehorse, bones and all."

Evelyn had a good point — we had little to do but eat and wait,

counting the seconds and minutes until Raine returned, trying not to think about what would happen if she didn't. I munched my way through several bags of crisps and a handful of little chocolate rolls, craving sugar and salt, trying to replenish my energy; what I really wanted was lemons, and lots of them. An entire supermarket bag of citrus fruit would set right everything that was wrong, or at least that was how I felt, though that was not an option. Evelyn ate another sandwich, chewing and swallowing with mechanical concentration, frowning at the failed magic circles she had drawn on some of the nearby lockers. Lozzie inhaled several bread rolls, and tucked one away inside her poncho for later use.

Ten or fifteen minutes passed with no sign or sound of Raine.

Cygnets Hospital was silent beyond the furtive rustling and muted breathing of our locker-lined corner — all except for the arrhythmic tap-tap-tapping on the radiator pipes, audible only when we three held our breath. Sallow moonlight lit a slice of my pajama bottoms, just above the wound on my left leg. The throbbing was slow and steady, hard and relentless. Pain washed upward through my hips with every beat of my heart. For a while the wound had not seemed so bad, but now I realised that had been an illusion. My nerve endings had been numbed by adrenaline, by the brief appearance of the King in Yellow. Now the pain was growing hard to ignore, turning my thoughts to static, absorbing a greater and greater portion of my attention. I felt fragmented and hazy.

We all slipped into an uneasy silence, food mostly finished, whispers trapped behind our lips. Evelyn sighed, eyes watching the moonlight through the window. Lozzie started to hum and swing her legs, but she trailed off after a while; her tune was light, but the echoes returned oppressive and gloomy. The Fox slept on, the only comfortable one among us.

Eventually I realised that Evelyn was staring at me instead of the window. Our eyes met, but she did not look away or speak up.

“... Evee?”

“Mm,” she grunted. “Heather, come here and let me have a look at you, please.”

“Ah? What for?”

Evelyn made an impatient gesture. “Just slide down the bench.

Don't put weight on the leg, don't stand up. Come here."

I did as Evee requested, sliding to the end of the bench until our knees were almost touching. Evelyn leaned forward in the seat of her wheelchair to get a better look at me. One of her hands was coiled around the Praem Plushie in her lap, hugging it tight; those flat, disc-shaped eyes seemed to examine me as well, though with less intensity. The Fox briefly looked up, found nothing of interest, and resumed her nap.

Evee held out her free hand. "Give me your wrist. Either one."

I offered my wrist. "What are we doing?"

Evelyn took my wrist and pressed her thumb over my pulse, pausing to count inside her own head. I could not help but notice how thin and tired her hands were, how pale and shrunken, all skin and bone.

"Normal enough," she grunted. She turned my hand over and examined my fingernails one by one. Then she let go and gestured at my torso. "Show me your flanks, where your tentacles usually are."

"Um ... not that I mind sharing my body with you, but—"

Evelyn tutted, huffed, and rolled her eyes. Lozzie smothered a giggle with her poncho.

"Heather," Evelyn hissed, "I'm not ogling you. I've seen you half-naked plenty of times. If I wanted to leer at your tits, I would probably not choose this as the location in which to do so. I'm not Raine."

A lump formed in my throat; I hadn't wanted to think about this. "I'm not trying to be funny," I said. "I want to know what you're doing."

Evelyn huffed an impatient sigh. "What do you think I'm doing? Everything here is wrong, including our bodies." She gestured with frustration at her withered leg and missing prosthetic. "You're alone in there, correct? Singlet Heather, not seven of you like normal. Which is wrong. You're missing your tentacles, your bioreactor, all of it, which is also wrong. I'm trying to figure out if there's anything else out of place. Now, show me your sides, come on."

My turn to sigh. "Evee, I don't think you're going to discover the

secrets of the dream by goosing my flank.”

Evelyn squinted at me. “What happened to ‘I’m not trying to be funny’?”

The lump in my throat grew so large that for a moment I could not speak. I looked away, composure dropping from my face, pain in my eyes. Evelyn must have noticed, because her tone shifted to baffled concern.

“Heather?” she whispered. “What’s wrong now?”

I swallowed hard, unknotting my throat. “Evee, my body is all wrong, yes. You’re correct. More than you know. The ... the ... abyssal dysphoria? The same urge that led me to make my tentacles real in the first place? It’s painful, like this. I’m not quite at the stage where I want to claw off my skin, but I know I will eventually reach that point if I keep thinking about it. I’ve been in momentum all day, moving, moving, moving. No time to think, and ... I need to not think, about that, about this. I ... I feel ... wrong, being looked at so closely, right now.”

“Oh,” Evelyn said. “Um. Mm.”

“Mmhmm.”

Lozzie murmured too. “Heathy ... ”

Evelyn went silent for a long moment. Then she said, “I don’t know if it helps to know this, Heather, but I feel pretty much the same about my body right now.”

I nodded, unable to meet her eyes. “It does. Here.”

Then I lifted my new disgusting brown jumper and my scratchy white institutional pajama top, to show Evelyn my flanks and the base of my ribcage.

Evelyn was a saint; she didn’t react with surprise, or comment on my sudden acquiescence, let alone make a snide remark. She simply leaned forward and looked, clean and clinical, detached but caring, examining my skin without a sound, except a murmur of ‘Okay, other side, if you please’. Evelyn Saye, the mage, treated my body as a problem to be solved. For once, that helped.

When she was done, Evee leaned back. I covered myself again and pulled my yellow blanket tight. Lozzie peered out from behind her

hands — I hadn't even realised she'd covered her eyes for me. I could have hugged her again.

Evelyn said nothing.

"Well?" I asked.

Evelyn cleared her throat. "Do you want me to say anything, or not? I can just keep my thoughts to myself, if you prefer."

"I mean, um ... yes, please do tell me."

Evelyn sucked on her teeth. "I saw nothing. No sign of your usual attachment points for the tentacles. No bruising, no damage, nothing at all." She shrugged, narrow shoulders moving below her grey dressing gown. "Nothing useful. My apologies."

"There's no need for apologies, it's okay," I said. "I just ... it feels so wrong. Like most of me is missing."

"Mm. Obscene," Evelyn said, sucking on her teeth, gazing at my face. "Heather, lean forward, look at me, please. No need for undressing this time, nothing like that."

I did as Evelyn asked. She leaned forward too, so our faces were mere inches apart. For a moment I thought she was going to kiss me on the lips; Lozzie evidently shared the same thought, for she emitted a little giggle-gasp and then stopped up her mouth with a corner of her poncho.

But Eevee didn't react to that. Neither did she kiss me, to my slight disappointment.

She just frowned, peering into my eyes. After a minute or two she leaned back again.

"Huh," she grunted.

"H-huh?" I echoed, still poised for the kiss that never came. "Eevee? What does 'huh' mean?"

"Your eyes," she said.

"What about my eyes?" I leaned back too, one hand going to my right cheekbone, just below the orb in question.

"They're ... odd."

I waited for more, feeling almost as denied as when I'd thought she

was about to kiss me. “Evee? Don’t be cryptic, please, don’t leave it at that. I think I need to know if my eyes have turned into mushrooms or if there’s something swimming behind my eyeballs. Just tell me. Nothing else is going to surprise me in this place, really.”

Evelyn frowned harder, but not without compassion. “I’m not sure I can put it into words. It’s not the colour or the shape. They’re still your eyes, they’re still you, just ... different, somehow.” She sighed and waved a hand. “Maybe it’s because I’m only talking to one of you, instead of all seven. And it’s always been all of you, in the past, even before we knew it.”

Lozzie chirped in agreement. “Mmhmm! Just a smalllllll piece of Heathies. Not the whole Heathy collective brain group!”

“Mm,” Evelyn grunted. “Perhaps that’s what I’m feeling. Like all we’re seeing is one limb, not the whole of her.”

“Oh!” I lit up. “Like what happened in that dream one time, the one with Mister Squiddy and Lozzie? I considered that too, but this doesn’t feel anything like that.” I flapped my arms. “I mean, what do you see when you look at me? It’s actually me, right? I’m shaped like me.”

“Heather-shaped is Heather-shaped,” Lozzie said.

“Well, mostly,” I sighed. “Other than the missing tentacles.”

Evelyn nodded slowly. “Yes, I just see you, nothing weird. Do you think the other six of you are around here somewhere?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. Six other Heathers would be pretty active if they were free. They must be locked up somewhere. Maybe inside that high-security area. At least, that’s my working assumption for now. If we can break in there—”

A soft click came from the front of the locker room — the door.

A return, or an intruder.

We held our collective breath. Lozzie bounced to her feet, metal shiv sliding into her hand. Evelyn swallowed and clutched the Praem Plushie tighter. The Fox sprang from her nap and sniffed the air, little black nose twitching at some secret scent. I readied myself to grab Evee’s wheelchair, in case this was a repeat of earlier.

The door clicked shut again.

“Ladies!” came a panting whisper. “Your scout returns!”

“Raine!” I almost cheered — quietly.

Raine hurried across the locker room, no longer concealing the sound of her footsteps. I stood to meet her despite the pounding throb in my left leg, eager to know what she had discovered, eager to welcome her back with a hug.

A blood-drenched spectre stepped around the edge of the locker-canyon, into the shaft of moonlight.

I swallowed a yelp, saved from a scream only by the unmistakable shape of Raine’s face beneath the splatters of gore. A toothy white grin ripped a line of clean white amid the bloody mess.

Raine was covered with a liberal helping of fresh blood. The sticky crimson sheen was soaked into her tank-top and her ragged pajama bottoms, matted in her hair, stuck to her exposed skin, smeared on her face, and slathered on the naked blade of her machete.

Evelyn sighed, rather unimpressed, as if she’d expected this. Lozzie murmured, “Woooow!”

“Raine!” I blurted out. “Are you alright?! Did you get hurt? Did you —”

Raine shot me a wink. “You should see the other guy, sweet thing. And hey, don’t worry, none of this is mine. Haha— ah, ow.” She winced and tensed up around her stomach.

“Raine!”

I rushed to her side, but she waved me off with her free hand. “It’s okay, Heather. Seriously. None of this is mine, not even a graze or a nosebleed. Just a couple of bruises. Don’t get yourself all smeared with this. Stay off for a sec, okay?”

“Raine, we’re in a dream,” I snapped. “I don’t have to worry about bloodborne diseases. Swear to me that you’re alright!”

“I swear it, none of it’s mine.” Raine straightened back up and shook her head. “And it’s cool, I’m gonna rinse off in one of those showers in a sec. No sense muddying us both.”

Evelyn snapped: “Did you leave a trail? Raine, did you leave a trail

of blood on your way back?”

Raine shook her head. I realised she was still panting with effort, doing her best to hide it in the cadence of her words. “Nah. Wiped off the worst on a wall. Feet too. No footprints, no trail, no evidence. Except the corpse I left, didn’t have time to move that.”

“Alright, good,” Evelyn said. “Well done. Go get rinsed off if you need to. You absolute fucking mad woman.”

“In a sec,” Raine answered with a smirk. “Hey, sweet thing, Heather. Sling me one of those chocolate rolls from the bag, will you?”

“Of course!”

I grabbed a snack for Raine, unwrapped the packaging, then pressed the packaged end into her free hand so she didn’t smear blood all over her own food. She inhaled the snack in three quick bites.

“Good girl,” I murmured. “Good girl. Well done. Well done for coming back to us. Well done. Oh my gosh, but that is a lot of blood.”

“I found our mysterious tapper,” she said.

Evelyn tutted. “Debrief can wait. Get clean.”

“Uh-uh,” Raine panted. “Gimme a sec. The tapping, it’s not too far from here, in a staff area on the hospital ground floor. All scratchy carpets and cubicles, like an office. Know what I mean?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “Anyway, the tapping pipes lead through a wall, into a corner office or something like that. But it’s weird, it’s not like anything else we’ve seen in this place.”

“Weird how?” I asked.

“Steel door. Steel and glass. Chrome frame. Like some shit from a Silicon Valley techbro office. Not real security, all style, no substance. But I couldn’t get the thing open, it’s locked up tight, can’t jimmy it or anything. Dream logic, I guess. But get this — it’s locked with a keypad. But not like a normal keypad. It’s got dozens of buttons, things that aren’t even numbers on there. I played with it for a bit, but no dice.”

“Mathematics!” I said, eyes going wide. “Brain-math! Eevee, do you think—”

“Mhmm,” Evelyn grunted. “We can’t be certain, but it could be an abstract representation of self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics. Maybe. Good thinking, Heather.”

“I can get in there!” I said. “I can probably solve it!”

Raine grinned and held up a hand. “Slow your roll. We ain’t doing it right now. It’s not good out there. Nurses are gonna be swarming all over the place after I passed through.”

“Ah, indeed,” Evelyn drawled. “Is that why you look like an extra from an interactive Halloween show?”

“Yes,” I added, clearing my throat with very careful politeness. “That is ... well, I think it might be the most blood I’ve ever seen you covered with, certainly. Other than your own.”

Raine raised her eyebrows at me. “Other than my own?”

“Oh, you got shot in the leg once,” I explained. “Long story. Maybe later.”

Evelyn sighed. “Yes, Raine, what happened?”

Raine lost her smug sheen. She blew out a slow sigh. “Ran into a nurse on the way back. Or, what I think was a nurse, probably. Couldn’t get away clean, not without a fight. She was gonna raise the alarm, then I would have been up against a dozen of the things, up shit creek with no paddle. Had to go hard and fast.” She gestured with her machete. “This is lot worse than it looks, it was over pretty quick.”

“What ... ” My stomach went sour. “What do you mean, you ‘think’ it was a nurse?”

Raine gave me a dark look. “Shit is weird out there at night. Like all the masks are off. I don’t even really know what I saw, just that it bled.”

“Good,” Evelyn grunted. “Things that can bleed are also things that can die.”

“Bleeding and dying!” Lizzie did a little cheer, waving the hem of her poncho. “Woohoo!”

We decided to wait for dawn. Despite her outward bluster and bravado, Raine was clearly exhausted from the fight with the mysterious ‘night nurse’. I suspected the confrontation had been a

much more serious battle than Raine was letting on, despite her easy victory. Perhaps she was trying her best to shelter Evelyn and me from our worries; after all, we had almost come face-to-face with one of those nocturnal nurses a little while earlier. The last thing we needed was growing paranoia about monsters stalking just beyond the locker room door.

Raine needed food and rest. My left leg needed time to heal, as much time as we could buy. Evelyn probably needed sleep, no matter what she said. Lozzie wanted to be off soon, off into the dark to assist the ringleaders of her riot; I had the distinct impression that she was planning a series of daring breakouts. But the sight of Raine covered in blood and panting with effort put a pause on Lozzie's plans for now. She agreed to stay with us for the night, even if she must depart come morning. The Saye Fox did not seem eager to leave either, sticking as close to Evelyn as she could.

To my surprise, Raine decided that it was safe to take a shower, in one of the locker room's dingy little cubicles; she posted Lozzie as a lookout at the locker room door, to alert us to the approach of any wandering midnight staff. Raine washed her machete and dried it carefully on a towel, taking better care of the blade than she often did of her own safety. Then she stripped, which was much to my lingering delight, even if I couldn't act on it at that moment; despite the shock of seeing her covered in blood, the implication of her violence made my belly clench up with excitement, fuelled by a moonlit glimpse of her naked form.

But sexy shower times were not meant to be, not this night, not in this place, not with Evelyn and Lozzie within earshot. Raine was all practical solutions, not showy displays — though she did throw me a wink and a flex, just for the sheer fun of it.

She washed the worst of the blood from her clothes, then dried them on a towel as well, before dipping her naked flesh beneath the stream of water. The whole process took less than ten minutes, though she remained wrapped in a towel for some time, until her clothes were dry. If I'd been involved, it would have stretched out to over an hour, and we could not afford such indulgences.

We needed to remain hidden that night, not thumping against the walls.

We bedded down as Raine had suggested earlier, spreading out and

bunching up towels on the floor as best we could, wedged into the narrow gap between the two rows of lockers. The floor was cold, but the towels helped, and the company helped even more. Raine and I assisted Evelyn out of her wheelchair so she could lie down properly; she said the floor would be preferable to the chair, despite any problems with the hard surface. Lozzie snuggled up inside her poncho, a nice extra layer of comfort for her; she ended up cuddled close to Eeve's side, though very gently.

Raine took the first watch, sitting on the bench and munching on spare bread rolls. The Saye Fox curled up too, wedged between Eeve and Lozzie. I lay down next to Eeve and fell asleep before I knew it, with the fingertips of one hand gently touching Eeve's wrist beneath the makeshift blanket.

The night was blissfully uneventful. Raine woke me after several hours and changed the dressing on my shin, cleaning the wound and wrapping it in a fresh section of torn pajama bottoms. I took the next watch while Raine slept, listening to the silence of the Cygnet night. I thought about the implications of this dream for a while, then I examined the blade-less hilt of the sword, given to me by the King in Yellow. I hoped this strange gift would make sense to Sevens.

Lozzie took over last; we had already agreed not to subject Evelyn to a turn on watch. Dream or not, Eeve was in a terrible physical state compared to the rest of us, malnourished and exhausted and worn down to a stub.

When I returned to sleep, I pulled the excess of my yellow blanket over Evelyn. She whimpered in her slumber, turning toward me in the dark. A soft mass fell against my side — I groped around and realised it was the Praem Plushie. Evelyn had been clutching it in her sleep. She murmured again, so I returned Praem to her grip, pressing the plushie to her chest. Evelyn hugged it and settled back down, none the wiser to what I had witnessed.

I only wished that I had all my tentacles, so I might have cushioned her all the better.

I slept away the rest of the night cuddled between Raine and Evelyn. I did not dream within the dream. Sleep here was oblivion, to ease the passage of time.

We rose at the first crack of dawn. Everyone drank water and ate

more of our provisions.

Evelyn was, as in reality, not a morning person.

“Fuck me,” she groaned once we got her situated back in her wheelchair. Raine pressed a bread roll into her hand. Evelyn stared at the roll as if it had personally insulted her. “Fuck this. Fuck being awake in this parody of body. Fuck, fuck, fuck—”

“I know the feeling, Evee,” I said. “Fuck this.”

“Ooooooooooh!” went Lizzie. “Heathy’s grown fangs!”

“I hope that’s not literal,” I sighed. I knew what she meant — teasing me about swearing — but I ran my tongue over my teeth regardless, hoping against hope that I had gained some modifications overnight. No such luck. I was still blunt.

“Ah, mm, yes, well.” Evelyn cleared her throat and trailed off, then turned her eyes to the narrow window running along the top of the locker room’s back wall. “Are we sure this is going to work? The night nurses will be gone?”

Beyond the walls of Cygnet Asylum, dawn was breaking — though I had no idea how the light was being produced, without a sun to crest the horizon.

The black wrinkles of the Eye’s underside were lit as if by the blazing orange rays of a cloud-graced sunrise; dark red and burnt umber played across the ridges and pits, warning of a rainy day or cloudy skies to come. Dark orange dawn poured into the locker room through that high window, catching dust motes in the cool air, reflecting off the metal of the lockers, turning the floor into a sea of freezing lava — for the dawn brought no warmth, only chill and cold, as if we had returned somehow to the depths of winter.

Raine drew her machete and nodded, mouth a hard line. “Our best chance is to get mobile before the asylum wakes up around us, before the day staff arrive and start their rounds. Or before the night staff turn back into the day staff, if that’s how it works.” She shrugged. “We’ll make for the door with the keypad, so Heather can try it. There’s a way out into the asylum grounds in that office space I told you about, not more than fifty feet from the door. If something goes wrong, that’s our exit. We head out, find somewhere to hide for the morning, then wait for Twil to show herself. That sound about right, sweet thing? Any objections?”

“None,” I said, though my heart was pounding. “I think we can do this.”

Raine nodded at my leg. “How’s the wound feel this morning?”

I made a show of flexing my calf muscle and putting extra weight on the wound. I winced, not entirely for show. “It hurts. A lot. More than yesterday, actually, but in a different way. It’s stiff and slow. I can put weight on it, though. I can run if we have to. I can do this, Raine.”

She smiled for me. “You can do anything. And don’t you know it.”

Evelyn swallowed. “I have no objections.”

Raine raised an eyebrow and cracked an indulgent smile. “I smell a but, Lady Saye.”

“A butt!” Lozzie chirped, then fell about laughing. The Saye Fox watched her with curious intent.

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “But — do not leave my wheelchair behind. Do not.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Raine said, then winked. “I gotcha, promise.”

“I would carry you myself if I had to, Evee,” I said. “I’ll handle the wheelchair, I promise.”

Lozzie raised a hand high into the air, like a schoolchild with a pending question, beaming a big smile. Raine indicated her with a gracious wave of one hand. “And Lady Lozzers?”

Lozzie lit up. “Oooh! Lady?”

Raine chuckled. “You like that?”

“Mmhmm!” Lozzie chirped. “Buuuut I’m not coming with you three. I gotta go help my other girlyies!”

“Right,” Raine said. “You can link back up with us whenever. We’ll be out in the grounds.”

Lozzie sketched a loose salute. “Yups!”

I gave Lozzie another hug; Raine watched closely, as if ready to leap, but she did not move to separate us. “Good luck,” I said. “And, Lozzie, don’t get caught. You’re doing so well, so well now. Don’t

get caught. Please be careful.”

Lozzie did a big comedy wink at me. “Next time you see me, I’ll have a whole squad of freaks at my back!”

“I do hope so. Good luck. Love you, Lozzie.”

Lozzie left the locker room first; she managed to turn her departure into an unintentional comedy routine. She eased open the single door open and peered out into the shadowy morning corridor with big exaggerated gestures, then tiptoed over the threshold like a cartoon character. When she confirmed the coast was clear, she did a big twirl with her poncho, sending her wispy blonde hair all over the place. She giggled, bowed to the rest of us, then turned and skittered off into the labyrinth of Cygnet Hospital, poncho fluttering out behind her.

“She’ll be alright,” Raine purred. “She’s a hell of a lot more robust than I expected. Our little rabble-rouser.”

I nodded along. “She always comes back. From Outside, I mean. She always, always comes back. This is no different.”

Raine raised a curious eyebrow.

“I’ll explain some other time,” I said. “Or maybe I won’t have to, if your memories return soon.”

Raine winked down at me. “You can tell me the story anyway, sweet thing. Let’s move.”

Stepping through the door and back into the warren of hospital hallways was not as simple as it seemed. Raine went first, naked machete in her fist, holding the door for Evee’s wheelchair. I wheeled Evelyn gently through the doorway. The Saye Fox slipped past us, circled Raine’s ankles, and sat on her haunches, keeping watch. Evelyn clutched the Praem Plushie in her lap. Our fabric carrier bag of supplies hung from one of the wheelchair handles.

But I paused on the threshold. A moment of fear took hold in my guts. An absurd notion flowered open in my mind.

“Heather?” Raine hissed.

Evelyn tried to twist around in her seat, squinting at me. “Heather, what the hell are you doing now?”

We had been safe, this one night, tucked away in an unseen corner.

What if we simply stayed there, the three of us, forever? The Fox was free to come and go if she wished. And Lizzie could come visit whenever she liked. Here we would be safe and hidden from the nurses and doctors, from the gaze of the Eye above, from the logic of the hospital, like rats tucked into the walls. We would live in the dark, but we would live, and I could not bear the thought of having Raine or Evelyn ripped away from me again. If only we stayed put, stayed inside the walls, inside the system, inside—

I cleared my throat.

“To fear the foe, since fear oppreseth strength,
Gives, in your weakness, strength unto your foe,
And so your follies fight against yourself.
Fear, and be slain — so worse can come to fight;
And fight and die is death destroying death,
Where fearing dying pays death servile breath.”

The words flowed from me, pure memory. I took a deep breath, straightened up, and nodded to Raine and Evee. “Sorry,” I said. “I was just afraid for a moment.”

“What the hell was that?!” Evelyn hissed.

“Poetry,” Raine whispered, cracking a delighted grin. “There’s my beautiful girl. Reciting poems by heart.”

“Oh, um, no,” I said. “It’s Shakespeare. Richard II. It’s a good mantra against fear, I always thought. The worst thing about fear is fear itself, and retreating from fear. All that stuff. So, let’s go!”

Raine nodded, winked, and saluted me with her naked machete. Evelyn huffed and clung on tight to both her chair and Praem’s empty vessel. I stepped out of the locker room, abandoning our hidden refuge, forever.

We crept through the dim daybreak light of Cygnet at dawn. Deep orange shafts of illumination crept around the corners and across the floors, spears of light stabbing into the shadows of the hospital, peeling back layers of night-time shade, splashing glowing reflections across the white walls, glittering on the metal doorhandles, gathering like liquid flame upon the skirting boards and windowsills.

Raine ‘took point’, as she liked to call it, though the Fox happily overtook her position to scout ahead, doubling back again and

again to let us know it was safe to proceed. I took responsibility for Evelyn's wheelchair, moving as quickly as I could, using the counterweight to help with the pain in my left leg.

We journeyed past sweeping metal stairwells and down single-file back passageways, following the route Raine had traced last night, when she had tracked the mysterious tapping sounds. The pipes of the heating system were silent now, the message ended by the dim light of the ruddy dawn.

The aftermath of the riot was everywhere. We passed makeshift barricades which looked as if they had been smashed aside by battering rams. We discovered discarded weapons — mostly pots and pans from the kitchen, along with broken chair legs, lengths of rope, and even an archaic fireplace poker; a few were stained with blood, but not many, not enough to speak of victory. We spotted shredded straitjackets, broken handcuffs, and a door hanging from its hinges. We stepped over bloody bandages, sooty blast-marks from illegal fireworks, and a single shattered megaphone.

It felt like a city, the morning after the spasms of a revolution struggling to be born.

"They really went for it, damn," Raine whispered. "And this was only the first try. These girls have got some real fire in them, oh yeah. Second time's gonna blow the roof off this place."

"Not while we're in it, I hope," Evelyn grunted.

"What if we do the blowing ourselves?" I asked. Raine smirked at me. Evelyn rolled her eyes. I tutted. "That is not what I meant, and you both know it! Gosh. Tch."

Eventually we reached the site of Raine's solitary fight the previous night — a crossroads of sorts, a junction where two long hospital corridors met in a wide space, with a defibrillator and a first-aid box affixed to one of the walls.

Raine paused and frowned, examining a massive splatter of sticky crimson all over the floor and up one wall. The Saye Fox padded over and sniffed at the drying blood. A corner of orange sunlight crept onto the stain, turning it bright and gleaming, still wet in the weak dawn.

"Is this where you put down a nurse?" Evee whispered.

“Mm,” Raine grunted, peering into each of the corridors, machete at the ready, every muscle pulled taut in case of surprises.

“Um,” I whispered. “Where’s the corpse? Where’s the body?”

Raine murmured: “Maybe it got up and walked away.”

Evelyn tutted. “Don’t even fucking joke about that!”

“My apologies,” Raine murmured, unamused, head on a swivel. “The other nurses probably took it away. There were dozens swarming around in the night.”

Evelyn sighed. “Yes, and where are the rest of them now? We’ve haven’t even heard anything moving about! It’s like this place is dead.”

“Let’s not look a gift horse in the mouth,” I whispered. “Raine? What are we waiting for?”

“For a zombie to shamble out of the shadows,” she whispered back, then winked at me. “Come on, it’s just up here, not far now.”

Raine led us down one final corridor and through a pair of nondescript double doors; she eased one of the doors open, slipping inside slowly, before nodding me and Evelyn through to join her. The Fox went first, darting through the gap.

I pushed Evelyn’s wheelchair through, then followed, blinking at the sudden bright light, fluorescent and harsh.

“Yeah, mind your eyes,” Raine whispered. “It’s a bit of a shock. And stay low, I can’t cover every angle in here.”

We stood on the edge of a large open-plan office — a stereotype straight from any sitcom or movie. Little cubicles were separated by modular plastic walls, furred with blue fuzz to aid in sound dampening. Everything was dark blue or grey or made of plastic pretending to be wood. Each cubicle contained a grey desk and a grey computer and a grey plastic chair with blue upholstery. Some of the computers were powered off, but a few of them were on, their screens in night-time power saving mode or showing screen savers that would be more at home in the 1990s. The floor was carpeted in scratchy blue, so perfect and untouched that it looked as if the room had never been used. The ceiling was all fluorescent light bulbs and foam panels. A clock sounded time with a tick-tick-tick, somewhere behind the endless cubicle walls. Some of the desks

sported personal effects — pictures of spouses or children, a paperback book here and there, a few vases of flowers. All the little touches were wrong, however; the people in the pictures were melting blobs of indistinct flesh, the paperback books had titles like ‘Anagrammatic Puzzles For Your Quadruple Amputee Cousin’ and ‘How to Make the Most of Being A Dreaming Dead Thing Beyond the Ken of Your Family’. The flowers in the vases were all dead and withered.

One wall — far away to our collective right — was made of big glass doors and long windows, showing a nasty back area between two buildings, a sort of gravel-floored liminal space covered in abused weeds, where employees might go to smoke a cigarette or two. The real asylum grounds were visible at one end, a hint of rolling hills and verdant lawns.

The sunrise had curdled to a grim grey morning, spreading a thin trickle of rain across the glass.

Raine nodded at the glass doors. “That’s our exit. If we get separated for whatever reason, go that way. As for the weird door, follow me. It’s in the back.”

Raine led us on a winding path through the cubicles, keeping her head ducked low. I followed her lead, trying to stay down and out of sight as I pushed Evelyn’s wheelchair along. Eevee stayed completely silent, hunched in the chair, grinding her teeth. The Fox stayed at Eevee’s side now, sticking close. The office was a maze, and strangely muffled. One nurse on the far side would easily see our heads bobbing over the cubicles, and we might get turned around if we tried to flee, stuck in this tangle of low walls and grey surface.

Eventually we reached the back wall. The cubicles ran out, leaving a long clear passageway formed by the plastic dividers and the white plaster of the wall itself. Raine slipped out and to the right. I followed the last few paces to the mysterious door.

Raine stopped, crouched by the strange portal, peering left and right for any sign of pursuit. “Here,” she whispered. “Keypad is on the right.”

The door was exactly as Raine had described — shiny steel behind a layer of decorative glass, in an ornate frame made of glossy chrome. It looked more like something from a bad science fiction movie than anything I had dreamed up. I wondered who had influenced this.

Twil, perhaps?

A keypad was set into the wall just to the right of the door, sporting the same steel-and-chrome aesthetic. It was huge, with over fifty little metal buttons protruding from the flat surface, topped by a tiny green LCD screen. Some of the buttons were numbers — one through zero, the usual — but most of them showed obscure mathematical symbols, signs I had only ever seen in passing. A few of them were absolutely bizarre, little swirls or spirals, spike-edged crosses, even a tiny picture of a splayed hand.

But that was not the oddest thing about the door.

My eyes were drawn to the little brass plate above the keypad.

Raine followed my wide-eyed gaze, then frowned. “Huh,” she hissed. “That wasn’t there last night. That’s new.”

Words were etched into the plate.

‘Professor Wilson Stout. Mathematics Consultant.’

Evelyn grew in a gasp. “Heather, that’s—”

“*Notes Toward a Unified Cosmology*,” I murmured. “Yes. Evee, it’s—”

“I know,” Evelyn rasped. “I know.”

“I don’t,” Raine hissed, all business. “Who’s Wilson Stout? Do we know him?”

“Yes!” I hissed. “Well, no, actually. But I know his book. His pamphlet, really, he ... um ... I-I don’t even know where to start, I —”

“Professor Stout was an academic at the University of Sharrowford,” Evelyn hissed quickly. “One of the original Sharrowford Coven which founded the Medieval Metaphysics Department. We — oh fuck this, Raine, you don’t remember any of this. He wrote a pamphlet explaining the theory of self-implementing hyperdimensional mathematics — a pamphlet which I gave to Heather when we first met, to explain to her what was happening to her, to give her something to work with. The professor went missing shortly after writing it, in 1974. Went missing from inside a locked office.” She took an unsteady breath. “I once joked with Heather that maybe he had messed with the maths too much, and met the Eye.” Evelyn swallowed. “Well, egg on my face, hm? Not a

joke anymore, is it?”

I could barely comprehend what I was looking at.

The mathematics in *Notes Toward a Unified Cosmology* had helped save me. Evelyn had handed me that slim volume when I was barely two weeks In The Know, still groping for meaning, for a handhold, for any way to understand what had happened to me. She had gifted me the blessing of a sliver of insight, in that dingy, sad little room beneath Sharrowford University Library. That book and the hints it had contained had opened the way for me. I owed the real support to Raine and Evelyn, of course, to my friends and allies. But without the words in that book — without the mathematical notation, the foundation through which to understand brain-math — I was not certain I would ever have found all the tools to mount this rescue operation for my sister.

The notion of another person who had journeyed beyond and returned was not so shocking anymore, not since I had met Taika.

But Maisie had been out here, in the clutches of the Eye, for about ten years.

Professor Wilson Stout had vanished from a locked office in 1974. He had been Outside — or in the abyss, or right here in Wonderland — for four and a half decades.

What manner of creature had been calling for help by tapping on those pipes?

Who — or what — was behind this door?

“Heather,” Eevee hissed. “Heather, we don’t know what’s in there.”

“He could be an ally,” I whispered back. “He was calling for help! Eevee, I’m not leaving anybody behind here. Nobody! Nobody gets left with the Eye!”

Evelyn clenched her jaw. Raine was poised, ready to move at a moment’s notice, eyes watching and ears listening for any sign that we were not alone. The Saye Fox waited on her haunches, still and alert in the way only an animal can be.

“Nobody gets left behind, Eevee,” I whispered. “Not even an elderly mathematics professor.”

Evelyn swallowed. “Fine. Fuck it, I guess you wouldn’t be Heather if

you didn't say something like that. Alright. Try the keypad. Raine, be ready, this might be nasty. Let's see if the Professor is accepting office hours walk-ins."

bedlam boundary – 24.14

Pale and pallid fluorescent light leaked from buzzing, flickering fixtures on the ceiling of the office-labyrinth, leeching the life from the scratchy blue carpet, bleaching the cubicle dividers to a bloodless grey, turning the white plaster of the wall into mist-wreathed bone; dull arcs of stained illumination reflected from the chrome housing of the keypad, trembling and twitching beneath the shadows of my stalled hands.

The longer I hesitated, crouched on the floor before the glass-and-metal door and its attendant keypad of mathematical symbols, the more alien and wrong this sheltered cove became, like an illusion wavering into solidity in my peripheral vision.

I blinked away the gathering sweat in my eyes, tried to wet my lips with a dry and raspy tongue, and forced a swallow down my empty throat.

Tiny raindrops pattered on the windows far to the right, casting the dreamlike office vault deep into a static haze. My breath came in nervous gulps. Sweat beaded in my hairline. The day-old wound on my left shin throbbed with every drum-like heartbeat. My yellow blanket felt thin and threadbare across my shivering shoulders. We were on a time limit; a nurse or an office worker or some other unknown staff member might interrupt us at any second. Three pairs of eyes — Raine, Evelyn, and the Saye Fox — watched me expectantly, waiting for me to open the barred portal to the office of Professor Wilson Stout.

Seconds ticked by, but I made no moves.

Eventually Raine hissed my name. “Heather? Heather, what’s wrong?”

I swallowed a sigh and lowered my hands. I hadn’t even touched the ridiculous fifty-button keypad, not even to punch keys at random. I must have looked totally gormless, staring at the thing for over a minute, eyes wide and mouth hanging open like a cave-woman examining an internal combustion engine.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “It turns out I have no idea what I’m

looking at. Um. Oops, I suppose?”

“What!?” Evelyn snapped.

Raine gently tapped on the arm of Evee’s wheelchair. “Shhhh. Voice low, magic lady. I can’t see over these cubicle dividers, and they absorb all the small noises. Somebody walks in here and we might not know until they’re right on top of us.”

Evelyn tutted and rolled her eyes, but she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Heather, what do you mean, you have no idea what you’re looking at? You’re the one who insisted we open the bloody door!”

I tore my eyes away from the numbers and symbols and magical sigils on the keypad. My chest burned inside with shame and awkward guilt.

Raine was crouched at my side, directly in front of the glass-and-chrome door; she was poised to spring forward or leap back as soon as the door swished open — as I imagined it would, like an automatic door in a silly science fiction television show, complete with a swoosh sound and a little ding. She clutched her naked machete in one fist, one ear cocked toward the ceiling, listening for any feet which might approach through the maze-like tangle of office cubicles. The Saye Fox waited at her heels, facing the opposite way, doing her best to watch our backs. Evelyn was sat in her wheelchair, clutching the Praem Plushie to her abdomen, scowling at me with incredulous incomprehension. We were hemmed in behind by the modular wall of cubicle dividers, but open on our flanks by the narrow corridor between the dividers and the real wall. We were hidden in the back of the office room, yet equally exposed. All it took was one person around a corner and we’d be fleeing for our freedom and our lives.

“I’m sorry!” I hissed. “I assumed the symbols would make sense to me, subconsciously, or instinctively, like brain-math always does, but they’re just ... meaningless.” I shrugged, feeling helpless. “They must be an abstract representation of brain-math, but I don’t have any brain-math in my head right now. I don’t have anything. I’m sorry, Evee.”

Raine whispered: “It’s alright, sweet thing. If we can’t do it, we can’t do it. We move on. Ready to go?”

Evelyn clenched her teeth and hissed, “Heather, for fuck’s sake. Just press the buttons at random! Follow your heart!”

I winced, the shame growing sharper. “Evee, this isn’t one of your magical girl animes. It’s brain-math, it—”

“Then follow your liver, or your bowels! Or do an eeny meeny miny moe! Roll a dice!”

“But—”

“This is a dream and a story, Heather, for pity’s sake! Press the buttons!” Evee jabbed her free hand toward the keypad. “Get on with it before something blunders in here!”

“But you said—”

Evelyn’s eyes blazed at me. “Heather, you are the only one of us fully awake and partially in charge of this narrative. Press. The. Buttons.”

I bit my lower lip, nodded, and turned back to the keypad.

Lacking my tentacles and my bioreactor was an offense to the body and soul, like being crammed back into a form that I had surpassed a dozen times over; the dysphoria was a creeping sensation of physical wrongness, spreading over my skin like cold tar every time I dared approach the mere thought, every time I felt the absence of my other six limbs, my other six selves, and the pumping, glugging, glowing bio-mechanical engine which should have been nestled deep in my guts.

But the absence of brain-math was a far stranger sensation. All my knowledge of hyperdimensional mathematics had always been an imposition, an intrusion, even a violation. Brain-math was pressed into me from outside — from Outside, by the Eye, a form of nightly torture I had never wanted and never asked for. Even with all seven of me working in concert to pull the dripping levers of reality, brain-math still hurt. If I was placed in some kind of metaphysical dilemma and forced to choose between the knowledge and the biology, I would choose the biology every time. I did not need the knowledge or the power, only that which had resulted from them.

But now, staring at a cluster of meaningless buttons, I felt a lack I had never realised before. Like losing a limb I hadn’t known I possessed.

Part of me was empty of information, as if I had forgotten how to walk.

Half in shame and despair, half to satisfy Evelyn's hunch, I jabbed buttons at random — some numbers, a few mathematical symbols, a string of the weird esoteric signs. I mixed them up and followed pure chance.

The little LCD screen at the top of the keypad filled with a row of black Xs, then went blank again, waiting for the next attempted input.

The door stayed shut.

"Tch," Evelyn tutted. "Try again!"

"My darling lady Saye," Raine purred. "You were so against this a moment ago. Why the change of heart?"

"Heather convinced me. And she needs to see it through, her decisions in this place have been vindicated so far. Heather, try again! Keep going!"

I choked down a cold slug of self-disgust. This was almost as bad as being forced to strip naked in front of Evelyn without my tentacles, so she could peer at what was missing. I felt stunted, cut off at the knees. I began to understand what Evelyn felt like, confined to that wheelchair, unable to do something which had seemed so simple all my life.

"Evee," I hissed, looking away from the keypad again. "I don't even ... know ... what ... "

I trailed off, blinking at our forgotten fifth companion.

"Heather?" Evelyn whispered. "What? What is it now?"

The Praem Plushie was staring at me — but no, that was impossible. Those blank eyes were made of fabric and stitches, they couldn't move. She was constructed of cloth of stuffing, no matter how delicate and detailed her little maid dress seemed. Even if she meant something more within this dream, she could not move, let alone look at me.

But still, she stared.

"Evee," I said slowly. "May I please borrow Praem for a moment?"

Evelyn's eyebrows drew together in a craggy frown. Perhaps subconsciously, her grip tightened on the plush toy. "What?! Why?"

"Evee, I promise you, I love Praem almost as much as you do. I won't go anywhere with her and I'm certainly not going to hurt her. I just think ... well, it's going to sound crazy, which I'm painfully used to by this point in my life, thank you very much, but I would like her help with this." I lowered my eyes back to the Praem Plushie. "Will you lend me your aid, Praem?"

The Plushie did not answer, for her mouth was a short, straight line of narrow black fabric.

Evelyn frowned at me like I was mad — which was fair, because in reality such a request would have been the height of insanity. But Evee also trusted me, with both her life and her heart.

She held out the Praem Plushie. "Don't you dare drop her! This floor is probably filthy. Offices are always unhygienic."

"I would not dream of treating her with anything but the utmost care," I said, and accepted Praem with both hands.

The Plushie weighed very little, just felt and fuzz. I held her upright, as if I was cradling a tiny person, supporting her underside with one hand. Then I faced her toward the keypad, held one of her blunt little arms in my other hand, and used Praem to press the buttons.

I didn't think, I just went with whatever felt right, guided by the plush fabric in my hands. Praem's stubby little arm needed additional pressure from my fingertips to help click the glossy metal buttons. I held my breath as the LCD screen filled with numbers and symbols. Evelyn looked on with a scrunch-eyed frown. Raine stayed perfectly tense, ready to move. The Saye Fox did not bother to watch.

The symbols completed an equation, then flashed into a line of little check-marks.

Before I could lower Praem or let out a sigh of relief, the glass-and-chrome door opened with a soft swish-swish and little mechanical 'bing!' Exactly as I had expected.

The halves of the shiny metal door parted and slid aside, retracting into the frame.

Beneath them lay another door.

I almost sighed and rolled my eyes in exasperation. The dream was mocking us, playing stupid games.

A regular old wooden door, made of stout, thick, dark wood, stained with age and cigarette smoke. A little metal handle stood at one side, above a keyhole. The door was set in an oddly familiar frame. I frowned with buried recognition, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what I was looking at.

Evelyn said it just before I realised. "That's the door to the Medieval Metaphysics room," she hissed. "Fuck me."

"Not here," Raine whispered back, totally deadpan. "Floor's too scratchy."

"Oh, shut up!" Evelyn hissed. "I cannot believe that worked. Here, Heather, give Praem back to me, please."

I held up the Praem Plushie briefly, facing me, and said, "Thank you for your assistance, Praem." Then I pressed her back into Evelyn's lap. Eevee tucked an arm around Praem's middle, securing her back in place.

"Well," I said. "Maids can go anywhere."

Evelyn squinted at me. "What?"

"Just something Praem said to me once, that's all."

"Shhhhhh," Raine hushed us. She reached up and tried the handle of this second, covert door. The door parted from the frame. Unlocked. "Both of you be ready. We might have to run. Heather, grab Eevee's wheelchair. Eevee, hold on tight."

"R-right!"

Evelyn tutted. "Yes, thank you for the reminder. As if I didn't know."

I scrambled back over to Evelyn and took hold of the handles on her chair. The Saye Fox nosed up to the door, as if suddenly curious. Raine eased the door away from the frame until she could peer through the gap with one eye, then flung it wide and scrambled over the threshold.

"Clear!" she hissed a moment later. "Get in here!"

I followed, pushing Evelyn's wheelchair ahead of myself, trying not to hobble on my aching left leg. The Saye Fox darted past us, plunging inside. As soon as I got Evelyn through the door and safely into the room beyond, Raine slipped the door shut behind us, sheltering us from the maze of office cubicles.

"Oh," I said, straightening up at last, back and thighs aching after our crouched scurry through the offices. I took in the room, wide-eyed. "This is ... different. Not what I expected."

"Familiar enough," Evelyn grunted. She was trying to play down the sense of creeping wrongness. A rough swallow betrayed her bravado.

"We know this place?" Raine asked. She wrinkled her nose.

"We do," Evelyn said. "Though not like this."

"Very well, in fact," I added. "Like a home away from home."

"Though I suppose we haven't been here in a while," said Evelyn. "And this isn't real. Right. Have to keep that in mind. None of this is real. Just a nightmare, a play. Yes. Right."

We were standing in the Medieval Metaphysics room, as it must have looked long before any of us had been born.

Bookcases lined the walls to our left and right, towering sentinels of dark and glossy wood, their shelves unbowed by time and weight, though I recognised their shape and colour and feel from their real-life counterparts, aged and worn as they were by an additional forty five years. They sported a very different catalogue in this dream-wrought memory, not a single occult tome or witchy volume in sight. Mathematics textbooks and papers lined the shelves from floor to ceiling, organised by some system my literary experience could not unpick at a mere glance. One side of the room boasted a low sofa — in awful tacky orange, a wisely abandoned relic of the 1960s — around which gathered many piles of additional books, most of them stuffed with bookmarks, some of them dog-eared or propped open in careless abuse of their fragile spines. A sleeping bag was unrolled on the sofa, topped with a rather unclean looking pillow, surrounded by used tissues, dirty eating utensils, and a discarded toothbrush in a filthy glass.

The back of the room was dominated by a large, archaic wooden desk, exactly the kind I would expect to see in the office of a mid-

century academic. More books littered the desktop, mostly serving as paperweights for loose sheets covered in handwritten mathematical notation. A few mugs held pens and pencils and other such stationery, while others held the mouldy remnants of forgotten coffee and ancient tea stains. A plate with a half-eaten meal of chicken pie stood on one corner of the desk, stone cold and congealed. Empty alcohol bottles lined the floor to the left of the desk — mostly whisky and vodka, all dry.

A large leather chair stood behind the desk, lined and cracked with age. Three comfortable armchairs formed a little semi-circle in front, a welcoming place for students and visitors to sit.

The back wall was broken by a line of windows, exactly as with the real Medieval Metaphysics room. The windows showed a fog-shrouded view of Sharrowford University, all spires and concrete rooftops and the looming giant of the library, spread out many floors below us, as if we had suddenly ascended to the tip of the building. All the structures were hazy in the mist, half-seen and blurred, as if in a dream.

Below that window stood an iron radiator, painted with peeling white.

Despite the defamiliarisation of such a beloved refuge, seeing the Medieval Metaphysics room in the guise of a slightly archaic academic office was not the source of our shared discomfort.

The air was hot and humid, reeking of meat, as if the heat was turned up all the way and something had died inside the wall cavity. A low rumble seemed to come and go, just below the level of human hearing, a slow and steady rasp with long pauses between strokes. Every surface looked somehow rubbery, but only when seen in one's peripheral vision.

"So," Raine said eventually.

"Yes," I replied.

"This room."

"Yes."

"It feels like we're standing inside something's mouth."

"Yes."

Evelyn whispered: "Fucking hell. You think that tapping was a trap?"

"Not sure," Raine answered. She held her machete low and loose, one hand still on the door. "Doubt it. Wouldn't it have sprung already? And where's the Professor?"

"Maybe ... maybe he goes home during the day?" I ventured.

Evelyn snorted. "Maybe this is the Professor."

"Heather," Raine said, soft and unsmiling. "Your call. You're in charge. Do we investigate or go back?"

"I ... I can't ... um ... "

Before I could make a decision, the Saye Fox padded forward on her silent paws. She trotted right down the middle of the room, without a care, and started sniffing at the sofa, the little piles of books, then on to the desk, winding her way around the wooden legs. She seemed completely unafraid.

Raine and Evee and I shared a series of uncomfortable glances. But when reality failed to snap shut around our vulpine friend, Raine nodded, and said, "Alright. Let me go first."

"Mm," Evelyn grunted. "I want a look through those windows. Wheel me over there, please. That can't be Sharrowford out there, it's not possible."

We did as suggested, spreading out and investigating Professor Stout's office, the room that would one day become the last remnant of the Medieval Metaphysics Department. Raine went first, true to her word, making a quick circuit of the space and peeking under the desk, machete held at the ready, in case anything or anybody was lurking in some unseen hidey-hole. But she turned up nothing. The room really was deserted. I pushed Evelyn toward the back window, taking it slowly, trying to breathe through my mouth to block out the foul, meaty smell in the air; I examined the titles of the books, making sure they didn't spell out some secret message or code. But they were perfectly mundane. Unlike the worrying titles of the novels back in the main office, the mathematics textbooks looked real enough. We even paused briefly to remove one from the shelf and flick it open. The cover did not feel like warm flesh or rotting meat. Inside, the book was legitimate, nothing spooky, nothing untoward.

"Maybe they're his," I suggested. "Maybe that's what he's been clinging to this whole time. Mathematics."

"I'd prefer to cling to a pair of tits," Raine said, without smiling. "But hey, whatever's kept him sane."

Evee and I passed the desk; I glanced at the papers with the mathematical equations, but I couldn't make head nor tail of them.

When we reached the windows, I just stared at Sharrowford, trapped behind the glass. I went up on tiptoes, trying to peer down at the ground, but the fog outdoors was too thick, and seemed to be clouding the perspective. I could make out little except the outlines of the buildings, standing like silent towers in the murk. Up close, the fog seemed greasy and dark, like fetid breath.

Evelyn leaned forward, scratched at the corner of one window, and peeled away the paper.

The illusion was broken instantly — the 'windows' were just a paper background over a sheet of moist plywood. The vista of Sharrowford University was fake.

My head swam with a strange reverse vertigo. Sweat prickled beneath my yellow blanket, and I had to flap the sides for some fresh air. Raine joined us quickly and put a steadying hand on my shoulder. "Heather?"

"It wasn't real," Evelyn muttered, lifting the sheet of paper. "Just a fake. A print out or something. To remind him of home? Ugh, this plywood smells like dog food."

"But it looked so real!" I protested, peering at the paper covering from different angles. The illusion moved with my perspective. "Oh, that is too much for me. That is very weird. I hate it, thank you."

"So do I," Raine muttered. Sweat was beading on her exposed arms and shoulders, drawn out by the humid heat. "There's nothing here for us, unless the maths on the desk makes any sense. This place is wrong. Feels like something sleeping. Let's get out of here."

"Agreed," Evelyn said. "I am not above admitting that this room is giving me the creeps. Heather, you—"

A voice suddenly spoke, from right behind us.

"Two and two and two and seven. Seven sevens. That all makes

one. No ... no, that's not correct. Damn. Damn it all."

We scrambled back, away from the windows. Raine's machete came up. I pulled Evelyn away, toward the bookshelves.

But the source of the voice did not look up, nor pay us the slightest bit of attention.

A man was sitting in the leather chair behind the desk, as if he'd been there all along.

Tall and thick, solidly built, with muscle beginning to run to fat, like an ageing rugby player. Dark hair and a matching beard had gone ragged, much in need of a trim and a cut, both speckled with too much grey for his apparent age; the man looked to be in his forties or early fifties, but prematurely withered and worn by stress and strain. A large nose was flanked by sunken green eyes, deep in pools of dark-ringed skin and sagging bags, their whites shot through with bloody veins, turned pink with sleepless effort. He wore an almost stereotypical outfit — smart trousers, a simple button-up shirt, and a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows. His tie was loose, pulled away from an open collar. His clothes were rumpled and greasy, as if he'd slept in them for months; a ripe smell rose from him — human body odour mixed with carnivore breath and wet dog. He was hunched over the notes and equations on the desk, his forehead resting in one meaty hand, staring at the numbers as if they were a diagnosis of terminal cancer. His other hand held a pair of large wire-frame glasses, limp and forgotten, as if he was about to drop them.

He didn't acknowledge us at all.

Raine had leapt to the opposite side of the room. I shared a glance with her and she nodded me sideways. Evelyn swallowed, gripping the armrests of her wheelchair. Slowly we all edged around to the front of the desk, so the semi-circle of three chairs were safely between us and the sudden new appearance.

Raine squeezed my arm, perhaps to reassure both of us. She whispered: "Is this him?"

"Probably!" I hissed back.

"Wait," Evelyn said. "Where's the— ah!"

She pointed.

The Saye Fox was perched in one of the chairs meant for students and visitors, directly across from the man at the desk. She was sitting on her haunches, watching his sad, drawn, exhausted face with her amber eyes. Her bushy tail was swishing back and forth.

“She knows what she’s doing,” Raine whispered. “She’s safe. Not led us astray yet.”

Evelyn clenched her teeth, but said nothing.

“Should we ... ?” I let the question hang.

“You want me to call out to him?” said Raine.

I shook my head. “I’d rather do it myself. I suppose I am a fan of his book, technically. Maybe that’ll help. Um, be ready though, I suppose?”

Raine nodded and raised her machete, ready to move. I winced at the implication of impending violence, but put it from my mind for now. We truly had no idea what we were looking at, not really. If this was the real Wilson Stout, then he’d been Outside — or trapped within the Eye — for almost half a century.

“Excuse me?” I said, purging the tremor from my voice. “Professor Stout?”

His eyes continued tracking back and forth across the equations. He placed his glasses down and reached for a pencil; something about the motion of his arm made my stomach turn over, like his limb was moving at the wrong angle.

“Wilson Stout?” I said. “You were calling for help? Professor? Professor!”

“Mm,” he grunted, but still did not look up. He frowned harder, as if the numbers were torture. He drew the pencil back toward the page, then hesitated, lead tip trembling above the paper.

Evelyn whispered, “What the hell is wrong with his arm?”

“Like it’s broken,” Raine murmured. “Weird.”

“Professor,” I repeated. “Didn’t you need help?”

“My apologies, young lady,” he muttered, his voice a deep and broken baritone, like cracked granite. “But I’m not seeing students at current. My office hours are cancelled. It seems I must throw

myself upon the mercies of the so-called ‘private sector’. Barbarians and philistines. If only I could ... ” He moved to write something with the pencil at last, then stopped and winced before he could commit to the page. He rubbed at his forehead, as if trying to smooth out the furrows. The motion of his hand was wrong as well, like meat rubbing on meat.

“Oi!” Raine said. “Wilson. Eyes up.”

He shook his head, eyes scrunched hard, still staring at the page, almost on the verge of tears; his head moved on his neck like rubber. “I can’t, I can’t, I’m simply out of time. I’ve been out of time for so long, these moments are too precious to—”

“Yip!” went the Saye Fox.

Wilson Stout looked up.

I recoiled. Evelyn flinched in her wheelchair. Raine, to her credit, held her ground with only a tightness of her muscles.

Wilson Stout had been pretty believable when he was hunched over his work; but when he sat up, his body moved like a single boneless mass, meaty and floppy.

He was a tongue, attached to the root of the mouth in which we stood.

He squinted at his vulpine visitor, then scrambled for his glasses and fumbled them onto his face; the motion of his arms was stomach-churning, no elbows or wrists, just flapping, muscular meat. He blinked several times, widening his eyes as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. His expression hesitated, then twitched with a fragile, bruised smile. A spark of forgotten happiness spread to his exhausted eyes. He blinked, and suddenly seemed a little less glassy.

“You know you’re not supposed to be here, Laurissa,” he said to the Fox, softly and gently, as if whispering a familiar flirtatious line to an old flame. “You’re barred from the campus, let alone my office. I’m pretty certain your husband will turn me into something unnatural if he thinks you came here willingly. Your reassurances are going to fall on deaf ears eventually.”

Evelyn raised a hand to her own mouth, stifling a gasp. I peered down and saw she had gone pale and wide-eyed.

“Evee?” I whispered.

She looked up, shaken but rapidly pulling herself together.
“Laurissa!” she hissed. “That was my grandmother’s name!”

“Oh!” I hissed. “Oh my gosh! The handwritten dedication in the front of his pamphlet. It was to her. I remember.”

I’d read that line so many times, every time I’d opened the *Notes*.
‘To Miss Laurissa Saye, I hope you will find this illuminating.’

Evelyn swallowed. “I ... I suppose I knew it had to be true, who else could the Fox be, but ... ” She trailed off, shaking her head and staring at the Saye Fox — at Laurissa Saye, her own grandmother, somehow — with something akin to awe.

The Fox replied to Wilson with a soft ‘Murr-r-r-rup.’ She clacked her teeth and swished her tail to one side.

The Professor almost laughed, pushing his glasses up his nose with one finger. For just a moment the exhaustion and the care and the weight of terror seemed to lift from his shoulders. He seemed like a young man, too embarrassed to flirt back.

“Not as if I could have stopped you, even if I wanted to,” he said, glancing at the Fox over the rim of his glasses. “You always did have a habit of getting in anywhere you liked, whenever you liked. Always the smartest person in any room. You were wasted on that man. Did you read my book? Ah, who am I kidding, of course you did, you probably just didn’t consider it worth commenting on. A poor little screed, really, with not much to say that you hadn’t already deduced. I would be flattered though, by even a simple acknowledgement. Just tell me you read it?”

Evelyn’s shock turned to a grimace. “Oh. Great.”

Raine whispered: “Are we watching your grandmother flirt with her side-piece?”

Evelyn tutted. “I think so.”

“Ah,” I said, feeling my cheeks grow warm. “Oh. Well. Um.”

Wilson Stout frowned, but not at us. “Wait, no. But how could you have gotten in here, Laurissa? This isn’t ... I mean, this isn’t my ... my real office, my ... ”

The weight of years settled back onto the Professor’s shoulders as

he stumbled over his words. His eyes darkened once again with that thousand-yard stare, his gaze drifting downward, toward the mathematics on the desk. The Fox went 'Yip!' but Wilson just shook his head and swallowed, his mind consumed by the equation before him.

"Oh no," I hissed. "We're losing him again."

"Could go shake his shoulder?" Raine suggested. "I'd rather not touch him though."

"Allow me," Evelyn said, then cleared her throat, and spoke with a full measure of steel in her spine, as Evelyn Saye, The Mage of Sharrowford's Occult Underworld. "Then she really is my grandmother? Do I have you to thank for this confirmation, Professor Stout?"

The Professor's head jerked back up, drawn by the ropes of authority, like a gigantic wet tongue flopping free. He blinked at Evelyn a few times, then sat up straighter, squinting through his glasses.

"And who are you, young lady?" he asked.

"Evelyn Saye," said Evee. "Daughter of Loretta Julianna Saye, granddaughter of Laurissa Saye. You knew my grandmother. I believe you may have been closer than I originally thought. Or perhaps I should say you're still close, as she is apparently sitting right there. Forgive me if I am rather curt, because we are in a hurry and this is an emergency. Pay attention, Professor. Concentrate."

Wilson Stout just stared, lips parted, as if having trouble processing Evee's words. "I ... Laurissa's grandchild? And you're grown up. You're an adult. I ... I see. I ... see."

I spoke up. "You've been in here a long time."

Wilson looked at me, eyes sunken pits of exhaustion, so deep and dark that they might run down his face in thick tears of pitch-black tar.

"Mate," Raine said. "You were tapping. Calling for help, right?"

Stout shrugged. He seemed distracted suddenly, glancing at his books on the shelves. "Yes. Well, that's hardly relevant now."

“Why not?” Raine asked. “We’re here. We’re help. What’s wrong with that?”

Stout sighed. “You’re not the right kind of help.”

“Do you know where you are?” I asked. “Where here is?”

“Here?” he echoed, glancing at me.

“Inside the Eye,” I said. “Do you understand that we’re all inside the Eye, right now?”

He squinted, adjusting his glasses. “The what? Pardon, I’m ... I must ... I must get back to the equation. It’s the only way, you see, the only way.”

Raine shook her head. “Poor bastard doesn’t even know where he is. No different to me in my cell.”

“Wait,” Evelyn snapped. “Stout. The equation is the only way to what? What are you trying to achieve?”

Stout blinked several times, focused on Evee, as if struggling to clear his vision. “I know I am trapped in a whirlpool. Going around and around, all of me scattered every which way. Did you know you can map whirlpools with mathematics? Tornadoes, twisters, hurricanes, all the most violent and dangerous meteorological phenomena, you can actually predict every blade of grass they will touch, if you only had enough information.” He touched the notes on the table. “If only I could compile all the information, I could pull myself back together. But there’s very few pieces left. It’s only her presence that is allowing me to remember myself.” He nodded at the Saye Fox. “And this is but a moment of clarity before the madness takes hold again. I have been mad for such a very long time. In fact, I’m uncertain if I still exist at all, independently of external observation. I think I have been replaced by something that was once my echo, but is now simply all this.” He tightened his grip, creasing the notes on the table before him. “My life’s work has supplanted me. My mind is just another line of this unfinished proof.”

“You do know where you are,” I said. “You do! Professor, please look at me.”

“What is the point?” he said, casting his eyes downward. “My work will never amount to anything, never affect a single atom of the

world, never achieve escape velocity to—”

“I read your book.”

Professor Stout looked up. He frowned at me, first with disbelief, as if I had tried to wound him with a backhanded insult. But then his expression cleared. He scratched at his beard. “Did you? Did you now?”

“*Notes Toward a Unified Cosmology*, yes. And it helped me, a lot. Most of it made sense. Not all of it was correct, of course, I doubt any single work ever can be. But it helped me, more than any other book I’ve ever read. I would like to thank you for that, even if you’re not real anymore.”

“Really? Well. Well, that’s wonderful. I’m glad my work could make some difference. I left something behind, then? An anchor in the real world. Mm, yes. A legacy. Good, good, that’s something, that’s something.” His eyes wandered away from us, back to the Fox, then to his desk.

“We’re not going to leave you behind,” I said. “Professor, we can get you out of here, the same as everybody else.”

Raine hissed: “Are we sure about that, Heather?”

I replied in a whisper. “We have to be sure! He’s been here longer than Maisie, and I don’t think there’s much of him left, but he is still here!”

But Professor Stout was already waving down my suggestion of help. “Oh, it’s far too late for that,” he said. “I’ve got a meeting at nine today, then three seminars from ten, on through lunchtime, and an afternoon class to teach. It’s all go go go here.” Suddenly he looked back up and clicked his fingers. “Did you get my memo?”

“Memo?” I echoed. “Sorry?”

Evelyn sighed. “He’s partially in and out of the dream. Keeps forgetting where and what he is.”

“Yes, yes!” Stout said, suddenly animated, almost agitated. “I sent a memo, tucked away with the new contract agreement for the staff. I could get away with that, since I’m properly tenured and all. Not as if the administration can do anything to get rid of me, I’m here for the duration. Haha.” He smiled and chuckled. “That is how you ended up here, yes? You got my memo. You must have gotten it. It

contained a serious portion of my work here.” He tapped his notes. “Enough to key in any interested soul.”

Evelyn and Raine and I shared a glance. Raine shrugged. Evelyn frowned. I chewed on my bottom lip.

Stout sighed and grew more annoyed. “It was vital! It contained vital components of local analysis and measurement. You couldn’t have simply walked in here without it, one of you must have read my memo and comprehended it, which— oh.” He stopped and blinked. “Which means one of you is a fellow mathematician, of course. Which of you would it be?” His eyes lowered to the Fox for a moment. “Not you, Laurissa, you were always a genius, but you never could understand the fundamentals of my discipline. You were a good listener, though. Very encouraging.”

“Me,” I said. “I’m the mathematician. Or I was, I suppose.”

Professor Stout squinted at me. “Then you must have gotten my memo. Did you read the whole thing? You must have done.”

I wracked my brains, trying to figure out what Professor Stout could mean. A message in a bottle, ejected from within the Eye? There were only so many possible candidates for that. Maisie had sent a message and a physical object with the Messenger Demon, almost a year ago, and that could not possibly have been Stout’s work. But there was one other.

“Evee,” I said slowly, “I think he’s talking about Mister Squiddy. A memo, full of mathematics. It’s the only thing which fits. Is that right?”

Evelyn snorted. “Great. If you’re correct, his ‘memo’ almost killed me.”

“And it taught me a lot of things,” I added quickly. “But, wait, Professor. That ‘memo’, that was clearly crafted by somebody who understood hyperdimensional mathematics, on my sort of level. I thought it was sent by my sister, Maisie. Have you ... worked with her, somehow? Have you seen her?”

Stout frowned and smacked his lips. “I work with a lot of postgraduate students, and I always make sure to credit them on paper, but I can’t recall them all off the top of my head. I’d have to check my notes. And those are at home. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow morning.”

“Maisie,” I repeated. “My twin. She looks exactly like me. Oh,” I sighed. “Or maybe she doesn’t, in this place. You don’t recognise me, not at all?”

Wilson Stout paused and frowned. “Twins.”

“Ah?”

“Twins. Twins!” he repeated, growing agitated again. “Twins, yes, that’s who I was trying to contact, who I was trying to call for. How did you know?”

“We ... we didn’t, we—”

Wilson tapped the table. “You need to find the twins, if you’re looking for a way out of here. They almost helped me, once. But they’re not really here, you see. They have to slip in and out. Stay beneath notice. They’ve very good at that. They’ve had to be, lest they get in too much trouble with the administration.”

“The administration?” Evelyn snapped. “You mean the Eye?”

“No, I mean the administration,” Stout almost laughed. “The non-teaching staff, the ‘bosses’. The ... oh, what do they call themselves? Director? Governor? Anyway, they don’t even know about the twins. That’s the trick. If you want to survive, remain unseen.”

“I’m one of the twins,” I said, sighing with exasperation. “You mean me and Maisie.”

“Are you certain of that?” Stout asked, with an odd little frown.

“ ... yes? I ... do you not mean myself and Maisie?”

Stout sighed and waved me away. Then he seemed to realise something, and quickly pulled up the edge of his left sleeve to check his watch. “My seven o’clock is almost here,” he said quickly. “You young ladies will not want to be around when they arrive, unless you want to meet the Director and the Governor for yourselves, up close. And you don’t, they’re terribly boring and long-winded, and they often come with an escort. If you’re on the shit-list then I would hurry on out of here before you’re trapped. There’s nowhere to hide in this room except under the desk, and I don’t think your wheelchair would fit.”

A cold hand crept up my spine. “Excuse me?”

“Aw shit,” said Raine.

"They're coming here?" Evee snapped. "The head of this 'administration' is coming right here?"

Raine said, "In about sixty seconds, by the looks of that watch! It's six fifty nine. Heather, grab Evee's wheelchair, we need to move, right now!"

The Saye Fox was already leaping off the chair and darting back toward the door, pausing to share a final lingering glance with Professor Stout. Wilson nodded at the Fox, his strange rubbery face creased with a melancholy smile of acceptance and loss. Raine followed quickly, grabbing the door handle and preparing to flee.

But I hesitated.

"Heather! Now!" Raine snapped.

"Professor," I said. "Wilson. We can get you out of here, the same as everybody else. There's no need for self-sacrifice. Come with us. Please!"

Evelyn twisted around in her chair to run me through with her eyes. "Heather! Heather, do not fucking strand me here! Move!"

Stout just shook his head, leaned back in his chair, and spread his hands across his stomach. He looked almost pleased with himself. "There's no need for that. I've become quite adept at leading the administration around in circles. It's terribly boring, an utter waste of a mind, but it stops them from bothering other people for a few hours. I'm quite safe here, thank you."

"But you're—"

"Also I don't think I can move. And I will cease to be coherent soon. Don't remind me of that, please. It's a horrible thought. You best get going before your friends get angry with you." He nodded to Evee. "And good luck, Evelyn Saye. I hope one day we can meet and chat under less pressured circumstances. It would be nice to tell you about your grandmother sometime."

"R-right ... right," I said. "Thank you, Professor Stout. And, well, good luck."

The Professor smiled through his thick and ragged beard. Then he called out: "Next time, Laurissa, you old fox!"

I grabbed the handles of Evelyn's wheelchair and raced back to the

door. Evee held on tight, and held her tongue, silently fuming at our delay.

Raine was crouched, holding the handle, one ear pressed to the door. She gestured for me to crouch as well, then hissed: “We have company.”

“Shit!” Evelyn snapped.

“Footsteps, lots of them, coming this way,” Raine said. “Heather, you stay as low as you can while still pushing the chair, but be ready to get up and sprint. If we have to move, I’m gonna grab Evee and run, and dump the chair. Whatever happens, stick close to me. You understand?”

I nodded, heart racing behind my ribs. Sweat broke out down my back and on my palms. The throbbing wound in my left shin seemed suddenly far away.

Evelyn hissed: “Do not leave me—”

Raine whipped her head around and stared right into Evee’s eyes. “I will carry you naked over burning coals if I have to. Be ready to get carried.” She didn’t wait for a response, just reached out and grabbed my wrist. “Heather. Three, two, one — go!”

Raine threw the door wide and burst back into the office, back into the narrow corridor between the wall and the cubicle dividers, staying low. I scurried after her, pushing Evee’s wheelchair ahead of me. The Saye Fox darted past my heels; I caught a glimpse of something white held between her vulpine teeth, but she was moving too fast for me to see what it was. Had she stolen some of Wilson’s notes?

Raine paused with one shoulder against the office partitions opposite Stout’s door. I drew up behind her. The Fox leapt on ahead.

The sound of booted feet was thumping against the blue carpet, coming from all directions, jumbled into muted echoes by the maze of cubicles. Thump thump thump went the marching boots.

Raine nodded toward the waiting wall of windows, still wet with tiny droplets of rain.

“Go!” she hissed. “Exit, now!”

We scurried down the narrow passageway between the wall and the cubicles. I did my best to keep my head low, but my left leg was screaming with pain at every awkward crouch-walk step. Evelyn shrank into her wheelchair, terrified into silence. Raine hurried on, machete gripped in one fist, muscles rolling in her back.

But then she halted.

We'd barely made it twenty feet. Raine looked back, then forward, then back again.

Her eyes were wide — not with fear, but with the onrush of inevitable violence, bright and focused. She began to straighten up, rolling her shoulders, raising the naked blade of her machete. Her lips twitched with a smile.

I skidded to a halt, Evee's wheelchair stopping along with me.

"Raine?!" I hissed.

Evelyn joined in. "What the fuck are you doing, you rabid hound?! Move! Go!"

Raine grinned. Her eyes flickered down to me and Evee, then back up the way we'd come.

"We're cornered," she said, and made it sound like 'God, yes'. "They're in front and behind. Two groups. Listen to that. They've pinned us, cut us off. Like they knew we'd be here." She showed her teeth. "Time for a fight. You two can still run, I'll punch a hole to the door."

"Raine, no!" I hissed. "No, we can't! We can't win, not as we are now! We can't risk it! We—"

"No choice, sweet thing." Raine blew out a long breath and stood all the way up, eyes looking out across the cubicles. She was exposed, in full view. "Time for a last stand."

In the corner of my eye, the Saye Fox hopped up into Evee's lap. One of Evee's hands flashed, accepting something hard and white from within the Fox's mouth, then tucking it against her own chest.

"Bullshit!" Evelyn snapped. "Heather, get me against the cubicle wall, right now! And grab Raine! Get her head down, for pity's sake!"

"Eh?" Raine looked down. I peered around Evee's front.

In one white-knuckled fist, Evelyn was clutching a lump of very familiar white quartz.

The Fadestone.

Where had she gotten it? From her grandmother, the Saye Fox. Where had the Fox acquired such a thing? From within Wilson's office? How? Well, that could wait.

I didn't waste a second explaining to Raine what was going on or how any of this worked. I just pulled Evee's wheelchair flush against the wall of cubicle dividers, crushed myself next to her as tight as I could, then grabbed the side of Raine's tank top and hissed: "Down! Now, down girl! Down!"

Raine obeyed. She hit the floor almost without a sound, cramming herself in tight. Absolute trust, not a moment's hesitation, despite the hint of disappointment on her face.

"Good girl," I hissed. "You can fight stuff later! Right now, we hide!"

"Fair," Raine purred.

The booted footsteps were almost upon us — heavy, marching, moving in time, closing on us from left and right. They sounded as if they were right on the other side of the cubicle dividers. The two groups would turn opposite corners any moment, and we would be trapped in the middle.

Evelyn stuck out the fist that held the Fadestone. "Hold my wrist," she hissed, voice shaking. "I'll do the thinking and the concentrating to hide us, just do not let go, try not to move, and don't break my concentration. Grab on, now, for fuck's sake, do I have to say everything twice?!"

Raine and I did as Evee said — Raine wrapped a hand around Evee's arm, while I used both of mine to support and hold her wrist in case her arm got tired. The Saye Fox peeked over the arm of Evelyn's wheelchair too, her head wedged against Evee's side.

Then Evelyn went absolutely still and silent, as if she had instantly slipped into deep meditation. Her soft blue eyes locked onto the Fadestone.

Thump thump thump went the approaching boots, shaking the cubicle dividers, drumming through the floor.

“Whatever you do,” Evelyn whispered, “do not break my concentration. Do. Not. Break. My. Concentration. Or we’re all dead.”

Thump thump thump.

Raine put a hand over her own mouth. I clamped my lips shut.

“We are simply not here,” Evelyn whispered, chanting a mantra to herself to hold our invisibility strong. “We are not here. We are not here. Not here. Not here. Not. Here. Not.”

bedlam boundary – 24.15

Over my long and lonely teenage decade — of Eye-borne nocturnal mathematics lessons, of daylight nightmares of the spirit-world menagerie, and of uncontrolled Slips to the otherworldly environs of a thousand Outside dimensions — I had become quite the seasoned veteran in the arts of hiding and skulking, to avoid the attention of vast and unknowable intelligences.

I had scurried from rock to rock on my hands and knees as shivering titans prowled blasted landscapes; I had wormed into nooks and crannies in the ground as blistering sunlight scorched burnt jungles to smoke and ash; I had gone silent and still and curled up in the fetal position, pretending to be dead, as alien forms and gibbering hungers had stalked by my frozen body. I had hidden everywhere — in the dark, in holes, beneath rotten wood, behind piles of flesh and mounds of earth and crammed into the metal cavities of world-machine god-things. Long before ever I realised my true nature and built my tentacles, I had acted like the Outsider cephalopod hybrid I always was, slipping into cracks in the rock to conceal myself from larger predators, squeezing myself down tight to dodge the jaws of swifter sharks and hunting rays and monsters in the cold void beyond.

I had never attempted such a habitual feat beneath stark fluorescent lights, in a seemingly mundane office, surrounded by scratchy carpet and sensibly upright walls.

But there we were — myself, Raine, Evelyn, and the Saye Fox — hunched down tight against a flimsy blue cubicle divider, in a dream of a very mundane, very boring, very soporific open-plan office. And we weren't even tucked out of the way inside one of the cubicles. That would have been cause for some hope, at least. Perhaps we could have stayed very quiet and very still, like children hiding under a bed. But no, we were blocking practically one third of the passageway along the back wall, smack bang in the way of anybody who was heading for Wilson's Stout's office. His door was barely twenty feet to our left, wide open. But we had no choice. Evelyn's wheelchair could not be folded up or tucked out of the way. Here was where we made our stand — or our crouch, to

torture the metaphor.

Only the Fadestone kept us hidden, clutched tightly in Evelyn's fist, a promise as-yet untested.

Raine and I gripped Evelyn's hand and arm, so the effect of the stone might cover us all. The Saye Fox peered over the arm of Evelyn's wheelchair — and so did the Praem Plushie, though I had not seen her move. Evelyn's muttered mantra of 'not here' faded away to nothing. She closed her lips. Her eyelids drooped, heavy with meditative concentration.

Thump thump thump went the footsteps on the office floor, drawing closer with every footfall. The cubicle wall vibrated against my back. Sweat beaded at my hairline. My heart was going a thousand miles an hour.

In a way, we were being cornered by two sets of tendrils or feelers, extended by an entity no less vast and alien than any Outsider leviathan I had hidden from as a teenager — the institution of Cygnet Asylum itself was reaching out to ensnare us.

Raine and I shared one last glance. I almost sobbed. Was this the end? Raine's free hand tightened on the grip of her naked machete. I shook my head. Don't break the spell!

And then our pursuers were upon us.

Four armoured figures rounded a corner to our right, roughly twenty feet away, emerging from within the maze of cubicles and cubby holes and computer desks. They wore black uniforms with full helmets and mirrored face plates. Each one carried a sub-machine gun slung across the chest. The uniforms bore insignia over the heart — a trio of tentacles, impaled on a spike.

Knights! I swallowed a gasp of recognition.

The quartet of Knights marched in perfect time, booted footfalls thumping on the carpet in a steady rhythm, approaching down the narrow corridor between the cubicle dividers and the bone-pale surface of the back wall. They were out of place among the grey and blue surroundings of the office, with greasy fluorescent light reflecting off their helmets, like confused sea-life dumped into a biome which had no place for them — or like an armed response team raiding a newspaper.

They did not pause in their advance, nor move their heads, nor raise their weapons. They did not seem to notice us at all.

My heart back flipped with relief. The Fadestone was working!

But then, as the Knights drew closer, I realised another figure was walking at the centre of the formation, like the middle dot of a five on the face of a die.

It was Seven Shades of Sunlight.

Sevens wore the mask of the Yellow Princess, but with several major alterations. Ice blue eyes glittered with razor-sharp intensity, set in her usual pale complexion, with her usual high cheekbones and fine little nose. Dark bags shone beneath her eye sockets, only partially concealed by make-up; I was never an expert in foundation and powder and blush, but even I could tell the make-up was a very slapdash job. I had never seen such an imperfection in the Yellow Princess before.

Her blonde hair was longer than usual, reaching past her shoulders in a mess of uneven curls, as if she hadn't yet found an opportunity to apply a comb to her scalp that morning. Her crisp white blouse had sprouted fancy ruffles and lace at the collar and cuffs, like a 17th century dandy, but had also gained a landscape of tell-tale creases and wrinkles. Her long yellow skirt had grown a flared hem and paired rows of bunched lacing about her calves. But the skirt had also been torn — all the way up one side, in a massive slit which ended in the middle of Sevens' left thigh; the tear was neat and tidy and very straight, as if it had been inflicted on purpose rather than by accident or in some unplanned tussle. Her confident stride made plain the reason: the tear allowed her to walk faster, fast enough to keep up with the Knights. Her sensible yet elegant shoes had been replaced by a pair of bright yellow trainers, with loose laces tucked beneath the tongues.

She carried a clipboard over one arm, festooned with papers and sticky notes. A pencil was stuck behind one elegant ear; another pencil was jammed between her teeth as she chewed on the end. A third pencil dangled on a string from the top of the clipboard. A series of pens were stuck into the breast pocket of her blouse; one of the pens had leaked green ink into the white fabric.

Seven-Shades-of-Stressed-Out-Scribe looked rumpled and haggard.

Like the Knights, Sevens did not see us sitting on the floor, even as my eyes went wide and my mouth hung open with a low gasp. Raine nudged my thigh with her elbow, reminding me not to break Eevee's concentration.

But Sevens was right there! I shared a glance with Raine, trying to speak with my eyes. She shook her head.

But—!

A second quartet of Knights rounded the distant corner on our left, much further away than Sevens and her Knightly bodyguards. These fresh four Knights marched down the passageway as well, heading toward us; if they had been planning a flanking manoeuvre to pin us here, it would have been quite successful if not for the timely present of the Fadestone. We were pinned between the two groups.

The second quartet marched up to Wilson Stout's office, then stopped just short of the open door.

This second group also escorted a fifth figure in their middle, flanking her like bodyguards. She stopped when the Knights stopped.

I had no idea who she was.

She wore a long white laboratory coat over a pair of jeans and a ribbed sweater the colour of congealed coffee — an exact match for the stolen sweater I now wore beneath my yellow blanket. A great mass of dark blonde hair fell down her back, a mane of tangled tresses, swept away from her forehead by a careless hand. By the lines on her face and the natural sagging of her skin she looked to be in her late fifties or perhaps early sixties — yet she had no crow's feet around her eyes, no laugh or frown lines, no crinkling at the corners of her mouth, no sun damage on her skin, no moles, no blemishes, nothing. She stood with a straight and unbowed back, hands in her lab coat pockets, head held high with the casual indifference of somebody who did not care for anything beneath her nose. Her complexion was impossible to place — she might have been southern European, or middle eastern, or central Asian, or a dozen other ethnicities all mixed together. She had a high nose, powerful cheekbones, and a wide mouth with colourless lips. She wore no make-up or jewellery, except for a dozen analogue wristwatches on her right forearm, exposed by the rolled-up sleeve of her lab coat; the watches were all different makes and models, all

set to different times, ticking away at different speeds.

She had eyes the colour of coral and blossoms, of the sky at dawn in the hours before rain, of flesh and meat and fresh-drained blood mixed with cold seawater.

Those eyes were distracted and absent; her gaze slid over Sevens, approaching down the passageway, then onto the wall, then the open door to Stout's office, then away over the tops of the cubicle dividers. She glanced downward just once, right at me and Raine and Evelyn and the Saye Fox.

When our eyes met, she saw me.

I knew with the certainty of a knife in my throat that she saw me, completely — right through the Fadestone. But she did not comprehend that I was present, or what I was, or what any of me meant.

Then she looked away again, eyes always in motion.

Blood left my face. My heart stilled. I did not recognise the woman in the lab coat, not at all.

But I knew what I was looking at.

Seven-Shades-of-Swiftly-Stepping walked right past us, inside the marching cage of her Knightly escort; she glanced down at us too, as if we were a passing notion or a wild fancy. Her eyes met mine; unlike her counterpart, Sevens frowned as if she really saw something there, saw my eyes, and understood on some subconscious level that some trick was concealing the truth from her mind. I wiggled my eyebrows, desperate to attract her attention, but she just shook her head as if dismissing a stray thought.

The momentum of the Knights carried her onward, past our huddled group. She turned her eyes away from us, and drew up on the opposite side of the door to Wilson Stout's office.

Raine whispered: "The moment they enter that room, we get up and we run. Be ready."

I stuck one hand inside my yellow blanket, reaching for the gift from the King in Yellow. I whispered, barely more than a breath. "I need to give her the hilt! The bladeless hilt from the King in Yellow!"

“Mmm,” Raine purred. “I don’t know about that, sweet thing.”

Evelyn kept her eyes fixed on the Fadestone, but she spoke in a murmur: “We can hide and move. It can be done. Just don’t break my concentration.”

“This might be my only chance!” I hissed. “And that other woman, she’s—”

“Good morning, Governor,” said Seven-Shades-of-Strident-Salutation, cutting across my words.

She sounded harried and breathless. Her voice didn’t carry the tone and timbre of the Yellow Princess. This was not just an alteration, it was a different mask, a different person altogether. Sevens had addressed the woman in the lab coat, but received no answer. She quickly checked her clipboard, flipping through loose pages, peering at sticky notes.

“We had a major incident yesterday,” said this new Sevens. “A full-blown revolt. Several major injuries, a lot of minor injuries to both staff and patients, and a secondary incident with some ... some regrettable deaths. Sixteen patients still unaccounted for, at large, or escaped the grounds entirely. A right fine mess, a bloody great fuck up.” Sevens huffed and looked up. “Governor? Are you listening to me?”

The woman in the lab coat clearly wasn’t paying attention. She wasn’t even looking at Sevens; she was gazing off across the office. At Sevens’ prompting she dragged her eyes back around, but did not seem to focus.

“Mm,” grunted the woman in the lab coat — the Governor. “Good morning, Director.”

Her voice was floaty and flimsy, like cobwebs on the wind. Her accent was unremarkable English, I couldn’t place it.

I whispered to Raine: “The Director and the Governor. So they are two different people. And if that’s Sevens—”

“That’s Sevens?” Raine hissed. “Oof.”

“Mm! Which means the other woman is ... no, no, it can’t be, there’s no way it could be so human.”

Evelyn swallowed. Perhaps this concept was disturbing her

concentration. I could hardly blame her. It was making my bowels shake.

Sevens huffed a big sigh. “Yes, good morning. Hello. Please concentrate.” She clicked her fingers before the Governor’s face, three times. “Look, okay, we’ll talk about the incident later, we—”

But the Governor was already looking away, running her eyes up and down the chrome frame of the door to Stout’s office. “I must get back to the archives,” she said. She sounded like she was talking to herself. “There’s so much to go through. So many case files. I need to keep going, or I’ll never finish. Never finish. Have to read it all.”

“Yes, yes,” Sevens huffed again. “You can do that in a few minutes. First we need to check in on our consultant and see if he can derive a pattern from yesterday. Then we need an all-hands meeting. All the nurses, at least. Get everyone ready for finding our fugitives and get them back on track. Then ... ”

Sevens trailed off, blinking in surprise. She had followed the direction of the Governor’s pinkish eyes. She leaned forward to peer through the open door of Stout’s office.

Professor Stout called out from inside. “Hullo there! Good morning!”

“Why is this door already open?!” Sevens shrieked. From zero to sixty in the blink of an eye; I had never seen the Princess lose her temper before, let alone screaming at the top of her lungs. “How?! Nobody knows the code, it’s not even consistent! Only the Governor can even read it!”

Stout replied from within. “I felt like I needed a breath of fresh air, that’s all. A morning stroll! You should try it sometime!”

Sevens whirled away from the door. One hand clutched and clawed at her own hair while the other brandished her clipboard, notes flapping as she waved it up and down. Her eyes bulged from their sockets. She went red in the face, spitting mad. “I can’t believe this!” she shouted. “I can’t— I can’t— I can’t do this anymore!”

She hurled the clipboard onto the floor. It landed with a dull, unsatisfying slap of plastic on carpet. She followed up with a stamp of one foot, but that was no better, so she suddenly lashed out and kicked the wall — thud, just as unyielding and disappointing.

Sevens keened through her teeth at the white plaster of the wall, as if it was personally responsible for being too sturdy.

The Knights politely backed away, making space for Sevens to have a tantrum.

"I can't keep control of every single spinning plate in this place, I can't!" she screamed. "Nothing does what it's supposed to! The pieces move on their own and the set itself shuffles about when I'm not looking!" She slapped the chrome door frame with an open hand. One of the Knights ducked in close and picked up her clipboard, then stepped back before Sevens-Shades-of-Scorching-Spleen could re-target her rage. "Fuck this! Fuck all of this! I'm fucking done! I can't!"

"Mm," grunted the Governor. "It's just a door."

"I've had enough, I've had enough of all this!" Sevens began to sob, lowering her face into her hands. "I can't do this, I can't keep control of all this, none of it fits together, none of it works, none of it woooooorks!" She turned the final word into a screech of frustration, lifting her face from her hands and baring her teeth, wide-eyed with panting anger and wet-streaked eyes.

"Oh, Sevens," I whispered to myself.

"Didn't realise she was so high-strung," Raine hissed.

"This is nothing like her, usually," I whispered back. "She's as trapped as the rest of us, I think."

Sevens just stood there panting for breath, on the verge of recovery or breakdown. The Governor did nothing to comfort or calm her. Eventually Sevens cleared her throat, wiped stray hairs out of her face, and straightened up. She took several long, slow, deep breaths. She held out a hand to the Knight who had picked up her clipboard, murmuring a thank you as her notes were returned.

"Thank you, yes." She glanced at the Knights, her voice lowered and meek, all rage forgotten. "Um, you four, would you please fan out and check the offices, to see if there's anything else out of place? Some patients may have gotten in here. Perhaps they got the door open, somehow, though I don't see how that would be possible."

"Ma'am," said one of the Knights, voice trapped behind black fabric

and padded armour. The Knight sounded just as androgynous as when we'd last met them. "We're detailed to escort you. It's not safe so soon after a riot."

Sevens gestured at the Governor and her matching quartet of Knights. "It's fine," said Seven-Shades-of-Strictly-Regulated-Systems. "I'll be with the Governor the whole time, with these other four guards. Just fan out and check for ten minutes while we have a meeting with Stout, then come back. I won't go anywhere alone."

Sevens' four Knights all looked at each other, then nodded in unison. "Yes, ma'am," they all echoed.

The four Knights turned and marched off the way they'd come, right past myself and my friends. They split up quickly, vanishing into the maze of cubicles, all heading in different directions. One of them lingered briefly, staring down at us through the mirrored visor. Raine readied herself to pounce, but I shook my head. The Knight leaned over the edge of the cubicle divider, checking behind us, then turned away and carried on.

Raine let out a slow breath, knuckles tight on her machete. I shivered with relief. We had to do everything we could to avoid open conflict with the Knights. They were not our target, they were little better than slaves of the institution, no different than us.

"Shall we?" said Sevens to the Governor, gesturing into Stout's office.

The Governor went first, with two Knights in front of her and two Knights behind. As the first group passed through the doorway and into the office, Raine whispered in my ear: "We go as soon as Sevens is inside. Be ready."

"No!" I hissed back. "Raine, I have to give her the hilt! I have to! This might be our only chance."

Raine locked eyes with me. I frowned, trying to make my face blaze with determination.

Raine nodded. "Alright," she whispered. "One condition. You let me do it."

I nodded. "As long as she gets the hilt, I don't care if we have to throw it at her or slap her with it or ... right."

A flicker of a grin passed across Raine's lips. "I'll do one better than

that. Let's make sure she gets the message loud and clear."

"Okay, good girl," I hissed. "Good girl."

Raine's eyes flickered back to the door. "Here she goes. On three, I let go of Eevee, and you slap the hilt into my hand. Then grab Eevee's wheelchair, be ready to run."

The last of the four Knights was stepping through the doorway and into Stout's office. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was just turning to follow.

"One — two — three!"

Raine let go of Eevee's hand and shot to her feet. I let go as well, fumbling inside my yellow blanket for the weighty metal of the Yellow King's empty hilt. Eevee snatched her own arm back, the Fadestone with it. The Fox ducked back down into Eevee's lap. The Praem Plushie was already tucked in tight.

Our disguise collapsed.

We must have appeared out of nowhere in Sevens' peripheral vision — three girls, one fox, and one wheelchair, crammed against the cubicle dividers where a moment ago there had been only empty air. She whirled on the spot, right before Stout's door, jaw dropping, cold blue eyes flying wide.

I slapped the empty hilt into Raine's waiting hand.

Sevens began to raise one arm, pointing toward Raine and the rest of us. Her mouth widened for a shout — guards, guards, they're right here!

Raine sprinted the gap in the time it took Sevens to draw the necessary breath. She cut off Sevens' shout with her own lips, sealing the mouth of the Yellow Princess with a sudden kiss. Sevens' eyes flew wide, trying to scramble back, but Raine had looped one arm around Sevens' slender waist.

I scrambled to my feet and grabbed the handles of Eevee's wheelchair, trying not to gape at Raine's daring plan.

Raine ripped back from the kiss, leaving Sevens a spluttering mess. Before Sevens could recover, Raine pressed the golden hilt into Sevens' free hand.

"Present from your dad! Sorry about the door! And nice lips," Raine

shouted — then turned and sprinted back toward me and Evee.
“Run! Go! Back doors, now!”

“I’m sorry, Sevens!” I shouted past Raine. “It was the only way! I’ll free you later!”

Seven-Shades-of-Spent-and-Spluttering gaped at me in confusion, then yelled, “I’m not your kind of crazy! I am not!”

“That again,” I hissed, then turned and fled, racing toward the wall of rain-splattered windows, pushing Evelyn’s wheelchair like an out-of-control shopping cart.

Raine darted ahead of me and Evee, legs pumping, taking the lead in our escape. We had a straight shot to the door, straight down the narrow passage between the cubicles and the wall. Most of the four Knights had already pushed too deep into the tangle of cubicles and computers to turn around and catch us; two of them actually blundered into the dividers, going down in a tangle of collapsing chest-high walls and the weight of their own equipment. One of them looked lost in the maze of cubicles, turning left, then right, then left again in an effort to reach us.

But one Knight had not yet gone too deep. A black armoured form hurried to intercept us, approaching our route from the side.

“You!” Raine yelled, pointing her machete at the Knight. “Back! I won’t go easy!”

The Knight plunged out into the passageway, right into our path. Evelyn gasped. The Fox let out a series of yip-yowls from Evee’s lap. The Knight’s hands went for the big black shiny gun, the weapon, the final word in the monopoly of violence. But then the Knight hesitated, as if thinking better of threatening us.

Raine sprinted right at the Knight. A grin ripped across her face. She wound back her machete to stab through a gap in the Knight’s armour, ready to gut and fillet our foe.

“Raine, no!” I yelped.

At the last second, Raine thrust her weapon forward — and turned it to the side. She smacked the Knight across the faceplate with the flat of her blade, with a sharp, resounding crack.

The Knight staggered back more in surprise than pain, crashing down into a cubicle divider.

Two black-gloved hands rose in surrender.

“Heather says you get to live!” Raine pointed her machete at the mirrored face-plate. “Stay down!”

Raine raced past the fallen Knight, leaping toward our exit. I followed, pushing Evelyn’s wheelchair past the Knight’s boots. The empty visor stared upward at me, eyes invisible behind the mask of authority.

“Sorry, sorry!” I yelped — then swallowed a hiccup. “Hic! Sorry!”

We hit the wall of windows seconds later. Raine slammed the bar-handle down and popped the door, leaping out into the drizzling rain. A gust of chill air whipped at my yellow blanket, threatening to drag me back into the offices. Raine held the way open for me and Evelyn. I shoved Evelyn’s wheelchair over the lip, as if I might not be able to follow. But then Raine reached back inside and yanked me out by one wrist, pulling me to freedom on my shaky, adrenaline-flushed legs. Damp air coated my face. The Fox whined at the sudden cold, at the moisture in the air, snuggling deeper into Eevee’s lap.

We were free — out in the gravel-and-concrete opening between two featureless wings of Cygnet Asylum, flanked on three sides by damp brick and dark windows.

Raine slammed the door behind us.

“Go! Go!” she pointed toward the open end of the space. The verdant grounds rolled off into the distance, the hills dusted with rain, the distant trees shivering in the breeze. “Don’t stop now!”

We all turned and fled, leaving behind the Director and the Governor and their eight unwitting bodyguards.

But as we did, I glanced back one last time, peering through the rain-fogged glass.

The ‘Governor’ — the pink-eyed, distracted woman in a laboratory coat — had emerged from Stout’s office, presumably drawn by all the shouting and commotion. She was just standing there, hands deep in her pockets, chin held high, eyes a glassy distance inside an aged and lonely face.

Her gaze met mine for a single fleeting heartbeat.

And I knew, as I stared into that pink-rimmed empty gaze, that the one in ultimate control of Cygnet Asylum did not comprehend anything that she saw.

* * *

“That woman was the Eye.”

Misty rain and damp-air haze could not blot out my words with static drums; the heavier drops falling from the leaves of the trees were too infrequent and too far away to interrupt my thoughts, landing on mulch and spongy earth, soaked into loam and clay. The chill air was a bare whisper, as if climate and weather had surrendered to the aesthetic demands of the asylum grounds, blunted to little more than a touch of cold upon one’s nose, serving merely to heighten the cosy warmth inside one’s clothes, not enough to make my teeth chatter and blur upon the truth. The hard pad of concrete ground, the uprights of dark-stained wood, the ring of benches, the fake plastic roof tiles — none of it could absorb my voice and hide what I spoke.

Cygnet Asylum itself made no effort to silence me.

Twenty minutes after our daring escape from the back offices of the hospital building, we were holed up deep in the little woodland which stretched across the rear of the asylum grounds, part of the same woods which Raine and I had crossed on the previous day. We had stumbled across the perfect shelter — a permanent pavilion or gazebo structure, a little way off the main paths of wood chips between the neat borders, like the abandoned memory of a bandstand which had not heard music in decades.

The pavilion was a heptagon, with seven sides — a detail I could not help but sigh at upon discovery. It was not much, just a concrete foundation with some wooden pillars, holding up a cheap plastic roof shaped to look like imitation tiles, as if this was some kind of fairy cottage in the forest with the walls ripped away and the contents removed. The concrete floor was host to four benches, gathered around a very empty, very dead, very clean fire-pit, probably never used. The pavilion was hardly a secure location; we would be spotted the moment anybody emerged from between the trees and looked in our direction. But it was dry and it kept the rain off our heads, so there was where we stopped, surrounded by dripping trees and rustling leaves.

Raine had made us keep moving until she was certain we weren't being followed. We hadn't passed a single patient out in the grounds, neither on the lawns nor between the trees. Either it was too early in the morning, or the foul weather was keeping everyone indoors. The weather was also horribly paradoxical — there were no clouds in the sky, only the black and wrinkled underside of the Eye. Where was the rain falling from? I tried not to think about that too hard.

When we'd finally taken shelter, Raine had pulled the towels from last night out of the carrier bag on Eeve's wheelchair, and forced me to dry myself first, wiping the rain off my face and out of my hair. She'd done the same for Evelyn, then offered the towel to the Fox. Evelyn had said nothing, sunken down in her wheelchair, recovering from the shock and adrenaline of our escape. The Fox had trotted away from Raine, casting disapproving glances at the big fluffy towel.

Raine had changed the dressing on my wound again. Evelyn had demanded something to eat, and scarfed down one of our remaining sandwiches, barely saying a word. I parked her wheelchair for her, at the end of one of the benches, before sitting down myself and trying to still my racing heart. Raine took guard duty, eyes high on the tree line, while the Fox circled and sniffed, staying out of the drizzle.

And then I had spoken the truth.

Evelyn looked up, framed by the trees and the misty rain. I wished I could bundle her up in bed, somewhere warm and safe and dry. She'd been watching the Saye Fox with tired eyes, so worn-out and exhausted, despite our night's sleep. Raine didn't waver from her guard duty, but she was well within earshot, she must have heard my words too.

"Heather," Evelyn said, in the exact tone one might say, 'Please, no.'

"I mean it, Eeve," I said. "That woman was the Eye. I'm certain of that."

Raine spoke without looking away from the trees. "What, the blonde science gilf back there?"

Evelyn clenched her jaw and screwed up her eyes. "We have more than enough to process and think about without entertaining

absurdist fantasies, thank you. The Eye has not been compressed down into a *science gilf*. And Raine, if you speak those words again I will find something to hit you with, so help me God.”

“Gilf?” I echoed, twisting around to look at Raine. She was standing a few feet away, damp with moisture from our flight across the grounds, her hair sticking up where she’d run a hand across her scalp. “I’m sorry, what does that mean?”

Raine finally glanced away from the trees and raised her eyebrows at me. “No shit?”

“No, Raine, I’m being serious. What does that mean?”

“Stop!” Evelyn snapped. “Just, both of you. Do not.”

Raine smirked, struggling to keep her mouth shut against the power of a laugh brewing behind her lips. I huffed and shrugged, a little miffed. “Evee, how can I be expected to keep up with this if you won’t—”

“They’re like milfs,” Evelyn said, with a tone of bone-deep exasperation, like she was talking to a very dim child. “Remember milfs? Like you find on the internet. Can we please move on from this point?”

The Praem Plushie in Evee’s lap seemed to be staring at me with her flat, empty eyes, willing me to let Evee have this one. I cleared my throat and nodded. “Okay, I understand.”

“I doubt that very much,” Evelyn muttered. “Look, Heather, there is no way that woman was the Eye.”

“She was looking at things without really seeing them,” I said.

“That’s what gave me the idea. Plus, she was the ‘Governor’, correct? Sevens was the Director — a rather obvious and silly title, but it makes sense. So that other woman was the Governor. That was the Eye.”

Evelyn sighed heavily and rubbed at her forehead. She watched the Fox for a long moment, nosing her way around the legs of the benches, sniffing at the concrete, bushy tail swishing back and forth. The Fox paused and met Evee’s eyes in return.

“There’s more evidence, too,” I went on after a moment. “Did you see her jumper? The awful cold brown colour? It matches the one Raine found for me.” I pinched a corner of the ratty old jumper and

held it out. "She's the big watcher, I'm the little watcher. It's all symbolic. And Sevens said she was the only one who can usually operate the lock to Stout's room. Brain-math!"

"That woman sounded like you, Heather," Raine said. "Is that a clue as well?"

"Ah? Sorry?" I frowned in mystified incomprehension. "She sounded like me?"

Raine nodded, quickly returning her eyes to the trees, watching for any hidden approaches. "She had your accent, sweet thing. Southerner. Reading, right?"

"Oh," I said, putting a self-conscious hand to my mouth. "I ... she just sounded normal to me. I didn't pick up on that at all. Gosh."

Evelyn sighed like a car tire about to blow. "Heather, you are the last person to whom I should have to explain this. The Eye is so vast, so beyond human form or human thought, that cramming it down into a human body is impossible."

"Why?" I said. "Evee, everything else here has been 'crammed down' into human form. This whole place is a metaphor. An entire dimension turned into a parody of a hospital from my memories. I rewrote reality and made it into a play! Why can't the Eye play a human being? Why not?"

Evelyn glared at me sidelong. "Because I don't like it."

I blinked in surprise. "Ah?"

"I'm making an effort to be honest with myself, and with you," she said. "I don't like what that implies. If you've somehow humanised the Eye, what are we supposed to do? Kill her? Have a sit down with her, with tea and cakes? Kidnap her? Entice her into a lesbian romance? Ha!" Evelyn barked with sudden laughter. She went to slap her own knee, but her prosthetic wasn't there, and she just tapped the air in front of her stump. "That's probably exactly what Sevens has in mind, isn't it? Show the Eye the wonders of getting her pussy munched down on, then she'll come around and we'll all be freed. Yes, great plan!"

Raine muttered: "Sounds good to me."

"Yes," Evelyn spat, dripping venom. "It would do. And that's why it's not working."

I shook my head. "I don't think that's what Sevens intends, nor would any of those things be possible. And I do hope Sevens is going to be okay. I hope she knows what to do with that sword hilt."

Raine clucked her tongue. "Looked like she needed a good fuck to get her mind off her work."

"Well," I cleared my throat. "That too. You're ... not wrong, I think. Though I wouldn't be so crude about it."

Evelyn snorted. "Let's hope she uses the sword to cut off the Eye's head."

Raine drew a breath between her teeth. "Waste of a good gilf."

I ignored that word. "So, Evee, you think I'm right?"

Evelyn sighed. "I suspect you might be, but I hope you aren't. If you're correct, I have no idea how we would even begin to approach her as a problem. Say we free Twil and Zheng, and take over the asylum with a second Lozzie-sparked revolt — what then? What do we do, tie her up and try to explain to her why all this is bad? This can't be resolved with a philosophical debate, Heather. Few things can."

"I could tie up a gilf and turn her right with some philosophy," Raine muttered.

Evee ignored that. "This is a serious question, Heather. What do we do about the Eye?"

My turn to sigh. "I ... I don't know yet. Planning like this is difficult. I feel like I'm slower than I should be, missing six sevenths of what I'm used to, I—"

"And you're the only one tapped into the dream," Evelyn interrupted. "That trick with Praem back there, getting the door open. You're wired into this place, this reality, probably because you helped create it. So, think hard. What do we do with the Eye?"

I stared out of the pavilion, at the dripping leaves of the trees all around. I lifted a corner of the damp towel from my shoulders and ran it over my hair again. The yellow blanket had somehow kept my shoulders warm and dry even as we had dashed through the misting raindrops. I felt cosy inside, shaken by the realisation of that strange woman's identity, but determined that we were on the

right path.

“This is her institution—”

Evelyn cut me off with a hiss. “Must we call it a ‘her’?”

I shrugged. “Right now the Eye is wearing a human form and a human face. I think it’s probably for the best.” I gestured at the Praem Plushie with one hand. “I treated Praem the same way, when you first put her in a body, and that turned out to be the right call in the long run, despite your initial misgivings. Right now, right here, in this dream, the Eye is a person. A ‘gilt’ in her sixties.”

Evelyn winced. Raine snorted.

“Whatever you do,” Evelyn drawled. “Do not use that word to ... ‘her’ face. Not that I think we should get anywhere near her, certainly not speak to her.”

“All right?” I said. “All right, okay. I won’t.” I frowned in private confusion. Milves and gilves were too confusing for me. “As I was saying,” I carried on. “This is her institution. Cygnet Asylum belongs to her. Sevens is the Director, but that just means she’s responsible for keeping things running, I think that’s why she was so stressed back there. She’s running the narrative somehow, that’s the role she’s been forced into here. But the Eye—”

“Eileen,” Raine suggested.

Evelyn made a sound like an angry gerbil. “Absolutely not. Raine, shut up. Stop talking.”

Raine began to laugh, but I nodded in agreement with Eevee.

“Actually, yes. I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to name her. If she has a name, she’ll tell us. She’s the Governor, or the Eye. I’m serious, Raine. Please.”

Raine put up her hands. “Sure thing, sweet thing. You’re the boss.”

“Good girl,” I said, almost on reflex. I was getting far too used to that. “Right, now, if we’re quite done with the interruptions?” I glanced at both Raine and Eevee. Raine bowed her head. Evelyn cleared her throat. “Right. This is the Eye’s institution. I think that’s partly what this nightmare version of Cygnet is. This is a representation of how she sees the world, how she interacts with reality — as a carceral institution, for observing all the mentally ill girls within. Now, yes, I’ve obviously influenced the metaphor as

well, but this place within the metaphor belongs to her. So, if we take it over and tear it down, that might ... change her."

Evelyn sighed. "Great. We're applying dream logic to the mind of an Outsider god. What could possibly go wrong?"

"The play's the thing," I recited. "I think this might be the only way to communicate with her. Via reality itself."

Evelyn shook her head, running her tongue over her teeth behind her lips, digging out fragments of the sandwich she'd just eaten. Raine looked away, staring out into the dripping woods. The Saye Fox padded up to us, to where Evelyn and I sat side by side. She plopped down on the concrete, sitting on her haunches, and looked up at us.

"Ah," I said softly. "I didn't get a chance to thank you earlier, did I? For grabbing the Fadestone off Stout. Thank you." I bowed my head to the Fox. "Without you, I don't think we would have made it out of there. Thank you ... Laurissa."

The Fox just tilted her head to one side, ears standing upright and alert. For a long moment, nobody said a word. I glanced sidelong at Evelyn.

She was staring back at the Fox with an expression I'd never seen before, a strange and heady cocktail of anxiety, loss, and hope.

"Evee?" I said her name very gently.

Evelyn snapped out of her reverie with a sharp sigh. "Yes, yes. I'm fine. I'm just ... " She gestured at the Fox — at Laurissa Saye, her own grandmother. "This is a lot to take in. I'm sorry I can't digest your theory right now, Heather. That is my grandmother. I can't deal with that right now, I simply can't."

The Saye Fox responded to Evelyn's anxiety by padding closer and rubbing her vulpine snout against the ankle of Evelyn's withered leg. Evee swallowed, very hard and very dry, but she did not chase the Fox away. She let out a shuddering breath.

"It is a lot to deal with, Evee," I said gently. "I'm here if you want to —"

"She achieved the miracle my mother never could." Evee spoke without looking at me, totally focused on the Fox. "Immortality, or at least major extension of life. She must have seeped out of her

own body, her corpse, maybe into the worms that ate her flesh after death. The beetles, the bugs, even the microbes. Then they got eaten by moles, shrews, the like, anything larger, anything higher up the systems of biology. Accumulating in the food chain like a toxin, concentrating upward over time. Eventually a fox ate enough of her, enough distributed particles, enough pieces of her soul to put them back together into something like her mind.” Evelyn sighed and reached down; the Fox sniffed at her fingers. Evelyn repeated the gesture with the Praem Plushie; the Fox sniffed Praem, then nudged the Plushie with her snout.

“Introducing her to her great-granddaughter?” I asked.

“They’ve already met.” Evelyn returned the Praem Plushie to her own lap. “Do you know I never met her in life? Did I ever tell you about that? She died when I was two. No memories of her. Absolutely nothing.”

“Evee ... ”

“The point I’m making, Heather, is that we are not looking at my grandmother’s reincarnation. We are looking at an actual fox, possessed by the spirit of a dead mage.”

Awkward silence fell. I swallowed, unsure what to say.

Evelyn muttered: “Am I going to end up like that, after I die? Will I end up as worms and bugs, and then moles and birds, then ... ”

Raine said, “Quicker ways to get a tail if you wanna turn into a fox, Evee. You’d look very fetching with cute little fox ears.”

“Tch,” Evelyn tutted and waved that away.

I said, “Are you going to ... to say ... I don’t know, say hello to her?”

Evelyn side-eyed me. “I think we’re a bit past that.”

“Well, at least thank her for the Fadestone.”

Evelyn nodded. She rummaged inside her grey dressing gown and pulled out the lump of white quartz. “Mm. Quite a trick, that. I wonder if she knew Stout would have the stone. Or if it was just quick thinking. Either way, well done.”

The Fox let out a soft ‘Yeerp.’

Raine said: "Clue me in here, magic lady."

"If you pledge to never call me that again," replied Evee.

"How come the magic hiding stone worked when your circles didn't?" Raine clucked her tongue. "And this isn't just idle curiosity, this is serious. If stuff around here works only part of the time, I might need to know."

Evelyn held up the Fadestone. The white quartz glinted in the rainy light. I did my best not to frown at the thing — even now I didn't like it very much, the way it hid things from my sight when I wasn't paying attention.

"Because it's a physical prop," said Evee. "That's my best guess."

"Sorry?" I said. "What do you mean?"

Evelyn snorted. "We're in a play, right? The stone is a nice large object, like on a stage. It's a prop, so it works how it should."

"Huh," Raine grunted. She did not seem convinced. I wasn't quite sure about that either.

"Raine," I said, twisting around on the bench to look at her directly. "I wanted to thank you as well."

Raine cracked a grin. "All you gotta do is call me a good girl."

"Yes, good girl," I said. "Thank you for not hurting that Knight. At least, not too badly. I suppose you did knock it onto its backside. Still, you could have run it through. Thank you for showing restraint."

"Ahhhh, hmm," Raine said, losing ninety percent of her grin. "You're welcome."

"Oh? Raine, what's wrong?"

Raine grumbled down in her throat. "Didn't like pulling the punch. Armed guards are fair game. Or should be."

I grimaced. "It's not their fault. They're no different to the patients. I told you, they're with us, they came into this dream along with us. And I know they're on our side, deep down. Didn't you see?"

Raine frowned with sudden curiosity. "See what?"

"None of them used their guns."

Raine's eyebrows shot upward. "Oh. Shit. Huh. I didn't even realise. Weird. Like the guns weren't even part of my thinking."

I nodded. "They could have pointed those guns at us and shouted 'freeze!', like we were in a silly crime movie or something. But they didn't. They blundered into the scenery and made a show of screwing up. I think that was on purpose! I don't think they're fair game, not at all. Well, okay, I know this principle probably can't be applied to real armed guards and paramilitary, but it applies to them. They're not like the nursing staff and the doctors. They're not even 'just following orders'. They barely followed their orders at all back there. They messed up so we could get away."

Evelyn interrupted: "You're saying they let us escape? That pratfall stuff was on purpose?"

"Exactly."

Raine nodded along, then looked out into the mist and the trees. She sighed, almost wistful. "Wish they'd slip us a firearm. I could work magic with just one gun. One mag of bullets. Hell, I'll bluff it, do it with no bullets at all."

"You most certainly will not," Evelyn grunted. "No shows of force without the teeth to back it up."

Raine turned back with a nasty grin. "Oh yeah?"

"Yes," I agreed. "I don't think it's a good idea to bluff. Not when we're so weak. Not unless we have no other choice."

Silence descended for a long moment. Distant raindrops filled the air, falling from the leaves of the nearby trees, dripping from the rim of the plastic roof above our heads. Raine flexed her shoulders and weighed her machete in one hand. Evelyn sighed and ground her teeth. The Saye Fox wandered away, circling the edge of the concrete foundations again. The Praem Plushie stared at nothing.

Perhaps Evee was right. Perhaps I was the only one truly plugged into the dream, the only one with a pen to adjust the course of the play.

I straightened up and stretched out my aching left leg — the wound was even more stiff than before, soothed only briefly by the adrenaline of our escape.

"Right then," I said. "We need to keep going, keep moving, keep

trying. Lozzie is working on the riot, and we have to hope that the hilt wakes up Sevens, somehow. And we can't just bounce from bolt hole to bolt hole. We need to stick to the plan, and find Twil. Eevee, you can talk to her, try to break her out."

Evelyn squinted at me. "What about Stout's advice?"

"What advice?"

"The thing he was saying about locating the twins."

I tutted softly. "I'm the twins, I'm pretty sure. Or one twin. Or one seventh of one twin."

Evelyn shook her head gently. "I don't think he was talking about you, Heather."

"Mmmmm." I sucked on my teeth, tugging my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders. "I'm not sure I agree. I think he was deeply confused. He wasn't really all there. He was tapping that nonsense rhythm on the pipes, too, had me thinking it meant something. He was trying to help, but I don't think we can trust any of his judgement."

"The tapping was mathematics," Evelyn said.

I boggled at her. Raine even turned to look as well. I said, "Evee, you can tell that?"

Evelyn snorted. "Absolutely not. Educated guess. Think about it. Wilson Stout was a mathematician. He developed some of his own hyperdimensional mathematics, probably originating from some kind of brush with the Eye. If you had your whole self right now, I bet you could have understood the pattern in that tapping. Stout was trying to communicate with some other entity which could understand the pattern, he practically told us — the twins."

Raine said, "What about those girls Twil was with?"

I sighed again. "They weren't twins. And they were just more patients. I don't think they were meaningful in that sense."

"Are we sure?" Raine pressed. "Sure as sure?"

"They didn't look the same," Evelyn grunted.

Raine shrugged. "They were both named Lily, right? They're the only thing here which could possibly count as twins. Maybe we

should have another gander at them, after we've gotten Twil freed. Can't hurt to try."

Evelyn grumbled, less convinced than she'd been a moment ago. She gestured out at the rainy woods with one hand. "And how the hell are we going to catch her in all this? The patients and inmates will probably stay indoors today. We're stuck."

I stood up, as straight as I could manage with my throbbing leg. I swept my yellow blanket back from my shoulders, took a deep breath, and allowed myself a small and mischievous smile.

"I have an idea."

"Heather?" Evelyn grunted.

"Oho," Raine purred. "She's got something between her teeth. Go on, Heather."

"Let's bait her out," I said, feeling very naughty indeed. "Her and her friends, like we planned. Let's draw them all the way out here, deep into the woods. It's where Twil belongs, after all. Where better to help her remember what she really is?"

bedlam boundary – 24.16

Cygnets Asylum loomed out of the misty rain and drizzling droplets, peering through the saturated trees and shivering leaves like a rotting manor house abandoned in the heart of a swamp; the layers of enclosing woodland peeled back like disturbed grave dirt, moist and sticky with the leavings of distant thunderstorms, revealing the face of the asylum like the contours of a buried skull. A hundred empty eye sockets peered down at the drenched greenery of the lawns, the slippery wet pathways, the benches with their wooden slats gone slimy and slick. Each window was streaked with the slow accumulation of weak and watery raindrops, massing together on the glass and sliding downward like insensate tears upon the mirror of ossified eyeballs. Brick walls were darkened by the swirl of pinprick moisture, stained to blood red and tainted clay and strangled sunset, like the memory of ancient veins dried hard and crusty on the side of empty, windblown bone. The toothless mouth of the main entrance hung wide, flanked by the osseous wound of the side-door. Worms and beetles shifted and shuffled within — nurses, going about their business.

Two fresh incisors stood to attention just inside the main entrance — a pair of Knights, clad in black, clean and alive and upright amid the fleshless skull. They were visible all the way across the open lawns, as if picked out in greater clarity than the background of the nightmare play.

Very few patients choose to brave the damp and dreary weather of the rainy morning. As I crept from the tree line, pushing Evelyn's wheelchair ahead of me, and felt the oppressive weight of the hospital's vacant stare, I spotted only four other inmates abroad upon the asylum grounds. A pair of girls were walking off around the left side of the hospital buildings, huddling beneath the shelter of an umbrella as they hurried along. Another girl was peering out of the tall vault of the side-door — flanked by the watchful presence of a nurse; she was quickly encouraged back indoors. A second umbrella-shaded figure was heading off to the right, toward some other wing of the hospital, clutching folders and loose papers to her chest. She was flanked by a pair of burly nurses, also carrying

umbrellas.

We, on the other hand, were not so lucky as to have acquired such fantastical and advanced technology as the lowly and humble umbrella, let alone two or three. No such luxury of equipment for renegades and revolutionaries — as Raine had put it. Those who fought an insurgency from the depths of the woods had to make do with the tools they had, or what little they could steal.

Raine's metaphors left a lot to be desired, but she had a solid point.

As I walked a slow and steady route down one of the red brick pathways, heading for the front of the hospital, surrounded by the swirl and churn of misty raindrops, I peered out from beneath the rim of a towel draped over my head and shoulders. The towel was growing damp already. Moisture kept dusting my face.

Evelyn was in much the same condition, hunched down in her wheelchair. Between her big grey dressing gown and the towel over her shoulders and hair, I couldn't see anything of her unless she turned her head — and she was concentrating much too hard for casual sightseeing. I felt like I was wheeling a lump of moist laundry toward the mouth of a skull.

Step one of a plan which already filled me with doubt.

My heart was fluttering in my chest like a caged dove, and we hadn't even reached the doors yet. I tried to keep my breathing steady, but found the air sticking in my throat. My palms were sweat-soaked and slippery on the handles of Eeve's wheelchair. My left leg ached with every step, the wound in my shin throbbing, muscles stiff and slow.

If this all went wrong and ended up fleeing, we had to trust that our backup was going to be swift and capable, because I was not.

"Stop," Evelyn said.

I halted instantly, heart pounding, lips sealed. The misty rain swirled around us on the feathery breeze. I tried not to move a muscle, eyes flicking left and right.

Had the first step failed so early? We'd barely started! Had somebody seen us? Did we need to retreat, or give Raine the signal, or—

"Heather," Evelyn murmured from down beneath her towel. Her

voice was gentle and measured, easier and more relaxed than I'd ever heard before. "Take a deep breath. Hold it for the count of ten. Then let it out again, slowly."

"... E-Eevee? But—"

"Just. Do it. You agreed to follow my orders. Do as I say. Right now."

I took the prescribed deep breath, filling my lungs and counting to ten. Then I let it out, nice and slow, my inner air joining the rain in front of my face.

"Good," Evelyn murmured. "Heather, you need to relax and stay calm. You need to clear your mind and focus on the actions of your body. I can only sustain this if you stay calm and collected. Do not panic. Do not let go of the chair. Do not hesitate to do as I say."

She spoke so calmly and softly, in a way I'd never heard from Evelyn before we'd set this plan in motion. I'd never expected Eevee to be capable of such meditative serenity. If I hadn't known better, I would have said she was high on muscle relaxants or had gotten in Kimberly's supply of special tobacco. Evelyn, in my experience, was not a calm or relaxed person. She was proving me wrong.

I swallowed and took a second deep breath before speaking. "If you'd rather have Raine do this—"

"Raine has to be our backup in case something goes wrong," Evelyn said, with just a touch of her usual irritation creeping into her somnambulant tone. "You can hardly sprint to our rescue with a weapon, can you?"

"No," I said. "I don't think I could."

"Besides," Evelyn continued with a little grumble, "if Raine took your role for this caper, she would undoubtedly break our stealth to do something stupid and dangerous. That is her style, after all. You know that as well as I do. And she's no different in a dream. It has to be you, Heather. You are my arms and my legs. I am your brain and your shelter. We do this together."

"O-oh. Eevee. You didn't say any of that back when we were planning this, back in the pavilion."

"Huh," Evelyn almost chuckled. "Sometimes even I am capable of subterfuge."

That wasn't quite what I had meant — but I just cleared my throat and said, "Of course you are."

"Then we stick to the plan," she murmured. "Are you ready to continue?"

I glanced back over my shoulder at the tree line, and at the area where the woodland snaked toward the hospital on our left. Raine was hiding in those woods right now, ready to dart across the open ground to huddle in the lee of the hospital building. She was our backup, ready for violence, ready to respond to a set of pre-arranged signals. If we had to abandon our stealth, Raine would come in swinging, all cylinders firing. The Saye Fox was with her, or at least somewhere nearby, our unpredictable wild card in russet fur.

I couldn't see Raine. I decided that was a good sign, because she was sticking to the plan.

"Yes," I said. "I'm ready."

Evelyn gestured ahead with both hands, concealed inside the joined sleeves of her dressing gown. Within that sealed tube of fabric, her hands were wrapped around the Fadestone.

"Take the left-hand fork up ahead," she said. "Go in through the side entrance."

"Why the side entrance?"

Evelyn sighed. "Because the main doors don't have proper disabled access. There's no ramp. You can't get me up there."

"Oh, right. Whoops."

"No, not 'whoops'," Evelyn grunted. "Fuck this place."

"Quite right," I agreed, and on we went.

The wheels of Eeve's chair whispered across the damp brickwork pathway, turning without the slightest squeak of metal. I flexed my fingers around the handles, careful never to fully let go, lest I lose the protection of Evelyn's magic. I took deep, slow breaths, and reminded myself that we were invisible.

The nurses and the Knights inside the entranceway did not respond to the bizarre sight of two girls approaching down the pathway, one in a wheelchair, both of them draped with damp towels; the

Fadestone hid us from all sight, even from memory.

Raine, somewhere away to our left, could not see us either. She was operating on pure memorised instructions, from my lips to her ears.

Before we'd left the pavilion to put our plan into action, we had tested that theory, to make sure that it would not be a load-bearing point of failure. If I delivered Raine an absolutely clear set of instructions and orders, totally independent of reference to where I was or what I was supposed to be doing, would she be capable of following those instructions, even when Evelyn and I were concealed under the mind-veil of the Fadestone?

The answer was yes. With Eevee and I 'vanished', Raine had followed her set of test orders to the letter. She had walked three times around the pavilion, tapped a bench with her machete, and barked like a dog. Even without the memory of why she was following my orders, she had stuck to them without the slightest doubt.

Raine trusted me without question, believed in my vision and my purpose without hesitation, and would do exactly as I ordered, even if she didn't recall where I was.

Which was useful for this plan, of course, but still a bit worrying. We didn't have time to address the root of that right then, let alone work through the reasons. We had to go bait Twil out into the woods, with or without her pair of Lillies. If Raine's unquestioning obedience to even my blurred memory helped, then we would use that tool too, at least for now.

Our other primary tool was no less reliable, but far more temperamental — Evelyn assured me that the Fadestone would work to cover her, the wheelchair, and myself. When we'd used it to hide from Sevens and the Governor, Evelyn had been in a state of panic and shock, so moving while operating it had presented a challenge. But like this, she was calm and prepared, so covering me with the effect was less difficult. As long as I held on.

But she did have to concentrate.

"It's working," Evelyn muttered as we eased into the shadow of the hospital. The face of the building loomed above us, eyes blind to our presence, framed by the black and wrinkled sky.

"Mm," I managed, throat tight, breath short.

"You can talk, you know," Evelyn said. "You don't have to stay totally silent. As long as you don't make me jump or jog my shoulder or say something to shock me. And don't test that last one, please."

"I would never," I whispered. "Sorry, Eevee, I just ... I'm very focused on getting you out of the rain. This can't be healthy for you."

"Huh," Evelyn laughed. "This? This is hardly worth the title of 'rain'. This is damp air. Last I checked, you're as English as me. We both grew up with a hundred times worse than this. Rainy weather is in our guts."

I sighed. "I never like that idea. That whole stereotype. 'Why are we out in the rain?'" I put on an exaggerated posh voice, the best good-girl tone I could muster. "'Because we're English, and good little islanders don't complain about the rainy weather.' Tch. Maybe we should stop going out in the rain so much. Maybe it would do us some good. Culturally. Or ... or something like that."

"I never had much chance to go out in the rain, when I was little. And I don't get much these days. I'm not exactly robust."

"I think you're robust," I said. "You're one of the most robust people I've ever met."

"That's very kind of you," Evelyn muttered. "But it's also a great big stinking lie." She forestalled any further debate on her robustity by nodding at the building ahead. We were just about to leave the pathways and cross the open area in front of the hospital. "Focus on our entrance, Heather. Go ahead, wheel me up there. Take it slow, watch for anything out of place."

"I wish Raine hadn't made that joke earlier," I hissed.

"Which one?"

"The one about watching for things out of place, about me wheeling you into a minefield. There's no minefields here!"

"Don't count your chickens until they've hatched."

"Tch," I tutted again. "The only person who would dream up a minefield is Raine. If it happens, we can blame her."

The front of Cygnet Hospital had two sets of doors. The main

entrance was all modern glass and metal set in the surroundings of ornate red brick; that was the one through which Raine and I had joined the riot yesterday. The side entrance stood slightly to the left — a large pair of open double doors made of dark, sturdy wood, which looked like they belonged to a Church. They were propped permanently open, presumably so the girls could wander the grounds without using the main way in and out of the building. Both entrances led into the same large hallway, but the one for patients had a disabled access ramp, a short switch-back of featureless grey concrete with a handrail on either side.

We reached the ramp. My left leg complained at the weight of Evelyn and her chair. I ignored the pain and pushed, peering out from beneath my damp towel.

The hospital building seemed to tower over us, growing vast in my peripheral vision. Three stories, four stories, then ten, then fifty, then a hundred — a leviathan of brick and glass, a mountain in the sky.

But when I glanced up from the wheelchair, the hospital resumed its normal form, outlined against the wrinkled black surface of the Eye's underside.

I frowned at the asylum, daring it to try that again.

It did not.

Evelyn stayed absolutely calm as I pushed her up the ramp. We turned the switchback corner and faced the double-doors. Two Knights were visible just inside, looming among the shadows of the entrance hallway, flanking our only way in.

“Just keep moving,” Evelyn murmured. “They cannot see us. Ignore them. Take deep breaths. Ignore them, they cannot see us. Ignore them. Ignore them. They cannot see us. Ignore them.”

Evelyn kept up her improvised mantra, but my nerves almost couldn't take the tension. My heart raced against my ribs as I walked the last few paces. Cold sweat broke out down my back and on my face as I passed beneath the shelter of the door. A flush of adrenaline — burning hot and pounding in my head — rushed into my veins as I passed between the twin sentinels of the Knights on guard duty.

The Knights didn't react. They didn't even glance down at us. They

ignored us completely.

I paused right between them, wiping my slippers on the doormat, then carried on, home free.

Evelyn and I were swallowed up by the vastness of Cygnet Asylum's entrance hall. Wet wheelchair tires squeaked on the tiled floor. The rain swirled at our backs, left behind outdoors. A wall of warm air tickled my face, pumped from a dozen radiators deeper inside the building.

"Stop," Evelyn said softly.

I halted just beyond the Knights. I probably would have done so even without Evelyn's orders.

The entrance hallway looked much the same as my previous visits to this part of the asylum — a large airy open space with a high ceiling, from which several corridors wormed off into the depths of the hospital. To our right was the reception desk, walled off by glass dividers. Beyond that, in the corner of the room, was the metal door through which we had passed in order to save Evelyn yesterday. On our left were the pair of archways which led to the mess hall and the main dayroom.

Evidence of yesterday's riot was everywhere; the staff had cleared up the worst of the mess, of course — picked up the pots and pans, cleared away the broken glass from around the reception desk, and mopped the blood off the floor. But several areas of floor tiles were still stained with red shadows; those would take more than elbow grease and bleach to scrub clean. The area in front of the mess hall was covered in scratches and dents — the aftermath of the avalanche of pots and pans. Several patches of wall were scuffed or scraped. A huge chunk of plaster was missing from one corner, as if gouged out by a set of claws or the head of a mace. One of the glass wall sections behind the reception desk was simply gone, missing like a shattered tooth with the stump yanked from the socket. The reception desk itself was empty — no nurses on duty, no computer or phone on the desk, no chair or stool behind. Normal functions had been suspended during this state of emergency.

Nurses and Knights were everywhere. Each corridor and archway was flanked by at least one Knight, more often two, hands loose and lazy on their submachine guns strapped over their chests. Nurses hurried back and forth on their tasks, always moving in pairs or

trios. Some of them looked haggard and worn out, drawn tight by insomnia and stress. Some had visible bruises on their faces, hands, or forearms. A few carried weapons — nightsticks and short clubs, wrapped in fabric or foam, nothing bladed or sharp.

Not a single nurse or Knight looked our way. A pair of nurses walked right toward us — then swerved around Eeve's wheelchair, as if they could sense us despite their conscious minds refusing to acknowledge our presence.

I felt like a beetle inside an anthill, coated in looted pheromone, unseen by the swarming automatons all around.

"Mm," Evelyn purred. "Security's heightened."

"My thoughts exactly," I said with a strangled sigh. "I'm trying to stay calm, but we are surrounded on all sides. I don't like this."

"If you want to retreat, we retreat."

"But— Eeve, you said to follow your orders for this."

"It's your plan, Heather. If you doubt it's feasible, or you think it's not doable anymore, then we turn back and rethink. You follow my orders for execution, but the executive decision is up to you. Do we go back, or push on?"

"You trust me to—"

"I trust you absolutely. Make the call."

I took another one of those nice slow deep breaths, and counted to ten. Evelyn waited.

Truth was, I didn't know.

Abyssal instinct — the gut-feeling which had guided me through so many dangerous and difficult situations, though sometimes with unintended side-effects — was silent. My decision making was impaired, missing six sevenths of myself. In a very real way, I was suffering a traumatic brain injury, though I still had all the grey matter inside my skull, untouched and undamaged. I felt like nothing more special than a scared young woman surrounded by threats. I let my attention linger on the Knights, then on the nurses. My eyes wandered over the subdued light of the entrance hall, illumination muted by the rain outdoors. I listened to the clack of shoes on the tessellated wooden tiles of the entrance hall floor.

And then I frowned.

“Wait a moment,” I murmured. “Wasn’t this floor made of lino, earlier?”

“Mm?” Evelyn grunted. “Heather?”

“Nothing, nothing,” I said. Had the dream changed, or were my memories incomplete?

The dream had changed, of course — the asylum had increased its security.

But it still couldn’t see us.

I made my decision. “It’s still doable. These differences change nothing.”

“Alright. Keep your hands on the wheelchair,” Evelyn murmured — though I could hear the slight tremor in her voice. She swallowed before she continued. “That’s all you have to do, Heather. Follow my instructions. Keep one hand on the wheelchair, but get these bloody damp towels off our heads.”

“Right, right.” I did as Evelyn requested; I kept my left hand tight on the wheelchair handle as I gently lowered the towel from over her head, smoothing out her mass of blonde hair. Then I did the same for myself, settling the makeshift rain-guard across my shoulders. My yellow blanket had kept the rest of my body mostly dry; I wished I could give it to Evee, but I had no idea what would happen to my position in the dream if I took it off. Perhaps the blanket was the only thing anchoring us to Sevens-as-Director.

Evelyn took a deep breath and straightened up in her chair.

“Alright, Heather. Dayroom first. Let’s hope our assumptions were correct.”

“Dayroom first,” I echoed, and set off across the entrance hall, pushing Evelyn ahead of me.

Nurses wheeled and dodged around us as we walked, their eyes often glancing over us without truly seeing. It felt like crossing a busy road by walking straight ahead, praying that none of the cars would plough right into us. The archway to the dayroom yawned wide, flickering with soft blue light and the distant murmur of voices on television. The Knight to the right of the door seemed to glance at us briefly, eyes hidden by the helmet visor. But then the

Knight looked away again.

The wheels of Evee's chair sank into the soft white carpet on the dayroom floor. My footsteps vanished, soaked up by the plush fabric.

Cygnets Asylum's main dayroom appeared to have been spared the worst of yesterday's riot. None of the many televisions were broken; more of them were switched on than yesterday morning, casting a cold blue glow over the white carpet, ghosting across the armchairs and sofas, draining the colour from the faces of their audience. None of the bookshelves had been overturned or ransacked, though I spotted a few places where the books themselves had been taken, seemingly without any collateral damage. The various board games on some of the tables had not been disturbed either; perhaps the patients had a special respect for those. I spotted Evelyn's game — the one with the little tokens of tanks and infantry and military symbols. It was exactly where she'd left it, spread out on a table close to the massive window which looked out across the grounds.

The only obvious casualty of the riot was one of the computers in the far corner. One of the row of desks was empty, the computer had been stolen, screen and tower both spirited away, along with cables and keyboard and mouse and all.

One addition had appeared in the dayroom — a whiteboard was standing toward the rear of the space, in front of the long, low counter top which supported the terrariums and animal cages. I couldn't read the text from the entrance.

"Lots of nurses," Evelyn hissed. "Damn. They're not taking any chances with another uprising."

"Yes ... that's a ... well, it's to be expected."

"Pity."

Groups of patients sat in quiet huddles, dotted about the room on the sofas and armchairs. Every group of girls was accompanied by a nurse.

Some of the nurses sat apart from the girls they were assigned to watch, aloof and distant. Others stood tall, arms folded and eyes narrowed. Many of them sat among the girls themselves, chattering along, trying to be friendly, watching television alongside the inmates they were keeping an eye on. Others still were napping,

nodding off in their chairs. A few were playing board games or cards with the patients, alternately grumpy and irritated or open-faced and bright.

The girls were subdued and sedated and stubbornly sullen. Murmurs of conversation broke out in hushed voices, then dribbled away to nothing. Some of the patients cast sidelong glances at their unwanted chaperones. Others kept careful arms around less confident girls, as if the nurses were wolves stalking through a vulnerable flock. Most girls just stared at the flickering televisions, saying nothing, unsmiling as they watched brightly coloured morning cartoons.

Were these the 'good girls' who had not participated in the riot? Or were these the troublemakers, now kept under close and watchful eyes?

"There," Evelyn whispered, nodding toward the huge window on the left. "That's her, right?"

Twil and her pair of Lillies were sitting on a sofa just in front of the huge window, their heads framed by the misty rain and dark green lawns outdoors. Twil was sat between Lily One and Lily Two. They appeared to be playing some sort of board game on a wide table.

A very familiar nurse was sitting opposite them, her back toward us, apparently joining in with the game.

"Yes, that's Twil," I whispered.

"Tch," Evelyn tutted with open disgust. "She looks like a parody of herself."

"Mm. And that nurse, I think that's ... 'Horror'."

"Eh?"

"Horror, it's on her name tag. The nurse who took you away yesterday, and confronted us after we freed you. She keeps cropping up every time I try to make a move."

Evelyn squinted. "I thought the King in Yellow killed her."

I shook my head. "I don't think she can be killed. I think she's some kind of main avatar or representative of the asylum itself."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "Maybe we should bait her out to the woods instead, have Raine cut off her head. See if she can come

back from that.”

I winced. “Not that I’m feeling merciful toward her, but I doubt that would work. Shall we head over there?”

“Not yet,” Evelyn replied. She nodded toward the rear of the room, where the cages and terrariums waited, with the message written on the whiteboard. “Take me over there, I want to see what it says. But keep an eye on Twil, just in case she moves.”

We crossed the razor tension of the dayroom at a walk. I examined the slack, bored, distant faces of the patients we passed.

A few of them were making small talk, but fewer still dared smile. I sighed in despair — we had failed these people, failed to free them, despite all of Lozzie’s hard work. Now they were beaten down and defeated, without much energy left, watched by a panopticon of nurses.

But then, as I observed from within the invisibility of the Fadestone, I began to spot scraps of paper being passed hand-to-hand, slipping from furtive fingers to soft palms — secret messages, circulating whenever the nurses weren’t looking. I noticed heads leaning on shoulders while girls pretended to watch television together, fingers tapping code on other’s thighs, squeezing silent replies against close-snuggled hips. I noticed meaningful glances cast across the room, winks and squints and tongues poking at the corners of mouths; isolated groups were communicating with each other, below the notice of the nurses.

“Oh my gosh,” I whispered. “Evee, are you seeing this? They’re still going, they’re still rebelling!”

“Ha,” Evelyn laughed, soft and gentle. “I certainly am. Lozzie’s work, I’m guessing.”

“Probably!”

“Wonder where she took them.”

“Yes, I— sorry, pardon?”

I halted Evee’s wheelchair just shy of the whiteboard, then realised she was talking about the message written in block capitals.

‘THE CATERPILLARS ARE VERY SENSITIVE CREATURES AND CANNOT SURVIVE FOR LONG OUTSIDE OF THEIR TERRARIUM. IF

ANY PATIENT HAS INFORMATION ON WHO TOOK THEM OR WHERE THEY HAVE BEEN TAKEN, PLEASE COME FORWARD TO THE NURSING STAFF. YOU WILL NOT BE PUNISHED FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION. IF YOU KNOW THE CULPRIT AND HAVE KEPT THIS SECRET, COME FORWARD AND YOU WILL NOT BE PUNISHED.'

I peered around the sign; the big glass tank which had held the shrunken Caterpillars was completely empty.

"Oh!" I breathed in delight. "Oh, thank heavens for that. It horrified me seeing them in there."

"Like I said," Evelyn muttered. "Lozzie, freeing her creations. Good on her. We're all working toward the same end, bringing this place down and freeing everyone and everything within." Evelyn clucked her tongue. "Though I have no idea what kind of wild card factor they could introduce."

"It would be lovely if they got large again," I said. "An instant win for us."

"Mm, they could just shout the place into rubble," Evelyn muttered. "Though I doubt they've managed to grow yet, I think we'd know about that. We need to contact Lozzie again, as soon as we have a chance. Right, mystery solved. Heather, wheel us over to Twil."

"Part two of the plan, here we go," I whispered, trying to stay nice and calm.

I approached the rear window and Twil's trio via a circuitous route, winding in and out of the sofas and armchairs and little tables and televisions, so as to avoid drawing near to any nurses — which was almost impossible, since every group of girls was accompanied by at least one white-clad member of staff. Several nurses looked up at us as we passed by, their eyes sliding off Evelyn and I as if we were not there, warded away by the power of the Fadestone. A few of the patients looked our way as well, though with less regularity; most of the girls in the dayroom were either entranced by the television shows or focused on slipping messages and nods and even hand signals below the notice of the ever-present nurses.

Eventually we emerged from the tangle of seating, with no further obstacles between us and Twil's group.

Twil and her pair of Lillies had not changed since the previous day.

Twil herself was still barely recognisable — straightened hair, bottle-thick glasses, her usual toned athleticism swapped out for the reedy, delicate physique of a bad romance novel protagonist, designed for the sole purpose of being swept off her feet or pressed against a wall, overwhelmed by taller, bolder, older girls.

The Lillies were sitting either side of her, their backsides dimpling the uncomfortable grey sofa. The waspish blonde was on Twil's left; the redhead tomboy with the freckles was to Twil's right. I couldn't recall which was which — one of them was 'Lilly' and the other was 'Lilii'. Internally I dubbed the blonde Lily One and the redhead Lily Two. I could apologise to them later, if this ever came up. This was a military operation, one of Raine's 'sneaking missions', so there was no margin for messing up my Lillies.

All three of them were dressed in those matching grey school uniforms, with ties and blazers and unflattering skirts. All three wore much darker tights than yesterday. A concession to the cold and rainy weather, perhaps?

Lily One and Lily Two were both leaning forward over the table, dominating the space.

Lily One was twirling a lock of platinum blonde hair about one finger, elbows on the table, tresses trailing down and pooling on the corner of the game board. She was chattering away about some minor point of the rules, putting on an easy-going, giggly tone.

“—and if you take two moves in a row after using the mind control token, you have to sacrifice one of your size three monsters, and you only have one left on the board right now. It's soooo silly, but them's the rules, you know? We can't go easy on you because you're such a lovely nurse, you know? Right? That would be like, reverse cheating! Hahaha! Don't blame me, blame the game!”

Lily Two was sitting with her legs crossed and stuck out to one side, sprawled across the opposite corner of the table as if intentionally taking up as much space as possible. Her short red hair cupped her head like a flared helmet. Her eyes looked unimpressed. She ran her tongue over her teeth, behind her lips.

Twil was sunken down between the pair, sitting straight-backed against the sofa, hands folded neatly in her lap, amber eyes peering through the thick lenses of her ridiculous glasses.

“Tch!” Evelyn hissed in open disgust.

“Evee?” I whispered.

“Look at them, boxing her in like that. I know you said it was bad, but I didn’t realise it was this bad. They have her pinned, psychologically. If you painted that set of poses, it would be too cliché for belief. She’s—”

“No,” I whispered, amazed at what I was seeing. “Evee, look closer. Really look.”

The trio were all sat on one side of the table; on the other side, playing the opposing force in their board game, was Horror — comfortably plush, young, straight-backed, and very blonde, hair pinned up behind her head in a loose bun.

She was listening to Lily One’s explanation with an indulgent smile. One of her hands was toying with a piece from the board game — a little grey plastic castle. She nodded along as Lily One rattled on, with the look of an adult humouring a child about some juvenile flight of fancy.

Her left arm was strapped across her front, immobilised inside a medical sling.

“What?” Evelyn hissed. “The nurse? At least she bugged up her wrist punching out the King in Yellow.” Evelyn sighed. “Now there’s a sentence I wish I’d never had cause to say.”

“No, Evee, look at them. Really look at them. What are they doing? What are the Lillies doing?”

Evelyn went silent. I couldn’t see her face without leaning forward and risking letting go of the handles, but I could picture her squinty frown.

“Explain,” she hissed.

“They’re not boxing Twil in,” I whispered. “They’re protecting Twil from Horror. They’re covering her flanks. Horror can’t reach her.”

I expected Evelyn to snort. I had no evidence for this theory except the rumblings of my own compromised gut instinct. But Evelyn just sighed. “Perhaps. But why? Who are these two, aren’t they just more dream-actor patients?”

“Maybe they’re more than that.”

Evelyn clucked her tongue. “We can speculate later. Wheel us close, about two feet out from the table. Let’s see if you were right about our target.”

I nodded, though Evelyn couldn’t see me. We crossed the last fifteen feet to Twil’s table. The huge rear window loomed wide as we approached, rain swirling against the glass, hazy droplets fogging the view beyond. If we had timed this right, Raine was on the other side of that wall, hunkered down below the level of the window, just out of sight. Our emergency back up.

As we approached, Lily One stopped talking and Horror looked around, as if they could both see us. I kept moving, though my hands were slick with sweat and my legs were shaking. Horror’s eyes lingered for a second, then slid away. She turned back to Twil and the Lillies. I halted Evelyn’s wheelchair alongside the table, with a good safe two feet between us and the edge.

“Well!” Horror said to the grey-clad trio of schoolgirl cosplayers. “Be that as it may, I think this game is almost over. You girls have put up a very good fight, especially for so early in the morning. I’m very impressed. I am, really!” Horror nodded, smiling brightly. Then she clacked her little plastic castle down on the game board. “But I’m two moves from victory. I’ve got you whittled down, cut off, and surrounded. Hmhm!”

Lily One tutted and rolled her eyes — she was smiling with all the toxic insincerity of a queen bee about to lose her temper, doing her best to conceal the raging torrent beneath her face. She swept her long blonde hair back, smiling like a snake. “Don’t be so sure, Miss,” she drawled. “You never know, we could have a trick up our collective selves. I mean, sleeves. Collective sleeves. You know what I mean.”

“Uh huh,” grunted Lily Two. She was staring, level and cold, like a thug loitering outside a Mafia-owned bakery, tapping her fingertips on the table in a slow and steady rhythm. “Tricks and traps and nasty trips. You know us, nurse.”

Horror let out a warm, bubbly chuckle. She inclined her head as if extending courtesy to an already vanquished foe, tucking one lock of blonde hair behind an ear with her uninjured hand.

“Weeeeeeeell,” she said, with the tone of a particularly indulgent preschool teacher. “What does your leader say to that? Got

anything left in your arsenal, Twillamina?”

Horror turned to Twil.

Lily One clamped her lips shut, visibly bristling. Lily Two narrowed her eyes at Horror; her fingers ceased their tapping.

Twil smiled, innocent and clueless, beaming beneath her huge round glasses. “I’m not sure, Doctor,” she said in that too-high, ultra-girlish tone, so unlike her real self. “I’m not really that familiar with the game. This is the first time I’ve played, after all. Maybe if we have a rematch, I could learn more?”

Horror sighed, smiling and tilting her head, as if speaking with a patient who was too far gone to understand how to dress herself. “Oh, bless you, dear. How many times must I tell you, Twillamina? I’m not a Doctor, I’m just a nurse. It’s alright to use my name, really, I promise. I won’t get angry or grumpy about that.”

Lily One cleared her throat. She spoke with false lightness, all sunshine and smile. “Actually, I think respect for one’s elders is very important.”

Horror laughed, bright and bouncy. “Tch, you! Don’t be silly. I’m barely ten years your senior. Some of the other nurses are old enough to be your grandmothers. But not me.”

Lily Two added, low and soft: “Important to show respect for the authority invested in Cygnet Staff too, you know?”

Horror sighed with significantly less patience, her bright smile dimming. “Alright, alright, you two, if you insist. But you can hardly call me ‘nurse’, there’s just so many nurses here that—”

“We’ll muddle through,” said Lily One. “Nurse.”

“Yes, Nurse,” said Lily Two. “You’d be surprised.”

Twil looked rather lost, eyes darting left and right behind her glasses, mouth open as if confused by the reaction from her bodyguards and lovers. I realised with mounting concern that she did not comprehend the position she was in, nor how hard her companions were fighting to protect her.

But protect her from what?

Horror endured the veiled insults with a beatific smile, then returned her attention to Twil. “So, Twillamina. Back to the game.

Do you have anything left in your box of tricks? Go ahead, if you do. I'm ready for it."

Twil bit her lower lip and peered at the board game.

The game itself was impenetrable to me — the board appeared to represent the streets and major locations of a fictional town, studded with little plastic monsters, important landmarks, and towering castles which had burst from the rock beneath the streets. A reserve of monsters great and small were gathered in front of Horror. Her remaining troops, I assumed. Little player tokens showed Twil's dwindling forces — gumshoe detectives with little plastic revolvers, mostly, their ranks bolstered by an occasional helmeted soldier or mobsters armed with stereotypical Tommy guns. Their numbers were few, most of them appeared to have been killed by the monsters or removed to a special box on the board labelled 'Outside', which caught my attention. The remaining player tokens were scattered all over the town, hopelessly cut off from each other, fighting individual battles against the plastic monsters.

On the table directly in front of Twil was a little plastic box with a hinged lid, raised so that Horror couldn't see the contents, but Twil and her companions could — and so could I, from my angle beside the table.

The box was almost empty. Only one piece remained within — a little plastic figure of a cone snail, peeking out from inside its shelled protection.

Twil reached for the piece, but then Lily One grabbed Twil's hand. "Ah ah ah!" She laughed and smiled, but I could see the tension crinkling around her eyes. "Twillamina, don't be so fast. Don't give anything away, right? For all she knows, we have a dozen moves left. Or none at all!"

Twil leaned back. "R-right. Right. Of course. Be smart, yes."

Horror sighed. "It is your move, you three. And we can't sit here all day, can we?"

Evelyn hissed to me: "Heather, does she have the book? I can't see from down here in the chair. It's not in Twil's lap."

"Ummm," I murmured. "Yes, yes, she does. It's by her side, down on the sofa."

Our target was within reach; propped against Twil's left hip, front cover facing outward, was the heavy hardback book which I'd seen her carrying yesterday morning, and which she'd been reading from when we'd interrupted her little picnic with her 'lovers'. The words we'd overheard yesterday had sounded quasi-religious, as if the tome was a holy book of some kind. She'd clung to the thing, pressed it over her chest like a shield when threatened, and then dropped it when she'd almost been goaded into her werewolf transformation. I hadn't gotten a good look at the cover before, but now I could see it clearly: there was no title or author, just leather cut and shaped into a raised illustration. The design showed a trio of feminine figures locked in an embrace — two were dryads, unearthly and fairy-like, wrapped in mantles and veils of leaf and blossom, while the figure in the middle was clearly meant to be a werewolf, trapped and protected by a cage of roots.

"Oh, you're joking," I whispered as I squinted at the book. "Can you get any more obvious?"

"Heather?" Evelyn hissed. "What do you mean?"

"The cover of the book, it's a metaphor for Twil. You'll understand when you see it, but ... "

Lily One and Lily Two were sharing a difficult glance. Horror just smiled, so soft and serene. Twil cleared her throat gently, but the tension refused to break. She pressed her hands tightly together in her own lap.

Evelyn hissed through her teeth: "Can you reach the book? Whatever you do, don't let go of the wheelchair handles completely. Wheel me closer if you have to, they won't be able to see us. Just don't touch any of them, especially the fucking nurse ... Heather?"

"Now, girls," Horror was saying, with a tone of forced reason and patience in the face of foolish dreams. "I said we can't sit here all day, but that's not strictly true." She gestured at the window and the rain-streaked glass. "Nobody's going outdoors in that, I think. If you need time to consider your move, I can come back after my rounds. I'd hate to leave the game unfinished, after all."

Twil started to say, "We can finish right—"

Lily One grabbed Twil's knee. "Maybe give us time to confer, yeah,

nurse. Right. Great idea.”

Lily Two sat up a bit straighter, easing out of her slouch. “Yeah, like, think it over. Think about the implications. Consider what comes next.”

Horror’s eyes twinkled. “But you’ve only got one move. Do I have to force you into taking it? That’s not very sporting, is it?”

Evelyn half-twisted in her wheelchair, frowning at me over her shoulder. “Heather, we’re going to lose our window. Grab the book.”

I shook my head. “No. No, we have to change the plan.”

Evelyn opened her mouth to argue — then stopped and nodded. “You’re in charge. Just stay calm and move slowly. Tell me what you’re going to do before you do it.”

I nodded. “Okay. Um ... the book, well ... ”

Our plan was not yet in tatters, but it was probably no longer viable — because a second, unexpected force had already closed on our ultimate aim. Horror was pressing Twil’s trio for something we did not yet comprehend.

The institution — Cygnet Asylum, the dream, the play — was trying to access Twil, trying to defeat her bodyguards.

The original plan was both simple and crude. Step one: get close to Twil while under the protection of the Fadestone. Step two: snatch the ‘holy book’ from under her nose. Step three: Evelyn and I would transport the book away from Twil and her bodyguards, while watching to see if Twil began to panic. Step four: when we were at a safe distance, we would intentionally show ourselves to Twil or her lovers, revealing that we had taken her book, thus beginning the wild goose chase — either Evelyn and I could do it ourselves by vanishing again, or Raine would take over that role, being faster on her feet. The idea was to bait Twil and the Lillies without exposing ourselves to the entire asylum and the staff, leading the trio deep into the woods. Even one of them alone would do. As long as we could start a chain reaction.

The whole plan might take several hours. We needed multiple openings for it to work. Stealing the book itself was just the start.

But now Horror had Twil cornered, and Twil didn’t even seem to

understand that she was fighting with her back to a wall, her 'lovers' at her shoulders. The Lillies got it, but Twil was still too deep in the dream.

"Horror has Twil cornered," I whispered to Evee. "I don't understand how, but we need to get her out of here. We need to bail her out. We can't have Twil get taken away. Not like you were."

Evee's eyes widened as she finally understood what I was getting at. She glanced at the board game, then at Horror's innocent smile, then at the increasingly tense looks on the faces of Twil's Lillies.

"Shit," Evelyn hissed.

"One move," said Lily Two. She sat up and rolled her shoulders back, then smoothed her hair with a hand.

I recognised that pose, that tightening of the muscles.

Lily One nodded, rolling her head from side to side. She pushed up the sleeves of her neat grey blazer.

They were preparing for violence. Against the nurses, against Horror! They would never win, they'd never even get out of the dayroom. There were dozens of nurses within sight, and more within earshot. Knights would come running as well. The whole place was teetering on the edge of more violence, and these two were willing to throw down to protect Twil from consequences I didn't even yet understand.

"I—I need suggestions, Evee," I hissed, trying to stay calm and collected; I couldn't risk breaking the cover of the Fadestone. "And quickly. We need a way to—"

"Mess up the game."

"Ah?"

"Mess up the game!" Evelyn repeated. "God, I'll do it! Wheel me closer, quickly!"

I did as Evelyn requested; I wheeled her right up to the edge of the table, so she was barely a foot from Horror on one side and Lily Two on the other.

Evelyn ignored them both. She took one hand off the Fadestone, yanked back the sleeve of her grey dressing gown, and reached onto

the game board.

She scooped up pieces and tokens, dropping some of them into her lap, placing others back down in new board positions. She rearranged the formation of Twil's embattled soldiers and detectives, rescuing dozens of them from the 'Outside' box, placing them at choke points and stuffing them into the illustrations of sturdy buildings. Within seconds she had Twil's plastic army occupying a newspaper office and a canning factory, the streets outside stuffed with barricades and sandbags.

I knew nothing about tactics and strategy, but even I could see that position was much more defensible.

All four people at the table watched Evelyn's changes as she worked to re-order Twil's forces. Twil herself, the Lillies, and Horror, they all stared at the moving pieces as if this was entirely natural, as if some exterior force was not reaching into the visible world and making mysterious changes to the game they had been playing.

I stayed very still, trying not to let my skin crawl; they could see us, but they also couldn't. The feeling was bizarre and unwelcome, like I was only partially real.

After shoring up Twil's board position, Evelyn started thinning out the ranks of Horror's monsters, plucking them off the board and placing them into reserve. Once she had scattered their hordes and broken up their assaults, she picked up a particularly large piece — a floating eyeball on a cluster of jellyfish-esque stalks, and went to drop it into her lap.

"Evee!" I hissed.

"Heather, don't break my— ah."

Evelyn froze.

Horror was looking right at us.

She could not see us, could not see our faces or acknowledge our presence. She was calm and breezy, as if doing nothing more than glancing to one side. But she stared and stared and stared.

"She doesn't want to let that piece go," I hissed — then hiccuped, painfully. "Hic. Ow. Evee, don't. Just put it back on the board or—"

"Better," Evelyn whispered. She reached forward and waved the

eyeball-piece in front of Horror's face. Horror tracked it back and forth; I wanted to scream. Evee whispered to her: "You want this? You need this one to win, huh? Okay."

Then Evelyn turned and pressed the piece into my hand.

"Evee?! Wha-what—"

"Throw it. Now. As far as you can. Toward the back of the room. Now!"

With no time to think, and certainly none to argue — for Horror's eyes were sliding toward me and the bait in my hand — I turned aside and hurled the little plastic playing piece across the room. It sailed with all the aerodynamics of a piece of lead shot, and landed with a tiny click-click-clatter among the animal cages at the rear of the room.

Evelyn sat back from her meddling.

Horror turned toward where the piece had fallen and let out a soft tut. "Oh dear, I think I must have dropped one of the more fiddly pieces. Excuse me for a moment, girls, I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere now!"

Horror got up and hurried off toward the rear of the dayroom, to retrieve the fallen piece. Lily One and Lily Two shared a look, while Twil was still watching Horror depart. Lily One drew a fingertip across her own neck, then thumbed at Horror's retreating back. Lily Two nodded in acknowledgement.

Evelyn huffed. "These two are as bad as Raine. For fuck's sake, get out of here, all three of you. Go on!"

But Twil just leaned forward and examined the new board position, smiling beneath her glasses, amber eyes twinkling in delight.

"Am I a strategic genius?" she said. "Look at all this! I didn't think I'd be any good at this game, it's an unsuitable pursuit for a young lady. But I've done really well."

Evelyn ground her teeth. "Yes, please, take credit for my intellect. 'Unsuitable pursuit for a young lady' my arse. Fuck. Heather, grab the book, before I cuff her over the head."

"But—"

"Wait!" Evelyn held up a hand. "Actually that wouldn't be enough.

Change of plan. We need to get Twil to follow us, right now.”

“But how—”

“Be ready to run!” Evelyn announced.

She leaned forward again, halfway across the board game. She reached out with one hand, her maimed hand, toward Twil — and cupped Twil’s cheek.

Twil’s eyes snapped upward, locking with Eeve’s gaze. Her mouth opened in a little ‘oh’ of silent shock.

“Remember me, bitch?” Evelyn grunted.

“What— I— where did you—” Twil stammered and stuttered.

“You should do, because you once knew what my cunt tastes like. Now, do try to keep up.”

Evelyn yanked Twil’s glasses off Twil’s face. Twil sat back, spluttering with confusion, glancing left and right, no longer able to see us now she was not in contact with the Fadestone. She blinked rapidly, blinded by the blurred world without her glasses. “My— my glasses!” she spluttered. “Where— who took my—”

The Lillies turned toward Twil. Twil looked like she was on the verge of a scream.

Evelyn raised the stolen glasses into the air. “Heather, grab the book. If this doesn’t make them move, nothing will. Grab that tome and wheel me the hell out of here, before we all get sucked into Twil’s lesbian boarding-school fantasy.”

bedlam boundary – 24.17

Evelyn and I had almost escaped the dayroom when Twil's mounting panic touched flailing flame to hidden fuse.

Twil's mysterious tome — her leatherbound 'holy book', the cover illustrated with an unsubtle metaphor about caged werewolves — was now tucked into the crook of Evelyn's arm, so Eevee could keep both hands on the Fadestone as we made our getaway. My fingers tingled from where I'd touched the leather cover of the book, as if I'd plunged my hand into a pot of spiced honey; I had snatched it off the sofa and whisked it away from Twil's slender hips, leaving her none the wiser. I would dearly love to claim that I had accomplished the manoeuvre in one swift motion, with steady hands and stilled breath, but that would be a pitiful lie, because I've never had stable nerves at the best of times, let alone when trying to steal a reasonably heavy object while rendered invisible by unreliable magic, in the middle of a crowded room, on a time limit.

But I'd done it, somehow, feeling like my body was hooked up to an electric wall socket. Twil hadn't noticed the book's absence as we'd turned and scurried away, still too preoccupied by the fact her glasses had vanished from off her own face — and still flushed beetroot red by Evelyn's rather choice words about Twil's carnal knowledge. Even if Twil couldn't recall who had said the words, the emotional impact lingered beyond the Fadestone's cover.

The tingling in my fingers wasn't supernatural, it was just jitters, the nerve-impact of a successful raid. My heels were spring-loaded, my shoulder blades were painted with a glowing target, and my heart was trying to squirm up my windpipe.

But a mad smile jerked onto my lips, coupled with a hitching little laugh and a double hic-hic of unwelcome hiccups. We'd done it! We'd stolen the book, and Twil's glasses as a bonus!

Was this what it felt like to pull off a madcap heist? I suddenly felt like a very, very bad girl indeed. And I rather liked that feeling.

We hurried away through the tangle of dayroom sofas and armchairs and televisions, skirting groups of stirring patients,

attempting to avoid the occasional nurse roused by the commotion we'd caused.

Twil's panic was drawing too much attention.

"My glasses! My glasses, they were right on my face! Right here! I can't find them, they're not— they're not in my pockets! Oh, you two, this isn't funny, this isn't funny!"

Twil's two Lillies attempted to soothe her, but they were just as confused as our dreaming werewolf. Their voices chased my heels as I wheeled Evee toward the archway and the exit.

"Did you drop them? Are they under the sofa?"

"Twillamina, breathe, take a deep breath, that's it, come on sweetheart. Take a deep breath. You just left them somewhere, that's all. It's nothing, it's nothing, nothing happened! Hey, heeeeeeey, relax, relax—"

"Maybe they got mixed up with the game pieces? Here, let's take a look, come on."

"Let me check your pockets for you, baby, you probably just got confused."

Evelyn hissed through clenched teeth, half in derision, half with savage satisfaction. "Those two are no smarter than Twil herself. Come on, you pair of old tramps, think harder. Use your brains."

"I really don't think we should taunt them!" I whispered, skirting another occupied sofa as the patients started to sit up and turn around and crane their necks to get a look at the unfolding drama.

"Rubbish," Evelyn murmured. "It's not as if they can hear us." She half-twisted in the wheelchair, trying to look past me, to look back at our as-yet unbaited catch. "Whatever. They'll figure it out eventually, and if they don't, we can bait them again. The first step is over and I've bought them time, with that stupid board game. Get us out of here, Heather, get us back out—"

"My book!"

Twil's shriek cut through the taut tension of the dayroom like shears slicing apart a set of violin strings.

A full-body shiver propelled me forward as if the werewolf herself was at my heels. Evelyn flinched and blinked and turned back

around, hands firmly on the Fadestone, whispering a sudden mantra to shore up our bubble of invisibility. “We are not here. We are not here. We are not here.”

“It’s gone!” Twil wailed. “It’s gone! It was right here, right here! You both know I never let it out of my sight, I would never drop it! I would never even turn away from it, not for a second! And— and it- no, no! It was right here!”

All across the dayroom girls rose from their seats or twisted on the sofas or sat up straighter, all eyes turning toward Twil and her Lillies. A ripple of motion and bobbing heads and bright-eyed attention passed over the crowd like the echo of a stone dropped into dark water.

Some patients called out rapid questions — “Hey, what’s wrong? Hey, what’s wrong with Twilla? Hey?”, “What did you lose, lassie?”, “Bet a fucking nurse stole it!” — while others darted covert glances across the length of the dayroom, making furtive eye contact with distant conspirators. A few girls slipped objects into their Cygnet-issue pajama bottoms, palming secret notes, tucking away hidden tools. Fewer still used the sudden distraction to carry out actions behind the backs of the nurses; some pulled silly faces or stuck out their tongues to shore up the morale of their nearby friends, but others snatched things off tables or rifled through briefly unguarded bags, pocketing access fobs and ID cards and bottles of pills. One brave and light-fingered patient openly pick-pocketed a nurse, sliding a bunch of keys from a uniform pocket and stuffing it up inside her own shirt.

Perhaps this was the opening they’d all been waiting for.

The nursing staff shot to their collective feet in a flash, but they lagged behind the patients and inmates by a vital few seconds; the eyes and hands of the panopticon could not, in fact, see everywhere all at once and touch every corner of every life. They had not seen this coming. They could not see the instigators — Evelyn and me. All they could do now was shout and bawl.

“Girls, girls, settle down! Settle back down!”

“Pay no attention! Carry on with what you were doing! Eyes forward, that means all of you! Anna, Marta, I see you both trying your luck there, sit back down!”

“No rubbernecking, it’s very rude. Isn’t it? You wouldn’t like it if your misfortune was on display for everyone to see. Come on, there’s nothing to see there, nothing to see. Don’t pay any attention, girls, please.”

Evee and I were almost to the archway when I made the mistake of looking back.

Horror — my medical adversary, my dream-bound antagonist, the one nurse who kept coming back again and again — was crossing the dayroom, returning to Twil’s table. She held the game piece which I’d hurled across the room, cupped in one soft hand. Her eyes were narrowed at Twil and the Lillies, lips pursed with impatience, shoulders and chin set. She carried the pose of an adult who planned to separate naughty children from each other. Perhaps she smelled a rat.

Twil and her Lillies were not in a good state. Twil herself was heaving for breath, tears running down her cheeks, face twisted with terrible distress. She was gripping the side of Lily One’s grey uniform blazer, like a lost child clinging to an older sibling. Lily One — the waspish girl with the long blonde hair and the curvy build — was alternately trying to calm down Twil and ducking her head to search among the sofa cushions and under the table. Lily Two — the freckled tomboy with the red hair, built like a tightly toned athlete — was glaring at the nearest groups of girls and nurses, as if examining faces for guilty looks.

“My book— no!” Twil sobbed. “I can’t! It’s— it’s the only copy! Please, I just— no— it was right—”

Lily Two suddenly shouted: “Who took it?! Which one of you took it?!”

An answering shout rose from the back of the dayroom, from a random unseen throat. “Must have been a nurse!”

“Yeah!” another girl agreed, somebody deep in a huddle of bodies, hidden from the staff. “Damn right, it was probably a nurse! Confiscating all our stuff! Fucking bitches!”

“Give it back!” shouted a third voice.

“Return her book!” yet another took up the cause. “Come on, it’s not fair!”

“Give it back! Give it back!”

“Give her back her book, you cunts!”

“Give it back! Give it back! Give it back!”

The words became a chant, spreading across the dayroom.

All around us groups of girls were turning on their chaperones and guardians; little angry mobs rose to their feet and took up the chant, while other girls sat back on the sofas and raised their fists in the air, adding their voices to the chorus. Some surrounded their respective nurses, while others ignored their ineffectual staff escort. Sleepy nurses jerked awake in the sudden panic, while others chattered into hand-held walkie talkies, backing away from the growing anger. A cluster of fresh nurses appeared in the archway and hurried into the room, spreading out as back-up. A pair of Knights followed them — though with far less clarity of purpose; the Knights shuffled into the dayroom for a moment, stood there looking very awkward, then shuffled out again.

I halted.

I drew the wheelchair to a stop about ten feet shy of our exit, blocking the passage between an empty row of three sofas and a little table piled with girl’s magazines, the covers all smiling and teeth and shining white eyeballs. The nearest group of patients was to our rear, all facing toward the commotion as Twil began to weep and wail.

“Heather?” Evelyn hissed. “Heather, what are you doing? Don’t stop here, not now.”

“Evee, they’re going to start another riot!”

Evee twisted in her wheelchair so I could see her craggy frown. “Good. Buys us more time. Maybe they’ll injure a few more nurses or burn down a wing of this place while they’re at it. Come on, Heather, get us out before the—”

“We have to start the plan right now,” I hissed. “We have to get Twil and her friends to follow us, right now. We can’t wait and do it later!”

The ringing chorus of “Give it back! Give it back!” rose louder and louder. Somebody shouted; another girl squealed in pain. A nurse tumbled backward into a chair, going sprawling on the floor.

Somebody else cheered.

Evelyn snapped at me. “The whole place might follow us! The nurses might follow us. Heather, we need to stick to the plan. I’ve bought Twil plenty of time with my changes to her board game—”

“There’s no time to go through the whole rigmarole!” I raised my voice above the chant. “Evee, look!”

I pointed back.

Violence bubbled beneath the surface of the widening disturbance: one or two girls pushed or shoved their respective nurses; a few nurses raised their hands in response, threatening more than they dared deliver. Several nurses were being forced back by miniature picket lines of chanting patients — “Give it back! Give it back!” — while the more vulnerable girls sheltered behind their companions.

Horror cut through the chaos like a shark through tropical waters. Lines of girls parted before her. Nurses turned away as she walked by.

Twil couldn’t see her coming, because her eyes were full of tears and her glasses were missing. But the Lillies could. Lily Two turned to face Horror, chin high, fists clenched. Lily One tried to pull Twil away from the sofa and the board game, retreating from their pursuer.

If this all exploded into violence, we would not be able to protect Twil. Horror would still get exactly what she wanted.

And so would the institution; the ratio of girls to nurses simply wasn’t high enough. The patients had been split up and divided, prepared for what Raine might call ‘defeat in detail’. If the staff had to face the entire body of the patients as one, organized and moving in unison, following one will, with one aim, then the institution would stand no chance. But the staff had determined the composition and layout of this space. Willing combatants were mixed in with younger girls, the stronger groups split up and unable to form a united front. As I watched I saw those who could not fight struggle to worm their way out of the growing scrum. Patients ready to throw down were not shoulder-to-shoulder, but halfway across the dayroom from each other. More nurses piled in through the archway, ready to put down this brief convulsion of a bound giant.

“Evee, we can’t let another riot happen, not yet.”

“What?!” Evee spluttered. “I thought you and Raine were all for another bit of popular violence. I thought that was what we wanted?”

“They’re not ready!” I hissed. “They’re not prepared! This is the worst condition under which to launch a second attempt. This isn’t what Lozzie would have planned, and it’s only going to sap the strength of another revolt. Evee, we have to stop this, we have to start our plan right now.”

Evelyn clenched her teeth and looked like she wanted to spit. “We’ll be sitting ducks if we get this wrong.”

“Not if I move fast. I’ll let go of you, call out to Twil, then grab you again and run for the doors. It might work!”

Evelyn swallowed hard. The sound was drowned out by the rising chant all around us, by the angry shouts of, “Let us back to our rooms!”, “Where’d you take Vanessa and Riley, huh?! I haven’t seen them since yesterday!”, “Fuck off, fucking screws! Get your hands off me!”

“Heather,” Evee hissed, “you always do this, you always jump in—”

“I will not do this if you don’t consent,” I hissed quickly. “And I promise I will not leave you behind.”

“You—”

“If you disagree, then please, Evee, *insist*. Insist, and we’ll let the riot happen, we’ll go.”

Evelyn ground her teeth together so hard that they squeaked. But then she nodded. “Do it. Now. Quickly!”

I reached down and retrieved the leatherbound book from Evee’s lap, fingers fumbling, heart pounding. The soft brown leather was warm to the touch, warmer than it had any right to be, warm as sun-kissed bark in a summer forest. I held up the book in my left hand, keeping my right wrapped firmly around one handle of Evelyn’s wheelchair. I turned toward Twil and the Lillies, held the book up high, and let go of my anchor.

Visible, for just a second.

“Twilllll!” I shouted, my reedy little voice fighting against the

growing chaos of the dayroom. “Twil!”

A few of the nearest girls glanced my way, but most of them were too preoccupied with the start of a second riot; a couple of nurses spared me a look, then did a double-take as they saw what I was holding aloft.

Lily Two looked around. Lily One looked up. Eyes widened. Brows furrowed. They saw me, clear and free.

Twil stared in my general direction, blinking away tears from her clouded eyes, panting for breath. Could she see that far without her glasses? I had to make her understand.

“I’m taking it outdoors, Twil! I’ll drench it in the rain! If you want it, come get it back!”

Horror halted her advance on Twil. She turned her head and looked right at me, then frowned with professional irritation, like I was a farm animal escaped from my pen.

Horror pointed and opened her mouth wide, about to shout some order to the other nurses.

I grabbed the handle of Evee’s wheelchair and resumed invisibility, vanishing from sight and mind alike. Horror’s orders died on hesitating lips. Her frown did not quite clear, but her eyes slid away from me. The Lillies suffered the same fate, forgetting I was there but retaining their emotional response. Twil just stared at the archway out, at the exit.

Fingers shaking like crazy, I shoved the holy book back into Evelyn’s lap. All around us the little groups of patients were trailing off with their chanting, the reason for their rage short-circuited, even if they couldn’t remember exactly why. The spark of the premature riot was snuffed out. I offered an apology and a prayer to Lozzie, whenever she was, hoping that this aligned with her far more experienced plans for productive rabble-rousing.

“Go, Heather, go! Now!” Evelyn hissed.

I didn’t need to be ordered twice. I felt like the Eye itself was opening above me. I grabbed both handles and hurried for the archway, shoulder blades tingling as I felt four sets of eyes burning into my back.

Evelyn and I burst out onto the wooden tiles of the entrance hall.

More nurses were hurrying into the dayroom, but the general panic seemed to have subsided. The chanting had died away to nothing, replaced by the unsatisfied grumbling murmur of a reluctant but grudging crowd.

“Don’t stop again,” Evelyn hissed. “Get us outdoors, ASAP.”

“Right! Yes! Absolutely! One hundred percent!”

We left the same way we’d entered, past a pair of Knightly guards and out through the side-entrance, back into the little swirls of drizzling rain, beneath the wrinkled black underside of the Eye, beyond the walls of Cygnet Asylum. We descended the concrete switchback ramp at speed, the wheelchair tires whispering against the damp surface, then out onto the brick pathways, out into the saturated lawns of the hospital grounds. I pulled one of the towels back up over Evelyn’s shoulders and head, to protect her from the worst of the rain; she hurried to stash Twil’s book and Twil’s glasses beneath her grey dressing gown. We weren’t actually going to damage or destroy the book — we had no idea what that might do. We just needed her to follow us. I wouldn’t have been able to countenance damaging a book regardless, whatever it contained.

I hurried away from the front of the building. Misty raindrops clung to my hair and face, swirling in the gyre of my breath.

“Heather, slow down,” Evelyn hissed. “Slow down. We’ve made it out. They still can’t see us. Slow down, slow down.”

“Alright—” I panted, heart still racing. The wound in my left leg burned like a hot iron pressed into my flesh, but I did my best to ignore it, despite my awkward limp. “What now? We need them to follow, don’t we? What—”

“Pull me to one side, off the path. Watch the doorways.”

“But the muddy ground—”

“Just do it. Please.”

I did as Evelyn instructed, wheeling her just off the path and onto the wet grass. The wheels of her chair sunk into the damp earth, but only a little — it wouldn’t be too difficult to push her back onto the pathway. We were completely concealed here, beneath the invisible aura of the Fadestone.

“And pull your own towel back up,” Evelyn hissed. “No sense in

you getting all wet as well.”

“Oh, of course,” I muttered, pulling the towel back over my own head and shoulders, making sure to keep one hand on the wheelchair at all times. I tugged my yellow blanket snug around my shoulders as well, to keep off the chill.

The fleshless skull of Cygnet Asylum stared down upon us with a hundred empty sockets, all-seeing yet blinded to our presence. Red-brick naked bone was streaked with the dark stain of the rain, running in slow rivulets down blank windows, dribbling from cold gutters, clinging to spongy, porous, rotting masonry. The skull no longer seemed so empty on the inside; it teemed with the sound of burrowing life, of nurses and patients and Knights, each straining in their own way against the bonds of the institution.

The underside of the Eye loomed over it all, a backdrop to all motion and stillness, from horizon to horizon, all the sky forever and evermore.

I tore my eyes away from that false firmament and back to the hospital. “They’re not coming,” I hissed. “I don’t see anybody coming to the doors.”

“Wait for it.”

“Evee?”

“I know Twil better than you and Raine ever will,” she murmured. “No offense. I have seen her without her kit on, after all.”

I sighed, breath still all a-quiver with adrenaline. “Evee, seeing somebody naked doesn’t mean you know them any better.” I cleared my throat. “You really did, though?”

“Mhmm.”

“... what do her tattoos look like?”

“Breathtaking. Now shhh, watch the doors. She’ll be here. I know her. Even in a dream, she would never — ah. There we go.”

Evelyn’s eyesight was better than mine; she’d spotted movement in the gloomy entrance hall a split-second before me. A moment later, Twil burst from the side-doors next to the hospital’s main entrance. She barely looked like herself — a scrawny girl wearing a starched grey uniform, face streaked with tears, screwed up with red-

cheeked fury and bottled frustration, little fists clenched at her sides. Her dark hair was a mess, as if her natural curls were straining against the artificial straightening of the dream.

She bypassed the disabled ramp and stomped down the stairs, flicking her head left and right, looking for the scoundrel who had stolen her new religion.

“Oh, Twil,” I murmured. “She looks awful.”

“She’ll be fine soon enough,” Evelyn hissed. “Hold still.”

The Lillies emerged moments later, flying to Twil’s sides, flanking her like a pair of bodyguards. Lily One carried a wide umbrella, shielding Twil and herself from the drizzling rain. Lily Two had dragged a thin raincoat over her grey uniform, a translucent piece of flimsy plastic not good for much except keeping the water off; she had something long and dark curled inside the raincoat, tucked half-within her uniform blazer.

Twil gestured helplessly at the asylum grounds, hands flapping, face collapsing into tears all over again. Lily One attempted to comfort her, while Lily Two peered at the tendrils of woodland, moving her head back and forth as if trying to catch sight of a thief fleeing through the trees.

About fifty feet to the trio’s collective right lay a long flowerbed, lining the front of the main body of the hospital building, just beneath the wide window which looked out from the dayroom. Before either of the Lillies could even think about abandoning their search or coaxing Twil back indoors, a low, dark, fast-moving shape burst from the flowerbed, crossed the lawns at a dead-sprint lope, and plunged into the nearest fringe of woodland.

“Oh, well done!” I hissed a muted cheer. “Well done, Raine. Gosh, I’m surprised she remembered her instructions so well.”

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted. “At least she’s quick on her feet. She better bloody well wait for us, or this could become a complete disaster.”

“She will!” I whispered. “I trust her. Have faith, Evee.”

“Huh.”

Twil and her Lillies were already stepping onto the brick pathways, hurrying in the general direction of Raine’s forest-bound shadow. Lily Two led the way, jogging ahead to make sure she didn’t lose

the scent. She passed within two feet of Evelyn and I, splashing through the shallow puddles gathered in the pockets of mortar between the bricks. Her eyes were set and serious, focused on her task. She moved with almost canine grace and purpose, a tracker hound pointing the way along Raine's trail.

Twil and Lily One followed a little way behind, sheltered beneath the umbrella, holding hands. Twil was still a sobbing mess, clinging on tight. Lily One kept the umbrella steady and led Twil onward with unerring steps. They passed by us too, almost close enough to touch.

"—she— I— I don't—" Twil was heaving for breath between her broken words. "I can't believe somebody would take my book like that! It's so cruel! There's no reason but to hurt me!"

"It's okay, Twillamina," Lily One purred, her voice a burning cocktail of velvet comfort and tightly controlled anger. "We'll get it back. That ... very silly person has no idea who she's messing with. Right? Isn't that right? Nobody messes with us three, right?"

"Right," Twil whined, through a face full of snot and tears.

It hurt to see Twil — so confident and cocky, so full of irrepressible energy, so strong and nigh-near invincible — reduced to this weepy parody of herself.

Twil and the Lillies hurried past us, splashing down the pathways, about to plunge into the woods.

"Right," Evelyn hissed from beneath the shelter of her increasingly damp towel. "Heather, take us back to the pavilion."

"The 'ron-day-voo'," I said, forcing a little giggle past my stretched nerves. I pushed Evee's wheelchair back onto the path and turned to follow the Lillies. "Raine did rather enjoy using that word. Pity we didn't have any watches to synchronize or anything."

"Don't give her ideas," Evelyn grunted. "The state she's in, she'll start giving us bloody code names."

"Oh? The state she's in?"

"Regressed," Evelyn snorted.

"You mean this is how she used to be? Before I knew her? When you first met her?"

Ahead of us, the Lillies stepped off the brick pathways and onto the forest trails of woodchip and mulch, with Twil between them. They plunged into the trees, out of sight within seconds. We would need to go around them to reach the pavilion and the spot where Raine had been instructed to wait.

“Mmhhh,” Evelyn grunted. “Sort of. She’s always been insufferable about that sort of thing. Code names, military jargon. Even when we were younger.”

“Well,” I said. “I wouldn’t mind if Raine gave me a code name. Maybe it would be cute.”

Evelyn sighed. “She seems to have given you one already. ‘Sweet thing’. Which is awful, for the record. I resent having to witness that over and over again.”

A blush crept into my cheeks. “Yes, well. I didn’t ask for that. And that’s hardly a proper ‘code name’. Code names should be like in that one video game Raine plays, the one with the cardboard boxes and the talking heads on the radio.”

“Heather, what are you blathering on about?”

The forest loomed over us. I left the pathway again, heading to the right. The wheels of Evee’s chair sank into the mushy grass, but soon we would be under the canopy, protected from the worst of the rain.

“You know!” I said, warming to the absurdity of my subject; we both needed an antidote to the panic and mayhem of the last few minutes. “Proper code names, like the ones in that game. ‘Sturdy Serpent’, names like that.”

Evelyn twisted in her chair, bringing a tight squint around upon me like the guns of a very irritable little ship. But I loved that look, I loved her confounded face, concealing her simple joy. We would fill these few minutes with much-needed relief before we joined back up with Raine. Evee opened her mouth and started to say something — but then she cut off, eyes going wide.

“Heather, stop!”

I jerked us to a sudden halt, then followed Evee’s gaze.

A fourth figure was making her way down the red brick pathways, sensible shoes splashing in the little puddles. Holding an umbrella

over her head, white uniform half concealed beneath the puffy exterior of a large raincoat, eyes scanning the edge of the woods, there she was, yet again.

Horror. Our nurse.

“Shit,” Evelyn hissed between her teeth. “Shit, shit, shit. I thought we’d shaken her.”

Horror’s eyes suddenly flickered with recognition, then narrowed into a very nasty frown.

“Evee!” I squeaked. “She’s looking right at us! She can see us!”

“I know!” Evelyn snapped. “Because I’m panicking! Give me a moment to calm down. Calm. Calm.” Evelyn took a deep breath, then two, then three. Horror picked up her pace, trotting toward us, opening her mouth to shout something. “Calm. Calm. We are not here. We are not here. We cannot be seen. We are unseen. We are not here. We are not here.”

Evelyn’s voice dropped into a sleepy chant. Horror slowed, blinking with confusion, eyes sliding off us once again. She glanced left and right at the rim of the woods. Evelyn took several slow, deep, steady breaths. I stayed absolutely silent, cold sweat plastered down my back and beneath my armpits.

“Alright,” Evelyn murmured, soft and relaxed, calmer than I’d thought possible. “We’re safe.”

“Good. Well done, well done,” I whispered. “But ... Evee, we can’t do this if she’s following. We can’t.”

“We’ll just have to get Raine to cut her head off.”

When she said it with that sleepy, relaxed, matter-of-fact tone, I almost believed it might work.

“Evee, I don’t think it’ll help. I’m serious.”

“No,” Evelyn said. “No, this is congruent with the narrative, with the play. A bunch of monsters lure a nurse out into the woods? She’s not even armed. She’s totally alone. She’s walking into a rainy woodland with no back up. I think we should try it. If we can. Fuck her. We put her down before she gets her hands on Twil again.”

“I ... oh, she’s ... ”

Horror walked right toward us.

Her eyes did not pause on me and Evelyn a second time, but lingered on the edge of the woods, scanning the trees for any sign of her wayward patients and inmates, her cunning little escapees. She strode down the path with a solid, steady click-click-click of her sensible shoes.

She drew level with Eeve and I, about fifteen feet away, on the path itself. She stopped.

Horror sighed.

“Where oh where have you gone, you three?” she said to herself. “I suppose I’m going to have to find you myself, and bring you back indoors, aren’t I? I never like solitary confinement for good girls, and you’re all usually so ... so good. But one of you was cheating at our board game, I’m sure of that. And now you don’t even want to play. Perhaps I’ll organise a separate game with each of you. Yes, that’s a good idea. One on one, one by one. No more support.”

Horror turned her head. She looked right at me and Eeve.

My heart climbed into my throat. Sweat broke out on my face. Evelyn murmured a mantra — “You cannot see us. We are unseen. You cannot see us. We are unseen. You cannot see us.”

“I wonder which way they went?” Horror said. Then she smiled and shrugged, like a comedy character pressed into the wrong role in a horror movie. “Oh well. I’ll just have to set off and find out. All sorts of things happen to good girls gone astray in the woods, after all. You never know what might transpire out there, with the animals and the crazies and the weird old trees. Off we go then!”

Horror stepped off the pathway and strode right past me and Eeve. She plunged into the woods, swallowed up in seconds. Her footsteps vanished along with her form.

Evelyn let out a deep breath, slow and steady.

“What do we do?” I hissed. “We can’t deal with her. We can’t even kill her, I’m pretty sure she’ll just come back. Even the King in Yellow couldn’t put her down.”

“Raine,” Evelyn grunted. “Pavilion. Now.”

Less than five minutes later — five minutes of pushing Evelyn's wheelchair down the woodchip pathways which wiggled and wriggled their way through the dripping woods, five minutes of keeping one ear cocked for the sounds of other footsteps tramping through the undergrowth, five minutes of hoping for a glance of Twil or her Lillies through the trees, and praying that we would not blunder into Horror's sight once again — we reached the place where the trails ran out, where they collapsed into disuse, where wood chips melted into leaf-strewn forest floor. We retraced the steps we'd taken to find the pavilion the first time, down past a little rise, then out into a tiny clearing.

The pavilion, our latest temporary base camp, was waiting exactly as we'd left it, an ugly little parody of a woodland cottage with its horrible plastic red roof and concrete floor and hard benches.

Raine was right where she was supposed to be, following her instructions to the letter. She was crouched down behind the end of one of the benches, peering over the armrest at the opposite tree line. I couldn't see anything in the direction she was looking, but I trusted her instincts better than my own — at least when I lacked all six tentacles and any semblance of abyssal self-hood.

Raine had our supplies slung over one shoulder, safely within the canvas shopping bag she'd stolen on the previous night. She held her machete in her other hand, tucked away inside the sheath.

"Quickly!" Evelyn hissed. "Touch her before she moves!"

I hurried over to the pavilion and wheeled Evelyn's chair onto the concrete foundation, finally out of the rain once again; fat droplets of cold water splashed onto our extremely damp towels as we passed beneath the rim of the red plastic roof. Raine glanced around at us, eyes sliding away as if her vision was greased; even she couldn't see us through the Fadestone's magic.

Raine's clothes were damp with both water and sweat. Her hair was swept back with the lingering raindrops. Her feet were filthy with mud from running through the woods. Her eyes were wide and alert, every muscle pulled taut with readiness to spring up and sprint away.

I'd never seen Raine like this before — more like a skittish deer than a predator. Raine was often ready for rapid movement, for violence, for swinging fists or a weapon. But she was rarely tense

with flight.

She wasn't scared though, just trying to keep ahead of a hunter she did not want to slay. She could hardly unsheathe her machete against Twil and the Lillies.

I stopped Eevee's wheelchair at Raine's side, let go with one hand, and grabbed Raine's shoulder.

"Woah!" Raine flinched hard, eyes flying wide with shock, almost recoiling from me — but her free hand came up and clamped over mine, holding steady even as she jerked backward.

"It's me! It's us! Hi! Hi, Raine!"

Raine panted for a second, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. Then she started to laugh. "Oh, haha, oh wow. Oh, wow, that is weird. That is a unique sensation. Haha! Hey there, sweet thing. Hey there, Eevee. Hoooooooo that's ... yeah, unique."

"What?" Evelyn demanded. "What's unique?"

"Memories and clarity all rushing back," Raine said. "Ten seconds ago I wasn't quite sure what I was doing crouching down here, 'cept waiting for you two." Her eyes flashed toward the tree line. "We're invisible like this, right? Invisible and unheard?"

"Yes, that's right," I said.

Evelyn grunted. "Just don't surprise me or jog my arms, or my concentration will shatter."

Raine straightened up, careful to keep physical contact with me at all times; I wished I had all my parts and selves, my extra limbs, so I could simply anchor us together without all this fuss. Raine reached over and held the opposite handle of Eevee's wheelchair, so I could stop worrying about losing contact again. I reached up and touched her head, running my fingers through her hair and down the back of her neck. She showed her teeth and closed her eyes, purring with deep satisfaction. I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks, though this was hardly the time.

"Good ... good girl, Raine," I murmured. "You did really, really well. You followed all your instructions. Good girl."

"Mmmmm," she purred, then cracked her eyes open again. "Had to improvise when I saw our target and her pair of indentured fuck

servants come out of the hospital. So what happened? We moved our plans forward? I'm game for that."

I lowered the damp towel from over my head, then helped Evelyn do the same with her own.

"First," said Evelyn, "where's the fox, where's my grandmother?"

Raine shook her head, glancing toward the tree line again. "She ran off. Doing her own thing somewhere. Couldn't have stopped her even if I'd tried."

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "Fine. Pass Praem back to me, please."

"Sure thing."

Raine reached into the canvas bag and produced the Praem Plushie. We'd left Praem with Raine in order to avert a worst-case scenario, in case Evee and I ended up getting compromised or captured. With Praem at her side, Raine stood a better chance of breaking us back out. With the plan a success for now, it was time to return daughter to mother.

The Praem Plushie looked identical to before. The flat eyes, the straight-line mouth, the soft felt-fuzz hair. Those flat eyes lingered on me as Raine placed the doll into Evee's lap. Evelyn took one hand off the Fadestone so she could tuck Praem safely inside her grey dressing gown once more, alongside the book.

"Come on then," Raine said. "Gimme the low-down, debrief me. Where do we stand? What's the plan?"

"We got Twil to follow us," I said. "We have the book, and also her eyeglasses."

Raine snorted with laughter. "Nice score."

"But we have an unforeseen complication."

Evelyn and I quickly explained what had happened inside the hospital building, including the details of the board game and Twil's book — which we showed to Raine, just in case. Raine nodded along with great interest as Evelyn rattled off how the pair of Lillies had actually protected Twil, how they'd been flanking her to keep Horror from winning at the strange board game. We told Raine what had happened upon our escape, and who had unexpectedly joined us.

Raine winced. "Horror, right. Our fat-bottomed fuck-pig pretend nurse. I thought I saw a fourth figure in the woods on my way back."

I hissed through my teeth. "Oh no, she's not caught up with them already, has she?"

Raine shook her head and pointed at the tree line, directly opposite the bench, where she'd been staring earlier. "Nah. Twil and her goon-twins are circling the forest, left first, then right. They'll pass through here if they keep going, I'm pretty sure. Miss Spank bait—"

"Tch, Raine," I said. "Must you?"

Raine laughed. "Spank bait. Horror. The nurse. Come on, she's somebody's walking fantasy. I'm trying to break her down here, sweet thing. If this is a dream, she's gotta be dismantled."

"I ... well ... fair enough," I sighed.

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Keep it in your knickers for five seconds, Raine, please."

Raine smirked. "Alright, alright, I give in. Our extremely fuckable nurse is tracing the edge of the woods, as far as I can tell from what little I saw of her. If she makes it all the way down here it won't be for a while yet. We've maybe got fifteen minutes in this spot."

"We need to bait Twil," Evelyn said, before I could call Raine a 'bad girl' for getting weird about Horror. "We're on a clock, a time limit. We need to peel her off, get her alone. Ideas, now. Go."

Raine shrugged. "We could wait here for about another ten seconds."

Evelyn sighed. "Really?"

"Um," I added. "Yes, Raine, excuse me?"

Raine held one hand to her right ear. "Listen."

We all fell silent. The crunching of leaves beneath three pairs of shoes reached my ears moments later.

Raine winked and put a finger to her lips.

Lily Two appeared first, emerging from between the trees as a ghostly transparent blur topped with a head of flame. She stepped

out into the clearing and resolved into nothing more outlandish than a young woman wrapped in a raincoat, with red hair beneath the flimsy hood. She paused for a second, surprised at the pavilion, then stepped beneath the roof and lowered her plastic hood. Her eyes flickered across the concrete floor, lingered on the empty fire pit, and examined the wooden benches. Then she sniffed, drawing a deep breath through her nose.

A muffled call came from beyond the tree line. “Lil?”

Lily Two turned and replied. “Here! There’s a building!”

Lily One slunk out of the woods like a feline predator — not on the prowl, but promenading for all to see, showing off her sheen and shine, her sleek sinuous movements, her slender muscle and smooth surfaces. Long blonde hair swayed as she stepped forth, sharp eyes darting around the clearing, face pinched with superior irritation and elevated anger. She held her umbrella firmly in one hand, and Twil in the other.

Twil looked lost and sad, half-blind without her thick glasses. Her neatly polished black shoes were covered in woodland mud. Her thick dark tights were splashed with rainwater. Her hair was all frizzy with the humidity in the air. Her grey tie was loose. She sagged with melancholy and exhaustion as Lily One helped her across the clearing and beneath the roof of the pavilion.

She seemed a bedraggled kitten next to these elemental forces of sapphic fantasy.

Lily One lowered the umbrella and blew out a big sigh. “Didn’t know this was out here,” she said, then wrinkled her nose. “Ugh, it’s covered in cobwebs and dust. What is this even for, camp fires and singalongs?”

Lily Two sniffed the air again, taking deep breaths through her nose.

Raine whispered: “Do we make a move?”

“Not sure,” Evelyn murmured. “Let’s watch them for a moment.”

I hissed, “You know what to say to Twil, though, Evee? You have a plan, correct?”

“Mhmm,” Evelyn grunted. “I was going to speak to her about being a werewolf. But now I’ve seen her, and seen these two ... I

don't know. I may have been wrong. Let's watch them for a moment. Then we can get close and take them all at once, get me in front of Twil, get me space to speak with her."

"Gotta make a move sooner or later," said Raine.

"Yes, yes," Evelyn hissed. "Just let me gather data."

Twil whined, gasping for breath. Her legs were quivering. "I have to sit, I must sit down," she panted.

"Oh!" Lily One tutted. "Twillamina, no, these benches are filthy. Can you not hold on? We ... well, no, I suppose we can't turn around, can we? Damn it. Damn it all to hell, this is so unfair."

"I really do have to sit," Twil whined. Her face scrunched up, threatening fresh tears. "I'm so sorry, I'm really sorry. I'm so weak —"

"You are not weak!" Lily One said, then burst into a big bright smile. "Here." She let go of Twil's hand, put her umbrella down on one of the benches, and then quickly unbuttoned her blazer.

"Oh!" Twil's eyes went wide. "No! No, I couldn't—"

"Tch!" Lily One tutted. "Nonsense. What's ours is yours." She peeled the smartly pressed grey blazer away from her shoulders, reducing herself down to shirt and tie above her grey skirt. Then she shook out the blazer and draped it over the bench, to act as a cover for Twil's sensitive bottom. "Here. Sit. Sit!"

Lily One herded Twil onto the bench. Twil eased herself down, then sighed with visible relief. "T-thank you. Thank you. You two do so much for me, more than I deserve."

"Don't talk such utter rubbish, Twillamina." Lily One laughed. "We both love you very much. And you do just as much for us, you do know that, don't you?"

Twil tried to smile. "I do hope we can find the book. I ... I don't know what'll happen without it."

"Yes, so do I. It's alright though. We don't need it." She tapped her chest, just over her heart. "The real words are always in here."

"Mm," Lily Two grunted. She had stalked halfway around the perimeter of the pavilion, sniffing the air. "For her, maybe. But for you and I? Might be messy."

Lily One's sharp eyes flashed toward her counterpart. "Shh."

Twil looked up, mildly confused. "I'm sorry?"

Lily One smiled down at Twil. "It's nothing, love. Just ... you know we'll always be together, whatever happens. But you're right. If we don't have the book, we might not be able to protect you so competently. We won't go anywhere, I can promise that. But we'll lose our ... extra help. You need to be prepared."

Twil blinked several times. "I don't quite understand."

Lily One reached down and smoothed Twil's hair over her scalp. "It'll be alright." Then she sighed and tutted. "Oh, blast. This weather is doing a number on our hair, isn't it? Lil, you're so lucky with your rusty top," she said to Lily Two. "You never get frizzy."

"Mm," Lily Two just grunted.

Evelyn was frowning harder and harder. "What the hell are they talking about? Did you two catch that part?"

"I have no idea," I whispered. "I still can't figure out what they are, either to Twil, or outside the dream."

Raine purred: "You think they're more than just dream people?"

"Maybe," I said. "But I have no idea what."

Lily Two sniffed again, frowning at the scent she was picking up.

Lily One sighed and turned to her. "My darling, my dearest, the other half of my very being, what on earth are you doing?"

"I can smell her," Lily Two said. She slid something from inside her raincoat — a truncheon, made of black metal. "Both of them."

Lily One froze. "Oh?"

Lily Two nodded. "The nasty one, the brute who needed a shower. And the little one with the silly blanket."

I tutted, bristling, tugging my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders. Raine just grinned.

Lily Two went on: "They were here. Maybe seconds before we arrived. There's other scents too, ones I don't know." She sniffed the air again. "A ... an animal? A dog or a fox or something. And another person, but I don't know her. Maybe something else too,

something like a ... living ... pillow?"

"Wait a second," I whispered. "She's doing what Twil does. The real Twil, I mean, back in the real world. She's tracking by scent!"

"Fuck," Evelyn hissed. "I may have gotten this all wrong."

"Ah?"

Evelyn sighed. "These two might be parts of Twil herself. Which is not what I expected. Maybe I need to talk to all three of them."

"New plan?" Raine said.

"Maybe," Evelyn grunted.

Lily One just sighed. "We'll never track them in this rain. We've failed."

Lily Two turned toward her blonde counterpart. "We can't go back now." She gestured at Twil. "If we don't have the book, she gets left by herself."

Twil blinked at this exchange, as if she didn't quite comprehend. Lily One just smiled, then stroked Twil's hair again, and said: "Twillamina, darling, sweetheart? Lil and I need to have a little chat, is that okay?"

"Okay ... " Twil murmured, trailing off.

Lily One nodded, then turned back around and marched over to the other Lily, leaving Twil a little way behind.

"We're breaking role," she said, serious but not angry. "That's a risk. You know that's a risk. We're burning fuel just talking like this, let alone properly. One real sentence and we'd both pop."

Lily Two crossed her arms and held her nightstick in one loose hand. She looked uncomfortable. "We don't have a choice. We'll be dry in what — an hour? Two? And that's subjective time. Not objective! We could flash out and leave these archetypes as empty as nothing. Especially if the woman upstairs is paying any attention."

Lily One sighed — and glanced upward, at the sky, at the Eye.

"It's not paying attention," she said. "That's the problem."

My eyes went wide. My mouth hung open.

“What the ... ” Evelyn hissed.

“The more I hear the less I comprehend!” I whispered. “They can see it, they can see the Eye! What—”

Lily Two was already carrying on. “I hate this dream,” she said. “I hate dreams. Especially flat ones.”

“It’s nonsense,” Lily One agreed. “Everything is so washed out. One dimensional.”

“Humans.” Lily Two tutted.

Twil listened to this conversation as if nothing was out of place, as if her two bodyguards and lovers were not wildly yanking at the stage props and scenery and pulling up the boards beneath their own feet.

Lily One turned and frowned out into the woods. “Do you think one of them is the dreamer causing all this?”

“Can’t be,” Lily Two scoffed. “Humans can’t dream.”

“It was the riot leader,” Lily One added. “She was a dreamer. I wish we could contact her, but Twil’s terrified of her. There’s no chance.”

“And she’s not human,” Lily Two said. “Which is my entire point. Case dismissed.”

“Soooooo,” said Lily One, taking a deep breath, twirling bright blonde hair around the fingers of one hand. “Maybe one of the other humans is not ... human?”

“Yes!” I hissed. “I’m right here! Oh my gosh, Eevee, we have to talk to them. We have to—”

“Hold,” Evelyn said. “This could be a trap. We have no idea.”

Raine chuckled. “I like the blonde one. I’d let her lead me into a trap any day. Let’s rock and roll. Let’s go.”

“Raine!” I hissed.

But Lily One was turning in a little circle, eyes passing over the edge of the trees, lingering on the benches, darting about the narrow space beneath the pavilion.

“Are you out there, dreamer?” she said. “Are you watching us right now?”

Lily Two went stiff as she realised what her counterpart was suggesting. She raised her nightstick and started to wave it through the air, as if brushing cobwebs aside, checking for our presence. She was going in totally the wrong direction, facing away from us.

“Evee,” I hissed. “These must be the twins Stout was talking about! It’s the only thing that makes any sense!”

“Hold,” Evelyn grunted. “Hold steady. We don’t know what they are.”

Lily One sighed and opened her hands. “We’ve dropped our roles,” she said, speaking to the air, to the invisible presence, to us. “The more we do this, the faster we burn through our lucidity. And when that happens, Twillamina is all alone. Come on out if you’re there, dreamer. Come out so we can chat. Human or not.”

bedlam boundary – 24.18

Lily One fell silent as she awaited an answer to her open invitation — come out come out, wherever you are, you hidden watcher tucked into the blind folds of this darkly dripping dream.

She may as well have been talking to the Eye itself, for all she knew.

Maybe she did know. And we needed to find out.

Her own sharply narrowed eyes darted back and forth beneath the shelter of the pavilion roof, tracking across the damp-edged concrete foundation, searching for any sign or symbol out of place. Then her gaze ventured outward, scanning the woods for any lurking red points glowing in the undergrowth or peering around the tree trunks. Her shoulders and neck were tense with nervous energy. She wet her lips with a flicker of her tongue, then ran a hand through her luxurious mane of blonde hair; loose tresses of pale gold fell about her face.

Was she truly anxious, or was this another act, another layer of falsehood spun into convincing beauty by the logic of the dream, by Sevens' misappropriated skills, by myself and the Eye and the gyre of this nightmare, designed to draw me and mine out from our invisible pocket of safety?

“Come on,” she hissed, more to herself than to the assumption of an observer. “We can’t break role for long, we need to get back to our hiding place. If you’re there, please, come out.”

Lily Two stalked the perimeter of the pavilion’s concrete, parting air with the blunt metal of her nightstick. She swept the weapon in slow arcs of discovery, hoping to connect with the postulated secret audience of this silly little play. Lithe and light and springy on her feet, she moved with the focus and dedication of a hound on the hunt, subtle muscles rolling and flexing beneath the thick fabric of her dark tights and the unflattering fall of her grey skirt. Red hair was swept back out of her freckled face, hairline touched with a sheen of sweat.

Watching them from my concealed position, I started to understand

why these two were part of Twil's fantasy — both of these young women, about the same age as us, were frighteningly beautiful, like a pair of angels crammed down into human form.

"They're here," Lily Two repeated, then sniffed the air, nose twitching. "They're right here, and they all need a bath. I can smell them, I swear it."

Twil — Twillamina, locked deep in the dream — watched her bodyguards and lovers with uncomprehending eyes, her vision blinded and blurred by more than just her missing glasses. She sat on one of the benches all hunched and shrunken, her eyes red from hot panic and cold tears, with Lily One's grey blazer cushioning her backside, seemingly oblivious to the implications of the moment.

"I wish they'd just bring back my book," she whined in a pitiful little voice, not really herself, not the Twil I knew.

Beyond the pavilion, misty raindrops swirled in great wind-stroked masses. Leaves shivered against their fellows, sending a susurrant sigh across the woodland canopy. The trees seemed to lean inward, tucking us within a secluded bower.

"Evee," I hissed. My left palm was slippery with sweat on the handle of her wheelchair. "We have to show ourselves. We have to try talking."

Evelyn clenched her teeth. She kept her voice slow and calm, so as not to disrupt the magical effect of the Fadestone. "We have no idea what these two really are. Can we risk this?"

"They're reaching out to us," I whispered back. "They're trying to make contact, that's a big deal. And they're being polite and—"

Evelyn snorted. "'Being polite' qualifies them for nothing, let alone trust."

"They're lucid!" I hissed. "They're lucid in the dream! That has to mean something!"

"Heather—"

"And I think they might be the twins Stout was talking about, though I don't understand how. Evee, we can't let this opportunity go. Horror might be here soon, we need to talk with these two. And we can hardly rescue Twil if we don't show ourselves anyway! We have to do this, we may as well attempt diplomacy first!"

“Heather, that was an actual question. Pay attention to my words, not what you imagine I say.”

“Ah?”

Evelyn glanced up at me, snuggled down in her wheelchair. The Praem Plushie peeked out of the gap in her grey dressing gown.

“Can we risk this?” Evelyn repeated in a soft murmur. “Make the decision. If you think this is the right move, we’ll do it. I have no objections, but I want you to make the decision, properly.”

My throat closed up. How certain was I?

Raine carefully removed our bag of supplies from her shoulder and hung it from the other wheelchair handle, nice and low so it wouldn’t add too much counterweight to Evelyn up front. Raine made sure to keep one hand on the chair at all times, to maintain her own invisibility. Then she raised her sheathed machete to her own face and yanked the sheath off with her teeth. The blade glinted in the grey light of the drizzle beyond the pavilion.

She dropped the sheath into the bag and spun the machete over the back of her hand. Then she grinned, first at me, then at the Lillies, dragging her eyes up and down both of them as if sizing up an opponent in a boxing ring — or a partner on the other side of a bed.

“We can take ‘em if we have to fight, sweet thing,” she purred. “If this all goes tits up, I can take ‘em both.”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “Oh yes, please do. Stabbing them to death with a bloody great knife will solve everything, of course. Raine, these women are parts of Twil. If you seriously hurt them I will personally find a dog to shit in your pillowcase every day for the rest of your life.”

“Um, yes,” I added quickly, catching Raine’s eye. “Though maybe not with the dog part. Raine, please, please don’t hurt them. I think Eevee’s right, they’re probably parts of Twil. The way they talk and move, even the way they look, it’s like bits of her, smeared around.”

“Phrasing, Heather,” Evelyn grunted. “Besides, I thought your theory was the opposite, that they’re Stout’s mysterious twins. Whatever that means.”

“Okay, well, maybe my theory is ... incomplete,” I admitted with a sigh. “But we’re not going to find out unless we talk to them!”

"Blade's just for show," Raine purred. "I promise. Sometimes you gotta front a bit if you wanna avoid a scrap."

"Good girl," I said on reflex; I was getting far too used to that. "Evee, please. We need to speak with them. If it all goes wrong, we can just vanish again. Can't we? We can vanish and run off into the woods. Yes, to answer your question properly. Yes, it is worth the risk."

Evelyn took a deep breath. She straightened up in her chair, doing her best to reassume the mantle of Evelyn Saye, Mage of Sharrowford, despite her withered body and fragile frame, her missing prosthetic, and her position tucked down in a wheelchair.

It worked. For a moment, Evelyn looked as if she sat upon a throne. Her face dropped into an easy sneer of casual superiority.

"Very well," she said. Her hands shifted beneath the layered folds of her grey dressing gown. "Both of you be ready. Our window may be very narrow, so do not hesitate. Raine, be prepared to move, but don't move too far, stay close. Heather, you need to start talking the moment I drop the Fadestone's effect. Stay in contact with the wheelchair if you can, because if anything goes wrong, I'll use the Fadestone again. You will get left behind if you're not in contact. Do you understand?"

Raine chuckled. "You wouldn't do that, my dark and mysterious magician girl. You'd never leave me behind."

"I bloody well would leave you behind, you fool," Evelyn hissed. "And you would do well to act like it."

Raine cracked a grin. "Very well, captain Saye. Drop out of stealth and drop our shields. The away party is ready for transport. Three to beam down. Four if we count Praem."

I squint-frowned at Raine. "Excuse me?"

Raine chuckled. "Never mind, sweet thing. It would take too long to explain. Tell you later."

"Heather, concentrate," Evelyn hissed. "You need to do the talking, and do it quickly. If this works, then I'll deal with Twil, but you are up first. Are you ready?"

I took a deep breath, tugged my yellow blanket tighter around my shoulders, and raised my head; I did not feel ready, not remotely. I

felt ugly and incomplete, small and weird and reduced, like a squid washed up on a beach and denied the cool waters of the ocean. I was damp with rainwater and my left shin throbbed like somebody had been hitting it with a sledgehammer for the last three days. Without my other six selves or my six beautiful tentacles, I felt as if I was about to give a presentation while stark naked and covered in filth. I felt vulnerable and vile, especially when compared with Twil's effortless angelic beauty, Lily One's queen-bee femininity, and Lily Two's predatory athleticism.

But victory left me no other choice; saving Twil left me no options. So I nodded, and lied, "Yes. I'm ready."

"On three," Evelyn said, trying to keep the tremor from her voice. "One."

Raine raised her machete and rolled her shoulders. I puffed out my chest and tried to look confident, tried to envision myself with all my limbs, a mouth full of sharp teeth, and eyes glowing neon pink. I was still myself here, even if I was scattered. Still Heather Morell. Still everything I was meant to be, and no dream could deny that, not for much longer.

"Two."

Lily One started to turn away, opening her mouth, perhaps to call out again. Lily Two lowered her nightstick, about to give up on her search. Twil looked down into her own lap, bottom lip all a-wobble, despairing at ever recovering her oh-so-precious tome.

"Three," Evelyn finished. "Now."

Our unveiling went unannounced — no crackle of static or thump of displaced air, no magical fwoomp or tingle of power dancing across my scalp, no change in perception or sensation to tell me that the Fadestone's magic no longer concealed us from prying eyes.

We were simply, suddenly, silently there.

Lily One flinched and leapt back, hands out to ward us off, eyes wide in shock. Lily Two caught us in her peripheral vision, then whirled around and raised her nightstick. Twil shot to her feet, mouth hanging open.

"Hello!" I said, putting one hand up in an open-palmed greeting. "Hello, hi, yes, it's us. We don't mean you any—"

“Hey hey hey,” Lily Two said, striding forward, brandishing her weapon, flapping her transparent raincoat wide like a billowing cape. “You three have a lot of explaining to do.”

Raine whirled her machete outward, pointing with the tip of darkly gleaming metal. A grin ripped across her face. “You best step off, carrot-top,” she purred. “I’ve got edge, but you’re all blunt. I’ll fuck you inside out if you’re not careful.”

“A knife?” Lily Two sneered, but she slammed to a halt. “As if that matters? I can break that knife in one hit, thank you?”

Lily One raised both hands and gestured toward Lily Two, suddenly trying to play peacemaker. “My darling bud-mate, slow your roll—”

“We don’t mean you any harm!” I finally managed to shout. “We just want to—”

“My book!” Twil shrieked.

Her voice cut through everyone and everything, blotting out the sound of the rain and the leaves and the drip-drip-drip of water falling from the pavilion roof, smashing through our voices and thoughts alike, as if she was the only real thing present in the clearing. For a split-second there was no sound and no motion, only Twil’s sudden outrage.

Then the strange spell broke and Twil marched right up to the brewing confrontation, her brow furrowed, her lips compressed with futile fury, her eyes brimming with a threat of fresh tears. Lily One and Two both tried to ward her off or hold her back, but she pushed past them and planted her feet directly in front of Raine and Evelyn and me.

“You stole my book!” she squawked. “One of you did! Give it back! Give it back, it’s not yours, give it—”

“For pity’s sake,” Evelyn hissed. Twil halted, blinking rapidly, squinting to see Evelyn’s face through the veil of poor eyesight. “Stop whining, Twil. It’s right here.” Evelyn dug around inside her grey dressing gown and produced the heavy leather-bound book. “Here. See? Safe and sound. And not going anywhere.”

Twil’s eyes lit up with relief. “That’s— please— I need—”

She reached for the stolen tome — then recoiled from the flat of Raine’s machete.

“Raine—!” I hissed.

“Ah ah ah ahhhhh,” Raine purred, her voice trailing off into a long slow rasp. She held Twil’s terrified eyes, then flickered her gaze to the bodyguards. Both the Lillies were paused and tense, ready to spring to Twil’s defence the moment that machete turned edge-on. Raine spoke, nice and slow: “Here’s what we’re gonna do, you comedy threesome. We’re gonna give you the book, and you’re gonna agree to talk. Do we have a deal?”

“It’s mine!” Twil shouted, voice gone shrill and cracked. “You have no right to do this! No right at all! This is stealing! I can’t believe anybody — let alone a young lady — would steal on purpose like this. It’s unthinkable. It’s grotesque. It’s— it’s—”

“Never known you to be above a spot of shoplifting,” Evelyn grumbled.

Twil blinked down at her. “E-excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“Who are you, anyway?” Twil demanded. “I don’t understand why you’re all treating me like this, it’s so horrid!”

Evelyn sucked on her teeth. “You two — the lucid pair, I’m talking to you — what does the book represent, hm? What does this mean?”

Lily One narrowed her eyes. “No chance, not before it’s returned to her.”

“Twil, please,” I said, trying to play the polite cop to Raine’s bad cop and Evelyn’s too-familiar-encouraging-you-to-recommit-to-crime-cop. “We only—”

“*Twillamina*,” Lily Two interrupted, speaking directly to me. “You will address her by her full name.”

I started to sigh, but Lily One spoke up before I could lose any of my temper. “Yes, it’s important,” she said, eyebrows raised. “Please, don’t use the short version of her name, at least not directly. It’s dangerous. Understand?”

“Alright, alright,” I said, hands up in exasperated surrender.

“Twillamina, we only took your book in order to bait you out here, so we could talk. I’m sorry it’s so distressing, I didn’t realise it

would upset you quite this badly. We'll give it back, we just want to know you won't all run away. Is that fair? I think that's fair. Please, do tell me if you think it's unfair."

"Here," Evelyn grunted. "I'll give you these for free. A show of good faith."

Evelyn produced Twil's glasses from inside her dressing gown and held them out. Twil's mouth fell open. She hesitated, glancing at Raine for permission to reach forward.

Raine shot her a wink and said, "I won't cut you, girl. Go ahead."

Twil eased forward with exaggerated care, as if Evelyn was a cobra poised to strike at her hand. She snatched her glasses from Eeve's fingers and pulled away. She fumbled the frames back onto her face, blinking and squinting through the ridiculously thick glass. The circular lenses made her amber eyes look huge, like a bug or an alien, or one of Evelyn's less well-proportioned anime girls.

She blinked at Eeve several times, then put her fingertips to her mouth. A slow blush crept up her cheeks.

"Remember me yet?" Evelyn grunted.

"No ... " Twil said. "I-I mean yes, but no. No!"

Lily One straightened up and tossed her hair back, golden mane arranged over her shoulders. She put both hands on her hips, adopting an imperious pose. "All right then," she said, enunciating her words with great precision. "Return the book to Twillamina, and we shan't depart. We won't open any hostilities either. Will we?" Her eyes slide sideways, toward Lily Two. "Will we, my dearest?"

Lily Two sighed and rolled her eyes. "We won't be the ones to start it. But we could win it. You know we could."

"And where would that leave us?" Lily One asked, not so gently.

"If you're correct."

"I am correct," Lily One countered. Her gaze flickered back to us. "Or at least I'm willing to gamble."

"Thank you," I said.

Lily Two grumbled a wordless complaint, but she lowered her

nightstick and shrugged all the same. Raine copied her gesture, lowering the machete and bowing her head to her counterpart, though a nasty grin lingered on her face. Lily Two rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose with open contempt. Raine looked her up and down with naked appreciation.

“Nice legs,” Raine said.

“Shut your vile mouth,” Lily Two replied. “Or I shall seal it with a gag.”

“Love to see you try, tough stuff. Wanna tie me up while we’re at it? I don’t make for a good captive, but you can sit on my face and —”

“Stop,” Evelyn grunted. “For fuck’s sake, Raine.”

Raine cracked a shit-eating grin. “Just a bit of friendly sparring.”

“Your friend there has better sense,” Lily Two said. “Better stop before she tugs your leash.”

“Actually I would be the one holding that,” I said gently, then cleared my throat. Why had I bothered to clarify that point?

“Ahem,” Lily One said. “The book, please. Hand it directly to Twillamina.” Lily One’s voice softened instantly as she turned to address Twil. “Twillamina, darling, sweetie, it’s perfectly safe, they won’t hurt you. We’re both right here.”

Evelyn held out the leatherbound tome. The raindrops swirled and misted beyond the pavilion, shivering the leaves and shaking the high branches of this dreamlike woodland. Twil crept forward with Lily One’s hand on her lower back. She eyed Evelyn for a long, long moment, then swallowed hard. She gently closed her fingers around the book, shaking worse than the twigs in the canopy above us.

Then she hopped back again, out of reach. She ran her hands over the cover, letting out a deep sigh of relief. She hugged the book to her chest, eyes fluttering shut.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she breathed.

“Hooray,” Lily Two deadpanned. “How much time does that buy us?”

Lily One sighed heavily and twirled a lock of golden blonde hair between her fingers. “While breaking role like this? Not enough.”

She clucked her tongue at us. “So, which one of you three clowns are we actually talking to? It can’t be all three of you, no way.”

“Clowns?” Raine purred, grinning dangerously.

“Buffoons,” Lily Two said. “Fools. Jokers. You’ve earned the title for this little stunt, if nothing else.”

Evelyn huffed and rolled her eyes. “Great. They’re still insufferable. I blame Twil. And no, I shan’t be using that ridiculous name for her.”

Twil opened her eyes and blinked at Evelyn. “Excuse me? Sorry, did I do something wrong?”

“Tch,” I tutted at the Lillies. “Yes, really, must you use language like that? I thought we had a truce now.”

Lily One folded her arms over her chest, cocked her hips to one side, and stuck her tongue into her cheek — a parody of a bad girl, acted by a young woman who never went to bed late, ate all her vegetables, and did her homework on time. There it was, clear as my own face in a mirror, that fake rough exterior wrapped around a core of honesty and kindness, the surface-level mean streets attitude over a girl who’d lived most of her life on a farm, in the woods.

Lily One, at least, was part of Twil.

Maybe I was wrong about them being something else. My deductions grew less clear with every passing moment.

“I don’t know about you three,” Lily One drawled. “But we do have to stay somewhat within our roles. Pardon the sneering disgust and the feelings of ... ” she trailed off, looking me up and down with a cocktail of pity and revulsion. “Aversion. It’s just the roles. No hard feelings.”

“Roles?” Evelyn grunted. “Explain.”

Lily Two said, “Roles. In the dream.”

Lily One sneered down at Evelyn. “Clearly you’re not the dreamer of the bunch.”

“You’re talking to all three of us,” I said, as politely as I could. “I’m lucid, I know what this is, and I know where I am. I know that none of this is real, that this is all a dream, or a play, metaphorically speaking. This is Evelyn. She’s lucid too. And this is Raine, she’s ...

semi-lucid. Sort of.”

“That’s me,” Raine purred, shooting the Lillies a cheeky wink. “Half-asleep and ready to rut.”

I sighed. Lily One wrinkled her nose. Lily Two looked like she wanted to spit at Raine’s feet.

Twil glanced between us as we spoke, wide-eyed but seemingly lost.

Evelyn snapped: “Is Twil keeping up with any of this?”

Twil herself just flinched, staring at Evelyn, blinking behind her huge glasses. “Excuse me?”

“Hahaha!” Lily One laughed with sneering contempt. “No, obviously not, duh!” She reached over and stroked the back of Twil’s head, smoothing her dark hair over her scalp. Twil made a happy little noise, blushing faintly in maidenly embarrassment. “If we let that happen, the dream-substrate would collapse. Twillamina will remember this as a friendly little chat, but the details aren’t going in. She’s as asleep as the rest of them.”

“Alright, so, we can talk,” I said. “I think we should establish our positions first.”

“Yes, quite,” Evelyn said. “We need to understand who or what we are addressing. Both of you are clearly lucid. I was working off the assumption that you’re parts of Twil, but—”

“We are,” said Lily Two.

Lily One sighed. “Sort of. It’s complicated. Go on, Saye.”

Evelyn frowned at the pair of Lillies. “But now I’m not so sure. You’re something else, aren’t you? You’re from outside this dream, you didn’t come in with us. Twil doesn’t have the kind of knowledge you’re displaying. What are you?”

“Woah woah woah,” Lily One said, raising a hand, smiling with sarcastic disbelief. “You first, sweetheart.”

“... ah,” Evelyn grunted. “I see.”

“Sorry?” I said. “Us first what? What do you want us to do? Eevee, you’re following this?”

“Mutual suspicion,” Evelyn grunted.

“Mexican stand-off!” Raine cheered. “My third favourite kind of stand-off.”

“We need you to prove what you are,” Lily One said. “As of right now, I’ve seen no compelling evidence that you’re not just another part of the dream. You need to prove to us that you’re real. Not just that you look the part of random crazies from inside the hospital.”

“Huh,” Lily Two grunted. “Good point. This could be tailor-made to expose us.”

I sighed a great big sigh and closed my eyes briefly. “I really have had enough of this place. Was our conversation with you yesterday not proof enough?”

“Don’t blame us, sweetheart!” Lily One said. “We’re taking a risk doing this too, you know? Give us something to work with. You can’t expect us to just go on trust alone, the stakes are too high for that.”

Raine purred, “I could fuck you both at the same time, how’s that for—”

Evelyn cleared her throat, a double-barrelled ahem-ahem to shut down Raine’s libido. The Lillies both looked down at her too. Twil followed, then blushed again and hid her lower face behind her big heavy book.

“We intervened in your board game,” Evelyn said. “Back in the dayroom.”

Lily One raised her eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Mmhmm,” Evelyn grunted. “You were losing the game, against Horror. Mostly because you were playing like morons. Strategy games are not Twil’s strongest skill, to put it lightly, which is why you were playing so poorly. We were right there, watching the end. I reached in while we were invisible, and re-arranged the pieces to buy you time, and maybe let you snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, if you’re not completely brain-dead.”

Lily One glanced at Lily Two, and said, “You’re meant to be the strategist.”

Lily Two shrugged. “Hard to think with only one lobe, don’t blame me.”

“Is that enough proof for you?” Evelyn drawled.

“Well,” Lily One said slowly, clearing her throat with a mockery of politeness. “That just proves you were acting within the dream, not anything else.”

“Here,” I said. “Look at this.”

I flipped the left side of my snug yellow blanket back over my shoulder, raised my left hand, and pulled back my sleeve.

The Fractal gleamed on my left forearm, marked out in the familiar black lines and angles. Raindrops shivered among the trees. The trunks creaked as if bending before high winds. Water splashed down off the roof, forming little pools on the earth just beyond the lip of concrete.

The Lillies stared.

Lily One said, “Dearest, do you see that?”

“I see it,” replied Lily Two. “But it means nothing.”

“Nothing? Are you joking? Has your reduction to this limited dream-form cut out four fifths of your brain?”

“Could be a trick.”

Lily One gestured at the Fractal. “This young woman has geospacial astral-cartographic magic tattooed on her body. I don’t think that’s possible to fake.”

“You lack caution,” Lily Two said.

I huffed. “Oh for crying out loud.” I pointed at the red plastic roof of the pavilion, at the sky beyond. “What do you see in the sky?”

Lily Two frowned, one eyebrow raised in a perfect little arch. Lily One blinked several times, making a curious little o-shape with her mouth. “Right back at you,” she said. “What do you see in the sky?”

“The Eye.”

The Lillies glanced at each other, both surprised.

“The Eye,” I repeated. “It’s the sky. But it’s like we’re inside it, or seeing it from behind, or something. There’s no split in the eyelid, no way for it to open. I can see it, and Evee can see it. Raine can’t. Not yet, anyway. How’s that?”

Lily One wet her lips, pushing me that final inch over the finishing line. “And what exactly is ‘the Eye?’”

“An Outsider god,” I said. “My name is Heather Morell, but I suspect you already know that. We’re here to rescue my twin sister, Maisie. She and I were kidnapped by the Eye ten years ago. I escaped. She didn’t.”

A flicker of horrified sympathy ghosted through Lily One’s expression. She put a hand to her mouth in shock. Lily Two dropped most of her aggression for a moment as well, brow creasing with recognition. She reached out with her free hand, toward the other Lily. They touched fingers briefly, then held on tight, holding on to each other.

Turned out I was right all along.

I went on. “The Eye has ... trained me, to some extent, in the use of hyperdimensional mathematics. You probably call it something else, but I’m willing to bet you’re the same. Because you’re the twins, aren’t you? We spoke with Professor Wilson Stout a little while ago, and he mentioned twins, twins who keep slipping in and out of Wonderland—”

“Wonderland!?” Lily One echoed. “Oh gods above, that’s what you call it?”

“Yes,” I huffed. “Please, concentrate on the subject. You’re the twins he mentioned, your reactions just now made it obvious. You were once taken by the Eye as well, weren’t you?”

Lily One let out a big sigh. She glanced at Lily Two — her twin sister, there was no doubt about that now — and nodded. Lily Two nodded back.

“Okay, I give in. You’re legit.”

Lily Two stuck her nightstick back inside her grey blazer. She broke the contact between the pair and folded her arms across her chest. “Fair enough.”

“Good,” I said. “Now, what are you? You’re obviously not just parts of Twil, but you’re also that? What’s going on here?”

Lily One rolled her eyes. “Again, right back at you. Look, sweetheart, Heather, we’re sympathetic to all this, it’s a bit ... a bit much. But what are you? You’re clearly not a dreamer, you’re

barely treading water, let alone swimming. You're not even suited up properly. The dream is trying to chew you up because you're breaking all the rules, breaking the role assigned to you."

"I'm one seventh of something that used to be a human being," I said. "It's complicated. Like I said, I can do hyperdimensional mathematics. That's how all this got so messy."

"Huh," Lily Two grunted. "Figures."

"Human messes everywhere," said Lily One. "Why am I not surprised?"

Evelyn piped up, "I'm human. I'm a mage, but I'm human, and last I checked I'm no dreamer."

"Me neither," said Raine. "One hundred percent grade-A human being." She reached back and slapped her own rump.

Lily One snorted. Lily Two shook her head, and said, "As if."

"Look," I said before this could accelerate into an argument. "That's not important right now. We're lucid, you're lucid, that—"

"Temporarily," said Lily Two.

"Yes," said Lily One with a tight little sigh. "The more we deviate from the parameters of our hiding places, the more the dream is likely to react. We can't keep this up for too long or we'll dry out completely and have to leave, or the dream will send something to get rid of us. That's what Horror was doing earlier, I think. Trying to uproot us and throw us out. She knows, though she can't show it."

"Alright," I said, "so we need to talk quickly. What do you mean, hiding places?"

"We're party crashers," said Lily One with a mischievous little smile.

Lily Two said, "Invaders."

"Uninvited guests, I prefer."

"Viruses."

"Ew!" Lily one tutted. "Don't. Please."

Lily Two shrugged. "And we're hiding, like viruses do. Inside cells."

“Hiding inside aspects of Twil, yes?” Evelyn said.

Lily One nodded to Evelyn. “Correct, mage girl, well done! I like you better than stinky and annoying here,” she gestured at me and Raine in turn. “Yes. All of this, these mannerisms, this face, this body, these ... weird clothes.” She paused to flick at the end of her grey tie. “All of this is from Miss Twillamina here. These are parts of her. Well, one part of her.” Lily One cleared her throat. “We had to split it in two, to accommodate both of us.”

“Mmhmm,” Lily Two grunted.

“And you were already here?” I said. “Or you came in when we did? Why Twil, why pick her?”

Lily One sighed and rolled her eyes, then gave me a look like I was a very slow little fool. “We’re not native to this dream. We just turned up and hid inside the first vessel we could find.” She gestured at Twil. “Twillamina just so happened to have one lying around, separated from her body, trapped in here.” She tapped Twil’s leatherbound book. Twil pulled the book away slightly, as if confused. “We’re just piggybacking on that. It was easier than slipping into some other form. Like this, we can walk around the dream a little without getting chewed up and spat out right away. But we have to stay in character. At least when we’re around ... well, anybody who isn’t lucid. Certainly any of the nurses.”

“And you’re not human beings?” Evelyn asked.

“Correct! Do you want a prize for that one? Did I not make it blindingly obvious already?”

I said, “You don’t seem very alien.”

Lily One rolled her eyes again. “Because we’re hiding, duuuuh. Trust me, you three, this might make sense to you, but it’s complete nonsense to me and my dear sister here. When we turned up, it was like being plunged down to the bottom of the ocean, in the dark, surrounded by weird wriggling lifeforms. Ugh.” She stuck her tongue out. “These personalities you’re talking to, these are more like diving bells or dry suits. We’re just peering out of tiny windows in the front, squinting into the murk, communicating by waving our arms about. Deaf and dumb and with no sense of touch. You’re lucky you’re getting this much.”

“Is it ... uncomfortable?”

"Imagine being stuck in an antique diving suit for three days," Lily Two said. "Stewing in your own sweat and urine."

Lily One wrinkled her nose. "Ick!" She sighed. "You know, Heather, I would dearly love to talk to you sometime when we're not trapped in these roles. You're right, for the record. We were ... abducted, by the Eye, a long time ago. But we can't really have a proper conversation about that with these suits on." She flapped her arms. "It's ... exceedingly rare to survive the experience, as far as we can tell."

"Yeah," Lily Two snorted. "Love to. Nice little chat with our real faces on."

I sighed. "Don't sound too enthusiastic about it."

"I can't," she grunted at me, a sneer on her lips. "Lucidity has limits. I do actually want to, but this voice makes it sound like I'm being shitty at you."

"O-oh."

Evelyn said: "What are you both, really?"

Lily One sighed. "That's hard to explain, we—"

I cleared my throat, dug through my memories, and made an educated guess; I recalled the text from the library of Carcosa, the one which Heart had so faithfully translated for me — *A full and true account of the disappearance and return of the twin sisters Jane Doe and Mary Doe, their subsequent alienation and alienism, their mathematical skills and strange habits, and their eventual transition into the weft between worlds.* I tried to remember the names, as accurately as I could.

"Xiyuol'tok-al and Zalui'yel-tul," I said, then cringed. "I do apologise, I'm probably butchering your real names beyond recognition, but that's you two, isn't it?"

Both the Lillies stared at me for a moment, blank-faced and empty-eyed, as if their 'diving suits' had been briefly vacated.

Then Lily Two scrunched up her nose with absolute disgust. Lily One raised both hands so she could flap them in distress.

"Um," I said. "Was it—"

"Yes!" Lily One said, almost but not quite laughing. "Very bad!"

Urgh, oh, blegh.” She stuck her tongue out. “That was terrible, that was awful, just vile! Hearing those words — my name! — from a flapping meat-hole. Ugh. Oh that was disgusting.”

Lily Two said, “Please, never do that again.”

“Sorry!” I said, suddenly blushing. “Sorry, I was trying to be polite. Calling you Lily and Lily inside my head is getting a little ... disrespectful, that’s all. Was I at least close?”

“A very rough approximation, sure,” said Lily Two. “Our names, as pronounced under a lake of tar, through the trunk of an elephant.”

Raine chuckled. “Those are some real Doctor Xargle names. What are we talking to here, a pair of space aliens?”

Evelyn slapped Raine on the knee with one hand. “Don’t be rude.”

“Yes,” I added. “Please, I was just trying to be polite. Is there something you’d rather be called?”

Raine gestured at the twins. “So which one of you is Xiyu and which one is Zalu?”

The twins glanced at each other. Lily One pulled a face, but Two shrugged. “It would be better if they can tell us apart.”

“It’ll undermine the dream!”

“Not if it’s just between us.”

“Uuurghhh,” Lily One sighed. She turned back to us with a very unimpressed expression. “Alright, fine. But don’t use these names in front of the nurses or any other patients. I’m ... ‘Zalu’, and my sister here is ‘Xiyu’.”

Raine said, “And how do we pronounce those correctly, hey?”

Lily One — Zalu — rolled her eyes and threw back her mane of blonde hair again. “You don’t, homo sapiens. You need an entirely different vocal setup. And don’t bother trying to remember what we look like. These faces are just Twillamina. If we ever meet again, we won’t look anything like this. In fact, you’ll probably foul your underclothes and scream your head off.”

Raine cracked a grin. “Wanna bet? If I win, I’m gonna slap your pert little alien backside, for real.”

“What do you look like normally?” I asked quickly, to short-circuit any future interdimensional incidents.

“Bigger,” said Lily Two — Xiyu. She smiled, thin and tight and dangerous.

“Niiiiiiiice,” Raine purred.

The twins both rolled their eyes at Raine; I didn’t blame them.

Twil followed this entire exchange as if she was listening to her ‘lovers’ debating the state of the weather or what we were all going to have at the next tea party. Her eyes seemed detached and dream-like. None of this was going in, the twins had been honest about that part.

“And you,” Zalu said, pointing a finger at me. “You know about us, somehow. I take it that means you’re the one who dropped all the loose change?”

I blinked at her, utterly bewildered. “The what, pardon me?”

“The loose change! That’s what brought us here in the first place. We don’t generally make a habit of randomly taking a stroll in ‘Wonderland’.” She made air-quotes with her fingers. “We only turned up because of all the racket. We assumed it was, well, somebody a bit more like us, in trouble. Which, I guess you are.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Zalu rolled her eyes and raised her right hand. She flicked her fingers as if doing a magic trick. Then she held her hand out to me, and opened her fist.

A greenish soapstone coin sat in the middle of her palm, shaped like a five-pointed star.

“Yours?” she said.

My wide eyes told her everything she needed to know. She gestured to Xiyu — her sister, her bud-mate, her twin. Xiyu produced a matching soapstone coin with a flicker of her fingers, holding it up to show me.

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted. “That explains one thing, and opens about a dozen more questions. None of which we have time for.”

“Yes!” I said. “Those are mine. Well, sort of. I was carrying them

with me when we went to Wonderland. I assumed they'd gotten lost in the dream like everything else. Where did you get them?"

"I told you," Zalu huffed. "We heard them clattering all over the floor, making such an awful racket. We thought one of our kind was in trouble ... though, well, it's been a while, to put it lightly. That's why we came running! And then we found all this nonsense." She gestured vaguely at the sky, the dream, everything. "Better question, where did you get these? Random humans running around with currency is very weird. Like finding a possum with a wallet."

"Oh, um," I tried to gather myself, casting my mind far, far back. "One of them we found on a corpse, Outside. The other was a gift from an Outsider, called Hringewindla, though that probably won't mean anything to you."

"Huh," Xiyu grunted. "Ghoulish, but valid enough. They're hers, legitimate like."

"Tch," Zalu tutted. She held the coin out to me. "Well go on, take it. It's yours, by rights."

I gingerly plucked the coin from her outstretched hand; she cringed at the touch of my skin and then wiped her palm on her skirt, trying not to grimace. Xiyu stepped forward and dropped her coin into my palm, to avoid touching me.

"What do they do?" I asked, staring at the coins. "What are they? I've been carrying them around all this time, without knowing."

"I already told you, they're loose change!" Zalu sighed. "Evelyn here has a better head on her shoulders than you, Heather, my God. We can't afford all these questions right now, we're running out of time. If we meet again one day, without these meat-suits on, maybe you and we can have a proper conversation. Hopefully with your twin sister at your side. Good luck with that, I mean it." Zalu tried to smile for me, but it came off like a catty girl pretending she didn't hate me. "But if you're going to have any hope of unravelling this dream and plucking her from the Eye, we have to stop wandering around like a bunch of lemons and get a move on."

"Hear hear," Evelyn muttered.

I tutted softly — it was good advice, but the Lillies had such irritating personalities. Were these really parts of Twil, parts of her

mind? She was never like this. How much of this attitude was Twil, and how much was the alien twins from Outside?

“Fine,” I said. “I agree. But how do we do that? How do we combat the dream itself?”

Zalu folded her arms over her chest. “We assumed you had a plan! That riot yesterday, that was part of it, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Raine confirmed. “We’re gonna pull down the prison walls. Take over the hospital, overthrow the staff — the security is already secretly with us, but they can’t declare openly yet. Lizzie, the one who started yesterday’s riot, she’s with us too. We’re gonna crack this place wide open.”

“And then break into the secure wing,” I added. “I’m pretty sure that’s where they’re keeping my twin sister. And maybe other things too, parts of me. Probably.”

Zalu sighed. Xiyu shrugged.

“You don’t think that’ll work?” I asked.

Xiyu shrugged again. “Normally we don’t have to think about stuff like this at all. This whole place is absurd. And we can barely see it, remember?”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Do you have time for a quick, seemingly off-topic question? I assure you, it matters.”

“No,” said Zalu. “But ask away, I suppose.”

“You’ve met humans before? Where? Have you been to Earth?”

Zalu blinked down at Evelyn in girlish surprise. “Is that where you’re from?” She put a hand to her mouth in shock. “Oh my gosh, no wonder you’ve messed this place up so badly.”

“That would be my fault,” I said. “I’m the one who did this, sort of. With some help. Look, that’s a long story, and there’s too many factors involved to explain quickly. You two are the only second opinion we can get in this place, the only experienced dreamers. Do you think tearing down the institution will work, or not? Are we on the right track?”

The twins shared a long, lingering look. Twil followed them, looking back and forth between their faces as if listening to a silent conversation.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Twil spoke up.

"I ... I don't think it's a good idea," Twil said slowly, so gentle and timid, shrinking behind her glasses, clutching her religious tome to her chest, arms wrapped tight and secure around the leather cover. The caged werewolf peeked out from between her arms. "I don't think it's a good idea to break the rules. We might all get punished. I don't want to be punished. It's frightening."

Zalu reached for Twil's hand. Xiyu stepped closer, to touch Twil's shoulder.

Before they could make contact, Evelyn said: "Twil. Look at me. What are you afraid of?"

Twil blinked behind her massive round lenses. She stared at Evee, then blushed faintly, frowning with confusion. "You ... 'Evelyn'," she said the name so carefully that I could almost hear the quotes. "You claimed that I have ... c-carnal knowledge of you, but—"

"You do," Evelyn said. She was completely unembarrassed. "You just don't remember it right now. Twil, you don't have to compartmentalize yourself in front of me. Or in front of Heather. Or Raine. Or anybody. You are your entire self. Stop hiding."

Twil raised the book to cover her chin and mouth and nose, amber eyes peeking out over the top.

Raine snorted. "Was that your grand plan to crack her psyche open?"

To my surprise, Evelyn didn't snarl with anger or frustration, she just held Twil's gaze. "No. Those are my honest feelings."

"E-Evee?" I said. "Are you okay?"

"No. Next question."

"Twillamina does have a point," Zalu said. "At least like this you're all relatively safe. What happens if you fail, if you get captured, or this escalating series of riots doesn't work? You really think a rag-tag group of revolutionaries out in the woods can bring down an institution that, as far as we can tell, represents the Eye itself?"

"Oh!" I said. "Actually the Eye has pretty direct representation, weirdly enough."

The Lillies both blinked at me. "Pardon?"

“Yeah,” Raine added. “And she’s a total gilf smoke show. Eleven out of ten. Spicy granny. Trust me.”

The twins looked at Raine like she was mad.

“The Governor,” I explained with a little sigh. “We saw her earlier. I’m pretty sure she’s a direct representation of the Eye. If we can somehow communicate with her, possibly after gaining control of the building itself or the institution as a whole, then ... maybe anything is possible.”

Zalu just blinked, wide-eyed and tight-jawed, making it clear that she thought we were all completely bonkers. Xiyu blew out a long, slow breath, glancing off into the woods, checking our perimeter.

Evelyn said, “And for that, we need Twil lucid. She’s one of our aces. In case you two didn’t work this out yet, she’s a werewolf. If she transforms, no number of nurses could stand against her. We need her back with us.”

Zalu rolled her eyes and put a protective hand on Twil’s shoulder. “And you think her going all ‘Werewolf of Brinkwood’ isn’t going to bring the self-correcting mechanisms of the dream crashing down on her?”

Evelyn frowned. “How do you know the name Brinkwood?”

Xiyu pointed a finger at Twil’s head. “From her, obviously.”

“Look around,” Zalu continued. “Look at the internal logic of this place! A werewolf, here? The dream will react, and it will send something to crush her.”

Zalu drew Twil back slightly, away from us. Xiyu moved closer, as if shielding Twil with her own body.

Evelyn snapped: “Why do you two care? You don’t even know her.”

Zalu sighed. “We don’t care. I don’t care — me, the real me, does not care. But these personalities do.” She gestured at herself and her sister. “They care, they’re part of Twil, and they’re trying to protect her. We can’t act with true independence, I keep telling you that. We’re constrained by our roles, and our roles are to protect Twil’s vulnerable core.”

Xiyu said, “If we stop protecting her, we’ll lose our cover completely. They’ll go back to being part of her.”

Evelyn slapped the arm of her wheelchair. “Then you need to give them back. Let her protect herself!”

Twil cowered from the sudden shouting, uncomfortable and afraid. She squeezed her eyes shut. The Lilies closed ranks as she shrank behind them.

“She’s not yours!” Evelyn snapped.

“Wait, wait, Evee,” I said, stepping forward. “They’re not claiming her, they’re parts of her. We’re still talking to Twil. We’ve been talking to her this whole time. Isn’t that correct?”

“Bingo,” said Zalu. “Remember, humans, we’re just along for the ride. You’ve gotta work this mess out between yourselves. All we’re doing is carrying on in the role Twillamina wants for us. She knows on some level that the dream will crush her if she reassumes her full self. The nature of this dream cannot bear a werewolf — it can’t even bear a little riot.”

“No,” I said.

Everyone looked at me, at the certainty in my voice.

But I had eyes only for Twil.

She stared back at me over the cover of her leatherbound book, her face framed from below by that illustration of a caged werewolf upon the cover.

“She’s invincible,” I said. “Twil, if you remember nothing else, remember that. You’re invincible. You’re unstoppable. I’ve seen you shrug off knife wounds and broken bones. I’ve seen you tossed against walls by supernatural force, then get up again and get back into a fight without so much as a limp. Your flesh regenerates faster than it can be wounded. You’re one of the strongest people I know. And you’re invincible.”

Twil stared at me, wide eyed, caught in bewildered horror. Slowly, she said, “I’m ... I’m sorry, but I’m not your kind of crazy.”

“I’ve had enough of hearing that line since we arrived here,” I said. “I don’t care. You’re still invincible.”

Twil started to cry, slow tears leaking from behind her glasses. Her face scrunched up. “I’m not. I’m not, I’m just hiding. It’s all I can do —”

"You could beat every nurse in this place ten times over, Twil!" I said, spreading my yellow blanket out to either side. My left leg throbbed, but I did my best to ignore the pain and the stiff muscles. "You could kill every nurse, every doctor, and win the riot for us, single handed!"

"I— I can't!" she wailed. "I need to stay down, I need to keep my head down, it's the only— the only way to be safe!" She shook her head, but she couldn't take her eyes off me.

"Keep pushing," Evelyn hissed from behind me. "Keep pushing her, Heather."

"No," I said to Twil. "There's no safety in keeping your head down. That's always the biggest lie they tell us, the lie everything else depends on. Keep quiet, don't speak up for yourself, stay out of sight, all that rubbish. They tell us that lie to keep us docile, to keep us separate, to stop us from finding each other. And it doesn't work. It doesn't keep you safe."

"It— it does—" Twil sobbed. "It does, I was safe, I was—"

"Not for long," I said. "That's the lie. They tell you to toe the line, to do as you're told, to be a good girl. But they'll come for you in the end too, and you don't even have to do anything wrong to provoke it. That's what was happening to you back there, back in the dayroom, with that board game."

Twil blinked at me, bewildered, but not quite faking it well enough to convince herself.

I pointed at the Lillies; they seemed paralysed, paused against the background of the swirling rainy mist. "They knew it, so you must know it too, on some level. Horror was cornering you, peeling away your protection. And it didn't matter that you'd been a good girl and followed all the rules and kept your head down. It's a lie, Twil. It's a lie to keep you under control."

"N-no, it ... "

"You're invincible," I repeated one final time. I could feel her wavering, about to break. "And you know what else? You could have leapt across that table and pulled Horror's head clean off her shoulders, without even breaking a sweat."

Tears were running down Twil's cheeks as she stared at me. Amber

eyes glistened with reflections of the rain-streaked light.

I smiled and held out a hand. “Twil, you’re one of us. And you are exactly my kind of crazy.”

Twil swallowed, throat bobbing. Her lips parted with a quiver. She panted, as if building herself up to something new. “I— I think I know you. You’re—”

A bright and bubbly voice broke across the clearing, sweeping beneath the pavilion like a gust of stormy wind.

“What’s this about pulling off my head?”

We all whirled — me with my yellow blanket clutched tight and a hiccup caught in my throat, Raine swinging her machete upward to meet this new and sudden threat; Xiyu pulling her nightstick from inside her uniform as Zalu stepped in front of Twil, arms wide to protect her vulnerable core self. Evelyn leaned forward in her wheelchair, turning pale and wide-eyed. Even Praem peeked out from inside Evelyn’s dressing gown, her eyes nothing but flat circles of white fabric.

A familiar nurse stood at the edge of the clearing, right at the tree line, holding an umbrella against the misty raindrops, white uniform half-hidden beneath a puffy raincoat. Her blonde hair was pinned up behind her head. A sickly-sweet smile split across her face.

“Hello there, girls,” said Horror. “Didn’t you know? It’s the height of bad manners to talk about a person behind their back. Now, once again, with less gormless gaping this time, please. What’s all this about pulling off my head?”

bedlam boundary – 24.19

Horror stepped from the tree line and walked into the clearing.

Each footfall was neatly measured, drawing subtle squeaks of damp wood from the spongy carpet of sodden wood chips, accompanied by a subtle brush of polyester moving across cloth, the sound of her puffy raincoat rubbing against her nurse's uniform. Drizzle and mist glazed the canvas of her black umbrella with a sheen of moisture, while thick droplets gathered and hung from the tips of the metal spokes. Her stride shook the droplets loose, falling to the wood chips as fat, wet, glistening globs, like mucus from the mouth of some unknowable Outsider.

The hazy grey light of the rainy day grew dim and dark as she approached, throwing deep shadows across the clearing and beneath the roof of the pavilion, as if heavy clouds moved to obscure the non-existent sun in the empty sky. For there was no sun, no sky, no clouds, only the wrinkled surface of the Eye stretching from horizon to horizon. Yet still the darkness thickened with Horror's every step. The trees seemed suddenly taller, closing off the ring of open space above our heads, swelling inward with undergrowth to choke the passages between the trunks. The woods extended skeletal branches to form a thick and thorny wall, the paths leading out erased by time and weather. Cold air wormed invasive fingers beneath my yellow blanket. Real raindrops replaced the swirling mist, falling with a drumming patter upon the pavilion roof and spattering off Horror's umbrella.

Horror walked right up to the pavilion's concrete foundation, then stopped.

Sound came rushing back — the drip-drip-drip of rainwater running from the red plastic roof, the rushing of wind through the tree trunks, the creaking of branches and the rustle of leaves overhead.

Horror smiled, cheeks plump and rosy with false warmth.

"Are you girls going to make me repeat myself a third time?" she said. "Because I really don't like having to do that. You've all got working ears, none of you are deaf. I know that for a fact, seeing as

I've known you all for the entire duration of your stay at Cygnet. I've known all of you since your very first day here, since you walked through those doors and joined us in the hospital. So I'm well aware that you're being obstinate, choosing not to answer my perfectly reasonable question. Isn't that right?"

Evelyn hissed between her teeth, "Don't answer her."

Twil was gaping at the woods, at the thickened tree line, at the sudden darkening of the light and deepening of the storm. "W-what's happening to the woods?" she said. "What's happening!?"

I grabbed the handles of Evelyn's wheelchair and pulled her backward, retreating a few paces from Horror's position; the benches and the empty fire pit stood as a bulwark between us, but I trusted nothing in the dream when it came to Horror. She had survived the King in Yellow. Wooden benches would not stop her, if the logic of the dream bent her way.

"Raine!" I snapped. "Raine, back away from her! Zalu, Xiyu, you as well! Bring Twil, over here, now!"

Zalu shook her head, eyes locked with Horror's too-sweet gaze. "I think it's a bit too late to resume our hiding places."

Xiyu raised her nightstick in one white-knuckled fist. "She was listening to us. To us, for real."

"Rumbled," Zalu sighed. "How very tiresome."

"Quite!" said Horror, dropping ninety five percent of her smile. "It's no use running away over and over. You girls can't live out here in the woods, and you can't get over the outside wall, not without seriously injuring yourselves in the process, and none of us want that. Running away merely delays the inevitable. Are you really going to make me trudge back and forth across the hospital grounds, just to end up in the same place? It's very tiring and I'm going to get worn out. Think of my poor feet. I'm not so different to you, I'm just a nurse, doing my job."

Raine smirked. "I can think of a much better way to get you all sweaty and breathless. You and me, one on one, we can make a much better afternoon of it. What do you say?"

I almost tutted, but I restrained my ire; Raine had made a good point earlier about breaking down Horror's facade, whatever she

really was.

Not that I didn't doubt the truth of Raine's offer.

Horror sighed and rolled her eyes, but not without a touch of colour in her cheeks and a tiny smile on her lips. "Raine, isn't it? From the high security wing, yes? I know you're of age, but there's still an unfortunate power differential between you and I. Even if I did have a personal interest in your dubious advances, that would break so many rules of good conduct. They'd throw me at a tribunal so fast my head would spin. So, no, I shan't be having illicit sexual relations with a resident or a patient. Besides, you would need about three baths first, a medical examination, a course of inoculations, some antibiotics, and probably a course of de-worming pills."

Raine chuckled. "Yeah, thought so. Pity. I'd prefer it go down that way, instead of like this." She raised her machete and pointed at Horror. "I was gonna get all up in your guts, but now I'm just gonna gut you."

"Raine!" I hissed. "Get to the wheelchair, now, touch it so we can go! Raine, we need to hide, we—"

"We can't," said Evelyn, her voice stretched razor thin, like a piano wire about to snap.

"... Evee?"

"I've been attempting to use the Fadestone since the first step she took toward us," Evelyn hissed. "And I can't. I can't. I can't calm myself. I can't not panic. She's doing this to us somehow. I can't use it. I'm ... fuck!" she hissed. "I'm too afraid!"

Horror smiled at Evelyn. "Sometimes fear is a sensible reaction, Miss Saye. Fear keeps us alive, don't you know? There's no point in running, not from me, and not from matricide."

"Fuck you!" Evelyn spat.

"Tch," Horror tutted. "Murder is a very serious crime. I'm disappointed that you don't show more guilt. A young woman like you, with extenuating circumstances, with reasons and motivations with which any jury would sympathise, with your disabilities and your situation, not to mention your father's financial resources and legal connections ... well, let's just say you would have a pretty

good chance of a lenient sentence, if only you showed any real remorse.” Horror sighed, smiling with toxic melancholy. “What a pity you chose to destroy your own life.”

“Ha!” Evelyn barked, though I heard the strain in her voice. “Getting your facts mixed up, aren’t you?”

Horror frowned, miming a mask of gentle sympathy. “Excuse me?”

“Evee’s right,” I said out loud. “You’re not talking about what happened yesterday, you’re talking about reality, the real reality, the real world, not here. Evee killed her own mother, in reality, yes. But here, in Cygnet? She wasn’t the one who killed her mother. I killed Loretta Saye. I beat her to death with my bare hands, somehow, which is completely ridiculous because I’m not certain I would have the basic physical strength to do that, not without the rest of me. Evee was strapped into that horrible chair through the whole thing. She had no hand in it. It was me.”

Horror sighed with great concern, her frown turning pained and difficult. “Oh, Heather,” she said. “You were always such a good girl. You were on the path to a real recovery. And now you’re so confused. You’re off your medication, running around in the woods with a convicted murderer and a will-be convicted murderer. Raine treats girls like you as meat. I’m not sure what Evelyn has planned for you, but it can’t be healthy. Oh, Heather, Heather Heather Heather. There’s still a way back, for you. Myself and the staff can testify that you weren’t involved—”

“No deal,” I said. “Not ever. Just stop trying. I’m wide awake.”

Horror sighed again and shook her head. Then she turned her eyes to Twil. “And you, Twillamina. I am very surprised by your involvement in this incident.”

Twil was half-hiding behind Zalu, her big amber eyes peeking over the crisp white shoulder of Zalu’s shirt. She was clutching her book to her chest so tightly that her arms shook.

“I-I-I-I’m sorry?” she stammered. “Nurse? W-what did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Zalu hissed over her shoulder. “You did nothing wrong.”

Horror smiled and shook her head. “I don’t know, Twillamina. All I know is that you’re out here in the woods, mixed up in all this, associating with these three deviants and criminals. It’s not where

you belong.”

“It’s exactly where she belongs!” I shouted.

Twil’s face contorted with frantic denial. “They stole my book! They took my book, I only followed them to get it back! I only—”

Horror interrupted. “And yet here you are, alongside them. Guilt by association, I’m afraid. This will all have to be untangled, at the very least. I suspect some serious punishment is in order for you, Twillamina. You strayed from the safe path through the woods. It’s your own fault you got bitten by the big bad wolf.”

“N-no ... no ... ” Twil whimpered. “I didn’t do anything ... I didn’t ... ”

“Twil!” I hissed. “Don’t listen to her, she’s lying! She’s trying to rattle you!”

Zalu nodded. “Yes, it’s all lies, darling. You’ve done nothing wrong. You are perfect as you are, I promise you. Nobody who disagrees is worth your time. This woman is rubbish. Her words are nonsense.”

Horror smiled that sickly-sweet know-better smile. “You should stop listening to your friends with such loyalty, Twillamina. They’re the ones who’ve led you astray.”

Xiyu stepped forward, nightstick clutched in her right hand, eyes narrow and level. “Shut your lying turd-streaked mouth.”

Horror blinked several times, free hand rising to her throat, miming mock-offence. “There’s no need to be so rude, Lily.” She paused to smile with sarcastic discomfort. “If Lily is indeed your real name.”

Zalu clenched her teeth. “Damn.”

“Damn, indeed,” Horror echoed, turning an unimpressed frown on Zalu and Xiyu. “You two are in an awful lot of trouble as well. Faked identities, false records, made-up backgrounds. You two aren’t remotely who you’re pretending to be, are you?” Horror drew a sharp breath between her teeth. “We’re going to have to contact your parents or guardians, get this all straightened out, and have the truth from both of you. But I’m afraid you won’t be staying at Cygnet any longer after this little stunt. We can hardly let you return to the way things were before, even under your real identities.”

Xiyu huffed. “Nice metaphor. Not.”

I said, “Has she ... discovered you, for real?”

Zalu sighed, “I think so.”

“There’s nothing metaphorical about it!” Horror snapped. “You two have committed forgery, perjury, and God alone knows what else. That’s right, Twillamina. Your best friends are not who they appear to be. I don’t know why they’ve attached themselves to you, but it’s time to say goodbye to them. Permanently.”

“What?!” Twil’s eyes bulged with panic. She grabbed the back of Zalu’s shirt. “No! No, you can’t, you can’t—”

“We’re not going anywhere, Twillamina,” Zalu said over her shoulder. “I told you, we’ll always be with you, we can’t be separated. We might just ... lose some outside help.”

Evelyn hissed between her teeth, “If that’s meant to be a pun, this is not the fucking time.”

“Not an intentional one, no,” Zalu said.

Horror produced a cell phone from inside a pocket of her puffy white coat. She held it in one hand and tapped at the screen with her thumb. “Now, I’m going to start by calling security to come round you all up. You girls aren’t going to drag this out by running away again, are you? I hope you’re going to ... make ... this ... hm?”

Horror frowned down at the screen, her face lit from below by a sickly blue glow. Behind her, framed between the white shoulders of her coat and the black rim of her dripping umbrella, the woods seemed to thicken further, their trunks pressed so tightly that not a scrap of light slipped between them. Overhead, the sky darkened again, turning almost black with the threat of a real storm. The raindrops intensified, pouring down in a heavy drumming wave, little droplets bouncing off the umbrella and dancing amid the wood chips around the pavilion.

My heart climbed into my throat. “No phone signal.”

Horror looked up at me; for the first time since I’d arrived here in this insulting, degrading, oppressive dream, the face of the nightmare wore a frown of confusion and anxiety.

"I'm right, aren't I?" I said. "Your phone doesn't have any signal. Does it?"

Horror glanced over her shoulder at the trees, at the wall of twigs and thorns, then back down at her phone screen. She frowned harder, biting her lower lip. Her whole body hesitated, as if she wanted to take a step back, away from us.

"Heather?" Evelyn hissed. "What's happening?"

"Yeah, sweet thing," Raine purred. "Clue us in, 'cos this is getting real spooky."

"It's the logic of the dream," I said. "We mentioned it earlier, but now it's really happening. Horror is a nurse, alone in the woods, confronting a group of murderers and imposters. The nature of the play, the dream, whatever, it's reacting. She, this, whatever it is all, she's vulnerable. The narrative logic has made her vulnerable."

"Don't be so sure," said Zalu. "You're no dreamer, human. The dream has been disrupted, yes, but that's just as likely to be a product of her overhearing us earlier. Our presence, me and my sister, it's breaking the dream substrate, tainting it. This might just be our fault, not an opening."

Horror raised her eyes. She seemed perfectly calm once again. She sighed and slipped her phone back into her pocket.

"Evee," I hissed. "You're sure we can't escape? You can't use the Fadestone?"

"I've been trying to this entire time!" she hissed back. "The conditions of the dream have changed. Maybe only here. Whatever happens, we're locked into this for now."

"No hiding from this," Xiyu said.

Raine grinned, rolled her neck from side to side, and swapped her machete from right hand to left, then back again, then again.

"Ohhhh yeah," she purred. "You know what this means? I think it's time for a spot of good old ultra-violence."

Xiyu snorted. "Agreed."

"Raine!" I hissed. "Be careful! Please!"

"This is our chance, isn't it?" Raine purred, then looked back at me and winked. "You said it yourself. She's trapped, lost in the woods."

The logic of the dream and all that, closing in on her. Time to get all slasher movie. You may not wanna watch this part, sweet thing.”

I swallowed, sweat beading on my forehead. Evee snorted, and said, “Yes, I’d rather not see this, thank you.”

“Ahem,” Horror said out loud. “I think you won’t find me as easily gotten rid of as you might prefer.”

Horror reached into her coat again and pulled out a short black baton, with a button in the handle and a length of naked steel at the end — a stun-gun, shaped like a cattle prod. She thumbed the button. The weapon emitted a loud electric click-click-click-click. Blue sparks of electrical power arced across the exposed metal tip. Raindrops sizzled and burst against the crackling halo.

“A young lady like myself does have to think about matters of self defence, after all,” she said. “Especially in my line of work, spending my days among so many troubled girls. One never knows when a patient might turn violent, or become obsessed with a member of staff. Crazy people are unpredictable, after all.”

“Oh please,” I hissed. “You’re such a stereotype. Worse than a stereotype!”

Raine grinned wider, eyes alight with pleasure. “Oh yeah. Ooooh yeah, babe. You think you can hit me with that before I run you through?” She brandished her machete. “I’ll bottom out against your spine before you can even land a kiss on my forearm.”

“Raine,” I tutted. “Does this have to be so ... ”

“Weird,” Xiyu sighed.

Horror smiled back, sweet and pretty. “I’m quite adept at taking care of myself. And I’ve already rejected your advances. No, thank you. I’m sorry.”

Raine glanced at Xiyu. “You go right, I’ll go left. No mercy. Take her as quick as we can.”

“No problem with that,” Xiyu replied. “No playing.”

Raine nodded. “No playing. For real.”

“Oh my— *hic*— gosh,” I hissed. “Raine, be care—”

But then Raine was off, darting across the pavilion’s concrete floor

like a hound who'd slipped her leash. She raced around the flimsy bulwark of the benches, looping around to Horror's left. Xiyu went to the right, vaulting the benches in a single leap, grey skirt and transparent raincoat flapping as she landed. The two of them converged on Horror in a pincer movement, bursting out into the rain to take her from both sides. Xiyu wound back her nightstick to cave in Horror's skull; Raine tucked her machete low, to pierce Horror beneath the ribs and straight up into her heart.

Horror raised her stun gun in one hand and twirled her umbrella in the other.

Xiyu's nightstick bounced off the stem of the umbrella as if she'd slammed it into a brick wall. The impact jarred all the way up her arm, drawing a scream of pain from her lips. The rebound threw her backward. She dropped her weapon from numb fingers, stumbling over and crashing down into the sodden wood chips and waterlogged mud.

Raine's machete slid past Horror's guard — Raine was an experienced killer, after all. I'd seen her do this sort of thing over and over again, in a dozen different situations, and she always had a trick up her sleeve, powered by the sheer exuberance she took in fighting and winning. Horror might be playing by a bent and broken set of rules, but Raine was still Raine, even in a dream.

I winced, intending to look away at the last second. I may have enjoyed Raine's style and confidence, the way she looked when she enacted such violence, but I didn't want to watch her end a person's life, even a metaphorical person who represented the worst excesses of the medical system.

But then Horror's stun gun touched Raine's sternum with an almighty crack of electrical discharge.

I didn't see how it was possible; Horror's arms were at the wrong angle. Raine was already too close, moving too fast. Horror should have been run through with the machete before she could even touch Raine.

Instead, Raine was thrown backward with a spasm of involuntary muscle contraction and a sharp yell of pain. She held onto her machete, but she fell over on her backside with a splash, landing amid the mud and rainwater pooling at the edge of the pavilion's concrete foundation. Panting and hissing, grunting through her

teeth, clothes soaked through in seconds, she glared upward at Horror.

“Ah ah ha,” said Horror. “Experience beats youth, every single time.”

Raine hopped to her feet, grinning back with sudden relish. “Hit me again, fuck-pig.”

Xiyu was more cautious. She climbed to her feet, grabbed her nightstick, and backed away. “She’s not playing by the rules. We can’t brute force this. We got something wrong. Something isn’t right.”

But Raine wasn’t listening. She threw herself at Horror again, a mad grin ripping across her face.

Horror repelled Raine with her stun gun three more times — crack! ping! zzzzzap! Raine kept her feet after that first tumble, whirling away with muscle convulsions, grunting and hissing through clenched teeth, squinting through the pain of brief, sharp, nasty electric shocks. On the second attempt, Xiyu darted back in as well, trying to distract Horror to buy Raine that crucial second she needed to stick a knife into the nurse’s guts. But Xiyu was thrown backward again too, tossed aside by the umbrella as if she had attacked a brick wall.

On the third try, Raine reeled away, sagging with exhaustion from the repeated shocks and muscle convulsions. Rainwater stuck her hair flat to her scalp, soaking her clothes, running off her hands and the blade of her machete. Horror regarded her with unimpressed amusement, nice and dry beneath her umbrella.

“I told you, there’s no sense in this struggle,” said Horror. “You are far weaker than you believe, and you cannot change the course of your friend’s lives.”

“Raine, stop!” I cried out. “Come back! You can’t keep taking electrical shocks like that!”

Raine didn’t move. She stared at Horror with a look I’d never seen on her face before — cold rage without expression.

Xiyu retreated back beneath the cover of the pavilion roof, her immaculate grey school uniform wet and dirty from where she’d fallen, barely protected by the transparent raincoat. “We’ve got it

all wrong," she muttered. "This isn't right."

Zalu agreed: "Quite, sister, this isn't working."

"I can take her," said Raine. "I can take her. Nobody can fight forever."

"Exactly!" I called out. "Raine, we've got this all wrong, this isn't right! It's not working! Come back over here!"

Horror took a step toward the pavilion, ignoring Raine. "I think we've had quite enough of this, girls. It's time to bring this silly little episode to an end."

Raine went for her again, ducking low and switching her machete from one hand to the other at the last second. But there was Horror's stun gun, the same as every time before, jabbing into the soft flesh of Raine's belly. Zzzzt-crack! Raine reeled backward, her free arm over her stomach, staggering back under the cover of the pavilion. She twitched and flailed with her machete, as if trying to ward Horror off.

"Raine, retreat!" I ordered. "Right now! Come here! Here, right now! Bad girl!"

Raine did as I ordered, retreating toward myself and Evelyn, but she bared her teeth and narrowed her eyes at Horror, pointing with her machete. "Cheater."

"Raine, Raine, here, here," I reached out and ran my hand over her slick-wet hair. "Good girl, good girl, you did really good. Stay, stay here, stay by me. Good girl."

Horror stepped forward again, alighting upon the concrete of the pavilion foundations with a smart little click-click of her shoes, finally out from beneath the pouring rain. The shadows of the pavilion threw her face into deep shade, as if her skin was a wooden mask over a void. She lowered her umbrella and slowly shook the water off the canvas.

"If you won't come peacefully," she said. "We can arrange for this to be much harder, even without security to assist me."

"Heather," Raine hissed, taking deep breaths in her shock-induced exhaustion. "We need another miracle."

"No," Zalu said. "We need to run. I have to protect Twillamina."

She had Twil's hand gripped tightly in her own, twisting and turning to look at the tree line, searching for a way out. "Can't we cut a way out through the plants? There has to be a way out of here!"

"Heather," Raine hissed again. "We need something, fast."

"I ... I don't know what to do!" I said. "The King in Yellow won't come a second time. We need— we need—"

"A horror movie monster," grunted Evelyn.

Everyone stopped panicking and looked at her — even Horror herself, oddly enough.

Evelyn gestured with her chin. "Look around us. Look at the light, the woods, the trees, all of it. Feel the wind, the cold. Listen to this absurd atmosphere. The dream has changed, that's true enough. But it's not enough to cut this avatar of the dream down with a knife. Heather, you never thought of Raine as a monster. And you." She gestured at Xiyu. "You're in disguise, you don't count. We're inside the logic of a horror movie, or maybe a nightmare. We need an appropriate monster."

Evelyn stopped talking and looked directly at Twil.

"You're up, my beloved mongrel," she said.

Twil gaped in shock, still lost too deep in the dream. "I— b-beloved?! What?!"

"Yes!" I said. "That's right! We need Twil awake, we need her lucid! Zalu, Xiyu, can you ... ?"

The sisters, the Lillies, the plant-girl Outsiders from so far beyond Earth's sphere that even their language had been an almost impossible challenge to translate, glanced at each other with a knowing double-look.

Zalu took a deep breath, and said, "We'll only get one shot at this. And it won't work."

"We won't win," Xiyu grunted, but she backed toward her sister.

"We could buy them time!" Zalu said. "That's not nothing. Not in this situation."

"And leave Twillamina unprotected?" Xiyu stopped next to her

sister, facing toward Horror. She slipped her nightstick up inside her grey uniform blazer, then flexed her empty hands.

"This is her best shot," Zalu said. "And that's not just me speaking. You know it too, sister. We need to high-tail it out."

"Mm," Xiyu grunted. "Okay."

Horror cleared her throat, loudly and clearly. "Whatever silly little games you're talking about, they won't help you now." She finished shaking off her umbrella and closed it up, then wrapped the fabric tight, pinning it shut with a strip of velcro. Once she was done, she held it like a walking stick, metal tip against the concrete floor, stun gun in her opposite hand. "I suggest you two come along. Make this easy on yourselves, and easy on me, too. Once we've verified your true identities—"

Zalu turned to me. "Heather, this is goodbye for now, I'm afraid. We won't be totally unreachable, we'll sneak back in later if we can, but this hiding place is burned. My sister and I need to leave—"

"No!" Twil spluttered. "No, you can't leave, I-I love you, I love you both!"

Zalu sighed, then turned and smiled at Twil. "We'll still be right here, Twillamina. The part of us that you love will never leave you. You'll see." Zalu glanced at me again, along with Evelyn and Raine. "We're off, but we'll do what we can first. As soon as we start this, the dream-substrate will become very unstable indeed. Much worse than what's already happening. So be ready. You may need to ... back up a bit. Perhaps out of the pavilion, yes. That would be best."

Xiyu circled around to stand on Twil's opposite side. "We'll hold her off. Weaken her. Screw up her logic. Maybe."

Zalu smiled, nodded, and faced forward, narrowing her eyes at Horror. "And we will be leaving Twillamina in your capable hands, you three. This is a lot of trust!"

Evelyn said, "We'll protect her too. I promise."

"Wait!" I said. "What happens to the ... 'diving suits'?"

Zalu blinked, then plucked at the fabric of her uniform shirt. She broke into a grin, yanked at her grey tie, and pulled it down until it hung at a rakish angle. "These? They're not going anywhere. We can no more part them from Twil than one of you could survive

being bisected.”

Raine snorted, “Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

Xiyu shot Raine a nasty smile. “Don’t foul your underwear when you see my real face, human. You aren’t going to enjoy this.”

Raine grinned back. “Wager accepted.”

On the far side of the pavilion, Horror took a single step forward. The tip of her umbrella clacked against the concrete foundation. She sighed. “This role-playing must seem very entertaining to you girls, but I’m running out of time and my patience for indulging you is wearing a little thin, especially after the last couple of days. Now, come along and—”

“Sister, here we go,” Zalu said.

She let go of Twil’s hand, much to Twil’s brief confusion; Zalu then opened her palm and presented it to Twil again, with a soft, warm, welcoming smile upon her face. Twil slipped her hand back into position, her other arm clutching the leatherbound tome to her chest. Zalu leaned in and planted a feather-soft kiss on Twil’s lips.

Before Twil could blush or stutter, Xiyu did the same. She held out her hand for Twil to take.

Twil hesitated. “I’ve only got one—”

“Take my hand,” Xiyu said.

Twil obeyed, so she held one Lily in each hand. Xiyu leaned in and kissed her in turn, a fleeting brush of lips against lips.

And by some sleight of hand or trick of the light, Twil’s leatherbound book was gone; it did not fall from her chest or land upon ground, but simply was no more.

Zalu and Xiyu looked forward, flanking Twil, facing Horror, their expressions blank. Twil’s gaze bounced back and forth between her Lillies. Horror took another step forward, sighing a big, unimpressed, long-suffering sigh — and then jerked to a halt, eyes going wide, face blanching with shock.

Twil screamed and stumbled backward, shaking her hands free from the tendrils which she had been holding.

Even I had not noticed the moment of the switch, the split-second

blink during which the Lillies — the pair of young women in grey school uniforms, one blonde and one redhead, both as angelically pretty as Twil herself — had been replaced with a pair of Outsider aliens.

I darted over to Twil before she could fall onto her backside. I caught her from behind, arms around her waist, and felt her knees go weak with uncomprehending fear. She kicked at the ground, trying to back away, scrabbling to catch me for support.

“Wh-wh-wha—” she panted.

“Aahhh!” I hissed as pain shot through my wounded leg, throbbing with the sudden twist of extra weight. “Twil— Twil, it’s okay, they’re on our side. I ... I think.”

Zalu and Xiyu — plant-girls, radiates, vegetables, star-spawn — whatever they were, they were two of the most bizarre and beautiful Outsiders I had ever seen.

Their bodies were shaped like upright barrels, about six feet in height, slightly tapered toward the top and bottom; the surface of their ‘skin’ was a marbled brilliance of lush and luxuriant greens — emerald and olive, jade and lime, fir-tree needle and fresh cut grass, shot through with darker bands of subtle yellow, deep orange, and ruby-red. The skin looked tough and thick, like the rind on a citrus fruit crossed with the hide of a cactus. The barrel-shaped body was pentagonal, split into five equal vertical segments like the engorged flesh of a desert succulent; a deep furrow lay at the join of each two segments, frilled with delicate membranes of highly vascular plant-flesh, running all the way down the length of the body, like a vertical slit-orifice sealed by pressure. A tentacle-like arm sprouted from the middle of each segment — it was these which had grasped Twil’s human hands so gently. Each arm-tentacle split into five, then into five again, forming a fractal pattern like the floating fronds of an underwater plant. Each arm thus ended in twenty five tentacle-like fingers, each finger tapering to a dexterous, thick-skinned pad of greenish flesh; Zalu and Xiyu possessed one hundred and twenty five fingers each.

The bottom of the barrel-body terminated in a foot structure shaped like a gigantic starfish, about four feet across, coloured with that same marbled beauty, but with more oranges and reds than deep greens. Each ‘limb’ of the starfish-foot was heavy with muscle,

thicker than a human thigh, and covered with rough bristles like a fuzzy tropical fruit.

At the barrel's apex stood a matching starfish-shaped structure — a head, much more complex than the foot. The 'head' of each sister was attached to the barrel-body by a complex system of leathery plates, thick frills and hanging flaps, forming a squat ring of neck. The starfish-head was fuzzed and furred in a similar manner to the foot, but with much finer and more delicate bristles. Each of the five starfish limbs terminated in a stalk about two inches thick, each of which supported a fist-sized greenish globe; each globe blinked open to reveal a huge red eyeball without iris or pupil, giving each of the sisters a quintet of massive blood-red eyes. Similar stalks lay at the join between each starfish limb, terminating in fleshy sacs a little larger than the eyeball-globes. These sacs hinged open to show tiny rows of razor-sharp spikes, like teeth.

Trees crossed with starfish, cast in perfect radial symmetry, born in the unthinkable oceanic depths of Outside.

All five eyeballs on both sisters twisted to point at Horror.

"You're fucking joking!" Evelyn spat.

Raine burst out laughing. "Bitten off more than I can chew, eh?"

Twil was gibbering in my arms. I did my best to drag her back, away from the alien weirdness that had shattered her comfortable dream. Raine darted over to help me, and not a moment too soon.

Horror recovered from her shock, drew herself up, and stared back at the 'Lillies'. "You two stay right where you are. I'm warning you, don't—"

The Lillies tipped forward.

The muscular starfish at the bottom of their bodies bunched and flexed, pushing them over, tipping both of them onto their sides, falling lengthwise.

For a moment I assumed they were falling over, like trees being felled; the nature of their motion made no sense to my ape brain and inapplicable mammalian standards. I doubted I would have understood right away even if I'd had all seven of me in one place and all six tentacles attached to my sides. The way the Lillies' bodies worked was simply too alien for me to comprehend without

example.

Both sisters caught themselves with their equatorial tentacular appendages, standing on three sets of tentacles and three of their lower-starfish limbs. They no longer looked like elongated sea anemone, but like something much more animal.

Then they shot outward — Zalu to the right, Xiyu to the left, though I could no longer tell them apart from each other — across the concrete foundation and out into the rain, flanking Horror from both sides.

I gasped. Evelyn's jaw dropped. Raine let out a low whistle. Twil just went silent.

In stillness, the sisters had been strangely beautiful, in the way a deep-sea plant might stir the imagination toward the otherworldly; in motion they were sublime.

I had expected them to drag themselves across the ground with that starfish-shaped foot, crawling and inching like a plant which had grown legs and learned to walk, or like a real starfish, pulling itself across the rocks at the bottom of the sea. But in truth, our unexpected Outsider allies moved with all the swiftness and clarity of predatory squid.

With their bodies now horizontal, the squat 'neck' extended outward like an accordion, twisting and turning like the length of a snake, pointing the starfish-shaped head and the five glowing red eyes toward Horror. They supported themselves on their middle tentacles and the massive muscular starfish limbs at the bottom of their bodies. They spiralled as they advanced, moving with a corkscrew motion, rotating the barrel-shaped body about a central axis; as they moved forward, one tentacle would rise on their left and the corresponding tentacle touched the ground on their right, always perfectly balanced.

When they emerged from beneath the pavilion roof, both sisters spread their wings — great sails of folding membrane shot out from inside the deep furrows between each of their five body-sections, snapping and cracking in the winds of the unnatural storm. The surface of each wing flowed with strange colours in washing sheets of prismatic change. The wings functioned similarly to the tentacles as the Lillies moved, each wing folding back into the furrow to accommodate or assist the spiralling motion as the body turned, a

new wing emerging as space opened up on the opposite side of the body. When each wing reached full extension, held tall in the dorsal position, it began to vibrate and quiver, pushing back the raindrops with some extra-dimensional harmony beyond human hearing.

Horror was not impressed.

“Girls,” she said with a little tut. “This display is really very shameful, very unnecessary, quite embarrassing. Are you trying to intimidate me? I don’t think this is the proper way to deal with—”

Ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-tiiiiiiiiiii.

The Lily on the right — Zalu — emitted a clicking, ticking, buzzing sound not unlike a cicada, but a thousand times deeper and more expressive, filled with tone and vocal quality. She had not produced this sound by opening her set of five tooth-lined mouths, but by vibrating a structure I had not been able to see before. In the middle of the starfish-shaped head lay a series of wide slits, fringed with membranes in deeply brilliant oranges and reds. Another kind of mouth, leading deep into the barrel-shaped body.

Whatever Zalu had just said, Horror responded with a sharp sigh. “We don’t use that kind of language at Cygnet. I’ll thank you to—”

Tiiiiiiiiii-ti-ti-tititititi—

Tiiii-iiii-ti-ti—

Tiii-ti!

Xiyu joined in. The Lillies filled the air with a terrible shrieking like a cloud of locusts, the sound rising and falling, flowing in waves like a song heard from an alien shore. Whatever they were saying to Horror, it made her frown, then scowl, then splutter in indignant offense.

“Well!” she shouted over the din. “Well, I never! In all my years of nursing, I’ve never heard such foul, poor-tempered, insulting—”

Both Lillies paused, suddenly still and silent, each with three wings spread to maximum extension, as if building hydrostatic or pneumatic pressure inside their bodies.

And then they launched themselves through the air with a thoomp of release, trailing a contrail of thick gasses behind. They descended toward Horror as a pair of twinned spirals of viridian, wings

pumping, tentacles whirling, screaming their cicada cries.

“Raine!” I shouted, dragging Twil backward and shoving her out of the pavilion, into the storm. “Grab—”

But Raine was two steps ahead of me. She grabbed the handles of Evee’s wheelchair and pulled her backward, yanking Evelyn clear of the pavilion. I followed, stumbling out into the pouring rain just in time.

The Lillies crashed into the pavilion, smashing through the plastic roof and the support pillars, tossing the benches aside, landing like a pair of guided missiles. Plastic and wood flew everywhere, followed by tiny chips of concrete. Raine protected Evee with her own body. I flapped out the sides of my yellow blanket to cover Twil, my head instantly drenched with the pouring rain.

Our hurried escape turned out to be unnecessary. Not a single fragment of concrete or speck of flying wood touched any of us, as if swallowed up by the logic of the dream. We all turned to look, confused by the moment of sudden silence.

Horror stood amid the collapsed ruins of the pavilion, none the worse for wear, twirling her umbrella in one hand; the umbrella was open once again, surface running with rainwater.

The Lillies heaved themselves out of the debris as if it was nothing more difficult than a children’s sandbox. But then they backed away from Horror, reversing the direction of their rapid spiral movements.

“How did she survive that!?” I screamed.

Horror huffed. “Survive what, Miss Morell? These games are really not my style, but I can more than hold my own if required. All part of the job, after all!”

The Lillies pounced at her again, twisting and spinning through the air. She flickered her umbrella left and right; the after-image of the cracking canvas trailed with a dark aura, as if cutting a window in the air. Through that window was a vista of black basalt, ashen soil, and towering monoliths of dark green stone. The window vanished as soon as it had appeared; it had not looked like Wonderland — the real Wonderland, outside the dream — but like somewhere else entirely, somewhere unknown to me.

The Lillies bounced off the umbrella like squid slamming into the underside of a boat, wings whirling as they spiralled away like falling sycamore seeds. Rainwater sluiced off their barrel-shaped bodies and ran down their starfish heads and muscular feet.

Tiiii-ti-ti-ti-ti!

Tiii-tiii-tiii!

They shouted at Horror again. She smiled with a little bit too much pleasure, as if enjoying her invulnerability.

“Now now, girls,” she said. “It’s your unreasonable behaviour which has led you to this, nothing I’ve done.”

Evelyn shouted over the rain and the wind: “We have to wake Twil up! Heather! Heather, concentrate on Twil!”

“What!?” I rounded on her, wide eyed with disbelief. “Evee, I’m pretty sure those two count as horror movie monsters, and they still can’t touch Horror! We need to run away! The Fadestone—”

“Heather,” Evelyn snapped. “Look at what’s happening. Their presence is warping the dream. They’re Outsiders — Outsiders to here. They don’t fit the dream, the narrative of this place, just like the King in Yellow had to leave. Twil will fit the narrative. We need her awake, now!”

Twil gaped at us, at the Lillies, at everything, wide-eyed and panting with terror. She clung to me with empty hands, her book long gone, her grey uniform drenched with cold rain, huge amber eyes blinking from behind her ridiculous glasses, streaked with rainwater.

“Wh-what am I supposed to do?!” she wailed. “I’m just me!”

Behind Horror, the trees themselves were warping — growing taller and darker, hardening into jade monoliths of gargantuan stone. The wind filled with an alien, ashen stench, like rotten pumpkin crossed with fish guts. The Lillies howled their clicking insults and launched themselves at Horror a third time, but she batted them away with her umbrella as if they were nothing more substantial than paper lanterns.

A slash in reality widened under the swoop of her umbrella, this time showing the hint of buildings, of a cyclopean stone city in the dripping jungle deeps, the plants black and red and reaching toward

the Lillies with thorn-studded vines and carnivorous mouths.

“She’s bringing their own context into the dream!” Evelyn shouted. “They can’t fight that, not for us! Heather, Heather give Twil here, now!”

“Wha—”

“Just put her in front of me!”

To our rear, the Lillies were in retreat, as if pulling back from the invisible reach of things only they could see. Horror advanced toward one, then the other, driving them away. Zalu and Xiyu cringed from her, spiralling in reverse away from the nurse, shouting their clicking, buzzing, insect-like language at her, then at each other. I could not read their alien expressions — their huge red eyeballs were absolutely beyond human emotion — but I could see the panic in the direction of their movements, in the way they backed up, scrambling away from Horror and her reality-slicing umbrella.

They were holding her off, buying time for us, so we could uncork Twil.

“Twil, come— come here!” I pulled Twil as hard as I could, treating her much more roughly than I would ever dare in reality. She squealed and flailed, squeaking and pushing against me. But desperation made me strong. I hauled her in front of Evelyn.

Evee stared upward into Twil’s amber eyes, blinking in the rain.

Twil just stared back down at her, panting with rising terror, trying not to look back at the losing battle unfolding behind us.

“Evee,” I said, water running off my face. “Evee— *hic*— I hope you have a plan here!”

Raine swung her machete free and turned to face the fight. “I gotta help, sweet thing. I gotta help those two.”

“No!” I snapped. “Stay! Raine, stay! Evee, what are you going to—”

“We already broke her free from the dream,” Evelyn said softly.

“You did that for her, Heather, with that little speech. And now she’s all together again, three in one, with her werewolf returned to her body.”

Twil just gaped. “W-werewolf?! I’m not a werewolf! I’m— I’m

nothing, I'm just—”

“You are not nothing!” Evelyn shouted — she had to raise her voice over the panicked *ti-ti-ti-tiiiii!* screeching from behind us. “That’s what you think, isn’t it? Deep down, past all this dream bullshit, that’s what got you hooked, that one moment of self-doubt.”

Twil’s eyes went wide. “What ... ”

“You’re always so bloody confident,” Evelyn shouted up at her. “And it’s not a mask with you, it’s never a mask. But part of you always doubts, doesn’t it? Part of you doubts if you’ll ever belong to anything. Because of your bloody family and their giant snail god, and you’re not part of that. You can’t play sports at school, because you’d beat the other girls a hundred times over, so you can’t be part of that either. You’ve never had a real group of friends, because you’re in the know, you’re different, you’re separate. You’re proud of what you are, and you should be! But you think it makes you alone, you think it singles you out. And you never fucking say it!”

Twil looked like she was crying, but I couldn’t tell with all the rain.

“No,” she murmured. “I was never—”

Evelyn reached up and grabbed Twil’s absurd grey tie, dragging her downward until they were face to face. “Yes, you do think that! Even with us, with me and Raine and Heather and all the others, you think you’re alone. And you know what!? It was my fault! It was my fault, because I drove you away!”

Evelyn was shouting now, red-faced with fury, not shame or apology. Twil just boggled at her.

“But you’re not alone,” Evelyn finished. “You’re mine, you stupid bitch.”

Evelyn yanked on Twil’s tie, pulling her forward, and forced her lips against Twil’s mouth.

The kiss was clumsy and cold, marred by rainwater and terror and teeth. Twil squeaked and pulled away, red in the face, confused beyond words.

But Evelyn held onto the tie with one hand, raised her other in a fist, and bopped Twil in the face.

Twil went reeling back — more in shock than pain. Evelyn was so

reduced inside the dream that her punch did not exactly carry much weight, backed by thin and wasted muscles, delivered by half a hand. But a punch in the face is a punch in the face. Twil rocked back, glasses falling off her nose, blinking in shock and surprise.

And then she paused. Amber eyes narrowed. Her lips peeled back.

“There you are,” Evelyn grunted. “Come get me.”

Twil clenched her jaw, baring all her teeth. Her eyes blazed with anger, bulging from their sockets. She heaved for breath, inflating with fury. Veins stood out on her forehead, tendons bunching and bulging in her neck. She reared up before Evelyn, looking like she wanted to crash down upon her with tooth and claw.

“Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr—”

She let out a belly-deep animalistic growl, one no human throat could have made.

“Twil!” I snapped.

Twil rounded on me, the good-girl exterior cracking as something else pushed through from underneath, something raw and real and ready to fight. My throat closed up, my feet skidding backward in the wood chips, instinct crawling into my throat and telling me to turn and run from this wild animal.

But then Twil saw the real fight over my shoulder. She saw the Lillies falling back, driven into retreat by Horror and her umbrella.

“Twil—”

Raine grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the way, out of Twil’s path. “Let her loose!”

Twil — glasses gone, grey uniform soaked through, hair plastered to her scalp with rainwater — bared her teeth, threw back her head, and howled.

“Awooooooooooooo-ooooow!”

Horror froze.

The Lillies halted their retreat, then turned both quintets of huge red eyes back toward us. I still could not read their expressions, but I understood the meaning all the same — they’d done what they could, the rest was up to us. They both spiralled sideways, as if

passing through the tree trunks and melting into the woods. In less than a blink the Outsider twins, the fellow survivors of the Eye and fellow users of hyperdimensional mathematics, had vanished.

The warping effect of their presence vanished with them. Suddenly we were all standing in a dense forest clearing once again, surrounded by nothing more than thick and thorny woods, plunged into the darkness of a rainstorm, battered by torrential downpour.

Horror's umbrella was nothing more than canvas and metal.

"Oh," said Horror, expressionless with shock. "You weren't supposed to come out."

Twil pounced.

She transformed as she leapt, silvery wisps of spirit-matter whirling about her limbs, coalescing into bristling grey-brown fur, forming a pointed snout before her face, wrapping her in solid pneumatic flesh.

A ball of tooth and claw landed upon Horror. She tried to raise her umbrella to ward off the blow, but Twil smashed it aside with a swipe of her claws, ripping it from Horror's grasp and hurling it aside.

Horror said: "Oh come now—"

Twil grabbed Horror's skull in one massive set of claws, wrapped her other around Horror's neck, and pulled Horror's head clean off her shoulders.

bedlam boundary – 24.20

Horror's head parted from Horror's neck with a ripping, tearing, wrenching sound — louder than the storm and the wind and the rain, drowning out the creaking of the trees and the roar of the leaves and the drum of raindrops upon the collapsed ruins of the pavilion. Twil's monstrous paw whirled outward, claws buried deep in Horror's blonde hair, gripping her scalp with sharpened points, painting the air with an arc of her blood.

Horror's final expression was wide-eyed with mute and mild surprise, lips parted in a little o-shape, cheeks flushed with faint and fiery blush. Her tangle of blonde hair hung upside down, loose tresses coming free from the bun at the rear of her head. Beads of blood trickled from the stump of her neck, running down her chin, breaking across her lips, flowing past her eyes, to finally be washed away by the steady beat of swirling rain.

The tableau held still for a second longer than necessary, as if some observer was etching this moment into memory, lingering upon the scene.

Was I producing that effect? Or was this Sevens' influence, scurrying to catch up with our changes to her script? Or did we feel the attention of the Eye itself, turning toward a rupture in the dream?

Then Twil tossed Horror's head to the right and dropped her decapitated corpse to the left. The body slumped onto the wet blanket of sodden wood chips. The head rolled to a stop amid the shattered red plastic of the pavilion roof.

Twil — our Twil once again, all werewolf and more than wild, her body wrapped in bristling grey-white fur over an under layer of reddish brown, upon a foundation of tight, toned, taut muscle, like steel cables wrapped around her bones, with her fingers and toes tipped by long black claws, her face an elongated snout filled with too many teeth, her eyes twin lamplights of deep glowing amber.

She threw her wolfish head to the stormy sky and howled at the top of her lungs.

“Awooooooooooooo-ooooow!”

The howl shook the trees and shivered the leaves and made the raindrops quail in fear. That howl challenged the underbelly of the Eye itself for a single glorious moment, before Twil trailed off, the echoes of her lupine voice absorbed by the wall of thorn and twig.

Then, at my side, Raine threw back her head and joined in:
“Awoooooooooo!”

Raine’s howl was a mere imitation compared with Twil’s canine clarity, just a human throat playing along with the pack. But the howl set off Twil again. She raised her muzzle to the sky and let out another wolfish howl.

“Awoooooooooooooooooo!”

“Awooo!”

“Awooooooooo!”

“Awoo-ooooow-ooooow!”

Twil and Raine went back and forth half a dozen times, until I was wincing and Evelyn was jamming one of the damp towels over her ears.

Finally they both trailed off. Raine had a gigantic grin on her face, puffing for breath, shaking her head as if she’d just lost a race to one of the most beautiful women she’d ever met.

Twil lowered her head slowly, still facing away from us. She dropped into a squat-crouch, shoulders hunched, all four paws on the ground. The pose was more gorilla or chimpanzee than wolf, with the ape showing through beneath the hound, despite the thick and bushy tail curled at the base of her back. Her ribs heaved and shivered with each pumping breath, her silken coat of greyish-red fur wet with rain. The air steamed in front of her snout.

As if signalled by Horror’s defeat, the storm began to taper off. The wind slowed, dying away, lost between the trees. The raindrops shrank and settled, turning back into drizzly mist as the grey and damp day returned to normal. Raine and I were both soaked to the bone, clothes sodden with water, hair plastered to our heads; Evelyn had escaped the worst of it, protected by towels and her big dressing gown snuggled down in the seat of her wheelchair, but she was still horribly damp.

“Hey there, wolfie,” Raine purred at Twil’s back.

Twil turned and looked over her shoulder, toward the three of us.

Amber eyes narrowed to predatory slits. Ears perked up, tips held high. Wolfish snout closed, teeth tucked neatly behind her lips.

Raine slid forward, in front of me and Evelyn. She didn’t raise her machete, but the blade stood naked in her right fist.

“You’re on our side, right wolfie?” Raine said.

“She is!” I answered quickly, though my belly was clenching up and the tiny hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end. Twil stared at us with the poised and pregnant silence of a wolf on the hunt, her gaze steady and unwavering, sleek muscles held in absolute stillness. “Raine, she is, she’s on our side, please don’t do anything rash. Twil!” I called to her. “Twil it’s us! It’s Heather, and Raine, and Eeve. You’re awake now, aren’t you? Twil? Twil, please say something.”

Twil answered by turning to face us. She rose from her crouch, front paws lifting off the ground, amber eyes flicking from one face to the next, cycling between me, then Raine, then Eeve. She made no sound at all, neither a word nor a growl.

Adrenaline rushed into my head. Instinct told me to run. This was a predator, a carnivore, a memory from the distant animal past, baked into my cells themselves. Twil — the wolf — was not angry or aggressive. She was hunting. She would dismantle us like food if we let her close.

“Oh no,” I said, then hiccuped painfully. “Oh. Oh, um.”

Raine’s machete twitched in her fist; she wet her lips with a flicker of her tongue. “I can take her—”

“Raine, no!” I whined.

“—but she regenerates, right? We don’t have any silver to stop her for real. Steel won’t do the trick, am I right?”

“We won’t need silver or steel!” I yelled, my own shout chasing fear back down into my guts. I stepped forward, hobbling on my wounded left shin again, as if scrawny little Heather could possibly hold back a werewolf. “Twil! Twil, it’s us! It’s— hic, ow! It’s me, it’s Heather! I’m your friend and I love you. Twil? Twil!”

Twil locked her gaze on Raine and took a step forward.

Twil's werewolf form was beautiful; I had rarely gotten any real opportunities to examine the shape of her transformation in full. She really was the stereotypical movie werewolf, a perfect cross between homo sapiens and canis lupus, though lacking the more ostentatious or gruesome features of Hollywood's imagination. Sleekly furred, lightly muscled, arms and legs elongated, a little like the limbs of an ape. Her four paws were each tipped with long blackish claws, like those of a real wolf. Her transformation gifted her perhaps a couple of inches of additional height, but she was still comfortably short, only a tiny bit taller than me, still recognisably Twil-sized. Her face was stretched forward into a long elegant snout, filled with lots of big white teeth, punctuated by her own amber eyes, topped with a pair of twitching, mobile little ears. She moved with a rolling, loping, canine gait, stalking across the ruins of the pavilion, coming right for us.

Raine raised her machete and raised her voice: "Hey, hey! I don't wanna fight you, friend!" Twil ignored her, padding closer. "I don't wanna fight you, I mean it! We're all friends, right? All buddies here? Didn't I date you once? That's what Heather says." Raine took a step back. "Hey, Twil, you touch either Heather or Eevee and I will have to fight you. Stop there, right there. Come on, girl. Don't make me do this, don't make me—"

Twil's lips peeled back from her wolfish teeth. A slow growl rose in her throat, vibrating deep and low in her chest. My heart skipped a beat, and not for the fun reasons. Raine reached for my hand to drag me back and out of the way and—

"Down!"

Evelyn's shout carried more force than her weak and withered body seemed capable of projecting. I flinched too. Raine twitched, almost as if she'd been about to obey the command.

Twil stopped. Her jaw closed. She ceased to growl. Amber eyes flickered to Evelyn.

"Stay," Evelyn snapped. Twil obeyed, easing back onto her haunches. "Good," Evelyn added. "Now wake up."

Twil just stared, a hound failing to comprehend an unfamiliar order.

"I said wake up!" Evelyn shouted. "Wake the fuck up, Twil! Come on!" Evelyn slapped the armrest of her wheelchair, temper fraying. "We all need you. I need you! Wake up!"

Twil blinked three times, straightened up out of her loping crouch, and shook herself like a wet dog. Raindrops flew everywhere. I squinted my eyes shut, wolf-fur spray misting against my face.

The werewolf transformation began to collapse. Wisps of pneumatic spirit-matter parted and drifted aside like fog beneath the morning sun, tendrils and veils turning pale before vanishing into nothing, unwinding the thickly glossy fur, peeling away the slabs of muscle, revealing Twil's limbs beneath. Her torso emerged next, still wrapped in that grey school uniform, blazer and skirt both sopping wet with rainwater. Her snout shrank as if sucked back into her face, her true features emerging from the surface. Twil's real eyes were just as brightly amber, set in a pale face wracked by a squinting frown.

Twil looked as confused as a dog confronted by the lifting of a dream.

"Finally," said Evelyn. "There you are."

Raine lowered her machete and puffed out a sigh of relief. "Thanks for the save, Evee. I wasn't looking forward to that fight."

"Twil!" I said, hurrying over to her. "Twil, are you okay?! Are you awake? Do you recognise us? Twil?"

Twil raised both hands to ward me off — but she was no longer the shrinking violet, the nervous and apologetic parody of her prior dream-self. She neither recoiled from me nor retreated in fear, just stuck her hands out in total confidence that I would halt, no questions asked.

Though she wore the same clothes and sported the same hairstyle, Twil looked completely different to five minutes earlier. Her eyes were wide and alert, sharp and active, rather than withdrawn and veiled. Her face was no longer composed into a permanent expression of forced feminine passivity, but moved with all the angelic energy she usually displayed. Even the way she held herself was different — hips forward, shoulders back, head high.

She slowly looked left and right, amber eyes roving the clearing with a bewildered frown. Then she looked at me and flinched,

blinking with sudden recognition, eyes darting to Raine and Evelyn in turn.

“Twil?” I repeated.

“Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” said Twil, emitting a sound like a printer suffering a nasty mechanical error. “What ... like ... where ... uhhh?”

Twil’s voice had lost the airy, floaty, high-pitched tone, no longer a conduit for the dialogue of a heroine from a bad lesbian novel. She had dropped back to her usual cocktail of gravel and honey, soft and rough both at the same time.

“Welcome back to reality,” Evelyn grunted. “Is what I’d like to say, but this isn’t it. So welcome back to your senses, I suppose.”

I stepped closer, one hand out in case Twil needed support. “Twil, do you know where you are, or what’s been happening?”

Twil blinked up and around at the wall of trees again, at the bulwark of twig and thorn in every direction. The forest seemed to be slowly thinning again now, the paths re-opening, the unnatural arena falling away after Horror’s defeat.

“Twil?”

She finally looked at me and blew out a long sigh, puffing out her cheeks. “Yeah.”

“ ... yeah?” I echoed.

Twil shrugged, a goofy smile spreading across her face. “Well, nah, not really. But wherever I am, I’m with you three, right?”

“Oh, Twil!”

Twil waved a hand at me, perhaps to forestall a hug. She squinted her eyes shut and frowned, much harder than before. “Uh, for serious, gimme a sec here, Big H. I’m kinda catching up. It’s like I’ve been dreaming for days. This is weird shit.”

I heaved a big sigh of relief. “Oh, it really is you. You’re awake, you’re with us! Twil, I missed you!”

“Uh, yeah,” Twil said, still with her eyes scrunched up. “Missed you three too. What—”

“Do you know where you are?” I asked. “Or what’s happening?”

Twil squeezed her eyes shut even harder — then they flew open, joined by a positively incandescent blush rushing up the sides of her neck and exploding into her cheeks. She stared at me, amber eyes gone wide, then glanced at Evee, then back at me.

“Twil?”

“Uh ... y-yeah. Yeah ... I. Oh, oh wow.” She swallowed hard. “I’ve been like, in a trance, or something? Oh wow, this is really no-shit hella embarrassing. What have I been doing this whole time?”

Evelyn snorted. “Having fun, apparently.”

Twil rounded on her, bright red in the face. “That wasn’t me! None of that was really me!”

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “Yes it was. And it’s fine to admit it. I shouldn’t laugh.”

Twil boggled at her, then shook her head, turning away. “Damn. Uh, yeah, damn, that was some major high-key embarrassing shit. Uh, you guys, uh, if you could maybe, like, forget about ... about ...”

She trailed off, voice going small and reedy, then looked up and looked at me, wide-eyed with shock.

Twil burst into tears.

She was not a pretty little crier, our werewolf. Twil’s tears were big and messy. She let out a sudden series of wracking sobs and threw herself at me, arms going around my back, burying her face in my shoulder. It was one of the most uncomfortable hugs I’d ever experienced, mostly because she and I were both soaked through by the rain. I squeaked, left leg almost buckling beneath me; Twil seemed to instinctively understand what was wrong — she pulled back and used the pressure of the hug to hold me up.

“I’m one of you guys, right?!” she asked me through her tears. “I’m — I’m one of you, yeah? I always was, right?!”

“Yes, yes!” I answered, hugging her back as hard as I dared. “You are, Twil! Of course you are!”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Twil sobbed.

Twil's crying jag ended almost as quickly as it had begun. She sobbed and sniffed a few more times, then awkwardly let go of me and stepped back, wiping her eyes and scrubbing at her face. She took a series of deep breaths, not forcing it down but letting it all out. One with final sniff she seemed to steady herself — but then she looked at Evee, her face dropping into desolate emotion all over again.

Evelyn said: "Hug me like Heather and you'll break my fucking spine."

"Y-yeah," Twil said, swallowing hard, nodding along. "I-I'm cool now. I'm cool. I think."

"Twil," I said gently. "How much do you remember—"

"All of it," she said through a big cringe.

"Okay, so, do you know where you are? Both physically and metaphysically??"

Twil blew out a big breath. "Yeah. Well, kinda, like. We're all trapped in a cartoon mental hospital or some shit? Evil nurses and crap like that. Sevens is in charge of the place. The Eye is a fucking gilf or something. Lozzie threw a riot. Which, you know, good. Fuck this place." She sighed and shook her head, almost laughing. "Would be funny if it wasn't so dumb. Or, like, serious, I know. And me, yeah, I was ... "

Twil looked down at herself. Her mouth dropped open.

"What the fuck am I wearing!?" she said. She plucked at the absurd school uniform, lifting the sides of the grey blazer, her face contorting with disgust and dismay as she pulled at the tie around her neck. "Why am I dressed like a prep school wanker?! Or an anime girl? And it's all grey, what the hell?! Did you put me up to this?" She pointed at Evee. "Is this like your fantasy, projected onto me?"

"Ha!" Evelyn barked, utterly unembarrassed. That made Twil blink in surprise. "If I was in charge of dressing you up, you'd be wearing a magical girl outfit. In pink. With frills. High heels maybe. No, Twil, none of us had a hand in any of this. You did this to yourself."

"That's not precisely accurate," I said gently. "Technically the Eye is responsible for all of this. Kind of. You were just—"

“Yeah, yeah, I remember the chat earlier, Big H, it’s cool.” Twil huffed. “But seriously, this?” she gestured up and down at herself. “I look like a private school mascot!”

Evelyn snorted again. “And you were having yourself quite the nice little fantasy.”

Twil grimaced, hissing through her teeth. She grabbed the lapels of her grey blazer and peeled the sodden garment off her shoulders, then threw it at the ground with a wet slap. Her white shirt was soaked through as well, stuck to her skin, leaving very little to the imagination, highlighting the outline of a bra against her torso.

I blushed, putting one hand to my mouth. “Um, Twil. I-I can see your—”

She grabbed her grey tie and yanked the knot forward, pulling and tugging until the whole thing came loose. She was about to cast that away as well, but then thought better of it and stuck the loose tie into her skirt pocket. Then she reached up and tore the top two buttons off her shirt, opening the collar and releasing her throat, revealing a slip of collarbone on either side.

Twil hesitated, then shouted, “Fuck it!” and ripped the rest of her shirt open, pulling the buttons free all the way to the bottom.

Thankfully she didn’t peel the shirt off as well, but left it draped over her shoulders, open down the middle. Even so, the open shirt left nothing to the imagination.

“T-Twil—” I stammered.

“I don’t fuckin’ care!” Twil spat. “Fuck this, fuck all of it! I’d go naked if I thought I could get away with it. Screw this skirt, too. I didn’t even wear shit this bad in secondary school! And why is my hair so straight?!” She reached up and ran both hands through her unnaturally straightened hair, messing it up in every possible direction, until her head was a mass of jumbled dark tresses. “Fuckin’ take away my curls, bitch-ass stupid dream shit.” She huffed. “Uh, sorry, Big H. Eevee. Raine. Just ... this is real weird. I hate this.”

“We’ve all been through it,” I said as gently as I could. “Some of us worse, some of us easier. Just ... do what you need to do, Twil.”

Twil sniffed and ran a hand through her hair. She had gone from

prudish good-girl to punk-rock rakish in record time. The open-shirt look suited her, even if it was dictated by nothing more than necessity.

“Yeah, yeah. I think I’m alright now,” she muttered. “Mostly. Kinda. Fuuuuuck that was weird.”

“Twil, I need to ask you, very seriously. How much do you remember? How much are you aware of?”

Twil let out a big sigh. “All of it, like I said before. Look, I’m good, I’m cool, I’m up to speed. We’re inside a dream, trapped in a mental hospital, all that weird jazz. And you’ve lost your tentacles.” Twil gestured at me. “Sorry to hear about that. Fuckin’ sucks for you, right?”

“Um, yes,” I replied. “It does ‘fucking suck’, to put it lightly. Thank you.”

Twil nodded at Raine. “Raine’s half-awake, right?” Then Eeve. “Evelyn, Eeve, you ... you doing alright like that?”

“No,” Eeve grunted. “I am confined to this chair. My magic does not work. Praem is reduced to a plushie.”

“Figures,” Twil said with a grimace. “Sorry. You’re in real bad, worst of us all. Wish I could, like, do something to help.”

“Huh,” Eeve grunted again. “Thank you.”

“So, yeah,” Twil said. “I’m up to speed. I even remember ... the ... hey?” Twil squinted and trailed off, looking left and right, one hand out as if reaching for somebody who should have been at her side. “Where are the two girls I was with?” Twil cracked a sudden grin. “Daaaaaaamn. Damn, that was my fantasy? Hooooo, okay, I mean I’m not into the schoolgirl look, it’s kinda shitty, but those two were fine as fuck. Nice!”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “They were you, you absolute moron. You were playing out your own sapphic boarding school fantasy with yourself and yourself. You may as well have been snogging the back of your own hand.”

Twil laughed, relieved at last. “Yeah, which means I’m fine as fuck too! I think you agree, right?”

Evelyn answered by rolling her eyes again. “This is going to be

insufferable.”

“Maybe I should dye my hair blonde for a bit, like the first one,” Twil muttered, then cleared her throat. “Uh, but yeah, I mean, they were real ten out of ten hot shit, right up until the part where they turned into plants, which was weird.”

“I thought the plants were really pretty,” I said. “In a very ... special ... way?”

Everyone was looking at me, so I trailed off and stopped talking.

“Aliens,” Twil said. “Actual no-shit aliens. Plant people! Hiding inside my mind. Weird. Thank fuck they were on our side, right?”

“Yes, quite,” I said.

“Twil,” Evelyn said, rather matter-of-fact. “You’ve got your werewolf transformation back, yes? We may be relying on you. We can’t have any duds.”

Twil snorted, rolled her eyes, and trudged over to Evee’s wheelchair. The back of her white shirt was still wet, stuck to her skin. Her tattoos were clearly visible through the sodden fabric — beautiful dark green spirals of solid colour, stretching from her shoulders all the way down her back, vanishing beneath the waistline of her skirt. The spiral pattern had no beginning and no end, forming one unbroken line; yet when one looked at any single point, a hundred dead ends appeared to proliferate in one’s peripheral vision, animating the spirals with sinuous, coiling, snake-like motions.

Twil stopped a few paces from Evee, put her hands on her hips, and said: “Of course I’m back to normal. I’m completely in contro—”

A pair of wolf ears sprung from the top of Twil’s head with a little ‘spoink!’ sound effect — an actual noise, not just something in my imagination. Furred in luxuriant greyish-red, they twitched and shivered as Twil stood there blinking in surprise. A half-second later, a bushy tail sprouted from her rear, lifting the back of her grey skirt, swishing back and forth as if with sudden excitement.

Raine burst out laughing. Evelyn cleared her throat and raised her chin. Twil touched her ears and tail, frowning in confusion.

“You were saying?” Evelyn asked.

"I didn't do this on purpose!" Twil went all shrill. "It's just ... it's never been this easy before. Is this because we're in a dream?"

"Probably," Evelyn grunted. "Or maybe you've come to terms with something and turned into a furry."

"Well, shit. I'm riding high, I guess." Twil cracked a grin, tail wagging — then stopped, and stopped grinning too, frowning down at Evee. "Hey, you bopped me in the face earlier. Like, you actually punched me, Evee."

"Just doing what I had to."

Twil rubbed her chin, though she wasn't even bruised. Her cheeks went a little red. Her tail stuck straight out. "You, uh ... all that stuff you said. When you were waking me up. What about all that?"

"I meant every word," Evelyn said, utterly unembarrassed. "And the kiss, too. A little bit more important than the punch, no?"

Twil didn't seem to know what to say for a moment. She cleared her throat, turned away and back again, then just nodded. Her tail coiled up, her wolf-ears went flat. "Well, uh. We can like, talk about all that when we're out of here. Yeah?"

"Certainly," Evelyn deadpanned. "My beloved mongrel."

Twil spluttered. "Don't fuckin' call me that, that's weird! And I'm not a mongrel."

Evelyn smiled, as much with her eyes as with her mouth. Twil frowned at her for a long moment, blushing awkwardly. After a moment, her new tail started wagging again. Eventually she turned away, looking at me and Raine.

"Big H, hey," she said. "Thanks for the assist. Meant a lot. I already like, hugged you and all. You know?"

"You're welcome. I like your, um, new tail, yes. Um. Really, the Lillies did most of the heavy lifting. I really, really hope they come back. We could use their help a second time."

I stuck my hand inside my yellow blanket and felt for the greenish soapstone coins, just to make sure they were secure. They were still slightly warm from the Lillies' hands.

"Huh," Evelyn grunted. "We could, yes. Though I would rather not rely on the whims of those particular Outsiders."

I boggled at her. “Why not? They more than proved themselves.”

Evelyn chewed on her tongue for a moment. “I’ll refer you to the relevant passages of certain books sometime. I recognised them, by description. That’s all.”

“The Lillies specifically? Zalu and Xiyu?”

Evelyn shook her head. “No. Their ‘species’, I suppose.”

I let out a little sigh. “Evee, imagine if you recognised a human being by description. On average we’re a pretty nasty species too. You don’t even have to go beyond England to find some of the worst examples of us. Don’t judge the Lillies just because they were big starfish cactus creatures. They helped us, without holding back. And they were like me! They were taken by the Eye!”

Evelyn let out a grudging sigh. “Fine, fine.”

While Evelyn and I debated the nature of our Outsider friends, Twil and Raine were eyeing each other up, far too much like a pair of unfamiliar dogs.

“You look like total shit,” Twil said to Raine, grinning with friendly affection, tail wagging back and forth. “Like you’ve been dragged backwards through a cesspit.”

Raine broke into a slow grin too, looking Twil up and down. “Did we really used to date?”

Twil grimaced. “For like five minutes. You aren’t my type, Raine, real talk. You never were. I was just lonely and being funny.”

Raine nodded slowly, then tilted her head from side to side, cracking and popping the vertebrae in her neck. “So, this is the real Twillamina, huh?”

Twil’s grimace did double-duty. “Shiiiiit, don’t call me that. That is not my real name. Cringey bullshit.”

“Sure thing, Twil,” Raine purred. “I think you and I are gonna get on just fine.”

Twil eyed Raine again; Twil’s new tail stopped wagging. “You’re weird like this.”

“Weird how?”

“ ... I dunno,” Twil said. “You get my hackles up. Like you’re gonna throw down all of a sudden. Like I don’t wanna turn my back toward you. Hey, Big H, Heather, is she really safe like this?”

I cleared my throat. “Behave, please. Both of you. Raine, be a good girl for me. And Twil, yes, Raine is on our side. Unquestionably.”

Raine shot Twil a wink. Twil blew out a long, long sigh. “Alright. One for all and all for one and all that shit. So, like, what do we do now?”

Evelyn spoke up. “First, I think we should inspect your kill. Make sure we’ve been successful. Somebody wheel me over there, please.”

In the shock and aftermath of the fight and the victory and Twil’s transformation, nobody offered an alternative course of action, and we did need to go check on the dubious spoils of our little war, after all. I started to hobble over to take the handles of Eeve’s wheelchair, but Twil got there first. She said, “I’ll do it, I feel strong and energetic. You gotta rest that leg, right?”

“That she does,” Evelyn said. “Heather, take your weight off that leg. Twil, you’re on wheelchair duty — and do not leave me behind if I need to move. Understand?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Twil grumbled with a smile in her voice. “I got you, Saye.”

“And I’ve got Heather,” said Raine. She slipped her machete away inside the canvas bag on the back of Eeve’s wheelchair, then helped me to stand properly, with an arm beneath my shoulders. She took a good portion of my body weight so I could lessen the burden on my wounded left shin.

We four — five, if one counted Praem tucked away inside Evelyn’s big grey dressing gown — circled around the ruins of the shattered pavilion, to where Horror’s headless corpse and decapitated cranium lay, at the edge of the plastic and wooden rubble.

Horror’s body lay on its side, twisted by the angle at which Twil had dropped it; both arms were stuck out backward, one pinned awkwardly beneath her body weight, the other flopped at an unnatural angle, hanging limp over her opposite side. One leg was bent backward, the other lay straight. They both looked broken. She seemed no smaller or less imposing in death, wrapped in her puffy white coat and matching uniform.

Horror's head sat upright in a pile of red plastic roof fragments. The eyes were open, staring straight ahead. The mouth gaped slightly, the echo of a final unspoken word on her tongue. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her lips.

"Looks pretty dead to me," Twil muttered, leaning over Evee's shoulder from behind. "I kinda remember doing it, but ... kinda hazy, like."

Evelyn snorted. "This isn't right. Can't you see?"

Raine said, "Not enough blood."

"Eh?" Twil frowned. "What? What are you two talking about?"

"Not enough blood," Raine repeated. "Should be a lot more blood in a human body than that."

"She's right," I said with slowly dawning realisation. "I've ... well, all of us, really, we've all seen more than our fair share of corpses. There's nowhere near enough blood around the body and the head. Look at that little puddle. That's not enough blood from a fatal neck wound."

A picturesque little pool of blood lay beneath the ragged stump of the neck, still and serene, the edges perfectly rounded as if it was refusing to mix with the moisture on the ground. It could not have been more than a single mug-full worth of crimson. No blood at all had pooled beneath the severed head, not even a few droplets.

"Huh," Twil grunted, frowning hard. "Okaaaaay. That's weird, yeah. Maybe it's the sun? Maybe it dried? Sun's finally coming out, after ... all ... " Twil trailed off as she looked up, one hand out to feel for the rain. "Is that ... the Eye, up there? Like, in the sky?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "And it's a good sign that you can see that, by the way. That means you're fully awake."

Twil puffed out a big sigh. "Great. Still. Sun's coming out. That's gotta be a good sign, hey?"

Twil was correct. The rain had ceased and the light was slowly brightening, creeping through the woodland canopy with gentle fingers of early afternoon sun. The ragged remains of the wind rustled the leaves against themselves, but no longer shook the trees with freezing gusts. The storm had passed, blown itself out, leaving behind a sunny afternoon.

“Not necessarily,” Evelyn grunted. “All it means is the conditions of the dream have changed. The rules or the script or whatever, it’s all adjusted according to our actions.”

“Yeah,” Twil said, “because we beat the mid-boss, right?” She gestured at Horror’s head and corpse again. “One down, one to go. How is this bad?”

“It’s not,” I said gently. “This is very good. Thank you, Twil, you did the right thing by killing her. We exploited the nature of the dream and we won this battle. But the war is far from over. Um, not to get too metaphorical.”

“Yuuuuuup,” Raine echoed me. She made sure I could stand properly, then left my side briefly. She circled around the ruins of the pavilion to the right, then doubled back to the left, head on a swivel as she stared off into the woods. “We need to be on the lookout for the next move.”

Twil snorted. “But—”

“This isn’t Castlevania,” Raine went on. “The hospital won’t come crumbling down just because we cut off Dracula’s head.” Raine thumbed at the corpse. “And she ain’t Dracula, anyway.”

“Yes,” I added. “I have only the vaguest idea what ‘Castlevania’ means, but Raine is right. One nurse is not the entire institution.”

Twil laughed and spread her hands, shaking her head with disbelief. “Uhh, but you’ve got me now, yo? Can’t we just walk in the front door and bust some heads open? I’m invincible!”

“They’ll have silver now,” I said.

“Ha!” Evelyn barked. “Probably. Good thinking, Heather.”

Twil went wide-eyed, staring at me. “Wh-what?”

I sighed and rubbed at my eyes, feeling exhausted. “Sorry. I mean, it’s just a guess, but it makes perfect sense. The dream reacts to the changes we make. I’m not willing to risk you putting yourself up front and getting stabbed with a silver dagger or something, Twil. We’ve introduced the concept of a werewolf into the dream. It may react accordingly. We’ve gotten this far by being careful and cautious, by relying on proper planning. We have no reason to change that now.”

Twil boggled at me, then at Evelyn. Eevee nodded in silent agreement. Finally Twil turned and appealed to Raine for help, but Raine just smirked, and said, “You ain’t solving all our problems alone, wolfie.”

“Then what the fuck was the point!?” Twil went shrill. Her tail went all bushy, bristling with anger, while her wolf-ears stood straight up. “All that stuff about me you said to the Lillies, was that bullshit? Aren’t I your ace in the hole? I thought we were gonna rock up through the front door so I could go all Brinkwood style on their asses!”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, gathering my thoughts. “Twil—”

“No, seriously,” Twil interrupted before I could get the words out. “What was the point of freeing me if we’re not gonna strike back?”

Evelyn snapped, “Because we all love you, you dozy mutt.”

Twil spluttered to a halt. “Wha— I mean— buh— um—”

“We would free you even if you were completely bloody useless,” Evelyn went on. “Because, as Heather so eloquently said, you are and always will be one of us. Look at me, I’m borderline useless right now myself. No magic, very little help, practically a burden with this wheelchair. But Heather moved heaven and earth to free me. We’d all do the same for you. Stop whining.”

“Eevee,” I said, gently but firmly. “Do not call yourself useless, please.” Then I opened my eyes and raised my chin. “Twil.”

“Y-yeah?” Twil’s tail curled upward and her ears went flat. “What’s up, Big H?”

“As I was trying to say. Sooner or later, Lizzie will throw a second riot, a second attempt at her revolution. Those girls in the hospital, whatever they really are, they’re ready to boil over whenever she says. And when Lizzie turns up the heat and makes that happen, we need to be ready.”

Twil frowned at me, mildly confused. “Sure we do? Yeah, of course, we do?”

“You, Zheng, Praem, Raine,” I went on. “Eevee, if we can get her magic back. Even me, if I can somehow regain my brain-math or get my other selves back. Yes, Lizzie has freed the Cattys, and the

Knights will be on our side eventually. But when Lozzie throws that riot, we have to be ready, as a group, to fight for that. The next time the institution responds, we have to be prepared to do incredible violence to protect those girls and overthrow the systems at play here. If we rush in there now and you get overwhelmed, we will have wasted that future opening. We support Lozzie's revolution, the moment she needs us. We don't go off beforehand. That's my plan."

Twil gaped at me, then swallowed, looking me up and down. She nodded slowly. "Okay. Okay, sure. Holy shit, Big H. When'd you turn into Che Guevara?"

I blinked, bewildered. "I'm sorry? Pardon?"

Raine chuckled with affectionate laughter. "Little Lozz ain't the only revolutionary at work around here."

A blush exploded into my cheeks. "I'm just laying out the obvious strategy! I'm not making a special argument here, really! I don't know the first thing about guerilla warfare, this is just obvious stuff, isn't it?"

"To some," Evelyn grumbled, though she had a strange little smile on her lips.

Twil shrugged. "Not to me, I guess. Sure, though. We'll go with your plan, Big H. You're the one with most of the dream in your head, after all. So, what's the next step now we've done for Horror?"

"I, um ... " I trailed off, feeling a weight settling on my shoulders. My head felt heavy and tired. My left leg was throbbing very badly, the wound gone stiff and hard now the worst of the adrenaline had once again left my bloodstream. My hair was still wet, my pajama bottoms were soaked through, and my slippers were sodden with water; my torso and shoulders had been protected from the worst of the rain by the yellow blanket, but the rest of me had not fared so well. "I'm not sure," I said eventually. "We're all tired and wet after that. We need to regroup, um ... "

"Sunshine'll help with that part," Twil said, spreading her arms to catch more of the slowly brightening sun. "This is pretty good, actually!"

She had a point. The light and heat were climbing toward those of a

proper summer's afternoon, despite the absence of a real sun in the sky. My hair was starting to dry out a little. I flapped the sides of my yellow blanket.

"That's ... true."

Raine stepped past me and headed toward Horror's collapsed body. "Executive decision," she said. "Let's turn Horror upside down and shake her by the ankles, see if any goodies fall out of her pockets."

"Raine!" I tutted, vaguely horrified.

Luckily for our sensitive constitutions and the contents of our collective stomachs, Raine was not speaking literally in her proposed handling of Horror's already grisly corpse. She rolled the body onto its back and spent a few minutes going through the pockets of both the coat and the nurse uniform. I watched, feeling a little sick, but unable to look away; we had killed this woman, whatever she really was, whatever she represented. Evelyn and Twil watched as well, though Twil took several moments to re-arrange Evelyn's towels and help with her dressing gown, so the damp patches would dry in the sun. Evelyn grumbled and fussed, but she submitted to Twil's tender care without further complaint.

Raine recovered Horror's cattle-prod stun-gun, though the weapon failed to activate when she thumbed the button; perhaps the electrical components had been ruined by the rainwater. She dug out Horror's mobile phone, nice and dry, with plenty of charge left in the battery. She tossed the phone to Twil, to slip into the canvas bag on the back of Evee's wheelchair. Next came a lanyard and an ID card, with a little photograph of Horror herself printed on the plastic. The card showed an employee number and her name — simply A.HORROR, the same as on her name badge. She had a purse with two credit cards and no cash, but nothing else of note within the pink leather folds. Last but not least, the inner pockets of her uniform provided us with an unexpected bounty — a heavy bunch of keys in all different shapes and sizes, hanging from a big steel keyring.

"Bingo," Raine said, straightening up and cracking a grin, dangling the jingling bunch from her fingers. "Keys to the kingdom."

"I doubt any of those will open the high-security wing," I said. "But that's wonderful, yes! We could potentially get in anywhere we need. We could find somewhere to rest, somewhere more secure

than that locker room, at least.”

Raine winked at me. “Or we could find weapons. Food. Clothes. Whatever you like, sweet thing.”

“Or the morgue,” Evelyn grunted. “If they have one.”

I blinked at her. “The ... the morgue? Why? What for?”

Evelyn sighed. “We’ve already discussed this, Heather. I need my mother’s corpse. Or more accurately, her thigh bone. If I’m going to be a mage once again, inside this dream, I need my wand.”

Twil leaned around Evee’s chair and boggled at her. “What?!”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “The less you comprehend, the better for you.”

“Wait wait wait,” Twil said. “No way. Your wand, that bone, the real one, like. That was your mother’s leg all this time!?”

Evelyn folded her arms. The Praem Plushie seemed to peek over her forearms. “Like I said, Twil. The less you know, the better for you.”

“Fucking hell!” Twil said. “Absolutely not! You need something, I wanna know about it, Evee! I don’t care what it is—”

Evelyn spluttered. “Just— stop— Twil, please—”

I spoke over both of them, trying to cut this short. “We all have to accept how weird this is. If getting Evee’s magic back means stealing her mother’s thigh bone, then, fine. That’s what we’ll do.”

Twil puffed out a big sigh. “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying, yo. Is that our next step, then?”

“Actually,” I said slowly, as a lump formed in my throat. “No. I think our next move has to be dictated by ... available ... resources.”

“Eh?” Twil frowned.

Evelyn said, “Heather, what are you talking about?”

Raine walked back over to the wheelchair and tossed the bunch of keys into our canvas bag. Then she drew her machete and removed it from the fabric sheath. She nodded to me, unsmiling, taking this entirely seriously.

“Arm or leg?” she asked.

I winced. “That probably won’t be enough, not by itself.”

Twil glanced between me and Raine, frown deepening, wolf ears going flat. “What the hell are you two talking about?” she said slowly.

“Freeing Zheng,” I said, unable to meet Twil’s eyes.

“Ah,” Evelyn said. “I should have guessed.”

“What?” Twil said, low and slow.

Raine nodded, hefting her machete in one hand. “Both arms? Both legs? More?”

I swallowed, trying not to feel nauseated. This was all a dream, and none of the people here were inhabiting their real, actual, physical bodies. But it was going to look and feel entirely authentic.

“Probably an arm,” I said. “For bulk. And ... and ... we need the heart. Zheng always has a thing about hearts. She finds them very symbolic.”

Raine pulled a big comedic wince. “That’s gonna get real messy. I can do it, sweet thing, ain’t saying I can’t. But I’m gonna be messy once I’m done.”

“We’ll find you a shower afterward, so you can clean up.”

Twil held out both hands. “Can one of you three explain to me what the hell you’re talking about? ‘Cos I don’t like where this is going.”

I raised my eyes to Twil’s face, then looked over at Horror’s corpse, lying on it’s back.

Twil went pale. “Oh, fuck no.”

“I promised Zheng she could eat a nurse,” I said. “Horror, specifically. I don’t think we can carry the whole corpse without getting spotted, especially trying to get it into the hospital, even with Eevee’s Fadestone to help us. But an arm for bulk, and the heart for symbolic reasons, we can do that. It will probably free Zheng. We do Zheng next, because the resources are right here, and we’re unlikely to get a better chance than this. Then we find Eevee’s mother’s corpse, solve the magic problem. Then we ... figure out Praem? We can go from there.”

“Fuuuuuuck,” Twil groaned. Her wolf ears went flat and her tail tucked up between her legs. “Oh shit, yo, I don’t wanna see this! How do you even get a heart out of a chest?”

Raine grinned. “With a big enough knife, all things are possible.”

“Ohhhh fuck,” Twil moaned.

“I thought you were a werewolf, Twil?” Evelyn grumbled. “Show some ... some ... stomach.”

“That doesn’t mean I wanna watch Raine go all Texas Chainsaw Massacre on some lady’s corpse! Fucking hell!”

Evelyn looked a little green in the face as well. She cleared her throat. “Well, we can both look away, then. I’ll thank you to wheel me around, please.”

“No time like the present,” Raine announced. “I’ll get to straight to work, make this quick. Sweet thing, you don’t have to watch either.”

“I ... I think I owe it, to you, maybe even to Horror,” I said, though sweat broke out on my forehead and down my back. “Just ... let’s get this over with, as quickly and efficiently as we can, yes.”

Raine grabbed three of the spare towels from inside the canvas bag, then strode back over toward the corpse. I crossed my arms over my chest, hugging myself tight, my mouth going dry; I didn’t want to watch the gory details, but I had ordered Raine to do this, so I could not allow her to shoulder the entire burden alone, no matter how robust and sturdy her stomach.

Twil turned Eeve’s wheelchair away, to spare both of them from observing the coming butchery. Evelyn reached out with one hesitant hand and brushed the edge of Twil’s bushy tail. Twil flinched, then relaxed. I left them to their flirting — or whatever it was — and focused on Raine’s work with Horror.

Raine worked fast, without speaking or cracking jokes or any unnecessary flair. She knelt next to the corpse and manoeuvred Horror’s right arm out of her puffy white raincoat, extending it perpendicular from her body. Raine raised the machete, using her other hand to guide her aim. The limb came off in three quick hacks with the blade — chop chop chop, like a butcher’s knife slamming through meat. I felt bile rise up my throat as Raine finally cut all

the way through, separating Horror's right arm from her torso at the shoulder. Raine lifted the severed limb, folded it at the elbow, and quickly wrapped it in one of the towels, hiding it away. The stump barely bled at all, exactly like Horror's neck.

Extracting Horror's heart was more of a challenge. Raine didn't have a bone saw to break through the sternum or the ribcage, so she cut into the soft flesh just below the last of Horror's floating ribs, on the left side of her chest. She worked the point and edge of her machete inside the wound, hacking and yanking at the bottom of the ribcage; the corpse produced the most awful sounds of ripping and sucking, fluids and blood spilling forth, meat ripping and tearing. I had to turn away and gag when Raine stuck her whole hand and wrist inside the massive wound, but then I turned back, forcing myself to bear witness.

"There you are," Raine grunted, gritting her teeth, almost elbow-deep inside a still-warm corpse. "Just a biiiitt more, come on, come on. There!"

Raine yanked. A ripping sound made the corpse jerk. Raine pulled her hand free, holding a fist-sized lump of bloody flesh, trailing the ends of several flapping meaty tubes.

It didn't look much like a heart. It was just a rose-red lump of steaming, bleeding, quivering meat. But I trusted Raine's judgement. She bundled up Horror's heart in the second towel, tied it into a tight package, then used the third towel to wipe the worst of the blood off her hands and forearm.

"Good girl, Raine," I said, taking slow, steady, deep breaths to still my own queasy stomach. "Good girl, well done, that was ... difficult. Oh my gosh, that was the most disgusting thing we've ever done. Oh my gosh. Oh, we did not just do that. Oh."

Raine cracked a grin and shot me a wink, wiping the sticky crimson mess off her machete with the spare towel. "Not difficult for me, sweet thing."

"Bloody hell," Twil grunted, wheeling Evelyn back around. "The sounds were bad enough!"

Evelyn huffed, looking pale and green. "Stop talking about the sounds. Stop talking about it at all, please—"

A sudden and unexpected voice interrupted us all, filling the sunny

air of the woodland clearing.

“Don’t you girls know that it’s very rude to take other people’s things without permission?”

I jumped about a foot in the air, swallowing a scream. Raine spun, machete out, ready for the one thing we’d all silently agreed not to discuss. Evelyn clutched at the armrests of her wheelchair. Twil swore, loudly and creatively and with several mentions of female genitalia.

Horror’s head — her severed head, perched on a mass of broken roof fragments — stared at us, waiting for an answer. She blinked several times. Her lips opened, drooling a thin trickle of blood from both corners of her mouth.

“It’s stealing,” she said. Her voice bubbled with the blood in her throat, gummy and moist. “Theft. Very naughty. Technically a crime, though I suspect that’s the least of your criminal worries at present, considering what you’ve just done.”

I stared at it — at her? At Horror? — with my mouth hanging open in shock. Raine reacted with much more practical considerations in mind; she turned and kicked the corpse itself to make sure it wasn’t about to get up and walk around. The corpse did not so much as twitch. Twil started laughing, panting for breath, muttering ‘fuck me, fuck me’. Evelyn hissed between her teeth, almost growling with frustration.

“We ... ” I said, trying to gather my voice. “We all knew this might happen! Everybody stay calm!”

Twil shouted at the head: “How are you talking without any fucking lungs?! You haven’t got any air up in your pipes!”

“This is a dream, or a play,” Evelyn growled through her teeth. “Forget logic, Twil. Think narratively.”

Raine lifted her machete again. “Oh, I’m thinking narratively alright. Sweet thing, say the word and I’ll scoop out whatever’s left of her.”

Horror’s eyes flicked back and forth as we spoke, eyebrows raised with the distinct air of a very unimpressed adult watching a group of children attempting to hide the evidence of a failed practical joke. She waited until we all trailed off, all of us staring down at

her severed head.

“Well,” she said. “I’m glad you girls are having so much fun with this. But I assure you, this little jaunt is far from over, and I am far from finished with you all.”

bedlam boundary – 24.21

Horror's severed head — emancipated from her shoulders and perched upon a pile of red plastic roof fragments, with trailing tendrils of blonde hair spilling from her loosened bun, and twin tracks of blood drying upon her chin like a pair of long red fangs — finished the delivery of her not-so-veiled threat, closed her blood-slick mouth with a soft wet click, and awaited our response.

We five — myself, Raine, Evelyn, Twil, and the Praem Plushie tucked up inside Evelyn's dressing gown — braced for absolute, unthinkable, screaming madness.

Eyes darted left and right, checking our collective backs and the perimeter of the woodland clearing. Raine kicked Horror's corpse again, watching carefully for any sign of movement, knuckles tight on her machete. Twil sniffed the air in rapid little motions, wolf ears perked high and alert, bushy tail gone stiff. I wished dearly for all my tentacles, or even just one, tipped with bio-steel and dripping paralytic toxin; I wished my left shin was not throbbing like a headache in my calf muscle, drawing all my energy downward as if sucking my blood into the earth; I wished Evelyn was not forced to shrink down into her wheelchair, helpless and afraid, relying so closely on the rest of us to protect her. Seeing her afraid was worse than my own fear.

Seconds ticked by. Twil swallowed loudly. Raine turned on the spot. Horror's head pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows.

Warm sunshine beat downward through the woodland canopy, falling from the sunless sky of the Eye's gnarled and wrinkled underside; a soft breeze trickled through the leaves, tickling the hairs on the back of my neck, helping to dry my damp clothes. Beyond our little clearing and the shattered ruins of the pavilion, the woods themselves were cloaked in a blanket of total silence, unbroken by birdsong or furtive scurrying or the sound of insects.

Horror's apparent threat did not result in the appearance and arrival of half a dozen armed nurses or Knightly security guards, nor in the sudden eruption of the woods into a teeming menagerie of implausible monsters. Her corpse did not rise to its undead feet;

her head did not grow legs and rush toward, nor did her eyes glow like warning lights and attack us with superhero heat vision from her rather reduced position down on the ground.

In short, nothing happened.

"I think we're in the clear," I hissed. "I think Horror was being rhetorical."

Raine let out a long sigh, spun her machete in one hand, and gestured at Horror's head again. "Heather, sweet thing, you give me the go ahead and I'll crack open her skull and cut out her brains. There's no way she can survive that. No way."

Evelyn snorted loudly, sitting up straighter in her wheelchair, rousing herself from the swamp of sudden fear. "That kind of logic will not serve us well here. Give it up, Raine."

"Yes," I said, trying to sound diplomatic. "Raine, please wait. She's not exactly dangerous right now. Unless she starts screaming for help or something, I suppose."

Twil hissed, "Don't give her ideas!"

"S-sorry," I stammered. "I just— this is a little— well, you can see for yourself." I gestured at Horror's severed head. "I'm having a little bit of trouble thinking around this."

Horror sighed, then tutted softly; how she achieved the necessary motions for either of those things, I had no idea.

"You girls may believe whatever you prefer," she said, her voice a wet gurgle of clotted blood. "But ignoring reality will not help anybody out of this mess you've created. I assure you, even like this I am more than capable of standing up for myself."

"... was that intentional?" I asked.

Horror frowned delicately. "Excuse me?"

"Standing up for yourself," I echoed. "You can't be serious. That has to be on purpose."

"Bloody hell," Evelyn grunted. "Please, Heather. Don't encourage this."

Twil butted in, leaning past Evee. "You're a head! What are you gonna do to us, huh? Roll over here and bite me in the ankles?"

“Don’t you give it ideas either, Twil,” Evelyn said. “You’ve seen *The Thing*, I know you have. I thought you’d have a more expansive imagination regarding the potential of a disembodied head.”

Twil opened her mouth to retort, then paused and went pale. Her big bushy tail had been wagging with excited agitation, but suddenly it stopped dead. Her wolf ears went flat as well. She stared at Horror’s head with renewed caution, baring her teeth and narrowing her eyes. “Shiiiiit,” she hissed. “You don’t think it could do that, right? Like, not for real, right? Shit, don’t give it ideas, Evee!”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “That is exactly what I just said to you. Keep up.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I have no idea what you’re talking about. ‘The Thing’?”

Twil grimaced at me. “It’s an old horror movie. With this like—”

“Don’t,” Evelyn snapped. “Heather is more intimately connected to the logic of the dream than we are, as far as our best guesses. The less she knows about that, the better. Don’t put ideas in her head either.”

Twil shrugged. “Sorry, Big H. We can have a movie night when we’re out of this shit.”

I frowned down at Horror’s head, trying not to imagine the possibilities, but it was too late; Twil and Evelyn being needlessly cryptic had already filled my mind’s eye with vile potential. Perhaps the head would grow massive and roll after us like a big fleshy boulder. Or maybe it would whip out a gigantic tongue, barbed with venomous spikes. Or perhaps it would sprout spider-like legs from the ragged hole of the neck, and skitter through the trees in pursuit as we fled.

None of those things happened either; Horror just stared at us with an unimpressed frown.

Raine said: “I still want to finish it off for real. We could burn the brains. Turn her to ash.”

“Yeah!” Twil said. “I’m with crazy-mode Raine on this one. Let’s fucking kill it again! Come on! Finish it off like a vampire or some shit!”

“Can everybody just stop for a moment?” I said, raising both my hands. My left shin hurt so badly that I was having trouble thinking. “This is a golden opportunity, don’t you see? We have Horror ... ‘incapacitated’, to put it lightly. We can ask her whatever we want. We could find out exactly where Maisie is being held. Or where the other six of me have gotten to. Please, don’t finish her off, not yet.”

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted. “I don’t think that’s very likely. She’s not going to tell us anything.”

“Quite!” Horror announced, her throat emitting a slick wet gurgle up through her mouth. “If you think I’m going to assist you girls in your petty act of rebellion, then you can think again. I shan’t be providing you with any information on the workings of the hospital, nor the staff schedules, or internal layouts of non-patient areas, or —”

“What are you?” I said.

Horror stopped, blinked several times, then squinted in concerned confusion. “Excuse me?”

Her voice was almost genuine, as if worried that a kind and gentle patient had finally gone over the edge into true delusion and insanity. Even her squinty frown hinted at true compassion. The hook was always baited, even when she was just a head.

“It’s a very simple question,” I said slowly. “And I would like you to answer it to the best of your abilities. What are you?”

Horror bit her lower lip. “Oh. Oh, Heather. Oh, you poor thing you —”

“What are you?” I repeated again, louder and harder than I had intended, my temper fraying quicker than I expected. Pain was making me rash. “I’m not even asking a metaphysical question, not yet. We’ve separated your head from your body, yet you’re still alive and still talking. Twil made a very good point earlier — there’s no air moving across your vocal chords in order to make sound. You’re clearly not a human being, or if you are then you’re very different to most human beings, who generally can’t survive decapitation. So, Horror, if that even is your real name, please answer my question. What are you?”

Evelyn sighed. “Heather, none of this is real. She doesn’t have to obey physical constraints.”

I held up a gentle hand toward Evee. “Yes, but if we’re talking to her, we need to work within the boundaries of the dream. Let her answer.”

Horror’s lip-bite turned into a deep grimace, followed by a sigh through her nose. The whole head twitched sideways, as if trying to tilt upon her detached neck.

“I’m a nurse, Heather,” she said. “I’ve always been your nurse.”

I rolled my eyes. “Right, technically correct, which is the worst kind of correct. Or is this a metaphor? ‘Horror’ is the nurse which delivered my life to me?”

Twil snorted. “Human beings don’t keep talking after having their heads ripped off. Come on, you fuckin’ roly-poly ball. How are you like that and not dead yet?”

A wry little smile creased Horror’s lips. “You’ve clearly never met very many exceptional human beings, Miss Hopton.”

Raine picked her way across the wreckage of the collapsed pavilion, until she towered over Horror’s severed head. Horror tried to look up at Raine, but her eyes could only roll so far and her head could not tilt backward.

“Raine,” I said gently, warning her off. “Please don’t. We can get something useful out of her, I’m certain.”

“I’m gonna pick her up,” Raine said. “Not in the way I’d prefer, of course.”

I winced. “Be careful!”

“Yeah,” Twil laughed. “Watch out for the teeth, she might bite!”

Raine reached down, grabbed a fistful of Horror’s thick blonde hair, and lifted the severed head from its perch. The ragged stump of her neck did not drip blood as she rose, clean and dry, nothing like a meaty, flesh remnant of a person who had just died. A nub-end of white spine dangled from within the torn flesh. I felt a little nauseated, but managed to resist the urge to avert my gaze. Evelyn swallowed loudly. Twil went, “Ugh!” and spat on the ground.

Raine lifted Horror until they could meet eye-to-eye, then cracked a grin. “Hey there, nurse. Not exactly how I wanted to get up close and intimate with you, slam-piggy. But hey, up close like this, do I

make you feel ... light-headed?"

"Raine!" I spluttered. "Don't flirt with a severed head! That's disgusting."

Evelyn let out a long grumbly sigh. "No, no, she has a point. However loathe I am to admit so."

"A point about what?!"

"About undermining whatever is going on here," Evelyn said. "Raine's insults appeared to work, earlier. But I draw the line at puns. Do not do that again, Raine."

"I'm not so sure they were meant as insults," I muttered.

Horror pursed her lips at Raine. "I'll thank you not to be so crass when I'm in such a vulnerable position, Miss Haynes. I thought you were the 'gentlemanly' type of butch lesbian, always willing to help a girl in need, always there to leap in and be strong and dependable when one of your conquests needs you. Does that not extend to me? I have been conquered, after all, haven't I?"

"You don't count," Raine said. "And I ain't sticking my fingers into your neck hole, either."

"I think you will find my neck hole is none of your— excuse me?!"

Horror burst into a splutter of outrage as Raine lifted her further and then peered at the underside of her severed neck, eyeing the mass of ragged flesh. Raine shrugged and lowered Horror again, then glanced over at the rest of us. "Very little blood," she said. "Spine's severed real neat, too. Doesn't really match the violence of Twil ripping her head off."

Twil blinked twice, wolf-ears swivelling, then muttered, "Um, sorry?"

Evelyn frowned at her. "You don't remember doing that?"

"Nah. I mean, yeah, I do," Twil said. "I remember it perfect like, but uh, sorry if I fucked up somehow?"

"Not what I meant," Raine said. "Not your fault or anything. Just weird. Here, come on, nurse-bot. Not that you've got any choice."

Raine ambled over to the rest of us, holding the head high enough so we could all see Horror's expression — pursed lips going white

with anger, brow furrowed hard and deep, eyes tight and narrow. Raine stopped a good few feet away, severed head outstretched in one hand, machete held low in the other, forearms still stained with faint crimson from butchering Horror's corpse. Though she had not claimed the kill herself, she looked like a hound who had brought her mistress the severed head of her slain foe. My throat closed up and my heart fluttered at that sight; part of me wished I had my real life mobile phone, so that I might capture the moment forever with a camera. But making electronic records of murder and butchery was probably not a very good idea, even in a dream.

"Thank you for fetching her, Raine," I said. "Good girl."

"You wanna interrogate her?" Raine said. "Go right ahead."

Evelyn groaned.

Horror let out a sharp little sigh. "Murder, theft, gross bodily harm. Mishandling a corpse, desecrating the dead, unlawful removal of organs. And now kidnapping! And you girls are worried about bad puns? You are in so much trouble I don't think you realise how deep you've gotten, you—"

"Technically it's abduction," Evelyn snapped. "It's only kidnapping if we demand a ransom for you. And it's only abduction in the first place if we take you somewhere without your consent. Do you want us to toss you back on the pile of rubble? You're quite welcome to it, I doubt we're going to use it again."

Horror closed her mouth and squinted at Evelyn.

"Thought not," said Eevee.

"I see your father's legal habits have rubbed off on you, Miss Saye," said Horror. "How very equivocationary of you. It's a pity you can't put those talents to use in service of society instead of—"

"What are you even doing?" I said. "What is this?"

Horror's eyes flickered to me. She couldn't turn her head, so Raine adjusted her angle.

"Giving my thoughts on the current situation," said Horror. "What else is there to do in my regrettable condition?"

"You're taunting us, or trying to taunt us, though rather ineffectually. You've got bits and pieces of Raine's innermost

anxieties, and also Eevee's apparently, but you're acting sloppy, not using your techniques very well. I think we've broken you, whatever you actually are. We've broken your purpose in the dream. Haven't we? What are you?"

"I already told you, Heather!" Horror tutted. "I'm a nurse. I'm your nurse!"

"I fuckin' hate this," said Twil. Her wolf ears had gone limp, same as her tail. "When you beat a mid-boss, it should either stay dead, or get up again with a second health bar. This is just bollocks. Come on, Big H, let Raine finish her off."

"I doubt that would work," I said, staring into Horror's unimpressed eyes. "We overcame her once, but the dream doesn't want her removed. The script, the play, whatever it is, it's worked around her defeat in order to keep her going. I'm sorry to be so absurd about this, Twil, but I suspect if we cut her head open and finished her off, she might come back as an actual ghost. Or something even worse. At least like this she's easy enough to contain."

"Contain?" Horror echoed, pulling a scrunchy frown. "Contain!? What are you going to do now, girls? Tie me up? Drag me along on your adventure? Oh no, absolutely not. I think you will find me a most uncooperative captive."

I sighed at her. "Yes. You're hardly a lady of infinite jest and most excellent fancy, are you?"

Horror frowned at me with incomprehension. "I'm sorry?"

I smiled in a tiny victory. "Hm."

"Heather?" Evelyn said.

"Yeah," Twil added. "What was that, some kind of code?"

"Sweet thing?" Raine said. "Clue us in?"

"Shakespeare," I said, still smiling. "Well, misquoting *Hamlet*, actually. There's no way to test for sure, of course, but I'm trying to figure out what exactly Horror is. If her origin lay with me, there's no way she wouldn't know that line. She would have responded in some fashion, she would have recognised Shakespeare. I ... I think?"

Twil said, "Big H, like, I respect you and all, but that is some mad

unscientific bullshit.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “But it’s a start.”

“You got a theory on what she is, then?” Twil asked. “Or why the hell she’s still talking to us, like?”

Evelyn broke in before I could answer, with something I had not figured out: “She’s an element of the dream, and we have adjusted that dream. That’s why she’s still talking.” Evelyn glanced around at the rest of us, wearing an expression like this should be obvious. “Think about it for a moment. We’ve just redefined the dream, rewritten the tone and the atmosphere, by waking Twil.”

Twil pointed at herself. Her tail wagged from side to side. “Eh, what? Me?”

“Yes, you,” Evelyn said. “Because you’re a werewolf.”

Twil frowned. “Eh? What does that have to do with a severed head still talking?”

“You’re both horror genre elements,” Evelyn drawled. “Ha! Ironical right? ‘Horror’ genre? Maybe that was on purpose. Heather should understand this, even if you don’t. We’ve introduced two new elements to the dream, a werewolf and a murder, and the dream has reacted accordingly. Not to even mention whatever the ‘Lillies’ brought with them, though that element does seem to be purged for now. Regardless, we’ve shifted the genre of Sevens’ ‘script’. We caused this.” She gestured at Horror’s severed head. “We solved one problem by introducing an entirely new category of problem.” She huffed. “Typical of us, I suppose.”

Horror said, “Well, I’m glad you realise your own powerlessness, at least.”

“Oh, we’re far from powerless,” I said. “Evee just spelled it out. We’ve redefined part of the dream, part of the genre. And you, you can’t even acknowledge that with your words, because you’re not actually a person.”

Horror raised her eyebrows.

Twil, however, drew a wincing breath between her teeth. Her tail was coiled upward behind her back. “Woah, woah, Big H, hold up a sec here. I know this is a dream and all, but like ... isn’t that a bit of a slippery slope? Kill her, sure. Cut pieces off her to feed to Zheng,

alright, fine. But like, she's still a person, yeah? Don't go down that road, yeah?"

"Not in this case," I said, speaking to Horror. "Because I think I've figured out what we're looking at. I think Horror may be part of the Eye."

Raine tilted her head in silent question. Twil scrunched her forehead into an uncomprehending frown.

Evelyn muttered, "Haven't we already identified the Eye's personal avatar?"

"Yeah," said Raine. "And she's a lot hotter than Horror here."

"Huh!" Horror spluttered.

"Well, yes," I said, then spluttered too, correcting myself. "Um, I mean— uh, yes, we've identified her, indeed. Not yes she's hotter than Horror. Not that— I— no, I refuse to make a judgement on that." I huffed, abandoning the subject. Raine cracked a grin and winked at me. Evelyn just rolled her eyes. I rallied back to the real topic. "Seriously, think about everything we've seen here so far. We now have three examples of people split into multiple parts by the dream. Myself, first off. Then Praem, who's been split in two. And now Twil, who was in three, and now reunited back into one. Who's to say the Eye hasn't been subjected to the same process? The 'science gill' we saw, maybe she's the ego of the eye, the primary decision maker, the personality. And the nurses — or rather, the whole institution of Cygnet Hospital — is the id, or superego, or maybe both?"

"Don't sound so sure," Evelyn said.

I cleared my throat, feeling self-conscious. "I haven't decided yet, but it makes sense."

"No it don't," Twil said. "Come on, Big H, is that what they're teaching you in English lit or something? Id, ego, all that shit? Freud wasn't actually right, you know? It's all a metaphor or something."

"Yes, yes, I know that, but I'm using it as a metaphor. We've been puzzling over what the nurses are, what they embody, or represent. Our current working theory about the patients — not that I can be sure — is that they're all the people and places the Eye has

absorbed and trapped in Wonderland, turned into metaphorical human beings, though most of them are probably Outsiders totally beyond our imaginations. But what are the nurses? Eye cultists? I don't think that makes any sense. Nobody has 'loyalty' to the Eye. The institution, the nurses, all of it — what if all of that is the Eye? Including Horror."

Horror listened to my theory with a curiously bored expression. We all peered at her, as if expecting her to crack under the pressure of detailed interrogation. But I knew she wouldn't. She couldn't. It wasn't that she didn't care, or that she was just that mentally tough, or unafraid of us, or anything like that. No, she simply could not 'crack' under discovery. She was her role in full, not simply a player upon the stage, following Sevens' script or the Eye's unfolding mind. The dream would not let her die. She was a primary component, and could not be removed.

Eventually she cleared her throat and said, "You girls are very creative, I will give you that. I'm actually rather impressed by all this fantasy. But unfortunately it's very unhealthy to let you run away with these fictional models of the world." She sighed heavily and focused on me. "Heather, I had held out hope that you were being led astray by your friends, but now I discover to my dismay that you are the ringleader. I didn't expect this. I'm very ... " Her eyes scrunched with mocking sorrow. "I'm very disappointed. Very concerned. You must give up on this. The only way out is to head back indoors and give yourself up. It will be painful and scary at first, but in the long run it is the right thing to do, both for others and for yourself."

Evelyn snorted. "And she's still like a broken record."

"Yeah, shit." Twil laughed a little. "She's not exactly convincing. What the hell was I scared of?"

"Horror," I said. "Look at me, please."

Horror looked.

Horror's eyes were slightly bloodshot, as if she'd had a long day at work. The trailing strands of her hair and the twin tracks of blood from the corners of her mouth made her look like the head of a giant comedy spider. Her eyebrows kinked upward as I stared — and stared and stared and stared, testing my theory in a new and instinctive way, gripped by an impulse I could not explain. The

others had fallen silent. I felt their eyes on me, but I didn't look away. My own eyes began to water slightly as I resisted the growing urge to blink. Raine watched me carefully, like a loyal hound who realised her mistress was working on some greater plan.

The sunshine was beating down upon us now, as if the storm's passing had cleared the atmosphere for a true summer's day. My hair was mostly dry and even my sodden slippers were starting to feel less mushy. Beneath my yellow blanket and my ugly brown jumper, I felt sweat prickle under my armpits and down my back.

Was this merely the effect of the warmer air? Or was I locked in a staring contest with a portion of the very thing we had come to Wonderland to stare back into?

The wound in my left shin throbbed harder and harder with every heartbeat. Wordless silence and protracted concentration gave my mind no distractions to spare me from the aching cut in my flesh, surrounded by stiff muscles and barely-healing tissues. I felt myself begin to buckle, listing to one side, eyes open and watering with effort.

A hand reached out and steadied me — strong as steel, soft as velvet, unerringly there at my side. I straightened up, drawing on that aid, until my chin was once again held high and my eyes were wide. Horror could not escape.

"You're going to help us," I said. "Whether you like it or not."

Horror blinked.

I let out a ragged breath and finally rubbed at my watering eyes, blinking hard to clear my vision. The powerful supporting grip left my arm, but now I could stand on my own feet, though the pain in my shin was still distracting me and threatening to scramble my thoughts.

"Ahh, ow." I winced. "Oh, I think that might have given me a headache as well. Thank you, uh—"

I glanced to my left, to confirm who had helped me, assuming that the firm grip had belonged to Twil; after all, Raine was holding the severed head aloft and Evee was down in her wheelchair, her meagre strength in reality reduced by the cruelty of the dream.

But nobody was there. Twil was still beyond arm's reach, both

hands firmly on the handles of Eevee's wheelchair. Evelyn's hands were tucked deep within the folds of her grey dressing gown. Raine was in front of me, at the wrong angle.

The Praem Plushie was peering over the right-hand arm of Evelyn's wheelchair, regarding me with flat, disc-shaped, inanimate eyes.

"Oh," I croaked. "Thank you, Praem."

"Eh?" Twil blinked. "Hey?"

"Heather, what—" Evelyn started to say, then noticed that the Praem Plushie had somehow gotten out from inside the protective swaddling of Eevee's dressing gown. "How did she get there?" Evelyn tutted, picked Praem up, and returned her to a safer place, snuggled down in Eevee's lap.

"Heather," Raine purred. "What just happened?"

"Nothing," I said, straightening up again. "Just my leg wound bothering me, it's ... it hurts, a lot. Praem offered some moral support."

Evelyn grunted a vague affirmative; Raine nodded seriously, accepting the strangeness of the situation without further question. Twil grimaced as if we'd all gone mad.

Horror cleared her throat gently, and said: "It is admirable that you girls stick so closely together. Even in the most dire of circumstances, from which you cannot possibly hope to extricate yourselves, you soldier on, shoulder to shoulder. This kind of solidarity would serve you well in life. Mm. What a pity, what a pity ... "

Twil pulled a big squinty frown. "Is it just me, or has she changed her tune a bit? That was almost like a compliment."

"I won the staring contest," I said.

"And what does that mean?" Twil asked.

"I don't know, actually."

Evelyn said: "Every act is a redefinition of the dream, a new line in Sevens' bloody play. Go on, Heather. What are you thinking?"

I took a deep breath, then stared into Horror's eyes again. This time she blinked right away. Surrender.

“She keeps trying to get us back on track,” I said slowly, thinking out loud, piecing together disparate notions as I went. “Not our track, but her one, the original script for the dream. She wants us to surrender ourselves, give up, return to the insides of Cygnet Hospital, so on and so on. She’s a narrative device to re-route us whenever we start to stray. Look at how she kept turning up whenever I would get close to freeing somebody or achieving something. But now we’ve neutralised her, we’ve written her into a corner. The dream won’t let her go, won’t let her be dead or gone or whatever. But she can’t do anything else except keep attempting to return us to the original path. She’s a bit like the Eye, in that respect. When observation is all you can do, you’ll keep doing it, no matter what. Horror was telling the truth when she answered my first question. She is a nurse.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “This is all very plausible, Heather, but what use is it to us?”

“Where is my sister?” I said to Horror. “Where’s Maisie?”

Horror frowned. “You know that already. You know exactly where —”

“Answer the question, please.”

Horror sighed, paused, then said, “In the Box.”

“And what is ‘the Box’?”

Horror blinked in surprise. “Are you being silly with me, Heather?”

“I assure you, I am being completely serious. What is the Box? Please answer.”

Horror’s eyes glanced at Twil and Eevee, then back at me. She tried to roll her eyes upward into her head so she could look at Raine, but that was an impossible feat for a severed head. Finally she looked back at me, and spoke slowly and gently, with the kind of care one reserved for small children or the very sick.

“The Box is the most high security part of Cygnet Hospital,” she said. “It has several names, some of them official, but the staff all call it ‘the Box’. It’s the reason all of the rest of the hospital exists, after all, at least legally and administratively. The rest of the hospital is an afterthought by comparison. The Box is a kind of special containment facility, for those very few and very unlucky

girls who are simply too dangerous to ever rejoin society. They're packaged up in there, with no way out. Like a sealed box. You must have seen the entrances, Heather? I was told you were wandering around, clearly looking for them, and I know you blundered into at least one. You've even spoken to some of the guards, though they were very circumspect and closed-lipped about that particular encounter."

"I remember. And that's a good sign, by the way," I added for the others. "The Knights keep trying to protect us, which is good."

"Huh," Raine grunted. "This 'Box', is it even more high security than the prison?"

"Yes," I said. "Big sci-fi style vault door. I ran into it earlier, just once. I think there's external entrances too, all guarded by the Knights. If Lozzie's revolt works and we can get the Knights openly on our side, we might be able to get into the Box without too much trouble."

Horror said, "I wouldn't be too certain of that."

"What else is in the Box?" I asked. "What kind of security? What are we talking about here, cameras and blast doors, or laser guns, or something else?"

Horror let out a little sigh. "I'm afraid I can't say."

"Answer the question, please."

"I'm afraid I can't say."

Raine raised her machete and caught my eye, asking a silent question. I shook my head. "No, Raine. I don't think torture will even work. Horror, why can't you say?"

Horror smiled, a little awkwardly. "I'm only allowed to take a set course inside the Box. I'm not allowed to deviate, or ask questions. I even have to hand over my mobile phone before I enter! Can you imagine that? It's like being inside a nuclear missile silo or something, like on that one show with the people underground? No? Oh well, you'd know the one if you'd seen it. All very serious stuff. So no, I can't say what they might have in there. I can tell you that your sister is not the only resident of the Box, but that's all, really."

"And Maisie is in there?"

“Yes. I’m not lying. You already knew this, Heather, you knew all of this, you—”

“There are six more of me,” I said. “Six more Heathers. Where are they? Are they in the Box, too?”

Horror let out a terrible sigh. “Oh, Heather. You are so very alone. There’s no—”

“Where is the Director’s office?” I skipped straight to the next question, trying to disorient her.

Horror raised her eyebrows. “The Director? You’ve got no business seeing the Director. She won’t be interested in you at all—”

“Where is her office?” I repeated.

Horror paused, rolled her eyes, then sighed. “I don’t suppose you can do any more damage there. Very well. The Director’s office is in the second basement level, just below the laundry rooms. You can reach it easily from the main staff room. There’s a lock on the door, though. Ordinary staff have no business down there and—”

“And where is the Governor’s office?” I said.

Horror stopped.

For a single second it was as if her head was finally, truly, actually dead. The jaw hung slack. The eyes went glassy. Tension left the muscles in her cheeks and around her mouth. A single droplet of blood fell from the stump of her neck and landed upon the wood chips.

“Horror?” I said.

The nurse’s skull animated again with a gulp, nervously wetting her lips with a flicker of bloody tongue. She blinked rapidly, light returning inside her eyes.

“You don’t want to speak with the Governor, Heather,” she said. “For your own good. You don’t want to do that.”

“Where is the Governor’s office?” I repeated. “Answer the—”

“I know, I know!” Horror said, her whole tone switching from exasperated adult to almost pleading. “I’ve not exactly endeared myself to you with the things I’ve said, and I’m loathe to help you in this absurd quest you’ve dreamed up for yourselves, but you do

not want to speak with the Governor. I don't even know why I'm telling you this, really!"

I opened my mouth to push again, but Evelyn said, "Heather, wait. You, Horror, whatever you are. Why don't we want to speak with the Governor?"

Horror swallowed, eyebrows knitting as if considering her answer with great care. "It is exceedingly difficult to get her full attention. She's always so distracted. But once she's aware of you, she never forgets you. And she has all the power in the hospital, in the end. If she distractedly decides that your time here is up, then poof! You're done! Hiring and firing, disciplinary actions, job title changes, all of it! She can have patients removed and moved around at will. Whole wings re-assigned for new purposes. And the worst part is that she's not even really interested! She doesn't care! She's got some special project involving all the patient data, past and present, and that's all she cares about. So she makes decisions on a whim, and you do not want to be in the way of that." Horror sighed. "Though I suppose you don't care anyway, do you? You're already criminals now. Oh, dear. What am I saying?"

We all shared a concerned glance. Twil grimaced, wolf ears flat, tail raised and wrapped around her own arm. Evelyn sucked on her own teeth, drumming her fingers on the arm of her wheelchair. The Praem Plushie seemed to peer out of her grey dressing gown, examining Horror.

Raine just nodded slowly, and said, "Well, Miss Gilf Eyeball has already seen us. So we've got no problem there."

Horror said, "She must not have been paying proper attention to you. I'm telling you girls, you do not want—"

A sudden shout echoed through the woods, somewhere far off to the right of our little clearing; the voice sounded neither urgent nor panicked, though the exact words were lost on the gentle sunlit breeze.

We all froze. A moment later another voice answered — words once again a wood-choked blur, but undeniably an affirmative of some kind.

"Shit, shit!" Twil hissed. Her tail was standing straight up, fur all a-bristle. "Who the fuck is that?!"

“Nurses,” Raine said, calm and collected but speaking quickly. “Or guards. Or worse. They’re looking for us. Looking for Horror. Time to move.”

Evelyn snapped, “We need to get under the cover of the Fadestone, quickly. Or get out of here!”

Horror sighed. A certain smug gloss returned to her expression. “I told you girls, there is no way out of this predicament which you have created. If you would only—”

“What do we do with her, then!?” Twil jerked a thumb at Horror’s talking head.

“We take her with us,” I said.

“Eh!?”

“Oh, great,” Evelyn grumbled. “I was expecting that.”

“We take her with us,” I repeated. “Leaving her here is not an option. For all we know whoever is on their way might be able to glue her back together or reanimate her or something.”

“We can stop her from re-spawning,” Raine said. “Quick thinking.”

“Yes, I ... I think? And at least this way we’ll know exactly where she is.”

“Excuse me!” Horror said. “May I—”

“We can’t take the whole corpse with us!” Twil said, gesturing at the rest of Horror’s now very mangled body, missing one arm, chest cut open, covered in blood and viscera. “That’s gonna get found! It’s not like there’s a convenient locker to stuff it in, either!”

Evelyn snorted. “Can’t you dig a hole, Twil? What good are your claws for?”

“Yeah,” Twil said, sneering. “Cos obviously I know all about digging holes in, oh, what, sixty seconds?!”

“It’s fine!” I said. “We can leave the corpse here. The head is the part that’s still alive. That’s all we need.”

“Excuse me?” said Horror. “I would like to—”

“Hey,” said Raine, cracking a grin. “What’s one more corpse? We’re already wanted women, after all. I’m used to that. All women want

me.”

Twil and Eevee both groaned. The Praem Plushie vanished inside Eevee’s grey dressing gown. I just blushed.

“Raine,” I said. “We need to move, quickly. Can you ... ?”

Raine cracked another grin just for me, then nodded. “On it, sweet thing.”

Horror started talking again as Raine walked back toward the corpse, over to the two neatly wrapped packages — Horror’s served arm and stolen heart.

“You girls should be surrendering yourselves to the proper authorities!” she snapped. Raine reached down and grabbed the third towel, the one she’d used to wipe the blood off her hands. “I shan’t be providing you with further help or directions or even so much as a- mffff! Mm-mmm-mfff! Mm—”

Horror’s words choked into silence on the folds of the towel Raine stuffed into her mouth. Raine then quickly bundled up the head inside the rest of the towel and tied the ends together to create a neat little sphere. She grabbed the other wrapped packages, the bloody parcels which contained Horror’s severed right arm and the meaty lump of her heart. Then she crossed back to the wheelchair and grabbed a final towel, using it to fashion a sling for all three of the wrapped-up pieces of Horror’s body. She positioned the sling over her own back, then filled it with arm and head and heart, so the grisly packages would not be revealed by a curious glance.

“Cool, cool,” Twil said. “Not fucked up at all, not fucked up, nope, nope. Not thinking about it. Not thinking—”

Another shout echoed through the woods — still distant, but closer this time. Whoever or whatever that was, they would be here within minutes.

My left shin throbbed with each beat of my heart; even fresh adrenaline was not enough to quieten the wound now. I took slow, deep, difficult breaths. No time to rest.

Raine reached over and fished Horror’s stolen keys out of the canvas bag on the back of Evelyn’s wheelchair. “Ladies and squid-girls, wolves and magicians, we got the keys to go anywhere. And the invisibility trick to get there without getting seen. We need to

find an infirmary or something, some kind of sick-bay, for Heather.”

“Zheng first,” I repeated my previous instructions.

“Yeah,” Twil agreed. “I wanna get Evee indoors, get her dried off proper.”

“I’m fine!” Evelyn grunted. “And this isn’t real damp, none of it’s going to kill me.”

“We’ll never get that wheelchair up the stairs to Zheng’s room,” I said gently. I reached over and braced one hand against Raine’s shoulder, so as not to sag to my left, easing my weight off the wound in my shin. “So I think we’re going to have to split up temporarily. Twil, I want you to wait with Evee, somewhere ... we’ll find somewhere. Raine and I will head to Zheng’s room with the meat, and try to free her.”

“Hey, what?” Twil said. “Nah, Big H, come on, we all just got together again! We gotta stay grouped up proper. And that leg of yours is right fucked. Stop trying to hide it, we can all see.”

I shook my head, taking deep breaths to force down the pain. “Twil, we can’t get that wheelchair up those stairs, even if we will be invisible. And the access lift is a coffin full of rust, I’m not risking that.”

Raine said, “Sweet thing, let me go do it myself. I can move faster than you. Sneaking missions are kinda my thing right now. And your leg—”

I shook my head again. “No. It’s Zheng. It has to be me and you, Raine. Not just one of us. It has to be us, both, both of us, both ... ”

Raine looked down at me, smiling gently. “Heather, that leg is—”

“Raine, you are a good girl and I love you. We need to free Zheng, ASAP. All this is snowballing faster than we can manage, and we have to be ready for the next stage of Lozzie’s revolution. We need Zheng free.”

“Sweet thing,” Raine purred. “With these keys we can find a proper infirmary and get you stitched—”

“Infirmary later,” I hissed.

Another muffled call and response rang out through the woods behind us. I reached for Evee’s wheelchair, to complete the circuit

for the Fadestone, to make good on our escape.

“Zheng first,” I said. “Now let’s— oop!”

Raine grabbed my arm — not roughly, but with enough force to hold me back and spoil my balance. I would have gone slamming down onto my wounded leg if it wasn’t for Raine’s free hand, her support beneath my grip, her strength holding me up. I stumbled into her.

I found myself pressed against Raine’s chest, my nostrils filled with the smell of blood and sweat on her skin, my hands feeling her heartbeat beneath her ribs. Her free hand went around my back, stronger than I remembered.

Raine looked down at me, not smiling, not amused, not a good girl.

“R-Raine ... ”

“Infirmary first,” she growled. “Executive decision.”

bedlam boundary – 24.22

With the Fadestone snug in Evee's lap and the bounty of stolen keys tight in Raine's fist, sneaking back inside the looming fortress of Cygnet Hospital should have been easier than any prior penetration of that sprawling nightmare structure. The towering red brick walls which rambled out over the grounds, the hundreds of darkly staring windows like empty sockets in a skull, the corroded black metal of the many rain gutters and down-spouts like outlines upon the building's rim, the side-doors in blank brushed steel and heavy lacquered wood — even the front entrance, gaping wide and lightless upon the gnarled innards of the asylum, where nurses drifted back and forth like white-clad ghosts in the mouth of a hungry god — all should have yielded before us, we who were invisible to sight and mind, we who held the keys to every locked door and barred portal of this dream-wrought castle of medical mistreatment.

Any door that Horror's keys could not open would surely not withstand Twil's werewolf strength or the cunning ingenuity of Raine's quick hands. Though the sudden summer sun beat down upon the hospital grounds from an empty sky of wrinkled Eye-flesh, we four — or we five, including Praem — strode unseen and unknown, sliding deeper into the flesh of the hospital, like a virus in the body of the institution, cloaked against any immune system which the asylum might care to muster.

Except we didn't — stride, that is.

By the time we reached the edge of the woodland, where the shivering canopy gave way to the immaculate green lawns of Cygnet Hospital, I could barely walk.

"Heather, Heather, hey, hey! Heather!" Raine kept repeating my name, trying to keep me grounded, keep me present; but the pain was crashing higher and higher, filling my eyes with tears, choking my throat with raw panic. "Heather, just hold on tight, that's it, keep one arm around my shoulders and squeeze as hard as you gotta. Just don't let go. Don't let go. Come on, keep moving, don't let go. Across the lawns, it's only another few minutes. Heather?"

Heather, you can do it, just keep moving, keep moving.”

“I-I can’t— can’t put on weight on- ahhh! Ow, oh my God. Ah— ah! It— it hurts! It really hurts! Why does it hurt like this?! It didn’t hurt like this before!”

“The dream has changed,” Evelyn murmured, trying to stay calm in the face of my pain. “So has her wound. Raine, you keep a firm grip on both her and my wheelchair. If you lose contact you’ll lose the Fadestone’s effect.”

“Shiiiiit,” Twil hissed. “Shit shit shit! What’s wrong with her?! Big H? Yo? She was fine like five minutes ago! She was running around after me and all! Big H?”

“Don’t talk to her,” Evelyn ground out. “Let her concentrate. Everybody bloody well concentrate and stay together. Stay together and do not let go.”

The wound in my left shin — a shallow but nasty cut from a shard of glass, sustained on the previous day, when I had clambered over the broken one-way mirror to save Evelyn from the dream-spectre of her mother — was on fire.

Each heartbeat jammed knives of molten metal up through my knee and into the meat of my thigh. The lightest pressure on my foot sent fresh waves of nausea and disorientation sloshing upward into my pelvis and gut, gripping me with an intense need to vomit, which never came to fruition. A sheen of cold sweat stuck my t-shirt to my skin and my hair to my scalp and threatened to glue shut my windpipe. I rasped for the smallest volume of air, shaking and shivering, clinging to Raine like driftwood in a storm.

A deep red stain was inching outward upon the left leg of my pajama bottoms, as if the wound had burst Raine’s makeshift dressing.

By myself, I would have fallen.

Raine all but dragged me across the lawns, one-armed from the necessity of maintaining constant physical contact with Evelyn’s wheelchair. Twil took charge of pushing the chair, chewing her lips in near panic, tail tucked between her legs, wolf-ears flat and sharp. Evelyn stared straight ahead, breathing slowly and carefully, trying to sustain magic in the midst of fresh crisis.

Despite the end of the rainstorm and the sudden sunny day which had burst upon the dream, the gardens of Cygnet Hospital were deserted. No patients sat on the benches or took their outdoor lunches in the clement weather. Clusters of pale faces stared out from the upper windows of the hospital wings, sullen and frowny, gathered in protective little groups, grumpy at their confinement. The side door next to the front entrance was closed; the front entrance itself was guarded by a quartet of Knights, facing inward, as if to keep the patients from a hasty escape.

“Shit,” Twil hissed when we drew close enough to see the details. “What the hell? They tightened security? Whole place looks like it’s on lockdown.”

“We go around,” said Raine. “Side door, back door, whatever. We take the first way in we can find.”

“Sure, sure. Just—”

“Just do it, Twil,” Raine grunted. “Keep moving. Let me worry about Heather.”

For me, the journey around the left-hand side of the hospital building was a blur of pain and wheezing breath, marked only by the small adjustments of Raine’s arm around my waist, punctuated by the moments our collective feet left solid brick pathway to cross the softer surfaces of grass and soil. Screwing my eyes up tight helped with the pain for a few seconds, but that was all. Every time I tried to blot out the world, the throbbing in my head grew so much greater, and I was forced to open my eyes again, vision blurred and spinning, head pounding with internal pressure. My entire left leg had been transformed into a bag of broken glass and bone shards, shaking up and down inside my flesh with every staggering half-step.

“Tell her she can scream if she needs,” said Eevee.

“Eh? What? Eevee, what the—”

“Not you. Raine, tell her she can scream. It won’t break the Fadestone’s invisibility.”

“Heather,” Raine purred my name. “Scream if you—”

I screamed. Or perhaps I merely choked and mewled. I couldn’t be sure.

By the time we stopped before a door — an unassuming windowless slab of grey steel, blurred sideways in my vision like a smear of paste upon the brick wall — I was whining and sobbing, drool hanging from my pain-slackened lips, sagging in Raine's grasp.

"Holy shit, holy shit," Twil was hissing. "What the fuck is wrong with her?! That's just not from a fucking leg wound, that's more like — I don't know! Like a gut wound or a—"

"Get the door open," Raine said, quiet and soft and more dangerous than I had ever heard her before. "I can't let go of her. Take the keys, open the door."

"Yeah, yeah, but like, is she—"

"Open the door," Raine said. "Right now."

If I hadn't been drowning in pain and fever, Raine's tone would have sent me reeling away from her in something akin to fear — or perhaps drawn me closer, aroused beyond words. I had never heard her speak with such quivering quiet, such cold clarity of promised violence.

Twil let out a weird little canine yelp. "S-sure, sure, fine! Fuck, don't get pissed at me, Raine!"

"Sorry," said Raine, hard and sharp as fresh-cut steel.

Getting the door open took hours — or what felt like hours, as I sagged against Raine's side, my vision throbbing and darkening, my skin flushed with sweat and fever and a tidal wave of pain sloshing upward from my left leg. Twil kept trying likely-looking keys in the lock, but there were so many keys on that ring. She was forced to work one-handed, keeping her other hand on Evee's wheelchair to maintain our invisible coherency. Rattle-rattle-rattle-click-click-clink-clink-rattle-rattle — the noise of the keys and the lock and the door wormed into my head, making the pain worse, drawing a most pitiful mewling from my throat.

Eventually the lock gave way with a soft metallic thunk. Twil swung the door wide and pushed Evelyn through. Raine and myself trailed behind, anchored by Raine's other hand. We plunged into the cool darkness of a little-used passageway.

"We need to find an infirmary," Raine said. "A sickbay, something like that. Those kinds of rooms should be on the ground floor, for

ease of access. Place like this should have more than one.”

“N-no ... ” I wheezed. I could barely open my eyes. “H-have to free Zheng first. We have to—”

“Heather, save your strength,” Raine purred. “Stop trying to talk.”

“But—”

“Stop talking, unless you have important information.”

“We have to—”

“Do as I say.”

The cold snap in Raine’s voice left no room for argument. If I’d been coherent I would have flinched, and most likely argued back. Raine never spoke to me that way. I rolled against her side, whining at the renewed pain radiating upward from the occluded wound in my left shin.

I was near helpless. Raine was my rock.

The walk from the edge of woods to the side of the hospital had been a confused blur, but the pain had not finished rising; the search for an infirmary was a feverish nightmare. I gave myself completely over to the guidance and protection of my friends, to the strength of Raine’s arms, to Evee’s wisdom and skill, and Twil’s wolfish instincts and boldness of heart. My vision throbbed red and black around the edges as Raine dragged me through the hospital corridors. Sweat soaked through all my clothes until I was dripping. My breath came in constricted, ragged wheezes. My eyelids drooped as we went, then fluttered shut, until I was just luggage, an insensate bag of blind pain. My leg felt like it was going to fall off — or perhaps it was already gone, and the pain I felt was the bleeding stump rubbed raw on the open air. But whenever I mustered enough lucidity to look down, there it was, hanging off me, pajama bottom leg soaking through with deep crimson.

More than once we all had to stop and step aside as groups of nurses hurried past, sticking close together, some of them carrying the same kinds of weapons that they’d used against yesterday’s riot. They couldn’t see us, of course, but we didn’t want to risk blundering into them and initiating accidental contact. We saw almost no patients down on the ground floor, as if they had all been confined to the upper levels.

Fifteen minutes — or fifteen hours, or fifteen weeks, or fifteen years of agony later, we finally passed from a corridor and into a room. I could only tell because of the change in the sound of our footsteps. The adjustment roused me enough to raise my head and pry open my eyes.

An infirmary.

I should have felt hope and relief, but the pain was too much. Thought was mostly gone.

The room looked like something from a 1950s parody. Bare wooden floorboards supported a little desk — thankfully unoccupied — along with a short row of six steel bed frames, each bed outfitted with a narrow mattress wrapped in immaculately clean and neatly pressed sheets. Tall windows punctuated the wall between the beds, the glass grimy on the outside and smeared on the inside, the light dulled and dimmed by the muck and murk. A white porcelain sink stood in the far corner, flanked by old-fashioned metal bedpans, stained and rusty. The wall opposite the beds was lined with wooden cabinets above and below a counter top, all covered in peeling white paint. Most of the cabinets were marked by big red cross symbols, like we were in one of Raine's video games. A row of bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling.

"Bingo!" Twil yelped. "And it's empty, perfect!" She reached over and slapped at a light switch next to the door frame, but the bulbs stayed dark. "Ahh shit, leccy's dead."

Raine spoke quickly. "Evee, drop the Fadestone's effect. Twil, shut that door and get it locked."

"Done," snapped Evelyn.

With her other hand finally free, Raine lifted me off my feet, princess carry style; the sudden pressure on the rear of my knee made me gasp and pant with a fresh wave of pain, but the weight off my injured leg was worth the trade.

Raine carried me over to the nearest bed and laid me down atop the sheets. My head fall back against the pillow, sinking into semi-conscious exhaustion, staring up at the dirty ceiling.

"Stay still. Don't try to move," Raine ordered. Then she left my dwindling field of vision.

Raine lifted my left ankle with a firm grip; I whined through my teeth. She eased the leg of my pajama bottoms up and over the makeshift dressing. Then she carefully peeled away the dressing itself, but the fabric was adhered to my skin with dried blood. I let out an involuntary scream, grabbing at the bedsheets.

“Shit!” Twil snapped. “We’re not fucking cloaked anymore, that racket is gonna bring someone running!”

“It— it hurts— I can’t— I can’t—”

Gentle hands offered me a folded corner of towel on which to bite down. Evelyn murmured something I couldn’t make out, but her words were soft and warm and full of aching sympathy. Her hand — her maimed hand — found mine and squeezed hard. I bit down into the folded piece of towel to muffle my next scream.

Raine worked as gently as she could. The fabric of the makeshift dressing finally peeled away.

Raine said nothing. Evelyn swallowed, loud and dry.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuck me,” Twil hissed. “She was running around on that not an hour ago! How did it get so bad so fast?”

I spat out my corner of towel and raised my head from the pillow, squinting down at my shin.

The wound looked horrible — a ragged double-line of split flesh either side of a deep incision filled with a trench of fresh, dark, ruby-red blood. The skin around the wound was inflamed, hot and aching; I thought I could see every pulse of my heart mirrored in the quiver of my flesh. The air reeked of blood and sweat and fear, but of something else also, a putrid, too-sweet, ammonia-like scent.

Infection. I started to gag and hyperventilate.

“Heather, lie back down,” Raine snapped, pressing a hand to my forehead.

“But— but—”

“We will deal with it. Lie back down. Now.”

“It— it’s infected! I can smell it in the air! I can smell it!”

My hands rose toward the wound in my leg, twitching with some mad desire to rip at my own flesh and dig out the infection. I bared

my teeth, wishing they were sharp, my chest filling with the echo of some instinctive need to bite and tear at my own skin.

Raine grabbed my shoulders and pushed me to the bed, holding me down. Brown eyes like banked fires bored into mine.

“Stay,” she said.

I obeyed, head sinking into the pillow, breath coming in ragged gasps of animal panic.

I was no stranger to pain. I, who had grown the truth of my own body from scratch upon my flanks, from nothing more than pneuma-somatic suggestion and phantom limbs; I, who had endured internal bruising and bleeding and the repeated agony of bodily loss over and over again, all for the sake of euphoria and clarity and the shining rightness of *Homo abyssus*; I, who had plunged my hands and my mind directly into the dark and burning controls of reality more times than I could count. I knew pain like an old and difficult friend who never left. I should not have been so disabled by a mere cut on my leg.

But I was not whole. The Heather who had experienced those pains was sevenfold more than I was then, lying in a damp patch of cold and fearful sweat on an unfamiliar bed. I was but a sliver of myself, and I could not endure this.

“Wait, wait, hey,” Twil said, sniffing at the air. “Is she serious, is that infected? I think I can smell it too!”

“Yes,” Raine said. “She’s burning up. Fever, and it’s bad.”

“How?!” Twil spluttered. Her tail was tucked over her own belly, her wolf-ears gone flat and limp. “She was running around on it like an hour ago! I mean sure, she was a bit unsteady, but nothing like this! Infection doesn’t progress this quickly! What the fuck?!”

“It’s the dream,” Evelyn grunted.

“Eh? What does that have to do with Heather’s leg?”

Evelyn sighed. I couldn’t see her face, but I could hear the tension in her throat, the worry in her dry swallow.

“We changed the genre and tone of the dream,” she said. “We injected more horror — ha! Pun intended. Flushing that wound with water and wrapping it in torn-up bits of t-shirt is no longer

viable. Heather needs proper medical treatment.” She paused. “Raine? What’s wrong now?”

I could only just about see Raine’s face in my peripheral vision. She no longer looked like my faithful hound, always grinning, wagging her own metaphorical tail as she awaited my orders. She was stony-faced and focused, staring at my leg.

“Raine?” I wheezed. “I-I’m scared, I’m really scared, I—”

Raine stood up and snapped off a string of orders. “Evee, you keep one hand on Heather, in case we need to use the Fadestone to hide. Twil, barricade the way in. Get one of those filing cabinets from behind the desk, drag it in front of the door. Now, please.”

As Raine spoke she unhooked the makeshift sling from over her shoulders — the loop of towel which contained Horror’s gagged head, Horror’s stolen heart, and Horror’s amputated arm — and dumped it on the next bed over.

“What?” Twil said. “That won’t keep anybody out for long. They’ll just bust the door down.”

“A barricade will buy us time to touch Evee so she can activate the Fadestone. Just do it.” Raine’s footsteps thumped on the bare floorboards as she strode away from the beds. I raised my head to see where she was going. She was walking to the far end of the room, talking to Twil. “Then get going through these medicine cabinets. We need antibiotics, disinfectant, maybe medical alcohol. Stitching thread and a needle, gauze, bandages, all that sort of stuff.”

“And what are you doing?” Twil said.

Raine went for the sink in the corner. “Washing my hands. With plenty of soap.”

Twil dragged a filing cabinet in front of the door to block any curious nurses, then flew to the cupboards and flung them open, rummaging through medical equipment, slapping needles and thread and packets of bandages down on the worktop.

“Raine, Raine!” she called out. “I don’t know what the hell I’m even looking for! There’s a ton of bottles, but—”

“Isopropyl alcohol, anything that says seventy percent or more. Iodine, or saline.” I couldn’t see Raine in the corner, but she was

making a splashing noise in the sink. “Antibiotics too. Look for bottles that say mupirocin, neomycin, polymyxin, or bacitracin. Vancomycin too, but I doubt they’ll have that here. We also need painkillers. Look for codeine or hydrocodone. Morphine would be better. And a basin, for water. A glass too, we need her to drink. Scissors, don’t forget scissors. And gloves, we need gloves, for extra safety.”

Evee called out: “How the hell do you suddenly know all that, Raine?”

“I just do!” Raine called back.

Twil froze. I could see the top of her head, not moving, wolf-ears flat with anxiety.

Evelyn twisted around at my side. “Twil,” she said, firm and calm. “Take it slow. Do as Raine says.”

“ ... r-right, right. Okay. Cool. Right.”

Raine finished up washing her hands and joined Twil moments later. She started tossing bottles and packets onto the foot of the next bed over. Within a few minutes they had everything they needed.

Raine fed me antibiotics and painkillers; I couldn’t tell which was which, and I was beyond caring by that point. She helped me sit up long enough to swallow the pills with a glass of water, then had me lie back down again. The painkillers worked quickly, but not quickly enough. When Raine started washing my wound, I had to bite down into the folded corner of towel again, to keep from screaming my lungs out. The water hurt bad enough, but the disinfectant was worse. I whined and sobbed until my head was ringing with the pounding of my own blood. My left leg was a field of fire and acid. I squeezed my eyes shut and screamed and screamed and screamed.

“I’m sorry, sweet thing,” Raine murmured. “But we gotta.”

“Raine,” Evelyn said. Then again, harder. “Raine. Raine!”

“What?”

“We cannot do wound debridement on Heather’s shin. You understand? We don’t have the right chemicals or equipment, let alone the right kinds of painkillers.”

“It’s infected—”

“And you will be torturing her. Raine, this is a dream. You don’t need to be physically accurate. We’re not debriding that wound. Do you understand?”

Raine went silent; I didn’t comprehend what they were talking about, but then—

“Alright,” said Raine. “Twil, pass me the needle and thread.”

Twil swallowed. “Are you fucking sure you know how to do this shit?”

“We need to stitch this wound up.”

“Yeah, but, like, do you know how?”

“She does,” Evelyn grunted. “I’ve seen her do it before. And I wouldn’t let her do this to Heather unless I trusted she can do it right.” Evelyn turned back to me, her face filling the left side of my wavering vision. “Heather, you’re in safe hands. I promise. She does know what she’s doing, even if she’s acting funny.”

“Yeah,” Raine said. “I do know how to do this. I learned back in ... in ...”

Raine trailed off. I couldn’t see her face, but I could hear the sudden disjunction, the jarring slam of memory’s vault.

“... Raine?” Twil said. “Fuck me, you don’t look right.” Evelyn twisted around as well.

Raine took a deep breath. Amusement forced its way back into her voice: “Well, I don’t know where I learned to stitch up wounds. But I did learn. Guess the real me doesn’t want me to know, huh? Here, pass the needle. Quicker we do this the quicker Heather can get more antibiotics down her.”

To my relief and surprise, the sensation of having my skin punctured by a needle and threaded back together was barely painful at all, at least not compared with the deep-tissue ache of the wound itself and the waves of cold fire washing up through my hips. Raine worked quickly and precisely, though I didn’t watch; any time I threatened to raise my head and look, Evelyn gently reached over and tapped my chin or cheeks, making her point with excellent clarity.

I wasn't sure how long the stitches took; time seemed to stretch out to infinity as I lay on that bed, staring at the ceiling or at Evelyn's face. Evee didn't say much, though an awkward pressure lingered in her lips and around her eyes. I couldn't see more than the top and side of Raine's head, and Twil was beyond my limited sight completely. Sunlight wavered on the opposite wall, dancing as if scattered by a leafy canopy, then dimming and darkening until the room was plunged into a sudden midday gloom.

"You sure you can't get the lights on?" Raine said.

"Nah," Twil grunted. "There's only one switch and it doesn't do shit. Leccy's fucked, I reckon."

"Mm," Raine grunted, and bent back to her work.

When she was done, she snipped off the thread with a pair of scissors. I almost flinched as the shiny steel blades descended toward my aching flesh, but my trust in Raine kept me from jerking aside. The moment she cut the line, I felt a throb of strange release flow through my heart. Raine smeared some kind of oily gunk onto my shin, then packed sterile gauze over the wound site. She and Twil worked together to wrap my shin with bandages, walling up the wound behind clean white fabric. They fixed the bandage in place with a trio of safety pins.

Finally Raine stood up and stepped back, re-entering my field of vision, wiping sweat from her brow on the back of her arm.

Twil muttered, "We done? That's it?" Then she stood up as well, eyeing me with curious caution, as if I might cough up blood or go into convulsions at any moment. Her tail was tucked between her legs, but her wolf-ears stood tall. She and Raine both peeled off the disposable blue gloves they'd been wearing.

Three faces peered down at me. A fourth looked upward from within the crook of my arm — the Praem plushie was nestled against my ribs. Evelyn must have put her there to comfort me. I stared back into those blank eyes of stitched fabric in mute gratitude.

Twil said, "Is she, like, conscious, or what?"

"She's fine," Evelyn grunted. "She's hopped up on enough morphine pills to knock me out for a week, that's all."

Raine leaned closer, touching the back of her hand to my sweat-soaked forehead, then brushing my hair out of my face. "Heather? Heather, look at me. Concentrate, look at my eyes. Heather?"

"Mm," I croaked. "Raine. G—" I had to clear my throat, dry as a bone. "Good girl."

Raine did not smile. "How do you feel?"

"Bad."

Twil laughed. "Understatement of the year."

"Water, please." I croaked.

Raine fetched me a fresh glass of water from the sink and helped me sit up long enough to drink it all. I stared at my bandaged leg as I drank; the bandage was very clean and very white, without any bloodstains seeping through to mar the perfect surface. I knew next to nothing about proper wound treatment and care, but something about that bandage felt right, as if Raine had saved me in a way I didn't fully understand.

After I lay back down, the others all drank their fill as well. Everyone was tired and worn out, thirsty and a little hungry. Raine rummaged around in the canvas carrier bag and extracted the last of our looted food — some packets of crisps and random confectionery — then shared it out. She ate standing up. Twil sat on the next bed over, hunched forward, the sides of her open shirt hanging downward. Evelyn chewed slowly, staring at my bandaged leg in silent contemplation.

The whole infirmary was sunk deep in grey shadows; the only illumination came from the row of uncurtained windows between the beds, stained dim and dreary by the sudden cloud cover. The air smelled of antiseptic cream and harsh soap. The reek of infection was gone.

Twil stared out of a window, up at the 'sky', then sighed. "Weather doesn't know if it's coming or going."

Evelyn snorted. "It's the dream. How many times do I have to explain?"

"Eh? How'd you figure that? What do you mean?"

Evelyn sighed. "We were triumphant, so the sun came out. But now

we're back down in the horror, quite literally. The weather has adjusted accordingly. Watch out if night starts to fall. That's when the real monsters come out, though we haven't seen one up close yet. Except for Raine. She killed one. Didn't you?"

Raine didn't answer.

Twil tutted. "I hate that shit. Bad stuff happens in full sunlight too, you know. Isn't this kinda like a bad cliché or something?"

"My fault," I croaked, little more than a whisper, staring at the ceiling, my head numb with opiate painkillers. "I like clichés. Stormy nights. Dark and spooky. Woooooooooooo. All that."

Twil laughed softly. "Wow. She really is drugged to the gills. You okay, Big H?"

"No," I croaked.

Raine still said nothing, munching through her bag of crisps without much expression on her face. She stared at me, as if thinking holes straight through me. I stared back, but she didn't even smile.

"Raine?" I croaked. She didn't respond. Perhaps my voice was too weak.

Evelyn said, "I hope there aren't any further shifts in tone and genre. You do realise that I haven't taken a piss the whole last two days?"

Twil blinked several times, then blushed faintly. "E-Evee? What are you—"

"Don't make it weird, Twil," she snapped. "It just occurred to me, after drinking that water. I haven't needed to use the toilet since Heather woke me up, which must be near twenty four hours now. I still don't need to. Whatever patterns the dream is following, our realistic bodily functions are not part of it. Pray that hasn't just changed, or one of you is going to have to lift me out of this chair so I can take a shit."

"No problem," Twil said. "Whatever you need."

Evelyn snorted. "As if. I'm being rhetorical."

Twil chewed on her tongue, then shrugged. "I guess Heather doesn't exactly play a lot of survival games?"

Evelyn reached over and patted my arm with sudden affection. “Yes, we should be thankful she doesn’t have a Minecraft addiction.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I croaked. “It’s all very esoteric.”

“Good,” Evelyn said, surprisingly gentle. “Let’s keep it that way, for now. You just rest, Heather. Stop trying to think.”

“No thinky,” I murmured. My eyelids were so heavy. “Head empty.”

The room lapsed into silence. Cloud shadows drifted across the peeling paint of the walls and the undressed bare floorboards, brushing Raine’s naked, filthy feet. Twil let out a series of long sighs, rubbing her eyes and running her hands through her hair, then poking at her recently acquired wolf-ears. Evelyn leaned to one side to peer at the Praem plushie, then shrugged and left her where she was, tucked into the crook of my arm. Tiny sounds filtered through from the rest of the hospital building — snapping footsteps, muffled voices, the gentle ticking and banging of old radiator pipes.

And Raine just stared at me, unsmiling, so very still. Something was wrong with her, I could tell that much, but I was too high on painkillers to put it into words.

“Soooooooooooo,” Twil said eventually. “What now? We gonna just rest up here for a bit? What’s our next move?”

I shook my head — well, I rolled it back and forth against the pillow. “We have to get to Zheng,” I croaked. “We can’t wait. Have to free her next.”

“No,” Raine said, so gentle and soft, too soft, like a predatory big cat rising from repose. “You have to rest, Heather.”

“I just need a— a— a lemon or two,” I said, trying to sit up. Evee put out one hand to encourage me to remain lying down, but I pushed past her and levered myself upright, supporting myself on my hands. My head throbbed with a rush of blood; my vision swirled, then cleared. I stared down at the bandage around my left leg. “A lemon, right. Or a ... fish and chips? Or a bottle of soy sauce. I could just drink it neat—”

“I can head out and try to secure some more food,” Raine said, still

not smiling. "But you're not going anywhere."

Screwing up my eyes did not help the fuzzy feeling inside my head, nor slow the throb of dull pain still radiating upward from my leg, but it did allow me to gather my thoughts. I opened my eyes again and squinted at Raine.

She was staring back, eyes propped just slightly too wide, no smile upon her lips.

I said: "Raine, we have to go get Zheng. Me and you, together—"

"No, you have to rest," Raine said.

I shook my head. "That doesn't matter. This isn't real, it's all a dream. The sooner we wake Zheng—"

"You're stuffed with painkillers and you cannot walk on that leg," Raine said. "You won't even be able to get there."

"Then carry me!" I snapped. "Carry me on your back and—"

"You need to rest."

Twil stood up and held out both hands. "Woah, woah, you two, fucking hell. I've never heard you argue like this before. Big H, you are hopped all the way up on a big fat dose of morphine. So chill, 'kay?"

Raine said: "That's exactly what I was—"

"And you," Twil said, rounding on her. "You are acting freaky as fuck. Snap out of this robot mode or whatever it is. You're giving me the heebie-jeebies, Raine."

Raine turned her expressionless stare on Twil. "Am I?"

"Fuck!" Twil snapped. Her tail curled straight upward, standing along with her wolfish ears. She bared her teeth and flexed her fingers like claws. A growl rose in her throat. "Stop it!"

"Stop what?" said Raine.

"Heather," Twil said between gritted teeth. "You gotta tell your girlfriend to stop acting like this or I'm gonna lose my shit."

"I ... I don't know what she's doing," I said slowly. My skin broke out with a fresh wave of cold sweat. "I've never seen her like this before. Raine? Raine, what's wrong? Raine, you've been a very

good girl. I don't understand what's wrong."

Raine turned back to me and broke into a grin — wide and sharp and manic, a burning light behind her eyes. I flinched; there was my Raine, but raw and unfiltered, like her confidence and charm was a switch she had flicked.

"Sorry, sweet thing," she purred. "Didn't mean to freak you out. Nothing's wrong. I just don't want you to burst all those stitches we just did."

Twil and I exchanged a worried glance. Twil swallowed. I tried not to shake and shiver. "Uh ... R-Raine, are you feeling okay?"

"Never better. Now you're safe."

Evelyn cleared her throat. "She's regressing."

Raine turned her worryingly tight grin on Evee instead. Evelyn did not flinch or balk or turn pale, she just sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Toward what, my darkling lady?" Raine asked.

"Uh, yeah," Twil echoed. "What do you mean, regressing to what?"

"It's hard to explain," Evelyn said, voice tight, holding Raine's manic gaze. "Regressing further toward how she used to be, how she was long before she met either of you."

"Evee," I croaked. "Didn't you say Raine is already acting like when you first met her?"

Evelyn spoke slowly, measuring each word. "Partially. Since I woke up, she's been rougher, yes, but not all the way there. She's been acting similar to how she did when we were teenagers, that's correct. But this ... this is more like Raine at our actual first meeting. The first few days or weeks. She's regressing toward that. I think. I can't be certain."

"And what was she like?" I said. "Back then?"

"Feral."

Twil snorted. "She's pretty damn fucking feral already! You mean this gets worse? Why the fuck is she acting like this?"

"I don't know," Evelyn said, low and tight. "Perhaps because we adjusted the nature and tone of the dream. Or perhaps because

Heather got wounded and needed real treatment. Remember, Raine is technically not awake, not like the three of us. She's still dreaming. She's just dreaming usefully."

Raine chuckled. "I feel wide awake, my darlings."

"This doesn't change that we need to go help Zheng," I said.

Raine's gaze flickered back to me. Her smile vanished. She pointed a finger. "No. You're hurt. You lie right there and rest—"

"Raine, please—"

"You lie there," Raine repeated. "And rest."

"... Raine, are you ... ?"

Raine blinked rapidly. She was shaking, as if poised on the verge of screaming rage or wild weeping. Her grin jumped back onto her face, splitting her mouth wide, then flickered off again. She blinked more and looked away, swallowing hard.

Twil said: "Is she waking up? Yo, Raine? You waking up?"

"I don't think so," Evelyn grunted. "I think she's stuck."

"Raine?" I said gently. "Raine, what's wrong? Try to put it into words? Please, for me. Be a good girl, for me, please?"

Raine's lips started to move, but her muttering was so quiet that it did not reach my ears. She shook her head gently, then hard, jerking it from side to side. A whisper scratched at her throat. The room fell silent as her voice rose.

"Can't let you get hurt. Can't let you get hurt. Can't let you get hurt," she kept saying, over and over. "Can't let you get—"

Raine cut off all of a sudden and walked over to the sink in the corner. She grabbed one of the glasses we'd been using, filled it with cold water, and dumped the contents over her own head. She set the glass back down with a clack and just stood there, water dripping off her face and sticking her hair to her scalp. Then she wiped her eyes and mouth with her hands and walked back to the foot of the bed. She swept her hair back and rubbed her damp face on her arms.

Then she smiled at me, almost back to normal. "I'll go."

“ ... Raine?”

“Fucking hell,” Evelyn hissed. “She may have been waking up, in fact, and she just bloody well suppressed it! Raine, for fuck’s sake!”

Raine smiled wider and held out both hands. “It’s cool. Heather’s correct, we can’t delay because of her leg wound. We need to be on point and ready for Lozzie’s next riot. But Heather can’t walk, not yet. I might be able to carry her, but that’s too risky with the heightened security. So I’ll go alone. I’ll take the meat to Zheng myself, make sure she eats it all, and do what I can to free her.”

“Uh, um.” I hesitated. “Raine, I really think it has to be both of us. Zheng and you have a special relationship, and she loves me too. She probably needs both of us to—”

Raine held up a gentle hand. “That’s not possible right now. This is the next best option. And you’re right, sweet thing, we have to keep moving.”

“Raine, it has to be like it was in reality! That’s the only way this makes sense.”

Evelyn broke in: “Actually I think this is already a little bit too much like reality.”

“Ah?”

Evelyn clicked her fingers to catch my attention. I met her eyes and found her looking rather unimpressed. “Self-sacrifice,” she grunted. “You’re always so bloody terrible about that, Heather. And now you’re trying to do it again. You promised, so many times, no more of this. If you keep pushing, there’s no telling what that stubborn impulse might do to the dream. No needless self-sacrifice.”

“You ... you think it’s right to let Raine do this alone?” I asked. “She’s all messed up!”

“And she’s right,” Evelyn grunted, then sighed. “She’s the only one who can go do this alone. You or I can’t make it up there. Twil isn’t as stealthy, so she needs to stay and protect us.” Twil muttered a gently offended little ‘hey’, but Eevee ignored it. “It only makes sense, Heather. Raine and Zheng, they have their ... thing, together, so she should try this. She’s right.”

Raine stared at me, waiting for an answer. Her eyes began to tighten, her smile slipping into that too-sharp, too-wide, manic grin

once again, the feral look creeping over her as she regressed toward something she did not wish to be anymore.

“You can’t do everything alone,” Raine said. “This is your dream, but we’re all in it too, right? You don’t do everything alone. Can’t do everything alone. Can’t let you lose that leg to gangrene or infection. You gotta rest. You gotta take care of yourself. Gotta let somebody else shoulder the burden.”

Twil sighed. “She’s got a point, Big H, even though this is pretty weird. This ain’t just all about you. Let her try for Zheng, hey? What harm can it do?”

I swallowed and nodded. “All right. All right then. I don’t like it, but okay, Raine. I’ll rest. You take the meat to Zheng.”

Raine nodded, then leaned forward, cupped the back of my skull, and kissed my forehead. Then, despite the presence of Evelyn and Twil, she kissed me on the lips too, hard and fleeting.

“Love you, sweet thing.”

“I love you too,” I said. “Good ... good girl.”

Raine prepared for her solo mission. I told her the location of Zheng’s residential room as best I could, hoping that the logic of the dream would guide her feet. She took her machete and slung the towel full of body parts over her shoulders again. But then she paused and removed Horror’s towel-wrapped head. She placed it on the next bed over from mine, upright, gagged and bound and sealed up.

Twil wrinkled her nose in disgust. “She’s staying with us?”

Raine nodded, straightening up and stretching her limbs one by one to limber up her muscles. “Gotta travel as light as I can. Sneaking missions by daylight are a lot harder. I can deal with a nurse or two, but one scream or one runner would bring the whole place down on me, so I gotta do this without being seen. Light and fast, in and out, quick as I can.” She nodded at the towel-wrapped ball on the bed. “Plus she might try to mess with me. Nah, she’s gotta stay here. Leave her wrapped up, yeah?”

Twil snorted. “Nah, I thought I’d play footy with her. Course we’re gonna leave her wrapped up, shit!”

“You be careful, Raine,” Evelyn snapped. “We lose you now, we’re

behind again. Don't you screw up."

"Same to you three," Raine said. She nodded at us as she stepped away from the beds. "Keep the Fadestone ready to go, stay close to each other. Twil, you shove that filing cabinet back into position as soon as I'm gone. I'll move as fast as I can. If the meat doesn't work, I'll try to pick Zheng up and carry her back here. Sounds good?"

"Sounds good," I croaked. "Take care, Raine."

She shot me a wink and a final grin. "I will, sweet thing. You rest that leg. Love you."

"What if you don't make it back?" Evelyn asked. "If we make it through the night here and you haven't returned, we'll have to keep going. Heather's right about that."

Raine winked for her too. "Carry on without me for a bit. I'll find you again. Ain't no cell on earth can hold me for long."

"We aren't on earth," Evelyn grunted.

"Exactly."

Twil followed Raine over to the door and prepared to pull the filing cabinet aside. Just before she did, Raine reached out and grabbed the loose collar of Twil's open shirt, pulling her around so they were face to face.

Twil spluttered. "H-hey, yo, Raine, what—"

"I am trusting you to look after these two," Raine said, stony-faced, back behind her unsmiling mask.

"Yeah, yeah, of course I will, what are you—"

Raine shook her head. "That means you listen out. You stay alert. You don't charge into a fight. You stay here, you stay with them. If you have to sleep here, you stand watch. If the worst happens, you fight so they can hide. Understand?"

Twil stopped struggling and looked Raine right in the eyes. "Course I do. That's two of my best friends over there." Twil's eyes flickered to Evelyn. "And maybe something else, too."

Raine smiled, all warm again, suddenly switched back on. "Good. Let's go, wolfie. Lock the door behind me."

Filing cabinet squeaked aside; door lock opened with a soft click. The door itself swung just wide enough for a single furtive exit. Raine paused to check left and right, then she was gone, padding off down the corridor at speed, racing away from our hidden refuge.

All I could think was that we'd done this before, back in the locker room. Raine would not stay lucky forever.

Twil got the door locked and barricaded again, then walked back over to the bed. She looked a little sheepish, tail tucked low, ears flat.

"So, uh, what now?" she asked.

Evelyn sighed and glanced at me. "Heather, for pity's sake, lie the hell back down."

I did as I was told, sinking back into the bed.

The three of us — four, if one counted Praem tucked into the crook of my arm — took Raine's sagely advice and stayed close together, well within arm's reach, lest a sudden assault by nurses or Knights seek to breach the barred door. Evelyn stayed right beside me, huddled down in her wheelchair, Fadestone in one hand, the other hand free to reach up and touch me at a moment's notice. Twil grabbed the chair from behind the single desk and joined us, knee-to-knee with Evelyn. Twil did what she could to make me comfortable; she pulled the sides of my yellow blanket around my front and tucked me in, to keep me warm, to cover my bandaged leg with the physical manifestation of Sevens' affection.

"I shouldn't be here," I croaked. "I should be helping. Should be helping. This is the dream, trying to slow me down. I was so stupid, shouldn't have gotten hurt ... "

"You got that wound saving me," said Evelyn. "Was that worth the pain?"

"... what?"

"Was saving me worth the pain?"

"... of course. Of course."

"Well, there you go then," she said as if that was the end of the subject. "You've already helped. Now try to relax. In four hours you can have a second dose of morphine, but not before."

For a long time I drifted on the edge of consciousness, floating on the cushion of opiates in my blood, kept from true sleep by the insistent throbbing pain in my shin. I stared up at the ceiling, watching the dirty white surface darken toward dusk. Twil and Evelyn carried on a whispered conversation at my bedside, but I only caught snatches of their words, dipping in and out of the oblivious haze of slumber.

“—you still look great, you know? Even if you’re all messed up by this bullshit dream or whatever, you look—”

“Oh do shut up, Twil. I look like a mummified frog and I know it.”

“You look beautiful.”

“ ... ”

“You always look beautiful.”

“Shut up. And this is not the time.”

...

“—dream is based on Heather’s experiences at Cygnet Hospital, when she was little. That much is blindingly obvious, but it’s also the Eye, at the same time, like two metaphors intertwined with each other. This whole place is a mess, I can’t even begin to pick it apart. We need a shrink who is also a mage.”

“And what about her over there?”

“Who?”

“Horror, in her towel. You buy Heather’s theory that she’s part of the Eye too?”

“Somewhat. But she’s more Heather’s fears than the Eye’s ego or whatever. I’m very worried by the fact she’s still alive and talking, even if she is just a head.”

“Ah? But she’s harmless. Unless she goes all body horror on us, like you said.”

“Yes, yes, but what if she really does represent Heather’s trauma? What does that tell us?”

“ ... ah. Oh shit. Yeah, like, that’s bad.”

“Indeed.”

...

“—wish we knew where the Cattys were. Can you imagine them busting through all this? I’d ride one into battle, no shit, that would be the coolest thing ever.”

“If wishes were fishes, et cetera, et cetera. I don’t actually recall how that saying goes, but you get the point.”

“Did you just say ‘et cetera’ out loud?”

“I did. What of it?”

“ ... ”

“What, Twil?”

“You’re so fucking cute.”

A sigh. “I don’t appreciate these attempts to flirt—”

“We’re in like, life-or-death peril, right? When else am I going to flirt with you? Come on.”

“Twil—”

“It’s not like I’m trying to bang you. Heather’s out cold right here. There’s a disembodied head over there. We’re in some real Scooby Doo surrounds. Not exactly sexy time. But hey, if you—”

“Miss Twilight Hopton.”

“Oof! Come on, Eevee, don’t call me that, that’s worse than ‘Twillamina’.”

“Really?”

“Well, no, it’s actually much funnier. But still.”

A short silence, broken by audible smiles.

“I do ... I do ... love you, Twil.” A huff, the loudest sound I’d heard so far. “But you and I are so incompatible it’s not even funny.”

“We don’t have to be like girlfriend and girlfriend or anything.”

“No, I suppose we don’t.”

“ ... would you like that, though? Going steady, nice and stable, all that?”

A shrug, heard in the clicking and grinding of the bones in Evelyn's shoulders and back.

Twil again: "What do you think of me, really? Come on, no filter. Just say it."

"I already told you, don't make me repeat it. Or are you pretending not to have heard?"

"Nah, nah. Not like, how you feel about me. What do you think of me? Come on, Saye." A grin crossed Twil's words. "Hit me as hard as you can."

Evelyn leaned forward in her chair — I could hear the seat of the wheelchair creaking — and hissed, low and sharp with a teasing grin in her voice that I'd never heard from her before, a side of Evelyn that was not mine to see, but which only Twil could draw out.

"You're hot shit and you know it," Evelyn whispered. "I want to put a collar around your neck and force your head between my thighs with a yank on your leash, but I'm afraid you'll bite."

Another creak — Evelyn leaning back.

Twil swallowed, dry and tight, then cleared her throat. "Uh ... o-okay."

"You did ask."

"I did, but ... okay then."

...

After that, I finally drifted too deep beyond the wall of sleep. If Twil and Evelyn flirted further, I did not hear them. I heard only the throb of blood in my own ears, backed by the ticking and tingling of pain deep down in my left shin, ebbing down and down and down, into the darkness of my tender healing flesh.

When I awoke into a dream within the dream, the pain was gone.

The infirmary had fallen into evening shadows, deep and heavy, clustered up in the corners of the dirty ceiling. I lay on my back, on the bed, staring upward at those shadows, wishing they would descend to lull me back to true sleep. A gentle scratching sound whispered at the edge of my hearing, punctuated by little tick-tap-tick-tap noises, in between the scratchy motion of chalk on a board.

I knew I must be dreaming, because the pain was gone. Surely I was overdue for my next dose of morphine. Nothing seemed to matter very much. All emotion, all worry, all concerns had fled. I was dreaming. Dreams were safe.

But curiosity lingered. What was that sound, the scratching and the tapping?

I turned my head on the pillow. Evelyn and Twil had fallen asleep in their respective chairs, holding hands. Evelyn looked like a comfy little sprite, tucked up inside her grey dressing gown. Twil's head had nodded onto her chest. She'd finally buttoned up her shirt again. Perhaps she was cold. The door was still barricaded. Raine had not yet returned.

A tall figure stood behind the desk, facing away from me.

She had long blonde hair, hanging down over the back of a white laboratory coat. A towel-wrapped bundle hung from her left hand — Horror's head. Her right hand worked with chalk upon a blackboard, which had not been present in the waking world. She had covered half the board in a single long equation, sprawling forth from a particularly difficult knot of numbers in the top left of the blackboard. She was still writing, still adding figures to the mathematics, scratching and clicking with a stick of raw white chalk.

The Governor of Cygnet Asylum had come to visit.

"Hello?" I croaked.

The Governor's hand paused. Her head twitched, but she did not turn to look.

"Crutch," she said. "Next to your bed."

I started to sit up; somebody had helpfully propped a plastic and metal crutch against the side of my bed, so I would be able to walk on my wounded leg. As I sat up, I almost knocked an object out of the crook of my arm — the Praem plushie!

I caught Praem before I could so rudely knock her to the floor, then cradled her in both hands, smiling down at her funny flat eyes and the straight line of her mouth, dim and dark in the evening shadows. I finished sitting up and swung my legs over the side of the bed, ready to reach for my new-found crutch.

Praem stared; I stared back. Her flat eyes insisted that I pay attention.

Pay attention, Heather.

Lucidity returned, rushing into my head as the adrenaline rushed into my veins. My left shin throbbed with renewed pain. I swallowed a gasp, because I really did need that second dose of morphine.

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap; the Governor returned to her equation, writing upon the board in clean white chalk.

This was no dream.

bedlam boundary – 24.23

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap.

The Governor's stick of chalk flicked and dragged across the blackboard, a stuttering white spark in the gathering gloom of an early evening, cradled in the spider-clutch fingers of a dusken hand, palm and wrist melding into the softly squirming shadows. Tendrils of shade lapped at her messy mane of dark blonde hair, as if trying to straighten out the tumbled tresses. Red-orange light filtered through thickly cloying cloud cover beyond the windows; the last glint of a ruddy sunset snagged on the metal angles of the dozen wristwatches she wore on her right forearm, framed by the rolled-up cuff of her laboratory coat. The night crept upward to swallow the swinging globe dangling from her other hand — Horror's severed head, wrapped tight in a towel.

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap.

The infirmary was choked with umbral tide; evening was dead, falling gracefully into the grave of night. Through the uncurtained windows, the grounds of Cygnet Hospital lay beneath crests and peaks of flowing darkness, crowned by the thinnest remnant of the sun's falsehood.

No sound reached out from the rest of the asylum, as if all the patients were sleeping in their beds and all the staff had gone home for the day, or retreated to their night-time posts, or simply vanished with the passing of the light. Even Evelyn and Twil were perfectly quiet in their premature slumber, though I could see their chests rising and falling with soundless breath.

All was silent and still. All, except that unceasing skitter-scatter — scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap.

Adrenaline drowned my brain and flooded my nervous system. Breathing was almost impossible. My skin broke out in cold sweat, sticking hair to scalp and clothes to flesh. I clutched the Praem Plushie in clammy palms, wide-eyed at the Governor's back, at her bold shoulders beneath her lab coat, at her tumble of dark hair, at the swish and flick and jerk of her hand as she drew chalk across

board.

How was this possible? The door was still barred by a filing cabinet, a big metal monster which only Twil could move with ease. Why had Twil and Eevee not awoken? The scratching and tipping and tapping, it was so loud! The sound jabbed at the inside of my skull, prickling my eyes with tears, provoking the edge of a sneeze.

And what was she — the Governor, the Eye, the Eye's embodied ego? — what was she doing?

Mathematics, of course.

She was writing out an equation.

Panic surged up from my guts in a wave of nausea and vertigo; the sneeze was strangled by the taste of bile in the back of my throat. The Governor had spoken to me, hadn't she? And now she was performing hyperdimensional mathematics, and only the horrors of Outside knew what nightmares would flower from those numbers and—

Praem — a plush Praem, held in my sweaty, trembling hands — bid me to take a deep breath and stay calm.

I nodded. I took that deep breath. Panic ebbed back down my throat, though it still burned in my chest.

"Evee," I whispered as loudly as I dared. "Evee? Evee, wake up. Wake up! Evee? Evelyn?"

Evelyn slept on; perhaps she could not hear my voice over the scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap of the chalk. I reached out and did something I would never normally contemplate, — I grabbed Evee's shoulder without warning or permission, hard and rough and careless enough to hurt. I shook her. I squeezed. I dug with my fingertips until I found collarbone and scapula. I even used Praem, pressing the plushie to Evee's shoulder.

But still she did not wake.

"... Twil? Twil, wake up! I need help. Twil!"

I had to lean further to reach Twil in the same manner. She was no more responsive than Evee. They both slept on, holding hands, breathing in slow silence.

Alone. Alone with the Eye. Alone to face—

No! Praem insisted.

I dragged my eyes downward to meet those flat discs of stitched white, going grey in the thickening shadows of the night. She was right here. Praem, who was in many ways as much my spiritual daughter as she was Evelyn's. Praem was right there with me. I need not face fear alone.

But face fear I must, or else the Governor would complete her equation without me.

"... stop," I croaked, raising my voice. Louder. "Stop. Stop writing. Wait for me. Stop! Please!"

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap. The Governor kept writing.

A plastic and metal crutch stood propped against the side of my bed; the Governor had put it there, so that I might walk on my injured leg. That was a good sign, I told myself. It meant she wanted me to get up and go over there and join her. She was not simply performing brain-math upon us, without knowledge or consent. I was expected to participate in this process, whatever it was.

My throat closed up. My hands shook all the harder.

A lesson.

The Eye wished me to join her for a lesson. We had gone without one for almost a year, had we not? And finally she had me where she wanted, back in a nightmare, back in the classroom, back with the mathematics once again.

I could not let her dictate the pace. I had to intervene.

I slipped my left arm through the supporting loop of the crutch and gripped the textured plastic handle in a sweaty fist. With my right arm, I hugged Praem to my chest, safe and secure. Then I levered myself to my feet, took one unsteady step, and—

A hundred tiny knives ripped open the flesh of my left shin.

The bandage was clean and unblemished. The dressing was intact. No blood leaked through Raine's loving and delicate stitch-work. But the pain choked me on my own gasp, blinded me with tears, and made me want to vomit. The sole of my foot could not endure the slightest pressure. I could not walk, even with the crutch.

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap; the Governor's equation now filled a full quarter of the blackboard.

"Stop ... " I whined. "Please, stop."

If I tried to cross the room — a dozen steps? More? — the pain would knock me out or drive me mad.

A row of pill bottles stood on the counter top, amid the peeling white paint and the dubious dark stains, about to be swept into the clutch of the crawling shadows. The counter was only three or four paces from the foot of the bed. I could make that. I forced three deep breaths down my throat, then clenched my jaw until my teeth squeaked. Raine and Evelyn and Twil had bought me time and clarity. Praem supported my other arm. I could make it! Three or four steps was nothing. I could make it, I could!

Never before had I held Evelyn in such reverent respect as upon the eternity of pain I spent crossing the width of that infirmary.

Evee always made it look so easy, walking on one mechanical prosthetic and one withered leg — which could barely hold her weight — swinging her walking stick like an extension of her body. Evelyn strode, strutted, stomped, and stamped with style and substance. But me? I sweated and shook and slipped, hauling myself along on that shivering crutch, my good leg almost buckling underneath my meagre body weight, swallowing a scream when I was forced to put pressure on the sole of my injured leg.

I reached the counter top and slumped against the wrinkled wood, panting for breath, sweat running down my face, sticking my pajama top to my back. The pain was creeping higher now, fresh barbed wire forcing its way up through my veins and arteries to tear at the meat of my thigh and chip away at my hipbone.

Painkillers — codeine, hydrocodone. Pill bottles jangled and echoed, shoved aside. Not enough, not for this pain.

The bottle of morphine threatened to slip from my sweaty hands. I gripped harder, scrabbling at the lid with my fingernails. Broke the white plastic, let it clatter to the counter top. Couldn't read the tiny text on the bottle, blurred by tears and shadow. Had four hours passed since the first dose? Would I poison myself with opiates if I took more right away? How many tablets, how many should I swallow, how many—

Praem assured me that more than four hours had elapsed. She instructed me to swallow two pills.

My juddering hands extracted four pills instead; I let two fall onto the counter and roll away, too desperate and distracted to pluck them up and return them to the bottle. I shoved the little disks into my mouth, dry and hard and small. A glass stood at my elbow, holding less than a mouthful of lukewarm water. I tossed it down anyway, then swallowed. The pills scratched and stuck as they went. I almost choked, coughing and spluttering.

But down the morphine went.

The painkillers hit my stomach like honey drowning a fire. I stood for too long, gripping the counter top, swaying suddenly, my vision eaten away by the darkness at the edges.

Praem guided me to a bottle of antibiotics. I needed my second dose, lest the first be wasted. The pills were chalky chewable circles. They tasted like lemons.

Praem told me to slip both bottles into my yellow blanket. I might need them later.

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap.

The Governor's flicking stick of ghost-white chalk had reached the halfway point of the blackboard. The equation glowed in the shadows, the letters and numbers and spiral-shape figures rising in phantom phosphorescence out of the falling night. Her blonde hair swayed as she wrote, dragging across the laboratory coat. The last of the sunlight was almost gone.

"Stop," I croaked again. "Stop writing. Please, just wait for me."

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that oral opiate tablets should take thirty minutes or more to start functioning, to wash away the pain and the care, to leave me able to walk without screaming and blacking out. But I did not have thirty minutes. I did not have even three.

I put Praem down on the counter top — "Just for a second, I promise, I promise, won't leave you here" — then fumbled with the cuff of my left-hand sleeve. I pulled back the ribbed brown jumper, then the soft pink pajama top with the strawberry pattern. The Fractal shone on my skin, darker than any shadow. Stark black lines

and perfect angles, pure and uncorrupted by the touch of the dream.

Praem returned to the crook of my right arm; I hugged her tight, to my chest. I gripped the crutch once again, angling my body weight so I could stagger forward.

Morphine dripped downward, leeching into my wound, pushing back the pain.

Off I went, striding into the dark, toward the Governor's back and the ceaseless flickering of her chalk, trying not to scream as I put weight on my left foot. Where were my slippers? Raine must have removed them before she'd carried me to the infirmary bed. Ah, there they were, fallen by the door. Too far for the additional steps. Too far to divert. To swing that way would break my momentum and send me crashing to the floor. My poor feet would have to remain cold for now. A little chill hardly mattered.

I lurched like a drunkard upon the deck of a sailing ship, lost in the worst of all storms. I slammed into the desk, hissing and grunting, using the impact to re-route my own balance. Then I staggered sideways, reeling forward, and fell against the wall, next to the edge of the blackboard.

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap. The Governor kept writing.

"Stop," I croaked. "Stop. Stop writing. Stop. Stop!"

Scratch-tick-tap-scratch-tick-tap.

I righted myself and stood on both feet, despite the grasping claws of pain inching upward. I extracted my left arm from the crutch and thrust it forward, pointing the Fractal at the Governor.

"Stop!"

Scratch-tick—

She stopped writing.

The Governor paused, a wavering shadow outlined by the glass of the window, a high nose and powerful cheekbones framed by a mane of darkest blonde. Her spine was very straight beneath her laboratory coat; her chest showed a swell of coffee-coloured jumper, a perfect match with my own. Her face, free of even the tiniest blemishes, without even a single mole, was blank and bored. Eyes

pink as blood-frothed water glowed faint as if with distant inner light.

My mouth was bone. My hands were frightened doves. My heart hammered against Praem's fabric-and-stuffing body.

"What are you doing?" I said.

She circled a portion of the equation with a loop of chalk. Then her arm hinged outward, offering me the shining white cylinder.

I started to shake my head, but then I took her seriously; I straightened up as best I could, taking my own weight on legs and crutch, tugging my yellow blanket tight across my shoulders. I examined the equation, but I could not make head nor tail of what it was meant to mean. It spilled across the blackboard in ghostly figures, thousands of them packed shoulder to shoulder. The numbers and symbols meant nothing.

"I'm not any good at mathematics," I said. The words felt absurd, but they seemed the right thing to say. "Not without the rest of me. Only one seventh of me is here right now. You must know that."

The Governor gestured vaguely with the stick of chalk, encouraging me to take it from her.

"I can't," I said, voice tight with new-found fury. "It doesn't mean anything to me. I don't understand. I never understood why you did this to me. I mean, yes, I have working theories now — you were trying to propagate yourself, spread yourself, make a copy of yourself, find a mirror into which you could look and see yourself. Or it was all a mistake, because we were just cuckoos in your nest, yes, fine. I know all that. But I still don't understand."

The Governor gestured with the chalk again, slow and easy.

"Look at me," I hissed.

The Governor turned her head — slowly, haltingly, dragging her eyes across the equation as if her gaze caught upon the figures. She stared for a moment at the number seven, then a three, then at a symbol I did not recognise. She stared at the darkness beyond the blackboard, pausing upon the wall, then on the filing cabinet which blocked the door.

Finally her eyes met mine. She did not withdraw the stick of chalk.

“Take it?” she said.

Raine had been correct; the Governor spoke with a distinct Reading accent, my accent. Her voice was floaty and soft, like the wind through a field of drying cloth. We did not look alike, the Governor and I. Her face was bold and sharp where mine was round and soft. Her skin was dusken dark where mine was pale and pasty. She was taller than me by more than a head. Her hair was thick and luxuriant. Her eyes were empty and elsewhere.

Only our accents matched — and the jumpers we both wore, brown as cream-rich coffee.

“I can’t do anything with it,” I said. “I was never able to refuse you before. In the dreams, the nightmares, the decade of nightmares. I could never say no. But now I can tell you no, can’t I? Because you have ears, like this. So no, I won’t take the chalk.”

She blinked. Twice. Looked away. Then back at me again.

“It’s yours,” she mumbled. “Take it?”

Praem suggested this was a good idea. If the Eye — or the Governor — did not have the chalk, then she could not return to the equation. At the very least, we would be more in control of the situation. Good idea, Praem. I reached out with trembling fingers and plucked the ghostly white stick from the Governor’s grasp. Our hands did not touch. The idea of touching her flesh made my skin crawl.

She watched me take the chalk. She had no reaction, neither good nor bad.

As I took the chalk, I noticed something.

“Your watches have all stopped,” I said. None of the dozen watches on her right arm were ticking. All their hands had ground to a halt.

She withdrew her arm and glanced at her watches, moving her gaze from wrist to elbow, as if struggling to rake her attention across the petrified faces. Her eyes flickered away again, losing interest. Then, back to me.

Eyes the colour of crushed brick and powdered shell. Rain-clouds at dusk, swallowing a dead sun. The rim of morning. Pink like entrails, flower-buds before the storm.

I shook my head, bewildered and numb, unsure what to say. What can one possibly say, to the avatar of a nightmare which has haunted one's dreams for half of one's life? My mouth felt dry and my leg ached, but most of my fear had fled. Why was I unafraid? Because this metaphor for my decade of nightmares was nothing compared to the reality. The Governor was nothing compared to the Eye. The Governor was so passive.

But she was the Eye, in the same way that I was Heather.

"Are you lucid?" I said eventually. "Do you know what you are?"

The Governor shrugged, eyes wandering away. "I know I can't leave."

"I've never spoken to you before," I said. "Not really. You and I, we don't speak. You can't speak. You just communicate in ... well, in this." I gestured at the inscrutable mathematics on the blackboard, the glowing letters thrusting outward from the night's skin. "Is that what you're trying to do? Are you trying to speak with me?"

The Governor blinked. "I don't have time for this."

"Time for what? Time doesn't matter, this is a dream, time will bend to accommodate whatever we do. I've rendered you down into a human shape. Or at least part of you. You can just use your mouth. You can talk. Talk to me. Tell me ... why."

She shrugged.

"I never wanted your lessons," I said, a strange cold anger dying inside my chest. "I never wanted any of it. I wanted to be a normal person, an ordinary person, and live with my sister. But you, you took all that away and shoved this shit into my head and ... and ..."

"A shuddering breath went through me. "And if you hadn't, I never would have met Raine, or Eevee, or became what I am now. I don't understand how I should feel about you. Should I feel anything at all?"

The Governor watched this truncated outburst without expression.

I sighed. "Why am I even saying this to you? You don't care."

"You need to finish the equation", she said.

"Why? What does it do? What's it for?"

"It's for you."

"I just told you, I don't want your lessons. I cut you off a year ago, because I don't want them anymore. You see this?" I gestured with my left arm, raising the Fractal. "This is a restraining order. No more of you."

"I know."

"All I want is my sister back. All I want is Maisie."

The Governor blinked, brow crinkling — with incomprehension. Did she not understand?

The Governor looked away from me, dragging her eyes across the equation once again. Then she looked out of the window, then up at the sky — no, at the ceiling, blank and covered with a clustering of shadows. But it was the sky at which she gazed.

"How can I be both above and below?" she asked. "How can we be more than one? We've always been just one."

Praem prompted me with something I would not have considered — empathy.

"... are you lonely?" I asked.

The Governor lowered her gaze and looked at me. "I need to see myself."

I shook my head. "I am not your mirror."

The Governor shook her head too. "Not what I meant."

"You can't see yourself in a reflection," I said. "That's just the physical self. If you want to see yourself — your real self — reflected, then you need context. Other people. Community." I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut. "What am I even saying? Why am I saying any of this to you? You're ... you can't comprehend any of this. Can you?"

"We are both trapped, are we not?"

I opened my eyes to find the Governor staring back at me, still without expression.

"Have you been watching us?" I asked. "Me and my friends? Have you been watching what we're up to, following our progress? Do you understand why we help each other, why we want to help each other? Is any of it getting through to you? Is this play reaching

you?”

The Governor looked back at the equation. “I don’t have time for this. You need to finish the equation.”

I almost laughed. “I can’t! I’m reduced. I’m one seventh of myself. And it’s your institution which has done this to me, to all of us. This place is the inside of you.”

She glanced out of the window again. “Not my intention.”

“Where are the other six of me?” I demanded, not expecting an answer.

“Restrained. Captive. Boxed up.”

“ ... in the ‘Box’?”

“Mm,” she grunted.

Hope surged in my chest. “And Maisie is in the Box, too?”

“Mhmm.”

“How can I get into the Box?”

She shrugged. “Through a door, I suppose.” Her gaze wandered back to the equation again. “Are you going to finish this?”

I sighed. “I keep telling you, I can’t. I don’t understand any of the mathematics. I need you to teach me, all over again. Is that why you’re here?”

The Governor looked at me — suddenly, sharply, her pink-frothed eyes clearing of haze and distraction.

Lucid, the Governor saw me.

I almost stumbled back, clutching my metal crutch, crushing Praem to my chest in quivering fear.

“I’m here because you understand,” she said. “Because you and I understand each other. We are the same thing. We seek the same thing.”

I snorted — a weak little laugh, a feeble defence. “You’re a god and I’m your angel. Is that it?”

“You are my daughter,” she said.

I sighed, the fear ebbing away. “No, I’m not. I have an actual biological mother, who gave birth to me. You just ... adopted me. Against my will. By force. I mean, you kidnapped me. Me and Maisie. Why did you never let her go? You have to understand ... ” I trailed off and swallowed, surprised by the bile rising up my throat. I had not prepared for this, for a face-to-face chat with the thing which had kept my twin sister imprisoned beyond reality for ten long years. “You have to understand how angry I am with you. With what you’ve done. Keeping her and I separated, keeping her here. I ... I don’t even think you understand the concepts, but I could easily hate you for that.”

“Do you hate me?”

I was lost for words. What was hate, to something like this? She didn’t care. Hate was irrelevant. “No,” I said. “Because there’s no point.”

The Governor’s gaze wandered away again, over the equation. She shrugged.

“I need to return to the archives and finish my work.” she muttered. “Then I will see.”

“ ... pardon?”

She shrugged again. I’d heard her perfectly, but I didn’t understand.

“What are the archives?” I asked.

“Everything,” she muttered. “Every detail. All which needs to be seen.”

“And what does that mean? What do you need to do in the archives?”

“All I need to do is finish going through the archives. Once I’ve finished, everything will make sense. Once I understand, everything will make sense.” The Governor turned away from the equation, back to me again. “Are you going to finish this?”

I glanced at the numbers one last time, chalk pinched between my fingers. I asked Praem if she knew how to do this — she had opened the door to Wilson Stout’s office, hadn’t she? But Praem said she could not. This was true hyperdimensional mathematics, irrelevant to any maid.

"I can't," I said eventually. "I keep telling you, I can't."

The Governor nodded. She slid her hands into the pockets of her lab coat with the finality of putting on a hat and scarf.

"Wait!" I snapped. "You're in charge of this place, Cygnet Hospital, the asylum. You are the authority, you're in charge. If you want me to finish this equation, or you want to finish whatever you're doing in the archives, then let us go."

The Governor looked at me without expression, pink eyes glowing faintly in the dark.

"Let us go," I repeated. "Dismiss all the staff, all the doctors and nurses. Throw open the cells, the prison, the high-security wing, all of it. Let us go before the next riot. Because if you don't, the riot will grow, the revolution will win. We'll sweep the staff aside and knock the walls down, either metaphorically or literally. And then we'll halt your work with the archive. It'll never be completed, whatever it is. We will halt your work."

The Governor stared at me, and said: "I would like that very much."

Then she stepped around me, heading for the barred door.

"Don't just leave!" I snapped. "Let us go! Or at least explain what the archive is! Hey!"

She crossed to the door; it was no longer barred. The filing cabinet stood aside. The door itself opened, yawning on the near-to-night darkness of the corridor beyond.

"I could show you," she muttered. "I'm going back. You can come, if you want."

"I ... I can barely walk!" I said. "My leg is killing me, and that's with a fresh dose of morphine."

The Governor paused in the doorway and looked back at me, then down at my leg. "Mine too. Same spot."

"... pardon?"

"We're the same. I told you, we're the same. We understand each other. You should look at the archives too. Maybe you can help. Maybe you were supposed to help all along. That would be pleasant. I would be ... less ... singular ... "

The Governor trailed off, turning toward the darkness. She stepped out into the corridor and turned left, heavy boots slapping on the floor as she strode away.

“Wait!” I snapped. “Wait for me, you— dammit!”

I stuffed the stick of chalk into my yellow blanket and hobbled over to my mud-befouled slippers. Getting them onto my feet was not easy, even now the morphine had soaked into my bones; putting too much pressure on my left leg sent a strange echo of pain upward from my shin and into my thigh and hip, like the sound of a bowling ball rolling slowly from wall to wall down an empty hallway. It didn’t actually hurt, but seemed as if it should, like biting one’s lip after having a dental anaesthetic. My body was calm and easy, but my mind knew that I would pay in pain later on.

With my slippers jammed onto my feet, I staggered toward the open door, swaying on my crutch like a ship with a broken mast. The Governor’s footsteps were vanishing toward the edge of my hearing.

In the doorway I paused and lifted the Praem Plushie to my face. We looked back together, toward where Evelyn and Twil slept on, oblivious to our departure.

“Should I follow her?” I hissed, asking Praem her advice. “This isn’t safe, I know this isn’t safe!”

I was addled by opiates and half-sunk in dream logic, but I was not stupid — venturing out, alone, into the darkness, on the heels of the Eye itself, barely able to walk, was by far the most stupid thing I could possibly do in this situation. I should slam the door shut and lock it fast, then try to drag the filing cabinet to re-create the barricade. But this was my chance to find out what the Eye really wanted. She would lead me straight to this ‘archive’, if only I could follow.

But was I stepping into a trap?

Praem said yes. Obviously. This was unsafe. Do not attempt to follow the Governor. Close the door and stay—

“Heather?”

The Governor’s voice floated down the hallway outside. Her footsteps had stopped.

Perhaps she had decided to give me a proper answer. I checked

with Praem. Praem said it was okay to look, but don't follow. Don't follow. Don't leave everyone else behind.

I lurched out into the corridor.

To my right was darkness, dingy walls, and dirty floor. To my left, twenty feet or more down the hallway, a single yellow light bulb guttered above an intersection, casting sickly grey light across the corners of painted plaster.

The white hem of the Governor's laboratory coat flicked around one of those corners.

"Wait!" I hissed into the darkness. My voice returned as a chorus of echoes — wait wait wait wait ... "Where are you going?! I'm not going to follow you! Come back! Talk to me, you—"

The light bulb in the intersection guttered out.

Darkness was absolute. For a split-second I could not even see Praem's fabric face, tucked into the crook of my arm. I hiccuped; the sound was flat, without echoes, as if I was buried in a box.

Then the light bulb burst back to life, like a dying body gasping for one more breath.

The door to the infirmary was gone, replaced by a whitewashed plaster wall. The junction ahead had vanished; the corridor had straightened out — and out and out and out, stretching off into infinity. A corridor of infinite length, punctuated by occasional flickering light bulbs between an infinity of nothing. The Governor stood beneath the first such struggling bulb, facing toward me, hands thrust deep into the pockets of her laboratory coat. Her pink-froth eyes seemed to look past my shoulder, as if penetrating the shadows to my rear.

"Don't dawdle," she muttered.

She turned on one heel and walked away, boots clicking against the cold floor, stepping out of the light and into the darkness, as if her feet created the reality beneath her soles.

"Oh," I hissed. "Oh, oh no." I glanced back down at Praem. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Praem. I've left Evee behind. I'm so sorry. This is my fault, I take responsibility, it's my fault, I shouldn't have stepped beyond the door. I'm such a fool, I—"

Praem told me not to worry. This wasn't my fault. I cannot have been expected to know the Governor would have authority over the physical walls and portals of Cygnet Asylum. That was just cheating.

But I should have expected anything; this was a nightmare, after all.

"We can get back to the infirmary, we can," I whispered to Praem. "I'm not doing what the Eye — the Governor, whatever she is — wants me to do, and right now she obviously wants me to follow her, she—"

Praem directed my eyes to the corridor ahead and impressed upon me that I did not have a choice. At my rear stood a wall of darkness. The corridor ahead was a straight line, unbroken by branches or junctions, punctuated by that weak light struggling against the night beyond the walls. The Governor was receding into the distance, laboratory coat flapping about her calves. Soon she would leave me behind, alone in the dark.

No path existed save on the heels of the Governor.

"I'll get us out of this," I hissed, then swallowed a hiccup. "I promise I will. Hold on tight, Praem."

I swung my crutch forward and lurched off in pursuit, driven by anger and outrage as much as fear or curiosity. The Governor — the Eye, I reminded myself with a grunt and a snarl of effort, as I caught my body weight and hauled myself onward, crutch-tip squeaking against the floor — had lured me away from my friends, away from those who mattered, and then trapped me with a dirty trick as soon as I was separated from those who helped define what I truly was.

"Wait for me, you ... you ... horrible thing!" I hissed at her retreating back.

The lights flickered at the sound of my voice. I cared not. Morphine pushed back the fear.

My lurching stagger ate up the corridor; my head spun with sudden vertigo, but I crammed my eyes shut and carried on. Within thirty seconds I caught up to the Governor's clicking heels. The sober part of my mind knew that was impossible, but Praem suggested I not consider that fact too closely. We walked between pools of flickering electric light, oases of weak and watery illumination

separated by oceans of darkness. In the gloom between the lights, nothing seemed to exist except her and I, and the sound of our feet.

“Where are you leading me?” I demanded.

“Where you asked to go,” said the Governor. “To the archives.”

“And what are the archives? What do they archive?”

“Everything,” she muttered, voice drifting away on the empty black air. “All of it.”

“Everything what?!” I spat, wishing she would pause for a moment so I could smash her in the ankles with my crutch. “All of what? What is in the archives, all of what?”

“Observations.”

And as she spoke that truth, the lights guttered out, plunging us into the abyss.

When they flickered back on, we were no longer walking down a corridor of infinite length, vanishing toward a point miles distant. That had just been a filthy lie to get me out of that room, to peel me away from my friends, away from my protection and my context. Now the Eye and I were walking down an ordinary hospital corridor, walls punctuated by doorways and junctions. A stairwell loomed ahead, climbing toward flickering bulbs.

Now is your chance, Praem reminded me. Get away from her as soon as you can.

Right, I agreed. Absolutely! Time to slip away and get back to the infirmary. Time to leave!

Yet the institution itself denied my escape with great and intentional efficiency; as we passed the open mouths of empty corridors and plodded up winding staircases, every route but the one ahead was choked by darkness. The Governor strode on past lightless junctions and the gaping holes of many doorways. Each was filled with black, the walls and floor vanishing into lightless immensity within a foot or two. I had no torch or mobile phone, no way to pierce the darkness except my own opiate-fogged vision. I wished for my tentacles, my other six selves, strobing as bright rainbows from my flanks; together we would have made a mockery of the darkness, turned it into a playground, no obstacle at all.

But I did not have any of that. I was one, alone, singular, and I could not see in the dark.

I hobbled on at the Governor's heels, hoping always that the next corridor, the next junction, or the next stairwell would provide an alternative route, a flickering light bulb in the distance, a hint of a way out. I waited for an exit.

I waited in vain. Every corridor was impassable with darkness, all but the one we already trod. The Governor walked on, click-click-click, heading always for the next island of electric illumination, the next set of flickering light bulbs in the ceiling, the next buzzing fluorescent bar attached to a hospital wall. We passed banks of windows blinded by the night outdoors, the last rays of sunlight finally swallowed up by the horizon of the Eye. We hurried on through gaping hallways that seemed to open into nothing on either side, as if we walked on a tightrope above an abyss. We trod past row after row of closed doors, the little windows looking in on the unlit cells of patient residential rooms. Nothing and nobody stirred within.

Twice I almost stepped from the path, willing to brave the dark just to avoid whatever deeper trap the Eye was leading me into. But both times I halted, then scurried back toward the Governor's heels, for I saw shapes moving in the deep darkness beyond sight — inhuman outlines, warped and twisted, wrapped in scraps of nurse-like uniform.

The staff of Cygnet Hospital still stalked the night-time corridors.

Raine might be able to outfight or outrun a nurse, but I was unarmed and disabled. If I left the Governor's side, I would not make it back to my friends. What an irritating and insulting irony.

After several long minutes of walking — of staggering and lurching and clutching at my crutch — I drew level with the Governor, to walk beside her rather than at her heels. I glanced up at her eyes, but she simply stared straight ahead as she walked. Pink glow burned deep behind her irises.

"May I ask you a question?" I said. "Will you answer?"

"Of course. That is the first principle of teaching."

I clenched my teeth, but I did not waste my breath on a rebuke. "Where are the archives?"

“Below my office,” she said. “Beneath.”

“And where is your office?”

“You’ve been there before. You should remember that.”

“Humour me. Pretend I don’t know. Just tell me where it is.”

“We’re going there right now.”

“Tell me where it is.”

“You should memorise the route.”

Praem reminded me that there was no point in losing my temper. This was a dream, and the Eye was not the Eye, merely an avatar, an expression, a small piece of a whole. The Governor was an idiot god at the centre of the institution, concerned with only one thing — the archives

And myself, I supposed; she was taking an interest in me. She was taking me to the archives, but wished me to know nothing else but that which she was going to place in front of my eyes.

The Governor led me deeper and deeper into the core of the hospital. We seemed to move into administrative areas, carpeted and whitewashed, with doors that opened on lightless offices and bookkeeping rooms, with a hint of desks and shelves pinned behind the wall of night. The stretches of darkness between the electric lights grew longer and longer, with light bulbs flickering at the far ends of elongated corridors, so that we trod across vast expanses of twilight emptiness between pools of reality.

And the staff — the nurses — began to surround us.

The misshapen figures never entered the pools of light, nor came close enough for the overspill of clean yellow illumination to reveal the truth of their features. They gathered in the mouths of empty corridors and lurked around the door frames of abandoned offices. Each one wore a clean white nurse’s uniform — the only element of each figure which caught the distant, dim illumination they so steadfastly avoided. But each uniform was stretched and warped in new directions. They came in all varieties, details hidden in the shadows: lumpy, humpbacked, bulging with ropes of muscle; writhing, tentacled, wet and moist and dripping in the darkness; stick-thin and jerking, quivering and shivering faster than sight could follow. Their faces were worse, concealed by the gloom; some

had their features jumbled into a chaotic mess, while others wore their expressions upside down, with eyes on the bottom and mouth up top. Many nurses had no face at all, merely a flat expanse of featureless flesh, or sagging folds of wrinkled grey, or trunks of drooping matter that looped downward to connect with a handleless wrist or a shrunken belly. They carried restraints, straitjackets, plastic cuffs, and brimming syringes, all cradled in quivering, jerking, twitching hands of too many fingers with too many joints.

Here was the truth beneath the human face of the asylum, pressing in from all sides, revealed by the paradoxical darkness.

The Governor's presence kept them at bay. Or perhaps that was Praem's work, cradled in the crook of my arm, trying her best to protect me from harm.

"What ... " I tried to whisper, but found my mouth had turned to dust. I hiccuped, painfully. "What do they ... "

The nurses stepped out behind us as we passed through the darkness, pressing thick to our rear, filling the corridor with a mob of flesh and uniform. The Governor was leading me toward a final distant light — a thick yellow bar glowing above the frame of a plain double-door, casting clean warm welcome in a semi-circle beneath the portal. The door was open by just a crack.

How could I tell this was the final light? Dream logic, morphine, and madness.

"What do they want?" I hissed, not expecting an answer. "The nurses. What do they want?"

"To make you better," the Governor said. "To heal you."

"I don't believe that for a second," I whispered, trying to swallow, my throat closing up. "They're a metaphor for part of you, part of what you want. Aren't they? Yes, fine, they're built from my own memory of medical treatment, but you can't seriously expect me to believe this is—"

"I have no jurisdiction over the night shift." The Governor glanced down at me, pink eyes glowing faintly in the darkness. "Night is your time."

"... what? You're saying I'm doing this? But I—"

A nurse stepped out in front of us.

Human once, perhaps still so by daylight, the figure's form was like melted candle wax stained with sewer water — mottled grey and green, sagging here, pinched there, the whole thing listing to one side as if weighed down by the mass of a bloated leg or over-large arm. She cradled a set of syringes in her hands, their fragile glass filled with noxious green fluid. She had no face, just a series of holes in a soupy grey surface.

Her name tag was illegible in the darkness.

The Governor stepped around the nurse without breaking her stride, but I stumbled to a halt and almost fell, catching myself on my crutch and my bad leg. A stab-pulse of pain jagged up my thigh like a bolt of pale lightning, overcoming the morphine in my blood. A gasp caught in my throat, spittle running down my chin. I grabbed Praem in my right hand and held her out like a talisman, to ward off evil spirits.

The nurse reached for me with one misshapen hand, fingers like burst sausages — but then she paused. Praem held her back.

The Governor strode on.

“W-wait!” I croaked. I lurched to the side and hauled myself around the nurse, hurrying to catch up with the Governor. The nurse turned as I circled her, watching me with those empty holes in what could not be a face.

Panting for breath, I rejoined the Governor. She did not spare me a glance as she walked on.

“I am not doing this to myself!” I snapped. “This is a metaphor for you, you’re doing this. Call them off!”

“I have no jurisdiction over the night shift,” she repeated.

“You’re in charge!”

“I’m afraid of the dark.”

I was shocked speechless. I almost halted. “What? Why? What difference does the dark make to something like you?”

“Can’t see in the dark.”

I blinked several times, stunned by the simplicity. No observations could be made in the dark, if one could not see. To a being that was all observation all the time, darkness must be like ceasing to exist.

But I'd always enjoyed the dark, the shadows, the comfortable gloom where one could rest at ease.

Perhaps we were not alike after all.

I glanced around at the nurses who filled the doorways and corridors we passed. Were they on my side, in some metaphysical sense I could not yet comprehend? I gave the question serious consideration, then decided no, that was impossible and ridiculous. The nurses represented everything I hated. They were intruders, infesting the natural calm of the darkness I enjoyed. They should not be here. The institution would not be so bad if only they were gone, if only they would—

This time a trio of nurses staggered into our path.

I lurched to a halt, swallowing a scream.

The Governor stopped, then quickly turned herself sideways and slid between two of the nurses, popping free on the opposite side. Three more nurses moved in to fill the gaps through which she had fled. She turned back and looked at me, pink eyes glowing over the faceless heads and hanging trunks and mangled masses of flesh that could not be called faces.

"You have trapped yourself," she said.

"I'm not doing this to myself!" I almost screamed, holding Praem up in one hand. "Tell them to move!"

"They're not mine," she said.

Behind me, more nurses were gathering, shuffling and dragging and swaying forward out of the darkness. They filled the sides of the corridor, blocking me off both in front and behind. A wall of stretched and broken white uniforms barred my way, filled with inhuman masses and dripping sores and twitching bundles of unidentifiable limbs. All flesh seemed to meld into the darkness, becoming one with the gloom, both emerging from it and merging into it at the same time.

"Get away from me!" I shouted, waving Praem as if she was a lit torch and the nurses would recoil from her fire.

They stayed back, but they did not retreat. I was trapped by a ring of staff, by the many mouths and hands and avatars of the institution.

“Are you not coming?” said the Governor.

“I can’t! I can’t push through this, they’ll— they’ll capture me, I— I don’t even want to touch them, I won’t touch them, they can’t make me, can’t make me do anything, anything, anything—”

The Governor raised a towel-wrapped bundle, dangling from her left hand.

Horror’s head. Had she been carrying it this whole time? I could not recall. I could only remember her hands being thrust into her pockets. How could she have carried Horror all this way, without my notice?

With a gentle underarm throw, the Governor tossed the towel-wrapped head into the scrum of nurses.

For a moment of reeling confusion I thought she was somehow trying to help me, trying to scatter the nurses like pins before a bowling ball. But the misshapen, twisted, flesh-beast creatures neither parted nor recoiled. They writhed as if they were a single organism, some occulted orifice accepting the bolus of Horror’s severed head.

A shudder passed through the crowd. Shoulders shrugged and heads moved aside. Arms rose, lifting an unwrapped package.

“No,” I hissed. “No, no no no no!”

Horror — A.HORROR — stared down at me, held aloft by a dozen nurses, with her loose blonde hair spilling from the sides of her decapitated head. She alone remained unchanged, the pretty face atop the ugliness of the institution.

She smiled, broad and bright. The hands leaned forward, as if the nurses’ arms had become a substitute for her neck.

“You’re dead!” I screamed up at her. “You’re dead! We killed you! And your boss is standing right there! Aren’t you supposed to be afraid of her?!”

Horror smiled.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, Heather,” she said, voice scratchy and raw, crusted by dried blood blocking her throat. “She can’t see in the dark.”

bedlam boundary – 24.24

A beheaded Horror leered and loomed above the sea of darkness, beheld aloft on a neck of dream-bewitched arms as if atop an archipelago of wan and wasted islands, her bedraggled hair a halo of burnt and broken blonde like ashes on the ocean; beyond Horror's dozen-doubled back, the Governor merely watched. Pink eyes stared impassive and uncaring, empty hands sunk deep in lab-coat pockets. She would not rise or rouse to take my side. And behind her, far away across the empty black of void and death and illimitable dissolution, a semi-circle of weak yellow light glowed above an unremarkable and unimportant double-door — the final island in a sinking chain, the final resting place of reality.

But that refuge lay too far distant, when even one step forward would be too much to take. To my own rear, another island of light stood beneath a bulb, blocked by a wall of nurses and their uniforms wrapped around false flesh. And then that light flickered out, the island sinking beneath the sable iron waves of the dream.

I stood beleaguered and besieged, by nurses and night, by the abyss of the mind, by nightmare madness from my own past.

Even I could see that much; one did not need to be a giant eyeball to figure it out.

"Patients are not allowed to wander the halls at night," Horror crooned — a clotted voice of crackly blood, dried to crust in her dead throat. "It's irresponsible of us to allow it. You could get yourself hurt! Or lost. Or get up to all sorts of mischief. Now, Heather, you must come with us, back to your room. You can't expect us to allow you to flout the rules like this. Rules apply to everybody."

The nurses shuffled forward, one organism of grey flesh and sagging meat, spread across dozens of bodies. The institution, embodied.

"No!" I screamed, waving Praem's plush prison before me like a cross at a crowd of vampires. "Stay away from me! Stay away, all of you!"

My left shin sang with a muffled chorus of pain pinned beneath

morphine. Sweat both hot and cold broke out all over my skin, screaming for fight or flight, though I knew I could achieve neither. The wall of nurses had become a ring, pressing inward on all sides, blocking me both in front and behind, contracting and constricting. I staggered on the unsteady support of my crutch, lurching around so I could wave the Praem plushie at the nurses to my rear.

“Now now, Heather—”

“Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me!” I screamed.

The nurses slowed their shuffle. Praem held them back.

Horror — held high on her neck of nurse’s arms — let out a long-suffering sigh, followed by the tut of a woman who wanted to go home for the night after a hard day at work. I twisted around again and almost lost my footing, catching myself with a squeak of my crutch against the invisible floor of darkness.

“Heather, Heather, Heather,” Horror huffed. The arms which held her aloft shook her head from side to side. “You shouldn’t make demands which you cannot back up with action. It’s a very bad habit, you know that? If you can’t ever enforce your words, people stop believing them. You should really think more carefully before you speak. I thought you loved books and literature, this is the sort of thing you should know.”

“W-what?” I croaked. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t touch you?” Horror echoed my own words, raising her eyebrows. “Don’t touch you — or what, Heather? What are you going to do? Are you going to bite and scratch? We have methods of dealing with that. Are you going to struggle and spit? We have ways of handling that too. Are you planning to hurt yourself? Well, that can all be explained away.” Horror smiled, her lips a slash of lightless crimson in the suffocating shadows. “Heather, I am holding back out of respect for our history together, not because you can compel me to do anything. That is not how this relationship works. I am the nurse. I compel you, the patient, to do as I say. And if you cannot be compelled with words, then you will be compelled with force.” She smiled again, almost sad. “All for your own good, of course.”

I sucked breath down my throat, trying to clear my head, trying to ignore the meaning of Horror’s words and see past the symbols

upon the surface of the dream. Had the Eye led me into a trap, or was the Governor telling the truth — was this all me, doing this to myself? Was this night shift my doing, my own pain and trauma inflicted back upon my own brain, a reflection of my own history, and nothing more?

But my breath came in jagged gasps. Fear had seized my heart. A panic attack was clawing up from my guts. And the nurses were shuffling closer still.

I had to fight, which in a dream meant I had to think, but—

Praem told me to take a deep breath. Count the inhalation. Hold the oxygen (in a dream? Doesn't matter, just do it.) Count the exhalation.

Horror's scabbed-up voice interrupted my purging breath: "You must come of your own will, Heather," she said. "It is so much better for you if you engage with the process. Healing is quicker and easier if you allow it to happen, if you would only—"

"Did you lead me into this trap?" I shouted — past Horror, past the heads of the nurses, past the darkness, speaking to the scrap of glowing pink eye standing tall in the dark.

The Governor blinked, but did not answer.

Horror tutted — a dry and papery rustling. Flakes of blood floated from her lips; they vanished when they touched the darkness beneath our feet. She leaned forward, neck of arms holding her further out, looming toward me.

"You cannot go over my head on this matter, Heather!" she snapped. "You think the administration, the Governor, the Director, all of those types, you think they have any stake or say in the day-to-day running of a hospital? No, of course they don't! They exist to keep the institution running, yes, but they're not really the brain or the heart. The nurses and doctors, the real staff, we are the—"

"Just answer me!" I snapped, ignoring Horror completely. "I need a serious answer, just yes or no. Did you lead me into this?"

The Governor shrugged. "Night's yours."

"Heather!" Horror shouted in my face, only a foot or two away now. I raised Praem and Horror's head recoiled, but not by far. She ranted on. "You need to accept the healing process, Heather! And

that means not engaging with these fantasies of meaning. This delusion that you will find answers in constructed worlds, in fantasies from inside your own mind. You must engage with reality! With reality!”

Fear curdled and boiled. “Reality!?” I screamed up at her. “In reality I would rip you all apart with my tentacles! This isn’t real! You’re a metaphor for something and I wish I could just—”

Deny you.

Realisation was a tingle in my brain, a tickle down my back, a flowering in my guts.

Horror went on: “Your sister is exactly where she should be. You need to accept—”

“You’re the denial,” I said, slowly and carefully. “You’re all of it — the denial, the diagnoses, the hospital, the trauma. You’re the bit of me that thinks I can’t free her, or I never deserved to, or that she was never real in the first place. Or the part of me which sometimes wishes I could slink off and die quietly, and pretend none of this ever happened, that the entire last year of my life was a lie.”

“Heather, this is—”

But she could not interrupt. “You’re right,” I said. “You are a nurse — you’re all the nurses and doctors I ever knew, even the kind ones, the compassionate ones, who really were trying to help. Because they did damage too. You’re the ten years of making me want to give up, leave Maisie behind, and surrender to the process. You’re the piece of me which wishes the diagnosis was real, so reality wouldn’t be so scary and complicated. You’re ... you’re everything I hate about myself, everything I fear I could give into, everything I would have given into if Raine and I had not met by pure chance.” I took a great shuddering breath; it felt like vomiting, like purging my guts of poison. “I mean, yes, you’re also a metaphor for the carceral structure of the Eye and what it’s done to Maisie. But firstly you’re all my fears. Aren’t you?”

Horror smiled, slow and sharp in the strengthening dark.

“Oh Heather,” she purred. “I’m just a nurse. And it’s past time you went back to your room.”

The wall of twisted nurses shuffled forward, stomping and slipping,

tripping and tapping, stumbling and bumping — and reaching for me with a hundred misshapen and swollen hands, pointing dozens of darkly glistening syringe tips toward my exposed flesh, brandishing their manacles and their zip-ties, their straitjackets and their handcuffs, a wave to drown me beneath the weight of the institution, no matter the cold clarity of inner revelation.

This time they did not recoil from Praem, though I waved her like a torch. One nurse clutched at Praem's stuffed body, greasy claws closing about her velvet head. I screamed and yanked Praem back, fearing more than anything to be rendered finally alone; I crushed Praem tight to my chest, hugging her close, protecting her instead. She had no suggestions, only a return of my embrace, a soft apology, and a declaration that she would not allow them to hurt me.

A mad impulse bid me to wave my crutch instead — anything to keep the nurses back, to protect myself and Praem.

But the moment the tip left the floor, my left leg buckled.

I went down with a yelp, fell with a snarl, and landed with a breathless whine. I hit the ground with a crack of bone on solid concrete, though the floor was nothing but darkness. Pain shot through my left knee and into my hips in a jagged web, breath ripping down into my lungs, eyes fogged with tears. The world and my body became a blazing rod of pain.

My legs and backside began to sink, as if the darkness was turning to quicksand beneath my weight. The lightness and warmth of Sevens' yellow blanket struggled against the sucking mire, but the buoyancy was not enough. The fabric began to soak through with rich black darkness.

The nurses closed in, tightening their ring, reaching down toward me with a hundred grasping hands. Syringes angled toward my neck. Scrabbling fingers closed around my right arm and pried at my grip, trying to take Praem away. Strings of frozen drool landed in my hair, sticky slick like old mucus. Feelers grabbed my ankles, squeezing at my bones. A bulging sack of distended meat brushed the back of my head. Horror watched from the apex of the closing circle, a mask of sorrow written upon her features, as if sad that our inner conflict had come to this. If I would not surrender, then she would grind me to nothing.

“Just relax, Heather,” she said. “We’ll take you back where you belong.”

A hand of knobbly knuckles and fingers like garden wire found my throat and squeezed. “H-help—” I croaked, not able even to cry.

A sigh rolled through the nurses, like a gust of wind through the leaves of a dead forest. They almost paused.

The Governor said: “You need to finish what you started.”

The hand about my throat tightened quick and hard. My pulse slammed upward through my neck; pin-pricks of syringes touched my flesh. Cuffs and manacles fumbled about my wrists; straitjacket fabric pressed to my back. The edges of my vision throbbed red, then faded black.

I wheezed. “What ... ”

“You still have the chalk,” the Governor said. “It’s yours.”

With the last of my fading strength I pulled my left hand from the sucking mire of the floor; droplets of oil-like darkness clung to my fingers and palm, falling like rain back into the dark below. Nurses clutched for my wrist and forearm — but they recoiled from the Fractal, fingers twitching and jerking as if struck by electric shock. I stuck my hand into my yellow blanket. My sight dimmed to nothing, choked to the edge of the dream.

My fingers crushed the certainty of chalk. I gripped hard, and drew it forth.

The nurses recoiled, reeling backward, staggering away. Fingers left my throat. Syringes retreated. Straitjackets fell to the floor.

The world came rushing back; breath slammed into my lungs like a back draft of superheated oxygen. I heaved and wheezed, coughing and spluttering, strings of drool hanging from my slack lips. My eyes were full of tears and my face burned like fever. The pain in my leg was a living thing, stirring in sleepless dreams, and I prayed it would stay in slumber.

For minutes I sagged and spluttered, hiccuping more than once. Praem nestled close in my right arm. My left held salvation aloft.

Vision cleared, fog of tears peeling back. Breath slowed, calming to the pump of my heart. Praem suggested I raise my eyes and take a

look, which seemed sensible enough.

The stick of chalk glowed in the dark.

Just as it had for the Governor, the chalk was lit with cold fire amid the infinite shadows. The nurses — Horror included — could not endure the pale shine of the chalk. They had retreated from me, but only by a few steps. The chalk-light was cold and weak, clean and white, with none of the yellow warmth of the electric bulbs or fluorescent bars.

“... oh-okay,” I panted, throat still raw from being strangled to the border of unconsciousness. “Okay. Okay. I-I think I get it.”

“This is unwise!” Horror snapped. Her eyes were half-squinted against the glow of the chalk. “Heather, it was never meant for you! Put it down! Put it down and—”

“Shut up!” I shouted at her. “I wasn’t asking you!”

The Governor’s voice floated upward, trapped beyond the wall of nurses. “You need to finish what you started.”

“But what does that mean?!” I waved the stick of chalk. “Everything here is metaphor, fine. Then what does this represent? The ability to perform hyperdimensional mathematics? The capacity for self-examination? The acceptance of my own body? What!?”

“Just write,” the Governor said. “The rest will come to you.”

I felt like rolling my eyes and keening with frustration, but Praem suggested that I take the Governor seriously. Praem reminded me with gentle firmness that I did not have much choice. I was still trapped by a ring of nurses. I had no other way out but forward.

“Write on what ... ” I muttered.

Praem made the obvious suggestion: the floor, of course.

Good girls did not scribble on the hospital floors, but I shed that objection with less than a shrug. I had not been a good girl in rather a long time; on the contrary, I had learned how to be very bad indeed.

The tip of the chalk clacked against the darkness itself, forcing the floor into solidity.

With no idea what to write, I simply scrawled on the ground —

numbers, figures, mathematical symbols, all jumbled up one after the other, spiralling off around my collapsed legs and my aching knee. The symbols glowed like phosphorescent paint.

The nurses recoiled further, stumbling backward.

But the writing — or what I was writing — hurt. An all-too-familiar tingle grew behind my eyeballs, blossoming into a stabbing headache pain of twin lances into my skull. A roiling spot of queasy unease in my guts spread and spread and spread, until I swayed with nausea, bile clawing up my throat.

Brain-math, without the aid and cushion of six extra minds, without the power input of my bioreactor.

And I had no idea what exactly I was writing; the numbers and symbols spilled out from within me, appearing as if my hand was possessed, like automatic writing. As soon as I started to think about that, as soon as I focused on it, as soon as I questioned, I could no longer continue. I faltered, stalling, choking on the promise of vomit.

The letters started to fade, islands sinking back into the benighted floor.

The nurses pressed inward once again.

“It was always falsehood, Heather,” Horror said. “Just delusion. The product of an unwell mind. Nothing more. And delusion can only prop you up for so long.”

“Shut up!” I screamed at her, then tried to catch a glimpse of the Governor past the advancing wall of nurses. “I—I don’t know what to write! I keep running out of numbers! I can’t do brain-math anymore, how am I supposed to know what to write!?”

“It’ll come naturally,” she said. “It’ll come.”

“It bloody well isn’t!”

The Governor fell silent.

I scrabbled on as best I could, snorting back the need to vomit, blinking hard against the growing headache pain, pausing between each number and symbol, worried that they were all wrong, that I was writing the wrong thing, performing the wrong equation. I couldn’t write fast enough, the numbers vanishing in turn, catching

up with my desperate shaking hands, glow fading to nothing. The nurses stumbled closer, raising their arms to shield their eyes from the light, reaching for me once again with hands like bags of walnuts and tendrils dripping with sticky mucus and—

“Needs both of us,” said the Governor. She sounded surprised, and almost regretful. “You have but half.”

“What?!” I shouted. “What do I do, then!? I can’t get free on my own! I can’t—”

Horror butted in, her severed head dangling from a cluster of hands gripping her hair. “You never could do anything alone, Heather. That’s why you require treatment.” The numbers of the equation faded and faded, growing dimmer along with the chalk clutched in my fist. I had exhausted my one chance, my one way out, because I had always been so bad at mathematics. “Now,” said Horror, dangling closer. “It’s time to put away these games and—”

Horror’s face blazed with yellow-orange firelight, cast from far to my rear.

Her eyes flew wide, then crammed shut, twinned with a scream from her lungless mouth. The nurses fell back — not in a staggering retreat as from my chilled and cold chalk-light, but as if a wave crashed over them. The nurses fell like bowling pins smashing into each other. They tumbled to the floor, crashing down in great wet heaps. Horror’s head went flying, then rolling, rolling, rolling across the darkness — until she hit the toes of the Governor’s boots.

Horror looked up, head lying on one side. The Governor returned her gaze without expression. Both were lit by the blazing flame down the corridor, pouring from some source far to my rear.

“I see you,” said the Governor.

“Ah,” said Horror. “Ma’am, I can explain—”

“No. No, you can’t.”

I tore my eyes from the tedious metaphor of internal institutional conflict and looked over my shoulder, back down the darkened corridor, facing into the flames.

A burning sword; a golden hilt. Gilt and gleaming glory, scouring the dark.

A yellow flame cut through a nurse staggering back to her feet, bisecting the twisted bones and parting the folds of grey flesh, sending the halves tumbling aside, casting leaping illumination up the walls and floors — real walls and real floor, dragging their forgotten forms from the shadowy deeps by sheer heat and light and the swinging arc of a blade.

It was Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

Sevens' former guise as the Drained-and-Dry-Director had gone through an unthinkable transformation. She still wore the mask of the Yellow Princess, recognisable in those ice-blue eyes, that pale swanlike throat, those sharply heightened cheekbones, that neat and tidy nose. But she had shed the exhaustion and the eye-bags, the rumpled shirt and the torn-in-haste skirt; the pens and the clipboard were nowhere to be seen, banished along with the pencil which had nestled behind her ear. Seven-Shades-of-Stressed-and-Strained was washed clean by flame and fury. Scribe no more; this Sevens was a Queen of war.

Her hair had grown wild, golden tresses glowing like burnished bronze, affixed to her brow with a gilded circlet. Her starched white shirt had become a breastplate of gold-pressed steel, the front emblazoned with a design in silver and yellow — a trio of tentacles, free and rampant, strangling a tapestry-like representation of a nurse. Her slender arms were clad in metal, soft yellow flues and whorls of flower stamped upon the armour; gloves of golden cloth protected her hands, each digit a beacon. A billowing cape flowed from her shoulders, hemmed in impossible buttery fur, the fabric burning like dawn in the darkness. A skirt of lemon-chrome mail swished about her legs as she strode forward, reflecting the light back as a million swirling points. She wore the most ridiculous shoes I had ever witnessed, utterly unsuited to real combat, but very fitting for the dream of a goddess at war — a pair of platform heels made of what was apparently solid sunlight.

In a two-handled grip she held her father's hilt, the gift he had given to me, the one Raine had pressed into Sevens' grip. From the empty hilt sprung a blade of yellow flame.

Seven-Shades-of-Sovereign-Sunshine raised her flaming sword and split another nurse in two. The nurse parted down the middle, halves hitting the floor and sinking into the darkness below.

Sevens twisted the sword about herself, eyes wide with focus, lips peeled from her teeth in a way I had never seen on the Yellow Princess before; then again, was she Princess any longer? Did I look upon something which had burst from a queenish cocoon?

All the many dozens of nurses had been knocked off their feet by the arrival of Sevens' light, but now they rose again, surging upward, scrabbling with dark and twisted hands, turning upon her with dripping syringes and clutching nets and the enclosing edges of open straitjackets. Sevens raised her sword, bellowed a war cry like the voice of a bird, and charged straight into them.

Nurses went flying, cut in two or impaled and kicked back — though I had no idea how Sevens managed all that, balanced on a pair of frankly absurd platform heels. She cut and burnt and swung, felling the parody nurses left and right, hacking and sawing, stabbing and slicing.

A larger-than-average nurse managed to get behind her, backed up by two smaller monstrosities; all three lunged for Sevens at once. For a horrible second I thought she might be overwhelmed, that this rescue would be short-lived.

"Sevens!" I screamed.

But then where the Queen-of-War had stood, Sevens' other war-form flickered into reality, as if disgorged by the darkness — Hastur's Daughter, eight feet of cone-shaped black armour frilled with yellow membranes, more alien than anything the dream could invent, and no less a queen of war. A razor-sharp tail flicked out and impaled one of the nurses, tossing her down the corridor in a careening spray of fluids too sickly to be blood. Massive crab-like claws closed on the second nurse, snipping her roughly in three. Poison stingers like hedgehog-quills impaled the third nurse a hundred times, turning her to ragged burst meat in an instant of violence.

A golden wave of downy fuzz shivered and shook, turning the air to toxic death; yellow spore-dust filled the corridor, melting the nurses down to pools of quivering flesh.

Sevens' foes all lay defeated. A few nurses staggered away, sinking into the dark, but the way between her and I was clear.

Hastur's Daughter was gone in a blink, replaced once again by the

Warlike Queen.

Seven-Shades-of-Wrath-and-Ruin strode toward me, putting up her sword, a smile of such satisfaction spreading across her face.

“Heather!” she called. “Heather, I figured it out! I figured it all out! I—”

A lone nurse sprang from the shadows and crashed into Sevens from the side, ruining her regal bearing, sending her toppling over, and proving my point about those unstable shoes. Sevens went flying, struck from her feet, crashing to the floor in a clatter of golden armour. The nurse clambered all over her, scabby bleeding hands clutching for Sevens’ throat.

The Flaming Valkyrie was gone. The Blood Goblin — Seven-Shades-of-Squeak-and-Gurgle, her most familiar and intimate mask — closed a maw of needle teeth on the nurse’s hand, ripping and tearing out a massive chunk of rubbery grey flesh. The nurse recoiled. Sevens spat out the gobbet of vile meat, then—

Blinked out once again, replaced by a girl I’d seen scant times before — a scared teenager in a uniform too large for her starved body, with a pistol at her hip and desperation in her eyes.

The Gunner — the one mask Sevens showed most rarely of all — jammed her stubby black pistol into the nurse’s chin and pulled the trigger.

She emptied all the bullets, making an awful mess on the ceiling; each spot of blood drew reality from the dark, glowing red in the night. The nurse slumped, dead as a sack.

The Gunner, Seven-Shades-of-Scared-and-Shaken, rolled the dead weight off her front and clambered to her feet, shivering all over, face and uniform splattered with blood. She met my eyes, re-holstered her gun, and nodded once.

And then she was gone too.

The Yellow Princess was back, once again clad for war, carrying a sword of yellow flame in a mailed fist.

She strode to my side, heels clicking on the darkness. Each step forced the shadows to assume solid form, dragging the bare banal linoleum up from the dark waters, leaving behind footprints of reality in the abyss of infinite possibility. The light of her sword

forced the shadows back, peeling the shade away from ordinary walls and the edge of an iron radiator.

Many nurses remained between me and the Governor, struggling back to their misshapen feet. But now they recoiled afresh from the clean glow which poured from the sword of Seven-Shades-of-Heir-Apparent. Hisses and warbles rose from dozens of warped and twisted throats. The nurses slunk back, too silly to be scary anymore, like a crowd of hissing extras in a bad horror film.

Sevens stopped, but did not look down at me. She stared instead at the Governor — who was still gazing downward at Horror's severed head, which lay on the dark carpet of the formless floor.

"... S-Sevens?" I croaked.

Praem, still hugged tight to my chest, suggested that I stay quiet for a moment. Gods were talking.

"You," said Seven-Shades-of-Crowned-in-Sunlight. "Pay attention."

Horror winced. "Oh, bother," she whispered.

"Not you," said Sevens. "You. The lady in charge. Pay attention."

The Governor raised her eyes of seashell pink. She looked at Sevens, unsurprised by either her appearance or the manner of her dress.

"I am," said the Governor.

"You weren't," said Sevens. "Pay attention. And take responsibility."

Sevens whirled the sword in her hands, flames licking across the walls. For a moment I thought she was going to duel the Governor for the prize of my mind; I started to croak a denial, choked by my own surprise. I did not want her to kill the Governor, I did not want her to kill the Eye! If she fought the Governor and banished her, I would never have my answers, never have my closure, and Maisie would be lost in the dark forever.

But my refusal was unnecessary; Sevens' flaming flourish served a dual purpose, not the purpose of a duel. The flash of fire drove back the nurses who seemed to be regrouping, and brought the point of the regal blade downward, to indicate Horror's head.

"Take responsibility," said Sevens.

The Governor shrugged, hands still firmly in her pockets. “I was never in charge of the night shift. It was never mine.”

“It may not have been your fault, but you have to take responsibility regardless.” Sevens removed one hand from the hilt of her sword and indicated me with a finger clothed in golden silk. “For her.”

The Governor looked down at Horror’s head again. Horror pulled an oily and ingratiating grimace.

“You really don’t have to, you know?” Horror said. “Ma’am, you can just go back to your project. All these details are beneath you. Let the staff handle this. That’s why you employ us—”

“Silence,” said Sevens — neither loud nor sharp, but with a cold fire of absolute certainty which belonged nowhere but in the mouth of a monarch.

Horror choked on her own words. Sevens stepped forward and jabbed the tip of her sword into the flesh of Horror’s neck, lifting her off the ground like a scrap of meat on a skewer. Flames licked Horror’s cheeks and scalp, but the fire did not consume or blacken her flesh, nor even singe the ends of her hair.

But it clearly hurt. “Ow ow ow ow!” she chattered. “Ow oh ow ow oh, ow! Hot! Hot! Hot! Ow!”

Sevens ignored the complaints and thrust the speared head toward the Governor. “Take responsibility.”

The Governor just gazed at Horror’s head, as if confused. “But—”

“I can become your equal,” said Seven-Shades-of-Storm-and-Strife. “I can be any bit as great and terrible as my father at his worst. That is one of the paths open to me now — the blinding of those who see, the never-ending prison of the self, the incomplete work. The unread book by the death bed. I can be those things, if I wish, and I can be them for you. But I would rather not. I would rather remain as I am. Take responsibility.”

The Governor got halfway through another shrug, then stopped and removed her hands from her pockets. She produced a towel from somewhere — had she held onto it when she had tossed the head into the crowd of nurses?

The Governor reached out with the towel and accepted Horror’s

head.

“You really don’t have to wrap me up again, you know?” Horror rattled on. “A good manager listens to her staff, especially down at ground level. There’s all sorts of things you don’t comprehend or can’t see without— mm! Mmmm-mmm—mm! Mmm!”

Horror’s chatter was muffled with a wad of towel. Within a few seconds the Governor had her wrapped neatly back up once more.

Sevens retreated a couple of steps, returning to my side, heels clicking on the floor; I thought she was going to look down at me, a monarch gazing from her lofty perch. But to my surprise she turned her sword so the tip touched the floor, holding it like a cane. Then she lowered herself in turn, going down on one knee before me.

The Yellow Princess gazed deep within me, with eyes blue as ice and a-glitter with the reflections of raging flame.

“Sevens?” I rasped.

“It is I, kitten,” she purred. “As I always was.”

“Uh ... um ... ” I tried to find the words, but found my throat rather painful. I swallowed hard, then looked her up and down. “Uh ... ”

“Say it, kitten.”

“You ... Sevens, you look absolutely absurd. You’re wearing nine-inch platform heels with an armoured skirt. You’ve got gloves made of golden cloth. You have a crown!”

Sevens smiled, a tiny kink of her royal lips. “And you are the only one in all the worlds who could get away with saying that.”

I sighed and laughed at the same time. “Thank you for saving me. Thank you. I ... I think I was about to die. You saved my life, again. How many times is that now?”

“Counting is for bankers and architects, kitten.”

“Are you ... awake, Sevens? I’m sorry for asking, it’s just that the dream keeps getting more and more confusing. Did the sword wake you? What happened? Does it work in the same way for you as for everybody else? You seem ... coherent.”

Sevens took a deep breath. “Oh, I am so much more than awake. I am flying, kitten. I understand it all, now.”

“Understand what?”

Sevens glanced at the sword. Her lips barely moved, but a smile entered her eyes, a glow of pleasure and promise. She glanced back over her shoulder, at the Governor and the darkness. The misshapen nurses were beginning to regroup again, shambling out of invisible side-corridors, raising clutches of dripping syringes and the iron maidens of straitjackets. They crept forward, ignoring the Governor, shambling to press against the rim of Sevens’ firelight.

“It seems we have little time to discuss the details,” said Sevens. “The rush of the stream does not afford us many moments to speak.” She turned to me all the same; nurses loomed behind her shoulders, peering out of the darkness with grey expanses of eyeless flesh and sagging mounds of folded skin. “But the short version is simple enough.”

She jerked the hilt of the sword toward me, as if to show me the proof of what she had become.

“The ... the sword?” I asked. “Yes, it was from your father. He asked us to give it to you.”

“My father made his own story,” she said. “The hubris, the arrogance, the fall from grace, it was never merely his obsession. It was him! It was his own story, with my mother. To wed a human, with such a limited span of life, that was his kingly arrogance, his ultimate hubris. Her death — by old age, by life, by nature — his own fall from grace. Do you see?”

Nurses pressed in from all sides, fighting against the glow of Sevens’ blade. I eyed them with my heart in the throat. “Sevens. Sevens, I think you were right, we don’t have time!”

“He made his own story,” she said. “Cutting through reality with the edge of the narrative. A pen that is a sword and a sword that is a pen. But he made a poor choice! Without that, my mother may have become like him. She needed not be mortal in the end, except for his nature.”

Sevens reached out and tucked the edges of the yellow blanket close to my chest, covering Praem on one side and my heart on the other. She muttered a tiny thank you to Praem, for looking after me. Then she gently plucked the stick of chalk from my fingers and slipped it inside the blanket too.

“Sevens, Sevens we—”

“But me!?” Sevens roared, rising to her feet again in a sudden rush. “I can make whatever story I wish! And I choose one where my love rides free!”

She swung her father’s sword in an overhand arc, bisecting the nearest nurse with a sweep of flame. Before the halves had time to fall to the floor, Sevens leaned down and used one arm to sweep me upward as swiftly as she had moved her sword.

All of a sudden I was back on my feet, my crutch pressed into my left armpit, Praem clutched to my chest.

Sevens took me by the shoulder and shoved me toward the Governor. I staggered, the echo of pain screaming upward from my left shin, strangled to quiet by the morphine in my bloodstream. The Governor put out one hand to catch my fall, but I recoiled in confusion and disgust, managing to catch myself at the last second, heaving onto the support of my crutch.

The Governor stared at me, then shrugged, turned away, and carried on toward the final light.

Sevens turned to the nurses, sword held high. “Go with your God, kitten!”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” I cried out. “Sevens, come with me!”

“My fight is here, with the nature of the narrative,” she said, whirling her father’s sword like a flaming baton. “Yours lies ahead, with the one who wronged you. Go with her, kitten. You have to do what the rest of us cannot! Go on!”

Praem suggested I take the opening; to do otherwise would waste Sevens’ efforts, and anger a wild and warlike future queen.

Besides, Sevens did not need any help. Her pen had become a sword, and the dream — the play, the narrative, all gone to horror and darkness — could not stand before the edits wrought by that blade.

“I love you, Sevens!” I cried out. “Stay safe, please!”

Sevens roared with cold laughter, sword splitting another nurse, driving back the crowd with flashes of fire. The nurses shambled past the Governor and I as if we were no longer present, totally

focused on swarming toward the towering golden figure of Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight.

I turned away with regret and reluctance in my heart, a crutch wedged beneath my armpit, and hobbled after the Governor.

She waited for me at the plain double-doors, beneath the fluorescent bar of clean yellow light. I staggered up to her, sweating and panting with the effort of walking on my crutch and my wounded leg, body singing with the adrenaline and fear, throat sore and raw from the nurses' many fingers. I glanced back over my shoulder, down the long dark corridor sinking into empty black. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was nothing but a distant spark, almost smothered by the staff of Cygnet Asylum.

"She'll be okay," said the Governor.

"What?" I twisted back to her, lurching sideways on my crutch. "How can you know that?"

"She will."

The Governor turned away and pushed one of the doors aside. She stepped through the gap, into safety beyond the dark. I cast one final glance back at Sevens' private war, then left her behind.

Over the threshold was more darkness — ordinary darkness, a refreshing plunge into the cool waters of private shade. My slippers and the tip of my crutch caught hard on the rough and scratchy surface of a carpet. The door clicked shut behind me. A familiar old feeling swelled inside my chest, bitter-sweet and distant, and brought the prickle of tears to my eyes.

For the ghost of a moment I felt like a squid who had squeezed into a gap between two shelves of ocean rock.

Had my other selves, my other six, my abyssal side, been inside me all along?

Then the Governor reached past my shoulder and clicked on the lights; the cephalopod sensation fled, driven deeper into the rocks by electric illumination.

"Ah ..." A dying murmur escaped my lips. I sniffed back tears, then took a deep breath. Praem hugged my chest. I had to concentrate.

The Governor strode away, toward what I could only assume was

her desk.

The Office of the Governor of Cygnet Hospital, Asylum, Prison, and Maximum Security Containment Facility was refreshingly normal after our journey through the dreamlike corridors of night. The room was very wide, carpeted in plush yet scratchy institutional brown; the walls were the plain off-white slight-cream of a doctor's office. The skirting board, light fixtures, window frame, and all other such flourishes were made of a rich dark wood polished to a high sheen. The room was illuminated by a trio of powerful incandescent bulbs in the ceiling, cupped behind plastic shades, and a matching quartet of standing lamps, all pointed at the walls so as to splash their light back upon the room, leaving behind no scrap of shadow or shade.

A large window dominated the right side of the room, looking out over the hospital grounds from four or five floors up. The gardens and lawns were now freed from the impossible darkness, lit by a gentle whisper of silver-grey moonlight, flickering between the distant trees and sliding across the empty grass. From that angle I could not see the false sky above, the wrinkled black underside of the Eye.

A short row of unremarkable filing cabinets flanked the window, alongside one of those glass display cases in which accomplished people liked to show off their trophies. Next to that was a tall, imposing, powerful bookcase made of ornamental wood. The bookcase was overflowing, but the letters on the spines of the resident tomes made my eyes hurt and my vision blur with ocular pain. The glass display case was stuffed with trophies and cups of all shapes and sizes — but the shapes made me feel sick and the sizes played tricks on my sight. Lining the wall next to the bookcase was a mosaic of diplomas and degrees, the exact sort of things one expected to see upon the wall of a distinguished professional — except the ink had run and rendered the words meaningless, turning each award and qualification into a smear of grey.

The seat of the Eye's mind boasted two desks. The first stood toward the rear of the room, right where it should be, and was pretty unremarkable — a great slab of oak with a jumble of stationary and documents atop, pens and pencils littered everywhere, a discarded newspaper in one corner, nothing that one would not expect to find in such a place. The only element out of

sync with reality was the total absence of any words on the documents, the newspaper, or the notepads. All the papers were blank white, empty of content, only there in form.

A high-backed, expensive-looking office chair stood behind the desk, mirrored by a low trio of uncomfortable plastic seats in front. No warm welcome for any members of staff who wished to address the Eye in person.

It was that first desk which the Governor walked up to. She tossed Horror's head onto the surface with a wet and meaty thump, then stared at the result for a moment. Eventually she turned back around and looked at me again.

"The archives are through there," she said. But I wasn't really listening.

A second desk filled the entire left-hand side of the office. Polished steel stretched from wall to wall. Before that desk stood a chair more at home in the lair of a cartoon mad scientist than a doctor's office — a huge reclining throne of plush fabric layered atop reinforced black plastic and sleek reflective metal, mounted on a ball-and-socket joint in the floor, so that any person seated within could turn the chair any which way, via the aid of a small electric control box mounted on one of the curved arms.

The second desk itself contained nothing, serving only as the foundation for a framework of monitor mounts.

Dozens upon dozens of screens stretched upward from that desk, lining the wall all the way to the ceiling, leaning forward as if sagging under their own weight, sprouting like dark fungus upon the spreading boughs of an electric fern. All different shapes and sizes and styles were represented — modern flat-screen televisions stood flush with the curved glass of cathode ray tubes; grainy CCTV footage unspooled while framed by high-definition video; film stock flickered and jumped and bloomed with imperfections shoulder-to-shoulder with to unshakeable digital clarity.

"The archives are through there," the Governor repeated.

She pointed at a door, a steel door with a trio of heavy locks built into the wall, next to the tree of monitors.

I spared the door only the briefest of glances. I staggered across the office, crutch and slippers scuffing on the carpet. I lurched up to

that steel desk and gripped the arm of the chair. I craned my neck to look upward, to watch the screens.

To observe.

On one camera feed, my own residential room; on another, Raine's cell down in the prison. Both empty.

Another screen showed Sevens, whirling in fire and flame in a dark corridor, slaying nurses left and right. On yet another — Twil and Eevee in the infirmary, Twil with her shoulder to the filing cabinet against the door, the door buckling and breaking, Eevee shouting silent words from her wheelchair.

On another — Raine! My Raine! Raine, sprinting down some nighted hallway, clutching her machete in one hand and the blooded paw of a girl in the other — a girl with ruddy red skin and black hair and Zheng's face on a body too small to be Zheng, her lips smeared with fresh blood and scraps of meat, the pair pursued by a crowd of things that should have been nurses. Raine was laughing. Zheng was howling. Away they went.

Another screen, and another, and another, and another! My eyes whirled across hundreds of views, inside and outside the hospital, into the patient wings, burrowed past the staff areas, dripping down in the prison. All of it, all at once, all without filter. I peered into every dark corner of the earth, every hidden secret of the asylum, every mind and heart and pair of eyes plugged straight into my vision.

There was Lozzie, poncho fluttering out behind her, leading a crowd of patients around a corner in the depths of the hospital. They blundered into something not-quite-doctor and fell upon the monster like a crowd of piranhas upon a carcass, shivs and knives rising and falling in dozens of little fists.

The patients were everywhere, on so many screens — some moving in ones and twos, scurrying and skittering through the dark, holding hands and hiding in corners. Others moved in big packs, flowing like water, avoiding concentrations of nurses. Lozzie's revolutionaries were laying their groundwork for tomorrow's dawn.

But I could not stay. My vision whirled away, as if I couldn't control my own eyes.

Down into the prison I saw a vortex of shadow — Praem's other

half, flanked by half a dozen Knights in their armour and visors. Guns raised and bucked in silent hands, firing at something beyond my sight. Not at Praem. They were on her side. Our side. Us.

Had they been fighting all night, all day, for all time?

Sight whirled on. I couldn't stay with them either.

On another monitor — an exterior view, deep in the woods. A flash of russet fur flickered past, vulpine tail whipping out behind. Shapes lumbered through the trees behind the fox, led on a merry chase deeper into the woods.

Exterior views flashed by, rolling across my mind. On another camera a white hump of ridged armour crashed over a low wall, fleeing a line of dark figures armed with crackling spears. Was that a Caterpillar? It was moving too fast, and so were my eyes. Tree lines and horizon and the exterior wall sped by, blurring into night and moonlight and out of sight. One section of the exterior wall look crushed or broken, bent inward by some great weight; I tried to go back, tried to focus on the gigantic fluttering shape that blocked out the night itself, but I could not stall. My eyes whipped on, as if drawn by gravity, down and down and down, into the black hole of endless observation.

One cluster of monitors showed a place I had not seen before — steel corridors, bulkhead doors, flickering lights, all placed to guard huge glass tanks of murky water.

There, my sight finally slowed.

All the views of that hidden place were drowned in emergency lights, strobing red and orange, silent sirens reflected off pools of standing water; many of the glass tanks had burst, flooding the hallways with brackish water, dripping off metal gantries, pouring down empty lift shafts. Gunfire flashed in the blinding darkness, chewing into walls, chasing slender figures I could not pin down as my eyes jumped from screen to screen. Bodies lay upon the floor, bleeding dark ichor into spilled water from the shattered aquariums. A moment of panic, but then no — they were not Knights, no, not ours at all. But if those armed guards were not our Knights, then what were they? I saw no face, no flesh, just blood and armour and broken guns. But I could not stop. My eyes tore onward.

Half-glimpsed forms slid through the shadows, their sinuous motion oddly familiar. Were those the ones who had slain the guards, and still fought them now? Had they burst their watery prisons and surprised their jailers? Did they know about Lozzie's revolution? Did they know about me?

My eyes followed the logic of the screens, spiralling toward the centre of this dirty secret.

And there, in the core, was the largest glass tank of all. Set amid hissing pipes and high guardrails, warning signs and wary checkpoints, ringed by automatic guns and electric fences, it was armoured in glass many meters thick, large enough for a pod of whales, and filled with an ocean of water.

A single mote of flesh floated in the distant core of that main tank, deeper down and further away than the floor of the abyss itself. The flesh, the figure, the hint of life — it was little more than a smear of pale skin, obscured behind glass and pressure and murk.

Upon that, my eyes finally halted.

I knew what I beheld.

“Maisie?”

bedlam boundary – 24.25

And there, at last, she was.

That distant speck of flesh bore neither face nor feature; a formless smudge crushed in the shackles of ten trillion gallons of pressure and darkness. She — for it was she, it could be no other — was too far away, too deeply buried in her watery grave, beyond meters of glass and miles of ocean, locked in the heart of a machine of which she was both purpose and core, the reason for this reality, the fuel in this engine of suffering.

But still she struggled.

Even at that abyssal distance, hints of desperate motion shivered and shuddered the waters about that scrap of humanity, as if she was trying to swim. But her fight availed her nothing; she was held in place by a million wires glinting like spider-silk beneath moonlight, thrumming in silent mockery as her motion churned the deeps. Each stainless steel line linked that speck of flesh to the interior walls of the tank, holding her in place as surely as the pressure and the glass and the murk. Even if all the water in the world were drained, she would still not be free. She would have to be cut out of her prison, line by line.

Her name escaped my lips again; I tasted my own tears upon my tongue.

“Maisie?”

It was her. It was her. It was her. I could not see her face, but I knew it was her, with all the logic of the dream and the play.

My right hand splayed against the monitor, my broken reflection peering back between my fingers. I pressed — harder and harder and harder still — until the bones of my hand ground against the cold glass. I showed my teeth, hissing and whining with frustration beyond human speech, willing the dream to bend and break beneath my will, to push through the screen and tumble free onto the gantries and bare metal of that hidden place, with the leaking water and the flashing alarms and the lethal lithe predators darting through the shadows. For one glorious moment I thought I might

shatter the dream asunder just as I had reality, to burst this final barrier of video and camera, to place myself before my lost twin sister.

But the screen was only glass. It creaked in the monitor's frame.

I screamed in a way I never had before, howling with rage and denial. I pulled back my hand and thumped the screen, but nothing happened. I screamed again, and hit the monitor again, but all I did was hurt my hand.

Praem, still tucked down in the crook of my right arm, bade me gently to stop. This was neither window nor door, it was a camera feed. Observation at a distance, with no touch or taste or truth of presence. Stop, Heather. Stop. Stop. Stop.

I ignored her and pulled back my fist a third time, hiccuping and choking and heaving for breath. Maisie was so close!

Praem pointed out I would need both hands intact and unbroken, if I was going to free Maisie from the water and the wires. This would not help her. Stop, Heather. Stop.

I stopped, lowered my fist, and nodded, choking down a final sob. Crying would not save my sister now. I scrubbed my tears from my cheeks, sniffing back the rest, then cast another glance at that struggling scrap of flesh.

"Maisie, I'm coming," I whispered. I framed her form with my fingers again, palm on unfeeling glass. "You just hold on. I'm almost there. I love you."

If she heard me, she showed no sign.

Before I turned away from the wall of monitors, I took note of one essential detail; on the bezel of each monitor was a label — sometimes printed, sometimes stamped, some hand-written with the indecipherable scrawl of a professional doctor. Many of them were nothing but corridor numbers or locations within the hospital — 'Floor 3, Corridor 8B', 'Main Hallway, Ground Floor', 'Cell Block H'. I had seen no physical cameras during my time out there in the nightmare of Cygnet Asylum, but that hardly mattered. None of this was literal. This bank of monitors was the Eye's view of the world, of Wonderland, or at least of what I had broken Wonderland into.

The label on the bezel of Maisie's monitor read: 'Maximum Security

Containment Facility / Core / Subject Zero.'

Eyes hot with the memory of tears, cold fury in my throat, with a quivering in my belly and my fingers clenched into a fist, I turned away from the wall of monitors, the inside of the Eye's sight, and fixed my own observation upon the Governor.

She stood by the other, smaller, mundane desk, dark blonde hair framed by the night beyond the wide window on the opposite wall, like a halo of light in the darkness. One hand rested atop the towel-wrapped bundle of Horror's head. Eyes of soft and rain-streaked sunrise stared right through me.

Her lips parted with a moist click, deafening in the silence of the office. "The archives are through—"

"Maximum Security Containment Facility," I snapped. "Is that the 'Box' I've heard the nurses talking about?"

The Governor closed her mouth. Her gaze wandered away to rove across the monitors, then drag itself over the walls, then finally yawning wide at the door to the archives.

"Mm," she grunted. "MSCF. Box. Same thing."

"How do I get in there?"

"Through one of the main security doors," she said, voice faraway and badly distracted. "There's four of those. But they're locked and guarded. And then inside there's guns, and checkpoints, and other special guards. All sorts of things."

"Take me there. Get me inside."

Her gaze wandered back to mine.

"Take me there!" I repeated, my temper flaring hot and furious. "You're in charge of this place, the hospital, this 'containment facility', whatever, all of it is you, yours! You take me there, you open the door, and you let my sister go!"

The Governor's eyes wandered away again. "I can't do that."

"You—" I almost shouted, stomping forward, stopped only by the jarring flare of pain up the length of my left shin. My crutch almost slipped, threatening to send me sprawling. I righted myself and groped for the arm of the massive steel throne. The seat swung around on the ball-and-socket joint set into the floor, smooth and

silent and perfectly balanced, inviting me to sit.

I all but collapsed into the chair, clutching Praem to my chest and my crutch to my side. Praem gently suggested I not get too comfortable; I assured her there was no threat of that, not with Maisie so close.

I panted for breath, sweat on my brow, shaking with anger and frustration and that heady drug I'd felt so little of for half my life — hope.

"Why?" I demanded, trying to keep my voice level. "Why can't you take me there? Why can't you let her go? You're the one in charge here, aren't you? Or is this another 'night shift' thing? I refuse to believe that I'm somehow the one keeping her imprisoned. I'm not, that's absurd. That's been you, all along. It's always been you. Sevens is dealing with my nightmares, back out there. Everything from this point onward is you!"

The Governor shrugged beneath her white laboratory coat. "You've seen the containment facility. I can't just walk in there and release her by myself. Questions would be asked. Systems would lock down, or lock up, or lock us out. We would probably both get shot."

"Then we get shot!" I shouted. "Fine!"

The Governor glanced at me for an extended moment, then away again. "No."

I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose, then looked back over my shoulder at the wall of monitors, at the scrap of Maisie inside that distant tank of water; the throne of steel made it easy, rotating on the ball-and-socket joint with the lightest touch. I stared at Maisie for a long time, perhaps thirty seconds, maybe thirty minutes. The other views on the monitors tempted and tugged at my peripheral vision, but they could not dislodge me from my goal, my twin, my Maisie.

I turned back.

"What do I need to do?" I asked. "To get in there, and get her out, what do I need to do?"

The Governor shrugged again. "I don't know. She's been there as long as I can remember."

On the desk, Horror's decapitated head twitched and let out a

muffled, “Mm-mm-mmmm!” from behind her mouthful of towel. The Governor glanced at her without interest. “Mmmmm! Mmm-mmm!”

“Be quiet,” said the Governor.

“Mmmm!”

“Quiet.”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Wait. Ungag her for me, please? I may as well hear her suggestion, it’s not as if I’ve got many other leads right now, if you can’t help me. Go on, please, remove her gag.”

The Governor unwrapped the lower part of the towel, leaving Horror still blind and bound, then uncorked her mouth.

“Pah! Peh, ugh. Bleh!” Horror spat and stuck out her tongue, working her lips up and down. “Oh, that was just frightful. You know there’s really no reason to keep me gagged—”

“How do I get into the Box?” I demanded. “The Maximum Security Containment Facility. Give me something useful or you’re going back in the towel. Talk.”

Horror tutted and sighed. Her head wobbled on the desk as if she was trying to tilt it sideways. “Oh, Heather. This is what I’ve been trying to protect you from! You don’t want to go in there! You do not want to confront that. You’re not ready or able or—”

“Wrap her back up,” I said.

“Wait!” Horror yelled. “Just look, look at the screens! You don’t want to go in there!”

I almost ignored her, but then some perverse and darkly urgent need sent my eyes over my shoulder, back toward the monitors.

And there, for a split-second, caught in the flickering, jerking, blood-red light of a blaring alarm, something looked back.

Sharp and spined and slick all over, strobing with dark-lit skin; too many teeth in a wide-set maw, below eyes made of glowing coal and bright-blown toxins; ghostly membranes dragged behind, flitting through the shadows; naked flesh was wet with ocean water, blood and gore dripping from clawed hands.

It vanished into the gloom, somewhere beyond the base of Maisie’s

vast aquarium.

"You see!" Horror heaved. "You cannot go in there, not with those things running around, you—"

I burst out laughing in relief. Horror did not understand me at all. And Maisie was not alone.

"Wrap her back up," I told the Governor. "Please."

Horror was gagged again in seconds, muffled behind her towel. She complained a little, 'mmm-mm'ing into the fabric, and then fell silent.

"Now," I said. "Please, how do I get in there? How do I free Maisie? Just tell me how."

The Governor shrugged.

I took a deep breath and tried to swallow my anger, my bitterness, my hate; the realisation that Maisie was not alone did help, but she was still beyond my reach. I could hate the Eye with incredible ease, for here we were inside the seat of her mind, with the evidence of her eyes before us — or behind my back, splashed all over the wall of monitors — and she still claimed she did not know how to let Maisie go.

"If ... if forgiveness is what will free her, then I will forgive you," I said, squeezing words up past the lump in my throat. "I am willing to accept that all of this was a mistake, an accident, ten years ago. We — Maisie and I — we fell into your world, into Wonderland, by accident, because of the actions of a man we'd never met, and you didn't even know about, who was trying to feed you with things you didn't even want or understand. And you took us for your own, because that was all you could see, isn't that right? All you could see was yourself, reflected in us, in our minds, or something, I don't know. I'm willing to accept this was an accident. I'm willing to forgive you. But you have to let her go."

"I can't. We'll be stopped. There's nothing to be done."

I clenched my teeth, anger throbbing back. "If I'm your daughter, then isn't she your daughter too? Don't you want to free her? Can't you see she's suffering?"

"You are. She is. I do. I can. But I can't. We'll be stopped."

“By other parts of you!” I snapped. “I don’t care if there’s armed guards, or automatic guns, or any of those things! You’re the authority here! You’re the boss, the ego, the mind. Let her go! Just let her go!”

The Governor stared at me for a moment, then picked up Horror’s head, dangling by a fistful of towel. “You couldn’t stop her.”

“What? What does that have to do with it?”

“You couldn’t stop her. You needed the Director. I can’t stop this. You and I are the same.”

I frowned at the Governor for a long moment, then grudgingly accepted she may have had a point; if Horror and the nurses were rooted in my own trauma, yet I could not simply order them to cease, then whatever this all represented for the Eye was not truly within her control either.

I snorted. “Being in charge doesn’t give you control, then? It’s lonely at the top?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” I sighed. “What if I help you? Can you free her then?”

The Governor looked down at the floor before my feet. Her expressionless face creased with a puzzled frown.

“The archives would be incomplete,” she said.

“ ... pardon?”

“The archives would be incomplete. I’d have to start over again. It’s already taken so long.”

“What? I don’t understand, what does—”

“Help me with the project, with the archives,” she said, raising those pink-soft eyes to meet mine. “And then it’ll be done.” The Governor blinked. “Though I still won’t be able to get you in there to reach her. But they might.”

She raised her arm and pointed at the wall of monitors. I glanced back over my shoulder and realised she was not indicating Maisie. She meant the others, my friends and family and allies, all of them.

Raine and Zheng careening down a hallway, shoulder-checking a

nurse aside; Lozzie leading her advance pack of feral patients, arming themselves with broken table legs and stolen crowbars and makeshift shivs; Praem and her group of Knights down in the dripping deeps of the prison, fighting some unseen foe; the slamming sextet of dark shapes out in the grounds which could only be the Caterpillars, chased by a mob of clambering shadows; the sleek dark form of the fox darting through the trees; Eeve and Twil, holding the door of the infirmary; the unknown giant shape looming over the broken perimeter wall of the hospital grounds; and Sevens, waging her one-woman war against the staff in a corridor of abyssal darkness.

Lozzie's revolution was bucking and tearing at the bonds of the dream. By morning the battle would be in full swing, one way or another.

All I had to do was make it through the night, and we'd start pulling down these walls, Governor or no Governor.

I turned back to her. "Do I even need your help?"

"I need yours."

"... pardon?"

She shrugged. "The project is unfinished. The archives are incomplete. Please. I don't want to go back again."

Realisation was cold comfort. I longed to leave this office and rejoin the fray, though my own limited strength and wounded body could make little contribution. But now I understood. My role was here, in the heart of the dream. Sevens had said it so clearly; I was the only one who could solve the Eye's problem, the only one who could fix this knot of trauma, however alien it might be.

With the Governor on our side, the revolution could not be stopped, and the way would lie clear to Maisie's prison.

"I help you, you help me, that's how we're going to do this?" I asked. "I help you with this project, and you'll smooth the passage of the revolution? You'll call off the nurses, announce a ceasefire, whatever I need? You'll do all of that?"

The Governor shrugged. "I don't see why not."

"Promise me."

“I promise you.”

I bit back a thick wad of anger still lingering in my throat; this was not what I had expected. I needed more than this, more than just a resolution. I needed closure, but maybe that was not to be had. Maybe that was the price of Maisie’s rescue.

“Do you ... ” I swallowed, knowing I would regret this. “Do you understand what you’ve done to us? To her? To me? Do you understand any of it?”

The Governor stared at me, then looked away, to the big steel door on the right of the monitors. “The archives are through there.”

I sighed, bitter and disappointed. Would I never have real answers? “Why did I escape and Maisie didn’t?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did you keep her here this whole time? Why did you never let her go?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not? What does this metaphor really mean?”

A shrug.

“Why did you try to teach me hyperdimensional mathematics? Why the ten years of nightmares? Why any of it? Why? Just give me something, anything.”

The Governor’s gaze flickered back to me. “I need to see.” She looked away and pointed again. “The archives are through there.”

Praem quite sensibly suggested that these lines of inquiry were fruitless, and I was sadly forced to agree. The Governor may have been the Eye’s ego, but she simply did not have any answers to my questions. In truth there was never a figure I could take vengeance upon for Maisie’s ten long years of confinement, and what that had done to me in turn. The Governor was no more than a metaphor herself, a representative of something which simply did not understand human beings. I had already gotten my revenge, hadn’t I? I had cast a harpoon into the Eye to force it wide, to force it to not look away from me. Revenge was pointless. Revenge would not bring back my sister.

I used my crutch to lever myself up and out of the massive rotating

steel throne, staggering back to my feet. The Governor stepped away from the desk, heading for the door.

“No,” I said, pointing with Praem, pointing at Horror’s gagged and blindfolded head left behind on the desk. “She’s not staying here unsupervised. Sevens told you to take responsibility for her, so take responsibility.”

The Governor went back to the desk and picked up Horror’s head. Horror sighed through her gag, clearly disappointed.

I limped over to the heavy steel door. The Governor joined me and operated the locks built into the wall — one was a combination lock, the second a code pad, the third a thumb-print reader. Each lock beeped in turn, little red lights flashing to green. The door to the archives popped open with a hiss of air as the pressures equalised. The Governor swung the door wide, steel hinges silent in their dress of grease.

A bare concrete staircase, lit by naked bulbs behind wire cages, going down.

The Governor stepped over the threshold and descended the stairs, boots echoing against each concrete step. She did not look back to make sure I was following.

I glanced over my shoulder one last time, to gaze upon that hint of Maisie, that struggling scrap trapped in her ocean of water, a speck of pale meat flickering and twitching behind the glass of the monitor.

A face peered back at me from another screen — skin of peach-leather and dove-down and void-dark, shifting into a dozen colours, sleek and smooth and sharper than sound. Muscles rolled, oiled and buttery, built for grace and speed and sinuous perfection. Clean spines, razor teeth, poison quivering in her barbed tips. Polychromatic eyes went yellow, then pink, then black. Membranous wings unfolded over her shoulders, slick with water dripping from their rims. The webbed fingers of one hand splayed against the glass of the camera, as if she was trying to push her way out of the prison and into the world, as if she was trying to reach me — as I was her.

“I’m coming for you, too,” I whispered. “Hold on, and watch Maisie. I’ll be there soon.”

The face of Homo abyssus vanished, darting back into the shadows of the Maximum Security Containment Facility, chased by the stutter-flash of silent gunfire.

I turned to follow the Governor, down into the archives. The metal door swung shut behind me with a sharp click, echoing on the bare concrete.

“Down we go,” I hissed.

Descending those concrete stairs began easily enough, but did not stay trivial for long; I took the first flight quickly, my crutch-tip gripping each step, my slippers scuffing, my left leg grumbling but not bursting into open complaint. The stairs met a narrow landing, then turned, then continued downward into the harsh-lit earth. The Governor stayed a few paces ahead as we went. A second flight led me forward, then a third snagged my soles, then a fourth slowed my feet, all joined by those narrow landings of dull and empty concrete. The electric lights blazed, not a shadow in any pitted nook or rough corner, just harsh white illumination forever and ever. Our footsteps echoed down and down and down.

By the third flight my left leg began to ache worse than before. By the fourth the arm which gripped my crutch whined with the effort of holding me up. By the fifth I almost stumbled, lurching forward, scrabbling with my free hand to catch the bare metal bannister. I did, and saved myself a trip to the floor.

Six, seven, eight, nine, on and on, down and down, numbing my mind to nothing but a nub. By ten flights down I was sweating and shaking. No abyssally-toned muscles here, no Raine to carry me in her arms, no tentacles to fling myself down the shaft at top speed. Just feet and sweat and down, down, down, down, down, down—

On the eleventh flight, I tripped.

My crutch flew out from under me with a catch-start slip. My right hand flailed to catch the bannister again, but I could not do so without letting go of Praem. I felt a desperate grip flutter at my elbow — strong and firm, secure in her competence, Praem trying to keep me steady. But her perfection was not enough, not without her full physical body. I screamed, careening forward, about to crash down the flight of stairs and slam my skull into the wall or bounce my neck off a corner or break a bone on a—

The Governor caught me, hands on my shoulders.

She righted me without comment, jammed the crutch firmly back into my hand, and tucked Praem into the crook of my other arm.

“Watch your step,” she said. “Long way down.”

Then she turned away and carried on.

I expected to feel some shivering disgust at her touch, but her hands were simply hands, neither too warm nor too cold. She had smelled of nothing except the fabric of her lab coat. I tucked Praem halfway into my yellow blanket, just over my heart, so she could peer out and keep watch, then placed my right hand on the handrail. No chances this time, no messing about. I gripped hard, and carried on down.

And down.

And down.

And down.

Down.

Down.

Dow-

D—

—

The concrete stairwell terminated after twenty seven flights of stairs. I reached the bottom ragged with exhaustion, sagging under my own body weight, but still in one merciful piece — except for all the sweat I’d shed into my clothes, technically. The final landing was a plain concrete box with one door leading out.

The Governor paused before that plain white interior door, her hand hovering a few inches from the stainless steel handle, for far too long.

“What’s wrong now?” I asked.

“This is it,” she said.

“The archives, yes? Is something wrong?”

“Nobody but me has ever been inside before,” she said. “This is a

strange feeling. It is enough that you help me.”

The handle creaked, as did the hinges; a taste of cold fog and the scent of paper brushed my face. The Governor stepped through without fanfare, onto an oddly familiar thin brown carpet. I followed on her heels, prepared for the utmost extremes of alien metaphor.

Instead, I found myself standing in a library, one which wore familiar clothes.

Rolling stacks stretched off into fog-drowned distance — library shelves made of grey plastic, tall and heavy and wide-set, mounted in rails on the floor, with handles on their ends so they could be moved back and forth. I recognised those shelves, that configuration, that colour, that shape; the carpet, the scent in the air, the close-packed silence. All of it I knew so very well.

All of this was Sharrowford University Library, wrapped in heavy fog lying in dense canals between the shelves.

Endless rolling stacks marched away into the fog ahead of us, swallowed up by the grey gloom and questing tendrils of mist. To the left and right, the same scene repeated at a forty five degree angle, then at another forty five degree angle, endless rows of shelves stretching out into misty infinity. The Governor and I had emerged from a solid cylinder of concrete which rose up and vanished into the hanging fog a mile above our heads. To either side of the concrete cylinder more rows of stacks stretched away into endless mist, and the same behind, so that the stacks formed an octagonal shape around this vertical entrance to the archives. The cylinder was the hub of a wheel, the rows of shelves a set of sixteen parallel spokes. But the rim was lost in the fog, too far away to see.

The Governor shut the door.

“Here we are,” she said. “The archives.”

Her voice was muffled by the fog, swallowed by the immensity of the dreamlike room, sinking into millions upon millions of books.

I tore my eyes away from the clinging infinity of book and shelf, and looked closer to hand. The space between the concrete cylinder and the start of the shelves was perhaps twenty feet of plain brown carpet. A desk stood close to the door — nothing special, a simple writing desk with sturdy legs and a wooden top. It was littered with

bound manuscripts in flimsy plastic covers, like archived dissertations in the basement of the real Sharrowford University Library. A few battered hardback tomes weighed down the various manuscripts, stuffed with bookmarks and little strips of paper.

Further away from the door was a free-standing blackboard, half-covered in an unfinished equation which I recognised; it was the same equation the Governor had been writing on the blackboard in the infirmary, the one she had halted before handing me the chalk, expecting me to finish the mathematics. This version ended at the exact same point.

A little way toward the start of the library stacks themselves stood a long, low table made of clean white wipe-clean plastic. It was occupied by a lumpy, incomplete figure.

I gaped at the thing lying on the table, then staggered closer for a better look.

The head was made of felt and fuzz, with eyes punched through the fabric; blood and bile and other fluids had seeped through the material and dried on the plastic table. Hair was string, yellow for blonde, unravelled and loose, stained with grease. No jaw, just a slash for a mouth, with teeth made from pieces of paper left to curl with age and blacken with sticky fluids. The body was mostly green garden wire, held together with messy clumps of duct tape, stuffed with handfuls of raw meat and mouldy sticks to serve as bones. The hips were a mess, the joints were all wrong, though an attempt had been made to get some kind of articulation for the femurs — made of old broom handles snapped and taped together. For arms the figure had tubes of chicken wire; forks served as hands, gone rusty and corroded. The feet were stubs of wood. The only piece of clothing was a pitiful attempt at sewing a poncho; the colours were all wrong, grey and black.

It wasn't moving. It wasn't even alive, just unconnected inanimate matter.

The Governor walked up beside me.

"It's Lozzie," I murmured. My voice was as muffled as the Governor's, as if the fog and the books had robbed me of the power of speech. I cleared my throat and spoke up. "Or, no. It's your attempt at her, isn't it? This is the Lozzie-thing, the Puppet, the thing you made!"

The Governor stared down at the mess on the table. I tried to read her expression, but there was so little in there, no creases around her eyes, no twitch in the corners of her lips.

"I couldn't get it right," she said. "No matter how hard I tried."

"Get what right?" I demanded. "You tried to create — what, a person? Why?"

The Governor stared and stared and stared, but the Puppet did not move; tides of fog lapped from the open mouths of the nearby library aisles, over-topping the shelves with pale grey-green waves, reaching toward the Lizzie Puppet with tendrils of mist, always fading to nothing before they could touch.

"Why?" The Governor echoed. She finally raised her eyebrows, as if surprised by her own thoughts. "If I created her well enough, then she might see me. She might look back at me. She might help me with the project."

I shook my head. "A person as a mirror?"

The Governor shrugged.

"Why Lizzie?" I pressed.

The Governor's surprise sank back into the foggy placidity of her face. "Somebody gave me a lot of information about her."

"... Alexander Lilburne? Her brother. Yes?"

"I'm not good with names. I have to keep notes. Whoever it was, they gave me a lot of information. I thought that would be enough to create a new one. But it wasn't. It's never enough. No matter how much I gather."

"But then you sent her to bring me back to Wonderland. You sent her to fetch me. Do you not remember that?"

"Only when I realised she couldn't see me."

"Is that all you wanted me for? To see you? To look back at you? Well, here I am! Is this not enough?"

The Governor shrugged, still staring down at the Puppet.

"Why ... why not have Maisie see you, then?" I asked, groping for meaning. "She's been here for ten years. Isn't that enough time to

do whatever it is you're trying to do here?"

The Governor finally raised her eyes from the dead matter of the Puppet, but she did not look at me. She stared into the fog-drowned library stacks ahead of us, then off to the left and the right.

"Yes," she said. "But it's not enough to merely collect. The project has to be finished."

I sighed, long and hard and losing my patience.

All of this was a dream, a metaphor, a play made of obsessions and traumas, as much the Eye's as my own. But this fog was so much more frustrating than a simple opponent to scream at or slay. I believe I would have preferred if the Eye's avatar was some cackling, gloating, dark lady villain, straight out of a Saturday morning cartoon, somebody I could hate with ease and fight to the death without a second thought. If only she'd been like Evee's mother, or akin to Horror, or some horrific floating eyeball trailing tendrils like the stingers of a jellyfish.

But instead of catharsis and release, I had this befuddled old doctor, so softly spoken, obsessed only with her private library, without an evil bone in her body.

I flexed my hands — my empty right, and my sweaty left wrapped hard around the plastic handle of my crutch. I tried to imagine my fingers crushing the Governor's windpipe. Could my pain-sapped, morphine-doused, dream-born strength knock the Governor to the floor and bounce her head off the carpet until her skull excavated the concrete beneath? Could I claw at her eyes and pluck out those pinkly glistening orbs? Could I kill her?

Praem — still tucked into the side of my yellow blanket, peeking out to offer her aid — suggested this was a rather counter-productive notion.

I sighed again, this time in total agreement. Toward the figure of the Governor I could muster no real anger, certainly not killing intent. With Evelyn's mother I had been consumed by rage and the need to rescue my beloved friend. If the Governor stood over Maisie and kept her imprisoned, that would have been a different matter, oh yes, then I could have fought. But she simply didn't hold those keys. Rage was pointless.

"Tell me," I said, speaking up to attract the Governor's attention;

that didn't work, as she continued to stare off into the fog and the library shelves. "What is all this? All these books, this library."

"Everything," said the Governor.

"Be specific. Is this a Library of Babel situation? Do you have all of reality compressed in here? Or all of Wonderland? Is that what we're looking at?"

"Everything."

I resisted the urge to whack her with my crutch, not wanting to fall onto my backside all over again, and instead swung myself away from the pitiful Lozzie Puppet laid out on the table. I limped over to the little desk next to the door.

The topmost book on the pile of manuscripts was titled 'Reflections of Orange Cut Swift, Volume MMMMDLXXIII.' I flipped it open to one of the bookmarks.

'—the great tower came down all in a hush on the year my fourth daughter died. That was all I recalled in the six months between sunrise and sunset, for I was afflicted most terrible with the grief and the wailing; three of my wings had been broken when I had cast myself from the window of our apartments; scarcely could I drag myself here and about for water and toilet; so that Bites Freely and Upon The Sound Of Rushing Water had to nurse me for the entire period of day. Great shame lay heavily like rocks upon my grief; but then toward the hours of dusk the Priest who I had known as a larva called Not So Wise came to visit and we talked for many hours about what comes after death and what follows is an account of our musings and—'

Up and down that page and onto the next the text went on much the same. I moved the book aside and selected another, titled 'Of The Years Between, Volume 5.'

'—starlight to the left, nebula to the right. Travel. Eight hundred and seventy eight years, three months, seven days, fourteen hours, two seconds. Interstellar hydrogen harvest falling short. Hungry. Swarm maintained coherency. After time, gas giant light reflected from star strong enough for readings. Unsuitable home. Disappointment. Four dead on system exit. Argument resolved. We swing outward again. Next star, 20,000 years distant. Wings folded. Currents exchanged. Course set. Predicted—'

I flicked forward a few times, but the book went on and on like that for well over a thousand pages. I pushed it aside and flipped open a manuscript instead, to a random page. This one was called, 'Memories Of Feeding.'

'—there was blood in my mouth after the act, but it was too much at first, too much to swallow without it spilling out down my cheeks, falling into my belly in waves of gushing gold and green. It had become to me like a seminal fluid, sweet and noxious as life itself; Caratus had been correct, the transformation had changed even my sense of taste and the sensibility of my loins. The man did not struggle in my arms long, for my fangs eventually found his nerves as well as the channels of his blood, and he died before he could shout a warning to the brood-guard before the portal—'

Another — 'The Long Year On The Hills.' Random page.

'—two sheep fell down a crack today. Couldn't get them out with my stick, so I had to fetch some rope, which meant a trip into town, which meant I saw the old woman outside the florist again. The flowers had mated and the result was all a-terrible screaming—'

Another.

'—seven is not a magic number and this I refute before council and queendom, on pain of being food for our most blessed queen so to for fill her stomach with enough meat for a thousand eggs laid—'

Another.

'—the trees were all dead after the eruption but the land was clean and ready for the next stage of the process—'

Another and another and another, on and on and on. I flipped open more manuscripts, but they were much the same — endless stories of all kinds, some dramatic or horrific or human, but many so obviously alien, written for alien audiences by alien minds. Had the dream compressed these down into a human form, an interpreted version of whatever texts these had originally been? Were these books from Outside, translated into English?

The Governor paid me no attention, still staring off into the fog.

"What are these?" I called out to her, holding up one of the bound manuscripts. She finally looked around. I waved the manuscript, this one titled 'Break Down In The Sump Where I Died Of Starvation

And Thirst And Exposure'. I had wisely declined to read any of that one; far too grim for our current circumstances.

The Governor stared at the manuscript in my hand, then said: "Everything."

I pursed my lips. "You are supremely unhelpful. Did you know that?"

"No." The Governor shook her head. If she was offended by my rebuke, she didn't show it.

I sighed and slapped the manuscript back down on the table. "I don't understand. What is this, a collection of books you've acquired from Outside? A catalogue of meaningless drivel? And what about that?" I gestured at the blackboard. "What is that equation for? What does it do?"

"That is the expression of the project. You can finish it."

"And what is the project?"

"To read it all."

My turn to shake my head. "I don't understand. I don't understand what any of this means. What is this room? What are all these books? What is this?"

The Governor turned away again, staring off into the fog which rolled and pillowed between the library stacks; for a moment I thought I'd lost her attention, and that I would have to walk over and poke her in the side before I could get any sense out of her.

But then she raised a hand and pointed ahead, into the row of shelves directly opposite the door.

"I'll show you," she said. "Then you can see."

Without so much as a backward glance, the Governor strode off between the shelves, instantly welcomed and swallowed by a thousand tongues of fog.

"H-hey!" I squeaked. "Wait, wait for me!"

I hurried to join her. At the threshold of the shelves I paused, where the fog seemed to thicken and tug, fingers of mist plucking at the edges of my yellow blanket and tracing the bulge of my bandaged leg, wrapping empty fingers around the base of my crutch and

cupping Praem's plush chin.

The Governor was receding into the distance, an indistinct figure sinking into the still and silent murk.

Praem pointed out that once again, I did not have any other choice, and I did not want to get left behind without my guide in these strange and dreamlike depths.

I plunged ahead, clutching hard to my crutch, trying to ignore the mounting throb deep down inside my left shin.

Unlike every previous time I had hurried after the Governor, she quickly got away from me; the tail of her white lab coat vanished into the fog ahead, her booted footsteps swallowed up by the murk, her dark blonde hair turning pale, then translucent, then gone.

"Wait!" I croaked. "Wait— wait for me! Wait!"

Within moments, I was alone in a deep cistern funnel filled with fog and shelves and books.

"Dammit," I hissed. "What now?"

Praem suggested I carry on; perhaps I would find what the Governor wanted me to see. I agreed, if only because there was nothing else to choose.

The tip of my crutch caught steady and secure against the rough carpet of the library. My leg ached with a subtle pulse of pain, but after a few steps the sensation became routine, easily dismissed, as if the pain was being leached away by the tendrils of fog. My pace was slow but steady, passing by the towering shelves set in their rails, with their well-oiled handles and their grey plastic faces.

Each set of shelves had a label on the end which faced into the aisle. Some were printed, others stamped; a few were hand-written, similar to the labels on the monitors upstairs. Was this the Governor's own penmanship?

Most of the labels were completely incomprehensible — alien names, date formats from impossible times, subject areas which sounded like riddles — but as I progressed down the empty aisle between the rows, I began to notice a pattern. The library was organised not by category, that was merely an illusion caused by the sheer number of texts; the shelves were descending in alphabetical order, though we had entered somewhere around the

letter 'J'.

A sinking feeling settled into the pit of my stomach.

"No," I hissed. "No, it's not possible."

It is, Praem said.

"Easy for you to say," I whispered into the fog. "I ... I would rather not know ..."

But I could only push on.

Doing so was easier thought than performed. I limped deeper into the fog for what felt like hours, reading the esoteric and occult labels on the end-caps of the shelves, and peering into an occasional open row, at thousands of books wedged tight in their places. The ache in my leg got worse and worse; how long had it been since my last dose of morphine? Praem said not yet four hours. I must wait. I must be sensible. So I waited and I walked, hobbling onward, lurching, staggering, past the end of 'J' and through the wilds of 'K' and 'L', until I finally reached the outskirts of 'M'.

By then my suspicions were worse than the pain. My heart was in my throat, a fist in my guts. A few minutes later I stopped next to a row of shelves with a very familiar name written on the end — handwritten by the avatar of the Eye herself.

'Morell, Heather.'

A dozen rolling shelves all bore of my name. And after those dozen came another, almost swallowed by the lapping edges of the cold and clammy fog — 'Morell, Maisie.'

I clung to my crutch like driftwood in the sea, dwarfed by the grey plastic shelves like the shores of some vast and undiscovered continent, peering into the first open row labelled with my own name. I wanted to be sick. I wanted to shut my eyes. I wanted to run away.

"Praem," I hissed. "What is this?"

We better have a look, Praem advised.

"But what ..."

Praem did not know.

I crept into the row, slinking beneath the shadow of the bookshelf. The plain plastic shelves themselves were stuffed with loose-leaf manuscripts, hardback tomes, spiral-bound notebooks, and laminated cards. A few of the hardbacks boasted actual titles, ones I recognised — there was *Watership Down*, and there was *The Hobbit*. I pulled both of those off the shelves and checked their contents; they seemed normal enough, matching the stories I knew so well. Here too was a collected works of Shakespeare, with Hamlet and Lear in their proper places.

But the hardbacks were in the minority. None of the other entities had titles, only catalogue numbers printed on the spines or on little sticky labels stuck to the covers. There were hundreds of roughly bound manuscripts on one shelf alone, and six shelves to each row, and a dozen rolling shelves in total. Too many.

I walked deep inside, where the shadows were heaviest and the fog the darkest.

There I found the text marked ‘M.H.1.1.’

Shaking hands drew it forth, feeling nothing like my own. Praem told me I was going to be okay. I balanced the manuscript on one arm and opened the first page.

‘On the day I met Raine, the first thing I did was jerk awake in bed and vomit nightmares into my lap.’

Eyeballs blossomed in my brain, peering and searching; fingers scratched and groped at the inside of my skull.

I slapped the manuscript shut, gasping for breath, choking back a wave of vomit. “What ... what ... what is this ... oh, oh, no, no no, that’s ... me? I—”

I grabbed another bound manuscript from further down and yanked it off the shelves, then let it fall open at random.

‘Of course, that wasn’t how it happened at all. There was no lightless abyss, no hole and no wall, no voice to whisper and no ears to hear. We didn’t use words, we used mathematics. We spoke in the language of atomic force and gravity, of starshine and photons, but I can’t tell you about that. I can’t even tell myself about that.’

I dropped that manuscript and grabbed a third.

‘I’d grown used to Evee’s anger by then. I thought I understood it, that I

understood her, at least better than I had back when we'd first met. Before we'd become real friends — and then perhaps more — I'd found Evelyn's anger intimidating at best, actively frightening at worst. Short-tempered, bitter, acerbic, often directly insulting, sometimes accompanied by threats of physical violence, omni-directional, not even sparing herself from her own ire, it was easy to see Evelyn Saye as the 'nasty bitch' she so often tried to project. But I'd come to understand that Evee wore her temper like a suit of armour.'

I threw that one at the shelves and staggered back, breath ripping through my throat, on the verge of hyperventilating.

Eyes, eyes inside my brain, looking down into my soul; hands and fingers and all scrabbling about against the limits of my skull. I clawed at my own forehead, heaving for breath, as if I could pull the sensation out of me.

Praem told me to take a moment and breathe — but I could not. I lurched upright and staggered out of the row, back into the central aisle, fog clutching at my ankles and whirling past my shoulders. I limped down to the furthest of the shelves labelled with my name, then plunged back into the stacks, looking for where it all ended.

I grabbed one of the last manuscripts — 'M.H.24.1.' My fingers shook so hard I could barely peel back the pages.

'My eyes snapped open, deep in dreary dread-drenched dark, in a place I did not know.'

I jerked upright, clawing at my racing heart, clutching scratchy bedsheets to my heaving chest. My breath came in ragged gasps. My skin was coated in cold sweat, gluing my pajamas to my clammy back and belly. Rusty bedsprings creaked beneath my slender shifting weight.'

That was me, when I had arrived in Cygnet Asylum; I felt those clawing fingers scraping at the inside of my skull again as if trying to scratch me clean, eyes blossoming in my own grey matter and peering into my deeps. I tossed that manuscript aside and grabbed the next, then the next, then the next, then—

'That was me, when I had arrived in Cygnet Asylum; I felt those clawing fingers scraping at the inside of my skull again as if trying to scratch me clean, eyes blossoming in my own grey matter and peering into my deeps. I tossed that manuscript aside and grabbed the next, then the next, then the next, then the next, until I found the very last. I stood

bedlam boundary – 24.26

The Governor and myself — the Eye and I — stood surrounded on all sides by the aisles of the archives, wrapped deep in the papery embroidery of her mind, embraced by the whorls and coils of clammy, clutching, claustrophobic fog, the folds and frills of her brain.

She — the Eye's avatar, the Eye's ego, the Eye's representative upon the stage of this play — loomed at the end of the row, flanked by grey plastic and tight-packed ranks of books. Fingers of fog plucked and pulled at the shoulders of her laboratory coat, trying to drag her back into the maze of the stacks, to drown her in the weight and heft of her own thoughts. Pink eyes burned like tiny toxic fires in the shadow of her face. Blonde hair the colour of old straw hung in an uncombed mass down her back. Her hands were shoved firmly into her pockets, with the head of Horror the Nurse nowhere to be seen.

The Governor had appeared like an apparition, thrown from the churning waves of fog to shock me senseless with this final revelation. But her expression was placid, passive, plain disinterest. To her, this was no shock at all.

"This is ... this is everything you've ever observed?" I repeated her words, my voice shaking. "This library, the archives. This is everything you've ever observed?"

The Governor nodded once, then looked away, her eyes wandering across the bound volumes on the opposite shelves. "Mm," she grunted an affirmative. "Everything."

"All the people and universes and dimensions you dragged into Wonderland, or which fell into your orbit? This is all those, everything you've ever seen?"

"Everything," she echoed.

My heart still raced like a dying dove; my crawling skin was coated with cold sweat; my stomach threatened rebellion, roiling and rocking, rejecting that awful feeling of eyeballs blossoming inside my brain and sharp-nailed fingers groping against the underside of

my skull.

But the feeling had faded. The revelation was over.

Now there was simply her and I, alone in the fog.

I felt like my mind would fly apart under the pressure, as if my skull was stuffed with an ocean, straining against the delicate bones of my cranium. This — all this, not just the books which had catalogued the inside of my mind, but all of it, all the tales under alien names, all the records and reminiscences, all the billions of volumes of stories, on and on and on, from all manner of Outside dimensions and Outsider minds, every last word — it was the inside of the Eye's head, the sum of her observations of everything she had ever seen, every being and world and mote that she had pulled into her orbit, into Wonderland, knowingly or by accident or otherwise.

The dream, the play, the metaphor-made-flesh, had rendered all that raw observation down into a library, peopled it with books, and filled those tomes with words, with stories, all of them in — hilariously or stupidly or bizarrely — British English, my own idiom and vernacular and dialect.

I didn't know if I should laugh or scream. The absurdity was too much. All these books, all this text, all this—

Metaphor, Praem reminded me firmly, still tucked into the front of my yellow blanket. Metaphor. Not real. These books represented the Eye's mind. They were signifier alone, not that which is signified.

“And this ... this is ... ” I panted, still unable to gather myself. “This is your ‘project’? To read ... ” I cast my right arm upward and away, indicating the totality of her archives. “All of this?”

The Governor still did not look at me. “Yes. Then the project will be complete.”

A hysterical hiccup-laugh slipped from between my lips. Praem said something sane and sensible, some attempt to grip my arms and steady my heart, but I wasn't listening.

“That's madness!” I said. “That's complete madness. Don't you understand? This— this— this place, this archive, this library, yes, it's a metaphor, fine. I get that! But you're a metaphor, too! And you're just one person. For one person to read all of this would take

more than a lifetime! Ten lifetimes! Let alone to actually understand and process it, to internalise or comprehend even a fraction of it. If this is a metaphor for everything you've ever observed, then ... then your project is impossible. You can't read all of this."

"I can. I will. There will be an end. And then I will be."

I laughed again, harsher this time, uncaring of how I sounded. I jabbed a finger at the bound manuscript I'd hurled to the floor — the hateful thing which had groped and scratched inside my head.

"Have you even read that?" I said. "How can you? It's still being written! You and I, standing here, even this conversation we're having, it's all been recorded right now! You've set yourself a metaphysically impossible task. Don't you understand? Look!" Still she would not look. "Look at the book! Look at me!"

The Governor finally lowered her pink-froth eyes. She stared at the manuscript on the floor for far too long, so that I thought she had been paralysed by the point I had made. But then she dragged her eyes across the books on the shelf, across the volumes of me, my life, my experiences, my everything.

She blinked several times, then frowned with the tiniest hint of melancholy.

"I need to get around to these," she said.

White hot anger surged up from my heart, boiling and bubbling into my throat with such force that it took me unawares; Praem suggested that I try to keep my temper, that furious words would avail me nothing. But my mouth was already opening, my vision stained red, my chest and hands trembling.

Violation. Every scrap of who and what I was, laid out on these pages. And she hadn't even read them!

She wasn't even paying attention now; the Governor was already turning aside and looking away, angling her eyes out into the fog, toward the other shelves, the other stacks, the other stories.

"So much to get around to," she said. "Now you see. You see now. You see—"

"You haven't even read them!" I shouted. "What was the point of all this?! All this violence and violation! You, inside my head for ten years, and you haven't even read it!?"

The Governor looked back at me. She seemed surprised and confused, her wide pink eyes glowing with soft inner fire.

“You haven’t even read it,” I repeated, throat full of bile. “You—”

“Volume twenty two point four,” the Governor said, and pointed at one of the bound manuscripts on the self. “Word eight thousand seven hundred and sixteen to word eight thousand seven hundred and twenty six: *My tentacle touched the black surface of the lightless blade.*” Her hand moved to point at another volume. “Twenty one point ten, word three thousand two hundred and eighty to word three thousand two hundred and eighty six. *I blinked at him in surprise.*” A third point, a third random volume. “Twenty point eight, word six thousand and forty one to word six thousand and fifty: *A rectangle of darkness, untouched by the heat-haze sunlight.*” Her hand flicked again. “Volume—”

“Stop, stop!” I snapped. “Stop!”

The Governor’s gaze wandered away again. “Check them.”

“ ... pardon?”

“Check them. If you do not believe.”

I glanced at the bound volumes on the shelves, the ones the Governor had indicated, but I didn’t need to open them and flick through the pages. I knew those words, those feelings, those sensations; they crawled inside my own head, threatening to peel open the lids of the eyes that had only just subsided into the meat of my brain. Those were my own thoughts, put down on paper — not only read by the Governor, but memorised.

My anger went cold and ashen on my tongue; I’d gotten her wrong.

“You ... you have read these?” I said. “Then what do you mean by saying you need to get around to them?”

The Governor shrugged. She began to turn away from me again, back out into the empty central aisle between the rows of shelves. “I don’t understand it all. Not yet. Have to keep reading.”

“Wait!” I cried. “Wait, please. Don’t just run off again. Don’t you dare. Please, just wait, wait there!”

To my great surprise, the Governor did as I asked. She paused just beyond the end of the aisle. Fog lapped about her boots and shins

like the shallows of a grey and sucking sea; little wavelets of translucent mist tugged at the hem of her lab coat, eager to pull her back into the ocean of memory.

I staggered forward on my crutch and awkwardly crouched down to pick up the volume I had cast onto the floor — the volume which had contained my own current thoughts, my own recursive actions. I handled it carefully, not wishing to see the pages inside once again; the experience might trap me in some kind of loop, an eternal reader unable to pull away from the page. But I lifted it with care and returned it to the right place on the shelves.

Then I turned away and staggered down the row, lurching on my crutch, bursting out from between the rolling stacks. I rejoined the Governor in the stagnant canal of the central aisle, choked both ahead and behind by endless depths of greyish fog.

The Governor glanced down at me, hands in her pockets, her expressionless face so far away.

“You ... ” I said, wetting my lips, knowing I had to make this next step or be paralysed. “Wait right there. Don’t move, don’t wander off again. Stay right there. Promise me.”

“Promise?”

“Promise me!”

“I’ll stay. I promise.”

I turned away from the Governor and looked down the row of rolling stacks, toward the neighbours to those with my name upon them.

‘Morell, Maisie.’ Lapped by fog, written by hand, awaiting a reader.

The first and last of those rolling stacks were moved aside, wide open for instant access. I need only take a dozen steps, and there I would be among my twin sister’s thoughts.

But that was the lure, wasn’t it? That was the very same seductive power which had held the Eye in stasis and observation for a subjective eternity. To prepare endlessly for the taking of action while never making that first real step. To read about others without taking the leap into real contact. What would Maisie’s thoughts avail me now? What would I find in those volumes? Nothing but tears and misery and horror; I knew full well the

indignity and isolation of her cell, I did not need to read about it. All I needed was to focus on the revolution, the jailbreak, the rescue.

Reading would not help Maisie now. I had to act.

With great difficulty I tore my eyes away from my twin's name. I had to focus on the Governor, on winning her allegiance, with what little persuasive power I had mustered.

I turned back to her, but I pointed at Maisie's shelves. "What will I see, if I read those?"

The Governor followed my finger. Her eyes threatened to wander away again, off into the fog beyond the shelves, but then she pulled her focus back, staring at the grey plastic, at Maisie's handwritten name.

"Not much," the Governor said, shaking her head. "Repetition, mostly. She is hard to understand."

I sighed, not sure if I could ever laugh at that irony. "Yes, that might be because she's trapped inside a gigantic tank of water. Do you understand how that might have something to do with it?"

The Governor shook her head. Her eyes wandered left and right, then finally alighted back on me, flitting about my form like a pair of pink-winged skittish moths.

"Do you hate me?" she said.

"You asked me that same question earlier," I replied. "And I already told you. No, I don't, because there's no point."

The Governor's eyes floated away upon the fog, off between the stacks. "That doesn't mean you don't."

"Why do you even care?" I asked. "I'm not your real daughter, I'm just—"

"I have to return to the project," she murmured. "I have to get back to work. Back to reading."

"No!" I snapped. "No, you don't! I just tried to explain, the project is impossible to complete, it's madness, a mirage you can never reach, you—"

The Governor took a step back, half-turning away. "I have to—"

“Stop running away! Stop looking away! You say I’m your daughter, well pay attention to me! Look at me! Look at me, damn you!”

The Governor paused in her retreat. Her eyes flitted back again.

“You’ve read all those books about me, all those volumes which catalogue the inside of my head. Is that correct?” I asked. “And you’ve got it all memorised, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me, what do you know about me?”

The Governor blinked. “What?”

“What do you know about me? Say the words, say it all out loud. Start with the basics. What do you know about me?”

The Governor said, “Heather Lavinia Morell. One hundred and two pounds. Five feet and one eighth of an inch. Sixty five percent oxygen. Eighteen point five percent carbon. Nine point five percent hydrogen. Two point six—”

“Oh my goodness,” I interrupted her so softly, barely louder than a whisper, but she halted for me all the same. “You ... you can’t actually see me, can you?”

“What?”

“How many hairs are on my head?”

The Governor answered instantly: “One hundred and fifteen thousand eight hundred and—”

“What did I have for breakfast on February first, last year?”

“Toast, two pieces. Butter. Jam—”

“How do I feel about you?”

The Governor stopped.

“How do I feel about Raine?”

No reply.

“Why am I trying to rescue Maisie?”

Nothing.

I shook my head. “You’ve got all those details, but you can’t really

see me. You can't really see people, you never could. Whenever you would look at things — people, houses, the whole of Wonderland, whatever — your vision rendered it down into components. Into atoms. Subatomic particles. You burned up and destroyed anything and everything you looked at, but you never saw the whole. You don't know anything about me. You have a whole ... story!" I gestured at the row of shelves with my name upon each one. "You have this whole story about me, and yet you can't tell me anything about myself?"

The Governor stared, and — to my incredible surprise, beyond words — her pink-soft eyes of sunrise in rain filled with a sheen of tears.

The rest of her face did not change. The corners of her eyes did not crease. Her throat did not bob. Her lips did not crinkle with sadness or turn down at the edges with parental melancholy.

She just said: "I'm sorry. I don't know how. That's why I have to finish the project. Then I'll understand. Then I'll get it. Then I'll know."

I shook my head. "No, you won't. That's not real understanding. It's not! If you've read all this stuff about me and you still don't understand me, then reading more isn't going to help!"

"Do you hate me?"

"I've told you, no, I—"

The Governor started to step away again. "I need to return to the project. If you can't help, I'll keep going, I'll keep going. I'll keep going. I'll keep—"

I reached out and grabbed the Governor's arm. She froze, staring off into the fog and the stacks, into her infinite project, her never-ending library of everything she'd ever seen. Glorious and infinite and utterly useless to the task of true insight.

We stayed there for a long moment. My thoughts were like acid in my throat, but eventually I forced them out.

"You are a giant, sky-filling eyeball," I said. "The size of a planet. Bigger, even. You are abyssal logic written on reality by the force of your own will. And by accident or otherwise, I've condensed you down into this human container. Or at least whatever part of you

which might be pressed to communicate. And this, this is the inside of your mind. You've let me in. And thank you for doing that. Because that's the point, you see? That's the point of all this — this asylum, this horror, this bubble-reality I've created. That is the whole point. You and me, alone in a room, finally talking, not just you reading books by yourself, 'observing' alone. So no, I am not going to let you wander back off into the project. The project doesn't work. The project has failed. The project is over."

The Governor relaxed; I knew she would not run, though she still did not look at me. I let go of her arm.

"You've done so much damage to me," I said, thinking out loud. "Much more than my biological mother ever did. But she had no excuse, she was a person from the beginning, she could have listened to me, her daughter. She could have made other choices. She could have done things differently. But you? You're not a person, or you weren't, at least. You're pure observation, a principle made into living matter. I don't even think you understand what you've done to me — or to Maisie — until right now perhaps, this very second, until I put you in this compressed form. You didn't intend to do this, did you? You just ... you just looked, and saw, and kept trying to see."

The Governor finally looked at me again. Her tears were gone.

"And you're still keeping Maisie confined," I said. "You still have her locked up. I should hate you for that, yes. But I don't think that's fruitful, because you understood not one bit of this. Did you?"

"I'm trying," the Governor said. "I have to keep going. I have to complete the project."

I sighed. I had gained a sliver of understanding of the Eye, and begun the process of communication, but this was like talking to a brick wall — or perhaps to an addict, so focused on her addiction that I could not peel her away, could not make her see in any other fashion, could not make her understand that this was not necessary.

"I cannot believe I am standing here having a conversation with you," I said. "You have been the monster in my nightmares for half my life. You took my sister. You're a giant eyeball in the sky, and I'm just talking to you. I ... I think I'm trying to save you. Why am I trying to save you? You almost destroyed me. You're right, I should hate you, but I don't."

The Governor said nothing.

I sighed again, heavy this time, exhausted inside. "The old me would have been a gibbering ball on the floor by now. Do you even understand that?"

"No," she said.

"Fair enough." I tried a different track: "What if you stopped the project?"

The Governor looked back down at me, pink eyes widened a fraction. "Stop?"

"Stop the project, yes." I gestured about with my eyes, at the library stacks marching off, swallowed up by the still and silent fog. My crutch creaked beneath my left arm. My weight was starting to bother me. My leg ached like a distant drum. "Stop trying to read all of this. Give up. Abandon it. Move on."

The Governor took a series of short, sharp breaths. I realised with my own wide-eyed surprise that she was terrified of that notion.

"Are you afraid?" I asked, stunned. "What are you afraid of?"

"I don't want that," she said. "I'd rather die than go back to that."

"Go back to what?"

"Before."

I bit down on my patience; she really was trying her best. "Before what?"

"Before I was ... before ... when I was ... was ... "

She frowned as she stumbled over her words. Whatever it was, she could not voice the concept.

And suddenly, I knew another thing we had in common.

"Before you emerged from the abyss?" I said.

The Governor turned to me and locked eyes.

Suddenly she was all there. Absolutely lucid, totally present, just like that moment back in the infirmary. Those pinkish eyes were torn wide and trembling with something I knew so well, so intimately, so painfully. Her stare was like the grasp of a drowning

girl, clinging to me with her sight, threatening to rip me beneath the waves with her desperation. I almost recoiled, clutching hard to my crutch like driftwood in a storm, but I restrained my reaction. I had to stand my ground, I had to push.

“I know you came from the abyss,” I said. “I deduced it, a long time ago now. You pulled yourself upward until you were large enough to burst out into reality. A reality, at least. That was Wonderland, before you burned it to a crisp.”

“Yes,” she said in a halting murmur.

“And that’s the before, the before you don’t want to go back to?”

“Yes.”

“... what was it like? Why don’t you want to—”

“I was blind.”

I wet my lips, struggling to imagine, but then the Governor carried on without prompting.

“I don’t want to be blind again,” she said, staring at me so hard I thought my skin might begin to cook as if beneath the midday sun. “I don’t want to go back to that. I would rather be dead. I want to be the way I’m supposed to be.”

I nodded slowly. “We really are like each other, aren’t we? I found my true self in the abyss and I’ve been modifying my flesh ever since, trying to get back to that feeling. But you, you’re coming at the same thing from the opposite angle. For you, reality is where you can become yourself. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want to be?”

“Complete.”

I sighed, hoping that the human metaphor was making sense. “Nobody is ever ‘complete’. Except in death, I suppose. Nobody ever stops changing or growing, even if that happens in directions they might not like. But you’re not going to stop being you just because you stop reading all these books. I don’t understand the connection.”

“The archives are the only way to understand,” said the Governor.

“Without them I don’t know anything.”

“To understand what, though?”

“Myself?”

She phrased the word as a question, and as she did, her focused stare collapsed. Her wide-struck eyes returned to normal. Her gaze wandered away, across my shoulders, out into the fog, over to the shelves — then down to her own hands, removed from her pockets. She flexed her fingers, staring at the motion of flesh and bone.

“Introspection?” I asked. “You’re trying to comprehend yourself?” I shook my head. “But you can’t, not like this.” I gestured outward. “Where are you?”

The Governor glanced up at me. “What?”

“Where are you?” I repeated. “In this library, in the archive. All the stacks are labelled and sorted with names and subjects. Where’s your story? Where are you?”

“I am the sum. I will be the sum, once the project is complete.”

I almost laughed. “You can’t grow just by reading books. I mean, seriously, I’ve learned that from my own life! You can learn a lot of things from books, and they can be beautiful, or powerful, or move you, or do all sorts of things to you. But for growth, for identity, you need context as well. You need other people. Reference points. Here, does Raine have a set of shelves in here too? Have you been observing her? Surely you picked that up from her, right? People need anchors.”

The Governor shook her head.

“You’re a singular, unique, isolated being, with no social context,” I said, talking more to myself than to her. “And you’re trying to build an identity by reading books, but that’s a metaphor, isn’t it? This metaphor is the only way to communicate with you. Your cognitive process would be incomprehensible otherwise. You’re trying to build an understanding of yourself by watching everything else. Observing, but not participating. Never being part of something. You’re like a little girl growing up on a desert island, with only books for company.”

“But everything is here,” she said. “The archives are everything. Everything is in the archives. If only I read it all, then I can—”

“You need something other than books. Something that isn’t other people’s experiences. You need your own anchor.”

The Governor seemed paralysed. “What else ... what is ... what is there?”

The obvious solution was almost too obscene to draw, but draw it I did.

“Me,” I said. “I’m right here in front of you. You don’t need all these books about me and Maisie to understand us. We can just talk, like we are now, without you blasting me to atoms and rendering me down to ash and grease. Look at me. Really look at me.”

The Governor looked — she did, she tried, I saw the effort in her face. But all she saw was atoms and parts, the angles of my face, the set of my limbs, the number of hairs on my head. ‘I’ was beyond her.

Her pinkish eyes filled with a sheen of tears once again.

“I tried before,” she said. “I tried to understand you. But I couldn’t.”

“Was that what all the hyperdimensional mathematics was about?” I asked. “The lessons, the teaching, the nightmares?”

“I thought I could understand you if you could tell me about yourself in a way I could understand.”

I blinked in surprise, then almost laughed. “Well, you weren’t wrong, were you?”

“What?” The Governor’s tears vanished.

“We’re talking now, in a way you can understand, via hyperdimensional mathematics. Well done. If you had never taught me, we couldn’t have this conversation. In a very long-winded and roundabout way, your plan worked. Here I am.”

The Governor blinked — once, hard, screwing her eyes shut.

When she opened them again, she stared directly at me.

We held each other’s gaze for thirty seconds, then a minute, then longer. Not once did she look away. Her eyes had ceased to wander. My left shin began to ache, a warning that the morphine was beginning to wear thin within my blood, but I dared not shift my weight or look away, for the Eye finally saw.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“ ... hello,” said the Governor.

“Hello,” I echoed. “Hello there. Hi. I’m Heather, but you know that already. And I’m not a book. You see me now, don’t you?”

“I see you.”

“Good. Um. I’m not sure how you did that, but good, well done.”

Her stare was a little too intense, a little too wide-eyed, but I wasn’t about to start complaining.

“What now?” she said, still staring.

“Well, if you want to understand yourself, you do need context, other people, mirrors in which to see yourself reflected, yes. I think I can serve as that for you, if you’re just ... looking at me. But you also need to think about yourself directly. That’s why I asked if there’s a book about you in here. You need to ... um ... ” I sighed, almost cringing at the metaphysical pun as the words came to me. “You need to look inward. Can you do that?”

The Governor seemed absolutely lost. Her lips hung parted. Her hands were held before her as if in prelude to a hopeless prayer.

Praem suggested I start for her, at the very beginning.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“ ... my name?”

“Yes, your name. You’re part of the Eye, okay, but ‘The Eye’ is not a name, not really. I’ve been just thinking of you as ‘the Governor’ this entire time, but that’s not a name either, that’s a title, a role, like in a play. Raine called you ‘Eileen’, which I’m not going to grace with serious consideration. I’ve heard other people call you the ‘Magnus Viglator’. Zheng called you some old Chinese word which I think means ‘lord’, but that doesn’t seem right for you. I think Evelyn spoke your ‘true name’ once, and it made everyone’s ears hurt, but I doubt that’s something you chose. I suspect that’s just some magical terminology that somebody else made up, some mage making assumptions. You had no parents to give you a name, so you probably named yourself. So, what’s your name?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t have a name? Or you forgot it? Or it was taken away?”

“I don’t know.” The Governor stared hard. Her pinkly glowing eyes seemed to expand and expand, as if trying to suck me down into a void. “Nobody has ever had to refer to me before. Nobody has had need to speak a name.”

I did my best to smile — awkward and horrified and deep in the fog of an alien mind, having a sensible and reasonable and polite conversation with the very thing which had turned my life into a tortured mess for the last decade. And rather than turning my stomach with disgust and anger and rejection, I began to feel mostly pity.

She was almost like a child.

“Well, I do,” I said. “I need a name with which to refer to you. If only to stop you wandering off the next time you decide to plunge into the fog and leave me behind.”

“You,” said the Governor.

“Me?”

“No. You.”

“ ... I’m sorry, pardon? What are you trying to say?”

“You,” the Governor repeated. “You can just call me ‘you’.”

I narrowly resisted an urge to put my face in my hand. “That’s not a name, that’s a second-person pronoun. It’s not specific to you.”

“Yes it is. You say you, and obviously it is me.”

I paused, squinting my eyes, trying to unknot this linguistic absurdity. “Do you think you’re the only entity with subjectivity? Do you think you’re the only person anybody could possibly be referring to when they say ‘you’?”

The Governor — You? — paused again, bewildered. “I have never thought about this before.”

“Yes, that sounds about right.” I tutted softly. “I suppose I could call you ‘Yuu’. That’s short for several Japanese names, like Yukari, or Yuuka. Though I suspect that would give Evelyn an aneurysm. I don’t know enough about anime not to name you after somebody wildly inappropriate. Besides, it hardly solves the linguistic issue.

And the linguistic issue is just a symptom of a metaphysical issue.” I sighed and stared back into the Governor’s focused eyes. “I don’t even know where to start with this.”

Praem offered a suggestion — herself.

“Ah! Good idea, thank you, Praem,” I said, and pulled the Praem Plushie out from the front of my yellow robe.

The Governor watched with a curious expression as I held up Praem. I pointed her flat-eyed, expressionless face of felt and fabric toward the Governor.

“Hello?” said the Governor. “Hello.”

“Oh, um, well done,” I said. “I was about to tell you to say that. This is Praem. She’s my ... spiritual daughter? Daughter-in-law? Family maid-by-choice? Whichever, she’s part of my family, that’s all you really need to know.”

Praem returned the greeting.

“Do you see?” I asked. “When I say ‘you’, I might be referring to you, or I might be referring to Praem.” I turned Praem so I could meet her flat eyes. “Hello Praem, how are *you*?”

Praem replied that she was well, thank you.

“See?” I asked the Governor. “To me, you are ‘you’, but Praem is also ‘you’, because neither of you are me. Do you follow?”

The Governor’s face collapsed into the strongest and starkest expression from her thus far — the most cavernous, craggiest, and confused frown I had ever seen on a human visage, coupled with the wide eyes of bewildered revelation.

She looked at Praem, then looked at me, then back at Praem, then back at me. Then down at her own hands. Then upward, at nothing.

“Ah,” she said.

I sighed with relief. “Okay, there you go! So, you need a proper name, you see? Because you’re not just ‘you’. You’re you. So, who are you?”

“I don’t know.” She looked at me again. “Can you give me a name?”

“I’m not sure about that,” I said with a wince. “Are you certain you

didn't have one before?"

"Heather," said the Governor.

"Yes, that's my name. But—"

"I could be Heather. It's a name."

I sighed again. "No, no, that's not what you should do. You didn't choose that, you just picked the thing that's right in front of you. And it would be incredibly weird and confusing if we were both named 'Heather'." I gestured left and right with Praem, at the library stacks and grey plastic shelves peeking through the veils of fog and shifting deeps of greasy mist. "You have this whole library of experiences, all these lives, compressed down into text. Why not pick a name from among these? You must have plenty from which to choose."

The Governor followed the directions I indicated with Praem, but then snapped back to me. Her eyes clung to me like desperate hands, clawing at the surface, trying to resist the pull of the ocean beneath.

"I don't know how to pick," she said. "Please, give me a name?"

"I ... I can't do that, not yet. I don't know who you are. I don't know enough about you. I don't know what you're like, or what you value, or what you care about, other than observing things, but we're trying to move past that. If I knew a bit more, perhaps I could pick a suitable name, though it would be better for you to name yourself, I think."

"Eileen?"

I winced again, much worse. "Let's not entertain that possibility. Look, the whole point of asking you for a name was to facilitate you looking inward, to define who and what you are. The name is just a container for that stuff. What's important is the material being contained and summarised. The signified, not the signifier. The signifier can be nice, or cute, or fun, or whatever. So ... "

"Who am I?" she finished the sentence, when I could not.

"Exactly. Who are you?"

The Governor looked left and right, then over her shoulder, down into the murk of the fog. "I'm all of this."

“No,” I said. “You’re more than that. We’re all more than the sum of the things we’ve read and the experiences we’ve watched other people have. What are your experiences? Who are you?”

The Governor’s face swung back around. She stared at me, bewildered and empty.

Praem suggested I keep dragging her. Don’t give up now.

“You started in the abyss, correct?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And ... did you have a twin down there? Is that what you’ve been missing this whole time?”

“No.”

I frowned. “Then why study myself and Maisie? Why the obsession with twins, with pairs, with—”

“Because I am incomplete. Because the archive is incompletely read. I need to look into a mirror. I wanted to understand you, because you looked a little bit like me, but whole. You had a mirror.”

“A twin, right.” But then I sighed. “This isn’t helping either of us. I’m not sure what you need, but I absolutely need to sit down before my left leg falls off. Are you certain there’s no entries in this library about you? No shelves with you in them? Reflections on yourself? Anything like that?”

The Governor shook her head. “None. I am sure.”

Praem made the obvious suggestion; I reached the same conclusion at the very same second.

“Well,” I said. “Can we write a book about you?”

“What?”

I smiled, feeling like I was finally getting somewhere. “A book about you. An entry full of your thoughts and feelings, your memories, your experiences. Do you have any blank books around here? There were some empty notebooks and papers up in your office, but I doubt those count, metaphysically speaking.”

“Blank ... books?” The Governor frowned with incredible confusion once again. “Why would a book be blank?”

“So you can fill it with words. Do you have any?”

The Governor shook her head. “The archive is for reading.”

“Well, you and I are going to work together, and add a new book to it.” I cast about, peering off into the fog. “Here, there must be something we can write on, like ... oh! Wait here a second. Don’t run off, okay?”

I tucked Praem back into the front of my yellow blanket, then staggered the few paces over to the open mouth of the library stacks, to the nearest row with my name upon it. I did not step all the way inside, but only reached in and grabbed one of the spiral-bound manuscripts, the chunkiest one I could find.

I pulled it out and turned it to the plastic front cover. A little pink label was affixed down in the corner — ‘M.H.24.27’.

Was this dangerous?

Praem said no, this was not dangerous. This book was not the inside of my mind; these were not my actual words. These were the Eye’s observations of me, boiled down into English text by the vastly powerful metaphorisation process of hyperdimensional mathematics. This would no more harm me than shredding a print out of one of my essays for university would hurt my own physical brain.

Still, I braced myself for the worst, like holding a gun to my own foot.

I used the corner of a fingernail to pick at the little label. It came up easily, then peeled away, and left behind no hint of sticky residue.

Nothing happened. I did not turn to mist or forget my own name.

Quickly, I pressed the sticker onto the cover of another nearby volume instead, rather than litter in even the metaphor of a library. Then I stepped back and opened the now-nameless plastic-bound manuscript, to see if my own imposition of meaning had taken hold.

Each and every page was totally blank.

“Yes!” I almost cheered, then turned back to the Governor and held up the manuscript. “There. Now we have a blank book, and I’m already carrying a pen. True, it won’t be the most comfortable pen with which to write, so you’ll have to fiddle about a bit to get the

nice thin part of the nib, but here. Here, take this.”

I limped and lurched back over to the Governor, then pressed the blank book into her hands. She accepted it with confused hesitation, as if she didn’t understand quite what it was. Then I dug around in my yellow blanket again, pulled out the black marker pen I had stolen from Cygnet Hospital’s dayroom, and pressed that into her hands as well.

“There. Now you’re all ready to begin. But not here.” I sighed. “We need to return to the entrance, because you need a desk, and I absolutely must sit or I’m going to fall down. And don’t run off ahead of me this time, I can’t keep up with you on this leg.”

The Governor looked back the way we’d come, staring into the still and sucking fog. “Okay.”

I took one last glance back at the rolling stacks which held Maisie’s name. But they were not Maisie, not her mind, only observations. That way lay madness. Only action would free her now.

We walked side by side this time, the Governor and I. She wandered as if in a daze, holding the blank book before her, sometimes raising the pen and frowning at it as if she could not quite fathom the purpose of such a tool. Sometimes she plodded along for minutes without raising her head, eyes fixed on the first unblemished page of the empty manuscript. But she did not speed up or stride off into the fog; she kept pace with my awkward lumbering gait, as I clung to my crutch and swung myself forward like a drunken ship on these fog-bound seas.

Minutes, hours, days — the return walk seemed to take forever. I no longer had the luxury of noting the names and subject areas on the grey plastic shelves as we passed, for all my spare attention was on the Governor, and the remains were claimed by the increasing pain clawing up into my thigh and hip from the bandaged secret of the wound in my shin.

Praem reminded me that four hours had not yet passed. It was not time for another dose of morphine. Not yet.

But it would be soon. Soon! Just keep walking. Soon! Keep going. Soon!

Eventually the central concrete pillar of the entrance loomed out of the fog ahead of us, like the cliffs of a distant foreign shore rising

up from the endless plain of the grey-washed sea. I redoubled my efforts. The Governor picked up her feet to stay at my side.

Finally we burst from the fog-drowned aisle and out into the octagonal open space around the entrance-pillar. I heaved to, swaying on my crutch like a ship at anchor, panting for breath. The Governor stumbled to a halt, unsure what to do with herself without my direction. Tendrils of fog lapped at our rear, plucking and pulling at the shoulders of the Governor's lab coat, trying to coax her back into the library stacks.

Everything was just as we had left it — the table with the wire-and-meat of the Lizzie Puppet, the free-standing blackboard with the half-complete equation upon its surface, and the plain desk by the door back to the stairwell.

After a few moments to catch my breath, I pulled myself upright and nodded at the desk. "Come on. You best sit down if you're going to write."

The Governor followed me like a puppy now. I limped over to the desk; it was cluttered with so many bound manuscripts and hardback volumes that barely a sliver of the desktop could be seen. The Governor hovered at my shoulder.

"Sit down then," I said. "At the desk, please. Sit down."

"Why?"

"So you can write, of course. Come on, sit down. The sooner we get this done the sooner we can return to the revolution upstairs."

The Governor pulled out the chair, clutching the empty manuscript and the black marker pen to her chest, then sat down. Her lab coat puddled against the seat and upon the floor either side. She looked rather awkward and gangly all of a sudden, with the pose and poise of an uncomfortable teenager, despite her obvious sixty years or so of age. She stared at the clutter on the desk.

"Can't I finish reading these, at least?" she asked, reaching for one of the volumes. "Can't I—"

"No! No, you can't!"

In a mad panic that she was about to relapse, I grabbed the edge of the desk with my free hand, raised my crutch into the air, and swept the metal pole across the desktop. The mass of manuscripts

and books were shoved aside, off the desk, tumbling to the floor in a tidal wave of falling paper and flapping covers. The Governor gaped as the books fell; I felt an instant wave of regret before the first volume even hit the carpet — for though these were mere metaphor for thought, they were still books, this was still a library, and that was an act of most grave disrespect.

The Heather of a year ago would have been aghast. And so was I.

Praem did what Praem does best; Praem reached out of my yellow blanket and tidied the books as they landed, sorting them into neat little piles. Rather than a deafening crash and clatter of crumpled spines and crushed pages, the volumes landed with a slap-slap-click-click-slap-click of rapidly stacked up books.

In the space of a second or two, several little towers stood by the desk, all neat and tidy, with no mess in sight.

“Oh,” I said, blinking several times. “Um. Thank you, Praem? Thank you.”

Praem said I was welcome.

Praem was still just a plush doll stuffed into the front of my yellow blanket, with stubby little plush arms and stubby little plush legs, boasting of no fingers, no hands, and only flat disks for eyes. The haze of morphine had receded just far enough for me to question this fact — but the pain in my leg bade me not think too hard. More opiates would be forthcoming soon enough.

I decided not to worry about it. Praem was on my side, after all.

The Governor looked rather nonplussed. She was still clutching the empty manuscript to her chest.

“Here, put it down on the table,” I said. The Governor did as I asked, but gingerly, as if she was defusing a bomb. “Open it to the first page. That’s it. Now uncap the pen. Set the cap aside. There. You’re all ready to begin.”

The Governor stared at the blank page, pen held awkwardly in her right hand. She tucked her long messy hair behind both ears. Then she didn’t move, for quite a long time.

“You ... you do know how to write, yes?” I asked.

She looked up at me. “Yes.”

“Then—”

“I don’t know what to write.”

“That’s a common enough problem,” I said, surprising myself with an easy smile. “But don’t worry, it doesn’t have to be perfect. You can just put down whatever is inside your head. Whatever you’re thinking, about yourself, about your feelings, thoughts, and so on. But mostly I want you to write about your history. Where you came from. What you did. How you got here. All of that stuff. Who are you, what do you want, where are you going? Those kinds of questions. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.”

I waited, but she just stared. “And do you think you can do that?”

“No.”

I sighed. “Just write. Start with anything. You’ll figure out where you’re going as you start moving. That’s how I write essays for university, when I’m not sure where to begin. I always have to spend a lot of time editing and rewriting the opening paragraphs, because they’re full of nonsense. But you have to push through the nonsense to reach the meaningful part. Start with ... how you were created, or the first feelings you can remember. Can you try that?”

“I’ll try.”

“Good.” I smiled again. “You can do this. And I can help you, too.”

The Governor looked down at the blank page, then back up at me. “Where will you sit?”

I glanced around, but there really was only a single seat. “On the floor, I suppose. Right here.”

I limped away a few paces, then spent an awkward minute lowering myself to the floor, clambering down my own crutch until my bottom met the carpet. I kept my left leg stuck out in front of me, shin throbbing and pulsing with slow waves of painful little needles. I lay my crutch down beside me, then put Praem into my lap.

How was I going to stand up again? That was a problem for Future Heather, and I was quite sure Future Heather was not going to like Past Heather and her surrender to the floor.

I let out a heavy sigh and looked into the distant layers of fog. They

reached out from the library stacks, lapping upon the shores of the clear space around the concrete pillar. Then I drew my eyes in closer and stared at the unfinished equation on the blackboard. An idle hand removed the stick of chalk from within my yellow blanket.

“Are you going to write too?” said the Governor.

“Ah?” I looked around at her, then at the chalk. “Oh, no, no. I don’t think I even can, not without all of me. The other six parts of me, I mean. I need your help to free them, too. Then maybe I can finish that equation for you, once I know what it means.”

“You could complete it now.”

“Not without you,” I said. I nodded at the blank manuscript, and at the Governor’s right hand holding the black marker pen, still and unmoving, framed by the distant whorls of fog. “You need to get started. If you need help, I’m right here. I’m only going to sit and rest, I’m not going anywhere. Please, start whenever you’re ready. Anything you like.”

The Governor — the Eye — returned her gaze to the blank page. Her pink eyes, like clouds before a sunset storm, focused on the emptiness, on that unblemished white expanse.

Her hand trembled. She let it fall toward the white. She tensed, relaxed, let out a sigh.

And then put pen to paper.

bedlam boundary – 24.27

I

I don't know what to write.

Heather told me that it is okay to write anything, in order to get started. Any words at all, even if they are very messy and inarticulate and do not communicate the inner world which lives within me. She told me it is okay to fumble, or stumble, or stagger, or fidget, as long as I continue writing. This is good, because I do not know what to write, even though I have now begun the process and written many words.

I am going to stop writing for a moment and look up from the page. I will draw a line with the pen to indicate when this happens.

Like this.

I return. Hello again, book.

I paused in order to ask Heather a question. The question I asked her was this: can she write for me?

It would be so much easier if Heather could put my thoughts into words, for I feel so inarticulate and clumsy and hesitant, while Heather is so eloquent and clever and verbose.

She told me no, she cannot do that, because this part of the story is mine to tell, not hers; her words would obscure me from myself, like a sheet of paper fastened over a mirror, so I would see myself as only a hazy outline. I then asked if she would take down my words for me, as if I was dictating to a secretary; the physical process of writing is surprisingly difficult. My fingers quickly cramp around the pen. My wrist hurts after too many sentences. My neck and back are pained by hunching over the page. Heather told me this is unfortunately and inevitably normal. She advised me to loosen my grip, stretch my wrist, and straighten my spine.

I have done these things; the difficulty remains.

Heather refused to take dictation. She believes the act of writing is as important as the content of the words themselves, for 'writing is a form of thinking'.

Those are her words; I have quoted them, because they are not mine.

Heather bid me to return to writing as soon as I was ready, so here I am, writing once more; she has, however, taught me how to use the semicolon. I rather like the semicolon; it is a versatile little creature, and I welcome it into my lexicon of punctuation.

What is the object of this process?

Heather has made the answer to this question unclouded by any doubt. This is an attempt to look inward, to turn my eyes away from the many books and volumes and tomes of the archive, and instead write a text about myself. This is to answer the question: who am I?

Who am I?

I am not sure. This question is very confusing.

I am the Governor of Cygnet Asylum; I have held this post for all my life. I am six foot four in height. Or perhaps I am six foot two. Or was it six foot one? I should know this detail intimately, yet the specific truth escapes me, and I cannot comprehend why. The same condition applies to my weight, my age, and what I had for breakfast this morning. I am sixty years of age; I am fifty nine years of age; I am sixty one years of age; all of these are true.

I have two legs and two arms and one head. My hair is blonde; my eyes are pink; my skin is intact. I have never broken a bone, nor contracted a serious illness, nor had an intimate relationship with anybody. All of these are true; all of these are lies.

I am sitting at a desk in the archives, writing upon blank paper by filling it with black marks. Heather is sitting a few feet to my left, on the floor. She is beginning to doze. Her head dips. Her eyelids struggle to remain open. She emits little snorting noises. This is endearing.

These things are also lies, though they are also true.

I have conceived of a better question.

What am I?

I am ninety one thousand nine hundred and sixty three miles in diameter. I am roughly spherical, though my surface is not smooth. I weigh somewhere north of 21.3×10^{30} kilograms. This number is an estimate, for there is no way to weigh my body.

Way. Weigh.

These are called 'homophones', and I never noticed this before. This is something new. This is new, and amusing. I will use an exclamation mark!

Heather was correct; writing is a form of thinking. I find this very surprising. Writing has allowed me to discover something new. I did not believe until now that this would work. What a revelation this is. However, I am distracting myself with a tangent. I have never distracted myself in this way before. This is novel, but I should probably control it. I will try not to giggle at any further homophones.

Back to me. More of what I am.

I am composed of many elements one might find in Heather's world, like oxygen, or carbon, or hydrogen, as she is, but I am also composed of large quantities of material for which she has neither words nor concepts. This presents some difficulties, because I am using Heather's language, which is called English. English is very silly. It should have more words. Perhaps I can invent some, and add them to the language, but that new project must wait. Right now I am talking about myself.

I must use metaphors instead; thus, I am made of coal dust, tin-light, and spheres of cartilaginous membrane. I am made from oceans of salt, continents of osseous build-up, and forests of neurons. I am made of looking, and seeing, and burning.

Also: I am currently two, where previously I was one. I am down here, writing this book; I am up there, in the sky, closed.

This is extremely disappointing.

I have always needed a mirror, to provide a reflection by which to examine myself, to finally see myself reflected. Was this not what I have been working towards? Heather was two; many of those I have looked at were two, rather than one. This is what I have

always wanted, a reflection, another me. But now I discover that I was incorrect, and Heather was not two — she merely looked so, when she and Maisie were both one, not two, but ones, apart, yet the same. With two of me, who are also one, but not two, I feel no more complete now than I did before. It is true that I can stand outdoors and look up at myself, but neither of these are reflections.

Heather thinks I am only a single part of myself, the ego of my larger self. Am I the pupil, the iris, or the sclera? Or am I the lid, the part which shuts out sight? I do not believe that last speculation is accurate. I am simply me. I am all of myself. I am a totality, though I am as yet incomplete.

I do not know the answer to any of these questions, and I have been writing for quite some time. My fingers are tired and sore, and I wish I had a typewriter. This doesn't feel like it is working. I am getting nowhere, despite the discovery of homophones, which are very funny and amusing.

I am going to pause again and ask Heather if this is working. She is snoring, which is interesting. There is drool on her chin.

Heather told me that I am doing well.

She said 'well done' and praised the amount of words I have written down. But she also told me that it is time to move on from my introductory thoughts. It is time to address the question of where I came from.

I told her I do not know where to start. She sighed and made an expression I have become familiar with, in which she smiles while she is also irritated.

She advised me to begin at the beginning, with my birth, or my genesis, or my first memories. She joked that a 'Bildungsroman' (she has taught me this word and I like it a lot) must logically begin with the protagonist's beginning, and as this part of the story is mine to tell, I must face my beginning.

I do not want to do this.

My hand is shaking, which makes it difficult to write additional words. My breath is sticking in my throat, as if the muscles are closing up. My skin is sweaty. My stomach hurts. My chest quivers

and my

I had to step away to compose myself, before I could continue this composition. (An almost-homophone! I like these.) I have returned again. Hello!

I asked Heather many questions, but then I had to wait for Heather to fall into a sleep again, because I do not believe I can write these words when I am observed by another. However, the other one is now sitting on the desk as I write these words. Her name is Praem. She is like me; she is big and small at the same time, and only the small part is present in the archives. She observes without observing. She speaks without speaking. She will not interrupt. She will not see. But I am not entirely alone as I write these words. This is comforting.

How paradoxical. How ironic. But I do not have time to consider the philosophical implications. I can do that later.

Praem went off for a little while and returned with the head of my Head Nurse; it seems Horror was affecting an escape, or attempting to affect an escape, for there is nowhere to escape to by rolling along the ground using her jaw as locomotion, unless she could climb the steps back to my office. She has been placed at some distance from the desk at which I am sitting, penned inside a corral of books, with bits of towel stuffed into her ears, for I do not wish her to overhear my story, any more than I wish Heather to witness my poor attempt at writing it down. But Praem is okay. Praem can stay.

Praem has indicated that I am stalling. This is true. I must go on.

I must write about the abyss.

But how am I to describe the abyss with words? Heather's metaphor for the abyss is not applicable to me. She experienced the abyss as water, deep and dark and full of terrors. In the abyss, Heather was able to find beauty in herself, and she brought that beauty back with her, and has been writing it on her body ever since. In the abyss Heather was graceful and swift and clever. In the abyss I was none of those things, but there were still many terrors.

I will try my best.

My first memory was of crawling out of something cold and wet and dead.

I do not know what that dead thing was. I dearly desired to return to it, perhaps to crawl back inside the orifice from which I had been expelled. But the thing was cold, and wet, and dead. There was no warmth to welcome me to consciousness, no muzzle to lick my body clean, no hands to puppet my limbs and show me how to move. Only cold, and wet, and dead.

However, there was a Voice.

The Voice did not come from the cold, wet, dead thing; it came from a gap in the floor. The Voice was made of metal hooks and sharp barbs, all attached to tendrils like fishing line, very narrow and tight.

The Voice was muttering to itself; that was the first thing I ever heard. The Voice seemed angry and frustrated, as if it had been rejected, as if it was blaming the cold, wet, dead thing in some manner I did not comprehend. Then the Voice noticed I was there, and touched me all over; I did not like that, for it was sharp and barbed and the fishing lines were trying to constrict me and drag me down beneath the floorboards. When I resisted, the Voice lost all power over me; it retreated with a disgusted apology.

The Voice spoke to me for a few minutes; it offered a 'Way Out', and promised that I would not need to find the 'Front Door'. But I neither liked nor understood this prospect; the only thing I wanted to do was go back inside the cold, wet, dead thing.

The Voice left.

I stayed close by that cold, wet, dead thing for some time. I grew hungry and ate several pieces of it, but the pieces were very small, for I was also very small, and the cold, wet, dead thing was so very large.

All was silent and dark; for those long first hours of my existence, I believed that was everything. Silent, cold, empty darkness.

But shortly after that, larger things arrived, hot and moving and alive.

I heard them approach, whispering and hissing down the corridors, mumbling seductions and crooning their lures — 'come out into the

light', 'show us where you are', 'are you under the bed? are you under the bed?', 'come here, little one, come here.'

I knew they could smell me, or perhaps they had heard me moving around in all the dark and the black. I scurried into a corner where the spaces were tight and small, where large things could not go. I stayed very quiet and very still for a long time; horrible noises like tearing and ripping filled the room, followed by frenzied slapping, rasping, swallowing, and howling. Fluids sprayed beneath the bed — for that was where I had hid, I believe, beneath a bed — and I tasted the salt and iron of blood on my face.

Eventually all the sounds stopped; the larger things went away again. When I got hungry, I crawled out from under the bed. The cold, wet, dead thing was gone.

I cannot use Heather's metaphor, but I can make my own. I believe this is correct.

My world — the abyss, for me — was akin to a great and rambling House.

The infinite House had many rooms and many corridors, which stretched off forever and ever, one after the other in an infinite arrangement of spaces. Stairs climbed up and down to other floors, sometimes with carpet, sometimes of wood, some of metal or stone or marble or substances which are difficult to put into words. Many rooms had soft furniture, like sofas and televisions and bookcases; I learned to recognise these objects by touch — especially the spaces behind and below them, where a small girl might squeeze herself when others approached, which was the primary survival skill in the abyss. Bedrooms were always unsafe places, no matter how soft and inviting the bedspreads felt beneath my hands, for bedrooms were hunting grounds. Kitchens were dangerous but in less definable ways. Other rooms were myriad, more than I could comprehend: some were empty and seemingly without purpose; others had no carpet or furnishings at all, mere concrete or metal boxes leading to other boxes and corridors in turn; many rooms were beyond my understanding, with purposes I still do not comprehend. Beneath these rooms, basements and cellars descended into an equal infinity, while above us all the ceilings and attics and crawlspaces spiralled upward forever.

Many doors stood open, or swung wide at a touch. A few were

locked; these were often dangerous to test. No door led 'outside', but only to more House, more rooms, more corridors and hallways and landings and staircases. No sound of the outside world reached within, no rain or wind, no song of birds, no sigh of trees in the breeze. There were no windows either, no aperture through which light might fall, no matter how dim or cloudy.

In this House, I was blind.

All was darkness, forever and ever. Was this the same for all, or I was uniquely disadvantaged? To this day, I do not know, though I have reasons to suspect the former, except in one or two exceptional cases.

As I quickly discovered within hours of my birth, I was far from alone in this forever House. Many rooms and hallways were empty; one might travel for quite some time without meeting another, with one's footsteps padding off into the darkness, unheard and unseen alike.

But then one would hear a whisper. Or perhaps a furtive footstep. Or maybe the rasp of a hand across the dry plaster of a wall.

And then one would pause, staying very still and very silent, straining to listen so as to discern the approach of the mystery sound. One could not breathe, nor twitch, nor whimper, though one's stomach would clench and one's skin would break out in cold sweat and one's pulse would race inside one's head. And I did so often wish to whimper, in those earliest days.

But if one had come upon a predator, to whimper would invite death.

The House was full of predators. They stalked the hallways, dozed on the sofas, lurked in the kitchens, hid behind the shower curtains. Sometimes they were silent too, hunting by sound and smell. Other times they were loud and lumbering, giants compared to us, hurling themselves around vast and cavernous rooms through which we scurried like rats.

I quickly learned how to hide, how to squeeze myself beneath beds and behind bookcases, where the groping hands and wriggling arms of bellowing predators could not reach. I learned how to go still and silent and choke down my tears as unseen predators drifted past in the hallways, always in the dark.

In those earliest days I was naked. That made everything worse, especially when wedging oneself into a cold and dusty corner to escape from death.

I heard many others my size get captured and devoured, ripped apart, eaten up. I knew that if I was caught then this existence would be over. So though it hurt, I hid. I sustained what I was by lapping moisture off bathroom taps and eating the crumbs out of the carpets. I found clothes in abandoned rooms, mostly torn pajamas from previous victims, and dragged them over my thin and reedy body to shelter myself from the cold.

We were the bottom-feeders, the lowest of the low, too slow and vulnerable and scared to do much but run and hide. An unraided rubbish bin was a banquet. A lukewarm half-full bottle of water was an oasis. A scrap of torn clothing was the most glorious evening gown.

I keep writing 'we'. This is because eventually I fell in with others who were approximately my size.

Were we friends? I do not know if that word makes sense in the abyss. We were all alike, and that was enough. I do not remember anybody specific, only that there were others who were similar in size and nature to me. Often many, many others. We met by confused touch and soft whispers, often while wedged into the hiding places of the House, while crawling and creeping through tight spaces that larger beings could not reach.

We tended to hold hands so as not to become separated. We moved in groups. In shoals? Perhaps Heather's metaphor is still applicable to my experience. Shoals, schools, herds. That was us. We explored together, in a mass of individuals many times larger than any one of us. When a predator came upon us we would scatter apart, fleeing into any available space. When we heard a monster approach, we would press each other to the walls and huddle and weep and try to stay silent.

We spoke endlessly in things that were not words, telling each other that one day one of us would find the way out — the Front Door.

It turned out that I was not the only one who had been visited by a strange Voice. The Voices were rare and inexplicable, but many had encountered them over a long enough span of time. I was not the only one who had heard of a 'Way Out' and the 'Front Door', nor

the only one who had been offered promises by the disembodied Voices; such legends and myths were passed around constantly.

We fantasised endlessly about that Front Door. What would it look like? We wondered if it would be similar to the occasional locked doors we found, the ones from behind which played the sound of muffled music, or the ones that shook and quivered with the violence locked inside, or the very very few from which issued apologetic words, telling us they could not help, but wishing us well all the same.

We dreamed of escape via that Front Door. What would outside be like? We dreamed of sunlight and eyesight, of no longer being trapped in the dark forever. We dreamed of a place where we did not have to avoid predators every hour of every day, and there would be food enough for everyone, a hundred times over.

But mostly we fled through the dark, blind and terrified. Our numbers fluctuated constantly, as we were caught and eaten and destroyed. One day we were a thousand, the next we were a dozen, then a thousand again.

Life continued in that way for a very long time. I believed it would never change.

Then, one day, we all died at once.

We — I do not know the exact number, but it was many of us — had ventured into a very large bedroom.

Bedrooms were particularly dangerous, as I have already mentioned. Generally there was only one way in or out of a bedroom, which made it a risky place to enter. There were many places to hide in bedrooms, but some of those places were large enough for a predator to hide as well. Bedrooms were always so tempting, regardless of danger. Comfort, softness, a place to rest one's head which was neither hard floor nor scratchy old carpet. Temptation was the death of so many, for little reward. We all knew that.

But that bedroom smelled so sweet, as if somebody had left food out to cool.

Cake, or cookies, or perhaps little muffins, something baked and fluffy, tugging at our nostrils, laid across the deeper scent of polished wood, ruined only a little by the musty reek of unwashed

bedsheets and the muffled wheezing of something which waited deeper within the room.

If only we had been able to see, we would not have entered, for we would have known the trap for what it was.

If only we had not been blind.

There were cupcakes on the floor; none of us thought to question the logic of this, for we were so very hungry. I fell to my hands and knees and stuffed a cake into my mouth; it was the most I had ever eaten in one go. All the rest of us did the same, scurrying inside and falling to the floor in eagerness to gorge ourselves. We had fallen into an obvious trap, of course, but how could we not? Do not blame us, reader, Heather, whoever is reading these words. Do not think we little things were fools. We who lived on crumbs and refuse, we were starving and skeletal. We could not have resisted.

The predator who had made the room its lair crept past, closed the door, and threw the bolt so we could not escape. Then it fell upon us.

There was nowhere to go. No escape, only screaming and clawing and bleeding in the dark. My companions died, picked up and hurled at the walls, their little necks wrung out, their spines snapped, their skulls crushed beneath meaty fingers that smelled of grease and soil. It ate us even as it killed the rest, splitting some of us apart in its teeth as it advanced, whirling through the room, giving us no way to back away or retreat. We scrambled over each other in a heaving mass of bodies, desperate to escape, trying to climb the walls or squeeze under the bed. But there was nowhere to go. Nowhere to go. No escape. We had been penned for slaughter, we were being eaten, there was no way out.

We — the many of us — had never been pushed into a corner like this before. Before, there had always been somewhere to flee, some room into which we could slip, some corridor through which we could flow, some gap in which to hide.

I do not know how we did it, for it was more instinct than decision, but in our last collective moments we turned on the predator — biting and clawing, kicking and grabbing, pulling off handfuls of quivering, greasy, unclean flesh.

Cornered, covered in blood, screaming in the dark — we won.

The predator collapsed with a crash, breathing its last from a torn throat. It made terrible sounds.

My breath and my weeping echoed off the walls of polished wood; I had crammed myself into the corner, keening and wailing long past the defeat of the monster. I was naked once again, my clothes torn away and ruined, my skin coated with the blood of my companions. I was bruised and half-strangled, with fractured bones and a swollen eye-socket and several loose teeth.

I was alive.

And I was alone. All the others who had entered that room had died.

I crawled beneath the bed and slept for a long time, caked in dust and snot and tears and rapidly drying gore.

But when I awoke, the room had not been picked clean by other scavengers and predators, for our ambusher had closed the door and thrown the bolt before the assault. I confirmed this by touch, as I did with everything else, and then realised my strange situation: alone, inside a room, and safe.

I was hungry, my belly rumbled, and so I began to eat.

I started with the predator. That took me days, then weeks, for it had been very large and very well fed, with much fat and muscle and many grit-filled organs to digest in my own stomach. Then I moved onto my dead friends, methodically chewing through their gristle and muscle and tendon, cracking their bones for marrow, digesting all that they had been.

I slept under the bed, with flesh blood smeared around my mouth and organ meat caked beneath my fingernails.

I ate, and I ate, and I ate.

All my companions — dozens of us, hundreds of us, thousands of us, I am not sure at this now great remove — were dead, and I was alone once again, like I had been at the beginning. I did not wish to venture back out into the lightless corridors and hallways and echoing rooms of the infinite House, not now that I had tasted sanctuary and safety and security; I made no attempt to leave, expended no effort on testing the door. Predators and monsters and hulking adults still prowled and hunted beyond that stout wooden

barrier with the smooth metal bolt; I heard them often, padding past my little castle, creeping along in the darkness we all shared. On several occasions something out there would stop and try the door handle, either easing it downward in careful stealth, or rattling it with violent frustration. Once a predator threw itself at the door in a frenzy, for it had heard me scurrying about on the other side; on that occasion I hid beneath the bed for days to endure the siege, lest my barrier should fall. But it did not. The bedroom was impenetrable.

By the time all the food was gone, I was quite a bit larger than my previous size. I was still blind, but I was no longer so small. I did not understand what this meant, and I was still afraid to leave.

For days, or weeks, or years (the metaphor breaks down, I cannot hold it together, I am sorry, book, and I am sorry about the droplets of moisture which threaten to smear the words I write) I sat in the middle of the floor and wept bitter tears that my respite must come to an end, and that I had reached that end alone, by myself, isolated. My face was a mess of tears and very ugly. Many things heard me through the door and tried to reach me, but the room was mine and mine alone, for good or ill.

If only I was not blind, I thought to myself, then all my companions would have lived.

If only I was not blind, and sunk so deep in darkness, then we would have seen the predator and avoided this trap. If I was not blind, I could step out into the corridors of the House without fear of becoming a meal or soil or meat. If I could see, I could pick up a knife from one of the many kitchens, and drive it into the flesh of anything that dared pursue me.

If only I could see. I would never be blind again.

My weeping began to subside when I made that realisation. The solution — to life, to reality, to all tribulations and terrors, all horrors and hungers, all predators and privations — was sight.

If I could see, I would be safe. If I could observe, I would know. If I could watch, I would understand. I would comprehend. I would have insight, forever and ever.

Beyond the Front Door, beneath Sunlight and Blue Skies, upon Green Grass and among Tall Trees, in the glory of the Outside

World.

There, I would see.

I decided it would be beautiful out there. I decided I would do anything to reach that Front Door and step through it. I decided it was not legend, or cold comfort, or a lie to keep us going. It was true, and I would find it.

Monsters were still at the door of the sealed room, but I was done with crying and weeping and feeling sorry for myself. I stood up and strode to the door and pulled it out of the frame. Many terrible things crowded through the gap, for they thought they had heard the weak and terrified voice of a small child, and then competed with each other to be first at the kill.

But in seclusion and safety I had grown large on the flesh of others.

The predators saw that truth and tried to flee. I was still blind, so several of them escaped, but an equal portion fell between my teeth and into my stomach. I stepped out into the corridor and scattered the terrors before me, for now I was more than their equal.

I was no longer afraid.

After that came my long journey to the Front Door.

The length of that period of my existence eclipses the prior epoch a thousandfold. My 'childhood' in the abyss was the blink of an eye compared to the journey, and yet I recall the childhood sensations with much greater clarity than what came next.

I wandered the dark House just as I had before — blind and groping, one hand upon a wall, feeling along the floor for the borders between rooms, always listening for the whisper of approaching feet or the furtive and hungry sigh of a hunting predator. Only I no longer froze in terror or fled to hide beneath or behind furniture. Now I was a predator, and I froze only to allow my prey to wander close.

I began adulthood as that kind of predator, akin to a trapdoor spider or an owl, ambushing from silence, only occasionally pressed into violent confrontation with those similar to me. Yet I quickly left that stage behind, fattened and glutted upon the flesh of so many. Within a comparatively short aeon or three, I was too large and too strong to prey from stealth. I was tall and powerful. I stood

astride the smaller corridors, and could touch many ceilings if I but extended my arm upward.

From then on I moved to an exclusive diet of other predators, others my own size. Often we confronted each other over kills, or wandered into territory not our own; each meal then became a contest — sometimes short and brutal and bloody, completed in a matter of seconds, filled with screaming and screeching and scratching and slashing. But sometimes these contests were slow and insidious, drawn out over months of mutual stalking and positioning as we pitted will against will, following each other in silence from room to room, manoeuvring around kitchen islands and over the backs of sofas, sneaking into bedrooms and hiding under covers, each move full of guile and misdirection.

But I always won.

Of course I always won, or I would not be sitting here, writing this.

I have often wondered in all the myriads and epochs since then if I was merely eating and absorbing others like myself, and we were all engaged in the same upward motion. If I had not won every fight and eaten every kill, then another would be sitting here in my place, writing different words in this same book. The process was bound to produce one of us in the end. I am simply the luckiest. The one who made it out.

How many like me did I devour? Many, very many.

That period of my abyssal adulthood opened many previously barred potentials. I discovered places and entities I could never have approached when I was small and naked and afraid. I knocked on many locked doors and was surprised to find myself freely admitted, although upon promises of good behaviour, to chambers and rooms and spaces where the rules of the abyss were suspended briefly in a variety of different ways, where different sizes of creature no longer ate each other, but looked outward side by side in uneasy truce, gathered around fountains of clean water or great banquets of fresh food or strange devices that I could not see.

I ventured up into the attics and down into the basements, spaces I had previously avoided for the sheer danger they presented. I met singers who sung into the endless black for little eternities of their own, surrounded by adoring tiers of listeners sustained by nothing but the songs. I walked across entities who had become the rooms

themselves, fixed in place and happier for it, cradling many within their own flesh. I fought staged duels against representatives of hive-like collectives, and found myself praised and tended upon defeat, rather than cast into another hungry maw.

Larger things than I still lurked in the further reaches of the infinite House — great lumbering leviathans which occupied vast ballrooms and garages, or whose mouths formed fake doorways into the rooms of their bellies. As I pushed deeper and deeper in my quest for the Front Door, these giants grew more common and grew larger, even as my own bulk increased and my head began to scrape the ceilings.

On rare occasions — enough to count on the fingers of one hand — I met cousins to that barbed Voice I had known at my birth.

The Voices always spoke from behind the walls or beneath the floorboards, extending their feelers of metal into the dark. Always teasing, seducing, weaving promises of plenty, making pledges of comfort and safety. Liars, all.

Once, I tried to bargain with one of those Voices, to see what it would offer me. It did not sound exactly like the one present at my birth, but higher-pitched and less trusting. I asked it of sight, and light, and the outside world. It promised me an eternity of sunshine and freedom, and told me I could grow as many eyeballs as I liked. I asked it about the Front Door, but it lied and told me there was no such thing.

I did not trust the Voice. I bit off its feelers and left them on the floor.

As I pushed further toward my goal, there was one class of entity in the infinite House which left me with feelings I cannot explain — those little ones, who I had once been one of.

They hid from me then, as I had hidden from larger predators when I was their size. They scattered before I could even enter a room or a hallway, slipping away beneath sofas and inside cupboards, hiding behind the television sets and the bookcases. Sometimes I tried to pry one of them out, just to hold a hand in the way we used to, when we were all small and vulnerable and naked. But they would scream and weep and press themselves deeper to escape my touch. They thought I would eat them, though even a thousand of them equalled not a single one of my usual meals.

I gave up on them; I was no longer of them. But then I carried on.

An age passed, more aeons than I can count or recount in these pages. If I recorded every detail, I would fill all the archives a hundred times over. I grew larger and larger on kill after kill. I grew so large that I began to break the walls with my body and buckle the door frames as I passed through them. I began to fight leviathans, the smaller ones first; their defeated corpses enabled an exponential increase in my own size.

The smaller leviathans were left behind in turn. I moved into rooms and chambers vaster than I had ever known, where my voice echoed from distant walls, where I could not have touched the ceiling with a hundred arms laid end to end.

I beat and broke those the same size as me, then those larger, and larger still. An eternity passed in this way, as my size continued to increase, until the walls could not encompass me, until there was nothing left to eat, for every other entity was tiny compared to the critical mass of thought I had become.

Finally I was too large to properly contain within the House. I was large enough to turn around and see what had lurked at my back for my entire life.

The Front Door.

It was real, and it was right there. The Front Door, the Way Out, the Exit.

It had been right behind me that entire time, in every room and every corridor, waiting on every wall, set into every frame. I had simply been too small to see it, too tiny and insignificant to take a step back and comprehend the shape and size and contours of my own world, of this abyssal deep, of this House. I had been blinded by the eternal black and endless dark. Of course I had not been aware of the Front Door.

And now I would never be blind again.

The Front Door was not locked; it was not even fastened. I opened it with but a push, the lightest touch of my fingertips.

When I stepped through, I was free. The world was light, and endless, and I would see it all.

I

I do not know how to go on.

None of what I have said is true. There was no house, no rooms, no darkness. There were no friends, no holding of hands, no predator who ate us all. There was no growth, no journey, no door. All of that is a metaphor, a rendering down into words on the page of something that was no mass or energy or light or time or life or breath or anything but mathematical perfection and principle and none of it happened and all of it happened and I remember all of it and none of it at the same time and how can this be true and false if my memories are so difficult to write down and I can't find a better way to explain it other than that I was naked and cold and hungry and tiny and

I cannot

I can't

the words I write grow blurry. I am making a mess of the page. I must try

IT HAPPENED

IT DID

My me

I

I am going to try

sorry

Hello, book. I am back again.

I had to take a very long break between the previous part and the words I am writing now. The line above this part was not written at the end of the previous section, but at the beginning of this one, only a few seconds ago. Technically I may be lying to you. But I have explained myself, so I am no longer lying. I hope you will understand and forgive this imprecise notation.

I had to stop writing because I was crying too hard to see the words. I have never cried like that before. Tears came from my eyes, but also my whole body shook. This continued for quite some time, and was very terrible to feel. I wanted to claw at my face and

clutch at my ribs and pull at my hair. I did some of that, but it did not feel good, so I stopped and became much louder.

My crying woke Heather from her doze. Praem gave me a hug, which helped the terrible feeling. Heather said many things, but I do not recall them, because I could not hear her over the sound of my own weeping.

Eventually I managed to stop. Heather asked me if she could read what I had written; I said yes, because I had changed my mind, and I now wished to share.

Heather read all the words; she told me that I was experiencing 'catharsis'. I did not like catharsis when I was crying; it felt bad and filthy and disgusting. But now I have stopped and calmed down, catharsis feels much better.

Now I know where I came from. I have turned my eyes inward. Heather says this is the right thing to have done.

Heather also told me 'sorry', but I didn't like that. Sorry is a funny word, because it is both apology and empathy at the same time. It is not like the homophones I discovered earlier; it is not clever. Heather is 'sorry' for my time in the abyss, but Heather did not create the abyss or determine what I experienced there. But nevertheless, she is 'sorry'.

I want to clean up the previous part where I made a mess with tears and sentence fragments, but Heather says to leave it alone and do not change it, because it is important. Heather says none of this is really physical, but an expression of thought processes, and it is important to acknowledge my process is messy and does not produce perfect thoughts on first try.

I believe I agree with this, so I have elected to continue the process, though I am not sure what to write next. I have answered the question, yet the question remains.

Heather is awake this time. She is nearby, instead of far. She tells me not to write about her, but to write about myself again.

I will try.

Who am I?

Once I stepped through the Front Door and left the abyss, I went to a new place. It was a very large place, many times larger than

myself. It is even harder to describe this new place, because it was not the House, it was not the abyss at all, and I cannot make it into a metaphor. However, I do not remember many things about it which I can put into words; Heather says this is part of the problem. She says I was looking without seeing. She says I was not 'paying attention'.

Heather calls the place 'Wonderland', so I will call it Wonderland as well.

Wonderland was very beautiful and full of lots of things to see, to look at, to observe. All sorts of things moved around and some of them looked up at me in return. They made a lot of noises, and lights, and threw lights at me, which I liked very much even when they burned slightly. I wanted to see everything and observe everything I could, so I instantly set about doing so.

That was when I started this archive. I could not keep all the things I observed inside my head all at once, so I started to put them here instead, so that I could finish making all the observations and then come back and go through them all, once the process was complete. Then I would understand all the things, and I would be complete too. I would never be blind again, because I would know everything, and everything would be inside me, and I would have perfect illumination of all topics and subjects and all things, or at least all things in Wonderland.

But however hard I looked, there was always more to see, more layers beneath the ones I had observed. As I observed, Wonderland became smaller and more dense. The process of observation removed the spaces between the things I was observing, bringing them closer in physical space as they were brought closer in my understanding. This seemed like a good thing, so I kept doing it.

But observation did not end, and reading did not end, and the process did not end.

Heather is reading these words over my shoulder now. She says this is the problem, but that she understands. My desire to never be blind again has led to a process of observation without end.

I

I am trapped.

Heather is correct: writing is a kind of thinking. And I have thought

clearly, for the first time since I stepped through the Front Door.

But I am afraid to stop. I am afraid to abandon the project, because then I will be blinded to so many things. So many things will slip back into darkness, never to be seen or observed or noticed by me. Those things will be alone in the dark, like I was. Or else they will creep up on me when my eyes are closed, because I will be blind.

Heather says I will not be blind. Heather says she is not asking me to put out my eyes or close the lids forever. She is only asking me to voluntarily turn my eyes away. I want to believe her, but I do not. I will be blind.

I must look elsewhere. I must stop observing before acting. I must change my nature.

What can change the nature of I?

I do not know.

But I know that I am trapped. Observation has trapped me, as surely as I was trapped within the infinite rooms and hallways and darkness of the House. I do not wish to be trapped. I do not want to be confined in bright and blinding light as I was trapped in deep and unbroken darkness. It is the same thing. It is the same thing!

I am still blind!

Heather was right. Writing is a form of thinking.

If I am still blind, what must I do in order to see?

The archives do not offer true sight, only infinite light. Closing my eyes does not offer respite, only temporary darkness.

I must decide on something else I wish to do, something more important than seeing.

But what do I wish to do?

Heather says she cannot answer this question, but she is incorrect.

I do not know what I will become, if I cease to observe. I do not know what I wish to become, if I cease to observe. I do know what will become of me, if I cease to observe.

Thus, I do not know what I want to do.

But I do know what I want to do right now. Heather has assisted me; writing is a form of thinking, and I would not have learned this without her assistance, without writing, and thinking.

Thus, in turn, I will assist her. I am making this decision — now.

Now.

This feels good!

the ground is shaking this all feels so exciting !

There are so many nurses?? not mine. Heather's. we will get rid of them together .

I

open

bedlam boundary – 24.28

I was watching the Governor finish writing down her story — leaning on the edge of the neat little desk in the archives, tracking the swish and flick of the marker pen across the page, witnessing her undergo a transition from personal narrative to introspective philosophy; I was also trying my best to keep my mouth firmly shut, unless I was asked specific questions, because I did not wish to unduly influence her choice of destination. This was her story, her process, her thoughts to think, and I would not interrupt unless I was sorely needed. Even when the words ‘It is the same thing!’ and ‘I am still blind!’ spilled forth from her quivering hand, threatening once again to spill tears from her pinkly glowing eyes, I kept my lips sealed and my opinions to myself, though I did risk a gentle hand on her shoulders. She was not alone in this, even if she was the sole author of her experiences. I had pushed her to this solution, and though I still harboured a terrible bitterness toward her, after reading her metaphor of the abyss, I could no longer hate her.

She had been lost and alone and so very tiny, so deep in the darkness, surrounded by predators and monsters. But unlike my own long abyssal descent, she had never learned to soar through the black, never seen beauty in herself, never found anything but nature so red in tooth and claw.

I was still watching — at that moment of her decision to help me — when the ground began to shake.

The floor of the archives juddered and jarred, as if slammed sideways by some incredible violence. At first I assumed one of Lozzie’s Caterpillars had finally regained true size and burst through a distant wall, but then the quaking continued. The whole vast library-chamber vibrated with tectonic force, shaking the little table from side to side and almost knocking me off my feet. I went reeling backward, clutching at my crutch as the tip lost traction and skidded across the carpet.

All my body weight slammed down on my injured left leg.

“Ahhh!”

A gasp-scream of white hot pain spluttered from my lips. Tears filled my eyes, burning and blinding. For a moment my lungs refused to work.

I tottered backward, grip and footing both gone, about to crack my head open on the ground — but then the Praem Plushie, Praem herself, was suddenly back at my side, wedged tight beneath my right arm, providing more support than a ball of felt and fuzz could possibly have exerted.

I lurched to regain my feet, clinging to my crutch like driftwood in a storm. I tried to thank Praem, but I could only splutter; my leg was like a cracked bell.

Praem told me to concentrate on keeping my balance.

All around us the ground was creaking and groaning; the concrete pillar which contained the stairwell emitted the most terrible cracking and splitting, like an oak tree finally beaten by a storm. A little way from the desk, Horror's detached head wobbled back and forth inside the corral of books we had used to pen her in, then fell sideways as the books collapsed on top of her. The free-standing chalkboard swayed back and forth; the table with the Lozzie Puppet rode the shaking, but threatened to topple the incomplete figure onto the floor. The distant walls, lost far beyond the infinite fog of the archives, moaned like the insides of a ship at sea. The fog itself churned and whirled as if kicked up by a sudden breeze, but did not — or could not — enter the octagonal refuge in the hub around the entrance. Beyond the fog, I heard the tumble of thousands of books and volumes and manuscripts sliding from their shelves and crashing to the floor in great waves of paper and card. The shelves themselves shook hard in their rails, rattling and banging back and forth.

I heaved for breath, the wound in my leg screaming for the attention of every bodily cell. Sweat ran down my face. My heart raced in panic.

But the Governor — the Eye — kept on writing, her pink-glow gaze glued to the shaking page.

With a jolt of fear, I recognised the quaking beneath our feet — not an earthquake, not the clash and grind of tectonic plates, but the same sensation of bucking and roiling that we had experienced back in the real Wonderland, before the dream-play world of Cygnet

Asylum had blossomed from our collective unconsciousness.

An Eye-quake. Wonderland itself, changing beneath our feet.

Praem told me to hold on. Wait a moment. Wait and hope. There was nothing else we could do.

But I opened my mouth and shouted over the furious noise: "Are you doing this?! Is this you?! Stop, stop it, you'll bring the whole place down on us!"

The Governor lifted her pen from the page. She straightened up and stared straight ahead.

The quake ceased.

For a moment neither of us moved, poised in the sudden silence of the aftermath. The fog on every side rolled back and settled amongst the shelves once more, like waves receding into a maze of coral. I panted for breath, straightening up on my crutch, every muscle tense and ready for an aftershock or second round. A few loose books tumbled to the floor somewhere far away, slipping and sliding and clattering against their fellows. Horror's severed head was making a soft 'mmm-mm!' noise, muffled to near silence by the towel stuffed into her mouth.

"What ... " I croaked, then cleared my throat. "What was that?"

The Governor did not look at me; she continued to stare straight ahead, at nothing. For a moment I was terrified that she had broken herself somehow, broken her place in the dream and the play, and returned to being just the giant eyeball up in the sky. Or perhaps she had regressed, and stopped seeing at all. Perhaps she had blinded herself, and become something less than the sum of her terrible fears of darkness.

"... Governor?" I croaked, for want of a name.

She swallowed, then blinked several times. Twin trails of glistening tear-tracks were drying on her cheeks.

"I have finished writing," said the Governor.

"Okay? Okay. That's ... that's good. Well done. Um ... may I ... may I take a look?"

"Yes."

I adjusted my weight on my crutch, trying not to wince at the flare of pain inside my left shin; my ungainly stamp during the earthquake had done real damage, and the limb throbbed and burned as if acid was eating away inside my flesh. I staggered back over to the little desk, then caught the edge to take my weight. The Governor still did not look up at me, so I peered at the final words she had written on the page. The letters were broken up and mangled by the motion of the quake.

'th e groun d is sha king this all fe els so ex citing !

I he ar so many nurs es?? no t mine. hea ther 's. we w ill get r id of th em together .

I

o p e n'

My blood went cold.

"What do you mean, 'I open'?" I said, voice all a-quiver. "What do you mean? Governor? Governor? Hello?"

The Governor finally turned away from nothing and looked at me; I was equally shaken and relieved to find her gaze was still wide and intense, gone almost bug-eyed now. She took a deep and cleansing breath. She did not quite smile — I don't think she was capable of the expression — but I saw the elation and release in her eyes, the new life in their pinkly glowing depths. I saw, to my great surprise, my own face reflected in her eyeballs, myself within her, shown in miniature.

"I am opened," she said. She sounded almost surprised.

"Metaphorically, allegorically? Or do you mean literally? I'm sorry if I sound a little concerned, but whatever you did it caused an actual, physical earthquake. I'm glad you're ... " I waved my free hand, searching for the right response. "I'm glad you finished writing, yes, that's undeniably very good for you, but ... what did you do to the dream? Just now, did you change something? Or change yourself? Or ... ?"

"I am open," she repeated. The smile in her eyes intensified.

I pointed at the ceiling, hidden far beyond the fog. "Do you mean up there, in the sky of the dream? Because if you — the main you, I mean — is literally open, that puts everyone at incredible risk.

Unless you're not ... I don't know ... oh dear."

Praem suggested I calm down and use my ears; I took a deep breath and took her advice. If the Eye was open and actively observing, then Cygnet Asylum would be rapidly burned down to scorched atomic debris, within minutes at most. The dream would turn to ash and smoke. But I couldn't hear a thing, certainly not a planet-sized conflagration roaring and crackling above my head; there was no chorus of a thousand melting throats, no fire like a star burning itself out, no mighty collapse of this dream-bubble reality.

"Okayyyyy," I said. "Okay. So, you're 'open' now. What does that mean, in practical terms?"

"It means I can help you," said the Governor. "It means that is my purpose, for now." She replaced the cap on the marker pen and held it toward me.

"Are you sure you're finished?"

"I will get my own pen," she said. "And then I will pen additional words."

The smile around her eyes intensified further; I accepted the marker pen, trying to frame another question — what was happening here? What transition had the Governor achieved within herself? But as soon as I had accepted the pen, the Governor closed up the manuscript and slipped it inside her laboratory coat. She scooted the chair back and stood up from the desk.

Her shoulders were back, her chin was high, her eyes were wide and bright, alive and dancing with inner light, so unlike before. Now she looked at each thing in turn with unbroken clarity, with a single moment of total focus, as if she were truly present for the first time since I'd met her. She looked at Praem, then at the fog, then at the half-filled blackboard, then at some of the tumbled books sitting in piles at the feet of the nearest shelves. Each thing was like the dawn in those eyes of pink-cloud lightning.

"Forgive me for pressing you so quickly," I said. "But what did you mean by those final words you wrote? I'm a little alarmed, to put it lightly."

The Governor stared at me as if I was the sun and she was trying to blind herself. "Which words?"

"About hearing so many nurses," I said. "I don't hear any, at least not down here. Except for her." I gestured at Horror, still wriggling and flexing beneath a little avalanche of books.

"In all the hospital," said the Governor. "There are many more nurses than before. We will deal with them together, because I will help you."

"... more nurses?" I echoed, frowning with confusion, trying to think past the waves of pain echoing upward from my leg. "Wait, what? How? The nurses represent stuff about me, and I realised that, I rejected it, I rejected them! How can there be more of them now? What's changed?"

"My authority," said the Governor. "It no longer exists. I have given it up."

I squinted harder, trying to figure out what this meant in the context of the dream; the Governor had given up on running the Asylum, so the nurses were out of control? But I could barely think past the pain, it absorbed so much of me.

The Governor held out one hand. "Chalk, please."

"Ah? Pardon?"

"The chalk I gave you. I have need of it now. Please."

"Uh ... sure, yeah." I fumbled around inside my yellow blanket and found the stick of chalk the Governor had gifted to me.

When I pressed it into her hand, she turned away without a word, and strode toward the blackboard. She stopped in front of the half-completed equation and raised the chalk.

"Wait, no!" I cried out, realising my mistake too late.

The Governor pressed the stick of chalk to the board — and struck through the figures.

She crossed them out with one diagonal line, then another, forming a large, clear X-shape across the very equation she had wished me to finish. Then, seemingly as an afterthought, she raised the opposite sleeve of her lab coat and drew it across the already negated equation, blurring and smudging what was left.

"Oh," I said, panting with relief. "I thought you were going to try to finish it."

The Governor turned back to me. “The project is over. It will never be complete. Completion was always impossible. And that is okay.”

I couldn’t help but smile, and almost laugh; here we were on the verge of two metaphysical crises — the opening of the Eye and an apparent sudden influx of new Cygnet staff — but the most important thing in that bubble of reality right then was the self-actualisation of an addicted reader, and her new freedom.

“Well done,” I said, and I meant it. “I don’t know if it’s appropriate for me to say this, but I suppose we’re well beyond any sense of propriety now. I’m proud of you. Well done for writing down so much. Well done for sharing all of that. That was ... a huge revelation for you, I think, and in such a short space of time. But, slow down a moment, please. What do you mean by you’ve ‘given up’ your authority? The dream has changed, and I need to understand.”

The Governor walked back over to me as I spoke. She stopped with her hands in the pockets of her laboratory coat, at the exact most comfortable distance from me — closer than a friend, further than a lover, at the position a real mother should stand.

How did she achieve such perfection? I don’t think she did. I think the dream did it for her.

“I am no longer the Governor,” she said. “That is the price of introspection.”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay, I mean, that’s good, but—”

“I wish to be called Eileen,” said Eileen.

My brief but brutal war against the cringe which rose to my face was a narrow victory for my better nature, but a victory nonetheless, as I kept it contained within the darkest reaches of my sour and soiled gut; Praem fought at my side as my greatest ally, by reminding me to be kind. I would never cringe at a human telling me their name, no matter how silly or archaic or old-fashioned, would I? If the Eye had made a choice, it was hers to make, whatever my own tastes and aesthetic sensibilities.

“O-okay,” I said. “Okay, good. Hello, yes, nice to ... um?”

For a moment I assumed some stealthy skirmisher of unkind emotion had crept onto my expression, because the smile in Eileen’s

eyes intensified so much I thought they might literally boggle from her head.

"I know," she said. "It is a pun."

"You ... you know? Then why ... ?"

"You may laugh if you want," she said. "You may point out that it is silly. I would prefer if you did."

"Ummm." I asked Praem for guidance or advice, but she had none. "But ... why?" I managed. "I don't want to offend you or be rude to you. It's your name, if that's what you truly want. I'm sorry I advised you against it before, if it's what your heart truly desires. I'll call you anything you like."

"No," said the Eye — Eileen. "Say it."

"Say what?"

"Say it. Please. Say it."

I hesitated, clearing my throat, my awkwardness so powerful that for a moment I forgot the throbbing pain in my leg. "Eileen sounds kind of like ... 'eye'."

"Yes!" she cried. "Yes, it does."

"And you like that?"

"Very much. I like puns, and homophones, and double meanings. Thinking with writing has taught me that. I like things which mean more than one thing at once, things which look like twins but which are not. English is a very silly language. I like this."

"Ah, well, um." I fought a losing battle against every good-girl impulse I had. "It is a very ... a very silly pun, indeed. I mean, you are a giant eyeball in the sky, after all. 'Eileen' is just too obvious. Everyone will think it's a joke."

"Good," said the Eye. "Iris was a runner up."

I winced. Eileen eye-smiled even harder, as if she was having the time of her life. "Really?" I said. "You're serious."

"Cornelia and Clara come in distant third," she said. "Clara is a poor substitute, not nearly punny enough. Did you know that in Japanese, the word 'eye' is spelled 'me'? This is amusing, but

unfortunately in Japanese this word is pronounced ‘may’, which ruins the pun. And it would be very confusing if everybody called me ‘Me’, and ‘May’ is a nice name but it is not a pun in English. Therefore, I have settled on Eileen.”

I puffed out a massive sigh, then shook my head, utterly flummoxed. “Well, Raine is going to be delighted and insufferable about this. That was her suggestion, you know that?”

“Yes. But no. It was my choice. Not hers.”

“True. And Evee ... I have no idea how she’ll react to this. She might be rude about it.”

What was I even saying? Evelyn would take one look at the Governor and either try to kill her, or pass out.

“Reactions,” said Eileen. “I desire those. I would be most disappointed if everybody politely ignored the pun. I have fallen in love with puns and double meanings, and now I myself am also a pun. Eye, and I, and Eileen, am a pun. This is the first step to loving myself.”

I blinked in surprise. “Wow, um. That’s a step further than I expected, and so quickly, too.”

“I am open now,” said Eileen.

“You’re also a lot more talkative. Is that on purpose?”

“I am myself. I!”

“Fair enough.” I sighed, trying to clear my head. The pain was throbbing back upward from my leg. “So, what now?”

Eileen raised her eyes from me and ran her gaze up the concrete cylinder which led back to her office. “We must leave the archives. I have nothing left to do here. We must leave them for good, and return to the hospital, where we can take action, and aid your revolution.”

“Right. Right! I ... wait, if you’ve relinquished your authority, who are we even revolting against?”

Eileen looked back at me, wide-eyed and very intense, as if surprised. “I do not know.”

“Huh, okay, um. Well, with any luck, the dream will sort itself out

somehow. Maybe the revolution will win by default now?" I winced and held up my free hand. "Wait, wait a second, we can't just go gallivanting off yet. What about her?"

I pointed past Eileen, indicating the sad framework of the Lozzie Puppet, built from chicken wire and felt fabric and scraps of meat.

Eileen turned and looked. "Her?"

"Yes, her! You made her, do you understand that? You created her, but you left her incomplete, like a parody of life. It's too cruel, far too cruel to leave her like that, unfinished. You made her, she was a 'failure', and then you abandoned her again. You have to take responsibility for her, too. And I don't mean putting her out of her misery! Don't you dare do that. You have to take responsibility."

Eileen just stared and stared and stared at the sad lump of the Lozzie Puppet. Not once did her eyes waver or flicker away, nor even blink. Sweat gathered beneath my armpits and down my back; the stinging, aching, stabbing throb in my left shin intensified in the fog-wrapped silence, with nothing to distract my body and mind. I clenched my teeth; was it time for morphine yet?

Praem told me to wait. Not just yet.

Eileen finally turned back to me. "I will finish her."

A sigh of relief slipped from my throat. "Good, okay—"

"But not right now. We are needed upstairs. My ..." Eileen blinked as if struck dumb; I realised it was the first time I'd seen her blink since she'd finished the manuscript. She took a moment to recover. "My biological child can wait. Your revolution and your sister cannot."

"Biological child?" I echoed, wide-eyed. "Actually no, don't worry, don't try to answer that yet. Yes, you can get back to her later, fine. And, one more thing. I made a promise to a whole group of people, and I'm trying to make sure I keep that promise, and this might be the last chance you and I get to talk like this. You have to release the remains of Alexander Lilburne's cult. Do you understand who they are?"

Eileen stared at me. "No."

"Back in my reality, on Earth, you're in all their heads, all the time. You have to release them. Do you understand?"

Eileen considered this for a moment, eyes locked on me. "I shall write them a letter of marque."

"A ... sorry, pardon?"

"A letter of marque and legitimacy."

I blinked several times, utterly stumped. What on earth would that mean, beyond the metaphor of the dream? Was the Eye going to set them free, or bind them closer? Praem suggested I take this at face value for now. Perhaps it was as much as Eileen could promise from within the framework of the play.

"All right, thank you," I said. "But you have to promise. They're under my protection. If you don't free them, I'll consider it a betrayal."

"I promise," said Eileen.

I let out a sigh, unsure if I should be relieved or confused. "Thank you. Right then, let's get out of here and back upstairs."

"Let's."

Together we made our way back toward the door which opened into the concrete cylinder of the stairwell. Walking was becoming more and more of a challenge for me, even across so small a distance as that; the morphine had almost finished working its way through my bloodstream, metabolised and processed, leaving the wound in my shin raw, exposed to the torture of my own nerves, no matter how carefully wrapped in bandages and gauze. I was afraid that the stomp during the earthquake had popped some of my stitches. The pain crawled down into my sole, piercing every footstep with knife-points, and reaching fingers of barbed wire upward into my knee-joint and thigh, scraping against the inside of my hipbone.

A dozen paces to the door left me shivering and sweating, heaving through my teeth.

"Praem?" I whined. "Now?"

Not yet, she said.

"Nnnnnnnnnhhh," I made a terrible sound. "I can't ... "

Eileen took a brief detour to retrieve Horror's severed head. She picked up the gruesomely animated nurse by the sling of towel

about her skull, then rejoined me at the door. Horror twitched her jaw and flexed the muscles of her face, but she was wrapped too tightly with towel to achieve anything, gagged and muffled and blinded.

"I suppose ..." I panted, trying to gather my breath past the pain. "Suppose we can't ... leave her down here ... alone. Who knows what mischief ... she would ... get up to."

"She will assist us," Eileen said.

I pulled a doubtful grimace. "Not so sure ... about that. She represents all the ... worst, most negative impulses ... toward my own history. How can she help us?"

"As a hostage."

"... ah, well. Fair enough."

Eileen opened the door into the stairwell. I had hoped to find it transformed somehow by the power of the dream, into a lift or an escalator, or some other form of ascent which would not invoke walking up twenty seven flights of stairs. But alas, there it was — bare concrete, naked bulbs behind wire mesh, the edge of each step a harsh, hard, unyielding lip of shadowless grey. Going up. For twenty seven flights.

I believe I let out some kind of guttural moan, and not the fun kind, then swung myself over the threshold in exhausted resignation.

Eileen followed, but then paused, her hand lingering on the door handle, staring out into the fog beyond the clearing. Her pink and glowing eyes rested on the rows of shelves deep in the mist, with their millions of books and untold number of stories.

"Eileen?" I croaked. The pain was so bad I had to squint through tears.

"It is difficult to say goodbye," she said.

"But you're not," I blurted out before I could think.

"I'm not?"

"No. No, of course you aren't!" I huffed, my patience wearing thin under the weight of pain besieging my leg. "Leaving the project unfinished, admitting it can never be finished, that doesn't mean you can't ever read any of these books again. It doesn't mean you

can't choose to read some, for ... for pleasure, or fun, or for some specific piece of information. It's okay! It's fine! You can come back down here, you know? You're going to have to come back down here, anyway, to finish the Lizzie Puppet. Or did you forget already?"

"Ah," said Eileen. "That is true."

"Good."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now please, shut the door. We should ... we should ... mm. Nn!"

The pain built to a crescendo, rocking up and down inside my leg like a tide of acid and fire. I had to squeeze my eyes shut and grip my crutch to ride the wave. I didn't see Eileen shut the door, but I heard the click of the latch.

When I opened my eyes again, my vision was blurred by a veil of tears. I whined deep in my throat, gritting my teeth and shaking my head from side to side, like an animal with a broken limb, insensible to the reason for my pain.

Eileen stepped past me and stared up the echoing tube of the stairwell. Then she looked at me, then back at the stairs, then back at me again.

"Yes?" I croaked.

"We have a problem."

I tried to laugh, but only sobbed. "Yes," I squeezed out. "Twenty seven flights! I— I doubt I can make it up— one flight— like this, I —"

Praem informed me that four hours had just passed. Praem instructed me to take two pills from the white bottle.

Gasping like a drowning sailor at the choppy surface of the sea, I fumbled inside my yellow blanket and drew out the little white bottle of morphine tablets. My hands were coated with sweat, slipping on the child-safe cap; I hissed with frustration as I tried to align the little notches on the lid — and then lost my grip. The bottle popped from my hands and clattered to the floor, rolling across the concrete with a rattle of pills.

“Nnnnnh!” I whined, choking down my pain with anger, staggering a step forward on my crutch. Bending down was going to be impossible, but I had to—

Eileen scooped up the pill bottle and held it out for me.

“Ah, uh ... thank— thank you,” I croaked, taking the bottle from her outstretched hand.

I stared at the child safety cap for a moment. My hands were slick and shaking. Sweat ran down my face. Claws of pain left great wounds in my nerves.

“I ... I can’t do this alone,” I said.

Eileen offered me her hand. Wordlessly, without request, I gave her the bottle. She popped the lid off and shook two pills into her palm, then replaced the lid and held out the pills. I shook my head and just opened my mouth, feeling more helpless and childlike than I had in years. A dull and slow part of my brain realised that I would never, ever let my real, biological, human mother feed me pills, ever again, at the cost of any indignity, any pain. But this? I did not hesitate.

Eileen placed the pills on my tongue. One, then two, then done.

The pills went down hard and dry. We didn’t have any water, nothing to drink, nothing to ease their passage. But I got them down in one rough swallow, feeling them squeezed down my throat to splash into my stomach.

Eileen pressed the pill bottle back into my hand. I shoved it into my yellow blanket, then stood for a long time with my eyes closed tight, clinging to my crutch, praying to my own bloodstream to flow fast and true.

“It’ll take ... fifteen or twenty minutes ... for that stuff to start working,” I said slowly. “Even then, I don’t know if ... I can walk up those stairs. I’m ... I’m stuck, I ... ”

“Climb aboard,” said Eileen.

I opened my eyes to find her crouched in front of the first step, with her back toward me and her hands waiting to accept my arrival, ready to give me a piggy-back.

“You’re joking,” I rasped.

“I am not joking.”

“You can’t make it up twenty seven flights of stairs with me on your back.”

“I should have carried you from the beginning.”

That stopped all the words in my throat. I was very still for a long moment, poised on the cusp of something which meant both less and more than I felt it did. Praem gently reminded me that there was no other way up those stairs, and that everybody else needed my help. The longer we delayed the worse things might get. The Eye — Eileen — was my ally now, of a sort, though against what I did not yet know. She was not trying to trick me. She would not betray me; if she wanted to, she could defeat me with ease right then. She was merely offering her help.

“All right,” I said eventually, staggering over to Eileen. “All right, just ... just take it as slow as you need.”

“I will stop to rest if I need to.”

“Okay ... ”

Like a very tired little girl at the end of a very long day, I climbed onto Eileen’s back.

I wasn’t sure where to put my crutch, but I recalled handling it to her so she could put it away somewhere safe, perhaps inside her lab coat. Praem tucked herself into my yellow blanket, high up so she would not be squashed. I leaned against Eileen’s back and put my arms around her neck. She took my weight in her hands, braced beneath my thighs; the burning iron cage of my left shin dangled free.

Then she stood up, as if I weighed nothing at all, and walked up the first flight of stairs.

Eileen took the steps slowly and smoothly, so as not to jog my wound. She breathed without difficulty, carrying me without a care. On the first flight I kept my head up, but on the second the effort became too great, and I laid my cheek against her shoulder. She smelled of nothing in particular, except the well-worn fabric of her laboratory coat. By the third flight my eyes grew heavy, lashes dipping. On the fourth, Praem suggested I nap.

I couldn’t truly sleep, of course. Who can sleep in a piggy-back,

except the most innocently guileless of real children, in the arms of perfect safety and security? But I came strangely close. The rhythm of Eileen's ascent up from the depths of her own memory lulled me to the liminal edge of slumber.

Carelessly, I murmured: "My real mother never carried me like this."

"I am your real mother," said Eileen.

"My biological mother," I corrected. "You're not my biological mother. You're ... "

Eileen did not argue further. She kept walking, pulling me up, one step after the other, never faltering, never complaining, never straining at my weight.

She felt like a mother, but I didn't say that out loud. I did not have the best relationship with my 'real' mother, even after I had exposed her to the revelatory truth of Maisie; would I ever have a good relationship with Samantha Morell, after she had knowingly or unknowingly done me so much harm? But Eileen — the Eye — was no different. She had hurt me more than I could put into words. Her thoughtless obsession had tortured me in ways I could not express, taken my twin sister from me, and turned any hope of young happiness to ashes in my mouth.

But without her, I would never have met Raine and Evee. I would never have visited the abyss. I would not have the family and comrades and home and life I had built in the ruins of the previous life which never came to be. Would I have never reached beyond the veil of my flesh? Would I have gone my entire life without abyssal transformation? Probably.

And now here I was, cradled against her back, cheek upon her shoulder, eyes closed in safety and security.

Could I forgive the Eye?

I didn't know — and for now, that was okay. I could not allow myself to confront that question right then. Forgiveness or unforgiveness, I needed Eileen's help with the revolution and with cracking open Maisie's prison cell; she was not holding that help hostage beyond a forgiveness I could not — and maybe never would — grant. So we would face the same foe, until this was all over.

But — what foe?

That thought drifted off, as true sleep almost won.

What felt like hours later, Eileen woke me gently. “We’re here.”

“Uhhh?”

I raised my head from her shoulder, blinking bleary eyes against the harsh light. A thick metal door stood before us, set in a concrete wall. We had reached the top landing of the stairwell.

Eileen gently lowered me back to my feet, crouching down so I could find the floor myself. I kept both hands on her back until she passed me my crutch, then she straightened up and helped me wedge the crutch back into position beneath my armpit.

The pain in my left leg was silenced, reduced to a half-heard echo beneath the smothering blankets of morphine in my bloodstream; a strange tremor passed through my leg as I put pressure on that foot, but that was all.

Eileen opened the door to her office and led me back inside.

The Office of the Governor of Cygnet Hospital, Asylum, Prison, and Maximum Security Containment Facility was exactly as we had left it. A wide room with scratchy brown carpet and off-white walls, so well lit that not a single shadow lingered — a habit I now understood, with a pang of sympathy. The room was equipped with two desks, one normal and covered with blank papers, the other a steel monster acting as the root for a tree of monitors which stretched to cover the entire left-hand wall.

Dawn was breaking, beyond the window on the right hand side of the room.

A ruddy orange glow poured down upon the hospital grounds, soaking into the lawns and sinking beneath the lake of gently swaying trees, dying every surface red and dark, as if the world itself was bleeding.

An open wound lay across the forest and the lawns — a track of destruction cut into the landscape.

I stood gaping for a moment. Eileen didn’t seem to care; she crossed to the desk and dumped Horror’s towel-wrapped head onto the surface with a wet and meaty thump. I recovered myself with a

deep breath and hurried over to the window, lurching forward on my crutch, flanked between the filing cabinets and glass display cases and the one tall bookshelf.

The window was cold to the touch; dawn would be chill this day. I braced myself against the glass and stared down at the damage.

A long, wide, winding trail had been cut into the woods which surrounded the asylum, as if a herd of elephants had knocked the trees aside and tramped down the trunks to kindling. The damage had exploded out onto the lawns as a series of narrow marks like puncture wounds in the grass, as if massive poles had been plunged into the ground and withdrawn in sequence. Something with a lot of very thin, sharp feet had scurried across the lawns — something much larger than any fully grown and restored Caterpillar.

The damage to the lawns was not isolated, but was accompanied by a chaotic slew of other paths, criss-crossing each other, winding back and forth over the main direction of damage. Some of those additional trails had simply crushed the grass flat and thrown up a lot of mud, but others were clearly the ruts of wheels or tracks, as if a whole squadron of armoured vehicles had been fighting a running battle with some giant monster.

“What on earth?” I hissed.

Whatever had happened, it was now happening on some far side of the asylum, for I couldn’t hear any gunfire or explosions, nor see any stragglers below.

As I concentrated on the damage to the hospital grounds and pressed my ear to the glass, I realised that the Governor’s Office was no longer so silently sound-proofed.

Distant shouts and calls echoed upward from below us, trapped behind walls of brick and steel, though too muffled and far away to make out any words. A sudden deep thump shook the floor several stories down. Running feet, screaming and howling, the banging and smashing of improvised weapons — all of it rose up out of the depths. I strained my ears in fear, listening for the tell-tale firecracker pop-pop-pop of guns, but I heard nothing of the sort. I didn’t know if I should be relived or worried.

“The revolution has started, I assume,” Eileen said.

“Yes, I assumed so too, but what’s—”

I ducked my head and twisted where I stood, hoping to get a better view past the brickwork of the hospital's exterior, to see if I could spot whatever giant creature had left those marks on the landscape.

But, as I did, I finally saw the false sky of the dream once more — the blank and wrinkled surface of the Eye, filling the sky from horizon to horizon, just as it had every moment since we had arrived in this compacted metaphor of Wonderland.

But no longer was the sky the unbroken surface of the underside — the inside, the back-side, while we played at being cornea and vitreous humour down in the dream below.

Mountain ranges of black flesh stood aside, continents of lid flowed beyond their world-spanning length, open on a chasm larger than the universe. The lid was cracked, the halves stood parted; from within shone a silver so deep and dark that it could have swallowed all the oceans of the world and every thought ever born in flesh.

A split, a parting, a crack in an orb from horizon to horizon, a gash in reality, an opening of the way, of knowledge and knowing as the universe itself peeled back and—

The Eye was open.

Staring down at Cygnet Asylum.

I reeled back from the window in ancient fear, with instinctive dread and terror and the mortal horror of being flayed atom by atom. Clutching my chest, panting in pure fight-or-flight reaction, I stared down at the landscape — and required Praem's gentle reminder that the trees were not burning, the grass was not turning to ash, and the air itself was not on fire.

The Eye was open, but it was not observant.

"I ... o-okay," I stammered, then hiccuped twice, painfully. "I mean — r-right. This is a dream, a m-metaphor. I suppose. Okay, it's fine, it's fine! It's safe! Safe ... "

From behind me, Eileen said: "I am looking inward."

I glanced back at her, at her pink eyes framed by blonde hair, the hair in turn framed by the wall of monitors. Every monitor was another chaotic view of the inside or outside of the asylum and hospital, too much confusion to pick out details without heading over there and sitting down in the massive metal swivel-chair. I had

unconsciously kept my eyes away from the bank of monitors when we'd entered, for fear of being unable to tear myself apart from my dear Maisie once I spotted her again.

"As long as you don't start melting everything down," I said.

"The project is over," said Eileen. "The archives are closed. Further additions are not required."

I sighed and rubbed at my chest, trying to still the wild racing of my heart. "Okay. Okay! Fine. Forgive me for having trouble accepting it's as simple as that. Seeing you, open, in the sky, does bring back some rather traumatic memories."

"No forgiveness is necessary. No transgression has been made."

I stared at Eileen for a long moment, framed by the flicker and static of her monitors; she stared right back at me, unblinking, bug-eyed, no longer distracted. The sound of distant shouts broke the silence between us, drifting up from the lower floors of the hospital. Far, far away, something clanged, metal against metal. A voice laughed, then cut off as if smothered. A rousing cry like a war chant rose, then fell. From even further afield — beyond the walls — something made an oddly familiar trilling, fluttering noise, like a giant fan had opened somewhere out on the grounds. That noise faded too, leaving us alone once more.

"Thank you," I said slowly. "Right, so, you want to help me. How do we start? How do we do this?" My eyes flicked to the front door of the office. "Is Sevens still ... ?"

"The Director has doubtless departed, in a new direction."

I nodded at the door. "Let's check anyway. Please?"

Eileen walked over to the door. I hobbled a few paces to the side so I could peer past her. She opened it without pause; beyond the door lay an empty corridor of whitewashed walls and linoleum floor, lit by the early crest of dawn breaking through distant windows. No nurses lay spread across the floor. No Sevens strode about in platform heels.

Noise floated up the corridor from somewhere below — shouting and banging, an occasional scream, feet pounding up and down stairs.

I sighed. "Damn. I was hoping she could help us."

"The revolution needed her elsewhere," said Eileen.

She shut the door and turned the latch to secure the bolt.

"You're locking us in?" I asked. "Why?"

Eileen stared at me, without any hint of a smile in her stilled expression. "I am no longer in charge," she said. "I have relinquished my authority. I cannot defend us."

A shudder of realisation climbed up my spine. Eileen was unarmed, no matter what she represented, and she did not seem particularly inclined to martial arts. I was barely able to walk, glued to my crutch, and stuffed with opiate painkillers. Praem was currently in plushie form. If we were caught by nurses out there in the corridors, we'd have no chance.

"We're trapped here," I hissed. "We can't help at all!"

"One is never trapped," said Eileen, with a hint of pride, "if one can but observe."

She walked over to the second desk, beneath the wall of monitors, and stopped by the metal throne, mounted on a ball-and-socket joint set into the floor. She touched the chair with a fingertip so that it spun around to face me, then she gestured an invitation with one hand.

"Be seated."

I almost laughed. "You're joking?"

"I am, yet again, not joking," she said. "Be seated. You will see."

I sighed. "Is that meant to be another pun?"

"It is not a good enough pun," she said. "I must practice further."

I lurched over on my crutch and very carefully sat down on the offered seat. The metal observation chair was gigantic, about three sizes too large for me; I felt like a child queen sitting in her mother's throne, sinking into the plush fabric layered atop the metal and plastic. I cleared my throat awkwardly and lay my crutch across my thighs. At least I was finally off my feet.

Eileen gently turned the chair on the ball-and-socket joint, until I was facing the wall of monitors. I deliberately kept my eyes off the various views, knowing I would get sucked into looking for my

friends, or watching Maisie, and might have trouble surfacing again. My heart raced all the same, afraid for my friends and family, for every single one of them, for the joint fate of Lozzie's bespoke revolution.

"Very well then," I said, looking up at Eileen. "What's the plan? What do we do?"

"We will observe."

"Yes, I got that much."

"And then we will intervene."

"How?"

"Through observation."

I frowned at her. "We do have to physically get there first. You do understand that, right? We can't just reach out and do things at a distance. We're going to have to be there. Do you ... "

Eileen was staring at the monitors, eyes flicking back and forth. "There are too many nurses. More than I thought."

"Ah?" I risked a glance at the monitors, just long enough to confirm she was right.

The nurses were all over the place, in every corridor and room, chasing clusters of scared girls or facing down makeshift phalanxes of armed patients. The dawn had not returned them to their human masks; they were stuck now in their night-shift nightmare truth, a myriad of mutations and impossible monsters, flowing up and down the hallways of the Asylum, brandishing syringes and straitjackets.

I shook my head. "This still doesn't make any sense. If you've relinquished your authority, who's in charge of all this? Who's running this now?"

"The Director?" Eileen suggested. She sounded uncertain.

"Sevens, you mean. And no. She broke out, she came to rescue me. She's not doing this." I chewed my lip. "Maybe this whole play really was originally meant to be for you, to show you how much me and my friends all love each other. Why we matter to each other. Why we're ... not like you, I suppose. Maybe that process isn't over. Maybe you need to keep witnessing all this?"

“Mmmmmm,” Eileen hummed, doubtful.

“Yes, right,” I said, trying to convince myself. “That must be it. You’ve turned inward, which is good. But you’ve not yet understood my attachment to my friends and lovers. You need to know that the future is not lonely. You need to know community! That’s what the play is for!” I tried to laugh, then leaned forward and waved at the screens. “You need to see everybody! Here, help me spot Raine and Zheng, let’s start with them, let’s—

Bang!

The door to the Governor’s Office burst open and banged off the wall, lock shattered, hinges bent.

Eileen turned; a touch of her fingertips turned the seat with her, so I was not left craning my neck to see what new horror bore down upon us.

Knights poured in through the ruined doorway — ten of them, black-booted and black-clad in body armour and helmets, their mirrored visors and tight gloves leaving not a scrap of skin showing. They had their big shiny black guns raised, pressed to their shoulders, sweeping the room like in a movie or one of Raine’s video games. Shock gave way to relief — we had our escort!

“Oh!” I almost laughed. “You came to ... pick ... us ... up.”

Relief curdled.

These were not Knights; the resemblance was clear, but the details were wrong. They moved with mechanical precision, more like automatons than my delightfully living Knights —flicking their guns left and right, clicking their heads around like little searchlights. The insignia over each heart was different — where the Knights had borne a patch showing a trio of tentacles impaled on a spike, these strange new arrivals wore a symbol that showed a crimson halo over a crowned head, the face a featureless white void on a field of black.

They finished the sweep with the muzzles of their guns, then lowered the weapons to aim at the floor; I couldn’t help but realise they had never once pointed the weapons at myself, but had gladly threatened Eileen.

“Clear,” one of them said.

It spoke in a machine-voice, clipped and empty, neither masculine nor feminine, nor anything else, buzzing like a computer-generated sound from decades past. There was nothing in there, nothing but empty space.

One of the not-Knights — just armed guards, really, without the Knights' true chivalry — stepped over to the main desk and picked up Horror's towel-wrapped head.

For a moment I thought the worst was happening, and they were going to free her again. But then the Empty Guard spoke into a radio attached to the uniform's shoulder.

"Targets one and two secured, Ma'am," said that robotic voice.

I exploded.

"Who?!" I shouted, gesticulating with both hands, almost knocking my crutch to the floor. Praem peered out of my yellow blanket and tried to get me to calm down, but I politely refused her. Three of the guards flinched, but they didn't point guns at me; I was beyond caring. "Who could you possibly be talking to?! Who's in charge of you lot? There can't be anybody! Another head nurse?! Who?"

The Empty Guard spoke into the radio again: "Target one is vocalising. Yes Ma'am. Understood. Not to be harmed. Understood. Yes M'am."

I glanced at Eileen. She was staring at the guards with as much surprise as me. "Eileen!" I said. "There isn't another part of your ego out there or something?"

"No," she said. "I do not know what—"

The Empty Guard spoke again: "The ex-Governor is also here. Orders?" A pause. "Understood. Yes Ma'am. Understood."

"Who can you possibly be talking to!?" I yelled again. "This is absurd!"

The Empty Guard lowered the radio and lifted the gun.

The other nine all followed their leader.

All ten Empty Guards aimed at Eileen.

"Eliminate the target."

bedlam boundary – 24.29

Ten black barrels of ten black guns — sharp little holes bitten out of reality's hide; the flesh-piercing, blood-sucking, brain-drinking mouth-parts of ten beetle-backed insects, all ten open wide as whirlpools in the great dark ocean of the mind, surfaces slick with oil and grease and corrosive mucus, eager and quivering with the promise of punctured lungs and ruptured hearts and an end to the dream.

Ten sets of squared shoulders. Ten pairs of gloved hands. Ten of my own wide-eyed face, reflected in ten mirrored visors. Ten safeties off, ten magazines locked, ten sights zeroed on unprotected flesh. Ten Empty Guards, ten false Knights, ten intruders commanded by one unseen voice, muffled by radio static and the distance of the void.

Ten trigger fingers, tightening on ten shots; ten bullets awaiting the strike of ten hammers; ten chances to fail, ten chances to die.

Ten guns all aimed at Eileen.

And me, with two hands, one body, and without my tentacles.

"No!" I screamed, and hurled myself off the throne.

'Hurled' is perhaps too grandiose a word for what I actually achieved — the ungainly slump of a morphine-addled waif falling sideways out of an overgrown swivel-chair, bloodstream fogged with opiate dreams, crutch sliding off my thighs, left leg reduced to dead weight, fingers clawing at empty air. But that was how it felt. A heroic lunge. A leap of faith. Jumping in front of a bullet.

This was all a dream, of course. A dream and a play, a metaphor for Wonderland and the Eye's mind, a stage wrought from hyperdimensional mathematics, painted with a heady stew of shared trauma, buried history, and allegorical obscenity. Would a stage-prop bullet truly slay Eileen? Could a slug of explosive-accelerated lead leave the tiniest pinprick upon the Eye? Probably not, no. Eileen's true body lay spread out across the sky, bigger than a gas giant, more dense than a black hole, unassailable by anything smaller than a supernova or an act of some unseen god beyond the

stage.

But she'd come so far in these last four hours. She had spoken, and written, and seen, and grown, in a way I gathered she never had before. I had shepherded her into true insight.

What would it mean to lose her now? Would she forget everything, like the parting mists of a dream? Would 'Eileen' and all she had experienced cease to exist? Would the Eye resume her blind observation, without memory of carrying me on her back?

Before that prospect, all my bitterness counted for nothing.

So I floundered sideways and tumbled out of the observation throne. I tackled Eileen from the side, bunching my fists in her laboratory coat, desperate to interpose myself between the guns of the Empty Guards and Eileen's unprotected flesh — the flesh which had carried me and borne me upward from the depths of the archives, only moments earlier. Part of me believed it was a calculated risk; the Guard who had spoken into the radio had said I was 'not to be harmed'. Eileen's only chance was for me to put myself in harm's way, and pray that the Empty Guards' orders were stiffer than their triggers.

I shouted some incoherent babble — don't shoot, don't shoot!

Like we were in an old western, or a noir detective story, and the posse or the pigs would put up their guns at the cry of a young damsel.

But we were not. We were in a horror story.

Eileen did her best to catch me, but my clumsy heroics had caught her by surprise. Praem tried to help, but she was only a plushie, without true strength in those soft little arms. I landed very badly indeed. My injured leg smacked against the side of the chair, then slammed to the floor; the pain burst morphine's bonds, knocking wind and sight and sense straight out of me. My crutch slipped forward and jabbed me in the gut so hard I almost vomited, feeling my intestines and organs pushed aside and warped out of shape; if this had happened out in reality, that would be a trip to the hospital, with internal bleeding, or worse.

Crumpled on the floor, wheezing for breath, blinded by tears, clutching my guts — I realised that the Empty Guards had not yet opened fire.

My fall had bought Eileen a second or two's reprieve, as I had passed in front of her.

I summoned more resolve than I believed I possessed, and reared up from where I had fallen, reaching for Eileen's front, bunching great fistfuls of brown jumper and lab coat, to haul myself up. Things tore inside my guts, but I pulled, I had to shield her from—

Bang-bang! Bang! Bang-bang-bang! Bang-bang!

Eight shots rang out, deafening booms in the close confines of the Governor's Office.

I screamed with an emotion I'd never felt before — desperate failure, utter desolation, hope terminated by blood-soaked lead and unfeeling hands. I slipped downward and slumped helpless on the floor, powerless to stop what had happened, tiny and beaten before this bland institutional violence.

I think I wailed; I wasn't sure, because my ears were still ringing.

Then, eight matching clatter-clank-rattle noises followed the gunshots, suspiciously like the sound of eight heavy, armoured bodies crashing to the floor.

Gasping for breath, with strings of bile hanging from my lips, my leg a vice of agony, and my insides about to be outsides, I grabbed a corner of my yellow blanket and raked it across my eyes, clearing tears of pain from my sight.

Eileen was still standing, right there in front of me, mercifully unpunctured by bullet holes. Her pink-glowing eyes were thrown extra wide with fresh surprise.

“—wha-what—” I wheezed.

Eileen looked down at me. “We have been spared, so do not go spare. There is no spare of you.”

I coughed, and tasted blood in the back of my throat. The pain throbbed like black shadows in my peripheral vision. “S’not— the time for ... puns.”

“This is the best time for puns.”

I coughed again, wheezing for breath.

“Thank you for jumping in front of me,” Eileen said. “I should have

done the same for you.”

Slumped on the floor, cradling my belly, drooling from pain-slack lips, I asked Praem for help. She assisted, and together we turned to look at the massacre behind us.

Eight of the ten Empty Guards lay on the floor. Some had fallen straight out with their limbs spread eagle, like pole-axed cartoon characters. Others had crumpled in awkward twitching heaps, armoured bodies tangled in their own black-clad limbs, guns pinned beneath chests and bullet-proof vests, legs twisted backward with the weight of their collapse. Each Guard had been felled with a single head shot, each helmet breached at side or rear, or shot through the shattered and broken visor. Dark tarry puddles spread outward from the fresh corpses, soaking into the brown carpet, ruining the Governor’s office forever; but the air did not stink with that unmistakable iron tang of fresh-spilled gore. Instead the room smelled like a garage. The Empty Guards were not bleeding — they were leaking machine oil.

Some of the more explosive head shots revealed slivers of plastic and chrome instead of skull and bone. In place of brains and meat lay broken circuit boards and burst vacuum tubes, oozing with arteries of wire and pipe, smoking and sparking like damaged computers on the bridge of a fanciful starship.

Robots. The Empty Guards were robots.

And two of them had saved us.

Two of the Guards still stood astride the wreckage of the death squad — feet braced wide, weapons flicking back and forth over the bodies. Twin streamers of smoke rose from the barrels of their submachine guns.

Eileen and I said nothing, both staring with shock; Praem did what she could to get me sat up properly and help clear my airways. I still tasted blood, and plenty of it.

Our pair of inexplicable saviours swept their guns back and forth across the corpses until they were satisfied. One of them gently kicked a couple of the bodies, checking for survivors. After a moment they nodded to each other, then lowered their weapons and straightened up. I realised these two were not like the other Guards — they did not move with the same robotic, boxy, halting

motions, but flowed with a loose, easy, quick muscularity. They were slightly taller than the other Guards as well, and their matching black uniforms lacked some of the details shared by the ones lying dead on the floor. They had no radios on their shoulders, no unit patches over their hearts, and their visors were dull grey rather than mirrored silver.

They flicked the safety on their guns, then slung the weapons over their bellies. Then they reached up in unison and removed their helmets.

Twin waterfalls of long white hair spilled forth, framing twin faces of copper-brown skin, with high cheekbones, bold noses, and wide, expressive mouths. Two pairs of deep purple eyes were set in steely expressions, full of suppressed passion, flushed with post-combat high, wide and alert and aware, both darting about the room one last time before settling forward, at rest, upon me.

Two helmets were clasped to two belts, and a pair of twins stood revealed.

“Heather,” one of them said — echoed instantly by the other: “Heather.”

I had never seen these people before, in reality or dreams or Outside or anywhere. There was only one logical conclusion.

“ ... Zalu, Xiyu?” I wheezed.

The twins — the Lilies, the plant-girls from Outside, the twin sisters Xiyuol’tok-al and Zalui’yel-tul, identical this time in their new dream-guises — nodded in exact unison, then glanced at each other with mirrored frowns.

“Yes, it’s—” “—us. But this is—” “—weird. Hm, it really is. We’re even finishing—” “—each other’s sentences. Oh, damn, I don’t—” “—like this.”

The twins spoke different parts of the same single sentence. Even their voices were identical, the same pitch of spiced honey poured over charred granite.

“Wait, wait,” I said, still wheezing, still struggling for breath. “What — how—”

The Lilies turned to me again. “How did you know—” “—it was us?”

“ ... uh ... uhh ... ” I wiped a string of drool from my lips; my hand came away smeared with blood. “Two ... two identical girls, who I’ve never ... never seen before? Who else would it be?”

“Fair—” “—enough. That does—” “—make sense.”

The identical twins glanced at each other with another pair of mirrored frowns.

“This isn’t—” “—going to—” “—work. One of us has to—” “—stop talking. You stop.” “No, you. No—” “—I said you—”

“Twins!” said Eileen.

The Lilies stopped. They turned their frowns upon Eileen.

“Twins,” Eileen repeated. “Hello. You are twins. Or you are the same one person, doubled into two, but still existing as one. How wonderful. How beautiful. What does it feel like?”

Twin hands twitched around the grips of twin guns. Twin brows furrowed in matching suspicion.

“Thank you for saving us,” said Eileen. “I have only just begun to think clearly, and bullets would clog my thinking. I am alive! I am not shot. This is capital, to avoid capital punishment.”

Twin purple eyes dipped down to me in identical silent question.

“She’s— on my— side. Long story.” I heaved for breath. “Can you two just— give me a second? I’m not— not— can’t think—”

“Under—” “—stood, Heather,” said the twins. “Take all the—” “—time you need. We’ll secure—” “—the room.”

“Help—” I groped for my mother’s — no, for Eileen’s hand. “Help me— back into the chair, please?”

Eileen handled me with great care. She took charge of my crutch, then lifted me by the arms, careful not to put any weight on my legs or pressure on my belly. She gently deposited me back into the throne of chrome and plastic. I felt as if I had never sat anywhere so comfortable, so perfectly shaped to accept my bruised and battered body. I sank into the plush welcome. Praem helped by smoothing my yellow blanket down over my back and easing the iron maiden of my left shin up and onto the chair.

For a long moment I just sat there, sunk deep into the throne, trying

to get my breath back, waiting for the morphine to resume its own tender magic. The taste of blood lingered in my mouth. My guts quivered with every breath. I stared at the left leg of my pajama bottoms, certain that I must have burst at least one or two of my stitches, waiting for the blood to start seeping through the fabric.

“Do you need medical attention?” Eileen asked.

Praem told her no, I was not in any danger. But I needed to rest. Damage had been done.

The Twins did not stand idle as I recovered. They really did ‘secure the room’. One of them closed the door, though it wouldn’t stay shut with the damaged hinges, so she dragged a filing cabinet in front of it, to block the entry of any further undetected interruptions. The other Lily checked the bodies of the Empty Guards, rolling them over and stripping their weapons and spare ammunition. In a couple of minutes she had eight additional guns and a big stack of shiny black magazines piled up on the Governor’s desk. The Twin who had closed the door went to the window and peered left and right, then frowned up at the sky — at the Eye, open in the firmament. The other one pointed at the metal door to the archives and snapped a question for Eileen: “Where does that lead?”

“The archives,” said Eileen. “It is a dead end.”

“Might want to grab her,” I wheezed.

Both Twins stared at me. Those purple eyes were so intense. Every motion of their bodies was like watching a predatory big cat stalking around the room.

“Who are you—” “—talking about?” they asked in unison.

I gestured at the floor. “That. Her.”

“... ah. We must—” “— have missed that. Thank—” “—you, Heather.”

One of the twins stepped quickly over to the towel-wrapped bundle still twitching and writhing on the floor, where it had fallen from the grip of one of the guards.

She lifted Horror’s severed head, then lifted her eyebrows. “Is this what—” “—I think it is?”

“Horror, yes. Don’t unwrap her, please. Unless you’re going to interrogate her or something. And I wouldn’t try that either, she’s not very useful.”

The Twin dumped Horror’s head back on the desk, where it belonged.

“You really—” “—did take her head—” “—off. Wow. Well done, Heather. Well—” “—done indeed.”

“Wasn’t me,” I wheezed. “Was Twil.”

“Ah. Even—” “—better.” “We did—” “—hope she would—” “—find our—” “—brief presence—” “—useful. Did—” “—she?”

Listening to the pair of them was dizzying. They were not merely finishing each others’ sentences, they were stopping and starting with split-second precision, like one mind in two bodies. Processing their speech would have taxed my mind at the best of times, let alone when my back teeth were floating in morphine, my left leg was going to fall off, my guts were recovering from a sledgehammer blow, and I was coming down from the adrenaline high of almost getting shot.

I held up a weak hand. “Sorry, Zalu, Xiyu, I can’t tell you two apart, not like this. It’s very disorienting. And you’re getting worse. More fragmented the more you speak.

The Twins glanced at each other with a strictly irritated look again. “You-” “have to—” “—stop. Let—” “—me do—” “—the—” “—speaking.”

I didn’t have the energy to roll my eyes.

Eileen said: “This is beautiful. Please keep talking.”

I sighed. “For you, perhaps. Please, you two, isn’t there a way to ... separate you out a bit?”

The Lilies both looked at me. “Technically—” “—no. This time—” “—we’re the same—” “—single person. But—” “—maybe we can—” “—improvise. Things are—” “—already breaking—” “—down, after all. We may—” “—as well—” “—take advantage.”

Both Twins reached into the pockets and pouches of their matching bulletproof vests, and withdrew matching black hair ties. With a swish of both hands and a flick of quickly gathered long white hair,

the Lily on the right pulled her snowy mane into a loose ponytail. The Lily on the left watched her sister, then repeated the motion, arranging her hair in a side-ponytail. One back, one side. That was enough to tell them apart, for now.

“Better?” one of them said.

I almost laughed. “Tactical hair ties, really? I mean, yes, good idea, but—”

“Zalu,” said the rear-ponytail twin, pointing at herself with two fingers.

“Xiyu,” confirmed Xiyu, with her side-tail.

I sighed. “Right. Thank you. Are you differentiated now?”

Zalu and Xiyu looked at each other.

“Operation successful,” said Zalu.

“Confirmed,” said Xiyu. “Mission complete.”

Eileen said: “Distinction has been introduced, yet the similarities remain unblurred. This continues to be very delightful.”

“You two were beautiful, earlier, by the way,” I told them. “When you showed us your true forms, when we were all fighting Horror, out in the rain. I just wanted to tell you that, in case we never get another chance to talk like this. You were incredibly beautiful.”

Zalu laughed softly. Xiyu raised her eyebrows in polite surprise.

“I’m serious,” I said.

“And I,” said Zalu, “will never truly understand you human beings. But thank you.”

“Who are you two inhabiting this time?” I asked. I nodded down at the machine-corpses of the other guards. “You’re not one of those. I thought you had to insert yourselves into the dream, take the place of somebody already present, or something like that?”

Zalu nodded. Xiyu looked grave. Zalu said: “In the normal course of operations, yes. Reinsertion would have taken much longer. But we ran into your fiancée. She got us straight to the front. Metaphorical airdrop. Unpleasant, but this was an emergency.”

“... you mean Sevens?”

“Yes. Seven Shades of Sunlight. She outranks us, even though she’s from a different outfit. Couldn’t turn down those orders. She arranged equipment and arms, and used her own transport to get us here.”

I felt like my leg pain was transforming into a headache. “You two are talking like ... I don’t know, like characters from a shooting game.”

“It’s part of the role,” said Xiyu. “It’s efficient, but showy at the same time. Very odd. But not our place to question.”

“We can’t drop the lingo entirely,” said Zalu. “Sorry.”

“But who are you?”

The Lilies glanced at each other. Zalu answered. “Identity unknown. We’re not locals this time, not from the dream. We think we’re some kind of composite, partly from a book Sevens has read, partly from a video game familiar to Raine. This kind of spec-ops assignment is not our usual haunt, but Sevens needed an operative proficient in small arms, CQC, infiltration, subterfuge, sabotage, snake eating, and assassination. She needed somebody to slip in among the guards. Sent us to help you.”

Both Lilies hefted their submachine guns, racking slides and flicking switches and making the guns go click-click-click, all in perfect unison with each other. They finished with a boot-stop attention-stand and a quick pair of salutes.

“... okay,” I managed. “And where is Sevens now?”

“Unknown. Our orders were destroyed after reading. She is occupied in another theatre.”

“Ah!” Eileen gasped. “Oh. Beautiful.”

The Twins both scowled at her.

I sighed and shook my head. The pain was making it almost impossible to think clearly. The morphine did not appear to be working the same as before. My leg burned like a hot piece of metal had been inserted beneath my skin, and my guts felt like I’d been run over by a bus driven by an entire troop of gorillas. My eyes kept watering. Every time I breathed I could taste blood.

I nodded down at the Empty Guards — the machine corpses, the

absurd robots with their circuit-board brains and vacuum-tube eyes. “What are they, then?”

“Enemy unknown,” Xiyu answered. “We slipped in alongside them, in the rear of the formation, following Sevens’ orders.”

Zalu carried on: “They’re not too smart, didn’t realise we were tagging along, not until we broke cover.”

“Sloppy discipline.”

“Bad officers.”

“Yes.”

Zalu and Xiyu glanced at each other again. Zalu said, “I’m starting to like this, sister. The white hair suits you.”

“The stature suits you, too, sister.”

“Nice muscles, beneath that armour.”

“Want to compare?”

“Not on the battlefield.”

“We’d have to strip.”

“Very unsafe.”

“Not sanctioned.”

“Excuse me,” I croaked. The Twins looked at me again. I gestured at the corpses of the Empty Guards a second time. “Where did they come from, then? Who sent them? Who’s in charge of the asylum now?”

Zalu eyed the Governor. “Her?”

I shook my head. “No, no, she’s not in charge anymore. Eileen has —”

“Eileen?” echoed Xiyu. Her purple eyes went wide with shock.

“Yes,” I sighed. “Eileen, it’s—”

Zalu laughed — a single hard bark. “A new designation? That’s absurd.”

“Yes!” Eileen said, voice brimming with pleasure. “It is absurd. Do you like it?”

Zalu and Xiyu eyed each other, unsure how to respond, their warrior-goddess appearance undercut by deep bafflement. Eileen beamed without actually smiling, her pink eyes burning in her face, hands deep in the pockets of her laboratory coat.

“She’s gotten into puns and homophones,” I said. “Listen, it’s a really long story to tell right now. The short version is that I finally got her to turn her gaze inward. She’s done some introspection. She’s on my side.”

“Yeah,” said Zalu, fingers flexing on the grip of her weapon. “We did notice the big peeper outdoors is open, but the world is still intact. Funny, that.”

“Did you feel the earthquake?” I asked.

Zalu and Xiyu shook their heads in unison, ponytails swaying. Zalu said, “No quake up here, ma’am.”

“Could have happened before we arrived,” said Xiyu.

“Don’t see any physical evidence though.”

“True, sister.”

“True.”

“Ah, hm,” I hummed, realising they had a good point. Down in the archives the earthquake had shaken books from shelves and cracked the concrete of the stairwell, but up here in the Governor’s office nothing seemed to have been knocked out of place. “That’s ... odd.”

I struggled to think through the pain. Had the earthquake been pure analogy, then? Was the centre of the Eye’s mind isolated from this metaphorical hospital?

“Sorry, Heather,” said Zalu. She pointed at Eileen. “But this is weirder.”

“She’s not observing any more,” I said. “For the purposes of the dream, she’s on my side. She wants to assist with the revolution, and she’s going to open the Box, so I can get to Maisie.”

“Your twin sister, right. The main mission target. And she’s going to assist with that now?”

“Yes.”

Xiyu snorted. "That's some battlefield conversion."

"Love can bloom," added Zalu.

I sighed a very big and exhausted sigh; the Lilies were easier to tell apart now, but some instinct told me they were descending even further in video game military slang. I said, "I'm pretty sure I had to rewrite part of the play to achieve this, but yes, it's real. She's on my side."

Zalu and Xiyu both stared at Eileen — the ex-Governor, the ego of the Eye, the avatar walking beneath her own gaze. Eileen stared back at them, intense and wide-eyed.

"I saw you two once before," she said after a moment. "I remember you both. You were very fast and very clever. And very green, but also ... very green."

Zalu sighed and closed her eyes. Xiyu winced.

"I am sorry," said Eileen. "Your language does not have many puns, and we are not currently speaking it, so I was forced to make a pun in English. But it was a bad pun. That was painful."

"You don't say," said Xiyu.

Zalu thumbed at Eileen. "Is this just what she's like now? Old people pun jokes?"

"She's still learning," I said, feeling oddly protective of Eileen's efforts. "Look, isn't it better than before? She's not burning this dream to ash or anything. This is a good thing."

Zalu nodded, sharp and smart. "On the battlefield, sure. But this doesn't mean we're sticking around afterward to see what happens when she finally lets go, out in reality."

"Thank you," I said. "I didn't say it before, but thank you for coming back, for saving me. Saving us. You had no obligation to do this. You didn't have to save us the first time either. Thank you both."

"We cannot take full credit," said Zalu.

"Ah?"

Xiyu pointed at the corpses on the floor. "The automatic guards paused when you gave them an order. That gave us an opening to

neutralise them.”

I squinted through the pain. “I ... they did what, sorry?”

Zalu echoed her sister. “The automatic guards held their fire when you told them not to shoot.”

My head throbbed with increasing pain. My guts roiled, still threatening me with a lap full of sick. The burning in my leg still absorbed so much of my mental processing. I felt like I was being torn in two; I couldn’t think. The guards had obeyed me? Why?

“Um,” I managed. “Thank you regardless. Thank you.”

Zalu and Xiyu both nodded, curt and simple.

Zalu said, “We needed to render our support for this operation. And we got conscripted by Seven Shades of Sunlight.”

Xiyu suddenly rocked back on her heels. “We’ve carried out our orders, sister. Technically we could be off now.”

“No we can’t. Seven Shades would have our heads for dereliction of duty.”

“True, sister.”

“What’s the SOP, then?”

“Stay here, guard Heather, wait for reinforcements.”

“Ummm, excuse me?” I said, interrupting the pseudo-tactical chatter. “But I don’t think that’s an option any more.”

Both Twins looked down at me. Xiyu said: “We know better than you do, Heather. We’re in the role for this, remember? We’re the professionals here, you’re a civvy in need of protection. Let us worry about the combat part. You just do what you gotta do, we’ll look after you.”

I frowned, hissing with effort. “Pardon me if I’m asking an obvious question.” I gestured at the dead Guards again. “But what happens when they don’t ‘report back’, or whatever they’re supposed to do?”

Zalu and Xiyu looked down at the dead Guards.

“Oh.”

“Hmmmmm.”

“That’s a good point.”

“They’ll be missed shortly.”

“When they don’t make their report.”

“And then another team will be sent out to finish the mission. Do we consider that probable?”

“Very likely, sister.”

“And we’ll be barricaded in here.”

“Like sitting ducks. Fish in a barrel. A tree on a bluff.”

“Can we hold that door with just two of us?”

“Negative. They’ll bring up heavier fire-power.”

“But they don’t want to hurt Heather. They wouldn’t risk doing that.”

“Can we use her as protection?”

“Negative. Seven Shades would never accept that.”

“True, sister.”

“True.”

“How about if we arm the Governor too, and retreat past that other door? Can we hold out until reinforcements?”

“What kind of reinforcements are en-route?”

“Good question.”

“We don’t know.”

The Lilies ceased their rapid-fire chatter and looked back up at me, in perfect unison. I felt dizzy.

“... well?” I said. “Do you agree with me now?”

“We do,” said Zalu. “Sorry, Heather. We’re not really special operations soldiers, we’re just playing the role. We missed that detail. We might miss other details too. You’ll have to let us know if you notice anything we don’t, ma’am.”

Xiyu asked, “Are we placing ourselves under Heather’s command?”

“Do you have a better idea, sister?”

“We could leave the dream.”

“We could.”

“And Seven Shades of Sunlight would hunt us down for gross insubordination.”

“We’d be court martialed.”

“Dragged before a tribunal.”

“Tried in the Hague.”

“What’s the Hague?”

“No idea.”

Both Lilies turned to me again. “Ma’am.” “Ma’am.”

“Um ... ” I blinked.

Zalu nodded — past me, at the wall of monitors to my rear.

“Ma’am, we need intel on the positions of friendlies, hostiles, and possible reinforcements. Can you interpret that data for us? We can’t understand a lick of it. Not in our pay grade.”

My head felt like it was splitting in two. The pain wasn’t going away, wasn’t ebbing, wasn’t flowing out of me. The observation throne felt massive compared to my battered, shrunken form. I almost croaked an affirmative, almost said yes, almost started to turn and look at the monitors. Because that would be so much easier than facing whatever had gone wrong here — to stare into those infinite views, that perfect omniscient observation, and lose the pain of my body in the sight of others. I started to turn, to seek solace, to stop thinking and start—

Praem said no.

I began to argue with her, but she put her foot down and held me steady. I pointed out that I had looked at those monitors only a few minutes ago, had I not? And I had come away fine, I had not gotten stuck or trapped, I was more than capable of exerting self control, and I was—

Praem said I was not all here. Praem said she was doing what she could. Praem said she could not anchor me against that impulse, with so little of me to hold onto.

I asked her what she meant. She couldn't answer in a way that made any sense.

"Praem?" I croaked.

"Hm," grunted Xiyu. "I don't believe Heather is capable of intelligence assistance right now." She looked at Eileen. "What about you?"

Eileen turned and stared at the wall of monitors to my rear; a flickering of infinite views was reflected in her pink eyeballs for a moment. Then she turned back.

"I cannot observe as I used to," she said. "A small price."

"Tch," Zalu tutted. "Then we can only stay here, bunker down, reinforce the position. Maybe we can retreat into your 'archives'."

"We require an escort," said Eileen. "Heather has made it clear to me that we must assist the others here, but I have relinquished my authority, and cannot protect her from nurses or others. Please escort us."

Zalu looked doubtful. Xiyu gestured at the pile of firearms on the desk. "You've got more than enough bang here. You're going to have to protect yourself, too."

Eileen transferred her gaze to the shiny black metal and matte black plastic of the guns. She stared and stared and stared, utterly still, without even blinking. Distant sounds of shouting and fighting filtered up from the lower floors of the hospital.

Eventually Eileen said: "I do not know how to use those. Please escort us."

Zalu sighed. "I can teach you. Quickly enough to—"

"I do not wish to know how to use those. Heather cannot use one either, because her leg is very injured, and if we are to venture forth, I must carry her on my back. Please escort us."

Zalu said: "Without intel, we don't know where we're going, or where our allies stand. We can't just—"

"Please escort us," Eileen repeated.

Praem gently suggested that I interrupt this debate, because the whole thing was pointless. We could not stay here in the office, nor

could we go blundering about the hospital hallways without information.

But I wasn't paying attention. I was fighting against the pain, and trying to think.

"The genre is collapsing," I muttered.

Eileen and the Lilies stopped talking. One of the Lilies said, "Heather?"

I looked up into twin pairs of dark purple eyes and twinned ponytails of white hair. Eileen watched me too, listening closely.

"The genre," I repeated, struggling to fit the pieces together. "The dream has ... or had, a genre, but it's getting all confused. When we defeated Horror, we did so by letting Twil pull off her head, in full werewolf mode. That changed the 'genre' of the play, changed the dream. It made it into a proper horror story, more directly, or changed the nature of the horror, I'm not sure which. My leg wound went from a scratch to a deep-tissue injury. The whole logic of the place shifted slightly. But this." I gestured at the dead robot guards. "Android security guards? You two? The battle outdoors, whatever was going on out there — do you two know what that was?" Both twins shook their heads. "Well, my point is, all of this stuff doesn't fit. The genre has shifted again."

Zalu said, "The dream is growing thin."

"... excuse me?"

"Getting thin. It's not collapsing or ending, but the logic is all over the place, you're correct. Restrictions have been lifted. Rules of engagement have been abandoned."

"Is that ... good? Or bad?"

"Unknown," said Zalu.

I gnawed on my bottom lip.

Without the Eye as Governor or Sevens as Director, the dream had become un-anchored, like a story without an author, a play with no script, a dream turned independent of the dreamer, into a jumble of signs and symbols all fighting against each other. Lozzie's revolution was in full swing out there, trying to fill the power vacuum, but she had not yet won. Cygnet Hospital was not yet ours.

The asylum was still in flux. Right then it belonged to nobody.

"The centre cannot hold," I murmured. "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

The familiar old poetry brought clarity to my mind. The pain ebbed back, at long last. Suddenly I felt more like myself again.

"Pardon?" said one of the twins.

"Nothing," I answered without looking up, then gestured at the machine-corpses on the floor. "I think these people— these robots, whatever they are, I think whoever sent them is trying to re-establish control of the dream." I sighed. "Oh, I do wish Eevee were here, she'd understand this so much better than I, she was always the one with a head for strategy. Nobody's in charge anymore. Somebody else is trying to step in, now the Governor is no longer the Governor."

"Who?" said Eileen.

I shrugged. "I haven't the foggiest."

"Here," said Xiyu. "Take a look at this."

She reached down and pulled the unit patch off the nearest machine-corpse, then held it out so I could see; it was stick-on, velcro-backed, easily detachable. I couldn't very well get up and accept the patch myself, so Praem went for me, and returned the patch to my waiting hand.

"Thank you, Praem," I murmured.

The patch itself was well-made, a precise piece of craft work in fabric and stitching, stiff and heavy and well-rendered, without a thread out of place. The insignia showed a faceless white head on a black background; the head was crowned in white and haloed in red, as if both royal and divine together in one being.

The face seemed oddly familiar despite the total lack of features, the absence of hair or ears or any form of identification. The crowned head could have been anybody, or nobody at all, a mere allegory for an ideal leader. Yet I found that silhouette so very familiar, as if I had seen it a million times before.

I reached out and stroked the woman's face with a fingertip.

Woman? How did I know that?

“Ummmm,” said one of the Lilies. “Heather, Ma’am, who was that just now?”

“Hm?” I looked up to find Zalu and Xiyu both staring at Praem, who was now tucked neatly back into the front of my yellow blanket. “Oh! I’m sorry, did she surprise you? This is Praem. She’s my ... surrogate ... daughter, I guess? Yes, let’s go with that.”

“Heather, that’s a plushie,” said Xiyu.

Praem told Xiyu that was true. Xiyu choked on her next words. Zalu sighed, and said, “Yeah, restrictions lifted, just like I said. Heather, do you make anything of that patch? Recognise the insignia?”

I shook my head, then returned my gaze to the crowned and haloed face, sinking back into the observation throne as I felt my eyes sinking into the symbol.

“Why is the face blank?” I murmured. “It’s like a ... like a mirror, or a ... ”

One of the Lilies said, “Miss Eileen, I need you to answer a question. Are you certain there’s no other part of you, perhaps trying to take charge?”

“I am only two,” said Eileen. “And really we are both one, so no, there is no other one of us two, only we two, I and I. And I have already surrendered my command, so there is nothing more to retreat from.”

A sigh. “Are you still trying to pun?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not doing a very good job of it.”

“I’m experimenting. And I am very stressed right now. I apologise for the shortcoming. I will improve.”

The more I stared at that faceless head with crown and halo, the less I was plagued by pain in both leg and gut. My own head began to clear. My mind woke up, thinking faster and faster. Within seconds I felt no longer like a pain-wracked blob of flesh writhing in a chair or sprawled on the floor. Whoever had sent these Empty Guards to kill Eileen, I would find her and hunt her down. I was smart and swift and capable, leg wound or no. Lozzie and the others were fighting for a revolution, and I would join them shortly — but

my first foe was here, behind the stage.

The faceless head seemed almost allegorical, as if it wasn't a face at all, but an echo of something else, which only appeared as a face inside this dream. It was like a magic eye picture that I couldn't quite solve, depicting something I knew with more intimacy than anything else in the world.

"It's really weird, talking to you," one of the twins was saying.

"Yes," said Eileen. "It is strange for me too, for you have all been strangers for far too long."

"We don't like you," said one Lily. "Me and my sister here, we're not gonna kiss and make up with you, not like Heather has. All you did was kidnap us and fuck us up."

The other sister hummed: "Mmm. Not entirely true, sister. Technically she also extended our lifespans, and taught us how to reach beyond the limits of our own species. Right?"

A big sigh. "Right. Whatever. Discuss this later."

The colours of the insignia were a bit silly — a bit 'edgy', as Raine might have put it. Black and white and red was so very supervillain, but a little part of me thought it was kind of 'cool', if a bit over the top. Not the kind of thing I would admit in front of others; good girls didn't dress up in black and red and cackle about their evil plans, but Raine would probably think I looked wonderful in spandex and a mask. I hadn't liked the patch worn by the actual Knights, which had depicted tentacles impaled on a spike. But this emblem was acceptable to some part of me. This symbol felt right, perhaps only in private.

I lowered the patch over my own heart, as an experiment. The pain was almost gone. My head was so clear. Perhaps if I held the patch there, I would remain coherent enough to turn and look at the screens and monitors. Perhaps if I affixed the patch to my chest, I would be able to 'take command' of Zalu and Xiyu in their military guises. Perhaps if—

Praem gently moved my hand — and the patch — away from my heart.

I blinked several times, eyes filling with tears; the pain came throbbing back.

“Oh. That was ... odd,” I muttered. “Hm.”

“Heather?” said one of the Lilies.

Praem reminded me of my resolve. We still needed a solution.

I glanced up, not at the Lilies and Eileen, but at the machine-bodies on the floor and the patches on their uniforms. If the owner of the blank face was the one they served, then perhaps I could make contact. Perhaps I could find an answer.

Each of the corpses had a radio strapped to the shoulder — a little device held on by an elastic strap. The squad of Empty Guards would be missed soon, if they didn’t check in with their commander, their boss, whoever had been on the other end of that radio call, the one they’d called “Ma’am”, the one who had given the order to execute Eileen.

Praem fetched one of the radios for me. Zalu and Xiyu both flinched, but I really couldn’t understand why. A moment later I held the radio in my right palm, with the patch in my left.

“Thank you, Praem,” I muttered, and tucked her back into my yellow blanket, so she could peek out and provide advice.

“Uhhh, Heather,” said Xiyu, stepping closer. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

I nodded, taking slow and steady breaths. The pain had rushed back, but I was still in control.

“They’ll be missed soon enough,” I said. “Like I explained earlier. Replacements might come. There’s no danger in me making contact first.” I raised my eyes to look clearly at the Lilies, each in turn. “That’s why we’re going to have to move. Those guards will be missed.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Zalu. “The radios. Why didn’t we think of that?”

“Why not, indeed, sister?” said Xiyu.

I almost laughed; that made my guts ache. “Because you’re not really soldiers, or whatever you’re meant to be. You’re very good shots, well done with that, but you’ve got no ... tactical ... good thinking ... ” I sighed. “I’m still finding it hard to think. Like there’s ... less of me.”

“Tactical acumen,” said Zalu. “You’re right. We don’t. We’re just

acting, faking it, for the dream.”

“Right,” I said. “Thank you. So, my point is, we will have to move, whatever we decide. You’re going to have to escort us regardless.” I raised the black shell of the radio in my hand. “And I have to know who’s trying to regain control of the dream. Whoever it is, I need to stop her.” I tapped the blank face on the unit patch, feeling a strange anger stirring in my chest. “Who even is this? She feels like ... like I ... should know ... ”

“Mm,” Xiyu grunted. Zalu added, “Fair enough, Ma’am. Go ahead, Heather. And you,” she added to Eileen. “Get ready to pick her up. We’re gonna move location at the very least, try to link up with some of the others if we can. Heather’s orders.”

Eileen nodded. The Twins prepared themselves, making their guns go click-click, checking their armour and holsters and straps.

I raised the radio and took a deep breath.

The device did not have many buttons — simply an on-off switch for broadcasting and receiving, and a little dial for selecting between several different channels, each one indicated by a number. The dial was currently set to 686572; it did not appear to have been knocked out of position during the brief fire fight. I puzzled over that number for a moment, then dismissed it. I would know soon enough.

Zalu and Xiyu and Eileen all watched with bated breath as I raised the handset to my mouth. Praem peered upward from the front of my yellow blanket, advising me to keep it short and simple; all I needed was to hear the voice on the other end and confirm who it was — another Eileen, or one of Horror’s counterparts, or a friend of mine doing something wildly inadvisable, or perhaps some other unknown, something I had not accounted for.

I depressed the activation button with my thumb. The speaker hissed, wide open with silence.

Zalu nodded. Xiyu braced. Eileen stared.

I said into the speaker: “We’ve killed your guards. We won’t be here when you send replacements to find us. Don’t try again.”

Silence stretched out a cold, clammy hand, and cupped my face. Gentle static hissed on and on and on. I winced; had I wasted my

chance? Any smooth operator would simply end the call, without giving anything away. If the force trying to re-establish control was at all sensible, then it would say nothing, give away nothing, and leave me with—

A sigh — soft and high, distinctly feminine, in a voice I had known all my life.

My blood turned to ice. My thoughts stopped.

She spoke.

“I suppose I should have expected that, especially from you,” said the voice. Fussy, overly precise, patronisingly intellectual; the most irritating voice in the whole wide world. She continued: “Or rather, I should have expected that from ... from ‘us’, I suppose? Oh dear. I’m sorry, the definitions are getting pretty confusing, and I am very tired indeed.”

The owner of the blank face, crowned and haloed, spoke with my own voice.

“ ... I ... S-Sevens?” I croaked. “Is that you, imitating me?”

Another sigh, this time vaguely embarrassed and more than a little uncomfortable. “You know it’s not. Don’t make us go through this.”

“ ... Maisie?”

A tut. “Of course not! She’s still trapped in the Box. Do you think we’d be doing any of this if she was free?”

I turned the observation throne on the ball-and-socket joint, whirling to face the wall of monitors. Praem was too shocked to raise protest. My frantic eyes found Maisie, to confirm this was not her on the other end of the radio. There she was — a scrap of flesh still trapped in the centre of an ocean of water, beneath miles of glass, bound by a spider web of steel cables. And there too were the outlines of my six tentacles — my six other selves, six little incarnations of Homo abyssus, flitting free among the shattered glass tanks and the waterlogged metal walkways and the mechanical corpses of so many Empty Guards.

Maisie and my other six selves were all accounted for. Who, then, was I speaking with?

“You just checked, didn’t you?” said the voice on the radio.

“I ... I did.”

She — I, me — sighed a third time. “Look, well done for dealing with the robots. We always have been endlessly resourceful, even if we’re really terrible at admitting it. I assume you already linked back up with Raine then, or maybe Twil? I know the rest of us aren’t there with you, they’re still in the Box too, so you didn’t do the violence yourself.” A pained grunt, a little ‘ugh’ sound, punctuated her sentence. “Look, if it’s any consolation, those guards weren’t thinking beings, they’re not like the Knights. We wouldn’t send actual thinking beings to their deaths, even in a dream. We’re not evil. I mean, I think we’re not evil. You probably agree.”

“Who ... who is this?” I managed to say. “Who—”

She cleared her throat, deeply awkward, deeply embarrassed. “I don’t have time to explain everything. I’m exactly who and what you think I am. And we can end all this, this whole dream, the whole play, right now. We can end it. You’ve defeated the robots I sent, so you must have some of the guns they were using. I know next to nothing about firearms, so I did what I could, but I’m pretty sure they will at least shoot bullets out if you pull the trigger. I assume Raine has picked one up? She must be laughing at the things, I’m so sorry, they must be a joke to her.”

“ ... I ... I don’t—”

“Heather,” said Heather, on the other end of the radio. “Just tell Raine to put a bullet through the Governor’s head. Just tell her, and it’ll all be over.”

“What?” I murmured.

“We have to kill the Eye,” she told me.

“Eileen,” I hissed, anger replacing bewilderment. “Her name is Eileen. And, no! No, absolutely not!”

I heard the wince. “I wish you hadn’t given her a name.” The voice — my voice — shook with real pain. “It makes everything so much more difficult.”

“She named herself!” I almost shouted. “Who is this? Who are you?! I don’t understand, you can’t be me, I’m here, I’m all accounted for, I—”

“I know she named herself!” my own voice shouted back at me, in a

perfect mirror of my anger. “I know! Okay!? I know everything you know, or everything you knew, until the moment you decided to forgive her.”

“But I didn’t—”

“You did!” snapped Heather. “You did. You did. We did. I’m not absolved of this, I just ... came to the other conclusion. And that’s why I have to do this. That’s why we have to kill her. Please, just ... just put Raine on, if you can’t give the order. Close your eyes, look away, cover your ears. You don’t have to see it happen. You can ... you can let me take responsibility for it. Heather, this can all be over. This is how it has to be. We have to do this.”

“No! No we don’t! We—”

“We have to do this!”

“Why?” I asked.

And my own voice answered: “Because that’s the price of freeing Maisie.”

bedlam boundary – 24.30

“Heather? Heather, are you still listening to me? Or listening to ‘us’, I suppose. Or, wait, no, listening to yourself, to your own better judgement, that’s what I— *hic!* Ow. Ahhh, ow. Ahhh. Oh, I hate this. I hate this so much, it’s all so confusing and absurd. Don’t make the mistake of thinking this is easy for me. I might be your better judgement, but I’m not some emotionless shell or a disembodied voice. I’m just as complete as you are, with a body and everything. And I’m ... I’m in pain, too. And scared, and so, so, so very tired. I’m exhausted, Heather. Please, please, just listen to me, tell me you’re listening. You don’t even have to think about this. You don’t have to make the decision or accept the responsibility. All you have to do is let me bear the burden. Heather? Heather, do you understand what I’m saying? I know you’re still there. Heather? Please! We have to kill the Eye.”

That hateful little voice — my voice, with my pitch and tone, my vocabulary and phraseology, my habits of wording and tics of vernacular — whispered upward from the plastic grille in the hand-held radio, like a palmtop demon plucked from the bowels of my own personal hell.

My fist began to shake. The shiny black plastic of the radio creaked between my tightening fingers. The flicker and lurch of live footage whirled and leapt in the reflections on the plastic. A hundred views of Cygnet Asylum played out on the wall of monitors, compacted down to this tiny mocking echo.

“Heather?”

I had always struggled to hear the quality in my own voice, no matter how many times Raine called me ‘adorable’. On recordings I sounded scratchy, awkward, and herky-jerky hesitant. Reflected in the mirror of Sevens’ masks, I had found my own voice transformed by confidence, courage, and certainty — intensely irritating, fussily over-precise, and dripping with assured intellectual superiority. Listening to me was, to put it lightly, very annoying.

But despite all that I had never truly hated my own voice. Until now.

“Heather? Heather, please, say something. Don’t leave me talking to myself — haha! To myself, oh that’s absurd, I hate it. Talking to ‘dead air’, I should say. I can hear that the line is open, there’s static from the speaker. Don’t pretend you’ve taken your thumb off the button. You wouldn’t— I wouldn’t— we wouldn’t treat ourselves like that.”

The moment she spoke those words, my muscles twitched in denial; I started to lift my thumb from the broadcast button. This voice could not possibly belong to me. This was a lie, some kind of trick by whatever forces still held sway in Cygnet Hospital, working from the same tortured logic which had produced Horror and Evelyn’s Mother and had trapped Raine in a prison cell. This voice was nothing but the dream clawing at my heels. This was not me, this was a lie, and I would listen to no more of—

Praem reached out, held down my thumb, and prevented me from ending the call.

“Ahhh!” I gasped, filling my stilled lungs, like a drowning woman pawing at the surface of dark waters. I finally ripped my eyes away from the wall of monitors; I had not even realised I was being sucked down into that whirlpool of observation. Praem commanded my attention, reaching out from where she was tucked safely into the front of my yellow blanket.

Praem told me not to run away.

Run away from what?! That voice on the radio could not possibly be me. I would not, could not, would never—

You already did, Praem told me.

The voice on the radio was still speaking, hissing lies amid gentle static: “Heather? All right, all right, okay, I know this must be a terrible shock, this must be so confusing, and frightening, and you must want to think this over. But we do not have time for that, there’s no time for an ethical or philosophical discussion. There’s nobody in control of the dream now, nobody to give it direction, except me. And I’ve already thought about those questions, I’ve taken responsibility for it, and I can ‘show my working’ later, if you really need that. I’m pretty sure that’ll happen regardless, when we finish this, when we ... agree. But we have to finish it first! We have to kill the Eye, we have to—”

“Shut up,” I snapped into the radio. “Stop talking.”

She — I — stopped.

I pulled another ragged breath down my throat, feeling like I was adrift, alone, in an endless sea beneath a terrible storm. My body was still wracked with pain — the spreading bruise deep in my guts throbbed hard with every frantic beat of my heart, while spots of blood began to blossom across the shin of my left pajama leg, the fruit of burst stitches. But those concerns felt so very far away. My body was a vessel and I was being drawn from it by hooks and snares.

Praem gripped my hand even tighter.

You’re here, she told me, and you have to argue with her. You have to win, not just deny.

I nodded, but it didn’t help.

Eileen was still by my side. She met my eyes when I looked up. She showed so much in her seemingly expressionless face — shock and surprise around those too-wide eyes, confusion and fear in the set of her mouth, wordless incomprehension in the way she tilted her head. A pinkly glowing gaze like sea-foam froth beneath the setting sun asked me an innocent question.

“No,” I mouthed. “No!”

Eileen nodded, but I felt so guilty. Was that voice really me?

The Twins, Zalu and Xiyu, peered at me with polite surprise. They waited with their hands resting on their guns. They had heard every word from the hand-held radio, but they offered no advice. How could they? This was my fight, within myself, with I and me and mine as the prize.

I turned back to the black plastic of the radio in my hand. The flicker-stutter from hundreds of screens lurked in my upper peripheral vision, a silent temptation calling to my sight. Cygnet Asylum’s revolution and fall played out in deep-sea blues and electric greens and whitewashed skies and dying sunrise.

But I kept my eyes fixed on Her — on the unit patch I held in my left hand, on Her insignia, on the ridiculous emblem of a faceless queen, crowned and haloed.

“Explain yourself,” I demanded. My voice shook, and I couldn’t help it. “How would killing Eileen free Maisie?”

A sharp-tongued tut made me flinch. “Not ‘Eileen’!” she snapped. “The Eye. The Eye! Call it what it is. Stop, please stop using her name— its name, I mean! Stop making this harder than it has to be. Look, Heather, just put Raine on, make this easier on all of us. Hand the radio to her, so I can talk to her directly. She can hear me right now, can’t she? Raine! Raine! Take the radio from her, Raine! Or just speak out loud! Raine, please! It’s me, it’s still me, I’m not a fake, it’s me!”

Aching need filled that voice. My voice, lost in a void, crying out for her beloved. Tears gathered in my own eyes. How could I doubt that pain?

Silence settled, filled with radio static.

Eventually the voice — the Other Heather — said, “Oh. Raine’s not there, is she?”

“I ... I’m not ... I’m not telling you anything,” I said, wiping the tears from my own eyes, reminding myself that this was some kind of trick. “Not until you explain to my satisfaction how killing Eileen would solve anything, let alone how that would free Maisie. I already know how to free Maisie. All we need to do is open the Box and break her prison. How would killing Eileen help with that?”

The Other Me let out a sad little sound, a pitiful attempt at a laugh. “Heather, what do you think the Box is?”

“I don’t know, but Eileen has offered to open it, willingly and gladly! What’s the point in killing—”

Murderous Little Me hissed with frustration, tears turning to bitter rage. “How can you even entertain that question? I should be the one asking you, Heather! How can you forgive her so easily?!”

“Because we don’t need to hate her anymore!” I said. “We don’t need to be afraid of her. She’s on my side now. There’s no point in this.”

The Other Heather snorted a derisive little laugh; I recognised so much in that laugh, because it wasn’t me at all. That was an Evee laugh, a habit I had picked up from her, a technique I had lifted from the mannerisms of one I adored and admired, pressing those

habits into service to bolster my own lonely heart and besieged courage.

Whatever this thing was, it felt my fear, and it used my emotional crutches.

“Are you ... okay?” I said into the radio.

“Not really,” she replied.

I took a deep breath, trying to suppress my self-pity. She sounded exactly like me at my most pathetic and defeated, so tired and worn down, like she’d given up on something essential to herself. The Voice on the Radio was me at my absolute worst, at the end of my rope, down at the bottom of a well.

“Listen,” I said, gently. “I’m not going to kill Eileen, or let you kill Eileen. Maybe we can—”

“The Eye!” she spat. “Stop treating her like a person, Heather, please. This is making everything so much more difficult. Do you think it’s easy for me to dehumanise her? Well, it’s not! I’m not you stripped of empathy or emotion, I still feel all of it, and I— I don’t want to do this, but this has to be done. We cannot afford to treat her like a person, like a—”

“She is a person!” I snapped back, surprising myself. “She’s our mother!”

“She’s not our real mother! Heather, that’s an absurd thought, and you know it. We both know it! That’s actually one point I’m pretty sure we agree on! We weren’t adopted, or made with secret Outsider material, or anything like that! We were kidnapped — brutally. Us and Maisie. That thing you’re standing next to, she’s not our mother, she—”

“Well what if I want her to be!?” I shouted.

A choke, a halt of breath, words lost deep in a closing throat. “T-that ... she’s not ... ”

“I’m sorry,” I said, not sorry at all. “But you’ve staked out an indefensible position there. Does Praem not count as Evee’s daughter, just because they don’t share blood? How about Praem and us? Is Praem not family to me, because she’s not got my genes? How about Tenny and Lozzie? Or Tenny and us? Is Tenny part of our family, a daughter to us, or is she not allowed to be? Or Lozzie

herself, can she not be a sister to me? Are we not allowed to choose that? Do you reject all of those, too?"

Lonely Heather did not reply for a long moment.

"I'm going to have to demand an answer," I said.

"... no, of course I don't reject those." She swallowed, hard and rough, then took a deep breath. When she spoke again, she had regained some of her confidence — a little bit of Raine crept into her voice, a rod of borrowed steel. "But this is different. You know this is different. We agree on that, too."

"Who or what," I said, "am I talking to, exactly?"

She sighed with an ill-tempered impatience I knew all too well, turning my stomach at my own worst qualities. "I just told you that we don't have time for a philosophical debate over this, let alone a discussion of first principles. It must be obvious—"

"Okay then," I said. "I'm going to assume you are my evil robot clone, and work from there."

A tut and a sigh. "Oh yes, very obvious. Except for the small wrinkle that I'm neither evil, a robot, nor a clone."

"Wow," I said.

"... w-what?" she stammered.

"We really do sound like Evelyn sometimes, don't we?"

"I-I don't see how that's relevant right now," she said. "I keep trying to tell you, we don't have the time for this messing about and—"

"You have two choices," I said slowly. "Either we talk, and you can attempt to convince me of your plans, or I can terminate this call right now and hunt you down. Your choice. After all, I did kill all your soldiers without Raine's help. Do you want to guess how I did that?"

A pause, followed by a horribly awkward and sad little laugh. "Oh. Oh wow. I see what you meant."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"This is what it feels like," she answered, voice forlorn and abandoned, "being on the receiving end of ourself. We always were

so harsh with ourselves, I suppose.”

“How can you expect me not to be harsh when you’re telling me to stop thinking and start murdering?!” I snapped back.

“Because I’m right!” she shouted.

Her yell made the microphone peak.

We both paused in unison, both panting for breath, both scrambling for composure.

If this voice really was me, doubled or split or projected by the dream, then she must be thinking similar thoughts; even now she would be racing to think of how to gain the advantage. I had to keep her — me — off-balance, keep her talking, don’t give her room to think too much.

“If you’re me,” I said, “then you must know I’m not going to accept that on faith alone. Start talking. Who are you?”

Another sigh, resigned this time. “I already told you,” she said. “You created me, at the moment you decided to forgive Eileen—” She tutted. “I mean, the Eye.”

“But I didn’t,” I said. “I haven’t forgiven her. I decided to postpone the decision. We’re in the middle of a metaphysical and literal crisis, I can hardly stop to chew over that in the middle of all this.”

“So you agree,” she said. “We can’t stop to think. We need to act.”

“Ugh,” I grunted. “Don’t try to lead me in rhetorical circles, I know myself too well for that. I didn’t forgive Eileen.”

“You did,” said The Other Me. “You forgave her in your heart, and in this place that’s what really matters. I exist because you disagreed with yourself. You can’t just leave such intense internal contradictions unexamined in a dream like this, not when you’re the centre of it, or they’ll become literal. I’m the product of that genesis.”

My head whirled. I cast my mind back. Had I decided to forgive Eileen?

I had accepted her piggy-back up the stairs from the archives; I had lain my cheek on her shoulder and trusted my body to her care; I had slept in her arms like a child; I had accepted her story, the tale of her past, and that she could be more than pure observation; I had

accepted that she had not meant to do any of this, and that she would help me now. But none of that meant forgiveness.

"This doesn't make sense," I said. "I didn't forgive her."

"I know you did," said Heather. "Because I'm you."

"Yes, well," I huffed. "And *the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.*"

The Other Me snorted. "And *sometimes we are devils to ourselves when we will tempt the frailty of our powers.* See, I can quote relevant Shakespeare passages at you, too. Is that the role you're casting me in, now? The devil?"

"Why not?" I said. "You seem determined to act the part. You are rather 'tormenting me with your bitter tongue', as it were."

"And that's a misquotation," she said. "I'm not an evil version of you, Heather. I'm a disagreement."

I sighed and felt an unaccountable urge to rub my face; she — I! — was incredibly irritating when I wanted to be. "Okay, so ... when I accepted Eileen in my heart, you popped into existence somewhere out there? And you were already in command of all these—" I glanced over my shoulder, at the corpses of the Empty Guards, the strange automatons which littered the floor of the Governor's Office, still leaking pools of oil, felled so swiftly by Zalu and Xiyu. "These robot guards?"

"Not exactly. I had to make those."

"And you worked that quickly?" I almost laughed. If Trigger-Happy Heather could manufacture robot soldiers in what little time she'd had since I'd accepted Eileen, I may as well surrender right away.

She sighed. I could practically feel her sagging with exhaustion. "I wish it had been that simple, Heather. You have no idea what I've been through."

"I'm sorry?"

"While you've been running around Cygnet Hospital, having all those lovely little adventures with Raine and Evee and— and— and all the rest—"

Her words drowned in silent sobs. She was no better at suppressing her pain than I was.

“ ... Heather?” I said.

A big sniff blasted up from the radio, followed by a frantic rustle of fabric — the sound of a sleeve raked across tear-streaked eyes. When she spoke again, her composure was a brittle iron surface, borrowed from Raine but lacking all warmth.

“While you were running around the hospital with everybody else, I stayed focused on the reason we came here. You got distracted. I went straight for Maisie.”

“ ... excuse me?” I said. “You mean to say you’ve been here the whole time, since the dream started?”

Another sigh, even more exhausted than the first. “Objectively, no. But subjectively, yes.”

“ ... but—”

“Look, Heather, I can’t wrap my head around it any better than you can. I’m no smarter or more well-educated than you are. We’re in a dream, remember? I’m sure Lozzie could explain it, but I can’t. All I know is that I exist. I didn’t exist until you forgave Eilee— the Eye!” She huffed. “The Eye. But I existed retroactively, because you were always going to forgive the Eye.”

I glanced down at Praem, tucked snug in the front of my yellow blanket, but she could offer no answers to this paradox. Tidying this dream was beyond even her maidly powers. Eileen met my eyes when I looked up, but she just shrugged; the Eye was not primarily a dreamer by nature. Zalu and Xiyu both nodded with sagely wisdom, as if this was all very simple and straightforward.

I turned back to the radio. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Retroactive Heather actually laughed, though without much mirth. “Don’t complain to me, I don’t determine the nature of dreams. I’m sure we can ask Lozzie about it later, when this is all over.”

“No, I mean, it doesn’t make any sense that a piece of me would decide to act like this.”

“Really?” she asked. She sounded so tired.

I decided to lie: “I mean, I still don’t entirely believe that you’re a piece of me. Like you said, this is a dream, so you could be anything. For a start, what’s with the robot guards? I don’t know

the first thing about robots.”

A little sigh from the radio. “Neither do I, obviously. I needed some ... ‘minions’, ones that don’t matter if they die. Those robots don’t have brains or feelings or anything. But they work, don’t they? I based them on the Knights. It was all I had to hand.”

I tutted and rolled my eyes; that did sound like something I might do. I’d always hated the idea of putting the real Knights in harm’s way, of spending their lives like chess pieces, even when they put themselves at my disposal.

“Fair enough,” I admitted. “But what’s with this absurd insignia?” I raised the unit patch in my left hand, as if she could see it, and ran my eyes up and down the faceless head, crowned in white and haloed in red, alone on a field of black. “Did you invent this?”

“Doesn’t it make sense to you?” she asked — with actual worry in her voice.

“Explain it to me.”

She tutted. “You’re being needlessly cruel.”

“Says the part of me which is trying to convince me to commit murder. Is that the person who you want Maisie to see, when she’s freed? Heather the murderer?”

Murderous Me simmered in silence for a moment, then said, voice dripping with scorn and bitterness: “We’ve murdered before, Heather. You’re a murderer.”

“Yes, in situations where it was necessary to defend ourselves or our friends. What are we defending ourselves from here?”

“The Eye,” she growled through clenched teeth.

“Well,” I said, trying to make myself sound easy and unconcerned. “Eileen is standing right next to me, right now, and I don’t feel any particular need to defend myself from her.” I glanced up at Eileen, deep into those eyes like dusk tangled in a blanket of clouds.

“Eileen, are you dangerous?”

“I am precarious,” she said.

I almost laughed. “That has about three different meanings in this situation.”

“Three! Delightful.”

Heather the Harsh squawked from the radio. “Stop that! I don’t want to hear her voice!”

“Yes, it’s a lot more difficult to contemplate murdering a person when you’re forced to treat them properly, isn’t it?” I said, making no effort to hide the scorn. “She carried me. Carried us! She’s not dangerous to me, to you, to any of our friends, or to Maisie, not anymore, before you say—”

“Have you even glanced out of the window?!” snapped Vigilant Heather. “The Eye, it’s open! How can you look up at that thing and not be afraid?”

“Because she’s not doing any damage. Nothing is on fire, or melting away, or being reduced to atoms.”

“Tch!” the Other Me tutted, as if I’d scored a point against her.

“Now come on,” I said, warming to this casual taunting. “Answer the original question. Explain this insignia to me. Why the crown and the halo?”

Mortified Me almost growled. “Does it seriously not make sense to you?”

“I want to hear you spell it out,” I said. “You made it, you deserve to own it. Go on. Say it.”

I had no idea where this vindictive, sarcastic, dominant confidence was coming from. I never treated anybody like this — I would never have dared, even as a game, even with explicit permission and request I would have struggled to provoke and goad like this, knowing that my target was squirming with discomfort and embarrassment. But when the opponent was all my own worst qualities? I got nasty.

Crowned and Haloed Heather cleared her throat, in an effort to regain her dignity. “It’s us, of course. The crown is inherited from Sevens. The halo is because we’re an angel. The symbolism is obvious.”

“And the faceless head?”

“The crown and the halo are the only personal identifiers we need.”

I snorted.

“Don’t— don’t laugh, you— it— it’s cool!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “it’s what? Could you repeat that?”

“It’s cool,” she said, pronouncing the word with great care; I made a resolution to extricate the word ‘cool’ from all my future vocabulary. “Don’t deny it!” she went on. “You agree, Heather. We have the same aesthetic tastes, we’re not mirror-world opposites or something. The faceless visage is very mysterious and imposing. The crown and the halo, that’s power.”

I sighed, pretending to be unimpressed; in truth I saw what she was getting at, what she had tried to express in this silly little symbol. That I agreed was worrying and more than a little upsetting. It proved that those thoughts had been mine all along, that the capacity for this cruelty and display of power was not a trick, it was me.

“Yes, yes,” I said. “It’s all very edgy, well done.”

Edgy Heather let out a little huff. “We’re good at ‘edgy’! We should let ourselves be ‘edgy’ more often. It works.”

My turn to huff. “Is that what this is to you? Trying to kill Eileen is ‘edgy’? It’s no surprise you’ve already failed, if that’s how you’re approaching this.”

“I’ve failed, really?”

Smug confidence suddenly returned to her voice, low and nasty and just as vindictive as me; I glanced up at Eileen in concern, then around, behind myself, to where the Twins stood ready with their hands on their guns. They looked to the window of the office, and glanced at the makeshift barricade against the broken door, ready for sudden surprises. But nothing happened.

“Heather,” the other me was already saying, “who do you think started the jailbreak in the aquariums?”

At mention of my other six selves, still trapped in the Box, my eyes nearly jumped upward to the wall of flickering monitors — but Praem held me back. I kept my lips carefully shut for a moment, cautious not to let my relief show in my words; the Other Me was not talking about an additional plot to kill Eileen, but about her previous victories.

If she was so set on killing Eileen, why no plan B?

"I'm sorry, pardon?" I said eventually.

"Hm!" a smug little noise came from the radio; I almost cringed, unaware I was capable of sounding so full of myself. "That's right, that was me. I freed the other six of us. I did it by remote, with this big console full of buttons and ... hm, I suppose you don't need to know that part."

My stomach dropped; this could be a disaster. If she recombined with the other six of us first, what would happen to me?

"Are they with you now?" I said.

A big sigh. "No. I can't reach them myself. But that's not the point, Heather. While you've been running around and having your wonderful little adventures, I've been fighting, all this time. For Maisie." Her voice grew thick again, throat closing up, tears threatening her eyes; if she'd been in front of me I would have reached out and tried to hug her, no matter what sins she'd convinced herself she must commit. "I've been fighting all by myself. All this time. While you've been achieving self-actualisation for the Outsider nightmare which imprisoned Maisie in the first place, I've been breaking us free!"

"I've been breaking us free, too!" I said. "I've been liberating the others! Raine, and Eeve, and Lozzie, and everyone!"

"Who do you think matters more," she said, dead-voiced and dead tired. "Us, or them?"

"It's not a binary choice! What are you even saying? We'd be dead without Raine and Eeve, without all of the others, a dozen times over! You know that!"

"Maybe so," she said, grudgingly.

"And Lozzie's started a revolution out there! We're snatching control of the asylum, right now."

"From whom?" she murmured, as if it didn't matter one bit.

"... sorry?"

"Who do you think you're taking control from?" she asked, voice faded and slumped. I could almost see her sagging with exhaustion, my exhaustion. I heard the creak of a chair, like an office chair, followed by a grunt of pain, as if she had strained her back or could

barely stand up. “And how does that help Maisie?”

“Once we have control, we can open the Box.”

“Can you? Can you really? Without me?”

“... is that a threat?” I asked. “Is that where you are? Are you inside the Box? You must be, if you started the aquarium breakout. If you’re inside, you can let us in! We can free Maisie together, can’t we?”

Bad Mean Evil Me sighed again. “We all wish it was that simple. Besides, Lozzie’s revolution doesn’t matter now.”

A chill went through me at the certainty in her words. “What? Why not?”

“I’m sorry, Heather, I didn’t want it to be this way either. If there was some easier method, I would ... I would take it too, and there would be no disagreement between us. But there isn’t an easier route, so it’s going to be hard, and you won’t accept that, so that’s why I have to exist. That’s why I have to do this, for Maisie.” She took a great, shuddering sigh. “There is no other way. Lozzie’s revolution is going to fail.”

“You can’t say that until it’s over, until it’s—”

“She and the others are all losing. Go on, take a look for yourself, if you don’t believe me. Take a look, Heather.”

My eyes involuntarily flickered upward, risking the monitors once again in mad panic. But I caught myself at the brink, pulled myself back, and screwed my eyes shut.

Had my Other, Evil, Murderous Self just attempted a little trick?

The wall of monitors — the Eye’s obsessive observational power represented in plastic and steel and glass — was a constant temptation flickering and buzzing in my peripheral vision. Previously I had been able to endure it and pull my eyes away again without external intervention. But now, dissociated from my own body like I was floating beyond the leg wound and the gut bruise, I had become susceptible to that seductive whisper, that promise of all-knowing, all-seeing, do-nothing power.

But what if Other Heather wasn’t lying? What if the others really were in trouble? I had to look, I had to know, I had to help, I had to

A gentle hand touched my shoulder.

My eyes flew open. I looked up and around to find Eileen staring back down at me, bug-eyed with determination and promise.

“Neither of us is alone,” she said.

I blinked several times, then nodded, slowly at first, then with growing confidence. She was right. Eileen patted my shoulder. She would be my anchor, lest I dive too deep, for she knew exactly what it felt like.

Praem offered additional help. She reached out from within my yellow blanket, raising a check-list. That way I would not get distracted. She told me to be a good girl, stick to my list, do my errands, then come straight home.

“Thank you,” I said out loud. “Both of you, thank you, I—”

Evil Heather’s voice squawked from the radio: “Pardon? What are you trying to say? I can’t—”

“Not you,” I told her. “Shut up.”

And so, with anchors and guidance aplenty, I raised my eyes once more to the wall of monitors and screens and camera feeds, and opened wide.

Hundreds of views yawned like the opening mouth of a great chasm of sight, from wall to wall, from desktop to ceiling, looming over me as if pressing itself against my very eyeballs, drowning my optic nerve with information; each little truth stood shoulder-to-shoulder with eight more, each one cupped in curved glass or smeared behind clear plastic or flickering or jerking across static-washed liquid crystal. I sank back into the throne of metal and plastic; my vision broadened, my mind expanded, my self-hood shrunk down to a quivering nub of desensitized flesh. For one dizzying moment I saw it all, every corner of Cygnet Asylum from the meanest hospital corridor to the echoing vaults of hidden operating rooms, from filthy prison cells with their patina of dirt to vast torture chambers of medical barbarism, from the separate blades of grass on the lawn to the sway and rustle of tree leaves beneath the dying dawn. I counted and catalogued and collated, and I understood nothing.

Eileen squeezed my shoulder. Praem tapped the list.

I narrowed my focus.

Lozzie's revolution was spilling through the hospital corridors, like a tide already racing beyond the high-water mark, the waves not quite yet over-topping a seawall. Dozens of girls had banded together in well-organised groups, little phalanxes of protection moving through the hospital, making for their pre-arranged targets with makeshift weapons and shoulder-to-shoulder solidarity: here was a shield-wall of broken tables, bristling with lances made from snapped table legs, a hedgehog which threw back a thick rush of horrible nurse-things again and again, while the more vulnerable patients sheltered in a knot of rooms to the rear; there — a bottleneck ambush point where girls lay in wait with heavy spanners stolen from some boiler room, smashing the brains from any mutant nurse-monster which dared shamle through; elsewhere again, inside a head office — some space I'd never seen — with the doors blocked and barricaded, as a team of patients ransacked the records and paperwork, shoving handfuls into shredders and tearing it to confetti, while helpless nurses with hands like melting ash and faces full of holes wailed and beat on the walls; over there, a mob of girls raced down a corridor, fleeing the pursuit of dozens of shambling nurse-creatures; back over here a wave of violence overwhelmed some hidden room, girls setting about themselves with half-bricks and frying pans, scattering the monsters and freeing one of their own number who had been tied to a table, her flesh pierced by syringes, her eyes rolled back into her head with drugged sleep.

The patients — the very same girls who I had spent the last two dream-days alongside, all dressed in Cygnet-issue patient pajamas or what old and worn personal clothes they had been allowed — were scoring so many little victories, more than I could count without deviating too far from my list.

Among them, dotted here and there like black-wreathed rocks deep in the tide, were Lozzie's beloved Knights. Their true chivalry had not remained suppressed for long — each one appeared to have torn off the emblem of the impaled tentacles, fighting now without flag or banner. And fight they did, though their shiny black submachine guns did not appear to work; they had been reduced to using the firearms like clubs. Still, their strength told well. Wherever one stood, the patients tended to hold firm; whenever two or three came together, they were putting the nurses to greater

rout.

My Lonely Counterpart's 'robot guards' were in evidence too — but they were not helping. Several dozen of the Empty Guards were clustered around the internal entrances to the Box, those absurd high-security vault doors deep inside the hospital.

Their guns worked all too well. Around each vault door lay a ring of dead nurse-monsters, the Empty Guards untouched. But they weren't firing on the patients, on the girls, only upon the nurses. But they weren't sallying forth to help, either.

"Why aren't you helping?" I hissed under my breath. "Why not help them?"

The Other Me answered: "I can't risk that."

Despite their many little victories, the patients and the Knights needed help. For they were vastly outnumbered.

Nurses swarmed and flowed over almost every part of the hospital now — shambling out of dark corners, bursting from locked rooms, crawling from beneath beds. They had not readopted their daytime guise of human faces, even though the orange sunrise was fading into a clear, bright, crisp-cold day; each nurse was still a unique monster of sagging grey rot and protruding bone spikes, of dripping acid tentacles and grasping strangler's hands, of eyeless faces and blinded maws and jagged teeth and lolling tongues, all barely contained inside those whitely starched uniforms. They were armed with an equal cacophony of weapons — man-catcher poles, plastic wrist cuffs, dripping syringes, ropes and gags and spit hoods and the gleam of surgical tools.

The nightmare had followed the patient body out into the daylight, and the sun had not banished it to memory. They were more like zombies than nurses now, shambling on without greater direction, forced to keep imposing the empty will of the institution.

The revolution was mobile, for now — staying ahead of the nurses where they could, picking off or ambushing smaller numbers where opportunity presented itself, trying not to get bogged down defending static positions. Lozzie had organized them well.

But they were outnumbered twenty or thirty to one. The nurses kept coming, as if from nowhere. Eventually the patients would tire.

Already a dozen little failures were unfolding, cracks in the revolutionary front: a team of girls cornered in a dead end, with no way out except through the press of a hundred nurses; a minor ring-leader snatched from the front of a shield-wall, dragged off and wrapped in a straitjacket, quickly gagged and drugged; an exit blocked by weight of nurse bodies, girls with no way to go but back into the dark; a phalanx shattered, the survivors pursued by grasping hands as they fled, all going in opposite directions, alone.

"No, no," I hissed, "stick together, stick together!"

The Other Me said, "It wouldn't help them anyway."

Praem tapped the list. My sight whirled on, looking for my friends.

Lozzie — there she was, leading a gang of seven others, poncho fluttering in some dark place far beneath the floors. Her companions were well armed, with kitchen knives and a steel baseball bat and little shields made of broken cupboard doors studded with nails. They were on some secret mission in the bowels of the hospital, stopping at regular intervals at junctions of water pipes and electrical boxes. But more and more nurses were shambling from the shadows, cutting off their escape routes, driving them away from their hidden targets.

Raine and Zheng had joined the revolution too. Raine stood atop a table in some ransacked operating theatre, at the head of a wild mob of girls, duelling with some lumbering nurse-monster. Her moment of victory was caught on the screens — her machete flashing through the monster's neck, like slaying a vampire. Her bare foot kicked the creature off the table, crashing down into a shambling mass of others like itself, smashing them back with sheer body weight. Raine raised her machete; the mob cheered, then surged forward.

Zheng was nearby, still diminutive, still smaller than she should have been, trapped in an insulting parody of her own body. She was half naked, covered in blood from head to toe, eyes wild and teeth stained with gore, beating a nurse to death with its own severed arm.

Raine called out a war cry; Zheng raised her grisly club and howled a reply.

At least they were having fun — though they were surrounded in all

directions by yet more nurses. The pair of them could dish out a staggering amount of violence, especially backed up by the other patients, but even those two would tire given enough time.

Evee and Twil had avoided the worst of the fighting; for a moment my heart soared with hope, but then I realised where they were. The pair of them were barricaded together inside a room of bright lights and stainless steel tables, with trays of bone saws and rows of cadaver-cubicles — a morgue. Evee's mother's corpse lay on a main autopsy table, still intact, stripped naked, gone grey as if dead for days.

Twil was dishevelled and frantic, wolfish tail tucked between her legs, canine ears gone flat with fear. She was busy piling stuff in front of the door, dragging tables to block the way in, all while casting wild glances back over her shoulder. Evelyn sat white-faced and frozen in her wheelchair — staring at the rattling, banging, bulging little hatches over the refrigerated corpse-drawers, and the way her mother's body was beginning to twitch.

Praem hesitated, down in the front of my yellow blanket. Her own mother was still trapped in a horror story.

But then she tapped the list again. We could not pause, not yet and not here.

Next came Praem herself — or Night Praem. She was sweeping upward from the prison levels at long last, bursting through the bars of a gate and slamming through a blockage of nurses like a whirlwind of black lace and oil stains.

She was followed by a gaggle of Knights, battered and bruised, their security guard armour loose here and damaged there, but all of them intact and upright. Praem swept onward and the nurses surged back in; for a moment it seemed the Knights would be overwhelmed, but then a tide of prisoners followed Praem through the breach, wild-eyed girls and bloodstained women, not unlike Raine when I had first found her down there. Praem had used her time down in the prisons well. She had freed all those inside.

The liberated prisoners hacked into the nurses with makeshift shivs and lengths of iron pipes and bare fists. For a moment I almost cheered — surely this would overtop the sheer number of nurses out there in the hospital?

But they faced a living wall of institutional violence. This prison riot would not grow the flood beyond the defences. Not yet, not quite.

Praem tapped the list. My sight whirled outward, beyond the walls.

Seven Shades of Sunlight stood astride some distant hospital rooftop, lit from behind by the last rays of the dying dawn-light and spotlighted from above by a single beam of silver-glint Eye-light. She looked as if she was playing out a scene from some absurd fantasy novel, still dressed for war in gleaming armour and cracking golden cloak, twirling on her very impractical platform shoes. She was surrounded on all sides by a sea of monsters, nurses who had chased her to the highest point she could reach. Her flaming sword sang in spark-trailing arcs, parting bodies left and right. Her lips moved in a silent chant. Her golden armour caught the turn of the sunlight.

Very dramatic, drawing off such great numbers. But Sevens had nowhere left to run.

My sight whirled still further afield, over the lip of the roof and out over the ground of Cygnet Asylum. Green lawns were speckled with morning dew. The woodland swayed in the breeze. I searched for the final three items on Praem's list — the Fox, the Caterpillars, and the Forest Knight. Would I find them in a losing battle as well, outnumbered and overwhelmed, surrounded and trapped?

The grounds of Cygnet Asylum opened wide, jumping and flickering on a hundred monitor views.

Praem blinked. Eileen made a little 'oooh' sound. Zalu and Xiyu peered over my shoulders.

A gargantuan black moth towered over the hospital grounds, locked in a pitched battle with an entire armoured division of Empty Guards.

A hillside of rippling muscle lay beneath smooth sable flesh, furred and resplendent with whorls of white, topped by a pair of fluttering, buzzing, dream-blur wings, the colour of oil on water lit by volcanic fire. Tentacles as thick as tunnel boring machines reached out from beneath the wings, waving mouth-tip openings in the air, each large enough to swallow a bus. Fluffy white antenna twitched and shivered above a massive head — a head I would know anywhere,

shooting nets and rubber bullets, walled off by blocks of tanks and trenches full of Empty Guards and barbed wire, stood the blocky grey monolith of the Maximum Security Containment Facility, the Box.

Tenny was trying to break it open.

“Oh,” said Eileen. “A moth. She must have followed the light.”

One of the Twins said: “The battlefield is no place for a teenager.”

“An insect, though?” asked the other.

“A teenage insect.”

“True, sister.”

“Is she one of yours, Ma’am?”

“Tenny!” I cried again, the spell of the monitors completely broken. “How is she even here?! And you!” I raised the radio back to my lips. “I cannot believe this behaviour! Suggesting murder was one thing — and still completely unacceptable, I would like to make clear — but this is absolutely obscene! I have completely lost my temper with you!”

“Heather,” the voice — my voice, which I had never hated so much — crackled back from the radio speaker. “Heather, calm down, please, you don’t—”

“You’re shooting at Tenny!”

“I’m not—”

“Those are your robot soldiers out there! And you’ve given them tanks and guns and you are shooting at our Tenny!” I punctured my outrage by slapping at my thigh with her stupid insignia, turning it over so I could slap her face on my leg.

“She’s the one who introduced the kaiju genre,” the other me protested, “I’m just trying to—”

“You are shooting at Tenny! There is no excuse for this!”

“With non-lethal weapons!” she shouted back, temper lost. “That’s the terminology, as Raine would say. Non-lethal weapons. Nets, sleeping gas, foam darts! As far as she’s concerned, she’s having a lovely time! Heather, please. I’m not ‘evil’, I wouldn’t hurt Tenny

either, not in a million years.”

“You’re shooting at her! I can’t make this any more plain, you are shooting at Tenny!”

I almost laughed, eyes glued to the screens as another little plastic-toy tank trundled forward and shot a big blue foam rocket at Tenny’s flank. The rocket bounced off, almost harmlessly, but Tenny rocked as if hit by a boulder. Her big cat-face smile swung through the air until she faced the little tank. A tentacle whipped out, picked up the offender, and shook it from side to side until pieces of the machine started to fall off.

“You would do the same!” the Other Me said. “She’s going to get herself hurt, she’s not even supposed to be here. We would both stop her if she was going to hurt herself.”

“Not by shooting at her!”

The Other Me huffed, as if she couldn’t believe my lack of comprehension.

“How did she even get here?” I said, not talking to Myself.

The monitors provided an answer, observation obeying intention; a cluster of a dozen views whirled in close, jumping and lurching forward as if seen from drone-mounted cameras, zooming in on Tenny’s gargantuan white-furred back.

A tiny figure was riding atop Tenny’s dream-form self, right in the middle of her back, clutching a tuft of fur with one armoured gauntlet, cradling a familiar vulpine shape in the other arm.

For a moment I thought it was the Forest Knight; the scale of Tenny’s body confused all else. But then the view lurched closer again, framing the figure in close-up.

This was no suit of Outsider armour; this little knight wore traditional plate mail, with interlocking joints and overlapping sheaths. A coat of arms flapped on a tabard down the front, but the red dragon was snapped back and forth by the bucking motion of Tenny’s body beneath. The helmet was unmistakable, though I had only seen it once before — shaped like the head of a goat, with metal horns and wide-set eyes above the dark slit of a visor. At least she wasn’t carrying her sword this time; this dream had nothing to do with that, after all. She had the Saye Fox — Laurissa Saye —

curled up in one arm.

As the view bobbed close, the goat-head helmet snapped up and looked straight at the monitor-view, as if it was a real camera, buzzing around on a drone above Tenny's back.

She reached up with one gauntleted hand and raised her visor; terrified eyes stared directly into the camera.

It was Jan.

"Heather?!" she shouted; I couldn't hear her words, but somehow the shape of her lips made perfect sense. "Heather, is that you?! I'm going to assume it's you! I am not supposed to fucking be here! I do not want to be here! How do we end this dream?! And where the hell is Lizzie?!"

"I— I— how did you even—"

Jan nodded down at the vast bulk of Tenny beneath her. "You've been two whole days and I couldn't stop her anymore! She insisted we nap and then I woke up here, on her back!"

"Oh," I said. "Oh dear. Um. Look, Jan, I think it's almost over! Keep hold of that Fox, okay, just keep hold of her for—"

Something beneath Tenny fired another shot. Jan almost lost her grip on the tuft of fur; the view went whirling off across the trees.

Praem tapped the list.

We were done, all except for the Forest Knight and Maisie's new doll-body, neither of which we had yet found.

I lowered my eyes from the wall of monitors and slumped backward into the observation throne, panting with exertion and shock and confusion. Sweat was running down my forehead and sticking my clothes to my skin. My left shin was on fire, pajama leg stained with a ragged line of blood; my guts quivered with every unsteady heartbeat, the bruise like a fist in my stomach.

But none of that mattered. I raised the hand-held radio.

"You need to stop this," I said. "Right now."

"I knew this would happen," hissed Heather With No Head. "I knew this would go rotten, I shouldn't have even let you speak, I should have never replied. Why do I do this to myself? Why do we always

do this to ourself? Why—”

“Shut up. Stop all this.”

“Never,” she said. “Never ever ever. I will do anything, make any sacrifice, break any taboo, all to free Maisie.”

“So would I!” I said. “But how is any of this helping free Maisie? You’re shooting at Tenny when she’s trying to break into the Box. You’re not using your robot soldiers to help Lozzie’s revolution. How can you not see the damage you’re doing? How can you not want to help everyone else?”

“Because the only conflict left is between us.”

“ ... I’m sorry?”

She sighed, as if explaining was tiring her out; good, I thought, make it as hard as possible for her to concentrate. “The Eye is no longer the Governor,” she said. “Sevens has stopped directing. The only forces left to control the dream are me and you.”

“You and I, you mean.”

Another little sigh. “I’m too tired for proper grammar.”

“You must be really worn out, then,” I said, unable to keep the scorn from my voice. “*And where care lodges, sleep will never lie?*”

“Stop it. Just stop. I’m so tired I can barely think.”

“Good,” I snapped. “Besides, your statement made no sense. If it’s just you and I, what about the nurses?”

A rough swallow. “A-and I am helping!” she said — voice going tight and tense. She was concealing something, and doing a terrible job of it; she’d avoided answering the question about the nurses. I knew my own tactics all too well. Something about the nurses, about that question, had rattled her.

“By hurting Tenny?” I pressed, pretending I hadn’t noticed.

“I’m the only one really helping!” she spat. “And I don’t care how much of a bad girl I have to be!”

“Is that what this is?” I asked. “You’re my ‘Bad Girl’ thoughts? Does that make me Good Girl Heather?”

“It makes you Easy Heather,” she said, voice brimming over with

bitterness. "Taking the easy way out. Giving up on Maisie."

"I haven't given up on her for one second," I said, and I knew I was right. "You're the one who's given up on everybody else. And I swore never to do that, don't you remember?"

"You can't deny me," she said. "I'm just you. These thoughts, these feelings, these methods, these are all things that you're not willing to acknowledge, but you know they'll work, deep down you know it's the only way. So that's why I'm here."

"To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man," I quoted at her. "Or woman, in this case. Is that really what you believe? I don't think so. I think you're lying to me, and lying to yourself, because it's what I would do. We promised to change."

"... w-what?" she stammered. "What are you talking about now?"

"After the incident with Taika. Or don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember Taika. What are you—"

I laughed, so hard it hurt my stomach, so real it made me light-headed. I rocked back in the observation throne and almost banged my head, adding to my wounds. Eileen said my name. Praem tried to stop me. Even the Twins stepped forward and both said "Ma'am?"

But I ignored all of that, and spoke into the radio, squinting my eyes through the pain.

"You're not 'Bad Girl' me at all," I said. "You're not Ruthless Heather, or Taking-the-Hard-Road Heather, or even the me that didn't want to forgive Eileen. You're none of those things. You don't even understand what you are."

"Then what am I?" she asked, defiant and sulky, but oh so very brittle.

"You're me but afraid and lonely. You think you're being ruthless, but you're just isolated."

A long pause. A squeak of breath, of a sentence abandoned. Eventually: "I'm not, I—"

"You leapt into this alone," I said. "When we promised — I promised — that we wouldn't do this kind of thing anymore. We

promised everybody, Raine and Eeve and everyone else. And you've broken that promise, and I know why you've done it, because you're alone and afraid."

"I did it to save everybody!" she screamed back, voice making the radio peak.

"No," I said. "You're doing this to save only yourself."

A muffled sob, the drag of a sleeve across a face, that sound I knew all too well; I knew equally well that I had not broken her, not yet. She was right about us in one respect — we were very resilient, more so than we allowed ourselves to believe most of the time. She had her mind set on a course of action and had decided to martyr herself to it, and if I knew myself half as well as my friends did, I trusted she would not step off that path without a good hard shove.

For the first time in my life, I had to pull myself back from the brink.

"Heather," I said, saying my own name. "Heather, I'm so sorry you've been all alone. But you don't have to be, not anymore. You don't have to—"

"Fuck you!" she — I — screamed into the microphone, in a tantrum I would never have expected from myself. The swearing shocked me, left me speechless, as she ranted on. "Shut up! Stop it! I know exactly what you're trying to do! And I'm not going to fall for it! We are going to free Maisie, and that's final! You cannot convince me otherwise!"

I retreated, backing up quickly, trying to think on my feet. Perhaps she couldn't be broken in that sense, perhaps that was why she existed.

She said she was Ruthless Heather, and would not be diverted from her Ruthless course of action; but I knew the truth now. She was Lonely Heather, wallowing in her old suffering. She was the me that doubted the last year of my life was even real. She was the me who doubted Maisie could be saved at all. She was Doubt, and Retreat, and cold solace in pain.

How to get through to that? Use Raine, of course, but I was not Raine.

"Alright, alright," I said quickly, scrambling for anything to say.

“Look, can’t we at least get together and help each other?”

“I don’t need your help,” she said, sulky and gloomy. My stomach turned. Did I ever truly sound like that?

I sighed and took a gamble. “Then why are you still on the line?”

No reply, but the hiss-crackle of the radio connection did not cease.

My gamble had paid off. Eileen and the Twins seemed to sense this, waiting with held breath and stilled tongues.

I knew exactly why this lonely and wretched version of myself was still on the line. She was still there for the same reason I had held on for so long in the lonely weeks and months before I had met Raine, the same reason I had been such an easy catch, the same reason I’d clung so hard to what I’d found.

Despite her supposed better judgement, she wanted a way out.

“Maybe ... ” I said, very gently, sliding the knife between her shoulder blades with every word. “Maybe if you explain the practicalities of your plan to me, we can come to some kind of compromise. How does that sound? You don’t even have to start with why Eileen needs to die. Start with the smaller pieces. Why did you have your robot guards retrieve Horror’s severed head?”

Bad Girl Heather sighed heavily. “Isn’t that part obvious?”

“Not really, no.”

“To protect you,” she said. “To protect us. To correct what you’ve been doing, carrying her around and letting the process just carry on, without taking control.”

“What process?” I asked.

Another big sigh. “She’s part of me. Of you. Us. Whichever. She represents all those negative experiences while growing up. Every visit to the real Cygnet Hospital. Every upsetting interaction with a nurse. Every time we were told to suppress, to pretend Maisie isn’t real, to be ‘normal’ and ‘safe’ and ‘sane’, and so on. She’s a single point of dream representation for all the nurses. I hate her.”

“So do I,” I admitted. “And the nurses are pretty scary, too.”

“They really are. I’m ... I’m terrified of them.”

“Mhmm,” I purred, as sympathetic as I could make myself sound. “I don’t blame you. But that still doesn’t answer the question. What are you trying to do with Horror’s head?”

“I already told you,” she said. “You and I are the only forces left to control the dream. The nurses are ours, so if I get hold of Horror’s head I can protect us, by taking control of—”

She stopped dead.

I grinned in triumph. “Sorry, you were saying?”

“You ... ” Her voice shook with anger and betrayal. “You just led me in a circle, just to get that out of me!”

“Whoever is in control of Horror’s head can control the nurses,” I said. “That’s interesting. I’m not sure how I’ll make use of it, but it’s interesting.”

“It’s not as simple or direct as that!” she spat.

“So, what do I do, hold up the head and shout orders at the nurses?”

She — I, me, my past, my loneliest and most bitter moments, all those times when I assumed I would be dead by thirty or going grey in a mental institution, when I assumed I would never find companionship, or understanding, let alone love, all the ten long years of repression and self-control, all the ‘Bad Girl’ feelings which had turned to solid black rot down in my heart — screamed, inarticulate with rage.

I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“I am trying to protect you!” she shouted.

“And failing,” I said, struggling to keep my voice calm and controlled. “Actually you’re the reason I got even more hurt, throwing myself off the chair to stop your robots shooting Eileen. And I’ve figured you out, now. You don’t actually want to kill Eileen, do you?”

“W-what? What are you—”

“You weren’t looking for her, you were looking for me, and Horror. Protection via control. That’s what you’re all about. You’re not even really looking out for Maisie—”

"I am!" she screamed. "How can you say that?! How can you—"

"Because you're the part of me which doesn't think we can do it. You're the part of me that wants to hide in a shell."

"I'm— I'm not— I—" she was almost sobbing. I had her.

I pitched my voice as gentle as I could, folding away all the internal recrimination, all the arguments, all the old bitterness.

"Let me protect you instead," I said. "Where are you?"

"I don't— don't need— don't need your protection."

The question was a mere formality. I knew exactly where she was. She was in the Box.

I raised my eyes to the wall of monitors, one last time.

And then I found myself.

There I was — she was — hunched up all tight and tense on a little steel chair, in a little steel room, before a little steel desk. Dark machines stood all around her, quiet and cold, blinking with chill light and empty displays. A row of Empty Guards waited for orders by a big steel door; another row stood at the opposite end of the space, before a glass wall of jagged shadows and shifting shapes and a vast darkness beyond.

She — Lonely Heather — was curled up, almost as if she was trying to grow a shell on her back, curled around the lifeline of the hand-held radio. She wore Cygnet Hospital pajamas, just like me. She looked rumpled and bruised and so very, very tired, exhaustion dragging at her bones.

I could not see her face, because she was wearing something I'd been looking for all this time — my Outsider squid-skull mask, my shell, my refuge.

"You're all alone," I said.

"I'm not," she whimpered. "I'm not—"

"I'm not being metaphorical," I said. "I know you're all alone."

"... how do you know that?"

"Because I see you clearly, now. Hello there, me."

bedlam boundary – 24.31

Lonely, Bitter, and Afraid — me, without a single companion at my side or word of support in my ears; or Ruthless, Willful, and Decisive — myself and my aims shorn of encumbrance and doubt, without anyone to get in my way, except myself.

Whichever of those she really was, or believed herself to be, wrapped like armour around her rotten and murderous heart, this Other Me, the Other Heather, alone among her cold machines and her empty tin-plate soldiers, trapped between blank walls in a little steel room, huddled behind the bulwark of her Outsider squid-skull mask — she looked up with sudden alarm, as if she might find my face peering down from a hidden corner of her secret command bunker.

“W-what!?” she squeaked, her sobbing and her whimpering replaced with keen panic. “What do you mean, you see me clearly?! How can you— where are you—”

The six dark eye sockets of her squid-skull mask showed nothing of her true face — a little cephalopod tucked into a crack between the rocks, hiding from truth and responsibility. Familiar predatory instinct flexed and coiled down in my belly, as if I still possessed my tentacles and my other six selves. I felt a desire to grasp her in my claws and yank her out into the light, to see the ugliness written all over her hidden face.

She couldn’t see me, of course. I was everywhere and nowhere. I was pure observation.

“Yes, that’s right. I see you clearly now,” I repeated, speaking into the hand-held radio. Nasty Little Me flinched as my words emerged from the twin in her hand. “And there’s nobody there with you. Nobody at your side. Not Raine, not Evelyn, not Lozzie. Not Praem, not Zheng, not Twil. No Tenny, no Knights, nobody. You are so completely alone.”

She — Bitter, Stupid, Hateful me — filled all the myriad monitors and screens of the wall now; all other concerns had been pushed aside. Caught from a hundred different angles and in a hundred

different video formats, she jerked her own hand-held radio up to the front of the squid-skull mask.

“You shouldn’t be able to see into here!” she hissed. “That means —”

“It means I’ve become too much like Eileen?” I drawled. “It means I’ve accepted too much help from the person you want to murder? Yes, you’re right. And I’m not ashamed or afraid to say—”

“No!” she squawked. “Heather, I’m serious. Listen to me, please. If you can see in here that means something has gone badly wrong, it means the Box is breached already, it means—”

“It means your plans are falling apart?”

“Yes! But that’s not the important part. If you can see in here—”

“If we open the Box, Maisie will be freed. Isn’t that correct? Why would you be afraid that we’re freeing her successfully? Why would you be so afraid that we’re about to win?”

“We’re not about to win! Not like this! It won’t work!”

I sighed. Her whining was so tiresome. “I’ve figured it out,” I said. “You and I and all this, I see it clearly now. The dream should have ended already. Eileen has been enlightened, her endless cycle of observation is broken. We’ve beheaded Horror, the symbol of all our old trauma. Everyone has been woken up and freed. The Box is breaking already. The revolution is underway—”

“And failing!”

“—and I will make sure it doesn’t fail,” I spoke right over her. “The only thing keeping Maisie imprisoned now is you and I. You said it yourself, we’re the only ones left with any control of the dream, and we’re in disagreement. One of us has to submit to the other so we can close this loop. And I’m not going to let you kill Eileen.”

Sad and Lonely me let out a noise halfway between a sob and a laugh. “You’ve got this so backwards.”

“Have I really?”

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair.”

“Tch,” I tutted. “Don’t *Macbeth* at me.”

Blusterous and Frangible Heather stood up from her hard steel chair with a screech of sharp feet scraping across the metal floor. She clicked the fingers of her free hand at one of her two lines of Empty Guards, the ones who were waiting for orders before the wall of frosted glass at the rear of the room. She gestured them toward something I could not see, something just beyond my multiplicitous line of sight — which was an odd feeling, as if one truth in that little lonely room was beyond me. I twisted my point of view back and forth, filling the hundreds of screens with every angle of the sordid steel chamber. I saw all the computers and machines lining the walls, the big steel door at the front, and Her, Myself, in so many different ways. But I couldn't see what she was doing, where she was sending her forces, or for what purpose.

The row of Empty Guards turned and marched off somewhere beyond my sight, perhaps around the side of the big frosted glass wall; from the radio in my hand I heard the ringing of boots on steel catwalks, and the crickle-crackle of stout glass straining against terrible pressure.

A vast, dark, jagged shape shifted behind that glimpse of glass wall.

“What’s that behind the glass?” I asked. “Is that another aquarium? Is that the side of Maisie’s prison? Is that ... Maisie?”

Hateful Heather huffed hard. “No! No, of course not. Do you seriously think I would be wasting time on any of this if I could simply walk up to her tank and have my robots shoot out the glass?”

“Well,” I said. “You do seem determined to make this as difficult as possible.”

“You really think I wouldn’t!?” Her words were broken by a wounded sob. She cast one arm out wide, almost theatrical, stomping a few paces across the floor of her little steel room, then a few paces the other way, marching back and forth before the matching steel desk. “You really think I wouldn’t free Maisie, after everything I’ve said? You think I would stall, I would make up excuses? You trust me that little!?”

“I think you’re the part of me which doesn’t believe she can be freed.”

The Other Me stopped dead. “ ... what?”

“You’re the part of me which enjoys wallowing in loneliness. The part of me which thinks we don’t deserve to free her. The part of me which has taken our old survivor’s guilt and turned it into something ugly and toxic.”

“Huh!” she laughed with derision. “I’m the one misusing our survivor’s guilt?! Take a look at yourself, Heather!”

“I have. And I know I’m right.”

Guilt Heather whirled around in rage and aimed a kick at the steel chair. She sent it skidding across the floor of her empty little room, but it hit the wall with nary a clink of metal, as if she was too drained for real violence.

She stood there for a moment, shoulders rising and falling, shaking with uneven breath, face hidden behind the smooth metallic bone of the squid-skull mask. The cold blinking lights and empty-faced displays in the computers and control consoles along the walls dyed her Cygnet-issue pajamas all the sunless colours of the ocean floor. Not one of her Empty Guards moved forward to assist her, nor offered a single word of comfort.

Across the tenuous connection of the hand-held radio, over the background hiss of static, almost blotted out by the sound of my Foolish Counterpart having a tantrum, I heard the unmistakable crack-bang-crack-bang of gunfire, echoing off metal and glass. The fire fight was suddenly punctured by a long, loud, low *hissssss!*

The Other Me jerked upward in alarm.

“That’s us!” I cried into the hand-held radio. “That’s us, our tentacles, our other six selves! *Homo abyssus!* And you’re shooting at them, too! Just like with Tenny! You can’t help yourself, can you?”

I repressed a sigh of relief, despite the accusation in my words; if she was actively rejecting the help of our other six self-facets, that gave me time and space in which to work.

Still, I was shocked. She was so bitter she would reject help even from herself — myself, ourselves. She was worse than I’d thought.

“I’m not,” she said, her voice oddly weak. “I’m not trying to hurt them, I’m just keeping them away from the exits. Heather, I don’t have the words or the time to explain this properly, you just have to take a leap of faith — we cannot free Maisie by forcing the Box

open. Eileen — tch!” She tutted and huffed. “The Eye, it has to die. It’s the only way.”

“There is no sure foundation set on blood,” I quoted at her. *“No certain life achieved by others’ death.”*

“*King John*, really!?” she scoffed. “You’re scraping the bottom of the barrel with that one, Heather. Nobody even reads *King John*, it’s terrible. I don’t know why we read it!”

“Because we actually quite enjoyed it?”

Foolish Me sighed. “I ... yes, I ... suppose we did.”

“See?” I said. “We’re still the same person, once all this dream is done. You must know I won’t be able to accept murdering Eileen. I would never submit to that solution. I’d never forgive you — which means I’d never forgive myself. And you wouldn’t be able to forgive yourself, either. I think you’re blinded by your biases, your loneliness, and your fear. You have to know I’m right about this, Heather. Please.”

The Other Me, still tucked safely behind her squid-skull mask, sagged inside her pajamas, shoulders slumping, back hunching. She let out an exhausted sigh, a rattle like a final breath. She didn’t have the energy to stagger across the room to retrieve the chair; she simply slumped against the steel desk.

Did I almost have her? Was she finally crumbling?

“Heather,” I said. “Please, just stop the fighting. Call off your Guards, let the Box open. Stop shooting at Tenny, send your Guards to help the others against the nurses instead. You and I, we’re the same person, we shouldn’t be at odds like this. Let me come and find you, and we can do this together.”

For a moment, Lonely Heather contracted further; she raised one hand as if about to remove her squid-skull mask.

“That’s it,” I said into the radio. “Just show me your face. It’s my face too, after all.”

Her hand dropped away.

“ ... Heather?” I said. “Please, just ... ”

She reached into her pocket and extracted a little round dot of matter. Dark grey, featureless, about the size of a finger bone. She

held it up before the eye sockets of the mask.

“What’s that?” I said.

“Huh,” she laughed, sad and abandoned. “And you have the gall to accuse me of forgetting promises. Of betraying friends. Of being false.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t forgotten anything! In fact, I’m hyper-aware that I couldn’t find the Forest Knight, or Maisie’s new body, or Mister Squiddy, when I was doing my little survey just now. And I strongly suspect you have something to do with that, you—”

“Oh yes,” she said, so soft and defeated, so fragile and exhausted — yet somehow the mournful certainty in her words stopped me dead. “You can’t forget the important people, the ones who’ve helped you so much, the ones you love, the ones who make you smile and make you happy, the ones who protect you with strong arms and a warm embrace. But what about the ones who don’t, or the ones who can’t?” She held up the little speck of grey. “What about the forgotten people, the things too small to be regarded? What about those, Heather? Do they matter as well?”

“... what is that?” I repeated. “What are you holding?”

Sentimental Heather closed her fist around the little speck of grit. “A pebble,” she said. “And you forgot all about it.”

I wracked my brains, trying to figure out what metaphor or—

“It’s not a metaphor, Heather,” she said. “It’s a pebble. An actual, physical pebble, from Earth. It doesn’t represent anything. It’s literal. One object unchanged by the dream.”

“Where did you get it?”

“We sent it here. Outside, to Wonderland. Months and months ago now. We were experimenting with Slipping objects, after we returned from Evelyn’s home down in Sussex. Don’t you remember?” Her voice began to quiver. “We lay awake in bed for so many nights, agonising over the fate of this one little pebble. We plucked it from a lakeside in rural England, and we sent it Outside. Eternal exile, eternally lost. And we believed it would never, ever, ever be found and rescued. Who would find something so small, so pointless, so unfeeling, in all the scorched and burned geography of

Wonderland?”

“Oh!” It all came rushing back to me. “I do remember, of course I share those memories, of course—”

“But I never forgot,” she said, her melancholy tone rising with wounded bitterness, knuckles turning white around the forgotten pebble in her fist. “I never forgot about even a single pebble—”

“Neither did I!” I cried out. “Neither did I! Heather, this doesn’t make any sense. What are you trying to say, you—”

“I found this pebble, you see,” she said, slow and sharp and laced with poison. “I found it inside the Box. And it started me down a very specific path of thought. What do you think the Box is for? Why do you think it’s here? Why do you think the world forgot all about Maisie, and only Maisie?”

I sighed. I couldn’t hold back my frustration; I’d had just about enough of her cryptical guilt-tripping and sanctimonious preaching. Was this really what I sounded like? Wallowing in loneliness and righteousness? Hiding behind my mask, while advocating for murder? An ugly little morsel of mollusc-flesh dripping with toxin and poison in every word? Was this what my friends saw and heard when they looked at me? A beached cephalopod, obsessed with gravel?

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what the Box is for. Why don’t you just tell me?”

“Because you should know!” the Other Me shouted down the radio. She thumped the steel desk with her fist; she must have been gripping the pebble with all her might, because I saw blood leaking from between her fingers. “Because you should have been thinking about Maisie, and the pebble, and everything that doesn’t matter! Because she’s a forgotten thing, too! And because apparently you won’t listen anyway! You’ve already given up on me, given up on Maisie too, given up on—”

“Oh, do shut up,” I huffed. “Stop giving yourself conniptions!”

Was this what it would feel like listening to myself, once we recombined? Would Maisie have to hear this voice, see this face, witness this part of me? What would she see, reflected in my eyes?

And she — I — still did not shut up.

"I thought you would understand," she whined, beginning to sob. "After all the time you and I have spent protecting each other, all the lost years, all the Slips and dreams and nightmares. I was always there when you needed me—"

"I don't need your way of thinking," I snapped. "Attacking Tenny, attacking our other selves. And trying to kill Eileen!"

"—and you were always there when I needed you, too! And now, what is this? When I need you the most, when Maisie needs us both more than—"

"Stop!" I snapped. "Just. Stop. Talking. Your voice is making me sick."

She finally stopped.

On the wall of monitors, a hundred eyeballs across, she sagged at the waist and curled up against her steel desk, as if holding back fresh tears. She looked as if she wanted to drop to the floor and curl into a sobbing, broken ball, shutting out the world and pretending none of this was her fault. Alone and lonely, without any support but the mirages she had conjured from dreams, without any direction but the rot in her heart. I felt bile rising up my throat, how could I ever have been so—

You shouldn't hate her, said somebody.

A tiny voice spoke from somewhere beyond my sight; for a moment I didn't realise what it was, for there was nothing in the world except the wall of monitors, the radio in my hand, and Her, Myself, I, in all my nasty, pitiful, spiteful glory.

Then I realised the voice was Praem. She was out there, in the space my physical body still occupied, back in the Governor's Office.

Praem said good girls should not hate themselves. She suggested I be kinder, for my own sake.

A lump of horrified guilt hardened in my throat, almost like I'd been slapped across the cheek and snapped out of some terrible downward spiral.

Praem was correct, of course. Why was I being so nasty to myself? Why was I being, in words my beloved Evelyn might have applied to her own self, such a bitch to this reflection of my own mind? This wasn't Alexander Lilburne, or Ooran Juh, or an unrepentant

member of the Sharrowford Cult, or Edward being vile and unredeemable. This was me, lonely and afraid. She didn't need me calling her names and spitting on her efforts to help — no matter how misguided and stupid.

She needed a hug.

I composed myself as best I could. I took a deep breath and forced myself to smile before I spoke into the hand-held radio.

"Heather," I said, gentle and soft. "Heather, if you're that tired, and afraid, and lonely, then you don't have to be alone anymore. Let me protect you again. Let me—"

"You think there's no value in me," she whined, voice quivering something akin to terror. "If I let you protect me now, there'll be nothing left of me."

"... I'm sorry?"

"Let every eye negotiate for itself and trust no agent," she quoted, between gritted teeth.

I swallowed a sigh, reminding myself this was me and she needed help. *"Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind."*

"And what is that one supposed to mean in this context?"

I held back another note. "It means that we shouldn't be arguing like this. We've been blinded by being able to have this argument in the first place. We should be together, not apart. Let me protect you again."

"Un-thread the rude eye of rebellion, and welcome home again discarded faith?" she quoted back at me, dripping with scorn. "You just want me to give up and submit!"

I bit my lips to hold my temper, then said: *"Get thee glass eyes, and like a scurvy politician, seem to see the things thou dost not."*

"Oh, so now I'm imagining it all?!" she snapped. "You know who you sound like? You sound just like mum! *They whose guilt within their bosom lies, imagine every eye beholds their blame.*"

"I'm not projecting!" I said. "You're projecting! And this is pointless, I'm still not going to let you kill Eileen. *You cannot make gross sins look clear: To revenge is no valour, but to bear.*"

“Ha!” she spat. “*Kindness nobler ever than revenge?* Perhaps you should practice what you preach!”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “You can’t seriously be worried I’m going to take revenge on you. You’re me! I’m you!”

“If I let you in — if I let you take control of the asylum — you’ll stuff me in a cell,” she said, beginning to sob again. “You’ll lock me up, just like our real mother did, just like everyone else wants to. That’s what your protection would mean now. You think I’m useless, you—”

“I don’t!” I whined, barely able to believe my ears. “You’re delusional, you—”

“If I let you in, you’ll kill me.”

All my carefully constrained temper burst forth in one almighty sigh — and She, I, Me, The Little Fool on the other end of the call, had the gall to flinch!

“Don’t be so absolutely ridiculous!” I snapped. “I’ve never heard such stupid—”

“You think I’m completely wrong—”

“—nonsense in my entire life, and that’s saying something—”

“—about everything! You forgot the pebble and you’ll forget—”

“—in this absurd dream. You are the most absurd thing in here, you —”

“—me too! You’ll forget me and abandon me and we’ll never free Maisie that way and—”

“—snivelling little bloodthirsty coward!”

“—both of us will die!”

“That’s it!” I shouted into the radio handset. “I’ve had enough of you!”

And with that, I truly lost my temper.

Before I realised the impulse I was following, I reached out toward the wall of monitors with my free hand — toward her, toward the smooth grey metal of the Outsider squid-skull mask on her head. My own body felt like a vessel piloted by another mind, as if my

hand entered my field of vision without my volition. Held between my thumb and first two fingers was a little white cylinder — the stick of chalk I had inherited from Eileen.

Hyperdimensional mathematics, wrought in dreamlike metaphor.

I did not need to know what I was doing, because this was a dream, and the dream would bend to the will of a lucid mind.

The tip of the chalk-stick touched the wall of monitors — then reached through, into that dark little steel room which the Other Me had made into a cage for her mind. The chalk slipped past her shoulders and shot toward the computers along the wall, jabbing at the hollow buttons and cold lights of the control panels. My hand swished and flicked, drawing white lines and symbols, writing brain-math in chalk on the substrate of the dream, exerting intention, willpower, and determination. Chalk-marks on the monitor threw switches and levers, turned dials and knobs, changed values and numbers and sent the systems of the Box spinning off into chaos.

Bitter Little Me shot upright and spun around in panic. “No! No, Heather, no, don’t!”

She lurched for the control panels, watched by her impassive, empty-faced line of Guards; she couldn’t walk properly, drained to near-disability by sheer exhaustion. But terror gave her impetus, and she flung herself onto the controls. Her free hand scrabbled over the buttons and switches, reversing my changes, fighting my willpower, scrambling to keep the Box shut, to keep Maisie in prison.

For several seconds we struggled on opposite sides of the screen. I jabbed and scribbled with my chalk, messing with the buttons, opening gates, and cancelling security lock downs. She scrambled to keep up with me, putting things back the way they were, hands slapping at the controls, slamming levers back into place, jamming buttons into their sockets to prevent further mischief.

Then she fumbled; a tiny grey mote tumbled from her open hand — the pebble, falling to the floor, rolling away.

“No!” she yelped.

Silly Little Me threw herself after the forgotten speck of grit. She hit the floor, landing hard, dazed and winded, squid-skull mask

bouncing off the steel plates. But she managed to slap her palm down on the pebble, just before it was lost beneath one of those cold, unfeeling machines.

I took the opening and finished the equation.

I cancelled all the lock downs, opened all the gates, and threw the Box wide. I took away her control.

The lights in the little steel room flickered, plunging my Unwise Counterpart into stop-motion darkness. She scrambled upright, struggling to regain her feet, bloody fist closed around the pebble. Across the radio, from far away, I heard a triumphant *hissssssss!* The hiss was followed by a deafening thump-crack-clang of metal, then a ripping and tearing sound like a car torn open by steel jaws. My other six selves, free and wild!

I was vaguely aware of a flinch at my side — Eileen, looking up and around. A muttered exchange passed somewhere beyond the screens, behind my physical body — Zalu and Xiyu, snapping back and forth.

That sound had not only been heard over the radio, but out in the hospital, for real.

“Heather, no!” the other me wailed, a metal-faced ghost beneath failing lights. “What have you done?! They’re going to get out, they’re going to get free!”

“Good!” I shouted into the radio. “Good! You deserve to see this nonsense fail, you—”

Past the shuddering shoulders of Defeated Me, the vast dark shape behind the frosted glass shifted and coiled. I slammed to a halt. That couldn’t be Maisie.

“Oh no,” she said. “No, no, no, this is all wrong, this is all wrong!”

Lying and Cheating Heather started to retreat into a corner, backing away from the glass, away from her soldiers, away from my unseen vantage point all around her. She stumbled over her feet, chest rising and falling with hyperventilating panic, masked head flicking left and right. A *hissssss* came from somewhere closer by, perhaps just outside the room. Other Heather raised a hand to gesture to her remaining row of Empty Soldiers, but then she almost fumbled the pebble again, clasping it to her chest in desperation. Her fist left a

smear of blood on the front of her Cygnet-issue pajamas.

“Just leave me— leave me— leave me alone, Heather, leave me— leave me alone, leave me—”

I drew a circle around her, around her hidden face, around the unreadable grey metal of the squid-skull mask.

And then I pulled it from her head.

The mask came off and landed in my lap — my actual, physical lap, here in the Governor’s Office — a sudden feathery weight which barely registered. Somebody else — Praem perhaps — reached out to prevent the mask from slipping off my legs and falling to the floor. I was so absorbed in the spectacle of myself, suddenly denuded of her protection, forced to show her face when she advocated for murder.

She was vile.

She screamed as the mask came away, dropping both the pebble and the radio handset as she swiped at the air, groping for the return of her shell and refuge. But her hands closed on nothing; her safety was mine now. Tears ran down cheeks flushed red with shame and self-loathing — both well justified. Her face — my face, the same face I saw in a mirror every morning, the same face I saw in still water and the bowl of a spoon and reflected in the eyes of those I loved — twisted with agonised tears. Thin lips, hollow cheeks, greasy hair. Eyes the colour of muddy-grey skies, brimming over with liar’s salt.

Something about those tears was so ugly. Was this really me? Did I really look like that?

Did Maisie look like that, when she cried?

“Don’t— *hic*, don’t look at me, don’t look—” she whined and sobbed, dropping into a crouch and shielding her face and head with her arms, trying to withdraw into a shell I had taken from her. “No, no, please, no, not again, no, no— don’t—*hic*— don’t—”

Bile rushed up my throat — disgust and shame burning my oesophagus, burning my words to nothing. Tears prickled in my eyes.

She was ugly and pitiful, but she was still me.

So why was I treating myself like this?

“W-wait,” I stammered. “Wait. I didn’t mean to— I’m— I didn’t mean to hurt—”

“You did!” she screamed, emerging from behind her arms. “You did!”

Suddenly every view in the wall of monitors was a close-up of her, of me, of our shared face, flushed and tear-streaked and ugly with such bone-deep bitterness. Her eyes were brown; her eyes were blue-grey.

I reached out one quivering hand, an apology on my lips.

Then she spat: “All I’ve done is try to help! All I’ve done is for you! And for you, she has to die! Eileen has to die!”

The apology died on my lips.

“Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot that it do singe yourself,” I said. “You’re wrong.”

She screamed.

The wall of monitors became a wall of her screams — my scream, my face, streaked with tears, distraught in abandonment and disbelief and isolation, a scream of frustration and self-betrayal howling from the black plastic radio in my hand.

That scream was like a shove; I tumbled off the lofty pedestal of observation and slammed back into my own body with a hard, sharp, convulsive flinch. I jerked against the cradle of the observation throne, suddenly panting for breath, surrounded by the walls of the Governor’s office, nothing more than a young woman staring at a bank of monitors.

A wave of gut-wrenching pain quivered through my bruised abdomen. My wounded left shin was on fire, pajama leg stuck to my skin with fresh blood. Pain-sweat broke out on my face. I gasped for breath, drowning in my own flesh.

“To hell, allegiance!” Other Heather screamed. *“Vows, to the blackest devil! Conscience, and grace, to the profoundest pit! I dare damnation: To this point I stand,— That both the worlds I give to negligence, Let come what comes; only I’ll be reveng’d.”*

“S-stop,” I gasped. “Stop, I’m— I’m sorry—”

A weak, pale, limp little fist lashed out toward me.

The single monitor directly before my face went dead, dark, black as a mirror of night.

The rest of the wall of monitors flickered back to the hundred views of the unfolding revolution inside Cygnet Asylum, as if a broadcast interruption had just ended. Regular programming resumed. Your scheduled drama, back on air.

A final line hissed from the black plastic radio in my hand.

“I won’t let you cage me,” said Lonely Heather.

The line went dead.

Crash landing back into my own body was not a pleasant experience, even if this was ‘only’ a dream. The combined pain of my leg and my gut was enough to bring a veil of fresh tears to my eyes. I wheezed for breath, fighting down both the whirling vertigo aftermath of such focused observation, and the strange hollow alienation from my other self, my poor, lonely, little self, who I had left behind in that steel-shod room.

Had I abandoned her? Had I betrayed her?

Just like I had abandoned Maisie to Wonderland?

My clammy fingers struggled to hold the slender stick of chalk; the little radio tumbled from my other hand and bounced off the squid-skull mask in my lap. Praem caught it before it could fall.

Eileen was saying my name — “Heather? Heather? Heather?” — while the twins to my rear snapped out, “Ma’am? Ma’am, are you in need of assistance? Ma’am?”

Beyond those three voices lay the distant roar and rumble of the revolution, the hundred riots unfolding in the hospital beneath us: shouts and screams, rallying cries, calls for aid, the clang and clash of metal-on-metal, the breaking of wooden barricades, the thunder of feet racing down corridors, the lightning of fists on flesh. From beyond the walls, far away on the other side of the asylum grounds, more lethal background noises filled the air — the revving of engines, the pseudo-fake boom-boom of toys pretending to be big guns, all punctuated by the ‘prrrt-prrrrt!’ trilling of one giant moth-girl on her lucid rampage.

But all of it turned to white noise in my ears, blurred to static by a wall of tears.

All I could see was the weeping face before me, ugly and nasty, twisted by pain and bitterness, by self-hate and survivor's loathing.

For a moment it was Her, Lonely Heather, the Other Me. Then it was Maisie, an impossible close-up view of her hanging in her aquarium tank, struggling against the bonds of steel and pressure. But how could Maisie be so ugly? How could my twin sister look so cruel and full of shame?

Then I realised I was staring at my own face, reflected in the dark mirror of a blank screen.

A hand fell on my shoulder and squeezed hard.

I brought myself around with a great heave of breath, dragging a sleeve across my tear-filled eyes. I looked up into Eileen's curious face. She stared back down at me with her own wide and questioning gaze, clear of sorrow, but wracked by alarm and worry and a thousand-fold cares.

"Heather," she said. "What do we do now?"

Two other voices piped up from behind me, mirrors of each other. "Ma'am, we need orders."

"She'll be sending a squad to this location."

"We have to move."

"Ma'am, by your command."

"Uh, um ... " I swallowed, my mouth so dry, my head pounding with each throb of my heart. I couldn't get my bearings. Observation had been like a drug, and here was withdrawal. "I ... I ... "

I hesitated, mired deep in doubt.

If the Other Heather, the one tucked away inside the Box and commanding these Empty Guards, was the 'Lonely Me', then what was I? What part of me was sitting there, in this dream-body, wracked with pain, bleeding from her leg, bruised in the gut, curled up in an observation throne? If she was Lonely, wallowing in her isolation, then was I the part that refused loneliness? Was I the part that placed faith in others, the part that never gives up on my

friends, the part which still believed, despite all odds, that we can and will overcome anything, all for the sake of rescuing Maisie, and rescuing each other?

Whatever part I was, I was filled with guilt and worse.

Was my judgement just as clouded?

Doubt could not be entertained, however; I shook my head and took a deep breath, simply because I could not afford it, not if I was going to win. The revolution was still salvageable. Everyone in the dream could still be saved, all my friends and the patients too. These machinations by some Bitter and Spiteful part of me could be defeated. We would be whole again, and Maisie would be free.

“Give me a second,” I wheezed, turning back to the wall of monitors.

The screen directly before me was still blank. I kept my eyes away from that one, terrified of seeing my own ugly, tear-streaked face again and mistaking it for Maisie. But all the other screens showed countless views of the hospital corridors and the unfolding violence. The revolution was guttering and stuttering now, like a candle in a cold, dark wind.

I selected a single screen — one miniature drama, one representative scene among the dozens of confrontations and barricades and headlong charges.

A grainy CCTV feed showed a dead-end corridor, somewhere high up in the hospital. A scrum of a dozen patients stood shoulder-to-shoulder, barring the end of the corridor. Most of them were armed with makeshift weapons — table legs, bits of broken chair, a crowbar, a snapped-off length of pipe — while two more used an upturned table as a barricade. Some of them were wounded, blood running from shallow cuts or grazes. Cygnet-issue pajamas were dirty and scuffed. Eyes were narrowed and set. Behind the line a smaller gaggle of younger girls huddled for protection — patients who couldn’t fight, who weren’t old enough or bold enough to be part of the front line, though some of them held bricks or shouted encouragement. But several of them were clinging to each other in open fear, crying and screaming. They knew they were cornered, with nowhere to run.

A flood of nurses was bearing down on the little group — four, five,

six dozen shambling monsters of sagging grey, crammed into ragged white uniforms, brandishing straitjackets and plastic cuffs and hypodermic needles and stun batons and nylon rope. They filled the corridor like a flood of sewage, with no gaps in their formation.

As I watched, a brick sailed out from behind the line of patients and smashed into the skull of one of the nurse-monsters, cracking bone and pulping flesh. The monster rocked back, collapsing from the impact. A cheer went up in celebration — then died away as the nurse-monster straightened back up and continued her shuffling advance, alongside so many others.

The line of patients braced themselves for a fight. But no matter how gallant and courageous, they would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers within moments. The line would fall, and the more vulnerable girls behind them would be taken away and locked up, drugged and bound, and left alone in the dark.

Tears threatened my eyes again. Just like the Lonely Heather I had shouted and screamed at.

I raised the stick of chalk and reached toward the screen.

Clink.

The screen was just glass. The chalk was just chalk.

That scream of rejection from Bitter Sad Lonely Heather had robbed us of even this pale imitation of brain-math.

“No!” I hissed, leaning forward in frustration, jabbing at the little screen. But the chalk just went clink-clink-clink. I twisted in the seat and almost winded myself by pulling at the bruise in my guts. I held the chalk out to Eileen. “Can you do it?!” I snapped. “Can you reach through, with hyperdimensional mathematics, and help them? Please!”

Eileen looked at the chalk, then at the screen, then back at the chalk, then at me.

“I cannot,” she said. “I have relinquished my authority. I assumed you would be able to assume.”

“Tch!” I hissed in frustration. “Not any more! I’m— I’m at war with myself! Neither of us has control! We’ve rejected each other!”

Eileen nodded, then said, “Then I am useless.”

“What? No, no, you’re not, don’t say that.”

“Ma’am,” said one of the Twins. “Ma’am, we cannot stay here. You were right about that part. We have to move. Ma’am?”

The six empty eye holes of my squid-skull mask stared up from my lap, ringed with protective bone-ridges. The awkward horizontal mouth-slash told me nothing. The flared skirt of bone seemed to suggest a pattern, and within that pattern, a solution. The metallic surface caught the light from the screens, reflecting back an oil-gloss kaleidoscope of colour.

To Her, The Other Me, this mask was protection and refuge.

What was it to me?

“Eileen,” I croaked. “Turn the chair around, please.”

Eileen did as I asked, applying just enough pressure to make the observation throne turn on the massive ball-and-socket joint set into the floor. The chair swung away from the wall of monitors, to face the rest of the Governor’s Office.

Zalu and Xiyu, in their dream-guise special forces role, waited with their hands on their shiny black guns and their hair up in non-matching ponytails, their feet planted amid the oil-leaking bodies of the empty guards. Behind them, the window was streaming with the cold light of a cloudy day, dawn finally tucked away behind the leaden sky — though there was no sky and no clouds, only the narrow visible sliver of the Eye, Eileen’s true body, staring down at the dream with an open slit of magnesium-silver.

To the right was the door of the office, our only way out, still barred with a filing cabinet. To the left was the other desk, littered with blank papers.

The severed head of Horror the head nurse sat in the middle of that desk, blindfolded and deafened and gagged, wrapped up tight in an old towel.

“Ma’am?” said one of the Twins. “What is your plan?”

I couldn’t answer — not because my throat was raw and half my consciousness was pain, but because the plan was abstract, a dream-thing, a set of actions which only made sense in the context of my own ancient traumas and lifelong preoccupations.

The stick of chalk went back inside my yellow blanket, followed by the insignia patch with the crowned and haloed head of Foolish And Murderous Heather; I told myself it was not 'cool' at all, but a seed of doubt in my chest was still a little impressed. The radio I left to Praem. She might find better use of it than I could.

Moving even that much, to stow the symbols of the dream, drew awful pain from my gut and a deep throbbing from my leg. My wound was bleeding through the stitches now, and my gut quivered and shook, sending waves of nausea up through my throat. But I kept moving. I needed to finish this on my own terms, and deal with myself.

I took my Outsider squid-skull mask from my lap, raised it with both hands, and lowered it over my head.

For a moment I was enclosed in warm metallic darkness, blind as in the womb. A familiar scent teased at my nose, of familiar skin and hair beneath my hand, of laying my head on my own pillow in bed, of stripping off my clothes and catching the smell of my own body. That scent was me, or her, or both of us, combined in one inside this mask. For a moment, as the safe enclosure of the mask slipped down over my face, I knew how she felt, I knew what she had felt, wearing this, feeling invincible, feeling right.

She was so silly to be afraid of me. Wasn't she?

Then I opened my eyes and stared out from the eye holes of the squid-skull mask. The metal felt like a second skin, like my own fresh-grown carapace of iron-infused bone and chitin. The pain in my leg and gut seemed to finally recede, the morphine in my blood finally working properly.

Eileen watched with a curious look in her wide eyes. Zalu and Xiyu shared a glance, mystified by my behaviour. Praem cautioned, but about what, she could not explain.

I raised a hand and gestured at the other desk. "Would one of you be so kind as to pass Horror to me, please?"

Zalu and Xiyu shared another glance.

"Has she lost her equilibrium?" one of them said.

"Can we trust her judgement and her orders?"

"I'm not sure, sister."

“True.”

“But you heard what the other one of her said.”

“We heard it all. Which parts?”

“Heather and Heather are the only powers left in control of the dream.”

“Which means if we don’t help one, the other will probably win.”

“That assumption places too much faith in our prowess.”

“Does it?”

“Does it indeed.”

I cleared my throat. “I promise I have a plan. And you heard what Nasty Me—” I paused. “The other me, I mean. You heard what she said about Horror’s head. We have to save the revolution, then I have to stop her, stop myself. Now, please. You’re right that we don’t have much time. I have to take control.”

Zalu shrugged. Xiyu nodded. Zalu walked over to the other desk and picked up Horror’s severed head, dangling by a loop of towel, then crossed back to me.

For a moment she just held the head out, blindfolded and gagged, jaw still trying to wriggle, facial muscles twitching.

“Where do you want her, Ma’am?”

“Put her in my lap, please,” I said. “I can handle her now.”

Zalu lowered Horror’s head into my lap. The severed stump of the neck squished against my thighs. I almost shivered at the disgusting sensation, but the refuge of my squid-skull mask fortified me against almost anything.

Zalu stepped back. I stared down at Horror through the mask’s many eye holes, then reached out and began to unwrap this wriggling package of human head.

First I pulled the gag from her mouth. The moment the towel was out, she retched and heaved and worked her lips up and down.

“Ugh! Ugh ugh ugh! Do you even know what it’s like to have a piece of cloth jammed in your mouth for that long?!” she said, jaw jerking at my thighs. “Heather? Heather, my dear girl, I know that’s

you unwrapping me. I can tell by your touch, you're always so tentative and— ow!”

I yanked on the length of towel as I unbound her ears.

“You were saying?” I said.

“I ... I said I can tell it's you,” Horror went on, jaw flapping up and down in my lap. “You're so tentative and gentle. I know none of this is really your fault, Heather. I know that you can find it in you to be a good girl again and do as you're told. All this mess can be put right, all this violence and strife can be put behind us, all this —”

“I am a good girl,” I said. “I've always been a good girl. It's something I'm too good at, in fact.”

Horror hesitated. “H-Heather? You ... you sound ... ”

I removed the blindfold from Horror's deep blue eyes. She blinked several times, then looked up at the Outsider squid-skull mask. She froze, tongue and jaw finally stilled.

I finished unwrapping the towel, grabbed a fistful of her blonde hair, and lifted her so she hung before my face, before my mask, before what I had determined to do.

“ ... Heather?” she squeaked.

“You have no power over me anymore,” I said. “You're finished now, Horror.”

“Wha— how— you—”

I sighed inside my mask, then leaned forward, closed my eyes, and tapped my forehead against hers.

“Because I accept you,” I whispered. “You are part of me. All my old traumas, all my hatred and bitterness about medical treatment, all the injustice that my parents put me through without realising. I can't pretend you aren't part of me, can't pretend I'll ever truly be rid of you, because that would be like opening a wound to get rid of a scar. It simply doesn't work like that.”

“ ... uh ... n-no, no,” she murmured. “You have to be a g-good girl, come back to ... to your room, and ... ”

I leaned back again, so I could look her in the eyes.

"I am the one in control," I said. "You don't rule me. You don't make decisions for me. And you don't put me in a cell."

Horror swallowed; how she achieved that with only a stub of her throat, I had no idea, but I wasn't going to start questioning the wisdom of the dream at this late hour.

"I am in charge of us," I said. "Do you understand?"

Horror wobbled. I realised with a little smirk that she was trying to nod.

"Say it," I said.

"You are in charge," she echoed. "You are in charge."

"Good," I said. "Now, you're going to do as you're told."

I lowered the head for now; I would need her shortly, but we had to get moving first.

"Eileen," I said, looking up at her pinkly glowing eyes. "I need you to carry me, like you did before. And for a much longer time. I need you for this, and I think you're the only one who can do it."

"Ah," said Eileen. She blinked. "I am filled with use again?"

"You were never useless," I said. "Nobody else can do this. I need you to carry me." Then I turned to Zalu and Xiyu. "And you two, I need you to defend Eileen and I."

"And I," said Eileen.

I almost laughed, high on the potential of my plan. Zalu and Xiyu both sighed, not quite in unison.

"Eileen and myself, then," I said. "Yes, I know, the first time was grammatically incorrect. Eileen is rubbing off on me or something. Eileen and me."

"Boo," said Eileen.

"This isn't the time for puns."

"It is always a good time for the best of puns."

Eileen got into position as she spoke, crouching down next to the observation throne so that I might once again climb onto her back, to be carried piggyback style. Praem helped me lever my quivering

body out of the chair, and dragged me over to Eileen. We worked together to prop me up, with one arm around Eileen's front, my thighs braced in her hands, and my other hand holding Horror's head by her hair, ready to raise my grisly trophy.

"Are you prepared?" Eileen said.

"Yes. Do it."

Eileen stood up, carrying me on her back. My guts roiled, but then settled. I cast one last glance at the wall of monitors, one last temptation at the power of observation.

Then Eileen turned us away, and I dragged my eyes to the door.

Xiyu leapt into action, pulling the filing cabinet out of the way.

Zalu said: "We can protect you, Heather. Seven Shades of Sunlight would have us in the dock if we didn't. But we need to know the plan. You need to give clear orders. What's our objective?"

I pulled myself as upright as I could on Eileen's back, fighting the pain in my belly and the blood dripping from the cuff of my pajama bottoms. Horror's head swung from my sweaty fist.

"Save the revolution," I said. "Tear down the institution. Take control. Or end control."

Xiyu got the filing cabinet away from the door. She let the door hang wide, showing the corridor beyond, lit by cold, grey, late-morning light. She shouldered her gun and peered out, left and right, checking our path.

"Sure thing," said Zalu. "But what's our immediate objective? Where are you going, Heather? With what purpose?"

I raised Horror's mute head in one quivering fist; her eyes were wide with submissive terror.

"To the nearest group of patients," I said. "To accept all my traumas."

bedlam boundary – 24.32

We left the Governor's Office behind — finally forgoing the twin temptations of observation and archives, both made obsolete by determination and resolve — and stepped back into the labyrinthine corridors of Cygnet Asylum.

Sickly grey dawn-light flooded the corridors, oozing through banks of grimy windows, staining the floors with a pallid sheen, as if the hospital herself were growing nauseated by the rotten ruction within her walls. The tumult of the revolution echoed upward through the floors, like the roiling in the guts of a great beast awakening from unquiet dreams. Shouts and screams and wild howls trickled off down long corridors, muffled by the maze of whitewash and sturdy doors, voices lost in a deep, dark, briar-choked canyon. Clashing and charging, cries of lost defeat, clarions of brief victory — all was reduced to a ghostly murmur, locked away in a forgotten cell.

“Hurry!” I panted over Eileen's shoulder. “We have to hurry up! We can't let any of them get overwhelmed!”

“Moving as fast as we can, Ma'am,” Zalu shot back over her shoulder. “We're not exactly set up for rapid insertion right now. Covering you is priority.”

I tutted inside my squid-skull mask.

The Twins — Zalu and Xiyu, in their dream-guise of video game special forces soldiers — were ‘taking point’, as Raine would so accurately say. Twin submachine guns like shiny, spiky, glisten-backed beetles were tucked tight against Twin shoulders, hungry twin barrel-mouths sweeping over doorways and passages as we passed. The Twins' non-matching ponytails swished and bounced as they leapfrogged each others' positions, hurrying ahead to make sure we didn't blunder face-first into any stray nurses. The display of ‘small unit tactics’ was all very impressive, full of dash and competence and accompanied by both Twins doing very odd things with the angles at which they held their guns, but to my uneducated opinion it was rather a waste of time when we should have been sprinting.

“More haste,” Eileen said, “less speed. Is this a paradox, or a riddle? I cannot decide. Perhaps I would enjoy riddles.”

“You probably will do,” I muttered.

Eileen was carrying me in the most stable piggyback I had ever experienced, with both hands braced firm and strong beneath my thighs, though I will readily admit that I did not have many other examples with which to compare. My ‘real’ mother, Samantha Morell, had never been the sort of person who would smudge her image by carrying me like that, though my father had done so a few times, when Maisie and I had been quite small. Despite my size — for I was no longer a child, even with my five foot nothing of height — Eileen strode with unbent back, each step sure and certain.

Praem helped, of course. Peeking out from the front of my yellow blanket, she anchored me to Eileen with all the considerable strength a plushie could muster.

I rode with my head high and my yellow blanket draped down my back like a conqueror’s cloak; I did my best to ignore the pain in my left shin and the awful bruise still blossoming across my abdomen, sending little waves of barbed torment deep into my guts with every flex and tilt.

The squid-skull mask made it easy. The metallic face muffled the pain and lent me focus, better than any opiate in the blood.

Horror’s severed head led the way, whispering directions as she dangled from my fist.

“Down those stairs, around to the right, one flight down. Then take the first left, not the second. Past the row of x-ray rooms, yes, that’s correct. Best not open those doors—” I turned her at that imprecision and implication, so she faced the six dark eye holes of my squid-skull mask, staring deep into her watery blues. She flinched. “No, that’s not a cruel joke!” she cried out. “I didn’t mean — I just— No, no, Heather, I was only — y-yes, yes, down this corridor, another left, and then— there! Right there! See? I’m telling you the truth, Heather. I’m telling you the whole truth. You’re in charge. You are.”

Horror’s whisper trailed off, drowned out by the sudden roar of the revolution bursting back to full volume before us — the shout and cry of patients fighting, the slam and slap of blunt objects striking

flesh, the squeal of girls overwhelmed beneath weight of numbers, and the shuffling step of so many nightmare nurses.

Zalu and Xiyu slammed to a halt, bracing their boots, guns flicking forward. Eileen stopped as well, just behind the twin heels of our trigger-eager escorts.

“Stay back, Ma’am!” Zalu snapped.

“This isn’t safe,” said Xiyu. “We’re exposed, sister. Bad position, poor angles. Withdraw?”

“Maybe. Ma’am, that chattering brain-box has led us into a trap. We need fresh orders.”

“No,” I croaked inside my squid-skull mask, fighting against the racing of my heart and the sudden lump in my throat. “She’s done exactly as I wanted. This is where we need to be. This is where we stand.”

Before us lay a sight I recognised from the wall of monitors. This was the place I had attempted to intervene with my brain-math chalk — a dead-end corridor lined on one side by windows as narrow as cracks in bone, and on the other by a row of locked doors like rotten teeth.

Even from the vantage point up on Eileen’s back I could not see the dozen besieged patients at the far end of the corridor, mounting their doomed last stand to protect the ones too weak or young or scared to fight. Six dozen nightmare-wrought zombie-nurses clogged the corridor like a wave of sewage, blocking the way with their misshapen grey backs, clad in torn and tattered uniforms stretched wide by curls of horn and rippling masses of fat-clogged tumour.

A handful of the rearmost nurses began to turn in reaction to our arrival. They stared at us with blank and empty eyes, with orbs on stalks, with ruined sockets, with glassy looks and slack mouths and dripping fangs slathered with yellow-green drool. They were more like something from a cartoon than a true nightmare, rubber-suit monsters too absurd to take seriously by the thin and reedy light of morning. They only made sense in the dark.

But their violence was real enough.

The ripple of recognition spread through the nurses. More of them

turned toward us, leaving their vanguard to deal with the patients beyond. They began to shuffle in our direction, raising rope and cuffs and straitjackets and syringes full of bubbling fluid. Jaws yawned wide. Strangler's hands grasped at empty air. The mob formed up and moved to swallow us whole.

Zalu and Xiyu backed away, flicking their guns left and right.

"Ma'am!" one of them snapped. "Permission to open fire?"

"No," I murmured.

"Ma'am?!"

"Permission denied," I said, slipping into the role with far too much ease. The squid-skull mask made it simple; I was in charge. "Do not fire, either of you."

"Ma'am, we need to defend ourselves or reposition! We can't stay here! Ma'am!"

"Eileen," I said — yet could not keep the quiver from my voice.

"Eileen, step forward."

"Ma'am!?" one of the Twins said, moving to block us. "Please, Ma'am, stay behind us, stay where we can protect—"

"And you two stay in the rear," I said. "Follow when you can. You'll know when. Eileen, do it. Step forward!"

Eileen stepped past the Twins. "If only I could have been so forward with the staff," she said. "We could have made some progress."

There was nothing between us and the oncoming nurses now, nothing but twenty feet of bare corridor and whitewashed hospital walls and the sickly cast of morning light through the slit-windows, painting the nurses a deep and dreary grey. Nothing between me and my trauma, no brain-math to save me, no Sevens to leap in swinging her sword, no Raine to grab my shoulders and fuck me stupid until I forgot all about my own past. My trauma — embodied in these nurses — was inflicting itself upon people who had nothing to do with me, who would be overwhelmed by my history, my past, my hatred, my spite, my pain.

She could never have done this, could she? Lonely Heather, Bitter Heather, 'Ruthless' Heather. She would never accept this. Would never understand. Would never take responsibility for—

Crick-crack; a great muffled cracking sound filtered up from somewhere deep inside the body of the hospital, miles below Eileen's feet, trapped beneath dozens of floors and shells of metal and oceans of darkness.

Whatever had lurked behind that frosted glass in Lonely Heather's little steel room, it was slowly but surely breaking out.

Nobody else reacted to the cracking sound. Zalu and Xiyu were still holding steady, ready to open fire despite my request. The nurses were shuffling forward, dragging club-like feet studded with jagged claws.

"Are we to wait," Eileen asked, "for their weight to weigh on us?"

"Not quite," I whispered, trying to smile at her newest pun. "Eileen, out in reality, for months and months now, I've been saying that nobody deserves the Eye. I would like to amend that statement. Nobody deserves Cygnet Hospital." I raised Horror's head and held it high, like the trophy of a defeated enemy general. "It's time for me to take responsibility for the dream. Walk forward."

Eileen — to my incredible surprise and endless affection — did not question the seeming madness of my orders.

She strode forward, carrying me into the surging tide.

The wave of nurses crowded toward us, reaching up for me with a dozen clawed hands, clacking plastic wrist-cuffs to capture my ankles, arcing naked needle-points toward my thighs, raising lengths of rope to bind my legs and arms and wrap around my throat. The shambling mass closed around Eileen and I in a ring of grey flesh and greyer uniforms. Their numbers formed a wall. There was no way back.

Horror kept her lips sensibly shut. I held her high, and knew I need not utter any words. All I needed was determination and clarity. The logic had been set. The dream would do the rest.

But in the split-second before the nurses made contact, I felt a speck of doubt worry at my innards.

What if I was wrong? What if I had lied to myself? What if Lonely Heather was right, or at least not entirely incorrect?

Or what if there was some other, third, as-yet unseen force which also held control of the dream? What if the only two players left

upon the stage were not I and I, me myself and my Lonely Counterpart? Where, after all, had all these additional nurses originated? Why were their numbers growing, now that the head of the hierarchy had been severed and confined?

Criick-crack went that great glass tank, down at the bedrock of the dream.

What if this was how it ended for me, bound and gagged and drugged and thrown in a cell, forgotten in a dark and lonely place, in the exact way I had been so afraid of spending all my short and brutish years, wasting away to rot and ruin inside the institution? What if the nightmare never ended, the curtain never fell? What if I lost?

Fear forced my heart up into my throat and my sight down toward what I faced; in those vacant drooling nurse-visages I saw every childhood fear, every night in the real Cygnet Hospital, every callous nursing hand, every dismissive doctor, every ignorant word. I saw the many moments in which my parents had listened to the medical professionals, nodding along with analysis which I could not understand, while I had stood there mute and dumb, as if I was a problem to be unpicked and solved and put back together again. I saw the threat of drugs — of anti-psychotics that only made it worse, of misdiagnosis and misunderstanding and mistreatment with the best of intentions. I saw my mother's warning words and chiding comments whenever I 'acted out', and saw the pain in my father's eyes when he caught me weeping all alone. I saw the oh-so-kind explanations that Maisie wasn't real, that I should do my best to forget her, because my fixation and delusion was unhealthy, and I had never had a sister, let alone a twin. I saw the years stretching out inside the confines of a padded cell. I saw death in my early twenties, by suicide or worse. I saw every lesson I had learned in Cygnet, made flesh and horror and hate.

My throat closed up. My skin went ice cold.

In that very last moment, I couldn't do it.

For Maisie I would face the Eye. For Maisie I would forgive Eileen. For my friends and lovers and companions, I would brave Outside and run riot through a revolution. For them I would face down gods and mages and kings and even myself, whatever shape they took and whatever flesh they demanded. For the meanest of forgotten

pebbles I would shed blood and tears and rip chunks from my soul.

But Cygnet was a symbol of everything I could not face. As the nurses closed around me, I wanted nothing greater than to turn and run.

Eileen twitched backward, as if she felt my thoughts. But there were nurses in front and behind, and nowhere to go.

I grasped the only thing I had left, the only motivation left which fit the gap — I pictured my Other Self, my Lonely Self, Bitter and Afraid and in need of help. I remembered that the Other Me was alone in a lonely little room, shorn of her protection, without her mask, without friends or allies or a warm hand on her back. She had no Raine, no Evee, no Eileen. I had rejected her, stolen her refuge, and insulted her efforts.

The guilt was poison in my throat; I expelled it with a cry.

Craaaaack went the hidden glass tank, so very far below.

“For me!” I shouted.

The nurses — hands and syringes and claws and cuffs and the fastenings of straitjackets — touched my legs, my feet, my ankles, my hips, my arms, my hands, my fingers pressed to Eileen’s front—
And fell.

Warped hands of greyish sagging flesh recoiled as if plunged into flame, the skin sloughing off and peeling away like ashes in a great wind, revealing the human hands beneath. Syringe-needles broke against my pajamas as if on steel and concrete, cracking and rusting and turning to dust; fluids evaporated, glass shattered, plungers broke. Straitjackets fell apart like the moth-eaten lies they were. Plastic cuffs splintered apart like cheap toys around my ankles. Ropes failed to catch and refused to knot, flailing upward into their wielders’ faces like unruly pythons.

Every nurse who dared to touch me staggered back, monstrous features falling away like so much smoke and mist, or reabsorbed back into their flesh like rocks sinking in swampy water. Uniforms re-knit, stretched taut over human shoulders and human hips. Human eyes blinked and stared, befuddled in human faces. Human legs gave out in exhaustion or shock. Standard nurse name-tags blossomed on chests like little rectangular flowers in plastic.

I raised Horror's head higher, filled my lungs, and shouted, "All of you are mine! Every single one of you! Mine!"

Most nurses collapsed on the spot, staring up at me in abject shock and religious awe, their eyes filling with tears or thrown wide in wordless wonder. More shambling monsters pushed past their collapsed former co-workers, but they fared no better than the first wave, recoiling and transforming at the merest brush of my flesh or clothes — or even just the six-holed stare from my squid-skull mask.

I felt like a Gorgon, my touch and my gaze melting stone back to flesh, forcing the dream to assume a new shape.

"Eileen, carry me forward!"

"So you may hit them upon the heads," Eileen murmured, and strode into the mass of nurses.

We cut through the nurses like wind through grass. Nurses fell before us, transforming back into the human dream-guise of my decade of trauma, crashing to their knees, scrambling away, struck by awe at the sight of my truth, my squid-skull mask, my claim upon Horror. Many of them were still caught in the act of turning around, still shambling toward the doomed last stand at the end of the corridor. Zalu and Xiyu swept in behind us, shouting stereotypical things like 'On the floor! Face down! Hands on the back of your head!', 'Stay down, stay down!' Privately I thought that was a bit unnecessary, but I let them deal with the few nurses who had not fallen to their knees or collapsed onto their backsides.

The waters of my trauma parted before us, rolling back like the tide defeated.

Even without my six tentacles and my other selves and the glorious truth of my true body, I had never before felt so much like an angel.

Within the space of a few moments, there were simply no more zombie nurses before us — only the equally bewildered, awestruck faces of a dozen Cygnet patients, crammed against the end of the corridor, with nowhere left to run.

We had saved their last stand.

Twelve patients of all shapes and sizes stood shoulder to shoulder, protecting a cluster of younger girls huddled behind the line. They clutched improvised weapons, broken table legs, and the shattered

remnants of their own barricade. Many of them were bleeding from small cuts and grazes, just as I had seen on the monitors. One tall girl with frizzy dark hair stared out from behind a mask of blood, running from a shallow head wound — but she stood defiant, in the centre, the closest thing to a leader. Two of the girls had been dragged down by the nurses, but were quickly helped up by their companions. One could barely stand, and had apparently been injected with something nasty. The other had a broken rib, coughing and cringing and leaning on her friends. The smaller girls behind the line peeked out between the arms and legs of their protectors, awestruck at the sight of me and Eileen, at the dark eye holes of my squid-skull mask, and at Horror's severed head.

For a strange moment I had no idea what to say; I almost apologised, but the whisper was lost behind my mask. These patients, these teenage girls and young women given form and figure by the dream, they were more than mere metaphor. The nurses I had conquered were my own trauma, pressed into human form. But these patients, they were everything and everyone ever drawn into the event horizon of the Eye, of that I was certain now. Their true bodies and minds were Outsiders from beyond the rim of my imagination. Eileen had trapped them without intention, and I had pulled them into this dream.

The patients' collective shock passed quickly. Eyes alighted upon Eileen, going wide with surprise and alarm. Weapons were brandished, fists raised, lips pulled back from snarling teeth. Flagging protectors regained their unsteady feet. The shield wall tried to reform. Shouts went up.

"It's her!"

"The fucking Governor!"

"She's come to finish the job—"

"Don't be stupid, Emily, she knocked all the nurses out! Look at them all!"

"She's come to unscrew our heads and scoop out our brains!"

"Weapons up, girls! Sadie, back behind. One of you girls get another brick, ready to—"

"I could run her through from here!"

“Give it a shot!”

“It’s her! It’s the Governor, it’s—”

Eileen said: “I’m sorry, but I seem to have misplaced that identity.”

The wall of girls hesitated all at once, as if they’d never heard the Governor speak before.

I raised Horror’s head, so that my intention could not be mistaken. “She’s not the Governor anymore!”

A flinch ran through the line of patients. All eyes jumped to my squid-skull mask. One of the younger girls behind the line yelped in sudden child-like fear, clutching at a friend to her side. A couple of the boldest patients up front raised their makeshift weapons, angled toward me like spears, as if I was a monster about to fall upon them.

Did I really sound so terrifying, from inside my squid-skull mask?

“She’s not the Governor anymore!” I repeated. “She’s my mother!”

The patients exchanged a series of worried glances, as if I was a madwoman bellowing nonsense. The tall girl with the frizzy hair and the blood all down her face squinted up at me.

Praem poked her plush head out from inside my yellow blanket, and suggested that though my struggles determined the nature and shape of the dream, to these patients such concerns were incomprehensibly peripheral.

“Incomprehensibly peripheral?” I whispered inside my helmet, and refrained from commenting on Praem’s choice of language. “Then what—”

Act like a revolutionary, Praem suggested. Tell them the truth.

“I’m with Lozzie!” I shouted — and that seemed to do the trick. Weapons dipped, fists uncurled, eyebrows raised in surprise. Lozzie was the most popular girl in all the worlds Outside, of course, and that had carried over into the dream of Cygnet. “And so is the Governor! She’s given up all her authority, she knows we’re in the right! The Governor is no more, and soon enough Cygnet Asylum will be no more! You all saw what I just did, yes? You must all know that this is a nightmare, a false reality. Cygnet Asylum is a lie and a trick, and we don’t have to endure it any longer. You all have

real faces, real bodies, outside this dream. We're going to tear down these walls and free every last prisoner! We're going to crack open the Box, and the staff can't stop us anymore!"

The line of girls visibly relaxed at the flow of my words. Some of them looked at each other and laughed or sagged with relief. Others finally lowered their weapons, stunned into silence, then nodding at my crescendo. The tall one with the head wound thought for a moment — then snapped off a salute at me. A ragged cheer went up as I finished.

My chest swelled with a strange pride, a feeling I had never experienced before. Was I leading these girls? Was I the right person to deliver this rousing speech? Behind my mask I was just Heather, and I had caused this dream in the first place, I bore the guilt—

Crack-crrrack went the glass in the deeps. None of the patients reacted.

One of the smaller girls pressed a round little face between the legs of her protectors, and addressed me. "What about the robot soldiers we saw downstairs? They were shooting at the nurses, but then they chased us!"

I looked down at her. So like myself when I was her age, questioning and inquisitive, before all that had been crushed by Cygnet.

"They won't shoot at me," I said, "They'll follow my orders if I can reach them. As long as you all stay behind me, we can win."

The tall girl with the blood on her face pointed past me and Eileen. "What about all those fuckers in the meantime, huh? You gonna tie them all up, squid-girl? Way too many to take prisoner."

"No," I said, and smiled inside my mask. "I have a better use for them. Eileen, turn us around, if you please."

"The lady turns, and is for turning," Eileen whispered, just loud enough so only I could hear.

Behind us, the corridor was littered with the six dozen nurses we had parted and conquered, down on their knees or lying on their faces, collapsed through sheer awe, staring up at me and Eileen — or at the hungry mouths of the Twins' guns. A few of them kept

trying to get to their feet, thrown down again and again by Zalu and Xiyu. Many of them looked terrified, for their weapons and tools had disintegrated in their hands, while the remaining lengths of rope and pairs of cuff seemed to slither out of their grip when they tried to reassert control.

But these were no blank-faced automatons or zombie-like metaphors. The expression of my trauma suddenly looked like a corridor full of terrified women, with human faces and human reactions. This was the line which would divide me from my Other Self.

I raised Horror's head again, and raised my voice.

"All of you, listen to me!"

Every nurse looked up, even the ones who weren't going quietly. A lump formed in my throat — I was no great orator, not exactly skilled at public speaking, but I had no choice except to make this work. What would Sevens say? She would probably let the logic of the scene flow through her. I imagined myself in her place, confident and powerful and with a God's command of dream-logic. I let the mask speak for me.

"I take responsibility," I said. "I take responsibility for you, every single one of you, and everything you've done here, in this dream, upon this stage. I accept you, all of you, all the different aspects and facets of my trauma. You hear me? I accept you! You will not be cast out into the cold when this process ends. You will not be abandoned, if you fail to assert dominance and control. You will not be forgotten, if you do not command. You are not in charge! But you will not be exiled. None of you will be forgotten. I promise." I waited a beat, as if underlining my intention. "Now, all of you, stand up, leave the employ of the hospital, and join us in revolution. Help us pull down these walls. Help us make something new."

Silence.

The nurses shared looks far more sceptical and worried than the patients had done. If anything, the crowd seemed even more terrified than before.

Sweat beaded on my face. Had I gotten this all wrong? Had we not bent and broken the genre far enough for this to work? Were these

women — who had moments ago been shambling monsters — convinced they were still nurses?

What mad step must I take, to have my own trauma accept what it was?

Horror's severed head opened her mouth with a wet and bloody click, issued a rather unimpressed little sigh, and said: "She didn't leave me behind, though she really should have done, strictly speaking. Come along, ladies. I think we know when we're beaten."

The carpet of defeated nurses all stared up at Horror, but stayed frozen where they lay.

I hissed inside my mask. "Try harder."

"I did!" Horror muttered from the corner of her mouth. "Heather, you're the one in charge now! I'm just providing a little credibility. If you can't convince ... ah."

Slowly, with great caution, a single nurse rose to her feet.

She was young — perhaps no more than a handful of years older than me, with long mousy hair and big bright eyes and a face gone white with terror. The name tag pinned to the chest of her uniform read 'A.TOKEN'. She raised her hands in surrender as she stood up, shooting fearful looks at Zalu and Xiyu. I gestured for the Twins to let her rise, though they stood ready to knock her back to the floor if she did anything untoward. They needn't have bothered though — 'Token' could barely make her legs work, so overawed by defeat and transformation. Her knees shook as she drew herself up to her full height.

When Token was certain she wasn't about to be brutalised by the buttstock of a submachine gun, she looked up into the eye holes of my mask. Her lips moved, but her voice was nary a whisper.

"Speak up," I called out.

Token flinched, then took a deep breath. "I accept," she said. "I accept. I accept! And I'm ... I'm sorry."

"Then show me," I replied.

For a moment Token didn't know what to do — and in truth, neither did I. The logic of the dream had made a demand through my lips. It simply seemed right to ask for an outward sign of fealty

and submission, some physical proof that this manifestation of trauma had finally given up the pantomime of primacy.

Token hesitated, eyes darting left and right, throat bobbing with panic. But then her face lit up with sudden realisation.

She grabbed the Cygnet-issue name tag on her chest — A.TOKEN — and ripped it clean off, leaving behind a ragged gash in the starched white of her uniform. She flung the name tag onto the floor, raised one sensible shoe, and stamped on the offending label. The plastic cracked beneath her heel, blotting out her name, her job title, and the stylised words, ‘Cygnet Hospital Staff’.

Token — or whatever she was now — looked up into the eye sockets of my mask.

For a horrible moment I had no idea how to respond. This was no trickery or trap. The symbolism and power of the dream was responding to my will. This little token of my trauma had truly surrendered, in the one way that really mattered. But the words were jammed in my throat. I almost hiccuped in panic, blocked only by the power of my squid-skull mask.

Praem peered up from inside my yellow blanket and provided the obvious answer.

Even then the words still stuck fast. I didn’t want to say them. A decade of resentment was almost too much.

But I had to let go. All other roads led to self-defeat.

Praem was right. I said the words.

“You are forgiven,” I told the nurse.

Those three words opened the floodgates; like a ripple from a pebble cast into deep water, the nurses rose to their feet either side of Token, then all the way back down the corridor. Name tags were ripped from uniforms and cast to the floor in a clatter of plastic rain. Almost six dozen heels came down on six dozen designations — A.LIE cracked and A.TECHNICALITY broke in two; A.FIST was kicked to the wall and A.BOOT was destroyed beneath the heel of a shoe; A.BURDEN was abandoned and A.DUTY was rejected. In the space of a few seconds, almost six dozen nurses had given up their places in the hierarchy of suffering that was Cygnet Asylum.

Yet not all the nurses accepted my forgiveness. A couple stood

defiant, arms crossed over their chests, frowning in disapproval — A.BAD MEMORY and A.LONELY NIGHT. A bold nurse, tall and strong — A.REFUSAL — made a lunge for Zalu's gun, only to get knocked across the jaw and shoved back to the floor. A handful of others hesitated too long, then hardened their faces, scowling at me from over their name tags — A.GRUDGE and A.RANCOR, A.RELAPSE and A.ROLE.

I swallowed a sigh. Not all trauma was so easily accepted. This process would last the entire rest of my life, but at least it had begun.

“Ma’am!” Xiyu shouted, covering some of those last few with the muzzle of her gun. “What do we do with the recidivists?!”

Horror whispered, “Interesting word.”

“You keep your mouth shut,” I said to her.

“Y-yes, Heather.”

I raised my voice. “They are still my responsibility, still mine to accept, even if they reject it for now. But we don’t have time to process them at the moment. Tie them up and bring them with us. I’ll deal with them later.”

Xiyu nodded, then gestured with her gun. Zalu moved to grab one of the rough blue nylon ropes which had fallen to the floor. The recidivists and reactionaries began to raise fists and back toward each other, forming a rough circle of their own last stand. I hissed with frustration behind my mask — were they really going to make us fight? Make us shoot them? They were my trauma, and they would not be swept away so easily, but I would not goaded into shooting them or abandoning them, or something equally worse. The dream logic would not serve me well if I took such extreme measures.

Before I could shout a halt, the ex-nurses — the ones who had cast off their badges and their roles — surged forward to apprehend their former co-workers.

Liberated hands grabbed rope and twisted unruly wrists behind backs. Superior numbers blocked clumsy punches and piled on top of the holdouts. In the space of half a minute, the former nurses had the handful of refusers bound at wrist and waist, roped together, ready to bring along with us.

One of the patients behind me let out a low whistle. “You’ve really got them whipped. Holy shit. Alright, squid-face girl, I’m on your side. What now?”

I glanced back to find the tall girl with the dried blood on her face looking up at me, broken table leg held ready in one fist, a determined light in her eyes.

“Now?” I echoed, and felt a grin rising behind my mask. “Now we break the asylum, and rescue the patients, and find all our lost friends.”

The tall girl cracked a grin. “Fuck yeah, squid-face. You leading us, then?”

I raised Horror’s head like a trophy and battle standard both in one. I filled my lungs to bursting, despite the throb of tender flesh in my guts. I yelled as loud as I could, putting all my confidence into a cry.

“Everyone who wants to be free, follow me!”

A cheer went up, both in front and behind, from patients and ex-nurses alike. Eileen took the cue and strode forward, down the double-line of former nurses to either side. Zalu and Xiyu fell in just ahead, our vanguard on the path. The scrum of patients swept up behind me, a phalanx to our rear, their younger numbers sheltered in the middle. Then the great mass of six dozen nurses swung in to follow.

We left the dead-end corridor behind, rampaging out into the ruptured guts of Cygnet Hospital.

Over the following hour — or two, or three, or ten, for time ceased to have meaning at the centre of revolution’s vortex — that minor triumph played out again and again and again. We burst through double-doors with the aid of the Twins’ booted feet, surprising gaggles of nurses leaning over girls strapped to operating tables, scattering the surgical torture before it could begin. We rescued beleaguered last stands in besieged doctor’s offices, extending a hand to patients who had thought themselves overwhelmed. We stumbled upon running battles inside a pool room — the pool itself long drained of water — and another in the movie theatre where I had met Lizzie, the screen now torn, the lights on full, the stage a shield wall of patients. We turned those tides and added their

numbers to our own. We watched nurses tear their uniforms and cast off their false names, and bloodied patients flock to us by the dozen.

The process had a logic all of its own; I had set something in motion greater than myself. I could not have stopped it even if I had wanted, for I was not standing at the head of an army and giving orders — I barely spoke except to deliver forgiveness to my traumas and promises of liberation to the patients and inmates. If I had fallen unconscious upon Eileen's back, the crowd would have simply swept us onward, using my insensible body to banish the nurse-zombies in every fresh corridor and hallway and stinking chamber of Cygnet Asylum.

We did very little actual fighting — we had no need, not with the way that my mere touch was enough to disable the nurses and return them to their human forms. Zalu and Xiyu were not forced to use their guns, much to my incredible relief; their duties were limited mostly to controlling the few nurses in every conquered group who refused to submit. The great crowd of nurses gathering to my rear were no use in a fight — none of them seemingly thought to pick up weapons or lend their strength, perhaps because they had given up on that role. The patients, far fewer in number, stayed closer to the figure I presented, riding on Eileen's back; on several occasions they did fight, the same as they had done so without my leadership, holding back the monstrous metaphor of the zombie-nurses for the few moments it took Eileen to carry me forward.

We swept through the hospital like an avalanche down a mountainside, gathering and growing, crushing everything before us, almost without contest.

I lost track of the edges of the group as we grew; such a feat was impossible for one mind, let alone one still wracked with pain behind my mask. Those closer to the front and core of the group made themselves into my lieutenants, those few patients who had been leading their respective groups before I had shown up. They shouted orders back and forth, herded the less confident and younger girls, darted forward to peek around corners, and called out warnings as we spotted fresh nurses up ahead. At some point we picked up three Knights — battered and scuffed, their weapons reduced to expensive clubs, their mirrored visors cracked by nurse-

fists, their impaled-tentacle insignias long discarded; those three joined Zalu and Xiyu in the vanguard, taking orders from the Twins with wordless precision, their true natures once again well-recalled.

Events blurred together — one liberation became another and another and another, smeared into one long streak by my exhaustion and pain. But I couldn't call a halt, not yet. We had to find the others, find my friends, find my other six selves, overcome myself, and end this nightmare so Maisie could finally be free. We had to peel my Lonely Counterpart out of her shell, and throw the Box wide open.

Now and again I heard that deep-down cracking sound, that crickle-crackle of straining glass, somewhere far beneath all our feet.

The Box was breaking already.

Eventually, a bright, clear, clean moment finally punctuated the rolling wave of the revolution — Zalu and Xiyu led the way out through a pair of double doors, and suddenly we found ourselves beneath the open sky, in the middle of a courtyard between several hospital buildings. Sad, wilted, bedraggled flowers grew in beds around the rim, while rotten old benches offered dubious places to sit, perched on crumbly concrete amid pathways of sad and faded asphalt. Dark windows stared down at us from all sides, some flickering with the hint of patients and nurses still locked in the long nightmare.

We swept through that open courtyard without pause, plunging toward the exit on the opposite side.

But for just a second, cool dawn breeze reached beneath my squid-skull mask and buoyed me up, waking me from the process of which I had become but one small part. I raised my eye sockets to the sky, to her, to the Eye.

Clean silver light poured from the narrow slit which stretched from horizon to horizon, a sliver of the vast shimmering sea beneath her gnarled black outer layers. Lid-ridges the size of mountain ranges bunched and wrinkled either side of that gaze, holding back the lid-halves wider than continents. The silver light eased through the eye sockets of my mask, and touched the skin of my face. It was warm.

"I see you now," I whispered. "Hello up there."

"My eyes are down here," said Eileen, beneath me.

I almost laughed, swept up in the heady tonic of the revolution all around us. “And you’re very beautiful, up there in the sky. You always were, I just couldn’t stop to look at you before, not for more than a split-second.”

“And now we have a staring contest.”

“Don’t be silly,” I murmured. “I’ve already won that.”

The crowd of patients and nurses, led by the Twins and a trio of Knights, swept us across the courtyard to the matching double-doors on the other side. As I lowered my gaze from the Eye, preparing to once again plunge into the hospital corridors, I caught a glimpse of a familiar velvet-black back over the rooftops, furred with whorls of white, framed by the flutter-buzz of giant wings, heralded by a distant *prrrrrrrt-brrrrrrt!* of lepidoptoid lungs.

Tenny was still fighting her own mock battle, doing her best to reach the Box.

“We’ll be there soon, Tenny,” I whispered. “Be there soon.”

“Presently,” said Eileen — and that time I could not comprehend the pun.

Zalu and Xiyu burst through the double doors and back into the hospital, followed by the Knights, then by myself and Eileen. The patients streamed in after us, carrying us forward like a tide, followed in turn by the great number of liberated ex-nurses. We plunged down the length of a wide, whitewashed corridor, the walls plastered with art by inmates and patients, punctuated by notices and circulars on pinboards and whiteboards, and by doors which opened upon big, bare rooms — classrooms or exercise rooms, in a part of the hospital I had never seen before.

The corridor disgorged us into a wide waiting room, with sticky floors and plastic chairs, lit by buzzing fluorescent lights and wallpapered with saccharine scenes from children’s books, of happy-faced dogs fetching bones and serene cows grazing in cartoon pastures. This was the kind of place which was unmoored from time and reality even when not in a dream, the sort of place I hated from the bottom of my heart.

To our collective left stood a row of doors leading deeper into the hospital; to our right was a wooden reception counter like a barricade across the room, abandoned now, the depths behind sunk

in shadow, the bulbs all burst or ripped from their sockets.

And directly ahead of us were two dozen nurses and patients, mingled together, their distinctions irrelevant now, down on their knees with their hands in the air or clasping the backs of their heads, pleading for their lives with a force that could not listen.

Six Empty Guards — the robotic automations serving the foolish paranoia of my Lonely Counterpart, formed like smaller, neater, more regimented versions of my beloved Knights, with shiny visors and black body armour and the herky-jerky movements of a stop-motion animation — had six beetle-black guns aimed into the pleading crowd.

As we burst into the room and swept forward, the Empty Guards twitched their attention away from those they held at gunpoint. I shouted to stop — slow down, halt, they’ve got guns! — but the logic of the mob was independent of my will, and they hit the brakes far too late. Zalu and Xiyu slammed to a halt, guns raised, fingers on triggers; the trio of Knights did the same, but they were only bluffing, their guns were not for shooting anymore. The patients scrambled to end their forward flow, heels skidding on the sticky floor, shouts of alarm passing back down the line.

Six muzzles swung upward to bite great chunks out of the revolution.

“Hold your fire!” I screamed inside my mask, hoping that my voice — the same voice as their Lonely, Bitter, Nasty Little Leader — would stall their guns. Eileen shouldered me to the front of the crowd in three quick steps, bursting from between the patients to block the Guard’s shots. “I order you to hold your fire! No shooting! No shooting! Put your guns down, put your—”

All six muzzles pointed right at my face.

Six jerky fingers tightened on six feathery triggers. Zalu and Xiyu did the same, preparing to open fire. Three Knights strode forward to take what bullets they could — but they wouldn’t be enough, they could not shield us all. Eileen and I would be in the fore, but the bullets would tear into the crowd behind us.

I had believed, somewhere deep down inside, that the Other Me, the Lonely and Bitter Me, the Me with the Most Terrible of Plans, would never stoop to this. She accused me of wishing her dead, of

wanting her imprisoned or erased. But that was all projection, for now her soldiers pointed their guns at me and mine.

By extending myself the smallest grain of faith, I had lost.

Another great, deep, distant cracking sound of meter-thick glass echoed up from miles beneath my feet.

Guilt and rage surged upward from my chest. I bared my teeth and held Horror's head aloft in that final split-second. She would have me shot — but she would still lose. Whatever she was trying to keep contained, it was only a matter of time until it broke free. Maisie would be free, even if I fell here.

I felt the six bullets slide into the six chambers. I stared into the six muzzles, so big and dark and empty. I saw my own face — my squid-skull mask — reflected in six blank and empty visors, six eye holes times six, smeared out across the dream.

But still I had to try, for all those who had followed me.

“Don't sho—”

A knife-blade of flesh and claw and iridescent membrane vaulted from the shadows behind the reception desk.

It moved faster than my poor eyes could follow, a whirling flicker-flash of abyssal grace crossing the room as a blur of rainbow-strobing colour. Spikes and spines and a fist of razor-sharp talons took the first Empty Guard off at the head. A sinuous tentacle caught the head before it could fall, and used it to crack the skull of the next Guard in line. Guns were turning toward the apparition, muzzles trying to flicker around and draw a bead — but she slapped the weapons with another tentacle, dripping acid to corrode their mechanisms, clogging their barrels with rainbow mucus, burning the hands of their wielders.

The four remaining Empty Guards stumbled backward, trying to get range, to regroup, to retreat. But it — her, she, the sight taking my breath away — unfurled wings like oceanic membranes, snapping taut in the air and pouncing after her prey. Webbed fingers grabbed a faceplate and put a spike through a robotic brain. Two tentacles ripped a gun from robotic hands and smashed the butt through a neck. A floating membrane caught the second to last Guard and melted it at the joints, leaving it to fall like prey drained of fluids. The last Empty Guard threw down the gun and lashed out with a

fist. She took the punch full in the face, unhinged her jaw, and bit off the entire hand at the wrist.

The Guard stumbled back, wrist-stump spewing oil. She spat out the hand, then rammed a tentacle full of spikes through the Guard's neck. The final robot body dropped with a clatter.

Truth and beauty paused for a moment, caught in bioluminescent profile against the shadows. The crowd all around me shifted, as if afraid.

"No!" I hissed. "No. She's with me. She's ... she's me."

Homo abyssus — one of six, for all six were free and loose in the hospital now — straightened up and turned toward me.

She — I? Me? — was one of the most breathtakingly beautiful things I had ever seen.

Sleek, smooth, and sharp. Skin like peach and dove feathers and the dark of the void, all at the same time. Muscles like warm butter, toned and slender, rolled beneath naked skin, scaled and furred and spined. She was built for speed and grace and perfection of motion. Her mouth was full of razor-sharp teeth. Her eyes flickered from one colour to the next like staring into a nebula of the mind. Her hair floated like tendrils in undersea currents. Six tentacles quivered with polymorphous change, folding away spikes and barbs and acid-dripping toxic stingers. Great membranous wings settled back over her shoulders. Her hands were webbed, her feet were clawed, and she had two sets of knees, one facing backward like an animal. A narrow, barbed tail lashed from her rear. She was perfect.

She had my face, transformed by euphoria.

She smiled at me, opened her mouth, and went *hiiiiiiisssss*.

Tears ran down my cheeks. A great need burned in my chest, one which I had been suppressing and ignoring and putting off since the beginning of this nightmare, this parody of Cygnet Asylum. That was me! That was my body! That was us!

I reached out a hand from Eileen's back, lips quivering behind my mask.

"Come— come here!" I said. "Please, let's be one again, let's—"

She — a part of my own mind, a piece of myself — stepped back

and shook her head.

“ ... w-what?” I murmured, surely too soft to be heard beyond my mask. “Why? Why? You’re me, I’m you! We’re finally back together, we ... we ... ”

Heather abyssus opened her mouth and spoke through a wall of shark-like teeth.

“You don’t pass the sniff test,” she said in a hissing, gurgling, otherworldly voice from the very bottom of the abyss, with a throat not designed for human words. “Neither did the other.”

“ ... what? What are you— the other? The other me? What do you mean?”

“You need to put yourself back together, Heather,” said Abyssal and Beautiful Me. “Or we won’t have any foundation on which to cling.”

She took another step back, as if to turn away and slip into the shadows.

“Wait!” I almost screamed. “Please, please, wait— *hic— wait! Where are you going?!*”

Abyssal Truth raised eyebrows of feather-soft down. “To rescue our family — Raine, Evee, all the others. Aren’t you with us, Heather?”

I nodded, despite the aching need in my chest. “Always, always! But can’t we just recombine first, can’t we—”

“Then I’ll lead the way. We’ll put you back together yet. Keep up, Heather!”

bedlam boundary – 24.33

Heather abyssus — me, just me, me all along, my figure and form and face wrapped in pneuma-somatic truth, flowing with sharp and sinuous grace, stalking ahead with a rapid click-a-click-clack of cleanly curved claws against the cold hospital floor, with barbed tail swishing and snapping from the base of a naked spine lined with velvet fur and armoured scales, with membranous wings flickering about her shoulders and flanks like the razor's edge of heat-haze in a void.

She plunged back into the labyrinth of Cygnet Asylum.

What else could I do but follow? I had been chasing that euphoria half my life.

Our progress through the buckling, broken, breached-and-beaten guts of the hospital became a burning blur — but not like before, not consumed by the heady rush of cumulative victories. Outwardly nothing had changed except the Abyssal scout and vanguard pulling us onward. I still rode at the head of what had become a conquering army, gathering mass and numbers and power, flowing down the corridors of the hospital like clean blood washing away decades of infected flesh. That 'army' was still present at my back, dozens of patients led by my temporary lieutenants, with the great crowd of liberated ex-nurses following behind. The Twins — Zalu and Xiyu, dressed like video game soldiers, with white hair bobbing in mismatched ponytails — still hurried along either side of me, backed up by the trio of Knights we had rescued. Praem was still tucked into my yellow blanket, anchoring me to Eileen's back with all the strength a plushie could muster. Eileen herself still held my body aloft, a rock-solid foundation for a piggyback. I still wore my squid-skull mask upon my face, and held Horror's severed head in one hand, proclaiming that the war within myself was all but over. We still cut through the monstrous zombie-nurses like morning sunlight melting nightmare's mist and fog.

My 'army' howled down the hospital corridors, hot on the heels of my Abyssal Self. She led us deeper and deeper through whitewashed hallways, across the debris of ransacked meeting

rooms, and through the shattered walls of ruined operating theatres. We were still a rising note of victory, still a crescendo roaring toward climax.

But that climax never came. All I could do was pant and whine behind my mask.

All those others at my rear, all those details of our careening trajectory through the hospital, all of it faded away in my peripheral vision. The cries and shouts of my little army were drowned out by my own quivering breath and the rapid flutter of my heart. Tears of desire and denial ran down my cheeks and gathered on my lips, tasting of salt and copper. I whispered, voice shaking, "Please ... please ... "

I had eyes only for her — for myself, I, me, everything I should be — true and beautiful at last.

The mere sight of *Heather abyssus* stalking and striding and slinking ahead of us drew me from my body like a squid pulled from between a crack in the rocks, my flesh hooked by her venomous spines, pierced by her poison spikes, wrapped tight and squeezed within her tentacles, dragged from my hiding place on a rip-tide current of need and lust.

And I'm not being abstract about the lust.

I had never understood what Raine saw in me, physically and sexually; I trusted that she saw something, of course. I knew she wasn't faking her appreciation when she told me how attractive she found me, or when she expressed that desire, regularly and often, by pushing me up against a wall and making me squeal into her shoulder with three of her fingers up inside me. Raine wasn't lying — but I simply couldn't see through her eyes, could not see myself with the gaze of another. Whenever I examined myself in the mirror, even scrubbed and clean and glowing with happiness, presented in my most confident moments, I struggled to see anything sexually attractive about my small breasts and slender hips and stumpy legs and scrawny five-foot-nothing body, wrapped in pallid, pasty skin, topped by a plain little face and a head of colourless brown hair. That was the Heather I saw when I looked in the mirror — an ordinary girl, with nothing special to recommend me to anybody. But that was also the Heather I had seen on the wall of monitors — Lonely Heather, ugly, small, and stunted, with

exactly the same face as my own.

The only beauty I had begun to find in my own body was in those six tentacles, in their smooth and buttery pneuma-somatic muscle, in their bioluminescence, in how they gestured toward a truth of what I should have been all along. Those six tentacles I had made over the last year of trial and error and tribulation were by far my best feature.

But her — as she stalked ahead of us down the corridors of Cygnet Asylum? Heather Abyssal, Heather Ascendant, Heather Angelic, with her eyes like the inside of dying suns, with her undulating skin and scales and softly ruffled fur the thousand colours of boiling midnight skies?

I wanted her, and I wanted to be her, in a way I had never felt before. All my desire for Raine or Zheng or Eevee or Sevens was but a mere shadow of this incandescent lust.

If I had met this dream-separated tentacle-self under almost any other conditions, nothing could have held me back, nothing except rejection. If this Heather Abyssal decided to turn around right in the middle of Cygnet and pounce on me, I would not have resisted. If she wanted to drag me from Eileen's back and impale me on spikes and spines and pull at my flesh with her claws and open me up and climb inside my hot and quivering meat, I would have cried tears of squealing delight. I wanted her to pin me to the wall as Raine did, or slam me against the floor and bite into my neck. I wanted to run my hands over that body — my body! — and drink in the divine truth of scales and fur, cup the bases of claws and spikes, run my shaking fingers over her hips and flanks, kiss the flowing muscle of her tentacles. Kiss myself! Kiss my own beauty, for it was an impossible gift from the abyss.

But she had said no.

She had declined reunion. She had told me I smelled wrong, that I was a poor foundation, incomplete, and not myself. Euphoria was within reach, but I had been found wanting.

So Eileen carried me forward, while I wept and shook behind my squid-skull mask.

Luckily for me — not to mention for my friends, and for Maisie — this one of six, this tentacle-Heather, she possessed a far clearer

head than I could keep.

She broke the trance of my forlorn lust upon an unexpected rock, right in the middle of our stream.

Down a particularly dirty, dingy, stain-encrusted Cygnet hallway, lined with rusty bars which blocked off shadow-choked entrances to the prison-level, we slammed right into a thick knot of nurses. Abyssal Heather leapt into them from behind like a threshing machine, clawed fists and barbed tentacles hurling them aside to cut a path, leaving awful lacerated wounds across their sagging grey faces, tearing open their already ragged uniforms. Luckily for the soon-to-be-ex-nurses, Eileen stuck close to Abyssal Heather's heels; the faintest brush of my skin or a glance from my squid-skull mask was enough to transform a nurse-monster back into a human form, unwounded and whole, blinking and sweating, cowering in awe and terror as Abyssal and Other passed by.

Just like every previous encounter with unredeemed nurses and additional patients, we swept through the crowd as if they were butter before a blowtorch. My patients and liberated ex-nurses hurried up through the breach behind me, spreading the good word among those who lay defeated, rushing forward to rescue those who had been besieged.

But the patients we saved here were subtly different to all those we had previously encountered. These girls were not dressed in Cygnet-issue pajamas, but clad in rags and filthy grey jumpsuits and the remnants of torn-open straitjackets. They were armed not with broken table legs and makeshift shields, but with shivs and dirty little knives and lengths of jagged iron pipe. Some of them looked half-starved, nourished by nothing but the rage of the wrongly confined and blossoming faith in the revolution; others were oddly pale or ghoulish, as if they had not seen sunlight in years, blinking and shying from the thin grey dawn-light filtering in from outdoors. All of them were far filthier, much bloodier, and roaring with triumph as we reached them.

Several of the patients from my 'army' rushed forward to embrace old friends or lost comrades. Half a dozen battered Knights strode from the mass of newcomers and clasped hands with the trio we had already gathered.

Abyssal Heather turned to face me, paused in the middle of the

crowd, framed by a coiling mass of umbra and shadow.

“Heatherrrrr,” purred Perfect and Flawless Me. She drew my name out, turning the final letter into a high-pitched clicking noise.

“Here, here. Pay attention.”

Pay attention? But I was already staring at her, my heart racing, my breath ragged with desire. “Uhhhn?” I managed to grunt.

Abyssal Me cracked a grin. My heart soared — for there I was, my own expressions wrought in abyssal muscle and scale and fur; she was a little embarrassed, almost sheepish, as if trying not to acknowledge something right in front of her face. Was that how I looked when overcome by the same emotions?

No, of course not. I could not look that beautiful, not without reunion.

She hissed gently, then said in that gurgling, inhuman voice: “You’re in heat. It’s very flattering, but this isn’t the time.”

My lips parted. I could barely breathe. “I ... but I ... can’t we reunite and—”

Then I realised — these were not, strictly speaking, patients we had rescued; these were the inmates released from the prison levels beneath the relatively presentable hospital exterior. These were the girls like Raine, freed by one of my own.

The trance of lust lifted from my eyes. I blinked rapidly behind the sockets of my mask, and realised what shape loomed behind my Abyssal Self.

“Night Praem?” I croaked.

Night Praem stood at the centre of the liberated inmates — a mass of roiling shadow like infinite layers of lace and gossamer floating in an oil-dark sea, a cloud of ink spreading wide beneath the ocean waves, frilled at the edges like delicate folds of mollusc flesh the colour of sable and ebony. Her presence seemed to drink the meagre light in the corridor, tinting the walls and rusty bars to either side with shadows from nowhere, floating in mid-air like a cephalopod bobbing in a column of water. In the very centre of the vortex-mass of living night, the heavy curves of a feminine outline faced toward me, long tendrils of hair hanging over her shoulders in ragged rat-tails, blank and black eyes lost behind waves of charcoal

fog.

The inmates and patients gave Night Praem plenty of space, but they were clearly unafraid of her. She had led them out of the dark of the prison, after all.

Abyssal Heather cocked her head and shot me a sceptical look. “Did you forget already, Heatherrrr? I told you, we’re rescuing our family. Stop thinking with your cunt.”

“O-of course I didn’t forget about Praem!” I blurted out. “I just got ... distracted, by ... w-well, yes.” I huffed. “You can’t blame me ... I can’t ... I can’t go on much longer without ... without you ... ”

“Mmmmmmm,” purred Abyssal Heather; that sound was enough to send a shiver through the exact organ she had so indelicately named.

Night Praem floated forward, moving straight through Abyssal Heather like a ghost from a cheap horror movie, as if cutting short our bizarre masturbatory flirting. Abyssal Heather blinked several times as Night Praem passed through her body, then sneezed, an alien sound which drew a ring of flinches from the nearby patients and inmates. Zalu and Xiyu didn’t raise their guns, but they did step back, silently wary of this umbral apparition.

Horror murmured, “Gosh, she’s fab.”

“You be quiet,” I muttered back. “And ‘fab’?”

“Short for fabulous,” Horror whispered. “You should expand your vocabulary sometime.”

“Shut up.”

Night Praem stopped about six feet from Eileen. From below me, Eileen said: “How very occult.”

“Is ... is that another pun?” I asked.

“I think so,” said Eileen. “Now, how are we to shed light on this veil?”

The answer came from the Praem Plushie, tucked into the front of my yellow blanket.

Present me, said Praem.

Not one to question the wisdom of plushies, especially when in dreams, I let go of Eileen with my left hand and extracted the Praem Plushie from within my yellow blanket. I held her out over Eileen's shoulder, but Night Praem made no movement. She neither raised a hand inside her cloud of inky darkness, nor stepped forward to retrieve the missing half of her soul.

"Praem?" I croaked. "Praem, what's wrong?"

Perfect and Spiky Heather stalked forward, claws clicking against the floor, throat clicking slow and soft when she opened her mouth. "She's nervous. Doesn't want to face everything this experience has taught her about herself. A little like you, Heatherrrr."

"What does that mean?" I demanded.

Smooth and Jagged Me cocked her head, as if I should know exactly what she was talking about.

"W-well," I said, desperate to fill the fertile silence. "I can hardly blame her for that, this dream has been intense for all of us, to put it lightly. But we don't have time for this right now, we need to get to the Box, to Maisie. Praem? Praem, you have to—"

Throw me, demanded the Praem Plushie.

"Throw you?!" I said. "Praem, I would never—"

A maid is still a maid, even when in descent, said the Praem Plushie.

With no way in which to formulate a credible counterargument — for I knew so little about maids — I did as she requested. With what little strength remained in my left arm, I tossed the stout and huggable little plushie directly at Night Praem's face. As the plushie breached the shadow, Night Praem flinched backward. As the plushie made contact with her core, Night Praem lashed out with one shadow-draped arm and caught herself in a gentle grip.

Umbra and shadow collapsed like a sheet of oil caught by gravity's sudden pull, splashing to the floor and vanishing into the folds of the dream; gloom and fog sucked inward, condensing into lace and frill, peeling back from pale skin and a loose bun of bright blonde hair, revealing a pair of blank white eyes set in a round, pleasant, soft-cheeked face. Undulating shade collapsed into the fabric of a long pleated skirt, the shiny black of heavily booted feet, and the

form-fitting ruffles of a well-tailored, very familiar, and most excellent maid uniform.

Praem — my Praem, looking almost exactly as she did out in reality, with only the addition of a dozen or so extra layers of excessive lace — held the plushie in both hands, staring into the blank fabric eyes of her own little Plush Self.

“Praem!” I cried with relief. Our demon-maid doll-daughter was wide awake at last. “Praem, oh it’s so good to see you. I mean, in full, back to normal. Though ... why are you the only one of us who looks exactly like you do outside of the dream?”

Praem looked up and into my eyes. Her blank white orbs were so beautifully unreadable, I could have hugged her if I was down on my own two feet.

“Okay, well,” I said, giving up some ground. “Not exactly like in reality, I suppose. That is a very fancy lace setup at your throat. And ... white lace gloves?” Praem raised a hand as I noticed that little detail; from fingertips to elbows both her arms were wrapped in the most delicate lace gloves I’d ever seen, though somehow without leaving a sliver of skin exposed. “And I’m pretty certain the current iteration of your real maid uniform doesn’t have ... ” I squinted at her long skirt. “Whatever that inlaid geometric pattern is meant to be. Very fancy. Gosh, you’re halfway to evening gown in that, never mind maid. Nice boots, too. Very, um, stompy.”

Horror muttered, “Good for kicking in heads, no doubt.”

Praem opened her lips with a soft click, then spoke in a voice like the ringing of silver bells amid a tower of ice.

“A maid is still a maid, even in a dream,” she said. “And I have been a bad girl.”

Abyssal Heather let out a soft *hisssss*. “Don’t feel bad, Praem. Heather’s been worse.”

Praem looked up at me again. “Yes.”

“W-what?” I stammered. “I’ve been a ‘bad girl’? Praem, you were there with us in the Governor’s Office, you know I’m not the bad one, it’s the other me, the bi— ah!”

Without the Praem Plushie anchoring me to Eileen’s back, I was finding it much more difficult to stay situated. The throbbing in my

left shin was very bad, a few droplets of blood were falling from the left cuff of my pajama bottoms, and my guts were burning like a banked fire with every minor adjustment of my muscles. I struggled for a moment to wrap my arm back around Eileen's front. She did her best to help, but even with her steady strength there was only so much she could achieve.

Praem stepped up beside me and slipped the Plushie back into the front of my yellow blanket. The Praem Plushie anchored me once again, her little fabric arms exerting the grip and strength of Praem herself.

"But," I protested, "Praem, it's you, it's part of you. And you only just got yourself back together!"

"Yes," she said.

"And you—"

"Yes."

"... thank you, Praem. I love you."

Abyssally Beautiful Me agreed: "Love youuuu."

"Yes," said Praem.

Eileen turned her pinkly-glowing eyes on Praem as well. "Thank you, for everything you have done—"

"Yes."

"—granddaughter?"

Praem said nothing.

Eileen said: "Silence may be golden, but it is not currency. Am I to attempt another form of payment?"

"I am not a granddaughter, I am a maid."

Eileen said, "You may have made yourself a maid, but the one who made you was not a maid, but a maiden, and did not treat you as a maid or maiden made, until Heather made you whole with a name, and finished your making. Therefore, you are my granddaughter."

Praem stared into Eileen's pink eyes, like sunset reflected off shimmering sea. She did not smile, but I saw something akin to deep amusement behind those milk-white empty orbs.

“Grand Maid?” Eileen tried one more time. “It is not a word, but I understand we can invent those now.”

“Maids are grand,” said Praem. “Grand Maid is grander still.”

“Oh my gosh,” I whispered, more to myself than either of them. “Granddaughter. Right. Evelyn is going to have the mother of all freak outs.”

Eileen tried to look up at my face. “Heather, you punned.”

“I did?”

“You did!”

Part of me revelled in seeing this — my surrogate daughter (one of two, if one included Tenny, which one should and must) and my surrogate mother, negotiating the starting line of this new relationship, right in the middle of a victorious revolutionary march. All around us, patients and ex-nurses were still helping others up, dressing wounds, clapping shoulders, taking a breather amid the unravelling dream.

But another part of me felt terrible guilt; here I was, enjoying the collateral fruits of the dream, while Maisie was still—

Crack-crrrrack.

That sound again — that great glass enclosure, breaking open so slowly, far beneath our feet, locked in the core of the Box.

For once I was not the only one who heard that noise. Heather Abyssal twitched as well, looking around and cocking her head, tentacles flexing and twisting, nictitating membranes fluttering across her void-dark eyes. Scales flexed and fur stood on end. Muscles pulled taut, rolling beneath her skin. I stared at her for a long second, overawed by the sheer arousal I felt at the sight of myself. But then panic blotted out the speck of lust.

“Praem?!” I blurted out. “Did you feel that? Did you hear that noise?”

“I did not,” said Praem.

“Me neither,” agreed Eileen. “Are there secrets secreted which cannot join our herd?”

Zalu spoke up. “Ma’am, I didn’t hear a thing either. Negative on

strange sounds.”

“Ditto,” said Xiyu. “Negative zero-zero.”

Horror muttered, “Not that anybody cares, but I also did not hear. You’re hearing things, Heather.”

Praem looked directly at Horror, and said: “Correct. Nobody cares.”

Horror stuck out her tongue.

Abyssal and Glorious Me went *hisssss*, then said: “We must hurry onward. The others are already winning.”

“Is that what that sound means?” I called out as she turned to stalk away, back into the corridors of the hospital. “Is that us winning? Is that Maisie breaking free!?”

She glanced back with a look from the deepest ocean trench, cold and alone and afraid, down in the infinite dark which lay along the very bottom of all reality. That look froze my blood and curdled my thoughts. How could something so beautiful look so forlorn, even if only for a moment? All my former lust was suddenly mixed with protective affection; I longed to enfold myself in my arms and tell her she would never be alone again. If only she would join me.

But then she showed me her rows of razor teeth, and shook her head. “We don’t know what that is, Heather. Only you do.”

“W-what?! But I have no idea, the Lonely Me in the Box was keeping it imprisoned, I don’t-”

“We don’t have time for speculation,” she hissed. “We need to save the rest. Or don’t you care?”

“Of course I care!” I cried out. “Eileen, follow her!” I raised Horror’s head, rallying my troops. “Everyone, everybody, we move onward again! To liberate the rest of the hospital! Onward!”

Abyssal and Razor-Clean Me turned and stalked away, her passing pulling at the attention of so many patients and inmates. Knights turned to follow, patients rejoined the mob, Zalu and Xiyu formed up either side of Eileen. The great mass of ex-nurses behind us fell in line.

We followed truth and beauty, plunging once more through the winding corridors of Cygnet Asylum.

Less than three minutes later, we stumbled into Lozzie.

Our Lozzie — our surrogate sister forever, no matter the blood in her veins — was in little need of rescue. She and her elite group of well-armed girls were waiting for us by the smashed-open wreckage of a fire door, which led down into the dark access tunnels beneath the hospital. All around them lay the bound and gagged forms of over a dozen nurses — already starting to lose their monstrous features and transform back into human forms, as our triumphant procession reached Lozzie's position.

Lozzie herself was hanging off the arm of a second *Heather abyssus*.

Lozzie was treating that Abyssal Heather like a delightful squeeze toy; she was half-wrapped in tentacles, rubbing her face against the scales and fur, giggling and purring, running her hands along spikes and spines and nuzzling against the plated and armoured neck of this Perfect Version of Me. Envy blossomed in my heart, for I longed so much to do the same, to be in Lozzie's place and take the embrace a step further. How Lozzie avoided getting pricked on toxic spikes or lacerated by rows of tentacle-barbs, I had no idea; this second Abyssal Heather had made no effort to fold away her sharp edges and lethal weapons, though Lozzie was perfectly unharmed. Her pentacolour poncho was stained with dirt and soot and more than a little blood, but she was glowing with a triumph all her own.

Behind me, whispers started to rise from the patients I had liberated.

"It's her! It's the Lozzers!"

"It's Lozzie!"

"It's her!"

Lozzie lit up as we approached, bouncing upward in the arms of this second Abyssal Me. "Heathy!" she cried out. "And Heathy! Two for one and one for two! Or three now, three's a magic number too! And Praemy! And ooooooooooh!"

'My' Abyssal Heather trotted forward to meet this second, identical self — another tentacle, now two of six. The second Abyssal Heather slipped out of Lozzie's embrace to greet the first. They touched their tentacle tips together, then entwined their limbs, smooth muscle spiralling each around the other's grasp.

Membranous wings quivered and flexed and brushed in feathery caress. These Beautiful Twins pulled close, spikes and spines fitting together like puzzle pieces, their bodies a perfect match. They purred and trilled and made little clicking noises, then finally locked mouths in an open-eyed kiss.

A bomb went off in my chest — a meltdown of lust and need, thawing through my wounded gut and burning in my loins.

And here I was, alone inside my mask, left out of the embrace, denied reunion with myself. My lips quivered. I reached out a hand. “Please ... p-please, you two, please—”

But then Lozzie was right in front of Praem and Eileen and myself, wide-eyed and wide-mouthed, making a face like she’d been handed a unicorn puppy.

“Hello,” said Eileen. “You are small, but also large. A little bit like me. Why have I never met you before? I would have learned so much, just by looking. But looking respectfully.”

Lozzie gaped, starstruck. “Heathy,” she whispered. “Heathy, how did you do it?!”

“My name is Eileen,” said Eileen.

Lozzie exploded into squeals, poncho flapping everywhere, raking greasy blonde hair out of her face. “No!? No waaaaaay! Seriously!? For serious double extra serious not a joke yes? Yes! Yes!?”

“I chose it myself,” Eileen confirmed. “Do you like it?”

Lozzie squealed again, going red in the face. “Yeah!”

I cleared my throat inside my squid-skull mask, trying to ignore the lust surging through my body, and the pair of Abyssal Mes necking just a few feet away. “It’s a long story, Lozzie. But to make it short, um, say hello to Eileen, she’s my ... surrogate ... mother.”

Lozzie straightened up like a cartoon snapping to attention; I half-expected her body to make a boi-oi-oi-oingggg sound. She stuck out a hand for Eileen. “You don’t get a hug, not yet, but you do get this!”

Eileen just stared at the hand, then at Lozzie. “I only have two. Both are occupied with Heather. I must uphold her decisions.”

“Ooooooh,” Lozzie purred, then nodded. She grabbed her own hand

and shook it in Eileen's place. "There. Now! Heathy!" Lozzie pointed up at my mask, then tilted her head sideways, her elation faltering just a little. "Heathy?"

“Y-yes? Lozzie, it’s good to see you, it’s good to see you’re not hurt!”

"HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM," Lizzie hummed. "I was going to say that we should take Eileen home, that we have to take her home, because her pun game is encoded in her name. But ... Heathy?" Lizzie tilted her head the other way. "Heathy?"

“Lozzie, what’s wrong?”

Praem said: "Heather is currently divided."

“Ohhhhhh,” Lozzie cooed, as if this made perfect sense — then turned and slammed a hug into Praem’s front, without the slightest warning.

Anybody else would have gone flying backward and sprawled on the floor under Lozzie's sudden 'glomp' — a delightful word I had learned only recently, but had been warned not to say in front of Eevee. But Praem took the hug like a cross between an oak tree and a foam mattress, barely even adjusting her footing. She gently patted Lozzie on the back several times. When Lozzie bounced free of the hug, Praem's maid uniform had not a single cuff of lace misplaced, not one crease where it should not be.

“Lozzie, I ... ” I struggled with a sudden feeling of dislocation. Was there something so wrong with me that it was obvious to Lozzie from a single glance? “Lozzie, it’s still me under here. It’s me, it’s Heather! I swear it! I’m not ... well I am divided, but ... ”

Lozzie nodded. "Mmhmm, mmhmm! I know, Heathy! And well done, well done, well done! You got the Box opened! Opened up!"

Lozzie did a little jig-shuffle dance on the spot, oscillating back and forth and making her poncho spin. Several of her elite team of girls noticed and joined in, copying her swaying motions. The dance spread to other patients as well, among those who must have known Lozzie only by reputation. For a dizzying second my ‘army’ almost turned into an improvised dance party.

The dream was so thin now that Lozzie could impose genre at will, with nothing more powerful than a twirl of her poncho.

But then I muttered, “It ... it wasn’t me. Who opened the Box, I mean. I was me, but the ... the other ... me ... ”

Lonely Heather, the version of me who had gone straight for Maisie without a second thought.

If she had not done that, could I have freed my Abyssal Selves? Without that other part of me, would I have overcome the nurses, and accepted my trauma?

Lozzie halted her little dance and cocked her head at me again. “You mean it was one of the other other Heathys?” She flapped a corner of poncho at the two Abyssal Heathers, who were now holding hands and tentacles, staring at us with those huge dark eyes, as if waiting for Lozzie and I to finish. “Like them! Aren’t they soooo pretty?! You’re so beautiful, Heathy! Look at youuuuuu! Look at you two!”

The Doubly Beautiful Heathers From Below both went *hissssss* at Lozzie, who giggled back and blew them a kiss.

“Uh ... t-thank you,” I stammered, feeling steamrolled by Lozzie’s affection.

How could she compare me with the blinding truth of those abyssal bodies? How could she call me beautiful, when I had the same face as the Loneliest Me, down in the Box? How could she call me pretty when, compared with those two, I was so small and rotten?

Lozzie bobbed her head at me again, then ducked low, as if trying to look upward and under the curved lip of my squid-skull mask. “Heathyyyy? Are you okay-okay in there? You sound kinda funny! Let me see—”

“No!” I blurted out, recoiling backward so hard I almost lost my grip on Eileen’s shoulders. “I’m not taking the mask off! I’m not let —”

Crick-crack-crrrrrack.

That hidden enclosure was still breaking open, somewhere deep down inside the Box, the cracks now deep and guttural, splitting apart metres of glass.

Both Abyssal Heathers turned on the spot, twitching their attention up and down the corridor, tentacles flexing, emitting faint hissing from their identical maws of sharp teeth. Either side of them the

corridor was full of patients and ex-nurses now — untying the nurses on the floor, raising them to their feet, spreading the good news. Patients and nurses alike gave the Abyssal Pair a wide berth, and flinched when they — we, I — let out that double-hiss of soft alarm.

The cracking sound had cut off the rest of my sentence.

I'm not letting you see how ugly I am.

For a moment of dizzying vertigo, I felt absurd and stupid; but it was true — compared to those Abyssal Heathers, I was ugly.

Lozzie did not appear to have heard that cracking sound, not been shocked by my unspoken admission. She was already speeding on, her words gathering momentum. “Okay okay okay! Any-way any-way any-way!” she chanted, bobbing from foot to foot. I breathed a silent sigh of relief, my heart racing behind my ribs. The idea of taking off the squid-skull mask terrified me, as if Lozzie would be repelled when she saw the truth of my face beneath. “Have you seen outdoors, Heathy? Tenn-Tenns is here! I told her not to come into the dream, but she did anyway and we have to get to her and help her though I think it’s all just foam rockets and—”

“Uh, yeah, yes, of course, Lozzie, I saw her too. And Jan is up on her back.”

Lozzie’s eyes lit up with mischief and delight. “She’s come to rescue me! She’s soooooo sweet!”

“I, uh, don’t think it’s quite as heroic as that. But perhaps in principle, certainly.”

Lozzie thrust one fist into the air, a sharpened metal shiv clutched in her grubby fingers. “And meanwhilies down here we’ve cut all the phone lines and the internet cables and everything!” Lozzie broke into a grin — predatory, dangerous, with a promise of violence behind her teeth. My little Lozzie might be awake, but she was still part of the dream, and loving it more than she had guessed. “Nobody’s calling for help, not before we’re done! And ooooh, hellos!” Lozzie was instantly distracted by the sight of Zalu and Xiyu. “You’re both prettyyyyyy. Are you two from Mrs Eileen as well?”

Eileen echoed, in a whisper, “Mrs. Mm.”

“Not with her, Ma’am,” said one of the twins.

“We’re here to back up Heather,” said the other.

“Another very long story,” I said, trying not to get bogged down.

“They’re from Outside, and they’re on our side. That’s all you need to know for now.”

Lozzie threw me a playful, sketchy, skew-whiff salute. To my surprise, several of the patients she’d been leading did the same, mimicking the gesture. Lozzie’s mannerisms were infectious.

“Yes Ma’am,” Lozzie yelled. “Scary Heather Ma’am!”

“ ... scary Heather?”

Lozzie shrugged. “S’what you’re trying to be, right? Right!”

“I ... n-no, I’m just ... just me ... ”

The pair of Abyssal Heathers were already turning away and moving off down the corridor, clawed feet clicking against the floor, grey dawn light catching the iridescent sheen of their scales, drowned out by the subtle rainbow bioluminescence pulsing inside their tentacles, with matching tails swishing in the air, brushing tips, and parting again with little taps and touches. That sight grabbed my head, my heart, and something significantly lower as well. I shivered and gulped, feeling a whine rising up my throat.

Lozzie was tilting her head at me again in silent question, like there was something wrong with me. “Heathy?”

“Uh ... I-look, Lozzie, explanations can wait until later!” I said, nodding after my Two Tentacles. “We have to keep up, and reunite with the others! Eileen, Zalu, Xiyu, Praem—”

“Yes,” said Praem, and strode on ahead, maid dress swishing about her ankles.

Eileen followed, carrying me forward. Zalu and Xiyu shouldered their guns and took up position either side. Praem walked with hands clasped behind her back, like a head maid inspecting the work of her many girls. Lozzie’s poncho fluttered as she fell in with the other patients; she turned around and back-pedalled after us, waving her arms and her poncho at the crowd.

“Come on, ladies and ladiettes!” she shouted. “We gotta tear down these fucking walls and we ain’t donezo onezo yetzo! Yaaaaaah!”

A wild cry went up from Lozzie's revolutionaries — howling, chanting, squeals of delight, a roar from the prison inmates, and more than a few muffled whines as girls were swept off their feet and kissed by those at their side.

Because in the end they were Lozzie's revolutionaries, not my 'army'. This was not a war, I was just tidying up my mess, and I couldn't do it alone.

No, the real war was between me, myself, and I. Between me and Lonely Heather.

If only I could talk to her alone. Just her and I, in private, where our mutual ugliness could not be seen. Maybe then I could bury this guilt—

Crack-craaaaack.

We followed the Abyssal Pair — Truth and Beauty, I dubbed them, though they were impossible to tell apart — along the spiral which led to the outer shell of Cygnet Asylum.

Resistance was rapidly thinning out. The groups of nurses we overran were smaller now, no longer the hallway-choking zombie-like hordes of before; these were only stragglers and wanderers, the lost and the damned. The few patients we encountered were the same — individuals and pairs locked in dark rooms, terrified girls hiding all alone under tables, screaming for mercy and clawing at the nurses clambering after them, as well as those unlucky few who had already been caught, drugged and bound and wrapped in straitjackets. We enlightened those locked in darkness, offered a hand to those who thought they were alone, and cut free those who had been trapped, even if they needed carrying afterward.

No matter how small or mean or overlooked, nobody was getting left behind. When this was over, every patient would be free and every trauma would be accepted. Every piece of the dream would come crashing down. Cygnet would be over and done.

We swept through the hospital faster and faster, hot on the heels of my twinned Abyssal Selves. Sickly grey morning light poured in through the windows — always to our left now, providing occasional glimpses of Tenny's parallel progress; my beloved giant moth-puppy was grinding her way across the toy-tank battlefield outdoors, toward the vast dark steel edifice of the Box. At that

distance I couldn't spot the shiny metal speck of Jan up on her back, only the bulk of Tenny herself, her velvet-black body and the white whorls of her fur.

Every time we spotted her, Lozzie would leap and point and flap like she'd seen the world's best dog. "That's my Tenn-Tenns! My girl! Look at her, she's so huge now!"

Distant echoes of that fight reached us through the stout brick walls — booming and crashing, the rip-tear of torn metal, the clatter of armoured vehicles dropped from a great height to smash open upon the ground.

Eventually the Abyssal Heathers led the way into a canteen, where our tidal wave of revolutionary inevitability slammed head first into the last true battle of Cygnet's fall.

This canteen was not the one in which I had eaten breakfast upon my arrival in the dream. That first canteen had been a sad and drab affair, plucked from my memories of the real Cygnet. Compared to this it may as well have been a pleasure palace stuffed with honey and dates and little dishes of caviar. The canteen into which we burst was unsuitable for any use, let alone for eating food.

The floor of cracked tiles was filthy with dark stains, both brownish red and reddish brown, the kind of stains which had weight and texture and offered a spongy cushion beneath one's cringing feet. The walls were worse, spotted with black mold and streaked with decades of water damage, perhaps once off-yellow or dark cream, but now reduced to soggy, sodden, slippery grey, as if the very substrate had been replaced by a mat of fungal infection. The tables and chairs were more rust than metal, and the metal was the soft grey sheen of unpainted lead. Rotten food lay discarded here and there upon cracked tin plates. At the rear of the room stood a counter from which food may have once been served, but had been overrun by a carpet of furry blue mold.

Many of the tables and chairs had been overturned, their rusty edges leaving streaks and scrapes upon the floor. In the centre of the room stood a makeshift barricade — a fortress of four tables turned on their sides, with one in the middle as a raised platform. That fortress was under assault from all four sides by the final mass grouping of monstrous zombie-nurses, numbering perhaps fifty or sixty, waves of ghoulish flesh and snatching claws, brandishing

bubbling syringes and snapping lengths of blue nylon rope.

My family held that fortress, against the crashing waves of my trauma.

Eight Knights stood inside the square of overturned tables, knighting the makeshift walls of the little fort. They were in an even worse state than the Knights who had accompanied Praem through the labyrinth of the prison levels. Black helmets were cracked and shiny visors were shattered, showing glimpses of pinkish-red meat wriggling and writhing beneath their humanoid exteriors. Bulletproof vests were slashed and torn, whole segments of armour ripped open and hanging loose. Their guns were reduced to twisted lumps of jagged metal, having long ago run out of bullets. They clubbed nurses with their guns as the monsters of my trauma tried to swarm over the tables, reaching down past the barricade to push back the onrushing tide. Between and behind the Knights were perhaps a dozen additional Cygnet patients, the very last few of the lost girls of the asylum, doing what little they could to assist the defence.

But Knights and patients did not stand alone. Four figures fought beyond the barricade, sowing chaos and carnage to keep the pressure off the others.

Raine — grinning with every flash and fall of her machete, whirling like a cross between a rugby player and a ballerina, fighting barefoot and greasy and stained with worse things than blood. Zheng — half-naked in shorts and a torn-up t-shirt, covered head to toe in a sheen of glistening crimson blood, knocking nurses together with brute strength; Zheng still did not look like her usual self, shrunk down to a cruel parody of her muscle and mass, lacking her sheer imposing height. But that compact frame now held all her demonic strength, undeniable as the ripping grin on her face. Then, Twil — all werewolf, a ball of tooth and claw and bristling fur, darting about like a hound among hens; nurses piled atop her, but she was an unstoppable force, a coiling knot of muscle and sinew and snarling teeth. And last — myself, me, I, another Abyssal Heather, floating and fluttering between the others whenever any of them should falter, bringing down nurses at unprotected rears, keeping the little trio tight and together and more well-protected than they knew.

Inside the barricade, past the wall of Knights and patients, my

family's little fortress benefited from what Raine might call 'fire support.'

Evelyn's wheelchair was up on the table in the middle, brakes applied, seat empty but for the coiled mass of a discarded grey dressing gown. Evelyn herself — still withered and wasted, her body so thin and fragile beneath a scratchy Cygnet t-shirt, with her one leg missing, and her eyes sunken with exhaustion and stress — was up, not on her own one foot, but supported and cradled and held aloft, by Another Me.

Another Abyssal Heather – Number Four? I was losing count — was helping Evee to 'stand'. Evelyn's withered foot rested atop abyssal claws, cradled in perfect safety so close to those razor-sharp weapons. The Abyssal Heather had both arms and four tentacles wrapped around Evelyn's body, cradling her from behind, supporting her weight with tendrils turned to plush cushions against her spine. That Abyssal Heather had folded away every single sharp edge and hooked barb. Her remaining two tentacles acted as a prosthetic leg, anchored at Evee's hip, their entwined tips played to take her weight.

Evelyn's eyes were wide with rage and satisfaction, her teeth clenched, her face flushed. She held a human thigh-bone in both hands — the fresh white of the newly dead, scraps of flesh still clinging to both ends, the middle covered in scrimshawed magic symbols.

Her mother's leg, stolen all over again. Evee's one memento, her revenge.

Evelyn clutched the bone-wand in both hands and shouted scraps of inhuman language from her raw and ragged throat, spitting blood as the syllables split her flesh. Any nurses who made it over the barricade were thrown back by coils of crimson flame, the product and pride of Evelyn the Mage.

A fifth and final Abyssal Heather stood a little way back from Evelyn, cradling a bundle of pale flesh and black clothes. She was not contributing to the fight, concentrating instead on protecting whatever it was which she carried in her arms and tentacles.

My family had done an incredible job of holding this little fortress, buried deep in the toxic stew of my trauma; without my support, they may have held it for many hours longer — but eventually they

would have fallen. The nurses which fell beneath Raine's machete stuck their arms back onto their shoulders and rose from the bloody heaps of their own bodies on the floor. The nurses with heads cracked and broken by Zheng re-knit their flesh and came at her again. The nurses dashed apart by Twil always stood right back up, like weighted children's toys bouncing upright, re-animated by the terrible logic of the dream.

But my family did not fight alone. None of us did, or would ever do so again.

I swept into the rotten canteen on a tidal wave of patients and inmates and liberated ex-nurses, carried forward by Eileen, flanked by Zalu and Xiyu, backed up by Lozzie and Praem, holding Horror's head aloft with a cry of victory echoing inside my squid-skull mask.

My pair of Abyssal Heathers ploughed into the final scrum of zombie-nurses, tearing a gaping hole in their formation. Patients poured in, laying about themselves left and right with improvised weapons, ripping the gap wider, ruining the nurse's cohesion, flowing right past the surprised looks from Raine and Zheng and Twil. Lozzie joined them, a flittering butterfly of pastel poncho sprinting down the middle — pausing briefly to hug Zheng's naked, bloody form, and to plant a sneaky little kiss on Twil's furry snout. Praem proceeded directly toward her mother, as if strolling down a Sharrowford street.

Zalu and Xiyu guided me forward, riding upon Eileen's back. I cast about myself with the six baleful eyes of the squid-skull mask, felling nurses before us, driving them back into their human forms, leaving them panting and gasping down on the floor.

The battle was won within seconds. Eileen had carried me to the edge of the makeshift barricade, and there were no more nurses, no more living trauma, no more monsters in this dream.

A sudden echoing silence settled on the rotten canteen, broken only by the distant rumble and crack-bang of Tenny's solitary fight outdoors. The room shook gently under the pounding of faraway guns and the fall of giant moth-feet.

I panted inside my squid-skull mask, quivering with victory and anxiety both at once. "Is it over? Are we done?"

"Staffing issues have been resolved," Eileen said under her breath.

“Collective bargaining is so much easier when one is not alone.”

I tried to laugh, but I felt limp and spent, sagging against her shoulders.

Time and sound and motion resumed all around. The aftermath of the final battle of the Cygnet Revolution began to unfold — patients and ex-nurses came forward to raise the defeated back to their feet, to offer them my acceptance; eight Knights opened the barricade and limped out to greet those who had rescued them; patients collapsed with relief or exhaustion. Shouts went up as the patients and inmates began to organise themselves — “Is that everybody?”, “Anybody missing a friend?”, “We need a full roll-call, find out if anybody’s not here!”

And amid all that, my friends and family and lovers approached.

Praem mounted the table in the middle of the fortress and took responsibility for Eevee, easing her from the tender embrace of Abyssal Heather Number Five, helping her back into her wheelchair. Evelyn clung to Praem with an urgent desperation, but allowed herself to be lifted up and lowered all the way back to the floor, wheelchair and all. She raised a curious eyebrow at me as Praem wheeled her forward, then went pale and silent. Lozzie flitted among the patients, then hovered at the edge of our gathering group, hopping from foot to foot, overexcited at this penultimate climax of the dream. Twil dropped most of her werewolf transformation — once again retaining only her wolfish ears and bushy tail — then stopped dead to gape at me and Eileen. Zheng joined us, grinning wide; she shouted “Shaman! Victory tastes like steaming meat!”

Raine ambled over next to Zheng, skin running with sweat, machete held in a numb fist, and broke into a matching grin, beaming for me, at me, because of me. She raised her eyebrows at the sight of Eileen, and said, “Holy shit, sweet thing. Heather, my genius little squid girl. You really did it.”

The Five Abyssal Heathers joined their tentacles together, matching caresses, swapping quick, strange, otherworldly kisses with each other — though one stood slightly apart, still cradling that bundle of black clothing in her arms.

For a long moment, nobody spoke, our mutual silence laid upon the backdrop of patient voices and sobbing nurses and the distant

crack-boom of Tenny's ongoing battle outdoors.

Everyone just stared at me, at Eileen, at those I had brought with me and what I had achieved. Everyone — with the exception of Praem — cast several fascinated glances at the Abyssal Heathers, and what they were all evidently getting up to with each other.

But eventually, attention settled back on me.

Raine blinked. "Sweet thing? You okay up there?"

I cleared my throat behind my squid-skull mask. "Y-yes, I just ..."

"Nah, serious question," Raine said. "Your wounds. You doing okay?"

I shrugged. "I'll keep. I'm ... f-fine." My heart was racing. My skin itched. My mask felt thin as paper. "Is ... is anybody ... hurt?" I asked, filling the silence with anything, the first thing that seemed right to ask.

Heads were shaken, shoulders were shrugged. Zheng said, "Yes, shaman! And it feels good!", then thumped her own chest. Raine chuckled at that, and nudged Zheng in the side.

Twill shook her head, and kept shaking. "Big H, I cannot believe what I'm looking at, yo. And who the hell are these two?" She gestured at Zalu and Xiyu.

"Yeah," Raine purred, with obvious appreciation in her voice. "Introduce us to these two spicy spec-op babes, why don't you?"

"It's us," said Zalu.

"Hello," said Xiyu. "We were plants last time we met."

"Oh," Raine said, eyebrows shooting up. She cracked a grin. "Nice, nice. I preferred your birthday suits."

Evelyn pointed at Eileen with her bone-wand, eyes bulging in her face. "Am I the only one here ignoring the obvious problem with this scene? Heather. Heather, start talking."

"Uh, yes," I said. "I know this looks—"

"Heather," Evelyn repeated, and made it sound like 'do not test me'. Her lips were still flecked with blood from her spell-casting, and she looked grey with exhaustion, animated only by irritation. "Heather,

I love you, and I am endlessly grateful that you are safe, and that you have just ridden to our rescue. But choose your next words carefully. If you tell me that you have seduced the fucking Eye, I am going to have some kind of cardiac event, right here, right now, and Praem is going to have to resuscitate me.”

Praem put a gentle hand on Evee’s shoulder. “Yes.”

“Oh!” I breathed a sigh of relief. “No, no! Not in the slightest, absolutely not. I’ve not made her into a lover, or anything like that. That would feel ... terribly wrong, gosh.”

Evelyn breathed a sigh of relief too, visibly sagging with an emotion I didn’t understand.

“She’s my mother,” I said.

Evelyn froze.

“Spiritually speaking,” I added quickly. “Not biologically. Metaphorically, I mean. By choice.”

Eileen opened her mouth. “Hello, everybody. It is nice to meet you. I am called Eileen.”

Raine threw her hands into the air, machete and all, and roared with a kind of wild triumph I’d never heard from her before, hard enough to make me flinch. Zheng copied her, breaking into a hooting chant of absolute abandon, stomping both feet and gnashing her teeth and waving her fists about. Twil blinked several times, then did a squint-frown, then finally got it; she winced. Lozzie covered her mouth with a corner of her poncho, stifling the giggles.

Evelyn stared and stared and stared. Praem stared too, for rather different reasons.

I waited for the cheer to die away.

“Um,” I said. “She’s on our side now. I’ve ... woken her up, out of a lifelong stupor, sort of. It’s very complicated to explain, and I don’t have time to go over all the details, but you can read the book she wrote, later on.”

“The what?” Evelyn squinted. “She wrote a book, what? Sorry? Heather, this is too much to unpack. Don’t even try.”

The bundle of black clothing and pale flesh cradled in the arms of

Abyssal Heather Number Five shifted and uncoiled, and revealed herself as Seven-Shades-of-Blood-Goblin, red-black looking a bit teary, scrawny frame rather worse for wear, like she'd been recently tossed down a hillside covered in brambles.

"Told you the Eye was open in the sky, Eevee," she gurgled. "Told youu-urrrrk!"

Evelyn huffed and pressed a hand to her eyes. "Yes, fine. Fine!"

Eileen looked at Sevens. "Hello, Rainbow."

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight spluttered with something only half akin to laughter.

"Sevens!" I said. "Sevens, oh, oh dear, I'm glad you're here too. I thought you were up on the roof!"

"I wasssss," Sevens rasped. "Fell off." She nudged the Abyssal Heather who was carrying her. "You caught me before I hit the ground. Still hurting. Urrrrr ... "

Sevens' trailing gurgle was undercut by the distant booming and crashing of Tenny's fight outdoors.

Evelyn raised her free hand. "Heather is right. We don't have time to unpack all this. You." She gestured at Eileen. "You ... I'm going to pretend, for now."

"We can all pretend together," said Eileen.

A horrible churning in my chest made me speak. "It'll make sense, I promise. We just don't have time for explaining the whole thing right now. We have to get to Tenny, and the Box, and Maisie, and finally end this dream. Don't we?"

To my surprise — and with a growing, gnawing, stomach-churning anxiety — my friends all shared a series of worried looks. Evelyn squinted at me, then glanced at the others, as if something was terribly wrong. Raine's beaming grin dipped in brightness; she frowned at me in thought. Zheng cracked her neck from left to right, then sniffed the air, as if trying to pick up my scent. Twil's bushy tail fluffed up with sudden alarm, ears twitching.

Lozzie bounced from foot to foot, capering forward. "Heathy's not all there right now! Praem told me alllll about it! Half of her is elsewhere!"

“That’s not true!” I blurted out from behind my mask, my cheeks suddenly burning in private darkness. “Well, um, no. I mean, part of me is elsewhere, but it’s not half. That would be far too much. And it’s not relevant right now! It’s not! We just have to keep moving and keep going so I can deal with it. So I can deal with me. I promise I can deal with me. I can.”

Evelyn frowned harder “Heather,” she said slowly. “Is that really you under there?”

Craaack-crack went that distant glass; the quintet of Abyssal Heathers reacted like a pack of hounds, twitching at the distant sound.

“Of course it’s me!” I said from behind my mask. “Evee, how could you ask such a thing?”

Silence seeped into the room, broken by the boom and crash from Tenny’s lone battle.

And I realised, with horrifying clarity, that none of my friends had approached me. None of them had stepped forward. My friends, my family, those I loved and trusted, they stood well beyond arm’s length, in a semi-circle of examination, with I and Eileen at the centre.

Evelyn didn’t answer.

“Yeeeeeeeah,” Twil said eventually. “Big H, I’m not like, being rude, or looking a gift horse in the mouth after you just rode in and saved us all and shit, but there’s something not right about you, like. And I’m not talking about the nurse’s head swinging from your fist.”

“Hello there,” Horror said. “Twillamina, you’re looking well and—”

“Shut the fuck up, stump-head,” Twil said, “or I’ll come finish the job.”

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight said, “Mmmmm. Heather’s all ... fragmentary.”

Zheng let out a purr — soft and low, without her usual power. “The Shaman does not smell right. Shaman, what has happened?”

“N-nothing!” I stammered, panting and sweating now, horrified at the prospect of taking off my mask and showing them all what lay beneath — her face, my face, Lonely Heather staring out from

behind my eyes, full of the guilt of abandoning her, abandoning myself, of—

Raine stepped forward.

She walked right up to me. I would have flinched away and clutched my squid-skull mask to my head, but Eileen was my legs, and she did not comprehend.

Raine — glowing with sweat and love, her eyes meeting my empty sockets without fear, her chestnut brown hair raked back over her head — stopped, and put her free hand on my thigh.

“Sweet thing, it’s only me.”

“ ... R-Raine, don’t ... ”

“I can tell,” she murmured. “I may only be half awake, but I can tell, sure as I can look up at the sky and see the sun.”

My throat was dry. My lips were glue. When I parted them, they hurt. “Tell what?” I whispered.

“That we’re only talking to half of you, Heather. Where’s the rest of my girl gotten to, hey?”

And with those words, a mighty breaking split my ears, louder and longer and more final than any I had yet heard. The ground shook and the walls trembled. Patients and inmates and ex-nurses screamed. My friends felt it happen, heard every moment. The creaking and cracking was no longer confined to the space beneath the asylum and the space between my ears.

This prison break was for everybody now.

Crack!

bedlam boundary – 24.34

Craaaaack-crunch-skeeeereeeeeekt-crrrkang!

Cracking and crunching, ripping and tearing, breaking and bending and bursting; it was the single loudest sound I had ever heard, Outside or on Earth, in dreams or in the waking world — a hundred-car pile-up on a busy motorway, crossed with the implosion of a continent made from crystal and diamond. An almighty dream-quake vibrated through the filthy floors and up the mottled grey walls of the dirty little canteen, shaking dust and debris loose from the ceiling tiles, rattling the rusty tables and chairs against each other, drawing gasps and screams from every throat. Liberated patients and ex-nurses alike clung together, gone wide-eyed with instinctive terror. All around me, my friends froze in panic, while I clutched all that much tighter to Eileen's shoulders.

This was no neat fracture in a glass aquarium, no matter how large. This was not a straight little fissure or a clean break in a single surface. This was the peeling back of ruptured metal layers, screaming as they were torn apart; this was steel girders and mountains of concrete smashed aside and tossed high into the sky; this was reinforced walls shattered into masonry dust and scattered across the emerging visage of the monstrous titan they had once contained; this was—

Over.

The great cracking roar trailed off as suddenly as it had begun. The cacophony had lasted no more than a handful of seconds.

Aftershocks of falling debris and clattering metal came from somewhere far away, echoing in the vastness beyond the walls of Cygnet Asylum.

Dozens of patients and ex-nurses looked about in panting fear, braced for a second tremor, bewildered and confused in the way only an Englisher exposed to the unthinkable breach of an earthquake can be. My friends and companions had fared little better: Raine, right at my side, had her machete half-raised, as if

she could fight an earthquake in a dream with the power of a sharp edge and a strong arm; Twil had tucked her tail between her legs and scurried over to Eevee's wheelchair; Evelyn had gone white-faced and frozen with fear; Praem was very, very, very still — the most anxiety she ever showed; Zalu and Xiyu, still flanking Eileen on either side, looked ready to execute what Raine later called a 'rapid advance toward the rear'; Sevens had buried her face in the chest of the Abyssal Heather who was carrying her; the other Abyssal Mes had ceased their constant heavy petting and turned outward in a protective ring, every muscle pulled tight, tentacles flared, lightless eyes thrown wide. Even Zheng had gone stiff, fists clenched hard, waiting for something to fight or eat or shout at.

Only Lozzie looked unconcerned, head tilted, one ear cocked toward the ceiling.

And inside me?

Nothing had changed.

That made no sense; I'd been ignoring the implications since those cracking sounds had started, but I was no fool, even reduced as I was. Whatever shell was cracking, the source lay inside my heart. But all those cracking sounds — had they been leading nowhere after all? Nothing inside me had broken open, no barriers had been breached, no revelations unfolded down in the dark secret meat of my soul.

If anything, I felt worse.

Behind the privacy of my squid-skull mask, my face felt like an unlanced boil, sweaty and shiny and taut with the pus of my guilt. I felt like sobbing for release, praying for the dream to end before I had to remove the helmet and show everyone my true face. I turned my head to whisper a half-formed plan in Eileen's ear; the battle, the revolution, it was all over now, our friends were safe — so if Eileen broke and ran for the Box before my friends figured out what was happening, perhaps I could steal a few minutes alone with Lonely Heather. Perhaps she and I could end this, between ourselves, with only the Eye herself to see my hands wrapped around my own filthy little neck.

But my lips faltered; I couldn't get the words out. Where had all my courage gone?

Before I could try again, my friends began to recover.

“Everyone okay?” Raine shouted. “Yeah, yeah, that means all of you, girls!” She pointed with her machete. “Any injuries, falls, bumped heads? Show of hands for injuries. Nobody?”

Twil joined in. “I think we’re okay! Like, emotional damage, yeah, but no real heat. Eevee, you good? Praem? We cool? We cool.”

Zheng grunted, “More noise and fury than motion. A trick?”

Raine glanced up at me. “Heather? Heather, what was that?”

“Uh ... ” I swallowed, trying to regain my bearings. “A-another Eye-quake?”

Twil spluttered. “Another?! When was the first?!”

Eileen said: “I do not quake.”

Evelyn shouted from down in her wheelchair, slapping at one armrest with her bone-wand. “Everyone stay where you are! If that happens again, we need to get out, before this whole building comes down on ... our ... ”

Evee trailed off, her words faltering before a strange sound carried on the wind.

A distant vibration — a feathery, fluttery, velvet-furred trill of triumph, a great and throaty “Pbbbbbbbbrrrrttt!” — sounded somewhere out there, on the battlefield beyond the hospital.

Lozzie lit up with delight, bouncing on the spot, throwing both hands into the air.

“It’s Tenna!” she cried. “It’s Tenna! That was Tenny, ripping open the Box!”

A cheer went up from the crowd crammed into the filthy Cygnet canteen, from patients and ex-nurses alike, punctuated with relieved laughter and plenty of mildly exasperated head shaking; even the Knights raised their battered weapons in silent salute. Doubtless half the crowd didn’t understand what they were cheering for, but Lozzie was the true figurehead of this revolution, and everyone understood the tone of victory from our dear little Lozzie.

Perhaps once this was all over and the dream was done, Lozzie

could teach them about the wonders of Tenny.

Once the dream was done ...

My throat tightened. My face felt hot and shiny. Something shifted in my chest, pushing against the inside of my ribs.

All my friends relaxed too. Raine lowered her machete and laughed, grinning at Tenny's antics. Twil straightened up, untucking her tail, wolfish ears popping up above her dark hair. Evelyn sighed heavily and ran a hand over her exhausted face, a little green around the gills. Zheng roared "Tenny!", grinning like the mad, blood-soaked idol she was. Sevens scrambled around in the arms of the Heather Abyssus still holding her to her chest. The five Abyssal Heathers all relaxed their postures, reaching out to link their tentacles once again. I envied such easy connection. If only I could communicate with myself like that.

Praem said, "Tenny is a good girl."

Eileen replied. "Good girls have good dreams."

"Good girls get to bed on time," replied Praem.

"Time is not time for bed. Bedtime has no time."

"Yes," said Praem.

Raine thumbed at Eileen and said, "Look at these two, getting on like a house on fire."

Eileen said, "Houses on fire generally do not get on, or up, or down, or much of anything ever again."

Twil sighed. "It's a figure of speech. Bloody hell, is she going to be like this for everything?"

"Yes," said Praem.

Evelyn groaned in her hand. "Put me back under the dream. Please. Just wheel me about and wake me when this is over."

"No," said Praem.

I should have felt comfort, belonging, and safety; it was only a few hours since I had followed Eileen out of that antiquated little infirmary room, leaving my friends behind, but it felt like days had passed. Now we were reunited, almost everybody was accounted

for, and we were safe. The revolution was over. The Box awaited. The dream was almost complete.

But all I felt was passive and vulnerable.

My courage, my determination, my resolve — it had all trickled out through my fingers. Should I not have felt those emotions more strongly, now that I was no longer alone? But the expected catharsis did not arrive. Instead, I wanted to flee. I wanted to jab Eileen with my heels like she was a horse, and have her carry me out of there, out of that stinking, dingy, filthy canteen, away from the patients I had freed, away from my friends, toward—

Crack.

And there it was again, inside my head.

This one was soft and subtle, a clawed fingertip tapping on the far side of cloudy glass. Still there, still within, still trying to get out.

Behind my squid-skull mask, down in the dream-wrought enigma of my body and soul, I realised I did feel something different now — cold air on exposed bone. No pain, no discomfort, only numbness and distance. I felt opened up, flayed raw, my innards on display.

My chest creaked. Something toxic and poisonous uncoiled inside me, writhing around my heart and lungs, as if trying to push out through my ribcage.

Lozzie capered from foot to foot, darting between liberated patients, hugging favourites and kissing the occasional cheek, followed by a train of giggles and thank yous and worshipful hands reaching out to touch her pentacolour pastel poncho. A wave of true release was passing through the crowd; everyone knew the revolution was over, the fight was done, the Box was open. Even with all these wounds and all this damage, the war was won. The mood of the crowd was shifting, spreading wide with smiles and gentle hands, turning toward the bounty of victory.

But not for me.

Before my friends could remember what they had been doing a few moments ago, I did my best to straighten up on Eileen's back and speak clearly.

"We should head to the Box," I said, but could not keep the tremor from my voice. "For ... to let ... to let Maisie ... t-to rescue Maisie

at last, to ... to ... ”

Raine turned and looked up at me again, all ears. “Heather? Speak up, sweet thing, I can’t hear you!”

“I ... uh ... I want to g-go ... alone ... ”

The five Abyssal Heathers drifted closer as I spoke, parting from one another with gentle touches of tentacle-tip and feathery brushes of membranous wings. Five sets of void-dark eyes settled on me as they spread out and stepped into the gaps between my friends; five sets of predatory looks, five pairs of slow, languid blinks; five maws of sharp teeth opening to hiss with soft and sinuous breath; five click-clicking claws treading closer. My words faltered at their beauty, at the feeling their approach stirred deep down in my belly — instinctive prey-response fear mixed into a heady cocktail with quivering arousal and desire, then overpowered by a need to join, to become one, to be entered and eaten and consumed and remade.

My breath turned ragged. My belly clenched. I felt a whine rising up my throat.

One Abyssal Heather stopped by Evelyn, dipping a carefully smoothed tentacle down into her lap. The second stalked up beside Zheng, hissing softly until Zheng responded with a grin. The third slid up next to Twil, catching her attention with a flicker-blink of glowing eyes. The fourth was already carrying Sevens, and began to scratch her under the chin.

The fifth Abyssal Beauty walked forward, toward Raine and Eileen and myself.

She raised her six tentacles, smooth-soft as melting butter, pale as peach-fuzz, strobing with night and coal-dust and rainbows in the dusk.

She reached upward; she reached for me.

Behind my squid-skull mask, my lips quivered and my skin broke out in burning sweat. My hands started to shake so badly that Horror’s severed Head finally slipped from my grasp. The decapitated ex-Nurse let out a little yelp. Zalu or Xiyu must have darted forward to catch her before she hit the floor, because she grunted, then huffed with relief, and began to speak a complaint, but was quickly silenced.

Six smooth tentacles reached for me, framing the void-dark, coral-pink, sunset-orange of my own eyes, staring back at me from within a perfect abyssal face.

I reached out with both hands, extending them past Eileen's head, desperate to touch myself, to feel my own touch, to be touched, to end the boundary between the two.

"P-please!" my voice quivered. "Please, take me back, be with me again, be me—"

The six tentacles ignored my hands; the Abyssal Heather reached for my squid-skull mask.

I reeled away so hard that Eileen was forced to stumble backward, lest she drop me entirely; only the tiny anchor of the Praem plushie down in my yellow blanket kept me in place. Eileen staggered to re-orient my weight as I clung to her shoulders and squealed with a stuck-pig fear I had never felt before. I made an awful noise, screeching and spitting without the aid of abyssal biology; I must have sounded like a rabid chimpanzee, screaming my head off inside a slab of metallic bone.

The Abyssal Heather whipped her tentacles back. She opened her mouth and replied with a screeching hiss of her own.

Hissssssssssss!

Eileen was saying my name, several of my friends were shouting, but I was locked in a contest of volume. I screeched and squawked and squealed; the Abyssal Heather hissed and whirred, a sound like a rattlesnake rising up her throat. We screamed and howled and barked and—

Raine stepped between us, one hand raised. Her voice cracked the air like a whip. "Heather! Stop!"

That voice was like a hook in my guts and groin. I flinched hard and clamped my mouth shut, barely resisting the urge to whine. Apparently Raine's voice had a similar effect on the Abyssal Version Of Myself — and why not? She was me, I was her, we were merely parts of the same whole. Abyssal Screechy Me recoiled as if stung, slammed her mouth shut, then blinked rapidly, fluttering frilled lids at Raine.

My breath came in ragged little gasps. I was coated with cold sweat, clothes stuck to my skin. Eileen tapped my arms with her chin — I'd

been squeezing so hard I'd put pressure on her throat. I quickly slackened my grip, mortified. Most of the liberated patients and ex-nurses were staring in shock, as were all my friends.

Raine broke into a smile — warm, confident, so much herself again. Had she woken up out of the dream?

"That's better," she purred. "Good girl. Or ... " She blinked once. "Isn't that what you're meant to call me, right now? Never mind. Just stop fighting with yourself, Heather. That goes for all of you squid-bodied Heathers, yeah? No more in-fighting. Or you'll get a spanking."

"Y-yeah ... " I croaked. "Sorry. Sorry, Raine."

The Abyssal Heather let out a soft hiss of acknowledgement, tentacles coiling in the air. Raine shot her a finger-gun, and threw me a wink.

Twil cleared her throat. "Big H, yo, what was that all about?"

Evelyn answered before I could speak: "She won't take off the bloody mask. Isn't that right, Heather? You still won't let us see your face."

I straightened up on Eileen's back as best I could, my mind working to deflect the question. "It ... it's just me under here! You can hear my voice, you can see my body! Can't you? Praem, Praem you saw me put on the mask, you know it's me! Praem, please, vouch for me!"

Praem said: "And yet."

"Wha— what does that mean!? Praem?"

"Heather, look here, please." Raine looked right at me, her gaze cutting through the dark eye holes of my mask. I tried to shrivel up inside; could she see me? "It means we can tell you're not all there," she said. "The dream's done something funny to you. Hasn't it, sweet thing? What happened?"

I could not tell her the truth, for I did not even comprehend the truth myself. I scrambled for an excuse — anything to avoid Raine seeing the hideous reality beneath the mask. I gestured at the Abyssal Heathers. "Why do you trust them, then!? I don't look like that! At least, not normally, though I would love to."

Zheng said, "Their faces are not hidden, Shaman. Though I know it is you under there. It could be no other."

Twil sighed. "This is confusing as shit. This is too many Heathers. Can't we just, talk to one of the ... alien ones here?"

"Ha!" Evelyn barked. "Yes, they are rather hard to deny, to put it lightly." She glanced up at the Abyssal Me by her own side. I couldn't help but see that cocktail of admiration, awe, trepidation, and a touch of something more in Eeve's eyes.

I felt sick. My friends didn't trust—

"It's not that we don't trust you, Heather," Raine said, as if reading my mind. She glanced around at all the others. "Isn't that right? Come on, we all trust her, don't we? She's just rocked through here with an army and saved us all. She's finished the revolution. We do trust her. We do. Anybody says otherwise, you gotta answer to me."

Raine received a chorus of nods and grunts; the threat seemed a little unfair, but I appreciated the gesture.

"But there's something wrong with you, sweet thing," Raine said, turning back to me. "We can all tell. It's like you're ill. Like there's something clouding your judgement."

Evelyn said, "What's the dream done to you? Lizzie said you're not all here, that there's half of you elsewhere. What does that mean? Heather, what have you done to yourself?" When I didn't answer right away, Evelyn half-turned in her wheelchair. "Praem! What did she do—"

"Eeve, no!" I yelped. "Please, I—"

Evelyn turned back around, glaring at me with a craggy frown, her face like a cliff-side etched by acid. "Heather. We need to know what the dream has done with you. Start talking."

"N-nothing, I ... "

"Or what you've done to yourself."

My throat closed up. My chest creaked with so much guilt that my ribs might explode outward and drown my friends in an ocean of toxic fluid from my rotten little heart. I felt fit to burst.

Evelyn said, "Heather, I insist—"

Crackkkkk.

“—because I love you. Now, what have you done to yourself?”

The pressure in my chest slackened. I swallowed, but couldn't get my own saliva down, like a bolus of food was stuck fast in my throat. When I spoke, my voice shook.

“Lozzie is telling the truth,” I managed to say. “There's another ‘me’ in the dream. A me who ... who managed to get inside the Box. I wasn't aware of her— no, wait, no, that's not right. She didn't even exist, technically, until I forgave Eileen. She was the other decision, the other way of doing things. She was determined to kill Eileen, instead of forgiving her. She was ... is ... all alone. Praem and Eileen know all about it, they saw the whole thing.”

Lozzie rejoined our half-circle of interrogation — bouncing past Eevee and Twil and glomp-smashing straight into the Abyssal Heather who stood before me. Abyssal Me whirled Lozzie around and set her back on her feet, sweaty-faced and panting with excitement and victory.

“Heathy's got twooooo parts right now!” Lozzie held out one hand, two fingers raised in a peace sign. “Two more to go with her six! Praem told me! One of them is in the Box, that's truuuuue. We gotta put her back together, it's simples!”

Raine flashed me an indulgent smile. “Put her back together, huh? With all the Queen's horses and all the Queen's ... girls?”

Several groans rose from the others. I almost laughed, despite the sweat on my face and the writhing in my chest.

Eileen said: “That was bad.”

Raine raised an eyebrow at her. “Says you, walking eyeball? You gonna do better? Come on, lay it on me.”

“Heather, back together,” said Eileen. “Not a pun, but a rhyme. I have not gotten used to those yet. I hope you will endure my clumsiness while I learn.”

Raine cracked a grin — a teasing and flirtatious grin I knew all too well, one that made my heart stutter and my breath halt whenever it was turned upon me.

Raine said, “I'd be real happy to ‘endure’ those clumsy hands, you

gilf-mode cougar—”

“Raine!” I almost shrieked, all my guilt forgotten in one blazing moment. “She’s my mother!”

“Yeah,” said Raine. “She sure is.”

“You cannot!” I snapped. “I forbid it! No, no, no!”

Twil burst out laughing, wagging her wolfish tail. Sevens, still coiled up in the arms of an Abyssal Heather in her blood-goblin mask, got a worrying little twinkle in her eye. Zheng just grunted, vaguely unimpressed. Evelyn huffed, and said, “I’m too exhausted to be disgusted. Raine, this is not the time. We can address this fascination of yours later. Or not at all.”

The Abyssal Heather a few paces in front of us purred an affirmative — agreeing with me, not Raine. “Rrrrrrr-rrrr. Raine. No.”

Raine put up one hand in surrender. “Alright, alright, no gilf-sploring for me.”

“It is forbidden,” said Eileen. “But not for bidding upon.”

“Eyyyy, nice,” said Raine. “A little clumsy, but nice.”

Inside the privacy of my squid-skull mask, I smiled, despite everything, despite the writhing rot inside my chest, despite the painful creaking of my ribs. Raine had once again performed the emotional alchemy she had perfected over so many past instances — she had recognised my discomfort, even through my face of dull metal bone, and disarmed all my anxieties with laughter and outrage, turning the attention upon herself. I could have climbed down from Eileen’s back and kissed her. I could have thrown myself into her arms. I could have—

Crrrack-tap-tap-tap.

But as soon as I consciously acknowledged her technique, the anxiety came flooding back.

Here Raine was, leading me forward. I had grown passive and helpless. I had lost control.

Evelyn cleared her throat. “Lozzie has an excellent point. We’re stalling. Let’s get this over with. The faster we can end this, the better.”

Lozzie bobbed up and down on her toes, one hand waving next to her ear. “Yeah! Listen, listen, you can hear Tennts! She’s calling us!”

Lozzie did have a good point — and even better hearing. Muffled by the layers of stout wall which encased this deep and dirty core of Cygnet Asylum, a distant call of “Prrrrbbbbbttt-prrrrrbbbbb!” echoed through the morning air of the dream. Tenny was having herself quite the one-moth victory party out there.

Raine reached over and clapped Lozzie on the shoulder. “I’m pretty sure we can put Heather back together again. Let’s get to it!”

“Y-yes!” I agreed from inside my mask. “Let’s go to the Box, to ... to the other ... other me.”

Twil tilted her chin upward. “What’s this other you like, Big H? We dealing with your, like, mirror universe evil-self, or what?”

“Um ... she’s sort of ... ”

Unspeakably vile, wearing my own face.

Crrrrrack.

“Wait,” Evelyn grunted. “Twil, that can wait. I have a much better concern to raise, before we move.” She gestured with her bone-wand, pointing at Eileen. “You.”

“Me,” said Eileen. “I.”

Evelyn faltered at that response, but then gathered herself and said, “What’s inside this ... ‘Box’?”

“I don’t know.”

Evelyn frowned, sharp and hard. “You don’t know.”

“I do not possess this knowledge. I am unaware. I lack the information.”

“This dream is a representation of the inside of you,” Evelyn grunted. “And you don’t know what’s inside there.”

“E-Evee,” I said. “Please, she’s only been self-aware for an hour or two, she—”

“Let her answer for herself, Heather,” Evelyn grunted. “I still don’t trust this ... Eileen.”

Eileen said: “An answer is never for oneself, it is for not-oneselves. But I do not have an answer to answer. I lack the knowledge, because I could not see. Despite looking at Heather for so long, I did not see her, and therefore I have not known her for very long. The Box is not mine, even if it is within me. I am sorry, Evelyn. I am of no answer.”

Evelyn let out a huge puff. “Fucking hell. It is very weird to have you saying my name, whatever you are.”

“I can refrain from your name, but then I must name you again, and that is not my right.”

“No, just ... ” Evelyn huffed again. “Forget it.”

“It is forgotten.”

I spoke up in Eileen’s defence. “Evee, she’s telling the truth. She really doesn’t know. She’s given up all her authority, her control, her power. And I don’t think she knew what was inside the Box in the first place. It’s almost like it was something ... something she didn’t do ... something beyond her control ... ”

“Wait a sec,” said Twil. “I feel like this shit is getting beyond me. If the Box is open, why isn’t Maisie here yet? Why’re we all still ... you know, doing this?” She flapped her arms, still wearing the remnants of her absurd grey school uniform.

“I-I know,” I stammered. “There’s a glass tank inside the box—”

Tap-tap-crack—

“—a-and that’s where Maisie is!” I spoke over the sound inside my head. “We have to confront this other me, and then break open the glass tank, and ... and there’s Maisie.”

Tap-tap-tap, went the claw on the glass. Haven’t you forgotten somebody? Aren’t you forgetting me, Heather?

No, I snapped into the silence of my mind.

My friends and companions and lovers shared a series of odd glances. The disquiet and trepidation was plain as a blush in every cheek. They knew something was wrong with me. Did they know I was lying by omission? Did they smell the guilt rolling off me like week-old rancid sweat?

Why was I even feeling so guilty? Because my face — her face, that

Lonely Face — was so vile? Or because of how I'd treated her, rejected her, cast her out? Or because of—

Tap-tap.

Evelyn sighed and started to ask another question, but before she could speak, Lozzie hopped and skipped and leapt away from us, throwing her hands into the air, poncho fluttering, delicate blonde hair going everywhere.

"Everyone!" she called. "Everybody!" Suddenly all the liberated patients and inmates and ex-nurses were paying attention to her. "Let's get the fuck outta here, girls! No more hospital, no more treatment, no more cells! Whooooooo!"

And with that, Lozzie led the way, skipping and hopping toward the double doors which led out of the filthy canteen. A cheer went up from her followers, an exhausted cry of freedom; patients hurried after her, holding hands, clinging to each other, older girls carrying the tired and weary younger ones, inmates from the prison levels propping each other up. Ex-nurses swapped ineffable glances, then nodded and followed along behind. Within moments a great snaking train formed, winding out of the doors and back into the hospital, heading for the grounds beyond. Where once I had ridden at the head of a conquering army, Lozzie now led a victory procession.

Raine laughed, Evelyn sighed, Twil perked up with wolfish glee. Zheng threw her hands in the air and roared with approval. Sevens was gently placed back on her feet to totter forward, bleary-eyed and a little battered; she reached Evee, then clung to a corner of Praem's skirt. Somebody muttered, "Guess that's our cue, then." Somebody else replied, "Sure thing, let's go pick up the rest of Heather."

The five Abyssal Heathers all locked eyes with me for just a second. They knew what we did. We knew what was waiting.

My friends and I fell in at the very rear of Lozzie's victory march, behind the last of the nurses and the patients; our role was over for the moment, our part in the collective finished with. Even my temporary lieutenants had peeled away now, their revolutionary roles forgotten, to join the mass of girls heading for the exit from Cygnet Asylum. Only the Knights stayed with me, forming up an

honour guard to our front and rear, led by the steady hands and purple eyes of Zalu and Xiyu.

Raine stayed right by my side — more like escorting an invalid rather than acting as the right hand of a conquering general. The five Abyssal Heathers stalked in a pentagon-shape, with me and Eileen in the middle; I felt like I was caged, held carefully between a wall of tentacles to avert any escape. Evelyn grumbled in her wheelchair, but even in her voice the relief was palpable.

Cygnets Asylum — the hospital, the incarnation of my trauma, the prison of my soul — could no longer hold us. Where before it had formed an impenetrable labyrinth, a spiralling maze of corridors and hallways that had led the revolution around and around, never able to win the freedom beyond the walls, now it disgorged us out onto the hospital grounds in less than a minute.

The nightmare gave up, banished by dawn.

Patients and ex-nurses spilled out of the hospital before us, streaming out through a side-door, emerging into the quiet grey light of a day gravid with expectation, like the sky before a thunderstorm. We followed, back out into the grounds of Cygnets Asylum.

Fingers of clear, crisp, cold air slid up inside my squid-skull mask and cooled my burning cheeks. Eileen's shoes found the soft cushion of healthy green grass. Sighs of relief passed from many pairs of lips. Twil puffed out a huge breath and turned her face to the sky. Lozzie cartwheeled forward, poncho cutting through the air.

The putrid guilt ebbed back beneath my skin. Freedom tasted clean.

Ahead of us towered the gently swaying trees of the woodland which surrounded the hospital, framing the churned and torn-up lawns and the little brick pathways thrown into disarray by Tenny's battle. To our collective right, the grounds of the Asylum stretched away toward the front entrance — quiet and abandoned now, no more nurses to guard the doors, no more patients to trap inside, no more threatening than the sun-bleached shell of an abandoned skull.

Above the trees, in the sky, filling the heavens from horizon to horizon, was Eileen — the Eye, her true body, a vast craggy sea of black wrinkles split down the middle by a narrow slit of open

eyelid. Silver light roiled and glimmered beyond that slit, pouring down upon the dream, like starshine from the other end of the universe.

“Holy shit,” Twil hissed, the first to stumble to a halt. Her bushy tail went stiff, wolfish ears pointed straight up. “Yo, is everybody else seeing this shit? It’s open! It— I mean, uh, she? You?” She gestured at Eileen. “You’re ... open?”

“I open,” said Eileen. “Eye, open.”

“Damn. Uh ... cool, right.”

We all halted. Every pair of eyes turned briefly to the sky, returning Eileen’s unwavering gaze. Not every one of my friends reacted with the same casual ease as Twil. Raine shook her head, staring upward in awe, then breaking into a slow laugh, as if she had realised herself the butt of a cosmic joke. Evelyn looked ready to spit — on the floor, at least, not up at the Eye. Zheng froze as if in a staring contest with a predator — the greatest of all predators, one on the same level as herself, still and tight and unsmiling; she slowly slid her gaze downward, to Eileen’s human body. Eileen stared back at her, until Zheng showed all her teeth in a shark’s grin, filled with razor edges. Praem and Lizzie didn’t seem bothered, at least.

Zalu and Xiyu said nothing, though they seemed tense with expectation; Horror’s severed head, cradled in one Twin’s arms, just swallowed, rough and dry. The Knights were unreadable; perhaps they knew even better than I that Eileen was no threat, not anymore. The five Abyssal Heathers all stared upward in unison, their eyes shifting through a kaleidoscope of colours; as one they all settled on a matching silver-grey hue, to mirror the deep sea inside the Eye.

“She sees us now,” said a familiar voice.

I glanced to the side and found Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight had reassumed the mask of the Yellow Princess.

She looked a little rumpled, her perfectly pressed white blouse and yellow skirt creased and stained for once, as if somebody had pushed her down a brambled hill. Her hair was swept back as if with one hand, her usual ruler-straight tresses thrown into artful disarray. The canvas of her umbrella was torn, though she held it just like normal, point down against the ground. Despite all the

damage, she stood tall and dignified, gazing upward at Eileen's true face.

"I see what I shall see," said Eileen. "And we will see what I end up seeing. See?"

Sevens glanced at her. "That remains to be seen."

"Oh," said Eileen. "That was a good one."

"Yours was barely a pun, esteemed lady," said Seven-Shades-of-Smoothly-Sarcastic. "You need to work on your quick thinking."

"I haven't been thinking for very long," Eileen said. "It was easier when I was writing. But I will keep trying."

"Please do. I await your creations with great interest."

Evelyn let out a sigh like the dying heave of a steam-engine cresting a mountainside. "Heather, I know there's barely any point in asking this, but somebody has to say it. Are we absolutely, one hundred percent certain that your surrogate mother figure up there is not going to change her mind and incinerate all of us?"

"I can answer this," said Eileen.

Evelyn looked up from within her wheelchair, a sceptical frown on her exhausted face. "I'm sure you can."

Eileen nodded. "I can."

"... and?"

"Would you like me to do so?"

Raine wheezed with laughter. "Oh, she's wonderful. I can't get enough of her. I've known this gilf for five minutes and I'm already madly in love with her. I'm sorry, Heather, sweet thing, but I think this is finally bringing me back to my waking self. Who knew that all I needed was an older lady with a taste for puns and literal interpretations?"

Eileen turned her head to look at Raine. "You have used that word several times."

"Which word?"

"Gilf."

“Ahhhhhh,” Raine purred, cracking a grin. “You curious?”

“Stop!” Evelyn snapped.

“What does it mean?” asked Eileen.

“It means you,” Raine said.

“But what does it—”

I sighed. “They’re from the internet, and we’re not introducing you to that. Not yet, anyway. Raine, please—”

“Can’t help myself, Heather, she—”

“Stop!” Evelyn snapped again. “All of you, just stop. And Twil, stop giggling! We are still in the middle of a dream, this is not over. And you,” she jabbed her bone-wand toward Eileen. “Answer the question, yes.”

“I no longer need to look so closely,” said Eileen. “All I can see is all I can see. I change my mind all the time, but my nature is changed already.”

Evelyn sighed. “That answers nothing.”

“Evee,” said Raine. “Hey, we’re all in one piece. I’m inclined to trust her.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Yes, because for some insane reason I cannot figure out, you’re trying to flirt with her.”

Raine cracked a grin. “Not like we have much choice, anyway.” She gestured at the lawns in front of us. “See?”

None of the liberated patients or ex-nurses seemed to care about the giant eyeball in the sky, let alone the cracked eyelid or the silver light streaming down from within the world-spanning orb. Perhaps they couldn’t see Eileen’s true body, or maybe the taste of freedom overwhelmed all other concerns.

What had been our army and our spoils of war was now gently collapsing outward across the churned and ruined lawns of Cygnet Asylum. Many patients wandered away and flopped down on the grass, in ones or twos or little groups of friends, giggling and grinning and luxuriating in freedom, curling bare toes in the grass, closing eyes in drowsy midday naps, or just stretching out sore muscles upon the ground. Some of the inmates from the prison

levels stood with their faces turned to the sky, arms held wide, crying silent tears at the touch of sunlight and the taste of fresh air. Many girls were hugging each other, jumping up and down in celebration, starting what would have been a wild party if not for the widespread exhaustion. Weapons were discarded, no longer needed. Wounds were tended to, blood wiped up, makeshift bandages torn from the hems of unwanted t-shirts. A few couples rolling on the grass were starting to kiss — and more than couples, in several cases, from which I averted my eyes as politely as I could.

The ex-nurses were just as spent. To my curious surprise, many of them were stripping off their uniforms, or at least the parts of their uniforms which marked them as employees of the hospital. Some nurses linked arms and started to head off toward the trees, with some of the more bold patients following them. Were they heading for the breach in the hospital's outer walls? Nothing lay out there but more dream. The only way out was through.

Other nurses joined the exhausted patients down on the grass. A few dozen were lining up, kneeling in a long row, facing vaguely in my direction, hands together as if praying. The reluctant nurses — the ones who had not truly given up the fight, but had to be taken captive and trailed along behind us — were freed by their former companions; they had nowhere else to go now, no fight left to take up, no way to reverse the revolution's victory; most of them just sat down on the grass, grumpy and sullen, all long faces and big sighs, though a few stood and frowned in my general direction, arms crossed, radiating disapproval.

Trauma was never truly gone and forgotten. Those ones would be with me forever, but I would make a place for them in my heart all the same.

A small number of patients stayed close to me and my friends — some of my former makeshift lieutenants, among them the leader of the first group I had rescued after leaving the Governor's Office. But they stood at one remove, simply curious rather than offering any help. This next part, after all, was no longer their fight.

It wasn't my friends' fight either. It should have been mine, alone with myself. But that control was long gone.

I started to sweat inside my mask once again. Soon, whatever I did now, my friends would see my face.

“Huh,” Evelyn grunted, looking out at the liberated patients. “Good for them, I suppose. But, you.” She glared at Eileen again. “We are keeping a close eye on you.”

Eileen made no sound. I couldn’t see her face from my piggyback position, but I saw Evelyn roll her eyes and huff.

Raine guffawed. “You set that one up yourself, Eevee!”

“Yeah,” Twil agreed. “Come on, that was a bit obvious.”

“You may keep as many eyes upon me as you wish,” said Eileen. “And I will keep mine away from you.”

“Fine,” Evelyn sighed. “Fine! Just ... just ... ”

“Observe,” said Praem.

Evelyn put her face in one hand.

A distant, gentle “Prrrrrt-pbbbbbbt!” rang out over the grounds of Cygnet Asylum, from far to our left. Lozzie hopped up like a startled hare and leapt away from the group, then turned and back-pedalled, waving both hands at the rest of us.

“Tenns is waiting!” she called. “Come on, Heathy! Come on!”

Lozzie didn’t wait for an answer. She turned and hurried forward, picking her way across the ruined battlefield, through the aftermath of Tenny’s one-moth rampage, a little pastel poncho fluttering through the debris. The rest of us shared a look, both at the sight before us, and the sight which towered in the middle distance.

The five Abyssal Heathers started forward, following Lozzie, but nobody else seemed prepared to move.

Then Raine leapt into action. “Hey hey, everybody good to go? Sevens, my girl, you’re looking a little worse for wear, sure you can walk? Yes? Good, great, I’ll carry you if you need it though. Praem, you sure you can get Eevee across all that ground in the wheelchair? Twil’s there if you need a hand. Zheng — haha, nah, I’m just kidding, I know you can take it. Eileen, you good with Heather up there, need me to, uh, carry you, too?”

“I am carried,” said Eileen. “For I carry.”

Raine nodded, then raised her machete and pointed forward, across the battlefield. “Alright, off we go! Watch your step, ladies and

cephalopods. The fight might be over, but we don't want nobody treading on a nail. That means you, Twil. Watch those clodhoppers of yours."

"Oi!" Twil shot back. "I'm one of the only people here wearing fuckin' shoes! And I can regenerate! And my feet aren't that big! Fuck you, Raine!"

Raine turned, cackling with laughter, and led the way across the battlefield.

Tenny had left quite an incredible mess in her wake — though to be fair to our dutiful, devoted, delightful moth-daughter, the wreckage and wrack and ruin was hardly all her fault.

A long swathe of lawns and flowerbeds and little copses of trees had been scored and torn up and smashed down by a combination of Tenny's incredible bulk, the scooting and zooming of the half-dozen half-grown Caterpillars she had protected and herded, and the opposition forces of Empty Guards and their strange toy-like tanks and trucks. The lawns were punctured with deep holes from Tenny's moth-like legs, marked with long skids and grazes and ruts of turned-up turf, and scattered with bits of brick wherever an armoured vehicle had slammed into a pathway. Ruts from tank tracks had torn into the mud here and there, while overturned trucks lay on their sides by the dozen. Thousands of 'bullets' — little blue foam cylinders about the size of my thumb — littered the wreckage for hundreds of feet in every direction, punctuated by the larger evidence of the big rockets the Empty Guards had been firing at Tenny.

My heart hardened at the sight, reminded of what I had witnessed on the monitors; Lonely Me had been fighting against Tenny! Such a thing was unforgivable. Maybe I didn't need to feel any guilt at all, maybe she deserved every bit of—

Tap-tap-THUMP.

I flinched inside my mask.

We picked our way across the remains of the battlefield, around the bulk of overturned tanks and past the broken bodies of dozens upon dozens of Empty Guards. The tanks themselves were odd — even my inexperienced eye could see that they were too simple, all one colour, with smooth plastic-like corners and big silly cylinders for guns, too

wide to shoot anything out in reality. The trucks and half-track things were even worse, all green on the inside like plastic toys.

The ‘corpses’ were real enough though, leaking oil and sparking with damage inside their robot bodies. Tenny had left them in pieces, shaken them apart inside their tanks, and hurled them through the air. Zalu and Xiyu led the Knights to either side of our group, checking the corpses as they went, making sure nobody was going to get back up and shoot at us.

Five Beautiful Abyssal Heathers ranged far past the head of our group, fanning out through the ruin of the battlefield, almost catching up to Lozzie up ahead.

Twil paused to pick up one of the big rockets as we passed the site of a particularly thorny knot of resistance, where several vehicles lay all tangled together. She straightened up and waggled the rocket in the air.

“B-be careful with that!” I blurted out from up on Eileen’s back. “It might go off!”

Twil frowned at me. “Eh? Big H, what are you talking about?”

“It might— you know! What’s it called? Unexploded something?”

“UXO,” Raine said, turning around to walk backwards for a few paces. “Unexploded ordnance. Heather, you ain’t gotta worry about that, hey. Relax.”

“Ah?” I blinked over Eileen’s shoulder. “B-but—”

Raine raised one hand. “Twil, here! Go long!”

Twil wound back her arm and threw the rocket like a javelin. I gasped and winced as the blue cylinder sailed through the air, Raine sprinting a few paces ahead to intercept it. “Raine!” I started to shout, terrified, confused as to why nobody else was reacting.

But then Raine ‘caught’ the rocket, no heavier than a chunk of foam. She stood there grinning, tossing it into the air and catching it again while the rest of us caught up.

“See?” she said, reaching out to gently buff Zheng on the stomach with the tip of the rocket. “Sweet thing, it’s just foam. It’s not real. See?”

Zheng ripped the rocket out of Raine’s hands and took a bite out of

the blue foam, then spat out the remnants. I couldn't believe my eyes. This didn't make sense.

"But ... but the Lonely version of me, she was trying to ... "

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP.

"Tenns was probably having the time of her life out here," Twil said.

"Can we all concentrate, please?" Evelyn snapped. "Less horsing about, more eyes on the corpses."

Lozzie stopped up ahead, turned back, and called, "Did anybody hear thaaaaat?"

THUMP.

We passed the tangled plastic wreckage of a trio of tanks. The sight on the far side of the battlefield came into clearer view.

The Box — the true highest-security wing of Cygnet Hospital, a windowless grey steel enclosure festooned with watchtowers and searchlights and even a radar dish — was open. The structure lay torn wide across the top, like a tin can with the lid peeled back, curling into a spiral of metal. Naked steel girders hung from the ragged hole, trailing bundles of wires and bunches of piping, steaming gently as if boiling off some hidden chemicals.

Towering taller than the hospital wing itself was Tenny — a giant in velvet black and fluffy white, halfway to moth-shape, her catlike smile calling out "Ppppprrrrttt-brrrrrrrt!!!" as she spotted our approach. Several of Tenny's massive black tentacles still clutched the peeled-open metal of the Box, as if presenting her handiwork for our approval.

A tiny metal glint on her back told me Jan was still up there, still clinging on, probably still terrified witless. I couldn't spot the Saye Fox at this distance, but I trusted Jan's grip.

At Tenny's feet, a confrontation was locked in a stand-off. Six Caterpillars — not fully grown, but halfway there — backed up a line of battered, ragged figures, the rest of our Knights. A glint of Abyssal chromatophores told me the sixth and final Abyssal Heather was over there too. The Knights and Cattys and One Of Me were arrayed against the last stand of the Empty Guards; half a dozen figures in black armour crouched behind the wreckage of a huge

circular vault door which led into the Box, backed up by nothing but shadows and darkness.

Nobody was firing, not yet. Perhaps they were waiting for our arrival.

“Heard what?” said Twil. “Lozzie? Did anybody hear what?”

Thump-thump-thump.

“Wait, wait,” Raine said as we caught up with Lozzie. “I can hear that. I can feel it, too. Everyone pause, one sec.”

We all stopped.

Thump-thump-thump.

My heart was racing. The noise from the inside of my head was now outside my skull.

“Holy shit,” Twil muttered. “What the hell is that? It’s making the ground shake.”

“It is beneath us,” Zheng said.

“Nah, fuck that, I think something making the ground shake is kinda our concern, right—”

Evelyn huffed. “Twil, she means it’s literally underground. What is that? Eileen, that’s coming from the Box, what is that?”

“A beating,” said Eileen. “From what? I do not know.”

Thump-thump-thump.

“It’s trying to get out,” somebody whispered, hoarse and quivering. “It’s trying to get out. It’s trying to break free.”

Thump-thump-THUMP.

It was only when everyone looked at me, that I realised who’d spoken those words.

“Heather,” Raine said, very gently. “What’s trying to get out?”

“I ... I don’t know,” I said, and it felt like a lie, even though it was true.

“Heather!” Evelyn snapped. “For fuck’s sake, you can’t just say that and leave us hanging. Do you know what’s in there, what’s in the

Box, besides Maisie?”

“I don’t want to know,” I whispered, and felt tears rolling down my cheeks. “I don’t want to know. I don’t ... I don’t want to do this anymore.”

And that was no lie at all.

bedlam boundary – 24.35

Dread.

Thump-thump—

Not just fear — oh, poor fear is but a pale imposter dressed in motley, cavorting about the stage and pulling faces at the audience, to be ushered off at the turn of the scene or banished by the final descent of the curtain. Fear is a hearty little jester, confined to the boards, who cannot follow out beyond the plasterwork and glitter-paint of the theatre; if one so wishes, one may vault the orchestra pit and dance hand-in-hand with fear, without any real peril to flesh or soul. But, one might say, what about terror — fear's older, larger, nastiest sibling? Nay, not terror, not even a little bit of terror. For terror is a fleeting apparition, a trick of grease paint and screeching strings, a darkening of the lights and a rolling thunder beneath the floors; terror is draped in ragged black and wears a worm-eaten skull for a head, all to inspire the sword and the axe and the cleansing flame cut from cardboard and wrapped in coloured foil.

Neither fear nor terror can invoke the reality of dread.

Certainty. Inevitability. Unavoidable doom.

—thump-thump—

A wave of cold sweat broke out from every pore, sticking my clothes to clammy, cringing, curdled skin; beneath the paper-thin security of my squid-skull mask, my face was flushed with heat, my hair was matted and filthy, and I felt my teeth begin to chatter. My guts clenched like fists in the throes of rigor mortis, threatening to void me at both ends. Nausea clawed at my throat like a beast trying to get out. A weight squeezed down on my chest, pressing hard, crushing the breath from my lungs.

—thump-thump—

Dread. Worse than I had ever felt before. I, who had been ejected Outside as a teenager over and over again, I who had scurried through the rot and the dark and the madness that roiled at the feet of entities a thousand times my size. I, who had hidden among the

sea-slick rocks, sheltering from the Gods of dimensions I could barely describe. I who had faced down the Eye, more than once, and won her to my side. I had been through so much — felt my body ripping itself apart from the inside, surfaced from the abyss and found myself trapped in the wrong physical form, surrounded by the pulsating meat and the glugging chemical factory of my own corpse. A year ago I had given up on life, and long before that I had been forced to give up on Maisie. That despair had marked the lowest points of my life.

None of it matched this dread.

—*thump*—

Because I knew, deeper than instinct or intellect, as I clutched Eileen's shoulders and stared across the toy-strewn battlefield, past the final stand-off outside the Box, past our beloved Knights and my Lonely Counterpart's Empty Guards, past the fallen vault door, into the blackness behind them—

—*thump*—

I knew that if I met that thing, the thing going—

—*thump-thump-THUMP*.

That I would die.

All around me, my friends and allies and lovers were trying to speak to me. But their words were drowned out by a single high-pitched note screaming inside my head; their faces were blurred, whirling together, a mass of meaningless flesh and teeth and eyeballs, smeared across the surface of the dream. Somebody touched me, a hand upon my knee. Somebody else placed their support against my back. Somebody else hugged my front. Voices asked if I was all right, calling out to me in concern and growing panic. Somebody told me they loved me. Somebody else told me it would all be okay. A third voice said my name with so much care and attention that a year ago it would have broken me.

None of that mattered now. The dream was turning to melted paste.

Dread is a terrible thing, when one has no way out. The universe narrows to a single razor-sharp point. There is nothing except that certainty, nothing except one's own—

You are doing this to yourself, said the Praem Plushie.

Her words were like a bucket of cold water over my head. I gasped and spluttered, heaving for breath, unsure how she could even speak, since I couldn't actually see her. The dream had become a churning vortex before my eyes.

"W-what—" I spluttered into the void. "What do you—"

You are turning the dream back into a nightmare, said the Praem Plushie. You won, but now you are surrendering again.

"But I can't— I'm going to— I won't survive this! I won't— I won't —"

Do what you were told to do, she said.

Before I could splutter another incoherent question, a face surfaced from the chaos beyond my self.

Raine, mouthing my own words back at me.

"I don't want to do this anymore?" she said. "Heather? What does that mean? Heather? Hey, hey, Heather, look at me, look at—"

Raine's face sunk back into the maelstrom.

I did not want to open the Box. I did not want Eileen to take a single step forward. Whatever that—

—*thump*—

—was, I did not want to face it, I did not want to know it, I did not want to acknowledge it even existed.

The knowledge would kill me.

Lozzie's face surfaced next — up on tiptoes, right by Eileen's side, trying to touch my cheeks beneath my squid-skull mask.

"Heathy! Heathy, she's so close! She's right there! We can't— can't leave her behind! You didn't leave me behind! You can do it, it's right there! We all believe in you, Heathy, so so so so so so much! Heathy—"

Lozzie faded out again, drowned by dread.

She was right, of course.

I would do anything to rescue Maisie. I had decided that long before we had embarked for Wonderland. Was dread certainty of

destruction enough to stop me, to turn me back, at this final hurdle? Where had all my courage gone? My resolve and my determination? Why had I allowed myself to falter?

Praem — or whatever the Praem Plushie represented — was also correct. This was a dream. I was but one component of myself, a tiny part of the gestalt being that we all called ‘Heather Morell’. She — I, me, the whole — could not die here, not physically, not truly. Was I afraid of death, or merely the negation of whatever I represented?

Abstract thoughts were rather difficult, however, because the dread still felt completely real.

Evelyn’s face snapped into clarity, somewhere below and ahead.

“Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once,” she said — and then she was gone.

If not for the dread, I would have howled with laughter; as it was, I merely spluttered a bit. That was not Evelyn, it was a quote from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. That was me, talking back to myself in this pinprick gyre of the dream.

She — I — was right, of course. To give up now, to fear death more than fear losing my sister forever, that would be like dying a thousand times. If I turned back here, I would die every day from this day forth; I would die with every breath, every twitch of my forlorn weeping. I would die with every second of life bought by my cowardice, my refusal to peel my lost twin from whatever cursed shell in which she had been sealed. The other parts of me, whatever they were, would never forgive this part of me, the part I inhabited right here and now, upon the stage of the dream.

There was my courage. There was my resolve.

Death before betrayal. Death before loss. Death before turning back, and leaving Maisie to her fate.

Behind my squid-skull mask, I closed my eyes as tight as I could, shutting out the whirling vortex of the dream. I squeezed and squeezed and squeezed, until the darkness beneath my lids throbbed red, until my pulse pounded in my ears and my body shook — not with dread, but with anger and focus and the heat of my heartbeat.

“Miles to go before I sleep,” I quoted at myself. “Miles to go before I sleep. Miles to go before I sleep. Come on, Heather. You can do this. You did harder things before. You can do this. You can do this. You can.”

When I opened my eyes I was free of the whirlpool. The dream was back, pretending once more to be reality.

The battlefield of overturned toy tanks and foam darts spread out before me, leading toward the Box. Eileen was below me, hands firmly grasping my thighs, carrying me secure and safe upon her back. My friends surrounded me. Everybody was speaking at once, almost as chaotic as the maelstrom of dream failure.

“—Big H? Big H? Yeah, yeah, I can see her breathing, see her eyes moving, she’s still—”

“—put her down! Yes, ‘Eileen’, I mean you! Put her down, there’s clearly something wrong with her, we need to—”

“Let the Shaman think! Let her think! She thinks and she acts, let her—”

“—Heather? Heather, hey, Heather, look at me, hey—”

“*Hisssss-hisssss-ssssss—*”

“She’s dreaming, deeper than us, deeper than—”

“Heather! Heather!”

“Heathy!”

“*Pbbbbbbrrrrt?*”

“Heather!”

Thump-thump—

How foolish I had been! Here was my strength and my resolve. They had been right here all along, by my side all this time, and yet I felt such a terrible distance from them since our reunion. Hiding inside my mask, an ugly and wretched thing, dreading what lay before me; I longed to take the mask off and let them all see my face, let them see I was still here. But if they saw, they would see my guilt, like rotten pus beneath my face. They would see me for what I was. Ugly.

They love you, said the Praem Plushie. That's why they're with you. To face dread alone, huddled in my shell — or to face it with my friends, no matter what they thought of me.

It was no choice at all.

Before I could second guess my decision or come down off the sense of unreality imparted by the swirling nightmare of a few moments earlier, I let go of Eileen, reached up with both hands, and yanked the squid-skull mask off my head.

Cold air, fresh air, filled with the smell of turned soil. My friends' and lovers' faces, blinking up at me in confusion and surprise. Raine was down on my right, one hand on my uninjured knee, deep worry and concern written on her face. Lozzie was to my left, one arm across my back, biting her lower lip in fear. Evelyn was frowning like I had hurt myself in some terrible way. Even Zheng looked concerned, as if she doubted her Shaman's health.

I felt like a wretched and vile little thing, wormed out from under a rock; it was good that Eileen was my legs, for I could not run away.

"I ... " I croaked. My voice was raw and scratchy, as if I hadn't used it in weeks. "I love all of you," I said. "I hope you know that. I ... w-well, I mean, okay, maybe not all of you, exactly. Zalu, Xiyu, I don't know you enough to love you, but ... um ... I-I hope that— *hic*— makes sense ... "

Silence. Wind rustled through the trees far to our collective right. A breeze moved over the desolate battlefield.

Raine broke into a laughing smile of incredible relief. "Of course it makes sense, sweet thing. Love you too."

"There she is!" Twil cheered. "Heather, yo, you alright?"

"Heathy!" Lozzie chirped. "You came back!"

"I-I, um ... uh ... " I felt tears prickle at my eyes. "I was— I was— gone?"

"Sure seemed like it for a sec!" said Twil.

"She needs medical attention!" Evelyn snapped. "She's concussed, or she's lost too much blood, or something else. Praem, Praem, go get her down off—"

“Heather is here,” said Praem.

Eileen said: “Heather is present. I present her. Presently.”

“What does that mean!?” Evelyn shouted.

“The Shaman is well!” Zheng bellowed — a notch below her usual depth, what with the reduction of her usual sheer size. “She needed to think. That is all.”

Raine said: “Heather. Heather, hey, it’s okay. You can cry if you gotta, it’s fine, I promise. You said you don’t want to do this anymore. What does that mean? Do what?”

I started to shake my head. “It doesn’t—”

“Nuh uh,” said Raine, sharper and harder than I expected. Her lips curled into a grin. “Sweet thing, you’re still the one most in tune with the dream. If you say something feels wrong, then something is wrong. And hell, even if we weren’t in a dream, I’d say the same thing. Your fears are my fears. Your worries are my worries. So what is it? Tell us what’s wrong.”

I swallowed. The words stuck in my throat, too tiny to face Raine’s kindness. I felt guilty and vile and ugly, and I could not understand those feelings.

But I told the truth.

“I’m terrified of whatever is making that—”

—*thump*—

I gasped. Something writhed inside my chest, poking at the spaces between my ribs, trying to get out.

“Uh ... that, that noise,” I said. “I’m terrified of what that might be.”

And it was more than mere noise; with every subterranean thump of mass against impediment, the ground shook ever so slightly. If a rain shower had passed over us to clean away the debris of Tenny’s battlefield, the puddles would have rippled beneath each distant shiver of the ground. My chest ached in time with the thumping, ribs creaking, some unseen horror trying to burst forth from within me. Guilt given form? Or something else? I tasted bile and blood in the back of my throat.

All a dream, I told myself. All a metaphor.

Evelyn snapped before anybody else could speak. "What's in the Box!? Yes, you, Eileen!" She jabbed with her renewed bone-wand. "What is in there?! I won't accept this anymore, not if it's scaring the shit out of Heather. What is in the Box? Answer me properly, or so help me God—"

"I have told you," said Eileen. "My answer remains the same. Unfortunately for all of us."

"—I will shove this wand—"

"Evee!" I shouted back. "Evee, she doesn't know! She doesn't know. It doesn't belong to her."

Evelyn turned her anger upon me. "Heather, I have never seen you this fucking scared. And yes, I could tell, right through that bloody mask! Something doesn't add up here. And she's the missing piece. Who does it belong to, Heather? Hm? Who else is in control of this dream?"

"Me," I said. "It's all just me now."

Evelyn clenched her teeth. "And what does that mean?"

"Maybe it's Maisie?" suggested Twil, shrugging, wolfish tail wagging. Everyone looked at her, but she just shrugged again. "Besides, hey, whatever that is down there going all bang-bang underground, it can't beat us now, right?" Twil gestured across what was left of the battlefield. "We've got me, Zheng, all the Knights. These two spec ops girls here," she added for Zalu and Xiyu. "And half a dozen alien Heathers, all spiky and stuff. Who's gonna go up against them? I wouldn't want to. Fuck that. No offense, Heather, just like, respect, real scary."

A distant "Pbrrrrrt!" echoed over the battlefield.

"And Tenns!" Lozzie said. "Tenns is on your side too, Heathy!"

Twil grinned. "Yeah, and Tenny, big style! Who cares if there's some giant monster down in the Box. Tenny's bigger, am I right?"

"Right!" Lozzie cheered, throwing her arms in the air. Another distant fluttery trill from Tenny floated over the remains of the battle.

Raine patted my knee again. "Whatever it is, we face it all together."

You got that, Heather? You aren't alone." She winked at me. "Gonna keep that mask off now?"

"I ... uh ... " The mask felt numb in my hands, as if it was a piece of me I had removed. I gestured with it, feeling helpless. "Could somebody ... ?"

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight stepped forward, still wearing a mask herself, the mask of the Yellow Princess, albeit rumpled and creased, carrying her broken umbrella. She held out her free hand.

"I will watch over your face," she said. "I will treat it as you, kitten."

She took the mask from my outstretched hand. Now I was truly naked.

This part of me — whatever I was — still felt the most incredible dread of my life. This part of me might be about to meet an end. But I would see it through with the love of my friends. It was only with their support that I could rescue Maisie.

Had Maisie known all along that this would happen? That I would split myself into all these pieces, and only my friends would be able to put me back together? That they would see past the ugly guilt, and see only me?

"Thank you," was all I could say. "Thank you, everyone. I ... thank you."

"Heather," Raine said. "You know I'd follow you anywhere, right down into hell if you needed me there. We're gonna get you through this. All of you. Every last piece of you."

I nodded. "Yes. Yes. Come on, let's ... let's get over there, then. Eileen, continue walking, please. I'm okay now. Let's resume this."

Which was a lie. I was very far from okay. My heart was racing, cushioned only by the secret support of the Praem Plushie. My skin was slick with freezing sweat. My teeth almost chattered. My chest felt as if it was wrapped in bands of iron, and as if that iron was the only thing keeping my ribs from bursting outward with some lively awfulness.

But I wasn't alone.

Our ragged band resumed the short journey across the remainder of

Tenny's battlefield. Myself and Eileen, with Raine at my side; Evelyn in her wheelchair, pushed by Praem; Twil and Zheng, Lozzie up ahead; Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, walking on churned mud in heels, a minor miracle in itself; half our Knights, led by Zalu and Xiyu; five Abyssal Heathers, ranging far ahead, as if other parts of me felt more bold than I could imagine. Horror's head was clipped to Zalu's belt now, and kept her mouth sensibly shut, at long last.

We crossed makeshift trenches cut into the lawns of Cygnet Asylum, littered with rolls of barbed wire, rows of overturned artillery pieces, and piles of Empty Guard corpses. Twil and Zheng both pulled at the barbed wire, bare handed, and came away with clumps of spray-painted cardboard. The Abyssal Heathers clambered up the overturned big guns, hauling themselves higher with tentacles and claws, only to find the barrels stuffed with cotton wool and string, sporting payloads of big paper banners which read 'bang'. The corpses, once again, were real enough, leaking great pools of oil into the ground. A calm and detached part of my mind was thankful this was mere dream, else all those hydrocarbons would ruin the soil.

But I could barely pay attention to the sights we passed. All I could do was stare into the darkness of the Box, the dark mouth of that vault entrance, past the fallen door and the Empty Guards and the last stand of Vindictive, Hateful, Horrid Little Me.

We finally reached the end of the battlefield, passing out from between dead guns and empty corpses and collapsed trenches, parallel to the deep swathe of destruction cut through the whole thing by the giant form of a certain faithful moth-puppy.

Zalu and Xiyu and the Knights hurried forward to join the stand-off at the mouth of the Box, where the Cattys and the Knights faced down the last of the Empty Guards. A single Abyssal Heather, the final of the six, flitted in the opposite direction, to meet up with the other five as they closed ranks and greeted her with an embrace, swapping kisses and caresses.

The rest of us halted a good thirty feet from the rear of the stand-off, in the warm embrace of a familiar shadow, towering far above us.

"Ppppbbbbbtttt-btttt!" Tenny trilled.

Tenny's dream-self was beautiful, in the same way as my Abyssal

Selves. I had never gotten a chance to examine her up-close during the previous dream which she had joined. I had only ever seen her from a distance, over the rooftops of a simulacra of my home town, Reading, or in the final few moments as the dream had closed. Here, in this expanded memory of Cygnet Asylum, Tenny was close enough to touch.

Somewhere between five to six stories tall, towering over the torn-open rooftop of the Box, she had made herself into a true giant — a ‘Kaiju’, just like in those old timey giant monster movies she sometimes watched on her laptop. Her body was shaped like a cross between a moth and a jelly bean, all soft and rounded at both ends, with a series of long, thin, insectoid legs jutting out from the sides to support her massive weight; six pointed tips were currently buried in the soft soil of the lawns, while another six were resting on the peeled-open Box, as if she was leaning against her handiwork, showing it off for our approval. Her wings were folded back in repose, their work done for now, but a mass of thick black tentacles extended from beneath the shimmering surface of the wings themselves; many of the tentacles waved in the air, like she was celebrating her victory, but several of them continued to grip the edge of the Box, as if ready to rip it wider. Two tentacles had descended all the way down to ground level, to hover over the last handful of Empty Guards, poised to crush them to paste at the first sign of resistance. She wasn’t going to let the Knights or Cattys get shot.

Furred in luxurious velvet black and thickly fluffy whorls of spiralling white, she caught the silver light which spilled down from the slit-crack in the Eye, highlighting the tufts and strands of her fur as if beneath the grace of God-sent sunlight. Her face was a little snout-like, but still instantly recognisable as our Tenny, complete with a beaming cat-like smile beneath her big black eyes and a pair of twitching antennae.

Lozzie threw her hands into the air again. “Tenny! Baby! Well done!”

“Prrrrrbttt!” Tenny replied. Her high-pitched trilling noise shook the air, but not unpleasantly, like standing next to a jet engine made of fluff and felt.

Tenny’s sheer happiness was enough to push back the worst of the dread which still clotted the passages of my heart. Even if I died

here, I had done some good out in the waking world, alongside Lozzie. Whatever happened here, Tenny was free, and had her whole life ahead of her.

I blinked a thin sheen of tears from my eyes. What if I never got to see Tenny finish growing up?

“Holy fucking shit,” Twil said, gazing up at Tenny’s substantial bulk. “Lozzie, you gotta stop her mainlining Mothra movies.”

“Too late!” Lozzie chirped. “Isn’t her cosplay the best?!”

Raine shot a smirk at Twil. “What’s this, wolfie? You scared of Tenny now?”

“No!” Twil tutted. “I mean just, like, I mean, she can’t do this in reality, right? She’s huge! We’d cause a national panic if she did this in Sharrowford, right?”

“Yessssss!” trilled Tenny. Twil flinched, then put her hands as if in surrender.

Evelyn huffed. “Stop bellyaching, Twil. She can do whatever she wants, we’re in a dream.”

“Glorious,” said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. “Well done.”

“Puppy!” Zheng roared. “You are huge!”

“Prrrrrrrrrrrrt!!!” went Tenny.

I added my voice, calling upward to my surrogate moth-like daughter. “Y-yes! Tenny, it’s me! It’s Heather! You’re so beautiful, and ... and thank you! Well done! I love you, Tenny! We all love you. Never forget that, okay? I love you, Heather loves you, I helped make you and ... and I love you.”

My voice trailed off as I realised what I was doing.

I was trying to say goodbye.

I clamped down on that emotion, cramming it deep down inside me. I could not let my friends and companions and lovers — least of all Raine or Evelyn — know about the dread certainty which coiled and bubbled in my guts, even if they were committed to stand at my side while I faced the source of that dread. If they knew what I suspected I was marching into, they might try to stop me. I had to be—

Ruthless?

Like her — Lonely Heather, the Vile and Rotten version of myself?

The paradox made my head spin. How could I be the ruthless one now, if she had separated from me?

Before I had time to let the implications of those thoughts blossom into a dream-splitting fissure, Eileen opened her mouth and spoke a single word which turned all heads toward her.

“Granddaughter?”

Evelyn scrunched up her eyes as if experiencing an instant and terrific migraine, hissing “Again?” Raine froze, eyes wide, swallowing a smirk. Twil started to laugh — then stopped.

Lozzie hopped into the air and did a full 180-degree turn, poncho spinning outward to either side. She landed on her toes, a twinkle in her eyes, and squinted at Eileen.

Eileen said: “Granddaughter number two? Via Heather.”

Lozzie raised a hand. “I’ll allow it! But it’s up to Tenny!”

Evelyn snapped, “This is all very heart-warming, but do we have time for this? I’m going to answer my own question — no!”

“Y-yes,” I agreed. “This is all very sweet, but we need to—”

THUMP.

“—get down into the Box.”

“Agreed,” Raine said, glancing around at the group. “Heather’s in charge of this. If she says we get shifting, we get shifting. Tenny, you’re a star. Thanks for the assist, big girl!”

“Prrrbt!”

“Hey, uh,” Twil said, shading her eyes against the silver light pouring from the sky. She was peering up at Tenny and squinting. “That’s Jan up there on her back, right?”

Twil was correct — Jan was visible, several stories up, as a dull grey metal figure clinging to the soft fur of Tenny’s back, clutching an even smaller blob of russet in one arm.

“Ah, yes!” I said. “Maybe we should call to her, see if she wants to

come down?”

Raine stuck her machete in the ground, point down, then cupped her hands around her mouth. “Hullo up there, Jan! How’s it going?”

Jan moved one arm, barely visible at that distance, raising her helmet’s visor. A pale oval appeared in the grey blob.

A distant voice floated down from Tenny’s back.

“It’s going!”

Raine shouted back: “Fancy coming down? Joining us for the final stretch? Dream’s almost over!”

“I’ll stay up here, thank you very much!”

Raine blinked in surprise and glanced at me. I shrugged, a little confused. Twil and Eevee both looked rather perplexed as well.

Jan shouted again: “It’s a darn sight safer up here right now! Away from all the guns!”

Lozzie flapped her poncho. “Janny! Janny, it’s safe down here too!”

Jan went silent for a long moment.

Lozzie did a little side-to-side spin with her poncho. “I’lllllll protect you, Janny! Right now I’m extra double good at that! I’m spiky and sharp!” She waved her shiv in the air, edge glinting in the light. “Sooooo?”

Up on Tenny’s back, Jan paused and leaned forward, as if trying to peer down at us. A moment later her voice rang out again.

“Lozzie, is that you?”

“Yaaaaah!” Lozzie called. “Come down, Janny! I’ll look after you! Niiiiiice and snug!”

Jan put her face in one hand. Even at that great height I heard a tiny little clank of metal.

A moment later, one of Tenny’s bus-width tentacles dipped toward Jan, pausing only a few feet above her armoured form, the tip narrowed to a sharp-ended slit. Jan looked up and flinched, but some kind of communication must have passed between her and Tenny. The tentacle dipped further, then lifted Jan up by the scruff of her armoured neck.

Like a battered angel in dull plate-mail descending on the mechanical arm of a stage-machine, Jan was briskly lowered through the air, past Tenny's smiling face, and down to the ground. Her armoured feet staggered sideways as she landed, wide-eyed with terror inside her helmet. She still had the Saye Fox clutched in her arms, hugging her tightly to prevent a fall.

"Janny!" Lozzie cheered, running forward to slam into Jan with an armour-piercing hug. She giggled and smirked with a little bit too much energy; the power of the dream had not entirely left our Lozzie just yet. Jan looked halfway between awestruck and terrified, but did not recoil or let go of Lozzie. A strong mark in her favour, I thought.

Lozzie would be safe and appreciated with Jan. Another thing I did not have to worry about, once I was gone.

The Saye Fox wriggled out of Jan's arms before Lozzie's impact. She hit the ground with a gentle skitter of paws and quickly crossed to Evee's wheelchair, where she paced around Evelyn twice, then sat at her feet.

"Yip-yip-yap!" went the Fox.

"Quite," Evelyn sighed. "Glad to see you're safe ... um ... grandmother."

"Yerp!"

Evee's past, finally bridged. Another matter that I had helped heal. Was it to be the last? My heart was racing in my chest now that I realised what I was doing, checking off the matters which I would not regret in my final moments.

Thump! Thump!

My ribs creaked. My chest ached. Something inside me still wanted to get out.

Jan peered over Lozzie's shoulder, eyes roving across myself and my companions. She stared in open awe as the six Abyssal Heathers stalked forward to touch Tenny's descended tentacle, each one briefly brushing their own tentacles over Tenny's gigantic black limb. Tenny let out a happy little "Prrrrbit!" just as if I'd given her a hug.

Jan swallowed. "Uh, I'm not going to ask what exactly is going on

here. Or who Heather is riding.” She eyed Eileen briefly. “Though it’s good to see you all, glad to see this plan worked. I would just like this to be over, preferably not with a final boss fight.”

“I am no longer a boss,” said Eileen. “But I am boss.”

Jan went even more pale. “Don’t— don’t— I don’t want to know. Okay? Just don’t— don’t tell me. Can we go back to the waking world yet?”

Raine said, “We need to put Heather back together first.”

“Long story,” Evelyn huffed.

Jan swallowed. “Right. Right. Okay. I’ll just ... I’ll just stick with Lozzie here, if that’s alright.”

Lozzie seemed to take this well. She hopped back and wriggled her hand into one of Jan’s armoured gauntlets, then threw her a saucy little wink.

—*thump*—

Raine pulled her machete out of the ground, made a circle motion in the air with her other fist, then raised her voice. “Alright, ladies. Everyone hang back a bit, okay? I’m gonna go check out this stand-off and—”

“Raine,” I said. “There’s no need for caution. I think they’re already beaten. We can just walk right in there.”

Raine held my gaze for a moment too long, with a mote of surprise in her eyes. But then she nodded. “I’m protecting you all the way on this, Heather. You don’t get a choice in that. Understand, sweet thing? You’re not walking in there alone.”

All I could do was nod, trying to control my emotions. “Eileen,” I said. “Take the lead, please.”

“Are you leading me, or am I leading you?” Eileen said.

I smiled a little. “Whichever you prefer.”

“I lead. I lean.”

Eileen strode forward, heading for the line of Caterpillars and Knights.

All the forces we had brought to Wonderland were accounted for

now, assembled around that final door, the final portal, the way down into the Box. In the rear of the stand-off stood the six Caterpillars, their off-white carapaces dirty with mud from the running battle, arranged in a curve as if to prevent any escape. They were not yet fully regrown, each one about the size of a shire horse rather than an entire barn. As we passed through the middle of their formation, a series of soft little *doot!* sounds greeted us, six in total, one from each of the Cattys. I reached out to touch one of the carapaces as we passed, running my fingers along the flank of a good friend and loyal ally. I muttered a thank you beneath my breath.

Lozzie decided to hug all of them, running up and down the line, pulling Jan behind her.

Next were the Knights — all thirty finally reassembled in one place. Their fake security guard armour was battered and broken, visors smashed, helmets cracked, weapons reduced to scrap metal and damaged plastic. But they crouched in three solid ranks, taking cover behind a series of low metal walls which separated the Box's vault-door from the lawns. Each one of them looked prepared to go over the top and charge the defenders, even empty-handed as they were.

Standing tall, out in the open, without a scrap of cover, was the one Knight I had wondered over for quite some time.

"Oh!" I said in surprise as Eileen drew level with him. "It's you! And ... and you. Oh, wow. What have you ... done?"

The Forest Knight — the only one I was reliably capable of picking out as an individual from among the hive-mind — turned the blank mirror of his visor to look at me. He nodded once.

The Forest Knight had undergone quite a transformation. Like his siblings, his armour was battered and broken and his dream-wrought firearm was reduced to almost nothing. Unlike the other Knights, something else had flowed in to fill the gaps — a thick, gloopy, viscous goo, light brown like fresh clay. The goo had hardened into plates of armour over his security guard uniform; the plates were decorated with the same perspective-defying floral patterns as his real armour, out in the waking world; that was the only reason I could truly recognise him. Some of the material had lengthened into an imitation of his chosen weapon — a huge axe,

held over his shoulder in an easy pose. From his arms sprouted a series of short tentacles, wriggling in the air, forming little eyeballs at their tips.

The Forest Knight and Mister Squiddy were working together, on a more literal level than I had ever expected. There was no time to investigate the implications right then, but I filed it away, for later, for beyond the dream.

If I survived.

And finally, right there, strapped to the Forest Knight's back, was the body Jan had built for Maisie — a grey and featureless version of my own body, limp and lifeless, without flesh or face, ready for inhabitation.

—*thump-thump*—

The rest of my friends drew up alongside us. A couple of them greeted the Forest Knight; Evelyn said something about Mister Squiddy, but I was barely paying attention. Eileen said something else, something that made Twil groan and Lizzie giggle.

—*thump-thump*—

Past the trio of low steel walls, opposite the assembled Knights, was the fallen vault door — a great metal disk lying on a wide expanse of featureless concrete, flanked by a pair of partially wrecked guard posts, damaged by the passing of Tenny's tentacles. Six Empty Guards — clean and shiny mirrors of the Knights, with working guns and intact armour — crouched among the wreckage, taking cover behind the rim of the fallen door and in the ruins of one of the guard posts. They were so still they looked frozen. Their submachine guns were pointed at the floor, as if in premature surrender.

Past the Guards and the fallen disk was the doorway itself — a massive circle of metal, set in a huge panel covered in electronic controls and little blinking LEDs. The machinery was wrecked, cracked by the pressure of the buckled walls. The doorway itself was bent out of shape; the vault door must have popped free like a cork.

Past that doorway was dripping darkness, lit by the distant fires of alarm-lights, like volcanism beneath the deepest of seas.

Thump!

And it — whatever it was — knew I was here.

“Heather? Sweet thing?” Raine said at my side. “What now? Those guards are armed, we can’t just walk past them.”

Evelyn hissed. “Are we certain this isn’t a trap? Heather?”

—*thump-THUMP*—

“Shit me,” Twil muttered. “Ground’s really fucking shaking now. We’ve pissed something the fuck off down there.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes. It’s over. We’ve already won. She’s lost everything. She’s all alone now. We can just ... just ... ”

In my peripheral vision, the six Abyssal Heathers stalked forward, flanking the remaining half-dozen Empty Guards from both sides. Tentacles flicked into the air, sprouting rows of barbed hooks, their tips narrowing into razor-sharp points. Claws slid from well-lubricated sheaths. Jaws opened wide, sharp teeth dripping with sticky toxic mucus. Six hissing voices rose in six abyssal throats.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Wait, please. There’s no need for more violence now.”

The Abyssal Heathers paused, turning void-dark eyes toward me.

“There’s no need for a fight anymore,” I repeated. “She has nothing left. We only have to ask.”

Beneath me, Eileen raised her voice: “You there! May we see Maisie?”

Evelyn sighed as if at the end of her rope. Raine made a valiant but failing effort not to smirk. Twil snorted. Lozzie made a sound like a steam kettle. I appreciated the pun, but—

—*thump*—

—my heart was beating too fast to laugh, and my ribs hurt like hell was trying to break free from inside my heart.

By some miracle, Eileen’s appeal worked. A distant crackle of radio static crossed the no-man’s-land of the fallen vault door. One of the Empty Guards turned his head to speak into the little hand-held radio attached to the shoulder of his uniform.

From down inside my own chest, a voice crackled forth.

“Yes, that’s correct,” it said — Lonely Heather, Isolated and Desolate Me, her voice like lead and ashes, answering the inquiry from her defeated soldiers. “Stand down. I ... I think that’s the right terminology. Stand down.”

For a moment I had no idea where the voice had come from. Between the cracking inside my head and the thumping beneath all our feet, I was prepared to believe that somehow I had become my own Lonely Self, that her voice was channelled from within my own chest, that the dream had coiled backward on itself so hard that I could simply hear these things now, no matter how far away. Why not? Everything else was far beyond the rim of absurdity now.

But then the Praem Plushie peeked out from within my yellow blanket, holding the little hand-held radio which I had taken off the first batch of Empty Guards.

“Stand down,” Lonely Heather’s voice hissed from the speaker. “Let them pass. Let them in. It’s over.”

I accepted the radio from the Praem Plushie, with numb fingers and a lump in my throat. All my friends watched me, frozen with anticipation and surprise. Raine mouthed ‘Is that her?’ I nodded my head, though my neck felt like a steel cable pulling taut to breaking point.

My thumb found the main button on the hand-held radio. I pressed it, and spoke into the microphone.

“Tell them to throw down their weapons,” I said.

A long pause. Then a sob, distant and muffled, so that I could not be sure if I had truly heard it. Lonely Heather said, “Throw down your guns, everyone. It’s over. I’ve lost.”

As one, the Empty Guards on the far side of the fallen vault door dropped their guns and rose to their feet, raising their hands into the air.

The Knights swarmed forward, without need of command or instruction, though Zalu and Xiyu joined them; within seconds they had scooped up the fallen weapons and restrained the six Empty Guards.

“Don’t be too hard on them!” I called. “It’s not their fault! They’re

not even really alive. They're just ... just her."

A limp and lifeless laugh squawked from the radio in my hand: "Ha. That's right. It's not their fault, Heather. It's yours. This is all your fault now. I hope you appreciate that I tried to protect you. I tried."

Anger and disgust welled up inside me, threatening to push a column of bile up my throat. I snapped into the radio, "You and I can talk face to face soon enough, thank you very much. How do we reach you? There better not be any traps inside the Box, either, or I'll—"

You'll what, I thought to myself — hurt her?

Lonely Heather snorted a dead little laugh. "It's a single route. Just walk in. I'll wait."

"Promise me—"

The radio connection cut out with a little 'fzzzt'. Lonely Heather had terminated the call. I tutted and hissed with frustration. She — me! — was so irritating and stubborn, I had no idea how anybody could ever put up with her behaviour.

When I lowered the radio and looked back up at my friends, I expected hard-nosed concern and practical frowns. Raine would have her machete ready to fight anything which my Traitorous Little Other sent against us, while Evelyn would be worried about tricks and traps and ambushes as we plunged into the Box. Zheng would be eager for a fight, and Lozzie would be flashing her shiv, and—

But instead the concern was gentle, and the frowns were worried.

Raine just said, "That was her, right? This other part of you? Down in the Box?"

"Uh ... yes."

"And she's all alone down there?" Raine asked. "You're all alone, down there?"

"... y-yes, but—"

Evelyn said, "I want to get down there, ASAP. I don't like the way her voice sounded, not one bit."

"Heathyyyyy," Lozzie said, a little whine in her voice. I glanced at

her, but she wasn't looking at me, she was staring into the dark portal which led down into the Box.

"Spooky as fuck," said Twil. "That sounded exactly like Heather. I guess ... it is Heather? Another Heather?"

"We already have enough of those," Evelyn drawled. "And— hey! Wait! Wait for the rest of us!"

The Six Abyssal Heathers were already stalking forward, claws tapping over the fallen vault door, sliding back into the shadows beyond the circular doorway.

Raine hopped forward, machete in the air, more like the baton of a parade leader than the weapon of a revolutionary. "Who's coming down with us? Who's holding the door? Quickly now, people!"

The brief debate over party organisation was lost on me; I felt like a pebble whirling in a waterspout, waiting to be carried to shore. The Knights opted to stay and hold the exit to the Box, in case of an unexpected situation. Zalu and Xiyu did the same, overtly much more comfortable sticking to their dreamlike 'special operations' role than plunging into the heart of the dream. The Caterpillars couldn't come either, the walkway beyond the door did not look wide enough for even their reduced size.

Everyone else — all the friends and companions I had rescued, plus the latecomers of Jan, the Saye Fox, and the Forest Knight — moved toward the doorway together, with me in the centre of the group, still carried on Eileen's shoulders, hurrying to catch up with the clicking claws of the six Abyssal Heathers.

Did my friends expect no trickery? No traps on our path? Praem pushed Evelyn's wheelchair as if we were not descending into the lair of—

—*thump*—

—a great and terrible beast. Eileen carried me forward without comment. Raine and Zheng strode at my sides. Twil had her claws out, but no more than that. Lozzie pulled Jan along by one armoured gauntlet.

We passed beneath the shattered circular doorway, into the subterranean shadows of the Box.

"E-Eileen," I stammered. "W-wait ... "

“But you weigh so little.”

“Now isn’t the time for puns! I—” The shadows covered us, swallowing us whole. “Oh ... n-no—”

—*thump*—

But then suddenly, Raine’s hand found mine. She looked up at me from beside Eileen, beaming with all her usual confidence, hair raked back, muscles flowing and flexing beneath her bloodstained clothes.

“Heather, hey,” she purred. “I know you’re afraid, I can tell. But I’ve got you. We’ve all got you. We’re not leaving any part of you behind.”

My chest felt like it was going to burst. “I ... love you, Raine.”

“Love you too,” she said. “I’ve got you.”

The interior of the Box — the most high-tech, high-security, high-secrecy part of Cygnet Asylum — was exactly as I had witnessed on Eileen’s wall of monitors. A world of matte steel surfaces was studded with emergency lighting and ineffable control panels; metal walkways were suspended over sheer drops down into infinite darkness, winding a slow and silent path between vast glass-fronted aquariums full of murky water. Our footsteps clicked and rang against the floors, echoing off into the silent flashing darkness beyond the glass tanks, beyond the landscape of pipes and machinery, accompanied by only the drip drip drip of water sloshing and sluicing from shattered enclosures.

Many of the tanks were indeed shattered — glass lay in avalanche sheets down the sides of ruined aquariums, spilling into the void below, forming an underwater sea-shore of razor fragments and iceberg-blocks among the slopping effluvia of the broken tanks themselves. Vast quantities of water seemed to have filled some lower layer of the Box, drowning the machines and choking the walkways and burying the lift shafts. Dark shapes slid past, swimming in the waters of this newborn ocean — giant shapes trailing ragged membranes, reaching above the surface with clutches of pulsating tentacles, opening glinting jaws as they floated beneath our path.

“Fuuuck,” Twil hissed as we crossed one such section, her eyes glued on the steel mesh at her own feet; in the oceanic abyss

beneath us, something with many sleek heads was basking upon the surface, floating at the very limit of our sight. A dozen jaws opened and closed as if breathing. Necks writhed and twisted like a nest of snakes, while a bloated white belly rolled beneath the still waters.

“Do not look down,” Evelyn said between clenched teeth. “Twil. Stop looking down. Stop it.”

“But—”

“Eyes up, girl. Eyes up!”

Lozzie cooed. “They’re all so pretty!”

“I wish I knew this place,” said Eileen. “But I do not.”

Jan was silent. Zheng rumbled like a tiger looking at her rivals. Raine stayed focused on me. The Saye Fox trotted along as if immune to such sights.

We walked on, heading deeper, down the one pathway which unfolded before us.

The six Abyssal Heathers showed no fear, ranging far ahead, scurrying across the walls, walking on the handrails, sometimes even diving into the waters below with a graceful swoop of wings and tentacles, only to surface again later, dripping wet and hissing with soft satisfaction. They led the way now — myself, confident and whole and striding free, where I was a mollusc hiding in my shell, carried upon Eileen’s back, cringing from the truth. I struggled to understand these transcendent beauties as part of myself. Had I ever possessed such clarity and wonder, before this dream of Cygnet? Would I have the courage to dive from the walkway into those dark waters, to swim with creatures which terrified mortal minds? It did not seem so, not then, not to me.

As we plunged deeper into the Box, we discovered the corpses of many Empty Guards — lying tangled on the walkway, slumped over the railings, or floating in the waters below. We passed automatic turrets with their electronic innards scooped out, control panels cracked open and eviscerated like carrion, security doors battered from their hinges and reduced to scrap metal.

“Holy shit, Big H,” Twil whispered in appreciation at one particularly complex looking automatic turret with the barrels bent and the gearbox fused into a mass of melted slag. “Your little alien

mini-mes did all this?"

"She did this," said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight. "They are all parts of Heather herself. The one on Eileen's back is just another part."

Hissssssss went one of the Abyssal Heathers, from up ahead.

Twil glanced at me, as if I was a finger, or a hand. She gulped and nodded, and we all carried on ahead.

Eventually — after ten, or fifteen, or twenty minutes' walk, for time ceased to have meaning, down here in the sump of the dream — an aquarium tank grander than any others slowly came into view up ahead. The vast structure loomed out of the darkness, as if the Box was a mere hollow space, and this was the core.

Wrapped in walkways and gantries, guarded by the dead shells of an entire army of automatic guns, lit from below by shattered red and orange warning lights, murky with darkness and depth and sheer crushing pressure, the aquarium tank towered — a hundred stories, a thousand feet into the air, taller and wider and grander than anything the Box could possibly have held. Mist and condensation drifted around the sides of the structure. Deep cracking sounds echoed outward from it, as if from an iceberg suspended in freezing seawater.

"Is that ... ?" Twil hissed.

"I suspect so," Evelyn grunted. "Heather?"

A lump had formed in my throat, while my mouth had gone dry. My hands were shaking, sweaty, skin prickling with heat. My heart went thud-thud-thud against the inside of my ribs. I longed to hide inside my squid-skull mask again, but then I would be alone.

Maisie waited for me, down there at the bottom of this abyss.

I nodded, just once. "Yes. That's her cell. Her cage. I'm sure of it."

"That pounding noise has stopped," Raine said, voice tight, muscles taut and ready; I recognised that look on her, that readiness for anything. She felt it too, or perhaps she was merely picking up on my own fear and resolve. "What does that mean?"

I realised with shock that Raine was correct — we had not heard the thumping noise in several minutes.

"It knows I'm here," I muttered.

“Heather?”

I swallowed. There was no sense in secrecy now, but I had no idea why this feeling was so strong. “It knows I’m here,” I repeated. “No reason to fight for release anymore. It knows I’m here.”

“And so are we!” Lozzie chirped.

“Damn right,” said Twil, cracking her knuckles. “You’re not here alone.”

“Never alone,” said Raine.

Evelyn sighed, as if all this drama was too much for her. But she nodded. “Heather’s not doing this alone. That much is clear.”

Above the central aquarium the ceiling of the Box was broken and shattered, peeled away in great layers of bent metal, where Tenny had breached the roof from outside. But paradoxically no silver Eye-light shone down through that gap, no hint of daylight reached the depths, no solace touched the core of this place, as if the conditions inside the Box had expanded outward to define the entire dream.

One of Tenny’s vast tentacles was hanging down through that gap. It twitched as we approached, then swung through the air to move level with us, level with the walkway. That tiny gesture heartened me beyond words. I whispered a thank you to Tenny, that she had managed to join us, down here in the dark.

Lozzie hopped to the edge of the walkway and reached out to pat the side of the tentacle. “Good Tenny!”

“See?” Raine said, smiling just for me. “You’re far from alone, Heather.”

The walkway led straight toward the central aquarium, terminating in a series of enclosed metal structures, like barnacles attached to the glass. In the middle was a structure like a box all to itself, stout as a bunker, windowless, the rear side flush with the glass of the aquarium itself.

The little steel room.

A single metal door stood at the end of the walkway, leading into that room. It was closed.

“Heather?” Raine said. “Heather?”

“W-what?” I could barely tear my eyes away. “Yes?”

“Do you want one of us to go in first? Or do you want to do it?”

My throat had closed up. My belly hurt like I’d eaten rotten meat. My skin was plastered with cold sweat.

“Can we ... ” I swallowed. “Can we all go together?”

Entering the little steel room was a blur. Raine burst in first, machete raised in case of some final trick. Eileen carried me through, right on her heels. The rest of my friends bundled inside, all rushing into the tiny, cramped, nasty little space. The Abyssal Heathers stalked in last, alongside the Forest Knight, as if they already knew what we would find.

Revealed to the naked eyes, the little steel room was sad and pitiful — a cold and empty space, walled in grey, with a little steel table and a little steel chair. Computers and control panels lined the walls, blinking their cold, empty lights into the chilly air. There were no Empty Guards left now, they had all gone.

The back wall of the little steel room was made of frosted glass, just as I had seen on the cameras in Eileen’s office — the exterior of the grand central aquarium in which Maisie was held, though we were much too far away to spy Maisie herself. The glass was cracked now, covered in a spider-web of broken lines. Little trickles of cold water seeped from between hairline fractures, pooling into a thin puddle on the floor.

A vast dark shape coiled and writhed far beyond sight, hundreds of meters away, hidden by the murk.

And huddled at the foot of that wall was—

“Heather!”

Raine rushed forward, going down on her knees, offering aid to my worst enemy. Myself.

Lonely Heather, Hateful Heather, Spiteful Heather. She was down on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, dressed in greasy Cygnet-issue pajamas. Her eyes were rimmed with red from crying, her expression slack and dead with exhaustion. Her hair was filthy, raked back from the action of panicked hands. Her right fist was covered in blood, clenched tight around what I knew was the pebble, the little speck of grit in which she had placed so much

meaning.

She looked exactly like me, in every last respect.

I felt sick.

Lonely Heather flinched away from Raine. “N-no, don’t touch me!”

“Woah, woah, Heather, Heather, it’s okay, it’s me. It’s Raine!” Raine said, but Lonely Me just shook her head, and shook with a dry sob.

“I just want to help, you’re part of Heather too. Heather? Heather, hey, heeeey, it’s okay, it’s okay.”

Others rushed forward — Lozzie, casting down her shiv, Evelyn in her wheelchair, shouting at everyone to calm down, Sevens, carrying my mask in one hand.

But Lonely Me had eyes for only me. We locked gazes. Everyone else fell quiet, as if the dream cleared the stage for this moment.

“I hope you’re happy,” she said.

“No!” I replied. “No, not at all. Not like this, not divided against ourselves. And not until I — until ‘we’,” I forced myself to say.

“Until we rescue Maisie.” I raised my eyes to the dark shape coiling far behind the glass. “But, what is that? It can’t be Maisie, I saw her before, it can’t be her. You wouldn’t explain to me, but I can feel it trying to get out. It’s been trying to get out, all this time. What is—”

The dark shape swooped forward, sliding through the water.

It was gigantic, a titan of the seas. It must have been even further away than I thought, because the motion made my head swim and my stomach lurch. Rainbow tentacles the size of redwood trees flickered in the murk. Membranous wings caught the fluid, propelling the giant toward the little steel room. Teeth and claws and hooked barbs scraped against fractured glass.

An eyeball the size of a car filled the glass wall, pressed against the cracks.

That eyeball was all the colours of reality — void-dark and peach-dawn pink and deeply dripping yellow. But it was oh so familiar.

Lonely Heather did not even turn to look. She stared at me instead, lost deep in despair.

“What ... what am I looking at?” I whispered, though I knew

already, down in my heart. "It looks like ... like another abyssal me, like—"

"It's us," said Lonely Heather. Her voice was so dead and empty, as if she felt the dread and death that I knew was approaching. "It's you and me."

"But what—"

"You know what. We both know it now. It's the one thing we've been trying to avoid acknowledging all this time," she said, with slow tears running down her cheeks. "Guilt."

Dread stopped up my breath. My heart juddered to a halt. I wanted to curl up in a corner and shut out the dream.

"No," I whispered. "No. Don't—"

"Survivor's guilt."

bedlam boundary – 24.36

Survivor's Guilt.

A leviathan of truth, shrouded in the murk of an ocean hidden beneath the world; a pelagic colossus more tremendous and terrible than any mere self-hatred or internalised loathing. A hundred feet in length, all scales and tendrils and a million hooked barbs, slathered with paralytic toxins; a hundred thousand tonnes of undeniable weight, displacing a pinprick worth of water from that great shadowed sea. It stared back at me from within Maisie's aquarium, from within an eyeball into which I could have dived and lost myself, from behind a curtain of cracked glass, creaking and groaning under the pressure of an abyssal eternity.

She was me, and I was her. This component of myself — forgotten, abandoned, drowned but not dead — had grown so vast down here in the rotten sump of my heart. Heather Abyssal, subjected to all the changes of deep-sea gigantism, biding her time, conserving her resources, brooding over her plans. Until this moment.

She — I, me, myself — stared into the little steel room, unblinking and unmoving, with an eye the colour of both darkness and dawn.

My voice was all but gone, I had to grope for the words.

“But— I don't— I don't ... ”

Lonely Heather — the Other Me, sitting in huddle down on the floor, with tear-stained cheeks and grease-matted hair and trickles of blood seeping from between the clenched fingers of her right fist — said, “Don't deny it.”

“But—”

“How can you deny it, Heather?!” she shrieked, suddenly shrill.

“This is what you wanted, isn't it?! Don't reject it now, it's too late for that.”

“But I don't—”

“It's right there!” she screamed, going red in the face, glowing through her tears. “Look at the size of it! How can you pretend not

to see it?! It's so big, there's nowhere left to hide it. And I've been in here alongside it, the whole time. You got to run around and have your fun little adventure, rescuing your friends, having sex with Raine, celebrating your victories, beating your trauma — and I've been in here, with the guilt! You wanted to see the inside of the Box, you wanted to win, you wanted to do this your way? Well here's your reward! Don't you dare turn away now. You don't have the right."

Everybody else started talking all at once, trying to say things to Lonely Heather. Her outburst, her panic, her pain, it drew the instant and unconditional sympathy of my — our! — friends and companions and lovers. Raine spoke to her in a soft, safe, comforting, confident voice, the same voice she had always used on me in the past, the voice which told me everything was going to be okay, the same voice she had used on our very first meeting. Evelyn snapped my name, our name, trying to draw me back out of the pit of despair with the same hard-nosed care she always had used. Lozzie hopped forward, poncho fluttering, angling for a hug. Twil called out reassurances, asking if 'I' needed helping to my feet. Zheng said something about how even in two, the shaman speaks wisdom. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight called me kitten. Even Jan spoke a few words of comfort, though she knew me so much less than any others present. Tenny's distant fluttery trilling reached in from beyond the little steel room, full of care. The Saye Fox whined. Eileen took a step forward, still carrying me upon her back, as if she could scoop up this other me as well and carry her just the same. The Forest Knight somehow went 'clank', the closest he had ever come to vocalisation.

Even the six Abyssal Heathers drifted forward, tentacles waving in the air.

But all those efforts were in vain. Lonely Little Me screeched with pain and rejection.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked, cringing away from Raine's hands, flailing with one arm, cradling her bloody fist to her chest as if to protect the pointless little pebble within. "Don't— don't— you can't — you can't—"

"Woah, woah," Raine was saying, calming her like a wild animal. "Heather, Heather, easy, easy, it's just me, it's just us—"

“She’s going to fucking hurt herself!” Evelyn shouted. “Somebody—Twil, Praem, restrain her, at least—”

“I don’t think it is our place to do so,” said Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, her measured tone somehow cutting through the chaos.

I finally dragged my eyes downward from the Survivor’s Guilt. I looked down, focused on the Loneliest And Most Pitiful Part Of Myself.

“But I’ve acknowledged my survivor’s guilt,” I said. “I’ve accepted it.”

Lonely Heather stared back up at me, more exhausted than I had ever seen my own face in real life; she was me at my worst, at the end of my rope. The bags beneath her eyes, the twitching of her lips, the pasty pale, drained, bloodless complexion, the proof of borderline malnutrition in her shrunken frame and hollow cheeks. She was me, but done and over and ready to give up on life. Me but defeated. Me without friends or allies.

The puddle beneath the cracked window was slowly approaching her backside, each droplet of water adding to the brackish stench. She clutched her pebble so tight that her fist shook.

“More denial,” she said. “Really? I don’t have the energy left for this, Heather.”

“I’m not denying anything,” I went on. “I truly mean it. I accepted the survivor’s guilt, long ago. I didn’t lock it away. I didn’t pretend it didn’t exist. I didn’t deny it, or suppress it, or forget about it. I’ve never forgotten about it, not once. Every night, every day, even when I’m feeling happy or fulfilled, it’s always there. It’s gotten easier to deal with, that’s true, but the hole it formed, the wound, whatever you want to call it ... it’s never, ever, ever gone away. A year ago, when I first really acknowledged it, I spent weeks so torn up that I could barely think about anything else. Accepting that I left Maisie behind, that all this was real, that Wonderland, the Eye, all of it really happened?” I shook my head. “It’s one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done. The guilt never goes away.” I gestured from Eileen’s back, at the Leviathan of Guilt which floated just the other side of the fractured glass. “How can this be survivor’s guilt? Are you sure you’re not mistaken?”

Lonely Little Heather began to sob and laugh, both at the same

time, both emotions contained within the same breath. She smiled at me with bitter recrimination through a veil of cold tears.

“You’re so— *hic*— stupid, Heather,” she whined. “You’re so determined to kill me, to forget all about me, that you’ll even deny —”

“I’m not going to kill you!” I snapped, my temper frayed to breaking point. “Stop making this all about you! I need to know, how can that be survivor’s guilt? How can this be possible?”

“—the evidence right in front of your own eyes!” she screamed. “It’s right in front of you! It’s right there! Look at it! Look at it and think!”

“I am looking at it!” I screamed back. “Why won’t you explain!?”

“Then you’re blind! You’re so fucking blind! You’ve always been so fucking blind!”

“Just tell me what I’m looking at!”

“Survivor’s guilt!” she screeched. “Fuck you!”

“Fuck you, too!” I screamed right back at her. My face was burning with heat. Red darkness throbbed in my peripheral vision. I tried to think of a Shakespeare quote to hurl back into her face, but up close like this, the disgust was overpowering, and all my intellect crumbled to nothing. “Fuck you, Heather!” I screeched. “Fuck—”

A blur of sharp steel sliced through the air between us.

Raine’s machete, severing the very breath which carried our mirrored rage.

Lonely Heather stuttered to a halt. My words swallowed themselves like a bile-scarred throat. We both blinked in shock.

Raine had stood up and stepped to an equidistant point between myself and me, machete outstretched, chin up, eyes gone hard. She slowly looked back and forth between us, lingering on both us Heathers. She wore the most unsmiling expression I had ever seen on her face.

“Stop,” said Raine, so very gently, first to Lonely Heather, then to me. “Stop. Stop it, Heather. You stop this, right now.”

Lonely Heather sobbed, “But she won’t acknowledge—”

I interrupted, “And she won’t tell—”

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” Raine said. She paused, then broke into a smile, for both us Heathers. “See? You ain’t the only one here who can quote a bunch of Shakespeare to make a point. This is my executive decision, Heather.”

“Which Heather?” I asked. “Which one?”

Raine added a frown to her grin. “I can’t see no difference between you,” she said. “To my eyes, you’re both just Heather. Lonely part, ruthless part, rude part, it’s all bullshit. You’re both the same. And I will protect you, Heather, against anything. Even against yourself. No more self-harm.”

A great shuddering sigh came from my right — from Eevee, down in her wheelchair, framed against the cold steel wall of the cold steel room, with Praem holding the handles of her wheelchair. I’d rarely seen Eevee so pale and shaken. Her eyes flickered between us and us and us, staring at the giant eyeball beyond the glass with a tremor in her throat.

“Thank you, Raine,” Evelyn said, tight and tense. “I think I speak for all of us when I say that this ... this ‘inner conflict’ should be resolved as politely as possible. Please?”

Twil cleared her throat. “Yeeeeeeeah, let’s not provoke the giant Heather. Hey? Sounds like a plan?”

“Yes,” Jan added in a tiny voice. “I concur.”

Eileen said, “I agree also. Also, ow.”

“Ah!” I loosened my grip when I realised what I’d been doing — digging my fingers into Eileen’s collarbone, gripping as hard as I could. “S-sorry. Sorry!”

Raine lowered her machete. “Alright, Heather. It’s alright. Can you talk to yourself without being abusive, now?”

Lonely Me just stared at the floor, defeated and dead. I stared down at her and tired not to feel disgusted.

“I still need to understand,” I said. “How can that be survivor’s guilt?”

Lonely Heather sniffed loudly, sniffing back her tears. “Will you believe me, if I explain? Or will you deny it again?”

“If you tell the truth.”

She laughed — a single hollow choking sound. “You hate me so much.”

“I— I don’t,” I lied. “I don’t hate myself, I ... just ... it’s always been hard, looking in the mirror, and ... and seeing ... ”

Lonely Heather raised her eyes. Her head of greasy, matted, mousey hair was framed by the vast eyeball behind the cracked glass. My words stuck in my throat.

“Seeing Maisie,” she finished for me.

“Well ... well, yes.” I sighed. “My own face is a constant reminder of what we lost. How could it not be? We were — we are — identical twins.”

“A reminder of what we lost,” echoed Lonely Me. “You’re so close.”

“Just ... just explain. Help me to understand.”

“How can you understand?” she asked, her voice so full of bitter venom and tears. “You’re up there, lording it over me, carried on ... on ‘her’ back. Being carried by the thing that did this to us. You’re surrounded by your friends. You’ve got all the support in the world, and I only have—”

“You have it too, Heathy!” Lozzie chirped. “We’re all here for you, too! You’re Heather! You’re you! You you you!”

Broken Heather stared at Lozzie for a moment, but then she looked down, her face collapsing into self-loathing and loss. “No, I don’t. All I have is myself. All I can rely on is myself. If you want to understand, then you need to come down to my level, Heather. Get off the Eye’s back. Come down here. On the floor. Where we belong.”

“We do not ‘belong on the floor’,” I tutted. “You hate yourself too, listen to yourself.”

Evelyn cleared her throat. “I do not think it is a good idea to set Heather down, in any case. She is still wounded, even if she’s not showing it, she ... ”

Evelyn trailed off as Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight put a finger to her own lips.

“Do not forget,” murmured the Yellow Princess, “that we stand on a stage. The spotlight lies upon Heather. The scenery reflects the turmoil of her heart. This room, the aquarium, the glass, all of it is her insides. We are merely interjections in this conversation with herself. Do not attempt to dictate. The script will buck us off, if we dare to disrupt.”

Evelyn hissed, “Yes, fine, but what about the giant fucking sea-monster?”

“That is Heather, too.”

Lonely Heather and I both glanced at my friends as they spoke, but then returned our gazes to each other, like magnetic fields pulled together.

“Look,” I said. “Rather than me joining you down there, you should join me up here. Let ... um ... let Raine take your hand and lift you up.” I sighed, disgusted by the idea, but I had to try. “You don’t have to be down there.”

“You’re lying.”

“Ah?”

Lonely Me sighed. “Maybe we’re not so different after all. You think it, the same as I do. We belong on the floor. We don’t deserve to stand.”

My turn to sigh. “I’m not going to pretend I like you. Just hearing your voice, it makes me angry, it makes me ... want to ... snap at you. But you’re me, fine, I accept that, or I’m trying to. And I’m pretty sure I won’t wallow in sadness, not when rescuing Maisie is so very close.”

“You will.”

I sighed again, temper fraying. “What does that mean?”

Lonely Heather paused for a long, long moment. Then she sighed and closed her eyes. “I tried to stop this. I tried as hard as I could. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, Heather. You’re getting what you asked for.”

“Warn me about what? I can hardly take a warning seriously if you won’t explain!”

Lonely Heather opened her eyes — suddenly calm and serene,

desolate as stagnant water in a shell crater. “Do you remember what happened in Wonderland ten years ago, when we lost Maisie?”

A fist of ice grabbed my heart. “I ... o-of course I do. Of course I remember losing Maisie, I remember all of it, I wish I—”

“Because I didn’t,” said Lonely Heather. “I did not remember all the details.”

“But I do—”

“No,” she said. “You remember the physical details. You remember crawling through that portal beneath our bed, as if our limbs were compelled. You remember the taste of ash, the smell of burnt stone, the sight of all those titans at the rim. You remember screaming, our screaming, Maisie’s screaming. You remember trying to turn back, and finding that the portal was suddenly a hundred miles away, like the landscape was playing a trick on us. You remember the monsters, the misshapen things in the ruins. You remember scrabbling around in the black, breaking our nails and bloodying our hands on the jagged, scorched rocks, desperate for somewhere to hide. You remember clinging together with Maisie, weeping, screaming for mum or dad to come find us. You remember the way we whispered to each other, trying to keep each other’s spirits up. You remember the things that drifted through the ruins, the things that came and went, the things we could not comprehend, not as small children lost beyond reality. And you remember the Eye. You remember as it began to open—”

“Yes!” I snapped, shaking inside. I hiccuped once, so hard my throat hurt. “Yes, I— of course I remember that, of course I— why are you repeating all this—”

“But you don’t remember how we escaped,” said Lonely, Bitter, Knowledgeable me. “I know that, because I didn’t remember it either. Not until I listened to her.”

“ ... to who?”

“*WE LEFT HER BEHIND.*”

The voice which answered my question was a nightmare from the deepest, darkest, blackest corner of illimitable eternity — low and slow, a rumbling murmur like a current creeping along an ocean trench. The little steel room shook with the vibration of that voice;

little trickles of water pulsed out from the cracks in the glass, while the cracks themselves lengthened and widened, spider-webbing outward. Half my friends gasped; somebody screamed. Zheng started to growl, then stopped, cowed in a way I had never heard from her before. Twil tucked her tail between her legs and whined. Six Abyssal Heathers froze where they stood, tentacles stilled.

Lonely Me closed her eyes, crying slow and silent tears.

“Traitor,” hissed the voice of a drowned giant. *“Weakling. Coward.”*

All the breath was gone from my lungs. My flesh was numb and empty. My thoughts were ash and rot.

Survivor’s Guilt moved behind the glass — she swam upward, her eye vanishing beyond sight, replaced first by the sharp sweep of a jagged jaw, then metre after metre after metre of abyssal flesh, of night-dark scales and peach-fuzz fur, of lashing tendrils and tentacles by the thousand, trailing great membranes of inky darkness behind her. Her legs were a dozen, branching and strong, tipped by webbed flippers and claws as long as my own body.

She swam upward, up beyond the little steel room. Then she returned from below, the glass wall framing her opposite eye.

She stopped, hung in the water before us, and said: *“Tell her.”*

Lonely Heather opened her eyes, still crying slow tears, and said, “We left her behind. We left Maisie behind.”

“We—” I almost choked on the word. “We did, yes. I felt that too, I know that. But it wasn’t our fault. We were nine years old, we were a child, how can we blame ... ”

Lonely Heather raised her right hand, still clenched in a tight fist. Blood had dried between her fingers and upon her knuckles. She opened the fist with great difficulty, easing back fingers which had been squeezing tight for hours and hours. She winced and hissed at the pain, fingers trembling with effort. Raine moved forward to help, to cradle her, to offer comfort, but Lonely Heather hissed at her with frustrated spite.

A trembling hand opened before me, palm up.

And there lay the pebble, slick with my blood.

“When ... ” Lonely Heather started, voice raw. She swallowed and

tried again. “When the Eye began to open, we and Maisie, we were clinging together, huddled in the burned out ruins of some ancient building. We said things to each other, but the words don’t matter now. What mattered was the idea.”

My heart felt as if it had been dipped in ice. “The idea?”

“Mm.” Lonely me nodded. “We had an idea. See, when you’re trapped beneath the Eye, being taken apart piece by piece, burned out atom by atom, you can still think. You can still plan. Thoughts take eternities, but they do happen. So, we and Maisie, we had this idea. How do you get an Eye to close?”

I stared at that blood-slick pebble on her — my — palm.

“A speck of grit,” I whispered.

Lonely Heather nodded. She swallowed, dry and hard. “A speck of grit. A grain of sand. It’s enough to make an eyeball blink, isn’t it? I think we ... Maisie and us, I mean, I think we got it from a cartoon, some children’s show we can’t recall now. Maybe something we’d seen a couple of weeks or months before. Sand in the eyes. A speck of grit against the cornea. But here’s the rub — one of us had to become that speck of grit.”

“Never,” I hissed. “I would never. I would never have sacrificed Maisie just to get away. That’s a lie! That has to be a lie!”

“You didn’t,” said Lonely Heather. She was crying freely now — not sobbing, just red-eyed and wet-cheeked, tears rolling down her face to drip from her chin. “We didn’t. Of course we didn’t. We couldn’t have lived with that. No, we came up with the idea together, we and Maisie. And you — us — we were going to do it, to let Maisie get away. We were going to make ourselves into that speck of grit, so the Eye would blink, and Maisie could get away.”

The memory began to come back, leaking in like poison at the edges of my consciousness. I started to shake, clinging to Eileen’s shoulders with all my fading strength. I felt a wave of terrible nausea. I felt hot and cold both at once. My chest ached like my heart would burst.

“But we—”

“We were so scared,” said Lonely Heather. “We were terrified. Who wouldn’t be? We were nine years old. We didn’t know— we didn’t

want to— didn't want to—”

“To die,” I said, filling in where this other part of me could not.
“We didn't want to die. But then—”

“We hesitated,” she said. “Just for a split second. We would have done it in the next.”

“But then, Maisie—”

“—went—”

“—first.”

“*WE FAILED HER*,” murmured that great and terrible beast, that hidden truth, Survivor's Guilt. “*COWARD. WEAKLING. TRAITOR.*”

The knowledge was like ice covering all my organs. I felt my innards slow, my brain darken, my eyes fill with tears, my throat close up.

Part of me wanted to die. Perhaps it had already.

I must have muttered ‘put me down’, because a moment later Eileen did exactly that. She squatted at my command, lowering me until my feet touched the floor. I let go of her, staggering free from the grip of my surrogate mother. The Praem Plushie was still tucked inside my yellow blanket, so I plucked her free and pressed her into Eileen's hands, ignoring all protests to the contrary. My friends reached out to touch me as I lurched forward, hands brushing my arms and flanks and ribs; even the Abyssal Heathers joined in, allowing contact at last, giving me a taste of the recombination I had desired so much.

But I felt nothing. I deserved none of those touches, none of that support, none of that love. I felt empty and pointless. The creaking pain in my ribs was gone, because the Survivor's Guilt was right here now, right in front of me. What need did it have to burst free, when I had finally acknowledged it? The pain in my leg returned, overwhelming the final dregs of morphine in my bloodstream. My gut, my head, my whole body was a bruise, a mirror of my soul.

I collapsed to my knees, facing my Lonely Self, so barely two feet separated us from each other.

“That's how we got away,” she was saying. “Maisie sacrificed herself for us. She bought our life, bought us ten years of grace, by

spending her own. And we didn't ask her. We didn't push her. We didn't betray—"

"YES WE DID."

Survivor's Guilt blotted out all thought, shaking the little steel room with her bubbling murmur, louder than any sound on Earth. Lonely Heather winced and quivered, as if beneath the fist of a giant. I gasped in shock, looking up at that one huge eyeball which filled the spider-webbed glass wall.

My words felt like dust. "Why could I never remember this before now?"

"Because," said Lonely Heather. "We locked it away. We buried it deep. Because it's so very small." She gestured with her bloodied palm, cradling the pebble in her wounded flesh. "Such a small detail, isn't it? Just one tiny detail of how we got away and Maisie did not. Half the screaming, when we returned, that very night she was taken, it was about that knowledge, the knowledge that Maisie flung herself into the Eye, for us."

I shook my head, barely able to see through the tears. "How? How could I ever forget such a—"

"The treatment," said Lonely Me. "The doctors and the nurses. The drugs, even if they didn't work. The therapy, the hospitals. Cygnet." Her voice dripped with venom as she spoke the name of this place. "The treatment worked, Heather, even if it was for the wrong things. It 'healed' us, by letting us lock the guilt away."

Behind Lonely Heather, the Guilt shifted in her vast tank of water.

"But it grew," she hissed. "Down here in the dark. When this dream was woven, it joined Maisie in the prison, in the Box, because that's where it knows it should be. Punished and imprisoned, alongside our twin."

A hot, wet, ragged sob seized my throat. "This is ... this is what it feels like? When somebody sacrifices themselves for you?"

"Yes." She sobbed too. "Yes. We left her behind."

"I don't— I don't want this! I never would have asked her for this, I never—"

"WE LEFT HER BEHIND."

I clamped my eyes shut and fought the tears; there had to be something onto which I could grasp. “But— no, wait, no, no. We didn’t do anything! We didn’t push her, you said it yourself, it was just a moment of hesitation.”

“Yes,” said Desolate And Empty Me. “That was all it took, less than a second of hesitation.”

“By a nine year old girl!” I almost screamed. “I was — we were a child! Nine! We couldn’t have— we can’t blame ourselves for that! We can’t! It doesn’t make any sense, it’s irrational, it’s—”

THUMP.

Survivor’s Guilt shook the little steel room. The cracks in the glass spread wider. Little trickles of water gushed forth. My words choked off.

“That’s why they call it survivor’s guilt,” said Lonely Heather. “It doesn’t have to be rational. We survived, but did we really deserve to? Why us, and not Maisie? Why did we deserve to survive, when she didn’t? Did we hesitate because our desire to live was more powerful than our love for our sister? Would we do it differently, if we could turn back time and—”

“Yes!” I yelled. “Yes, yes, yes, a thousand times, yes! If I had to do it all again, I would do it differently, I would take her place, I would, I would!”

Lonely Heather managed to smile, a tiny broken flutter through her mask of tears. “That just gives it more power. We left her behind, Heather. We left her behind. We left her behind!”

Survivor’s Guilt pressed the orbit of her eye against the glass. Tiny cracking sounds filled the room. Water seeped and squeezed from the network of fractures.

“Yes,” I said, “we did. But now we’re here to rescue her.”

Lonely Me smiled all the harder. “You’re still clinging to that?”

I shook my head. “We don’t deserve this,” I hissed. “We don’t. We can’t keep hurting ourselves over it. That doesn’t get us any closer to Maisie. It doesn’t. We are here for one reason. To bring her home.”

Lonely Me, Desolate Me, Abandoned Me, she started to sob and wail, wracked by all the guilt I had kept locked up for so very long.

I fought one of the greatest battles of my life, compressed into a single moment — I stared into the face I found so vile and wretched, so ugly and full of hate, my own face, twisted by guilt and anger and the darkest of my own impulses.

All I was doing was looking into a mirror.

I reached out with one hand, to her, to touch—

Survivor's Guilt thrashed and raged behind the glass, shaking the little steel room like a cork in a storm. The floor and walls vibrated with the leviathan's fury, shuddering and drumming beneath the giant's fists.

The rage went on and on. Just when I thought this was it, this was the end, and she would shatter the glass asunder, she began to subside. The shaking trailed off. Survivor's Guilt pressed her eye back to the glass, bulging with anger.

All my friends stayed silent, frozen in shock.

Lonely Heather hissed, "Don't touch me!"

"But— why—"

"Because there is somebody here who should feel guilty, somebody who deserves all of this." Lonely Heather raised her free hand and pointed past my shoulder. "Her."

I did not need to glance over my shoulder to know that Lonely Heather was pointing at Eileen. But I looked anyway, behind myself, into the pink dawn-glow of Eileen's gaze.

Eileen said: "I did not know this was here. I could not see inside this part of myself. Something was hiding! I did not know. I am sorry, Heather."

"You see?" I asked, turning back to Lonely Heather. "How can she —"

"She was responsible for all this in the first place!" Lonely Heather spat at me. "She did this! She dragged us to Wonderland, she kidnapped us, she—"

"That's not true," I said, shaking my head, surprised by my own calm. "We know that's not true. A person did this, a human being, a mage we've never even met. You were there, you heard Taika's story just as well as I did. A human mage did this. By accident, by

chance, without knowing what was happening. It could have happened to any other pair of twins, not us and Maisie. Luck of the draw. Random chance. Eileen didn't even know what was happening, she wasn't capable of understanding, let alone doing anything differently. She never intended any of this. She never intended anything! That doesn't mean the damage wasn't real, but ... all this was a mistake. You know that as well as I do. Stop lying to yourself."

Lonely Heather opened her mouth as if to continue the argument, then closed her mouth and fell silent.

"See?" I pressed on, feeling a surge of confidence. Maybe there really was another way out of this internal war. "You know she wasn't truly to blame. You know she's not some evil cackling villain. You can't keep up that fiction when she's standing right there, helping me, helping you, helping to rescue Maisie!"

Lonely Me raised her eyes — hollow, empty, defeated. "You're right. You're more right than you understand, she did not intend any of this. But you won't like the place that leads us."

"Then tell me!"

Lonely Heather raised the pebble again. "What does a speck of grit become, trapped inside soft tissue?"

"I— I don't follow—"

"Sealed off from everything else, locked away from the world, wrapped in layers of protection. The Eye doesn't keep people trapped, Heather. It never even understood concepts like that, I know that full well, yes. And ... Eileen, up there, do you think she has the ruthlessness to keep a person imprisoned, to deny them freedom, to make the world forget all about them?" Lonely Heather shook her head. "No. That wasn't her. That was all Maisie. She made herself into grit."

I raised my eyes to the interior of the little steel room — the Box, the walls, the high-tech prison. Maisie was at the core, trapped within so many layers of metal and liquid and concrete and brick.

"... a pearl," I whispered.

Lonely Me nodded, "A pearl, formed around a spec of grit. In reality it was not a physical process, of course, it was metaphysical. Her

soul was grit. The pearl is metaphysics. The Box was just the best possible metaphor for it. A place within the Eye, full of things that it could not expel, dangers, toxins, irritants. And that's what Maisie made herself into, something the Eye could not expel. Something it had to encase. Maisie did that, for us."

"And this is why the world forgot her? All this time? This is why?"

"She edited reality. Not the Eye. And she did it for us."

"And—"

"And Survivor's Guilt has joined her, because that's where we should be. It should always have been us, not her. That's where we should be. In the Box. Forgotten."

I shook my head. "No. No. We can free her now! That's what I'm trying to tell you! We've already won, we—"

THUMP went the leviathan behind the glass.

Lonely Heather just stared at me, framed against the giant eyeball of Survivor's Guilt.

"Eileen still has to die," she said.

I almost laughed; instead I hiccuped. "But why?"

Lonely Heather's mask of tears cracked; she pulled a sad smile, trembling with agony and loss.

"This is what I was trying to protect you from, Heather," she said. "I wanted to make it so that you would never have to learn about the survivor's guilt. I was going to kill Eileen, take all the responsibility upon myself, accept all the blame, the hatred, the scorn, the rejection. Maisie would be freed! And you could blame me, you could heap your recrimination upon me. You could kill me, imprison me, forget all about me, it wouldn't have mattered—"

"You matter! I matter!"

"—and her?" Lonely Heather gestured over her shoulder, at the eyeball on the other side of the glass. "She would have been satisfied with that, with Eileen's death. How do you think she feels about Eileen?! Hmm?! How do you think she feels about our new surrogate mother? You think she believes we deserve that happiness? Of course we don't!"

“Eileen has nothing to do with it! Why would killing her free Maisie?”

“If she dies, the Survivor’s Guilt, it ... it would change. It would become something else. And then it would be on our side.”

“Revenge?”

“Probably.” Lonely Heather shrugged. “All I know is that we need it, we need her. We need every part of ourselves. We need it’s help, to free Maisie.”

I glanced at the glass, at the darkly beautiful leviathan in the vast tank of water. “Why? Can’t we just crack open the Box now? We’re here, we’ve won! Nobody has to die, there’s no need for revenge, there’s no need for any of this!”

Lonely Me shook her head. “The Box — the pearl — it’s so much deeper than what you can see here. Oceans of water, endless seas stretching down into an abyss. She told me about it, you see. The Survivor’s Guilt, she told me all about it, those fathomless black depths that go down forever. We could crack open this glass and it would take decades for the water to empty. It would drown the dream, and all of us with it.” Lonely Heather finally looked over her shoulder, at the dark eye behind the glass. “She is the only thing which can dive that deep and survive. She is the only part of us who can make it and live. And she wants revenge.”

I shook my head, numb and distant. “Then the only thing keeping Maisie imprisoned now is—”

“Us.” Lonely Heather turned back to me, eyes like used up coals.

“Yes. You, actually. You have to kill Eileen. You have to take revenge. You have to give up that connection, that contact, that happiness. Because we don’t deserve it.”

“Deserving has nothing to do with it!” I hissed. “I won’t kill—”

“You will. We’re both ruthless, Heather. We’re all ruthless. You thought that was just me. To be fair, I thought it was just me, too. But I was so very wrong. She’s ruthless, too, and she wants revenge. You’re ruthless as well, and you want to rescue Maisie. All I wanted to do was protect you, but I’ve failed. Do you want to know the real difference between you and I?”

“No, no—”

“You still think you can be a hero. I know that we can’t.”

All around me, the dream seemed to slow down, to go grey and cold and empty. The dream reflected my insides. And now I was hollow.

“Survivor’s Guilt has to be placated. Revenge is the only way. Revenge, or our death. And our death won’t bring Maisie back.”

Lonely Me was right. This dream did not have a happy ending, because I wasn’t a hero.

I was nothing.

I was dead.

A terrible cold certainty came over me.

With a neck made of rusty wire and eyes made of dead stars, I turned and looked over my shoulder, at Eileen.

She said nothing in return. My surrogate mother, the mother I always wanted, she just held my gaze — without judgement, without accusation, without fear.

All my friends looked on, and nobody said a word, because this was not their dream. Mouths stopped up by the inevitable script, morality and better angels held back by the logic of a dream.

Six Abyssal Heathers unsheathed their claws, moving to flank Eileen from both sides. Void-dark eyes narrowed. Toothy jaws opened with soft hissing.

I was no hero.

I was a traitor, a coward, and a weakling. The part of me which thought I could be a hero was dead now, and all the parts of me were finally in agreement.

I would do anything to rescue Maisie. I had promised myself that, long ago. And if that meant accepting the guilt for a murder, then I would become any kind of monster, any kind of traitor, any kind of evil. This way we would share the guilt together, forever. This way, Lonely Me would see where her philosophy ended. This way the Survivor’s Guilt would have to watch it happen. This way they would know that I was right all along, I was right, I was nothing, and we would all roil in our ugliness together and hate ourselves for the rest of our short and pitiful—

Eileen opened her mouth, clutching the Praem Plushie to her chest.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Whatever you choose, it’s okay, Heather. But please, when the dream is over, if I am gone, please love yourself.”

I vomited.

Not much — just a string of sticky bile laced with a bit of blood. But I hacked and coughed and heaved and spluttered, as if I had just burst from the surface of a sea of filth. I sucked down deep breaths of clean air, even if it reeked of brackish waters and the stench of rotten guilt.

The Six Abyssal Heathers paused. They felt the change, too.

I turned back to Lonely Heather, with drool hanging from my lips and the taste of vomit in my mouth.

“I’m no hero,” I croaked. “But I know what I am.”

“You can’t!” she hissed. “You can’t resist the Survivor’s Guilt. Look at how big she is. Look how she’s grown. If she won’t help us rescue Maisie, we can’t do it alone! If she breaks free, she’ll kill us all, long before we have any hope of reaching the centre of the aquarium. The water will drown us all, the dream itself will drown. You can’t deny this, Heather. You can’t!”

“I trust Maisie,” I said. “I trust Maisie.”

Lonely Me blinked. So did the Survivor’s Guilt, with a giant eyelid behind the glass.

“W-what?” Lonely Heather stammered. “I don’t—”

“Maisie told me to bring my friends,” I said, wiping the spittle from my lips on my sleeve. “And I have done exactly that. For a very long time, I didn’t know what difference that would make. I didn’t know why she told me to do that. But now, I think I understand. I think she knew this would happen, this splitting of ourselves. She knew that I would feel survivor’s guilt. She knew it would grow. And she gave me the weapon to fight it.”

Lonely Me shook her head. “What does that have to do with—”

“I hate you,” I said — without any hate. “When I look at your face, I feel disgust, and anger, and loathing. You’re so ... irritating, and misguided, and ... and just plain stupid. But also you’re me. I hate myself. I loathe what we did, leaving Maisie behind, even if it

wasn't our fault, even if we were nine, even if no rational person would ever blame us. And that's the result." I pointed at the glass wall, at the Survivor's Guilt. "But ... but ..." I stared to tear up again. "How can I hate myself, when I see the way Raine looks at you?"

I glanced up at Raine. She was frozen as if afraid to speak.

"How can I hate you?" I repeated, back to Myself again. "When I saw the way every one of my friends rushed to your aid? Evelyn was worried by the tone in your voice over the radio. Lozzie thought you might be hurt. Twil acted like she did when we first met, walking into some dark, terrible place which had nothing to do with her, just to see if you needed help. Zheng, Sevens, Tenny. Even Jan, and we barely know her, by comparison. The Knights. The Cattys. All of them! Even Evee's grandmother, a fox with the brain of a mage! So many people, all bent toward helping me — helping you, us."

Lonely Heather's voice shook. "Where are you going with this?"

My turn to smile. To smile at my own face, which I hated, because it was Maisie's face, the face of the sister I felt I had betrayed.

"You and I, we're not actually any different. The self-loathing, the self-sacrifice — I see that now. Maybe I had to come here and see it, to understand. Maybe that was the only way. You and I are the same. We deserve the same things."

"No," she hissed. "No, don't—"

"We do not deserve to be alone anymore. We do not deserve to face this alone. We do not deserve—"

"We deserve to rot!" she screamed at me, all those tears and that loathing curdling into boiling rage. "We deserve to watch Eileen die, by our hands! We deserve—"

"Stop," I said.

And She stopped. Something in my voice stopped up all my self-hatred, if only for a moment.

"I want to throttle you," I said, and I meant it. Even as I spoke the words, I felt my hands twitch with the desire to wrap them around my own throat and squeeze as hard as I could. "I want to give you what you've asked for. Revenge. I want you to see what it would

feel like, what it would do to you. I want to rub your nose in it. I want to hurt you, by hurting myself.”

“Then—”

“But none of that helps Maisie!” I shouted in my own face. “None of this will free her! You think going to war with myself will free our sister?! You think revenge is strong enough to swim down to the bottom of an ocean?!”

THUMP

The little steel room shook all around us. Survivor’s Guilt slammed against the glass, spreading the cracks wider, forcing little pulses of water through the hairline fractures. Lonely Me screamed.

But I staggered to my feet.

A dozen hands reached out to steady me, from all directions. My legs wanted to give out, my belly was on fire, and I was shivering like a leaf. But my friends held me up. They sustained me, where I could not sustain myself.

SLAM—SLAM—SLAM

“And you!” I roared the glass, unable to hear my own voice over the banging and crashing. “You can shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

The slamming trailed off. Survivor’s Guilt eased away from the glass, so I could see the rim of her other gigantic eye, her face — my face! — sinking into the murk.

“You’re wrong,” I hissed at her — at myself. “I know I can prove you wrong. But you don’t want to let me. You’ll use violence before you listen to my words.”

Lonely Me, still huddled down on the floor, shook her head. “Heather, Heather, stop. Just stop. All this is hopeless. You’re hopeless, you’re a lie, we’re filth, what can we possibly—”

“I may not be a hero,” I admitted, “but that doesn’t matter. One of the most important lessons I’ve ever learned, and it’s still true.”

“ ... wait, what—”

“We are what we pretend to be. And I am going to pretend that I am capable of love.”

Lonely Heather scrambled to her feet, eyes wide with fear, trying to back away. She slipped in the puddle of cold water spreading out at the base of the glass wall, almost losing her footing as she staggered back from me.

“No!” she snapped. “No, you can’t, you can’t—”

Gently, I pulled free of my friends’ hands; six sets of tentacles took their place, six Abyssal Heathers holding me up at last, their will combined with mine, our minds as one.

I took a lurching step toward the Lonely, Sad, Hateful part of me.

“I’m going to do it,” I said. “And you can’t stop me.”

“No!” she wailed. She glanced back at the Survivor’s Guilt inside the tank. “She’ll get free! Heather, she’ll get free! She’ll kill us all! We can’t!”

Another lurching step. I spread my arms, trying to feel like a swift and graceful predator again; my Abyssal Selves held my wrists aloft, lending me their strength.

“I don’t care,” I said.

Behind Lonely Me, a giant webbed hand rose to the glass, each finger tipped with a massive black claw. Survivor’s Guilt pressed her paw against the wall and started to push. Cracking sounds filled the room. The glass, so many feet thick, began to bulge.

“Everyone will drown! The dream will drown!” Lonely Me wailed. She tried to back up again, but there was nothing behind her but the buckling glass. She flinched from that contact, then whirled to face me, a cornered animal before the flood.

“No,” I said. “No, they won’t.” Then I swung my head from side to side, taking in all the others in the little steel room. “Um, everyone needs to be ready to run away? Okay?”

That warning seemed to reanimate my friends, as if the stage spotlight had finally widened beyond myself and I.

Raine shouted: “We’re ready, Heather! You do it! You do what you gotta do!”

“You best know what you’re fucking doing!” Evelyn snapped as Praem scooped her up out of the wheelchair and into a princess carry. Twil ducked in and grabbed the chair itself.

“Do it, Shaman,” Zheng rumbled. “We can outrun any guilt.”

“Yip-yap!” went the Saye Fox.

Lozzie whooped. Jan stayed silent. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight merely lifted her umbrella tip from the floor, ready to move.

Eileen said: “I am ready to carry you, as I always was.”

Lonely Me was trying to cram herself against the glass, as if I held a poisoned dagger to her throat. She was panting, covered in sweat, cringing away from me. “No. No, no, we don’t deserve—”

“I should have done this a long time ago. I’m so sorry.”

“No!”

I pounced.

That was how it felt, at least — a pounce, a leap through the air, landing on my prey with outstretched claws and snapping jaws. In truth what I did was lurch forward, supported by the tentacles of my Abyssal Selves, to blunder face-first into Lonely Little Me.

I caught Myself in a hug.

She — I! Me! — wailed as we bumped into the cracking glass together and slid down to the floor. We landed all tangled up in the cold, wet, brackish puddle of water. She pushed and shoved and writhed and bucked, wriggling like a weasel trying to escape my grasp. She smeared blood on my face and chin as she slapped and clawed in desperation. She fought with all the same determination I always did, and she fought well.

But I held on tight, squeezing her with all the might I had left to muster.

“Get off!” she wailed through her choking sobs. “Get off! Get off me! Get off!”

“Never,” I growled into her shoulder. “Never!”

We rolled through the widening puddle; above us, the glass buckled inward, cracking and splitting, spilling cold water into the little steel room. I was so bruised, so wounded, so tired that each impact felt like the end of the world, blacking me out for micro-seconds of unconsciousness. But the six Abyssal Heathers forced me to keep going, to keep my word, to keep myself within my embrace.

Eventually Lonely Heather gave up and gave out, her struggles trailing off. Sobbing and broken, pinned beneath my fading strength, her arms finally clawed at my back — a kind of hug.

“You can’t—” she sobbed, so very ugly with tears and blood and spite on her face. “You can’t mean this. You can’t. You can’t. Not with all the guilt, all the—”

I kissed her — the worst kiss I had ever participated in. I mashed my lips against her own, rough and hard and desperate. I tasted blood. Our teeth clacked. She moaned into my mouth with pain and tears and a horrid wet sob, clutching at my back with fingernails like claws.

When I pulled away, she was weeping.

“I love you,” I said.

“No.”

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you—”

“Stop it,” she sobbed, all her power drained away. She clung to my shoulders like a frightened child, whining and keening. She sobbed into my shoulder, biting at my collarbone. She blubbed and burred and tried to say all sorts of words, none of them with much sense.

“I love you,” I repeated.

“I ... I ... I-love you too,” she finally squeezed out. “But—”

Survivor’s Guilt reared away from the glass wall of the final aquarium. A titanic hand drew back through the murk. Webbed fingers closed up tight. Claws bit into her own palm, wounds trailing vast streamers of crimson blood through the water. She made a fist.

“She won’t let us love ourselves,” said Lonely Heather. “She won’t.”

Survivor’s Guilt threw a punch at the glass wall. Thousands of gallons of water parted before her fist. The onrushing pressure sent a spider web of cracks spreading across every inch of the glass, finally reaching the edges of the wall. Water burst forth in streams and spouts. The glass crackled and popped and screamed with tension, bulging outward, ready to burst.

The fist landed. The glass exploded.

bedlam boundary – 24.37

Survivor's Guilt — an abyssal leviathan who wore my face, who bore within her heart all my most furtive fears, whose void-dark eyes burned with the fires of my very own self-righteous rage — slammed a wrecking-ball fist into the weakened glass of her prison, breaking the watery bonds which held her at bay, parting the final barrier between us and Maisie.

Glass exploded inward, filling the little steel room with flying chunks of razor-edged debris; a tidal wave of bitter cold seawater crested above my head and that of my Lonely Counterpart, as we lay locked in our sobbing reconciliation. The reek of brackish water and dying fish-flesh and matted seaweed invaded my nostrils, coated my exposed skin with unclean air, and pulled fresh tears from my stinging eyes. The hooked claws of That Great And Terrible Guilt unfolded through the falling wall of water, unfurling from a palm which could crush me and myself and all my other facets with a flicker of one swift squeeze. Guilt reached out for us — for myself and my Lonely Half alike, who clung to me, screaming and sobbing for mercy; six Abyssal Heathers raised their barbed tentacles and opened their fanged maws, hissing a warning at the top of six identical lungs. But this Giant Of The Deep, she could not and would never heed any warning, because her cause was just and right, and we were all so very wrong and wretched.

A shadow of flesh and water descended, to crush us all beneath sheer weight of guilt. In the darkness of that death, I believed for just a moment that this was what I had deserved all along. Self-love fled in terror; acceptance curled up and went silent. I felt nothing in my arms, certainly not myself. My eyes began to close.

At least Maisie's prison was broken. At least that—

Strong hands hooked beneath my armpits, dragged me to my feet, and hauled me away from the brink.

Guilty Heather's giant fist snapped shut on empty air. Black claws raked across bare steel, their tips screaming like nails down a chalkboard. Pale fingers flailed, flexing for the fleeing prey.

And all about my ears were the voices of those who loved me.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!”

“Stop yapping! Just run! Run, now! Everybody out! Out that fucking door! And get Heather on her—”

“I’ve got her, I’ve got her! Eileen, you carry the other, you—”

“Hahahahahaaaaa! Shaman! We will fight as we once should have!”

“Somebody grab her, too! She can’t fistfight a giant!”

“I thought you said it was just Heather?!”

“Yes, and she’s furious — mostly with herself! We don’t want to get in the way! Run!”

Before I could protest, struggle, voice a complaint, or even comprehend what was happening, I found myself cradled in strong, protective, reliable arms, carried against a warm chest which felt like home. Eileen’s face was above me, pink eyes burning in the sudden dark; a familiar presence crawled into my yellow blanket — the Praem Plushie, telling me to hang on as tightly as I could. We were at the centre of a mad scrum of all my friends, as everybody rushed for the exit from that little steel room. Water sloshed around everybody’s ankles, flowing in a stuttering torrent from the shattered glass wall; the worst of the water pressure had been blocked, dammed up by the sudden stoppage of the Guilty Leviathan’s hand, still snapping and grasping for her prey denied.

Lonely Heather still clung to my own right hand, screaming and sobbing against our separation as we were pulled apart; for a terrible moment I thought my most beloved people in the world were leaving her behind, leaving behind a part of me, leaving her to drown in that awful steel prison. I think I screamed too, screaming out that I loved myself too much to let myself go — but then our hands parted, too slippery with sweat and blood and freezing cold water to maintain our grip. But then I realised with sobbing relief that Lonely Heather was being carried too, cradled in Raine’s arms.

“Out, out!” somebody shouted again — Twil, I thought, with the snarl and snap of too many teeth in her panicked snout. “Back the way we came! Double time!”

“You wouldn’t know double time if it hit you in the cu—”

“Just run, hey?! Argue later, like!”

Everyone bundled out of the little steel room, bursting out onto the metal walkway beyond; water was already trickling through the door, falling through the metal mesh holes on the walkway, plummeting into darkness. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight paused by the door, counting off names as everybody fled, then ducking at the last second to scoop up a bundle of russet fur — the Saye Fox, not to be forgotten. Above us, Tenny's single black tentacle whipped through the air as if startled, tip-mouth opening wide, lined with tiny black teeth.

We — me and myself and all of I, and all the companions who had descended into this abyssal inferno alongside me — sprinted away into the darkness of the Box, our gang of footfalls ringing out into the drowning shadows.

I clawed my way up Eileen's shoulder. "No!" I wheezed. "No, I can't run, I have to face her! I have to face myself ... "

My complaint was rather premature.

Behind us, the glass of the aquarium shuddered, quivering like molten light beneath a beating star. A spout of solid water exploded from the doorway of the little steel room we had just fled, bursting free in a horizontal torrent, crashing down onto the walkways behind us, pouring a waterfall of icy brine into the depths below, splashing into the vast seas which already lay heavy and dark in the sump of the Box.

The aquarium glass shuddered a second time, ringing like a bell of lead and iron, a great gong vibrating all through the interior of the Box. Several of my friends winced and hissed as they ran. Zheng shook her head at the terrible noise. The Saye Fox whined. Twil barked.

The twin shadows of gigantic clawed hands thumped against the glass, moving slowly as if trapped in tar, framing a glass-blurred vision of my own gigantic face. Once, twice, three times she thumped on the weakening walls. Cracks the size of canyons spread across glass as thick as redwood trees, spider-webbing outward, filling the air with an artillery barrage of crack-crack-crack-crack!

The aquarium burst asunder.

I am convinced that if this had happened beyond the cushion of a dream, we would all have been struck deaf in an instant. The shock

wave alone would have tossed us about like leaves before a hurricane. None of us would have made it a single additional step. This would have been the end.

But I — and me — was still grappling for control of the dream. And self-love reduced certain death to merely the loudest sound we had ever heard.

Chunks and spears and plates of glass the size of train cars flew into the air, raining down upon the cavernous innards of the Box like a shower of meteors, crashing into metal walls, crumpling the walkways either side of our fleeing group, smashing down into the deeper seas below to throw up huge plumes of water. Somebody screamed — perhaps myself, wild with panic and fear and worse.

Somebody else shouted, “Duck and cover, duck and cover!”

A third voice — Raine? — laughed with manic terror. “Are you fucking mad?!”

“It’s better than nothing, ain’t it!?”

Evelyn screamed, “Keep running, you imbecile!”

Tenny’s silken black tentacle whipped overhead, to provide the cover we could not. She smashed aside falling chunks of Guilt’s demolished prison, deflecting boulders of glass, catching them like tennis balls and hurling them back the way they came.

“Puppy!” Zheng roared.

Lozzie — her voice blurred by tears and panting lungs — howled a thank you as Tenny protected us.

A true tidal wave of water followed the eruption, exploding outward as the aquarium collapsed. Billions upon billions of gallons rose in a vast wall behind us, crashing down onto the walkways, swallowing the metal innards of the Box, devouring the corpses of Empty Guards, demolishing the dead automatic turrets, sweeping up a mountain of debris before the waters, drowning all the lesser seas over which we had passed. The former inhabitants of the Box — the hidden creatures of the deep who had breached their tanks and joined the seas — roared and squealed and lashed as the waves swept them forward, trapped in the chaos.

“You can’t do anything against that, Tenny!” Lozzie shouted. “Go back, go back outside for now! You’ve done so so so well, go back!”

We'll see you outdoors!"

A great throaty 'pbbbbb!' of distress echoed from beyond the Box, barely audible above the rage of the waters.

"Just keep running!" Evelyn roared from within Praem's arms, cradled in an awkward princess carry. "Keep running! Stop looking back, that's how it gets you!"

"How what gets you!?" Twil shouted. "You can't outrun a tidal wave! That's not how it works!"

"This is a dream, you mongrel! Keep going!"

Brackish rain began to fall — the leading edge of spray from the tidal wave. It began as mere spitting, turned within seconds to a steady pitter-patter, then burst upon us as a downpour of reeking seawater, drenching us all in Guilt's Accusation. Salty water stuck my hair to my scalp, sluiced my clothes to my skin, and ran in little rivulets into my mouth. It tasted like bitter tears and stagnant hatred, the rotten remains of a forgotten brew.

And at the centre of that crashing wave of water an abyssal goddess reared up, breaching the surface, clawing at the air — Heather The Leviathan.

Armoured in scales of midnight black and luxurious fur of peach-fuzz pink, with eyes the colour of the void between stars, her claws each longer than a great white shark, her vast mass propelled on a dozen flippered legs, body studded with hundreds of barbed tentacles, spined and spiked and bristling all over, she was the abyssal truth grown to titan proportions. Giant Heather — Guilty Heather, Heather The Murderous, Heather The Bitter, Heather The Vast And Terrible And Full Of Punishment — rode the crest of that tidal wave, pulling herself forward with each smooth swipe of her arms, crashing through the metal innards of the Box, reaching for us with the descent of her clawed fists.

We outpaced her by mere seconds, more by luck and chance and dream logic than natural speed — and by divine intervention, for Tenny had not left us behind at Lozzie's urging.

As Leviathan Heather ate up the walkway behind us, dragging twisted metal scrap down into the depths with her lashing tentacles, or biting into the metal with a vast and hungry maw full of silver teeth, she had to contend with a single silken black tentacle. Tenny,

still reaching in from far beyond the Box, thwacked Guilty Heather in the forehead every time she threatened to gain on our little scurrying group. Every time Leviathan Me raised a clawed hand to cut off our escape, Tenny's tentacle was there to wrestle her away. Every time she reared up out of the waters to crash down upon us, Tenny's tentacle darted in to slap her across the face. Every time she opened her maw to roar us into submission, Tenny shoved her head back below the waters with a piston-slam of tentacled strength.

I howled over Eileen's shoulder, shouting at my Leviathan Self.

"Stop it!" I yelled. "Stop this! Stop, please! We're so close to Maisie, we almost had her free! All we have to do is go back, we can swim down there and free her! Why won't you stop!? I love you too, do you understand?! You're still part of me! Stop!"

Lonely Heather joined in, bawling and braying in Raine's arms. "Stop hurting Tenny! Stop it! Stop, stop!"

"We love you!" I hurled at her. "Even you, even the guilt! I love you, you don't have to do this!"

A voice rumbled from beneath the onrushing water, a voice from the abyss — "*TRAITOR. WEAKLING. COWARD. WE LEFT HER BEHIND!*"

"And we're leaving her behind right now!" I shouted at My Giant Self. "We're inches from getting her back! Who's the one betraying Maisie now!?"

Leviathan Heather raised her gargantuan face from the waters for but a moment, opened her maw, and hissed with a noise like the burble of a volcano.

Tenny slapped her across the mouth, loud, wet, and crunchy, breaking bones and pulping meat. She crashed back into the waters and resumed her submarine pursuit.

All around me, my friends fled before the crashing wave of my own Guilt. Eileen cradled me in her arms, no longer upon her back. Raine held the other me, comforting her sobbing, bloodstained face against her chest. Praem carried Eevee, Evelyn's eyes crammed shut with real fear. Twil was almost all werewolf now, using her wolfish strength to haul the less glamorous prize of Evelyn's wheelchair, holding it two handed above her own head. Zheng sprinted, her

half-naked blood-streaked form washed clean here and there by the water, running in bloody tracks down her skin. Lizzie hopped and skipped and slid as if the fear was no impediment at all — but she clung to Jan's more clumsy hand, pulling along Jan's armour-encumbered frame. Seven-Shades-of-Swiftly-Striding had her shoes off and dangling from one hand, her umbrella over one shoulder, running barefoot, the Saye Fox cradled in the crook of her arm. The Forest Knight jogged almost at the rear, his joints lubricated and accelerated by the strange symbiosis of Mister Squiddy, with Maisie's destined new body still strapped to his back.

Six Abyssal Heathers raced to either side of myself and Lonely Heather, as if protecting and herding us, turning now and again to hiss and screech at the crashing giant of our own Guilt, flaring their tentacles and baring their teeth at this hundred-magnified mirror of their own abyssal beauty.

For one dizzying moment — as we raced across those ringing metal walkways, with the Box collapsing around us, the waters of the abyss rushing at our heels, and Tenny's single tentacle the only thing between us and the oblivion of a nightmare — I saw us all, from behind, from above.

I saw us — me and Myself, all my friends, Raine and Eileen carrying our opposite halves, surrounded by a phalanx of abyssal tentacles, racing ahead of inevitable doom. We were so very small, insignificant remnants clinging to a reality which could never be, trying to reverse history, to deny causality, to make a world where Maisie had never sacrificed herself.

I saw through giant's eyes, for just a moment. I saw us how she did — as irritating denials of what had come to pass, as those who needed punishing, as the last thread holding us back from well-deserved self-destruction.

There were so many of me — one and two and six and eight and nine.

Staring up at that crashing wave of water, staring out of the water down at myself, staring through a twinned pair of crying eyes, through six pairs of abyssal senses all around us. For one moment, I saw through them all, and they saw through me, and we were almost one again.

"Oh," I breathed to nobody in particular, for no ear could hear over

the waters of Guilt. “Are we recombining? Are we—”

“No!” wailed Lonely Heather, and her lips were mine, my voice was her own, she took our vocal chords and screamed. “No, we can’t! She’ll kill us all, she’ll overwhelm us! There’s so much more of her than us! There’s so much of her! Stop!”

The Abyssal Heathers joined with a chorus of hissing — they agreed, the Guilt could not be allowed in, for it would devour them all, overwhelm their defences, and swallow me whole. The six hissing voices suggested victory over ourselves was the only way out. She must be beached, starved of water, dried out in the light of the Eye’s gaze, denied and deconstructed and left without a single way back in, for she was death and self-ruin and suicide. She must be killed.

Though I was only human, and my throat was but meat and gristle, and rather sore at that, I opened my mouth and hissed right back.

“No!” I screeched. “No! She’s part of me, she’s part of us, she’s us too! And I have to, I have to love her all the same, I have to, I have to—”

Another shout broke in from beyond this inter-Heather conversation — Twil, up front.

“I think we’re almost at the doors!” she yelled over the sound of the crashing water behind us. “We’re almost there!”

Jan yelled from inside her armour, “And what the hell do we do when we get out!? Run sideways?! What’s your plan?!”

Raine shouted, “Keep running, mostly! Clang clang clang, Jan! Keep clanging!”

Twil was correct. A few moments later a pinprick of silver-grey light floated up out of the shadow-wreathed metal ahead, surrounded by massive chunks of glass thrown clear from the exploded aquarium tank — the doorway. Huge gashes had been torn in the surface of the box by giant spears of broken glass, hanging in the dark like icebergs on a metal ocean. The great circular door frame rushed toward us as we sprinted down the final walkway, racing ahead of the crashing wave at our heels.

The door was partially blocked by jagged debris from the glass tank. Lozzie raised her voice in a shrill shout, “Tenny! Tenn-Tenns,

get the door!”

Tenny obliged. We had long outpaced the single tentacle with which she had assisted and defended us from my own Raging Guilt, but now a fresh trio of silken black tendrils appeared around the edges of the door; huge black mouth-tips opened wide and swept aside the debris clogging our escape.

Lozzie whooped. “That’s my girl! That’s my Tenny!”

“Mine as well,” I whispered, filled with a pride I had never known before.

We burst free from the Box, stampeding back out into the grounds of Cygnet Asylum, beneath the grey daylight of the dream and the silver glow of the Eye which filled the sky. The subterranean darkness of the Box receded behind us, leaving me blinking against the sudden blinding light.

Nobody slowed down or stopped — none of us was foolish enough for that, the power of the dream extended only so far. Water was flowing out of the doorway already, sluicing around the sides of the fallen metal door, splashing down the concrete, flooding out onto the green lawns beyond, beginning to trickle into the trenches and craters of the mock battlefield. Footfalls splashed through the running stream, racing across the concrete, heading for open ground as quickly as we could all run.

The rest of our split party was waiting for us. The Twins — Zalu and Xiyu — stood in front, with Horror’s decapitated head clipped to one of their belts, now gaping wide at the sight of the torrent rushing behind us. All six of the Caterpillars had formed up into a protective wall, as if to receive and shelter us from a pursuing foe, with the thirty Knights ready at their collective rear. The remaining six of Lonely Heather’s Empty Guards stood with their hands bound, escorted by a pair of Knights, to make sure they behaved.

Tenny towered above it all, a vast moth-shape clad in velvet black and fluffy white, topped by twitching antennae and the iridescent flutter of her huge wings. She was already disengaging from the Box, unwinding her tentacles from where she had grasped it, her many legs backing away from the twisted metal wreckage and the trickles of water flowing from the many cracks and splits and breaches in the surface.

Xiyu was shouting, “What’s on your rear?! What’s at your rear? Orders! We need orders! Where’s all that water coming from, where —”

“Run!” Raine yelled. “Just run, get out of the way!”

“We can’t,” Xiyu snapped. “We need orders, we need—”

I wondered briefly if six full-grown Caterpillars would have been enough to stop Heather The Leviathan. Maybe, if everything else about the situation had been different. Maybe if they had six times that number. But not these vulnerable, half-restored Cattys; they could not fight that giant, no matter how loyal and stout their hearts. I would not see them swept aside and drowned by my own Guilt.

I twisted in Eileen’s arms as we passed through the phalanx of Knights and Caterpillars.

“It’s me!” I screamed in their faces. “It’s me! It’s all my guilt and hate and everything bad about me! Run, now!”

We flew through the cordon and burst out the other side. Zalu and Xiyu shared a look, then glanced in twinned unison at the way the gushing river of water from the doorway was beginning to lift the massive steel door from the ground. They broke and ran, joining us in our flight. The Knights hesitated all as one body, then turned and followed the Forest Knight too, dragging the Empty Guards after them. The Six Caterpillars let out soft little ‘doot-doot!’ sounds, closing ranks as if to buy us more time.

Behind us, the flow of water from the doorway turned into a gushing spout, a solid mass of liquid shooting forth and spraying out over the grounds of Cygnet. The concrete and metal walls of the Box creaked and groaned with pressure. A great thumping, cracking, banging sound rang out, shaking the mud and soil at our feet.

“Where do we fucking go!?” Twil yelled as we stumbled into the remains of the battlefield. “There’s no high ground or anything, there’s just the hospital rooftops, and there’s no way in from over here, there’s no—”

“Just keep going!” Raine called. “Keep running!”

Evelyn raised her head from Praem’s chest, hoarse with panic. “We

can't keep running! We have to have a solution! Heather! This is your dream, how do we—"

"I don't—" I panted with the effort. "I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do! Love isn't— love isn't enough! She won't stop, she won't—"

"She's going to drown us all!" screamed my Lonely Counterpart. "She's here, she's here, she's all—"

Screeeeeeekt-crunch-krrrrrang!

The front wall of the Box buckled outward in a flower of metal and concrete, blossoming with bent girders and twisted pipes, bursting asunder under the pressure of two fists full of black claws and titanic muscle. An ocean of water cascaded from the breach, pouring from the Box and out into the dream, a deluge drowning concrete and grass and trenches and trees and light and dark alike. A wall of water splashed and sloshed forth, to smother reality beneath the waves.

Survivor's Guilt — The Terrible Leviathan Inside Myself — hauled her vast bulk through the breach in the Box, clawing at the ruined edges of the wound in the world, carried through on the tumult of gushing water. She snagged herself on spikes of metal and grazed her flesh on exposed concrete, uncaring of these wounds, adding pinkish froth to the braken seas. She slopped forth like a breaching whale, stumbling in the rushing murk; she strode out onto the surface of the dream, tides swirling around her dozen ankles. Her footfalls cracked the concrete and cratered the earth. She straightened up to her full height, taller than the Box itself, tall enough to scrape the air.

She raised her face to the sky, staring upward into the Eye, then opened her maw, each tooth as long as a human being.

Hissssssssss!

Her hiss split the heavens and made the ground tremble. The dream itself quaked at her arrival.

Eileen gasped as if struck; in the sky above, the Eye — her true body, vast beyond human scale, a crust of mountain-range lid-lip enclosing a silver sea wider than all the Earthly continents combined, a god of hyperdimensional mathematics, a leviathan in her own right, self-liberated and uplifted from the darkest reaches

of the abyss — flinched.

A cliff-face of water bore down on us, stretching the width of Cygnet's grounds, sweeping up the discarded tanks and abandoned corpses from the mock battlefield, churning with the lethal debris from inside the box, studded here and there with darkened patches — the other leviathans from the deep places, struggling for their lives amid the cataclysm. We stumbled and lurched past waterlogged trenches, Raine shouting and urging us all on. But there was simply nowhere else to run. Behind us, the six Caterpillars stopped and turned, as if they planned to face the wave head-on.

We were all about to drown in the salt-water afterbirth of my own Guilt. And all I could do was stare upward at the most beautiful version of myself I had ever seen.

Despite all that she represented, the Leviathan Heather was an abyssal beauty to surpass all.

Standing at six stories tall, framed against the black ridges of the Eye, she was a true giant of the deeps. Her face was mine but sharper, so much more predatory and full of clarity, with none of the careworn lines of stress and exhaustion. Her eyes were the colour of interstellar nebula, pupiless and black and glittering in the light. Her hair was a flowing mass of quasi-fleshy tendrils, floating like seaweed in a placid current, as if she had brought the ocean abyss to the surface with her emergence. She possessed a mouth full of shark's teeth, muscles like butter, and all the grace of an oceanic predator, moving with fluid speed in the open air despite her incredible size. She was clad in both scales and fur, in the armour of midnight and the blush of dawn, streaked here and there with the gently strobing colours of rainbow bioluminescence, ghostly in the daylight, like a phantasm which refused to lie down at night's end. She was lined with hundreds of tentacles, each one barbed or spiked or with a fanged maw gnashing and snapping in the tip. Her belly was taut with muscle — something I had never experienced before — and her hips were skirted with flared plates of chitin. Her legs branched outward into a dozen separate limbs, each one multi-jointed, each one ending in a flippered talon, tipped with curling claws. Great ink-dark membranes hung from her shoulders like a cloak, or wings, or a sail with which to catch the hidden currents out in the black.

She was sublime, perfect, divine.

If only she could have understood how much I loved her.

As that wave crashed toward me and my friends, I could see no other way out. Our tiny little group was all stumbling to a halt — even Praem, even Lozzie, those who never seemed to give up, they too were turning in awestruck surrender, stilled by the certain knowledge that we could not outrun a true tidal wave, even in a dream. Raine stumbled to a halt and hugged Lonely Heather to her chest, kissing her hair, muttering words I could not hear; Lonely Heather clung to her in turn, weeping freely. Twil turned like a wolf at bay, showing all her teeth and claws, howling at our doom, fur bristling all over. Zheng stood tall, grinned wide, and raised her fists, ready to fight anything, even a wall of water. Jan slapped down the visor of her armour, grabbed Lozzie around the waist with one arm, and started making strange symbols with her other hand. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight simply stopped, hugged the Saye Fox tight, and closed her eyes. Before us, the six Caterpillars dug their front ends into the wet soil, as if trying to anchor themselves, wiggling back and forth like little digging mammals.

“No!” I cried out. “No, we can still make it! We can— somehow— there has to be—”

Eileen murmured, “I will carry you until the end. Whatever that may be.”

“There doesn’t have to be an end!” I screamed. “There doesn’t— we don’t have to die here! This isn’t how it was supposed to—”

“Prrrrrrrrbbbbbbt-brrrrrrrrttttt!”

A giant of our own came splashing through the climbing waves.

At the very moment we began to accept that the dream would end as a nightmare, Tenny skidded up beside our ragged little group, her many insectoid legs hoisting her far above the limit of the crashing waters. Two dozen thick black tentacles writhed out from beneath the wings upon her back, then shot downward toward us like a cluster of guided missiles. Sticky black mouth-tips opened wide, then clamped shut on collars and shoulders and waists, plucking us upward one by one, wrapping supporting coils around those who wriggled or panicked or yelped in surprise. She grabbed Eileen by the scruff of her laboratory coat, Raine by her waist, and

had Twil dangling upside down from both legs, growling and barking and yapping at the top of her lungs. Zheng roared with exhilaration, Jan squealed in surprise, while Lozzie whooped and cheered and cried with relief. Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight rode a tentacle up in perfect composure, the Fox cradled in her arms, and Evelyn crammed her eyes shut, still held in Praem's grip as we were all yanked off the ground and hurled into the air. The Knights clung to a single tentacle all together, hands linked in a long chain, like ants crawling across a moth's leg. Six Abyssal Heathers scrambled up Tenny's fur, accepting the tentacle-ride without so much as a hiss of mild surprise. Zalu and Xiyu held on together, Horror screaming in wordless terror.

My stomach lurched, left somewhere back on the ground, as Tenny lifted us all into the air. Wind whistled past my ears, my heart gave a terrible spasm of fear, and—

And Eileen's feet found solid ground — or at least sturdy concrete, followed swiftly by everybody else.

Tenny deposited us upon the top of Cygnet Asylum itself, on a nice flat rooftop, with lots of wide open space. Thirty Knights climbed off one tentacle, while my friends staggered and heaved for breath, wild-eyed with shock or composed as if they had expected nothing less. Twil fell onto her backside with a loud thump, swearing with guttural creativity. Praem bowed her head in thanks, while Sevens let the Fox down, to scamper across the rooftop. Lozzie hugged one tentacle with all her might. Zheng roared "Puppy!" at the top of her lungs. Jan turned aside, opened her visor, and vomited onto the floor. Evelyn blinked her eyes open, clutching Praem with hands like claws, staring about as if she couldn't believe we weren't all drowned.

Eileen looked up at Tenny's cat-like face, hovering above us, and said: "Thank you for the lift, granddaughter."

"Brrrrrrrrrrrrt!" went Tenny, smiling with that curled and cattish mouth, full of delight and mischief.

Far behind Tenny, framed by the twisted metal ruin of the Box, Leviathan Heather lowered her face from the Eye-wrought sky. A void-dark gaze stared at Tenny, with none of my affection.

"Hisssssssss!"

With the last of us safely on the rooftop, Tenny turned away, facing her opponent. “Brrrrrrrt!”

“Hisssssssssssssssssss!”

Survivor’s Guilt strode forward, wading through the rising water, raising one giant fist as if to smash the rooftop to pieces. Tenny scuttled out to meet her, trilling at the top of her lungs, waving a battery of silken black tentacles.

“Oh my gosh,” I whispered, heart leaping into my throat. “Oh my gosh, no, no, they’re going to fight, no!”

Lonely me screamed from Raine’s arms. “Don’t hurt Tenny! Don’t you dare hurt her! You bitch, you foul monster, I hate you, I hate —”

“Tenns!” Lozzie shouted, hands cupped around her mouth.

“Remember to dodge! Light on your feet! Bounce bounce bounce! You can do it, you’re my girl!”

Twil shook her head like a wet dog — which she was, just then.

“You cannot be serious. This can’t be happening. Who the hell is in control of this part of the dream?!”

Jan sighed, wiping her lips on the back of a gauntlet. “I seem to recall the last surprise dream I got dragged into also ended with a kaiju fight.”

“But that’s Heather!” Evelyn shouted, gesturing wildly at Leviathan Me. “That is Heather! Look at her! That’s Heather!”

“Sure is,” muttered Raine. “And she sure is beautiful. Wish she’d listen to us, though.”

“Eileen,” I said, twisting around to look up into her face. “Take me to the edge, take me to the edge, I need to see!”

Eileen did as I asked; she carried me to the lip of the roof, where a low concrete wall rose to prevent accidental falls. Raine did the same, then gently placed Lonely Heather, my mirrored counterpart, back onto her shaking legs. Eileen lowered me gently beside her, so I and I clung together, our arms clutching each other, supporting each other’s body weight. Lonely Heather’s right fist was closed tightly around the pebble, which she still would not release. The six Abyssal Heathers drew close in turn, sliding stealthy tentacles around my waist, supporting my sagging muscles, soothing my

bruises and my wounds and my sheer exhaustion; I hurt so badly I could barely stand, worn down to a stub by panic, by effort, by pain, by the dream itself. But within seconds I was locked in mutual support with my Lonely Half and the six expressions of my Tentacles. We were all here, all except her — the Guilt.

The others all followed too, clustering around, staring up at Tenny with wide eyes, or out across the flood with gaping mouths.

The grounds of Cygnet Asylum were rapidly drowning beneath an ocean of water, solid shafts of liquid pumping from the ruined shell of the Box as if from a burst dam. The trees of the little woodland were still above the surface, but not for long. The bottom floor of the hospital building itself was beneath the churning surface by then. In the distance, off to our collective right, the liberated patients and ex-nurses were running for higher ground, where the landscape curved upward into gentle hills; those hills would protect them for a few hours, but not if the water level kept rising. Down in the Box, that final aquarium had held more water than all the oceans of Earth. Lonely Me had not exaggerated — Guilt would drown the dream and kill us all.

Far below us, the six Caterpillars we had brought to Wonderland had apparently learned how to swim, bobbing and dipping on the surface of the crashing waters. They darted about like lifeboats, rolling on the waves, propelling themselves forward with some arcane power. They circled the many ankles of my Guilty Monster, shouting up at her with a chorus of angry *doot*-ing.

To my relief, The Guilty Leviathan ignored the Caterpillars; I could not have endured it if she had spared a fraction of her power to scoop them up and crush them within their shells. I would have cursed her to oblivion for that.

Instead, she did worse — she strode forward, hissing and spitting, and slammed into Tenny.

“Prrrrrrrrrrrbttttt!”

The pair of dream-titans crashed into each other, their ankles sunk in the churning waves, their tentacles slapping and lashing and cracking at the air. Guilty Heather bared her teeth in an ear-splitting hiss; Tenny raised her trilling so loud it shook the hospital building and made the water vibrate around her legs. Tentacles clashed and locked, struggling against each others’ strength. Guilt-

Ridden Me pulled back a fist—

“Don’t you dare hit her!” I screamed, red in the face. “She’s our daughter!”

The Guilty Leviathan hesitated — only for a heartbeat, but that was more than enough time for Tenny to lash out with a clutch of silken black tentacles. She grabbed Titan Heather by the wrist, stopping her punch and hauling her to one side, forcing her to stumble and stagger through the waves. Leviathan Heather hissed and screeched. Her other fist lashed out, unhindered by further hesitation. Tenny bobbed sideways with a moth-like grace, wings fluttering for lift, dodging the fist by what seemed like inches. She caught the offending strike in another clutch of black tentacles, holding Guilty Me by both fists.

Leviathan Heather screeched and hissed and raged in frustration, struggling against her fresh bonds.

“Prrrrbtttt-brrrrrt!” Tenny trilled in triumph.

From behind me, Jan sighed. “This is your fault, you know that, Heather?”

Raine spoke with a low warning in her voice, “Hey. Jan. No, not here, not—”

“No, no, no,” Jan huffed and tutted. “That’s not what I mean. I don’t mean because it’s her guilt or whatever. I mean because ... look!” A shiny metal gauntlet flashed in my peripheral vision, Jan gesturing out at the titans locked in combat. “You lot keep saying this is a dream, or a play, or whatever. And there you go. Final boss fight. This is only happening because Heather and ... Heather, and Heather and Heather and so on and so on, they all think it should be happening! You can stop this any time, can’t you?!”

“She’s right,” I murmured. “She’s correct. But I can’t stop it. Not like this.”

I nodded as I spoke, numb to everything beyond the sight of Tenny fighting my Guilt.

Tenny was, after all, the only thing which could fight my Survivor’s Guilt head-on, toe-to-toe, as an equal. Tenny was proof that I’d done something good in the world, that I had given selflessly, to help raise her from nothing but spare spirit parts. Tenny was

external proof that I was capable of more than this self-destruction. But that didn't mean she was going to win.

Out in the giant's battlefield, Leviathan Heather managed to wrench her left hand free of Tenny's tentacles, ripping it from the spongy grip with a great tearing sound of sticky suckers and toothed maws. She reeled back as Tenny was forced to let go, as if winding up for another punch; but Leviathan Me spread her fingers instead, massive black claws catching a glint of light from the Eye above. Her talons sliced through the air, too sharp and too wide for Tenny to catch in time.

My Guilt raked her talons across Tenny's snout-like dream-form face; a spurt of dark blood shot into the air, caught as an arc of blackish crimson before splattering down into the waters below.

"Prrrrrt!" Tenny trilled in wounded pain, stumbling to one side. A trio of nasty gashes marked her cheek, bleeding freely down her face. "Prrrrbt-brrrt!"

Beside Me, Lonely Heather exploded with incandescent rage. "How dare you?!" she shrieked. "You— how dare you strike her! I did everything to avoid that! You— you— I hate you! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

I and the six Abyssals had to cling to her, or she would have climbed over the ledge into empty air.

The Leviathan swept her hand back for another open-palmed strike; Tenny lashed out with a cluster of tentacles and stopped her arm mid-air. The pair of them grappled together, great churning seas sloshing about their legs, waters still rising, rapidly now. Six Caterpillars circled the Leviathan of Guilt, dooting and tooting up at her, but to little effect. It was only a matter of time until she managed to hit Tenny again, or the waters rose and rose and rose until her natural aquatic biology would give her the advantage in the fight. She would wear Tenny down. Without intervention, my Guilt would win.

Fighting was no way to end this.

I could not win by killing my Guilt, just as she would not win anything but her own extinction if she triumphed over Tenny and drowned us all in the waters of her womb.

“Tenny!” I yelled. “Tenny!” I slapped the low concrete wall with one hand, a rather absurd gesture to get her attention. “Tenny, Tenny, I need you to listen to me! Tenny!”

The Abyssal Heathers joined in too, tapping and hissing and waving their tentacles, until we all saw Tenny glance at us out of the corner of one eye. Amid the fight, she spared us a flicker of attention.

“Tenny!” I shouted again. “I have to talk to her! I have to, it’s the only way to stop her! Tenny, I have to speak with her! I need you to hold her, pin her so she can’t avoid me, so she has to listen to my words. And ...” My stomach lurched and my guts rebelled at the thought of what I was saying, but the alternative was death and failure and Maisie’s loss. “And I need you to get me right up in her face!”

“Prrrrrrrrrrrrrbttttt!” Tenny trilled.

Perhaps it was greater purpose that gave her strength — Guilt could not win against Love, as Sevens might have said, if she had not been wide-eyed and out of her narrative element.

Tenny surged up and out of the waters, wings buzzing too fast for the eye to see, cupping and pushing the air in great waves that made even the waters retreat for just a moment. She yanked the Leviathan sideways, forcing this Giant Me to stumble and crash down into the waves beside the hospital building itself. The ground shook with the impact, but we didn’t have time to scream.

Suddenly one of Tenny’s tentacles was before us, before me, hovering at the edge of the roof, dipped to allow us to mount.

Before I could make a plan, before I could even think, or hesitate, or feel the lurch in my stomach, ‘we’ acted as one — the six Abyssal Heathers looped their tentacles together with each other, cradling me and Lonely Heather within their combined arms. They scurried forward, clinging to the surface of Tenny’s tentacle with gentle barbs and the strength of their own limbs.

And then we were aloft.

I yelped as Tenny lifted us up and into the air. For a dizzying moment all of Cygnet was spread out below us — the hospital building in all its impossible gothic glory, folding in on itself like a flower of architecture; the Box, a broken wreck of metal and concrete, pumping out billions of gallons of water every second; the

grounds, drowning beneath the dark salt waters of Guilt, the treetops struggling for a final breath, the lawns far beneath meters of murk; the distant perimeter wall, broken in one spot by Tenny's entrance; the little specks of nurses and patients on distant hilltops. The dream was for one moment entirely within my grasp.

A moment later we landed on Tenny's back, just behind the swell of her head, amid a low landscape of black velvet and thick white fur. The six Abyssal Heathers clung hard to that snowy fluff, anchoring us as we rode upon Tenny's back.

She lurched round, returning to the fight, like the world moving beneath us.

"Oh my gosh," I panted, my stomach punching up and into my throat. "Oh, oh, okay, okay, this isn't what I—"

With an explosion like an undersea volcano, the Leviathan of Guilt surged back out of the waters right in front of Tenny. Her skin streamed with run-off as hundreds of tentacles lashed at the air. A toothed maw opened wide with a screech of humiliation and self-righteous pain. She screamed right at us, making the air itself vibrate within my lungs.

Black claws swiped for Tenny's face once again. Tenny was prepared this time; she hopped sideways, wings buzzing either side of her body, filling the world either side of my vision with iridescent flickering. I think I probably screamed again, but screaming was so beyond importance that nobody cared. Lonely Heather certainly screamed too, but I held tight to her, to my other half, and to all our anchors to each other.

Tenny landed back in the waters, then lashed out and caught the Leviathan's wrists again. Guilty Heather opened her mouth in a hiss, that sharp-toothed maw filling the world above me for one heart-stopping moment. But then Tenny drowned her out with a chorus of trilling, so hard and so long that the Leviathan was forced to shake her head as if plagued by a cloud of moths.

In the moment that followed, I opened my mouth, and shouted up at my own Guilt.

"I'm not going to abandon you!" I screamed. "Do you understand?! I'm going to feel this guilt forever! Even when we rescue Maisie — yes, when! — when we rescue Maisie, it won't ever go away! You

won't be abandoned, or murdered, or suppressed, or silenced! I want to be one with you, one with myself again!"

If the Leviathan heard a single word I said, she didn't show it. She pulled both fists up and around, forcing Tenny to stagger after her or lose her grip. The six Abyssal Heathers hissed and clung on harder, lest we all be thrown off Tenny's back.

"You're going to kill everybody?!" Lonely me shouted up at the Guilt. "Is that what you really want?! Raine, Evelyn, Lozzie, Praem!? All of them?! You want to drown Tenny? She's an innocent! Are you trying to turn survivor's guilt into murderer's guilt?! Bury yourself in so much pain you forget you exist? Stop it! Stop it! Just stop!"

Heather the Leviathan hissed in Tenny's face, then yanked her fists the other way, finally ripping them free of Tenny's grip.

She reared up, both hands hooked into claws. Raising them high, she blotted out the light of the Eye, intending to slam Tenny's head down into the waters below.

I lurched to my feet, up on Tenny's back, anchored only by the tentacles of my Abyssal Selves.

"Do you want Maisie to feel what you feel?" I said.

Survivor's Guilt hesitated.

Tenny took the opening; she launched herself forward like a battering ram, propelled by the great power of her wings cupping the air. She crashed into the Leviathan's chest, sending her sprawling. Before the Guilt could slide into the water, Tenny grabbed her with as many tentacles as she could spare; Tenny swung her round and slammed her into the ruins of the Box, face pinned sideways on the roof of broken concrete, arms scrabbling for purchase against twisted metal, legs kicking helplessly in the churning water.

"Prrrrbtttt!" Tenny trilled — not in triumph, but with great urgency.

The Six Abyssal Heathers let go of Tenny's silken white fur; we slid together, down the side of Tenny's hide, a mass of tentacles and scales and hissing mouths, with two soft and vulnerable apes cradled in the core of this tentacle-ball. We hit the roof of the Box

together, cushioned by the tentacles of the Abyssal Heathers, until we came to a stop on a relatively flat surface of metal.

Our ball of tentacles and limbs unfolded. Bruised and shaken and with the wind knocked from my lungs, I staggered upright all the same, supported on six sets of tentacles. Lonely Heather clung to my right arm, crying softly.

The Leviathan's face was before us, crushed on her side, hair lying limp across the ruins of the rooftop. Those giant void-dark eyes rolled in their sockets, panicking as Tenny kept her pinned.

"Look!" I shouted up at the sideways face of the Leviathan Heather. "Look here! Look at me! Look at me!"

The Leviathan's eyes rolled, focused on me for a fleeting moment. She bared her massive teeth, hissing deep in her throat, but I stood fast. I had something she didn't — conviction based on something other than self-hatred. She kicked and struggled and tried to buck Tenny off her. Water sloshed and crashed around the box, giant waves threatening to overtop our precarious platform. But I stared up into my own eyes. To look away now was death.

"Do you want Maisie to feel the way you do?" I repeated. "Do you want her to feel like this? Like you do, right now?"

The Leviathan stopped struggling. She finally looked at me, with no other distractions.

"Because she will," I said. "If you go through with this, Maisie will be in your place."

She bared her teeth again, then spoke, so low and so deep that my flesh itself vibrated. *"She should have been in our place. We should have been in hers. We left her behind, we abandoned—"*

"Then she would feel what you feel now!" I shouted into my own mouth. "She would be the one rescuing us! And she would feel the survivor's guilt instead! And she will, she will do, if you don't stop."

Survivor's Guilt shut her mouth.

"You think Eileen is going to keep her trapped, after all this?" I said. "The Box is breached, the waters are emptying. Maybe it will take years, decades, maybe longer. Maybe we all die here and that's that for us, that's all, that's the end of our story. But the waters will drain, and Maisie will be free, years or decades from now. And if

you win, if you drown us, what is she going to see, when she emerges? Who will be here to greet her? To hold her? To tell her she's not alone? Nobody!"

The Leviathan opened her mouth again. "*It is what we deserve.*"

"Maybe." I shrugged. "But is that what Maisie deserves?"

The Leviathan's brow furrowed.

I went on. "If the cost of her freedom is my death." I thumped my chest with one fist. "Our death, as you drag us all down with the rest of you — how will she feel?"

The Leviathan's massive form went limp in the grip of Tenny's tentacles. Her eyes softened. "*No ... I ...*"

"She'll feel what you feel now. What I do now. Do you want to condemn her to that?"

Leviathan Heather said nothing. Her lips went slack. She blinked.

"And unlike us," I said. "She won't have anybody to rescue, to make it right. She will live with this forever. And will she be able to live with that guilt?" I shook my head. "Because you're trying to prove that — that I can't live with the guilt. So, she won't either." I swallowed, tears gathering in my eyes. "If we die here, because of you, then Maisie's life will be very short indeed. Short, and filled with nothing but regret."

A vast sheen of tears gathered in the Leviathan's eyes. She blinked, face misted with more than mere melancholy.

She let out a soft whine. Behind her, Tenny slowly let go. The Leviathan Heather, my Guilt, my Regret, did not rise.

I took a step toward her, guided and supported by my Six Tentacles, with Lonely Me hanging off my left arm. We walked up to the vast and terrible face of guilt. I reached out and touched her cheek, touched the scales, running my fingers through the fur. She was warm. She was alive.

She was just me.

"I'm not going to abandon you," I repeated. "You will always be a part of me. But it doesn't matter how guilty we feel, we still have to rescue Maisie. Nothing absolves us of that responsibility, no amount of self-loathing can relieve us of that. To save her, I will accept

anybody's help — my own Guilt, the Eye, Eileen, anybody. Nothing matters as much as rescuing Maisie.”

Leviathan Heather whined again, like a wounded animal.

“Punishing ourselves just punishes her,” I said. “We have to live, we have to win, we have to accept each other, ourselves. For her.”

The Leviathan closed her eyes. Tears ran from between her lids.

Beneath us, the wreckage of the Box shuddered and shook. Waters crashed on all sides, sending great waves of spray up into the air. The oceans were still rising. Back on the rooftop of Cygnet Hospital, my friends were shouting their encouragement, but I could barely hear them.

“It’s time,” I said, with a lump in my throat. “It’s time to end the dream, before we all drown. And the only way to do that is to save our twin sister.”

The Leviathan nodded, ever so slightly. Lonely Me took a deep breath and murmured, ‘Yes, please, yes.’ A chorus of Abyssal Heathers hissed in soft agreement.

“It’s time for us all to be one again,” I said.

A pair of clawed hands cupped my chin and stroked my cheeks. One Abyssal Heather — one perfect representation of my own abyssal truth — gently turned my head aside, drew my eyes into the black depths of her own gaze, and pressed her lips against mine.

Reunion, at long last.

bedlam boundary – 24.38

Once upon a time — down at the deepest nadir of one of the darkest hours of the long, cold, empty winter of my teenage years, in a moment of unmitigated weakness and hopeless longing, locked in a solitude and seclusion which masqueraded as privacy and prudence — I had kissed my own reflection.

I've never told anybody this story. I try never to think about it. I had never before wished to do so.

I was fourteen years old at the time. It was exactly five days after my fourteenth birthday, and seven days since I had returned home from what was then my longest inpatient stay at the real Cygnet Children's Hospital. The reason for that extended residential stay did not belong to the usual shifts and spells of my 'illness'. It had been caused by a single sharp shock.

Several months prior I had gone missing for a full twelve hours — one morning I had simply failed to arrive at school, somehow wandering off or getting lost on the short walk between the bus stop and the school gates. Despite the press of other students, the crowd of uniformed teenagers who had been all around me, all heading in the same direction, there was not a single witness as to where I had gone. At eight o'clock that evening I suddenly turned up outside those very same school gates, scant feet from where I'd vanished. I was screaming my head off, scratched and bruised all over, school uniform torn and dirtied, inconsolable with terror, bleeding from my nose, from several cuts on my face, with skinned knees and lacerated hands, and totally unable to explain what had happened to me or where I had gone for those twelve long hours. My parents and the other responsible adults were mostly worried about kidnapping, about strangers in the bushes, about terrible things which might have happened to me; after all, I was physically small and mentally vulnerable, easily led and easily confused and easily lost, and oddly reticent to give any kind of coherent account to authority, legal or medical or parental.

They had the truth from me eventually, of course, if only to put to rest all that salacious nonsense. My parents and the doctors had

assured me I would not be punished, so I told them the truth. I had spent the entire day ‘hallucinating’ — one wrong step on that short walk to the school gates had transported me elsewhere, with a lurch of my stomach and a twist of my brains and a hooked barb of ashen reek in my nostrils.

I had spent the day scurrying across a landscape of dusty hollows made from jagged rocks, filled with the dried remains of oceanic creatures both great and small, stalked by the predators which had moved in after the rolling retreat of some vast sea, leaving behind this world of desiccated tidal pools. That tide was gathering once again on the horizon — a wall of water higher than any mountain range, the colour of old blood and fresh vomit, filled with the writhing giants of an alien sea, vast shadows suspended in the vertical wave. I had spent every minute of those twelve hours racing ‘inland’, trying to reach some kind of high-water mark — to no avail, for the tidal zone went on forever and ever. Thrice I had grappled with tentacled things to which I was simply another wriggling morsel of meat. Two times haunting voices had called out to me across the dried landscape, hooting and warbling frantic alien language in the scant moments I was silhouetted against the sky. And once I had fallen, hard and chaotic, scraping my hands and knees and chin on the crumbly rock of that Outsider dimension.

My parents and the doctors were convinced that I had spent the day wandering in a hallucinogenic daze, grazing my hands on brick walls, scuffing my uniform on ragged concrete, bloodying myself on some forgotten corner of the asphalt landscape, all while my eyes and ears had beheld nothing but the phantoms of my own brain. And I believed them, despite how real it had all felt, despite the raw terror, the scent of the ashen dust of the tidal pool world, the wriggling creatures I had peeled from around my own forearms, the way my legs quivered with a whole day of running and scrambling and crawling. I believed them, despite the small wrinkle that nobody had reported seeing me stumbling around the nearby residential streets. I believed them, because the alternative was unthinkable.

They cared — they really, really did care. They did their best. One must try to see it from their perspective, I suppose. A thirteen year old girl had gone missing for twelve hours, and when found she had been covered in blood, her clothes torn, unable to stop screaming. What would you assume?

It had all really happened, of course; we know that now.

My trip to the world of empty tidal pools was the first major Slip in nearly a year, one from which I had not been able to return for many hours, which had seemed to take my physical body as well as my mind.

I didn't understand any of that at the time. I was mad. I had done as mad people did. I was a danger to myself. I needed help.

The next several months of my life were spent at Cygnet, 'under observation', going through counselling, trying to stabilise my 'episodes', watching me for signs of another relapse. My parents treated this inpatient stay with great responsibility — my father became a sort of conduit for all the school work I was missing out on. They were determined to give me the best fighting chance a mad girl could have. They did what they thought was best.

But I still went to sleep every night in a cell. A well-appointed cell, bright and modern and full of books and comforts and not the least bit threatening. But it was a cell. And every night I could hear the other girls, the other patients, crying out or screaming or sobbing, all locked in their own little cells.

The inpatient stay ended in time for my birthday — just me and my parents, of course. I returned to school — quietly, unobtrusively, without fanfare, with faint hopes that I could rekindle the few casual friendships I had acquired. And I did, a little, enough to pass on by. There was no bullying, no overt shunning of the crazy girl, no nasty stares in the halls or cruel whispers behind my back.

Oh, I'm sure there actually were, but I never saw or heard anything of the like. Nothing so dramatic.

But the girl I'd had a crush on was gone.

Her name was Sutton. She was small and quiet and extremely blonde. She was in my year, and I often saw her haunting the library at lunch or after school, the same as myself. She had a taste for history books with big serious titles, which I respected and admired, but could not quite relate to, though I was intrigued; I believe that is what I found attractive about her — the way she would smile with a dangerous little hitch in her lips when reading about the mechanics of warfare and battle. Despite this intimate knowledge of her reading material and my rather detailed

observations of her facial expressions, we had never shared a single word. How cliché, how typical, I know, but it's the unvarnished, mortifying, sordid truth. I didn't even really know her. In my teenager's heart, I was convinced that eventually we might meet properly, somewhere among the thin gloss of the library stacks, perhaps becoming aware of each other for the first time as we reached for the same book, and then she would look at me and we would both giggle and—

As I said, a teenage 'crush', an adolescent infatuation with mere image and imagination, barely worth the remembering even a year later.

But when I returned to school after the inpatient stay, Sutton was gone from the library, gone from our year, gone from our school, gone from Reading. Her family had moved to London to be closer to her father's job. At fourteen, such a loss can strike a surprisingly powerful blow. Teenagers can be very silly, after all, though most would have gotten over it in a couple of weeks.

But me? Ah, no, of course not. My madness had caused this. My broken brain had robbed me of opportunity, of agency, of chances to simply be. This was merely the first, the smallest, a symbol of the great destruction yet to come. My own insanity would rule my life and take everything from me. This I knew.

That very same night, five days after my fourteenth birthday, long after my parents were fast asleep, I crawled out of bed. My 'hallucinations' — the silent crowd of what I did not yet know as pneuma-somatic life — still frightened me, especially in the dark. But fear was a poor and pitiful shadow of the melancholy in my soul that night. I crept to the bathroom and shut myself in, then turned on the light, bright and harsh.

I stood before the bathroom mirror for a long time, looking into my own eyes. I did not examine my colourless hair or my pale complexion or the minor and meaningless blemishes on my skin. I did not judge my lack of curves or the rather sad efforts puberty was making with my chest. I just stared at — me.

I was not beautiful. I was not even pretty. I was like a drowned rat.

But I was all I had.

And I looked so much like—

“Maisie,” I whispered, as I brought my lips to the cold surface of the mirror.

I had not whispered her name in months. The forbidden secret, the unspeakable name, the holiest of holy hallucinations, my own twin sister, the girl who never was.

I tried to press my lips against my own cheek at first, but that didn’t work, because my reflection moved as I did; an elemental mistake in the heat of alienated passion. After a moment’s hesitation, I settled for lips against lips — knowing that I was kissing myself, not the ghost of my imaginary sister. I knew that I had to love myself, because there was nobody else to love, and I better get used to my own face, to my own lips, to the taste of myself. I was all we had.

But the mirror was hard and cold and inhumanly smooth. I was not there. I was nowhere.

I ran back to bed that night, crying with hot and terrible shame. I could not kiss myself, I could not touch myself. Maisie was not real. There was no reflection worthy of love, just my own inner ugliness, my own face in the mirror twisted with rage that I could not make that inner connection.

Did I know of the guilt, back then? Not consciously, but perhaps she lurked in my heart even then, growing larger, growing stronger.

Perhaps my abortive tryst with the mirror was our first argument, one in which she was victorious, and I was vanquished.

But now I had won, and my prize was the real thing.

My own lips.

We kissed, myself and I, upon the cracked and buckled roof of the Box, surrounded by the crash and spray and churn of the waters pouring from the heart of the dream, here in this broken memory of Cygnet Asylum.

It began with just me and one of my Abyssal Selves — soft human lips sliding against abyssal curves. She gathered up my flanks and hips and backside into her claws and crushed me against her arms and wrapped me in her tentacles as our kiss deepened. But then I began to feel my own lips — my soft, human, blood-splattered lips — as if from beyond myself, as if I was doubled somehow. Suddenly I was the one clutching my own slender shivering body in my

scaled hands. I was the one breaking the kiss and passing this heaving, blushing ape on to the next mouth; I was the ape, I was the abyssal truth, I was both in one, I was all six. They passed me from hand to hand, from lips to lips — some gentle, some rougher, some biting, some cooing, some purring; I passed myself, holding myself, hugging myself, sliding swift little hands down into my pajama bottoms to make myself gasp and shiver. I brought my two halves — my most difficult division — together in the middle of six tentacles. I kissed my Lonely Self, long and slow and deep, until I could taste her tears and cry them myself; I was my Lonely Counterpart, still tortured with the belief that I did not deserve love, sobbing into a kiss delivered by myself.

Touch and taste blurred fragile boundaries which should never have been raised in the first place. Was I the giant, with her tongue extended to allow the smaller pieces of me to touch and squeeze and caress? Or was I the little shivering ape, cradled in the tentacles of six sharp selves? Or was I the abyssal instinct and impulse and image, razor-edged and athletic, holding up the two halves as they embraced and groped and climbed a ladder toward union?

I was all of them at once. I was. We were.

And with a shuddering and a gasping and a quivering flex of readied flesh, we had together something very much like an orgasm.

And then we were together again.

We — me, us, a multitude of voices inside one mind, The Calm and the Lonely joining hands, the Guilt finally content to provide her power, and the six Abyssal Fragments lifting us all up and binding us together as one.

We were once again Heather Morell, nine-in-one, one-as-nine, a unity of many, inside one mind.

“Unnnh?”

We were also waist-deep in churning seawater, rather badly bruised in several places, and bent double over a crumbling mass of cracked concrete and shattered metal. It was more than a little uncomfortable.

Lurching to my feet was like taking flight.

Salt water crashed and churned around a dozen legs as I straightened up and staggered back. A hundred tentacles flexed and coiled, all down my flanks and my ribs and my spine, stretching their tiny muscles, rotating little hooked barbs, tasting the salt-rich air with saw-toothed maws. Clawed hands came up before my eyes — my own hands, paw-like, webbed for swimming, each finger tipped with a beautiful black talon, clothed in skin of dark scales and thickly fluffy fuzz the colour of dawn spied through dying clouds. My tongue unrolled from my mouth, twenty feet long, brushing the sheathed razors of my teeth. My shoulders were clad in a new mantle now — the dark wing-like membranes of Homo Abyssus crossed with the golden yellow love of Sevens' blanket, warming and coating my skin, billowing outward with the tiniest movement.

My eyes flickered with translucent layers and water-tight secondary lids, showing the world in false colours, in the shifting kaleidoscope of heat and sound and motion; I needed only to tighten the muscles to show the truth — the great waves all around me drowning the world, the rambling buildings of Cygnet Hospital, the Box, the hills, the distant trees, all of it sized as if I was giant among a world of dolls.

We were whole. We were leviathan. We were a hundred feet tall and built like a dream.

For a fleeting second, we almost lost control — not in the manner of Guilt's Rage, for she was one of us now, simply another member of a collective, and in full agreement with the rest of us. We felt the water flowing past our dozen ankles and over our dozen shins; we smelled the close and reeking air of the salt-tossed waves. Our line of sight towered over the ruined Box, over the waves, over the treetops and the roofs and the hills of the dream alike. And all this, all these details, we could see them all at once, as if from every angle at the same time. We comprehended the tiniest sluice of seawater crashing between the broken windows of the hospital buildings. We saw the individual particles of grit beneath the bare feet of one of our friends. We watched the moisture glistening on the hard white carapace of a Caterpillar bobbing in the waves. We watched a droplet of dark red blood fall from a gash on—

Tenny's face.

It was Tenny who saved us, yet again, simply by her presence. We

had been on the verge of observing, as the Eye observes, of giving up our specificity before the clarity and light and truth of our multiplicity.

But Tenny was standing in front of me, in her strange and dreamlike guise of more moth than humanoid. Her insectoid legs were buffeted by the crashing waters, her big dark eyes staring at me in wary caution, as if she was not yet sure that I was myself again. Her fluffy white antennae twitched back and forth. Her curled and cat-like mouth formed a silent question.

And blood — dark and thick and red, the colour of crushed cranberries — dripped from her cheek, where Guilt's Leviathan had struck her.

No. Where I had struck her.

Tenny opened her mouth, trilling above the sound of the crashing waves: "Heath? Heatherrrr?"

I nodded.

"It's me, Tenny," I said — and discovered my voice was a haunting call, a deep-sea voice fit for a kraken, scratchy and high and raw, yet rumbling like rocks on the sea floor.

I loved it. I should always have sounded like that.

"Heath!" Tenny lit up with a smile. "Heath all!"

From somewhere off to my right, a cheer went up, tiny and tinny. My friends, my family, my companions, my allies, cheering that I had come back to my senses.

But, before I could reach out and brush the blood from Tenny's cheek, I realised there was something so very tiny cupped in our right paw.

I made certain not to drop it, as I turned my palm up and uncurled my fingers.

It was the pebble, the little speck of grit which Lonely Heather had gripped and valued so hard — which I had valued so much, and still did. We all agreed on that now. We formed a temporary pocket of flesh in our palm, to make sure we would never forget the pebble again. We tucked it in there, armoured within our flesh.

Tenny had made us aware of the world, but the pebble made us

aware of ourselves, of our sheer size now, our massive presence in the dream compared to the crashing waves, to the little crowd gathered on the nearby rooftop, to the spouts of water pumping from the ruins of the Box. The only thing bigger than us now was in the sky — the Eye, Eileen’s true body, hanging there far above the reaches of any wave.

The water was still rising. Soon it would reach our thighs. Within thirty minutes, Tenny would have to swim. Within an hour, my friends on the rooftop would have nowhere to go, nowhere to run.

“The dream has to end,” I murmured, like the rumble and rush of undersea currents. “The dream has to end. It’s time.”

I began by tidying up the loose ends, taking responsibility for the consequences of our selfish guilt.

First — the Caterpillars. All six of the stout little travellers were still bobbing in the crashing waves about my shins, struggling to stay upright, fighting the currents, dooting and tooting either for aid or in complaint, or perhaps simply calling out to each other in encouragement and solidarity. Tenny’s tentacles were not strong enough to lift them, for though they were small, they were dense as chunks of solid lead. I stooped, cupped my hands, and lifted them each out of the water, one by one, like aiding insects who had fallen into a swimming pool. Some of them were content to be carried on the waters cupped within my hands, while others shot out sticky black anchor lines and clung to my giant fingers. I deposited them upon a rooftop — a much sturdier one than the roof on which my friends waited. All six Caterpillars formed up in a line, trumpeting their thanks, or perhaps their approval. I touched each of them with a fingertip, as gently as I could.

Doot!

Next — Tenny, so wronged and wounded by our claws. I felt a terrible guilt there, new and fresh, as I turned back to her, crouched and waiting in the rising waves. Her snout-like moth-face was scored by a trio of gashes from my own claws. But this guilt would not fester, this guilt would not grow; we would cradle it and coddle it and turn into it something else before it could be born. I would not pass this trauma down to Tenny. She would emerge unscathed.

“I’m so sorry, Tenny,” I purred, my voice a rush of water in an ocean trench. “Let me kiss it better?”

“Heath?” Tenny tilted her head, in perfect trust. She turned the wound toward me.

I stepped forward, wading through the waters, and took Tenny’s head gently in both my clawed hands, cupping her chin and her skull. I unravelled my gigantic tongue, coated with antiseptic mucus, regenerative enzymes, stem-cell analogues, and more, more than my little monkey’s brain could comprehend. With infinite care we lapped up the blood on Tenny’s cheek, slathering her wound with our own biology, coating the lacerations with healing mucus, taking responsibility for our tantrum, our selfishness, our moment of weakness.

Tenny shivered and flinched at the touch of my tongue. The medicine stung. But she did not pull away. When I was done, she trilled and purred and nudged her head against me.

We hugged for a moment, tentacles around each other.

“We love you, Tenny,” I purred.

She trilled against my chest. That was all I needed.

When we broke the hug, I stepped back, ready for the third and final matter before the climax of the dream — my friends, gathered on the rooftop, waving at me, jumping up and down, shouting suggestions in their tiny voices.

“Big H! Big H! Hahaha! It’s a pretty fucking literal nickname right now, hey?!”

“Shaman! Shaman, you have it all!”

“Large Heather. Big Heather. I struggle to pun in the face of this magnitude.”

“Go get her, Heather! Go get your sister! It’s what we came here for!”

“Heathy! Heathy, dive, you can do it! You can do it! Don’t be afraid!”

Was I afraid? Lozzie’s tiny voice carried on the salt-reeking air made me question that assumption. Was I afraid? We, who had swum the deepest reaches of the abyss, were we afraid to descend once more into the waters of our own guilt? With guilt accepted, with our selves recombined? What did we have to fear?

“I’m not afraid!” I called back to them. “I’m not afraid! And I love you all!”

A tiny voice called out — one I could pick out so easily from among the others.

Raine, with both bloody hands cupped around her mouth, shouted: “We’ll be waiting for you in the waking world, Heather! Don’t dawdle, or we’ll be swimming too!”

I almost laughed.

Almost. A seed of doubt held us back.

Finally — after running my eyes across each of my friends to assure myself they were accounted for, safe and sound — I turned to the Box. The building was a ruptured shell, a flowered ruin of buckled metal and burst concrete, with great gouts of gushing water flowing with incredible pressure from every gash and gouge.

We readied ourselves. We wrapped our yellow mantle-membrane tightly about our torso and limbs, for warmth and safety and security, tucking our many tentacles close against our body for speed and grace and hydrodynamics. We felt with inner senses for the great throbbing organ of our bioreactor — triple lobes hanging heavy and hot inside our gut, like a second stomach, a knot of pure power, ready to be uncorked; we groped for biochemical control rods and slid them free, feeling the heat rise, until our belly was boiling and our skin was glowing with bioluminescent run-off. We allowed that energy to permeate our limbs, flowing into every cell, every gap between each cell, saturating every drop of moisture which made up this dream of perfection.

We selected the largest rupture in the Box — the one through which our Guilt had been born and climbed out into the dream. We strode directly into the gushing waters; the spout crashed against my front, but the heat of our bioreactor turned the salt-water to steam, flash-boiling it in a great cloud of white. We blinked protective membranes over our eyes and closed up our nostrils, switching internal processes to anaerobic respiration. There was no need for one last breath of air, not with my soul clothed in this abyssal culmination.

With both clawed hands we grasped either side of the rupture and pulled it wider, breaking metal and crushing concrete.

We forced our head in first, straight into the onrushing stream of seawater. We braced our dozen legs, put all our strength into our arms, and propelled our leviathan body forward, into the water, into the breach, into the Box.

We dived.

Down, into darkness, debris, and discord.

The interior of the Box was not the organic clarity of the abyss; it was a drowned maze of twisted metal, studded with sharp spears of broken steel, pockmarked by submerged icebergs of shattered glass, the aftermath of our own escape and self-pursuit, all of it pounded by the constant outflow of gargantuan pressure. Great creaking and groaning sounds filled the water, the bending of toughened metal, the buckling of tortured steel, the breaking of all these labyrinthine innards.

We swam against that sucking current, kicking with our dozen strong legs, scooping the freezing seawater with our massive claws. We kept our sunlight yellow membrane close to our skin, Sevens' gift and our own hard scales protecting us from the scrape and puncture of broken metal, our chitin plates turning aside unseen edges in the lightless chaos of the Box. We curled our massive form over the remains of twisted walkways and through the wreckage of broken cages, parting the glittering midnight veils of hanging fields of glass-grit with a swipe of our hands. We risked entanglement in great spider webs of wreck and ruin, worming our way deeper into the destruction, wriggling through spaces so tight that they threatened to swallow us — or spit us back out with the sheer pressure of rushing water. We encountered many smaller leviathans — still giants in their own right, but tiny compared to our size; these were the other inhabitants of the Box, swept up in our tantrum. Many of them were trapped, stuck in tiny compartments, or crushed by metal tangles which they could not extricate themselves from, or confused by their reflections in fallen glass walls, their own forms multiplied by the broken surfaces. We paused to free each and every one of these great and hidden beasts of the dream, untangling them from the ruins, shoving them toward the exit, toward freedom. None would remain imprisoned here once we were done dreaming. The pearl would be broken and emptied, at any cost.

We swam deeper and deeper still, past the wreckage, past the ruin,

to where the centre of the Box opened out into a vast vault, filled with the coldest waters in all creation.

At the centre of that vault lay a crater of glass, the burst and ragged stump of Guilt's Prison — the prison which still held Maisie, down at the deepest point.

We hauled ourselves along the bottom of that vault, to the jagged edge of the crater. We pulled ourselves across that, too, across a landscape of transparent razor blades bigger than buildings. Then we paused at the edge, where even our abyssal divinity shivered at the vast emptiness of what lay below.

A sink-hole.

A great circular mouth yawned wide in the core of the Box, lined by the jagged remains of the aquarium glass, like giant's teeth carved from diamond. Each tooth was the size of a mountain; the range had taken me several minutes to cross. The hole itself was wider than a city, wider than the Eye, wider than the dream. It led down into utter darkness and frigid cold. Freezing water flowed up from those depths, chilling my scales and fur and tentacles as I paused at the lip of infinity.

It was there that I realised what Maisie had done.

When she had made the pearl, she had turned herself into grit. But how? By hiding, from both the Eye and from all reality — by wrapping herself in layers of protection and dipping her soul down into the space between worlds, into a space so few could follow, a space into which even the greatest and most terrible Outsiders were loathe to peer too deeply, the one place Eileen would never look.

Because I recognised that cold sea water, that stygian darkness, that infinity of oceanic potential. This was a dream, after all, filtered through the very same metaphors I had adopted the first time I had peered into the black.

Maisie hung suspended on the edge of the Abyss.

As I paused, crouched on the jagged lip of the crater, I realised that the broken glass of the aquarium was growing inward — creeping toward the centre of the vast hole, like a cut scabbing over. It would plug this breach eventually, this puncture wound in Eileen's soul. The flow of abyssal waters would cease; not quickly enough to save the dream from drowning, but Eileen herself was at no risk.

This abyssal abscess would not kill her. But the healing process would seal off what lay below.

There was no time to spare, no time for hesitation. Maisie's clock was still ticking.

I bunched my leviathan muscles on the lip of infinity, and kicked off, diving down into the dark.

The sides of the sink-hole fell away instantly; the secret cavity beneath the pearl opened out into endless black waters on all sides. Within seconds, the great jagged circle was nothing but a speck of lighter grey in the black, a dying star signalling the way home. Mortals, mages, the most experienced of monsters — all would have been confounded by this featureless void, and this was merely a water column suspended far above the truth of the Abyss itself. This was a vertical pocket formed by Maisie's sacrifice, drawing the tiniest sip upward from the freezing infinity below.

But we had swum the Abyss before. We had passed through the most powerful alchemy of the soul, brought it back to the waking world, wrought it upon our body, and survived. I was made for this place!

So I kicked my dozen flippered legs, navigating by the subtle flow of currents across my fur and scales, by the minuscule changes in water pressure or temperature or direction, by the microscopic swirls and eddies in the black. When the water pressure increased, I armoured my skin in thicker scales and hard chitin and purged my insides of lingering air bubbles and the memory of breath. When the cold intensified, I ramped my reactor higher, flooding my veins with boiling crimson pitch, heating my flesh until it glowed. When the dark became too maddening, I burst with rainbow bioluminescence, broadcasting my intent out into the void. More than once, strange questing things ventured near to my light and my heat — visitors from the true abyss below, single tendrils which belonged to unthinkable giants, or lost predators in the barren waters of Maisie's pearl. But when they saw what I was, they veered away; the few who did not required only a squirt of toxic ink or a cloud of electro-magnetic paralytics to encourage them to leave. I could not spare effort on blind wanderers.

Time ceased as I descended; subjective hours passed, then days, then weeks in this freezing black, yet I knew that the surface of the

dream was not yet drowned. Time itself was stretched and smeared in this place, screaming in silence as we approached the event horizon of the abyss, this lip on the infinity between worlds.

I thought of my friends, clinging to the memory, pulling my yellow membrane tight around my flesh. This was not the abyss, I told myself. This was just a tidal pool, full of dark waters, soon to be emptied.

That was when I discovered my passenger.

I had almost forgotten about her, tucked into my yellow blanket when I had been divided against myself; I had carried her with me unthinkingly, down into this nightmare of freezing darkness. I found her inside my membranes now, pressed tight to my chest just over my heart, so tiny that I could have held her between the points of two claws.

The Praem Plushie was still with us.

The moment we discovered her we almost scrambled to a halt, swirling in the black waters, struggling with sudden panic — should I go on, should I turn back to deposit her safely where she—

No, said the Praem Plushie. *It is too late to go back now.*

But you're not meant to be here! You can't survive down here!

Maids may go wherever they are needed, she told me. And plushies fight nightmares better than any other. What finer companion could you wish for this descent?

But you—

I am your other daughter, am I not? You named me.

Yes! And I don't want you to get—

Even this, Heather, you do not have to do alone.

I could see there was no arguing with Praem. There never had been, after all, right from the very first time we had met. Even Evelyn could not dissuade Praem from her duty and her aims. And I comforted myself with the thought that this Plushie was only part of Praem. The rest of her was on the surface, at Evee's side. The halves would be reunited when the dream was done, and one half was with us. A good sign. Reason for good cheer.

I swam on, growing colder and darker, sinking fast.

Five hundred fathoms further down, I reached the first of the steel cables. It seemed to come from nowhere, anchored to the darkness itself, glittering in the pulses of my own bioluminescence, like spider silk in moonlight. Several inches thick, braided like hair, it plummeted into the depths ahead; to my leviathan size it was nothing more than a fishing line. I swam beside it for a while, then reached out and ran a hand along the cold steel length; it was taut, tight with pressure, thrumming at the lightest brush. When I severed it with a flicker of my claws, it sprang apart, each half scything off into the infinity of black waters.

Many other cables joined the first, on all sides of me, above and below, turning the featureless void into a glittering landscape like the splayed innards of a flayed cage. The deeper we swam, the more dense the steel cables became, all leading down, all converging toward a single point, at the heart of this abscess in reality, this pearl in the dream, this secret at the core of Cygnet Asylum.

And then we saw her.

At first she was a pale dot at the very limit of my senses, a scrap of ragged flesh floating in the dark. I could not tell if she was moving or if she lay still, or even if she possessed a face or limbs or any semblance of humanity at all. I was prepared for anything — a blob of featureless flesh, a ghost like sodden gossamer drowned in the seas, a fragile memory which I would be forced to cradle in my giant paws.

But this was a dream, and even victorious dreams can be cruel.

I swam closer, slicing through the forest of steel cables with my claws, ripping open the bonds which held us apart. I kicked hard, pushing deeper, until the very core of the place was torn asunder beneath my paws, and the braided steel cage lay in ragged waves all around me, hanging loose in the black waters.

And there she was, with her limbs bound in metal snakes, arms and legs pulled wide as if at the centre of a torture device, slack and empty in the core of her own sacrifice.

My sister. My twin.

“Maisie?”

She had my face.

Maisie Morell looked exactly like me. She was not frozen in time at nine years old, but had grown up in captivity, exactly as I had. She was not transformed into a blob, or a squid, or a bodiless spirit upon the air of Wonderland — because this was a dream, and here she had weight and heft and terrible reality. She had my soft brown eyes behind my own dark lashes, the very same neat nose above my pert little lips, set in my delicate jaw. She possessed my petite frame, my prominent collarbone, my compact, lithe, flexible limbs. She had my long, precise fingers, my downy hair on my forearms. She had my waist and my hips and my too-slender legs. She had my mousy hair — and there was the only exception, for her hair had grown long in her imprisonment and isolation, a great tail of brown which stretched far past her feet.

Her lips were slack, her skin was pale as old milk, and her frame was painfully thin. She looked like I had, a year ago, on the verge of surrender.

She blinked — slowly, just once, with all the energy she could muster.

Her eyes were dull with more than pain.

But she mouthed my name — “Heather?”

Maisie Morell looked exactly like me. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

I freed her from the core of her prison, gently unwinding the steel from around her legs and arms, peeling her free from the impression which her body had left in the mass of woven metal. I pulled her out, cradling her gently in the palm of one leviathan hand, for I was a giant compared to her. She lay there gazing up at me, struggling to keep her eyelids open; there was so little of her left, so little life and energy and awareness left in that body.

But the corners of her mouth curled upward in a tiny smile. She didn’t need to speak.

She closed her eyes after that, lapsing into catatonic unconsciousness, curled in a fetal position. Her heartbeat was weak and irregular against the palm of my hand, but it was there, and it was not guttering out or slowing down or fading into the dark.

We had made it in time. Our twin would live.

We cradled Maisie to our chest, as gently we could, next to where the Praem Plushie still nestled inside the yellow membrane, over the beat of our heart. With a dozen legs and one strong arm, we kicked away from the core of the prison, out of the ragged remains of the steel web, and into the open waters of the abscess. Behind us, the steel cables seemed to drop away, sinking into the black, as if sucked down into the abyss now that their purpose had ended.

We swam — up and up and up, through the black, the cold, the pressure.

And we realised, after hours and hours and hours of effort, that we were drawing no closer to the surface.

A great and terrible current pulled at our ankles. All around us, the flow of the black waters had reversed direction, no longer gushing upward to drown the dream, but sucking downward, emptying this lanced boil into the infinite dark seas of the abyss. Even our leviathan strength was not enough to fight this irresistible pull, this metaphysical emptying; the best we could do was remain in place, fighting the flow of the current, until at last we would be swept down with the final remnants of the draining waters.

A tiny grey dot still glimmered so far above us, a pinprick in the infinite black — the hole in the Box, the way back to the dream.

It was still open, perhaps by only a crack.

But we could not reach it, not with all our muscle, all our might, all our selves. We were nothing compared to that abyssal pull.

Realisation was followed swiftly by acceptance. I felt no regret, no inner struggle, no emotional torture. Oh, we argued about it, of course — Guilt's Leviathan most of all, for was this not the exact decision which we had convinced her to avoid? But it was not. This was no self-sacrifice, no act of self-destruction; we had not begun this dive expecting to fail, we had not entered this pit with the intention of our own loss, we had not gone into this for our own death. This was not self-sacrifice.

It was simply the only way out — though the way would be exceedingly long.

Kicking my many legs to stay suspended in the water column, I

unfolded the fist which held Maisie.

I gave her three gifts, that she might reach the surface of the dream.

First, I opened the little fleshy pouch where I had held the pebble, so filled with meaning for us. This pebble was her, it was her in miniature, grit in the Eye. I pressed it into her hands and whispered through the waters that she must hold on tight. She squeezed both hands into fists around the pebble, even though she had not the energy to speak, nor to open her eyes.

Second, I tore off a piece of myself — a piece of the yellow membrane, the abyssal descendent of Sevens' yellow blanket. I wrapped it around Maisie's tiny form, like a bubble of heat and light and life. I covered her body and her face, pressing it to her skin, enclosing the long tail of her hair. I made sure she was armoured and warmed against the cold, that nothing may touch her.

Third, I took the Praem Plushie from next to my heart. I expected Praem to complain, but she did not. She understood this was the only way out, this was not self-sacrifice, and that this was not goodbye.

But still, she gave us a little hug. She did not say it, but she disagreed with this decision. She wanted to stay with us.

"No," I whispered into the waters. "That's why you're going with her. Because if I can't do this alone, somebody needs to tell the others."

Praem did not raise further question. I pressed her through the little piece of sunlight gold membrane I had wrapped around Maisie, until she was cradled in my twin's arms.

I held this buoyant bauble in a cage of my fingers, for just a moment, just long enough to feel doubt, just long enough to feel my muscles begin to weaken against the tireless rip of the current, just long enough for salt and tears to gather in my eyes.

This was not self-sacrifice. I intended to live. I was just taking a different route home.

But I could not be sure.

"See you soon, sister," we said to Maisie. "I love you."

Then I let go of the tiny sunlight mote, of pebble and membrane and Praem, all wrapped about my twin, about Maisie's form, trusting to her their power.

The mote rose rapidly, shooting up the water column like a bubble of air, natural buoyancy unmatched and untouchable by the sucking pull of the abyss. It shot upward, heading for that grey crack in the dream, that path back to my friends and allies and family. I knew they would find her, because all about us the dream was coming apart, draining into the depths, and would soon pop like a soap bubble in the dawn. Within moments, all would wake.

But I was down in the dark, sinking fast.

For me there was only one way out, and I might forget myself on the path.

I stopped fighting the current, stopped struggling against the pull of the waters, stopped trying to resist the urge that had ridden me and owned me and become me since my very first taste of the truth. When I could no longer see the glimmering light of Maisie's protective bubble, I turned in the waters, head down in the dark. I kicked hard, riding the flow, leaving the dream behind.

For the second time in my life, I raced down past the undersea cliffs, past the point of no return, past the freezing limit of the thermocline, down into the place between worlds where all reality melted away into metaphor.

Maisie was free.

But I plunged into the abyss.

??? – ??

We were hunched over a kill — still feasting and feeding, with teeth and claws and wide-hinged jaws all bloody and coated with gore — when the submarine found us.

Of course we didn't know it was a submersible, not at first.

We assumed it was another predator, a very large predator, so big and so confident and so powerful that it needn't concern itself with such petty matters as stealth or subtlety. All we could be sure of was that a presence was approaching us, as if stalking for prey among the jagged rocks of the ocean floor, with their coating of mushroom-pale aquatic mosses and sticky sallow-skinned mold, hung with dense sheets of thorny seaweed and encrusted with horns of diamond-hard coral. Whatever manner of creature was slamming through the waters above the tangle of rock, it put out so much noise and light that even the slowest and most inelegant of our peers could have avoided it with ease. It sang out a chorus of little vibrations into the pitch darkness, peering about itself with flickering pinpricks of dark red light, sweeping over the broken landscape in which we hid.

In truth, those who designed and crewed the submarine had intended it to be both quiet and covert; they thought they were being furtive, slicing through the freezing pelagic depths like a silent knife cutting cold flesh, safe and sound inside a sealed bubble of light and air and pressure, totally invisible to the void beyond. They had leveraged the most advanced expertise, employed the best quality materials, and armed themselves with knowledge few others could imagine, let alone put into practice. They had gone to lengths almost none had attempted before — pioneers down in the dark, in a way that should have been impossible.

To our senses they were blundering about, broadcasting power and threat, clueless and blind.

No technology could match the perfect processes of personal transformation. No book or account or second-hand information could substitute for raw physical experience.

Nothing could prepare one for exposure to the abyss.

So, we made the safe assumption — we were being set upon by a predator, either to steal our kill, or to pick off one of us as live prey, to snatch the weak from our seemingly ragged edges.

With a little rapid discussion via flickers of tendril and tentacle and claw-signs and a few squirts of water-borne pheromone, we agreed that this was, unfortunately, entirely our own fault. We had been very hungry for rather a long time, despite our constant grazing on the thin flora and translucent slime of the ocean floor. The huge half-eaten corpse we were devouring now had been an overconfident predator itself; it had tried to attack one of our number, then learned its mistake far too late, when we — all of us, all together, all working as one — had turned on it and brought it down in a flurry of wounds and blood loss and overwhelming numbers. That was how we had survived down here for so long despite our rather conspicuous behaviour and fuzzy biological footprint — by applying principles that were almost alien to the abyss. Teamwork and cooperation and pack behaviour was difficult to beat.

We had done our usual best to avoid the scent of bloody streamers floating off into the water. But perhaps we had missed a few particles of gore slipping past our teeth. Perhaps our warning clouds of toxin and poisons squirted out into the dark had not been enough to dissuade any eager scavengers. Maybe this thing which approached us simply did not care about the wounds we might inflict. Perhaps it really was a leviathan, even compared with us. Or maybe it simply did not comprehend our numbers and our unity.

We had to flee. We had to abandon the kill.

Very disappointing, but the abyss was still the abyss, pressure could not be avoided entirely.

We agreed upon a direction. We would head deeper into the tangle of crumbling rock and twisted little undersea valleys across which our kill lay draped. Among the drowned canyons and long-cooled magma-tubes was the perfect place to lose a pursuing predator, especially one of such apparent size. Whatever it was, it could not follow us down there.

Most of us grabbed a final few mouthfuls of hot and steaming meat, some even carrying it away in specialised pouches or bodily

cavities, developed for precisely this kind of eventuality, this kill-stealing opportunist. A number of small arguments broke out; the newest and least experienced of us had to be restrained from darting upward for the open water, which was no escape at all, or else pulled bodily away from the kill as they attempted to cram meat into their jaws right up until the very last second. We could hardly blame them; such a grand and filling meal was a rare treat, and it was such a shame to return to the grind of chewing seaweed and cracking open the occasional crab for petty morsels of pale flesh.

But I — we, us, me and me and me — was the authority among the others. I was the only one with the size and weight and lethality to truly determine our direction, not to mention my wealth of experience from the sheer amount of time I had spent down here in the dark. If I said go, then we went, because the alternative was being left behind.

And we did not ever leave anybody behind.

So off we went, fleeing the remains of our kill in a swift cloud of elegant tendons and tightened sinews, fins and flippers and sharp-edged tendrils cutting through the freezing currents. Some of us wriggled through the water with sheer muscle power, while others jetted on streams of water expelled from within their light-drinking shells; others still pulled themselves along the rocks with masses of sticky tentacles, clinging to others of the shoal when they had to cross open water. A small number of us flitted and flew with methods even I did not comprehend, seeming to flicker or jump through the water at great speed, propelled by stutters of something that was not light, shrouded by invisible colour which opened holes in the ocean. Those few had come from parts of the abyss I had never seen, from far-off climes and reaches beyond even my storied imagination.

We — me, I, myself — lingered last, floating in the churned-up waters just off the kill. We left behind thin trails of blood and the scent of fresh meat, so I covered our tracks with squirts of mucus-laced ink, clouds of paralytic toxins, and minefields of sticky burrowing burrs. I waited until the very last second, listening to that incessant *ping-ping-ping* from the approaching mega-predator. I watched the way those tiny red light-feelers crawled across the rocks, mapping and groping and squeezing the ocean floor with flickering crimson beams. The mass of the leviathan was leaking

sound and light in such chaos that I was stumped, overawed by a display which had no place in the cold and dark of the deeps.

Did I have some inkling of what it really was? Was that why I paused, on the very rear of my own pack, to watch it crest the nearest rocky outcrop?

Perhaps part of me knew it was a submersible. But that didn't matter. Survival was paramount.

I lingered just long enough to see a sliver of this strange and noisy predator as it crested a rise, still hundreds of meters away. Metal skin was coloured a deep sunburst yellow, studded with glass eyes and darkened lamps and a face of steel feelers.

We squirted one last warning directly into that distant face — a cloud of ink and toxic mucus laced with a thousand tiny lances, enough to sting and burn and make it clear we were capable of more.

We did not wait to see how it reacted, or for it to reveal more of itself. We turned and fled, following the rest of our shoal down into the ragged rocky underworld of the sea floor.

Months passed by down there. We travelled far, moving fast. We flitted through ridged tubes of igneous rock, swam along the bottoms of vast crumbling canyons, preyed on the pale, scuttling, soft-bodied things which lived in the cracks and hollows of the abyssal trenches. We crossed a distance further than all of planet Earth's oceans, keeping our heads beneath the rocky crust, but always angling upward — never down, never descending into those ancient volcanic vents.

We were heading upward, you see? Always upward, always higher, always toward that distant surface, that sunlight zone which still lay lifetimes away.

We had been heading in that direction since the moment we had plunged into the abyss, though we struggled to recall exactly where or when that had been. Our reality was darkness and cold and the shapes of the sea floor. We were strong and swift and beautiful, wrapped in a yellow membrane of our own, powered from within by special reactors, the product of a perfect evolutionary process; we often felt at home in the limitless black of the waters, tempted to stay, to abandon the journey, to embrace the rightness of our

own form and place. We were euphoric with ourselves. We felt 'complete'.

But I knew this was not an end. This — the abyss — was merely a different place. Another stage of being. And after this, there was more.

Up there. Beyond the surface. In the open air.

Not all of us believed in this vision, this promise, this strange echo of a memory. Some of us were simply along the ride, for very different reasons, for self-interest or safety or the novelty of the new or simple survival. I was the one making the journey, and I would gladly continue making it all by myself. But I had accidentally shown others the way to their own salvation.

I should probably define 'us' and 'we'. I'm being very confusing, aren't I? I do apologise, but I cannot help myself. Describing this is almost impossible as it stands. To be more specific is a challenge my mind can sorely afford.

But I must try. I must attempt the impossible, a second time.

We — me, I, us, singular and unitary and yet nine-in-one — had swum the waters of the abyss for years, perhaps longer, so long that we had forgotten more than we recalled. We had started our solitary journey down somewhere very deep, very dark, and so very empty, at the absolute bottom of some trench utterly devoid of life, empty of whale-fall or discarded bones, where even the marine snow was absent. Our earliest memory was of a great crack in the ocean floor itself, which had been recently sealed over with a plug of rapidly cooling magma. We had been alone then, alone and cold and confused. But we were also perfectly suited for this environment; we were leviathan, we were sharp and swift and smooth, with many claws and a great maw of teeth and more eyes than we needed and an array of tentacles on all sides. We had powerful flippers and many siphon-jets and armour all over our body. We were graceful and fast and unmatched by the things which came near as we began to explore. We were warmed by our internal reactors, and saved the need to stave off starvation by the anaerobic processes within our own body, filter-feeding off salts and grit in the water itself.

We had swum in those empty waters for a very long time, slowly climbing the deep valley in which we had begun. We ate rocks and

sand. We floated on tiny currents in the dark. Whenever we rested we stared out into the black infinity. We felt complete, as if we were the product of some divine process which we could no longer comprehend, now that it was done.

But we had to go up. That instinct was enough to drive us. Up, up, up.

Eventually we left that trench behind. The first thing we found beyond those secluded waters was a hydrothermal vent — a cloud of black particulate rising into the dark from a little field of cylindrical chimneys, formed from accreted mineral run-off. We had settled there among the strange growths and pale little creatures, basking in the warmth and the nutrients, listening to the tiny chattering sounds of those others who drew life from this crack in the earth, watching their little dramas and discoveries, hovering over them like a moon in their tiny world. We stayed there so long that we became part of their mythology, part of the ecosystem ourselves, as we ejected spent reactor cores and grew new ones inside our body. The spent cores turned into new oases of change and mutation. We watched the processes with fascination, as the field of hydrothermal life spread outward with our additions.

But in time we grew restless — because rest and time had allowed us to recall.

Another set of memories lay heavy and dense within us, as if our abyssal body existed only to protect and cradle those recollections, but also as an outgrowth of them, as if we were both seedbed and plant in one. The memories were of an ape, all gangly and clumsy and gormless, not elegant or clever or swift at all. But she was beautiful too, in her own way, even if we could not quite see it. She had a name — ‘Heather’. And that was our name. She was us, we were her. She had brought us to the surface once before, and made us a part of her, and now she had returned to the abyss, and remade us from herself.

So the abyss was not an end. It was just part of a cycle.

And Heather had to get home, because she had a sister to see.

After many quiet and happy years around that hydrothermal vent — and many creatures which were perhaps the children of our cast-off parts — we left, heading out and away into the dark waters above, the first step on a journey to the surface.

Over time, we made friends.

This was a difficult concept in the abyss — friendship, comradeship, mutual cooperation of any kind, any meeting of minds or bodies which did not involve a contest over who was going to eat who. The scarcity of resources, the struggle for survival, the crushing pressure of water and darkness and the ever-present unknowns lurking out there beyond reach of sonar or feelers — a cocktail of danger which discouraged anything but tooth-and-nail competition.

But it was not impossible. My time around the thermal vent had taught me that. Another abyssal presence had taught me that too, though she was also a strange and ape-like memory — a mother in whose arms I had felt accepted and safe and secure, who had not eaten me or rejected me.

And was I not living proof myself? For I did not need to kill; my reactors kept me fed.

The first friend I made in the abyss was a mollusc. We met over her own most recent ‘kill’ — a nice juicy piece of slime-soaked moss she had wrestled off the surface of a particularly jagged rock. She was terrified by me, though all I did was watch her from a polite distance. One can hardly blame her; she was smaller than the size of my clenched fist. A leviathan like me could have scooped her up and eaten her in a single mouthful. She sprayed the water with toxic mucus, shot at me with paralytic spikes, and turned her shell a kaleidoscope of the most wonderful warning colours — deepest red and poison orange and evil sickly purple. She smashed into me with her coiled shell and ran from me when I did not fight back. She threw rocks and bits of bone when I followed.

I shadowed the little mollusc for months — not because I wanted to torment her, but because I did not wish to make this ascent all alone.

That was one of the truths of the abyss which we had not understood before. It is loneliness and isolation which makes this dive so difficult; when together, the beauty down here becomes so much easier to endure, so much easier to bring back, so much less final.

Eventually the little mollusc accepted that I was not trying to eat her, though this was not easy. The process only worked because I was obviously not eating anything else either — not other

creatures, not the leftover scraps of her food, not bits of myself. She would bob in the water, watching me in return as I lounged on some outcrop of rock, my presence so obviously keeping the larger predators away from her vulnerable little shell.

One day, when the waters were very still and calm and we had not seen a whisper of another creature in ages, she drew close enough to reach out and touch one of my fingertips with a face-tendrill.

She didn't have a name. She hadn't possessed the concept of names until we spoke. She asked me to name her, but the only name I had was my own — 'Heather' — and another which I could not bear to bestow upon anybody.

After much discussion, she named herself after the sound made by her siphon — 'Silurt'.

It was a beautiful name. It was! But that is the closest approximation I can manage, with these clumsy, inadequate, ape-like sounds.

Silurt was the first. After her the process became so much easier. When one sees two creatures travelling together, one knows they are not eating each other. After Silurt came Uurent, a mass of tentacles with a tiny armoured ball in the middle. Next was Tushkernt, then Peneil, then Fandril, then more, and more, and more; all of them named themselves, all of them joined of their own free will, and all of them found something in the group which they had lacked in their abyssal isolation. As I rose through the layers of the abyss, swimming my years-long route back to the surface, gathering more and more friends to my sides became easy, a by-product of the journey, second nature to what we were. I offered something very simple — protection in numbers, safety when sleeping, and freedom from the cycle of predation.

We became a shoal, something no predator could hope to tackle.

By the time the submarine found us, all those first friends had grown great in size. Silurt herself was now a nautilus-like leviathan in her own right, as big as my torso. I was still the true titan among us, but I was not the only one, and not the only one who understood the value of what we had become.

Of course, none of this is true.

Everything I am telling you is wildly and hopelessly inaccurate.

None of what I am saying is literal; it simply cannot be. There was no ocean, no water, no perfect elegant leviathan body of my own. There was no hydrothermal vent where I remembered myself and learned how far the abyss could be pushed; there was no great shoal of friends forged along the years of journey — there were not even years, because time was not a thing down there in the space between worlds, in the capillary cavity between dimensions. There was no submarine, either. It is merely the only way I have of expressing what it all felt like.

All of this is metaphor, and none of this is adequate. I am forced to use the flapping of my meat — my lips and tongue, the bone of my jaw, the vibrating membranes in my throat — to render down a pure shining truth of starlight and atomic waltz and mathematical precision, into mere words. If this was a picture, it would be blurry beyond recognition. If it was music, it would be whispers at the edge of hearing. But it is words, and words are the only medium I have.

It was the abyss, and the abyss is not an ocean. It is not fields of fire and brimstone, or solid-packed earth filled with wriggling life, or an empty sky dense with cloud, or any of those things. It is not an infinite house filled with darkness, however much comfort and meaning my true and chosen mother takes from that particular metaphor.

The abyss is whatever one brings to it, and whatever one takes away from it. It is truth and beauty untrammelled by matter, unclouded by physics.

It is the abyss, and this was my second time in those other waters.

I hope my metaphor makes sense, because it is all I have.

When we — us and I and we, but also my shoal of friends all about me — reached the end of that undersea landscape cut and burned and carved by long-dead volcanic activity, where the canyons and tunnels and smooth shafts ran out into a sandy floor which extended for thousands of miles, as the ground climbed once more toward that infinitely distant membrane of the surface, we knew we were still being followed.

The submarine had tracked us, across all those thousands upon thousands of miles, for months on end. We had heard it pinging and beeping and scraping far above the secluded lightless holes through

which we swam; we had spotted a corner here or a sliver there, hovering over the narrow canyon-mouths as we passed below. Sometimes we had been forced to outrun the scouts and probes it had dropped into the deep — strange twitching objects which we thought were little sacks of animated poison.

The probes were machines, of course. And the submarine was no predator. But we did not yet know any of that. All we knew is that something loud and terrible and confident had followed us all the way to the limit of our hiding place, waiting for us to emerge into open water.

We could not go back, because back would take us down. We needed to go up — to ascend, toward the surface, toward the membrane.

We had to be Heather again.

We lingered at that boundary between cave-network and open sand for weeks, stymied by the ever-present signs of the abyssal giant in the open water above us. We hoped it would leave, drawn away by hunger and appetite and the lure of easier prey. But it didn't. It sent those incessant sonar pings roving across the boundary-line of the cave system, sweeping back and forth with red-lit laser-eyes, sending out probes to search for the trailing edges of our shoal. We were the ones growing hungry, stripping every scrap of vegetation and slimy mold from between cracks in the rocks. I alone among our number was not beginning to starve, so I fed the others with the product of my bioreactors, nursing them from my tentacles, keeping them alive and healthy as we attempted to wait out this strange predator in the darkness.

I could have escaped by myself, of course. My grace and speed and power allowed me to outrun anything. But I would not leave the little ones behind.

I would not surrender to the logic of the abyss. I would transcend it.

Our patience began to pay off, slowly at first, then all at once. The great and terrible predator which had followed us all the way over the rocky landscape was forced to linger in open waters, waiting for us to emerge, making so much noise and light, making itself so very conspicuous.

Other predators began to gather, out in the dark, biding their own

time.

We became aware of their presence first because of the subtle scents they left on the currents, and then from the sounds of the probing attacks they launched at the submersible — only a few at first, claw-and-tooth on metal ringing out into the black waters, followed by a swift retreat when the submarine proved too much for them to handle, punctuated by the strange crump-crump-bang sounds of the machine defending itself.

Within the space of a day or two, the attacks increased in frequency. The noise of clanging and tearing and explosions shook the edge of the cave network where we still hid, rising to a crescendo over a span of five or six hours.

And that was our opening.

We — our shoal, hungry and tired but still alive and whole and together — left our hiding place in a great cloud of muscle and sinew and tentacle, squirting ink and toxins and minefields of spikes behind us as we jetted out into the waters above the lone and level sands. The colossal fight above and behind us threw jagged shadows and bright flashes across the sea floor — alien and wrong in this lightless abyss, accompanied by the pressure-waves of undersea explosions and strange backwash from the battle. Several of our companions froze in unspeakable fear, or turned to look, mesmerised by this strange interloper into our dark world. I hurried them on, grabbing stragglers with my tentacles and hurling them forward, making sure that we left nobody behind.

Only when I was certain that I was last, did I turn back and look.

I thought I understood the abyss.

I thought that I — who had dived into these black waters twice, who had surfaced into reality and remade myself, who had returned and clung so hard to this name of an ape that I should be, who was a leviathan now in my own right, who was the equal of any predator of the deeps — I thought I knew the limits of the possible, down here in the space between worlds.

But there, hanging in the dark of the void, was an angel.

Bracketed by the flash and crump of underwater detonations, haloed by a whirling ring of tracer rounds and flare-lights and torpedoes in flight, clad in a cape of ablative armour and electrical

shielding and the stubs of a thousand sensory feelers, surrounded by a dark ring of predators each a paltry tenth of her size.

She — I cannot describe her as otherwise, as an ‘it’, not with her graceful curves of imperishable steel plate and her shining halo-rings of propulsion system and the way her body was fluted and smooth and arched — was a machine, a submarine, a submersible. Built beyond the abyss, plunged into these waters on purpose. Not a living thing, not grown or evolved or self-wrought for these depths, but put together by other hands, to dive.

Such a thing was beyond my comprehension.

She was beautiful, in a way almost nothing else in my life had been, but also in a way that seemed oddly familiar, as if I had known this machine forever and ever, as if she had lived in the back of my mind since my birth. Ten thousand feet from tip to tail, painted yellow and red in the warning colours of an alien ecosystem, with great ring-sections rotating around the plump, plush, proud mass of her main body. She was armed as an armada, bristling with weapons — guns! Another alien intrusion into the abyss, one which I felt a tickle at those ancient memories of my name. Little metal orifices flowered open to disgorge torpedoes at the leviathans which plagued and mobbed her; tiny cannons swivelled all over her hull and squirted flickering lines of bullets into the water, chasing the predators which outnumbered her singular beauty; arcs of energy crackled from projectors, turning spheres of liquid into electric death as her tormentors slid away into the murk.

And she was — to my unbridled horror — losing.

The angel was far too large for any single abyssal leviathan to pose a real threat to her, but it seemed the desperate predators had learned teamwork too; they were working together to bring down this vast promise of prey. They darted in and out of her fields of fire, baiting her, goading her, forcing her to turn about and thrash at each individual attack. They tore off her guns here and there, or slid claws through isolated plates of armour, or cracked the great rotating rings which encircled her body, trying to cripple her propulsion and her engines and the heart of her energies.

Her loss would take a long time to play out. She might fight for hours yet, or drive off her attackers and limp on for days or weeks more. But if this went on much longer, she would not recover, she

would fade and die.

I hung on the edge of the sandy expanse for precious seconds, staring in awe at this alien intrusion, unable to comprehend what it meant.

The abyss was infinite and boundless. I had to accept that I would never understand it all. Nobody could.

But this was not my fight; I began to turn away, to follow the rest of my shoal. I had to reach the surface, and breach the membrane. I had another stage of the cycle which I must return to, for this was not where I ended. I had to remember. I had to be—

HEATHER

My name was etched on the flank of the angelic submersible, in letters taller than my leviathan body.

I spotted it as she turned aside, to ward off another attack.

Torn between our retreating shoal and this signpost of our soul, we made the only choice we could. We squirted a cloud of pheromones behind us, pheromones which said ‘we are going alone, don’t follow, flee, save yourselves’. Then we kicked off from the sandy sea floor with our dozen strong legs, and shot through the freezing waters of the abyss.

We swam to our angel’s rescue.

She — the submarine-goddess — came about as if in surprise as we rose through the waters before her, cutting off the flow of bullets and bombs so as not to harm us. One of the leviathan predators took advantage of this lapse, darting in to attack one of her rotating ring-sections. We flew past our angel’s bow and slammed into the rival creature, easily our own size. We tore wildly at its body and face, ripping off great chunks of meat, biting through muscle and bone, streamers of blood spiralling off into the water. We kicked the attacker free; the submarine responded by opening up on it with a barrage of torpedoes, forcing it to flee into the outer darkness.

But there were dozens of predators stalking the angel now, or perhaps more, all leering maws and pinprick lights in the closing darkness of the abyss, barbed tentacles and poisonous feelers and corrosive tendrils tightening a noose around us. My angelic namesake was scored and burned and wounded in so many places,

she would not survive this fight alone. I squirted clouds of toxic ink and lashed the water with my own hundred tentacles and made my sleekly muscled body flash with bright red-pink warning lights.

But I was only one leviathan myself. The circling sphere of predators edged closer, ignoring all my threats. They knew that they outnumbered us, and that if I wanted to live, I had to abandon the machine to her fate.

I twisted and turned, refusing to run, unwilling to give up this angel which bore my name. Hissing, screaming, thrashing at the water — none of it would work.

This divine machine had broken the rules of the abyss, attempted to survive outside of the balance of the ecosystem, and now she would be destroyed and eaten and forgotten.

Then all the other members of my shoal rose from the waters below — all the dozens of friends and allies I had gathered over my long sojourn in the abyss.

They had ignored my instruction to carry on without me. They had disregarded the need to flee.

We were breaking the rules of the abyss, too.

Dozens of abyssal creatures rose from beneath us, a cloud of tentacle and claw and flashing shell-patterns, hissing and warbling and filling the water with bioluminescent warnings, squirting toxin and ink and paralytics and worse, shooting invasive bone darts and packets of corrosive enzyme and puffing out their tentacles and flesh to make themselves as big as possible. My friends and companions stood around me on all sides, a sphere of protection around my metal angel.

Most of the predators scattered, fleeing this inexplicable group behaviour. A few lingered for several moments, attempting to pick off a weaker member, or flashing their own threat-displays on the assumption that the shoal would break in terror; they got seared snouts and bleeding limbs and flash-burned eyeballs for their trouble. A couple of the largest and boldest of the predators attempted more — darting in to finish the kill, despite our superior numbers. The first of those two was driven off in a cloud of its own blood; the second punched deep through our protective sphere, only to find out that the machine angel was not yet helpless. The

submersible vomited up a barrage of torpedoes and bullets, wounding the final foolish predator so badly that it sank, limping off into the very same canyons and caves in which we had hidden for so many weeks.

And then the dark, the quiet, and the pressure of the abyss.

When the fight was over, we were left hanging in the open waters, surrounded by clouds of blood and messy gobbets of fresh meat. The stench would soon bring scavengers. All our shoal knew we had to move, and yet all eyes turned with infinite curiosity toward this submarine angel which we had saved, this machine which bore my name upon her side.

The angel's only method of communication was via her own sensors. She had no windows, no viewing ports, no true commerce between inside and out. She ran laser-light mapping lines over my body and face, over each of my many dozens of companions, and flashed little pinpricks of illumination in complex sequences, attempting to make sense across this gulf of embodiment.

I spent a few moments trying to decipher those symbols, then gave up and did things our way.

I closed the gap between myself and the angel, embraced the side of her body, and held on tight.

Scaled flesh against smoothly curved metal; twitching cannons against curled claws; coiling tentacles around glowing haloes. She was a hundred times my size, hot with the internal fires of reactor energies, vibrating with the power of her engines and her many weapons, creaking softly beneath the terrible pressures of the abyss. We pressed our chest to her steel, feeling the flex and flow of her body; we stroked her with our paws, learning the way she cut through the water, running a fingertip along the letters of my name etched into her flank; we pressed our lips against her many parts, learning her seams and secrets, and lay our ears to the flat places where we might hear.

By holding her tight and listening to her insides, I began to understand what she was.

She was filled with familiar sounds, cradled in a bubble of air and light and pressure, protected within a hundred layers of steel. Even if the leviathans had disarmed her, she would neither have sunk nor

been truly breached. Those inside her rode in perfect safety, in a manner no abyssal creature could comprehend, because they were untouched by the black and the cold and the infinite waters.

I heard the scuff of footsteps, the murmur of voices, the rustle of clothing. Somebody laughed. Somebody else made a sound which was my name, spoken by flapping meat. A third person banged on the hull, to let me know.

Alien beyond words, down in the abyss.

These things should not have been dragged that deep.

I unwound myself from the angel's embrace and floated back a little in the waters, so I could look at her full length once again. I cooed and purred and let my chest vibrate, speaking words across the liquid medium.

"You didn't need to come down here and get me," I said. "I'm on my way home. I'm not lost. I just ... wandered, briefly."

The red pin-lights on the angel's exterior flashed and blinked; I understood them now, because I understood who was inside the submersible, who had dived into the abyss protected and cradled by technology and machine, by steel and plastic and rubber — by magic.

The flashing lights were angry and short-tempered.

You absolute incorrigible idiot! the lights said. *You're taking forever!*
You can't blame us for panic—

The lights swirled and settled.

Tell Heathy I'm saying hello! Can you tell her?! Hello, Heathy!

Can she actually, like, hear us? Is that how this works?

I have no earthly fucking clue! Let me concentrate—

Abyssal journeys do not work like that, human. She is not experiencing what you experience. Her own mind will filter for her. As it did for us.

Yeah, what the freaky plant-barrel said. Abyss ain't like that.

Thank you, goat meat.

Everybody stop! I'm the one channelling this, let me—

Hey, Heather.

That final voice was so full of sunlight that it almost lit the abyss, beaming with confidence. The voice which had first pulled me from the deeps, from the long darkness of my own soul.

“Yes?” I said.

Take as long as you need. We’ve got you. No need for executive decisions here.

If I had tear ducts, I would have cried. Instead, I reached out to stroke the steel angel, running the edges of my claws along the eternal metal of her body.

“Everything is going to be okay,” I said. “I promise. I’m on my way home.”

We — me, myself, and I, plus all the abyssal companions of my shoal, joined now by the dented and damaged but still hale and hearty machine-angel sent by my friends — descended together, back toward the sandy floor of the abyssal ocean, leaving behind the cloud of blood and viscera from our fight.

The ocean floor tilted upward, climbing toward the far-off sky of the membrane between worlds.

Once again, I must explain, lest I sow discord and confusion among those teeming billions who will never see the black waters so far from light; there was no submarine, no battle with torpedoes and guns and explosions, no angel of the deep made of steel and iron, no lights which spoke in the voices of my friends. This is metaphor, mere words, and cannot capture the transcendent truth of experience.

My friends had sent something down to fetch me home. And they were carried within it, in a way I cannot explain. I saw it as a submarine a hundred times the size of any ship, and it was, in another way, the greatest thing I had ever seen.

But that was merely how I saw it, and this is merely the best I can do. Pardon my poor words, dear ape, or Outsider, or other, but this is the best I can do.

The rest of our journey to the surface was more tale than I can possibly tell here. We passed over empty expanses of obsidian sand which concealed great beasts a thousand times still larger than our

size, predators content to await some future prey worth their stirring; we crossed fields of hydrothermal vents peopled by strange forms found nowhere else in the abyss, things which fought us off in massed waves if we dared dip too close. We swam through coral forests which sang with tiny voices, hiding within their living hearts secret grottos where the aged and ancient progenitors of these woodlands held court. We ascended through draped jungles of pale seaweed and mushroom-like growth. We fought with predators and scavengers and strange things from the darkness which did not belong in those waters. We lost friends — not many, but some, for the abyss is still the abyss, and not all can survive the ascent.

And we made this journey with both kinds of companion at our side, abyssal and earthly.

After lifetimes in the deep we reached that layer of dark green murky water, lit by the faintest trickle of sunlight which struggles down from above.

It was there that we had to bid farewell to our shoal. The waters above — the zones of increasing light, though still deeply murky — were more dangerous than even the darkest reaches of the ocean floor. Up here the greatest leviathans floated with the currents, beings a million times our size, grown vast and heavy and slow with the effort of their ascent. To lead our shoal further on would only get them all killed.

Saying goodbye was not easy. Many did not want to leave, but they all understood they must. Silurt, my first friend, my little mollusc who had overcome her terror, lingered for the longest, pushing her beautiful coiled shell up through the waters alongside myself and the submersible.

But even she had to depart in the end. We shared an embrace, something akin to a kiss, and then I let her fall away, sinking back into the depths to rejoin the safety of the shoal.

I had left them all with that, at least — solidarity and safety, in numbers and each other. I had left something new in the abyss.

But for us, there was only up.

We rose through the final layers of the abyss now, me and the angelic machine. We stayed side-by-side as we dodged the giants, slipping past vast and terrible presences in the subtle currents of the

murky green waters. Three times we were almost caught — pulled into great blind maws by fistfuls of feelers and hydra-headed tongues. But three times we squirted poison and toxin and made ourselves too nasty too swallow, and the angelic machine at our side hurled her explosions and bullets and haloed herself with electrical power, so we were spat out again, to continue onward and upward.

As we approached the surface, I went all but blind. The light was so strong that it seared my eyes. I had lived in the dark for so very long.

But the machine-angel held my hands in her rings, to guide me those last few fathoms. She led me up — up — up —

My whole body felt as if it was peeling away and coming apart, but up I kicked, through the cold waters, past the thermocline, until my skin seemed to bubble and boil and slough away and—

And then I burst through the membrane, thrashing and screaming and howling as water gave way to air, as my gills sucked on empty space, as I felt the abyss drop away behind.

I went home. I went back, a second time.

To be Heather again.

epilogue – E.1

We woke to flesh — to electrical impulses crackling across the grey neurons inside the bones of our skull, to our heartbeat thudding and flexing behind the cage of our ribs, to muscles twitching and quivering against their anchors of sinew and tendon, to blood and bile and mucus and acid and chyme all pumping and flowing and gurgling through our innards —

— and we inhaled a lungful of fluid.

Warm, salty, thick as congealed jelly. A mass of saline sludge slid past our lips and rushed down our throat, carrying a tide of silt and the taste of hot iron.

I — me, us, we, nine-in-one and one-as-nine, as-yet-nameless in our vortex of stirring meat — was suspended in the centre of a bubble, surrounded on all sides by the pressure of this clinging jelly-mass against every inch of our skin. Two arms, two legs, six tentacles, a torso; one head on one neck, two eyes and two ears, and all of it gripped in a liquid fist, at the core of a sphere made from glittering silver translucence. The light — argent brilliance so bright it burned my eyes even through the meter or more of thickly-pressing gel — fell from above in a radiant wave, trapped and twisted and turned by the refraction of the bubble. Lower down came a smeared mess of other colours, blobs of pink, a mass of dark blue, copper and gold and distant rainbow shimmers, but those were pale before the silver tsunami.

We thrashed our limbs, but the gel was so thick we could barely move. Our tentacles pressed outward and met a membrane, fleshy and taut, flaring with strange sensation where we touched, as if pressing against the inside of our own mouth with a wet tongue. We pushed and strained and stretched the membrane, but it did not break.

Our lungs were filling with salt and silt.

We were drowning.

This was somewhat metaphysically confusing, as one might imagine. The ocean depths of the abyss are only a metaphor, as I

have gone to great lengths to stress, but those dark depths are my metaphor, and I clung to it even harder with these first stifled breaths of reality's open air. Upon my first return from the abyss, after my first dive so very many months ago, my body had been engaged in reading a book, in the kitchen, at home, in the familiar surroundings of Number 12 Barnsloew Drive; I had rejoined my physical vessel mid-sentence, shocked and dissociated and dysphoric beyond human knowledge, with lost time and lost connection and more than a little self-disgust at this ragged bag of meat drenched in chemicals and studded with bits of calcified mineral.

But this time the transition was smooth — from the waters of the abyss to the unimpeded atmosphere of reality.

Except the 'open air' was full of salty gunk.

My body and all nine of us within it — lesser or greater, as we were, coiled about each other in a protective ball, never to be parted again — attempted to breathe anyway, imposing the metaphors of the abyss onto atoms-and-light reality. This did not go well, as our lungs filled with gunk and the gills — (gills? We filed that away for later) — which lined our neck and our ribs failed to extract anything from the glittering gel which pressed us tight. Our trilobe bioreactor stuttered to life down in our belly, guttered briefly, then blazed like a miniature sun inside our flesh, assuming responsibility to keep us from asphyxiating.

Panic was swift and terrible. All six of our tentacles sprouted barbed hooks and layers of serrated blade; we lashed out, slashing and tearing and hacking at the fleshy membrane.

"Mmmmmmm!" we screamed into the thick jelly of reality's womb, a choked and muffled noise, made with whatever pocket of air was left at the bottom of our lungs.

Breaking that fleshy membrane *hurt*, like tearing through our own skin.

But then we tore a slit, and the whole thing burst open.

The spheroid bubble of salty fluid collapsed as the membrane parted under the assault of our tentacles. We felt dozens of tiny fibres and feather-soft umbilicals rip away from all across our body, slithering out of orifices and peeling off our skin. We felt no sense

of bodily invasion, no impression that we had been violated, only a parting from some cast-off piece of our own body. We felt our trilobe bioreactor ramp down an extra process it had been supporting, leaving behind this layer of ourselves as it fell away.

The bubble collapsed with a wet slap of fleshy membrane, like a dozen melons dropped onto a concrete floor; a wave of fluid fell after it, sluicing outward, steaming in the true air of reality, glittering and glinting in the blazing silver light.

And there we were — naked, wild, covered in our own amniotic vitreous humour, lashing the air with half a dozen tentacles, vomiting up a wave of gunk, coughing and hacking as we cleared our lungs and flared our gills to unstick their surfaces.

We were back.

We were embodied, as meat and mass. We were a chemical factory of dubious function and short life, filled with salt-water flows and stinking effluence, wrapped in flaking proteins, drooling and wet and slick and—

“Heather!”

Ah, our name?

That was the only word I could pick out from the whirling chaos all around our senses — my name, clear and clean from a voice I knew so well, a voice that had called me back to flesh once before. But the cacophony was too great; hooting apes all yapping over each other, alien paws and meat-clubs reaching for me, the glug and slosh and crackle of my own flesh, the shivering cold gel rapidly drying on my skin, the hiss and pop of fire and the creaking growth of plants, the dust in the air, the single silvered note of light pouring from the sky, all whirling and snapping and crying out with noises I could not interpret.

Because I was fresh from the abyss, and flesh did not yet make much sense.

But still we remembered the first time we’d done this, as a distant echo, as if in a dream. We remembered the horrible hooting apes were our friends. We recalled the stinking chemical factory was our own body. We remembered with some embarrassment how close we had come to pulling out our own eyeballs, driven by the sheer wrongness of the kitchen of Number 12 Barnslow Drive. We

remembered how alien it had all felt, and how so very wrong we were.

This time we came a little better prepared.

We opened our mouth as wide as it would go — click-click-click went our jaw, unhinging as it went. And then we hissed at the top of our freshly cleared lungs.

Hiiiiiiiisssssssssss!

The apes stopped hooting. The fire eased down. The plants turned their petals away. We shivered amid a puddle of our own fluids on the slick, slippery, bone-cold floor.

But the silver light did not abate.

For one second, it was just me — and I and we and us — and our body.

We knew that if we turned our eyes down and looked at our hands, we risked that same dislocation and dysphoria as the first time we had returned from the absolute clarity of the abyss. We knew that to examine ourselves was to go through the horror of physical imperfection all over again. We knew the price, and the truth, and the result.

But we had chosen to return. We had chosen to come back. We wanted to be a person again, not just a memory of somewhere else.

We had to embrace our body, not merely inhabit this sheath of flesh.

We picked a direction, the first one which came to our blurred and tear-streaked sight, one free of apes and animals. We picked up our feet, skidding and slipping and sliding on the hard white ground. We broke into a wild, headlong, surging sprint.

My legs almost didn't make it, launching me the first few unsteady steps across the hard white surface, with claws clicking as if on concrete; but then we passed the edge of that artificial floor and shot out onto soft soil and the sensation of grass beneath our feet. Free and clear, we ran like we were made of springs and pistons. We sprinted with eyes wide, streaming with tears. The wind chilled our flesh beneath the coating of sticky gel, dragging air across the gasping flaps of our gills, billowing the thick, wing-like membrane which hung from our shoulders and upper back. We turned our

head to spit out the last of the amniotic gel, then filled our lungs with a ripping breath of fresh air, cool and crisp and real, purging the remnants of our birth shell. All six tentacles gathered behind to throw us forward, slamming the ground and kicking us upward; we soared through the air, weightless for a second, before crashing to the soil once again, legs whirling as we ran, and ran, and ran, and ran.

We sprinted until our legs were screaming and our throat was sore, until our vision was clear and our body sang, lungs heaving for breath, muscles quivering with effort, the flaky remnants of amniotic gel purged by sweat and steam rising off our skin beneath the silver sunlight.

When we could go no further, we stumbled to a halt.

And only then — half-bent with clawed hands clutching my scaly knees, with tentacles reaching down to brace my shaking frame against the ground — only then did I realise who was watching.

Because I looked up, into a sea of silver.

“ ... Eileen?” I croaked. My voice did not sound remotely human, a scratchy warble well suited to something dredged up off the ocean floor. But it didn’t matter, because I wasn’t speaking to a human.

The Eye was open.

Not by a crack, not just a sliver of sight between two mountain-range ridges of furrowed black, but wide open. The mountains of her lid-lip had retreated all the way to the rim of the sky, to form a narrow margin of wrinkled black at the edge of the firmament. The sky was the Eye and the Eye was the sky, from horizon to horizon — a sea of churning silver light, like the surface of a star made from mercury and moon dust. Little eddies and swirls crossed her unthinkable depths, each larger than a dozen Earths, tides and troughs and swells and surges carried on currents of argent fluid. Illumination poured from the revelation of her innards, falling upon the world beneath in languid waves of bone-deep warmth.

I reached up toward her. That silver light caressed the back of my own scaled and furred hand, glinting on the sharp black of my claws, soaking into my skin.

And I did not burn.

Several full minutes passed before I could master my own awe and lower my hand. I cradled the clawed paw against my chest, amazed it was not reduced to subatomic particles.

Was this still the dream? Had we somehow come full circle, and exited the abyss right back into the dream-realm of Cygnet Asylum, all over again?

I lowered my eyes along with my hand, and discovered that I was sorely mistaken.

We were in Wonderland, as it had never been before.

A flat plane stretched off in all directions — the inner surface of a bowl, cupped by a distant ring of gargantuan mountains. The mountain tips were dusted with snow — bright and gleaming with a rainbow sheen of prismatic colours, as if made of oil rather than frozen water. The slopes of the mountains were marked with deep ruts, roads and tracks leading over their edges and down the other side, into a beyond that had not existed before, when this dimension had been folded into a crushed ball by the weight and heat and pressure of Eileen's observation.

At the foot of the mountains, the great ring of watching titans had been broken. Where once had stood a shoulder-to-shoulder phalanx of leviathan gazes drawn upward toward the magnetic power of the closed Eye, now less than a third of those bound giants remained, and those few were uncaged from their eternity of enforced rapture. A few still gazed upward into the sea of revealed silver, but no longer in poses of rapt attention; the ones who had chosen to stay lay upon the valley floor in easy repose, or slept with their own eyes closed, dozing upon their forepaws like giant cats, or closed up inside turtle-shells the size of continents, or floated in the air, paying attention to nothing. Some of them had moved — a few sat among the mountains themselves now, but most had simply left, perhaps gone past the mountain-border of Wonderland, heading for other places, for other dimensions, for the sockets of reality from which they had once been torn.

They had been the patients, the ones we had liberated in Cygnet.

Among the titans and upon the lower slopes of the mountains, I was surprised to see a few familiar white grub-shapes, so far away they were like grains of rice to even my inhuman eyes.

Caterpillars!

Lozzie's Caterpillars, exploring the contours of the transformed landscape, just as they had explored the quiet plains of Camelot. Most of them were up on the mountains themselves, but a few were trundling across the backs and hides of the resting titans, like smaller creatures exploring the fur and shells of larger friends.

A smaller number of Caterpillars were exploring the floor of the basin, among the blossoming ruins of Wonderland.

Where once had stood only the scorched and scarred stubs of so many walls, those same remnants of a long-burned world were now covered with the beginnings of vegetation. Creeping vines blanketed the surfaces, while fluffy mosses and spiralled lichens sprouted in the gaps between; clusters of bulbous stalks like flowering fungi reached toward the sky, rooted atop the highest points of the ruins, while fuzzy mats of thickened bulbs spread in the shadowed hollows beneath. None of it was green, not like Earth's vegetation; the plants of Wonderland were a riot of burnished brass and shiny copper, deep-sea blues and glimmering blacks, all suited to soak up energy from that omnipresent silver light pouring from Eileen's open lid.

Great jellyfish creatures bobbed and floated in the air — the very same floaters that I had witnessed in Wonderland before, no longer mist-wreathed specks of wrinkled flesh, but bloated masses the same colours as the plant life, coruscating orbs of metallic gold and bronze, highlighted in black and blue, swimming through the thickened upper air. Smaller forms scurried and scuttled among the lower ruins, the resurrected forms of the sad, burned-out remains I had spotted in the past. Glimmering compound eyes peered out at me from around a dozen ruined walls, as mandible jaws chewed on scraps of dead vine, their skin all the colours of the deep sea and the black of space, highlighted with gold and bronze, soaking in that silver radiance.

There was even grass beneath my feet, coloured a deep, dark, twilight blue, with patches of bright copper here and there among the billions of blades.

Holding my breath as if my intrusion might burst this bubble-dream, I crouched down and sank my fingers into the grass.

It was real. Soft and light and feathery against my palm.

The grass was sprouting directly up from the bed of ancient ash which coated Wonderland's surface. I curled my black claws into the ash itself, careful not to dig up any blades of grass. The silver light caught the flakes and motes of dust as they trickled through my fingers.

This world, Wonderland, had died a long time ago. Eileen's arrival had burned it beyond recovery.

But now it might grow again, into something new.

Footsteps approached my rear, but not with any stealth.

We carefully dusted the ashes off our hand, then stood up and turned around. We expected to see one of the apes — one of our friends, we reminded ourselves — but instead a phantasm of fire and curled horns and cloven hooves was striding toward us across the deep blue grass.

We blinked several times, trying to reconcile reality with the lingering truth of our abyssal perceptions.

Bright red hair, the colour of living flame, falling in a wave. Strong, sleek, athletic muscle, wrapped in a pair of jeans and a plain white t-shirt, arms loose and free at her sides. Eyes with horizontal pupils, backlit by firelight glow. Angular face. Easy smile. Confident gait.

The figure didn't have horns or cloven hooves, of course, not literally. But that was what I saw.

She drew to a halt about fifteen feet away. The short walk had dirtied her perfect white trainers with ash from beneath Wonderland's bed of grass. She raised a fire-red eyebrow — and also raised a bag of lemons in one hand.

“ ... Taika,” I croaked.

Taika nodded. “The one and only, and making a hell of a house call. Hey there, calamari. You've been down there a long time.”

Taika's words didn't match the motion of her lips. Her voice was like the crackling of logs in a bonfire, just as heavily accented as I expected, a mixture smeared across Eastern Europe and beyond, but it was also not her actual voice. My ears heard the flapping of meat and the whistle of air, but Taika could speak truth, directly into my head, as a fellow returnee from the abyss.

“Yes,” I said. “But I’m back now.”

Taika raised her eyebrows. “You sure about that? You wanna try telling me your own name?”

I let out a low, soft hiss, halfway to a warning. “I’m not stupid. I know I’m disoriented. It’s taking all my willpower to hold myself together like this. Why do you think I ran off? I had to ... embrace my body. Be my body.”

Taika shrugged. “Squids get spooked so easy. Come on, calamari. Say your own name.”

“I’m not going to perform for you. I’ll recover in my own ... time ...”

Taika reached into the bag of lemons. It wasn’t anything special, just a mesh fruit bag from Tesco; the sight of that familiar supermarket name against the backdrop of Wonderland in bloom, held in Taika’s fire-wreathed paw, sent my mind whirling with fresh alienation. What was real, England or Wonderland?

Then Taika pulled out a lemon, tossed it into the air, and caught it again.

“Say your own name and you get a lemon,” she said.

My mouth watered, saliva glands tingling in the back of my throat. We felt every barbed hook and little spike on all six of our tentacles flex with sudden tension. The gill slits on our neck and down the sides of our chest flared and quivered. Our stomach rumbled. Our bioreactor ached for the sour taste of lemon juice.

We were very, very, very hungry.

We hissed through a mouth full of drool. Several loops of sticky saliva slipped through our razor-sharp teeth and dripped onto the dark grass at our feet.

“Say your own name,” Taika repeated. “Come on, calamari. Work with me here, girl. Stop drooling and say your name.”

We wiped the saliva from our chin, slurping back the rest. We opened our mouth and hesitated; the name was like a handhold we could not quite grasp, slippery and slick beneath our grip. We scrabbled, bringing together disparate parts of ourselves. Six Abyssals and three Others all lifted together, all at once.

“He— hea ... Heath— Heather,” I forced the sounds out of my throat — then let out a great shuddering sigh as identity fell across me like a weighted blanket. “Heather. Heather. Heather Lavinia Morell. Heather. That’s us.”

Taika grinned. “Well done, calamari. Or ‘calamaris’? Is that how you English pluralise that word?”

“My lemon, please?” I held out a clawed hand, grasping at the air. “Catch.”

Taika tossed me the lemon. I snatched it out of the air with both hands and couldn’t wait long enough to rip through the peel; I bit directly into the waxy outer layer, teeth sinking into the sour flesh beneath. The tang of lemon juice exploded into my mouth, sharp and clean and clear, slipping down my throat like liquid sunlight. I sucked at the fruit, tearing it open, pulling the flesh out, gnawing and chewing and swallowing. I ate the whole thing, skin and all.

I stuck both hands out. “Another. Please.”

Taika was laughing. “Hoooooooly shit, calamari. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody eat a lemon with the peel on before. And I’ve seen some weird eating habits in the dark corners of the Earth, trust me on that one.”

“Just give me another lemon,” I croaked, flexing my claws. “I need — I want— it feels—”

“Bringing you back around, right,” Taika said. “Food’s always a good trick for that. At least in the cases I’ve known. Here.” She pulled out another lemon. “But first, tell me where we are—”

“Wonderland. Lemon. Now!”

Taika threw me a second lemon. That time I had enough self-control to shred the peel with my tentacles, dropping it to the ground; I figured that the newborn plant life of Wonderland could use all the help it could get, a little extra fertiliser would go a long way. I ate the flesh itself in three quick bites, down the hatch and no leftovers. Taika didn’t need prompting for the third, or forth, or fifth lemons, she fed me like a beast on the other side of a zoo barrier. When she moved to toss me a sixth, I waved a tentacle, shaking my head.

“All done?” she asked. “You full?”

“Fish,” I grunted. “I need ... fish? Soy sauce? Or meat, maybe. Or just ...”

“No can do, calamari. We ain’t going camping out here. You want a meal, you’re gonna have to dial this down a bit, and come on back.”

“Excuse me? Dial what down?”

Taika gestured at my body. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re a hell of a sight, I’m impressed. But you’ll bite right through your cutlery and put half a dozen holes through any kitchen table. Ease down, girl.”

We knew what we would see when we looked down at ourselves, but we did it anyway, because we needed to feel it.

Homo abyssus, in the flesh.

Our flesh.

My skin was a flowing riot of peach-pink blush and void-dark shadow, backed by subtle layers of chromatophore light, clothed in patches of elegant scale and bands of thick fur. My muscles were like butter, shifting beneath my skin in a way I had never experienced before. My fingertips were claws, black and sharp and curled; my feet were the same, clawed and elegant, digging into the soil with every step. My tentacles were as they had always been, strong and flexible and strobing with rainbow bioluminescence, currently studded with rows of spikes and little hooks and barbed swivel-joints. A long tail lashed behind me, pointed at the tip, thick at the base. A familiar yellow membrane hung from my shoulders, attached down my back, halfway between wings and a cloak. I felt teeth sharp as razors in my mouth, and the flesh somehow immune to being bitten. My tongue unrolled from my head, almost twelve inches long before I whipped it back in. My hair was floating like seaweed in slow currents.

Oddly enough, the lines of the Fractal were still visible on my left forearm. Some things never changed.

“But I’m ... I’m supposed to be like this,” I said to Taika. “I feel like ... me.”

The flame goat from the pits of hell laughed again, but her smile was genuine. “Sure you are, calamari. But you need to learn to put the claws away. And everything else, if you’re going to set foot back on Earth ever again.”

A pang of horror and rejection flared in my chest. I was finally what I was supposed to have been born as, all along; I had been this way for all of a few minutes, and Taika was telling me to go back? My lips peeled away from my teeth in a rising hiss.

“Ah!” Taika held a hand out. “Come on, calamari. You think I stay lit all the time?”

My hiss died away. “Huh? S-sorry?”

Taika sighed and clicked her fingers; the impression of flame and hooves and big black curling horns died away, like a fire going out. A moment later Taika was just Taika, a rather tall woman with striking red hair and impossible eyes.

“I don’t stay lit all the time, calamari,” she repeated. “If I did, no more Earthly pleasures for me, hey. Couldn’t set foot in a building without burning it down. Couldn’t get all up in some nice friend without causing some very nasty third-degree cooch—”

“Yes, yes! Fine!” I hissed softly. “I ... I get it.”

“Do you?” Taika waited, eyebrows raised.

“I ... ” I looked at my claws, at my fur, my scales, my everything. Me.

My friends were waiting for me. I couldn’t hug them with spikes and toxins. I had to put my claws away.

“Cos this is the moment you make the decision,” Taika was blathering on. “You can accept that sometimes you have to turn it on and off, or you can walk out there, beyond those mountains.” She nodded past my shoulders. “And—”

“I made that decision a long time ago, thank you very much. Save me the preaching. That’s not what I need.”

And with that — and a huff and a tut and a little glare at Taika for being so wise and right and so very annoying — I ramped down my bioreactor and folded away the dangerous parts of my abyssal blessings. I smoothed out my tentacles, reabsorbing the barbs and spikes, so they were simple lengths of strong muscle once again. I withdrew the claws on my fingers and reshaped my feet back into human form. I tidied up the mess of biotoxins and paralytics and everything else which shouldn’t have been on the surface of my skin. I clacked my teeth until they withdrew into my gums; hard to

kiss anybody when you might bite through somebody else's tongue.

I kept the gently strobing chromatophores, most of the scales and the fur, the peach-bright sunrise and night-dark bloom on my flesh. That couldn't hurt anybody, unlike the spikes and barbs.

The rest of it lurked just beneath my skin, hidden for now, but not gone.

Never gone, never again.

Taika nodded. "There you are, calamari. Well done. You'd probably still turn heads on a Sharrowford street — I know what you English are like, you stare at anything and everything as if it's grown wings. But you'd probably not get a second glance at an anime convention."

I sighed at her. "That's not a compliment. At least, I don't think it is?"

Taika smirked. "It's totally a compliment. You should get your ass to Comiket one year. You'd probably get a dozen people asking to take your photo. Squid-monster girl, caught on tape. You'd be a real hit online."

"No thank you," I muttered. I had only the vaguest idea what Taika was going on about — and no idea what 'Comiket' was; I would learn the answer to that one later, from a rather reluctant Evelyn. Instead I straightened up, flexed my tentacles, and looked Taika right in the eyes. "My friends sent you after me when I ran, didn't they?"

Taika nodded. When she spoke again, the teasing amusement had left her voice. "Sure did."

"Because we're alike, aren't we? Both back from the abyss."

Taika smiled gently. "Because I know what it's like, yeah. And they don't, even if they try." Then she raised her eyebrows and glanced back over her shoulder. "Well, except those cactus girls, or whatever they are. But they ain't human. Different frame of reference." She turned back to me and shook her head. "You've made some strange friends, calamari."

"The ... Twins? Zalu and Xiyu? You've met them?"

"In passing. Your little friend in the fancy poncho has to do all the

translating, though. Don't worry about that right now, calamari. You focus on you. You're still raw."

"I'm fine," I said.

Taika laughed. "No you ain't. I can see you ain't."

I sighed. "Yes, but I'm trying to keep a handle on it, thank you. I'm ... 'keeping my shit together', as Raine might say. Pardon my language."

Taika raised an eyebrow. "That counts as bad language for you? Shit?"

"Shush."

She waved the concern away. "Whatever. Anyway, you can stand here and stretch for as long as you need. Walk in circles, take a squat piss, anything you like. I'll turn away if you want. Your friends are waiting." She nodded back behind her. "But they're not going anywhere. Can't say I want to hang out beyond reality for much longer either, but I'll keep. Take a moment to really come back, okay? And don't try to bullshit me again. I know what it's like, remember?"

The mention of my friends — my family, my anchors — stirred something tense and knotted within my chest, like a muscle gone sore and hard from clenching for far too long. The sensation began to uncurl, filling me with need.

"No," I said. "No, I ... I don't want to wait. I want to see them. As soon as possible. I can walk, I can move, I'm fine." I took a step forward. "Let's go."

Taika shrugged. "Sure thing, calamari. Let's get you back where you belong."

Taika turned and led the way back across the blue-and-copper grasses of this new and verdant Wonderland, back the way I'd sprinted. I was a little surprised to see how far I'd run — hundreds of meters in what had felt like only a few moments. Time had not yet completely resumed normal function for me, upon my exit from the abyss.

In truth I was far from 'okay'; I knew I would be fine, given time and rest and familiar surroundings, but as I followed Taika's heels across Wonderland, I still felt dislocated and disoriented. Was this

really our body, or merely a vessel we might leave behind at any moment? Was this transformed landscape a real place, or just another expression of abyssal perfection, warped by the lenses of my own eyes? Were we — us nine in one body — truly reunited? We had so much to discuss internally, and no time in which to do so, not right then. Instead I focused on the brush and tickle of grass against my bare feet, on the sensation of my hair — now lying flat again — as I ran a hand through it and raked it back out of my face. I tried to concentrate on the gentle breeze against my front, on the strangely familiar scent of citrus in the air, on the glint of silver light from up ahead.

Anchoring myself in the physical was easier than upon my first return from the abyss, but I still had to exert conscious effort to stop my mind wandering in fixation; if left unattended, my eyes would follow a single dust mote, counting every sister and twin to that one, knowing that the whole world was nothing but these motes of atomic definition and I was trapped within the same net, forced into a shape and a single form and I should be swimming free and—

And when that happened, I glanced down at myself again.

Homo abyssus was better than anything else I had ever been, no matter how much of it lay tucked away beneath my surface.

“Ah! Oh, um ...”

But then I realised, as we came to inhabit my body more and more firmly — I was stark naked.

Nudity had not mattered a few moments earlier. It barely mattered now; I had spent a second eternity in the abyss, what did a little full-frontal flash matter to us? But a light blush rose to my cheeks. That was more like it, more ourselves again. The fact that Taika had been getting the full unintended Heather experience made us squirm with mortified self-consciousness. We gently tugged the edges of our yellow membrane around our front, like a well-fitting cloak, so we weren't giving the whole of Wonderland front-row seats to our unmentionable parts.

“Wondered when you were gonna put some clothes on,” Taika muttered as she led me onward.

“Oh, do shut up,” I hissed back. “But, um. Thank you, Taika. I was rude before. Thank you.”

“Hm? What for?”

“For coming back for me. This time.”

Taika pulled an awkward smile and wiggled her eyebrows, but she didn't look at me; was she incapable of admitting when she'd done some good? Instead she raised a hand and waved at what waited ahead of us.

Spread out across what was once the topographical dead centre point of Wonderland, directly beneath the heart of Eileen's gaze, was the massive plate of shaped and fused Caterpillar carapace which had formed the canvas for the Invisus Oculus. The plate had been broken into four neat quarters, the edges of the quarters burned and melted as if by a cutting torch, perhaps provided by one of the Caterpillars themselves. On one of the far quarters stood the gateway back to Camelot — still open, the gateway surface shimmering with Camelot's purple light upon a background of additional Caterpillar carapace. I could just about spot a sliver of wall from Camelot castle, and a hint of Camelot's yellow grasses, on the far side of that portal.

On the closest quarter of what had once been the Invisus Oculus, a small group of familiar faces and figures were gathered at the edge of the plate. To their collective right, a long shallow pit had been cut into the ashen earth of Wonderland itself, filled with shining silver liquid, still and placid as a mirror, currently reflecting the silver light which poured from the Eye.

A few hands rose and waved to us. A strange knot twisted and turned inside my chest. My throat threatened to close up. My feet twitched against the grass.

“Run if you gotta, calamari,” Taika murmured. “I'll catch you up.”

I didn't need permission. I picked up my feet and sprinted back to my friends, my family, my pack.

One familiar figure ran forward to meet me — wispy blonde hair flying out behind her, pentacolour poncho in pastel pink and blue whipping at her sides, a huge grin spread across her goofy face.

“Heathy!”

Lozzie slammed into me like a little wrecking ball; without my tentacles to brace her, I would have gone flying. I caught her in a

hug, holding on hard, spinning around in dizzying circles for a moment. My fingers dug into her back, my front pressed against her, my nose filled with the familiar scent of another person, another monkey, another earthly ape of flesh and blood and bone.

We broke the hug after what seemed like an eternity. Lozzie smiled back at me, breathless and biting her lip, a strangely manic light in her eyes, as if she had retained something from the depths of Cygnet.

“Heathy! You’re home!”

“Home ... y-yeah ... ” My voice emerged with some difficulty — because now I wasn’t talking to another abyssal returnee. I had to use human words and human sounds. I cleared my throat several times, unknotting the inhuman mass inside my neck. When I spoke again, the words were clear. “I’m ... I’m back.”

A second voice called out, grumpy with exhaustion and stress: “Lozzie? Lozzie, is she lucid? Is she there? For pity’s sake, is she—”

“The swimmer awakes,” sounded a voice like a little silver bell.

“Surfaced,” said another, a little stiff. “Hm. No. I will need to work on that one. A poor pun.”

“A sterling effort, though,” said yet another voice. “Keep trying, I suggest.”

“Hey. Hey! Squid-girl! Heather!”

I pulled myself together and cast my eyes toward the rest of my welcome party.

Raine stood at the very edge of the carapace plate, almost within arm’s length. She was dressed in jeans and boots and a leather jacket, as if we were on the streets of Sharrowford, back in England, rather than out beyond the walls of reality. Her chestnut brown hair was swept back from her forehead, her lips curled into a beaming grin, the same grin that had won my heart.

She had a machete strapped to her right thigh, and a hand outstretched toward me.

Behind Raine was quite a scene. There was Evelyn — my Evee, no longer beset by the horrific malnutrition of the Cygnet nightmare, restored to her plump health and hearty looks, though she wore a

most thunderous frown. She was propped up in an armchair, a full-blown cushions-and-footrest thing, with both legs very much present beneath a long skirt. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail, her body was wrapped in a pale ribbed sweater, and she looked about ready to either scream at me or sleep for twelve hours — exhausted beyond words.

Praem was at Eeve's side — restored to her maid uniform, prim and proper, straight-backed and serious, milk-white eyes greeting me in knowing silence. She stood ready with a bottle of water, a thermos of something stronger, and presumably even more than that, carried in the bag which hung from her arm.

Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight was also perched on the arm of Eeve's chair, in the mask of the Yellow Princess, with a gentle hand on Eeve's back, as if to support her; that surprised and delighted me.

In front of Eeve was a massive magic circle, cut into the soil of Wonderland itself, encompassing the shallow silver pool which lay beyond the lip of the carapace-plate. The circle was like no magical construct I'd witnessed before — it was not merely a flat design, but served as a foundation for a framework made of wood, a pyramid shape of old beams. I had no idea what to make of that.

Behind Eeve — opposite the magical circle — was a big mess of pink flesh and amniotic fluids, still steaming. I knew exactly what to make of that. The mess was mine, the layers of bubble-womb I had extruded for my transition back into my own flesh. My own placental leftovers.

Further back was a sight I had not expected to see again, at least not so soon after the nightmare of Cygnet. Standing (or 'sitting?') at a polite distance from the magic circle and the pool of silver were a pair of what could have been mistaken for alien barrel-cacti, if cacti came in a mass of colours other than green and were tipped with fractal arms and starfish heads.

The Twins — Zalu and Xiyu, in their real bodies, as they had briefly appeared during the Cygnet dream — were stood upright, side-by-side, which I assume was their biological equivalent of sitting down. A pair of their tentacle-limbs were entwined, which I think meant they were holding hands. They were both very still and completely quiet, moving only the little globular eyes on stalks at the tips of their starfish-shaped heads. Probably trying not to spook

the apes.

Standing on the other side of my afterbirth mess was a figure even more shocking, one I had half-accepted I would never see again.

Dark blonde hair fell in a long mane down the back of a laboratory coat. Bright pink eyes the colour of sunlight on coral peered out from an uncreased face, skin a light and dusky brown. Hands in her pockets, dressed in jeans and a coffee-coloured ribbed sweater, she looked at me as if no time had passed at all.

Eileen. In the flesh.

How? I couldn't even voice the question.

Hiding half behind Eileen was a figure I'd never seen before — a young teenage girl with more than a passing resemblance to Eileen herself, with the same burning pink eyes and blonde hair and light brown skin. Unlike Eileen she looked wide-eyed with anxiety, peering out at me as if I was very scary indeed.

I didn't have the sense of mind to ask who that was, because I couldn't help but notice that not everybody was present.

My mouth opened with a wet click, panic ratcheting upward in my chest.

"Where's—"

"Everybody's fine," Raine said before we could even ask the question. "Heather. Heather, hey, sweetheart, love. Look at me. Look at my eyes. There you go. You see me, yeah? You see me now? Just breathe, Heather. Just breathe."

"I ... yes, Raine. But where—"

"Everybody is fine," Raine repeated, almost laughing. "It's just that everybody isn't here right now. I promise you, Heather. Everyone who came with us, they all got out. Everything's okay. Just focus on you right now. I promise you. It's okay."

I nodded, trying to swallow the dozens of questions swirling in my mind.

As if being passed from hand to hand, Lizzie let go of me and Raine reached out. I fell into Raine's embrace, hungry for her touch in a way I hadn't realised until we'd completed the circuit of our bodies.

I clung to Raine for far too long, digging fingers into her back, almost gnawing on her shoulder, inhaling the hot scent of her skin and the familiar smell of her hair. She rubbed my back, cooing and purring and calling me all sorts of things — her squid-girl, her good girl, her sweet thing from the other side of reality. She told me ‘well done’ for coming home, she told me she loved me, she told me how good it was to see me. I leaned into her until my thoughts began to coalesce, and only straightened back up when Raine herself loosened her grip.

“I love you too, Raine,” I said, speaking to myself as much as to everyone else. “But why isn’t everyone—”

Evelyn snapped: “Because it’s four o’clock in the fucking morning, Heather! Because—” She paused and flinched, eyes going wide, flailing for Praem with one hand. “Oh fuck me, I’m going to be sick again. Praem, Praem—”

Praem was there with a bucket. Sevens resumed rubbing Evelyn’s back. Eevee did not vomit, but she did retch and heave for breath, then sigh heavily before she resumed speaking. “Because it’s four in the morning, Heather. Stop freaking out about that.”

Lozzie chirped, “Yeah, Tenna was here, but she’s sleeping now!”

Taika finally caught up and joined the edge of our group. She said, “And Miss January Martense won’t share a dimension with me, let alone a room. Can’t imagine why.”

Lozzie shot her a naughty grin.

Raine filled in the rest: “Twil’s at home. She did three days vigil non-stop, wanted to be here, but Eevee forced her to take a break. We didn’t know how much longer you’d be, on your way back. Zheng’s doing the same thing she always does when you’re not here — running around in the woods, with Grinny too, now. She said she has perfect confidence in you and we’re all worrying over nothing. The Knights are back in Camelot. Eevee’s grandmother, the fox, I mean, she slipped off as soon as everything ended, back into the streets. Everyone is in one piece, Heather. I promise.”

I blinked, overwhelmed. That couldn’t possibly be everyone, could it? I felt as if something was missing. What about all the patients? What about the nurses? What about Horror? And Cygnet, and—

“Professor Stout?” I croaked, settling on one. “And— and the

others, everybody! Horror!”

Raine raised her eyebrows. “Horror was part of you, Heather.”

“Yes, maybe not her then, but ... ”

“As for the old professor we met, well.” Raine nodded toward the impossible figure of Eileen. “Better ask her.”

I turned my gaze to Eileen, still speechless at her mere presence.

“Stout?” Eileen echoed. She looked upward for a moment, into the sky-spanning silver sea of her own gaze. “He is hardly that short. But he is swimming, within. He has let me know that he will be some time yet, while he decides the way to go. Up or down.” Her pink eyes returned to me. “As for the others, most have departed for parts better known.” Eileen raised a hand and gestured out at the ragged ring of watching titans. “Some have chosen to remain. All are free.”

“The patients, from ... Cygnet, I don’t ... ”

“The hospital still exists,” Eileen said, and pointed upward. “Within. But it is no longer a hospital. Which raises a question. What will it be now? Those who were once patients are now forced to show a little patience, while it is built, here. I predict the project may take me some time. I’m ... rusted.”

I almost laughed. Raine let me go and I tottered over to Eileen, almost bashing her with my head as I hugged her, hard and tight, to prove to myself that she was really here.

She hugged me back, like the mother she always should have been.

“How are you even here?” I said as I pulled away. “How are you ... real?”

Then I noticed the mini-Eileen, hiding behind her, scowling at me with a cocktail of curiosity and fear.

Eileen said, “I am, despite my loss of a job, still a very skilled mathematician.” She raised a hand and flexed her fingers. “This was simple. She was harder.”

She indicated the nervous girl behind her. I stepped back to give the child some room. After a moment, she peered out around Eileen’s side again.

“Who ... ?”

“I promised I would take the puppet and make her a real person,” said Eileen. “I have committed this promise to flesh. Say hello to my biological daughter.”

I couldn’t believe my eyes, staring at—

“Another sister?” I said, almost coughing.

Raine cleared her throat gently. “She’s a bit shy.”

Lozzie chirped: “Not to me! She’s lovely! Rainey is tooooooo scary.”

I crouched down, to bring myself to eye-level with this strangely familiar girl. She resembled Eileen, like daughter to mother. She had her mother’s face and eyes. Somebody — Eileen? — had dressed her in a long skirt and a thick, comfy, baggy sweater. She looked perhaps twelve or thirteen years old, but was that literal, or merely a representation of an abstract process?

“Hello,” I said. “I’m Heather. What’s your name?”

“She has not chosen a name yet,” said Eileen. “This is vexing, and yet also, delight. Perhaps you can help her.”

Mini-Eileen stared at me, with big bright eyes, round and pink.

“Heather,” she said. “I could have that name?”

She sounded just like her mother.

I almost laughed. “Well, that’s my name too, so that would be a little confusing. But if that’s what you really want. Think about it some more, yes? I ... I ... ” I straightened up and turned away, my mind still reeling. If there was a child, then— “How long was I ... gone? I ... I didn’t think—”

Evelyn answered, spitting with even more fury than before.

“Seventeen days, Heather! Seventeen days!”

“ ... Seventeen days?” I echoed.

Both longer than I wanted, but shorter than I feared. Seventeen days in the abyss had felt like a million years.

“Yes!” Evelyn was raging from within her armchair. “Seventeen fucking days! And then you started growing that bloody fluid sac

around you, and I thought you were going to bloody well drown, you moron! You wouldn't come home, you wouldn't walk through the gates, you wouldn't even lie down! You just wandered in circles like a bloody insect or something, following anybody who happened to be nearby. You wouldn't read books put in front of you, you wouldn't eat. You wouldn't fucking eat! You—"

I silenced Evelyn's protests by staggering over to her and falling to my knees beside her armchair. I reached out with a tentacle, found her hand, and held it as gently as I could.

She shut her mouth, staring back into my eyes.

"I love you, Evelyn. Thank you, thank you for coming to get me."

Evelyn cleared her throat and looked away. "Well. Yes. Well!"

I looked up at Sevens. "I love you too, by the way. I'm sorry I was gone so long."

"Welcome back, kitten," Seven-Shades-of-Safe-and-Sound purred for me. "Well done."

"Welcome," said Praem.

Evelyn cleared her throat again. "I can hardly take credit for retrieving you, Heather. From what I could tell, you didn't seem to need much help at all, not with all the company you had down there." She flashed her eyes at me, almost angry again.

"E-Evee?"

"You haven't brought any passengers back, have you? Any plus ones? Any new 'special' girlfriends?"

"Um," I faltered. "No, I ... no. Not yet, I suppose."

Evelyn sighed and pressed her lips tight.

I wobbled back to my feet and cast my eyes over the magic circle cut into the soil of Wonderland; it was shaped unlike every other magic circle I'd seen Evelyn develop before, even the grand majesty of the Invisus Oculus. It wasn't particularly large — perhaps fifteen feet across, just wide enough to contain the pool of shimmering silver liquid, which I assumed had acted as a scrying pool for Evelyn to peer into the abyss. But the shape of the circle itself was strangely alien, making my eyesight blur as I tried to follow the outline; it was both circular and pointed at the same time, both a

ring and five-pointed star in the same shape. The lettering cut into the soil was not a human language; I could tell because trying to make out the lines made my head throb with sudden nausea.

The pyramidal framework inside the circle was much more familiar — but I couldn't fathom why. It looked like a bunch of old beams, the wood aged and pitted, but strong and solid. The beams had not been cut to the shape of the pyramid, but lashed together with masses of tape and rope, braced with vast quantities of bubble-wrap and foam padding, as if they had been handled with the utmost gentle care.

"What did you see?" I murmured, staring down into the silver pool.

Evelyn didn't answer for a moment. Then she swallowed. "I'm not sure how to explain it. I'd rather not try. Maybe I'll write it down."

I squeezed her hand, gently, in my tentacle. Even for those who had not visited, the abyss was an experience like nothing else.

"Thank you for coming for me."

Evelyn took a deep breath. "As I said, I can't take credit for any of this. I may have done the channelling and performed the procedure, but very little of this is my work." She nodded at the circle before us. "This is the product of a trans-dimensional collaboration which would probably make most mages soil themselves with envy."

"Ah?"

A nasty little smile crossed Evelyn's face. "The fluid in that pool is from up there." She waved a hand upward, at Eileen's true surface, up in the sky. "The spell work is hers." She pointed at Taika. "The beams are ours, but—"

"Wait," I interrupted. "The beams, are you saying they're from ..."

Evelyn chuckled. "Home. Number 12 Barnslow Drive. You love that house so much, Heather. It was the best theory we had to reel you in."

I gaped at the beams. "You are going to put them back, yes? D-did this do any damage, did—"

Evelyn snorted. "Of course we're going to put them back! Most of them are from the cellar and the attic. Mostly the attic. God knows the roof needs the work. But yes, of course they're going back." She

pulled herself straighter in her chair. “I contributed that part of the spell. All the real underlying theory was ... those two.” Her eyes flicked to one side. “Thank them, Heather. Not that you’ll be able to understand the response.”

Gently, carefully, I let go of Evelyn’s hand, and turned to the two she had indicated — the Twins.

Before I crossed the few paces of carapace plate to address them, I paused to hug Sevens — “Love you, kitten,” — and Praem, who said nothing, but patted me on the back exactly three times.

Then I stepped over to address the Twins, Zalu and Xiyu.

For a moment I didn’t know exactly where to look, other than up, because they certainly were both very tall. What with all the shocks and dislocation of abyssal return, I wasn’t able to fully appreciate the sheer beauty of their alien bodies, the bright colours of their hides, the muscularity of their starfish-foot tips and tails. In the end I settled on looking back into the eyeballs at the end of the stalks attached to the five tips of their ‘heads’.

“Thank you, both of you,” I said. “You barely know me. To put in all this work, just to help my friends dredge me from the abyss, it’s just—”

One of the plant-girl twins let out a high-pitched clicking, ticking, buzzing noise, like a cicada trying to speak language, filled with tone and meaning, and completely incomprehensible to our ears, even with the benefit of abyssal experience and nine of me all working together. This went on for a while, then fell silent. Both twins peered down, waiting for a reply.

“Um ... ”

Lozzie bounced up beside me. “Zalu says you’re very welcome, but please spare her the sappy talk! And she also also also points out that she’s wanted to test this theory for a while, you were just a very good candidate, so don’t think it was special or anything!”

Behind me, Evelyn sighed heavily. “Absolute nonsense.”

“Thank you for translating, Lozzie.” I focused on the Twins again. “Will we, um, see you again?”

Lozzie answered first. “They left a forwarding address! For meeeee!”

I nodded, numb with more questions than I could express. I turned away from the Twins, looking at everybody, or at least the portion of ‘everybody’ who was gathered here.

“Thank you,” I said. “You too, Taika. You didn’t have to do this. Thank you all, I—”

And then I stopped, a cold knot in my belly.

“Heather?”

Somebody voiced my name, urgent with concern. Somebody else said I was probably still hungry, and liable to collapse. Somebody else moved forward to support me, but I waved all that away.

“Where is she?” I said. I blinked and stared around, at the faces of our friends. “Where is she?”

Evelyn sighed and rolled her eyes. “We told you a thousand times! Through that!” She pointed at the scrying pool, made of Eileen’s silver sea. “You asked and asked and—”

“Well I’m asking again right now,” I said.

Ironically enough, Evelyn’s habitual irritation kept me from panicking; if she had shown anything other than total normality, I would have guessed the worst had happened. But I already knew it had not. The absurdity of the moment almost made me laugh; instead, I hiccuped.

“Heather—”

“Where’s Maisie?” we said. “Where’s my twin sister?”

Raine stepped forward, beaming with endless soft confidence. She took me by the shoulders.

“Maisie’s right where she should be, Heather. She’s at home.”

“You mean—”

“Number 12 Barnslow Drive. Alive and well, in one piece. She’s just taking time to adapt.” Raine nodded sideways, at the gateway to Camelot, at the road back home. “Let’s go see your sister.”

epilogue – E.2

Seven days later, a full week since my return from the abyss, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, I broke the uneven rhythm of my self-imposed vigil — primarily to shower, change my clothes, and eat a proper meal, but also to stretch our limbs and get some much needed fresh air into our lungs.

That statement contains a little white lie. I do apologise. We didn't break our vigil willingly; Praem forced us, of course. Raine was too indulgent of my every desire, Evelyn's protests fell on deaf ears, and nobody else stood a chance. Zheng could have bodily lifted me up and carried me downstairs, but keeping me there was an entirely different kettle of fish.

Perhaps they should have tried exactly that — a kettle filled with fish, an appeal to my appetite. I don't think that would have worked either.

There was no way I was leaving Maisie's bedside of my own unprompted volition.

We're probably making it sound more dramatic than it actually was. It wasn't as if I'd spent the entire last week shut up in that bedroom, looming over my twin, sleepless and fasting and driving myself to the edge of my own rude health. Far from it; I'd been taking showers almost every day, albeit rather rushed and perfunctory. I'd been eating properly, even if I was doing so hunched over in a chair. I'd even been sleeping, right there on Maisie's bed — or on a plush bedroll on the floor, when I had the sense of mind to lie down by myself. My sleep was very spotty and sporadic, that was impossible to deny; I'd been waking a dozen times every night just to check on her, stare at her, make sure she was alright, to touch her and confirm she was still there, still real, still right in front of my eyes. Over the course of that week, even the tiniest noises of Number 12 Barnslow Drive woke me with a start, had me thinking it might be Maisie, parting her lips, making a sound, whispering my name.

But it never was. Not yet.

On the previous night, Raine had finally coaxed me back into our own bed for an enforced eight hours of proper slumber, sandwiched between her and Zheng in a bold attempt to make sure I actually stayed where I was supposed to be. Zheng caught me creeping across the floorboards in the middle of the night, trying to slip out of the room so I could go check on Maisie.

Hence the new rules. On this day I was to follow Praem's instructions, for my own good.

It wasn't as if we were being forced to leave Maisie all by herself; that would be unthinkable, I would never have accepted it, not even under the threat of Night Praem. Besides, this was no solitary vigil. Number 12 Barnsloew Drive was home and community to so many residents that taking turns to watch over Maisie was very simple to organise.

But still, as Praem ushered me out of the room and into the cramped shadows of the upstairs corridor, I kept peering back at the open door, ears pricked for a hint of Maisie's voice. Our tentacles betrayed our desires, briefly drifting all to one side, preparing to bounce us off the wall and around Praem so we could scuttle back into Maisie's room.

As we passed the single window of the upstairs corridor, I felt our tentacles tense, our legs quiver, ready to leap at an angle so Praem could not—

Praem grabbed a tentacle, gently but firmly. We yelped and squealed and jerked upright on the spot, eyes flying wide.

"P-Praem!" I squeaked. "I wasn't going to— I'm coming quietly, really! I'm doing as I'm told, I am!"

Praem just stared at me with her blank, all-knowing, milk-white eyes. A stern maid blocked my path, brooking no excuses.

We faltered; we, who had swum the deepest reaches of the abyss. "I ... I wasn't going to ... I ... "

"You will be a good girl," Praem told me, her voice ringing like a little silver bell.

I sighed, my subconscious plot rumbled without so much as a single attempt. Praem always seemed to know when I was about to do some squid-based mischief, even if we denied it internally, us

Heathers split on the legitimacy of our actions.

“I’m sorry, Praem,” I said, and I meant it. “I just want to check on her. Just once, before we go downstairs?”

“It has been less than twenty seconds since you last saw your twin sister,” Praem told me.

“I know, I know that, but ... ”

“Self care,” said Praem. “Or Night Praem.”

I sighed a second time. I knew I was being unreasonable and silly. I needed to look after myself. What good would it do Maisie if I went unwashed and unfed? None at all.

My eyes flicked to the doorway again. I just couldn’t help myself, not after ten years. “But what if she ... what if she needs ... ”

“We will be informed,” said Praem. “Loudly.”

We nodded, mostly to convince ourselves; we did not all agree on this, and the internal debate was not yet settled. All six tentacles wanted to scurry down the corridor and wrap ourselves around our waiting twin, no questions, no hesitations, no delays, not even for Praem. The part of me that we thought of as ‘Calm Heather’ cautioned us against hasty decisions, and suggested we just go along with the flow. She wasn’t always right, however, sometimes she was too easily convinced of doing things she shouldn’t, too much of a Good Girl, even when she needed to be bad. ‘Lonely Heather’ — who desperately needed a better self-definition, but was too self-conscious to decide — was deeply unimpressed with all this; our friends and family were right there! They were all as good as us, they could look after Maisie just as well, and we were being foolish. The abyssal leviathan who was no longer Guilt, she knew that we could not stand up to Praem in any case. The debate was moot. Get on with it. Go eat a fish.

“Self care it is, then,” we said, forcing myself to turn around and march down the corridor. “Good girl mode. Just for you, Praem.”

Praem already had a change of clothes laid out for me in the bathroom. I attended to all the matters I’d been ignoring since yesterday — I brushed my teeth and took a long, hot, proper shower, with plenty of scrubbing. I made sure to unroll and massage each tentacle in turn. I wasn’t yet sure about cleaning the

gill-slits that sometimes appeared down my ribcage and the sides of my neck, so I made sure to fold them away for the duration of the shower, tidying up the other pneuma-somatic additions I didn't need right then. We spent a couple of minutes playing with our chromatophores, making our skin glow and flare, until we could cast rainbows between the droplets of water; a poor substitute for the deep desire which lurked in my heart. I wanted to go swimming, of course, and a bath would only have made me sad. But swimming had to wait. The vigil came first, for now.

I blow-dried and brushed my hair, moisturised my skin, and even trimmed my nails a little bit. By the time I was done and dressed I was practically vibrating with need.

But I was not allowed to return to Maisie just then. Praem had been charged with the whole process, not just hosing me off.

Praem herded me down the creaking stairs of the house, across the familiar floorboards of the front room, and into the warm embrace of the kitchen. My besocked feet picked up a little chill from the flagstones, prompting my bioreactor to turn up the heat inside my belly, but I eased it back down. We didn't need the protection just then. We wanted to feel the house as it was, even if only as a distraction. We stretched out our tentacles and ran their tips along the walls, the edge of the wedged-open door, the rim of the table, and more.

"Sit comfortably," Praem told me. "Wait."

Praem had lunch all ready to cook, laid out on the kitchen counter — not just a sandwich with a few slices of cheese and lemon wedged into it, but the luncheon equivalent of a squid-girl-tailored Full English Breakfast. Eggs ready to scramble; two lemons for eating, one lemon for squeezing; a entire unopened packet of smoked salmon (a rather pricey gastronomic preference, the satisfaction of which I had Evee to thank for); half a tin of beans; a large flat mushroom to go under the grill; two tomatoes, equally for grilling; and a small cheese toastie, to be placed inside the 'air fryer' which the household had received as a gift from Jan.

We, however, felt terribly restless as Praem bustled about the kitchen, partly with guilt for being waited on — which Praem really did not have to do, she wasn't a servant or a maid, she was, in many ways, our daughter — and partly with the magnetic force of

our gaze being drawn up toward the ceiling, our thoughts still lingering upstairs, with our twin.

Instead of twiddling my thumbs and vibrating on the spot, I got up and helped tidy the table; breakfast and lunch stuff was still all over the place, so I set about getting the dirty dishes into the sink.

Praem gave me a blank look. I raised both hands and all six tentacles with instant surrender.

“I’m not trying to escape, I’m just ... restless. Let me help? Just a bit of cleaning up ...”

Once Praem was satisfied that I was not going to go sprinting back upstairs, she returned to the cooking,

But a bit of cleaning up did not last long. After a few moments we were out of things to do. We pottered around the table once, then over to the door which led to the magical workshop. Nobody was inside except the pair of spider-servitors and Marmite, all clinging to the ceiling as usual, exchanging soft, brief touches of their face-mandibles. One end of the room was lit with the gentle purple glow of the semi-permanent portal to Camelot, and the table was littered with Evelyn’s books and papers and magical diagrams, all drenched in the heavy shadows of many closed curtains. I waved to Marmite and the spiders with one tentacle; Marmite waved back with a leg. I shut the door, trying to remember—

“Oh, right,” I muttered to myself. “Evee’s still napping?”

“Evelyn is napping,” Praem echoed, cracking an egg into a saucepan.

Evelyn had been taking a lot of naps since my return from the abyss. The ‘submarine’ she and the others had sent to dredge me out had required a great deal of energy and exertion from her, and no small amount of pain. On Monday of that week she’d surprised everybody by going to see a doctor — an expensive doctor with a private practice, on Harley Street in London. She’d taken the train down, accompanied by Praem. (“First time in a couple of years!” Raine had informed me.) According to Doctor Rosalie Brunot — who Evelyn had seen several times in the early months after the death of her mother — Evelyn was simply exhibiting symptoms of exhaustion and stress, despite a battery of tests to rule out anything else. She was prescribed rest and painkillers.

Real rest! the doctor's note had said, underlined several times. *Not sitting-up-in-bed-doing-paperwork rest. Intellectual rest. Do nothing for a week, then we'll see how you are, Miss Saye.*

Evelyn had taken this poorly, but she took to the naps like a natural. We could all tell that she was already doing better.

The house did seem oddly quiet, but that was to be expected. I had lost track of time over the last seven days, my normal rhythms of life subordinated entirely to the new processes of my twin sister. We — us nine, all a bit upside-down inside our own head for a moment — sorted through our slow catalogue of where everybody was. Eevee was napping, Kimberly was at work, Lozzie had popped out to fetch Jan, and Sevens was off visiting her father — a task I had yet to fulfil, to thank him for his help in Cygnet. Eileen and her as-yet-unnamed daughter had not visited Number 12 Barnslow Drive, not quite yet, though we had plans hatching for something soon, when Maisie was ready. Zheng and Grinny were out who-knew-where. Twil had come over, she was upstairs with Tenny, taking a turn on the watch.

And Raine ...

"Praem," I said, a little confused. "Where did Raine go? I recall her saying bye, but ... "

Without turning around, Praem said, "It is Friday."

"... oh! Work!" I laughed at myself, feeling very silly. Friday afternoon at the student union bar on campus; term had not quite started yet, but Raine's regular shifts had resumed, to coincide with the early-arrival freshers on their first days at campus. She was picking up a few more shifts before classes inevitably filled the schedule. "Yes, I ..." We sighed, rubbing a tentacle over our face. "Wow, we really haven't been paying attention, have we?" We flapped our arms. "I'm so restless, now, I ... you know what, Praem? I think I'm going to step outside for a moment."

Praem turned to face me, spatula in hand, blank-faced and staring with her wide and empty eyes.

"I mean outdoors, into the back garden," I added quickly. "Not Outside outside. You did say I should get some fresh air."

Praem stared.

“ ... Praem? What do you think I’m going to do, climb up the side of the house and scrungle in through Maisie’s bedroom window?”

“A distinct possibility.”

I laughed — giggled really, with one hand to my mouth. I felt so free. “I promise I won’t! I promise you. I’m serious, I need to walk about for a moment, breathe the air, stretch my legs. I promise, I cross my heart, on all the love I bear for you, that I will neither climb the side of the house nor make a spring with my tentacles and bounce up there, nor anything else. I’m going to walk around the big tree in the garden. That’s all.”

“Promise accepted.” Praem turned back to her cooking.

“Call me in when it’s done,” I said. “Thank you, Praem. You really didn’t have to do all this.”

“Yes,” she said. “I do not have to.”

We — I, me, us — wandered over to the open door which led into the narrow little utility room, slipping out of the relative brightness of the kitchen and into the shadows between the washing machine, the door down to the cellar, and the broken-backed old sofa. I padded over to the back door, slipped on my shoes — left there from the previous time I’d done this exact same thing, a few days earlier — then opened the door and stepped out onto the patio.

Chill air kissed my cheeks, ran feathery fingers through my hair, and cupped all six of our tentacles. We were dressed in only a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, but our yellow blanket came quickly to hand, hanging from our shoulders as if it was part of our body. We never had to put it away or take it off ever again; whenever we showed greater truth in our form, the blanket took on the aspect of a wing-like membrane. But right then, outdoors in leafy Sharrowford, it was a warm blanket.

We tugged it tight, to keep out the cold weather.

We also checked our appearance briefly, making sure our tentacles were not visible, our skin was not a riot of colour, and we weren’t sporting any spikes or showing our tail, despite the desire to wiggle it in the open air. We wouldn’t want the neighbours to post on the internet that they lived next to a space alien, now would we?

I shut the back door, turned to the garden, and took a deep breath

of frigid air.

Autumn had arrived early, in a blush of reds and yellows and brilliant oranges on the boughs beyond our garden. The big tree in the garden itself was holding on valiantly, but even those leaves were starting to turn. A riot of colour lay still as a painting against clear blue skies, cold and crisp, light and fluffy upon the rooftops of Sharrowford beyond. A few stray spirits crossed those rooftops, far away.

It was September. A Friday. The academic year at Sharrowford University would begin in just over two weeks, on the first of October. I was enrolled for my second year of a degree in English Literature.

This time last year I had been arriving in Sharrowford. I had believed myself fragile, alone, and insane.

I filled my lungs, held the breath, and stretched out all my briefly-invisible tentacles, allowing myself a soft whine deep down in my throat.

When I lowered my eyes to the garden, I discovered that I had some unexpected company. Framed by the overgrown grass and the riot of fascinating weeds in the flowerbeds, beneath the cool shelter of the shadow cast by the gnarled old tree in which Tenny's cocoon had once lain, were two familiar figures, one standing, the other crouching, with something cradled in the latter's lap.

"Zheng!" I called, surprised to see her back in the garden so soon. "And ... Grinny?"

Zheng heard my voice and looked my way. She broke into a toothy grin, full of sharp glints in the sunlight. "Shaman! Come see our bounty!"

Steeling my stomach against the inevitable sight and smell of whatever raw meat the pair had brought home this time, I stepped off the patio and onto the unkempt grass of the lawn, heading over to the tree.

Zheng was standing, dressed in her usual baggy layers, boots covered in woodland mud, dark hair and reddish brown skin kissed hard by the cold sunlight. Grinny — the Grinning Demon who we had rescued from Edward Lilburne, now Zheng's constant companion — was squatting with something held in her lap. She

was dressed a little more neatly than Zheng, having expressed a fondness for tracksuits and jogging bottoms. She was still completely bald, head like a shiny egg, but somehow she made it work. Twin pools of blood-red eyes glanced up at me as I approached, framed by the curling black of her horns. Her mouth split wide to show rows of sharp teeth, proud of whatever prey she'd caught.

"Good afternoon, Grinny," I said, carefully bracing myself for whatever puddle of gore I would find in her hands. "I take it you two had a good ... hunt? Oh! Oh my! Hello?"

I squeaked in surprise, tentacles going everywhere.

A tiny red-brown snout peered over the edge of Grinny's arm, followed by two little clawed paws. Beady black eyes fixed on mine for a heartbeat, framed by a swish of dark red tail. The face vanished, trailed by the tail, as the owner of both scurried up inside Grinny's tracksuit top. She burst into peals of laughter, cradling the surprise visitor inside of her clothes.

I stood, mouth agape, eyes wide.

"A rare find," Zheng purred. "No, Shaman?"

Grinny looked so proud.

"I ... um ... I didn't quite get a good look, was that ... a red squirrel?"

"Yes," Zheng purred. "A little wanderer. A little lonely. But lonely no longer, perhaps?"

I laughed as well, boggling at both of the demons. "How on earth did you two find a red squirrel this far south? Don't tell me you've just sprinted to Scotland and back? Even you couldn't do that, Zheng."

"I could try."

"Found him!" Grinny said. "In the woods! All alone!"

"The puppy," Zheng rumbled — by which she meant Tenny, "was educating the little one here," (by which she meant Grinny,) "on the subject of English wildlife. This forlorn weakling had to be found. Sheltered. Protected."

"Greys would bully!" Grinny said, petting the squirrel under her

top. The animal shifted a little. Grinny giggled, a wet and toothy sound.

Zheng sighed. "I am not allowed to eat this one. A pity."

"Not eating!" Grinny snapped at her. "No!"

"Just so," Zheng purred.

"What are you going to do with him?" I asked.

"Look after," Grinny told me. "In woods."

Zheng rumbled a wordless sound and placed a hand on the back of my neck. She gently drew me closer, then planted a kiss on my forehead. She smelled of blood and meat and earth, but her clothes were mercifully clean. I gave her a quick hug.

"You're not coming in?" I asked.

Zheng shrugged. "The little one is restless. Your twin?"

I shook my head. "You think I'd be out here by myself if she was talking? No. I'm in enforced self-care mode. Enforced by Praem, that is."

"Good." Zheng grunted, raising her eyes to the house. "Here she is. You have strayed too far, shaman."

"Ah?"

When I glanced back at the house, Praem was visible through the glass of the back door. She'd been about to open it and call for me. I raised a hand to let her know I was on my way.

From the garden, Number 12 Barnslow Drive was beautiful. The cold sunlight soaked into the tiles on her roof, reflecting off the patches of blue tarpaulin, ready for the much-needed work to be done up there over the following weeks; roofing repairs were well overdue. Her dark windows were like heavily lidded eyes, dozing off in front of a fire. Her bricks seemed soft to the touch, as if they would yield like skin. All her little external details — her drainpipes, her door handles, the open palm of the patio, the glass of the windows, the flanks which led around to the front — filled me with a sense of belonging.

I'd lived here for less than one twentieth of my life, but this house felt more like home than anywhere else.

Except maybe the lightless waters of the abyss.

“Don’t stay out too long, Zheng. Love you,” I said as I turned to leave, our fingers interlinked for a few moments. “And um, Grinny, good luck with looking after the squirrel. Let me know what you name ... him? Her?”

“Hims! Squirrel!” Grinny said with a wet cackle.

Praem awaited me at the back door, her black and white maid uniform framed by the shadowy interior of the utility room. She opened the door for me and ushered me inside, greeting Zheng and Grinny with a stare. I slipped my shoes off, grateful to be back inside the familiar warmth of the house.

Lunch was served, steaming softly on the kitchen table, filling the air with the scent of eggs and lemon and a seductive hint of smoked salmon; Praem had used the entire packet of the latter. I was salivating before I even got my backside into a chair, feeling like an aquarium squid at feeding time, wiggling all our tentacles with involuntary excitement.

I was not allowed to pick up my plate and rush upstairs to eat in Maisie’s room, as I had taken all my meals in that fashion for the last week. Praem didn’t have to say so, and I was not foolish enough to ask. She simply stared at me for a few moments until I picked up my fork and got started.

“Chew properly,” she said.

“I will, I will!” I replied around a mouthful of lemon-drenched fish. “I promise! No rushing, I promise.”

Praem turned away and set about cleaning the kitchen.

We — I, me, us, nine of us coiled about each other inside one physical form — weren’t lying about that promise, either. We tried, very hard, to pace ourselves and eat with a reasonable degree of leisure, no matter how our eyes felt magnetically drawn to the ceiling, on the other side of which our sister waited for our return. As we ate, we pricked up our ears, trying to discern from among the myriad little noises of the house any hint of raised voices from up there, or the beginning of a triumphant rush down the stairs, or an excited trill from Tenny. We were being rather silly, of course; we didn’t doubt the whole house would know at the very moment of the slightest change in my twin’s countenance. Evelyn’s comfy nap

would surely be interrupted by Tenny at full trumpet-blast volume, shaking the window panes and shivering the bricks.

When Praem finished cleaning up the kitchen, she sat down opposite me, with her hands folded upon the tabletop.

“You, um ... ” I said, swallowing a mouthful of scrambled egg. “You don’t have to watch me eat, Praem.”

“I do not have to,” she confirmed. “Yes.”

I sighed, smiling ruefully at myself. “Thank you, by the way. For lunch, I mean. Thank you for all the cooking you do around here, Praem. I hope you know how much we all appreciate you. I never want to take you for granted.”

“I do.”

“I’m sort of hoping that over this coming year I can learn to do a bit more cooking myself. Things should be a bit quieter from now on.” I frowned at my own words. “Um, to put it lightly.”

Praem raised one elegant hand and rapped a knuckle against the wooden tabletop.

“Ah? Praem?”

“Touch wood.”

“Oh! Oh, right, yes.” I tapped the tabletop myself, hewing to the ancient superstition; I hoped my words had not jinxed us, though I struggled to imagine how any year of my future life could be as stressful and busy and difficult as the one which I had just passed through. Was that the voice of youthful naivety? Several of us agreed; that was too much of an assumption to make. Don’t tempt fate. “Touch wood, indeed,” I agreed. “Well said. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

I smiled across the tabletop, then set about scooping up the last few mouthfuls of this extravagant lunch.

When I was down to just one spoonful of baked beans and a crust of cheese toastie, we heard a key turn in the front door, followed by the familiar click of the lock, and a sudden clatter from two pairs of feet.

Praem stood up from the table, as if to greet guests, but by the

familiar patter-stomp of trainers being kicked off, I knew exactly who had arrived home. My suspicions were confirmed a moment later by the soft cry of—

“I’m hooooome! With Jannyyyyy!”

—followed by the patter-step-skid of Lozzie bursting into the kitchen. Poncho all a-flutter, hair tousled by the wind, face a little red from the cold weather, she bounced over the kitchen threshold, then slammed to a halt and boggled at me.

Praem said, “Welcome home.”

“Hiiiiii Praem!” Lozzie chirped, then switched back to me again.

“Heathy! You’re eating in the kitchen, in the kitchen!”

“I’m under strict orders,” I said, swallowing my final mouthful of beans and gesturing at Praem. “And you know how Praem is, I can’t dare say no. I, um!” I stammered, suddenly blushing. “I mean that in a good way of course, Praem! Sorry!”

“No offense has been taken,” said Praem. “I am flattered.”

Lozzie crossed the kitchen in a series of little hops. She kissed me on the top of my head, then pattered around to Praem and hugged her tight, emitting a high-pitched “Mmmmmmm!”. Praem returned the hug.

Jan appeared in the kitchen doorway, eyes darting left and right, as if checking the corners for lurking fears.

“Hello, Jan,” I said, unable to keep the slightly exasperated amusement from my voice. “Good afternoon.”

Jan was not dressed in the armour she had worn in the dream, but she acted as if she was. Jan Martense, mage and mystery and self-made doll, was dressed in a two-piece pink tracksuit, with a white puffer jacket over the top, unzipped down the middle; this was not the gigantic armoured coat she’d worn upon certain previous visits to Number 12 Barnslow Drive, but it did match the style, despite terminating at her hips instead of turning her into a huge cartoon penguin. Jan had in fact worn that massive protective coat for the first three days of the last week, but eventually Lozzie had convinced her that the protection was not needed.

But still, I spotted a hint of straps and holsters inside the coat.

Jan met my eyes, jaw set, looking ready to bolt. “That ... that *woman*, she’s not here again, is she?”

I swallowed a sigh and turned it into a smile; Jan had asked that exact same question every single day for the last week, always the opening refrain of her regular visits. And always with the same answer. Some of us — three out of six tentacles — toyed with the idea of rushing up to her and tickling her under the armpits, just to make her relax. But that would be silly, not to mention an invasion of Jan’s personal space. The notion received a firm veto from the rest of us.

“No, Jan,” I said. “Taika’s not here. Taika was never here. She came to Wonderland directly, she never set foot in the house. How many times do I need to say this?”

Jan puffed out a breath she’d been holding, flapped her arms, and cleared her throat. “You don’t ... you don’t have to keep repeating that last part. I know that part. I just want to make sure she’s not, you know ... here.”

“Jan, if you feel ridiculous, you only have yourself to blame.” I paused and cleared my throat as well. “Sorry, that sounded more harsh than I intended it to be.”

Jan almost laughed. “I don’t care about feeling ridiculous. I care about not having to deal with that ... person.”

Lozzie disengaged from Praem and pattered over, slipping behind Jan and sliding her arms over Jan’s shoulders. “Jannyyyyy,” she purred, eyes closed in relaxation. “Taika’s fiiiine, she’s not scary at all!”

Jan swallowed, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “You don’t know her like I do, Lozzie. I wish you wouldn’t ... ”

Jan trailed off.

“Jan,” I said. “You don’t have to worry about that here. In Sharrowford, but especially in this house, you’re under our protection. I don’t understand what history you and Taika have, or what your disagreements are about, but she’s not going to lay a finger on you.”

Jan shot me a sceptical look. “I’m not worried about getting shanked. Hell, I’d like to see her try. I’d lay her out flat. No, I’m

worried about getting drawn into an interminable philosophical argument which should have been forgotten a long time ago.” Jan sighed, patted one of Lozzie’s hands, and made an effort to smile. “Look, let’s not linger on that. Let’s talk about happier matters.” Jan’s smile turned genuine. “How’s sleeping beauty? Any change?”

I shrugged as I stood up from the table, my lunch finally all comfy down in my tummy. “Same pace as the rest of the week, I think. Do you want to come see her? Say hi?”

“I most certainly do!” Jan beamed at me. She gently peeled Lozzie’s arms off her shoulders, but held her hand instead. “Let’s go see our patient.”

Lozzie and Jan trooped out of the kitchen and back into the front room, hand-in-hand. On the first few days Jan had waited for somebody else to take the lead, but Lozzie had a way of enforcing domestic familiarity. I glanced at Praem for permission to join them.

“Lunch is complete,” she said. “You may return.”

Jan and Lozzie were already halfway up the stairs by the time I caught them; Jan had paused to leave her coat by the door. Praem trailed behind, attending to some other matter, probably intending to go wake Evee shortly. We emerged into the upstairs corridor, passed several of the bedrooms, the open door to the bathroom, the clean, clear, sunlight pouring through the single window, and made our way almost to the corner.

That was where Praem had cleared out a room for Maisie.

Lozzie and Jan went in first. I followed, still with a hitch to my heartbeat and a catch in my throat, despite an entire week of this routine.

The room — on the same side of the house as Evelyn’s bedroom — did not yet contain very much of note. Maisie did not yet own anything, with no books or clothes or plush animals or any possessions with which to express and define herself. But we’d done what we could to brighten up the space; we didn’t want her to awaken to blank walls and empty shelves. The bed covers were a riot of pinks and lilacs, donated by Evelyn, watched over by a pair of plush sheep detached from the mass of Evelyn’s collection. Several yellow drapes hung from the walls, borrowed with great

enthusiasm from Seven's new room at the rear of the house, reflecting the bright and cheery sunlight that poured in from the window, filling the room with a familiar yellow glow. The floor boasted not one, but two nice thick fluffy rugs, currently accompanied by a bedroll on which I had been sometimes sleeping. A bookshelf stood opposite the bed; the books within were rather thin on the ground for now, mostly second-hand copies of novels I recalled from our shared childhood, along with many of my own favourites. A desk had been rescued from one of the old rooms at the rear of the house, though we couldn't figure out what to put on yet, so it seemed a bit sparse. The only important thing on the desk was a small plate with a pebble in the middle — The Pebble, the one I had pressed into Maisie's fist at the end of the dream.

One of the rugs was currently occupied by Tenny and Twil, both sitting cross-legged on some cushions. A chess set lay discarded to one side. A spread of playing cards formed a wall between the two.

"Hey hey hey! Hey there Jan." Twil broke into a grin when the three of us bundled through the doorway. Her wolfish ears stood up and her tail started wagging; she had retained those pneumatic additions after the dream of Cygnet, and preferred to keep them present, at least when she wasn't out in public. "Is it that time already? Time for the regular check up?"

"That time again," Jan said. "Twil, Tenny." She nodded at the pair in turn, passing them by and striding over to the bed. "Maisie, hello. Only me again."

Lozzie flopped down, arms over Tenny's shoulders, peering at the playing cards in Tenny's hand. Tenny returned the hug with half a dozen tentacles. "What'cha playing, Tenns?"

"Winning!" Tenny trilled, a big smile on her face, tentacles wiggling everywhere. "Brrrrrrt!"

Twil blew out a big puff, but she was still smiling too. "Yeah, no kidding. It's Blackjack, sort of. I won two hands, but I think Tenny learned how to count cards after that. I've got no hope here."

"Maffs!" Tenny giggled. "Can go back to chess if you want, Twil? Beat you harder?"

Twil rolled her eyes. "I like you better when we're playing Minecraft."

Lozzie giggled, hugging Tenny, rubbing her cheek against Tenny's face. Twil made some clever quip, grinning when Lozzie giggled all the harder. Tenny revealed her hand, and won, again.

I passed by, lingering only to briefly touch tentacles with Tenny, following Jan over to the large, comfortable bed which dominated one side of the room. It was not flush against the wall, but pulled out slightly, so that any observer might make a complete circuit of the bed, to peer at the recumbent occupant from any desired angle. This process of regular examination was becoming less and less necessary, but Jan had silently determined that she wasn't going to stop the inspections, not until the process was well and truly complete, without any doubts left. I understood why, even if it was only for her own sake, but I appreciated the expert opinion.

Lying on the bed, with the covers pulled up over her chest, her eyes closed in something akin to repose, was Maisie.

She looked exactly like me — minus my various abyssal additions, my six tentacles, my chromatophores, and the lines of all my habitual expressions etched into the curves and muscles of my face. She was tiny beneath the covers, so very petite, just like me. She had my narrow jaw, my dark lashes, my neat nose, my curled lips, the softness of my cheeks, all of me, reflected.

The only major difference was the same one which had been revealed upon her rescue. Her hair was extremely long, currently coiled across one side of the bed, to keep it out of the way.

She was no longer thin with metaphysical malnutrition, no longer pale and drained by a decade of isolation, sensory deprivation, and imprisonment, no longer slack with inner exhaustion. I had to remind myself that she had technically never been any of those things in the first place, that had been the language of a dream, the language of a Cygnet Hospital which was never real. Maisie's physical form in that place had been only memory and metaphor. This — her, in that bed, right in front of my eyes — was the real thing.

She was dressed in plain pajama bottoms, borrowed from Evelyn, and a long-sleeved t-shirt, borrowed from me.

A fragment of yellow cloth was wrapped around her right wrist, satin-smooth, tied into a bouncy little bow. Sometimes only I could see that sliver of yellow fabric; sometimes it was plain for any

unaltered eyes, visible to all. Sometimes it was made of silk, sometimes cotton, sometimes a kind of unnatural gossamer which faded beneath the sunlight. But it always came back. This was the fragment of my yellow membrane which I had gifted to Maisie in the dream, the piece of me which had helped carry her to the surface of the waters. Nobody had even voiced the prospect of removing it.

And, cradled in her left arm, pressed gently to her chest, just over her heart, was the Praem Plushie. Another survivor from Cygnet.

Maisie was breathing, slowly, softly, as if in a very deep sleep.

She'd only been breathing for six days. On the day I had returned and first laid eyes on her, she hadn't finished growing an approximation of her lungs.

I sank into the armchair by the head of the bed, careful not to dislodge the book resting on one arm.

"Hello," I said to her sleeping face, both brightly and bravely. I did not have to fake any fraction of my tone. The mere sight of her filled me with hope and cheer. "I'm back! I was only gone for a little while. I mean, you heard what I said before I left, you know what I was doing. Lunch was great, Praem is an excellent cook, I can't praise her enough, really. I can't wait for you to try her cooking. You're going to love it, though I don't think you'll need quite as much lemon as I do. Oh, and I popped outside, too! I mean, uh, not 'Outside' outside, not to another dimension, I mean out into the garden. Zheng was out there with Grinny. They've caught a red squirrel! Not to eat it, but to ... protect it? I think? I have no idea how they found one so far south. But it's kind of heart-warming, actually. Maybe a pet, something to care for, maybe that's what Grinny needs. I hope it helps her."

As I spoke to the unresponsive face of my sister, Jan took a circuit around the bed. She pulled out her mobile phone and started comparing Maisie's sleeping form with the catalogue of photos she'd taken over the last twenty four days, checking on her from all different angles. She lifted a handful of Maisie's hair and felt all along the length of her left arm, fingers sinking into the skin. She peered into Maisie's ears, gently peeled open an eyelid to stare into the depths beneath, and carefully pulled her jaw down to examine her mouth and tongue. Jan used a timer on her phone to measure

Maisie's breaths, and even put one ear to her chest, listening to the strong, steady pump of her heart.

I'd done that a dozen times this last week. I couldn't help myself.

As Jan drew near the end of her check-up — which I knew was approaching, because we'd done it so many times now — I said: "Jan, are you certain she can hear us?"

Jan paused, eyebrows raised, then pulled a smirk. "Now who's repeating needless questions?"

"I just ... I like to be sure."

Jan patted Maisie's right hand. "I'm sure she can hear us, Heather. When I was in her position, my senses came back a lot faster than my fine motor function. I could hear blurred sounds for ... well, for a lot longer than Maisie's been lying here. I can't guarantee she's following the exact same process of bodily inhabitation that I did, but yes, I'm certain she can hear us talking."

I frowned up at Jan, sitting on the edge of my chair. "Senses came back faster than motor function?"

"That's ... what I said, yes?"

"Then how do you explain the ... running ... thing?"

Jan sighed. "I don't. Heather, come on, putting souls into physical vessels isn't exactly a production line process. She's one of a kind. Bespoke. It's her body, she may have had to do some ... adjustments. I don't know. Okay? And it's not happened again. Relax. She knows you're here, she knows she's cared for."

"I keep worrying that she was panicking or something ... "

"She probably was," Jan said. "I know I did. But then she calmed down. She knows she's in safe hands, Heather. She can hear you."

I nodded, then reached out and briefly touched Maisie's right hand, where it lay on the bedsheets.

"So, uh," I tried to ask, nodding at Jan's mobile phone. "Any change?"

"Actually no," Jan said, gesturing at 'our patient'. "She's not changed from yesterday's check-up, not at all. I don't spot any further changes to the surface of her skin, no new pores, nothing

added, not even a hair. Her breathing is normal, heartbeat's normal. She's got saliva, earwax, and I think I could even hear a digestive gurgle or two. Good for her."

"Oh," I said, alarmed. "Does she need to eat? She won't starve, will she?"

Jan shook her head. "I doubt her digestion is actually functioning yet. And she's showing no signs of dehydration, she doesn't need to intake water, not until all this, you know, comes online, as it were." Jan shook her head. "Frankly I'm surprised she's still sleeping."

"Really?" I asked. "Could something be wrong?"

"Nothing serious. The doll-joints still show when you look closely, but that's something she'll have to learn to consciously adjust, she's not awake enough to change it. So, yeah, I think her pneumasomatic layer is done. Twenty four days! Tell you what, Heather, I am jealous." Jan almost laughed. "Took me ... well, a lot longer. I'm glad my craft work could spare her those difficulties."

"How much longer?" I asked, squeezing my hands together, twisting my tentacles into knots.

Jan glanced back at Lozzie and Tenny and Twil, to make sure all three were engrossed with the mess of the card game. When she spoke again, she lowered her voice.

"I haven't a clue. It took me a lot longer than this, in my own body." She waggled a hand, her own doll-joints showing at wrist and knuckles. "But then I wasn't exactly undergoing the transfer in optimal conditions. I was face down in a bad place, all by myself. Half the time, I thought I was actually dead. I had to rush, if I wanted to survive. I was up on my feet long before I was physically complete. Maisie here, she doesn't have that pressure. She's got a lot of advantages. She might simply be taking her time, in the knowledge that she's safe to do so. It might be better that way. She's skipping right over a lot of the problems I went through. No blindness. No spinal pain. No failed digestion. Not even the thing with my sense of touch being all upside down. And she's got actual physical remains, that's boosted the process in ways I never could have done myself, and—"

Jan must have caught a look I hadn't known I was wearing. She halted and cleared her throat.

“S-sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to seem worried.”

“It’s alright, Heather,” Jan said with an awkward smile. “Maisie’s doing great. Just give her time. Who knows, she might wake up in a day or two. Might be a week. But she’s in there, and she’s made incredible progress. I’m sure she’s just comfortably getting on with it.”

“I hope she is comfortable, yes.”

Maisie — my sister, my twin, my mirror-half — was, for want of better and more accurate terminology, ‘anchored’ inside the doll-body that Jan had engineered for this express purpose. Maisie had spent the last twenty four days instinctively building her outer layers and inner details from pneuma-somatic flesh, the hard and physical kind, the same kind of flesh which Jan had once desperately draped over her own emergency-escape body, the same kind of flesh that clothed Praem’s wooden core. Now she was complete, but not yet ready to awaken.

I had missed the dramatic moment of transubstantiation, the moment of Maisie’s return to the physical; I’d been busy swimming through the abyss. In a way I was glad that I had missed it — I don’t know if I could have kept myself together in the moments after the collapse of the Cygnet dream.

According to everybody else, the collapse of the dream of Cygnet Asylum had been horribly confusing, ejecting everybody back out onto the then-still blackened ash of Wonderland, complete with memories and knowledge of where I’d gone, but no sign of myself — and no sign of Maisie, even though they knew she should logically be present.

It was Eileen who had solved that mystery. As the great lid of the Eye had rolled back above Wonderland, Eileen had appeared among my very confused friends. She had prioritised constructing her own body, as rapidly as she could, because she had a delivery to make.

Eileen had presented to my friends a carefully cradled handful of fire-blackened scraps.

A few fragments of human bone, scorched and charred.

Maisie’s mortal remains.

According to Eileen’s rapid — and mercifully pun-free —

explanation, Maisie's soul still clung to those chips of carbonised bone.

I had seen those pieces of bone, but I had not touched them. A picture had been taken, for the sake of my own knowledge, in case I needed closure. I don't know how I would have reacted to cradling those fragments in my own hands. But I hadn't needed to. Jan had worked fast, even disoriented from the dream and terrified out of her wits to find herself in Wonderland. Before the others had even regained their bearings, Jan had opened up the doll-body and added the bone fragments to the core of the magical mechanism, among the crystal innards which were meant to contain Maisie's mind and spirit.

Maisie's 'soul' (again, for want of better terminology) had quickly settled into her new vessel.

I had also missed most of the process by which she had built her pneuma-somatic outer layers. For the first few days — while the others had split their time between watching over her and preparing to dredge me from the abyss — Maisie had been nothing but a lifeless, faceless, seemingly empty doll, made of grey-on-grey carbon fibre. Slowly she had begun to take shape, first as a ghostly outline, still featureless and vague, but with increasing detail by the hour. After a week she had been solid enough to touch her skin. At ten days, everybody had agreed it was time to dress her in some clothing. Between the twelve and eighteen day mark, the process had turned rather gruesome — her facial features had to solidify from a shiny surface. I had missed most of that, but Jan had pictures, taken for entirely proper medical reasons. The pictures showed eyes like pinpricks, ears like twists of mangled flesh, a mouth formed from a lipless slash, and hair like bristles. Over time my own face had emerged from the warped lump of pneuma-somatic clay.

A few of the others had been surprised that Maisie did not have tentacles, like we did. But why should she? She had not traversed the abyss. She was not a Heather, not us. She was Maisie.

Over the days I had watched her, Maisie's skin had gone from a shiny, unyielding, too-perfect surface, to real human skin, with pores and little hairs and even a few moles. Her fingernails had finished emerging. The hair on her head had taken on full solidity. She had gained a pulse and a heartbeat and oils on her skin. She

had started breathing, at which I almost climbed the walls in excitement. Sometimes her fingers twitched or her eyeballs moved behind the lids.

But still, she wouldn't wake.

Some of the others were worried she'd had a bad experience.

Back at the five day mark — another milestone I'd missed — Maisie had done something that Jan had not predicted, nor prepared for. She had surprised everybody, in a way that was meant to be impossible.

She had gotten up and sprinted for the front door.

This had come as a bit of a shock to everybody involved, especially because Maisie hadn't yet taken proper shape. She'd been nothing but a glossy, smooth, ghost-like illusion, wrapped around a skeletal doll made of carbon fibre. She hadn't possessed muscles or eyes, with no way of navigating or locomoting. According to Jan, the whole thing had been achieved via willpower alone, pneumasomatic motion, like a spirit bound to a lump of matter.

She had reached the front door quite quickly, before anybody could properly react. She'd gotten down the garden path, over the front wall, and out into the street. After twelve paces at a dead sprint, Zheng had finally caught her and bundled her back into the house.

Luckily nobody had witnessed this doll-jointed apparition loose and wild on a Sharrowford street; the whole episode had unfolded at about five o'clock in the morning, when few prying eyes were awake to see.

Maisie hadn't resisted being returned to her new room; in fact, she'd gone completely limp, just as she was before, as if the escape attempt had been some confused bodily reaction rather than an actual plan. Everybody was concerned she might try it again, or that she was suffering somehow. Jan was encouraged by this — it was a good sign, technically — but also shared in the others' concern. They had redoubled the watch inside her bedroom, and made sure the Praem Plushie was propped in her arms at all times.

We — me, I, us — were worried as well.

But beneath that, we were also very proud. Our sister, our twin, our Maisie, full of life and energy, even if she now knew she had to wait

before expending it on running about. We felt so proud of her, of what she was achieving — becoming herself.

Jan reached over and gently patted my arm, as we both stared down at Maisie. “She’s got the best care anybody could hope for, Heather. And she’s a lot more comfortable than I ever was.”

“Mm,” I murmured.

Jan cleared her throat, briefly glancing back at the others, before returning her eyes to me, down in the armchair. “Raine mentioned in passing that you called your parents again, yesterday?”

A sigh escaped my lips. Jan had phrased it as a question, but I didn’t want to think about that right then. I wanted to focus on Maisie.

Jan waited a moment, then added: “It might be pertinent to Maisie. That’s the only reason I ask. Raine gave me the gist, but, you know.”

“The second attempt, yes,” I said, feeling my throat tighten. “It didn’t ... they didn’t ... ”

“No luck?”

We shrugged, unable to face this now, not with Maisie herself needing so much attention. “They’re trying their best, but they only partially remember. My mother, she’s ... she’s got that notebook where she wrote down the truth, and she believes the stuff written in her own hand. But it’s like a dream for her. My father, he tried to sound stoic, but he’s ... oh, I don’t know. Both of them know Maisie exists, they accept it. But without any physical evidence, no return of her things, of proof she was ever alive, it’s hard for them to tell reality from a dream. They need something more.”

“They need to see her,” Jan said.

I nodded. “They do. When she’s awake. When she’s finished growing herself. Not like this. We don’t know if she’d even want that.”

Jan nodded, slowly. She didn’t say anything, neither argument nor agreement. After a long moment she gently patted me on the shoulder, then wandered over to where Lozzie was cooing at the card game between Tenny and Twil.

“That was Jan,” I said to Maisie, leaning forward. “I mean ... you know that was Jan, of course you do. Why am I telling you that?” I laughed softly, then settled back into the armchair, getting comfortable. We didn’t intend to get up for anything for the next while, not until we needed to use the toilet. “Do you want us to read to you some more?” I picked up the book from the arm of the chair and touched the bookmark. *Watership Down*. We were only a few chapters in. “I do hope you’re enjoying it, Maisie. I know it’s a heavy one, but it’s still one of my favourites, and I can’t help thinking it’s a bit like ... like ... well, you know.” I sighed. “Though, if you’re getting tired of it, we could switch out to something else. We’ve got all the books in the house to choose from, after all. I don’t mind reading something I’ve not read before, then we can both experience it for the first time, together! Praem’s good at suggesting books, she’s been reading so many this past year. Or we could always read *The Hobbit* a second time. There and back again. Just like you and me.”

I trailed off, staring at the mirror of Maisie’s face, at her eyelashes against her cheeks, at the slow rise and fall of her chest, the long brown tail of her hair lying on the pillow and across the sheets.

The Praem Plushie seemed to stare at me for a moment. I nodded and smiled to her; good job watching over Maisie, Praem.

Behind me, the card game was abandoned, and the others asked if I was okay by myself for a bit — I wasn’t really listening, but I gathered that Tenny wanted to show ‘Lozzie-mums’ and ‘Jannary’ something exciting on her laptop, while Twil needed to stretch her legs and fetch a snack, and probably sneak off to see Eevee, once Evelyn was awake. Of course I was okay! But I wasn’t by myself. There were nine of us in here, and Maisie was right in front of us.

The others went off. Twil paused to squeeze my shoulder. “She’ll be up and about in no time, Big H. Lookin’ forward to it.”

“Me too. Thank you, Twil.”

“Back in a bit!”

“Take your time,” I told her. “No rush.”

A few moments later, it was just us and Maisie, and the gentle play of sunlight across the wall. The little noises of Number 12 Barnslow Drive filtered through the walls and the floorboards — the murmur

of distant voices, the tap of footsteps on the stairs, the occasional creak of old beams. The house herself seemed to lean close, cupping us between her hands. I could have napped, right there in the armchair. Our tentacles were coiled softly about us, relaxed and unhurried.

I let out a contented sigh leaning back in the armchair with the book in my lap.

"I hope you'll come to love this house as much as I do," I said to Maisie. "Not that you have to, of course. I have no idea what your tastes or feelings will be like, not exactly. You might not even want to stay here. Maybe you'll want to live with mum and dad, or maybe ..."

My throat tightened around those words. It wasn't time for that, not yet.

Maisie was home. Maisie was safe. Maisie would be awake, quite soon.

I opened *Watership Down* to where we'd left off. "Shall I keep reading, then?" I asked. "I shall, I think. Now, where were we? Oh, yes, here we are. The opening of chapter five. *It was getting on towards moonset when they left the fields and entered the wood. Straggling, catching up with one another, keeping more or less together*—"

For several minutes I concentrated on the words of the story, putting all material concerns out of my mind, sinking into a familiar old fiction that I had read half a dozen times already. I spoke clear and soft, and I even did the voices, letting the narrative fill the room. I did hope Maisie was enjoying the tale, even if it could get a little dark from time to time.

"They followed him through the fern and very soon came upon another, parallel path—"

"Heather?"

It is a strange thing, to hear yourself interrupted by your own voice.

For a split-second I had no idea what was happening; my name, pronounced in my own voice, interrupting my thoughts and my words. We had become used to such things, of course, for we were nine-in-one now, a spread of little Heathers on the inside. But this

was not an internal interruption. It came from beyond us, impossible, absurd.

The book fell from my fingers and into my lap. My eyes flew wide. My mouth probably hung open, making me look rather silly.

Maisie's lips were parted, wide enough to whisper.

I shot upright in the chair, leaning forward, leaning over her, my own breath held tight for fear of interrupting the next word. When she didn't speak on, I thought it must have been a hallucination.

"Maisie!?" I whispered, as if we were children again, hiding under the blankets "Maisie, are you ... are you awake? Maisie? Was that you?"

Her fingers twitched; her lips moved. I reached forward, my own hand trembling so hard I could barely feel when I slipped my fingers around hers. Two tentacles joined us, curling about her wrist. All of us, all nine of us, poised over her, waiting for a response.

"Maisie?" we whispered. "Maisie?"

Her hand tightened on mine, fingers coiling inward. Her eyes shifted behind the closed lids — then the lids peeled back, lashes fluttering, muscles squinting against the light.

Maisie's eyes — my eyes, seen in a mirror — turned and looked at me. Deep and dark. Richest brown.

We were speechless. She was not.

"Of course I want to live here," Maisie said. Her voice was weak and dry, like my own voice had gone on a long journey and could not quite fit into the throat it had once occupied. "I want to stay ... wherever you are, Heather. I don't want to go anywhere away from you."

We are not ashamed that we started crying, not in the least. Tears ran down my cheeks, and into the smile on my lips.

"Welcome home, Maisie."

And then—

I am afraid that this is where I must leave you, at least for a short time, dear listener, dear reader, dear however-exactly-you-are—

experiencing my words and thoughts, this rough record of my deeds, inscribed upon reality with all the unreliable contours of an imperfect memory.

Don't be afraid. This is not where my tale ends, not exactly, but it is the point at which I cease to be the most relevant one to tell it. I was never the centre of the universe; it only seemed that way, for this busiest year of my as-yet young life.

Does it feel odd to be so directly addressed? Don't be surprised. You'll make us all giggle! You can't seriously think that I wasn't aware of you this whole time. I've learned a trick or two from Seven-Shades-of-Sunlight, and another one or two from some of her siblings, and the less said about the methods of The King in Yellow, the better. The less I explain, the safer you will be. All you need to know is that you have my gratitude.

At the start of this account, I told you — yes, you — not to come here, whoever or whatever you are. To Sharrowford. To Barnslow Drive. To me and mine.

If you've made it all this way, perhaps you've seen how I changed, during this most busy year — from a scrap of quivering humanity, isolated and lonely and turned against ourselves, to what we are in the aftermath of our journey, nine-in-one, one-as-nine, Homo abyssus, sat beside the bed of our twin sister. Perhaps you have some sensible reckoning of what we are, and what we are capable of, and who stands at our side in turn. Perhaps you've seen that we don't have to be so afraid of each other — those of us who inhabit this supernatural underworld, by choice or otherwise, with or without quests and great tasks of our own, those of us 'In The Know'.

So, it is with open hands that I amend my previous statement.

You're welcome to visit Sharrowford. Under my protection, or the protection of Evelyn Saye, or perhaps under the protection of other entities who you may wish to invoke. There are plenty to choose from, after all.

Tread lightly, be polite, and you will be very welcome.

But I can't promise it won't be busy. My story may be complete for now, but there are so many more to tell, here in Sharrowford, for those of us In The Know, for those whom I hold close. And that is

why I must leave you, for a time. I must leave the boards of the stage for those better suited to tell their own stories.

Which stories, you may ask?

I suspect you have some inkling of the answer to that question; you're not a fool, if you've made it all this way. I've not exactly been subtle. Even here, at the end of 'my' story, we are still surrounded by many who deserve their own chance to grow, not least Maisie herself. Tenny needs an education, if she is to have a future. Zheng is still caged by circumstances that I, sadly, have not been the best to address. Twil, just about to start university herself, leads such a busy life sometimes. Kimberly, Felicity, Nicole — there's a love triangle I do not wish to interrupt, if it counts as a triangle at all. What of Eileen's daughter? No, I won't tell you her name, that would spoil the surprise, I'll let her do it herself! What of the King and his other children, not least the irascible Heart, who you may remember quite well. Ah, and then there's Jan, with far too many secrets of her own.

I can't even list them all, because I don't know! I'm not an omniscient eyeball in the sky, and these aren't my stories to tell.

But we'll be here. Maisie and I both. We aren't going anywhere.

See you soon, observer.